

The Crane

Volume 50 Number 6 June-July 2009

Our Gloriously Crazy, Incredibly Rewarding June Challenge

Each June a bit of craziness descends upon many of the birders of Alachua County. They find themselves out in the heat of summer involved in a search for birds. This craziness is the result of our June Challenge, the brainchild of Becky Ennis, with a lot of help from the tireless Rex Rowan. Get out there, say Becky and Rex. Never mind that it is hot and humid. Never mind that the mosquitoes and ticks are rampant in the woods and fields. Never mind that you would rather be in Alaska or Argentina or some other cool place. Find as many species as you can within Alachua County during the month of June. Rex urges us on with his almost daily reports of total numbers of species seen to date and updates on what birds are being found and where people are finding them.

Just why do we let ourselves get sucked into this craziness? Well, I have a few ideas on this subject. This past June was my first time to participate in the Challenge and I found that the experience brought me many unexpected rewards.

There is, of course, the sense of competition. Living, as we do, in the back yard of those "Fighting Gators", we understand competition very well and I am certain that it is part of the motivation for braving the heat and bugs to seek out those birds. However, I found that cooperation and fellowship among birders was even more important to me than the competition. Everywhere I went I found another birder or two looking in the same place—John Hintermister here, Judy Bryan there, Howard Adams and Barbara Mollison in yet an-

other. Some of my best days were spent birding with friends: at the Pine Flatwoods with Helen Warren and with Linda Hensley on the LaChua Trail. I even met new (to me) birders like Phil Lapis, who was directing people to the Roseate Spoonbill at Clear Lake. At the end of the month there was an endless assortment of people each evening on the PPSP platform on US 441, many of them birders hoping to see the Barn Owls that were regularly hunting there. The others were sunset watchers, but interested in why we were there and thrilled to look at a real gator in our scopes. I added a good dozen birds to my list out there on the platform and had many interesting conversations. I really enjoyed this social aspect of the challenge.

I also enjoyed the unexpectedness and unpredictability of the search. At the Pine Flatwoods Helen Warren and I almost stepped on a coiled up, sleeping pygmy rattlesnake as we were stepping off the trail to dodge a huge diamondback rattlesnake that was blocking our path. Pretty exciting that was - those two snakes in one spot. So was the Chuck-will's-widow that we flushed from near the trail near that same spot, and even better because we were able to relocate it in a small tree where we had long, satisfying looks. Then there was the Barn Owl that Linda and I saw at the La Chua trailhead, flushed by a pack of noisy crows. The looks at the Barn Owls from the 441 platform were better, but this first unexpected look was special. Most surprising of all, though, was the howling coyotes on the prairie basin. They responded to the siren of an emergency vehicle crossing the basin on 441 and they sounded at first like a thousand small sirens, but ended up in an equal number of yips. Who would have thought there were so many out there? *continued on page 6*

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**Deadline for
Aug-Sept Crane:
July 15th**



Spring migration, subject to the whims of wind and weather, never plays out quite the same from year to year. In some years we experience cold fronts and northerly winds well into May. In those years, birds are frequently forced down to feed and wait out the weather. Under those conditions, migrants can seem relatively abundant. Other years, with an absence of weather events, birding can be rather dull as migrants pass unseen overhead on their ways north. Because bird species don't all migrate simultaneously, the timing of weather events can make some species seem much more common than in other years.

This year there was a general absence of weather events; so most days, while one could usually see a few migrants, birding was decidedly slow. Some frontal activity livened up the weekend of April 17-18, when reports from three parks: Split Rock, San Felasco Hammock, and Biven's Arm, yielded collectively seventeen species of warblers, (including unusually high numbers of **Worm-eating** and **Black-throated Blue Warblers**), plus several **Wood Thrushes**, a few **Veeries**, **Scarlet Tanagers**, and large numbers of **Indigo Buntings**. Feeder watchers also reported lots of Indigo Buntings, along with more **Painted Buntings** than usual.

