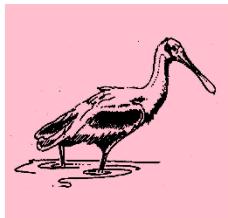


## **Monthly Meeting February 2, 2015**

### **Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet St, Houston, TX**



**6:30 pm Learning Corner: Raising Monarch Butterflies by Jan Hanson**

**7:00 pm Ornithology Group (OG) Business Meeting**

**7:30 pm Program: Wildlife and Scenery of Alaska by David Hanson**

**Field Trips: Brazos Bend State Park, Feb. 8, 8:00 am; Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR, Jan. 24, 8:30 am**

**The Feathered Unicorn | Renew Membership**

### **Raising Monarch Butterflies**

**by Jan Hanson**

Jan will present her pictures and discuss the experience of raising Monarch butterflies. Don't be late for this one as she will have information on helping the Monarchs survive the pesticide assault which nearly has them listed as an endangered species.

### **Wildlife and Scenery of Alaska**

**By David Hanson**

David will show his visually astounding camera work from a three week trip to Alaska. You can count on many views of the magnificent Alaska landscape along with Birds and mammals sought after by all visitors to our most northern state.

Jan and David live in Baytown area and both are Master Naturalists. David compiles the monthly bird census for the Baytown Nature Center and also is the 2015 Galveston Featherfest Birding Program leader.

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### **Brazos Bend State Park**

Saturday, February 8, meet at 8:00 am at 40 Acre Lake. This is the first parking lot on the left after the entrance. State Park fee is \$7.00 per person or the yearly pass per vehicle.

### **Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR**

Saturday, Jan 24, meet at 8:30 am at the visitor center building at Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR. We will walk the pipit trail and drive the auto loop. You may want to bring walkie-talkies

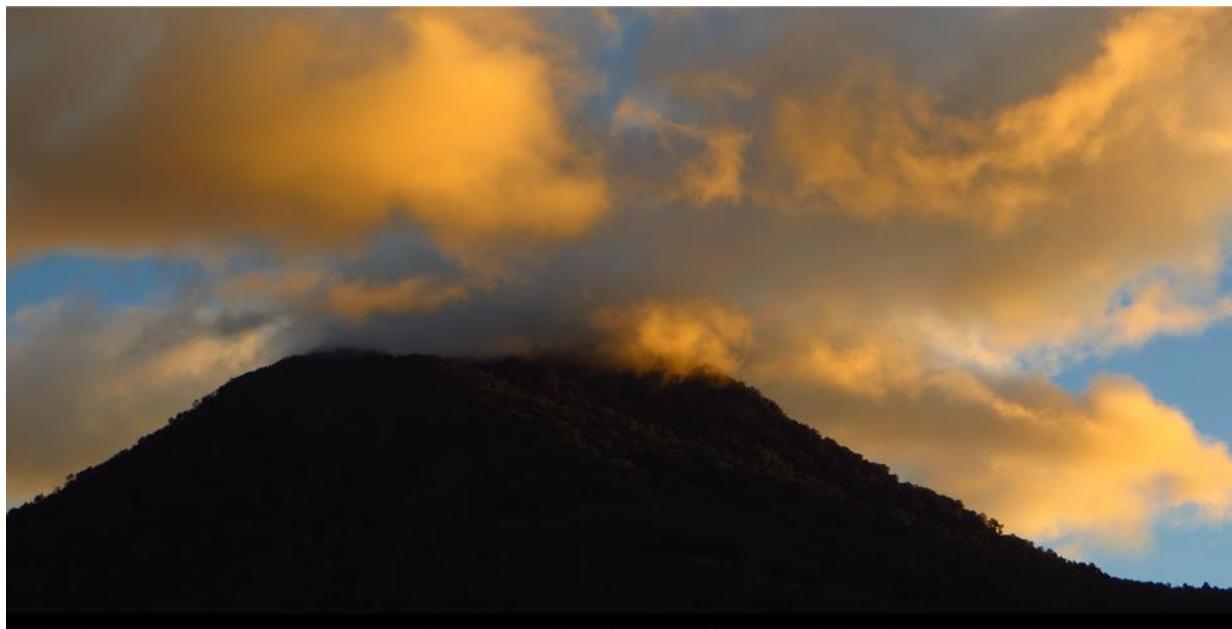
if you have them. Bird until lunch. Dress for the weather. Target species: sparrows, especially Le Conte's sparrows, white-tailed hawk, ducks.

