

**TEXAS** *Birds*  
ANNUAL



*Ken R. Pyle*

# Editor's Introduction

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As with any publication that relies on uncompensated writers you have new faces. This year we are pleased to publish articles by numerous new writers. We also include contributions from past favorites including Tim Brush, Carol Ohl-Johnson, Christina Mild and Sheridan Coffey.

This publication also bids farewell to Ron Weeks who finished his term as President of the society. Ron has kindly written a passing message for this magazine but frankly it does not do his term justice. Ron and his team tackled issues like hurricane cleanup, membership promotion, the ailing newsletter and other issues with intensity and devotion. He has truly left an enduring mark on the society. We all owe him gratitude for donating all the effort.

Now on to this issue of *Texas Birds Annual* and again my heartfelt thanks to all the authors and photographers that made it possible.

Jack Eitnear  
Editor/T.O.S. Publications

Bron Rorex  
TBA Copy Editor



Barn Owl by Ram Papish [www.rampapish.com](http://www.rampapish.com)

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*Front cover:* Winter Sparrows. Artist Ram Papish [www.rampapish.com](http://www.rampapish.com)

*Back cover:* Tern courtship feeding. Photographer Mark Bartosik



Goldfinches relish thistle which, like other plants, can be planted to attract birds. See Hummingbird Heights pg. 41 for more plants that attract birds. Photo: Ricardo Romero.

**11 species of nesting woodpeckers**  
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# Texas Rarities and Vagrants

By Eric Carpenter

Texas birders were treated to a number of great rarities in 2008. The unquestionable highlight of the year would have to be the **White-crested Elaenia** that visited the Sheepshead woodlot on South Padre Island 9–10 February. Discovered mid-afternoon on the 9<sup>th</sup> and tentatively identified as a Yellow-bellied Elaenia, photos were circulated on the internet late that afternoon and expert opinion by that evening suggested that the bird was not only a White-crested Elaenia, but an individual of the highly migratory *chilensis* subspecies found in southern South America. This was confirmed the following day with additional photos and some sound recordings that were made by the lucky few that were able to see the bird on its 2<sup>nd</sup> and last day. This record was a first for not only Texas, but also a first for the ABA and AOU areas.

Birders had to work hard in the first couple of months of 2008 to find other rarities. A **Ruddy Ground-Dove** put in an appearance at Anzalduas County Park on 8 January and a **Masked Duck** was photographed at Aransas N.W.R. the same day. Up in the panhandle, a **Clark's Nutcracker** discovered on 22 February near the town of Panhandle remained loyal to that location through early April.



Outside of two Crimson-collared Grosbeak invasions, one in 1987–1988 and the other in 2004–2005, Texas sightings of this species are few. This individual at the Frontera Sanctuary in late December 2008 (thru April 2009) was the first record in two and half years.

Photo by David McDonald.

March is when we start to see a transition from wintering birds to the first of our north bound migrants, and in 2008, it was also a month when several exciting birds were discovered. A first-winter **Iceland Gull** discovered on 6 March in a huge wintering gull flock in N.E. Houston was observed

there though 15 March. A small number of **Lawrence's Goldfinches** may have irrupted into west Texas during this time. Between 12 March and 27 March, four different Lawrence's Goldfinches were documented in the Trans-Pecos; the first

Since 2000, Costa's Hummingbirds have been recorded every year. A record 4 documented sightings were made in 2008, including this bird in Alpine from 16 September thru the end of the year.

Photo by Mark Lockwood.



found at Davis Mountains State Park and the remaining three all in the El Paso area. Two different **Fork-tailed Flycatchers** also showed up along the coast during mid-March; one stayed briefly in Sabine Pass from 15–18 March while another lingered at the opposite end of the Texas coastline at The Nature Conservancy's Southmost Preserve near Brownsville from 16–29 March. A **White-throated Thrush**, discovered in Pharr on 18 March, was viewed by many during its stay there through 12 April. Meanwhile, a sound recording of a calling **Northern Pygmy-Owl** on 28 March along the Pinnacles Trail at Big Bend National Park cinched the 4<sup>th</sup> documented state record.

April and May brought us the peak of northward bound migrants and a small smattering of vagrants. An injured dark-morph **Short-tailed Hawk** picked up by a



This Fork-tailed Flycatcher at Sabine Pass on 16 March was one of an amazing three enjoyed by Texas birders in 2008. Photo by Lynn Barber.

rehabilitator near Troup (Smith County) on 8 April was an unexpected first for the Pineywoods. The banded **American Flamingo** that has been wandering our coastline since the fall of 2005 put in a brief



With the addition of this Flame-colored Tanager in early June, Big Bend National Park can now lay claim to four of the seven Texas records of this species.

Photo by Malcolm Boothroyd.



Patience was rewarded at the end of another Gulf of Mexico pelagic trip on 19 July when this Greater Shearwater treated participants to some of the best looks of this species that Texas birders have ever enjoyed. Photo by Tony Frank.

appearance on Bolivar Flats on 12 April. That same day, a **Ruff** was discovered at Hornsby Bend in Austin, where it lingered for two weeks to the delight of many. A very cooperative **Piratic Flycatcher** at Pollywog Pond in Corpus Christi from 3–6 May provided just the 5<sup>th</sup> state record.

An **Arctic Tern** at Mitchell Lake in San Antonio on 10 May and a **Gray Kingbird** that lingered in Port O’Conner from 13–16 May put an exclamation mark to the end of another exciting spring migration.

Birders that braved the heat of the Texas summer were occasionally rewarded for their



The gigantic and unique Jabiru is one of the most sought after rarities in Texas and the United States. Texas had only seven prior records (the last in 1997) until this bird was found near Raymondville in August 2008. Photo by Jan Dauphin.



Texas enjoyed its first three records of Kelp Gull in 1996–1997 but none had been found since, until November & December of 2008 when this adult was present along the beach at Quintana.

Photo by Michael Lindsey.



Piratic Flycatcher was unrecorded in Texas prior to 1998. This cooperative individual at Pollywog Pond in Corpus Christi from 3–6 May 2008 represented the 5<sup>th</sup> occurrence in the past 10+ years.

Photo by Dan Roberts.

diligence. Taking first place as the rarest bird seen from one's surfboard in the Gulf of Mexico is a **Red-billed Tropicbird** studied near the South Padre Island jetty on 7 June during a leisurely surfing outing. A female



Almost all of the state's Ruddy Ground-Dove records are along the Rio Grande corridor. Two wayward individuals were found in 2008 far away from that river, including this individual that wintered near San Angelo from 11 December thru the end of the year. Photo by Jay Packer.

**Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher** tended to a nest during her 9 June–5 July stay at Quinta Mazatlan in McAllen, though she was not successful in attracting a mate. A **Red-footed Booby** that washed up dead on a Galveston beach 12 June was only the 2<sup>nd</sup> record for the state. Across the state in Big Bend National Park, a **Flame-colored Tanager** was seen sporadically in Boot Canyon from 12–28 June. The highlight of the 19 July pelagic trip out of South Padre Island had to be an obliging **Greater Shearwater**.

The fall season started out with a bang with an **Olive Warbler** that was studied in the upper elevations of Guadalupe Mountains National Park on 9 August. This was followed shortly by a **Jabiru** near Raymondville, a bird that generated as much excitement as the elania had. This magnificent wader was present 10–22 August but was only discovered by the Texas birding community on the 20<sup>th</sup> and provided a wonderful 8<sup>th</sup> record for the state. A **Ruff**, one of two found during the fall, was also discovered





The highlight of 2008 was this White-crested Elaenia found 9 February on a woodlot on South Padre Island. Thanks to the Dan & Honey Jones discovery and their quick dissemination of details and photos, this first TX and first A.B.A record was sufficiently documented during its short two-day stay. Photo by Erik Breden.

at the same site on 24 August and lingered there until at least 14 September. The third **Fork-tailed Flycatcher** of the year showed up quite unexpectedly in the Trans-Pecos near Balmorhea from 28–30 August. Rare hummingbirds made a good showing in the fall with 2 different **Violet-crowned Hummingbirds** in the Trans-Pecos only to

be outdone by 3 **Costa's Hummingbirds** including one that lingered in Dripping Springs just west of Austin from 17 November to 15 December.

Late fall and early winter also brought their share of highlights. **Ruddy Ground Doves** are rarely found in Texas very far away from the Rio Grande so it was unusual to have one at Balmorhea Lake on 11 October. Topping that was another cooperative individual that wintered near San Angelo 11 December into late March of 2009. The state's 4<sup>th</sup> record of **Kelp Gull** was an adult that called the Quintana beach area home from 8 November to 24 December. That individual was quickly followed by the state's 5<sup>th</sup> record – a first-year bird that was seen in the same area 19 December. The Thanksgiving holidays brought us a **Rufous-backed Robin** in El Paso on 26–28 November and a **Purple Sandpiper** on the South Padre Island jetty on 29 November, which would remain in the area thru late May 2009. One of the highlights to end a marvelous 2008 was a **Crimson-collared Grosbeak** at Frontera Audubon Sanctuary in Weslaco, which would stay until mid April 2009 after being discovered on 14 December.

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The White-throated Thrush is still an extremely rare bird in Texas. This bird in Weslaco 18 March to 12 April was just the 12<sup>th</sup> record for the state, though eight of those occurred during an unprecedented invasion from Dec 2004 to Feb 2005.

Photo by Mathew Matthiessen.

# Once Upon a Bunting Time: Magic comes to the Hill Country

**By Bill Lindemann**

With wacky weather seemingly playing tricks with drought, thunderstorms, wind, cold and heat across the Texas Hill Country, the spring 2009 migration season appeared to be lost before it began. The Purple Martins were struggling to find good warm weather for their insect food sources to take flight. Hummingbirds couldn't find many wildflowers because of the dry fall and winter. The Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were lagging behind their appearance of a year ago. On the brighter side several Audubon's Orioles made short appearances in Fredericksburg and Kerrville.

Lark Buntings were reported in several backyards in the Kerrville area. Lazuli Buntings started to show in several spots around the Edwards Plateau. Not far behind came the two regulars, Indigo and Painted Buntings, with many appearances and in good numbers. Suddenly, it was beginning to look like bunting time in the hills.

Add a few Summer Tanagers, orioles, American Goldfinches in breeding plumage, resident Lesser Goldfinches, and resident Eastern Bluebirds and the show began. Our scarce wildflowers were being supplemented in color by flowers with wings. If you live in the Hill Country you learn that we do not normally get the dazzling warbler and migrant shows taking center stage along the Texas Gulf Coast and in East Texas. But with our buntings taking the spotlight, we can match the warblers in at least color, if not energy.

Hill Country birders are accustomed to seeing Painted Buntings throughout the summer months, but the increased numbers of Indigo Buntings were a welcome addition to our spring migration parade. A few indigos are known to breed in the Edwards Plateau, but most are seen during the spring and fall migration seasons. However, the Lazuli Buntings were a surprise addition.

A few Lazuli Buntings have been seen over the years, but not on a regular basis. The Lazuli Buntings breed in the western states and winter along the Pacific coast region of Mexico into Central America. Central Texas is not in the direct line of flight from their terminal destinations. Why Lazuli Buntings take an occasional swing through the Hill Country may be a mystery, but when they irrupt as they are doing in 2009 the curiosity heightens.

Most migrating bird males take the most direct route from the wintering grounds to their breeding grounds because the males are intent on claiming the best habitat for themselves. However, after the breeding season chores are completed, many migrating birds can wander in their trek to the wintering grounds. Mark Lockwood reports in his book, *The Birds of the Texas Hill Country*, that there are no fall records in the Hill Country for Lazuli Buntings. He also points out that spring migrants are more frequently seen in the western part of the Edwards Plateau than in the eastern (Hill Country) part of the region.

Why so many Lazuli Buntings are being seen this spring may not be understood, at least by me, but it is very clear that this is an exceptional year. I have had around ten reports of Lazuli Bunting sightings, two of which reported small flocks of up to six birds. The first reports came in mid April and have continued into May. Male Lazuli Buntings are showy birds with azure blue heads, backs and tails, rufous breasts, and white bellies. Their blue and rufous plumages might be confused with those of bluebirds, but the buntings have wing bars and bluebirds do not. Lazuli Buntings are likely to appear at back yard seed feeders; sites from which bluebirds generally shy away.



"Before me was a sight I could only have imagined – three of the most colorful birds sitting on the feeder." Photo by Bill Lindemann.

A friend, who lives along the Pedernales River northwest of Fredericksburg, called to say she had a number of Lazuli Buntings at her backyard feeder. She invited me to come see them and possibly photograph them. Upon arrival, she excitedly told me that the Lazuli Buntings were being joined by Indigo and Painted Buntings as well. Having the chance to see three out of four of our dazzling male buntings on the same feeder seemed surreal to me.

From a cedar staved fence hiding point less than ten feet from a recessed granite feeder containing white millet, I stood and nervously waited. The first arrivals from the left were a few Lazuli Bunting males in less than full breeding plumage who landed on the ground below the feeder. Soon they were joined by a small flock of Indigo Buntings. I was taking photos as

fast as I could to capture the two bunting species together, when a male Painted Bunting flew in from the right to the ground a few feet away.

I was mentally trying to coach all three to get on the feeder. A lazuli male was the first to take position on the feeder and was followed by a stunning male Indigo Bunting. The Painted Bunting decided to loiter on the ground for a while as I held my breath hoping the other two would stay in place. Suddenly, he joined the party on the feeder. Before me was a sight I could only have imagined – three of the most colorful birds sitting on the feeder calmly eating the millet seed. To make matters even better, the sun broke through the clouds to give more light for photographs.

I got a number of photographs of the threesome having lunch together at my



Why so many Lazuli Buntings are being seen this spring may not be understood. Photo by Bill Lindemann.

friend's great bird restaurant on the Pedernales River. In the ten photographs I took, four of them had a Chipping Sparrow that I did not even notice joining the buntings while I was taking the photographs. When the buntings left, I then became nervous that my photos might not be in focus, but later my fears were relieved when I saw all were in focus. One of my fondest memories in over forty years of birding had been captured and preserved.

The next day I was working at my computer when I heard a bird hit a picture window behind me. When I went to see who the victim might be, I saw a stunned

beautiful male Painted Bunting sitting in a cenizo bush. I grabbed my camera to get close up photographs while the bunting was still seeing stars. As I moved in closer after the second photo, the bunting flew and landed on top of my head.

Here I stood with a camera in my hand and one of the prettiest birds on the planet perched on my head, leaving me completely dumbstruck as to what to do next. I could see our image in the picture window, but when I moved the camera to take a self portrait, my head also moved causing the bird to fly to the siding on my house. My bunting fantasy ended, but having two magical experiences in two days is something I won't soon forget.

What started as a questionable beginning to our spring migration season turned into a time for Hill County birders to get extremely excited over their bunting experiences. Many people who are not serious birders likely saw birds they did not know even existed in the Hill Country. In addition to the buntings we have had increased sightings of Black-headed and Rose-breasted grosbeaks. Some people may become active birders because of the bunting magic that made our 2009 spring migration one of the best ever.

