



Monthly Meeting December 4, 2017
Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet St, Houston, TX

6:30 pm Christmas Social: Bring some food to share

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

7:30 pm [Program](#): Birding around Jardin, Dept. Antioquia, Colombia by Nina Rach

[Field Trip](#): El Franco Lee Park, December 2, 8 am, led by Larry Dybala

**[Minutes of November Meeting](#) | [Birds and Hurricanes](#)
[Upcoming Texas Birding Events](#) (link to web page)**

Birding Around Jardin, Dept. Antioquia, Colombia

By Nina Rach

Jardin is a colonial town in a coffee-growing area, about four hours drive south of Medellin (the main square of Jardin was declared a national monument by the Colombia Minister of Tourism in 1985). In addition to the lovely architecture, the area is mountainous and hosts many trout farms and local trout restaurants. The town offers an extraordinarily accessible Andean Cock-of-the-Rock lek with fruit feeders, Gallito de Roca Preserve, just a few blocks walk from the main square. It's a short drive to the 465-acre **Yellow-eared Parrot Nature Reserve** (*Ognorhynchus icterotis*). And there are several local coffee fincas that offer birding opportunities. It's a lovely place with very good birds. We visited in early August. <http://www.proaves.org/yellow-eared-parrot-bird-reserve/?lang=en>.

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Field Trip: El Franco Lee Park and Pearland Retention Ponds, December 2, 8 am

Led by Larry Dybala

The group will meet at 8 am at the Gazebo in El Franco Lee Park. From the Beltway 8 feeder past Monroe/Pearland Parkway heading toward Beamer, turn right on Hall Road. Turn right at the gate leading into the park. Turn right at the road heading away from the El Franco Lee Community Center (9500 Hall Road). At the end of the road is the parking lot for the Gazebo.

El Franco Lee now has an improved trail that encircles its wetland pond. There are two 2-storey birding towers and a birding blind. We will hike this loop trail focusing on the wetlands to the left and woodlands to the right. After that we will head toward Pearland, stopping at two retention ponds on the way to the retention pond near to the recycle center. For further information or if you get lost, contact Larry at larrydybala@gmail.com or 832-651-3241.

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Minutes of November 6, 2017 Meeting

By Jean Greenhalgh

The November meeting of OG was held on November 6th, 2017 at the Bayland Park Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet, at 6:30 pm. 19 people attended.

The scheduled Learning Corner – Birding in Oregon – had to be postponed because the PC – projector cable couldn't be found.

December's meeting will be on December 4th. There will be social time at 6:30 with refreshments. The program will comprise members bird photographs and everyone is invited to bring some photos, preferably on a thumb drive, or tablet or laptop, so they can be projected.

January's meeting will be on January 8th at Tracy G Community Center, 3599 West Center Drive. As we did last year, there will be small prizes, with everyone attending receiving one ticket for each Christmas Bird Count in which they participated. David Sarkozi will speak on his Texas Big Year (spoiler alert, he's at 493 on November 20th).

Nina Rach, OG President, said that volunteers are still wanted for the positions of President and Vice President/ Program Organizer. Please contact Nina at nrach@autrevie.com if you are interested in any of the positions or would like further details.

Teresa Connell (teresacconnell@live.com), Field Trip Coordinator, is building this OG's field trips around the theme of Birding in your Big Back Yard – County Birding. Here is the tentative field trip list through April 2018.

December 2 – El Franco Lee Park with Larry Dybala

January 13 – Brazoria County with Ron Weeks

January 27 – Archbishop Fiorenza Park

February 10 – 11 - Austin Waterbird weekender

February 24 – San Jacinto Battleground

March 3 – 4 – Palmetto Woods and Cameron Prairies NWR, Louisiana, with Baton Rouge Audubon Society

April - Kerr County - 3 day weekender, possible sites include South Llano SP, Lost Maples SP a ranch and a fish hatchery.

In addition, December 14 – January 5, Christmas Bird Counts. The HAS site has a list –

<https://houstonaudubon.org/birding/christmas-bird-counts/>

Texas Ornithological Society meeting dates have been announced –

January 11-14 – Thurs-Sun - Winter Meeting, hosted by Piney Woods Audubon, Nacogdoches area

May 3-6 May – Thurs-Sun - Spring Meeting, Alpine area

Future Field Trips will be listed on the OG website <http://www.ornithologygroup.com/>

Stephan Lorenz presented the main Program. Stephan is a guide for both Rockjumper and High Lonesome birding companies.

Remote Birding in Colombia: Search for the Rarest Hummingbird in the World!

