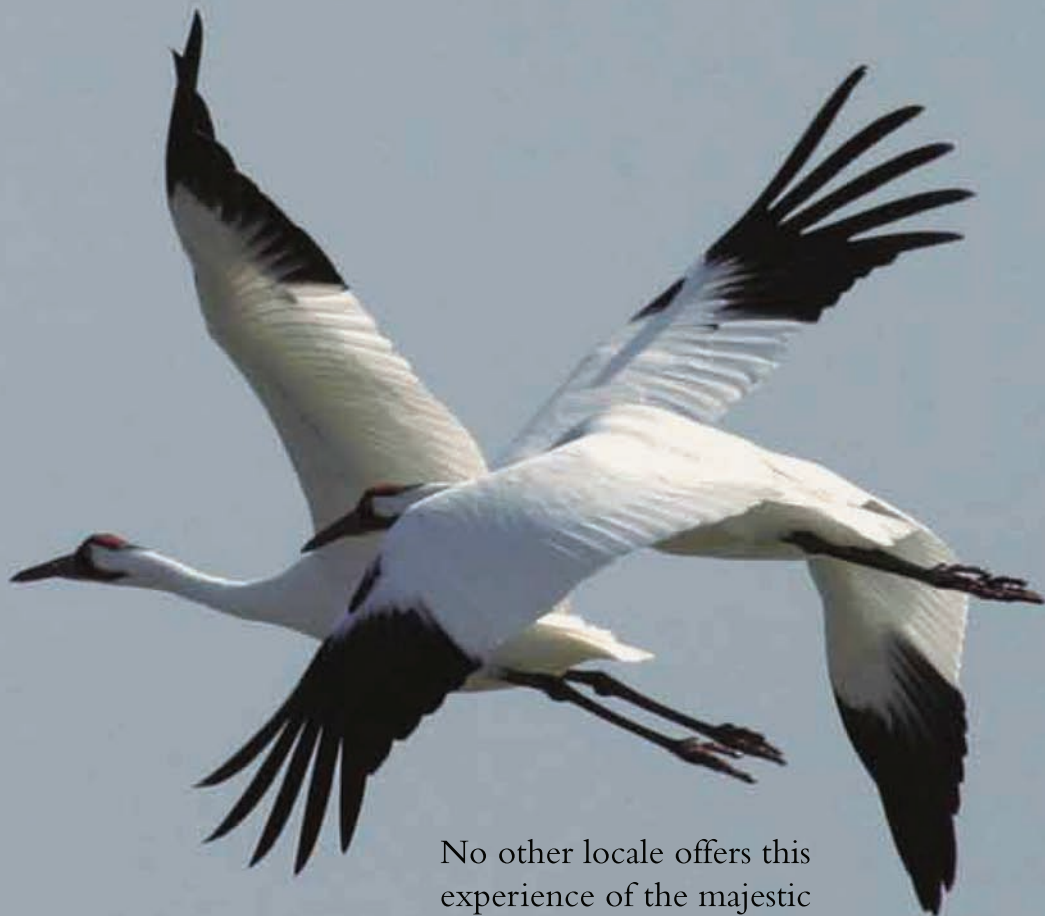


TEXAS *Birds*
ANNUAL

VOLUME 7 (2011)



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Charm of the Texas Coast

Photography by Diane Loyd

Editor's Introduction

With every issue of Texas Birds Annual (TBA) I begin with a clean slate. The manuscript folder is empty. Fortunately, Texas is blessed with many good birders, bird photographers, and writers! This year TBA contains articles from past contributors like Timothy Brush, Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, Christina Mild and Clay Taylor. With a request posted on the listserv TEXBIRDS for articles on birder's favorite birding locations I received contributions from Jerry and Dot Hall, Ken Francis, Stephan Lorenz, and Dan Smith. Also contributing for the first time is Fred Collins (citizen science), Ron Outen (saving Whooping Cranes) and Bill Hilton (hummingbirds).

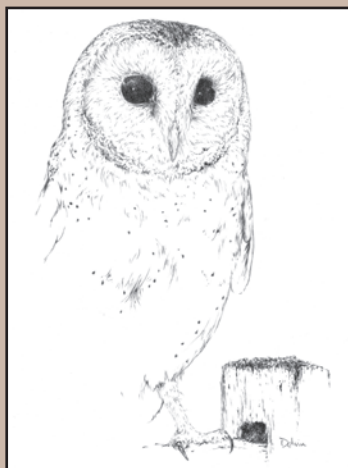
Topping off the issue Eric Carpenter contributed the annual TBRC "Vagrants and Rare Sightings" and Sheridan Coffey again coordinated the review of birding media. Finally, my friend Arturo Longorio wraps up the issue, in style, with a thoughtful essay on "Transcendent Birding".

Without the contributions from numerous authors and photographers we simply wouldn't have anything to insert between the covers! A million "kudos" to you all. And speaking of covers Lynn Delvin, talented artist and lover of owls, graciously agreed to supply a painting for the front cover and the drawing below.

So it's once again time to grab that glass of your favorite beverage, seek out a shady place, and enjoy another issue of Texas Birds Annual.

Enjoy!!!

Jack Clinton Eitnrear
Editor/TOS Publications



Barn Owl. Drawing by Lynn Delvin.

Front cover art: Screech Owl by Lynn Delvin.

Back Cover: Yellow-faced Grassquit photographed along the Texas coast
by Mark Bartosik.

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Yellow-headed Blackbirds are common to uncommon migrants in the western half of the state, becoming increasingly less common eastward to the Pineywoods and Upper Texas Coast. Photo Peter Forton, www.peterfortonphotography.com.

Vagrants and Rare Sightings

By Eric Carpenter

Each year, the mythical birding gods litter the Texas landscape with unexpected birds, just waiting to be discovered by bird seekers. It seemed like the number of rare birds sprinkled in Texas in 2010 were slightly below expectations, but what was uncovered was certainly worthwhile. With some leftovers still around from 2009, the year would start with three cooperative birds already in place: a **Northern Jacana** at Choke Canyon State Park that would stay until 16 April, a **Northern Wheatear** near Beeville present until 29 March, and the first Texas and ABA record of **Bare-throated Tiger-Heron** which was enjoyed through 20 January. Indeed, many a birder would make a weekend circuit through south Texas in early January to look at all three.

The place to be for the remainder of the winter, and indeed for much of the year, would be south Texas. Three **Brown Jays** first seen at San Ygnacio on 22 January could be reliably found through 17 April, an encouraging sign due to the recent decline of this species around the border. A somewhat elusive **Roadside Hawk** near Frontera in Weslaco 24 January to 6 February was followed by a



Roadside Hawks are rarely found in Texas and they can be quite elusive. Two different individuals were found in south Texas in 2010, highlighted by this fairly reliable one at Falcon State Park 5 February to 11 March.

Photo by Alan Wormington.

slightly more cooperative individual at Falcon State Park from 5 February to 11 March. The

main attraction though would be discovered further up the Rio Grande. Excitement gripped Texas and ABA birders on 24 January when the news that Alan Wormington and



Texas's third Tufted Flycatcher at Big Bend's Rio Grande Village 21 November 2010 to 4 January 2011 drew the attention of numerous birders from not only Texas but also from other parts of the A.B.A. area.

Photo by Mark Lockwood.



Two Great Shearwaters were found in offshore waters in the summer of 2010, including this cooperative individual seen by participants on the 17 July pelagic trip out of South Padre Island.

Photo by Mary Gustafson.

Robert Epstein had discovered an **Amazon Kingfisher** along the river in Laredo. Much hoped for but never previously documented in the state, this first Texas and ABA record remained somewhat loyal to the same location through 3 February, where it was enjoyed by the hordes of folks that came looking for it. Almost exciting but not quite as abiding was Texas's sixth and the Lower Rio Grande Valley's first documented **Aztec Thrush** at Bentsen State Park 16-17 February.

A few of the rarities found in the winter outside south Texas included a couple of **Northern Goshawks**, one at Lake Meredith in the Panhandle on 11 January and another studied by a fortunate observer in Austin on 26 February. Two **Trumpeter Swans** near Whiteface in Cochran County 15 February to 12 March were perhaps a sign of the successful reintroductions from the northeast. **Evening Grosbeaks** were placed back on the TBRC Review list in 2008 due to an alarming decline of this species in the state so one

found in the heart of the state near San Saba 25 February to 8 March was rather unexpected.

The Lower Rio Grande Valley would still be the place to be in early spring of 2010. Up



Estero Llano Grande State Park seems to be a reliable spot to find Ruddy Ground-Doves. The third individual found there in 5 years was this one present from 10-12 November 2010.

Photo by Mark Scheuerman.



The majority of Texas records of Red Phalarope are juvenile and basic-plumaged birds found in the fall. Quite surprising and rather unmistakable was this bright alternate-plumaged female found on the beach of Padre Island National Seashore on 4 June 2010.

Photo by Phil Zeigler.

to two **Tamaulipas Crows** were around their historical haunts near the Brownsville Dump from 26 March through at least 5 May. A **Northern Jacana** was discovered at Santa Ana N.W.R. on 4 April and would linger there for three more days. A striking **Black-**

vented Oriole was a surprising visitor to the woodlots on South Padre Island, though it was only seen by a lucky few during its short 10-11 April stay. The action then shifted to the Upper Texas Coast with a **Ruff** found on 11 April at much birded Anahuac N.W.R.



The highlight of the year was this Amazon Kingfisher in Laredo 24 January to 3 February 2010. It was not only a first record for Texas but also provided a first A.B.A record.

Photo by Robert Epstein.



Though seen by only a handful of folks, this Aztec Thrush at Bentsen State Park on 16-17 February 2010 was one of the great finds of the year.

Photo by Rick Nirschl.

Further inland, a great needle-in-a-haystack discovery was another **Ruff** in the flooded fields of east Waller County 14 – 25 April. The crowds at High Island must surely have been excited to find a **Fork-tailed Flycatcher** at Smith Oaks on 24-25 April.

As often happens, things slowed down during the summer months and many of the highlights came from the immediate coast and further offshore. A **Purple Sandpiper** that had been present at the Port Isabel jetties since 25 February was surprisingly seen as late as 10 June, providing the first June record of this species in the state. An unmistakable **Red Phalarope** along the beach on Padre Island National Seashore on 4 June was also a rare June record, only the 2nd June sighting for this species in Texas. Pelagic species were the story the rest of the summer, starting with a **Red-billed Tropicbird** seen 12 miles offshore from Port Aransas on 22 June. The highlight of the 17 July organized pelagic trip out of South Padre Island was a cooperative **Great Shearwater**; another **Great Shearwater** was 40 miles offshore from Port Aransas on 31 July. More unusual was a **Sooty Shearwater** seen in the surf near the mouth of the San Bernard River on 27 July.

The highlight of early fall 2010 was a **White-collared Swift** that didn't linger too long in Port

O'Conner on 9 September, just the fifth record for the state. Things were relatively quiet until Halloween weekend when 3 good treats (not tricks!) were uncovered. A **Red Phalarope** found at the La Sal del Rey unit of the Lower Rio Grande Valley N.W.R. on 30 October was present the next day as well. A **Rufous-capped Warbler** discovered on 30 October on a private ranch near Crystal City (Zavala County) was seen by many through the end of the year. West Texas also got into the action with a **Violet-crowned Hummingbird** present in El Paso on 30-31 October and then a longer staying individual near Fort Davis 8 November to 21 December.

Things heated up starting in mid November, thanks to the work of birders during the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival. A **Ruddy Ground-Dove** found during the festival at Estero Llano Grande State Park from 10 – 12 November was already the third documented record of this species for the park in its first 5 years. A **Crimson-collared Grosbeak** at the Valley Nature Center in Weslaco was regularly seen from 12 – 18 November. A second **Crimson-collared Grosbeak** was discovered at Allen Williams' place in Weslaco on 15 November where it was seen by hundreds of folks for the next 5 months. South Texas' third **Red Phalarope** of the year was an individual seen in the bay off of South Padre



One of the most striking and most photographed birds in Texas in recent years was this colorful Black-vented Oriole seen in and around Bentsen State Park from 13 December 2010 into early spring of 2011.

Photo by Jim Bangma.

Island on 15 November. Two different **Rufous-backed Robins** would also become favorites of visiting birders. The first was discovered on 17 November at the National Butterfly Center in Mission and would be seen there and at nearby Bentsen State Park through the end of the year and into early spring. The other **Rufous-backed Robin** showed up at the visitor center of Laguna Atascosa N.W.R on 21 November; it would also linger there through the end of the year.

The best finds of the late fall and early winter would not come until later. The real surprise was a **Tufted Flycatcher** found at Rio Grande Village in Big Bend National Park on 21 November. Only the third record for Texas, the behavior of this bird was similar to the first state record found in the same location nineteen years earlier as it would seemingly alternate between the eastern end of Rio Grande Village and the western end at Daniel's Ranch. Many birders were able to see this individual as it was fairly reliable until it was last seen on 4 January 2011.

Another exciting find over Thanksgiving week was a **Greater Pewee** found on 26 November at Roselawn Cemetery in McAllen; this bird also was seen by many into the new year.

A **Crimson-collared Grosbeak** at a private residence in Corpus Christi 12 -23 December was a surprising find so far from the Rio Grande Valley. The Bentsen State Park area would draw even more attention when a **Black-vented Oriole** was discovered there on 13 December. This seventh record for Texas, though the first really chase-able one in over 20 years, would be seen at various times into early spring at the park, at a nearby RV park as well as at the nearby National Butterfly Center. The icing on the cake for 2010 would come in the form of a **White-throated Thrush** first seen at Estero Llano Grande State Park on 29 December that would also linger well into early spring.

Eric Carpenter
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New birding place

The John Bunker Sands Wetland Center

By Ken Francis

As with most people-made “good” birding places, it was not created primarily for birding. The John Bunker Sands Wetland Center



The John Bunker Sands Wetland Center includes 800 acres, and six miles of trails. Photo Ken Francis

(JBSWC) is 235 bird species “good“. Here-
tofore, it was considered good to see Least
Bitterns once or twice a year in North Central
Texas. They are here in abundance. There is
a growing colony of Least Terns
nesting. While being constructed
in 2008 the first Masked Duck to
be recorded in North Texas was
documented here by Bob Stone.
Other birds of note for North
Central Texas are Purple Gallinule
and Black-bellied Whistling Duck.

There are three habitats and
many different vegetation types.
The main habitat is marsh with
less than 6 inches of water. When
river levels are low, mudflats de-
velop. In late summer there will be
floating mats of vegetation.

About 25 miles from down-
town Dallas, the JBSWC is only

open to the public the first and third Satur-
days of each month from 9am till 4pm at this
writing. (There is a gate, so do not get here
too early.) Volunteers are being trained and
the center should be open more
often by October. There are 800
acres, 6 miles of wetland trails,
3,168 feet of which is a boardwalk
that carries you over shallow water
and mud flats.

The JBSWC, 655 Martin Lane,
Seagoville, Texas 75159. Phone
calls will be answered Tuesday till
Friday from 9am till 4pm, (972)
474-9100. www.WetlandCenter.com. From US 175, exit FM 1389
south, about 2 miles, left on Mar-
tin Lane. Entrance fee of \$5.00
adult, \$4.00 Senior, \$3.00 child 12
and under.

The Dallas and the Fort Worth
Audubon Societies sponsor field

trips to the JBSWC.

One of the largest people-made wetlands
in the United States, the East Fork Wetland
Project is a process that allows a percentage



Of the six miles of trails, 3,168 feet is a boardwalk over
shallow water and mudflats. Photo Ken Francis

of water from the Trinity River to flow naturally through a variety of vegetation types that cleanse the water of heavy contaminants in 7 to 10 days. The water is then pumped through a 43 mile pipeline north to be further processed and delivered for water supply managed by the North Texas Municipal Water District.

Classes of school children K to 12 are educated in the 5,400 foot facility and observation deck at the center. Wetland and river ecosystems, bird migration, and water conservation are taught. A catering kitchen to host

larger events and private sleeping quarters for research students are available.

So come, feast your eyes, aim your binos and scopes at the ducks, herons, egrets, bitterns, rails, gallinules, shorebirds in the wetland and don't forget the perching birds in the surrounding trees. Check them out carefully so that you can be the one to find the next accidental that will surly find it's way to the John Bunker Sands Wetland Center.

Ken Francis
E-mail: mj_kfran@sbcglobal.net

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Tufted Flycatcher in Big Bend National Park

By Carolyn Ohl-Johnson

The name Barbara Duplisea became engraved in my mind when I learned she was the person who located the first US, and first Texas, Tufted Flycatcher. That was in November of 1991. Although I have lived in the Big Bend region of Texas since way before then, I didn't become a serious birder until around 1995. Otherwise, I positively would have gone to Big Bend National Park at Rio Grande Village to see that bird. No doubt about it. Never did I expect to get another shot at seeing that species in the United States. And although I've birded in Mexico occasionally, I've never seen it there.

By 2010 I considered myself to be a seasoned birder, not the novice I was when Dale Ohl and I found the first Texas record of a Flame-colored Tanager in BBNP in 1996. Unlike in 1991 when I didn't have a computer, and Texbirds listserv didn't exist, I am now plugged into the world via the internet. I don't even want to imagine a life without it, any more than I would want to imagine a life of being illiterate. In those days when we first tried to identify that tanager, I was the first to declare its identity, a Stripe-backed Tanager, per an old Mexican bird guide I owned. Having con-

vinced myself, and Dale, that was correct, I called the park to report what we had seen. Researchers actually deemed our report to be credible enough, without so much as a poor photo, that they sent researchers out to relocate it. And amazingly, they did relocate it. I remember correcting them when they said it was a Flame-colored Tanager. That's pretty close to being bird-illiterate! Someone patiently explained to me that the name had been changed since 1973 when my Peterson guide had been published.

But I'm plugged in now. And in a millisecond the name Matt Van Wallene became engraved in my neural pathways forever. He discovered the park's second TUFL (Texas's 3rd), also in November, albeit 19 years after the first one. (In 1993 a TUFL was found at an interstate rest area near Ft Stockton, making it the 2nd for Texas.)

This empidonax-sized flycatcher belongs to the family of Tyrant Flycatchers (Tyrannidae) of the genus *Mitrephanes*. Generally known as the Northern Tufted Flycatcher (*mitrephanes phaeocercus*), the only other *Mitrephanes* is the Olive Tufted Flycatcher (*mitrephanes olivaceus*) of South America, never documented in the United States. The Northern TUFL



Habitat where the Tufted Flycatcher was observed. Photo Carolyn Ohl-Johnson



With only a “handful” of accepted sightings in Texas, the Tufted Flycatcher remains a TBRC Review Species. Photo Carolyn Ohl-Johnson

nests high in mountain forests of Mexico, and although it’s not migratory, small numbers of them are known to go down to lowlands during winter, in pairs, or singly.

Matt (a Certified Public Accountant by trade) is an unlikely candidate for a birder/bird photographer in that he is colorblind. So while many hopeful birders were frustrated that he waited two days to report this fantastic sighting, in actuality he didn’t know the bird’s identity until he was back home in Arizona, and had posted his photos of it to a couple of bird forums that he regularly used when he couldn’t identify a bird. He had been in Austin visiting his son, and during his return to Chandler, had impulsively decided to detour through BBNP for a little recreational birding. At the park a helpful ranger recommended Rio Grande Village as the best birding hotspot for this time of year.

The Rio Grande River makes a huge curve that comprises the park’s river frontage. At the southeast portion where the “big bend” ends, the river is flanked on the American side by a mile-long campground. This campground con-

sists of large lawn-like areas, partly or wholly, canopied by cottonwood and various other tree species, with dense native vegetation around the periphery, as well as in patches here and there. The huge cottonwoods and other trees there were planted by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s shortly before the park became an official national park, transforming this flood-plain area into the ideal, and world renowned, birding site it is today. The campground has many campsites and full services, including store, showers, and laundry. It’s darned hot in the summer, but ideal in the winter. This November it was near perfect.

