



Volume 30 Issue 4

BIG COUNTRY AUDUBON SOCIETY

# Penfeathers

## Upcoming Events...



### December 6, 2012

Christmas Party — Ben Richey Boy's Ranch, 6:00 pm. We will enjoy a white-elephant gift exchange. Keep gifts from \$10 to \$20. Drinks will be furnished. Bring food to share.

### December 8, 2012

This will be a half day field trip around Lake Ft. Phantom Hill. We will meet at Denny's on I-20 & FM 600 at 7:30 a.m. Come earlier if you wish to eat breakfast. Bring snacks and water. Target birds will be Osprey, Vermillion Flycatcher, and Canvasback.

### January 5, 2013

Christmas Bird Count — Meet at Aldersgate United Methodist Church at 6:30 am. We will reconvene at the church at 5:00 pm to tally our lists followed by dinner at Cotton Patch.

### January 8, 2013

Board Meeting at Mezamiz, 6:30 pm

### January 19, 2013

Field Trip to Waste Water Treatment Plant. Depart at 8:00 am from McDonald's, 1201 N. Judge Ely. Come early if you would like to buy breakfast. Target birds: Ducks, waterfowl, and sparrows.

### February 7, 2013

Regular meeting at Rose Park Senior Center, 7:00 pm. Program by Larry Millar — "Archaeological Digs in Texas."

### February 16, 2013

Field Trip around Abilene. Meet at Will Hair Park at 7:30 am. Go by Diamond Lake and then to Lake Kirby. Target birds: Wilson's Snipe, Harris's Sparrow, and Eared Grebe. Bring water and snacks.

### March 7, 2013

Regular meeting at Rose Park Senior Center, 7:00 pm

### March 12, 2013

Board Meeting at Mezamiz, 6:30 pm

### April 4, 2013

Regular meeting at Rose Park Senior Center, 7:00 pm

## Laura's Blind Feeder Patrol

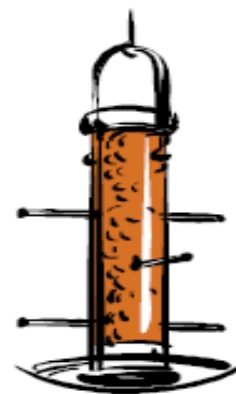
Dec 8 — John English

Dec 15 — W. K. and Carolyn Wiggins

Dec 22 — Dan Symonds

Dec 29 — Dan Symonds

Jan 5 — Buffalo Gap CBC team



We fill the feeder and maintain the bird blind at the Abilene State Park. Want to volunteer? Sign up at any regular meeting. You may wish to accompany someone first.

# Birding in the Shadows

## *Perspectives from the Wife of a Lifelong Birder*

by Amy Packer

*“There’s only one thing you need to know about this family: every trip is a birding trip.”*

*-Randy Packer*

That little nugget of wisdom was passed on to me at my first Packer family dinner soon after Jay and I started dating. I guess you can’t I wasn’t warned.

When I first met Jay at the age of 20, I knew as much about birds as the next person. I had heard of scis-sortails, roadrunners, mockingbirds, and cardinals, but beyond that, I was clueless. I called all vultures buzzards; all white, water birds seagulls; and didn’t know the difference between a Blue Jay and a bluebird. I had never even heard of the word birding. So, what is life like for a city girl who marries a guy for whom the word *obsessive readily comes to mind? Allow me to share.*

### **Binoculars for a Wedding Gift**

It all began with my wedding gift. While most brides might expect a pearl necklace, fancy perfume, or a book of poems, I received Nikon binoculars. I mean, how could we go birding on our honeymoon without them? And bird we did. We honeymooned in San Francisco, and sandwiched in between a trip to Alcatraz, fancy dinners, and shopping downtown, I saw Surf Scoters at Point Reyes National Seashore and a Pacific Wren at the Muir Woods. This was when I started to realize how true Randy’s statement at our first dinner really was.

### **The Worst Day of Birding Ever**

After being married for about nine months, Jay and I took our first marathon birding trip during spring break 2006. We went down to South Texas, where I saw my first Green Jays and Great Kiskadees. During this trip, we hit all the valley hotspots including Bentsen State Park, Santa Ana, Laguna Atascosa, and Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. I had a blast and found myself becoming more and more interested in this whole birding thing. That is, until I experienced “the worst day of birding ever.”