One trend noticed by several birders was a slightly higher number of species seldom seen in spring. This list includes Veeries and Painted Buntings mentioned above, **Kentucky Warbler** (one seen at Bivens by Geoff Parks, another at Grace Kiltie's birdbath!), and **Blue-winged Warbler** (Geoff Parks again).. Notable by relative absence was **American Redstart**, which is normally one of our most common migrants. Few field trips or birding reports included more than one or two of them.

Water levels at Chapman's Pond and the Dairy lagoon were too high for shorebirds, but a few other places yielded results. Bob Carroll and Becky Enneis found **Greater Yellowlegs**, **Black-necked Stilt**, **Pectoral** and **Western Sandpipers** April 17 at some of the newer retention ponds around the city of Alachua. The settling ponds at the dairy typically had a few

Solitary, Spotted, and Least Sandpipers, and Phil Laipis found a locally-rare Semi-palmated Plover May 4 in the pond behind Royal Park Cinema.

By the time you receive this issue of the Crane, the June Challenge will be underway. The challenge is a good-natured competition to see who can see the highest number of species within Alachua County during the month of June. It's fun, and past challenges have produced interesting information about the distribution of our breeding birds and new record late-dates for some migrant species.

Thanks to those who shared their sightings through May 15, 2009

A Note from the President

As I sit at the computer tonight we have had several days of good rain. Some are saying it is the early summer showers but I wonder what happened to the April showers. There was rain along the panhandle but little made it to Gainesville. Maybe this will set us up for a really great June Challenge- will you be there? Maybe you ask, "What is the June Challenge?"

Briefly, it is an opportunity to get out and see what is out there for the period of time that birders had traditionally hung their binoculars to stay in the cool comforts of their homes and not worry about the birds until the fall migration. The result of this competition has been some reports of bird activity that have opened some record books and, maybe the best part, has gotten birders outside with a new appreciation of summer. The level of competition is pretty much whatever you want to make of it. I like to just see what I can see and have a small list of my count from last year. And then there is the serious side of the competition with every detail being accounted for and recorded. Generally, it is a time to have fun while birding!

On the business side of chapter details, with the coming of summer we move to the planning for the next years programs, field trips and events. If you have a favorite field trip and suggestion for field trip or program, please let us know. You may reach me with the email address, helenkwarren@cox.net or phone call to 352-377-7755.

Citizen Lobbyist for Climate Change

What happens in Washington does not stay in Washington! We all live downstream from the politics and policies but we need to be the voice that is heard up and down the Hill! With the current use of the internet and faxes, We the People have some great tools to get our voices heard.

Last month, I was able to visit some of our congress people in DC and ask for their support to some legislation that was in the works with the Energy and Commerce committee of the House. The National Wildlife Federation had brought together about 20 people from all over the country for a day on the Hill and had us set up with appointments to talk with senators and representatives. We were a coalition of Audubon, parks service workers, private consultants and others with a common interest in getting policies and legislative support for climate change. Specifically, we were in town to ask for support for the Cap and Trade bill and a designation of 5% from the monies that would be coming in for the 'trade' part to be put towards our natural resources.

I cannot begin to inform you on the many details of this process, mind boggling that it is. What I really want to share with you is a sense of excitement that what we do here does make a difference. And to get back to the bit about the tools that we have available for letting our voices be heard: You can sign on with National Audubon and Audubon of Florida for Action Alerts and when an issue is up for a vote or public comment you will get an email which is easy to respond to and send your request for support or opposition- All done within 60 seconds!

Let us make a commitment to be involved in the process, up the ante for the next five years and see what impact we can have on the politics if we can bring together a community of citizens for a healthy planet. Check out the tools on line, go to <http://www.audubonofflorida.org/> and <http://www.audubon.org/> and link into their issues and take action pages. If five years is too far out for you then aim for the next year but start soon. Remember, it really does matter to be involved with the process!

