The Brown Pelican

The Newsletter of the Golden Triangle Audubon Society

Vol. 24 No. 10 October 2018

Membership Meeting
Thursday October 18, 2018 7:00 p.m.
Garden Center, Tyrrell Park, Beaumont

Bluebirds in Texas
Debbie Park

Debbie writes "I have always been a backyard birder, enjoying the outdoors and all birds and animals in general. John and I became interested in looking beyond our backyard and started combining our love of travel with birding destinations in mind. Our first trip to the Lower Rio Grande Valley introduced us to the Green Jay and the Great Kiskadee. We were hooked!

"I have enjoyed bluebirds everywhere I've lived – Ohio, Florida, Georgia, and now Texas. However, it wasn't until I retired and moved to Texas in 2006 that I became an active bluebird supporter and conservationist. John had already installed a bluebird nestbox in our backyard and we were lucky enough to have bluebirds nesting every year.

"I joined the Texas Bluebird Society in 2008 and immediately signed up as a volunteer. I was a booth host at various local events, gave presentations to garden clubs and other civic organizations, handled a variety of administrative tasks, served on the Board of Directors, and have been the newsletter editor for the last nine years.

"Over the years we have continued to travel and go birding whenever we can. We have seen all three species of bluebirds right here in Texas. Thanks to the Tucson Audubon Society, we were also lucky enough to see one bluebird subspecies, aptly called Azure, in southern Arizona in Patagonia Lake State Park. I am happy to share my "bluebirding" experiences with you!"

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.

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Golden Triangle
Audubon Society

Web Site for more information
www.goldentriangleaudubon.org

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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, two days prior to each trip, or by contacting Field Trip Committee chair, Steve Mayes at gtaudubon@aol.com.

Thursday October 18, 2018. Membership Meeting. See page 1. For details.

Refreshments

We thank all those who brought refreshments over the last few meetings. The Port Arthur Convention and Visitor's Bureau is kindly providing the sandwiches for the October meeting. We need items which will complement these, such as desserts

Saturday October 20, 2018. Field Trip to Sabine Woods. Meet at Sabine Woods, which is 4.1 miles west of Sabine Pass on the north side of Highway 87 at 7:30 a.m. or join the trip in progress in the woods later. Waterproof footwear will probably be a good idea, especially if it is at all wet from previous rain or just heavy early morning dew. Bring mosquito repellent just in case. There are few services available on weekends in Sabine Pass, but gasoline is available. The deli is no longer open. Bring drinks.

October 20 is towards the end of fall songbird migration, but often brings a good variety of birds. A cold front may drive down the last of the warblers and the first big push of wintering birds. Some of our winter birds may be arriving, and often the woodland species that winter in the Big Thicket overshoot a little at first. In some past years, this has included Red-breasted Nuthatch and Brown Creeper. There are always interesting birds at Sabine Woods!

Although the boardwalk was destroyed in Hurricane Ike, the trails are clear and mostly reasonably wide, and, although some care is needed to avoid uneven ground, birding Sabine Woods is relatively easy.

Thursday November 15, 2018. Annual Meeting and Pot-luck Dinner. Bring your favorite bird photos. Full details in next month's issue.

Saturday November 17, 2018. Field Trip to West Jefferson County. In recent years, this has been one of our most successful field trips. The area is well known for its birds of prey, which in past years have included Bald and Golden Eagles, Crested Caracaras and White-tailed Hawks in addition to the more "expected" Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harriers, and American Kestrels. In some years we have seen White-tailed Kites and Merlins.

The area is well known as the wintering ground of what has become a large (about 1,000 strong) flock of Sandhill Cranes and is also one of the best places to see sparrows in the area. In wet years, there can be lots of waterfowl including geese and many duck species as well as ibis and other waterbirds. Four years ago's trip found a Mountain Bluebird, which staying all winter and was visited by birders from all over the region.

