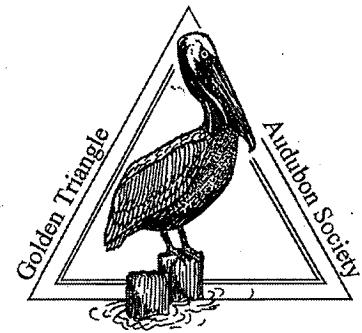


The Brown Pelican



The Newsletter of the Golden Triangle Audubon Society

Vol. 20 No. 9

September 2014

Membership Meeting
Thursday September 18, 2014 7:00 p.m.
Garden Center, Tyrrell Park, Beaumont

Butterflies - SE Texas and Beyond

Dr. Harlan Stewart

Butterfly watching and bird watching have much in common. Both involve colorful and active subjects of wide diversity and distribution. Interestingly, while the world holds innumerable insect species (a million? multiple millions?) and huge numbers of Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths - well north of a hundred thousand species) bird and butterfly species occur in roughly similar numbers world wide, in North America, and in Texas. While a distressing number of butterfly ranges seem to avoid the upper Texas and western Louisiana coastlines, Southeast Texas does not lack for a wide and fascinating range of species. This program will review some of the commonly occurring butterflies that are found in Southeast Texas, as well as their place in the wider scheme of butterfly diversity in North America.

Harlan Stewart is a retired pathologist from Nederland who has had a life-long fascination with insects, including butterflies, that extends from childhood in Montana through adulthood in Texas. He has graduated over the years from accumulating a collection of several thousand insects from Montana, Central Texas and Southeast Texas to the beginnings of a photographic insect collection, facilitated by the advent of digital photography.

We will plan on having the doors open by 6:00 p.m. and the program will start at 7:00 p.m. sharp. A light supper will be available from 6:15 p.m.

The Brown Pelican

Vol. 20, No.9 September 2014
Issue number 210

Golden Triangle Audubon Society

Web Site for more information
www.goldentriangleaudubon.org

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The Brown Pelican is published monthly except July by the Golden Triangle Audubon Society, P. O. Box 1292, Nederland, Texas 77627-1292

Calendar of Events

Important Note: Field Trip notices published here should always be regarded as needing confirmation just before the date. Changes will always be posted on the web site at www.goldentriangleaudubon.org. Confirmation of the location will also normally be available at the Membership Meeting that is usually, but not always and is not in September, two days prior to each trip, or by contacting Field Trip Committee chair, Steve Mayes at 409-722-5807 or sgmayes@hotmail.com.

Thursday, September 11. Sierra Club Meeting, Unity Church, 1555 S. 23rd Beaumont, TX. Reception with light refreshments 6:00 p.m. Presentation 7:00 p.m. Landscape Scale Green Spaces for Hurricane Surge Protection by Environmental Attorney, Jim Blackburn. Mr. Blackburn is an author, poet, fisherman, birder, kayaker, and co-founder of the Galveston Bay Foundation. He was the lead attorney for the Aransas Project in its attempt to protect the whooping cranes, and to ensure that fresh water inflows into the bay were sufficient to sustain the blue crab population on which the whoopers feed. For more information contact John Paul at 409-201-0005

Saturday September 13 (tentative date). Sabine Woods Work Day. Scheduling Work Days in September is always very difficult with many activities competing for the four Saturdays in September, and insect population issues. **We will decide a few days before whether conditions are acceptable for this work day.** The insect population at Sabine Woods has recently been very high. Normally, it abates somewhat in September, but if it has not done so sufficiently, we will probably reschedule for October 4.

Riding mowers, especially heavy duty ones, are most valuable for grooming the trails, but there is a lot of trimming of bushes and undergrowth needed on the trails inside the woods. Loppers will be the best tool for much of this. We have a few but if you have your own, so much the better. We also would like to continue thinning the excessive number of small oak trees in some older parts of the Woods and one small chain saw would be helpful in

this process. If you have a larger chain saw, check with us a few days prior in case any larger limbs or dead trees may have fallen and need to be cut.

We recognize that the ponds appear somewhat overgrown and we are currently reviewing options for dealing with this problem. We believe the willows will be very attractive to birds when they grow a little more, even though we may need to remove one or two now to improve viewing of the others.

