

TEXAS *Birds*
ANNUAL



A Publication of the *W. Dennis Shepler '14*
TEXAS ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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TEXAS *Birds* ANNUAL

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Winners of the TOS T-Shirt art contest included; First Place: Yellow-throated Warbler by Dennis Shepler, Second Place: Cactus Wren by John Cappadonna, Third Place: Elf Owl by Lynn Delvin

Editor's Introduction

With this introduction we move into *Texas Birds Annual's* second decade. Several new contributors make this issue especially interesting. While we start the issue off with a sobering tribute to several TOS presidents who have departed, we quickly jump back into the driver's seat with an article on invasive Egyptian Geese. Then we're off birding north central Texas with Mike Cameron and Gailon Brehm. Finally, we travel north from Texas to Maine to bird with David Sarkozi. Back in Texas, Ted Eubanks and Arturo Longoria contributed thought provoking articles on their favorite topics. We wrap up the issue with details on the recent documentation of a Red-legged Honeycreeper in Texas and informative pieces on bird behavior and quail research by Kent Rylander and Lenny Brennan and his colleagues, of the Richard M. Kleberg, Jr. Center for Quail Research, respectively.

This is an especially wonderful mix considering that all our writers and photographers donate their works. In our age of facebook, blogs, tweets, and listservs there is no shortage of places for aspiring writers to get their material into the public's view. I really appreciate their choosing to contribute to our publication and hope you, our readers and members, will consider writing something for a future issue of *Texas Birds Annual*.

Jack Clinton Eitnienar
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Pileated Woodpecker. Art by Lynn Delvin

Front Cover art: Yellow-throated Warbler by Dennis Shepler. To purchase a TOS t-shirt with this artwork see the advertisement on page 10.

President's Message



President Byron Stone

H is for Hawk; What is TOS For?

Greetings TOS Members,

2015 has been an interesting year for TOS. We started the year with a bang with what I believe was our first-ever meeting in El Paso. And what a great meeting it was, with tons of Trans-Pecos birds, including Gambel's Quail, Band-tailed Pigeon, Lewis's Woodpecker, Ferruginous Hawk, Prairie Falcon, Crissal Thrasher, Sagebrush and Black-chinned Sparrows and a remarkable number and variety of waterfowl. And even some avian "naturalized citizens" in the form of Lilac-crowned Parrots. And I will never forget the accipiter show early in the morning when a huge flock of roosting Yellow-headed Blackbirds began its exodus from the bulrushes while various Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks launched attacks from low perches on the surrounding hillsides. I think it is fair to say that a good time was had by all.

TOS activities continued to be interesting in a different way in the spring during a contested and contentious election for officers and board members. Passions were aroused and tempers flared at times, although everyone seemed to settle down after the votes were tallied at the Winnie meeting in early May

and a new slate of officers and board members were installed. But not before then-TOS President Jim Hailey abruptly resigned from office. Jim did help with the coordination and execution of that meeting, which most participants deemed a success, even though the small passerine migrants that had accumulated in good numbers early in the week mostly disappeared by Thursday evening. The shorebirds, however, and the waders, terns and resident woodland birds still put on a great show and trip leaders made adjustments to their itineraries and most participants saw lots of great birds.

Things may have seemed to slow a bit for TOS in the summer, but your board of directors has been fairly busy, meeting twice by phone conference and once in person in early September. More on that in a bit.

I just finished reading "H is for Hawk," by Helen MacDonald, and I now understand why so many people, birders and non-birders alike, recommended the book to me. It is thoughtful, insightful and well-written. It is not difficult to read, but the subject matter is complicated and hard to condense into a short statement, but I believe it is about grief, love, hawks (especially goshawks), falconry, wildness and what it means to be human. If you have contemplated reading it, I would encourage you to go ahead and find a copy and read it now.

While reading that wonderful book, and contemplating the meaning of hawks and of humanity, I found myself thinking about our organization and wondering what exactly TOS stands for. Of course, we all know the letters stand for the name of our organization – Texas Ornithological Society, but what exactly do we mean by that or what exactly should we mean by that name?

I'm sure TOS means somewhat different things to different people. For much of the decade and a half that I have been actively involved, TOS has seemed to me to be

primarily a statewide birding club, one that organizes periodic meetings and field trips where those who are fortunate enough to be able to attend can get together with like-minded birders from other parts of the state and share our enthusiasm for birds in the field and in meeting rooms and lecture halls and even over drinks and dinner. But we don't call ourselves a Birding Society; we call ourselves an Ornithological Society. Why? Our Mission Statement (referred to in the current Constitution as "Article II. Objectives," states that our purpose is to "encourage ... observation, study and conservation of birds in Texas... to encourage formation of local groups of ornithologists ... encourage cooperation among ornithologists of Texas and the Southwest... and to establish such wildlife sanctuaries as the society's means permit." That is a lot! And TOS has done a remarkable job over the past 50 years to accomplish most of these objectives. Local birding and conservation groups are now well-established across most parts of the state, our twice-annual meetings have been well-received and are increasingly well-attended. The TOS sponsors a number of publications, including Texas Birds Annual, and we also officially sponsor the Texas Bird Records Committee, which is well-respected across the country. And we have 5 TOS bird sanctuaries along the mid- and upper coast.

Even though most TOS members are not ornithologists, it is probably safe to say that most ornithologists in Texas belong to and support TOS. I think, however, that the "ornithology" in our name is intimidating to some prospective members. I have heard as much from non-member birders, some of whom seemed to have the idea that TOS meetings must be "for eggheads only," and there wouldn't be much of interest to non-professionals. Anyone who has attended one of our meetings would know that is not true. We do, however, have some problems.

The population of Texas has grown tremendously in the past five decades, and

so has the membership of TOS. The state has changed, and birding in the state has changed, but TOS may not have changed enough to keep up. If the organization is to keep up with growing demands for statewide leadership for bird conservation and advocacy, it will need to become more efficient and may need to find a way to hire professional assistance. The demands on limited statewide resources of water and open space have never been greater. Besides maintaining sanctuaries, TOS has been involved in conservation advocacy in the past, and probably needs to be involved in the future. TOS leadership has been criticized for inadequately maintaining its sanctuaries. I think the criticism is understandable but misguided. For several years I have heard periodic grumblings that the TOS board "doesn't care" about certain sanctuaries. I can tell you that the board does care, but that we are limited by time and volunteer resources. In fact, one of the surprises to me from our board meeting and retreat in early September was to learn that a majority of the current board would be in favor of acquiring another sanctuary if the property was within our means and appropriate in terms of bird conservation. This surprised me because our discussion to that point had already made it clear that we have not been managing our current sanctuaries adequately, but encouraging also because it indicates that the board is forward thinking and willing to consider solutions to the problems we already have. In a state as large and diverse as ours, with a membership now exceeding 1200, it is difficult for a volunteer board to attend adequately to all the tasks that deserve attention.

Consequently, your officers and board of directors have been meeting more regularly of late, actively discussing the issues facing TOS, both within and without the organization. We hired an organizational consultant and asked him to help us update our articles of incorporation and revise and simplify our bylaws with the goal of helping us run

the organization more efficiently and more effectively. The board discussed these issues and approved hiring the consultant in our conference call in late July. Then at the board meeting and retreat in early September, we reviewed the recommended changes and discussed them at length among ourselves and with the consultant. We asked for some revisions and discussed them in another conference call in early October, and we are hopefully in the final round of discussions before taking a vote on the revisions. If the board approves these bylaws revisions, we will then provide ample opportunity for the membership to review and discuss the changes before

the revisions are presented to the membership for final approval.

H may stand for Hawk, but TOS stands for many things—birding, education, science, conservation and fellowship. Birds and birding have not stood still in Texas for 50 years, and if TOS is to keep up, the organization needs to change and evolve to be able to effectively meet the more complex demands of birding and bird conservation in the 21st century. I think TOS is a great organization, but I think with your help, we can make it better.

Good birding ya'll,

Byron "Doc" Stone
TOS President



TOS President Byron Stone entertains the board at a recent retreat

Tribute to Two Past TOS Presidents....



David Thomas Dauphin, 68, was born October 2, 1946 in Baytown, Texas and passed away Wednesday, July 8, 2015 in Mission, Texas.

Several days ago, Jan Dauphin called to let me know of David's passing. I have wanted to write something about my old friend, but I have found David's death to be particularly sad and difficult. I am just now able to begin to put the words together that express my feelings about his passing and what he meant in my life.

David, Jan, and I have been friends for over 40 years. I met David at an Ornithology Group meeting in Houston in the early 1970s (at the Fondre Center, I am sure), and we soon became birding pals. We were soon joined by Jim Morgan. Beginning in the early 1970s, the three of us spent countless weekends together along the upper coast. We eventually drifted in our own directions, but we always remained fast friends. Of the three of us, I am the one left to remind people of who the others were and what they contributed to Texas birds and birding.

Even at the earliest years of our friendship, we were aware that the lands we depended on for our recreation were at risk. Anahuac NWR had been established in 1963, and Brazoria NWR in 1969, but otherwise we depended on the graces of private landowners

who could always choose another (and more destructive) use of the land.

We experienced such changes of direction (and heart) firsthand. One of our favorite woodlands, Bolivar Point, was scraped for a well pad (a dry hole, by the way). We decided that we needed to find better ways of preserving these crucial sites such as High Island and Sabine Woods. We had no idea how we could do this, but we knew that it needed to be done.

We started our efforts by attending public meetings in support of conserving more lands, and exploring ways to purchase lands for birds and birding. David Dauphin could always be counted on, no matter where or when we needed his help. I can remember attending a commissioners court meeting in Jefferson County, speaking in support of the establishment of the McFaddin NWR. David, Jim, and I attended, and we were surrounded by over 100 infuriated duck hunters who stood to lose their leases. It meant a great deal to me to have David and Jim at my side.

We were joined over the years by friends such as Fred Collins, Steve Gast, Stennie Meadours, Winnie Burkett, Pete Peltier, Paul Nimmons, Robert Benson, and many others. Consider the accomplishments from the late 1970s to today. McFaddin NWR survived the onslaught and was established in 1980. We, along with many friends and organizations, opposed the creation of the Wallisville Reservoir. What exists today is a shadow of what the Trinity River Authority originally proposed, and much of the surplus land ended up being conserved. The sanctuary at Lafitte's Cove is also the result of a battle fought by many of us, including David.

We were able to do far more than fight. The sanctuaries at High Island are a direct result of the efforts begun in the early 1970s. The same is true for Sabine Woods and Bolivar Flats. David played an important role in most of these efforts. Many of us,

David included, spent years inventorying Hale Ranch and influencing what became Brazos Bend SP. David served as president of the Texas Ornithological Society, and raised the funds necessary to discharge the debt for Sabine Woods.

I suspect that most of you have birded the upper coast. The UTC is the crucible of Texas birding, after all. And, I suspect that most of you have birded the sites that I have just listed. All of us who love Texas birding and the upper coast owe David a debt of gratitude

for his unwavering commitment and relentless efforts to see these sites acquired and conserved for birds and for birders.

Over the next few months, a number of us will be discussing ways in which we can honor David for his lifetime of working to conserve Texas birds. That is the least we can do for someone who gave so much to our recreation and to the resources that it depends on.

Ted Lee Eubanks
Austin, Texas



STEVE GROSS

Steve Gross was a true renaissance man. You may know that he was a top birder, but did you know that he was a wine connoisseur, a talented musician, photographer, and above all else an extraordinary teacher by profession as well as in life in general? He taught troubled teens as well as he taught birders, guitar, and life lessons. He was one of the smartest people that I have known as well. Most importantly, he gave of himself to those who needed him willingly and with such a freeness that you thought that you were very important to him, and you were.

I met Steve at the 2009 CBC on the Katy Prairie with Howard Smith, and we spent the day birding on private property with the owners. That was one of my most enjoyable days of birding as a new birder, because both Howard and Steve made me feel not only comfortable,

but also like I was somebody of value, even though I was still very green as a birder. I still look forward to birding with Howard whenever I can because of this. I met up with Steve again at Featherfest in Galveston. We hit it off and became fast friends afterwards. We birded together regularly, and eventually started going on trips across Texas, starting with the chase to Big Bend to see the Tufted Flycatcher. After that I was hooked and travelled with him as much as possible, the highlight trip being his trip to Idaho in 2012.

One of Steve's many talents was his almost perfect memory of the Texas roadmaps. I could call him and ask for directions and he would get me to someplace or out of someplace without looking it up on the internet. He would regularly remember where he saw birds years before and look in that location and refind the same species. This obviously increased in efficiency with his use of eBird. He was very good at accessing data from eBird, but was initially not as good about posting findings there, until I started calling him on that inaction. He got better this past year.

Steve was good at both visual birding as well as birding by ear. This helped him in his competitive birding with big day events that gave him, Ron Weeks and Bob Kemp the Idaho record in 2004 and still standing in 2005. His breeding bird surveys were fun to watch as he called out singing birds in the early morning

hours. He enjoyed birding, but I think he enjoyed the excitement that new birders got when he helped them get a new lifer. He was there when I got a majority of my lifers and directed me to a lifer from Houston as I was driving back from seeing the Amazon Kingfisher. It was so memorable. "Pull into the rest stop and park as soon as you can on the left. Look back towards the first picnic table and the Painted Redstart should be right there." I pulled into the parking spot and I saw this bird before I even had the door halfway open! Steve was magic in that way. I got on the phone with him and you could just hear how pleased he was.

Steve passed away less than a week later from still unknown causes. The birding community

lost a leader who introduced birding to the uninitiated in such a way that they couldn't walk away from the hobby/ lifestyle. And many of us lost a great friend who made us feel special. It turns out that he made lots of people feel that way as illustrated by the 300+ people at his service. What a waste that such a talented and positive part of society was taken from us at such an early age. I hope that we can learn from him and take that knowledge to the next level to help others the way he helped us.

David Dolan

Get your TOS Yellow-throated Warbler Tee Shirt

Now you can get your Yellow-throated Warbler tee shirt by mail.

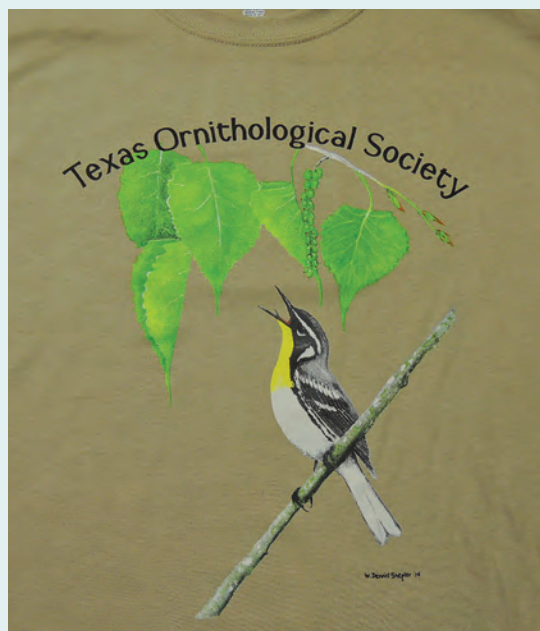
The price is \$15 each (price includes tax of \$1.24).

Add \$5 if ordering by mail for postage/handling.

For ordering details contact

Georgina Schwartz

Email: gbird@att.net or by telephone 210-342-2073



TOS Sponsored Teams Finish 1st & 2nd Place Statewide In TPWD Great Texas Birding Classic



The results are in from the 19th Annual Great Texas Birding Classic sponsored by Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD) which was held April 15–May 15, 2015.

I am proud to let you all know that our 5th grade team took 1st place in our region AND 1st place in the state out of almost 20 teams competing!!! Woohoo!!! Our young 4th grade team took 2nd place in the region and 2nd place in the state! Amazing!!!!

They even beat out secondary teams comprised of high school and middle school students. Wow wow wow!!!! I am tremendously proud of these students!!!

The Birding Classic has been called the world's biggest, longest and wildest bird-watching tournament and it is now held statewide! A total of over 100 teams competed this year in various categories of the Birding Classic. Throughout the years, the Birding Classic has donated over \$800,000 in conservation funding to nature tourism and avian habitat restoration, enhancement, and acquisition projects throughout the state! The number of grants awarded (and their amounts) are determined based on team registration fees (independent and sponsored) and corporate sponsorship dollars collected each year. The Birding Classic is a cost-recovery event, so once minimal event costs are covered, all remaining funds go to conservation grants in Texas.

Fulton 4-5 Learning Center (FLC) entered 2 youth teams this year in the Roughwings category and was provided mentorship by Steve Reisinger, Bron Rorex, and me.



5th Grade Birding Team is #1 in Texas Finishing 1st in our Region and 1st in the state for their division was our 5th grade team named “TOS 4 Wandering Willets and 1 Tenacious Titmouse”. They are shown left to right in the attached photo—(Top) Bron Rorex, Martha McLeod, Steve Reisinger (bottom) Cole Chapman, Jaby Tarkington, Jami Bleiker, Kaylee Howell, and Karlee Friebele. This team logged down 119 species of birds and was sponsored by the Texas Ornithological Society.



