



Volume 30 Issue 3

BIG COUNTRY AUDUBON SOCIETY

# Penfeathers

## Upcoming Events...



### October 4, 2012-

Regular Meeting at Rose Park Senior Center— Program: HBO documentary entitled, "BIRDERS: THE CENTRAL PARK EFFECT."

### October 13, 2012-

Bird Walk at Abilene State Park. Meet at Laura's Blind at 8:00 a.m.

### October 27, 2012-

BCAS Wild Goose Chase west of Weinert. We will depart What-A-Burger on North 1st & Pioneer at 7:00 a.m.. We will stop for lunch before heading back.

### November 1, 2012-

Regular meeting at Rose Park Senior Center, 7:00 p.m. Program: Jay Packer will discuss his and Amy's recent trip to Ecuador.

### November 17, 2012-

Field trip to Lake O.H. Ivie. We will leave from Burger King on Antilley Road promptly at 7:00 a.m. This will be an all day trip, bring a sack lunch and water. We will try to stop at a frequented eatery for lunch. Target birds are returning waterfowl and Bald Eagles.

### December 6, 2012-

Christmas party at Ben Richey Boy's Ranch, 6:00 p.m. Bring goodies 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 - mark your calendars! More info to come.

### February 7, 2013-

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



## Laura's Blind Feeder Patrol

Sept 15—Wiggins

Oct 20—Wiggins

Sept 22—Joe

Oct 27—Dan

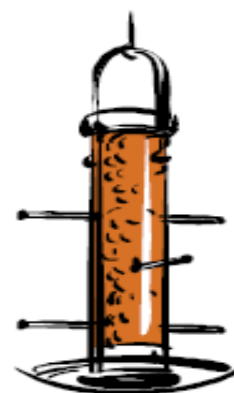
Sept 29—Larry

Nov 3—Dolores

Oct 6—Larry

Nov 10—Dan

Oct 13—Jay & Amy



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.

OCT/NOV

# They're Not as Rare as You Think

by Jay Packer

One of the joys of birding is that no two days are ever the same. I still remember reading an article when I was 12 years old in the magazine *Birder's World* about a guy who was tempted to go back to bed and skip birding because he had to get up at some ungodly hour to go see a lek of male Sage Grouse dancing for the ladies. He witnessed a Prairie Falcon make repeated dives at a grouse, who simply ducked to avoid the danger. This went on several times, with the falcon's dive and the grouse's duck becoming more half-hearted each time. He summed up the story by saying that whenever he was tempted to skip birding, he thought of the grouse and the falcon. He concluded by saying, "For if I don't go, I know I will miss something."

These words have been a guiding principle for me over the years, but especially during migration -- one of the greatest spectacles in all of nature. My wife and I have been participating in the Texas Century Club, with the goal of recording 100 species in 100 counties in Texas. Many of the counties in our part of Texas are arid and 100 species are not easy to come by. In the past month, we've visited Schleicher, Scurry, Stephens, Stonewall, and Throckmorton Counties. (Further afield, we even visited Lubbock and Lynn Counties.) In all of these travels, I'm reminded that one of the great attributes of the place we call home is that it offers a unique mix of east meets west, especially during migration. We're also positioned in the central flyway, a path that many waterfowl and shorebirds take from the arctic down the middle of the country on their way to wintering grounds.

One of the most exciting aspects of birding this time of year is finding rare birds. "They have wings," we like to remind ourselves. For a number of reasons though, I think we all too often call birds rare when, in fact, they are not. I think of *rare* as meaning that a bird is not likely to occur in a region or occurs with great infrequency. Examples that come to mind might include Long-tailed Jaeger or Snowy Owl (each of which I've seen only once locally in over 20 years of birding). Let's consider a number of factors that can lead us to mistakenly call a bird "rare."

