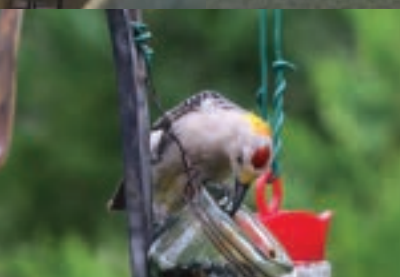
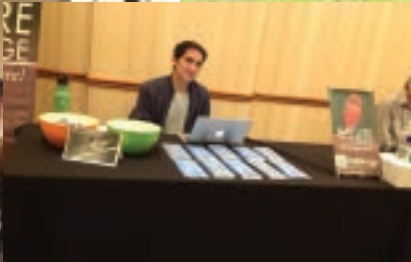


TEXAS *Birds*
ANNUAL



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TEXAS ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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TEXAS *Birds* ANNUAL

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So its December 2014 I am thinking this could be the year to attempt a Big Year for Texas. I count 490 species for Texas that are not review species. The record for Texas is 522... did I make it? See article on page 17.

Editor's Introduction

Seems like just yesterday I was putting together TEXAS BIRDS ANNUAL. This year had me concerned as I did not receive a single response from my plea for articles in the various Facebook pages. Without paying for material we really rely on the good will of our membership.

At last, with some help from Bron Rorex and numerous emails by the editor, material started to appear in my in box. As usual it's a healthy mix starting with a visit to *Warbler's Woods Bird Sanctuary*, then to some off shore pelagic observations, only to return to the mainland to learn about Buff-bellied hummingbirds. Two rare lutino green parakeets were the subject of much study—and note taking—by Charles Alexander. Tucked amongst this material is a lengthy account of David Sarkozi's "Big Year", the results of Fred Collins bulbul census, and a glimpse of the annual "Birds in the Brush" art competition in Laredo.

Despite initial concerns the issue came together. Hopefully it contains something to your liking.

So sit back, relax, and enjoy this year's issue of *Texas Birds Annual*...

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Belted Kingfisher. Art by Lynn Delvin

Front Cover art: Cover Black-necked Stilt. Leslie De Leon's submission to the Birds of the Brush Art Contest 2016.

WARBLER WOODS BIRD SANCTUARY UPDATE

By Don Schaezler

In 2011 Dan Smith wrote a very kind article about us entitled “Warbler Woods Comes of Age.” He wrote at a very propitious time: the Spring of 2011 was during a severe drought period, and it was also an amazing year for migrant birds at Warbler Woods Bird Sanctuary (WWBS). Dan wrote very kindly and described a particularly good day when Victor Emmanuel was here with Peter Matthiessen, a famous conservationist and author. It was a day when we truly had to duck to avoid being hit by busy warblers.

The birds keep coming, maybe not as spectacularly as in 2011, but still exciting for us and our many visitors. Just recently, for example, during a very hot oppressive July day, I had a Greater Roadrunner approach the feeding area at the Old Barn and later a pair of Northern Bobwhites at the ground-feeding area near the Chat Pond. Every day in June and July we hear summer resident Chuck-Will’s-Widows, Painted Buntings, and Yellow-billed Cuckoos. This year we had our first sighting of a Black-throated Sparrow. And for the past several years we have occasionally heard and seen Hutton’s Vireos. None of these is a rare bird, but we and a lot of energized visitors get a lot of fulfillment from these and our other resident, migrants, and nesting birds.

Since 2011 we have made a number of improvements: more trails, all-weather loop trails, covered blinds, new feeding locations with water features, bigger parking lot, etc. We have not done this alone; in fact it is our amazing volunteers who have done the heavy lifting and the tedious chores. That’s what this update is about—the volunteers and their projects.

LINDHEIMER ROOTS

Lindheimer Master Naturalists (LMN) members have spent almost uncountable

hours at WWBS in the last five years. They have cleared trails, widened the driveway canopy space, brought in mulch, planted and tended to gardens, etc. Two specific, beautiful projects were:

- A memorial to Ann Tubbs, a long time friend of WWBS and member of LMN
- A covered bird blind, our first on the slope of the dam at Scout Pond

LMN has adopted WWBS a site for special attention and regular work parties. They have cleared trails of fallen limbs and trees (especially in Spring 2016 following repeated strong storms), moved plant materials to brush piles, tended gardens, and helped feed the birds.



First covered blind at WWBS, by LMN, fencing by Texas State University Students.

EAGLES SOAR

We are proud to be the recipients of seven Eagle Scout projects over the years, including five since the Spring of 2011. Scouts have added new trails, built a Chimney Swift Tower, created all-weather trails, constructed covered blinds, benches, and a special trail to the Old Oaks with a bridge over the (mostly dry) creek!

Some of these projects are shown in the photographs accompanying this article.

These projects were capped by the latest



Scout Tower, Aldo Leopold-inspired Bench (top) and Scout Bridge (bottom)—parts of three Eagle Scout projects.

effort which utilized 73 workers (scouts, other Church youth, and a few adults) to build five benches, clear trail-side areas to host the benches, and perform service work on our trails as well as trash pickup. A work force of 73 is amazing!

In addition to Eagle Scout projects, Boy Scouts often volunteer for trail work, trash



73 Volunteers for support of Eagle Scout Project.



Cub Scouts and Leaders gather at WWBS for volunteer work.

pickup, brush pile replenishment, and other chores to help earn badges.

Scouts and their leaders are incredible people. Scouts earning their Eagle award demonstrate creative and organizational skills as they conceive, design, plan, and coordinate their public service projects. We salute you scouts!

WILDLIFE SOCIETY AT TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Another amazing group of young people has been the students from Texas State University, who have performed many days of service at WWBS. These students have often been introduced to Warbler Woods by their ornithology professors during field trips as part of coursework. Many of those students also belong to the student Wildlife Society, which has sponsored their volunteer trips to Warbler Woods.



Texas State University Students preparing to plant easement.

A MEADOW MEMORIAL

A very special volunteer project was sponsored by Thomas Moore Feed Company, a company renamed in honor of the owner's son. Thomas was killed in an ATV accident at the age of 12 a few years ago. Matt Moore, his father, and owner of a feed company, ST Mill Feed, learned about us at the TOS meeting in Katy a couple of years ago. He asked what he could do to create a memorial for his son, and we planned a photo blind with a significant waterfall/water feature and a support for multiple feeders. ST Mill Feed, dba Thomas Moore Feed Company, furnished or paid for supplies and also furnished a work crew and heavy equipment to install a spur water line, haul rocks from the fields to decorate the waterfall, and construct the blind. Volunteers from Travis Audubon Society and many others contributed to this effort.

This was not a one-time donation; TMF continues to supply WWBS with bird food for our five major feeding locations: Thomas' Meadow, the Old Barn, the Sparrow Hole, the Chat Pond, and Sandi's Hideout. Local volunteers, including those from LMN and San Antonio Audubon Society help us keep the feeding areas fed (almost) each day.



Thomas' Meadow in operation 2016.



First group of avid birders to use the blind Note signage by LMN and all-weather trail from an Eagle Scout project.



Thomas Moore Feed Co. personnel building the blind, and water features at Thomas' Meadow; sign by LMN.

DEVELOPMENT "PROGRESS"

We can all see the accelerating conversion of agricultural and scenic lands to roof tops and siding. In 2014 we had a small measure of success in minimizing the environmental impact of a new subdivision planned to be about 600 ft from our fence line. We convinced the Planning Commission for the City of Cibolo to write an ordinance to require

any builder on that 92-acre tract to comply with our suggestions. Those development requirements included saving potential Black-capped Vireo habitat, reducing the number of houses built, creating a water feature from the retention pond, limiting construction activity during bird nesting season, using low-impact lighting, etc. We had a lot of help from birding friends across the State, including professionals such as Jim Sinclair and Brush Freeman.

This was a small step, but it demonstrated the potential for developers, engineers, city officials, and citizens to act reasonably and responsibly to help mitigate development impacts.

As Aldo Leopold said “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot... wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher ‘standard of living’ is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free.” Written in 1940, this statement has even more urgency and applicability today.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

In 2016 The Black-throated Sparrow became the 291st species on our “yard list.” Another special bird in 2016 was the Black-headed Grosbeak (one or two) that was seen on numerous occasions between February and May.

Our parking lot is now paved, and yellow lines show people where to park. This will be a great improvement next Spring when our parking becomes overtaxed and chaotic.

Our native grass establishment program has borne some late fruit. We are two years past the official end of our TPWD-assisted project, but each summer brings and encour-

aging number of native grasses that we initiated by sowing seeds. Hairy Grama and Side-oats Grama have been particularly visible, and there have been a few Green Sprangled Top and Little Bluestem plants as well.

Plants and wildflowers in particular were amazing this year because of Fall and Spring rains. Summer has brought a good butterfly showing, including almost daily sightings of Zebra Longwings (*Heliconius charithonia*). We have a few *Passiflora lutea* vines that help with their life cycle here.

The bridge over the (mostly dry) creek has been improved with ramps, and a new trail added so that the golf carts can travel over the creek in style and reach the Old Growth Forest.

THE FUTURE

We will continue to fund WWBS as long as is necessary and feasible. We have been paying about 75% of the expenses, with 25% coming from donations.

We have taken the first steps toward preserving Warbler Woods Bird Sanctuary as undeveloped land well beyond our lifetimes. Those steps may encourage new funding opportunities and will allow us to exercise our Vision and Mission, which we define as:

WWBS Vision: groups of people enjoying God’s creations in a wild environment for lifetimes to come.

WWBS Mission: to provide a Wild Space to an urban population, particularly children, who need a place to learn about and enjoy Nature.

COME ENJOY!

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Red-vented Bulbul Survey; A Citizen Science Project of the Houston Audubon Society

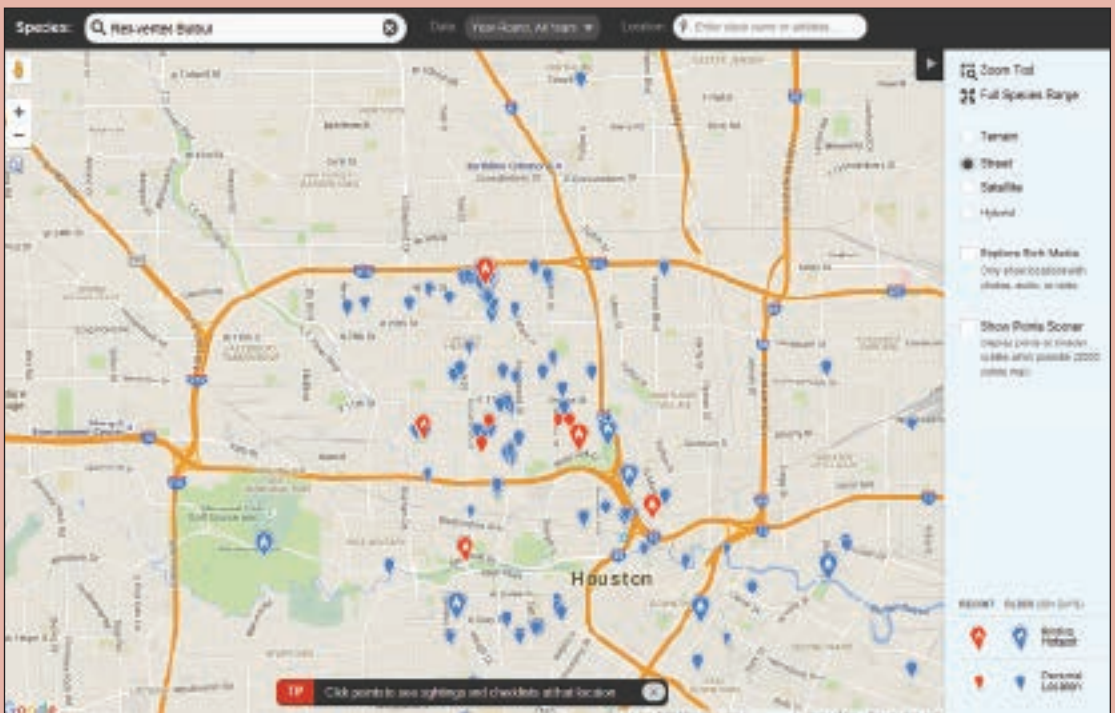
By Fred Collins and Kendra Kocab

INTRODUCTION

The Red-vented Bulbul, which has become established in the Heights area of Houston, is a species native to the Indian sub-continent from Pakistan east to Bangladesh, Assam and Myanmar, and south to Sri Lanka. This species has become established on South Pacific Islands including New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa. It is also now found at various ports in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. How it arrived in Houston is unknown, but in other places it is thought to have arrived via ships. It could have been introduced via escaped or released birds from the pet trade. It was first reported in Houston in 1958. However, the birds are not particularly noticeable and were not shown in any North American field guide until Sibley's Second Edition in 2014. John Berner, the regional reviewer for eBird Harris County, made a pioneering decision to include bulbuls in the regular Harris County list. This has allowed the cataloguing of nu-

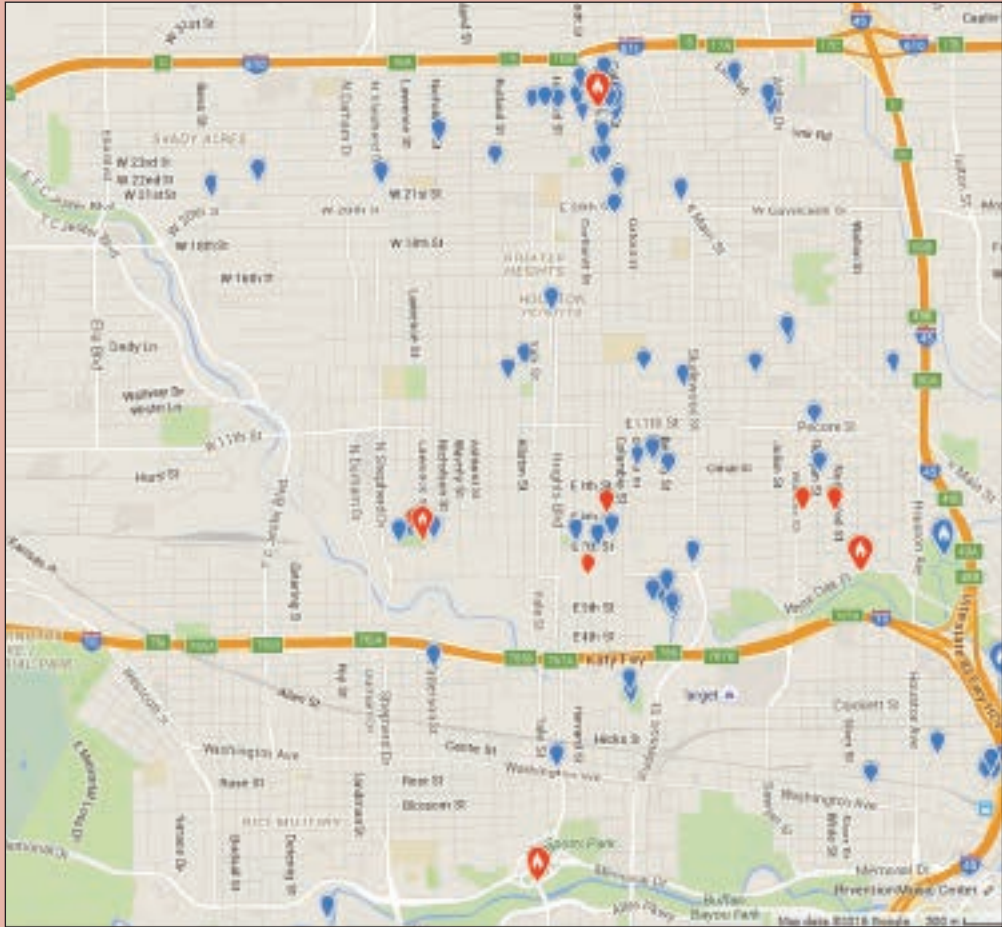
merous sightings from 2010 through 2016, many of which might otherwise have gone unreported. The plethora of recent sightings during the last five years suggests an increase in the Heights population and an expansion well beyond the Heights. Dan Brooks of the Houston Museum of Natural Science used citizen science-generated data collected between 2008 and 2012 to analyze the status of Red-vented Bulbuls in the Houston area. His results were published in the *Wilson Bulletin* in 2013. Based on the data from Dr. Brooks' paper and the information available on eBird, we felt tracking the birds in a more systematic fashion was needed. We hoped to answer two questions: Is the distribution of Red-vented Bulbuls in the Heights patchy or uniform, and what is the magnitude of the population?

Below is the eBird data for Red-vented Bulbuls prior to the survey, with the exception of three of the red markers on this map that are reports by survey teams during the June 11, 2016 survey.



The picture below shows more detail of the area that was surveyed. Notice that there are areas (“holes”), with no sightings prior to the June 11, 2016 survey. Most noticeable is a large portion to the west, including Little Thicket Park in the northwest. Montie Beach

Park in the east central portion of the survey area is another hole. There are also relatively few sightings south of I-10, north of Buffalo Bayou. There are recent sightings (as noted by red markers) on Buffalo Bayou at the southern border of this area.



We hoped the survey would help determine if these holes represent a lack of birds, birders, or reports. We put out a call for people to participate and were pleasantly surprised that many local residents responded. One surveyor regularly birds Montie Beach Park and finds bulbuls there almost daily. He does not use eBird, so there are no accessible records of his sightings. We heard from several people that had bulbuls in their yards but were unable to participate on survey day. Records from these residents as well as other observations reported in Brooks’ 2013 paper would help fill in the eBird map extensively.

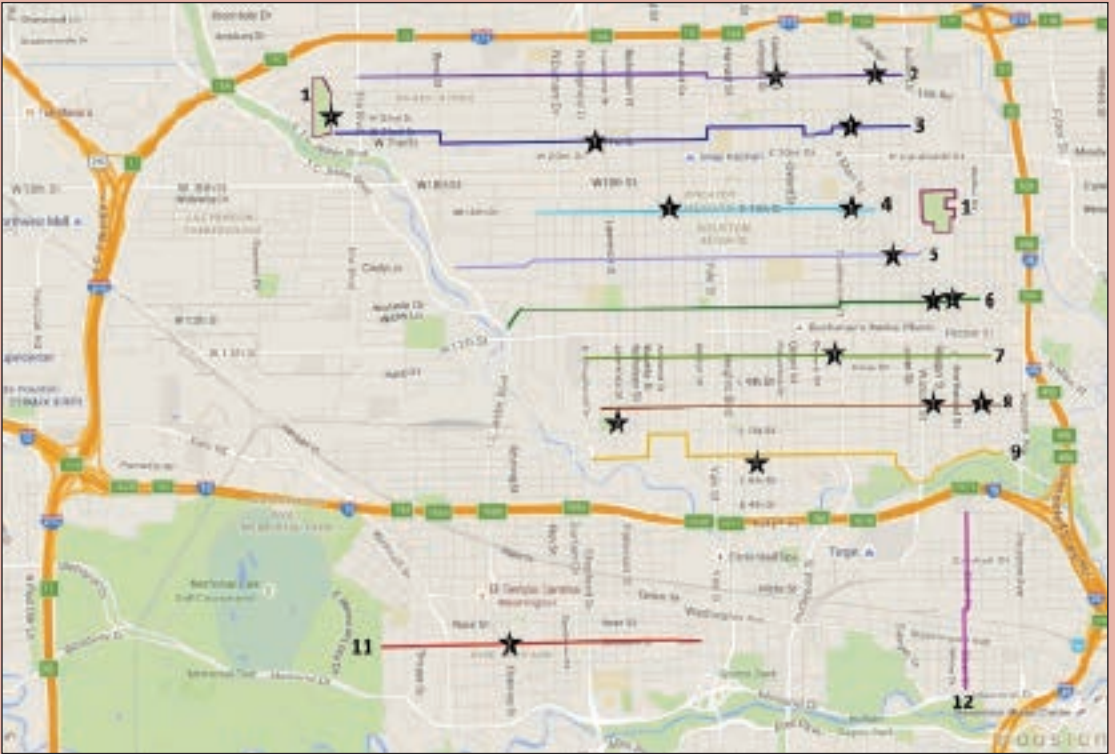
THE SURVEY

Eleven of the 12 routes, covering the Heights and two areas south of I-10, were approximately two miles long and were worked from east to west. One route consisted solely of Montie Beach Park and Little Thicket Park to accommodate a volunteer who was unable to walk two miles. Route 10 was not covered and is not included on the map below.

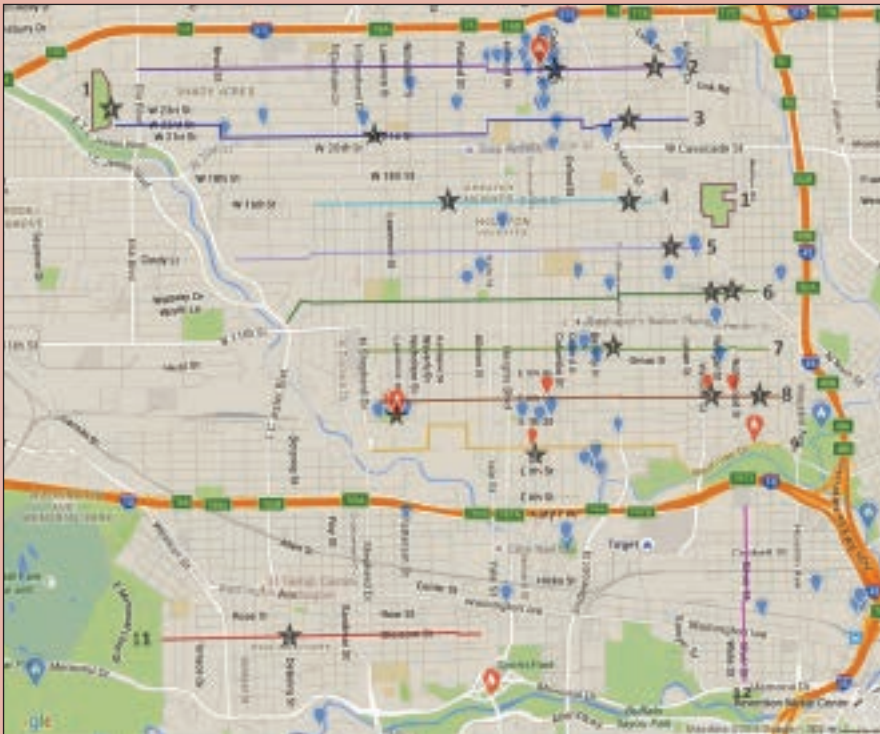
The 11 routes that were surveyed are shown in the picture below. A star indicates the location of each bulbul observation along with the number of bulbuls found there. The survey was done on June 11, 2016 from 8:00

a.m. until 10:00 a.m., and 21 people participated. One additional surveyor was only able to run his assigned route on June 10 but did

not locate any bulbuls. A total of 29 Red-vented Bulbuls were found during the survey, averaging 1.6 bulbuls per mile.



The map below is a composite of the eBird map, generated on June 13, plus the observations from the survey.



SURVEY FINDINGS

Route 1 contributed a new sighting of four birds in Little Thicket Park in the far northwest corner of the Heights. While no bulbuls were found in Montie Beach Park, the surveyor of this route finds them there frequently, so we know they occur in the “hole” east of N Main Street. Route 2 only found bulbuls in previously reported locations but had the highest number of birds found during the survey with six. Route 3 had bulbuls slightly east of other previous sightings and others well west, where there was only one nearby previous record. Route 4 was in the central portion of the Heights through a major hole in the map. This route found two birds near each end of the route, filling in that hole. Those surveyors also talked to residents who asked them about a dark gray bird with a comb that they regularly saw in their yard. They were shown a photo of a Red-vented Bulbul, immediately recognized it, and were delighted to learn the name of their mystery bird. Route 5 was also at the bottom of the central hole in the map and encountered one bird. Route 6 found three birds at locations previously unreported to eBird. These surveyors live near this route. Both have birds in their yards regularly but had not reported them previously. Route 7 also found a new location which was near several other previous sightings. Route 8 had four birds at two locations, neither location previously reported. Route 9 had two birds at one location. The surveyors reported that traffic noise on this route was a major problem. These birds, along with a report from a local resident responding to the survey solicitation, are in areas on White Oak Dr. with no previous or nearby reports. Route 10 was not covered and is not on the map. Route 11 south of I-10 was created in response to a local resident who was familiar with bulbuls because they regularly occur at her residence. She detected one bird on the route in the center of a neighborhood with no previous eBird reports. Route 12, also

south of I-10, was surveyed on June 10 by a resident who often sees bulbuls in his yard when fruit trees are ripe near that route. No bulbuls were detected during his survey.

Two survey routes discovered active nests. Route 2 had a nest in a pecan tree, while Route 3 found one in a sycamore tree. Route 8 suspected a nest in a magnolia tree but was unable to locate it. Finding two nests during the survey confirms that this time period is an active one for the species to breed.

Observers also reported birds perched in a wide variety of trees, bamboo and on utility lines. Observers noted the birds eating Chinese Tallow blooms and grapes.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey clearly answered the question: Is the distribution of Red-vented Bulbuls in the Heights patchy or uniform? The birds are more widely distributed than previous data had demonstrated. They are obviously utilizing patches of suitable habitat but the habitat is far more widespread than eBird records indicate. It would seem that observed birds are more often unreported than reported. Consequently, one could say the birds are common and widespread. They are found in all the parks where people regularly search, so one need not go wandering neighborhoods and people’s yards to find them.

As for the second question about the magnitude of the population, we are not able to make any conjecture from the survey results. The final tally of 29 bulbuls is somewhat unsatisfying, as we had hoped to find several times as many. The birds are difficult to detect. They were not particularly vocal and were not very aggressive in playback response. We suspect many (if not most) did not respond at all. Time of year plays a factor in that, as well as time of day. Also, we will never know what effect this spring’s tremendous rains had on population size, nest success, etc. The birds have a protracted breeding season stretching from March through September.



No one currently knows if this population is double brooded.

NOTEWORTHY

Bulbuls seemed to be more easily detected before 9:00 a.m. Nine of the 15 encounters with bulbuls during the survey occurred between 8:00 a.m. and 8:45 a.m. Of the six sightings that occurred after 9:00 a.m., three were at locations where bulbuls were known to occur by residents, prompting surveyors to go back and find them. Bird song generally dropped off significantly after 9:00 a.m.

It may be noteworthy to mention that records in eBird show that Red-vented Bulbuls in their native range in India occur in neighborhoods with similar frequency and numbers to our survey findings. Perhaps the apparent expansion beyond the Heights indicates that the habitat there is near capacity for the species.

Another interesting comparison is the abundance of bulbuls compared to other species on the route. Unfortunately, we did not ask other teams to keep tallies of all the birds they heard or saw, but on the route we covered White-winged Dove was most common (160), followed by European Starling (30), House Sparrow (30), Northern Mockingbird (25), Great-tailed Grackle (20), Eurasian Collared-Dove (15), Common Grackle (12), Chimney Swift (10), Blue Jay (8), House Finch (6), Mourning Dove (4), American Robin (4), Red-bellied Woodpecker (3), Inca Dove (2), Purple Martin (2), Red-vented Bulbul (2), Northern Cardinal (2), Rock Pigeon (1). So while Red-vented Bulbul numbers



were low, they compared favorably with some common urban birds.

We learned a great deal about how future surveys should be conducted. Continuing surveys will provide important information about this exotic member of Houston's avifauna. We hope to conduct a less-structured fall census that will not have pre-defined routes. The dates for the "Fall Bulbul Bonanza" were Saturday, September 17 and Sunday, September 18. This effort encouraged as many observers as possible to visit areas where bulbuls occur and try to find wandering flocks which likely number between 10 and 20 birds. Then, in 2017, we would like to expand with modifications route-based surveys on March 18 and June 3. We hope you will consider joining one or more of these surveys.

We would like to thank those who came out Saturday morning to participate in the survey: Skip Almoney, Julie d'Ablaing, Donna Diggons, Harry Gendel, Tim Goings, Mary Goldsby, Jonathan & Louise Holley, Robert Knetsch, Kathy Long, Bob McFarlane, Sue Orwig, Nina Rach, Vicky Rogers, Mike Schell, Kristen Schlemmer, Mary Waters, and Mary Anne Weber. We would also like to thank those who provided bulbul locations for the area: Diane Arnold, Jason Bonilla, Paul Randall, and Sandra Tirey. We would like to acknowledge the thoughts and highly constructive criticism offered by Bob McFarlane which have improved this survey and report.

