



# The Crane

Volume 66 Number 1 September– October 2024

## FIELD TRIPS

**Saturday, September 7, 2024, 8:00 am**  
**Palm Point Park, 7401 Lake Shore Dr., Gainesville**  
Park in the parking lot of Palm Point Park or on the road's shoulder. Meet José-Miguel Ponciano to look for migrant warblers and flycatchers in the live oaks, sweetgums, sugarberry, and cypress trees at the park and then along Lakeshore Drive.  
Difficulty 1: (easiest) less than a mile.

**Sunday, September 8, 2024, 8:00 am**  
**La Chua Trail, 4270 SE 15th St, Gainesville**  
Meet trip leader Felicia Lee in the parking lot near the trailhead of La Chua Trail off Camp Ranch Rd. La Chua has been one of the most productive birding locations in the county. The myriad of habitats found within the park support an abundant and diverse bird population, including wading birds, waterfowl, raptors, warblers, and others. Entry fee for the State Park is \$4 per vehicle - you can pay online [here](#).  
Difficulty 3: may involve uneven terrain and/or walking distances greater than two miles.

**Saturday, September 14, 2024, 8:00 am**  
**Chapman's Pond and Nature Trails, 7100 SW 41st Pl, Gainesville**  
Meet Ben Fick in the grassy parking lot. We will follow the trails in search of migrant warblers, vireos, and flycatchers. Historically, this has been a good location for the rare Canada Warbler.  
Difficulty 2: greater than one mile.

**Sunday, September 15, 2024, 8:00 am**  
**San Felasco Hammock Preserve State Park, 11101 Millhopper Rd, Gainesville**

Meet Maggie Paxson in the parking lot. If the lot is full, you can park off the shoulder. Entry fee for the State Park is \$4 per vehicle - you can pay online [here](#). We will be hiking Moonshine Creek trail. This is a shady hardwood forest around a creek and sinkhole that attracts fall migrants. Hooded Warblers, Acadian Flycatcher, and several vireo species are likely. Our walk may include the Creek Sink Trail depending on trail conditions. Mosquitoes possible.  
Difficulty 3: walk may be up to 3 miles with elevation changes and uneven terrain.

**Saturday, September 21, 2024, 8:00 am to Sunday, September 22, 2024, 12 pm**  
**Overnight Trip: Roxy's Big Day**  
Join us in Osceola County for fall migration birding and explore some of the county's beautiful native habitats including mesic flatwoods, dome swamps, and prairies. Trip leader Roxy Ohyanan. Please visit the [website calendar](#) for the full description.

**Sunday, September 22, 2024, 7:45 am to 2:00 pm**  
**Duval Audubon: Camp Blanding**  
This event is hosted by Duval Audubon who kindly invited us Alachuans to participate in a very unique opportunity. Camp Blanding WMA is 56,197 acres located in western Clay County, east of Starke. The

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northern half of the area is planted pine plantations with remnant mature pines that support Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. Bottomland hardwood forests occur along the headwaters of Black Creek. The southern half of the area includes several thousand acres of sandhills, with plentiful white-tailed deer and turkey. Our main purpose for this trip is to visit a cluster site and learn about the life of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. Other birds we will look for: Red-headed Woodpecker, Kestrel, Sandhill Cranes, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Northern Bobwhite Quail. Visiting the Red-cockaded Woodpeckers is usually 2-3 hours. We will then proceed to travel across to Camp Blanding where we will visit the many lakes and learn about the water systems of Camp Blanding and look for waterfowl. This optional activity usually wraps up around 1-2 pm. **We are meeting at the intersection of Barker Rd and US-16 at 7:45 am, across the street from the main entrance of Camp Blanding Joint Training Center. DO NOT GO TO THE CAMP BLANDING MAIN ENTRANCE! FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS ON THE WEBSITE CALENDAR TO OUR MEETING SPOT: PLEASE DON'T BE LATE.** The gates will be locked after entry. Once we sign in and drive into the WMA, there will not be another restroom. There is no fee, but **everyone will need proper picture ID (e.g. driver's license)** to get into Camp Blanding. Bring your binoculars, insect repellent, sunscreen, snacks and plenty of water. Please plan to carpool or join the carpool at Camp Blanding.

**Saturday, September 28, 2024, 8:00 am  
Loblolly Park, 1039 NW 31 Dr, Gainesville**

Meet trip leader Matt Hitchings at 8:00 am at the parking lot. Trailhead coordinates: (29.65987, -82.36934). In this under-birded gem close to central Gainesville, we will be on the lookout for departing summer residents and migrating warblers and thrushes. Loblolly Woods is one of ten parks that makes up the Hogtown Creek Greenway, and birding next to Possum Creek will allow us some good views of birds. The trail includes a boardwalk. Depending on timing, we may cross 8th Avenue to explore Loblolly Woods South after we complete a loop along the creek and down the boardwalk. Mosquitoes are prevalent so bring insect repellent. Most of the trail is in the shade. Difficulty 2-3: walk may be two miles and may include muddy parts or offshoots with uneven terrain. The boardwalk could be a turnaround point for a less difficult walk.

