

the ROADRUNNER



newsletter of the
El Paso/Trans-Pecos Audubon Society
P.O. Box 9655, El Paso, TX 79986

Editor: John Sproul

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Volume 11, Number 1

CALENDAR

GENERAL MEETING

MON. 19 JANUARY 1981, 7:30 PM, Garden Center, 3105 Grant St., in Memorial Park. A GREAT WHITE BIRD. Probably no endangered bird has received more attention than the Whooping Crane. In 1941, the wild population was down to just 21 birds, 15 in the flock wintering at Aransas Natl. Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Texas and 6 in a now-extirpated nonmigratory flock in Louisiana. Today, the world population stands at well over 100, 16 of which are now wintering in the Rio Grande Valley in New Mexico (11 at Bosque del Apache NWR). What's behind the comeback? It is due to a long-term conservation effort that has included habitat protection, education, captive breeding and, since 1975, the cross-fostering of whooping cranes to Sandhill Crane foster parents. Our January program is a National Film Board of Canada/U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service film on the life history of the Whooping Crane and on the efforts to increase its numbers, from establishment of Aransas NWR in 1937 to creation, through cross-fostering, of the 2nd flock that today summers at Grays Lake NWR in Idaho and winters at Bosque del Apache.

Also at this meeting we will elect chapter officers for 1981. #

BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

MON. 12 JANUARY, 7:30 PM. The Board will meet at the home of John Sproul, 601 W. Yandell #25, El Paso (545-5157). #

FIELD TRIPS

SAT.-SUN. 17-18 JANUARY. BOSQUE DEL APACHE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE. First meeting place: K Mart, 6020 N. Mesa, at 8:30 AM, Sat. 17 Jan. Second meeting place: I-10 and Transmountain Rd.; we'll leave here at 9 AM.

Do numbers like up to 23,000 Snow Geese, 2000 Canada Geese, 35,000 ducks of 17 species or 14,000 Sandhill Cranes sound enticing? How about 11 Whooping Cranes? Bosque del Apache has this and more. We'll spend Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning observing the wildlife on this 57,191-acre marsh-and-grassland refuge near Socorro, NM. At 11 AM on Sunday, as a warm-up for our general meeting on Monday, refuge personnel will show us a newly released documentary film on the Whooping Crane recovery effort.

Some of the group will camp out Saturday night. Others will stay in Socorro motels. We will not be the only Audubon group visiting the Bosque this weekend, so if you prefer a motel, make your reservations early: Best Western Golden Manor (800/528-1234), El Camino (505/835-1500), El Rio (505/835-0510), San Miguel (505/835-0211). Leader: Joe Guinn (566-8438). Call Joe in advance if you plan to attend.

SAT. 31 JANUARY. ARROYO PARK. Meet at 8 AM at New York and N. St. Vrain. A good trip for beginners. Arroyo Park, below Rim Ed., harbors many of the birds typical of desert-scrub habitats around El Paso. We may explore other spots, too. Easy walk. Leader: Jo Ellen Warolin (533-8731). #

FROM THE PEN OF THE PRESIDENT

I was especially happy to see the wonderful turnout at the planning meeting for the El Paso and Hueco Tanks Christmas bird counts. The increase in participants in these activities gives me the feeling that we will continue as a viable chapter of the National Audubon Society. Our thanks to Joe and Elizabeth Guinn for their arranging this get-together. And thanks to Ed and Elza Gilboe for their "Super" hospitality in hosting the post-El Paso Count activities. And another "thanks" to Joe DiPasquale as El Paso Count compiler and Al Gavit as Hueco Tanks Count compiler.

Still more thanks are in order. A very big "Thank You" to Joe and Elizabeth Guinn, Peggy Heisel and Gretchen Bleicher for dedicated efforts in a flea market sale on 27 Dec 1980. They added \$100 to our coffers for chapter activities.

Generally we designate a day and place to go birding and hope to find a reasonable

number of birds to make us feel we have had a successful outing. However, bird activity takes place every day, and many big events go unnoticed. On the afternoon of 3 Dec 1980, my wife, Gretchen, and I were to meet Parks & Recreation Dept. representative Jim Shaw at Feather Lake. We decided to get there 30 minutes early and spot some birds before Jim arrived. As we left I-10 and began traveling south on Ave. of the Americas, we could see ahead and to the right, a large flock of big birds rising from a field and circling to gain altitude. Driving as near as we could, we jumped out of the truck with bird books and binoculars and found that we were witnessing the migration of a large number of Swainson's Hawks (conservatively, 75-80) that had, for some reason, temporarily fed or rested in the cotton fields adjacent to Ave. of the Americas. This spectacular sight was the largest group of migrating hawks I had seen since observing another large hawk migration in Korea in 1975.