As Matt was contentedly ambling around RGV, taking photos of any bird that would stay in his viewfinder for long enough, he spotted a lone flycatcher high in a cottonwood tree. After snapping a dozen photos of it, he moved on. Flycatchers are challenging for even the best non-colorblind birders.

Back in Chandler, in typical CPA fashion, Matt first organized his photos, and then began the arduous job of getting IDs on the difficult

ones. Including his time in Austin, he had shot over 1300 photos of nearly 40 species. He posted photos of his “little flycatcher with a beautiful crest” to his two favorite forums, and immediately set off a storm of cyber proportions. Through the years he has made over 4,000 posts to WhatBird alone, where Liam Wolff was the first to ID the bird for him, writing, “This is a Tufted Flycatcher. You should report this bird immediately.” On the other forum, BirdForum, the first person to ID his treasured find, James Holdsworth, added, “...get the word out ASAP.” What did we ever do without the internet?

Things happened so near-simultaneously that it’s difficult to put them in order. According to Susan Billetdeaux, the sole monitor of Texas Rare Bird Alert, a division of NARBA (North American Rare Bird Alert), one of the forums’ members emailed her. Since I help with sighting reports from the Big Bend area, she emailed me. She didn’t know anything. I didn’t know anything. And when I contacted Mark Flippo, the park biologist, he didn’t know anything. I’m not sure if Mark Lockwood, Secretary of TBRC (Texas Birds Record Committee), had heard about it before I emailed him either. Cyber-speed timing had me in its grip and I couldn’t keep up. My first thought was that it was unusual that a rare bird had been reported, and verified with photos, and neither of the Marks knew about it. Normally, a rare bird sighting gets reported in the park before the person who discovers it even leaves the park. But, of course, Matt didn’t know he had found a rare bird. He only knew that he found a bird he personally couldn’t identify. Nothing rare about that!

The confusion only accelerated. For one thing, Texbirds, which Texas birders have come to depend on for prompt reporting of rare bird sightings, was having technical difficulties. NARBA contacted Matt; Matt contacted NARBA. With Matt’s digital flycatcher flying through cyberspace, at least the bird’s ID was not in doubt. That left the when and where to be sorted out.

The next day I arrived at RGV at daybreak... and searched in vain for 4 hours. I felt certain,

based on the 1991 individual that hung around for 2½ months, that the bird was still there, but I was hung up on looking where Matt had reported seeing it, east of Daniel’s Ranch, halfway between there and the campground store. The rest of the park I gave only a brief half-hearted search. It is pretty much too much for one person to do anyway. A group spread out with two-way radios is more realistic. Meanwhile, as it was the day before Thanksgiving, I had to return home to my holiday guests.

The following day Mark Lockwood relocated the bird on the west side of Daniel’s Ranch, the opposite side from where it had first been reported by Matt, but still toward the west end of the mile-long campground. When a group of birders all had great looks at it the following day, I couldn’t stand it any longer and tried for it again. I hadn’t been there long when someone located it and spread the word via two-way radio as well as birders’ usual loud whispering, or quiet yelling, however you call it. If you’re a birder, you know what I mean, just like you know what phishing is. I’m plugged in now.

While hundreds of birders got to see the 1991 flycatcher (per Kelly Bryan and Barry Zimmer “American Birds” Spring 1993) in the over 2 months it was there, nearly one hundred birders got to see this 2010 bird in the first week, thanks mainly to the technological tools of today.

As in the 1991 sightings, the unpredictable little tyrant kept observers guessing as to where it would show up next. One day some of the over twenty searchers had given up when around 3:00 PM it was located at the opposite side of the campground from where it was normally being seen. A friend of mine who happened to be there to see the bird that day actually began driving around the campground, seeking birders to let them know where the bird was. The bird was last reported seen on Jan 4, 2011 close to where it all began, in the Daniel’s Ranch area (Mark Flippo personal communication).

Carolyn Ohi-Johnson
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Birds Within the City Limits: El Franco Lee Park

By Stephan Lorenz

While a few birders have discovered El Franco Lee County Park in south Houston, the majority of locals and visitors are unaware of its great potential. It offers some of the most rewarding birding within the Houston city limits. On first impression it doesn't look very promising. From the entrance off Hall Road most of its 361 acres appear to be covered with dozens of playing fields and a few scattered trees. After fronts during spring migration though the short grass here often holds American Golden Plovers, Pectoral Sandpipers, and Upland Sandpiper, the latter are regular in very small numbers. The rest of the year the usual assortment of Northern Mockingbirds, Great-tailed Grackles, European Starlings, and Brown-headed Cowbirds frequent these developed areas, but on some

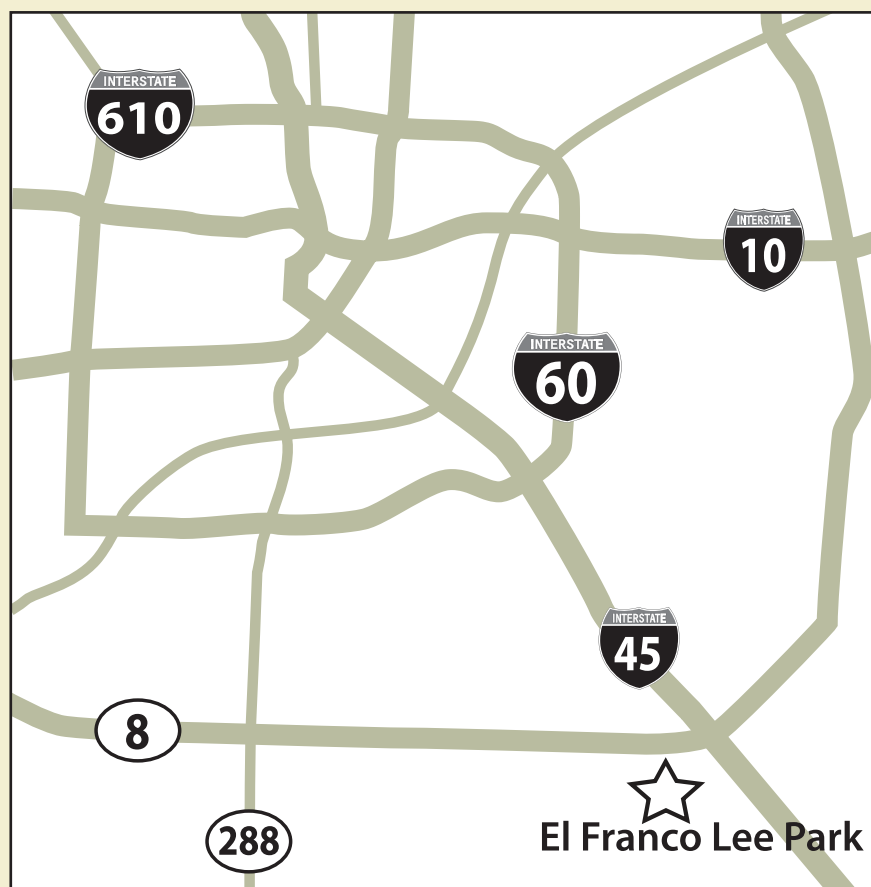
days Monk Parakeets from nearby colonies join, feeding on seeds.

The birding gets a bit more interesting in a flood basin just beyond the fields, especially when water is present, it can hold several species of shorebirds during migration, including Greater Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Least Sandpiper. In recent winters dozens of Wilson's Snipes frequented wet areas here.

From the last parking lot a wetland, nearly hidden behind rows of cypress and brush, is visible. These 80 acres of open water, mudflats, reed beds, and dense brush in drier sections harbor an incredible number of birds for such a small area. A wide nature trail encircles the marsh and passes woodland growing along Clear Creek. It is possible to walk around the entire impoundment, which

served as water storage during the rice growing era and has now been established as a managed and protected wetland. A short boardwalk with a roofed pavilion allows for easy scoping of the birds.

It's a great place to see Wood and Mottled Ducks year-round. During summer Black-bellied Whistling Ducks breed here and Fulvous Whistling Ducks have been seen. The open water gets crowded during





El Franco Lee Park's 80-acre wetland attracts a wide variety of wading and shorebirds, along with flocks of waterfowl especially during the winter. White Ibis (upper left) feed in shallow areas year-round. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks (lower left) and Yellow-crowned Night Herons (lower right) are common summer residents, while Ospreys (upper right) fish above the open water from fall through spring. Photos by Stephan Lorenz

the colder months with large rafts of wintering American Coots and ducks. Over twenty-three species of waterfowl have been found here, including Canvasback, Redhead, and Cinnamon Teal. Wading birds are common throughout the year with thirteen species of heron, egrets, and ibis, including American Bittern in winter. Bald Eagles visit the wetland regularly during winter to hunt ducks alongside fishing Ospreys.

During spring migration the small woodlots can be alive with warblers, vireos, thrushes, and buntings depending on weather. The majority of woodland birds can be found along a short trail passing through low forest to the northwest of the last parking lot. Interesting warblers have included Cerulean and Golden-winged along with more common migrants.

Blue-headed Vireos, both kinglets, Brown Creepers, and half a dozen sparrow species add a mix to the resident Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, and Downy Woodpeckers in winter. The wetland harbors large numbers of Sedge Wrens from fall until late spring and Winter Wrens, up to four individuals, remained here for the colder months. Over past years Vermillion Flycatchers, with up to three birds, set up shop and a single Palm Warbler remained for four consecutive winters. Incredibly a Snail Kite was recorded recently in June, marking the fourth documented record for Texas.

On any day, birders can expect a great mix of marsh and woodland birds within a brief morning walk. The park list boasts nearly 215 species, which will surely in-



A wide nature trail leads around the wetland and through small sections of woodland that can harbor large numbers of migrants in spring. On a good day it is possible to see several species of warblers, like Magnolia Warbler (left) and American Redstart (upper right), vireos, buntings, and thrushes, Gray-cheeked Thrush (lower right). Photos by Stephan Lorenz

crease as birdwatchers explore the area more, especially during migration. A few regionally rare birds have occurred here, most notably a Harris Hawk that spent a winter and several Wood Storks in late summer. In addition at least two pairs of King Rail are resident in the dense reeds. It's a great place for a half day of birding for seasoned locals and

visitors alike. The park is easily accessed off Interstate 45 and Beltway 8 in south Houston. A checklist is available upon request from the author.

Stephan Lorenz
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Blue Buntings—behind the scenes

By Timothy Brush

The Blue Bunting (*Cyanocompsa parellina*) is “on the list” of many birders visiting the famous Lower Rio Grande Valley (the Valley) of Texas. Although chances to see it are greater in winter, their current status in Texas (“very rare and irregular”, and their reclusive behavior make them difficult to see. In the past, informal word-of-mouth chains or the recorded rare bird alert directed birders to spots such as “trailer site 31 at Bentsen.” Now, email, texting, facebook, and even twitter can help provide up-to-date information. Other, even rarer, species may be found while looking for a particular reported bird, as in the case of the Stygian Owl (*Asio stygius*) found at Bentsen in 1996.

Often seen as a dark shadow flitting between patches of dense cover, Blue Buntings are more easily seen at feeding stations or artificial water sources, where they may pause long enough to grab a few seeds, drink, or bathe. Occasionally, one hears the sharp “chink” call of the species, which reminds me a bit of Eastern Phoebe or Hooded Warbler (the song is only heard during the breeding season). One has to eliminate the more common Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*), which is not blue in winter. All winter Indigos and females of species such as Varied (*P. versicolor*), can be confused with Blues, but are more likely to occur away from forests, at times in flocks. In addition, those other buntings have more slender bills and are less “stocky” overall than Blue Buntings. Female Blues seen in Texas and eastern Mexico are a darker brown than other buntings.

The first Blue Bunting recorded in the USA was in December 1979, in Cameron Parish, southwestern Louisiana, in a migrant/vagrant “trap” known as Hackberry Ridge. The vast majority of USA sightings have been in the Valley, but in winter 1987-1988 two birds were seen in Brazoria County. Both those birds were found on the same day, December 20, 1987. Birds have been seen as far northwest as Laredo. In the Valley, heavily-visited Hidalgo County locations such as Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge have the most records, but birds

have also been seen in Cameron County sites, such as the excellent native plant garden and water feature at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Overall, Blue Buntings have been documented 34 times in Texas through 2009, as accepted by the Texas Bird Records Committee. Most records have occurred during the peak season of November through March, with a few sightings through April). There are doubtless valid sightings never reported or accepted by the TBRC.

Habitats used or preferred by Blue Buntings during their visits are difficult to determine, since many birders see the birds at feeders or water features. Surrounding habitats vary from tall riparian forest to thorn forest and thornscrub, often with small grassy areas interspersed. In Mexico, Blue Buntings normally inhabit tropical deciduous forest and similar habitats. In southwestern Tamaulipas, Blue Buntings are uncommon residents of tropical forest and edge in semiarid and humid lowlands and humid subtropical slopes. Unlike other buntings, grassquits, and sparrows, Blue Buntings tend not to use extensive fields, even if overgrown with scrubby vegetation. The late J. Stuart Rowley, tropical nest-finder extraordinaire, found them “present, but not common” in shrubs and weeds at the edges between tropical deciduous forest and cultivated fields in Oaxaca, southern Mexico. He described the first nest, which was well hidden in vines covering a small shrub. In the well-studied Chamela Biosphere Reserve of Jalisco, western Mexico, Blue Buntings are one of the most common residents of tropical



Female Blue Buntings seen in Texas and eastern Mexico are a darker brown than other buntings. Photo Alan Wormington

deciduous forest, especially during the mid-late summer rainy season. In Veracruz, southeastern Mexico, where wetter conditions allow taller, semievergreen forest to grow, Blue Buntings are one of the most common species in regenerating forest 10 m (30+ ft.) in height. Blue Buntings have likely declined in areas where tropical deciduous or other preferred habitats have been cleared, but they generally remain fairly common to common from Sinaloa and Nuevo León south to north-central Nicaragua. In densely-populated El Salvador they are considered threatened forest specialists. On a May 2011 trip to the Yucatán Peninsula, John Brush and I saw Blue Buntings in roadside weeds in otherwise forested areas, not in weedy borders of agricultural fields.

Although their diet is little known, Blue Buntings' frequency at the edges of forests and in little clearings where seeds are often abundant, fits in with their short but thick bill and generally granivorous habits. Blue Buntings are common in tropical deciduous forests, where they are one of the most common pollinators of a chameleon vine (*Combretum fruticosum*). There are records of fruit-eating in several regions of Mexico, from the Yucatan to Jalisco. The species has been seen foraging at spider-webs in the Yucatan, opportunistically taking insects or small spiders. Like many seed-eaters (granivores), Blue Buntings consume many insects during the breeding season.

My personal experience with Blue Buntings in the Valley is seeing a female that regularly visited a seed-feeder at Bentsen in the late 1990s. In Mexico, I typically have seen one or two birds per morning in streamside or hillside forests with a dense understory. During my May and June visits to south-central Tamaulipas, I have heard the "warbly", fading song from dense understory patches within forests. On one occasion, I saw a male come to a swiftly-flowing stream for a quick drink at mid-day when there was little overall bird activity. In the cold snap of early 2010, John Brush and I saw several Blue Buntings along the rocky road leading to Alta Cima from Gomez Farias. Although we couldn't see them eating, they were associated with flowering and seeding

Mexican flame-vines (*Senecio chenopodioides*), where we suspected they were foraging.

There is no direct evidence of migration in Blue Buntings, although some have speculated that birds may disperse a bit during the severe dry season of western Mexico, perhaps moving to moister forests or more seed-rich thorn-scrub areas. In eastern Mexico, winters are fairly dry, and also fairly cold, perhaps causing some Blue Buntings to disperse in search of seasonally more favorable areas such as the Valley. Where do these birds come from? Conservatively, we could guess they come from Nuevo Leon or Tamaulipas, the nearest populations, but there is no way of knowing without more in-depth study of in-hand birds.

Obviously, Blue Bunting sightings have increased since the 1960s and 1970s in the Valley. Does this represent a true increase or is it just reflective of much larger numbers of visitors, better field guides and identification skills, and communication? Since there were some very diligent researchers and birders in the Valley, and Blue Buntings were not seen, I believe it does represent a true increase. Interestingly, there is little evidence of a northward spread in Mexico. Blue Buntings still occur around Monterrey, Nuevo León, where the species was first observed by Couch in 1853. They have not been observed yet in the Sierra de los Picachos, the closest mountain range to Falcon Reservoir. Observations near La Pesca, Tamaulipas, in 1961 and Anáhuac, northern Nuevo León in 1995 are in seldom-birded areas where their previous status was unknown.

Given the relatively regular occurrence of at least one bird in the Valley over a couple decades, why have there been no breeding records? Based on data from northeastern Mexico, breeding would occur during April-July, when most Valley species are at the height of their nesting seasons. Species like Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) and Clay-colored Thrush (*Turdus grayi*) were first recorded mainly as winter visitors and then established breeding populations. Of course, Blue Buntings may have bred, undetected by birders. However, if birds had stayed at popular spots like Bentsen or Santa Ana, I would think sooner



Blue Buntings have been documented 34 times in Texas through 2009. Photo Greg Lasley

or later a male would have been heard singing, in these not-so-large islands of native vegetation. Perhaps the habitats are not moist enough to attract Blue Buntings to stay, or perhaps there are some unknown resources not available. Or, perhaps it is just a matter of time before the “random molecules” collide, so that a male and female both end up in the same spot during the breeding season.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*. Common to abundant summer and winter resident throughout the state. Large numbers of Mourning Doves from outside the state replace the summer resident populations during the winter.

Photo Erik Breden

Is Texas the Columbidae State??

By Jack Eitniear

Texas is not only a big state but its unique location geographically maximizes avian diversity. The state not only supports species typical of most of the central states but also those of the southwestern region and of nearby Mexico. Several other states are also located in such a manner as to enhance such diversity. For example, Florida supports Caribbean species and California those of the more arid Mexican region. When it comes to native (I am not including exotic species in this article) Columbidae pigeons and doves being located close to the tropics brings added diversity as both the Caribbean islands and tropical northeastern Mexico supports numerous species of doves.

In this article we will compare the variety of doves and pigeons recorded in Texas to those in Florida.

Due to its proximity to the Caribbean, Florida lists the White-crowned pigeon, Key West Quail-Dove, Zenaida Dove and Ruddy Quail-Dove, whereas Texas lists the Red-billed Pigeon, Ruddy Ground-Dove, White-tipped Dove, and Ruddy Quail-Dove (from adjacent Mexico).

While presence of these “tropical” species seems to be about equal the “edge” is that Texas also supports the Band-tailed Pigeon and Inca Dove, two species we think of as western and southwestern, respectively. Another difference is in the abundance of the various species. While it is not difficult to observe seven of the nine species in Texas only four of the seven species in Florida can easily be observed. Ironically, the Key West Quail-Dove (also resident of the Bahamas, Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico) is only occasionally seen in Florida!! In fact, the



White-tipped Dove *Leptotila verreauxi*. Common resident in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. White-tipped Doves are uncommon and local north through the north Texas Brush Country. This species is slowly expanding its range northward.

Photo Michael Patrikeev



Ruddy Quail-Dove *Geotrogon montana*. Accidental. Texas has one record of this tropical dove. Ruddy Quail-Doves are uncommon to rare residents in northeastern Mexico as far north as the state of Tamaulipas. Ruddy Quail-Doves are also resident throughout the Caribbean (except the Bahamas), but are only occasionally seen in Florida. The most recent sighting was from Hugh Taylor Birch State Park in 2002.

Photo Greg Lasley



Ruddy Ground-Dove *Columbina talpacoti*. Casual visitor to the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the Big Bend region, and El Paso County.

Photo Jack Eitniew



Common Ground-Dove *Columbina passerina*. Uncommon and locally common resident in the South Texas Brush Country, Coastal Prairies, and southern Trans-Pecos along the Rio Grande, but uncommon away from the river.

Photo Erik Breden

last one I could find a record of was seen on Elliot Key, Biscayne National Park in 2002. Considering this, Texas is clearly the Columbid state! Now how many of you have seen all nine species?

