

March, 1974

2709 S. Fairfield, Amarillo, Texas 79103

Vol. xi, No. 3

PROGRAM FOR MARCH:

BOAT-TAILED/GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE IDENTIFICATION:

We are happy to announce that Paul Ferguson, Manager of Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge, will be our speaker at the March meeting. With the lake once again dry and our favorite birding area sharply reduced in its species numbers and variety, we look forward to hearing what Paul has to say about the future of the refuge. We urge all who can to attend.

THE BLUE LIST:

The Blue List of birds for 1974 has been published by American Birds and it remains much the same as the one issued in 1973. This list consists of those species the Regional Editors of AB think are showing signs of declining in numbers. They emphasize that inclusion on the list does not necessarily mean that a species is declining throughout its range, but it may be occurring in a restricted part of it. Altogether, 45 species are listed. Of this number, the following species are the ones we should pay particular attention to in our area. We urge each of our birders to report his or her observations of these species to Peggy Acord who, in turn, will channel this valuable information to our Regional Editor, Frances Williams, in Midland:

Western Grebe, White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, Black-crowned Night Heron, White-faced Ibis, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Marsh Hawk, Osprey, Prairie Falcon, Merlin, Am. Kestrel, Snowy Plover, Franklin's Gull, Least Tern, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Barn Owl, Burrowing Owl, Bewick's Wren, Loggerhead Shrike, Bell's Vireo, Yellow Warbler, Com. Yellowthroat, and Grasshopper Sparrow.

Of the 34 species on the list, we are directly involved with 26 of them. Many of them nest among us. Your observations of their nesting occurrence and success is particularly needed.

RESULTS OF PDC WINTER BIRD STUDY:

The seventh annual winter population study in the Palo Duro Canyon has been completed by Kenneth Seyffert and its result supports the commonly held view that birds were scarce this winter. 45 different species were recorded during the 85-day study period with an average density of 107 birds for the 31 acre plot, or 345 birds per 100 acres. This is an all-time low and contrasts sharply with the previous winter's record high of 58 different species, 216 average density, and 697 birds per 100 acres. This winter was a relatively mild one; last winter was one of the worst we have had in some time.

Some features of the count are worth noting. For the first time no Mountain Bluebirds were seen: last year an average of 26 per count day were observed. One Mockingbird on one count was seen: usually 2 or 3 per count day are tallied. Eleven Robins per count day were recorded and most of them were seen on the last three counts. While this was not a low, it contrasts sharply with the previous year's 101 Robins per count day. On the plus side, a record high was set for the Scaled Quail, 8 per count day as against the previous high of 5. Three new species were added to the count period, the Wood Duck, Say's Phoebe, and Scrub Jay.

The following article was written by T. Ben Feltner for "The Spoonbill", the newsletter of the Ornithology Group, Outdoor Nature Club, Houston. It is reprinted here, in part, to help clear up points of identification between the two species which were recently separated from what had previously been considered as one species. This may help you to identify the next "big" grackle you see:

- (1) Any adult male large-tailed grackle with intense yellow eyes is a Great-tailed Grackle.
- (2) Any adult male large-tailed grackle with brown or gray-brown eyes is a Boat-tailed Grackle. (Note: On the east coast ranging from Georgia north to New Jersey is a Boat-tailed Grackle with yellow eyes, Cassidix major torreyi. The bird winters to Florida and is not presently known from our area. Its eye color is not intense yellow.)
- (3) Male Boat-tailed Grackles are smaller, with shorter, narrower tails. They tend to look thicker necked.
- (4) Male Great-tailed Grackles are larger with longer, wider tails. They appear thinner necked.
- (5) Female Boat-tails are paler on the underside of the body with more conspicuous metallic sheen dorsally. The eye color is brown or dull yellow.
- (6) Female Great-tails are darker on the underside with less metallic sheen dorsally. The eye color is yellow.
- (7) The voice of the Great-tailed Grackle is split into four distinct sections.
 - a. A low, untuned introductory phrase which suggests the crackling of twigs.
 - b. A finely tuned undulatory chewchew accompanied by an untuned hissing sound
 - c. A short clacking repetition of harsh sound of phrase (a) followed by
 - d. A terminal series of one to five (usually two) loud, piercing chaw-we notes. The latter often sounds like an ascending interrogative: why?
- (8) The voice of the Boat-tailed Grackle is
 - a. A variable of harsh treet or shreet notes.
 - b. A peculiar, rapid series of weakly ascending notes accompanied by wing-flapping, ruff-distended display.
 - c. a Second series of treet notes similar to those of phrase (a).

