

# the ROADRUNNER

Newsletter of El Paso/Trans-Pecos  
Audubon Society - P.O. Box 9655  
El Paso, Texas 79986



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January 1984

## GENERAL MEETING

MON., JANUARY 16, 1984, 7:30 PM,  
GARDEN CENTER, 3105 Grant St. in  
Memorial Park covers the when and  
where of the first general meeting  
of 1984. To greet the new year we  
will have Bill Hutchinson, the new  
(to El Paso Audubonners) Refuge  
Manager at Bosque del Apache Wild-  
life Refuge in New Mexico. Mr.  
Hutchinson has been with the De-  
partment of the Interior, Fish  
& Wildlife Service for 17 yrs.,  
and so brings a broad base of ex-  
perience to his position in New  
Mexico. He will present a slide  
show and afterwards answer any  
questions we may have. As our  
field trip to the Bosque will be  
on January 14-15, the area and its  
birds will be fresh on our minds.  
Come for an interesting program  
on this unique wildlife refuge we  
enjoy visiting yearly. / S.J. Dodds

## FIELD TRIP CALENDAR

### BOSQUE DEL APACHE

SAT.-SUN., JAN. 14-15. Meet either  
at 7:30 AM Sat. at Transmountain Rd.  
and I 10 or at 12 noon at Park Head-  
quarters at the Bosque. For over-  
night call any of the following  
for reservations:

Best Western Golden Manor	(800) 528-1234
El Camino	(505) 835-1500
Motel 6	(505) 835-1492
El Rio	(505) 835-0510
San Miguel	(505) 835-0211

For camping there is KOA in Socorro  
or Natl. Forest and BLM land. Tom  
Baker is the leader (562-9461).

### FORT BLISS SEWAGE PONDS

SAT., JAN. 21. Meet at 7:30 AM  
at Furrow's parking lot on Fred  
Wilson Rd. Leader, Joe Guinn (566-  
8438).

### RIO BOSQUE PARK

SUN., JAN. 29. Meet at 7:30 AM  
at Feather Lake, 9500 North Loop.  
Trip Leader: John Sproul (545-  
5157 h, 541-6126 w).

### BEGINNERS TRIP TO TORNILLO LAKE

SUN., FEB. 5. Meet at 7:30 AM  
at Feather Lake, 9500 North Loop.  
Leader: John Sproul (545-5157 h,  
541-6126 w).

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## FIELD TRIPS FOLLOW-UP

Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) dom-  
inated December birding activity  
and will be reported in detail  
next month. Even our Dec. 4 be-  
ginners' trip to Hueco Tanks had  
a CBC angle, as the 8 partici-  
pants were introduced to just  
what a CBC entails. They also  
enjoyed fine weather, a fine look  
at a Great Horned Owl roosting in  
a juniper and, for those who  
stayed later, a Prairie Falcon  
perched high on the rocks.

/J. Sproul

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os Audubon Society. Nonmembers  
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in name, address or telephone to  
this same address./

THE STATUS OF  
THE APLOMADO FALCON IN  
NORTH AMERICA

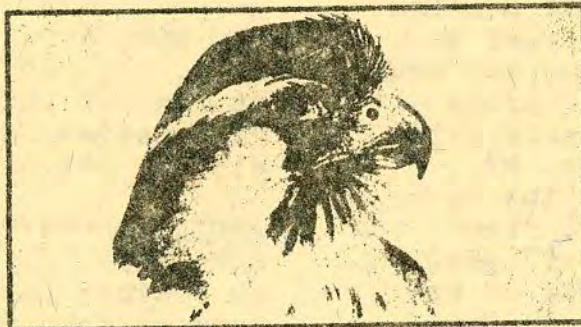
(Ed. note: This article appeared originally in THE EYAS, newsletter of the National Wildlife Federation's Raptor Information Center, and is reprinted with the author's permission.)