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## **The Feathered Unicorn: Searching for Central America's Most Mythical Bird**

**By Stephan Lorenz**

It is rumored to live in the remote highland forests of far southern Mexico and western Guatemala. It creeps silently among the mossy branches and dense epiphytes of ancient cloud forests. The creature hides high in the canopy, often shrouded by mist and fog that rolls down the steep slopes of its mountain domain. Its total number may be down to triple digits worldwide, but it is difficult to know for sure and few venture regularly into their realm.

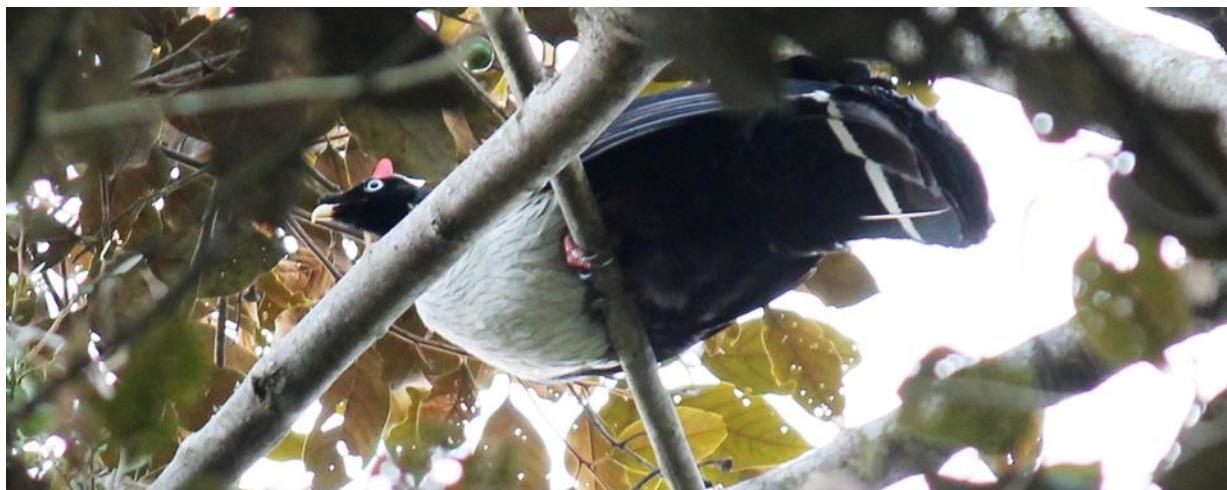


**The feathered unicorn lives among the ancient cloud forests of Guatemala's volcanoes like the Volcan San Pedro seen here during sunset from the village Photo Stephan Lorenz**

For every fortunate birder who lays eyes on a feathered unicorn there are many searchers that return without a single glimpse. For decades, birders ventured to a far-flung reserve in southern Mexico's mountains called El Truinfo where the bird thrives with protection. After an arduous hike it is possible to see one of these incredible animals, but it is always far from guaranteed whether the feathered unicorn will reveal itself. In recent years, the volcanoes of Guatemala have become more accessible and some of the cloud forests, fringing these perfect cones, support small populations of this mythical bird.