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Kendra Kocab

My Texas BIG year

By David Sarkozi

PROLOGUE (DECEMBER 23, 2014)

So it's December 2014, I am thinking this could be the year to attempt a Big Year for Texas. I count 490 species for Texas that are not review species. The record for Texas is 522 (Lynn Barber, 2005). I set a goal of 500, which is pretty ambitious. Not all of those 490 species are accessible in a given year just because of where they occur. Lynn had 42 review species which is a remarkable year. I set a goal of half that for review species, 21. That gives me a buffer of 11 species beyond the non-review list for 500. If I had unlimited funds and time, I think that would be pretty easy—but I don't, so a bit of luck will be needed.

The Texas Ornithological Society meeting this year is going to be in El Paso and that works well for me. I'm going to head out early and spend an afternoon and morning in the Davis Mountains before the meeting. After the meeting I'll be able to spend a full day in Guadalupe Mountains National Park. After the sun sets I'll head for Lubbock and be able to bird the morning, hopefully picking up a good number of the more "southern" panhandle species before heading home.

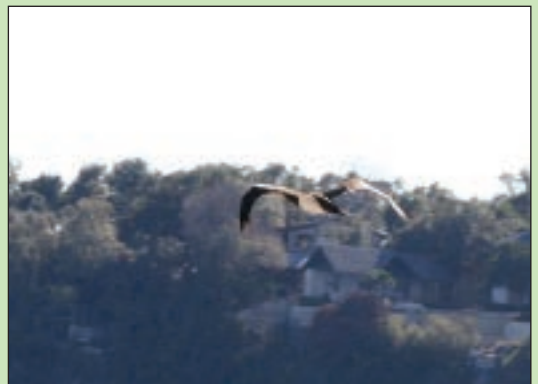
I'm signed up for the Old River CBC on January 2, 2015 and the New Braunfels CBC on January 4, 2015. Those two counts alone should get me 150 species. I feel like I have to get something good on January 1 though. I think a review species should be the target. There is a Trumpeter Swan in the Woodlands (Montgomery Co.) and the Greater Pewee in Bear Creek Park (Harris Co.). Yesterday a Fork-tailed Flycatcher was found on Galveston Island; I think that's a remote possibility to stick around. Since Bear Creek Park is a county park and will be closed on New Year's Day I think it's going to be the swan, however a lot could change between now and then depending on what gets found in the last days of the CBC season.

January 3, 2015 is a travel day, so I will likely go for the Greater Pewee on my way out of town, and then perhaps swing through Williamson County for Mountain Plovers.

I also need to decide what to do about the Painted Redstart at the rest stop south of Falfurrias, TX. It's not a review species, but it is a hard one to find in the western mountains of Texas. I'm tempted to make a dash for it and the easy Rio Grande Valley (RGV) species in January. I could try waiting for something rare to show up in the RGV. It's going to be a year of making choices, that's for sure.

So I ran the species reported to eBird.org for the last 10 years in all the counties I'm planning on being in for January. I come up 378 species, so I think my goal for January will be 320 species.

The first two weeks of January fly by. It's wet and raining most weekends, but I do have 164 species and some good stuff, Brown Booby and Black-vented Oriole for example.



Brown Booby Black-vented Oriole.



Clark's Grebe.

Today was the start of the big west Texas trip as part of the TOS meeting in El Paso. My friend John O'Brien and I left Houston at 1 am and headed west on I10. 10 am found us pulling into Balmorhea, TX. We gassed up for the rest of the day and headed for Lake Balmorhea. Almost immediately we found a Clark's Grebe coming only a few feet from the car. Over the next few hours we dug up as many birds as we could here, with an adult California Gull being perhaps the best bird. There were no Western Grebes to be found, a disappointment. We spend quite a lot of time looking through spotting scopes with no luck.

Over all it was a cold and dreary day. By the time we left the area it had risen to 35 degrees by 1 pm, the warmest we would see all day.

Turns out Lake Balmorhea is NOT where the rubber meets the road, at least not when you drive the road opposite the dam at Lake Balmorhea. My tires developed a rind of more than an inch of sticky, slippery mud on the tires. I felt like Hermann Munster walking, my boots in similar condition.

Finally heading for the Davis Mountains, we decided to make a quick stop at the Wild Rose Pass Picnic Area. The place was very birdy, with three towhees, Green, Canyon, and Spotted; and three wrens, House, Rock, and Canyon; Scaled Quail, and several species of sparrows. We counted 23 species on just a 20-minute stop.



Where the Rubber Doesn't Meet the Road... (January 14, 2015).

When we finally made it to The Lawrence E Woods Picnic area on 118, it was 3 pm and really quiet. I mean, no sound at all quiet, no vehicle noise, no wind noise, and no bird noise. We beat the bushes for a while and managed several new year birds for me, and found a large number of Chipping Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos coming to seeps along the creek.

The day added 25 species to my total for 2015, bringing me to 189. I'm crossing my fingers that I get to 200 birds tomorrow. The game plan is to hit the Lawrence E Woods Picnic area again early, maybe stop in at the state park for their feeders, then head for El Paso via Van Horn, TX. We're going to bed after 20 hours on the road and birding with dreams of finding a Baird's Sparrow tomorrow.

SURE, IT'S ON THE WAY BACK TO HOUSTON. (FEBRUARY 10, 2015)

I finish January with 258 species—62 less than my goal. I feel pretty good though. I got the Gray-crowned Yellowthroat at Estero Llano Grande State Park. February starts off well picking up the returning Greater Pewee in Bear Creek Park in West Houston for two more review species.

Friday, February 8, while at the Laredo Birding Festival I hear there is a White-throated Thrush at Estero Llano Grande State Park. I use the rule of thumb when trying to decide

to make a long distance chase. Was the bird seen the second day? The thrush was found again on Saturday so the chase is on.

Sunday, I woke up at 3:30 am and got my gear loaded and headed to Estero Llano Grande State Park to look for the White-throated Thrush. It's a 180-mile drive.

Three solid days of being on the road between 6 am and 6:30 am had me pretty tired. I stopped for some breakfast tacos, coffee, and a 5-Hour Energy. I get the feeling I should see if 5-Hour Energy would become a sponsor of my big year. The food, coffee, and energy boost, and I was not quite perky, but at least felt safe to drive.

I arrived at Estero at 7:30 am, found the location the bird was seen at last night and joined "the watch". Birds were perking up and soon several Clay-colored Thrushes were moving about for year bird 275. A Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet called close by. A couple of American Robins perched up above the group, signaling that we had to be careful about our ID.

Some stood on benches, most just scanned standing. I decided to kneel down and cover a perspective no one else was checking. I was about to ask someone to take my picture as I knelt in "prayer" for this bird. Looking through a tunnel in the trees a thrush popped into view. Browner than a Clay-colored Thrush, with a pale streaky throat, no "red-breast" this was it! White-throated Thrush was in the books as year bird 276!

I tried to get others on it, but I was in such a different position than the others no one

else got on it before it disappeared to where ever it goes. I understand I was the sole person to see it that day. I still had a lot of miles to cover and headed out to chase Tropical Parula.

Next stop, Resaca de la Palma State Park in Brownsville, TX. I'm ashamed to say I've never been to this gem of a park. I checked in and got directions to where the parula has been seen. Turns out it was the parking/picnic area. I was chatting with Tom Langschied and Jim Sinclair when someone alerted us that our target was being seen now. We hurried over and bingo! Tropical Parula for year bird 277. The parula was hanging out with a small group of blue-gray Gnatcatchers, feeding almost exactly like them.

Tom mentioned that he also had a Black-throated Gray Warbler here in the same area. It was early still and I decided to give it until noon to find it. I started circling the area. I soon found an Altamira Oriole for year bird 278.

Another searcher called me over to where he was and told me he just had the Black-throated Gray. It had faded into the background by the time I got there. I spent some time watching and I did find a Black-and-White Warbler for year bird 279.

I soon heard the flock of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and the Tropical Parula made another appearance. I was able to get another birder on the Parula on her first day in the RGV on the Parula. Still no Black-throated Gray.

I managed to make 3 miles in the parking lot according to my hiking app by noon but no Black-throated Gray Warbler. Alas, it will have to wait for another day, it was time to make the 350 mile drive home and see my wife!

IT PAYS TO BE LUCKY (MARCH 14, 2015)

I started the day in Brazoria County looking for an Aplomado Falcon I had a tip on. The ABA recently voted to make the Texas



Tropical Parula.

coastal population countable so I needed to get this bird. I found the spot where it was seen on Wednesday and set up to watch for a while.

Not a lot was happening. After about 30 minutes, I thought I heard a Black Rail call, but it only called once. As I listened I noticed a distant Mockingbird was doing a Black Rail call. Interesting. I have a lot of experience with Mockingbirds doing Black Rail calls at Anahuac NWR. They usually start doing the call about this time in the spring and I've always assumed that it coincides with the start of Black Rails calling. I've always speculated that they start imitating a call that they are hearing. In other words, when the Mockingbirds are imitating Black Rails, the Black rails have started calling for the year.

Then another call, it came from a different direction! After about 10 minutes I heard it again. I walked across the road to where I was hearing it. Yes! it started calling again, this time multiple times and it wasn't far away. Black Rail was down as Year Bird 294! Some days it pays better to be lucky than to be good.

I spent some time attempting to get a recording of it since it wasn't far away. The voice memo app on the iPhone actually does an amazing job. I was able to get a couple of good clear recordings of the bird for documentation. I was amazed that there were no Texas recordings of Black Rail on XenoCanto.org.

After spending 90 minutes at the site, I decided to move on and look for some other needed birds in the area. Since I was actually inside Brazoria NWR I decided to check out the Big Slough Auto Tour and see if perhaps

I could find either a Fulvous Whistling-Duck or an American Bittern.

I tried to head over to Surfside and Crab Road again and make another try for Nelson's Sparrow. As soon as I got off the bridge, I realized something was up. I was right on the route for the St. Patrick's Day parade! Curse me Luck! I decided a hasty retreat from this mess was in order and I headed to Quintana since I was close.

Quintana was mostly quiet with not much going on. A Field Sparrow was kind of a surprise for the sanctuary there, and a White-eyed Vireo cooperated for a picture. A Cooper's Hawk flew into the sanctuary and since that shut things down I decided to leave.

On to San Bernard NWR to try again for the Fulvous Whistling-Ducks and American Bittern. It was getting late. I decided to just take the Moccasin Pond Loop and exit via Rail Pond. Ducks are really thinning out fast this year, no Fulvous, but an American Bittern posed for Year Bird 295.

So now the race is on, what winter birds can I get before they all fly north for the summer? My next big milestone is not 300, but 366, my total last year. After that it's the race to the finish! The next hundred shouldn't be too hard because spring migration is about to start!

NEITHER SNOW NOR RAIN NOR HEAT NOR GLOOM OF NIGHT (APRIL 25, 2015)

Well there was no forecast of snow for today, but rain was there for sure and we had plenty of gloom of night planned. We were running our Upper Texas Coast day for the Great Texas Birding Classic. We were plan-



ning to run from midnight till we ran out of birds to chase.

During the night conditions were actually pretty good, we had a few drips on us but there was very little wind. Bad for the mosquitoes, but really good for listening for birds.

By the time we got into position for dawn chorus in the Boykin's Springs Recreational Area we had 30 species on the list. Almost as soon as we got out of the car to listen Chuck-wills-widow was calling for Year Bird 368. Soon an Eastern Towhee joined the chorus for Year Bird 369.

We headed to our woodpecker spot. As we got out of the car we could hear the trill of Bachman's Sparrow for Year Bird 370. As I raised my binoculars to a marked tree I saw a Red-cockaded Woodpecker jet out for the day for Year Bird 371. While we all got on the woodpecker a couple of Brown-headed Nuthatches made their squeaky toy noises for Year Bird 372.

As we were heading out of the area to begin the race for east Texas warblers, John calls out "Hairy Woodpecker" and I jumped out of the car to hear the sharp "Peek" several times of a Hairy Woodpecker for Year Bird 373.

By now the rain had started in earnest and we had some tense moments negotiating the rutted muddy forest roads. Luck was with us and we were soon back on firm roads. Our next target bird that was a year bird was Prairie Warbler. We checked the first spot we had lined up for them; nothing. We checked the next spot; nothing! I was getting nervous. At the last spot, one called right next to the road nabbing me Prairie Warbler for Year Bird 374.

I felt better and we headed off to our next stop for breeding warblers. Along the way in a wet field we saw a group of shorebirds wheeling about in the pouring rain. Wilson's Phalarope for Year Bird 375.

Martin Dies State Park was tough in the rain. Many birds that are easy there just didn't show up as expected. We did manage most of our targets though. It just took some time

(which we didn't have) and patience. No new year birds though.

Busting out of the piney woods and heading for Beaumont, I got a message that a friend had a large group of warblers in his backyard. As luck would have it (finally!) his house was the next exit! We pulled in sucked up several needed day birds, and I got Black-poll Warbler for Year Bird 376.

Next we headed to our American Robin spot, and while there had a pair of Fish Crows croaking for Year Bird 377.

Blasting east out of Beaumont, we headed to a spot we had scouted some great ducks. En-route we spotted a large group of shorebirds over a rice field. We pulled over and sure enough our suspicions were correct. Buff-breasted Sandpiper for Year Bird 378. Another flock of shorebirds flew by and it was clear they were White-rumped Sandpipers for Year Bird 379.

Our duck ponds produced some cool stuff like a pair of late Hooded Mergansers. While there a couple of Bank Swallows passed over for Year Bird 380.

Cruising down to Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, we continued to tick off shorebirds in the rice fields and lingering ducks in some special ponds we knew about. At the refuge we headed for the Jackson Prairie Woodlot and Marchetti Bird Blind. It was hot (and humid too!) and we ticked off a nice group of migrants. I also added Year Birds Yellow-bellied Flycatcher for 381 and Bay-breasted Warbler for Year Bird 382. A Traill's Flycatcher was perched in the brush and I was afraid we'd not be able to put a name to him, but it gave a mellow "whit" and we were able to call it Willow Flycatcher for Year Bird 383.

High Island was jammed with birders and birds and we added many species. At Roll Over Pass we broke 200 species for the day with the many shorebirds there that you don't find in the fresh water rice fields. On Retillion Road heading into the Bolivar Flats Shorebirds Sanctuary we were able to scope a Barn Owl in the back of a nest box.

On the Flats proper we quickly found all the ringed plovers we still needed save one, Snowy Plover. While searching for that we found a couple of Red Knots. A Magnificent Frigatebird was a surprise—only my second ever April one. Snowy Plover eluded us.

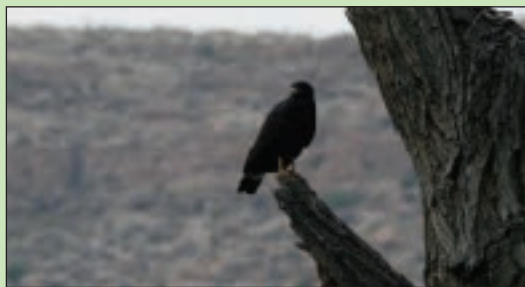
After the Flats we were out of light and mostly out of birds to chase. We listened for a while at Frenchtown Road hoping for a migrating Upland Sandpiper and Nelson's Sparrow with no luck. Finally, we had to call it a day. We had been on the road for over 24 hours and had been actively birding for 21 hours. I had 2 hours of sleep since Friday at 6 am. We finished with a healthy 212 species for the day.

I did add 16 Year Birds to my total. Next week is the TOS meeting and I'm leading field trips for the meeting on my usual patch in Chamber's County. With luck the intense schedule of trips will turn up some rarity. I would sure like to finish next weekend with 400 species, but with 27 to go that seems unlikely, but I'm going to try!

UP, THEN DOWN, THEN UP AGAIN (MAY 12, 2015)

I finished April with 385 species. The TOS meeting only netted me 2 new species, not really surprising, I had scooped up most of the expected migrants already. I was on Swarovski Optik Six Day Statewide Birding Classic Team. The first couple of days weren't pretty. We had howling winds to deal with and had not done as well on the coast as we expected. In Junction our day got a late start because of a flat. A flat that turned out to be caused by the business end of a knife left in our tire! Great birds though, best look ever at Black-capped Vireo, Common Black Hawk in Rio Grande Village, and best of all the Northern Pygmy-Owl in Pine Canyon. 1500 or so miles behind us as we roll into the Chisos Mountains Lodge in Big Bend for the night and I've added 28 species to my total since the first of May.

We are up at 3 am and on our way up the mountain at 3:15 am. The plan is to be at



Common Black Hawk.

Boot Springs for dawn chorus. We have about 2 hours and 45 minutes to make the 4.5 miles and climb about 1,300 feet. We're hoping for some night birds on the way up the mountain. There was rain most of the night but it had stopped by 3 am as predicted. The trail presents no problem—other than it's dark, steep, and rocky. Hiking with a headlamp feels like walking through a tunnel. Since the plan is to be gone only about 6 hours, we take just the minimum; water, snacks, and Cliff Bar's for breakfast.

It's completely overcast. We can't see any stars or the moon. We hear nothing for the first 2.5 miles and 90 minutes. At the top of switch back 19 (did I mention there are 21 switch backs on the trail?) David and I hear a Mexican Whip-poor-will give a couple of calls for Year Bird 414 and then go quiet. Clay missed it unfortunately. After those calls it stays silent though. We finish the switch backs, cross below the Pinnacles, and catch our breath. We see the edge of the clouds moving across the sky revealing stars as they go. In a few minutes the moon is out and the Mexican Whip-poor-wills start calling all around us. We can hear dozens. The trail levels out and we make quick time to Boot Springs, and get there about 6:30 am.

For the first few minutes we only hear the whips. Some other birds are waking up though. We pick out Hammond's Flycatcher for Year Bird 415, Cordilleran Flycatcher for Year Bird 416, Hutton's Vireo for Year Bird 417, and Plumbeous Vireo for Year Bird 418. Nice, but not the bird we came for. We heard

a Western Tanager calling, and then one that sounded exactly like a Flame-colored Tanager. Unfortunately, a hybrid as well as a pure Flame-colored Tanager have been reported here and we never see this bird.

We soon have a hummingbird zipping around with a distinct trill, Broad-tailed Hummingbird for Year Bird 419. Another giant bruiser of a hummingbird perches in view, Blue-throated Hummingbird for Year Bird 420.

Finally, we hear a Colima Warbler for year bird 421. A few minutes later I get some really good looks at this life bird. We spend a few more minutes at Boot Springs but since we have a long way to go today we head down the mountain.

Right past the boot we hear a hoarse “hu whoo, hu whoo” call that at first I take for Great Horned Owl. Then we realize we’re hearing a calling Band-tailed Pigeon for Year Bird 422.

We keep an eye out for the Short-tailed Hawks that have been reported from the Pinnacles Trail. It turns out they had last been reported on May 10 and it was now May 12.

Almost at the bottom of the switch backs we get a glimpse of a thrush. We chase it down a couple of short switch backs and it turns out to be a Hermit Thrush—a thrush I had lost hope of getting in the Classic.

We get out of the Basin quickly once we get off the trail and head for Cottonwood Campground. The 45 MPH speed limit of the park makes it feel like a very long drive to Cottonwood, but we get there in good time. The curvy nature of the road makes it hard to stay at 45 MPG for very long anyway.

Even though it’s getting late in the morning, Cottonwood is birdy and full of birders too. One helpful birder gets us on a roosting Great Horned Owl that we still need for the Classic. Lots of kingbirds and we soon pick out Cassin’s Kingbird for Year Bird 423. We start working the brush line at the edge of the campground and pick up Lucy’s Warbler for Year Bird 424.

All our target birds for Big Bend National Park are behind us so we head out. Our next stop is Carolyn Ohl’s Oasis in the Christmas Mountains. This is my first visit here even though I’ve tried to come a couple of times



Hail in Big Bend.

before but couldn't make it. Even though the Big Bend Country is as green as I've ever seen it the oasis stands out as a dark green lush spot in the hills. A few minutes after we get there Carolyn offers to take us to the favorite perch of a Lucifer Hummingbird up the arroyo a bit. A couple of minutes later he is there as promised on the perch, Lucifer Hummingbird as Year Bird 425.

We spend a few more minutes looking for MacGillivray's Warbler under the shade of the oasis. We get great looks at Varied Bunting for Year Bird 426.

It would be easy to linger here for hours, but we have miles to go today. We push on to the Davis Mountains. On the drive in to Alpine from the south I watch the GPS and I'm struck by the altitude of the road, for a good distance it's higher than most of the scenic loop in the Davis Mountains. I wonder why there isn't more birding on this road.

On to the mountains. We're still missing Black-chinned Sparrow and we use the BirdsEye App on my phone and see one reported recently from a picnic area right by the McDonald Observatory. We head there and not one minute out of the car we hear one singing. BirdsEye comes through again.

We head on to Davis Mountains State Park hoping to snag a few goodies there before the sun sets. We head straight to the bird blind and as we approach a woman sticks her head out the door and in a loud stage whisper says "He's here right now!" Oh yes you most annoying of nemesis birds we know who she is talking about. Montezuma's Quail poses for pictures as Year Bird 427.

There is a second bird blind at Davis Mountains State Park by the interpretive center. We go check that out and it's hopping. A vireo comes in and it proves to be a Cassin's Vireo for Year Bird 428.

We go to the campground hoping to find a Western Screech-Owl reported the week before. We sit down to wait for sundown but the wind has really picked up. After about a 15 minute wait we decide to call it a day and try again tomorrow. Tomorrow is the last day and we have a long way to go!

TEXAS PELAGIC (JULY 11, 2015)

I come into July with 438 Species and feel pretty good. There is something I need to do though.

This is what I'd been dreading. There is no getting around it. If you want to do a credible



Montezuma Quail.

Big Year in Texas, you have to do a couple of pelagic trips. This year Gary Hodne who organizes the Texas Pelagic trips is trying a couple of 16 hour trips. These trips will get about 8 hours in the pelagic waters versus 4 hours for the 12 hour trips they usually do. I decided to do two of them, 32 hours in the water for 16 hours of prime pelagic birding. With the 12 hour trips I would have to spend 48 hours on the water for that amount of birding in pelagic water. I get motion sick, so to me this is a bargain. That's a 33% reduction in exposure to seasickness! You might have noticed I didn't post any updates in June. In June I led two back-to-back field trips to Maine for the Texas Ornithological Society. These trips include two Whales and Puffins trips for a total of 11 hours on the water. I was able to get some Scopolamine patches for the trip and they worked really well for me. I didn't get sick on those trips. I went into the Texas Pelagic trip feeling much more confident. Still I would do all the right things, eat light, nothing greasy, light on the caffeine, don't drink a lot of liquids at once and get it sloshing in my stomach, and stay on deck so I could see the horizon.

John and I left Houston about 2:30 pm headed for Harlingen the day before. I still needed Wood Stork for the year and figured we would get one soaring somewhere along the trip down. Nope; lots of Swainson's Hawks and a few White-tailed Hawks and Crested Caracara everywhere, but no Wood Storks.

We had to be back at the dock by 8 pm so the boat must leave by 4 am. That means meeting at 3:30 am, and that means leaving Harlingen at 2:30 am! It was going to be a long day.

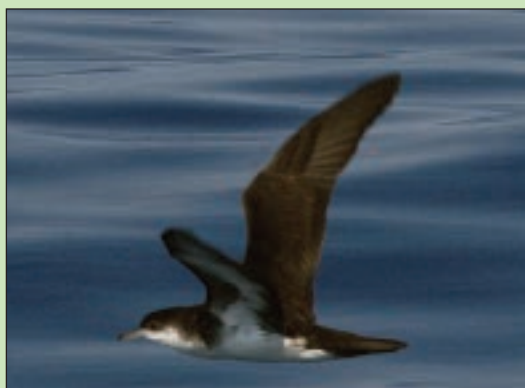
The boat pushed off the dock just a few minutes after 4 am. The forecast was good, 2-3 foot seas. A bright crescent moon rose just as we were leaving. As luck would have it we headed out due east into it so there was an easy to see horizon. I checked our speed using the iPhone app Waze. It showed we were moving at 14 miles per hour. After an hour

I was still feeling good, looking forward to sunrise, and actually seeing some birds.

At 6:52 am and 31 miles offshore we saw our first bird of the day, a Royal Tern. A couple of miles later we had 4 Cattle Egrets. Then at 36 miles offshore we get our first pelagic bird, Masked Booby for Year Bird 339.

We see another pair of Masked Boobies following a sport fishing boat. I think this is the last boat we see until we are back on the shelf late in the afternoon. At 46 miles offshore we get our only Cory's Shearwater of the day for Year Bird 440.

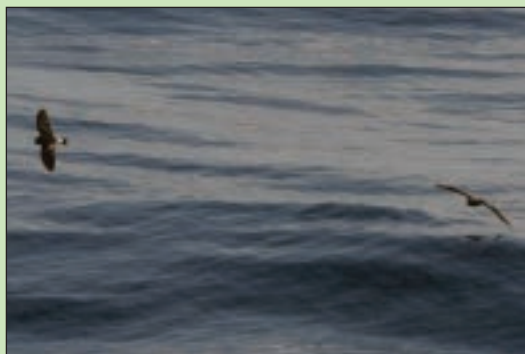
We motor on. At 8:19 am and now 4 hours into the trip and 52 miles offshore



Audubon's Shearwater.

at the edge of the continental shelf we bag Band-rumped Storm-Petrel for Year Bird 441. Right behind it we get Audubon's Shearwater for Year Bird 442.

About 20 minutes later we get a lone Storm-Petrel that looks a little different. After



After comparing notes and a few photos a consensus is agreed that this is Leach's Storm-Petrel for Year Bird 443.

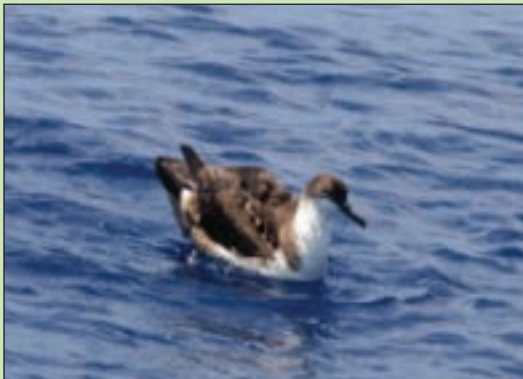
comparing notes and a few photos a consensus is agreed that this is Leach's Storm-Petrel for Year Bird 443.

Our goal is the Camel's Head, a sea-mount almost 90 miles out of South Padre Island and we'll briefly be in Mexican waters. When we get there, there is not much happening. The crew sees what they think is a whale breaching. We head for the site and there is indeed a big slick there. We do see a few birds in Mexican waters, Masked Booby, Band-rumped Storm-Petrel, and Audubon's Shearwater went on my Tamaulipas list.

We've reach the half way point of the trip by now and we turn west and start heading back. We have almost 4 hours still in deep water though. At 12:24 pm and just back into Texas water we spot a large flock of terns. Most are all dark revealing them to be juvenile Sooty Terns for Year Bird 444. We are able to pick out a few Bridled Terns for Year Bird 445.

We see a lot of Sooty Terns and good numbers of Audubon's Shearwaters and Band-rumped Storm-Petrels on the way back. At 4:46 pm and 36 miles from South Padre Island we get our last pelagic bird, a mystery Storm-Petrel whose id is still being discussed.

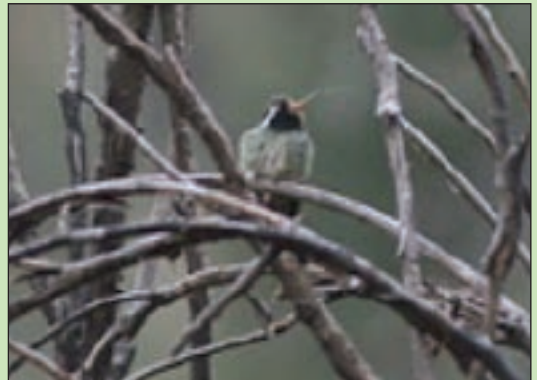
We pulled into the dock just a few minutes before 8 pm. I never got sick, I picked up 7 year birds, and surprisingly I'm really looking forward to my next pelagic trip.