The Aplomado Falcon (Falco femoralis) occurs in grasslands and open savannahs throughout the neo-tropics from Isla Grande at the southern tip of Argentina and Chile to the northern fringes of the Chihuahuan Desert in Texas, New Mexico, and (historically) Arizona. Within the last 70 years the species has drastically diminished in numbers in the northernmost parts of its range, to the point where it is presently one of the rarest North American Falconiformes. Next to the California Condor (Gymnogyps californianus), the Aplomado Falcon is perhaps the most likely raptor to disappear entirely from the United States in the near future.

Historical records indicate that the Aplomado Falcon was both widespread and relatively common in suitable habitat north of Mexico in the mid-to-late 1800's. A.L. Heerman secured the first North American specimen in 1852 in southwestern New Mexico, and by 1950 at least 55 additional specimens and 125 clutches of eggs had been collected in the United States. Writing of southeastern Arizona in 1874, H.W. Henshaw stated that "It (the Aplomado Falcon) would . . . appear to be not very rare in this section," and 13 years later in 1887, H.C. Benson located five Aplomado Falcon nests in the vicinity of Fort Huachuca, Cochise Co., Arizona. A.P. Smith referred to the species as

common between Port Isabel and Brownsville in Cameron Co., Texas and in 1930, J.K. Streckler noted that the species was probably far more common in western and southern Texas in former times than was generally believed.

Acquisition of Aplomado Falcon specimens and eggs peaked in the United States between 1900 and 1910, and both specimen and sighting records diminished rapidly in subsequent years. The species was apparently extirpated as a breeding bird in Arizona by 1910, although single individuals were sighted in Cochise Co. in the autumns of 1939 and



1940. By the early 1930's the Aplomado Falcon had largely disappeared from New Mexico as well, although A. Bayne found the last known North American nest of this species in the state 20 years later in 1952. Since 1952

the species has only been observed sporadically in the southern parts of New Mexico; two were seen together in 1962, and single individuals were sighted in 1968, 1975, 1977, and 1978. Aplomado Falcons were reported fairly regularly in Texas until the late 1950's, although the last known nest in the state was discovered by F. Nye and J. Peterson in Brooks Co. in 1941. As in New Mexico, however, the species continues to be observed sporadically in Texas. Between 1960 and 1980 at least eight individuals and one pair have been reported, nearly all in southeastern and southwestern parts of the state.

Egg collecting and reductions in nest site availability are commonly cited as factors that contributed to the Aplomado Falcon's decline, but generally habitat

changes in North America seem primarily responsible. The North American range of the Aplomado Falcon coincided with the distribution of semi-desert grassland at the northern edge of the Chihuahuan Desert in Arizona, New Mexico, and Western Texas. In southcentral and southeastern Texas the Aplomado Falcon occurred in subtropical grasslands along the northern fringe of the Tamaulipan Biotic Province. Historical accounts indicate that prior to 1850 these grasslands resembled open savannahs. Thickets of mesquite and acacia were largely restricted to lowlands along drainages or protected pockets in uplands, and were well separated by open expanses of grassland which, in Chihuahuan sections, supported an overstory of soap tree yucca (*Yucca elata*). In the mid 1800's (ca. 1850) the once isolated woodlands and thickets began to encroach into the previously open grasslands and continues in many areas today. The thickening of the open savannahs produced major physiognomic changes not favorable to grassland birds, in particular the displacement of grasses by woody shrubs, trees, and cacti. The proliferation of woody plants has been so complete that D.E. Brown now regards most of the Chihuahuan section as a disclimax grassland that resembles a semi-desert scrubland.

