WEEDY ESTATES

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2014

INTRODUCTION

This book includes my field trips arranged monthly from January 3 through December 23. We visit Weedy Estates all over northwest Arkansas, and on occasion, even farther afield.

I have arranged these visits more or less chronologically. Bison, birds, botany, wind and weather, all make natural appearances season by season.

Weedy Estates is an actual place, though you won't find it on a map. I made up the name for my own purposes. There's an explanation of sorts in the writing for October 6, 2010, titled "Love in the Wasteland."

The world's Weedy Estates are usually wonderful places to see sparrows and other birds. This wealth does not suddenly and mysteriously disappear in periodical financial collapses.

I encourage everyone to find their personal Weedy Estates. They are everywhere. These are just a few ideas about where to look. It is different for each one of us.

Most of these writings were posted to ARBIRD, an online discussion list hosted by the University of Arkansas.

Continuing a discussion I started in "Birdside Baptist" (2010), the jest of the matter was summarized long ago: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt …." (Matthew 6:19).

Welcome to Weedy Estates.

– Joe Neal September 2014

JANUARY

I'M GOING WITH FLYING SAUCERS January 3, 2011

I've been getting calls and emails soliciting opinion about blackbirds falling dead from the sky at Beebe on New Year's Eve—the so-called blackbird rain. I had one email from San Francisco and then a call from Portland (my daughter). This has been kind of upsetting to me because I thought everyone would be interested – or at least I would get some choice hate mail -- concerning my ARBIRD-L post about how ground up Northern Cardinals could cure middle age male paunch syndrome. But no, it's all about blackbird rain.

It's all about blackbird rain even though we had a big twister up here on the same evening that killed three people at Cincinnati in Washington County. Branches bare of leaves are now revegetated with chicken house tin, the tinning of the trees. In past years, Bald Eagles have maintained a winter roost in that area – I assume the twister didn't do anything good for them, either. But today it's all blackbird rain.

I was in Ozark Natural Foods and ran into some old friends. Here I am standing in front of an imposing case of 17 species of 100% organic granola, trying to decide which is most likely to restore my youthful vigor without also requiring me to take out a second mortgage on my house. They didn't wonder if I had already violated any New Year's resolutions. They wanted to discuss blackbird rain.

Questions directed at me may be because I hold the Very August position of Curator of Bird Records for Arkansas Audubon Society. Surely the person who presides over such an ornithological empire should know blackbird rain. I know just about the same amount as those who put forth the theory about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. That is, I know squat. But I do have opinions and I can't see any reason why I need to have them grounded in fact. Lack of fact doesn't seem to stop any of the radio politician millionaires who otherwise rule our airwaves, so why should it stop me?

In the space where I live, eerie blackbird rain meets all necessary weirdness criteria. It's "out there," in the unknowing sky, an unearthly event, a snug fit in my x-files. There is no readily available explanation unless, as one person suggested, space aliens are testing their new death ray. You can just imagine the aliens scouting planet earth who saw all the New Year's

celebration rockets going off. Then several thousand Red-winged Blackbirds – strangely altered earthlings -- converged on the mother ship. Time to try out the new toy, the death ray.

And then there's this: The affected creatures may only look like blackbirds. What if they are body doubles of space aliens themselves, ejected by accident – or by design – from the mother ship? I suppose the cause could be as simple as blackbirds accidently flying into the mother ship, but what would that change? And what the heck were they doing out there anyway, on New Year's Eve?

In my official role as Curator, I contacted the US Office for Flying Saucer Investigations (FSI). "No comment," said the FSI spokesperson, dismissively. But then an eerie voice came on the line. "We are on the case!" But which case I wondered? The granola case? The tinning of trees? The blackbirds, whoever they were or are? So many questions, so few facts. 2011 is off to a great start.

EXTRA! EXTRA!
REDBIRDS CURE MALE PAUNCH January 2, 2011

I receive regular mailings from private organizations and government agencies with lists of rare birds, rare mammals, rare butterflies, rare snails, etc. They are long, fine print columns with common names, Latin binomials, places where the few remaining creatures are still found. These lists contain hundreds and sometimes thousands of names of wild creatures who did nothing to deserve their fate.

Since we are at the start of a new year, let me share an example: the prized redbirds in your yard. As rare and endangered, it could appear on a future list as

Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*); small local population remains in West Fork, Washington County, Arkansas.

If you are of a Christian mind, you operate on the assumption that god put redbirds on the earth for good cause – even if we can't always discern the reason – and that we still have redbirds because Noah saw fit to bring them two-by-two into his ark, prior to the great flood. On the other hand, if you are more of a scientific turn of mind with or without religion, you might assume that as creatures on the earth evolved, one of them, our prized redbird, took on very bright colors to attract mates and a very strong bill so that it could crack open hard seeds.

I couldn't care less myself how anyone chooses to believe the origins of redbirds. What does matter is that they are here and we enjoy them in our yard. Grandma in her wheelchair gets a LOT of pleasure out of seeing her redbirds at the feeder. And unless you are too busy to pay attention, there is no song in the world lovelier than that of a redbird in spring and summer. It defines what it means to live in Arkansas.

Is it even remotely possible that our redbirds could become rare? The same question could have been asked about the now extinct Passenger Pigeon, when in 1800 they existed in the United States of America in the multiple billions. Now there are none. They survived Noah's flood but they did not survive rapacious, stupid, blind persecution by another species with the collective miasma they have a "right" to use and destroy anything.

So, rare redbirds? Someone, somewhere, may discover ground up redbirds cure male pattern baldness, remove wrinkles in middle-aged women; redbirds well ground up and mixed with mushrooms bring back from the dead, Lazarus-like, cherished relatives; turn gray hair black? You don't think our nation would be filled, coast to coast, with a heu and cry about the "right" to kill all cardinals for the sake of effortlessly erasing that big male paunch, restoring lost youth?

I hope you are laughing now, because that's the best way to greet this dawn of this new year. Laughing, and also thinking. Happy New Year.

BREWER'S AND BISON January 5, 2011

Doug James is still recovering from his surgery at Health South hospital here in Fayetteville. I saw him this evening. He is doing well and authorized me to say so. Stitches out, walking a lot. He expects full recovery, but may be in rehab another week.

I asked him for his "take" on the Beebe blackbird rain on New Year's Eve. His response: biologist Brook Meanley worked on blackbird control in the rice producing areas around Stuttgart for years. For a time they made war on roosts with dynamite. Meanley told Doug, "We'd kill a million and another million would come to the funeral." Image THAT blackbird rain. Visiting hours are after 4:30 PM, and you can call Doug at 444-2309.

I'm just back from northeastern Oklahoma and the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve CBC on 4 January. There were hundreds of Brewer's Blackbirds, and in patches of Aristida (three-awn grass), Smith's Longspurs. Around mid-afternoon David Chapman and I found a flock of about 120 Brewer's hanging around – and sometimes perching on – a small bison herd. Like oxpeckers, David, an international birder, observed. The bison seemed to ignore us and Brewer's, which is about right for great, shaggy beasts with curved horns, lords of rolling grasslands. Among the bison, on the ground, between their legs, standing in bison shadow – Brewer's with bright eyes (males) and brown eyes (females).

David spotted a male harrier bobbing up and down just at grass top level in the open fields. As we turned to admire, a prairie Merlin raced by, all speed, power, and light blue feathers. I was already in full-blown awe. That Merlin flashed and perched on an old sign for the Chapman-Bernard ranch, part of which is now the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve. Stopped and watched and then went on into time and space. It's like stepping back into the 1820s. Wild and primitive like when Audubon was in southeastern Arkansas watching 5 noisy foraging Ivory-billed Woodpeckers.

ARKIES in the OKLAHOMA FLINTHILLS January 11, 2011

January 3, 2011: 5 people from northwestern Arkansas drive 3 hours into northeastern Oklahoma for the Christmas Bird Count at the The Nature Conservancy's Tallgrass Prairie Preserve. Why? Our once expansive native grasslands in northwest Arkansas have been melted down into the golden calves of subdivisions-highway-megachurch-mall-fescue-Bermuda grass fields. So we escape the golden calf. We go for multiple Rough-legged Hawks, for Smith's Longspurs in patches of three-awn grass (genus *Aristida*), where bison have been grazing.

On January 3, 2011, Dr. H David Chapman of the UA-Fayetteville loads me, Jacque Brown, Rose Ann Barnhill, and Joanie Patterson in his Tahoe. With 5 adults, plus sleeping bags and other gear needed for two days, the Tahoe is full. Tahoe does not = fuel efficient. An alternative, two small relatively fuel efficient cars also does not = fuel efficient. Driving 3 hours does not = fuel efficient. We are the national dilemma. Some of us are pretty ardent when it comes to "environmentalism." As we pull onto the freeway, we discuss it and move to Greater Prairie-chickens? If we could find a small bus that ran on a Prius engine, that might provide a solution, but then there is all of that "rare earth" from China…back to chickens…

Right here would be a useful place to mention that CBC data helps document location of birds at this time of year, what's changing and not changing. I'm pleased there's something useful. For me a long day of birds is raison de etre.

Did I mention that last year it was 9 degrees with snow crust here for the CBC? This year we drew balmy. We hit the quickstop in Pawhuska at 11:15 and cross the TGPP bison fence at noon. Sunshine, blue sky, 40s, no snow, no wind, bison in the distance. *Aristida* patch after *Aristida* patch turns up 1, 3, 3, then 7 Smith's Longspurs. We have our first Rough-legged Hawk, then the heavenly blue plumage of a prairie Merlin. By mid-afternoon we've watched a Short-eared Owl and a few Greater Prairie-Chickens. It's a long, long ways from the golden calf.

TGPP survived as prairie because it is in the flinthills – tallgrass prairies with so much surface rock it couldn't be plowed. Ecological characteristics survive, including these birds. If bison mind uneven stony surfaces they're not saying anything against it, but 7+ miles of walking by 5 birders from northwest Arkansas =s big tired by dark. And this is only a warm up; the CBC is tomorrow.

Our trip over from Arkansas has been made easier with help from Deb Batson, associate director for TNC in Oklahoma. Previous to TNC, Deb was associated with both Washington Regional Medical Center and NARTI, both in northwest Arkansas. She arranged for us to stay in the Foreman's House, usually reserved for researchers. We were looking forward to seeing her and learned she had suffered a severe stroke as she was preparing to come out for the CBC.

CBC day, January 4: in the 20s to start, soon in the upper 40s. If we are going to be here, if we are going to own avian treasures, what's good for bison needs also to be good for us. Our

Arkansas group divides up. David and I form one group; Rose Ann, Jacque, and Joanie support two other groups. And we Arkie-5 survive another 9 miles or so of birding flinthills.

David and Joanie both got premier looks at different Sprague's Pipits. Originally from England, David, has previously observed 5 *Anthus* (pipit) species in his international travels. Just image the 2 of us, both in our mid-sixties, standing out there in the flint hills, with David recalling this *Anthus* and that *Anthus*, seen in England, seen in Austrialia… Jacque Brown, whom we call "the Walmartian" carried her big camera all the way and for her trouble got an amazing photograph of an in flight prairie-chicken. Rose Ann took ample opportunities to examine bison bones scattered around in the flinthills.

And me, well, it was baby blue on that Merlin, those busy Brewer's Blackbirds: perching on bison backs, foraging on the ground among and beside bison hooves, the white-eyed males and the dark-eyed females, their distinct clock-clock-clock calls as they whirl in from blue sky, to bison, to us, like time blown in from prairie past.
Debra is hospitalized in Oklahoma City. Here is a link to a site set up to keep family & friends informed: http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/deborahbatson.

SUNNY SIDE OF THE CHICKEN HOUSES January 13, 2011

9 degrees at 9:00 in Siloam Springs. But sunny. But northwest wind – light. I've run across a small mixed species sparrow flock on the sunny, south-facing, out of the north wind side of 5 huge chicken houses. There are Savannah Sparrows and White-crowned Sparrows, a few meadowlarks and Starlings, 1 Harris's Sparrow, plus one American Tree Sparrow, all red-capped, bright and sprightly on our coldest day of the year so far. Like Field Sparrows today, tree sparrows seemed sprinkled among the other flocks, with 1-2 associated with at least 3 flocks dominated by White-crowned Sparrows.

Big fields all have a thin crust of ice and snow. The chicken houses are steaming. Trucks have been driving in and out servicing the chicken houses. There's short grass, bare ground, spilled chicken feed. That's where the birds are. Except for Bald Eagles perched up on stout limbs of leafless oaks, and except for 25 Ring-billed Gulls standing on an iced-up pond. Even the harriers are sheltering out of the wind. Of 4 today, two were perched low and protected, on the sunny, south-facing sides of dense thickets.

From Siloam I'm headed for Maysville. In the distance, a big plume from the SWEPCO plant rises from the stack, forms a hammer-headed cloud, drifts south. It's all the way up to 12 degrees at 1:30 according to folks at the Maysville handi-stop. The old Beatie Prairie here is mostly wide open, so no one will be surprised this trip is mostly in car, heater blowing, window down ONLY when I use the scope. Bald Eagles overhead, adults and immatures, and Bald Eagles everywhere I drive.

The biggest flocks are Savannah Sparrows (100-150 in one flock, plus many smaller flocks) and White-crowned Sparrows (50+ in one flock, plus many other flocks). The two flocks of American

Pipits are on the sunny sides of chicken houses or in a dairy feedlot, also protected from the wind. During the day I find 2-3 flocks of Horned Larks, with Lapland Longspurs. The first lark flock also includes a bunch of Savannah Sparrows and at least 8 longspurs. Later, I find another flock, actually a cloud of longspurs, spiraling a harvested bean field, then settling into short, snow-free grass and a big driveway, adjacent chicken houses. I get one count of 85 of them on the ground.

The spot with 8 longspurs is part of the Chastain Cattle Company operation. A friendly, curious Mr Chastain himself drives up, very busy hauling big round bales of hay to his cows. I've met him before; we talked eagles then. This time we brave the cold and wind, set up my tripod, and get the spotting scope on Lapland Longspurs, Horned Larks, and Savannah Sparrows enjoying the sunny side of one of his barns. We have good looks; the birds are too busy trying to survive to overly worry about us. But here comes a nosy kestrel, swooping low, driven by hunger like all of these creatures. The little birds are off with longspur rattles, savannah seeps, and the see-lits, see-lits of larks.

They'll be back. For wild creatures of the old prairies, there are few alternatives on a deep winter day like this one.

A NEW SPECIES OF SNOW BIRD January 22, 2011

Here in northwest Arkansas, we've just had a few inches of snow and several nights of temperatures in the low teens. It was 13 last night. They've been out in Fayetteville plowing and sanding the streets. Suffering from mild cabin fever, I walked the mile from my house up to the UA campus. Campus was mostly empty except for flocks of robins and starlings working the last fruits, but on the way Wilson Park's steep hillside hosted 200 boisterous children and used-to-be children sailing the steep hillside on recycling bin lids, plastic saucers, a door, linoleum strips, a bunch of junk I wasn't even sure what it was, and even a few proper sleds. It was Norman Rockwell set in the Arkansas Ozarks, where native innovation reigns.

Home again (in the same day!) from my walk, me and the Toyota -- with 255,000 miles, including sun and ice and well-earned squeaks in wheels, springs, and doors that sound like birds -- negotiated mostly plowed and sometimes sanded roads out to Sara and Coy Bartlett's place to see the remarkable thing, with feathers, – all 4.88 grams (and at that weight deemed "fat") of Anna's Hummingbird. It was there, as Sara had promised, and I sat in Toyota with my trusty scope on the window and collected images like I was out on the west coast. It is nothing, if not remarkable, to see a striking, healthy bird close up, no matter when, or where, but it far exceeds the merely remarkable when that bird is a few grams of hummingbird in the middle of winter in the Ozarks.

Like a Christmas card, the Bartlett place is all snowy, including pines and a magnolia snow-painted, grounds under feeders with dense flocks of every kind of snow bird your heart could desire. I saw enough seeds in feeders and spread on the icy ground to make me think the Bartlett's will have to refinance the farm unless winter ends soon. And I haven't even

mentioned paying for electricity for the heat lamp that keeps the hummingbird feeder flowing and thawed water in a bird bath. Dining here at least: Dark-eyed Juncos (what old timers used to call “snow bird”), White-throated Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows, American Goldfinches, House Finches, a few Brown-headed Cowbirds, a Downy Woodpecker, a Song Sparrow, a White-breasted Nuthatch. Periodically the birds make a BIG noisy flush, so I assume a Cooper’s Hawk is dining here, too, though I never saw it. AND, sailing over the ice and snow and birds on the ground, 4.88 grams of Anna’s Hummingbird, reddening up on throat and crown and maybe studying maps for its trip back West.

FEBRUARY

CONSIDERING FEBRUARY February 3, 2011

Come a big storm, I'm thinking longspurs. When it shuts down Chicago and Kansas City, I'm thinking good birds come south. So, even with the deep freeze, I can't stay in the house. Ice, snow, and zero covers everything. It's a safe bet what's left bird-wise will be in feedlots, working any scraped spot along the highway, riding it out on the sunny side of chicken houses. "Come out with your hands up," says John Wayne. Says me, "Come out of those fields in big flocks where I can see you." And, come a big storm, they do.

The highway from Springdale to Siloam Springs is maybe one-third open. Clumps of juncos, White-throated Sparrows, and cardinals fly between brush and small spots free of snow and ice. Just past the Siloam airport, I turn onto a partially cleared road heavily traveled by poultry feed trucks. First I see a dozen or so Savannah Sparrows, then maybe 20 White-crowned Sparrows. A Harris's Sparrow has joined them. A harrier flies across the snow field, blindingly white underneath.

A white Walmart bag with black lettering, stuck in a low bush, gives me a start. Snowy Owl? I stop, check, and see tree sparrows (2). A cloud of 36 Lapland Longspurs settles on open parts of the road.

Out in the field, Savannah Sparrows and juncos are perched up on round hay bales, probing for seeds. Starlings, meadowlarks, Red-winged Blackbirds, and cowbirds are crowding into lines of hay spread for hungry cattle. One Rusty Blackbird joins in, striking black and rust against the field of white (and there's that bold white eye!). I'm wondering how many Rusties? I spot a clump of six immature Bald Eagles, perched on the ground in the same field, black and white.

With their energetic caroling longspurs wheel in and spread out on the road. A few laps are close enough that I can see the rufous-colored nape, black smudges on the upper breast, and the head with its bold pattern of tan, black, and brown. I can maybe get a picture, so I stop, turn the car a little sideways, roll down my window, and get ready. As the laps begin moving my way, casually foraging up the road, I'm all set for THE longspur image. Here comes a feed truck and then a flatbed truck with two round hay bales. Up and away go the laps and I'm fixing to be roadkill if I don't get out of the middle of the road.

At the Sleepy Hollow store on 59, just south of Decatur, the owner has spread sunflower seeds. There are 30 or more goldfinches and Savannah Sparrows on one side of the store, cardinals, White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows, and a bunch of blackbirds and starlings, on the other. I sit in the car with a burrito and watch. One of the clerks tells me Harris's Sparrows come to her feeder.

The order of business now is slow-drive old prairies around Decatur. There's no rush. Stop and look at flocks and anything else, including an abandoned farm house with sunlight through the roof. Check all hawks (no Rough-legged Hawk today). At the Safari drive-through wilderness, prairie dogs hang close to their burrows, animated balls of reddish fur, fresh dark soil on snow. Looking back along the tree line, I eventually get a count of 14 Bald Eagles (4 adults). Great-tailed Grackles prance and squeal in pens with deer. Then five juvenile eagles soar low and over, big patterns of dark and light against a pure blue sky. Prairie dogs call and dive into their burrows. Bison ignore them.

All day I've been more or less in the shadow of the SWEPCO electrical generating plant, big stack puffing, dark plume rising high into the blue sky – we're all using a lot of power right now. Near the plant I find a Krider's Hawk perched on the dark outer limbs of a leafless oak, white bird against blue sky, right along the road. It's a fabulous creature straight out of the Great Plains, with a white head and a white tail with just a ribbon of pink at the tip. And then off it goes, underwings brightly illuminated by snowfield.

Then back in Fayetteville, at rush hour, a slow rush, cars inching along on roads re-icing at dusk. There's just one small bare spot along 540 and in possession stand two Killdeers. They seem to watch me as I pass, but of course I am feeling meditative after a long day of wandering through the storm. The Killdeer seem oracle-like, a center of apparent calm in all the hurry of the hour. No doubt there must be many answers behind those big dark, red-rimmed eyes, that purposeful walk, that ancient gaze from their clear patch of earth along the roadside.

PINK FLAMINGO, IN WINTER 6 February 6, 2011

Just a little northwest of Gentry, in Benton County, midst the open flatlands that was once the Round Prairie, and still locally known as Bloomfield, there stands a pink flamingo in the yard of a neat red brick home in front of five chicken houses. For a week we've had ice, snow, then more snow, and by now there must be 6-8 inches covering just everything. This yard too is all white, except for a sturdy, lone pink flamingo, with a few inches of snow on its back – a White-backed Flamingo, perhaps.

The temperature out here is 18 degrees and it's not really stirring much, planted as it is on its twin steel rods. The White-crowned Sparrows, Northern Cardinals, Harris's Sparrow and a couple of Savannahs are making a lively scene at a feeder nearby. It's not hard to image how the flamingo is making it through. Plastic and steel, after all, ignore weather and of course life itself, but what of creatures like us, mere flesh and blood? And the feet and legs! How can the Savannahs stand it? In my case, I'm in the Toyota, the heater is blasting, duck hunter's hat pulled down over everything but an eyeball, which is tight on the spotting scope. Savannahs must be tough, but pink flamingos they aren't. But I've already gotten ahead of myself.

The day started with a Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip to Eagle Watch Nature Trail at Gentry. Well, actually it started with me worrying about whether or not I could even get

out of my drive, much less successfully negotiate 40 miles to Gentry. When I went outside to start the car the door was frozen shut. Long clear icicles hung from everything. But the sun at 8 AM was up enough that the predictions of a warmer day were believable, the car door came open, and a male cardinal had mounted a frozen bush and begun to sing like spring.

Yes, I made it to Gentry, and yes a grant total of seven others did as well. We met Terry Stanfill and eventually at least 27 Bald Eagles, including a soaring flock in a sky impossibly blue. Unfortunately, so were my feet -- not flocking, but getting blue. I wasn't alone in this regard, so by acclamation around 11 we decided to hike back through the snow to the cars. Bonus bird for the way back was an overflight by 10 Common Mergansers, led by a male with a brilliant green head. The pinkish blush of their otherwise pure white undersides was illuminated by a snowfield bathed in sunshine, snow crystals turned to sparkling diamonds.

Most folks were headed home at this point, but Jacque Brown had driven from Centerton, and I from Fayetteville, so we decided to get our money's worth and drive some more. This drive was on the old former prairie roads in search of American Tree Sparrows, Lapland Longspurs, and whatever was available. That's when we found the pink flamingo.

We found tree sparrows in two spots, including one flock of at least 30 in possession of one of those unkempt fields with scattered native grasses and a fence in bad repair. They were brightly singing at their weed seed harvest, rusty caps in a field of white. In the industrious manner typical of their kind, they were also collecting seeds dislodged from plants by performing the miracle of walking on snow.

Later in the day we found another small flock of tree sparrows expertly working seed-rich heads of June grass poking from the snowfield. The sparrows hopped up 2-3 feet to the seedheads. Here they perched sideways and went to work. All that vast sparrow bulk (less than a half-ounce) caused the June grass to slowly bow. Back on the snow, the sparrows held the seedhead securely their claws, well paid for their efforts and satisfying their hunger, what must be a great hunger in such days as these.

HUNGRY BIRDS February 9, 2011

We have another 8 inches of fresh snow as of this morning in Fayetteville. We're shut. Everything including the University of Arkansas is closed. All kinds of blackbirds have come to town and my yard, driving my indoor cat crazy as they crowd the feeder.

I'm doubly glad I made another effort yesterday (when the roads were relatively clear) to get up into extreme NW Arkansas, roughly from Siloam Springs up through Gentry, Maysville, and back through Gravette. This basically involves highways 59, 12, 43, and 72.

There were flocks of Dark-eyed Juncos, American Tree Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, meadowlarks, Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs, Northern Cardinal, and Harris's Sparrows (one flock of 7 at Maysville), more or less in that order of abundance, along

the roads. Plus big flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds, European Starlings, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and a few others including Rusty Blackbird and Common Grackle (plus, I have heard reports for a few Yellow-headed Blackbirds).

This is poultry country and a lot of chicken feed gets spilled/drifted along the highways. Since everything else is covered with ice and snow, plowed roadsides and feedlots are crowded with hungry birds. There is also a LOT of car and truck traffic along these roads, so the birds are constantly flushed. It is a sign of hungry times that they flushed and come right back, flush and come right back.

At the Vaughn dairies I saw Great-tailed Grackles in one place – walking around in the hay and manure under and alongside big dairy cows – quite a scene really, an island of life in a vast snowfield.

Yesterday, under these conditions – with shoulders iced-over or with big plowed drifts – and feed trucks trying to keep the poultry houses supplied – and everyone trying to get to the store before the storm we have today -- it wasn't easy to obtain real flock sizes. I throw on the flashers, pull over as far as I can and rapidly count everything I can see.

The stress on hungry sparrows is apparent. I saw several Savannah Sparrows that were sluggish and barely moved or didn't move at all. I photographed a lone Lincoln's Sparrow at Maysville that ignored me.

In a few places with less or little traffic, or when I just got lucky and caught a break in the traffic, I felt like I was seeing and able to count entire flocks. There were 58 tree sparrows in one flock along 43 between Cherokee City and Maysville and 42 and 20+ in fields along the road adjacent the state fish hatchery at Centerton. I had 254 tree sparrows for the day and that did not include the many flocks I couldn't safely stop for. If I could have stopped it would have been 2X that. Horned Lark flocks were abundant along 72 E of Maysville.

The handistop store at Maysville is open again, with gas, snacks, deli sandwiches, and daily lunch specials. This is an asset for birders visiting this area and I encourage everyone to stop and spend to keep it open. Gas prices are always competitive and the sandwiches have been great.

LONGSPURS IN THE SLUSH February 19, 2011

We are past mid-February and Lapland Longspur season in northwest Arkansas is either over or nearly over. The historic storm of February 9 (up to 24 inches of snow and as low as minus 18 on the 10th) may have kept them here longer than usual. Main roads were open after the 10th. I managed to get out of my driveway in Fayetteville and over to the former prairie lands at Siloam Springs and Maysville on the 12th and the 13th.

Since open fields still had deep snow cover, longspurs and their "snowbird" brethren dined in the roadway slush on spilled poultry grain, on the road and the thin plowed grassy shoulder – or, alternately, didn't dine at all. It's hard to imagine the mortality among snowbirds during the height and aftermath of this storm, BUT I imagine it would make the now infamous blackbird deaths at Beebe on New Year's pale by comparison.

Chief flocks in the height of the storm include Dark-eyed Juncos, Lapland Longspurs, Horned Larks, American Tree Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows, Song Sparrows, cardinals, meadowlarks, starlings. I see one flock of 7 Harris's Sparrows. Traffic is heavy along the roads so the birds are flushed constantly. Longspur and Horned Lark flocks (pure flocks and more often mixtures) land on the road, then scurry to the shoulder to feed. FLUSH! A loud WHOOSH! of wings. Now longspurs race over me in a low tight flocks, dipping as if to stop, circling, passing close so I cleanly hear the low hard buzz prrrrt or a sort of geeeb they say to one another in flight.

Tiny sparrow birds, they settle in sight of the roadway, on a field of white. Through the spotting scope I can see the long spur from which they derive their common name. Standing in the pure white, in a vast field of pure white: in their plumage rich chestnuts, blacks, summer tans and yellows -- their dark legs – 25 birds, males and females, all in bold relief. It's much like a huge, white canvas upon which has been painted the heart of the matter. While the traffic passes they preen and watch. Most of the drivers are in too big a hurry to get to work, to the chicken houses, to the cows, to the store, to haul the kids somewhere, to notice.

Unfortunately, they miss a basic reality of the world of which we are but part. Longspurs define the open country in a storm. It's the laplands in Arkansas. It's a fact, but it's all but unknown. Survival foraging on a roadside has its price. I'm watching a flock of 10 Savannah Sparrows. They don't flush as rapidly as the longspurs. One truck passes too close and up and off they go. As I watch, one Savannah seems to peel off, or so I think. Right in front of the feed truck it sails straight up in front of the windshield, then with folded wings, flops down to the yellow stripe. Flops again, and is still. Tiny, tiny creature of broad open fields: survived 24 inches of snow, 18 degrees below, survived all the winter that came before the big one, but not our traffic, not the world we are in such a big hurry to own. Poor perfect Savannah Sparrow. Pity for us, for not recognizing.

It's now been 25 years or more that I was at Beaver Lake on a fall day when the lake was very low. I walked out on a long spit and there, in the middle of the lake, on the last rocky bit before water, there was a single Lapland Longspur. I was looking for eagles and found a creature of less than an ounce. From the extreme far north, no less. Trying to understand, I wiped my eyes and the lens and looked again. Yes, it was a longspur. Here it had come all these thousands of miles, from the place of native Arctic peoples, to…well the land where we Call the Hogs. Seemed a miracle. Still does. I'm definitely NOT against Calling the Hogs. Here I go, WHOOO PIG SOOEY!!! But it is the miraculous incongruity that spurs me on.

Where they breed across the vastness of Arctic tundras virtually worldwide, Lapland Longspurs are either the most common terrestrial bird or among the most common. And in their swirling masses they are about the most numerous bird wintering in North America. Enormous numbers, like the unimaginable and uncountable masses of Passenger Pigeons recorded by Audubon.
… the Inupiaq Eskimo name "Kungnituk" may be a modification of "kungenook," meaning black, with reference to the male's black throat, face, and flanks. The Yu'pik name "Natchakuparak" means "hood-like marking on head." Eskimo names vary considerably across range, with the following all being documented. **Inupiaq**: in Nunavut, "Kungnuktah" on Bylot I., "Nasaulik" on Belcher I., "Kingnituk" or "Kungnituk" on Southampton I., "Kowlegak" or "Kaoligak" on Baffin I. Greenland, "Narssarmiutaq" **Yu'Pik:** in Alaska, "Tuk-cho-fluck"and both "Tik-i-chi-ling'-uk" and "Natchakuparak" at Hooper Bay, "Nessaúdliga" at Point Barrow, "Potokialuk" at Anak-tuvuk, "Pig-git-tig-wuk" at St. Michael, "Chir'-loch" on Attu I., and "Chí-loch" on Atka I. (From the Birds of North America species account for Lapland Longspur by David J. Hussell and Robert Montgomerie [2002]).

WHY DO I WATCH BIRDS? February 20, 2011

Why do I watch birds? A good question! Despite having written and co-written several books about birds, I still ask myself this question. If I had THE answer, I'd be pleased to share it.

Before trying, here's a potential response that doesn't fit me. Birds are beautiful, and I often find that inspiring, but I haven't stayed with bird watching for over three decades because of beauty. If it's a matter of beauty, why not just collect stamps?

I received a phone call a few days ago from a retiree whose son claimed he had seen Trumpeter Swans in what would seem an unlikely environment – an affluent planned subdivision with an artificial lake in western Springdale. I dropped other plans and drove out there. What an unlikely place! Every building perfect. Every lawn symmetrical. A place as completely un-wild as human planning could make it. Just as he had thought, two completely wild swans had found this lake, no doubt during their migration.

The totally unexpected, the complete lack of congruity, the sudden arrival of the unplanned wild of existence – these attract me to birding. Birds are beautiful, and as in the case of the cardinals so common around northwest Arkansas, breathtakingly so, including both the males and the females. But even this extravagant beauty can become commonplace and our better senses become dulled. This is never the case when unplanned wild nature is involved.

I should also mention that the same human ability to build a planned subdivision is bringing Trumpeter Swans back from the brink of extinction. The low point was reach in the 1930s, with the birds nearly gone as a result of unregulated hunting and widespread destruction of their

nesting habitat. Swans were out there in the lake because people who believe we have responsibility toward all other living creatures invested their lives in the effort to protect the remaining birds and to expand their required habitat. These efforts are ongoing and include our own Arkansas Game and Fish Commission working to return Trumpeter Swans to the natural state.

Judging from what I saw the other day, I would say the efforts are working. These efforts are inspiring, as are the birds themselves. That's probably why I keep watching. I'm always receptive to inspiration.

MARCH

A PAIR OF PHOEBES MAKES A SPRING March 1, 2011

The early bird supposedly gets the worm, but maybe the lay around birder gets the close-up look at a vulture? I went down to Devils Den State Park this morning and got there for the blue sky, the brilliant sun. Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures were still lazing about in roost trees. One Turkey Vulture is perched in an oak just budding, fully wing-spread and soaking up rays. My point: early is not required for extraordinary.

Sitting on Lee Creek bridge, looking up toward a typical Ozark ridge, the bluff line has a shallow saddle shape. Is this real or illusion? Is it just the brilliant sun or the shapes of leafless trees. While I puzzle over this I notice a line of dark green cedars and above that, an intricate lace of leafless limbs. And above that, a blanket of blue sky with a thin feathering of clouds, a drifting kettle of 10 Black Vultures, spring peepers in the back ground, chorusing.

