

TUFTED PINK SNOWBIRD

observations

November through March



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2014

PREFACE

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November 2

BIRDING OF THE COTTONWOOD

This cottonwood tree in the Arkansas River Valley near Dyer has lost most all of its leaves, a natural fall event. But there's nothing to worry about. I was down birding in the valley today with David Chapman. Also in the neighborhood, big flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds. They seem nearly as countless as leaves. As can be easily seen here, they have re-leafed the



cottonwood. Maybe we should call this, The Birding of the Cottonwood. They remained in the tree, even as we watched, but left in mass and in a real hurry with approach of a Cooper's Hawk.



November 4

MOST FANTASTIC



The most fantastic bird of all is right outside my door -- male Northern Cardinal.

November 5

BALD EAGLES TODAY



As these birds once neared extinction in the lower 48 states, we had to fight for integrity of the environment in which we all live. We still do. It is because of this successful fight that these Bald Eagles were at Craig State Fish Hatchery, Centerton, Arkansas, today.

AND THERE'S ALL THAT WONDERFUL SINGING

November 10

These WHITE-CROWNED SPARROWS were at Chesney Prairie Natural Area near Siloam Springs today. I



have included a photograph of an adult, with distinctive black and white feathers on its head, and the equally beautiful and more subtle plumage of younger birds. I always wonder how it is they find places like Chesney when I see them in the fall. Data obtained with tiny radio tracking devices indicates that adults have learned the route here from previous winters. By contrast, juveniles depend upon inherited abilities to orient to general regions. Pretty amazing, plus there's all that

wonderful singing every time there is even a scrap of winter sun.



ASHE'S JUNIPER, JUNIPERUS ASHEI

November 11



These are the berries on Ashe's Juniper, *Juniperus ashei*. Limestone glades and the "bald knobs" at Beaver Lake dam site provide droughty habitats where it thrives. It's a southern tree (think Texas and Mexico here), in the far northern parts of its range. I've seen them a lot on glades above the Buffalo National River. The place where I took this photograph would be way up on a hilltop, too, but the entire valley of the White River, below this glade, is now Beaver Lake.

LE CONTE'S SPARROW AT WOOLSEY WET PRAIRIE

November 11



This LE CONTE'S SPARROW was at Woolsey Wet Prairie in Fayetteville today, 1 of at least 5 Joan Reynolds and I saw there. A small weedy area was full of Swamp, Song, White-crowned, Lincoln's, and Savannah Sparrows. It made me think this might have been part of a recently arrived flock, just ahead of the cold front coming in tonight.

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS AUDUBON SOCIETY FIELD TRIP TO LAKE FAYETTEVILLE

November 17



Meet NIKOLAI MARGULIS who, along with his brother Alexander, and mom and dad, Lisa and Martin, joined in yesterday's Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip to Lake Fayetteville and later, the Big Sit at Northwest Arkansas Land Trust's Wilson Springs Conservation Area, where Nikolai and I spotted a Sora. Also in the picture, Douglas Arthur James, founding member of Arkansas Audubon Society and NWAAS, and ornithologist at UA-Fayetteville since 1953. Doug started leading bird walks when he was 7. Nikolai turned 6 in July. He has organized the Carolina Chickadees, a bird club for friends and younger avian enthusiasts. We had BIG wind yesterday. Nikolai and I were sitting on limestone slabs on Lake Fayetteville dam while watching American Coots and Pied-billed Grebes. When we got up, big wind ignored ole me, but tried to fly away with Nikolai. All in a day's work, it seems, for so far as I could see, no birds or beats were missed. It was off to ducks in flight and a distant Common Loon.

LUX AT THE SPOTTING SCOPE

November 17



LUX at the spotting scope, watching a Pied-billed Grebe, from the dam at Lake Fayetteville, during yesterday's Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip. Just beyond her and waiting his turn, Alexander Margulis. Beyond the top of Alex's orange hood, Lux's mom, with binoculars.

TURN UP THE GOOSE MUSIC

November 20



I was out all day in goose music. It filled that part of the valley of the Arkansas River in Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge near Vian, OK. 5000 geese, more or less including white and blue forms of the Snow Geese, plus a smaller number of Ross's Goose, and one Canada Goose. Concert tickets were free. "If, then, we can live without goose music, we may as well do away with stars, or sunsets, or Iliads," wrote Aldo Leopold in his Sand County Almanac. "But the point is that we would be fools to do away with any of them . . ." Amen to that and turn up the music.



LAKE ATALANTA PARK IN ROGERS

November 25



This female BELTED KINGFISHER was at Lake Atalanta Park in Rogers today, one of the best all-around birding places in northwest Arkansas. Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society schedules regular field trips there. The lake is an impoundment of Prairie Creek, an important tributary to Beaver Lake. In turn, Prairie Creek is formed by the junction of natural springs that flow from the series of Ozark hollows in the park. The hollows shelter rare Ozark

plants, like a unique wild ginger different than the typical species found in Arkansas. All that, plus a popular place for family outings, fishing, hiking, and running. The City of Rogers plans to make some changes in the park. I'm going to go to a meeting tomorrow night to share information about the 190+ bird species so far identified there. Most recent: HARRIS'S SPARROW that Joan Reynolds and I saw on November 18.



COMFORTABLE SUNNY PATCH AT CHESNEY PRAIRIE NATURAL AREA

November 26

I saw this big hombre, a Western Rat Snake, *Elaphe obsoleta*, today at Chesney Prairie Natural Area near Siloam Springs, Arkansas. Seeing any snake still active in late November is always a surprise. My estimate is this one is at least 5-feet in length. E. obsoleta and I go way back, to graduate school at UA-Fayetteville and then on to the Forest Service. I studied Western Rat Snakes for my Masters and later, helped manage interactions between these snakes and



one bird upon which they prey, the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Despite such size, hunger drives them to climb high in trees, quite an admirable feat. It was cold today, but sunny, and this big old creature and I were both out in a comfortable sunny patch at Chesney.



(The day after Thanksgiving is . . .) LOON FRIDAY

November 28



Tomorrow, November 29, is LOON FRIDAY. This is the day when you are supposed to get ready for Christmas and mid-winter by getting up real early and heading out to your local loon habitat. Crowds of loon observers are predicted to be heavy. There are radical mark downs on Common Loons and lots of possible great deals on rare loons, especially if they are far away in that fuzzy region where fact and fantasy so easily mingle. Long ways off? Bill uptilt? A little light in color? No problem! Must be Yellow-billed Loon, but only on Loon Friday! This photo is a Common Loon, from Beaver Lake pretty close, so not able to be converted to one of the rarer species in an over-active imagination.

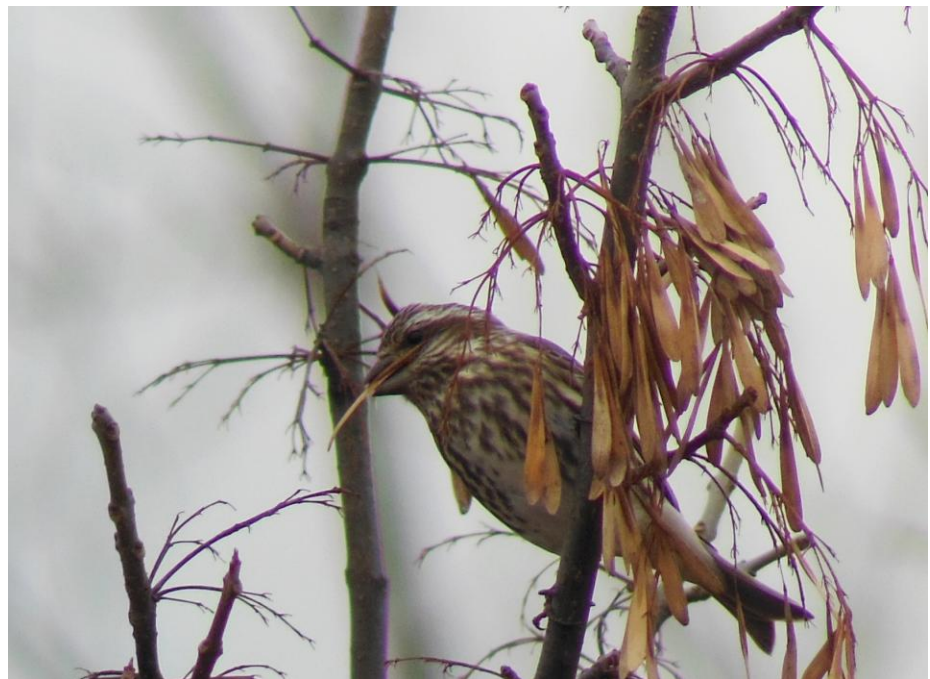
COEVOLVED RELATIONSHIPS, USUALLY OF MUTUAL BENEFIT

December 1



These finches were at Beaver Lake Nursery Pond, east of Rogers, today. The PURPLE FINCH female (or first year male) is dining on green ash seeds. AMERICAN GOLDFINCHES dined on ash seeds, too, but more often they probed for seeds within the long curved pods of trumpet creeper vines. In a broad manner of speaking, these native plants

and birds have coevolved relationships usually of mutual benefit. The birds get food; in perching and probing, they help disperse uneaten seeds. This is their world and it powers them into the future. At home, I'm thinking about OUR world. What powers us? How are we addressing the need for balance? We only fool ourselves when taking the view that science and technology earns us an exemption from forces governing others, including finches, ashes, and trumpet creepers.



