



Volume 31 Issue 3

BIG COUNTRY AUDUBON SOCIETY

# Penfeathers

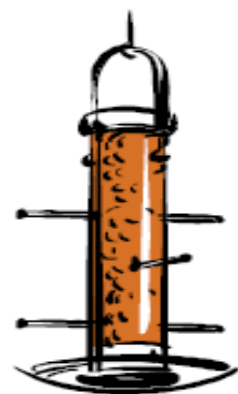
## Upcoming Events...



- November 16, 2013** Field trip to Lake Kirby. We will meet at the east entrance to the lake at 7:30 am. Park in the paved lot across from the playground.
- November 19, 2013** Board meeting at Jay Packer's home, 7:00 pm.
- November 21, 2013** Regular meeting at Rose Park Senior Center, 7:00 pm. Jay Packer will share his experiences and birding in Australia.  
\*\*\*Note the date change.\*\*\*
- December 5, 2013** Christmas party at Ben Richey Boy's Ranch, 6:00 p.m. Bring goodies to share.
- December 14, 2013** Field trip to Callahan County. We will meet at the McDonald's on Judge Ely at 7:15 am. Come early if you would like to eat breakfast. We will be out until mid-afternoon and will grab lunch in Clyde or Baird.
- January 4, 2014** Christmas Bird Count - mark your calendars! More info to come. Contact Dolores Owens if you would be willing to be a leader.
- January 18, 2014** Field trip. Location and details TBA
- February 6, 2014** Regular meeting at Rose Park Senior Center, 7:00 pm.

## Laura's Blind Feeder Patrol

We fill the feeder and maintain the bird blind at the Abilene State Park. We need volunteers! If you would like to help out, contact Bera Johnson by phone at (325) 690-6355 or email at [bebe\\_3754@hotmail.com](mailto:bebe_3754@hotmail.com)



# The Birds Go on Forever and the Party Never Ends

By Jay Packer

An exodus of Elf Owls, a flight of phoebes, a movement of Mallards, a passage of passerines. I've written many times about migration. It's one of the greatest spectacles in nature, and there is no better group than birds to showcase its majesty and grandeur. Because of migration, birding is dynamic. What you see in September is very different than what you see in January or June. How much less interesting would birding be in the absence of migration?

## Thinking About Migration

A common mistake that we make when thinking about migration is to view it as a fixed event. If you ask new birders when migration is, they might respond that it occurs two times a year, in the spring and the fall. They might even get more specific and put dates on it. "Migration is from the first week of April until the second week of May." Another mistake is that we often associate migration with its best known *migrants*, those remarkable (and often bright colored) species that cross vast distances at dependable intervals to move between breeding and wintering grounds. Species like the American warblers, vireos, and cuckoos. Thinking of migration in such simplistic terms is a mistake, however.

## So when is migration?

One answer to the question might be: "It depends!" Different species migrate at different times, and no two are alike. My favorite example of this is Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and Western Kingbird. The two look remarkably similar, especially if you've ever tried to tell apart young birds, yet they arrive and leave at very different times. Western Kingbirds often show up in late April and by the end of August / beginning of September, they are completely gone. Scissor-taileds on the other hand arrive much earlier, in mid March and leave ... whenever they feel like it. Their retraction for the winter is reluctant at best. Large numbers can be seen into October, with stragglers even later. This fall, I recorded what might have been my last one on October 24th. However, even when they seem to have all but left the state, they can turn up. I've seen one after Thanksgiving at Lake Kirby, after Christmas in the Dallas / Fort Worth area, and last year, a small group hung around all winter in Austin, attracting a Fork-tailed Flycatcher to their gang. It seems that Scissor-tailed Flycatchers just can't all agree exactly when migration is.

A second valid answer to the question is that migration never stops. It's *a/ways* happening. Whoa, you say. What about the summer? What about the winter? Yes, even then, birds are moving. One of the



Orange-crowned Warbler

most remarkable migrations occurs with shorebirds, who must carefully time their arrival and departure to conditions in the Arctic Circle. Birds that arrive too early or stay too late meet a frigid end. Thus shorebirds are heading to the Arctic as late as early June and coming back down from the Arctic as early as July. In other species, a type of migration known as post-breeding dispersal occurs. Once young birds have grown up enough to fly, they travel some distance away from their parents in search of food and other resources.

