



Nature never did betray, the heart that loved her.
William Wordsworth

The Spoonbill

September 1998
Volume 47, No. 8

OG Activities for October

MEETING PROGRAM

"Improve Your Bird Photography"

presented by
Kathy Adams-Clark

Well known nature photographer and writer, Kathy Adams-Clark, will give advice on how to improve your bird photography skills. Plan to see some beautiful slides of her travels throughout Texas photographing the birds of our state.

The next OG meeting is to be held **Monday, October 5**, at the Baylands Community Center, 6400 Bissonett (just west of Hillcroft) at 7 PM.

LEARNING CORNER

LC time will be used for socializing!

FIELD TRIPS

Mid-week

Wednesday, October 21

Jones State Forrest - led by Howard Patton

Gather at 8:30 AM in parking lot. Contact Sonny Fisher at (281) 346-2354.

Weekend

Saturday, October 3

Fall Migration in Brazoria County - Leader TBD

Start time is 8:30 AM. Contact David Sarkozi at (713) 520-5906.

Embarrassed by Empids?

by Mel Cooksey

Every soldier has a Waterloo. Every president a Watergate. Birders have Empidonax flycatchers. We are once again in the middle of Empid migrations. This article written for a Spring migration is also valid in Autumn.

When a conversation turns to empids, many birders move discreetly to the other side of the room. For those of us who remain, I will attempt to provide a short outline of my experiences and methods of spring empidonax study in the Corpus Christi area, centering on North Padre Island to include the Packery Channel area.

Arlie and I have spent an estimated 11,000-12,000 manhours (personhours?), not including feeder and yard watching, in these areas for the last ten years. We have kept what has become a rather large database of sighting records from this area. A secondary area of our interest has been Blucher Park in central Corpus Christi. Both spots are in Nueces County.

Studying empidonax flycatchers on North Padre is not without problems at times. Certain days here are poor due to high winds. Certain other days are just plain poor. For instance, today I have seen exactly zero empids! Tomorrow, there may be dozens. Another factor to deal with here is the fact that neotropical migrants simply do not want to sing at all. It is difficult to get even a call note sometimes.

Therefore, my methods for empid study involve eliciting responses to taped vocalizations. It is quite rare for any empid to sing "unprompted", and even rarer for any empid to sing for more than a few scant seconds! Such is the case vireos, warblers, etc.

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The monthly deadline for timely information is *the 15th of every month*. The editor reserves the right to edit or refuse submissions.

All submissions should include contact information for the author and/or person doing the submitting.

Please include as much information as possible about the source when submitting copyrighted material. Contact the editor for assistance.

The Flock Is Thinner

Martha Mullican Micks, a resident of Galveston passed away on August 19, 1998, in Greeley, Colorado.

"She was an active member of our birding community for many, many years," HAS Board Member Peggy Boston recalled.

Mrs. Micks was born in Grapevine, Texas but called Galveston home for over 50 years.

Her 20 year passion for birds took her front the Aleutian Islands to the Galapagos Islands, and from the Arctic Ocean to Central America.

She was active in the Texas Ornithological Society; the National and Houston Audubon Societies, the American Birding Association, and the Nature Conservancy.

Mrs. Micks contributed to several birding publications, including "A Birder's Guide to the Texas Coast" and "Birder's Guide to Texas." Her life list of North American birds included more than 740 birds.

Memorial contributions can be made in her name to the Houston Audubon Society.

Separated By The Same Language

From 'Partidge's Concise Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English' bird-watcher's slang:

twitch; twitchable; twitcher;

twitching: n. and adj. A group based on the fact that many bird-watchers tend to twitch with excitement, whether at the sight of a bird new to them or of a genuine rarity. (Contrast dude.)