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# Finding the Mangrove Warbler Nest in the U.S. or Quest for a Nest

*By Scarlet and George Colley*

Here, step on to our skimmer, our boat and skim out on to the Laguna Madre bay with us. Have a seat and smell the sea air. This is where our story begins. This is our quest to find the first Mangrove Warbler nest.

Moving to the Rio Grande Valley at the end of the millennium in ninety five was a magical time for me and together with my most wonderful husband, George; we began giving eco tours of the lower Laguna Madre off South Padre Island, Texas. As if living on a tropical island was not enough magic, the water of the bay was where we spent our days dancing with the local wild dolphins and getting to know the local birds and began a new millennium full of wonder and adventures.

In the late nineties dear friends Father Tom Pincelli and Jane Kittleman would join us on our boat to enjoy some dinner, wine and

birding of the shore birds up close. Jane related her experience of seeing a Mangrove Warbler while out on the bay years ago. She had seen it in the surrounding black mangroves which at that time were thick along the bay. Father Tom shared his feelings along with Jane that this bird could make an appearance. At that time there had been one sighting documented along the Rio Grande River which is only a few miles south of our bay.

But the mangroves that Jane pointed out to us were sparse and small. There had been a freeze in the late eighties which wreaked havoc on the tropical mangrove. It would take years for those mangroves to make a comeback. Little did we know that by the early 2000's those sparse mangroves would become thick dense mini forests along the bay? Almost two decades after the freeze, the black mangrove has made its stand once again, and with it the possibility of the Mangrove Warbler appearing.

Father Tom's and Jane's suggestion to keep vigil for this tiny Yellow Warbler with a bright orange hood remained a little shining star in the back of my mind as a hope to find and see. Oddly enough my husband, George and I were leading a dolphin tour; it was the fall of 2003, when Jane's and Father Tom's prediction came true. And it was the dolphins that helped make it happen. George had recently found an Audubon squeaker and put it on the boat. We both seemed to have the idea at the same time to play the squeaker around the dolphins and see if they liked the sound it made.

I was on the front deck twisting this little mechanism, delighting in the dolphin like high pitches it was making. The dolphins reacted to it



A gorgeous bright yellow body accented by that full red-orange hood prompted the exclamation . . . Mangrove Warbler!!!! Photo by Seth Patterson.

and swam around us, but something else reacted too. From the little island just fifty feet from us flew a blur, chipping. As a small bird hung in the air over us for a moment we scrambled for binos watching it fly back to the edge of the mangroves. The lighting was good and this little fellow was holding still enough to see something that amazed us. It was time to use my canon digital camera with its 1 to 400 lens. I could see red hues around the face of this bird. George slowly maneuvered our now floating bird blind, in closer. It was at long last, the long awaited sighting of this elusive warbler of the mangroves. The dolphins gave up on us and went on their way and we stayed with the bird until it flew into the deeper parts of the grove and out of sight. Sending photos off to the experts it was confirmed that this bird was indeed an immature Mangrove Warbler and many folks wanted to see it with us. John Arvin had photographed a gorgeous male that year along the river as well. Our warbler stayed around for a few weeks and then disappeared. We squeaked away but no warbler. It was not until February of the following year 2004, that we would have the light bulb turn on.

We were close to the shore line looking at peeps when a very small yellow bird hopped out of the mangroves onto the exposed tidal flat and actually began to bathe in a tiny pool of salt water. Exclaiming excitedly that this was a Mangrove Warbler, the birders on board could not see the orange on the sides of its face, just a hint of it. I had fine tuned looking for that after our first Mangrove Warbler but we were not convincing the others. But not to worry, out hops a greenish warbler, which quite likely was the female. And then to round up the whole family the bright male, sporting a gorgeous bright yellow body accented by that full



The Mangrove Warbler, *Dendroica pensylvanica oraria* now a race of the Yellow Warbler was formerly considered a separate species, *D. erithachorides*.

Photo by Seth Patterson.

red-orange hood. There they were all three of them. My mind was churning. Mom, Dad, Baby right here and it is February. This can mean only one thing, they nest here. Mangrove Warblers are nesting here. There are no nesting records for the U.S. Now the challenge would be to find one.

As spring approached we normally do not even bird the water but concentrate on migrant traps on South Padre Island, but now we would be sure to bird the mangroves too. Our good friend from the nearby town of Brownsville, David Benn, called to let us know he was hearing and seeing many males along the mangrove edges from his kayak, in the same area we bird by boat. We waited for what we thought would be the right time for the birds to be nesting which in my mind was May.

With May arriving friend Petra Hockey joined us and after pushing our boat up on shore we walked across the vast barrens of the dredge flats and approached the now ever thickening mangrove forests. We stopped and



Searching for Mangrove Warblers often means sinking up to your knees in mud, but you're likely to be rewarded with outstanding photo opportunities.

Photo by Scarlet Colley.

listened. It was a male singing. We saw him with his head turned up to the sky perched on the very tip of a mangrove sprig and singing his heart out. What a sound. He then flew from one perch to another marking the boundaries of his territory. We searched for a nest but did not find one. It was looking for a needle in a hay stack.

We could see the female and male going into the mangroves with bugs in their mouths but it was thick and mucky and at one point I sunk to my knees in the soft mud and we called it quits. Not after a good laugh at me sunk up to my knees in the unpleasant mud. Though we did not find the nest we had no doubt they were nesting. We were elated and I listened closely to all of Petra's wealth of knowledge on bird behavior. She was convinced we could find a nest.

Within a week a storm was brewing in the gulf and it was Hurricane Emily. We would now get busy packing up for the evacuation. But before we pulled the boats my mind was on how the babies would survive a hurricane. I had to have one last look before we pulled my boat. Cameras in tow George and I

rushed out there, made the long trek in and behold, in front of us, in the evening sun light, was the whole gang.

Some dead mangroves sprigs made the perfect spot for the parents to teach their little ones to feed. This made it easy to see them and film them. There were three adult males and their females and to our delight at least seven or eight babies, just fledged. We were relieved and knew that they were going to be alright. The babies could fly and would be able to go into the thickest part of the mangroves to ride out the storm. It was such a relief for us. We had not found a nest but we had seen and documented the fledged babies. As it turned out Emily went in south of us into Mexico causing extreme damage there. We were spared and our Mangrove Warblers would be fine.

It would be another year of waiting and 2006 to find a nest. John Bax, a friend and world renowned cinematographer, who has filmed nesting birds for decades, offered to help me do so and we would go in April. The following spring we did not get out there together for John had to leave early for Canada so I went on my own but again I had waited too long and the babies were once again fledged. I had probably missed them in the nest by just a day or so. They were so awkward trying to fly around, their primaries were still growing and female and male were still feeding them. I stood close to them and filmed them doing just this. The male would grab a moth and baby would call to him and then dad would feed him as baby clung to a mangrove perch. I am certain it was the same pair as last year and this year they had three babies to feed. Going no further to find others and happy to film this event in the life of the Mangrove Warbler babies and parents, I looked around for the



I peered into a single mangrove and there it was, a beautiful nest, but empty. Photo by Scarlet Colley.

nest that must be nearby, but no luck, no nest. Now it would be 2007 to find a nest, not knowing at that time that they nest twice.

We watched the birds all winter and many folks went with us to see this first nesting record for the U.S. and all in hopes of the bird someday becoming recognized as a separate species from the Yellow Warbler. Their song was now ingrained in my mind and we were learning much about their behavior.

With April of 2007 arriving, it was time to call John Bax, octogenarian expert back from Canada. John was excited to accompany me and we packed our cameras onto the boat. He shared his experiences of filming Yellow Warbler nests as we skimmed across the bay to the mangrove forest. Unloading our gear quietly we began the respectful walk in. Pointing out to John the little grove I suspected they are nesting in, we were disappointed to hear chip notes away from the grove. To our chagrin we saw the baby already fledged and the parents are feeding it right in front of us as if they could care less we were there.

But this time I had the expert with me and it was not long before John said he had found the nest. I peered into a single mangrove and there it was, a beautiful nest, but empty. John said he was sure they would nest again. We filmed the nest and marveled at it. We

watched the parents feeding the fledglings. I vowed to return in a few weeks to see the new clutch. We were now getting closer to finding the nest with the babies in them. I felt relieved that a major part of our quest was now accomplished thanks to John. The nest was tiny, about four and a half feet off the ground at more to the back edge of the mangroves instead of the denser middle. They had used dried turtle grass to make the nest so it was very soft.

John suggested waiting about two weeks and return to the nest site.

So I went home and marked my dolphin calendar with mangrove warbler dates. Two weeks arrived and to my dismay, when returning to the sight, the very mangrove that held the nest was now without a nest. Miffed, I could see there were still some remnants of nest materials in the little forked branches where the nest had been. Standing there wondering what could have happened to the nest and how would I ever find another without John there to help me, I heard a chip to my left and looking over, there was the female perched on a smaller mangrove.

Suddenly feeling like Mary from the Secret Garden when the robin showed her the key to the garden gate, I imagined this bird showing me her nest. She did. They had rebuilt their nest. She hopped down to a lower branch and then back up and chipped and then Dad sang nearby. As if in a dream, slowly creeping towards her, whispering to her in what I hoped was warbler friendly words, “what do you have to show me”, there was her nest, a fresh new one and inside of it five eggs. Five beautiful speckled eggs. There are no words to express the wonder of this experience. Why so many eggs when there had been only one to three fledglings per breeding pair that I had seen in the past? Snapping a few shots and backing away slowly the female immediately settled down on the eggs with



me still there. Walking away, counting the days in my head when the eggs should hatch, it would be two more weeks.

It was a long two weeks and upon my return, creeping slowly up to the nest and hearing both parents nearby, holding my breath and peeking in, there low and behold was the tiniest yellow naked baby. Baby Yellow Warblers are pink. Why was this one so yellow? It was lying so still I dared not even take a picture it seemed so vulnerable. I would go back in ten days hoping to film it being fed at the nest.

Ten long days passed, and this would be the final day of my quest. This would be the day that I waited years to experience, the baby in the nest, alive and well, feathered and being fed by both parents. They did not care I was there. They busily fed baby and I filmed away. I do not know what happened to the other eggs but the second clutch had one

baby out of five eggs. I eyed the Great-tailed Grackles nearby somewhat suspiciously but who knows, perhaps only one egg was fertile. At any rate there was one healthy baby and yes, we have nesting Mangrove Warblers on this side of the river. I delight in every aspect of this bird and it is here to stay as long as these thick mangrove forests are not frozen as back in the eighties. Will the Mangrove Warbler split from the Yellow Warbler is a key question to be answered in the future. But for us this bird lights up the mangroves with its singing and it is a song we will never forget. It lights up our eyes with its fabulous color and it lights up our hearts to see it raising family. I am hopelessly hooked on Mangrove Warblers! And the quest for the nest is over.

---

*Scarlet and George Colley*  
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# Texas Purple Martins

**By Louise Chambers**

When I moved from northwest Pennsylvania to Texas a few years ago, I was introduced to a different world when it came to Purple Martins. Whereas several northern states, and a few southern states, struggle to stop martin populations from declining or even disappearing as a breeding bird, in Texas martins are thriving. There is a saying about Texas that turned out to be true – a cowboy boot hung in the open can attract martins! Of course that works best if the boot has been modified a bit, as it was in that case, to make it a better home for martins than your average Tony Lama. Whereas ideally open locations in the north can go without martins for years, in Texas martins are urban as well as rural birds, as readily attracted to small city backyards as to larger, more rural sites.

One of the nicest things about martins is that they are everyone's birds. They are more than likely to be backyard birds enjoyed by the whole family, with a love for these unique birds passed on from one generation to the next. Martins invite relaxation and contemplation, behavioral study conducted from the back porch, along with a cold

beverage. These gregarious colonial nesters offer lots of entertainment as they claim cavities, pair up, and raise their families before heading to South America for the non-breeding season.

Spring migration in Texas can be the best in the country, and martin arrivals along the coast can contribute to the excitement. Seeing groups of 100 or more martins arrive at already filled housing is a sight that isn't repeated anywhere else in their breeding range. The first martins usually arrive along the upper Gulf Coast in late January, to be followed by waves of adult and then subadult (yearling) martins over the next three months. Egg-laying gets going in April and most young fledge by mid July. Texas martins may occasionally have second broods, with some confirmed by banding (Dr. Charles Brown) or nestcam observations. By August the skies are empty and quiet once again, unless a roost of northern martins stops along the Texas coast for a week or two.

Being a martin landlord is easier than it used to be, thanks to numerous housing innovations of the past 20 years. These include larger nesting compartments and starling-resistant entrances, external owl/hawk guards and pole guards. Houses and gourd racks on poles equipped with winches make it easier and safer to do regular nest checks. Getting involved with the martins by keeping records of weekly nest check results makes it a very enjoyable and educational family activity.

In cooperation with the Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA), landlords participate in various research projects track arrival dates, collect information on annual nesting success, and monitor premigratory roosts. Martin roosts



John Barrow gives a banding demonstration for 5th grade students at Sanders Elementary School in Corpus Christi every spring. Photo by Louise Chambers.

especially are something everyone can help track and enjoy—results for all these projects can be reported or viewed at [www.purplemartin.org](http://www.purplemartin.org).

Martins' accessibility and tolerance for human activities make them ideal candidates for public sites—what better way to get children interested in nature than to give them a peek inside a house full of eggs and nestlings! Schools in San Antonio, Houston, Dallas-Ft. Worth and Corpus Christi either host colonies of their own or visit neighborhood colony sites on annual field trips. At John Jay High School in San Antonio, science teacher Mike Scully's students have taken science fair projects based on martins to state competitions. The school's colony is equipped with a nestcam and that is broadcast to classrooms, where teachers and staff enjoy the birds as much as the students. In Houston, although no martins have nested in their housing as yet, Meadow Wood Elementary School's 2nd grade classes study martins and then write and illustrate books to showcase what they



Colonial nesters like martins interact with other birds at the colony site, making for lots of opportunities to watch social behavior. Photo by Louise Chambers.



An unusually marked female martin that nested two years in Port O'Connor, TX, at John Barrow's colony. Her sex was only determined after she paired with an adult male. Photo by Louise Chambers.

have learned. And Smith Elementary School in Richmond hosts martins in a house built by a teacher's son as his Eagle Scout project, with the teacher, Daryle Esswein, monitoring the house with help from excited students. The entire 5<sup>th</sup> grade at Sanders Elementary School in Corpus Christi enjoys an annual field trip to see a nest check and banding at the next-door colony of landlord John Barrow, who also participates in their annual science fair. The martin field trips have grown into a nature club, with trips to view whooping cranes, fall hummingbird and hawk migration,

and a trip to the World Birding Center in the Rio Grande Valley. Success stories like these depend in part on teachers, parents, and martin landlords who are willing to spend some extra time and efforts so that students can experience birds and nature up close.