Overuse of forage by livestock, suppression of range fires, rodent activities, and climatic changes have all been considered as possible factors causing the deterioration of southwestern rangelands. Humphrey, however, essentially dispelled all but fire suppression and livestock grazing as major causes, and laid most of the blame on the reduced frequency of fires. Accounts of early settlers in the southwestern United States indicate that range fires were prevalent historically, and that the invasion of woody plants began at about the time the fires ceased in any given area. Control of range fire was accomplished both direct-

ly, and indirectly, by settlers through construction of firebreaks and fences, and through overgrazing, which resulted in the removal of the herbaceous fuel needed to carry the fires. Once the frequency of fires had been reduced, livestock probably further hastened the invasion of woody plants by dispersing seeds in their droppings and by the consumption of grasses, which resulted in barren sites suitable for tree and shrub establishment.

In the early 1930's a large scale scrubland-eradication program was initiated in Texas in an effort to restore rangelands to their former composition. To date several million acres have been returned to savannah through prescribed burning. Although some other avian species that declined in Texas with the encroachment of scrubland have reoccupied restored grasslands, the Aplomado Falcon has not.

D. Peakall, L. Kiff, and D.P. Hector have shown that Aplomado Falcons breeding in eastern Mexico are contaminated by DDT, and that eggshells from this region average 24.0 to 25.4% thinner than pre-DDT era eggs. This level of shell thinning is sufficient to produce population declines, and as Hector has pointed out, it could certainly reduce the species' ability to recolonize the limited amount of suitable habitat currently available in North America.

The Aplomado Falcon is presently listed as extirpated in Arizona by the Arizona Game and Fish Department, endangered in New Mexico by the New Mexico Game and Fish Department, and threatened in Texas by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The species is not federally listed even though such listing appears warranted, and may be necessary to spawn the types of management necessary to reestablish a via-

ble population in North America.  
/Brian Millsap, Raptor Information  
Center, Natl. Wildlife Fed./

### CONSERVATION CAPSULES

**LOWER VALLEY HABITAT LOSS:** The Tornillo Lake (a.k.a. County Line Lake, a.k.a. Lake No. 1) area is a poorer place these days. Recent visitors to this productive wildlife habitat just off the Rio Grande at the El Paso-Hudspeth county line have found the large saltcedar stand immediately west of the lake a thing of the past. Wiped out. Gone. The Hudspeth County Reclamation District (HCRD), which manages the area, decided the saltcedars claimed more than their share of reclamation-district water and cleared them out. In the process, HCRD eliminated a roosting area for Black-crowned Night-Herons and Snowy Egrets (and, in recent years, an occasional Yellow-crowned Night-heron) and nesting habitat for Yellow-billed Cuckoos, Bell's Vireos, Yellow-breasted Chats, Summer Tanagers, Blue Grosbeaks, Painted Buntings and other members of our hard-pressed desert riparian avifauna.

**WETLANDS I:** Wetland protection got lots of attention from the U.S. Congress in 1983, but only 1 piece of legislation, a 1-year extension of the Wetlands Loan Act (WLA), was actually passed. The more comprehensive Emergency Wetlands Resources Act (RR, Oct 1983) remains in the legislative mill, with action expected early in 1984. Both the House (HR 3082) and Senate (S 1329) versions of this bill would extend the WLA for 10 years, and both call for making \$75 million in federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) monies available annually for state and federal wetland programs. S 1329 is presently the stronger bill, for it "directs" this transfer of funds; HR 3082 only "authorizes" it and thus would subject the program to the vagaries of the annual appropriations process. Both bills are getting some resistance right now from national-parks advocates who don't want to see any LWCF money diverted from parks acquisition.

**WETLANDS II:** Meanwhile, wetland protection is also addressed in HR 3282, the Clean Water Act (CWA) reauthorization bill introduced by James Howard (D-NJ) and backed by Audubon and other conservation groups. Section 404 of the CWA requires the Army Corps of Engineers to control dredging and filling in wetlands, but over the past 2 years the Dept. of the Army has gone all out to weaken the Corps' Section 404 implementing regulations. Among other provisions, HR 3282 would amend Section 404 so that these regulations could no longer be weakened by administrative changes.

