

The Birdside Baptist

& other ornithological mysteries



Joseph C. Neal

Sign of the times cover image by Jacque Brown: The author on his way to study winter gulls. Note the telltale binoculars. December 2009.

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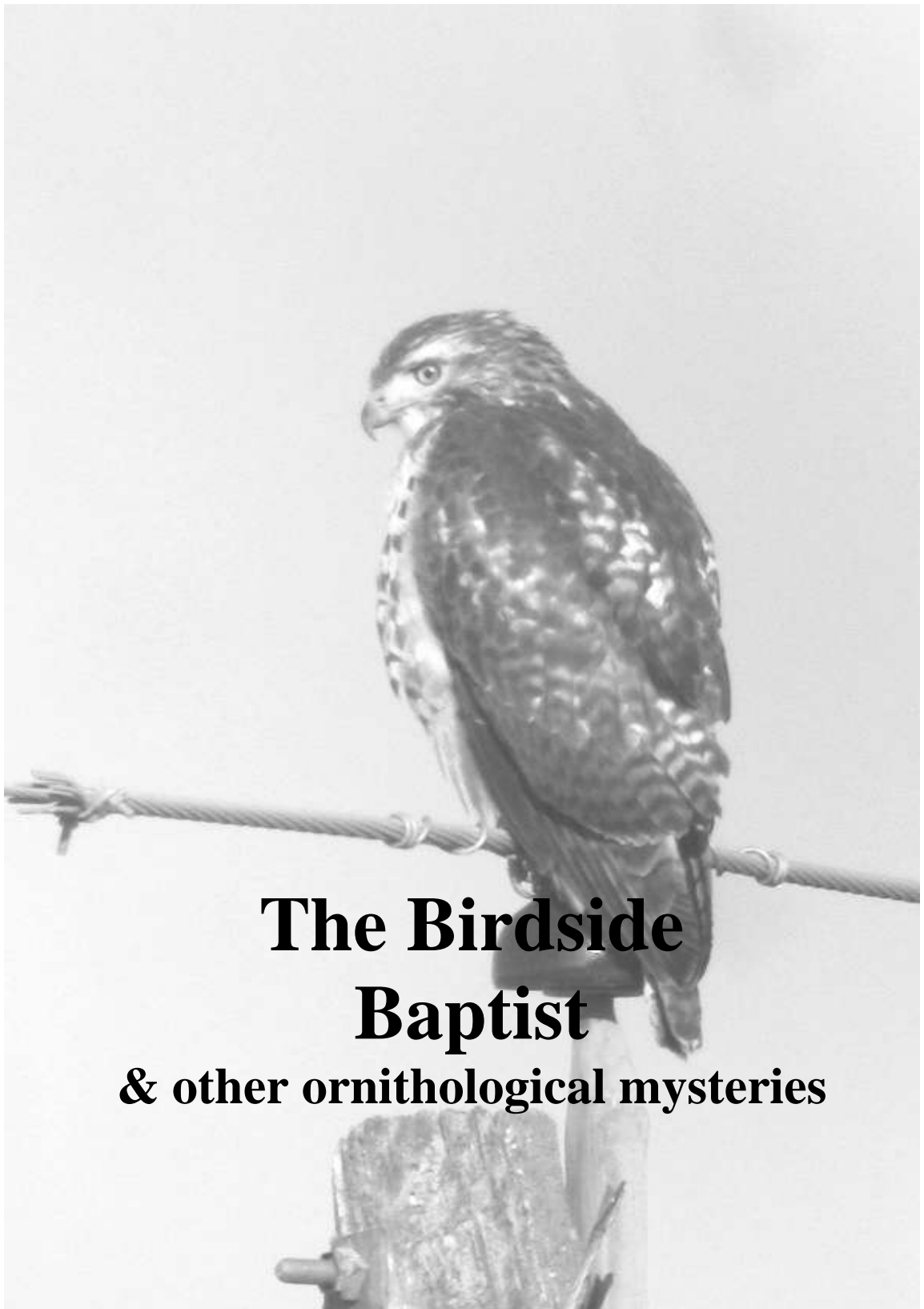
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**The Birdside
Baptist
& other ornithological mysteries**

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Richard Stauffacher, artist
3048 Hughmount Road
Fayetteville, AR 72704

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Dedications

This little volume is dedicated to the ARBIRD-L subscribers, old & new, young & old, Baptist and Atheist, and even Methodist (just kidding).

These essays are also go out to friends of mine who prefer their ARBIRD-L posts terse: just a couple of words and right to the rare bird, all well displayed on the iphone. Wordy, opinionated essays on ARBIRD-L don't work that well on the iphone. That's why god, in his infinite wisdom, gave us the DELETE key.

Many thanks to *Ozark Ecological Restoration, Inc* (OERI), and its president and founder, Joe Woolbright of Siloam Springs, AR, for numerous environmentally positive projects in northwestern Arkansas. Joe and OERI generously provided support to allow publication of this volume.

Richard Stauffacher, working artist and creator of numerous etchings often featuring natural history in northwestern Arkansas, including birds, has generously hosted several of my writing projects on his web site, *etchings.org*. The current project will be available to all with a computer & a sleepless night, 24-7.

Thanks to Joe & Richard, now all you have to do is reach out there and grab that book, or fire up that computer, and you will be right there in the pews with me, at Birdside Baptist.

INTRODUCTION

If you are looking for an explanation for the somewhat weird title, check out my entry for August 22, 2009. When my sister misses Sunday morning services & instead enjoys preaching on TV, she refers to this as attending “bedside Baptist.” Out birding on a Sunday morning, I guess we may claim to be attending “birdside Baptist.” I have attended many such services over the years. Some are included in this essay collection.

In terms of trying to understand where I am coming from in these essays, it will help if you were a kid growing up in Fort Smith, Arkansas, in the 1950s, and attending 5 church services a week, always wearing shiny black shoes that pinched growing toes and a tie that was meant to show how serious Hazel and Grover Ray Neal’s son was suppose to be about Jesus business. But, maybe some of this will make sense, even if your own growing up was somewhat deficient in suitably strong doses of Christianity, Arkansas style.

Over the years more than 400 Arkansans, plus others from out-of-state (and occasionally from other countries), have posted their daily bird records, observations of life touching on birds, and passions about politics, butterflies, and what have you, on the Birds of Arkansas Discussion List—ARBIRD-L. It’s a birders’ town meeting well attended by Arkansans from all walks of life, rich and poor, old and young.

My old friend and birding companion, Dr. Kimberly G. Smith of the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, is the “owner” of the discussion list, which is hosted by servers on campus. Generally he lets us post whatever we want as long it has some relevance to birds in Arkansas. It’s an economical way of connecting tax-payers who support the University with ornithological pursuits all over the Great State of Arkansas.

Starting in 2009, Kim began to reject or at least edit potentially controversial references to subjects associated with our modern so-called “culture wars” (e.g., religion). Paying close attention to such realities is one of the problems of living here, on the Buckle of the Bible Belt. You never know when you are going to offend someone, from the “left” or the “right.” It makes sense to keep a public discussion associated with the UA out of the middle of that dog fight.

I got by with posting to ARBIRD-L a welcome for “Christian Conservative Birders” (July 1, 2009) to go birding with some of us backsliding birders, but I guess that stirred up the hornets. I was one of the first to get stung. My “Birdside Baptist” posting for August 22, 2009, was heavily edited, down to the bare birds actually. But now I have my sweet revenge: the copy included in this essay collection is restored to its true (?) luster.

I know someone who manages a public list like ARBIRD-L has to be concerned about the culture wars. Kim is not the first editor to take a solid whack at my writing in my 40 year toils at the typewriter. Mostly I have benefitted from these whacks.

In the essays & reports that follow, you will discover many references to my origins as a Southern Baptist, subspecies *Arkansensis*, a part of my heritage that I cherish and value, even if I am not often in the formal pews of Sunday mornings or any of the other sacred days of the week (note to non-Baptists: we call no shows in the pews “backsliding”).

As I grew older, I decided that God must have created a heck of a lot more than just brick & mortar churches. I arrived at the settled opinion that we may worship and give thanks just about anywhere in this vast creation. It has to do with how you see it. I often see it through binoculars; hence, my life as a birdside Baptist & backslider.

But back to the ARBIRD-L. Only on a few occasions when we’ve just gone on and on and on about one subject has Kim intervened and told us to “Move on.” He was about to pull the plug after numerous angry postings about a cranky radio station’s offer for “Kill the Woodpecker” mugs shortly after the Ivory-billed Woodpecker was rediscovered in 2004. We were all pretty hot about the “Kill the Woodpecker” deal, even though it was probably a publicity stunt. We ARBIRDERS take our woodpeckers seriously! Kim is also the one to remind us not to post anything but words: “Hi, All...a friendly reminder that attachments and/or pictures are not allowed on this list...Either post pictures off-site and give the address or ask people to contact you directly for a copy...Thanks, The Management” – from January 15, 2007.

I made scattered postings to ARBIRD-L from 2002-2004, and with greater regularity thereafter. At times I expanded lists of birds found during field trips into short essays. These essays reflect discoveries and random thoughts while birding in the field: my vista. These short essays reflect what I’m experiencing on the western Arkansas birding frontier, my ornithological vista. Here and there I have edited the posts for clarity. But, for better or for worse, this is mainly the way they went to ARBIRD-L.

It has been a lot of fun to write these essays. I am grateful to Kim for keeping the enterprise going, even though I maintain he is just too hard on us poor Baptists. I am also grateful to a small handful of subscribers who actually took time over the years to read some of these essays as they came out on the list. Your acknowledgement of me as a birder & writer has made all the difference. You can’t imagine what pleasure your comments have given to me. You inspire me to keep searching and to keep thinking. Thank you so much.

Finally, subscribing to ARBIRD-L is cheap and easy (actually free) and so is unsubscribing, if you become disgusted. The easiest way to start filling up your email box with bulletins from Arkansas’s busy and endlessly curious birding community is to go to the home page of Arkansas Audubon Society and tap the link for the bird discussion list. It is all there -- quick & easy guide to subscribing.

I actually have more to share here for this introduction, BUT I’m in a rush to get back to my email inbox to see if anyone on ARBIRD-L has yet figured out how to identify those darn vexing immature fall ibises. Glossy? White-faced?

So that’s it for now.

– J. Neal December 18, 2009

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**Joseph C. Neal
2010**

LESSONS FROM WINTER FIELDS (2002)

This year's Fayetteville's Christmas Bird Count underscored for me the diverse ecological roles of wetlands—whether obvious ones with water and cattails, or less obvious ones with only endemic Ozark burrowing crawfish and migratory birds.

I was thinking about this during the annual Fayetteville Christmas Bird Count (CBC) held Sunday, December 15, 2002. The Fayetteville count dates back to the 1920s. I have done analysis of the most recent 40 years of the count, dating to the early 1960s. Since CBCs are held all over the U.S., plus Canada, Mexico, etc., the data provides a snapshot of where birds are at mid-winter.

This year the Clabber Creek bottomlands were searched for wintering birds by my group of three experienced birders (myself, biologist Irene Camargo, and artist Richard Stauffacher) and another headed by Arkansas native and U of A PhD student, Rob Doster. I was responsible for the City-owned Wilson Springs property. Rob covered adjacent Clabber bottomlands including the Razorback golf course and a parcel just east of Salem Road.

Perennial as well as seasonal wetlands in the Clabber Creek bottomlands play an important role in the life cycles of several groups of birds—none of which, unlike Bald Eagles, are household names.

The numbers of Song Sparrows and Swamp Sparrows were especially impressive. These are among the highest numbers EVER found on a Fayetteville CBC. Of course, it was a mild day, and as a result, we could easily find the birds, but the high numbers recorded can also be explained by the quality of the habitat: Clabber's grassy, wet former Tallgrass Prairie habitat is a fine place for these wintering birds.

Le Conte's Sparrow and Sedge Wren are small birds that have always been very hard to find in the Fayetteville area in winter. This was a big year for them here, too, and all were found in the fields along Clabber Creek.

I mention these things because we tend to focus on birds rare and somewhat novel. In focusing on them and their fate, we focus our energies to save their habitat. This is a good impulse, but quality habitat for even more common species is important if these creatures are to avoid the downward slide toward rarity.

What I find interesting is how the birds themselves make selections. They don't worry about how wide a strip of land to save along the creek. They don't carry on debates about whether or not society as we know it will collapse if we don't add another 25 jobs

or acres of parking lot to the Fayetteville landscape. Their presence in such numbers indicates habitat quality that may not be so obvious to many human observers. They have selected the Wilson Springs bottomland fields as a valuable place. They are waiting on us to catch up to their discovery & selection.

WILSON SPRINGS (2003)

I have made several posts to this list concerning the Wilson Springs property near Northwest Arkansas Mall and the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville. You may recall that this public property has nesting season populations of Henslow's Sparrow, Bell's Vireo, Sedge Wren, Painted Bunting, and others. I have networked with American Bird Conservancy (Jane Fitzgerald), Arkansas Audubon Society, Audubon Arkansas, Arkansas Game & Fish, and others about this property and some adjacent land in Clabber Creek bottoms. None of this is "critical" for salvation of these species, but I don't personally know what would be critical, so being the conservative person I am, I decided it was worth starting right at Wilson Springs to protect these birds and other species of highly threatened lowland Tallgrass Prairies. Jane Fitzgerald (who lives in Missouri) asked me what was going on. Andrea Radwell, who has spent years studying and defending the spring itself and its associated wetlands values, asked me what I thought was going on. So here goes my personal view:

As you may recall, as a controversy developed about the future of the Wilson Springs property, our Mayor appointed a task force to help him resolve the conflict. The task force, including Sierra Club, U of A, and Chamber of Commerce reps, decided that only about 70 of the 289 acres were really suitable for development, and that most of the rest should get some kind of protection (at least 189 of the total, if my memory serves). The Mayor rejected this finding, apparently because he did not believe the ecological values were that great, and because the money on the table was such a big stack. Like every other government entity in this great land of ours, Fayetteville has a budget crisis. He stated that selling this property could generate funds for other parklands--not a bad idea in some other context. So he went out and found a developer to buy the whole tract for almost \$6 million. That's where things stand now. It's a logical business decision on the Mayor's part.

My friend Don Nelms (who is chairman of the board for Audubon Arkansas) has apparently worked out an arrangement whereby up to 125 of the most sensitive acres would become part of an Audubon Nature Center. There seems to be a deal with the new owner on this, though the swirl goes on at least in part because Sierra Club is holding the developer's feet to the fire by demanding a new wetlands delineation. I don't know if money has changed hands nor do I have a good feel about the delineation.

As far as I am personally concerned, if there are Ozark Burrowing Crawfish on the land in question, it's a wetland. I don't think Congress in its wisdom mentioned our endemic crawfish, so it may be that the official delineators may ignore thousands of years of crawfish "wetland delineations," migrating Soras, Sedge Wrens, and those American Bitterns I found out there in spring. The crawfish claim about 229 acres of the property in their wetland delineation. I'll have to go with them, since they are the real wetlands experts, according to the big chimneys they build and their explorations by tunneling into the underlying groundwater.

I have not personally "washed my hands" of the situation, but I know I (and many others) did all I could to promote the ecological values of the land. I tried to promote the idea that, like the National Forest where I work, Wilson Springs was "public land" and could be managed as such and not simply for its economic values. This view had traction with some, but did not prevail. In my view, Wilson Springs is a lot like National Forests-- it could be managed for multiple uses, including economics; but economics would be just one part of the package.

The main thing I got out of all of this was a nuts & bolts understanding and appreciation for the lowland, seasonal wetland aspects of Tallgrass Prairie and the floral & avian aspects of this community. Wilson Springs has been a lab for me and a graduate course. I've had many enjoyable days birding and botanizing within sight of the NWA Mall and the UA. I learned a lot about Henslow's Sparrow, Bell's Vireo, Sedge Wren, and others birds of this habitat. I now speak "hydric soils" like the cracker barrel expert I am. It has greatly increased my understanding of fundamental ecological issues about prairies, springs, and associated wetlands in western Arkansas. It could be that way for many others, too, though this vision is not the one that prevailed. Parts of this vision could be realized in an Audubon Center.

I personally think it's worth a lot more than \$6 million, but admittedly I'm thinking what folks are going to say 50 years from now, about all that green space that could have been preserved in the middle of an urban area of one million people. It's like we had a chance to save a version of Central Park in the Ozarks but our Mayor--and the views of the many folks he represents in this respect-- could not see it that way. Nobody but a few ecowhackos consults the Ozark Burrowing Crawfish or the Sedge Wrens--but then that goes without saying.

The Mayor won office here with a lot of support from the "green" community; so you can image the disappointment, since it turns out that while our Mayor does have mainstream values about the need to protect the environment and has done several things in office to promote "green" values, he does not take the same views as say, we biologists. By comparison, I guess we are radicals. This does not make him an evil or shallow person in my view. The world needs Mayor/politicians and it also, maybe, perhaps, needs mouthy biologists. (Mayors run for office; biologists run from bill collectors). Wilson Springs provides a cautionary tale about political endorsements on one hand and lost opportunities on another. I'd humbly offer the opinion that folks bashing the Mayor over this remember that there are many, many folks with less of an interest in the environment than he has, and he has always favored protecting at least part of the wetland at Wilson Springs.

I have personally shifted gears to help Don and National Audubon establish a center at Wilson Springs. This will be a worthwhile project and will provide numerous future opportunities for western Arkansas. Ozark Burrowing Crawfish are snapping their claws in support of this idea, though it entails loss of part of their Wilson Springs homeland. Many others are still working on the wetlands issue to insure that, whatever the outcome of all this, the wetlands receive the full protection they deserve, and not just lip service. There are other contentious issues in Fayetteville and a lot of damage being done to streams and wetlands in the name of "Progress."

Ah, Progress. Ah, Holy Grail of Civic Improvement. Without you and your tender mercies, we would still be crouching under the bluff lines and gnawing on acorns.

I hope that the feisty folks who have fought for Wilson Springs will take heart, "gird up their loins" (as the Holy Bible) puts it, and get ready for whatever lies ahead. It adds an interesting aspect to our civic life and sometimes we make Progress (gulp) on the environmental front!

RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER NESTING SEASON OUACHITA NF (July 2003)

I've been meaning to update our list on what's happened to our Red-cockaded Woodpecker recovery efforts here on the Ouachita National Forest in western AR. The nesting season for 2003 is over and it was excellent overall. It follows excellent years especially in 2001 and 2002. It appears at this point to be a positive trend. That is to say, the Ouachita NF population appears to be growing and it appears it is going to avoid the extirpation (or local extinction) that has been the fate of almost all isolated populations (isolated because of habitat loss and fire suppression) across the bird's range in the Southeastern US.