Meet at 8 a.m. at the intersection of FM365 and Johnson Road (on the "north/west" side of Johnson Road at that intersection). From the intersection of Interstate 10 and FM365 in Fannett, proceed along FM365 (towards Nome) for about six miles. Shortly after you emerge out of the woodlands, South China Road goes to the right (east then north) and immediately afterwards, on the left, is Johnson Road. There is a green G and A Turf Farm sign on Johnson Road at the intersection. Contact Steve Mayes, gtaudubon @aol.com for further information.

Grand Opening of Wetlands Education Center at Cattail Marsh Tuesday October 16, 2018 4:00 p.m.

You are invited to the Grand Opening of the Wetlands Education Center at Cattail Marsh on Tuesday October 16 at 4:00 p.m. (Note the changed time from the earlier announcement.)

In 2016, the Garden Club of America Founder's Fund awarded $10,000 to the Magnolia Garden Club towards the construction of the Wetlands Education Center at Cattail Marsh. This facility will provide an elevated classroom setting for an introduction to the importance of wetlands as well as a site for further scientific study.

Membership Dues

To simplify our record keeping, all memberships now run from January through December. Membership dues effective with 2019 dues are $20 per year. We are now accepting 2019 dues. You may pay at any membership meeting (checks preferred) or use the subscription/ membership blank on the back page.

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. All dues already paid in advance for 2019 will be honored. For new members joining National Audubon on line and selecting our Chapter code (W25), 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 (NAS) 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 also welcome NAS members in other nearby counties although their membership in NAS does not automatically bring them to our attention.

We would very much encourage you receive the Brown Pelican electronically. To start that, simply send an email to gtaudubon@aol.com from the address you want us to use. Please include your full name if it is not contained within your email address.

The Origins of Hummingbirds are Still a Major Mystery

By Jillian Mock

There is a dazzling diversity of the tiny birds in the Americas, but recent discoveries trace their evolution back to Europe—where today there are no nectar-feeding species.

In East Africa, you'll find little birds with purple heads and red chests flitting from flower to flower for nectar. Across the Indian Ocean you can see brown and yellow birds with iridescent neck patches hunting spiders among the jungle leaves. These species and their relatives are abundant across the tropics in Africa and Asia; they're brightly colored and they all drink nectar. But none of them are hummingbirds.

Back in 1557, Jean de Léry published a journal of his travels to Brazil. In it was one of the first descriptions of hummingbirds to reach the Old World. Early European explorers like Léry had never seen anything like the fearless, tiny birds that buzzed around their heads when they reached the Americas. As a result, hummingbirds quickly joined the birds-of-paradise as must-haves for any natural history collection and Victorian drawing room. In 1851, the Crystal Palace in London exhibited more than 300 hummingbird specimens, dazzling crowds, along with Queen Victoria herself.

The obsession is understandable. Hummingbirds come in a jewel-like assortment of colors and are so dexterous, they can hover still for seconds and fly backward. They also have one of the most diverse avian families in the world, boasting about 350 known species across North and South America. Sunbirds, the prime nectar-feeding birds of the Old World, have fewer than 150.

But once upon a time, tens of millions of years ago, hummingbirds did zip around the hills and forests of Europe. According to Jim McGuire, it all started about 42 million years ago, when hummingbirds broke away from the swifts, their closest living relatives. McGuire, an integrative biologist at University of California Berkeley, calculated this date by examining genetic variation across living hummingbird species and using that information to piece together an approximate evolutionary timeline.

The plot, McGuire says, thickens at the 30- to 35-million-year mark. The oldest hummingbird fossils we've discovered come from this period—but they aren't American. Instead, they were unearthed in southeastern Germany.

Gerald Mayr is the paleontologist at the Senckenberg Research Institute in Germany who identified the fossils as hummingbirds in 2004. (He named the species *Eurotrochilus inexpectatus* to reflect his surprise at the finding.) One look at the short upper wing bones on the specimen and he knew: They looked just like the unusual "short and stocky humerus" that help modern-day hummingbirds with their aerial acrobatics.