FLC 4th Grade Team is #2 in the State Finishing 2nd in our Region and 2nd in the state was our 4th grade team named “TOS Powerful Peregrines”. They are shown left to right in the photo—(Top) Bron Rorex, Martha McLeod, Steve Reisinger (bottom) Kyleigh Karl, Kate Hill, Lucas Wilshire, Sam Holden, and Taylor Hoover. This team was excited to find and correctly identify 107 species and was sponsored by the Texas Ornithological Society.



Team Alternates were Kaylie Skinner and Audra Jones

Approximately 500 species of birds can be found migrating through Texas or as resident species, so working with students to teach

them to identify birds is quite a challenge. We practiced with the students every Wednesday morning before school and once a month on weekend field trips. Funding for travel costs, team shirts, and trophies was made possible by Bob & Nela Wilems of Boerne, TX. The Texas Ornithological Society paid sponsorship fees for both teams in the Birding Classic. Student field guides and binoculars were donated by the Aransas Bird & Nature Club. Thank you all for your support! We truly appreciate all of you!

Alternates for the teams were Kaylie Skinner and Audra Jones.

Video of the Classic: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U42CSWznE7k>

—*Martha McLeod*

TOS-SAYBC Senior Chickadees take Divisional 1st prize in Great Texas Birding Classic 2015

Interview Video: <https://youtu.be/9YuICqoj6qM>

**Madeleine McDonald
(Senior Team Captain)**

This is the second year I've led the Senior Young Birders for the Great Texas Birding Classic, and I have to say it was also twice as fun! Overall, our team was much more interactive with one another and much more involved, and this made the experience that much more enjoyable! I gathered three new species to add to my personal list: Ash-throated Flycatcher, Swainson's Hawk, and Northern Bobwhite. The bobwhite was a treat because it has been a long overdue life bird,

and when our group heard one call in the distance, everybody was thrilled! This was a memorable birding experience for me. When in the company of good people and good birds, you'd expect nothing less. Thank you again for this opportunity.

Hannah Franklin

Our family woke up early to get ready for the Great Texas Birding Classic. We were meeting our teams at the Land Heritage Institute at 8am and planned to bird there for 3 hours before heading over to Mitchell Lake Audubon Center for lunch and another few hours. This was my second year to participate



TOS-SAYBC Senior Chickadees: Antonio Flores, Naomi Flores, Madeleine McDonald, Hannah Franklin, Delaney Kempf



Senior Team Warming Up for Action



We LOVE Mud!



Hitting the Birding Trail with a Mascot



Mr. Tom, the Official Recorder

in the Great Texas Birding Classic, and all of us really wanted to beat our record from last year.

At the Land Heritage Institute we started off with a bang, spotting an Ash-throated Flycatcher on the wire near the entrance to LHI. That was just the beginning, and before we knew it, we had over 40 birds from trekking all through the property. The weather was great considering how much rain had been predicted, but the ground was really

muddy from all the precipitation that had come the day before. When we tried to go near the river, there was a moment of excitement when a few of us almost slid down the bank, so we found some rocks and waited out the birds, enjoying the river view.

We had a “birder’s lunch” at Mitchell Lake Audubon Center where we scarfed down our food while walking along the trails to make sure we didn’t miss anything. Then, we hopped into the Mitchell Lake van and we were off to the polders. Birding didn’t stop as we drove along, and a few times we pulled over to see what was flitting around. We didn’t find as many species at the water’s edge as we had hoped, but a quick tally of the species we sighted throughout the day

proved good news, and a total of 74 species, blowing our record from last year out of the water.

Overall, it was an amazing day with wonderful friends, fantastic birds, and great leaders. I can’t wait for next year!

Delaney Kempf

This was my first time participating in the GTBC, and I can honestly say it was an enjoyable and informative experience. Being able to bird with a small group of knowledgeable birders my same age was an adventure I



A break at the Medina River

can't wait to repeat. I would definitely suggest this event to any and all birders, whether young or old. Of the 70+ bird species we saw this day, my favorite was, as always, the spunky Spotted Sandpiper and my lifer of the day was a Swainson's Hawk soaring with a Red-Tailed Hawk and Black Vultures.

I can't wait to join the GTBC next year and can't say enough praises about it.

Antonio Flores

This was my second time on the senior team participating in the GTBC, and I enjoyed it so much. We were able to see so many birds on this trip, and we really worked as a team to reach our goals. My two favorite birds that we saw were the Northern Bobwhites and the Orchard Orioles. I'd seen Orchard Orioles before, but not this close, and the detail we were able to see on them was awesome. The bobwhites were life birds for some of us, and I was really excited to see them because I'd been searching for them for a long time and was finally able to see them.

I really had a great time and I can't wait till next year.

Naomi Flores

This year's Birding Classic was the best I've participated in! I had a lot of fun. I really enjoyed all the many birds we were able to see. I thought it was so amazing that we saw so many Orchard Orioles all at once! I also liked seeing the Ruby-throated Hummingbird nest. It's so cool that a hummingbird could make so delicate a nest and it still holds together. But I'd have to say that my favorite bird that we saw was the Bobwhite. It was pretty funny how we found it. We'd heard the call, but we hadn't actually seen it. Then all of a sudden, BOOM! The Bobwhite came fluttering up from the tall grass, scaring us all half to death! My favorite part about the whole tournament was being out in God's Creation with my friends. We had so much just being together, joking around and, of course, spotting and hearing amazing birds. I feel like that I not only learned to bird better, but I really got to know our team.

The Birding Classic really motivated me to start birding again. I can't wait till the next one comes!

Patsy Inglet
tpinglet@satx.rr.com

Egyptian Geese in Central Texas: An established exotic?

By Jack Clinton Eitnrear



Egyptian Geese *Alopochen aegyptiaca* are widely distributed throughout Africa, and southern Europe. They are especially common in southern Africa, below the Sahara and in the Nile Valley. Primarily a grazing bird, it establishes a permanent pair bond and constructs its nest at a variety of sites. Resembling



Egyptian goose with gosling at Canyon Lake (2015)

Photo Stephen Johns (2008)

a large shelduck, hens lay 6 to 12 eggs per clutch requiring a 30 day incubation period and a fledgling period of up to 14 weeks.

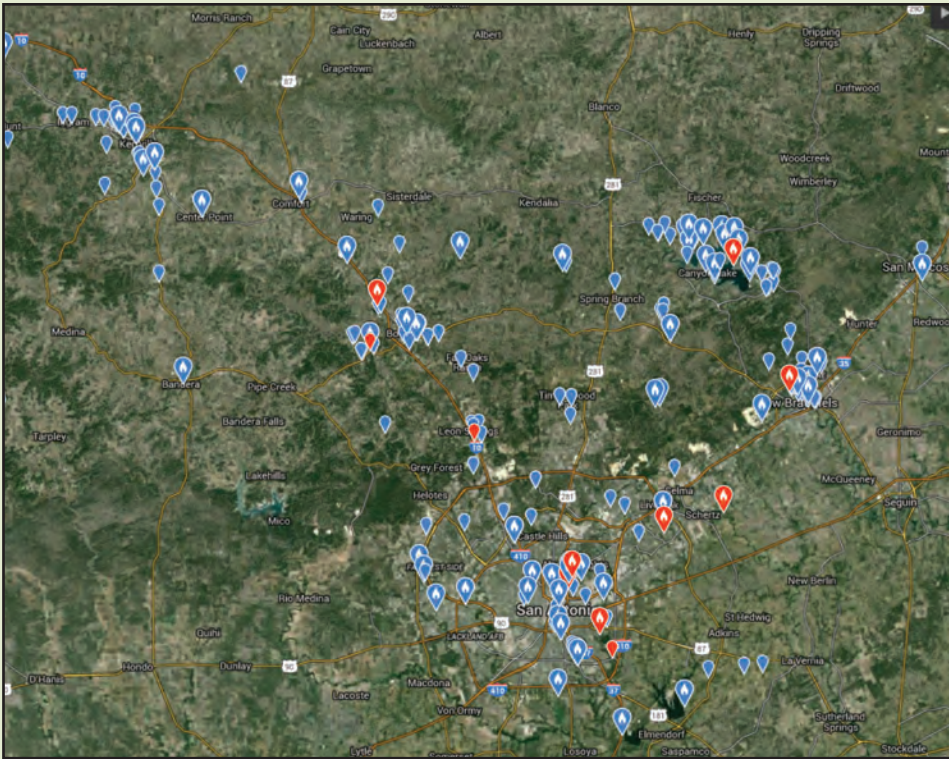
In the 18th century, *Alopochen aegyptiaca* was introduced into Great Britain, and a substantial population still thrives there. It is currently colonizing the Netherlands, Belgium,

and Germany. First reported in Florida in the 1960s, is recently has become widespread and numerous along the southern Atlantic coast. In Florida Egyptian Geese at 181 sites totaled 1,204 birds: 1,023 adults and 181 young. Numbers of geese at each site ranged from 1 to 80 occupying 31% residential areas; 26% parks; 21% golf courses; 11% commercial; 5% miscellaneous; 3% preserve; and 1% spoil islands.

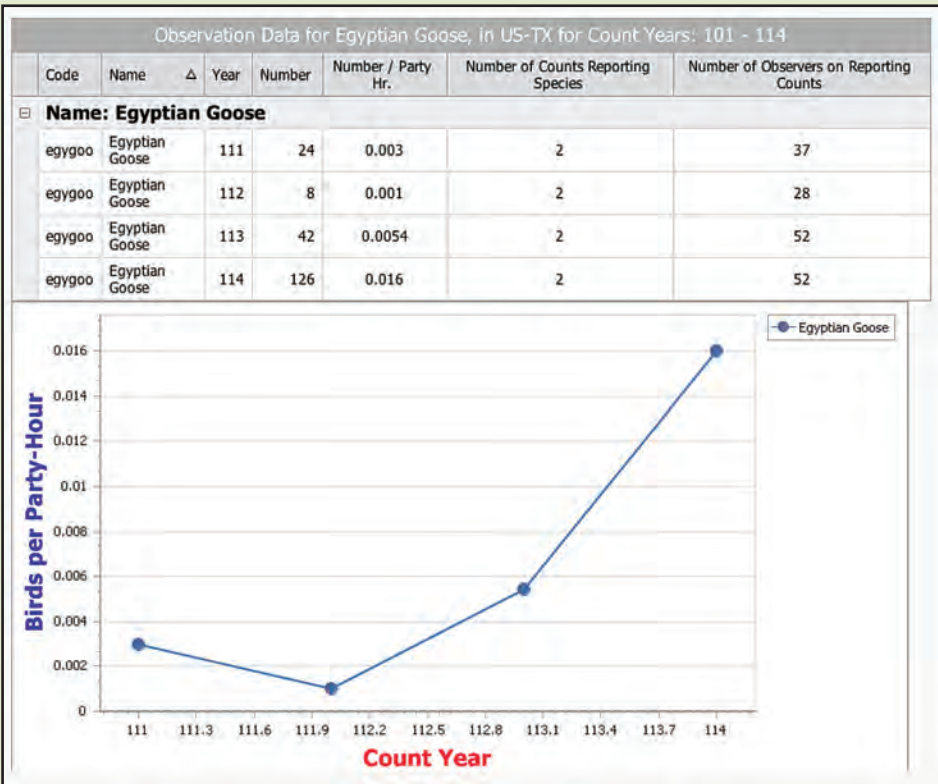
While population growth in Europe is limited due to cold weather, this is not the case in the southern United States. Case in point, I observed a pair with goslings in January near San Antonio. While breeding can occur throughout the year, it appears in Texas to mainly be between January and June. In Africa it is cited as being from January to November. The shorter reproductive period in Texas may be due to our hot and dry summers as grasses become stressed.

Due to their being common in waterfowl collections, it is difficult to determine the exact date when escapees first established the feral population in central Texas. That said, records on e-bird provide some clues as it documents their presence at Canyon Lake in 2004.

After Canyon Lake the next nearby areas colonized were Landa Park, New Braunfels



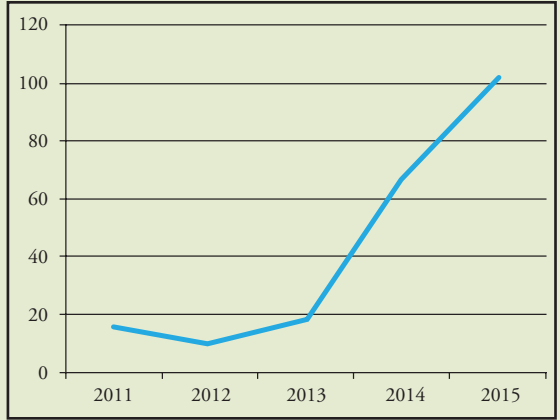
Distribution of Egyptian Goose in Central Texas as of August 2015 Data Ebird.org



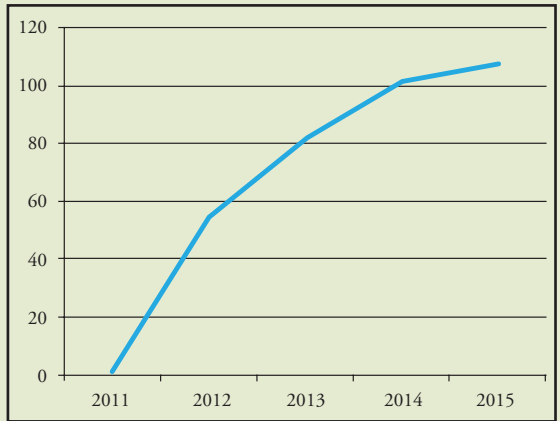
Alopochen recorded during Texas Christmas Bird Counts 2010-2013 Source: <http://netapp.audubon.org/CBCObservation/Historical>

POPULATION TRENDS

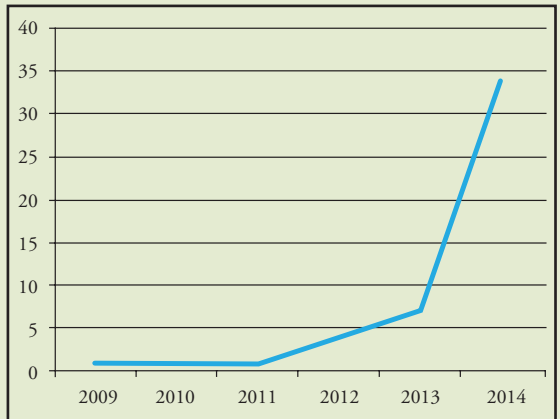
Woodlawn Park-San Antonio (29°27'01.2"N 98°31'58.4"W) Photo John Eitnear



Tapatia Springs/River Road Park-Boerne (29°47'20.3"N 98°43'33.5"W) Photo Cheryl Cato-Flicker



Brackenridge Park-San Antonio (29°27'48.4"N 98°28'13.0"W) Photo John Eitnear



(2005) and then River Road Park, Boerne (2005). It is not know if the birds from Canyon Lake flew the 20 miles (32 km) to New Braunfels or were sourced by released/escaped birds. While the New Braunfels and Boerne populations increased, it took until 2009 for significant numbers to start appearing in San Antonio (which is about 28 miles (45 km) to the south). In the same year they were sighted in San Antonio, they also showed up in Kerrville, which is 34 miles (55 km) from the Boerne population. New areas continued to be added to the list although most do not include sightings of goslings. One exception is San Marcos which has had a small number since 2011 and has breeding documented as recently as 2015.

So what limits population growth in the Egyptian Geese? First, being territorial dominant pairs will seek out the best habitat and nesting sites. As additional pairs arrive at the area less preferred habitats would be used of-

ten resulting in lower productivity. Predation rates also vary with the area. Goslings spend more time on land than ducklings which likely exposes them more to terrestrial threats than aquatic ones. While aquatic habitats often have large turtles, snakes, and predatory fish, often park-like, areas are ideal habitats for raccoons, opossums, skunks, hawks and domesticated cats and dogs. Considering this, populations should level off as suitable habitat is saturated. Unfortunately most populations are still increasing (see graphs below of Woodlawn Lake and Brackenridge Parks in San Antonio and Boerne). Since the landscape in central Texas is covered with residential complexes and golf courses, both of which often include ponds and grassy lawns, it is likely to be a number of years before Egyptian Goose numbers stabilize.

Jack Clinton Eitnrear
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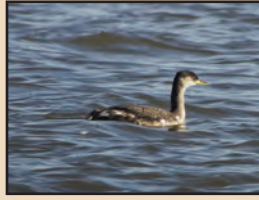


Pair with young at Texas State University, San Marcos Photo Meliussa Skasik 2015

Important dates in spread of Egyptian Geese in central Texas		
<i>First Recorded</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Observers</i>
2004-06-10	Canyon Lake Reservoir	Tom Gannon
2005-03-08	Landa Park-New Braunfels	J. Berner
2006-05-21	River Road Park-Boerne	Craig Turner
2009-11-01	Brackenridge Park-San Antonio	Karen McBride
2009-12-08	Guadalupe Park-Kerrville	Tom McLinden
2011-10-29	Aquarena Springs-San Marcos	Gene Major

Annual Meeting of the TBRC

The 2015 annual meeting of the Texas Bird Records Committee (hereafter committee or TBRC) was held at 11:00 AM on 1 August 2015 at the Biodiversity Researching and Teaching Collections in College Station, Texas. Keith Arnold served as host. Six members were present in person; four members attended via conference call. In attendance were:



Stephan Lorenz received the most votes and were elected to fill the open positions.