As martins exit North America at the end of the breeding season, Texas hosts martins from points further north by the thousands as they occupy pre-migratory roosts along the coast and inland. Premigratory roosts offer a spectacle that everyone can enjoy, and sometimes offer a great opportunity for a community. Even 'non-birders' can appreciate the sight of thousands of martins swirling down into trees to roost.

On the downside, property owners do not always welcome martin roosts. The fact that martins are attracted to well-lit urban locations can mean that droppings accumulate up on vegetation, cars, and sidewalks. Sometimes businesses hire bird control companies to disperse the roosts with pyrotechnics, other times they are willing to host the birds for their 4–6 week stay and hire clean up crews to hose away the droppings. Today martin events and festivals, several based around premigratory roosts, are held in numerous states, and some cities, such as Lewisville and Grand Prairie, Texas, have incorporated martins into murals decorating highway underpasses, parks, and other public art projects.

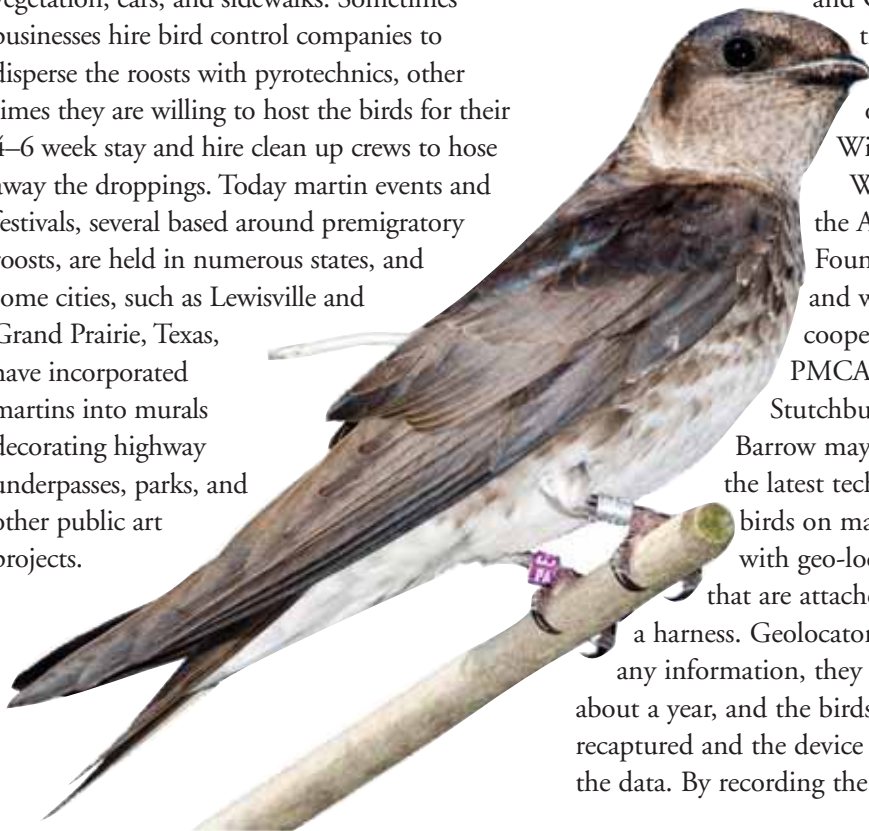
There is a long history of martin banding in Texas, with Dr. Charles Brown and later (the late) Dr. Thomas B. Dellinger banding in the Sherman and Duncanville, to mention just a few banders. A bird banded by Dellinger was eventually recovered in Ontario, and three martins he banded were recovered in South America.

More recently, auxiliary color bands are being used, so keep an eye out for martins with a purple leg band on one leg, along with the aluminum federal band on the other. TX is stamped on one end of the purple band, which will also have an alpha-numeric stamped code, making it easy to read bands with scopes at colony sites or at roosts. Jim Ray is color banding up in the TX panhandle and into OK, while birds have been marked in or near Corpus Christi, San Antonio, Buckholts, Kyle, Buda, Seguin,

and Georgetown under the auspices of Dr. Brent Ortego of TX Parks & Wildlife.

With funding from the Audubon Foundation of Texas, and working in cooperation with the PMCA and Dr.

Stutchbury, bander John Barrow may be the first to use the latest technology for tracking birds on martins later this year, with geo-locators, tiny devices that are attached to the birds with a harness. Geolocators don't transmit any information, they record data for about a year, and the birds must be recaptured and the device removed to retrieve the data. By recording the time of sunrise and



In April of 2007, cold wet weather held migrating martins along the Texas coast for several days. These birds, both adult and subadult ages, hunkered down at John Barrow's Port O Connor colony, but landlords up and down the Texas coast reported the same behavior, until weather improved and the martins moved on. Photo by Tim Morton.

sunset each day, geolocators make it possible to create a map showing daily movement as birds migrate south to their non-breeding grounds, then return north again.

First used on martins in 2007 in a joint project directed by Dr. Bridget Stutchbury of York University in Ontario, and carried out at the PMCA's colony sites in NW PA, the data contained some eye-opening results when two marked martins were recovered in the spring of 2008. One female martin took only two weeks to travel from southern Brazil to NW PA, and the second martin took one month—far quicker journeys than any would have predicted. Since satellite tracking is not an option for small birds due to weight and cost limitations, the use of geolocators offers the first opportunity to follow songbirds on migration. The data gained will help map migration routes, stopover points during migration, and length of time spent in various locations and habitats. Knowing where martins make landfall, rest, and feed could be critical in making sure they have the



Martins cover power lines in Corpus Christi after the nesting season ends. Roosts can be found in Texas any time from June through October, though most martins have headed south by the end of August.

Photo by Louise Chambers.

resources they need available. The Texas Gulf coast is an ideal place to apply this new technology to one of North America's most popular songbirds, and learn more about the time they spend away from their landlords and homes.

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## The White Birds

I WOULD that we were, my beloved, white birds on the foam of the sea!  
We tire of the flame of the meteor, before it can fade and flee;  
And the flame of the blue star of twilight, hung low on the rim of the sky,  
Has awaked in our hearts, my beloved, a sadness that may not die.  
A weariness comes from those dreamers, dew-dabbled, the lily and rose;  
Ah, dream not of them, my beloved, the flame of the meteor that goes,  
Or the flame of the blue star that lingers hung low in the fall of the dew:  
For I would we were changed to white birds on the wandering foam: I and you!  
I am haunted by numberless islands, and many a Danaan shore,  
Where Time would surely forget us, and Sorrow come near us no more;  
Soon far from the rose and the lily and fret of the flames would we be,  
Were we only white birds, my beloved, buoyed out on the foam of the sea!

*William Butler Yeats*

# Resaca de la Palma Opens...

**By Katherine Miller**

When a colleague first told me about a Bird Program Specialist job position at a state park in Brownsville, I knew I'd found my niche. While living in Corpus Christi, I did my research on Botteri's Sparrows on the King Ranch. The draw to return to south Texas and my desire to find something really cool like a Stygian Owl proved irresistible. Besides, when looking for a place to go birding in Texas, it's hard to top the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Along the river from Roma to South Padre Island, the land is dotted with US Fish and Wildlife land and National Wildlife Refuges, State Parks, city parks, and private lands that provide needed habitat for wildlife. The World Birding Center was organized with this in mind. Nine sites, both city parks and state parks, represent major cities from Roma to South Padre Island, inhabited by over 500 species of birds, over 300 species of butterflies, many dragonfly and damselfly species, and other wildlife.

Resaca de la Palma State Park, the eighth to open its doors, celebrated its Grand Opening December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

Resaca de la Palma State Park is a hidden treasure of South Texas, located in Brownsville, Texas. Four habitats compose the 1200-acre park. Sugar hackberry woodlands, close to the resaca, form dense covers ideal for warblers, Long-billed Thrashers, Plain Chachalacas, and buntings. In the Ebony-Anacua woodlands listen for White-tipped Dove, White-winged Dove, White-eyed Vireo, and perhaps even a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. The Tamaulipan Thorn-scrub is a dense thicket of painful branches, but inhabited by Cactus Wrens, Verdins, Greater Roadrunners, and other denizens of the drier habitats. There are two types of grasslands in Resaca: open grasslands and revegetated cropland. The cropland was revegetated for White-winged Dove nest sites, and is more of a savannah site, ideal for Groove-billed Anis and Blue



A park interpreter leads a school group down a trail in search of our feathered friends.  
Photo by Katherine Miller.



One of four observation decks overlooking the resaca. Photo by Katherine Miller.

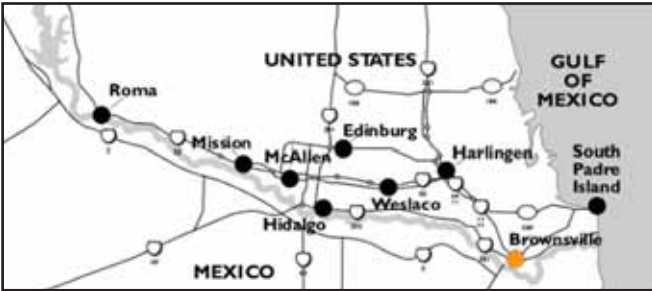


Our grand opening, complete with a ribbon-cutting. The park staff was joined by the members of the World Birding Center and Texas Parks and Wildlife's Executive Director, Carter Smith, and Director of State Parks, Walt Dabney. Photo by Katherine Miller.





A red admiral, one of many butterflies you will see at our park. Photo by Katherine Miller.



Resaca de la Palma is the Brownsville satellite site of the World Birding Center, which is headquartered at Bentsen Rio-Grande State Park in Mission. Photo by Katherine Miller.

Grosbeaks. The open grasslands support White-tailed Kite, Harris’s Hawk, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and Barn Owls.

Finally, the resaca wetland, a fifth habitat, sustains this hidden treasure of South Texas. Black-bellied and Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, Blue-winged Teal, Least Grebe, Anhinga, and all three kingfisher species can be found here. Greater Kiskadees, Carolina Wrens, Northern Cardinals, and Eastern Phoebes thrive along the resaca. Until July of last summer, the resaca had been dry except for

seasonal rains, something that south Texas rarely sees. We began pumping water into the park in July; as the park and the resaca develop, we will see more duck species feeding on the aquatic vegetation.

If your significant other or your children aren’t birders, have no fear. A park that supports these birds thus supports: indigo snakes, Texas tortoises, coral snakes, armadillos, bats, bobcats, coyotes, and javelina. The Tamaulipan thorn-scrub is the preferred habitat for ocelots; while none have been detected here, it’s best to keep your eyes open! We also have 7 geocaches, a hobby of winter Texans, and an excellent way to get non-birders outside for the day! The park is accessible by walking, biking, or riding on our tram. The tram stops at two spots where you can access our trail system, over 8 miles long. There are 4 observation decks, a short boardwalk, and a 2.8-mile tram loop that circles through the park. Admission is \$4.00 for adults and children 13 and older, and free if you have a Texas State Parks Pass.



Visitors ride the tram into the park, ride bicycles, or hike. Photo by Katherine Miller.



The author's favorite trail: Yellowthroat loop.  
 Photo by Katherine Miller.

After playing in the park you can refresh yourself with water and snacks, or buy souvenirs, from our park store.

This site, mostly undisturbed by human impact, is vital to the wildlife of the lower Rio Grande Valley. South of the park, a new public high school is being built, slated to open in the fall of 2009. Much of the agricultural land surrounding the park is being

turned into housing developments. The border wall plays a role, both political and environmental, in the future of the lower Rio Grande valley as well. As these changes to our habitat take place, it is vital that we save unique sites like Resaca de la Palma State Park for the wildlife, and for ourselves.

To find our park: from Hwy 77/83 in Brownsville, go north to Olmito. Take the exit for FM 1732 and go west 2.5 miles. FM 1732 will curve through the small town of Olmito and open into cropland. You will see a sign for Resaca de la Palma

State Park, turn south here. Take this road, New Carmen Blvd, south 1.5 miles. You will see the entrance for our park on your left. For more information, please visit our website, <http://www.worldbirdingcenter.org> or call (956) 350-2920.

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# A New Birder's First Year

**By Tommy Power**

April 26, 2008 is a date that I will remember for a long time.

When my friend and lifelong birder, Jeff Patterson, called me from Austin last April to ask if he could stay at my place in Tomball during his trip to the coast for migration bird watching, I had no idea that I myself was about to become consumed. There was no reason to expect it. Friends since grade school, Jeff and I had been through Boy Scouts together and had been on many backpacking and camping trips as adults on which his bird watching had always added interest for me but had never become a passion. I had even visited with him in Corpus Christi at the home of his grandfather and birding mentor, Sheriton Burr, who was an active T.O.S. member in

his day. But I never had the urge to pick up the binoculars myself.

For some unknown reason, this time would be different. I told Jeff to come on down, and he invited me to come along with him to the coast, so on April 26, we threw our gear into his Isuzu Rodeo and headed down to Bolivar Flats and High Island, neither of which I had visited before. We hooked up with an early morning Audubon tour at the bollards at Bolivar Flats, and my life as a “birder” began just like that. I use that term wishfully and put it in quotation marks, because I have a hard time seeing myself attaining the level of most of the birders I have met during the last year (at least not while still holding my day job). On the other hand, I am encouraged by looking back at how far I have come in the past year. This article is a look back at the highlights of that year from my perspective as a “newbie.”

That first day, Bolivar Flats was teeming with Brown Pelicans, American Avocets swirling the water with their peculiar bills, five species of terns, three of gulls, and all sorts of sandpipers. Here I saw my first Reddish Egret and was able to observe its bizarre foraging behavior. I also got my first look at a Ruddy Turnstone, whose name alone will probably keep the bird a favorite of mine for some time to come.

Leaving the Flats, we headed up the peninsula toward High Island. The love bugs were so intense that day that the ground seemed to be spawning them before our eyes when we would stop to observe the Roseate Spoonbills, Blue-winged Teal, and Lesser Yellowlegs that we saw along the way. Each of these was of course a life bird. One of my early thoughts



Reddish Egret, White Morph, Bolivar Flats. July 2008.

This was my first solo birding trip.

Photo by Tommy Power.



Tricolored Heron, Juvenile, Anahuac NWR. July 2008. This was my first visit to Anahuac, two months before Hurricane Ike. Photo by Tommy Power.

was of the incredible variety that surrounds us every day and to which, up to that point, I had been largely oblivious.