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White-winged Dove *Zenaida asiatica*. Common to locally abundant summer resident throughout the southern half of the state. The population of white-winged Doves in Texas is undergoing a rapid range expansion. Photo Michael Small

Red-billed Pigeon *Patagioenas flavirostris*. Locally uncommon to rare resident in the western Lower Rio Grande Valley. Red-billed Pigeons are found primarily in close association with the riparian forest of the Rio Grande.

Photo Michael Woodruff



Inca Dove *Columbina inca*. Common resident in the southern two-thirds of the state, becoming uncommon and local farther north and in the Pineywoods. As with the White-winged Dove this species is expanding its range northward and eastward.

Photo Joseph Kennedy

Texas Pigeons and Doves

Band-tailed Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas fasciata</i>
Red-billed Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas flavirostris</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>
Common Ground-Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>
Inca Dove	<i>Columbina inca</i>
White-tipped Dove	<i>Leptotila verreauxi</i>

Texas Vagrants

Ruddy Ground-Dove	<i>Columbina talpacoti</i>
Ruddy Quail-Dove	<i>Geotrygon montana</i>

Florida Pigeons and Doves

Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>
Common Ground-Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>
White-crowned Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas leucocephala</i>

Florida Vagrants

Zenaida Dove	<i>Zenaida aurita</i>
Key West Quail-Dove	<i>Geotrygon chrysia</i>
Ruddy Quail-Dove	<i>Geotrygon montana</i>



Band-tailed Pigeon *Patagioenas fasciata*. Common to uncommon summer and irregular winter resident at the higher elevations of the Davis and Chisos Mountains. This species is a rare, and possibly declining, summer resident in the Guadalupe Mountains. Photo Mark W. Lockwood

The 2011 Great Texas Birding Classic

By Clay Taylor

It was the end of Day 4 of the 2011 Great Texas Birding Classic, and the Swarovski Optik Fabulous (EL) Fifties birding team was dragging. After four days birding throughout the three Texas Coastal Birding Trails, we had seen or heard nearly 300 bird species, and new birds were getting hard to find. We were departing the Galveston terminal of the Bolivar Ferry, heading toward Beaumont for the evening, and we still needed Magnificent Frigatebird for our list. The same ferry trip four days earlier was frigate-free, as were viewing sessions at South Padre Island, Packery Channel, Port Aransas, Quintana and other coastal locations. I was convinced we had missed it.

The ferry set out for Bolivar, with a beautiful sunset to the west, and a strong wind from the southwest. Our team was huddled out of the wind at the front of the observation deck, scanning for long, dark wings. After 10 minutes, Brian Bielfelt and I wandered down to the back to the boat, peered around the corner into the gale, and there was a Magnificent Frigatebird 35 feet away, at eye level, heading up toward the bow of the boat! We sprinted past it up to the bow, rounded the corner, and breathlessly waved the other team members to look around the corner. By then the bird had arrived at the bow, and it hung in the air not 25 feet from us, “surfing” the air at the front of the boat. Viewing through my new 12x50 EL Swarovision binocular, I could only see the bird’s beak, head, upper breast, and the leading edge of the base of its wing. The sunset colors in the background made the view look like a painting, and I was watching it move its eye! Wow!! The mood on the ride to Beaumont was considerably more upbeat than when we had boarded the ferry.

The birding “Big Day” is a game of seeing how many species you can identify in a calendar day. My first one was in Rochester, NY while I was in college, and since then I have

done Big Days in many states and at different times of the year. However, I have never been all that motivated to DO anything with my Big Day results. The American Birding Association keeps Big Day Lists for every month in every state, but the only way that my Big Day totals ever were published was if one of my teammates sent in the results.

In 1999 I met Joel Simon in Corpus Christi, and had a great time learning about birding the Texas Coastal Bend. One of the things he told me about was a pretty unique birding experience—The Great Texas Birding Classic. It was a twist to the classic birder’s Big Day, in that you could compete in different areas of Texas, and the winning team(s) could then donate money to conservation programs within the areas of coverage.

There was a condition to being able to donate the GTBC money—your team had to have a Sponsor and pay a pretty hefty entry fee. That was where I was in luck, as my job as Naturalist Market Manager at Swarovski Optik N.A. gave me the ability to field a Swarovski Optik team.

Our first effort was in the Lower Texas Coast (LTC) with teammates Fr. Tom Pincelli, John Arvin, and Mel Pineda. We called

ourselves the Swarovski Roadside Hawks, had a great time, and I was almost embarrassed to admit that I got three North American life birds on that trip – Brown Jay, Red-billed



Andy Bankert, a native Floridian, was part of our winning team. Photo Clay Taylor



Joel Simon at Bentsen Rio Grande State Park.

Photo Clay Taylor

birding techniques and finally won the LTC event. Receiving the Grant Proposals from the GTBC and picking out the best one was a huge pleasure.

However—the BIG prize of the GTBC comes from the winning team of the Week-Long Competition, which at that time covered three days (Upper, Central, and Lower Coast) spread over a calendar week (Sunday, Wednesday, and Saturday were the counts—the other days were used for scouting). Joel had competed in that one, but never won it. In 2002, the contest was changed—the Week-Long event was now going to be five consecutive days of birding, ANYWHERE within the three Texas Coastal Birding Trails. Ok, now that was tempting.

We formed a 5-Day team and simply competed—no scouting, no elaborate planning. We ended up tied for 5th with Bill Baker’s Environmental Partners team. The next year, I went back to doing a One-Day Team, while Bill pursued the dream to win it all, which his team did in 2005. That started his six-year winning streak—truly a dynasty.

This past January at the Space Coast Bird Festival, Bill was egging me on—“come on,

Pigeon, and White-collared Seedeater. Our Roadside Hawks team competed in the LTC for the next few years, and we slowly refined our route, timing, and

Clay, enter the 5-Day, ‘cause we need some competition!” I looked at Joel, he nodded, and it was on! I immediately recruited two team members, both native Floridians—David Simpson and Andy Bankert. They are Big-Day junkies, and have broken and re-broken virtually every FL Big Day record there is.

I decided to call us the Swarovski Fabulous (EL) Fifties, in honor of our newest binocular that we were debuting at the FL birding festival. The fifth member of the team was Brian Bielfelt, a graduate student living in Robstown, TX, and currently doing field work on S. TX ranches. However, that was not all – the GTBC Rules allow a non-competing Driver, so I persuaded Mike Bergin to be our driver. He is the owner of the blog-site “10,000 Birds” (www.10000birds.com), which is the most widely-read bird blog in the world. His blog would be a great way to get information about the Great Texas Birding Classic out to the rest of the birding world. This was going to be fun!

We were able to do some pre-Classic scouting, and the team assembled in Houston the day before the 5-Day event started. Here is why the Great Texas Birding Classic is so much fun – the ability to use resources to plan routes, and the free exchange of information among teams, even during the event. We were “hooked up” while traveling, as Joel’s mobile hotspot allowed Brian to access Tex-Birds posts, including John Arvin’s daily “bird migration as observed via NEXRAD weather radar” updates, as well as the current reports to eBird via the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology (<http://ebird.org/content/ebird/>).

Day 1 started with breakfast taquitos by Whataburger (a TX birding tradition of mine). New Yorker Mike was very impressed. Nick Block had been kind enough to give me a copy of his Big Day route for birding the Upper Texas Coast, so we started our 5-Day odyssey in East Texas darkness, listening for owls and calling nightjars and ulti-

mately missing both. Dang. Dawn brought us Red-cockaded Woodpeckers sticking their heads out of nest holes, and we were off!

Our objective for Day One was to lock up the East TX Specialties – birds like Bachmann’s Sparrow, Red-headed Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, American Robin, and Swallow-tailed Kite, all the while adding species to the overall list. We missed the robin and the kite, but did well with the others. We swept out of the Piney Woods down through Beaumont (finding Bonaparte’s Gull and American Pipits at the sewer treatment plant) and on to Sabine Woods along the coast. There were decent numbers of warblers present, but the best bird was a Black-billed Cuckoo. The next stop was High Island for more migrants, but a better bird for our list was a lingering Eastern Towhee. After that, down the Bolivar Peninsula with stops at Rollover Pass, Bolivar Flats, and the Bolivar – Galveston Ferry. That brought us our first “Rare Bird” that required a reporting form – the Long-tailed Duck that had been found three days before during the Galveston FeatherFest. It was hugging the jetty, and we digiscoped it for good measure.

With the help of the internet, we decided that Day 2 on the Upper Coast was not going to bring us a big influx of warblers and other neotropical migrants, so we turned the van southwest toward the Rio Grande Valley. That’s where Driver Mike (fueled by RockStar



On the King Ranch I found, and digiscoped, two female Masked Ducks. Photo Clay Taylor

energy drink) paid dividends. We slept, he drove.

After a stop at Whataburger in Roma, pre-dawn Poor-wills greeted us near the Santa Margarita Ranch. We were on the bank of the Rio Grande at first light, watching for Muscovy Duck, Ringed Kingfisher, Red-billed Pigeon, and Green Kingfishers to fly by. We saw all but the latter kingfisher, so we headed up to Starr County Park and Falcon State Park. We missed a previously-scouted Zone-tailed Hawk at FSP, but did find a black-tailed Gnatcatcher at SCP. Well, that is, until I looked a little more closely at my digiscoped pictures of the bird. “Um, hey, guys, we got the gnatcatcher wrong—it was a Blue-gray”. Dang. A consolation find at SCP was the Vermilion Flycatcher that we had missed during the scouting.

The team then zoomed through the Rio Grande Valley, passing up big spots like Bentsen Rio Grande State Park and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge for a stop at the Edinburg Wetlands—we missed the Ring-necked Duck that was there during scouting, but picked up Green Kingfisher. Yay!

Why did we avoid those iconic RGV birding spots? It was all about rolling up big South TX species numbers early in the game. We headed out to South Padre Island for rails, shorebirds, waterbirds, and the possibility of more migrants. The boardwalks at the SPI World Birding Center and the thickets at the SPI Convention Center were good (but not great), so the next big decision was to dash to Brownsville to get Green Parakeets and Red-crowned Parrots as they came to roost. Again, being able to access TexBirds and eBird gave us locations, and we ended the day with a pair of parrots as they flew by in the fading light. We headed back to McAllen for much-needed showers and Tony Roma’s for dinner, with strategy sessions for Day 3.

Fueled by more Whataburger, we arrived at Bentsen Rio Grande State Park pre-dawn,



Monk Parakeet was added to the list from the Leopard Street colony in Corpus Christi.

Photo Clay Taylor

serenaded by Elf and Eastern Screech Owls, then wandered down to the hawk platform to await the reported Groove-billed Anis. It took a while, so we amused ourselves by watching a great hawk liftoff, but finally the anis squealed in the underbrush, so we made our way back to the entrance. During scouting Dave had briefly spotted a Myodynastes-type flycatcher from the tram, but no luck today. A calling Northern Beardless Tyrannulet and a brief look at a dark-morph Hook-billed Kite finished our job at Bentsen.

Mike was due to fly back to NY, but we had time to stop at Allan Williams' famous yard in Pharr for the Crimson-collared Grosbeak that had been there for a few months. We dutifully paid our \$10 each and went in, immediately spotting our first Yellow-breasted Chat of the count. However, upon reaching the viewing area, we were informed that the CCG had not been seen for two days. That was a darn expensive Chat.....

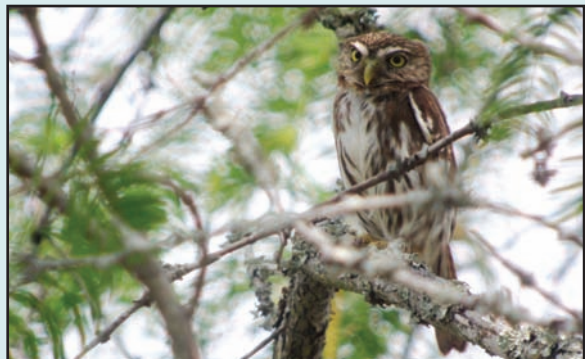
By now we had been in each other's company for over 72 hours, and the team was forming up nicely. While Brian and I had always thought our bird-call ID skills were pretty good, Dave's hearing put us to shame. Andy was the junior member of the team and his energy and drive were always dialed up to "11", especially when he had been snacking on Reece's peanut butter cups. Joel was the old sage of the group,

with more Texas birding experience than all of the rest of us combined, and he and Brian were the professional hawk-watchers of the group, so they usually spotted the long-distance birds. I did much of the long-distance scope viewing and digiscoping, plus trying to keep everything on schedule.

We now had put almost 260 species on the list, and the hard decisions were staring us in the face—what species remained to find, and what route do we follow to find them? Our immediate options in McAllen were two—go up river looking for White-collared Seedeaters and a few miscellaneous desert species, or to the King Ranch tour that we had arranged. We chose the King Ranch. Good move—in addition to the hoped-for specialties, I found and digiscoped two female Masked Ducks.

What followed was a quick trip to Port Aransas, where a gorgeous male Blackpoll Warbler greeted us at the Paradise Pond boardwalk. We swept through the Birding Center, then went down at a very wind-swept South Jetty, where I promptly got the van stuck in a sand drift. Uh oh. I guess that is where having five team members pays off—four pushing and one feathering the gas got us out in a few minutes. Whew!

The ride up from Mustang Island toward the Hotel Taylor in Calallen was noisy—everybody had an opinion about what our Day 4



Ferruginous Pygmy Owl was observed at the Norias Division of the King Ranch.

Photo Clay Taylor

itinerary should be. I was driving and stayed silent. When Brian finally asked me what I thought, I replied “I’m tired, I’m hungry, and I don’t trust my judgement right now. Let’s get something to eat and decide after dinner.” We stopped at Rudy’s, destroyed lots of barbecue, and the final few miles of the ride were more civilized. By the time we reached Calallen, the next day’s route was agreed on, and we all slept like babies that night.

Day 4 started all too early—pre-dawn cruising through the outskirts of Kingsville, looking for a Barn Owl in the area where we had missed finding a roosting one the previous afternoon. Andy spotted one perched on a fence post next to a small horse barn, and it posed in the van’s headlights. Then it was off to Joel’s house near Lake Corpus Christi, where his resident Barred Owls atoned for our Piney Woods miss. At Brian’s suggestion, we broke with tradition to get breakfast kalachis at the S&J Bakery in Corpus, then headed to the Rockport HEB parking lot for the nesting Tropical Kingbirds that were obligingly teed-up on aisle “C”.

We rolled the dice on spotting a lingering Whooping Crane from the Aransas NWR observation tower (nope!) and then headed up coast. An adult Lesser Blacked-backed Gull at Quintana and migrants arriving from their Gulf crossing added a bunch of new species. As we approached the bridge to Galveston Island, Dave spotted a Merlin zooming over the salt marshes. Laffite’s Cove on Galveston Island was buzzing with migrants, including a notable hole in our list—Dickcissel! After that, a visit to Coast Guard Woods, and the aforementioned frigatebird on the ferry ride to the Bolivar side.

The final day was going to be a series of stops for missing species, with hopes of picking up more incoming migrants at places like Houston Audubon’s High Island sanctuaries.

In only five days, there were new birds on territory back in the Piney Woods, so “birding deja-view” found us back in the same places, adding arrivals Acadian Flycatcher and Wood Thrush as well as the Hairy Woodpecker we missed the first time around. We again missed Swallow-tailed Kite, found American Robin in Winnie, TX, and headed to Anahuac NWR (a singing White-crowned Sparrow) and then High Island. Stunning views of Swainson’s Warblers (already on the list as heard-only, but a treat nonetheless) at Boy Scout Woods were augmented by a few new warbler species, and the reported Yellow-headed Blackbird at the High Island RV Park took us six visits to finally spot it.

We ended the daylight hours back at Anahuac, finding American Wigeon, a surprise Baird’s Sandpiper, and listening in vain for Virginia Rail. However, missing Virginia was compensated by an an 8:50 pm Black Rail calling in the marshes. That put us at a happy 312 species for the 2011 Great Texas birding classic.

The GTBC Awards Brunch was in Beaumont, and we were nervous—our 312 was a pretty good list, given the lack of really good migrant days, but I was worried about Bill’s team—they were based out of Houston, and had a lot of areas with potential late-lingering species nearby. Plus, you never can count out a six-time champ, right? Turns out, our 312 did the job, edging out the GenOn Energy Environmental Partners by 6 species. Whew! As we accepted the beautiful GTBC Trophy, I quoted Hannibal (Smith of the A-Team, not the Carthaginian military commander) “I love it when a plan comes together!”

Now we have to defend our title in 2012.

Clay Taylor

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Native Plants, Wildlife and Environmental Extremes

By Christina Mild

Most of us in Texas have drought uppermost in mind during June 2011. St. Augustine lawns and potted plants are in need of very frequent watering, a rather tiresome and costly endeavor.

To be sure, after extended seasons of drought, even our undisturbed tracts of native plants will show signs of wilting and little fruit may be available. Yet some species are extraordinary in the capacity to bear copious amounts of fruit months after hot, dry weather has begun. Allthorn Goatbush (*Castela Erecta*) has a spotty distribution throughout much of southernmost Texas. It is typical for this formidably-armed shrub to provide a heavy crop of shiny red fruit in the hottest months of late spring. The common name Amargosa indicates the bitter taste of leaves and fruit. Amargosa's ability to bear such amounts of fruit months after the last rain is nothing short of miraculous. I've encountered Groove-Billed Ani more than once in heavily-laden Amargosa thickets.



Allthorn Goatbush
Castela erecta.

Photo Christina Mild

grow from transplants. Left to grow in places where it is already established, Amargosa has great potential to provide food and shelter to many species of wildlife.

Throughout the state (and the world) are natives which are perfectly suited to whatever

Should we rush out to plant Amargosa in every Texas yard? No. To be sure, the plant is ill-suited to the hard freezes typical of Texas north of San Antonio. And Amargosa is rather slow to

environmental conditions occur in that area. Some of these, like Amargosa, will have the uncanny ability to produce fruit in seemingly impossible conditions.

A friend asked for planting recommendations beneath an old Ebony tree which casts a heavy shade. I can't say that she ever really listened to my advice. It was obvious (to me) that a large diversity of native herbivorous plants and potential shrubs already existed beneath the tree, which grew in an area of the yard which was regularly mown low but infrequently watered. "Stop mowing there and water beneath the tree. Give the area a periodic, heavy soaking," I advised. If you soak such an area sufficiently, water will penetrate several inches into the soil, where a wealth of roots from diverse native species will suddenly begin to grow and flourish. This simple technique makes much more sense than transplanting "natives" into the area. Whatever species have managed to maintain a tenuous foothold in such areas are perfectly suited to growing there. They will take advantage of any additional moisture provided.

Thus, my first point is: give existing diversity a chance to demonstrate just what each species might provide to the wildlife present in your yard, park, riverbank, etc. Anyone who has promoted native plant diversity will have countless recollections of the increasing diversity of birds and other wildlife species which results.

Secondly: provide a bit of water, if you can, to the native plants which happen to grace your yard. Most natives will bloom and fruit more frequently with a bit of extra water. And deep watering is always best.

Third: natives will show amazing results if competing tall, exotic grasses (Johnson, Guinea and buffle grasses, for example) are removed, lessening competition for available moisture and soil nutrients. It isn't easy to remove the roots of tall, weedy grasses, but



Sea Oxeye Daisy.

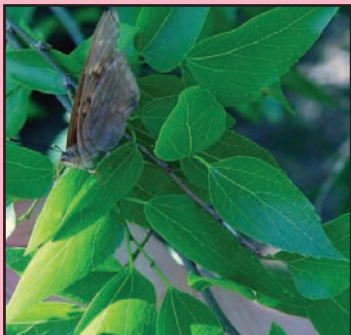
Photo Christina Mild

it pays large dividends very soon after they're removed (or killed with RoundUp!).

