



Bird Calls

Newsletter of the Bastrop County Audubon Society

February 2006

SKY ISLANDS: The Chiricahua Mountains

William B. Montgomery
Margie Crisp

Tuesday, February 21
7:30 P.M.

The Chiricahua Mountains of Southeastern Arizona are a massive “sky island,” a forested mountain range surrounded by arid high desert. They combine breathtaking scenery with opportunities for seeing rare & unique species of birds, reptiles and mammals. The habitats in the Chiricahuas range from Chihuahuan Desert at the base of the range to the forests of Englemann spruce and alpine fir at the summit of Chiricahua Peak, nearly 6000 feet higher at 9795 feet. Canyons carved out of the striking pink granite protect permanent streams and lush riparian habitats. The diversity of habitats and the range’s proximity to Mexico mean that a wide variety of bird, animal and plant life found nowhere else in the United States can be seen here.

The presentation will begin with a slide show by artist, photographer and herpetologist William B. Montgomery chronicling the extraordinary scenery



Portrait of a Texas Horned Lizard. Etching by William B. Montgomery

and diverse habitats of the Chiricahua Mountains and surrounding desert. Following the slide presentation, Margie Crisp will give a birder’s highlights tour of the unique and entertaining bird life found in the Chiricahuas.

Everyone is invited to join BCAS board members and the speakers for dinner before the meeting. We will meet at 6 P.M. at El Nuevo Mexico on Old Austin Highway, behind the HEB.

Bastrop County Audubon Society meetings are held the third Tuesday of the month (except July & August) in the Long Community Room of the First National Bank of Bastrop, 1020 Main Street, Bastrop.

Everyone is invited to stay for refreshments after the program.

BCAS CALENDAR OF EVENTS



FEBRUARY 2006

February 19 – Board Meeting at the Bastrop home of Sue & Stew Brubaker, 4 PM with potluck dinner following, 303-0440

MARCH 2006

March 19 – Board Meeting at the Bastrop home of Barbara & Jerry Harp, 4 PM with potluck dinner following, 581-0835

March 21 – Chapter Meeting: Costa Rica by Dr. David Mitchell

APRIL 2006

April 16 – Board Meeting TBA

April 18 – Chapter Meeting: TBA

April 22 – Field Trip to Fort Hood to view Golden-cheeked Warblers and Black-capped Vireos. Contact Alan Jaeger 308-1991 for meeting time & place.

Other local events of interest:

Saturday April 8 – Texas Parks & Wildlife Department Wildlife Management Extravaganza. Smithville 2-8 PM

Saturday April 29 – Yesterfest, Bastrop

Visit our Web site for updates and additional information on field trips, BCAS events, and other events of interest.

www.bastropcountyaudubon.org



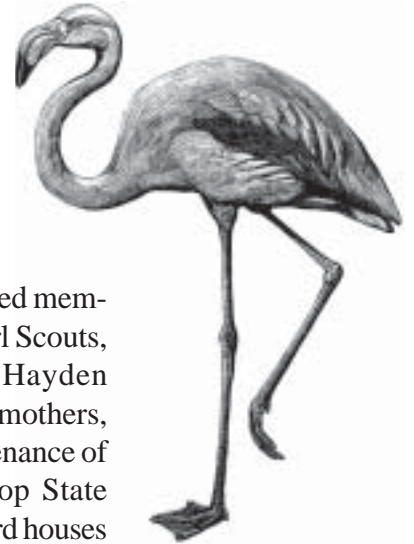
Bird Calls is published by the Bastrop County Audubon Society. Submit information to:

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E-mail: Tiliqua2@earthlink.net or (512) 281-5667

President's Message

by Priscilla Jarvis
BCAS President



In December, dedicated members of the BCAS and Girl Scouts, Caitlyn Goodwin and Hayden Higginbotham, and their mothers, met for our annual maintenance of the birdhouses in Bastrop State Park. One of these bluebird houses

contained an abandoned nest (with 3 eggs) covered with another nest. Caitlyn and Hayden are working to earn the Cadette Girl Scouts highest award for girls 11 to 14: the Cadette Silver Award. These two young women oversaw the construction and installation of 12 bluebird houses in Bastrop and Buescher State Parks. We are proud of Caitlyn and Hayden.

In January, another team of dedicated BCAS members went to Bob Bryant Park to maintain the five birdhouses there, one of which contained a nest. THANKS to all the BCAS members and the Girl Scouts who participated in these important conservation efforts.