**Sunday, September 29, 2024, 8:00 am - 11:00 am  
Natural Area Teaching Laboratory (NATL),  
3215 Hull Rd, Gainesville**

Park at the Florida Museum of Natural History where you will meet trip leaders Christine Zamora and John McVay. We will walk to the NATL trails on Natural Area Drive. 17 different species of warblers have been reported here in the month of September. We'll be searching the hackberry trees whose feeding aphids should attract warblers. Pine and Prairie Warblers are expected. We will be walking the Old Field trail and some of the Hammock trail along the west side of the Upland Pine. The SEEP trail is dependent on water levels. Difficulty 1: up to a mile.



*Birder extraordinaire Tim Hardin with his birder-in-training, daughter Aurora. Photo by Debbie Segal.*

## President's Message

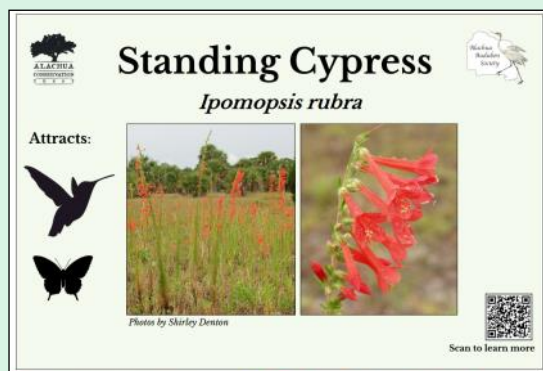
Alachua Audubon, together with Audubon chapters throughout the state, rallied with numerous other environmental organizations to oppose the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's destructive plans to develop golf courses, lodges, pickleball courts, and more on sensitive habitat in some of our favorite state parks. The sheer number of organizations and individuals who responded so quickly to the action alerts and sent opposition letters to the Governor, FDEP, and Congressional Representatives was the encouraging bright light in an otherwise hugely destructive plan to impact such treasured natural areas. Thank you to all of you who expressed your opposition. Governor DeSantis responded to the state-wide outcry by halting the State Park plans, although temporarily. If you wish to track this and other significant conservation issues, consider signing up for [Audubon Florida's Advocate Newsletter](#), and you will receive updates on this and other important environmental work in Florida.



Alachua Audubon just selected four outstanding college interns from a field of 15 applicants for the AAS's fall internship program. This educational program is more popular than ever thanks to the valuable career experience these students receive and the many AAS board members who volunteer and contribute to the program. This semester the interns will learn to mist net, process, and band birds; staff AAS's educational booth at several upcoming festivals; contribute to youth educational opportunities; maintain kestrel nest boxes and monitor kestrel activities; and attend birding field trips.

On the topic of festivals, Alachua Audubon will be tabling at three upcoming fall festivals – Hawthorne Sustainability and Resilience Summit on September 28<sup>th</sup>, the Horticultural Expo on October 19<sup>th</sup>, and the Lucee Bat Festival on October 26<sup>th</sup>. We need volunteers to help staff the AAS booth for a 2 to 3-hour shift at these festivals. This is a wonderful way to share the joy of birds and conservation with others while volunteering with your local Audubon group. To request more information or to sign up for a shift, please send an email to [Contact@AlachuaAudubon.org](mailto:Contact@AlachuaAudubon.org).

The field trip committee consisting of Tim Hardin, Tonya Becker, Renee Slaw, and Danelle Zukowski have assembled an impressive slate of upcoming weekend field trips which are posted on the AAS website [Events Calendar](#) and on the [AAS Facebook page](#). The Audubon-led Wednesday Bird Walks at Sweetwater Wetlands Park start the 2024/2025 season on September 4<sup>th</sup> at 8:30 am. The Birds and Brews bird walk continues every first Sunday afternoon of the month, and the Santa Fe College birding classes are open for registration. The Bird Rambles – a slower paced weekday birding stroll – will start back soon. Please join us on one of these bird walks and consider bringing a friend. With over 100 Audubon-led bird walks annually, it is no surprise that Alachua County has been dubbed the “eBirder-est” county in the state, as Adam Kent and Adrianna Nelson point out in their *Alachua County, a Florida eBirder Hotspot* article in this newsletter.