It began innocently enough. Jay saw on the internet that a Surfbird had been spotted in Galveston. It was a little out of our way, but since he assured me that it would be a really good



Surfbird, Photo by Marlin Harms (Wikipedia)

## Birding in the Shadows (cont.)

bird for Texas, I was happy to go. What I didn't know was that the temperatures were dropping and the wind was blowing at something like 30-40 miles per hour. As we drove along the Galveston boardwalk, checking out every single jetty searching for a grayish-brown shorebird, we were getting sandblasted from what seemed like every direction. I quickly decided that no matter how rare this bird was, it simply wasn't worth what we were going through and hunkered down in the car while Jay doggedly continued to get out the scope at every stop and look through scores of terns, gulls, and plovers. Despite his determination, the bird never made an appearance. I learned that birding for Jay wasn't just a hobby. It was a sick obsession.

### A Magical Day

One bad day did not turn me off of birding, and as time passed, I grew more and more competent in my birding skills. Jay was always my guide, but I began to find that I could identify most common birds by sight and even some by sound all by myself. As my skills increased, birding slowly became something that I chose to do for fun, and not just something that I did to get outside and be with Jay.



Ringed Kingfisher, Photo by Jay Packer

One October day in 2006 stands out as an example of just how exciting birding can be. We were out on our usual stomping grounds at the San Angelo State Park, when suddenly Jay heard an odd kingfisher. We tracked it down, and were elated to find a Ringed Kingfisher, which turned out to be only the third Tom Green County record. We followed it along the river and Jay was even able to get great photographs. After a while, it flew out of sight. As we were trying to refind it, I spotted a little bird hopping around the base of a tree. "Jay, what's that?" I asked. Preoccupied with the kingfisher, he was slow to turn around. When he did, his jaw nearly dropped to the ground. It was a male Black-throated Blue Warbler, a first Tom Green County record, and a lifer for both of us. We both got great looks (and photographs), and I got to say I found a rare bird. When Jay wrote about the experience on his blog, he called it, "A Magical Day," and I must admit that I agree.

### The 400th Bird

Towards the end of 2008, while looking over our bird notes, we realized that I was headed for a milestone. I was only a few birds away from reaching 400 species on my life list. Once this realization hit, we began to actively seek out lifers so I could hit that special number.

## Birding in the Shadows (cont.)

It happened on a cold February day on the outskirts of San Angelo in the middle of a plowed dirt field. We had been scanning fields in an area known as the Lipan Flats looking for Horned Larks and Longspurs, when suddenly I heard “Aha!” from Jay, a sound I knew meant something good was in the scope. He had found a Lapland Longspur, which, coincidentally, I had never seen. As I gazed through the scope across the barren soil at a little brown bird, I felt a feeling of elation knowing that this unassuming little guy was number 400. From that point on, I knew there was no going back. Any person who is crazy enough to feel happy about a little brown bird in one of the ugliest places on Earth must be a real birder.

### The Trip of a Lifetime

Not every trip seeks out birds in barren dirt fields though. Through the years, Jay and I have been fortunate enough to see birds in some of the most *beautiful places on Earth*. *We have seen Limpkins and Pileated Woodpeckers while canoeing through swamps in Florida, Mountain Bluebirds and Rosy Finches in the high reaches of the Rockies, and we even had the opportunity to bird our way through England, France, and Germany.*

Most recently, our travels have taken us to Ecuador, where I got to see truly, some of the most spectacular birds on the planet. From the tanagers with their breathtaking colors to hummingbirds with tails twice as long as their bodies, it was a trip that many people only dream about. Before meeting Jay, however, a trip like that would never have even entered my mind. Through birding, entire worlds previously unknown to me have opened up. On that trip, I was able to really test my birding skills. At times flocks of anywhere from twenty to fifty birds of different species would move through, and I had to rely on my own knowledge to identify birds. Was it difficult? Yes. Did I miss some birds? Of course. But through that experience, I forced myself to become more independent and trust that I actually know a few things about birds.

### County Birding

While coming home from Ecuador was somewhat of a letdown, Jay and I have found a way to keep birding interesting here in Texas. We are working on what's known as the Texas Century Club, where we are trying to see one hundred species of birds in one hundred counties in Texas. So far, I have 34 counties. Jay has more, but who's counting. (Well, technically, we are...)