To all our Chapter members and friends, a very happy and prosperous 1981. /Bob Bleicher/

OBSERVATIONS -- 27 November to 31 December 1980

The brevity of this report reflects a Holiday lull, as local birders either found little time to be afield or else left town altogether. The day everybody birded, the El Paso Christmas Bird Count (CBC) day of 20 Dec, was cold and blustery and yielded few outstanding finds.

BITTERNS THROUGH SANDPIPERS

Our 2nd LEAST BITTERN for 1980 was along the Rio Grande n. of Randle's Pool 7 Dec (PH, JD). Two White-faced Ibis visited Feather L. 4 Dec (TG, fide AG) and 1 has been there since 28 Dec (BB, GB, JF). Single Rough-legged Hawks were between Anthony and Camutillo 6 Dec (JD, KZ) and near Horizon City 25 Dec (AG, MG), but the most intriguing hawks were the 75+ dark-phased Buteos in a field off Ave. of the Americas 3 Dec (BB, GB).

An adult PEREGRINE FALCON rocketed over Santa Teresa Country Club in New Mexico 15 Dec (JD), but that's only half the story. Several minutes later, a Prairie Falcon chased a Lesser Scaup, but the chase was interrupted when the Peregrine returned and intercepted the Prairie. The ensuing scuffle attracted 2 Marsh Hawks, who soon went off to harass a Sandhill Crane when it flew overhead. The scaup escaped.

Roughly 100 Long-billed Curlews gathered in a field near Fabens 7 Dec (MG, CG) and a Long-billed Dowitcher stopped on the Rio Grande n. of Randle's Pool 14 Dec (JD, PH). Top shorebird for the 20 Dec CBC was a Western Sandpiper that was with a flock of 20 Least Sandpipers on the Rio Grande near the Hacienda Cafe (SJD, DD, JP).

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OWLS THROUGH WOODPECKERS

In contrast to last year's shutout, this year's CBC yielded owls of 3 species, including 2 Long-eared Owls and 1 SHORT-EARED OWL in a ravine near Transmountain Rd. and I-10 (JS, JW). POOR-WILLS don't always leave this area in winter, as evidenced by the 1 that called twice over n.e. El Paso at 2 AM on 14 Dec (JD). The surprising thing about the hummingbirds reported this winter around El Paso is that most seem to be ANNA'S. All details are not in yet, but this species has been reported wintering in Thunderbird Heights (FB), Mission Hills/Kern Place (DD, EK, HP) and Mountain Park (JF). For the CBC, a male and female "Yellow-shafted" Flicker were in Memorial Park (JDiP, KK, SW).

PASSERINES

A single BUSHTIT was with a group of White-crowned Sparrows on the w. side of the levee road n. of Randle's Pool 14 Dec (JD, PH) and Hueco Tanks held 3 GRAY CAT-BIRDS 7 Dec (TW, JDia, JO). The Solitary Vireo at Durling's Farm 6 Dec (JD, KZ) was not the best bird at Durling's that day. That honor went to a WORM-EATING WARBLER (JD, KZ). JD and KZ saw this eastern vagrant independently; both saw it only briefly, but both reached the same tentative conclusion before comparing notes. A "Myrtle" Warbler

frequented a Chaparral Park yard 12-13 Dec (KK).

Two female ORIOLES, probably HOODED, forgot to migrate and are still visiting feeders in a Mountain Park yard (JB). A male Cassin's Finch was in Horizon City 4 Dec (AG, CG, MG) and a pair were at Hueco Tanks 7 Dec (TW, JDia, JO). The 2 White-throated Sparrows at Hueco Tanks 27 Nov (JDiP, KZ) were nothing compared to the 8-15 at Durling's Farm 6 Dec (JD, KZ). Durling's also held an immature Swamp Sparrow 6 (JD, KZ) and 7 (JDiP) Dec, and 2 adults were at a Santa Teresa CC pond 15 Dec (JD).

OBSERVERS: Flora Bittick, Bob Bleicher, Gretchen Bleicher, Janet Brockmoller, Joe Diamond (JDia), Joe DiPasquale, Sarah Jane Dodds, Jeff Donaldson, Diane Dutton, Jane Fowler, Al Gavit, Chris Gavit, Madeline Gavit, Tom Gavit, Peggy Heisel, Earle King, Kris Kohlhoff, Jack Osborne, Jim Polk, Helen Ponder, John Sproul, Jo Warolin, Scott Wilson, Tony Worth, Kevin Zimmer.

