

April, 1973

2709 S. Fairfield, Amarillo, Texas 79103

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PROGRAM FOR APRIL:

Rena Ross and Thelma Fox will give our program for April. Be sure and attend for they will relate the events of their recent trip to East Africa, illustrating their talk with slides taken while there.

SABINAL CANYON PURCHASE:

Approximately 1280 acres of rugged Hill Country have been purchased by the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department for inclusion in the state park system. The department recently obtained a contract for a portion of the Sabinal Canyon in Bandera and Real counties. Located $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles north of Vanderpool on Ranch Road 183, the new park site is 90 miles from San Antonio and 145 miles from Austin.

The area is famous for its "lost maples", a stand of the rare Uvalde bigtooth maple. Wildlife is abundant in the Sabinal Canyon park site and rare species of birds such as the Golden-cheeked Warbler and the Black-capped Vireo have been sighted in the area.

Sabinal has been used for sheep, goat and cattle ranching, but very little agriculture. Although a contract has been obtained for the area, the park site will be closed to the public until opened by the Parks & Wildlife Commission. The site lends itself to very little development and tentative recreation opportunities include sightseeing, hiking, primitive camping and nature study.

"PEEPS":

This is the time of the year when the shorebirds return to our area and we are all forced to go back to the study of our field guides in an effort to relearn those species we were so sure we had down pat last year. Of these numerous species none are more confusing to the beginner, or the semi-expert, than the smaller ones that are generally referred to as the "peeps". In the Panhandle, when we say "peeps" we have in mind the Least, Semi-palmated, Baird's, Western, and White-rumped Sandpipers.

The ideal way to identify each of these species is to have them all in one flock at one time so that the differences in sizes, colors and bill configurations can be readily compared and distinguished, and it wouldn't hurt a bit if the sun was shining brightly over your shoulder and there wasn't a breath of wind stirring. Recognizing that these conditions can hardly occur simultaneously, there are some characteristics to look for in each species that will aid you in correctly identifying them.

The Least Sandpiper is well named for it is the smallest of the "peeps". One says this and then must confess that it's hard to tell the difference in sizes between a full grown Least and a three-quarter grown Semi-palmated. Also, if there is nothing to compare its size with then it might as well be called a Greater as a Least! The best thing to do in such a situation is to forget about its size and concentrate instead on the color of its legs and feet. Since birds walk on their toes, however, most of the color you are going to see will be on its feet and not on its legs. The Least Sandpiper is the only one that has yellowish, or greenish-yellow, legs and feet. The White-rumped has yellowish-brown ones and this can be confusing if you rely solely on leg and foot color as criteria in identifica-

tion because if the Least has been walking about very much in mud or muddy water, as it quite often does, then you might think its legs and feet were yellowish-brown rather than greenish-yellow. In our area, when we do have water around it is usually muddy water and there isn't much green algae growing in it, which is too bad because the clinging algae would help make the Least's legs and feet appear more greenish-yellow, thus aiding you greatly in ascertaining the proper color.

If you still aren't sure about committing yourself to an identification, then you might sneak a look at the bird's rump. If it's all white then your problem is solved! The only "peep" that has an all-white rump is the White-rumped Sandpiper. A word to the wise, however. When the bird is not sitting you will seldom be able to see its rump, unless you are standing directly over it. Bent says this species is "invariably among the tamest and most confiding", but I hardly think it is so confiding that it will permit you to stand over it and look at its rump. The problem is that when the "peeps" are on the ground the tips of the primaries on their closed wings extend across the birds' rumps, thus covering most of that area and revealing very little to the distant observer. On all the other "peeps" only the sides of their rumps are white, the middle being dark, and this can confuse you too because sometimes when the wind is blowing stoutly, which is most of the time, it will ruffle the feathers on their rumps, or more circumspetly put, their upper tail coverts, and they will appear all white, particularly to the birder who badly needs a White-rumped Sandpiper on his year's list. Personally, I used to get White-rumps every year until I realized what the wind had been doing. So the best thing to do, really, is flush the bird and then if its rump is all white you won't have any trouble seeing it; that is, if you are close enough.

Another way you can tell a White-rumped Sandpiper from the other "peeps" is by listening to its distinctive call. This can best be summarized as a high-pitched, squeaky, disyllabic jeet-jeet. It very seldom says merely jeet, or so the books say. Unless you had the bird by itself, though, you couldn't tell for sure. In a flock of twelve, eleven of them might be going jeet-jeet and only one saying jeet. Actually, though, its call is so distinctive that you should experience no trouble in distinguishing it from the Least's weak threep, the Semi-palmated's reedy Cherk, the Baird's twittered kreet, or the Western's thin cheep. The best thing to do in this situation is to identify your bird first and then listen closely to the call it's making, disregarding entirely the calls of the other "peeps" in its neighborhood.

The Western Sandpiper is easily identified by its bill for it is heavier and longer than those of the others and curves downward appreciably at the end, or distal third. This droop at the tip is a life-saver most of the time, particularly if you are near enough to the bird as not to need a scope with which to see it. Otherwise, viewing it through a scope can produce confusion because the heat waves that shimmer above the water or plains makes the bills of birds appear as though they came in waving sections. Of course, if the last section, or distal

think, drops your problem is still solved and you know you are looking at a Western Sandpiper.