Dug up by private collectors in Frauenweiler, Germany, *Eurotrochilus inexpectatus* was identified as an ancient hummingbird, largely by the structure of its wings. Since then, at least six more hummingbird fossils have popped up in Germany, Poland, and France. The similarity between these fossils and New World hummingbirds could be an example of convergent evolution—when two species are not closely related yet develop similar traits over time by adapting to similar environments—but McGuire and Mayr both believe the family probably originated in Eurasia and somehow migrated to the Eastern Hemisphere. "It is still theoretically possible that those fossil hummingbirds are not really hummingbirds but another bird group," McGuire says. But after closely comparing the morphology of the fossils to modern hummingbirds, he thinks convergent evolution is "unlikely" in this case.

That still leaves a gaping hole in hummingbird history, however. Modern hummingbirds evolved in the Americas around 22 million years ago, according to McGuire's estimates, but we don't have any fossils from the West that are older than 10,000 years ago. "We basically have no fossil material we can use" in the New World to figure out how to connect the dots, says McGuire.

That still leaves a gaping hole in hummingbird history, however. There's also the question of *how*. McGuire and Juan Francisco Ornelas, an evolutionary biologist at The Institute of Ecology in Mexico, speculate that the birds used the former land bridge between Siberia and Alaska to move from Eurasia to the Americas. Neither scientist is satisfied with that option, but it seems more viable than a trans-Atlantic route; while hummingbirds are migratory and capable of traveling long distances, it's unlikely they could traverse an entire ocean without stopping.

And finally, there's the question of *why*. Did hummingbirds relocate after the climate in Europe shifted from tropical to temperate? If that were the case, they would have just migrated to Africa or Asia, where sunbirds currently thrive, Mayr says. Food could have been another issue, but given that Europe has a broad diversity of deep-necked, nectaring plants, the birds should have had plenty of options before they disappeared, Ornelas says.

Mayr's best guess is that other nectar-feeding species like sunbirds outcompeted hummingbirds in the Old World. "But that's pure speculation," he concedes. And it doesn't fully explain why the family died out in mainland Europe, where there are no sunbirds, honeycreepers, or any other bird that survives on nectar.

Meanwhile, there was little competition for hummingbirds in the New World, so they were able to expand rapidly and furiously. Today they can be found wherever there are flowers to pollinate: Rufous Hummingbirds have been spotted as far north as Alaska and the Green-backed Firecrown makes its home in the Juan Fernandez Islands off South America. In fact, the only avian family in the Americas that's more successful and diverse is the tyrant flycatchers, says Sheri Williamson, who wrote the *Peterson Field Guide to Hummingbirds of North America*.

Of course, an animal's current range isn't always a great measure of where its ancestors lived, McGuire says. Hummingbirds could have occupied multiple continents and then for whatever reason, went extinct everywhere but the Americas. What's more, they aren't the only birds to have a shadowy past, Mayr says. Modern hoatzins, for example, dwell in South America alone, but Mayr has identified fossils in Africa and Europe.

Until scientists discover more fossils on both sides of the Atlantic, the hummingbird mystery is a tough one to solve. But what we do know about hummingbird evolution so far is fascinating. "Hummingbirds can be very resource-specific in terms of their needs; they evolve relatively quickly into actual separate species that look similar and have different needs and genetics," says Geoff LeBaron, the Christmas Bird Count director for Audubon.

McGuire, meanwhile, believes that hummingbirds are still breaking off into new species. As part of his molecular-phylogeny research, he's created "species-accumulation curves" to graph the change in diversity over time. Once hummingbirds have evolved to fill all the ecological niches they possibly can, he expects the curve to flat line. But they aren't close to maxing out yet, he says.