BCAS members are pleased to be working with Casey Schultz, an Eagle Scout candidate, and Todd McClanahan, Bastrop State Park Ranger, to construct a wildlife and bird viewing blind which will also serve as a Houston toad monitoring station in Bastrop State Park. We are in the initial planning stages and seeking approval for this project. We are very enthusiastic about this project and would like to see more members become involved. Our working with youth in conservation projects is very important and your help is needed. Please let me know at 281-2762 or pjflamingo@flash.net if you want to join the team.

On another note, I made a batch of the Marvel-Meal highlighted in our last *Bird Calls*. The birds seem to like it even better than the plain peanut butter and corn meal mixture I previously used. A male cardinal was very entertaining to watch as he continually ate, coating his beak with the M-M. He would stop after a bit, hop to a branch to clean his beak, and then return to the log feeder to have another go at it. Ah, bird watching can be so much fun!



The Ultimate Oxymoron: Outwitting Squirrels!

By BCAS member Lee Graham

Ah yes, squirrels. Rats in cuter outfits. The bane of every bird lover's existence.

No, I am not a fan of the crafty varmints. I find it hard to believe that at one time, when I lived in the "big city", I actually thought they were adorable little creatures. Now that I'm a country gal, bird fanatic, and tomato grower, I find them infuriating, exasperating, and a real nightmare.

I guess it was about seven or eight years ago I declared war on the squirrels. Especially on one in particular, Einstein, the most brilliant rodent ever to empty a bird feeder. To this day, I am convinced he had an IQ higher than mine.

Or maybe we should have called him Arnold Einstein, because he was a Schwarzenegger of squirrels—big, brawny, and brazen. Brains and brawn. A wicked combination in a squirrel.

I remember watching with disgust one cold winter's day as Arnold Einstein shoveled at least half a pound of Marvel-Meal down his gluttonous gullet as fast as his burly little arm could shovel. He stared at me with his defiantly beady eyes, and I stared back, Clint Eastwood style, vowing revenge. As the fully satiated scoundrel waddled back to his comfy squirrel's nest for a nice long nap, I knew war was officially declared.

Little did I know that my attempts at outsmarting a squirrel like Einstein would end up becoming a series of disastrous lessons in futility. My feeble attempts were foiled again and again. However, fellow Auduboner, if you are also waging war against your rascally rodents, here are a few almost completely useless strategies that can help in the battle. But be forewarned—you are about to embark upon the most hopelessly futile task of your life—outwitting the squirrels.

Useless Strategy # 1: (This is an obvious one). Always use a squirrel baffle over your hanging feeders or underneath your pole-mounted feeders. Choose the widest and most menacing ones you can find. The smaller, wimpier

ones just can't accomplish the job. We own an assortment of gargantuan types—all of them work quite well.

Enormous baffles are available at many stores that carry wild bird paraphernalia, and online from the Duncraft catalog and other sources. Not only do they make your feeders more squirrel-resistant, but they also help to keep your seed dry and less prone to spoilage.

Useless Strategy # 2: Use a window feeder for your sunflower seed or Marvel-Meal (the peanut butter/cornmeal mixture I wrote about in the January *Bird Calls*). Window feeders make great delivery systems for the tasty concoction.

Window feeders are small, clear plastic boxes that attach to windows via suction cups. They range in size from about 3½ to 7 inches or so, and range in price from about \$7.00 to \$15.00. They are available at Wild Birds Unlimited, Duncraft, and other sources.

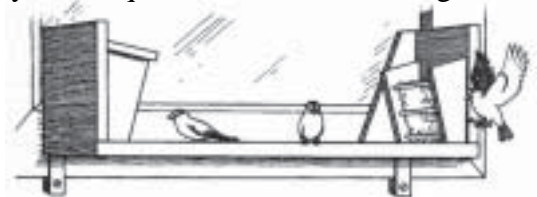
My mother has successfully foiled her squirrels by attaching a window feeder onto a glass patio door and filling it with Marvel-Meal. She keeps her Bewick's and Carolina Wrens

very happy this way. Another benefit of a small window feeder is it prevents the larger, more aggressive birds like Blue Jays from scarfing down all of your Marvel-Meal.

Useless Strategy # 3: Construct a window ledge feeder—another one of my mother's tricks. This is simply a wooden plank attached under her kitchen window, held in place by several metal L-shaped brackets. Every day, she places small amounts of Marvel-Meal on the ledge, and with the exception of one intrepid Einstein of her own, her morbidly obese squirrels can't reach the ledge.



