



Volume 32 Issue 1

BIG COUNTRY AUDUBON SOCIETY

Penfeathers

Upcoming Events...



January 4, 2014

Christmas Bird Count . We will meet at Aldersgate United Methodist Church at 18th St. and Sayles at 6:30 a.m. (Enter the building through the south door off 18th St.) We will be given instructions, break into teams, and venture out to the various areas of Abilene and Taylor County to count birds. Dress warmly and bring your own binoculars, snacks, and drinks. At 5:00 p.m., meet back at the church to compile findings. Afterwards, a room has been reserved at El Fenix, 3241 S 1st, for dinner. (Dutch treat.)

January 14, 2014

Board meeting at Jay Packer's house, 7:00 p.m.

February 6, 2014

Regular meeting at Rose Park Senior Center, 7:00 pm. Dr. Johnny Bliznak will be talking about birds of prey.

February 15, 2014

Field trip to Lake Brownwood and other locations in the area. Meet at Nelson Park at 6:30 a.m. Park at the south end of the zoo parking lot. This will be a full-day trip. We plan to eat lunch in Brownwood. Bring snacks, binoculars, and water.

March 6, 2014

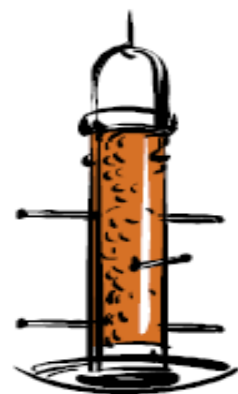
Regular meeting at Rose Park Senior Center, 7:00 pm.

March 22, 2014

Field trip to Seabee Park and Lake Fort Phantom. Meet at the McDonald's on Judge Ely at 7:00 a.m. Come early if you wish to eat breakfast. This will be a half-day trip.

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



Top Tens Ways to be a Better Birder in 2014

By Amy Packer

It's that time of year when folks are looking ahead at the New Year and deciding how they want to make 2014 their best year yet. We all know the drill. We make New Year's resolutions, only to have given up by February (and that's if we're really committed). Instead of making a resolution you know you won't keep, why not resolve to do something you want to do this year? Why not make "becoming a better birder" a New Year's resolution? To help in that effort, here are ten simple ways to end 2014 as a better birder than you are right now.

10. Start in your own backyard

Put up a feeder and document what you see. But don't just glance at that Bewick's Wren and check it off. Study it! Use the opportunity of its close proximity to note every detail. What exactly separates it from a Carolina or a House Wren? When you see that same species out in the wild, will you recognize it? One of the best ways to become a better birder is to become familiar with common birds. They may not always be the most exciting to study, but the more you do, the easier it will be to separate the every day from the unusual.



Bewick's Wren — photo by Jay Packer

9. Pick a group to study

Choose one group of birds that you find to be difficult and commit to study them. Often it's intimidating to look at the bird book and realize how much there is to learn. Instead of being overwhelmed by all that you don't know, choose one group of birds and commit to learning more about them. Maybe you've always struggled with sparrows or you call every shorebird a "peep." Whatever the case, by starting small with only one or two groups, you'll find that the huge book becomes a little bit more manageable.

8. Bird with a friend

Research has shown that people who have an exercise buddy get better results. I think the same holds true for birding as well. When you have a friend who enjoys birding as much as you do, you can motivate each other to go more places, go out more often, and study more. Can't find a friend? Whether you've been in the Audubon club for many years or have only recently joined, one of the benefits of the group is that it provides a ready-made pot of

individuals who share a similar interest. At the next meeting, ask someone to go on a birding excursion with you. I bet you'll find that they were just waiting for you to ask.

7. Bird with an expert

No matter how much you read or study, nothing can truly compare with being out in the field with someone who knows what they are doing. One simple place to start would be to come on the next Audubon field trip. They are typically the third Saturday of the month. Check the newsletter or your email for more details. You can also attend field trips for other Audubon societies in the state. No matter where you go, you'll find someone passionate about the birds in their area and happy to help in your quest for learning. Finally, you can go on a commercial birding trip or attend a festival. While these trips often come with a fee, the benefits of learning from a top birder (not to mention all the extra birds you'll see) are well worth the cost.

6. Study a book

While maybe not the most exciting suggestion on the list, this is possibly one of the most beneficial tips. Take a few minutes every day or week to keep your mind fresh on the likely birds for your area. Have the book handy when you're out in the field and study it as you're birding. Sometimes the best way to really cement a bird in your mind is to study it carefully in the field and then compare what you're seeing to the images in the book.

5. Keep detailed notes

One of the most fun aspects of birding can be looking back and reminiscing on the amazing birds you have seen. These days, with websites like ebird.org (through Cornell University) keeping a great list is easier than ever. However, don't just list your "lifers". Keep notes each time you go birding of everything you see. Not only is it a great way to get a better sense of what's common in your area, it also contributes to scientists' understanding of bird distributions. People often resist taking notes because they haven't done a good job in the past. Don't worry! Just start with your next birding trip and go from there. You can enter your other notes on a rainy day or just enter your life birds to get your list up to speed. The sooner you start keeping notes, the more you'll enjoy looking over your past trips.

4. Visit a new spot

Over time, it's easy to become bored with your normal stomping grounds. You start to feel like you've seen everything there is to see at this park or that lake. Break the monotony by looking at a map and going somewhere new. It could be as simple as visiting a park in town you've never been to before or as complicated as planning a month-long trip to a foreign country. No matter where you go, you'll see something unexpected to rekindle your interest. And next time you go to that same old park, instead of seeing it as a tired, worn-out spot, you will view it with fresh eyes as an old friend who's happy to see you again.