If you combine our efforts on the Ouachita NF with those being made by the State of Oklahoma on the McCurtain Wilderness Area (MWA) in McCurtain County, OK, it looks like we are on our way to a really wonderful tale of recovery. The MWA is in the eastern OK region of the Ouachita Mountains. Like the population in the Waldron, AR area (where I work), the MWA RCW population represents a saved remnant with potential to recover as habitat in the western Ouachitas recovers. We know these populations are already in contact, based upon bird banding efforts in both the MWA and the ONF.

Here are some numbers: The Ouachita NF population had been in a long decline, likely since the original forest was cut off-- when all of what is now NF was privately owned--and fires were suppressed. The FS began an accelerated recovery effort in the early 1990s. The population continued to dwindle for several reasons through the mid-1990s, but then began to stabilize.

The low point with fledglings came in 1997, when only 7 young birds left nests in the Waldron area; this compares to 47 in 2003.

The low point with nesting attempts came in 1996, with 11 attempts; there were 26 in 2003.

The low point in the number of active territories came in 1996, with 11; there were 30 by 2003.

Many things have contributed to what appears to be a turnaround. In a mechanical sense, FS personnel in Texas, Louisiana and elsewhere have helped by finding young birds that could be moved to the Ouachitas. This provided opportunities for Ouachita birds to find new mates, establish territories, and rear a fresh batch of young birds. It helped overcome some of the genetic problems associated with a long period of isolation. The Ouachita NF has supported efforts to manage and improve habitat suitable for RCWs, as well as other plant and animal species that require this habitat (such as Bachman's Sparrow, Prairie Warbler, etc.). Many people --both within the FS as well as outside -- have gone way over the top in their efforts to save this population, and to put it on the road to recovery.

Many more things could be listed, but I should say LAST BUT NOT LEAST, RCWs in the Ouachita Mountains have demonstrated resiliency in the face of such

incredible and overwhelmingly negative changes in a landscape that once supported them and many other species that are now "rare"--not because of problems with their genes, but because we modified the landscape in a radical way before realizing what we were losing.

Paraphrasing Aldo Leopold, we fortunately saved this part. We may once again see a robust ecosystem based upon this saved part.

INCREDIBLE WOODPECKER STORY (September 2004)

Here's a just absolutely amazing TRUE story involving Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, and the effort to bring them back from the edge of extinction in Arkansas and Louisiana. It involves the Ouachita NF ranger districts in western Arkansas where I help with the RCW recovery effort. Warren Montague, wildlife program manager and leader of the Ouachita NF's RCW recovery effort, provided the following data:

Most of you may already know that RCWs are endangered because of massive (~99%) loss of mature growth pine in the southeastern United States. So much habitat has been lost that normal dispersal of female RCWs has become difficult (do to huge areas with unsuitable habitat). This leads to isolation and eventual extinction of small populations that under former habitat conditions were healthy. But, as it turns out, the will to survive is very strong in this species.

In 1995, Warren and his RCW team banded a juvenile female RCW in Scott County, north of the Parks community. This bird received a permanent metal band on the right leg, plus a color band on the right, and two color bands on the left. Subsequently, this bird "disappeared" from the Ouachita NF. However, Forest Service biologists on the Winn Ranger District in Louisiana, also working on RCW recovery, later spotted this same bird there, approximately 210 AIR miles away! This new Louisiana resident found a mate and nested, and reared several batches of young woodpeckers in the following years.

This event was incredible on several accounts. In the first instance, banding is a lot of work, and the chances that banders would actually find a bird that had flown this far is extremely low--especially when you realize that this is one of the longest known dispersal distances ever recorded for an RCW. But the story just gets better.

Last week, Warren and trainee biologist Jason Nolde were monitoring an RCW cavity that had become suddenly and unexpectedly active in an area of the Ouachita NF north of Parks. Was there an RCW there? They got the band colors, which did not mesh with any in use on the Ouachita NF. Checking in a wider area showed this bird had come... from the Winn RD in Louisiana! It was not the original female RCW of 1995 either. Instead, it was her GRAND DAUGHTER!!! This bird had retraced the 210 AIR miles, and taken up residence on the Ouachita NF two miles--yes, that's two miles --from where her grand mother had started life!

The implications for these discoveries are mind-boggling. Who says we have all of the answers? The optimist in me says that no matter how much we damage habitat, our fellow creatures retain a will to survive--and to flourish.

The biologist in me notes that the habitat where grand mother started life is being intensively managed on public lands to guarantee that there will be a flourishing population of RCWs in future years. The cluster of trees where the grand daughter

returned includes artificial cavities installed by Warren and wildlife tech Keith Piles as part of an effort to make the area more attractive to RCWs.

It sheds fresh light on the sometimes dull and seemingly unproductive days working with RCWs. It suggests we can slowly retrace and improve the situation that lead to endangerment. To me it says we don't have to be victims of the past. Actually and metaphorically, we can recover and move on.

FISH-EATING BIRDS, BIRD-KILLING PEOPLE (2004)

Twenty years ago in Benton County, a father took his two sons out to a hillside above Osage Creek, overlooking a rookery where Great Blue Herons were nesting. He showed them how to shoot the "Blue Cranes" right out of their nests, while sitting in lawn chairs. They killed as many as they could, then came back the next weekend to finish. A neighbor in the area couldn't take any more of it. She made a call, and as a result, an enforcement officer from Arkansas Game & Fish caught them in the act and got fines. I salute her courage and civic-mindedness in making her call.

The man claimed that fishing was bad because GBHs were wiping out all of the fish in local streams. It's one of the relatively rare cases in which it has been possible to actually catch people doing such things, then to get convictions. I salute AG & F for such valiant efforts and many other efforts on behalf of non-game bird management in Arkansas. Our hunting and non-hunting wildlife-enjoying community in Arkansas has had a long and productive relationship with AG & F.

I mention this because it is more difficult to appreciate the fact that our AG & F is joining the effort to kill fish-eating birds in Arkansas. For details, you can look at an article by Leslie Newell Peacock in Arkansas Times (August 5, 2004, p. 10). She reported that AG & F personnel cooperated in attempts to destroy the Double-crested Cormorant breeding colony at Millwood Lake. "The irony that a bird native to Arkansas is being shot for nesting at a man-made lake stocked with a Florida strain of bass has not been lost on many biologists, who found the report appalling--and ridiculous," wrote Peacock. Further, at the time *Arkansas Birds* was published in 1986, we had lost all of the former breeding cormorants in Arkansas (see pages 79-81). I remember with excitement when the first cormorants were found nesting at Millwood. I have never felt comfortable about damming free-flowing streams, but I must say that when Millwood produced nesting cormorants (as well as many other nesting birds and rare migrants), I felt this "good" had balanced the environmental "bad" of stream damage.

I find it difficult to accept a public agency funded with both game and non-game taxes undertaking to support destruction of a native breeding bird, even if it is a now "common" one that is unpopular in some quarters. Unfortunately, opening this door is likely to impact other native birds, too. I wonder if that guy and his sons in Benton County who thought they were improving their fishing by shooting GBHs will now feel vindicated? And what about the law enforcement officer and judge, who sided with the basic logic behind laws that protect migratory birds?

It's all about economics, some will say. It was also "all about economics" when the first laws were passed protecting migratory birds. It was public policy versus the economics of hard-pressed Arkansas chicken farmers who shot all hawk species because a few hawk species caught chickens and folks in Florida who shot nesting egrets for their feathers. A century has passed; the pressing issues remain.

Peacock also mentions that AG & F has requested a new kind of permit for all of its fish hatcheries that would allow expedited killing of birds that eat fish. At the hatchery I have birded at for 25+ years (Craig, at Centerton in Benton County), I have seen how a good-sized flock of cormorants and pelicans can suddenly appear and obviously consume lots of fish being raised for release in streams and lakes. This is a direct loss. GBHs are at the hatchery all year, but are particularly numerous after the breeding season, as fledglings get their start in life. Lots of fish go down those long skinny necks. These birds add pressures to hatcheries.

Birds make headlines, but the problems in this industry seem varied: groundwater pollution, groundwater shortages, human population growth, growing stocking requests resulting from construction of new lakes and ponds, rising land prices (that inhibit expansion of the hatcheries), the need to build new and expensive hatcheries, the need to directly improve job quality for hatchery and fish farm workers, new disease strains that kill or damage fish, etc.

The hatcheries and fish farms do a lot of good for migratory birds. They make up in part for massive habitat losses caused by other activities like draining wetlands. However, I don't think it's fair to assign all fish business problems to migratory birds.

Max & Helen Parker (and others) found a healthy, vocalizing Royal Tern at a private fish farm at Lonoke in June 1986. The Parkers knew the bird would have to be thoroughly documented; it was a first, fully verified state record and a relatively new thing in the Land of Opportunity. They returned the following day, and found the bird dead, where it had been shot, like other birds, foraging at a private fish farm. The Parkers got the dead bird and delivered it to Doug James, who prepared the specimen now in the UA collection.

The Royal Tern killing illustrates the problem of a fundamentally "open season" on birds at private fish farms, at public lakes (like Millwood), and potentially at our state hatcheries. Some of this killing could be done in a relatively "sensitive" way; that is, in a way (like integrated pest management) in which appropriate technology is carefully applied by qualified individuals to highly specific problem areas; that can do some long term good, without also having widespread negative impacts undermining the rationale for the original action. This could possibly work with real oversight, with care taken to protect the public resource (migratory birds). But in fact, it's unlikely there could be real oversight.

Permitted killing announces to everyone that killing of migratory birds is OK. The green light gets back quickly to folks like the people who shot up the GBH rookery in Benton County and killed the Royal Tern in Lonoke County.

I know that some of my long time friends and associates at A G&F may be discomfited by my statements here. I know that some hatchery managers and fish farmers will say I don't know what I'm talking about, and I sure don't understand their problems. I honor their knowledge and notice that they have a good point. However, I lack the faith to think that if we could kill 90% of the cormorants, herons, and pelicans, that we would fundamentally and over the long run improve the "profit" centers in the public and private fish industry.

By the way, I never felt serious ill will toward the old man and his boys who shot up the Great Blues. They were probably taught this behavior. They had seen the "Blue Cranes" eating fish and decided to put a stop to it.

AN ANCIENT SEARCH FOR IVORY-BILLS (May 23, 2005)

Here's some info about a search for Ivory-billed Woodpeckers (IBWs) in late 1986 in the Newport area of Jackson County. A hunter had reported seeing IBWs.

At Newport, the White and Cache Rivers are maybe 10-15 miles apart, and a world of swampy bottomland hardwood habitat lies between them. The 2004-2005 IBW sightings have occurred approximately 50 miles south, near Brinkley. This is within the historic range: in 1885, IBWs were said to be present in "unfrequented swamps" in the Newport vicinity.

Nigel Ball and I volunteered to check it out. Nigel, from the UK, was a post-doc doing avian sleep research at UA-Fayetteville. On December 27, Nigel and his family (including spouse Maggie, and children Hazel and Thomas), and my family (including Nancy Edelman and our daughter Ariel) arranged ourselves in the Ball's commodious car and set out across state to Newport.

At Newport we met Mr. Harold Hagar (who lived in Tuckerman approx. 8 miles north of Newport) and went with him to a bottomland hardwood forest with cypress near Diaz (north edge Newport on Highway 67). This is in the Village Creek floodplain, between the White and the Cache. Hagar stated that he saw two IBWs while hunting in this area in October 1985. The impression he made on us was a levelheaded person who knew the difference between Pileateds and IBWs.

The habitat we saw during our visit was primarily small-medium sized trees with scattered huge cypress stumps from a much earlier logging. The fact that the area had been logged since Mr Hagar's sightings considerably dampened our spirits. From the Diaz area, we drove toward Tuckerman and saw some more bottomland hardwood habitat. It also had been logged, but not as heavily. Many large trees remained. Overall, the habitat looked better here, though Hagar had not seen IBWs at Tuckerman.

On December 28 we birded along Highway 14, southeast of Newport, in the Cache River area. Here we found some trees in the 60-70 foot range, and many, many more enormous stumps; one had a big river birch growing from inside the stump-a second-growth forest coming on! We also found a few trees in the 100 foot height range. The water was frozen and the winter birding good: lots of Hermit Thrushes, creepers, Rusty Blackbirds, and numerous Hairy Woodpeckers-a bird strongly associated with mature forests. Alas for us in 1986, no IBWs.

Our search was far from thorough. We had fun mucking around in some country very different than the Ozark uplands of northwestern Arkansas. From what I've heard about the recent searches in the Brinkley area, we would probably have had to spend a whole heck of a lot more time (like 1000X more time!) than we did to do real justice to Mr Hagar's observations. It was mid-winter and we were out with our families during the Christmas vacation.

TAIL OF A SNAKE (June 2005)

Each year during the Red-cockaded Woodpecker nesting season on the Ouachita NF, I get to spend several weeks visiting all of the nesting groups. I take my spotting scope and binoculars and try to figure out the identity of the adult birds feeding young in the nest cavities. In essence, our whole year of work aimed at recovery of RCWs comes down to the outcomes during these few weeks of nesting.

When I was out on June 7 I heard adult RCWs calling loudly and excitedly. I assumed, correctly, they were gathered in vicinity of the nest tree. I figured this would be an easy job for me that day: all of the adults in one place. I quietly worked my way around the area and found a good place at some distance (to limit my disturbance) where I could observe and identify bands on the birds' legs. However, when I swung the spotting scope around to that point, I saw, not an RCW feeding the nestling, but rather the tail of a black rat snake poking out of the hole.

Rat snakes and I go a long ways back. I used to find them in weedy lots as a kid growing up in Fort Smith. They figured prominently in my graduate research. I had seen snakes in RCW cavities before, including one in 1992 that had 3 perfect lumps which, of course, were remains of 3 young woodpeckers banded just the week before. There is an ancient relationship between cavity nesting birds and tree climbing snakes, but at least in our time the snakes have been plentiful, and the birds--or at least these woodpeckers--rare. So while a predation event like that I witnessed on June 7 has a long natural history, it is frustrating, to say the least, when our disturbed ecosystems are unbalanced and so much rides on getting the snakes to eat something besides rare woodpeckers.

We use snake guards on RCW nest and roost trees, but as the event of June 7 shows, snakes get around or over them at times. When this happens, our whole year of work on RCW population growth is frustrated. But before we put too much of the blame on our snakes, there is more to consider.

In terms of recruiting young RCWs into our population, we have had 4 excellent years previous to this season. From 2001 through 2004, we estimate there were 176 fledglings, or slightly more than 40 per year. This compares well to the previous decade, 1990-2000, when recruitment amounted to an estimated 171 birds, or about 17 per year. This year we are going to fall below the good recruitment years. It's not just snakes, either.

Very early in the nesting season we began to notice problems--smaller clutch sizes, and rapid reduction of the broods to just 1 or 2 nestlings; in many cases, the young disappearing entirely--but with no evidence snakes were involved. The whole thing seems more likely related to weather and insect abundances. Nesting season 2005 may prove to be a year when the adults had their work cut out for them just staying alive, with little left over for rearing young birds. If this is the case, then what affected RCWs here in 2005 probably affected other cavity nesting birds as well.

Those who watch bluebird boxes may notice something. We notice these changes in nesting output of RCWs on the Ouachita NF because we watch closely--but such things typically go unnoticed for other birds.

We have been wondering if west Nile virus has affected the adults (as it has affected some other bird populations--crows, jays, etc)? Was it too hot and dry during the critical early nest period?

FORMER ROUND PRAIRIE (June 2005)

I have an 1890 Arkansas Geological Survey book that includes information on named prairies in Benton County. I've been birding some of these areas. Most are still prime grasslands, though not native grasses, and some of the best open country habitat in northwestern Arkansas. The native Tallgrass Prairie is long gone, but you can hear echoes at least in some of the birds.

One of these is the former Round Prairie, along the AR-OK border in western Arkansas (look for Cherokee City on your state map). I was out there on June 5 and June 18. Most of my birding was on Floyd Moore Road. I picked this road because it is long and straight, basically connecting between Highways 43 & 59. "Long & straight" in this country means it once was prairie with few obstructions. This road is directly north of the SWEPCO's Flint Creek power plant; the big stack is always visible in the south. This area is also directly north of SWEPCO's Eagle Watch Nature Trail, a comfortable place to view Bald Eagles in winter.

What I wanted to see were the open country birds of summer: shrikes, kestrels, dickcissels, Grasshopper Sparrows, etc. I was not disappointed. Here's an abbreviated list from the 2 days:

American Kestrel: a single bird, and 4 together (presumably a family group)

Northern Bobwhite: 3 calling

Eurasian Collared-Dove: scattered in the area

Yellow-billed Cuckoo: 6+ calling from various woodlots and fencerows

Bewick's Wren (brown; eastern form): seen in 2 spots; one a single singing bird; second was 2 birds

Loggerhead Shrike: saw birds in 5 scattered spots, including 2 family groups (one with 5 birds)

Warbling Vireo-2

Grasshopper Sparrow: singing in one hayfield that is mostly fescue, but includes some native forbs like Baptisia

Blue Grosbeak-4

Painted Bunting-3 or 4

Great-tailed Grackle-2 spots

Orchard Oriole & Baltimore Oriole (latter near Cherokee City in 4 spots)

Overall, this area has been less obviously impacted by rapid population growth in northwest AR than others. I assume this is because it is an important poultry producing country and big chicken houses means there is a need for big fields for spreading litter.

Long may this and the other former prairies of western AR remain open, grassy, lightly-developed, and shrike-friendly.

SWAINSON'S HAWKS & PAINTED BUNTINGS GALORE (July 2005)

Mike Mlodinow and I made our somewhat annual trip to look for Benton County's summer Swainson's Hawks on July 2. We were not disappointed. We had GREAT looks at three. The first was just N of Maysville, at the intersection of Highway 43 and Wet Prairie Rd. It perched nicely, right in front of us, in a walnut tree (I have a 99 KB image file in case anyone wants to see a genuine AR Swainson's). We saw the other 2 together from Floyd Moore Rd, east of Cherokee City. Both of these areas are former prairies.

While no longer prairies in a botanical sense, they both have extensive grasslands. Other birds of interest: we found 2 flocks of Horned Larks in the Maysville area: one with at least 20 birds, the other with at least 6; both were in harvested bean fields. We

found Painted Buntings basically "all over the place." I figure at least 5 in the Maysville area, and at least 6 along Floyd Moore. There are nice thickets and fencerows along most of the big fields. This provides a lot of Painted habitat. Mike saw 2 Cedar Waxwings at Maysville; I was off recording mockingbird songs and didn't get up the road in time. We also found Lark Sparrow (1) and Bell's Vireo (1), plus shrikes, kestrels, and Grasshopper Sparrows singing in at least 3 fields.

