

Volume 41 Number 5, January 2000

Landscaping is the topic for the January 22 program

Sometimes it doesn't seem like it, but spring is just around the corner and it's time to start thinking about doing some gardening. The Alachua Audubon program meeting this month will feature Joe Durando, President of the Paynes Prairie Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society.

Joe operates Possum Hollow Nursery in Alachua which specializes in native plants. He will be talking to us about landscaping and how to avoid some common errors. The emphasis will be on the use of native plants—those found occurring naturally in Florida. They have many good features which are not always fully appreciated. These include general hardiness, resistance to pests, and adaptations to hot and dry weather. Joe will have some recommendations for plants which are best suited to our area.

Please bring your gardening questions and join us for this informative presentation. As usual, there will be refreshments and a chance to exchange birding stories with other Audubon members.

2 p.m. at the Millhopper Branch Library 3145 NW 43rd Street

Field Trips Coming Up

→ Saturday, January 29, 6:00 a.m. Ft. Clinch State Park / Hugenot Park

Meet at The Exchange Publix (NW 39th Avenue and NW 13th Street) to carpool. Rex Rowan will lead. This expedition to the beaches and salt marshes of the northeast coast is usually productive and interesting. We will look for Purple Sandpiper, Common and Red-throated Loon, Reddish Egret, Nelson's and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows, and Northern Gannet. It's a good opportunity for beginners to sort out gulls, terns, and shorebirds at close range. And there's always a chance for a rarity – last year we found a Black-legged Kittiwake on the beach at Ft. Clinch! Admission is \$3.25 per car at Ft. Clinch, 50 cents per person at Hugenot Park.

→ Saturday, February 12, 6:00 a.m. Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge

Meet at the Target store (Archer Road just east of I-75) to carpool. John Hintermister will lead. The tidal ponds and marshes of this, one of Florida's fabled birding spots, are a great place to see shorebirds, waders, raptors, and ducks of many kinds – Northern Pintail and American Wigeon, to name just two of the dozen or so we should find. Reddish Egrets, Glossy Ibises, Florida Scrub-Jays, and Bald Eagles are certain, while Peregrine Falcons, Roseate Spoonbills, and American Avocets are quite possible. Rarities turn up here all the time. An excellent trip for beginners, with clear views and lots of birds very close up.

Around the County....

by Mike Manetz

If you haven't been out birding much this winter you have missed one of the most remarkable seasons in memory. The spectacle on the Prairie basin captured the attention of birders and non-birders alike. As the water level continued its relentless subsidence, the concentration of ducks and wading birds made all previous records obsolete. At times it seemed as though every Wood Stork, Great Egret, and White Ibis in the state were engaged in the feeding frenzy. In addition to the unprecedented numbers of White Pelicans and a flock of 25 Snow Geese, cameo appearances were made by two Roseate Spoonbills and an American Avocet. Virtually all previous Spoonbill sightings have been during summer, and while Avocets may be increasing in numbers elsewhere in the state, they are still considered accidental here. Local rarities such as Black-bellied Plovers continue to be seen. Birders have also reported extraordinary numbers of Bald Eagles and vultures. The best raptor so far to show up was a Short-eared Owl found Dec. 3 along Bolen Bluff dike by Barbara Muschlitz, Alice Farkash, Mary Landsman, and Ruth Palenick. The group was on the dike near the platform where they apparently spooked the bird off its roost. They were able to flush it a couple of times before it finally disappeared. While no one was able to relocate the owl through the middle of December, the hope is that it will be detected on the Christmas Count.

Almost overshadowed by events on the basin, there has been something of an invasion of several species of birds that don't always winter this far south. Golden-crowned

Kinglets, which are virtually absent some winters,

have been reported from several locations. Even more rare here in

winter is the Red-breasted Nuthatch. Andy Kratter found one in a large track of pines Nov. 20

in southeast Gainesville. I lucked into a Winter Wren the same day in the

Hogtown Creek floodplain south of SW 20th Avenue. The next day I checked the abandoned driving range on Hwy. 441 at NW 53rd Avenue and found a Henslow's Sparrow; however, my biggest personal triumph this winter was finding a long-sought county lifer, a Brown Creeper, on Dec. 12 in the Turkey Oaks north of Millhopper Road in San Felasco Hammock. (If you recall from the last issue of *The Crane*, Lloyd Davis found a Creeper on the south side of San Felasco in November. Same bird?) Another great winter bird is Wilson's Warbler, and Bryant Roberts found two of them Dec. 6 at Kanapaha Botanical Gardens. Bryant also reported the appearance of a Selasphorus sp.

