

VOLUME 9 (2013)

**TEXAS** *Birds*  
ANNUAL



A Publication of the  
**TEXAS ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY**



## Editor's Introduction

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In a world of blogs, listservs, and webpages, Facebook, and Yahoo groups I am always pleasantly surprised with the overwhelming support for this publication. As with previous issues, the 2013 edition of *Texas Birds Annual* contains articles from long-time contributors like Bron Rorex, Susan Heath, Christina Mild, Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, and Fred Collins. Containing a delightful mix of articles, from Lila Theis and her experiences with chickadees to Ron Weeks, who took up the challenge of birding by bicycle, we hope you'll find something of interest.

As always, a publication of this nature would not be possible without the contributions from numerous photographers. Texas is blessed with a bounty of wonderfully talented photographers, artists, and writers. To all those past, present, and future contributors of *Texas Birds Annual* a heart filled thanks!

One last request. Anyone with suggestions for next year's issue, which is the publication's 10th anniversary, please drop me an email. It's going to be difficult to summarize the past decade...I'll certainly require some assistance with that one!

So get yourself a glass of your favorite beverage, seek out a shady place and enjoy this year's issue of *Texas Birds Annual*.

Jack Clinton Eitnearn, Editor  
editor@texasbirds.org



American Robin. Artist Lynn Delvin.

Front cover art: Lynn Barber, second place winner of the 2012 art contest now gracing the front of the new TOS T-shirt.



# President's Message

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This message is in the premier Texas Ornithological Society publication, Texas Birds Annual. Besides, the TBA your membership provides you three newsletters and annual

Bulletin. TBA focuses on providing an outlet to publish articles of interest to the general birding audience. Our newsletters serve the purpose of providing timely information to Texas birders, statewide sightings of unusual species, news about future events and future meeting registration material. The Bulletins offer a scientific/academic focus providing researchers and individuals with a forum to present findings and observations to the birding community. We should be extremely proud of these publications. Not many statewide birding organizations are so inclined. I should note that the cost of these publications annually to TOS nearly equals the collection of all annual dues.

What can TOS members expect for the remainder of 2013 and the upcoming 2014? By the time this publication reaches your mail box the first of our Weekenders will have been held. Thanks to Mel Cooksey's efforts in Corpus Christi, 30 students will have learned to better identify shorebirds. Weekenders feature classroom lectures followed by field trip experience. They are open to TOS members on a first come, first serve basis. In early December the Sparrow Weekender will be held in Georgetown. Lee Hoy will be our instructor. He has taught classes for Travis Audubon and Williamson Audubon Group and is an exceptional teacher. Laurie Foss and Shelia Hargis (Shelia is VP of TOS) will lead an Austin area Weekender for Beginning Birders in late February or early March. We have an April Warbler Weekender in the planning



**Outgoing President Steve Gross (L) and New President Jim Hailey.**

stage. Sounds exciting, don't you agree?

This is the 60<sup>th</sup> year of TOS as an organization and in January we will celebrate in Round Rock. Victor Emanuel, a past TOS President, will be our feature speaker. He will be joined by Sandy Komito of Big Year fame, and Kim Risen of NatureScape Tours who has taken many TOS members on TOS sponsored owl and prairie chicken field trips. Local sponsors will be the Williamson Audubon Group. They promise this to be an exceptional meeting with over 15 field trips daily to birding areas in Central Texas. For our spring meeting we will move to Brazoria on the coast to join forces with our local sponsors, the Gulf Coast Birding Observatory (GCBO), and enjoy the splendor of our Texas coast in migration. The GCBO will be celebrating the opening of their newly constructed facilities. Those dates have now been set as April 24-26 so plan accordingly. One thing I want to stress, we are blessed by many willing, able and knowledgeable field trip leaders at these events. They give of their time free of charge to our TOS members and TOS. I hope when you attend a field trip with one of them that you express your gratitude for their selfless sharing of their time and knowledge with you.

One final note. Look for some interesting changes and improvements on the TOS website [www.texasbirds.org](http://www.texasbirds.org). We have a new webmaster with strong credentials in organizing and maintaining our site. James Giroux has graciously volunteered to be our webmaster. I urge our members to consult the website on a regular basis. James has interesting ideas for this valuable resource. An up-to-date website will include available field trips local or otherwise, TOS events, current contact information for officers and directors and who knows what else? I could go on but don't want to show all my cards up front.

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**Jim Hailey**  
**TOS President**  
**E-mail: [irasciblej@gmail.com](mailto:irasciblej@gmail.com)**

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The Western Meadowlark trend shows declines throughout most of its range, but increases are evident from southern California across the southwestern states to Texas and locally on the Great Plains. Photos Peter Forton.

# A Big Enough Texas Big Year

**By Fred Collins**

Photos by Randy Pinkston

Like many of you I am always enticed by the idea of a big year and have enjoyed the stories of those who have conducted a Texas big year. It so happens that many of those who have succeeded in breaking 500 in Texas in one year are friends or acquaintances and I heard the blow-by-blow accounts as the year proceeded. In every case, they plodded through December with determination rather than joy or triumph. They worried about every species they had missed. They often got home from a chase only to have to turn around and chase again. More than once from where they had just returned. A big year is not what it is cracked up to be. The Steve Martin movie made a good case for that. In the end, it was not the number or record but all the things which made up the big year effort that were worth remembering, or forgetting.

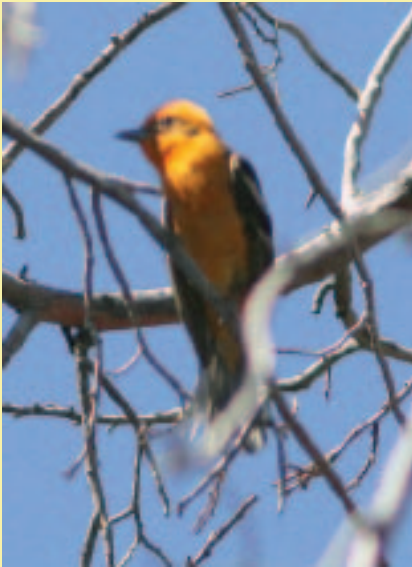
Cognizant of the pitfalls, my circumstances presented both last year and this year an opportunity for my own personal version of big years.

They have had all of the fun and adventures of a big year minus the stress of continually chasing every bird and the resulting conflicts at home and work. For me they are big-enough years. My goal in both cases was to exceed 400 species in Texas in one year. Not too difficult and doable for even people like me with diminished hearing and eye sight far below what I had been blessed with most of my life.

To accomplish this without chasing much beyond local birds requires a few trips to the corners of Texas. I am fortunate to live near the coast so am able to make almost monthly trips there. In spring I usually make three or four trips to catch migration. I also bird Kleb Woods Nature Preserve weekly which is about 76 miles NW of Galveston. Spring migration is typical of inland locations instead of coastal ones. I live about two hours from the coast and if you live much further, your big-enough year will require more weekend trips to a coastal location. Obviously coastal birding is essential for a great variety of species at all seasons, especially winter and spring.



Band-rumped Storm-Petrel off South Padre Island on a pelagic trip, July 2013.



Flame-colored Tanager in Boot Springs May 2013.

In 2012 I visited the Panhandle during January in conjunction with the TOS winter meeting. That is actually what started this whole thing. My companion for this trip was my old college birding mate Dennis Shepler. This trip and becoming acquainted with e-bird would lead Dennis to two consecutive big year efforts of his own in which he was not satisfied with just 400 species. The trip allowed me to add about a dozen species I would not encounter otherwise.

Additions provided in the Panhandle included: Ring-necked Pheasant, Turkey, Common Merganser, Golden Eagle, Northern Shrike, Chihuahuan and Common Ravens, Mountain Bluebird, Townsend's-Solitaire, and American Tree Sparrow. The trip also made sure-things out of many otherwise iffy birds. Birds like longspurs, towhees, and some hawks and waterfowl were regular and common to the north, while at home they often require special effort. Being west of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian, many western species were added as well.

Of course the Rio Grande Valley is the biggest key to a big year. In 2012 I visited the Valley as a reunion trip with old birding buddies Victor Emanuel and Dennis She-

pler. Our visit was early February and we hit many of the hot spots to pick up most of the unique valley specialties but also two rarities: Rose-throated Becard and Golden-crowned Warbler. By the end of February 2012 my year list was 222.

2013 has been a bit different but similar in total numbers. I made no January trip and ended up 14 species behind 2012. The winter TOS meeting was in my area, west Houston and the field trips did a good job of finding most of the regular winter species. However January offered me no "bump". In February, Dennis and I went to Dog Canyon in the Guadalupe Mountains looking to add some rarity to our Texas list. We also visited Imperial and Red Bluff reservoirs in route and birded Lake Balmorea on the way home. We found the Dell City area west of the Guadalupe's fascinating and worth a return visit. We failed to find a rarity except for a lone female Evening Grosbeak in Dog Canyon, but did manage to add some good birds for our Texas year lists. Some additions included: Common Merganser, Clark's Grebe, Golden Eagle, Acorn Woodpecker, Juniper Titmouse, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Sage Thrasher, Chestnut-collared Longspur, and Brewer's Sparrow. Again being well west of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian, we added many western species to our year lists. I ended February of 2013 with 207. Although well behind the 2012 February total, the 2013 total did not include a trip to the Valley.

March and April were spent concentrating on birding the Upper Texas Coast region with day trips to the coast as often as possible. Both years provided some interesting birds. The annual loon flock at Offatts Bayou in Galveston in 2012 had both Pacific and Red-throated Loons. I was fortunate to be present at TOS's Sabine Woods Sanctuary on April 21, 2012 when a Black-whiskered Vireo was present. I also saw the Tropical Mockingbird at the sanctuary. This first Texas and US record had been discovered earlier and





Dusky-capped Flycatcher in Boot Springs May 2013.

was nesting with a Northern Mockingbird. In 2013, two Tundra Swans were at Anahuac January through March. In April I attended a successful Yellow Rail walk at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge and also managed to see a Reeve at the refuge the same day.

Since I live in east Texas, I take it for granted, but if you live in the western two thirds of the state you will need to include a spring trip to the east Texas pineywoods to get breeding warblers and pineywood specialties like Swallow-tailed Kite, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and

Bachman's Sparrow.

In late April and early May of 2012 I made a trip to the Big Bend and the Davis Mountains. I was joined by Bill and Randy Pinkston and Dennis Shepler. We backpacked into Boot Springs and spent the night to assure we would get the Colima Warbler and hopefully Flammulated Owl and Mexican Whip-poor-will. We succeeded in all of these species as well as adding the expected species at the springs including Blue-throated Hummingbird, Cordilleran Flycatcher and Painted Redstart. We got a few bonus western





Grace's Warbler in the Davis Mountains May 2013.

migrants: Dusky Flycatcher, Townsend's and Hermit Warblers. The trip produced many of the expected Trans-Pecos region summer residents. My end of May 2012 list stood at 385.

May 2013 again found me in the Trans-Pecos region, with Dennis and Randy. We met at the Texas Nature Conservancy Davis Mountain Preserve. We were not expecting any rare birds but were hopeful nevertheless. The Conservancy was doing its annual spring survey, a series of point counts. The volunteer workers, a group of highly talented

birders, found a Buff-breasted Flycatcher, but unfortunately we were unable to relocate it later in the day.

However, an extraordinary collection of birders, doing extraordinary things, often make extraordinary discoveries. Such was the case on the night of May 25, 2013. I was fortunate to join them in an owling venture up into the high country in pursuit of Flam-mulated Owls. Storms were brewing around and below us. The sky was periodically lighted by gigantic flashes and the wind built



Botteri's Sparrow in the Valley near Laguna Atascosa July 2013.

as we ventured higher into the canyon. It was definitely a wild owl chase.

We flushed a bird from near the road. No one person got a conclusively identifiable look. I saw it fly away. My first impression was Chuck-wills-widow, long narrow winged, but it soared away more hawk-like. A narrow-winged owl it seemed. I lost sight of it as it passed behind a tree but I thought it perched and alerted others ahead of me on the road. Several of the group saw it perched and it had prominent ear tufts. The first thoughts were Western Screech-Owl but soon it was

recognized to be too big. Others thought they saw its face and perhaps a spotlight found it briefly. It flew away and was lost. Discussion soon came to a consensus of Long-eared Owl, a rare bird in the Trans-Pecos with a few summer records. It is believed to nest in the area but no nest had been found. No one was overly excited however because no one had seen it and identified it conclusively. The spot was marked and serendipitously it happened to fall within 30 feet of a survey point the following morning. While Mary Gustafson listened to calling birds at the

spot, she scanned an old hawk nest. It held a Long-eared Owl brooding at least two downy owlets. What an amazing discovery! We were all treated to scope views of the family later in the day. In subsequent days, a second nest was located. Details of this exciting Texas ornithological discovery will be published by the discoverers in the future, perhaps in the TOS Bulletin.

While the original plan was to spend three leisurely days in the Davis Mountains, the continued occurrence of a rarity in the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend changed our plans. So from the Davis Mountains we traveled to the Big Bend and day-hiked on May 27 to Boot Springs. At the spring we got all the expected species plus the rarity we chased, a Flame-colored Tanager. This was a new Texas bird for all of us. This bird had been discovered about a month prior and may have paired with a female Western Tanager. We also found the pair of Dusky-capped Flycatchers which seemed to be in residence that summer. Dennis and I birded the park the following day and found several highly desired species including Crissal Thrasher and Lucy's Warbler. The Lucy's Warblers were prevalent in Cottonwood Campground with one or two family groups busily feeding and being pursued by begging young. This was a new Texas species for me.

On the way home we tried to see the Rufous-capped Warbler near Uvalde but missed it. The Tropical Parula at Concan turned out to be a hybrid. We swung by Choke Canyon and I added Green Jay and Audubon Oriole to my year list.

I ended May 2013 at 380. Since I have not been to the Valley this year and plan on making at least one pelagic trip from South Padre, I will probably top 400 species in Texas for 2013 by summer's end.

In 2012 I went to the Valley in July for a pelagic trip from South Padre Island. This was a four day trip that included the lower valley and up river as well. The pelagic trips provide great bonus birds but seldom are more than

four pelagic species seen per trip. On the July trip of 2012 I saw Cory's Shearwater, Audubon's Shearwater, Band-rumped Storm-Petrel and Pomarine Jaeger. I returned from the Valley trip in 2012 with my year list total at 403.

The balance of 2012 I stayed close to home, and as time permitted, picked up birds I had missed earlier in the year. The Upper Texas Coast provided a few summer surprises, a Black-tailed Godwit strutted its stuff all summer in Brazoria County and a Brown Booby made a several day appearance in Baytown near the Lynchburg Ferry in August. During the fall a Broad-billed Hummingbird turned up in Russ Pitman Park in Bellaire and a Greater Pewee came for the winter to Bear Creek Pioneer Park in west Harris County. I eventually went and got a Red-cockaded Woodpecker in December, not 30 minutes north of where I work. My final year bird was Mountain Plover on the Dec. 29<sup>th</sup> Granger Christmas Bird Count. I ended 2012 with 418 species. I suspect I will end 2013 with a similar total.

While these totals are a far cry from the 500+ many recent Texas big years have totaled, I enjoyed each bird and did not have the anxieties over missed species. Every trip to a far flung corner of Texas is full of wonderful birds we seldom get to enjoy unless we live in that particular corner. I love the fact that I enjoyed each one and had no thought of leaving the presence of one so I would not miss another. The fact of the matter is that in Texas, there is always another species to see; which means there is always one to miss. A big-enough year is all about enjoying the diversity the state has to offer. Of all the people I know who have had a 500+ Texas big year, not one has seriously considered doing it again. A big year of 400+ makes me wish to do it every year. I encourage you to try a big-enough year and enjoy the wonderful birds Texas has to offer.

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**E-mail: [Fred\\_Collins@itc.co.harris.tx.us](mailto:Fred_Collins@itc.co.harris.tx.us)**

# Our “Green” Big Day

**By Ron Weeks and John Hale**

Last year, we became aware of a web page maintained by Scott Smithson detailing a new form of Big Days, “Green” Big Days. Green Big Days amount to Big Days without using any fossil fuels—no motorized vehicles. This concept had already been incorporated by the Great Texas Birding Classic’s Human-Powered category. We, along with Jason Oehring and Eleanor Kwik, had won the Classic’s Human-Powered category in 2011 with 153 species by linking Anahuac NWR, High Island and the Bolivar Peninsula. Now, we just needed to cover some more habitats to bump our total above the published Green Big Day record of 161 species set in Marin County, California in 2012. We figured adding in Bolivar Flats and getting a decent migration day at High Island would do the trick.

On Saturday, April 20<sup>th</sup>, we started our attempt at Double Bayou Park in Chambers County, Texas. This park, located just northwest of Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, holds many of the common woodland residents such as woodpeckers, American Crows and Carolina Chickadees absent from the immediate coast. We picked the day after a strong front was scheduled to blast past the coast. Such north wind days are famous for impeding trans-Gulf migrants that have left the Yucatan Peninsula the previous evening by stalling their progress. The tired migrants simply “fall out” into the first available habitat they can find. Our fingers were crossed that the day after would leave many of those migrants at High Island despite the very light north winds forecast that night. That would also leave us more hospitable biking conditions—a factor most Big Day birders would never consider.

At 4 AM, the winds were seemingly nonexistent as we started birding. Our first birds of the day were the expected owls, Barred and Great Horned, along with some early-rising Northern Cardinals. Unfortunately, our East-

ern Screech-Owl yard was being guarded by a loose dog across the street. That and the lack of a calling Chuck-will’s-widow left us with two misses right off the bat. Dawn got our spirits up as we not only got several wintering residents but some migrants brought down by the front. By the time, we mounted our bikes we tallied 47 species including 8 warblers, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and a bonus Red-breasted Nuthatch, a species that had spectacularly invaded Texas this past winter. Despite missing two species we had never missed before on this route, Downy Woodpecker and Red-shouldered Hawk, we figured if Double Bayou had migrants, High Island must be loaded.

Our next stop was a known swallow nesting bridge where I had both Cliff and Cave scouting. The cold swallows were perched on the line soaking in the day’s first rays of sun. There were not just Cliff and Cave, but Tree, Northern Rough-winged and Purple Martin! The ride to Anahuac NWR found us logging



Stopping to take in the gulls and shorebirds at Rollover Pass. Photo by Linda Hale.





Our Classic Big Day team: Ron Weeks from Lake Jackson and John Hale from College Station. Photo by Linda Hale.

another 25 species including Upland Sandpiper and Whimbrel - most without slowing below 15 mph. What few stops we made were largely for Ron to adjust his binoculars and backpack which contained a full size tripod and scope. Ever try and ride a road bike (“10 speed”) with your binoculars being bounced from one leg to the other?

