Birding in a HART BEAT

Columns and Photographs by

HART RUFE

Originally published on
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Edited by Mary Dodge

with assistance of Bob Rufe

The original versions of these columns can be found on the website of the St. Lucie Audubon Society, with active links and larger versions of many of the photographs. To find a specific column, us the site-specific search box on the home page. Visit the SLAS at

stlucieaudubon.org

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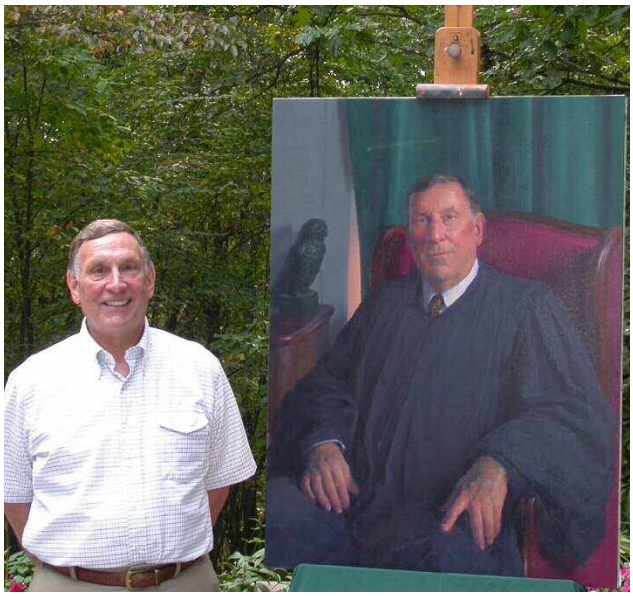


The portrait of Judge William Hart Rufe that hangs in the Bucks County Courthouse in Pennsylvania

FOREWORD

I've known William Hart Rufe, III, my entire life. He was an early mentor, and still regales telling the story of threatening to pull all my teeth after I bit him at age four. He took me under his wing for my first birding outing on the Saturday of Easter weekend in 1973, and gave me my first field guide for Christmas that year – I still cherish it, and the memories of the time, miles and birds we have shared.

He often recalls his own early fascination with birds, being willingly adopted by the only two adult "birdwatchers" in the area of Sellersville, Pennsylvania – Bob Brown and Ralph Waite. As a member of Boy Scout Troop 1, Hart's first merit badge on his march to the Eagle Scout level was Bird Study. He once told me that hearing his first mockingbird (a species uncommon in the north in the 1950s), while laid up in a hospital bed from an injury in a football game in Maryland, was the only thing that softened the pain of ending his gridiron "career." He now lives this fantasy as a diehard Philadelphia Eagles fan.

Hart graduated from Sell-Perk High School (now Pennridge), Mercersburg Academy, Lafayette College and the University of Pennsylvania Law School, *en route* to a successful law practice, Rufe & Rufe, with our other brother, John Jacob, succeeding to an appointment in 1972 to the bench of the Bucks County Court of Common Pleas. He officially retired in 1999, but remained active on "Senior Judge" status, handling mediations and settlements at which he is particularly gifted.

Throughout this time he kept an eye on the birds, becoming the fourth President of Bucks County Audubon, and later, the third President and Chairman of the Board of Heritage Conservancy (*www.heritageconservancy.org*), serving from 1975 to 2011. Hart is a Past President and Life Member of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club (*DVOC.org*), the oldest bird club in the US, a member of the American Birding Association (*ABA.org*), the St. Lucie Audubon Society (*StLucieAudubon.org*), and the Delmarva Ornithological Society (*DOSBirds.org*), as well as a member of numerous other birding and conservation clubs and organizations.

He led numerous field trips for all these birding groups, ranging from a day or weekend outing to fully weeklong excursions to U.S. birding hotspots in Arizona, California, Texas, Manitoba, Alaska and, of course, Florida. A compilation of his accomplishments in the field of environmental activism may be found online at *conserveland.org/heroes/2*. Hart has four children and nine grandchildren. He and his wife, Jewel, reside in Perkasie, PA and Fort Pierce, FL.

Hart is the consummate ambassador for birding, bringing passion for the pursuit of birds and their identification to anyone within earshot, sometimes to the dismay of others wishing to hold a "normal" conversation. While he would probably not consider himself a teacher/naturalist, his

enthusiasm for sharing a wealth of accumulated knowledge and experience has turned many a curiosity seeker into an avid birder.

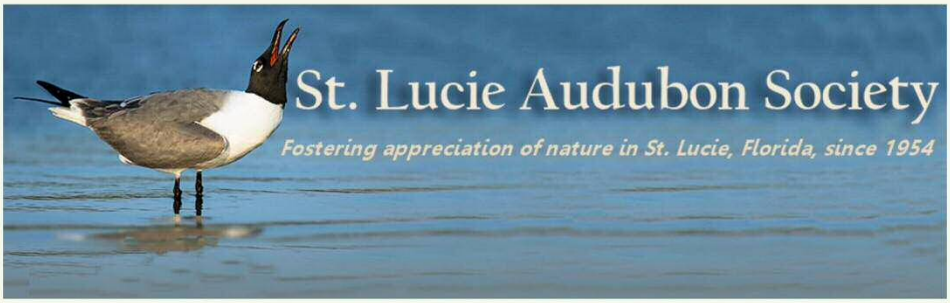
This compilation of *Hart Beat* articles resonates with the human side of birding. There is sufficient technical reference and scientific detail to satisfy an ornithologist, but the allure in this literary presentation is his personal interaction with the birds and their observers in both rural and urban environments. A parallel universe exists, and truly a compendium of articles could be written on birders we have known, antics and strange behaviors of birders we have witnessed, and the unbelievable places we have been and things we have seen. Surely you know of at least one "Clueless Idiot" encounter (p. 98). To this day, if I hear a car door slam, I think of my brother, Hart. You will have to imagine these parallel story lines being created and retold as the journey unfolds for the photographic adventures which are the *Hart Beat* series.

Robert Grim Rufe

Hockessin, Delaware

Bob Rufe at Alapocas Run State Park, Wilmington, Delaware


HART
BEATS
2012
Reddish Egret



Since he first began spending his winters in Fort Pierce, Florida, Hart Rufe has been an active member of the St. Lucie Audubon Society, leading many of its trips to area birding spots and actively participating in many of its events. In 2011, he began contributing the columns and photographs found here to a blog on the web site.

stlucieaudubon.org

The photos in this book can be found in even more vivid color on the web site as links from the Hart Beat blogs. Also, thanks to Hart and our other talented members, we have several web pages of photos of birds found in St. Lucie County, Florida. There is the useful ability to conduct searches within the web site.

We were founded more than 60 years ago and envision ourselves as an organization that is

-- The recognized local authority on birds and their habitats
-- A credible voice promoting environmentally sound decisions on local conservation issues
-- The leader in education on birds and their habitats.
-- A local information resource on wildlife.
-- Identified as a provider of high quality programs and field trips

Dedicated to both environmental education and advocacy we

-- Work to protect wildlife and conserve Florida's outstanding natural resources;
-- Connect people and nature through hands-on experiential learning;
-- Build community through members and chapters.

Our meetings and field trips are between October and May annually. A friendly group, we encourage members of all ages and at all levels of interest and expertise.

Check our web site for schedules, the Hart Beat columns and other news of interest.

HART BEAT 1, first published October 2011

SLAS PHOTO MAKES 'BIG TIME' ON PRIME TIME SIT-COM

My raccoon photo, which is was first posted on the St. Lucie Audubon web site, has been used on the cover of a fictional book, written by a fictional author (Leslie Knope) actually played by Amy Poehler, of *Saturday Night Live* fame, on the comedy series, Parks and Recreation on NBC.

The book, about fictional Pawnee, Indiana, describes the history and life of the town and is quite humorous. In particular, it describes the raccoon invasion that occurred and the reason for my raccoon photo to be on the cover just under the "Welcome to Pawnee, IN" sign and again in the book at page 95.

The book was featured in the *Parks and Recreation* show which first aired on Oct. 6, 2011, when Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) was interviewed by the local TV station and questioned about her claim to having been born in Pawnee. She is challenged to produce her birth certificate, not the short form, but the actual long form, just as in the Donald Trump/Barack Obama episode. The show can be seen online. We also found it on DirecTV On Demand.

I was first contacted by James Burke, a Graphic Designer working as a staff member of Parks and Recreation, assigned to securing photos for the book, on July 22, of this year, and after going through all of the legal and release formalities, James informed me the book cover had been

approved and the book name *Pawnee: The Greatest Town in America* adopted, with October 4th the release date. He sent me a copy just last week. James own photo of himself was used in the book as "Howard Fint, Indiana State mini-golf champion" on page 147. This has been a truly fun experience.

In addition, also last week Kevin Stoos sent me two copies of his book, tu*The Wind and the Spirit*, in which he used my photo of the Bachman's Sparrow from the St. Lucie web site. *www.pawneeindiana.com/about/pawnee-book.shtml*

HART BEAT 2, first published February 2012

VIDEO OF AMAZING TREE SWALLOW "MURMURATION"

Jewel and I recently had an amazing birding experience, perhaps the most outstanding experience in a lifetime of birding. I have recorded a very small portion of it on the YouTube video below. I suggest you watch it in full screen mode and with the sound turned up. Below I have explained my use of the word "Murmuration" for this spectacle, and why I consider it so amazing.

To see this amazing video go directly to YouTube,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvKUKPHJo_Y

Murmuration is the word used to describe a large flock of Starlings, particularly as masses of them wheel and fly in a seemingly coordinated unison without any apparent inter-communication. The term dates back to the 1400's and technically only applies to Starlings. The equivalent word to describe a large flock of swallows engaging in the same behavior is "flight" as in a "flight of swallows." However, "flight" just does not seem to be a descriptive enough word for the enormous gatherings of swallows that we have recently witnessed, and "murmuration" is definitely a more appropriate word to depict the incredible spectacle of millions of swallows wheeling and turning in unison, forming dark clouds of birds, and finally descending in a tornado like funnel down to their roosting grounds, where they wash back and forth over the reeds like waves before settling in for the night.

In my lifetime I have been fortunate to witness hundreds of thousands of penguins in colonies on South Georgia Island and in the Antarctic. I have seen snowstorms of Snow Geese whiten the sky at Bombay Hook in Delaware, and tens of thousands of Gannets on Bonaventure Island, and thousands of Kittiwakes line the cliffs in Alaska and in the Bering Sea. Huge masses of shorebirds have covered acres of marshes at Heislerville in New Jersey, and enormous rafts of thousands of Lesser Scaup off Jekyll Island, Georgia, and American Coots at Merritt Island have been tremendously spectacular. Even five thousand Canada Geese covering our small one acre farm pond from shore to shore in Pennsylvania and thousands of gulls and vultures over your average land fill can be pretty impressive. We even observed a remnant population of thousands of American Bison stretch for a mile to the horizon in Custer State Park in South Dakota several years ago. That also was “spectacular.”

However, none of those prior experiences even began to compare to the amazing spectacle of millions of Tree Swallows blanketing the sky in every direction, from horizon to horizon, and forming into fast moving dark clouds of wheeling and turning birds, over a 45-minute time period, until they made their mad dash to the ground and their roosting spots in the marsh. Finally, this phenomenon only lasts for a few days as the birds continue their migration north to their breeding grounds. This took place on private marshland property on the west coast of Florida.

I believe it is impossible to capture on film or video the over-whelming enormity of this wildlife scene, for the camera lens limits the scope of view while the spectacle is everywhere, over-head and at ground level, at the same time. I am aware that others have much better videos, but this is the best I was able to do.

One final note: yes, we did wear hats and did need to wash our clothes and hats after the event, for all those birds do indeed inevitably drop their calling cards everywhere, including on my camera. (Nikon d300s, video mode, with a 28-300mm Nikkor lens, mounted on a heavy Gitzo tripod with a Miller pan-head. My first ever experience with the video capabilities of this set-up.)

HART BEAT 3, first published on March 6, 2012

The Vermilion Cliffs of Escalante National Monument, Utah

RED BY ANY OTHER NAME

"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. *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."

HART BEAT 4, first published March 12, 2012

WORTH THE WAIT

I am often asked, "What is the most important thing you have learned from all your years of birding?" One word answer: Patience. Birds come and go on their own schedule, not yours. They may develop some general patterns and routines, but just when you think you know when and where they will be, they deviate, and you are left with only one solution: wait.

On our recent trip to the west coast of Florida we had this message once again forcefully driven home to us. A rare for Florida (actually anywhere in the United States, as its range is from Mexico to Argentina) Fork-tailed Flycatcher was reported being seen frequently in a location southeast of

Tampa. The directions went something like this: “Go past the Cockroach Bay Aquatic Preserve and turn onto Lost River Trail. Follow along the west side of the lake to a cul-de-sac at the end of Fossil Point Drive. The bird hangs out in a twiggy tree in the vacant lot near the lake.”

Additional posts added the information that sometimes the bird flew across the lake, east to strawberry fields on the far side and could be seen with a strong telescope, but make sure not to trespass on the strawberry farm; and another post added that other times it flew west to the area near Gulf City Road. All pretty sketchy, but typical, rare bird alert information. The bird had been seen sporadically for more than three weeks, but had not been seen at all during the three days before we got there.

We arrived at the cul-de-sac about 2 p.m. and quickly located the “twiggy tree” which was the only significant tree on the property. No bird, so we settled down to wait and watch. For a couple of hours we scanned the lake and the strawberry farm on the other side; checked out the close shore of the lake and all the other areas mentioned in the web postings, but still no bird.

More waiting and watching. We amused ourselves by watching and photographing some of the other birds in the area, while watching for our target bird also. Suddenly, shortly after 5 p.m. we saw an unfamiliar flash of white on the far side of the twiggy tree. We maneuvered into position to get a better look and confirmed that it was the Fork-tailed Flycatcher, only to have it fly off and out of sight after only a very brief look.

Remembering that an earlier web post said it went back toward Gulf City Road, we jumped into the car and headed back that direction. Twenty minutes later we relocated the bird, fly-catching in the trees between the road and the lake just as the comment had stated. Using the car as a blind, we watched and photographed the bird for almost half an hour until it left the area.

Three days later, a Sunday, several observers saw the bird for the last time, after it’s nearly month long visit. Had we not been patient and waited for the bird to arrive on its own schedule, we would have missed it, as so many other birders did. The bird was definitely worth the wait

HART BEAT 5, first published March 19, 2012

This ran with a video that you can see on YouTube (youtube.com/watch?v=7aQar1R9h0w)

SANDHILL CRANE MYSTERY AT HIGH POINT

What happened? At approximately 10 a.m. on March 7, after watching and videoing the Sandhill Crane babies for over an hour, we packed up our binoculars and cameras and returned to our condo to review the morning photography and video results. When we left the babies we were satisfied that they were doing well and were going to thrive. An hour later we received a frantic call that there was now only one baby Crane. We rushed to the nesting area and confirmed that there was indeed only one baby, but the entire Crane family was now off the nesting island and on the mainland.

OK, so what really HAPPENED? When we saw the family off the island, visions of wildebeests in Africa crossing the Zambezi River while a gauntlet of hungry crocodiles awaited an easy meal, immediately came to mind, for there are turtles and a small alligator in the lake where the nesting island is located. Or the second baby might have simply drowned while attempting to

make the water crossing. Also, there are both a resident Kestrel and a cruising Cooper's Hawk that we see in the vicinity almost every day. Either would have loved baby crane for breakfast.

How about possible human intervention? We know the Cranes are not universally loved in High Point. One resident walking by the assembled Crane watchers complained, "Those f---in' birds create a traffic jam every year." That sounds like Yogi Berra's famous comment, "That restaurant is so crowded, nobody goes there anymore." The High Point equivalent would probably be, "So many people watch the Cranes, we should get rid of them." And the care-taker of the bocce courts constantly complains that the Cranes dig in the clay and ruin the smooth bowling surface. But most High Point residents have a positive, and even protective, feeling about the Cranes. This is regularly confirmed when one watches residents rush out of their homes, cameras in hand, to photograph the birds as they wander across front yards through-out the complex. We just don't believe humans harmed the baby Crane.

Epilogue: Eight days after the disappearance (and after our video had been made and posted) we learned that a licensed wild-life rehabilitator took the second baby Crane into protective custody because the older sibling had begun pecking at the younger, weaker baby and had actually drawn blood. Apparently such activity is an occupational hazard for younger Cranes exposed to an older stronger jealous sibling. The rehabilitator, a resident of High Point, was aware of this potential and watched closely for it to happen. When it began she intervened quickly and placed the baby in appropriate foster care. The baby should be returned to the area of its birth in four to six weeks. Hopefully there will be a future for the second Crane baby.

Sandhill Crane baby update. Sad news to report. Baby No. 1 was hit and killed by a hit and run driver yesterday. I understand there were no witnesses. It is believed that the driver must have been a visitor. The baby was almost full grown and just about the same size as the parents, and could only be distinguished from the parents by its different feathering. It was badly smashed and could not possibly have survived. It was given a proper burial. I am also told that many residents of the condo complex have cried almost as though the baby was a family pet. The parent birds appear devastated and frequently come right up to complex residents almost seemingly to ask, "Do you know where my baby is?" It is heart wrenching.

Further news: Baby No. 2, in rehab, was discovered to have a bad leg, which has been fitted with a splint and the rehab facility is cautiously optimistic that it will recover and survive. The bad leg may explain why the parents were not as attentive to it, and why Baby No. 1 picked on it. However, it does not appear that Baby No. 2 will ever be able to return to the wild. Nevertheless, only time will tell and we can only be hopeful.

HART BEAT 6, first published March 26, 2012

Mirrors and other reflective surfaces can be threatening to some birds.

THOSE BLANKETY BLANK BIRDS

How often have you heard a statement like this: "That _____(fill in the blank- "stupid" , "idiot", "crazy", "annoying", "pretty", or "beautiful") bird is _____ (fill in the blank – "hitting", "pecking at", "flying into" or "crashed into") our _____ (fill in the blank – "picture window", "kitchen window", "car window/bumper", "truck mirror", or "skyscraper window") again." ? Yes, sometimes it does seem that birds have a death wish.

WHY? All birds are territorial. When they find an appropriate place to fill all their basic needs; food, shelter, water, and a place to raise their young; they defend it to prevent competitors from taking it away

from them. This becomes particularly true as birds prepare for breeding season when choice nesting sites may be in short supply, or in winter time when food sources become critical, or during migration when birds are rushing to be the first on the breeding grounds to select prime locations.

Birds, unlike humans, have not evolved with mirrors or other reflective surfaces in their evolutionary history. Consequently, their own reflected image becomes a competitor that must be driven away. Or that large expanse of reflected sky in a skyscraper, or reflected expanse of trees in a picture window, looks inviting for safe passage, or even escape from a predator. Certainly birds must see their own reflection in pools of water, as reflected bird images are cherished opportunities for bird photographers. But water reflections are in the birds DNA background as they have undoubtedly learned that all they achieve by driving away such a competitor is a wet head. Also, the water reflection is always a challenger that is below them so they always have an automatic position advantage in the confrontation.

The most competitive times for birds are the breeding, migration and winter seasons, so those are the seasons when one is most likely to see a bird attacking its own image. Robins, Cardinals and Mockingbirds are all species quite comfortable living close to humans, which explains why they

may very much want to defend the shrubbery around your home from the challenger in your windows. But woodpeckers, Bluebirds and even Turkeys engage in this behavior, and hundreds of species fly into reflective windows on migration.

Recently, while waiting to depart on the Painted Bunting field trip, the participants were treated to a Pileated Woodpecker attack on a car in the Home Depot parking lot. The poor bird was confronted with two intruders: one on the driver's side window and a second one in the driver's side mirror. The poor bird didn't know which one to attack first. Several years ago, Jewel and I experienced a Wild Turkey that attacked our Pennsylvania home ground level picture window, as well as the shiny hubcaps on our car, and strutted his stuff all fanned out to drive away his rival. It was quite a sight to see.

How to stop these attacks? Tape a shiny plastic spinning wheel along with some shiny Mylar streamers from a party store to the window and let them spin and wave in the breeze. And wait for the next season

HART BEAT 7, first published April 2, 2012

Long, beautiful tails on birds, such as this Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, may be more than mating lures. Swallow-tailed Kite below.

MINE IS BIGGER THAN YOURS!

Swallow-tails, scissor-tails and fork-tails all describe the long streamers that some birds sport as part of their everyday attire. It has long been assumed that this adornment was meant to attract members of the opposite sex, for the male with the longest sexiest tail would surely win the most desirable mate

Certainly many species have developed showy features to demonstrate their outstanding fitness for passing on their genes. Consider the beautiful blue head and fanned tail of the strutting tom turkey;

or the spectacular plumes that rendered so many of the egrets almost extinct a hundred years ago; the drumming and fancy dancing of Prairie Chickens and other members of the grouse family; and what could be more fanciful than the displaying male Peacock; all with but one purpose: to prove Darwin right and to win fair maiden.

Barn Swallows

But research now proves that there is an aerodynamic benefit for birds with a long tail, particularly those species which make their living catching insects by snatching them on the fly. Without getting into the details of the mechanics of the maneuverability advantage streamer tailed birds have (for this see *www.int-ornith-union.org/files/proceedings/durban/Symposium/S31/S31.3.htm*), it might be generally summarized to say the long split tail increases lift and reduces drag when compared to the more common flat tail of most bird species.

Fork-tailed Flycatcher

The "swallow-tail" almost seems to be a misnomer, for only the Barn Swallow of our North American swallows actually has a swallow tail. But the Swallow-tailed Kite, and Scissor-tailed and Fork-tailed Flycatchers all have magnificent streamer tails which, even if the main purpose is to help their owners catch bugs, stirs birders imagination with its unique beauty.

Some years, like this one, all four streamer-tailed species can be seen in Florida. Maybe it has to do with Leap Year, or could it be "Presidential Election Year?"

