Monthly Meeting November 4, 2013

Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet St, Houston, TX

6:30 pm Learning Corner: The IPhone as a Birding Tool, Part 1 of 2 Parts by Kendra Kocab

7:00 pm Ornithology Group (OG) Business Meeting

7:30 pm Program: Bird Conservation on the Texas Gulf Coast by Gregory L. Green

Field Trip: November 23, 7:30 am – Jones State Forest, led by Stephan Lorenz

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The IPhone as a Birding Tool, Part 1 of 2 Parts

By Kendra Kocab

Kendra will be talking about using applications on your smartphone as a birding tool. These are available by downloading (some are free and some require payment). Although she will focus on the IPhone, most applications are also available on an Android phone and tablet and IPad. She will include bird-specific applications such as field guides and bird call applications, but will also cover a few applications that are not bird-specific such as WindAlert. Part 2 of her talk will the program for the January 6 meeting. ↑top↑

Bird Conservation on the Texas Gulf Coast

By Gregory L. Green

The Gulf Coastal Prairie Region, which includes the Upper and Mid-Coasts of Texas, is a physiographic region that consists of a variety of ecotypes, and is vitally important to many migratory and resident avian species. The importance of this region is highly prioritized in the four major bird conservation plans. However, natural and anthropogenic stressors of drought, development, habitat conversion and degradation, sea-level rise, and subsidence are continually decreasing this area's ability to meet foraging demands. Bird conservation actions remain a high priority for many agencies and nongovernmental organizations, and opportunities do exist. Bird conservation along the Texas Coast cannot be completed alone or by a single group. Conservation planning and partnerships must be used to effectively and efficiently deliver organizational missions and ecologic objectives during a time of economic stress and future uncertainty. A review of various bird population trends, current conservation partnerships, and future concerns will be presented in an effort to generate thought, discussion, and relevance.

Gregory L. Green is Regional Biologist, Ducks Unlimited, for the Texas Gulf Coast. He has more than 13 years' experience in the environmental field with an education background that includes a Master of Science in Rangeland Ecology and Management from Texas A&M University and a Bachelor of Science in Wildlife Conservation from Louisiana Tech University.

His experience includes development, design, implementation and management of a variety of habitat improvement projects in coastal marshes, freshwater wetlands, riparian forests, and native grasslands. He oversees the delivery of Ducks Unlimited's (DU) conservation efforts on properties in Texas owned by public agencies, as well as municipalities, corporate entities and other nongovernmental organizations. Mr. Green has worked for DU since 2003 in Texas and California. Prior to his employment with Ducks Unlimited, Mr. Green was a Restoration Specialist for the Galveston Bay Foundation, where he coordinated and implemented several community-based restoration projects for events such as Marsh Mania and Trash Bash. ↑top↑

Jones State Forest Field Trip (November 23, 7:30 am)

We will meet 7:30 am at headquarters (location at: http://goo.gl/maps/inbQ8). We will spend the morning exploring the pine forest around the state forest, especially targeting Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers, other woodpeckers, Brown-headed Nuthatch, any early winter finches, and of course sparrows, making a determined effort to find Henslow's Sparrow.

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Birding Convergent Evolution in Chile

By Stephan Lorenz

It is no surprise that international birding trips offer exciting possibilities to see new species and add to one's life list. The majority of birders dream of tropical latitudes and colorful exotic birds, including toucans, parrots, hummingbirds, and tanagers, or maybe less familiar groups like motmots, jacamars, and puffbirds. Central and South America especially harbor a wealth of avian diversity unmatched by any other continent on the planet. The Neotropics are home to more than one-third of all bird species, creating a formidable task for any birder new to the region. The challenge of identifying new birds can be both rewarding and frustrating, but no matter what, a trip overseas will invariably add quite a few ticks to the list.

We tend to focus on the spectacular and novel. Who does not want to see Resplendent Quetzals in Central American cloud forest, or watch a mixed flock of gaudy tanagers in South America bombing through the binocular view faster than a pencil check mark. Birders dream to be fortunate enough to witness the massive bulk of a Harpy Eagle, or observe the antics of displaying day-glow Cocks-of-the-Rock. Observing bird families not found in North America and studying new behaviors all add to the excitement. Often the Neotropics may be overwhelming and it is crucial to keep detailed notes, lest one forget all the new species in a swirl of feathered confusion.