At High Island, we began at Boy Scout Woods. After loitering around the grandstand for a short period, we headed out onto the



Purple Gallinule, Anahuac NWR. July 2008. Photo by Tommy Power.

boardwalk and were almost immediately rewarded with a Common Yellowthroat in a bush not 5 feet from the walk, in plain sight, and perfectly happy to afford us very good looks. I was told not to expect this as normal behavior (or luck). We soon found ourselves at Smith Oaks looking at orioles and warblers of all sorts. Later, while taking a break at the tables under Smith's huge oaks, it was announced that a Cerulean Warbler had been found well down the trail in the direction from which we had just come. Based on what I had seen thus far of the skittishness of warblers, I was disinclined to go running all the way back to try to see a bird that had probably already flown before it was even announced to us. Fortunately, I was persuaded into a better attitude, and ran off to have a look. The effort was rewarded. The bird was still there, and it was beautiful.

I learned some valuable lessons from this first outing: (A) I needed a guidebook (or two). (B) I needed more lens than the 28-135mm zoom I was using, if I wanted to get photographs of anything smaller than a Great Egret or of anything more than 20 feet away. (C) My binoculars were fine. (D) Effort is sometimes rewarded; non-effort never is. And most importantly, (E) I was really enjoying this.

My next highlight was the discovery in June of a striking bird foraging in the drainage channel that runs right behind my home in suburban northwest Harris County. It was a wading bird with plumes and handsome markings on its face. It reminded in some ways of a Great Blue Heron, but it was far too small and the markings did not seem really correct. First, I took photos of it (with

my new lens) and then consulted my Sibley's Guide (also new), which informed me that I had a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron on my hands. To my delight, the bird continued to visit near the same spot several times over the next weeks.



own, again visiting Bolivar Flats and High Island, and adding this time the Anahuac

Mississippi Kite dismantling a cicada, Northwest Harris County. August 2008. These birds provided several evenings of entertainment just blocks off of my homeward commute. Photo by Tommy Power.

I also began noticing several interesting birds around my office (also in northwest Harris County). In addition to the Northern Mockingbirds that were always present, there were also these curious little birds running around, always seeming upset about something and calling out their funny little “peeps” whether on the ground or in the air. It took me a while with my Sibley's and assistance from Cornell's “Birds of North America Online,” to which I had also recently subscribed, to figure out that these were Killdeers. The audio files from Cornell sealed the deal. If this seems almost laughable, remember that I did not know a plover from a pewee at this point. I also learned that another familiar song of summer around my office belonged to a brightly colored and beautiful bird—the Eastern Meadowlark. One satisfying evening after work during this period was spent until almost dark watching what I later learned was a Swainson's Hawk gliding and circling for several minutes in the golden light before diving to the ground to capture its dinner. All of this happened within a few hundred feet of my office.

I took an entire Saturday in July to bird the upper Texas coast on my

National Wildlife Refuge. I am very glad that I did this before Hurricane Ike significantly changed each of these landscapes a couple of months later. I recorded 40 species on this trip and added 21 life birds between the three locations, including Wood Stork, King



Swallow-tailed Kite, Robbins Park at Smith Point. August 2008. This was the highlight of a trip originally intended to focus on the Smith Point Hawk Watch. Photo by Tommy Power.



Great Egret, Faulkey Gully Trail. January, 2009. This was taken on my first walkabout of this year.  
Photo by Tommy Power.

Rail, Purple Gallinule, and Piping Plover. It was thrilling to see so many interesting birds for the very first time in one day. I wondered if I would ever get 21 lifers in a single day again.

In early August, I started seeing some interesting and very graceful birds circling



American Kestrel, Faulkey Gully Trail. January, 2009.  
Photo by Tommy Power.

above a neighborhood on my daily commute. At first, I saw only a couple of them, apparently raptors, but with narrower wings than I had ever seen before. After a few days, I was able to figure out that these were Mississippi Kites; I had never seen anything like them. Eventually, I located their favorite tree, in which as many as eleven would perch at a time. I returned a few times in the evenings to enjoy watching their display of cicada-catching in flight, dismantling their still-buzzing prey in midair, and dining on the wing.

August brought me to Yosemite National Park, where I added four new birds that I am not likely to see around Harris County: Acorn Woodpecker, Mountain Chickadee, Blue Grouse, and Steller's Jay.

At the end of August, Jeff returned and we made trips to W. G. Jones State Forest in Conroe, where we saw the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, and to Smith Point to participate in the Hawk Watch. The hawks were not numerous that day, but we did manage to see a Swallow-tailed Kite at Robbins Park on Smith Point, which, along with the other 65 species we saw (including another 21 lifers for me), made the trip to the coast well worth it for both of us.

September brought Hurricane Ike, followed immediately by a trip through the Panama Canal with stops along the Pacific Coast of Central America. I saw many Texas birds while there, including the Groove-billed Ani, Great Kiskadee, Osprey, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Common Black-Hawk, Green Kingfisher, and Spotted Sandpiper—all life birds. I also got very good looks at Brown and Masked Boobies from the ship.



Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Faulkey Gully Trail. May 2009. I was glad to see the return of this visitor to my neighborhood this year. Photo by Tommy Power.

My first real experience of the effects of Hurricane Ike came during the Christmas Bird Count at the Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, where my small group went with David Sarkozi on a swamp buggy through some of the marshlands of the refuge. Everything land-based, including a young alligator lying by the side of the road, was dead from saltwater inundation, and some of the areas had already been cleared by burning. Our count was pretty low, the highlight being a single Virginia Rail. The refuge was almost unrecognizable, a far cry from its vibrant appearance in July.

My 2008 birding came to a close with a trip to the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge. We did not see any Prairie-Chickens, but I did see a Northern Harrier in action and added another 8 species to my life list, including the Sandhill Crane and a pair of White-tailed Hawks.

Most of the interesting birds of early 2009 were found in my “back yard” along the Faulkey Gully trail that runs right behind my home in northwest Harris County. Notables

included seven species of heron/egret, several American Kestrels, many Wilson’s Snipes, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Belted Kingfisher. I was also treated to a neighborhood fly-over by a pair of Bald Eagles in January, just as I was leaving to run errands.

Recent notables have included the return of the Yellow-crowned Night Heron to the drainage canal behind my house, a Buff-breasted Sandpiper found at Rushing Park on the Katy Prairie, a Cape May Warbler at the Willows near Sabine Woods, and the HDNT-banded American Greater Flamingo, which put in an appearance in mid-May of 2009 at Freeport.

In my first calendar year of birding, I recorded 187 birds, 25 of which were outside



Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Paul D. Rushing Park, Katy Prairie. May 2009. Photo by Tommy Power.



American Flamingo, Freeport. May 2009. This well-documented bird had been seen the previous week on the Louisiana coast and has visited up and down the gulf coast since 2006. Photo by Tommy Power.



Texas. Of those 25, only 4 were seen in the US (at Yosemite), with the balance coming on the Central America trip, mostly from Mexico and Costa Rica. As I write this, I am now up to 207 life birds. As for listing, I decided that, for birds prior to April 26, 2008, I would list



American Robin, Kleb Woods, Tomball. February 2009. Photo by Tommy Power.

only those for which I had photographs, since I kept no other records before then. There are only four birds for which I have such photos: Chihuahuan Raven, Western Scrub-Jay, Greater Roadrunner, and Turkey Vulture, all from a 2006 trip to Big Bend National Park. So, even though I have been seeing Blue Jays and mockingbirds all my life, they became life birds for me in 2008.

This was a very satisfying year, in which I learned how blessed I am to live within day-trip distance of the upper Texas coast and that there is good birding right out my back door. I have made some new friends, and I have thoroughly enjoyed my trips to Sabine Woods, Quintana,

Wilson's Snipe, Faulkey Gully Trail. January 2009. Another of my fascinating "home birds."

Photo by Tommy Power.

High Island, Bolivar Flats, and the Anahuac NWR, and I look forward to many happy returns.

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# Reddish Egrets: Ongoing research into their ecology and plumage coloration

*By Clay Green*

The Reddish Egret is a fairly common sight along the Texas Gulf Coast. In some areas, especially in the Laguna Madre, it is arguably the most common species of the family Ardeidae (the herons). Reddish Egrets are a coastal habitat specialist, generally foraging in shallow waters (< 25cm) of lagoons, estuaries and tidal flats and nesting on nearby dredge-spoil or naturally occurring islands. The range of this species occurs westward to southern California and Baja California and along the Pacific coast of Mexico to Great Inagua, Bahamas and Cuba representing the easternmost portions of its range. Texas and Tamaulipas, Mexico represent the epicenter of the global population and account for 10–40 percent of the total population, depending on survey estimates (Green 2006).

Reddish Egrets, a dimorphic species, occur as all white-plumaged birds or the typical “dark morph” plumage pattern. Infrequently, intermediate or pied morphs are observed where the individual is a “dark morph”

plumage pattern with intermittent but symmetrical white feathers generally occurring in the flight and tail feathers. Reddish Egrets are one of several dimorphic species of herons and understanding the evolutionary and ecological significance of this phenomenon has intrigued biologists for many years.

Initially, I became acquainted with and began studying Reddish Egrets during my dissertation work on the ecological significance of white plumages in herons. I spent many days, stretched out over a 2-year period, observing foraging Reddish Egrets at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge near Rio Hondo, Texas. I was interested in seeing if there were any foraging differences between the two color morphs as reported to occur in the Reef Heron, another dimorphic species of heron. What I found out was not as straightforward as I originally suspected. I did observe some foraging differences, specifically dark morph Reddish Egrets appeared to be more active foragers in

shallow waters while white morphs were more passive foragers at shallow depths. This is in support of the hypothesis that white plumage is more cryptic to aquatic prey than dark plumage and therefore, white plumage birds may adapt more passive foraging while more conspicuous dark plumaged birds may choose more pursuit-type foraging. This anecdotally seems to be the case as seen in typical foraging behaviors of American White Pelicans (forage while swimming) and Brown Pelicans (plunge-dive). However, with Reddish Egrets it may not be that simple as both morphs are often foraging in their typical high-energy manner and research shows, neither



Reddish Egret nestling banded on island in the Ojo de Liebras, Baja California. Reddish Egrets in Baja California build twig nests on bare rock outcroppings on the various islands off the coast.

Photo by Austin Hill.



Typical "dark morph" and "white morph" of the Reddish Egrets. This picture was taken on nesting colony just south of the Kennedy Causeway in Corpus Christi, Texas. Photo by Zachary Holderby.

morph differs in their overall use of foraging tactics.

The interaction between habitat and ambient light on Reddish Egret foraging is an area of research that has yet to be fully



Intermediate or pied Reddish Egret. Note the symmetrical pattern of white plumage occurring on the flight and tail feathers. Photo by Austin Hill.

explored. As the sun tracks across the sky, the altitude and azimuth of the sun influences the level of ambient light and degree of shadows. It is already known that other herons such as Great Blue Herons alter their foraging posture to account for the sun glare on the water. A current hypothesis is that the interaction between ambient light, foraging habitat and plumage coloration may influence where Reddish Egrets forage with each color morph taking advantage of the environmental conditions to maximize crypsis to aquatic prey thereby increasing their foraging efficiency. While conducting research for his thesis, one of my graduate students Zachary Holderby observed dark morph Reddish Egrets leaving (and returning) more often during morning and evening hours from nesting colonies while white morphs forage continuously throughout the day, but peaking

during midday hours. This preliminary data suggests the two color morphs may have different daily activity patterns for foraging, taking advantage of different lighting conditions to maximize the success of each

foraging trip away from the colony. My graduate students at Texas State University and I are continuing to explore the fascinating phenomenon of plumage dimorphism in the Reddish Egret.

I also became interested in Reddish Egrets because of their conservation status. Reddish Egrets are listed as state-threatened in Texas (Florida too) and are a Species of Special Concern by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and included in Focal Species Strategy that lists the top ~130 species in North America requiring conservation attention. As

mentioned, Texas contains the largest population of Reddish Egrets and conservation efforts in Texas will go a long ways towards ensuring the survival of the species globally. Our understanding of the natural history of Reddish Egrets is good but not complete and one major area that is lacking in information pertains to juvenile survival. Reddish Egrets are suspected of not reaching adult breeding maturity until their third or fourth year of age. Very little is known about juvenile movement and survival during those critical years between leaving their natal colony and breeding as an adult.

In 2006, in collaboration with Bart Ballard (Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute), I initiated a color banding program of Reddish Egrets along the Texas coast. Our first two years, we used vinyl colored tags affixed to the standard aluminum bird band on their leg. This method was developed by Dr Ray Telfair II and used successfully for many years on Cattle Egrets. We used orange "Telfair tags" in 2006 and 2007 that had an alphanumeric code stenciled on the tag. Each tag was given a unique alphanumeric code which allows us to specifically identify a resighted bird,



Color banded Reddish Egret showing color band with alphanumeric code. These bands have been used continuously since 2008. Photo by Clay Green.

gaining information on survival and movement from the bird. We banded over 250 hatchling Reddish Egrets in those first two years and have had considerable success in resighting the individuals over the past 4 years. However, the tags have not withstood the daily exposure to sun and saltwater and in some cases the tags have discolored, curled, and the stenciling has faded. In 2008, we switched to color bands which have an alphanumeric code engraved on the band. We used red bands with white engraving in 2008 and blue bands with white engraving in 2009. These bands appear to withstand the environment much better and are considerably easier to resight.

To date, we have banded over 700 birds, mostly in Texas but also Great Inagua (Bahamas), the Florida Keys, Tamaulipas (Mexico), Baja California (Mexico), and Chiapas (Mexico). Birds banded in Texas have been resighted along the Texas coast northward to Cameron Parish in Louisiana as well as southward into Tamaulipas. Birds have also been resighted inland. For example, a bird banded near Port Mansfield was resighted foraging in a feedlot pond near Hargill, Texas (Hidalgo County) and another banded in the Upper Laguna Madre was seen just east of Kingsville in Kleberg County. We also had one of our birds banded in the Ojo de Liebras of Baja California resighted by a biologist vacationing in Puerto Vallarta. The bird was seen daily for about a week foraging in tidal creek near his hotel! One important fact to consider is that over 80 percent of our resightings are from birders, fishermen, and naturalists who happen upon the bird and take the time to report the sighting. This is citizen-science at its best and this research could not be possible without the help of others reporting the banded birds. Our team of



Banded Reddish Egret with vinyl "Telfair Tag." These tags were used on birds banded in 2006 and 2007.  
Photo by Clay Green.

biologists cannot possibly search all potential areas that Reddish Egrets can forage, so your help is greatly needed.

Besides trying to understand more about the movements and survival of Reddish Egrets, conservation and management of Reddish Egrets involves dealing with the threats that face this species and other waterbirds. Factors such as human disturbance, predators on islands, habitat loss and global climate change (sea level rise) all represent significant threats to the survival of Reddish Egrets in Texas and across their range. For example, the restoration of Bahia Grande in south Texas has already paid dividends for Reddish Egrets (not to mention many other species) as numbers of this species were reported nesting in the restored wetlands where only recently there were none. Additionally, major colonies like Green

Island (off mouth of Arroyo Colorado in Laguna Madre) are only successful so long as predators such as coyotes and raccoons are not present on the island. Based on early reports from the 1920s, Green Island contained several thousand nesting Reddish Egrets while today the annual counts yield 400-600 nesting pairs in productive years. In some years when predators are able to get on the island, the Reddish Egrets along with dozens of other species fare poorly.