Columbia has many species of hummingbirds, including Puffleg, Starfrontlet, Coronet, Sylph, Inca, Velvetbreast, Sword-billed, Woodstar, Thorntail, Thornbill, Woodnymph, Brilliant, Violetear, Emerald, Metaltails and Helmetcrest. Some of the birding lodges have great feeder set ups, often out in the woods, up to 1.5 hours from a lodge.

The rarest hummingbird in the world is the Blue-bearded Helmetcrest. Population estimates range from 50 – 249 birds and it is critically endangered. It was discovered in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta as early as 1880 and was recorded for the last time in 1946 before disappearing for nearly 70 years. The species was lumped with three other distinct subspecies and was known as Bearded Helmetcrest, but was split in 2013, with Blue-bearded, Green-bearded, and Buffy Helme Crests all being endemic to Colombia, plus the White-bearded Helmetcrest which is endemic to Venezuela. Three of these are relatively easily seen but the rare Bluebearded Helmetcrest was feared to be extinct since several searches between 1999 and 2011 failed to locate any birds. It was rediscovered during a survey of fires by ornithologists working for ProAves Columbia in March 2015 at high elevations in a remote section of the Santa Marta Mountains of northern Columbia. There were 2 follow up expeditions in 2016 and 1 in 2017.

Stephan and his wife Claudia completed their 6-day trek in February 2017. After driving up a rough track they stayed overnight in very basic accommodations in Minca in the Santa Marta mountains in northern Columbia. Their guide, Sebastian Ballesteros, a nature photographer, lives in Minca. Their mule driver, Pepe Rojas, a local coffee farmer, walked 4 hours from his home to meet them at 6 am to start the trek. He provided a mule and a horse (Pinocchio) to carry their gear, including camping equipment and food.

They trekked 26 km one way with 6,000 ft. of elevation gain to reach the paramo habitat at 13,000 – 14,000 feet. According to Wikipedia, “The páramo is the ecosystem of the regions above the continuous forest line, yet below the permanent snowline. It is a Neotropical high mountain biome with a vegetation composed mainly of giant rosette plants, shrubs and grasses”. Some of the trek was on mule trails cut into the terrain by marijuana drug runners. Now there is coffee on the mule trains. Most of the land is “owned” by the Koguis and Arhuacos tribes, who have been forced to move higher into the mountains, first by the drug trade and now by coffee cultivation.

The Koguis and Arhuacos are fairly suspicious of outsiders, both Columbians and foreigners. Fortunately, they do speak Spanish. Permission must be sought and an “entrance fee” paid to go to higher elevations. Sebastian Ballesteros organized this, as well as the gear and supplies and the mule and horse. Without him, the trek would not have been possible. Pepe Rojas has a number of mules and horses, but only one of each that can do this difficult trek. The trek was demanding, both for the terrain and the altitude. It can be below freezing at night and up to the 70s by day, and the climate is the same throughout the year. They camped each night and mostly ate rice.

The Santa Marta mountain area is isolated from any other mountain range and has been for a long time. Consequently, there are a number of Santa Marta endemic birds. Because this route is remote and in a little traveled area the birds are less cautious and more easily seen than in the usual birder visited areas. It also has the northernmost Andean Condor population. Stephan had great photos of some of the endemics, including the Santa Marta Antbird and the Santa Marta Wren, of which they saw 12 – 15. Other high elevation birds, included Brown-rumped Tapaculo, Streak-backed Canestero, Columbia Sierra-Finch, Black-cheeked Mountain-Tanager, and the Rufous-chested Tanager.

After two days of strenuous hiking they reached a lagoon at around 14,000 ft. The expected search for the bird proved unnecessary as a female flew into a bush within 5 minutes of their arrival at their camp site. It was the first time a Blue-bearded Helmetcrest had been seen in that spot. Over the time they were there they saw a maximum of four, with the last one seen being a male. Stephan’s photos were wonderful, especially of the male with his blue beard. This population has a habitat of less than 10 hectares – 24.71 acres. There may be other areas with the correct habitat, but the area is high mountain ridges with deep valleys and is very difficult to explore. Very few people have ever seen this bird, and Claudia is probably only the second woman to see it. For photos and description of its re-discovery go to <http://www.sci-news.com/biology/science-blue-bearded-helmetcrest-oxypogon-cyanolaemus-rediscovered-colombia-02615.html>

The Helmetcrest appears to have specific needs in the paramo, but the Koguis are burning the paramo to clear the area for livestock and to grow crops. This leads to boulder fields with little grass or bushes. The bird perches on vegetation or boulders instead of hovering. It crawls along

branches to get to the tiny flowers it uses for nectar. Another problem is feral pigs, but, fortunately, the Koguis eat them.