We plan to start around 7:30 a.m., and will probably work until about noon. Sometimes on past fall work days, we have shortened the schedule because of the presence of migrants!

Please bring work gloves and insect repellent, and whatever hand tools you have – loppers, clippers etc. We will try to provide light refreshments.

For more information, please contact John Whittle at 409-722-4193 or johnawhittle@aol.com.

Refreshments

Each month, we rely on volunteers to provide the refreshments at our membership meeting. We thank, Jessica Barry, Jean Beavens, Linda Davis, Cindy Harland, Denise Kelley, Sherrie Roden, Christine Sliva, Gail Slocum, Herb and Mary Stafford, Harlan Stewart, and all others who brought refreshments in August. **We need volunteers to bring items for the September meeting.** Please do not wait until the last minute to volunteer! We do not expect one person to bring everything, but please call so we can coordinate! Even if you can just bring drinks and cookies or something similar, please call Jana Whittle at (409) 722-4193 (or email her at janafw@aol.com) **as far in advance as possible.** Please help if you can! We thank all those who brought refreshments over the last year or so!

Saturday September 20. Jefferson County Fall Migration Count. Please contact John Whittle (johnawhittle@aol.com or 409-722-4193) to volunteer to help in this county-wide count. See the item below for more details.

Thursday September 18. Membership Meeting. Details on page 1.

Saturday September 27. Field Trip to the Smith Point Hawk Watch. Our leaders will be there from about 8:30 a.m. This trip will be one week later than our normal field trip schedule.

Broad-winged Hawk migration typically peaks around the 25th-26th-27th of September in southeast Texas, but the exact timing is dependent on weather conditions along the routes the hawks take. However, the Hawk Watch is manned every day, and if the 27th is not convenient, you could consider going a day or two earlier or later. The Broad-winged Hawk migration is tracked quite extensively in New England and especially over the famous mountain ridges in Pennsylvania. But there are no organized Hawk Watches that we know of between the mid-Atlantic states and the Texas watches at Smith Point and Hazel Bazemore near Corpus Christi. So it becomes somewhat of an interesting exercise to "guesstimate" the progress of the large concentrations of hawks as they work their way between the mid-Atlantic and Texas. (They usually takes about a week.) There is also another population of Broad-winged Hawks that funnels between Lakes Erie and Huron over the Detroit area, and presumably joins the other stream somewhere in Texas. There is some evidence that some of the flights go west of Hazel Bazemore, but all the Hawks certainly funnel through the east coast of Mexico at Veracruz where the coastal plain between the Gulf of Mexico and the Sierra Madre Oriental mountains is very narrow.

To reach the Smith Point Hawk Watch site from Winnie, take Highway 124 south towards High Island. After 12 miles, turn right on FM1985 and follow it about 14 miles (two miles past the access road for Anahuac NWR) until it meets FM562. Follow FM562 (south) another 14 miles to Smith Point. At the end of FM562, there are usually signs to the Hawk Watch. Continue straight until almost reaching the bay, and turn left on a shell/limestone oilfield road, bearing left again to the parking area next to the Hawk Watch Tower on the Candy

Abshier Wildlife Management Area. It takes at least 90 minutes from the Golden Triangle to reach the site. This Field Trip is much more a come and go as you wish trip, and help on hawk identification is always available on the tower!

Our leaders may lead a group into the nearby woods looking for migrants, but you may stay on the tower if you wish. Mosquitoes are not normally a problem on the tower, although they almost always are in the woods. Availability of food and fuel is limited or non-existent in Smith Point, so bring your lunch!

The Smith Point Hawk Watch is conducted every day from August 1 through the end of October by the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory.

Thursday October 16. Membership Meeting. Details in next month's issue.

Saturday October 18. Field Trip to Sabine Woods. This trip will be looking for some of the later migrating species, and may include other places in the Sabine Pass area.

Membership Dues

To simplify our record keeping, all memberships now run from January through December. Membership dues remain at \$15 per year. You may pay at any membership meeting (checks preferred), use the subscription/membership blank on the back page of the hard copy version or simply mail to us at PO Box 1292, Nederland, Texas 77627.