The day is so beautiful I forget to use my binoculars. In fact, I forget to stay awake. I forget everything and prop up against a big smooth rock alongside Lee Creek. When I wake I think a titmouse is pulling at gray hair sticking outside my cap. Am I dreaming or what? My hair as lichen; maybe the titmouse thinks it will work to line a nest. Or maybe I have finally lost my mind. Yes, the smooth cobbles alongside the creek are real and forgiving.

So I am back up and walking around looking at stuff. Best sightings of the day are White-breasted Nuthatches, walking the trees. They stop, look out, and survey the scene from gravity-defying upside down. They call and keep looking. They see what we cannot see unless we bend down and look from between our knees. I am considering such wild things in view of the various courses, the various back-and-forths, the various stops-and-starts, the various backing-ups, in my own life. And to think we always talk about them walking upside down!

It was a good phoebe day in the Den, too. In our neck of the Ozarks we do see phoebes at times during winter. Today there are at least a couple of pairs in the park. Doesn't matter to me what the calendars says. A pair of phoebes makes a spring.

GREAT MYSTERY ENOUGH March 3, 2011

Joan Reynolds and I walked a loop through Chesney Prairie NA at Siloam Springs yesterday. We had a focus on the 60 or so acres burned a few months ago. Light green is spreading across black. Creatures like pocket gophers churn the prairie soils. We found a few first spring beauties. Soaring over was a black buteo with red tail – a dark morph western Red-tailed Hawk.

Over the black we saw workings of terrestrial Osage Burrowing Crawfish and even a couple of the recently deceased: blue carapace, bluish-greenish head, pinchers and legs reddish and bluish, tail an earthy pink. Sorry about all of the ishes, but their colors wildly deviate from standard. Those we saw in whole were three inches or so, but Joan picked up a pincher that all by itself was even longer! Like to have seen that one au naturale.

One crawfish carried under tail a few reddish masses. Standing out there in bright sunshine, we couldn't tell for sure what they were, even using the tried and often true method of turning binoculars backwards. At home, I examined one with a hand lens. Small red resolved into baby crawfish, maybe one-fourth of an inch: earthy colors and looking ready for business, a prairie future.

I wondered if we would find American Tree Sparrows or Lapland Longspurs, common here during the snowstorms of early February. We didn't. There was a flock of at least nine Harris's Sparrows. Many have molted to black face and chin, engagingly set off by sharp pink bills.

At Lake Fayetteville there was a friendly older man sitting on the deck near the environmental study center drinking beer. Said he'd had a bad day and offered up brews to us. But we had come to see "ole loony" as David Chapman calls the Common Loon that wintered here. Our big ice storms and the lake pretty much frozen up did not seem to faze ole loony. She is now busy changing to spring finery. Our down-in-the-spirit fellow at the deck took joy, as did we, from a close look at ole loony through my spotting scope, plus nearby Gadwalls and Buffleheads.

I'm proud to report here that Great-tailed Grackles are still very much in business at Safari near Gentry. Their squeaks, toots, and cackles blend well with bison bellows and they didn't seem the least put off by strident calls of peacocks, strutting the grounds in full train, like they owned the place. As the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote in a different but never-the-less appropriate context, they have a real tale and a real tail to tell it with. I have to try and avoid thinking about peacocks and THAT feathered glory. Great-tailed Grackles tails are Great-Mystery enough.

DO IT YOURSELF GOOSE LAB AT LAKE ATALANTA March 5, 2011

Here in the western Ozarks we don't see many geese at mid-winter, but the skies should be full of geese heading north anytime now. Got me to thinking about two geese at Lake Atalanta in Rogers – a white Snow Goose and a white Ross's Goose. These birds are easily seen and easily photographed and all of us who enjoy birding there have seen them many times. But who are they, exactly?

I photographed them up close and personal by accident on December 5, 2010. In one image you can see their bills, legs, etc. With the images up on my computer at home, what strikes me is their similar size and shape. Compared to Ross's in the same image, Snow Goose has the obvious grin patch, heavier/larger bill. The legs of the Snow Goose are thicker. I am puzzled by

how close they are in size, but didn't get any further with it until Doug James and Elizabeth were up there recently and Doug noticed the exact same thing: if you are close enough to see the grin patch, you can separate them by that widely accepted field mark, but the size is so close that no real difference is apparent.

Species accounts in the Birds of North America (BNA) series help expand the mystery. To begin, these geese have a close genetic relationship. That is, they are basically sisters. Snow Geese that winter in Arkansas are mainly assignable to the subspecies called Lesser Snow Goose. There is additional geographic variation in body size and other characteristics related to growth conditions during the pre-fledging period in the Arctic. For example, one study cited in BNA demonstrated that early-hatched goslings had access to more food and presumably better growth opportunities. So what happens on the ground in the Arctic must influence the size of birds we see in Arkansas.

In terms of Ross's Goose, they are rarely found with the form called Greater Snow Goose, but often with Lesser Snow Goose. DNA analysis shows that Ross's is a sister species with Lesser Snow Goose. So the sisters migrate into Arkansas and maybe that is who is at Lake Atalanta.

My conclusion in all of this is that apparent size similarity may be reconciled as follows:

1. The Snow Goose at Lake Atalanta is the form Lesser Snow Goose
2. This Lesser Snow Goose may be even smaller than other Lessers because of various ecological conditions in its prefleging growth
3. Male Snow s are modestly larger than females, so our Snow may be a female
4. Male Ross's are heavier than females in winter, so our Lake Atalanta bird may be a male

By juggling all of this stuff, it is possible to logically squeeze these two real live wild birds at Lake Atalanta into the same frame: a small female Lesser Snow Goose and a large male Ross's Goose. Like we used to say in the Forest Service when confronted by the unexplainable, That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

DOG-TOOTH VIOLETS, BUT NO BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLERS

March 7, 2011

David Oakley, Jacque Brown, and I made an early spring voyage to the upper Buffalo River of Newton County on Sunday March 6. Predicted weather was sun, but at the hilltop crossing into Newton County big leafless hardwoods were decked out in frost-foliage left from a dense fog already cleared.

From this point you can see hilltops for many Ozark miles, and at mid-morning it remained a vast ice-foliage forest. We had just begun marveling at THAT when a roadrunner appeared

alongside us. And we had just begun to marvel at THAT when we saw another ahead and on the other side of the highway.

Two Trumpeter Swans were in Boxley Valley, both with neck collars, along with at least three male-female pairs of unimaginably fresh-looking Wood Ducks. Six Wild Turkeys were in a pasture with a small elk herd. We eventually had 80-100 elk in four herds.

We did not find the much coveted, early spring-in-the-Ozarks avian trio of Black-and-white Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. But in the forests of Lost Valley campground was a patch of white dog-tooth violets. Birding had gotten pretty slim, so Jacque and David made the most of it. As I am sure most of you know, the leaves look engaging like mottled skin of a trout, and the white petals nod over, obscuring brilliant yellow stamens. This poses a problem for photographers of faint heart, but none for my birding partners.

The ground was still pretty wet from snow melt and heavy rain, but that paperwork-crunching Walmartian (Jacque) and golfer and retired papermill manager (David) stretched out prone into the damp, onto the mossy rocks, ignored upcoming poison ivy, and for their labors received not just any old dog-tooth violet image, but THE dog-tooth violet image. They captured white petals, trout leaves, and the complex golden yellow business end. In forests, in the Ozarks, in early spring, dog-tooth violet is to botany what Black-and-white Warbler is to ornithology.

Dark-eyed Juncos were singing at the intersection of Boxley bridge and Cave Mountain road. That is a hearty trill, too, because it carried above the sparkling flow of the Buffalo. Many witch hazels were in bloom on the big gravelbar west of the bridge, great masses of yellowish and orangish flowers, above a shiny river, and above that, a blue-blue sky.

By mid-day there was enough sun to carry witch hazel fragrance down the river. Of course, we had to investigate. As we walked along I noticed a limestone cobble with a couple of perfectly formed impressions of fossil brachipods, tales from a couple of hundred million years ago, shared with us, in sun and witch hazels.

GRACKLE March 9, 2011

Blue-winged Teal (1) and Snow Goose (2 small flocks on the ground) were among transients I saw yesterday during a loop through former prairie lands in western Benton County. At Highfill there was one Wilson's Snipe and four Bald Eagles (3 adults, I immature). Harris's Sparrow (3) associated with 40+ White-crowned Sparrows at the Vaughn dairy farms. I looked for a flock of Great-tailed Grackles there but settled for a disappointing, but obviously great-tailed male (1). Everywhere I saw flocks of Common Grackles.

A Common Grackle had staked claim to a huge dead red crawfish on a mudflat at the state fish hatchery in Centerton. Beyond, and on nearby ponds, at least 29 snipe, a single Lesser Yellowlegs, 11 Pectoral Sandpipers, a few Killdeer, 8 duck species (a scaup with patches at the base of the bill dull yellowish-orange), American Pipit (1), etc. But I kept going back to the

grackle. Maybe it is that penetrating eye from which energy radiates. It is as though vast machinery of evolution has concentrated itself on ensuring sleek dark plumage sufficient to offset the golden eye. Or maybe it is the tail – that long keeled tail employed for admirable balance. I could see it in action as it stood upon the slippery back of the crawfish, tail acting much like a flexible balance pole used by tight rope walkers.

Overall, grackle design is inspiringly efficient: the bill a large probing tool, feet with claws sufficient to clamp down objects of interest. Claws hold the crawfish, bill collects meaty bits undertail and inside the thorax. The grackle at times probes with such vigor the crawfish spins a few inches, then settles back to the flat. Meanwhile, other grackles, infected by enthusiasm, fly in toward the crawfish. This results in several birds parading the mudflat heads and bills up-up.

GRACKLES PARADE MUDFLAT IN DRAINED FISH POND IN BENTON COUNTY ARKANSAS. Now there is your good TV news banner, IF birders are the audience, or maybe if just I am audience, and I am. Now the original grackle ruffles black feathers and this is accompanied by an authoritative and screechy CHACK. Rivals thus dispatched, our grackle returns to crawfish.

On the way back home I drove through the dairies again, and lo, an enormous flock of Great-tailed Grackles, with some Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles, spread across the fields on both sides of Anglin Road and perched nearby in huge old oaks. I counted up to 100 and then guessed up to 250. If you are feeling blue, or black, or red, or whatever; that is, need an attitude adjustment, let me recommend parking alongside, and better yet, underneath, excited Great-tailed Grackles. Some must have those plastic kids whistles with a slider to change pitch, for the WHEE EEE rises, then falls to CHER CHER WHER and a low WERE, and soon joined by jeetjeetjeet, chcikchick, erererer, with lots of CLACKS for emphasis.

Behind, as though grackles were not enough, raindrops bomb the roof of my car, dairy cows bawl for hay, and several miles away, a jet rises in vast elongated roar, one kind of power from Northwest Arkansas regional airport, but not apparently fazing grackles. Not the same planet.

A VISITOR SO RARE March 11, 2011

March 11, 2011, opened simply enough. Joan Reynolds had part of a day for Devils Den State Park. We met in Fayetteville around 9, blasted off into bright sunshine, heading south on old Cato Springs Road. Joan spotted two Greater Roadrunners seeming to enjoy the same spring sun just north of Hog Eye. Birding was slow in the park, but sunshine energized patches of golden pale corydalis and toothwort. White dog-tooth violets poked up through brown leaves on a rocky hillside. We were back in Fayetteville by 2. Joan returned home to Rogers to pick up her kids from school, me to the house with a blinking answering machine.

Behind the blinks was the familiar voice of Mike Mlodinow. A guy hauling hay bales loaned Mike his cell phone so he could let us know about a Northern Shrike he was watching at Woolsey Wet Prairie in Fayetteville. The answering machine is just inside the front door. My

birding gear, especially spotting scope and camera, were still in the car. As on Black Friday, if you snooze you lose. I spun for Woolsey, sudden acceleration from sunny slow birding and spring wildflowers to high drama of a second state record. No time for lunch, no time for noon nap.

Woolsey Wet Prairie is not huge. The formal wetlands mitigation is 30 acres give or take, but mounded former prairie occupies at least three times that, including a fine pioneer oak savanna. Where is the shrike? I pull up, park, scan fences and powerlines; in the past I have had Loggerhead Shrikes here. At the savanna edge is a deteriorating barn, remains of an old rock home, and dense fencerows. Scan tree tops, scan tumbling fences marked by tangles of multiflora rose and blackberries. No shrike, but here is the figure of none other than Mike Mlodinow! He is walking toward me; once there, informs me we are in the right place, thickets by the house remains.

By now it is 3 in the afternoon. Mike has spent the day here. He rode mass transit as far as he could, then walked the rest to Woolsey. That is his style. Now we walk some more.

We scan and scan, thickets and house place, around the barn. And then, way on top of a catalpa tree, Mike spots the Northern Shrike: thin mask with the eye rising above it, bill large and strongly hooked. Reddish-brownish bars mark the soft gray of breast and under parts. This is a bird in the first year that has mostly molted to adult plumage. A real northerner, it may have been pushed south by two big snows of early February.

A visitor so rare exudes star power. Return flight north is inevitable, but maybe, just maybe, it will remain a few days for others attracted to so rare a sun. For those bitten by birding, it is not enough to see a picture.

NOTES LIKE SUNNY MAY March 15, 2011

We had a big storm on Sunday night, with house-rattling thunder and hard rain. My old cat started howling after one flash, the house seemed lifted from its foundation, followed by Noah's Flood. I woke thinking about Ring-billed Gulls and their webbed feet. Specifically, about their migration since on March 11 I had seen none in a place where there had been a wintering flock. So had they all headed to the Great Lakes and Canada?

Weather has turned cold again behind the storm. Playas on our former prairies might now host northward-moving American Golden-Plovers. In Benton County near Vaughn, just north of the Centerton state fish hatchery, a couple of playa-like shallow ponds have in past years yielded shorebirds. Checking them is scope work, scope mounted on the window, looking north. On a day with wind and cold mist, the blast is enough to keep the car heater running. I noted a few golden-plovers, my season first, midst wiping glasses and lenses.

In one spot at the hatchery a flock of 14 Pectoral Sandpipers stood on a pond berm in the wind, rather than foraging somewhat protected mudflats. By my calculation, their elevated perch

wasn't good thermo-regulation. But occasionally they flushed up in compact flock and flew against the north wind. When it didn't work they wheeled back. Then I caught on. The wind isn't right yet they say to themselves. Of course they were thinking wet Arctic tundra, little pecs in the nest. No doubt they'd been thinking it since they left South America, headed out across the Great Plains, through what we term Arkansas.

Eastern Meadowlarks were unvexed by cold mist and all night rain. One wet, bedraggled meadowlark threw back its head, opened that long pointed bill impossibly wide, and belted notes into the mist like sunny May. It listened to singing on the other side of the hatchery and quickly returned the favor. What indomitable creatures they are, with message not just for the meadowlark competition.

Still thinking about Ring-billed Gulls, I stopped by Waste Management's Tontitown landfill, Eco-Vista. It received this name in a local competition honoring the effort to reclaim our unending Himalayas of trash as mountainous wildlife habitat in the Ozarks. Landfill manager Kirby Thompson gave me an orientation, loaned me a safety jacket, and allowed me to go for gulls.

Huge trucks roll back and forth, hauling from all over. Monster tractors push and spread and mash. Above it, gulls. I thought maybe 25, until a white cloud rose, revealing another 200. The loafing spot is directly exposed to north wind. Maybe gulls like it that way, and maybe they too are leaning into the upcoming nesting season, on a lakeshore far from our Ozarks. Among 200 Ring-billeds were 3-4 Herrings, and to my astonishment, an adult plumaged Lesser Black-backed Gull.

In the distance I again heard Eastern Meadowlarks. Nearest me, as I studied the black-backed visitor, a Western Meadowlark in full song, tuning up for the real west of summer.

AMERICAN GOLDEN-PLOVERS, WESTERN ARKANSAS RIVER VALLEY – AND MISS LAURA'S March 18, 2011

Thurman Jordan and I spent yesterday roaming the Arkansas River valley from Frog Bayou WMA near Dyer west toward Van Buren and Moffett, AR (oops! OK). At Frog there were 2 flocks (8, 21) of golden-plovers in a big plowed field and soon 2 Vesper sparrows, plus several flocks of Blue-winged Teal. At the King Ranch near Alma we had at least 5 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks. Right on the Arkansas River below the highway 59 bridge, Cliff Swallows (15-20) were busily investigating nests. In the Arkansas bottoms at Moffett, 280 Ring-billed Gulls and 17 golden-plovers were in a freshly-disked field and the gulls were actively following the tractor. Nearby, in a harvested bean field, 158 golden-plovers, biggest flock of the day.

Our birding route took us right by Miss Laura's, an upscale 19th Century whorehouse that was a few years ago scene of a huge post-breeding Purple Martin roost and is today home of the Fort Smith tourist bureau and a major tourist attraction. Though I grew up in Fort Smith, I had never before visited Miss Laura's, so this was a wholly unexpected treat. Thurman just completed an

amazing 500 volunteer hours there helping visitors understand area history AND the director, Claude Legris, made me an honorary US Marshall of the Marshall's Museum, or so I took it since he gave me a small gold star!

AMERICAN BITTERNS AT WOOSLEY WET PRAIRIE ++ March 19, 2011

Paraphrasing Edward Abbey, Seasonal wetlands need no defense, only more defenders. That was running through my mind after I had seen a fourth (possibly fifth) American Bittern yesterday at Woolsey Wet Prairie in Fayetteville. Woolsey had a prescribed burn on March 18. I walked the black yesterday evening.

Woolsey used to be just like tens of thousands of other low-lying former tallgrass prairie acres whose clay-rich soils retain so much water they are hard to plow. Unplowed or only plowed in the occasional dry year, they retain biotic aspects of tallgrass prairie. An anomaly, Woolsey is not ditched, drained, plowed, and covered with the endless ugly pursuit to turn every square inch into gold bullion. Unlike the lost tens of thousands, Woolsey functions to retain rain water and snow melt, protecting streams from flash floods. It does have migrating American Bitterns that eat what's in the shallows including bugs, fish, even snakes and small mammals, and terrestrial prairie crayfish whose burrows are much in evidence after the burn.

The wetland cells where I found bitterns didn't burn, of course, but higher areas did. Song, Swamp, and Savannah Sparrows were harvesting exposed seeds in the black. Swamp Sparrows have molted into the nesting seasons bright plumage, reddish crown feathers sharp contrasting blacken stubble.

Wetland mitigation cells function like shallow ponds. In these I found Blue-winged Teal (4), Green-winged Teal (2), Canada Goose (8), and one American Coot. Wilson's Snipe (15-20) flushed here and there. Chorus Frogs, Spring Peepers, and a choir of American Toads welcomed dusk.

It was a satisfying hour or so. I have never seen so many American Bitterns. It must be a migration peak. But it is disturbing that we once held a fortune in functioning seasonal wetlands suitable for bitterns migrating through western Arkansas. That fortune has been thrown away. Today declining bittern populations face our bottleneck – for what? You don't have to be a math whiz to see that greed driven sprawl contributes to this bird's population decline.

Too bad they don't make a bittern that eats ditching machines, drainage projects, plows, and real estate developers. And the next time someone calls you an environmental wacho because you prefer bitterns to mini-malls, tell them as I do that Noah loaded bitterns into the Ark. Who are we to say they don't belong here in our consumer paradise?

Again paraphrasing Abbey, American Bitterns need no defense, only more defenders.

AMAZING TRANSFORMATIONS March 24, 2011

Coming out from Fayetteville, on highway 21 BEFORE descending into Boxley valley and the Buffalo River: heres the Newton County line. This spot marks a pleasant transformation from city to country. A left turn off the highway becomes a well-maintained county road passing through Elk Horn, Stoverville, and Centerpoint. The understory serviceberries call sarvis crank out wonderful masses of white flowers transforming in an amazing manner a leafless forest. But a Pine Warbler sings in a green patch of native shortleaf pine.

This is not the Buffalo River of spring floats and hiking. Rather, the scenic landscape of rolling Ozark farms, pastures and forests coursing plateaus above and immediately east of the Buffalo River. The road is 6 miles, give or take, of easy driving, and comes out north of Ponca on highway 43, high above the Buffalo valley. Small flocks of north-bound juncos forage along the road.

I was out there on March 22. It's a forested country, but the relatively level mountain tops are cleared and Eastern Meadowlarks sing in big fields. Migrating Vesper Sparrows have found high country roadsides in 2 spots at least. Field Sparrows and Eastern Towhees sing in fields and thickets. This is just the best time to enjoy Brown Thrashers, because they have come out of hiding in thickets and amazingly now proclaim from treetops. Going farms in this high country have big ponds and at one: male and female Wood Ducks, a singing Eastern Phoebe, and two migrating Pied-billed Grebes.

Abandoned farm places mark out old days. When houses are first built they are designed to shut nature out and allow her in only as a minimum: windows and a porch. A pioneer woman maybe plants a few daffodils to greet spring in remote Newton County. It all seems permanent -- the house and the yard and the family there -- but a few years or a perhaps a few generations pass and the metaphorical minute we turn away, nature is back, sunlight flows between old boards in the deteriorating roof, and daffodils, now at spring peak, run riot in the abandoned yard, amazing transformation of time and place.

Later in the day, and now down out of the high country, I'm standing on the Ponca low water bridge, looking and listening for Northern Rough-winged Swallows along the mighty Buffalo. River cane all over northwest Arkansas is yellow and seemingly lifeless, top-killed by heavy snows and -18 degrees in February. Two Louisiana Waterthrushes, my first for spring, race up Leatherwood Creek where, right beside me, it flows to the Buffalo. This cane is green and I have an AHA! moment. This spring-fed river, so pleasantly cold in August, is in winter comparatively warm, buffering severity of -18 degrees in February. Cane appreciates buffering and here says green. And while I'm thinking about that, I hear overhead telltale jitt-jitts of swallows.

Down the Buffalo valley, along the river bank, 22 Wild Turkeys work a cane edge. A big gobbler with a long beard dragging the grass is in full blue-headed, giant red wattles, and tail-fanned display. I don't know how all of the other turkeys feel about this, but the turkey watching through a spotting scope is very impressed! And I don't think any turkey in their right mind

would choose to mess with the old gobbler, so amazingly transformed, so puffed up, so obviously boss of spring.

FINALLY, THE ORANGE CROWN March 28, 2011

Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society and friends had a wonderful field trip on Saturday March 26. It was cold, with a modest north wind and occasional rain and no sun. Not a bluebird day by any measure. We met at Shores Lake in the Ozark NF north of Mulberry, traveled from there to Frog Bayou WMA near Dyer, then on to the river itself and adjoining turf farms, and ended up in old downtown Fort Smith. Veteran birder Bill Beall of Fort Smith, and NWAAS treasurer, was our leader.

Brown-headed Nuthatches have all but disappeared from the shortleaf pine forests of the western Ozarks. Bill found them again, as he did last year, in the Fern area. We also saw Red-breasted Nuthatches and Purple Finches and a tree with at least 150 American Goldfinches. From Fern we slipped south into the Arkansas River valley. At Frog Bayou, we had Blue-winged Teal, a flock of Greater Yellowlegs, and 15-20 Wilson's Snipe, all in one pond. The Arkansas River was full of birds, including a snaggy limb decorated with 20 Tree Swallows. From Frog we headed toward Alma and the King Ranch, where we saw 24 elegant Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks (and a male Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, FOS).

Next on the agenda, big turf farms over toward Van Buren. First up was a single Upland Sandpiper, soon followed by about 140 American Golden-Plovers, and Horned Larks singing in big plowed bean fields. We also stopped for Vesper Sparrows but did not stop for numerous Savannah Sparrows.

Cliff Swallows nest under the highway 59 bridge. We didn't see any swallows when we drove up, but a few came out of their mud bottles as we stood there. My assumption is that with cold, rainy, north wind and early dusk, they'd already gone to roost.

Bill asked if anyone wanted to see White-winged Doves? We crossed the bridge and headed for old downtown Fort Smith in the historical Belle Point district. Soon we had doves, all kinds of doves. As we watched them, photographed them, enjoyed their cooing, an Orange-crowned Warbler popped up in a honeysuckle thicket below one of the dove trees. A very cooperative orange-crowned I might add. And here's the best part: We all got good looks and Jacque Brown's photograph actually shows the orange crown!

HORNED GREBE, ASTONSHING March 29, 2011

During a trip around Beaver Lake yesterday, I saw 113 Horned Grebes, give or take a few. I'd last been at the lake on January 8.

The Horned Grebes of January, and most of the months they spend here, are creatures mainly of various slaty blacks and mottled whites. They wear a dark crown atop a broadly white cheek and neck and breast. This is all set off by dark wings, and seen a ways off -- the typical view -- they are sort of dark and blotchy at the waterline. They are interesting, if you are interested in water birds, but not really striking.

Now here comes the spring model, of late March, in the Ozarks. Of those I saw yesterday, most had made an astonishing transformation. The crown is deep black and now offset and wildly contrasted with amazing salmon colored plumes ("ears"). Plain old white cheeks of winter are transformed to velvety black plumage of aquatic royalty. All that white and blotchy white of neck, breast, and flanks of January is now deep, plush red. These birds are ready for the north country, where they nest, far from the Ozarks.

I have spent a fair amount of time around lakes here during migration, when we have both Eared and Horned Grebes passing through. My right eye screws hard into the spotting scope eyepiece, trying to see the white tip on a darkish bill that helps distinguish a distant water bird. Horned has it, Eared doesn't. It's not the only thing that distinguishes them, but it is a field mark. That was no problem yesterday. That bill is jet black, that tip is pure white. There is no compromise when it comes to summer dress. And you can say the same for our loons.

We have Common Loons mainly as migrants. In winter, much like Horned Grebes, the remaining few wear plumage plain and serviceable, but not especially fancy. Well, that part of the year for loons is also gone. I counted nine around the lake yesterday, and most are dramatically black-headed, black-billed, red-eyed, and sporting that justifiably famous checked pattern of jet black and pure white on their backs.

I was watching one loon at Prairie Creek on Beaver through my scope when it suddenly pushed up in the water and fully spread its wings. So there was more or less the whole bird, excepting legs and feet! In the brilliant contrasting blacks and whites, it was drama flashing across the otherwise humdrum pattern of a blue-green water universe. It was also revelation, and as suddenly over as it had begun, striking and remarkable as those wonderful Horned Grebe ear plumes.

SCOTER TRIFECTA FOR CENTERTON March 30, 2011

OK, this is not about horse racing, but I suppose it is a race of sorts. The Surf Scoter that we saw at Charlie Craig state fish hatchery in Centerton yesterday marks a clean sweep for three scoter species, all now seen over the years there. It started with White-winged Scoter in November 2003. Number 2, Black Scoter, appeared at the hatchery in November 2006. Now this immature male Surf, late March 2011.

This Arkansas Game and Fish Commission facility is designated as one of Audubon Arkansas's Important Bird Areas, not especially for scoters, but providing inland migration habitat for these big sea ducks is certainly an asset, not only for an IBA, but for the birds themselves. Ditto for

many other bird species, too. Funds for facilities like the hatchery are tied to fish production, but birders have always been welcomed.

I've seen a number of scoters over the years, and in various places, but you NEVER see them like you see them at Centerton. That goes for other birds, too. Before I noticed the scoter, I had very up close views of shorebird migrants like Baird's Sandpipers. When seen in many other places with distant views it makes you want to pull out your hair or give up. Yesterday Baird's were so close I could barely focus my window-mounted spotting scope.

Those of us who saw the Surf Scoter saw it up close. Even though the plumage and bill color is not the one typically illustrated in field guides, the close views of the bill shape are diagnostic, whatever the age of the bird. You get to see many birds that way at Centerton.

My memory isn't getting any better (or my forgettery, as one old friend called it), but I recall each of these scoters at the hatchery, in large part because the views were close and that make's quite an impression, even on a forgettery.

APRIL

101 SPOTTED GOLDEN-PLOVERS April 4, 2011

How many of you passionate, ARBIRD-L rare bird chasers have logged spotted golden-plovers for your Arkansas list? I wager not many. So fire up those gas guzzlers and head up here to Fayetteville. American Golden-Plovers are coming through in good numbers, and if you can track me down, I might help get you a spotted.

OK, so let me just back up a minute. I have started what a friend of mine calls the third trimester of life. That is, I officially entered the golden years or the not-so-golden years, as one old friend puts it. The old guys at the senior center gym where I go say, Every day this side of the grass is a good day. This includes one who has liver and kidney transplants and is missing an ear and part of a lip from skin cancer.

In the past weeks I have been pining that at this highly advanced state of life I should have one of those new HD spotting scopes. I have been looking at a Swarovski HD that comes in as a bargain for $1,850, WITHOUT eyepiece. I hover meditatively on the Eagle Optics web page. So near! And yet so far!

Well my artist friend Amy Edie heard these meditations one day recently on a trip that included a stop at the remarkable Bass Pro destination in Springfield. She saw me examine the spotting scopes, but finding them one after another altogether lacking, except for Swarovski. Ah, Swarovski, gleaming green and gold-like in the bottom of the case.

So, now we have arrived at my birthday. At 3:09 AM I turn 65, and not that long afterward Amy calls, knowing that I would be up. She has a present for me. It is something I REALLY want. Something for which I have pined. She asks, Can you guess what it is? I am briefly silent on my end of the line. I'm thinking quietly to myself, Amy didn't mortgage her home for a Swarovski HD?

When I make no response, she says, OK, here are some hints. Something you really, really want. It is made with glue, two kinds of tape, aluminum, and a big apple juice lid, string and leather, a couple of plastic ties. It includes a Hooded Merganser. Now do you know?

This does not sound like Swarovski HD. I am at total loss. I hate to admit this to Amy. Finally, after some serious fumbling of thoughts, I ask her, Can I come over and get it now?

Let me just point out that in oft used terms like spotting scope, spotting is passive, an adjective. We do not even think about it. But in the creative genius that makes an artist what she is, spotting can be active. That is, adjective morphs into verb. The unpatented process Amy uses in

this remarkable transformation involves an objective lens from old eye grasses and a fine tip black sharpie for the pattern of spots. Now you don't spot individual things. ALL that is viewed is spotted!

And it is in this manner that just when we grow tired of our fates, just when we think our world is old and useless, and just when we think everything important in the world is already known, American Golden-Plovers of proper ornithology creatively transform. Voila! Magic, and right before our eyes!

Spotted golden-plovers are something entirely new under the sun. And in case I run out of other things to spot, Amy has thoughtfully attached several laminated bird pictures to the end of the scope. So this is how 65 starts for me.
In my declining years, or my recliner years as I have also heard them called, I find this new spotting scope works quite well, even in the living room. The recliner and the living room are far from rain and cold, close to the AC as summer as approaches, and best of all, I get to spot all the stuff I want.

SLOW DRIFT THROUGH FROG April 6, 2011

I managed a drift through Frog Bayou WMA yesterday, DESPITE 80 degrees, strong south wind, and a calendar cluttered with stuff other than spring migration. Here are a few highlights.

Franklin's Gull. A flock of 13 slowly working west, over moist soil units, a few with black heads. Blue-winged Teal, king of the Frog. I gave up trying to count, but the total probably was 150 or so. Also many fewer Green-winged Teal, Mallards, Northern Pintails, Gadwalls. Ivory-billed Coots. Just kidding, but coots were all over the place today. Great Egret: saw one flock of about 45 in the air when an adult Bald Eagle came over low. American White Pelicans. Pelicans, pelicans in 2, 10s, and 20s drifiting off the Arkansas River over Frog, and back. American Golden-Plover. I had small flocks all over in 2s and 15s, maybe 50 for the day. Of shorebirds, mostly greater and lesser legs, also snipe and pecs, and peeps, including Baird's.

I spent most time watching 5 Long-billed Dowitchers that I identified by keeks. They were obviously trying to rest, so after a few quick close images I left them alone. I assume they have come in on the strong south winds and could go no further. In the images I collected I can see weariness in their eyes.

A Northern Harrier worked fields the whole time I was there. Based upon field trips last year, I think they are nesting in the immediate area, but it is yet to be proven.

Overall I found the best bird habitats from parking area B, including Units 4, 5, and 6. This is a walk. I carry my scope on a backpack tripod and wear rubber boots. The moist soil units are nicely turning into marshlands, rewarding for all kinds of birds and birders. Remember this is an area with regular hunting seasons. There is a guide to the road and unit layout at Frog on the

Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society website here:
http://media.tripod.lycos.com/2020453/1274831.pdf

If walking is not possible, unit 2 is easily visible right along Red Hill Road (check the guide above). It was covered up with shorebirds, egrets, teal, etc. yesterday. BUT I was in a rush to return to Fayetteville, so I just scanned in case there was a Long-billed Curlew. Why not!

ALL GEARED UP, READY TO BIRD (FROG and SOD) April 14, 2011

My inbox had a deluge of 45 bird-related emails today, almost all Arkansas birds. Welcome to spring excitements. So I am not kidding myself that with so much birding, many of you have no time for literary rambles. Here is my Executive Summary for you busy busy birders.