“If you are waging war against your rascally rodents, here are a few almost completely useless strategies that can help in the battle. But be forewarned—you are about to embark upon the most hopelessly futile task of your life—outwitting the squirrels.”



Outwitting the Squirrels, continued

Useless Strategy # 4: The quickest and easiest seed solution of them all—use safflower instead of sunflower seed in your feeders.

Safflower seed. Good eats for the birds; anathema for the squirrels. A great solution with some serious drawbacks.

To begin with, it would be easier to find another Blue-footed Booby on Lake Bastrop than to buy safflower seed in Bastrop County. Where it is available, it is usually sold out, or I find myself buying the last remaining bag. All of us squirrel foes must be competing with each other for the scarce seed.

In addition to that, it's expensive. At the Tractor Supply, black oil sunflower seed is a wonderfully inexpensive \$0.28/pound, basic birdseed mix is an even cheaper \$0.25/pound, and safflower seed is a whopping \$0.71/pound!

One more complaint about safflower seed. Early one morning, whilst stumbling around half asleep, I was engulfed in a cloud of unknown species of moth that had hatched from an open bag. Not exactly a pleasant experience before one has had a chance to have one's morning cup of coffee.

Useless Strategy # 5: Invest in a *squirrel-proof* feeder. I'll pause for a moment and allow you to laugh hysterically at the preposterous concept.

Now that you've collected yourself, I shall continue. Squirrel-proof feeder. Now, there's a misnomer if I've ever heard one. Against our better judgement, my husband and I bought a mega-sized, "squirrel-proof" feeder with a lifetime guarantee. Ours is a pole-mounted variety, with a rectangular shape and a gabled roof.

It took Einstein only a few days to conquer our exorbitantly expensive feeder. We muttered and cursed as we observed him cling gingerly to the side of the feeder with his toes and use his Schwarzenegger arm to sweep out huge amounts of seed to an applauding crowd of squirrels gathered on the ground below. Like candy pouring down from a piñata, Einstein's fan club gleefully collected every bit as we stood shaking our heads, utterly defeated, and a lot poorer.

We added a squirrel baffle to the pole, but Einstein continued to empty our feeder. That's when we discovered he was able to make spectacular leaps from a tree limb onto the roof of the feeder.

Which leads me to . . .

Useless Strategy # 6: To prevent your residential scoundrels from leaping onto your feeder, mount it as far



away from tree branches and fences as possible. I would suggest a minimum of eight to ten feet. A minimum of four hundred feet would be even better.

Useless Strategy # 7: Use Vaseline to grease the roof and pole of your feeder, then have fun cackling sadistically as

you watch the scampering scalawags slip and slide. You can also grease the wires suspending your hanging feeders. Great idea, right? Sorry, didn't work. Now that our pole-mounted feeder was stationed in the blazing Texas sun instead of cozily nestled under the branches of our shady oaks, the Vaseline melted off the roof within hours.

However, Vaseline could still work for you if your feeder is not in direct sun—or if you reapply the Vaseline often enough. Give it a try.

Useless Strategy # 8: Feeder height. Seeing a squirrel and/or raccoon jump from the ground onto your feeder is like watching an Olympic event. They don't merely jump—they levitate. Whether you have a pole-mounted or hanging feeder, it must be a *minimum*, mind you, a *minimum* of five feet from the ground, lest the little devils will simply leap up and grab your precious fare.

Five feet was not high enough for our ridiculously round Olympic athletes. Our solution? We went higher. We removed our feeder from its pole and mounted it to a four-by-four post, 8 ½ feet from the ground. No, that is not a typo. And yes, it is a tad hazardous to fill. It looks more like a Purple Martin house than a feeder.

Below it, wrapped around the four-by-four post, sit *two* gargantuan, twenty-two inch squirrel/raccoon baffles, about twelve inches apart. The entire contraption looks weird, unsightly, and just plain silly. But it works. With our alterations, it is now indeed a squirrel-proof feeder. Even Einstein couldn't figure out how to conquer our towering skyscraper.

Nevertheless our silly yet effective skyscraper is a pain in the neck to fill (literally speaking), and requires a sturdy, non-wobbly ladder. If you do elevate your feeder beyond your reach, keep in mind that each year, ladders are the cause of an alarming number of dreadful accidents. When I climb our ladder with a bucket of sunflower seeds, I know I'm being carefully watched by a multitude of beady varmint eyes—all of them waiting for me to fall.

