

The Brown Pelican



The Newsletter of the Coastal Bend Audubon Society

On the Web at <http://www.coastalbendaudubon.org>

Winning Water for Whooping Cranes



Photo by Linda Fuiman

Whooping Cranes, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

Since Whooping Cranes faced near extinction in the 1940s, when only 15 individuals were seen in Texas, conservationists have made a significant difference by protecting their habitats. Today about 300 birds winter at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, but the death of 23 juveniles in the winter of 2008-2009 was cause for alarm about the species' continued survival. The Aransas Project (TAP) boldly took a state agency to court for failing to protect freshwater inflows needed to maintain the delicate estuary balance these endangered birds and other wildlife depend on. In the following excerpt, Jim Blackburn, the lawyer representing TAP, shares his experience with CBAS following the trial. The judge is expected to make a decision on the issue this summer.

See Whooping Crane Trial on p. 3

Audubon's 112th Christmas Bird Count

Each year for three weeks, more than 60,000 volunteers participate in the largest, longest-running wildlife census in the world: the Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC). From the Arctic Circle to South America, volunteers take part in 2,000-plus "count circles." This year's count took place from Dec. 14 through Jan. 5. The count is considered "citizen science," and the results, which are carefully compiled, are used by Audubon in their annual state of the birds report, which includes information about birds that are in decline.

Report from Owen Fitzsimmons, CBAS volunteer coordinator:

Every year from mid-December to early January volunteers gather data on local bird populations, helping establish long-term population trends on hundreds of species. I was fortunate enough to be able to participate in a few of the counts this year, including the Corpus Christi count on December 17th. The weather wasn't great, but it was a fun boat ride.

See CBC p. 3

Monthly Meetings

Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2012

Speaker: Timothy Anderson

Topic: Northern Aplomado Falcon Recovery (See p. 2)

Tuesday, March 6, 2012

Speaker: Daniel Reed

Topic: Reddish Egrets (See p. 2)

Location:

Corpus Christi Museum of Science and History.

1900 N. Chaparral
Corpus Christi, TX

Time: 7:00 p.m.

*All members and the public
are invited! Monthly
meetings are held
on the first Tuesday of the month
at 7:00 p.m.*



Earth Share
OF TEXAS

One environment.
One simple way
to care for it.

CBAS FIELD TRIPS

Gene Blacklock will lead free guided field trips this year for members of certain local conservation groups including CBAS. If you plan to attend, please communicate your interest to: blacklockg@gmail.com.

February 11, 2012 (Saturday) — Habitats of Carmel Hills, Live Oak County. Start at the junction of 534/ Carmel Hills Road - 7:00 a.m.; no restrooms are immediately available. Bring water, hat etc. Energy Rating: slow walking, terrain moderate.

John Keller caught this super-sized spider web with his phone camera at the CBAS Sanctuary. Although he and David Newstead went to shoot feral hogs, which are serious pests there, none were seen that day. They did find a screech owl in a nest box.



18th Annual Migration Celebration

April 21-22, 2012

San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge

Bird banding, hawks, refuge tours on van or foot, and marsh buggy, kayaking, photography, exhibitors, children's activities, nature store.

Phone: 866.403.5829

Website: <http://migrationcelebration.org/>

MORE TEXAS EVENTS ON PAGE 4

Feb. 17-20, 2012:

Great Backyard Bird Count

(www.birdcount.org)

The annual Great Backyard Bird Count is the perfect opportunity for novice and experienced birders to contribute to science. The event, hosted by Audubon, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and Canadian partner Bird Studies Canada, provides a snapshot of the whereabouts of more than 600 bird species. Watch and count birds for at least 15 minutes on any day of the count.

Upcoming Programs

Feb. 7, 2012 - Falcon Recovery

Timothy R. Anderson, field coordinator
Partners for Fish & Wildlife and Coastal Programs,
U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Anderson will speak on the recovery of the Northern Aplomado Falcon, a federally listed endangered species, whose historic range included the prairies of southern Texas and New Mexico. The bird became endangered because of overgrazing and brush encroachment, conversion of native habitats to agriculture or exotic pastures, and toxins from pesticides. Efforts such as reintroduction programs have been underway for many years, but the species continues to face obstacles to a more speedy recovery. Over the long term, the species will require a landscape-level, cooperative effort, combining efforts of biologists, landowners, and agency cooperators.