Going forward, it will also be important to track how climate change interferes with hummingbird evolution. "[Their] migration is starting to vary due to climate change that may be impacting plant bloom times," says Kathy Dale, director of science technology at Audubon. Dale is in charge of monitoring these differences through Hummingbirds at Home, a community science project that logs hummingbird sightings throughout the year. Through data, it could end up being much easier to forecast the future of these birds than it is to piece together their past.

from the National Audubon Society Website
12 July 2018

Fall Migration Count – 15 September 2018

The results of this year's Fall Migration Count show quite clearly that looking at one count alone and isolated from the accompanying circumstances, especially weather, is unlikely to provide any meaningful insight into longer term trends. However, in examining several years, we can pick up alerts suggesting one species or another may be decreasing or increasing. What were the principal accompanying circumstances this year? A day in which a significant variety of passerine migrants remained in Sabine Woods most of the day, and a day in which very large flocks of White Ibis were roaming west Jefferson County! We all have been conditioned to look first at the number of species seen on the count. This year's number was fairly typical, but not particularly typical of a day with a good diversity of species in Sabine Woods. Such days usually result in an above average number of species. So to the extent there was good diversity at Sabine Woods, we were missing species elsewhere. There is no obvious species group that is short in species seen, although perhaps raptors and shorebirds were on the low side. The groups covering the towns (Beaumont, Port Arthur, mid-county) remarked on the relative paucity of birds in the urban areas.

Clearly the 18,000 individual birds seen was quite high. But analyzing the numbers, it is obvious the almost 7,500 White Ibis and almost 3,500 Cattle Egrets were responsible. The Cattle Egret number is somewhat above those of recent years, but the White Ibis number is more than three times the recent high. The numbers of other egrets and herons and related groups were also very healthy.

The number of ducks other than Whistling-Ducks was low, but both Fulvous and Black-bellied Whistling numbers were higher than in recent years. Neotropic Cormorant numbers were also quite high reinforcing the apparent theme of increasing water bird numbers this year. An interesting and welcome trend of several years of increasing Purple Gallinule

numbers continued.

The count is held a little earlier than the peak of Broad-winged Hawk migration, and seeing other migrating hawks over the broad expanse of the county is very much hit or miss.

We must remark on the impressive effort in Area 1 (extreme NW Jefferson County) that produced five owls of four species. Barred Owl in particular is not easy to find in Jefferson County. Good numbers of Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers were seen. Usually by mid-September, at least a few American Kestrels have reached Jefferson County, but there was only one this year. The center of Hurricane Florence was just onshore in North and South Carolina on the day of the count. Perhaps others are hunkered down waiting for the hurricane to move inland and start dissipating.

Flycatcher numbers were generally unremarkable, except for the large number of Eastern Wood-Pewees, both in the normal woodlots and in the more urban areas. Kingbirds were prominent in the extreme western edge and along the coast and southern tier of the county. In reviewing the results of recent counts, we have expressed concern about a shortage of Loggerhead Shrikes, and while the evidence is still only anecdotal in nature, we view the low number with concern. We were relieved to see Northern Mockingbirds back even if with a somewhat uneven distribution. We probably will not shed any tears over a reduction in European Starling numbers.

We have already referred to a good diversity of warblers. The 18 species at Sabine Woods (after accepting that Yellow-breasted Chat can no longer be described as a warbler) were supplemented by three others elsewhere. Buntings and orioles were also well represented.

One final point comes out clearly from the totals, and that is the dearth of blackbirds. I suspect this will not come as a surprise to anyone who has recently spent any time birding in the western part of the county. This applies to cowbirds, blackbirds and grackles, the numbers of all of which were low.