Useless Strategy # 9: Avoid using tree limbs. Hanging a feeder from a tree branch is the same as hanging a flashing neon sign that reads, "EAT HERE!" But, if you're like us, you really don't have a choice. We have suet feed-

ers full of Marvel-Meal, log feeders, and hummingbird nectar hanging from limbs all over our property. It was only after a lot of trial and error, and trying different locations, that we have finally begun to consistently foil the gluttonous scamps. Here are a few tips that work for us:

Hang your log, suet, and/or hummingbird feeder from a spindly branch that a squirrel would think twice about venturing out on, (cedar trees work well). Trim away all foliage and adjacent branches that they can cling to, hang your gargantuan, menacing baffle, then tuck your feeder up under the baffle as close as possible. And remember to make sure it is a minimum of five feet from the ground.

This does not apply to feeders containing sunflower seed. We have never been successful hanging sunflower feeders in trees; the little devils always manage to knock them down and destroy them.



Lee Graham promises more entertaining strategies in the next installment of the Outwitting the Squirrels articles including: ways to keep squirrels away from tomatoes, live trapping squirrels for relocation, and airtel suspension feeder systems!

If you have any Useless Strategies for outwitting squirrels you can share, Lee would love to hear from you at (512) 303-0476 or leegraham61@yahoo.com



9th Annual Great Backyard Bird Count

Count for the Birds in America's Great Backyard:

February 17-20, 2006

- * No Fee or registration required
- * All ages and skill levels welcome
- * Track results in real time online
- * Count in your backyard, balcony, schoolyard, park, wildlife refuge
- * Be a part of the network

Join with thousand of others to find out how many birds are being seen in your area and across the continent this winter. By participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count, you help document where birds are, and track changes in their numbers compared to previous years, helping scientists paint a picture of the state of birds this winter.

For more information, or to get started, go to <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc>

FEATHER FEST

March 30 to April 2, 2006

Come flock to historic Galveston Island, Texas, for the 4th annual FeatherFest, a four day celebration of nature, when the area abounds with hundreds of species of resident and migratory birds. This trip is only at most a 3-hour trip for most of us and Galveston accommodations and food are rather inexpensive. Those who have never been to High Island, Texas, can sign up for the Feather Fest field trips to that area. The rookery at High Island should be amazing then.

While traveling by van, bus, kayak and harbor cruisers, participants will enjoy field trips to some of the top birding areas in the nation. Expert naturalists will lead field trips and conduct workshops on photography, butterflies, dragonflies and birds. A variety of Galveston's signature social evenings will guarantee a unique experience!

FOR MORE INFORMATION or to register, visit www.galvestonfeatherfest.com or call 1.888.GALISLE

*Highly Recommended by 2005 Field Trip Chair,
Mary Ellen Branan*

The Ivory-bill Chronicles, Chapter I

John C. Arvin, Research Coordinator
Gulf Coast Bird Observatory

Last April 27th I received one of the most exciting messages of my life. A friend who was “in the know” sent me a flash e-mail that on the following day he and a group of fellow researchers would publish in the prestigious journal *Science*, the news that at least one Ivory-billed Woodpecker had survived sixty years of presumed extinction and had been conclusively documented in eastern Arkansas. The next day it was officially announced to the world by no less than the Secretary of the Interior that the Ivory-bill lived! I immediately sat down and dashed off a draft proposal to search that part of the historical range of the species in Texas in which I thought that enough of the right kind of bottomland forest existed that might support a very small population of this charismatic symbol of Americana Lost.

I received the news earlier this week that my proposal to seek Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in Texas had been funded - not quite fully funded, but with enough to start the chase. My reaction was elation laced with a certain amount of misgivings, and also with a sense of awesome responsibility. I have been entrusted with a considerable sum of public money, your money, to look for something that may not exist. And if it doesn't exist, or at least if our efforts do not provide compelling evidence that it does, will the public look upon those efforts as just another frivolous waste? I hope not, and our every effort will be to come away from this project with a lot of newly acquired knowledge of the ecology of southern bottomland hardwood forests and the role of the most dramatic symbol within that system. But that is the risk you take when you chase dreams.