The n. *twitch*, the earliest derivative, signifies a trip to see a rarity; then comes *twitcher*, one who reacts thus, also called a lister or tick-hunter, and Gavin Weightman (G.W.) refers to the 'hard-core twitcher'; *twitching* = either 'excited' or 'being a twitcher' or 'pertaining to such bird-watching' — and, as n., 'the practice of excitable, enthusiastic bird-watching'; and *twitchable* = likely to cause such ardour and excitement, as in 'looking at a Blyth's reed-warbler, "the first twitchable one for years"' (G.W.). R. E. Emmett claims to have coined twitcher in the mid-1950's to describe the behavior of well-known bird-watcher Howard Medhurst when on the trail of a rare bird.

Green adds that H.M. 'rode to rare sightings on a motorbike in all weathers, often shivering and twitching with cold.'

dude: 'At Wilstone, I was clearly among dudes (rather staid non-twitchers)'; serious, experienced, usually rather older bird-watchers.

Several entries are the same as those in the USA: to bird, birder, lifer, lister. Here are a few other entries:

clinch: v.t.; whence vbl n clinching. 'clinchin is identifying a rarity' (G.W.) crippling. 'Birds are graded according to rarity value and range from merely "worth having" though "crippling" up to a "megatick" or — every twitcher's dream—a "cosmic mind-blower"' (W.C. Collins). Hence also *crippler*, 'a rare and colorful bird'. (Collins)

string: v. 'Confuse a rare bird with common species' (Collins)

dip in: In twitcher talk, to be dipped in is to go on a successful twitch (trip to see a rarity).

dip out: To fail, on a bird-watching trip.

yank: n. an American bird.

Collected by
OG member
Derek Sandberg

AUGUST'S PUZZLE
GENUS GENIUS SOLUTION

Last month we asked you to unsrambulate sets of letters to reveal the genus of birds found in SE Texas!

Here's the answers:

acreddoi = dendroica

iaagv = gavia

aeriedtic = icterridae

earlpudai = parulidae

dipicea = picadae

ieccadpirtai = acciptiridae

yeardotltdgoi = troglodytidae

rcatildohei = trochilidae

New Address

The e-mail address for "The Spoonbill" staff is now dc@kingwoodcable.com. Comments, suggestions and contributions for "The Spoonbill" can be made via e-mail.

Mexico's Rio de Rapaces

Mention the word "Veracruz" and raptor enthusiasts' eyes light up, pulses quicken, and adrenaline starts to pump—for Veracruz, Mexico, is the site of the world's largest raptor migration. Each fall, on their southward journey to Central and South America, migrating raptors from across Canada, the US, and northern Mexico converge at the coast north of Veracruz city. There, they are forced to pass through a narrow corridor bounded by the Sierra Madre mountains and the Gulf of Mexico.

This natural bottleneck sends raptors by the hundreds of thousands streaming over two count sites—the rooftop of Hotel Bienvenido in downtown Cardel, a few miles north of Veracruz city, and a scaffold-like structure on a soccer field in the nearby town of Chichicoxtle, where sharp-eyed, quick-fingered raptor counters monitor the migration. In Veracruz, this spectacular migratory phenomenon is called Rio de Rapaces—River of Raptors. Most migrants are Swainson's Hawks, Broad-winged Hawks, and Turkey Vultures, passing over in huge flocks. Fair numbers of Kites, Ospreys, Northern Harriers, Coopers' and Sharp-shinned Hawks, Peregrine Falcons and American Kestrels come through. Some Hook-billed Kites and Merlins, and fewer American Swallow-tailed Kites, Red Shouldered Hawks, Common Black Hawks, Zone-tailed Hawks and Harris' Hawks also fly over.

Approximate peak days for the most common species are: first week in September for Mississippi Kites; end of September/early October for Broad-winged Hawks; mid-October for Swainson's Hawks (half a million Swainson's were counted one October day in 1997); and the end of third week in October for Turkey Vultures.

The Veracruz River of Raptors Project, headed by Ernesto Ruelas Inzunza, was initiated in 1991 by a Mexican conservation organization called Pronatura, with the help of Steve Hoffman and Hawk Watch International in Utah, and Laurie Goodrich and Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association in Pennsylvania. The two U.S. organizations still provide training and financial assistance, and exchange intern positions. The USNFW Foundation provided a matching grant which will help fund a planned Bird Observatory. Additional funding comes from other agencies and foundations in the United States and Mexico and individual contributions.