Exotic, invasive grasses, drought and hot winds are pretty obvi-

ous to the beholder. Other environmental extremes are much less obvious. A friend sought my advice on native species to transplant into a barren area on her property. Adjacent was a beautiful colony of Sea Oxeye Daisy (a pollinator-attracting, butterfly hostplant providing larvae for frugivorous birds). Sea Oxeye Daisy is an indicator of salt-laden soils, in which many plants, even locally-native species, cannot grow. Native grower Mike Heep recommended the addition of lots of organic matter before any transplanting was attempted. Organic matter, in sufficient quantities, can buffer some effects of soil pH, including salty, acid or alkaline conditions. It will definitely increase moisture absorption and the number of soil dwellers, like earthworms, which many birds actively seek.

Fourth: Take advantage of free windfalls! Driving thru neighborhoods, I actively track the existence of bagged leaves discarded at the curb, especially any bags of small leaves which



Sugar Hackberry Butterfly.

Photo Christina Mild

will decompose quickly. A top-mulch of leaves around a tree, shrub or flower bed, sprinkled with water to speed up decomposition, attracts

mockingbirds, thrashers and many other birds, in very short order. It also cuts down on the spread of unwanted weeds and grasses, and makes unwanted seedlings easier to pull out.

Fifth: In relatively barren areas, it also makes sense to investigate what soil types are present. County agricultural extension agents can help in this



Retama blooms.

Photo Christina Mild

regard, as extensive soil maps have been created for most areas. Someone skilled in native plant recognition may be able to provide many insights, as well. For example, areas (even small pockets) where seasonal flooding occurs will be dominated by trees such as Sugar Hackberry, Retama and Huisache. These trees tolerate standing water, where many other plant species would perish. In order to add diversity to such areas, seeds or transplants of additional flood-resistant species might be introduced or drainage might be improved. The addition of organic matter can be helpful in increasing the moisture-absorbing qualities of soil.

I can't over-emphasize the issue of unnecessary mowing. Many areas of intended lawn are highly disappointing to the average lawn owner. In shady areas, for example, St. Augustine just doesn't do well, and a whole assortment of "weeds" begins to appear. In most cases, this indicates that St. Augustine



Nest in Retama tree.

Photo Christina Mild

is not well-suited to that micro-environment. So, make the best of it! Let the area grow a bit taller than the rest of the yard. A whole assortment of low-growing wildflowers and groundcovers may well appear. Each is probably a hostplant for a moth or butterfly, will attract pollinators, and will add a bit of variety to your yardscape, as well as to the diversity of birdlife which will visit or take up residence.

Perhaps my last bit of advice is to make friends with local activists who admire native

plants. You can find them on the internet with a simple search on native plants and your geographic area. These folks will share seeds, transplants, information and the whole gamut of human interest. And visit local nature centers. Take note of which plants the birds are feasting, nesting, loafing or hiding in. It's a never-ending exploration which should keep your neurons firing in a most pleasant way.

Christina Mild

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Can the Aransas Whooping Cranes be Saved?

By Ronald B. Outen, PhD

During the winter of 2008-2009, continuing water diversions during a period of natural drought reduced the flow of the Guadalupe/San Antonio River system at its outlet to a trickle. San Antonio Bay and the other bays and marshes in and around the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge became hypersaline as river flows dropped, disrupting normal food webs and reducing productivity of the estuary. The wintering whooping cranes that depend on the Aransas-area marshes suffered.

In April, 2009, Refuge Whooping Crane Coordinator Tom Stehn distributed the following comments in an email:

"A blue crab count done on April 1 found zero crabs in the marsh....Overall, these continue to be some of the worst conditions I have ever observed for the cranes at Aransas, with some birds looking thin and with disheveled plumage."

This account marked the end of the worst winter season for the crane flock in recorded history. By the time the birds started the 2400 mile journey north to begin a nesting season in Wood Buffalo National Park,



Bird captured with injured leg and emaciation - December 1st, 2008. Bird died in transport to a vet.

Photo by: U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

16 juvenile cranes and 7 adults—8.5% of the entire flock—had died on the Aransas Refuge.

In winter, whooping cranes are creatures of the open coastal marshes. The marshes provide plentiful food and brackish water for drinking, both of which the cranes can access with little effort. The “money shot” photo for the typical tourist comes when a strolling whooping crane plucks a crab from the mud. In fact, blue crabs are the most nutritious prey in the marsh, and a single crane may eat as many as 60-80 crabs per day. These convenient packages of protein and fat give the cranes the boost they need to return to their Canadian nesting ground with energy reserves to start the nesting season.

But during 2008-2009, bay salinities rose to levels that exceeded the salinity of the Gulf of Mexico, while salinity levels in the Aransas crane marshes were higher still. Bay productivity declined, commercial and recreational fishing collapsed, and crabs disappeared from the marshes. As Tom Stehn noted, the marsh pools became too saline to drink, and the cranes had to range far and wide in search of fresh water and sub-optimal foods such as bird seed and corn. As the energy costs of foraging exceeded the energy gains of feeding, the cranes’ fitness declined. Some first-year juveniles separated from their parents to forage on their own—a behavior rarely seen in these protective family groups—and undoubtedly became more vulnerable to predation.

When the accounting was complete, it was clear that 270 cranes flew south to the Aransas Refuge in the fall, and 247 started the trip back to Canada in the spring. This is the only naturally-migrating flock of whooping cranes left in the world. Losses of this magnitude are a significant setback for a population the US Fish and Wildlife Service wants to grow to 1,000 birds.

The Aransas Project (TAP), a non-profit alliance of local governments, businesses, conservation organizations, and individuals, was organized during 2009 to assure adequate freshwater inflows into San Antonio Bay to protect the whooping cranes on their winter range and preserve the productivity of the local bays and marshes. What can be done to achieve this goal? To preserve the ecosystem that supports the winter whooping crane, TAP believes it is necessary to assure an adequate supply of fresh water to San Antonio Bay during periods of natural drought. In fact, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has identified



During April of 2009 Blue crab numbers were low do to an increase in salinity.

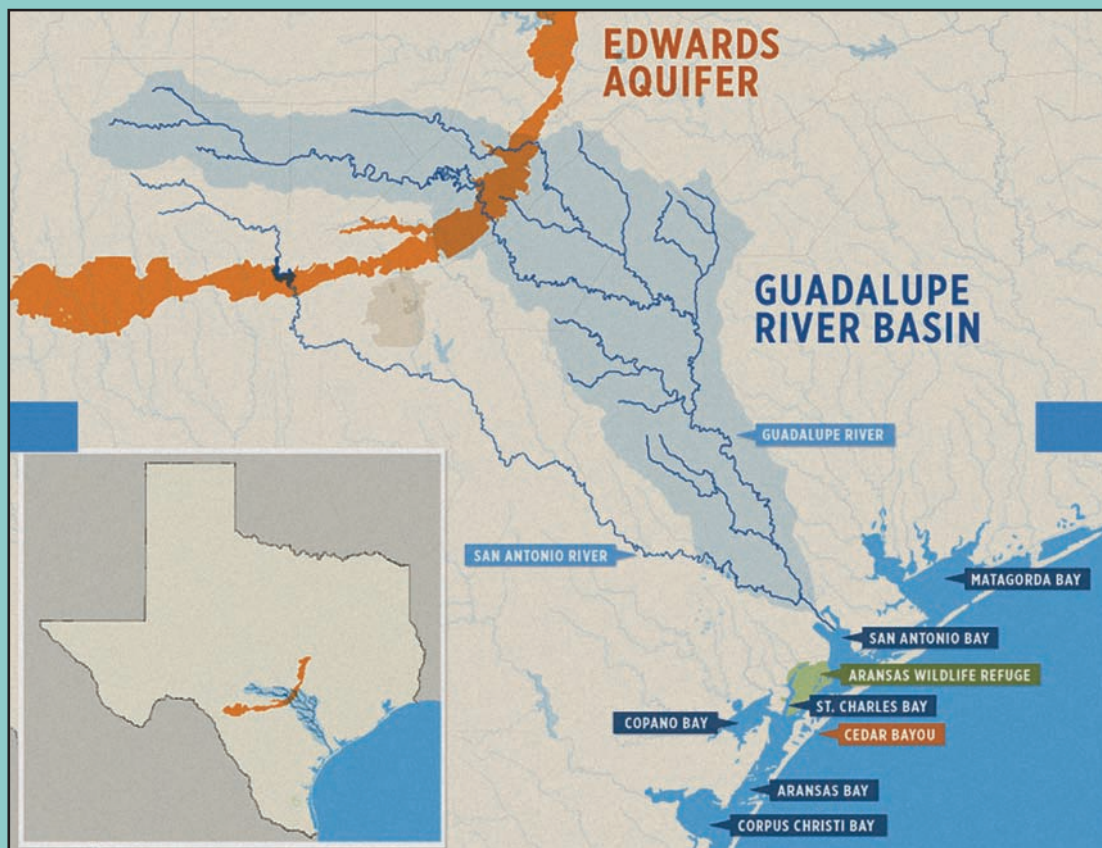
Photo by: U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

lack of reliable fresh water inflows as one of the biggest threats to the Aransas flock. To assure more reliable water, and save the cranes, it will be necessary to manage water diversions better.

All surface water in Texas is owned by the State, and any person who wants to divert water from a river must obtain a permit to do so. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) developed and administers the program for issuing diversion permits. In deciding whether to issue a permit and determining the amount of water that can be diverted from the Guadalupe / San Antonio River system, the

TCEQ program does not taken into account the ecological health of downstream estuaries, nor does it consider adverse effects on the whooping cranes. TAP believes this river system is already over-allocated. In fact, at the time the whooping cranes were dying and recreational fishing had collapsed, numerous diversion permits were “on the books” but inactive or not exercised to their full amounts. Had those permit holders chosen to exercise their permits to divert water, the river-flow drought affecting the Refuge would have started earlier, lasted longer, and been more severe. In other words, so much water is already allocated for diversion that San Antonio Bay will be starved for fresh water whenever Central Texas experiences a rainfall drought, even without future permits.

These concerns notwithstanding, in the year since the TAP filed the lawsuit, water authorities continue to lay the groundwork for future diversions, including the use of 75,000 acre feet per year



Guadalupe river basin map. Courtesy of www.thearansasproject.org

for a proposed nuclear power plant near Victoria and a planning recommendation for a 189,000 acre feet off-channel reservoir in the lower Guadalupe River Basin. To provide a sense of scale, 75,000 acre feet is more than 24 billion gallons of water.

On March 3, 2010, TAP filed a lawsuit in Federal District Court in Corpus Christi, alleging under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) that the TCEQ water diversion permit program caused an illegal “take” of whooping cranes during the winter of 2008-2009.

Under the ESA, to “take” an endangered species is defined as “to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture or collect a member of a listed species.” The term “harm” includes “significant habitat modification or degradation where it actually kills or injures wildlife by “significantly impairing essential behavioral

patterns, including breeding, feeding or sheltering.”

Putting the pieces together, the “chain of causation” leading to the illegal “take” of whooping cranes looks like this:

- Cranes died/were harmed, because—
- Food and water resources were insufficient, because—
- Bay and marsh salinity was too high, because—
- During the drought, people kept diverting water from the river, because —
- TCEQ allowed them to.

TAP is asking the federal court to order TCEQ to revise its water diversion permit program and establish mechanisms to assure a supply of fresh water to San Antonio Bay that will protect the whooping cranes.

Not surprisingly, the lawsuit has attracted the attention of numerous entities with a

vested interest in present or future water diversions, and several organizations have been granted intervenor status to participate in the trial as defendants. The defendants filed numerous motions asking the court to dismiss TAP's case. All were denied, and the Court recently scheduled the trial to begin December 2, 2011. It will be conducted by federal Judge Janis Jack in Corpus Christi. TAP is confident that its case is strong, both legally and scientifically.

To follow progress of the case, go to www.thearansasproject.org and signup for email updates. You can also become a member of TAP. There is no membership fee. And from the website it's easy to communicate with TAP via email.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Ronald B. Outen, PhD
TAP Regional Coordinator
E-Mail: ron@ronouten.com

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Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds: from Texas to the Neotropics—and Back!

By Bill Hilton Jr.

In the summer of 1982—after spending four very long, very cold, very dark winters in Minnesota researching behavioral ecology of Blue Jays—it was time to move the family back home to South Carolina and continue my career as a high school and college biology instructor. I also wanted to keep banding Blue Jays and other birds and near York South Carolina found an 11-acre tract complete with small pond and comfortable old farmhouse. Intent on studying all aspects of the local environment, wife Susan and I christened the place “Hilton Pond Center for Piedmont Natural History” (www.hiltonpond.org). Because the former farmstead seemed like a great spot to further my studies I immediately erected bird feeders, traps, and mist nets and started banding. Blue Jays did show up, as did a wide variety of resident species and Neotropical migrants—all of which received numbered aluminum bands that had potential to track them in migration and tell about longevity and site fidelity.



Beneath a shady Guanacaste tree in northwestern Costa Rica, master bander Bill Hilton Jr. (seated) and Ernesto Carman Jr. (checkered shirt) explain the intricacies of hummingbird morphology to citizen scientists Rita Heath (left) of Rock Hill SC and Gisele Norman of Calgary, Alberta while a local farmer looks on.

Photo courtesy Mary Kimberly



By the time adult male Ruby-throated Hummingbirds wander north to Belize in spring, they have attained pristine breeding plumage—including a full red gorget—and are preparing to head back to North America.

Photo © Bill Hilton Jr

I suspected I had about two dozen Ruby-throated Hummingbirds visiting my feeders and was astounded to band 75 of them in the next five days. (This gave rise to my “rule of thumb” that at a given site you probably have at least three times more hummingbirds than you think—a guideline that has been borne out by banding at several other locations.) By the end of migration that year I had banded what I thought was an amazing total of 114 RTHU, so in 1985 I hung the feeders in mid-March and started banding hummers during spring migration. That year I caught, banded, and released 144 more hummers, with 161 crossing our banding table in 1986. These kinds of numbers constituted a good sample size and I began to get really interested in all aspects of



Although site fidelity, longevity, and migratory behavior of hummingbirds are main emphases of Operation RubyThroat expeditions to the Neotropics, observers also are interested in learning whether native flowers such as this brilliant orange Combretum vine are pollinated by Ruby-throated Hummingbirds.

Photo © Bill Hilton Jr.

ruby-throats—so much so that I got “hooked on hummingbirds” and have spent nearly three decades monitoring their abundance and behavior at Hilton Pond and elsewhere.

To shorten the story considerably, from 1982 through 2010 (27 years) I banded 4,288 RTHU at my main study site in York, an average of 159 per annum—including some summers when I was away from Hilton Pond for all or part of the field season. (The average for 21 “complete” field seasons, March through October, is 178.) Of those 4,000-plus ruby-throats, about 12% have exhibited strong site fidelity by returning to Hilton Pond in at least one later year—with one female showing up in each of five consecutive years after banding.

My RTHU banding numbers at Hilton Pond are both significant and remarkable because nearly all ruby-throats from areas away from the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts depart the continental U.S.—apparently for Mexico and Central America. (A relatively small number of RTHU overwinter in Gulf and Atlantic Coast states.) I use the word “apparently” with good reason because of the 200,000 or so Ruby-throated Hummingbirds banded in North America in the



Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are the target species for Operation RubyThroat, but because mist nets are non-selective many other Neotropical migrants and resident tropical species are captured. Bander Bill Hilton Jr. reports (with tears in his eyes) that this Rufous-browed Peppershrike could bite harder than any bird species he had ever handled.

Photo © Bill Hilton Jr.



Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, drawn to a rich nectar source in commercial fields of Aloe Vera near Cañas Dulces, Costa Rica, are captured in mist nets erected and monitored by citizen scientists such as Rosalyn Fleisher of Rockville MD and Jim Lawhon of Polk City FL.

Photo © Bill Hilton Jr.



Four-foot-tall flower stalks of Aloe Vera—planted as a commercial row crop in Guanacaste Province, Costa Rica, proved to be a real magnet to Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. This female spent hours each day feeding on nectar from the aloe’s tubular yellow flowers.

Photo © Bill Hilton Jr.

past 100 years, not one has been encountered on its wintering grounds south of the U.S.-Mexican border. When inquisitive students or the public ask me “Where do our hummingbirds go?” I have to shrug my shoulders and respond with an apologetic “I don’t know.”

Despite the work of more than a hundred researchers now authorized to band Ruby-

throated Hummingbirds, there is much we do not know about this native species that occurs regularly in 38 eastern states and across southern Canada to Alberta. It is the most common hummer in east Texas, a region in which it breeds and/or passes through in large numbers during fall migration. Indeed, the annual Hummer/Bird Celebration at Rockport/Fulton annually attracts thousands of human visitors who come to see what must be hundreds of thousands of RTHU at backyard feeders in the area.

Some of the ruby-throats that come to Rockport have been observed departing the coast toward the southeast, but no one knows for sure their exact travel route to the Neotropics. They may be short-hopping and landing just a bit further south on the Texas or Mexican shoreline and flying overland the rest of the way, or they may be going across the Gulf of Mexico to put in on the Yucatan Peninsula before dispersing into Central America. One thing my work at Hilton Pond has shown for sure is that despite popular conjecture most East Coast hummingbirds probably do NOT go to Florida before attempting a trans-Gulf migration in autumn.

I now have four case histories that tell us much about migration of East Coast ruby-throats. Here’s the first: In 1991 veteran hummer banded Bob Sargent traveled to the Atlanta GA suburb of Loganville, where on 6 October at the home of Gina Pearson he



The first Operation RubyThroat Costa Rica hummingbird expedition in December 2004 encountered a major problem by unknowingly arriving BEFORE the bloom of Aloe Vera plants that were expected to concentrate nectar-hungry ruby-throats for banding. Fortunately, a small wintering population of RTHU could be trapped as they fed on the tiny red blossoms of a Jocote tree. Prior to release, this female was color marked with blue dye on her lower throat. Photo © Bill Hilton Jr.

trapped a young male Ruby-throated Hummingbird bearing a band inscribed “54512.” After contacting the federal Bird Banding Lab he learned I had banded this particular hummer just ten days earlier at Hilton Pond, a straight-line distance from Loganville of about 172 miles. It’s impossible to know exactly how long it took the bird to cover this distance but I suspect he didn’t do it all in one flight—choosing instead to fly perhaps 15-20 miles per day along the southwesterly overland route. This hummer was especially significant because he was the first Ruby-throated Hummingbird ever to be recaptured and released more than ten miles from the original banding site, and the first that showed migratory direction.

Since that auspicious event, three more of my banded RTHU from Hilton Pond have been encountered at distant sites: A female of unknown age recaptured and released at Robertsdale AL by bander Fred Bassett on 20 October 2000 (banded 3 October at York SC); an immature male found dead by Parrish Pugh at Thomaston AL on 1 October 2006

(banded 17 September); and a female of unknown age sighted by Judy Fruge on 21 September 1997 at Cameron LA near the Texas border (banding date unknown). All these birds were noticed and reported because they had a bar of green dye on their upper breasts, a color mark I apply to all RTHU banded at Hilton Pond. It is also significant that all these encounters came during fall migration, and all were at sites southwest of Hilton Pond—a strong indication they may have been aiming toward Rockport rather than going due south to Florida. Once again, the specific migratory route(s) they were taking after their encounters are anybody’s guess—which is why through “Operation RubyThroat: The Hummingbird Project” (www.rubythroat.org) I started leading hummingbird expeditions to Central America. This region truly was ripe for discovery; after all, during a hundred years



By late January in Costa Rica, virtually all young male Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are exhibiting some degree of throat molt. This individual already had about a dozen gorget feathers, with three more “in quill.”

Photo © Bill Hilton Jr.



Ruby-throated Hummingbirds do not typically molt wing feathers on their breeding grounds in North America, so Operation RubyThroat has been able to document wing molt timing in the Neotropics. This female has clean, new primary feathers #1 through #6, a half-grown #7, and #9 through #10 that are faded and worn. Primary molt must be completed before the hummers begin their north-bound migration.

Photo © Bill Hilton Jr.

of scientific banding only 46 RTHU had been banded in all of Mexico and the seven Central American countries combined.