Winter too sees a constant stream (or trickle) of migrants, depending on the species and the local conditions. Some species are famous for their massive eruptions, pushing hundreds or even thousands of miles outside their normal distributions. Many of the finches are renowned for this. Species like Cassin's and Purple Finches make relatively short excursions, while species like Common Redpoll and Snow Bunting occasionally show up more than a thousand miles from where we think they should be. Fruit eaters too wander the wintery landscapes in search of their favorite berries. Birds like Cedar Waxwings, Phainopeplas, and all of the thrushes (including the bluebirds) can be wholly missing or in abundance depending on food resources. Species that usually reside further north during the winter will sometimes show up further south if it's too cold or there's not sufficient food. Birds like Rough-legged Hawk, Long-tailed Duck, and everyone's favorite - Snowy Owl can all show up unexpectedly in the winter.

### **What's migrating in Abilene right now?**

This brings me to Abilene, right now, in the beginning of November 2013. The "classic" fall migration is all but over. By classic, I refer to those species that do not breed in Abilene but move through on their way south; species like warblers, vireos, and shorebirds. Our breeding species, birds like Painted Buntings, Mississippi Kites, and Yellow-billed Cuckoo, are all but gone too, though some stay much later than you might expect. For example, the last Common Nighthawk I saw was on Oct 3rd and the last Chimney Swifts on Oct 11th. Seeing any of our breeding species, with perhaps the lone exception of Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, would be noteworthy.

As we've discussed though, that doesn't mean migration is over. As I type these words, a large flock of Common Grackles is cackling outside. They remain a mystery to me, because they all but disappear in the winter and head, presumably, a little further east for a few months before returning in early spring. The thing is, most people don't pay much attention to them, particularly on how to separate them from the (also) common and ubiquitous Great-tailed Grackle. Thus every year on the Christmas Bird Count, we receive reports of large numbers of Common Grackles that are almost certainly wrong and lack convincing detail to distinguish them from Great-tailed Grackles. But right now, as birds join together and the flocks become larger, their fall migration is underway.

We also have a number of wintering species that have just arrived or are still migrating through. Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Orange-crowned Warblers showed up in late September. Many of our wintering sparrows have arrived (and I just haven't seen them yet) or they are about to. Our ducks too are beginning to arrive, with some species (like American Wigeon) showing up earlier than others (such as Bufflehead).

### **Seeing Birds Differently**

The joy of migration is that it lets us view birds in new ways. For example, if you visit a place regularly, and you see birds on one day you didn't see the day before, you can ask yourself where they came from and why they're here now. You can also pay attention to trends happening elsewhere in the state or in neighboring states. Is Oklahoma getting an influx of Northern Shrikes? Time to start looking more carefully at all the Loggerhead Shrikes around Abilene. Are Arctic finches spilling across the Canadian border? Better keep the thistle feeders full. Once we realize that migration never really stops, we have new reasons to get back outside and see what's happening.

# September 21 Field Trip to Sweetwater - Warblers and Waterbirds

By Amy Packer

On September 21, 2013, eight club members set out to Nolan County for a little early fall birding. Included in the party were Jay and Amy Packer, John Kirk, Kathy Hampton, Larry Barnett, Justin Gann, JoAn Wilkes, and Linda Beyer. We were a little concerned about the weather because it had been rainy the day before, but the morning dawned bright and clear, bringing with it cool, comfortable temperatures.

We began around Lake Sweetwater. It was still too early in the season for ducks, although we did see one group of five Northern Shovelers. The most numerous birds were the Barn Swallows, which were zooming all over the surface of the lake catching bugs. We estimated that there were at least 400 individuals. The whole group enjoyed a Belted



Amy Packer (left) & Kathy Hampton at Lake Sweetwater.



Least Flycatcher

Kingfisher who landed on a power line and a White-eyed Vireo that gave a few brief but decent looks. (Surprisingly, this White-eyed Vireo lacked bright white eyes and was therefore probably a young bird.) Off on the far side of the lake and mostly hidden by grasses and reeds was a group of about 40 American Avocets, migrating through. We also counted at least ten Spotted Sandpipers waggling their rear ends along the shore and a Greater Yellowlegs. Other birds of note from the lake were a pair each of Eared Grebes, Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Chipping Sparrows, along with 5 Eastern Bluebirds, a Least Flycatcher, an Orange-crowned Warbler, and a couple large flocks of Lark Sparrows, totaling 25 in all.

On the drive back into town, the lead car suddenly made a quick U-turn. This can mean only one thing to birders - there's something cool on the side of the road. Sure enough, a beautiful Osprey was on top of a telephone pole, sitting in the sun. We all got out and enjoyed the sight before jumping back in the cars and heading on our way.