I went down to Frog Bayou WMA and nearby West-Ark Sod. At Frog one of my first birds was a Tricolored Heron flying out of Unit 5. Soras were singing at dawn in Unit 3. One of the last birds was a Willet in Unit 2. Unit 2 also had 12 Greater Yellowlegs that looked puny next to lordly Willet. Sod had Horned Larks singing to a south wind and my first of the spring Grasshopper Sparrow, handily perched and singing alongside the road. Such an apparently tiny creature, but when it throws back that big bill and sings that lusty insect trill, it owns the world of open fields, the only reality that matters.

Before closing the Executive Summary, let me note that at a distance, and in the hopeful heart, an exquisitely ruddy female Northern Pintail bears a certain likeness to a juvenile male Cinnamon Teal that has not quite acquired full glory of the breeding season. Throw in some aquatic vegetation, distance, white light, a drop or two of sweat on the old bins, and voila! You have yourself a rare bird, or so you think, for oh so very brief and sweet a while. But I reveal too much. Allow me to draw the curtain on anxious moments and my disappointment, and move on to birding gear.

Frog is laid out in a series of shallow moist soil units, essentially marshes that mimic wetlands that once existed along the Arkansas River. If you are like me, you are sure the next cattails, that next big patch of sedges, that far corner will surely have even more interesting birds. And thus, one marches deeper and deeper into the heart of Frog. And, of course, there is the required walk back. That walk would be one thing, if we were in the olden days, when we just shoved a field guide in the back pocket and threw bins around the neck. Birding light. Well, those days are long gone, gone as dollar gas gone.

So I am at Frog all geared up. The sun is higher, the wind is sharper, and the spotting scope, tripod, field guide, water bottle, MP3 player with speaker, binoculars, rubber Muck boots have not gotten lighter. Did I forget anything? Is there any other gear I just cannot go in the field without? Oh yes, the Sony sound recorder. All hauled in, cattail patch after cattail patch, and will be hauled out. On foot.

But today I brought my bicycle with me, now all tricked out with two big wire baskets and very ugly in an aesthetic sense. I stuffed those baskets full of gear and off I went, wobbling down the levees around the units, flushing a very surprised abundance of Savannah Sparrows. I saw Brian Infield of Arkansas Game and Fish. He did not openly laugh at my outfit. In fact, he was cordial and rather sympathetic, telling me that duck hunters also get loaded down with tons of gear, so much in fact that many now pull little two-wheel carts full of shotguns, decoys, stools, ammo, and what have you. I have seen those two wheel tracks in the mud and wondered what creature had made them.

American Coots had no idea what to make of me, so off they went. Pied-billed Grebes promptly sank under water. Blue-winged Teal watched a while, started peeping, and off they went, too.

THEY FLEW OVER US April 18, 2011

Twenty or so of us from Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society were at Woolsey Wet Prairie in Fayetteville yesterday. Red-winged Blackbirds are in the season of bold reds and yellows and jet black. Savannah Sparrows flush off grassy levees. Swallows (barn, rough-winged, tree) sweep insects above shallow pools. Suddenly, a small flock of Blue-winged Teal flushes up and over us. Canada Geese escort at least 4 yellow fuzzy chicks. Then 3-4 birds flush that prove part of a flock of 12 Upland Sandpipers.

They flew over us and around us, generous with trademark flight song. Their passage to points north and west is a grand summary of spring migration through western Arkansas grasslands. They settled in a big flat grassy field and soon were up and over us and calling. It is like being inoculated with grasslands, the Great Plains incarnate. Then came bitterns.

An American Bittern popped up, or I should say squawked-up, in front of David Chapman as he walked through grassy wet shallows. Then a second squawked up from cat tails and flew low over us. And if two surprised bitterns wasn't surprise enough, Steve Erwin spotted a small rail that darted away before we could tell who she was. Just by the numbers, it must have been Sora, but who knows.

A night-heron species, all red eyes and in immature dress, also flushed. Brandon Schmidt noticed where it settled, got around behind it, and our second look confirmed Yellow-crowned. In flight over us it was easy to see part of the leg and the entire foot extended beyond the tip of the tail. We also had a good study through the scope of Lesser Yellowlegs and Solitary Sandpiper together. It was late morning, and after shorebirds, our group itself began to migrate.

Joan Reynolds and I headed south toward the Arkansas River, visiting sod farms south of Kibler and a brief stop at Frog Bayou WMA. Six male Yellow-headed Blackbirds walked mowed lawns around farm machinery near the UA experiment farm. On the sod farm itself, Horned Larks in 2-3 spots seemed in active courtship. We had singing Grasshopper Sparrows in two places adjacent sod. Singing with such force we could see tongues in the wide-open bills. We got a

nice shock when we saw a Short-eared Owl in plain sight in the grassy field behind a Grasshopper Sparrow. The owl flew and perched in the road in front of us. It looked surprised, but no more than us. On east, toward Frog, we began seeing Swainson's Hawks. Three flew over, then two (more?), and at one point 5, plus one perched on the ground. So how many did we see? Well, at least 5-6. Nearby, I tried to turn a singing Lark Sparrow into Bewick's Wren.

We were thrilled to see 25 immaculate Blue-winged Teal in a muddy pool right by the road. Tired and hungry, they basically ignored us. How far had they flown to reach this muddy field in the Arkansas valley? Then another 20 flew over us, skiing to a muddy stop. Then another and another. Eventually there were 120 teal, including a few green-wings.

I'm used to gun-shy teal, up and away at slight disturbance. These were tired teal. Like Upland Sandpipers, sparrows, and owl, like bitterns and Swainson's Hawks, they now negotiate western Arkansas and for most, still a ways to go.

LE DANSE: NESTING GREAT-TAILED GRACKLES April 20, 2011

Great-tailed Grackles at Wild Wilderness Drive-Through Safari in Benton County are hot for danse de l'amour by middle April. Besides their golden eyes, the ladies are dressed in warm browns with highlights in cheeks and dark charcoals in wings and tail. For gentlemen there are ample purples. She's gathering grasses for a nest. In her presence, his breast, tail and wing feathers are ruffled and snapped, spread to double size. He watches. Suddenly, all puffed up and bill thrown wide open, he runs and lunges toward her in a cascade of screams and whistles.

Le danse is nicely choreographed, if a bit undignified. She moves, he circles, feathers quivering. At the end, she ignores him or accepts him, in which case there is a wild squabble and flailing. Then she flies off, and he resumes a dignified pose, feathers back in usual places, but long bill pointed blue sky up.

Joan Reynolds and I were at Safari on April 19. The action is all in a row of Bradford Pears near the entrance and visible from the county road. Females are collecting grasses and twigs and flying up to nests, but we couldn't tell if they were building new or repairing old. Whatever they are doing is accomplished with admirable energy. The males are supervising, a right that may derive from the magnificent tail, an avian sceptre. It is obviously a necessity on the strutting field where males go bill to bill and seemingly tail to tail. For display to females how could you ever top the long feathers made to a shallow V of striking and picturesque symmetry? Then there is the royal purple itself, but perhaps you already see my point. We counted at least 126 birds in the immediate area and this must be only part of the nesting group.

Over the last few years I've always been able to find birds at Safari in all seasons. This contrasts with the flock around the dairies at Vaughn, just north of Centerton. The Vaughn birds are dependable from late summer through winter into early April, but not during the nesting season. This year I counted about 200 out in fields with cows as late as April 11, but thereafter numbers have involved a few dozen at most.

I suspect many Vaughn birds migrate and may be part of the range expansion well north of Arkansas. But there are still great-tails around Vaugh-Centerton. Joan and I saw at least two pairs just north of the Centerton hatchery. They were associated with dense thickets of Multiflora Rose. It looked like they were probably nesting or at least considering.

In summary, the Great-tailed Grackle business in northwest Arkansas is booming. And this is just what we saw from the roads.

SWAINSON'S HAWKS, WESTERN ARKANSAS VALLEY April 22, 2011

I spent most of yesterday in the western Arkansas Valley near the river and south of Alma. By mid day I reached West-Ark Sod, busy with workers and trucks. Across the road at least 15 Swainson's Hawks were perched on ground in a huge open grassy-weedy field and an adjacent plowed field. They have been in this area in numbers since at least April 16, because Kenny and LaDonna Nichols saw 6 that day. It's all private land, but you can view the sod farm, and these fields, along Westville Road.

By the time I got there, it was all big thunder and columns of lightning were visible in the west. Of the 15 hawks, only a few were familiar adult Swainson's with grayish heads and rufous breasts. The others looked almost pure white in the stormy overcast, striking contrast especially to the wet dark plowed field.

At home I got out my Brian K. Wheeler book, Raptors of Western North America. I have seen adult Swainson's before during summer in Benton County. A few of today's birds were dark like the adult male Wheeler refers to as "light intermediate morph" (plate 279 on p. 284). They are truly fantastic-looking creatures, but I was most taken by those white Swainson's, much like Wheeler's "juvenile light morph" (plate 307, p. 291).

These birds are attired in Basic 1 (subadult) plumage. Their heads look white before you get the scope on them, but close study shows a mask-like dark line through the brown eye and another dark line crossing the white cheek, falcon-like. As I understand it, these birds are at least one year old. They are making their first or second northward spring passage which this year includes western Arkansas. Molt continues while they slowly migrate. They will attain the adult plumage at two years.

Both the few adults and the many more subadults are associated with the easternmost part of the summer range for Swainson's Hawk, with Benton County as an eastern outpost of this predominantly western species (see Wheeler's range map on p. 283).

A few Grasshopper Sparrows are also in this field along with flocks of Savannah Sparrows. Other birds of passage included at least 20 Upland Sandpipers. I'd been hearing Upland calls, but never could pick up a flock. As rain began, they rose in 2s and 7s, then resettled. I saw one

Grasshopper Sparrow perched with its head thrown back and bill wide open. Obviously singing, but I couldn't hear anything as the storm rolled in and over all.

UPLAND SANDPIPERS, YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRDS and RAIN April 24, 2011

I spent wet stormy yesterday around Siloam Springs and especially near Chesney Prairie Natural Area. Three storm days show how former prairies in western Arkansas once functioned in spring migration. Clay-rich soils retain water and temporary pools dot former tallgrass prairies. Blue-winged Teal and Northern Shovelers were out in fields. Solitary Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Pectoral Sandpiper had new habitat, and I also saw Wilson's Snipe and Wilson's Phalarope there. A flock of at least 49 Tree Swallows perched on a fence near a temporary pool.

A big field was partially flooded northeast of Chesney, at a sharp bend in O'Neal Road. I could hear bur-wit flight calls of Upland Sandpipers and also the brrrreeeer wolf whistle that I'd previously heard only in summer in northeastern Oklahoma. Eventually I found a compact flock of 22 Uplands in heavily grazed pasture. I watched one bird for a while, then noticed a second with it whose left leg was torn and bloody. The foot hung useless with the broken tibia exposed. The bird seemed to manage on one foot. I kept wondering how this could have happened. We have had heavy tornadic winds and on Thursday big hail knocked holes in my patio roof. It is uncomfortable to recognize that birds so graceful, so filled with grassland spirit can be hammered rudely by violent thunderstorm downbursts. It brings down airplanes, why not a sandpiper.

There were three Dickcissels and whole flocks of Savannah Sparrows also along O'Neal. From Airport Road behind the Siloam airport, I watched 7 male Yellow-headed Blackbirds as they moved between a partially flooded yard and an overflowing drainage. At times they foraged on dandelions as did a Yellow-headed Blackbird at Centerton on April 15.

Let it rain, let it rain but there is no dampening spirits of White-crowned Sparrows. The flocks keep up a steady chorus of singing, in the face of constant wind, devastating thunder claps, massive lightning, and cold rain. It's like they are revving for the big flight north, like they smell tundra in these storms and north winds. I saw a Harris's Sparrow with White-crowneds at Chesney, all pitch black in the face, nicely setting off the pink bill, and singing too and no doubt for the same reasons.

PRAIRIE GULL, THE PINK BLUSH April 24, 2011

It was pouring cool rain the whole time, but today David Chapman and I had close study of 108 Franklin's Gulls on the ground near Siloam Springs just south of Chesney Prairie Natural Area. Wind is still from the north and the birds ignored us. All now have dramatic black hoods and most the rosy pink blush on an otherwise pure white breast. Oh and did I mention the reddish bill and reddish inside the gape, visible even in today's poor light. In the wind, in the rain, they

chattered constantly, maybe about the prairie marshes where they are headed, maybe about our fourth day of rain, continuous rain, thunder, lightning.

It is the rain, and these migrating gulls, that restores an old and much abused former prairie. The rain and the north wind is no respecter of how we have chosen to change it. It will have its way. It will shape reality as it sees fit. A big stalled storm creates unsuspected terrain.

On our way to Siloam we passed over a swollen Illinois River. Trees and farm equipment were headed west for Oklahoma and at a fast pace. Bottom fields are disappearing, becoming islands. On one we saw 5 Willets, a bunch of peeps, and a big plover, either golden or black-bellied. Nearby, 25 Blue-winged Teal and a flock of 24 Cattle Egrets worked an edge. There was also a swallow swarm and some perched on a barbed wire fence out in the brown surge. I guess 300-500 birds, including at least Tree, Cliff, and Barn.

Flooding, mostly shallow, is spreading over a wide area of former prairie, and it didn't spare us, either. We birded by rolling down windows and getting soaked, peeked between windshield wipers, and at times just got out and swam it with our scopes. Out there in the rain we were, in our soaked everything, cars and trucks going back and forth, doing the usual Easter Sunday thing. To the credit of our fellow citizens, no one called the law or social services as far as I know, but surely someone thought two were loose that shouldn't be. Out in the rain, with scopes, looking at ducks in a field. Of all things.

Just northwest of Chesney, David counted more than 120 waders, with Lesser Yellowlegs and Pectoral Sandpipers predominant, but also Greater Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, two Wilson's Snipe, and Wilson's Phalarope, plus three shovelers. We found 12-15 Upland Sandpipers scattered in several fields, including the bird with a leg injury that I saw yesterday. A flooded soybean field included 8 Semipalmated Plovers and 7 Semipalmated Sandpipers. Another field, where I saw Long-billed Curlew in such weather a few years ago, is now a fine seasonal wetland. Today it hosted 19 White-faced Ibises, Blue-winged Teal, 18 Wilson's Phalaropes, and a dozen very red-looking dowitchers.

I have long tried to stick by a rule that I don't call them by name unless I hear dowitchers call first. I do think this is a good idea, but in the rain, and with a whole lot of wiping, I managed some close photographs. At home, and now with help from a 5 and one-half inch thick stack of bird guides, I call them Long-billed in breeding plumage. Of course these birds already know who they are. We have them but only in this moment, as they pause in the former prairies of western Arkansas, and well on their way to northern Canada, Alaska, maybe even Russia.

CLAY-COLORED SPARROW, BOBOLINK, and CRAWFISH FROG April 25, 2011

It's just too true that hours free of rain have been scarce. But there were a few this morning, before the onset of the Great Deluge, a wetting epochal, nearly Biblical, in proportion. I never

saw Noah or his ark, but that may have been because I started seeing sparrows perched on fences almost as soon as I turned onto Airport Road at Siloam Springs.

All winter I see Savannahs in numbers here and I assumed that's what these were too, but since it wasn't raining I got out and soon had my first Clay-colored Sparrows for spring. Saw 5-7 here, plus 2 more near Chesney Prairie Natural Area. They seemed mixed or at least in the same places as Savannahs and both species were singing. Also on the fence, Lark Sparrow and White-crowned Sparrow.

You know you are flooding when Blue-winged Teal swim your front yard. Also, the presence of Wilson's Snipe with teal is an indicator. It's not every day yellowlegs fly by the porch. And if all this isn't indication enough, this morning from once safely dry pastures comes the snoring, sonorous songs of crawfish frogs.

I had met up with Joe Woolbright when we heard this gwaaa gwaaa from out there where the once prairie, last week pasture, is today seasonal wetland. It's where unexpected frogs find retreat in the burrows of native prairie crawfish. We spotted one White-faced Ibis working the far flooded field and Upland Sandpipers scattered on at least three fields. I had just started to count them when the front edge of a new storm started hammering the car.

One of the big former prairie fields was overflowing the roadway and across to the next field. Perched up on a metal fence post, like it was just a sunny spring migration day was a singing Bobolink. Take that you thunder! Along the edge of another fresh wetland, a single male Yellow-headed Blackbird. Then deluge.

DRIZELLA AND THE BUNTING April 27, 2011

Mike Mlodinow's Purple Gallinule at Woolsey Wet Prairie yesterday was electric. It's the first time this bird has been found in the Ozarks of western Arkansas. Joan Reynolds also read Mike's ARBIRD-L posting. She got her kids off to school in Rogers this morning and drove down for the try.

This morning before gallinule, my first spring Wood Thrush is singing in the yard, along with Swainson's Thrushes. It's gotta be a good day. And it is, even though early calm, relatively dry too soon turns to mist, and mist again turns to rain. We get out to Woolsey, suit up in nylons, and walk ponds for a gallinule. Along the way, two American Bitterns, three Soras, 30 Blue-winged Teal. A great few wet hours, but alas, no gallinule.

Partially soaked by rain driven by NW wind, but undefeated, we drove to Siloam Springs and the flooded former prairies for in-car birding. We slow drove while it rained hard and blew cold. You can car bird, even in that. Nine Yellow-headed Blackbirds were out behind a house just off partially-flooded Airport Road. A pleasant young woman who saw us, apparently lost in rain, walked out of her house to help. She was as charmed as we by brilliant western blackbird visitors and all smiles at the thought of folks in floods watching birds.

On Russell Road, just east of Chesney Prairie Natural Area, we see a few White-crowned Sparrows. Then a brilliant white bunting with a few black markings appears alongside the road, just long enough for me to scream SNOW BUNTING!!! and lunge for my camera. It's still raining, of course. Then it is gone. We find it down the road, now in a field, and collect fuzzy images. It's either an albinistic Loch Ness Monster or…well what? An hour later, after slow drives up and down Russell, Joan yells THERE IT IS!!! We have it close, in a feedlot, associated with White-crowned Sparrows. An astounding white bird with black wings and black tail, pink bill, dark smudge behind a dark eye. For ponder and for puzzle, we do get some images superior to those of Nessie.

Now at home with images on my monitor, and remembering the bird as seen in the feedlot, I feel a little like Lady Tremaine and her daughter Drizella, trying to cram reality into Cinderella's slipper. Or trying to cram images from Siloam Springs into a Snow Bunting. Or trying to cram them into a simple leucistic White-crowned Sparrow. Tonight, nothing fits, which of course was the case with Cinderella's slipper. It is part of what makes birding both fun and challenging and there may even be some science here. Or maybe we just need a fairy god mother.

Over more than three decades I have looked at thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of White-crowned Sparrows in northwest Arkansas. I have never seen anything that looks remotely like this bird. Maybe it, like Mike's Purple Gallinule, is a storm child. Maybe came with floods, maybe came with brilliant blackbirds, flooded fields of Ruddy Turnstones and White-faced Ibises, and other astonishing mysteries. For me, it is the first of something, though tonight I'm not sure what.

MAY

WALKING THE ORDOVICIAN, MAYDAY AT NINESTONE May 1, 2011

A dozen folks under auspices of Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society drove out to Ninestone Land Trust in southern Carroll County today for a field trip hosted by Don Matt and Judith Griffith. Predicted chance of rain: 100 %. Thunderstorm prediction: every hour. We were at Ninestone five and one-half hours. It rained all but 30 minutes. We ventured out when the sky lightened and rain slackened.

Out in the tops of the pines, in a rain slack, a Yellow-throated Warbler sings. A few minutes later, we see a Blue-headed Vireo. We stop to admire a tiny plant named widow's cross on a sandstone glade. Perhaps startled by thunder, a Yellow-breasted Chat commences toots and whistles. With more thunder, then rain, we commence dignified retreat to shelter at Don and Judy's porch overlooking Piney Creek.

Clouds filter sunlight; greens of trees and shrubs radiate. It's not just greens. So brilliant is this filtering it's like inhabiting the canvas of a French impressionist. I'm thinking about this on the porch after being rained off the glade. There are 15 male Indigo Buntings in the yard. This is penetrating color, too, not the tired, washed-out dishrag blue we see on brilliant sunny days. They look tropical. The earth is new like a new-born calf and rain shines it up.

We have shared our lunch potluck and now the rain has slackened. So we are off to Piney Creek. It flows through sandstones composed of quartz grains. Some rock beds are pure white. This is the St Peter sandstone, deposited in the Ordovician Period, 500 to 425 million years ago. St Pete forms bluffs above Piney that are conspicuous for weathered holes, large and small, including grottoes where Black Vultures nest. Waterfalls that form in St Pete are uniquely dominated by pot holes or kettles. You can imagine a refreshing jump into a water-filled kettle on a 100 degree day in July, but it's not so easy to picture that in today's rain as the temperature falls below 50 degrees.

Last week, after 15 inches of rain, water levels were at least ten feet above where we stand. We cross freshly deposited sandbars to reach a white chunk of the St Pete. A Louisiana Waterthrush walks on a big log, spots us, and takes off. Flood debris is everywhere. Chicken house tin is lodged in small trees. The dashboard from an old car forms part of a sandbar. A black power cord with a grounded plug lays aside white cobbles. A sock, plastic bags, and a much-battered television form part of the Ordovician post-15 inch rain landscape. Yet, a little later, when we stand high on the bluff overlooking Piney valley, we don't see the debris. It's all green hills and a winding stream and three Turkey Vultures braving the day. Juxtaposition, juxtaposition: it is difficult to get a fix on the meaning of time.

We are well armed with hats, water proof coats, ponchos, and rubber boots. Binoculars are stashed somewhere in all the garb. We are birders, botanists, jacks-and-jills of nature, and not easily driven away. So we don't quickly retreat, even as rain returns. But then, as thunder and lightning dominates the Ordovician, we retrace toward the porch. Seven Pine Siskins tank up at a feeder, soon joined by ten American Goldfinches, most molted to brilliant golds and blacks. Then we have a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak, joined by two males, maybe 15 feet from where we sit. The colors of their feathers I have long admired, but I have never knowingly seen the delicate pink of their massive bills. The more I look, the more pink dominates. What is nature up to here?

Now in a steady downpour, we 12, plus Judy and Don, continue on the porch or hang in the kitchen's warmth. Out on the porch, David Chapman enjoys hot tea and birds. Sara Caulk tells me about Bob Caulk's passion for creating pasta. Joan Reynolds has a magnifying glass examining tiny green: moss? liverwort? Jacque Brown and David Oakley collect images of a close Ruby-throated Hummingbird, all red gorget. So on behalf of NWAAS, I bid you welcome to our wet astonishingly productive field trip. Welcome to a green place, on a stormy day, deep in the Ozark Mountains of western Arkansas.

BEST BIRD: CERULEAN May 5, 2011

Joan Reynolds and I explored the Cherry Bend area of the Ozark National Forest yesterday. Best find: male and female Cerulean Warblers, with female at a nest approx 50 feet up in an understory slippery elm that was under a huge black walnut on a moist and very plant-rich northeast slope. Cherry Bend – or Cheery Bend as Jacque Brown appropriately termed it a few years ago – is on highway 23, the Pig Trail Scenic Highway, about half way between Brashears and Cass.

We parked where the Ozark Highlands Trail crosses 23. Second Best Find: native azelias in stunning pink bloom along a high bluff face, attended by tiger swallowtails, with Ovenbirds seen and singing along the walk, easily heard even above active flows of an unseen stream far below. From the azelia line, out there below the broad green canopy, came songs of Hooded Warbler and Yellow-throated Vireo.

The parking area provides easy access to a short walk up to Rock House. Standing there, tall trees are rooted far below in a ravine. Usual neck-straining canopy birds magically appear at and sometimes below eye level. Wow, what a relief! We had such views of male and female Scarlet Tanagers and a male Hooded Warbler. Views of Red-eyed Vireos from this angle alter my thinking about the beauty of these forest creatures so easily dismissed as just a common bird. Improbably, we had overflight by a boldly marked Peregrine Falcon and while the great green canopy is a wonder to behold, just at that moment, as the great peregrine soared over, I wished for a vast open sky.

During the day we got as far as Fly Gap, immediately north of Cheery Bend, and as far south as the Turner Bend Store on Mulberry River. The Mulberry was big and muddy. No one, or virtually

no one, was camping or boating. Below are some of the birds, with a few comments. I was surprised not to find Black-throated Green Warbler today, so I assume they haven't reached Cherry Bend yet.

Acadian Flycatcher - 1
White-eyed Vireo
Yellow-throated Vireo
Red-eyed Vireo
Swainson's Thrush – 6+ in the woods, along highway
Wood Thrush - 4
Tennessee Warbler - 8
Nashville Warbler
Northern Parula - Redding
Chestnut-sided Warbler – Fly Gap
Yellow-throated Warbler – Mulberry R
Pine Warbler – upland pines near Fly Gap
Cerulean Warbler – 5 birds at least, all along the NE-facing slope
Black-and-white Warbler - 3
Worm-eating Warbler - 2
Ovenbird - 8
Common Yellowthroat
Hooded Warbler - 8
Yellow-breasted Chat - Cass
Scarlet Tanager -6
Rose-breasted Grosbeak – 1

WARM-UP LAP FOR BIRDER'S WEEKEND May 6, 2011

It was foggy in Fayetteville this morning, so I used the time to get my gear ready. Also noticed, in first (foggy) light my grass really needs cutting. I am proud to announce that was a no-brainer. No. I decided I needed a little warm-up lap before heading down to Devil's Den State Park, so I walked a short loop at Lake Fayetteville, just east of the Environmental Study Center. After fog, today opened calm, blue, bright and sunny. Too pretty to be very birdy, so I planned to be out there from about 8-10. But didn't get home until noon. Here's my partial list.

Osprey – carrying a fish
Cooper's Hawk – seemed like it was near a nest, but didn't find it
Empidonax flycatcher – 4
Least Flycatcher – 2
Blue-headed Vireo – 1
Warbling Vireo – 1
Blue Jay imitating Red-shouldered Hawk - 1
Tennessee Warbler-1
Orange-crowned Warbler – 2

Nashville Warbler – 4
Northern Parula – 6
Chestnut-sided Warbler – 2
Magnolia Warbler – 3
Yellow-rumped Warbler – 2
Black-and-white Warbler -2
American Redstart – 4
Prothonotary Warbler – 1
Northern Waterthrush – 1
Kentucky Warbler – 2
Mourning Warbler – 2
Common Yellowthroat – 1
Wilson's Warbler – 3
Yellow-breasted Chat – 1
Lincoln's Sparrow – 4

SWAINSON'S THRUSH May 9, 2011

I've been trying to think what the best bird was during just completed Birder's Weekend at Devil's Den State Park. Just for oohs and ahhs, maybe it was a brilliant Blackburnian Warbler on May 7, nicely illuminated high in sycamore, during a field trip lead by Karen Garrett. It may have been a ton of Orchard Orioles, in all plumages, all singing, all over the park. It may have been a Clay-colored sparrow right outside my cabin, when I was walking to the Saturday evening program, when I had decided at the last moment to take along my binoculars.

But I think, more than the rare and unusual, I was impressed most by a working class bird, Swainson's Thrush. They owned the park's fine forests and a fair percentage of my personal intention. Along the edge of every road and path, perched on the scattered sandstone boulder poking above leaves, and there, on the parallel limb just above the forest floor. There was even some singing, the ethereal flute harkening vast woodlands of North America, tying together trees, rivers, air, and us in our time here.

After 15 inches of rain that sent a flash flood down Lee Creek, destroying all in its path, women and men working for Arkansas Parks and Tourism, and with timely help from groups like AmeriCorps, scouts, etc have in a few weeks made the park whole again. The toilets flush, drinking fountains work, picnic tables invite, campgrounds readily sprout tents. I couldn't believe they had pulled this off. I knew birding would be good, no matter what, because Swainson's Thrushes and Red-eyed Vireos don't care about washed-out playgrounds. But there were hundreds of cyclists in the park for the Joe Martin race, several buses of church groups, lots of casual visitors, splashing kids, people on blankets, and us, the birders of Birder's Weekend. It all came off.

At Devil's Den, even on a busy sunny day in May, when everyone wants outdoors and a park and trail, well even on such a day a half hour's walk from a proper bathroom opens to what

amounts to a wilderness. And there, just ahead, a thrush with an olive back, looking over its shoulder at me, its big dark eye taking me in. I watch it intently. There's a lot of time and distance in mutual viewings, though the earth itself may not consider it much. What is a few tens of thousands of years among billions?

I'm trying to think what all of this means. I give up and stretch out on a big sycamore, brought down in the flood. What is it in the PIP PIP of Swainson's Thrush and CHEREE of a Red-eyed Vireo? It calls us so. Lee Creek this weekend had a calm gentle green to it.

LAKE FAYETTEVILLE: REDSTARTS AND INDIGO BUSHES May 10, 2011

Joan Reynolds and I birded part of Lake Fayetteville yesterday morning. It was warm (84 by 2 PM) with strong wind gusts from the south, and very bright. We met at the Environmental Study Center then took advantage of shade and wind protection by walking a short piece immediately north of ESC (prairie restoration trail), then a big loop east, around the forested hill. Part of this is well protected from south wind, even 30 MPH. We finished with a walk across the dam to the spillway bridge where we had a fantastic, down-look study of a Spotted Sandpiper and a foraging male Northern Parula. No warbler-neck watching these! This is an angle, and under light conditions, that allows appreciation of parula's absolutely startling, complex beauty. Otherwise, yes, we were mainly watching redstarts, but we also saw a fine male broadhead skink at the butt of a big hardwood tree. In its own way, it too looked like a redstart.

Then, midst all invasive introduced tangles of vegetation typical of Lake Fayetteville, midst distracting hubbub in the heart of Northwest Arkansas City, an amazing sight: down below the dam, a solid field of ferns. Near entrance to the marina, under a mass of invasive honeysuckle growing on a fence, native indigo bushes flowering all deep purple and golden pollen, attended by a small, heavily covered-with-pollen bumble bee.

I had an email from Joan later. She and her daughter Samantha had figured out that we had sensitive ferns *Onoclea sensibilis* below the dam and our hardworking bumblebee was indeed a worker. Her image of the skink showed it had several seed ticks attached to its neck, foretaste of what is sure to come to birders, too.

Here is a partial list covering about 3 hours:
Least Flycatcher 2 plus several Empidonaxes
White-eyed Vireo 6
Blue-headed Vireo 2
Red-eyed Vireo 8
Orange-crowned Warbler 1
Nashville Warbler 1
Northern Parula 6
Yellow Warbler 1

Yellow-throated Warbler 2
American Redstart 7
Prothonotary Warbler 1
Northern Waterthrush 1
Mourning Warbler 2-3
Common Yellowthroat 2
Wilson's Warbler 5
Canada Warbler 1
Yellow-breasted Chat 2

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW END-OF-SEASON May 11, 2011

There were a few White-crowned Sparrows in the woods at Lake Fayetteville on May 5, and a few in the woods at Devil's Den State Park on May 7. Maybe 2-3 have been at your feeders recently, too. But words "in the woods" combined with "White-crowned Sparrow" means they are headed far north. I saw not a single White-crowned Sparrow during a visit to Centerton-Vaughn yesterday.

When we were still in the stormy, rainy cool mode last week, hundreds remained and singing was at crescendo. A silage pit associated with one of the dairies near Vaughn functions like a seed-eater's supermarket. They are always there, or nearby, often with Harris's Sparrows and others. But the season has turned. Cool and rainy are replaced with south winds and temps in the 80s. There were no White-crowned Sparrows yesterday. Silence is defining. They have been here in numbers since October-November. Now after six enlivening months, the big energy is gone.

Singing flocks and boldly striped heads define our weedy estates. Like nothing else, they know our old grasslands, the connections to bigger and wider realities. So, to them, I say: Take care in your travels. Have a productive nesting season. Be fruitful and multiply. And like the old settlers in the Ozarks would say, when you are done up there, come on back. "Y'all come and stay a while."

THANKS IN THE MANNER OF THE DALAI LAMA May 12, 2011

I spent about 4 hours at Cherry Bend this morning. CB is in the Ozark NF, northern Franklin Co., half-way between Brashears and Cass, where the Ozark Highlands Trail crosses highway 23. The only obvious transients today were Swainson's Thrushes. Black-throated Green Warbler nests sparingly in the Ozarks and Chestnut-sided Warbler has as well.

Cheery Bend is almost completely forested in mature hardwoods. Most is also on plant-rich east and northeast-facing slopes. I walk a bit along highway 23 because the right-of-way allows me to see more of the canopy. It also gets me out of dense stands of native hydrangea and poison ivy, wet and droopy this morning from last night's rain. I also walk short pieces of the OH

Trail, especially the one up to Rock House. While walking today I spotted a bobcat on the slope below.