CEDAR WAXWINGS GETTING A HEAD START ON THANKSGIVING

December 3

These CEDAR WAXWINGS were trying to get a head start on

Thanksgiving.

The photo is from a rest stop along I-40 in Oklahoma on November 23.

Obviously, the waxwings aren't in any kind of a resting mode.

Rather, this



hungry flock descends to forage on the numerous eastern red cedar berries. They roam in flocks, sometimes including hundreds of individuals, seeking the best food patches. When they locate the patches, it's ALL about Cedar Waxwings. They also like persimmons. As this has been the best year in



memory for persimmons – persimmons are just everywhere now -- we are seeing them swarm trees heavy with fruit, most recently at Prairie Creek on Beaver Lake. I am also including a photograph of Cedar Waxwings during an ice storm a few years ago, when they swarmed persimmons in my neighborhood. The bird is all puffed out against the cold, with a glob of persimmon on the end of its bill, and partially consumed persimmons on the ice and snow.

BUFFLEHEADS, SOMETHING BRAND NEW IN HER WORLD

December 3



These BUFFLEHEADS were at Lake Atalanta Park in Rogers today. Birds with the most white are males. The female displays her modest white patch. They nest well to the north, in Canada and Alaska, but come down here for winter. While I was watching Buffleheads diving, a young woman drove up who'd just dropped her son at school. She'd been told about a Bald Eagle frequently seen around the lake. It hadn't turned up yet, but then she noticed the Buffleheads, something brand new in her world. With all that black and white, they're one of our most striking winter birds and this is a fine place to see them. Regular folks walk around the lake for exercise, often families with children. Bank fishing is popular. There's even room for us birders -- and what soon turns into successful eagle watching. Some major changes are proposed for Lake Atalanta. Speaking for myself and maybe Buffleheads, the best will emerge from fair consideration of nature, especially the unique springs and hollows that junction and form the real living heart of this unique park.

KRIDER'S HAWK WEST OF GENTRY, AKA "FLORIDA"

December 5



A KRIDER'S HAWK west of Gentry yesterday was a long ways off. Once a stand-alone species, Krider's is now recognized as a race of Red-tails that nest in the northern Great Plains of the US and Canada. It probably originated in the Dakotas or further, up toward Calgary. Ancient ways are buried deep in its genes. What we think of today as the Great Plains was even greater during a period 9000 to 5000 years before now, when the plains extended much further east and south. In looking at a map of North America, we may see two countries, a bunch of states and provinces, a few hundred years of accumulated history and various trumped-up demarcations. Krider's sees none of this. It didn't need Garmin to find what we call Round Prairie. My digiscoped pictures from yesterday are fuzzy, but interestingly enough, this Krider's (photographed in winter 2011) is near yesterday's, and in the same plumage. Is it the same bird? Does it go to the same place in "Florida" (AKA, Gentry, AR) every year?

TUFTED PINK SNOWBIRD IN FAYETTEVILLE!

December 7



As far as I know, this is the westernmost sighting of this bird in Arkansas and the FIRST documented record for Tufted Pink Snowbird for the ENTIRE state! And right here in my yard among Northern Cardinals, White-throated Sparrows, Fox Sparrows, Blue Jays, Dark-eyed Juncos, Common Grackles, House Finches, and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. You're all welcome to come check it off your life lists.

DARK-EYED JUNCOS IN THE RAGWEED

December 10



These small, hardy, northern sparrows are both DARK-EYED JUNCOS, what old timers call snowbirds. And indeed, they were part of a flock in a snowy field near Siloam Springs today, when northwest Arkansas is still under snow and ice. Today's flock was pretty clever and quite versatile in harvesting seeds on giant ragweeds poking up

through the snow. Sometimes they jumped on top of the plants, raining seeds down to the snow. They also perched atop some stout plants, picking off seeds. They rode pliant stalks down to the snow, holding them there with their toes as they plucked seeds. All this action, involving 25 or so birds, sent many seeds raining down, all to the delight of other juncos. One of these is an obvious Slate-colored Junco. They nest way up north across a broad region of Canada and Alaska. The more colorful one is

mostly an Oregon Junco, from the Far West. They were once considered separate species, but then it was learned that different forms of juncos are capable of interbreeding. Most of the ones we see in Arkansas are Slate-colored, but in these flocks are occasional others, including those displaying the colorful plumage associated with Oregon Juncos.



INDOMINABLE MEADOWLARKS

December 11



The open fields are still covered with ice and snow. Meadowlarks find that spot with a little bare ground, probe for food among tufts of grass. They gather in small flocks of 6 or 10 on little south-facing slopes with less ice and snow, and more sun. They're out in the fields among cows that have broken up the ice or along the roadside where the snowplow exposes grass. They are

foraging on grain spilled from poultry feed trucks. Come just a little break in the weather, a little sunlight, a modest rise to 34 degrees, why they are out and about, calling and singing, maybe not exactly like spring, but nevertheless a pleasure to hear. A song is a song, especially after the deathly still of a sudden winter storm. In

December, we have Eastern Meadowlarks that nest here, joined by Western Meadowlarks escaping bitter cold to the north and west. I photographed one meadowlark in a snow-covered barnyard. The other is up on a broad fencepost, all but asleep in the pleasure of some afternoon sunlight. Maysville in northwest Benton County, Arkansas, today.



MEMO FROM CANVASBACKS AT LAKE ATALANTA

December 14



These photographs are a reminder of what Lake Atalanta in Rogers is NOW, without any of the proposed improvements. These two species of migratory ducks, CANVASBACK and COMMON GOLDENEYE appear a little fuzzy because yesterday it was 100% overcast with light rain. Their presence makes the point about importance and value of Lake Atalanta, biologically-speaking, and

what is at stake in the deliberations concerning the park's future. These are both northern ducks present in Arkansas only in winter. For Canvasbacks, there is an ongoing problem involving loss of migration period stopover sites and wintering areas. Besides these two species, other wild ducks present on the lake yesterday included Gadwall, Mallard, Lesser Scaup, and Bufflehead. Other interesting waterfowl species are part of the flock of resident domestic geese that crowd around visitors who come to the park to feed them. This includes Snow Goose (blue goose form with an obvious wing injury), Ross's Goose, and Canada Goose. I am sharing these pictures, not because I oppose improvements in the park, but because it is easy to lose sight of what works, and works well, in the rush to change everything mainly for the sake of changing. If changes actually degrade the existing strengths, it is a little like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, in my view.



THREE TRUMPETER SWANS ON FAYETTEVILLE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

December 16



Midst our ice, midst our snow, midst our frozen fields, ponds, and lakes, midst frozen spirits . . . three Trumpeter Swans were seen by quite a few folks during the Fayetteville Christmas Bird Count on December 15. I am thrilled because we have them at all. Almost 80 years ago a few folks stepped up and said not “No” but “Hell NO!” when they faced extinction and many thought it too late to save them. Brought back from the edge because a few did not accept the proposition that Trumpeters had to disappear so we could plow the entire earth, shoot anything that moves, build another mall, or just sink into sour don’t care and don’t give a damn destructive petulance. Based upon their black bills and grayish, blotchy white plumage, our three Trumpeters must have hatched this year and are making their first migration. I assume they are rediscovering a landscape well-known to their distant ancestors. I hope Trumpeter Swans will reclaim all of North America, along with other manifestations of creation we have, in ignorance and greed, driven nearly to extinction. I look for a place for us in that future, too. A generous place, hopefully, for all creatures, not just some.