Anahuac greeted us with raptors on the entrance road—“just a Red-tailed,” “there finally is a Swainson’s,” and “the kestrel is still here!” Our first scope setup stop paid off handsomely with a bonus: Hudsonian Godwit, one of the most sought after shorebird migrants in Texas. Little did we know that lone dark ibis with it was a Glossy; we were informed of this later in the day. The surrounding moist soil unit had almost all the freshwater shorebirds we needed including Wilson’s Phalarope and even some recently-arrived White-rumped Sandpipers. Shoveler Pond had the expected King Rail, Seaside Sparrows, our only Gadwall and a bonus Double-crested Cormorant. But no Purple Gallinule or Least Bittern were to be seen or heard. Given our tight schedule we had to move on and hope we would find them at the nearby Skillern Unit of the refuge.

After working into a strong headwind as we headed east, Skillern rewarded us. We dipped on the Ruff present for the last two weeks

on our way in, but got our Purple Gallinule in the bayou. And then, as we moved to the marsh overlook, we found warblers! First, a Yellow-throated (late), then we heard a chat and best of all a Palm (quite late). Our only Belted Kingfisher and several Yellow-crowned Night-Herons were added, but no Least Bittern despite my sexiest imitation. I joked that maybe I was too sexy and had caused the males to retreat further into the marsh. Our bonus on the way out, the Ruff had returned to view. Talk about a bonus bird! We did not know it at the time, but we left Skillern with 132 species already on the list.

Next, we headed back into the wind and then turned south toward the legendary migrant trap, High Island. We hoped that some of the many warblers that had dropped in with the strong front were still there despite light north winds overnight. As we pulled into High Island we flushed a bonus Wilson’s Snipe. As we stopped to look for White-winged Doves, I heard a Bronzed Cowbird sing. Could that starling have made that song? Fortunately, as we mounted our bikes I spotted the cowbird—a species we had not seen during scouting.

Smith Oaks was our first major stop. It took us a while to find our first warbler, and then it happened. One-by-one as we moved along American Redstart, Blue Grosbeak, Prothonotary Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler and then a real treat, Golden-winged Warbler! On to the rookery; there we added our missing egrets and herons. Next up was Boy Scout Woods and the hope for more warblers—we had 21 already. We listened and looked for new thrushes—we had Wood and Swainson’s—but not luck. In the process of searching the shadows I recognized a “chup” note, Kentucky! It eventually gave us a nice view. We decided to search the edges for a Painted Bunting knowing it was early for numbers. But, surely there must be one. We continued out to the marsh overlook, and John spotted a most unexpected



Pedaling the home stretch on the Bolivar Peninsula.

Photo by Linda Hale.

American Bittern. What luck! Then on the way back, I spotted a streaking shape on the horizon—Merlin! It was about time to move on, so we headed back to the grandstands. We decided to take one last look at the drip. Then someone said, “What is that bird on the drip?” Someone else said they thought it was a female Painted Bunting. And it was! This left us with 155 species and most all of our gulls and terns to come.

The next spot was the High Island beach pond which had been holding Lesser Scaup and an assortment of shorebirds including some Baird’s Sandpipers on the beach. The area greeted us with large flocks of roosting gulls and terns... Royal, Sandwich, Common, Ring-billed Gull, Herring Gull... Wait look at this gull: Lesser Black-backed! The ponds still held the scaup and a few extra shorebirds pushing our total past the old record to 170 species as we pedaled our way to Rollover Pass.

Rollover Pass is a great flats area for gulls terns and shorebirds. The now east winds suggested the water should be in and the birds up close. And they were. We completed our small ringed plovers with a Piping and also added American White Pelican, Reddish Egret, American Oystercatcher, Marbled Godwit, Black Skimmer and Black Tern pushing us to 177 species.

Now we had the long unenviable 20 mile ride to Bolivar Flats. Fortunately, with the wind behind our back we made good time, stopping at Crystal Beach to add some staked American Golden-Plovers. The last part of the ride got really tough. We were tired and our bike lane disappeared to make room for center turn lane. This meant it was nearly impossible to look up and around. We found out later we had ridden right by a species we would miss, Rock Pigeon. We struggled into Bolivar tired from riding nearly 70 miles and

hungry. While we were getting something to eat a Pectoral Sandpiper flew over. And then we spied a Horned Lark just past it.

Another decision point came where we needed to walk the beach as our skinny tires would certainly become mired in the sand. We walked well over a mile of beach before we got to the flats—which were very small due to the winds. We did add about 20 Red Knots, but no Short-billed Dowitcher or Long-billed Curlew—birds that are normally easy scores there. After the long walk back we had only enough light to get to the ferry landing and try for our last gasp Rock Pigeons. It was not to be as John flatted less than a half-mile from the ferry landing. We walked there but could not find a pigeon. We stopped, rested and pulled out the checklist. 181 species, a new record!

P. S. We later found out that a team from California had also seen 181 species this spring, but we reflected on the fact that we accomplished the same total while imposing the additional Classic rules of no lights and no playback on ourselves—“Green” Big Day rules require no such restrictions. We have gotten many comments applauding that fact. We not only reduced our impact to the environment as a whole, but more specifically the birds we so love to watch.

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**E-mail: [ronweeks@sbcglobal.net](mailto:ronweeks@sbcglobal.net)**

# Flaming the Tanager

**By Cameron O. Carver**

Photos by Author

When the Flame-colored Tanager was reported by Mark Flippo up at Boot Springs (Big Bend National Park) in early May, I was immediately trying to find time to go down to see it. It's not like I haven't seen one before, I spent some quality time with the one that frequented Madera Kubo in 2010. I just really wanted this species for my Texas list. I had chased one that was reported from The Davis Mountain Preserve in 2011 and failed to find it, so there was some history.

After two straight weekends of trying and failing to find time to chase the bird, my opportunity came. I also conned my father into coming to Lubbock to pick me up. We drove down Friday evening after work and stayed in Marathon.

We had intended to wake up early and begin the Colima Death March before sunup, but somehow there was a communication failure and we didn't depart Marathon until close to 0600—OOPS! We had the typical birds along the way: Scott's Oriole, Scaled

Quail, Blue Grosbeak—pretty birds in the morning light.

A stop at Panther Junction to use the facilities netted us our only Curve-billed Thrashers in the park. Panther Junction also had quite a few House Sparrows. Not sure why they have not attempted to eliminate that population....

## THE BASIN

Finally, we made it to the Chisos Basin parking lot. We then waited 30 minutes to pay the damn entry fee. I wanted to high-tail it up the mountain but, no. The usuals were darting around the parking lot: Black-headed Grosbeak, Scott's Oriole, Canyon Towhee, Say's Phoebe and Cactus Wren.

Time to start the Death March. I like to wear my snake boots up the mountain. They are comfy and protect me when I am paying more attention to what is in the trees than what is on the ground. So, if you ever see a goofy guy walking up Pinnacles Trail with snake boots, that's me.

A female Summer Tanager was the first exciting bird of the hike. We were soon hearing



Say's Phoebe in the Chisos Basin parking lot.



Mexican Jay with a yellow leg band.

Mexican Jays and more Black-headed Grosbeaks.

About half way up the Pinnacles Trail, we stopped to eat a snack. There was a nice, worn log that looked like it had been used by many for the same purposes we had in mind.

We hadn't been sitting 10 seconds before a pair of Mexican Jays came flying in to beg for food. The more audacious of the two birds had a single yellow leg band. Someone banded these birds many years ago and this was one of the remaining birds.

They say not to feed the wildlife, but this bird knew what was up. Obviously, it had been fed before.... maybe that is how it has survived for so long. We chucked it a few almonds and enjoyed the beautiful bird at the closest range possible.

## BACK TO THE RACES.

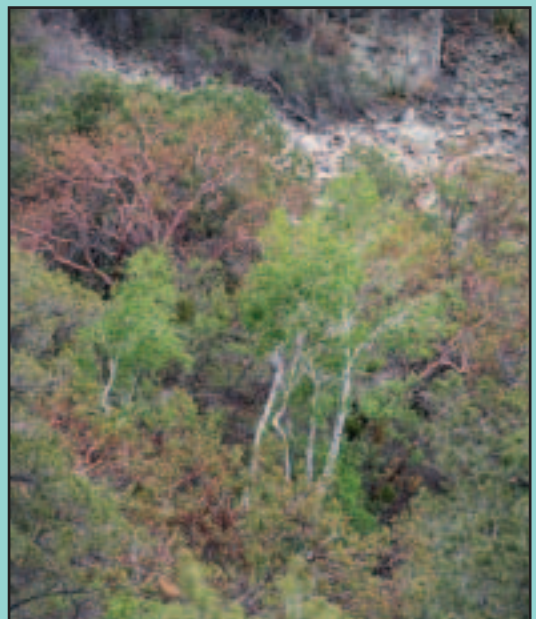
We were soon on the Pinnacles Trail switchbacks. This is my least favourite part of the trail, but it does provide for some great scenery and it holds a number of secrets.

About halfway up the Pinnacles Trail there is a window that overlooks a shaded slope. This slope holds the southernmost stand of

Quaking Aspen in the United States—a relic population of a past era.

In one of the recesses along the Pinnacles Trail switchbacks we heard the call of a Dusky-capped Flycatcher. One had been seen and heard up near Boot Springs, so we were not too taken aback by this... but still excited.

We did not hear or see any Colima Warblers



Quaking Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*).





Female Lucifer Hummingbird with a broken mandible.

on the ascent. They were probably singing, but... we paid no attention.

We took a nice rest at Boot Springs. There were several Hutton's Vireos and a family of White-breasted Nuthatches (will the AOU split these?). We also had a Painted Redstart a couple of Cordilleran Flycatchers and a distant Dusky-capped Flycatcher (all heard only). We could hear the Flame-colored singing up the trail, but I was tired.

We eventually went looking for the Tanager, but we got sidetracked by an eye-level Colima Warbler and a female Lucifer Hummingbird with a broken lower mandible (the poor thing could barely fly).

We got back on track and followed the singing until we found a birder from Kentucky



Blue-throated Hummingbird.

pointing straight at the bird. It was in the very top of an Arizona Cypress with its apparent mate a female Western Tanager. Also in the tree was a Yellow-billed Cuckoo and a Black-headed Grosbeak. It was very hard to keep track of what was what and where was what and what was what where. We eventually got some acceptable looks at the bird, but I didn't manage any photos. My father and the nice gentleman from Kentucky managed to get some decent photos. I had really wanted to get some video and audio of the bird....

A Cordilleran landed 20 feet from us and offered some great views—it was a lifer for the Kentuckian. I heard 5 different Cordys on the hike, but this was the only one that offered such great views. Good timing.

The trek back was uneventful (one Colima), but the parking lot birding was excellent as usual. I found a male Hepatic Tanager and we eventually found its mate. We went up to the private residence to check the hummingbird feeders and found a male and female Blue-throated Hummingbird and also found the Hepatic Tanager nest in their backyard.

## RIO GRANDE VILLAGE

The Basin campground was full, so we headed down to Rio Grande Village. There were rain clouds in the air and it was making for some beautiful scenic views.

We attempted to bird Rio Grande Village, but there were many people and it was very hot. We set up camp instead.

In selecting a campsite I always look for a sign: Coyote, Javelina, any sort of animal. This time it was a congregation of Turkey Vultures on and around the picnic table—perfect spot.

We set up camp and enjoyed a cold beer. Summer Tanager in the tree above the tent. Vermillion Flycatchers everywhere. Flyover and vocal Common Black-Hawk. Elf Owls calling in several trees. Lesser and Common Nighthawks flying around. At least two species of bats (a big one and a small one). I know how to choose a campsite.



The Chihuahuan Desert with the Sierra Del Carmens (Mexico) in the background.

**SLEEP. ELF OWL. SLEEP.**

Woke up again to the sound of an Elf Owl... and a stumbling father. Time to get birding. Summer Tanagers were awake and so was just about everything else. Brown-crested Flycatchers were in the trees surrounding me.

We broke down camp and moved on. Mississippi Kite in the Common Black-Hawk

nest trees. Indigo Bunting near Daniel's Ranch. Nothing super awesome.

I did work on my Mexico list. This entails standing on the US side and counting all the birds that are on the Mexico side. The best Mexican bird was a Common Black-Hawk (this was flagged for being rare, HA!)



The Rio Grande from the boat launch near Daniel's Ranch.



Bell's Vireo working on some nest building.

### SAM NAIL RANCH

We hadn't walked 50 meters at Sam Nail Ranch when a male Varied Bunting flew right into the bushes next to the trail... and then disappeared. We walked to the drip where I found a tan-morph White-throated Sparrow—very late. Bell's Vireos were copulating right in front of us. I sat down at the bench and discovered that the Bell's Vireo nest was right out in the open.



Cave Swallow on nest in Marathon.

We sat at Sam Nail for quite some time watching the Bell's Vireos work on the nest and the Yellow-breasted Chats display. We started back to the truck, but got sidetracked by a singing Crissal Thrasher—a lifer for my father.

### AFTERNOON IN MARATHON

We returned to Marathon for the afternoon. Grabbed a couple of semi-tasty

beverages at the Saloon (The White Buffalo is better) and waited for Heidi to get off work so she could take us to the Wastewater ponds. Just outside her place of work we studied a Cave Swallow nest.

When Heidi got off work, we followed her to pick up her Matt and then followed her to the ponds. This is a great place to work on your Brewster County list. It's, however, private and the only way to get on the property is through Heidi. Several duck species were found. Best birds were a pair of Baird's Sandpipers.

### THE FINALE (NOT SO GREAT)

We enjoyed a delicious meal at The Gage Hotel and stayed in Marathon that night.

The next morning we went to Post Park. It was an OK visit, nothing spectacular. We missed the Hooded Oriole—that bird is becoming a bit of a Brewster County nemesis. Overall, this was a pretty darn good trip.

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*E-mail: [c.o.carver@yahoo.com](mailto:c.o.carver@yahoo.com)*



# A Luxury High-rise Apartment for Carolina Chickadees

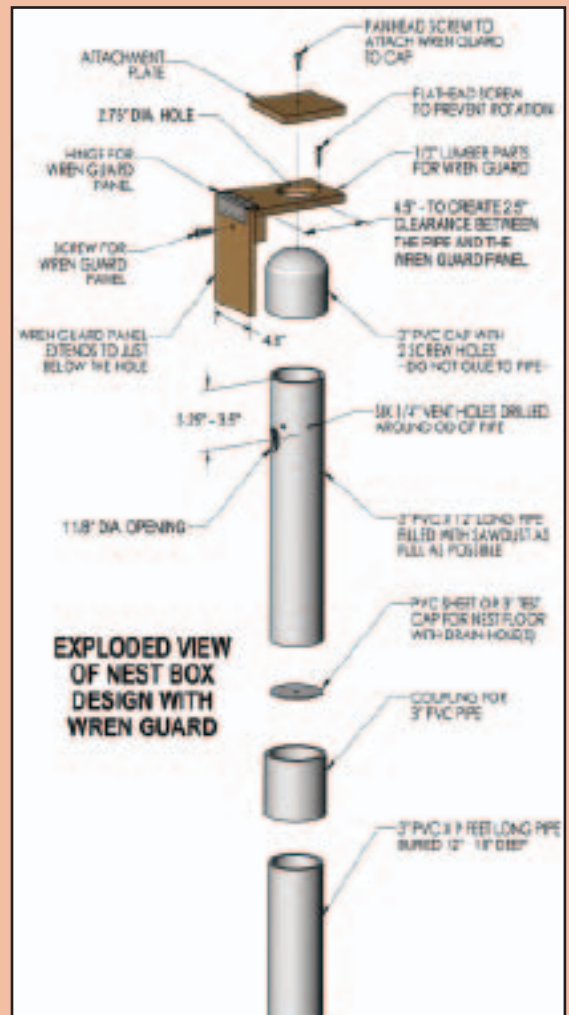
By Lila Theis

Photos by Author

In the back yard of my 1-acre lot in NW San Antonio, I have a fountain and 2 bird-baths in a garden with tropical/house plants that are watered regularly. So when the Texas drought was so severe in 2011, many birds found relief in this little oasis. We have large windows that face this garden, so I was able to see the birds, even as I went about my daily indoor routine. Thus began my curiosity and interest in my back yard birds. My husband mentioned seeing an occasional Carolina Chickadee, but it was months before I finally saw my first one. This tiny bird quickly became one of my yard favorites and I wanted to get to know them better. In my research about them, I stumbled across a paper published in 1995 about a research project using artificial snags as nest boxes for Chickadees. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has an article about these nest boxes, "Looking For The Perfect Fixer-Upper" by Caren Cooper, David Bonter, and Laura Erickson, posted here: [http://www.birds.cornell.edu/Publications/Birdscope/Summer2008/fixer\\_upper.html](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/Publications/Birdscope/Summer2008/fixer_upper.html), and also has archived the original research paper entitled, "Artificial Snags As Nesting Sites For Chickadees" by Thomas C. Grubb and C. L. Bronson. The paper includes dimensions and descriptions of how to build this artificial snag, where to locate it, and what direction to face the opening. I was intrigued and decided to build one. My goal was to lure more of these special little birds into my yard.

The original researchers built 76 nest boxes and strategically placed them in wooded lots, but I built only one for my yard. In early May, 2012 I purchased a 10 foot long 3" PVC pipe, a coupling, and an end cap. I proceeded with the project even though I knew it was too late for Chickadees to begin a nest that year. They would have plenty of time to get used to the nest box being there

before the next year. For the floor of the nest cavity I used a PVC test cap with a drain hole added and glued it firmly in place where it is captive in the coupling joint. I cut a 12" long section of the PVC pipe for the nest box section at the top. The researchers added a second coupling mid-way up the pipe so that they could lower the top section of the pipe for observations in the field. Since I planned to use a ladder for access to the nest, I decided not to add this second coupling on the pipe. I drilled small vent holes around the circumference of the PVC pipe just below the top cap that were not included in the original design.



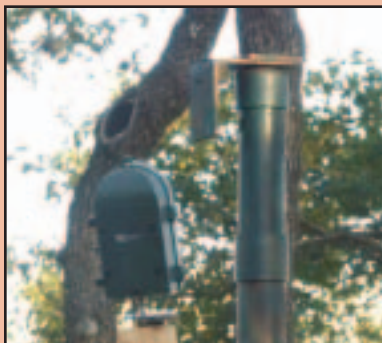
This diagram shows an exploded view of the nest box assembly as I built it.



Though not part of the original design, I decided to address the threat of House Wrens by adding a wren guard. I based the design on data found online and built it out of wood and attached it to the PVC top cap with screws. The wren guard plate is hinged so that it can be flipped back until the eggs are laid, and can again be flipped back when the nestlings are about a week old.