We thank those who participated in the count: WHISTLING-DUCK, Black-bellied (326); WHISTLING-DUCK, Fulvous (108); DUCK, Wood (2); TEAL, Blue-winged (103); DUCK, Mottled (7); GREBE, Pied-billed (4); CORMORANT, Neotropic (391); CORMORANT, Double-crested (3); ANHINGA (152); PELICAN, Brown (130); HERON, Great Blue (23); EGRET, Great (285); EGRET, Snowy (264); HERON, Little Blue (62); HERON, Tricolored (34); EGRET, Reddish (4); EGRET, Cattle (3968); HERON, Green (16); NIGHT-HERON, Black-crowned (18); NIGHT-HERON, Yellow-crowned (11); IBIS, White (7499); IBIS, White-faced (10); IBIS, Plegadis (165); SPOONBILL, Roseate (247); VULTURE, Black (84); VULTURE, Turkey (135); OSPREY (5); KITE, White-tailed (3); KITE, Mississippi (1); HAWK, Cooper's (1); HAWK, Red-shouldered (10); HAWK, Broad-winged (6); HAWK, Red-tailed (6); RAIL, King (2); RAIL, Clapper (22); RAIL, King/Clapper (3); GALLINULE, Purple (19); GALLINULE, Common (50); COOT, American (17); STILT, Black-necked (72); PLOVER, Black-bellied (11); PLOVER, Snowy (10); PLOVER, Semipalmated (11); PLOVER, Piping (20); KILLDEER (103); SANDERLING (83); SANDPIPER, Least (41); SANDPIPER, Western (2); SANDPIPER, Peep species (13); DOWITCHER, Short-billed (7); SANDPIPER, Spotted (8); YELLOWLEGS, Greater (11); WILLET (14); YELLOWLEGS, Lesser (4); GULL, Laughing (746); GULL, Ring-billed (6); TERN, Least (45); TERN, Gull-billed (8); TERN, Caspian (26); TERN, Black (22); TERN, Forster's (119); TERN, Royal (23); PIGEON, Rock (265); COLLARED-DOVE, Eurasian (18); DOVE, Inca (3); DOVE, White-winged (148); DOVE, Mourning (298); CUCKOO, Yellow-billed (1); OWL, Barn (2); SCREECH-OWL, Eastern (1); OWL, Great Horned (2); OWL, Barred (2); WILL'S-WIDOW, Chuck- (1); HUMMINGBIRD, Ruby-throated (34); HUMMINGBIRD species (7); KINGFISHER, Belted (12); WOODPECKER, Red-headed (5); WOODPECKER, Red-bellied (12); WOODPECKER, Downy (10); WOODPECKER, Pileated (4); CARACARA, Crested (6); KESTREL, American (1); MERLIN (1); FLYCATCHER, Olive-sided (3); WOOD-PEWEE, Eastern (24); FLYCATCHER, Yellow-bellied (2); FLYCATCHER, Least (2); FLYCATCHER, Empidonax (12); FLYCATCHER, Vermilion (1); FLYCATCHER, Great Crested (11); KINGBIRD, Western (5); KINGBIRD, Eastern (36); FLYCATCHER, Scissor-tailed (25); SHRIKE, Loggerhead (42); VIREO, White-eyed (42); VIREO, Red-eyed (9); JAY, Blue (88); CROW, American (31); CROW, Fish (5); CROW, Species (12); SWALLOW, Tree (5); SWALLOW, Bank (7); SWALLOW, Barn (13); SWALLOW, Cliff/Cave (4); SWALLOW species (90); CHICKADEE, Carolina (21); TITMOUSE, Tufted (5); WREN, Carolina (22); GNATCATCHER, Blue-gray (23); BLUEBIRD, Eastern (10); VEERY (1); ROBIN, American (3); CATBIRD, Gray (5); THRASHER, Brown (4); MOCKINGBIRD, Northern (176); STARLING, European (279); OVENBIRD (1); WARBLER, Worm-eating (1); WATERTHRUSH, Northern (6); WATER-THRUSH species (1); WARBLER, Blue-winged (1); WARBLER, Black-and-white (9); WARBLER, Prothonotary (1); WARBLER, Swainson's (3); WARBLER, Nashville (1); WARBLER, Mourning (3); WARBLER, Kentucky (3); YELLOWTHROAT, Common (6); WARBLER, Hooded (11); REDSTART, American (4); PARULA, Northern (4); WARBLER, Yellow (4); WARBLER, Chestnut-sided (1); WARBLER, Pine (4); WARBLER, Black-throated Green (2); WARBLER, Canada (7); WARBLER, Wilson's (1); SPARROW, Seaside (14); SPARROW, Lark (1); CHAT, Yellow-breasted (1); TANAGER, Summer (4); CARDINAL, Northern (65); GROSBEAK, Blue (48); BUNTING, Indigo (17); BUNTING, Painted (3); DICKCISSEL (1); MEADOW-LARK, Eastern (1); ORIOLE, Baltimore (7); BLACKBIRD, Red-winged (78); COWBIRD, Brown-headed (10); GRACKLE, Common (139); GRACKLE, Boat-tailed (117); GRACKLE, Great-tailed (226); SPARROW, House (10)

TOTAL (18005); Number of species (151).