Effective at the end of the Annual Meeting, current membership and term of service are as follows:

MEMBERS

- Randy Pinkston, Chair
- Eric Carpenter, Secretary
- Keith Arnold, Academician
- Greg Cook
- Mark Lockwood (via conference call)
- Jim Paton (via conference call)
- Byron Stone
- Tim Fennell
- Mary Gustafson (via conference call)
- Petra Hockey (via conference call)

Due to some technical difficulties with access to the building and setting up the conference call, the meeting was convened at 11:45 AM.

ELECTION OF MEMBERS

Pinkston, Carpenter, Arnold were the only nominees respectively for the Chair, Secretary, Academician positions. Cook's and Lockwood's first term both expired at the meeting and both had indicated their willingness to serve a second term. Stone moved that everyone be re-elected by acclamation. This was seconded by Lockwood and voting was unanimous in favor.

Gustafson's and Fennell's 2nd-term both expired at the Annual Meeting. Nominations for the open position were Dan Jones (nominated by Randy Pinkston), Stephan Lorenz (nominated by Petra Hockey), Chris Runk (nominated by Byron Stone), and Ron Weeks (nominated by Mark Lockwood). Discussions were had about each of the candidates and then the members voted. Dan Jones and

- Randy Pinkston, Chair—term expires in 2017; can be re-elected
- Eric Carpenter, Secretary (not a Voting Member)—term expires in 2016; can be re-elected
- Keith Arnold, Academician—term is as listed for Secretary; can be re-elected
- Dan Jones—1st term expires in 2018, can be re-elected
- Stephan Lorenz—1st term expires in 2018, can be re-elected
- Petra Hockey—1st term expires in 2017, can be re-elected
- Greg Cook—2nd term expires in 2018
- Mark Lockwood—2nd term expires in 2018
- Jim Paton—2nd term expires in 2016
- Byron Stone—2nd term expires in 2016

The sequence of members for voting becomes:

Jones, Lorenz, Hockey, Cook, Lockwood, Paton, Stone, Arnold, Pinkston

FOURTH ROUND RECORDS

There was 1 fourth round records that was discussed and voted on: 2013-29—Red-necked Grebe 16-18 Feb 2013, near Packery Channel, Nueces Co. not accepted 0-9

Adjournment

With no other formal business on the agenda and no Any Other Business items raised, the meeting was adjourned at 12:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Eric Carpenter

Secretary, Texas Bird Records Committee

Eric Carpenter
ecarpe@gmail.com

New Directors and Officers



Catherine Winans
Treasurer

My father built a small house with a large back porch, in a quiet town in a valley of the Appalachian Mountains in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Then he built an even smaller house for birds and mounted it on a pole in the

back yard. One of my earliest memories is of a House Wren belting out his gurgling song from atop that birdhouse. Dad also built a feeder and placed it near our kitchen window. Evening Grosbeaks on that snow-covered feeder are another early memory.

Fast-forward about forty years to another small house with a big back porch, this one on a wooded lot on Lake Fork in East Texas. Our family spent as many weekends as possible at that house. My husband and son are avid fishermen. My daughter and I enjoyed the peaceful and beautiful setting. And there were so many birds in the woods and on the water. I found the ancient field guide and binoculars that I had used in my childhood in Pennsylvania, and soon determined that I would need updated versions of both. So, some twenty years ago I resumed a casual interest in birds.

My enjoyment of birds continued to grow. In 2006 I decided to venture outside my back yard, and began to keep a life list. I joined TOS in 2007 and the birding floodgates opened. I have traveled most of the United States in search of birds, often as a participant in TOS-sponsored trips. But my favorite birding experiences have been here in my adopted state of Texas. My husband, Skip, would not

call himself a birder, but he is a good sport and a great spotter. We often combine birding outings with other travel plans. I owe much of what I have learned about birds and birding to three mentoring organizations, Fort Worth Audubon Society, Prairie and Timbers Audubon Society, and TOS.

I enjoyed math in elementary and high school, so a career in accounting seemed like a good fit. I graduated from The University of Scranton, with a degree in accounting, and worked for several years as an accountant and later as a computer programmer. After our children were born, I spent ten years as a stay at home mom, and earned a graduate degree in accounting at the University of Texas at Dallas. I became a CPA and joined the accounting firm of Deloitte and Touche, where I worked for eight years in the audit department. For the past twenty years I have worked in the healthcare industry, holding positions ranging from Director of External Reporting to CFO. I retired in April of 2015 after sixteen years with a privately held company specializing in emergency department practice management.

Retiring Treasurer, Sandi Wheeler, has held financial responsibility for TOS for the past eight years. Our organization owes her a great deal of thanks for her conscientious stewardship and dedication. Her excellent recordkeeping and ongoing assistance have made for a smooth transition for me to the TOS Board. In the coming years The Board and I will build on that history, focusing on strategic planning of TOS priorities, budgeting and funding to carry out those priorities. I am honored to serve as Treasurer of the organization that has contributed so much knowledge and enjoyment to my life.



Susan Foster, Secretary

(Everybody sing along, please.)

Blackbird singing in the dead of night
But Susan Foster's busy typing more.
All her life.
She was only waiting for this

moment to arise.

Take those notes. Place that call.

Post all the info on our site.

TOS. TOS.

Keeping the minutes up-to-date.

(Second Verse)

Should you have any questions, friends,
I'll be here to help you if I can.

All my life.

Hopefully, the blackbirds still are singing when I'm done.

Hopefully, the blackbirds still are singing when I'm done.



Jimma Byrd, new Edward's Plateau (Region 5) Director

I'd like to introduce myself and express my appreciation for being asked to serve out the un-expired term in Region 5. I'm a life member of Texas Ornithological Society, a Texas Master Naturalist and a Master Gardener.

In 2010 I founded, and am currently President of, San Saba Bird and Nature Club. My husband, John, and I make our home in a pecan orchard on the river 14 miles SW of San Saba.

I'm a fifth generation Texan but received my B.S. from the University of Nevada Reno.

In my senior year I took Ornithology to complete degree requirements for my major. The professor was an avid birder and I've been hooked ever since. Although I've been casually birding for more than 30 years, a few years ago I decided to dedicate some effort to improving my skills. Since then I've enjoyed TOS meetings, field trips, and the friendships I've made through TOS.



Linda Belssner, Region 3 Director

TOS Welcomes New Region 3 Director...

I grew up in Illinois, lived all over the Midwest and have been in Texas for 35 years. I now live in Henderson County on Cedar Creek Reservoir. I get to bird

right from my front yard. I have just retired from Mabank I.S.D. after 19 years. I'm loving being retired..more time for birding. I've been married for 47 years and have two wonderful grown children. One is an Aggie and one is a Longhorn. Always a fun time at my house during college football season. I only have one grandchild and I'm working hard on turning her into a birder.



Jane Tillman Field Trip Chairperson

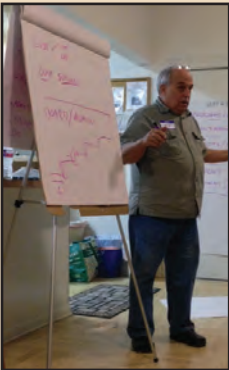
Jane is an active member of the Travis Audubon Society, a Capital Area Master Naturalist and the president of the Native Plant Society of Texas Austin chapter. She was recognized by the four-mil-

lion-member National Wildlife Federation as the 2011 Volunteer of the Year for her work

training more than one hundred Habitat Stewards to create backyard wildlife habitat in Austin. Jane teaches beginning backyard birding classes and gives talks about Central Texas birds and gardening for birds to garden clubs, neighborhood associations, and libraries. She gardens for wildlife, and was fortunate to have a rare Green Violetear hummingbird visit her yard in 2008. She has led many field trips for Travis Audubon, the Native Plant Society, Balcones Canyonlands NWR and other organizations. She co-captains several Birdathon teams each spring, including a team with Byron Stone for the past decade. In her position as TOS Field Trip Chairperson, she will

be responsible for organizing TOS field trips that are not associated with either the spring or winter TOS meetings, such as the “Week-ender” and other regional trips, and the out-of-state trips that TOS occasionally sponsors. She will work closely with field trip leaders and trip participants to try to insure that TOS field trips are educational and enjoyable for all concerned. She has also already begun work to develop consistent guidelines and policies for field trip leaders and participants in order to insure a more uniform field trip experience for both participants and leaders. If you have an idea for a TOS field trip, feel free to contact Jane at jtillman@utexas.edu.

TOS BOARD GOES ON RETREAT



Sandy Duncan of The Nonprofit Center of Austin talking with the Board about strategic planning



Hey, I thought these people were birders?! (There was a millipede on the ground...)



Reward for a hard day of work

Texas Birds Annual Staff

Jack C. Eitniar Editor Bron Rorex..... Copy Editor
 Advertising..... Judy Kestner Proofreader..... Susan Foster

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Puffins, Warblers and Seabirds—TOS Goes Down East Birding

By David Sarkozi

Ever since I had the chance to bird Mount Desert Island in Maine during the Acadia Birding Festival¹ in 2013 I've wanted to go back. I thought what better way than to share it with members of TOS and I organized a trip for spring of 2015. The trip filled quickly and I was able to schedule a second trip.

Since this was only my second trip to Maine I engaged Michael Good of Down East Nature Tours². I met Michael previously while he was leading field trips at the Acadia Festival and found him excellent in the field and great fun too.

We gathered up Sunday afternoon at the Bangor Airport and we were quickly off to Millinocket, Maine where we would start out at Baxter State Park the next morning. We quickly left the development of Bangor behind and made the hour drive through the beautiful Maine bog country headed to the North woods.

¹ Acadia Birding Festival <http://www.acdiabirdingfestival.com/>

² Down East Nature Tours <http://downeastnaturetours.com>



David Sarkozi

It was June and in Texas most of us were used to waking up to steamy temperature of close to 80 degrees. Not in Maine though; we woke to 42 degrees and rain and fog. Nevertheless we ate a hurried breakfast and headed out through the logging country to the wilderness of Baxter State Park.

Baxter State Park protects about 200,000 acres donated by the former governor and namesake Percival P. Baxter. It is protected as wilderness and activities are limited in the park. The visitor numbers are limited, the roads left unpaved, compost toilets only, even party sizes are limited. The park is home to several species of birds never seen in Texas, notably Bicknell's Thrush, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, and Black-capped Chickadee.

Today's plan was to seek the species most expected in the boreal forest, especially Bicknell's Thrush which is found at the tree line on Mount Katahdin, the highest point in Maine. The whole party started out together and those not up to the climb up the mountain would turn back.

The first part of the trail was easy and we quickly started ticking off some good birds. Warblers were numerous and singing. One of the first wow moments of the trip was a pair of Black-throated Blue Warblers at point blank range.

Ovenbirds proved to be common and easy to find with their loud "teacher, teacher, teacher" call. We also tallied Blackpoll, Nashville, Black-and-white Warbler, American Redstart, Bay-breasted, and Yellow-rumped Warblers in their handsome breeding plumage.

Soon the trail started to climb faster and all but five of the party dropped out. A little higher we found a couple of Boreal Chickadees and then some Fox Sparrows. A calling Yellow-bellied Flycatcher made empid ID easy.

Oh did I mention it was starting to rain in earnest now? I did mention that this was wilderness but the trail really was just the rocky stream bed and it was getting wetter and wetter. We were starting to get pretty high on the mountain while we jumped boulder to boulder up the mountain.

It was getting later. Michael and some of the party had gone ahead of me and those of us in the rear were taking a breather. Just then we heard something. I compared to the app on my phone, Yes! It was Bicknell's Thrush calling. I ran up ahead on the trail looking for the others, then a thrush came out in the trail in front of me, in plain view there was a Bicknell's Thrush!

It was late enough and raining harder and we had to turn back. It was a grueling wet 90 minute trip down the mountain to the van. Fortunately the van was running and warm when we got back. It was just in time too because I was dangerously close to hypothermia and the shivers were setting in. A dry shirt and the heat in the van and I warmed up quickly.



Birding the Western Mountain Road at Acadia National Park

It was raining in earnest so we head for the hotel to get dry and clean up and then headed for a fabulous dinner at the River Driver's Restaurant.³

The next morning we birded more of Baxter State Park and picked up more good birds, American Black Duck, Common Merganser, and Alder Flycatcher. Plus more warblers, Common Yellowthroat, Magnolia Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Blackburnian, Pine Warbler and Northern Parula.

By afternoon we headed for Mount Desert Island, arriving at the Seawall Motel⁴ on the shore in Southwest Harbor on Mount Desert Island (MDI). Most of Mount Desert Island is Acadia National Park. We settled in and decided on lobster tonight at the best lobster pound on MDI, Thurston's Lobster Pound. We feasted on the great Maine seafood, lobsters that were in the Gulf of Maine that morning, super fresh mussels and clams. We are from Texas and tackled our lobsters like Texas-size crawfish and headed back to the hotel stuffed.

Next morning we started at the Seawall Pond and natural seawall. We added Great Black-backed Gull, Song Sparrow, Yellow Warbler, and Purple Finch to our trip list.

We had tentatively scheduled a Whale and Puffin watching trip for the afternoon but the seas were too rough. Instead we headed to Michael's staked out Ruffed Grouse and got everyone up-close and personal with the relative of the Texas Prairie Chickens.

We moved on the Nature Conservancy's Indian Point Blagden Preserve⁵. We added new trip birds, my first ever dark morph Broad-winged Hawk and Ruby-throated Hummingbird. A large flock of distant scoters defied identification and we got our first views of seals.

³ River Drivers Restaurant <http://www.neoc.com/river-drivers-restaurant-maine/>

⁴ Seawall Motel <http://seawallmotel.com/>

⁵ Blagden Preserve <http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/maine/placesweprotect/indian-point-blagden-preserve.xml>



Atlantic Puffins in Maine

After lunch we checked out the hay fields on Norway Drive and were rewarded with several Bobolinks displaying and making their amazing toy robot calls.

We headed over to Otter Cove and got our first Black Guillemots and Common Eiders.

Thursday morning we started at one of my favorite sites on MDI, Sieur de Monts Spring and Wild Gardens. This site is loaded with warblers; we also got close to an American Woodcock. Late in the afternoon we were back at the Seawall and added Black Scoter to the list.

Friday morning we learn the Whale and Puffin boat is going out, but first we headed over to the Precipice Trail Overlook to look for the nesting Peregrine Falcon successfully. At the nearby Tarn we found an American Bittern, very rare for MDI.

At noon we boarded the Bar Harbor Whale Watching Company's⁶ Friendship V catamaran. This boat is the ultimate pelagic birding boat. It's fast. I clocked it at 35 mph. It is 115 feet long; the 31 foot wide catamaran hull makes it super stable.

We headed to Petit Manan Island first for the star of the day. As we approached the island we saw our first Atlantic Puffins! The boat was able to get close to the island and for 15 minutes we slowly spun the boat close to the island and we all got our fill of Atlantic Puffins. We also had Common Murre and



Waiting in line to board the Freedom V for the Whale and Puffin Tour, in Maine

Razorbills. Michael spotted and got most of us on some Arctic Terns.

Michael had advised us to dress for winter. We left the dock at about 72 degrees. At Petit Manan Island it was in the low 60's. Then we headed for the open Gulf of Maine. The water temperature was 45 degrees in the open gulf. The captain throttled up and the wind and water temperature dropped immediately as we headed off shore. The deck cleared of all but us hardy Texans.

Soon we ticked our first seabird, Northern Fulmar. Great Black-backed Gulls soared like eagles. Next we started to get Northern Gannets. At our furthest point offshore, 48 miles from Bar Harbor we got our last new bird of the trip, Wilson's Storm-Petrel.

It was a great finale for a great trip. We tallied about 100 species and life birds for everyone. We watched the sunset and celebrated at great trip with dinner dockside after disembarking from the Friendship V.

David Sarkozi
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⁶ <http://www.barharborwhales.com/>

Birding at the Max

By Teresa Cigarroa Keck

Photos by Raul Delgado

“Are you looking for the big pigeons?” A golf cart pulled up behind me, and the golfer behind its wheel motioned to an area I was scanning. “They’ve been seen here, and at the fourteenth hole, too, *pero ¿quién sabe?* They’ve got wings, right?” The unknown golfer smiled and zoomed away, and I jumped into the golf cart that Raul Delgado and I rented for the day. I was eager for the opportunity to confirm the presence of Red-billed Pigeons, and to observe them again at close range.

Thus began a fantastic day birding the Max A. Mandel Municipal Golf Course. Known simply as “The Max,” the 270-acre course abuts the Rio Grande approximately twelve miles northwest of Laredo, Texas. The 270-acre course is routed along bluffs overlooking the river, and encompasses nearly a mile of riverfront property, as well as open farmland and mesquite woodland. I’m told that The Max is excellent for golfing; I know that it is superb for birding.