**THE RATING GAME:** The Conservation Foundation, a national conservation and education organization, recently rated the 50 states on their efforts to maintain environmental quality. The foundation assigned point values for some 23 indicators, with emphasis on regulatory programs and environmental-quality expenditures. Who looked good? Of a possible 63 points, top-rated Minnesota had 47, followed by California with 46. Who fared poorly? Alabama ranked 50th with 10 points, but also lagging were New Mexico in 46th and Texas in 39th.

/John Sproul/

#### MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

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This is a  new  renewal membership.

Please make checks payable to National Audubon Society. Mail to Bob Johnson, 5109 Paris, El Paso, Tx 79924.



BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

W., Jan. 9, 7:30 PM. The Board will meet at the home of Sarah Jane Dodds, 4011 Santa Ana (533-4150). All members are welcome.



The deadline for the February Roadrunner is January 23.

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\* THIS SPACE RESERVED \*  
\* FOR A \*  
\* VERY IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT. \*  
\*\*\*\*\*

BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

Lois Beno has had to step down as our chapter librarian, and we want to say "THANK YOU" to Lois for doing a super job. Anyone wishing to volunteer to find the books see or call Pres. Joyce Davis. (581-9470)

Speaking of books, don't forget our Bookfair (Feb 11) at B. Dalton Book-seller, Cielo Vista Mall.

\$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$ \$

Our chapter RUMMAGE SALE is fast ap-proaching. Save those discards. Details next month.

OBSERVATIONS

November 21 to December 19

Some excellent reports came in during this period although the trend set earlier still existed. Many to be expected species were either totally absent or appeared in lower than normal numbers.

LOONS - FALCONS

November 24 and 25 were notable days at Fort Bliss Sewage Ponds (FBSP). Most exciting was a LOON (most probably an Arctic) seen and photographed there 11/24 (BJ). This is the first loon sighting

in our area in 12 years. Also present 11/24 were 2 Horned Grebes and 3 West-ern Grebes (BJ). One Western Grebe in the dark phase was there 11/25 (JS,BJ, JF,HA), 2 Am. white Pelicans 11/24,25, and a single Double-crested Cormorant 11/25 (BJ,JS,JF,HA). Three very late Great Egrets were at Madden Lake 12/7 (BJ). Single Cattle Egrets were seen at FBSP 11/27 and at Madden Lake 12/7, while a lone Green-backed Heron was in the Tornillo area that same day (BJ). Also on 12/7, 5 Snow Geese were at Ft. Hancock Reservoir and 12 Canada Geese at Madden Lake (BJ). A female WOOD DUCK and 4 Common Goldeneye were pres-ent at a pond near Gary Lane in the upper valley 12/17 (BJ, et al). A single Northern Harrier at FBSP 11/24 (BJ) was the only one reported. This species was notably absent from the lower valley 12/7. Best sighting for count day has to be the adult NORTHERN GOSHAWK well observed and studied in the Randel's Pool area 12/7 (SP,BJ,JN, et al). One immature and 2 adult Harris' Hawks were noted in the lower valley 12/7 (BJ). A single Ferruginous Hawk at FBSP 11/27 (BJ) was the only one reported. Single Golden Eagles were reported on 4 occasions (3 loca-tions) during the period (BJ,JS,et al), and a single Prairie Falcon was at Hueco Tanks 12/4 (JS,et al).