(Rufous/Allen's) hummingbird at the feeders he regularly checks there.

Two of the best backyards over the past few winters belong to Dave Beatty and Evelyn Perry. Dave maintains several seed, suet, and sugar-water feeders that attract a sizable percentage of the state's winter Baltimore Oriole population and, over the past two winters, a Dark-eyed Junco and one of the few Black-chinned Hummingbirds ever to appear in the county. Both birds are back this winter, and the hummer, just a youngster last year, is now in magnificent adult male

plumage. Evelyn Perry's yard is usually full of winter chippies and goldfinches, and she often has a Junco or two show up. This year is no exception. Her hummingbird feeders have consistently attracted

winter selasphorus hummers, and she has one visiting this winter as well.

Remarkable, the male American Redstart

that spent the last two winters around my yard has returned for a third. He feeds in the oak trees and hedges surrounding the yard and usually makes a splash twice a day in the birdbath. One of the most awe-inspiring aspects of a migratory bird's behavior is the ability to relocate in the exact area where wintering was successful in the past. While this skill is clearly key to their survival, it is a never-ending source of amazement and pleasure to me.

Thanks to those who shared their sighting through December 15, 1999.

New AAS Members

Tatiana Barr; Mr/Mrs Jeff Butler; Mr/Mrs John Cameron; Martha DeWitt; Mrs. John DiLeo; Emily Fourman; Elizabeth Frank; Tiffany Goldberg; Donald Kelting; Chuck Messer; Anglea Nation; Pat Powers; Sandy Scruggs; Marjorie Spence; Dr. Patricia Werner; Helen M. Wilhoit; Sampreethi Aipanjiguly; Renee Andrews; Fern Baker; George Blakeslee; Norman Botsford; Edmond Burzycki; John Vincent Depaola; Heather Mulvenna; Catherine Justis; John McFarland; Mike Murphy; Mary Neavin; Marlene O'Connell; Janice Rivera; David Seeds; Russell Tucker.

The Crane is published throughout the year except June and July. Content of The Crane is the sole responsibility of the editor and fulfills stated objectives and goals of Alachua Audubon Society. Annual subscription to The Crane is included in AAS dues. Non-Audubon members may subscribe to The Crane for \$8 annually. Submissions to The Crane are welcomed, can be e-mailed or on disk or hard copy, and must be received

by **January 28** to be included in the February issue. Please limit each article to no more than two pages. Mail or bring your disk or hard copy to Evelyn Perry, The Branch Office, 519 NW 60th St., Suite A, Gainesville 32607. Or fax to 331-2585. Or e-mail evperry@aol.com.

The Crane is printed on recycled paper

→ Wednesday, January 12, 6:30 p.m. **Board Meeting**

All AAS members and the public are invited to attend monthly board meetings. Location: Conference Room of the Florida Museum of Natural History, UF campus.

Puss Comes to Shove; or The Kitty Hits the Fan

by Rex Rowan

It was the kind of call I hate to get. A political call, something about the County Commission. The County Commission? What do I know about the County Commission? I'm just a birdwatcher!

Alas, it's no longer possible to be "just a birdwatcher," not if you want a clean conscience anyways. Environmental brush-fires are springing up everywhere, and if we don't get enough volunteer firefighters, they'll get bigger and bigger till we all go up in smoke....

Alachua Audubon had been watching this particular brush-fire for a year and a half, ever since Dr. Julie Levy initiated "Operation Catnip" at the UF vet school. This program aimed to deal with ... The Feral Cat Crisis. You didn't know there was A Feral Cat Crisis? Neither did anyone else, until Levy declared its existence. Too many feral cats! What to do, what to do? No need to worry, Dr. Levy is

The Feral Cat Crisis, as described by Levy, is this: there are cats living on the streets that have become, to all intents and purposes, wild

animals. They survive in city alleyways, around apartmentcomplex dumpsters, and in suburban neighborhoods, subsisting on garbage and whatever small animals they can catch. They cannot be domesticated, and when caught by Animal Control officers they are euthanized. Those which manage to evade Animal Control generally die from disease or under the wheels of a car. It is a sad situation. But to Dr. Levy, it is more than a sad situation. To Dr. Levy, it is a Crisis.

