

The **BARRED OWL**

Newsletter of the Baton Rouge Audubon Society

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Finding myself at the LOS meeting: A novice's experience

By Crystal Johnson



photo by Marty Floyd

It's not often the LOS meeting gets to Baton Rouge, so when I found out that it was coming to town, I vowed to make time to attend. I only started birding in 2013 and still find myself approaching the hobby as a novice. Friday night's agenda included the private tour of the LSU Museum of Natural Science I'd been waiting for for several years, despite working just a few buildings away. I showed up and was greeted with laughter and hugs, an exquisite array of desserts made *from scratch* by Donna Dittmann herself, and that grounding, sigh-inducing sensation you get when you meet up with friends you haven't seen in forever but can instantly re-connect with as if no time has passed at all.

The Louisiana Ornithological Society (LOS) is a group that was organized in 1947 to disseminate information about Louisiana birds, to promote interest, appreciation, and conservation of birds, and to promote acquaintance and fellowship among those interested in

nature. The LOS holds several meetings per year in different locations in the state, and the meetings feature birding tours, special speakers, conversations about birds, a family-style dinner, and much more.

As we waited in line outside the doors for the private tour, I could feel my pulse race and remarked that I felt like I was waiting to get on a roller coaster at Six Flags. As LSU graduate student Andre Moncrieff led us through the collections, he regaled us with epic tales of chasing birds in tropical jungles and mountains of South America, and he showed us some extra special treats including Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, passenger pigeons, and an owl that could fit in the palm of one hand. And the hummingbirds! My goodness, the hummingbirds! Andre helped us appreciate the sheer diversity of birds, all while using language that was gentle and digestible to a non-expert, which as a microbiologist I appreciated immensely. That is

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Purple Martins Have Arrived in Louisiana!

by Krista Adams, Purple Martin Landlord

This is an exciting time in Louisiana for Purple Martin landlords. By now, many Louisiana landlords have their housing up and are ready for the return of these native songbirds of the swallow family. Purple Martins begin their spring migration from South America as early as December where they move up into North America to begin their breeding season. They are a wonderful addition to any backyard with their social chatter and insect-eating habits.



I live in Denham Springs, Louisiana with my family and have been a martin landlord for over 15 years. My grandfather introduced me to Purple Martins many years ago at our family camp in Grand Isle, Louisiana. Since that time, I've realized there is much more to being a martin landlord than putting up a house. Purple Martins are dependent on us for their survival and nest almost exclusively in human-supplied housing east of the Rocky Mountains, so there are many factors to consider before putting up housing. A key consideration is location. Martins prefer an open area away from trees. Some landlords choose to put up multi-compartment housing, whereas others prefer gourds. Other considerations when deciding on martin housing include the number of cavities, accessibility, height of the pole, material the house is made of, type of entrance holes (round or starling-resistant), and predator protection. Being able to lower your housing during the nesting season is important. I have offered the martins a house and gourd rack combination at my residence, and the nesting birds use both!

With the help of my husband and daughters, I also manage a public site at a local park in Denham Springs where I have worked with their staff to place two gourd racks along the bank of a pond near a walking path. My family and I perform nest checks at our sites and record our findings. This allows you to detect and correct problems that may develop throughout the season and also increases your knowledge and enjoyment of your martins. I encourage anyone starting a colony to begin with the right set up to ensure a successful martin season which will lead to many more to come.

In Louisiana, Purple Martins are the first spring Neotropical migrant to arrive. Many continue their migration for several months and can begin nesting as late as June in the southern part of Canada. But here in south Louisiana, now is the opportune time for Louisiana landlords to attract their first nesting martins.



My family and I enjoy these beautiful birds and look forward to their return every year. If you are interested in learning more about the Purple Martin, the largest member of the swallow family in North America, please visit the Purple Martin Conservation Association's webpage at www.purplemartin.org. Connecting with martin landlords is another great way to learn about martins. You'll find martin landlords have many tales to tell and love their birds.

photos by Robert Jernigan



2016-2017

Baton Rouge Christmas Bird Count

by Katie Percy

The 117th Christmas Bird Count (CBC) took place between December 14, 2016 and Jan 5, 2017. For those not yet aware, the CBC was started by Dr. Frank Chapman in 1990 as an alternate to the traditional "side hunt" of that time. Participants count, rather than hunt, every bird they see or hear within a given 15-mile diameter circle on a particular day within the count window – making this the longest running wildlife census in the western hemisphere.

The first CBC had a total of 27 observers. Since 1990, participation has grown to over 72,000 volun-

teer bird counters in more than 2,500 locations! The CBC has become an extraordinary example of citizen science. Participation is free and the data collected is publicly accessible (www.christmasbirdcount.org) and widely used to assess long-term trends in winter bird populations of North America.