Dues for all members will be for the period ending on December 31. The memberships of new members joining in August or later in the year will extend to the end of the following calendar year. For new members joining National Audubon using the membership blank printed on the back page of each printed issue of the *Brown Pelican*, we receive a rebate of the entire first year's national dues, and no Chapter dues are expected for that first year.

As a reminder, dues are voluntary for National Audubon Society members living in the Chapter's official territory, which is defined by zip codes, but basically covers all of Jefferson, Orange and Hardin Counties and one or two zip

codes adjacent to these counties. We do welcome members in other nearby counties!

Your dues cover the cost of printing and mailing the *Brown Pelican* to you, and help fund our other activities. We urge you to help us do more by receiving your *Brown Pelican* as a PDF attached to an email if you do not already. We will continue to post the Newsletter on the GTAS website at www.goldentriangleaudubon.org. The typical issue is currently less than 500 KB so it is not a large file, although we are now including added additional materials to the electronic version and plan to include pictures in the future, both of which may increase the file size slightly. Please send an email to johnawhittle@aol.com with your request, including the name we are currently send the printed copy to, and the email address you want us to use.

Fall Migration Count; Saturday Sep 18

A number of our regular participants will not be available this year, and we will welcome your offers to help.

We will be in the field from sun-up to sun-down covering as much of Jefferson County as possible, but the morning hours are particularly important, as bird activity is highest then, and bird are more easily detected. We can accommodate feeder watchers and in-city birders also.

If you have no previous experience with bird counts, we can pair you up with a more experienced observer. More eyes equals more birds seen!

Please contact John Whittle (johnawhittle@aol.com or 409-722-4193) to volunteer to help in this count.



EarthShare of Texas represents Audubon Foundation of Texas and the National Audubon Society in payroll contribution programs in workplaces throughout Texas. For more information about how you can support Audubon Foundation of Texas and the National Audubon Society at your workplace, call 1-800-GREENTX, or visit www.earthshare-texas.org.

Field Trip to Bolivar Flats – 23 August 2014

It was one of the hottest days of the year that the Golden Triangle Audubon Society gathered at the Houston Audubon Society's Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary for their August field trip. Birding in August can be an unpleasant experience at any location but Bolivar is better than most for two reasons: no bugs and lots of birds! With the hopes of avoiding biting insects and observing hundreds (if not thousands) of shorebirds, gulls and other birds, more than a dozen local birders headed out onto the flats!

The group was not disappointed as the birds were obvious right away. A Northern Harrier cruised over the nearby marshes. These low flying raptors are typically thought of as wintering birds on the upper Texas coast but a small number also nest here and there was at least one nesting pair on the Bolivar peninsula this year. A hovering White-tailed Kite was also seen over the marsh demonstrating its hovering hunting technique.

Shorebirds were evident right away with a Long-billed Curlew easily seen and Ruddy Turnstones quickly picked out. Least and Western Sandpipers handled the duties of the small sandpipers along with numerous Sanderlings while Marbled Godwits joined the curlews at the other end of the shorebird size range. A few Short-billed Dowitchers worked shallow pools on the flats while Spotted Sandpipers in both spotted and unspotted versions picked at the sargassum debris on the beach.

Bolivar Flats is great place to work out the differences in the small plovers and all four of our common species were well represented on the day. Pale Piping Plovers with orange legs and stubby bills were the most numerous on the day despite their endangered status. They were easily compared to Semipalmated Plovers which have similar orange legs and stubby bills but noticeably darker brown plumage. Wilson's Plovers were also easy to find and easily distinguished from the other small plovers by their larger size and heavy bills. Snowy Plovers were a little harder to find but were eventually located and identified by their pale backs, longer, thinner bills and dull legs. Of course, large Black-bellied Plovers were also seen (and in good numbers) but there was no problem picking them out from their smaller cousins. The Black-bellies are significantly larger with very different plumage and, in fact, there were individuals displaying both the plainer winter plumage and the more striking black and white breeding plumage on the day.