Her plan, which sounded plausible enough, was to capture the feral cats in traps, vaccinate them against the common feline diseases, neuter them, and then release them into "colonies." A "colony caretaker" would put out food for them every day. Thus the cats would be less miserable, and, because they'd been neutered, they wouldn't produce any more feral cats. Over the course of a few years, the feral cat population would decline and The Feral Cat Crisis would be over.

A great idea! If it worked, which it doesn't.

In fact there are so many things wrong with it that I'm at

a loss where to begin.

Let's start with the wildlife. Imagine an army of ten small predators set loose to prowl around your neighborhood. How long do you think that cardinal nest in the azalea bush will last? That fledgling mockingbird hopping around the back yard - what do you suppose his chances are? Do you think the total number of birds, lizards, flying squirrels, and other small wildlife will go up as a result of this, or down? Are you willing to make the trade? What's worse, a feral cat being euthanized, or a nest full of hatchling cardinals being crunched up in its jaws?

The number of studies describing the destructive capabili ties of feral cat colonies — one bibliography lists 341 of them — makes for a convincing case. One example: Two parks in California, the first with no cats, the second with 20 feral cats fed daily. In the first park, populations of native mice were six times greater than in the second. In the first park, California Thrashers and California Quail were in normal abundance, while in the second they were never seen at all. Study after study, the pattern is repeated: where feral cat colonies exist, wildlife doesn't.

> There are other considerations. Students who are leaving town may see cat colonies as good places to dump their unwanted pets. Some cats are too smart to be trapped. Caretakers may find it too much trouble to trap the cats and get them neutered, or they might like their cats and want them to have kittens. Thus colonies won't necessarily get smaller.

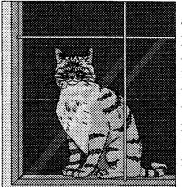
> And is it really better for the cats? They may not starve, but on 25-degree mornings they're still frozen with cold, and not a single one of them dies a comfortable death.

However, these considerations did not deter Levy, who set about convincing the county's Animal Services office to legitimize Operation Catnip. The new director, Barbara Snow, was informed of The Feral Cat Crisis. She was unaware of studies on cat colonies' devastating effects on wildlife, and at any rate tended to see Audubon members not as guardians of wildlife, but as "bird people," just another interest group, equivalent to "dog people" or "cat people."

In drafting a new Animal Services ordinance, Ms. Snow therefore included a lengthy bit on feral cats. And this part of the story is interesting in itself. An early draft of the ordinance required colony caretakers to, among other things:

- 1. sterilize all the cats in the colony,
- 2. sterilize all kittens over eight weeks of age and before 16 weeks, and
- 3. remove kittens from the colony by eight weeks of age for domestication and placement.

In the ordinance's final draft, #2 and #3, which would certainly have reduced the size of the feral cat population, had been deleted altogether, and #1 had been whittled away



until it required only that the caretaker "establish a program of vaccination and sterilization," for which compliance could be "proved" by putting out one trap per ten cats in the colony and signing a letter of intent! When queried, Ms. Snow said the ordinance had been altered to make it "more workable." More workable, maybe, but less likely to work.

The ordinance did not address colony size, or where colonies could be located. In theory a caretaker might establish one on the edge of Paynes Prairie. You think I'm exaggerating, but in California, cat colonies have more than once been set up on the edge of wildlife refuges, and the caretakers have gone to court to keep them there.

Anyway, this was the ordinance that came before the County Commission. Five of us from Alachua Audubon attended the meeting, as did Leslie Straub, representing Florida Wildlife Care, and a few students from the UF School of Wildlife and Conservation. Each of us spoke against it. Dr. Levy and one of her graduate students spoke in its favor.