HARLAN'S HAWK ON FAYETTEVILLE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

December 17



Twenty-three freezing degrees and sun is spilling way too few rays on yet another Fayetteville Christmas Bird Count, our 51st as far as I can tell. We're parked on solid ice at the University farm. Car heater doing its best. Low rays from the east snake across snowfields and fencelines and land on a huge, ancient, leafless post oak, great scion of former prairie. Been here since pioneer days. Knew Passenger Pigeons and Osage hunters. Knew Big Bluestem grass before Malls and Gated Communities. Knew Greater Prairie-Chickens. On a huge limb straight from the trunk is Harlan's Hawk, dark as post oak and with scattered flecks of white. It's come from summer in what we call Alaska to winter in what we call Arkansas. A fine addition to our count. Watching, I'm considering its presence in "our" world, so-called, come here on its own wings, unaided by nostrums of conservative Republicans or liberal Democrats, factual demonstration of the ultimately and utterly futile concept of boundaries, especially those deemed "international" or "financial." They-we, inhabit our-their earth, by the way. Been flying here since long before us.

OLE JACK

December 19



These days I'm advocating for informed civic discourse and balance. Yes, my hair is gray and not so strangely, in the middle of December, I'm thinking about wildflowers I have enjoyed at Lake Atalanta in Rogers and elsewhere, usually in mid-April. That's JACK-IN-THE-PULPIT, *Arisaema triphyllum*. I know you probably think I'm kidding, BUT I grew up a Southern Baptist and I darn sure know a pulpit when I see one. I also know from many a sermon that a person can easily spend an entire life in Rogers, Arkansas, or Anywhere, America, and never discern the message from a leafy pulpit hidden among the green realities of summer. To hear ole Jack we have to open up. Have to "Use your head for something besides a hat rack," as my dad used to say. Closed up, as we too often are, we miss the obvious. We imperil everything, from great cathedrals to parks like Lake Atalanta. This is what I have been trying to convey to those who advocate rapid, wholesale changes in the park. Just slow down. Let's consider the obvious first. I am advocating on behalf of myself, plus the birds and flowers I have so enjoyed there. Truly, in our busy universe, it is way, way over-the-top too easy to miss the obvious. I ask myself, How do we fairly balance between the ancient rights of natives, like Jack, and our own ambitions? I know we can send satellites to the rings of Saturn. Now I'm waiting to see if we can fairly grasp the much closer rings of Lake Atalanta. In these near rings, ole Jack pushes up his April pulpit. Amen.

BOREAL FOREST IN THE YARD December 22



The great Boreal forests of Canada have come to my yard in the person of none other than (drum roll here) . . . White-throated Sparrows . . . The first few white-throats exited Canada and set wings south by October. Some dropped off right here in Fayetteville, America. I know this, not because they are pounding on the door or descending in great unmistakable flocks, but because of a sudden flashing of wings around the bushes. A certain whistle at dusk that says there is room here. There's quite a bit of calling and answering I haven't heard since early May, when last year's white-throats headed north. Now, again, with ice and snow, like today, these handsome, winged ambassadors from the great north lands have fully set up shop. They own the place, like an extension of the Boreal. Out there around the feeder, there are locals like Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, and Northern Cardinals -- and these visitors from afar. White-throated Sparrows! Bushes suddenly come alive in the dead of winter! It may be one of the few things you can't order off Amazon.com, download from the web. Just outside the window. Here's one today, in my yard.

LITTLE BIG MAN, THE VISITOR FROM ALASKA-CANADA-ROCKIES

December 23



A pretty good snow is coming down right now. We had ice and relatively deep snow two weeks ago. And yet, even with all that, a male RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET -- slightly more than 4 inches long and weighing-in at slightly less than one-fourth of an ounce -- and with his very ruby crown much in evidence -- seems to be thriving in my yard, a long, long ways from old growth forests where he nests, across Alaska and Canada all the way to tree line and down into spruce-pine forests in the Rockies. I don't know how an inexpensive suet block compares to his usual spiders, aphids, leafhoppers, lady beetles, moths, etc . Kinglets after all are royalty among insect-eaters; it's 90% of their diet. Yet today, in cold and snow, it is suet fat from my feeder or nothing or at least not much. Most of these kinglets that migrate through here in fall are gone further south when cool turns to winter cold. I first noticed this guy foraging on suet during the big ice-snow in early December. The Carolina Wrens that nest in my yard also like the suet and they don't much care for this energetic little king. However, they can only hog the suet so long. Off they fly for the brush pile. Here comes little big man, the visitor from Alaska-Canada-Rockies, 6-7 grams max tough, red crown and all, ready for a suet refill.

MORE SWANS! December 27



Three TRUMPETER SWANS continue at Fayetteville. These are probably the same 3 at Lake Fayetteville starting Dec 13. They are foraging in shallow playa-like pools in the middle of a huge former wet prairie that looks like it will soon be developed. I photographed the birds again today from the on-ramp where the 540 loop around Fayetteville heads north towards Springdale. Killdeer and prairie crawfish chimneys in the same area. Mallards and Canadas on a bigger pond nearby. The north end is along Van Asche Drive, where the City of Fayetteville is expanding the road. I'm unsure what other plans may be in the works, but I can see survey stakes. There is a lot of traffic on what used to be sleepy Van Asche. Not good news for swans, prairie, crawfish, and the ducks, but then they don't vote. The wheels of progress are not likely to slow down just because a few swans have returned to an old prairie. "I'll swan," my mother used to say when she was surprised about something. I still hope for good outcomes in the effort to rebuild Trumpeter populations.

SHARE THE ARK IN 'ARK'ANSAS December 29



In the early 1980s, when Doug James and I were working on Arkansas Birds, we had a grand total of zero recent swan records. The idea of Arkansas Trumpeters seemed impossible. Three decades later I sit in the car as tall as I can, spotting scope on the window rolled up as high as possible, for a better angle, and trying to avoid a killer northwest wind. Again, it is the three TRUMPETER SWANS I've been watching. These are not my first Arkansas Trumpeters, but the thrill is not gone upon seeing more. From today's better angle I can see black bills, black legs; feathers are grayish-bluish with patches of white coming through. Sibley (p. 72, *The Sibley Guide to Birds*) deems this first summer plumage. A photo on p. 14, *The Stokes field guide to the birds of North America*, is a dead ringer. So they are derived from nesting season 2013. And from where? I have enough of an angle I hope for leg bands, but don't see any. Maybe from the wilds of Alaska? Canada? South Dakota? Watching and wondering -- from where ever they have flown, to here -- I feel modestly hopeful. Sometimes the wasteful things we do make me crazy. We seem determined to perform the equivalent of Noah's flood again and again, laying waste, large and small, to life so freely given. Other times, like today, I think we are willing to share the 'Ark'ansas (pun intended, my apologies). Heading towards 2014, I want to think we are growing up. Maybe we are willing to share. That's what our mothers always try to teach us. Maybe time to listen -- and watch visiting swans.

CAN'T BEAT THAT OPTIMISM

January 2

Two male Lesser Scaups in the shallows. Two adult Bald Eagles perched in mature trees. A cold snowy morning from Lake Atalanta in Rogers. Atalanta lies in a broad hollow fed by smaller hollows with numerous springs, some famous and historic like Diamond Spring. Most are nameless and flowing this morning. Atalanta is charmingly slow poke, with excitement when kids work the swings or someone fishing on the bank reels one in. I watched as a Great Blue Heron flew right over



and perched near a guy who'd just caught a fish. Can't beat that optimism. Families, many of them immigrants, mom and pop and the kids, walk the lake's circle drive. Hillsides forming the hollows are pretty quiet except when chipmunks get excited. As Rogers has rapidly grown and expanded east, new parks serve the public with lighted ball fields, but you can't build new the natural and historical charm of Atalanta. A new bathroom and a little fixing up around the lake would help, but in addition, the city proposes to cover the wooded hillsides -- where Wood Thrushes and waterthrushes nest now -- with 12



miles of off-road mountain bike trails. The idea is to shed slow-poke & old-fashioned for a new, vigorous stallion Rogers. They will host off road bike festivals and bring in the money. I can't say that I'm shocked the proposal doesn't address Wood Thrushes. Nor am I surprised the planners-for-the-exciting-future don't know Lesser Scaup or Bald Eagles. It is their place, too, and that's why we speak for them.

WINTER AFTERNOON WITH BISON

January 5



Afternoon sunlight illuminates thick wooly fur coats of Bison and the native plants like Indian Grass and *Eryngium leavenworthii* at The Nature Conservancy's Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in northeastern Oklahoma. Tallgrass is on the southern end of the Flinthills prairies that have retained their biological richness because rocks prohibited plowing and because private conservation groups like TNC stepped in to protect and preserve. I was there on Sunday to participate in the Christmas Bird Count. You have to be respectful around Bison; I am. This photograph was taken from the car on the "Bison Loop," an easily driven graded road through the preserve. Great way to see Bison, many interesting bird species, and special plant communities of the Flinthills prairies.