I end with a special shout-out to Karen Brown and Lee Bloomcamp who have contributed many hours designing and producing 25 lovely and informative plant signs for the Prairie Creek Native Plant Garden. The signs will soon be installed within the garden circles. Karen and Lee will next focus their attention on the educational sign for a kiosk describing the Bird Banding Lab and the Native Plant Garden. This has been a multi-year project and it is closer to completion, thanks to Karen and Lee.

By Debbie Segal

## Alachua County, a Florida eBirder Hotspot

A morning stroll through the boardwalks, platforms, and paths at Paynes Prairie is sure to yield interesting sights. A colorful orange-and-black Halloween Pennant dragonfly skims past a huge basking gator and disappears into the vegetation where a Limpkin expertly extracts a snail from its shell. On the exposed mud, a Spotted Sandpiper bobs its tail and searches for small invertebrates while Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks excitedly whistle. Another flash of movement is spotted down the trail – a fellow birdwatcher! In Alachua County, it is a regular occurrence to encounter other birders in the field. In fact, running into other birders is almost expected and it's no wonder why – many protected natural areas and accessible eBird hotspots, friendly birders, and a strong Audubon chapter have fostered a particularly active birding community. With so many birders coming out of the woodwork, it begs the question: How does the birding scene in Alachua County compare with other counties? Where does Alachua land on the list of “eBirder Hotspots” in the state? We looked to eBird for answers.

In 2023, 444 bird species were recorded in eBird in Florida. Topping the list of counties with the most species was Miami-Dade with 338 species (Table 1). Though Brevard County has more species recorded in eBird overall, in 2023 it came in a close second with 337 species. Further down the list, Alachua County ranked 12<sup>th</sup> in overall number of species recorded, with 292. Frankly, this is no surprise. Coastal counties have a higher potential for pelagic birds, shorebirds and Caribbean vagrants, factors which limit the maximum number species recorded in landlocked counties like Alachua.

*Table 1. Population, total eBird species, & 2023 eBird species by county, ranked*

County	Species on eBird in 2023	2023 eBird rank	Total species on eBird*	Total species rank	2023 Population	Population rank
Brevard County	337	2	424	1	610,723	10
Miami-Dade County	338	1	420	2	2,688,237	1
Pinellas County	301	5	416	3	959,918	7
Monroe County	308	4	408	4	82,044	38
Palm Beach County	328	3	406	5	1,494,805	3
Duval County	296	8	400	6	995,708	6
Volusia County	299	6	396	7	558,520	12
Escambia County	295	9	374	8	321,296	21
Okaloosa County	284	16	369	9	212,021	26
Franklin County	291	13	368	10	12,276	64
Orange County	266	28	366	11	1,427,403	5
<b>Alachua County</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>279,729</b>	<b>23</b>
Collier County	291	14	362	13	380,221	18
Wakulla County	297	7	360	14	33,732	49
Sarasota County	286	15	359	15	439,392	14
Lee County	284	17	354	16	772,902	8
Indian River County	293	11	354	17	160,986	31
Broward County	278	20	353	18	1,940,907	2
Leon County	269	24	353	19	294,128	22
Santa Rosa County	280	18	353	20	188,994	29

\*as of June 2024

While interesting, the total number of species observed in a year doesn't bring us closer to knowing if a given county has a more active birder community. To determine this metric, it's helpful to know how many people were consistently eBirding throughout the year and consequently seeing a higher number of species on any given year. We used the number of people who saw 200 species or more in 2023 as a metric because this relatively high

number represents a species total that should be achievable with a consistent effort throughout a year (Table 2). There were 39 people in Alachua County who reported more than 200 species in 2023, 10 more than the second-place county, Pinellas. How about if we lower the number of total species seen in a year to 150, a number that should be achievable with a more casual birding approach spread out over a year? Alachua still ranks number one with a whopping 86 people achieving that milestone, 17 more than the second-place county, once again Pinellas.

*Table 2. eBirders with >200 & >150 species in 2023 and rankings*

County	# eBirders reporting >200 species in 2023	>200 rank	# eBirders reporting >150 species in 2023	>150 rank
Alachua County	39	1	86	1
Pinellas County	29	2	69	2
Palm Beach County	25	3	52	3
Miami-Dade County	16	4	39	6
Brevard County	15	5	45	4
Manatee County	15	6	27	10
Duval County	13	7	35	8
Orange County	11	9	37	7
Collier County	11	8	23	12
Charlotte County	10	10	20	14

The 200 and 150 species cut offs are arbitrary but give an indication of how much local birding effort is made in each county. Eleven other counties outrank Alachua by the number of total species in 2023, yet Alachua County dominates in numbers of active local birders with high species totals. For example, Miami-Dade County has the most reported species in 2023 with 338, but it ranked 4<sup>th</sup> in number of birders having reported more than 200 species. Brevard County ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in number of birders having reported more than 200 species in 2023 despite having the second-highest species total for the year. Let’s emphasize “local” birders in these cases. Some counties, like Miami-Dade or Brevard, might receive high numbers of visiting birders, but those birders usually are not consistently birding the county throughout the year. In more extreme cases, counties such as Monroe, Escambia, Okaloosa, and Franklin all ranked ahead of Alachua in total number of species observed in 2023, but none of those four counties ranked in the top 10 in number of eBirders observing more than 200 species in the year.

