

The **BARRED OWL**

Newsletter of the Baton Rouge Audubon Society

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Mr. Sibley Came to Town....

by Jared Wolfe, BRAS Programs Chair

Some initiatives workout while others exceed expectations. Fortunately, expectations were surpassed during David Sibley's visit to Baton Rouge in May. When BRAS first suggested inviting David to our community I noticed how the name 'David Sibley' resonated in different ways among various crowds of bird enthusiasts. Some knew David from his award winning field guides that have introduced a generation to the finer aspects of bird and tree identification. Others recognized David as a leading opposing force to the 2005 published rediscovery of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Arkansas. Many others regularly followed David's prolific blog which explores many facets of bird watching, from the proper use of playbacks to differentiating black-bird species in flight.



David's dedication to the study of bird identification and behavior made him a perfect guest speaker for the last BRAS monthly presentation this season. In addition to a public lecture, David agreed to teach a day-long advanced bird watching workshop at Bluebonnet Swamp where his encyclopedic knowledge of the natural world was on full display. The workshop began in the morning with David drawing sonograms on a large pad of paper representing each species we heard singing at the swamp. As we slowly moved along the trails, David led the group through challenging identification problems: Red-eyed Vireos skulking through the canopy, migrant warblers in the tree tops, distant songs and intricate differences in undertail covert patterns.



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Looking Backward, Looking Forward

A message from BRAS President Jane Patterson...

Baton Rouge Audubon has had a wonderful year! Our programs chair, Jared Wolfe has done an outstanding job putting together programs for the year. All of the programs were very well attended, especially our "big one" featuring David Sibley. We literally had standing room only! Thanks so much to LSU School of Coastal and Environmental Science for the use of the beautiful auditorium. We want to thank Bluebonnet Swamp Nature Center for letting us use their facility for the programs each month, and also hosting our monthly bird walks. Dan Mooney has hosted those monthly bird walks on the first Saturday of the month with the outstanding help of BREC volunteers John & Cindy Hartgerink and Jeff and Carol Newell, all of whom know the swamp inside and out! We will be on hiatus for programs through the summer, but our bird walks will continue (7am on the first Saturday of each month). Dave Patton, our Sanctuary chair, has done a great job of keeping up with the maintenance for the Peveto Woods sanctuary this week and I know I and many others especially enjoyed the woods this spring during migration! Erik Johnson, Jared Wolfe and Eric Liffmann continue to be active with the Bluebonnet Bird Monitoring program -- look for the annual report to be published on our website very soon! We welcomed a new Conservation chair this year in Richard Condrey. Dr. Condrey is a retired associate professor with LSU's Department of Oceanography and Coastal Sciences. Many thanks to Donna Lafleur, chapter secretary who keeps track of our board meeting notes, and Jay Guillory, our treasurer, who makes sure we have money in the bank and that our bills are paid. Beverly Smiley serves on our board as an at-large member and we can always count on her to host wonderful meetings!

Last week we held our annual members potluck dinner, which included our annual election of officers and volunteer recognition event. We were for-



tunate in that the current officers agreed to all serve again and the membership voted in our board: Jane Patterson - President, Erik Johnson - Vice President, Donna Lafleur - Secretary, and Jay Guillory - Treasurer. For volunteer recognition, top honors went to Dr. Jay Huner for his efforts with his Big Year 2012 that also provided funding for BRAS and Yellow Rails and Rice Festival. Dr. Huner was presented with a framed copy of the article that appeared in the Baton Rouge Advocate regarding his Big Year. We also recognized the efforts of John and Cindy Hartgerink, Jeff and Carol Newell for their help with the bird walks, and Kimberly Lanka for her help with the refreshments at each of our programs.

I was also able to give the membership an update on our efforts to find new sanctuary property for BRAS to purchase. We have been working with BREC and the BREC Foundation on the possibility of jointly acquiring a parcel of land adjacent to BREC's Frenchtown Conservation area in north-east Baton Rouge at the confluence of the Amite and Comite rivers. It would be wonderful way to extend the green space offered by this park and offer a great birding and outdoor activity location for Baton Rouge Audubon membership and the public. We'll keep you posted on those efforts!



**20% OFF for BRAS Members
One Regular price item.**

*Valid 07/01/13 thru 07/31/12 only on non-bird food items at the Baton Rouge location. 225-408-0600. One discount per purchase. Not valid on bird food, previous purchases, optics, gift cards, DSC memberships, sale items or Brome Bird Care branded feeders.



When Mr. Sibley Came to Town....