Since the first Hawk Watch in 1992, counters have tallied astonishing numbers: 3,309,790 in 1994; 4,124,596 in 1995; and 4.6 million in 1996. The 1996 record was broken in 1997 with a total of over 8 million. Ernesto plans to use radar this year to "validate the value of migration counts in Veracruz."

Last October, along with eleven other participants on Raptors' eight day Veracruz Raptor Tour, I experienced the River of Raptors. Bill Clark, coauthor of *Hawks*, in the Peterson series, and *A Photographic Guide to North American Raptors*, Academic Press, was our tour leader. He was assisted by John Schmitt, an extraordinary bird artist who has collaborated with Bill on *A Field Guide to Raptors*



of the Western Palearctic (forthcoming from Oxford University Press), and Allen Fish, director of The Golden Gate Raptor Observatory, San Francisco. We stayed at Hotel Bienvenido, the count site hotel, and enjoyed the convenience of simply climbing a few flights of stairs to reach the hawk watch.

The Bienvenido's rooftop is attractive and comfortable with tables and chairs arranged beneath a thatch-roofed sunshade. Almost as eye-catching as the raptors overhead is the waist-high wall bordering three sides of the roof. It is decorated with colorful murals of resident neotropical species painted by one of the counters, and hawks in flight painted by local elementary schoolchildren. (Pronatura conducts a successful environmental education program for elementary students and teachers. The lively and creative "Hawk Classes" are popular with the students.)

These are some of my fondest memories: Huge kettles of Swainson's, Broad-wings and Turkey Vultures with Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, Mis-

issippi Kites or perhaps a Hook-billed Kite in the swirling jumble—some bumping into each other and flapping a few times before continuing the spiral; in contrast, a kettle of white ibis in a ballet of synchronous spiraling; and one tall column of kettling raptors, particularly striking because of the wood storks on two levels, with mixed raptors between, above, and below, like layers in a parfait.

Most beautiful, in my opinion, were the kettles made up exclusively of Swainson's and Broad-winged Hawks. The image of one in particular is still vivid: It was late afternoon, we were standing by the road west of Cardel, looking up at underwings lit by the sun's rays as the hawks streamed out of the kettle—a truly rapturous sight!

More memories. Exuberant high fives at good sightings, and the hushed reverence that overcame us when the great "rivers" streamed overhead—quiet except for the sound of the counters' clickers, two in each hand, like castanets accompanying the grand promenade across the sky.

In the evenings we joined other raptor enthusiasts for lectures. Laurie Goodrich and Steve Hoffman had tour groups there, and local people attended as well. Ernesto spoke about Pronatura and the River of Raptors Project; Steve Hoffman, discussed Hawk Watch International; Laurie Goodrich spoke about Hawk Mountain Sanctuary; Ruth Tingay spoke of her work with Mauritius Kestrels; and Bill Clark spoke about the hawk watch at Falsterbo in Sweden and gave an ID lesson on Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks.

Although raptor migration was the focus of our tour, each day also brought new discoveries from the amazing abundance of local neotropical species. One morning a Bat Falcon gave us an incredible show making three hunting forays. He caught two insects and ate one in midair right before us. I missed part of that because I was distracted by a very vocal Band Backed Wren.

That was typical of the hard choices at every turn. Another day someone called out, "a line of seven Magnificent Frigatebirds overhead!" Intently focused on a Short-tailed Hawk making a graceful stoop into the distant canopy, I couldn't pull myself away—I made the right choice that time! Other raptors seen on trips in the Cardel area were: Aplomado Falcon, Cara-

HawkWatch Mexican Style

cara, Roadside Hawk, Gray Hawk, White-tailed Hawk, and Common Black Hawk—the first of many sightings of those species. So many in fact, that by the fifth day, we caught ourselves saying things like, “Just another Roadside Hawk”.