Reddish Egrets are always a target bird on the Bolivar trip and one was found very quickly on this trip very near the vehicle barrier at the flats. It soon lurched into the quirky feeding style for which the species is well known, staggering and jumping around while occasionally spreading one or both wings. For some of the birders present, it was their first time to see this odd but entertaining display. Another interesting aspect of the Reddish Egret was also seen by the group: color morphs. Just as humans can be blondes or brunettes, some birds of the same species can be of different colors. In the case of the Reddish Egret, there are dark and white morph birds. The dark morphs are normally the more common, especially on the upper Texas Coast, and have dark grayish bodies with

reddish-orange heads and necks while the white morph birds are all white. These white egrets could easily be mistaken for a Snowy or Great Egret without close inspection but, luckily, the group got to see several of both of the color morphs on the day.

Gulls were numerous at the flats but mostly restricted to Laughing Gulls with a few Ring-billed Gulls thrown in. Terns were a bit more diverse. Royal Terns were numerous but a little searching turned up several of the larger Caspian Terns as well with their large reddish bills setting them apart. Good numbers of small Black Terns were present in a variety of plumages along with the even smaller Least Terns. A few Forster's Terns were around and a number of Sandwich Terns with their yellow-tipped bills were eventually picked out. Odd Black Skimmers were also present with their large orange and black beaks. Skimmers are the only birds whose lower mandible is longer than their upper mandible and the birders were able to get nice scope views of these birds demonstrating this bit of trivia.

Another target bird of the Bolivar trip is always Horned Lark. This is a common species in the more arid landscape of west Texas but is quite uncommon on the upper Texas coast. It is largely restricted to the dune areas of the immediate coast and even there can be uncommon. It did not take long to find Horned Larks on this trip, however. Several birds played hide and seek with the group, running back and forth across open stretches of beach only to quickly hide behind small bits of vegetation. A little patience allowed for good scope views of the Larks showing their yellow faces and even (to some extent) the "horns" they are named for.

But Bolivar Flats is not the only place to explore in this area. Other exciting birding spots were also visited by the Golden Triangle group and other nice birds were located. Clapper Rails on Yacht Basin Road along with a probable Acadian Flycatcher. Common Nighthawks were perched on fence posts and trees in several areas. Bob's Road gave looks at several Seaside Sparrows. Rollover Pass produced a multitude of birds including great looks at several American Oystercatchers. Even our lunch stop produced a soaring Anhinga over a grocery store!

This trip traditionally wraps up with a stop at the Houston Audubon Sanctuaries in High Island. Boy Scout Woods was a little quiet in the heat but still produced a few birds. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were pretty easy to see and an Olive-sided Flycatcher was perched in a high snag for all to see. A Yellow Warbler was seen flitting in the trees by some while most everyone got a look at the Chuck-will's-widow that was flushed from near the trail. A Magnificent Frigatebird soared in the distance. Smith Oaks also produced some nice birds including a brief look at a Hooded Warbler and a more cooperative Black and White Warbler. The rookery at Smith Oaks wrapped up the trip with lots of Neotropic Cormorants, Cattle Egrets and Little Blue Herons with a few Snowy Egrets and Roseate Spoonbills thrown in for good measure. All in all, a was another fine trip to the Bolivar area was had by all who joined in giving great looks at shorebirds and songbirds alike. Several life birds were seen on the day by members of the

group but even those who had seen it all before agreed it was a great trip. Soaring Wood Storks bid the group goodbye as they left for home (or dinner at Al-T's).

The following species were noted by the trip leaders: Wood Stork (9); Magnificent Frigatebird (2); Anhinga (1); Neotropic Cormorant (61); Cormorant species (1); Brown Pelican (82); Great Blue Heron (5); Great Egret (3); Snowy Egret (2); Little Blue Heron (20); Tricolored Heron (4); Reddish Egret (7); Cattle Egret (50); Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (6); White Ibis (1); Roseate Spoonbill (15); Black Vulture (2); Turkey Vulture (2); White-tailed Kite (4); Northern Harrier (1); Red-tailed Hawk (2); Clapper Rail (3); Common Gallinule (6); American Coot (2); Black-bellied Plover (65); Snowy Plover (5); Wilson's Plover (4); Semipalmated Plover (9); Piping Plover (14); Killdeer (7); American Oystercatcher (4); Black-necked Stilt (5); Spotted Sandpiper (4); Willet (25); Lesser Yellowlegs (1); Long-billed