IN LEK PURSUIT

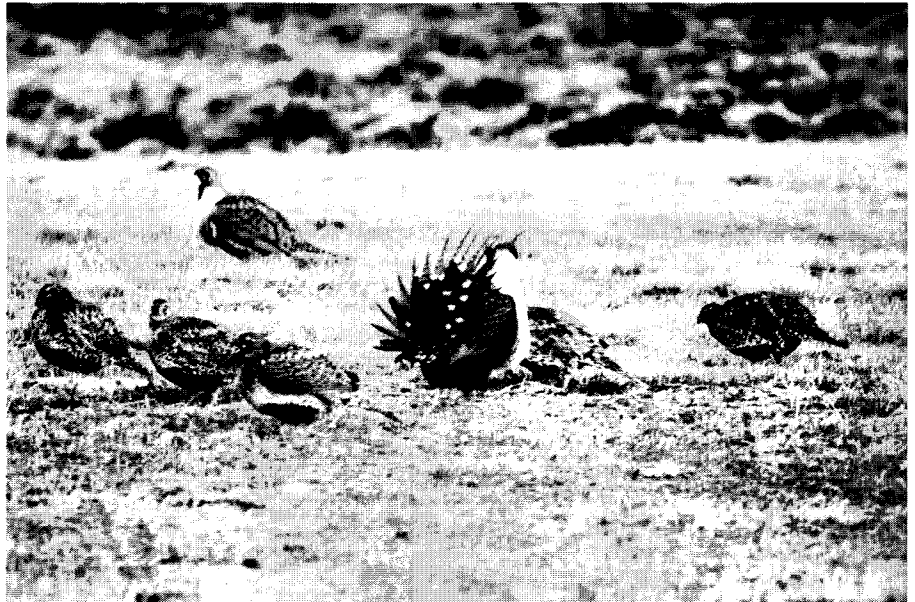
"Hope is the thing with feathers," penned Emily Dickinson, the Belle of Amherst, and hope, if such an emotion can be ascribed to birds, is about all that's left if you're the last individual of your kind. The last Heath Hen, a male, died in 1932. He tried to boom up a hen during his last appearance on his lek, but none responded. There were none to respond. Even as they were headed toward extinction Heath Hens were being sold by poachers in Boston's black market for \$5.00 a pair (supposedly undressed). The last Dusky Seaside Sparrow and the last Carolina Parakeet, both males, could have vocalized all they wanted, but no female was there to give them an appraisal. It's a moot point since both birds were in captivity when they died.

The plight of the Heath Hen, an Eastern race of the Greater Prairie-chicken, is particularly poignant (see Christopher Cokinos', *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*), and it propelled us to arrange a trip that would offer the chance to observe some of the grouse of the lower 48 states while there is still suitable habitat to support them. Forest grouse (Blue, Spruce and Ruffed), and the alpine White-tailed Ptarmigan, all seem to be holding on, although there are contractions to their ranges where human disturbance enters the picture, but the grouse that occupy open habitats like sage flats and prairie confront various degrees of difficulty. Their hold on survival is increasingly at risk. So, we had to go and see the situation for ourselves.

Mike Flieg, a birding guide, leads a tour specifically designed to put birders in places where they can observe grouse in full courtship display on their leks. He calls his tour "Lek-a-Day." The itinerary, while challenging, sounded like just the thing we were looking for, so we signed on.

Participants on this tour need to be mentally prepared to have their sleep routine warped beyond recognition. It is a week of getting up at 3-4 AM, all in an effort to arrive at the leks before dawn. Otherwise, you run the possibility of spooking the birds. Our visit to

the lek of the Greater Sage Grouse was typical of how it went every day all week long. The van pulled into position just as a hint of pink, suffused with orange, began to lighten up the eastern horizon. We could barely make out forms among the sage. As more light streamed into our location these forms resolved into male grouse. The exact number of birds counted varied with each observer, but the guide said around 15 were present. The number may not be all that significant because while all had come to dance and vocalize, only one, the master cock, is allowed to mate, and the hens that soon began appearing knew exactly who that special bird was. Whether flying in or running, they gravitated to the alpha male, giving not a glance at his competitors. Darwin would be pleased. And the old boy (that's the alpha male, not Darwin) seemed up to the challenge. As each hen had her turn with the top male, she would fly off to her nest. We followed the



master cock through 17 couplings, impressive by any standard, but our schedule required a departure before we could confirm exactly how many hens got serviced.