High up on the slope, with a Hooded Warbler male singing in front of me, I endured the disconcerting roar and passage of traffic: cars, log trucks, three big chicken trucks in a row. And there were merry up-buzzes of Cerulean Warblers and sharp PIZ-ZAHs of Acadian Flycatchers. Highway 23 was visible from my perch. I thought to myself, if there is a devil in the garden, surely it is this highway in the heart of a noble landscape. Then, before I got too precious and sanctimonious, I remembered that the Toyota in the Ozark HT parking was the one I roared out from Fayetteville. While it is true we have spoiled much of North America through our greed, we also created the Ozark NF, where there is more than a million acres, mainly for birds, and most far from such disturbance. And with that little bit of philosophizing accomplished, I put my hands together in the manner of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, who visited Fayetteville yesterday, said thanks, and returned to the Hooded Warbler.

Here's a partial list from the morning.
Eastern Wood-Pewee 2
Acadian Flycatcher 3
Yellow-throated Vireo 1
Red-eyed Vireo 10
Swainson's Thrush 3
Wood Thrush 5
Chestnut-sided Warbler 1 or 2
Black-throated Green Warbler 1
Cerulean Warbler 3
Black-and-white Warbler 2
American Redstart 1 or 2
Worm-eating Warbler 3
Ovenbird 4
Louisiana Waterthrush 1
Hooded Warbler 6
Scarlet Tanager 2

This made for an interesting morning, then I roared back to Fayetteville.

BANK SWALLOWS IN A NORTH WIND May 14, 2011

Bank Swallows rode out stormy Friday at Lake Fayetteville. Rain, wind, lightning, thunder and hail ruled Fayetteville Thursday night. South winds turned decidedly north. Temps dropped from 80s to 50s. I had broken limbs in my yard. Hundreds of swallows were flying low over the lake when Jacque Brown and I got there at mid-morning Friday. We were on the north shore, near the Environmental Study Center deck. Flocks were spread in all directions, but some came straight and low toward us, protected against the north wind. Then they flared and turned,

letting wind push them back out over the lake. In this maneuver it was easy to see small brown swallows with an immaculate white belly marked with a distinctive dark neck collar.

I'm going out on a limb here to estimate there were 200-500 swallows on the lake. Of these at least half were Banks. The others, in rough descending order: Barn, Cliff, Northern Rough-wing. I did not see Tree Swallows, but it was misting and raining off and on and I admit how sketchy this report is. Whatever the true count, even half of 200 is a lot of Bank Swallows for the western Ozarks.

Of course swallows weren't the only ones stalled in migration. Warblers and vireos passing through made similar choices. So did Jacque and I. We concentrated birding efforts in protected lowlands. In a few hours we had seen at least 15 warbler species. Most numerous were American Redstart (10+), Chestnut-sided, and Magnolia, in roughly that order, and one Blackburnian.

We were doing a lot of wiping to stay in business because of constant mist. But Jacque spotted a Common Nighthawk perched longways on a limb, and quite low over the trail. Out of the mist, here came jolly young students from the Environmental Study Center. As it happened, they were trying out new binoculars. And for something out of the ordinary, the veritable teachable moment, how can you beat a low perching goatsucker? In easy view, like lumpy bark on an old oak, that oval, half opened huge eye, that bold white patch, the strangeness suddenly and decidedly among us.

A FIELD FULL OF DICKCISSELS May 18, 2011

Wet Prairie is a pioneer-era community north of Maysville in Benton County. The turn off from highway 43 is graveled red dirt coursing big fields, including some featuring soybeans that are only now being plowed because of weather. I was in Wet Prairie Saturday for International Migratory Bird Day. I searched plowed fields for Horned Larks; saw and heard several. Broad open hayfields knee high deep in grass are still wet from spring rains. I expect meadowlarks and Red-winged Blackbirds and was not disappointed.

I was shocked when waves of Dickcissels rose from one hayfield: 20, then 10, then 25, etc. Then came more grassland royalty, Bobolinks and Blue Grosbeaks, and at one point a flock of maybe 50 Dickcissels. They flew from dense grass and disappeared into dense grass. It was a cool, north wind day, and I assume these were grounded migrants, waiting for a south wind. In this same area, on previous IMBDs with north winds, I have seen grounded flocks of orioles and Grasshopper Sparrows.

Everybody was singing, including Bobolinks. Eleven males eventually collected for a sing-out of dramatic bubbling and caroling projected in all directions. These males displayed gold and white in the right places, but in their passage through northwest Arkansas mostly black breast

feathers retain a fringe of white. I saw a few females, too, as they rose discretely from the grass before again disappearing.

As of Saturday, I had seen several cuckoos, but heard nary a one. I got close looks at two on Saturday. The first was Yellow-billed, the expected one. The second was a Black-billed. This bird was in a hardwood lot. I got close enough to see red orbital feathers and a thin bill, both mandibles black. A third may also have been Black-billed, because when it flew I could see no white in the undertail, but it got away, even with deployment of my trusty MP3 player.

Besides masses of Dickcissels and Bobolinks, and the unexpected cuckoo, I saw Swainson's Hawks in three widely separated places northeast of Maysville. This is expected; they nest in northwestern Benton County. I looked and listened in all places where I expect Grasshopper Sparrows, but was disappointed.

And last, but not least: along Leonard Ranch Road I found a Loggerhead Shrike fence: barbed wire upon which was hung a headless shorttail shrew, a grasshopper two inches long with wings nicely mottled in black, plus a decorated larval insect – but no shrike. I did find shrikes in two other places.

SNAPSHOTS FROM UPPER BUFFALO, AND UPPER UPPER BUFFALO May 19, 2011

Steep forested mountains rise all around from the churchyard of Boxley Baptist in the valley of the Buffalo National River. Straight south are exposed sandstone bluffs atop Cave Mountain. I'm up there, sitting on a ledge, surrounded by grape vines as thick as my arm, my view partially obstructed by long blackberry-like vines rooted above and trailing over the bluff face, white flowers and all. In front of me, an American Redstart dominates a slope covered with pawpaws. A Wood Thrush sings upslope. Below, the forest floor is covered with Arkansas spiderwort whose flowers vary from pure white to pink.

Elevation ranges up to 1900 feet, but earlier in the day I toured old farmlands along Fire Tower Road, often above 2200 feet. I guess this is the upper upper Buffalo. The road overlooks the justifiably famous Boxley valley far below. This is truly big sky country with kaleidoscopic 360 degree views of hayfields, homes, mountaintop roads paved and graveled, cattle, and chicken houses. Goats in one place stand in the bed of an abandoned pick-up. A big pond impounded in a small valley has Wood Ducks, including a hen leading 5 tiny, recently-hatched young. Flowering wisteria has gone wild and riot, taking over the ruin of an abandoned home. There are well-attended hummingbird feeders at a neat new farmhouse. At least three female Bobolinks PINK PINK in a hilltop hayfield near Stoverville.

Fire Tower Road reaches highway 43 at the Center Point trailhead. Turn south and at several spots the asphalt squeezes along a narrow bench, with precipitous fall off to the east involving hundreds of feet. These moist, plant-rich steep slopes are full of Neotropical migratory

songbirds. I find a place to pull off, albeit not much of a place, and listen to a steady chorus of Ovenbirds, Cerulean Warblers, Hooded Warblers and Acadian Flycatchers. The birder who wants detailed exploration of these slopes would tightly belt up a climbing harness, secure herself to a mighty oak, and gingerly traverse downslope. I settle for standing by the car and clean looks at a decidedly White-eyed Vireo.

The highway passes through Ponca and eventually reaches old Boxley mill pond. Dating to about 1870, the mill was powered by water impounded behind an earthen dam. No grinding since 1950, but folks pull off here for the wildlife. I gasp when I stop. The long pond's northern section is mudflat enjoyed by two Spotted Sandpipers. Maybe heavy spring rains damaged the old earthen dam? But that's why god made beavers and they do their duty. Behind THEIR dam, in the mill pond's mid-section, is plenty of water and Wood Ducks, including one family group with four largish young, a male Blue-winged Teal, and two Trumpeter Swans, part of the ambitious effort to restore populations of these now rare creatures. Nearby, in a big hayfield, stand 11 elk, including four with notable antlers. The bulls are in velvet, as they say. Nature has her way.

Today's trip was a scout for a couple of upcoming birding expeditions. Fresh from a weekend meeting of Arkansas Native Plant Society, Joan Reynolds helped me identify plants. She found flowering Adam-and-Eve orchids, pointed out Arkansas beard-tongue that is flowering in profusion from a sandstone bluff, rattlesnake ferns, 4-leaved milkweed, and … well lots of what makes biologically rich, and so very interesting, the upper and upper upper Buffalo.

STORMY SPRING AFTERNOON AT CENTERTON May 21, 2011

It was thundering with hard rain and occasional light hail when I reached the state fish hatchery at Centerton yesterday. Thirty shorebirds, mainly Pectoral and White-rumped Sandpipers, ran across the pond flat just as I parked. While getting my initial soaking, they huddled under modest cover of a grassy pond bank, then as the front passed, back to the mudflat. Sharp gusts and bullet-like rain were roughly from southwest, but it didn't seem to make any difference how I parked, window down with scope poked out; rain poured in. I was drier than shorebirds, but that's not saying much.

Rain dimpled the wet mud and floated large bubbles on the shallow water. One bird stood seemingly unconcerned with a stormy spring afternoon. As thunder gave everything a good shaking, it balanced on one reed-like leg, the other pulled up against its body, black bill tucked back and hidden among black and white feathers. Orangey plumage of head and neck were striking. A dark eye open and slowly closed as though this American Avocet needed some rest midst wind and rain and booming. Perhaps because of the storm or weariness, it seemed less wary, tolerated closer approach.

Probably for the same reasons, today featured the much sought-after refresher, Peep ID 1001. That is, close studies of Least Sandpiper versus Semipalmated Sandpiper versus White-rumped Sandpiper, and to keep the course honest, versus Baird's Sandpiper. Killdeer and Pectoral

Sandpipers moved as giants among them. There's nothing quite as fun as sorting peeps at workable range.

I got a rude shock when two decidedly NOT peeps flashed by, bold white and black. I thought I'd missed them, but on the next pond flat stood immaculate Black-bellied Plovers, one repeatedly calling PER WEE, as other flying creatures, sheathed in metal rather than feathers, flushed from nearby XNA in periodic spasms of anthropomorphic thunder. PER WEE PER WEE and then a pause PER WEE. A flock of 12-13 Black Terns descended from storm clouds. With graceful dips they worked pond surfaces, then back into the air, revolving in this way from pond to pond. One of three Wilson's Phalaropes, a male, seemed to be doing the avocet's one-leg until I noticed it was missing the left foot. In foraging, it didn't get around as gracefully as the others, but it did get around, and was able to use its stump in the process.

Swallows were also packed in the hatchery today, but in chaos of rain and gusts, it wasn't easy to ID them on the wing, at distance. But there were also Roger Tory Peterson moments, when a community of swallows lined up on a low-hanging utility wire, just like a silhouette in a Peterson field guide. In one such line-up were 15 Cliffs, 2 Banks, 2 Trees, and 2 Purple Martins, just for variety. Another was Cliffs only, 25, and another, Barns only, 7. Barn Swallows were certainly dominant overall, their long tail streamers much in evidence.

When it rained too hard to watch birds, there were water turtles. I removed the scope from the window and rolled it up. Through rain streaky windows I counted turtle noses poked just a little out of the water. One pond had 60.

ORNATES 23 May 2011

Ornate box turtles are trying to cross I-75, north of Tulsa, an hour or so west of Siloam Springs. Swirls of bright yellow lines on a dark background celebrate ornate glory, striking as sunflowers rising above the prairie landscape. We have them in western Arkansas too, but they are now rare, as gone as the pieces of bright shell on I-75 marking fates of many ornates who, carrying prairie genes from ancient times, unsuccessfully undertake the slow and deliberate crawl across unfamiliar, fuel-injected, 4-lanes-of-concrete.

Joe Woolbright and I are on our way to The Nature Conservancy's Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Osage County to meet eight folks from northwest Arkansas. Among them are Ellen Turner, former president of Arkansas Audubon Society, and her husband Tom McClure, both teaching at Northwest Arkansas Community College. Their friends Bob and Cathy Ross are both retired from Rogers public schools. They are well-known for successful owl prowl field trips and as supporters of Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society.

Road grease is the fate of many ornate box turtles on prairie country highways, but not all. Just ahead of us, midst 75 MPH, a dark SUV suddenly brakes, swerves, stops. Traveling fast, we pass before reality dawns. Through our rear view we see them dismount, grab a turtle, and walk it to the grass. In our SUV hoorays, and soon we too have an opportunity.

We see a live ornate, stop, and it snaps shut, then pokes out, with orangey red eyes and bright red scales on his front legs. Yes, we too are 75 MPHers in a hog of a machine that comfortably conquers interstate perils and contributes to environmental despair. But Joe Woolbright rationalizes us and our aggressive lifestyles with what he terms “51 percenters.” This is a unique state of being that goes like this: We share the earth and its ultimate fate with ornates, but we do so with eyes wide open. Fifty-one percent reflects our acts to mitigate our environmentally destructive lifestyles. We save land and protect rare species. This is to offset the 49 percent represented by our SUV and our expensive binoculars for bird watching, among other materialistic sins.

Fifty-one percent is the philosophy of the big tent. We will all rise or fall together. It makes no difference if we are middle-income Arkansas environmentalists proselytizing the gospel of recycling and natural foods or Trillionaire Walmart, High Church of American materialism. Everyone has opportunities for 51 percenting.

Out on the prairie, binoculars around my neck, I’m in sharp anticipation for grassland royalty like Upland Sandpipers and Greater Prairie-Chickens. I’m working on reconciliation, looking for my 51. This is heady stuff and a Grasshopper Sparrow is singing atop a flowering indigo bush. We spot black-tailed jack rabbits. The afternoon suns streams through their huge erect ears like some kind of prairie stained glass. Dickcissels are courting everywhere we stop.

A patch of Penstemon grandiflorus, large beardtongue, is marked by astonishing big bluish lavender blossoms, with the flower’s trumpet-like throat invitingly streaked with purples. A female Ruby-throated Hummingbird, hanging in mid-air of prairie blue, checks them with its long bill. A dragon-sized collared lizard, sporting various shades of green and blue with bold orange throat, suns on a rock ledge. Upland Sandpipers call BURR URR URR WEE EEE in the grassy distance. We have an over-flight of 40-50 Franklin’s Gulls, heading north. So far we have seen two ornates, none slaughtered.

We encounter bison herds, many with golden-colored calves and adults shaggy and shedding winter hair. Of course, the modern world is here with graveled roads, gas wells, and three cars of our group. We appreciate clean bathrooms and a coke machine at TNC’s preserve headquarters. But this vast and intoxicating spring green protected by TNC refreshingly owes much to the 1800s and promising western landscapes of painter George Catlin. In the relative calm of a place bought and managed by faith in 51 percent, bison freely wander grass and road, and so do we.

BAKER PRAIRIE May 29, 2011

Baker Prairie Natural Area in Harrison was a wind-blown flowerscape yesterday. Acres of pale-purple coneflowers and prairie larkspurs nodded and rolled, waves of pink and purple under an oceanic sky of puffy summer clouds; a field of green, with crimson spots of winecups and yellow clusters of Texas greeneyes.

On what felt like the first day of summer, Bell's Vireos (5-6) sang from the flowerscape under cover of low sumac thickets and tall fronds of advancing compass plants. Male Dickcissels mounted scattered dead saplings to give their DICK CISS CISS ELLLLs, all brilliantly attired in bold yellows, reddish browns, smart blacks, business-like grays.

We found Willow Flycatchers in two thickets with sumac, plus wild plums, willows, elm, etc. Birds sang FITZ-BEW! in both. Baker is the only place where they are known to nest in Arkansas. But I'm already getting ahead of myself.

I picked up David Oakley in Springdale and headed to Rogers for Joan Reynolds, but on the way David I made a brief stop at Lake Atalanta in Rogers. Along the loop on the lake's shady east side, we heard close singing of a Louisiana Waterthrush and soon found one walking on the road's rocky red clay. An ant or other insect with short black legs was clamped firmly in its bill. As we sat in the car and watched, it bobbed towards a grassy cutbank above the road. A second adult was well secreted there from prying eyes and incubating 6 boldly red-streaked eggs. Cliff Swallows are nesting under the park's little bridge over Prairie Creek and their pink rump patches are much in evidence as we stand above, on the bridge.

It wasn't that easy to reach Baker, and not mainly because big rains collapsed part of 62 near Eureka Springs. It was demanding coneflowers on little rocky clearings along the roadside, black-eyed susans attended by a great spangled fritillary, and finally piercing rising trills of bugs. We are midst emergence and massive choruses of 13-year periodical cicadas. How many red-eyed, orange-winged, black-body cicadas does it take to penetrate glass and steel at 55 MPH? Penetrate us with sounds like flying saucers hovering unseen in the forest? On this summer day, their only time above ground in their long lives, cicadas own Ozark woodlands. In the sun and the wind on this first summer-like day, they climb from earth to mate, to lay eggs, and die. But finally, and astonishingly, and in spite of reality's distraction, we make Baker Prairie!

In a technical sense, you can't get lost on two neatly mowed and therefore unambiguous loops through 60 acres. But in the broader sense, it is easy in such a place to lose, or perhaps I should say, be freed from, that which is peripheral. I can't decide how many Northern Bobwhites we heard singing, but one called near us, another answer from the north and another south. And that, with Eastern Meadowlarks, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Indigo Buntings, and Barn Swallows in dramatic swoops over grass and flowers.

We tried to stay on the mowed path, but in identifying Willow Flycatchers our trousers collected black charcoal streaks, like cammo patterns. We assumed status of three upright-walking grassland birds with blending streaks. Of course charcoal is evidence of burning, in this case prescribed burning, that imitates how nature makes and keeps her prairie a prairie. Our streaked pants are compliments to the prairie's managers.

A Painted Bunting sang in an oldfield thicket adjacent Baker Prairie. I thought this might be Martha Milburn of Harrison, recently deceased. She, like so many others in Harrison and

throughout northwest Arkansas, loved this last biologically-functioning part of what was once 5000 acres of rocky, upland tallgrass prairie in Boone County. If not Martha herself, then it sang in her honor.

JUNE

THE MOTHER SHIP HAS LANDED June 1, 2011

Painted Buntings sing from woodlots of oak, hickory and cedars in south Fayetteville, along City Lake and Willoughby roads. I hear them as I bicycle a loop at the base of South Mountain that also includes old highway 71. Now I am also hearing a powerful low hum, like the mother ship has landed, unseen, on the mountain. In waves of rising and falling, a shrill hiss has joined hum. It's like the earth has taken on new breathing. In and out, up and down, inhale-exhale. Millions of individuals of different species of periodical cicadas are in massed chorus.

It's the old story of frog turned prince. They live 13 years underground as worm-like larvae, emerge into light transformed to astonishing red-eyed, black-bodied, no-nonsense adults. They sing and mate in massed frenzy and die in a few fantastic weeks. It's an orgy to the future. Singers of 2024 come from eggs fertilized in these few sun-lighted weeks.

Something like an old road heads through shrill hiss to mother ship. I can't resist. I'm not too far in before I find dump trucks, trailers, miscellaneous pipe, boards, an inspiring working junkyard of mechanical equipment. Red-eyed and orange-winged, periodical cicadas land on my head while I'm wondering if I'm trespassing.

A Red-bellied Woodpecker heads toward hiss and hum. The trail rises into a former rocky hillside pasture now regenerated to oaks, hickories, and lots of eastern red cedar. And today, periodical cicadas. They hang upside down under cover of twigs and leaves. Blue Jays bugle from the woods. A Yellow-billed Cuckoo calls CUK CUK CUK COO COO. Cicadas fly back and forth where tree tops join the sun.

In their puffy summer cloud hats, midst hum and waves of shrill hiss, green hills of the Ozarks transform. For a moment I can't remember where I am. It's like I'm hallucinating. But I see the familiar visage of a Great Crested Flycatcher at eye level, low and slow, looking methodically up under twigs. There are lots of "flies" here to be sure. Out fly a dozen screeching cicadas as a yellowish female Summer Tanager darts into oak leaves. Fantastic it is, hallucination it is not.

Above hiss and hum, I can hear someone banging around near where I started into the woods. This turns out to be Earl Smith, property owner, looking for pipe. In our lamentable age of suspicion-about-everything, this retired truck driver and mechanical jack-of-all trades is friendly, open, unsuspicious. He immediately says I am welcome anytime while swatting a cicada that has just tried to land on his ear. Behind Mr Smith a hickory trunk is so packed with bugs it is the periodical cicada equivalent of a Saturday afternoon Walmart parking lot.

We talk a bit about the hum. For him, it's not the mother ship. Rather, it sounds like a big chicken barn. Hawks and vultures are soaring overhead as we talk. One hawk is eating a familiar-sized insect held kite-like in its claws. Back in 1985, two festive periodical cicada parties ago, a Mississippi Kite spent weeks in the vicinity of a cicada chorus near Durham in Washington County. I've called the hum the mother ship, a rather romantic notion, but now at Smith's suggestion, it does resemble the massed sounds of thousands of white birds in big poultry houses, too. Smith adds, Well maybe more like one of those big turkey houses.

Standing there, with cicadas briefly landing on us both, in the big sound, in all the hiss and hum at once familiar and astonishingly strange, I see not one or two, but 5 kites soar over.

NOT YET TAMED WITHIN US June 2, 2011

COMPTON Breeding Bird Survey samples the famous landscape of Newton County. From pastured uplands where Newton and Boone counties join, down through Boxley valley, along the Buffalo's cool sinuous shores, past upright, white-sided Boxley Baptist Church, and then way up steep viney, tangled wilds of Cave Mountain. The survey ends not far from much-visited Hawksbill in the Upper Buffalo Wilderness.

This is the avian version of "The Buffalo River Country," my friend Ken Smith's now classic book of stories and big format photographs celebrating natural beauty and local tradition that helped save the Buffalo from a perdition of dams.

Compton encompasses a mighty 24.5 miles of avian diversity. Big open upland fields have Northern Bobwhites, Blue Grosbeaks, Eastern Meadowlarks and Field Sparrows. Yellow-throated Warblers, American Redstarts, and Louisiana Waterthrushes are regulars along the river and Wood Ducks know Boxley mill pond well. Cave Mountain has Cerulean Warblers and Scarlet Tanagers.

I ran the survey today, as I have done so in early June for more than 20 years. All breeding bird surveys consist of 50 stops at half-mile intervals. This year's emergence of 13 year periodical cicadas was all afire in fresh wee light of 0525 AM. This is stop one, in the beginning, on the Newton-Boone line. They had lost none of their raucous vitality at 10 AM, stop 50, the end. Metallic rhythmic cicada hums that sound to me like a space alien's mother ship were audible on 40 or more stops. And sometimes deafening. I could hear almost nothing but cicadas on stops 42-46 on Cave Mountain. Cicadas, cicadas and more cicadas. Many many millions of red-eyed, black-bodied, orange membraneous-winged beings. Today and for a few fine summer weeks they own the Buffalo.

And besides the headline cicadas, the Buffalo country was foggy this morning with hills standing out like green islands in a sea. Down slope, and out of sight, a Wood Thrush sang flute music. In the valley, in the fog, 7 elk grazed in a grassy field, with songs of Red-winged Blackbirds. At Boxley millpond, a Trumpeter Swan is sitting on a huge, freshly-built nest. This is the part of the pond that still has water, thanks to beavers and their dams.

Up on Cave Mountain I had the impression that Cerulean Warblers are more widespread than in previous years. While listening and marking them down, I saw a Turkey Vulture standing in the gravel road, more or less under a tree where I'd spotted a Cerulean. Next to it, a big lump of … well, four feet of timber rattler, freshly run over.

The vulture had already consumed choice red meaty bits, but intact was the broad head, slit eyes, and velvet tail with rattles. Dead and now passing into the vulture sphere, the snake retained that fierce, indomitable threatening glare symbolizing what is not yet tamed, out there in the Buffalo country, and not yet tamed within us, either.

GREAT POTOO June 6, 2011

Just at daylight on Sunday morning, June field trip day with Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society, I noted a big something-or-another fly off the lawn. Even so early on a Sunday, jays and robins were all atwitter. Something was a red-phased Eastern Screech-Owl making back-and-forth flights from ground to adjacent woods. This means hungry fledgling owlets.

Something else great: we were carpooling, which means that four of us in my relatively fuel-efficient old, but not terminally crippled, Toyota turns $4 per gallon gas into $1 per gallon passengers. Take that high fuel prices! So we are the lucky ones, big free day ahead, and off for the Buffalo National River at 6:15: Steve Erwin, Jacque Brown, David Oakley, and I.

Out past Huntsville, along 412, near Kings River and before the Buffalo, we stop for fuel, field trip spirit at high tide. While I wrestle with the credit card reader, they pounce on a showy Regal Moth, 4-5 inches wingtip to wingtip, all fuzzy yellows and oranges, flopping around on the concrete drive. For photographs. David and Jacque especially are photo hawks. The spot the prey and they are on it in a flash, long camera lens stuck out like a hawk's bill.

We are meeting at Boxley Bridge, and at 8 AM we are a mere 12 souls, one of the most poorly attended field trips of the year. Bird-wise, and especially breeding warbler-wise, this is the best place to be on June 5 in Arkansas, BUT it is stifling, and the sun, an unforgiving glare, is intimidating. Happily, this doesn't obviously bother American Redstarts singing in the willows along the Buffalo, or Yellow-billed Cuckoos, out there where periodical cicadas hum like mother ships.

In terms of interest and enthusiasm, the best stop is at Cave Mountain Cave, in the shade. We stand around on a narrow path enclosed by luxuriant poison ivy and wild ginger, and thanks in part to the modern miracle of MP3 players, enjoy clean views of Acadian Flycatchers, Scarlet Tanagers, and an Ovenbird. But by 10:30 no one can really focus.

By comparison, what works best is shade, bathroom break, and the church pew in front of Ponca Store, with snacks and a Blue Sky soda. A Wood Thrush sings on the slope, where there is humidity, ticks, and mosquitoes. Duely noted in today's field book.

We had already stood out in brilliant shadeless boil for picture postcard perfect views of nesting Trumpeter Swans and a Wood Duck family, both at Boxley mill pond. Cars passed by, windows up, AC blowing long hair. They had more comfort, but no swans. Naturally enough, probably wondered about us demented idiots. In Ponca, at the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission Elk Education Center, we learned both swans at the nest are females. So this is practice for a future nesting, or I thought, part of re-defining what it means to be a family. Steve Erwin and I battered this one around under shade, listening to mother ship periodical cicadas, and awaiting the return of our photo hawks.

So this is most of our Buffalo field trip, but on return to Fayetteville we find our way out to Skillern Road and hopes for Mississippi Kites. OK, I know this elicits yawns for y'all out there in kite plentitude, where a kite is about as interesting as nesting habitats of Brown-headed Cowbirds. BUT kites remain mysterious and novel in Northwest Arkansas. Maybe not as mysterious and novel as say, a Great Potoo, but when one and then two suddenly kite over the Toyota, we just can't get stopped fast enough.
Steve and I and the photo hawks bail into the burning glare of 2:30 PM, binoculars handy and skyward, and photo hawks praying the kites will soar low and away from the sun.

BOB WHITEs! June 10, 2011

A Swainson's Hawk flew over Joe Woolbright and I yesterday, at Chesney Prairie Natural Area near Siloam Springs. We were standing in a nicely mowed path, admiring wildflowers like obedient plant and colicroot. As the hawk soared over, we were speculating about the spreading swath of liatris, the prairie gayfeather, up and at it, but not yet blooming. Come July 10 it will be a magnificent prairie forest of purple, and just in time for the Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip.

I would not call Swainson's rare here in summer, but rather local. We never find many, but we see them on a regular basis. It is a bird of former tallgrass prairies, now become pastures, hayfields, epicenter of poultry production. Summer records from western Benton County date to the 1960s.

Dickcissels are singing from anything that serves as perch. Males and females are together, and the peeping notes I hear in dense vegetation tells me it is not just a bunch of random singing. We also see several small flocks of American Goldfinches, including six working seed heads of a yellow composite. We flush a male-female Northern Bobwhite pair and for the morning hear BOB WHITE! from three directions on and adjacent Chesney.

There is a kind of fever attached to actually seeing or even hearing BOB WHITEs, kind of an Ivory-billed Woodpecker moment for Arkansans not otherwise interested in birds. The fever derives from the fact that in the 1950s bobwhites seemed everywhere. Now they seem nowhere. Joe told me that while herbiciding invasive non-natives like velvet grass, he recently saw or heard BOB WHITEs in at least six places on or adjacent Chesney.

Some may classify such reports as tall tales, right up there with Big Foot. Joe carries BOB WHITE abundance with him to Kathy's Corner in Siloam, where he riles his coffee-drinking buddies who can't quite figure-out why he cares so much about prairie restoration. Six coveys, right! And how many Ivory-billed Woodpeckers?

Besides Swainson's, Great Blue Herons are much in evidence and fly over while Joe and I explore the path. Included is the 2011 class of novice black-capped juveniles. When Joan Reynolds and I visited Chesney early in the week we were greeted by a grim sight: a Great Blue Heron juv alive and twisting by wing tip from a highwire; helpless, struggling, broken ulna clearly projecting from the wing. Survived and prospered in this spring's many storms, but unlucky in close encounters with high wires.

GBHs, hawks, and winged creatures in general are fully prepared for the unobstructed landscape of 1800 or 1900, but not our high-energy demands of 2011. Now mercifully deceased, this wire-hung GBH is cautionary tale for all of us environmentalists pushing hard for wind energy development that will come especially to these old windy prairies and introduce many more wires.

But back at Chesney, Joe points out how much liatris has expanded. The mowed path now winds THROUGH liatris, but originally went AROUND it. That is, liatris has jumped the path and happily there seems no stopping it. Perhaps, like other energetic creatures under a June sun, liatris is intent upon storming the gates of heaven. To paraphrase the artist Walter Anderson, god knows it needs storming.

YIELD NOT TO YOUR INNER SOUND CURMUDGEON June 13, 2011

My house is about a half-block from College Avenue, busy drag through Fayetteville's heart. Cardinals and Carolina Wrens sing at first light. When I tune in, add thrasher, catbird, and phoebe. But at various times my backyard soundscape is performed by Harley-Davidsons, 70,000 trying all-at-once for Razorback stadium, medivacs swooping into Washington Regional.

When I bought this place 17 years ago, it was summer, quiet traffic gap in a college town. The little house seemed a tropical island, miraculously isolated from city, a place in the country, Thoreau's cabin, well off pavement. Papers all signed, we move in, and on one otherwise quiet June morning I notice a noisy constant pump from a neighbor's pool. Summer Wednesdays I learn are Bike Nights when Harleys race up and race down the hills of College, roaring river at flood tide, audible in my paradise so recently acquired. And have I forgotten rider mowers, weed whackers, and the guy who with latest in power tools restores old Chevys?

So welcome to the soundtrack of urban America, Fayetteville style. Welcome to my litany of audible woe. I've tried to figure out what to do. I thought maybe the city government would care, but some are themselves Wednesday's Harley Knights. Maybe the neighbor would

consider an electric mower? But can you ride one? And pool pump? I enjoy the happy splashy screams of kids and their friends. It sounds like innocent fun, and I am a sour curmudgeon.

Sound curmudgeon I am, but by the same token, this weird stuff doesn't just appear out of thin air, like an immaculate conception. Either the worst curmudgeon in me prevails, or I convert. The inside of my brain, that is, and at least some of my house. Down go windows, up goes AC, and there's a CD player beside my bed that like Superman is more powerful than a speeding locomotive, or perhaps I should say, rotor wash from a low passing chopper.

The CD playing is "Rain Forest," from The Atmosphere Collection entitled "A month in the Brazilian Rainforest. " Here's first aid for aggrieved audio sensitive brain cells. An island of sorts, rescue for a sound curmudgeon. Who would have thought my old house, so near a busy noisy center, could acquire modest aspects of Walden Pond where I might "Relax with Loon Lake" courtesy of Eclipse Music Group?

So on quiet days as in old and more naïve times, I try my windows up and enjoy cardinals. But as antidote to my creeping and sometimes galloping sound curmudgeoncy, I have the "Nature sound adventure series" by Lang Elliot, numbers 1-4. He celebrates the birds of North America in all their audio glory: No. 1, "Prairie Spring," No. 2, "Voices of the Swamp," No. 3, "Seabird Islands," and 4, "Wings Over the Prairie."

For y'all out there with audio distress, yield not to your inner sound curmudgeon. Help is on the way! I have no license to practice, but palliation if not cure may be as simple and inexpensive as a do-it-yourself brain rewiring job.

TELEBOTANY IN WALLYWORLD June 15, 2011

Productive birding is in store when y'all come northwest for the fall 2011 Arkansas Audubon Society convention in Rogers. Dates are November 18-20. Western Grebe and Surf Scoters are possibilities; also, think Le Conte's Sparrow and Harlan's Hawk. Several of us in Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society are plotting your opportunities. Webmaster Richard Stauffacher is putting field trip guides up on the NWAAS internet site.

Yesterday, Joan Reynolds of Rogers directed birding and botanizing exploration along new hard surface walking/biking trails near the convention hotel in the I-540 corridor. Yes, some field trips will range all over what Jacque Brown terms BF Egypt in search for Harris's Sparrow or Prairie Falcon, but visitors will also have options right outside the hotel.