The County Commissioners didn't decide against us, but they didn't decide in our favor either. They voted 3-2 to have Ms. Snow rewrite the feral-cat section of the ordinance, with our input and Operation Catnip's. Very surprisingly, Commissioner Newport, who is generally considered a conservationist, voted with Catnip. His reasoning was that Gainesville needed to show itself a Progressive Community by addressing this Crisis (! - Levy is very good at convincing people there's a Crisis) in a Progressive Manner. He was also swayed by the testimony of his own personal veterinarian — well, presumably his pets' veterinarian — Dawn Miller, who stated that toxins were a greater threat to wildlife than cats. Which is like saying that, since heart disease kills more people than cancer, we shouldn't worry about cancer.

Let me sum up:

- 1. Operation Catnip is not solving a problem, it is creating one: cat colonies.
- 2. Feral cats are not worth *any* level of wildlife mortality. This cannot be emphasized strongly enough.
- 3. Feral and stray cats should be captured and taken to Animal Control. If they can be adopted, they should be. If not, they should be euthanized.
- 4. Our own pet cats should be kept indoors at all times. Household pets that are allowed to wander do a significant amount of damage to wildlife.

Alachua Audubon is not anti-cat. I'm not sure that needs to be said, but maybe it does. I think more of our board members own cats than don't. Furthermore, of the people who represented us at the County Commission meeting, two of them, Bob Simons and Matt Williams, own cats that were originally strays, and Matt's wife even found homes for a dozen stray kittens. Cats are fine with us. Indoors. But like rats and mice, which are also charming and enjoyable

household pets when properly cared for, they are harmful when they run wild.

Let the County Commission know that you're opposed to feral cat colonies. Call them (374-5210), write them (P.O. Box 2877, 12 SE 1st Street, 32602-2877), or e-mail them (bocc@co.alachua.fl.us).

For further information on feral (and domestic) cats, check out the American Bird Conservancy's "Cats Indoors!" web site at www.abcbirds.org, or write them at 1250 24th Street, NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20037.

Keep in mind that....

- Today's mighty oak is just yesterday's nut that held its ground.
- And a mighty river is just a lot of little drips who stuck together.

—From Vicki Watson, U of Montana, via e-mail from Susan Hughes, San Antonio, TX



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Bird List

Mourning dove and white-crowned pigeon, Snipe and woodcock, jay and widgeon, Guillemot and razorbill. Phalarope and whippoorwill, Hummingbird with throat of ruby Green-winged teal and blue-faced booby Red-winged blackbird, white-tailed kite. The ubiquitous bobwhite. Swallows, waxwings, vireos, finches, (Charming birds of lesser inches) Gold-wing warbler in a tree And the common chickadee. Owls with notes distinctly cheerless, Snowy, spotted, long-eared, earless, Laughing gull and whooping crane Harlan's hawk above the plain; Roseate tern, his sooty brother, (One good tern deserves another) The sandpiper, the corn crake, The black-legged kittiwake Mallards, eiders and pintails, Prairie chickens, grouses, quails, Oystercatchers, avocets, Great blue heron sends egrets!

-Lucy Cores Menemsha

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(Thanks to M.M. Cole, a longtime member of Alachua Audubon Society, who sent us the above poem which he enjoyed reading while in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.)

Gainesville Christmas Bird Count 19 December 1999

After a very rainy Saturday, 18 December, and morning rain a possibility, we were fortunate to get only a cloudy day after a morning fog. We were comfortable with a low of 57° and a high of 70°. Winds were variable, but never very strong.

Earlier fall sightings indicated a probable "invasion" year with the possibility of counting many more northerly species, but it was not to be. However, it was a great count. Our 58 observers found 4 new species and counted enough individuals to give us 21 other new highs. Many of the "highs" were from the Paynes Prairie Basin alone. As many of you know, the pools resulting as the water has drained from the prairie basin, created concentrations of fish which attract many wading birds. LaChua Trail is still closed, after the collapse of a culvert under Sweetwater Branch, but the East Basin team reached the Platform by a circuitous route. They were

there just before dark to get final counts on all the birds coming in to roost for the night. One didn't have to be on the platform for an awe-inspiring spectacle. Our team was finishing the count along US 441 just before dark. It was fantastic to watch all the birds flying in from the west, including group after group of Little Blue Herons, Glossy Ibis, and Sandhill Cranes. We could also see a couple dozen Am. White Pelicans.

