



NEWSLETTER

of

EL PASO AUDUBON SOCIETY

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Geth Osborn White, Editor

CALENDAR

Sat. Apr. 8 7:30 A. M. FIELD TRIP -- upper valley. Meet at bridge over Rio Grande on County Club Road. We will cover the levee, the bosque south of the bridge, fee fishing lakes and country roads to Durling Farm. Spring migration is in full swing so come see the birds.

Mid-week

Field Trip

Call me (Geth White) at 565-1024) if you're interested in a morning's birding. I can't miss spring migration. The pleasure is doubled when it's shared.

Sat. Apr. 22 7:30 A.M.

FIELD TRIP. Meet at the parking turnout on the east side of Trans Mountain Road at the pass for exploration of an interesting habitat, Fusselman Canyon. This canyon has been heavily raided by people in trucks removing plants and rocks and shows the impact of this kind of vandalism which should be stopped. We will start at the head of the canyon near the pass and walk down to the lower desert. A car shuttle will take us up to our starting point.

Much of the time we will be in a sotol grasslands belt which the canyon has cut into, gradually walking down to the shrub desert. Creosotebush, lechuguilla and ocotillo range far up the mountain with denser vegetation occurring in the washes which is quite rich in plants having a firm foothold in the loose gravel beds washed into the canyons. Most birds prefer the denser vegetation in the washes. We should expect to see rock wrens, canyon wrens, rufous-crowned sparrows, verdins, desert sparrows, chipping sparrows. Fusselman Canyon had a large wintering population of birds in December. Be sure and wear hiking boots -- it's the snake season.

Sat. Apr. 22 7:30 P.M.

REGULAR MEETING, CENTENNIAL MUSEUM, U.T.E.P. Campus. Note the time change instead of our usual third Monday. Ralph Fisher, our speaker, could not come any other time. He is a member of the Southwestern New Mexico Audubon Society of Silver City. Known as a photographer of the rare Coppery-tailed Trogon, he will speak to us on bird photography and show us slides of his own making of the birds of New Mexico and southeastern Arizona.

We're invited to a field trip to Cave Creek Canyon, one of the most beautiful natural areas in the Chiricauhuas in Arizona the first week of May to see the rare trogon and other birds favoring this canyon. Let him know if you plan to go.

REGULAR MEETING CONT'D. Important business to consider at this meeting is the adoption of a constitution and by-laws. We've made our chapter affiliation with more than 35 new members! John Spinks, Regional Audubon Representative, suggests that we change our name to indicate a larger area than El Paso and have a region including Alpine, Marathon, Pecos, the Guadalupe and a part of New Mexico, excluding Carlsbad. A group in Las Cruces spearheaded by Larry Clark and Steve West has indicated their interest in starting a Society there and we do not want to impede their progress so possibly on the West Texas Trans Pecos section should have chapter designation. We might become the El Paso-Trans Pecos Audubon Society. Suggestions anyone?

SPARROWS OF THE EL PASO AREA

by Lena McBee

Sparrows are small streaked birds, colored much like the ground, on or near which they build their nests. They are called seed-eaters but some are largely insectivorous and all feed insects to their young.

El Paso's warm desert climate attracts large numbers of sparrows in winter having a plus in the Rio Grande and irrigated fields, some drainage ditches having a permanent water supply with trees and shrubs growing on the ditch sides. This area, as defined in the Checklist (Keever and McBee) of 1957, includes valley, mesa, and foothills from Radium Hot Springs, New Mexico, to Fort Hancock, Texas.

El Paso cuts this territory into two parts: the "Upper" (Mesilla) Valley in New Mexico and the "Lower" valley in Northwest Texas. The city hugs the southernmost spur of the Franklin Mountains which rise above 7,000 feet.

A natural access into the Franklins is McKelligon Canyon, which is also the gateway into the El Paso County Park of that name. If he can elude the picnicking throng, a birder may find Black-throated Sparrows the year around within the canyon, numerous in winter. Less common and seen in the fall and winter only, are Rufous-crowned and Black-chinned Sparrows. Lark Sparrows occur sparingly all year.

Of those to be seen in winter only the White-crowned is abundant; Chipping sparrows are common; Brewer's and Clay-colored, fairly common.

Back in the 30's Sage and Baird's Sparrows were sometimes to be seen among Junco flocks at the canyon's entrance; and in 1959 an immature Golden-crowned was twice seen near the pavillion on January 13 and February 7 by McBee and others, affording us a second record for this accidental sparrow. An adult male Golden-crowned had spent a week from January 17 to January 23, 1954, near Canutillo at Durling's Farm where several Audubon members had a chance to see it well. (Editor's note: this bird was seen in Big Bend National Park in the winter, 1971)

Brief discussions of these and other sparrow visitors follow, based on my Bird Diary for 1936 to 1966. Extreme dates are given for arrival and departures, the earliest and the latest, and they do not necessarily mark the height of migration. Find that by adding or subtracting some two weeks. Find sparrows (after learning their field markings through Zim or Peterson,) by following irrigation ditches and by infinite patience.