I also camouflage painted the PVC on the outside to blend in with the surrounding trees. For observation purposes, I placed the nest box about 50 feet from the house with the opening facing NW (opposite the southeast prevailing breezes). About 2 ½ feet away, I constructed a 2x4 post to mount my Birdcam for daily external photos and videos.

I filled the nest cavity—the 12” long top section—with sawdust, and waited. With the wren guard flipped back, it didn’t take long for our local Bewick’s Wrens to discover this luxury high-rise apartment, but as long as I kept the cavity as full as possible with sawdust, they were easily discouraged. Chickadees nest in an empty tree cavity or excavate a nest cavity in a tree, so the sawdust is optional but worked well in this case. I provided 2 other bird houses, and the Wrens chose one to successfully raise their family. Shortly after the nest box was first put in place, I saw evidence of woodpeckers trying unsuccessfully to enlarge the hole in the PVC. The Chickadee nest box remained full of sawdust and vacant until early February of 2013, nine months



after it was installed. We first noticed the Carolina Chickadees entering the nest box and flying away with a mouth full of sawdust. When the sawdust level was to their liking, they began building the nest on top of the remaining sawdust.

The photo below of the completed nest was taken on March 13 by removing the top cap and taking the picture down into the top of the PVC nest box while standing on a ladder. You can see the opening facing toward the upper left corner of the picture and the ground 9 feet below. This process proved to work well for taking pictures inside the nest throughout the incubation and nestling periods.



Two days later, on March 15, I took another picture and discovered 6 eggs had been laid! So within the 54 hours between these 2 photos, all 6 eggs had been laid.



The Birdcam captured this photo of the male feeding the female as she incubates her eggs in the nest box.

The next day, March 16, the wren guard plate was flipped down into place. After several fly-bys, it took the male Chickadee 6 minutes to accept the wren guard and fly around it to the nest opening. But it took the female Chickadee 33 minutes to accept the wren guard and enter the nest.

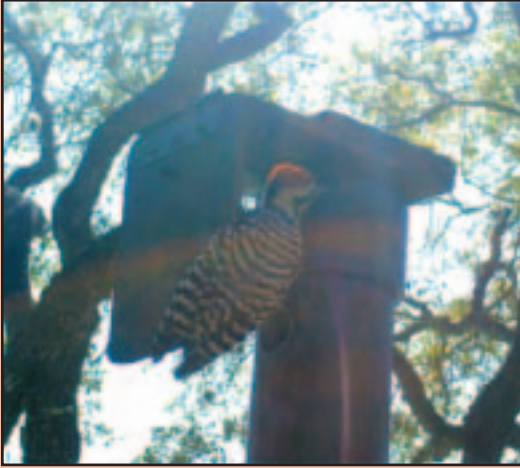


During incubation days # 4, 7, 11, 12, and 13, I monitored the nest by removing the top cap assembly and taking pictures into the nest when the parents were away.





At certain times of the day, the sunlight shone on the Birdcam lens, creating a glare in the photos. On day 12 of the incubation period, March 26, the Birdcam captured 3 pictures of a Ladder-backed Woodpecker inspecting the nest box. But the 1-1/8" diameter opening is too small for Woodpeckers. We did not see the woodpecker, so even with the glare on the lens, this picture is the only way we knew he had visited.



I quickly retreated. I later realized that hatching had begun or was imminent. The next day, I was able to get a picture of 5 hatchlings and 1 egg remaining.



I began counting day 1 of the nestling as March 29. On nestling days 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 14, and 16, photos were taken inside the nest cavity to show the growth of the nestlings. I could only count 5 tiny heads and no eggs in each of the pictures until day 14, April 11, when all six were then clearly visible.

On day 14 of incubation, March 28, when I thought the female was away from the nest, I climbed the ladder, removed the top cap, and held up the camera for one photo. Since I did not peer down into the pipe, I was surprised to see in the photo review that the female had remained on the nest!



Day 2



Day 4



Day 7



Day 8



Day 11

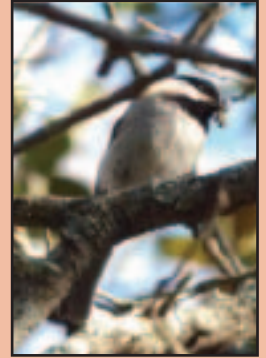


Day 14



Day 16

As their babies grew exponentially each day, Mama and Papa worked tirelessly to feed them.



The adult Carolina Chickadees frequently used the wren guard plate as a place to perch when returning to the nest.

This is a picture of the female in the nest opening with the male perched on top of the wren guard.







The picture above shows 2 Pine Siskins visiting the nest box. Perhaps they were not a threat, but Papa was perched at the opening to guard the nestlings. From my personal experience on several occasions with the adult Carolina Chickadees swooping close to me in attack mode, I know they are fierce protectors. They don't seem to know how tiny they are, and defend themselves and their family valiantly.

It is recommended that the wren guard be removed on Day 7, so we were quite late when we flipped it back on Day 14. We almost forgot that the fledglings would need open space for their first flight from the nest box.

The young ones had become quite vocal, and we wanted to record their sounds, so on day 16, we attached a microphone under the wren guard top plate.



We retreated under the gazebo to take movies from a distance while the long cord on the microphone brought all the sounds from inside the nest right up to the camera. Since we live only 1/8 of a mile from Loop 1604, the highway sounds would have overpowered the bird sounds, but the microphone allowed us to get good video with great sound. The adult Carolina Chickadees were quite upset about the microphone so close to the nest opening, so it took 16 minutes for the male to accept it, and it took 45 minutes for the female to finally enter the nest. The microphone picked up a riotous chatter of the nestlings whenever the parents flew to the nest. Distinctively different voices could be heard from the 6 babies. Perhaps the microphone was enough of an intrusion that it triggered the fledging of the young sooner than they might otherwise have done so. In any case, all six of the nestlings successfully fledged the next day.

Day 17, April 14, was fledging day, so there was too much activity to take pictures into the nest cavity. The Birdcam was set up to take videos with motion detection, but the trees were moving constantly, so that resulted in movies taken at a rate of about 1 per minute with a 10-second duration each. Each time a video was taken, a still photo was also taken by the Birdcam. We spent most of the morning under the gazebo watching, waiting, and listening. Only the usual activity of the parents was observed. At noon, we decided to go into the house for lunch and left the Birdcam to record any happenings. We checked progress at intervals and did not see or hear any activity changes. But at 3:17 pm we returned to the gazebo to find one of the fledglings on a nearby tree. In reviewing the Birdcam videos later, we realized that 4 of the 6 young had fledged sometime between 11:40 am and 1:40 pm. In the videos after 1:40 pm, only 2 nestlings could be heard in the nest. We have a video of the last one taking its first flight at 3:13 pm,

just 4 minutes before we returned to discover the fledgling on the tree. I suspect that this last straggler was the one that hatched last, too.



Above is a still shot captured from the Birdcam of the last fledgling leaving the nest.



Before finally taking flight with the rest of the family, the last one climbed up the tree while Mama was calling from another tree.

Immediately after these photos and videos, the entire family flew away, and we didn't see any Chickadees for 5 days.



The last fledgling rested on a nearby tree immediately after fledging.



The photo above is the empty nest, flattened and containing abandoned fecal matter.

On April 19, we began to see 1 or 2 of them occasionally, and then on April 23, 9 days after fledging, there were 18 Chickadee visits to the feeder and birdbath within 1 hour. We never saw them all together so it was im-

possible to count them, but there were lots of Chickadees chattering in the trees above.

Regular visits ensued, and 16 days after fledging, on April 30, there was another busy Chickadee day in the garden. As of this writing 4 weeks later, Chickadee activity remains very busy.





## Chickadee Sound Recordings and Recognition

To record the sounds of the nestlings in our Carolina Chickadee nest box while videos were taken from a distance, the sound setup was fairly simple: the microphone was a low-Z type with a 20 ft. long cable. Using adapters, it was plugged into the microphone input of a portable cassette player/recorder with headphones attached. The headphones, when held against the camera's microphone, provided vivid sounds of the nestlings to accompany the camera's video. This allowed for remote manual operation of the camera and recorder for less intrusion into the normal nest activities.

Later, during the 3-1/2 weeks following fledging, we saw other Chickadee fledglings at our bird feeder. I was curious if "our" family was still among the visitors and if they would respond to the recordings made during the video sessions of the bird feedings. So, 25 days after fledging, I set the cassette player 8 ft. away from the now-empty nest and hit the "play" button. As the cassette played back the recording of the chicks' chattering, there was an almost immediate response of Chickadees flying and fussing from the branches above the nest area. Papa (or Mama) kept darting down to the nest hole and looking in. More chickadees—that were perhaps the young from our nest—kept chattering and flying down and landing close to where the cassette was playing. It was quite a frenzy of chickadee activity and I quickly turned it off, since I didn't want to intentionally aggravate them. The Chickadees' response was spectacular and we concluded that our family of Chickadees still resided in the area and that they recognized their own unique sounds.



In summary, building just one simple PVC artificial snag turned out to be a very rewarding experience. In spite of our continued presence and invasive gadgets, our pair of Carolina Chickadees built their nest in our nest box, laid 6 eggs, and cared for their 6

beautiful babies through fledging and after. I wonder if they will nest here again next year, or if the wrens will move into this vacant luxury high-rise apartment.

**E-mail: [lilatheis@earthlink.net](mailto:lilatheis@earthlink.net)**

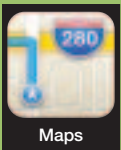


# The iPhone as a Birding Tool

**By Kendra Kocab**

Over the past century, bird identification has evolved. Early on, if you saw a bird you didn't recognize, you shot it. Eventually, binoculars and field guides replaced shotguns, and now smart phones are rapidly replacing a number of birding tools. Working as a naturalist at Kleb Woods Nature Preserve, I have seen the number of bird walk participants using iPhones increase dramatically in the last five years. The draw is not just that they can text, access email, take pictures, and utilize apps. It's that they can text about *birds* they see, access email to see *TEXBIRDS* posts, take pictures of *birds*, and utilize *bird*-related apps. Many bought the phone specifically for birding.

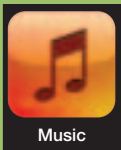
Quite a few, however, were unacquainted with the full potential of their iPhones. Since many of them expressed an interest in knowing more, I developed a short course on using the iPhone as a birding tool. This article is a compendium of the information provided in that course. These are my personal preferences, and although the apps are all iPhone specific, many are available on other smart phones.



Maps



Voice Memos



Music



Camera

## APPS THAT COME WITH THE PHONE

Some of the standard apps preloaded on the iPhone are helpful to birders. One of the most useful is the **Maps** app. Once you master this complex app, you can find birding hot spots, save the location of a nest, and see what restaurants, hotels, or gas stations are nearby during a birding excursion. It works anywhere cell and internet services are available, so unless you are in far west Texas, that giant folded-up road map can remain in the glove box for emergencies.

The **Voice Memos** app can be used to record bird calls. Although the built-in mic picks up a lot of background noise, the recording can still be useful in identifying a call. Also, you can purchase a small plug-in microphone that improves the recording quality.

The **Music** app lets you store audio files from your computer onto the phone. If you have bird call CDs, you can first transfer the CDs to iTunes on your home computer and then sync them to your phone. You can also purchase bird calls in the iTunes Store and download them directly to your phone.

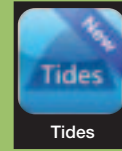
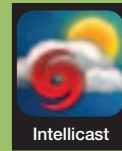
One of my favorite techniques is using the **Camera** app in combination with other birding tools. Using the iPhone alone, you are limited to taking pictures or videos of birds that are either very large or very close. However, you can use the phone along with a spotting scope, or even binoculars, to get identifiable photographs of birds. Taking pictures with a camera through a spotting scope is called *digiscoping*. It is more difficult than it looks, but with practice it gets easier. You can even purchase an attachment for your scope made specifically for digiscoping with an iPhone.



Digiscoping a male House Finch at a bird feeder.



Female Broad-tailed Hummingbird.



Digibinocularing. Photo by Debbie Layer

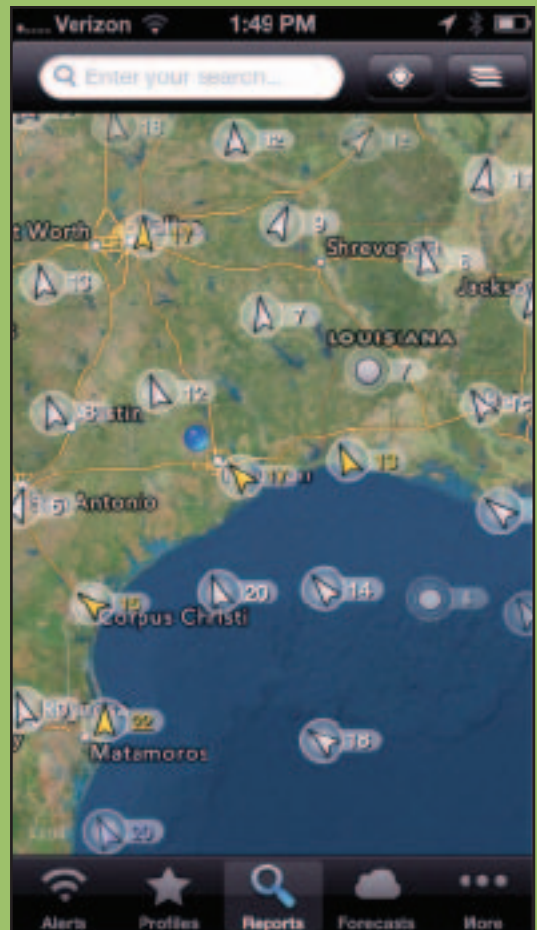
I have used digiscoping to get spread-tail shots of hummingbirds; this has helped us identify female Calliope and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds at Kleb Woods.

Much more difficult than digiscoping is what I call *digibinocularing*—holding your iPhone camera up to one eyepiece of your binoculars. This works best with two people, but can be done solo in a pinch. If you are somewhere without a camera and observe an unknown or very rare bird, you may be able to get an identifiable photo using digibinocularing. Both digiscoping and digibinocularing work only with stationary birds.

### FREE APPS

There are some useful apps that don't come with the phone but can be downloaded from the App Store for free. The phone does

come with a **Weather** app, but there are others that I like more, such as **WeatherBug** or **Intellicast**. These are useful year-round to help you decide if and where you want to go birding. **WindAlert** is great to have, especially during spring migration. With it you can see what direction the wind is blowing both on land and out in the Gulf, so you know when to drop everything and head to the coast.



WindAlert

**Tide Table** lets you keep track of high and low tides. With this app you'll know when to go shorebirding and when you might want to get your car off the beach!

With the **Facebook** app, you can join one of several groups that discuss birds in Texas and access those groups from your phone. You can also post your digiscoped pictures straight from your phone to Facebook.



#### APPS THAT COST (BUT ARE WORTH IT)

If you were only going to spend money on one bird app, I would suggest **iBird Pro** (\$19.99). iBird is perhaps not the most advanced bird app out there, but it is packed with useful features. It has information on more than 900 North American species, including birds found in Hawaii. For each bird you get illustrations, photos, a range map, call recordings, and detailed descriptions of appearance, habitat, migration, breeding and nesting behavior, feeding behavior, and similar species. You can include your own photos of each species, take notes about where and when you see birds, and flag your favorite or most referenced species so they are easily accessible. You can also search for a bird you don't recognize by entering the location, general shape, size, color, and habitat, and the app will suggest species that match your description. The search function is more helpful for beginning birders, and doesn't always suggest the correct species. Overall, iBird gives you the most for your money and is a great introductory app for those new to iPhones or birding.

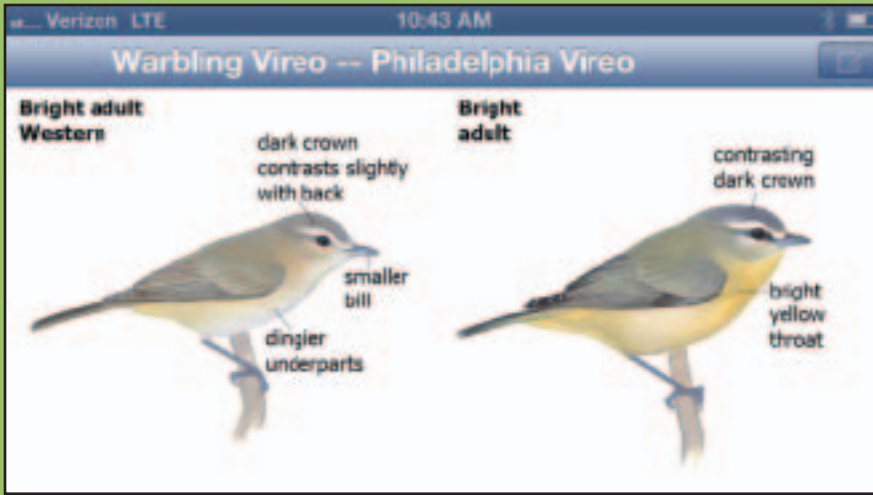
If you don't mind spending a bit more to build a terrific suite of bird apps, here are my



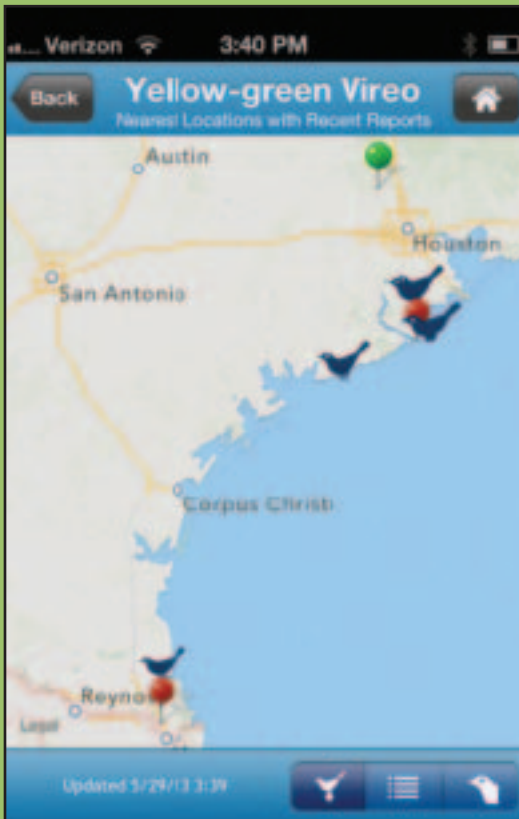
iBird Pro—information page for Northern Mockingbird

suggestions. (If you get these, you can skip iBird Pro.) First, you need a field guide app. Why carry a giant book around all day when you can just use your phone? There are several field guides to choose from, such as **National Geographic Birds: Field Guide to North America** (\$9.99), **Audubon Birds** (\$3.99), and **Peterson Birds of North America** (\$14.99); but my favorite by far is **The Sibley eGuide to the Birds of North America** (\$19.99). You get all of Sibley's fabulous illustrations, range maps, descriptions, and bird calls. There is also a compare function that lets you see two species side-by-side. What really makes Sibley outshine the other field guide apps is the ease of use; it is very user friendly and intuitive.