Great Shearwater.

THE BOWL (AUGUST 23, 2015)

I start August with 448 species, I tick off Collared Plover for 447 species at the end of July. My August pelagic trip nets two more species including Great Shearwater. The Nature Conservancy Open House in the Davis Mountains Preserve gets me to 453 with White-eared Hummingbird. Dave Dolan and I head north to Guadalupe Mountains.



White-eared Hummingbird.

There it was, the last big birding hike I had never done. The Bowl, a reputed Shangri-La of hard to find montane species in Texas. Trouble is getting there. The Bowl is 2,300 - 2,500 feet above the Pine Springs Campground depending on which National Park Service webpage you land on. There are two routes to get there. You can take the 2 mile, mostly straight up route, through Bear Canyon, or the kinder, gentler route of the Tejas Trail. Finding a good estimate of the



distance is hard, but average estimates are 3.1 miles with plenty of switchbacks. We were two guys in their 50's who don't get enough exercise, we opted for the Tejas Trail.

We were a little lazy and started out about 6:30 am mountain time on the trail. The trail is good enough that you could do a lot of it in the dark if you wanted. I took a GPS reading as we left and it showed the elevation as 5,811 feet. That's about 400 feet higher than the Chisos Basin in Big Bend.

The Tejas Trail is pretty open. It's all creosote and sotol with an occasional madrone or juniper tree. We tallied 14 species on the trail, all of them expected open semi-desert species. At 6500 feet it felt like we were getting close. Actually we were just getting into the switchbacks.

Over all the trail isn't bad, I don't think the hike is as hard as the Boot Springs Trail in Big Bend. The views are much more spectacular too—because you can see so far.

We rounded a ridge feeling like we really were about there and saw how much trail was in front of us. At 6,965 feet at 9:40 am we were only at about the halfway mark.

We chugged along making the rest of the trail in about 90 minutes. As we climbed on to the plateau that is The Bowl habitat, we suddenly were in pines and oak trees. I took a GPS reading, 7,899 feet. Emory Peak in Big Bend is 7,825 feet and Mount Livermore in the Davis Mountains is 8,375 feet. We were still well below Guadalupe Peak at 8,751, but we were now birding the "Roof of Texas".

Down to business, the reason we made this trek was to find Pygmy Nuthatch. We started working our way to the Bowl Loop proper through pines and oaks. White-breasted Nuthatches seemed to be everywhere. Lots and lots of Bushtits. Dave spied a yellow warbler that turned out to be an immature Wilson's Warbler. The next mixed flock yielded Townsend's Warbler for Year Bird 454.

On the Bowl Loop proper we heard some high pitched nuthatches off trail. Like a bloodhound on the trail I went after them, Dave followed. Finally, Dave spotted one at the top of a dead pine. Pygmy Nuthatch was Year Bird 455.

We finished the loop, which was 4.7 miles according to one website I consulted. As we were about to start our decent the outflow from a thunderstorm reached us, the wind picking up and dropping the temperature at least 10 degrees in a flash. That was good because we didn't have a lot of water left.

We made it down to camp in less than 2 hours. Actually I found the scramble down more treacherous than the trip up just because of all the loose rock and gravel. The camp was wet but everything dried in a short time in the West Texas low humidity.

We slept in the next morning all the way to 7 am! After striking camp we headed over to the Frijole Ranch to make another try at Juniper Titmouse. We worked the area for 45 minutes with not a whole lot moving. The gully right by the ranch house proved again to be the hot spot. We decided to check it again



Juniper Titmouse.



Northern Jacana.



Sage Sparrow.



Magnificent Hummingbird.

before leaving and Dave pulled a new one for me out of the ether, Black-throated Gray Warbler for Year Bird 456.

So I dipped on the Juniper Titmouse. Once winter gets here, I will have to make it up when I try again for Sagebrush Sparrow. Once winter gets here. Winter is going to be crazy. I've now birded Guadalupe Mountains National Park three times this year and I see a fourth time in my future.

We discussed diverting to Granger Lake to search for the Sabine's Gull reported there but the reports appeared that it had already moved on. We headed home while I plotted the end of year route through west Texas that seems inevitable.

YOU MEAN THEIR HABITAT ISN'T TRAILER PARKS? (OCTOBER 26, 2015)

September and October slowly add in some birds. I snag a Northern Jacana at Estero

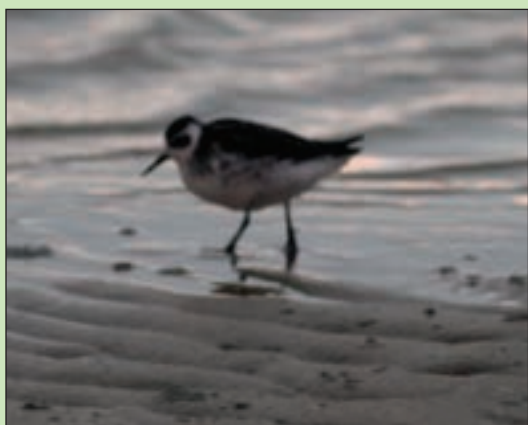
Llano Grande State Park. I make a quick 40-hour round trip from Houston to Fort Davis and back for Magnificent Hummingbird. Rufous-capped Warbler at Lost Maples State Park was another goodie.

I've been tormented by reports in eBird for the last month of Red-necked Phalarope. I've been looking in the usual places you expect to find red-necks; trailer parks, ice houses, NASCAR tracks, etc. I looked for the field marks; mullet haircuts, dually trucks with mud-flaps that say "Back Off!". No luck.

Today about 1 pm Howard Smith called and said he had one at San Luis Pass at the west end of Galveston Island. I wrapped up my day at work a few minutes after 3 pm and headed home to gear up. I was on the way to Galveston by 3:45 pm. The GPS showed my ETA to be 5:15 pm. I was able to shave a few minutes off and got there by 5:05 pm.



Rufous-capped Warbler.



Red-necked Phalarope.

Howard was more than generous to meet me and show me where he had found it. He told me he and Dennis Shepler had looked for it that afternoon with no luck. I thought it likely was there and I had a chance to find it. Positive vibes you know.

The edge of the dunes and the low area behind them had ponds all the way to the pass itself. We started hiking. No luck. At about 6 pm Howard had to call it a day and I continued on. Positive vibes. I made it to the pass with nice wet shoes from flooding then getting to some good looking ponds with only a half dozen coots to show for my effort. I started back but continued to recheck the ponds. That bird was here somewhere. Boy it was a long trip back to the car, close to 2 miles according to Howard. The sun was setting and so were my chances at finding this bird.

Howard had told me when he found the bird he knew it was a phalarope right away because it was by itself. As I was approaching the beach access, I saw a bird in the original pond that Howard had found it in wading in belly deep. Was this it? Damn it was dark and hard to see! I worked my way up to it and it was amazingly unperturbed. Yes! Red-necked Phalarope was Year Bird 470! Of course my camera battery was almost dead, so close to dead it wouldn't auto focus. I wanted a photo though. Manual focus, aperture priority at F4, ISO 1600 and I could get the exposure. Oh and hand hold a 300 mm lens. I took deep breaths and held them as I took as many shots as possible. A couple even turned out ok. This bird was a camera hog, it even walked out of the water a few times, about 50 feet in front of me. After about 200 shots of the bird I turned to a blazing sunset and headed home with one of the most satisfying chases yet.

SLIPPING IN A WINTER WONDERLAND (NOVEMBER 29, 2015)

One chance. One chance is all I'm going to get at the heart of the Texas Panhandle. It's now or never for some of these species I'm afraid. If I don't find them today, it could mean a mad last minute dash to find them at the end of December when I could be chasing something else.

I get out of Lubbock a little later than I planned but was half way to Amarillo before the sunrise. I27 is fine, totally clear of ice. South of Amarillo my GPS Overlords instruct me to exit and take the loop around Amarillo and head up to 136. There is ice but a clear lane through the ice. The temperature on the car says 27. I take 136 north from Amarillo and things aren't very nice. There is a rut in the ice, but I'm still driving on ice. I take it slow and easy, there really is no one on the road.

Before I leave Potter County I see a buteo on a pole right by the road up ahead. There is no one in sight and I can see at least a half

mile in each direction. I stop carefully right in the middle of the road. It's another beautiful Ferruginous Hawk.

I head to Fritch Fortress first at Lake Meredith. This site has had both American Tree Sparrow and Northern Shrike. The GPS Overlords take me through the neighborhood and I see a pickup do a 360 in the road in front of me before getting traction and rutting his way out of someone's front yard. I take it really slow and easy. Five miles an hour and make it to the road into Fritch Fortress without incident.

I can see where someone tried to get in and slid off the road on the slope and took out the car counter. I decide to walk in and park in a safe spot and head in. It's still 27 degrees.

I worked in an ice factory in high school and walked on a lot of ice. I was good at it. This ice is at a 10-degree slope though, and it's tough going. I walk in the icy grass where I can. At times I find myself sliding across the ice like I'm skating and have no choice but to ride it out to an open patch.

Its birdy. Lots of White-crowned Sparrows, some Savannahs, a pair of very handsome Lincoln's Sparrows. I hear some unfamiliar chip notes. Unfamiliar is good, very good. I find the bird. Nice rufous cap, thin rufous eyeline and two white wingbars! American Tree Sparrow is Year Bird 480.

I walk the whole hill. No waterfowl on the lake, no gulls, no eagles. In a big patch of sunflowers I find a mixed flock of finches. Lots of House and American Goldfinches, but no Purple Finches.

In another flock of American Goldfinches I find my first of season Pine Siskins. I love the Ziiiiipppppp call. No Shrike though.

I head over to Cedar Canyon, this is a traditional spot for American Tree Sparrow, but Northern Shrike has been found here too. Lots of sparrows and another American Tree Sparrow. No Shrike though.

Ok, back on the road. I feel like it's not a good idea to head to Texline like I originally



Ferruginous Hawk.

planned. Might mean giving up Northern Shrike, but I think it would be foolish. Positive vibes though, don't count a dip until the day is over. I check BirdsEye and I see a Rough-legged Hawk in the right direction reported 5 days ago. I head south picking up 207 out of Borger headed for CR16 north of Panhandle The road is pretty good and I make time. I get to CR16 and like much of the Panhandle it's a rutted muddy mess. Not this road.

I decided to bird my way back. The road is good and who knows what's on the next telephone pole? I find some paved roads to work down off of 207. I see Sparrows, Kestrels, and some Red-tailed Hawks. Near Claude I find a Peregrine Falcon on a pole. That's a pretty good record for Armstrong County, eBird only shows 3 others.

I come to a big playa that's got a lot of open water. I keep hoping for something like a Eurasian Wigeon or a Brant so I get out and

scan. Lots of Northern Pintails and the first Lesser Scaup of the trip. As I scan, a bird on bare stick on the edge of the playa catches my eye. I tick off the marks. Narrow black face mask, larger bill, little throat to breast contrast. Northern Shrike is Year Bird 481. Dig those positive vibes.

Back on the road it's a frozen winter wonderland. I didn't realize it, but the road drops through Palo Duro Canyon. Spectacular is all I can say. Not a bit of ice in the canyon, I'm guessing the lower elevation is the reason. As I climb out of the canyon the frozen landscape returns.

In Briscoe County I see a dark hawk up ahead. I slow to check it out. Lots of dark western Red-tailed Hawks around. A bit of study and yes, it's a Rough-legged Hawk for Year Bird 482. Those positive vibes are humming now. I try for a picture but after chasing it down the road for what I feel is getting to be too much, I leave the bird be.

It's getting late and I'd rather not be on unfamiliar roads that could have ice in the dark, so I start to cut over to I27. I see a Short-eared owl on a fence post. A bit further down

the road I see another one hunting. Then a third owl. Something seemed off though. The night before, over beers, Fat Tony warned me to make myself familiar with the difference between Long-eared Owl and Short-eared Owl in flight. He warned that they were very similar in flight. I had done that but was still digesting it. This bird bugged me and it took me close to a mile to decide to turn around and go back.

At first I couldn't find it. Lots of harriers hunting, I could see three at one time. I saw them drop into the grass a couple of times. All of a sudden it was there; it must have been down in the grass. The darker belly, even color of the back and tail, this was it! Long-eared Owl for Year Bird 483. Probably roosting in the trees on the hill.

What a day, I didn't think I was going to sweep all my targets for the day! I have to figure out what I can look for tomorrow for the half day I have left.

SLICK (DECEMBER 30, 2015)

By Christmas Day I've made it to 489 Species. I'm so close. I have a week to go. I plan to go on the road for the final week,



Icy roads in the Panhandle.

chasing what I can. I head to Northeast Texas December 26 and tick off three more, including Tundra Swan. I head south and try for a Crimson-collared Grosbeak that was in a backyard but dipped due to the high winds. I try for Rufous-backed Robin in Del Rio with no luck, but team back up with the Shepdawg. We try all afternoon for Baird's Sparrow with no luck. I decided to head to the Guadalupe Mountains and spend the night in White's City, NM. The next day, I pick up Juniper Titmouse and Sagebrush Sparrow. I team back up with Shepdawg and we try for Baird's Sparrow again and dip.

I woke to not too many options on my plate for new birds in Alpine, TX. I gave Baird's Sparrow a solid effort and have to agree with The TOS Handbook of Texas Birds that it is rare to very rare, there just weren't a lot of solid birds left to go for. I could count the number of non-review species on one hand that might be in the state and that I still needed. Parasitic Jaeger (2 reports in the last month), Dusky-capped Flycatcher (no reports), Henslow's Sparrow (no reports), Baird's Sparrow (no reports), and Purple Finch (several reports). Nothing was very chase-able though.

My initial plan for the day was to check Lake Balmorhea for a rare gull or a Red-throated Loon, then check Imperial Reservoir for the same birds then head back to Houston and chase a Purple Finch the next day. Slim pickings.

Shepdawg and I decided to split up and he would take the dam and I would take the



Bufflehead.

marshy end. Lots of Ring-billed Gulls around for a good omen I thought. A bufflehead hung close to shore and there were a lot of small grebes, another good omen.

Heavy equipment was using the levee at the West end of the lake to get to an oil project so it was really rough but I thought passable. I made it to the north end and made the turn. Then it got slick, I was spinning. I started working my way back to the levee. It was slow going but I made a little progress and got the car turned around. Two guys helped me push but soon it was no go. I was just spinning, but not dug in.

Good thing I renewed my AAA membership before I left Houston. I called and they said one hour. I let Shepdawg know what was going on. He decided since I had help on the way and there was really nothing he could do for me or even safely get to me he would head



on to check Del Rio again for the Rufous-backed Robin. I bid him safe travels and he was off.

Ah well, I could be stuck in worse places. There was a large flock of Eared Grebes that seemed to ignore me completely. A few Bonaparte's Gulls showed up. A small flock of Snow Geese landed for a new county bird for me.

After an hour AAA called back and said they had someone on the way and the wrecker would be here in 60-70 minutes. I wryly said cheerily "I'll be right here waiting". It's funny really. I made 363 days without getting stuck and I have been on some really bad roads and finally on day 364 I get stuck.

About 45 minutes later I see the wrecker heading my way. The driver gets out and walks my way. I meet him half way. He's afraid his truck will get stuck. Hey AAA, why did you send a wrecker service to get someone out of the mud whose truck won't get there?

The driver decides that maybe it's dried up enough in 2 hours and maybe if he just pushes I might get going. He gets behind me and it works. We get both vehicles out, and I sign the ticket and I'm on my way. I tried to get up to speed to get the mud out. Trouble was, I had pounds of mud stuck inside the tires making it very unbalanced.

I got word that the Crimson-collared Grosbeak was being seen this morning. It was only 11:30 am now. Time to make a decision. I should go for the bird in the hand, the grosbeak. Wheels up! its only 620 miles to Weslaco! I can be there by 10 pm! Wheels up! I was headed south.

I realized the mud was still a problem before I even got to I10. The mud had my tires so unbalanced that I couldn't drive more than 50 mph. I pulled over and was able to get some mud out with a stick (there aren't many sticks in Balmorhea it turns out, I really had to look for one). A little better, but I was not able to go more than 60 mph. I decided to limp in to Fort Stockton and

look for a car wash with a pressure hose and clean it out.

Turns out there is no such thing in Fort Stockton, so I went through a drive through car wash. Better, but still a problem. I pulled into the truck stop and found another stick and got about two pounds of dirt out of two tires. Much better. I can do the speed limit, 80 mph here, and I'm off.

It's a long drive but I make it to Weslaco by 9:30 pm. I get some rest dreaming of finding five more species somehow tomorrow.

THE FINAL PUSH (DECEMBER 31, 2015)

Shepdawg suggested that I just go for 500 in my eBird list for the year since that's what everyone is looking at. I couldn't get into Frontera Audubon until 8 am and Olivera Park in Brownsville has a couple of species of parrots there I could use to do that. I check eBird and in the last couple of days it shows Yellow-headed, Red-lored, and White-fronted Parrots there. I have 497 species in eBird because I have Lilac-crowned Parrot and Egyptian Goose on my list. I haven't not listed non countable exotics this year, but I didn't go out of my way to see any either.

Sunrise was at 7:16 in Brownsville. Parrots don't wait around long after sunrise in my experience so I needed to be there early and see if I could find where they were roosting and be ready. I timed my arrival for 6:30 am.

I looked and looked and found no parrots roosting. Finally, about 7:20 I heard a squawk and headed for the playground. I spotted what I counted as 6 Red-crowned Parrots in a tree. I started scanning other trees in the area. Suddenly the tree with the Red-crowned Parrots erupted and about 150 Red-crowned Parrots came out. Where the heck were they in the tree?

A few seconds later from another tree three Yellow-headed Parrots flew out. I then found a group of 4 more birds perched in where I could see them. Cool, Red-lored Parrots!

That would make 499 in eBird. I headed for Frontera Audubon.

There were already a few people on the trail when I got to Frontera Audubon. I headed for the last sighting of the grosbeak. As I turned on the trail I heard it! Then a yellow-green streak with a black face flew across the trail. That was it! Crimson-collared Grosbeak was Year Bird 496!

I heard excited voices up the trail and one woman was on it. I tried over the next 30 minutes for a picture and while I saw it well briefly one more time I didn't get a picture of my own.

It was early, just a few minutes after 9 am. I hatched a plan to go out in a Blaze of Glory. I dumped requests for help on social media and email and headed for Bear Creek Park in Houston. There had been Purple Finches there earlier this month. My plan was to get a group of people searching the park and crowd sourcing the last bird of the year.

I got word as I was leaving that there was a report of Amazon Kingfisher at the resaca on FM100 where it was found a couple of years ago. I decided it would only cost me 30 minutes to check it out. No luck though, not a single kingfisher there.

Headed north to Houston, traffic was heavy. I had a long wait at the Sarita Border Patrol checkpoint. I wondered if I was getting flagged for the number of checkpoints I've been through this year.

I made it to Bear Creek Park about 4 pm. I did manage to muster several birders to help look and while it was pretty active, there was no Purple Finch found that day. I ended the year with 496 ABA countable birds in Texas and 500 in eBird. I had traveled 3,272 miles this week in Texas and 29,642 in Texas this year. I did 11% of my miles in the last week! Time for some downtime I had 48 hours until my next Christmas Bird Count!

EPILOGUE

Well I didn't make 500, but 496 countable birds felt good. Still, I was 26 birds off the record. The secretary of the Texas Bird

Records Committee tallied 532 species of birds recorded in Texas during 2015, so even though the year wasn't an exceptional year, it was good enough to break the record perhaps.

My big misses were Purple Finch, Henslow's Sparrow, and MacGillivray's Warbler. I put the effort into MacGillivray's. I looked in the right places at the right time, I just didn't find one. I only spent one day really looking for Henslow's and that just isn't enough. I didn't go get some easy Purple Finches close to home I could have in the early part of the year and then there were no reliable ones around at the end of the year. You just can't pass up a bird in the hand. Lesson learned, don't leave any birds for December you don't have to.

I was pretty efficient in my travel. I made about 30,000 miles in Texas, much less than the other big years I know about. I think that could be improved on, making fewer day trips and spending time in bigger blocks looking for regional specialties, especially the Trans-Pecos and Panhandle.

I learned a lot in 2015, I have a plan to break the record now. The number of birds I recorded on the 6-day Birding Classic, 331, got me thinking. What if you did that three times, January, late April, and perhaps September? I think those three weeks of birding would get you very close to all the non-review species in the state. That last trip would likely be very targeted, just picking up missing species, I would think you would be knocking on the door of 500 by then.

I likely would handle the Rio Grande Valley the same, wait for chases to tick off things there. You're going to make those chases anyway, and the specialties there are pretty reliable.

My winter big week would certainly include going to The Bowl in the Guadalupe Mountains. Info on what is there during January and February is scant, but one can assume it could have something pretty interesting.

I would also likely work my way through the panhandle at that time too. Species would

be much easier to find I think, because more will have settled in by then.

Outside of the big weeks, I would mostly be doing targeted birding for things missed and chases for rarities. Hopefully there would also be at least four pelagic trips. Pelagic trips are so important to this, nothing else basically guarantees a review species every time you go out.

I can't have another dip with Purple Finch and Henslow's Sparrow. Birds like that have to be found by March. They just aren't reliable enough in December to count on. Especially when they are within a 90-minute drive of home.

eBird reports an average of 532 species for the last 5 complete years, take that same 10 off the countable list and you have on average the record number. I think the record is there for the taking.

So will I try for it? The answer is yes. I will be retired in 2017. I'm already thinking about the routes for the big weeks. I'm already looking forward to the pelagics. I have the time to get in shape for the mountain hikes. Maybe I should hit up 5-Hour Energy for a sponsorship?

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Flight of the Castaways: *Notes from a Wild Parrot Field Journal*

By Charles Alexander



Wild Green Parakeets gather at close of day at 10th and Violet in McAllen, Texas.

MARCH 13, 2012

My first day at the Green Parakeet roost in McAllen surpassed all my expectations. Tipped off by an internet birding forum post that mentioned that parakeets could be seen in large numbers near sundown every evening at 10th Street and Violet, I arrived in McAllen several hours early, eager to see the flocks for myself.

While waiting in the parking lot of a local wings place, I discovered a lone Green Parakeet in residence in a palm log cavity across 10th, right over heavy traffic. What a stroke of luck! I had to stand in the middle of the busy street to get good shots of him in his high-rise penthouse, a near-death experience that I cannot recommend. A starling has commandeered another hole in the same dead palm. Two feral cats were prowling the sidewalks and parking lot beneath the snag.

Flock after flock of Green Parakeets arrived in waves close to 6:30 pm, landing on the power lines along the street, their numbers far greater than I had imagined they would be. Thousands of Great-tailed Grackles swarmed into the neighborhood as well, the parakeets and grackles all making a colossal racket at sundown. I have never seen anything like it in my life. 10th and Violet must be the best place in the world to observe Green Parakeets in such numbers up close.

To my surprise, a pair of Mitred Parakeets showed up among the flocks of greens tonight with a grown youngster in tow, their voices coarser and deeper than the high-pitched, histrionic screaming of the greens. The mitreds are larger and sturdier birds than the Green Parakeets, in flight reminding me of small macaws. The largest of the three has extensive red mottling on his forehead and cheeks.



Green parakeets take flight over 10th Street, the reflective surfaces of their underwings winking in the evening light.

By 8 pm the parakeets had all gone to roost in the tall palms along the street. After a few random squeaks and squawks, all was quiet under the street lights.

MARCH 17, 2012

I arrived in McAllen at 5:30 this afternoon to check on the parakeet in the nesting cavity over 10th—discovering within a few minutes



Green parakeets peek from their nesting log, high above city traffic.

that he's not alone up there! First I saw one little green head poking out of the hole, then another. The larger bird, presumably the male, emerged from the cavity to cling to the palm trunk, reaching up to touch bills with the female while she was still in the hole. I am looking forward to learning more about Green Parakeet nesting behavior.

This evening's roost-rally was a hive of diverse activity. Within seeming chaos, distinct patterns of behavior are emerging. Neatly spaced family units huddle together on the wires, preening each other furiously. Up and down the lines, birds jab, squeal, and squabble with others who dare to infringe upon their clearly-marked and well-understood kinship boundaries, the ousted birds constantly taking wing to settle elsewhere.

These birds love to fly! I often see small parties recklessly diving down toward heavy traffic, almost touching the tops of vehicles, then zooming at top speed across sidewalks and parking lots to buzz me as they pass. Near sundown tonight, dozens of parakeets were leaping from local rooftops and street signs, balancing airily on the wind, then dashing off to play in the tall palms in another section of the neighborhood. Palm fronds were tossing in the stiff breeze like waves in an angry sea, with multitudes of parakeets—like darting reef fishes—landing, quarreling, snuggling, and shrieking into the wind. The parakeets and palms, the wind and sky all felt in perfect accord. Sensing these connections has shifted my perception of these birds. I left them only when it became too dark to see them anymore. What more do they have to teach me?

MARCH 30, 2012

At 9 pm last night, the neighborhood of the Green Parakeet roost in McAllen took a direct hit from a hailstorm of immense proportions. Quarter-sized to baseball-sized hail transformed 10th Street into a war zone, shattering office park and restaurant windows, totaling a local car dealership, and



Casualties of the McAllen hailstorm, the day after impact.

killing hundreds of birds. Every tree within the impact zone was stripped of its leaves, every palm frond shredded, creating a wintry landscape in a South Texas spring.

Arriving in McAllen at 4 pm this afternoon, the day after the storm, I feared the worst as I walked from 6th Street down to 10th at Violet. Mounds of hail were still melting everywhere I looked, up and down the street. Soon I began to see them: parakeets half buried in debris, scattered across parking lots and sidewalks, tossed and broken by the storm. Many of the birds had no feathers on one side of their bodies—the hail had plucked them as neatly as it had stripped the leaves from the trees. The smell of death pervaded 10th Street as I searched the neighborhood, picking up parakeets one by one, until I had a garbage bag full. Each bird looked as if it had been smashed with a hammer. Night fell before I could get them all.



Safe atop their battered palm log, a pair of nesting green parakeets surveys the aftermath of the storm.

APRIL 1, 2012

Of the surviving birds that I discovered on the ground following the devastating

hailstorm in McAllen, all were male Great-tailed Grackles. No great-tailed females, no Green Parakeets, no birds of any other species were found alive on the ground. Most of the surviving grackles were blind on one side. Checking on the nest cavity of the mated parakeet pair along 10th, I saw a Golden-fronted Woodpecker perched on the snag near the nesting hole, ready to move in—the cavity apparently vacant now. Walking down the street, I turned to look back once more—and was surprised to see a lone parakeet clinging to the palm trunk, just outside the nest hole. At least one of the pair had managed to survive! Suddenly I saw two birds at the top of the battered snag. Safe in their palm log condo, the pair had weathered the storm.

MAY 4, 2012

I spent the late afternoon and evening in the new parakeet roost location at the Pharr/McAllen city limits, right across from Whataburger along Nolana. Most of the 200 plus parakeets that I've located post-hailstorm were checking out the local palms, a few hiding



Survivors of the McAllen hailstorm cross over Nolana Street, near the McAllen-Pharr city limits.



Green parakeets tuck themselves in for the night in the “hula skirt” of an untrimmed palm.

themselves within the cone-like bracts where the palms have been trimmed. In Brownsville, I’ve seen the parakeets slipping beneath the shaggy “hula skirt” layers of dead fronds on palms that have been left natural and untrimmed—a roost site favored by bats as well. Here in McAllen, the palms are routinely pruned. Most of the palms within the impact zone had been severely trimmed just a few days before the storm.

This newly-discovered Whataburger flock decided to roost for the night in small live oaks in a strip-center parking lot, only 15-20 feet from the ground, looking exposed and vulnerable to predators and bad weather. How did this completely unscathed flock survive the hailstorm when so many others died? I have many more questions about these birds than answers. The parakeets are capricious birds, rallying at the usual spot, then roosting in various places. Perhaps the many parakeets that died just happened to have decided to spend the night within the impact zone? Go down just a few blocks in either direction and the trees are not stripped, the palms not

shredded. I visited the dead zone at 10th and Violet at sundown tonight: not a parakeet or even a grackle in sight. The smell of death has lifted somewhat.