We searched for the Collared Forest Falcon and heard its haunting call, but the rascal stayed in hiding. A Boat-billed Night Heron was more cooperative. In that same area, among many other colorful neotropical species, we spotted Masked and Black-crowned Tityras for close scope looks.

After five days in Cardel, we drove south to the village of Catemaco where we would stay at a resort hotel on a picturesque lake. Birding along the way in the Alvarado wetlands, we enjoyed several sightings of Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures and Laughing Falcons, we watched Snail Kites successfully hunting and eating, and studied Great Black Hawks, both adult and juvenile. Later, stopped to watch a Zone-tailed Hawk which was hunting, we tallied 15 raptor species in 10 minutes, and by the end of the day we had seen 24 species of birds of prey! The total included five falcon species, making it our second Five-Falcon-Day.

The next morning at a patch of rain forest, we had a White Hawk Experience—ten individuals in all. My notes read: two White Hawks perched, Gray Hawk overhead; four White Hawks; sound of Howler Monkeys roaring in distance; three White Hawks and a Short-tailed in a territorial dispute (crabbing); Yellow-throated Euphonia and Pale Billed Woodpecker; another White Hawk in the scope; Morpho flies by. Double-toothed Kite! On the last day's return trip to Veracruz we saw more Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures and a one-year-old Great Black Hawk patiently hunting on the ground in a marshy area. Patient birders watched until he caught a crayfish and flew into a tree to eat it. And best of all, at the eleventh hour, when hope was running out, a Black-collared Hawk, perched only 100 ft. away!

Other highlights included Aplomado Falcons seen EVERY DAY and Ferruginous Pygmy Owls studied at close range on three occasions.

Memories overflow. I hear the hawk counters clicking and see raptors swirling. My pulse quickens and adrenaline starts to pump...the River of Raptors is calling.

by Adele Bennett

Weather Wanderers

Brush Freeman compiled the below is a list of unusual bird movements as a result of the '98 tropical storm activity in Texas.

Specie	Qty.	Locale
Band-rumped Storm-Petrels (Possible)	1	Bexar Co.
	1	Rivera, Kleburg Co.
Magnificent Frigatebird	2	Lk. Lewisville Denton Co.
	2-4	Braunig & Calaveras Lks., Bexar Co.
	3	Granger Lk., Williamson Co.
	1	Hornsby, Travis Co.
	1	Missouri City, Fort Bend Co.
Hook-billed Kite	1	Mitchell Lk., Bexar Co.
Red Phalarope	1	Village Creek WWTP, Tarrant Co.
Pomarine Jaeger	1	Granger Lk., Williamson Co.
Sabine's Gull	1	El Paso, El Paso Co.
	5	Lk. Lewisville Denton Co.
	1	Choke Canyon Res.
	1	Calaveras, Bexar Co.
	2	Lk. Tawakoni, Van Zandt Co.
	1	Cooper Lk, Delta Co.
Laughing Gulls	Many reported from areas where they are uncommon.	
Gull-billed Tern	3-5	Granger, Williamson Co.
	2	Eagle Lake, Colorado Co.
Caspian Tern	Many reported from areas where they are uncommon.	
Royal Tern	2-3	Lk. Alcoa, Milam Co.
Least Terns	Many reported from areas where they are uncommon.	
Sandwich Tern (Possible)	1	Lk. Alcoa, Milam, Co
Bridled Tern	1	Calaveras Lk., Bexar Co.
Sooty Terns	2	Lk Braunig, Bexar Co.
	4	Lk. Calaveras, Bexar Co
	1	Stillhouse Hollow, Bell Co.
	1	Armand Bayou, Harris Co.
	5	Lk. Livingston
	1	Sam Rayburn, San Augustine Co
	2	Sam Rayburn, Angellina & Nacogdoches Cos.
Black Terns	Maybe regular but many reported	
Black Skimmer	3	Attwater NWF, Colorado Co.
Townsend's Warbler	1	Port O'Conner Calhoun Co
Big Fallouts	UTC, CTC, San Antonio, LRGV	

Each May, I am joined at the hip with a 120v tape deck containing Peterson's Third Edition Eastern/Central Bird Songs, 1990. I sleep with it. I prefer this tape simply because the selection of songs/calls just seems better suited to our birds.

