

Monthly Meeting February 3, 2014

Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet St, Houston, TX

6:30 pm [Learning Corner](#): Becoming a Purple Martin Landlord by Larry Dybala

7:00 pm [Ornithology Group](#) (OG) Business Meeting

7:30 pm [Program](#): New Zealand and the Sub-Antarctic Islands by Steve Gast

[Field Trip](#): Katy Prairie (February 15, 1:30–6:00 pm), led by Bob Honig

[Membership Renewal for 2014 | Downloading Bird Calls](#)

Becoming a Purple Martin Landlord

By Larry Dybala

Larry Dybala will talk about attracting and sustaining a Purple Martin colony. Because we live in the southern part of the country, it is much easier to attract and keep a thriving Martin colony than elsewhere. Location of the house or gourd rack (housing) is most important. Housing must be placed as far away as possible from trees that might impede the Martin's flight path and attract perching predators. The housing must also be able to be opened and lowered vertically to the ground via a telescoping pole, wench, or pulley system so that the nests can be inspected and English Sparrows trapped. I'll bring examples of gourds that have been modified to keep your Martins cooler on hot summer days. I'll bring a copy of the dawn song (the most effective method of attracting Martins) and show how to play it on an inexpensive clock radio from 4-6 am. Lastly, I'll show how to ensure that your Martins are kept alive by preventing predation by English Sparrows, Starlings, snakes, and owls. The picture shows a Martin house, lowered with a winch, that attempts to attract Martins by including a Martin decoy, mirrors, additional perching areas, gourds, and sparrow traps (bottom two smaller holes in the house).



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New Zealand and the Sub-Antarctic Islands

By Steve Gast

Steve Gast has been an avid birder since the 1960s. He arrived in Houston Texas in 1985 after working for 10 years overseas in oil and gas exploration, and since then has been active in various birding and conservation organizations. He is recently retired and currently serves on the advisory boards of Houston Audubon and GCBO, and is a member of the board of directors for The Katy Prairie Conservancy.



When he journeyed to New Zealand and the sub-Antarctic islands in 2011, he took over 15,000 photos. He will include some selected photos in his presentation.

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Katy Prairie Field Trip (February 15, 2014)

Led by Bob Honig.

This trip will focus on giving you an opportunity to see some Katy Prairie Conservancy (KPC) properties that are not generally open to the public. With our leisurely 1:30 p.m. start, we'll spend the afternoon looking for sparrows and hawks and other wintering birds. As the sun sets, we'll position ourselves where we hope to see birds coming to roost for the night—flocks of geese and cranes are possibilities, and there's always a chance for an owl. Be sure to wear appropriate footwear—some places may be a bit wet or mucky. Bring a flashlight in case we linger until it's a bit dark.

Meet at 1:30 p.m. at KPC's Field Office on the Indiangrass Preserve. Directions can be found at <http://katyprairie.org/IndiangrassDirections.html>.

If you want to make a day of it on the Katy Prairie and start early on your own, a couple of wonderful destinations are Warren Lake (KPC's observation platform is open to the public) and Harris County Precinct 3's Paul D. Rushing Park. Directions to Warren Lake are at <http://katyprairie.org/Warren%20Ranch%20Directions.html#WRWL>. The Paul D. Rushing Park home page, including a link to directions, is <http://www.pct3.hctx.net/parks/pauldrushing.aspx>.

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Downloading Bird Calls for Tailored Playlists Using XenoCanto and AVoCet

Text and Photos by Stephan Lorenz

One critical aspect of successful international birding, especially for the independent traveler, includes obtaining and learning recordings of bird vocalizations. It is well worth the effort to review and memorize as many possible sounds of unfamiliar species before the start of the trip and the hours spent listening over and over to the same calls will pay off dividends in the field. I

usually do most of my learning while driving to and from places or some last minute listening during the flight to the actual destination. It can take months or years to learn all the calls, songs, and variations for many locations. In Neotropical rainforests, for example, where more than one hundred species can join the dawn chorus, even familiarity with a small percentage of species or a basic understanding of differences between bird families, can aid in successfully finding and identifying new birds. Oftentimes, just knowing whether an unknown call is a trogon, antbird, or flycatcher, facilitates where and what to look for. For the rare specialty or range restricted endemic, knowing the call beforehand can be the difference between a memorable sighting or an unforgettable miss.

While many commercial recordings of bird calls are available for nearly every corner of the planet, sold as CD's or Apps, a large repository of recordings can be downloaded for free from several websites. These downloadable files, most commonly in MP3 format, allow birders to create tailored playlists, helps avoid buying material containing nonessential recordings, offer subspecies specific vocalizations, and allows you to add several recordings of a particular species.