Bird diversity increases steadily, depending on habitat of course, as one travels south and peeks into the topical zones flanking the equator. In the southern hemisphere, bird diversity decreases in a reciprocal fashion as one continues south, away from the equator, towards Patagonia and colder Antarctic reaches. Within tropical rain forests birders are often flabbergasted by the bewildering diversity, and it is a relief to spot something familiar like a wintering Prothonotary Warbler in mangroves on the Colombian coast or a Great Egret in a Brazilian wetland. Occasionally, an unfamiliar bird may look and behave very similar to a North American species

and birders often draw comparisons. Other species appear so uncannily recognizable that they are easily mistaken for something from home. Take a quick glance at a Yellow-Throated Longclaw and the first word that comes to mind is invariably Meadowlark, but it is the wrong continent--think Africa, and also the wrong family--try Motacillidae, wagtails and pipits.

While birding new turf, comparisons between familiar species and foreign avian treasures can help with identification, learning, and memory, but these observations also offer a glimpse of bird behaviors and avian evolution on a larger scale. Across the globe many unrelated species look similar because they fill comparable ecological niches. In technical lingo this results in convergent evolution and can be really fun to study during birding trips overseas. This point was really driven home during a recent journey to central and southern Chile. The three countries in the world with the highest diversity of species are found in South America. However, Chile has a comparatively impoverished avifauna. Chile's landscape is dominated by extreme deserts, high mountains, cool southern beach forests, and freezing steppe, supporting only 400 bird species. For example, the diverse family Thamnophilidae, the antbirds, represented by more than 200 species in South America, is completely absent. There are relatively few hummingbirds, eight in total. In comparison, the small country of Ecuador has around 150 species of Trochilids.

Chile offers an abundance of shorebirds. Some migratory species are very familiar to visiting birders and others are unfamiliar southern cone breeders. Great numbers of waterfowl flock to wetlands and, not surprisingly, the cold Humboldt Current attracts seabirds swarming above gray swells. On land, Tyrannid flycatchers are well represented, with approximately 40 species. But it is among the ovenbirds that any visiting birder will strike diversity gold, with roughly 33 species. Within the latter group of birds, a visitor will note similarities to familiar species at home and it is not too far-fetched to see thrashers, thrushes, wrens, and creepers, except that in Chile, all belong to one diverse family instead of several. Central and South America harbor a mindboggling 306 species of Furnariids, the majority ranging in tropical climes, where they skulk and hide in dense rain forest, but a good variety are found in open and temperate habitats. Numerous species have peculiar names like the cincloides, horneros, thistletails, canasteros, cacholotes, and there is even one very descriptive label, the unique Firewood-Gatherer. While Chile supports only a slice of Furnariid diversity, it is plenty to observe convergent evolution in action.

The widespread and common Thorn-tailed Rayadito is likely the first Furnariid encountered during a trip to Chile. At first glance, it may not bear much resemblance to anything at home, with its brown plumage, buff supercilium and spiked tail. But after a few minutes of observation it is quite obvious that it passes for a pretty decent chickadee, hanging upside down at the tips of thin branches and roving in little flocks from trees to shrubs. In taller forest, the White-throated Treerunner gives both the creepers and nuthatches a run for their money, as it moves upward along the trunk like the former, but resembles the latter. A visit to any wetland in central Chile will not only result in a plethora of waterfowl, but also glimpses of a small brown bird that often chatters in irritation and perches with legs splayed on thin reeds. The semblance in behavior and morphology to a Sedge Wren is striking, but the appropriately named Wren-like Rushbird belongs to the same family as the nuthatch-like treerunner.

La Campana National Park, which protects one of the largest swaths of Matorral, a scrub biome unique to Chile, offers the chance to see the majority of Chilean mainland endemics. The climate and vegetation structure is similar to Chaparall in southern California and the endemic Dusky-tailed Canastero seems to imitate in size and secretive behavior the Wrentit. At higher altitudes the dense woodland and scrub give way to open alpine areas and rocky cliff faces. Here, the endemic Crag Chilia bounces along the vertical walls and with its white throat, rufous rump and wings is a perfect match of the Canyon Wren. Except, the Crag Chilia boldly squeaks, instead of the Canyon Wren's ringing song.