### Ongoing Research

Faculty and students from Texas State University and Texas A&M-Kingsville have been studying Reddish Egrets since 2005 and we together with partners such as Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program and the US Fish and Wildlife Service are finally bringing Reddish Egrets the attention they so deserve. Reddish Egrets are a fascinating species for numerous reasons and are worthy of our efforts to conserve this magnificent species. Reddish Egrets are a model species to study the occurrence of color polymorphism in birds and are an indicator species to aid humans in assessing the environmental health of important ecosystems like the Laguna Madre. Lastly, our efforts here in Texas for Reddish Egret conservation may truly have range-wide implications for the survival of this species.

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# The Ringed Kingfisher in Texas

By **Tim Brush**

The Ringed Kingfisher (*Megaceryle torquata*) is a large, crested Neotropical kingfisher that has expanded its range into the USA from Mexico, within the last 40 years. Although first recorded in the USA in 1888 in Laredo, Texas, the first Ringed Kingfisher nest was not discovered until 1970, just below Falcon Dam. The species, like so many tropical birds, is spreading north across Texas, so more Texas birders are able to see it close to home.

In Texas, Ringed Kingfishers are almost exclusively found on fresh water, and all records are from low elevations. In its broad range in Central and South America, the species occurs regularly on salt water, even on some of the Lesser Antilles, and it has occurred as high as 2600–3000 meters above sea level. Texas obviously does not “provide” high elevations but does have salty shorelines!

Originally occurring as far north as central Nuevo León and central Tamaulipas, Mexico, the 1888 record was made by a traveling bird collector. Birders found a few birds in central and southern Texas during the 1950s, and a pair was present along the Rio Grande below

Falcon Dam for at least 3 years before the nest was discovered in 1970. We will never know for sure, but I suspect that the species “river-hopped” between the many permanent streams emerging from the Sierra Madre Oriental of Nuevo León. Ringed Kingfishers expanded throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley (the Valley) and upriver to Laredo and Del Rio during 1970s and 1980s and now are fairly common in the Valley, including the Arroyo Colorado and various resacas in Hidalgo and Cameron counties. Nesting is limited to locations with steep, dirt banks, but the birds spread out along canals and other water bodies in winter.

The first Texas nesting outside the Rio Grande watershed was along the Nueces River, near Uvalde, in 2001. Since the Nueces, in its southwestern bend, is only 40–50 miles from the Rio Grande, the birds may have crossed somewhere between Laredo and Eagle Pass. Currently, Ringed Kingfishers are seen regularly along the Nueces and Guadalupe rivers in parts of central Texas, and the species has spread recently to the South Llano River near Junction and the

Colorado River. The species is seen less commonly near the coast (even on South Padre Island!), but two individuals seen along lower Mission River in 2007 were an exception. Lack of both hunting perches and nest-sites may explain the species rarity in coastal South Texas.

As species expand their ranges, wandering individuals are occasionally seen well outside the normal range. Ringed Kingfishers have been seen as far north as Oklahoma (1998), as far east as western Florida (1996) and northwestern Louisiana (1999), and as far west as the Amistad Lake drainage in Texas (Devils River in 1998 and 2002) and in the Pecos River valley (1998, 2001, and 2003). The species occurs north only to



The Ringed Kingfisher is one of three Kingfishers found in Texas. Photo by Bob Pierson.



The rufous breast is often the key field sign in Ringed Kingfishers.

Photo by Jimmy Jackson.

southern Sinaloa on the west coast of Mexico, and shows no signs of spreading northward from there.

Like the Belted Kingfisher, which is more widespread in Texas and in the USA as a whole, Ringed Kingfishers often hunt from relatively high perches with good visibility of the water. However, unlike the Belted, the Ringed seldom hovers while searching for fish (and the occasional crab or other crustacean). One would have to be very patient to study Ringed Kingfisher foraging, since it may take more than an hour for the next foraging attempt (as J. V. Remsen noted in his intensive detailed study of tropical kingfishers). Normally, fish are captured within 1 meter of the shoreline and quite close to the surface. Clear water is preferred, but not necessary, as long as prey are abundant.

The harsh, low-pitched *klek* or *kek* is often heard before seeing the bird, which may be flying over a forested or open area. If the bird detects another Ringed in its territory, it may give a rapid, machine-gun-like rattle and may fly at the intruder. Alexander Skutch, in one of his careful studies of tropical birds, heard nestling giving a “sizzling” sound when he opened a nest-cavity in Central America.

The nests of all American kingfishers are burrows excavated about 2.5 meters into a riverbank or other vertical, dirt exposure, far enough above the water or ground to make it

almost impossible for predators to enter. Nestlings and adults must shuffle in and out, on their small, weak feet, but the large strong bill of the adults is quite useful in excavation. The incubation period is difficult to determine for obvious reasons, but is probably more than 3 weeks. Both sexes incubate, sharing duties equally and incubating for 24 hours at a time. Incubation constancy is very high, with a short foraging break in late afternoon by incubating adult. Exchange of incubating birds occurs in early-mid morning, with returning bird usually entering burrow before incubating partner has left. Incubating birds regurgitate undigested fish scales and bones, attracting flies to nest chamber (Skutch 1972).

The nestling period is likely 35–38 days long, and both partners bring food. Active nest burrows usually develop grooves made by the feet of the entering and exiting adults. Fledglings stay together, near the nest, for at least a few days after fledging. Juveniles are distinguished by “streaky” upperparts and blue-gray breast band washed with Rufous (Fry and Fry 1992). I do not know if burrows are re-used, but suspect that birds normally excavate a new one each year. I have seen Black Vultures and Muscovy Ducks perched at the enlarged entrances of burrows along the Rio Grande, and I suspect that they may occasionally take over old Ringed Kingfisher burrows.



The harsh, low-pitched *klek* or *kek* is often heard before seeing the bird.

Photo by Bert Frenz.



On occasion the Ringed Kingfisher allows for outstanding photos, but one must be patient and lucky! Photo alanmurphy.com.

Ringed Kingfishers tend to dominate in encounters with other kingfishers, because of their size. Usually, birds are dispersed fairly widely along rivers and may not encounter each other much. Sometimes, conflicts develop when a “good” perch site is occupied by a Belted Kingfisher (or Amazon Kingfisher, in the tropics). The smaller bird quickly flees when the Ringed approaches and no harm is done! The tables are turned, occasionally, as in the observation of a White-tailed Hawk eating a Ringed Kingfisher in Brazil.

Much remains to be learned, particularly of the nesting biology of the Ringed Kingfisher. The sources listed below are some of the more extensive studies of Ringed Kingfishers. In addition, a detailed summary of information on Ringed Kingfishers will be published soon in the Birds of North America life-history series (available at a discount for T.O.S. members, and free for AOU members).

The Inter-Library Loan Staff, University of Texas-Pan American Library, helped acquire materials. I thank all the observers who provided information on unpublished observations, in particular Manuel Marin,

Rhandy Helton, and Mark W. Lockwood, and the support of Jack Eitniear.

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# Hummingbird Heights

**By Christina Mild**

*Hummingbird Heights* is a take-off on modern names for subdivisions and apartment complexes. It's meant to encourage the inclusion of blooming trees and other tall native blooming plants in the hummingbird garden. These provide hummers a bit of added safety from predation, especially in residential yards, where ever-present domestic cats are on the hunt.

In planning a hummingbird garden, one might consider using a bit of existing vegetation to create a natural screen where viewers might watch visiting hummers without disturbing them.

Any existing tree or tall shrub might also be used as a hummer nest site. Thorny specimens are especially protective. Older trees with lichen-covered branches are especially useful, as hummers use lichens as a camouflage-covering in constructing a nest. Spider webs are used to glue the nest together and spiders provide high-nitrogen food for egg-laying female hummers. Thus, one considers garden spiders friend rather than foe in this context.



*Acleisanthes obtusa*. Photo by Christina Mild.



Hummingbirds can be attracted with native plants as well as with sugar water hanging feeders. Photo by Christina Mild.

Hummer feeders are great, but mine are quickly infested by a wide variety of insect pests, and pillaged by visiting squirrels, opossums and raccoons.

In lieu of maintaining nectar-feeding contraptions, I've planted native species favored by hummers in easy-viewing distance of my office window.

Pata de Chivo, *Bauhinia mexicana*, a small tree native to nearby Mexico, performs well in deep south Texas. Delicate white blooms are present almost year-round, attracting large swallowtail butterflies and several species of hummingbirds. A Hill Country native, Anacacho Orchid, *Bauhinia congesta*, is appropriate for much of the state.

Another white bloomer, *Acleisanthes obtusa* (Yerba Santa), attracts hummers to long



*Acleisanthes*. Photo by Christina Mild.

trumpet-shaped (Angel's Trumpets) white blooms. These provide nectar from late afternoon into evening. Growing as a mounding groundcover or climbing adjacent shrubs, this vine will form a drapery of white blooms. Several species of *Acleisanthes* grow in many parts of the state. I see hummers nectaring from my birding tower where these vines cover vast portions of wild brush.

Anacahuita (Wild Olive) tree (*Cordia boissieri*) grows well in south Texas. Hummingbirds guard these prolific white bloomers as nectaring territory.

One thinks of hummer nectar plants as those with red tubular blooms, and many natives fit this description. Among these are species widespread in Texas:

Wild Turk's Cap (*Malvaviscis arboreus*) shrubs attract hummers as well as many nectar-seeking and egg-laying butterflies.



*Bauhinia mexicana*. Photo by Christina Mild.



*Bauhinia congesta*. Photo by Christina Mild.

This plant is a favorite of photographers and grows well in many locations.

In wide open, sunny locations a field of wildflowers will attract hummers. They are especially attracted to Tropical Sage, *Salvia coccinea*, which survives even clay soils and seeds out readily. Lesser Goldfinch eat the seeds of this scarlet red bloomer.

Indian Paintbrush is another hummer favorite. Many Paintbrush species are present throughout the U.S. Such legumes as Texas Bluebonnets and Partridge Pea will enhance the growth of other wildflowers by adding nitrogen to the soil. Native American Seed has created native hummingbird wildflower seed mixes and provides all kinds of information about planting and maintaining wildflower gardens. See: [<http://www.seedsources.com>] Select "Shop for Seed" and "Hummers and Singers".



Ginger's Paintbrush. Photo by Christina Mild.



Indian Paintbrush. Photo by Christina Mild.



*Pata de chivo*. Photo by Christina Mild.



Tropical Sage. Photo by Christina Mild.



Turk's Cap *Malvaviscus drummondii*.  
Photo by Christina Mild.

Several books by Sally and Andy Wasowski on Native Texas Plants list best hummer plants for each region of the state. They provide lots of detail about each plant.

Travis Audubon has created a great webpage for folks in Central Texas, a guide to planting hummingbird gardens:

<http://www.travisaudubon.org/Birds/Hummingbirds/Hummingbirds.html>

The hummers will remind you when it's time to water your planted garden. My resident hummers peer into the office window when their favorite plants are thirsty. That's a bit of nagging I actually enjoy!

---

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# Lucifer Hummingbirds in the Christmas Mountains

**By Carolyn Ohl-Johnson**

Lucifer Hummingbirds (*Calothorax lucifer*) breed only in a few areas of the United States. Although they can be found nesting in the semi-desert scrub of southeast Arizona and New Mexico, their primary nesting grounds are at elevations of four thousand feet, or above, in Big Bend National Park and the adjacent Christmas Mountains. As the park doesn't allow hummingbird feeders, the best place in Texas to study these mysterious marvels of nature may be my oasis in the Christmas Mountains (<http://bigbendbirdhabitat.com>).

Over the years I have found their feeder visitations to be quite erratic. One day there will be several Lucifers vying for the feeders and the next day nary a one. Of course, there is a logical reason behind that... something they crave is in bloom. When the agaves and other flowers are blooming Lucifer activity decreases at the feeders, but when the ocotillos are flowering, they tend to ignore the feeders altogether.

Black-chinned Hummingbirds are the only other hummingbird species known to

breed in the Christmas Mountains. Their feeder visits are more constant, although they too diminish in frequency when ocotillos are flowering.

When Lucifers are compelled to visit feeders, they are attacked mercilessly by the more dominant Black-chinned. These relentless attacks may be the main reason they eschew feeders whenever feasible. Honeybees are also a feeder hazard for hummingbirds to reckon with. Perhaps not coincidentally, hummers are most active early in the mornings when bees are least bothersome.

Lucifer sightings are reported in the Christmas Mountains off and on from early March through November. This small hummingbird is easily identified by its curved bill and magenta gorget. Of the two *Calothorax* hummingbird species, the Lucifer is the only one that extends its range into the United States.

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**Carolyn Ohl-Johnson**



Lucifer hummingbird.  
Photo by Kendall Craig.

# Northern Aplomado Falcon Restoration – 2008 Report 15 Jan 09

**By Peregrine Fund Staff**

## PROPAGATION

In 2008, the Aplomado Falcon restoration program had 34 Aplomado Falcons lay 156 fertile eggs that hatched, and 152 (97%) survived to release age. One of the ovulating falcons was a first-time layer. One falcon, which ovulated in 2007, did not lay in 2008. In addition to the captive eggs, three eggs were removed from a nest that was in jeopardy in South Texas and brought to the Boise facility. The three eggs hatched and all survived to release age. Including the wild eggs, 190 were fertile, 159 hatched, and 155 survived to release age.

## New-laying Falcons

One falcon laid for the first time in 2007. This five-year-old female laid seven eggs. Three (43%) were fertile, three (100%)

hatched, and three (100%) survived to release age.

## Non-laying Falcons

Three breeding age (2+ years) female Aplomado Falcons did not lay. Two two-year-old females will remain paired with their males and should lay next year. A sixteen-year-old female, which laid eleven eggs in 2006, did not lay this year and will be repaired with a proven male for 2009.

## Egg Production

Thirty-four Aplomado Falcons ovulated in 2008. Twenty-one were artificially inseminated, nine copulated and were artificially inseminated and four females (three because of old age and the fourth an imprint on display at the VMIC and therefore a single bird) did not copulate and no artificial inseminations were performed.

Twenty-one females were artificially inseminated and produced 222 eggs. One-hundred-five (47%) were fertile, 86 hatched (82%), and 84 (98%) survived to release age. Semen was obtained by stripping the paired males and was generally high quality.

## Young Dying

Four young Aplomado Falcon chicks died in 2008. Three chicks hatched with unretracted yolk sacs, most likely from poor natural incubation because of the unusually cold spring. The yolk sacs were either reinserted into the abdominal cavity or removed but it appeared there were egg infections and



A popular perch for Aplomado Falcons are the miles of fence posts along the lower Gulf coast.

Photo by Steve Bentsen.