SAVANNAH SPARROW Fairly common in winter. Seen from August 5 to May 1. Both forms (See Zim) occur, the darker one more frequently. Usually seen in small numbers but as many as 50 fed along an irrigation ditch south of Anthony and near the cannery, April 21, 1970. Resembles a Song Sparrow, but is smaller, lacks breast spot generally, and has short notched tail, pinkish bill and feet, and wing bars.

GRASSHOPPER SPARROW. Rare visitor that was dropped from the checklist because unrecorded after 1938. Seen sparingly in 1934, 1945 and 1948 and should still be looked for. Sharp tail, unstreaked breast, rather flat head, fluttering up quickly from grasses and dropping down again.

BAIRD'S SPARROW. Fairly common in winter. Seen since 1938 from September 10 to April 29 in small numbers but sometimes in flocks at most of the favorable sparrow habitats in this area. It likes the levee just south of the Country Club bridge and was still there in March, 1971. It runs, flits, hides and feeds between cotton rows, along grassy stretches, even between furrows of plowed ground. Easily mistaken for a Savannah at first glance, but it is whiter in contrast to its blacker striping and with a necklace of shorter streaks. The outer feather of the sharp tail has white webbing. Buffy coloring of the head on sides and medial stripe especially is helpful, but not a constant field mark.

VESPER SPARROW. Common September 9 to May 15. (There is an early date of August 23). Peak number, about 100, seen at Anthony on March 19, 1950. Frequently loose flocks appear in fields near Durlings but oftener Vespers are noted in smaller numbers. This bird and the Lark Sparrow feed sometimes near dairies or horse stables. Flashing white outer tail feathers are good field marks. A beautiful singer in nesting territory, especially near dusk.

LARK SPARROW. A rare resident at river level and less so in the foothills. It nested in 1934 in a brushy corner of Ascarate Park and in similar territory near the Girl Scout Camp. I found a nest near Ruidoso Junction at 7,000 feet on July 11, 1944. The female was sitting on three eggs and that brushy spot was ringing with songs by the male. Handsome striping of white, black and chestnut on the head with white tail corner identify the Lark Sparrow. In August I have seen a flight of 25 or more over Lake Ascarate; and in April as large a flight over Memoria Park.

RUFIOUS-CROWNED SPARROW. It has been found on the Franklin Mountains near the top in summer and in July has been seen with flown young near the floor of the Canyons. In April we have seen it in Memorial Park and near the Power House probably in transit to summer quarters. I have heard the song ringing out below the tunnel near Mountain Park, from Heuco Tanks, and from Ash Springs in the San Andres.

A creeping bird, with rufous head and moustache and stripings of rufous on the back, it has a conspicuous white eye-ring. Their ground-hugging ways foil the birder.

CASSIN'S SPARROW. Has appeared in the upper valley twice, but as yet they are off their beat here. Heard and seen near Country Club Bridge on July 1-3, 1953; and again singing in alfalfa fields in same area last summer. (See Geth White's record in El Paso Roadrunner, September, 1971). Distinguished by their way of mounting a few feet into the air to sing. They appear to be at home in fields along Highway 180 east of the Huecos.

BLACK-THROATED (DESERT) SPARROW. Common resident in desert locale, some winters very common in McKellington's Canyon. It is a relief to birders to find a sparrow so unmistakably marked: grey back, white face marks, black throat and U-shaped bib; black tail with white edging on outer feather. A story about Desert Sparrows in my garden will follow in the next newsletter and bring Part I of my paper to an end.

CONSERVATION CHAIRMAN ROBERT BARTO REQUESTS that we write letters to President Nixon and Secretary of the Interior, Mr. Rogers Morton.

1. SUBJECT: The need for public hearings on the Trans-Alaska pipeline environmental impact statement.
2. FACTS:
 - a. The impact statement covers 7 alternative routes through Alaska and Canada, including all land routes.
 - b. The statement concedes that any transport mode would impact the biological and socioeconomic components of the human environment far beyond the relatively small part of Alaska that would be occupied by the pipeline and the oil field.
3. CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT NEEDED. Urge caution and open hearings to insure that all aspects of the proposal are discussed.