At high elevations and in barren steppe, miners, small dull Furnarrids, strut like pipits or wagtails, and earthcreepers, flick vegetation left to right with their long curved bills like thrashers. The widespread cincloides are similar to thrushes in appearance and behavior, except for the unique Chilean Seaside Cincloides, which makes a living akin to a Black Turnstone, foraging along rocky coastlines, right up against the crashing waves.

The Furnarrids have diversified to fill various niches through adaptive radiation. These ecological roles are filled by members of different bird families in North America. Making comparisons between familiar and unfamiliar birds does not only aid with identification and memory, but also highlights bird adaptations to similar environments, foraging behaviors, and survival challenges. From hummingbirds to sunbirds, from auklets to diving-petrels, and from the fairy-wrens to Troglodytid wrens, bird diversity around the world has plenty of neat examples of convergent evolution. Next time a life bird hops into view, think about how it fits into the local ecosystem and draw some comparisons to more familiar birds; it greatly improves identification, learning, and appreciation.

Thrasher anyone? No it is another Furnariid (ovenbird), the Scale-throated Earthcreeper. Photo by Stephan Lorenz.

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Red by Any Other Name

By Hart Rufe

First published March 6, 2012. Reprinted with permission.

"Vermilion" is a word you don't hear very often. As shades of red go, "red" itself is the rock solid standard, fitting as a modifier for a number of rock solid birds, such as the Red-shouldered, Red-tailed and Red-bellied. "Cardinal" is a rich deep color and certainly a fitting description for our crested Christmas bird. "Scarlet" has a naughty "Scarlet Letter" connotation, perhaps like the gaudy Scarlet Tanager. "Crimson" is the color of embarrassment, and to the best of my knowledge has only been applied to the Crimson-collared Grosbeak, an illegal immigrant from Mexico, who came to pick seeds from a feeder in south Texas several years ago. (Another illegal immigrant from Europe, the Red-footed Falcon, did not fare as well when he snuck into Martha's Vineyard, for he became lunch for a local red-neck Cooper's Hawk.)

But "VERMILION!" now there is a red word that evokes mystery, beauty and excitement, and must certainly be applied to a spectacular bird.

Every year one or more Vermilion Flycatchers winter in Florida, coming over from south Texas, where they can be found year round. Usually they take up residence in remote areas in the Seminole Reservation lands between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. This year at least four have been around most of the winter: two in the Everglades and two in Orlando Wetlands Park, a water treatment area for the City of Orlando. http://www.cityoforlando.net/public_works/wetlands/index.htm

At Orlando Wetlands Park (OWP) there is a system of cells surrounded by dikes with miles of roads throughout the park just like many other similar systems all over Florida. However, unlike most other such systems, OWP doesn't allow vehicles on their roads. Walking over a mile, carrying birding and photography equipment by back-pack is not for the faint of heart.

When found, the Vermilion Flycatchers were far out in the cypress trees in the reservoirs and not readily photographable. But even at that distance they were stunning. Unfortunately,

the heavy duty 600mm lens (emphasis on “heavy”) needed to properly catch those gorgeous little beauties remained in the car. Nevertheless, we did succeed in obtaining some less than satisfying shots which we share here with you.

After spending several hours hoping the birds would come closer to the road for us, we finally gave up in despair, just as a car with four birders arrived with their own heavy duty camera equipment. Obviously, it is a simple matter of “who you know.” We left, “vermilion!” with rage. But not for long, for that same night we witnessed the Tree Swallow Extravaganza, after which we were ready to “paint the town red.” (3/6/12)

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Membership (2014 Membership Renewal)

ONC/OG dues are paid yearly on a calendar basis beginning January 1st. Life Members of ONC still need to pay yearly OG dues used to help pay for Spoonbill expenses, speakers and their travel, OG donations to other organizations, and other OG expenses.

Pay by check at the next OG meeting or mail the form to submit updated information for the ONC Yearbook and database along with your check. If you have questions about your membership status, contact Margret Simmons at msimmons@compassnet.com or 713-776-2511I

IF YOU ARE ATTENDING THE MEETINGS AND FIELD TRIPS, THEN YOU SHOULD BE PAYING YOUR DUES!

TO START OR RENEW A MEMBERSHIP:

Name:_____

Address:_____

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ONC Annual Dues: $ 8.00 for individuals; $ 15.00 for families
OG Annual Dues: $ 12.00 for individuals; $ 15.00 for families

Total: **$ 20.00 for individuals; $ 30.00 for families**

Additional contributions are welcome in any amount.

Send to:
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Membership questions?
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