LAKE ATALANTA ICED IN THIS MORNING

January 7



LAKE ATALANTA PARK IN ROGERS was almost totally iced-in this morning, but there were open patches associated with spring runs. Springs flows are impounded to form the lake and later flow into Beaver Lake. These open spring flows are where the birds are in severe weather. They form the heart of reality at Lake Atalanta Park. I saw this resting Snow Goose (blue goose form) along with other ducks today, along spring flows, midst our very big deep freeze. Lake Atalanta Park could be fundamentally degraded by miles of off road mountain bike trails that would coil back and forth on the slopes, alongside spring runs, and even cross the springs without bridging. The history of Rogers and this park are closely associated with springs, major and minor, coming from the hillsides. This provides outstanding habitat for rare Ozark plants, plant communities, and many bird species, including Wood Thrushes, Louisiana Waterthrushes, Kentucky Warblers, Acadian Flycatchers, and others. There is nothing wrong with mountain bikes or those who love this sport – I have owned such a bike myself for years -- but turning Lake Atalanta into a mountain bike park will degrade its natural resources.

JANUARY IS BALD EAGLE MONTH IN ARKANSAS

January 12



This photograph is from Maysville, northwest Arkansas, yesterday, and is of a juvenile Bald Eagle. David Chapman and I tried to do our part during yesterday's birding tour through the former tallgrass prairies – you could call them chicken house prairies if you wanted – of western Benton County. By day's end we'd celebrated at least 103 Bald Eagles. Going back 30 years, we've broken 100 many times, but that said, it never ceases to amaze. I know Baldies are a dime a dozen in Alaska, but here in the Lower 48 we'd pert near killed 'em off. Yesterday, roughly two-thirds were iconic adults, the other one-third carries that awesome black-white-streaked-spotted badge of youth. Those young birds remind me that when the chips were down, thoughtful Americans stepped up to the plate and rejected nesting extinction for Baldies in the Lower 48. Did not exhibit that whipped-as*ed not-sure-it-is-OK-to-feel-this-way behavior that seems to characterize us in too many battles for environmental integrity. Saved these birds.

EASTERN SCREECH-OWL SUN BATHING IN A POST OAK

January 18



The Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip to Rocky Branch Park on Beaver Lake, Saturday January 18, was enlivened by discovery of a red morph Eastern Screech-Owl, sunbathing on a limb of a post oak. It was discovered when a Carolina Chickadee harassed it, including vocalizations described as “weird.” The smallish post oak still held most of its leaves, pretty much the same color as the owl. Screech-Owls often sunbathe in winter, so this was not so unusual. However, what you typically see is an owl in a box or in the entrance hole of a tree cavity. Day light roosting out on a tree limb is pretty unusual. “Out on a tree limb” may be a bit misleading. Everyone wanted to see the owl, but most of us, yours truly included, could not initially pick it out in the intricate pattern of bark and reddish leaves. It wasn’t that high up in the tree, either. Obliging, eyes mostly closed shut, the owl just continued the sun bath, just shifting a bit now and then, presumably to maximize exposure to the sun.

WESTERN SANDPIPER AT CENTERTON

January 22



A wonderful creature weighing in at less than one ounce (26 grams) popped in here on a sunny if very cold winter day. I'm talking about a Western Sandpiper. All the way from the arctic of Siberia or maybe just the bare northwest tip of Alaska . . . to Arkansas . . . 5000 miles or something. Today's Western Sandpiper is loosely associated with Least Sandpipers (2), plus a few Wilson's Snipes and Killdeers at Craig State Fish Hatchery in Centerton. Water is partially frozen. A Gadwall slips sideways walking on the ice. Northern Shovelers with their orange legs slide in to a halt. A few ponds over, 20-30 male greenhead Mallards and a few dun-colored cammo females watch Joan Reynolds and I as we study the sandpiper. We are somewhere in the middle of things. The Westerns that pass through here in migration during spring, are headed way-way north, and in fall, way-way south to the coasts and perhaps into Central America. But then there are those few who don't follow the schedule. They show up in winter elsewhere in Arkansas, but rarely in the Ozarks. Mike Mlodinow and I saw two small shorebirds that could have been Westerns at SWEPCO Lake near Gentry in January and February 2004. We were interested and excited, but could never close the deal. Today is different. We are close and collect photographs in good sunlight. Tickle the mind, expands the universe.

LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH IN WINTER

January 23



MIKE MLODINOW SENT ME an email about a LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH in the spillway area at Lake Fayetteville yesterday. I have just gotten nutty enough that even with the Arctic Vortex bearing down upon us again, I just could barely sleep last night for thought of starting the New Year with one of my all time favorite birds. This is the bird that makes a river a river. It's the bird that makes the Buffalo River June's raging joy. This is also the bird that is supposed to

be way, way south of here in mid-winter, like Central America. NOT Arkansas in January. It was 13 degrees F or less when I got out to Lake Fayetteville this morning. The "felt like" was -2 or less. When I got to the spillway there was one barely moving Killdeer and a Winter Wren in the rocks. My hands, oops, those two blocks of ice, had stopped, not a good sign. But as I turned to go, I spotted Mike's waterthrush in rushing shallow water, framed by the blasted limestone rubble



left over from the 1950s. It bobbed and foraged in slow mo and I focused my scope and collected images, also in slow mo. I know that odd, very-out-of-season records like this tend to stick in the craw of seasoned keepers of bird records. That's why I kept trying for pictures to document. Pardon my odd paraphrase, but this morning it was damn the frozen fingers, full photography ahead.

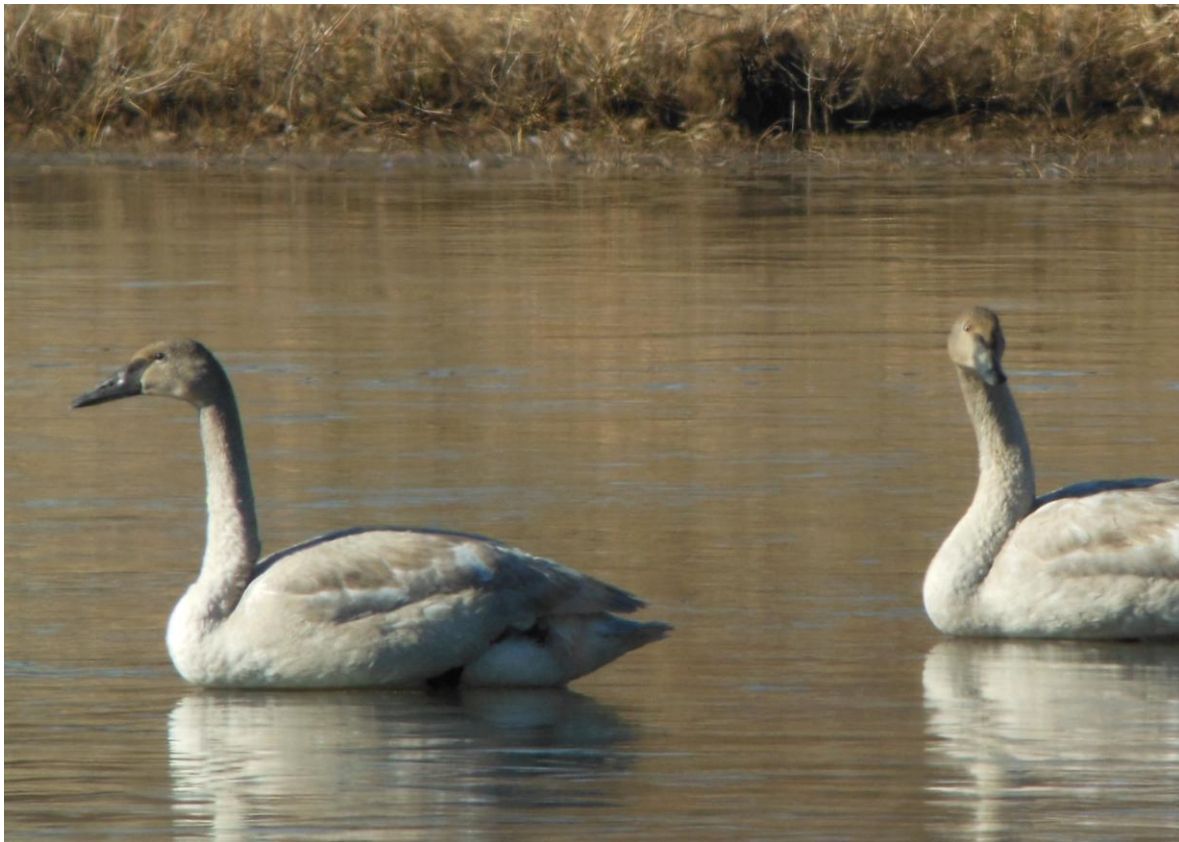
THREE TRUMPETER SWANS ON ICE

January 24



THREE TRUMPETER SWANS that have been in Fayetteville since mid-December are still hanging in here, through snow and zero temps. They were perched on a completely frozen pond today. When I first saw them I feared they were frozen stuck, but then I saw one, then two big webbed feet, and a little movement. Then realized with all that body mass and down feathers, they were probably much warmer than I, in my flimsy coat and gloves. Out there, one world whizzes along on I-

540 in cars and trucks and blaring music. Another rests on the ice, eyes closing in afternoon sunlight, maybe with dreams of a big open marshy pond in Alaska.



LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

January 28



These photographs are from Lake Fayetteville. On a cold winter day an AMERICAN ROBIN and an EASTERN BLUEBIRD are among quite a few birds attracted to a tree top in the sun and to these available berries of Oriental Bittersweet, a widespread non-native invasive species. As in the case of some other imports like kudzu, it has spread far and wide, replacing surrounding native plants. What botanists notice is that it grows rapidly, consuming available sunlight,

covering trees, shading out everything that might otherwise be growing. Like many of you, I was really struck seeing these birds in winter, but my enthusiasm is muted. Oriental Bittersweet is not a “bad” plant. In the right place, in China say, I’m sure it must be “good.” But as they say in real estate, it’s location, location, location. These pictures demonstrate that birds eat the berries in mid-winter. What

isn’t shown is that aggressive non-natives like this displace the native plants with which these birds evolved. This sets off a cascade of negatives. For example, native insects that are part of this ecosystem are also displaced. I do not consider myself some kind of aggressive native plant nazi, but I’m pretty sure in winter, robins and bluebirds would be better served in the long run by the native plants with which they evolved.



EYE TO EYE

January 30



When I find a wild creature like this, be it bird or bumble bee, I wonder what they see. What is the world's shape through their eyes? I have a sense of the world that I myself live in, what it looks like, what it means, but how about them? What is it that they see? What do they notice about us? Do we look like massive Martians arrived from outer space, wearing our winter outdoor attire like green space suits and carrying dangerous-looking high tech out-of-this-world gadgetry, ray guns consisting of binoculars, cameras, and spotting scopes? As they watch us does it seem we have dropped suddenly onto their planet? Or none of this? Or maybe they see something of us we cannot imagine because it is so far out-of-our-world as to be unimaginable as the far corners of the universe? Eye to eye, I see an interesting shorebird, KILLDEER, named for its common vocalization, though in our part of their universe they sound to me more like KEE DEE, with no Ls and no R. So how does Keedee see it? Close up, I see that deep dark eye, that rim of red skin that seems to decorate the depth of that eye. When I walk too close, Keedee moves in an opposite direction. This bird was out on the spillway at Lake Fayetteville, with lots of people, dogs, and bicycles going back and forth across the pedestrian bridge.

THE DAMNED HUMAN RACE REVISITED

February 2



We had a Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip yesterday to Eagle Watch Nature Trail near Gentry. It was NOT a sunny, warm, clear day. It was 100% overcast, with occasional rain of ice pellets, temps around freezing; nary a scrap of blue broke through dense gray. And yet, when it would have been perfectly predictable that the only shows would be the two guilty parties – Terry Stanfill, who manage Eagle Watch, and yours truly, who scheduled for NWAAS – well,

instead there were 20 people, not daunted, not obviously dispirited by the near-frozen mist at 9 AM. Not obviously disappointed by a totally misted-in Eagle Watch, where we got a brief looks at a few low flying ducks (couldn't see well enough for ID), one characteristically silent Killdeer, one low-flying Bald Eagle, and another perched far off. Some of us older people know this drill pretty well, and we are just happy on such a day to be on this side of the grass, even if wet. Our NWAAS President, Doug James was there, with his wife Elizabeth Adam, and Doug's graduate student from India, Anant Deshwhal, and one of Anant's undergraduate biology students, Christopher Barnett, from Siloam Springs. They were undaunted and so were the rest. In fact, Doug was well protected with his Sherlock Holmes deer-slayer cap he got when he was at Cambridge, in Sherlock Holmes territory for sure. We adjourned misted-in Eagle Watch and followed Terry a few miles to a part of the former Round Prairie, where Doug and company eventually counted 53 Bald Eagles flying across the road from a field to roosts in big post oak trees, many close enough to bring forth ooohs and aaahs, even in this land of perpetual drip. As I have gotten older and my horizon inevitably widens towards the edges of defined time, I find myself just amazed in such moments. Yes, it is a lot of eagles and you'd have to be damn near dead not to be moved, but the human spirit and the search for meaning that brings otherwise rationale people out on a cold, soggy, gray Saturday also amazes and gives me hope that we will, at some point in the future, make our peace with the universe that brought us here. Thanks to all of you who braved the day and remained for the grand finale and renewed my hope in what Mark Twain called, for good reason I might add, "the damned human race." I have included a photograph of an American Coot, later in the day, at Moberly Pond, when the light was better. Coots are a preferred food item on the buffet consumed by wintering eagles in Arkansas.

NEWS FLASH!

TUFTED PINK SNOWBIRD SIGHTED AGAIN IN FAYETTEVILLE!

February 2



(Just off our wire.) Our reporter in Fayetteville, Arkansas, a small college town deep in the Ozark Mountains, is reporting presence of a rare Tufted Pink Snowbird, last seen during a snowstorm in 2013, and thought extinct until this morning's sighting!

Bird watchers on Big Years throughout the world are already crowding into Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport on their way to Fayetteville.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED (WITH APOLOGIES TO ROBERT FROST)

February 4



On a day with five inches of snow on the ground, with crystalline flakes sparkling in fresh cold sun and blowing all around, I am reminded that some roads are much better than others. On clear roads with poultry truck traffic you might get very lucky and see something, maybe a fine adult Bald Eagle, all white head and big yellow hook, watching intently from the leafless bough of an ancient post oak. A fine sight, for sure. I expect this mid-winter in northwest Arkansas. But on roads with just a few fresh tire tracks, the roads less traveled, well here resides the unexpected. A flock of 25 grass-streaky Savannah Sparrows energetically extract tiny seeds on heads of autumn-colored weeds emergent from snow, soon joined by a dozen American Goldfinches. It may be the wind-swept Dakotas. It may be Benton County, Arkansas. There's time and space to roam. Cattle farmers were out yesterday spreading last fall's hay crop on snow. Where cows gather, so too is the crystalline churned, ground exposed, with generous dollops of fresh, seed-rich patties available for all who chose to dine. Just like back in the old bison days, bovines set table on the snow-covered prairie. I am stopped at such a feedlot along a less well-traveled road just northeast of Chesney Prairie Natural Area. At least 60 meadowlarks of both species, maybe 100, work patties, sustained in snow-covered fields by these seeds, feathers puffed-out against cold, long grayish/bluish bills brown for their effort in cow pies.

RUSTY BLACKBIRDS IN THE SPRING RUNS

February 5



Song Sparrows are common in winter here in big fields of dense grass and weeds. But our grassy expanses are now snow fields. They work tufts of grass in open ground between snow and a spring run at Lake Atalanta Park in Rogers. I imagine this is a very tough time for them. Today started with more snow, though it didn't last long. Everything is already covered. By contrast, the spring is around 55 degrees when it emerges from underground. Think of it as Florida meets North Dakota. A special habitat of relative moderation is created. As a result, grass and weeds along the spring are only modestly frozen. Hopefully there are still seeds and maybe aquatic insects associated with spring runs. I also saw a flock of Rusty Blackbirds, all the way for Boreal forests, American Pipits and Yellow-rumped Warblers, walking and looking for food in the water cress that grows in the spring. They were also busy in the bare ground kept open by naturally elevated temperatures. This is part of what makes so special these spring hollows in the Ozarks. Personally, I was heavily dressed but still freezing just watching them. These birds may survive an extended spell of severe weather just because of springs that naturally moderate the killing knife edge of this winter's unexpected arctic-in-the-Ozarks. It was around 15 degrees when I took the photograph this afternoon. They were still at it when I retreated to my car and its heater.