Young Aplomado Falcons. Photo by Steve Bentsen.

antibiotics were administered. These chicks died a few hours after hatching. The fourth chick appeared normal until it arrived at the release site. At that time it had reduced control of its legs. The chick was euthanized and the necropsy revealed a trauma to the spinal column indicated by loose and easily manipulated vertebrae.

### Young Retained for Breeding

Six young male Aplomado Falcons were retained for breeding. These birds were chosen based on genetic representation in the captive population. The males will be paired and placed in breeding chambers in the future. These young were retained to ensure we meet our proposed production goals.

### Peregrine Falcon Incubation of Aplomado Falcon Eggs

Aplomado Falcon clutches are easily extended to more than eight eggs. This can greatly increase the potential production of the population. However, Aplomado Falcons

only incubate three eggs at a time and natural incubation generally doubles hatchability. Our solution is to obtain natural incubation of Aplomado Falcon eggs from Peregrine Falcons. Incubation of Aplomado Falcon eggs by Peregrine Falcons is necessary to produce large numbers of young Aplomado Falcons on an annual basis.

### Vitamin/Mineral Supplementation

Vitamin supplementation in the quail feed was similar to previous years. Additional vitamin E and biotin were added at the rate of 3.14 pounds and 0.86 pounds, respectively, to 1996 pounds of Purina Turkey Starter®. This supplementation provides the quail with 4  $\mu$ gs. The vitamin E supplement causes similar circulating levels of vitamin E in the captive adult Aplomado Falcons compared to wild Aplomado Falcons. In addition we used Purina Turkey Starter® which contained 30 pounds per ton of marigold seeds. The marigold seeds contain high levels of beta carotene which enhances the skin color of the falcons. The two rations were fed to the quail at a ratio of two to one. Other vitamin/mineral supplements used in 1996 through 2007 were used in 2008. Dynamite Zoo Formula®, Dynamite Marketing Inc., was administered daily, at one-quarter teaspoon in the food items. This supplementation regime will be used prior to and during the 2009 breeding season.

### RELEASE

#### Release of Falcons

During the 2008 field season, a total of 149 Aplomado Falcons were released from three sites in New Mexico and four sites in West Texas. Our overall success rate for this year resulted in 88 (59%) falcons successfully reaching independence. A total of 1,542

captive-bred falcons have now been released in Texas and New Mexico, and during the previous five years, 444 of 650 (68%) falcons released became independent.

In New Mexico we continued our release efforts at the site on land administered by the Bureau of Land Management, White Sands Missile Range, and New Mexico State Lands Office and on the Armendaris Ranch (Engle, New Mexico). A total of 70 falcons were released in New Mexico in 2008; 32 at the aforementioned site and another 38 at two sites on the Armendaris Ranch. These falcons were released under the 10(j) Rule which designates the population in New Mexico and Arizona as a “Nonessential - Experimental Population.” Seventy-nine falcons were released at four sites in West Texas.

Mortality factors after release remained much the same as in previous years. This included premature dispersal and predation by Great Horned Owls and coyotes. Low condition of the falcons caused by high ambient air temperatures and subsequent dehydration and lack of appetite as well as adverse weather conditions, predominantly high wind, contributed to poor release success early in the season at two locations. We quickly responded to the problem by providing bath pans inside of the hack boxes and also fed pre-release falcons more quail mush. This presented problems later during release when falcons emerged from the hack box and showed little to no interest in the food available on the tower. The falcons fledged without making an association with the tower which led to premature dispersal. We adjusted to this problem by reinstating removing food from the hack box and fasting the falcons the day prior to release to increase their hunger on release day. This worked very well and releases progressed as expected thereafter.

Depredating Peregrine Falcons were not a problem at release sites this year; however, southern New Mexico and West Texas

received little to no rainfall between the months of October 2007 and June 2008 making it one of the driest winters and springs on record. This apparently had a huge negative impact on early nesting birds like raptors, and very few immature raptors were observed in the area during the hack season. These conditions most likely relate to the absence of Peregrine Falcons as depredating birds at hack sites this season, but we anticipate, once weather and range conditions improve in the area, Peregrines will again present a potential problem.

### **Nesting and Survey Results for Texas and New Mexico**

Survey efforts in South Texas were focused on determining occupancy and productivity in all known territories as well as searching for falcons outside the current survey area; a total of 73 falcons were observed. This includes 31 territorial pairs and 11 individuals. Out of the 73 falcons sighted, we were able to determine if 35 (48%) were banded. We found 11 were un-banded and 24 were banded, of which 16 were identified. We surveyed 38 territories in South Texas of which 31 (82%) were occupied. Of the 15 territories in the Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuge (MINWF) survey area, 14 (93%) were occupied. Eleven pairs attempted to nest and four were successful at fledging 12 falcons. Nest success was particularly low compared to the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge survey area. Seventeen (74%) out of 23 territories surveyed in the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge (LANWR) area were occupied; 14 pairs attempted to nest. One pair was still active at the completion of the survey and 10 pairs successfully fledged 26 falcons making this one of the highest productivity rates observed yet in the LANWR area at 2.0 fledglings per nest. Overall, occupancy was lower this year than in previous years with 31 out of 38 (82%) territories occupied; this is down from

2007 (91%). The occupancy rate for the LANWR area dropped from last year's 89% to 74%, and it appeared that a large amount of turnover occurred, especially in the male component of the population.

Of particular concern, aside from the number of unoccupied territories ( $n = 4$ ), was the presence of un-paired adult females on territories ( $n = 2$ ) and the presence of juvenile males paired with females on territories ( $n = 4$ ). Furthermore, the prey in LANWR wasn't very abundant, at least when compared to what we've seen before. The area had not received any rainfall between November of 2007 and June of 2008. Perhaps a lack of prey created a situation of unoccupied territories and apparent low condition in falcons occupying territories; nevertheless, fewer occupying pairs managed to fledge a considerable number of falcons despite the habitat and prey conditions earlier in the year. On MINWR, everything seemed normal with regards to falcons occupying territories and prey populations being substantial; however, nest depredation, even at artificial nest structures, depressed the observed productivity in this survey area. Likely predators include raccoons and Crested Caracaras.

Minimal survey work occurred in West Texas and New Mexico. Four territorial falcons were observed in New Mexico and five in West Texas. One pair fledged one falcon from a nest north of Valentine, Texas. In addition, we collected two addled eggs for contaminant analysis from an abandoned nest in one of the occupied territories in West Texas. Additional surveys were conducted on the King and Kenedy Ranches to check the nest structures and surrounding habitat, and included a road survey west of Raymondville. Overall, no falcons were observed during these surveys.

We placed six artificial nest structures in currently unoccupied habitat and four structures in existing territories as new additions or replacements. Currently, there

are 63 nest structures available to falcons in South Texas.

### **Activity under Safe Harbor Permit**

We conducted the first "take" activity under our Safe Harbor Permit since its inception in 1996. A construction project on Port of Brownsville property was approved and works begun prior to notification of The Peregrine Fund, putting a nesting pair of Aplomado Falcons in the middle of the project in jeopardy. After our biologists identified the problem, a meeting was held among all concerned parties. We determined the best course of action for all concerned, including the falcons, would be to pull (take from the nest) the falcons' eggs and incubate them at our Boise facility. All three eggs were hatched and the young falcons were then sent to one of our West Texas release sites; two survived to independence. An additional, artificial nest structure was provided for the adult falcons approximately a quarter mile away from the construction project. Within days, the falcons had occupied this new structure and within several weeks were incubating another clutch of eggs.

### **Monitoring Remnant Populations in Mexico**

Since 1996 we have monitored nest productivity of a small population of Aplomado Falcons in Chihuahua, Mexico. Since then the population has fluctuated with climatic conditions, particularly precipitation. In recent years the number of the population has also decreased due to conversion of grasslands to agriculture. During the 2008 season survey efforts focused on determining occupancy of known falcon territories within the Tinaja Verde and Sueco study areas. A total of 29 territories were surveyed; 17 (59%) were occupied. This is a decrease from 18 occupied territories observed in 2007. Twelve young fledged from 11 nests for a productivity rate of 1.09 young per occupied territory.



Native grasslands, in particular at the Sueco area, continue to be converted to farmland. During the last three years several territories have been converted to agricultural fields. We continue to work with state and federal agencies, and conservation organizations in Mexico and the United States in addressing this issue.

No falcons have drowned in water storage tanks equipped with these escape ramps. We currently have over 60 wildlife escape ramps operating within our study area. In 2008 we maintained existing escape ramps in the two study areas.

In collaboration with Miguel Mora at Texas A & M University, blood, addled eggs, and eggshells collected in Chihuahua and Veracruz were imported into the U.S. for analysis. We will determine organochlorine and inorganic element contaminant burdens and their potential association with egg failures and reproduction. During 2009 we plan to publish these results in a peer-reviewed journal.

During the 2009 season we will continue to monitor the status of the Aplomado Falcon in Chihuahua, Mexico; our focus will be occupancy surveys. We plan to promote grassland and Aplomado Falcon awareness with conservation groups and agencies in Chihuahua, Mexico.

## FUTURE PLANS

During 2009 our captive breeding population will remain at 46 pairs. We plan to raise 100–150 falcons for releases at up to ten sites—five in New Mexico and five in West Texas. In collaboration with Miguel Mora environmental contaminants will be monitored at falcon territories in both the U.S. and Mexico.

Additional lands signed into the Safe Harbor program in 2008 totaled over 10,000 acres. Over 2.1 million acres are now enrolled in the Aplomado Falcon Safe Harbor in both

South and West Texas. Because of the success experienced in reestablishing nesting pairs and the recent approval of 10(j) status for falcons in New Mexico and Arizona, release efforts are now being concentrated in New Mexico and West Texas. We will continue working with more land owners in order to incorporate additional suitable release and nesting habitat into the Aplomado Falcon Safe Harbor program.

The wild population in South Texas will continue to be monitored, and additional barred nest structures will be placed in both areas with existing falcons and in areas located between the nesting pairs on Matagorda Island and those to the south around Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and Brownsville. We will document territory occupancy and productivity from established pairs. We also will inspect and maintain existing nest structures in South Texas. In West Texas and New Mexico we plan to do a systematic survey to locate nesting Aplomado Falcons.

Publications in progress include manuscripts on the importance of yucca grasslands to the Aplomado Falcon's recovery, artificial nest structures and their usefulness as management tools, the effects of environmental contaminants on the falcon's productivity, and factors influencing habitat use by grassland birds in Chihuahua. We also plan to develop a yucca grassland management strategy for land managers to implement.

In Chihuahua, Mexico, we will continue monitoring occupancy of the remnant population and promoting awareness of the Aplomado Falcon in the State. We will continue installing wildlife escape ramps to minimize falcon drownings. We plan to publish our work on environmental contaminants and grassland birds.

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***Peregrine Fund Staff***

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# In Pursuit of Piping Plovers

**Berlin A. Heck and Mary Heck Kay**

It all began with the fall Hawk Watch at Hazel Bazemore Park in west Corpus Christi in late September 2002. As usual, I drove down from southeastern OK to see the spectacle of hundreds of thousands of soaring Hawks migrating south. I stayed with Mary, my sister who lived in Corpus then, and each afternoon, after I had sated my hawk-watching appetite, we would walk on the Corpus Christi beach for relaxation and exercise. As we walked, we saw a few Piping Plovers, including a couple of them with colored plastic leg bands (Figure 1). We had no binoculars or pencil with us, so we decided to look for the Plovers the next day. We began driving along Mustang Island's beach, now with binoculars and a Kowa

scope with window mount, to look for and to record the sequence of color bands on the legs of Piping Plovers. And after two afternoons of driving Mustang and Padre Island beaches, we had recorded 10 banded birds.

We sent our data to the Bird Banding Lab in Patuxent, Maryland, and they forwarded it to the Canadian Wildlife Service, whose biologists band most of the Piping Plovers, much of which is done where many nest near Lake Diefenbaker south of Saskatoon Saskatchewan. We received detailed data for each banded bird from Dr. Cheri Gratto-Trevor, along with her profuse thanks for our help. We were hooked!

Since that day in 2002, we have continued the ritual of driving the beaches each fall to



Color banded Piping Plover. Photo by Berlin A. Heck and Mary Heck Kay.

read color bands, and we have recorded 245 banded Piping Plovers to date, along these very important beaches. Our ability to spot the birds has improved, and our efforts to visit every beach area have resulted in finding more banded birds in recent years. But the most productive strategy has been to wait until the tourists have gone home, and then to census during week-days when fewer people are using the beaches, in early to mid-October. Also, we have found it better to drive the beaches in the afternoon, from southwest to northeast, so the sun is behind us, for better viewing.

This fall from October 6 through 9, we searched all the beaches on Mustang and Padre Islands, including part of the 4-wheel drive beach at the south part of Malaquite beach on Padre Island National Seashore. Yes, federal officials allow basically, unlimited vehicle traffic on the National Seashore, and on some summer weekends during the tourist season, no place remains on the crowded beaches for birds. Texas beaches are extremely important for migrating and wintering Piping Plovers, Snowy Plovers, Red Knots, and many other birds, but human recreation comes first in the hierarchy of beach usage.

We observed during this fall's three long, fun days, 445 Piping Plovers with 50 banded; 74 Snowy Plovers with no bands, and 822 Red Knots with no bands! We saw several flocks of more than 40 Knots along the water's edge in several locations, as well as one flock of 70 Red Knots flying along the beach on Mustang Island. We sent our results to Dr. Cheri Gratto-Trevor, a Research Scientist (shorebirds) with Environment Canada in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Her detailed report to us on the banded birds included this remarkable information about the Piping Plover in Figure 1: "Egg collected from Lake Diefenbaker, SK in 2005 as the lake flooded, raised in captivity until fledgling (by Corie White and her crew),

then released at Chaplin Lake, SK. Last reported in 2005."

One problem that we have encountered in reading color bands is that some colors seem to have faded, so when we see a peach-colored band, was it orange or red originally? Or a faint green/blue-tinted band could have originally been either color. Because of this fairly common problem, we now use a camera with a long lens to photograph the bands on every bird we see. By sending the photographs, along with our written observations documented by using binoculars and scope, to the banding coordinator, we let the banders interpret the faint colors.

During our few years of observing Piping Plovers, we have found that, while on the beach in the fall, they are very territorial. We have observed many confrontations of varying intensity between neighboring Piping Plovers at the boundaries of their territories (Figure 2). Using the vehicle trip odometer, our observations indicated that a territory is, almost always, about 0.1 mile of beach. However, it seems that during the heat of the day, or when too many people crowd the beach, many Piping Plovers will move to tidal mudflats away from the beach, where they appear to be one big happy family. This fall, during a short drive beside Packery Channel, located near the east side of the bridge (JFK Causeway) connecting Corpus Christi to Padre Island, we found 12 Piping Plovers (2 banded), and 4 Snowy Plovers, gathered in a loose flock on a mudflat along the shore of the tidal channel. We watched these birds for about 15 minutes and observed no agonistic behavior.