Yes, we are famous for chickens and razorbacks, but I-540 corridor is Walmart World HQ. Welcome to WallyWorld, built upon what was once the tallgrass prairies of western Benton County. Like I-540, the AAS convention hotel was built in what must have been a seasonal wetland, with burrowing crawfish and migrating bitterns.

But, perennial springs retard total WallyWorldification. That is, the durn water has to go somewhere! And some of these somewheres form attractive cores of trails near our convention hotel. For example, in the vicinity of Northwest Medical Center-Bentonville, legally protected wetlands and pools are accessible along the trail. A big snapping turtle, covered partially by green moss, wanders the bottom, completely visible in clear water. A Warbling Vireo sings from willows. Green Herons flying back and forth suggest a nearby nest. High overhead, American Goldfinches harvest seeds from balls on big sycamores. Over there, a nicely banded watersnake, and in some green cover, a female Wood Duck, briefly visible because of that bold eye pattern. Steadily and noisily, cars race Medical Center Parkway, once a wetland where migrating Soras foraged.

Near the trail we discover a patch of remnant prairie. The most striking evidence: obedient plant in full bloom. Also, bushes like rough-leaved dogwood, a very thorny native hawthorn, mountain mint, Sampson's snakeroot, and most strikingly, a tall, stout plant with leathery leaves and greenish-whitish flowers preparing to bloom.

A trail section along Horsebarn Road includes a stand of mature bottomland trees. Here are Grrrreat Crested Flycatchers, Baltimore Orioles harassing a crow, Northern Parula, and Eastern Phoebe. From sunny bushes comes the song of Bell's Vireo, once a very common, but now discouragingly unusual, species of Benton County's moist prairie thickets. At the trailhead, Illinois River Watershed Partnership has worked with others, including Walmart, in an educational rain garden promoting environmental stewardship. And then we spot a fox squirrel, but not just any ole squirrel. Most red is replaced with black. Bright sunlight is an eye-pleasing color mix through its bushy tail. A guy on a bicycle stops and says he has seen it here before.

The trail is within five minutes of the convention hotel. So if driving all over BF Egypt for Lapland Longspurs is not your good time, visiting a few spots along this convenient, accessible trail might serve. You can hit the high spots and head for happy hour.

In the evening, back at home, I'm still mystified about the prairie plant across from Northwest Medical Center-Bentonville. So is Joan. If you can televangelize, surely you can also telebotanize. So we are on the phone. On the Fayetteville end, I have a field guide and an old copy of Steyermark's Flora of Missouri. At Rogers, Joan has up-to-date botanies. Several minutes, and many page-flips later, we have it: Indian plantain, *Arnoglossum plantagineum,* elegant reminder to all us citizens of WallyWorld, that this quarter-acre remnant was once the whole world of bison and prairie chickens, indicator of very high-quality, if now much restricted, habitat.

LOST BETWEEN THE LINES June 17, 2011

The big Civil War battle in March 1862 was 149 years ago, but time, the trickster, isn't always forwardly linear. I am reminded of this on a birding trip this morning to Pea Ridge National

Military Park northeast of Rogers. My first stop is along Sugar Creek, clear water flowing over attractive yellowish-red chert rubble.

An Acadian Flycatcher gives the PIZ-ZA! call. When I stop to see it, I notice a snapping turtle up on a high sandbar where it has dug a hole and appears to be laying eggs. This could just as well be 1862. It could be near the beginning of time itself.

Union soldiers expected attack from Confederates, so they constructed protective works of log, soil, and rock on the ridge overlooking Sugar Creek. A trail leads up there into the old desperation. I park, and from a thicket comes the song of a Kentucky Warbler. Soldiers cut big virgin hardwoods and made them into breastworks. Today, towering white oaks re-own the place, as do Red-eyed Vireos. And the trail? Water has been busy eroding it away. Roots are pushing up through asphalt. Leaf-cup and wild hydrangea are blooming along trail sides, with patches of Christmas fern. Shady bare spots are colonized by bottlebrush grasses. A Louisiana Waterthrush walks and bobs on the once battlefield.

Along Arkansas 72, open fields stretch east and west from another section of the battlefield near the pioneer community of Leetown. Once a place of desperation, this morning's fields are given over, not to cannon roar, but to BOB WHITE, with one announcing to others in a kind of rebel yell. Northern Bobwhites have taken these big former prairie fields as surely as the boys of 1862. That is, it's not BOOM BOOM BOOM, but rather BOB BOB BOB WHITE! My bare minimum count is a cannonade of five birds calling in rapid back-and-forth succession. This is like rural Arkansas in 1950, and probably 1862 as well.

Park headquarters is two miles further down the road. From there I walk toward seemingly endless grassy fields where the battle climaxed on March 8. Tens of thousands of scared boys and men arrayed here, north and south, in deadly earnest formation now suggested by lines of silent cannon and split rail fences.

Like some Civil War officer, I survey the scene with my binoculars and listen. There, in the distance, is a Turkey Vulture and a sky with distant lightning, darkened not by black powder, but oncoming rain. I hear, and then see, a male Blue Grosbeak calling from atop one of the rails, soon joined by an Eastern Meadowlark. What I'm listening for is the CHE-LICK of a Henslow's Sparrow.

Out there in grassy fields, I am lost between the lines in a kind of warp. Conflating soldiers and birders, I turn to an imaginary general and report, "No Henslow's, Sir! But look at those meadowlarks!" And then with thunder, lightning and a minie ball-like rain upon me, I retreat, without dignity, to my car.

SUCH A SKY June 18, 2011

We are out of Fayetteville at 6 AM for a trip to Frog Bayou WMA along the Arkansas River near Dyer. The idea is to beat the heat. But, so sorry: a bank sign at Alma reads 88 degrees at 7:18.

Whew! We are in for it. However we have energy enough to enjoy a giant, carved, red rooster next to the Alma McDonald's. I get David Oakley and Jacque Brown, photographers, beside it for a photo. And the young day promises more.

At Dyer we turn off highway 64 onto River Road. A few miles just ahead, Frog and the Arkansas. But half way we spot and stop for a small flock of plastic pink and white flamingoes, arrayed along a small pond. The piece de resistance: they are naturally and perfectly reflected in the pond by early morning light. There are also two flamingoes fashioned from wire, de rigueur pink with fashionable black bills, and perched under real banana trees.

Past the rising heat, past small farms, past perfectly reflected faux flamingos, we are arrived in the river bottomlands with its full soybean horizon. And over us, on this summer day, such a sky! Clouds in caravans separated by patches of blue. Roadside and parts of fields are thick with a small coreopsis, bright yellow with a fetching brown eye. We have Painted Buntings singing in dense rows of trees bordering the road. As the day goes on, we will also have them in shrublands along the river and in trees bordering the moist soil wetlands that comprise Frog. In one place, we have Painted, Bell's Vireo, Yellow-breasted Chat, Indigo Bunting, and Field Sparrow, with a steady chorus of Dickcissels. I am ready to call Painteds "common" here, but how can common apply to a creature with red feathers around its eyes and two shade of green on its body? And the blue, and the dark tail?

The idea of leaving early is to bird the big moist soil units before our enthusiasm evaporates in the heat. But just open the door and feel the crush. Bravely we bail from the car like so many Lawrences of Arabia (sans camels). We try for King Rails and Least Bitterns, but no luck. Cattle Egrets are flying over us constantly, but on the ground we have Little Blue Herons, and most of these are patchy, a lot of white and a little blue. The humid air is full of WITCHITY WITCHITY from Common Yellowthroats. One sails low over us, riding its wings and singing from the sky. A sleek black Great-tailed Grackle squeaks and clacks in cat tails, soon joined by a brownish female. Dive-bombing Red-winged Blackbirds dispute the presence of their considerably larger cousins.

The first boom I assume is a military jet, or perhaps artillery from Fort Chaffee. But then comes another, and distant lightning. A genuine summer thunder-boomer is building south of us. Blue clouds spread, sun disappears, cooling breeze rises. Did I say, Like a miracle? Two male Painted Buntings go chest-to- chest in aerial combat and a Prothonotary Warbler sings from willows. I look up at sky scraps, Cattle Egrets brilliant white against blue. It is astonishing just to be alive on such a day, under such a sky, just to hear the booms, just to feel the breeze.

On the way out of Frog we pull off at a good spot to scan the Arkansas River, now without the crushing sun, with a cool breeze. In smart formation, a loquacious flock of 35 Canada Geese cross the river and settle in great honking splashes. Along the far shore I count up to 26 Great Egrets. Two Double-crested Cormorants own logs out in the water. Part of the reason for the stop here is Least Terns. And there they are, too, three of them, working from shallow dives, from the low sky.

PEOPLE DAMAGE TO WOODPECKER HABITAT June 22, 2011

When I'm out giving bird programs I hear from folks who have woodpecker problems. They worked and saved and finally afforded a hilltop lot with nice old trees in a nice piece of woods where they built that dream house, often of fine wood. Then, as winter starts to break, and spring dawns, here come the woodpeckers, hammering and drilling the dream home. The woodpeckers discover they have new uninvited neighbors and a novel opportunity, a fine place for loud drumming and at times, a storehouse of insect-filled wood, just right for some serious excavation.

OK, first, let's set the record straight: the woodpeckers were here first. They did not invite us to the neighborhood. The problem is almost always put this way: "woodpecker damage" but isn't it really "people damage"? But I digress. Whoever was first, whoever has ultimate fault, we must live in a no-fault environment. So to answer the questions, I usually keep my pro-woodpecker bias to myself, and instead refer to publications that have taken a scientific look at this.

I was thinking about this because the June 22, 2011, issue of Cornell Lab eNews has a good section on this topic. Embedded in the article are PDF files for two interesting papers: "Assessment of management techniques to reduce woodpecker damage to homes" and "External characteristics of houses prone to woodpecker damage" (both by Emily Harding and others). A product called "Irri-Tape" was the most effective deterrent. Groove plywood siding was the wood type most likely damaged.

I've also picked up a few other publications. My old employer, the USDA Forest Service, published "How to prevent woodpeckers from damaging buildings" (by Tony Jasumback and others). This is a good general discussion of the problems and some suggested solutions.

"Woodpecker damage, a simple solution to a common problem" is available from Texas Parks and Wildlife. These folks found that placing suitable boxes in problem areas lead to happy results for all. Or as they put it, "So far, the homeowners and the woodpeckers are pleased with the results and it was a very cheap, efficient method of dealing with the problem. It is yet another example of how people can adjust a little and live in harmony with nature." Amen to all of that.

360 DEGREE SKY June 26, 2011

An Upland Sandpiper stands on a fencepost, iconic prairie figure seemingly oblivious to a strong west wind. The perch overlooks miles of grass any which way we look. Our car slowly approaches, stops, and binoculars ready, we prepare to disembark. But then the Upland drifts slowly to the grass and out of sight. This is disappointing, but then up comes another, right

beside the car. Under graceful cup of wing, it hovers outside in the wind, by our windows. Inside our car, gasps of surprise, pleasure, and sounds of cameras.

Welcome to big green horizon, 360 degree sky. Welcome to Tallgrass Prairie Preserve, north of Pawhuska, Oklahoma.

Briefly, an Upland Sandpiper hangs in my mind, incongruously seeming to peer into the car at we six explorers from northwest Arkansas. The wind-hoverer has drifted away, but then another Upland appears from out of the grass, into the road, calls, and walks deliberately and slowly away from us, Killdeer-like. We have stopped near an active nest? Or perhaps recently fledged young? Either way, in this big green country something important and exciting is invisible to us, something central to future Junes on the prairie.

We have come fully armed with field guides for birds, reptiles, and even geology, and especially prairie flowers, a rolling, air-conditioned library to the great outdoors. But you don't need a mammal guide for scattered herds of dark placid-looking bison and their golden calves that casually cross the road. Busy local ranchers and gas field workers slow down for them, but maybe not all appreciate how they cross at their own pace, like they own the place. But thankfully this is our day to slow and appreciate, and we can choose to stop and linger with them and big swaths of purplish flowers, Monarda, or Wild Bergamot, and in at least one spot, a fetching patch of purplish Amorpha, leadplant, near where bison have bedded down.

We want a better look at the ensemble of bison families and leadplant, 360 degree sky, and endless green, plus a good take home image. Shaggy and shedding dense winter fur, adult bison closely mind sleek calves. Behind the bison, a Grasshopper Sparrow sings from across the field. We probably should stay in the car, as advised, but instead we are out in the leadplant landscape. As we charge out to see flowers, bison prepare to charge us. Watchful dark-eyed stares become no nonsense scowls. Fools for natural history we are, and now without undue dignity, backing into the car.

Tallgrass Prairie Preserve is in the Flint Hills, named for rocky terrain under the grass. It kept the country from being plowed, hence saved the prairie. One beneficiary is the eastern collared lizard. Welcome to Jurassic Park, Flint Hills style. At an astonishing one foot in length, and basking on large rock slabs, it is a relic of ancient times, dinosaur-like. A male atop a pointed slab displays his size and power to great effect, green body, orangish-yellow throat, and black collar readily visible. The road cuts through a low hill and Richard spots another atop a small rock. Big but mostly plain-looking, it shows distinctive red spots along its body. These make it a gravid female and that explains why, despite our approach, she is reluctant to leave the rock and a burrow we see when we get close.

Moist June clouds seem to rise from behind low grassy hills. Along a path dominated by songs of Dickcissels and a distant Bell's Vireo, we identify a tall hawkweed with dense gray hairs, rose gentian, and phlox-like blue hearts, to list only three, and above us, the play of wind-driven clouds rising massive, many-shaped, and curtain-like, over a moving landscape. There are

scattered small oaks, with shade, and it would be fine to sit there for all the acts, for as long as the show goes on.

(Joe Woolbright from Siloam Springs used his suburban to haul us. Besides me, this included Jacque Brown (Centerton), David Oakley (Springdale), Joan Reynolds (Rogers), Richard Stauffacher (Fayetteville). I thank all for disparate talents transforming such days into a living, evolving university of the great outdoors.)

JULY

FROM ROADSIDE DITCHES July 1, 2011

The hour's drive from Fayetteville to the former Beaty Prairie at Maysville can be sobering. The land remains prairie-like flat and refreshingly open, but native summer flora is sparse. Where once inspiring masses of yellow-flowered compass plants dominated, there's mainly invasive fescue and Johnson grass. But at Maysville spiritual and perhaps ecological refreshment is at hand. Green stalks of blazing stars, purpling from the top down, are remnants of what once covered many square miles. I see them on the right-of way along highway 72 east of Maysville in Benton County.

Purple wild mint, Monarda fistulosa, is in full bloom today, fragrant memory of Beaty Prairie. Initially I stop, not for flowers, but because I hear a Painted Bunting singing in a dense fencerow. I ease over on the highway shoulder and happily mash a bunch of Johnson grass. And parked just out of the traffic, it's time to watch and listen, trouble lights flashing for safety.

On the Monarda is a fat yellow skipper and in zooms a hummingbird moth. There are also white and yellow sulphurs, some pollen-covered bumblebees, and a hot prairie wind keeping all in motion. Watching them, I hear Dickcissels, Northern Bobwhite, and a Brown Thrasher. There's also a Blue Grosbeak, but where? I spot it up the road, just as it flies from atop a compass plant.

Fifty yards up I've again stopped on the shoulder, looking down at ashy sunflowers, mountain mint, rattlesnake master, and a patch of hairy wild petunia. It's a wet ditch, apparently, because spreading out from the flowers is prairie cordgrass, sharp blades nodding rhythmically in the breeze. I hear Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Eastern Meadowlark, Red-winged Blackbird, and Orchard Oriole. Indian hemp is covered with butterflies. Fledgling Dickcissels are being fed out of the nest. A Grasshopper Sparrow is singing on a barbed wire fence midst hay fields that have been cut and baled, perhaps including the sparrow's nest.

There are no protected parcels associated with Beaty, no natural areas of public land. What remains is in roadside ditches along highways 72 and 102 and in a few prairie swales where natural springs keep the ground too wet to effectively plow or graze. Across the road is such a swale, covered with sawtooth sunflowers that may reach 10 feet by late summer.

In addition to checking highways, I drive Beaty Road to the Missouri state line. Interesting are pioneer-era cemeteries, an old school, and farms, but almost no native flowers. The edge of one field is planted to giant sunflowers, but none of the various native sunflowers remain. I'm certain winter birds will enjoy this patch at least as much as the black oil sunflower seeds in my yard. But it's like we're in reverse. First we wipe out the natives, then bring back simulacrums.

More seeds are an improvement over nature, some would say. Only a cranky visitor from what amounts to a different planet even notices, much less prefers, one sunflower over another.

After Beaty Road, it's too hot to do anything except return to Fayetteville. Speeding along air-conditioned on a hot July day, afloat in a virtual universe, I wonder if it is me, rather than native flowers, that is confined in roadside ditches. In past years most of my mid-summer Maysville trips have been for Swainson's Hawks and Grasshopper Sparrows. Seeing the once rich flora reduced to remnants, and seemingly confined in spaces like roadside ditches, I'm nudged toward a big picture.

MID-SUMMER CREEK WALKS – UPPER BUFFALO July 3, 2011

In early July there are serious questions about moisture. All is wilt in my Fayetteville yard. But as I head toward the Buffalo River's upper valley, one hour east, the sun is an iridescent orange mass pulsating pinks through a jagged green tree canopy, moisture-laden blue clouds scattered above. A cardinal sings fresh and new at the rise.

At the Buffalo in Boxley valley, fog is so dense there's no sun and no mountain tops, and the humidity -- or hume ah did ditty as my Dad once put it humorously – is close to light rain. But the valley is cool, moist, green, like an extended spring. Won't need canoe, kayak, or anything fancy today. The Buffalo is low but flowing, and perfect for a creek walk.

There's no one else at the Ponca low water bridge, like I'm the first post-Ice Age human in the valley. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds zip among astonishing pink flowers on an old mimosa leaning precariously over the river. I hear chips and soon have a close Louisiana Waterthrush, all pink legs and tail-bobbing across smooth brown cobbles. Nearby I spot another, also working for bugs, and it sings like May.

Powerlines run above the old bridge, and this morning fledgling Northern Rough-winged Swallows perch on the wires. As late as June 24, adult swallows were still feeding them nearby in rock crevice nests. Now adults forage up and down the Buffalo, snagging insects. At the powerline they pause briefly mid-air, poking food in open mouths. A Yellow-billed Cuckoo flies across the river and up on the mountainside, I hear a Scarlet Tanager's hoarse singing, but can't see it.

Here are the rules: walk like a Great Blue Heron, slow, watchful, one foot at a time. Stick to the shallows, look at and listen to everything. Don't walk too far: think density of experience, rather than distance or endurance.

Already at 8:30, there are jug-o-rums of bullfrogs, and right in front of me, on an elm leaning 15 feet over the water, a thick midland water snake, with copperhead-like brown stripes. I'm imaging the wild frenzy of swinging paddles if a canoe floats under this limb and the disturbed but entirely harmless water moccasin drops off and into the boat. But today there's water enough only for creek walking.

In the shallows, with my feet in flowing water, I attend the busy affairs of a miniature forest of water willow (Justicia americana). The engaging flowers remind me of irises, petals with blue, purple, white. I sit on a convenient cobble and watch clearwing hummingbird moths making the rounds of flowers, plus spider-webby combos of black and orange on crescent butterflies, silver spotted skippers, various bees, and stunning damsel flies. Have I left anything out? Well yes, quite a lot, but it's an empire unto itself, a universe indifferent to what we view as critical and important, valuable and not commodifiable. You can't convert skippers to dollars or euros, and that is the bottom line: whole and complete without us and our values. And a darter investigates the strange universe of my feet.

A Hooded Warbler sings in the adjacent, shady bottomland forest, and what I first thought a Prothonotary Warbler turns out to be an Ovenbird. Red-eyed Vireos sing with vigor, like May, even as a rising mid-summer chorus of dogday cicadas speaks otherwise. American Goldfinches are flying back and forth overhead, chippity chip, and suddenly I spot Northern Cardinal. What a fantastic creature, bold red and black, big bill and stunning crest. I remind myself how easy it is to fall into the simplistic laziness of judging ordinary what is truly extraordinary. And if that's not lesson enough, I spot several Great Crested Flycatchers perched on a huge beech snag.

Ahead, a grayish bluff line looks sporty with its attendant masses of rich green Venus-hair ferns. An Eastern Phoebe is catching insects on the bluff and it flies to a fern clump – and voila! – I can see an active nest there, a gem in the crown of ferns. And while I'm watching and wondering about the status of this nest, two Broad-winged Hawks fly from the stand of trees above the bluff. Over me I hear their distinctive pewee-like whistle and below, flowing water.

OLD MAN IN THE MOUNTAINS July 6, 2011

With temps headed for 100, I vote for clear water and black shade along Lee Creek at Devil's Den State Park. There are Summer Tanagers and Eastern Phoebes, and if birding slows, busy rocks full of puzzling marine fossils. And there's rising and falling zuh zuh zuh zuh zzzzzz zuh zuh of dogday cicadas. Its joy of the familiar and songs of childhood, still total pleasure for this old man in the mountains.

Heading south out of Fayetteville, nothing is ahead but Boston Mountains, a grand plateau formed several hundred million years ago. It started broadly flat and nothing mountain-like, its upper layers mainly sandstone and shale deposited in an ancient river system. But millions of years of down-cutting, drip, drip, drip, and now our land is a series of flat topped ridges with stair step-like slopes, marching away blue and poetic in the distance. At Devil's Den, you fall from the sunny plateau top of farms and pastures to a bottom with Lee Creek and its shady, birdy riparian forest. It's the face of the planet growing old and experienced in a vertical drop of only 1000 feet.

Here's a Jeff Foxworthy-like concept on the Road to Devil's Den. You know you are on the right road when there are no 70 MPH signs, when four dogs of inscrutable lineage lounge at the

crossroads and ignore you, and when even modest speed is unacceptable to three guinea hens ahead of you. At top speed you hear Red-eyed Vireos singing and you can safely dig out your binoculars for a quick look at Cooper's Hawk.

Lee Creek is now dried up, or more accurately, the flow is under gravel bars and most visible water is in cool pools. On a fairly isolated bend of the creek I begin to find vultures perched in several big old sycamore snags, plus other vultures on the cobbles by a pool. I pile down on a big sandstone cobble in the shade in the middle of what would in another season be creek, and take in the whole spectacle, one of the greatest of the Boston Mountains.

I get 51 birds at one count, including adults and young-of-the-year, and at least 10 of them are Black Vultures. One Black standing on the cobbles watches but mainly ignores me. This is pleasing. It makes me feel I am not the enemy. I suppose this says more about me than it does the bird. Like proverbial old mountaineers back in Ozark hollers, they live here and thrive here. This is their place and they keep an eye on the newcomers.

From their perches in snags they absorb July sun into their wings. By 10:00 many are up and away, mounting a blue summer sky, big kettles of both vulture species spiraling out into the universe. They are soon out of sight, and gone. Gone to juicy, just ripe, road-killed skunks, armadillos, white-tailed deer, bunny wabbits, the big rat snakes cut in hay baling, and other choice stuff just awaiting their interested presence. God only knows what else they may find in the Ozarks far outback, hidden from our prying eyes, and he isn't telling.

Finally, just so no one thinks I just sat on a rock out in a dry creek bed, like some old retiree, here's an edited partial bird list from when I got parked at 8:30 AM. They are presented in the order found: Pileated Woodpecker, Northern Parula, American Crow, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Chickadee, Summer Tanager, Northern Cardinal, White-breasted Nuthatch, Eastern Kingbird, Red-bellied Woodpecker, American Robin, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Warbler. Here are a last few: Fish Crow, Black-and-White Warbler, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Louisiana Waterthrush, Hairy Woodpecker, Yellow-throated Vireo (11:00 AM). The actual list is longer, but that big cobble in the shade out in the dry creek bed is calling.

TURTLES CROSS THIS ISLAND July 7, 2011

An island in the Arkansas River at the mouth of the Mulberry is crisscrossed freeway-like by turtle tracks. Some lead to eggs or egg shells, others begin where the turtle hauled out, crossed the sand, and crawled back in. Nearby are nesting Least Terns, Cattle Egrets, Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, and Little Blue Herons. It's like the whole energy of the Arkansas valley is summed here on a small island.

And you know you're in for full tilt summer when the dogday cicada chorus is a powerhouse already at 8:00 AM. Seriously sweaty, yes, but the Arkansas is so smooth flocks of Cattle Egrets, flying just a foot or two above the water, create these energetic, long reflections of white wing-beats, just barely rippled by the river. And too, you know you are in the right place, at the right

time, when as you paddle up toward the nesting rookery, aromas of thousands of herons and egrets is like some great green chicken house, and indeed there are clucks and crows, constant cries of YAK YAK, YAWKA YAWKA YAWKA and GEER WOCK! GEER WOCK and various unearthly, engaging, wild vocalizations.

My estimate is about 1750 for Cattle Egrets, and something in the range of 10-25 for Little Blue Herons, Great Egrets, and Snowy Egrets. Cattle Egret nesting is going full blast. Incubation is underway in most nests, but adults are still flying into the rookery with fresh sticks for new nests, and there are already a few fledglings. There is noisy fighting, too, and in places a few dead birds and a punctured egg too far from nests to have been accidently dumped there. There are 10 Great Egrets foraging in a bay too shallow for the canoe. Fledgling Little Blue Herons actively trail 5 adults along the island's south side.

These are not the plain white Cattle Egrets so easily dismissed in the pasture. They are bright white, and upon the head, upper breast, and back are the pinkish-orange elegance of flower-like, ethereal plumes, province exclusively of the breeding season. With their basic white and these nuptial plumes, add long yellowish bills and legs, and golden eyes. But wonders do not cease here. One adult sports the plumage as above, but with reddish eyes, pink-reddish bill and legs. Thus does Nature paint her creatures as at creation. She sees nothing wrong with gilding the lily. Neither do I, and if you're going to go around the planet creating these amazing opportunities to showcase life, why not gild a sturdy bird like Cattle Egret?

Endangered Least Terns are on the sandy portion of the island, where strong floods collect and pile up small gravels. Their nesting estate is a mosaic of multi-colored pebbles, all smooth, some polished, blacks, grays, reds, browns, and everything inbetween. These rest on a shelf of regular sand, overlooking the river, like exclusive water front property of a different world. Birds on the nest don't exactly disappear into the pebbles, at least not when viewed through a spotting scope, but they do blend. I can see the long grayish upswept wings, white breast, black cap and mask, yellow bill with dark tip, and the Arkansas flowing just behind. All is in bright sun, and all god's creatures must pant to stay cool.

There appear to be four nests. When disturbed the terns sweep over the island with high-pitched DEER DEER DEER KIDEE KIDEE cries. A tern flies in with a minnow toward a bird on which I assume is a nest, and all at once the adult on the ground moves, revealing two fuzzy chicks that were being shaded.
I appreciate the moment and the hot situation. I have my hat on, too. (Joan Reynolds was the bow paddler for this expedition and I appreciate her help today.)

MARVELS July 8, 2011

From the edge of Piney Creek, a Louisiana Waterthrush chips, soon followed by song. An Indigo Bunting delivers bright doublets from a shortleaf pine on the sandstone bluff above. Judy Griffith, Joan Reynolds, and I are in cool shallows at Ninestone Land Trust, in southern Carroll County. Looking above, way above, two Turkey Vultures and one Black Vulture soar over our

well-baked, mountainous Ozark landscape. It is really good to be here now. How can you beat sounds of birds and rushing water, minnows schooling and flashing as they swim in a deep pool?

From our spot directly below Judy's home, the waterthrush is almost, but not quite, out sung by a spring flow cutting through a smooth sandstone bluff. Here we are in July and the flow remains clear, smooth, unhurried, well-groomed. As it passes over and falls, it separates like wind-blown hair into thin streams and droplets. Quiet water gone wild, now grayish rather than clear. And it slams into the deep, rocky pool below, spreading frenzy and energy of white bubbles. Well, slams is too much of a word for a fall of six feet, but it roils the pool's surface. No matter to crawfish, easy to see in the water, waiting on rocks below.

Welcome to waterthrush country, a great place anytime, but most especially now, when vegetation is curling brown, earth cracking, SWEPCO electrical generating plant burning hundreds of railroad cars of Wyoming coal to satiate our ravenous urban AC appetites.

Standing there admiring falling water, trying to see the waterthrush, we are surrounded by marvels. Joan notices pines successfully rooted in shallow holes pocking the almost vertical sandstone bluffs. I start examining the bases of these pines when suddenly something stunning green and black crosses my binocular view. Perched then on a spicebush shrub, I see polished emerald green, prominent dark eyes, clear wings black at the tip, and set off extraordinarily by a prominent white spot. Like a Greek chorus well-steeped in the natural history of the Ozarks, Judy and Joan respond "female ebony jewelwing," a damselfly. And we have the males too, with impossibly black wings.

Piney Creek had massive spring floods taking out parts of banks. Big sycamores now lean across the water, what Judy calls raccoon bridges. While root wads are partially exposed, the trees continue their duties; much remains in gravelly soil. They adapt to this unexpected lean in life by sending branches and fresh leaves up and vertical horizontal trunks. I'm thinking this may be something to consider myself, blown out of my comfort zone by a variety of storms. Maybe I too have the sap for some new leaves out of the old trunk?

OK, strange musings these are. Why waste my time here in private murk? I understand completely that I've fallen far from center. At least a half-bubble off, as one of my co-workers noticed years ago. But as I wander in a curious mental state, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo calls unseen nearby. I realize, for maybe the 1000th time, I've come here to the creek to be called back. It may be oppressively humid and lethargic, but undeterred, Red-eyed Vireos keep up songs, a steady chorus, with dogday cicadas, and that is good enough. As Thoreau said in his last breaths, one life at a time, and as I think now, we will have this one right here, thank you, and with whatever roots available.

And now Joan has spotted an artistic caddis fly egg case constructed and well-disguised between short plant stems. The fly larva is at home. This marvel noted, Judy and Joan head up the creek to look at a special liverwort. I remain behind, piled down on a boulder and listening

in on the pines above the bluffline. I hear a Yellow-throated Warbler and much louder, persistent, and insistent, wheezy HER REE! HER REE! begging calls of a fledgling Red-tailed Hawk. Closer, a Yellow-throated Vireo delivers its burry song in a walnut tree right along the creek.

THE DIVERSER IT GETS, CHESNEY AND STUMP July 11, 2011

Chesney Prairie Natural Area yesterday was a sunny field of native grass and flowers attended by Dickcissels in constant song, Northern Bobwhites in 3-4 places, patches of native flowers attended by a universe of insects, and 20 folks. It was the Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip, even as temperatures exceeded 100. We started with birds, added flowers, gorged on insects. As birder Neil Nodelman humorously put it, "The longer I'm here, the diverser it gets." Amen.

Right at the entrance a male Indigo Indigo Bunting sang on a leafless limb. I got my scope on it. Susan Raymond worked the broad rim of her hat over the top of the scope for the view. No mercy of shade on the prairie; it was a diverse hat day for sure. But at least we didn't wade in ticks, chiggers, and briars, unless we couldn't resist. Joe Woolbright mowed paths in vegetation already knee-high, in spite of heat and drought. Prairies can take it. In fact, prairies thrive on it. But if you are not a prairie, you need a good hat, like Susan's.

I could hear American Goldfinches flying over, and sure enough we found the first extravagant yellow blooms on ashy sunflowers whose seeds are finch magnets. We people may have had summer enough already, but this is early in the season for our workhorse ashy, so there are no seeds, but the diverse world of pollinators is full blast. I got my scope focused and was stunned by emerald green walking on flowers, soon joined by another, with black and white abdomen, like a Red-shouldered Hawk tail. What is that green bug? From behind came an answer. Green is probably a Halictid bee, the other likely Syrphid fly, a bee mimic. This from Amber Tripodi, PhD candidate in UA entomology. And furthermore, after my 100th question, with a big smile Amber laughs, "Don't bug me," a joke about her dissertation. She calls herself bee gal.

Digiscoping bugs on flowers, I forgot I was leading a bird trip. Brenda Gavilan, also much taken by the Halictid, wanted to try digiscoping with her camera phone. She experimented with settings and positioning to get the desired result. We bring new realities to the prairie.

Great purple wands of blazing star have spread across lower Chesney. Coming up behind the group, I was listening to Red-winged Blackbirds singing around some buttonbushes then watched as four chased a Red-tailed Hawk. Our field trip had come to halt in the purple field and was spread out in the sea, not just of purple, but of butterflies, hundreds and probably thousands. Yellow sulphurs and white sulphurs, skippers, hairstreaks, pipevine swallowtail, variegated skippers, to just put names on a few. Many of us had driven 25 miles or more for this trip. Along the way we may have seen a few butterflies; hell, you see a few in a Walmart floral department. But not this. Not native flowers derived from lineages stretching back, way way back before people. I counted 10 bug-type creatures of one sort or another on the head of a

single rattlesnake master. It's like suddenly meeting the Whos of Dr. Seuss's Whoville. Fast food this is not. Magnificence doesn't yield secrets in a glance.