With this report, I am retiring as observations editor. Kevin Zimmer will take my place. Give him the cooperation you have given me, and we'll have El-Paso-area birds covered like a Brittany on a covey of quail. Starting...right...NOW, report observations to Kevin Zimmer, 5115 N. Mesa #A-226, El Paso 79912; 561-0665. /John Sproul/

EAST EL PASO'S CHANGING BIRD LIFE

(Editor's Note: When Bettie Roberts moved to Cabot Pl. in east El Paso in February 1973, she lived at the edge of the desert. No longer. Here she reports on the changes that took place in local bird life as desert gave way to subdivision. I hope this article will stimulate other backyard birders to observe and record trends in their yards.)

Looking out a window the other day, I saw the well-manicured lawn across the street. I looked eastward, the rows of houses and paved streets came into view, and I could not help but reflect on the scene

as it used to be. Was it only 7½ years ago?

It was quite different then. In 1973-74, there were vast expanses of desert to the north as far as Montana St. and east as far as you could see. Ground squirrels played and ran between the sand dunes, and you could hear their "bird-like" trills as they stood guard by their homes. In the early morning, a covey of Scaled Quail followed their leader and fed "chicken-like" in the front yard or sometimes marched single file, like soldiers on parade, atop the wall enclosing the back

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yard. Fall and spring migration brought large flocks of Lark Bunting and many species of sparrows--Savannah, Vesper, Lark, Rufous-crowned, Black-throated, Clay-colored and even Sage, to name a few. It was quite fascinating to watch a female Marsh Hawk fly low over the desert in "harrier" fashion seeking her prey. March brought scores of Western Bluebirds, and large flocks of white-necked Ravens called noisily as they flew overhead en route to their feeding grounds. But omens of change--rising clouds of dust from bulldozers working to the east--were in the air.

The desert shrank rapidly during 1975-76 and in 1977 disappeared altogether when the last pocket directly across from us became the neighborhood it is now. Today, in place of desert, we have landscaped yards. Barren at first, their small trees and shrubs now have matured and provide a type of sanctuary and protection different from desert scrub.

The birds too have changed. Inca Doves, once seen infrequently, now nest and are common in the area. Green-tailed and Rufous-sided towhees, more species of flycatchers, and larger numbers of warblers are seen on spring and fall migration. In the winter Common Flickers and large flocks of American Robins feed on heavily laden pyracantha bushes. An occasional Sharp-shinned Hawk pays us a visit, probably lured by the numerous House Sparrows and House Finches at well-stocked feeders.

I reflect again on the changes. The quail have disappeared, the ground squirrels are gone and so is the Marsh Hawk. The last ravens were seen in 1976, as were the last Western Bluebirds. Of the 12 species of sparrows recorded in 1973-74

only 2 have remained on the list, White-crowned and Brewer's. In the last 2 years, new names have been added: Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, Lesser Goldfinch, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Warbling Vireo and, surprisingly, Pyrrhuloxia.

Some species have remained stable. The House wren still pays its bi-annual visit on spring and fall migration, as it has since fall 1973. Black-chinned Hummingbirds first appeared at feeders in summer 1973 and have if anything increased in numbers. Rufous and Broad-tailed hummingbirds still occur on migration. In winter the juncos, Gray-headed and Dark-eyed, are as numerous as ever. The American Kestrel still perches atop a nearby utility pole or line.

All in all, the trend has been an initial decline in species numbers, followed by recovery as the new, landscaped habitat developed:

<u>Years</u>	<u>Species Seen</u>
1973-74	54
1975-76	27
1977-78	20
1979-80	39

I consider it all. It has been an interesting and unique experience to have studied and recorded the changes of this area as they have been and are occurring, but the fact remains that the desert immediately north and east of us has disappeared. Much more has gone and is going with the rapid development and expansion of El Paso's east side. I, for one, miss the serenity and beauty of the desert as it was and am having to accustom myself again to the confusion and noise that more traffic and people bring. I feel with certainty that the benefits of a changing environment to some can never fully compensate for the losses to others. /Bettie Roberts/

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 The ROADRUNNER is sent to all members of the El Paso/Trans-Pecos Audubon Society. Non-members can subscribe for \$3 per year. Mail payments to John Sproul, 601 W. Yandell #25, El Paso, TX 79902. Make checks payable to El Paso/Trans-Pecos Audubon Society.

Deadline for the February ROADRUNNER is 28 January.