Several unusual birds were counted in the same places as last year. Two

Vermilion Flycatchers (female) were at Williamson's Farm just off the prairie and near Lake Tuscawilla right off US 441. Rusty Blackbirds were about implie off US 441 on SE 134th Ave. The Black-chinned Hummingbird at Dave Beatty's house was listed last year as Hummingbird, sp. Before it left in the spring, enough violet was visible at the throat to i.d. it as Black-chinned. He returned in his full adult male plumage. A Dark-eyed Junco in Dave's in-law's yard next door is also probably the same one as last year's.

All 15 Grassshopper Sparrows were counted at Persimmon Point as were 12 of the 13 Henslow's Sparrows. The other one was found by Greg McDermott (back from New Mexico to help us) in the grassy area in the Paynes Prairie recreation area near Lake Road. At times we regret that Persimmon Point is only open to the public when accompanied by a ranger, but that may be why sparrow winter in numbers there. The American Avocet and the Roseate Spoonbills had both been found near LaChua Trail Platform sometime before the count. Five Wilson's Warblers were astonishing: two males were at Kanapaha Botanical Gardens (found earlier by Bryant Roberts and refound by him); Tom Webber found one male on campus just west of the parking garage on N-S Drive; Katie Sieving's group had one male along Lake Shore Drive north of the entrance to Palm Point parking lot. The only female was discovered by Mike Manetz's group along Cone's Dike. The Am. Redstart that visits Mike's yard regularly was hiding Count Day, but was seen by Mike during Count Week.

As usual our Count-up Supper was at Civitan, with Griselda Forbes as our hostess. Her son, Ethan, assisted her in setting up. This year, I borrowed my husband's laptop with the spreadsheet Excel installed. I had entered a file to tally the results, but Bob Knight contributed some programming, then turned entry duties over to his sons, Adam and Scott. One used the laptop and one double-checked with an adding machine. My thanks to all those who helped with the count-up and all the observers in the field.

-Barbara P. Muschlitz

Gainesville Christmas Bird Count 19 December 1999

Bold-faced species are new to the count. Bold-faced numbers are new maxima. A T indicates tie with previous maximum.