March 6, 2012 - Reddish Egrets

Daniel Reed, biologist and researcher
Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute,
Department of Animal and Wildlife Sciences,
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Learn what researchers have recently discovered about the movements, migration routes and wintering areas of Reddish Egrets at the March CBAS meeting. Until now little was known about these birds' movements. Birds marked with satellite transmitters have revealed some secrets about where they stopover and where they winter after leaving the Texas Laguna Madre. This information will help guide management plans and increase understanding of the connectivity among breeding populations.

Reed grew up on the Sabine River just north of Orange, Texas. He earned a B.S. in biology from Lamar University. While there he was introduced to birding and ornithology by Dr. Andy Kasner and the local Golden Triangle Audubon chapter. Reed has experience monitoring shorebirds at the Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge and surveying Mexican Spotted Owls for Sul Ross State University in the Guadalupe Mountains. Reed is currently studying the seasonal movements of Reddish Egrets in the Laguna Madre, for his master's thesis.

CBC from p. 1

Beth Hoekje, Winnie Shrum, Carmen Hagopian and I were originally going to survey Nueces Bay proper, but the open bay can be a nasty, dangerous place in bad weather, so we launched the boat from Labonte Park and motored down the Nueces River instead. From the get-go we saw wave upon wave of trumpeting Sandhill Cranes heading to their morning feeding grounds. The overcast sky grounded all the Black and Turkey Vultures, which were clustered in several large groups along the river. Other raptors were plentiful, and we even caught a brief glimpse of a Northern Flicker. We wrapped up the day with some close-up looks at Seaside Sparrows before heading in for warm food and coffee. See photo p. 6.

Larry Jordan, a compiler for the Christmas Bird Count (CBC), mentions the following highlights for the Corpus Christi and Flour Bluff counts. The Flour Bluff Christmas Bird Count went very well in terms of number of species. We had 182, including species such as Mountain Bluebird, Sage Thrasher, Clay-colored Thrush and Glossy Ibis. The total number of individuals was low due to a low count on Red-winged Blackbirds. The number of Redheads was pretty good. Due to technical difficulties, the compiling of the data on the National Audubon Society website the count is not yet complete. About 30 birders participated.

Results are not in yet for Corpus Christi's CBC yet; however, the number of species is not going to be very high. We did get some birds like Clay-colored Thrush, Audubon's Oriole and Green-tailed Towhee. The compiler is still sorting out detail and trying to verify some rare species.

Tom Langsheid reported that the tentative CBC for Kingsville stands at 169 species. This would be the 3rd highest count if all species are verified. Some of the best birds were Mountain Bluebird, Fox Sparrow and Sage Thrasher.

If you are interested in participating in the Christmas Bird Count next year, visit the National Audubon website or contact Owen Fitzsimmons, volunteer coordinator, at 361.885.6247 or owen@cbbep.org. To learn about this year's results, visit <http://birds.audubon.org/christmas-bird-count>.

Keep up with the latest birding news and be our friend!

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Name:
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Audubon Society
(CBAS)

Whooping Crane Trial by Jim Blackburn

I just finished a two-week trial before Judge Janis Graham Jack in Federal District Court in Corpus Christi. It was the experience and event of a lifetime. I felt like I had been learning and practicing for thirty years for this case.

I represent The Aransas Project (TAP), a non-profit group formed to protect San Antonio and Aransas Bays in an attempt to secure freshwater inflows for this important estuary. TAP filed suit against the Commissioners and the Executive Director of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) and the South Texas Watermaster for violating the federal Endangered Species Act. We alleged that the TCEQ allowed so much water to be removed from the San Antonio and Guadalupe Rivers that the bay salinity was changed beyond what the drought would cause, leading to less food supply for the Whooping Cranes, altering the drinking water supply of the whooping cranes and ultimately causing the death of 23 cranes during the winter of 2008-2009.

The bench trial (heard by a judge, not a jury) lasted for about two weeks. The case was heard by Judge Jack. TAP put on 10 expert witnesses, five citizen witnesses and called two TCEQ employees as adverse witnesses. The TCEQ defendants were joined by interveners Guadalupe Blanco River Authority (GBRA), San Antonio River Authority (SARA) and Texas Chemical Council (TCC), with GBRA assuming a major role in the defense effort. Together the defendants called 11 expert witnesses. At the end of the trial, Judge Jack indicated that she wanted us to file written closing arguments and indicated that she may not issue a ruling before the end of summer. There are several hundreds of exhibits and thousands and thousands of pages of technical papers and documentation as well as hours of video tapes of crane feeding habits that she intends to review. It will take a while to do this information justice.