Number of Observers (13); Number of Parties (8).

Number of Party-Hours (62.79); Party hours on foot (14.82); Miles on foot (11.00); Party-hours by automobile (47.97); Miles by automobile (372.10).

Participants 2018; Michael Cooper; Howard Davis; Linda Davis; Ashley Fuselier; Sherry Gibson; Claudia Gilson; John Haynes; Sheila Hebert; Thomas Hellweg; Denise Kelley; Gary Kelley; Steve Mayes; Mark Scheuerman; Christine Sliva; John Whittle.

John A. Whittle

How the House Sparrow Conquered the World is Encoded in its Genes

The species, found in urban areas around the globe, can digest starchy grains—which helps explain its close bond with people and its love of pizza.

By Hannah Waters

This week, at a New York City park, a House Sparrow vigorously assaulted a pizza crust twice the length of its body. The three-inch bird didn't get much out of it, wrenching off a crumb here or there as I watched from a nearby bench. But I admired its perseverance regardless, because I know something the bird doesn't: That the species' love of starchy treats is key to its world domination.

Similar scenes are familiar to people living on all continents except Antarctica, but as it turns out, only in recent history. House Sparrows were restricted to Eurasia until about 200 years ago, when they tagged along as Europeans colonized the world—sometimes hitching rides on ships, and sometimes intentionally transported to new places by people.

"As human technology has developed, House Sparrows have dispersed much farther than they would have by themselves," says Aaron Schrey, a population geneticist at Georgia Southern University who has studied the invasion genetics of the House Sparrow. They were introduced to the United States in the mid-1800s, and expanded to Canada and Mexico by the early 1900s. They made it to Australia and New Zealand in the 1860s, to South America by the late 1800s (first to Argentina, then Chile and Brazil), and to Kenya around 1950. Wherever they land, they compete with native species for food and nesting cavities.

Now, new research published this month by the Royal Society shows that the relationship between humans and House Sparrows goes back much further—some 11,000 years and to the invention of agriculture. Scientists from Norway, Iran, and Kazakhstan sequenced the genomes of House Sparrows found throughout Eurasia, and found that the urban birds split from the wild population right around the time when farming was developed in the Middle East.

The research links the House Sparrow's' global success to a pair of genes that let the birds eat and digest starchy grains.

Interestingly, the research links the species' global success to a pair of genes that let the birds eat and digest starchy grains—and that aren't found in a relict population of non-urban House Sparrows confined to the Central Asian steppes. (Unlike most House Sparrows, these birds migrate, eat only natural grass seed, and are cautious around people.) One gene, COL11A, regulates beak and skull development, which the scientists suggest gave urban sparrows a larger beak and more robust skull to crack open tougher seeds used in farming. They also found that urban sparrows have the gene AMY2A that encodes the enzyme amylase, which helps digest starch, those complex carbohydrates found in our staple crops like potatoes, wheat, and corn. Amylase genes in humans and dogs are thought to have driven adaptations to high-starch diets in both species after farming took off.

Genomic studies that identify adaptive genes sometimes fall into the trap of telling evolutionary just-so stories, so I asked Suzanna Lewis, who leads the development of gene-annotation standards at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, what she thought of the new work. While she would have liked to see more on how the researchers identified these genes, she is satisfied by the analysis and reassured by their cautious statements. "Green light, I would say," she wrote in an email.

Schrey, who was not involved in the new study, agrees. "You don't see stuff that clean most of the time," he says. "The new genetic techniques are powerful in such a way that they're changing the way people think about how evolution happens."