Although The Max did not become accessible to birders until mid-May, members of the Webb County-based Monte Mucho Audubon Society had birded the course several times in the preceding months. In mid-April, Monte Mucho Audubon Society members Daniel

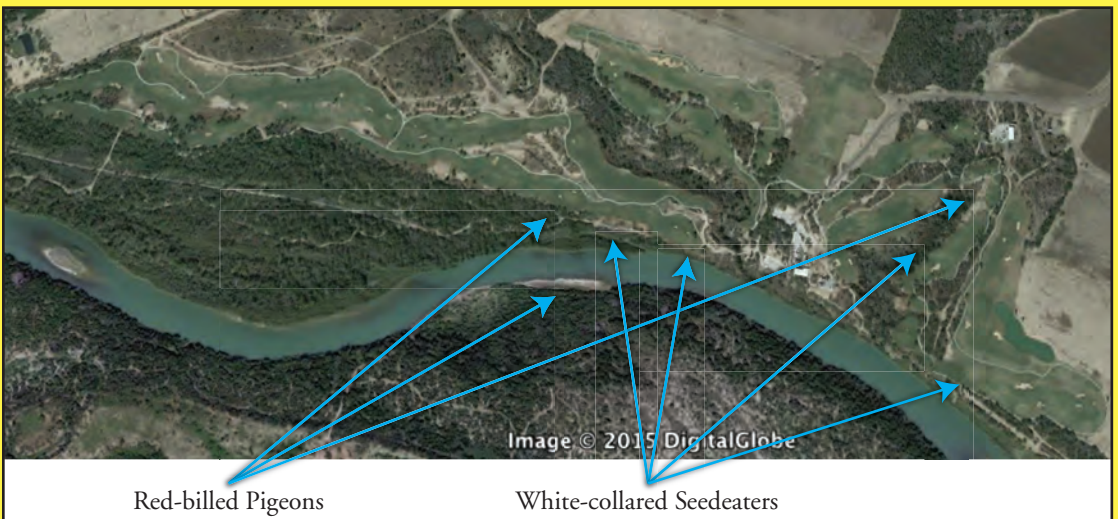
Perales and Glenda Barrera discovered a pair of Red-billed Pigeons perched in the deep arroyo near the fourteenth hole. This discovery, combined with the presence of the White-collared Seedeaters, drew the management’s attention to the significance—and appeal—of this location to birders. The Max’s management established a flat fee of \$15 for the rental of a two-seater golf cart. At this time, birding the course on foot is not permitted.

The presence of the Red-billed Pigeons in Webb County is uncommon. Historically, in the United States, the Red-billed Pigeon has occurred in riparian habitat in Cameron, Willacy, Hidalgo, and Starr Counties.¹ Webb County is the westernmost range of the Pigeon.² Prior to this spring, it appears that there were few Webb County records of the species: small numbers were seen in 1996 and 1999 in northwestern Webb County, and no nests have yet been found.³ As reports of the species continued throughout the summer of

¹ Breeden et al., *Vegetative Composition of Areas With and Without Red-billed Pigeons (Patagioenas Flavirostris) in Texas*. *The Southwestern Naturalist* 54(1):58, 69.

² Timothy Brush, *Nesting Birds of a Tropical Frontier: The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas*. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press: 2005), 88-89.

³ *Id.* See also Marc C. Woodin et al. *Birds of the Rio Grande and Other Riparian Habitats of Western Webb County*. *Bull. Texas Ornith. Soc.* 40(2): 2007, 67-80.



Rio grande Satellite photo



RDL

Club House at the Max

2015 and through the early fall, it's become apparent that The Max was the first reliable, publicly accessible location in Webb County to see Red-billed Pigeons.

NAVIGATING THE MAX: WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW

Upon parking your car, a staff member will meet you with a golf cart. Drive your cart

to the clubhouse, where you will pay the cart rental fee. Be sure to let the staff know that you'll be birding. Upon paying the fee, it's time to hit the course to enjoy the course and its birds.

As you head out, please keep in mind that The Max is, first and foremost, a golf course. In order to ensure future access for birding,



RDL

A bend in the Rio Grande from the Max



(L-R) Susan Foster, Judy Kestner and Danny Perales birding at the Max

it is important for birders to adhere to golf etiquette. The cardinal objective is to avoid distracting the players. Therefore, where golfers are playing, park your cart at a reasonable distance and wait quietly until they are finished putting or driving.

In order to minimize potential delay birding the course, it is wise to get an early start and to bird the course in modified order. The following routes prioritize the locations where Red-billed Pigeons and White-collared Seedeaters are most frequently reported, as follows:

THE NINTH HOLE—GREAT VIEWS OF THE RIO GRANDE, EXCELLENT VIEWS OF BIRDS

White-collared Seedeaters have been reported consistently from the ninth hole. From the parking lot, follow the path to the green, (where the flagstick and hole are located), and park your cart close to the edge of the bluff. Looking down at the river, you will notice that a narrow, dense strip of giant cane lines

its banks. Seedeaters are often seen in this type of reed. Walk upriver along the overlook until you reach the tee, keeping an eye—and ear—out for male Seedeaters on the tops of the cane. They are comparatively easier to locate than their female counterparts.

Red-billed Pigeons are likewise seen along the river along this stretch of the course. Look for them perched in the open, on an exposed branch. Red-billed Pigeons are often seen perched in large numbers in the trees across the river. Scan accordingly.

Other birds recently seen at the ninth hole—and throughout the course—include Audubon's and Hooded Orioles, Green Kingfisher, adult and immature Gray Hawks, and other South Texas and Rio Grande Valley specialties.⁴

⁴ “Our results showed that most of the tropical species known to occur in the lower Rio Grande Valley also occur along the Rio Grande in Webb County, and some species in Webb County are found now only intermittently in the lower Rio Grande Valley. Most prominent



White-collared Seedeater Photo by Raul Delgado

From the ninth hole, you'll drive through a mesquite wood to reach the eighth and ninth hole; then, the path will loop and open onto an expanse of farmland. The drive from

among these species is the White-collared Seedeater, which occurred commonly during our study in stands of giant reed along the Rio Grande in both northwestern Webb County and at Laredo." Marc C. Woodin *et al.*, at 71.

this area back to the clubhouse offers excellent views of raptors soaring over the river, as well as the sparrows.

THE FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH HOLES—THE RAVINE

Following the ninth hole, head over to the fourteenth to inspect the arroyo. Park your cart, and make your way along ravine toward



Gray Hawks Photo by Raul Delgado



Red-billed Pigeon Photo by Raul Delgado

the fifteenth hole. As with the ninth hole, you'll have a good chance of finding Red-billed Pigeons and White-collared Seedeater in this vicinity. The Pigeons here will once again be perched in exposed branches, and can be seen at fairly close range. The White-collared Seedeaters, in turn, can be seen making their way along small exposed branches, and the tops of trees.

Proceed through mesquite woodland to the sixteenth hole, where Groove-billed Anis have been reported, and continue through open farmland until you have birded the loop to your satisfaction and are ready to return to the clubhouse.

After parking your car at the clubhouse, take a seat at one of the tables on the covered terrace that faces the Rio Grande. Order lunch and refreshments, and enjoy the panoramic views. If you mention the Monte

Mucho Audubon Society, you should receive a 10% discount on your food orders.

IMPORTANT:

Call ahead to verify access and the price for golf cart rental.

Relevant information:

Max A. Mandel Municipal Golf Course,
27700 FM 1472 Mines Road
Laredo, Texas 78045
956-726-2000
<http://themaxlaredo.com/>

Remember to use common sense and courtesy to guide your conduct on the course.

Enjoy!

Teresa Cigarroa Keck
tckeck@gmail.com

The Woods Roamer

By Arturo Longoria

In my world the value of a life is measured by one's journey through nature. Memories emerge from days in the woods where sunrises unfolded with a demure glow as if borne from out of the stars, and sunsets lingered behind giant thunderheads silhouetted by shafts of light fanning overhead. I recall nights sleeping on the tin roof of my grandfather's cabin and then atop a hill at my father's ranch house in Mexico listening to pauraques whistling melancholy tunes nearby. You favor birds that have accompanied you through life. It's not so much the sight of them as the sound. In my life the ghost dove (white-tipped) will always be special as will the pauraque. The Mourning Dove speaks to me in ways not easy to explain. I do not go out to look at birds or count them or photograph them. Instead I simply experience them. This past spring I had two pairs of common wrens nesting in little

wooden boxes I set on the back porch banister. I'd sit listening to their constant chatter and tweets like an expectant father awaiting the first glimpses of the newborn. There is Henry, the screech owl, who lives out front and every evening peeks from his bird box to survey the goings on around him. At night I hear his eerie yodels from the woods a few yards away. You see, I live in a secluded cabin in the deep woods. Last night as I worked in my shop making a couple of new bushcraft knives I'll use to carve spoons or whatever else suits me, I listened to three Great Horned Owls talking back and forth. One owl was close, perhaps no more than forty yards away, and the other two were a bit farther back. One would hoot and then the other and then the one farthest out. Back and forth and as always I gave thanks to whatever or whoever makes it all possible. The nearest hamlet is four miles south of me and one must cross three locked gates to reach my



Looking out from the cabin Photo by Arturo Longoria



Looking into our “backyard” Note one of the wren boxes on the banister Photo by Arturo Longoria

cabin. People drive down the narrow two rut road leading to my place and when they arrive they say it's too isolated, too quiet, too dark at night. They fear the woods and wonder why I don't clear it back from the cabin. But it's just one more realization of how I measure my life and they measure theirs.

Some nights I'll take a flashlight and with two of my blue heelers alongside I'll hike the two miles to the second gate. At the first gate I'll pause to look up at the Milky Way. My grandson came to visit in July from his home in Maryland. He'd never seen the Milky Way and was enthralled by its beauty. The last night before he had to fly back home he went out on the front porch and sat quietly for about an hour. After a while I stepped out and asked: “Are you okay, son?” It was too dark to see his face but in a subdued voice he said, “I'm just trying to take it in one more time before I have to go.”

I have four watering stations in the front and a pond out back. Every day I sprinkle

grain in two feeders and on the ground. Then I'll sit on the porch or perhaps go inside and look out through one of the windows to watch the birds come to feed. They have come to know the old man with the white beard, his face shadowed by a wide brimmed hat. As I step off the porch they line up on the tree limbs and wait patiently as I spread the grain. If you are kind and nonthreatening then animals will not fear you. The birds are part of the family and, in fact, one group in particular follows me around like chickens. It all started with the male bobwhite quail I named Buddy. For whatever reason (a genetic quirk, behavioral anomaly, deep perspicacity) he began approaching me and then following as I walked in the front yard. I would stoop and extend my grain-filled hand to him and he would saunter up cautiously then peck the grain from out of my palm. I'd talk to him and tell him how much I cared for him. Last fall he disappeared and I worried he'd been lost. But



Along the road to the second gate Photo by Arturo Longoria

this past spring he walked back into the yard and at first I didn't realize it was him; at least, not until he ambled up to me. "Oh, Buddy. I'm so happy to see you." I walked to the storage room and grabbed a handful of grain and then brought it back to him. As before, I talked to him as he ate. Then one afternoon Buddy appeared with a lady friend. She was shy and wouldn't approach me like Buddy but even so she'd keep close and I'd toss out grain for her to eat as well. The weeks went by and as I had hoped Buddy and Mrs. Buddy appeared one morning with a string of Little Buddies following in line. To the shed for grain and back as Buddy and family gathered around me for breakfast. Now the kids are almost full grown. Yesterday I was in the yard looking at some watermelons I planted in the garden and when I looked back I saw Buddy and clan standing at my feet. "Let me go get some food," I said. Walked back with a cup full of grain and then stopped and sat on my heels as Buddy, Mrs. Buddy and their seven children peeped and squeaked and carried on a continuous communiqué pecking at the seeds. Other quail were watching from a distance. I wondered what they might be

thinking. Were they contemplating the old man who walks amongst the birds and sits with them mumbling strange sounds?

The summer was tortuously hot. I don't recall summers like this when I was a boy. In those days we had no air conditioning



Feeding Buddy

Photo by Matthew Longoria



Buddy and family at watering station Photo by Matthew Longoria

and yet it was an odd day if the temperatures rose above 100 degrees. Last week I checked the thermometer on the front porch and it read 108°. In midday the birds will seek the shelter of the granjeno (*gran-hen-no*) motts surrounding the cabin. There are also mesquite trees and brasil, lotebush and colima. Prickly pear grows in scattered clumps as does pitaya. Not far from the cabin stands a grove of Texas ebony. Old growth trees that survived the oil boom of the 1940s and 1950s. Like ancient grandfathers wizened and arthritic they hold a solitary council keeping their secrets and looking on in a stoic reverie. I walk among those somber trees as Pyrrhuloxias and Green Jays hop amidst the sinuous limbs above me. Then I'll sit on my little folding stool and allow the darkness to creep in from the setting sun. A preamble of things to come perhaps. Years ago I left the naiveté of youth and in this late fall of my journey I've come to know the woods in ways deeply spiritual and transcendent. I know

Buddy will probably not last another season. A bobwhite's lifespan is short. But in the years to come as the old man steps out from his cabin there will now be others. Just now my son, Matthew, tapped on the window and I walked outside and saw him leaning over the front porch banister tossing grain to Buddy and family. Matthew had gone out to feed the dogs and he said when the group saw him they "stampeded" across the yard towards him. I watched as Matthew tossed out grain and the little birds pecked and chirped. Now every time I see Buddy I take in the moment never knowing if it will be the last.

The old man moves a bit slower these days but still manages a four or five mile walk several times per week. I think of myself as The Woods Roamer. As it was in those long ago days I often pause to hear the birds and look up at the clouds and revel in the beauty of nature. I've spent my adult life fighting to save it. I hope that Buddy's children and grandchildren will know, as did their father, that the man in the cabin means them no harm. There's a little clearing out back. Surrounded by mesquite trees with *chile del monte* growing all around. Mockingbirds and thrashers fly in daily for a spicy treat. The bobwhite quail walk in and out of the *monte* to peck at the seeds from sundry herbaceous plants. A nice place to listen to the birds as cottony clouds cast their shadows across the ground.

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Arturo Longoria is the author of *Adios to the Brushlands* (1997) and *Keepers of the Wilderness* (2000) from Texas A&M University Press. He wrote the novella *The Trail*, published by Four Notes Books. He contributed to the book, *Home Ground* from Trinity University Press and to *Hecho en Tejas* from The University of New Mexico Press. His wilderness and bushcraft blog, *Woods Roamer*, has been read by over a million people worldwide.

Winter Birding in North Central Texas

**By Gailon Brehm
and Mike Cameron**

Centered on the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, North Central Texas provides abundant winter birding opportunities with a diversity of species that will please the beginning and experienced birder alike. Sitting on the Central Flyway, it is comprised primarily of the Blackland Prairie ecoregion to the east, and the Cross Timbers and Prairies to the west. The area also contains many large reservoirs along the major drainages of the Trinity, Brazos, and Red Rivers, which taken in whole, provide a wide array of habitats for many birds. Generally mild winters provide a pleasant birding experience without the worries of insect bites and other nuisances, though one must always be prepared for cold or windy weather.

Many species of ducks and geese call North Central Texas home for the winter. Although waterfowl seem immune to cold temperatures and breed far to the north, they do require open water. Given the mild winters of this area, regional lakes and rivers are never frozen for any significant length of time, making

this prime waterfowl country. Five species of geese—Cackling, Canada, Ross's, Snow, and Greater White-fronted Geese can often be seen during the same day at Hagerman NWR on Lake Texoma, as approximately 10,000 geese winter there most years. Geese move around and forage for vegetation during the day; so the number seen resting at or near the water varies greatly from time to time. Sometimes huge numbers are seen—other times only a few.

Ducks are numerous in North Texas as well, particularly Northern Pintails. One fun aspect of waterfowl birding is that most duck species molt in fall and are seen in breeding plumage during the winter—beautiful compared to the dull winter passerines. Given their skittish demeanor, one must often view ducks at a distance through a scope, adding to the difficulty of separating males and females of our 17 regularly appearing species. Other water birds such as Horned Grebes, Eared Grebes, Common Loons, and Double-crested Cormorants can be found on some lakes. In addition Lake Tawakoni typically produces records for Pacific and Red-throated Loons nearly every year. Ring-billed and Bonaparte's



Area lakes host birds in abundance



Grasslands host many sparrow species

Gulls are seen in abundance, and the exciting appearance of rare species occurs annually.

Rural areas of the region provide a variety of habitats suitable for wintering sparrows and finches. Common grassland breeders

of the area, such as Grasshopper and Lark Sparrows, have mostly moved south during the winter and are only rarely seen, as are Clay-colored Sparrows which move through the area but are gone by winter. Taking their



Greater White-fronted and Snow Geese



Snow and Ross' Geese

place for the winter are 15 other species, with Harris's and LeConte's Sparrows being highly sought after. Drab colors and confusing feather patterns tempt many birders to lump these species together as "Little Brown Birds". Fortunately, close-sightings are often possible,

allowing birders to refine their sparrow identification skills. Lapland and Chestnut-collared Longspurs are seen on some plowed fields and short grass pastures, sometimes disappearing into almost non-existent cover when they land. Smith's Longspurs are nomadic and very



Mixed Flock of Ducks



Male Bufflehead scratching the itch

habitat specific, but are typically seen at a few sites annually.

In addition to sparrows, American Goldfinches are quite common during this time and are often seen at backyard feeders in addition to foraging for ragweed and other seeds. Pine Siskins and Purple Finches move into the area sporadically; so be on the lookout and don't confuse them with the numerous House Finches! These birds are typically seen in the wooded or brushy edges of prairies or small meadows.