Second Letter

1. SUBJECT: Commend the president and Secretary Morton for the executive order banning the use of poisons on all Federal lands for predator control.
2. FACTS:
 - a. This month the President banned the use of poisons for predator control by Federal agencies or on Federal lands.
 - b. Sheep and cattle interests are applying strong pressures to cause the President to withdraw his executive order.
 - c. The use of poisons, as in poisoned meat, results in the death of many animals other than the intended victims, including many on the endangered species list.
 - d. Loss of sheep and cattle to wild predators has long been grossly exaggerated by livestock interests.
 - e. The use of poisons is inhumane.
 - f. To the extent that controls are needed, more humane methods can be used.
 - g. Research and study is required to develop such humane means.

FORMS OF ADDRESS:

The President
The White House
Washington, D. C.

The Honorable Rogers Morton
Secretary of the Interior
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. President

Dear Mr. Secretary

MUSINGS ON YUCATAN: (The Whites spent a month in Mexico in February and March, three weeks of the time in Yucatan visiting the ruins and looking at birds.)

A great trip in retrospect and as we experienced it. It was the dry season in Yucatan which meant birds were not as active as they are in the wet or breeding season. But there are compensations. They move through the woods in small feeding bands of mixed species. This time of year many of the tropical deciduous trees were without leaves but in blossoms, making quite a show. One to remember was the Yellowsilk Shellseed, Cochlospermum vitifolium, having great golden tulips on bare branch tips; a second tree which was a blaze of yellow at a distance has the common name of Springbells, Cybistax Donnell-Smithi. Pink in the color spectrum was not neglected with the Trumpet Tree, Tabebuia palmeri covered with masses of orchid pink trumpets forming a radiating cluster, truly spectacular on a 200 foot tree.

Lush gardens around Hotel Victoria's grounds in Oaxaca were loaded with birds, high enough in altitude for the Grey Silky Flycatcher, Rusty Sparrows, Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds and White-throated Towhees also being present.

Tehuantepec, on the Isthmus, took one back in time with picturesque oxcarts in a two hour procession at the end of the day coming in from the fields with a load of corn fodder. Younger boys on the oxcarts apparently followed a custom when they peeled off their clothes and went skinny dipping in the irrigation ditch running nearby where we were birding. Irrigation ditches serve many purposes in Mexico beside watering the fields, such as for doing the laundry and cooling off after a hot day with a plunge.

MUSINGS FROM YUCATAN CONT'D. We saw our first parrots at Tehuantepec to really see them and note field marks.

The rain forest at Palenque, what a place! A Tarzan jungle with long lianas, curtains of heart-shaped philodendron, giant tropical trees loaded down with epiphytes of many kinds, some in bloom. Imagine being buzzed by Long-tailed Hermit Hummingbirds while shouting "I'm holding a trogon, come quick." How long can you hold a trogon? My nearest companion was slow in coming because she was looking at a Keel-billed Toucan farther up the trail.

Then there was the mystery of the Tuxtla San Andres, a beautiful rain forest preserve near Lake Catemaco. Its plant life was quite different from the Palenque rain forest possibly because the soil was volcanic. Eruptions occurred during the Pliocene when Catemaco and smaller lakes were formed. This is a place I would like to come back to and explore in some depth. It is reassuring that it has been set aside by Mexican officialdom for only two years with much research to be done. Abounding in wild game, edged by the sea to the east, it was a place least touched by man that we saw.

The other-world quality of San Cristobal de las Casas high in the mountains, damp with condensing clouds, peopled with Indian tribes wearing picturesque dress, another unique place. Women were hung with bundles and babies under rebozas and walked while their men rode. Their dull black clothes contrasted with their men's handsome dress, their costume finished off by striking shallow-crowned straw hats wound with colored ribbons which hung streamer fashion down the back, colors of the ribbon indicating their marital status. In this moist forest the Collared Robin sings like our American Robin, but its appearance is strikingly different with an orange collar on a dark body.

The many ruins were impressive -- large pyramids rising to the sky, geometric ornamentation little changed by the weathering of centuries, varying degrees of symbolism according to their religious beliefs. Such skill and such consummate art is mute, but eloquent, testimony of man's desire for a structured society, a continuous theme in the ancient stone buildings of Yucatan.

TRIP TO DESERT MUSEUM AT TUSCON OVER EASTER WEEKEND was a most enjoyable and educational experience. We were treated to behind-the-scenes tours by their management personnel who were generous with their time, explaining their operation, answering our questions how they got started, their role in education in the schools, how they executed many of their interpretive exhibits, their financial set-up and so on. Their living museum which interprets the Sonoran Desert, including the Sonoran in Mexico, is world famous for its exhibits of plants and animals in their own environment. Their plans for the future are most impressive. Our group came back inspired with the hope that a similar living zoo-teaching center on the Chihuahuan Desert could be a reality in El Paso. Representatives from several organizations will be able to carry back information to El Pasoans. Mary Moore, Geth and Ed White represented the Audubon Society.