The Baton Rouge CBC circle is centered on the intersection of Highland Rd and Gardere Ln., and further subdivided into 17 areas. Each area has a designated leader, but anyone is welcome to join the count. Less experienced birders are paired with the more experienced. We also welcome

those who live inside the count circle to record and submit a list of the individual birds they count in their yard or at their feeders.

The Baton Rouge CBC is traditional held on the last Saturday of the count period. This year, that day happen to be December 31st, New Year's Eve. Unfortunately, the weather was less than desirable. Morning cloud cover and light drizzles became heavier scattered showers by the early afternoon. Despite these rather dismal weather conditions, 37 people still participated. To each of those, our sincere gratitude!

Together we totaled 124 species and 29,118 individual birds. Given the poor weather, it is not surprising that these totals are low relative to previous years. Many participants were forced to count from inside their car for the majority of the day. And several area leaders had to stop counts early as rain became too heavy to continue recording.

The highest Baton Rouge CBC record occurred in 1998 with 151 species, followed closely by 150 species in both 2003 and 2013. No new species were documented inside the Baton Rouge circle this year. The rarest species detected was an Ash-throated Flycatcher, which is more common in the western US and Mexico, and similar in appearance to the Great Crested Flycatcher, which is common in LA during the summer breeding season.

Thank you again to all who contributed. If you are interested in participating in future Baton Rouge CBCs, please contact Katie Percy (kpercy@audubon.org) or Richard Condrey (coecnd@lsu.edu).

Baton Rouge Audubon Society APPRECIATES YOU !!

BRAS would like to extend a special thank you to our high-level contributors for their generous support in the fourth quarter of 2016.

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Finding Myself at the LOS Meeting

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a real talent that draws people in instead of turning them off from science. He was the kind of kid that gives you hope for the future and restores your faith in humanity. I would not be surprised to hear about him becoming a fancy professor at a prestigious university one day and receiving numerous teaching and research awards.

The next morning, my group (18 birders total) met before sunrise at a local coffee shop, and we caravanned to the Morganza Spillway. I rode with Marty Floyd and Christine Kooi, who were very patient and willing share their knowledge with me. When we got out of the vehicles, there were giant dotted lines undulating across the cold overcast sky. I initially thought it was one of those murmurations of starlings you see in Facebook videos, but upon closer inspection those starlings were suspiciously large. It turned out to be Snow Geese. Over 2,000 of them. I don't think I've ever seen so many geese in my life. Or such perfect V formations. And the sound was shocking.

Next we passed a Bald Eagle's nest that in my opinion was inappropriately sized for the size tree that held it. It was like placing a cantaloupe on top of a celery stalk and expecting it to support the weight with no complaints. I was told the nest and the eagle pair were well-established in that tree, so clearly the setup was working, despite my shock and disapproval.

Later, atop the levee, I began screaming (a nasty habit that scares birds away, I'm trying to quit, but I just get so excited). I was yelling "*Snipe! Snipe! Snipe!*" because I had taken Jane Patterson's birding class and had had success with snipes in the past. But then I re-

membered my novice status and switched to "*Long bill! Long bill! Flying overhead! Somebody help me ID this bird!*" Which would have been much more appropriate, and in a quieter voice. I turned out to be right and shared high-fives with others in the group. This confidence surge would raise me to superstar status a couple of hours later.



photo by Marty Floyd

After lunch at Satterfield's (yum!), we visited several more locations, and since we weren't quite ready to head home, most of us stopped at Port Hudson in Jackson, LA to bird along the trail there. We were treated to nice views of a Golden-crowned Kinglet, Carolina Chickadees, and warblers. Marty Floyd did his call of an Eastern Screech Owl in an attempt to attract additional birds we might have been missing, and this resulted in awe-inspiring looks at a Brown Creeper. I'd seen people use playback on their cell phones but had never seen anyone

create this whiny sound from their own throats. During last year's Christmas Bird Count, I'd heard an actual Eastern Screech Owl respond to cell phone playback.

I love owls. I follow owl pages on Facebook. My license plate has the word "hoot" on it. In the field, I have seen Barred Owls, a Burrowing Owl (thanks, Jane Patterson!), Great Horned Owls, a Barn Owl (which I found all by myself!), and even a Snowy Owl (in Florida, of all places). I have heard but never, ever seen an Eastern Screech Owl. I have tried many times unsuccessfully to turn twigs, bark, and debris into an Eastern Screech Owl. I have even tried to make the whiny sound myself, although it comes out sounding like a drunk witch trying to scare little children. I have checked many tree cavities with no luck and was even given a mirror on a telescoping pole for my birthday so I can be extra-nosey when birding. So, when I saw that shiny eye looking back at me from the cavity in a tree on our trail at Port Hudson, I knew I'd hit the jackpot.