Next, you need a good bird call app. Yes, most bird apps have recordings, but **BirdTunes** (\$9.99) has more recordings per species than any other app I have found. For



example, for Carolina Wren, iBird has two recordings, one song and one call, whereas BirdTunes has eleven recordings, including four songs, a duet, and six calls. It also indicates the state where each recording was made. This app is especially great for those who are learning to bird by ear, but I recom-



BirdsEye showing recent reports of Yellow-green Vireo.

mend it for all birders. Gone are the days of carrying a giant case full of cassettes and a tape recorder. Now all your bird calls fit into your pocket!

Next in the suite is **BirdsEye** (\$19.99). This app has photos, descriptions, and

calls for each species. What makes it special is its ability to access eBird in real time to locate birding hotspots, see what birds have been reported recently in your area, or find where a particular species has been found recently. You do not need an eBird account to use BirdsEye. However, for the eBird function to work, you need internet access, so if you are out where there is no cell service, the app's functionality is limited.

Finally, an honorable mention goes to **BirdWatcher's Diary** (\$12.99). This app is difficult to use and is not for the casual birder, but it works incredibly well for bird surveys. While in the field, you can log the birds you see and hear, and it records the exact coordinates of each entry. When your survey is complete, upload the coordinates to GoogleEarth to view exactly where each bird was seen. You can also upload your entries to Facebook and eBird. This program only works when there is internet service at the field site.

### OTHER ACCESSORIES

If you find yourself using the iPhone a lot, you may want to invest in a few additional items. Car chargers and plug-in packs extend the battery life of the phone. For louder playback, you can get plug-in speakers. Also, a good iPhone case may increase the weight and size of the phone a bit, but it can help you avoid having to replace a dropped phone.



**Where will the technology take us next?**

The makers of BirdsEye quote Ken Kaufman, saying that the app is the “best invention for birding since binoculars.” I disagree; the iPhone itself is the best invention since binoculars. Technology is rapidly changing the birding experience, and the iPhone provides access to the newest developments. Advances in birding combined with those in the tech world eventually lead to new apps for your phone. Already in the works is an app that will identify bird calls in the field. Imagine looking at your phone screen. It displays a list of birds it “hears.” Touch the species you want to see, and a compass points

the direction. Next, a laser beam points out the bird, and a level indicates how high to point. Then the beam, using technologies developed for detecting gases on remote planets and stars, reads the bird’s DNA fingerprint—Wow! A Southwestern Willow Flycatcher at Kleb Woods! For birding technology, it would seem, the sky is the limit.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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*E-mail: [Klebwoods@hctx.net](mailto:Klebwoods@hctx.net)*

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# The Buff-bellied Hummingbird in West Texas

*By Carolyn Ohl-Johnson*

October 19, 2012 started out gorgeous. Sunrise morphed comfortingly around me as I awaited Kelly Bryan's arrival to band hummingbirds at my oasis in the Christmas Mountains.

He arrived promptly at 8 AM. We set up the trap, hoping for at least one Anna's Hummingbird. We weren't disappointed. Within minutes we had a female in the trap. But that seemed to be the only hummer around, so after awhile, we headed south to a couple of our other banding sites. At one, we saw a Ruby-throated and an Anna's, but caught nothing. It's like fishing. Some days are better than others.

I arrived back at my house around 1 PM, caught up on my email, snacked, and at 4 PM, as I normally do, I went down to the

oasis to record the day's high temperature. Ah, a lovely 81°.

I felt ready for a nap, which I rarely have time for, but this seemed to be the day. Spontaneously, I decided to nap at the oasis so I wouldn't miss any potential action. I dragged out some cushions and arranged them on my largest bench with my camera within reach. As I started to lie down, I heard an incessant chip note that sounded like an angry Anna's. But I wanted to be sure so I grabbed my camera. Just then, I saw a Western Scrub-Jay enter a Live Oak tree, and then quickly leave with a green acorn. Jays can really annoy other birds so I figured the hummer was mad at the jay. But it still kept up the rapid-fire chipping after the jay was long gone. I wanted to at least confirm it was an Anna's. (It was an Anna's.) I headed toward the area of the noise and saw



Sunrise from Christmas Mountains Oasis.



Empidonax Flycatcher

an empidonax flycatcher fly into a tree behind the Live Oak. Well, it seemed late in the year for an empidonax, so I sure wanted to know what kind it was (It was a Cordilleran.) To do that, I needed photos. So I took a few, then decided to change positions, hoping to eliminate the shadow across the bird's head.

Suddenly, behind my left shoulder, about ten to twenty feet away, I heard the unmistakable wing beat of a larger hummer. I turned my attention behind me, into the glare of the late afternoon sun, and saw the hovering silhouette of a hummingbird that had a slightly decurved bill, and was way larger than a Lucifer (which has a decurved bill). Very interesting! My heart raced with my determination to photograph it. The wing beat sounded

like a Magnificent Hummingbird to my untrained ear, but the bill assured me it wasn't that species.

When I swiveled my camera into position to photograph it, bad light and all, it disappeared. Undaunted, I finally relocated it feeding on the anisacanthus in my hummingbird garden. I managed to snap a dozen or more photos, but its constant movement was causing most of my shots to be way out of focus. Nevertheless, I had documentation of what I thought looked like a Buff-bellied, but knew couldn't be, since that species had never been recorded in West Texas before. I figured the only other

option had to be a Berylline. Never mind that I distinctly saw a green throat that ended at a light cinnamon-colored belly.

The bird finally retired to a nearby mesquite tree about 6-7 feet above the ground. I snapped a few more pictures but with its back turned, a few were more than sufficient.

I've had rare birds visit the oasis before, but never one that had not been documented in the Big Bend area before. I didn't know what to make of this occurrence, or how to deal with it.

I'm thinking, "I need to call Kelly, I need to call Kelly." Beryllines are quite rare in this area and sightings of them need documenting. I believe there are five Texas records of this species. Buff-bellieds are fairly common in the Lower



First Buff-bellied Hummingbird documented in the Trans-Pecos.

Rio Grande Valley in east Texas, but have never been documented in the Trans-Pecos region. I certainly, never in my wildest dreams, imagined I'd see one at my oasis.



Buff-bellied Hummingbird perched in mesquite tree.

Reluctantly, I left and headed for the house a block away. When I reached Kelly on the phone, after we had just parted a few hours earlier, he probably thought, “what’s so

important, so soon, that you can’t just email me?” That’s what I would have thought, anyway. I was also thinking “Buff-bellied,” but couldn’t let myself be foolish enough to blurt that out. So, I gushed, “I’ve got a rare hummer here.” There’s nothing like getting right to the point (I only have an expensive long-distance calling card from here, so hardly ever make a long-distance call).

He, of course, politely and patiently inquired, “What is it?” I’m sure by now I had piqued his curiosity.

“I don’t know,” I replied, truthfully, wanting to say “Buff-bellied,” but lacking the temerity





Buff-bellied Hummingbird at Anisacanthus bush.

to do it. “Maybe a Berylline,” I added, knowing he would know I was knowledgeable enough to at least have some idea of what it was. “But it doesn’t have a red bill.” I figured that caveat would explain to him why I wasn’t sure about the identification.

To my relief, he immediately said, “maybe it’s a Buff-bellied” (It’s always reassuring to know you’re not crazy, or if you are, you’re in good company). I agreed, and informed him I was downloading pictures and would email them to him asap.

After he received a few of the photos, he responded that

it looked like an immature male BUFH. I agreed. He said he’d be down first thing in the morning to attempt banding it. Again, I



Kelly Bryan retrieving buff-bellied from trap as Mark Lockwood looks on.



Buff-bellied in Kelly's hand after being banded.

agreed, eager to let him handle the situation from there on.

And, I was praying it would still be there in the morning. Meanwhile, I went back down to the oasis hoping for better photos. I sat impatiently for an hour before I heard its distinctive wing beat. I headed for the sound and located it just as it seemed to be about to drink from a feeder. But it saw me approaching and departed. That's the last I saw of it that day, although I hung around another hour.

At daybreak Kelly, along with Mark Lockwood, showed up and located the bird within minutes. Apparently it was coming to the same feeder I had seen it approach the day before so Kelly set up his trap there without even bothering to cover or take down the other feeders. In no time at all he had the

hummer in his hand. I was impressed!

Later analysis of the measurements determined it to be a juvenile female. The extensive bill grooving indicated that it hadn't been fledged long from the nest.

I do think we would have seen it while banding earlier the previous morning if it had been present then, but perhaps since we had covered the feeder it was using, it may have just caught insects during the hour we were trapping. It made very infrequent feeder visits anyway. Kelly declared that it was really skinny. The underside of the bill was red, but during flight, that didn't show.

It hung around a few more hours, and I thought I glimpsed it around 6 PM, but wasn't positive. That was the last potential sighting of this surprise visitor, alas.

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*E-mail: [carolynohl@aol.com](mailto:carolynohl@aol.com)*



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## Texas Waterfowl

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### Palms and birds

Photos by Greg Lasley, Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, Cissy Beasley, Lois Mahowitz

# Investing Wisely in Trees

**By Christina Mild**

Most birdwatchers are aware of the many ways that birds use trees. Any tree can serve as a place to forage for leaf buds and insects, to call for potential mates or simply to roost. Thorny trees provide the best-protected nest sites. Native trees provide the greatest potential for fruit (ex: hackberry family) and nectar (ex: Wild Olive), as well as tasty caterpillars munching leaves on their butterfly/moth hostplant.

Thus, it's fairly obvious that trees, especially natives, are an important investment for those who wish to improve the welfare of birds, butterflies and other desirable critters.

While many well-meaning individuals, businesses, communities, etc. spend considerable sums to plant trees, the same dedication to managing a healthy tree is generally lacking.

So what constitutes “healthy tree management”?

First, the tree should be planted at the proper depth, according to species. Soil type should be appropriate for the species and the amount of watering will vary according to species and season.

Most of us can detect clues that a tree is ailing. Harlingen's native plant nurseryman, Mike Heep, has often been called out to diagnose an obviously struggling tree. Most often, Heep discovers a specimen deeply-ringed by a weed-whacker.

When the tree's outer bark is compromised, all sorts of detrimental organisms utilize this “open door” to a protective home and source of nutritious sap.

Deeper abrasions decrease the tree's ability to conduct water, sugar and minerals between the roots, leaves, fruit, etc.

There are many available products and methods for decreasing the likelihood that a tree's health will be compromised during routine and repeated yard care.



Insects attracted to trees provide important food resources for birds. Photo Carolyn Ohl-Johnson.

The tree can be surrounded by a wide variety of available products, to create a zone of protection.

Most nursery departments in big-box stores sell flat “tree rings” of heavy porous recycled rubber. This retards the growth of grass and weeds in an approximate one ft. radius of the trunk. It also remains flat enough for easy mowing.

For those who enjoy gardening, a variety of edging types can be used to create a “weed-whacker” barrier (and!!!) a small gardening space. In the photo of my “pentagonal” tree-surround garden, I’ve used fake-brick interlocking plastic sections. I was able to push them into place in wet soil using my foot. I began the small garden, of course, by removing any hint of grass. Periwinkle was the easy planting choice for maximum blooms in full sun and the punishing heat of summer.

The periwinkles died back as cooler temperatures approached and I was happily surprised to find a number of native species arriving on their own. That small garden now hosts X plant species to feed all sorts of organisms.

My garden-edging method was quick and cheap. Anyone with some bricks, large rocks or small logs can create a tree-surround garden which complements the landscape with imaginative beauty.

## PRUNING & TRIMMING

A more difficult aspect of tree care is pruning and trimming. I begin with thoughts on palms.

Palms may be the most high-cost tree investment in the state of Texas.

In deep south Texas, at least 85% of the treasured tall *Washingtonia* palms are regularly and repeatedly raped or brutalized by paid palm trimmers. Owners pay a considerable sum annually to ignorant palm rapists. As yet, a way to educate the myriad roving palm-trimmers or the palm-owners has not been discovered.



Fruiting trees provide food for adult and growing birds. Photo Cissy Beasley.

It is all too common to drive past newly-trimmed palms with only 5 remaining upright green leaves. After a few windy days, these same palms have 3 upright leaves and 2 with broken petioles (stems) hanging limp, showing signs of yellow, brown and impending death.

I experienced this ignorance in the fall of 1989 when palm trimmers appeared at my door to offer their services. As a first-time palm owner, I hired the guys and went inside to do chores.

When I returned to check on their progress, nine of our ten palms had been raped in the manner described above. A fellow was up the tenth palm, having already removed most of the protective brown skirt. Every expletive deleted you can imagine raced thru my mind, and I proceeded to yell in Spanish and English to cease and desist “immediateamente!!”

The LRGV experienced a hard, long freeze in late 1989. As things began to thaw out, nine of our ten palms died. Only the 10th, which retained most of the green leaves, survived. Using the approximate cost of planting a mature palm and multiplying by nine, one can easily calculate the enormous cost of my mistake in hiring uneducated men with the willingness to scale and whack away at palm trees.

Dead fronds which remain as a skirt below the living green “energy-factory” fronds provide preferred roosting sites for mosquito-eating bats. Hooded Orioles weave their nests below a palm frond in a position well-hidden from predators. Mark Conway tells me that



Green Parakeets roost within the thick skirts of palms. A thick skirt also protects living upper leaves from wind. An intact skirt moderates temperature extremes. The trunk is shielded from direct drying rays of the sun, thus maintaining cooler temperatures for such roosting birds as the Eastern Screech-Owls which call from my palms.

Max Pons, Manager of TNC's Southmost Preserve in Brownsville, TX adds: "In addition, detritus in the base of the leaf (boot) attracts many invertebrates. Small invertebrates become food for the before-mentioned animals (bats and birds). The skirt (I prefer "petticoat") is advantageous to the health of the tree as well. It provides additional moisture to the palm as the added surface catches dew and fog precipitation and contributes to the cooling and warming of the trunk in inclement weather."

Many years after my palm trees froze, I met the former Wm. MacWhorter, who taught me many things about the growing and care of palms. MacWhorter was adamant that green fronds should not be removed from a palm (unless they threaten passersby in an area where the palm was planted too close to walkways, which happens all too often!). After all, green leaves are a palm's only source of energy. In comparison, few of us would pay or even allow someone to destroy a large portion of our vegetable garden!

MacWhorter also pointed out "toothpick" palms, grown too closely-packed by unscrupulous or idiotic nurserymen. Toothpick palms snap off like toothpicks when hurricane winds pass through. Stronger palms with thicker trunks have a great capacity to bend with the wind.

Other technical aspects of tree-trimming are beyond the scope of this article. However, if tree trimmers must be hired, it is crucial to seek out a licensed arborist with an insured workforce. (This is a rare entity in deep south Texas.)

Even with those criteria fulfilled: "buyer beware."

I was once invaded by an army of workers (minus the arborist boss I contracted with). They came and left with lightning speed. With limbs falling left and right in every segment of the yard, I was sorely afraid to venture out until they departed. As one might suspect, details already paid for were left undone, necessitating a call-back from the owner. In retrospect, I'd prefer a crew of three: trimmer, ladder-stabilizer and brush hauler (perhaps four, if a brush-chipper is in operation on site).

In conclusion, enjoy and protect your trees! Plant natives (when weather permits) if you have space for more trees or shrubs. Perhaps more importantly, become active in speaking out for better tree care in public spaces. Roadsides, parks, libraries, schools and shopping malls often have the most brutalized trees to be found anywhere.

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**E-mail: [mild.christina@gmail.com](mailto:mild.christina@gmail.com)**



Properly pruned trees and shrubs produce more berries so are of greater value as wildlife food. Photo Carolyn Ohl-Johnson.

## **Two Youth Birding Teams Represent Rockport-Fulton**

**By Bron Rorex and Martha  
McLeod**

The community of Rockport-Fulton proudly produced four youth birding teams to compete in the 2013 Great Texas Birding Classic in the Roughwing division (youth 13 years and under). All students attend Aransas County ISD. T.O.S. sponsored two of the teams.

The T.O.S. Krazy Kites were represented by sixth and seventh grade birding students. Team members Kyler Friebele, Britney Goodwin, Zoe’ Sundberg and Carissa Taylor tallied 135 species during their eight hour competition day the second weekend of the Classic. The adult team mentors enjoyed an amazing day in the field with extremely enthusiastic middle school birders. The kids’ excitement for birding was evident as they shared their bird list and descriptions of birds seen during the day with adult birders along their route. They were thrilled with Indigo Buntings,

Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Baltimore Orioles, Blackburnian and Magnolia Warblers and other spring migrants. Kyler and Britney are third year birding students in the local birding program and Zoe’ and Carissa are second year birding students. The team received a first place award from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for identifying the most species statewide in the Roughwing division.

The T.O.S. Awesome Ospreys team was composed of fifth graders. They tallied 104 species on their competition day. The kids did surprisingly well considering this was the last of the four teams to compete, and late in the season. Second year birding students Jacob Brake, Brian Rabroker and Lucas Rice and first year birding student Angela Owens comprised this team. This was an especially interesting day for our youngsters since the TPWD film crew chose that morning to film a segment of young birders in action for an upcoming fall



Front Row L to R: Carissa Taylor, Kyler Friebele, Britney Goodwin, and Zoe’ Sundberg. Back Row L to R: Martha McLeod, Robert Edwards, and Bron Rorex.

First stop in the morning; the Birding Center in Port Aransas at 6:45 AM on a Saturday morning. Notice how bright-eyed and bushy tailed our middle school students were this early on a weekend. Photo by Martha McLeod.



Collaborating to identify a teal hen seen out of the water at Port A Birding Center. Photo by Martha McLeod.



There were dozens of warblers in the tall trees and we were delighted to find Blackburnian Warblers next to the roadway besides Rose Hill Cemetery. Photo by Martha McLeod.





Our Awesome Ospreys team photo of the day. Front Row L to R; Lucas Rice, Angela Owens, Brian Rabroker, Jacob Brake. Back Row L to R: Bron Rorex, Robert Edwards, Martha McLeod. Photo by Martha McLeod.