WELCOME Y'ALL FROM ALPS-OF-THE-OZARKS

February 7



Good news: main roads, including highway 71/College Avenue near me, and I-540, are safe for travel. Bad news: my street is an ice rink. Looks like I'm atop Mt Hood in the Cascades. Snow bound and heavy with cabin fever, I had many reasons to be pleased when yesterday David Chapman invited me up to his place near Lake Fayetteville, to stand in his dining room, for a Spotted Towhee, American Tree Sparrow, and 3 or 4 of the reddest "Red" Fox Sparrows, all on the warm side of a clean plate glass double door. David and Ruth have turned a once typical expanse of suburban backyard, plain lawn and scattered trees, into a complex warren of bushes, rocks, secrets, spaces to hide, places out of view -- and maybe away from prying cats or Cooper's Hawks. My impression is that the "Hoover Effect" is in play in the Chapman back yard. That is, in this cycle of perpetual cold-snow-ice, ole Chapman has Hoovered up the "good birds" from the nearby fields of Lake Fayetteville. To quote Ross Perot, you can just hear that "giant sucking sound" of birds drawn to a yard well stocked with food and habitat niches.

WINTER OASIS IN THE OZARKS

February 8



GOLDEN-CROWNED and RUBY-CROWNED KINGLETS wintering in northwest Arkansas may eat a small amount of vegetable matter, but their diet is overwhelmingly a variety of small-bodied insects, spiders, etc and their eggs. I was watching them at Lake Atlanta Park in Rogers today. With the park and most of the lake frozen and snow-covered, we are not, to put it mildly, in the middle of warm-weather insect-time. Lake Atalanta is an impoundment of several large springs that join in the

park to form Prairie Creek. Water gushes from the ground at something like 55 degrees. They are hunting along relatively balmy flowing spring runs. It is smoky when that relatively warm water emerges from underground and hits frozen air. Books like CAVE LIFE OF OKLAHOMA AND ARKANSAS (2013) amply documents the complex web of small bodied creatures associated with springs. It is here in a kind of oasis that kinglets survive extreme winter weather like we have experienced in the past few weeks. Think of the food web. Warm springs allow aquatic vegetation like algae and water cress to flourish even in winter. Plants nourish a community of small-bodied insects. These provide food and shelter for small-bodied insects eaten by darters, or in the present case, kinglets. Besides both kinglet species, today's consumers in the winter oasis included Song, Swamp, and Lincoln's Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Carolina Wrens, Hermit Thrush, American Pipit, Eastern Bluebirds, American Robins, and Rusty Blackbirds. A tough time to be a wild creature, but at least modestly festive in the food rich spring runs at Lake Atalanta.



GULLS ON ICE

February 10



Down by the marina at the Prairie Creek area on Beaver Lake, just east of Rogers, gulls are standing on ice. With just a little bit of water splashed up on the ice shelf, most Ring-billed Gulls have heads tucked, yellow legs and feet oblivious in the freeze. In this mirror

of ice the scene is dominated by their primary flight feathers, a brilliant, natural, art deco reflection of jet black field with brilliant white spots. And juxtaposed one with another, spaced at odd angles, where birds have come to rest.

And standing over all, His Towering Lordship With Official Pink Legs of Majesty, a Herring Gull.



FEBRUARY THAW ON OUR CHICKEN HOUSE PRAIRIES

February 12



Yesterday afternoon was so bright I needed sunglasses and so relatively warm I had my coat off. The day felt promising, first in weeks. Big, open former prairie fields with their chicken houses looked less like the menacing ice-snow frigidity of our past three weeks, more like crystalline white beaches of Destin, Florida. That is, 32 degrees as good as 60. Brewer's Blackbirds were in the well-trod feed lots, with hay, cow pies, melting snow, and White-crowned Sparrows singing WE WE ZEE ZEE. Snow has thinned everywhere, with poking up clumps of grass and cow pies. Big bluestem grass has lost its turkey foot of seeds, spread now to remake a future. Up northwest of Gentry I revisited mounded former prairie fields where there were 53 Bald Eagles on February 1. Today I saw 6, including a juvenile enjoying the sun, perched close to the road and not particularly in awe of me in my car. Massive bill upturned to the vast blue, dark chocolate feathers of its neck and head a bit ruffed, its body an immaculate tawny-rufous, like it owned the place. The February thaw is on, but I suspect the cows, which now have their fields back, wonder why ponds are still frozen? I'll second that, horses say.

WOODCOCKS AT THE FIRST STAR

February 16



Around 40 folks, including Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society members, Dr Doug James and his ornithology students, Dr David Krementz and his graduate students in the Arkansas Coop Unit, and others met last night at 5:30 PM in the Illinois River valley, opposite big sandstone bluffs. It was time for the annual American Woodcock field trip to the Wedington Small Game Area in the Ozark Natural Forest near Siloam Springs. Clad in his green buffalo plaid hunting jacket, Dr Krementz uses woodcock feathers, a skull, and a career devoted to wildlife research, habitat management, and hunting to explain lifeways, times, and ecological needs of woodcocks. We hear coyotes as daylight slips, then a Barred Owl. Krementz explains we might have dancing at the first star. That said, I don't think people drive down a rough woods road just because of a certain bird. Yes, a quiet outback with promise for woodcock dancing is intriguing. But why stand in the gathering dark? Why bother to hope? In 2014, on certain February evenings, hungers drive us down back roads that can't be satiated by woodcock dancing on YouTube. We want real, we want dance, the hieroglyph for life. So out at the end of that muddy road there is a big moon, a first star, and that first rasp of a PEENT, then PEENT, and then above us, two males in wild twisting chase, cackling!

WHAT DO WE WANT TO BE HERE? A PUBLIC MEDITATION ON THE FUTURE OF LAKE FAYETTEVILLE PARK

February 21



That's my question for the Botanical Garden of the Ozarks, Mountain Bike riders, and the City of Fayetteville.

The Garden could have been built midst the web of concrete and powerlines along I-540, but a natural setting at Lake Fayetteville Park was preferred.

If the energetic Mountain Bike riders just needed miles of trails to stay fit, they could unload and ride endless loops in vast parking lots.

There would be no conflict among users except for one thing: Nature is increasingly limited. Conflict over how to divvy up that last bit of Nature grows sharper. Part of this sharpening discussion involves supposed rights.

The Garden does not require a developed shoreline in order to meet growth targets. Mountain Bike riders have the rest of this park, plus a lengthening system of trails on Mt Sequoyah Park and Kessler Mountain.

As for who is "first": Wood Ducks, Snow Geese, Pied-billed Grebes, Trumpeter Swans, water turtles, and wintering Bald Eagles were an established reality and treasured by many park visitors since the beginning, long before Garden, trail, and any claimed inalienable right to preferred use of public land.

Each of the various user groups want their preferred activity in a natural setting. So in advocating for a realistic wildlife buffer along the lake shore line, the point is to protect what is fundamentally attractive about the park.

Both the Garden and the Mountain Bike trails could have been built right on I-540, but weren't, because they want Nature. So now it is time for the City to step up and exercise its own right to protect what makes the park attractive.

TEA KETTLE TELEGRAPH

February 23



TEA KETTLE TEA KETTLE TEA KETTLE. It's the TEA KETTLE telegraph and it seems to go 'round the world. With the outbreak of warm weather, daffodils are 4 inches high and I'm hearing Carolina Wrens singing throaty, answering TEA KETTLES from somewhere, from far away. A Carolina Wren suddenly pops out on a bare twig, points that long bill upwards and returns with its own hearty TEA KETTLE! In and out of my brush piles, hanging off the suet feeder, flying up under my overturned canoe, carrying twigs above the light in my carport. We have not always been so wealthy. Back in the 1970s, for example, we had almost none. That is TEA KETTLE was rare. We had a run of very cold winters and local numbers of Carolina Wrens went almost to zero. Not zero because they migrated, either. Our wrens need their spiders and insects. Fortunately, a few seem to have survived where there are natural springs that remain open and flowing even during deep freezes and snow cover. With their relatively stable warm temperatures, springs provide the emergency food bank. Subsequently, and with generally warming temperatures, wrens numbers have soared. Just listen to the evidence: TEA KETTLES overtaking oncoming spring.

IN WELL-PROTECTED DARK NOOKS

February 24



These Black Vultures perched together yesterday atop a big snag at Hobbs State Park. David Oakley, Mitchell Pruitt, and I were tramping around looking at some flowering American Hazelnut shrubs Joan Reynolds had told me about. The vultures watched us, but they didn't fly, and at one point even touched bills, perhaps an example of allopreening. Typically they don't allow close approach by humans even near a feast involving a well-rotted deer carcass. I feel pretty sure something important is up seeing them perching tight. Behind them: limestone bluffs with plenty of dark nooks protected by loose rock, thorny greenbriars, and dense tangles of poison ivy. This reminds me of a spot below South Twin Mountain in the Ozark National Forest where on a February 27 a few years ago I saw a Black Vulture nest already with two eggs. So spring may have already begun for hazelnuts and vultures. They pair for life and spend a lot of time together all during the year, only taking a new partner if one dies. Maybe they have a nest up there behind, in those well-protected dark nooks.