QUAIL - WOODPECKERS

There were 20 Sandhill Cranes along the river area near Canutillo 12/4(DB). Spotted Sandpipers are usually absent on count day, but 6 were present in the upper valley 12/17 (BJ, et al). On 11/26, 100 Long-billed Curlews were at the border crossing near Fabens (AG). Western Sandpipers, casual in winter, were seen singly near Tornillo 12/7 (BJ) and in the upper valley 12/17 (BJ,et al), and 85 Long-billed Dowitchers were at Madden Lake 12/7 (BJ). Bonaparte's Gulls were reported on 3 occasions with 5 at FBSP 11/24, 1 there 11/27, and 3 at Madden Lake 12/7 (BJ). Of special interest were the 2 Herring Gulls seen at the Fort Hancock Reservoir 12/7 (BJ). The only owl reported was a Great Horned Owl at Hueco Tanks 12/4 (JS,et al). Always of interest are the hummingbirds that

remain late in the El Paso area. A male Black-chinned was at a Coronado area feeder 12/18 (KMC); a female hummingbird (sp.) at a Mountain Park feeder 12/17 and there as late as 12/19 (JB); a pair of Anna's there as late as 12/19 (JB); a Broad-tailed in e. El Paso 12/10 (ElG); a male Rufous there from 11/30-12/10 (ElG); and another one in Mt. Park, present for awhile, as late as 12/19 (JB). On 12/17, single Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were counted in the Juarez area (TB) and in the Pennsylvania Circle area (BaR,EG).

#### FLYCATCHERS - VIREOS

A very late swallow (Bank or juv. Tree) was at FBSP 12/11 (BJ). A single Scrub Jay in the Mt. Park area 12/17 (JB) was the only one reported, and a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher was present in a Los Nogales yard 11/27-29 (AB, fide JS). Single Brown Thrashers were in the Mt. Park area in late Nov (JB) and in an e. El Paso yard 12/18,19 (JN). On 12/17, a Phainopepla was observed in an area along the river in the upper valley (SP,BJ,et al).

#### WARBLERS - WEAVER FINCHES

A female Western Tanager was noted in the upper valley river area 12/17 (PR,BJ, et al), Sage Sparrows at FBSP 11/24 (BJ), and a single Am. Goldfinch in ne. El Paso 12/17 (BaR,EG).

CONTRIBUTORS: Harry Assad, Tom Baker, Anita Britt, Janet Brockmoller, Dave Brown, Jane Fowler, Al Gavit, Ed Gilboe, Elza Gilboe, Bob Johnson, Kim McCombs, Jo Nagel, Shawn Pierce, Peggy Riede, Bart Rumaker, John Sproul.  
/Bettie Roberts, Observations Editor/  
(591-0421)

#### FOR SALE

Special prices to National Audubon Society members are in parentheses.

- BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA, 2nd Ed., 1983. The popular, easy-to-use "Golden Field Guide", revised and expanded. Paperback (\$6.75) \$7.95.

- JIM LANE'S "BIRDER'S GUIDES". Regional bird-finding guides.
  - \* Rio Grande Valley of Texas, \$4.50
  - \* Texas Coast, \$5.50
  - \* Southeastern Arizona, \$5.00
  - \* Eastern Colorado,

\$5.00 \* N. Dakota, \$5.00.

- TEXAS BIRDS: WHERE THEY ARE AND HOW TO FIND THEM, by Ed Kutac, 1982. The first comprehensive guide to birding locations throughout Tx. Over 150 sites described. Paperback(\$3.50)\$9.95.

- BIRDSAVER, 14" Kestrel Silhouette, mounts on window to keep birds from flying into glass (\$1.50) \$1.75.

- SUPPORT TEXAS WILDLIFE T-SHIRT. 100% cotton. A soaring white Whooping Crane with the legend "Support Texas Wildlife". Proceeds to Audubon's campaign to support nongame wildlife and endangered species programs in Tx. Lt. blue, Tan, Yellow S,M,L,XL \$7.00.

- A GUIDE TO THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES, by Laura and William Riley, 1979. (\$12.75) \$14.95.

- GUIDE TO CITIZEN ACTION, by National Audubon Society, 1979. \$2.50.

- DAYPACK with NAS Insignia \$19.95.

- NAS Sew-on Patches 4"- \$1.50, 2"- \$1.00. NAS Decal \$0.50.

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