



The Roadrunner

NEWSLETTER OF THE EL PASO-TRAMS PECOS AUDUBON SOCIETY
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Geth White, Editor

CALENDAR

- Sat. Feb. 16 Field trip to Hueco Tanks. Wintering hawks are abundant around rock faces -- bring your telescope. \$1 admission fee to park. Meet at Borderland Theater at 8:00 A. M.
- MON. FEB. 18
7:30 P. M. Monthly meeting at Centennial Museum, UTEP. Parking in rear. Park Ranger George Morrison, Chief Naturalist, White Sands National Monument, will speak to us about the unique white gypsum sand dunes which compose his park. He has had many interesting assignments in his seven years in the Park Service from Hawaii to the Everglades. He will bring a film he has prepared comparing the swamp to the desert. Come and bring a friend.
- Sat. Feb. 23 Field trip to Radium Springs near Las Cruces. Meet at Coronado Shopping Center at 8:00 A. M. for carpooling. We will follow the Rio Grande from Borderland to Las Cruces. Bring lunch.
- Sun. Mar. 3 Field trip to new area: El Paso Natural Gas Pumping Station at the base of the Franklins, east, near Anthony's Nose. Habitat includes irrigated alfalfa fields bordered by desert scrub, a small cooling pond. Birds to be found are horned larks, pipits, desert and sage sparrows, hawks.
- Sat. Mar. 9 Field trip to grasslands habitat and pictograph area at old Butterfield Stage Stop at the base of the Cornudas NE of El Paso. Meet at Borderland Theatre on Montana and drive east on Carlsbad Highway to Hueco Inn, turning north on unimproved road through prairie grasslands to the Bennett Ranch. It's antelope-golden eagle country.
- Sat. Mar. 16 Field trip to Horizon Lake via unimproved road at the base of the Hueco Mountains, turning south on unimproved road from Montana. Spring migration is just beginning. Meet at Borderland Theatre.
- Mon. Mar. 18
7:30 P. M. Monthly meeting at Centennial Museum, UTEP. A "show and tell" of color slides by members for an hour's program. Mary Moore has pictures of a recent Mexican trip, Lisa Davis has some closeups of owls, Carl Jones constantly adds slides to his bird collection.
A new 20 minute film release from National Audubon entitled "The Empty Nest" dramatizes the plight of the osprey, or fish hawk, whose thinning eggshells threaten its survival.
Geth White will give a 10 minute talk on hawk identification.

OUR JANUARY MEETING was well attended. Charlie Jensen was elected vice-president, Linda Jones as treasurer, and for the Board Jack McDaniels, Helen Barto, Weldon Yerby, Al Gavit, Berttye Barnhart and Clarence Shelfer.

Dr. Al Canaris gave an outstanding talk on parasitology with a dynamic interpretation of an interesting but little explored facet of nature difficult to comprehend in our sheltered, antiseptic human existence. His account of diagnosing the cause of death of many ducks which occurred in a lake in the lower valley last year was especially interesting. With heavy summer rains and runoff into a man-made lake and the consequent rapid growth of aquatic plants cutting off oxygen in the water, the anaerobic bacterium grows. Ducks eat the infected water plants and die. Botulism has killed millions of waterfowl and shorebirds in the U. S. in recent years.

He also told about some studies in parasitology in birds being carried on presently by the Biology Department at UTEP in cooperation with other universities engaged in research on the same species. Mortalities and risks to wild birds makes one better understand what at first blush appears to be prodigality in breeding potential, but is in reality, survival of the species.

If you're not attending meetings, you're missing a lot. We especially welcome new members. Our field trips are fun also. You have to be out in the field to see how a bird soars, or to note the arrangement of stripes on heads and breasts of sparrows to learn birds. It's healthy, good exercise and pure enjoyment in our winter sunshine. Field trips are listed through the March meeting and we hope to see you at one. If you have a special area you'd like us to visit, call Charlie Jensen, Field Trip Chairman, at 584-7626. He will welcome field trip suggestions.

HERPETOLOGY SOCIETY PROTESTS THE JAYCEES ANNUAL RATTLESNAKE HUNT. In an appearance before the board, a member of this group explained how this annual publicity stunt is injurious to the hunted snake who is inhumanely treated with numbers of the reptiles perishing in the bad handling. Furthermore, an opportunity of treating snakes as part of environment with a place in nature was ignored. It was urged that this year the snakes be humanely provided for and this real chance for public enlightenment of the role they play in the balance of nature be a part of the publicized affair.

The Board voted to write a letter to the Jr. Chamber of Commerce expressing the conservationist's views.