Curlew (4); Marbled Godwit (32); Ruddy Turnstone (4); Sanderling (45); Least Sandpiper (28); Western Sandpiper (10); Short-billed Dowitcher (5); Laughing Gull (105); Ring-billed Gull (4); Least Tern (95); Caspian Tern (12); Black Tern (85); Forster's Tern (15); Royal Tern (100); Sandwich Tern (4); Black Skimmer (22); Inca Dove (1); Common Nighthawk (8); Chuck-will's-widow (2); Ruby-throated Hummingbird (2); Downy Woodpecker (1); Olive-sided Flycatcher (2); Eastern Wood-Pewee (1); Acadian Flycatcher (1); Empidonax species (3); Eastern Kingbird (2); Scissortailed Flycatcher (1); Loggerhead Shrike (2); Blue Jay (2); Horned Lark (4); Barn Swallow (7); Carolina Wren (1); Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (11); Northern Mockingbird (1); Black-and-white Warbler (1); Hooded Warbler (1); Yellow Warbler (1); Seaside Sparrow (4); Northern Cardinal (1); Great-tailed Grackle (50); Orchard Oriole (4); 76 species.

Steve Mayes

Bird Sightings – July 2014

In this section of the Newsletter, we now generally limit the report to birds justifiably shown as rare or very rare on the local checklists for the week of the sighting, but we also try to mention any particularly high numbers as well as any sightings that may be of special interest for reasons other than those mentioned.

We have reviewed eBird and other submitted records for the Texas counties we have always covered – Angelina, Hardin, Jasper, Jefferson, Newton, Orange, Sabine, San Augustine and Tyler. We use all checklists in eBird that are reasonable in the light of other checklists and reports (if any) for the date and place, and/or where the rarities are supported by documentation or photographs. We also reviewed, looking for very rare or vagrant species only, records for nearby counties or parts of counties that are easily accessible to and often birded by birders in our core Golden Triangle Audubon area. These are Chambers, Galveston (High Island and Bolivar Peninsula only) and Liberty counties in Texas, and Calcasieu and Cameron Parishes (both west of the Calcasieu River only) in Louisiana.

The format of the listing is Species – Date – County-more

Northern Shoveler	Jul 1, 21	JEF-Big Hill Rd (1) RHRC
Ring-necked Duck	Jul 7	JEF-Big Hill Rd (1) RHRC
Turkey (wild)	Jul 14	HAI-Old Kountze Rd (1) Andy Newman
Glossy Ibis	Jul 19	JEF-TP (1) Thomas Hellweg
Whimbrel	Jul 26	GAL-North Jetty (1) multiple observers
Osprey	Jul 7	JEF-Big Hill Rd (1) RHRC
Bald Eagle	Jul 19	JEF-TP (1) Thomas Hellweg
Bald Eagle	Jul 19	JEF-BTNP-Edgewater (1) Thomas Hellweg
Solitary Sandpiper	Jul 14 on	JEF-Big Hill Lake (1) RHRC
Stilt Sandpiper	Jul 14	JEF-Big Hill Rd (4) RHRC
Stilt Sandpiper	Jul 21	JEF-Big Hill Rd (3) RHRC
Buff-breasted Sandpiper	Jul 28	JEF-Big Hill Rd (40) RHRC
Yellow-throated Vireo	Jul 12	JEF-BTNP-Edgewater (1) JHH
Yellow-throated Vireo	Jul 12	ORA-BTNP-Four Oaks Ranch Rd (1) JHH, SM
Swainson's Warbler	Jul 12	ORA-BTNP-Four Oaks Ranch Rd (1) JHH, SM

precise location if available – (number) – Observer(s)

Commentary: As could easily have been predicted, July did not produce many noteworthy sightings. Those that we have noted mostly fall into two categories: birds of species that normally all migrate, but one or two did not, and early returning shorebird migrants. We have noted Wood Stork sightings in a separate section. Fall shorebird migration for some species begins as early as the third week of July, so we have only noted a few earlier than that. One year old birds of a number of shorebird species often fail to migrate northwards, and these birds often also retain the basic (winter) plumage. The species in the sightings below are ones for which this is rare. Ospreys are very rare in our area in summer, but are year-round residents on the Gulf Coasts of Alabama and Florida. Bald Eagles have nested in Cattail Marsh for the last two years at least, but the normal pattern has been for the birds to disperse, northwards it is believed, post-breeding. This includes the juvenile birds. The two passerine species listed are regular breeders in Hardin County and further north, but are noted here because breeding warblers and vireos are quite rare in Jefferson and Orange Counties.