WANT ADS

NOMINEES WANTED. Our Audubon Chapter will elect a new vice-president and a secretary/treasurer at the January general meeting. If you have suggested nominees or want to run yourself, contact the Nominating Committee. Committee members are Sid Shepperd (566-2162) and Bertha and Berttye Barnhart (592-3651).

EDITOR WANTED. This publication needs a new editor. Here's a great chance to develop your incipient editorial talent, implement your ideas for improving the ROADRUNNER and contribute mightily to Chapter activities. Desirable qualities: enthusiasm, meticulousness, modicum of typing ability. Contact John Sproul for details, 545-5157 H, 543-6126 W.

CONSERVATION

YEAR-END UPDATE

Current status of conservation issues mentioned in the ROADRUNNER in 1980:

ALASKA: President Carter signed the Alaska lands act 2 Dec. It doubles the size of the National Park System by adding 43.5 million acres, doubles the size of the National Wildlife Refuge System by adding 53.7 million acres and triples the size of the National Wilderness System by adding 56.4 million acres. The political reality of the Reagan landslide forced supporters of stronger legislation (RR, Nov) to accept the Senate bill intact; both sides have vowed to pursue changes to the act in 1981. All who contacted congressmen and senators on the Alaska issue deserve a pat on the back; steady grassroots pressure made passage of a bill possible.

NONGAME BILL: President Carter signed the Nongame Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act (HR; Feb, Sep) 29 Sep. It authorizes \$20 million over 4 years to go to state agencies for comprehensive planning and program implementation for all wildlife species. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is to conduct a study on alternative funding sources to support the nongame program when the 4-year authorization expires.

EL PASO RECYCLING: El Paso's voluntary recycling program (RR, Nov) is gathering steam. The first 4 collections have raised \$18,221, and the only extra expenses for the Sanitation Dept. have been for 50 gallons of gas. Moreover,

recyclers are finding their nonrecyclable trash much reduced, so much so that a shift to once-a-week regular garbage collections--and more savings--looks feasible. Some 15% of El Paso's households now participate, compared to 9% with the old newspapers-only program.

SOCORRO WETLANDS: The Texas Department of Water Resources is reviewing El Paso's Wastewater Facilities Improvements project and expects a decision on whether to approve the initial plans by 1 Mar 1981. The proposal to create wetlands near the existing Socorro Sewage Treatment Plant (RR, Oct) remains under consideration.

MONO LAKE: A wet year in 1980 allowed Mono Lake (RR, Feb; AUDUBON, Sep) to stay relatively stable; its water level could have increased over 2 feet if there were no diversions. Los Angeles still resists any reduction in its use of Mono's water. An estimated 40,000 California Gulls nested at the lake, up from 21,000 in 1979 but below the 51,000 in 1976-78. Only 4 gulls nested on the former Negit Island.

CALIFORNIA CONDOR: In April 1981, the Audubon-sponsored Condor Research Center plans to submit a new request to the California Fish & Game Commission for the program of condor trapping, radio tagging and possible captive breeding (RR; May, Sep). A permit hearing is expected in August. Meanwhile the Center continues its other field research. Its biologists learned in 1980 that the condor population has at least 5 potential breeding pairs. On 1 Aug, various observers saw 22 separate California Condors, and a mini-survey 16 Oct also turned up an estimated 22 birds. #

ANDRUS ACTS FOR SNAKE RIVER RAPTORS

More than 500 pairs of 10-14 raptor species produce over 1500 young each year along a 60-65-mile stretch of the Snake River Canyon in southwestern Idaho. It is the highest-known-density nesting population of raptors in the U.S., perhaps the world. For food, these birds rely on the surrounding desert plateau with its high populations of ground squirrels, jackrabbits and other small creatures (see AUDUBON, July 1977). On 24 Nov, Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus issued Public Land Order 5777 to protect these surrounding lands. The order creates a 482,640-acre Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area (BPNCA) and withdraws this land for 20 years from agricultural development. Other existing uses--grazing, mineral development, hunting and fishing, National Guard training, and existing farming--may continue, since they are compatible with maintaining the raptors' prey base.

The Carter Administration had proposed legislation to create a 610,000-acre BPNCA, but Congress failed to act on it. Andrus now has upped the ante. His order focuses attention on the issue and should prod Congress to speed up its consideration of the BPNCA proposal. Order 5777 gives the BPNCA interim protection while Congress debates its future. The lands protected are the federal portion of the proposed 610,000-acre area.