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After a morning of bird watching David led the group through avian topography by hand-drawing the skeletal structure, layering muscle and finally feathers to holistically illustrate the relationship between visible features and the underlying anatomy of perched birds. Special attention was paid to how small variations in facial patterning are responsible for perceived differences among many warbler species. After the lecture, we concluded the day with some light birding, chatting and autographs, then raced to LSU for David's evening presentation titled "*The Psychology of Bird Identification.*"

BRAS had previously reserved a large auditorium at LSU for David's lecture, second in-size only to Death Valley (slight exaggeration – but, it was a truly monstrous venue at 250 seats). Initially I was apprehensive at the thought of filling so many seats; I wasn't sure if our local



David Sibley with BRAS volunteers Jeff and Carol Newell

bird-enthusiast community was large enough to produce a crowd capable of filling more than half the seats. Ten minutes prior to the presentation my concerns were alleviated as every chair was filled and lines of audience members began sitting in the aisles. In total, approximately 300 people filled the auditorium to hear the lecture. David's talk was engaging; he used optical illusions to demonstrate that our minds are incapable of correctly dealing



with ambiguity, often leading to spurious bird identification. He supported his ideas with real-world examples of (in)famous misidentifications by dozens of bird watchers: Smith's Longspur in California (actually a Skylark), Curlew Sandpiper in Florida (actually a Dunlin) among others.

David had a final obligation in Baton Rouge in addition to the bird watching workshop and public presentation: a crawfish boil. Former BRAS president and expert crawfish chef, Eric Liffmann, hosted the boil and provided David with his first crawfish eating experience. Several beers and pounds of crawfish later, David appeared quite content with his Baton



David Sibley eating crawfish with Eric Liffmann and Kristin Brzeski

Rouge experience and suggested a return visit to witness spring migration along Louisiana's coast. We all are truly grateful that David was able to share his time and expertise with our community. I am especially grateful for all the BRAS volunteers who worked hard to make his visit a success.

Remember, if you enjoyed David Sibley's BRAS lectures, please join us next season (starting in September 2013) for another exciting line-up of public presentations.



A satisfied participant, Alex Haun

BRAS Bird Monitoring Expands to Palmetto Island State Park

Learning about Louisiana's birds and how to ensure that future generations continue to enjoy them is one of the goals of the Baton Rouge Audubon Society. With on-going monitoring efforts at Bluebonnet Swamp in Baton Rouge, we have learned much about birds' life cycles, such as novel molt strategies in Eastern Towhees and Indigo Buntings and the survivorship of several of our resident songbirds. By building collaborations with scientific researchers at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and Biodiversity Research Institute, we anticipate continued growth in our knowledge and capacity to study Louisiana's birds. These monitoring efforts at Bluebonnet Swamp serve as a foundation on which to expand, and as such we are excited to announce a partnership with the Louisiana Office of State Parks to begin bird monitoring and banding at Palmetto Island State Park, near Abbeville in Vermilion Parish.

Palmetto Island State Park, opened relatively recently in 2006, is located along the lower Vermilion River and helps ensure the protection of 1300 acres of cypress-tupelo swamp and bottomland hardwood forests.

These forests contain a wealth of biodiversity including nesting Prothonotary Warblers, Hooded Warblers, and even the occasional Swainson's Warbler. The "island", or salt dome, on which the park is situated and the surrounding working agriculture landscape, was found to host at least 224 bird species in a one-year study conducted by Michael Musumeche and Dr. Jay Huner.



On busy summer weekends, hundreds of visitors enjoy the park's recreational opportunities, which include camping, hiking, fishing, a nature center, and a splash pad for cooling off on hot summer days. With such a unique combination of high visitation rates, and fascinating bird life, the outreach and education potential is enormous and we are

looking forward to interact with and engage this new community as we continue our bird banding program.

On our inaugural day of banding on 12 May 2013, we caught 41 birds of 11 species, including Red-bellied Woodpecker, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Veery, Swainson's Thrush, Red-eyed Vireo, Carolina Wren, White-eyed Vireo, Ovenbird, Prothonotary Warbler, Hooded Warbler, and Northern Cardinal. As we continue to monitor the site once or twice a month, we will be learning much more about the value of this site for breeding, stopover, and overwintering success of the birds the use this habitat.

If you are interested in learning more about our banding schedules at Bluebonnet Swamp or Palmetto Island State Park, please let us know so we can put you on the email list. To learn more about Palmetto Island State Park, visit their blog: <http://palmettoisland.wordpress.com/>.