I celebrated July 4 with a brief early morning trip to the old Norwood Prairie, located about 15 miles W of Fayetteville, basically between Fayetteville and Siloam Springs. I found 4 Lark Sparrows, 4 Painteds, and Grasshopper Sparrows singing in one field (so that makes at least 2 fields in this area with Grasshopper Sparrows). I'd gone out there to record mockingbirds, but got distracted. In one recording I have Painted Bunting, Indigo Bunting, and Blue Grosbeak, all in the same regenerating field--a nice and predictable ecological songfest. When I listened to this section at home, I found that I had also recorded a Lark Sparrow.

Last evening (July 6) I made a brief (1.5 hr) tour after work. I left the office in Waldron (Scott County) at 6 PM and finished about 7:30. Altogether I slowly drove 5-6 miles of farm roads--big fields with heavy fencerows, etc. This is also former prairie: the whole area features large prairie mounds highly visible after the hale is baled. I saw 8 Painteds (7 males, 1 female) and heard (but didn't see) at least 2 others. I wasn't out specifically for Painteds, but I did feel overwhelmed by the numbers yesterday, and generally the numbers of Painteds since July 2.

All of this tends to confirm a growing feeling on my part that Painted Buntings are at least fairly common birds in the whole former prairie region in western AR, at least from Scott County north to Benton County (including the Arkansas R valley). When their singing is strong—as in the last week at least--they are obviously widespread and at least relatively numerous in suitable habitat. This is farm country, with hayfields, cattle, chicken houses, and fencerows. It's big cloud country. It's Painted Bunting country.

HENSLOW'S SPARROWS & SWAINSON'S HAWK AT PEA RIDGE (July 2005)

Mike Mlodinow and I counted at least 6-7 HENSLOW'S SPARROWS at Pea Ridge National Military Park in Benton County on July 9. I also saw an adult SWAINSON'S HAWK. This trip was a follow-up to the discovery of a single Henslow's there by Mike and David Chapman during International Migratory Bird Day May 14. Mike and David had not found them there in previous years, so Henslow's there may be recent.

The birds are in an expansive, grassy field, immediately north of the visitor's center. Cost to get into the park: \$5 per car--good for visiting one week.

After paying our \$5, we walked back out the front doors, around the west side of the building, crossed the tour road, hopped the split rail fence soldier-like (well, old soldiers--maybe like those ole graybeards that used to come to reunions in the 1890s), but with binoculars rather than muskets, and marched (well, strolled?) directly out into the grassy fields. What you see out there are Civil War artillery emplacements--3 or 4 big guns then some space, then more guns. Closest to the visitor's center are the Union lines, which face roughly northeast to the Confederate lines--more lines of big guns. The space

inbetween--just a few hundred yards--is a grassy field now, but was a sea of suffering humanity in March 1862.

The grass in 1862 must have been one of the common Tallgrass Prairie species (Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, etc.). Today it's about 100% introduced Johnsongrass--a strongly invasive weed that, from the looks of things July 9, works OK for Henslow's. We covered maybe half of the big field. Seems probable that the actual Henslow's numbers are higher. One of the best things is that this is public land. Since it is the core of this bloody battlefield--called in Civil War days "the Gettysburg of the West"-- it will be maintained as such in perpetuity. This is good news for a grassland species like Henslow's. However, there wasn't much of anything else in the field, birdwise--surprisingly few meadowlarks and dickcissels, for example. I suppose that may be a result of it's being a Johnsongrass monoculture.

Time is certainly a trickster. My relatives of 143 years ago who served in the war (on both sides--northern AR was thoroughly divided) probably saw this field where on July 9, 2005, Mike and I eagerly listened for, and enjoyed watching, a small sparrow inhabiting a big space.

Also, the wonder of all of this is that this is, as I said, public land. Emotionally, it became so because of the blood-letting of 1862. It was saved from development years ago by the dedication of local history buffs. It may now play a role in protection for one of our much-declined grassland birds.

STATUS DESIGNATIONS (September 2005)

Mike Mlodinow and I birded Lake Atalanta at Rogers on Sunday 9-18. Overall, a pretty slow day, and nothing truly fancy to report:

-- flycatchers: pewee, Acadian (one singing! and a second probable), *Empidonax* species, phoebe

--vireos: white-eyed (at least 7), yellow-throated, blue-headed, red-eyed

--warblers: Nashville, parula, black-and-white, redstart, yellowthroat, Wilson's (~8, still pretty numerous), Canada (2), chat

We also had our first fall Rose-breasted Grosbeak and at Centerton, our first Savannah Sparrow.

There was a big rain up our way in the middle of the week. Mike spent the day combing Mt. Sequoyah in Fayetteville (mature upland hardwoods, mainly) and had 11 warbler species for the day. During fall, this is equivalent to a big spring fall-out.

During the drive time between Fayetteville and our Benton County birding spots, we get in lots of bird chat. Mike brought with him a tight little list of dickey birds (AKA Neotropical migrants) and their status according to the current Arkansas Audubon Society field list. It's hard to square some of the status designations (common, uncommon, rare, etc) on the field list with what we see in the field in NW Arkansas. Mike has carefully collected data since the 1980s, charts it all, figures frequencies, and hence has a pretty good grasp of whether or not a bird like Wilson's Warbler is really "uncommon," as stated on the field list. We see them often on our fall trips, so the bird can hardly be called "uncommon" in NW AR--especially say compared to migrant Bay-breasted Warblers, which the list also notes as being "uncommon" but which we rarely see in NW AR. So who is responsible here? Well, let's start with *moi*.

One of the problems is that eastern AR and western AR are quite different in terms of many of the ranges of these birds. Also, and I really hate to have to own up to this in such a public forum: some of the apparently rogue status designations likely date to the work I did on this field list in the mid-1980s. As far as I know, Mike is the only person in AR who has actually collected enough field data in fall landbird migration to confidently chart frequencies that can be translated into some standardized language like "common" versus "uncommon." What I did in the mid-1980s was to look at all of the card files on hand and make some intelligent (???--pretty speculative statement!) -- or what I then hoped was intelligent -- guesses about status. I got other folks to look at this list before Arkansas Audubon Society published it. Subsequent editions of the list have been reviewed & reviewed. Unfortunately, we do not have statewide data to make confident statements about the status of many of these birds in migration. These would be good, highly useful studies.

The Mike Mlodinow *Experience*, is the way I think about it. Bird 'til you drop, then go home and analyze what you've found out. If we had some strategically-spaced "Mikes" scattered around the state, we'd have a chance to fine tune our list, which is a wonderful product, even with the above-stated caveats. They would need an interest in mathematics, which is what lies behind Mike's analysis of bird field data.

It would be useful sometime if all/most with a particular interest in this topic could assemble in a room somewhere and sort some of this out. Maybe Bay-breasts and Wilson's are of similar abundances in migration? Or is this an E-W thing? Or am I getting too old to crane my head back far enough to see Bay-breasts, or what (compared to Wilson's, which I have in my yard, nearly eye level, routinely, in migration)?

STORMING THE GATES OF HEAVEN (September 2005)

Mike Mlodinow and I birded Lake Atalanta in Rogers on 9/11 and Chesney Prairie Natural Area near Siloam Springs on 9/13.

At Lake Atalanta we came up with the following: Acadian Flycatcher- 1; Least Flycatcher (3+, and several more empids). Vireos: White-eyed-7, Yellow-throated-2, Warbling-1, Red-eyed-2. Warblers: Parula-~10, Magnolia-1, Black& white-2, Redstart-1, Louisiana Waterthrush-1 (possibly 2; relatively "late"; the one was a close study), Kentucky-3 (together!), Mourning-1 (adult male type plumage, so a different bird than last week), Wilson's-~10 ("all over the place"), Canada-1.

Up to today (9/14), we have had a powerful drought affecting everything here. It is no wonder, then, that some of the most interesting birding has been in the shady, moist, relatively cool Frisco Spring run with its lush vegetation, even in this drought. I suspect what we are seeing is the working of a natural reality of life in the spring region of the Springfield Plateau section of the Ozarks. Here the life processes go on, much as in a typical moist summer: many flowers and birds. Hummingbird numbers are still high in the abundant jewelweed patches. It adds to my sense of loss about the amount of damage being done natural springs in the mad rush to squeeze every possible dollar out of the landscape of northwest Arkansas.

A small farm pond on the drive into Chesney Prairie held 23 Great Egrets and 2 Snowy Egrets--both good records for the western Ozarks. We saw our first harrier of the season at Chesney. Most kingbirds have migrated south already, but there were 4 at Chesney. We found 3 Sedge Wrens, but they have basically stopped singing, and they

were not generous with views or even chap-chap calls. They melt into tall, lush grasses (especially big bluestem in the lower parts of the prairie).

It's late in the season, but we were not surprised by finding a number of Dickcissels, Indigo Buntings, and Common Yellowthroats in the dense grasses and forbs at Chesney. I had a flock of Indigos in a head high patch of giant ragweed, poke, goldenrod, and some big bluestem. It's like summer is still with us, at least in respect to these birds.

It was Northern Bobwhites--bobwhite quail--that were "storming the gates of heaven." I am using that phrase from the writings of artist Walter Inglis Anderson, of Ocean Springs, Mississippi. He was referring to a juvenile green heron that he found, wanted to paint, and that was trying to escape (he did paint it, and it is one of his masterpieces--from the book, *The Horn Island Logs of Walter Inglis Anderson*). Mike and I saw one covey of about 10 full-grown birds on Chesney proper. They stormed the gates of heaven in the usual manner--exploding at our feet, up, up, and away, and gone into Chesney's waves of grass and goldenrod. We found a second covey just south of Chesney. This was an adult male and maybe 10 half-grown chicks. They were crossing a recently harvested hayfield and heading for a dense roadside thicket. We were between them and the thicket of greenbriar, blackberry, foxtail grass, etc--their gate to heaven. They remained on the ground until we stepped out of the car, then BOOM, all of them up and away (including the youngsters), and into heaven. Heaven seems a flexible domain, providing a supplicant's appropriate needs.

BRINKLEY (September 2005)

I had the very good fortune to attend the fall meeting of the Arkansas Chapter of the Wildlife Society, September 15-16. It was held in Brinkley, at the Brinkley Convention Center, same as for our upcoming fall Arkansas Audubon Society meeting. The Thursday afternoon presentations got us up to speed on the multi-agency, multi-faceted approach underway in regards Ivory-bills. Arkansas Game & Fish Commission folks generously hosted us on a Friday morning canoe trip on Bayou de View, Dagmar Wildlife Management Area, a few miles west of Brinkley.

What an incredible place. You leave the heavily developed Delta farm country and enter a tupelo-cypress wonderland cut from the cloth of the 19th century. It's black water & cypress knees; for me, the presence of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers was palpable. Some of the Dagmar folks directed me for land birding to the Apple Lake area along Bayou de View, also near Brinkley. There is an easily walked elevated levee (originally built for a railroad) that provides great views of this habitat. I can't image an easier way to see a real live swamp, and--lucky for us--a chance to see/hear Ivory-bills. Oops, guess that "kent" call was just a White-breasted Nuthatch, but you never know.

Mosquitoes were a minor nuisance on the float, but the Apple Lake walk was...well...something else. This may not be such an issue at the end of October, but for this meeting I was super-duper proud that I'd brought my dear ole bug jacket (made from mosquito and no-see-'em netting) and also that the AG&F folks were generous with their supply of insect repellent. I've never tried to bird this area in late October, so I don't know what the situation vis-a-vis mosquitoes will be like then. Probably no problem, but I'm going to come prepared and will probably do this hike again.

A BIRDER'S FALL COLORS (October 2005)

I wake up before daylight on Sept. 14 and hear "seep" notes overhead. "Seep" then "seep" seep" =s sparrows overhead, fall colors heading south. After the long, late summer drought, "seep" in the night sky promises good birding ahead.

And it has been an interesting fall so far in northwestern Arkansas: big wods of mixed species sparrows and other seed-eaters. There was nothing to electrify or to set off a listing stampede toward Fayetteville, but it was informative and pleasurable. (What follows is primarily from my own notes--I know in many cases my frequent birding partner Mike Mlodinow saw some of these earlier than the dates I list.)

First of the obviously migrant sparrows, Savannah Sparrow, was at the state fish hatchery at Centerton in Benton County on Sept. 18: 1-2 birds. I got my first Clay-colored Sparrow Sept. 26 at Razorback Golf Course in Fayetteville (same day as a BIG monarch migration, for you b'fly folks). An unfortunately poor look at what was probably a "late" Lark Sparrow, a small flock of Savannahs, numerous Lincoln's Sparrows, a last small flock of Indigo Buntings (with snatches of the summer song) all at Chesney Prairie Natural Area in Benton County on Oct. 3.

October 7 at Chesney was a real banner day for the sparrow business: first Song Sparrows, Swamp Sparrows, first junco (one of the *cismontanus* types with reddish-pink in the flanks), White-throated Sparrows, and a brownish Blue Grosbeak which tied the local "late" departure date for our area. First White-crowned Sparrows at former Norwood Prairie near Wedington west of Fayetteville, 4 birds sprinkled around in 3 spots, on Oct. 8. At Hindsville in Madison County on Oct. 15: a flock of at least 8 Vesper Sparrows, and 2 Grasshopper Sparrows (getting "late" for these summer residents).

First LeConte's: at Chesney on Oct. 21, about the colors of the seasoned Big Bluestem grasses there.

Oct. 11--my first local Golden-crowned Kinglet of the season plus a nice bonus of 3 brown & black tarantulas crossing a Forest Service road in Scott County.

At Hindsville on October 20, I spent a couple of hours following a mixed-species flock that included at least Clay-colored, Field, Vesper, Savannah, Grasshopper, Lincoln's, and White-crowned; Common Yellowthroat, Orange-crowned Warbler, and House Wren were in the same mix. There was a big "black warrior" (Audubon's words) western Red-tailed Hawk that at first looked, for all the world, like a standard Turkey Vulture with a non-standard rufous tail.

After a month of birding's fall colors, I'm getting a little tired and have the start of a cold. I had some trim painting on my house that I didn't accomplish. I wanted to travel out to see my sisters, but didn't. While Mike tramps the smartweed edges at Centerton on October 22, I relax on a pond levee and stare into a blue sky; then fall asleep, flat on my back (binoculars and all) under Benton County's big fall sky. Suddenly awake, I hear Savannah "seep" notes and see a single white pelican, soaring low and slow over one of the hatchery ponds. One pelican?

Now here's Mike coming up after a long tramp of two big ponds: he's worked a small flock along a narrow brushy edge that includes Field, Savannah, Song, Lincoln's, and Swamp Sparrows, plus a Marsh Wren.

ARKANSAS AUDUBON SOCIETY MEETING, BRINKLEY, ARKANSAS OCTOBER 28-30, 2005

(Note to Sandy Berger)

In response to your desire for a report on last weekend's Arkansas Audubon Society meeting, please accept these notes:

One thing that stands out for me: there are few opportunities to center any kind of a meeting around something as wonderful as a rediscovered "extinct" bird. Lots of people came, myself included, not because of a good chance to see THE bird, but because it was there...and who knows, on a given day, a birder might get really, really lucky. My evidence for good turn-out despite a poor chance to see THE is as follows: 50 people with \$1000 bins around their necks, standing most of the day on a bridge in rural Monroe County, purely on the basis of a good rumor of a recent sighting that THE was there on the previous Monday. As far as I know, there has NEVER been such an organized field trip at an AAS meeting. Wow! I'm not sure anyone would stand around that long if \$100 bills were promised to all who completed 6 hours on a busy bridge in eastern Arkansas.

All that, plus the unplanned musical accompaniment (a dance with "loud music" next door attended by African-American youth) toward the end of Saturday night's finale--an irritation to be sure for us "quiet" birders, but also a gift, really-- a reminder that the world is bigger than that part we choose to see through our bins or hear through our finely honed ears. I hope we can find ways to reach out in an inclusive way to the wider community in Brinkley and Monroe County. Our society--and the ornithological community in general everywhere--is heavily drawn from a narrow racial spectrum--not by design or because we are a bunch of racists--but because of history and its aftermath. We don't have to be victims of such history. But it is a steep challenge to overcome.

It occurred to me that all of us on that bridge--waiting for "Elvis" (code name for Ivory-billed Woodpecker)--are much like those who seek another Elvis at various places around Memphis. We have faith. We await the defining moment.

LOONS (November 2005)

I liked Jeff Wilson's loon (s, actually--4 species) page: http://www.pbbase.com/ol_coot/loon_species. If any of you on the list are like me--looney, but not that good at separating the 4 species--this is a wonderful primer. Like being out there with Jeff. It's become a cold weather tradition. Find those drowned rivers turned into clear water lakes. Find the birds that we can now see that were absent in the bad old days, before the rivers became reservoirs. Many of the images are like what you'd get on a great day at a place with the 4 species--down & dirty through the scope--with waves and Charles Mills quality "heat shimmers"--and that odd way that much-longed-birds (viewed at great distance) rarely cooperate for the perfect profile--and with the the Ol' Coot himself whispering in your ear about the location of the high point on the back of that loon, and how that high point isn't in the center of the back on that other loon. I started at Jeff's first loon, then slowly worked my way through the 4 species, clicking "next," and "next" and reading his Roger Tory Peterson style "key marks" play-by-play. Within 4 images the warm world of my office had segued to cold wind tearing through my jacket, numb fingers, and furious focusing my spotting scope. It's in TN, but it's the same in Arkansas (on a VERY lucky day) and at Tenkiller in eastern Oklahoma.

I have found that seeking and seeing loons is a season high point for me as a birder. I mourn summer's passing, look forward to loon's arrival. Or I should write, loons' arrival. We see loons on Beaver Lake in northwest Arkansas, but usually just a few., Tenkiller Lake in eastern OK, 70 miles west of Fayetteville, is a different matter. All 4 species have been seen there in the last couple of years. I've made the hajj over there several times in the past 2 years. This past weekend we saw 50 or so Common Loons from the Strayhorn area, plus two Pacific Loons, but not the other two loon species. I like Jeff's description of the Pacific as "Colbra head." I noticed the distinct look, but hadn't gotten that far with a descriptor.