The case was complex. We put on two types of evidence that linked Whooping Crane deaths to freshwater inflows. We put on statistical evidence linking freshwater inflows to whooper mortality, and we then put on a step-by-step chain of causation evidence that linked Whooping Crane mortality to poor food supply and needing to fly inland for fresh drinking water, rather than drinking brackish marsh water. . . . Tom Stehn, the now-retired Whooping Crane coordinator at the Aransas Refuge, was subpoenaed and testified the next day regarding his methods for determining mortality of cranes on the

See TRIAL p. 6

Photo by Linda Fuiman



Real live Harris's Hawks attracted a crowd at the CBAS meeting in November. Jason Slade, curator of birds & mammals at the Texas State Aquarium, demonstrated how Harris's Hawks can become socialized.

Piping Plover Research Opportunities

Piping Plovers are listed as a threatened species nationwide. Around 35 to 45 percent of the North American population winter on the Texas coast. Not much is known, however, about the quality or availability of wintering habitat here in Texas. CBAS President David Newstead is conducting research using radio telemetry to learn more about their movements and habits and to better determine their critical wintering habitats – important information for future management and protection.

To track Piping Plovers using radio telemetry, one must capture them first and then fit them with radio transmitters. Most capture methods involve a net of some sort: whoosh net, rocket net, drop net, etc. About 15 plovers have been captured so far, but more are needed to increase data gathered from the study. David is looking for volunteers who can help trap, preferably on a somewhat regular basis (regular experience = faster net setup time).

The days start early and usually last a full workday, six to eight hours. The work involves carrying equipment, setting up nets, and a lot of waiting for birds to move into capture range. Conditions on the mudflats might be tough, but if you participate, you will get to be a part of important research for one of the more threatened bird species on the continent. If interested, contact:

David Newstead
361.885.6203
dnewstead@cbbep.org

WHAT'S UP AROUND TEXAS

Laredo Birding Festival February 1- 4, 2012

Location: La Posada Hotel, Laredo, Texas

The only place in the U.S. to have boasted four species of Kingfisher, Ringed, Belted, Green and Amazon along with local stars and residents White-collared Seedeater and Green Parakeet. Field trips, seminars, speakers including our own Gene Blacklock, and banquet with Pete Dunne.

Phone: 800.361.3360

Website: www.laredobirdingfestival.com/

Annual Whooping Crane Festival February 23-26, 2012

Port Aransas, Texas

Celebrate the survival and re-emergence of the Whooping Crane, North America's most endangered species, which makes South Texas its migratory winter home.

Tours, speakers, optics, and photography workshops.

Phone: (800)45-COAST or (800.452.6278)

Website: www.whoopingcrane festival.org

Big Shell Beach Cleanup – 17th Annual Saturday, February 25, 2012

Padre Island National Seashore (PINS)

Come out and join Capt. Billy Sandifer in his effort to keep PINS clean. Be sure to check website for updates in case of date change due to adverse conditions.

Phone: 361.882.3439

Website: www.baysfoundation.com

Galveston FeatherFest & Nature Photo Festival -- 10th Anniversary

April 12 – 15, 2012

Galveston Island, Texas

One of the largest birding festivals in Texas, and the only one with a dedicated nature photography track. Come experience early spring migration birding and nature photography at its best! Trips, seminars, socials, and birders' bazaar.

Phone: 832.459.5533 or 1.888.425.4753

Website: www.galvestonfeatherfest.com

Attwater's Prairie Chicken Festival April 14 - 15, 2012

Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR at Eagle Lake

Prairie chicken viewing tours, refuge van and auto tours, woodlot birding walks, native plant walks,

Phone: 979.234.3021 **Website:** www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/attwater/index.html

Birding the Refuge

by Lauren Schneider, vice president CBAS

The Whooping Cranes have arrived for another winter at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, and I, for one, am extremely excited! Whooping Cranes are one of only two crane species found throughout North America, the other being the much more prevalent Sandhill Crane, and with their majestic black, white and red plumage they are one of the most breathtaking birds in North America as well. But it's not just their beauty that would make any birder want them as part of their life list, it's their rarity.