OPOSSUM

February 25



This Opossum was in the Illinois River bottomland forests of the Ozark National Forest at Wedington, west of Fayetteville, this morning. It was walking along when Mitchell Pruitt and I first spotted it, then climbed this tree to wait us out. This is in the Wedington Small Game Management Area where we always go to see woodcocks.

HAZELNUTS IN FLOWER

February 26



I always thought my mother Hazel may have been named for the color of her eyes, but then again, her folks were country people from the Ouachita Mountains, and they may actually have been thinking of that shrub that grows in rich, moist soils along streams, like witch hazel. I'd stuck to eye color until a couple of years ago when Joan Reynolds mentioned hazelnuts growing around Lake Atalanta in Rogers. In many years of tramping around rich moist places along streams, I'd never known anything that I recognized as hazelnuts. City-wise, knowledgeable about birds and fossils, I still nevertheless had to get into my 60s before I knew hazelnut. After Joan's introductions, I can now spot them. Maybe those Kennedys of my mom's family knew these shrubs from Lick Creek Valley deep in the Ouachitas. I guess this is something I'll never know, but hazelnuts are blooming right now. Here is a picture of a tiny magenta-colored female flower. Long and pendulous, male catkins on the same plants are easy to spot at distance, making the shrub a standout in our still winter-looking woods.

ALDERS ALONG MILL CREEK

February 27



During a winter low water creek walk years ago, I encountered a flock of 40 Pine Siskins hungrily working alder shrub cones for tiny seeds. I was thinking about this yesterday: sky blue, air cold, but warming: long icicles dripping from the shale lips of waterfalls along Mill Creek, just north of Combs in Madison County. Alders forming thickets along Mill Creek with witch hazel. Long smooth limbs and distinctive bundles of small cones – the alders. So yesterday, only 22 days shy of official spring, it was fragrant thickets of witch hazel and alders, and scattered hazelnuts, in the valley of a rushing mountain stream, along the first few miles to White Rock Mountain. On the alders, pendulous clusters of male catkins; nearby, stubby, reddish female flowers that will become cones. Then later, those skyscraping, heart-stopping bluffs forming White Rock, that incomparable Boston Mountains panorama of forested hills and deep valleys falling away in all directions, plus a few Turkey Vultures BELOW in no-flap soars. On the way back to Fayetteville through Bidville, a home composed like a symphony of local native stone, with artistic flourishes of shiny ocean abalone shells and prairie sunflowers petals rendered perfectly in sandstone. And if that isn't wisdom enough to underline a visit in the ancient Bostons: a Barred Owl, perched on a low straight oak limb, framing White Rock Mountain.

WOODCOCKS ON KESSLER MOUNTAIN

March 1



This migrating AMERICAN WOODCOCK is one of three I saw atop Kessler Mountain in Fayetteville this morning. It flew only a short distance, settled, turned just enough to track me with huge, see-in-all-directions eyes. It is all but invisible among big trees, bluffs of limestone and sandstone, rotting logs on the ground, and especially leaves of every size, shape, and color. Its feathers mimic the landscape, as nature intended. I knew where to aim the camera only because I'd followed its flight. Now it is easy to see because this picture is zoomed in. The woodcocks had stopped in the forests atop Kessler, in what will soon be a park. It wasn't far from one of the best known spots, Rock City, named for the maze of moss and fossil-covered limestone and sandstone through which the trail winds. Much of soon-to-be park is a pure celebration of Ozark rock life, 300 million year old consolidations of ancient rivers, sandy and muddy, worn down ceaselessly, and in 2014 overlain by a thin tissue of fragility, including this woodcock, shagbark hickories, chestnut oaks, emerald green mosses, and today, a few hikers, like me, exploring and amazed.

LAKE ATALANTA PARK SPRINGS OPEN FOR BUSINESS!

March 3



YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLERS (8) and American Pipits (10) were picking small winged insects from atop the ice and snow at Lake Atalanta Park in Rogers today. Joan Reynolds identified the most common ones as small flies called midges. Except for springs that flow into the lake, all the land was snow covered and human endeavors in northwest Arkansas

mostly cancelled, except for bird watching. Also in or alongside the flowing springs: Rusty Blackbirds (15), Eastern Phoebe (1), Song Sparrows (3), Wilson's Snipe (1), Carolina Wren (1), Killdeer (8), American Robin (12), Great Blue Heron (1; all decked out with fancy feathers for the nesting season). It took a while to catch on, but finally we noticed the yellow-rumps and pipits walking and fly-catching right on the snow. Then we saw all of the small insects. The phoebe was quick on the drawn and low to the water, fly-catching emerging midges. After we figured out the midges, we noticed a bunch more tiny insects in the spring. This may explain why we were seeing small fish, in big schools, leaping from the water. A Belted Kingfisher was taking note, too, grabbing fish in expert shallow dives right into the spring run. Food rich and weather-baffling, springs provide lifelines. When everything else freezes shut, springs are OPEN FOR BUSINESS!



THE KESSLER LIMESTONE

March 8



Today is all about life in the here and now AND the way, way back, the geological past. I walked through forests, atop ancient beaches, observed remains of small marine animals native to coral reefs. First bird out of the car was a Pileated Woodpecker, whooping it up in the deep woods atop Kessler Mountain in Fayetteville. I heard 3-4 Pileateds during a couple of hours of walking trails. They'd whittled one dead tree down to a thick toothpick with a big pile of chips below. That was the 2014 part. The trail starts on Kessler's crest at around 1800 feet in elevation, a place of big trees and awe-inspiring rocks. There are sandstone blocks along here geologists think may have been deposited as beaches or barrier islands, maybe 320 million years ago. Even older is the Kessler Limestone Member, exposed just below the crest. You walk on limestone deposited more than 320 million years ago in an ocean. Evidence: the Kessler Limestone is composed of all kinds of small marine animals. Their relatives are alive in seas today. One of the obvious fossils looks roughly like a fan with many small holes in it. This is a lacy bryozoan that lived in colonies as part of an ancient reef, just like corals. And beyond that, and now returning closer to the present, the stump of a tree that must have been cut 60 years ago. Like those marine fossils, it has a different function in 2014. From lofty tree, it is now the welcoming home of moss and lichens. Its center nurtures small green leaves of a flower native to these hills, dittany. My take away for today: time travel happens at unexpected times, requires no space age technology. Here is a fossil rock from the Kessler Limestone, today.

SOUNDS A LOT LIKE SPRING

March 9



AFTER THE ICE, after the snow, after the rain, today the melt. There's water in the shallows and Woolsey Wet Prairie sounds a lot like spring, what with the chorus frogs and a flock of 12 immaculate Green-wing Teals, back in a shallow weedy pool. Most conspicuous today, in melt and sun, male Red-winged Blackbirds. They've taken charge of small trees above buttonbushes with last year's nests. From these perches it is CHUCK-CHUCK-CHUCK calls all around. Then songs, WERE KU WEEEE! projected at

the neighbor, or maybe just for the good of this old world in general. Blackbird renewal it is, from pool to shining pool, every shallow with its singer, making earth ready for spring. Later, I was watching through my spotting scope and noticed first a few, then at least 18, Rusty Blackbirds, bathing in a shallow puddle. They are heading north, to the wet Boreal forests, where they will nest. Here are two pictures: a singing male Red-winged Blackbird and a male Rusty Blackbird, in grassy shallows, both this afternoon at Woolsey.



ROBINS IN THE BLACK

March 10



Part of Chesney Prairie Natural Area near Siloam Springs is in the black because of a prescribed burn in February. Burning is what keeps a prairie a prairie. I was curious to see who all was out there getting a living. Best Vocals awarded to Killdeer, with 3 of them in constant chasing and KEEDEE KEEDEEing and occasionally walking midst the blackened bases of burned grasses. American Robins (60) were well distributed over the 24 burned acres, like a specialized, black, private lawn. They perch up in that posture of alert, cock that black head, run a few steps among the stems of last year's sunflowers, and go for worms. Also: Loggerhead Shrike (1), Northern Flicker (2), Brown-headed Cowbird (54), Wilson's Snipe (7), American Pipit (1), Eastern Meadowlark (2). With rising temperatures and lots of sunshine, it was also the Big Sing for White-crowned Sparrows up near the parking area.