So what now? The grant is for 2006 and the precious window of time when the bottomland forests are leafless is already about a fourth gone by. One of the first steps we will take will be to make reconnaissance flights over the search areas, which are the corridors of bottomland forest along the lower Trinity, Neches, and Sabine Rivers in southeastern Texas. From the air we will identify those areas that appear to have large, intact tracts of mature forest so that they can be marked for priority ground searches. At the same time we will be watching for the birds themselves. A flying Ivory-billed Woodpecker, viewed from above, should be quite conspicuous from a low, slow-flying aircraft. Additionally we will be watching for lookout points from which stationary watchers can see long stretches along streams or other breaks in the forest that would make likely corridors

for Ivory-bills moving about within their huge home ranges. When these features have been identified from the air we will begin ground surveys.

Whether as paid searcher or volunteer, the ground search will be no picnic. When I first envisioned the project the search areas were merely filled with usual impediments - lack of ready access points, a bewildering winding of waterways through swamp forests with



Ivory-billed woodpecker, Singer Tract, Louisiana, 1935. Photo courtesy of David Allen

no shortage of mosquitoes and the occasional Cottonmouth, tangles of thorny green brier and poison ivy, and seemingly bottomless mud. All these were relegated to relatively minor nuisances with the passage of Hurricane Rita in September, cutting right through the heart of the region. I have visited some of the search areas since Rita and downed trees range from a minimum of about 20% to as high as 75% in some of the hardest hit areas. Cross country navigation through the tangled vegetation is going to be a nightmare in some areas. The good news is that all evidence suggests that the Ivory-bill is a “disaster” species, shifting its home range over vast areas of forest in response to the transitory presence of large numbers of recently dead or dying trees. Their primary animal food source, the large boring grubs of long-horned beetles, infests such trees in the early stages of decay. Rita has insured an abundant source of these grubs for the foreseeable future.

Present funding has forced us to cut back to one single full time search team. We will be needing volunteers to fill in the gaps of our coverage. Information about volunteering will be forthcoming.

The Chronicles will be continued.....

John C. Arvin, Research Coordinator at the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory can be reached at jarvin@gcbo.org or by phone (979) 480-0999

The Chronicles are designed to keep the public informed about this important project. They will be issued serially at irregular intervals and are available to subscribers (free) on the Texbirds list. For more information visit the Texbirds Reference Page at <http://www.texbirds.org>



Texas Roadside Silhouettes (after Peterson) © Margie Crisp2005

The Top 15 Things You Can Do For the Environment of Bastrop County in 2006

Lee Graham

I asked Tom Dureka of Smithville, one of the founders of Bastrop County Environmental Network (BCEN) to help me with an answer to the question, "What can I do for the environment of Bastrop County?" Tiny little question, I know. Here are his top 15 suggestions. *

- 1 Pay attention to your environment. Look around. Read your newspapers. Observe wildlife.
- 2 Speak out! If something smells bad, it probably is.
- 3 Get out of the house. Enjoy an afternoon on a trail.
- 4 Take your kids to Nature. Learn with them about Nature
- 5 Learn where your water comes from, where your waste goes, and why these things are important.
- 6 Educate your elected officials. City, county, state, or federal—letters are the best, but phone calls are very good. Emails aren't good for early contacts. Always be polite but firm.
- 7 Participate in local and national advocacy groups.
- 8 Respect your air. Carpool, bus, bike or telecommute.
- 9 Help preserve wide open spaces. Google Pines and Prairies Land Trust or Envision Texas for starters.
- 10 Refuse, Reuse & Recycle. Buy recycled products, including used items whenever possible.
- 11 Harvest Rainwater. Conserve water at home and work whenever possible.
- 12 Cherish our island forest of pines and oaks and millions of other creatures. Be respectful of the diverse wildlife on your own land or in your own backyard.
- 13 Meet your neighbors and get to know your community.
- 14 Vote in local elections. Vote in national elections. Make your vote count.
- 15 Plant gardens—native plants use less water than traditional lawns and provide food and shelter for wildlife. Grow your own vegetables.

**Tom's list does not reflect the priorities of BCEN.*

THE LEARNERS' CORNER

Please join us Tuesday, February 21st at 7:00– before the regular meeting—for a short introductory program on birds and birdwatching skills.



What the heck is a Butter-butt? Or an LBJ? What about the ubiquitous #@*!-bird? Why are House Sparrows & Starlings anathema to most birdwatchers?



Join us before the regular meeting at The Learners' Corner for the answers to these questions and to learn other fascinating tidbits from the intriguing world of birds and birdwatching.



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