MAY 9, 2012

Clearing skies followed an afternoon downpour here in downtown Brownsville. A perfect evening for observing scores of raucous Green Parakeets flocking to feed in neighborhood palms, nibbling orchid tree flowers, fussing and fighting in a roiling featherball, or free diving with flockmates from a cathedral bell tower, just for fun.

At twilight last evening, thunderstorms threatened the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Dozens of Green Parakeets were circling the historic neighborhood of Brownsville’s Sacred Heart Church, screaming defiance into the wind beneath ominous clouds. The roof and bell towers of the old church, the bank next door, the tall palms and plantings in the parking lot: all serve as a sort of urban clay-lick/parakeet Disneyland every night at Elizabeth and 6th streets, just a few blocks from the



Eager to make deposits, green parakeets play on a bank sign in downtown Brownsville.

bridge to Matamoros, Mexico. The block party—lasting up to 3 hours—is routinely wild and rowdy, ending at last when the birds go to roost at sundown.

A highlight of the past couple of weeks has been piecing together a rudimentary list of some of the Green Parakeet food plants here in the Valley. So far, I've seen the birds feeding on orchid tree blossoms, hackberries, palm fruits and flowers, anacua berries, crepe myrtle seeds and blossoms, live oak acorns, the flowers and fruit of wild olives, and the

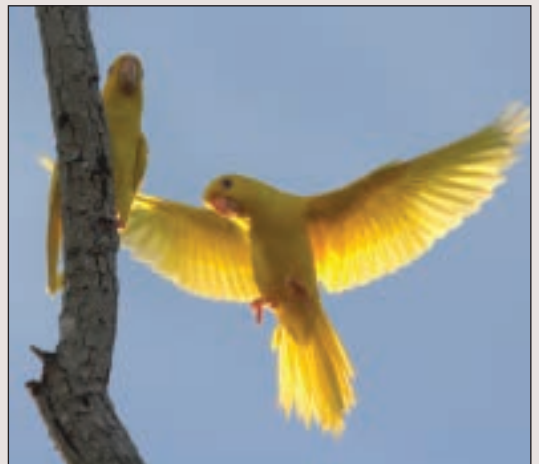


A green parakeet snacks on orchid tree blossoms on the grounds of Brownsville's Sacred Heart Church.

seed pods of the lead tree: all exclusively within the urban environment.

AUGUST 29, 2013

This morning I was alerted via social media to the presence of an unusual Green Parakeet—a solid yellow bird—that had been photographed as it fed on fruiting trees outside a Mcallen law office. Since first observing the Valley's wild parakeets in March 2012, I had never seen a solid lutino mutation anywhere among the flocks, though I had discovered a pied bird with yellow primaries and a yellow tail at the Sacred Heart Church



The wings of the golden Novas were almost transparent when backlit by the sun.

in downtown Brownsville. The bird in the Facebook photo did not appear to be a lutino Indian ringneck or any other cage-bird mutation familiar to me.

By late afternoon, I was back on 10th Street in McAllen, looking for the mystery bird among the hundreds of parakeets that had gathered for the evening roost-rally. Walking along the sidewalk at the intersection of 10th and Zinnia, I looked up and immediately saw a flash of gold land on the wires over traffic. I was amazed to have found the mutation bird so quickly. Here indeed was a solid yellow parakeet, flocking with a family party of greens. My astonishment turned to disbelief a moment later when a second all-yellow bird appeared, fluttering on golden wings to join the first. The two huddled together next to three normally-plumaged green birds, nuzzling and snuggling on their perch in typical parakeet fashion—then the party took off. The birds circled the street, vanishing the next instant behind Office Depot.

These two lutino mutation birds, the first ever seen in the species, were like beacons, visible for a long way down 10th. Hoofing it to the alley behind Office Depot, I found one of the three Green Parakeets in the party locking bills with a yellow bird on a power line directly overhead—a parent feeding a newly-fledged youngster. As the fledgling fed, it pumped its head and wings rapidly, its golden primaries brilliantly backlit by the sun.

Today marks the beginning of my observations of the Nova family, so named as I can think of only one word to describe plumage more chromatic than a sun conure's.

SEPTEMBER 5, 2013

Waiting at the Lowe's fountain plaza at 10th and Dove—the best place to observe McAllen's wild parakeets up-close—requires patience and a healthy dose of faith. On some days the birds arrive as expected. On others they fail to show at all. The two Spanish fountains are multi-tiered and fifteen feet tall, standing as neighborhood landmarks on each



Parakeets arrive at the Fountain of Dreams at 10th and Dove, McAllen.

side of the plaza entrance. Water pours from a cement ball at the top of each fountain—and the wind blows refreshing spray from the rim of each bowl as the flow makes its way to the tiled basins at bottom. Patrolling each tier, threatening and chasing away any bird that dares try for a drink, male Great-tailed Grackles are a constant menace, black and shining in the sun. The ultimate prize for a grackle male is to stand at the pinnacle of a fountain ball, his head tossed back as a warning to would-be rivals.

As shadows lengthened this evening, I feared that the parakeets might be no-shows. The robotic whirrings and screechings of grackles, the rush of falling water, and the passing of steady traffic lulled the senses as the minutes ticked by. Then just within my range of hearing, I picked up a single signature call, then another—then many voices together: the sound of parakeets in flight. The shapes of cottoritos—“little parrots”—looked like small crosses against the sky as they converged upon Lowe's plaza, some arriving from nearby locations, others materializing from unknown distances.



A young green parakeet deflects a grackle attack at the Lowe's fountains.

The Novas came in late today. It is always a surreal experience to spot, high in the air, two golden specks in the sky among the greens, banking and circling to land. Bypassing the fountains entirely this evening, the

family flew straight to the plaza live oaks, joining the general commotion as more and more parakeet kinship groups arrived, waiting for the right moment to try for a drink. Meanwhile, the fountain great-tails dodged and parried, flying and stabbing at incoming parrots with their sharp bills. As more and more green kamikazes braved a landing on the fountain tiers, however, the grackles abandoned their posts. Finding safety in numbers, the Novas soon fluttered down from the live oaks to join their flock mates for a drink.

SEPTEMBER 27, 2013

One of the Novas has been missing for two days. Strangely enough, the all-green sibling—not one of the lutinos—has vanished. While I have no way of knowing what happened to the bird (it could be sitting two yards away with many other greens and remain completely anonymous), something interesting jumped out of my photos of the Novas coming for a drink at the fountains on the 24th. The two green parent birds, the two brilliant gold lutinos, and two other greens came in for a landing. One was definitely the green sibling with the short tail—the other was an unknown green. The strange bird saw the hideous thing on two legs pointing a



The Novas—two parent birds, two lutinos, and one green sibling—arrive at the Plaza Las Fuentes.



Hope and Glory arrive to bathe and drink at *La Fuente de los Sueños*.

camera at him and did a double-take—then gave a quick alarm call and took off. The Novas, no longer frightened by my presence (though I am always a good ways off, looking at them through my 400mm lens), continued to drink. I wonder if this new bird sought to pair up with the green sibling—and has now done so? Was the green sibling last year's hatchling, sticking around to act as a "helper", now spirited away from the family by a suitor? When do parrots pair up and form those famously long-lasting bonds? The strange bird didn't just show up for a drink at the same moment that the family arrived—they all arrived together, circling the fountain as one and alighting in a body for a drink. What to make of that?

SEPTEMBER 29, 2013

The golden Novas still look rather infantile with their short baby tails, though I haven't seen them being fed by the parents in recent days. Tonight, the parents were jabbing at the golden pair—and the lutinos sat by themselves for a while, grooming each

other. At close of evening, however, the pair returned to cuddle and preen with the parent birds. At sundown the family flew across 10th Street to go to bed in the live oaks at Lee's Pharmacy. The Season of the Anis—the Moon When Grackles Grow Their Tails—has turned, I think. As the Novas vanished into the shadows of their evening roost tonight, I felt a twinge of nostalgia for days just recently passed, realizing how swiftly those days flew by and how quickly the lives of the birds are changing now. What will the next chapter be?

OCTOBER 15, 2013

Back from McAllen: all parakeets known to me have been accounted for. In case you haven't heard, green is their favorite color. I wear the same green t-shirt every day when I'm with the birds. I can get fairly close at this point without altering their behavior. Anything different—another person, another color—they don't buy it. This afternoon the power lines right over my head were covered with birds waiting to drink at the fountains. When they arrive, I take a slight step back—



JJ—one of the numerous parakeets on 10th with unusual yellow markings—enjoys a drink on a hot South Texas afternoon.

and move slowly and deliberately, always respecting their boundaries. Even the crusty old Mitred Parakeet comes down to drink when I am quite close, behaving as if I am

not there. It took weeks to get to this point. Today is Day 48 with the Nova family. The birds are constantly teaching me something new. I've been able to identify quite a few individual flock members now. I've named parakeets after Audubon (JJ), the Voyage of the Beagle (Captain Fitzroy, Darwin, Jemmy Button), genetics (DNA), the Father of American Ornithology (Wilson), interesting markings (Goldust, Goldfinger, Golden Arrow, Cleo), Native American names for the Carolina Parakeet (Kelinky), old movies (Pete and Tillie, Hope and Glory), etc. I never leave McAllen until I see the Nova family fly to their roost and settle in for the night. 10th Street at sundown redefines the concept of "outdoor aviary".

OCTOBER 16, 2013

I arrived in McAllen this afternoon to discover a demolition crew obliterating one of the most secluded and food-rich refuges in the parrots' preferred neighborhood: a lush and shady vacant lot thick with tall palms and other old trees that I liked to think of as a sort of Secret Garden.



A dozer demolishes the verdant Secret Garden, habitat for many species of urban wildlife.



Glory feasts on anacua berries in the parrots' secluded Secret Garden.

Walking over in shock to have a look at the destruction, I heard a series of piercing screams and found the dozer drivers gathered round a milk crate in which they had placed two baby fox squirrels, orphans fresh from the catastrophe that had left them homeless and without their mother. One baby seemed out of it and almost past caring, clinging to the side of the crate, but its sibling was huddled in a corner, screaming in terror at the top of its considerable voice. The men offered the pair to me, seeming eager to be rid of the orphans, so I took them. Bundling them up in my t-shirt for security and quiet, I walked the lot, looking for their mother. I didn't find her, but did encounter many displaced birds, including a Golden-fronted Woodpecker perched on the wreckage where venerable old trees had once stood, and a frantic Couch's Kingbird flying in circles. A couple of Green Parakeets arrived to have a snack in the garden's fruiting trees. They perched on the wires

at the street, looking down at the carnage below for quite some time, craning their heads this way and that, talking to one another before flying away. I took the two baby squirrels to a wildlife rehabber in Edinburgh. They huddled together in their impromptu t-shirt nest for warmth and security as I drove, their tails wrapped around their bodies.

OCTOBER 20, 2013

Tonight only the parent birds and one lutino showed up to roost in the live oaks at Lee's Pharmacy, along with less than half the number of parakeets normally present. The birds fell silent on the roost at one point, then started murmuring a barely audible, raspy chant: the parakeet word for raptor. I scanned the skies carefully but could see nothing. Of the 53 days that I've followed the Novas thus far, tonight marks the first time that I haven't seen both lutinos present at evening bedtime. The family always goes to roost together, snuggling in as close to one another as possible. Like the normal-colored fledglings in the population here, the two golden Novas are still in need of parental guidance. They aren't being fed by the parents anymore—and are branching out to test their wings on their own. The golden siblings are inseparable, a team. They explore away from their parents for extended periods, but are still perched with the two normally-colored parent birds every evening at roost time. I wonder if yesterday's storm or perhaps a raptor divided the flock?

OCTOBER 21, 2013

I'm still on the lookout for the missing Nova. A man in a flashy pickup has been hanging around the Office Depot parking lot for several evenings now, watching the parakeets on the wires and at the roost. I asked him tonight if he was a bird dealer—and he admitted proudly that he was indeed a parrot *breeder*, owner of a McAllen pet shop, but promised that he was here only to appreciate the birds, to share a glimpse of the lutinos with his wife



Hope begs at weaning time and is refused by a parent bird. No meant no.



Snuggling close, the Novas embody the concept of togetherness.

and kids (they were indeed in the truck). I pointed out that one of the two yellow birds was now missing. He said matter-of-factly that yes, others less honorable than he were interested in the lutinos, that he had been told that a wealthy collector in North Carolina had already placed an order for the birds.

A chill went down my spine as he spoke—and my anger began to boil, realizing that there was absolutely no law to stop anyone from catching the entire family if they so desired. Though I was at the roost every evening without fail, perhaps Glory Nova had been netted late in the night, when I wasn't around to prevent her capture. Perhaps even now she was stuffed into a shipping crate, on her way to North Carolina. Though the Green Parakeets are native to northern Mexico, no law protects them on this side of the Rio Grande, where the birds are considered non-native and feral.

No one knows for sure how the Green Parakeet became established here in South Texas. Some say that the species wandered across the Rio Grande from Mexico, perhaps driven

north by habitat destruction. Ciudad Victoria, near the historical northern limit of the Green Parakeet's range in Tamaulipas, is just a half-day's bus ride from McAllen—a journey much swifter as the parakeet flies. Monterrey, where the parakeets have established themselves north of Victoria in the state of Nuevo Leon, is even closer.

Others believe that the birds are escapees from the pet trade. Considered plain of feather and a poor talker, the Green Parakeet has never been a desirable cage bird (at least not until the lutinos showed up). Nevertheless, thousands of Green Parakeets were brought into Valley quarantine stations from the 1970s to the early 90s. Many more were smuggled across the border. I've been told that bird smugglers, if pursued by law enforcement, would simply open crates filled with contraband birds, releasing the evidence of their crimes into the Valley environment. For every parakeet that survived post-release, countless others suffered and died in the hands of unscrupulous traders.



On the evening of Glory's return, the Nova parents defend their offspring from the attentions of an unwelcome caller.

OCTOBER 22, 2013

Glory Nova returned to the family. I've rarely been so surprised and overjoyed. I am not a scientist—and it's great to be free to say: I love these funny little birds, just as they love each other. Such is my bias—and it makes me laugh just to look at them.

I haven't seen so much furious preening among the Novas for several weeks, not since the fledglings were much younger. They were definitely happy to be back together again, the parents acting as bookends as they nibbled and fussed over their youngsters. I have never seen the parents so protective as they were this evening, the father leaping over the golden siblings to help mother drive away an interloper on the wires at roost-rally time.

After they had all settled down to bed in the pharmacy live oaks, I walked into the pet shop next to Office Depot to have a look at the green-winged macaw baby that I noticed in the window there yesterday. Just a few minutes earlier, I had stood in the presence of five-hundred wild parrots at their evening roost: families sitting together, preening each other, cuddling as close as possible as the sun went down. While still very young, this baby green-wing had been taken from his breeder parents to be handfed, changing the course of his life forever and traumatizing the parent birds. On display, he lives now in a plexi-glass isolette by himself, at least until his first owner buys him. He'll never learn from his parents how to be a macaw, will never know their touch.

NOVEMBER 2, 2013

10th Street's lone Mitred Parakeet dealt some payback to one of the Great-tailed Grackles that tried to interrupt bath time at the fountains this afternoon. The grackle had been darting and jabbing at the parrots over the previous hour and seemed pretty pleased with himself. Tackling the testy mitred, however, the great-tail was quickly outclassed. Faster than the eye could follow, the mitred



Gronk family members bathe at *La Fuente de los Sueños*.

struck like a snake, clamping down on the grackle's leg with his powerful bill. The leg was not bitten off, but the great-tail fled the fountains at meteoric speed, perhaps a bit wiser now to the ways of red-masked street bandits.

The mitred wears a metal band on one leg, evidence that he was once a captive bird. Certainly, he had lived another life at some point in the past, perhaps many lives, before facing the wilds of 10th Street. The sole-surviving mitred of the 2012 hailstorm, he had found a new mate of a different species: a red-throated conure, also an escapee. I saw the two together a few days after last year's catastrophe, sitting in the same palm in a medical plaza across from the Nolana Whataburger. I named this mixed-species family the Gronks, an acronym for "great big honkin", a reference to the pair's huge, rowdy hybrid fledglings. The name also recalls the Mitred Parakeet's distinctive voice, a deeper, coarser, almost gull-like sound easily distinguished from the greens—a pitch also inherited by the Gronk offspring.



Parakeets gather on the wires over 10th, waiting to drink at the fountains.

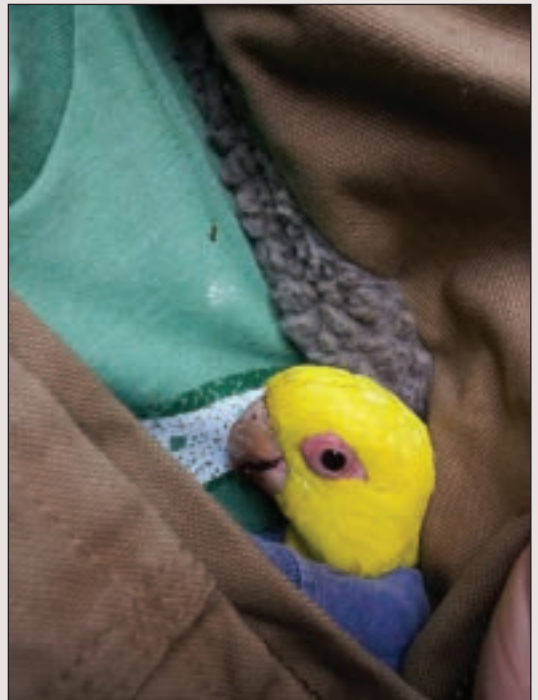
NOVEMBER 6, 2013

The parakeets spoke back to me! A small flock was sitting on the wires, directly over my head at the fountains, waiting for the right moment to come down—and I decided to whistle to them, imitating one of the plaintive *Wee-Weeeeeeee* whistles that I sometimes hear them add to the end of a statement. I whistled- and the birds instantly repeated it. I could not believe my ears. I did it again—they immediately responded. Then once more. I didn't want to push my luck after that. I wonder what I said? I first heard them make the sound while they were feeding in some palms a few days ago, speaking their normal chatter—but with this distinctive whistle sound added to the end. The birds didn't fly away when I whistled at them today, so my offer to communicate must not have been too alarming. It was funny how swiftly they repeated it. Instantaneously, like "Oh yes! We get that!" And these birds are com-

pletely wild! It wasn't a wolf whistle, just one of their words. I bet I got it all out of context. Like most native speakers, the parakeets at least acknowledged the attempt. They even responded with what appeared to be enthusiasm.

NOVEMBER 14, 20013

Glory, the more adventurous of the golden Nova sisters, fell to earth this evening at bedtime. She tried to follow as the parakeet flocks—spooked by a menace invisible to my eyes—dashed in a panic from the wires at Office Depot. To my astonishment, Glory lost altitude with every labored wingbeat and fluttered to the ground, just two feet from oncoming traffic. Disoriented and too weak to bite, she allowed me to pick her up without a struggle. In a flash I put her inside my coat, against my chest, where she snuggled in the warmth as I drove her to rescue. For the next hour, I felt her rapidly-beating heart against the pulse of my own as she pressed herself close for comfort and security. Glory is now in the hands of the local wildlife rehabber



Glory Nova, the night she fell to earth.



A few days after Glory's death, Hope searches for her missing sibling.

who took in the orphaned squirrels from the now-demolished Secret Garden, an abandoned lot full of mature food trees. I fear that the loss of the Secret Garden's huge anacua tree, tall old palms, and many sugar hackberries was a blow to the parrots. The Novas fed there every day. The relentless winds of the blue norther that swept into the Valley on Tuesday evening further weakened Glory. The cold snap persisted yesterday—and I was very worried about the Nova family, as they did not show up at the fountains. Today it was

still cold and overcast. The Novas arrived late at the fountain plaza, with Glory working very hard to keep up with the family. Finally, exhausted, she could fly no more.

NOVEMBER 18, 2013

Since Glory's death, Hope has seemed lost and confused. Though her parents fly to cuddle with her, lavishing their affection upon her whenever they are perched together, Hope has been circling the flock—and landing alone. I think she is looking for Glory. Often when the sisters circled and landed to one side, they would find one another, one bird fluttering down to join her sibling. Bad weather is again on the way—and I am concerned about Hope. She looks so fragile and ethereal up there without her sister at her side.

NOVEMBER 30, 2013

A fascinating discovery this afternoon in McAllen: I happened upon a large flock of hundreds of Green Parakeets alighting in a live oak tree in an office parking lot along Nolana Street. Soon the air was filled with bits of golden fluff as the birds began to feed, reminding me of Frank Chapman's description of Carolina Parakeets feeding upon



Green parakeets enjoy a taste of winter "cotton candy": the galls of the wool-bearing gall wasp.

thistles in Florida c. February 1889. I soon realized that the parrots weren't feeding on the live oak's plentiful acorns (as they often do), but on little tan puffballs growing everywhere on the underside of the oak leaves: galls caused by an infestation of wool-bearing gall wasps. The parrots were clamoring to get at this nutritious "cotton candy", shredding each puff to eat the 2-6 protein rich kernels within which the gall wasps develop. Drifts of golden fuzz were soon accumulating on the pavement below and scudding across the parking lot in the wind. Today marks my 89th consecutive day following the wild parakeets of El Valle this season.

DECEMBER 4, 2013

AM—Up at 430, I drove from Brownsville to McAllen, arriving at the parrots' roost of the previous evening—a bank parking lot with small live oaks lining the sidewalk—before 6am. All was silent but the muffled sounds of pre-dawn traffic along 10th Street. Looking at the rather ordinary urban scene, you would never imagine that hundreds of

wild parrots were concealed there in the dark foliage of the oaks, cloaked from curious eyes. I waited, standing back from the trees under the streetlights so as not to disturb Hope and her flockmates. They had slept for over 12 hours now! Random murmurs and sharp squeals from the trees told me that the birds were beginning to awaken and to jab restlessly at one another. Every now and then, a few quicksilver green forms darted from a smaller to a larger tree, then all was still again under the morning star til dawn. Suddenly, at 640 the parrots dashed in a body from the trees, faster than I've ever seen them fly, screaming and rising in an instant to circle in a helix spiral over the street. In a moment they were high up in the cold morning air, creating wheeling formations over 10th for several minutes, greeting the rising sun. The birds circled there at their high vantage point, then quickly the veil began to tatter as squadrons broke away to head in various directions across the colors of daybreak. I tried to follow these rapidly-vanishing wisps of smoke, but soon lost them. I could never discern Hope's



Green parakeets disperse against the colors of dawn.



Harris's hawks scan the Best Buy parking lot for prey.

golden form among the other tiny moving crosses in the sky.

DECEMBER 4, 2013

PM—Another day of raptors and chaos in McAllen. First, a Cooper's Hawk commandeered the parrots' favorite live oak in the fountain plaza, making forays from there and sending every bird in the neighborhood into the air. Just a handful of parakeets arrived to drink at the Fountain of Dreams today—and those soon fled in terror. Whenever pigeons, grackles, starlings, and other birds in your neighborhood all suddenly take to the sky as one, look up and around. You'll most likely find a raptor on the hunt overhead. At roost time, the parrots were going to bed in the live oaks at the bank parking lot on Nolana, just as they did last night, when suddenly they all froze and started making their low, rasping "raptor" sound. I looked behind me just in time to see a swift shadow swooping up to land on the topmost ledge of the Compass Bank building: a Peregrine Falcon. I did not see Hope all day.

DECEMBER 18, 2013

After coming up missing for two weeks, Hope and her parents have returned! I last saw them as they went to roost December



Hope and flock members roost in a live oak at HEB, ignoring the holiday traffic.

3 in the Compass Bank parking lot here in McAllen, but failed to locate them through the succession of blue northers that howled across the Rio Grande Valley in recent weeks. Thus far, the family has survived Peregrine



Hope demonstrates to a peer that she can effectively stand her ground.

Falcons, Cooper's Hawks, Harris's Hawks, cold, wind, rain, and numerous others hazards here in the urban jungle—and have prevailed. I believe that Hope has even grown!

The Novas are asleep at the moment in a very small live oak in the middle of a megaparking lot crammed with heavy traffic. Holiday shoppers are pushing noisy carts across the pavement. Others are pumping gas—all to the tune of the thousands upon thousands of Great-tailed Grackles that are thronging every available perch for at least a mile along 10th Street. I suspect that the parrots may be using the grackle armies as a shield against predation. Grackles are extremely sensitive on the roost, taking off at the slightest disturbance and instantly warning the parrots. The trick of roosting where there are so many people about may also be a deterrent to predators.

Every evening I stand beneath a low ceiling of tens of thousands of grackles, hearing the soft rushing of wings passing overhead and the din of countless voices—and realize that we are not apart from nature. There is no nature. The sable tide rushes in, the birds arrange themselves in regimental lines along the street, each bird spaced just so. With clockwork precision the multitudes lay claim to the streets and buildings that we presume to call our own.

DECEMBER 21, 2013

Every day on parrot watch, I marvel at the tenacity of a crippled Harris's Hawk as he hunts across the Best Buy-Target—Kohl's shopping megaplex here in McAllen. The bird's badly mangled right leg looks like it was twisted brutally sideways by a collision with a powerline, then healed that way. The leg



Unlike tactile parakeets, grackles space themselves in regimental order on the wires along 10th.



A crippled Harris's hawk tries for a parakeet meal over Red Lobster.

is frozen in position and sticks straight out, whether he is perched or flying, making him instantly recognizable whenever I see him. He and his hunting partner are aggressively working the area, though I haven't seen them catch anything yet. The parakeets never miss a chance to mob the injured one and wheel about him as he sails over the holiday shopping chaos, screaming abuse in his ear. They have no problem identifying—or commenting upon—his infirmity.

JANUARY 5, 2014

A cold norther swept into the Rio Grande Valley this afternoon. As temperatures plummeted and sundown approached, hundreds of Green Parakeets rained down into the live oaks across the street from *La Fuente de los Sueños*—the Fountain of Dreams—hungry for acorns (no wasp galls on the menu today). The parking area beneath the trees was pinging with bouncing acorns, the plaza resonating with the contented voices of the parrots. A Peregrine Falcon perched on the radio tower overlooking the fountain plaza as cloud cover deepened, a presence that sent the parrots screaming north toward Trenton. At dusk, the Harris's Hawk with the mangled leg circled the Target-Best Buy shopping area with its hunting partner, surviving against the odds. A Cooper's Hawk zoomed over 10th Street, scattering flocks of parrots, pigeons, and Great-tailed Grackles over fast food parking lots. No sign of Hope since last Sunday.

FEBRUARY 2, 2014

Hope is roughly eight months-old now and won't be able to reproduce until she is two years of age. However, that doesn't stop her from leaving her parents whenever she feels like it, flying down to a low perch or wire to interact with other birds her own age. She's playing and testing just now, discovering her strengths, and learning where she stands within her peer group. Hope is treated exactly the same as any other young bird. Peer play can get rough, but Hope has gotten quite



Parakeet flock members feast on acorns on a cold winter day.

good at holding her own during these getting-to-know-you sessions. One of her young green “suitsors” is often seen bobbing his head up and down, as if regurgitating something to offer her, whenever he lands next to her. Once Hope tires of playing and kissing, she flies back to mother and father, who are always waiting to preen her from head to foot.

FEBRUARY 22, 2014

The past few afternoons at the Plaza Los Fuentes have been sunny, but blustery, with the wind changing direction day to day and blowing spray from the fountains. Hope's visits to the fountains have been sporadic for mysterious reasons, her absences perhaps dependent upon the strength of the wind, the availability of water elsewhere, and the presence of raptors. Though hundreds of thirsty parakeets arrive to drink and bathe nearly every day, the Novas are an unreliable presence, their appearance always feeling like a sudden and miraculous gift. Only Hope's parents and their traveling companions know the true



Diamonds and Gold: Hope arrives at the Fountain of Dreams.

reason for their conservative approach to life on 10th Street.

DECEMBER 6, 2014

I found Hope roosting in parking lot live oaks tonight with her parents and hundreds of other parakeets and grackles at Logan's Roadhouse, just across from their evening roost-rally spot at Red Lobster on 10th. Prior to bedtime, Hope was flying around and around in swift circles, pursued by a potential mate in a dizzying nuptial flight over Red Lobster, attended by the family chaperones that always accompany these matchmaking affairs.