Dozens of eager birders have trudged up the steep inclines of these volcanoes and returned with fantastic fables of close encounters. The creature is said to be of simple black and white plumage, with finely streaked underparts, and roughly fits the size of a runt turkey. It possesses a clear bluish eye that fixes observers with a curious stare. The yellow bill appears undersized for its equally small head, and then there is the incongruous coral horn, protruding from its coal-colored head. Its initial plump and sluggish appearance belies its ability to run quickly among stout branches. Often it disappears among the dense foliage with just a glimpse of its black, broad tail that sports a distinct white band.

I am talking about the Horned Guan of course, one of Central America's most special and sought after birds. We had arrived in Guatemala with a target list of two dozen bird species, but knew that there was only one bird to see. I planned accordingly and built two volcano accents into the itinerary. For the first three days we acclimatized and if hailing from any parts near sea level this is an important step, since birders not only need energy to climb the volcano, but also enough stamina to lift binoculars to look at a bird that is likely perching in the tallest canopy.



**The Horned Guan (*Oreophasis derbianus*) has to be one of Central America's most spectacular birds** Photo Stephan Lorenz

It is good advice to sleep several nights at higher altitudes and we settled in for three nights on the shores of Lago Atitlan, which at just over 5,000 feet makes an ideal base, plus the birding in the vicinity of "the world's most beautiful lake" is pretty productive. During the first days in the Guatemalan highlands we birded behind the famous Rincon Suizo Restaurant just off the Interamericana (CA-1) and climbed the ridge beyond the hot springs of Fuentes Georginas further north, reaching at least 8,000 feet there. After two days, the huffing and puffing had given way to somewhat regular breathing, albeit the legs were still tired.

The small lakeside town of San Pedro La Laguna (or just San Pedro) sits right at the base of the Volcan San Pedro and is the best starting point for climbing the cone. Dozens of trekkers clamber to the top on a daily basis and it definitely lacks the sense of remoteness, but it is often touted as the easiest place in the world to observe the feathered unicorn. We spent the first afternoon in town setting up the hike for the next morning. It is recommended to hire a local guide, best done in the small office by the boat dock, since the moderate fee supports the community and maintains the trail. Plus the local guides are familiar with the feathered unicorn and while arranging our hike we learned the local name for the mythical beast, "Pavo de Cacho". After we had arranged time and point of departure with Peneleu, our guide, we spent an hour walking around town, buying food and water for the trek the next day.



**The trail to the guan and top leads through several patches of corn fields before reaching pristine cloud forest and Lago Atitlan is visible 2,000 feet below Photo Stephan Lorenz**

We arose groggily at four in the morning and stood outside our hotel twenty minutes later. A tuk-tuk (a three-wheeled taxi) arrived just on time with Peneleu and we raced towards the trailhead through the empty streets of San Pedro. Without much pause we hoisted our small backpacks and set off down the trail with flashlights illuminating the narrow path. Initially the trail was fairly flat, but soon sloped upwards before steps appeared and then

steeper switchbacks. I focused on Peneleu ahead, who looked like he was out for a stroll, as we tried to keep up with our labored breathing and burning legs.

It was difficult to make out our surroundings in the dark, but open plantations eventually gave way to forest. We reached the often-cited viewing platform 40 minutes into the hike and this overlook is a major landmark en route signaling the halfway point to potential guan habitat. We took a longer break here, replenishing with nourishment and water. Below us the shimmering lights of the various villages and towns outlined the black of Lago Atitlan. The distant mountain silhouettes morphed into distinct ridges and valleys and the sooty sky turned purple. It was time to head higher. Our goal was to arrive in guan range by sunrise.

Our guide told us to take the lead so we could look for birds among the wakening cloud forest. The exploding chandelier song of Brown-backed Solitaires emanated from the canopy and a Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush hopped along the margins of the trail. We continued to climb and the trail was relatively easy at birding pace. I scanned every bare branch, stared at every gap in the canopy, and raised my binoculars periodically to glass the margins of distant clearings. The trees increased in stature, epiphytes in size, and the moss and lichen tangled canopy looked perfect for a feathered unicorn, or a goblin, fairy, or sprite for that matter. Maybe I was a bit tired, but still on high alert.