INVITATION TO FAYETTEVILLE CBC 2005 (November 2005)

Please join us on the historic and formerly well-organized Fayetteville CBC Sunday Dec 18, 2005. The many benefits (?) include:

1. An opportunity to rise at 4 AM for owling, if you wish
2. A chance to dodge any one of the hundreds of construction projects creating new "profit-centers" within the count circle
3. Fellowship with "The Best & the Birdiest" in the Fayetteville area
4. A chance to learn technical details for separating Lesser and Great Scaup as hopefully viewed on a sweet-smelling sewer pond
5. Wild romps through blackberry thickets in pursuit of Harris's Sparrows
6. Bald Eagles soaring over a Walmart supercenter, oblivious to contantly-falling prices
7. Golf Course Birding, Introductory Course 1001 (forget your clubs; bring the nokies)
8. An investment of \$5, rain or shine, heat or cold. Where can you find a comparable deal for a full day's "entertainment"?
9. The coveted opportunity to defend any UNUSUAL sightings before a famously skeptical post-count conflag at the home of Doug James and Elizabeth Adam. An image will help; written docs are a must. Speakers are requested to lick pizza sauce from their fingers BEFORE interrupting.
10. Please no hoot-owling out in the yard.

WESTERN MEADOWLARK (F'VILLE CBC December 20, 2005)

When it's all said and done, including count week birds, Fayetteville will come close to its own "Holy Grail," 100 species. It looks like 98 now (94 + 4 for the count week), but count week isn't over. We had lots of folks and lots of fun. The brilliant male Summer Tanager (now affectionately known as "Tannie") made an appearance at Bob & Sara Caulk's Mt. Sequoyah suet feeder, as hoped. No ice, no snow, no wind.

I'd say my biggest personal challenge for the day was finding a Western Meadowlark. The University Experimental Farm in Fayetteville is home to many wintering meadowlarks, but it has been my experience that it is a rare midwinter day when there is much singing, and Western "chups" are rarely heard. Doug James says he

used to get them by spotting meadowlarks, then slowly...slowly...creeping up on them, always pausing before they fly, then creeping some more, until one bird finally gives it up and "chups." This was years before Sibley and years before hotshot birders with super scopes picked them out by malar stripe alone.

In a manner of speaking, I have inherited the CBC-day farm and have tried Doug's technique, occasionally with success. This year I decided to go high tech and try playback. I deployed all of my finest technology on a dry run at the farm the day before the count. I did get a Western interested or perhaps I should say puzzled? I mean, just what are those strange sounds of June in Colorado doing here in Arkansas in winter???

(playback)

On count day I eagerly sought out the meadowlark flocks, liberally deployed my playback, and got zapped again and again. Things were looking bad for our CBC in terms of that bird. How could a flock of 40 meadowlarks not have a single Western at least chup back? But there I go again with my human hubris. The reality is, how could a human think any self-respecting meadowlark would pay attention to a Colorado June in a mid-December Arkansas field? But then, it happened.

There was a huge old post out in an open field, with its branches filled with maybe 30 meadowlarks -- all yellow against the gray of the day. I fired up the MP3 player. The cows looked strangely at us, who had no hay for them. And one Western Meadowlark sang a few--a very few--notes for us. That song from the upper boughs of an old post oak was Manna from Heaven. I bent down and kissed the ground, no doubt an embarrassment to my party, especially considering it's a pasture with lots of...well you know...Not really, but I secretly wanted to.

This will doubtless sound pretty silly, especially to all who have their Western Meadowlarks all lined up and ready to be counted, and especially to anyone out West...where "chups" don't count for much...where the chase, I assume, involves Easterns and those buzzy zapps.

IS NATIONAL AUDUBON ANTI-HUNTING? (January 2006)

The following post to ARBIRD is from a birder in eastern Arkansas who thinks National Audubon is trying to end hunting: "I believe that National Audubon tried that back in the 70s. If my memory is right they went to Washington D. C and tried to get a law passed to end all hunting and to do away with all state game and fish commissions. If they had been successful they would have destroyed the conservation group that saved the Ivory-bill. Then today there might not be an Ivory-bill. Also thousands of acres of habitat that the state games and fishing commissions have purchased would not be perserved today. I wish someone would figure out just how many thousands of acres of habitat the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission owns today and compare that to the few that [National Audubon] owns. I sure can't figure why some people think the national group is so great."

My post to ARBIRD in response:

During the extremely low duck reproduction years of the 1970s, almost everyone with an interest in birds (hunters and non-hunters) felt there was a need for a moratorium or lower bag limits, not to mention a need for a lot more habitat protection. If Audubon believed then that we were about to see the end of Canvasbacks, would they have been

so wrong to work to save them? There was also a time when shooting raptors was respectable--was it wrong then to seek an end to such practices? And how about the feather trade? Audubon sought to end the killing of herons, saving several egret species from extinction. Some folks are publicly griping right now about Ivory-billed Woodpecker (s?) because of modest restrictions on 5000 out of 180,000 acres (less than 3%) of public lands in eastern Arkansas

Maybe someone, somewhere, writing in Audubon magazine or somewhere, blamed hunters and others, and wanted an end to hunting in the low duck years. Maybe someone said state game & fish agencies weren't, in their view, properly doing their jobs. In my view, these folks are entitled to their opinions, and to our respect, even if we disagree and promote different ideas.

But, just for the sake of argument, let's say the statement was true of National Audubon "back in the 70s" (I don't know Audubon's views from that time). It's easy enough to look at the group today. National Audubon is sometimes criticized because of its support for game management and its lack of opposition to hunting. If they opposed it in the 70s, they sure have made a heckofa turnaround!

Modern game management involves collection of data and decisions made on the populations and health of target animals. Moratoriums, bag limits, limited or closed seasons, license fees, regulations on uses of dogs and ATVs--all are used to achieve these ends. Imagine, our good ole once trustworthy "hook & bullet" agency now cares about warblers and salamanders! Some folks see this as proof that Arkansas G & F has been taken over by the "anti-hunting" crowd. Ouch! I have heard it said--and now it's "fact"--because it's on the internet.

DARDENELLE (February 2006)

Kenny and LaDonna Nichols squired a group of us Fayetteville-area birders around Dardenelle Lake on Saturday Feb. 4. Our group included Mike Mlodinow, plus Mary Bess and Paige Mulhollan. We got wonderful views of one Black and one White-winged Scoter. Besides that, we saw all of the Ruddy Ducks and Lesser Scaups the heart could desire, and views of male Canvasbacks in perfect sunlight. The north wind made the water a little choppy, made us clutch those scopes tightly, but the views from the Nichol's place were superb. That cloud of scaup rising as a boat approached was a sight of wild nature rare and wonderful.

Kenny and LaDonna teamed up in spotting the scoters for us in that choppy water. I am taking not a thing from Kenny in awarding my personal best prize to LaDonna for spotting, holding down her scope, and occasionally also holding her dog, all at the same time. In case anyone doubts, I collected images.

These wonderful days of bird chasing crank up my ambiguities. It's a two-hour drive from Fayetteville to Dardenelle. I think it's safe to say the four us in the car Saturday are concerned about green house gas emissions and energy use, think Americans are addicted to their cars, and would offer the opinion that President Bush hasn't quite figured it out. Boy, is that finger ever pointing at us. Then there is the lake.

I came of age in the 1960s alternative culture and honestly, never quite grew out of it. Favorite slogan from then: "No nukes is good nukes." Dardenelle provides cooling water for the nuclear plant. While watching scoters, we could see the steam billowing from the big cooling tower. I assume the elevated water temperatures associated with

cooling the plant fosters suitable environmental conditions and the forage base for all of those thousands upon thousands of diving ducks, not to mention white pelicans, gulls (including the California Gull), a huge flock of Snow Geese, cormorants, etc. So here I am in 2006, with my big scope, scanning diving ducks in the nuke lake.

I am grateful for friends and birders who share their treasures. I am also grateful to have reached the life stage where the many facets constituting most ambiguities are easily seen if uneasily entertained.

DUNLIN & TIME (February 2006)

This report involves Benton County in EXTREME northwestern Arkansas. I spent our **one** winter day this winter with Mike Mlodinow, plus Paige and Mary Bess Mulhollan, scouring the Maysville area, with a quick stop at the Eagle Watch Nature Trail just W of Gentry. The temp hovered around just below 30 all day. We had snow flurries, varying from a little to a lot. At one point, it was a 30 MPH cold wind from the W, with heavy flurries blowing straight into our eyes as we tried to look W at a field with potential for longspurs, Horned Larks, etc. It doesn't take long under such conditions to choose inside the car, even if you can't hear anything but springs in the seats, breathing, and, well, the joyful crackling of snacks.

As we drove out from Decatur we saw a knot of Bald Eagles behind some chicken houses. Eventually, we could see approx. 25 in a couple of trees, plus others lower down and mainly out of our view. We saw eagles all day, with a conservative tally of 40 and the actual number likely higher.

During one break in the wind we did hear and see a few Western Meadowlarks among many more Easterns. We found only scattered Horned Larks (5 for the day), with no large flocks. We found one flock of at least 21 American Pipits in a plowed field recently fertilized, with that and snow flurries blowing straight in at us. You think you must really love birding at such moments. You appreciate the fact that if the land continues to be productive for farming, it might remain open rather than being condemned to death by subdivision. What I'm saying here is that the smell is powerful, and I'm pleased the landowners are still farming.

There were no Lapland Longspurs for the day. Our latest local record is February 9, so the lack of them is not so surprising on February 11. Without the wind, we would have had a better chance of at least hearing them, and then perhaps finding a migrating flock. There were flocks of Savannah Sparrows all over the place. White-crowned Sparrows were plentiful, and we found a few Harris's Sparrows mixed in among them. Most surprising for us for the day, a LINCOLN'S SPARROW, right in "downtown" Maysville, seen at very close range. We find few of them in mid-winter in our part of the state, and you just don't get those kind of looks: the bird flew within 10 feet of the car, and perched out in front of god and everybody, so we could thoroughly enjoy its presence (and for me, to confirm the fine breast streaks & buffiness) in the warmth of the Mulhollan's car.

We found 3 harriers in the Maysville area. I know this will make no impression whatsoever on birders in eastern Arkansas, where, for example, Dick Baxter recently had dozens in view at once as they went to roost. The 3 on February 11 is a winter "peak" for us, and each of them was completely enjoyed.

Among many "regular" Red-tailed Hawks were 2 Harlan's and 2 of the calurus variety--looks like a Turkey Vulture (silvery primaries and secondaries and black otherwise) with a reddish tail.

The Dunlin was on a big mudflat along SWEPCO Lake at the Eagle Watch Nature Trail. SWEPCO Lake is comparatively warm because it is used to cool the electrical generating plant. We had a Dunlin in the same area on December 31, 2005. If you look at the Christmas Bird Count Data for North America (I used the 10 year automated map feature), you can see that the winter range is overwhelmingly coastal, but with a few spots inland, including a few north of Arkansas. It is still unusual and noteworthy, and was a nice place for us to end a long and fruitful day.

It was snowing pretty hard at that point, with we birders trying to get good Dunlin looks, clouds coming up from the lake, snow falling and blowing, shorebirds probing for invertebrates in the mud.

One other note: Paige Mulhollan was my history professor and honors project advisor when I was an undergrad at U of A-Fayetteville in the late 1960s. In addition, Paige and Mary Bess have a talented son, Kelly. With his partner Donna Stjerna, they have performed as Still on the Hill and are among Fayetteville's finest musicians and producers. Kelly and Donna also teach each summer in the Halberg Ecology Camp. I listen to their CDs and have enjoyed them many evenings in clubs and coffee houses around town. If anyone had told me in 1968 that Dr. Mulhollan and I (not to mention Mary Bess) would be birding together in 2006, I would certainly have considered the possibility that they had inhaled a little too much of what was much in the air around campus that year--not to mention that a Mulhollan son and partner would be powerful, creative musical forces.

Well, here we are.

THREE MISSISSIPPI KITES SOARING (August 2006)

Mike Mlodinow birded Lake Atalanta at Rogers in Benton County on Saturday August 19. We were out to see what the migration held, and eventually identified 9 warbler species--a good fall day in the mountain forests of western Arkansas: Northern Parula, Yellow, Cerulean, Black-and-white, Prothonotary, Northern Waterthrush, Louisiana Waterthrush, Kentucky, and Mourning. We rarely find Ceruleans away from the known breeding areas, so one seen (and possibly another singing [!]) at Lake Atalanta is a treat--also a pain-in-the-neck (treetops=warbler neck). The Mourning Warbler was an "early arrival" for the western Arkansas Ozarks; our previous early bird was August 24th. We also had 2 or 3 Upland Sandpipers fly over, calling, and providing us with good looks.

I'd say we had the most fun with the two waterthrush species. Louisianas nest in our area and Northern's are fairly common migrants. We don't often find them, however, in the same place. Sure, it's always wet, but all dampness is not created equal for these birds. Birders with a few years under their belts know to look at the eyestripe shape & color, carefully examine the throat area, and finally to note the density of the belly/flank streaking. Finally--and I say this with a bit of hesitation--consider the difference in call notes.

Mike and I were just at the head of the Frisco Spring trail when we each heard, then each noted, a waterthrush at the little bridge near the picnic pavilion. Mike sang out,

"Northern Waterthrush" as I was still getting in focus. But what I saw didn't look like Northern: the eyestripe was white and broad in the rear and when it turned I could see clearly a plain, unstreaked throat. In short, it sure didn't look like a Northern. But I hesitated, because Mike is a genuine expert on the eastern *Parulidae*. As a friend and birding partner of his for 25 years, I know darn well that while I'm watching TV or mowing the grass, Mike is studying Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett's *Peterson Field Guide Warblers*.

"Well Mike," I hesitate, "look at that eyestripe--good contrast with the flanks and it's WHITE." Mike is silent. "The THROAT! It's unmarked." Finally Mike says, "Where are you looking?" I assume we're looking at the same bird.

In just a small spot there at the bridge are at least two waterthrushes. Mike sees my bird, at last, and confirms. That sends me looking. Now I have his Northern, and Mike has my Louisiana. But how many of each? Now come the chink notes. Who's doing that?

Off and on during the day I'm scanning the sky for Mississippi Kites, which are now migrating, but are rare in our part of the state. All of the high-flying birds look like kites to me, at least until a good look with the bins shows them to be swifts. Etc. Etc. When I get home I have a message from my neighbor, Kelly Mulhollan. He and Donna Stjerna (these are the same folks from the Halberg camp--musicians and birders) have been seeing a Mississippi Kite from their house for the past two days! Of course, I immediately run out in the yard and see swifts, but no kite. But my luck is about the change.

On Sunday evening, August 20, my friend Amy Edie is over for supper. My plan is to lounge inside, under the comforting benevolence of the AC, but Amy thinks it's cool enough for the front porch, so out we go. Immediately, I hear an *Empidonax* call that I think is a Least--"Come on Amy, let's look at it. Don't need bins." I see the bird up in a cottonwood--and while looking up--3 hawks. Not just hawks, but kites! I race in for binoculars: 3 Mississippi Kites soaring over the neighborhood.

WOOLSEY WET PRAIRIE (December 11, 2006)

Amy Edie and I went out to the Woolsey Wet Prairie at Fayetteville on Sunday Dec. 10, 2006. We flushed a Short-eared Owl from tall grass among the big prairie mounds that dot the place. It's a rare bird in NW AR. Besides this owl, we saw a Loggerhead Shrike, a flock of American Pipits, Savannah Sparrows, etc. The owl perched on a low limb and was swopped off the limb by a Northern Harrier. (We also had Sedge Wrens there on Nov. 19).

"Woolsey Wet Prairie" is a working name for a wetlands mitigation project in association with Fayetteville's new wastewater treatment plant. Woolsey is part of former lowland Tallgrass Prairie, once widespread in the prairie region of NW AR, including Fayetteville. The Ozarks, of course, are justifiably famous for scenic upland forests, but seasonally wet former prairie is our region's most endangered habitat, overall with our rarest birds. Loss of this habitat has heavily impacted many bird species. We lost a breeding location for Willow Flycatcher, for example, near the Bentonville airport. We have all but lost our breeding Bell's Vireos, once common here.

Amy & I ran into Joe Woolbright, of Ozark Ecological Restoration, at Woolsey. Joe is serving as a consultant to the contractor responsible for the project. The last Short-

ered Owl I saw in NW AR was at Chesney Prairie Natural Area at Siloam Springs where Joe is doing restoration and management. Outside of Joe's work with prairies and former prairies, I am aware of only a few individuals and no institutions or conservation groups with abiding interest in protecting this increasingly rare habitat in the Ozarks region of NW AR. It's like we can't see the forest for the trees, or more precisely, the rare native grassland habitats for the forest.

On the previous day, Mike Mlodinow and I were scouting for the Fayetteville CBC and hit the former Wilson Springs area--which, like Woolsey, features a lowland former prairie. We lost the fight with the City of Fayetteville to protect 200+ acres of Wilson Springs (and its breeding season Henslow's Sparrows), but it looks like about 100 or so acres will remain, with much of it buffer land adjacent Clabber Creek, plus a few other riparian strips and a few acres of native grasslands. Among other birds, we found 2 or 3 Sedge Wrens--a "good" bird for winter at Fayetteville and a treasure for our CBC. At least it will not all be developed. There will be birding opportunities adjacent the heavy development along I-540.

It's agonizing to see fields that supported Henslow's, American Bitterns, Soras, Short-eared Owls, etc. being turned into a Sam's Club, an 8,000 square foot liquor store, upscale housing, etc. Locating and protecting significant parcels of lowland former seasonally wet prairie in the Ozarks could be an important and rewarding challenge for the conservation community in Arkansas. It is my hope that construction of the wastewater treatment (AKA, sewage) plant will retard housing and commercial development around Woolsey, keeping the area in big open fields, as it is today, and giving a better chance for the kind of birds we saw Sunday.

Every acre we lose pushes a group of bird species closer to the time when they become listed as threatened or endangered, with huge long term management costs for society. That's why protecting it and managing it early benefits all of society, not just the birding community.

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that the new streets covering former prairie fields at Wilson Springs have bird names.

BALD EAGLES IN WINTER IN BENTON COUNTY (Dec. 28, 2006)

At mid-winter (best time: January) you can see many Bald Eagles in Benton County right along the highways, along 102, between Decatur & Maysville, or along 72, between Gravette and Maysville. I saw 25-40 with no effort on Christmas Day during birding around Maysville--overhead, perched in trees, standing in fields. They were numerous on Christmas Eve in and around Chesney Prairie Natural Area near Siloam Springs, also in Benton County. All of the heavy poultry producing areas in Benton County (and elsewhere in NW AR with heavy poultry concentrations) are attractive to Bald Eagles.

Golden Eagles are an EXTREME rarity in this area. Don't expect Golden's, but every age class and plumage condition of Balds is present.

The big mid-winter roost is near Gravette. Doug James and his students have studied several Bald Eagle roosts in Benton County since the late 1970s, more recently near Gravette. The Arkansas Audubon Society Trust has provided funding to assist these students in their studies.