On 9 February 2006, my brother, Charlie (from Louisiana), and I visited the Bolivar Peninsula, northeast of Galveston (across the channel), and as we drove east along the beach, we counted nearly 150 Piping Plovers in two large groups, resting on the beach. On 11 and 12 February, we drove all of Mustang Island and found no Piping Plovers. We



During our few years of observing Piping Plovers, we found that, while on the beach in the fall, they are very territorial. Photo by Berlin A. Heck and Mary Heck Kay.

interpreted this situation to mean that, as northward migration time approaches, the Plovers become non-territorial and they use Bolivar Flats area as a migration staging area. On 13 February, my brother and I returned to Bolivar Flats and the birds were still there. We looked upon this gathering of Piping Plovers as a great opportunity to read bands, so we slowly approached the sitting birds with the intention of seeing them stand so we could read their bands. However, whenever we approached too closely, the nearest ones would jump up, run a short distance, and immediately sit down again. We could see the bands, but there is no way to accurately read color bands on the legs of a running Piping

Plover. We disturbed a few birds and then gave up—they were not in a standing up mood, and we read not one band.

We now consider the annual beach census of Piping Plovers (and Snowy plovers and Red Knots) to be one of each year's highlights. If you feel that you have a dull life and need a fall pick-me-up, we recommend checking the legs of Piping Plovers (also, Red Knots and Snowy Plovers) on the Texas beaches. We have never searched the beaches of South Padre and Brazos Islands, so they may yield surprises.

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# Le Conte's: my favorite sparrow

*By Lora Render*

The Le Conte's Sparrow is by far my favorite in the Ammodramus family; they are very secretive and difficult to see at times without the proper coaching by a skilled leader. Le Conte's Sparrow was spotted by Byron Stone the leader of our group of 6 on the Eckhardt Tract the morning of the Sparrowfest 2009. The anticipation to see a life bird can become overwhelming and your first instinct out of anticipation is to approach the area as quick as possible but not in this case; we were asked to slow up in

our tracks. We approached very slowly and in a circle surrounding the shrub the Le Conte's was in, the bird was at the base of the shrub in the thick grass below; as I mentioned earlier very secretive. As we began to circle in closer to the shrub the bird started easing up on the branches and then was within eyesight but not for a photograph. My first reaction was the beautiful yellow color on its face and the intrigue markings throughout its body and with the sun shining on this jewel was just stunning and an added bonus!!!!



This Le Conte's Sparrow is always a favorite for birders who attended the annual Sparrowfest sponsored by Friends of Balcones at the Balcones Canyonland National Wildlife Refuge-Flying X Ranch on 31 January 2009; at this point the sparrow has been flushed from the shrub and the group now has been able to observe the bird.

Photo by Lora Render.

The time has come to attempt to get a photograph of the bird but there were still too many branches in the way, eventually feeling uneasy with 7 people surrounding the shrub and moving in closer, the Le Conte's started moving higher and higher in the shrub and the time had come. Finally out in the open I took several pictures of the bird and managed to get three different angles before it flew away, it's an amazing feeling when you know that you at least got one good picture out of the experience. When I'm out taking photographs in nature I always have to remind myself to take deep breaths and be very patient and by far the most important criteria is that you have all the settings just right on the camera otherwise it could be a very sad day that you just missed a shot you will never get again; I speak from



This Le Conte's Sparrow is now becoming uneasy with the group closing in. Photo by Lora Render.

experience. This day turned out to be a spectacular event for me.

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**Lora Render**

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Le Conte's Sparrow at the base of a shrub and was very still as we approached. Photo by Lora Render.

*Edited by Sheridan Coffey*



**Birds of the US-Mexico Borderlands: Distribution, Ecology, and Conservation.**

*By Janet Ruth, Tim Brush, and David Krueper (eds.). 2008.*

Studies in Avian Biology No. 37. Publication of the Cooper Ornithological Society. 165 pp. ISBN 978-0-943610-84-9. \$60.00 (cloth).

This book on birds of the borderlands region continues a lengthy series of scientific ornithological treatises irregularly published by the Cooper Ornithological Society. It consists of twelve well-written papers arranged in four separate topical categories: 1) changes in bird distribution and abundance, 2) population trends and ecology of riparian and wetland birds, 3) population trends and ecology of grassland birds, and 4) new technology applications and bird conservation planning. Importantly, the trio of editors have also contributed a very effective preface, in which they describe the borderlands region and placing its birdlife and major conservation issues within the context of the breadth of environments of the borderlands. Included in the preface are useful maps of the borderlands area, showing watersheds, major population centers, and biotic communities; mention of southwestern Bird Conservation Regions and a climatic overview of biotic communities of the borderlands; review of the overall numbers and diversity of bird species that are listed as endangered or threatened in the United States and Mexico, as well as the species considered to be Birds of Conservation Concern; and, lastly, a sentence or two providing a brief introduction to each of the twelve contributed papers and their significance.

The papers themselves represent high-quality scientific contributions to the field of avian conservation biology. Many contain excellent maps and well-constructed tables, and an English abstract and resúmen (in Spanish) are provided with each paper. Occasional black-and-white photos of birds are sprinkled throughout the volume. A positive aspect of the volume is that there is a relatively even mix of studies from both the U.S. and Mexico, something that is not always accomplished in publications purporting to be representative of a binational zone. Studies are included on breeding birds as well as birds during winter and in migration. These latter two stages in the life cycle of migratory birds often are underrepresented in scientific publications, but not in this volume. The papers on riparian and wetland birds are focused mostly on species of Sonora and adjoining Baja California, while the papers on grassland birds are focused heavily on species of southern New Mexico and adjacent southeastern Arizona. This creates the impression that the volume overall may tilt more toward the western portion of the borderlands region, leaving Texas ornithology somewhat underrepresented. Indeed, there are only two papers in the volume which focus solely on birds of Texas, one on species of the lower Rio Grande and the other on birds of Big Bend National Park; there are at least two other papers, however, which include parts of Texas within their scope. This volume should aid in moving ornithology and avian conservation biology in the border area forward. It is to be hoped that this volume will benefit efforts on conservation, management, and research on avifauna in the ecologically diverse, yet extraordinarily fragile, southwestern borderlands of the U.S. and Mexico.

**Mark Woodin**



**The Armchair Birder**

*By John Yow (2009)*

The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill. 256 pp., \$25.00 (Hardcopy)

John Yow's *The Armchair Birder* (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2009) is for those who enjoy learning detailed secret things about the behavior of birds. His love of observing and his love of birds are both evident from his careful descriptions of forty-four common birds, primarily of the central and eastern United States. Not only do his accounts make pleasant reading, but he also augments his accounts with quotes and anecdotes from other bird-watchers, and provides a helpful bibliography for those interested in doing a more in-depth study of bird behavior.

He begins with the Carolina Wren, which "always seems to be either building or singing", and weaves his own observations of their fanatic nest-building and other interesting behavior with the accounts of others about Carolina Wrens. He proceeds through a lively folksy discussion of Eastern Phoebe, and his worries about a pair in his yard. He then reminisces about installing a feeder in his new yard and the one morning looking across his back yard "straight into the scarlet bib of a rose-breasted grosbeak" which he

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says was when he “about choked on my cornflakes.” But he doesn't get lost in his own personal remembrances, but goes on to tell about the migration of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and asks important questions about why he saw none of them in 2001 after seeing them regularly for years. He ends the book with an exploration of which hawk is really the “chicken hawk”, and an afterward that comes full circle back to the Carolina Wren.

Each chapter is gently fascinating, allowing his carefully chosen avian tidbits to be easily taken in and appreciated. While most of the birds covered in the book are yard birds that many readers will have been happy to have in their yards too, he does fill us in on the habits of the undesirable Brown-headed Cowbird, and does cover some less frequently seen birds (e.g., Whip-poor-will and owls) and some birds that readers will be lucky to see fly over their yards (Sandhill Crane) or hear (Bobwhite).

While experienced birders might think themselves too advanced to read a book about common birds, I am sure that this book holds many interesting surprises, even for them.

Lynn Barber



### **Hummingbirds of Texas**

*By Clifford Shackelford, Madge Lindsay and Mark Klym*

Photographs by Sid and Shirley Rucker; Illustrations by Clemente Guzman III,  
Texas A&M University Press, College Station 2005, second printing 2009, 112 pp.  
87 color photos. 47 color illus. 20 color maps. Paperback \$19.95

Which state in the United States has had more species of hummingbirds than any other? Arizona, right? Wrong! Despite having 17 species\* on its state list, Arizona is in second place, behind Texas, which has 18! More birders are becoming aware of Texas as a destination for seeing hummingbirds. This book goes a long way towards encouraging them.

Originally published in 2005, *Hummingbirds of Texas* by Clifford Shackelford, Madge Lindsay and C. Mark Klym is now in its second printing with some updates. The book is more than just a field guide. Besides species accounts, it includes chapters on interactions with hummingbirds, feeding, gardening, photography and places to go. The text is well written and easily accessible by non-birders who are just keen on hummingbirds.

Back yard hummingbird enthusiasts in the ongoing citizen science project, Texas Hummingbird Roundup\*\*, gathered much of the information in the book. Sponsored by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department this survey helped set a bench mark of what species are actually found in the state, their ranges and frequency. Started in 1994 the project was initially very popular in the eastern half of the state. Unfortunately in the first five years only 33 surveys were sent in from the eight large counties of the Trans-Pecos, where the largest diversity of species is found. The TPWD began focusing more on this area, with some amazing results.

Species accounts are done on a two-page spread and are well illustrated with paintings by Clemente Guzman III. A large photograph is also included. The range maps are excellent, some of the best I have seen. Similar to the maps in Sibley's field guides, they include seasonality, and extralimital records. Improving on Sibley, the dots representing extralimital records are accurate and not just an approximation. The book is worth purchasing for this feature alone. There is also a bar graph with seasonal abundance. The text is brief but well done. There is also a chart with species from Mexico that could show up in Texas. It would have been nice if illustrations of these birds were included.

The photographs by Sid and Shirley Rucker are spectacular. They also wrote the chapter about photographing hummingbirds and how they achieved their shots. Some of their techniques are beyond the amateur photographer, or at least this one. Despite that I found it very interesting to read about the effort made to get these photographs. Unfortunately I found the colors in the cover photo to be rather overstated, with bright purplish blue tail feathers and orange-gold gorget on a male Ruby-throat, but that is a minor criticism.

The one thing I did not enjoy in the book is section with anecdotal stories from participants in the Hummingbird Roundup. Some were very anthropomorphic and way too “cutsie” for my taste. I realize that this is a subjective thing and some people really like these observations.

Over all I think this book is a necessary addition to anyone interested in hummingbirds in Texas, whether they are a serious birder, or just a back yard observer. The authors have put together a book that is attractive, fun to read and very informative.



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\* Arizona also has an historical record of two Bumblebee Hummingbirds from 1897, which is not included.

\*\* For more information on the Texas Hummingbird Roundup visit [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/birding/humrunup.htm](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/birding/humrunup.htm) or write Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Attn. Texas Hummingbird Roundup, 4200 Smith School Rd, Austin, TX 78744.

Sheridan Coffey



### **Pelican Blood**

by *Cris Freddi*

Paperback: 240 pages, Publisher: HarperCollins UK (April 1, 2006), 7.6 x 5 x 0.9 inches

"I would kill for a Goshawk!" I have probably said that, if not about a Goshawk, then certainly another rarity. In Cris Freddi's debut novel, *Pelican Blood*, his protagonist actually does. Don't worry. This is not a spoiler; the act takes place in the opening chapter, when Nikko, a young English birder, shoots an unrepentant egg collector in the act of robbing a Goshawk nest. The storyline builds on the tension Nikko feels, sure of his impending incarceration, while continuing his daily life devoted to obsessive "twitching" of rare birds with his friends and his on again off again love, Stevie "Red Bus" Oxford.

Nikko makes a living of sorts as a house cleaner, only taking on enough work to get by. He has no ambition and claims to have no real talent, unlike Stevie, an aspiring artist and passionate environmentalist, or his friend Bish, a well-known blues musician. Together the three travel across the UK looking for rarities and picking apart fellow birders. Their chases are supplemented with healthy, or rather unhealthy, doses of sex, drugs and rock and roll. Their set is obviously not made up of "little old ladies in tennis shoes".

As Nikko awaits his seemingly inevitable fate with the law, he begins to think, "If I killed one, why not another?" His attempts to carry out these plans lead to some very interesting twists. The ending of the book is a total corkscrew. There is a sense of nihilism through out the story, nicely balanced by moments of humor. The characters are flawed in the most interesting ways and held my interest through out the book.

I do want to give a couple of caveats. Both involve language. Its often said that Britain and the United States are two countries divided by a common language. There are phrases in the book that might prove confusing to the average American. I do believe that most of these terms can be deduced without too much effort, even for someone who has never been to England. The other is that this book is written in the vernacular of the British workingman, and is heavily sprinkled with words considered extremely vulgar on this side of the pond. Some might find it jarring, or even offensive.

I can heartily recommend this book. It is the best portrayal of the British birding culture I have ever read, far surpassing the recent non-fiction books about "twitching". Cris Freddi has been heavily involved in the English birding scene, and it shows. I loved the underlying themes concerning art and philosophy. I have read several novels that involve birding, *Pelican Blood* is by far my favorite. The skewed morality, the untraditional plot lines and the honest portrayal of obsession made it a enthralling read.

Sheridan Coffey



### **Birdwatcher: The Life of Roger Tory Peterson**

By *Liz Rosenthal*

Lyon's Press, 464 pp., 29.95 (Hardcopy)

Roger Tory Peterson was truly one of the masters of our modern world of birdwatching and is sometimes credited with being the person who most brought this pastime to the masses with the publication of his early field guides in the 1930s. Prior to Roger's early books, birdwatching was usually done along the barrel of a shotgun since "in-hand" identification was the accepted way to properly determine the identify of a bird. Roger's books, with his wonderful bird paintings, were the first to use the term "field marks" to describe something about a particular species that could be seen in the field by an observer using binoculars which could help lead to a correct identification. All of our more recent books and field techniques rely, at least to some degree, on similar ways to make these identifications. The "Peterson Field Guides" cover many aspects of our natural world, but it is the world of birds and ornithology for which Roger is truly known and remembered.

Roger passed away in 1996 at the age of 87. Since his death there have been a number of biographies written about him including a work by Elizabeth Rosenthal titled *Birdwatcher: The Life of Roger Tory*

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Peterson". I first met Roger in 1985, when he was 76 years old, and it was my privilege to spend quite a bit of time with him over the next 10 years before he passed away. Since I knew Roger, and had many long and personal conversations with him on various trips we made together, I have enjoyed reading several of the recently published biographies. For those readers who never had the opportunity to meet Roger, I think that *Birdwatcher* will make you feel as if you knew him.