A few weeks after his red-throated mate vanished in December 2013, I observed the Mitred Parakeet pursuing a Green Parakeet in similar fashion over the fountain plaza, bumping against his intended in mid-flight. As with Hope's flight, the object of the mitred's affections was flanked by two Green Parakeets who kept pace with the courting pair. At least that's one interpretation of these



Parakeet winter flocks roost with legions of grackles in parking lot plantings.



A maturing Hope circles over 10th.

exhaustive circles over the neighborhood. Fortunately, I have extensive HD video of Hope's flight in my archive to examine and think about in the upcoming months away, as well as many photos.

Early tomorrow morning I leave for the long drive home to West Tennessee and on to my sister's Kentucky wedding. I do not want to say goodbye to the Rio Grande Valley—or to the birds. The Green Parakeets of South Texas have revealed their world to me, a thread that I prefer to remain unbroken. Back home in Tennessee, a place that lost its wild Carolina Parakeets long ago, a parking lot is merely an expanse of pavement; office park crepe myrtles are never weighed down by a chattering flock; and the wires over Office Depot are just another blank. That's the true nature of extinction.

NOVEMBER 28, 2015

A cold, drizzly Saturday here in El Valle. Undaunted, the wild parrots are enjoying their favored seasonal foods. Searching Hope's old haunts in McAllen over the past few days, I found no trace of her. I have not seen her since leaving for Tennessee almost a year ago. Today, back in the Valley for good, I managed to reconnect with at least one bird familiar to me: the lone mitred conure of 10th Street, wearing his metal leg band. This afternoon I



In the midst of a flock of greens, the lone mitred of 10th Street feeds on crepe myrtles at Kohl's, November 2015.

found him feeding in crepe myrtles at Kohl's with a rowdy party of greens, looking as fit and confident as ever. A few yards away, more hungry Green Parakeets were visiting parking lot live oaks for acorns and the protein-rich galls of the wool-bearing gall wasp. Familiar drifts of golden fuzz were drifting across the pavement as the birds enjoyed a taste of "cotton candy". The winter flocks of parakeets seem greatly diminished this year, nothing like the huge gatherings of 2013-14. I found just a couple of scattered flocks this afternoon, this one at Kohl's and another at Whataburger down the street at 10th and Trenton. I found no trace of the mitred's robust hybrid offspring Guenther and Baby. How to account for so many missing birds?

MAY 24, 2016

Last evening at sundown I checked on a tall palm log standing alone in a vacant lot in Alamo, Texas, a few miles from the McAllen

city limits. Hope had been photographed at the snag via cell phone—in the company of two green birds (presumably her parents)—back in late 2014 after I had returned north to cold Tennessee, land of my pioneer ancestors. Since it is now nesting season, I thought I'd give the location another shot, in spite of the passage of time.

The Alamo palm log is very tall and contains several nesting cavities near the top, perfect for parakeet penthouses. I discovered after a minute or two, however, that the holes were now occupied by those slick cavity bandits: European Starlings.

Before heading home, I stopped at the ramshackle house next door to ask if anyone had spotted *cottoritos* ... little parrots? The property was strewn with an odd assortment of junk. Kids of various ages were running and playing in the dirt yard out front, while older folks were hanging out on the porch, enjoying the evening. A thirty-something



Hope and winter flock members take flight over urban McAllen.

man whom I assumed to be the children's father came over as I rolled down the truck window. He seemed a friendly fellow, telling me that si, he had seen cottoros—even today, this morning.

“How about a yellow one?” I asked, holding my breath.

“No, no yellow ones—only green. I shot one with a BB gun right here,” he said, indicating the spot where the wing joined to the body.

“Why would you do that?” I asked, attempting to keep my voice as calm and flat as possible.

“Oh, I needed one,” he answered matter-of-factly with a shrug, adding that the bird was just inside in the house, now captive.

No sign of Hope and no word of her at this or any other location. These are new tenants in the house bordering the lot—and this was my second inquiry since March. It sounds to me as if the people living there now genuinely have no idea of a Golden Parakeet ever being seen in the neighborhood.

Charles Alexander
karasimbi@yahoo.com



“But Hopes are Shy Birds flying at a great distance, seldom reached by the best of guns.” John James Audubon.

AVIAN ARTWORK IN LAREDO.....

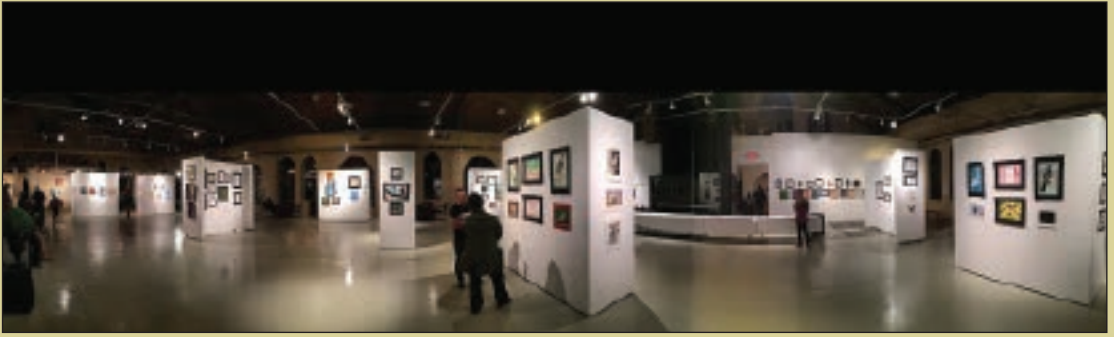


Figure 1: Finalist during the 2015 Festival art contest
Rafael Rimmingsbird/Andrew Lazo

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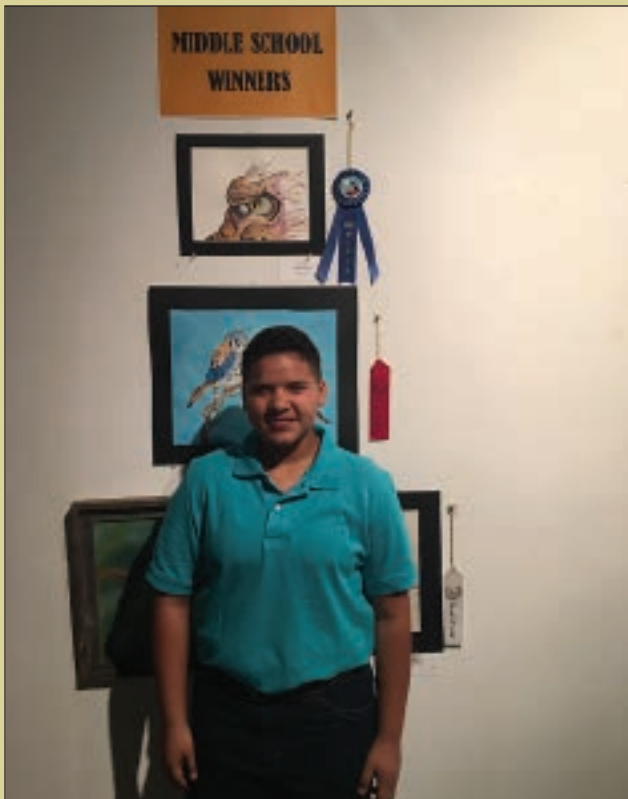
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2nd – Alberto Salazar Our Lady of Guadalupe School

3rd – Isabella Lopez Rosario Azios Art Studio

Honorable Mentions

Jorge Dozal Border Region Children Adolescent Parent Services

Nathan Dover Border Region Children Adolescent Parent Services

Veronica Maldonado Children’s Advocacy Center

MIDDLE SCHOOL

1st – Alexia Garcia Gonzalez Middle School

2nd – Aleida Juarez Lamar Middle School

3rd – Jessica Estevane Lamar Middle School

3rd – Angelina Cerda Alex’s Studio

Honorable Mentions

Giovanna Granillo Alex’s Studio

Wendy Ledezma Border Region Children Adolescent Parent Services

HIGH SCHOOL

1st – Julia Leyva Vidal M. Treviño School of Communications and Fine Arts

2nd – Maegan Yeary Vidal M. Treviño School of Communications and Fine Arts

3rd – Natalie Terrones Cigarroa High School

Honorable Mentions

Jocelynn Augillard Nixon High School

Jonathan Recio Vidal M. Treviño School of Communications and Fine Arts

Jacob Hernandez United South High School

COMMUNITY

1st – Hilda Zavala Alex’s Studio

2nd – Joe Olivares N/A

3rd – Samuel Bowers N/A

Honorable Mentions

Raquel Morales N/A

Rosa Isela Reyes N/A

Elias Alonzo -

The Texas Bird Image Project

By Jim Peterson

Now in its fourth year, The Texas Bird Image project (TBI) continues to collect bird images from around the state. TBI has now archived over 10,000 bird images and 800 videos of identifiable bird species all documented by date and county.

While the TBI project is certainly educational as a visual reference guide, its intention is more than just a scrapbook. Each image and video is recorded with date, county, and credited photographer. These photos and videos add weight to the state's accepted species list. The images aid in documenting regional rarities within a state, add information regarding status and distribution, and add clarity to

any discussion regarding rare and confusing species. Over 500 Texas photographers have contributed to the archive project.

Below are some recent important photo-documented additions to the project including the hard-to-see Black Rail by Greg Lavaty, White-collared Seedeaters from a new area in Val Verde County by Martin Reid and Sheridan Coffey, and Flame-colored Tanager and Golden-crowned Warbler from Nueces County by multiple photographers. The tanager and warbler are both pending review by the Texas Bird Records Committee.

Jim Peterson
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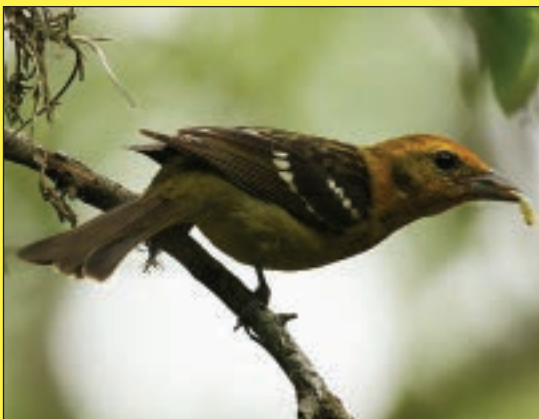
Black Rail.

Photo by Greg Lavaty



White-collared Seedeaters from a new area in Val Verde County.

Photo by Martin Reid



Flame-collared Tanager.

Photo by Bob Friedrichs



Golden-crowned Warbler.

Photo by David Hanson

A Texas Pelagics Big Year!

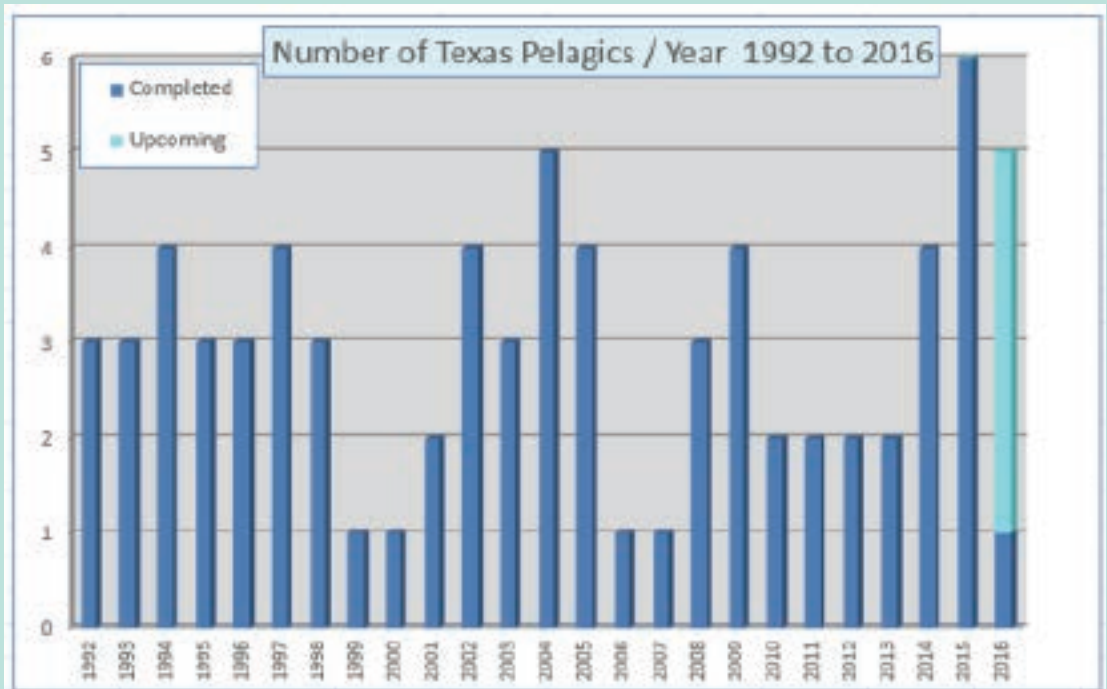
By Gary Hodne

During a period of just barely over one year between September 20, 2014 and October 10, 2015 seven consecutive Texas Pelagics trips from South Padre island collectively tallied an incredible 598 individual seabirds of 15 species including 6 Texas review species making this the best year ever for Texas Pelagic trips run from South Padre Island since they started running there in 2000. There were two trips that tallied over 200 seabirds each (219 and 240)! In fact you have to look back to 1997 and 1995, 18 and 20 years ago, when Texas pelagic trips were being run from Port O'Connor to find the only other two Texas Pelagic trips that have found greater than 200 pelagic seabirds on a single trip. But equally impressive were the number and variety of marine mammals and fish seen during this year. The complete species list is found at the end of this article.

For the past 25 years, beginning in 1994 pelagics available to the public in Texas have been organized by a variety of people and

organizations. Many of those people are still engaged in leading the Texas Pelagics trips I am currently organizing. During the 1990's most trips were run from Port O'Connor. Beginning in 2000 most trips have been run from South Padre Island. A much smaller number of trips have also been run from Port Aransas and Freeport. On average there have been approximately 3 trips per year for the past 25 years.

Why go on a Texas Pelagic? Short answer—they are a lot of FUN!! Long Answer—if you ask any of the Texas Pelagic leaders and regular participants they will tell you some of the most amazing bird and wildlife encounters they've ever had in Texas occurred on a Texas Pelagic. Most people start off going on a Texas Pelagic hoping to see a few life birds or maybe add some birds to their Texas state list. And if you've never been on a Texas Pelagic before you will certainly get either a lifer or a new state bird. We can expect to find many of each of these species throughout one season: Cory's and Audubon's Shearwaters,



This graph shows the number of public pelagic trips run in Texas for each year since 1992 when public pelagic trips began in Texas.

Band-rumped and Leach's Storm-Petrels, Masked Booby, Magnificent Frigatebird, Sooty and Bridled Terns, and Pomarine Jaeger. Rarer seabirds that occur at least annually or almost annually include: Great Shearwater, Red-billed Tropicbird, Brown Booby, Sabine's Gull, Parasitic Jaeger and Long-tailed Jaeger. The real rarities seen on Texas Pelagics includes: Yellow-nosed Albatross, Black-capped Petrel, Sooty Shearwater, Manx Shearwater, Brown Noddy and South Polar Skua. In addition to all these species there is the matter of subspecies that could one day attain full species status. Examples include the Cory's Shearwater—Scopoli's Shearwater, Leach's Storm-Petrel and Band-rumped Storm-Petrel species complexes.

If you're willing and able to return for multiple trips you will probably experience one of those magical days that keep so many of us coming back time after time for years. We routinely have amazing encounters with all sorts of marine mammals and fish, not just the birds. We've seen many different species of dolphins and whales—often very close to the boat for extended times. These have included: Sperm Whales, Bryde's Whale, Short-finned Pilot Whales, Melon Headed Whales, Mesoplodon species toothed whales, Cuvier's Beaked Whale, Risso's Dolphins, Bottlenosed Dolphins, Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, Spinner Dolphins and Rough Toothed Dolphins. We've seen huge schools of jumping fish: tuna, bonito, bait fish that are often accompanied by the largest of all marine fish, the Whale Shark. Flying fish routinely accompany the boat once we reach deep crystal clear blue water.

Aside from all the great pelagic seabirds, marine mammals and fish there are the seabirders. Getting to spend 12 or 16 hours trapped on a boat with 40-50 likeminded seabirders and nature enthusiasts is a real treat. It is really a chance to meet so many new friends and see so many old friends from all parts of Texas. The camaraderie we have on our trips

just makes them really enjoyable. The shared anticipation and excitement is just so much greater than you typically have on a land birding trip in my opinion.

What is amazing about this "Texas Pelagics Big Year" is that we had almost all of the above experiences packed into 8 trips. What follows is a photo essay of many of the best sightings we had over the course of these seven consecutive Texas Pelagics over a year and one month.

SEPT 20, 2014:

Soon after 10:10 am, we had our first good seabird—a cooperative Audubon's Shearwater... Then things were slow for another hour until the distant blows from the first pod of Sperm Whales were seen several hundred yards out. By now we were in very deep water 2,000-3,500 ft. That first group of 3-4 whales sank into the depths before we could get closer to them.

No sooner did they disappear than we immediately spotted a huge pod of what turned out to be Melon-headed Whales excitedly making their way to our boat and encircling it for 15 -20 minutes. Conservatively we estimated 250+ whales (dolphins actually) surrounding the boat and within feet of us. It was one of the greatest wildlife spectacles we've ever seen and a lifer mammal for everyone on board including our captain and his very excited young son.

Over the next few hours it seemed like non-stop action. A couple Band-rumped Storm Petrels passed close by the bow.

Then a distant huge splash seen off the bow really got our attention. As we watched in amazement we had 2 to 5 huge Sperm Whales breach in rapid succession. Too bad they were maybe 1/2 mile away, still it was just spectacular! No one aboard had ever seen Sperm Whales breach before. As we cruised toward them to try for a closer look a second closer pod of 6 sperms surfaced very close just in front of the boat. After a couple minutes



Melon-headed Whales.



Sperm Whale.

the two large bulls sounded for the depths off the port bow showing off their massive flukes. Then the smaller females and their calves approached the starboard bow giving us superb views of the two calves side by side with their blunt noses reaching up out of the water to look us over. There were even a few more whales from a third group at the same time blowing behind us off the stern. By

now we had seen somewhere around 16-19 Sperm whales. In 4 different pods! Finally 40 minutes later another few blows from a fifth pod of sperm whales was spotted. Our total Sperm Whale count for the day was 18-20+ an unprecedented high count for 25 years of Texas Pelagics, where we had seen Sperm Whales on two previous South Padre Island Texas Pelagics.



Masked Booby.

Following all the whale action it was a steady stream of sightings. We had some brief looks at another Band-rumped Storm-Petrel, Audubon's and Cory's Shearwater. We were also building a nice list of land birds as well, including Black-and-White Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Barn Swallow, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Cattle Egret and numerous other unidentified passerines.

Once back over the continental shelf a very curious sub-adult Masked Booby greeted us and circled the boat for about 20 minutes. It was fascinating to watch it repeatedly make shallow dives torpedoing just below the water's surface in pursuit of flying fish that the boat was scattering.

As we were growing tired of watching the booby a flurry of 4 terns, 2 jaegers and a few passerines scrambled by the bow. It was confusing to sort out all the action with binoculars alone. One Jaeger alternately chased a fat passerine and then was sidetracked to chasing the terns. This jaeger was initially identified as a 'parasitic' and the photos proved that the 'passerine' it was chasing was a Sora. There were 2 or 3 Bridled Terns in the group and a second jaeger of uncertain ID. Reviewing the photos later revealed that the 'parasitic' was actually a first summer Long-Tailed Jaeger.

The photos also revealed at least one of the terns was a Sooty Tern.

Soon we approached the first of a half dozen shrimpers we would investigate. A second Masked Booby was nearby and the usual shrimp boat followers of Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, Laughing Gull, and a few Common Tern. The second Shrimper had a pair of adult male Magnificent Frigatebirds perched in the rigging for nice close up views. Between the second and third shrimpers a pair of cooperative Pomarine Jaegers were harassing a group of terns and gulls and then sat on the water allowing us to approach and study them.

OCT 25, 2014:

By 9:00 am we had seen 3 Magnificent Frigatebirds in addition to the usual scattered Laughing Gulls and Royal Terns. The first and only shrimp boat on the way out held a large pod of 30+ Pelagic Bottlenose Dolphins. We reached the shelf/slope break in very good time by 9:30 am. Just an hour later and now in over 2,000 ft of water we set out the first of 2 chum slicks. Shortly after we flushed our only shearwater of the day off the water, a lone Audubon's Shearwater.

After setting out the second chum slick we were treated to the best sighting of the day, an



Red-Billed Tropicbird.

incoming Red-billed Tropicbird. This cooperative bird circled the boat at least 6 times giving everyone plenty of time for photos and great looks, before finally giving up on us and flying away. It was a life bird for many people on board and the first RBTR we had seen in Texas in 3 years since 7/16/2011, and the ninth RBTR seen on Texas Pelagics.

We soon had the first of 3 Masked Boobies we would see for the day. Monarch Butterflies were very conspicuous over the gulf and we must have seen hundreds plying their way south to Mexico.

As we cruised north towards the edge of a warm-core eddy we continued passing very long lines of sargassum which had first been



Bridled Tern on Sargassum Island.



Brown Booby.

encountered upon reaching the shelf edge. We eventually came upon the largest solid floating island of sargassum I had ever seen. It was at least as big as two football fields maybe bigger, and upon it were 4 Black terns and 1 Bridled Tern resting on embedded flotsam. For some on board this was the best view they'd ever had of a Bridled Tern since it was perched.

After over 4 hours in pelagic waters as deep as 3,000 feet, we needed to head back in.

We tried to string together as many shrimp boats as possible on the route in to see if we could pick up some more pelagic species. As we approached the second shrimper a larger brown bird flew out of the rigging, a Brown Booby, in what is certainly the year of the Brown Booby in Texas. Mary, always alert, soon started to chum and the Brown Booby came over along with the Laughing Gulls to investigate and eat its fill. At times it would almost slap us in the face with its webbed yellow feet. This show continued for a good 15 minutes until we decided we'd seen enough and cruised away. We continued to rack up Magnificent Frigatebirds and by days end had seen 8.

Finally as we approached the South Padre Island jetties a huge feeding frenzy was happening. It looked as if it was pouring rain as so many "rain minnows" were jumping out of the water. The few fisherman in boats in the midst of this frenzy appeared to be having no luck catching anything, but the thousand Laughing Gulls, hundreds of Brown Pelicans and hundreds of Royal and Sandwich



Sabine's Gull.

Photo by Brad McKinney.

Terns were surely feasting on the bonanza. We cruised by very slowly looking closely for something unusual. It was literally a blizzard of gulls and terns but Eric and Mary, our sharp-eyed leaders, managed to find a Sabine's Gull simultaneously and then just as quickly lose it in the melee of gulls. We slowly backed up towards the feeding frenzy and then just as we gave up, Petra yelled that she found it briefly again. Well we had run out of time and needed to head back to dock. Brad and a number of others headed over to the SPI jetty just before sunset and managed to find the Sabine's Gull again.

JULY 11, 2015:

On the cruise over the shelf a sport fishing boat 1200 yards off the port side had 2 Masked Boobies following it and eventually they flew towards us to investigate our boat. Soon as we approached the shelf edge Kelly spotted our only Cory's Shearwater of the day which stayed off our bow for a few minutes allowing everyone to get a good view, even though it didn't come in too close. We cleared the shelf slope break into true pelagic waters by 8:15 am which was the earliest we have ever made it to deep water from South Padre.

Within a few minutes we had our first group of 7 Audubon's Shearwaters and a few Band-rumped Storm-Petrels. From the shelf edge—which is about 45 miles offshore—to the Camel's Head another 30 miles farther, would take us about 3 hours.

During this time we had two more flocks of 12 and 7 Audubon's and a steady stream of individuals and pairs of Storm-Petrels. Some were



Band-Rumped Storm-Petrels.



Audubon's Shearwaters

close enough to positively identify as Band-rumped many just remained storm-petrel sp. One or more storm-petrels were tentatively identified as Leach's pending photo review.

We had our GPS set on the Camel's Head "Eye." The shallowest point of this huge seamount is at about 2,231 feet. It rises from great depths of over 5,200 ft at the bottom of its eastern slope to its underwater summit in only about 5 miles. As we approached the "Eye," which is just a few miles into Mexican waters, we could see a natural slick smack dab on top of it. Captain Bobby's son Clay came out of the wheelhouse to tell us they think they saw the back of a large whale but no one else saw it and it was not seen again. We set out a chum slick and waited around. A couple of Masked Boobies eventually showed up so we had a seabird on our Mexican lists. We also managed a few Audubon's Shearwaters in Mexico.

As we returned to Texas waters it wasn't long before we came upon the first of 3 large flocks of predominately Sooty Terns that we would encounter today. This group of terns numbered around 20 and must have been over deeper schools of fish (tuna?) or maybe just flying fish as they would occasionally fly low over the water apparently feeding. We

cruised about 5 miles north and gradually tuned back towards the west. We slowed down a couple of times to set out more chum.

We came across one more large flock of 40+ Sooty Terns while still in deep water. At the 100 fathom contour we laid out more chum and dragged our chum bags along this contour for about a mile. At the end of this mile the third flock of 40+ Sooty Terns and at least one Bridled Tern were spotted and they circled towards our chum slick.

As we retraced our chum line it had attracted a few Audubon's and Band-rumped Storm Petrels. The entire time we were in waters greater than 600 ft deep we had a lot of activity. Usually not more than 15 minutes went by without some seabird being encountered and usually small groups of them at a time. The large Flocks of Sooty terns kept us busy for 15+ minutes at a time trying to sort through all of them before they gradually drifted out of sight.

AUGUST 8, 2015:

We arrived in deep waters at the shelf edge around 10 am. Almost as soon as we did we had our first flock of Storm-Petrels. The flock was flushed off the water as we



Sooty Tern flock.

approached and scattered in every direction. What was amazing was the large number of Leach's Storm Petrels, it seemed most of what was photographed turned out to be a Leach's, rather than the default Band-rumped Storm Petrel. During the next 4 hours we encountered three separate flocks of Storm-Petrels and while it's hard to say for sure it seemed that the majority of them were Leach's. We counted a total of 21 Storm-Petrel's with at least 6 of them positively identified as Leach's from a quick review of the onboard photographs. It's highly likely that there were many more than six. This is quite remarkable in that the highest number positively identified before on any one Texas Pelagic is 2. We were all wondering if this was due to the cooler waters in the cold core eddy that we encountered off the shelf edge.

AUGUST 29, 2015:

Shortly after sunrise the first birds of the day Royal Terns flew by and then like a fighter plane in hot pursuit a Pomarine Jaeger

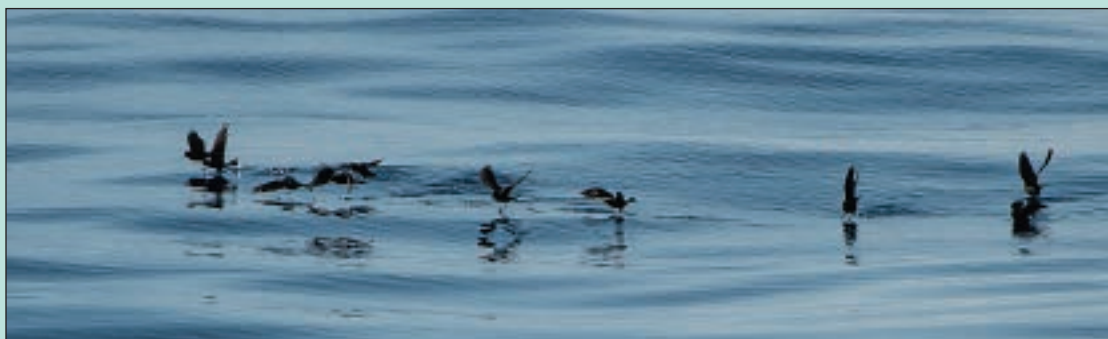
harassed them off into the distance. The next bit of excitement would come in the form of 6 Atlantic Spotted Dolphins that caught up with the boat for a brief joy ride on the bow wave. We reached the shelf edge drop-off around 9:00 am. As soon as we did things really started to happen. Our first group of 4 Storm-Petrels all were Leach's.