If you are interested in the roost, a good time to see a mass of birds is at dawn, as they leave. You can view them from the area of the Spavinaw Creek bridge on highway 59, between Decatur and Gravette (find a safe place off the bridge). You can also get good views from the heights along Mt Olive Road, also between Decatur and Gravette. Go west a short distance on Mt Olive after turning off 59, keeping your view to the north (towards Spavinaw). Birds leaving the roost will fly up from the bottoms heading south (right overhead). I have not visited this area in the afternoon or dusk, when I assume birds would be streaming in as well.

There is also an interesting place to see Bald Eagles near Gentry--the Eagle Watch Nature Trail west of Gentry (more information on this below). Eagles do not roost there with regularity, but during the peak times (mid-winter) they are almost always there during the day.

I would encourage everyone with an interest in this topic to remember that eagles are federally-listed as threatened; don't harass the birds & **stay out of the roost!** The roost is on private rather than public property and the property owners are very protective of "their" birds.

Here are some details about the Eagle Watch Nature Trail in case you head up that way:

Notice Highway 59 on your Arkansas highway map. Gentry is at the intersection of 59 and Highway 12. From this intersection, travel W on 12 for approx. two miles. The Eagle Watch Nature Trail is approx. 1 mile W of the city limits on the S side of the highway. Look for the parking lot on the highway's S side, immediately E of the highway bridge spanning Little Flint Creek. There is an information sign in the parking area.

The approx. 1,500 acres of EWNT are part the 500-acre SWEPCO Lake, constructed to provide cooling water for the coal-fired plant generating electricity for NW Arkansas. During winter, temperatures in the lake average in the low 70s. This warm water is presumably the source of some interesting bird records.

The parking lot is the starting point for a trail that is 0.5 miles long (1 mile round trip). The trail is well-marked, generally level, and easily walked because of a thick bed of mulch. The first 0.3 miles include open fields and the Little Flint Creek bottoms. There is a farm to the E, and a forested ridge to the W. The final 0.2 miles includes an optional steeper path into typical Ozark woodland. The trail ends at an attractive pavilion that provides tables, an appealing overlook of part of the lake and forested ridges, and information about the flora and fauna of EWNT.

Many visitors want to see Bald Eagles, which are present during winter. The best time to see them is probably from late November through early March. The eagles perch on snags out in the lake and in trees along the lake's edge. Also look for them soaring overhead anywhere along the trail. It's possible to visit EWNT and miss them. If that happens, try the lake's boat ramp: from Gentry, travel W on 12 to Cripps Road, turn S, travel about 2 miles to the boat ramp and parking area (this turn is about 1 mile west of EWNT).

BATTLE FOR THE BUFFALO (Jan. 17, 2007)

I took advantage of the holidays and winter weather for birding and reading. On my list was Neil Compton's "The Battle for the Buffalo River" (U of A Press 1992). This is an amazing book. Birders and their concern for the environment played an important

role in saving the Buffalo from at least 2 planned dams and the local congressman aggressively pushing them.

Here are a few pertinent factoids: our own Arkansas Audubon Society (AAS) was the **first** organized statewide group to take a forthright stand against dams on the Buffalo River. Doug James, Fran James, William Shepherd, Hank & Luvois Shugart, and others—early members or AAS founders -- stood up in the early 1960s and fought for a free-flowing river, fought against the odds, when it seemed highly likely the Buffalo would drown as had most mountain rivers in the Ozarks.

Today's living, breathing habitat for Neotropical migrants, numerous rare plants, and places for people in a natural environment, is owed to what others (including those who would form the Ozark Society) freely gave. Otherwise, it would have all been buried under powerboats, marinas, and exotic fish.

Doug James was a critical player in this. His role is prominently displayed in the book. He went to the meetings, organized the students, used his professional skills. He and Fran used the occasion of the 1969 American Ornithologists' Union meeting at Fayetteville to get the AOU--and Roger Tory Peterson--over to the Buffalo. There is a fine picture of Peterson, Fran James, and Charles Johnston at Tony Bend on the Buffalo. It was before there was a park, when dams loomed over waterthrush habitat.

Here's something from Neil's Compton's introduction. I find it inspirational, as relevant now as during the battle:

"The struggle to save the Buffalo River in the Arkansas Ozarks brought to the fore manifestations of a worldwide plague generated by the hand and mind of man. If we in our great wisdom cannot develop insight enough to control that affliction, we might well become the principal agents in the ruination of our only possible home in the universe.

"It is not likely that we shall ever find sustenance on any celestial body beyond the earth. Some may provide temporary abode, but none other than the earth can harbor us on into the future. And here we have only a hairline two-dimensional surface upon which to place our feet...Where the earth's gaseous envelope meets dry land is our natural domain, and today we stand dominant upon it. We now exercise power to change and mutilate it in ways undreamed of a generation ago. With that power we now course the skies like angels and live like gods on terra firma. If at last we have become gods, it is now past time to extend to the earth and all of its creatures the compassion and understanding that we have hitherto assigned to the gods."

IN PRAISE OF BURROWING CRAWFISH, *Procambarus liberorum* (March 14, 2007)

I know this is going to sound pretty weird, but terrestrial crawfish are about the best ally grassland birds have in northwestern Arkansas. Low wet fields that support communities of Ozark burrowing crawfish are typically those in the best ecological condition—specifically because they are so wet, so low, that they have usually not been plowed and developed to death. Degraded ecologically—yes. But this is the place for Sedge Wrens, Le Conte's Sparrow, Soras in migration, Northern Harriers looking for a quick rat. Looking for a wintering Short-eared Owl? That's the habitat here. It's what's left of Bell's Vireo summer habitat in our neck of the Ozarks. This is where I go to find these birds in the Fayetteville area.

In short, when I see the characteristic mud chimneys of these terrestrial crawfish, I know I'm in good bird country. If there are remnant prairie mounds between the saucer-like depressions with chimneys, it's even better. It's where we have found nesting season Henslow's Sparrows.

Crawfish chimneys + prairie mounds + scattered small wetlands with sedges = a great place for bird diversity in our part of the state. These are a special kind of wetlands associated with the former Tallgrass Prairies. I call them "seasonal wetlands"—they are very wet at times of the year with much rainfall, but dry in others. Ecologically, they have characteristic plants and animals of both wet and dry ground.

They are not much like the perennial wetlands or marshes of southern and eastern Arkansas or those associated with the valley of the Arkansas River. They have no legal protection, really. A 200 acre lowland field covered with crawfish chimneys, prairie mounds and all kinds of bottomland native plants may not have more than a couple of acres of perennial shallow wetlands that looks "marshy." Only the perennial shallows have some legal protection as "wetland." The rest is fair game for what's called "improvement"—draining, filling, building, paving. Of course, the general view is that such land is a boggy wasteland of no value until commercially developed. This attitude seems as endemic to our human species as terrestrial crawfish are to seasonal wetlands.

If terrestrial crawfish survive flood & drought in these clay-rich soils, the same soils and underlying water table can absorb a whole lot of rain, hold it for a while, and release it slowly. Some of this flow is expressed as springs, which are numerous in the Fayetteville area and a source of civic pride. Water that is held in such habitat also helps remove pollution and assorted impurities. Slow release reduces the danger of downstream flash flooding. All of these are economic realities—the value to birds and wildlife in general, the value of springs for personal renewal, and pure water and flood control in growing cities.

As a society, we can readily state the current price of a gallon of unleaded gas, but what is the ecological value of an acre of seasonal wetland in terms of endemic terrestrial crawfish, migrating Soras, and clean water? We will know how much when, month after month, we pay higher water bills. We will know when for flood damage we pay in lives and higher taxes. We will pay in social disfunction when we trade diverse grasslands for over-built city.

If you come to Fayetteville (as I hope many of you will do for the Spring meeting of Arkansas Audubon Society April 27-29, 2007), you will probably get to see how really poor we are getting in what's called the wealthiest part of Arkansas. You'll get to see how we value "big box" retail outlets and "looks pretty much all the same" housing over our rapidly dwindling stock of seasonal wetlands and burrowing crawfish.

I-540 in the vicinity of the U of A campus and Northwest Arkansas Mall anchor parts of what's left of our once expansive headwaters of Clabber Creek. There were originally thousands of acres of seasonal wetlands here; a few hundred remain. You can imagine the impacts on the many bird species dependent upon such habitat.

I laughed aloud recently when a developer planning to convert about 100 acres of seasonal wetlands made quite a pitch about saving a couple of trees out in the middle of wetland fields to a bunch of us self-appointed guardians of truth & environment. He was shocked when I said I didn't care about them & they shouldn't be there anyway. "Hey,

look at this great crawfish chimney!" I think it's hard for tree lovers (myself included) to switch gears and recognize that our old grasslands and their crawfish also need the love.

If you come to the AAS meeting, I will try and get out with anyone interested in this subject. I don't know if it will be the BEST place for birding in late April, but it's always interesting. Thanks for listening.

ABOUT TRUST (May 3, 2007)

I have serious trust issues about plans to kill Barred Owls to help Spotted Owls in the west. This doesn't mean I am necessarily opposed. It's more like I'm out there, waiting to find out what's really going on:

"...The recovery plan envisions removing 12 to 32 barred owls in each of 18 areas, first by luring them with recorded calls and an owl decoy, then by shooting them at close range." – news report.

I think this will be a stormy debate, as it should be. Perhaps removal could work, and serious, well-meaning biologists are involved in this proposal. I can see that the science involved may be on the side of reducing Barred Owls, which I agree are not rare. But the trust problem for me is derived from the internal workings of some folks charged with solving such problems and what motivates their proposed solutions. For example, one scenario is that this alternative is being chosen because someone in an involved agency is trying to inappropriately protect private interests operating on public land. Let me say clearly, **I do not know that this is the case** (proposed killing of Barred Owls instead of protecting additional habitat).

We need to be able to trust officials involved in such things. If we cannot trust them, it is hard to support such plans, even if it might help a rare species.

I have professional experience that makes my head spin in these situations. I have been working on Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) recovery on the Ouachita NF in Arkansas for the past 15 years. Early on, we discovered that southern flying squirrels were a common & even abundant rodent. They used many cavities needed for RCW recovery. We found that removing squirrels helped move us toward our RCW recovery goals. In the course of capturing and relocating flying squirrels, we accidentally kill some every year. (Our captures as well as the deaths are reported each year to Arkansas Game & Fish as part of the permit allowing us to handle the squirrels). There is a long, and complicated, biological reason why RCWs became so rare and squirrels became so abundant in the Ouachitas--another issue, for another time.

I am sure that many folks on the list would not be happy that we "disfavor" flying squirrels even though it is for what I consider a defensible cause--trying to recover RCWs. Even with our efforts, the other 85-90% of the 1.8 million acres of the Ouachita NF provides LOTS of squirrel habitat with no well-meaning biologists like me (and others) hauling them away. So in that respect it may be like the owl situation. If the public trusts us, and our intentions, we hope we will continue to be supported, even by those who appreciate RCWs AND flying squirrels.

Barred Owls are magnificent creatures. Supporting killing them on public lands with public money requires a lot of trust. We need to know that the motives are driven by biology, not politics. I do not know this at this point.

Trust is the basic issue raised in the article in part pasted below. It's really hard to keep the public supporting public officials charged with managing public resources when trust is undermined by personal incompetence or politically-motivated decisions unsupported by objective biological field work. This is hard stuff and rarely does it lend itself to black-and-white clarity.

Interior Department official resigns (Julie Cart, LA Times Staff Writer May 2, 2007): “An Interior Department official who was recently rebuked for altering scientific conclusions to reduce protections for endangered species and providing internal documents to lobbyists resigned Monday, officials said. Julie A. MacDonald, a deputy assistant secretary who oversaw the Fish and Wildlife Service's endangered species program, also faced conflict-of-interest questions in a report issued by the Interior Department's inspector general in March. MacDonald's departure came a week before a scheduled congressional oversight hearing to investigate whether Bush administration officials have ignored scientific findings in their decisions on endangered species... In many instances, MacDonald's changes caused scientists to request that their names be removed from documents. The inspector general calculated that in the last six years, 75% of the endangered species reports from the Fish and Wildlife Service's Western offices did not have standard signoffs by scientific staff members.”

This kind of stuff is really hard on trust.

RED-COCKADED WOODPECKERS AND MARBLED MURRELETS (July 3, 2007)

Nesting season 2007 for endangered Red-cockaded Woodpeckers is now over on the Ouachita NF in western Arkansas. The woodpeckers have had a good year and as a result, those who view endangered species recovery as an important societal goal have also had a good year. It appears the woodpeckers fledged 66 young'ns, which nicely exceeds our previous high of 49. All of us working on the woodpecker project agree that the effort is moving in the right direction. It's a very big team effort.

First it starts with the birds themselves, then includes our Forest Service (and a few citizen volunteers) team on the Ouachita NF, and also includes all of **you**, who support the concept of public lands where an ideal like recovering a rare bird is a possibility because \$\$\$ is only one part of the bottom line. That's your decision given voice through the Endangered Species Act and support for the concept of public lands. Thanks to all of you. Nesting was excellent along Buffalo Road, which is where many of you have come to view the woodpeckers.

So, Marbled Murrelets, where do they fit in? I'm just back in Arkansas after a quick trip to see my daughter Ariel in Olympia, WA, which included a trip to Neah Bay and Cape Flattery (both in NW WA) to see Marbled Murrelets and other seagoing birds (like Tufted Puffins) in the Pacific NW. I saw them from Tongue Point and on a three hour boat trip out of Neah Bay aboard the "Puffin," with an outstanding guide, Steve Boothe. The birding was fine and we also had brief looks at grey whales, etc. Neah Bay is on the Macah Indian reservation. I also made it to the Macah museum where the close association of the Macah and the coastal environment is well displayed. It provided a lot of food for thought for an environmentalist who is still trying to understand the balance between our modern world and the old natural world in which we must live. I felt

like I had been in a graduate seminar with excellent instruction from Boothe, seabirds, and the Macah.

These murrelets are listed as a threatened species: threatened by widespread reduction of the old growth forest where they nest along the Pacific coast, and threatened by repeated oil spills at sea, where they forage. Murrelets share with our woodpeckers the common need for public lands management to include them as well as us. They also share the need for us to be aware that our everyday actions have direct impacts far away. Our big homes use a lot of wood, which fuels pressures on our forests. I used a lot of oil and gas getting out to the Pacific NW, and much of it probably came from tankers like those which periodically spill & kill murrelets along our coasts. So, like support for good public lands management, support for reasonable environmental standards and personal responsibility in this area can have positive impacts on the future of the murrelets, just as it can on RCWs in Arkansas.

It's kind of a package deal and it doesn't make a lot of difference where you live. Challenges and opportunities abound.

WILD PERSIMMONS & EASTERN FREEZE (October 2007)

Persimmons are one of the great late summer-early fall delights for me and I'll bet for a bunch of you, too.

Part of my birding operation during persimmon-ripening season in northwest Arkansas involves the location of trees that ripen earlier than others. They ripen WAY, WAY before any kind of "typical" late fall-early winter freeze. It's fun to eat a few persimmons while looking for the late migrating tanagers. Looking for just the right RIPE persimmon provides a good excuse to look around the field for that odd, perched sparrow. Sampling these potentially ripe persimmons also may have drawbacks--most of your know--puckered mouth.

After the first few freezes, there are usually lots of persimmons available in all of the old field & abandoned farm fields where I like to go birding in the Fayetteville area. Persimmons are, ecologically-speaking, an early successional species. They begin to take over in the fencerow and the abandoned field. It's a good place to look for bobwhites. I see all kinds of birds in early winter going after this really huge food crop. There's nothing really quite like a flock of Cedar Waxwings swarming over a bunch of persimmons.

I have been concerned because the Easter freeze of 2007 slammed all kinds of wild food crops in NWA. There are no pawpaws this year, so far as I can see--I check the patches. And almost no persimmons.

However, I have finally found a few persimmons that seemingly escaped the freeze. I can see evolution at work in this, I think: most persimmons flower about the same time & these trees have no fruit this year and produced no seeds. They're "normal." But I have now found a grand total of 6 trees with good fruit. Perhaps the timing of their flowers is just a little out-of-kilter with the persimmon mainstream & as a result, they have survived the Easter freeze catastrophe? These "abnormal" persimmons may pass their seeds into the future, better to survive future, ill-timed freezes.

These are ecological issues fun to think about while birding (and eating). It also gives me hope for some of us "abnormal" people.

I will share an image of waxwings porking-out on winter persimmons, if anyone is interested. It's from 2002, a "normal" year, when I first started digiscoping with a low pixel camera, and therefore of minimal quality.

FAYETTEVILLE CBC (December 16, 2007)

We held our count on Sunday, Dec. 16. We are still reviewing a couple of birds, but the final species tally will be close to 100 -- excellent for NW Arkansas and right up there with our highest tallies in the years since 1961 when this count began. Are we better birders? With better equipment? More of us? Is global warming impacting the totals? Perhaps each makes a contribution. It snowed lightly in the Fayetteville area on the 15th, but cleared, and the 16th was pretty mild and calm--as fine a winter day for a CBC as possible.

After the day we assembled to tally up at Doug and Elizabeth James' home, as usual. The two birds that got the most attention were Short-eared Owl found by James Morgan's group (a first for our count and rare overall in our area) and a Spotted Towhee found by Mike Mlodinow's group (a 5th record for the Fayetteville CBC; photographed by Jacques Brown). In choosing the most charismatic bird of the day, the assembled group split toward the owl. Richard Stauffacher, an artist and long time CBCer, donated a Great Blue Heron etching as reward for this discovery.

Jason Lucier's group of graduate students found two American Tree Sparrows. Roland Roth, one of Doug James' former students who is now himself retired from teaching birds, also found a tree sparrow.

Our group had a fine day at the University farm, just north of the campus: pipits pipits pipits everywhere, a flock of 12 Horned Larks and a small flock of 6 Lapland Longspurs, and billions of Savannah Sparrows. We expect or reasonably hope for each of these, but extreme weather north and west of us swelled these numbers. I wonder what we missed? Where was that Snow Bunting? That Rough-legged Hawk. That...? (sigh)

We all have "good" birds that "get away," and my group had one for sure. We were in a big grassy field sorting through Song, Swamp, and Savannah Sparrows, hunting for bobwhites and Le Conte's. Suddenly we saw an immature Bald Eagle floating over us. While watching it, another bird, much further away, flew across our field of view. It was large, long-necked, short tailed, a kind of dove gray color except for darker areas in the primaries. The wing beat was rapid, unlike a Great Blue, and its straight neck flight was also wrong for a Great Blue. It was a ???.

I wanted it to be a Sandhill Crane, but others at our tally later thought it more likely a swan. Standing in the field, knowing it was getting away, I longed for my spotting scope and a closer view. Still I am glad for these tantalizing moments, these fleeting glances, these great surprises, even if we don't cinch the ID. There's next year, god willing, and a perhaps a diagnostic view.