Our next stop was near the Sweetwater Country Club where there is a drainage ditch lined by trees just off the golf course. I'm sure we must have looked a little strange to the country club folks, walking around with our binoculars and looking at a dirty ditch. It was worth it, however, when the warblers started coming out. It started with some Yellow Warblers jumping up on the grasses. We counted 4 individuals, ranging from a bright yellow male to drab



Osprey

females and juveniles. Next, we saw a beautiful Black-and-white Warbler creeping along the branches and trunks of the trees lining the ditch. This bird was quite cooperative, even allowing Jay to get a few photos. Finally, our work paid off when a female American Redstart made a brief appearance. (Coincidentally, Randy Packer had a male American Redstart at Laura's Blind the same morning.) A couple other interesting birds at this spot were an Orchard Oriole and a Curve-billed Thrasher.



Black-and-white Warbler

On the way back to Abilene, we made a quick detour at Spinks Road where Burrowing Owls have been seen in the past. We saw lots of prairie dogs but unfortunately no owls. Overall, the trip was a success. We had beautiful weather and a nice mix of lingering summer birds and fall migrants that totaled over 50 species. If this sounds like fun to you, come join us on our next field trip to Lake Kirby on November 16.

# Arctic Ocean Birding Trip

By June Estes

Between June 16-19, I was able to cruise on a Princess Lines tour to Norway. June Wheeler and I were roommates. My brother, Gene Linn, also went. The ship was luxurious and the Norwegian country was overwhelmingly beautiful - clear, blue water, huge, green mountains, numerous waterfalls, and quaint villages with colorful houses. The whole scene was indescribably lovely and serene, but the best part was the birding trip!

We docked at Honningsvåg which is the northernmost city in Europe on a latitude with Point Barrow. Although each year the surrounding area has about 200 days of snow and frost, the Gulf Stream assures enough warm currents of air and water to prevent a hard freeze in the port most of the time. Amazing! The port never freezes up! We boarded a bus and drove through the beautiful mountains on well-made roads to the birding ship docked in the Arctic Ocean. The weather started out windy and brisk, but soon the sun began to shine! The water was a clear, cold, dark, blue. The birds were everywhere - in the water, in the air, on the rocks, on nests, and in the crevices. Most were puffins. They looked like butterflies in the air, flying every which way. The guides said they were Tufted (or Atlantic) Puffins. There were Tufted (Shag - their name for them) and Red-faced Cormorants, Black Guillemots, and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Razorbills were flying and diving everywhere with the puffins. Then came the White-tailed Sea-eagle being chased by two ravens, followed by another eagle. What a sight! One swooped very close to our boat. I had a great look - all mottled brown with a white tail. Great Black-backed Gulls were perched prominently on the rocks.

What a ride! The sun was out, the water was calm, the colors of the sea, land, birds and sky - beautiful! Thank you God!

We drove through the islands for about an hour. The boat was very comfortable with tea, coffee, and restrooms.

P.S. At another look-out stop, I ID'd a White Wagtail on a fence. It had a grasshopper in its mouth and was waiting for the bus to move.

-June Estes

*Thank you June for sharing your story! It sounds like you had a fabulous trip. Any members who wish to contribute to Penfeathers are welcome to do so. You can email your article to [president@bigcountryaudubon.org](mailto:president@bigcountryaudubon.org) or hand it to Jay or Amy Packer at any regular meeting.*

**BIG COUNTRY AUDUBON SOCIETY**

*President* Jay Packer  
*Vice President* Amy Packer  
*Treasurer/Membership* Dolores Owens  
*Secretary* Bera Johnson  
*Education* John English  
*Member-at-Large* 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.

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

**Big Country Audubon Society  
Chapter Membership Application**

Please enroll me as a member of the Big Country Audubon Society

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

**Individual Membership:**

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

**Family Membership:**

One year—\$30.00	Prorated Dues
If you join in Sep, Oct, Nov	Dec, Jan, Feb \$22.50
	Mar, Apr, May \$15.00
	Jun, Jul, Aug \$7.50

**Student Membership:**

One year—\$10.00	Prorated Dues
If you join in Sep, Oct, Nov	Dec, Jan, Feb \$7.50
	Mar, Apr, May \$5.00
	Jun, Jul, Aug \$2.50

All dues renew on September 1st.



**Big Country Audubon Society**

**P.O. Box 569**

**Abilene, TX 79604**