HEART BEAT 8, first published April 9, 2012

More exciting than seeing a few Redhead Ducks is seeing a whole pond covered in them, here in Tierra Verde, Florida

"DUCKS ON THE POND"

Anyone who has ever played baseball knows that "Ducks on the pond" means there are base runners in scoring position. The exhortation by team-mates is a socially acceptable way for them to urge their batter at the plate to "Just hit the damn ball, Stupid, and drive those runs in!" For birders, the phrase can mean anything from a single Mallard female duck in a mud puddle, to a raft of hundreds, even thousands of ducks on a large lake.

In Tierra Verde, at the southern tip of the St Petersburg peninsula, along the Pinellas Bayway on the way out to Fort DeSoto County Park, we have discovered (well, not a Christopher Columbus type discovery, just new to us) a pond with ducks on it, a lot of ducks. In 2010, when we visited the area in late March the pond was covered with Ruddy Ducks. This year, our visit in February found it covered with Redhead Ducks (*male above, female previous page*) with a few other species sprinkled in.

Why do concentrations of ducks choose one lake or pond over another that seems to be almost identical in nature and character? Safety and food are probably the main considerations. There were no alligators on the lake and the lake was surrounded by thick vegetation on all sides except where there were large well-kept homes with manicured lawns running down to the lake edges. Surely there is no duck hunting in this area. No people or dogs were anywhere in sight.

We had great difficulty finding a small break in the vegetation in order to photograph the birds. When we did find such a spot, we pulled our car up to it and used the vehicle as a blind, waited for the birds to drift back close to our shore, and took our pictures out of the car window.

American Wigeon

As for food, the water depth and quality are critical. Both Ruddy and Redhead ducks dabble and do shallow dives for aquatic plant life as well as mollusks, small shellfish and crustaceans. The water must support an abundance of both at the right depth for easy reach. The Tierra Verde pond obviously met both criteria. Other, seemingly similar ponds probably do not.

Jewel loved the area, and as we drove along the homes bordering the pond, exclaimed, “I could live here.” We found one vacant lot for sale, for which Jewel located the online listing – the $750,000 price tag for the vacant lot alone convinced us that it was indeed a nice pond for the ducks, and a nice pond for us to visit to see them.

Lesser Scaup

Northern Shoveler

HART BEAT 9, first published April 17, 2012

The Little Blue Heron appears to have a difficult time deciding on what he wants to wear as he goes through his life.

TIME FOR A NEW OUTFIT

We know that in the spring a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of (drumroll!) -- getting a new outfit. (Did you really think that in a birding article, I was going to say "baseball"?) All mankind recognizes that with the waning of winter and the stirring of spring, the changing from dreary gray drab to light, bright colorful sparkle, (well, at least up north, if not so much here in Florida) it is time to celebrate the freshness of the season with new fashions in keeping with the uplift of the spirit. And so it is in the bird world as well.

One challenge a new birder faces early on arises with the realization that two different plumages must be learned for many species: the plain nondescript basic plumage worn most of the year, and particularly in the winter non-breeding season; and the fancy dress alternate plumage worn for a relatively short time in the spring breeding season, when the birds, like humans, want to look their absolute sexiest best to attract the most promising mate.

Then add, to the new birder's consternation, the further realization that many species feature young and juvenile plumages that don't look anything at all like the adult; and sometimes, while changing from juvenile plumage to adult plumage, the bird may, like some teenagers, appear altogether alien

An excellent example of this four plumage learning requirement is provided by the very common Little Blue Heron which starts out wearing a very simple basic white outfit. After nearly a year of sporting this dress that perplexes beginning birders trying to separate this juvenile Little Blue Heron from the similarly dressed, Great, Snowy, and Cattle Egrets and maybe even White Ibis, (come on, students, remember the gray bill with the black tip and the green legs separates this bird from all the others), the teenager then goes into a plumage change during which it is almost half white and half blue. (*above, right*)

Upon reaching adulthood the Little Blue Heron finally sports its blue body, reddish neck and head appearance (*left*), but retains the distinctive gray bill with the black

tip and green legs of its youth. Finally, the fourth plumage comes into play the following spring when, preparing to breed, the neck and head adopt a slightly richer hue of red, the bill blazes bright blue, and the legs develop a dark shade of green, almost black . It doesn't last long though, for like the wedding dress and tuxedo, bright adornments briefly worn, they are soon discarded for the more mundane dress of everyday wear.

For additional examples of extreme plumage changes check the Black-bellied Plover, Dunlin and Laughing Gull on the St. Lucie Audubon photos page.
(*stlucieaudubon.org/PhotoPages/photos3.html*)

Little Blue Heron in breeding plumage

HART BEAT 10, first published April 24, 2012

The game is on as gulls swarm unwatched beach booty.

FOREIGN INVADERS?

When Hernando de Soto, the famous Spanish explorer and conquistador, conquered Peru in 1530, his expedition was regarded as extremely successful back in Spain because he came back a wealthy man with vast riches in gold and silver that he had plundered from the Incas. Conversely, his second trip to the new world in 1539 was deemed an utter failure, as he marauded his way through Indian territories now known as Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas, but did not find any gold, silver or treasure of any sort, and ultimately died in 1542 on the western bank of the Mississippi River. History credits de Soto as the “discoverer” of that great river.

This background is relevant because in 1898, at the height of the Spanish-American War, a fort was built on Mullet Key in Tampa Bay near the presumed location where Hernando de Soto began his American odyssey. The name Fort De Soto just sounds more imposing than "Fort Mullet Key." I am certain that de Soto never dreamed that the REAL treasure of the area would be the birds and Gulf Shore beaches that attract visitors from all over the world.

Recently we witnessed a modern day plunderer pillage local treasure on a Fort DeSoto Park beach. Unsuspecting beach-goers went for a pleasant stroll leaving their luncheon snacks protected only by plastic shopping bags and a small sand fort in front of their beach chairs. The natives, a group of Laughing and Ring-billed Gulls led by a foreign conquistador, Lesser Black-backed Gull, seized the loot and made off with it. In the main photo on the previous page, the Lesser Black-backed can be seen taking command of the raid, and in the second photo he is successfully transporting his bounty to safer surroundings. The photo above depicts a juvenile Herring Gull attempting to steal a plastic bag of a Coke six pack. Note that he is alone in this endeavor. Finally, the Lesser Black-backed posed for his formal portrait.

The Lesser Black-backed Gull is a European gull that is slightly smaller than the more common Herring Gull. It is identified by the darker back (mantle) and wings, but not as deep and rich a black as the larger Great Black-backed Gull. One of the Lesser Black-backed Gulls' most distinctive features is its yellow legs, contrary to the pink legs of the somewhat similar, but lighter backed, Herring Gull. It, like the human European invaders of yore, has become more common in the eastern United States, and can be found on Hutchison Island, both north and south, most winters. Ground zero for the species in the winter is in eastern Pennsylvania where

they occur in the hundreds on two lakes – Nockamixon and Peace Valley, only a few miles from our Bucks County home.

Just as the Spanish Galleons that transported stolen treasure from the New World back to Europe in the 1500s, (and sometimes sank in hurricanes off Fort Pierce Inlet, giving rise to our popular designation as "Treasure Coast"); and modern day double hulled oil tankers transport modern day treasures from the Middle East, past Florida, to refineries in Texas; perhaps future space shuttles will transport treasures of the future, (uranium? lithium?) from undiscovered planets back to the Space Coast with who knows what impact on the unsuspecting planet inhabitants.

Lesser Black-backed Gulls, as plunderers, are strictly "small-time."

Lesser Black-backed Gull

HART BEAT 11, first published May 8, 2012

The Western Kingbird is not often seen in Florida but has showed up recently in Hendry County.

Cassin's Kingbird

KINGBIRD HIGHWAY

In 1973, the now famous birder, Kenn Kaufman, at the age of 16, dropped out of high school and hitch-hiked all across the country in pursuit of setting a new Big Year record of bird species seen in North America. He covered over 69,000 miles and spent less than $1,000 total, travelling from Key West to Alaska and Baja California to Maine. He chronicled his exploits in

Gray Kingbird

an excellent coming of age autobiography entitled Kingbird Highway. An internet search did not disclose why he chose that title, but his thumbing rides, eating cat food, sleeping under the stars experience certainly qualified him as a "King of the Road," searching for birds along hundreds of highways. Now finally, to the point of all this – there is a road here in Florida, out in Hendry County, south of Clewiston and Lake Okeechobee, near STA-5, known simply as County Road 835, that truly qualifies as "Kingbird Highway."

Eastern Kingbird

For the past several winters, Western Kingbirds and an occasional Cassin's have found this area to their liking. Western Kingbirds are expected to be here in Florida in small numbers most winters. They sometimes appear in St. Lucie County on the fences that keep poachers out of the orange groves along Route 70. But Cassin's Kingbird breeds primarily in New Mexico and Arizona, and winters on the west coast of Mexico and the Baja Peninsula, extending north into southern California. Any that show up in Florida clearly have a mal-functioning GPS.

To top it off, this year a Gray Kingbird, a common summer resident of mostly coastal Florida, stayed for the winter on Kingbird Highway instead of migrating to the West Indies with all the rest of its kin. If you add the Eastern Kingbird (*bottom left on previous t page*), a common summer bird throughout the eastern United States, including Hendry County, you have all of the Kingbirds that might reasonably be expected in eastern North America in one relatively small area: Kingbird Highway. Note: Now if the Loggerhead Kingbird that appeared in Key West in March 2007 for one of its very rare North American appearances, ever shows up on Kingbird Highway - that will REALLY be something to write about.

Incidentally, Kenn Kaufman did not set the Big Year record on his try in 1973. His total of 666 was trumped by 669 seen that same year by a student doing a doctoral dissertation on bird conservation named Floyd Murdoch. The current record is held by Sandy Komito at 748 species set in 1996. (5/8/2012)

Sandy Komito's record was documented in the book and movie entitled The Big Year, starring Owen Wilson, Jack Black and Steve Martin. Sandy Komito was the January 2013 speaker at St. Lucie Audubon Society.

Loggerhead Kingbird

HART BEAT 12, first published May 15, 2012

When you see them together, there is no doubt which is the Greater or Lesser Yellowlegs.

SIZE MATTERS

Yes, size does indeed, matter. The taller a basketball player is, the greater advantage he or she has, all other things being equal; and at the Kentucky Derby, a jockey's total weight, with outfit, riding equipment, and saddle, must come in under 126 pounds. Football players seem to be getting bigger every year, and tiny elfin gymnasts at the Olympics this summer will dominate our television screens. Surprise, surprise, size is important in the bird world, as well.

Without getting into the obvious differences between Sandhill Cranes and hummingbirds; or discussing the distinct advantages that large raptors have over their smaller counter-parts; or why some birds have long bills that are stocky/thin/straight/up-curved/down-curved, while others have short bills, (also sometimes stocky/thin/straight/up-curved/down-curved); or the escapability that smaller birds have when diving into a brush pile or thicket to avoid a hungry predator; this article will concentrate on the role size plays in simply identifying a bird and separating it from other similar species with which it might be confused. In fact, Peterson, in the introductory "How to Identify Birds" section to his field guide, begins with the first basic question: "What is the Bird's Size."

In field guides all species are drawn to appear pretty much the same size. Bird photographs, often without any scale for reference, depict birds in full frame so that it is hard to tell whether the bird is a jumbo jet or a Piper Cub. Only the written description in the accompanying text tells you the actual size. And that is very hard to visualize. In the field a larger shore bird with bright yellow legs is probably a “Yellowlegs,” but the question becomes, “Which one?” The Greater, 14 in. as the field guide says, or the Lesser at 10 ½ in. according to the “book?” Almost impossible, even through a telescope, until you see them side by side. Then it becomes obvious. Size does make a difference.

On Bird Identification class field trips the participants are often astounded that either Jewel or I are able to identify a distant flying bird as a Forster’s Tern, without even raising our binoculars or taking more than a sideways glance. Of course, we already know that there are only three species of terns commonly present in Florida in the winter when the classes are held, and that two of them, the Caspian and Royal are half again as big as the Forster’s (*Royal and Forster's shown below*). This too, becomes obvious when they are seen side by side.

So the lesson, Class, is: that it is important to become familiar with the general size of the different species as they relate to other members of their family groups, whether they be herons and egrets, shorebirds, gulls and terns, raptors, and just about all the different bird families.

HART BEAT 13, first published May 24, 2012

White morph of the Reddish Egret (Standard Reddish Egret below left)

COLOR MORPHS IN BIRDS

If a Labrador Retriever and a Poodle can be interbred to create a "Labradoodle," why can't a Cardinal and an Oriole interbreed to form a "Cardinoriole?" Wow! Would that be one colorful bird! Simple answer: all breeds of dog originated from one canine specie and therefore can interbreed to their heart's content to ultimately create highly individual breeds from Chihuahua to Great Dane,

as well as the ever lovable "Mutt."

Birds, on the other hand, are each members of their own separate species and can only breed within their own specie. Therefore you will never see a "Cardinoriole" or a "Hummingcrane."

O K, then why are the Great Blue Heron and the Great White Heron (*both right*) considered the same specie, and why are there two colors of Reddish Egret, not to mention Short-tailed Hawk?

Another simple answer: they are considered color morphs of the same specie, carry the same DNA, and can breed together. With some species, Screech-Owls (red and gray morphs) for example, the young of either or both morphs may appear in the same nest. The "why" for this occurrence is still a matter of study among ornithologists, but a very erudite and hyper-technical discussion of the current thinking can be found in this paper on Colour polymorphism in bird: causes and functions.

1. An over-simplified summary of the different theories would be that:
2. The color gives the bird an advantage in finding food in its habitat;
3. The color gives the bird an advantage in mating selectivity;
4. The color gives the bird an advantage in blending in or standing out in its habitat;
5. The color doesn't make any difference at all;

6. The color helps confuse birders and makes them have to pay closer attention to their preparation for field trips; and
7. The colors give more illustrations that need to be in bird books so that more field guides get sold.

(Those last two weren't really in the erudite study, but I think they are probably true.) Since the white morphs of these three species occur most often in the southern most portion of their Florida range, perhaps the white plumage helps keep them cooler. Just a thought.

Maybe instead of getting all bogged down in analyzing why there are color morphs, we should just enjoy the birds and marvel at how they are able to adapt as they see necessary. Incidentally, there are some birds that have been bred within their own specie, much like dogs. Just think of domestic chickens, from White Leghorns to Rhode Island Reds, and all the different colors of pigeons, all descended from the original Rock Pigeon.

Sometimes it even happens naturally in the wild: for an example, check out the Wurdemann's Heron, which is a rare interbreed between the Great Blue and Great White Herons, exhibiting features of both. You can find it in the Green Cay trip report on the St. Lucie Audubon web page: *stlucieaudubon.org/docs/120204GreenCay.html*

Still, a "Cardinoriole" would really be neat.

Short-tailed Hawks, light and dark phases

HART BEAT 14, first published June 3, 2012

Four Carolina Wren chicks take their first trips out of the nest.

HOUSE WREN?

Which bird is the true "House" Wren? The one that lives in a bird house on the edge of the woods, or the one that lives in your house?

The House Wren *(right)*, a winter resident of Florida, typically nests in a bird box, building a nest of small sticks and twigs, often usurping a chickadee, titmouse or bluebird nest and

building its nest right over top of the prior owners nest after having tossed the unhatched eggs out of the box. Reminds one of the uninvitedsquatter who moves into your home while you are away, and completely takes over the entire house. In the accompanying photo of one of our bird boxes at the end of the year, note the Tufted Titmouse moss nest at the bottom, followed by a grass nest started by a Bluebird, but usurped by a House Wren stick and twig nest on top. The Titmouse family was probably successful, but the Bluebirds, I'm sure were overwhelmed by the tiny little House Wrens.

Now the Carolina Wren (*right*), on the other hand, is like the pleasant house guest who comes to visit and makes no muss of fuss, and you don't even know they are there. Quiet around the house, they come and go very stealthily and are not at all bothered by our human activity.

For years we have had a nesting pair in a hanging basket on out front porch. This year they commandeered the fake flower display right next to our front door. From a distance, and even close up, the nest is not at all visible. Only when you examine the display from just the right angle are you able to see the mother on the nest. And she is so confiding in you that she does not fly even when your eyeballs are mere inches from her face. A few days later there are five hungry mouths begging for food. Actually, the open mouth appears to be about five times the size of the rest of the baby.

When the birds are ready to leave the nest the parent will stay on the ground, or in this case, our front brick porch, and entice the hungry babies to flutter down to be fed. All five made it down safely, but only four posed for their initial portrait. By the end of the day all our guests had quietly left the house and dispersed into the surrounding area, not to be seen or heard from again, until their next nesting in a few weeks. And we didn't even have any clean-up to do.

I don't know why the two wren species were named "House" and "Carolina," but to me it seems the Carolina Wren is a more desirable house guest than the House Wren. Perhaps they should be renamed House Wren and "Home Wren" for the Carolina. Certainly the Carolina Wren is a more welcome guest in our home than the deceptively mean little home-wrecking House Wren.

Carolina Wrens range year-round from the Adirondacks to Florida and west to just beyond the Mississippi River, so keep an eye out for them on your porch. You might have guests that you don't even know are there.

Carolina Wren nest

HART BEAT 15, first published July 5, 2012

The "flags" on the Red Knots show where they have been.

FLY YOUR FLAG

Citizens of every country in the world proudly fly their nation's flag. Flag colors are universally bright and bold evoking the strong emotions of love and devotion all feel for homeland. One can observe the tears of joy and pride that people from all over the world shed when they see their country's flag flying in front of the United Nations building in New York, and who can doubt the sincerity of flag wavers supporting their nation's athletes at the Olympics. But did you know that some birds also carry flags, not as symbols of national love and devotion, but rather to show, in a manner, where they have been? Something like a tourist pin collected at some distant travel location.

Red Knots (*right*) sometimes collect these travel flags. They breed in the High Arctic and winter in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, a migration of over 9,000 miles. Along the way, they stop off to re-fuel, and pick up flags to help researchers follow their life cycles. In recent years, some Red Knots have been foregoing the

long flight to Argentina and have been wintering in Florida, where they can be found at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge and on Sanibel Island. Most of the banding and travel flag placement is done in Argentina on their wintering grounds (orange flags), in the Delaware Bay, a prime stop-over on their migration north (lime green flags), and in Canada on their breeding grounds (white flags). Some birds also carry a silver U.S. Fish and Wildlife band as well.

The winter plumage Knot pictured here (*above*) sporting "JL4" was photographed on the causeway linking Sanibel Island to the rest of Florida. The remaining photos were taken on Reeds Beach, a famous stop-over for Red Knots on the Delaware Bay just north of Cape May, New Jersey. One Knot has collected all four travel flags – white "KH," orange, green and silver. Another pair of Knots, one in full breeding plumage, and one still molting into that plumage, walks past a Horseshoe Crab that gave its life after spawning and depositing the millions of eggs that the Knots feed upon to refuel for the remaining leg of their trip to the arctic tundra. The dark horizontal lines in the photo) near the crab shell are horseshoe crab eggs washed up onto the beach by the tide.

Red Knots leave their Tierra del Fuego wintering grounds and fly non-stop to the Delaware Bay, timing their arrival there to coincide with the short Horseshoe Crab spawning season which occurs in late May of each year. They arrive exhausted, emaciated and in critical need of food. They gorge themselves for several days on the crab eggs, regaining as much as ten per cent of their body weight a day, building up fat reserves for the next flight to the arctic tundra.

Unfortunately, Horseshoe Crabs have been severely over-harvested for the past ten to fifteen years for fertilizer and fish bait and the decline in Horseshoe Crabs has resulted in a serious Red Knot population loss which some estimate to be as high as ninety percent of their former numbers. Some researchers also believe global warming is impacting their high arctic breeding grounds, but more study needs to be undertaken in this area. For more information on Red Knots and Horseshoe Crabs see this US Geological Survey release (*www.usgs.gov/newsroom/article.asp?ID=2843#.VagpGPmrSUm*) .

Perhaps the Red Knot is evolving, and more of them will winter in Florida each year instead of making the long flight to Argentina. It certainly seems to me that we see a few more each winter in Florida than the year before. Only time will tell. In the meantime, enjoy them while we can and continue to look for their little flags that signal to us that they are travelling as they should.

Red Knots migrating

HART BEAT 16, first published July 15, 2012

This Bay-breasted Warbler is just one of the many species of birds, especially warblers, that stop to refuel at Magee Marsh on the south side of Lake Erie, Ohio, during their return north.

MAGEE MARSH, OHIO

Floridians instinctively know when the south-bound "Snowbird" migration is in full flower. For confirmation they need only record the license plates in their local mall or condo complex. Cars suddenly appear from such exotic places as Vermont, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Kentucky, and almost any state north of the Florida/Georgia border, (Florida's equivalent of the Mason-Dixon Line).

Swainson's Thrush

Similarly, at Magee Marsh, on the south shore of Lake Erie in Ohio, the northerly migration of real birds (as opposed to "Snowbirds") can be documented by checking the hundreds of license plates in the parking lot. A quick survey will disclose arrivals from Michigan to Massachusetts and from Maine to Manitoba, with even a few from (drumroll, please!) Florida. On the board-walk in the marsh one can hear a multitude of languages, including a fair amount of Pennsylvania Dutch spoken by the numerous local Amish and Mennonite families who bird together, and demonstrate outstanding birding skills and knowledge, exceeded only by the profusion of professional guides in attendance at posts along the boardwalk to help spot and sort out the different species. All are drawn to this spectacular birding location by the vast variety (over 300 species) of neo-tropic migrants that have reached this road block of a Great Lake in the path of their sex-driven hurry to reach their northern nesting grounds.