TPWD filming the kids finding and identifying a Northern Waterthrush near the sidewalk of the Birding Center in Port A. Photo by Martha McLeod.



Filming the kids in a discussion with Dr. Edwards about Western Sandpipers seen at the Wetlands Center in Port A while Lucas and Bron verify the bird using a spotting scope and binoculars. Photo by Martha McLeod.

episode of their television series. The videographers filmed conversations with the kids. At



The team of kids using an informative sign to scan the commonly seen birds in this particular area. Photo by Martha McLeod.

every stop, they followed along and filmed the collaboration between the young team members as they searched for and discussed identification of birds, using field guides for assistance. They exhibited composure and focus throughout the filming process.

Three years ago fifth grade science teacher Martha McLeod encouraged two local birders to share their love of birding with her students via weekly birding classes and monthly field trips. We quickly learned about their infectious enthusiasm and how quickly young birders absorb all we share with them about birds. Our original goal was to work with one kids' birding team but the class and field trips have been so popular that our program has grown like topsy. We're now teaching weekly at two school facilities and are out on field trips almost every Saturday morning. We don't know who gets the most out of this endeavor, us or the kids.

**E-mail: [bron@rorexusa.com](mailto:bron@rorexusa.com)**



## The TOS Seaside Sparrows

### By Kendra Kocab

Travis Younts, Matthew Simpson and Owen Bradford met a couple of years ago during a multi-week Junior Birding Program. This is where they developed their birding skills before participating in the Birding Classic as a team in 2011.

This year, one of the most difficult moments for first-time team leader Kendra Kocab was watching a Magnificent Frigatebird fly overhead and painfully waiting and hoping the boys would get on it. The bird cooperated by circling for several minutes, and finally one of the boys stopped looking at

American Avocets and Wilson’s Phalaropes long enough to spot the frigatebird and point it out to the other two. That was a very long several minutes for their team leader!

The highlight of the day for most of the team was a Red Knot. The boys worked very hard, knowing time was running out, to find this bird. It was a lifer for almost the entire team, including the team leader and chaperones. The team would like to thank Fred Collins, Alan Younts, Cindy Jordy, and Michelle Bradford for their help and support.

*E-mail: [Klebwoods@hctx.net](mailto:Klebwoods@hctx.net)*



Watching for warblers (Matthew, Travis, Owen).



The team with Fred Collins, Kendra Kocab, Travis Younts, Matthew Simpson, Owen Bradford, and Cynthia Jordy at LaFitte’s Cove.



The team at LaFitte’s Cove, with Cynthia Jordy and Alan Younts.



Owen Bradford, Travis Younts, and Matthew Simpson.



## TOS City Flickers

By Kathleen Whelen



As the parent of Joshua, 17, Benjamin, 16, and Laura, 13, my greatest challenge was finding a day when other extracurricular activities weren't competing for our time.

I have always loved birds and learning the different species and characteristics and have tried to take advantage of any opportunity to share this love with children. This year, the Great Texas Birding Challenge was the perfect occasion so I signed my own children on as a Glider team, the TOS City Flickers.

Birding and nature have always been a part of our family activities. We have counted in the El Paso/Trans-Pecos Audubon Society's Birdathon since the 90s.



May 1997 at Hueco Tanks State Park, Joshua (left), big sister, Tara (middle), and Benjamin (right), participate in their first Birdathon. Due to 105 degree heat and a shortage of experienced birders on our "team", we counted only 17 species.

Laura began preparing as soon as we signed on. For the weeks leading up to the big day, every bird we encountered, she tried naming. If I spouted the species name before she could call it (or miscall it), I was reprimanded for giving assistance. At times it can be difficult to allow a Western Kingbird be called a canary.

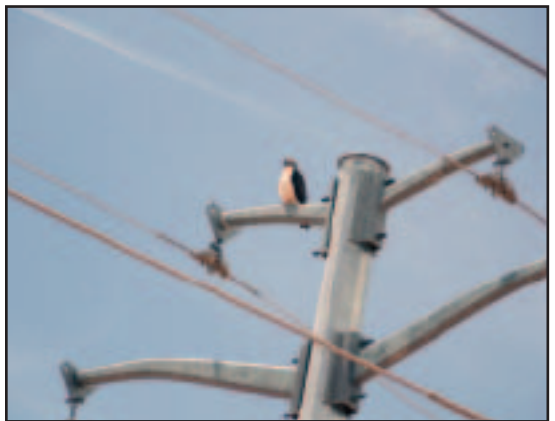
We used Audubon's Birdathon as our scouting trip and counted for the Great Texas Birding Challenge the following day. Our species number of 31 surely won't impress the casual reader of this article however, Joshua did find that a young lady at his high school told him it was "cute" that he could identify the birds that visit their patio area.

As always, several bird species remained elusive as they were unable to identify them. At the end of the day, I sent several photos to a friend to verify the species. Reminiscent of the canary, we had to strike Baltimore Oriole off the list since it was actually a black-headed grosbeak.

The hours flew quickly and we enjoyed time together as a family and ended with memories and experiences and hopefully traditions that will continue through the years.

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***E-mail: [whelenk@gmail.com](mailto:whelenk@gmail.com)***





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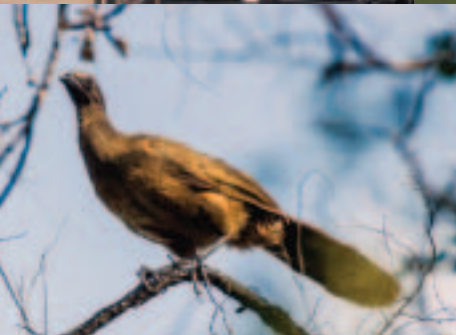
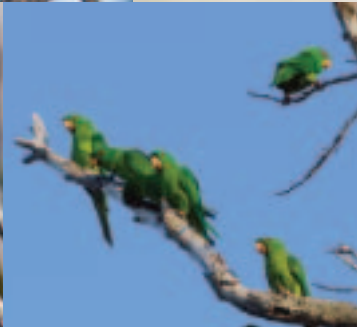
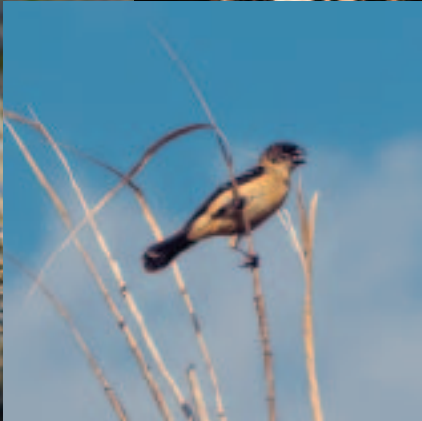
Proofreader ..... Kent Rylander

Contributing Writers ..... Eric Carpenter, Cameron Carver, Sheridan Coffey, Fred Collins, Jack Eitnear, Ted Lee Eubanks, Richard E. Gibbons, Susan Heath, Judy Kestner, Kendra Kocab, Christina Mild, Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, Bron Rorex, Dennis Shepler, Lila Theis, Ron Weeks, Kathleen Whelen.

Contributing Photographers and Artists ..... Mark B Bartosik, Cissy Beasley, Scott Buckel, Cameron Carver, Fred Collins, Raul Delgado, Chris Doolen, Ted Lee Eubanks, Peter Forton, Richard Gibbons, Michael Gray, Susan Heath, Kendra Kocab, Greg Lasley, Lois Mahowitz, Ann Mallard, Martha McLeod, Darleen Moore, Carolyn Ohl-Johnson, Dan Pancamo, Randy Pinkston, Bruce Strange, Lila Theis, Elvind Vamraak, Sandi Wheeler, Kathleen Whelen, Debbie Layer.

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# Laredo Birding Festival a Great Success

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**By Judy Kestner**

Photos by Raul Delgado

In its fifth year of existence the Laredo Birding Festival has come into its own in the birding world.

Several reasons contributed to the sparse attendance at the event in its first four years. Uneasiness about the safety of visiting this border town had probably affected the numbers of birders willing to make the trip. Another factor was the city's lack of experience and, more importantly, available personnel to promote an event such as this. Even with the local Monte Mucho Audubon Society acting as birding host in conjunction with the city, there was no one person or team to work full-time to get the word out and coordinate logistics in a timely manner.

Those concerns were completely conquered this year. First of all, the city of Laredo and Monte Mucho partnered with the Rio Grande International Study Center, whose help proved to be the missing link in our attempts to present a well-organized, well-attended event in an under-birded area of the birdiest state in the Union. Special kudos go to the Study Center's Executive Director Tricia Cortez and her able staff for their management and attention to detail from the terrific accommodations secured at La Posada Hotel to knowing every participant and attendee by name. They also are super birders with a firm knowledge of the birds to be expected in the area. These hard-working individuals dotted every "I" right down to ensuring that there was sunscreen and a roll of paper towels in every trip van! Bird-counter Glenda Barrera and people-counter Danny Gunn, members of Monte Mucho, rounded out the behind-the-scenes crew who helped keep things on track.

Second, when polled by TOS president-elect Jim Hailey on Saturday night, not one hand was raised to indicate any feelings of apprehension about safety at any time. There

is nothing like personally testing the waters to find that the sharks you heard were chewing people's legs off are actually minnows nibbling your toes. As Jim says, "If you haven't birded Laredo, you don't know what you have missed."

The weather could not have been better if we had a direct line to Mother Nature's command center. Even the rain on Saturday morning ended early, putting to rest birders' apprehensions about mud and flood and fogged lenses. It also had the added benefit of stirring up lots of insect activity, reviving and invigorating the birds.

There were 76 paid attendees (versus fewer than 20 last year!) who came from within Texas and from states as diverse as Vermont, Oregon and North Carolina, and they ranged in age from 11-year old Belle who came from Rockport with her mom (and won the grand prize at the sold-out banquet on Saturday night: a straw sunhat decorated by a local artist), to 81-year-old Sandy Komito, our keynote speaker at the banquet. Sandy holds the Big Year record with a total of 748 A.B.A. bird species seen and identified in 1998. His amusing anecdotes about that effort capped off this satisfying festival. When asked to describe birding in Laredo, Sandy's reply was, "Fabulous!"

Twenty field trips were offered over the course of three days and the areas visited ranged from local Laredo hot spots, such as North Central Park, to a trip to Salineño in Starr County, an hour and a half away. Several local landowners opened their private ranches as birding destinations, expanding the number of species and knocking the enjoyment factor out of the park.

Of course the target bird everyone wants to see during a visit to Laredo is the White-collared Seedeater. Though most of the adult males had not yet migrated back, enough females and young males were seen to whet everyone's appetite for another trip to Laredo

on April 18-20 for the spring TOS meeting when these birds are mating and nesting and singing out in the open.

Over the three days 164 species were seen, which is far and away the most species in any “single” count in Laredo. In addition to the seedeaters, trip goers reported seeing all three kingfishers, Zone-tailed, White-tailed and Gray Hawks, Red-billed Pigeon, Reddish Egret, Wood Duck, Western Grebe and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. There was also a first-ever species reported – a California Gull!

Our birding experts included Lee Hoy, Chuck Sexton, Michael Marsden and Barry Noret who, along with Jim Hailey, Sandy Komito and Monte Mucho members Susan Foster, Raul Delgado, Dario Gutierrez, Danny Perales, Monte Mucho president Tom Miller and I, guided the attendees through the varied habitats of Webb, Zapata and Starr Counties.

The Laredo Birding Festival also presented several special opportunities for our new *amigos*. On Thursday a walking tour with audio guide of the historic downtown area was offered and visitors were encouraged to attend the opening of an art exhibit at the Villa Antigua Border Heritage Museum next door to La Posada.

At sunset on Thursday and Friday attendees could take a short van ride into the historic St. Peter’s district of town to observe a flock of Green Parakeets calling loudly to

one another on their return to their roost in an old building. Raul Delgado also pointed out a pair of Peregrine Falcons roosting on a nearby communications tower. These birds have been here all “winter.”

Additionally on Friday a cultural excursion was hosted by Gallery 201, an art gallery housed in a lovely two-centuries-old building within walking distance of La Posada. It featured a community art contest called “Birds of the Brush.”

On Saturday afternoon, Tom Miller took a group to the Laredo Community College’s main campus for a tour of the Lamar Bruni Vergara Environmental Science Center, one of the local hot spots (complete with lunch room) explored by festival attendees, where he serves as director.

Thursday and Friday afternoon and evening we enjoyed presentations and workshops designed to hone our birding skills and expand our cerebella with topics like “Confusing IDs” and “Energy Flow and the Art of Birding” presented by Jim Hailey and Chuck Sexton.

All in all, this was, as Tricia Cortez described it, a “transformative year” in the life of the Laredo Birding Festival and the city truly is a “place of discovery and exploration for birding.” We hope you will join us next year for the sixth annual Laredo Birding Festival.

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*E-mail: [jkestner@stx.rr.com](mailto:jkestner@stx.rr.com)*

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# Black Skimmers in Texas

**By Susan Heath and Amanda Hackney**

*“To a naturalist there are few more reassuring sounds than the soft barks of a pair or more of Black Skimmers as they go about their night’s fishing; these notes go with Gulf breeze, foamy salt water lapping at the shore, and a moon-silvered bay. As long as skimmers thus bark it is a sign that the world is not yet completely poisoned.”*

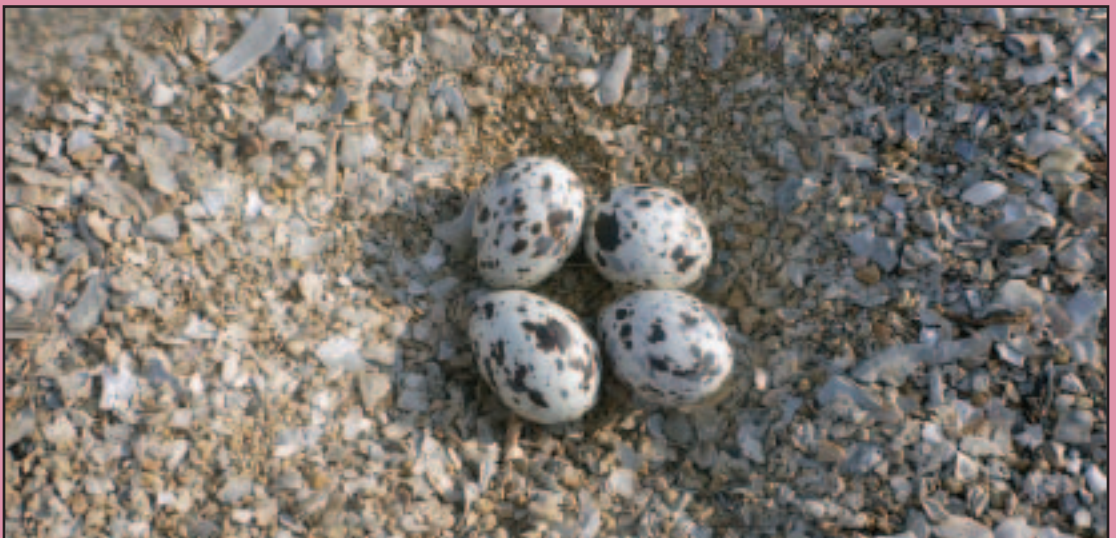
—Harry Oberholser in *The Bird Life of Texas*

As Harry Oberholser so poignantly stated, the Black Skimmer is part of our Gulf heritage. Anyone who has seen this elegant seabird skimming the surface with its unique bill cannot help but be in awe of the wonder of this bird. Unfortunately, we are coming to realize that the bark of the Black Skimmer is in jeopardy. Colonial waterbird data from Texas shows that the number of breeding pairs of this species statewide has declined by 70% in the last 40 years. This is an alarming trend and its cause will be difficult to tease out of many contributing factors.

Black Skimmers are quite gregarious and are found in large flocks at all times of the year. During the breeding season they typi-

cally nest in large colonies on bay islands although there are a few mainland colonies. This species nests on the ground and in Texas they prefer a shell or sand substrate. The adults make a scrape in the substrate and the female lays 2-4 eggs. The eggs, like those of other ground nesting seabirds, are speckled and quite camouflaged. Both sexes incubate and the chicks hatch in about 24 days. The chicks are semi-precocial and can fly within about 30 days. It takes them a while to become fully successful at their unique foraging style so even after they can fly, they are still dependent on their parents for a couple of weeks at least. Fledging of more than one chick per pair is unusual but does happen occasionally when foraging conditions are good and predation rates are low.

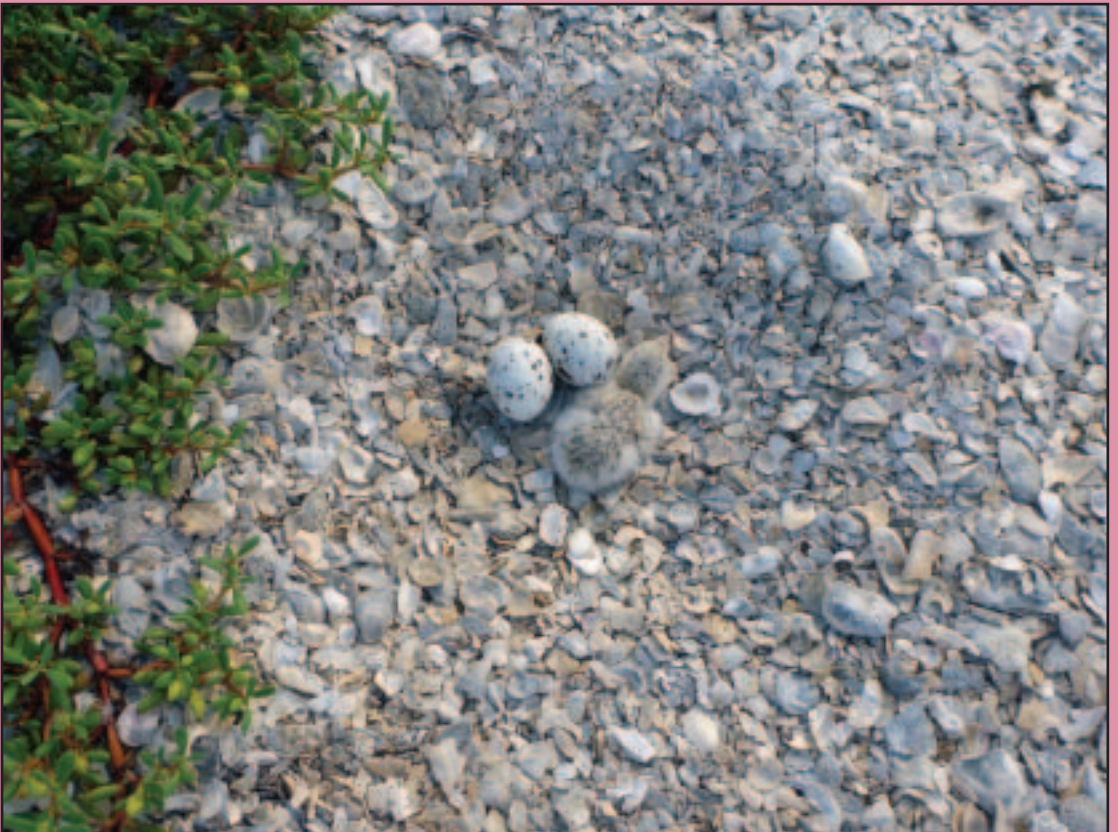
Because these birds nest on the ground their nests are subject to predation by mammals including raccoons, skunks, opossum, coyotes, feral cats, and others. This is a major problem for mainland colonies. Island colony nests are subject to overwash from high tides which occur frequently during the nesting season when we have strong south winds or tropical storms in the Gulf of Mexico. In addition, skimmers often use lower elevation



A Black Skimmer nest with four eggs in West Galveston Bay. Photo credit Susan Heath.