Thus far nothing has been said about the Baird's Sandpiper. It is a very common "peep" of our area but it presents no outstanding characteristics to aid us in its identification. The thing we commonly look for is the sandy or buffy breast with dark streaks. The Semi-palmated has this too, but on the Baird's it continues up the sides of the neck and includes the cheeks. Sometimes it is behavior that gives us clues to proper identifications. Some "peeps" are primarily "probers" in their manner of feeding, while some are both "probers" and "snatchers", using both means of feeding with equal relish; the Baird's is primarily a "snatcher". It is mostly a surface feeder and quite often grabs insects and spiders on land. Perhaps that is why it is seen more often around our prairie playas than the other "peeps" are. Another of its peculiarities is its manner of holding its body more horizontally when on the ground. Too much importance should not be placed on this characteristic, however, because our wind is apt to make all the shorebirds flatten out if they hope to make any headway against it. I've even seen an upright bird like a robin get down flat against the ground when it wanted to walk against the wind.

The different manners of feeding can be a guide to proper identification in the "peeps". As pointed out before, the Baird's is a snatcher and seldom probes. The Western is also primarily a snatcher but it has a tendency to wade out further into the water to do its snatching. The question here is, how far out is further? The least is, by and large, a snatcher also, but it scatters more when a group is feeding and when it does probe it does so delicately, being a shallow prober. When not snatching, the Western is a real prober, burying its bill deeply and probing rapidly several times and then running foreward and repeating the action. The Semi-palmated, now, is a half-snatcher and a half-prober, preferring very soft mud and inserting the bill very shallowly when probing. Palmer says: "The bill marks seem to occur rather haphazardly as compared to those of some of the deliberate-acting sandpipers". This is very interesting and denotes sharpness on the part of the observer, but it only works when there is only one bird of one species present and it is feeding on virgin ground. Then you can check the bill marks left in the soft mud to see whether or not it is a Semi-palmated. If not, then keep watching the bird and by bearing in mind what has been said before, eventually, through a process of elimination, you will come up with the correct identification. Of course, if you determine the bill marks were placed haphazardly, then you know the bird was a Semi-palmated and you can congratulate yourself on a shrewd piece of sleuthing and go home happy.

All of the gems gleaned from experience are being given to the reader in the hopes they will make the identification of "peeps" easier. If you will take this paper with you the next time you go "peep" watching, you shouldn't have any trouble in identifying them all, and then some.

FIELD TRIP:

Mark Sunday, April 29th, on your calendar

as the date the TPAS will have their next field trip. Mrs. Fred Emy has invited us to view the flora and fauna of the Frying Pan Ranch and from the accounts given by those who went on a previous field trip to that locality, it will prove to be a worthwhile event. Directions for getting there? Go to Coulter Road intersection at I40 West, drive 13.2 miles, make a right turn north on a county road and drive $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles.

A SMALL MIRACLE;

A small miracle occurred in the land this past March. I'm sure Tom Bell of Lander, Wyoming, would object to that statement, however, and say there was nothing small about it.

The story is much too important to be silent about. It revolves around a small town newspaper whose primary concern is to aid in the struggle being waged by all conservationists, environmentalists, preservationists, call them what you will since tags seem to be necessary, in their efforts to preserve a viable world for all its inhabitants.

The name of the paper is HIGH COUNTRY NEWS, a bi-weekly publication packed full of news and accounts of the environmental problems being faced by the people of the high country west, problems involving the increasing development of coal and shale resources, the proliferation of nuclear power stations and the building of high steam-generated power complexes, the daming of rivers, the clear-cutting of forests, and the slaughter of eagles. They are sober, thoughtful, analytical articles seeking answers to conflicting needs; not articles to make you shout with joy over the wisdom of man's actions but ones to make you think clearly about what should be done toward silviculture or preventing abuses.

The paper carries no advertising since the editor insists upon its complete independence of thought and posture. Therein lies much of its financial problem for it must rely almost entirely on its readers's subscriptions for its sustenance and continuance. Its readership is small, being some 2200 all told, and it has no capital with which to carry on a circulation campaign to increase it. Still, it kept going on a shoe string, striving to get its important message across to a public largely indifferent or unaware.

Finally, after a brave struggle, the end was announced in the March 2 issue. I think Tom Bell tells the story best:

"We have done our best. It was not good enough. I am sure there are many people out there in this great country who would have subscribed had they known about the paper. But it is difficult, expensive, and time-consuming to reach them. We have simply run out of resources.

I have been frank with all of you, our readers, throughout. I will be now. My wife and I have been bled white by the financial drains of the paper. And it is not over yet. We have put almost \$30,000 in cash into the paper. We must still repay \$7,500 owing to a local bank. I have worked as editor of the paper since January 1, 1970. I paid myself a salary out of my own money that first year. In all of 1971 and 1972, I drew \$910.97 in salary. Both Marge Higley and Mary Margaret Davis have drawn salaries that ran between \$200 and \$250 a month. Anne Turner has faithfully appeared every morning and worked all day - for absolutely no compensation - since she came to work in November. Anne washes dishes and waits tables after

working L... all day. Obviously, we could have all made more money washing dishes.