I'd promised to try and wrap up by 10 AM, but we were stalled in purple. So, forward march! Through rising heat and humidity, past Eastern Kingbirds in a snag, past a Common Yellowthroat in cordgrass, past the first turkey feet on big bluestem grass, past patches of mountain mint with an interesting orange and black thread-waisted wasp, past an orange and black dragonfly, halloween pennant, past a snowberry clearwing moth (hummingbird-type) visiting blue-flowering germander, and a Northern Bobwhite flushing dramatically.
We got in a quick visit to nearby Stump Prairie, also with a Woolbright-provided path. Many thanks for that, and Bell's Vireo was in a thicket of indigo bush, as in past years. But it was now almost noon. In the crock pot most of the day and cooked enough, we called ourselves done.

FRISCO SPRING, IN THE RAIN July 13, 2011

Frisco is one of several springs joining to form Prairie Creek at Lake Atalanta in Rogers. An aerial view shows the urban landscape to the west, built entirely upon former tallgrass prairie. To the east, it's forested hills and hollers, now Beaver Lake and Hobbes State Park. It's a crossroads and that's why, biologically, it's so interesting, even on a rainy day in July.

I've met Joan Reynolds, who lives nearby, and we're birding and botanizing up Frisco Spring. Fish Crows happily investigate a turned-over trash barrel. There's a sharp chip of a waterthrush working the spring run, but which species? We have one nesting, another only in migration. Finally we hear snatches of Louisiana; an adult is teaching fledglings the ropes. Soon we have Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Blue Jays. American Goldfinches chipity-chip overhead, connecting forest and prairie. Then out of the morning comes the Rogers High School Mounties track team, headed uphill and seemingly undaunted by July.

The old rain crow, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, calls it from the slope: a bit of thunder, cu-cu-cu, and here comes rain. We try sheltering under the lean of a big box elder, but we're gonna get wet, and who cares? It's been 100 degrees for days. Rain slows, an Acadian Flycatcher sings, a hummingbird zips over the spring. Now the punishing July sun is blocked by heavy clouds and it's going to rain off and on until we quit, at 10:30. We hear, then spot, a Northern Parula up in the canopy. We hear songs of a Kentucky Warbler, unseen, down the spring. Every leaf is moving, not because of warblers, but rain drops.

Joan is looking for a plant very rare in Arkansas, bigleaf aster, Eurybia macrophylla. We head uphill, looking for blue flowers connected to big leaves, but instead encounter a tent and what looks like a long term camper. Asters tend to bloom a little later, so maybe we're early. About face, we turn back downhill and Joan's phone rings as we are looking at a possible hawk nest. I am reminded of my friend Joe Woolbright. With the left hand Joan holds the phone, talking to her mother. Binoculars are in the other hand. She talks and watches the nest, just like Joe. One

time when I was with him he solved an electrical wiring problem for a construction crew in Oklahoma while shading an orchid at Chesney Prairie so that I could get a good photograph.

Joan is full stride as we head back. First she spots the tiny bird's nest fungus, "nests" occupied with egg-like dark spores. Next comes turkey tail fungus. Growing shelf-like on a log, it does look amazingly like the tail of a Wild Turkey. And if these aren't enough, she's found a leafy liverwort. I look at the specimen with my binoculars turned upside down, making them a microscope, but it's blurry, through raindrops.

We didn't find Eurybia macrophylla, but the consolation prize, pawpaw fruits, are impressively big and green.

ASTONISHMENT ENOUGH July 19, 2011

At first light I'm on the porch in time for songs of Northern Cardinals, Carolina Wrens, Blue Jays and crickets. The air feels like spring. That's daily relief from our heat wave, an hour or two, enough to make the point earth-cracking heat is temporary and surely we won't have another 101 degree day. But yes we will, and when asked about it, the cardinal says WHOOPA WHOOPA CHA CHA CHA. I ought to go birding.

Terry Stanfill, of Eagle Watch Nature Trail at Gentry, has been sending me interesting emails about herons and egrets at SWEPCO Lake, an impoundment providing water for the coal-fired electrical generating plant. I'm going. At the parking lot American Goldfinches are collecting seeds from purple coneflower heads. A Blue Grosbeak sings from a big grassy field and down toward the lake, an Orchard Oriole. A trumpet vine is growing up a big oak and I spot several hummingbirds there and then hear a familiar song. But what? I hear it again: Warbling Vireo. Fall webworms have been at work on small trees along the trail. I am not surprised to hear CUH CUK CUK CUK in these trees and spot several Yellow-billed Cuckoos at work. Also Brown Thrashers in the same low trees.

Besides CHIP CHIPS of goldfinches the air is filled with hummy exhalations from the plant's landmark stack, rising 500 feet through a clear blue sky. On June 23 the lake was so high it topped an earthen walkway to a handy, well-constructed viewing platform. Now -- after almost a month of baking heat, and after thousands of railroad cars of coal burned for millions of kilowatts of electricity generated so our homes, churches, businesses and schools remain spring-like despite endless 101s -- the berm is happily out of the water and the north end is a big mudflat attended by KEEDEE KEEDEEs of seven Killdeers. I spot 23 Great Egrets scattered around the mudflat or perched in small dead trees, plus four more flying south, plus one Snowy Egret and one Little Blue Heron. SQUAWK says several Green Herons working the shallow water, disturbed by my sudden appearance. There is also a single cormorant, but it flies before I can get a close look.

The earthen berm is a handy corridor through a blooming, energetic thicket of buttonbushes. I think the high water was a happy time for them. Buttons are well-attended by flies, bees,

wasps, beetles, clearwing moths, plus a bunch of butterflies, including Hollywood show stoppers like eastern tiger swallowtail. These include bright yellowish males with tiger stripes and dark females with their brilliant mix of black, iridescent blue, and reddish-orange.

The Red-winged Blackbirds still find matters of interest in this thicket. As we head into the second half of July, blackbird life is decidedly not now about that single defended buttonbush with its precious nest. Males have mainly lost that incandescent scarlet wing patch of spring, now become pedestrian red. The brilliant yellow is also faded. I assume no male red-wing would be caught dead with brilliant flags of the nesting season, because now it's mainly about fitting in, about sticking together in flocks.

My (sun-blocking) cap is off in honor of the World of Buttonbushes. It's the utter banishment of all things dogdays-dreary. And if 27 Great Egrets, a forest of buttonbushes and tiger swallowtails, and a couple of Red-headed Woodpeckers don't provide astonishment enough for one summer morning, up boils a rise of vultures, mostly Turkeys, slowly clearing a deep green, low forested ridge, kettling under a two-thirds moon, then seeming to flatten out and spread to the four corners.

FAR FROM THE BAKING-LOTS, AND HALLELUJAH FOR THAT July 21, 2011

I have this directly from the bill of a singing Northern Parula: our whole 101 degree July world isn't necessarily as suffocating as a visitor from outer space would assume while hovering within heat shimmers of a typical asphalt Walmart baking-lot, or just to be fair and balanced, the whole of baking-lot called Fayetteville. Of course it's the depressing grand rotisserie of mid-dogdays, if you're stuck in it. But happily, we're not. On Steel Creek, where it joins the upper Buffalo in Newton County, it doesn't look or feel like a rotisserie of 101s, or even a perpetual ring in Dante's Inferno. It's pleasant, like September.

Most of Steel Creek has gone under the gravels, but there are pools, still cold as natural springs that feed them, and full of interesting darters and crawfish, plus Louisiana Waterthrush, a visitor from inner cool space, and demonstrating reality with sharp chips and tail-bobs. We're far from the baking-lots, and hallelujah for that! It is technically 20 degrees cooler and at least 100 degrees more interesting. You don't have to take my word for it or even waterthrush chips. I heard it direct from a Hooded Warbler, singing in the low woods, with a mixed flock including Black-and-white Warbler, Tufted Titmouse,
Downy Woodpecker, and Carolina Chickadee.

Steel Creek comes to its Buffalo junction in riparian forest against a soaring sandstone bluff. Joan Reynolds and I have parked in a shady spot often used by canoeists or horseback riders. From that spot we can see dark cave-like openings in the bluff. And we hear something like croaks? Muffled barks? What? The shade is overpowering, the cold water stunning, and especially when contrasted with baking-lots. When is this place; that is, where are we in the calendar? It must be September, not mid-dogdays. Instinctively I check my watch; July 21, and it tells no lies.

Along Steel Creek there are big sycamores and understory ironwoods with a trunk that reminds me of well-muscled arms and drooping ornament-like fruits. A rivercane thicket covers the slope. There are also pawpaw trees, patches of wild ginger, Christmas ferns, spicebush, and at least one wild azelia. Out from what seems sheer sandstone grows an endemic flower, Arkansas alumroot (Heuchera villosa var. arkansana), fuzzy geranium-like leaves and clusters of tiny white flowers, a mid-summer glory. Then we spot vultures.

Two fledgling Black Vultures perch in a sycamore in front of the caves. We study them through a hole formed by leaves and grapevines. They are big and black like adults, but in place of obviously wrinkled gray skin of adults, they retain a few short head feathers and their bills have not acquired the distinct two-toned look. They seem to be waiting, and I assume adults are waiting too, for them to round up their own bloated skunks. Perhaps this is graduation day when young'uns become journeymen vultures.
Above the immediate bluffline are more rock strata and at least another bluffline or two, overall more than 500 vertical feet of rock. There are Ashe's junipers up there and plenty of isolated perches for big birds and all around sky so they can easily lift off and soar. I figure the adults are conveniently watching the whole scene.

Standing down in the Buffalo bottoms at Steel Creek, looking above the last bluffline, it's a world of clouds, like swirls of soft ice cream, and patches of blue, and some otherwise feathery white clouds heavy and purplish with moisture. Puffs of bright angle-slides separate purple clouds and pure blue sky. It's like the air is drifting cosmic matter. And far away, black specks prove to be vultures, teetering and turning, cloudweavers, masters of a mid-July Ozark sky.

ACRES OF WATERMELONS July 23, 2011

This past Saturday, Jacque Brown, David Oakley, and I traveled down to a sandy island where birds nest in the Arkansas River. We got out of Fayetteville at 5 AM. Going through Alma, barely dawn at 6:17, the bank marquee said 90 degrees. Across from closed Mulberry Market, we spotted a Cattle Egret, then a European Starling, both on the sidewalk, both walking like Egyptians, the only stirring on this early Saturday morning. At 6:50 a male Painted Bunting was up and about near the Mulberry wastewater treatment plant, but dogday cicadas were already screeching it out.

In a swampy back slough along Vine Prairie Road south of Mulberry, we saw, and simultaneously inhaled, overpowering odiferous evidence of death -- dark water covered with small shiny fish attended by many white birds, including Great and Snowy Egrets and Little Blue Herons. They seemingly cared not at all about the horrendous smell, but took off without undue deliberation when they saw us. So much for us, masters of the universe.

We launched at 7:05 into the mighty, sauna-like, Arkansas River – or perhaps, to be more precise, pushed our canoe through some head-high Johnson grass, then let it down the bank with a rope, while avoiding poison ivy. The bird island lay just east, below a dawn sun already a

burning spear over flat water. Adult birds were dark silhouettes against morning light and haze, flying back and forth in all directions, with the island at center.

Other than a nearby gas compression station, the main sounds were constant YAKAKAKAKAKA of young birds in active nests, mostly Cattle Egrets, but also Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, and Little Blue Herons. There are now many fledglings or nests with well-developed young. And of course, where thousands of birds nest there is much death and opportunity. We saw 15 vultures (mostly Turkey) hanging out near the rookery. In terms of recycling death, Jacque made the sage observation that vultures serve as alligators here.

Least Terns are still rearing young on the island's pebbly tip. We saw 5 agitated adult terns in the air and soon found the cause. A boat with two men and boy were there, and they were teaching a dog to retrieve. I walked over and explained about the terns as an endangered species. They were interested, polite, and soon left. When we paddled around the island tip we saw at least three fairly well-grown tern chicks.

The southbound migration was in evidence, too. We saw two Least Sandpipers and one Spotted Sandpiper on the island's mudflats and had an overflight by two Forster's Terns. Later, as we drove through Frog Bayou WMA, we saw two Spotteds along the shoreline and six Forster's perched on snags out in the river.

We were back to the car by 9:15, the day still young and promising. There is another sandy island that I thought was nearby, so we explored a farm road new to us to find a launch for the boat. This proved more adventure than anticipated. At first the road was conveniently graveled, but that ended at a gas well, and beyond it was a sandy track, and not through the Arkansas River valley as expected, but more like Death Valley, albeit with soybean fields and deep, tire-sucking sand. It ended, not at a place where we could launch for island adventures, but at NO TRESPASSING signs mounted on the edges of a tight, barbed-wire enclosure, and seemingly well-defended, too.

What is this? Fort Knox, home of America's gold? And the bullion so well protected? It was gold of sorts, especially in summer, in Arkansas: big green striped watermelons, acres and acres of watermelons!

ALONG A MOWED PATH AT CHESNEY PRAIRIE N.A. July 24, 2011

Blazing star fields are fading the stunning, fresh royal purple we enjoyed during the Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip to Chesney Prairie Natural Area on July 10. Chesney is increasingly bathed in ashy sunflowers, strong like July sun. American Goldfinches in their seasonal best check flowers, but "increasingly" is the right word, because the ashy peak is ahead, as is maximum seed availability, and the goldfinch hightide.

Butterflies have moved from blazing stars to ashy sunflowers, including high numbers of variegated fritillaries, orangish-brown, with black lines dividing color like panels of stained glass.

These fritillaries also like passionflower, common here, and one is laying eggs on passionflower leaves right along the walking trail.

We hear BOB-WHITE! as soon as we are out of the car, and again, not so far away from a green metal T post along the path. Joan Reynolds has spotted a fresh-plucked pile of feathers, some colorful. Unlike the Smithsonian's late Roxie Laybourne, I'm no feather expert. But one is whitish with irregular black lines that might fit into the showy breast of a Northern Bobwhite. Another is cryptic, with earthy irregular patterns of wavy brown and dappled white, dead leaf-like. There are several coveys associated with Chesney. An alert Cooper's Hawk might be responsible.

I am pleased here to announce that big bluestem grass is well up and many clumps display characteristic turkey foot-shaped seed heads. Dickcissels are singing, but now it's more calls than songs and with regular chips from within the grass. The females fly toward these chips, often with green-colored food in their powerful bills. In one case, we see fresh-caught green pretty well and it looks like a katydid with big green wings and extraordinarily long antennae.

A female Dickcissel that perches close to the path has what looks like a small version of a chicken leg. When we look through the scope it appears to be the leg of a big grasshopper. But it is very hot and very bright and that does things to your logic. Later, in the cool comfort of home, I have my digiscoped images up on the computer. Our female caught her young'ns a big grasshopper all right, but what's in her beak is the juicy and presumably nutritious abdomen, with head and legs removed.

Chesney's mowed path heads down toward a now dry creekbed, then begins a loop back up. In the shade of some trees, and out of our sight, American Robins are vocalizing excitedly. I have heard this often when fledglings were on the ground, in my yard, stalked by cats. Joan soon spots a fledgling with spotted breast. But as we walk toward the disturbance, things get suddenly quiet. Nothing, say like Cooper's Hawk, flies off, or not that we can see. But what does fly is a Great Blue Heron. Dogdays drought upon us, creatures accustomed to fish in ponds and creeks may be running out of attractive options. Could also have been a feral cat, coyote, or?

Ahead, an American Kestrel is perched on a snag out in the pasture adjoining Chesney. A Red-headed Woodpecker is there too, on a lower bare limb. Overhead, we spot a second kestrel, this one carrying a small mammal with a long tail, headed toward the snag, calling KLEE KLEE KLEE KLEE as it passes over.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DOUG July 25, 2010

My friend and ornithological mentor, Doug James, will open his 85th year on July 25. Just for the record, he was born in Detriot in 1925. I will be out of town on the 25th, so I'll just have my say right here, right now.

Doug and I go back to 1977 when our shared interest in art and nature found us working together on an art exhibit. I'd been traveling to the Mississippi Gulf Coast as a pilgrim, studying

the life and art of Walter Inglis Anderson of Ocean Springs. He was the celebrator of the natural history of the Gulf Coast, and especially Horn Island, now part of Gulf Islands National Seashore. He died in 1965, but his family accepted and nurtured my interest.

Artists Robert Ross, Neppie Conner, Martha Sutherland and others in the University art community were interested in having a Walter Anderson show in Fayetteville. His family was willing to loan to us, no strings attached. This grew into plans for two galleries (Oct 3-22, 1977), with some work in the Arkansas Union Gallery (now the Annie Kittrell Gallery) and the Fine Arts Gallery. Annie Kittrell (Arkansas Union Programs), Billie Giese (an art student), and I drove a UA van to Ocean Springs and loaded it up with what would today be millions of dollars of art. VOILA, we had drawings, paintings, pottery, and hand-carved furniture.

Anderson was an avid birdwatcher and bird drawer. He painted birds on pottery and carved them in wood. He created huge murals with birds as central figures. We really needed a bird expert to help us interpret Anderson for the exhibits. This is where Doug came in. He showed up at the Union Gallery and began examining the art in a professorial manner.

Besides drawing and painting, Anderson wrote what he called logs, essentially a journal of his day-to-day experiences while doing the art on the Gulf islands. Doug read these logs and found phases that pertained to what was happening when Anderson was doing each watercolor. Doug collected these relevant statements and positioned them next to each of the paintings and drawings.

Besides traveling to the Gulf Coast trying to figure out Walter Anderson (and myself), I had been writing weekly feature stories for a newspaper, the *Grapevine*. Doug had seen my bird pieces. Before we were done with the Anderson exhibit, we had started talking about his state bird book project. My features tended heavy on poetic phrase and light on science. I don't know if Doug approved of them in an ornithological way, but he knew I was interested in birds and nature, and especially that I could write. That is, he saw potential in me as a collaborator on what became Arkansas Birds (1986).

Looking over the 30+ years of friendship, I can see that what happened between Doug and I over the Anderson show has been repeated with others. He has seen in many a rough-hewn graduate student potential others couldn't see; he provided opportunity for potential to flower. Off campus, he has encouraged the public to become involved in ornithology. Consider his role in founding Arkansas Audubon Society. As president of Wilson Ornithological Society, he encouraged networks between professional and non-professional bird enthusiasts. He helped found and then helped resuscitate Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society.
I could go on here, but … Happy Birthday, Doug. Once the beers and cake are downed, there's more work to do. We are glad at your being freshly minted at 85 and we look forward to sharing with you the work ahead.

THE BEE WITH THE GOLDEN LEG(s) July 29, 2011

Our native post oaks and big bluestem grasses can take the high heat and drought. So can prairie natives like blazing stars and compass plants. Birds that nest in our former prairie lands, like Dickcissels, take this weather in stride. At the very least, they aren't obviously wearing any

big floppy sun hats and none that I've seen recently were lathered up with sunscreen. This is their time.

It's like there are whole different worlds that exist side-by-side. I was reminded of this on a visit to Searles Prairie Natural Area in Rogers this morning. Searles is just 10 acres, and it is all that is left of what was around 25 square miles of native Ozark prairie, now rebranded as Rogers and Bentonville.

I park my car off highway 102. Yards and fields outside Searles look just like yards and fields all over northwest Arkansas: brown, crisp, overdone, burned up. Except, that is, where lawn or flowerbed is still being watered. By comparison, Searles is seriously green. Native prairie plants there – the same that settlers who came here in the 1830s saw – put down roots and evolved strategies to deal with July and August. A true green zone it is.

You see big swaths of purple. These are blazing stars, with stout straight stalks maybe three feet high. In the middle of this high heat and drought, it's all about lush purple flowers. They are doing this without water piped from Beaver Lake. Midst the purple are patches of tall compass plants, marked by bright yellow flowers, many on a single stout stalk six feet high. Each stalk has a few to maybe a dozen flowers, 4-5 inches in diameter, and these are natural magnets. American Goldfinches perch up there, brilliantly, as do Dickcissels. Bring on the heat.

Through my spotting scope I see bees with golden hind legs. They radiate pure gold in flight. Turns out this is another part of what makes Searles a green zone. Their bodies are hairy and the hind legs are big and flat. When they visit flowers the pollen sticks to hairs on their bodies. They periodically comb the pollen onto these special hind legs. So who is this bee who spins gold from dogdays?

I ran this question by Amber Tripodi, PhD candidate in entomology at UA-Fayetteville, AKA "the bee gal." Her answer: Svastra obliqua obliqua, a long-horned bee (in the Apidae family with honey bee, bumble bees, and carpenter bees). Some just call it the sunflower bee, since it is so fond of them.

There is a fair amount of concern that we are losing our bees because many agricultural crops are pollinated by them. To my untrained eye, bee populations look pretty healthy out in the green zone of native prairie. I'm not so sure about what surrounds it and our futures in the asphalt zone. You have to wonder whether or not we are clever enough to sustain our ever extending way of life. To paraphrase the bard, it may be something like To bee or not to bee, that is the question. What I mean is, what impacts bees, impacts birds, impacts people.

AUGUST

NEVER HEARD OF NO STINKIN' BEATIE PRAIRIE August 1, 2011

A vigilant female Dickcissel is chipping and perched spread-leg on a yellow compass plant. It reminds me of a Willow Flycatcher whit call. Compass plants provide a solid perch and she's using it to keep track of a fledgling hidden in dense prairie vegetation along the highway. Open fields roll in all directions. On a big scale, this is sky and hayfield, south breeze, blinding sun.

Dickcissels among ashy sunflowers rising to their full golden glory and blazing stars fading rich purples. Add columns of blue-flowering verbenas, tiny white fog fruits, buttonbushes covered by tan-colored skippers and spicebush swallowtails, black, blue, and orange. Back by the fence is the sawtooth sunflower landscape, on the way to 8 feet or more.

These are my impressions of a small patch of the former Beatie Prairie along highway 72 east of Maysville in Benton County. Beatie was described in a report from the state geological survey for 1891 (published in 1893): "Beatie Prairie lies partly within Benton County, extending from the line of Indian Territory in a northeast direction across 20 N, 34 W and ending in 20 N, 33 W, section 6. Its length, within the state, is about six miles; its greatest breadth is on the territory line, where it is over two miles wide. The roads entering Maysville from the northeast and east traverse this prairie…"

Highway 72 is one such road. Something akin original prairie covers a few hundred yards along the highway and may contain an acre or two, one of the scattered remnants of native flowers hanging on along 4 miles east of Maysville. There are a few other such places nearby along highways 102, 72, and 43. From downtown Maysville south to Loux Road, a distance of about 4 miles, 43 has scattered compass plant, ashy sunflower, ironweed, and others. Total it all up and it may contain 20 acres, what remains of Beatie.

So divvy up North American birds by ecological groupings and note grassland birds exhibit steepest declines. A line here is straight and cutting as barbed wire. It's where compass plants end and Bermuda grass begins. It separates an historic and naturally productive ecosystem from farming culture commercially valuable. But it is unclear if it is sustainable to remove all big bluestem grass and Indian grass for the sake of more beef. Declines in grassland birds provide a suggestive thresh hold of potential consequences.

Of course, birding happens with or without the preservation of native prairies and their singular cargoes of plants – take Arkansas ironweed as an example -- and interesting insects, like the clearwing hummingbird moth perching on a blazing star. Swainson's Hawks nest here in summer, probably because it is a lot like the Great Plains, also prairie country. It is a treat to come up here in winter and find Harris's Sparrow; all that spilled chicken feed is bound to help.

But prairies are not defined by an open grassy place with Eastern Meadowlarks – that also defines a pasture with cattle or a big field full of chicken houses. Rather they are specific living things evolved and adapted to local reality.

With exception of a few sweet spots along the rights-of-ways of highways, is it not disturbing that the tallgrass prairie ecosystem upon which the local economy of northwest Arkansas is constructed -- and upon which our empire of grassland birds is based -- is not represented in a single acre of public property devoted to study and preservation of the local adaption called Beatie Prairie? Other than a few lines in a book published in 1893, we don't know a thing about it.
What's immediately missing is a public space. There is not a single protected prairie field where school kids can learn, scientists study, artists seek, bird watchers hear Grasshopper Sparrows. That is, there is no Beatie Prairie Natural Area, no Beatie Prairie Preserve, but there should be. We need a source of reference so we can understand where we have come from, what we must do to sustain.

Beatie exists only in Benton County history and only as a name on a local road and an old cemetery where 99.9% of all native vegetation has been removed. No compass plants there, no blazing stars.
We have run off into a ditch. Beatie Prairie? Never heard of no stinkin' Beatie Prairie.

Coveted MOST YELLOW award August 2, 2011

Early in morning at Chesney Prairie Natural Area ashy sunflowers all turn about as east as flowers can turn, facing brilliant yellow early morning sun. I feel summer tapering off despite the predicted 106 degrees in Fayetteville. Fall is quietly easing in.

For one thing, male Dickcissels have stopped singing. A female is perched atop a gaily-colored poke bush – green leaves, red stems, berries fresh green, others ripe black. She's keeping a sharp eye on fledglings hidden below. She calls low, buzzy BEEZIT BEEZIP with a few CHIPs and WHITs thrown in. Poke berries are popular; as kids we smeared them on our faces as Indian war paint. Many juicy black fruits have been removed. Under the burning regime called August, a heavy pokeberry crop is welcome, but it's going fast.

Chesney is blessed with many goldenrod species. These mark the fall and lo, one is blooming, competing with ashy sunflowers for the coveted Most Yellow award. I don't think anything can dethrone ashy sunflowers, but goldenrods raise the stakes by hosting a sublimely green katydid perched atop goldenrod buds. And not just any old katydid. Eyes, lower legs, and antennae are reddish with dashing chevrons on the upper legs. The long antennae are as impressive as some on police cars.

Like goldenrods, asters say fall. I've spotted my first southern prairie asters sort of hidden in the cool shelter of a thriving patch of big bluestem grass. I say sort of hidden because I'm not sure how well you can hide an elegant flower with a brilliant green roseate of pineapple-like bracts,

and atop that numerous blue petals surrounding a yellow disk. There's no mistaking fall, even at 106.

While seeking more asters I nearly walk into the web of an Argiope spider with a significant yellow abdomen. Its orb web with obvious white zigzag pattern hangs between tall sunflower stalks. As I stand there a variegated fritillary, eye-pleasing orange, black, and yellow, dodges the web, as does a hummingbird. But it is the American Goldfinches that steal the show.

Fancy goldfinch males look elegant in their gold, black, and white. There are fewer females; I assume they are tending nests. Of course, nesting finches and blooming flowers say summer, but there are now many ripe seed heads. Goldfinches at the sunflower harvest says fall in the Ozarks: fields of seeds, goldfinches pouring in from all directions. I want to watch so I attempt my just-another-fence-post-in- the-field routine.

Ashy sunflowers have multiple flowers on a stout stalk. The birds defy gravity by perching sideways on fuzzy stalks, contort up, down, around, or stretch their bodies to reach another ripe batch of seed. It's like a bunch of yoga poses. They perch on one flower head while reaching above with their bill, seeming to stand on tiptoes, to the next seed head. They bend way, way down to remove seeds from below, twist sideways around the stalk to the next seeds. With one foot they grasp a big bluestem grass stalk and with the other a sunflower head.

A fine male perches on a sunflower with a great view of Chesney's expanse. He sings CHET CHET CHET DE DE DE followed by WIT WIT. After a brief silence I hear another with what sounds like a question, PEE UR? Of course they sing in summer, in the nesting season, but might it also be something about thanks for a bountiful earth, for open space, for sun-loving flowers that produce seeds, for this day in the sun, even at 106? Then they're off and overhead with CHIPITY-CHIPs.

AGAINST A GENERAL BACKGROUND OF GREEN, FROG WMA August 7, 2011

Most interesting birds yesterday at Frog Bayou WMA: Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (2 adults, 1 juvenile), Upland Sandpiper (8), Buff-breasted Sandpiper (flock of 21), dowitcher species (1), White Ibis (1 adult), and a green Painted Bunting. Overall, we tallied 8 shorebird species. Drought has taken its toll on mudflats, but shallow pools remain. We also had Blue-winged Teal (6), American Coot (3), Pied-billed Grebe (2). Around one pool we saw 40 Great Egrets, 12 adult Little Blues and several harlequins (patchy blue-white sub-adults). Shorebirds, ibis, and night-herons were in a wet field just west of Unit 5, probably still a good place to forage on crawfish.

Out on the Arkansas River, everything sticking above water had a bird ornament. These included cormorants (6), Black Terns (3), Forster's Tern (4), Fish Crow (1), and several Great Egrets.

Our early beat-the-heat morning began auspiciously at McDonald's coffee stop in Alma. Many hundreds of dragonflies – mostly wandering gliders according to David Oakley – performed swirling patrols over the concrete parking lot, the asphalt lot at neighboring Bryant Preserving Company, and the little grassy dog potty between. The dragonfly mass seemed an anomaly until we reached Frog with its own dense dragonfly clouds. Ecologically-speaking, something was obviously up; probably not a good day for gnats and mosquitoes.

We didn't hear any singing by Painted Buntings, but we spotted one, and probably two, in Unit 5. A conspicuously green bunting was foraging on millet. We bunched up for the view, except for Oakley. He was lying down in the grass on the edge of Unit 4, obviously still alive, since his big camera lens was pointed up. Lying in the grass, in the heart of chiggerdom, one might logically assume he'd found the Ivory-billed Woodpecker of dragonflies. No, this is his field technique: subject eye level or lower, background blue sky or clouds. Back in the car he listed the day's dragonfly haul, in rough order of abundance. Number one, accounting for 99%, wandering glider; followed by Halloween pennant, slaty skimmer, widow skimmer, eastern amberwing, eastern pondhawk, 12-spotted skimmer, black saddlebags, plus probably 3-4 other species that would require looking at images collected during the day.

Jacque Brown discovered what she termed "faux birds," odd-shaped sticks or twisted leaves partially hidden in grass. One faux proved a Pied-billed Grebe, only its head poked from a mat of green vegetation.

From Frog we drove through Kibler toward the turf farms. I was remembering August 2004 when Sandy Berger saw 20 Buff-breasted Sandpipers, one of the best northwest Arkansas counts for this migrant. I was still working full-time then and was functionally or at least metaphorically sleepless until I had a chance to get out and bird the turf. In this respect, hope springs eternal.

Along the way today, we saw 13 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks at the Alma sewer plant, including one with six half-grown ducklings. Cattle Egrets were numerous all day, including 165 perched around ponds at King Ranch, and in ordered ranks like soldiers on dress parade. We found two Mississippi Kites, low over oak trees. Joan Reynolds could see they were eating on the wing. Jacque has a fine new lens and her photographs show both birds with swollen crops. We weren't sure it was dragonflies, but isn't it unlikely kites would pass up a swarm?

Today turf mirrored heat and drought. An Upland Sandpiper walked in shady wet below a mobile irrigator. A Buff-breasted Sandpiper flushed from the irrigated edge of a soybean field and Joan saw two Upland Sandpipers that had been in the muddy rows. Red-winged Blackbirds perched on the irrigator's metal arms. Otherwise, it was blinding sun and mostly bird free.

We finished around noon, temperature 106. Back toward Van Buren the road is lined with huge Arkansas River bottomland cottonwoods, rich green, black shade, no sign of stress, roots deep in flood plain soils. We got deep too, in Gatorade and bottled water. Rose Ann Barnhill, who researched as a graduate student in tropical Belize, countered drought with three quarts of

water. And of course, when we weren't admiring dragonflies or green buntings, Joan's car provided coldest AC and boldest imaginable contrast with early August.

Heading north toward Fayetteville on I-540, where the Arkansas River Valley transitions to the Boston Mountains, stressed hardwoods on the foothills were starting to show as narrow, conspicuous bands of brown against a general background of green.

WHAT UPLAND SANDPIPERS SAY August 8, 2011

There were two adult White Ibises and six Yellow-crowned Night-Herons (3 adults, 3 juveniles) at Frog Bayou WMA yesterday morning. The birds are feeding in a low, wet disked field with little vegetation and muddy in part. The ibises were constantly engaged in probing with their long decurved bills, usually up to their eyeballs, and wearing mud for shoes. I never could see for sure what they were finding, but so busy were they no one could fault them for lack of industry. Then they would pause, preen in a puddle, and return to mud, red face and pink bill all clean like new.

By comparison, the night-herons seemed mainly to stand around, watching with those bold, orange-reddish eyes, seemingly disengaged. Imperceptibly, they followed the mud, then all of a sudden, a crawfish was hauled up sideways, clamped in the heavy crab-crushing bill. Little Blue Herons, many in their patchy blue-whites, hung around with the night-herons, whereas Cattle Egrets came and went in strings and vees, 10-20 at a time. There were no Great Egrets in the moist field, but I counted 87 around a shallow pond nearby.

As I drove in at dawn, early morning singers included Bell's Vireo, Field Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak, Common Yellowthroat, Indigo Bunting, Northern Cardinal. I was surprised by all the song. Could it really be only a month ago that we took it for granted, that it would last forever? Upland Sandpipers were calling as soon as I got into the river bottoms, from across seemingly endless soybean fields.