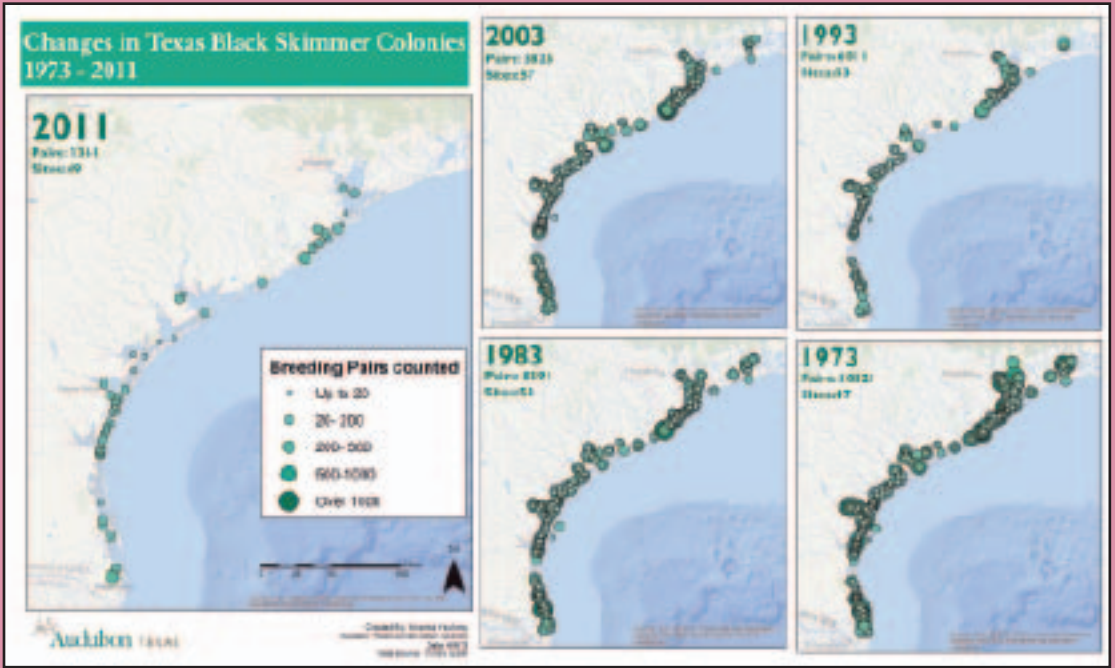


Black Skimmer nests and scrapes on Marker 52, an island in West Galveston Bay. Photo credit Susan Heath.



A Black Skimmer nest with a just hatched chick in Bastrop Bay. Photo credit Susan Heath.





Black Skimmer data for the last 40 years in Texas showing a 70% decline in nesting pairs statewide.



The Black Skimmer colony on Struve Lucy in West Galveston Bay. Photo credit Scott Buckel.



Black Skimmers nesting on Struve Lucy near the I-45 bridge to Galveston. Photo credit Scott Buckel.



areas which are threatened by subsidence, erosion and relative sea level rise which adds to threats they face. Human disturbance is also a major factor in nest failure for all colonies as the adults are slow to return to their nests when flushed. The eggs and small chicks are subject to predation by hungry gulls when the adults are kept away from the nest and in the summer the eggs can actually cook in the sun without the adult there to shade them.

In an effort to gather better data on skimmer productivity, we monitored three small colonies and one large colony on the Upper Texas Coast in 2013. The small colonies were located in Swan Lake just north of the I-45 bridge to Galveston, on an island in West Galveston Bay known as Marker 52, and on a small island in Bastrop Bay. The large colony was on an island in West Galveston Bay known as Struve Lucy.

Adults began to arrive at the large colony by mid-March but did not arrive at the smaller colonies until mid to late April suggesting that perhaps the smaller colonies are occupied by those who could not stake a territorial claim at the larger sites. It is hard to tell when Black Skimmers are actually on a nest because there are usually many birds laying prone that are just resting. To avoid causing disturbance, we did not land on the islands to check for eggs, but rather counted the number of prone birds and the number of chicks when they became apparent. Unfortunately counting chicks was rarely an issue at the smaller sites as there were few chicks noted at any of them.

The largest number of adults at the Swan Lake site was 80. This colony was completely

overwashed by a high tide in late May. Although some adults returned for a few weeks after this event, the colony was abandoned by the middle of July. The largest number of adults at the Bastrop Bay site was 25. It was completely abandoned in late June even though there had been several small chicks present the week before. We suspect human disturbance was the cause of this abandonment. Several signs we had posted warning of nesting birds were stolen from islands in this bay including the island with the skimmer colony. In addition, an oystercatcher nest on the skimmer island with a camera deployed on it was left undisturbed, eliminating the possibility of predation as the cause of nest abandonment. The colony with 35 adults on Marker 52 was also abandoned by the middle of July with no known cause. No chicks were ever noted at this location.

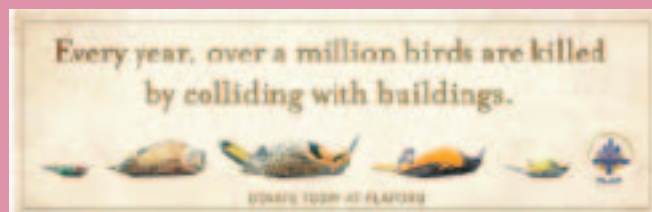
The news from the Struve Lucy colony was much better though. We counted 700 adults at this colony in early May and by early July 117 chicks had fledged. We estimated a productivity rate of about .25 for this island meaning 25% of pairs fledged at least one chick. We plan to continue monitoring it in the future which will allow us to compare how many chicks fledge each year. This type of data is critical for determining what can be done to ensure the bark of the Black Skimmer remains a part of our avifauna for generations to come.

Susan Heath is an Avian Conservation Biologist at the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory.

Amanda Hackney is the Audubon Texas Coastal Program Manager.

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**E-mail: [sheath@gcbo.org](mailto:sheath@gcbo.org)**



# Texas and eBird: New Applications for this Observation Documentation Tool

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**By Richard E. Gibbons**

By now, most bird watchers have heard of the web-based program eBird and I would venture a majority of avid Texas bird watchers use it regularly. Early adopters have witnessed incredible advances in the ease and functionality of the program. Developed and operated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, eBird provides information and services bird watchers value. It also encourages collection of data in ways that provide more value to scientists, land managers, and conservationists. The end result is a database of bird records that reveals patterns and processes—information vital to management and policy decisions. During the last decade, the eBird developers have provided many improvements to expand the utility of these data. In short, it is very easy to contribute to this globally crowd-sourced data initiative. With a well-developed group of contributors, there is great potential to apply this user-friendly tool to specific regional questions.

One of the early eBird developments was the alternate portal, essentially a different front door through which to enter the eBird website. Ten states—Texas being one of them—and several applied projects have partnered with the eBird team for customized data entry. These portals provide users access to all the data and functionality of the main eBird page, but also provides a place for specific news stories, links, photo pools, and most importantly, project specific protocols. The Texas eBird portal (Figure 1) currently has two portal-specific projects, the Great Texas Birding Classic and the Texas Shorebird Survey. Most Texas birdfolk have heard of or participated in *Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's* “Birding Classic.” Participants may recall late nights filling in carbon copy checklists to turn in before the stroke of midnight. Bleary eyed judges stayed up through the night to review and assess checklists and supportive documentation for rare birds. The partnership between *Texas Parks*

*and Wildlife Department* and eBird allows all of the data from this statewide event to be nearly immediately available to the public and data entry can be made from anywhere with an internet connection. Checklists are first run through regionally tuned filters and flagged records are reviewed by seasoned volunteer eBird reviewers. The new model has made it possible to expand the Classic statewide and to operate on a reduced budget.

The Texas Shorebird Survey also uses the Texas eBird portal for data management. This new initiative has the goal of establishing a statewide monitoring program for birds using Gulf beaches. The Deepwater Horizon oil spill exposed a monitoring blind spot along Texas beaches and the eBird data entry and archival allowed organizers of the Texas Shorebird Survey to focus on participant recruitment and implementation, rather than collecting data forms from participants, compiling the data, and developing an archival system.

The list of customized projects collaborating with the eBird program is growing. Louisiana recently completed its sixth and final field season of the Louisiana Bird Atlas, a combined winter and summer atlas. Bird atlases, a snapshot of bird distribution at a specified time and scale, are most often accomplished with a mix of hired technicians and volunteers and require several years to complete. The Louisiana effort is touted as a major success with approximately 25,000 field hours and most of the targeted areas covered. With eBird serving as the dedicated data management interface, the small project team could direct their energy toward volunteer recruitment, coordination, and fieldwork. Further, using eBird as the data entry system permitted what most breeding bird atlases lack, relative abundance. The end product was a next generation bird atlas with distribution and relative abundance maps for both summer and winter (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Texas eBird portal provides regionally relevant content and custom project protocols.

Louisiana, like Texas, is an important wintering area for hundreds of species. Although Christmas Bird Counts are very informative and have the advantage of a long history, the sampling is geographically limited and the sampling period is perhaps a better estimate of late fall migration rather than true winter. A Texas winter atlas could be used as an additional data source to complement the Christmas Bird Counts.

There are several projects that could be developed in Texas using eBird as the data management system. It has been 20 years since the last data were gathered for the Texas Breeding Bird Atlas. When a second Texas Breeding

Bird Atlas or the first Texas Winter Bird Atlas is planned, the benefit of a familiar and established data management platform such as eBird should be considered. Colonial waterbirds, prairie birds, marsh birds, adaptive management plans, urban monitoring programs, you name it. We are deep in the information age and our approaches to scientific inquiry, monitoring, and plain old birding fun can benefit greatly from the technological leaps and bounds.

*E-mail: rgibbons@houstonaudubon.org*

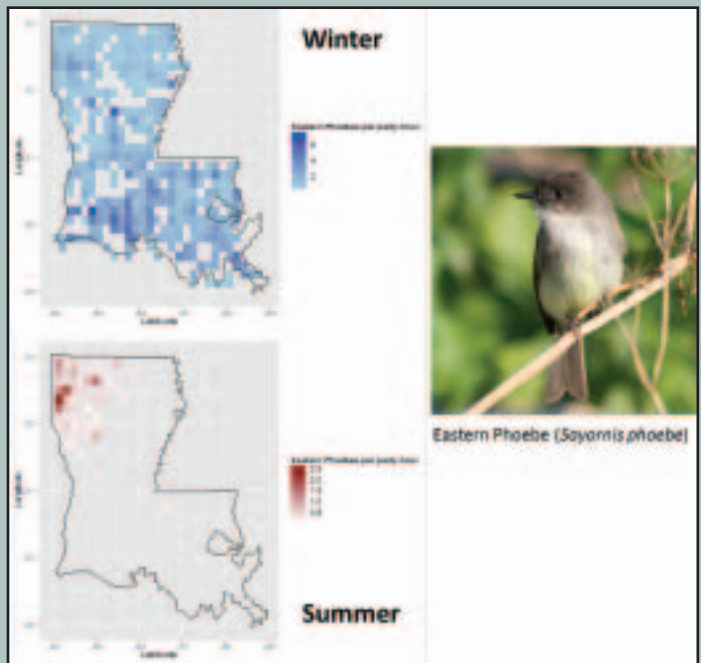


Figure 2. Distribution and relative abundance are shown for Eastern Phoebe in Winter and Summer. Photo and maps by Matt Brady.



# A New TOS T-Shirt

By Bron Rorex



Lynn Barber at Hummerbird festival. Photo Sandi Wheeler.

The 2013 Texas Birds Annual cover is adorned with a photo of a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher painting, the art work of our Past-President Lynn Barber. This scissortail painting is also upon the front of our new TOS T-shirt. Now I'll bet you're wondering how this came about as you didn't hear a thing about an art contest, and some of you artists are waiting patiently for the next art contest announcement, so allow me to explain.

We suddenly realized our inventory of TOS tees was about decimated following our Laredo meeting. We were already committed to vendor booths at both Rockport's HummerBird Celebration in September and Harlingen's Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival in November. Then next January will be our meeting in Round Rock. We needed tee shirts quickly. Crisis time!

We put our heads together and brainstormed. It takes about 3 or 4 months, at

best, to hold an art contest and have a shirt ready to go - have contest information printed in a TOS publication, allow reasonable time for artists to paint and submit their art work, then have the winning tee shirt printed. We considered our options and the short time frame in which we were working.

Someone remembered the second place vote in the last art contest was a scissortail painting (the winner was selected by vote of attendees at Amarillo TOS meeting). The scissortail is the bird on our TOS logo. This year is the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the TOS founding in 1953. It all clicked so far.

Fortunately, Lynn was reached without difficulty in South Dakota where she and her husband now reside. She had the original scissortail painting in her possession and was willing to mail the original work to the shirt company for replication on the tee. It all worked out!

By the time you read this, the new TOS tee will have been unveiled at the Rockport HummerBird Celebration which Lynn, fortunately, attended as a speaker. The shirt may also be purchased in November at the TOS vendor booth in Harlingen. Or at our January TOS meeting in Round Rock.

Yet another option is to contact Georgina Schwartz. Georgina is willing to mail TOS tees (and/or TOS caps). Please contact her at ([gbird@att.net](mailto:gbird@att.net)) to order your tee shirt at \$15 each. Checks should be made out to "TOS" to cover cost the shirt plus \$5 shipping (for up to 2 shirts). Georgina's address is: 3006 Belvoir Dr, San Antonio, TX 78230-4410. Her phone number is (210) 342-2073.

You see, you too can be one of the early TOS members to wear the new blue TOS scissortail tee proudly.

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**E-mail: [bron@rorexusa.com](mailto:bron@rorexusa.com)**

# Indian Peafowl in San Antonio: should they be added to the State List?

By Jack Eitnrear

Texas is full of exotics. We have exotic plants everywhere: mammals from foreign lands roaming the countryside, and exotic birds in the air. Originating from a foreign land, when do they “officially” become members of our flora and fauna?

It was with this question in mind I met Joe Dominguez on a hot August day off Babcock road on the northwestern side of San Antonio. Our quest was to locate a flock of Indian “Blue” peafowl *Pavo cristatus*. Joe was made aware of the presence of the peafowl one morning when to his surprise nearly two dozen peahens were walking through his yard! Discussing the matter with his neighbor he soon discovered the location of the flock as well as acquired some information about its history.

Not all peafowl are equal in terms of their status in the wild. According to the *Birdlife*

*species factsheet* ([www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org)) the Indian Peafowl occurs throughout India with significant introduced populations in Taiwan, Japan and Australia. Because of its large range it is in no risk of extinction, being placed in the category “Least Concern” by Birdlife. Such is not the case for its cousin the Green Peafowl *Pavo muticus*. Ranging through Southeast Asian habitat, destruction and hunting has diminished populations to the extent that Birdlife has listed it as “Endangered”.

Peacocks are polygamous with the female (peahen) doing all the incubating and chick rearing. They become sexually mature in 2 to 3 years and lay 4-8 buffy white eggs which require 28 days for incubation. Peahens are remarkably good mothers, allowing the chicks to climb on their backs hitching a ride that may even take them in flight to a safe tree branch!

In captivity they have been documented to live 23 years but in the wild 15 years is likely



Three male Indian Peacocks foraging in a yard off Babcock road in north-east San Antonio.

a normal lifespan. Except for large predators, including humans, the adults have few enemies. Eggs and chicks are another matter.

It did not take long to locate the Babcock flock. Soon small groups were seen walking through yards in typical galliform fashion. Observing more males than females (the likely cause being the hens hiding in the brush to keep their chicks out of harm's way) most males were without their colorful tail "trains". After considerable searching we were finally able to locate 3 or 4 hens with chicks. Despite being documented as laying 4-8 eggs we always seemed to observe but a single chick accompanying its mother. This was not surprising as predation of eggs and chicks is likely high with coyotes, foxes, raccoons, domestic cats and dogs plus the occasional raptor and snake feasting on eggs and/or young when they encounter them. The origin of the flock seemed to stem back to a 1960 resident

in the subdivision. Despite being fed by the neighborhood, most residents we spoke to felt there has been about 50 birds continually throughout the past few decades.

Peafowl in Texas cities does not appear to be uncommon. A quick internet search located a flock established in the 1950s in the Lake Highlands area of Dallas ([www.dallasnews.com](http://www.dallasnews.com)) and another flock of about 50 birds established in West Houston more than 30 years ago ([www.baldheretic.com](http://www.baldheretic.com)). Additional flocks in Galveston and other parts of Houston were recently mentioned on the listserv TEXBIRDS. Since they are considered exotic, peafowl are not included in ebird listings so their actual numbers and distribution throughout Texas is unknown.

The American Birding Association (ABA) has included 17 exotics on their official checklist. Of course this is only a small fraction of the total number of exotic birds documented



Producing 4-8 eggs this peahen cares for its remaining peachick. Predation is likely high on eggs and chicks in residential areas.



## ABA CRITERIA FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF EXOTICS

1. The species is recorded in the form of a published photograph or a specimen archived in an ornithological collection.
2. There is a more-or-less-contiguous population of interacting or potentially interacting individuals, rather than scattering of isolated individuals or pairs.
3. The population is not currently, and is not likely to be, the subject of a control program where eradication may be a management goal that is likely to succeed.
4. The population is large enough to survive a routine amount of mortality or nesting failure.
5. Sufficient offspring are being produced to maintain or increase the population.
6. The population has been present for at least 15 years.
7. The population is not directly dependent on human support.
8. A publication, ideally in a peer-reviewed journal or book, describes, how, when, and where the above seven criterion have been met. Source: <http://www.aba.org/checklist/exotics.html>

throughout the United States. According to ABA, Florida alone has documented the presence of over 100 exotic birds! Most species when released into the wild perish within a short period of time. Some populations linger on only to die out when some traumatic event occurs. The ABA has eight conditions that have to be met before an exotic can be

considered established. The American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) generally follows the recommendations of the ABA however requires that the population only be stable or increasing over a period of ten years.