As an attention-getter, Order 5777 was a success. Both Idaho senators, James McClure (R) and Steve Symms (R), plan to fight the withdrawal. So do supporters of a movement to transfer ownership of federal lands in the west to the states, a movement endorsed by President-elect Reagan. Reagan can't overturn the withdrawal but his Interior-Secretary-designate James Watt or Congress can if either acts within 90 congressional working days. Senator McClure, as incoming Chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, is well-positioned to advance his views, and the

Senate may well vote to rescind the order. Look for the House, though, to back Andrus. Watt's position on the withdrawal is not yet known.

In any case, expect the BPNCA to be in the news in 1981. For more information contact Bob Turner in Audubon's Rocky Mountain Office, P.O. Box 3557, Boulder, CO 80307; 303/499-0219. #

NATURE CONSERVANCY BUYS WEST TEXAS LAND

In December 1980 the Nature Conservancy (TNC), a national conservation organization that specializes in protecting outstanding natural areas, made its 1st west Texas acquisition. The 226-acre Gypsum Dunes Preserve, immediately west of Guadalupe Mountains National Park, is some 10 miles north of Highway 62/180 and 12 miles east of Dell City. In the next few months TNC will prepare a management plan for this new nature preserve to assure that future uses are consistent with protecting its unique resources.

Those resources include the 2nd-best example of a gypsum dune field in the Chihuahuan Desert (next to White Sands National Monument in New Mexico) and at least 10 plant species restricted to gypsumiferous salt flats in Trans-Pecos Texas and southeastern New Mexico. At least 1 of those plants, warnock's groundsel (Senecio warnockii), is a candidate for endangered-species status.

The sand dunes in this visually-impressive white landscape are composed largely of gypsum fragments derived from salt flats to the west. Today, because the dunes have migrated northeast, the salt flats probably no longer contribute much new material. Rather the dunes exist as an isolated entity, reworked steadily by the wind.

TNC has protected over 1.7 million acres since acquiring its 1st preserve in 1954. Its demonstrated ability to act quickly when unique natural areas are threatened and its far-sighted programs to identify and protect such areas before threatened have earned the respect of conservation

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groups, business leaders, and government agencies. It obtains some areas as gifts, purchases others and uses conservation easements and other innovative techniques to protect yet others. Some preserves are transferred to government agencies, universities, or other conservation organizations for management, but approximately 60% are retained by TNC and managed by volunteer land stewards. TNC will retain and manage the Gypsum Dunes Preserve.

TNC's Texas Chapter has been increasingly active in recent years, but all prior projects, such as McFaddin Ranch on the Gulf Coast and Enchanted Lock near Fredericksburg, have been in east and central Texas. With the Gypsum Dunes Preserve, the Trans-Pecos finally has a place in TNC's system. For more information on TNC, contact: R. Scott Spann, Texas Field Office, The Nature Conservancy, 201 N. St. Mary's, Suite 618, San Antonio, TX 78205. #

MEMBERSHIP

The 6-month incentive program is half over. In it we are competing against other Audubon chapters in the southwest region to win either a full scholarship for 1 to the National Audubon convention in July or a free Audubon Wildlife Film lecture. We can win in any of 3 categories. By combining data from the national office for our region through 30 Nov with my own through 31 Dec, I find our standing is:

* Highest renewal rate--we've nothing to crow about here, but we can catch up fast if you'll please renew promptly; we need your continued support!

We have a real shot at winning in any category. If you are not a member, you can join using the application in this newsletter. Also use it for gift memberships. Thanks for your efforts so far; keep it up! /Jo Ellen Warolin, Membership Chair/

* Highest number of chapter-generated memberships--we may be in 2nd place!

* Greatest percentage increase in membership through our own recruiting--we're in the top 5 (out of 26) but this is tricky. Fourteen chapters are smaller than ours; 1 new member for them means a greater percentage jump than 1 does for us.

Look at the return address on the last 2 ROADRUNNERS; you'll see something new. We decided to get respectable and obtain a permanent mailing address. If you have trouble keeping track of oft-changing addresses, remember that anyone in El Paso/Trans-Pecos Audubon now can be reached through P.O. Box 9655, ZIP 79986.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Yes, I want to join the El Paso/Trans-Pecos Chapter of the National Audubon Society.

name

address

city state zip

phone

Membership category desired:

- Individual/\$20 Family/\$25
- Sr. Citizen, Individual/\$13.50
- Sr. Citizen, Family/\$15
- Student/\$13.50

This is a new renewal membership.

Make checks payable to National Audubon Society. Mail to Jo Ellen Warolin, 1406 N. St. Vrain, El Paso, TX 79902.

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