The findings hew closely to the story told by other genetic studies of House Sparrow populations around the world, says Schrey. The species followed human migration patterns from the Fertile Crescent through the Middle East, slowing down when they hit mountains on the Asian border while continuing to spread north and west into Europe. "They essentially map the spread of farming technology through Eurasia and the Middle East," he says. "They started living close to human shelters, eating human grains, and going wherever humans go—and humans go everywhere."

Most species picked up and dropped into a new environment wouldn't be able to survive and adapt, but because the House Sparrow can digest agricultural grains, they thrive pretty much anywhere—as long as it's near people and our foodstuffs.

On a broader scale, the research can help us better understand "what makes a species become commensal" and learn to thrive near people, says Lynn Martin, a University of South Florida professor who studies modern House Sparrow evolution in Kenya and was not involved in the new study. "It's important to learn as we push our wildlife into closer contact with us. Understanding how that happened in the past could help us in the future."

So next time you see a House Sparrow snacking on pizza or popcorn or a stale dinner roll, don't deride it as just another urban pest. Instead, consider the species' deep evolutionary story—one that goes back some 11,000 years and is inextricably bound to our own.

From the Audubon Website August 21, 2018

Bird Sightings – September 2018

For this column, we review, looking for rare and very rare species, all credible eBird and other records for the Texas counties we have always covered – Angelina, Hardin, Jasper, Jefferson, Newton, Orange, Sabine, San Augustine and Tyler. We also review records for Chambers, Galveston, Harris and Liberty Counties in Texas, and Calcasieu and Cameron Parishes in Louisiana.

The format of the listing is Species – Date – County-and brief location information if available – (number) – Observer(s). If more precise location information is needed, it can often be obtained by using the bird species map feature to find the sighting in eBird, opening the checklist, and using the map function to display the location as precisely as the observer provided.

Commentary. Once again, we have some space for commentary. Another rather slim month as far as rarities are concerned, but fall migration is much more drawn out than spring, and fall migrants have to be very substantially early or late to meet the rare and very rare categories.

The commentary we present here necessarily focuses on the rarity of the species reported. In many cases, we really should be focusing on the numbers of the less common species. But the variables inherent in any of the methods we have to census birds are both numerous and of great import to the process. Weather is, of course, the most important factor, influencing birds in several different ways. The timing of migration can easily be influenced by a week or two by temperature, winds and rainfall, all significantly variable from year to year. It is unfortunate, but bird population trends rarely become discernable in any statistically valid way until periods of years or even decades have elapsed. We do our best to pick up trends from anecdotal evidence, but we are under no illusion that the reliability of such estimations is anything but poor over short time intervals.

September has been an exceptionally wet month this year, following a rather dray and hot August. Locally, September has produced a couple of our rarer warblers at Sabine Woods, and the Ringed Teal seems still to be present in Cattail Marsh, although it was not seen for a considerable period. In its native South America, the species is non-migratory. A little further afield, Brown Boobies were seen in numbers at the Baytown Nature Center. Black-backed Gulls, both Lesser and Greater, are slowly become more regular as they spread from their original threshold in the North East.

Seen in our Core Counties (listed above)

Ringed Teal	Sep 28	JEF-TP (1) Harlan Stewart
Veery	Sep 13-14	JEF-SW (1) JHH, Rick Heil, Steve Arena
Cave Swallow	Sep 22	SAA-Hwy 147 Causeway (24) David Bell, John Smelser
Cape May Warbler	Sep 14	JEF-SW (1) JHH, Rick Heil (m), Steve Arena
Townsend's Warbler	Sep 6	JEF-SW (1) JHH