You might be thinking, maybe there are just more birds in Alachua County somehow. Here’s another way of looking at the numbers. Counties with coasts have more species in general than inland counties, so we compared Alachua with other landlocked counties. In 2023, Alachua County had the highest species total (292) of any inland county. Leon County had the second highest inland county total with 269, a sign of high birding effort in Alachua County.

Finally, we threw county population into the mix. If we look at a summary table (Table 1), we see that Alachua County is ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> in population and 12<sup>th</sup> in both total species reported to eBird and species reported to eBird in 2023. Even in counties with larger populations, the high number of active birders relative to population in Alachua County is impressive. For a county with a smaller population and thus a potentially smaller pool of birders, and with a lower all-time and 2023 eBird species total, there are more local county residents going birding than in other counties.

But the fun with numbers doesn’t stop there. Cross the Alachua County line, and the story is very different. For example, Putnam County, bordering the eastern edge of Alachua, had only one eBirder who reached over 150 species in 2023, and no birders reaching over 200. Putnam is just one of many counties in Florida that receives minimal eBird coverage. What does this mean for local birders? It means that there are a lot of places adjacent to Alachua County that are rarely covered. This leaves plenty of room for exploration, bolstering citizen science efforts, and the potential to discover some unusual new species and productive birding sites.

Of course, numbers of species are not the only measure of an active birding community. As Kenn Kaufman wrote at the end of his book *Kingbird Highway* (1997),

*One thing was becoming obvious to me now: list-chasing was not the best way to learn birds. It had been a good way to start, an incentive for getting to a lot of places and seeing a lot of species. But the lure of running up a big list made it all too tempting to simply check off a bird and run on to the next, without taking time to really get to know them. And there was so much that I did not know.*

Does Kaufman's quote imply that listing birds is bad practice? Not at all. In fact, it clearly states that the quest for a high bird list leads to visiting new places and seeing new species, both excellent ways to enjoy birding. However, the quote does suggest that it is also rewarding to spend time observing and understanding birds and the listing is a means to this end.

These high numbers of birds seen on an annual basis clearly show there are many birders in Alachua County, a fact not lost on anyone who has spent time birding here. With so many active birders and a friendly birding community, any new visitor to the county is sure to feel welcome surrounded by a similar crowd. Kudos to Alachua birders, making Alachua the "eBirder-est" county in the state!

Adam Kent and Adrianna Nelson

## Alachua Audubon Volunteers Needed

**Volunteers Needed for Fall Festival Booth Duty!**

Join the **Alachua Audubon Society** in spreading the love for birds and nature by volunteering at our chapter's booth at fall festivals! We need enthusiastic members like you to help engage with the community, share information, and represent our local chapter.

**How to Sign Up?**

Use the QR codes below to easily sign up for a shift that fits your schedule. Just scan or click, select your preferred time, and you're all set!

**Fall Events and Festivals**

Event	Date	Time	Location
The Hawthorne Sustainability and Resilience Summit	Saturday, September 28th	9:30AM - 3:30PM	New Generation Church in Hawthorne, FL
Alachua County Fall Horticultural Expo	Saturday, October 19	9AM - 4PM	Newberry, FL
Lubee Bat Festival	Saturday, October 26	10:00AM - 5:00PM	Lubee Bat Conservancy in Gainesville

**Thank you for supporting our chapter and helping to make a difference. See you at the booth this fall!**

**Optional Training**

We will be hosting an optional training session for volunteers before the first festival event. This training will cover everything you need to know about volunteering at the booth, including tips on engaging with visitors and sharing our mission. Details on the training session will be provided once you sign up!

**Volunteer Perks**

For every hour you volunteer, you'll earn a ticket for our prize drawing at the AAS Holiday Social in December. The more you volunteer, the better your chances of winning!

Please contact Ellen Frattino (efrattino@gmail.com) with any questions.

**H**appy Fall Migration! I hope everyone is enjoying the birds as we approach cooler weather. As summer ends, we're gearing up for our season of festivals and events, and AAS needs volunteers to share our love for birds at three upcoming festivals this fall.