Trumpeter Swan

Think about it – many of these birds have spent the winter luxuriating in Central and South America, and in their journey north, have already made the 18 to 24 hour non-stop flight across the Gulf of Mexico, only to arrive exhausted and energy depleted on the Gulf coast shores from Florida to Texas. They then slowly make their way north through the states, feeding and rebuilding their body reserves during the day while migrating at night, until they are confronted with Lake Erie, another huge body of water to cross. Déjà vu all over again! While they mill around in places like Magee Marsh, building their reserves for the flight and awaiting good migration conditions, we birders are treated to up-close and personal, spectacular views of a myriad of marvelous little beauties that are mostly hard to see at any other time of the year. (For an excellent FAQ on neo-tropic migrants crossing the Gulf of Mexico, see the reference to orioles at *www.learner.org/jnorth/search/OrioleNotes3.html*.)

The local Ohio area, led by the Black Swamp Bird Observatory, which is located at the entrance to Magee Marsh, has capitalized on the phenomenon by creating what they pretentiously call "The Biggest Week in American Birding." (See: *www.biggestweekinamericanbirding.com/default.htm*.) While the Space Coast in Florida, Cape

May in New Jersey and any number of places in Texas, Arizona, and California might argue with Ohio's "biggest week" claim, Magee Marsh is, indeed, pretty good.

Warblers are definitely the feature attraction, but uncommon, unusual and varied birds such as Trumpeter Swan (*left*), Swainson's Thrush (*right*), Rusty Blackbird, Lincoln's Sparrow, and Solitary Sandpiper can be found with little effort. Some of these birds pass through Florida and St. Lucie County on their way north, but usually when they are in a hurry to keep moving. It may, or may not, be the "biggest week in birding," but it sure makes a great place to check out the license plates to see where everyone has come from. We already know where the birds came from and where they are heading.

Incidentally, if you are interested in seeing all the warblers in one place, Gerry Dewaghe, a long-time friend of ours, has an excellent collection of photos he taken over the years. You can access it at *www.pbase.com/gdewaghe/wa&page=all*.

Black-and-white Warbler

Blackburnian Warbler

Black-throated Green Warbler

Cape May Warbler

Chestnut-sided Warbler

Kentucky Warbler

Lincoln Sparrow

Magnolia Warbler

Northern Parula

Northern Waterthrush

Pronthonotary Warbler

Red-breasted Nuthatch

Rusty Blackbird

Solitary Sandpiper

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Yellow Warbler

HART BEAT 17, first published July 26, 2012

If it weren't for the work of the industrious vultures, the roads and landscape would be filled with rotting carrion. Black Vultures get first choice at the table.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

When the vultures appear overhead, the captain of the St. Lucie River cruise boat cautions everyone onboard to "Look alive!" lest they be mistaken for an easy vulture meal. No one wants to be mistaken for carrion, the main source of the vulture diet. In fact, we would probably be up to our eye-balls in stinking rotting road-kill if it weren't for the excellent work done by those ubiquitous efficient scavengers, often maligned because of their less than gorgeous good looks and gorging, gluttonous feeding habits. They can clean up a car-killed wild boar or white-tailed deer in a matter of hours, or a vehicle-flattened skunk, possum, or groundhog in minutes. There are actually places where their migratory return is hailed much like the swallows of Capistrano, but maybe without as good PR. Think Hinckley, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. (I found six such festivals: *vulturesociety.homestead.com/Events.html*)

Beginning birders struggle with separating the two species of vultures commonly found in eastern North America, particularly when seen flying overhead at a distance. But when seen in close proximity to each other, and to us, the differences are obvious.

The red head of the Turkey Vulture (*left*) and the black head of Black Vulture are readily apparent, while the different flight shapes of the two, as well as the light colored feathering in the under-wings can readily be distinguished.

Less obvious, and therefore needing more observation to learn, is the difference in the bird's flight patterns: the Turkey Vulture has more of a "V" shaped flying profile, which it seems to teeter-totter back and forth as it soars; while the Black Vulture flies with a more flat, stocky profile, and intersperses its soaring with quick bursts of wing-beats.

Both feed in communal togetherness, but the smaller Black Vulture is dominant over the larger Turkey Vulture, which will patiently wait at a respectful distance until all the Black Vultures have had their fill before moving in to tackle the remaining carcass. Both have bare, un-feathered heads so that they won't mess up any fancy hairdo they might have, while dipping into some poor critter's bloody bowels. (Some image, isn't it?!)

Out in the southwestern United States, the Zone-tailed Hawk, (*left*), a normal typical raptor that feeds on small birds, particularly quail, and small mammals, reptiles and amphibians, looks very much like a Turkey Vulture.

Except that it has a black feathered head, a gray beak and small white stripes in its tail. But it has developed a unique hunting style: flying just like the teeter-tottering Turkey Vulture, and actually often soaring in the company of the vultures. The potential prey on the ground know they have nothing to fear from the carrion eating vultures, but mistake the identity of the vulture mimicking Zone-tailed Hawk with them, until it is too late. Almost like a computer hacker or a wealthy banker's widow in Nigeria who needs our help in spiriting millions out of the country ("just send $2,500 to show your good faith").

Now go forth with confidence that you won't mistake the identity of the vultures, and if you get to southern Arizona, New Mexico or west Texas look for the "Turkey Vulture" with the gray beak and the striped tail. And be sure to "Look alive!"

All vultures, such as these Turkey Vultures, are usually seen dining in groups.

HART BEAT 18, first published on August 8, 2012

The Florida Scrub Jay has never been found outside the state.

ENDEMICS

"Why are you writing a birding article about a medicine that makes you go to the john?" my non-birding friend asked. "ENDEMIC, you dolt, not enema!" "Ok, so what's an endemic?" An endemic is any kind of bird, animal or plant species that is "native to or confined to a certain region," and not found anywhere else in the world.

In Florida there is only one endemic bird species, the Florida Scrub-Jay (*left*), found nowhere else on earth, only in Florida. It has never been seen outside the state. “OK, so why is the Northern Mockingbird the state bird of Florida instead of the Florida Scrub-Jay?” Good question, maybe we need to start a state-bird campaign for the Jay. Campaign basis: It doesn’t make any sense, the Northern Mockingbird is the state bird of Florida and four other states, but the Florida Scrub-Jay is the only bird in the world with the word “Florida” in its name. And besides, it’s prettier than the Mockingbird anyway.

Until 1995 there was only one species of Scrub-Jay in the United States even though there were three distinct and disconnected populations of Scrub-Jays that never came in contact with each other. That year the American Ornithological Union, the final arbiter of all things bird related, based on extensive studies and particularly DNA analysis, separated scrub-jays into three separate and distinct species.

Thus was born the endemic Florida Scrub-Jay; the endemic Island Scrub-Jay (*right and top of following page*), found only on Santa Cruz Island, part of the Channel Islands National Park, 22 miles off the coast of California and nowhere else in the world; and the much more common Western Scrub-Jay, found across much of western United States, and not endemic anywhere. Current population estimates put Florida Scrub-Jays at less than 6,000 and declining and the Island Scrub-Jay at 9,000 – 12,500 and stable, although Jewel and I had to work like blazes to find the one and only one pictured here.

All three Scrub-Jay species (incidentally, writing this article I learned that "species" is one of those words like "deer" where the same word is used for both the singular and plural) look pretty much alike. The Florida brand is somewhat lighter and grayer, with a gray forehead, while the Western and Island versions are bluer overall, but particularly with a dark blue forehead. The Island Scrub-Jay is noticeably larger than the other two and has the richest coloring.

To make it even more confusing, there is some thought that the Western Scrub-Jay (*below*) should be split into two species because those along the west coast are different from those in the western interior. Where they overlap they do interbreed, but research on this question is on-going.

So why are here two endemic Scrub-Jays so far apart? Believe it or not fossil records disclose that the Florida Scrub-Jay evolved from ancestors two million years ago during the Pliocene when a large band of ultra-dry scrub habitat extended from Florida to California. As the seas rose and isolated the Florida peninsula the Florida Scrub-Jays were similarly isolated. However, the Island Scrub-Jay evolved in a different way because the Channel Islands are off-shore mountain peaks that were never connected to any land mass. Consequently, the Jays arrived there some 11,000 years ago in some unknown manner, and have now evolved, Darwin like, into their own separate and distinct endemic species. Thank you for listening; now I hope you wouldn't have preferred reading about enemas.

David Sibley's update to his popular guide regarding the Western and Island Scrub-Jays can be found at: *www.sibleyguides.com/2007/07/distinguishing-island-and-western-scrub-jays*/. For more information on Florida Scrub-Jays see *www.birds.cornell.edu/page.aspx?pid=*1691 and *markgelbart.wordpress.com/2012/03/23/florida-sand-scrub-habitat-hosts-pliocene-age-relicts/.* For a more detailed discussion of the differences between the three species of Scrub-Jays see *creagrus.home.montereybay.com/scrub-jays.html*.

HART BEAT 19, first published August 18, 2012

American Oystercatchers are found along the East Coast of the U.S., and along some parts of the West Coast. *(above and below)*

OYSTERCATCHERS

It's easy to visualize flycatchers, they swoop out from an open perch to catch some hapless passing bug, bee, or butterfly and return to their branch to bolt it down and await the next one. But Oystercatchers - how do they "catch" oysters? It's not as though oysters are elusive or likely to dart away from the stalking predators. In fact, they spend their entire adult life clinging for all they are worth to their "bed" waiting for

just the right oysterman or oystercatcher to liberate them to their destiny.

Thus, it seems to me, “Oyster-finder” or “Oyster-eater” or “Oyster-lover” would be more appropriate names for such a bird. Come to think of it, the moniker might apply to me as I stalk the tasty little critters at the Samson Street Oyster House or the Tiki Raw Bar.

American Oystercatchers are uncommon residents of beaches from New England to Florida, including a few along the Indian River in St. Lucie County. There is also a separate, but disconnected, population of the same American Oystercatcher species on the Pacific coast of Mexico along the Baja Peninsula extending almost to San Diego. From San Diego north to Alaska the Black Oystercatcher (*above and left*) chases down the tasty mollusks instead of the American Oystercatcher.

We even saw them on the rocky shores of islands in the Bering Sea. Sometimes, in a very small overlap area just north of San Diego, rare hybrids of the two species occur. It was our good fortune to spot one such rarity in the Ventura, CA harbor on our return from the Channel Islands National Park boat trip.

In the photos the difference between the American and Black Oystercatchers is obvious: the American has white undersides extending from a sharp line below the neck all the way under the tail, and a longer, sharper bill. The Black, as you might expect, is all black.

The hybrid American/Black Oystercatcher has a smudged black breast smeared into the white belly and a dark black flank between the belly and the back, same as the Black Oystercatcher, but not seen on the American.

You might also have noticed that the American Oystercatcher has a long bill shaped exactly like an oyster knife used in shucking oysters. The Black Oystercatcher has a shorter, rounder bill used more to pry smaller mollusks from rocks and crevasses and force them open. Oysters are more common on the east coast and therefore the longer bill works better for the American Oystercatcher. It would be interesting to study whether the west coast version of the American Oystercatcher, where oysters are not nearly as common, has evolved a shorter rounder bill like its Black cousin.

Either way, I still prefer mine on the half shell served on a bed of ice.

Hybrid American/Black Oystercatcher

Hybrid and Black Oystercatchers

HART BEAT 20, first published September 6, s012

Some birds can be identified by their silhouettes more easily than others.

SERENDIPITY BIRDS

Western Screech-Owl

At dusk on a field trip quite a number of years ago, a participant asked me to identify a bird outlined on a distant branch against a gorgeous sunset. Not being able to name the species, I simply replied, "That's just a silhouette bird." After dinner that night the participant sought me out, perplexed that he had searched his bird book diligently for the "Silhouette Bird" and had not been able to find it anywhere. Sometimes those silhouette shapes outlined in the sky can be identified and sometimes they can't. Surely everyone has seen an iconic newspaper photo of a Bald Eagle against an evening sky, and I surmise that all readers will be able to identify the silhouette birds depicted above in this article.

Whimbrel

But there is a category of birds that I find even more interesting, that I call "Serendipity Birds." These are birds that one stumbles upon completely by surprise and unexpectedly. They are birds you find yourself, either while birding, or not, that are out of range, or at the wrong time of day, or at a completely unexpected location. On our trips this summer Jewel and I encountered several Serendipity Birds.

For example, near Sunflower, Arizona, we occasionally played a Western Screech-Owl call to entice small birds, accustomed to harassing such owls, in to view. Having used this technique for decades, and while several owls, over the years, have responded with soft calls, I have never had one, Eastern or Western, respond into view at high noon. Until this one! Completely unexpected! Note also, that this bird exhibits a brood patch: bare skin on the belly, feather-worn in the process of incubating eggs. *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brood_patch*. Another Serendipity Bird this summer was the Whimbrel that flew across the bow of our boat returning from the Island Scrub Jay excursion just outside the Ventura, California, harbor. Technically, still at sea. Weird!

Spruce Grouse

Downeast in Maine on a delightful hike in Quoddy Head State Park we stumbled upon this very confiding female Spruce Grouse, foraging on the trail, which let us approach to within 20 feet. While Spruce Grouse are not rare or even unexpected in Maine, this bird qualifies as a Serendipity Bird because we walked right up upon it, at mid-day, and were enormously delighted by the unanticipated encounter. A stranger to us, who shared the observation with us, told us he had been in Maine for six weeks, working nights and hiking every day, and that this sighting was the most exciting thing that had happened to him that whole time.

Buff-breasted Sandpiper

Least Flycatcher

A day later, while admiring spectacular rocky seaside scenery on Campobello Island, Canada, we noticed a pair of sandpipers on the rocks just off shore. While they were at quite a distance for photography, I was able to obtain a few shots to conclusively establish they were Buff-breasted Sandpipers even though that species typically migrates south along the Mississippi flyway. Nevertheless, a few are documented each year along the east coast of Canada and Maine. We may be the only people to see these birds on their southern migration this entire year. Serendipity!

Finally, we have two “Serendipity Birds” in Florida: the best one was the Lark Sparrow that we discovered on March 26, 2004, with Dottie and Hank Hull on a farm in western St. Lucie County, in my pre-photography days; and the second one was the Least Flycatcher Jewel and I found on January 8, 2008, along Carlton Road in St. Lucie County. We were able to share that bird with Dottie and Hank a day later. To find “Serendipity Birds” one must get out into the field and be alert. You cannot find “Serendipity Birds” in your living room in front of the TV set.

HART BEAT 21, first published, September 15, 2012

A hovering White-tailed Kite is beautiful sight that can be seen in southern Florida.

WHITE-TAILED KITES

"What's that bird hovering up there?" our daughter asked, pointing at a white, gull-like bird hanging almost motion-less over the marsh just behind her suburban San Diego backyard. "White-tailed Kite!" I exclaimed as I simultaneously made a dash for my camera. (Full disclosure: Our daughter didn't really ask what it was, she already knew, I just thought it made an interesting opening line for this article. Also, I didn't really dash for my camera, for I already had some photos of a White-tailed Kite that I was relatively pleased with, and they're seen here.)

As it turned out, a pair of kites had set up territory in that marsh and could be seen every day of our California visit, although they never were as cooperative as the one we photographed in Florida. My research disclosed that the wings-up, tail-down,

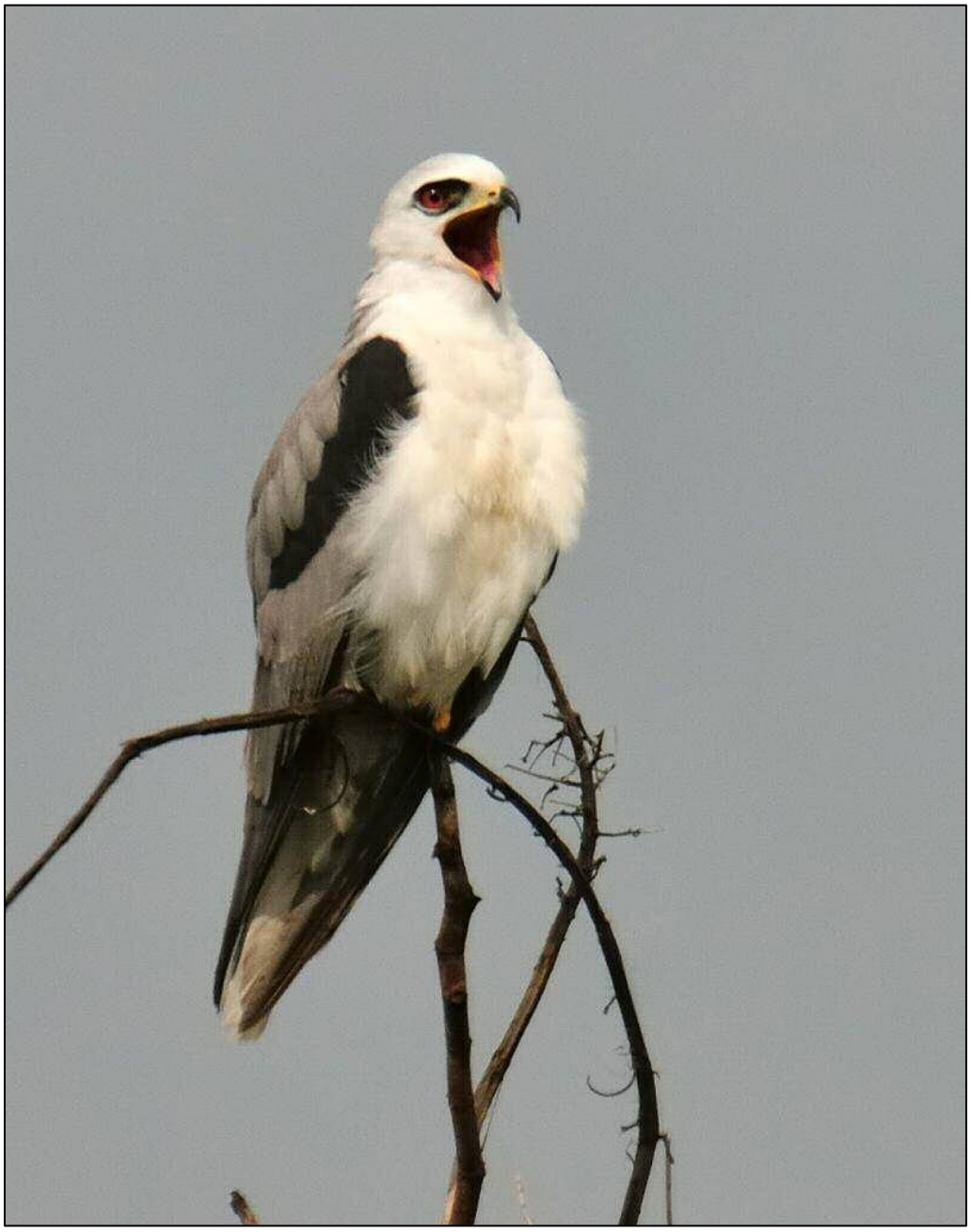
dangling-feet flight posture pictured here is for courtship purposes. When hunting, we observed that their hovering is more horizontal, followed by a direct dive onto some poor unsuspecting mouse or vole.

White-tailed Kite is another one of those birds where they keep changing the name. I first learned and saw the bird as "White-tailed Kite." Then in 1982, the official bird-namers decided it was the same species as the African Black-winged Kite and lumped the two bird species together as "Black-shouldered Kite." In 1992, they decided that there were enough differences that the two species were split again into Black-winged Kite in Africa, and White-tailed Kite in the new world. There is still a separate "Black-shouldered Kite" species in Australia. Confused? I still think it all has to do with selling more bird books for birders to keep up-to-date. I haven't seen any reports of DNA studies to definitively resolve the question.

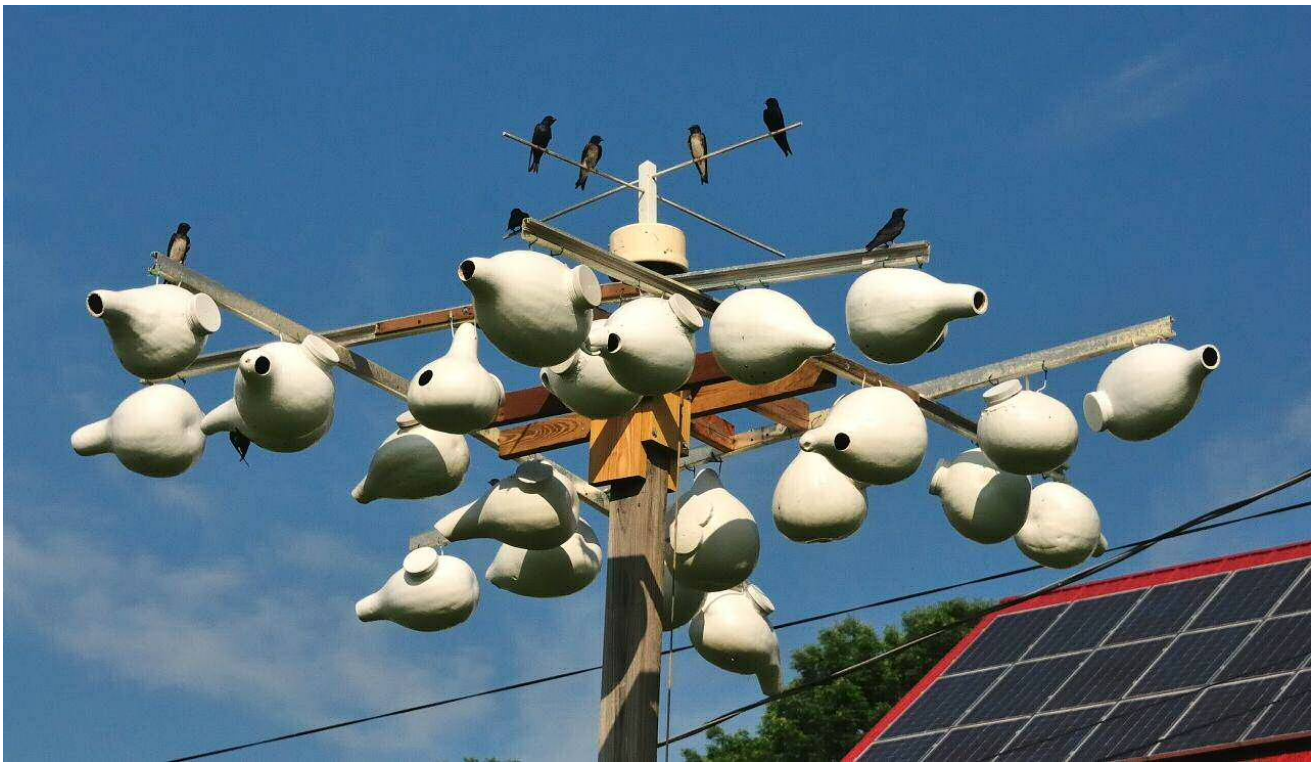
White-tailed Kites almost became extinct in the 1930's when they were indiscriminately hunted and shot in the large generic group designated "chicken-hawks," although their diet is mostly mice and voles, and never chickens. With protection they have recovered to the point where they are no longer considered endangered, but they are not tremendously common anywhere.