My modus operandi is to locate an empid, ID it to species visually if possible, and quickly forward the tape to that species location on the tape. (I leave the tape set at the beginning of Acadian Flycatcher when I start) I then play the first song on the species song/call group. (I may vary this, depending upon what I am finding effective on any given day) If I do not receive a reply, I revert to the species call. All of this at a moderate to low volume setting. If no reply, I may switch to another species, if I am uncertain about visual ID

Occasionally, I sometimes play calls and/or songs of another species simply to observe the reaction of a known-species empid. Once a bird responds to taped calls, I try to learn all I can from that individual bird, including back, crown, and nape color, breast markings, facial color, placement, size and intensity of eye-ringing, throat color, bill shape, width, length, and color.

I try to study width, length, and shape of primary projection. I find the tips of primaries useful, i.e. blunt on Least, sharp on Acadian. This is fairly well illustrated in Kaufmann and Whitney's works. I try to find tail shape differences between species as a contributing mark, but am not very proficient at this.

Some observations of various species, as pertain to our area:

Acadian Flycatcher. Uncommon transient with a wide range of spring dates. We find our highest numbers in early May. I can't get the "weet-suh" song here, but have heard the typical, high-pitched "Weet" call quite a few times. I agree with Kaufmann that this is the "weet" in "weet-suh, but it seems to be delivered a bit differently. This usually requires the tape for encouragement. I hear small groups of these in the evenings calling very briefly before dark. Acadians are usually silent here.

This is the silent species of empid which I became familiar with in the Missouri Ozarks as a teen in the late 50's. It's songs and calls are as much a part of the streamside sounds there as the cicadas and crickets.

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher: About the 1st of May, these begin to show up, and are easily found, but in low den-



sity. I have yet to induce these birds to sing or call. Present until June.

Least Flycatcher: The most common, sometimes abundant empid here. Peak seems to be May 5-15, a little earlier than "Traill's" peak. This species does occasionally call without encouragement, and can be heard in the short oak scrub around Packery at all hours of the day, on certain days.

The "che-bek" call is not common here, but can be heard occasionally, again tape-prompted. I don't like the call notes of Least of the Peterson 1990 tape, they seem to be a very agitated bird, and not indicative of Padre Island migrant Least. This could be easily mistaken for Willow, but I have only heard Least sound like this after a long rapid series of "che-bek" calls, and then only rarely.

I assume that both the song and call of the Michigan bird on the tape is one bird, an excited territorial nester. The typical call note here would be a very soft, dry, flat, "wit"... "wit"... nothing to get excited over.

"Traill's" Flycatchers: It has occurred to me over the last few months, judging from other strings on this listserv, that the status of abundance here for these species may be totally out of sync with other portions of Texas. This type of situation is not without precedence, but is a bit enigmatic.

Willow Flycatcher: This bird is not uncommon, and at times, is rather

common here in spring. I have been able to induce singing in as many as 10-12 of these birds in one morning in late May. On any day in which empids are active and responsive during this period, we are almost certain to find Willows.

Here is the process. I always begin my search for WIFL in areas of open lots which contain weedstalks and isolated woody perches. These birds like to be out in the open here. I have certain spots in which the birds are regular. I find a "Traill's" and simply play the Peterson Tape, using the first song type. Often, nothing happens. I try the calls. I find another bird, etc. You know the drill. When I receive a response from a Willow, it is IMMEDIATE and EMPHATIC. Nothing left to the imagination! The answer is so fast it is almost unbelievable!

People I have shown this phenomena to have always described it as an "echo"! At this point, I will proceed through the series of songs and calls, so as to study each birds song a few times, "unsolicited."