As we made our way from one lek to another, covering 5 species of grouse, it became apparent that each one had a unique approach to lek behavior. All went in for the inflated throat pouches, but beyond that one couldn't help but notice the differences in the various dances. The extended wings and foot stomping of the Sharp-tailed Grouse contrasted with the regal posturing of the Gunnison Sage Grouse, his long "ponytail:

of black plumes being flipped forward and backward for dramatic effect. The Lesser Prairie-chicken lek we visited was located in a prairie-dog town, resulting in a tableaux not to be seen elsewhere. Several of the burrows hosted families of Burrowing Owls. The antics of the grouse seemed to agitate these wide-eyed little raptors, and, while they showed no overt aggression toward their dancing neighbors, the owls clearly were not pleased with the goings on. They took up watchful stations on the mound of excavated dirt rimming each burrow, giving out a rattling call that some birders compare with the warning issued by western diamond-backs. Why all the tension among the owls? It's hard to say. Both the leks and the prairie-dog towns are old. The same area has been used for years, so the owls have witnessed this commotion many times over. It's one of countless mysteries surrounding the short-grass prairie community.

Early Spring birding in the West is hard to beat if unusual encounters with the feathered ilk are your cup of tea. To check out the details of our tour, go to Orni-folks@sbcglobal.net

Dana & Nancy Griffin

Howie the Harris's Sparrow

By Steven Goodman

Howie the Harris's Sparrow was born and spent his first summer season in northern Canada with his friends and family. Being a young sparrow, this would be his first migration down south to western Arkansas.

So when it came time to migrate, he set off in a small flock with the other sparrows. He flew thorough the Plains States but when he reached Missouri, vicious winds started to blow. Howie kept flying until he noticed he was a lone sparrow flying in the sky. Still, he kept flying.

When Howie felt like he was there, he began his descent. He came to the ground and saw a big, brown sign in the distance. He flew through the canopy to where he could read the sign. The sign read, "Paynes Prairie, Florida."

"Florida!" cried Howie. "What am I doing here?"

Knowing that he couldn't risk flying back to Arkansas alone, Howie decided to see if there was a good

spot to spend winter here. Then Howie saw a pile of dead sticks surrounded by tall grass. "It's as good a spot as any", he thought to himself.

So Howie started to settle in. It was actually a nice place. There were Savannah, White-crowned, Grasshopper, and Vesper Sparrows coming to greet him. But there was one especially nice sparrow, a White-crowned Sparrow named Teddy. Teddy showed him around and told him that he had never seen a Harris's Sparrow here before.

Then one day, a big group of people showed up. Howie wanted to see what they were doing, and Teddy came with him. He hopped up on top of the pile of sticks. Howie heard one of them say, "Look, it's a Harris's Sparrow! That's so awesome!"

Howie hopped back down into the grass, and he heard groaning coming from the people. When they finally moved on, Howie came back and perched on the brush pile.

The next day, even more people appeared at his spot. He did not want to come up and show himself while he was pecking on the seeds some generous person spread. But again the crowd disappeared.

No more people came that week. One morning, though, he saw another sign. It read "Home of the Harris's Sparrow." Howie couldn't believe what he was seeing. "I never knew that I was famous," he remarked.

Now knowing that he was a famous sparrow, he perched proudly for all of the people who stopped at his brush pile. He sat there for hours at a time each day.

But then it came time for migration again. "I don't want to leave," said Howie.

"You don't have to," a familiar voice echoed. Howie turned around. All of his family and friends were right there!