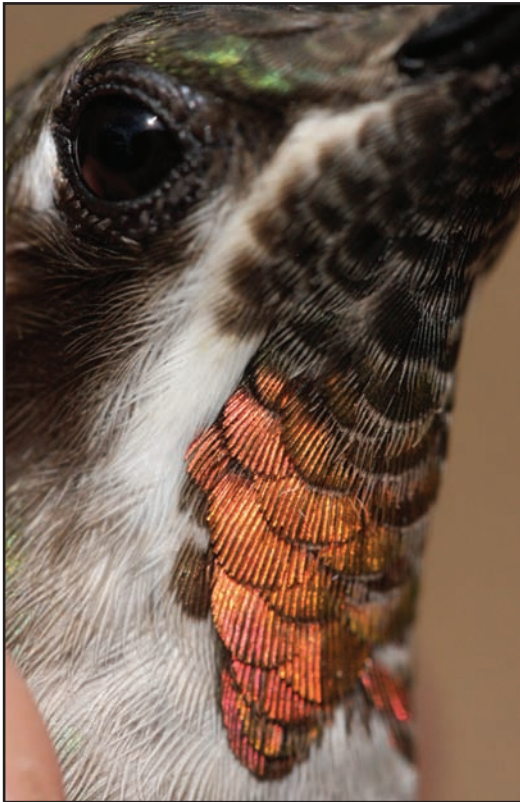
In late December 2004 I assembled a group of citizen scientists who journeyed with me to Guanacaste Province in the north-western corner of Costa Rica. We selected this Pacific Coast province because Ernesto Carman Jr., an up-and-coming young tico ornithologist, had observed good numbers of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds feeding in Aloe Vera plantations near the small town of Cañas Dulces. That first group of “Pioneers” included Susan Beree of Rockport, who at that time was a hummingbird banding sub-permittee studying under Dr. Brent Ortego of Texas Parks & Wildlife. Unfortunately, when we got to Cañas Dulces in late December that first year we weren’t aware Aloe Vera wouldn’t bloom until late January, so ruby-throats weren’t concentrated in the fields for easy capture. We did, however, find a small assemblage of RTHU feeding on tiny nectar-rich blossoms of a Jocote tree, where Susan Beree pulled the string on a trap that captured our first ever Ruby-throated Hummingbird

in Costa Rica. A second group of citizen scientists came in after the Pioneers departed and altogether that first year we banded 15 hummers around Cañas Dulces. This was a small number, but we were satisfied because it was the first time anyone had tried to systematically capture, band, and study RTHU on their wintering grounds in Central America.

The next year we went to Costa Rica much later in the season—the third week in February 2006—in the hope aloe would be blooming. We weren’t disappointed and in five days in the field banded 51 ruby-throats drawn to the heavy nectar load

of aloe blossoms. Each winter since I’ve taken a new group of U.S. and Canadian adults to help with observations and the banding process, and I now have several different study sites in Guanacaste Province. I also visited El Salvador in 2009 where I banded two RTHU at a training workshop for Mesoamerican biologists and then went on to Lake Atitlan in Guatemala to handle 57 more. Remarkably, these were the first ruby-throats ever banded in those two countries.

To further expand my work in the Neotropics, I’ve taken additional groups of citizen scientists to observe Ruby-throated Hummingbirds at new locales: Crooked Tree Sanctuary in northern Belize (2010 and 2011) and Guatemala’s Los Trrales Reserve (2011). The bottom line for all these trips is that through March 2011 my teams and I have captured, banded, and released 762 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds in Costa Rica, 72 in Belize, 61 in Guatemala, and two in El Salvador, bringing the Central American total to 897—quite a few more than those 46 that had been banded before I began my Operation RubyThroat expeditions in the winter of 2004-05.



Although hummer bands from the U.S. federal Bird Banding Lab may be used only on Ruby-throated Hummingbirds in the Neotropics, Bill Hilton Jr. and his citizen science teams have incidentally mist netted more than 20 hummingbird species. This Plain-capped Starthroat in Costa Rica has a two-inch bill and is nearly twice the size of a ruby-throat.

Photo © Bill Hilton Jr.

It's interesting—and not unexpected—that our Central American study sites have yet to yield any Ruby-throated Hummingbirds banded in North America, but I'm hopeful that day will come. One exciting encounter did occur in June 2009 when a banded female RTHU was found in a truck bay at Baxley GA, just west of Savannah. When Stacy Carter reported the dead hummer to the Bird Banding Lab, he learned I had banded this bird at Cañas Dulces during one of my mid-winter expeditions to Costa Rica. As such, C51599 became the first hummingbird of any species ever banded on its wintering grounds in the Neotropics and later encountered

within its breeding range in North America. In a sense, then, this was the first real “proof” of long-distance northbound hummingbird migration; all previous evidence had been merely circumstantial.

Although little can compare with the excitement of having a hummer banded in Costa Rica show up 1,500 miles north in Georgia, my 28-year long-term study of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds has been filled with interesting results. For example, of the 4,000-plus RTHU banded at Hilton Pond more than 12% have returned in at least one later year—a conclusive demonstration of hummingbird site fidelity in the Carolina Piedmont. Interestingly, I now have evidence of similar site fidelity for this species on the Costa Rica wintering grounds; nine of my banded RTHU have returned to exactly the same site within the aloe fields—ample justification for environmentalists, governments, and landowners to protect habitats on BOTH ends of the species' migratory path.

My citizen science teams also have spent quite a bit of time observing Ruby-throated Hummingbirds both before and after I've banded the birds. We've learned a lot about molt sequencing and another thing we now know for sure is that adult male RTHU are just as territorial on their wintering grounds as they are within their North American breeding territories. And because we've seen ruby-throats feeding on more than two dozen native Neotropical plants—including many that are neither red nor tubular—we have reason to believe RTHU may be more important as pollinators of tropical herbs, vines, and trees than anyone suspected.

Despite all this work, there's still plenty to learn about Ruby-throated Hummingbirds in South Carolina and Texas and the rest of North America; what these birds do during the “other” six months of the year when they're south of the border is wide open for discovery. To better understand these long-distance hummingbird migrants, in future years I'll be taking still more citizen



All Ruby-throated Hummingbirds banded at Hilton Pond in York SC also receive a necklace of temporary green dye to minimize recaptures. RTHU banded in the Neotropics are also color marked according to this scheme: Costa Rica (turquoise), Belize (purple), Nicaragua (orange), and Guatemala (black). Observers in Texas should look for green-marked birds during fall migration and the other colors during spring.

Photo © Bill Hilton Jr.

science groups to the Neotropics when the ruby-throats are “down there.” In November 2011 I’ll lead my first-ever Costa Rica group excursion to San Jose, where ever-vigilant Ernesto Carman Jr. has observed a population of ruby-throats in Chayote plantations near Paraiso—far east of where the species was believed to overwinter. Then, in January 2012 I’ll take two expeditions back to Guanacaste Province in western Costa Rica, followed by my maiden trip in February to Montibelli Forest Reserve in Nicaragua. The winter season ends up with two more excursions to Crooked Tree in Belize during early March.

As 2011 unfolds I’ve already been banding and recapturing more Ruby-throated Hummingbirds at Hilton Pond and am looking forward to the upcoming nine-day trips to Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Belize. No experience is necessary for teachers, senior citizens, backyard birdwatchers, nature photographers, and other interested adults who’d like to participate in these exciting citizen science expeditions, all of which are described in detail on my Hilton Pond Web site in pages linked from www.hiltonpond.org/TropicalTripAnnounceGeneral.html. Field work is not physically demanding and there are a multitude of opportunities to watch birds and all the local flora and fauna, from butterflies to orchids and

monkeys to strangler figs. (Costs are reasonable, and because Hilton Pond Center is a non-profit organization a significant portion of your trip expense is tax-deductible.) Join me this fall or next winter in the warm, sunny Neotropics and perhaps YOU will be on hand when we finally encounter a banded Ruby-throated Hummingbird that has migrated 1,500 miles from Rockport or Hilton Pond.

Along with Susan Beree of Rockport, other

Texans who have signed on help in Costa Rica are Twyla Miranda (Arlington) and Laura Templeton (Abilene). I’m pleased that I now have quite a few Operation RubyThroat “groupies” who have been with me on more than one hummingbird expedition.

If you can’t join me for one of my Operation RubyThroat trips organized through Holbrook Travel, don’t forget in this

and future autumns to watch throughout eastern Texas for that odd-looking Ruby-throated Hummingbird with a bright green color mark on its upper breast or throat. And during spring migrations be on the lookout for my northbound RTHU from Costa Rica (marked with turquoise), Belize (purple), and Nicaragua (orange). Please let me know immediately research@hiltonpond.org if you see a color marked bird and likewise report it to the Bird Banding Lab by phone at 800-327-BAND or via the Web at www.reportband.gov. (Use the same contacts to report a banded native bird of any species.) You never know when your observation of migratory Ruby-throated Hummingbirds will help unlock an important secret about these tiny balls of fluff that fly from Texas to the Neotropics—and back.

By Bill Hilton Jr.
research@hiltonpond.org

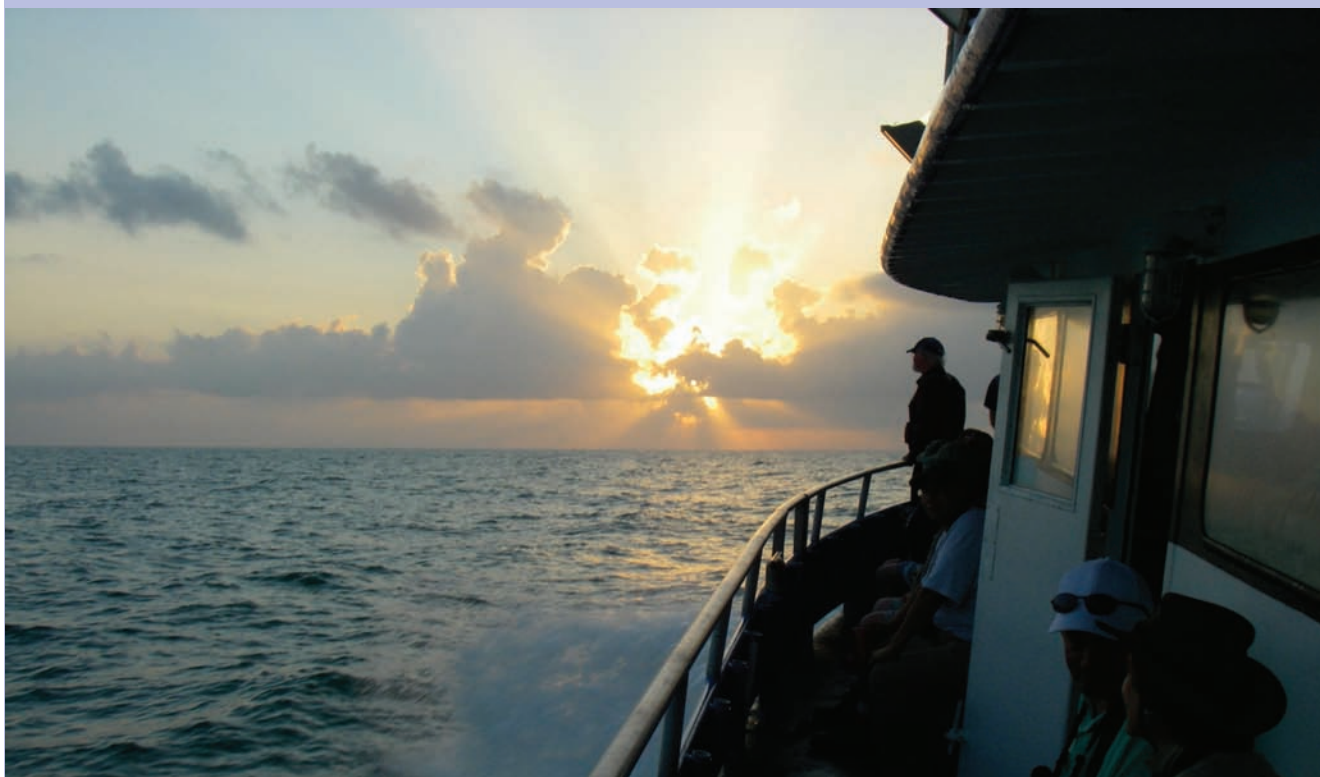
Pier 19 at 5:30 a.m.

By Fred Collins

An eclectic group gathered in the orange yellow glow of the Pier 19 lights on South Padre Island this July 16th morning. Conversation was low and subdued as some greeted an occasional person they recognized. Neophytes settled in at the edges, smiled politely and watched for someone they might recognize. All the newcomers were assembled by the appointed 5:30 a.m. hour along with the World Birding Center representative and a couple of the official guides. The dawn began to lighten and a rush of “just-in-time folks”, experienced ones that knew just how much time they needed to reach the pier, pushed in and greetings became more overt as this band of musketeers assembled. Our main leader then emerged from the circle of musketeers and began the announcements. What he said was lost in the anticipation of finally getting boarded and underway. The group rather

quietly, orderly and with surprising speed was on board. The engines fired and everyone fell into conversation with their travel mate and new acquaintances sitting next to, or across from them, in the cabin. The boat pulled away from the dock and we were beginning a twelve hour odyssey.

It was 6:25 a.m. The gray morning was turning to oranges and purples. Clouds looming on the horizon were still gray. The water was slightly choppy so that it appeared a dark steel gray framed by the pink granite jetty to our left. The engines quickened and soon the boat passed the end of the jetties into the open channel. Within minutes the boat was in the swells and waves of the Gulf headed east, climbing into the on-coming waves. Most passengers sat on the port side away from the spray of the waves, while an intrepid group occupied the bow. A few remained inside the cabin for the lengthy ride to the



Sunrise near the end of the jetty. Photo Dennis Shepler



Immature Red-billed Tropicbird passing over the boat.

Photo Darlene Moore

choice, deep water habitat still four hours away.

The sky continued to lighten and the sun rose behind clouds in front of us. The clouds and light were spectacular. The clouds were pink in a purple-blue sky but the tops were snow white in some cases and infinite shades of gray in others. About 7:15 a.m., a peculiar set of circumstances created a surreal picture off the bow. A strange cloud, still gray, set in a royal blue sky created a doorway-like arch. The top of the doorway hid the sun but a bright shaft of sunshine reflected brightly on the water. The reflection looked round, shimmering and bright white. The sight can only be compared to a “Stargate” through which the boat and its passengers were sailing; sailing to another world, a world of alien pelagic things where fish fly and birds shear the water.

Having passed through the gate the sky became deep sky-blue, the clouds more white than a sheathbill and the water dark steel-blue. Travel on this “space craft” was physically taxing and those who were worried about seasickness retreated to the cabin to stretch out on cushions for extended naps. Others coped by

concentrating on the horizon and tasting the salt sea-spray as they stood on the bow. The few terns and gulls that had diverted attention closer to shore were gone. Only the rumble of the diesel engines, waves, sky, and wind remained. Miles of empty ocean passed, the boat pitched, conversations waned, and eyes searched in concentrated earnest.

Suddenly a cry was heard, Tropicbird! Overhead! The engines cut back the boat lurched in the waves as all eyes were cast above the boat. From the stern passing to the bow about 50 feet up was a young tropicbird. Its tail streamers only extended a few inches beyond its tail but were clearly visible. They were white streamers lying on its white tail. The bird’s bill was bright yellow and it had a solid white cap with a black edging reminding one of a bald headed man. It turned and circled behind the boat twice, allowing even those sleeping in the cabin a chance to clamber out and see the rare bird. Those with cameras at the ready were able to get some nice pictures before it left. While it circled, it afforded views of its upper wing surfaces which showed a dark coal smudged carpal at the top of the outer black primaries. That cinched the identification and eliminated any possibility that this bird might be a White-tailed Tropicbird which has not yet been documented in the gulf’s Texas waters.



Leach’s Storm Petrel.

Photo Tripp Davenport



Magnificent Frigatebird. Photo Randy Pinkston

The trip was officially a success: Red-billed Tropicbird, a lifer for most, a new Texas bird even for many of the seasoned pelagicist, and the 12th record for the state of Texas. Suddenly many of those sea-sickened, dragging, participants were up and about, all smiles. It was only about 8 o'clock, they were not even in deep water yet!

The seas were rougher, the wind stronger, the steel-blue swells topped by white caps that tricked searching eyes. The white tops seemed at times like shearwaters banking or whales surfacing and the shadows beyond a wave tip was surely a bird too far out to clearly see. Searching eyes pierced the day, intent on the next find. It came about 9:45 a.m. nearing deep water and it was almost directly in the reflection of the sun, still relatively low on the horizon. The white-out reflection made looking at the fluttering almost black bird hard on the eyes and it was restful to ones eyes when the bird was found in ones binoculars. Unfortunately, those binoculars were steadied with only one hand as the other was locked on the railing to prevent falling to the deck or into the drink. This bird seemed to fear

the boat and its passengers and its nighthawk-like flutter took it into the reflected light and away before the boat could follow. The entire observation was likely only about one minute. Some thought they saw some white on the rump, Others were sure they had observed a forked tail but mostly all agreed they saw a distinctive flight pattern. One of our guides was overheard to say “the flight pattern was Leach Storm-petrel-like” and distinctive. A similar comment was also heard from one of the pelagicist as the bird had been watched. It all happened so quickly, many never even saw the bird, much less found it in their binoculars.

Amazingly, some very quick photographers managed to photograph the bird. How that was accomplished is beyond comprehension. Those photos required both hands on the camera in a heavy pitch of a boat turning into the swells to attempt to chase the bird. Those photographers could have crewed for Captain Ahab, and had digital camera's been aboard the Pequod, pictures of Moby Dick would exist. The pictures would eventually confirm the initial impression of the bird's identity as Leach's Storm Petrel.

The elation of the petrel was soon squashed by the deep swells and growing wind. Already many were feeling the strain on their bodies, especially those in excess of 60 years-old. Each wave caused the contraction of calf, thigh, solar plexus, forearms, biceps and hands. Big swales caused squats or crunches. For those sitting, though less exercised, they would find their gluteus maximums extremely sore and raw in the coming days. About 11:00 a.m. many began to think more of lunch than birds. Each person slipped from their spot on the bow or seat on the lee side to eat and drink as their sea-legs, and

sea-stomachs dictated. The snacks and now lunch quelled stomachs and it was evident that many had gotten their "second-wind" after a short break, as they took up their spots on the lee side of the boat or on the bow. It was stressful for one to leave the deck for fear that "the bird of the trip" would be seen while below eating or attending to personal requirements. Birders have the strangest fears! No one missed anything during the noon lunch hour, nor the hours before, following the storm petrel, or the hours after lunch.

The afternoon saw the seas flatten and the wind ease so that one could almost imagine they were sailing were it not for the drone of the engines. However, as the day wore on ones' brain seemed to completely filter out the noise of the engine and only the vibration remained. The vibration traveled from rail or seat to ones bones straight to the brain. Boredom set in and was relieved by conversations which seemed to smolder after lunch and build into a fire through the afternoon. The first three hours of the trip had produced two nice truly pelagic species but now the next six produced hardly a single bird. Two Black Terns caused a brief excitement but were quickly and disappointingly identified and forgotten. By about 3 o'clock the boat was back into the area worked by the shrimp boats. Someone aboard had reported that Gulf Commercial Shrimp season had opened about 6:30 p.m. the previous night. Now most of the boats were sleeping but some were beginning to stir and begin what would be a night long net drag. Somewhere among the shrimp fleet, where the water was littered with the dead floating bodies of by-catch fish, someone spotted a bird on the water. The captain turned the boat and carefully approached a large brown bird on the water. It allowed us to approach it closely and the full battery of cameras was fired at the target, an immature Pomarine Jaeger. We approached so closely it took flight but landed again only

a hundred yards away and again the boat stalked it for another battery of Canons, along with a few Nikons and miscellaneous small armament. Victory at sea, what great photos were had, photos of a lifer for some.