Abbreviations used: HAI – Hardin County; HJ – Harrison Jordan; HS – Harlan Stewart; JEF – Jefferson County; JHH – John Haynes; ORA - Orange County; RHRC – Rene Hebert and Rita Czek; SM – Steve Mayes; TP – Tyrrell Park incld Cattail Marsh.

Wood Storks

Wood Storks were once comparatively rare along the western Gulf coast, but in recent years have become regular post-breeding wanderers. The consensus is that these birds are from the populations breeding in coastal Mexico, and not birds of Florida origin. Over the years, they have appeared earlier and earlier in our area. The earliest known local sighting this year was of one bird on June 21 at the usual site on US 90 immediately east of the Liberty County line. There were nine there June 28. There were reports from Cattail Marsh and Big Hill Road during July, and numerous subsequent reports.

Field Trip to Liberty-Dayton Area – 2 August 2014

The Trinity bottomlands in Liberty County hold many great birds but one in particular catches the attention of birders: Swallow-tailed Kite! Many years ago, this graceful raptor was widespread nesting well up the Mississippi River and throughout the southeastern United States including much of eastern Texas. But years of pesticides, shooting, land clearing and other problems caused the U.S. population of this bird to plummet. Eventually, Swallow-tailed Kites only remained fairly common in Florida with a smaller population in Louisiana. The Texas breeding population was completely gone. Luckily, the population remained strong in Latin America and more recent times brought with them stronger environmental laws that curbed many of the problems the kites (and other birds) were facing. This allowed the Swallow-tailed Kite to reestablish itself in much of its former range. They can now be found, at least in small numbers, from South Carolina to eastern Texas but they are still uncommon enough to cause a stir with birders. It was with a hope of finding these raptors that birders from the Golden Triangle Audubon Society gathered in the town of Liberty, the stronghold of the Texas Swallow-tailed Kite population.

The frequency of Swallow-tailed Kite sightings in eBird for the Dayton-Liberty area in 2014 so far is matched only by an area in the Mobile River bottomlands just north of the City of Mobile, and three widely separated areas in Coastal Florida. Although there are undoubtedly several nesting pairs in the Trinity River area (and others in the Sabine and Neches bottomlands just north of the Golden Triangle), the Liberty area is a favored area for the kites to congregate in August from a wider area in preparation of their southward migration.

This field trip comes down to birding two spots in the Liberty area: Liberty Municipal Park and the stretch of the Trinity bottomlands that lies along Highway 90 between the towns of Liberty and Dayton. Liberty Municipal Park gives, not only the possibility of Swallow-tailed Kites but is excellent for songbirds as well. The recent creation of the “Knobby Knees” Trail in the Trinity National Wildlife Refuge adjacent to, and now connected to, the park gives even more coverage of the forest and cypress swamp habitat common along the Trinity River. We are promised an even more extensive series of trails in the refuge leading north from the Knobby Knees trail in the not too distant future. Walking the existing trails of the park and refuge produced a number of birds in the morning hours. Carolina Chickadees chattered from the tree tops while Carolina Wrens fussed from the underbrush. Red-eyed Vireos sang from overhead while White-eyed Vireos played hide and seek in the deep bushes. Tufted Titmice sang along with Northern Cardinals while Blue Jays called along (I can't call it singing).

Yellow-billed Cuckoos seemed especially abundant in the park and it seemed that every time the group turned a corner there was a cuckoo flying out of another tree! Blue-gray Gnatcatchers put in an appearance while Eastern Bluebirds were obvious in the open areas of the park. Several Summer Tanagers were located along with a couple of tree-creeping Black-and-white Warblers. Acadian and Great Crested

Flycatchers were found and woodpeckers were fairly cooperative with Red-bellied, Downy and Pileated all being seen by the group. A few Mississippi Kites were seen soaring overhead but no Swallow-tails among them.