A short, optional training session via Zoom will be offered for anyone interested in learning more about staffing the booth. Volunteering at these events involves talking to community members about our organization, distributing educational materials, running games for kids, and helping with setup and takedown of the booth. It's a great opportunity to meet fellow birders and introduce them to something we all cherish!

The flyer contains all the essential information for signing up to help at the AAS booth. Shifts range from two to three hours, but you are welcome to sign up for multiple shifts if you wish.

Additionally, we're excited to introduce a new perk: our Volunteer Prize Drawing! For every hour you volunteer for AAS, your name will be entered into a drawing for prizes at the Holiday Social in December.

Thank you so much for your support! We couldn't do it without you!

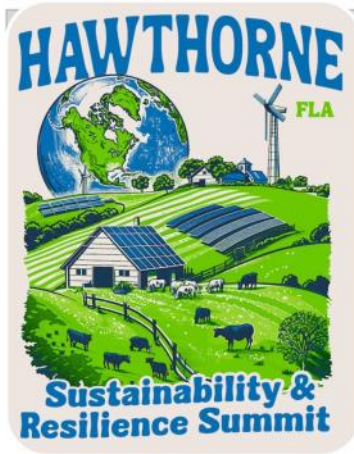
Ellen Frattino. AAS Board,  
Festivals and Events Committee

## Bird Watching Class Offered

Develop your skill in identifying the birds in our region. Whether you are a beginner or have some experience in birding, this field course will increase your knowledge. Santa Fe College Community Education in partnership with Alachua Audubon is offering a bird watching course on Saturday mornings from September 21 to October 12. A second course will run from November 2 to November 23. Each course consists of 4 field trips to local natural areas, guided by experienced birders. Field trips begin at 8:30 AM and last 2-2.5 hours. Register online at the [Santa Fe College Community Education website](#). Click on [Register here](#), then [Explore Community Classes](#), then [Outdoor Adventures](#), then [Intro to Birds and Birding 1B2](#). You may also try [this link](#). For assistance, call 352-395-5193 and mention the course name and number above. Course Fee: \$49.00. *Note: Must be at least 18 yrs old to register. Bring binoculars. Register early as this class fills quickly.*



*Red-headed Woodpecker.  
Photo by Deena Mickelson.*



### NEW GENERATION CHURCH

22500 SE 71st Avenue  
Hawthorne, FL. 32640

**9:30am-3:30pm**  
**SATURDAY**  
**SEPT. 28TH**  
**2024**

Keynote Speaker:

## ENNIS JACOBS

J.D. Pres.,  
Southern Alliance for  
Clean Energy, Tallahassee, FL.

**“Building Sustainable Climate Justice Solutions  
for Our Most Vulnerable Communities.”**

- Panels on: Development and Wetlands Conservation, Health, and Weatherization.
- Moderated by mayors of Archer, High Springs, and Micanopy.
- Climate Vulnerability Study presented by Steve Hofstetter and John Nix.

SCAN QR-CODE TO  
PRE-REGISTER!



### Good News for Birds

In October 2023, nearly a thousand migrating birds died in one night after crashing into the McCormick Place Lakeside Center in Chicago. This prompted the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) to take out a full-page ad in the *Chicago Tribune*. Many Chicago birding groups had been monitoring collisions at the building and voicing concerns due to the Center’s location along Lake Michigan’s lakefront, an area known for its high concentration of birds during migration.

The tragic October event brought local and national media attention as well as a meeting with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Center is now installing a reputable window collision deterrent, Feather Friendly, on its glass windows. The next step is to convince the Chicago City Council to adopt mandatory bird-friendly building design guidelines. More than 20 U.S. cities and municipalities have enacted bird-friendly building policies since 2008.

ABC offers resources on home window solutions, tips for advocating for retrofitting buildings, model local ordinances, and more. Visit their website [here](#).

*Adapted from ABC’s Summer 2024  
Bird Conservation magazine.*

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## Hunting a Sea Eagle

Newfoundland is a jagged-shaped island that hangs off the northeast corner of Canada. It is a raw land of sea cliffs, fjords, bogs, and boreal forests. A creation of the collision of tectonic plates, part of the island is formed from the seabed of the ancient Iapetus Ocean, while the western part of the island includes The Tablelands, an upthrust part of the earth's mantle. The entire island was scoured and scraped by glaciers during the last ice age. Black Spruce and Balsam Fir dominate its young forests.

Five thousand years ago, indigenous people first arrived on Newfoundland, probably by canoe. Four thousand years later, the Vikings sailed their longships past icebergs to establish a settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows. Five hundred years after that the English explorer, John Cabot (who was really a Venetian named Giovanni Cabato), stopped by on a three-masted caravel (although he may have landed in Nova Scotia or Maine; all we know is that it was cold and he said that Cuba was off to his left) and this summer the Morrows flew into St. John's on an Air Canada Boeing 737.