They are more easily found in California and south Texas, andrange through Mexico into Central America. They are permanent residents wherever they are found including south Florida. (For a range map see: *sdakotabirds.com/species/maps/white_tailed_kite_map.htm*) In south Florida, your best chance of seeing one is in the Everglades or in the open country south of Lake Okeechobee, where we found the one featured in this article,

near Belle Glade. However, a pair nested this summer in Kissimmee Prairie State Park, northwest of Lake Okeechobee, so they are definitely moving closer to St. Lucie County. See: www.examiner.com/article/white-tailed-kites-nest-at-florida-s-kissimmee-prairie-preserve. Our gorgeous Swallow-tailed Kite only shows up in the summer; the equally gorgeous White-tailed Kite can be found year-round, so let's hope its population increases so that we can hear the question more often in Florida, "What's that bird hovering up there?"



HART BEAT 22, first published September 26, 2012



APRIL FOOL-ED BY PURPLE MARTINS

April 1st is April Fool's Day. Fools that we are, we target that date to be back north after our winter in glorious Florida. April in Florida is spectacular: bright sunny days; spring in full flower; exciting bird migration just underway; summer hurricanes still far out in the Atlantic off the African coast; and Florida just about as good as it gets. April in

Pennsylvania is dreariness personified: gray, gloomy skies often punctuated with cold rain; barren trees and brown, sometimes snow covered lawns and fields; flowers and tomatoes still dreams under the gardener's grow-lights; and the excitement of the bird migration still six weeks away. So what's wrong with us? We are Purple Martin landlords in Pennsylvania.

While Purple Martins arrive back at their nesting sites in Florida in January, (we have recorded their arrival at our condo complex in Fort Pierce as early January 15, and as late as January 29) and are well into their breeding cycle by late March when we head north, they don't typically arrive at our Pennsylvania farm until about April 10 to 15. So, we have about ten days to get everything ready for them.

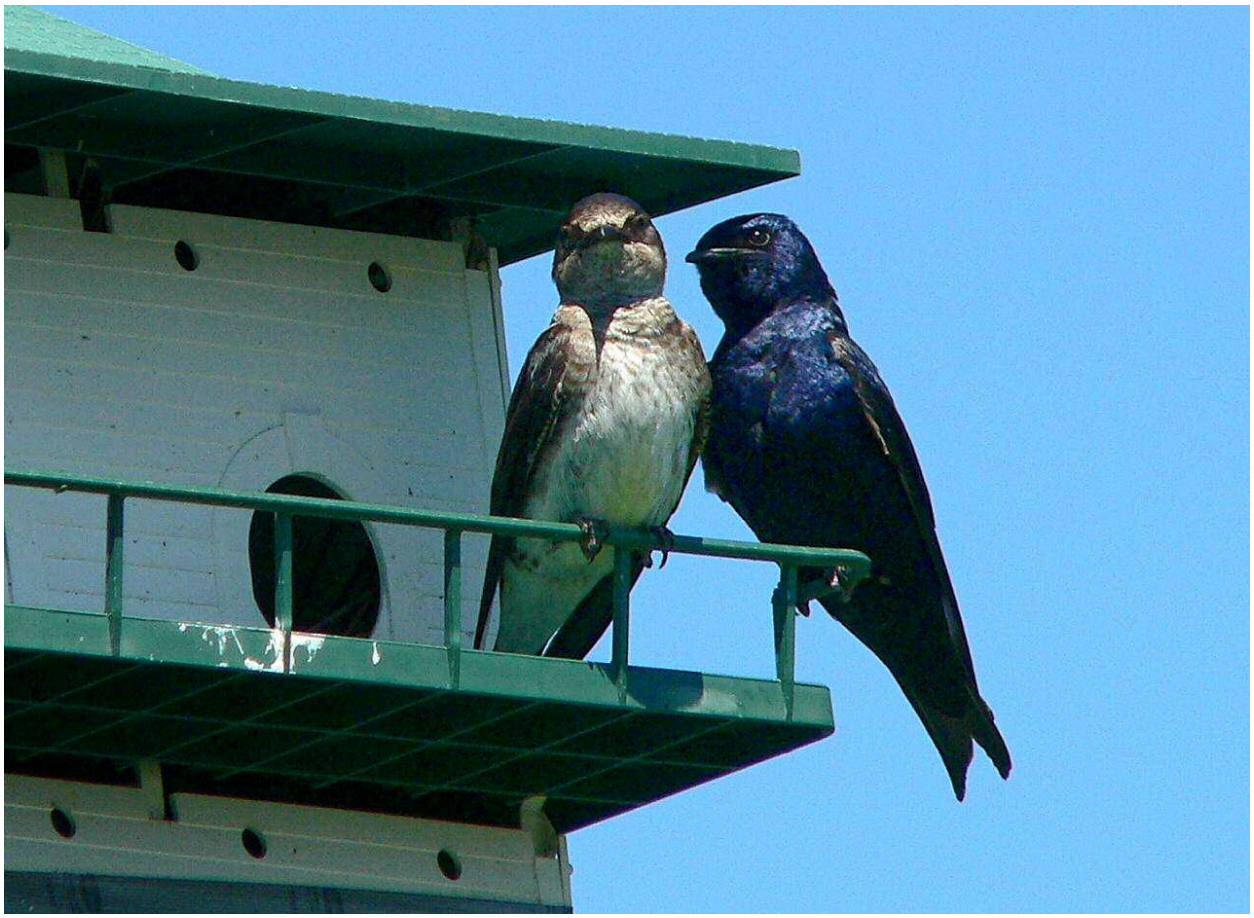
Purple Martin Fledgling

Except this year 10 of them showed up on April 2, just two days after we got home. They screamed and hollered at us from the perches above the empty gourd racks, and continued to scold while we hurriedly mounted the gourds into place. They immediately investigated the gourds even while we were cranking the racks to the top of the pole. No question about it: That sex urge is a powerful thing.

Purple Martins probably nested in cavities in trees at one time, but now they are almost completely reliant on man-made housing for their nesting needs. American Indians hosted them in gourds before Columbus opened the immigrant flood-gates, and in our experience, Martins still much prefer the natural gourds to the plastic imitation gourds or the commercial wooden or aluminum houses commonly available, although many other Martin lovers have been completely successful with each of the alternatives.

We have a total of 91 gourds available in our colony. (Purple Martins are “colonial” nesters; when I first started birding and read about “colonial” nesters, I thought that referred to birds that were here at the time of the 13 colonies, not being aware of the fact that some species like to nest close together in colonies.) 74 of our gourds had nests with a total of 251 young, most of which have fledged, although there are a couple of pairs still feeding what we suspect may have been second broods. It was truly exhilarating at the peak of the season to have over 300 adult and young birds coming and going all day long to the gourd racks. As I write this in early August, most of the Martins have left for their Brazilian Amazon wintering grounds.

When you think about that long flight ahead of them, take note of the long pointed wings and the large wing to body ratio that is depicted in the photo of the flying bird. Also, the photo of the male Purple Martin propositioning the female on the aluminum house, was taken at High Point in Fort Pierce, well before April 1st, and undoubtedly that female was fooled into the whole baby raising process by that lascivious Lothario, well before we fools headed north for April Fool’s Day.



HART BEAT 23, first published October 6, 2012

These Limpkin Chicks are only a day or two out of their eggs

BABY BIRDS

"That Mockingbird just hit me in the back of the head!" Jewel complained as she was picking tomatoes in her garden. A thorough search in the depths of her thickest tomato plant disclosed a nest with four eggs nestled in among the tomatoes. For the next few weeks, until the baby Mockingbirds fledged and left the nest, every time Jewel went near the tomato plants, I, as the dutiful and protective husband, had to stand guard behind her with a large piece of card-board which I constantly waved at the outraged Mockingbird to keep it from attacking either one of us.

Mockingbird chicks a day or two after hatching

Mockingbird chicks four days later

An electric wire just over our garden provided the perch from which the Mockingbird would launch its attacks. It was uncanny how the bird knew exactly when I did not maintain direct eye contact with it, for without fail, it flew directly at us whenever my attention wandered ever so slightly. Fortunately, like an Iraqi scud missile, the attacks did not do any significant damage.

We followed the development of the baby Mockingbirds from their hatching until one morning when we came to the garden to find them gone and the nest empty. We got glimpses of the young birds occasionally over the next couple of weeks, but they became remarkably good at concealment. There are quite a few Mockingbirds all around our property, so we are confident that the babies did not come to an untimely end.

Baby birds come in two flavors: altricial, or birds that are born blind, featherless and completely dependent upon their parents; and precocial, or birds that hatch with downy feathers, eyes open, able to walk or swim immediately and much less dependent upon their parents. All passerines, or "perching birds," are altricial. Herons, ducks, shorebirds, game birds, and some raptors are precocial. As you might expect, there are grades between the levels of altricial and precocial development.

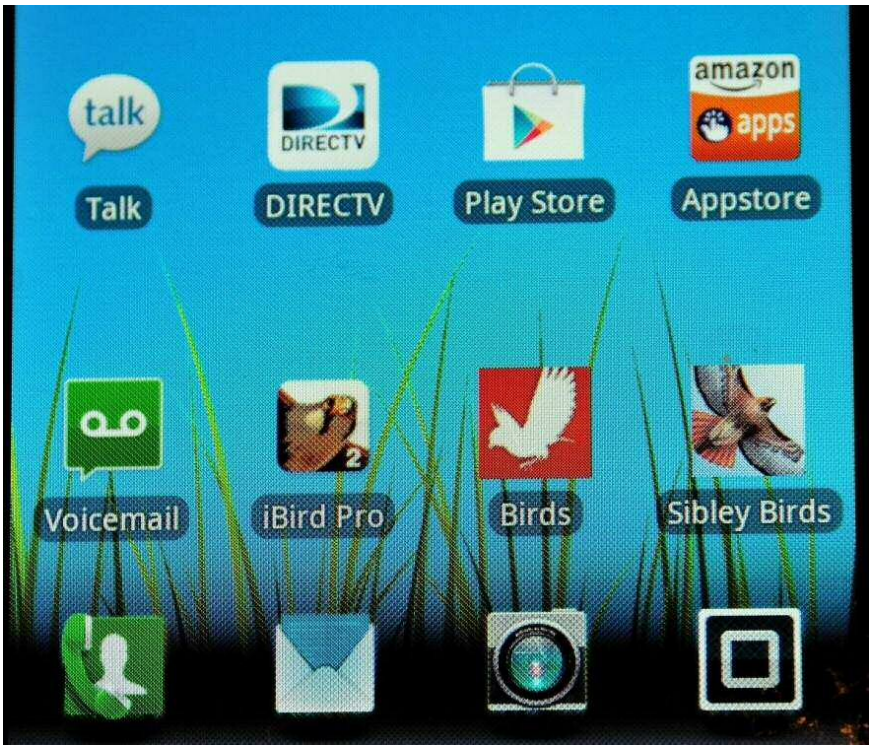
As a general rule, altricial babies are in the egg for a shorter period, but remain in the nest, cared for by the parents for a couple of weeks; total time – egg laying to fledging – about a month. Precocial babies are in the egg, being incubated a much longer time, generally about four weeks, but, upon hatching are fully fledged; total time – egg laying to fledging – about a month. For an excellent discussion of the altricial – precocial dichotomy, see *www.stanford.edu/group/stanfordbirds/text/essays/Precocial_and_Altricial.html.*

In the photos, our Mockingbirds, typical altricial babies, always seem to be all mouth (top, left) just a day or two after hatching, but are already developing feathers just four days later (2nd from top, left). The precocial Sandhill Crane chick (*right*) was photographed on the second day after it hatched and the Limpkin and Piping Plover chicks were all only a day or two out of the egg when these portraits were taken.

One unexpected benefit of the Mockingbirds nesting in our tomatoes was the fact that this year we had almost no tomatoes pecked by birds, a common problem in prior years, because the Mockingbirds, while guarding and protecting their nest also unwittingly guarded and protected our tomatoes. And Jewel survived the tomato season, completely unscathed. Yes, the tomatoes this year were outstanding.

Piping Plover chicks

[HART BEAT 24, first published October 16, 2012]



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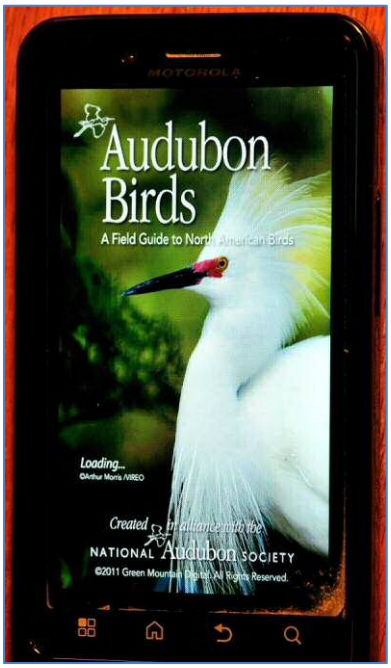
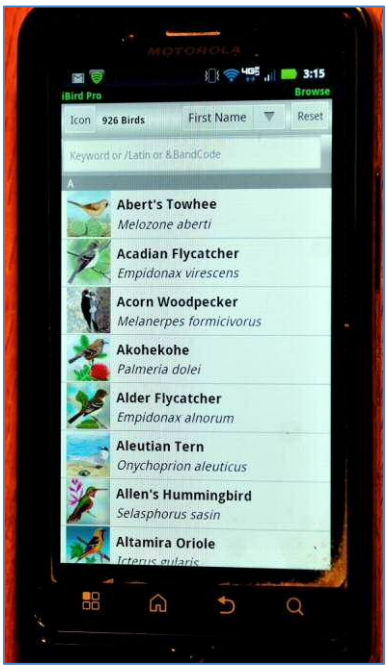
BIRDING ENCYCLOPEDIAS

In the fall of 1945, shortly after World War II ended with the dropping of two Atomic Bombs on Japan, a new dream occupation leaped into the consciousness of teen-age boys alongside the old standards of "cowboy" and "professional baseball player." Suddenly the exotic and mysterious future lifework of "nuclear physicist" became the dream goal. I decided I needed to get a head start on all my friends who had the same dream. Where to begin? Obviously, the encyclopedia!

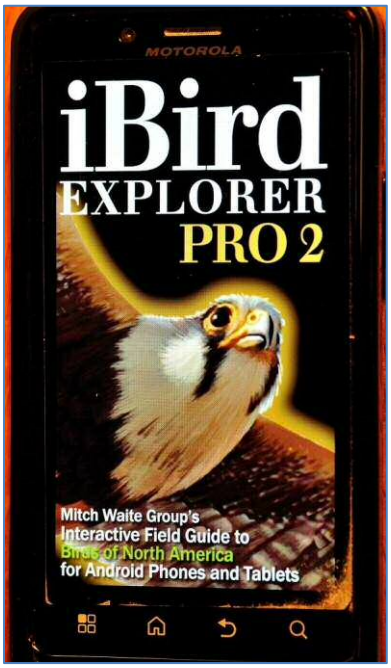
At that time the gold standard for encyclopedias was the Britannica, but our school had the second tier Americana, which you could only access in the library at school. My father had succumbed to a smooth door to door salesman selling the *World Book*, with a new volume coming out each month starting with A and working through the alphabet. We were then up to L so I didn't have too long to wait. Finally, volume N arrived and I hurriedly leafed to "Nuclear Physics." There was about half a page on the topic, and I didn't understand a word of it.



That was a very short-lived dream occupation, and it was quickly back to "cowboy" and "baseball" even though my Dad was very subtly implanting "lawyer" without my realizing it. I had not yet learned the term "ornithologist" and at that time bird-watching was regarded as a sissy activity, so I kept my interest pretty much to myself.



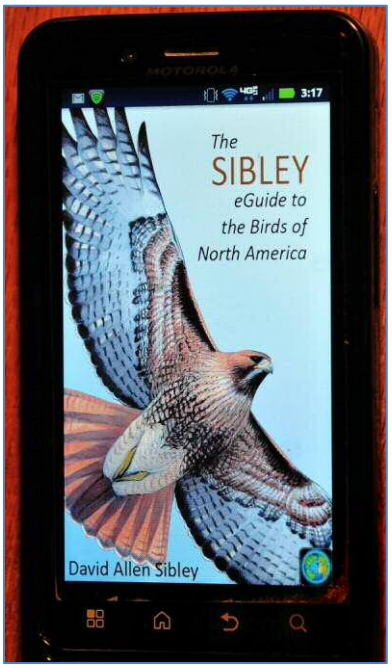
As my birding interest became more intense I often wondered why there wasn't an encyclopedia for birds or birding. There was, but I wasn't aware of it, and it certainly wasn't in our school library anyway. Arthur Cleveland Bent was more than half way through his 21 volume "Life Histories" series which he began in 1919 but wasn't completed until after his death in 1968. The series was reprinted by Dover publications but it was difficult to find all volumes for a complete set. Now the work is largely on-line at *www.birdsbybent.com/index.html*.

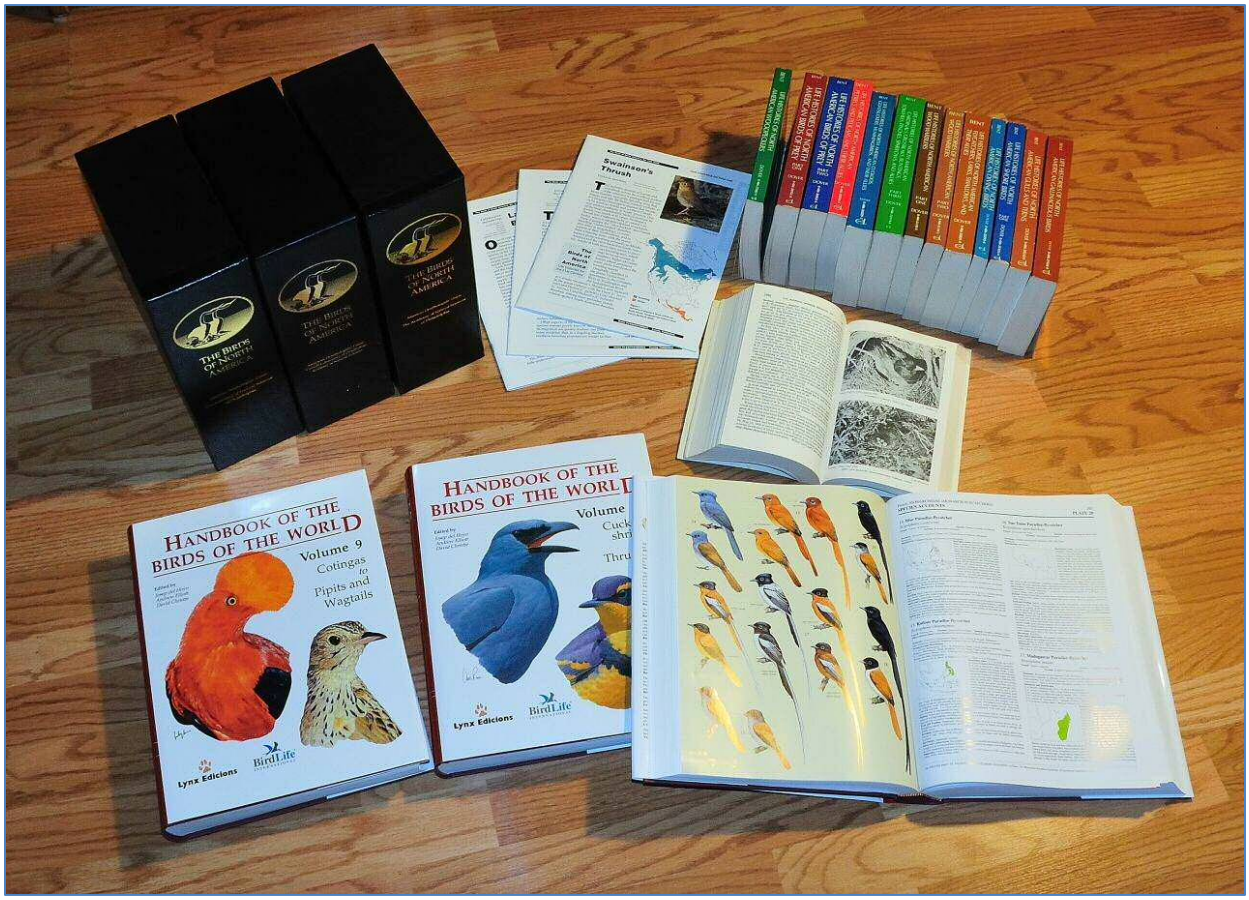


The next major encyclopedia of birds was the "Birds of North America" joint project between the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and the American Ornithological Union, edited by Dr. Frank Gill. From 1992 through 2003 over 5000 individual researchers contributed to 716 individual printed species booklets, released as they were completed, and in no particular order. The entire collection is now available by subscription on-line through the Cornell Lab of Ornithology *bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna*/, but much of it is available free at *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birds_of_North_America*

The most ambitious encyclopedia of birds that I am aware of is the Lynx Editions 16 massive volumes *Handbook of the Birds of the World.* A more appropriate description would be "Fork-lift truck book …" but it purports to illustrate and treat in detail every known species of bird in the world. The project started in 1992 and was completed in 2011. *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handbook_of_the_Birds_of_the_World*. A free on-line collection can be found at *ibc.lynxeds.com*.