The first thing to consider is the timing of migration. Different species migrate at different times and different rates. Based on my own experience and notes, Yellow Warblers start to arrive in the middle of August and by the middle of September are harder to find, while Wilson's Warblers don't typically show up until the first or second week of September. Depending on when you get outside and go birding, your perception of which species is more common



Yellow Warbler, Photo by Jay Packer

## They're Not as Rare as You Think (cont.)

may vary. If, like most rational and sane human beings, you prefer to avoid the heat and wait a while to go birding, you may see more Wilson's Warblers than Yellow. Because most of us only go birding once every few weeks, a species that has a longer migration period is also more likely to be detected. Imagine a hypothetical species that is extremely common but only passes through our area one day of the year. Most of us will miss seeing this species because chances are, we just won't go birding that one day of the year. For example, as best I can tell, I've never been birding on January 27th in over 20 years. Consequently, the more you can go birding during migration, the more likely you are to find "rare" species.

Habitat preference is another factor that can play a profound impact in our perception of how common or rare a migrant is. Many passerine migrants like warblers and vireos depend on riparian habitat, the vegetation along the edges of creeks or ponds. Even in wet years, this habitat is far less numerous than the mesquite grasslands that dominate our region. In dry years, there's even less.

Sadly, so much of Texas is private property that a species may be quite common but widely missed unless one gains access to the right locations. I went nearly 20 years without seeing a single Lazuli Bunting in Taylor County until last year I saw five at one time at Cedar Gap Farm south of town. Is this a rare species in our region? I would have said yes for close to two decades. Seeing five at once, however, would seem to indicate that the answer is 'no.' Even if I go birding every day, I'm unlikely to see one unless I'm in the right place.

Certain species are also unlikely to ever be detected. Any secretive or nocturnal species is likely to be missed. Owls and nightjars readily come to mind. Take Flammulated Owl for example. This bird nests in the Chisos, Davis, and Guadalupe Mountains of West Texas as well as most of the major mountain ranges in the western U.S. It went largely undetected in the Davis mountains until the last twenty years when it became apparent that the birds nest at the higher elevation. The bird is a known migrant that apparently travels through the western third of our state. Coastal records and birds from offshore oil platforms speak to the species' ability to turn up anywhere. The Big Country has no documented records of this species, but counties like Lubbock, Midland, and Tom Green do. In other words, this species gets close enough that it likely passes through. It may even be fair to call the species "rare." But the point remains. If one hundred Flammulated Owls pass through Abilene every year, how are we going to find them?

It's worth pointing out that the three factors I've mentioned -- timing, habitat, and detectability -- are not mutually exclusive. That is, some species may seem particularly rare because they meet two or even three of the factors at once. A species might occur every year in the Big Country, even in large numbers, but if it's nocturnal, comes through only one week of the year, and requires habitat that is limited or inaccessible, we might *never* detect the species without methods like banding or intensive searching.

## They're Not as Rare as You Think (cont.)

All is not lost, however. There are ways that we can increase our chances of finding migrants. The first seems self-evident but bears saying out loud. We have to look for them. The more often we can go birding during migration, the more likely we are to find good migrants. I've heard "Type A" personalities use the phrase "I'll sleep when I'm dead." I prefer the slightly less morbid, "I'll sleep after migration."

We can also consciously look for less common species by learning what separates them from more expected birds. Many of the shorebirds, flycatchers, vireos, warblers, and sparrows look similar to one another. It's all too easy to dismiss an unexpected migrant because we mistake it for a more common species. Study and practice are both tools that equip birders to recognize less common species when they show up.

Want to really find "rare" birds all the time? Learn to recognize birds by ear. I know this sounds hard, impossible even, but it's not. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and when it comes to learning bird sounds, start with the easy stuff. Buy a CD of North American bird songs or one of the many apps for smartphones and start practicing with the common species. The trumpeting of Sandhill Cranes, for example, is



Upland Sandpiper, Photo by Jay Packer

unmistakable. Yet these birds are easily missed because they often fly overhead at great heights. Once you know what to listen for, you'll find them much more often. Upland Sandpiper is another example. They are rarely seen on the ground, and as a budding birder, I would have called them rare migrants. Today, knowing their distinctive calls, I can go outside when it's still dark and hear "Uppies" calling as they pass overhead. They are a common migrant, both spring and fall.