I prefer to have multiple recordings of different length, quality, and geographic location for especially rare or skulking species. This increases the chance that one of these recordings will be useful for playback, eliciting the hoped for response, leading to a sighting. Playback should always be used judiciously, and in heavily birded areas the use of prerecorded bird calls should be limited. In fact, the extensive use of playback in certain popular birding locales has habituated birds and often elicits no response. If used properly of course, playback increases the chance of actually seeing many shy and difficult species. Certain families are nearly impossible to see without some use of playback: rails, antpittas, tapaculos, and gnateaters come to mind. Even raptors, like the White-browed Hawk on the right from the southern Amazon, can be secretive in the Neotropics, often foraging out of sight in the subcanopy. Judicious playback can greatly enhance the chances of a sighting.



Downloading and collecting bird recordings is useful for trip preparation to a new destination and I essential in the field for successful playback. While planning for any bird trip, whether overseas or within the confines of North America, I systematically prepare recordings of all species I am likely to encounter. I recently planned an independent birding trip to the Dominican Republic and while much more goes into the preparation than just downloading bird calls, plane tickets, car rental, hostels, and research of birding sites, I will focus on making the playlist for the trip here and address other planning tips in later articles.

The Dominican Republic does not harbor overwhelming bird diversity, but does offer a nice mix of island endemics, a whopping 31 species, and many interesting species restricted to the West Indies. I find it easiest to systematically select bird calls based on the country list. Some quick typing into Google (Bird List Dominican Republic), will usually result in a Wikipedia entry offering an exhaustive list for almost any country in the world. It is also possible to use lists from

eBird for specific regions, locales, or hot spots. The field guide to the particular country and region offers another alternative to create a target list. With the list in hand, or on the computer screen I should say, I first visit my favorite website for bird recordings, Xeno-Canto (<http://www.xeno-canto.org/>). This is an excellent site dedicated to “sharing birds sound from around the world. The site is run from the Netherlands and mainly functions to “popularize bird sound recordings worldwide, improve accessibility of bird sounds, and increase knowledge of bird sounds.” The recordings on the site serve for “enjoyment, education, conservation, and science.” The collection now boasts recordings of nearly 9,000 species and is still growing, with the ultimate goal of storing songs and calls of all birds on the planet. Hundreds of birders and ornithologist have shared thousands of sound recordings from all over the globe, creating an invaluable tool that can be used for free by birdwatchers and researchers alike. The Such’s Anthrush, seen below, is a secretive endemic of Atlantic rainforest, almost exclusively seen with the use of playback, and it is best identified by voice, since it overlaps with the similar Rufous-tailed Anthrush.



In order to speed up the process of downloading potentially hundreds of files, I usually have bird list for the destination open in one window, a spreadsheet or word document works also, and simply copy and paste the name into the search bar near the top of the Xeno-Canto homepage. For the Dominican Republic trip, I skipped through the waterfowl and wading birds as I am not really anticipating using playback on Great Blue Herons or West Indian Whistling-Ducks, and I know what these sound like. Thus, the first bird of interest on the list was Ridgway's Hawk, an endangered endemic restricted to Los Haitises National Park. This is a species call I better study if I want to improve my chances of a sighting. I copy and paste the name into the search, click go, and find one recording. Now the process is pretty

straightforward, I click the download icon (Fig. 1 **D**) and rename the file to whatever I need—in this case just Ridgway’s Hawk. For many species, numerous recordings are available and it is important to pay attention to the additional information provided. For the Hispaniolan Trogon four recordings are available, and I look at the other columns to give me more information as to

which one I want to download. Length (Fig. 1 [2](#)) can be important, as I prefer shorter recordings of one or two songs or calls. The next column provides the name of the recordist (Fig. 1 [3](#)) and it becomes apparent very quickly who shares high quality recordings as I usually prefer to download files uploaded by these individuals. For South America, it is hard to beat Nick Athanas, for example, but the vast majority of recordings are of amazing quality. The column of time, date, and elevation (Fig. 1 [4](#)) are less crucial for my purposes, but the country and location information (Fig. 1 [5](#)) can be critical. Birds have regional dialects and subspecies specific vocalization. For widespread species, it is important to download recordings from locations that match the trip destination, ideally from the same geographic area or at least the same country. I always double-check these columns and try to find the best match.

The Greater Antillean Oriole was split into four species in 2010, including the now island endemics: Bahama Oriole, Cuban Oriole, Hispaniolan Oriole, and Puerto Rican Oriole. Downloading calls prior to the split, it would have been important to get the island right as birds have different vocalizations between islands. Fortunately, Xeno-Canto keeps up with splits and lumps and a recording of Hispaniolan Oriole was easily found. For canopy species, like the Spotted Puffbird on the right, knowing the call will help birders zero in on the bird.