It was very interesting to see an ornithological expedition and realize that, apart from the conveniences of the digital age aiding planning, communication, and documenting, this was very much like the expeditions of a couple of hundred years ago.

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Birds and Hurricanes

By Hart Rufe (Reprinted with permission from Hart Beat, first published November 1, 2017)



Whimbrels migrated through Hurricane Irene in 2011.

What happens to birds in hurricanes? We know quite well what happens to humans, for hurricane paths are followed 24/7 on the news, television, newspapers, and internet. We are inundated with scenes of devastation, flooding, windblown damage, power outages, displaced and rescued residents, death tolls, and constantly reminded of the millions/billions of dollars recovery will require. But have you ever seen any mention of the plight of birds that go through the same hurricanes, without shelters to evacuate to, with their habitat being destroyed or changed beyond recognition, their food supply obliterated, and with only their wits to get them through?

As with humans, it is only after the hurricane has passed through, that we are able to survey the scene and assess the damage. But even then, bird reports don't make the national consciousness or news unless the bird, such as an enterprising juvenile Cooper's Hawk, seeks shelter in the back seat of a taxi cab. (*See reference and video below.*)



Migrating birds are able to sense air pressure changes and apparently can speed up or delay their migration schedule to their best advantage, avoiding disaster. But some species, such as a number of radio tagged Whimbrels migrating through Hurricane Irene in 2011, flew right through the storm. Some made it through successfully; others survived the storm, only to fall to hunter's guns on Guadeloupe Island. On another occasion a flock of Chimney Swifts (*above right*) got caught up in a hurricane while migrating and became windblown transplants to England, where they delighted birders. Unfortunately, most did not survive the relocation, as over 600 were later found dead. In reality, very little is known about the survival rate of migrating birds confronted by a hurricane. It is most likely that a great many do not survive.

Resident, non-migratory birds have the same need to survive the hurricane as we humans have. They must find a safe haven in the storm: a cavity in a tree works for most cavity nesting birds,



unless the tree is blown down; or a sheltered spot out of the wind and rain must be located, just as humans must find. However, there is anecdotal evidence that some species are severely impacted by hurricanes. Prior to the 2004 hurricanes, Frances and Jeanne, here in St Lucie County, Eurasian Collared Doves (*left*) were the most prevalent and dominant dove species. After the two hurricanes, their numbers were greatly reduced, and even now have not, in my opinion, recovered to the pre-hurricane years.

A family of Florida Scrub Jays that for years before the same hurricanes delighted birders on Savanna Road in Fort Pierce, disappeared with the hurricanes and have not been found in that same location ever since that time, even though the habitat has recovered and appears unchanged in the interim. Sadly, it has been documented that every one of the 44 known Snail Kite nests between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades was destroyed by hurricane Irma this summer. The only good news is that the hurricanes occurred after their breeding season was pretty well completed.

But it is the unfortunate hurricane blown birds, far from their normal range and locations, that excite and delight birders, when relocated, whether they survive to return home or not. After this summer's spate of hurricanes, a badly windblown first year Painted Bunting (*right, well-plumaged bird depicted here*) was found on Monhegan Island in Maine; a Gray Kingbird (*below*) was found in Cumberland County, New Jersey; a Limpkin (*below right*) was found in Virginia; and Roseate Spoonbills and Woodstorks were found in several locations in New Jersey and Pennsylvania; all far north of their usual Florida and deep south haunts.



While relatively little is known about the impact of Harvey, Irma, Jose, Maria and Nate on the fate of birds, we can easily extrapolate the devastation we see on humans in affected areas and assume the loss of habitat, cover, food sources, and roosting and nesting sites must have an equivalent effect on birds.

Heartrending as the images from Barbuda, Puerto Rico, Florida and Texas are, depicting human suffering; similar sufferings by wildlife and birds are unreported. We may never know the full impact in either case. And, as I write these words, equally unnerving reports of loss and suffering

are preminent on the daily news of the wild fires in California, which are certainly having a similar impact on humans, wildlife and birds, differing only in that the California catastrophe is wind and fire, rather than wind and water. For many humans and birds, life will never be the same.

For more details on birds migrating through hurricanes and juvenile Cooper's Hawk/taxi video, see:www.forbes.com/sites/grrlscientist/2017/09/08/where-do-birds-go-in-a-hurricane/#2ea48459254a

www.birdscaribbean.org/2017/10/bird-



dispatches-from-the-hurricane-front-lines

For the Snail Kite report, see: www.audubon.org/news/hurricane-irma-destroyed-all-everglade-snail-kite-nests-lake-okeechobee

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