Twelve days into our trip, after seeing tens of thousands of gannets, puffins, kittiwakes, razor-bills, guillemots and murrelets, we went on a three-hour whale watch with Sea of Whales Adventures. We found sperm whales, along with the usual seabirds. Noting that we were birders, the trip leader, Kris Prince, asked if we were interested in seeing a Steller's Sea Eagle. He said that he could take us out the next morning before his whale tours started. We would search the section of coast where the sea eagle had been seen. He cautioned that there was no guarantee that we would find the bird. We agreed to meet him at his house at 4:45 am for a two-hour sea eagle hunt.

Steller's Sea Eagles are large dark brown raptors with white shoulders, legs, and tails. They have a seven-foot wingspan and breed along the Siberian coast. The entire population is only about four thousand birds. This particular sea eagle started wandering in the summer of 2020 with sightings in interior Alaska and Texas before jumping to the northeast, where subsequent sightings have included Massachusetts and the Canadian Maritimes. Lately, it has been hanging around the Bonavista peninsula in Newfoundland.

The next morning, the Trinity Lighthouse was still flashing as we drove into the small town where we were to meet Kris. He was waiting for us and quickly got us outfitted in one piece red-and-black survival suits. We walked down to the dock, about a block away, where he had moored a 26-foot Zodiac with two 90 horsepower outboard motors. It was overcast and windy with rough seas. We launched at 5:03 am, just as the sun was theoretically rising somewhere in the fog over the North Atlantic. Layers of fleece and down under the survival suits helped with the cold until the Zodiac rounded Fort Point and accelerated. Then, it was a frigid June morning on the open water in Newfoundland.

We were sitting on a bench seat behind the driver's seat. Our position partially protected us from the salt spray that was kicked up as the Zodiac bounced across the swells. The Zodiac had a curved metal lattice, sort of like a roll bar. Kris spent part of his time standing on the back of the driver's seat, holding on to the lattice and steering the boat with one foot.

The coast of Newfoundland is never straight. It is a series of promontories, heads and points separated by bays, harbors, coves, and bights. Scattered about are seven thousand associated islands.

About four miles down the coast we slowed and began to cruise along Spaniards Bay, the first of the areas in which the sea eagle had been reported. A fog layer obscured the upper slopes as the three of us scanned cliff ledges and the tops of spruce trees with our binoculars, finding only Bald Eagles. I counted sixteen during the morning and likely missed others.

We passed a rocky beach. Kris said that there was a freshwater lake just beyond that the sea eagle sometimes hunted. Unspoken was the fact that if it was doing so, we would miss it.

We swung around Bonaventure Head to Trinity Bight. Bonaventure Head rises several hundred



feet above the water. Huge dark slabs of wet rock slant steeply down to the water where angry surf swirls around sea stacks and floods sea caves along its lower edge. Black Guillemots nest on ledges here, small black alcids with white wing patches. It is easy to get mesmerized by the dramatic landscape and forget to look for birds. We kept looking, but still, no sea eagle.

We worked along Trinity Bight and Cat Cove, finding more Bald Eagles and a few ravens, but no sign of our target bird. We were running out of both territory and time. When you go on a rarity hunt, there is never any guarantee of success.

As we rounded Maiden Point, a low rocky outcropping, I looked over and saw the Steller's Sea Eagle looming on the upper slope. It was unmistakable; brown and white with a large orange beak. Kris pulled our cameras out from the dry well and we

tried to take photos as the Zodiac rose and fell in the rough swells. Most of my pictures were crisp shots of foggy sky or the rock ledge in front of us, but a few showed the sea eagle with enough detail for identification.

We felt exuberant. We had found our bird. It was not only a life bird for my wife and me, it was a magnificent wild creature at home in a rough, raw environment. As we watched, it took off, showing its white tail and flew to the north. Kris gunned the Zodiac and we swung around Maiden Point back into Cat Cove, looking for it. We found it sitting in the top of a Black Spruce. It ignored our close approach. Cat Cove is sheltered with calmer water and we were able to get a few good photos.

It was a quick return trip across the open waters of Trinity Bay, past Bonaventure Head, and around Fort Point and the Trinity Lighthouse into the calmer waters of Trinity harbor. After we docked, we walked back up to Kris's house, got out of our survival suits and settled up, before heading back for breakfast.

It was a good morning.