BIRD SIGHTINGS

| | | | |
|---------|---------------------------|---|---|
| Jan. 5 | Male cardinal, dead | Sarah Jane Dodds, Al Gavit, Charlie Jensen, et al | On field trip to lower valley at Fabens |
| | Tree Sparrow | Madeline Gavit | " " |
| | Vermillion Flycatcher | " " | " " |
| Jan. 18 | Vermillion Flycatcher | Geth and Ed White | Upper valley near horse barns, Country Club Rd. |
| | Perengrine falcon | " | " |
| Jan. 18 | Rivoli's Hummingbird (2) | Geth and Ed White, | At feeder in garden of |
| | 1 immature male, 1 female | Grace Thompson | Mrs. Eugene Schafer Las Cruces |
| Jan. 16 | Ferruginous Owl | Sarah Jane Dodds | Upper valley near scout camp |
| Jan. 27 | Canada Goose (7) | Charlie Jensen, Vince Zauskey, Patti Canaris, et al | " " |
| | Great Blue Heron | " " | " " |
| Feb. 2 | Baird's Sparrow (2) | Luis & Sue Santaella, Geth White, Mary Moore, et al | River Bend Irrigation Drainage Ditch |
| | Sharp-shinned Hawk | " " | " " |

BIRD SIGHTINGS CONT'D.

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| Snow Goose (25) | Luis & Sue Santaella, Geth and Ed White, Mary Moore, et al | Racetrack Lake |
| Ring-necked Duck | " | " |
| Common Goldeneye | Luis & Sue Santaella, Geth and Ed White | Rogales Lake in upper valley. |

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CHRISTMAS BIRDING TRIP TO
THE HIGH JUNGLE OF TAMAULIPAS.

The northernmost cloud forest in Mexico, with dominant trees sweetgum and oaks, lies on an eastern slope of the Sierra Madre Oriental, about two hundred fifty miles south of Brownsville near Ciudad Mante. A 62 acre portion is appropriately enough administered by the Texas Southmost College at Brownsville, under the direction of Mrs. Barbara Warburton, as an enrichment program for their students and as a research station for scientists.

Mary Moore, Helen Barto, Geth and Ed White traveled through dense fog with a car caravan of twenty people from Brownsville south through the agricultural land cleared of the thorn forest, eventually to the Rio Corona with its big cypress trees, past the Rio Sabinas in tropical lowlands, turning off at a marker for the Indian village of Gomez Farias. This old settlement of banana and mango plantations is pretty much out of the mainstream of Mexico. The road ends here. We boarded two large trucks maintained by the college for transport on an old lumber road which wound up the tropical mountainside to a clearing near the top seven miles away.

Beginning the ascent, the truck shouldered huge boulders to one side and we bumped our way upwards, the motor grinding in low gear. Our eyes followed the grotesque roots of strangler figs encompassing smaller trees. Giant ceibas with ferny compound leaves were silhouetted against the sky. Trees grew taller with air plants studding the limbs and our necks strained as eyes traveled upwards to 100 feet. A passing flock of green parakeets were noisy enough to be heard above the motor's roar.

After two and a half hours of rough transport we came to our destination, Rancho del Cielo -- a 62 acre tract in the pocket of sweetgum and oak forest surrounded by the adjacent dense tropical forest at an elevation of 3500 feet.

At the turn of the century, one of the former owners had made the clearing, erected a cabin and planted the orchard now drifting with wisps of moss, its limbs covered with a mosaic of lichens. The college had erected other cabins of rough-sawn lumber bought from the local sawmills -- our dormitories, cook cabin, library and lab. Everything was comfortable, but primitive, with butane for lamps and hot water, wood stoves for warmth and cooking, even hot showers, but a warning to use the water sparingly. Water is caught and stored in huge tanks to serve the cabins as the limestone karst formation underlying the rich vegetative cover is porous and rainfall drains through quickly. This occurs in spite of more than 100 inches per year in the rainy season, May to September.

The ridge trends nearly north and south and the college land lies on an eastern slope which gets moisture blown in from the Gulf less than a hundred miles distant. We were in the dry season in December but morning fogs and heavy dews condensed on the dense ground covers and tropical evergreen understory.

Familiar sweet gum and oaks like in East Texas woodlands towered to 100 feet with buttress trunks helping to anchor them in rocky, shallow soils, their limbs heavy with mosses and lichens, air plants and bromeliads tilting at crazy angles in luxurious profusion. There were many orchids which will be triggered to bloom at the start of the rainy season. Redbuds were blooming 50 feet up. On the ground were ferns of every size, their delicate fronds contributing to the beauty of the understory and helping to conceal the vertical sinkholes which characterize this part of the forest. One did not venture too far from a trail or road for safety's sake and birders had to remember to look down instead of up some of the time. Our necks were ready for the change for so many small birds were at great heights in the canopy.

On New Year's Day our group started out for the annual Christmas Census down a forest road with a flashlight. We were lucky to have Mabel Deshayes, who is an expert on tropical birds and their voices, with us.