As it turns out, you don't even have to know your vocalizations perfectly. Warblers make little *chip* notes that are very difficult (impossible?) to distinguish between species. However, knowing when you're hearing a warbler, as opposed to the abundant cardinals and titmice one typically finds in wooded areas can be invaluable. Just two weeks ago, I ended up finding an American Redstart for just this reason. Recognizing that I was likely hearing a warbler, I quickly walked some 50 feet further down the path to discover the redstart.



## They're Not as Rare as You Think (cont.)

Above all, the main thing is to enjoy birding. Even in our own backyard, my wife and I have enjoyed some nice migrants this fall. Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Least Flycatcher, Bell's Vireo, Yellow Warbler, and Wilson's Warblers have all shown up. Whether you travel to nearby counties, take a walk through your neighborhood, or just watch your backyard feeders, by paying attention and getting outside, you just might find the next "rare" bird.



Sandhill Cranes, Photo by Jay Packer

# *Bird Tracks...*



## **Notable Sightings for September and October 2012:**

Mallard: (16) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby

Blue-winged Teal: (60) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX; (5) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Stephens County; (3) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby

Cinnamon Teal: (5) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX

Northern Shoveler: (2) 1 Sept (JP,AP), Hubbard Creek Lake; (12) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX; (26) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby; (7) 15 Sept (JP,AP), Snyder, TX

Northern Pintail: (1) 1 Sept (JP,AP), Hubbard Creek Lake; (2) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX; (2) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Stephens County

Green-winged Teal: (2) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX

Lesser Scaup: (1) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX

Eared Grebe: (1) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX

American White Pelican: (12) 15 Sept (DS), Lake Fort Phantom

Little Blue Heron: (2) 1 Sept (JP,AP), Lake Daniel, Breckenridge, TX

Eastern Screech-Owl: (1) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Stonewall County; (1) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Throckmorton County

Northern Harrier: (1) 1 Sept (JP,AP), Hubbard Creek Lake

Red-shouldered Hawk: (1) 8 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park

Common Gallinule: (1) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby

Snowy Plover: (1) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby

Semipalmated Plover: (1) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby

American Avocet: (25) 15 Sept (DS), Lake Fort Phantom

Solitary Sandpiper: (1) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Stonewall County

Greater Yellowlegs: (5) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby

Lesser Yellowlegs: (3) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Stephens County; (1) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby

Upland Sandpiper: (2) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Stonewall County; (1) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Throckmorton County

Western Sandpiper: (20) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Stephens County; (1) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby

Baird's Sandpiper: (6) 1 Sept (JP,AP), Hubbard Creek Lake; (5) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Hubbard Creek Lake

Buff-breasted Sandpiper: (3) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Hubbard Creek Lake

Wilson's Phalarope: (1) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Throckmorton County

Black Tern: (5) 1 Sept (JP,AP), Hubbard Creek Lake; (5) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby

Common Nighthawk: (2) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Aspermont, TX; (2) 1 Sept (DS) Taylor County; (1) 25 Sept (DS) Taylor County

Ruby-throated Hummingbird: (1) 2 Sept (JP,AP), Aspermont, TX; (4) 8 Sept (JP,AP), El Dorado, TX; (many) various dates at backyard feeders in Abilene, TX