*Steller's Sea Eagle. Photo by Don Morrow.*

By Don Morrow

*Reprinted with permission of the author from the Appalachian Audubon newsletter.*

## FEATHER QUESTING IN TEXAS (2002)

In the wee hours of the morning of January 19, 2002, a group of enthusiastic Gainesville birders gathered to begin a birding adventure organized by Howard Adams. He had dubbed the ten of us “Feather Questers.” By 4:18 A.M. Howard Adams, Pat Burns, John Hintermister, Mary Landsman, Barbara Mollison, Craig Parenteau and Bob Simons were loaded into two minivans and headed for the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Don Morrow was waiting for us in Tallahassee. Lloyd Davis and Greg McDermott were flying into Houston and would meet us there. Over nine days we logged 3,276 miles and found 192 species of birds, including 142 life birds for the group; everyone had at least one lifer. We found all but four of our 20 target birds and saw 25 of the 29 “Key Species” for the Rio Grande Valley listed in *Birdfinder: A Birder’s Guide to Planning North American Trips*.

Houston was our goal on **Day One**. As we passed through Tallahassee, we picked up Don Morrow, engaged “warp” drive and headed west on I-10. There was rain most of the way and we saw quite a number of accidents, some very bad. We were thankful for our drivers (Howard, Barbara, John, Greg and Don) who were to take us safely through the entire trip. We crossed into Texas about 4:00 PM and a stop at the newly built Texas Welcome Center produced our first Texas bird, Great-tailed Grackles (a lifer for Bob and Barbara). A brief stop at Anahuac NWR’s Rice Unit provided views of a Merlin flying low over the fields and trees at sunset. After an unimaginably bad dinner at a Black-Eyed Pea Restaurant, we arrived at our motel somewhat fed and definitely disgruntled and tired, but happy to find Greg and Lloyd.

**Day Two** began at 6:20 A.M. with a trip to Brazoria NWR where we found the recently reported Trumpeter Swan. In addition to a good variety of the more common ducks we found a pair of Cinnamon Teal, some waders and shorebirds, and our first look at White-faced Ibis. A flock of Horned Larks was lovely in their bright plumage and our first White-tailed Hawk gave us stunning looks both in flight and perched. Late in the morning our caravan, which now included Lloyd and Greg in a car, headed south. We stopped to scan the many flocks of Snow Geese in the fields and some of us were successful in spotting a Ross’s Goose. The rest had to be satisfied with the Greater White-fronted Geese, which were easier to see. We stopped at Aransas NWR to see the Whooping Cranes and also enjoyed the sight of a White-tailed Kite and its acrobatic flight. American Avocets and a Reddish Egret were on the flats. We spent the night in Harlingen.

Howard had arranged for us to spend a half-day at El Canelo Ranch, which caters to dove hunters and birders, an interesting mix. An early start enabled us to begin **Day Three** at the ranch at dawn. John spotted our first Harris’ Hawk and Don a Great Horned Owl. In the yard surrounding the main buildings we watched a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl catching its breakfast. Under the roof of a pavilion Cave Swallows were nesting and a flock of Brewer’s Blackbirds were feeding in the corral. We roamed around the ranch looking for sparrows and other thicket birds. We were well pleased with a resident flock of Wild Turkeys and a variety of sparrows which included Lark, Clay-colored, Savannah, Vesper, Grasshopper, Olive and Lincoln. The frequent and prolonged looks we had at Lincoln Sparrows were a special treat. Birds that we were to see daily we saw first on the Ranch: Golden-fronted and Ladderback Woodpeckers, Verdin, Bewick and Cactus Wrens, Inca Doves, Pyrrhuloxias, Great Kiskadees, Crested Caracaras, and Couch’s Kingbirds. While we were crashing about trying to get everyone looks at the Bewick’s Wren and Ladderback Woodpecker we flushed a trio of Common Pauragues. Two of them settled again under a nearby bush and through the scopes they were stunning—a favorite bird for Pat, Lloyd and Mary. Hiking through the many fields produced Green-tailed Towhee, Sprague’s Pipits and a group of bathing Long-billed Curlews. The Curlews were a magical sight. We stopped for lunch in Raymondville where John had promised us a Vermillion Flycatcher. Believe it or not, here it was—a beautiful male. Laguna Atascosa NWR was our next stop. We had fleeting looks at a Bell’s Vireo and our first White-tipped Doves, Plain Chachalacas, Green Jays (Barbara’s favorite bird) and Long-billed Thrasher. We spent that night in Brownsville.