But friends, entire encyclopedias of birds are available as apps for your smart phone. Three in particular are on my phone and available at all times, in the field, at home, at work, whenever I have my Android smart phone in my pocket. They are “Bird Pro” by iBird.com, featuring 924 species accounts and selling for $4.99; “Birds” by the National Audubon Society with 777 species also for $4.99; and “Sibley Birds,” an online version of David Sibley’s popular field guide featuring 810 species and available for $19.99. I understand there are additional intriguing apps available for iPhones. So just go to your app store and download your encyclopedia. You won’t even have to watch the mail, or wait for shipping, or the next volume to be issued. Or, easiest of all, just type any bird’s name into Google search. An amazing amount of information is available at your fingertips!!





HART BEAT 25, first published October 26, 2012

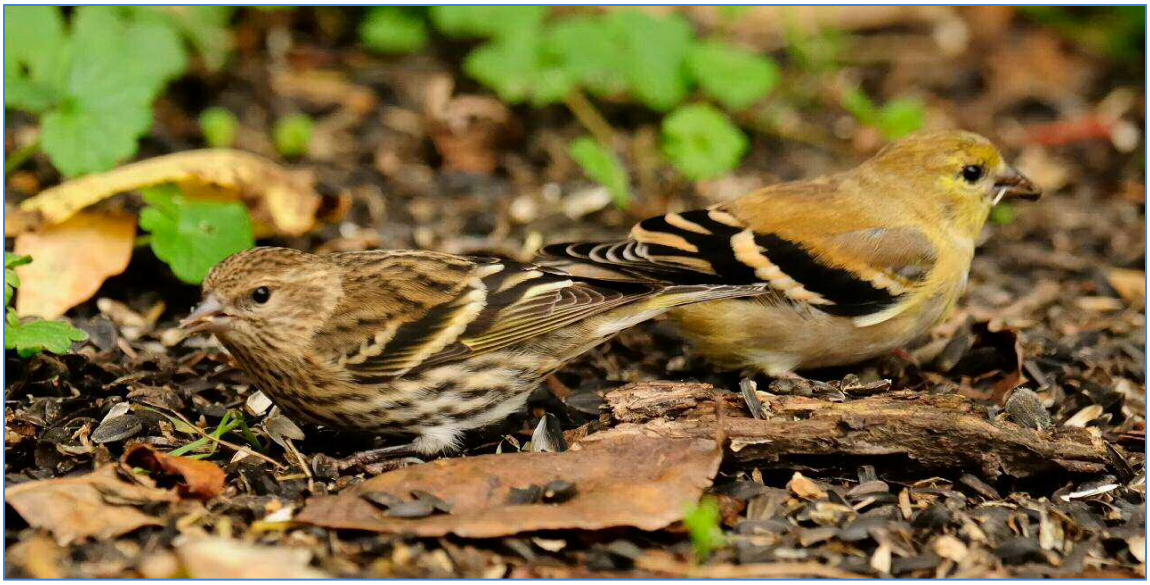
A House Finch (left) and a pair of Purple Finches stoke up at a bird feeder on their way south. Black oiled sunflower seeds are favorites.

IRRUPTION: WHEN BIRDS HEAD SOUTH

"Freeze warning tonight!" Jewel was reading the weather alert for our Pennsylvania home base even as we were in mid-migration scurrying down I-95 to our St .Lucie County wintering grounds. This was not a surprise for, indeed, we had tolerated a few cold nights just before our departure the preceding day, and thus hastened our escape from the advancing winter.

The same early cold weather had created the apparent beginning of what ornithologists call an "irruption" of Pine Siskins and Purple Finches. For even though very few of our more common winter visitors had yet arrived, the White-throated Sparrows and Northern Juncos (the original "snowbird") for example, our feeders, and from reports, everybody's feeders, were covered with Pine Siskins and Purple Finches, birds that in normal winters show up in modest numbers. When these birds have irrupted previously a few always seem to make it to Florida, and St. Lucie County appears to be at just about the limit of their irruptive range. Or, more realistically, probably just beyond their range. Nevertheless, it might be well to know what to look for.

The species most likely to cause confusion in identifying Pine Siskins and Purple Finches, because of their superficial similarity, are the American Goldfinch and



Pine Siskin (left) and American Goldfinch

House Finch respectively. Pine Siskins have tiny little bills compared to Goldfinches, but are distinguishable by the fine streaks on the breast and belly of the Siskins unlike the plain breast and belly of the Goldfinch.

Juvenile male Purple Finch

Siskins have yellowish wing markings, but Goldfinch wings are black. Male Purple Finches and House Finches are both red, but Purple Finches tend to shade more toward cranberry color. Also, the male House Finch has brown streaking on the under-belly, while the male Purple Finch is plain under the belly.

House Finch

The female Purple Finch has more finely marked streaking on the breast and belly than the plainer female House Finch, but one noticeable difference between the two species: both male and female Purple Finches have a lighter line over the eye that House Finches don't have. When I first began birding I would scrutinize the array of House Finches at our feeders for Purple Finches. I often thought that maybe a particularly brightly colored male might finally be it. When one finally did arrive, it really was fairly easy to determine that there is a distinct difference. One final caution, the juvenile male Purple Finch can look almost like a bird from a completely different species altogether. Check the photo shown here.

Pine Siskin

How to attract these finches? Black oiled sunflower seeds work particularly well for all four species, and Niger (or sometimes Nyger) seed also works well for Siskins and Goldfinches. The plain unsalted and blanched peanuts also attract these birds as well as many others. We found that the millet feed, preferred by the Painted and Indigo Buntings, was not as attractive to these finches as it is to the buntings.

When we arrived in Florida and called back to Pennsylvania to inform family and friends of our safe journey, we learned that we did indeed have a heavy frost the preceding night and that the pineapple sage and black and blue salvia flowers that we had left in full bloom for any late passing hummingbirds did not survive the brief wintry blast. Oh well, the hummingbirds have no business waiting this long to migrate anyway. They should have been on their way to Florida and points south, just like us. For more information on irruptions see *www.birdsource.org/ibs/irruption.html*.

Purple Finch, female

Purple Finch, male

HART BEAT 26, first published November 6, 2012

A frog makes a welcome gift in this Swallow-tailed Kite couple's courting ritual.

THE OTHER KITES

Snail Kite

White-tailed Kites were the featured bird of *Hart Beat* No. 21. There are two other kite species that regularly occur in Florida.

The Snail Kite is here year round, but is considered a rare and endangered species in the United States with fewer than 400 breeding pairs believed to be remaining. However, there is

a healthy population in South America and for that reason it is not thought to be in danger of extinction, notwithstanding its low distribution in the United States, pretty much limited to Florida.

Swallow-tailed Kites

The third kite to be found regularly in Florida during its breeding season between March and August of each year is the gorgeous Swallow-tailed. In August and early September large concentrations of Swallow-tailed Kites gather, preparing for migration, in an undisclosed location between Lake Okeechobee and the Gulf Coast, and if one is lucky enough (not me, yet) to stumble across it, it is possible to see probably half of all the Swallow-tailed Kites, estimated at between 800 and 1500 breeding pairs, in North America at one time. Here is a shaky, but definitive, video of the roost: *www.youtube.com/watch?v=2B5fldpvLlc.*

So there you have it birding fans, three spectacular kite species, none real common here, but all possible to find in south Florida in the right time and season.

Where, you ask? Well, for the White-tailed Kite please see Hart Beat No. 21 in this book. To see the Swallow-tailed Kite you must now wait until March when they return from South America. They nest along the St. Lucie River and the participants who take one of the daily trips on the River Cruise run by Deena and Dana Wade are almost certain to see one or more in April, May

and June. *www.riverlillycruises.com*/. Or, they can pop up just about anywhere at any time of day soaring over the tree tops searching for snakes, lizards and frogs, or large insects such as grasshoppers and crickets.

In the photo at the start of this column, a female (*right*), with a broken left tail feather, awaits a courting male, bringing a frog, which it then gives to the female in a re-enactment of a ritual that is so familiar to all of us. I can confirm that he did indeed "get lucky" shortly thereafter, but no photos; this is family column.

Snail Kites

Snail Kites, formerly called the "Everglades Kite," (bottom two photos) are among the rarest of birds in North America. On the first week-long field trip I led years ago to south Florida it was the most desired of all the species the 22 participants hoped to see, including me. Despite diligent searching and chasing many fruitless leads we learned that a pair might be found along the canal behind the Miccosukee Indian Restaurant on the Tamiami Trail. After hours of eye-wearying scanning we finally found one male visible, at a great distance, only through our most powerful telescope.

Now, after 13 years of wintering in St. Lucie County, I know they can be found along almost any canal road in the farm country in the western part of the county, but they move around depending on the apple snail population. They breed at STA-5 just south of Lake Okeechobee, and they are regularly found in the Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area, both places that St. Lucie Audubon often conducts field trips. Snail Kites feed almost exclusively on apple snails, and have a longer, more pronounced curve to their bill, which enables them to insert that bill into the snail's shell to cut the muscle and extract the meat. It is not uncommon to find a fairly impressive pile of discarded apple snail shells beneath a Snail Kite favorite feeding perch. Escargot anyone?

When I searched for the derivation of the word "kite" as applied to this particular family of raptors, I found four definitions: 1. The obvious light cloth or paper framework "kite" flown in the wind on a long string; 2. Light sails of a ship, used only in a light wind; 3. A bank check drawn on insufficient funds to take advantage of the time interval required for collection; and, of course, 4. The various predatory birds in the hawk family Accipitridae, "having a long, often forked tail and long pointed wings." It occurred to me that the common thread here is the fact that all four of these defined "kites" tend to soar or glide gracefully and effortlessly, including a "kiting" victim's funds that just waft away in the breeze. At least the other three defined "kites" can be very beautiful

HART BEAT 27, first published November 21, 2012

American White Pelicans wading at Viera.

ON AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS & COMMUNICATIONS

While on a mundane mail mission to the Post Office, the smart phone in my pocket began to ring insistently. Jewel: "Deena just called. There's a White Pelican just off their dock!" Hurry home; grab gear; rush to the river; and within 15 minutes I join Deena and Dana watching the American White Pelican in the Indian River just south of Fort Pierce and record the photograph shown here (*right*).

Brown Pelican

Now, American White Pelicans are not rare, nor are they even uncommon in Florida in the winter. They can be found in good numbers as close as Sebastian Inlet, the next break to the sea through the barrier island for the Indian River north of the Fort Pierce Inlet; we see them virtually every time we go to Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge in Titusville, and STA-5, just south of Clewiston and Lake Okeechobee, both places where St. Lucie Audubon runs field trips; on the beach at Sanibel's Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge; and loafing with scads of other shorebirds and waders on the sand bar just off the Visitors Center at Flamingo in the Everglades National Park.

But in 14 winters of birding St. Lucie County I have never seen or heard of one being seen around here, although it is included on the St. Lucie Audubon county bird check list. Having now made that admission, I expect that I will receive emails from one or more of my local birding friends, who will assure me they are here every winter, but it was a very exciting find. For a map of American White Pelican Florida winter hotspots see: *floridarambler.com/central-florida-getaways/white-pelicans-migration-florida*/.

The American White Pelican differs from its Brown Pelican cousin in that the White is half again as big as the Brown, with a wing-span of eight to nine and a half feet compared to the Brown's six foot wing-span. White Pelicans scoop their fish prey into their cavernous beaks, while Brown Pelicans plunge dive into the water to capture fish, and White Pelicans frequently soar in large flocks rising on air thermals, while Brown Pelicans fly in single file lines usually flapping and gliding, sometimes just above the surface of the water. And guess what: American White Pelicans are white with black wing tips, while Brown Pelicans are chocolate brown.

Incidentally, have you ever wondered why so many virtually all white bird species have black wing tips? Ah ha, a topic for another article.

This adventure brings to mind the vast changes that have occurred in birding information communication. When John James Audubon or Lewis and Clark made their exploratory expeditions, the world had to wait months or even years to learn what birds they may have seen or discovered. Even as late as the mid-20th Century, birders went to bird club meetings once a month to find out what other birders had seen in the intervening period.

Gradually, more active clubs began to develop "phone trees," so that when a birder found a rare or unusual bird, he or she would call a leader at the top of the "tree," who would then call two or three birders further down the "tree," each of whom were responsible to call two or three more until all members of the tree got the word. Unfortunately, most of these phone trees developed before the common use of answering machines and consequently were only successful if the call recipients were home. Thus, there were many breaks in the tree chain.

Sometime in the late 1970's or early 1980's the North American Rare Bird Alert (NARBA) was developed by Houston Audubon Society, *www.narba.org*. This was, and still is, a subscription service for birders to call for the latest information on the location of rare birds anywhere in North America. Many local Rare Bird Alerts (RBA's) similarly developed and are still maintained by local Audubon chapters, bird clubs and other organizations. For a complete list see: *birding.aba.org/*.

But now, in the "Information Age," with the proliferation of smart phones, it is increasingly common for a birder to find a "good" bird, take a photo of it with his or her cell phone through his or her telescope and immediately transmit the image and location information to the internet for the entire world to see. And when my smart phone rings in my pocket, I am always ready and able to immediately decide whether the bird is more important than what I may be doing at that moment.

I can only imagine what John James Audubon or Lewis and Clark would have given for this type of communication ability. Not to mention modern optics.

White Pelican with fish

A flock of White Pelicans

HART BEAT 28, first published December 3, 2012

Red-breasted Nuthatches have been seen in St. Lucie County

UPSIDE-DOWN BIRDS

Black-and-white Warbler

"Those upside-down birds are my favorite." When a field trip participant made that statement a number of years ago, I had to think for a minute to figure out what he was talking about. Upside-down birds, of course, he's talking about nuthatches. While most birds that work on tree trunks or branches go up, the nuthatches go down, upside-down. Right, "upside-down

birds.” Almost unique among birds species, (the Black-and-white Warbler is the only other upside-down bird that comes to mind, and its upside-down activity is only a some-time thing, unlike the nuthatches which typically travel down a tree trunk,) nuthatches are diminutive hyperactive cavity-nesters that eat seeds and nuts, but I have never seen or heard of them actually trying to hatch a nut.

White-breasted Nuthatch

In North America, there are four species of nuthatches: the most common and widespread White-breasted Nuthatch; the southern breeding Brown-headed Nuthatch; the northern breeding and winter southerly invading Red-breasted Nuthatch; and the western breeding, tiny Pygmy Nuthatch, which looks remarkably like the Brown-headed Nuthatch, but is range separated by almost a thousand miles. Range maps show that none of the nuthatches is likely to be readily or easily found in St. Lucie County. However, some range maps do show that occasionally, in an irruptive year like this one, Red-breasted Nuthatches may get this far south in the winter, and the ast Florida Breeding Bird Atlas did record one location where a Brown-headed Nuthatch was observed in St. Lucie County, but not confirmed as breeding.

White-breasted Nuthatches the most common and widespread nuthatch in most of the eastern United States, only ranges into the pan-handle of Florida, and is very rare farther south in the state. Unusually high numbers of Red-breasted Nuthatches are moving south this year and have

already been seen in Georgia, and in Florida, south of St Augustine, and as far south as Mount Dora. Everyone with bird feeders should keep an eye out for Red-breasted Nuthatches this year. They, like the Pine Siskins and Purple Finches, love black-oil sunflower seeds and unsalted, shelled peanut splits.

But my personal Don Quixotian quest this winter will be to try to find Brown-headed Nuthatches in St. Lucie County. With so much appropriate habitat, and the fact that they can be found just north of us in the St Sebastian River Preserve State Park makes me believe they can be found here. So I'm going searching.

I vaguely recall someone telling me at a St. Lucie Audubon meeting a number of years ago that there were Brown-headed Nuthatches in the pines around the complex where they lived, but I was naïve and inexperienced enough at that time to believe they would be all over the county. Wrong! If you, dear reader, are the person who told me about those birds so many years ago, please, please tell me again.

I might add that this search will make two such quests for me, as I am still searching for my St. Lucie County Burrowing Owl. If this keeps up, and I add a bird a year to search for, and continue to be as unsuccessful as I have so far, I may end up like Don Quixote: melancholy in defeat. Or not, for I do have my very own Dulcinea as most of you know.

Brown-headed Nuthatch

HART BEAT 29, first published December 13, 2012

The showy Roseate Spoonbills stand out in this feeding frenzy, but also there were White Ibis, Wood Storks and several egrets.

FEEDING FRENZY & CLUELESS IDIOTS

Sharks are famous for frantic feeding frenzies. But sometimes birds can engage in the same kind of group gorging orgies. Jewel and I recently witnessed one such spectacular birding extravaganza at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (MINWR) when hundreds of wading birds gathered in three small pools, and the adjoining meadow, and ravenously worked the pools and surrounding area for well over 45 minutes, providing us with a memorable experience and some outstanding photographic opportunities.

The birds were predominantly White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbills and Wood Storks, with several Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, and a smattering of Glossy Ibis mixed in. We also saw at least one Tricolored Heron and a Cattle Egret during the feeding event, but both birds managed to elude my camera. Boat-tailed Grackles serenaded us during the show.

The three small pools were right beside the road at the beginning of Blackpoint Drive, and the birds came as close as 20 feet from our car, undisturbed by the hidden humans, hiding behind the

car windows and clicking away with their cameras. Several more birders in vehicles behind us also enjoyed the fantastic spectacle of bird activity from their cars as well.

The entire scene may well have continued for some time and might have been enjoyed by many more birders, except for the arrival of two Clueless Idiots, who pulled up in their car and immediately got out, one with a telescope (completely unnecessary) and one with a small hand-held camera (no tripod) and flushed all the birds. Thus, the two Clueless Idiots violated the first cardinal, red letter rule of birding: **Never disturb or flush the bird or birds; if the birds are in close proximity, STAY IN YOUR CAR!**

By violating this rule the Clueless Idiots accomplished three things:

1. They flushed the birds, disturbing and ending the feeding activity the birds were obviously enjoying and enthusiastically engaging in;
2. They ended the outstanding viewing opportunity that we, and all the other birders who joined us, or might have continued to join us, and observed the **Don't Flush The Birds** rule, were privileged to witness and share; and
3. They, themselves, did not get to see the very sight and activity they got out of their car with their unnecessary telescope and hand-held camera in apparent hopes of somehow seeing it better.

We left in disgust, rather than witness the lynching that the birders behind us may have imposed on the perpetrators. In retrospect, we may have missed a teaching opportunity, but it might not have been a cool and calm lesson in our then state of mind. Yeah, probably better that we left.

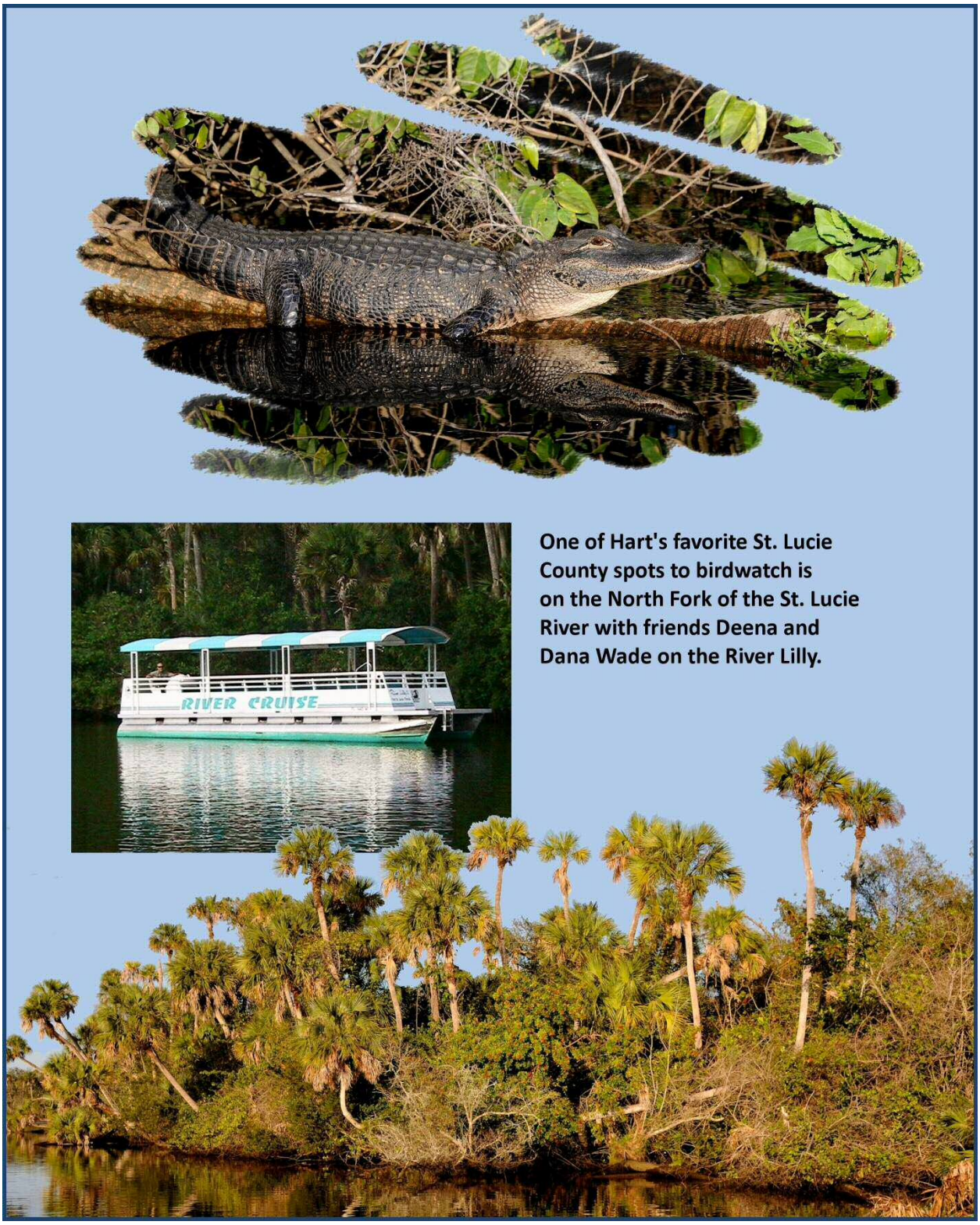
It was fascinating to study the different feeding styles of the different species. The White Ibis stayed in the shallower water or in the mud and probed by picking and poking their bills in search of food. The Roseate Spoonbills, with their wide sieve bills, swished their heads back and forth in the water as they walked along, to filter out the organisms that constitute their diet. The Wood Storks worked the deeper water probing with their entire heads often under the water as they dug in the bottom of the pools for their food. Finally, the Egrets, Great and Snowy, waited and attempted to spear small fish from time to time as the other birds pushed the fish around the pools. All of these feeding styles are apparent in the video accompanying this article.