But why be greedy here? So many birds, so many diagnostic views of our universe's amazing diversity, so many gestures and hints about what we have inherited, and for what we are responsible. It reminds me of something from the Psalms of my Southern Baptist upbringing in Fort Smith: "This is the day that the lord hath made and I will rejoice and be glad in it."

After NOT IDing the Tantalizing Bird, we had close views of a dark Harlan's Hawk that Roland spotted. -- Joe Neal, Fayetteville CBC compiler and owner-upper for that one that got away.

LAKE FAYETTEVILLE VIEW (November 28, 2008)

I went out to Lake Fayetteville early Thanksgiving, a brilliant, warm day of glass-like water. From the top of the dam, on the northshore, an adult Bald Eagle; along the southshore, 7 waterfowl. The sun illuminated the heads of a few of these birds. Eventually I could see reddish shaggy crests of Red-breasted Mergansers. Two Ringed-billed Gulls flew over.

My eyeball was pushed into the scope when a familiar voice greeted me. "Whatcha seeing, Joe?" It was Wade Caldwell, a local scout leader and member of the City of Fayetteville's parks committee. He was on a bike, and with some other folks, on a T'giving morning ride. I spotted a Common Loon as he came up.

Caldwell has been involved with scouting for years. The trail that now entirely loops Lake F'ville was initiated as a scout project. I told him that Doug James and his students birded the lake in the 1950s, when it was brand new & of course trail-less, and when much of the shoreline was without trees and visited by migrating yellowlegs. Caldwell and the scouts are now hard at work on a 7-mile loop trail around Lake Sequoyah, also in F'ville.

Parts of the Lake F'ville trail have been paved, making it highly accessible for those with walking impairments. You can park at or near the marina, and wheel with no barriers all the way across the dam -- with a look at all the lake's deepwater (loon, merganser, gulls, eagle, etc) and keep rolling to the forested stream bottom at the spillway, crossed by a magnificent pedestrian bridge with a fine view into the crowns of soaring sycamores. You can run, walk the dog, push a stroller or a wheelchair, or just saunter & sit, like me with my scope. The loop trail, and now its paved accessible sections, testifies to public spirited civic activism joined with government action aimed at improving opportunities for all. It's a reality for which I truly give thanks, and I thanked Wade Caldwell for his vision and work.

With some more study, I figured-out the 7 birds were 3 Red-breasted Mergs, plus 4 Common Goldeneyes -- first of the season for me.

"I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders." -- HD Thoreau

RETURN TO WILSON SPRINGS (December 3, 2008)

I have recently been in contact with Audubon Arkansas, an office of the National Audubon Society, concerning some seasonal wetland - former prairie property at Fayetteville. I incorrectly stated on this list (Nov 14, 2008) that National Audubon owned this property and was, in effect, letting us all down. I also incorrectly blamed National Audubon for the potential demise of NWA Audubon Society.

Wilson Springs is a former prairie lowland in the Clabber Creek bottomlands at Fayetteville. The local conservation community struggled for years with various city administrations and developers to protect this seasonal wetland. Up to 2004, and despite years of damage, it held numerous species rare in Arkansas: nesting Henslow's Sparrows, numerous unusual sedges and other wetland flora, and the Arkansas Darter itself, a small

rare fish. It is a problem timeless and universal. As Thomas Higginson, a friend of Emily Dickinson, said in about 1890, "Everything which does not tend to money is thought to be wasted."

In an act of real arrogance (or ignorance), the Mayor Dan Coody sold most of the property to a developer, who then named streets to be developed after birds ("Harrier Street" etc). What's now left is about 120 acres. National Audubon has generously agreed to manage the 120 acres and whatever is left of its original treasures. Funds for stewardship will have to be raised privately if it is to become anything more than a former prairie now sadly overrun by an army of introduced, non-native species: sericea lespedeza, multuiflora rose, and Bradford (Callery) pears.

Mike Mlodinow and I met Kevin Pierson, Audubon Arkansas's Director of Conservation, and Brent Kelly out there yesterday. Mike & I made suggestions for some trail access, based upon out (50+) birding trips in the past. Kevin and Brent got started laying out and brushing out some access. This is a beginning -- they don't have funds for a full-blown project. BUT, it is a start, and it may open a new chapter in the running issue about the fate of that property the developer placed into what is termed an "irrevocable trust" for conservation purposes. Like Emily Dickinson wrote, "Hope is a thing with feathers." As in past years, we saw interesting birds (example: Sedge Wren, Swamp Sparrow) that require this habitat type.

This is the first positive thing that has happened out there in 3-4 years. I am looking forward to working those fields for the Fayetteville CBC.

THE GREAT PRUNING: ICE STORM OF LATE JANUARY (January 31 & February 1, 2009)

Northwest Arkansas isn't as iced-in today as it was on Tuesday & Wednesday. Still, trees & shrubs have a destroyed look. Big trees in my yard are stripped & toothpick-like. I now live in a toothpick neighborhood.

I was out & about on Wednesday, at the height of the ice. There was an Orange-crowned Warbler at my feeder -- a first for me. There is a persimmon tree in my neighborhood that I have walked by for years, and often enjoyed the persimmons. On Tuesday it was the turn of American Robins, Cedar Waxwings, and European Starlings. The top of this tree -- as is the case of many trees here now -- was busted-out and there was a big persimmon crop on the ice. The robins spent most of their time chasing down persimmons on the ground. There was just about every robin age class you could image, and easy to watch, I suppose because hunger made them less wary. I always enjoy robins like that, but the big show involved waxwings. They swarmed persimmons hanging on branches. There were waxwings right side up, upside down, sideways, working persimmons, their bills all with persimmon globs. Somehow it reminded me of Audubon's flock of Carolina Parakeets, and of course the waxwings too are colorful & flockish, like parakeets were said to have been. Like the robins, they were less wary than usual, so I managed to collect a lot of close images.

Of course, I haven't seen them yet, because I am still without power & am on a borrowed computer. Oh, starlings: also enjoying persimmons, and all starry like they are sposed to be.

I have a name for our now, just-about-all-gone northwest Arkansas ice storm: the great pruning. It has pruned just everything. I went to the old Lindsey Prairie today at Siloam Springs. The old former prairie is covered with melted ice water. All the low places are playas. Saw 7 Bald Eagles in a field, gathered around remains of a small carcass -- maybe an ice victim -- seemed to be taking turns picking at what was left. Tall prairie mounds north of the Siloam airport offer refuge from the ice melt -- saw 2 coyotes enjoying themselves on the east side of a big mound, in bright sunshine. One of them was darker than any coyote I've seen.

Just down the road -- a fine Harlan's Hawk, perfect blotches like the cover image on the current issue of Birding. Hailing from the Far North, you know a big hawk like that probably wasn't too inconvenienced by the ice or the great pruning. The great pruning laid down the tall grasses at Chesney Prairie Natural Area. Swamp Sparrows there probably appreciate more water. I was watching them, then overhead heard a familiar gabbling overhead -- a flock of maybe 100 Snow Geese (blues and whites), heading north. What the heck, it was 60 degrees and the sky was pure blue -- maybe they were missing winter.

BUBBA AND THE GREBE (January 25, 2009)

I had a disagreeable experience birding today and wanted to share it, mainly to just vent...the locale is Beaver Lake in NWA. I was up there with Amy Edie & wanting to show her the Western Grebe I had seen several times recently from Slate Gap Road near Lost Bridge. I had excitedly counted up to 162 Horned Grebes (and anticipated other water bird species as I scanned & counted). A bass boat came barreling up on the flock, never slowed, and seemed to deliberately target rafting grebes. After putting them in flight (yee-haw!), the boat slowed...I saw a mangled grebe. The boat turned, pulled up next to it, and bubba fished it out of the water...I heard laughter and saw them grinning through my spotting scope, then tossing the bloody grebe back, like it was trash. I honked and yelled. They probably thought I was saluting their manhood.

Things like this make me despair of the human race, since I assume from the obvious insensitivity that it probably applies to more than birds. I wondered what these two guys in their \$20,000+ rig would think if it were grebes in the boat, barreling down purposely on them, a rafting flock of humans...

I had a call at home last night about a planned "crow shoot" in a small community just southeast of Fayetteville. I wondered how the crow shooters would feel if the tables were turned. That is, if crows ran the world -- or at least thought they did -- and planned a "people shoot." You know, got to get rid of those people -- there's just too many of them and they're eating up all of our crops, etc.

I grew up as a Southern Baptist. I am fond of reminding my fellow Arkansas natives that there is no guarantee that when they get up there to the pearly gates god will necessarily be a bubba. Maybe god will be a grebe, or perhaps a crow, or perhaps...any of a number of undervalued and despised creatures.

COMMENTS ON WILSON SPRINGS (February 28, 2009)

I woke up this morning in Fayetteville to gray skies, north wind, and snow on the ground. Could be a good birding day. Also, a good day for conservation. Michelle Viney

(and her team) from Audubon Arkansas's northwest Arkansas field office (Fayetteville) teamed up with Sam's Club for a volunteer work day at the Wilson Springs property here in Fayetteville, adjacent the Sam's Club. Over the years, Mike Mlodinow and I have documented more than 120 bird species there (Bell's Vireo, Painted Bunting, American Bittern, etc). Despite the cold, north wind & snow, there were 25-30 volunteers to help remove invasive callery pears -- what is hopefully the opening effort to reclaim this former tallgrass prairie and Henslow's Sparrow nesting habitat.

The volunteers are women and men, youngish and oldish. All of us here in NWA have been hauling limbs for a month as a result of the ice storm. Here were the volunteers from Sam's Club anyway. What a sight it was.

Michelle asked me to make a few comments before the volunteers set off on the pear removal effort. Here's what I offered: "The history of this property is basically lost in the mist of time, so let me take you back. Native Americans hunted buffalo here. Buffalo were still seen in the Fayetteville area by the first visitors in the 1820s. The City of Fayetteville was established in Prairie Township. Please note: it was not established in Tree Township, Subdivision Township, or Mall Township, or Sam's Club Township. It was Prairie Township, because when the first settlers here looked around what they saw were tall native prairie grasses: Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indian Grass, and Switch Grass. The only trees they saw were in scattered oak barrens surrounded by native grass plus trees along the major streams, like Clabber Creek.

This is what I mean about being lost in the mist of time. You cannot look around Fayetteville now and see the buffalo or the native grasses. But, that doesn't mean history is unimportant.

Clabber Creek and its associated natural springs is an important perennial stream that runs through what was once an extensive prairie that consisted of at least 25 square miles, part of which included Prairie Township. In the Clabber Creek area, open fields were covered with prairie grasses and prairie wildflowers. The fields included small round mounds—we call them prairie mounds-- that formed thousands of years ago. Mounds have been mostly plowed down and paved over. The native grasses and wildflowers have been mostly replaced with non-native grasses like fescue. The fields have been invaded by non-native trees like callery pears.

The Wilson Springs property is important because many aspects of its status as prairie grassland remain. There are still prairie mounds on the property, including fine examples near the Wilson Spring run within sight of Sam's Club. A rare prairie fish, the Arkansas Darter, can still be found in Wilson Spring. Scattered in nooks and crannies are small areas that retain the four chief native grasses: Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indian Grass, and Switch Grass. Some very rare wetland plants have also survived, reminding us of our natural heritage right under our noses here alongside I-540. Wilson Springs is still one of the best places in the immediate Fayetteville area to see and hear more than 120 species of native birds, many of them strongly associated with prairies. Bell's Vireo, once a common bird here, still nests in the open field thickets. Painted Buntings – one of America's most beautiful native birds – occurs here in summer. Until recent years, Henslow's Sparrow found one of its only nesting habitats in Arkansas here.

Located in the heart of the development area of northwest Arkansas, Wilson Springs provides that rare greenspace where people can commune with nature on her own

terms near where we live the rest of our lives. Restoration efforts can improve this opportunity by returning more of Wilson Springs to its original beauty and functionality as a prairie coursed by perennial springs and Clabber Creek. This restoration will add greatly to the value of the property to all visitors, surrounding developments, and it will help rescue from the mists of time our true prairie origins in Prairie Township.”

AMERICAN BITTERN WITH 2 LEGS, 2 FEET (March 1, 2009)

I was out at Woolsey Wet Prairie in Fayetteville this morning, for about as long as I could take it: temps in 20s, north wind, water iced-over, and a thin crust of snow. Woolsey had a prescribed burn on February 20, so a lot of the tall grasses are short and black. But there are many places too wet for fire to be effective, and vegetation remained there. First thing I noticed -- more meadowlarks there than I had seen before (35-40) -- no doubt, taking advantage of the good foraging after the burn (I only heard Easterns). Also, maybe 15 Wilson's Snipe. Sedge Wren - 1 -- in sedges not much impacted. Then, suddenly, an American Bittern lifted up in front of me out of some dense vegetation between the prairie mounds, tried to go north, then sort of drifted back low and right over me. Other than a bittern I once saw & watched in a leisurely fashion while sitting in my car at Centerton, this was one of the best looks ever. I don't think the prescribed burn hurt this bird: it clearly had both legs and both feet. There were 15-20 Swamp Sparrows, ~10 Song sparrows, 8 White-crowned Sparrows, and a seemingly endless flock of Savannah Sparrows, which I counted up to 78.

Now for a couple of landscape comments: Behind Woolsey is NWA's newest mountain -- it's called Mt Limb & Tree Trunk, child of the ice storm, growing daily. Twisted limbs from all over the area are being hauled and dumped there. Quite a few are from my own yard. As fast as possible, the limbs are being returned to wood fiber by the planet's biggest wood chipper.

The prairie itself never looked more interesting: with much of the vegetation burned-off, you can clearly see the height & shape of the prairie mounds and the inter-moundal playas.

BIRDS, TRILLIUMS, FIRE (March 22, 2009)

After seeing the trilliums in bloom at Ninestone Land Trust on March 20, I decided to head over to Cave Springs Cave Natural Area in Benton Co., to visit the mother lode of Ozark Wake Robin (*Trillium pusillum* var. *ozarkanum*). They were sure enough in bloom -- thousands on a gentle north-facing slope above a cave that houses the rare Ozark Cave Fish. I was also hoping to get my first spring hearing of Black-and-white Warbler, an early parula or Yellow-throated Vireo, but struck out. The trilliums alone were worth the effort. However, I didn't go away feeling all that great about the visit...

Unfortunately, patches of these rare trilliums on Cave Springs Cave Natural Area are in the process of being overwhelmed and smothered by honeysuckle and other aggressive non-natives like the vine *Euonymus fortunei* (wintercreeper). The only cure for such a thing is mother nature's favorite tool, fire. Repeated winter or early spring burns, before the trilliums are up, would suppress/push back the honeysuckle and other alien plants, leaving the cherty rubble free for the emergence of trilliums and other

botanicals adapted to open forest landscapes free of smotherers & stranglers like honeysuckle. Some patches have already been lost to honeysuckle and wintercreeper.

I mention this in the context of rare trilliums, because the same thing hugely impacts birds. Many among us in the conservation (in our case, bird lovin/ Audubon community) still don't have the fire thing figured out -- how historically fires shaped the natural landscape, and how without deliberately using fire, it will be impossible to reset the clock, even in those patches that we call preserves, natural areas, national forests, etc. Admittedly, my attitude about this is **STRONGLY** shaped by years of working as a USDA Forest Service Wildlife Biologist with endangered Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, which were headed for extinction before biologists began to strongly push fire back into southern pine forests. Bobwhite quail, Bachman's Sparrows, Prairie Warblers and many other birds have rebounded in those habitats where fire is reintroduced. I saw it for myself on the Ouachita National Forest in west central Arkansas.

So, my friends in the conservation community with a worry about fire, treat yourself to a good read. The bible in this case: Restoring North American Birds, Lessons from Landscape Ecology, by Robert A. Askins (I read the second edition). Unlike many environmental books, this one is pure as a bedside reader, Aldo Leopoldish astride our fire-hungry landscape.

We don't need to keep scratching our heads about this one. Just get that drip torch and go to work!

PLOVER-EYE VIEW (March 25, 2009)

I saw American Golden-Plovers again today in a former Tallgrass Prairie area immediately south of the Craig state fish hatchery at Centeron, Benton County. It must be March & they must be flying in with spring. There were approximately 180 golden-plovers in the southwest corner of fields at Anglin & Barron roads, plus more in adjacent fields, and 7 at the hatchery. These are all low-lying fields, with playa-like pools in places from yesterday's heavy rain. There were Wilson's Snipe, yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpipers among them in fields with dairy cows.

I am always amazed at the fantastic juxtapositions of time & place & history. Here are the migrants of 10,000 miles, set down like magic among us. Their ancestors must have done the same when bison & prairie chickens reigned. Maybe the dairy cows work just as well as bison. (I don't mean to say they are the same, but perhaps for birds-of-passage, this is minor). The plovers are the immaculately wild and for me the releaser from burdens of modernity among things strictly mundane. The birds call their que-ees, seemingly oblivious to traffic on Arkansas 279 & cows demanding morning hay. There were also Great-tailed Grackles there, with their fantastic chucks & whistles.

It's a transporting thing, being among them, with binoculars and questions. What a truly fantastic landscape, from the plover-eye view.

IS OUR IVORY-BILL NOW RISEN FROM THE DEAD? (back & forth on faith-based ornithology March 2009)

(Below is a string of messages that started out when I made a post to ARBIRD soliciting bird records for our seasonal report. It drew some interesting comments from Gary

Graves about the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and how the record was handled by the Arkansas Bird Records Committee (BRC). The exchange illustrates pretty well how the battle lines have been drawn about the announced rediscovery of Ivory-billed Woodpecker in eastern Arkansas in 2004. I got drawn into this exchange, not because I saw the bird, not because I was on the Arkansas BRC, not because I am a knowing practitioner of faith-based ornithology, but because I had subsequently become Curator of bird records for Arkansas Audubon Society—and therefore inherited the record and the controversy.)

FIRST MESSAGE POSTED TO ARBIRD BY JOE NEAL

Subject: oh ye of little faith (curator)

When Max Parker handed the Arkansas Audubon Society curator of bird records tasks to me (October 2007), he gave me this admonition, which he attributed to Art Johnson: "It's better not to accept a good record than to accept a poor record." I took this to heart. I mention this now (and again) because in going through the records submitted for the period Dec 2008-Feb 2009, there are a few that are wildly-out-of-season (e.g., a Feb. Yellow-billed Cuckoo) submitted with no supporting details by people I don't know and therefore I have no idea about their abilities (I have been dealing with birders in the state for close to 30 years). So, if you find something really weird AND you want it to be part of the AAS database AND I am unaware of your skill level/critical judgment ability in terms of birds, send me an email and ask, or just do the document thing. If you don't, I will consider what I have in front of me and may elect to hit the magic delete key. It doesn't mean you didn't see the bird -- only you know that -- but it won't be in the AAS database. I don't mean to offend, but we have standards that have been in place since the card file was set up by Doug James in the late 1950s.