**Day Four** began at Sable Palm Sanctuary, where we saw our first Altamira Oriole. From the blind we had excellent views of several Least Grebes and a nice feeding flock included Black-throated Green, Orange-crowned and Wilson’s Warblers. Next, we visited the Brownsville Dump—a decided disappointment, lacking in garbage (because of the long weekend) and birds. We did find a pair of Chihuahuan Ravens and Pat spotted a Peregrine Falcon on the ground, surrounded by vultures. It had caught a gull and when one of the vultures tried to steal a bite the Peregrine put on quite a show chasing away all the vultures. From the Dump we drove

to McAllen, where we were to spend the next three nights. We stopped at Bentsen State Park where we added Black-throated Gray Warbler and Eastern Screech-Owl to the trip list and saw our first Neotropical Cormorants. Bob had his best experience of the trip standing on the trail while the Plain Chachalacas came to roost and hearing them "purr" and call. Late afternoon found us at the spot where a Hook-billed Kite was reported to appear daily around 4 PM. We staked out the spot, but no Kite appeared. We did get directions for finding a Blue Mockingbird at the Cemetery in nearby Weslaco. Then, as we were leaving the spot a Hook-billed Kite flew low across the road in front of the last van and that group all had definitive looks at the bird. That night in McAllen we had great meals at Joe's Crab Shack; where Howard liked the redfish and the coconut shrimp were superb.

The Mockingbird would be a lifer for everyone so dawn on **Day Five** found all of us but Bob, who seemed to have come down with the flu, in the Weslaco Cemetery. White-tipped Doves, a small flock of Lesser Goldfinches and a cruising Cooper's Hawk kept us amused but there was no Mockingbird. We motored on to Santa Ana NWR in search of more cooperative birds. A BOBCAT walking across the road surprised part of our group when it stopped, sat down and licked one of its front legs. After inspecting us carefully it sauntered off into the brush leaving us in awe. Another part of the group had an encounter with an Indigo Snake, which slithered across the trail just in front of them. The drought in the Valley was much in evidence at Santa Ana NWR. Only a few ponds had water enough to attract birds. We were glad to have better looks at the Cinnamon Teal as well as Long-billed Dowitchers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and Black-necked Stilts. Three Roseate Spoonbills worked their way around the edge of the largest pond. Our best bird was a Clay-colored Robin, which Greg spotted deep in the tangled brush. It was cooperative and everyone had a chance to see it through the scopes. A Tropical Parula was spotted by John and the Visitor Center's feeders provided great looks at a male Buff-bellied Hummingbird. Late afternoon we were again at Bentsen SP watching for the Hook-billed Kite. We had to be satisfied with a Gray Hawk.

Early on **Day Six** (again without Bob) we were back in the cemetery, stalking the mockingbird. We had been there only a short time when Don spotted movement in the undergrowth behind the fence. Eureka? Yes! It was the Blue Mockingbird deep in the tangle of vines and shrubs, foraging on the ground. As it moved around, we caught glimpses of its tail, its head, and its blue color. It flew into a thick bush and started to sing a lovely song, lower and more melodic than a Northern Mockingbird. Then it flew onto the top of the fence, up into a tree, and then disappeared into the thicket. It was THE favorite bird of the trip and we were a very happy group. At the Nature Conservancy's Chihuahua Woods, we had excellent views of Curve-billed Thrasher and Cactus Wren and at Anzalduas County Park we added American Pipit, Western Meadowlark and Northern Rough-winged Swallow to our trip list. At Bentsen SP we made a final unsuccessful attempt for the kite. Back at the motel we found that Bob was much improved after a visit to a doctor.

**Day Seven** found us in Salineno. We arrived at dawn. Soon Howard spied two dark birds atop a tall tree. They proved to be Red-billed Pigeons, a life bird for Howard and Craig. We enjoyed watching a Ringed Kingfisher hovering over the Rio Grande River and at Pat and Gayle DeWinn's feeders we saw Audubon's Oriole. At Falcon State Park we found our only Black-throated Sparrows of the trip. At Chapeno we missed Brown Jay but found Green Kingfisher. After a fruitless trip to San Ygnacio for White-collared Seedeater we spent the night in Zapata. We said "good-by" to Lloyd, who left for Houston and his flight home. On **Day Eight** part of the group visited the Zapata Library, where they easily spotted the White-collared Seedeater sitting on a fence. It was the favorite bird of the trip for John, Don and Greg. Mid-morning we headed home, going north out of Zapata with all eyes searching for one final Texas specialty. John spotted it a Greater Roadrunner, an "exquisite experience" for Pat. It was the last lifer of our trip. We dropped Greg in Houston for his flight back to Washington DC and stopped for the night at the Louisiana state line. **Day Nine** we drove through rain (again), left Don in Tallahassee and arrived back in Gainesville at 8 PM, a contented group of birders, already talking about where the next Feather Quest would take us.

Mary Landsman with help from Howard  
Adams, Pat Burns and John Hintermister






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