"How did you know I was here?" exclaimed Howie.

"We heard about you," said his mom.

"Really?" said Howie.

"Yeah, you were in the news," Mom replied. "I think we should stay here forever."

So then the group of Harris's Sparrows met Teddy and all of the other sparrows that live near Howie's brush pile.

And they lived there happily ever after.

Steven Goodman is in 4th Grade at Talbot Elementary and wrote this story for a newspaper produced by his reading enrichment class..

Then there was the great personal satisfaction of finding a bird on my own. It wasn't always easy. For example, I know that San Felasco is the best place to see Hooded Warblers. However, it took three attempts before I managed to see one there in June. It was almost my last bird of the Challenge. On one attempt I could hear one singing right in front of me, but it was still, and I never actually saw it. Sometimes I went to places where I thought a bird ought to be. One of those places was the Campground area at PPSP. I went to look for woodland birds, and was rewarded with an unusually cooperative Acadian Flycatcher, the first I had ever seen there. The same day, after trying to locate several singing individuals unsuccessfully, I finally saw an elusive Yellow-throated Vireo. I also searched in this spot for birds that would be around the water and was rewarded on one visit by the appearance of a Belted Kingfisher at the boardwalk on Lake Wauburg. Finding birds where I thought they might be was especially rewarding.

Observing the nesting behavior that was common in June was a great satisfaction for me. If it were not for the Challenge I would not have seen the numerous Least Bitterns that were flying about feeding their youngsters near the platform at the end of the La Chua trail. I would not have enjoyed the many family groups of White-eyed Vireos noisily feeding all over the county or been able to admire the hawking skills of the Eastern Kingbirds feeding their adolescent young on the power lines on Cellon Creek Road. Then there were the Tufted Titmice building a nest at Watermelon Pond and the gangly young Green Herons patiently

awaiting food from their parents at the pond near the platform on 441. I never realized how busy our Alachua County birds are in June.

Perhaps more important than any personal knowledge that I gained from the Challenge was the communal knowledge we all gained about the birds that are here in our county in June. Our knowledge about where they are, how many there are, and which are nesting increases each year. We can thank Rex for this because this is just the sort of thing that he loves to document and then remind us of at some later date when otherwise it would have been forgotten. This kind of knowledge was readily available in *A Birdwatcher's Guide to Alachua County, Florida*, by Rex Rowan and Mike Manetz. This little gem of a book was especially helpful to me in finding neat birding spots to go to and finding particular birds after I got there. One can never know too much about our home county and its birds.

By the time you read this, the June Challenge will have begun. I hope that you will join me and all the others who answer the June Challenge. They don't all show up on the final list, but they are out there just the same. Give it a try. It is a chance to learn more about the birds and birding spots in Alachua County, improve your birding skills, spend time with birding friends, meet new ones and discover the rich and varied bird life (and other kinds of life) that can be found in Alachua County during the month of June. It will soon be time to rise to Becky's Challenge again. So get out there. I promise you—you will not be sorry.

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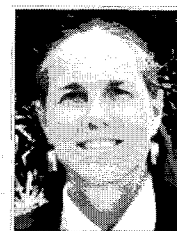
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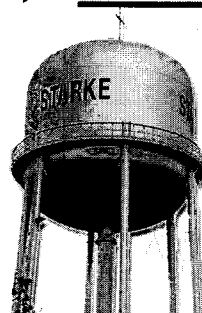
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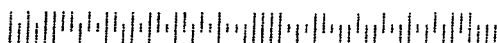
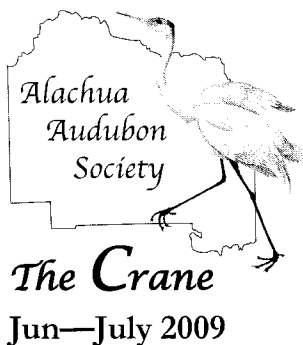
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the June
Challenge!**

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one page one.**

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