Those whose skills have been demonstrated in the eternal birding wars are not held to the same standard. Unfair probably -- we are all human & all make mistakes --but a necessary arrangement in an all volunteer all the time organization striving to cast the light of truth on the surrounding darkness... etc. I think Art & Max are right. The AAS bird records database is science-based, not faith-based (or at least only partially faith-based: see above), and unsupported records without facts and in which I lack the faith of experience may not go into the database. -Joe, curator (who is sorry to be so cruel and heartless, but I don't want Max on my a** for all of eternity for not doing careful reviews).

FIRST RESPONSE FROM GARY GRAVES

Joe--Speaking of faith-based ornithology, perhaps it's time to revisit the ivory-billed woodpecker record that was "accepted" by the AAS committee.

GRG

FIRST RESPONSE TO GRG FROM JOE NEAL

Hi Gary,

That record wasn't "accepted," it was accepted with one dissenting vote after a very, very long process. That was the bird found in 2004. I know Max Parker had doubts about what the committee had done before he died. I still have never seen any reason to reject the sight reports of qualified observers, but admittedly, as time drags on without additional evidence, things don't look rosy. But I am not at this point ready to revisit the committee action of 2004. -Joe

SECOND RESPONSE FROM GARY GRAVES

Joe,

The AAS homepage bluntly states that the record was "accepted" by the Bird Records Committee---no equivocation, no mention of dissenting votes, etc. This validation has been picked up verbatim and posted in a number of other places, including the TNC website... Fitzpatrick et al (2006)...even stated, "After studying the evidence at length, the Bird Records Committee of the Arkansas Audubon Society voted unanimously to accept the documentation of ivory-billed woodpecker. Comparable validation by critical and experienced local experts has not occurred following any previous report of this species."

This gives the appearance that nobody on the committee had doubts about the record. The fact that the deliberations of the Committee were never made public is a shame. Disagreement among committee members is a good sign of healthy skepticism under enormous sociological pressure. You can draw your own conclusion about what a "unanimous" acceptance does for the reputation of the AAS Bird Records Committee.

It will be politically and psychologically painful to reverse the Committee's decision, but sooner or later it should be publicly reversed. Arkansas will survive and life will go on. It is not widely known outside the USFWS, but a letter signed by the leading North American experts on bird identification (e.g, Jon Dunn, Kenn Kaufman, Mark Robbins, David Sibley, Steve Howell, Guy McCaskie, and dozens of others) stated in no uncertain terms that the evidence was insufficient to warrant acceptance of the 2004 ivory-bill record (http://web.mac.com/lrbevier/ivorybilled/Comment_to_USFWS.html > <http://web.mac.com/lrbevier/ivorybilled/Comment_to_USFWS.html>).

The signatories had access to every shred of evidence and information that has surfaced since the initial reports. Although the letter is about ivory-bills and ivory-bill politics, it contains some general recommendation about bird records committees (by people who invented them in the USA). A rigorous process must be transparent and the deliberations must be available for examination. The AAS decision was not transparent (not surprising since there was no precedent for transparency). Anyway, I think you can see my point. You know the AAS process as well as anyone. It might be best to start preparing the remainder of the committee members to revisit the ivory-bill in year after the USFWS pulls the plug on the official search (probably at the end of the current search year).

GRG

>
AAS home page> <http://www.arbirds.org/index.html>

>
Ivory-Billed Woodpecker Record Accepted

After reviewing evidence of the ivory-billed woodpecker gathered in the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge in April 2004, the Bird Records Committee of the Arkansas Audubon Society has voted to change the status of the bird in Arkansas from "extirpated" to "present". Max Parker, longtime curator for the Arkansas Audubon Society, received on June 17, 2005, verifying documentation for the extraordinary record from a member of the research team. The documentation was studied at length by all members of the Arkansas Bird Records Committee before the record was accepted.

FINAL RESPONSE FROM JOE NEAL

Hi Gary,

I decided to share this string of messages with others in Arkansas, since they too have an interest in IBWO goings-on, or lack of them. Plus, duking it out over the ole IBWO +/- is a premier spectator sport among us birders. I just never expected to be in the ring. I am TKOed in round one, so I hope the pay is a lot better than it is as curator.

Fitzpatrick's statement -- that our bird records committee vote was unanimous -- was unfortunate. As far as I know, none of numerous experts involved in this debate at high levels ever bothered to ask Max for details about the committee's vote or personal misgivings on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker from 2004. The dissenter is a friend of mine and if I recall correctly, no one but me bothered to ask him about it at the time and I only asked then because we had a 40 minute drive up to Centerton and we were tired of just bashing George Bush for the whole drive.

Nothing is secret or sacred about our committee. If someone chooses to point a finger of shame at the AR BRC, I will ask them to notice how many fingers point back at them. We serve at the pleasure of Arkansas Audubon Society. The committee enjoys respect among its constituents.

I imagine the IBWO record will be reviewed again at some point, but I personally do not consider it a priority to make or unmake history. I'm busy enough without trying to smooth everyone's ruffled feathers about IBWO, either + or -.

May I offer the modest suggestion that instead of trying to make or unmake history, perhaps some high priest in the official ornithological establishment can just cut to the chase and declare, *ex cathedra*, the risen-from-the-dead or alternatively, the non-existence, of the IBWO. That seems to be part of what's going on, perhaps an unintended and as yet unrecognized offshoot of a different type of "faith-based" ornithology among those who reject the old-fashioned kind. -Joe

RAMBLINGS FROM THE FORMER PRAIRIES OF BENTON COUNTY (April 13, 2009)

Good tidings from the former prairies of western Benton County:

I spent the last 2 days either birding in the rain or near it. The skies are dark & wind is northwest. While floral spring is delayed, the old former prairies are vibrant with ephemeral pools & stalled grasspipers. You can see how things used to work during spring migration through the Tallgrass Prairies of western Arkansas. Northward moving Blue-winged Teal and Northern Shovelers take advantage of the new shallow pools in the fields. Many ponds and pools have their own Greater Yellowlegs, including some small flocks. The big fields with grazers have their coterie of American Golden-Plovers. I had a conservative count this morning of 225 golden-plovers between Centerton & Vaughn (a good number for northwestern Arkansas), where flocks have been daily since at least March 21 and at least 45 at another pool just west of Hiwassee. Yesterday, in the rain, I saw 9 Upland Sandpipers standing on the partially flooded road near Vaughn. They were in the adjacent pasture today, among the grazers: they glide through the new grass, presence reduced to that large dark eye. Finally, an ultra-elegant Great Blue Heron, in nest season high finery, lord of an ephemeral pool.

I made a swing up through the Safari near Gentry, for nesting Great-tailed Grackles. Even in a cold, steady rain, His Lordships are perched, bills pointed up, atop the trees, tails curled & cocked. Below, Her Ladyship gathers bits of grass (hay) & disappears into the small dense trees, where nests are underway. His Lordship squeals, flutters, whistles, squawks so that the neighbor Lordship, 2 feet away, gets the message: it's all about space & the future of things.

Killdeer down on the gravel road, covering two eggs from the cold.

WOO WOO MOMENTS WITH A VERY COOL SORA (April 14, 2009)

I spent part of today birding with Lynn Christie from Little Rock. We started out in the Vaughn area of Benton County. When we got up there it looked like most of the 200+ American Golden-Plovers had continued on their epochal 10,000 mile journey. We did find 6 of the original 9 in a flock of Upland Sandpipers. Just as I began making solemn pronouncements about gone plovers & their amazing odyssey, and lots of other miscellaneous stuff I've heard on PBS, here they came, in tight flocks, making a fine display. Not yet gone, a few thousand miles still left. I also pronounced 2 B-w Teal on a far pond, that Lynn noticed were shovelers...

After Vaughn, we headed for Woolsey Wet Prairie at Fayetteville. I was telling how Joyce Shedell just saw a Sora at the Centerton hatchery (posted on ARBIRD), so I thought...well maybe we can see one today at Woolsey. After the yellowlegs, after Wilson's Snipe, after the teal (both), after avoiding a threatening Canada Goose, after a dramatic Cooper's stoop on shorebirds, etc etc... a Sora--casually it seemed--walked out of wet grass, right in front of us. It was so dramatic I could barely breathe.

OK, Sora is not a rare transient in Arkansas, BUT this Sora appeared & stopped. Didn't dodge back into cover. Didn't fly up and drop out of sight. Didn't leave me wondering if it was a Virginia Rail. Remained in plain sight & in perfect light, and stayed there for eternity. It knew we wanted it (my friend Joy Fox would call this a woo-woo

moment): red eye, yellow beak, white under cocked tail, dove gray on sides, rich whites/blacks/browns of wings & back. It turned this way, then that. We got the whole thing. There's no way to have seen more. Finally it sauntered into cover. That red eye among leaves of grass.

Now at home, thinking about it, I like Peterson's Sora best, of the various bird book illustrators. But even with its high artistry, Peterson looks pretty static compared to the gaudy remarkable beauty that showed today. These are moments that made me a birder & keep me. I don't need it every time. Once in a while will keep me under the spell.

SWAINSON'S THRUSH ON SCULL CREEK BIKE TRAIL (April 17, 2009)

I had a Swainson's Thrush singing this morning on the Scull Creek bike trail at Fayetteville. This is the typical first arrival period here (around second-third week in April). The song slowed and mesmerized me -- a good thing. A few miles further--White-eyed Vireo. We do get them earlier, but this creature-gem exhibited typical arrival. I had errands to do, and heard House Wrens singing in three places, so that's starting up, too, also about on time. None of this was official "birding," but it was official "biking," happy combination: ears do the walking.

Also saw my friend Steve Erwin (of local winter Summer Tanager fame) in his Cardinals ball cap, on the trail with an armload of trash he had picked up, just because it's worthwhile. Like a favorite bumper sticker about acts of kindness, just because. Scull Creek and its creatures appreciate the less plastic just because he stooped to help.

Yesterday evening, at Lake Fayetteville, Stephanie Cribbs and I saw & heard the reaps reaps of a Great Crested Flycatcher, nonchalantly atop one of millions of damaged, broken, or uprooted trees. That date, April 16, ties the earliest previous record in NW AR as far as I know. From that trip I harvested the following (with many, many apologies to Emily Dickinson):

To direct attention to a bird
in our post ice storm age
gesture toward a tree
broken more or less in half.
Mention bird of interest.
See it's in the crown
that one, upside down.
Well maybe halfway or midway
toward the ground...

OUR WORLD NEEDS ITS IBISES & GALLINULES (April 20, 2009)

I went birding yesterday in a key part of the Little River Bottoms Important Bird Area in southwestern Arkansas near Lake Millwood. My partners & guides were Charles Mills & Yancey Reynolds, both long time members of Arkansas Audubon Society. Water birds, water birds, everywhere; a partial list: Anhinga (nesting), Great Egret (nesting),

Snowy Egret (nesting), Tricolored Heron (3-4 birds), Black-crowned Night-herons, White Ibis (big flocks, hadn't started yet to nest, but immaculate!), Bald Eagle (nesting), Purple Gallinule (2 seen), Common Moorhen (abundant, wonderfully vocal), Prothonotary Warblers singing from cypress everywhere. This IBA is the finest imaginable expression of Arkansas' aquatic ecosystems.

Within a few miles is the site for a proposed coal-fired electrical generating plant. Southwest Arkansas has a lot of human poverty & a remarkable natural heritage. Many needed jobs are promised and so the coal plant has local support, but also Jeremiahs. Many of you know Charles Mills and his remarkable, scientific & highly artistic photography of birds, dragonflies, etc. On the way back, I asked him if he had ever had a public exhibit of his photography. No (a few prairie wildflowers appeared in one show). To me it brings focus.

An accomplished regional artist is uncelebrated in his backyard; the coal plant is greeted with hosannahs. The desire for jobs and a better material life are completely understandable midst great poverty. Yes, we energy hogs (like me) need electricity. In our greed, we trade natural heritages for chimeras. Bring us the women & men in political life who will step up to the need to provide healthy opportunity to those who have been left behind & combine that with understanding that our world is fatally flawed without its ibises & gallinules.

CHERRY BEND (May 6, 2009)

Judith Ann Griffith & I birded in Madison and Franklin counties May 6, mainly between Brashears (intersection highways 16 & 23, aka the "pig trail") and Cass (on 23). I met Judith at Brashears. At the start, we were in our local cloud forest. Through the fine mist we could hear both Sedge and Marsh Wrens in a big hayfield & soon had both in close view. I had already seen a first year male Orchard Oriole atop a brushpile. When we returned in the afternoon, two Bobolinks perched atop the brush and nearby was a flock of 10 Orchard Orioles.

The main focus was Cherry Bend in the Ozark NF. It's half-way between Brashears & Cass and involves about two miles of upper, east-facing moist, mature hardwood slope. We parked in the small lot where the Ozark Highlands Trail crosses 23, then walked up to Rock House, which overlooks slopes below.

We saw bunting flocks along the whole drive between Brashears & Cass, in both the private farmland and National Forest. Most involved 5-10 Indigos in all plumages, a few had 25 or so, and some included a few White-crowned & Chipping sparrows. At Cass, we saw a fine male Painted Bunting along them. We got the red around the eyes, both greens, etc. I cannot image what the field & thicket-loving White-crowned Sparrows felt when they awoke midst the shagbark hickories & pawpaws of Cherry Bend!

In the Cherry Bend area we made several short stops & listens, and the short hike up from the parking lot to Rock House. The native wild azaleas are blooming & it's hard not to stop in full blown admiration for a fine male Black-throated Green Warbler when you have a flaming pink bush extending over a high bluff, and below, the stream full & screaming. At Rock House we caught a crack of sunlight & at eye level a singing male Cerulean Warbler. For those of us mainly used to butt shots of Ceruleans high in the canopy, an eye level male in decent light makes clear the bird's name & its unique

creation. I was just dumb struck & that's saying something in my case. We humans have fine sensibilities, but they can be overloaded.

For the day, we recorded 21 warbler species. In the forests at Cherry Bend, we had the following: Golden-winged (1), Tennessee, Nashville, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Green (in 4 spots; they are likely breeding birds at Cherry Bend now), Cerulean (12+; all along the 2 miles & best place I know in the Ozarks), Black-and-white, American Redstart, Worm-eating, Ovenbird, Kentucky, Hooded, Wilson's. These are mostly common breeding birds at Cherry Bend.

Also at Cherry Bend, our highway workers are valiantly repairing giant cracks and minislides in the asphalt. Bless their hearts; it's a critical road through our neck-of-the-woods. Gravity makes its claims on highways, just as it does on us. Judith & I made our way carefully along 23, spotting Swainson's Thrushes and one Gray-cheeked Thrush using roadsides. This old "pigtrail" is steadily heading downhill & one senses it has chosen return to its pre-1880 state as a pioneer trail & Native American hunting track. We have smart highway folks & I'll bet they can keep it going for us who love birding & botanizing Cherry Bend, not to mention all the Ozark towns and communities who depend upon the feed trucks and freighters passing through, below Rock House, where we are watching Ceruleans & wondering at the many Hoodeds...and the virtually unimaginable resplendence of Scarlet Tanagers in spring light.

WESTERN BENTON COUNTY FOR INTERNATIONAL MIGRATORY BIRD DAY (IMBD, MAY 9, 2009)

It rained all night Friday night, but when I got up Saturday morning...lo, darkness had turned to light, the storm had cleared & there was a promising N breeze. How much more perfect could it be? No way to order up more perfect weather for finding migrants! Highlights:

Grounded flocks of Eastern Kingbirds, Orchard Orioles, Baltimore Orioles, with Dickcissels and Indigo Buntings mixed in in various numbers. This is my second IMBD to see grounded orioles in front of a N breeze. Maybe grounded and exhausted -- relatively many Painted Buntings, too, in places I'm not used to seeing them later --

American Bittern at Stump Prairie, flushed from a shallow pool of native cordgrass, Bell's Vireo singing away in the native shrubs above -- thank you Joe Woolbright for 10 years of backbreaking & often thankless restoration work making this habitat attractive to its natives -- I thought of you & others like you as I watched the bittern --

Clay-colored Sparrows -- found them in 3 places, and in 2, watched them singing or buzzing to be more specific -- 7 total was my "conservative" count, though instinct tells me the number was at least 2X that --

Black-bellied Plover -- a single bird, fully decked out in to-die-for breeding plumage, in a big young bean field, dwarfing a Killdeer that maybe didn't want it there -- singing Horned Larks, maybe in accompaniment?

Swainson's Hawk -- not unexpected at Maysville, but sure good to see for IMBD - two adults soaring together, then a 3rd bird, or was it one of these 2? -- with breeze over the old Beaty Prairie under wings...

Bewick's Wren (brown back, eastern form) -- just as I was ready to throw in the towel, I heard Bewick's Wren singing from a yard -- one of those yards full of cars,

trucks, storage sheds, all paraphernalia of family life in the Arkansas back country. How weird & suspicious a "big city" (AKA, Fayetteville) birder looks, all binned-out & such, hot on the trail of a what(?) a wren? Why? What do you want? But invariably & generously, the waters part, incredulity gives way to interest & I get permission to stalk their yard. Bless their hearts.

What a weird & sometimes very wonderful world is this in which we live.

ERBIE ON THE BUFFALO RIVER (May 16, 2009)

The Disorganized Birder's Club (DOBS) sponsored a field trip for members and visitors May 16, to Erbie along the Buffalo National River. We met in the rain at the Koen Forest Trail, just north of Jasper. In the rain we saw both tanager species, and as the rain lifted, we had warblers, including Blackburnian, Blackpoll, and others. There are tulip poplars along the trail & they were in full bloom, amazing flowers attended by Baltimore Orioles, plumage a nice match with orange in the petals. It dazzled me, watching them wayway up there, until my neck hurt & I had to keep wiping the old bins...it's a world we barely enter, but I rejoice at least such peaks.

Jack Stewart (Arkansas Audubon Society president and expert birder) was our leader & he treated us to a hike on the "Erbie loop" he and Pam walk from their home just above the Buffalo valley. Highlights of the loop: Blue-winged Warblers in the pioneer-era like forest openings (park service keeps them open with prescribed burning, like in "ye olden days") and a fine Swainson's Warbler that sang in the open for us along the edge of a huge rivercane thicket along the Buffalo. David Oakley got some bell ringer-type photos of the singing bird.