Visit YouTube to see my video from this sighting:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQr7n6Hh_QU&feature=plcp.

Listen to the sounds in the video as the birds feed. Toward the end of the video you can hear the swoosh of the flight of the birds as they flush from the first pool as the Clueless Idiots exit their car. Also, the video shows all the birds in the third pool moving toward the far end of the pool, away from the approaching Clueless Idiots as they invade the birds "comfort zone." I looked up from my camera at this point to realize what was happening, which accounts for why I missed the shot of all the birds taking off in a big white cloud of flying feathers. Disturbing as it was, I must admit the fleeing flight of the birds was spectacular. Maybe the Clueless Idiots got that shot.

Roseate Spoonbill



One of Hart's favorite St. Lucie County spots to birdwatch is on the North Fork of the St. Lucie River with friends Deena and Dana Wade on the River Lilly.

HART BEAT 30, first published January 9, 2013

Coming back from being endangered by DDT, the Peregrine Falcon is now a relatively common sight, including in Florida.

PEREGRINE FALCONS

The Peregrine Falcon is the fastest bird in the world. I know this because I read it somewhere. I have never seen one dive in a stoop where it reaches the highest recorded speeds of up to 273 miles per hour, but if I haven't by the time I am old enough to start a "Bucket List," this experience will certainly go on it. "No.1, See a Peregrine Falcon stoop at over 200 miles per hour."

The Peregrine's typical method of taking its prey is to use its speed to strike the victim, hitting it with closed talons, but with such force that it usually kills on impact. The Falcon then circles around and catches the falling meal in mid-air and carries it to the Peregrine version of the dinner table. Try to visualize: You are some poor hapless Rock Pigeon making a meager living picking paltry pieces of pop-corn and bread crumbs from among the cigarette butts and other detritus of

some city street, all the while dodging the feet of passing pedestrians and contending with pesky House Sparrows, and on the way home after work one day, a ball of flying fury hurtles out of the sky and ends your world. It is the stuff of a Hollywood “asteroid hits earth, end of the world” movie, but probably less marketable.

The recovery of the Peregrine Falcon is a remarkable story. The Eastern sub-species was extirpated in the late 1950’s, an early victim of the DDT thin shell syndrome. At that time a few Peregrines of other sub-species still survived in relatively DDT-free places like British Columbia and Greenland. A falconer/ornithology professor at SUNY New Paltz, named Heinz Meng, experimented with raising Peregrine chicks from eggs laid by Peregrines in British Columbia, and later, in 1974, successfully hacked them back into the wild from a simulated aerie atop a campus building in New Paltz, NY. Closely following the work of Meng, and collaborating with him, Cornell University biology professor, Tom Cade, founded the Peregrine Fund in 1974, and successfully raised the funds to develop a full scale Peregrine propagation program and eventually release hundreds of captive bred Peregrines back into the wild. Their program was so successful that in 1999 the Peregrine Falcon was removed from the US Endangered Species list.

They are now a relatively common sight in the winter in Florida. On a personal note, it was a program presented by Heinz Meng in 1969 on his Peregrine experiment that moved me from casual birder back to intense birder after my eight years away at school, starting a family, a career, and middling effort at golf. And a couple of years later I was privileged to meet Tom Cade and

observe the Peregrine Fund work at the Chester County, PA, farm of Bob Berry, a cofounder of the Fund with Cade.

Peregrine Falcons formerly nested on high cliffs at inaccessible locations free from predators. Now their re-introduction into the wild has occurred on man-made cliffs more commonly called sky scrapers in cities, where nest monitoring is easier. For some reason they also have taken to large bridges. They nest on most of the largest bridges over the Delaware River; we have seen them on the Verrazano Bridge over the Hudson; and experienced one fly mere feet over our heads as we walked the Brooklyn Bridge in New York. Plentiful pigeons provide ample food for their hungry chicks, and they are free from their most persistent predator: the Great Horned Owl.

There is a local birding legend in Bucks County, PA, our summer home, that the last wild Peregrine Falcon nest was located on the Nockamixon Palisades, cliffs high above the Delaware River, and that in 1958 an ornithologist died in a fall from the cliffs while checking on the nest. I have never been able to confirm the legend, but have heard it often from various sources, usually old-time locals who were not even birders. Whether the legend is truth or myth, the last Peregrines probably did nest on some cliff somewhere and it will be an exciting day when they are confirmed returning to their original natural high cliff habitat. In the meantime, I'm wondering whether it is time for me to begin thinking about starting a "Bucket List." Nah, not yet. Maybe when I get old.

For more information and an interesting video on the speed of Peregrines, see: *www.extremescience.com/peregrine-falcon.htm*. For information on Heinz Meng, see: *www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20073472,00.html*; and for information on Tom Cade and the Peregrine Fund, see: *www.peregrinefund.org/people/cade-tom*

HART BEAT 31, first published January 19, 2013

The Purple Swamphen (pale-gray-headed, here) is now considered a "non-countable" foreign invader from the Mediterranean, but that designation may be destined to change.

THE COLOR PURPLE

There are four species of North American birds with the descriptive color “Purple” in their name, and when they are listed alphabetically, as they are on some smart phone apps, they all appear one right after the other. They are Purple Finch, Purple Gallinule, Purple Martin, and Purple Sandpiper. They appear destined to be joined by a fifth: the Purple Swamphen.

The first four are native birds, but the Purple Swamphen is another foreign invader from the Mediterranean area. It has not yet been accepted as established in the U S by the American Ornithological Union (AOU) or the American Birding Association (ABA) (not American Bar Association as some of you might have thought, at least not in this blog), but it is now getting closer to acceptance, as the species is breeding quite successfully in many parts of southern Florida, and will probably be a “countable” bird within the next year or two.

Purple Swamphen (blue-headed)

The color purple appears to be in the eye of the beholder as it relates to these five species, for the Purple Finch seems more cranberry in color; and the Purple Martin is certainly a deep rich shade of very dark purple, if anything; the Purple Sandpiper must have been named for its dark color, but hardly what one would call a true purple; and the Purple Swamphen tends more toward blue, along with a small amount of purple. Only the lovely Purple Gallinule actually qualifies as truly purple to the eye of this writer.

The Purple Swamphen's native range extends from the Mediterranean Sea across Africa, Asia and even to Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines. They arrived in south Florida when a number of them escaped from aviculturists in Pembroke Pines, southwest of Fort Lauderdale, in the 1990's, and despite attempts by state wildlife biologists to eradicate them, they have succeeded in breeding and expanding their range.

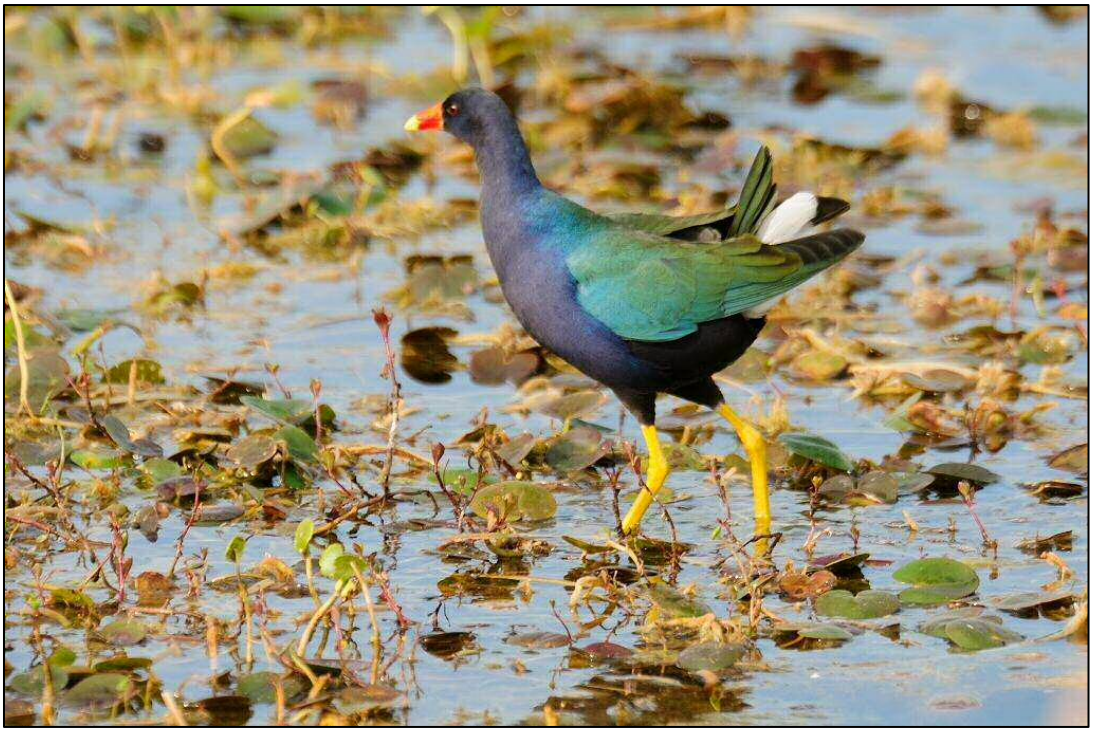
While there are at least 13 subspecies of Purple Swamphen, distinguishable primarily by color variation ranging from pale gray to blue to a dark black version, the Florida birds apparently descend from the Caspian Sea race of pale-gray-headed birds, although at STA-5, where they have been particularly successful at becoming established, both the pale-gray-headed and the blue-headed European versions can be found.

The photos accompanying this article, one gray headed and one blue headed, were both taken on the same day at STA-5, south of Clewiston, Florida. Jewel and I found and photographed a blue-headed Purple Swamphen at the Goodwin WMA near Felsmere, which, according to Florida bird authorities, is apparently the northern most outpost that the bird has reached in Florida. But the first one we ever saw was in the early 1990's near Dover, Delaware, a bird coming to a backyard bird feeder, whose origin never was discovered, and the bird was "not life-list countable" to the

Purple Finch

disappointment of many Delaware Valley area birders who made the trek to see it. The Florida Purple Swamphen will most likely change that in the very near future.

Our daughters attended a school whose primary school color was purple. It was always interesting at events, such as sport competitions and graduation, to see all the different interpretations of purple that school supporters wore to honor the school. As I recall, even the school book store had different colors of paraphernalia for sale in an apparent admission that they, themselves, were not sure which was the true color of purple. No wonder we mere birders have difficulty determining which bird is actually purple.



Purple Gallinule

Purple Martin

Purple Sandpiper

HART BEAT 32, first published February 1, 2013

Belted Kingfishers (male above) have large-size comfort zones and a long lens is usually needed to photograph them satisfactorily.

COMFORT ZONES

Apollo Robbins is widely regarded as the best of the entertainment "pickpockets" in the world. Several years ago at a convention of magicians he was sitting with a group of magicians when a skeptic challenged him, "Come on, steal something from me." Robbins demurred, saying he was uncomfortable working in front of other magicians, and also noting that the skeptic was only wearing shorts and a sport shirt. The skeptic persisted, but Robbins begged off and offered to do a magic trick instead. He asked the skeptic to take off his ring and with his pen draw a circle around the ring on a paper in front of him. When the skeptic tried to draw the circle with his pen he found the pen didn't work. Robbins was holding the cartridge from the pen in his hand. He had taken the cartridge right out of the pen in the skeptic's pocket in front of a collection of magicians, none of whom ever saw him do it.

In a recent magazine article, Robbins was interviewed and explained at length the different techniques he uses to get inside a subject's "personal space" in order to do his pickpocket tricks. While individuals have personal space, the area around us within which we are comfortable, and which when violated causes us to feel uncomfortable, birds have "comfort zones," the area near them, which when compromised, will cause them to depart.

Female Belted Kingfisher

In some birds, it can be a very small area, think sparrows feeding under the tables at an outdoor restaurant, and everyone has seen pictures of various species being hand-fed. In other species it can be such a large area that even stopping a car half a block away, without even opening a door, is enough to spook them. Game birds also seem to know when it is hunting season, for their comfort zone grows exponentially when they have been shot at, but contracts again when the season is over.

The Belted Kingfisher seems to me, to have the largest and un-easiest comfort zone of almost any species. I have found them particularly difficult to photograph because they just do not let you get close. While they are common in the winter in Florida, and can be seen on wires along most roads near any water when you are travelling at high speed past them, the minute

you slow the car down, they take off. Approaching them on foot is not an option whatsoever, and they even seem to know that a photography blind is not a normal part of their territory.

The answer, for me at least, has been using a longer lens to photographically reach them from outside their comfort zone and serendipity. If they have just caught a fish, small crab or a crawfish, their comfort zone may contract slightly for a short period while they are pre-occupied. Other than that, long lens has been the only answer for me.

My grandson, living and working in China, tells me that the Chinese concept of personal space is completely different from the American standard, and that it is virtually assured that on a subway in China you will have a fellow rider literally under each armpit, under your chin and tight up against your back. Sounds to me like a pickpocket's dream.

The most effective bird comfort zone deterrent I ever suffered occurred years ago during a Christmas Bird Count when I was climbing up the confined ladder of a silo to confirm the presence of a Barn Owl, only to have the owl both confirm his presence, and display his displeasure at my presence, by dropping a whole load of white wash on my uncovered head, shoulders, back and everything. It is the worst invasion of my personal space that I have ever encountered, and it was done by a bird. I have never climbed a silo again.

Belted Kingfisher (female)

HART BEAT 33, first published February 13, 2013

The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (above) or the Blue-headed Vireo are two of the birds likely to appear in Florida shortly after the call of a Screech-Owl is heard in the daytime.

CALLING BIRDS

The Screech-Owl kept calling incessantly. Little birds seemed to be coming from all over, attracted to the call. What's going on? First of all, it's strange that the owl is calling in the middle of the day like this, and aren't all those little birds supposed to be afraid of owls? Let's find the owl. There it is. It's not an owl at all; it's a man playing a tape recording of the owl's call. But look at all the little birds, homing in on the owl's call, obviously searching for the bird! And now you know one of the dirty little secrets of successful bird tour leaders.

There is no question that using sounds is an effective way to attract birds. There are three common ways that birders use sounds to call in birds:

1. Pishing, *10000birds.com/pishing.htm* or using one's own voice to make sounds that will make the birds curious to come and see what is going on, including imitating the Screech-

Owl whinny, (I have never mastered this technique, but I have heard imitators who are so good, you would think the bird was actually present);

2. Taped Screech-Owl recordings, (or in the west, the Pygmy Owl) a generic call that will attract many species of birds; and
3. Taped recordings of the specific species you are trying to attract, which is the most controversial use of imitating calls to attract birds.

Blue-headed Vireo

The taped calls seem to work because birds are naturally curious, and the pishing sounds simulate the calls of other birds who may have found food, or an owl to harass during the day time, (owls are sworn enemies of little birds, and it is believed that they may make a night time meal of a small bird they find, unhidden, at night). The taped calls of the specific species sought may cause a response out of curiosity, a need to defend a territory or nest site, or even perhaps the seeking of a sexy sounding mate.

My most interesting bird response to a Screech-Owl taped call took place a number of years ago, during a Christmas Bird Count, when a Northern Goshawk responded, undoubtedly hoping to find a Screech-Owl that could be converted into an easy meal. My most unusual Florida response to a taped Screech-Owl call was the arrival of a Least Flycatcher, a quite rare winter visitor in Florida, along with a whole host of other species, out on Carlton

Western Screech-Owl

Least Flvcatcher

Road, just south of Paleo Hammock. Occasionally a Screech-Owl will respond to its own taped call during the day time, but I never had one actually fly in until this past spring in Arizona. Out in Sunflower, AZ, Jewel and I were using the Western Screech-Owl taped call to attract a good number of western species, from Bewick's Wren, to Summer Tanager, to Scott's Oriole, to Ash-throated Flycatcher, when lo and behold, at high noon, a Western Screech-Owl landed on a branch directly over our heads and proceeded to call for a full 20 minutes, even though we stopped playing the tape immediately upon his/her arrival.

Here in Florida, in the winter, the first bird that will respond, usually very shortly after the tape starts playing will be either the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher or the Blue-headed Vireo. Shortly after that the White-eyed Vireo will arrive, and the longer the tape plays, Palm, Yellow-rumped and any other warbler species in the area, various woodpeckers, Robins, Cedar Waxwings, Towhees, Blue jays, and any number of additional species will show up. And Jewel is in the market for a taped call that will cause me to respond immediately to come do some chore she has in mind, but if you know of such a tape, please don't tell her.

White-eyed Vireo

Some purists oppose any use of taped calls for birds at any time. The most nuanced discussion of using taped calls that I am aware of is *www.sibleyguides.com/2011/04/the-proper-use-of-playback-in-birding/* And the American Birding Association has a policy on the use of recordings as follows: "Limit the use of recordings and other methods of attracting birds, and never use such methods in heavily birded areas, or for attracting any species that is Threatened, Endangered, or of Special Concern, or is rare in your local area*." www.aba.org/about/ethics.html*

HART BEAT 34, first published February 23, 2013

It's dinnertime for this Tropical Kingbird

LUCKY HAMMOCK LIVES UP TO ITS NAME

Lucky Hammock! Sounds like a perfect name for a Seminole Indian Casino Resort. But it is actually the name of a small birding mecca just a half mile before the Visitor's Center of the Everglades National Park. Consisting of less than a half-acre of deciduous trees surrounded by the grass lands typical of the Everglades, the hammock attracts an amazing array of rare and unusual birds, concentrated in one spot in Florida. Check out the small rectangle of trees just to the left of the "SW" of SW 232nd Ave in the Google Earth screen-shot accompanying this article. That's it! One of the best birding hot-spots in all of South Florida!

On a recent trip to the Everglades, Jewel and I were alerted to Vermilion Flycatchers (yes, plural), Tropical Kingbird, Western Kingbird, possible Brown-crested Flycatcher, Bell's Vireo, Swainson's Hawk, and a whole variety of warblers, sparrows, wrens and who knows what else, all uncommon to rare, that could be found in this tiny little corner of Florida. For a relatively complete list see *www.tropicalaudubon.org/frogpond.html*

Tropical Kingbird

When we arrived at the location, we were sure it could not be correct, because it was such a small patch of trees. Then we saw the Tropical Kingbird. (right) Then we saw the Western Kingbird, not one, but two. Then it began to rain. Early the next morning, armed with more specific information about the exact location of the Vermilion Flycatchers, we found and photographed both the male and female, not exactly at Lucky Hammock itself, but around the corner at the canal that is now considered to be part of the Lucky Hammock area. Not too long after that we found an Ash-throated Flycatcher , which no one had even mentioned as a possibility before, and which is not included on the "relatively complete list" quoted above. (Since our "find," several other postings on internet bird sites have reported it as well.) Lucky us, no?

Why are all these species found in one small location like this? Two reasons:

1. the hammock and surrounding area contains a number of bird friendly resources that are attractive to a wide variety of species; and
2. ever since some lucky birders stumbled upon some "good birds" in the area in 2001, many more birders have continued to search the area, and lo and behold, have continued to find more and varied "good birds." The phenomenon even has a name.

Ash-throated Flycatcher

Western Flycatcher

It is called the Patagonia Roadside Rest Effect. Patagonia is some 60 miles south of Tucson, AZ, and about 18 miles from the border town of Nogales, AZ, and only a few miles north of the

Mexican border. In the 1960's a couple of lucky birders stopped at the one picnic table Patagonia Roadside Rest Area to take a break from an arduous morning of birding, and discovered a pair of Rose-throated Becards, a rare Mexican species, nesting there. That discovery brought many more birders to that very small area and led to the discovery of many more rare birds ever since that first discovery; and the phenomenon continues today. On a personal note, Jewel and I saw our first Tropical Kingbird at the Kino Springs Golf Course, only a few miles west of the Patagonia Rest Stop, and then shortly thereafter, stopped at the already famous picnic table and found our life Rose-throated Becard.

Thus, luck does play a small part in the discovery of a Lucky Hammock or a Patagonia Rest Stop birding hot-spot. But the birds discovered the place first, and found it was a good place to hang out. My guess is there are a lot more such hot-spots simply waiting to be discovered. All they need is a succession of birders concentrating on the area, getting lucky. They probably don't need a Seminole Indian Casino Resort. That takes another, different kind of luck.

P. S. A week later, Jewel and I, on a trip to STA-5, south of Clewiston, saw and photographed another Tropical Kingbird; making that the first two Tropical Kingbirds we have seen since that first one in Arizona.

Vermilion Flycatcher, male

Vermilion Flycatcher, female

HART BEAT 35, first published March 10, 2013

This Northern Pintail had just finished preening without getting all his feathers in their proper place.

PREENING HAS ITS PURPOSE

Have you ever noticed that people, here and all over the world, during the course of their everyday lives, often take a few moments to check their appearance, wash up, comb their hair, fix their make-up, or spruce up their appearance in a multitude of different ways? It is a daily ritual. We all do it to keep up our appearance, and to stay as clean and healthy as we can. Birds do the same thing. We humans call it personal grooming or personal hygiene. When birds go through their everyday grooming activities, it is called preening.