But this was our thing, and it was a good thing - except economically. We believed in what we were doing or we wouldn't have stuck it out this long. I have no regrets, and as

as I know, neither do any of the girls.

We tried several avenues to save the paper in the past few months. In August, I went to the Ford Foundation seeking a grant. It was to no avail. In my report to you in October, I said we had to have more subscriptions. Since then we have gained, but not nearly enough.

The state of the economy and the on-coming energy crisis do not bode well for a venture such as HIGH COUNTRY NEWS. If people get in a financial squeeze, they have to cut back, and they cut those items they feel to be least necessary.

...Miracles can happen. It is possible that one will happen between now and March 30. If not, we will quietly leave the scene.

The miracle did happen. Those relatively few subscribers knew a good thing when they saw it and decided the good thing would not fold because of lack of support. By March 30 the paper had gained 161 new subscriptions. 176 individuals had contributed \$7290, an average of \$41.42 per person. A reader had suggested that if 1000 people would contribute \$30 each then the \$30,000 need would be met. Within less than two weeks 47 people responded and the money continued coming in. As a reader in Indiana wrote: "If I can afford \$30 for a Wyoming Non-Resident deer permit then I can afford \$30 to help the cause of preserving the West that I love". An insurance broker from Polson, Montana, committed himself to \$1000 over a 10-month period. He and his wife look on their pledge as an investment in the future and he candidly says American families commit themselves to \$100 a month payments for automobiles - why not for a cause which may mean much more in the long run? With the added help of a number of state, regional and national groups, the almost lone voice in the Rocky Mountain west will continue to be heard. And don't forget Jim Hyland of San Luis Rey, Calif. who sent in \$20, saying: "Wish it could be more but I'm out of work right now. God Love You."

Tom Bell speaks: "HIGH COUNTRY NEWS is but one small instrument of change. Thanks to you, our readers, it will be a viable instrument. I took over as editor that I... meant so much to so many. In no way do I look upon what I have done as a sacrifice. I did what I did because I wanted to; and because I felt it

was only right. So did my wife who stood beside me and the staff who joined me here. This Good Earth has been most kind to me, and so has my great country. I am only repaying a debt of gratitude. I now extend that debt to all of you, too."

Tom Bell and his staff still need your help. The battle isn't over yet. \$10 to HIGH COUNTRY NEWS, Box K, Lander, Wyoming 82520 will bring you a very fine and brave little newspaper.

BIG DAY COUNT:

May 6 (Sunday) has been set aside for the annual Big Day Count for Potter/Randall counties. This is a sun-up to sundown count, but unlike the Christmas Count, it takes in

all of the two counties area. Please contact Peggy Acord for area assignments. If you cannot go afield, please count the birds around your home and those coming in to your feeders. Turn in the results to Peggy.

BIRD NOTES:

Blue-winged Teal - a very early male at Buffalo Lake on Feb. 25 (Ken Seyffert).

Chukar - 1 along the fence row 12.2 miles south of Amarillo on Feb. 25 (Ken Seyffert).

Bohemian Waxwings (4), Evening Grosbeaks (50+), Purple Finches (several), and Cassin's Finches (a male and a female) in the Lake Tanglewood/Palisades area on March 16 (Peggy Acord and Rita Kenney).

Long-eared Owl (8 in one group) at Buffalo Lake on March 18 (Ken Seyffert).

Bohemian Waxwings - 20 or more in town on March 18 (Peggy Acord).

Sora and Virginia Rails, and 1 Horned Grebe - below the dam at Lake Meredith on April 1 (TPAS field trip participants).

Whistling Swan - 3 near Dumas on Feb. 20 and for at least a week thereafter (Carolyn Stallwitz).

Black Duck - 1 near Dumas this winter (Jack Dillard with the Parks & Wildlife Dept.).

Pigeon Hawk - what appear to have been two during the winter near Dumas (Carolyn Stallwitz).

Clark's Nutcracker, Steller's Jay, Cassin's Finch - coming to feeders through first week of April (Thelma Fox and Rena Ross).

O. O. S. MEETING:

The spring meeting of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society will be held May 11, 12 & 13 in the beautiful Black Mesa country of the Oklahoma panhandle. O.O.S. members are dedicated birders and they have an organization wherein the interests of the amateur and the scientist are happily balanced. Details of the meeting are not yet available but either Peggy Acord of the Editor will be able to supply them before the meeting takes place should you desire to attend.

CALENDAR:

- April 16 : Monthly society meeting at the Garden Center, 7:30 p.m.
Program: "East Africa Safari"
Speakers - Rena Ross & Thelma Fox
- April 29: Field trip to the Frying Pan Ranch.
- May 6 : Big Day Count
- May 21 : Monthly society meeting.