Nearby Counties

Ringed Teal	Sep 16	CHA-Oyster Bayou Hunting Club (1) David Hanson (banded, probable escapee; killed by hunter)
Gadwall	Sep 15	HAS-Sheldon Lake SP (2) Ken Beeney
Mute Swan	Sep 29	HAS-Longenbaugh
Brown Booby	Sep 9-16	HAS-Baytown Nature Ctr (up to 9) Janet Rathjen,et al
	Sep 29	HAS-W Sam Houston Tollway (1) Richard Gibbons
Harris's Hawk	Sep 28	GAL-HI-Smith Oaks (1) Maria Hart, Bryce Loschen
Sandhill Crane	Sep 2	HAS-Westside Park, Katy (4) Theresa Wiens
Sabine's Gull	Sep 21	CHA-Smith Pt Hawk Watch (1) David Sarkozi
Lsr. Black-backed Gull	Sep 9-15	HAS-Morgan's Pt (1) James Rieman, Dennis Cooke et al
	Sep 12	HAS-El Jardin Pk (1) Brian Berry
Gtr. Black-backed Gull	Sep 24	GAL-Galveston Is SP (1) Deborah Valdez
Common Tern	Sep 9	HAS-El Jardin Pk (1) Janet Rathjen, Adam Wood
	Sep 16	CAL-Lake Charles (1) Justin and Devin Bosler
Mexican Whip-poor-will	Sep 27	HAS-Edith Moore NC (1) Michael and Sarah Kuzio, et al
Greater Pewee	Sep 16	HAS-Spring Valley (1) Nina Rach
Willow Flycatcher	Sep 21	GAL-Lafitte's Cove (1) Sonny Bratz (calling)
Couch's Kingbird	Sep 9	HAS-San Jacinto Battleground (1) James Rieman
Bell's Vireo	Sep 2	CAM-Peveto Woods (1) Paul Conover
Purple Martin	Sep 25	CAL-Hayes-Mississippi Ave (1) Oscar Johnson
White-breasted Nuthatch	Sep 5	HAS-Piney Point (1) Ben Hulsey
	Sep 7	HAS-Sanctuary Golf Resort, Huffman (1) Bonnie de Grood
Cedar Waxwing	Sep15	CHA-Smith Pt Hawk Watch (1) Rick Heil, Brenda Gonzales, Steve Arena
Orange-crown. Warbler	Sep 15	CAM-Willow Is (Mark Meunier et al
Cerulean Warbler	Sep 12	HAS-Geo. Bush Park Are (1) Kevin Smith
	Sep `6	HAS-Bear Creek Park (1) Drew Dickert, Jim Hinson
Eastern Towhee	Sep 13	HAS-Jesse H. Jones Park (1) nomadbirder
Rusty Blackbird	Sep14	HAS-Arthur Storey Park (1) Ron Shrieves

Abbreviations used: ANG – Angelina County; ANWR – Anahuac NWR; BF – Bolivar Flats; BTNP – Big Thicket National Preserve; CAL – Calcasieu Parish; CAM – Cameron Parish; CHA – Chambers County; GAL – Galveston County; HAI – Hardin County; HAS – Harris County; HS – Harlan Stewart; JAS – Jasper County; JAW – John Whittle; JEF – Jefferson County; JHH – John Haynes; JJW – Jana and John Whittle; LIB – Liberty County; MC – Michael Cooper; NEDR – Nederland; ORA – Orange County; PI – Pleasure Is, Port Arthur; RL – Randy Lewis; SAA – San Augustine Co.; SAB – Sabine County; SH – Sheila Hebert; SM – Steve Mayes, SRSP – Sea Rim State Park; SW – Sabine Woods; TH – Thomas Hellweg; TP – Tyrrell Park including Cattail Marsh; TXPT – Texas Point NWR; TYL – Tyler County; WJC – West Jefferson Co..

Golden Triangle Audubon Society
P. O. Box 1292
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RARE BIRD ALERTS

Unfortunately, almost all the local and regional telephone Rare Bird Alerts have been discontinued in favor of various forms of Internet distribution.

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.

Detailed information/maps on birding sites in Texas is available on the Web at **http://www.texasbirds.org/birdingLocations.php**. This leads you to the maps of the various eBird hotspots. You can also subscribe (free) on eBird for email alerts for all rare birds reported in a specific county.