In most cases, WIFL will echo each portion of the tape! The series of Willow vocalizations on this tape is divided into four different types, in alternating fashion.. 1. The "fitz-bew" song ("feet-brew" to me, a moot point) with a BURRY "fitz" intro. 2. The fitz-bew song with a sweet "feet" or "weet" intro. 3. The burry, upslurred, "brr-i-it" note. 4. Three sharp "weet" call notes.

Virtually all responding WIFL's on North Padre Island sound EXACTLY like type 1, the "fitz" or burry intro. They will answer the type 2 call readily, but with a type 1 response. EXACTLY like type 1 on Peterson Third Edition Eastern/Central. Not the Western 1992 Second Edition version of WIFL. This bird is higher pitched and more nasal. Our birds constantly utter the brr-i-i-t notes as well, as a mixture with song notes, and will readily respond to a taped version of it.

The "weet" call notes are heard here, but strangely, they are not common, even when a bird is induced to sing. The one portion of the tape that they are hesitant to answer is the call notes. I have found in studying WIFL on migration in the Midwest that they are easier to locate by call notes in the middle of the day, but this is seldom heard here.

Occasionally, call notes are heard, and again, sound virtually identical to the Eastern 1990 Peterson, a mellow "weet" noticeably different than the extremely high, squeaky Acadian. As a further note,

singing Willows will quite often inspire other nearby Willows to answer. I have had as many as 3-4 answer the tape or answer an answering bird. Ron Weeks describes a similar occurrence from Choke Canyon.

Alder Flycatcher: Here's the rub. This bird is a prize here. I haven't seen or heard one this spring. We have a total of eleven records for this bird from the island, period. Eight spring, three fall. You can draw your own conclusions. When we do find Alder, it is usually a matter of hearing a song or call response deep in an oak motte, or at least, within the canopy. Most ALFL's that we have found responded to taped song from Peterson 1990, and have sounded here, also, with virtually identical to the ree-beer (forget phonetics) of that tape.

My methods differ here only in the respect that I am usually not taping directly to a visible perched bird. I routinely play Alder song and calls in suspected spots in Mid and late May.

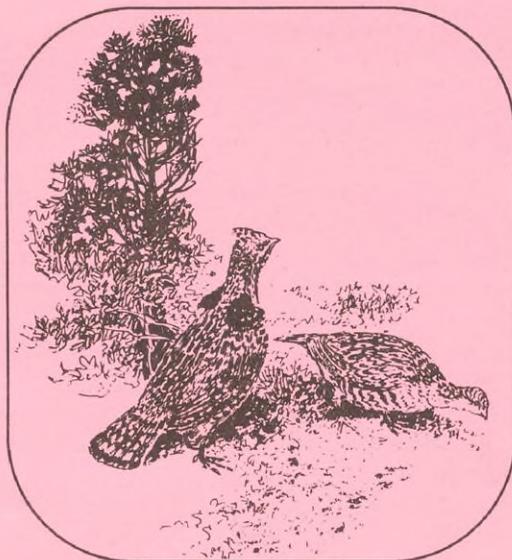
I have had average success bringing these birds to the open with the tape. Some never appear. They may be slightly better than other empids at repeating their notes of Alder on the island sounds quite like the Peterson tape, a "Downy Woodpecker.

For Empid study, I prefer Kaufmann and Whitney's tremendous series of articles in *Birding* 1985-1987. Also, Kaufmann's *Advanced Birding* Empid treatment contains some of the "rethinking" that occurred after those articles were published.

John Arvin has suggested that observers record empid vocalizations in the field for purposes of comparison. This seems to be a worthy and noble thought. How, exactly, would this be accomplished, maintained, organized, etc. Is any organization able to create a repository for this? For what immediate purposes would this be intended? Long range, they could be a source of educational and research data. I would attempt to provide recordings, if possible.

My playback tactics simply do not permit recording (not enough hands), but I am sure I have missed countless opportunities, other than the few in which I have actually recorded, for empid recording over the years. I use a camcorder mike occasionally with my low-dollar, replaced every two years, equipment. Works pretty well.

I will encourage all you potential empiders to learn these miserable little birds, forget those gaudy little wood warblers, this is real birding.



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