So does our Indian Peacock meet all eight conditions? I think all conditions except number seven has been met. It appears to



Being fed by some of the residents may indicate that the flock is dependent on human support.

## AOU CRITERION FOR INCLUSION

Species that have been introduced by humans, either deliberately or accidentally, are considered to be established if there are persistent records for at least 10 years and satisfactory evidence that they are maintaining a reasonably stable or increasing population through successful reproduction.

*Source: American Ornithologists' Union. 1983. Check-list of North American Birds, 7th edition.*

me that the flock stays pretty close to a few homes where they are fed. While I may be wrong I doubt that density of peafowl could survive without supplemental feeding. Unlike several exotic columbids, psittacids and finches in Texas the peafowl seem to stick close to their food source. Without further study we

really do not know if the flock could survive without feeding. What we do know is that they have been around for several decades and will likely continue to grace the neighborhood for many years to come with their flamboyant plumage and unique call.

*E-mail: [editor@texasbirds.org](mailto:editor@texasbirds.org)*

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# Vagrants and Rare Sightings

By Eric Carpenter

Rarity seeking in Texas started out with a bang in 2012 as a **Nutting's Flycatcher**, the first to be documented in the state, was the buzz, having been found on New Year's Eve at the parking lot in Santa Elena Canyon in Big Bend National Park. This bird proved somewhat elusive though several chasers would enjoy it as it lingered until 11 January. Other than that, the place to start 2012 was the Lower Rio Grande Valley, with several birds found in the last 3 months of 2011 staying put and being quite cooperative well into 2012. The South Texas bounty included 3 different **Crimson-collared Grosbeaks**, a **Black-vented Oriole** returning for the second year to the Bentsen State Park area, 1-2 **Brown Jays** appearing frequently at Salineno & Chapeno and a somewhat cooperative **Golden-crowned Sparrow** that would linger at Frontera Audubon Thicket into early spring. In the first 10 days of January, they would be joined by a 2-day appearance

of **Blue Bunting** near Bentsen State Park, a **Rose-throated Becard** at Salineno, and a **Black-legged Kittiwake** on South Padre Island.

Venturing north from the Rio Grande Valley, a few other outstanding birds were being uncovered. **Common Redpolls** made an invasion of sorts to northeast Texas with 4 different sightings starting with one visiting feeders in Southlake (Tarrant County) 7-10 January. This was followed by additional individuals near Nacogdoches 27 January – 12 February, in Colleyville (Tarrant County) 29 January – 1 February, and at Lake Bridgeport (Wise County) 10-19 February. Never easy to chase down, a somewhat cooperative **Brant** remained rather loyal to Southeast Park in Canyon 1 February – 31 March. The highlight of the winter season though certainly had to be 2 different **Snowy Owls** – only the 6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> to be documented in the state, and the first in almost 10 years! The first was apparently found in late January/early February at Lake Ray Hubbard in the Dallas area but was not known to Texas birders until 11 February or so, where it was enjoyed by 100s of lucky birders through 19 February. The second was a one-day wonder that was remarkably videotaped with the Dallas skyline in the background on 26 February. Also quite outstanding was the 6<sup>th</sup> record of **Slaty-backed Gull**, a first-cycle bird nicely photographed near Port Aransas on 23 February. The fall/winter of 2011-2012 will also be remembered for the remarkable number of **Little Gulls** found. From late November 2011 to mid April 2012, there would be an amazing NINE records of THIRTEEN individuals documented in the state. This pattern combined with the general increase in records in the past few years would be part of the reason that the T.B.R.C. would remove Little Gull from it's Review List later in the year.

Packery Channel (Nueces County) would be the place to be in early spring. A stunning



Need inspiration to do a county Big Year? Ron Weeks found the state's first Black-tailed Godwit during his Brazoria County Big Year and the bird was obliging enough to stick around for a couple months for everyone to enjoy. Photo by Michael Gray, 4 June 2012.





A great find in its somewhat regular haunts in west Texas and even the Lower Rio Grande Valley, a Greater Pewee at Houston's Bear Creek Park was quite unexpected. It was a first for the Upper Texas Coast and the eastern third of the state. Photo By Randy Pinkston, 6 January 2013.

**Surfbird** discovered on the jetties there on 22 March would bring crowds of birders who usually saw this cooperative bird that lingered until 1 April. The increased attention around the jetty would lead to the discovery of a **Purple Sandpiper** there on 28 March, followed by a **Red Phalarope** on 1 April, both birds being one-day wonders. Things were quiet until mid April, when a **Black-whiskered Vireo** was discovered at Sabine Woods on 17 April. It would linger there for a week while three other Black-whiskered Vireos would put in appearances along the upper and central coast through mid-May. A **Rufous-**

**capped Warbler** uncovered at Chalk Bluff Park (Uvalde County) on 22 April would be seen on-and-off with a second bird through the end of May.

The spring highlight though would be a completely unexpected **Tropical Mockingbird** discovered at Sabine Woods on 18 April. This unusual find was rather cooperative and quite easy to see most days. It paired up with a Northern Mockingbird and by mid June, successfully fledged two young. The adult Tropical was last seen on 28 July though the hybrid offspring would continue into the fall. Questions about the bird's provenance were a hot topic for this occurrence as it is not known to be much of a migrant and is also a common cage bird over much of its range. Ultimately, the T.B.R.C. voted conservatively on this record, opting not to accept it as the likelihood of a natural occurrence on the Texas coast seemed to be outweighed by possibilities that the bird did not arrive there on its own accord.

The summer season would start out with the incredible find of a **Black-tailed Godwit** at Brazoria N.W.R on 4 June. A first



Jaegers can be tough to identify, especially young ones, though great pictures are definitely worth a thousand words. Rarely are they photographed so well in Texas as this one, a juv. Long-tailed Jaeger off of the Texas City Dike, the first one to be documented in the state in December. Photo by Dan Pancamo, 1 December 2012.



Red-necked Grebes are not very predictable about when and where they'll show up in the state, though they seem to be always at some remote spot on a large lake. Few have been photographed quite as well as this one-day wonder that visited White Rock Lake in the Dallas area. Photo by Darlene Moore, 4 December 2012.



Ruddy Ground-Doves are irregular in Texas though they are usually very near the Rio Grande corridor. Quite surprising was this cooperative individual found at Crescent Bend Nature Park, just northeast of San Antonio, where it lingered 5 - 18 October 2012. Photo by Ann Mallard, 10 October 2012.

record for Texas, the godwit lingered throughout the summer and was initially easy to see but would take some patience as summer wore on and the water levels in the fields it frequented changed. It would remain until 13 August. Another great find for the summer season would be a one-day wonder **White-collared Swift** along the Galveston seawall on 3 July, just the 6<sup>th</sup> record for the state. Puzzling were inland discoveries of **Brown Booby** with one at Lake Sam Rayburn on 7 July and a more cooperative and equally unexpected bird that lingered at the dam on Canyon Lake 25 August to 3 September. Neither of these sightings were associated with a Tropical Storm or weather-event. One bird



Birding the various gulf jetties can certainly have it's rewards. This stunning Surfbird was a treat for many at the Packery Channel jetties during its stay 22 March to 1 April 2012. Photo by Chris Doolen, 25 March 2012.

that was certainly storm-related was a rather worn-looking **Great Shearwater** on Wright Patman Lake (Cass County) on 31 August,

discovered immediately after the push of Hurricane Isaac to the east of there.

The fall season would bring its usual surprises. The El Paso area held its own with first fully documented record for the state of a “**Slate-colored**” **Fox Sparrow**, which lingered in an El Paso yard 20-27 September. Just down the valley at Tornillo Reservoir, a lone **Heermann’s Gull** was nicely photographed on 24 September, providing just the 3<sup>rd</sup> record for the state, the first in almost 30 years! October was off the charts starting with a **Ruddy Ground-Dove** north of San Antonio at Crescent Bend Nature Park and a **Greater Pewee** at Houston’s Bear Creek Park. Both birds were found on 5 October and were enjoyed by many. The dove would linger only until 18 October while the Greater Pewee would stay the fall, winter and into early spring before departing around 23 March of 2013. A **Varied Thrush** discovered in the



Spring migration 2012 got interesting real fast with the discovery of a Tropical Mockingbird at much visited Sabine Woods in mid April. Many came to see this bird that somehow must have crossed the Gulf of Mexico to arrive on the Texas coast. Questions remain about how it might have made the journey, perhaps with human assistance or perhaps not. Photo by Elvind Vamraak, 19 May 2012.





With only 9 previous documented records over the years, Common Redpolls staged an invasion of sorts with 4 birds that were well documented, including this one in Colleyville in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

Photo by Darlene Moore, 30 January 2012.

Christmas Mountains (Brewster County) on 20 October would also be a popular bird, as it would continue to be seen into March of 2013 as well. A one-day wonder **Mew Gull** at



With only 5 previous records and none in almost 10 years, at least two Snowy Owls reached Texas in late winter 2012 as part of their incredible southward invasion across most of the country. This one at Lake Ray Hubbard was enjoyed by many and may have been present for weeks before any birder was even aware of it! Photo by Bruce Strange, 16 February 2012.

Delta Lake (Hidalgo County) on 27 October would be the first for the Lower Rio Grande Valley. October would end with two different **Red Phalaropes**; one at Hagerman N.W.R. from 27-30 October and the other a Halloween treat at Balmorhea Lake on the opposite side of the state.

Late fall and early winter had a few more surprises in store to close out 2012. A **North-ern Jacana** was a one-day wonder on Pintail Lake at Santa Ana N.W.R on 3 November. **Costa's Hummingbirds** certainly seemed to be on the increase the past few years, including 3 during this period starting with one that lingered at the Christmas Mountains 7-17 November, followed by another in El Paso starting on Christmas Eve (that lingered until early spring), and an incredible male with a full gorget in Kerrville 29 December that lingered for almost a month. Tantalizing one-day wonders included a **Long-tailed Jaeger** at the Texas City Dike on 1 December

and a **Red-necked Grebe** that was seen by a lucky few at White Rock Lake in Dallas on 4 December. The Christmas Bird Count season always turns up surprises but perhaps nothing as exciting as a **Fork-tailed Flycatcher** found on count day (15 December – by the count compilers no less!) of the Austin C.B.C; it would linger in the area until 26 December. To put a nice ending to the year, a **Pine Grosbeak** found in upper Dog Canyon in Guadalupe Mountains N.P. on 30 December would provide just the 6<sup>th</sup> documented record for the state.

*E-mail: [ecarpe@gmail.com](mailto:ecarpe@gmail.com)*

# First US and Texas record for the Sumichrast's Meadowlark

*By Fred Collins and Dennis Shepler*

This past February while Dennis Shepler and I were taking a birding trip to west Texas we discovered this meadowlark near Red Bluff Reservoir in Reeves County. We believe it may be a first US record. True to its nature, it was with a flock of Western Meadowlark. This bird is very rare and while based on the original collection and description it is thought to be a native of Mexico, its current breeding grounds are unknown. One would not expect it to move north in winter yet it is always associated with the more numerous Western Meadowlark. The only documentation we were able to obtain was some digitized images. While they leave a great deal to be desired they are good evidence of the distinctive and rare species.

**Sumichrast's Meadowlark (*Sturnella sumichrasti*)** was named in honor of the famous romantic author Frederick Caesar de Sumichrast (1845-1933) currently best known for writing *Les Miserables*. He had a varied career and one of his popular works in the mid-1800s was *The Captive Bird*.

The meadowlark was first observed and collected in Veracruz Mexico in 1868 by ex-Texian naturalist Gideon Lincecum who had moved to Mexico following the Civil War. Gideon was well known to most scientists of his day including Charles Darwin who sponsored his publication on agriculture ants (harvester ants). His observations and specimens were accepted by Spencer Baird who formally described the species as Sumichrast's Meadowlark much to the dismay of Gideon that wanted the bird named Curlew Meadowlark since its mode of living was so like that of the curlews. Baird was hoping the then Harvard professor Sumichrast would donate money to his museum. But never-the-less at least he scored points with his wife who adored the professor's work.

Lincecum noted one very distinctive behavior for which he took full credit of discovery. The Sumichrast's Meadowlark is rare and travels among flocks of Western Meadowlarks in winter when it subsists almost entirely on earth worms. The worms are completely safe from the Western Meadowlarks that





cannot probe to the depths capable of the curlew-meadowlark. The unsuspecting worms hearing the passage of harmless meadowlarks above are easily plucked in the same fashion that a Zone-tail Hawk descends on a hapless ground squirrel that paid no attention to the group of Turkey Vultures overhead. And one more thing, happy April fool's day.

May April be filled with the best birds you can imagine. Good birding from Fred Collins and Dennis Shepler.

A.L.J.F. Sumichrast was the actual person for which the name is derived, a collector that worked in Mexico in the mid 1800s.

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*E-mail: Fred\_Collins@itc.co.harris.tx.us*

## Keith Arnold – Recognition of 40 years of serving on the TBRC



2012 marked 40 years of existence of the Texas Bird Records Committee (TBRC). Dr. Arnold not only founded the TBRC forty years ago, but he has been a volunteer member in one capacity or another for that entire time. On behalf of the TOS and the TBRC, Randy Pinkston (Chair) presented Arnold a plaque commemorating his dedication for the past 40 years. TOS has also commissioned renowned ornithologist and artist John O'Neill who will present Dr. Arnold with an original painting at a later date.



*Edited by Sheridan Coffey*



## **The Warbler Guide**

*By Tom Stephenson and Scott Wittle*

Flexibound: 560 pages, over 1,000 colour photographs; sonograms, drawings and maps; Publisher: Princeton University Press (July 7, 2013); Dimensions: 1.5 x 7.9 inches; Shipping weight: 2.8 pounds; ISBN 978-0-691-15482-4; ISBN-10: 0691154821; ISBN-13: 978-0691154824; Price: \$21.56 Amazon.com

*The Warbler Guide* by Stephenson and Wittle attempts to illustrate all adult and subadult plumages of New World warblers occurring north of the Mexican border. The book has probably more warbler photographs than any other publication (>1,000 photographs, mostly smallish, 1 3/4" to 1"). The book has been divided into introductory chapters (e.g., "How to Use This Book", "Aging and Sexing Warblers", "Understanding Sonograms", etc.), several "visual finder" pages featuring very small photographs of all species of Parulidae warblers found in the United States and Canada; the latter section is followed by photographic species accounts, and finally several pages of quizzes, plates of warblers in flights, silhouettes, measurements, a table with brief notes on habitat and behaviour; glossary, "resources" (including few references), and finally the index. The species are presented in alphabetical order and similarly looking or closely related species are scattered throughout the book. Thus, the accounts for American Redstart and Painted Redstart are placed on pages 138-149 and 390-395 respectively, Louisiana Waterthrush and Northern Waterthrush on pages 318-323 and 372-377, Blue-winged Warbler and Golden-winged Warbler on pages 208-213 and 280-285, etc. Vernacular names for the majority of warbler species are shortened to the adjective, e.g., "Magnolia" or "Connecticut" instead of Magnolia Warbler and Connecticut Warbler respectfully. The probably extinct Bachman's Warbler is omitted altogether.

In the reviewer's opinion the book is overburdened with photographs. Although the authors shall be congratulated on assembling a collection of warbler photos taken from every possible angle, the overabundance of photographs may confuse and overwhelm a beginner. The authors chose to illustrate each distinct feature with a separate image, and many pages have as many as sixteen 1 3/4" to 1" photographs of similarly looking birds. In addition, species accounts feature not only photographs and sonograms of those particular species, but also of many similar or sometimes dissimilar warblers and other bird species. In comparison Roger Tory Peterson's guide to "Eastern Birds" (Houghton Mifflin 1980) allotted only 21 pages to warblers (does not include Western or Mexican species), and the National Geographic's "*Field Guide to the Birds of North America*" (1992) 26 pages. The reviewer is yet to encounter a New World warbler that could not be identified with help of the either guide.

Although *The Warbler Guide* clearly targets North American birding audiences the authors go to a great length to explain how warblers differ from other songbirds and provide photographs of such un-warbler like species as House Sparrow, Eastern Towhee, Black-capped Chickadee and House Wren (interestingly omitting Arctic and Willow Warblers, family *Silviidae*, found in Alaska).

At its three pounds, *The Warbler Guide* is clearly not a field guide; however, it could be useful for identification of warblers from photographs, e.g., those taken from bad angles, and sonograms of bird choruses. An experienced birder shall be able to identify the majority of species, including the "confusing fall warblers", from the "visual finder guides", pages 100-115.

**Michael Patrikeev**

## Media Reviews



### **Owls**

*By Marianne Taylor*

Hardbound: 224 pages; Publisher: Comstock Publishing Company (November 6, 2012); Dimensions: 0.8 x 9.2 x 11.7 inches; Shipping weight: 2.4 pounds; ISBN-10: 9780801451812; ISBN-13: 978-0801451812; Price: \$23.85 Amazon.com

This lavishly illustrated book is a “definite” for owl enthusiasts! The book is divided into two sections, the first being a general overview covering such attributes as senses, hunting behavior, breeding biology and more.

The second section offers detailed individual accounts on owl species in North America and Eurasia.

As an artist interested in owls this book provides many high resolution photos that make great reference material when actual birds are not available to study.

Marianne Taylor has provided hours of easy reading in a scholarly manner. I hope you enjoy her book as much as I do!

Lynn Delvin



### **The Crossley ID Guide**

*By Richard Crossley, Jerry Liquori, and Brian Sullivan*

Paperback (flexibound): 288 Pages; Publisher: Princeton University Press (April 7, 2013); Dimensions: 7.5 x 0.9 x 10 inches; Shipping weight: 2.3 pounds; ISBN-10: 0691157405; ISBN-13: 978-0691157405; Price: \$21.45 Amazon.com

The old adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is the perfect way to introduce a review of the new Crossley *Guide to Raptors*. Just open the cover and you'll see what I mean. You're immediately greeted by a two page color spread of raptors in flight, wings spread giving you a full detailed view of the under body of these magnificent birds. And it gets better page after page as you read further into the book.

Even birders who've spent years in the field observing and photographing raptors will enjoy this guide. Although I've been stalking raptors with my Nikon gear for decades all over the United States I still have a difficult time identifying them at times. This beautiful book provides a very useful tool in determining which specie you've discovered wherever you might be. The hundreds of pictures of raptors in every position, from practically every angle is especially helpful but also great fun to just look at.