The remarks column (Fig. 1 [6](#)) can be important in some cases and of course type of vocalization is crucial. If available, I always download at least one song and one call of each species, to help with learning and potential playback in the field. The final column (Fig. 1 [7](#)) includes scoring of the quality of the recording and I strictly stick to A, unless only lower quality recordings are available, which is the case for many rare species. Quality of recordings is scored on a scale of A-E with: **A**: Loud and Clear, **B**: Clear, but bird a bit distant, or some interference with other sound sources, **C**: Moderately clear, or quite some interference, **D**: Faint recording, or much interference, **E**: Barely audible. Anything below C is often not useful for playback, but can be good enough for learning the call. Of course the best tactic is to listen to the recordings online, which can be done by clicking the play icon (Fig. 1 [P](#)), and then choosing the best and most suitable.

If I am pressed for time, I focus on the critical recordings of forest passerines and often skip aerial insectivores like swifts and swallows, nectivorous hummingbirds, and larger waterbirds, as I rarely find myself in the field wanting any of these calls. The best strategy though is to download as complete a sample of the destination's avifauna as possible, since one never knows when that recording of a hummingbird may come in handy.

Working my way systematically through the list of the Dominican Republic's birds, I searched for Bay-breasted Cuckoo in the Xeno-Canto search tab and it came back without any recordings found. This can be a fairly common occurrence and often is related to a different common name or spelling of that name. The quick fix is to find the scientific name (the Latin binomial) and pluck it into the search tab, which accepts common or scientific names. Nine times out of ten, looking up the species by scientific name fixes the problem, but the Bay-breasted Cuckoo search came up empty again. I realized this could be a problem as the species is one of the more difficult endemics to see and a recording could prove very useful. Neotropical rainforests are

filled with skulking antbirds, like the White-shouldered Antshrike below, and for many of these species voice is the surest way to correct identification.



I searched the web for another recording and came across AVoCet (<http://avocet.zoology.msu.edu/>) the Avian Vocalizations Center sponsored by Dr. Pam Rasmussen at Michigan State University. This site contains hundreds of recordings from all over the world and most importantly had a recording of the Bay-breasted Cuckoo. Species can be searched for by common or scientific name and each sound recording has a spectrogram and much additional information on location, quality, and call type. While I rarely use this site, it offers a perfect complement to Xeno-Canto, especially for rare species that may yet be missing from the latter. Between the two sites, I can usually build a complete playlist for nearly any international bird trip.

Once I have downloaded all the files (recordings) I need in MP3 format, I sort these into folders for easier access on my MP3 player or iPod. It is worth double checking all recordings before the trip to ensure that the collection is complete and the sounds of useable quality. Now just listen to the calls over and over and good luck in the field. If you have recordings of your own, please contribute to Xeno-Canto.

English / Scientific	Length	Recordist	Date	Time	Country	Location	Elev. (m)	Type	Remarks	Actions	Cat.nr.
Hispaniolan Trogon (Priotelus roseigaster)	0:15	Ian Davies	2012-03-19	?	Dominican Republic	Zapotén, Independencia, Dominican Republic	1400	call, song	A few chuck calls and then one phrase... more » [sono]	[Download] [Share] [A] [B] [C] [D] [E]	XC97174 ©
Hispaniolan Trogon (Priotelus roseigaster)	0:24	Ian Davies	2012-03-19	?	Dominican Republic	Zapotén, Independencia, Dominican Republic	1400	Song	[sono]	[Download] [Share] [A] [B] [C] [D] [E]	XC97173 ©
Hispaniolan Trogon (Priotelus roseigaster)	0:59	Ante Strand	2000-06-14	00:59	Hispaniola	Baoruco NP, Dominican Republic	?	song	[sono]	[Download] [Share] [A] [B] [C] [D] [E]	XC15750 ©
Hispaniolan Trogon (Priotelus roseigaster)	0:59	Ante Strand	2000-06-14	00:59	Hispaniola	Baoruco NP, Dominican Republic	?	song	[sono]	[Download] [Share] [A] [B] [C] [D] [E]	XC15751 ©

Figure 1. Showing the layout of Xeno-Canto (<http://www.xeno-canto.org/>) tabs for the Hispaniolan Trogon.

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2014 Dues are Due!!

Don't forget to renew your ONC/OG dues if you haven't already done so. ONC/OG dues are paid yearly on a calendar basis beginning January 1st. Ornithology Group dues are used to pay

honorariums and travel expenses for speakers at OG meetings, to make OG donations to other organizations, and for a few other OG expenses. Life Members of ONC still need to pay yearly OG dues. Pay by check at the next OG meeting or use the form below (it specifies the proper dues amounts) to submit updated information for the ONC database, and mail along with your check to the ONC post office box.

We need your dues to keep the Ornithology Group running!

If you have questions about your membership status, contact Margret Simmons at msimmons@compassnet.com or 713-776-2511.

Thank you for your renewal!

TO START OR RENEW A MEMBERSHIP:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

E-Mail: _____

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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