This has been a lot of fun and has taken us to some really out of the way places. While we've had some great birds (including a rare Clay-colored Thrush in Eldorado), one of the best things about county birding has been seeing parts of the state that we would never have visited otherwise. We have learned that almost every West Texas town has a Mexican food restaurant (that's usually pretty good) and a Dairy Queen (that can range from



## Birding in the Shadows (cont.)

decent to pretty awful). We've been through a dust storm in Lubbock that rivaled "the worst day of birding ever," watched a parade in Throckmorton, and even saw a mule-drawn wagon funeral procession in Moran, TX (southeast of Albany). My point is that one of the best parts about birding, I've discovered, is not always the birds. Sometimes it's about getting out in the world and seeing what there is to see.

### Pros and Cons of a Constant Bird Guide

Now, I know many of you must be thinking, "lucky her, she always has a great bird guide to tell her what everything is." And yes, in many ways, that's true. I see way more birds with Jay than I would by myself and I rarely have to leave a bird unidentified. I also always have someone to carry the scope and, you must admit, he's usually good for a laugh. I have learned so much about birds that I wouldn't have otherwise, and I'm really grateful for that.

On the flip-side, however, I've been somewhat spoiled by having Jay around. Whereas many of you might spend hours flipping through the book to figure out exactly what that "brown-stripey bird" was, I just have to ask. This may sound great, but it means that I may not be learning as much because I'm not doing the work myself. Jay sometimes chides me for not studying, but it's difficult to force yourself to study when you know that all the answers are already waiting inside his brain.

While I must admit that I'm nowhere near the birder that my husband is, I have learned a few things in my seven years in the birding world. First, I've become pretty good at telling what family a bird is in. No, I probably don't know the scientific name, but I can tell if it's a sparrow or a warbler, a wren or a flycatcher, a duck or a grebe. This ability to narrow it down, has helped me immensely. Another thing I've gotten better at is anticipating what birds are likely in an area, especially if that area happens to be West Texas. Through all of our county birding, I've learned what the common birds are, and make sure to rule them out before going to Jay to help me identify something. Finally, I've actually learned a few songs. In fact, on the most recent Audubon field trip out to Lake OH Ivie, I heard a gurgling, rattling trill, and thought, "Marsh Wren." Seconds later, Jay called out, "Marsh Wren." I looked at him in shock and said, "how do I know that?" I guess that even without studying, a little information had to sink in, if only through osmosis.

My journey into to the world of birding has been surprising, exciting, at times dull and uncomfortable, but always unpredictable, and I wouldn't trade a minute of it. As I continue, I hope that my skills will continue to improve. I may never be as good at birding as my husband, but I will always keep learning, and you never know when I might find that next Black-throated Blue Warbler.



Black-throated Blue Warbler, Photo by Jay Packer

# Bird Tracks...



## Notable Sightings for October and November 2012:

Species	Date	Location	Observers	# of Birds
Greater White-fronted Goose	11/09/12	Lake Stamford (Haskell Co)	DL	40
Snow Goose	11/11/12	Ranch Rd 222 (Throckmorton Co)	JR	15
	11/18/12	Millers Creek Reservoir (Throckmorton Co)	BC, GC, DM, SG	17
Canada Goose	11/11/12	Ranch Rd 222 (Throckmorton Co)	JR	15
Western Grebe	11/11/12	Lake Kirby (Taylor Co)	AP, DS, JP	1
Ferruginous Hawk	11/10/12	CR 190 (Throckmorton Co)	DL, JR, JiP, PJ, PC,	1
			SS, SL, ST	
California Gull	11/11/12	Lake Kirby (Taylor Co)	AP, DS, JP	1
Red-bellied Woodpecker	11/18/12	Throckmorton, TX (Throckmorton Co)	BC, GC, DM, SG	1
Red-breasted Nuthatch	11/24/12	Abilene State Park (Taylor Co)	AP, JP	1
Winter Wren	11/17/12	OH Ivie Reservoir (Concho Co)	DS, JP, AP	1
Chestnut-collared Longspur	11/11/12	Ranch Rd 222 (Throckmorton Co)	JR	75
	11/18/12	Ranch Rd 222 (Throckmorton Co)	BC, GC, DM, SG	45