There were also some wonderful, mysterious "gwaks" that we decided must be a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, but who knows. The Universal merry prankster may have been using Her MP3 player...such mystery provides refreshment for our besotted minds to play & wander. Thank you, universe.

We visited the Stewarts in their "off the grid" home, but not before great looks at Prairie Warblers in the field we walked through. "Off the grid" – we saw the solar generation set up that powers their modern lifestyle (lights, computers, TV, etc). It was looking at the future & having a chance to be there, where the whole country must head in the coming years, in some shape and form, though perhaps not as serene & fetching as this modern cabin above the valley of the Buffalo National River.

MOURNING WARBLERS & FORMER PRAIRIES (May 26, 2009)

In writing about Mourning Warblers in the Birds of North America series, Jay Pitocchelli states that it is a common breeder in cleared but regenerating areas of North America's boreal forest, winters in Central and South America, where it also prefers disturbed areas with thick undergrowth. He also says that in favoring such clearings caused by logging or forest fires, this warbler may be one of North America's few Neotropical migrants that has benefited from human settlement.

I mention this because Jacque Brown, David Oakley, and I found a fine singing male at Chesney Prairie Natural Area yesterday (May 25) in just such circumstances – a thicket along a regenerating tree line in the headwaters of Sager Creek. Both of them

obtained prize-winning images. It was the kick off of a fascinating, rainy spring day on the former prairie lands in western Benton County.

I use the term former prairies because almost all Tallgrass Prairie habitat in northwestern Arkansas was long ago plowed and planted to introduced grasses, massively altering their botanical character. Nevertheless, the clay-rich soils remain, and because of that – and because prairie plants are tenacious – the former prairies retain many important aspects of their histories – and some of its bird life.

From Chesney, we drove the mile or so to Stump Prairie. First we heard a Bell's Vireo in a prairie wetland thicket, audible above traffic on Highway 59. The first bird we saw was an adult Swainson's Hawk, on the ground in a recently mowed pasture, consuming what we eventually decided was a rabbit, probably killed or injured in the mowing. You could hear the cameras firing away on that one. When the bird made a slow, low loop over us, an Oakley whoop easily topped feed trucks on 59.

We found two of the region's prize prairie orchids in bloom: ragged orchid *Platanthera lacera* and grass pink orchid *Calopogon tuberosus*. Joe Woolbright, land steward for both these special areas, told us about the flowers. He was off working on a project near Sulphur Springs where yesterday he found more rare plants! The areas where we found both orchids both had spring prescribed burns this year.

One of the real gems of these open country fencerows, thickets, and shrublands are Painted Buntings. We had at least 4 during the day. Over the years I have come to the conclusion that the more open the area -- that is, the more it resembles a prairie – the more likely we find Painteds, even if Indigo Buntings are nearby and plentiful. Conversely, the more forest habitat develops (especially with effective fire control), the better the habitat becomes for Indigos. If we are to bring back Painteds, getting fire back into these habitats is the key.

SHAPING-IN-THE-MAKING (June 26, 2009)

Cooper's Hawk was common in the Fayetteville area in the 50s, rare at least by the late 70s. It is now VERY BACK as a nester. I share the expressed joy of William Shepherd and others posting to this list on recovery. It is easy to be so overwhelmed by negative in our world that we fail to celebrate concrete evidence that sound science backing thoughtful public policy can make it better.

Historically -- northwestern Arkansas probably had a nesting population of Upland Sandpipers on its Tallgrass Prairies. We still see them regularly as transients. Rose Ann Barnhill, David Oakley, Jacque Brown, and I made a trip over to the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve north of Tulsa on June 20. We were treated to dozens of Upland Sandpipers that nest there. A trip like that is time travel. We are back to Arkansas in 1800. We saw 5 ornate box turtles, another amazing creature mostly lost to Arkansans. Finding one is like finding an arrowhead. Others have been here before.

We had a field trip over to Baker Prairie in Harrison on June 13, expressly to seek Willow Flycatchers. This is the only bird first described to science from Arkansas. In Audubon's time, they were apparently widespread nesting birds on our prairies. Slowly our prairies have disappeared, as have nesting Willow Flycatchers. We found them on June 13, and Leesia Marshall-Rosenberger showed us a nest. This is the only place in the state (I think) where they still nest. We were as excited as Audubon, when he saw his first.

The situation with Cooper's Hawk, Upland Sandpiper, and Willow Flycatcher reminds me of how we shape the environment, good and ill. Shaping is all around us. The proposed coal plant down by Grassy Lake and Lake Millwood is a shaping-in-the-making. As in the case of hawks, sandpipers, and flycatchers -- we have choices to make. It is about how many watts to generate and how to generate. We have futures to shape. It is about the nature of power.

Some of y'all got upset when some others celebrated the recent court decision re-thinking the coal project. As I write on my computer, cooled by AC, with cold water in the ice box (oops, refrigerator), I am reminded we don't have a realistic choice about whether or not to generate electricity. That train has already left the station. But how -- is that not the CURRENT question?

If you look at the billions of folks in the developing world who are just now learning to depend on lights and fans, it is easy enough to see our planetary distress. We need electricity generated in a way that guides the world, as we aspire to do with democracy. I would very much like to see our large utilities lead in generating power. I mean it metaphorically. They have the people, the expertise, and the resources IF we want it.

Creating jobs folks desperately need in SW AR - YES. Generating electricity that reflects the needs of our future - YES. Retooling America to help us lead the world in a safer cleaner energy future - YES. That is POWER, thoughtful and respectful of our future.

We can bring back Cooper's Hawk and we can restore more of our Tallgrass Prairie plus the wonderful creatures that require it. We can have electricity, jobs, ornate box turtles, and a relatively clean environment. We do not have to live in negativity and refusal to celebrate the good and the possible, just because it is different than practices in the past or not as perfect as we wish it could be.

I am proud to say: we lead the world in many aspects of living, and we do it in thoughtful, respectful conservation as well.

CHRISTIAN CONSERVATIVE BIRDERS (July 1, 2009)

Off and on over the last couple of years, I have conversed via email and in person or gone birding with LOTS Christian Conservative Birders (CCBs) plus some of what I assume are Christian Liberal Birders. I am TOTALLY comfortable with CCBs, having grown up as a CC myself in Fort Smith, before I was a B. I still identify myself as a Southern Baptist, though mainly in a cultural sense; I love the hymns, the communities, and of course many of my relatives who still believe as we did in our youth. What I no longer do is embrace the social and political agendas of the noisier Christian Conservatives.

Looking back, I realize this noisy C agenda is not a new thing.

When I was a kid in Fort Smith, we were taught from the pulpit, Holy Bible in hand, that African Americans who were kneeling-in at Southern Baptist churches to promote racial diversity within those churches were Communists, not real Christians. We were taught that if the Catholic John Kennedy was elected, America would be ruled by a foreign Pope. And so on. I still have a deadly fear of drinking beer on Sundays and I am sometimes suspicious of Methodists (just kidding!).

As a young college student (UA Fayetteville-1964), I began to see the world through different eyes, politically and socially. That said, I have never felt a need to reject the morals, values, and spiritual teachings of my parents. As I formulated my own beliefs, I no longer embraced that an Immaculate Conception was required for human beings to have divine spark. I was also taught and never rejected that the right to think for yourself is the best of our American values. Those who think America needs ayatollahs and religious laws really should try at least a brief residence in one of those countries run that way AND perhaps take a deep bath in the history of our own country and its founding. I have taught my daughter to respect faith and seek the truth of things in her day-to-day living.

So, I enjoy birding with people of traditional faith, whatever that faith, Conservative or Liberal, or Neither, including no belief. As (I guess) a Liberal Birder, I personally welcome all of Christian Conservative Birders to this list, to their faith, and to field trips. Please miss your usual Sunday morning services and join our congregation at Chesney Prairie on July 12, 8 AM.

Every Baptist preacher worth his salt knows it is a mortal sin to let divine services spill over and cut into the Sunday noon feast. We will end services by noon, I promise.

ARKANSAS RIVER SANDBARS July 15, 2009

Richard Stauffacher and I put a canoe in on the Arkansas River July 15, just south of Mulberry and Dyer, near a long string of predominantly sandy islands, and approximately a mile or so upriver from the islands we paddled around July 8. Great Egrets still have active nests in low willow trees, though all of the nestlings visible from the boat were crawling around the nests. The apparently long string of sandy islands will be one as river levels drop.

From the canoe we saw Least Terns on three of these low sandy islets, always where there are mounds on the islands covered with pebbles (so nesting sort of like Killdeer); about 25 terns air mobile at one point. Unlike last week, we saw few brownish youngsters running about; some birds were apparently incubating. We also saw some obvious courtship, including the tern's habitat of presumptive Mr offering presumptive Ms an offering -- presumptive he standing erect with the long silver minnow, she crouching adjacent (but, according to rules of this list--no sex, no religion, no politics--we now modestly avert our eyes...).

The shallow islands also hosted shorebirds: we saw both yellowlegs (1 each), 4 Stilt Sandpipers, 5 Semipalmated Sandpipers, and 2 Spotted Sandpipers, and a couple that got away. A brilliant Baltimore Oriole chased a Fish Crow from a tall sycamore on one island. Bell's Vireos (3 in one spot) were singing with considerable vigor in the early succession veg near the shoreline.

On the drive back, along a 2-track trace through a beanfield, 2 Horned Larks, including one singing away, oblivious to 98 degrees, bright sun, mid-July.

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER, HIROSHIMA, NAGASAKI (August 9, 2009)

Jacque Brown, David Oakley, and I spent Sunday morning, August 9, in the Arkansas River valley, in the vicinity of the U of A vegetable experiment farm & a

private sod farm southeast of Kibler in Crawford County. We saw a Black-bellied Plover still in immaculate nesting plumage, plus a good sprinkling of other migrating shorebirds: Semipalmated Plover (4), Greater Yellowlegs (2), Solitary Sandpiper (6), Spotted (1), Upland (8, including 1 flock of 6), Semipalmated (1+; many peeps), Least (2+), Pectoral Sandpiper (24+); 8-10 Horned Larks and a similar number of Lark Sparrows, both either at the turf farm or alongside sandy roads through bean fields (including yoy [young of the year]), Grasshopper Sparrow (1 adult singing, 2 yoy near, at turf), Painted Bunting (1; yoy), and BIG flocks of Dickcissels in the bean and sorghum fields.

At one point a couple of guys in a flatbed work truck hailed us to a stop. They explained that there were vandalism problems in the area, including folks stealing watermelons. Our bins and floppy hats marked us as potentially weird but probably harmless. It was Sunday morning, after all, and real bad guys would be shackled-up somewhere. They had 5 just picked big melons on the flatbed. After a friendly talk, they gave us directions we needed. In 5 minutes we spotted a watermelon that had rolled off the truck and split open blocking the roadway. There was no putting that one back together again.

We left by noon, because of heat, and because I wanted to get back to Fayetteville and still have a little August energy to see some public art: the Quaker-sponsored exhibit "Eyes wide open" displayed at the Fulbright Peace Fountain on the U of A campus PLUS to make a program marking the anniversary of atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at one of the chapels adjacent campus. My dad was on a Navy ship in the Pacific ready for the invasion of Japan when the bombs were dropped. He always credited the bombs with saving his life and, by the way, getting him home soon, resulting in me. "Eyes wide open" features combat boots arranged in symmetric rows for US servicemen from Arkansas killed in more recent wars & civilian shoes in another area honoring dead non-combatants. It was honorable & sobering, even to a devout bird-watcher. My own eyes and head were still wide open to Black-bellied Plovers & sudden materializations of Upland Sandpipers & generally to the timeless wonder of massive continental-wide bird movements. Thinking of my dad, birds, all of these war dead, seemed a confluence of modernity, even on campus, as we honored the disparate victims of various species of spectacular orgasmic violence.

BIRDSIDE BAPTIST August 22, 2009

The following is all completely true. I am not trying to re-ignite the "culture wars."

Jacque Brown, David Oakley, and I birded in the Arkansas R bottomlands, including Frog Bayou WMA and east toward the turf farm and fields south of Kibler. We saw two adult Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks with a brood of half-grown young at the Alma sewer plant. There were Caspian and Least Terns on the Arkansas R; also 10 cormorants (which have been there all summer). Shorebirds were sparse, but we found 3 singleton Upland Sandpipers & two Buff-breasted Sandpipers. A shrike south of Alma had hung mouse, cicada, and grasshopper on barbed wire. Bell's Vireos were still singing at Frog. Yellow Warblers seemed numerous (5-10) in the bushy edge at Frog. We saw two green Painted Buntings.

While we were watching Horned Larks and the Buff-breasted Sandpipers from a graveled road that was open, well-traveled & NOT posted, we were accosted by a

gentleman who informed us we were on private land and we weren't welcome. He said some birdwatchers had found an abandoned Bald Eagle nest nearby and the government had taken 40 acres of private land as a result. He asked a lot of questions, including whether or not we were Christians. He relaxed when we testified to our faith – especially brightening when I responded that I was, like him, a Southern Baptist -- said we could keep watching. Sure glad we aren't just a bunch of bird-watchin' heathens. Today was a Saturday; we'd been in a bad way if it was Sunday.

When my sister misses Sunday morning services & instead enjoys preaching on the radio, she refers to this as attending “bedside Baptist.” I guess, if we get accosted on a Sunday morning, we may claim to be attending “Birdside Baptist.”

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWKS & CLIMATE CHANGE (11-28-2009)

The current issue of BIRDING (American Birding Association Nov 2009) includes on page 35 a summary of the best current data suggesting how climate change is impacting winter bird distribution. I was delighted that the entire article appeared in the 109th Christmas Bird count issue of American Birds (vol. 63) mailed to everyone who participated in last year's CBC. One of the things that caught my attention in the latter is on p. 13. There are figures based upon the CBC data we all go out and collect for Rough-legged Hawk, Purple Finch, Stellar's Jay, and Carolina Wren. The figures display changes in latitudinal center of abundance during CBC periods and this is plotted against regional population trends.

I've been wondering about why we almost never see Rough-legged Hawks in Arkansas in winter anymore. Based upon Figure 3, an obvious reason is that starting in the mid-1970s, the winter center of abundance for rough-legs shifted way, way north of Arkansas; it is actually now in Canada in early winter. There's something similar in Purple Finch, though the shift is not so dramatic. This stuff is all well worth a look, especially if you are personally wondering what the climate change issue is about.

This stuff was running in the back of my mind yesterday, especially, because Jacque Brown, David Oakley, and I made a tiring but birdy trip over to the The Nature Conservancy's Tallgrass Prairie Preserve (TGPP, near Pawhuska, north of Tulsa). It's about 3 hours from the Fayetteville area. Once inside the imposing bison fences, about the first bird we saw was a light morph Rough-legged Hawk. It was zoomed by an almost pure black bird that we soon realized was a dark morph rough-leg. Before the end of the day, we saw at least 5, and maybe as many as 9, rough-legs. David & Jacque got wonderful images of both morphs. In one spot, rough-legs were using an updraft of breeze against a low hill to hang almost still in the wind. We also found Smith's Longspur in 4-5 *Aristida* grass patches, Sprague's Pipits in a bare spot where bison gather, and Greater Prairie-Chicken and a Short-eared Owl snug down out of the wind in knee high grasses and forbs.

Perhaps rough-legs are still present at TGPP because the habitat is of such high quality, whereas areas with margin quality habitat (like the former Tallgrass Prairies in northwestern Arkansas) cannot support them in this era of changing climate...or something...

PRAIRIE-CHICKENS AND BISON DUNG (December 16, 2009)

Someone recently told me there are prairie-chickens in Arkansas. This came from a “good source.” It’s one of those deathless rumors. I like it, but I doubt it.

When I was kid growing up in Fort Smith, my dad, a disabled Navy vet, worked for the Army at Fort Chaffee. We went out there to see the doctor, shop in the PX, etc. Nobody was a bird watcher in my family and we never took time to look at birds on the base. As an adult, with my folks both gone, I have been back at Chaffee, working on a research project (1980s) involving bobwhite quail and later to see Smith’s Longspur. This was a field trip on November 13, 2004, with Mike Mlodinow, Sandy Berger, and Karen McGee. Smith’s country at Chaffee looks like the flint hills prairies of northeastern Oklahoma where there are sure enough prairie-chickens.

Chaffee is part of the old Massard Prairie, described by Nuttall in his travels through western Arkansas Territory in 1819. So back to the claimed rediscovery of Arkansas prairie-chickens. Artillery and all other kinds of ordinance have been fired there since WW II. As a result of regular wildfires, Chaffee probably has the best and most extensive native grassland in the state, BUT you can’t get into most of it – all that unexploded ordinance – and now with the unending War on Terror, all that fresh layer of security.

So I was asked about those prairie-chickens lately, and I said, “I doubt it.” I regret to say, in this regard, that I sound like a poor echo of the Ivory-bill doubters. Show me the chickens and I will convert. What’s most likely is some kind of exotic introduced grouse or so I was told by someone knowledgeable about the situation.

I have been thinking about this because of a field trip to TNC’s Tallgrass Prairie Preserve just north of Pawhuska, Oklahoma April 20-21, 2006. Joe Woolbright set up this trip. I got to go as a bird guide. Harvey Payne, who founded the preserve and became its director, guided us out to a prairie-chicken lek. Chickens boomed from the only high places available – big piles of bison dung. It could very well have been exactly the same thing on the Massard Prairie in 1819.

I wistfully doubt the reports of Greater Prairie-Chickens at Chaffee. But, if by some miracle, they survive there, I hope the unexploded ordinance and the War on Terror continues to protect them. I also hope none of the big energetic male chickens hop up heedlessly on a still viable artillery shell fuse, which may be all that’s available during courtship, since there is no bison herd, or at least none reported, at Chaffee as far as I have heard.

ABOUT THE BIRDSIDE BAPTIST & other ornithological mysteries

In this book you will learn virtually nothing about religion, including the Baptists of the title. You will also not learn anything useful about how to identify birds. BUT even if you forgot your binoculars, you may obtain a view of the chaotic mindscape of at least one Arkansas birder. Visit exotic weedy pastures in the remote corners of Benton County, Arkansas, in search of migrating Upland Sandpipers! Visit Civil War battlefields in search of almost always elusive Henslow's Sparrows! Join the author on front line visits to native grassland habitat restoration (see the author's image of Greater Prairie-Chicken, below from the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, in the act of booming from its perch on a pile of bison dung). Oh yes, and then there is that Ivory-billed woodpecker thing – there is a visit to that battlefield, too.

So, if you've got nothing better to do with your time, you might as well climb aboard and take a ride through the wilds of ARBIRD-L, the online Birds of Arkansas Discussion List. You may discover what at least some folks are thinking about, bird-wise in the not-always-so-natural Natural State, landscape & mindscape.