Not long after this encounter, a shrimp boat was spotted being used as a roost by four frigatebirds including one full adult male. Again the light arms and heavy canons were fired and portraits were had. This shrimp boat was also being accompanied by a pod or pods of Spotted Dolphin. At least two pairs had half-sized babies that stayed between the parents. Their curiosity drew them to the birders' boat and as soon as the captain picked up speed and headed toward port, the dolphins decided to demonstrate just who could move best through the water. They toyed with the powerful diesel powered boat and rode the bow as if strolling down hill. They entertained themselves and the boat passengers for several miles, but eventually lost interest as the boat had long since topped out its speed and became boring to them. There was little question who was master of these waters.

The social dolphins seemed to stimulate conversation on board and that lasted for several more hours to shore. While some had counted the hours to solid ground, all became somewhat subdued as the boat came inside the jetties and docked. All on board were now shipmates, having shared a common bond. They had all suffered a physical and mental stress together and had survived the ordeal with a good feeling of mission accomplished. They all had trophies of sorts, a checkmark for their list, a photograph, or perhaps best, a new friend. The group took far longer leaving the boat than was required for the morning boarding. Leaders were thanked; hands shook, while old and new friends had to be addressed with "good byes". Like the squad in Stargate episodes, they were leaving with a desire for more episodes. Alien worlds are indeed enchanting.

Fred Collins
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Warbler Woods Comes of Age

By Dan Smith

“It’s raining birds!” texted one birder and gifted photographer from behind the screen at Warbler Pond at *Warbler Woods Bird Sanctuary* (Also called *Warbler Woods*). There’s something

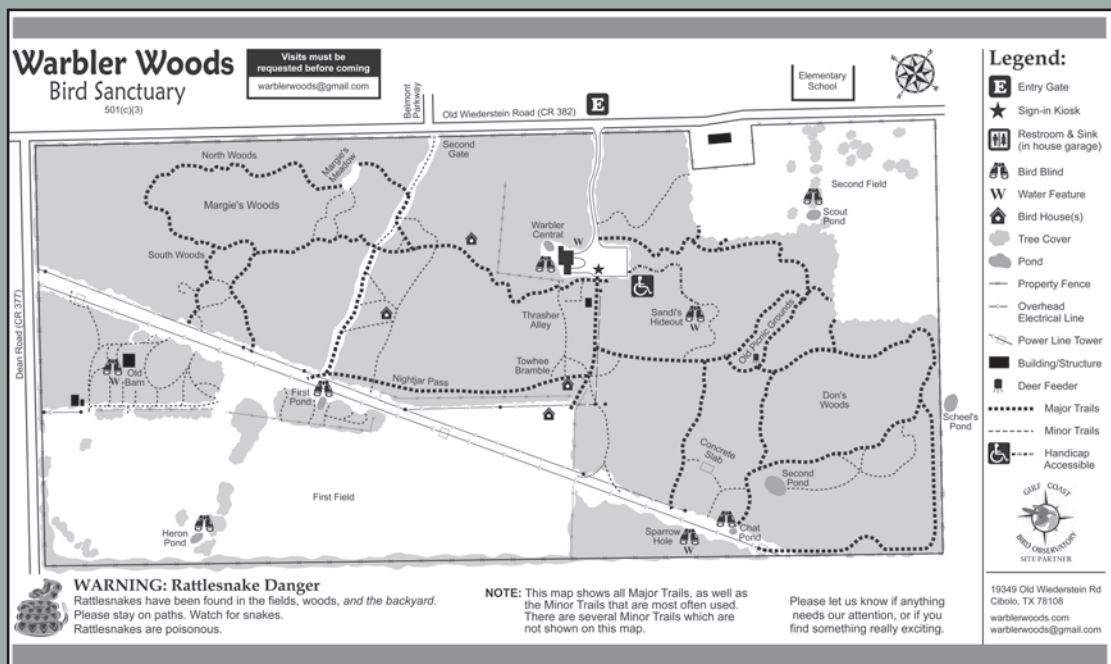


Warbler Pond at *Warbler Woods Bird Sanctuary* (Also called *Warbler Woods*). Photo Dan Smith

about this 124-acre mix of woods and prairie northeast of San Antonio, and about a mile east of IH-35, that seems to attract an inordinate number of migrants during both spring

and fall migrations. This was in late May 2011, at the tail of what had been a spectacular and long-lasting spring migration. Several of us had a similar experience a few days earlier, with chestnut-sided, yellow, bay-breasted, Nashville, black-and-white, Wilson’s, and Blackburnian warblers, almost grazing our hats and binoculars, as they foraged in low-hanging branches. Naked-eye views were wonderful. Spring migration in 2011 seemed in many ways to almost concentrate on *Warbler Woods* rather than on the coastal sanctuaries. Perhaps because of the drought—and the poor little guys were really thirsty by the time they passed San Antonio—or perhaps because in this increasingly urbanized area, the site is truly a wooded haven for them and they concentrate there.

Whatever the reason, *Warbler Woods* now concentrates not only birds, but birders. Don and Susan Schaezler must be the most star-



Warbler Woods Bird Sanctuary map. Photo Dan Smith



Blackburnian Warbler one of many species of warblers observed at the sanctuary. Photo Melody Lytle

tingly welcoming of total strangers of any couple in the whole world. All that is required to visit *Warbler Woods*, which, you must understand, is their home, is to send an e-mail (Susan's posts are always on TEX-BIRDS, so getting the address is not difficult), say who you are, and ask permission to come on the day you can get there. She'll send you the gate code unless it's an open-gate day. Once there, just cooperate by signing in



Don and Susan Schaezler owners of Warbler Woods. Photo Dan Smith

at the kiosk at the parking area, leaving a list of what you saw, and not blocking other visitors in with your car. Pretty simple rules, really. Unless it is a really special and busy family day for the Schaezlers, the welcome mat is out. I've visited dozens of times and have never found a time when I wasn't welcome.

When you're there, you're free to walk the property or, if it's available, take the Birdmobile—a golf cart—out for a birding ride. The Schaezlers spend a fair amount of money making the property attractive for both birds and birders. Bird seed is a significant expense. I went out recently on the Birdmobile to do a regular feeding at three stations, and I put out what I think was close to 30 pounds of seed in a only a few minutes. The birds, especially the collected families of cardinals and titmice and, in winter, sparrows of various species, are ravenous. Whoever is feeding will put out about the same amount the next day. So if you are able, make a contribution at the kiosk. It's not required, but it will be appreciated by the birds and by Susan and Don.

No matter how early you arrive in migration, you'll find some birder has beaten you there. I've arrived as early as 7:00 a.m. and not been the first car in the lot—not by a long shot. A recent visit found Victor Emanuel and Peter Matthiessen in the gallery, thoroughly enjoying themselves as though they had not traveled the world together searching out birds over a 30- or 40-year span. When a Blackburnian warbler, a flaming jewel with orange and black face and throat markings, showed up at the water, Victor showed why his organization has been such a success over the years. He was as enthusiastic about sharing why this was a special bird as he must have been over his many years of sharing with his customers. "This is one of the great warblers of the world," he remarked. "Teddy Roosevelt once stopped a cabinet meeting when a Blackburnian warbler turned up on a branch outside the window." Later, when a crackling magnolia warbler was moving so quickly through the trees that a relative novice had difficulty in finding what would be a life bird, Victor

jumped up from his front-row seat, exclaiming, "This is important!" He took the novice in hand, and together they found this spectacularly beautiful bird in a flock of such jewels.

Birders from all over have shared their experiences. One guest from Montana, temporarily displaced by work to San Antonio, noted;

"I had never been to a private sanctuary, no need really with all of Montana's open spaces. I had a wonderful first day out there exploring and discovering new species at every turn. I encountered Don out in the field repairing some waterline. He was most welcoming and spoke to me about half an hour answering questions about what I had seen so far. Since then, I have been back there almost every weekend and volunteered one Sunday to clean out the many water features, work I was happy to do given the enormous effort of Don & Susan to create and maintain such a wonderful and welcoming place for people and birds. *Warbler Woods* is truly a gem in their community and a critical habitat in the ever-shrinking world of open spaces. Don and Susan are tireless ambassadors for land stewardship, habitat restoration, and the wonderful world of birds."

And speaking of such stewardship, Don and Susan were honored this year by the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department and received a Lone Star Land Steward Award for their efforts. Owned jointly by Don and Susan and by Don's sister, Marguerite Bonnes, the property is managed by Don and Susan under a Wildlife Management Plan that was created about 20 years ago. In 2008, *Warbler Woods Bird Sanctuary* was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) charitable foundation, which operates the two properties as one entity. The site is recognized by the *Gulf Coast Bird Observatory* as a Site Partner and as "essential habitat for migratory birds." It is also a hot spot on the San Antonio Audubon Society's list of local birding spots and on the Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology's *eBird* program.



A group birding on one of the many fields at the sanctuary. Photo Dan Smith

The latter is a special classification that allows anyone to post observations of birds on the property at *Cornell's Bird*.

Among the many things that make the place special is that it is in close proximity to quite a variety of ecoregions and influenced by all. Those ecoregions are the Edward Plateau, South Texas Plains, Post Oak Savannah, and Blackland Prairie. The topography is gently rolling and underlain by Pecan Gap sediments with such soils as Doss silty clay, Houston black clay, and Eddy very gravelly clay loam. It supports a wide variety of plant species. After it was purchased in 1950 by Don's father, Harold Schaezler, it was farmed lightly for hay, cattle, and Spanish goats. Cattle have not been present for more than 20 years, and there has been no agricultural activity since 1997. Currently under way is a prairie-restoration project for the open fields, funded in part by a grant from the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department. Often maintenance, and such projects as this restoration of native grasslands, is supported by the efforts of volunteers.

Warbler Woods hosts approximately 2,000 visitors each year, many of them, like me, quite regular visitors now that we have come to know the place, Susan, and Don. I took a quick look through the visitors' log for mid-March through mid-May this year and discovered that those on the guest list included visitors from 18 states and the District of Columbia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany, among others. Since 1997, Susan and Don have hosted well more than 10,000 visitors and provided opportunities

for more than 1,000 hours of volunteer service by high school students and scouts. The wheelchair-accessible trail was an Eagle Scout project, and an extension of that trail and other improvements will produce another Eagle Scout this summer.

Many of the visitors are students, who visit as part of class activities or to fulfill volunteer requirements by various service and academic programs. Most visitors are birders, but many others are specialists in other areas of nature studies or generalists such as Master Naturalists. In June 2010, the Sanctuary hosted Dr. Clay Green's ornithology class from Texas State University – San Marcos, and Dr. Brent Ortego of the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department introduced the students to bird banding. Expanding the site's participation in educational programs is a specific goal of the Schaezlers.

The sanctuary has also become an important asset to the neighboring communities, the cities of Schertz and Cibolo, and Guadalupe County. What was once a strictly agricultural area has become a sea of expanding subdivisions, schools, paved and widened roads, and utility expansions. *Warbler Woods* is an oasis of wilderness, a place where children can experience nature, enjoy wildlife, and even contribute to the experiences of others.

As I was assembling the information for this article, I asked participants in TEX-BIRDS to share some of their experiences at the sanctuary. Bill Holliday of New Braunfels shared his observations, which began when;

“Susan and Don decided their small (for a wildlife preserve) property was going to be run as a preserve rather than for cattle grazing. Neither Don nor Susan had expertise with setting up a preserve (either) from legal or on-the-ground procedures. (Like Connie Hagar and her husband), Don focused on plants, Susan on birds, somewhat as the Hagers did in Rockport, Texas. Over the years, they have joined and attended organizations and meetings to gain practical education and contacts. They now have bird, wildlife, and legal knowledge on how to manage the land both as

habitat and as a showplace where people can see lots of really good birds, plants, and a few animals. As they worked at recording species of both plant and birdlife, some were a little skeptical, as many were with Connie Hagar's records. But experts did visit and concur. Their habitat management is expert and visitation amenities efficient. Having been around them for more than a decade, their success seems due to relentless positive thinking, continual hard work, education, and long-term planning. You get that same picture reading the Connie Hagar story by Kay McCracken, published about 20 years ago."

Sam Taylor of San Antonio writes;

"Warbler Woods has been a huge blessing to me. I've seen many lifers at Warbler Woods and have enjoyed getting to know Don and Susan since I started visiting about 2 years ago. I would venture to say this is the High Island of the Hill Country. It is a dream come true to have such a marvelous place to go birding and so nearby."

Linda Valdez, a Birder, Master Gardener, and Master Naturalist from Victoria, Texas, said this year;

"I moved back to our hometown area after being living in Victoria, TX for almost 33 years. I began birding in 1987 and for many of those years; Victoria was not great for warblers. Somehow the south breezes would just send them flying over our heads. Sometimes we would drive the hour to Aransas Wildlife Refuge when we thought it might be a good migration day but over the years we never really ever had great fallouts. Sometimes we resorted to traveling to High Island during migration and that too did not compare to what I experienced this year at *Warbler Woods*. I went to *Warbler Woods* four times over the first two weeks in May and, Wow, was I surprised at how wonderful it is to sit under great shade trees near wonderful water features and experience up close and personal the variety of warblers that I saw. I have contacted my

Victoria birding friends and informed them of this wonderful natural resource. I have offered them invitations to come next year and enjoy the wonders of *Warbler Woods*."

Garey and Linda Marritt, from Guthrie, Oklahoma, say;

"Being from Oklahoma, to us a 7-hour ride is fairly close (and on their last trip they brought with them friends from Arizona). The warbler experience was good, and we were struck by the number of warbler species that showed up that we would usually associate with more easterly or westerly migration routes. Don and Susan are always willing to help. Susan took us on the Bird-mobile to the field with the powerlines, and we got a glimpse of a whip-poor-will. "

Finally, Roz and Ray Hodson of Austin had this to say;

"We have been visiting Susan and Don's *Warbler Woods* for at least the last five years. They are such great teachers and try to let you know what they have most recently planted and built to attract wildlife. The most interesting people may be there as well—young naturalists, photographers, birders that you have read about, authors and birding experts, and those who just enjoy being out and seeing the birds. It makes each visit a surprise. Susan and Don are devoted to protecting their property from the encroaching development that is steadily surrounding them. They are strong voices in their community for conservation. Their energy and zeal is unlimited and their generosity in sharing their home every day with visitors from around the world is exceptional. We love their enthusiasm for the birds and animals on their property. Please thank you, Susan and Don for all we have learned and seen while visiting *Warbler Woods*."

One can't help but believe that somehow the birds are grateful too.

Dan Smith
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Patsy Glenn Refuge

By Jerry Hall

Located in downtown Wimberley, Patsy Glenn Refuge provides a 1.8-acre haven for birds, wildlife and native plants. It includes a butterfly garden, rainwater collection system, chimney swift tower with an informational kiosk, and a large walk-in bird blind. Plants and trees are identified with signage and cedar-mulch trails wind through the property.

Birds regularly seen include Painted Buntings, Northern Cardinals, Black-crested



Sign at the 1.8 acre refuge in downtown Wimberley. Photos Jerry Hall



Cedar mulched trails wind through the property. Photos Jerry Hall



Informational kiosk at the refuge.

Photos Jerry Hall

Titmice, American Kestrels, Carolina Wrens, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and Lark, Clay-colored and Chipping Sparrows. Eastern Bluebirds have nested in boxes built to their specific nesting needs and butterflies such as red admiral, monarch and tiger swallowtail are common. Plants include possumhaw, agarita, Texas dogwood, wild persimmon and red oak.



Inside view of the walk in blind.

Photos Jerry Hall



Outside view of the walk in bird blind.

Photos Jerry Hall

Filter strip dams slow runoff into nearby Cypress Creek and native wildflowers and grasses attract birds and butterflies. There are brush piles for wildlife habitat and vari-

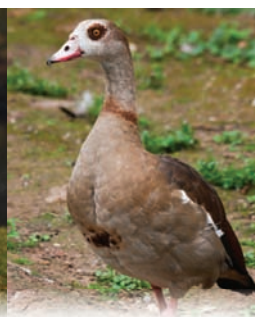
ous feeders and nest boxes. The bird blind includes benches and tables with birding literature and is equipped with camera portals. Mixed seed and sunflower seed feeders, a suet feeder and a hummingbird feeder are provided outside the blind's large windows. There is also a platform for viewing field birds at the rear of the sanctuary which looks out onto a private ranch.

Managed by the Wimberley Birding Society www.wimbirds.org the refuge is open during daylight hours. It is located directly behind the Wimberley Community Center, 14068 Ranch Road 12, in Wimberley.

Jerry Hall

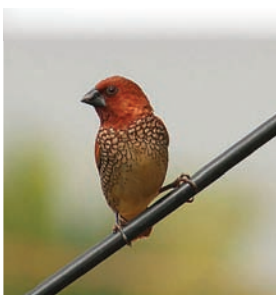
E-mail: jdothall@verizon.net

Request for Information on Exotics



Dan Brooks, an ornithologist at the Houston Museum of Natural Sciences, is conducting a citizen science project on introduced birds in Texas. Dan is currently focusing on the Egyptian Goose, Mute Swan, Monk Parakeet, Red-vented Bulbul, Nutmeg Mannikin, and Orange Bishop and has received many reports from Houston, Austin, College Station, as well as a few from Lubbock, Beaumont, Amarillo and San Antonio (and surrounding areas).

For whatever reason, word hasn't gotten out as much to other parts of the state such as in the northeast, south and in west Texas. Dan is hoping readers might be willing to take a moment to check out the link (<http://www.hmns.org/files/InvasiveBirds.doc>), and report respective observations as they are available.



San Saba River Nature Park to Open this Winter

By Jimma Byrd

If you're passing through the northern part of the Hill Country you may want to linger at the new LCRA San Saba River Nature Park and bird it's 1.5 miles of sidewalk trails. Located in the town of San Saba, the 40 acre park is bounded by Mill Creek and the San Saba River and connects with existing Risien Park. Several acres of grassy open area and the



The 40 acre park is bound by Mill Creek and the San Saba River.

Photo Jimma Byrd

canopy of an old pecan orchard provide good bird habitat to complement the two riparian corridors. Mesquite, cottonwood, elm, and bumelia are part of the mix of native trees in this lovely park that includes a railroad right

of way - which is often productive for less common plant species.

The majority of the sidewalk trails are in the shade, making for a very pleasant walk in warmer months. San Saba Bird and Nature Club will erect a birding blind and water feature to enhance the opportunities for birding and wildlife viewing. The park is scheduled to open in early winter of 2011. Mill Pond Park, Risien Park, San Saba River Nature Park, and the city Wastewater Treatment Ponds in town, plus Colorado Bend State Park just an hour away, make San Saba a good place to do some birding.

Jimma Byrd
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Grassy area at the park.

Photo Jimma Byrd



The San Saba River Nature Park has 1.5 miles of sidewalk trails. Photo Jimma Byrd

John James, Kenn, Ted, and You?

By Fred Collins

Sometimes I think that the term “citizen science” is the most unfortunate possible. This is especially the case in today’s politically polarized, sensationalized 24-hour news cycle world. Enjoying birds or other wildlife is the furthest thing from my mind when I just simply say the words “citizen” and “science”.

The concept of the term is that ordinary people, not degree-toting scientists, perform genuine scientific research. Ornithology is rich in this tradition and its history is rife with extraordinary people from every walk of life contributing to our basic understanding of birds. Ornithologists, professional birders, and professional bird writers and photographers are very recent innovations. One of the earliest American examples of what today is called a citizen scientist is John James Audubon.

Looking back almost 200 years, it sounds strange to think of him as such. After all, he contributed as much to the basic knowledge of birds in the U.S. as perhaps anyone since. However, he was a failed general store business owner and unsustainable portrait artist, who taught in small one room school houses or tutored children of wealthy plantation owners to provide for his own family. He became obsessed with the idea of documenting the birds of North America and sold his idea to people of means. He managed to provide for his family and engaged all of them in his business that produced the birds and later quadrupeds of North America. He never became wealthy, but is now revered as one of America’s greats. He instilled the tradition of bird art as an American livelihood, and we have had many professional artists grace our galleries, museums, and bird books ever since.