I have been trying to figure out what Upland Sandpipers say during the Arkansas sojourn. Is it "Nice grass" or "Great grasshoppers" or some such? One says WERE WERE WIT! at first light, sun still bedded in the east. Then a flock of five, in early pink sky, flies low and directly over, calling WIDOW WIT! Soon I hear WIDA WIT! and PE R R WIT! and PERR PER WIT! And finally late in the morning, I manage to nail down a defining WIT IT! WIT IT! This from a bird unseen, gliding in grass.

The fields are surrounded by all kinds of voices, including some from the past. The present has its birds, whines of dogday cicadas, and steady roaring of gas well pumps all over the valley. And then there's my dad, Grover Ray Neal, who grew up in Van Buren just minutes east as a sandpiper flies. Gone almost 40 years, I nevertheless hear him along with gas pumps and Uplands. His voice is a native mix of western Arkansas twang and southern drawl, mediated by life as an enlisted sailor. An Upland's voice recalls its native grass; my dad's combines the valley

of the Arkansas with the cultural brew of a Navy ship. Like Uplands, he sounds like where he's been.

The Uplands have much in common, but every call sounds just a bit different. It shouldn't come as a big surprise. They are drawn from a vast nesting range, speaking various native grassland dialects. That's what we hear during their sojourn in Arkansas. Besides that, some may just talk funny like those of us started life in Fort Smith, upriver from Frog Bayou. It could very well be that proper speech, not to mention grammar, is as optional among Upland Sandpipers as it was for us kids.

WELCOMING GRASS August 11, 2011

Deep booms of far away thunder recalls historical accounts of the furious cannonade proceeding Pickett's charge at Gettysburg. In the wee dark of yesterday, hundreds of storied Confederate cannon fired away, not at Union lines on Cemetery Ridge, but on drought and heat. The storm held until I got to Vaughn in Benton County.

From this open former prairie, now pasture, fury gathered in the northwest, regiments of whipped-up and boiling gray-purple spreading inexorably across a battlefield of morning sky. I was out of the car scanning the fields when I heard one, then two, and finally 5-7 Upland Sandpipers streaming low and headed south ahead of the storm.

If you use Google Earth, type Vaughn AR (or 72712) into the "Fly To" search field. This gets you to the crossroads of highways 279 and 12 in downtown Vaughn. Now zoom out a little so you can see more landscape, roads and property lines straight, big open fields, and evidence of prairie mounds. Benton County fair grounds are here, less than a mile from where Uplands were flying. They have found it, and didn't even use Google Earth!

Just as the storm assault commences, I've located a flock of 10 Uplands on the ground in a flat grassy field reserved during the fair for stock trucks. Thunder booms and the sandpipers call PER WITA WIT! I sit in my car with my waterproof spotting scope and watch.

If these Uplands nested in North Dakota and are headed for Argentina, they've covered a minimum of 1000 miles. The total migration way exceeds 5000, even if it is a straight line, which of course it isn't. They've stopped in what we term our country, near beginning of their southward journey. They wait out the storm in the bare and seemingly miserable shelter of grass in a former prairie converted to a park for cattle trucks.

From my car, and through a 30X eyepiece, I see how rain breaking our drought forms beads on an adult Upland's sleek, brownish, tan-edged feathers. Beads gather and slow roll toward the tail, diamonds of great value on millions of years of feather evolution. This reminds me of Joseph's fabled coat of many colors. It blends -- even with all these many tones of brown, white, black, even with streaks and chevrons, even animated by a deep pool of an eye, peering from between two green blades of welcoming grass -- it blends.

But a juvenile, after the storm blast, reminds me of a wet hen. Its plainer, camo browns look, well, and I mean no disrespect, like a wet dishrag. It's just soaked, its sides and tail ragged and disheveled. I've been there myself, soaked to the bones. But, with thousands of miles ahead, there's plenty of time to molt to that fabled coat.

Morning thunder slowly retreats, yielding to prevailing sun. An adult shakes off diamonds and glides off in pursuit of all kinds of small and low flying insects. Watch out beetles, moths and grasshoppers! The juvenile is more or less on its own, spending a longer time drying, shaking, preening back to a condition suitable and serviceable for an up-and-coming sandpiper. It's part of figuring out what must be done and when. Sun out, preening done, it too glides off into welcoming grass.

BUFF-BREASTED SANDPIPERS, DANGLING August 15, 2011

The first Buff-breasted Sandpiper I notice on Sunday stands on its yellow right leg atop the height provided by a dark brown dirt clod midst a plowed field. Its left leg is dangling. Even without a spotting scope I notice the scaly look formed by relatively thick white edges of dark feathers. Viewed through the scope, feathers with bold edges look bluish-purple and brownish, and even greenish. Overall, it's scaly that stands out against relative uniformity of damp brown soil. With a close look, I see general buffiness in the breast and a big deep dark eye in a buffy head.

I'm south of Kibler, in Crawford County, two and one-half-miles north of the Arkansas, in a field that was once a river loop. Bill open, the buff-breasted is panting, and so am I, in the car, merely watching. Yes, we are thankfully past this summer's grand version of Death Valley, temps in the 110s. And yes, we are thankful for rain that has left standing water. Now humidity is murder and in the bright noonday sun of mid-August, it's in the low 90s, hardly a cold front. I'm getting sun burned in the car, eyeball sweating as I watch through a spotting scope.

I wouldn't have seen the bird except for four Killdeers who conveniently flush from a puddle on the sandy farm road and fly into the field that has been plowed, disked, and subsequently rained on. Otherwise, it's mainly soybean universe as far as the eye can see.

From the initial bird, I now see four Buff-breasted Sandpipers atop dirt clods, dangling one leg. This is not so surprising since shorebirds often stand on one leg. The first three dangle left. Bird number four dangles right. Perhaps there is left leggedness and right leggedness? Then I pick out at least 18 in a few acres, most foraging rather than dangling, plus other sandpipers including Upland, Least, Pectoral, and Semipalmated. Many of these birds are panting.

The buff-breasteds have flown from the high, high Arctic, barren tundra as far north of Arkansas as possible, and they are heading way south into South America, including Argentina. Our usual August inferno must be quite a shock. Like me, in the relative shade of my car, they seek ways to beat the heat and avoid direct sun. Panting helps reduce build up of excess heat. Tails of

dangling birds are oriented south, toward the sun, and this may expose less body to solar radiation. Perching on clods, they get more of the light south breeze that ruffles their back feathers. Could this too reduce heat? The dangling leg is less exposed to the sun, not to mention burning soil. And maybe a one-legged bird looks less obvious as a meal for migrating hawks?

Panting is a well-studied habitat for thermoregulation, but most of the rest is just speculation. I'm sure trying to keep as much of my body in the shade as possible!

As I watch different birds, they periodically look up, showing a thick light circle around the dark, upward-searching eye. Earlier in the day I'd been downriver, about six miles northeast, at Frog Bayou WMA. I was looking at a mass of herons and egrets in a wet field when peeps that I hadn't seen in front of me suddenly flushed and flashed over, heading west real fast. I was so anxious to identify them I almost missed a dark Merlin, twisting to capture.

Reaching for my scope, I lost them all. In bright sun, and with a brief view, it would be impossible to be sure, but the falcon was dark like one of the Boreal Merlins. Maybe it too originated in the far north and like me, following shorebirds, including watchful, leg-dangling Buff-breasted Sandpipers.

THINK PINK August 19, 2011

A wet ditch adjacent the state fish hatchery in Centerton is now full of blooming swamp milkweeds, Asclepias incarnata. As in the old name for Painted Buntings, nonpariel, swamp milkweed with pink flowers is without compare. Think pink. Sorry, I didn't find a Roseate Spoonbill.

The milkweed stands in for what we don't see: Virginia Rails, Least Bitterns, and Nelson's Sparrows.

Designated by National Audubon an Important Bird Area, the hatchery is one of a few properties with public access in the former Osage Prairie. Fish ponds were possible because of abundant springs with a year around supply of clear, cold water. Swamp milkweed provides a marker for native wetlands and native birds once associated with these artesian springs.

Before urban development over the Osage Prairie, what is now a ditch was part of an extensive native wetland. Herons, egrets, rails, and sparrows utilized wetlands developed by spring flows throughout our former tallgrass prairie region. Migrating shorebirds foraged muddy open edges. Where mowers can't easily reach them, ditches with cold clear water remain rich in these native "weeds."

In mid-August, and despite heat and drought, no weed of cool flows is so readily identifiable as swamp milkweed. Pink flower clusters radiate. If we pause briefly in admiration, or hopefully

spot a migrating Sora, we are rewarded with pollinators: bees, moths and butterflies. Famous monarchs swarm the pink.

The weedy ditch refugium reminds us of a time when wetlands and wetland birds were numerous. If we remain long in admiration, we may also wonder why grassland birds decline? Where have all the Willow Flycatchers gone? And does decline in pollinating insects impact us?

Springs flow in our former tallgrass prairies, even in mid-August. Along the flows nothing compares to this pink, nothing more typical of the former prairie, nothing so astonishing.

MIKIs LOW & SLOW—FAYETTEVILLE (24 August 2010)

I took off on a bike ride this morning during our "cool" weather. Got one block from my house and had 2 Mississippi Kites soaring low & slow right over me. OK, so MIKIs aren't a big deal in places where they are common, but northwest Arkansas hasn't been one of those places. MIKIs have been quite a rarity here, always a big prize find on a local field trip. These 2 birds maybe are part of the nesting birds Ricky Corder found in northeast Fayetteville this summer? Or just migrating birds? Whatever, it's neat to see them in the neighborhood, though I doubt the dragonflies, much sought after by foraging kites, appreciate the change in the local avian line-up.

The presence of more MIKIs here reminds me of a time 25 years ago when we started noticing more Red-shouldered Hawks nesting in town. These gorgeous hawks had suffered population losses due to widespread reductions in bottomland hardwood forests throughout their range. But here they were in town and one year in the 1980s they nested in Evergreen Cemetery by campus. Then within a few years we found them in more places. They built a nest right next to the city pool at Wilson Park. These birds became big celebrities because everybody and their child in the pool saw them carrying snakes to the nest. Film maker Carl Hitte made a fine DVD program based upon his study of these birds. See this DVD if you've not yet.

Today's MIKIs also reminds me that once upon a time, not so many years ago, the discovery of a nesting season Cooper's Hawk here was a VERY BIG DEAL. Skeptically, we drove across town to see a reported nest and then drove home believers. Now they are nesting basically all over where there are good-sized blocks of forest. They regularly terrorize birds that lounge around feeders. Woo to any American Robins on the lawn, not keeping a sharp look-out in Fayetteville! Cooper's are back.

Note to owners of small dogs: better watch out! Powerful Cooper's will take you & the dog for a ride! Just kidding…

I was with Doug James more than 30 years ago on a Fayetteville Christmas Bird Count. We were thrilled to pieces to see a Bald Eagle soar over the K-Mart on College Avenue. No, I didn't exactly wet my pants, but came close. Thirty years & MANY Bald Eagles later, we now kinda take them for granted. But I still look up in wonder & my brain often flashes to that bird over K-Mart. Today Bald Eagles winter around northwest Arkansas in the hundreds. PS: K-Mart is gone.

So maybe this year's MIKIs around Fayetteville are part of a range expansion? Or maybe we just got lucky? Whatever the ultimate explanation, it's very cool to be out on a bike, in the middle of town, and have Mississippi Kites soaring low & slow (and not be a dragonfly).

BREAKING NEWS, LIVE FROM CLIFTY August 25, 2011

Stephen Marquardt from West Fork called me August 22 about a Swallow-tailed Kite. He was on highway 12 a few miles east of Clifty in northern Madison County. I was incredulous. Northwestern Arkansas has one record in a half-century, and that by birding expert Mike Mlodinow, at Lake Fayetteville on July 28, 2009. Stephen reported a black-and-white hawk with a forked tail. But after reviewing thousands of bird records over the decades, I have become a hard-boiled skeptic.

The following day, August 23 I am a SWEPCO Lake near Gentry with Terry Stanfill, documenting a Neotropic Cormorant, a new bird for northwest Arkansas. Back in Fayetteville five hours later and all atwitter with cormorants, I have not one, but two NEW messages from Marquardt. He and his helper Jake Sellers are parked at Keith's Saddle and Tack near Clifty and later in front of chicken houses down highway 12. "There it is! It's right over us!" It's Breaking News Live from Clifty!

You know that saying about trying for those radically inexpensive deals on Black Friday? "You snooze, you lose." So, after Marquardt's new messages, and after feeling sorry for myself about a lost nap, I walk right out; 55 minutes sees me at Keith's Saddle and Tack and I too have kites! Not 1, not 2, but 3 kites soaring above a dreamy landscape of gorgeous Ozark mountaintop pastures. These are beautiful, sharp-winged, long-tailed, sleek, but not black-and-white, not swallow-tailed. These are Mississippi Kites, an entirely different species, and not so rare in Arkansas.

We love looking at birds. In Arkansas we have recorded over 400 species. We make mistakes, including instances when we are sure of something. It's called eyewitness testimony. It is notoriously unreliable.
I shift from excited to skeptical. Not a Swallow-tailed Kite. Smug in my august expertise, I put it down as mistaken identification. I return to Fayetteville.

But hold it right there, Mr Expert. You're a little too quick on the draw.

After nap and into my email, Marquardt has sent me a picture. It is unmistakably big, black-and-white and swallow-tailed. Oops … so … this brings me to August 24. Bright and early, Joan Reynolds, David Oakley, and I are headed for Clifty. Her kids are in school, and Joan, a great spotter, has part of the day. David has given up golf for the chance to photograph the kite. I, well I have my humble pie to eat.

For my expertise there is quick and well-deserved come-uppance. By golly, almost immediately, we have 1 Mississippi … 2 Mississippi … 3 Mississippi … then 1 SWALLOW-TAILED KITE! David's image shows a dragonfly, much-favored kite fare, right by the bird's wing.

Job done, we retire to Keith's Saddle and Tack. Grasshoppers explode as we walk. Inside we meet Darrell Frazier, who says he has been seeing this big kite for two weeks. One time it swooped right through a gap in small trees by the shop, brushing leaves, scaring into flight a shower of grasshoppers. Experts term this gleaning – getting lunch by raking leaves, scaring up insects. No one exceeds kites in such behavior.

Local news has been making this summer's abundant grasshopper crop into the Biblical plague of locusts. So just in case you haven't been keeping up with your daily Bible readings, it's in Exodus, and it is God's way of punishing the Egyptians for idolatry. Times change.

What was plague now feeds kites headed for South America. And on the way, in these Ozark hills, at Clifty, they pause to fatten on the bounty.

YANK-YANK, TOO-TOO-TOO: MORE IVORY-BILL August 26, 2010

When I'm out doing a bird program in public, I am regularly ask if the report of an Ivory-billed in Arkansas is "real"-- or what. I get asked this in the aisles at Walmart. I run into an old friend when I'm out bicycling and the question comes up. I'll bet a lot of you get asked that, too. For the record: I'm glad the Ivory-bill deniers are out there pushing their views that Ivory-bills have been gone a long, long time. Debate is healthy.

I tell folks that a dramatic film like the Zapruder footage that clearly shows John Kennedy being assassinated in Dallas in 1963 has not been collected for an Ivory-bill (I call it, "the moment the bullet hit Kennedy film"). David Luneau's famous video lacks the unambiguous clarity of the Zapruder film, but then David was in a boat in a swamp, and he wasn't filming a parade.

But there's other information to support the presence of Ivory-bills, unless you think a fair-sized group of qualified, professional observers are actually unqualified to properly identify birds they see in the field, and unless you completely discount numerous sound recordings.

Yes, some sound recordings may be nuthatches, jays, distant shotguns, or duck wings, going yank yank and too-too-too, but ALL?

Accepting evidence of the existence of Ivory-bills strains the credibility of many professional ornithologists. It strains my credibility to reject the sightings of every single person who has ever claimed to see Ivory-bills.

The Arkansas Birds Record committee reviewed the available evidence and concluded the record was valid. The vote was 4 to accept, 1 to reject. I doubt the vote would be any different now, even though the dramatic searches of 2005 and 2006 did not turn up anything like the Kennedy assassination film. The fact that it was 4 to 1 doesn't prove Ivory-bills are out there, but it did – and still does – meet standards applied to reviews of other records of rare birds in Arkansas.

OK, before everyone starts jumping on me about dragging in the Zapruder film, I apologize if it offends. I'm always a fan of a documentary film. However, I've always thought the best evidence to support the existence of Ivory-bills was not the Luneau video, but rather what a handful of very qualified observers have seen themselves in both Arkansas and the Florida panhandle.

So now the US Fish & Wildlife Service has weighed in. Appendix B (pages 43-45) in the **Recovery Plan for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker** (signed 16 April 2010) includes statements like this: "Our review of the presented arguments leads us to conclude that the alternative interpretations of Sibley et al. (2006) and Collinson (2007) fail to credibly support their assertion that the woodpecker in the Luneau video could reasonably be a Pileated Woodpecker." And, "In conclusion, the FWS accepts the original Fitzpatrick et al. (2005) interpretation of the Luneau video and other evidence gathered during the last five years as the best information available to support the hypothesis that Ivory-billed Woodpecker has persisted into the 21st Century."

If you take a look at this for yourself, read carefully. It is no specific endorsement for the existence of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. They are NOT saying they have evidence of an Ivory-bill population out there in 2010. They ARE saying their review supports the hypothesis that the bird in David Luneau's video was not a Pileated Woodpecker and that the alternate explanation is more convincing. They are saying the Luneau video, and sight records, provide the best evidence for Ivory-bills.

The appendix is only three pages, part of a longer document. It's worthwhile to take a look IF this is an issue for you.

SQUEAKS, CLACKS, HISSES, TOOTS: GREAT-TAILS RETURN August 28, 2010

The welcome mat is out for Great-tailed Grackles at Vaughn, in Benton County. From me anyway.

As summer wears on, as things get hotter and drier – so dry even dogday cicadas fall dead out of oaks – well there is need for refreshment. I'm refreshed by squeaks, clacks, hisses, toots, and assorted vocalizations of Great-tailed Grackles. I don't know what they are saying, but hey, so what. I'm out in Fayetteville and every second person I see is talking on a cell phone, with some human version of squeaks, clacks, hisses, toots. I have no idea what these mean either. I'm right at home with the grackles.

I'm happy to report big flocks of Great-tailed Grackles have returned to the dairy farms around Vaughn at least as of August 24. There were 150 or so among dairy cows. I know y'all been waiting with baited breath for this happy announcement. It's a relief to have them back.

They've been mostly gone from Vaughn since the end of April. So August 24 was a banner day. OK, seriously, I have been traveling up to these dairy farms every few weeks checking for great-tails. We find them all winter there and I had long assumed they were also nesting nearby.

However, during the past two years I've realized they abandon the dairy between late April and early August. We find a few here & there around northwest Arkansas in other places, and even find them nesting in low numbers elsewhere, mainly in Benton county, but so far, not at Vaughn. Yet, from now on through winter to early spring, Vaughn's big time in terms of grackle with major tails. Sometimes there are 200, 300, 400, etc.

It may be that the birds around Vaughn are migrants that actually nest up north somewhere, say in Missouri or Iowa. Other migrants are showing up in northwest Arkansas now. Why not grackles.

There's just nothing more interesting than watching how the male great-tails manage to negotiate that wonderful sailing ship like tail in a prairie breeze. Is it that strut they employ that gives them firm footing, even when it seems that significant sail-of-a-tail must cause them to be blown away like errant Walmart bags?

SEPTEMBER

STARS September 1, 2010

I was up this morning and out in my front yard at 4:30 A (as in apple) M. As soon as I hit the porch I heard screech-owls singing – male and female. OK, singing screech-owls is not front page news, but these birds are one-half block off College Avenue, right in the middle of busy Fayetteville, which is the buckle on the belt of northwest Arkansas. If it had been 7:30 AM, you couldn't have heard them for the commuter traffic. But- even in our urban madness, in this bit of peace before dawn, two owls making the most of it. How can a day be bad after such a start.

The old part of town where I live is in Prairie Township. There were bison here, even up on the hill where the Farmer's Market draws big crowds to the old town square, and even Passenger Pigeons, as evidence in bones dug from the cellar of a pioneer era home just off the Square. Besides noise, traffic, and trash, my neighborhood is full of old post oaks that must have been seedlings when Greater Prairie-Chickens owned the hilltop that now forms the Square. These oaks have lots of natural cavities, so I suppose that's where the screech-owls live.

Later in the day I took a walk across College, over toward Wilson Park. One of my big avian scores was a bald-headed Red-winged Blackbird. I don't know how many on ARBIRD-L keep a life list of bald-headed birds, but it was a new one for me. Of course I have the usual bald-headed cardinal and the bald-headed jay, but the red-wing was a life bald-head for me.

Also of note on the walk, European Starlings. OK, I know some of you are already holding your nose and staring in disbelief about my bald-headed bird observations, but now…starlings? Well yes. It's not their fault we hate them so. I doubt they volunteered to come here. But, the two I saw on my walk were both all stars – I mean in the plumage that makes them look special. Fall must be on its way.

KEEKS, FINALLY September 2, 2010

After the rain in northwest Arkansas last night the deep cracks in my yard look a little less like an earthquake zone, but not much less. The rain made me think it might be worth a shorebird trip up to state fish hatchery at Centerton, so I was up and out in the pre-light.

The first stop on that trip for me involves the dairy farms around Vaughn, just south of the hatchery. Some of the small, dried-up farm ponds had a little water and a few shorebirds: Least(5) and Semipalmated Sandpipers (1) and a few Killdeer. I looked around for Great-tailed

Grackles and found about 75, ragged with molt and probably a bit fuzzed-up from last night's rain. They were on parade in the morning light, drying out.

I'm refreshed by squeaks, clacks, hisses, toots, and assorted vocalizations of Great-tailed Grackles. I don't know what they are saying, but hey, so what. In Fayetteville every third person is talking on a cell phone – in the car, on the bike trail, walking across campus -- uttering some human version of squeaks, clacks, hisses, toots. I have no idea what these mean either.

The hatchery was no shorebird mecca: a few more Killdeer and one (1) Spotted Sandpiper. But, I also found a dowitcher in a tiny patch of soft gray-black ooze/mud over which ran myriads of long-legged flies. The dowitcher was probing deep; back up, its bill was covered with a slick, thick mud coat which when the bird looked around tended to drip off the tip in a rather singular manner. I moved in close and the bird just kept at it, virtually ignoring me, so you know that mud is loaded with fly larvae or something of that sort. Down in the mud – back up – back down … The dowitcher kept steadily to its business and I got very close images.

So, I'm at home tonight with these images and my shorebird books. Plumage wise, this bird is a dead ringer for a molting adult Long-billed (much like the picture in The Shorebird Guide by O'brien et al. page 205). If you look at range maps, you can see how very, very far this creature has come, from tundra in northern Alaska and Canada to Benton County, land of Walmart World Headquarters and God's Country, according to a sign along the highway.

It's one of the birds we see here that I associate with the West, since a lot of its migratory path lies across the Great Plains. It has come quite a ways and still quite a ways to go before this year's journey is done. Which is why it kept going after whatever goody lay one bill deep in that primordial ooze -- until that is I opened the car door. It took off in a start: keek! keek! keek! So can we put up a billboard out on the highway that says LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER COUNTRY?

That was about it for shorebirds. There was also a tight flock of 20 Blue-winged Teal and a very spread-out flock of Common Nighthawks, casually coursing the former prairies. All I counted of the latter was 12 birds, but I spent so much time watching the dowitcher that a million nighthawks could have flown over while I was staring at mud. Well, not a million, but they migrate in big flocks at this time of year and I could have easily missed a hundred.

GREAT PAWSPAWS AND BIRDS AT LAKE ATALANTA, ROGERS September 4, 2010

Joan Reynolds and I birded Lake Atalanta in Rogers this morning. There is a pawpaw thicket in the upper end of the Frisco Spring run and it was loaded with big, ripe pawpaws. Finally, after many years, we beat the coons to them, or at least there were so many that the coons didn't get them all. I shook the tree & Joan spotted. Down they came, split just right, and we sat right down there on a log and ate a couple.

There is a huge white oak tree along the trail that got busted up during the big ice storm last year. If you know about the ice storm, you can immediately see how many of the big spreading limbs were broken. Fear not: the tree seems fully recovered. I mention this because I suspect all of the extra light that has gotten into that area has been good for understory trees like pawpaws.

Overall, it's just a very good year for pawpaws and all kinds of fruit, in general. For example, there are heavy tangles of wild grapes in some of the trees – flickers, catbirds, starlings, Summer Tanagers, etc. all porking down on wild grapes.

It was a decent day for what Peterson called "confusing fall warblers." Of the not-so-confusing ones, Joan and I saw Northern Parulas (10-15), Nashville Warbler (1-2), Canada Warbler (1), Black-and-white Warbler (1), Black-throated Green Warbler (2), American Redstart (1). The jewelweed was in bloom along the spring run, well attended by hummingbirds (~15). There were some really intriguing whistles that just had to have been a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, but if it was, we couldn't find it.

We also ran into Mike Mlodinow and Joanie Patterson there, and they'd seen a few other species we missed.

Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society will sponsor a field trip to this area next Sunday, September 12. Meet at the parking area adjacent the bathrooms at 9 AM. Slow easy walk and often birdy at this time of year. If you want more info about Lake Atalanta, including directions, check out the NWAAS website. Go here: www.nwarkaudubon.org and look on the left side for "Places to bird in Northwest Arkansas." Lake Atalanta is described there.

ULTIMATELY AGILE ENOUGH RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD September 5, 2010

Joan Reynolds, Chris Kellner, and I birded at Frog Bayou WMA this morning, then hopped over to the sod farm, just to the west. We met Chris this morning at Dyer, at the leisurely hour of 9. Chris and I "fondly" remembered our 5:30 AM starts of "yesteryear" – the mid-1980s, when Chris was working on his PhD and we were censusing birds as part of a study of periodical cicadas.

At Frog and along the Arkansas R, we had Great Egrets (~20), Snowy Egrets, Cattle Egrets (several hundred during the day in the area, mostly in pastures), Little Blue and Great Blue Herons, Double-crested Cormorant (~7 on the river), Caspian Tern (1, on the river), Blue-winged teal (~35), Northern Shoveler (1), Mississippi Kite (1). We got pretty much skunked on shorebirds at Frog, other than a few Killdeer and Wilson's Snipe (1). Bell's Vireos were still singing in several thickets and we encountered a flock of transients, including Wilson's Warbler. There was at least one Yellow Warbler in the flock.

We watched a Cooper's Hawk chase a seemingly unlucky but ultimately agile Red-winged Blackbird that bobbed and weaved it's way to safety despite Cooper's amazing efforts. The chase and escape played out in full view over Frog.

We had Upland Sandpiper (6) and American Golden-Plover (1) at the sod farm. The plover was at a distance, but we could see that it was an adult in molt, with some black feathers remaining in the vent area. At one point a sizable (~150) mixed swallow flock rested on the short grass, including Cliff, Barn, and Tree.

David Krementz (UA-Fayetteville) and Brian Infield (AG & F field biologist) were at Frog today. David said his dogs had flushed 4 Soras there yesterday.

BIRD BOOK BURNING BANNED September 10, 2010

A good, old-fashioned bird book burning in Arkansas has been banned by District Judge Barnabee B. Basher because of local security concerns. "The lives of private citizens in Washington County are threatened when deliberate destruction of texts like Peterson field guides are proposed," read the court order.

The judge's order did not go down well when Washington County deputies served First Minister Burnin' Berry Bird of the Soldiers of the Sacred Communion Worship Center with Judge Basher's order banning the proposed immolation of a Peterson Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern North America. "Americans have the right to burn books if they want, for whatever reason," the First Minister stated to assembled media. "Bird watchers are well known sinners when it comes to church attendance," he stated, "and are clearly responsible for the pews not being filled on Sundays." Furthermore, "The state has no right to interfere in religious matters."

That last line, about constitutional rights came as something of an afterthought, on advice of some attorneys. Investigative journalists have discovered that Bird actually hails from a long line of bird watchers so the suspicion is that he's found a way to settle some old family scores.

The issue came to a head recently in the Fayetteville area when an immature White Ibis was spotted at a local lake. White Ibis is a rare bird in northwest Arkansas. The bird wasn't reported until late Saturday, which didn't give the usual bird book toting pew warmers much choice but to miss services on the following morning at Soldiers of the Sacred Communion Worship Center. Minister Bird quickly struck back in the only way he knew: burn The Book. Burn the Peterson, and burn it publicly to make the message clear: White Ibis or no White Ibis, the pew warmers have responsibilities that come before their life lists.

Advisors to Minister Bird are now stating quietly and way off the record that the lack of pew warmers hasn't been limited to bird watchers: gardeners, butterfly watchers, and even some

sports fans have been missing some morning services at Soldiers of the Sacred Communion Worship Center. On background, one of the staffers told us “Even grandma has missed when the grandkids stopped in for an unexpected visit from California.” Worship Center staff is now looking at ways to punish them. Butterfly books could be listed for future burnin’ events, but it’s not been as easy to target grandma and the errant gardeners.

SEARCHING FOR REALITY AT LAKE FAYETTEVILLE Sept 11, 2010

Lake F is as fake as a 3-dollar bill, a stopped-up, formerly free-flowing, spring fed perennial stream. Once part prairie and riparian woodland, today’s neighbors are highways 71B and 265, NWA Mall, and a subdivision. It receives blowing trash and polluted runoff from all. Fishermen seeking stocked bass and catfish regularly dump their liver bait cups on the banks, along with mounds of tangled monofilament fishing line that entangles wings of Great Blue Herons and feet of American Coots, drowning them. Run-off from leaking sewer lines and septic tanks feed vast algae blooms in the clear water that once was an Ozark trademark.

But this wholely artificial construct is probably the best single all-around birding spot in northwest Arkansas. Go through the state bird list. Common Loon to Le Conte’s Sparrow, Lake F is well represented: shortgrass fields, brushy fields, blackberry thickets, upland hardwood forests, scattered pines and cedars, willow and buttonbush edge, and a former tallgrass prairie block now in the process of restoration. When it comes to fall migration, it’s hard to beat Lake F when looking for land birds.

I’ve had a few short (2-3 hour) trips out there in the past week. 6 September: Northern Parula, Nashville Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Wilson’s Warbler, American Redstart, Prothonotary Warbler. 10 September: Northern Parula, Wilson’s Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Nashville Warbler. 11 September: Wilson’s Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler. And in addition: Warbling Vireo, Yellow-throated Vireo, Least Flycatchers (at least) among quite a few Empidonaxes and Baltimore Orioles. And did I forget Red-shouldered Hawk: 2 calling and calling, driving the local Blue Jays nuts. Lots of other stuff, too.

This is not a staggeringly long list, but not bad for northwest Arkansas, in fall. In a time when we feel short of $$$, so many are out of work or under employed, when we recognize AGAIN the unacceptable poisoning of the Gulf because of BP’s recklessness and our own endless reckless demands for energy, when we see impacts from climate warming-- in consideration, there much to be said for a handy if artificial birding spot, just a short drive and even a bike ride away, an easy place to get away and forget about it for a while and just notice what a fine little bird is a Wilson’s Warbler.

GOLDEN-FRONTED HUMMERS, LAKE ATALANTA September 12, 2010

I know all you folks keeping state lists will want to call in sick today when you read here about the golden-fronted hummingbirds at Lake Atalanta in Rogers. The 25 or so folks who showed up for Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip September 12 already got 'em for their life lists. Of course, we are speaking of Archilochus colubris, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, all golden on the long bill and face from deep probing into the reddish-orangish, quite elegant, broadly-lipped and deftly curled tubes of Impatiens capensis or jewel-weed to those of us in the birding hoi polloi. The jewel-weed is much in bloom along the shady run of Frisco Spring and well-attended by hummers.

While birds in general were much in evidence, warbler species were relatively sparse: Wilson's Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Nashville Warbler, Northern Parula, Orange-crowned Warbler, and Black-and-white Warbler. Vireos included Red-eyed, Warbling, White-eyed (still singing), and Blue-headed.

American Goldfinches flew over us all day. We encountered a couple of them in a patch of Polymnia canadensis, leaf-cup that grows against rock cliffs. They seemed to be very busy probing the flowers and not much concerned about our interest.

We heard a few soft coo-coo-coos and saw a couple of Yellow-billed Cuckoos. Some trees were all decked out in the tents of fall webworms. One of our best views of the cuckoos was a close up of a cuckoo with a yellowish fuzzy-bristly late instar larva fresh-plucked from the EZ-Mart of the forest: AKA, tents of fall webworms.

We had a couple of decent views of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, not so rose-breasted in the fall. One spent a long time on the long dangling hop-like seed sacs of Ostrya virginiana, the hop hornbeam tree. I guess it was extracting nutlets there – it was just too long in one place, with a fascinated crowd of birders below – for this to be about anything else.

We were surprised by a Wood Thrush relatively late in the season for us. We never saw the bird, but the distinctive chattering call notes were given for quite a while from deep in the hollow.