Birds preen their feathers every day and sometimes several times a day. It is the activity they most engage in, second only to feeding. To learn all you ever wanted to know about bird preening, see *birding.about.com/od/birdbehavior/a/Preening.htm*.

Black Skimmer

While birds are working their way through every feather, cleaning and getting them into optimal condition, they often display them in unusual ways that show off many colors and the consequential beauty of those feathers that is hidden most of the time. Some birds clean their feathers by bathing to clear off dirt, insects or mites, and will do their preening as they dry.

Preening should not be confused with displaying, the strutting and showing off of feathers and colors to attract a mate, such as the fanning of tails by male Wild Turkeys and Peacocks. While preening is the avian equivalent of human personal grooming, an indirect purpose may be to make sure the bird is in prime condition when mating season comes around. Come to think of it, that may be an indirect purpose for humans as well.

White-tailed Kite

In the photos accompanying this article, the Northern Shoveler put on a preening show for us, displaying feathers we never knew he had, because when he (the same bird) was just swimming by, all those colorful feathers were pretty well

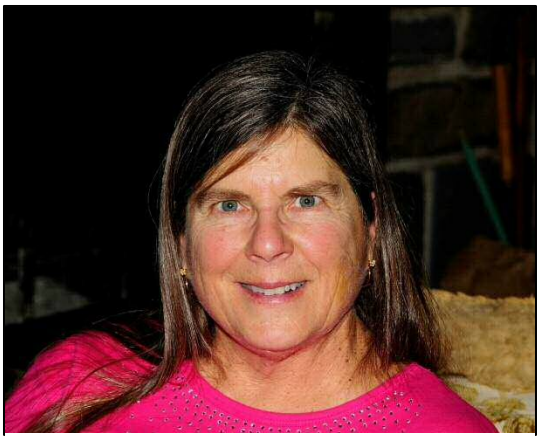
Blue-winged Teal

hidden. The Northern Pintail has just finished preening, but hasn't gotten all of his back feathers in their proper alignment yet; and the White-tailed Kite while preening, shows why its name was Black-shouldered Kite at one time, before the current focus on its white tail.

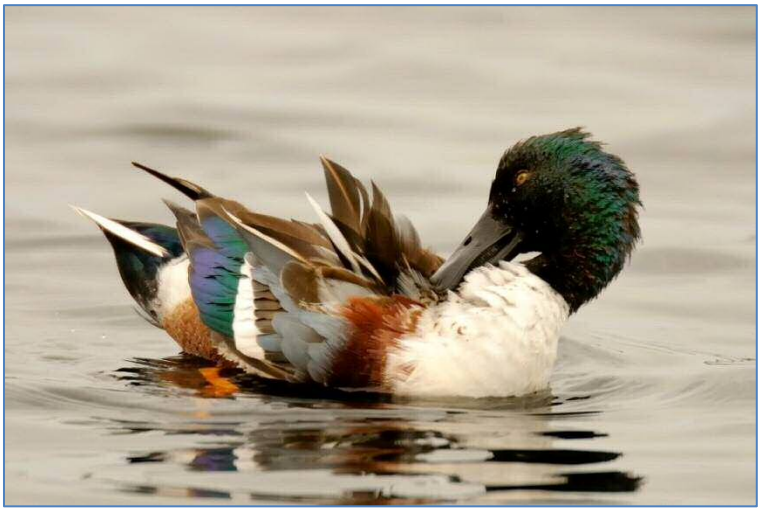
The male Blue-winged Teal has just finished preening and has not yet covered the beautiful blue and green wing patches for which he is named. In fact, the bird still has a small preened out feather stuck to his beak, just as he appears ready to take a post-preening nap. The Black Skimmer bathed for several minutes, oblivious to our nearby presence, preliminary to preening all those damp feathers back into their proper order.

So while both people and birds can exhibit an unintended and unexpected beauty when they are simply doing little things that they do every day, designed to keep up their appearance, remain fit and healthy, and just to make life better for themselves, sometimes they inadvertently enrich the lives of those of us who get to observe and appreciate all that unexpected and unintended beauty, as well.

I have included a picture of Jewel because several readers, whom we have not met, have asked what she looks like, since I refer to her all the time. And, I might add, she was sort of the inspiration for this article. I think it was those inadvertent blue eyes that got me. And she isn't even preening.



Jewel Rufe



Northern Shovelers

HART BEAT 36, first published March 24, 2013

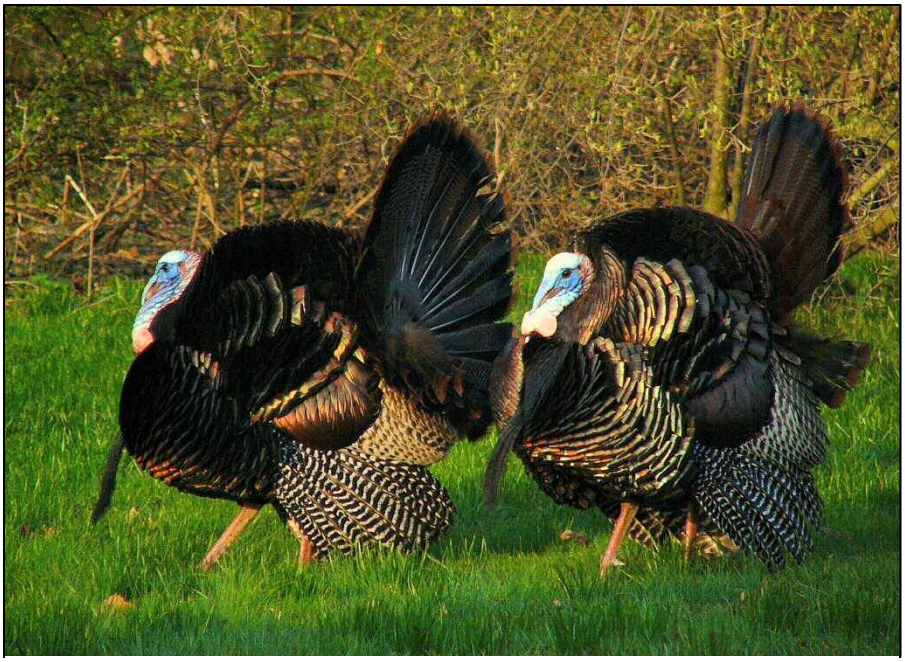
Male Hooded Mergansers raise crests, hoping that will make them more attractive to prospective mates.

DISPLAYING

Great Egret

Did you ever marvel at the beautiful people being interviewed on the red carpet leading up to the annual Academy Awards ceremony? Or watch all those gorgeous bodies working out, or merely showing their stuff, on South Beach? Or see glamorous models strutting the latest fashions on an elevated runway? Or experience the excitement of dressing up for a senior prom? All are examples of how we humans strive to appear at our very best,

demonstrating how attractive and desirable we can be, and what a fine choice any other human would make, if he or she chose us.



Wild Turkeys

Is it any surprise then, that birds engage annually in the same intense displaying behavior in order to convince prospective mates of their desirability and fitness for passing on their genes to ensure the survival of the species? Although, I doubt that either humans or birds are thinking of their behavior in those particular terms at that particular time. Or maybe they are.

Frigatebirds

Just over a hundred years ago, egrets almost became extinct when women's fashions sought to transfer the beauty of the displaying bird to the beauty of the most fashionable hat, undoubtedly, both for the same purpose. Egrets and herons display by pointing their necks and heads either to the sky or to the ground, and splaying their plumes in an elaborate delicate fan.

Many grouse species and, most notably, Wild Turkeys and Peacocks (more correctly, several species of "Peafowl," see: *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peafowl*) are most famous for the fanned feathers display which is most familiar to us all. Other species have body parts that change color,

such as the bright red and lavender that invades the yellow bill of the Cattle Egret, or the bright red eye lores and orange feet of the normally "golden slippered" Snowy Egret, or the green eye lores of the breeding Great Egret, in addition to all those gorgeous plumes.

Snowy Egret

Some species, such as the Hooded Merganser, are able to raise a crest, which presumably makes them more attractive to the opposite sex, than their un-crested competitors, even if the female does appear to be scolding him.

But perhaps the most dramatic body part display is that of the male Magnificent Frigatebird, who is able to blow up a huge red sac under his bill to create a sight that no female of the species can possibly resist. And you don't have to go to the Dry Tortugas to witness the Frigatebird sac display, they sometimes perform, as this one did, on an island in the Indian River at Jensen Beach.

Cattle Egret

So the next time you see a wedding couple all decked out in their finest "plumage," or a pair of robins just jumping up and down, face to face, in the front yard; just remember, they are only doing what courting couples have done for years, (centuries?, eons?): trying to convince a mate that he or she has indeed made the right choice. Can you imagine humans with a tail to fan like a turkey? Now there is a thought provoking image to take with you from this article!

For all you ever wanted to know about birds displaying see: *www.stanford.edu/group/stanfordbirds/text/essays/Visual_Displays.html.*

For a fascinating video of the absolute ultimate in bird displaying behavior, see the Birds of Paradise Project video

at: *www.cornell.edu/video/?VideoID=2398*.

For a video of Western Grebes doing their "walking on water" display, see*:* *www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2YfOdWp0pk&NR=1&feature=endscreen*.

And finally, for an unusual bit of Wire-tailed Manakin dancing display, see: *www.bbc.co.uk/nature/life/Wire-tailed_Manakin*

Tricolored Heron

HART BEAT 37, first published April 6, 2013

American Bitterns can be secretive and are helped by their camouflage coloration.

THE ELUSIVE BITTERNS

Many birds, and all kinds of other organisms for that matter, use camouflage and disguise to protect themselves, their nests, and their young from predators intent on doing them harm. Many have mottled feathers and/or streaking and/or coloring that will help them blend into their surroundings and make it very difficult for them to be seen. They also have the ability to remain still, so that a potential predator will not see any movement that would give them away.

Bitterns have a unique combination of back and belly streaking and color that enable them to blend in with the reeds, stalks and leaves of the tall plants where they feed, live, raise their young, and go to work every day. They are very shy, stealthy, slow moving and retiring. In addition, they have the ability to point their beaks straight upward, and wave back and forth with the surrounding vegetation so they actually blend in even more. Consequently, they can be very difficult to find and observe, and it is always thrilling to find one, particularly the Least Bittern, because of its smaller size.

The first time I ever saw an American Bittern, it was standing stock still, beak pointed to the sky, in the middle of a small pond without a single stick of vegetation anywhere near it, in the apparent mistaken impression that it was camouflaged and therefore nearly invisible. While it is true that Bitterns can be almost impossible to see when they are in their stationary head and beak skyward stance, it is still the surrounding stalks and reeds that provide them their singular sense of safety, by simply simulating their surroundings. Sort of like Br'er Rabbit in the briar patch. But it just doesn't work in a pond without any vegetation whatsoever.

In North America we have two bittern species: the larger American Bittern, shown on this page, spread through-out most of the country, but concentrated in the south, including Florida, in the winter; and the Least Bittern, primarily east of the Mississippi River, but only a few remaining in the winter, with the rest heading farther south, probably to Central America or the West Indies, where they are common year round. They are technically "herons" and appear at the beginning of all the herons taxonomically, but are each in a separate genus divided by size. *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bittern*.

This winter, for some reason, it seems that every time we went to a location affording appropriate habitat we saw American Bitterns. A couple of times, particularly at Green Cay and Wakodahatchee, the birds uncharacteristically came out into the open and performed as if on a stage to the delight of all fortunate enough to be there to see them, sometimes quite close to the boardwalk. I do not have an explanation for why they were more readily seen this winter than in the past. Maybe it was just our dumb luck.

I also searched for the derivation of the name "Bittern," hoping to find some really neat and exciting reason for such a name choice. No such luck though, and you can imagine my disappointment when I found this dictionary explanation, "… identified with Latin būteō a species of hawk (see buteo)+ Latin taurus bull (cited by Pliny as a name for a bird emitting a bellowing sound)." Not very sexy at all, is it?

However, we should soon begin finding the more secretive and elusive Least Bittern as they start arriving back in North America from their wintering grounds. Only the American Bittern emits the "bellowing sound" though, which has also been described as a "congested pump." *www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Bittern/sounds*.

The Least Bittern has a four note clucking sound. *www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/least_bittern/sounds*. Years ago, on a spring round-up birding count in Pennsylvania, my companions and I heard this sound coming from a marsh and immediately marked it down as a Black-billed Cuckoo, even though the habitat didn't look right, and of course, we never saw the bird. Only years later when I actually heard a Least Bittern call did I realize the mistake. Listen to this Black-billed Cuckoo call, compare it to the Least Bittern call, and perhaps you will understand our inexperienced stupidity. *www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black-billed_Cuckoo/sounds*.

Inexperienced stupidity used to be hard to admit, but it has gotten much easier as I have aged.

Least Bittern

HART BEAT 38, first published April 16, 2013

The male Painted Bunting is perhaps the most beautiful bird found in Florida, if not North America.

BEAUTY IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

John Keats said it exquisitely: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever."

Have you ever watched a beauty pageant and wondered how the judges can select one contestant from all the truly gorgeous beauties competing, keeping in mind that every one of the participants has won a prior pageant at the local, regional or state level before appearing on the final stage? The winner will undoubtedly have many fans who agree with the judges' decision, but many more fans will wonder why some other beauty didn't win, as they would have preferred. The same wonderment applies to birds.

As birders, we are often asked, "What is the most beautiful bird you have seen?" OK, do you mean, "Ever?" or "in North America?" or "at home?" or "on one of our trips?" The answer might be different, depending on the circumstances. If the criterion is "ever," I have always thought the Flame-colored Tanager, a Mexican species that we saw at the Mile High Ranch in southern most Arizona, was the one that I found most striking. We saw the male high-lighted in the sun, and the bright orange of the bird seemed to burst into flame in the tree before our eyes. I have never seen

a depiction in a field guide or a photograph of the bird that did it justice as I remember the sighting. But, then again, maybe it was all the surrounding circumstances of seeing the bird that made the difference, or maybe my memory has only improved the recollection with age. In any event, I don't have a photo, as the bird appeared in my pre-photography days.

The "most beautiful" bird at home is easy: the fanned out Wild Turkeys vying for the favors of one of the female turkeys watching and evaluating their display … in our front yard, no less. Their photo appeared in an earlier *Hart Beat 36* entitled "Displaying."

The "most beautiful" bird seen on one of our trips is much more problematic, as we have taken several trips to South and Central America where there are so many colorful, and even gaudy birds, to choose from. Keep in mind that of the approximately 10,000 species of birds in the world, almost half are found in these two regions. It's like watching the Miss America or Miss Universe Pageant of birds. Mixed flocks of spectacular tanagers, or the big-billed aracaris or toucans, brightly colored mot-mots, trogons, parrots, manakins, and splendid macaws parade before you on a stage of green foliage. Just Google the images for any one of these families of birds and glory in the splash of color

Female Painted Bunting

that spreads before you on your computer screen. And virtually none of them are included in the just over 700 species of breeding birds in North America. If pressed at knife-point to name a "most beautiful bird from a trip" I would probably anoint the Scarlet Macaw. For a sample of "color splash" in this bird family, go to Google, search "macaw," and click "Images."

But for "most beautiful North American bird" the decision for me is really easy. The Painted Bunting wins, hands down. Others might argue for the "Hoodie" or the "Woodie" – the Hooded Merganser, or the Wood Duck, both strong contenders. And I'm sure one of the several species of North American tanagers, or orioles, or hawks, (think Swallow-tailed Kite), or even the Northern Cardinal, will have their fans, but to me, none is as beautiful as the Painted Bunting. Not the female, only the male, and I support my argument with their portraits.

Yes, birding and beauty fans, the birding beauty pageant in North America is much easier to judge than in some other parts of the world. Maybe with global warming, North America will develop its own jungle habitat and we can then begin seeing some of these more colorful birds right here. Probably not in our lifetimes though, and maybe that's not a bad thing.

HART BEAT 39, first published May 1, 2013

Serious birders can add this Thick-billed Vireo to their lists with good conscience. Other sightings may be open to discussion.

LIFE BIRDS AND OTHER LISTS

Most birders keep lists of the birds they have seen. Perhaps the most common list is of the birds seen on a particular field trip. Many birders keep a "yard" list of the birds seen around their home, or birds seen from their kitchen window. Others, a county list of the birds they have seen in their home county, or their state, or a region such as the Treasure Coast or the Delaware Valley, the two regions Jewel and I bird the most.

You get the idea, the list of possibilities is endless. State lists, multiple county lists, multiple state lists, international lists, birds of South America, Africa, France, Russia, trip lists, you name it. We even have a friend who keeps a list of birds seen on television shows, and a second list of birds -heard on television shows, including those strange anomalies when a definite North American bird is heard in a TV show while depicting some African jungle scene. And I won't even get into Big Year lists.

Thick-billed Vireos

But the one list that is most popular and the one most birders are asking about when they ask, "What's your life list?" is the birds seen during your lifetime in North America, meaning north of the Mexican border and including Canada. Officially, the birds that may be counted on a formal birding life list is legislated by an American Birding Association committee composed of eight members who evaluate every sighting of a new bird seen in North America to determine whether it should (or not) be added to the ABA Checklist, which currently stands at 976. For further information on all aspects of the ABA Checklist, see: *www.aba.org/checklist/.*

Jewel and I are frequently asked the "What is your life list?" question, and we now answer, "We don't really know," because we haven't really kept it up. We used to. It used to be important to us. When we went to Attu in 1992, we proudly added our names and then life lists of about a respectable, but not outstanding, 760, to the long list of names and life list numbers of previous birders, magic marker inscribed on a wall in the old barracks we called home for two weeks.

But in recent years, as some of the birds we had on our list got de-listed for one reason or another, and other birds got added, as some species we saw in different parts of the country got split into two or more species, we have just stopped major "chasing." I guess we have become less competitive and simply enjoy the birds we see regularly more than we used to, and in addition, travel has just become less pleasant and more of a hassle. Now we only go after birds that are relatively nearby. Like this year.

The White-cheeked Pintail showed up at Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, and after four trips there, two completely unsuccessful, one just OK, we finally were able to photograph the

bird satisfactorily on the fourth trip. The Thick-billed Vireo (3 views shown) was being reported regularly at Bill Baggs State Park on Key Biscayne, just south of downtown Miami, and when we got there another group already had it in sight and made it easy for us to see and photograph it. So there you have it: two life birds in less than two weeks. It's been years since that happened.

Ah, but just a minute, the Vireo is OK, but will the Pintail be countable? There are two schools of thought. The first is expressed by David Pavlik, a post graduate in Ornithology, who was standing next to me when the photos shown here were taken; his thoughts, "This is a bird that is commonly kept in captivity, but also exists in the wild just over 100 miles from Pelican Island NWR. Given the spree of Caribbean vagrants Florida has had this winter, the fact that this bird is on an Atlantic coastal NWR associating with Blue-winged Teal (a species that also occurs in the Bahamas), is unbanded with no clipped halux and isn't pinioned, it seems this is about as good of a vagrant as it could get! It will be interesting to see what the Florida records committee does with this bird, but if this one doesn't get accepted, it seems the other accepted records from Texas, Florida, Alabama (and Virginia?), should also be called into question." His blog, and these thoughts, can be found at in his March 18 blog at "Birding for Conservation."

The second is expressed by Jeff Bouton, a highly regarded birding writer and speaker, referring to a known released White-cheeked Pintail in a public park, who writes, "This is also valid in lieu of a certain [referring this time to the Pelican Island bird] White-cheeked Pintail and understanding why it will likely never be accepted as a true "wild" bird. There are just too many cases like this where well meaning "bird lovers" with a farm mentality, buy a bunch of exotic waterfowl and just toss them out in a pond in a neighborhood for all to enjoy. Because these individuals did not apply for or adhere to proper permitting, or treatment etc. It is more than likely the birds are not banded so no obvious sign that these are aviculture birds." This second view is further expressed at *10000birds.com/the-problem-with-vagrant-ducks.htm.*

But there is also a third thought on the matter: Your list is your list and if you aren't going to submit it into any formal competition or to the ABA or some other similar organization, it doesn't matter. Do what you want with it.

Then there are Big Year lists and big time competitions, and the related questions of birding ethics, etiquette, honesty, and the credibility of your lists, which reminds me of the principle so important to birders, "Your credibility is like your virginity: you only lose it once, and once gone, it is gone forever." (Is this a topic for another article?) Once you reach that highly competitive level of list keeping, with a little bit of luck and a lot of effort, not to mention money, you might get yourself immortalized in a movie starring Steve Martin, Owen Wilson and Jack Black. Or, more likely, not.

White-cheeked Pintails

HART BEAT 40, first published May 15, 2013

The feeders on the Comer property are known for attracting many Painted and Indigo Buntings, but other birds come as well, such as this Brown Thrasher.

A RELIABLE FOOD SOURCE

Nelson's Family Farm in St. Lucie County, between Fort Pierce and Port St. Lucie, is renowned for the produce and varied foods they sell. Many of their fruits and vegetables are grown on their own farm, but they also carry a great variety of fancy and exotic produce, plants and gourmet by-products that make wandering their aisles a wondrous adventure and an impulse buyer's night-mare. As Jewel says, "Never go to Nelson's when you are hungry, for you might buy out the whole place." The parking lot is always jammed and shoppers with heavy loads can be seen leaving, while new arrivals await their parking spot. The place is the very definition of "A Reliable Food Source."

Conversely, there were two other nearby similar farm and produce stands, presumable offering similar food fare, with arguably better marketing locations on a major highway with better traffic volume, but both are now gone. Presumably, not "reliable."

Sam and Allie Comer, also in St. Lucie County, maintain a reliable food source for birds, both where they live and where they work. Their feeders are always clean and well stocked with fresh food, plenty of water, and nearby surrounding cover for quick escape when the inevitable Sharp-

shinned Hawk comes looking for lunch. The Comers are renowned for the Painted and Indigo Buntings they attract to their feeders, and indeed, they open their home and property for many birding, garden, photography, artist, and naturalist organizations to come and view the profusion of beautiful birds they feed.