3. Use your ears

To many new birders, identifying birds by ear seems to be an almost unattainable skill that takes decades of practice and maybe a tiny bit of magic. Although this may be partially true with the best in the world, (ask me sometime about a bird guide in Ecuador named Leo) developing basic skills just takes a little time and effort. The first step to developing your skills in this area is to learn what's around you. (See #10 above.) Go outside in your backyard and learn what a House Sparrow, Northern Cardinal, and American Robin sound like. Once you've mastered your backyard birds, move on to studying the most common species in your area. You don't have to learn every call of every rare bird. If you know the common stuff, you can pick out when something is different and whether or not it's worth trying to chase it down. Knowing even a dozen of the most common species can dramatically improve your success when birding. The Sibley app for iPhone and Android includes bird vocalizations useful for

studying. The internet also has useful resources such as macaulaylibrary.org (through Cornell University) and xeno-canto.org. Both of these websites have huge databases full of bird songs and calls from around the world.

2. Learn what's expected

Use the range maps in your field guide or play with the interactive maps at ebird.org to learn what birds are expected in different areas and habitats. Are you at a wetland? Look for Marsh Wren or Swamp Sparrow. Out in the desert? Keep an eye out for Cactus Wren. Just knowing what to look for in an area substantially narrows down the candidates when trying to ID a bird. While rare birds can show up, 99% of the time, the bird you're looking at is probably supposed to be there. By understanding the status and distributions of common birds, you're less likely to make a mistake.

1. Get outside!

As with any activity, the best way to become a better birder is to practice. Just get outside and go birding. Are you finding it difficult to get motivated? Do something to add an element of fun or competition to your birding. Start counting birds in a local patch. This could be your town, neighborhood walk, or favorite park. Try to document more birds in your backyard this year than last year. Using ebird, you can track your personal stats and even compare your results to others in your area. (For more information, check out the Yard and Patch Guidelines on the eBird website at <http://help.ebird.org/customer/portal/articles/1006845-yard-and-patch-guidelines>.) If you want to get further from home, chase rare birds. You can stay up to date on rare bird sightings through the Texbirds email list or Facebook page. And if you really want to go crazy, start working on the Texas Century Club and try to see one hundred birds in one hundred counties. No matter how big or small you make it, I think you'll find that once you're outside enjoying nature, you might not want to go back inside.



Golden-headed Cisticola — photo by Jay Packer

Field Trip Reports

By Amy Packer

November 16 - Lake Kirby

The November field trip found the club at one of the best spots for birding in Abilene, Lake Kirby. Six members were present, including Jay and Amy Packer, Kathy Hampton, JoAn Wilkes, and Larry and Donna Barnett. The weather was nice and everyone had a great time birding and enjoying being outside. Being that it was still fall, we didn't have quite as many ducks as one might expect later in the winter; however, we did have 40 Gadwall, 2 Mallards, 50 Northern Shovelers, 5 Green-winged Teals, and 3 Ruddy Ducks. In addition to the ducks, we also had a handful of shorebirds and other water birds, including 40 Long-billed Dowitchers. Perhaps the best bird of the day was a Marsh Wren that hopped up in the reeds right as we arrived. Though the looks at this bird were brief at best, everyone in the group got at least a glimpse of this little songbird, its bold stripes easily distinguishing it from a Bewick's or Carolina Wren. We saw or heard 38 species in total and ended the trip at midday.

December 14 - Callahan County

December 14 fell in the midst of a cold spell, so we weren't sure if anyone would be willing to brave the weather for this field trip. Happily for us, JoAn Wilkes and Linda Beyer were not scared away by frigid temperatures and after a quick breakfast at McDonald's the four of us loaded up into Linda's car and were on our way.

We began our day birding County Road 107, which is actually still in Taylor County. At a small pond, we saw American Wigeons, Mallards, and Northern Shovelers. We also came across a nice Red-tailed Hawk and American Kestrel. We spent the majority of our time on this road picking through large flocks of black birds at cattle feeders. We were able to estimate 15 European Starlings, 30 Red-winged Blackbirds, 15 Brewer's Blackbirds, 35 Great-tailed Grackles, and 25 Brown-headed Cowbirds. Not bad for a flock that initially looked to be just a great, big, black mass.

Next, we headed into Clyde and birded a rural road called Cherry Lane. There, we were amazed by the amount of Northern Cardinals and Pyrrhuloxias we saw. We counted about fifteen cardinals and four Pyrrhuloxias as well as Spotted Towhees, Field Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows, and one Dark-eyed Junco. The best bird from this leg of the trip was a Wilson's Snipe that was hanging out by a tiny stock tank near the side of the road.

We ended the day by winding our way through the county on Union Hill Road where the highlight was a large flock of about fifteen Eastern Bluebirds who were gorgeous in the bright sun. We also managed to add a nice Myrtle's Yellow-rumped Warbler to the day's list.

Despite the cold weather, the four of us were able to have a great time in Callahan County, even if we did do most of our birding from the comfort of the heated car. We had 33 species in total and I believe that JoAn got a "lifer" with the Wilson's Snipe. Don't miss out on all the fun! Our next field trip is coming up soon. Check out the calendar of events for more details. We hope to see you there.



Wilson's Snipe — photo Jay Packer

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

**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

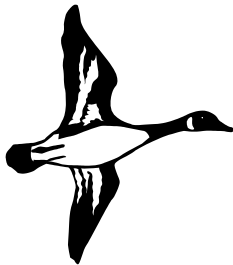
Family Membership:

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

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