A squadron of 4 Masked Boobies flying in formation like dive bombers strafed the boat and circled it a number of times until their mission was accomplished.

Then another flock of 10-15 Stormies sitting on the glassy water were all Leach's, as best as we could determine. We were having trouble finding a Band-rumped Storm-Petrel in the flocks of Leach's. Normally Band-rumped Storm-Petrels are the predominate species in Texas waters by a wide margin, but not today. It seemed that every flock of Storm-Petrels we encountered, and there were a lot of them, were predominately or entirely Leach's Storm-Petrels. And so it would stay that way for the rest of the day. Band-Rumped Storm



Masked Booby Squadron.



Leach's Storm-Petrel flock.

Petrels are typically becoming scarcer by late August but we have never before encountered so many Leach's. We tallied about 110 Storm-Petrels for the day which is a record number for a Texas Pelagic. The previous high number was 88 Band-Rumped Storm-Petrels on July 15, 2000. But even more incredible was that at least 66 or 83 (depending on whose records you look at) were identified as Leach's and the majority of the remaining unidentified storm-petrel sp were probably also Leach's. We only positively identified 7 Band-Rumped for the day. And so the morning went storm-petrel flock after storm-petrel flock, all of them roosting on the flat seas and visible from a good distance. However they wouldn't allow us to approach very close before they flushed and flew off to settle on the water again hundreds of yards away.

Some did come close allowing for good photos to be obtained.

Interspersed with all the stormies were smatterings of Audubon's Shearwaters, Cory's Shearwaters, Sooty Terns and a couple of Pomarine Jaegers.

The day continued on this way with near constant bird action until 12:50 pm when Todd on the bow called out Mammals at 3:00 o'clock! We turned the boat towards them and soon what turned out to be a beaked whale of the Mesoplodon genus appeared again. John O'Brien caught the diagnostic beak in one of his photos! This was the proof we needed that it was most likely either a Blainville's Beaked Whale or a Gervais' Beaked Whale. Specific identification is nearly impossible with this genus unless a mature male is spotted and the dentition is visible and



Leach's Storm-Petrel.



Mesolopodon Species beaked whale.

Photo by John O'Brien.



Raft of seabirds and Whale Shark.

photographed. It surfaced 4-5 times then was gone, but enough for everyone to see them and photograph them.

Only 20 minutes later I spotted a large raft of seabirds roosting on the water about a mile away. As we approached the raft, fish started jumping within the raft and it was clear to me the birds were sitting on top of a tuna school. Immediately I called out to watch for Whale Sharks. Sure enough, within 30 seconds the huge snout of a Whale Shark appeared at the surface in the middle of the birds and breaking tuna. The curious and docile Whale Shark soon was swimming towards our boat, much to the screams of excitement from everyone onboard. The Whale shark passed less than

10 feet off our port side as everyone stared on slack-jawed. It wasn't a really huge one but we estimated it at about 15 -17 feet long. They have been documented as large as 41 feet long, with fish tails of even bigger ones.

David our diehard birder was still pointing out that Hello!! there is a Great Shearwater out there too. Well the Shark swam off and our attention was directed to the Great Shearwater our 10th pelagic species for the day!

Here is just a portion of this single flock with 2 Cory's and 23 Audubon's Shearwaters. The flock included in total: 1 Great Shearwater, 8 Cory's Shearwaters, 42 Audubon's Shearwaters, 8 Sooty Terns, 4 Bridled Terns, 3 Black Terns and 1 Laughing Gull!



The Whale Shark's huge mouth.

Photo by Gwyn Carmean.



Great Shearwater.



Audubon's and Cory's Shearwaters.

As the adrenaline subsided after all this excitement, we were motoring in over the shelf and activity noticeably slowed down for the first time all day.

As we approached our first anchored

shrimper it was clear there were a few roosting Magnificent Frigatebirds on board for a siesta. As we got closer we could see that there were five male Frigatebirds hanging out. So we started chumming and soon had a feeding frenzy



Magnificent Frigatebirds.



Pomarine Jaeger bruiser.

of Laughing Gulls, Royal Terns, 7 Magnificent Frigatebirds (2 more flew in) and a Pomarine Jaeger putting on a nice show for us.

The second shrimp boat had 2 Masked Boobies roosting on it and was soon joined by a third.

At the fourth shrimp boat another Jaeger came blasting in that at first looked big enough to be a Skua. But it was only a dark Pomarine Jaeger.

The August 29th, 2015 trip has to be about the best overall Texas Pelagic I've ever been on. We saw 10 pelagic seabird species, 274 total pelagic seabirds, a beaked whale and whale shark. And we saw more Leach's Storm-Petrels than I've ever seen in my life, and certainly a record number for Texas by an order of magnitude.

SEPTEMBER 19, 2015:

After a beautiful sunrise the seas were calming down some and by 8 am were more in the 3 foot range and would continue to calm down throughout the day. It wasn't long before we had our first 2 Audubon's Shearwaters. We would continue to see single Audubon's Shearwaters at regular intervals up until 2 pm. A distant Masked Booby seemed uninterested in coming over to investigate us like Boobies usually do. Looking at Dwight

Peak's photos of the distant bird at maximum zoom we wondered if it may have been an immature Northern Gannet?

A flock of our first 6 Bridled Terns signaled our arrival in pelagic waters over 600 ft deep. As we passed the shelf-slope break at 9:00 am I announced for everyone to be on the lookout for whale blows. Shortly thereafter, as if on cue we picked up a pod of at least 20 Atlantic Spotted Dolphins who enthusiastically swam over for some bow-riding play time. The pod stuck with us for at least 10 minutes and everyone got great looks, photos and videos from the bow.

About 30 minutes later Mary Ann sitting next to me on the upper bow deck, yelled out "WHALE!" In just a few seconds it surfaced briefly a second time and then that was it. It never resurfaced. John O'Brien got a look at its blunt nose so we were able to identify it as a *Kogia* species of either Pygmy or Dwarf Sperm Whale. These two species look so much alike it is almost impossible to distinguish them in the field. It happened so fast that no one was able to get photos and only a few people actually saw it.

We continued cruising east out to about 2,700 feet of water at 63 miles offshore, but it seemed there were more birds in closer. So we turned back towards the shelf edge where

we would contour the edge for about an hour. The day continued on with a steady stream of birds singly or in pairs every 10-15 minutes. We added more Audubon's Shearwaters, Bridled Terns and Leach's Storm-Petrels but no Band-rumped Storm-Petrels as it is late in the season for them.

OCTOBER 10, 2015



Manx Shearwater.

Photo by Brad McKinney.

We found our first seabird of the day at 8:30 am, its breast glowed white in the sunlight as it sat on the water. We thought at first it was an Audubon's Shearwater. But we saw it arc high over the sea and I thought we don't often see Audubon's fly that way? Well after we looked at the pictures it became clear that it was a Manx Shearwater, which is quite similar to an Audubon's, slightly larger with pure white under-tail coverts that were nicely captured in many photographs. The Manx Shearwater has only been seen on one previous Texas Pelagic and there are only 8 records for Texas! A number of people got great photos, some of which had the end of the rainbow in the background illuminating the Manx! We should've realized this was a dead give-away; we had found the pot of gold! It was a lifer for many of the people on the trip.

Nearing the shelf edge at 9:07 am, a nice pod of 12 Atlantic Spotted Dolphins came swimming towards us for a short bow-ride. Just past the 300 foot depth mark we had our

first Pomarine Jaeger. A Bridled Tern flew by right off the bow, staying very low to the water which was unusual. We reached the shelf edge around 9:30 am and at 450 feet of water the second Pomarine Jaeger came barreling straight at us. Eric Carpenter started chumming and then a second, third, fourth Pomarine Jaeger joined the group. After a few minutes we were up to eight Pomarine Jaegers all circling the boat chasing chum bits. It was a great show! The first shrimp boat we reached had no birds. The second shrimper a couple miles away had a juvenile Magnificent Frigatebird perched on its highest mast. A Masked Booby passed by at some distance away then finally gave in to its curiosity and came right over us a few times to see if we had anything for it to eat.

We hit a nice bunch of birds on the fourth shrimp boat. The expected passengers of Royal Terns and a few Sandwich terns were all lined up in order on the rigging lines. Strangely no Laughing Gulls though. Then as the chum started stirring them up the regular terns were joined by 3 Pomarine Jaegers, including a nice dark morph who demonstrated its aerial flying skills at hot pursuit of a Royal Tern for its dinner.

Then another highlight was spotted working the Sargassum line from below a Scalloped Hammerhead about 6-7 feet long. The high dorsal fin breaking the surface for long periods as it foraged in the sargassum. A second Scalloped Hammerhead was also spotted.



Pomarine Jaegers harassing a Royal Tern.



Scalloped Hammerhead.

CONCLUSION:

Our experience from 2015 suggests that with more frequent coverage by pelagic trips we are much more likely to have a few very good pelagic birding days in the season. This is probably due to improving our odds of hitting favorable current, wind and sea conditions for seabirds that occur every so often in the deep Gulf of Mexico off of Texas.

Texas Pelagics in the warm ultra-clear blue tropical waters of the Gulf of Mexico don't yield thousands of seabirds with dozens of species like west coast Pelagics. But we have seen hundreds of pelagic seabirds of up to 10 pelagic seabird species on any one trip with a surprising number of rarities.

One of the last birding frontiers are the world's oceans and the seabirds that inhabit



Bow-riding Atlantic Spotted Dolphins.

Photo by Brad McKinney

them. And this is certainly true for the Gulf of Mexico as well. A lot has been learned about seabirds and their distributions over the last 25 years but there is still a lot that is unknown, and new discoveries continue to be made. We always hope to make a new and ex-

citing discovery and that has happened often enough to keep us coming back.

Texas Pelagics—It's not just birding, It's an Adventure.

The Cumulative Lists of Species seen during the 7 consecutive Texas Pelagics from one year+ between September 20, 2014 and October 10, 2015.

PELAGIC SEABIRDS:

1. Cory's (Scopoli's) Shearwater (<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>)	18
2. Great Shearwater (<i>Puffinus gravis</i>)	1
3. Manx Shearwater (<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>)	1
4. Audubon's Shearwater (<i>Puffinus lherminieri</i>)	160
5. Leach's Storm-Petrel (<i>Oceanodroma leucorhoa</i>)	85
6. Band-rumped Storm-Petrel (<i>Oceanodroma castro</i>)	38
7. Red-billed Tropicbird (<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>)	1
8. Magnificent Frigatebird (<i>Fregata magnificens</i>)	39
9. Masked Booby (<i>Sula dactylatra</i>)	29
10. Brown Booby (<i>Sula leucogaster</i>)	1
11. Sabine's Gull (<i>Xema sabini</i>)	1
12. Sooty Tern (<i>Onychoprion fuscata</i>)	128
13. Bridled Tern (<i>Onychoprion anaethetus</i>)	24
14. Pomarine Jaeger (<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>)	28
15. Long-tailed Jaeger (<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>)	1
storm-petrel sp.	45
jaeger sp.	1

MARINE MAMMALS:

1. Atlantic Spotted Dolphin (<i>Stenella frontalis</i>)	26
2. Bottlenose Dolphin—PELAGIC (<i>Tursiops truncates</i>)	33
3. Bottlenose Dolphin—INSHORE (<i>Tursiops truncates</i>)	24
4. Melon-headed Whale (<i>Peponocephala electra</i>)	250
5. Sperm Whale (<i>Physeter microcephalus</i>)	19
6. Pygmy / Dwarf Sperm Whale <i>Kogia sp.</i>	1
7. Mesoplodon sp. Beaked whale	1

FISH:

1. Whale shark (<i>Rhincodon typus</i>)	1
2. Scalloped Hammerhead (<i>Sphyrna lewini</i>)	1
3. Yellow-finned Tuna (<i>Thunnus albacares</i>) school	1
4. Albacore (<i>Thunnus alalunga</i>) school	1
5. Flying Fish <i>several species undetermined</i>	thousands
6. Tripletail (<i>Lobotes surinamensis</i>)	3
7. Longbill Spearfish (<i>Tetrapturus pfluegeri</i>)	1

The Buff-Bellied Hummingbird in Victoria County

By Brent Ortego and Bron Rorex



Adult Male Near Raisin.

The Buff-bellied Hummingbird is a year-round resident of Victoria County. Peak numbers occur in spring and fall at sites with high concentrations of feeders/flowers near riparian woodlands and oak mottes. Breeding starts in early spring and extends through early summer. Species is regular during winter at hummingbird gardens with feeders and with intensive management dozens may overwinter at a site.

This was not always the case. Despite being a large, showy and noisy hummingbird that seeks feeders, this species is viewed by some as one of the least studied resident hummingbird species in the United States.

The 1974 TOS checklist reported the species as an uncommon resident of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and rarely extending north to Brooks County. The 1995 TOS Checklist reported the species as common in the Lower

Rio Grande Valley and the population was local as far north as Victoria County with the species being rare along the Gulf Coast. The 2014 TOS Checklist reports further expansion of the range into south-central Texas with nesting records in Bastrop and Washington counties.

The species was first reported summering in the Victoria Area during 1979 by Gerry Green who lived in northern Victoria County. She reported individuals would use her garden from March through October with regularity during this period but none wintered.

I moved to Victoria in 1992 and observed 1-4 Buff-bellied at my feeders daily from March through October. I started working in collaboration with Dr. Ross Dawkins from San Angelo banding this species in August 1995 and continued through 2010. I banded 41 Buff-bellied from that population of 1-4

daily visits by the species during my first year. I did not band a wintering individual until 1997.

This seemingly large number (41) of Buff-bellied Hummingbirds using my property fueled my curiosity and I increased capture efforts over the years until 2003 when I reached my maximum capacity of maintaining 75 hummingbird feeders distributed in a grid on trails through dense brush, along woodland borders, and near my house during winter. I primarily used traps during my first 4 years of banding in the vicinity of 12 feeders and I would characterize the effort as opportunistic with the availability of birds. I started using mist-nets in the vicinity of 30 feeders during 1999 and I recruited a number of volunteers to assist with banding. We managed 50 feeders in 2000, and at least 70 hummingbird feeders from 2001–2010. During the last decade of banding, we standardized efforts to have 3 netting efforts per week during the 6 months of spring and fall when migrants were regular, and once every two weeks during summer and winter when there was very little movements of birds. This effort banded 1399 Buff-bellied from which we were able to recapture 822 (59%) of them at least once. These are the data that allows me to tell you the story of the Buff-bellied Hummingbird in Victoria County.



Banding Data Helps Describe Life History.

LAND OF ORTEGO-ZALK

My banding station was known as the Land of OZ because Craig Zalk was a major participant and initially purchased the lots with dense brush where most of the mist-netting took place. The property is about 6-acres in size with 4-acres gridded with trails spaced at about 10 yard intervals with feeders spaced at about 5 yards on 2 of the 3 lots. Dense brush consisted of deciduous shrubs, trees and vines common in the riparian zone of Coleta Creek. When trees grew beyond 10-feet in height, they were cut down to keep the woody habitat within the range of the mist-nets.

SPRING

Migrants start arriving in March with peak numbers of new birds (birds not banded previously) in April and May. These two months support the greatest number of newly arriving birds. Most adults are in full breeding plumage as evident by brightly colored bill and completion of feather molt. Young from the previous year are typically duller and a portion of them are still molting feathers. Many previously banded birds linger on my property during spring along with 30% of newly banded birds with peak numbers of about 50 Buff-bellied. Birds disperse rapidly in Mid-May presumably to breeding grounds once Turk's-caps start blooming locally. My perspective of this situation is that many birds stage in my area where there is an abundance of feeders until there is an adequate supply of native flowers to support them away from people.

Newly fledged birds are a rarity during this time period. Even so, we have banded 19 newly fledged young during April and May.

SUMMER

With most residents and migrants dispersed to breeding grounds, I have been able to summer only about 1 dozen birds each year with 30 feeders. Half of newly banded adults during this period typically are recaptured. Evi-



Adult Male Undergoing Wing and Body Molt During Winter.

dence of reproduction is a little lower during June and July with only 5 newly fledged young being banded during our study. The first newly fledged young captured was in 1999.

FALL

As fall progresses new birds to my property start arriving in large numbers, but only 60% of what occurs in April/May. About 50% of newly banded adults are recaptured and only ¼ of the young of the year. Greater than 1/3 of adults undergo wing molt while in residence while less than 5% of young of the year do. Needing to molt likely influences length of stay.

WINTER

I typically consider the hummingbird winter to start in November even though there is still migration happening in the early part of the month. About 75% of the newly banded males are recaptured at least once while only about 30% of females. Peak numbers during winter was typically about 50 captured during the winter season, but the most ever caught during one day was 40.

The Buff-bellied Hummingbirds banded in Victoria County are made up of 80%

males regardless of age. There are no data elsewhere from which to compare to indicate if this is the norm for this species or this sex ratio is a function of being near the edge of the species range. Reviewing data from thousands of Black-chinned Hummingbirds which we have banded near feeders in the Texas Hill Country indicated there was no apparent difference in numbers of males and females.

Both sexes are similar in appearance. With attention to a few details age and sex can be determined. Males have green chins while females have buff colored. Males have a deeper forked tail than females. The last major character is bill color. Males have much more red on top of the bill and females colors tend to be duller. However, this condition is highly variable since young birds start with a black bill and gradually add red on top of the bill. Thus, young males at times will have similar bill colors to females.



Note Bill Color, Chin Color and Shape of Tail to Determine Age/Sex.

HOW LONG DO BUFF-BELLIED HUMMINGBIRDS LIVE?

Most individuals likely die during their 1st year of life which is common among species. However, some individuals are very good survivors and may live as long as 9 years.

We were fortunate to have been able to recapture 38% of the 1399 birds one month after banding. I use one month as a gauge that the bird had some form of site fidelity. Birds banded only once may have been on my property for only a few seconds. Thus, I did



Survivorship Chart For Buff-bellied Hummingbirds.

not use their data in the analysis. Time from first banding was used to develop a picture of survivorship with the understanding we do not know if any died. We just know we did not catch them again. There was no apparent difference in recapture rates between ages of the same sex so I pooled all of my information.

If recaptures indicate mortality rate, Buff-bellied have a fairly large mortality during first year, followed by moderate mortality from years two through four, and then a slow decline from a few birds which are very good at surviving.

WHERE DO HUMMERS GO AFTER THEY LEAVE THE BANDING STATION

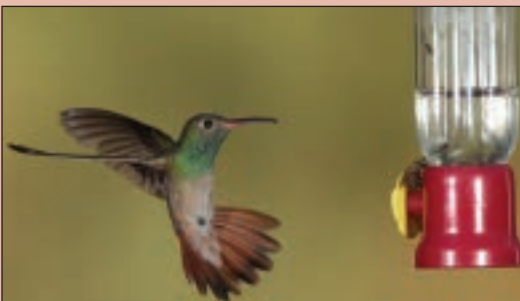
This is the question all banders ponder. We band the birds so hopefully we can recapture

them and learn more about their life. This typically only tells us the bird lived, returned to your station and you were fortunate to be able to catch it again. Additional information is obtained if one of your birds is captured by another bander or you catch one of theirs.

Recapturing somebody else's bird is relatively rare. The bird has to go where there is another bander and very few banders work in the range of this species. Thus, most distant recaptures of our birds were associated with hummingbird banders more eastward along the Gulf Coast because this area contains some dedicated banders where few if any exists to the south.

Fairhope, AL was the furthest east one of our birds was recaptured. A little closer was Picayune, MS. One of our birds was recaptured in New Orleans 5 years after banding by Nancy Newfield and we returned the favor when we caught one of her birds at my home 11 months after banding.

One of the more entertaining events was a male we banded during fall 2002 that ended up being recaptured at a banding station by Dave Patton in Lafayette, LA. This bird spent the winter there and when it left in the spring



Adult Male Competing With Bees.

Photo by Dora Ann Ortega

we recaptured it two weeks later. The bird left for the summer and we were able to catch it during the following fall. After leaving the Land of OZ, it showed back up in Louisiana at the same feeder to spend the winter. I was alerted when it left during the spring and we recaptured this same individual on 11 March roughly 2 weeks after it left its winter home. **WOW! What site fidelity and consistency of movements. This is a very rare event that was enjoyed by all involved.**

WEATHER IMPACTS

Native birds are adapted to survive in our climate. We all basically know this but some of their accomplishments still amaze us.

Rainfall tends to produce more native flowers which means birds will not be as dependent on feeders and you likely will not see as many during a wet season. However, tropical systems which create rain for days will force birds to feeders because most flowers are diluted during rain events.

I only experienced one hurricane at my home. It was during a major migration

period. There were obviously concerns for my family's safety as well as the birds. For the birds we moved feeders inside bushes and placed them at low levels to avoid the wind. The hurricane hit mid-morning with strong winds and sheets of rain. Branches and small trees laid broken throughout the yard. As soon as the eye passed over head and the winds became calm, I could see many hummers were out of the bushes working feeders amongst fallen limbs and trees. I do not know if any perished in the storm.

Snow. Victoria experienced a foot of snow during Christmas 2004. I had about 100 hummingbirds wintering in the yard and we were all concerned with the well being of each of the eight species of hummers that were present. The Buff-bellied likely has not been exposed to many events of snow, but seems to handle cold weather as well or better than most species. Larger body size is likely an advantage for this species.

My yard had snow covering every limb and my family through the night was envisioning many little igloos of hummers. I went out



2004 Victoria Christmas.

at first light to a very quiet yard blanketed in snow. I put out feeders in the dense brush equipped with heat pads to withstand temperatures in the teens and crossed my fingers. When the sun started shining mid-morning, birds were flying and I did not notice a difference in numbers of hummers. Many hummingbirds are known to use torpor to survive cold weather, but it is not known if the Buff-bellied Hummingbird has this adaptation.

UNANSWERED QUESTION

What is the origin of the birds flying northeast for the winter? Is it just natural genetic variation, or is it possibly the northern breeding birds turn left when they reach the Coast?

Shawn Ashbaugh, Susan Beree, Charlie Brower, Brad Lirette, Robert & Kay Lookingbill, Sumita Prasad, Bron Rorex, Maggie (Bron's friend), Suzie Ross, Glenn Swartz, and Craig Zalk were just a few of the many people who helped us at the banding station over 15 years and I thank them all.

LONG STORY ABOUT THE OLD MAN

A new wave of hummers arrived today and fall migration is well underway for many species. I occasionally have birders stop by to check on things.

I met an old man today. I have known him since he was in his prime. I checked my log and over the past 8 years he has stopped by 26 times; usually in the fall and winter. I guess you could call him a winter Texan. We have had many conversations and occasionally would share a drink, usually something sweet.

I have never seen him drive a car. He just shows up and I can usually hear him fussing about something in the yard. He doesn't seem to have any possessions, but that does not seem to bother him. He is a spunky old guy and just seems to live for the day. I have been worrying about his health the last 3 years. He seems to be paler each time we meet. I was really worried about him last winter with the deep snows at Christmas. I did not see him for a month and I was expecting the worst. However, he showed up again in February and said good bye for his spring trip. I never did figure out where his summer home was.

It was especially exciting seeing my old friend this afternoon since I initially banded this Buff-bellied Hummingbird adult male in November 1997.

Brent Ortego
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Bron Rorex
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Last Capture of the Old Man 12/05/2006

The Story of Shorebird Migration

By John Brush

There are moments, patterns in nature that are enrapturing. As a naturalist I would say that there are many aspects of nature like this, but one such phenomenon has captivated biologists for thousands of years: migration. From the thundering herds of bison that used to roam the Great Plains down to the Ruby-throated Hummingbird stopping briefly in your yard, migration continues to enchant our lore and everyday lives.

Some of the more well-known migratory animals are birds (and as a bird watcher my focus tends to be avian). We are familiar with the bright warblers, tanagers, and orioles that stop at our bird baths in the fall and spring, or the aforementioned hummingbirds that dine at our hummingbird feeders. Shorebirds, however, have some of the most impressive annual migrations of any group of birds.

There are many examples of long-distance migration in the roughly 35 species of shorebird that pass through and inhabit the Lower Rio Grande Valley. This diverse mix of sandpipers and plovers represents about a third of the shorebirds found in North America, and will travel thousands of miles each year.

The Pectoral Sandpiper, a species that starts to pass through the Valley in March,



Pectoral Sandpipers seem to prefer freshwater marshes over saltwater, and they can often be found along mudflats and in grassy marshes.

Photo by Erik Bruhnke.

can travel upwards of 14,000 miles round trip as it travels between the Arctic Circle and South America twice a year. Compare that to the estimated 900 miles the average American walks a year (from a study published in 2010 in the journal of Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise).

Even the Least Sandpiper, a bird smaller than a House Sparrow, travels a similar route to the Pectoral Sandpiper's. The small bird that probes the mud along canals and ponds here in South Texas (all the way to South America) will raise its young in the tundra of



One way Sanderlings avoid predators is to fly in a close flock over the water. The flock will fly in an unpredictable pattern, and some of the birds may even dive straight into the water to avoid capture.

Photo by Erik Bruhnke.



Least Sandpipers are about the size of a sparrow and are often called 'peeps'. This tiny bird migrates in the spring from Chile and Brazil all the way to the Arctic to breed, and then returns south in the fall. (Least Sandpiper in front of a Sanderling)

Photo by Erik Bruhnke.

the arctic. Simply thinking about it is exhausting.

Just as road-tripping across the United States takes a lot of gas, migration takes a lot of energy from shorebirds. But instead of being able to fuel up at convenient gas stations, shorebirds must fuel up by consuming amazing amounts of food at what ornithologists call "critical stopover sites". Whether they are coastal mudflats or inland wetlands, these stopover sites provide the abundant foods shorebirds need to continue their journeys. A famous example is the Delaware Bay, where thousands of Red Knots eat millions of horseshoe crab eggs on the beach.

An important area in the Rio Grande Valley is the Laguna Madre. The mudflat and coastal wetland habitats of places like Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and South Padre Island provide stopover locations for migrating and wintering shorebirds such as the endangered Piping Plover. Conserving these habitats is of great importance to preserve shorebird populations.

The next time you visit South Padre Island or explore the ponds of your local nature center, think about the small gray-brown shorebirds. Their plumage may not always be colorful, but their journeys are amazing. The



Piping Plover nests are very sensitive to disturbances on the beach, and their numbers are rapidly declining. This bird has been color banded by a scientist for research purposes.

Photo by Erik Bruhnke.

Sanderlings we see, their feet a blur as they run across our winter sand, cover more of the world in a year than many of us.

Interested in learning more about the birds native to the RGV and to Texas? Register for one of Quinta Mazatlan's Birding Workshops



Sanderlings are easily identified by their habit of 'chasing the waves' as they look for small prey in the sand.

Photo by Erik Bruhnke.

which will be hosted in March. Participants can sign up for the Beginning Birders classes, the Intermediate Workshop, or both! Reserve your spot by registering online at webtrac.mcallen.net, stop by any McAllen community center, or visit Quinta Mazatlan World Birding Center. For more information, call (956) 681-3370 or visit www.quintamazatlan.com.

February 27, 2016 Monitor Newspaper

John Brush
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From the Great Texas Birding Challenge.....

YOUTH BIRDING IN TEXAS

Several years ago the TOS Board of Directors decided to emphasize birding for Texas youth and began sponsoring youth teams in the Great Texas Birding Classic annually. Additionally they sponsored Mrs. Martha McLeod, an extraordinary science teacher in Rockport-Fulton who is also a TOS member, to teach classes for Texas teachers about how to start birding teams in their schools.

This year, the Board went all out and sponsored eight Roughwing level teams (up to and including 13 years of age) in the Classic plus two Glider level teams (ages 14 and older). That was in addition to TOS becoming event sponsors themselves.

In return for TOS team sponsorship we asked two things of the youth teams: that TOS be recognized by including TOS in their team names and that they write a short story (including photos) about their team members and how their competition day went so our TOS members could see what is happening with our Texas youth. We had teams representing McAllen, Rockport-Fulton, Tivoli-Austwell, Austin, San Antonio, Dallas and El Paso... just to mention a few areas represented.