In winter, this region becomes a mecca for mixed-species flocks of blackbirds. The ever-



American Wigeon



Fox Sparrow



Northern Pintails



Harris's Sparrow



LeConte's Sparrow



White-throated Sparrow

present Starlings, Red-winged Blackbirds, Common and Great-tailed Grackles, and Brown-headed Cowbirds somehow seem to multiply in number across cities and agricultural lands. Joining them, Brewer's Blackbirds frequent the fields of our rural areas, and on lucky occasions one can find small numbers of Rusty Blackbirds. Eastern Meadowlark numbers increase with the onset of winter as northern populations move south, and their Western brethren join them, creating another identification challenge for the serious birder. The two meadowlark species have distinct vocalizations, but in winter they rarely sing. One must then rely on the shorter call notes

(hard to hear in wind) and indistinct plumage differences for identification. This is compounded by wind noise and difficult viewing conditions, but we love a challenge. Nevertheless, the vast majority of meadowlarks sighted should be recorded as "meadowlark sp." rather than guessing which species it might be. And be aware that mixed species flocks are common.



Rusty Blackbird

This region's combination of habitats, ranging from dense bottomland forests to open grasslands and from deep lakes to brushy wetlands, attracts many raptor species. The resident Red-tailed Hawks are joined by large numbers of migrants in the winter. While breeding birds are typically of the Eastern race, winter birds may include Western, Krider's, and Harlan's races. Northern Harriers and Short-eared Owls come to cruise the grasslands and marshes of the region, and American Kestrels perch on power lines along the highways. Other falcons can be sporadically found; a single Merlin may establish winter territory near shorebirds, the occasional Prairie Falcon may be seen flying across our western grasslands, and a lingering Peregrine Falcon might be seen chasing birds at a lake or in our cities. Bald Eagles can be found



Western Red-tailed Hawk



Mountain Bluebird



Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk

around the region's major lakes all winter, and sharp-eyed birders may catch a glimpse of a Crested Caracara in the localized areas where they have recently established small populations.

Finally, even the experienced birder can be surprised. This region has witnessed several vagrant western species during the past few years of drought: Sage Thrasher, Cassin's Sparrow, Mountain Bluebird, and Red Crossbill. Out-of-range gulls, like Little and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, used to be rarities, but are now expected each year. This coming winter may bring something new as well! Please come bird with us in North Texas.

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Pretty Pictures

By Ted Lee Eubanks

The creative act lasts but a brief moment, a lightning instant of give-and-take, just long enough for you to level the camera and to trap the fleeting prey in your little box...Henri Cartier-Bresson.

How many Americans watch birds? How many Americans care to know how many Americans watch birds? More importantly, at least for this essay, how many Americans photograph birds and wildlife, and, in general, nature?

The question is innocent enough. Who doesn't like a "pretty picture" of a Roseate Spoonbill, or a nighthawk, or a frigatebird? As it turns out, the answer to the question isn't that simple. In truth, not everyone likes a pretty picture.

The Outdoor Foundation, in its annual Outdoor Participation Report, estimated that around 14 million Americans watched birds in 2013. That number, around 4.9% of the

population age 6 and older, has been relatively stable since 2007.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), in its 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, estimated that 17.8 million Americans age 16 and older took trips away from home to observe birds.

The number of birders committed enough to escape backyard feeding, between 14 and 18 million, underestimates the impact of the recreation. Not only does the number of birders matter, even more important are the numbers of days spent watching birds outdoors, at least from the standpoint of public use and economic impact. User-days (or outings) is a more accurate predictor of tourism and resource impacts than the overall number of recreationists.

According to the Outdoor Foundation, birding is the third most favorite American recreation when measured by frequency of



Roseate Spoonbill (*Platalea ajaja*), Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center, Aransas, Texas



Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*), Coastal Heritage Preserve, Galveston, Texas

participation (lagging behind only running/jogging and biking). Birders and wildlife viewers averaged 39 outings per-person per-year, for a total of 1 billion outings in 2013. By comparison, fishing is the fourth most favorite recreation, and anglers averaged around 20 outings per-person per-year.

The USFWS survey looks at a variety of ways that people watch wildlife. People feed wildlife, observe wildlife, and photograph wildlife. I am interested in the trends in these activities, particularly the growth in photographing birds and/or wildlife when compared to observation.

In 2001, there were 20,080,000 wildlife observers who left home to recreate, and there were 9,427,000 wildlife photographers. Ten years later, the number of wildlife observers had stayed relatively flat (a 1% decline to 19,808,000), while photography had grown by 31% (to 12,354,000 away-from-home wildlife photographers). Outings tracked a similar pattern. Observers spent 295,345,000 days in the field in 2001, dropping to 268,798,000 in

2011 (a decline of 9%). Wildlife photographers spent 76,324,000 days out in 2001, growing to 110,459,000 in 2011 (an increase of 45%).

Why is this important? The growth in wildlife and bird photography is helping mitigate for the losses in people observing or feeding birds. Photography is the engine that is propelling many toward nature in the 21st Century.

The next USFWS survey should be out in 2016. I am eager to see how the growth in wildlife photography is captured in the new report. The past five years have seen photography grow at an unprecedented rate. According to 1000 Memories, “Every 2 minutes today we snap as many photos as the whole of humanity took in the 1800s.”

There are over 350 million images posted to Facebook each day. What if only 1% of those images are related to nature? That’s still 3.5 million images being shared daily!

The rise of digital photography has breathed life into birding and wildlife observation. Photographers are doing much more than looking; photographers are chronicling. The



Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*),
Codrington Lagoon, Barbuda

ability to record and then instantly share what you see is a powerful influence in the ways that people are approaching nature. People are sharing experiences with their images. There is an ad hoc interpretation taking place, one that is introducing swaths of our population to nature in new and credible ways.

According to Neilsen, “Ninety-two percent of consumers around the world say they trust earned media, such as word-of-mouth and recommendations from friends and family, above all other forms of advertising.” What is a Facebook photo if not “earned media”? Look at the number of nature tour companies and destinations posting images in Facebook groups and other digital platforms. What could be a more perfect example of content marketing?

Consider this example. The Facebook page Texbirds focuses on rare birds seen in the state. The “rules on photos” from that page state that PHOTOS MUST SHOW SOMETHING, I.E. EARLY OR LATE SPECIES, UNUSUAL BEHAVIOR, UNUSUAL FOR LOCATION, ETC. PHOTOS JUST TO SHOW OFF A PRETTY PHOTO ARE NOT ALLOWED. IF YOU JUST WANT TO SHOW OFF YOUR PRETTY PHOTOS PLEASE JOIN THE BIRDS OF TEXAS GROUP FOR THAT (their all caps, not mine).

A “pretty picture” posted on Texbirds is likely to receive a curt criticism, not a com-

pliment. People interested in the beauty of nature, not just the odd or rare, are not welcome to share their experiences as reflected in their photographs. As a result, Texbirds, the original discussion group for Texas birders, has only 4,431 members as of October 2015.

The other Facebook group referenced above is Birds of Texas. Birds of Texas only requires that the photos be of Texas birds. Otherwise, any bird image is welcomed, no matter how common the bird. Birds of Texas has four times as many members as Texbirds (17,723). In fact, the Birds of Texas group, focused only on one state, has attracted significantly more members than the American Birding Association Facebook group (13,719 members) that covers the entire nation.

I see no reason for this trend not to continue. As more affordable digital cameras suitable for nature photography are brought to the market, the growth in nature photography will only accelerate. Digiscoping, even photographing with smart phones, is fueling this growth, as well. Demands for enhancements that are desired by photographers will only increase pressure on public land managers.

The USFWS, the resource agency that manages the nation’s wildlife refuges, has traditionally dumped all wildlife observers, feeders, and photographers into one bucket. This is no longer appropriate or meaningful. The needs and desires of photographers are not necessarily the same as those of observers. This segment of the wildlife recreation population has been relatively shy and hidden to date, but I doubt that this reticence will continue.

For those who have spent their lives promoting recreation as the path that leads people to nature, this revolution in nature photography could not be more welcomed. People are finding their ways to nature; they just aren’t following the traditional paths laid before them. Let’s hope that those agencies and institutions that are being confronted by this growth are prepared to nurture it to maturity.

Ted Lee Eubanks

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory

By Chris Eberly

The mission of the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory (hereafter GCBO) is the conservation of birds and their habitat in and around the Gulf of Mexico and beyond. GCBO was founded as a partnership to accomplish conservation through avian research and the protection of coastal habitat utilized as stopover by migratory songbirds. In 1992, to obtain funding for land acquisitions along the Chenier Plain of Texas, Houston Audubon Society (HAS) approached Phillips Petroleum Company for support. Phillips responded enthusiastically with a \$60,000 challenge grant. About the same time, The Nature Conservancies of Texas and Louisiana (TNC) were also working to protect the important habitat of the Chenier region. Amoco Production Company had pledged \$200,000 and land valued at over \$700,000 in support of that effort. In 1993, the conservation organizations (HAS and TNC) merged the two complementary initiatives, forming the framework for what is now the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory—a *long-range effort to protect birds and improve and protect their habitat along the entire Gulf Coast.*

After operating for four years as a joint endeavor between HAS and TNC, in Octo-



Felipe Chavez-Ramirez with an “urban” shrike

ber 1996, the founding partners of GCBO drafted a ten-year strategic plan for the observatory. Following that plan, the GCBO incorporated in the State of Texas and received its IRS 501(c)(3) status determination as of September 19, 1997. As an independent non-profit organization, GCBO has become recognized as an innovative organization, designing and conducting a significant number of large conservation projects, including migration studies, habitat enhancement, land acquisition, regional habitat mapping, and others. Our permanent headquarters are located in Lake Jackson, Texas, on a 34-acre tract of Columbia bottomland forest donated by The Dow Chemical Company. The **Cecilia Riley Avian Conservation Science Center** was completed and opened in August 2014, the culmination of the original strategic plan and a multi-year capital campaign. The Center is used for public education and volunteer-based avian monitoring programs, and also houses offices for the permanent staff.

The original Site Partner Network has now grown to include 74 partner sites around



Chris Eberly attending a meeting about coffee and conservation in Colombia



The Dow Black Skimmer colony

the Gulf of Mexico in all 5 U.S. states, five Mexican states, and western Cuba. Our current three-year strategic plan focuses on three main program areas: Land Protection, Avian Research and Monitoring, and Education and Outreach. GCBO is not a government-funded organization. We must raise funding for all our programs through memberships, donations, foundations, and grants.

Our **Land Protection** program encompasses land acquisition, restoration, and easements. GCBO is a member of the Texas Land Trust Council in order to stay up-to-date with the current state of conservation easements

in Texas. Our main activity, however, comes from two of our endowments. *The Land Acquisition Endowment* is used to assist our Site Partners with acquisitions, easements, and restoration action. The most recent grant from this endowment was to The Nature Conservancy of Louisiana as match for their North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant to acquire 5,436 acres of bottomland hardwood forests in the Atchafalaya River Basin. The *Tropical Forest Forever Fund*, the other endowment, is used for acquisitions in the tropics that benefit North American migrants as well as tropical species. Grants are



Smith Point Hawk Watch tower Photo by Joe Fischer



Sue Heath with banded adult American Oystercatcher

made to conservation organizations in Latin America or U.S. organizations with a proven record of conservation in the tropics.

We awarded two **Tropical Forest Forever Fund** grants in the past year. Reserva Las Galarias, Ecuador, was launched in 1998 with the purchase of a small farm of 19 acres. With the most recent acquisition, the reserve has grown to encompass 1,275 acres of continuous and protected cloud forest habitat ranging from an elevation of 5,740 feet up to 7,870 feet. Reserva Las Galarias protects five important water systems which serve as the source of water for native wildlife as well as for downslope communities. The reserve is located along the equator within the parish of Mindo, a two-hour drive northwest of Quito, and provides habitat for 25 Chocó endemics and eight bird species categorized by the IUCN under some level of threat. The reserve also serves as annual stopover and overwintering habitat for Nearctic-Neotropical migra-

tory bird species. We also partnered with *American Bird Conservancy* and *Fundação Biodiversitas*, on a 958-acre acquisition in the dwindling Atlantic Forest of Brazil. The acquisition is part of the now 2,539-acre Stresemann's Bristlefront Reserve. The Atlantic Forest stretches along the Brazilian coastline



Seeing a Ruby-throated Hummingbird up close and personal at the Xtreme Hummingbird Xtravaganza



Summer Bird Camp participants learning about bird banding

from the state of Rio Grande del Norte south to Rio Grande do Sul, reaching inland as far as Paraguay in the south. Coinciding with dense human development, the Atlantic Forest has been reduced to less than 8% of its former extent, in fragmented patches, and in some places has almost disappeared completely. After being identified as an Alliance for Zero Extinction site, the Stresemann's Bristlefront Reserve was created in 2007 by the Brazilian conservation group *Fundação Biodiversitas* and is the only known site for the Critically Endangered Stresemann's Bristlefront, where fewer than 10 individuals have been found. In addition to Stresemann's Bristlefront, the Leal tract also protects 12 vulnerable bird species, 16 globally threatened species and the remaining population of the Banded Cotinga.

GCBO's **Avian Research and Monitoring** program focuses on species and habitat on the Texas coast. Dr. Susan Heath is the primary shorebird and waterbird researcher, and Dr.

Felipe Chavez-Ramirez, a renowned crane biologist, handles most terrestrial/upland bird research. The Gulf of Mexico population of American Oystercatcher is much smaller in number than the Atlantic coast population, and our knowledge of the ecology of the Gulf oystercatchers is also smaller. Our research on oystercatchers has helped us gain insights into the unique life history of the Gulf coast population compared to the Atlantic coast—for example, they are non-migratory and nest on small islands in bays. GCBO collaborates with groups like the *USFWS Texas Mid-Coast National Wildlife Refuge*, *Audubon Texas* and *American Bird Conservancy* on projects involving Eastern Willet, Wilson's Plover, Snowy Plover, and larger-scale Beach-nesting Birds work. GCBO staff all participate in monitoring what is perhaps the largest Black Skimmer nesting colony on the Texas coast, if not the entire Gulf of Mexico. Skimmers have been nesting in the middle of The Dow Chemical Company's Plant A in Freeport for almost 50

years. The 2015 nesting season saw a record 2,187 adult skimmers and 980 nests!

As the Whooping Crane population slowly increases, wintering whoopers are spending more time off of the *Aransas National Wildlife Refuge* and other protected lands. GCBO is studying wintering crane behavior to better understand how cranes forage and spend their time on these privately-owned lands. This knowledge helps us better communicate with landowners about the compatibility of cranes with cattle grazing. Another species with shift-

ing demographics is the Loggerhead Shrike. An increasing number of shrikes are nesting in urban areas. Our urban shrike study will help us determine if urban habitats are a population sink or if they are as productive as more “traditional” rural habitats. We have also coordinated the Smith Point Hawk Watch for 19 years. Smith Point juts into the east part of Galveston Bay, providing a natural funnel for migrating birds. In addition to tens of thousands of raptors, migrating passerines stream past the watch tower on their southward migration.



GCBO Influence Map (March 2015)

Founding Director Retires



After leading GCBO from infancy to authority on Gulf of Mexico bird conservation, Cecilia Riley retired on July 31, 2015. Associate Director Chris Eberly was promoted to Executive Director. Through Cecilia's leadership GCBO developed its Site Partner Network, established permanent endowments for land acquisition, assisted partners throughout the Americas in protecting more than 17,000 acres of tropical forests in 10 countries as well as thousands of acres in the U.S., conducted many avian field studies, spear-headed the completion of the new Avian Conservation Science Center and much more. Congratulations on 18 years of making a difference for birds and habitats around the Gulf of Mexico Cecilia!

Finally, monthly bird banding at our headquarters in Lake Jackson, started 10 years ago, occurs on the third Saturday of every month and offers an opportunity to the public to see birds in the hand.

Our old headquarters building is being repurposed as a GCBO Field Office and we will now have the capability to house seasonal interns onsite. We are talking with several universities (including La Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León in Mexico) and our Scientific Advisory Board about expanded internship opportunities.



Education and Outreach programs at the GCBO headquarters and sanctuary site take advantage of the natural outdoor classroom and our new conservation

science center. Carol Jones coordinates our education and outreach program. Our created wetland on a former softball field provides the perfect environment for using dip nets to examine aquatic macroinvertebrate life and viewing wetland birds during our annual Summer Bird Camp for 8-11 year olds. The *Cradle of Texas Master Naturalists* use the sanctuary for training classes, and Master Gardeners add their expertise to the landscaping and plantings. *Brazosport Birders*, the “unofficial bird club” of GCBO, now holds meetings in the Avian Conservation Science Center. Our annual Spring Fling at the Neotropic Bird Sanctuary in Quintana is a

month-long celebration in April where we invite birders to come and enjoy spring migration on the immediate coast. Our Birdies for the Birds golf tournament is held at nearby Wilderness Golf Course, and includes a team prize for most bird species observed during the tournament. The fall migration of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds is spectacular along the Texas coast. Our Xtreme Hummingbird Xtravaganza on the second and third Saturdays each September celebrates this phenomenon with banding, activities, food, and a native plant sale. Carol also oversees the *Friends of GCBO volunteer corps*, without whom none of these events would be possible. GCBO and our volunteers met many of you when we hosted the Spring 2014 TOS meeting in Lake Jackson. To all of our dedicated volunteers (many of whom are TOS members)—Thank You!