A Mottled Wood Owl, harsh and mournful, cried deep in the woods. As if to dispel his gloom, from the canopy came the cheerful whistle of the Black-headed Orioles. Seeming troubled by his musical score, a Blue Mockingbird tried first one note and then another before swinging into the pattern of his song. Tuk, tuk! We heard the alarm note of the Mountain Trogon. His dazzling crimson breast flashed as he turned to face us, swinging his beautiful black and white patterned tail. Pumping his tail, he flew in short arcs from branch to branch. Another joined him to scold us, the sun was filtering through the tops of the trees and our light improved. We could hear a pair of Military Macaws making audible plans as they left the forest for feeding grounds.

Looking down the road a small flock of Bell's Warblers were catching insects on the shrubs overhanging the road, beautiful bright yellow birds having chestnut caps and ear patches with yellow eyebrow stripes. To my right, not three feet away a Singing Quail exploded into his loud whistled phrases, increasing in tempo to a burst of song and then diminishing with such a performance it stops you in your tracks. Then I saw him for the first time though I have heard him often in Mexico's cloud forests. He left his place on the ground so suddenly he lost a few feathers and I have a memento: a feather of a rich coppery brown tipped with beige, banded in black. A third of the feathers' barbs are downy and it has some tiny after-shafts of down to insulate this ground-dweller from the cold.

The day was cooler than usual and our jackets and gloves felt good as we walked along, alert for movement and sound. A long cooo, whooo echoed in the forest -- the note of the Red-billed Tropicbirds. Later we were to come across a flock of 30 or 40 sunning on a treetop at the edge of a woods. Woodcreepers were numerous, probing the mosses and airplants for insects, propping with large spiny tails like a woodpecker. We tallied both the Spot-crowned and the Ivory-billed.

I am putting the emphasis on Mexican species, but there were many wintering stateside migrants with an almost ever-present ruby-crowned Kinglet among the warblers and flycatchers. Green Jays were a constant presence in these woods as were the Brown-backed Solitaires. We came to a clearing with dried cornstalks standing in a small field, the valley opening up quite a distance. As we scanned the sky, a noisy flock of White-crowned Parrots circled the trees, flocks of goldfinch and siskins bumped through the air to settle in distant tree-tops. The telescope revealed we had Black-headed Siskins. A White-tailed Hawk sailed overhead in a rising air current. As we walked up the trail we found two Gray Silky Flycatchers feeding on the white berries of a small evergreen shrub, making as pretty a picture as Sutton's color print of this species with mistletoe. We studied them, lemon yellow undertail coverts leading into a long tail with striking black and white pattern.

A pair of Tufted Flycatchers almost bounced as they flew from perch to perch. A beautiful Brown-backed Solitaire rendered his "filling up a jug" song as we watched, a song with overtones of flute. The Mexican people call him "clarina." Two more Trogons held our attention for a time when we were diverted by a brilliant yellow bird flashing by to join a small flock of Hooded Grosbeaks who were feasting on passion flower fruits festooning a small shrub. We completed coverage of our territory and walked in just at dusk to end an exciting day of many Mexican species, some new and some seen only after an interval of years. Our last bird of the day was the Azure-crowned Hummingbird feeding on hibiscus flowers on an old shrub left in the orchard near the trail, a fitting climax to a day of high notes.

Full details of the Christmas Count of Ranch Cielo will be published in the Christmas Census volume of American Birds. For information concerning future birding trips, you may contact Fred Webster, 4926 Strass Drive, Austin, Tx. 78731. --- Geth White.

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LOCAL AUDUBON SOCIETY TO GIVE BOOKS TO THE PUBLIC LIBRARY. The Education Committee, chaired by Linda Jones, has been working at the Library with Acquisition Librarian Pat Loddell, who led us to the card catalogs and the stacks where we are checking titles on birds. We are compiling a hypothetical list for purchase by the library, who will buy the books with their discount advantage, place a memorial card therein. We hope to build up this slender resource with \$100 as a starter, and perhaps another \$100 later on. It is also a good opportunity to make a memorial to the departed, either giving it to the Library Fund or to request a specific volume. We might move on to botany, ecology and environment after we have built up volumes on birds which are shorter in supply than the last two named categories. We welcome suggestions for our list. We have discovered there is a "Q" list of larger books of all subjects in shelves by themselves and some of the best books on birds are here. Don't overlook the Southwest Section and the Reference Department as well as the Juvenile Section.

BIRD SLIDE SHOWS GOING WELL. Linda Jones, Weldon Yerby and Ed White have been giving these shows to grade school children who are enthusiastic about them. We have so many requests, we are hoping of working with Chamizal through the good offices of Felix Hernandez working out a tape recording to accompany the slides. The personal touch of presence is always appreciated however. Third graders at Hillside school wrote "thank you" letters to Linda after a recent slideshow, one is printed below:

"Dear Miss Joans:

"It was a beautiful world of birds and did you know that birds are my favorit animils. The robin was the most beautiful bird of all. You should just know how much I injoy it, Miss Joans. I just love birds. "

Sincerely,

Rocio Mercado

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