The following is what each team shared for you about their teams and how their competition day went in 2016.

Bron Rorex



One of the **4th grade birding teams at Fulton 4-5 Learning Center** in Rockport was named the “TOS Wacky Warblers” and they competed in the Great Texas Birding Classic on Wednesday, April 20, 2016. This was the 20th year of the GTBC and it has been called the world’s biggest, longest and wildest birdwatching tournament. This team was sponsored by the Texas Ornithological Society and was comprised of 4 students: Camryn Cruzan, Laila Flowers, Hayden Hoover, and Michael Jones. They were accompanied by their mentors Bron Rorex and Steve Reisinger who are members of TOS. School sponsor Martha McLeod also joined the team and served as team driver as well as being a mentor.

The kids worked for 8 hours identifying species as a team and tallying their numbers. They competed against other young birders across the state of Texas in the “Roughwings”

division of the GTBC which is sponsored through the Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept. This young group of birders submitted their checklist with over 100 species of birds - woo hoo!!!! There were some AMAZING birds that showed up during migration and it was awesome watching the kids identify them correctly. Some of the great species seen and recorded included Painted Buntings, a Wood Duck, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, a Cape May Warbler, and Wilson’s Phalaropes.

The Wacky Warblers ended up in 3rd place in the Central Coast division of the GTBC and 4th place overall in the state for their division by submitting a total of 101 species of birds. We were all very proud of this young team of 4th graders who were competing for the very first time.

The mission statement of the Classic is: To increase appreciation, understanding, and conservation of birds through education,



recreation, nature tourism, and conservation fundraising. The birding program at FLC has been set up to mirror those same goals of increasing appreciation, understanding, and conservation of birds through the education of our youth.

The 5th grade birding team at Fulton 4-5 Learning Center was named the “TOS Birdacious Buntings” and they competed in the Great Texas Birding Classic on Tuesday, April 26, 2016. This team was sponsored again by the Texas Ornithological Society. These kids also worked for a total of 8 hours identifying species as a team and then recording their numbers. It WAS A TOUGH DAY TO FIND BIRDS!! There was a strong wind out of the SE. As you all know, most migrating birds will continue to migrate farther inland rather than resting on the coastline with a hard Southeast wind. Our 5th graders, therefore, had to work feverishly trying to find new species of birds to tally. It was one of the toughest birding days yet!

This group of students was also competing in the “Roughwings” division of the GTBC which is sponsored through Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept. Even though the weather was against us, our 5th grade team submitted their checklist with 103 species of birds - awesome! We are so proud of our 5th graders who

worked cooperatively as a team and shared ideas and knowledge. We will miss them all next year! Most of the team members had participated in the birding program at our school for 2 years in a row.

Their excitement for the outdoors and enthusiastic quest to learn more about the world of avian life was truly admirable and enjoyable. Team members included Kate Hill, Sam Holden, Taylor Hoover, Shelby Hudson, and Kyleigh Karl. They were also accompanied by TOS members and mentors Bron Rorex and Steve Reisinger and school sponsor Martha McLeod.

There were many GREAT species of birds seen during the day of competition. These included Baltimore Orioles, Wilson’s Phalaropes, a Western Tanager, both Fulvous and Black-Bellied Whistling Ducks, and a big flock of Cedar Waxwings.

Our 5th graders recorded enough species to take 1st place in the Central Coast division of the GTBC and 2nd place overall in the entire state. These students recorded more species of birds than any Glider team (middle and high school students) in the GTBC. We will definitely miss them next year and wish them luck as they move on into middle school life.

“TOS TAS YBC Heroic Hawks GTBC Birding Day 2016”

By Sebastian Casarez

The rain didn’t stop the TOS TAS YBC Heroic Hawks Team from spotting and identifying 70 bird species on Saturday, April 16, 2016. We birded at Roy G. Guerrero Park and Hornsby Bend for eight hours with on and off rain, mud, and bugs. But, it was so much FUN!

This was the first time that our team participated in the GTBC.

We were so excited! We would like to

thank Texas Ornithology Society for sponsoring our team. Our team members were: Team Captain Sebastian Casarez, Lizzy Jacques, Mary Jacques, TJ Jobe, Tori McCarley, and Team Chaperone Sandra Casarez.

The highlight of our birding day came when we all saw a beautiful male Indigo Bunting and a Red-eyed Vireo. Because this was the first time that my fellow team members have ever seen both birds. I was so excited to share this birding experience with them. I es-

pecially liked it when they all were so fascinated with seeing a male Indigo Bunting. I just love seeing how kids and adults faces light up when they are able to discover a new bird they have never seen before. Luckily, there were so many birds that day.

As we were having lunch enjoying pizza and watermelon at Roy G. Guerrero Park my team and I were having a lunch Big Sit.

The best thing my team and I got from participating in the GTBC was the fact that

we were able to share our passion for birds with each other and the people that came up to us at the park wondering why kids were out with binoculars in the rain. They were trying to figure out what we were looking at in the tree. Hopefully, we made them look up too!

We can't wait until next year's GTBC!

By TOS TAS YBC Heroic Hawks Team
Captain Sebastian Casarez



DALLAS ZOOM: Our future looks bright!

Dallas Zoo youth birding teams won regional first places in Texas Parks & Wildlife's *Great Texas Birding Classic* for the second year in a row. Our teams documented 86 species and counted 1000 individual birds on a marathon fueled by an insatiable hunger for birds...and Rice Krispies Treats. Species list attached.

Shannon Linton and **Courtney Jonescu** recruited this stellar team. The Texas Ornithological Society (TOS) and the Dallas Zoo Docents, Inc. provided generous support. **Sahar Sea**, **Casey Cutler**, and **Dennis Mabasa** made practices rigorous and fun. **Susi Rinck** chaperoned all day long and she doesn't even really like birds.

Have you seen the *2016 State of the Birds* report? www.Stateofthebirds.org/2016. One third of all north American bird species need URGENT CONSERVATION ACTION. To turn this tide like we did for the Bald Eagle, California Condor, and Whooping Crane, we have to fight for every species on one front while brooding the next generation of conservationists on the other.

DALLAS ZOOM is **Kaela Adkins, Katherine Morgan, Evan Jansen, Xavier Hernandez, Christian Hernandez, Ethan Casas, Jonathan Ritter von Weber-Hansberg, Elias Vasquez, Juan Garza, Lily Zimmerman, and Miranda Rinck**. These young conservationists will make you proud. They're our future.

Dallas Zoo—We're changing the world for wildlife.



Your champion junior birding team, *Dallas Zoom*, sets out early tomorrow morning on a 12-hour birding marathon. They'll compete with 100 teams from across the state in Texas Parks and Wildlife's *Great Texas Birding Classic*. Last year they won regionals with 73 species.

Armed with binoculars, field guides, Cheetos, and hawk-like vigilance, this year they've set their sights on 80 species.

Youth Volunteers and **Guest Services** have been the wind beneath our wings over

the last month of practice and this year the team is lucky to be supported by grants from the **Dallas Zoo Docents** and **Texas Ornithological Society** <http://www.texasbirds.org/>.

Dallas Zoom: Miranda Rinck, Xavier Hernandez, Christian Hernandez, Ethan Casas, Jonathan Ritter Von Weber-Hahnsberg, Markaela Adkins, Katherine Morgan, Evan Jansen, Elias Vasquez, Juan Garza, and Lily Zimmerman.

23RD ANNUAL RGV BIRDING FESTIVAL
 ON NOVEMBER 2, 2016
 MUNICIPAL AUDITORIUM
 1204 Fairpark Blvd., Harlingen, TX

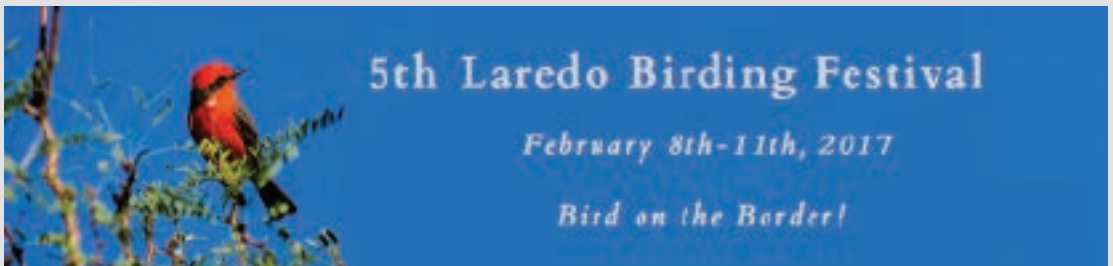
TOS “We Don’t Killdeer” 2nd Place, Central Texas Coast Glider

By Allan Berger



“Yellow boots... Snowy egret” Sean McClellan points out while Lauren Lutz and Macie Hernandez quickly agree. “How many do we have now?” “We have to beat the Flycatchers!” (the Roughwing team from Austwell-Tivoli ISD). I was a little surprised by the competitive spirit apparent on the Classic Birding Day. These three 8th graders had started as novice birders eight months earlier on their first field trip to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Throughout the year, the three teens had always seemed interested, but not usually enthusiastic, so their eagerness was a pleasant surprise. They had learned their area’s basic birds quickly: herons, egrets, vultures and others that would sit still and visible long enough for all to see the field marks. The trio identified all those with ease on competition day. But the smaller birds were more of

a challenge—always flitting about. The team’s binocular skills are still a work in progress as is getting them all to focus on one bird at the same time. They were all tuned-in, however, when they heard the familiar call of the gray catbird. And we were all pleased with a total count of 33 species for the day (more than the Flycatchers!) While they didn’t know at the time, I’m certain they were happy when they learned that they made a second place finish in the Glider category of the Central Coast division. When I see them at the start of school, I’ll congratulate them on that accomplishment—and remind them that they were only 2 birds away from first place - just a couple small birds will make them Champs. So we will stoke the fires of the friendly competition for next year!



TOS-SAYBC Junior Chickadees



Patsy Inglet (Adult Leader), Jordan Rochlitz (Captain), Elias Flores, Andres Flores
Thanks to Michelle Flores for her help and her photographs and Jennifer Rochlitz for her support

JORDAN ROCHLITZ (JUNIOR TEAM CAPTAIN)

The 2016 Great Texas Birding Classic was amazing! I was the team captain of the TOS-SAYBC Junior Chickadee Team. We went birding at the Land Heritage Institute and the Mitchell Lake Audubon Center where our team saw a total of 71 species. Although the day was overcast, the birds were still out and about. So, in the wet, freshly rain-drenched grass, we set off. My socks soaked up water, so my shoes sloshed with every step I took.

While birding, I saw two life birds: the White-tailed Kite, and the Grasshopper Sparrow. The White-tailed Kite was one of my most favorite birds we saw that day. As we were hiking, our team mentor reminded us to scan the tops of the trees. A raptor's figure caught my eye. At first, I thought it to be a Common Red-tailed Hawk, but when our team looked more closely, we weren't sure what it was. We inched closer and the raptor started flying, revealing black wing patches. We brought out the bird guide and identified the raptor to be a

White-tailed Kite. I was actually surprised because I wasn't expecting to see a Kite, let alone a White-tailed Kite. So we watched him circle overhead majestically until he flew out of sight, leaving us all in excitement.

During our birding, I also learned more about bird identification. We had a few birds we never identified—the ones that got away. One of them was a bird that our team knew, but we still failed to ID. The bird soon flew away, leaving us puzzled. It turned out to be a female Painted Bunting. Afterwards, our team mentor mentioned the beak. It was not long, like a tanager's, but shorter and thicker, like a grosbeak's. I learned that I needed to observe birds' beaks a bit more closely, rather than just their coloration or behavior. Overall, I had a great experience- I learned new things, saw life birds, and connected with nature!

ELIAS FLORES

On April 16, 2016 we went to the Land Heritage Institute on a very rainy day to compete in the Texas Birding Classic. I



Tres Hermanos warm up before the competition starts: Antonio, Elias, and Andres Flores.



The rain didn't stop us!

thought there would be no way we would see any birds with all that fog and bad weather. Additionally, our team was made up of only 3 people this year. Surprisingly we saw 71 amazing species, including the Vesper, Savannah, and Lincoln Sparrows, Eastern Kingbird, and my favorite, the Pyrrhuloxia. At Mitchell Lake we were blessed to see a Lesser Goldfinch, Osprey, migrating gulls (we learned later they were Franklin's Gull), Black-throated Green Warbler, and—to put the cherry on top—a Curve-billed Thrasher in the parking lot! Despite the soupy weather, I can say that as a team we had a fun time.

ANDRES FLORES

I'm glad I finally got to compete in the Junior Group in the 2016 Texas Birding Classic.



Junior team in hot pursuit.

I had been waiting to join the group in this competition for a long time, but I had to wait because I wasn't old enough. It was a great experience. I was so thankful our team of only three saw 71 birds. My favorite birds were the White-tailed Kite and the Pyrrhuloxia at the Land Heritage Institute.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!!!!!!TOS WINTER MEETING ...JANUARY 2017
www.Texasbirds.org

TOS-SAYBC Senior Chickadees



Delaney Kempf (Captain), Naomi Flores, Antonio Flores, Marlys Baldwin, Alaina Blue, Tom Inglet (Adult Leader)
Thanks to the Kempf, Flores, Baldwin, and Blue families for their support!

DELANEY KEMPF (SENIOR TEAM CAPTAIN)

This was my second year on the San Antonio Young Birder's Club Gliders team and my first year as team captain. It was such a blast! What started out originally as a dark and dismal day turned out to be great birding weather for our determined team. Our Gliders team included two newer members to the birding community (Marlys and Blue), and this was a great way to introduce them to the competitive and sports-like aspects of birding. It was also a great way to introduce them to the Great Texas Birding Classic. Birding on such a rainy day allowed me to glimpse several species of birds that had been transformed by dampened and darker feathers, as well as observing birds that were deviating from their normal habits in order to escape the rain.

My favorite moment was right before we called it a day; when walking towards our vehicles to head home, we had several large groups of gulls and raptors "kettling" over-

head. What a great ending to the day! This is such a fun competition and one I hope to participate in for many more years.

NAOMI FLORES

This year's Texas Birding Classic was considerably different from last year's competition for me in many ways. For one thing, we were missing a dear family member who'd been an integral part of our team for many years. With their move to Plano I missed their enthusiasm, expertise, and friendship. We also struggled with intermittent rain all morning while at the Land Heritage Institute. Our hopes began to falter as to the success we would achieve. I felt we probably wouldn't be able to beat our record of 74 from last year because the birds wouldn't come out in the rain. When we missed spotting a turkey, I continued to doubt the day's outcome. Yet, spotting a White-tailed Kite, a life-bird for me, began to challenge my way of thinking.

We continued our search at Mitchell

Lake after lunch with a bit more enthusiasm. Although searching at the ponds didn't deliver much, we continued to catch a glimpse of a few birds here and there. But finally, on our return back to the main parking lot, we were surprised to see about 200 migrating Franklin's Gulls, a Mississippi Kite, and an amazing kettle of raptors flying overhead! Surprisingly, by the time we totaled all of the birds seen, I was astonished to discover we had counted 81 species! Despite all of the struggles, physically and emotionally, it turned out to be a true blessing and so memorable!

ANTONIO FLORES

I completely enjoyed participating in the Great Texas Birding Classic again this year. As always, it was a wonderful time to see some awesome birds and to get out in nature. When we first started birding at the Land Heritage Institute, the rain hit us really hard, which made it difficult to bird watch. We still managed to pick up a couple of good finds there, including a Northern Bobwhite and an impressive White-tailed Kite. Additionally, on the drive from Land Heritage to Mitchell Lake, we were able to see a lot of birds: Ash-Throated Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Indigo Bunting, Vesper and Grasshopper Sparrows, Loggerhead Shrike, and a few egrets.

It had finally stopped drizzling by the time we arrived at Mitchell Lake, so we were able to observe some fascinating birds at Bird Pond. We were able to see one of my favorite birds which was a very colorful Wood Duck. I hadn't seen one of those in years! As we concluded our birding adventure, we were very satisfied with our final bird count of 70.

Then we surprisingly discovered that we were not done yet! On our way back to the nature center, we saw a humongous flock of Franklin's Gulls flying in a spiral-shaped cloud, quickly propelling themselves out of sight. In the parking lot, we saw Swainson's Hawks, a Mississippi Kite, and an enormous kettle (flock of birds of prey) of Broad-winged Hawks. Our final two birds were a brilliant

Ruby-throated Hummingbird and a Curve-billed Thrasher. My favorite two birds were the Mississippi Kite and the White-tailed Kite, both of which were quite unusual finds for me. In the end, our final count was 81! I've been participating in this birding competition for three years now and can say that each one has been a challenging fun adventure. I can't wait till next year's Classic!

MARLYS BALDWIN

While I was at the Land Heritage Institute (Marlys had to leave after lunch and was not able to bird with the team at Mitchell Lake Audubon Center), I learned how to listen for birds in the proper way and how to use the binoculars to identify them. I also learned how to communicate to my birding friends to describe the bird's body and song. I saw many new birds to add to my life list, such as the Grasshopper Sparrow and the White-tailed Kite. I really loved walking through the beautiful habitat and admiring the amazing birds we encountered! This was a great experience! Thank you so much for taking me along with you!

ALAINA BLUE ("BLUE" TO HER FRIENDS)

Our day at the Land Heritage Institute and Mitchell Lake Audubon Center was, simply put, amazing. I was able to get many year birds that I hadn't seen yet, such as Double-crested Cormorant, Grasshopper Sparrow, Inca Dove, and Black-bellied Whistling-duck, and a few lifers, like Eastern Kingbird and White-tailed Kite, which was a very nice highlight of our trip. For such a dreary and wet day, we managed to pull together a nice list; we actually finished above last year's count. We hoped for Northern Bobwhite and Wild Turkey, but we were only teased: we heard bobwhites throughout the walk at LHI, and we saw turkey tracks, scat, and feathers, but no actual turkey.

The birds themselves were awesome, the experience itself was great. Tom and Patsy continue to be great leaders, and my team-

mates were friendly and wonderful, as usual. I came home with all the markers of a good day in the field: wet shoes and socks, pants covered in mud and burrs, mosquito bites, and—best of all—a smile.



Proof that Turkeys DO exist at LHI.



Captain Delaney looking for the next bird.



Homing in on those important field marks.



The rain did NOT dampen our spirits!.

TOS Fabulous Flycatchers 4th Place Central Texas Coast Roughwings


By Brigid Berger

“Steady as we go.” That was the Fabulous Flycatchers strategy in their first ever competitive birding event, the 2016 Great Texas Birding Classic. Starting in the school yard, the Fabulous Flycatchers, participating in the Roughwing division within the Central Texas Coast, picked up several species even before boarding the school van. Desiree Martinez, 5th Grader at Austwell-Tivoli, checked her field guide to ensure correct identification and Amy Brewer, 6th grader validated the id using her new birding app. At their first stop in Aransas National Wildlife Refuge they not only picked up nearly a dozen species of water fowl and shorebirds at Jones Lake but found a sound of feral hogs and a vicious-looking redheaded centipede. After lunch they climbed the mountainous observation tower overlooking San Antonio Bay and spotted egrets, herons, gulls, terns, a kettle of turkey vultures and an osprey. Mid-afternoon the team took to Heron Flats Trail to flush woodland species and on the Rail Trail they found a few more fresh water wetland species and got in some good gater-viewing including babies and a Mama gator. The youngsters did well in their first competition, logging 28 species and they never missed an opportunity to have fun along the way, especially Simon Lumpkins and Fischer Franck, both 3rd graders at Austwell-Tivoli ISD, spotting each other with a refuge scope.





Austwell-Tivoli Gifted and Talented Birding Program.
(L to R) Allan Berger, Macie Hernandez, Lauren Lutz, Sean McClellan, Simon Lumpkins, Desiree Martinez, Amy Brewer, Fischer Franck, Maggie Franck, Brigid Berger.

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Top 10 Birding Hot Spots for Matagorda County

By *Bob Friedrich*



WHY MATAGORDA COUNTY?

Matagorda County is a great year-around birding destination! The county is located on the midcoast of Texas approximately 100 miles southwest of Houston. It is bordered by Brazoria County on the east, Wharton County on the north, Jackson and Calhoun County on the west and the Gulf of Mexico to the south. The deltas of the Colorado and Tres Palacios Rivers are located in the county and contribute fertile riverine and estuarine habitats. There is grain, cotton and rice cultivation; also thousands of acres in turf grass production. Fish and shrimp farms provide valuable foraging and stop-over sites for tired, hungry and thirsty shorebird and waterfowl migrants. There is bay, beach and gulf habitat and even some unique thorn scrub habitat along the Inter-coastal Waterway (ICWW) near the town of Matagorda.

The good news is that a lot of this diverse habitat is publicly available to birders and other outdoor enthusiasts. There are fee-based parks open to the public like the Matagorda County Birding Nature Center near Bay City. Public roadways border much of the crop and fish farm production. The

beaches and bays are available to everyone with the outer reaches of these accessible to folks with 4x4s, boats or kayaks.

Data from eBird, the on-line database created and maintained by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, suggests that it is possible to see 377 species of birds in Matagorda County. Obviously, some of these records are accidental and rare occurrences. Still, there are over 300 regularly occurring species that may be seen in the county.

A further testament of the richness of avifauna in the county is the success of the Matagorda County Christmas Bird Count (CBC), conducted each year on the first Monday of the CBC count period that runs December 14- January 6. Diversity of habitat, access to that habitat thanks to the generosity of local landowners, skilled birders in the field and outstanding planning and organization by Matagorda County CBC leaders has made this count #1 in the nation for most of the last 20 years!

HOW AND WHERE TO START

eBird is a great place to find birding hot spots and there are over 30 listed. Also, the Texas Coastal Birding Trail on-line resource and brochure describes suggested birding stops in Matagorda County. And birders may have access to additional hot spot resources. This article draws on the above listed resources and personal experience to offer a "Top 10 Birding Hot Spots for Matagorda County". For each of the birding hot spots this article shows a site name, GPS coordinates, rough driving directions, target species by season and other tips based on local knowledge. The Top 10 list is presented in descending order beginning with #10. The ranking is based primarily on the total number of species listed in eBird for the hot spot, and secondarily by accessibility (somewhat subjective). The hot spot ranking will perhaps aid birders

in narrowing their options when birding in Matagorda County.

So, if you are a county lister, need to pad your Texas list, are a visiting birder and need to add a much needed 'lifer' to your list or photo library, then here are the.....

TOP 10 BIRDING HOT SPOTS FOR MATAGORDA COUNTY

#10—Palacios Waterfront and Lookout Point (127 species)—The small town of Palacios sits at the top of Tres Palacios Bay, part of the Matagorda Bay complex. It is known as the “Shrimp Capital of Texas” because of the large fleet of gulf shrimpers that call the port home. In addition to the port activity, the open bay and adjacent salt marsh habitat offer good birding. During winter, Lookout Point (GPS coordinates 28.6961, -96.2309) is a good place to glass and scope for diving ducks and loons on the bay. Shorebirds and waders may be found on nearby exposed reefs and in the marsh.



Fisherman's Memorial at Lookout Point faces the bay welcoming home Gulf shrimpers.

Also in the winter, you may get close views of Common Loons diving for fish that seek the deeper, warmer water of the port turning basin. Be sure to look the loons over carefully since Pacific Loon has occurred here. Other good places to scan the bay are the dock at the south end of 12th Street, along South Bay Blvd and from the end of the Pavilion Pier.

Another good spot in Palacios is Trull Marsh (GPS coordinates 28.7112, -96.2107) along Hwy 35. It can hold shorebirds and

Clapper Rail any time of the year, as can the Palacios Prairie Wetland just north of Trull Marsh. During migration, it might be worth a slow drive or walk down Collins Drive; it borders the south side of the Palacios cemetery (GPS coordinates 28.7066, -96.2284). The trees and scrub bordering the south side of Collins Dr. can be productive for warblers, vireos, orioles, buntings and grosbeaks. To get to Palacios take Hwy 35 northeast for 29 miles from Port Lavaca or Hwy 35 southwest for 29 miles from Bay City; it's the same distance from both towns!

#9—South Citrus Road Turf Farm area (143 species): Matagorda County has thousands of acres in turf production and turf farms are usually large, wide-open places, along gravel roads. This turf farm at South Citrus Road (CR 383) is no exception and is one of the most productive for birding.

In March and April, it is a great place for American Golden-Plovers. April and May bring Buff-breasted Sandpipers and Pectoral Sandpipers. Where large numbers of shorebirds congregate, a Peregrine Falcon or Merlin can't be far away; look for these falcons perched on the turf or irrigation pipes. Another good indicator of their presence is when all of the shorebirds flush at once.

Horned Larks are resident here and usually reliable. In winter, the turf and grassy edges of the road are good for Sprague's Pipit. Mountain Plover is occasionally found here from January through early March; the best place is the field where Henry Rd intersects South Citrus Road.

A scope is a valuable tool when birding this and any turf farm. To get here, turn south



Mountain Plover at turf farm on South Citrus Road.

onto Henry Road (CR 383) from FM 521 just west of the STP Nuclear Plant. Go 1.5 miles south on Henry Road until it dead ends onto South Citrus Road. Turn left and follow South Citrus Road around until the turf ends at the wooden bridge over the irrigation canal. A word of caution: please stay on the public, gravel road and pull off to the side if you get out to scope. The dirt roads into the turf are private property and the owner will not be kind to trespassers. (GPS coordinates 28.7434, -96.1002)

#8—Sargent Beach and environs (188 species)—The town of Sargent, southeast of Bay City, is named for George Sargent, a cattleman who immigrated to Texas from England in 1834. It lies on Caney Creek and about 5 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico. Riverbend Road and Creekside Dr which are on opposite sides of Caney Creek, run through riparian habitat. Though this habitat is fragmented in places with nice homes and yards along the Creek, drive slowly during migration looking for warbler, vireos, orioles, buntings and grosbeaks.

Sargent Ranch Road runs east from FM 457, just south of Sargent. This road can be good for marsh and scrub birds. Common Ground Dove and Ladder-backed Woodpecker have occurred here and the marsh can harbor Black Rail and Yellow Rail. Obviously, the rails are very secretive and a tough find.

FM 457 continues south across the Inter-Coastal Waterway (ICWW) and then to the Gulf beach. The bridge over the ICWW is a drawbridge and a short wait may be required if barge traffic is heavy. It is interesting that the collection of houses on the beach here is called Bay City; not to be confused with the county seat of Matagorda County that lies about 30 miles northwest at the intersection of Highway 35 and Highway 60.

The Sargent beach is very 'natural', meaning that it is tough to drive, even with a 4x4. Nevertheless, FM 457 parallels the beach for

about a mile down to West Moring Dock Park (GPS coordinates 28.7633, -95.6302). This drive provides good views of the beach and the avian denizens here. Look for Red Knot and Lesser Black-backed Gull during migration and in the winter.



Lesser Black-backed Gull at Sargent beach.

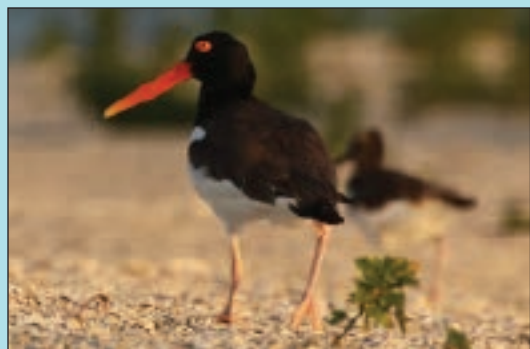
To get to this hotspot, take FM 457 south from Bay City or from FM 521. After passing through Sargent, FM 457 dead ends at the Gulf of Mexico.