We invite you to stop in the next time you are birding the upper Texas coast. Or come by to see our monthly bird banding, shop in our Nature Store, or just say hi. GCBO will continue to serve a network of site partners around the Gulf with a wide range of land protection activities, birding, and research opportunities. We will also engage the community with new and exciting programs, educate visitors about migration, and protect species in need. GCBO cannot accomplish any of this without the support of volunteers and members. We look forward to adding you as a valued supporter.

Chris Eberly
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Red-legged Honeycreeper at Estero Llano Grande State Park, Weslaco

By Mary Gustafson, Ruben Rangel, Dorian Anderson, Tiffany Kersten, John Yochum.

On November 27, 2014 Estero Llano Grande State Park Ranger Ruben Rangel spotted an unfamiliar bird in the Tropical Zone at Estero Llano Grande State Park. Word was passed through park staff to a small group of local birders talking strategy with human powered Big Year birder Dorian Anderson. Curious, I led the parade to where the bird was seen in the park host area. It only took a minute before a female plumaged Red-legged Honeycreeper appeared and quick photos were obtained. The bird's very long decurved bill and dull green plumage allowed me to identify the bird in the field, and others independently identified the bird to species using Howell and Webb (1995).

The bird was quite small, perhaps a little longer than an Orange-crowned Warbler, and somewhat pot-bellied. The plumage was dull green above and only slightly paler below. The underparts were streaked with faint dark streaks on the upper breast and a darker line behind the eye. The bill was the most striking feature, long and sharply decurved at the tip, all black with a brighter gape. The legs were dull dark reddish. The tail was solid green. The median coverts had a narrow paler edge contrasting with the rest of the wing coverts. The wings, tail, feet, and nails all appeared to be in excellent condition. There was not a lot of detail that could be reported on this fast-moving drab little bird, but we did our best to note what we saw in the field.

The pale tipped greater coverts and dull red legs we noted in the field were confirmed in the photos. These characters age the bird as a young of the year. Given the excellent photos that were obtained, we knew the issue for the TBRC would be more the question of origin than the question of identification. Having a known juvenile makes it easier to argue on a wild origin. The species breeds within 250 miles of the Texas



border in the area of El Najarno in San Luis Potosi, Mexico and is at least partially migratory. The appearance in Weslaco in November could represent a bird migrating in the wrong direction.

With any species that has been maintained in captivity the question of origin becomes an issue for consideration by the members of the records committee. Long-time birders in the area reported seeing Red-legged Honeycreepers in cages in Mexico near the border. Texas Bird Records Committee members independently determine whether to question the possible origin for rare bird reports and for potential new species for Texas. There are many factors that may be taken into account by reviewers. I have used the species migratory status, pattern of vagrancy, logical date, in good plumage and soft parts condition, age, and pattern of vagrancy to evaluate records.

The Red-legged Honeycreeper was shy and retiring during most of its short stay at Estero, with records from the initial discovery on November 27 through a park bird walk on November 29, 2014. An estimated 100 people got to see the bird, but many times that looked for it unsuccessfully.

In mid-September it was announced that the TBRC had voted to approve the record, with a 9-0 vote in the first round. The record now moves on to the American Birding Association Checklist Committee for review as a potential first for the United States and the ABA area.

Howell, S.N.G. and S. Webb. 2005. *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*. Oxford University Press.

Mary Gustafson, Ruben Rangel, Dorian Anderson, Tiffany Kersten, and John Yochum. (MG) live4birds@aol.com

Quail Research In South Texas: A Legacy Spanning Four Generations

By Leonard A. Brennan, Fidel Hernández, Eric D. Grahmann and Fred C. Bryant

South Texas is the Last Great Habitat that supports extensive populations of wildlife on a vast expanse of relatively unspoiled rangeland. This is particularly true for wild quail, especially the Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*), hereafter bobwhite. A recent Geographical Information Systems survey indicated that there are about 11 million acres of habitat that supports wild bobwhite populations in the South Texas Ecological Region (Brennan et al. 2014). This is more bobwhite habitat than exists anywhere else within the



Graduate research assistant Carter Crouch poses with a captured bobwhite in Karnes County. His research is focused on documenting the influence of bobwhite habitat restoration in areas formerly dominated by bermudagrass. Photo Credit: Carter Crouch



Former undergraduate researcher Blake Martin, traps and radio-marks a Scaled Quail in LaSalle County, 2012. Scaled quail have been declining in Texas for at least the past 2 decades. Our research is focused on understanding the factor(s) contributing to this decline. Photo Credit: Eric Grahmann

species' distribution. Given the widespread and ongoing declines of bobwhite populations throughout their geographic range, this is an important factor when it comes to bobwhite conservation.

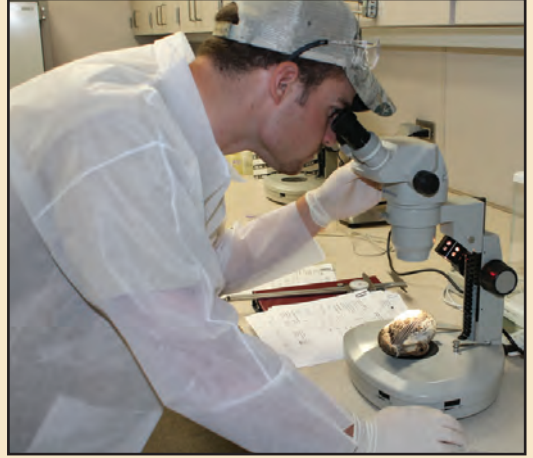
There is a unique set of circumstances that resulted in South Texas becoming one of the Last Great Places for quail, and as a result quail hunting. These circumstances involved



Graduate research assistant Michelle Downey releases a bobwhite in Shackelford County. Her study is focused on the translocation of wild bobwhites as a way to augment population declines. Photo Credit: Michelle Downey



Graduate research assistant Kelsey Davis attempts to locate a radio-marked scaled quail in Dimmit County. Her research is focused on understanding the impacts oil and gas exploration may have on both bobwhite and scaled quail. Photo Credit: Eric Grahmann



Former graduate research assistant Andrew Olsen searches for parasites in the intestinal tract of a northern bobwhite. Our knowledge of quail parasites is relatively scant compared to knowledge on other aspects of their ecology and life history. Photo Credit: Ben Olsen

compatible land use trends, as well as economic and cultural factors, that came together in such a way that one of the results was a major and sustained research initiative on wild quail in South Texas. The primary objective of this research initiative is to develop a scientific basis for the sustained management of wild quail populations in South Texas. Because of their generous financial support over



CKWRI Assistant Professor of Research Eric Grahmann, performs a call-back survey for Montezuma Quail in the Davis Mountains. He and his graduate research assistant Zack Pearson are working on updating the known geographic distribution of this secretive quail species in Texas. Photo Credit: Fidel Hernandez



Graduate research assistant Josh Pearson poses with a captured bobwhite in Real County. His research is focused on quantifying patterns of bobwhite habitat use in the Edwards Plateau where few studies have been conducted. Photo Credit: Josh Pearson



South Texas Natives program director Forrest Smith poses with a handful of seeds being used for a restoration project for northern bobwhites. Over 32 plant releases have resulted from this program and are being used to restore quail habitat across Texas.

Photo Credit: Eric Grahmann

many decades, hunters have been a fundamental component of quail research in South Texas. However, the quail research conducted in South Texas during the past eight decades also represents a massive contribution to applied ornithology. The purpose of this essay is to provide an overview of the factors that have led up to the current state-of-the-art of quail research in South Texas.

A Happy Accident of Land Use Trends

South Texas encompasses about 8,080,000 hectares or 20,000,000 acres that are dominated by a diverse array of rangelands. Soils are predominately deep sands, heavy clay or



Banding a female bobwhite and preparing to attach a radio-transmitter. Photos: Leonard A. Brennan Collection

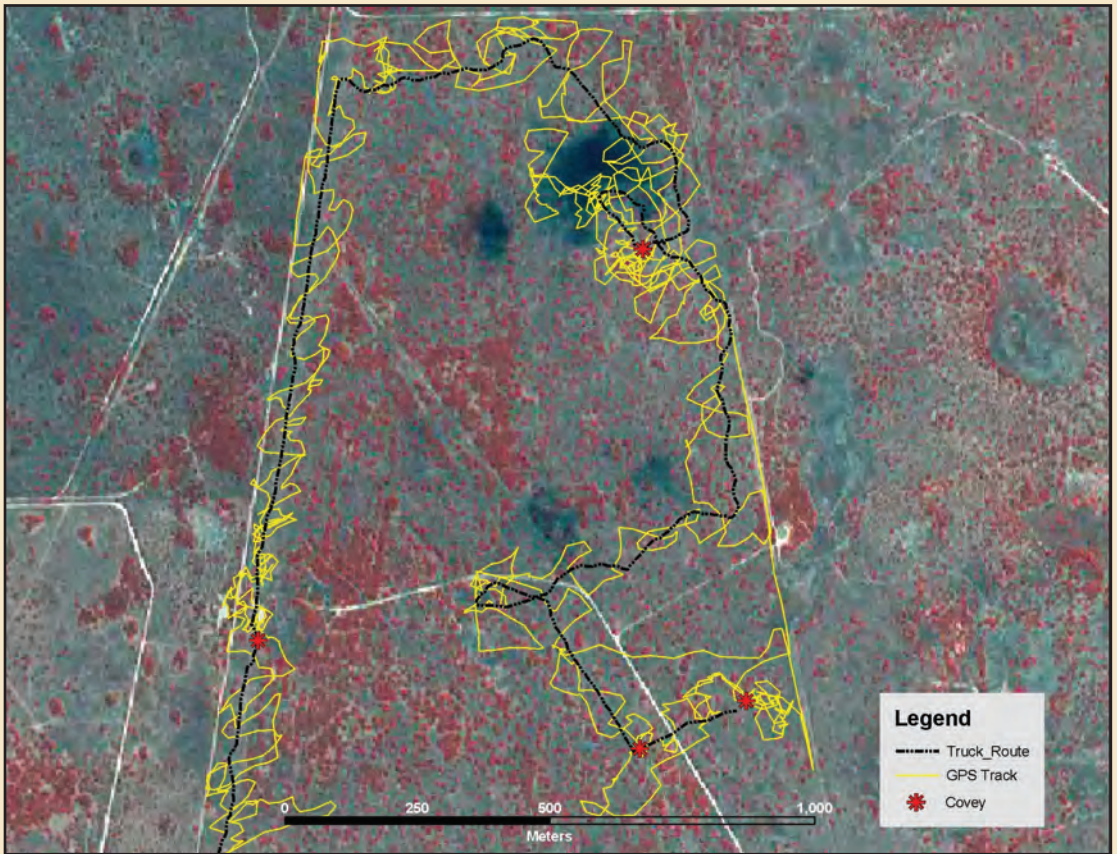


Graduate student locating a radio-marked bobwhite. Telemetry has revolutionized our understanding of many basic aspects of Northern Bobwhite life history during the past 25 years. Photos: Leonard A. Brennan Collection

exposed limestone ridges, and, for the most part, are not suitable for row-crop agriculture. These relatively poor and in some cases very



Pointing dogs with GPS units attached to their collars. This technology has allowed us to quantify many aspects of bobwhite hunting and better understand how to manage hunting pressure and sustain wild quail populations in South Texas. Photos: Leonard A. Brennan Collection



Track-log map of a bobwhite hunt in South Texas. Note the vast amount of area not covered in the middle of the pasture. This information will allow a manager to direct the next hunt to focus on the middle of the pasture, rather than re-hunt along fence rows and pasture edge. Photos: Leonard A. Brennan Collection

shallow soils have ended up being a blessing in disguise for quail and wildlife conservation because for the past two centuries livestock ranching was pretty much the only economically viable land use for most of the South Texas Region. The Rio Grande Corridor has been lost to agriculture, and several hundred thousand acres of blackland prairie west of Corpus Christi are farmed for cotton and sorghum, otherwise, the vast majority of South Texas remains in native rangeland vegetation that supports diverse and abundant populations of wildlife.

The livestock ranching community of South Texas developed some unique cultural aspects that have had a profound influence on quail and wildlife conservation in this region. Because property ownerships relate back to large Spanish Land Grants, ranch

sizes were large (40,500 to >325,000 hectares or 100,000 to >800,000 acres), and many of these historic large ranches remain intact today. The poor soils and unpredictable rainfall in this semi-arid, subtropical region also meant that large tracts of land were required to develop and sustain economically viable cattle herds. After World War II, oil and gas exploration in South Texas resulted in additional sources of income that allowed many of the large ranches in this region to remain intact, and still produce relatively large herds of cattle. None of these factors were intentionally planned. They were an accidental by-product of what the land would produce for the people who settled there.

Starting in the 1970s, a system of fee-leasing for hunting access started to develop in South Texas. Ranch owners began to realize that



Counting quail from a helicopter using a laser range-finder. Helicopters are an efficient and effective platform for collecting distance-sampling data that can be used to estimate bobwhite population densities in large South Texas pastures. Photos: Leonard A. Brennan Collection

along with cattle, oil and gas, leasing hunter access to game animals could be an additional source of significant income. Today, lease fees for hunting are an important economic driver in the region. Hunters typically fly in to South Texas on private jets from urban locales such as Houston, Dallas, San Antonio and elsewhere. They readily pay up to \$38.00 per hectare or \$15.00 per acre per year for hunting leases that range from 400 to >20,000 hectares or 1,000 to >50,000 acres in size. Cattle production, by contrast, nets about \$13.00-15.00 per hectare or about \$5.00-8.00 per acre per year in this region. It is not uncommon for hunters to also purchase grazing rights along with hunting rights so that they, rather than the landowner, make the decisions about how many cattle, if any, are present on the pastures that they lease for hunting.

In this current socio-economic situation, ranchers have become both motivated and pressured to destock pastures in order to

either restore or maintain nesting cover and other habitat components for bobwhites. In many cases, the native bunchgrasses that quail prefer for nesting are the same grasses that cattle prefer to eat. While cattle and quail can certainly co-exist, it is usually not possible to maximize stocking rates and still produce abundant quail numbers for hunting, especially over the long-term. Thus, during the past 15-20 or so years, many ranches have either completely destocked, or have dramatically reduced stocking rates.

THE CULTURE OF QUAIL RESEARCH IN SOUTH TEXAS

Modern quail research in South Texas began eight decades ago when Val Lehmann was hired by King Ranch as a wildlife biologist in the 1940s. Lehmann spent four decades collecting and synthesizing information on bobwhite populations and bobwhite management in South Texas. His book *Bobwhites in*



Male bobwhite roosting in a mesquite tree during middle of the day. Although bobwhites roost on the ground at night, during periods of peak summer heat during the middle of the day they roost 1-3 meters above the ground in woody vegetation to mitigate heat stress. Photos: Leonard A. Brennan Collection

the Rio Grande Plain of Texas” Lehmann (1984) contains more than a dozen chapters on bobwhite life history in the semi-arid, sub-tropical portion of its geographic range as well as an

array of chapters on management that cover topics such as inventory, brush management, grassland restoration, fire, harvest regulation, and so on. This information was not just gleaned from his activities on King Ranch, but also from information from more than a dozen other ranches in South Texas over the years.

Lehmann’s conclusion about predator control and quail management is particularly interesting because he considered that it was largely a waste of time because annual variation in precipitation swamped any difference that might accrue from the reduction of predators. This conclusion was borne out by comparative field experiments, and sophisticated systems modeling. Lehmann’s message of the importance of habitat for quail conservation took root and spread throughout South Texas. You can find his book in the living rooms and-or offices of ranches across South Texas.

The two editions of “*Beef Brush and Bobwhites*” by Guthery and Hernández and Guthery provide a wealth of material that documents management for bobwhites in South Texas. The first edition of “*BB&B*” is long out of print; many tattered copies were



Hunters are a fundamental component of bobwhite conservation in South Texas. They have contributed millions of dollars to fund research that is developing a scientific basis for quail conservation in South Texas. Photos: Leonard A. Brennan Collection



Bobwhite habitat is the key to bobwhite conservation. Maintaining large blocks of native range land with tall grasses and a mix of weeds and woody vegetation provides habitat for scores of other species of grassland birds, small, medium and large mammals and iconic reptiles such as the Texas Tortoise. Photos: Leonard A. Brennan Collection

bleached out by sun from years of riding on the dash boards of pickup trucks. The second edition updates facts and perspectives learned over the past two decades, and contain a case-history of Laborcitas Creek Ranch, which is arguably one of the state-of-the-art quail operations in South Texas today. The second edition of “*BB&B*” was recently recognized with an Outstanding Publication Award from the Texas Chapter of The Wildlife Society.

The encyclopedic “*Texas Quails: Ecology and Management*” summarized virtually everything known about wild quail in Texas up to the first decade of the 21st century. The chapter on quail management in South Texas by Hernández et al. and managing a South Texas hunting camp by Howard also document the legion of habitat management efforts directed at benefitting bobwhites in South Texas that are rooted in a deep tradition of classic wildlife research. The chapter by Howard is particularly compelling because only about a third of it pertains to actual hunting camp management; the rest is about habitat and what their hunting

camp operation does to keep it in shape for quail, even though they only lease, and do not own, the 12,000 hectares (or 30,000 acres) of pastures where they hunt.