There were only an estimated 334 whooping cranes left in the wild as of 2007. Interestingly enough, today's population have all descended from 15 individuals that composed a migratory flock in Texas in 1941.

And lucky us, they winter right here in our backyard! The Aransas National Wildlife Refuge was originally founded by President Franklin Roosevelt and today consists of over 115,000 acres dedicated to the sole purpose of preserving habitat for native Texas wildlife and migratory birds. The refuge gives the public access to several hiking and birding trails as well as an audio tour loop, all of which provide ample opportunities to view wildlife and their flagship species, the Whooping Crane.

Come along as I recollect my trek to the refuge to see these remarkable birds for myself.

I am amazed at my drive as dozens of Red-tailed Hawks, Kestrels, and Northern Harriers can be seen from the road alone. As I enter the refuge, I always stop at the Rail Trail in a normally futile attempt to catch a glimpse at the elusive and highly camouflaged rails for which the trail is named. Today I'm in luck. Not only do I see an eight-foot American alligator, which is much more impressive without a fence in front of it, but I spot a Virginia Rail as well.

As I meander along the road on my way to the observation tower, I stop off at Jones and Hog Lake. Only last year these lakes were teeming with Grebes and a variety of other waterfowl. Unfortunately, the drought has taken its toll, and I am sad to say there is nothing left of either lake besides some spotty mud puddles, a field of tall grass having replaced the lakes completely. In my experience the observation tower is one of the best locations to view Whooping Cranes. Not today. Not only is the large tower still under construction (slated to be completed by mid-December) but there is not a bird to be seen. Where could the cranes possibly be?



Photo by Lauren Schneider

And then it hits me. Heron Flats. There were several cars parked there on my way out and, as any birder knows, one stopped car could mean anything from a bathroom break to a lost driver but several stopped cars almost always means a sighting.

As I walk the short path to the blind, I know I am right; the calls of cranes and geese become audible. As I scan the landscape with my binoculars, it becomes difficult to ascertain just how many birds are present. I see an extremely large flock of Snow Geese and several dozen Sandhill Cranes and, finally, towering above all else are three large white birds. I spot the red caps. Whooping Cranes. I hike down the trail to get a closer look, and I am rewarded. Approximately 100 Sandhill Cranes fill the air in their flying V formations and intermixed are two small flocks of Whooping Cranes. I can hear the flocks calling back and forth to each other, almost as if those on the ground are directing those in the air where to land. I watch these beautiful birds for as long as the sun will let me. As the sun sets, I leave the refuge elated at seeing one of the rarest birds in North America.



Photo by Lauren Schneider

TRIAL from p.3 refuge. Tom described to the court his careful and thorough methodology for his aerial census to determine peak flock size, and to detect individual crane mortalities. His testimony effectively refuted any allegations that the 23 dead cranes simply were “missing.”

We also linked estuary salinity to blue crab and wolfberry abundance and then linked bay salinity to the inflow and water withdrawal patterns authorized by TCEQ. We put on evidence that the TCEQ had authority to address these overuse issues if they wished. We put on evidence that the Senate Bill 3 process was not working, and we offered answers in the form of remedies that involve creating a balance between the economic requirements of the basin and the inflow needs of the bay and the birds.

For their part, the TCEQ primarily put on evidence that they did not have authority to manage or control existing water use permits. According to the TCEQ, existing water use permits are exempt from the Senate Bill 3 process (we agree) and these existing permits cannot be altered under current authority (we disagree). TCEQ did not offer any technical experts, choosing instead to rely upon GBRA and SARA to present the scientific evidence. GBRA’s case challenged the death of the 23 birds and Tom Stehn’s counting methods, and also asserted that Whooping Cranes are omnivores and eat other food items when crabs and wolfberries are in short supply due to drought and water use. They also put forward an expert in the review of crane carcasses (a so-called necropsy), arguing other causes of death (although emaciation was noted in the necropsy reports), and they put forward an expert with an energetics model to explain how the cranes could find sufficient energy with different diets (but with no offer of proof that the food was actually available on the refuge).