Indigo Bunting

They have counted as many as 60 Painted Buntings and 175 Indigo Buntings at their feeders at one time over the years. They have a truly reliable food source for birds, and the birds respond by putting on a show. Conversely, anyone interested in birds has observed empty bird feeders hanging in some one's back yard, undoubtedly hung during a spurt of enthusiasm, but unfortunately, not maintained or properly cared for. Not "reliable," and therefore, no birds.

Lazuli Bunting

But while the Comer's bird feeders attract the buntings they are famous for, the focus of this article is upon all the other rarer or more unusual birds they have attracted over the years with their reliable food source. Yes, they draw in all the common birds you might expect: Cardinals, Catbirds, Mourning and Ground Doves, Goldfinches, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Blue Jays, and Carolina Wrens. But, in addition, they also have attracted such uncommon and unusual birds

Ovenbird

as a Brown Thrasher, Clay-colored Sparrow, Dickcissel, White-crowned Sparrow, Ovenbird, Lazuli Buntingand Northern Bobwhite, and both Blue and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Not every bird every year, but one or more of these unusual birds each year. All photos shown here (as well as the Painted Bunting photos featured in the recent *Hart Beat 38* on the Beauty of Birds) were taken at the Comer's feeding stations.

People and birds are very much alike, both have a very strong interest in food, (probably because both develop a strong interest in eating it at a very young age) and therefore both are attracted to a consistently reliable food source. And they are also both alike, in that they will both ignore a food source that can't be counted upon. But if we human eaters don't want to go while hungry to a fantastic food festival for over buying or over-eating reasons, this is certainly not a problem with birds, which always seem to be ready to rally to a reliable food source.

The Comers have certainly learned the secret to attracting many and varied birds to their feeders: it is the same secret that attracts us to a place like Nelson's Family Farms. And sometimes there are so many birds, that they just have to wait for a parking spot at the feeders.

Clay-colored Sparrow

Northern Bobwhite

Dickcissel

White-crowned Sparrow

HART BEAT 41, first published May 30, 2013

"Black and Tan" has a different connotation in the bird world than in a pub. Shown is a male Eastern Towhee, northern variety. The female is shown on the next page.

BLACK AND TAN

I have a friend whose favorite beer is a Black and Tan. I was always intrigued when he drank it by the fact that the drink was two-toned: light tan on the bottom, and a very dark, almost black on top. While Yuengling makes and sells a pre-mixed "original" Black and Tan, my friend preferred to make his own the old British way by pouring pale lager or ale into the bottom of the glass, followed by a very slow pouring of a dark stout into the top. The slow pour kept the two beers from mixing because the stout was less dense than the lager and the black and tan colors remained separated until the glass was tipped into the drinker's mouth. The whole idea stems back to the 1880's. *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_and_Tan*. I have no idea what it tastes like.

White-throated Sparrows come in two color phases: black and tan. While other bird species come in different color phases, i.e. Great Blue Herons, Screech-Owls, Short-tailed Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks, and Snow Geese. The White-throated Sparrow is unique in that approximately equal numbers of both color phases are produced, black White-throats are universally more

aggressive and tan White-throats are universally more passive, and most importantly: male or female black White-throated Sparrows mate almost exclusively with tan female or male White-throated Sparrows, while tan male or female White-throats mate almost exclusively with black female or male White-throats.

It is the absolute ultimate in "opposites attract." *nationalzoo.si.edu/scbi/migratorybirds/featured_birds/default.cfm?bird=White-throated_Sparrow*. I believe White-throated Sparrows are the only sparrow species to exhibit this complex pattern, and I was not able to discover any other species in any bird family to engage in this unique behavior.

White-throated Sparrows do not reach the Treasure Coast in their winter migration. Occasionally they are reported in the winter as far south as central Florida, but are more common in the winter in the Florida Panhandle. While they only occur at our home area in Pennsylvania in the winter, they are abundant at that time, and they are still present when we complete our north-bound spring migration. See the earlier *Hart Beat 22* on Martins. By early to mid-May, all of our White-throats will have migrated farther north, primarily into Canada, for their breeding purposes.

Another black and tan scenario comes to mind: Eastern Towhees. The male is black above, with rufous sides and a white belly, while the female is tan in the same areas where the male is black.

Florida Towhees have white eyes: See *stlucieaudubon.org/images/BirdPhotos/EasternTowhee.jpg*, while northern Towhees have red eyes, but that difference has not been deemed sufficient to consider them separate species. One can find Eastern Towhees year round in Florida, but in Pennsylvania, they migrate, both ways, pretty much about the same time that we migrate.

What does black and tan beer have to do with the birds described? Not much of anything really, except a commercial for Yuengling "original" Black and Tan reminded me of my friend's preference for the brew, and that occurred while I was looking at White-throated Sparrows, and that jarred my recollection of a birding club program describing a study where the black and tan "opposites attract" behavior of White-throats was documented. Then, while taking photos of the White-throats for this article, a pair of Eastern Towhees serendipitously put in an appearance, and another light bulb went off in this old head. My long time ago English teacher would have called that thought process "stream of consciousness." Luckily, Jewel did not interrupt that stream of thought at any point, or I might never have reached this point in the article.

White-throated Sparrows

HART BEAT 42, first published July 12, 2013

Tree Swallows seldom sit still long enough to get a good photograph.

THE BIGGEST WEEK IN AMERICAN BIRDING

While modestly proclaiming May 2 through May 10 "The Biggest Week in American Birding," the Black Swamp Bird Observatory, located on the south shore of Lake Erie in Ohio, humbly declares its Magee Marsh "the warbler capital of the world!" *dev.biggestweekinamericanbirding.com/default.aspx*

Located at the intersection of the western edge of the Atlantic migration flyway and the eastern edge of the Mississippi migration flyway (*birding.about.com/od/birdingbasics/ss/North-America-Migration-Flyways.htm*), and on the Lake Erie hurdle to the continued flight north for many species, Magee Marsh is indeed, ideally located to concentrate birds and birders in a Biggest Week joint venture. And, some 35 to 37 species of warblers can be seen in any May at Magee Marsh.

Cynics quickly point out that Magee Marsh features neither the Biggest Week, nor the Warbler Capital, as they argue both distinctions belong to Vera Cruz, Mexico, where in a given week in the fall millions of raptors and tens of millions of songbirds, from all four U S migratory flyways funnel together through a narrow passage on their way to wintering grounds in Central and South America. *iap.audubon.org/veracruz-mexico*. Thus, a birder can find more than 50 species of warblers from all parts of North America in the early morning, marvel at the spectacle of millions of raptors in the late morning as the thermals and winds support their southerly urge, and then spend the rest of the day viewing the hundreds of resident bird species, including 30 endemics, found nearby. *www.hawkwatch.org/conservation-science/migration-research-sites/109-veracruz-river-of-raptors*.

Upland Sandpiper

Spotted Sandpiper

Ohioan hyperbole and Mexican cynicism aside, Magee Marsh is

truly spectacular, and the warblers, seen at arm's length at times, are amazing. *Hart Beat 16* features Magee Marsh. But we have found that the location also features many other species that we don't see too often in either Florida or Pennsylvania.

Whip-poor-will

For example, the Upland Sandpiper (top, right) can be found in south Florida on migration in late July and August, but not in the winter when we are there, and they nest in small numbers in south central Pennsylvania, but are classified as "critically imperiled." Yet, there they were, in a field just along the road near the entrance to Magee Marsh. We also saw breeding plumage Spotted Sandpipers (top, left) sporting their namesake spots instead of the drab winter plumage that we see in Florida. In other nearby fields, well hidden and found only with diligent searching, were a surprising number of American Pipits and Horned Larks (bottom, left). Both American Pipits and Horned Larks can be found in Central and North Florida in the winter, but are regarded as rare or unusual at best, and I was not able to find any indication either has been found in St. Lucie County.

Meanwhile, back in Magee Marsh where the crowds of birders and warblers were engaged in their ongoing jockeying for position: the birds in the trees and shrubs, and the birders on the boardwalk seeking an ever better view, we searched for species other than the warblers.

A Whip-poor-will presented a particular challenge by taking up a position on a branch well shielded by a large shrub, so that only by considerable jockeying of my own could I find a small hole through which to take the less than satisfactory photo presented here. And a Gray-cheeked Thrush moved along a small water course, in a "now I'm in view, now I'm not" tantalizing tango, until finally posing ever so briefly for this shot. But the most surprising bird experience was the one Tree Swallow, among the hundreds (thousands?) present, that took up a guard position in the middle of a sand trail to the Lake Erie beach and refused to budge out of the way

until a whole horde of birders descended upon him. Full frame photos at four feet are rare for any bird species, but for Tree Swallows, unheard of in my experience. Does he look angry?

Whether or not Magee Marsh offers the Biggest Week in American Birding, many Vera Cruz adherents were there partaking and it is plenty big enough to satisfy Jewel and me. We have already made our reservations for next year.

American Pipit

Gray-cheeked Thrush

Horned Lark

HART BEAT 43, first published July 26, 2013

BIRDS IN CAMO

and

Pete Dunne, the renowned Director of the Cape May NJ Bird Observatory and inveterate raptor enthusiast, some years ago declared that all birds fall into two categories: “Raptors and food for raptors!” That harsh pronouncement perhaps oversimplifies the relationships between birds, but there is certainly much truth in that statement when one considers the Darwinian fact that many species are simply prey species that are forced to spend all their waking hours simply avoiding being eaten by other species, which have similarly evolved to spend their waking hours finding and eating those very same prey species. And it has ever been thus.

I maintain an email notification list of readers who have expressed an interest in receiving immediate notification and link to new postings of these *Hart Beat* articles. (If you would like to be added to that list, just let me know by email.) Occasionally, I send out birding items of interest to the readers on that list, which items do not appear on the web site, but go to the list members only. Some time ago I sent out a challenge to “Find the Copperhead Snake” in the then attached photo, which someone forwarded to me from the internet. It was the supreme test of one’s observation abilities, as well as an outstanding example of animal camouflage, and many responded that they could not find the snake in the photo. If you would like to try your luck at finding the snake, the photo can be found at *www.city-data.com/forum/rural-small-town-living/441907-can-you-spot-copperhead-snake.html*.

On our trip to Magee Marsh this May, we had our own opportunity to observe bird camouflage at its very best. Not once, but twice with two different birds of the same species. We probably would not have found either one on our own, but the Magee Marsh park service attendants had protected the area where the birds were located in the narrow grass strip between parking areas, by marking it with what looked like yellow crime scene tape. At the beginning of this column are the two different “crime scenes.” Are you able to find the nesting bird in one and the resting bird with four chicks in the other one? And what species are they? No peeking at the rest of the article for the answers or the close up photos until you have truly given it your best effort.

This exercise is presented not so much to test your powers of observation, but rather to illustrate the extreme extent some bird species have developed the ability to blend into their surroundings and camouflage themselves while remaining absolutely still in order to avoid detection and being eaten by predators.

I have seen an American Woodcock in the past when I observed it sitting still, looked away for a moment, and then was unable to relocate it again in order to show someone else, only to have to spend considerable time finding it again even though I knew pretty well right where it was. Now that is a very humbling experience. Yes, both birds in the photos are American Woodcock, a very tasty (I am told) game bird that is preyed upon, not only by larger birds, but also many mammalian predators including we humans with our firearms. And we humans sometimes use the same camo techniques for both hunting and photography purposes as the American Woodcock, but not nearly as effectively. Here are close-up photos of both American Woodcock, on the nest, and with the four chicks.

HART BEAT 44, first published August 21, 2013

We've been where and when they're supposed to be in Florida, but have yet to spot one.

CHASING HENSLOW'S SPARROWS IN FLORIDA

There are Henslow's Sparrows in Florida. I know this because I read it on the internet. And I believe everything I read on the internet. Understand, Jewel and I have never seen a Henslow Sparrow in Florida, even though we have gone looking for them where they are supposed to be on their wintering grounds.

Twice we have participated in bird banding projects at Kissimmee Prairie State Park where we were assured that Henslow's Sparrows were most certain to be caught in the mist nets, along with Common Yellowthroats, Bachman's Sparrows, House Wrens, the more common northern Grasshopper Sparrows wintering there, and hopefully, some of the very rare and endangered Florida Grasshopper Sparrow, the target bird of the banding projects. Both times we were there to participate all of these species except the Henslow's Sparrow were captured for banding, including the nearly extinct Florida Grasshopper Sparrow. *fl.audubon.org/florida-grasshopper-sparrow*.

We have also searched for Henslow's on several occasions at Tosohatchee State Reserve, where they are also reported as a regular wintering species, similarly without luck. Admittedly, we have not gone looking for them at Apalachicola National Forest, where they are reported to be "relatively abundant" in the winter. *www.birdforum.net/showthread.php?t=241034*. I suppose the emphasis is on the "relatively" part of that description. I suspect that any number more than one qualifies as "abundant."

Henslow's Sparrows formerly were readily found in appropriate grassland habitats in New Jersey and Delaware, and there was a particular spot in Delaware where we could always take field trip participants in the spring and be certain to find them. No more, though. Not for many years.

But there is good news, for in Pennsylvania and other nearby states where vast areas of the landscape was devastated in the practice of strip mining for coal, much of the moon-like terrain that was left after the coal was gone, has now been reclaimed and returned to expansive fields of grass-lands, exactly the habitat that Henslow's Sparrows prefer. *www.fs.fed.us/psw/publications/documents/psw_gtr191/Asilomar/pdfs/504-510.pdf.*

One such reclaimed area, recently becoming well regarded by birders travelling on I-80 in northern and western Pennsylvania, often on their way to or from the "Biggest Week in American Birding" (*Hart Beat 42*), is known simply as "The Piney Tract" http://www.senecarocksaudubon.org/pineytract.html. It is an internationally recognized globally Important Bird Area (IBA) *web4.audubon.org/bird/iba/* primarily because of the presence of the rapidly declining Henslow's Sparrow. Jewel and I could not resist the siren call of such a difficult bird to find and the promise of success in such a well-regarded location, not to mention the opportunity to observe a truly successful environmental reclamation project.

We present here photos and a video recording of the Henslow's Sparrow from the Piney Tract. While the bird will never be confused with such elegant songsters as some of the thrushes, finches or even the Mockingbird, he certainly should get bonus points for enthusiasm. In the photos we show both the side and front views so that you can appreciate the unusual olive neck and back of the head, as well as the fine streaking on the breast, the white throat, and the stripe on the head seen from the front.

We will keep searching for Henslow's Sparrows in Florida, but are not particularly sorry that Florida does not have any stripped coal mines that need reclaiming. That does not mean that Florida is devoid of environmental projects to undertake. We are just not sure which ones, if any, would benefit Henslow's Sparrows. But, Lord knows, there are more than enough other species that need help in Florida. Like the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow. For sure!

Click to see the video: *www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRl94lrQHDw*

HART BEAT 45, first published September 8, 2013

Flock of Red Knots at Cape May, New Jersey

DELAWARE BAY BEACH DANCE

In one of the stranger relationships in nature, Red Knots and Horseshoe Crabs dance together on the beaches of the Delaware Bay in New Jersey and Delaware for a few short weeks at the end of May each year, and then ignore each other until urges bring them back again the following May. Urges? Actually, the Horseshoe Crabs are there to mate and lay eggs to perpetuate the species, hopefully more eggs than the birds will eat.

The Red Knots, having carefully timed their arrival from the southern tip of South America, are there to eat all the eggs they can to build up their depleted fat reserves so that they can continue their migration on to the high Canadian Arctic for their summer of mating and perpetuating their species. They rely on the Horseshoe Crabs to provide enough crab eggs for them to gorge upon and rebuild all their fat reserves lost in the first leg of the migration flight. For millennia this converging dance has worked well, as the crabs produced more than enough eggs and their numbers grew; just as the shorebirds were able to eat more than enough to be able to reach their breeding grounds and have all the energy they needed to successfully raise their young and increase their numbers. Happiness reigned.

Horseshoe Crabs mating

Then came human Greed. First, in the early nineties, a small number of opportunists discovered that Horseshoe Crabs, ground up, made good cheap plentiful fertilizer. They carted Horseshoe Crabs away by the truck load. Shortly behind them, another group of opportunists discovered the horseshoe crabs made excellent cheap plentiful bait for catching eels, those delightful slippery slimy metaphors for the criminal dregs of our society, that in real life are the tasty parts of Japanese sushi, for which there is a vast Asian market. Many more truckloads of Horseshoe Crabs were carted away. Not surprisingly, the Horseshoe Crab population plummeted, and also not surprisingly, did the Red Knotpopulation: from an estimated 140,000 in the 1990's to less than 15,000 in the early 2000's when a state moratorium on harvesting Horseshoe Crabs went into effect.

Red Knot, summer plumage

Red Knot, winter plumage

Since the moratorium they have rebounded to around 25,000, but they are definitely not out of the woods. Tremendous lobbying pressure continues for the lifting of the moratorium and to allow the same small number of opportunists to resume cashing in on the easy pickings.

But human greed is not the Red Knot's only problem, nature can also create disastrous circumstances. Hurricane Sandy did well publicized damage to New Jersey's Atlantic beaches, but it also did much, less well publicized, damage to the Delaware Bay beaches where the Horseshoe Crabs and the Red Knots do their annual dance. Strapped New Jersey did not have the funds necessary to restore the Delaware Bay beaches, and it was only a very concerted private effort that raised the funds to do the restoration work in time for the Red Knot – Horseshoe Crab 2013 annual prom. See *www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2013/06/red_knots_shorebirds_feast_on.html.*

While virtually the entire world's population of Red Knots passes through Delaware Bay on its annual migration north, a small part of the population has begun to change its pattern and fly to Florida for the winter, rather than make the entire journey to Tierra del Fuego. They can be found wintering at Merritt Island and also at Sanibel. Perhaps this is nature's way of accommodating the changes the species is encountering to ensure its survival.

I don't expect that we will ever see the Delaware Bay beaches undulating with Horseshoe Crabs and Red Knots as we did in the 1950's and 60's when there were no houses on the beaches or road access as there is now, and it was very difficult to even get to the beaches to view this annual spectacle, which then continued as far as the eye could see; but we can hope that with enough dedicated conservation care and concern, future generations will continue to thrill at the spectacular annual Red Knot – Horseshoe Crab prom.

The photos depict Horseshoe Crabs mating, and those that perished, presumably after mating, as well as Red Knots in breeding and winter plumage, and in flight. The beaches are littered with Horseshoe Crabs shells for miles.

For a short video of shorebirds feeding on Horseshoe Crab eggs, see: *youtu.be/f6bKqolJAt8*

For an excellent, comprehensive 50 minute PBS film on the two species interaction, see: *www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/episodes/crash-a-tale-of-two-species/video-full-episode/4772/.*

Dead Horseshoe Crabs

HART BEAT 46, first published September 21, 2013

The outfit of the Black-bellied Plover we see is a bit drab compared to the breeding plumage of spring and summer. (below, left)

WHICH OUTFIT TO WEAR?

Have you noticed at the supermarket or at the mall, all of the shoppers are going about their business dressed appropriately in comfortable presentable clothes, not too flashy or dressy, but completely suitable for their current shopping activity. But those same shoppers, when dressing for a date, or the

Dunlin, winter

Dunlin, summer

beginning of any type of courting activity, will get all dolled up in an outfit designed to present themselves in the best appearance possible. Thus, one outfit to run to the store for a gallon of milk; but a much more fancy and elaborate outfit to go to the Prom.

With birds, the "shopping at the mall" outfit they sport is called "basic" plumage. Birds wear that plumage most of the year, changing into their "alternate" or "prom" outfit in those few short months when they engage in the courting process to prepare for mating and the serious business of breeding and perpetuating the species. In Florida, in the winter time, when many species follow the human "snowbirds" south for the winter (or is it the other way around, the humans following the bird "snowbirds" south?), we are treated to birds in their basic, more nondescript, visit-the-mall, plumages. In New Jersey, in the spring while on migration, we are treated to birds in their alternate, dressier, going-to-the-prom, plumages. Sometimes, as with humans, the difference is dramatic.

Ruddy Turnstone, summer

Ruddy Turnstone, summer

Four common species, found in the winter in Florida, are the Black-bellied Plover, the Dunlin, the Ruddy Turnstone and the Sanderling. A birder, viewing any one of these four species in Florida in the winter in their basic or shopping mall plumage, would never suspect that the same species, in its alternate or prom plumage, could be transformed so dramatically. Unfortunately,

we are not generally privileged to observe their prom plumage in Florida, but farther north in New Jersey, in May, for a few short weeks until they head farther north for the breeding season, they can be seen in all their best feathered finery.

On field trips in Florida I am sometimes asked, “Where does the Black-bellied Plover get its name?” This is quite a legitimate question from a Floridian who is never treated to the breeding “alternate” plumage, which, when only observed farther north, makes the name obvious. The Dunlin, with its slightly down-curved bill, was formerly called the “Red-backed Sandpiper” which referred to its alternate or breeding plumage, not the basic plumage we see in Florida. The Sanderling probably gets its name from its habit of running back and forth on sandy beaches, not its plumage; and the Ruddy Turnstone, which is not at all “ruddy” in the winter, gets its name from its practice of over-turning small stones while searching for food that might be hiding there.

So the next time you go grocery shopping and see fellow customers comfortable in their shorts and tee shirts, remember that those same customers are just as likely to get all decked out in very dressy finery when getting ready to go a-courting. Same thing is true with most bird species: very plain basic garb for everyday taking care of business, but once a year, for several weeks, a transformation into a remarkable change in appearance, that it’s not surprising that some birders may think that they are a completely different species. Come to think of it, I have seen some of my friends transform into virtually different people when they have made the effort to really put forward their most attractive appearance. And don’t even mention how good they can look for their wedding.

Sanderling, winter

Sanderling, summer