The breeding ecology of the two species differs in that the Great-tailed Grackle is found breeding in several habitats: parks, roadside oaks, Houston City Hall, scattered trees along open fields, in addition to marshes. The Boat-tailed Grackle is much more restricted and breeds, as far as is known, only in wet, marshy areas most often over water.

In summary: The best field mark is the eye color of the adult male. The eye color of the female is good but sometimes not as easy to ascertain as the male. The song, once learned, is diagnostic but mostly restricted to the breeding season. Immature birds are best identified by association or not at all.

BIRD NOTES:

A trickle of spring migrants has begun moving through the area. Peggy Acord reported a male Hooded Merganser at Lake Tanglewood on Feb. 24. Kenneth Seyffert saw a small flock of Tree Swallows between Amarillo and Canyon on March 3, and a Sage Thrasher at Buffalo Lake on the same date. A number of species are showing great interest in starting their nesting cycles. Male House Finches have been singing with greater frequency and vigor of late. Mourning Doves are now encountered in pairs and the first reported singing of one was in the Palo Duro Canyon on Feb. 3. Bewick's Wrens, Cardinals and Mockingbirds will sing briefly during the winter, especially on warm days. Their chrus was joined on Feb. 17 in the Palo Duro by Rufous-crowned Sparrows, Black-crested Titmice and Road-runners. On the same date and place a pair of American Kestrels were observed going thru their courting and mating activities.

Many people keep lists of birds they have seen in the world, hemisphere, continent, nation, state, county, city, and some of their yards. A recent addition to Peggy Acord's backyard list was the Common Crow. Two appeared there on Feb. 26. Crows are not often reported from within the city and these two were the first for her yard in twenty or so years of residence. Though not new for his backyard, Kenneth Seyffert thought it unusual to see a Lincoln's Sparrow in the midst of a flock of House Sparrows feeding on bread crumbs scattered on the ground. This was on March 3.

SPRING MEETING OF T.O.S.:

The Spring meeting of the Texas Ornithological Society will be held on April 18, 19 and 20 in Beaumont, Texas. Headquarters for the meeting will be Ramada Inn, 1295 North Eleventh St., Beaumont, 77702, P. O. Box 5295, telephone number (713) 892-7722. The schedule of events are: Thursday, April 18 - Registration, 8:00 p.m. reception and cocktail party, home of Dr. William J. Graber III, 1340 Audubon Place. Friday, April 19 - Registration and Field Trips. Evening program by Roland H. Wauer and Annual Meeting of T.O.S. Saturday, April 20 - Field Trips. Evening banquet speaker will be Dr. Sidney Gathreaux, Professor of Ornithology, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina. Sunday, April 21 - Breakfast meeting, Texas Chapter of Nature Conservancy. All T.O.S. members invited and urged to attend.

FIELD TRIPS: High Island, the marsh at Sabine, the whole length of Bolivar Peninsula, Anahuac Wildlife Refuge, at least one trip into the Piney Woods for Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Bachman's Sparrow, and Brown-headed Nuthatch. This Spring Meeting coincides exactly with the peak of migration on this part of the upper Texas Gulf Coast. Last year at this time, on High Island, there were numerous reports of 20 to 25 species of warblers in one day along with such migrants as Scarlet Tanagers and Black-billed Cuckoos.

FIELD TRIP:

On Sunday, March 17, at 2:30 p.m., the TPAS will have a field trip in the Palo Duro Canyon. This outing will be a little different than the ones we usually have for we will be devoting our main interest to the geology of the canyon. Bill and Ginger Holliday will conduct the trip and we will meet at the park entrance. Even though our attention will be directed toward geology, bring your binoculars with you as there will be ample opportunity to bird along the way.

BIRD NOTES CONTINUED:

At the Hollywood Road sewage disposal plant SE of the city - 1 Long-billed Dowitcher and several "peeps" seen on March 7 by Peggy Acord and Rena Ross. These are the first sandpipers reported for the season. Also present were some 200 Snow Geese that were sent scattering by a swooping immature Bald Eagle. On the same day in her yard in town, Rena reported large flocks of Robins and Cedar Waxwings. On March 3 Peggy observed an Eastern Phoebe at Lake Tanglewood.

CALENDAR:

- March 17 - Field trip in the Palo Duro Canyon - 2:30 p.m.
- March 18 - Monthly society meeting at the Garden Center - 7:30 p.m.

BIRD NOTES CONTINUED AGAIN:

A last minute report came in from Joel Reese of Dimmitt. He recently observed a flock of 35 Snow Geese by a playa lake near Kress, and a flock of 50 or more Snow Geese were seen flying over Dimmitt. With the Snows were 3 Blue Geese. This is the first report of Blues this winter.