*Birdwatcher*, as most biographies, begins with Roger's childhood. Roger grew up in Jamestown, New York, and had his first experiences in the natural world were in the fields and woods of that community. Rosenthal leads us through his early years and his fascination with birds and through the beginnings of his painting career. Through many interviews with Roger's friends, people who knew him throughout his life, Rosenthal has weaved together a remarkably complete story of his life.

Roger became smitten with birds when he was about 12 years old. He often told the story of finding a Northern Flicker apparently sleeping or resting on the trunk of a tree. Somehow the bird did not notice Roger's approach, and when Roger touched it, there was an explosion of action and the bird quickly flew off with flashes of golden color. From that point on, Roger regarded birds as the most vivid expression of life.

Roger devoured every book he could find in those days (1920s) about birds. He and several other young naturalists started a bird club and the young men spent many happy days in the field. After high school, Roger got a job decorating Chinese furniture, but soon turned his painting skills toward birds rather than cabinets. He studied art and was able to spend time with several of the renowned bird artists of the day including Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Fuertes was important in Roger's early development as a bird artist, but the older man was killed in an accident when Roger was about 20, so their relationship was cut short. Roger determined to make himself as good a bird artist as Fuertes was.

*Birdwatcher* takes us through the various trials and challenges that Roger faced while trying to create the first Peterson field guides and gives the reader many in depth views of Roger's relationships with friends and colleagues over the years. The book is arranged more or less in a chronological format, but some chapters spend considerable time on one topic from the beginning to the end of Roger's life. One of Roger's most important interests was conservation, and *Birdwatcher* does an excellent job of demonstrating Roger's commitment to this subject in everything he did.

Many Texas observers do not realize that Roger spent quite a bit of time in our state over the years. The book has many interviews with Roger's field companions who provide accounts of many trips or interactions with Roger. Some of the Texas accounts were provided by both Victor Emanuel and me.

The book is a wonderfully accurate and complete treatment of Roger's life. It is a good read and I encourage anyone with an interest in the life of this remarkable man to get a copy.

Greg Lasley

### Dragonflies and Damselflies of the West

By Dennis Paulson

978-0-691-12281-6, Paperback LC 2008030893 \$29.95



Oding—the “in” word for watching dragonflies and damselflies—is fast becoming the favorite alternate hobby for birders, and with good reason. Butterflies are ahead of the interest curve compared to Odonates (the order to which dragonflies and damselflies belong) but odes have a couple of distinct advantages: All the features that identify them are on the outside of their bodies (unlike some large groups of butterflies such as certain skip-pers and hairstreaks where the internal sex organs have to be examined); Once dry after emerging they are robust creatures that can be handled without any damage (one needs to be very skilled to touch butterflies without harming them).

As with butterflies, many odes fly in the warmer summer months when birding has waned, but while you can plant a butterfly garden and wait for butterflies to sniff you out and come to you, odes for the most part cannot be drawn to you (some will colonize a newly created pond)—you have to go out, learn their favored habitats, and find them—more like we do with birds. Thus oding is the perfect foil for birders seeking something else to “hunt” when the birding is slow—and don't forget that most odes are active in the middle of the day, so birders can still bird the early morning (or steal a lie-in!)

It was with the advent of decent field guides that birding as a hobby really took off, and it's the same with dragonflies. In the past eight or nine years an increasing number of ode field guides have been published, but almost none covered everything that can be found in Texas (Abbott's 2005 guide being an

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exception that—like the first Sibley Guide—is a bit too large to slip into a pocket, and now four years later missing a few key species). Dennis Paulson—one of the most respected names in the areas of academic and field Odonatology—has delivered a pocket-sized guide to all the Odonata found from Texas westwards in the U.S (348 species)... so how does it deliver?

In a word: brilliantly! Each species is illustrated with closely-cropped, good-sized, well-angled photos depicting males and females; for species with multiple female forms each is shown, and for some species younger individuals are depicted where that aids identification. The text is brief but to-the-point and includes a large ID paragraph plus a helpful Natural History commentary that aids the ID process. There's a precisely drawn range map that also shows significant out-of-range records—and the photos, text, and map for each species are placed together avoiding that tiresome flipping process required when these data are separated due to a publishing constraint.

Dennis is also an accomplished birder with a number of fine books to his credit (especially on shore-birds), so he is able to bring a birder's perspective to the matter of field identification of odonata—and it shows in the many useful nuggets embedded within the species entries.

The Introduction section is more than thirty pages, packed with interesting and useful tidbits covering such topics as: perching, sleeping, flight, vision, feeding, prey and predators, reproduction (odes are unique in all the insect world in how they copulate!), larval history, emergence, anatomy, coloration, names, finding odonates, identifying odonates, photography, collecting and preparation, threats and conservation, and research.

At the back of the guide there is an appendix of the major ode resources and publications, a very helpful glossary section, and an index that includes common and scientific names. Perhaps the most telling appendix is the one briefly mentioning the species new to the U.S. since the publication deadline: since end of 2007 SEVEN species new to the U.S. have been documented in the West! The Rio Grande Valley just held its Dragonfly Days Festival in late May 2009—and a new species for the United States was discovered on the first day. This highlights the appeal of oding to birders: it's at the stage where there's enough resources for a keen amateur to quickly learn the ID basics—but still enough gaps in our knowledge that said amateur can make really significant discoveries—it's exciting!

There are a couple areas for improvement in the book: the range maps would have been more helpful if a color-coded system had been used to indicate flight season (but that information is stated—often in great detail—in the text close to the map); Within each family of odes Dennis has chosen to use a species sequence that is significantly different to most of the other popular (and many scientific) publications—this takes a bit of getting used-to if like me you've spent much of the past eight years poring through the preceding literature.

The minor quibbles pale in comparison to the extraordinary amount of useful data packed into this guide, and I wholeheartedly recommend it. Armed with this one book in the back pocket any Texas birder will be able to identify the great majority of odonates they encounter—and will get just as good a buzz from an unusual find as they do with a bird. At less than thirty bucks for all those great photos, it's a steal.

**Martin Reid**

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Buteo Books specializes in Ornithology books, with one of the largest selections of new, used, and rare birding books in the world, from birdwatching your backyard to textbooks for the serious ornithologist. Let our knowledgeable staff be of assistance.’”



# What's in a Name, and Does it Matter?

By Kent Rylander

As the story goes, Dr. Elliott Coues, an Army surgeon stationed in Arizona in the 19th Century, collected a new warbler there. Because it has never been in good form to name a plant or animal after oneself or a member of one's family, Dr. Coues asked his friend Spencer Baird to name the bird after his sister, Grace Darlington Coues. And so we have Grace's Warbler, *Dendroica graciae*.

The practice of naming organisms after people has always been with us, but it seems to be increasingly popular in our celebrity-obsessed culture. Almost weekly scientists name new plants and animals after friends, colleagues, favorite professors, and chairmen of foundations that support expeditions and research.

There is nothing basically wrong with creating these nomenclatural monuments, and no one seems to object that the names of Audubon, Darwin and other giants in the field are forever embedded in the taxonomic literature. On the other hand, surely our language is enriched more when a name refers to the bird itself. The Red-headed Woodpecker's vividly descriptive name certainly adds more character to our language than "Botteri's Sparrow." Moreover, it is especially gratifying when allusions to prominent features show a little imagination. "Red-cockaded Woodpecker" is almost poetic.

Some names are particularly graphic in this regard. "Falcon" comes from *falx*, a sickle, referring to the strongly curved bill and talons. Had the genus (*Falco*) been named after a person (as was *Zenaida*, the genus for the Mourning Dove), we would not have this interesting etymological linkage. (*Zenaida*, incidentally, was the wife of Charles L. J. L. Bonaparte, a 19th Century ornithologist and naturalist.)

Even reference to a bird's typical habitat ("Marsh Wren") or its call ("Killdeer") adds dimension to a name. Names based on geographical regions, such as "Eastern Bluebird," are less informative, but such names convey at least some information

about the bird. The same cannot be said for the hawk named after a certain Mr. Edward Harris.

Many bird names are truly ancient, and may be appreciated like we appreciate antiques. "Crow" is recognizable as a derivative of *crawe*, the Anglo-Saxon name for its European relative; and "eider" comes from Old Norse and Icelandic *aedr*.

My favorite names carry a story of some sort. Although the etymology of "loggerhead" is not entirely clear, in the case of the shrike the term refers to its large head. Like all perching birds, the shrike has relatively small, weak feet, making it necessary to kill prey with its bill. To kill animals as large as mice it needs a large skull to support its powerful jaw muscles.

Scientific names provide an especially rich source of fascinating facts even if one does not know Latin or Greek or has no interest in memorizing these names. Perusing a book such as Ernest A. Choate's *The Dictionary of American Bird Names* one discovers that the genus for the Phainopepla, which also happens to be *Phainopepla*, is appropriately derived from Greek *phainos*, shining; and *peplos*, robe. The generic name for the scrub jays, *Aphelocoma*, is a bit fanciful: it comes from Greek *aphelos*, smooth, and *koms*, hair, referring to fact that these birds do not have a crest. The name for the Scaled Quail, *Callipepla squamata*, is derived from Greek *kallos*, a beauty; Greek *peplos*, a robe; and Latin *squamatus*, scaled.

So names do matter, even apart from their obvious role in allowing us to communicate? In my opinion, however, they matter only to the extent that we find significance in them. Bird names based on Latin and Greek words that are also roots of familiar English words are particularly significant because they relate to other facets of our lives. For example, in *Corvus cryptoleucus* (the Chihuahuan Raven), *crypto* is derived from Greek *cryptos*, "hidden" (compare "crypt," "cryptic," "cryptography"); and *leucus* is derived from *leucos*, "white"

(compare “leucocyte,” a white blood cell). The name fits the bird nicely, as *cryptoleucus* emphasizes the normally concealed white bases of the feathers on the nape. *Corvus* is simply the ancient Latin name for crow.

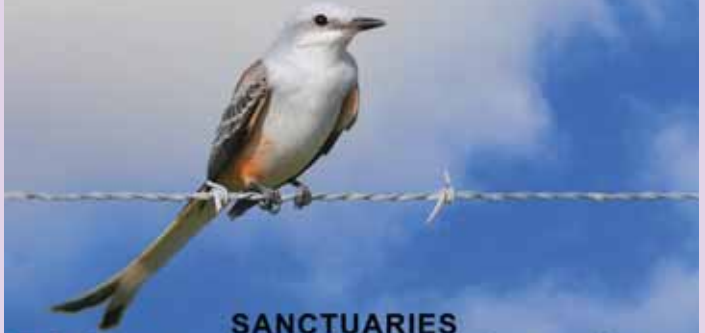
Finally, how we name birds reveals something about how we view the world, which is often relatively independent of our culture. For example, some authorities trace “quetzal” to the Nahuatl word, “quetzalli,” meaning “large brilliant tail feathers.” Had the Quetzal been a North American bird, one would not have been surprised if it had received an English name that likewise called attention to its impressive tail feathers.

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# Texas Ornithological Society



## **SANCTUARIES**

T.O.S. has several sanctuaries that provide valuable habitat for migrating and resident birds. These sanctuaries can be visited by members at no charge.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

Members receive a variety of publications including: the peer reviewed scientific “Bulletin of the Texas Ornithological Society” our popular annual magazine “TEXAS BIRDS ANNUAL”, and the “T.O.S. News” newsletter.

## **MEETINGS**

T.O.S. members meet multiple times through the year. The advantages of these meetings include: meeting other Texas birders & making new birding friends, hearing knowledgeable guest speakers, and opportunities to attend field trips that have local experts and access to private ranches & closed refuge areas.

## **FIELD TRIPS**

T.O.S. field trips visit U.S. and Texas hotspots to expose participants to a maximum number of birds.

## **TEXAS BIRD RECORDS COMMITTEE (TBRC)**

Membership supports the work of this committee to validate records of birds from the state of Texas. The committee publishes an Annual Report in the Bulletin.

[www.texasbirds.org](http://www.texasbirds.org)

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# Past President's Message

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By Ron Weeks

As I reflect back on my two years as T.O.S. President, I am very proud of what we have accomplished during that time. The accomplishments are many and varied...

- We made significant changes in the membership roles and the way we track dues. Membership committee chair, Brad Lirette, and new membership secretary, Jericka Miller, have taken us to a point where we actually have balanced membership finances. This has allowed us to remove non-paying "members" and eliminate publications that we actually paid to have sent back to us from outdated addresses. This discipline allowed them to reduce annual membership mailing and secretarial costs from over \$15,000 to just \$6,000!
- The increase in members was fueled by an increased outreach and promotional effort. A new promotional display featuring the photography of Greg Lavaty and the graphic design of Mike Sims allowed us to hit local bird festivals in style. Bron Rorex spearheaded our efforts at those festivals taking the T.O.S. message to the birders from around the state. Sharp new T.O.S. t-shirts and pins rounded out our "new look". New discount offers came in the form of Texas A&M Press and Birds of North America and we launched our new Century Club web page. These efforts to grow by increasing the value of memberships increased member income to over \$30,000.
- Jack Eitnjar helped take us to unprecedented page counts of publications that kept member mailboxes consistently full. Even the mainstay T.O.S. Bulletin added pages. The newsletter reached new levels of reporting with contributions from nearly the entire board. And this Texas Birds Annual as the others before it speak for themselves.
- Glenn Olsen and especially Jim Hailey led an effort that saw our field trips return to "Bert Frenz" form with regular trips not only throughout Texas but also Alaska and Arizona. This was in addition to all the

great trips at our semi-annual meetings in San Antonio, Winnie, Alpine and Bay City!

- We were able to nearly double the size of our Magic Ridge sanctuary as the deal we had been waiting for so long finally came to pass. We also were successful in securing two \$10,000 Great Texas Birding Classic grants with applications for American Birding Association and SEMPTRA grants still in the running. And boy did we need them with both Hurricane Humberto and more notably Hurricane Ike wreaking havoc on our Sabine Woods and Hooks Woods sanctuaries. Members also donated well over \$15,000 to help us in the recovery and replanting scheduled to begin again this fall.
- All this success (over \$50K in the black for 2008 alone) led to unprecedented levels of funding for our publications, future land purchases and some new outreaches. The most significant of these was our much overdue formal involvement in the Birding Classic. This year we sponsored youth teams in each of the three Classic segments and yours truly and Kathie Holder chaperoned youth teams.

Although we were very successful on many fronts, the lack of support on other fronts was discouraging. Work days went largely unattended and pleas for a conservation committee chair drew not a single response. We have grown our sanctuary systems and membership to the point where the board has more than it can handle alone. At present, a subset of the board does nearly all the work – to the point where they burn out and want to quit. T.O.S. needs your help or we risk returning to the state we were in just a few years ago with inconsistent mailings, little to no outreach and few field trips beyond meetings. Help Lynn and the rest of the board keep things going by answering the calls for support. The healthy future of T.O.S. depends on it.

Good Birding!

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**Ron Weeks, Immediate Past President**  
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Courtship feeding or “tug of war”?

Photo by M.B. Bartosik