I recall meeting a hitch-hiking high school drop-out in 1972 who managed to get washed off a Freeport jetty on the Christmas bird count and lose an expensive and borrowed spotting scope in the process. This poor drowned-rat-like character was spending what should have been his senior year wandering around the country trying to see 600 species of birds in one year. At times, he was

resorting to eating dry cat food. He had a bus pass good for anywhere in the country which was a safety-net from his parents, should he give up his quest and want to go home. This fellow eventually became a professional bird guide, author, and creator of the first real field guide innovation since Peterson. Ever hear of Kenn Kaufman? I bet you are an owner of one of his many nature field guides. He did eventually get a degree or two in natural science but long after he had already made significant contributions to bird distribution and biology.

It would take an entire bird-related encyclopedia to document the many instances of “citizens” becoming bird biologists (scientists) as an avocation, and occasionally, a vocation. Perhaps the brightest star in Texas is Ted Eubanks, who is largely responsible for giving us the Great Texas Birding Trails. His entry into birds was as an avid bird watcher. Then, this delivery company businessman did some significant research on the ecology of Piping Plover wintering on the Upper Texas Coast. Eventually he changed vocations and the resulting Texas Birding Trails is just one example of his handiwork.

If you are a birder and reading this article you are a likely candidate to become an extraordinary citizen and contribute to the science of ornithology. The first step is recording what you observe. The second is sharing your observations with others. In so doing, you become the wildlife technician for other researchers who are working on a wide variety of projects across the state and nation. In case you don’t know, the position of wildlife technician is what most recent graduate college-degree biologists hope for, if they are planning to make a career in field biology and ecology. From technician, one tends to grow into a scientist as you demand answers for questions that form in your fertile mind while gathering data for others.

The easiest place to start your road to wildlife technician is with Cornell’s eBird. Cornell has a host of citizen science projects you can participate in. But, by posting in eBird your observations



Audubon instilled the tradition of bird art as an American livelihood, and we have had many professional artists grace our galleries, museums, and bird books ever since.

Photo Wikimedia

from your yard or recent birding sortie, you will provide useful information for a nation-wide database. You will learn what information you should collect when doing field work by following eBird instructions for different types of observation. Most importantly, posting your observations to e-bird will develop the critical habit of record keeping. E-bird further allows you to see all the information you have collected and it does some simple analysis. From this, you will gain an appreciation for accumulated records.

You can also find other ways to be a useful wildlife technician by participating in local projects usually run by trained biologists. In the Houston area, the Houston Audubon Society (HAS) has a backyard bird survey for June and January. This project is designed and operated by Bob McFarland. HAS also has a number of bird surveys in which you may participate. The Museum of Natural Science is conducting research on exotic bird species. Exotic species are often ignored by most of the birder and ornithological community until their numbers begin to have negative effects. This project hopes to study them in earlier stages of establishment. This project

is designed and operated by Dan Brooks, who was nominated for membership on the National Council for invasive and exotic species. At Kleb Woods Nature Center, there is an annual Greater Roadrunner survey which is attempting to identify and quantify the distribution and status of this species in Harris County. This project is designed and operated by Kendra Kocab. The Gulf Coast Bird Observatory has similar projects in different parts of the state on a regular basis. Their projects with volunteer opportunities have included Ivory-billed Woodpecker and American Oystercatcher research. Professional ornithologists direct all of their projects as well.

Statewide there are Breeding Bird Census (BBC) and Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) where your field efforts will be put to good use. Never underestimate the conservation value of your efforts on these projects. Check with your local Audubon Society or local nature center to find other opportunities in your area to participate in local projects. The knowledge of the distribution of Texas birds has significant gaps in spite of BBC and CBC efforts. The TOS Century Club is helping to fill some of those distribution gaps by

encouraging birders to visit less birded counties, and it is easy for you to participate. The TOS web site has information on how to participate in this project.

Perhaps nothing converts one to bird research more than participating in a bird banding program. The experience of holding a wild, living bird in one's hands and giving it individuality, with a numbered bird band, can have life changing effects on some people. I could write a long list of biologists and birders who were moved to an ornithology career by this experience. Many people and places across Texas offer opportunities to participate in bird-banding activities. Contact Brent Ortego with Texas Parks and Wildlife for an opportunity in your part of Texas. All bird-banders in the state are project-oriented and often can use a novice wildlife technician.

Bird-banders are sometimes asked by researchers to collect blood samples for DNA research. Such DNA research has elevated some sub-species to full species status, and it is likely that future research will expand this trend. Consequently, there are many "new" or "potentially new" species of which our knowledge is severely limited. That was made evident to me on a recent trip to the Trans-Pecos region, where I observed the local summer resident meadowlark, the *Lilianae* race of the Eastern Meadowlark. Recent DNA-based research indicates that it is not an Eastern Meadowlark, as currently treated in field guides, but the split is not yet official. More information



The easiest place to start your road to wildlife technician is with Cornell's ebird.

Photo Jack Eitnrear



Perhaps nothing converts one to bird research more than participating in a bird banding program.

Photo Jack Eitnrear

is needed to determine how Lilian's meadowlark is related to other meadowlarks in Mexico before it can be placed in a proper species or given an English name. Therefore, any detailed information about Lilian's meadowlark or Mexico's resident meadowlarks will be significant. Nesting dates and details, call notes, distribution during each month of the year, identification details; all of this information will be important determining its true status and species. If you live in or visit the Trans-Pecos, virtually any detailed observation of this "species" can contribute to our knowledge. You can be a citizen scientist.

A similar dilemma exists with the newly split Pacific Wren. There is little doubt that it occurs in Texas each winter, but how widespread it is remains to be determined. Winter Wrens occur throughout the state each winter. A great personal citizen science project is learning to distinguish between Pacific and Winter Wren and documenting which is present in your local birding patch. I suspect that the range maps for both species will change a bit as the aggregate knowledge and records accumulate.

I encourage you to participate in a local bird survey. Begin to keep records and share them with eBird or a local ornithological researcher. Become the next extraordinary citizen and contribute to science and add to our knowledge of Texas birds.

Fred Collins
Email: Fred_Collins@hctx.net

Media Reviews

Edited by Sheridan Coffey



Avian Architecture
How Birds Design, Engineer and Build
By Peter Goodfellow

Hardcover: 160 pages, Publisher: Princeton University Press (June 5, 2011), Language: English, ISBN-10: 069114849X, ISBN-13: 978-0691148496

When the words “bird nest” are mentioned, almost everyone gets the same image in his or her mind, a small cup-shaped structure made of sticks woven together. Certainly many birds do construct these kinds of nests, but most of us are aware of at least a few other forms. In “Avian Architecture; How Birds Design, Engineer and Build” Peter Goodfellow examines the 12 basic nest types that most birds use, and how they build them.

The book is divided into 12 chapters. Each chapter takes a different type nest and first gives an overview of the basic structure common to the nests and identifies some of the various bird species and families that use this form. The basic methods of construction are discussed as well as the advantages and disadvantages of the form. Some of the overviews discuss what type eggs would be expected, such as in a “scrape nest”, used by many shorebirds, which usually would contain well-camouflaged eggs due to the open nature of the nest.

After the overview the author presents a two-page layout with blueprints of the basic nest type, along with more information on how the nest is constructed. Detailed drawings show a small assortment of nests, labeled with the species that use it. This includes the dimensions, shape, nesting material and placement of the eggs. He provides some cut away views of the interiors of closed nests, such as the hanging nests of oropendolas and caciques.

A short section then gives a study of the nest of an individual species, describing features unique to that bird. Construction methods, materials and adaptation to the environment are discussed. He goes into more detail on camouflage techniques. Illustrations and photographs are used to demonstrate these features. Where applicable, human imitation of these methods is shown. This is followed by a two-page spread of another species with detailed construction methods.

The final part of each chapter is a series of case studies providing details of how several different species adapt the particular structure to their needs. These studies include the taxonomic classification of the bird, an even more detailed description of the nest, photographs and illustrations of both the birds and the actual nests. Very different birds are shown building the same type nests, such as the Sooty-capped Hermit, Baltimore Oriole and Goldcrest under the hanging nest category.

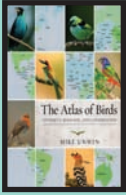
This is not a book that will allow you to identify nests in the field by species. It is far from exhaustive in its coverage of bird species. It will, however, cue you in on various constructions that you perhaps would not recognize as even being nests. The majority of the birds presented are not North American birds, which might be off-putting to some readers, but I found some of these species to be utterly captivating. The descriptions of various bowerbird structures (which are not nests but display theaters) make me ache to go to Australasia!

The illustrations and photographs are mostly excellent. I found some of the blueprint pages a little difficult to read, as the very small font does not contrast enough with the blue gray paper. The text is presented in small, very digestible bites, which I think would make it appealing to older children. Overall it is a beautiful work, well suited to a coffee table, but with a lot more “meat” than the average coffee table book. At 10.1x8.4 inches, it is a comfortable book to hold. A glossary in the back was very helpful, with terms for both nests and nestlings.

I thought I knew quite a bit about nests. I was wrong. I had never considered just how much a bird is able to accomplish with such limited tools. The strategies of location, materials, camouflage, and structure are intriguing. The very short amount of time that birds are able to accomplish this in is amazing. I even got the scoop on bird-nest soup. This is not a scientific tome, but an enjoyable introduction to the world of bird-built structures.

Sheridan Coffey

Media Reviews



The Atlas of Birds

By Mike Unwin

Paperback: 144 pages, Princeton University Press (July 10, 2011), ISBN-10: 0691149496, ISBN-13: 978-0691149493, 10.9 x 8.4 x 0.6 inches,) \$22.95

According to the publisher "The Atlas of Birds" captures the breathtaking diversity of birds, and illuminates their conservation status around the world. Full-color maps show where birds are found, both by country and terrain, and reveal how an astounding variety of behavioral adaptations--from flight and feeding to nest building and song--have enabled them to thrive in virtually every habitat on Earth. Maps of individual journeys and global flyways chart the amazing phenomenon of bird migration, while bird classification is explained using maps for each order and many key families.

Conservation provides a strong focus throughout, with maps illustrating where and why birds are most under threat, and what is being done to protect them. Separate sections examine key factors influencing their distribution and endangering their survival, from deforestation and climate change to invasive species and the cage-bird trade. Bird groups most affected, such as island endemics, are highlighted, while a fascinating chapter explores the complex historical relationship between birds and humans, with maps and data for everything from poultry farming to birdwatching.

The maps are supported by an authoritative text that uses the very latest data and case studies from BirdLife International. Packed with sumptuous photos, original diagrams, and imaginative graphics that bring the numbers to life, this book is a stunning and timely insight into perhaps the most colorful and intriguing group of organisms on our planet."

The book contains outstanding images, illustrating well with text and photos the vast variety of birds, their habitats and challenges to survival throughout the World. Like most books that provide an overview it does not detail any topical area in much details but if your new to birding or just interested in birds, in general, this is the book for you.

Jack Clinton Eitniear



HAWKS AT A DISTANCE.

By Jerry Liguori.

Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 2011: 191 pages, 20 large color photographs, 573 small color photographs, 896 small black-and-white photographs, 2 tables. ISBN 978-0-691-13558-8 . \$19.95. (Soft cover).

Jerry Liguori is one of, if not the, most experienced and competent North American hawk watchers, as well as an accomplished raptor photographer. He has in his career conducted raptor migration counts at many concentration points in North America and nowadays regularly monitors raptor migration in the mountains near his home in Salt Lake City, Utah. He has traveled as far as Alaska to observe migrating raptors.

The stated purpose of this book is to present photographs and descriptions to aid hawk watchers in identifying correctly distant raptors in flight.

This smart little guide begins with a Foreword by Pete Dunne. Who is better qualified to introduce us to Jerry's book than the senior author of *Hawks in Flight?* After all, his book was the first to cover, among other topics, putting a name on distant raptors.

Following the contents, short preface, and acknowledgments, is an Introduction section that includes subsections entitled 'How to use this book'; 'Terminology' (both age and color morph terminology), an extensive Glossary, 'Hawk migration', 'Helpful hints', 'Hawk counting', 'Optics for hawk watching', and 'Photography' (with a subsection on Ethics). There is an Anatomy page with two large photos of a raptor in flight from below and above, with arrows and text pointing out the parts of them. Another set of 10 photos is called 'Flight positions' and shows each of many different ways that raptors fly, such as 'soaring', 'wing on', 'stooping', etc.

The species accounts constitute the bulk of the book. Twenty species are covered in detail; these are grouped into four sections, each beginning with an introductory chapter, named 'Accipiters', 'Buteos', 'Falcons', and 'Vultures, Osprey, and Eagles' and each has two subheadings: 'Overview' and 'Plumage'. Following these are the species accounts, also with subheadings of 'Overview' and 'Plumage'. Most begin with a full page color photo of the species and are followed by a variable number of pages of small color flight photos of that species, three to six photos per page, with an explanation of each at the bottom of the page.

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The section with the most photos (78) was Red-tailed Hawk, and with the least were Osprey and Black Vulture (6 each); most had 20-40 photos. Following the main species accounts is another section using the same format called 'Uncommon migrants and others', which covers in less detail an additional eight raptor species, plus Common Raven and some owls.

The last chapter is named 'Shapes.' It begins with a short description followed by 19 pages, one per species, full of small black & white photos, usually between 40 and 50, arranged in six or seven rows of that species in flight. The top row consists of six or seven head-on pics, the next rows are of side view pics, hawks coming toward the viewer; hawks going right or left as seen from below or going away obliquely, with a few shots of soaring hawks. All ages and color morphs are shown. A paragraph at the bottom summarizes the main feathers of each species as seen on distant hawks.

I must confess that I am an advocate of the Peterson field mark school of raptor identification and teach this regularly. But I do use what is called JIZZ, or what some call the holistic approach, for identifying distant hawks (too far away to see field marks clearly) in flight. Regardless of name, it is learning to recognize raptors at a distance using only what they appear to us, repeated many times over, such that distant raptors become familiar. Somewhat like getting a glimpse of your mother or spouse at a distance in a crowded location and knowing who it was. I teach that one can learn raptor ID using the JIZZ method by spending loads of time looking at them in the field, as Jerry has done, or by watching repeatedly many videos of them in flight. Now we have a third way to get up to speed on learning raptor ID by Jizz—reading and studying this book.

As you might have suspected from reading this far, I like this book, very much. It is a refreshing new look at hawk identification, one that will prove to be successful for most and most likely could only have been written by Liguori. *Hawks at a Distance* meets its stated goal and then some.

This book is a **must** for Texas hawk watchers; you should have it with you when you visit Hazel Bazemore (where most hawks are seen at a distance), Smith Point, and the Rio Grande Valley hawk watches at Bentsen and Santa Ana. It is also highly recommended for all raptor enthusiasts and serious bird watchers, as most of the information presented applies equally to non-migrating raptors.

William S. Clark

The Bird Photography Field Guide



by David Tipling

Focal Press 2011, 192 pages; 6.2"x4.5"x0.6", 200+ color photographs, \$15.95

This pocket-sized guide to photographing birds is remarkably ambitious, as it covers a huge span of topics, including nineteen chapters on equipment, another twenty chapters on actual photography, and a further fourteen chapters on managing/using your photos. That's 23 chapters in 168 pages (the rest devoted to Introduction, Glossary and Index) so necessarily the chapters are short.

My biggest complaint about the book is the font size and contrast. I'm in that 50+ group whose eyes are starting to struggle with small print, and I really had a difficult time reading some passages in the book – particularly photo captions which are in an even smaller font. One might argue that to keep the book pocket-sized the small font was required – but I wish more thought had gone into this aspect.

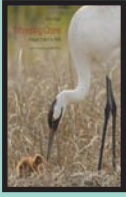
Despite this constant challenge, the content was mostly very good. This book will be of more help to those at the early stages of bird photography, yet I too (a digital photographer for around ten years) found a few really useful nuggets in the text – mostly down in the details of how to process photos on the computer. One other small bugbear were the small number of forward page references in the text that were inaccurate (my guess is that extra content changed the pagination after this text was written).

The earlier chapters seemed a bit thin on content to me. One example was that for cameras no mention was made of built-in flash speed limits, or the placement of vital controls (button or menu?). Another example was no mention of autofocus range or types of image stabilization found on some of the lens types mentioned – and how these would influence your choice. Later on - especially in the image processing section - the content improved and I learned a few things that had mystified me about sharpening techniques and using image curves. Histograms could have done with a bit more, especially an example of an over/under-exposed histogram.

In summary I was quite impressed with just how much useful information was in this very small booklet. I realize that if had I owned such a book 6 – 8 years ago I'd have made much better buying decisions, storage choices, and used better processing protocols that would have gotten me much faster to where I am now. I consider that a great recommendation for this useful and inexpensive booklet.

Martin Reid

Media Reviews



WHOOPING CRANE: Images from the Wild

By Klaus Nigge with an Introduction by Krista Schlyer

Texas A&M University Press, College Station, TX; 2010 (\$45.00)

Whooping Crane: Images from the Wild is a coffee table book with text. Actually, it is two books in one. The first is the 25 page "introduction" by Krista Schlyer. Obviously, 25 pages is not enough to discuss in depth any of the myriad issues surrounding cranes in general or the Whooping Crane in particular; but Schlyer does a reasonable job in providing an overview of many of the aspects of historic and current crane existence. This includes the interrelationships of various crane species with many peoples worldwide, including cultural crane stories, crane and human dances, art, religion, and health issues. In doing so, Schlyer addresses vocal and behavioral crane communication, what these appear to mean to cranes, and how various peoples have reacted to them. Schlyer also addresses the habitat needs of the Whooping Crane, their prior ranges, the fact that well into the 20th century there were both migratory and non-migratory populations, that in 1941 there were only 15 Whooping Cranes in the world, and the implications of such a limited gene pool.

Emphasis is placed on the only original Whooping Crane population still existing, the one that breeds in northern Canada and winters on the central Texas coast. Schlyer addresses the dangers faced by these individuals. For example, Bison wallows once provided migrating Whooping Cranes with micro wetland habitats that they used as stopover areas. Today, the stopover areas for $\frac{3}{4}$ of migrant Whooping Cranes are limited to an 80 mile wide corridor. Likewise, their wintering grounds are 500 acres along the intra coastal waterway that is regularly used by vessels carrying extremely toxic materials and are in the path of many of our hurricanes. Life on the breeding grounds is not that much better. Although the breeding area of the migratory Whooping Cranes is remote and protected by the Canadian government, 50% of the chicks hatched do not survive long enough to make their first migration.

Since World War II, significant efforts have been made to protect and expand the Whooping Crane populations. To date, efforts have been mixed. Captive bred Whooping Cranes raised by Sandhill Cranes survived, but would only attempt to breed with Sandhills. Another effort has resulted in about 100 Whooping Cranes that annually migrate from Wisconsin to Florida, but they have yet to breed.

The majority of the book, almost 200 pages, is made up of the images of the author, who had two decades prior experience photographing cranes in Europe, divided into three sections: "Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Texas;" "Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada;" and "Aransas Again." The images generally capture the mood of the places and the Whooping Cranes that breed and winter there. As such, they often lack the pristine cleanliness that many of today's wildlife photographers seem to deem necessary. Such images, while often beautiful, show only the subject without providing a sense of place or the subjects' role in the place, and Nigge's images do not have this failing.

Having said that, a number of the images in this book are unnecessarily out of focus, poorly exposed, or otherwise technically lacking. The impression I receive from these images, of which there are a fair number, is that Nigge felt the need to use the images he had as opposed to spending the time and money to get better images. This includes images showing other species present at Aransas NWR such as Sandhill Cranes, White-tailed Deer, Feral Hogs, and Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks as well as Whooping Cranes defending deer feeders against all comers.

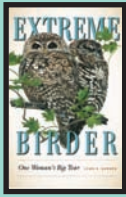
For those of us who have only seen Whooping Cranes on their wintering grounds in and around Aransas, a number of Nigge's images from Wood Buffalo NP are compelling. For example, images of a Whooping Crane soaring over the north woods, incubating, and feeding young, as well as aerial photos of the area, are not to be seen on the wintering grounds. Also, although Nigge spent only 6 days at Wood Buffalo, his images from there tend to be technically better than those taken at Aransas even though Nigge was under much stricter constraints at Wood Buffalo than at Aransas.