#7—Oyster Lake Rd and Oyster Lake Bridge area (188 species)—Oyster Lake Road runs north-south from near the community of Collegeport in southwest Matagorda County and dead ends at the 'bridge to nowhere'. The fairly substantial concrete bridge across the west opening to Oyster Lake from Tres Palacios Bay, was built to allow local ranchers to access cattle ranging on the island south of Oyster Lake. The habitat along Oyster Lake Road is pasture and crop land as well as hedge rows, shrimp farms and salt marsh. The road goes from paved to gravel, 0.5 miles after leaving FM 1095. The gravel portion is generally in good condition even when wet but drive slowly to minimize vehicle damage from potholes. During migration, the loop road just past Franzene Road, called LeTulle Lane (GPS coordinates 28.6813, -96.1629) can be good for passerines. The shrimp farm on the opposite side of Oyster Lake Road from LeTulle Lane and along Franzene Road west of Oyster Lake Road can have dabbling ducks, shorebirds and waders. If any of the shrimp

farm tanks are drained, these can be especially good for shorebirds.

Continuing south on Oyster Lake Road, in winter watch the crop fields for Sandhill Cranes and falcons and during migration watch for passerines hop-scotching along the hedge rows.

Oyster Lake at the end of Oyster Lake Road has salt marsh, a large salt flat and views of both Tres Palacios Bay and Oyster Lake. In the winter and during migration this area can be good for diving ducks, American Oystercatcher, terns and gulls and shorebirds.



American Oystercatcher at Tres Palacios Bay.

Look for small plovers on the salt flat on the southeast side of the bridge and Nelson's Sparrow, Seaside Sparrow and Clapper Rail in the marsh grass on both sides of the bridge. (GPS coordinates 28.6139, -96.2116)

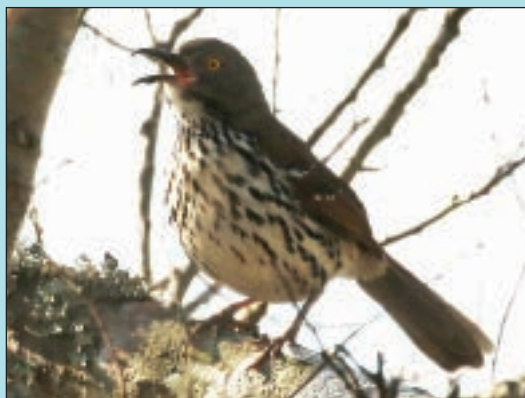
Another place to try for passerines during migration is the community of Collegeport. You can find this small, quiet, close-knit community by continuing down FM 1095 after passing the turn-off for Oyster Lake. Beware of dogs in the area and respect private property. (GPS coordinates 28.7221, -96.1840)

To get to Oyster Lake Road and Oyster Lake, at the 4-way stop intersection of FM521 and FM 1095, turn south on FM 1095 which curves west at about the 4 mile mark. After about 6 miles (from FM 521), turn south on Oyster Lake Road. (GPS coordinates 28.7255, -96.1661)

#6—**East Gulf Road** (196 species): This paved road just east of the town of Matagorda, runs past the cemetery and along the

ICWW over a crabbing bridge, turns north and eventually dead ends at private property. The road is bordered by a mix of wetlands, pasture and thorn scrub. The thorn scrub is especially interesting because it regularly produces Long-billed Thrasher. It is suspected that the species breeds here. Try the thorn scrub patch on the north side of the road at GPS coordinates 28.7082, -95.9226 or the one on the south side of the road at GPS coordinates 28.7067, -95.9362.

Keep your eyes open for Brown-crested



Long-billed Thrasher on territory at East Gulf Road.

Flycatcher and Painted Bunting during breeding season.

The small wooden 'crabbing bridge' at GPS coordinates 28.7109, -95.9145 is usually good for a mix of terns, shorebirds and waders. American Oystercatchers have also been reported loafing here. During the summer, keep an eye on tugboats pushing barges down the ICWW; they could have Magnificent Frigatebirds soaring above them.

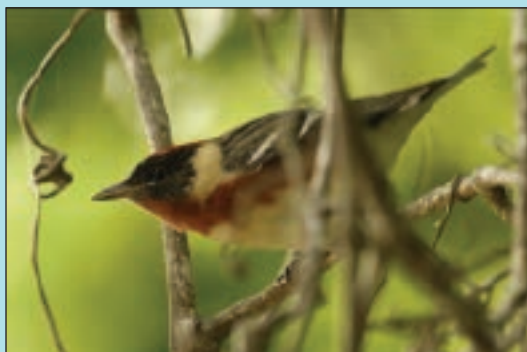
The Matagorda County Christmas Bird Count is a great way to access unique birding opportunities on private property in the East Gulf Road area. Contact the compiler for the CBC, Brent Ortego (bortego@hotmail.com) for more information. Otherwise, you will need to bird from the road and watch for fast-driving fishermen in a hurry to catch that first fish of the day.

To get here, take Hwy 60 south from Bay City or FM 521. Just before reaching

the town of Matagorda at GPS coordinates 28.6989, -95.9575, turn east on this great little birding road.

#5—Chinquapin Road and Big Boggy NWR area (220 species)—This is another one of those great Matagorda County birding roads that runs for about 12 miles from FM 521 south, ending at the fishing community of Chinquapin on the ICWW. It is a narrow gravel road the entire length with a high crown toward the end; be careful if it is wet. Chinquapin Road passes through pastures and crop fields for the first 8 miles. After that it borders the Big Boggy NWR with fresh and brackish marsh, finally ending at the ICWW. Enjoy the quiet drive and look for migrating raptors, passerines and shorebirds in the fields. At Big Boggy NWR, stop at the nice wetland on the east side of the road (GPS coordinates 28.7835, -95.8264) and listen for rails. South of the wetland a mile or so, you will see trees on both sides of the road. This is the place to stop and walk along looking and listening for migrating passerines. This spot is only a few miles from the Gulf and during ‘fall-out’ conditions, one of the places that passerines can be found in good numbers; more than 15 species of warblers have been reported here in one outing. (GPS coordinates 28.7707, -95.8118).

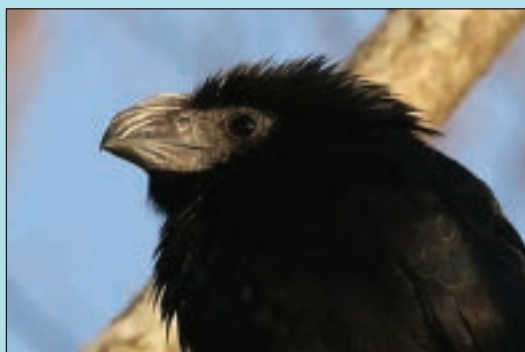
Continuing south, trees give way to wide open marsh. At the culvert, stop and look for shorebirds, Seaside Sparrow and in winter Nelson’s Sparrow (GPS coordinates 28.7602, -95.7816).



Bay-breasted Warbler at Chinquapin Road during a Spring fall-out.

To find Chinquapin Road, drive east from the town of Wadsworth on FM 521 for about 2 miles. Chinquapin Road runs south out of the ‘S’ curve at GPS coordinates 28.8350, -95.8889.

#4—W STP Road (222 species): This gravel road runs along the western boundary of the South Texas Power (STP) nuclear plant. The east side of the road is a mix of rose hedge, deciduous trees and viney undergrowth. The west side of the road is bordered by pasture and agricultural fields. An irrigation canal runs along the west side of the road for much of the way. During Spring and Fall migration, this is a great place for all manner of passerines such as warblers, vireos, orioles, tanagers, grosbeaks and flycatchers. In the winter, the brushy areas on the east side of the road are good for sparrows. Groove-billed Ani’s have been reported here too.



Groove-billed Ani at W STP Road.

One of the best ways to bird this road is to drive slowly watching for movement (foraging activity, birds that flush or fly over) and then stop to play screech owl calls. Birds will come to the owl call and attempt to mob the offending owl; be ready with your binoculars and camera.

Take special note of the brush at the school bus. It is about 30 yards back in the trees; easily seen in the winter when the trees are leafless. Not so much in the summer. (GPS coordinates 28.7752, -96.0814).

The road and brush line is somewhat exposed so a stiff wind can keep the small birds

under cover. And, the early morning sun can sometimes make birding the brushy east side of the road more difficult; afternoons provide better light conditions.

At the end of W STP road where the road makes a sharp right turn and the name changes to Corporon Road, is the Saha Fish Farm. This is good for waterfowl, gulls and terns, especially during the winter months. The roads on the levees of the fish farm are private so do not drive on them unless you want a lesson in Texas trespassing laws.

To get here, turn south onto W STP Road from FM 521, just west of the STP nuclear plant. (GPS coordinates 28.7866, -96.0816) Bonus location: The STP nuclear plant manages the South Texas Power Prairie Wetland and each Fall they disc and flood the large field on their property along FM 521 at GPS coordinates 28.8052, -96.0377. The man-made wetland is a magnet for wintering waterfowl and shorebirds. It is also a great place to spot Bald Eagles that follow the waterfowl crowd around.

#3—Matagorda County Birding Nature Center (238 species): This park covers 34 beautiful acres along the Colorado River west of Bay City. The riparian habitat here features many large Live Oaks with Spanish Moss and many mature Pecan Trees. There are six botanical gardens, as well as freshwater wetland areas with willows, cattails and duckweed. Also, there are palm trees, fruit trees, butterfly gardens, feeders and water features to round-out this interesting park. The well maintained trails in the park include pretty wooden bridges, a pavilion and public bathrooms; truly a delightful park.

Birding is good here all year. Spring and Fall migrations features many passerine species like buntings, tanagers, orioles, warblers, vireos and flycatchers. In the Winter, sparrows abound. Pileated Woodpeckers and Wood Ducks are resident. Other birds known to nest here in recent years are Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, Great Kiskadees and



Matagorda County Birding Nature Center entrance.

it is suspected that Green Kingfishers have attempted nesting in the banks of the Colorado River. Overhead, in season, you may see a Bald Eagle, Mississippi Kite, Broad-winged Hawk, cormorants, herons or egrets.

There is a minimal \$3 entry fee per person or \$5 per carload. Or you can opt for the annual pass for \$20. Family memberships are slightly more. The fees cover maintenance and a camp host so the park is safe and enjoyable at all times.

To get here, drive west on Highway 35 out of Bay City. Just after crossing the Colorado River bridge, there is a bend in the road and on the south side of Hwy 35 you will see the well-marked entrance sign. Once inside the park, there is a small welcome center staffed occasionally by volunteers. This is where you pay the entry fee and can get more birding information and even purchase a T-shirt. If no one is there, then please use the self-serve kiosk. For more information, call 979-245-3336 or go to mcbnc.org (GPS coordinates 28.9842, -96.0129) **Bonus:** Right next door to the Matagorda County Birding Nature Center is Tule Park. This is essentially the city park of Bay City. Tule Park features a nice duck pond and more majestic oaks with Spanish moss; worth a stop if you're in the area.

#2—Matagorda Beach Jetty Park and environs (240 species) - The Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) owns and manages much of the property at the mouth of

the Colorado River. They offer very good outdoor programs, with a bird trail, kayak tours and beach walks featured. Check their website or call 979-863-2603 for the latest program offerings, times and meeting places.



Shorebird line-up in tidal pool along the birding trail at Matagorda Beach Jetty Park.

To get to the Jetty Park, you must drive through salt marsh habitat along FM 2031 from the ICWW to the Gulf. Drive slowly looking for Roseate Spoonbills, Neotropical Cormorants, Clapper Rail and Long-billed Curlew. At the beach, especially the lagoon area between the rock jetty and pier, look for Common Tern, Caspian Tern, American Avocet, Marbled Godwit, Snowy Plover, Wilson's Plover in summer and Piping Plover in winter.

A sea watch from the end of the fishing pier can produce Northern Gannet and possibly Jaeger during the winter months. A sea watch can be especially productive if shrimp boats are trawling near shore and culling their catch. Birds in the Gulf will usually be seen at long distances and it can get cold in the winter with a strong north wind. Dress appropriately and pack your patience.

If you have a 4x4, then driving the beach to 3-mile cut or even the cedars at 7-mile can be productive for migrating shorebirds like Red Knots in the fall, spring or winter or for fall-out passerines in April and May. Use caution because the sand can be very soft in places and if you get stuck, digging out is not much fun and a tow can be quite expensive.

To get here take Highway 60 south from Bay City to the town of Matagorda. At the 4-way stop in Matagorda, turn south and go over the high bridge that crosses the ICWW. This is FM 2031 and will take you to the Jetty Park. GPS coordinates for the Jetty Park are 28.5976, -95.9774.

#1—**The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Clive Runnells Mad Island Marsh Preserve and TP&W Mad Island Wildlife Management Area** (294 species): The Clive Runnells Family Mad Island Marsh was part of an expansive coastal wetlands and upland prairie system which, 60 years ago, stretched nearly unbroken along the mid- and upper-Texas Gulf Coast. In 1989, Clive Runnells donated to The Nature Conservancy 3,148 acres of this coastal wetlands and upland prairies. TNC obtained additional acreage in 1993 and today the Preserve totals 7,063 acres. Likewise, TP&W obtained for management similarly sized properties from generous donors.

During Spring migration, a team of bird banders from the Smithsonian Institute mist nest in the thick brush along the ICWW and have documented many species of warblers and vireos. Ducks, geese, cranes, herons, egrets, bitterns, rails and shorebirds are abundant in the Preserve, especially in winter and during migration.

Access to these properties is limited and one of the best ways to see them is to partici-



Sandhill Cranes are abundant during the winter at Mad Island Marsh Preserve (photo taken elsewhere in Matagorda County).

pate in the annual Matagorda County CBC. The Mad Island Marsh Preserve usually hosts dozens of birders during the CBC so space is limited. Contact Brent Ortego (bortego@hotmail.com) compiler for the count for more information about helping with the CBC. Another way to see the Preserve is to join monthly “Feathered Friday” events. These tours usually meet the third Friday of each month at 8 am at the main gate to the Preserve. Space is limited and it’s best to confirm dates and times before coming out by emailing Cathy Wakefield at cathywakefield78@gmail.com.

To find the Mad Island Marsh Preserve head south on FM 1095 from FM 521. One-half mile after FM 1095 bends west toward Collegeport, turn south on CR 378 / Brazos Tower Road for about 2 miles, then turn east on Franzene Road. This gravel road dead ends at the main gate of the Preserve just after a small wooden bridge over Mad Island Slough (GPS coordinates 28.6888, -96.1108)

MORE THAN JUST 10!

This Top 10 list is offered as a starting point for birders wishing to explore the many rich birding opportunities in Matagorda County. Obviously, there are other very good places to bird in Matagorda County including Selkirk Island, FM 521 River Park, Carl Park and Riverside Park to name a few. And if you have a boat, the new mouth of the Colorado River from East Matagorda Bay can be excellent.

It’s great fun to find new birding locations and to learn something new about an old favorite hot spot. With at least 377 species possible, Matagorda County has something to offer for the intrepid, the casual and the novice birder. Come on down and try all of the hot spots or find your own birding ‘honey hole’. Either way you’re sure to have a great time and likely to find some interesting birds.

Bob Friedrich
bird.fried@gmail.com

Get your TOS Yellow-throated Warbler Tee Shirt

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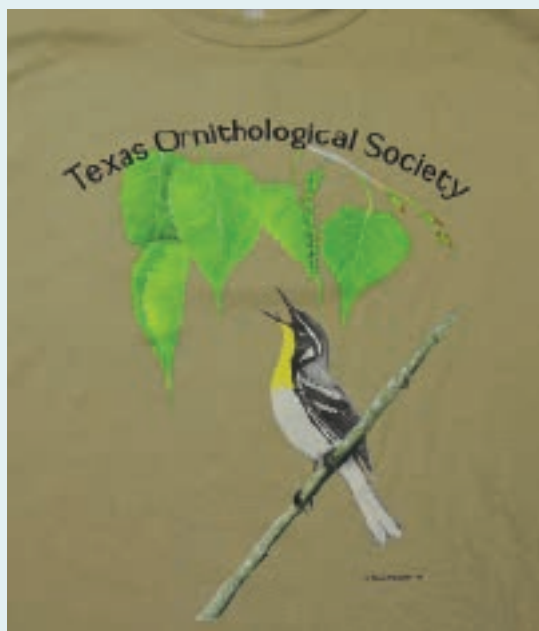
The price is \$15 each (price includes tax of \$1.24).

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

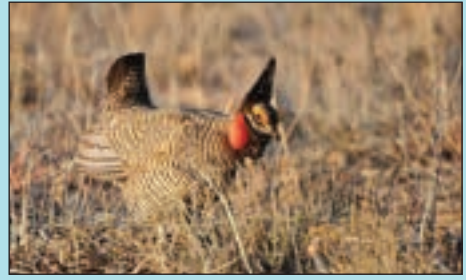
For ordering details contact

Georgina Schwartz

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



Aerial Surveys to Document Lesser Prairie-Chicken Population Trends



Aerial surveys for Lesser Prairie-chickens begin March 17 and ran through mid-May in Texas and four other states containing habitat the bird needs to thrive. The surveys are conducted annually by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) to ascertain population trends and how the bird is responding to management strategies identified in the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Range-wide Conservation Plan.

The range-wide plan is a collaborative effort of WAFWA and the state wildlife agencies of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas and Colorado. It was developed to ensure conservation of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken with voluntary cooperation of landowners and industry. This plan allows agriculture producers and industry to continue operations while reducing impacts to the bird and its grassland habitat.

“Working with the wildlife agencies of each of these five states, we’ve established a consistent methodology to conduct these aerial surveys,” explained Bill Van Pelt, WAFWA’s grassland coordinator. “This allows us to get the most accurate information possible so we can see how various management strategies for the bird are working on the ground.”

The surveys will be conducted by helicopter in locations chosen randomly within Lesser Prairie-Chicken range, which is part of the methodology strategy. In previous years, some of the fly paths prompted calls, which is why WAFWA is getting the word out about the start of aerial survey work.

Last year’s aerial surveys brought good news:

an abundance of spring rainfall in 2015, along with ongoing efforts associated with the range-wide plan and other conservation initiatives, helped increase the Lesser Prairie-Chicken population by approximately 25 percent from 2014 to 2015. Results from this year’s surveys will be available on July 1. Despite last year’s encouraging news, the population is still low compared to historical numbers, and the impacts to the lesser prairie-chicken and its habitat still exist. WAFWA is committed to continued successful implementation of the range-wide plan and the long-term recovery of this iconic grassland bird.

For more information about the Lesser Prairie-Chicken and the conservation work being done to support it, see the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Range-wide Plan¹.

Since 1922, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) has advanced conservation in western North America. Representing 23 western states and Canadian provinces, WAFWA’s reach encompasses more than forty percent of North America, including two-thirds of the United States. Drawing on the knowledge of scientists across the West, WAFWA is recognized as the expert source for information and analysis about western wildlife. WAFWA supports sound resource management and building partnerships at all levels to conserve native wildlife for the use and benefit of all citizens, now and in the future.

¹<http://www.wafwa.org/Documents%20and%20Settings/37/Site%20Documents/Initiatives/Lesser%20Prairie%20Chicken/2013LPCRWPfinalfor4drule12092013.pdf>.

Book Reviews



American Birding Association Field Guide to Birds of Texas

Mark W. Lockwood, Brian E. Small (Photographer)

Paperback: 352 pages; Publisher: Scott & Nix, Inc.; ISBN-10: 1935622536; ISBN-13: 978-1935622536; Product Dimensions: 4.5 x 1 x 7.2 inches; Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds; Price \$24.95 Amazon

"The American Birding Association Field Guide to Birds of Texas includes more than 300 species birders are most likely to see in the state. Illustrated with hundreds of crisp, color photographs, it includes descriptions of each bird along with tips of when and where to see them."

This relatively small book can fit into your birding vest's pocket. It has a nice flexible binding. It is a welcome addition to the bird book shelf and your pocket. The photographs are wonderful. They all show those marks we are all looking for. Each species has a full page. The introductory information is very helpful in learning the terms that birders use and learning where to look for them in the state. There is a complete checklist of the birds found in Texas in the back of the book.

However there are some missing species that I miss when teaching about the birds of the area.

The absence of the Neotropic Cormorant does not allow me to show the difference between the two cormorants seen in my area. The missing Greater Scaup allows me no way to tell the difference between the two scaups. The missing Glossy Ibis does not let me show the student what to look for on the coast where both may be found. We do have Common Ground Doves around here, but not in this book. Surely one would want to know how to tell Louisiana Waterthrush from Northern Waterthrush, but not in this book. Sometimes we get Scarlet Tanagers but only the Summer is in this book. We saw a Bank Swallow the other day, but it is not in this book. Brown-crested Flycatchers are moving into our areas, but they are not in this book. Other species are missing, but you get the point. The ones that are present are wonderful, but the missing species leave me with a problem.

Georgina Schwartz



Trails that lead somewhere

Lytle Blankenship

Paperback: 596 pages; Publisher: Outskirts Press (August 14, 2015); Language: English; ISBN-10: 1478725885; ISBN-13: 978-1478725886; Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.2 x 9 inches; Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces; Cost 45.95 hardback 28.95 paperback AMAZON

My first thought while reading Dr. Lytle Blankenship's autobiography *Trails That Lead Somewhere* was that this is certainly a book I could relate to because we have traveled some of the same trails, met some of the same people, and shared many outdoor interests.

According to the book, Lytle began his life's journey as one of 14 children living in a one-room house on a small South Texas farm during the Great Depression. He hand-milked cows before dawn and after dark for 10 cents a day, worked cattle on unpredictable horses, and hunted deer to put meat on the table. Lytle grew up listening to the calls of Mourning Doves and rain crows (Yellow-billed Cuckoos). Early on, he developed a strong interest in wildlife. He served in the U. S. Navy at the end of World War II and received a B.S. degree in wildlife management at Texas A&M College (later University) under the G. I. Bill. Graduate university studies involved waterfowl ducklings in South Dakota and timberdoodles (Woodcock) in Michigan.

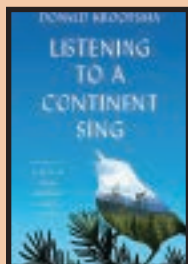
Dr. Blankenship worked for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service for several years on Mourning Doves and White-winged Doves in Arizona and Mexico. He always seemed to be at the right place at the right time to participate in other adventures including an extensive "People to People" scientific trip to South America initiated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. This trip offered a chance to meet new wildlife professionals and see new birds including Scarlet Macaws, Golden-eared Doves, Rheas, and Screamers. Lytle later organized his own nature tour group to Belize and Guatemala. An offer from Texas A&M led to three years in East Africa studying game cropping and other adventures with lions, leopards, elephants, rhinos, and more birding. He traveled widely in Africa, Europe, Asia, and Australia.

Lytle served as a Wildlife Scientist and Professor for over 50 years, much of it involving big game research. He was an advisor to graduate students, wrote scientific publications, and attended many wildlife conferences. Somewhere along the way it became apparent to everyone that Lyle is a person who gets

things done, and he was often asked to serve as chairman of professional, service, and religious organizations wherever he went. I first met Dr. Blankenship during the 1980s when he served as President of The Wildlife Society (the North American organization of professional wildlife biologists), but I had no idea that he had a leadership role in so many other national and international organizations.

Over the years, I have been privileged to see Nenes in Hawaii, Resplendent Quetzales in Costa Rica, Crimson Rosellas and Superb Fairy Wrens in Australia, and Hoopoes and Red-crowned Cranes in China, but I will never come close to matching Lytle's incredible life list of birds of the world. I recommend Lytle's book to anyone interested in wildlife and birding.

Ron George, Certified Wildlife Biologist



Listening to a Continent Sing: Birdsong by Bicycle from the Atlantic to the Pacific

Donald Kroodsma

Hardcover: 336 pages; Publisher: Princeton University Press (May 3, 2016); Language: English; ISBN-10: 0691166811; ISBN-13: 978-0691166810; Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1 x 9.4 inches; Shipping Weight: 1.8 pounds; Cost \$22.20 Amazon

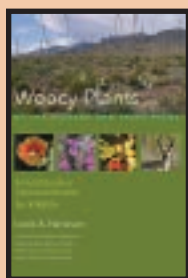
Donald Kroodsma's latest book, *Listening to a Continent Sing: Birdsong by Bicycle from the Atlantic to the Pacific*, recounts a ten-week, ten-state bicycle journey as the author travels with his son, David, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, lingering, listening, and describing birdsong along the way.

The book features QR codes that link to audio birdsong—an interesting feature that takes advantage of relatively recent technology in an innovative way. (Curiously, Kroodsma's previous book, *Birdsong by the Seasons*, published in 2009, was accompanied by two CDs of birdsongs. How quickly technology changes!)

This most recent contribution from Kroodsma's already rich legacy as one of the country's finest interpreters of avian birdsong is a delightful blend of travelogue, a personal bonding between father and son, and a gentle introduction and useful compendium of information about the singing life of birds.

Attractively illustrated with small, black-and-white drawings in the margins, this book is a recommended read for anyone with an interest in birdsong blended with a heart-warming narrative that is certain to leave the reader the better for having read it.

Birding Community E-bulletin.



Woody Plants of the Big Bend and Trans-Pecos

Louis A. Harveson, Philip Dickerson, Andy James, Reagan Gage, Johnny Arredondo, Shawn Gray, Annaliese Scoggin, Austin Stolte, Jason Wagner

Series: Myrna and David K. Langford Books on Working Lands; Paperback: 224 pages; Publisher: Texas A&M University Press (February 4, 2016); Language: English; ISBN-10: 1623493536; ISBN-13: 978-1623493530; Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.7 x 8.7 inches; Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces; Cost \$25.12

This guide was developed for landowners, ranchers, hunters, and wildlife managers in the arid, western portion of Texas or Trans-Pecos. It outlines the climate, topography, habitat types, and big game found in the 19 counties that comprise the Trans-Pecos. Five vegetation types are identified for the region that are dependent upon elevation changes and location of water. These varied vegetation types and topography make the area quite diverse.

Following an introduction and background, the book moves on to the diet of big game animals. A hierarchy is broken down into three tiers based on the preference of big game in regards to browse selection on woody plants. Texas Parks & Wildlife developed this system specifically for this region to determine browse utilization by big game. It continues with control methods for less desirable brush species.

The main portion of the book covers 87 of the common woody species that are important components in the diet of big game animals. The plants are arranged by family and each includes high-quality photo representations with separate photos for leaves, flowers, and fruits to aid in identification. Written descriptions are included for each, with sections dedicated to plant value for wildlife and management techniques.

This book is not geared toward birders or naturalists with little attention paid to song birds or other non-game wildlife. Some of the management techniques suggested would be valuable to improve habitat

for resident landowners, but is of little use for visitors. For a naturalist, this would be practical guide for identification of woody plants in Texas' portion of the Chihuahuan Desert.

Overall, this guide is well organized and easy to read. It contains large, clear photos and information that would be useful for a variety of people dependent upon their needs.

Alan Crow 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



Birds in Trouble

By Lynne E. Barber

ISBN: 9781623493592, Publisher: Texas A&M University Press, Year of Publication: 2016

Page Count: 224, Price \$29.95

What does it mean to say a bird is an "endangered species?" How is that different from a bird that is "threatened," or a "species of concern?" The agencies and their various threat categories, along with the language for describing them, can be confusing. **Birds in Trouble** does a wonderful job unravelling this knot of terminology and agencies. The appendices, in particular, show these organizations and the status of various species, acting as a guide to terminology.

On a more practical front, the Preface and two introductory chapters offer a broad perspective on why bird numbers are declining. That there is a chapter dedicated to habitat, alone, speaks loudly about the importance of this factor in what is endangering all birds, regardless of their official status. Likewise, the chapter following the species accounts, "Helping Everyday Birds," offers very practical suggestions about what we can do to help all bird species.

The reasons for the birds chosen for the species accounts are carefully explained. And although that list may contain birds of lesser interest in your location, in a broader sense their inclusions makes sense. Nonetheless, the species accounts section, the preponderance of the book, was the least interesting, except, of course, for those few relevant local species. It is still worth reading about all the species, if for no other reason than understanding the broader perspective of what is happening to these birds with respect to habitat and other location-specific threats.

Overall, and irrespective of the species accounts, this well-organized book offers important insights into many of the problems with bird populations and what we can do to help reduce our impact on these populations.

John Huecksteadt

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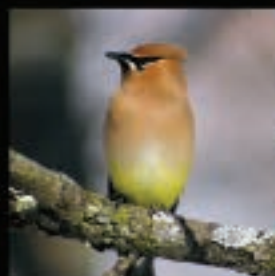
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Hope and Glory arrive to bathe and drink at *La Fuente de los Sueños*. See full article on page 36.

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