Erik I. Johnson
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Prothonotary Warbler Boxes at Bluebonnet Swamp



Photo by John Hartgerink

Members of the Baton Rouge Audubon Society built and installed nineteen nest boxes for Prothonotary Warblers at Bluebonnet Swamp this past April. The materials necessary for the building the boxes were provided by BRAS (thank you members) and the original design and construction consultation were provided by Dr. Van Remsen. As I write this (6/16) we had at least seven chicks fledge from our boxes with other boxes still containing eggs. In total we've had Prothonotary Warblers nest in seven of our boxes!

I'd like to thank several participants of the Bluebonnet Bird Monitoring Project (and BRAS members) for their help in the construction; Jerry Seagle, John Hartgerink, Jeff and Carol Newell, Luke Powell, Dan Mooney and Jared Wolfe. I'll give detailed instructions on the box construction next spring if you're interested in housing your own Prothonotary family.

*Good Birding,
Eric Liffmann*

Do we have your email address?

Keep up to date with all of Baton Rouge Audubon Society's events and programs by joining our email list. We won't inundate you with email, we promise! Send a request to "President@braudubon.org" and ask to be added to the list! Also follow us on Facebook at facebook.com/BRAudubon.

Backyard Birdwatching

I'll be offering my first ever Backyard Birdwatching class this summer. It's available through the LSU Leisure system (www.lsu.edu/leisureclasses) We'll talk in some detail about all the common birds you might see in your yard, with a whole session dedicated to hummingbirds. We'll talk about what it takes to attract birds, and how to solve bird-feeding problems. It should be a lot of fun. Classes start July 8, Monday nights for 4 weeks. Tell your friends and sign up today!

-- Jane Patterson



by Crystal Johnson

Just experienced my first spring migration. When I started birding in January of 2013, I began to better appreciate my location in Louisiana as a migratory super-highway for birds crossing the Gulf of Mexico from readings and whisperings from other birders. I started to relate on a more personal level to the wetlands and pollution lessons that I teach my students. When I squealed with delight at the wintering birds Jane Patterson was pointing out to me in February around Baton Rouge, she looked at me with a knowing grin and said, "You just wait."

Boy was she right. I spent a good bit of April with both my eyes and my mouth wide open and my neck craned up. As a birder novice, I



was counting 10 or more lifer birds every weekend, particularly in Grand Isle the weekend before the Grand Isle Migratory Bird Festival and in Cameron Parish for the Louisiana Ornithological Society meeting. I was even starting to identify some of the birds on my own.

I saw my firsts of deep rich velvety male Scarlet Tanagers, bright saturated red Summer Tanagers, and even a Western Tanager doing his best tequila sunrise impression. I spotted electric blue Indigo Buntings so numerous their combined weights bent tree branches. I felt like I was back in Honduras.

I screeched on brakes as I spotted my first Scissor-Tailed Flycatcher in the middle of the street, lurching my poor passengers forward and likely compounding their warbler necks with a touch of whiplash. I swerved in and out of traffic lanes, hitting speed bumps along the way, in attempts to discern Red-Tailed Hawks on power poles from something more interesting like perhaps a Peregrine Falcon.

My eyes bulged as I finally saw the Rose-Breasted Grosbeak all my birder friends had bragged about. My jaw dropped in BRAS's Peveto Woods as I walked around what I could only describe as a hummingbird tree, a honey locust tree that was loaded with at least 50 thirsty Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds fresh off the Gulf of Mexico who were

oblivious to our presence 6 feet away.

My nose wrinkled as I drove by an impossibly orange Baltimore Oriole who looked like a cross between Tang and my fingers after I've been eating Cheetos. I almost pulled a muscle as I chased a singing Kiskadee across Peveto Woods. I frightened total strangers as I leaped screaming from the car to see a Crested Caracara flying over in a Walmart parking lot. And, alas, my eyes crossed as I attempted to keep track of the numerous warblers my birder friends identified for me (I still don't understand why the Elvis warbler is a Kentucky warbler and not a Tennessee warbler).



The season brought out the best in people. The mere presence of binoculars meant you were instant friends with total strangers, with no need for introductions or niceties. "How are you? My name is..." and "What do you do for a living?" were replaced with "Did you see the Fork-Tailed Flycatcher? Here, let me help you find it..." and "Is the Western Kingbird still here?" You were simply another cousin in the birder family and immediately accepted as you were, no arrogance, no judgment, no pretentiousness. I enjoyed this birdy camaraderie and felt welcome. Indeed, my first spring migration in Louisiana was a memorable one, and I can't wait to do it again.