Moving on from the park to the Highway 90, changed the focus of the search from songbirds to kites! Driving between Liberty and Dayton while watching for soaring kites can be a tricky business but several experienced hands were at the wheel and scanning the skies while trying to avoid traffic! A number of other species were seen over the highway and adjacent bottomlands. Several Anhingas soared by and a White Ibis passed through. Black and Turkey Vultures were noted along with more Mississippi Kites and a Tricolored Heron. It began to look like, for the first time in the history of this field trip, the group might get skunked on Swallow-tailed Kites until ... success! A Swallow-tailed Kite was spotted zipping over the highway near Dayton. A quick pullover to the road shoulder allowed the group to enjoy the bird better and, sure enough. More kites were quickly spotted! Eventually at least a half dozen Swallow-tailed Kites were seen flying over the road and the nearby trees. They cruised over the tree tops looking for prey (large insects, lizards, small snakes and birds) to snatch out of the branches. The group enjoyed the kites for a good long time and even got to explain the allure of the birds to a local police officer who stopped to see what was going on. The officer was very nice about the situation and now has a whole new appreciation for birders and where they are willing to go for good birding!

With Swallow-tailed Kites under the belts of the birders along with other great birds like Mississippi Kites, Summer Tanagers and Yellow-billed Cuckoos it was another great trip to Liberty County for the Golden Triangle Audubon Society. What a pleasure it is to have a chance to see these once rare birds in numbers practically in our own back yards and what a pleasure to know that these magnificent raptors are on the rebound and there should be many more opportunities to see them in the future.

The following species were recorded by the trip leaders:
Anhinga (4); Great Egret (1); Tricolored Heron (1); Cattle Egret (5); White Ibis (1); Black Vulture (2); Turkey Vulture (10); Swallow-tailed Kite (6); Mississippi Kite (12); Rock Pigeon (15); Eurasian Collared-Dove (1); Yellow-billed Cuckoo (10); Hummingbird species (3); Red-bellied Woodpecker (2); Downy Woodpecker (4); Pileated Woodpecker (4); Acadian Flycatcher (3); Great Crested Flycatcher (1); Eastern Kingbird (1); Loggerhead Shrike (1); White-eyed Vireo (2); Red-eyed Vireo (2); Blue Jay (1); American Crow (4); Crow species (2); Purple Martin (25); Barn Swallow (3); Carolina Chickadee (10); Tufted Titmouse (3); Carolina Wren (6); Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (2); Eastern Bluebird (2); Northern Mockingbird (4); European Starling (4); Black-and-white Warbler (2); Northern Parula (2); Northern Cardinal (6); Painted Bunting (1); Common Grackle (4); Great-tailed Grackle (2); House Sparrow (6).

Steve Mayes

Changes in the Local Bird Scene over the Last Thirty Years

Part One

Changes in bird distributions often happen quite quickly by biological standards, but nevertheless are generally slow enough that a retrospective evaluation is needed to draw attention to them. Recent intensive studies to determine the effects of global climate change have in some cases provided a firm backing for what would otherwise be largely anecdotal observations on changes in bird distributions. This is the first part of a two part series.

In this article, we discuss some of the more readily obvious changes that we have observed in the local area. Many, but not all, of these involve birds moving their wintering or breeding ranges northwards, but there are changes in other directions. Some of these changes involve us seeing breeding species that formerly were restricted to areas further south. Others involve birds that no longer come far enough south in winter for us to see them. In other cases the directional trends appear to be unique to the species involved. We have focused more on species new to the area, or no longer present, rather than any attempt to evaluate modest changes in the populations of species that have spent the entire year, the breeding season or the winter season in the area over the entire period. We have not included species where only a few individuals have been seen, nor have we included species, mostly migratory birds that pass through the area, where there are large fluctuations from year to year that may reflect more the vagaries of relatively short term weather effects than anything else.

Among waterfowl, two species that stand out are Black-bellied Whistling Duck and Canada Goose. Thirty years ago, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks were not found much north of the Rio Grande Valley. Now they are numerous locally year round, and probably still spreading. Canada Geese are now very rare in the area as they apparently are "short-stopping" on their southward migration, finding areas of suitable habitat where human activity provides adequate food resources.