They also put on an economist who assumed that if TAP won, all of the water in the river system would then be dedicated to freshwater inflows, shutting down numerous existing businesses and causing significant economic harm to the region. This last witness did not even pretend to analyze the remedy that TAP was seeking (e.g., something akin to the Edwards Aquifer process), choosing instead to make the most incredible assumption possible, leading to a conclusion of economic ruin to the region. I was not impressed.

Overall, I feel very good about our case and our evidence. Our witnesses were excellent across the board. . . . It was such a relief to get before an impartial federal judge and be able to be heard. I don’t know if we will win or lose. I do know that we got a fair hearing.

Spend Time with a Master: Gene Blacklock

Birding 102 - Spring Semester 2012
Mondays 6:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m. and
Saturdays 7 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Classes include 10 lectures and four field trips, meet on Mondays and Saturdays throughout the spring to focus on field silhouette identification with species by species comparisons for birds expected to occur in North America, aspects of their natural history and preferred habitats, and occurrence in our area.

Sparrow and Finch Identification
Lecture and Field Trip
January 27 & 28, 2012

Lecture: 6:30 p.m.- 8:00 p.m., Friday, Jan. 27

Field Trip: 7:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m., Saturday, Jan. 28

Information/Registration: Texas A&M Corpus Christi

Website: <http://outreach.tamucc.edu/regforms/birding.html>

Phone: 361.825.5967

Contact: joseph.miller@tamucc.edu

Red Knots in the News

David Newstead, president of CBAS, was interviewed recently by the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* about his work tracking Red Knots on the beach and in the air! Newstead’s work with Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program involves following birds equipped with radio transmitters in a small plane. To learn about his recent Red Knot findings, see <http://www.caller.com/news/2011/dec/26/red-knots-the-center-of-attention-in-migratory/>

Photo: Winnie Shrum



Carmen Hagopian (pictured), Winnie Shrum, and Beth Hoejke braved the cold and counted birds for the Christmas Bird Count while Owen Fitzsimmons (pictured) piloted the boat.

See Fitzsimmons’s story p. 1.

Welcome New Newsletter Editor

Barbara Rapstein has cheerfully agreed to put together future issues of the Brown Pelican. Rapstein, an avid birder and active CBAS member, has professional experience in advertising and years of service to Audubon organizations. Please send news items and photos to her at brownpelicanrap@yahoo.com.

Field Trip Coordinator

CBAS is in need of a field trip coordinator. Please contact David Newstead, president, at dnewstead@cbbep.org or another CBAS officer for more information.

Big Day Organizational Support

CBAS needs the help of its members to share in the duties of organizing Big Day for next year. If you would like to help with the venue, dinner, teams, t-shirts, silent auction, publicity or any other aspect of planning and support please contact Rosalie Rossi at rosalierr@gmail.com.

Wind Energy Zones: Comments Due Feb. 27

from American Bird Conservancy

On Dec. 29, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) announced plans to create a rule authorizing competitive leasing for wind and solar projects on the public land it administers. The announcement states that before competitive leasing for wind projects could occur, the agency would designate wind energy development zones.

Wind energy development zones, if done right, could be helpful to both birds and wind energy development. Siting is the most important step in making wind energy bird-smart. Zones could protect birds while encouraging well-sited wind energy development.

BLM's Federal Register Notice is available at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2011-12-29/html/2011-33429.htm> and the agency is accepting public comments and suggestions about the proposed rulemaking until Feb. 27, 2012.

New or Renewing Membership

<input type="checkbox"/> New Member		<input type="checkbox"/> Renewal		Chapter: C1ZW130Z	
Name:		Address:			
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Phone (optional)		Email (optional)			
Indicate Membership Preference: I would like to become a					
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The Newsletter of the Coastal Bend Audubon Society

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Regular CBAS meetings:

First Tuesday of the month, September through May, 7 p.m. at the CC Museum of Science and History



The Brown Pelican

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The Coastal Bend Audubon Society is a non-profit 501c(3) organization dedicated to the conservation of birds and bird habitat, and to conservation education in the Coastal Bend.

The organization is supported by contributions from local memberships and from the National Audubon Society.

Your CHAPTER needs you! You can help steer the course of growth and change in our community by working together. Please contact us at 361.885.6203 about getting involved!

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This newsletter is compiled, written and published every other month. News is gathered from volunteers, contributing authors and other sources. Please send comments, articles and photos to: Barbara Rapstein at brownpelicanrap@yahoo.com.



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