# *Bird Tracks... (cont.)*

Rufous Hummingbird: (1) 1 Sept (DS), Taylor County; (1) 25 Sept (DS) Taylor County  
Olive-sided Flycatcher: (1) 8 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park  
Willow Flycatcher: (2) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Stonewall County; (1) 9 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park  
Least Flycatcher: (1) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Stonewall County  
Great Crested Flycatcher: (1) 8 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park  
White-eyed Vireo: (1) 8 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park; (1) 9 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park  
Warbling Vireo: (1) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Breckenridge, TX  
Bank Swallow: (1) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Stonewall County; (8) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby  
Canyon Wren: (3) 1 Sept (JP,AP), Breckenridge, TX; (1) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Hubbard Creek Lake  
Northern Waterthrush: (1) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Stonewall County  
Orange-crowned Warbler: (1) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Breckenridge, TX  
Nashville Warbler: (1) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Breckenridge, TX; (2) 15 Sept (JP,AP), Snyder, TX  
Common Yellowthroat: (1) 15 Sept (JP,AP), Snyder, TX  
American Redstart: (1) 15 Sept (JP,AP), Snyder, TX  
Yellow Warbler: (1) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Stonewall County; (1) 1 Sept (JP,AP), Breckenridge, TX; (2) 8 Sept (DS), (1) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX; Abilene State Park; (2) 9 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park; (7) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Stephens County; (2) 15 Sept (JP,AP), Snyder, TX  
Wilson's Warbler: (2) 8 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park; (1) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Schleicher County; (2) 9 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park; (10) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Breckenridge, TX; (8) 15 Sept (JP,AP), Scurry County  
Lark Bunting: (75) 15 Sept (DS), Lake Fort Phantom  
Summer Tanager: (1) 8 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park; (1) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX; (1) 9 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park  
Yellow-headed Blackbird: (3) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Aspermont, TX; (4) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX; (1) 9 Sept (JP,AP), Hubbard Creek Lake; (13) 14 Sept (RK), Lake Kirby  
Brewer's Blackbird: (20) 25 Sept (DS) Taylor County  
Orchard Oriole: (2) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Stonewall County; (1) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX; (6) 9 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park  
Bullock's Oriole: (1) 19 Aug (JP,AP), Stonewall County; (1) 8 Sept (DS), Abilene State Park; (2) 8 Sept (JP,AP), Eldorado, TX

Additional Sightings of Resident Birds Include: Cattle Egret, Green Heron, Swainson's Hawk, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Vermillion Flycatcher, Rock Wren, Bell's Vireo, Blue Grosbeak



## Upcoming Programs

**BIG COUNTRY AUDUBON SOCIETY**

presents

**"BIRDERS: THE CENTRAL PARK EFFECT"**

**Thursday, October 4, 2012**

**7:00 PM**

**Room D, West side of Rose Park Senior Center**

*Come enjoy this outstanding HBO documentary featuring the excitement and contagion which birders experience as they participate in the phenomenon of Central Park in New York City. Over 275 species of birds are seen throughout the year in this natural oasis. Big city dwellers are able to go birding and feast on the sights of many and varied birds who survive in the midst of a mass of humanity. You'll identify with the birders and the thrills they enjoy, spotting and identifying these gorgeous, fascinating creatures.*

**"Crossing the Line:**

**Adventures at the Equator in Ecuador"**

**Presenter: Jay Packer**

**Thursday, November 1, 2012**

**7:00 PM**

**Room D, West side of Rose Park Senior Center**

*Have you always wanted to visit the tropics, but couldn't seem to make your way down south? Come experience the beauty and wonder of Ecuador through the eyes and photos of Jay Packer as he recounts his summer trip. He will take you through dense jungles, up to glorious mountain peaks and everywhere in between. The trip list contains over 600 species of birds, including 76 different hummingbirds, and while he won't be able to cover them all, you'll get a great sampling of the birds of Ecuador, plenty of eye-candy, and some just-plain-fun stories.*

Reminder: pay your annual dues to keep being an active member.

**INDIVIDUAL: \$20**

**FAMILY: \$30**

**STUDENT: \$10**





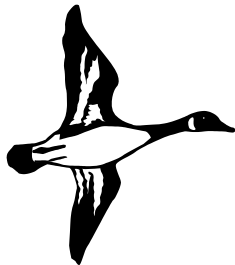
## **BIG COUNTRY AUDUBON SOCIETY**

<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		