Few people realize that quail research and management has developed a continuous eight-decade track record in South Texas that spans four generations of researchers who have been dedicated to developing a scientific basis for sustaining wild populations of quail. Lehmann was the first generation quail researcher in South Texas (1940s to 1980s), followed by Guthery (second generation; early 1980s to 1997), then third-generation Hernández (1999-present) and Brennan (2000-present), and now a fourth generation scientist hired by the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute in 2013 (Grahmann).

SOUTH TEXAS QUAIL RESEARCH TODAY

The Richard M. Kleberg, Jr. Center for Quail Research at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute (CKWRI) at

Texas A&M University – Kingsville is home to the largest research program in the world that is focused on the habitat and population ecology of wild quails. During 2012, the Quail Research Program at CKWRI received the Group Achievement Award from the National Bobwhite Technical Committee. Background and details related to this award can be found at: http://bring-backbobwhites.org/newsroom/fact-sheets/doc_view/148-2012-nbtc-proceedings

DONOR SUPPORT

Consider the following endowment support (\$4,750,000 and growing) from private individuals interested in quail conservation in South Texas:

Endowed Center for Quail Research	\$2,500,000
Endowed Chair for Quail Research	\$1,000,000
Endowed Quail Professorship	\$ 500,000
Endowed Quail Fellowships (3)	\$ 750,000

Annual donations that support our research operating expenditures for quail research are typically in the range of \$200,000 to more than \$300,000 per year. During the past decade and a half, we have garnered more than \$4,000,000 in grants and contracts for quail research projects from state and federal resource agencies and private foundations. The Quail Associates Program, which is a network of private donors, contributed more than \$700,000 to quail research and related activities. (Brennan 2011).

The overall track record of quail research productivity in South Texas has been remarkable by any standard. In addition to six books from academic presses, well over 100 peer-reviewed scientific journal articles have been published by quail research scientists in South Texas. The results of these articles have been made accessible to managers through magazine articles, extension publications and newsletters.

We presently have three full-time faculty members with Ph.D.s dedicated solely to quail research, five other faculty who often use quail as their model species for research, 2 post-doctoral scientists, and 20 graduate students who are all active with quail and quail-related research projects and initiatives throughout South Texas. Important focal research areas include the role of exotic grasses, habitat restoration, habitat improvement in the context of brush management, grazing management, water management, oil-and-gas development and molecular genetics.

Study locations for all of these research projects occur on private landholdings in South Texas. Consider, for example, the recent paper by Tri et al. that documents the relationship between rainfall and annual quail production in South Texas. The data in this paper came from 31 private ranches in 16 counties who contributed more than 72,000 quail wings over eight years.

IN SUMMARY

South Texas clearly represents the Last Great Habitat with respect to bobwhites, and as such has been recognized as a Legacy Landscape for Northern Bobwhite Conservation by the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative. The legacy of quail research in South Texas was an important component of this designation. While bobwhites continue to be the main focus of quail research in South Texas, we are also undertaking important research projects on Scaled Quail and Montezuma quail in order to understand factors limiting their populations. Additional details about quail research in South Texas as well as lists of publications can be found at <http://www.ckwri.tamuk.edu/research-programs/richard-m-kleberg-jr-center-for-quail-research/>

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Birding the Sod

By Bob Friedrichs

It was July 31st, 2015 and I was on my way from Houston to Palacios for the weekend. I thought I'd stop by the Saha Sod Farm in Matagorda County to see what was happening. Shorebird migration had started and there were various reports of Buff-breasted Sandpipers (BBSA) already showing up along the Texas Coast. While it is expected to find a few BBSA in very late July, I was anxious to see if they had already arrived in large numbers.

As I pulled off of the main road and made my way down the gravel-surfaced Bieri Rd, it was just starting to spit rain and there were lightning strikes in the distance. Just a quick look, I thought. Even as I pulled up to the sod farm, without lifting my binoculars, it was obvious that there were lots of birds present; primarily sandpipers, gulls, grackles, and starlings. I put my binoculars up, focusing on the nearest group of shorebirds. I noticed several groups of cinnamon brown shorebirds with medium long yellow legs, pumping their heads pigeon-like as they did the BBSA high-

step across the sod. I continued studying the birds, trying to get an accurate count for my eBird report, but with every thunder clap the birds flushed from the field, making a loop around the field and finally settling in another spot; it was equally frustrating and exciting! At this point the rain was coming harder and blowing into the car window. I called it 'good' and left with a rough estimate of over 100 Buff-breasted Sandpipers on this last day of July. They were back and in relatively large numbers for this early in the migration season.

Sod farms mimic the short grass settings that existed when fires used to sweep through the 6 million acres of coastal prairies. Buffalo also used to roam the coastal prairie and created short grass settings when they grazed the tall coastal grasses to their nubs. Interestingly, irrigation from the sod farms also serves to somewhat offset the hundreds of thousands of acres of depressional wetlands that have been lost to agriculture and development along the Coast.

Wide-open fields with a possibility of finding short-grass specialists make sod farms fun



The 'Bermuda Triangle' sod farm in Matagorda County, Texas



Mountain Plover at the 'Bermuda Triangle' sod farm in Matagorda County, Texas

to bird. The sod fields are usually along quiet backroads with little or no traffic allowing ample time to scope the fields and really study the birds. Plus it's so easy to find the birds in these big wide-open short grass fields, right? Well, not always. You would be amazed at how hard it can be to see a tan brown Mountain Plover resting in a sandy strip alongside a harvested stretch of sod, even with a scope. They are practically invisible! It can be a real challenge trying to re-find a bird you had seen just the day before or even a few hours earlier. While the bird could have gone into an adjoining stubble field, it is equally possible that the bird is resting out of sight or just blends really well into the sod landscape.

There is one large sod farm along South Citrus Road in Matagorda County that Ron Weeks has dubbed, the 'Bermuda Triangle' sod farm. We have found Mountain Plovers, out of season American Golden-Plovers, out of season Buff-breasted Sandpipers and Prairie Falcons that were there one moment and gone the next. This 'Bermuda Triangle' sod farm has on more than one occasion frustrated an intrepid birder who unsuccessfully searched for a previously reported and potentially exclusive bird, during the annual Matagorda County - Mad Island Marsh Christmas Bird Count.

There are over 60 sod farms in my patch: Matagorda, Wharton, Jackson and Victoria

counties. These provide lots of opportunities to bird the sod. Obviously, the Lone Star State has many sod farms available for birding, all holding birds at different seasons and in varying degrees. If you are looking for a sod farm in your own patch, the Internet or something called a phone book is an obvious choice. Even eBird sometimes has turf farms marked as 'hot spots'. Google Earth is a very handy tool for locating sod farms. Look for the distinctive thin rectangular shape of sod fields that are usually greener than the browner adjacent row crop fields or pastures. You may also notice thin strips (of harvested sod) in the green fields, and zooming in for closer examination may reveal irrigation wheeled pipes. As you know, Google Earth images are sometimes dated, so to really know if there is sod in the location you suspect, then you have to 'put some gravel in your travel' and check it out yourself.

Sod farms are not all created equal. Some are large while others are small. Some are remote and others are along busy roadways. The shapes of the farms vary. Some of the farms are recently irrigated and contain standing water and others are dry. Some are the recipient of generous doses of fertilizer and pesticides and are a beautiful dark green, the very picture of lushness, while others look like they have been largely neglected except for the occasional mowing. The grass or turf varieties are many: 5-6 varieties of Bermuda Grass, and equal numbers of varieties of St Augustine Grass, sometimes all at the same farm. Even the soil under the sod can be sandy loam or clay-based 'black gumbo'.

Does all of this matter? Will any sod farm hold the birds that you are targeting? The answer to this question is "No". Some sod farms hold birds, sometimes lots of them, while other farms do not. So, how to make sense of all of this? Which of the sod farms in your patch do you check for birds? Many have asked these important questions, and though the answers are elusive, we're learning more all the time.

There are a number of factors that are important when assessing sod farms for potential birding hot spots. I have observed that Buff-breasted Sandpipers especially seem to prefer larger farms with many fields and those located in more remote areas. Varied substrate seems important. For example, fields with strips of sod harvested or even a mix of closely cropped grass and some slightly taller grass (but no more than a couple of inches) seem best. The presence of water seems to be a key ingredient since birds tend to congregate in areas recently irrigated. Again, my personal observation is that birds have a preference for Bermuda Grass varieties over St. Augustine varieties. This is especially evident at a large farm with both species of grasses present; the birds are almost always on the Bermuda. At farms planted exclusively in St. Augustine, the birds do not seem to be as abundant. Perhaps Bermuda requires less pesticide and fertilizer to keep it looking good and thus holds more invertebrate food. Regardless, my observations suggest that the birds prefer Bermuda Grass and do so by voting with their feet.

Of course, even after all of this analysis of anecdotal information, the birds will inexplicably be in fields that do not meet the criteria of a 'preferred field'. Perhaps even though two fields look the same, meeting most of the

previously mentioned criteria, food and water is more abundantly available to the birds on the fields in which they are present. Like all creatures, birds need water, food and safety/shelter. Find all of these at a given location, sod farm or not, and you will find the birds.

Some may have a different opinion but to me the premier avian species of the sod are the 'grasspipers': Upland Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper and my favorite, the Buff-breasted Sandpiper. This 'grasspiper trifecta' has been the object of much searching and the source of much joy for those successful in their quest. It is a real treat to find them resting and recharging their batteries at Texas sod farms during the spring and fall migrations. These amazing long distance fliers breed on the open arctic tundra and spend the off season in South America. The Buff-breasted Sandpiper for example can travel over 18,000 miles in a single year between their breeding and wintering grounds, pausing for a few weeks in the spring and fall to briefly grace our Texas sod farms and other short grass habitats.

One of the dangers faced by 'grasspipers' when congregating at the sod, is birds of prey. On multiple occasions and with lots of Buff-breasted Sandpipers present, I have seen a Peregrine Falcon perched on the sod, enjoying a meal of BBSA tartar. Another unexpected danger to the birds of the sod is power transmission lines. Late in September of 2014, at a sod farm with a large power transmission line along the south edge of the



Upland Sandpiper at a sod farm in Matagorda County, Texas



Buff-breasted Sandpiper at sod farm in Matagorda County, Texas



Pectoral Sandpiper at sod farm in Matagorda County, Texas

farm, I observed at least 3 dead Buff-breasted Sandpipers. The remains of these birds were laying neatly in a row underneath the power transmission lines. Also present on days just before or after this, were birds dragging a leg or a wing. I suspect that these were young birds since it was late in the migration period; as they were rallied into the air by other birds and rose on a strong tail wind, they very likely ran into the nearly invisible wires stretched some 40-50 feet in the air.

‘Grasspipers’ are just a few of the exciting birds that can be found on sod farms.

If standing water is present from a recent rain or irrigation, it is common to find Least Sandpipers and Western Sandpipers as well as Dowitchers. (Note: Some species like Western Sandpiper and Black-bellied Plover make daily movements from the coast at high tide so inland sod farms rarely have these species). Spotted Sandpipers or Solitary Sandpipers can sometimes be found along the ditches



Spotted Sandpiper at sod farm in Matagorda County, Texas



Black-bellied Plover at sod farm in Matagorda County, Texas

bordering the sod fields. Long-billed Curlews, Baird’s Sandpipers and White-rumped Sandpipers (spring only) are also visitors that you might see at the sod. The plover clan consisting of Killdeer (year round), Black-bellied Plover, (spring, fall and winter), American Golden-Plover (mainly in the spring) and rarely Mountain Plover (winter) use sod farms on a regular basis. In fact, it is a very rare trip to the sod that does not yield at least one member of this plover clan. Of course, regular residents of the sod farms include Killdeer, Horned Lark, Eastern Meadowlark, and a host of blackbirds, cowbirds, grackles and starlings.

At other times of the year, you may find swallows, nighthawks, Black Terns, or Laughing Gulls working above the turf. Raptors such as American Kestrel, Merlin, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed or White-tailed Hawks may be seen overhead or resting on the turf or irrigation wheels. Somewhat regularly Bald Eagle may also be seen at the sod farms or adjacent habitats in the Matagorda County area.

The winter shift typically includes Savannah Sparrows, American Pipit and a few Sprague’s Pipits along the edges of the sod fields. White-fronted, Snow and Canada/Cackling Geese can use the sod farms for forage and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks have been observed roosting in these fields. Though they are extremely unusual in our area along the Coast, longspurs are possible



Horned Lark at sod farm in Matagorda County, Texas

on the larger sod farms; I'm still looking for these denizens of the wide open spaces.

Some of my favorite sod farms, regardless of season, are the King Ranch Turf Farm on County Road 118 in Wharton County (29.2109,-96.0065) and the Dacosta Turf Farm along Boehm Road in Victoria County (23.7341,-96.8556). In Matagorda County, the Saha Sod Farm on Bieri Road (28.8089,-96.0948), the Triangle Turf Farm on Shepard Mott Road (28.8689,-95.9309) and the Hanson Sod Farm on South Citrus Road (28.7726,-96.1057) are usually 'crowd pleasers' as well. In fact, the Hanson Sod Farm (aka 'Bermuda Triangle' sod farm) is within the count circle of the Matagorda County—Mad Island Marsh Christmas Bird Count and during 2014 produced The 'Count Bird', a very late and lonely Buff-breasted Sandpiper. It also produced the first January record of Buff-breasted Sandpiper for North America (see related article on page 32 of Volume 47 of the *Bulletin of the Texas Ornithological Society*).



Sprague's Pipit along the edge of a sod farm in Matagorda County, Texas

Though we would like to think that sod farms are solely there for the benefit of the birds and for our birding enjoyment, these farms represent the livelihood of a very industrious bunch of hardworking landowners; sod farming is a very labor intensive proposition. On a trip to the sod farm it is very common to see workers irrigating, fertilizing, mowing or harvesting the sod. While many sod farms are adjacent to public roads, please remember that they are private property and that they are the means for putting bread on the table of the farmer's family. When at a sod farm, stay out of the field and off of the service roads through the fields. As a safety precaution, pull your vehicle onto the shoulder or apron of the public road. If the farmer or a worker stops to ask you questions, remember to be respectful and take the opportunity to tell them about the amazing birds you are watching and about the importance of their fields as a stop-over or wintering habitat for our feathered friends.

In addition to providing enjoyment for us, these farms provide very important stop-over, wintering or even breeding habitat for a variety of birds. Do some homework to find farms with the right conditions and you never know what you might see. "Birding the Sod" can be quiet, relaxing and great fun. So, get out there and *bird some sod!*

Bob Friedrichs
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Golden Plover at the 'Bermuda Triangle' sod farm in Matagorda County, Texas

Birding The Far North Country In Winter With TOS

By Jim Hailey

Each February for the past six years TOS has teamed up with Kim Risen of Nature-Scape Tours to bird the far North Country for winter species. The trip focuses on owls, grouse, and other boreal specialties. While you may think it crazy to go to Duluth, Minnesota in February, and you might be right, but the opportunity to see Great Gray, Snowy and Northern Hawk owls up close is worth the effort. I have been in Minnesota at this time of year when the high was near 50 and the low at 42 below zero, and that was an experience. On occasion we have added Boreal Owl to the list as well. And last year we were treated to a returning Gyrfalcon for the first time since TOS began these trips. Most of our time is spent driving the roads of Sax-Zim Bog or the Northern Shoreline of Lake Superior and venturing over to Superior, Wisconsin looking for Snowy Owls that are easily seen there. Some years we have seen as many as 7 or 8 Snowy, 6+ Great Gray, 5+ Northern Hawk Owl, and one year we found 3 separate Boreal Owls for very close up views.

And owls are not the only focus. We also target 3 species of grouse—Sharp-tailed, Ruffed and Spruce. On only one or two occasions on past trips have we failed to add these beautiful birds to our trip list. On several occasions we have been treated to observing the Sharp-tailed Grouse on their lek, a real treat. Yes, in late February these birds are already looking for a spring fling and are



serious in their strutting. While in the bog we can easily add Boreal and Black-capped Chickadee, Pine Grosbeak, Northern Shrike, Rough-legged Hawk and Evening Grosbeak. Some years, when the pine cone crop is right, we can expect to find both Red and White-winged Crossbills. And, one of my favorites, Bohemian Waxwings.

If the conditions are right, that is, there is open water at the harbor in Duluth, we can add both species of goldeneye, ducks and mergansers, gulls, including, Thayer's, Glaucous, and Slaty-backed gulls. One year we had all three of these gulls on a small block of floating ice. Besides the opportunity to see these highly sought after species, we get to experience the beauty of this boreal hinterland in all its glory dressed in its winter coat. This is a trip worth taking.