You'll also find written descriptions of flight patterns of each bird, which can also be very helpful in identification. If you've ever watched a harrier gliding over a field looking for dinner you'll know what I mean.

Finally, don't forget to check out the back section of the guide for location maps for each of the species. Several times I've ruled out identifications of certain raptors with help from a map showing where you should and where you shouldn't expect to find them around the country.

For anyone interested in getting more out of a day of raptor watching, the Crossley *Guide to Raptors* is a great place to begin.

Peter Forton



### **The World's Rarest Birds**

*By Erik Hirschfeld, Andy Swash, and Robert Still*

Hardcover: 352 pages; Publisher: Princeton University Press (April 14, 2013); Dimensions: 1.2 x 8.5 x 11.2 inches; Shipping Weight: 3.6 pounds; ISBN-10: 0691155968; ISBN-13: 978-0691155968; Price: \$ 33.08 Amazon.com

Most of us have - in an idle moment or when waiting to drift off to sleep— conjured up images of seeing a Spoonbill Sandpiper, Kakapo or a bird of similar ilk, and vicariously enjoyed the excitement that such a moment would bring. Now we have a book that will flesh out those wistful thoughts and provide a concise synopsis of the world's rarest birds. From the inviting dustcover front image of a dancing Japanese Crane through to the rear collage of some of the world's most enigmatic birds, this book is stuffed full of high-quality photographs. All of the bird species categorized by Birdlife International/IUCN Red Data as “Endangered” or “Critically Endangered” or (to a lesser extent) “Data Deficient” are covered in the book—a total of 646 species as of 2102, but a total that sadly is likely to grow every year. Of the 586 Endangered and Critically

## Media Reviews

Endangered species there are good/excellent-quality photographs for 515 species, and of the 60 Data Deficient species there are photos for 21 of the 60 species. The species without photos (the authors/publishers scoured the world for photos for this publication) are illustrated by artist Tomasz Cofta, who has done a fabulous job of combining accurate detail with a lifelike gestalt to produce a series of wonderful illustrations that compliment the photographs.

The bulk of the book is given over to brief summary entries for each species (4 per page), but arranged into 7 geographical regions: Europe and the Middle East; Africa and Madagascar; Asia; Australasia; Oceanic islands; The Caribbean, North and Central America; South America. For each species entry there is a photograph (or illustration), range map, population estimate and trend, Birdlife status (Endangered; Critically Endangered; Possibly Extinct in the Wild; Possibly Extinct; Extinct in the Wild), threat summary (see below), and a concise summary of distribution, specific threats, conservation actions, and where space allows behavior and ecology. One innovation is the provision of a QR code (a square bar code) in each species entry. A scan with a QR reader will take you directly to Birdlife International's species factsheet on their website, where to can get the very latest information – there are apps for smart phones and tablets that will scan a QR code.

The first 50 pages of this book are devoted to bringing the Reader up-to-speed on virtually all aspects of why some birds are rare. It discusses diversity and distribution and Endemic Bird Areas, explains how rarity is not based solely on population/range (using a handful of examples—each with a mouthwatering photo!), provides a concise explanation of the Birdlife/IUCN Red Data categories and what the thresholds are for each category, and discusses the issues involved in detecting and declaring extinction (again wonderfully illustrated—including a couple of evocative photographs). A large portion of this introductory section is given over to categorizing and describing in detail the various threats that birds face—each major category is given a three-letter code that is listed in the species-entry sections for all birds affected by this threat.

At the end of the 7 regional species-level entries is a short section covering the Data Deficient species—each entry being much more brief and lacking a map (there are 8 entries per page), however the QR code is included. Lastly there are two appendices: one a table of extinct species, with distribution and year for the last record for each entry; the other a list of all the 586 Endangered and Critically Endangered species in taxonomic sequence, separated into families with a count for each family of all species and the totals for each IUCN Red Data categories.

This is not the kind of book that one reads from start to finish, but is more the kind that, after reading the data-rich and informative introductory sections, one cherry-picks for a particular region or species. Having said that, I found it hard to put down, as each region with its unique birds and issues kept me thumbing through the accounts. I checked the content for a handful of species that I have some knowledge of, and found them to be largely current (as of 2012) with no substantive errors.

There are a couple of quirks that could make it awkward to use this book: The index does not provide a species-level breakdown for common (= English) name suffixes; for example if you look up “warbler” you find no breakdown of all the species of warbler but instead a visually confusing list of 18 page numbers where text or a photo for a warbler species can be found. This is such an oddity given that they do provide a species-level breakdown for scientific genus names - ?

The Glossary of Terms is on page 56 just before the first regional entry; I feel it would have been easier to find as an appendix.

In summary this is a spectacular book both in terms of the species it provides data and imagery for, and the general primer it provides in understanding the many issues involved in why some birds are very rare. I thoroughly recommend it.

**Martin Reid**



## Media Reviews



### **How to Be a Better Birder**

*By Derek Lovitch*

Paperback: 208 pages; Publisher: Princeton University Press (March 5, 2012); Dimensions: 0.5 x 6 x 8.9 inches; Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces; ISBN-10: 0691144486; ISBN-13: 978-0691144481; Price: \$14.22 Amazon.com

The author chose not to define what is meant by the title, since there are likely to be different interpretations by different birders. He believes that no matter the level of one's experience, there is always more to learn. Lovitch's goal is to provide the reader with helpful hints, encourage the study of birds, and provide information that a birder can use in pursuit of becoming a better birder.

In the chapter on "Advanced Field Identification" Lovitch focuses on learning how to identify more birds through practice and study, starting with common birds in one's own area. He advocates a holistic approach and provides examples of how we should focus on the "whole bird" rather than studying only the field marks. In this and subsequent chapters, the author provides numerous references to print and web resources that the reader may consult to enhance his or her learning.

Other chapters focus on use of habitat, geography, weather, and night birding. The author provides many useful pointers that may be helpful to someone planning a birding trip to parts of the country that one hasn't previously visited. The chapter on geography discusses water and land features which make certain areas attractive to birds and Lovitch encourages birders to seek out such areas. In the chapter on weather, the author points out the value in gaining an understanding of some basic concepts of meteorology, which may help one determine whether or not birds may be present at a particular time. He recommends a web site for the National Weather Service's "Jetstream—Online School for Weather," a site I've only begun to explore, but which appears to be very informative. Unfortunately, there is an error in the web link, which should be [www.srh.noaa.gov/jetstream/](http://www.srh.noaa.gov/jetstream/). I also found the chapter on night birding particularly useful. The author devotes more than half the chapter to the interpretation and understanding of NEXRAD (NEXt generation RADar) Doppler images in one's area, so one can use radar to ascertain the overall density and spatial extent of bird movement during migration. He uses numerous figures (radar images and others) to illustrate his explanation. All four of the above mentioned chapters may help one to select the right time and place to travel during migration.

"Birding with a Purpose" recommends the birder go beyond just identifying and listing a bird, and remember that conservation is also very important. Lovitch recommends that birders add motivation and purpose to birding activities by engaging in independent study or citizen science projects, such as Christmas Bird Counts, Breeding Bird Surveys, or breeding bird atlases in order to apply their knowledge to collect data that will aid in long-term trend analysis. He also discusses the usefulness of recording one's sightings into the eBird database.

In his chapter on vagrants, the author notes that while it is fun to chase rarities that others have found, it is much more challenging and fulfilling to find a rarity of one's own, carefully documenting it, and alerting others to the presence of the rarity. All of this requires skills one has learned about habitat, geography, and weather (in prior chapters), and the author includes additional references to consult about vagrancy. Another chapter includes a case study to illustrate the author's application of the different study techniques in order to more effectively and efficiently bird in a favorite area he hadn't birded in a while.

The final chapter is on "Patch Listing," a concept which has been discussed occasionally since about 2010 on the Texbirds discussion list (<http://www.freelists.org/list/texbirds>), with a special Patch Challenge having been suggested by the list owner early in 2013. The idea is to identify an area near where one lives and to bird it extensively throughout the year and keep records of birds one finds, in order to really learn the birds in one's area. Such study will enable a birder to learn about the local bird population, distribution, microhabitat, the timing of migration, and more.

I believe most readers would find useful tidbits of information throughout this book, regardless of their level of birding skill, with those who are at the beginning or intermediate level finding it especially beneficial.

**Jean K. Martin**



## **Texas Waterfowl**

*By William P. Johnson and Mark W. Lockwood*

Paperback: 192 pages; Publisher: Texas A&M University Press (January 15, 2013); Dimensions: 0.6 x 5.8 x 8.5 inches; Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces; ISBN 978-1-60344-807-9; Price: \$6.76 Amazon.com

When I saw the first announcements of the publication of *Texas Waterfowl*, by William P. Johnson and Mark W. Lockwood, I was expecting it to be an identification guide, similar to the *Ducks Unlimited* brochure about ducks on the wing. I was a bit surprised to find a completely different book. As the introduction says there are other excellent resources for identification purposes. This book takes you into the lives of waterfowl. It provides individual life histories for each naturally occurring species of waterfowl in the state, including ducks, geese and swans. Feral and exotic species are not included.

The species accounts for our more common birds each begin with an interesting fact, for instance "Compared to other waterfowl, Ruddy Ducks have extremely large eggs and a large total clutch weight. A single egg is equivalent to about 12 percent of a female's body weight..." The authors then present information on distribution, breeding in the state, migration, and the average number of birds found during the Texas Mid-winter Waterfowl Survey. Other points covered include longevity averages and records, population status, diet, range and habitat, reproduction strategies, and a brief physical description. Conservation challenges are presented, both on breeding and wintering grounds. One unexpected feature is that statistics are presented for each species of the annual number of birds taken by hunters. An excellent map is included for each species, showing seasonal distribution in the state. One or two color photographs are provided in each account.

Also covered are all of the vagrant waterfowl accepted by the Texas Bird Records Committee. Species such as Brant, Garganey, King Eider and Harlequin Duck are included. These accounts are shorter, mostly covering historical records and descriptions of the bird. Maps are presented with individual dots for sighting locations along with a photo of the bird. The normal range of each species is described.

This is an easy book to read. The language is geared towards an average birder or hunter, not a biologist. There is a glossary in the introduction, though I imagine that most terms are already understood by the layperson. The species accounts vary in size, from a couple of paragraphs for some rarities and the scoters, to three or four pages for common ducks. The book is organized in taxonomical order, and the index is well put together, making it very easy to find individual species.

Overall, I enjoyed the book very much. I found it very educational and quite entertaining. There were a few things though that I feel could have been better. Most of the photos are beautiful, but a few are not of sufficient quality. In some of them, such as for Muscovy, Garganey and Greater Scaup, the birds are quite small. I wish that there were more photos, particularly for ducks where there is sexual dimorphism. Only female scoters are shown, which does make some sense, as the majority of scoters seen in Texas seem to be females or young birds, but I would still have liked to have good photos of the males. I wish there was more information on molt, but that is readily available in other publications or online, so it is a small flaw.

One thing I tended to do when I began birding was to just flip through my field guides, looking at the pictures and maps, but not paying close attention to the text. As I progressed, I began reading more. I wish I had this book years ago. It has added to my knowledge of waterfowl and made me more aware of the challenges some species face. I came away with a deeper appreciation. I believe it will make a good addition to the library of birders, or anyone else with an interest in waterfowl.

**Sheridan Coffey**

## Patched

*by Ted Lee Eubanks*

My birding is patched. I have patches in my backyard, patches where I work, and patches where I travel. Patches are large and small, rural and urban, green and not-so-green, wet and dry.

I like patch birding. I can get my arms around a patch. I can slip a patch into my pocket. In my patch I learn every note, every chip, and every flash of color. In a patch, I can know every bird, or I have fooled myself into thinking so. I am king of my patch.

I have a favorite patch in Philadelphia. When in the city I usually stay in the Embassy Suites across from Logan Square (which is now a circle). For the past few years I have worked in Philadelphia with the Philadelphia Parks and Recreation Department (PPRD.) My walk to their offices near Love Park is only a few blocks.

On the way I pass a tiny patch that I have adopted. This patch has a few trees and shrubs, with mulched grounds separated by a few blades of grass. A statue dedicated to the victims of the

Holocaust dominates one end; for that reason I call this Holocaust Park.

This is not the only tiny patch of green along Ben Franklin Parkway. The Sister's City Park across from Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church nurtures a scattering of green as well. In general, however, the center of America's first great city is varying shades of concrete gray.

Birds use my Holocaust Park. There is always a small flock of House Sparrows chattering in the crowns of the few trees. American Robins are ever present as well; I have seen them digging through the snow in search of food they overlooked. Add European Starling and Rock Pigeons and you have accounted for the resident bird population.

The brilliance of patch birding is that you learn the common quickly. You learn the common intimately. Any interloper is instantly noticed. Resident birds are a background against which the new and unexpected are highlighted.

In the past I have seen an eclectic selection of birds in my Philly patch. American Woodcock, Prairie Warbler, Ovenbird, and Slate-colored Junco are examples of the birds that have dropped in and attracted my notice. My only limitation in birding this patch is that my visits to Philadelphia are rare. If I lived there, I would search my patch daily.

I wonder how these birds even find this patch. I assume that birds displaced in the city search out any miniscule scrap of green. While in college I birded the trees around the city hall in Houston every morning on the way to class. Migrants, attracted



White-throated Sparrow, Holocaust Park, Philadelphia.

Photo by Ted Lee Eubanks.





**White-throated Sparrow, Holocaust Park, Philadelphia.** Photo by Ted Lee Eubanks.

by the lights and disoriented by the tall buildings, would crowd into these live oaks each morning. I guess that the birds in my Philadelphia patch are doing the same.

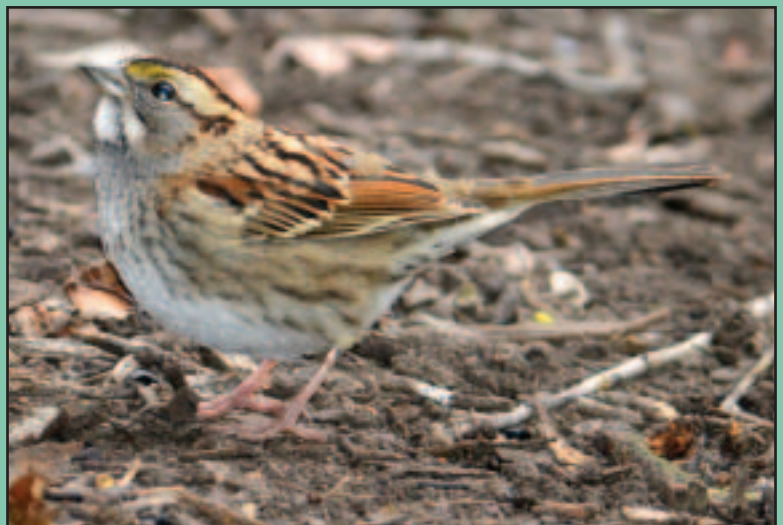
However, I am convinced that some of the patch birds have selected this site. For example, for the past few winters I have noticed a small group of White-throated Sparrows scattered among the trees. They stay the winter. Are these lost birds, or have they found a place where they can survive the

winter and therefore return each year?

I suspect both. I imagine that young birds find the patch, survive their first winter, and therefore repeat the pattern the remainder of their lives. Wandering individuals join these acclimated birds each year. The result is that my patch has a wintering group of White-throated Sparrows that I can count on seeing.

If I banded these birds I suspect that I would see many of the same individual birds each year. They nest far to the north (although a few breed in the mountains of northern Pennsylvania); I know that they are not local nesters. But winter site fidelity is strong in many birds, and I know, from personal experience, that this is true for white-throated sparrows.

For many years I banded in High Island's Boy Scout's Woods, and every year I would recapture White-throated Sparrows that I had netted in previous years. These sparrows would arrive each fall, somehow find their way to this postage stamp of woods on the Texas coast, and remain through the spring. If these birds can find High Island, surely they can find my Holocaust Park.



**White-throated Sparrow, Holocaust Park, Philadelphia.**

Photo by Ted Lee Eubanks.



**Banded Greater Yellowlegs, San Luis Pass, Texas.** Photo by Ted Lee Eubanks.

Banding also allows you to get to know birds personally. As birders we count species. As a bander you notice individuals. For example, I once color-banded shorebirds along the Texas coast. One Greater Yellowlegs that I banded returned to the same part of the flats at San Luis Pass (the western tip of Galveston Island) for seven consecutive years.

I came to know this yellowlegs as an individual, a bird faced with its own unique set of challenges. I believe that each bird approaches life in a singular fashion. While they are constrained by specific genes, they still make choices that are so fine-tuned they escape our notice.

Learning a patch gives me a closer look at the life of birds individually as well as collectively. Perhaps I imagine knowing each bird. Perhaps my need to get closer, to become more familiar, masks a more pedestrian reality.

Yet there are times when there is evidence that bolsters my conjectures. Each fall I would watch the flats at San Luis Pass in hopes of seeing the



**White-throated Sparrow, Holocaust Park, Philadelphia.** Photo by Ted Lee Eubanks.

arrival of “my” yellowlegs. And every visit to Philadelphia I shuffle past Holocaust Park in expectation of being greeted by “my” White-throated Sparrows.

What happens when Holocaust Park is developed? There are plans for a museum at this site. Will my birds find other sites or other parks? What if there are no other sites, or that the other sites have their own White-throated Sparrows?

Perhaps there are green spaces where my sparrows can resettle. I hope so. But what about my Greater Yellowlegs? What happens when San Luis Pass is inundated by sea level rise? What happens to the tens of thousands of shorebirds that migrate through or winter there? What about the Black Skimmers, Least Terns, Wilson’s Plovers, and Texas Horned Larks that nest there? Forget moving; the neighboring flats will be inundated as well.

Yet tonight I am not worrying about climate change. I am in Philadelphia to celebrate my grandson Han’s birthday. This afternoon I walked over to my park to see my sparrows. I am hoping that the world will begin to patch together a solution for climate change. But tonight I am enjoying my own.

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**E-mail: [eubanks@fermatainc.com](mailto:eubanks@fermatainc.com)**

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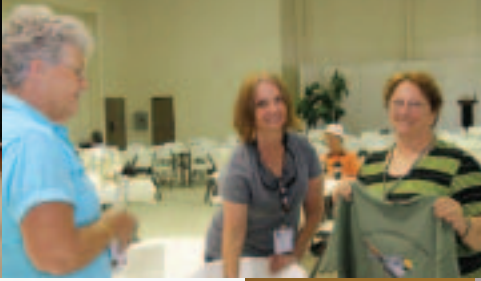
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Composite photo showing a Royal Tern swallowing an inflated spiny puffer.  
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