O- 1	•		150	D1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1	
Common Loon	2	Least Sandpiper	150	Black-and-white Warbler	51
Pied-billed Grebe	145	Dunlin	3	Ovenbird	8
American White Pelican Double-crested Cormorant	150 1600	Peep, sp.	25 40	Common Yellowthroat	276
Anhinga	316	Dowitcher, sp. Common Snipe	209	Wilson's Warbler	5
American Bittern	6	American Woodcock	209	Northern Cardinal	424
Least Bittern	1	Bonaparte's Gull	48	Indigo Bunting	1
Great Blue Heron	604	Ring-billed Gull	241	Eastern Towhee	73
Great Egret	401	Herring Gull	3	Chipping Sparrow	120
Č .	295	Forster's Tern	33	Field Sparrow	17 19
Snowy Egret	637	Rock Dove	201	Vesper Sparrow	220
Little Blue Heron Tricolored Heron	32	Eurasian Collared Dove	160	Savannah Sparrow	
	659	Mourning Dove	503	Grasshopper Sparrow	15
Cattle Egret	29	Eastern Screech-Owl	33	Henslow's Sparrow	13
Green Heron	89	Great Horned Owl	24	Song Sparrow	65
Black-crowned Night-Heron White Ibis	2701	Barred Owl	26	Swamp Sparrow	411
		Whip-Poor-Will	1	White-throated Sparrow	20
Glossy Ibis	750	Black-chinned Hummingbird	1	White-crowned Sparrow	4
Roseate Spoonbill	2	Selasphorus, sp.	2	Dark-eyed Junco	2
Wood Stork	427	Belted Kingfisher	44	Red-winged Blackbird	6086
Snow Goose-Blue	13	Red-headed Woodpecker	11	Eastern Meadowlark	157
Snow Goose-White	30	Red-healied Woodpecker	164	Rusty Blackbird	68
Wood Duck	211	Ylw-bellied Sapsucker	31	Boat-tailed Grackle	1416
Green-winged Teal	1370	-	105	Common Grackle	954 77
Mottled Duck	29	Downy Woodpecker	103 84	Brown-headed Cowbird	77 10
Mallard	29	Northern Flicker Pileated Woodpecker	72	Baltimore Oriole	19
Northern Pintail	85	Eastern Phoebe	218	House Finch	44
Blue-winged Teal	1133	Vermilion Flycatcher	2	American Goldfinch	401
Northern Shoveler	2	Tree Swallow	73	House Sparrow	47
Gadwall	75 7	Blue Jay	168	No. 1 - CO	145
American Wigeon	7	American Crow	382	Number of Species Number of Individuals	145
Ring-necked Duck	992	Fish Crow	90	Number of individuals	43042
Lesser Scaup	23		114	Observe Constitution in the	L-14 C
Common Goldeneye	1	Crow, sp. Carolina Chickadee	88	Observers (Team leaders in	
Bufflehead	3	Tufted Titmouse	186	Howard Adams, John Hinte	-
Hooded Merganser	247	Brwn-headed Nuthatch	12	Adam Knight, Bob Knight,	
Ruddy Duck	7 550	Carolina Wren	297	Knight, Pat Meng, Don Mor	row, Steve
Duck, sp.		House Wren	99	Nesbitt, Brad Williams, Jim	Weimer,
Black Vulture	739	Sedge Wren	59	Susan Weimer, Sydney Jone	s, Adam
Turkey Vulture	807	Marsh Wren	26	Kent, Tom Workman, Mike	Manetz,
Osprey	15 T	Golden-crowned Kinglet	5	Mark Dolan, Sallie Lieb, Ke	•
Bald Eagle	154 25	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	383	McPherson, David O'Neill, I	-
Northern Harrier	25	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	264	Muschlitz, Alice Farkash, D	
Sharp-shinned Hawk	16 7	Eastern Bluebird	74	Henderson, Mary Landsman	
Cooper's Hawk	1	Hermit Thrush	23		. •
Accipiter, sp. Red-shouldered Hawk	88	American Robin	646	McDermottt, Brian McNab	
Red-tailed Hawk	41	Gray Catbird	81	Kiltie, Carmine Lanciani, C	-
American Kestrel	55	Northern Mockingbird	120	Parenteau, Dan Evans, Ria	
Wild Turkey	20	Brown Thrasher	19	Dan Pearson, Ken Scott, Re	x Rowan,
Northern Bobwhite	1	American Pipit	56	Lloyd Davis, John Martin, C	Carl Miles,
King Rail	9	Cedar Waxwing	25	Mike Paczolt, Bryant Robe	rts, Ariane
Virginia Rail	4	Loggerhead Shrike	50	Roberts, Jan Bolte, Kris Day	ris, Karl
Sora	16	European Starling	174	Miller, Tom Webber, Terry	
Common Moorhen	168	White-eyed Vireo	76	Martha King, Pat Burns, L	-
American Coot	1751	Blue-headed Vireo	76	Lundeen, Alice Tyler, Dave	•
Limpkin	5	Orange-crowned Warbler	55	•	-
Sandhill Crane	5035	Yellow-rumped Warbler	2156	Renee Burns, Michael Meise	
Killdeer	534	Yellow-throated Warbler	36	Joan Stephens, Katie Sievin	
American Avocet	1	Pine Warbler	123	Gude, Patricia Hernandez, T	
Greater Yellowlegs	1 89	Prairie Warbler	1	Hoctor, Frank Mead, Linda	Terry.
Lesser Yellowlegs	89 14	Palm Warbler	281		
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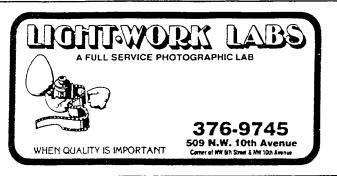
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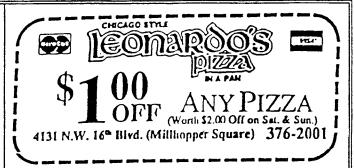
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Address				_Apt
City		State	ZIP	
	Please o	check level of membership.		
	Basic \$35	Senior \$15	Student \$15	
	INTRODU	CTORY MEMBE	RSHIP \$20	
		TWO YEARS \$3	Λ	