Observers: AP—Amy Packer, BC—Blaine Carnes, GC—Greg Cook, SG—Steve Glover, DL—Dell Little, DM—Darlene Moore, DS—Dan Symonds, JP—Jay Packer, JiP—Jim Peterson, JR—Jane Ramberg, PJ—Patricia Jordan, PC—Paul Crowe, SG—Steve Glover, SL—Shannon Love, SS—Sahar Sea, ST—Susan Thrower

**Editor Note:** Starting with this edition of the newsletter, Bird Tracks will be limited to those species that occur rarely, sporadically, migrate through the area at low densities, or whose distribution is not fully understood. Species that occur regularly and are expected in the area will no longer be reported. This will reduce the amount of time needed to prepare the Bird Tracks list, as well as make the list more useful for reporting those species that are truly noteworthy in the area. Sightings are generated from eBird data and reports from local members.



1st Winter California Gull with Ring-billed Gulls, Lake Kirby  
Photo by Jay Packer



1st Winter California Gull with Ring-billed Gulls, Lake Kirby  
Photo by Jay Packer



# Bird Tracks... (cont.)



1st Winter California Gull with Ring-billed Gull, Lake Kirby, Photo by Jay Packer



1st Winter California Gull, Lake Kirby, Photo by Jay Packer

## California Gull—1st Taylor County Record!

Dan Symonds called me Sunday to tell me that he'd found a California Gull at Lake Kirby. To my knowledge, this is the first Taylor County record of this species. I grabbed my camera and my wife and headed out the door.

We met Dan on the east side of the lake, where he was watching the bird soar above the dam. The bird didn't hang around long and soon flew out of view, headed south down the east shoreline. After waiting and searching unsuccessfully, we headed over to the west side where the bird was relocated.

The bird was a 1st winter juvenile, as indicated by the uniform brown scalloped appearance and the pink bill with a black tip. It's slightly larger size than the nearby Ring-billed Gulls (but not so large as a Herring Gull), brown tail, and most importantly, dark greater wing coverts all confirm the identification.

Thanks Dan for finding me a new county bird!!!

— Jay Packer



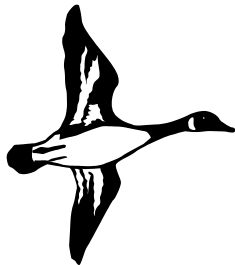
## **BIG COUNTRY AUDUBON SOCIETY**

<i>President</i>	Jay Packer
<i>Vice President</i>	Amy Packer
<i>Treasurer/Membership</i>	Dolores Owens
<i>Secretary</i>	Bera Johnson
<i>Education</i>	John English
<i>Field Trips</i>	Dan Symonds
<i>Member-at-Large</i>	John Kirk

Big Country Audubon Society meetings are held at Rose Park Senior Activity Center on the first Thursday of October, November, December, February, March and April.

Hotline: 325-480-1089

Web Page: [www.bigcountryaudubon.org](http://www.bigcountryaudubon.org)



**Big Country Audubon Society**

**P.O. Box 569**

**Abilene, TX 79604**

<b>Big Country Audubon Society</b>		
<b>Chapter Membership Application</b>		
Please enroll me as a member of the Big Country Audubon Society		
Name: _____		
Address: _____		
City _____	State _____	Zip _____
<b>Individual membership:</b>		
One year—\$20.00	Prorated Dues:	
If you join in Sep, Oct, Nov	Dec, Jan, Feb	\$15.00
	Mar, Apr, May	\$10.00
	Jun, Jul, Aug	\$ 5.00
<b>Family Membership:</b>		
One year—\$30.00	Dec, Jan, Feb	\$22.50
If you join in Sep, Oct, Nov	Mar, Apr, May	\$15.00
	Jun, Jul, Aug	\$ 7.50
<b>Student Membership:</b>		
One year—\$10.00	Dec, Jan, Feb	\$ 7.50
If you join in Sep, Oct, Nov	Mar, Apr, May	\$ 5.00
	Jun, Jul, Aug	\$ 2.50
All dues renew on September 1st		
Mail to: Big Country Audubon Society, P O Box 569, Abilene, TX 79604		