The book ends with two short sections on where to view Whooping Cranes and what was involved for him to photograph them on their Canadian breeding grounds. There is also a further section that seemingly serves as a bibliography.

All in all, for those of us who, in this internet world, remain interested in coffee table books, *WHOOPING CRANE: Images from the Wild* By Klaus Nigge is worth its asking price of \$45.00.

Mike Hannisian

Media Reviews



Extreme Birder. One Woman's Big Year.

Lynn E. Barber, 2011.

Texas A&M University Press, College Station, Texas. 288 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1-60344-261-9

Lynn Barber set out to see as many bird species as she could during the course of a single year, in the United States and Canada. This book chronicles her trips around the continent in pursuit of her quest. She wanted to see 700 species during the year 2008, a goal she wasn't positive that she would achieve. In October of that year she reached her goal, and continued birding until the year ended. In the end, she saw 723 species, which is the highest "big year" total by a woman according to American Birding Association statistics. At the end of that year, it was apparently the third highest ABA-area big year total, although in 2010 three people edged past that figure.

Extreme Birder has the immediate feel of accounts taken straight from Barber's diary. Some of them were composed as her airplane was descending to land, late at night while getting coffee or a bite to eat, or in heavy traffic. Accompanying the book are about 140 photographs, almost all taken by her, and a couple of her paintings. Her fine portrait of two Spotted Owls in Arizona graces the cover.

The book begins with a summary of why and how she chose to undertake her second big year, just three years after her record-setting Texas big year, and explains what comprises a big year. Following this is the heart of the book, are the monthly chapters. January starts off with a bang, with over 300 species, but as one would expect, the number of new species from subsequent months is far less. September brought just 25 new species, with lower totals for the remaining months. But even during those final months she spent at least half the months continuing with her search. While Barber naturally spent much of the time in Texas, a combination of planned and spur-of-the-moment trips took her to 19 other states and three Canadian provinces. All told she spent three quarters of the year in her quest.

Of necessity, a big year involves taking birding to extremes. Driving 500 and more miles a day five times in a week with hours-long plane flights interspersed, birding in all kinds of weather, and skimping on sleep by driving overnight are parts of the process. The most extreme period was in May and June when Barber returned from a nine-day trip to Alaska, flew to Michigan two days later for two days, and three days after that trip headed back to Alaska for another 28 days. Flat tires, injuries, and illness are almost inevitable somewhere along the way. Barber narrates the highs and lows, the excitement and despair, as she begins on New Year's Day and continues until December's end.

At the back of the book is her species list with the first-noted date, a section containing references she used for her big year, and a chronological summary of where she went. At the start of each monthly chapter is the total number of bird species seen through the end of that month, as well as the number of new species recorded during that month. I think that giving the total number of species seen in each month would have been a nice addition to these totals.

***The book is attractively designed, with heavy pages and a flexible binding. I particularly like the covers: white but with brown margins simulating a book left on the front seat of a car parked in the sun for a few days.

Barber's big years were essentially new to me, as I was only vaguely aware that she had undertaken them and knew nothing else. I enjoyed reading about her visits to places I have been to as well as locales that I dream of visiting. Her accounts of repeated attempts to find certain species struck a chord with me; in particular, I smiled ruefully at her repeated efforts to see Muscovy Duck, which mirror my own and still unsuccessful tries. My hat goes off to her for her dedication to and persistence with her year.

Rob Hilton

Obituaries

Relections on Lorie Black



She burst on the big screen, Planet Earth, on 19 September 1956 and I would suspect with a smile on her face. Just as conspicuous she would leave for her Heavenly home on Friday, 18

March 2011, a body wracked with pain but the lovely smile still ever present. Because as many knew her, Lorie Diane Black, the name bestowed upon her by Ben and Berniece Black of Abilene, almost always had a smile on her face. Not only a smile but a ton of patience and a willingness to be a mentor and friend to anyone seeking to know more about the land and its animals that she loved and of which she was a true steward as assigned by her Heavenly Father.

With youthful exuberance and yet forever quiet, unassuming lass as most of us knew her, Lorie spent her younger days enjoying life with her siblings and friends in and around Abilene where she subsequently attended the Abilene public schools. Later she attended Abilene Christian University, graduating with highest honors, and always living an exemplary Christian life, having become a Christian early in life. Following her education, Lorie became a faithful employee of the Lone Star Transportation of Ft. Worth developing a long list of life time friends, but then that was typical Lorie. But her real love was the phenomenon of Nature which she exemplified by her many volunteer hours in such organizations as Big Country Audubon Society, Friends of Abilene State Park and the Texas Ornithological Society (TOS). This is where I first met this quiet, sweet, smiling lady. I took over as Region 5 Director when Sue Wiedenfeld became President of TOS in 1995. Lorie was already on the Board as Director of Region 1. I'm not

sure when she was elected to the Board since records are sometimes lacking, but she had to be one of the longest serving directors ever. Although not very outspoken as a Director she did make her presence feel known when necessary as well as faithfully performing other assigned duties of a Regional Director.

Lorie always had a concern that membership should be getting more information about the activities of the Board and any other interesting birding information from around the state. So at a time when TOS was without a Newsletter Editor, Lorie assumed that position and became the reporter, editor, printer and publisher. On at least two occasions, Lorie was ready to resign from her self-imposed position and I was able to persuade her to continue awhile longer. I never realized that during this time she was already battling her nemesis, cancer. As I reflect back I wonder where she found the energy, strength and will power; it had to be because of her love for birds and the birding community.

In closing this tribute to as fine a birder, lady, Christian one could ever want to know I want to include some comments already published elsewhere by some of her peers and admirers.

Jay Parker - "Lorie was especially influential to my birding interests. When I began birding at the age of 12, Lorie's knowledge of birding was second to none in our small birding club. As a person who was hungry to understand how to identify sparrows and shorebirds, she was an invaluable resource. Lorie's contribution to our knowledge of birds in this area, as well as her willingness to share her love of nature with all who knew her will be missed."

David Sarkozi - "Lorie was one of the first people I met and made friends with at TOS meetings...I will likely think of her at every TOS meeting I attend in the future."

Brush Freeman - "Lorie is a special person to me...one of the most steadfast support-

Obituaries

ers and board members for TOS ever...Never missed a board meeting, always had ideas and in the toughest of times managed a newsletter and helped get TOS the preserves and publications we have now when TOS was so very much struggling. TOS could not have achieved what it did in those hard days without her votes of confidence in the future of the organization...I just really loved to be around Lorie, she was always easy to be around...This is so sad, and I just had no idea she was even ill. I feel so bad that I have not kept up with her recently...my eyes water as I type this. My sincere condolences to the family and everyone that had the pleasure of knowing this beautiful, giving and wonderful person.

David Dauphin - "Throughout many years I served on the TOS Board, it seems like Lorie was at every board meeting. She was a true asset to TOS. The few times I was able to get up to Abilene, Lorie and your Mom always showed Jan and I a great time. Everyone that has ever been involved in Texas birding should appreciate the many contributions Lorie made to birds, birding, and conservation. I don't ever remember seeing Lorie without a smile on her face. She will indeed be missed. Our thoughts and prayers go out to her family and friends."

Jimmy Jackson - "I was saddened to hear of Lorie Black's passing. She was always a champion of Texas birds, a tireless worker for TOS and a sweet and gentle person to be around. She will be missed by all who knew her and certainly welcomed by the birds she worked so hard to protect and save."

Lytle H. Blankenship - "...She was always the same sweet smiling Lorie, always entering into discussions but never complaining. I'll have to admit, maybe to the dismay of other Board members, that I enjoyed working side by side with Lorie as much as with any of my other friends on the Board.

Lorie was an excellent constituent of the Board, always fulfilling her responsibilities as a Director; I'm sure more completely and efficiently as I ever did. She was a great adver-

tisement for TOS as well as the birding world in general. An astute birder and even more so, an astute and faithful lady to all who knew her. I have missed her following her final term of office with TOS but now that she has entered her eternal abode having received her welcome of "well done, good and faithful servant," I'll miss her even more, but anticipate with eagerness of seeing her again."

I saved the next words of thoughtfulness until last believing they would be similar to what Lorie might express.

Rusty Alderson, Leander, TX - "I didn't know Lorie, but from the posts about her, she sounds so much like someone I would have liked to know. Whenever a person passes who has been instrumental in promoting Texas bird (either publicly or personally), Texbirders are quick to lavish praise in their remembrances and retrospectives.

These eulogies allow a vicarious pleasure in hearing about these dearly missed, wonderful people. They give us a glimpse of what life in their presence was like and I'm grateful for that opportunity. Thanks, Texbirders.

I wonder, however, how many of us take the time to tell those who are important to us how we feel about them while it is still possible? I know that I'm guilty of taking friendships and relationships for granted. Perhaps some of you are, too. Please join me today in honoring Lorie by telling someone you know, love and respect why they are important, and what they mean to you! Treasure them today, not after they are gone! Lorie, I wish I had known you." (Rusty)

As we reflect back upon our past and recall all those Lories that may have crossed our trails somewhere along the way, we can honor Lorie the most by being a caring friend; thanking those who have made life just a little sweeter with their lovely smiles and words of encouragement. We miss you Lorie, but realize life is so much more comfortable and the bird songs so much sweeter for you now.

Lytle Blankenship

Obituaries

Birders Reflect on the Passing of Fred Webster



Sadly, I got a call last night from my friend Marie Webster asking for help in notifying the birding community of the passing of Fred Webster. She was pleased to hear that we could put an announcement on line.

Fred was a huge icon of Texas birding for many years and one of the first birders I met when I became a regular around 1965. He was the original editor of the South Texas column of the Audubon Field Notes (which became American Birds), serving from about 1953 to 1983. After he retired taught very popular birding classes through University of Texas' Informal Courses for a number of years. Fred was always happy to get a phone call reporting some exciting bird discovery and his "how do you know that's what it was?" was always done in a way that was encouraging. He had a great sense of humor and was always interested in what you said. He lived just a few blocks from us, and one January rushed over to share our male Black-throated Blue Warbler, arriving just a minute too late.

Fred, along with Edgar Kincaid, was a mentor to a number of young Austin bird enthusiasts whom we all know, who have become professional bird guides and helped lift birding to the national obsession we know it as. In 1959 Edgar and Fred and Marie were sitting around a campfire with a group on a birding trip to Mexico and on that occasion originated the now far-reaching and well-known custom of tagging our best friends with bird names like Cassowary, Western Grebe, Brown Pelican, Rufous-browed Pepper-shrike, and for Fred, the Potoo.

Fred had connections with Southmost College people in the Rio Grande Valley and with the owner of Rancho del Cielo before his death

when the property became a research station for the college. As a project to establish their presence there, as a fundraiser, and as a favor to us birders, Fred and Marie led birding trips there several times a year for a number of years.

I was privileged to co-compile the first Christmas Count held there with Fred in 1969.

Fred compiled the local Austin area counts for a number of years. When he couldn't get enough people to help him at Palmetto, he used to list as one of the participants his dog Sambo, who was always the one to find the woodcocks!

If others have memories of Fred to contribute, I will be printing them up for Marie. She is a great birder, too, and remembers all those adventures. She will appreciate our notes about how Fred helped make us who we are today.

Barbara Ribble
Austin

I am so sorry to hear of Fred's passing. My husband and I tried out birding back in the early 80s by attending one Fred's informal classes at UT, and we were hooked! For several years we signed up for those classes and went on the weekly field trips with Fred, accompanied many times by Marie.

The funniest experience we had was when Fred, leading the caravan, came to a screeching halt on a remote county road. He thought he saw something interesting on a pond that was in the middle of a field. We didn't have a scope, but all of us trained our binoculars on that pond. Fred scratched his head, we all searched our field guides, and after about 15 minutes or so Fred finally had the ID nailed--it was a decoy! Fred grumbled something under his breath, we all got back in our vehicles, and drove on.

Over the years I've had the pleasure of chatting with Fred when he and Marie would attend the Lady Longhorn basketball games. More recently I would occasionally see him

Obituaries

at HEB and get to hear about the latest book he and Marie were publishing. Their book, "Two Texas Birders" talks about some of their early birding history in Central Texas.

Fred will be missed.

Cindy Smith
Austin

I took Fred's UT class in 1979, I believe. Fred and I later birded together now and then. Fred and I once spent a rainy late spring morning attempting to tape a Wood Thrush at Bastrop State Park. Fred had a self-fabricated cone around a mike attached to the recorder, and we got excellent recordings of rain on a Fiat roof. Still, it was a pleasant morning spent in good company, and we did at least hear the thrush.

Dan Smith
Austin

I first became acquainted with Fred by mail (remember that?) as an obsessive, pre-teen, wet-behind-the-ears birding kid. At the age of 12 or so I began to contribute my sightings to Fred as compiler of the "South Texas Region" of Audubon Field Notes (later American Birds, then simply Field Notes, and presently North American Birds), a position he held for 30+ years. He either was gullible enough to believe everything I sent, or more likely, just too polite to indicate that he did not by

leaving it out of his seasonal reports. Later, when I came to Austin as a graduate student, we became acquainted in person and I owe Fred and Marie more gratitude than I can easily express for inviting me to join them for a period of close to a month at Rancho del Cielo in the summer of 1966, one of my first trips to the neotropics, and one of which I remember almost every detail, even now 40+ years later. That trip, as much as anything, shaped my future as a student of neotropical birds.

Fred invited me to participate in the Bastrop/Buescher State Park CBC which he traditionally did with Edgar Kincaid. He and Edgar were friends, but couldn't have been more different. Both became major influences. Over the years Fred organized and led many, many birding trips to Rancho del Cielo, and I was fortunate enough to be invited to assist on many. Veterans of those trips, and especially of Fred's perennial birding classes at Informal Classes at UT, who were often the same folks, enjoyed Fred's rich, but always understated, humour.

Fred was a gentleman of the old school, too kind at times. There was not a trace of cynicism or superiority (though he was in many ways superior to his peers).

I grieve for Marie and she is in my prayers. Rest in peace, Fred.

John C. Arvin
Brownsville

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Transcendent Birding

By Arturo Longoria-Valverde

I believe everyone who ventures into nature whether as bird watchers, native plant lovers, or admirers of mammals, reptiles and amphibians eventually seeks something deeper and more profound than merely the observation of creatures with which we share this time and place. For ultimately what we find is a reflection of ourselves and what we gain from the experience is but a token of what we offered during our sojourn. Perhaps that can be said of all life experiences. Do we not see in others anything more than the echo of what we gave in return?

My favorite days are the cloudier days. Not simply because the sun is partially hidden but because in a paradoxical way I see more clearly the land before me within the darker cast of long shadows. Some bring cameras and take frenzied photographs. Others come in groups. But I roam alone because that is who I am. Solitude provides a chance to reflect and meditate on what lives before me. Long ago the quest to document and categorize faded as the need to experience at a level removed from mere acquaintance took hold; and it became not a matter of seeing but of feeling, not of quantity but of quality.

As a lifelong lover of birds, indeed enamored by all things in the natural world, I somewhere along the path began to know life not as it occurs but as it perseveres. That is to say that it became like an intricate song woven into a complexity of interweaving melodies and harmonies in which untold instruments play in fluid and translucent form. Birding as such melded into the milieu of a starlit night as I lay in camp allowing the nearby whistles of pauragues and far off hoots of great-horned owls and the interjections of a mockingbird deep in the throes of insomnia to climb into the galaxies and unfold from the darkest woods and flow along the ground and merge with the backdrop of croaking crickets and distant yodels of wandering coyotes. An afternoon sitting within the darkest ramadero watching and listening to green jays as they telegraphed the latest news; or on a ledge

overlooking a steep ravine as turkey vultures swooped through the thermals and nearby a canyon wren attended its nest as cliff swallows darted in and out of sight. The object was not to narrow the field of view with binoculars or slice it with a camera but instead to fall into it and out of it all at the same time.

Shortly after midnight, as I lay in bed a white-winged dove began to coo from the mesquite tree near my window. Earlier in the night I was in the backyard using my Mocotaugan crooked knife to carve a wooden spoon from a piece of knife-leaf condalia. As I sat within the lamp's glow a barn owl appeared from the nearby woods and hovered but a few feet overhead then screeched and disappeared into the blackness. I was birding.

Next to several windows I planted brasil shrubs that have managed an abundant crop of berries this spring. The brasil blocks the afternoon sun and the leaves act like stained glass casting haunting shades of green into the rooms as the sun dips towards the horizon. A mockingbird is feeding on the brasil at the window where I sit and write. A moment ago a cardinal landed and hopped from branch to branch and an hour past two Inca doves in love perched and ate berries.

A number of birds nest in a large anacua tree out back. I'll sit under that tree in the late afternoon and look up to see if I can spot them within the mesh of dark green leaves. Birds love anacua berries too.

By my window in my writing room I've placed a hummingbird feeder. Every few minutes a buff-bellied hummingbird appears. Now and then a black-chinned hummer comes to visit as well.

I am birding.

Arturo Longoria-Valverde divides his time between South Texas and The Hill Country. He is the author of *Adios to the Brushlands* and *Keepers of the Wilderness* both from Texas A&M University Press. His latest novel, *The Trail*, is now available as an eBook from Amazon.com.

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President's Message

by Steve Gross

Birding in Texas is a true blessing. As I think back on learning the birds, nooks, and crannies of the state, I'd like to think that I personally discovered many of the spots I now share with others, but the truth is that it's simply not true. It was only possible because of the information shared with me by other birders. Even if you only get your Texas birding information via the Internet, you are still getting it from another birder, possibly someone you've never met, and whom you may never meet. We truly do live in interesting times. I've never met Brush Freeman, Tony Gallucci, or Brad McKinney, for example, yet I owe each of them and many others a great debt. I wouldn't know a lot of what I know if it hadn't been for individuals like them (I picked the names above for no particular reason other than their significant contributions to *TEXBIRDS* and other information sources).

I've been asked to share my vision for TOS during my tenure as president, and it relates very well to what I've written about above. If there's a theme that I'd like to establish for these next two years, it's "social connectedness". Wouldn't it be nice to make connections in parts of Texas that you haven't birded very much? Wouldn't it be great to walk into a TOS meeting and see a lot more familiar faces, or match a face with a name you've seen countless times on *TEXBIRDS*? I've had the opportunity to meet more and more TOS members as I've led trips and attended meetings, but I'd like for those same opportunities to be available to the membership. Our Facebook page gets some traffic, but that is not a venue that many people choose to utilize. However, if you haven't paid the Facebook page a visit, please do. It's a good source of information and responses by members can be quite immediate and lively.

Additionally, the TOSRBA text message system was well-used during the winter of 2011, and I look forward to seeing that network grow and provide benefit to anyone interested. TOS benefits whenever birders, even non-members, get to see rarities reported on TOSRBA.

At our meetings, which I encourage you to attend, social opportunities will be more a part of the agenda. The inaugural Friday Night Bird Quiz was a big hit at the Junction meeting, and I will endeavor to provide more chances for people to mingle. Birders are almost universally friendly and welcoming, even before their morning coffee. I'm always impressed with the congeniality and helpfulness of TOS members. They also tend to be interesting and successful, and who wouldn't want to surround themselves with people like that?

It may sound like I'm pushing a purely digital agenda, but I'm not. Though our means of communication have become more and more electronic, nothing beats face-to-face contact. Hosting a Century Club trip in your county, or attending a meeting or field trip would allow for that contact. When each of us shares what we know, it contributes to the knowledge base about Texas birds and birding. I encourage all members to share their stories, birds, and time in order to better the organization. Our publications need authors, our meetings need attendees, volunteers and presenters, and our board needs your feedback.

These are ways I'd like to see our "social connectedness" increase within TOS. If you can think of other ways we can make this happen, shoot us a note via email, the Facebook page, or carrier pigeon. any way you do it, you can never have too many friends. Let's facilitate THAT within TOS.

Steve Gross
sgross77@comcast.net





Yellow-faced Grassquit photographed on Goose Island in February of 2011.

Photo Mark Bartosik