We stopped after an especially grueling switchback, stared at the canopy, and let a group pass that was already descending. Incredibly, we had not been the first people on the mountain that morning and these hikers must have enjoyed the view atop in the dark. Another local guide recommended to go higher for the “Pavo de Cacho”, albeit he had not spied one that morning. We trudged on, worrying that too much traffic on the trail would scatter the shy birds.

I noticed that our guide had fallen behind and joked that he was possibly looking at a Pavo de Cacho when we heard a muffled call from below us. I turned to walk back down when Peneleu came running up the trail, yelling three words “pavo-de-cacho”. He turned on his heels and we ran after him, somewhat incredulous that we had apparently walked past the bird and hoping that it was still there. We reached the spot two minutes later and a friend of our guide had luckily been keeping an eye on the bird. He pointed at a tree right by the trail and within seconds spotted it again. We looked through a gap in the lower foliage and spotted the large bird, improbably perched on a thin branch, swaying in the rising winds.



The entrance to the park and trail has a promising logo Photo Stephan Lorenz

The broad tail showed the wide band and its whitish underparts were streaked. The legs were a deep red and after the bird shifted a bit we could see the clear, piercing eye even at a distance. Then the feathered unicorn revealed its namesake ornament, a large reddish horn extending from the crown of its head. It would be near impossible to count the bird on a life list without seeing its unique adornment. The bird remained high in the canopy right next to the trail and did not seem bothered by throngs of hikers that filed past. Many stopped and inquired as to what we were looking at and we shared binoculars, information, and our excitement with anyone that would listen. Several hikers took some photos that are sure to make their birding friends jealous back home. I snapped my fair share before the bird flew to another tree, sounding its distinct bill clacking while on the wing.

We followed by racing up the trail and found it again running along thick branches, calling and revealing a red gular patch. It flew again into the back of the extensive crown of an old tree and proceeded to pluck some fruit from nearby branches. An Emerald Toucanet perched nearby and our guide reminded us of the fact that both species often occur together, a good hint while looking for the feathered unicorn. The bird then completed an amazing disappearance act and melted into the dense foliage not to be seen again.



**The view from the top of Volcan San Pedro with Volcan Toliman and Volcan de Atitlan seen across an inlet of Lago Atitlan, the latter volcano supports a healthy population of Horned Guans Photo Stephan Lorenz**

We realized we could not do any better, having been fortunate enough for the feathered unicorn to reveal itself to the fullest. The only thing left to do was hike to the top of the volcano. With the excitement and adrenaline of the morning waning, my legs felt a bit more tired and the slope appeared steeper, but we arrived at the rocky summit one hour later. We enjoyed the views of nearby Volcan de Atitlan and Volcan Toliman and 4,000 feet below us lay the wrinkled blue of Lago Atitlan.

The wind picked up considerably and any birds that may have been present disappeared into sheltered hollows. The return hike was steep and dusty and we did not add much in terms of bird life, but no bird list is too short with a Horned Guan on it. Our backup hike two days later had to be cancelled due to unseasonable winds and the risk of tree fall. Volcan de Atitlan has a healthy population of guans, and while it is a more difficult hike, the chances of seeing one are better. Fortunately, we had glimpsed the main bird of the trip. Peneleu had told us that there are not many birds left on San Pedro Volcano and now is the time to see your feathered unicorn. Join a High Lonesome BirdTours trip to Guatemala to see some of Central America's most special birds, including the Horned Guan.



Horned Guan on the slopes of Volcan San Pedro, the bird of the trip Photo Stephan Lorenz

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## **2015 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](mailto: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:

Outdoor Nature Club  
PO Box 1014  
Bellaire, TX 77402

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**ONC website: <http://www.outdoornatureclub.org/>**

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