My heart started racing, my palms beaded up with sweat, I stopped swallowing saliva, my hands were too moist and shaky to hold my binoculars still. At this point, most of our group was pretty far along the trail, and I said gravely, with what I suspect were eyes the size of grapefruits: "*Guys, we're being watched.*" My fellow birders stopped what they were doing to indulge me and walked all the way back to see what I was fidgeting about. We stared at the cavity from different angles, with different perspectives, and different levels of belief and enthusiasm at looking at the

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owl's face in the cavity. I tried hard not to get too excited in case I was wrong. It wouldn't be the first time that day. We decided to get Marty to do his screech owl call again, but only after we all put our binoculars on the cavity at the same time so nobody missed the opportunity to see this elusive bird. We only parted when we realized a young man in a wheelchair and his family were trying to get by us on the trail.

Finally, one of the more seasoned birders in the group said "*Crystal, I think that is indeed a Screech Owl.*" My heart rate spiked. My jaw dropped. I ran to her with arms open wide. Time slowed down. From somewhere in the distance, Chariots of Fire played. We embraced, and below our arms my feet did the happy dance of my people. It was the same happy dance my mother did in 1993 when she found out I'd been accepted into Tulane. Joelle Finley was kind enough to run all the way back to the car to get her scope, and several other birders got good long looks at the owl through the scope. All the while, however, I was troubled by doubts. Why wasn't the owl moving or hiding? Why did the eye have such a weird shape? Why did the feathers look so... downy? Why did the feathers look so... downy? It was not an Eastern Screech Owl. It wasn't even a bird. It was a squirrel.

I still have goose bumps as I replay that moment of realization. I had committed the ultimate faux pas: a misidentification in the field. With a huge audience, no less. An audience that included expert-level birders, novices, photographers, biologists, college professors, artists, men, women, folks from all walks of life and from both sides of the aisle. I later realized this happens to everyone, even the hot shot birders. And amidst consoling pats on the back

and profuse apologies for wasting people's time, I realized I'd never felt closer to such a disparate bunch of strangers as I'd felt then. I was among friends. I was reminded of why I love birding so much. It's not just the birds but the camaraderie. The support. The shared memories created. I realized then that I need more bird conferences in my life.

After Chariots of Fire faded to the "Womp womp womp" sad trombone song featured on game shows, I later attended a riveting talk by Van Ramsen (yes, *that* Van Ramsen, and it was nice to finally put a face to the name) extolling the museum's virtues and the fact that at least 42 (forty-two!) different species of birds had been discovered right there in the museum, many by Dan Lane, a field trip leader who was in attendance himself. I looked around at my fellow birders in disbelief with that "*Did you know about this?*" look of astonishment. I kept wondering, how did I not know about this? How are more people not talking about this? How is this not the lead story on the local and national news? He highlighted their exciting research findings, and the science was made even more exciting by the backstories of how these discoveries were made. I think hearing about the human side of discoveries in parallel with the science itself is another aspect that keeps outsiders interested in science.

In conclusion, this winter's LOS meeting was an excellent reminder of how much I love birding and birders. The meeting, the presenters, the birders, the ornithologists, the hosts, the attendees, etc. were all novice-friendly. To quote Dr. King: "*Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject*

and your verb agree to serve. ... You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love." The whole experience reminded me that you don't have to **know** birds to participate. You just have to love birds. Treat yourself to an LOS meeting. You'll be glad you did.

LOS at 70!

Please help celebrate the 70 years of LOS at our spring meeting. Details are not finalized as of now but please check www.losbird.org for updates. Saturday's speaker will be Neil Hayward author of *Lost Among the Birds: Accidentally Finding Myself in One Very Big Year*.

The first organizational meeting of the Louisiana Ornithological Society was held on December 8, 1947 in the old cafeteria on the campus of Tulane University. Much advance work had been done, principally by Earle R. Greene who has always been considered the Founder of the LOS.

The necessary formalities were concluded on that first night to bring the new organization into existence, a Constitution and Bylaws were adopted and officers were elected. Earle Green was named President, George H. Lowery, Jr., Vice-President and Dr Gladys King, Secretary-Treasurer. These, together with Col. Francis Eastman, Dr. Robert M. Lockwood and Buford M. Myers, made up the first Board of Directors.

Since that time, LOS has grown to over 625 members, including 131 Life members. The present membership covers not only Louisiana but 28 other states, Canada and Kuwait.



Baton Rouge Chapter of the National Audubon Society

Baton Rouge Audubon Society

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