UPDATE: LOUISIANA WHOOPING CRANES

“REINTRODUCTION OF A WILD, RESIDENT FLOCK”

As a child I always wanted to help wild animals. I read an article about people who raised young Whooping Cranes from the time they hatched, wearing costumes so the birds would not imprint on their human caregivers. Loving the idea, I became a biologist. In the process, I learned that most wild animals need help for populations because the threats they face are so pervasive, including habitat loss and degradation, pollution, invasive species, and disturbance where they are trying to breed, feed, or rest. Only in certain cases, often with endangered species, does hands-on management truly matter.



Such was the fate of the Whooping Crane, for only 21 wild individuals remained in 1944. As a result of intensive captive breeding, wild population management, and reintroduction efforts, the wild population now exceeds 430 individuals. Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) partnered with federal and private organizations to begin a reintroduction of a wild, resident flock starting in 2011 (<http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/wildlife/whooping-cranes>). They have released 3 cohorts of juvenile cranes, reared at Maryland's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, from a temporary enclosure at White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area.

This past January, I was invited with several Audubon colleagues to visit the release site, for a chance to view any cranes that were still returning to the area for supplemental food. The newest group of 14 individuals had arrived on November 29th, 2012, and after being habituated to the area were released on December 17th. Many would return for

several weeks, supported in their quest to learn to be wild cranes by the food and relative safety of the area.

When we arrived at the blinds we stepped into a world meant to keep the cranes completely wary, wild and isolated from humans. No speaking above a whisper, no camera flashes, and no humans visible to the cranes are protective measures that allow them to interact naturally so close to their human protectors and rare guests. The biologists that continue to provide food and interact with the cranes go incognito, covered head to boot in a white costume with a mesh face guard and a hand-held Whooping Crane puppet head operated with one hand.

To my surprise I was invited to help feed the cranes. I dressed quickly then followed Sara Zimorski, LDWF biologist, through the marsh into the crane enclosure. We walked slowly, approached by hungry and curious juveniles, each at a different state of transition from brown juvenile to white and black adult feathers. I followed Sara up onto a wooden platform with feeding stations. Transfixed, I watched the young cranes crowd around, plucking spilled pellets and cooing quietly. When one young bird pecked at my boots, then peered up at 'my' crane head, Sara showed me an appropriate crane response. I picked up a pellet with 'my' beak, moved it toward the youngster who tilted its head and gently took the food from 'my' bill. I fed the crane, carefully watching its movements and trying to memorize the moments in this once in a lifetime experience.

I will treasure those moments, content in my work with populations, having had a brief moment to live a childhood dream. I will also use every opportunity to teach others what the cranes need to become the wild, wary adults capable of surviving like their ancestors did in Louisiana's expansive marshes and wetlands. I will continue to work for Mississippi River Delta restoration (<http://www.mississippiriverdelta.org/>) and the restoration of the barrier and bay islands that protect all of our Gulf Coast waterbirds (<http://conservation.audubon.org/restoring-gulf-coastal-waterbirds-long-term-vision>). I will inform LDWF of any information I learn in the rare but tragic instances that individuals kill these wonderful creatures (<http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/news/36782>).

And to keep them truly wild, I will treasure any incidental sightings of these magnificent birds but will protect them by never posting locations publicly, for they must learn to avoid humans, as they cannot distinguish between predators and protectors.



To learn more about Louisiana's Whooping Cranes, look for the documentary from Louisiana Public Broadcasting:

Louisiana Public Broadcasting will present a half hour documentary on the Louisiana whooping crane reintroduction program in August 2013. The program is part of a series of programs called **ALIVE: In America's Delta**, that LPB is creating in cooperation with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. Each of the six episodes will detail a different subject, such as Enforcement, Endangered Species, and the Louisiana Black Bear. Producer Donna LaFleur and Photographer Rex Q. Fortenberry have been following the latest cohort of whooping cranes since their arrival to Louisiana in November 2012. They also traveled to Port Aransas, Texas for the annual Whooping Crane Festival to interview George Archibald, co-founder of the International Crane Foundation, and Wade Harell, the new chief of the Whooping Crane Project at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The program will also follow the LDWF personnel that manage the reintroduction program in Louisiana and give a close-up look at their interaction with the cranes. This first peek at the series will be during LPB's Pledge Drive in August.

Melanie Driscoll
Director of Bird Conservation
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Flyway; National Audubon Society



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If you want all of your dues to support local conservation and education, join BRAS only. You will NOT receive the *Audubon* magazine. You WILL receive *The Barred Owl* and a free sanctuary patch. You may join on-line at any level by visiting our website www.braudubon.org, or send this form with your check to: BRAS, P.O. Box 67016, BR LA 70896.

If you would prefer to receive the newsletter in electronic form only rather than a printed version, please email our Membership chair and let her know! Membership@braudubon.org

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