Least Grebe is another Rio Grande Valley species that now seems to be present in the area on a regular basis. The recovery of the Brown Pelican is one of the success stories of modern conservation. The first individuals appeared on the Upper Texas Coast in the late eighties, and individuals from the local nearby breeding islands are now a regular sight along the Sabine Neches waterway and the beach from Texas point westwards.

Anhingas locally were essentially confined to the Oyster Bayou area of Chambers County in the 1980s. Now, they may be found in any suitable bayou, and flocks of more than one hundred are common over the Smith Point Hawk Watch tower each September.

Reddish Egrets were formerly absent from the stretch of the Upper Texas Coast between Galveston Bay and the Florida Panhandle, but seem to be filling the gap very slowly from both sides. Birds seen locally are mostly immature birds and most often appear in the fall. Glossy Ibis was extremely rare in Texas until the mid-nineties, coming no further west than the mid-Louisiana coast, but now are reasonably regular at Cattail Marsh and elsewhere, although still vastly outnumbered by White-faced Ibis. Wood Storks, believed to be post-breeding

individuals from the colonies on the Mexican east coast, have slowly increased in number in the area in late (and recently not so late) summer. Very rare thirty years ago, they are now to be expected every year in significant numbers.

Raptors are large and generally very visible birds, and changes affecting these birds are sure to be noticed. Perhaps the most visible change affects the most graceful species of the group, the Swallow-tailed Kite. Formerly a perhaps one- or two-a-year phenomenon in our area, kites are now almost certainly breeding in the bottomlands of the Sabine and Neches rivers, probably up to 100 miles inland, and now can be found each August congregating in advance of southward migration in the Trinity River bottomlands near Liberty.

Bald Eagle numbers throughout the nation have recovered from the precipitous declines caused by DDT. Thirty years ago, a few Bald Eagles wintered on the lakes just north of the Golden Triangle. A very small number of the southern breeding population could be found in the area. Now, we have breeding Bald Eagles adjacent to Cattail Marsh, and almost certainly others in the lower Neches and Sabine rivers. The southern Bald Eagles start nesting in December, and so are not always easy to tell apart from the wintering birds of the northern populations, which return north to nest in the summer. The southern nesting birds tend to disperse north in the summer after breeding.

The eastern edge of the "normal" range of the White-tailed Hawk is probably a few miles east of Houston. However, we believe the species is gradually becoming more common in Jefferson County suggesting a very slow eastward expansion.

A much more rapid expansion has occurred with the Crested Caracara. Virtually unknown northeast of the Corpus Christi area twenty years ago, the species is well established in Jefferson County (and regular eastwards into Calcasieu and Cameron Parishes in Louisiana).

Apart from an isolated flock in central Louisiana, the nearest wintering Sandhill Cranes were to be found from west Galveston Island southwards. Over time, a flock now wintering in extreme west Jefferson County and adjacent Chambers and Liberty Counties has increased to between 500 and 1,000 birds annually.

The expansion of dove populations in the area has been nothing short of spectacular. First, Inca Doves greatly expanded their range in Texas starting in the 1990s, when they were confined to the southern parts of the state. They have since retreated from north Texas and Oklahoma, but are still common in southeast Texas. Eurasian Collared-Doves are generally believed to have been introduced to the Bahamas from Europe in the 1970s. They spread to the Fort Lauderdale, Florida area in the 1980s. The first birds were reported in Texas in 1995, and on the Upper Texas Coast by 1999, and on to essentially all of the state and beyond. White-winged Doves have spread from populations centered on Central Texas (especially the Kerrville area, but with a small number in downtown Galveston) to become abundant in urban parts of our area.

(to be continued)

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The Texas-wide Rare Bird Alert, maintained by Houston Audubon Society, is available on their web-site at <http://www.houstonaudubon.org/>. Email alerts are also available for a fee. Most rare bird sightings in Texas are posted on the TEXBIRDS listserv. Archives of the listserv are at www.freelists.org/archive/texbirds. It is not necessary to subscribe to the listserv to view the archives, which include all recent postings. Postings for the last two weeks are also available at <http://birding.aba.org/maillist/TX>.

Transcriptions of many current and recent email alerts are available on the Siler's Birding on the Net at <http://birdingonthenet.net/hotmail.html>. Detailed information (maps and text) on birding sites on the Upper Texas Coast is also available on the Web at <http://www.texasbirding.net..>