Jim Hailey
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Book Reviews



A Naturalist's Guide to the Texas Hill Country

By Mark Gustafson

Paperback (flexibound): 360 Pages; Publisher: Texas A&M University Press (April 2, 2015); Dimensions: 8.4 x 6.3 x 0.9 inches; Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds; ISBN-10: 1623492351; ISBN-13: 978-1623492359; Price: \$17.56 Amazon.com

This guide is a worthwhile addition to a naturalist's library. The book has an easy-to-follow format with logical organization of information and has many, high quality photos. It works well for new residents and visitors as an introduction to the Texas Hill Country's rich diversity of plants and animals. First is a summary of the geological history of the 19 counties in this region, including the influence of limestone in much of the area. Since all life is dependent upon and influenced by water; a description of the streams, reservoirs, and aquifers is include in this section of the guide.

Following the introduction, the major portion of the book is devoted to the most common selections of plants and animals found in the Texas Hill Country. The author has included 44 trees and shrubs, 45 wildflowers, 27 additional plants, 8 fungi and lichens, 56 birds (in family order), 21 mammals, 25 reptiles, 11 amphibians, 13 fishes, and 43 invertebrates. To cover this much material in a single volume, the author has elected to discuss only the most common of each of these categories. For example, the section on birds does not include migratory species, even though there are many for the Texas Hill Country. Each species has a photo and a descriptive paragraph with one or sometimes two species per page.

From a birder's perspective, this guide is not extensive enough or detailed enough to be used as a field guide, but is more suited to be used as a planning guide or library reference. There is only a single photo of each bird with a limited description that includes some field marks, typical behavior and habitat. Only a few of them mention differences between male and female and plumage changes for the time of year.

The final section of the book is a brief description of 32 State Parks and other natural areas. General locations are listed for each, but detailed information on park facilities and trails is not included.

This guide to the Texas Hill Country is easy reading, with well formatted text and many beautiful, generously sized photos. The introduction with geology and history has information that even long-time residents would find interesting.

Lila Theis

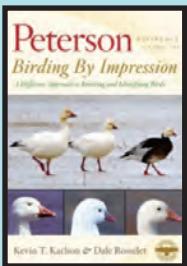


Bird Watching for Kids: Bite-sized Learning and Backyard Projects

By George H. Harrison

Paperback Price: \$14.95 ISBN: **9781623438500** Publisher: **Willow Creek Press** Year of Publication: **2015** Page Count: **79** Shipping Weight: **1.75** pounds

George H. Harrison provides informative text and appealing photos for children from ages 8 to 14 years. Young readers will learn how to lure a multitude of birds within easy viewing range by providing appealing backyard habitats including feeders, birdhouses and birdbaths.



Peterson Reference Guide to Birding by Impression: A Different Approach to Knowing & Identifying Birds

By Kevin T. Karlson and Dale Rossetet

ISBN: **9781623492113** Publisher: **Texas A&M University Press** Year of Publication: **2015** Page Count: **306** Shipping Weight: **2.25** pounds Format: Flexi-binding Price: \$27.95

Today, according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, more than fifty million Americans feed birds around their homes, and over the last sixty years, billions of pounds of birdseed have filled millions of feeders in backyards everywhere. Feeding Wild Birds in America tells why and how a modest act of provision has become such a pervasive, popular, and often passionate aspect of people's lives. Each chapter provides details on one or more bird-feeding development or trend including the 'discovery' of seeds, the invention of different kinds of feeders, and the

creation of new companies. Also woven into the book are the worlds of education, publishing, commerce, professional ornithology, and citizen science, all of which have embraced bird feeding at different times and from different perspectives. The authors take a decade-by-decade approach starting in the late nineteenth century, providing a historical overview in each chapter before covering topical developments (such as hummingbird feeding and birdbaths). On the one hand, they show that the story of bird feeding is one of entrepreneurial invention; on the other hand, they reveal how Americans, through a seemingly simple practice, have come to value the natural world.



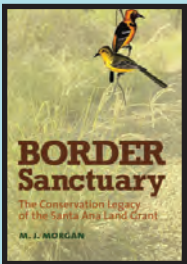
Feeding Wild Birds in America: Culture, Commerce & Conservation

Paul J. Baicich, Margaret A. Barker, and Carroll Henderson

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Border Sanctuary: The Conservation Legacy of the Santa Ana Land Grant

By M. J. Morgan

Hardcover: 240 pages; Publisher: Texas A&M University Press (August 10, 2015);
Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 9.4 x 0.9 inches; Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces ISBN-10:
162349320X ; ISBN-13: 978-1623493202 Price \$32.00 Amazon.com

Located in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge is a well-known hotspot for birding in south Texas. The new novel *Border Sanctuary* by M.J. Morgan reveals a wealth of information about Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge.

The book follows the passage of time and delves into the historic ecology, politics, weather, and land management have shaped Santa Ana into the ecosystem it is today.

M. J. Morgan does a great job captivating readers about the history and upbringing of Santa Ana NWR over a considerable timeline. The four hurricanes of 1933 are referenced in detail along with the alteration of the habitat throughout the refuge as well as the impact on the local economy. Every biome in Santa Ana NWR is experienced in this read, from forest to chapparal and from patchy grasslands to wooded ponds. Morgan leaves readers in awe as he described trees at Santa Ana NWR surpassing 300 years old. Highlighting these biomes are many grasses and tress, mammals, and birds which are identified to the species, leaving the reader informed about identifying various plants and animals found in Santa Ana NWR. At times the reader will feel as if they are walking through these habitats as Morgan describes the nature of the refuge.

Border Sanctuary helps readers grasp a deep understanding of what Santa Ana NWR has been like over the years since the early 1800's. The spectrum of historic facts in this book is welcoming to all nature enthusiasts. Birders will be immersed in rich splendor as over 1,000 Hooded Oriole nests are being depicted at Santa Ana NWR back in 1948. Morgan talks about the regularly nesting Rose-throated Becards which were documented in considerable numbers from year's past. The Rose-throated Becard's numbers throughout Santa Ana NWR is something that present day birders can only dream of.

When massive clearings of Santa Ana NWR took place in the 1940's, brush piles of 10-15 feet tall were put compiled. The depressions in the land resulted in pooling water which drew in flocks of White-



tipped Doves and Red-billed Pigeons. White-tipped Doves are a south Texas specialty, never found in huge numbers but possible in varied woodland habitat. The Red-billed Pigeon is a bird that has been reduced to areas of the upper Rio Grande Valley over the years as a result of loss of habitat in the lower Rio Grande Valley. The idea of flocks of Red-billed Pigeons is something that birders cannot fathom in south Texas, as Red-billed Pigeons are seen in small groups at their very largest concentrations. Fact after fact in addition to the well-documented sightings leaves the reader connected to Santa Ana NWR.

As most residents of the Lower Rio Grande Valley know, the Plain Chachalaca is a unique brown bird which produces quite a ruckus of vocalizations. Chachalaca population fluctuations are described well in Border Sanctuary. Early findings of chachalaca are also noted as Morgan quotes field journals from generations past. "As late as 1910, a respected ornithologist who visited south Texas reflect this attitude. 'Lo, behold!; he wrote in his field guide, 'sitting not fifteen feet over my head in a patriarchal ebony tree, were ten or more of a stupid looking aves as I ever gazed upon.'" The citations and many quoted sentences are a special touch found in every chapter of Border Sanctuary.

The birds at Santa Ana National NWR are one of the main attractions to this area. In addition to the birds are several elusive cats which included ocelot, bobcat, jaguars and jaguarondi. The lives of these beautiful animals is presented in a way that makes one feel the pain of the extirpation of these cats throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

The history of the Santa Ana NWR's landscape is well stated in both text and photographs. Several pictures from the 1940's show the condition of the landscape as weather patterns altered the region during this timeframe. One black and white photograph shows West Lake during the 1944 drought. This lake is now known as Cattail Lake, which contains water in the present day. Recently-taken color photographs show parts of Santa Ana NWR in its present state, with lush vegetation along the trails and lakes as this site is known for.

The hunting history of this region is described in great detail from how the hunters lived their lives all the way to the translations between the Spanish and English wording with various hunting-related words. Escopeta (flint-ignition hunting muskets) were used by Spanish and Mexican ranchers traditionally throughout this region. Morgan talks about how skunk was a delicacy to the early settlers exploring the nearby woods. Border Sanctuary offers a great deal of information and enjoyable reading for so many nature enthusiasts.

As ranching advances in the book, Morgan talks about the horses that were found throughout the Alamo and Santa Ana NWR lands. In the 1800's, "Indians and Mexicans were involved in 'river piracy' up and down the Rio Grande. They were stealing horses as well as cattle." Border Sanctuary provides the many angles of history that took place throughout far southern Texas. The combination of history, nature, and a degree of politics can be seen in every chapter in this book.

Border Sanctuary is a great read for anyone looking to learn about the upbringing and unique history of Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. If you are interested in birding, hunting, and the past times of how the land of far-south Texas (particularly Alamo) came to be, Border Sanctuary will prove to be a great read. I thoroughly enjoyed learning about the ecological history in and around Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge through this book.

Erik Bruhnke

The Goose, the Egg, and the Threatened Gull

By Kent Rylander
Photos Angelika Schlager and
Mark Bartosik

If one gently removes an egg from under an incubating goose and places it in front of her, she will stretch out her neck and move her head and neck back and forth to retrieve it. This behavior, *egg retrieval*, doesn't appear particularly surprising or interesting until we look at it more closely.

Egg retrieval resembles our own behavior when we pull an object towards us, but the similarity between retrieving an object in geese and humans is superficial. In an experiment conducted during the last century, European investigators removed an egg from under a goose, incubated it, and raised the gosling indoors. When this goose matured and was incubating her infertile eggs they

removed an egg from under her and she retrieved it, just as geese do in the wild.

Clearly *egg retrieval* is innate, or genetically based; in contrast, how humans retrieve an object, or if we retrieve it at all, depends on our mood, our past experiences, what we have learned, the consequences of retrieving it. For us, retrieving and object is a volitional behavior.

Moreover, humans retrieve an object in different ways—by pulling it, grabbing it, pushing it—whereas the goose retrieves the egg in only one way: she always extends her neck, cups the egg as best she can with her bill, and with rhythmical movements pulls the egg to her. The point here is that egg retrieval is basically *invariable*, or stereotyped, whereas when humans reach out and grab an object the process can be quite variable.

Egg retrieval, by being *innate* and *invariable*, belongs to a special category of animal behavior called a *fixed action pattern* (FAP). This extremely useful concept is a building block for more complex behaviors such as the threat display in gulls discussed below.

FAPs have other features. If the egg rolls away from its path because of an irregularity in the ground, such as a slope, the goose compensates by steering or guiding it back towards the nest. This is called a *steering mechanism*, which of course isn't unique to FAPs, but which does show that the goose is in some sense aware of its behavior even if it's genetically based.

What is surprising is the following. If, while the goose is retrieving the egg, the experimenter snatches the egg away from her, the goose *continues making the egg retrieving movements* even though now there is nothing to retrieve! This rather bizarre behavior indicates that once a FAP is set in motion it will continue to run its course even in the absence of the stimulus that triggered it.



Greylag Goose retrieving an egg. Retrieving movements are a FAP; egg is the releaser



In sparrows, a seed on the ground is a releaser for a “feeding” FAP



Gull showing threat display that probably evolved from a drinking FAP

The stimulus that triggers a FAP is called a *releaser*, and releasers are usually easily identified when one observes a FAP. For example, a thirsty gull standing by a pond takes a drink. For convenience we may call this the “drinking” FAP. The releaser for the drinking FAP is water (corresponding to the egg in egg retrieval) and the drinking FAP is, specifically, dipping the head into the water and lifting the neck upwards, with the bill pointed towards the sky (movements that correspond to egg retrieval movements).

This FAP allows the water to flow down the throat and it exhibits the same characteristics as the egg retrieval FAP.

We see FAPS and their releasers everyday. In sparrows, a seed on the ground is a releaser for a “feeding” FAP—picking up seeds with the bill; a rodent is a releaser that incites a hawk to reach out and grab it with its talons (a FAP for capturing animals); and the open mouth of a begging fledgling is a releaser for the returning parent to shove a worm into its mouth (shoving the worm being a FAP). All are innate, invariable, and have a steering mechanism

The other characteristic of a FAP, that it continues after the releaser has been removed, is a bit troublesome because in most FAPs the movements are so short and rapid that it’s difficult to remove the releaser before the FAP has been completed. Fortunately egg retrieval is slow enough so that the releaser, the egg, can be snatched away and we can watch the FAP as it continues to completion without the releaser.

FAPs, among other behaviors, may be the building blocks of displays, which are postures or movements that function to communicate or send a signal to another animal, either of the same or another species. Courtship displays, for example, signal to attract a mate; threat displays warn an animal that threatens to invade a bird’s territory; and appeasement displays signal to an ag-

gressor that an animal is submissive and will not fight.

Since the FAP for drinking in birds—lowering the bill into water and lifting the head and neck—closely resembles the threat (upright) display in gulls, theoretically this display could have evolved from the drinking FAP. Certainly it is more efficient to evolve a display from a FAP than to “invent” new, unique movements for a display.

The problem is that if the display looks too much like the FAP from which it evolved, the two might be confused. How would a gull flying over another gull’s territory know that the resident male is sending a hostile signal rather than merely drinking?

As FAPs evolve into displays, a process known as *ritualization*, they become modified in at least three ways. These can be seen if one compares a video of a gull drinking and the same gull during its upright posture (threat display).

Even though the drinking FAP is invariable, there are still slight variations in timing and directness of the movements. However, in the display this is not the case: the movements are more stereotyped, so much so that it would be difficult to mistake the display for drinking.

Second, the “drinking” movements in the display are exaggerated. The head is lowered more deliberately and afterwards is stretched upward in an exaggerated manner. One might say that this movement is almost “theatrical.”

Third, the display often pauses at some point. Drinking birds, of course, pause when their head is lifted so the water can trickle down the esophagus, but the pause is not held stiffly, as in the display.

These three mechanisms reduce the ambiguity of the signal, thereby reducing the chances that a bird flying overhead will mistake a displaying bird for one that is drinking.

Displays can evolve from other movements as well as FAPs. These include intention movements and reflexes. In all cases the same three mechanisms reduce the ambiguity of the signal, and in all animals. A bull might put its legs out when it intends to walk or run; this intention movement evolved into the highly exaggerated aggressive display when the bull paws at the ground in the bullring. It is stereotyped, exaggerated, and it pauses.

Birds fluff their feathers when cold. This is a reflex that evolved into the courtship dis-

play in which a bird lifts its crest to attract a potential mate.

Thus, the analysis of egg retrieval in geese, one of the first FAPs studied in detail, led to the identification of numerous other FAPs throughout the animal kingdom, many of which are hypothesized to have later evolved into displays.

Kent Rylander
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Another example of gulls exhibiting threat behavior



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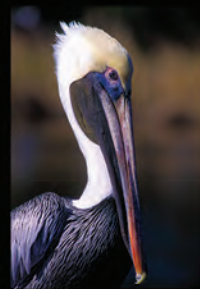
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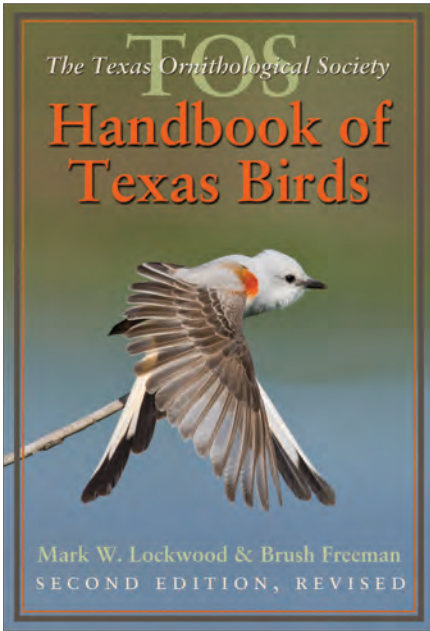


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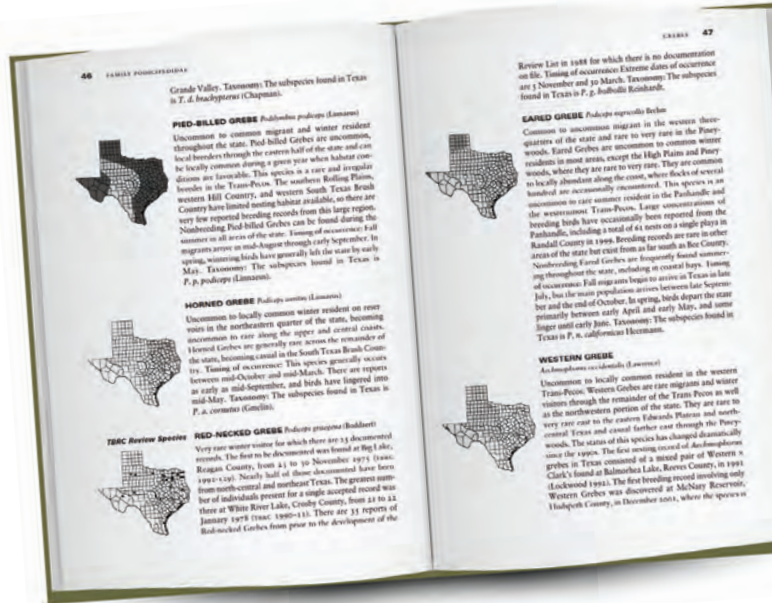
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