WOOLSEY AFTER DARK

March 12



Last night, Dr JD Willson at UA-Fayetteville and his PhD student Jackie Guzy allowed Mitchell Pruitt and I along on one of their herptile research expeditions, after dark, on a big wade through Woolsey. Turns out, I knew only diurnal Woolsey: the birds of daytime: UPLAND SANDPIPERS in spring. DICKCISSELS nesting in summer. The big fall rush of SONG and SWAMP SPARROWS. That black warrior, HARLAN'S HAWK, spending winter. All faithful descriptions of Woolsey Wet Prairie in Fayetteville, seasonal wetland prairie-in-restoration. I've enjoyed all of these birds . . . in the day light. Case closed: Woolsey is a great place. I thought I knew it well . . . until last night. First fascinating creature in the headlamps: Osage Burrowing Crawfish, tail full of young'ns. The reddish body and heavy blue pinchers are familiar. I've seen a fair number of dead ones in daylight, victims I suppose of raccoons and herons. But we saw at least 25 very alive ones, going about the business of sending young into the future, making a wetland a wetland.

THE LONG-TAILED DUCK OF MONTE NE

March 14



Mike Martin sent me a facebook message yesterday with an astounding photograph of a male Long-tailed Duck he has been seeing for about a week on the Monte Ne arm of Beaver Lake near Rogers. Denizen of the arctic, flown here from some distant northern tundra or taiga. A male with a real tail to tell it with (apologies to Ferlinghetti). I couldn't sleep last night just thinking about Monte Ne. I could hear the wind beating on my porch chimes and just knew it would be too choppy to see anything on the lake. I looked at the calendar and knew the bird wouldn't be here long. Rolled over wide awake at 3 AM thinking about Beaver Lake's 32,000 acres and a single immaculate duck . . . somewhere. Who says bird watching isn't heavy lifting by another name? Today Joan Reynolds and I were supposedly heading out to spring wildflowers. She graciously passed up trout lilies for the unknowns. Then she spotted the duck. Like the Little Rock bird, Monte Ne's is complete with 2-tone pink-black bill, bright yellow eye, white head, buff between bill and eye, big black spot on the neck, black and white avocet-like body. And that tail! In one foraging dive I could see just the last inch or so of white feathers and the 2 black streamers curling out of the water like a fountain. Maybe we have a Long-tailed Duck because the fishing is good. Not every dive was successful, but it caught and handled several small, silvery, flat shad-like fish and maybe also a crayfish. Here's the Monte Ne bird today.

WHITE TROUT LILIES PUSH UP THROUGH WORTHLESS ROUGH

March 15



WHITE TROUT LILIES ARE BLOOMING today along Tilly Willy Road, Fayetteville. Where nuthatches sing. Just beyond known, where Pileated Woodpeckers call, unseen. Where chipmunks contemplate the civilized debris of last year's acorns. Where the land is not good for anything . . . Trout lilies push up before the baby leaves on oaks, when salamanders move. Push up in the worthless rough where it is good sandstone, where lichens and mosses range. Where ground is fertile in spring peppers. Trout lilies push up through the oak and hickory mold and the old trees, who receive. Where clouds disperse and reform a south breeze, with sun. Where river bottoms are full of wild turkeys, heads blue and red. Along hillsides with Tufted Titmice, in full song.

CAVE SALAMANDER TAKES OWNERRSHIP

March 16



THIS CAVE SALAMANDER was at the edge of a shallow cave in the Ozark National Forest at Wedington, west of Fayetteville. Significant rainfall was coming in as Mitchell Pruitt and I arrived last night just after dark. When the supposedly known world turns wet and dark, most of us -- including yours truly -- crouch in default mode; that is, waiting under umbrellas and rain coats for sunshine. But not so for salamander scientists and aficionados who with bated breath await these big early spring rains. It is then they and their brethren in the vast tribe of the amphibians take ownership of the earth. Their lineage goes back to First Days when their relatives crawled from primordial waters, breathed air, staked claim to the earth. They did so last night, again. Besides Cave Salamander, we also saw Ozark Zigzag Salamander. At one spot we couldn't hear one another talking because of the volume of a Spring Peeper chorus in a small pond. The Forest Service road was covered -- and I do mean covered -- by spectacular Spotted Salamanders, all gold and black, headed for the pond.

MAYBE THE ARCTIC HAS FINALLY ARRIVED

March 16



What with our big snowy landscape today, this ROSS'S GOOSE may have thought things were looking up, like the central Canadian Arctic had finally arrived in to northwest Arkansas. But nope, it was Lake Atalanta Park in Rogers. Rain turned to cold, then ice, then big fluffy wind-driven snowflakes. A modest whitening of a landscape, now covered with daffodils and first wildflowers, doesn't signify return to winter. We are decidedly on the track to spring in the Ozarks. That said, maybe our immaculate visitor has taken note of what Aldo Leopold termed "goose music." While I was watching today it shared some high-pitched KWAK KWAKs. I couldn't tell to whom this might be addressed, but I have been hearing migrating geese. Flocks pass over and in the act of filling our skies broadcast visions and memories of faraway places, and events timeless, like a new nesting season in the Arctic.

LIFE GOES ON IN THE BIG PINE

March 18



In May 2003, loggers working on the Ouachita National Forest near Waldron cut a big pine. With the log on the ground, they began lopping it into sections. Suddenly, in the entrance of an old woodpecker cavity were two young birds, spiky reddish crown feathers and all, apparently unharmed, seemingly curious about new circumstances, especially, I assume, a world gone from vertical to suddenly horizontal. I

got to thinking about this today while a male Pileated Woodpecker was industriously excavating what I assume will soon be a nest cavity in a big still vertical snag along the shoreline of Beaver Lake at Monte Ne. It must already be spacious inside, because we couldn't always see him. Then every once in a while he would come to the entrance, push out woodchips, look around, then disappear back to his work. I appreciate his industry. And I appreciate the decency of those loggers back in 2003. They took the nestling woodpeckers home, strapped the section vertical on a tree in a cage, and hand reared them until it was time to fly.



NOBODY KNOWS SPRING LIKE BLUE-WINGED TEAL

March 23



BLUE-WINGED TEAL: jewelry store with feathers coming to a pond near year. Yesterday I was in the Arkansas River valley country near Alma and Dyer, including Frog Bayou WMA. Ponds large and small were full of ducks, especially flocks large and small of Blue-winged Teal. You don't need a road sign like Nesting Just Ahead to see what's happening. Many a winter-dreary, cow-tired farm pond is now gussied-up by russets and blues and constant peeping with the males and the females jockeying for position that will shape teal world of the future. Like wealthy Americans everywhere, they avoided serious winter by flying way south last fall, many of them straight across the Gulf of Mexico, including on down into South America. Now they're headed back. They don't return until its safe for daffodils in the yard, and for them, no ice in the ponds. They will pass through for a month or so, at least well into April, then most continue north for nesting across the Great Plains, all the way up through Canada and Alaska. Bottom line: nobody knows spring like Blue-winged Teal. In this photograph, males with a female on the right.

GREAT EGRET WITH NUPTIAL FEATHERS

March 24



This Great Egret was one of five I saw yesterday near the Arkansas River. It carries a wonderful history. A big white bird against a field of green is imposing enough, but how about that pink bustle of long feathers! These signify the onset of the season's important nuptial business. A century ago gunners were out shooting egrets, killing to near extinction, just for nuptial feathers, worth their weight in gold, sold for elegant

designer hats and costumes of wealthy women. Some of those women also recognized the wrong in this, rose up, protested, and stopped the slaughter. Great Egrets and hundreds of other bird species have survived, protected by laws passed at the insistence of these angry women. Otherwise, and without them, there would have been no Great Egrets in the Valley yesterday. Without them and their angry demands, Great Egrets would be just another Passenger Pigeon, another Carolina Parakeet, driven to extinction for transitory human economic gain. How about that impressive green between the base of the bill and surrounding the eye (lore and eye ring)? The eye itself is sooo impressive, gold iris set off with an ebony pupil.

TUFTED PINK SNOWBIRD AMONG DAFFODILS

March 25



Some of you may remember the Tufted Pink Snowbird first sighted in Fayetteville December 7, 2013, and a second time on February 2, 2014. In each case, it perched in a field of snow, with snow accumulating on its back and head. Now it's back, but this time without snow, and perched instead in a field of heirloom Carlton daffodils. Birds know things we don't know. Maybe that was the attraction all along? These old daffodils came when my house was two rooms perched on field stones, with a spring and a privy. That was back in the 1920s. Those folks planted what is now termed the world's most numerous daffodil and one of the best – are you ready for a truly wonderful word --“perennializers.” It has indeed perennialized: even when the old houses are long gone, pioneer country all over the Ozarks is memorialized by these perennializers, cheerful rows along what once was the path to the front door or garden, just like in my yard. It is no matter that I am surrounded by an expanding, noisy, rushed city. These daffodils, not to mention the Tufted Pink Snowbird among them, mark the place, keeping faith with an expansive view of time.