Michelle Ivy and family came out for the walk. Michelle is Conservation Program Manager for Audubon Arkansas, part of the National Audubon Society. I don't bring this up because Michelle is a stranger to local birding, BUT because she and her husband Lee Chalmers brought their brand-spanking new daughter, Callie Chalmers (age 2 months) too, by far the youngest in our group. And she got plenty close to the gorgeous birds because ole dad had her well-protected in a snuggy that allowed him one free hand for binoculars. I have the pictures to prove this!

There was a dazzling male Baltimore Oriole perched atop a tall tree in bright sunlight. There were two Barred Owls that called back to us after play-back. The last bird of the day was a Cooper's Hawk that barreled across the trail just before we reached the cards. I almost forgot the wonderful upside antics of flickers harvesting possum grapes in dense vines high in the trees.

Finally, I would be remiss if I failed to mention our favorite break, in the sacred grove of Asimina triloba, the venerable "Arkansas banana," AKA, paw paws. The grove occupies a shady spot at the head of Frisco Spring. When I first arrived, I saw one of the local non-birding cognoscenti come out of the grove with 3 paw paws ("The last ones I'll bet," I said to myself), but was then relieved when he said there were more, "still too green." We'd worked up a real lather after our prolonged studies of the golden-fronted hummers and were ready for refreshment. With many sets of eyes, we spotted more paw paws. With a few practiced tree shakes, we had ripe paw paws.

And yes, there are still more there. What an amazing year for paw paws and wild fruit in general.

CAVE MOUNTAIN & UPPER BUFFALO September 13, 2010

I had a lovely, blue sky fall day on Cave Mountain in Newton County yesterday. Warblers: Hooded (most numerous one, 7, and many singing), Northern Parula, Nashville, Wilson's, Kentucky, Worm-eating, American Redstart, Orange-crowned, Chestnut-sided, Common Yellowthroat (at millpond). Vireos: White-eyed (lots of singing), Yellow-throated (lots of singing), Red-eyed (some singing), Warbling.

I heard what I thought were 2 Swainson's Thrush call notes (pip! pit!) and finally got a close look at one. Swainson's is common in northwest Arkansas in spring, but rare and hard to find in fall. There were still Scarlet Tanagers on the mountain, too, rich yellow with black wings.

Some of the best birding was in open patches with thickets of leaf-cup, hydrangea, poke, pawpaws, maple, spicebush (very eye catching with bright red berries) and wild grape. Lots of LBJ Indigo Buntings in these thickets.

I found pawpaws again on Cave Mountain, just in the nick of time because it was noon and I didn't have anything to eat with me. They were perfectly super-ripe. I spit out the seeds, leaving them in situ, as the archeologists say, hopefully for a future grove.

At Boxley Baptist there were 22+ crows in the pasture adjacent the cemetery. Most were American, caw-cawing seemingly just for the joy in it. There was at least one Fish Crow among them and maybe a second, also seeming to enjoy the fall weather. A single Broad-winged Hawk soared over.

At the Boxley millpond there were 4 Trumpeter Swans, all with green neck collars. The 30+ Wood Ducks included many young of the year, all full grown now, but still somewhat clustered in family groups. I cannot image a more spectacular display than all of those Wood Ducks in varied plumages. And, 8 Turkey Vultures and 1 Black Vulture perched in persimmon tree full of green fruit, near the millpond.

Recent rains have returned flow to the upper Buffalo around Boxley Bridge, but there are still broad exposed gravelbars, perfect for exploring. I didn't find many birds there, but the sound of the Buffalo flowing over riffles is pay enough.

SAWTOOTH Sept 19, 2010

It was hot, dry, sunny, and calm – and virtually birdless today around Maysville in northwest Benton County. But there were sawtooth sunflowers that marched west to Oklahoma and north into Missouri. They are a brilliant bit of the former Beatie Prairie not yet converted to cows and chicken houses. They grow tall and covered with remarkable yellow blossoms. Their narrow sawtooth leaves deck out a sturdy stem. Their irregular, and wholly accidental sanctuary is anywhere the big blade of the road grader can't quite reach or where herbicides haven't killed everything green and living below power lines.

Despite recent rains, the dominant mode here is dry, and the birds in the fields were pretty much laying low. Where the heck were the meadowlarks? The blackbirds? One big pond formed by damming a natural prairie wetland was full of cows. I counted 129 Killdeer, 23 Blue-winged Teal, and one Great Blue Heron on the muddy cow-tromped margins. When the cows heard the hay tractor fire up, there was a sudden agitation and a modest stampede for hay. Used to such goings on, the Killdeer called out their kee-dee kee-dee complaints and moved a little, but just enough to avoid the stampede. The teal – new to this country -- got up and circled a few times, flashing their brilliant blue against the fields. The heron slow walked to the pond's back side, so I suppose he or she is use to the routine. I'm just sure I heard the call notes of a Red-headed Woodpecker from a big snag, but I never could see it.

Fortunately, cardinals are no-nonsense birds, sturdy and workman-like, and they were attractive in thickets today, as usual. I found a few small flocks of Indigo Buntings, mostly no longer indigo, and just a perfect shade of brown and dark, blended well in the same thickets with cardinals. I did at last find the meadowlarks, along with a few shrikes, but mostly it was a day about sunflowers. For a few precious weeks they are blooming, here at the end of one thing and the start of another, last of summer, first of fall.

Here's a conservative slogan for the political season: how 'bout conserving the prairie? SAVE THE BEATIE!!! Put a sawtooth sunflower on your hat. They lend an elegance to the farms and country generally. If you get the angle right, in height they far exceed the fenceposts and the powerpoles and reach into the clouds. They even exceed the normal boundaries of time, connecting us back to a past when prairie was the dominant mode here.

You'd think such an obvious fact would have caught some candidate's attention, but so far I haven't heard a thing. But sawtooth sunflowers have my vote anyway.

MUSCADINE FRENZY NEAR FERN September 20, 2010

The crossroads called Fern is just west of Shores Lake in Franklin County. The attraction at Fern is the Ozark NF with its managed shortleaf pine forest for those of us mainly used to hardwood forests. Bill Beall has birded this area for years, documenting irregular occurrence of Red Crossbill and nesting by Brown-headed Nuthatch. In the case of the latter species, it is the only place it has been found in the western Ozarks for many years.

Just east of Fern, I turned off 215 onto FS Road 1544, and followed it around and down through pine stands. When I piled out of the car at 7:30, I was greeted by the pleasant singing of Pine Warblers and LOTS of other small birds. These proved to include Black-throated Green Warbler (1), Tennessee Warbler (1), White-eyed Vireo (several), and a small flock of Indigo Buntings, plus…well…plus what?

As I was trying to sort out the many birds, I was attacked by an enormous swarm of gnats. I breathed them in, squashed them in my ears, and when I threw up the bins for a treetop bird, I pushed them into my eyelids. I waved my hat to try and sweep them from my face. Two days later, I still have many small, itchy swellings. It's just another example, if I need another, that so-called bad bugs go with good birds. I actually don't badly of the gnats, but I haven't figured out how to really stay in focus when they are in full-throttle bloom.

I found 3-4 Hooded Warblers. Some of these were still singing. I did not find B-h Nuthacthes. I counted at least 21 Pine Warblers during a couple of hours and many more Chipping Sparrows.

One of the most striking things along the road were beauty berry bushes with big attractive knots of lavender fruit. And then, while listening for nuthatches, I spotted a big muscadine tangle right along the road. When I worked for the Forest Service, no self-respecting field-going person could pass up ripe muscadines. As far as I could see, it was virgin territory, so it was full speed ahead, damn the green briars & poison ivy! Needless to say, I inhaled quite a few additional gnats during the muscadine frenzy.

HISTORY BEING MADE: LAKE FAYETTEVILLE September 24, 2010

A couple of Red-shouldered Hawks (RSHA) at Lake Fayetteville have been resolutely KEE-YAH KEE-YAHing for the past few weeks. I watched one in early light this morning, perched in a persimmon tree. It called KEE-YAH KEE-YAH while another, well out-of-sight and at some distance, KEE-YAH KEE-YAHed back. There were good imitations of kee-yahs, too. I know this because every once in a while the Blue Jays sharing their mild kee-yahs couldn't help but pause and throw in a few of their old reliable "pump-handle" calls before returning to kee-yahs. I assume the scattered kuk-kuk-kuk-kuks I heard were jays, too, rather than Cooper's Hawk. All this and harvesting acorns, too: a busy morning for jays.

Warblers today: Wilson's, Northern Parula, Mourning, American Redstart, Black-and-white, and Nashville. I also had a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. White-eyed and Warbling Vireos.

Hidden in the far back shallows was a tight raft of resting Blue-winged Teal, at least 179 in that one place. These birds were all either females or juveniles. Among the juvs, a few were developing the white facial crescent that will mark them as males. I assume these birds came in with last night's rain. Since most go well south, into South America, they have a long ways to go.

There is still a huge amount of wild fruit – saw 5 catbirds in one cluster of possum grapes. Big flocks of robins, caroling and chuckling and gorging. Saw robins all over fruit clusters on sumacs. Chicadees eating poison ivy berries.

Ate my first persimmons of the year today, too. At our Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society board meeting this week, we had a lively discussion about persimmons. As it turns out, many of the so-called birders on our board spend a fair amount of time scouting persimmon trees, especially the scattered ones that have edible fruit well before hard frosts. And I thought I was the only one!

I walked around the bike trail on the north side of the lake. The new trail is located far enough away from highway 265 that you can hear the soft chips of even Wilson's Warblers. It passes the prairie restoration area associated with the Butterfield Overland Mail route that included northwest Arkansas starting in 1858. Private groups like the Fayetteville Natural Heritage Association have been working with Fayetteville parks to restore prairie mentioned in newspaper accounts from 1858. They have a great start on the restoration and already have one prescribed burn under their belt.

I was pretty sure that I would never live to see the day when anyone in the city government of Fayetteville permitted a prescribed burn in a park. So here is my mea culpa: Good work parks! Good work private citizen volunteers! We have the benefit of learning a key piece of local history as we study birds this area. And in terms of habitat restoration, we see history being made.

JOIE DE VIVRE AT CHESNEY PRAIRIE NATURAL AREA September 26, 2010

It was not promising at Chesney Prairie Natural Area (near Siloam Springs) at the Sunday morning start: cool north breeze, 100% overcast, occasional light mist. But as I drove along the edge of the Siloam airport, Eastern Meadowlarks were in full song, like spring, and I soon encountered a flock of about 20 Fish Crows, calling back and forth, with a few American Crows in the far background. It seemed pretty joyous for such a gray misty day.

At Chesney proper, numerous small birds were protected from the cool air in the brushy thicket and thin tree line on the south side of Sager Creek. I saw these warblers: Nashville (2), Wilson's (2), Northern Parula (2-3), Yellow (1), Common Yellowthroat (5+, plus in other spots). Other small birds: gnatcatcher (1), an Empidonax flycatcher with a good eye ring and a longish bill (maybe Alder, but was silent), House Wren (10 for the day, lots of mew calls), a flock of at least

10 Indigo Buntings, and a Dickcissel, and small numbers of flickers flying over (5 for the morning).

At some point I fortunately looked up and noticed a small hawk that proved to be a far away Broad-winged, and then at last a kettle of 42, drifting southwest. A few minutes later, another 25 or so. High numbers of Turkey Vultures were also in the air, so they may too have been part of the movement. Also, at one point, a swirl of Chimney Swifts (20?) and swallows. I kept wondering about the vultures since they are often here in numbers except during winter. While watching, a single dark bird with a long decurved bill flew toward me, circled close, and dropped down toward a farm pond adjacent Chesney. It was a dark Plegadis-type ibis (either white-faced or glossy) that soon headed southwest, with the other soaring birds.

I had hoped for the season's first Savannah Sparrow, or something like that. I did see a sparrow, maybe Lincoln's, but it was a poor look.

A Killdeer flock, maybe 25 birds, was pretty vocal in the pasture. Maybe all the kee-deeing was just joie de vivre, or maybe it was response to the American Kestrel flying the area, but then it occurred to me it might be something like a new kestrel migrated into the Chesney area and new Killdeer just arrived in the pastures.

Chesney is now Goldenrod Country, big news on the margins with vast swashes of rich yellows. However, the real story is in the tall grasses (Big Bluestem and Indian Grass prominently), which are now at the peak of their majesty.

MATE CHOICE IN HARLEY LAND September 26, 2010

Even if you don't have an advanced degree in biology, I'll bet most of y'all know something about mate choice in birds. This is the hypothesis that the male Northern Cardinal with the reddest red and the blackest black mask most likely finds favor with the alpha female. That is, she with subtle plumage wants a real man out there guarding her and the nest. And the Painted Bunting with the greenest 2-tones of green, and the reddest eyeliner – he sings from atop the trees for the green plumaged female blended into the densest thicket. And the Wood Thrush male who plays his flute the best – he's the victor in the timeless struggle of mate selection and the opportunity to pass genes into the future. And so on.

I was thinking about this today because Fayetteville is poised on the threshold of its famous and widely toasted Bikes, Blues, and Barbecue motorcycle rally, one of the greatest such events in our great nation. Thank goodness, Fayetteville is now famous for something besides being the birthplace of Senator J. William Fulbright, the home place of various authors of books about birds in Arkansas, not to mention the home of William J. Baerg, ornithologist and father of tarantula studies.

I heard somebody in line at Walmart today say that promoters expect 400,000 folks to visit our fair city. A lot of them will be on Harleys. Apparently one of the attractions of a Harley is noise: they are loud and most who ride them apparently prefer that since there are other powerful motorcycles that aren't loud. It's really loud when you get thousands of them racing up and down streets of a small mountain community. I guess that's part of the attraction – it echoes so well across hills and hollers -- that, and the fact that we have plenty of liquor stores and bars.

I asked a young friend of mine, a Harley person all decked out in his black leathers, why he likes the noise. "You get chicks," he said, flatly. I guess I had sort of a dumb or blank look on my face, because he continued, "They like the rumble. They like the power." So there you have it and finally after all of these years, I get it. The "chicks" aren't impressed with binoculars and the ability to identify winter plumaged Indigo Buntings. It's that explosive Harley rumble, that equivalent of the banging bright red of male cardinals.

So I've been thinking about this, what with the big Harley rally headed our way. This afternoon, after I got home from birding, I crawled under my old Toyota and disconnected the muffler. When I fired it up, it sounded a little like a Harley, though it lacked that deep and seductive rumble-purr, or whatever it is that's such a "chick" magnet. But it was loud. The next step is to run a straight pipe right out of the manifold, like they do with Harleys.

It is my plan to test this during the motorcycle rally. I'll drive around town and gun the engine at stop lights and other venues. The explosions from my Toyota will join the fierce competition of explosions from Harleys. Mine might be comparatively puny since many Harleys have larger engines than my car. But maybe an available female will hear the distinctive rumble of my Toyota and take that as an attractive power sign? Not the alpha female, but maybe beta?

It's just a hypothesis, like Darwin and evolution. We'll just have to rumble and wait and see.

OFFICIAL FALL BIRD FRUIT FORECAST, WESTERN OZARKS REGION

September 27, 2010

David Oakley and I did a slow turn on the north side of Lake Fayetteville (7-10:30 AM), along the bike trail then back east toward the environmental center. We had a Rose-breasted Grosbeak keeking in the cold at the start. Warblers: Black-throated Green, Nashville, Northern Parula, Common Yellowthroat, and call notes of what would have been our FOS Yellow-rumped – but never saw it. Vireos: White-eyed and Blue-headed. Also a couple of Ruby-crowned Kinglets and our FOS Lincoln's Sparrows (2). Robins, starlings, cardinals, catbirds, and thrashers were consuming huge crops of possum grapes, sumac, poison ivy, and merrily singing inbetween gobbles. Oakley and I found a rusty blackhaw bush covered with fruit, some of it ripe, and tried a few ourselves. As for the Official Report: looks like a banner wild fruit year. If we don't have some bad cold weather later, we may be in for birds around CBC time.

VULTURES & BUTTERFLIES at DEVIL'S DEN September 29, 2010

I went down to Devil's Den State Park this morning. A fine fall morning with a light breeze from the north. First of season birds for me: Yellow-rumped Warbler, White-throated Sparrow, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Blue-headed Vireos singing. I stopped around 10 and took a break on the dam next to the CCC monument. The comfortable flat rocks here face a long forested hillside, now bathed in this immaculate sunlight. Vultures were making the most of it.

Within a few minutes I was watching several big drifting kettles, with 120 Turkey Vultures and two Black Vultures. It was relaxing to sit on the rocks and watch big birds after an intense morning of following small birds overhead in big canopies. The close ones I could see without bins, but as they drifted away, getting smaller and smaller, I found myself doing a lot of focusing and refocusing – and noticing a huge flow of southward-moving monarch butterflies along a broad front within the same field of blue.

It reminded me of 20 years ago around this time when I was struggling to get over a divorce and pass a statistics course. I bad needed to get some pressure off. I was up on the UA-Fayetteville campus one day and lay down on my back and closed my eyes. There was just no place to go and no place to hide. When I opened my eyes again I began to see monarch butterflies sailing over, some pretty low. There were a lot of them. Monarchs overhead, steadily sailing south, brought me an unexpected opportunity. Just enough.

I know this sounds sappy, simplistic, even pollyannaish. But, there are times when our spirits just need a lift. I figured if monarchs could make it, maybe I could, too.

OCTOBER

BIG OZARK SKY, NINESTONE October 2, 2010

What a wonderful day in a Ozarks for the Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip to Ninestone Land Trust in Carroll County. Temp= 70s, modest north wind, Piney Creek clear and low. We spotted big birds against a changing panorama of fall blue sky and summer clouds. The big bird list included both vulture species (BV=7, TV= at least 20), Bald Eagle (2 immatures), both Accipiters (1 each, seen well), Broad-winged (1, immature), Red-tailed (1), and Red-shouldered (2), plus a quick Northern Harrier fly-over. Improbably, we had a string of 15 cormorants over and low and headed south. The Broad-winged Hawk was much guessed-over, but ultimately well identified. Transient warblers were sparse, supposedly proof for an oft-repeated birder's mantra that only bad weather = good birds. But we did have a sampling of winter residents: both kinglets, sapsuckers, Yellow-rumped Warblers.

A star from summer, the Indigo Bunting, was present in small numbers. The only blue left now in a bird or two are a few unmolted tail feathers. Numerous flocks of Blue Jays were raucous and busy, as always, enlivening the landscape, and no doubt a helpful bother to the Cooper's Hawk we saw.

We had an agreeable surprise provided by a Marsh Wren, seen by most, and photographed by Jacque Brown. It was improbably in a thicket best suited for a House Wren, which is what I first called it, soon helpfully corrected by others. As I've gotten older I've developed a rule-of-thumb for field birding. When something interesting pops up, you get three guesses in the excitement of discovery; you are only stuck with the last one shouted. In my defense, I did say Marsh Wren on guess three. Hopefully this tardy show will encourage rather than discourage birding novices that were along on their first NWAAS expedition to the unknown known, the terra cognita that is actually often incognita. That is to say, considering that after three decades+ in my case, every birding field trip explores a new world and there are unexpected consequences for entering.

During our lunch break, Doug James, NWAAS president, explained Indigo Bunting molts and left-handedness in some snails that inhabit Piney Creek. There were buntings in the yard and both right and and left-handed snails in the creek. Doug and his students have been studying the interesting learning capabilities of the lefties.

At mid-afternoon what was left of the original 25 walked across a pasture, enclosed in vastness by forested hills and soaring sandstone blufflines above Piney Creek. We could see a small

green field visible in a distant forest, vultures perched on an old pine snag atop the bluffline, and wave after wave of clouds, a summer caravan hurrying south. This warm and restful place brought us to a halt. Why go any further? What more to seek? Eastern Bluebirds overhead, giving their pleasant bell calls in passing.

We appreciate the help in crossing the creek provided by Don Matt. And we appreciate Don and Judith Griffith for opening their home and their Ninestone adventure to NWAAS, again, today.

FALL *PLEGADIS* IBISES October 6, 2010

I was out in the field today at Lake Fayetteville. It's headed toward mid-October and towhees are on the move. There were lots (6+) of them today in the brushy, shrubby fields north of the Environmental Study Center. While listening I heard a very un-towhee song -- CHEE CHEE CHUR -- and soon had the singer in my bins: a male Eastern Towhee. I recorded this very song in south Fayetteville in summer 2003 and watched a towhee singing it then, too. I had never heard this song so I emailed it around in hopes someone else had. I figured it must have learned it in some far away, exotic place. I never heard from anyone else who'd heard this, so the mystery remains. I am thankful that just about the time we think we know it all, fundamental mystery remains, even on a Wednesday morning, even in western Arkansas.

I got to thinking about this knotty towhee song because off and on for 20+ years I've observed dark ibises in northwestern Arkansas that could be either White-faced or Glossy. For the past year or so, I've been especially looking at a series of close and clean digital images of fall Plegadis that were at Centerton in Benton County in October 2009. After soliciting a lot of opinion from others, it has become obvious that from about 14 to 25 October 2009, there were at least 2 Plegadis ibises at Centeron (and the general area) which were photographed. Jacque Brown and David Oakley photographed them and so did I.

I photographed a single bird closely on 14 October that is an adult Glossy Ibis. The eye is clearly brown in all photographs from different angles including good light. The patch of skin between the base of the bill and the eye is always dark. There is a faint thin border. The back plumage is very glossy. Jacque Brown also photographed this bird, plus another that is clearly a White-faced Ibis (October 20-25). The eye is obviously red. The facial skin patch is reddish and there is part of a relatively broad white border. This image reminds me of a bird photographed at Little Rock recently.

Sorting this out helps us better understand fall Plegadis distribution. The Glossy is only the third record for northwest Arkansas. The White-faced is the only definitive fall record for this species in northwestern Arkansas, though many of the past Plegadis observations may have been this species.

The images and the willingness of folks to sort them out demonstrate the value and the power associated with obtaining good clean images of unusual species. It takes a lot of time, work, learning, and skill to get the images and lots of time to process them, but the work can have a great pay-off, as in this case. It's one of the things I really like about birding. The story continues to unfold.

You never get to the end. Just when you think you have it ALL figured out –HELLO! HELLO!— here comes the new, the spiritual refreshment, the weird towhee song no one has ever before heard. So-called reality is never set in concrete. It is just stable until the next field trip and that diagnostic image and that sound file collected in the field, now studied at home – now shared with people half way around the world – with experts who don't speak English, or at least the western Arkansas version. In all of this way, at least, birding mirrors the evolving, unfolding story of life itself.

SPARROW ISLAND October 7, 2010

It's early October, the weather is cool, and we all know what that means: sparrows. I have them on the mind. I'm thinking Le Conte's Sparrow and Nelson's Sparrow. I was out at Woolsey Wet Prairie in Fayetteville for a few hours this morning giving it a try.

Marsh Wrens popped up immediately in a dense thicket of smartweed. I stood still and soon had three around me, obviously curious about what invaded their realm. A Lincoln's Sparrow perched and called TUCK TUCK from a small willow. I decided to try and PISH-up a Marsh Wren for a photo and soon had one calling CUT-CUT very close, plus a couple of Common Yellowthroats, all in dense smartweed. After that, a Sedge Wren, a White-crowned Sparrow (juvenile, first of season for me), a couple of Dickcissels, a Swamp Sparrow, a Savannah Sparrow, four Chimney Swifts overhead, and a season first (for me) Northern Harrier in the adjoining hayfield.

For a while this morning I didn't notice the soundscape. I guess I inadvertently sealed myself into a bubble trying for clear focus on sparrows in smartweed. It's like being on an island and not hearing the surf. I studied Lincoln's grayish head, fine streaks on the breast and that yellow wash, and the dark eye watching me as I watched it. To the south, the wastewater treatment plant was humming away. To the west, two backhoes alternately and constantly gunned forward and BEEP BEEP BEEPed in reverse working on an electrical substation. To the north, a track hoe and two dozers were singing the same hymn to the future, in service of new, bigger water and sewer lines. To the east, an ambulance blared up Broyles Avenue and just beyond, in accompaniment to clanks & BEEPs, dump trucks regularly banging their tailgates at the dirt mine.

Thing is, I hardly noticed any of this when I had my bins on a close Lincoln's Sparrow. That quiet born of concentration dissolved when I let my bins down and looked around and found myself

in the industrial soundscape. There's a lesson in this, but of course you can't be looking through bins all the time.

In my field book I noted during two hours at least four Lincoln's Sparrows, six Marsh Wrens, four yellowthroats, and an overflight by a male Wood Duck. A nice haul of birds. Simultaneously, I despair that BEEPing and CLANGing with such intensity is a dirge for prairie grasslands and native seasonal wetlands. More of nature's dreamscape lost to each dozer blade, to every BEEP. In such moments I wonder how very disparate realities co-exist exist side-by-side? The natural world in a close up binocular view, the world as it is being reworked beyond the bins?

On a recent cold night, sparrows that nested up north began their annual fall trip to weedy fields all over Arkansas. Now in a wet field denominated Woolsey Wet Prairie --where damage to wetlands is being mitigated – and where adjacent mitigation a newer northwest Arkansas is rising upon former prairie lands -- Lincoln's Sparrows talk to one another.

LOVE IN THE WASTELAND October 9, 2010

My ambition this morning was to get up to Centerton for sparrows, and maybe a Dunlin, but never made it, waylaid instead by reality. First, it was foggy. Around the time I reached Vaughn the sun was just barely up, and a kind of pink light suffused the fog. I passed an old chicken house, admiring the broad old artistically weathered boards exposed when the tin siding fell off. A big hole that used to be a window was filled with pink light, except for the space occupied by the head of a black and white milk cow. This seemed a promising start.

I still couldn't see anything across the big fields, but I could hear the Eastern Meadowlark version of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. They sang all around ("surround sound" is how they market this, I think), with support from KEE DEE KEE DEE – Killdeers from an invisible, but audible, farm pond. I pulled up right there and listened for a while, thinking I might hear a first of season Western Meadowlark, but didn't. A few sparrows flushed up on the barbed wire, near enough that I could see them – Savannah Sparrow (2), Grasshopper Sparrow (1).

Still not to Centerton, BUT the day is young, and it's not so far to "Weedy Estates," a big flopped subdivision where in the get-rich-quick daze of three years ago, 80 acres were dozed to bare red dirt, streets pushed in, curbed but not paved, forlorn utility hook-ups marooned and deteriorating, plumbing scattered all over the place. So instead of Centerton, I'm headed for Weedy Estates.

The joys of trash dumping in Weedy Estates have been discovered (tires, car parts, yard waste). The unpaved streets are growing gullies. Spaces dozed and flattened for mansionettes are festively decked out in a variety of composities (daisy fleabane, for example), plus poke, persimmon sprouts, and the odd, isolated oak tree. The open country birds obviously love the place. I saw 15 Scissor-tailed Flycatchers carrying on in a fine racket in one tiny tree out in the

middle. Enjoying them, I noticed one small bird tail-flipping, then a second, and soon had 2-3 more – Palm Warblers (4-5). Composites sheltered Common Yellowthroats, House Wrens, a Marsh Wren, several Indigo Buntings (including one with a lot of blue), Lincoln's Sparrow, and other stuff I missed.

Mentally I took note of the obvious beauties of a seemingly bankrupted subdivision. I summarize as follows: (1) lots of interesting weeds (butterflies and botany); (2) rocky bare dirt (Lark Sparrows); (3) very open (American kestrel); (4) relatively quiet – no lawn mowers, leaf blowers, weed eaters, or Harleys; (5) unfinished roads perfect for easy slow-walk sparrow birding; (6) isolated trees great for hawk perches; (7) a moonscape, a wilderness uninhabited as the moon itself; (8) big open weedy fields perfect for Savannah Sparrows – oops! – just saw 3 in one of those dried up composites! (9) scattered poke bushes (there are 2 Palm Warblers!); (10) no street signs, so I make 'em up as I go: "Scissor-tailed Perch," "Palm Warbler Poke," "Kestrel Vista." Long may they show the way.

It's up to mid-morning and the illustrious pink fog is gone -- in fact all of the fog is gone. It's another drop-dead-beautiful fall day. Then, in the warm light, monarchs stir in the low sheltering atmospheres of tall weeds not planned for these 80 acres, but which now belong almost exclusively to them.

LE CONTE'S & NELSON'S, RETURN TO WEEDY ESTATES October 10, 2010

I made a return trip up to Vaughn in Benton County this morning and stopped off at the abandoned subdivision I have termed Weed Estates. First couple of birds were Palm Warblers, then I saw Jacque Brown who was out with her camera. We joined forces and soon had more interesting birds. We both got images of Nelson's Sparrow perched in a fine composite weed, sun to our backs, illuminating the orange plumage. At one point Jacque counted 23 scissor-tails in the air at once (huge number of grasshoppers here). In about 1.5 hours we had Field Sparrow (2+), Savannah Sparrow, (6) Grasshopper Sparrow (1, heavy molt), Le Conte's Sparrow (1), Nelson's Sparrow (1), Song Sparrow (2), Lincoln's Sparrow (4-5), Swamp Sparrow (1), White-throated Sparrow (2), White-crowned Sparrow (5+, adults and juvs). Also Indigo Bunting (6) and Dickcissel (2), and many monarch butterflies. I had visitors from out of town and couldn't stay longer and Jacque had her house to paint. We only covered a small part of the area.

CAVE MOUNTAIN, NOW October 11, 2010

I was up on Cave Mountain in the upper Buffalo River of Newton County yesterday, October 11. It's a bit over an hour from Fayetteville, so I have plenty of time to get all fired up. Overlooking Boxley Valley and the Boxley Baptist Church, that ancient mountain holds promise and mystery, great and fresh. By the time I get there I am totally jazzed up and ready to do bird ID battle. I drive to the top, pile out and listen, then drift down to the next level, and look and listen some more. It's like my eyes and my ears are real hungry. There's a stop at the massive sandstone

bluff line and a down slope stop that's all paw paws. There's the side road about halfway with small brushy fields that used to be farmland. Then comes the bat cave. At the bottom, the Buffalo itself, an engaging riparian zone covered by rivercane, and willows, gravelbars, clear running water, and that fabulous sky above all. October 11 was no disappointment.

I had an end of the season Wood Thrush that announced itself with that distinctive "popping" call and later, several first of season Hermit Thrushes, calling excited CHUK CHUKs amidst a gang of Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets. Fall leaves, falling hickory nuts (oops! Forgot my hardhat!), woodpeckers hammering, while overhead there's a constant roar of military aircraft, and from far in the valley, the bugling calls of elk, rolling up the slopes of Cave Mountain. For warblers I had Northern Parula, Black-throated Green, Nashville, Yellow-rumped, and Orange-crowned, and a vireo that was probably a Warbling.

Down in the valley were 4 Trumpeter Swans and at least 18 Wood Ducks on the mill pond. The ducks are mostly all molted into adult dress, immaculate as can be imagined. There were a couple of birds still in juvenile plumage, but obviously males from their distinctive red eyes and emerging facial pattern.

I enjoy such days greatly, but every field trip also potentially has emotional baggage. If I'm leading a group or out with a few friends everything remains pretty much on the level. We yack away when the birding slows and topics range from ephemeral and mundane to the terminal and eternal. But this only lasts until the next leaf is stirred by a foraging warbler. Birding by myself, without the comforting distraction of companions, what's deep and inside sometimes finds its way to the surface.

I'm walking along the vine-covered sandstone bluff looking for that last Scarlet Tanager. Things have gotten quiet and I'm unexpectedly confronted, not by an errant timber rattler, but an old failed relationship. It's 5, 10, 25 years ago, feelings-wise. I hear voices lost to ill winds years ago. Then there's my dad, dead 40 years, and I hear him talking to me about his growing up in Van Buren. It's like some crazy film with unexpected and surprising flashbacks. I hear voices. Then suddenly, more voices: Blue Jays!

Five birds sweep into the hickory above, screaming and pumping up and down on the limbs. Maybe they just scream JAY JAY for the joy in it, but I did hear a Barred Owl, so maybe it's that. Come back! Come back! They seem to say and I do. Too, maybe it's the profusion of heavenly blue asters and the fragrant patches of dittany. Maybe it's the monarchs floating south. Whether birds, flowers, or butterflies -- thank goodness I'm back and it's about Cave Mountain right now.

REAL 100% AMERICAN COOT October 14, 2010

American Coots are migrating through Arkansas in big numbers now. I roughly counted 1,400 on Bob Kidd Lake near Prairie Grove in early November a few years ago. This energetic influx,

strong pulse of migration, accounts for a bird I found yesterday, dead on highway 170 just north of Devil's Den State Park. Coots mainly nest in extensive marshes and shallow waters of the prairie pothole region, northern US and Canada. Maybe the bird I found on 170 was planning to winter here, or maybe not, since some migrants go as far south as Columbia.

Coots swim like ducks, but are actually rails with paddles on their toes. On Lake Fayetteville, for example, they certainly look like ducks, an undifferentiated herd of blackish waterbirds that usually hang out near the shoreline. We often ignore them as we scope the lake for a prize like a Surf Scoter. That is, in our unintended insensitivity we take 'em for granted, "just coots."

When flushed, ducks spring directly from the water and can do so even from a tiny pond. Coots "flush" – it's not really an appropriate word here, but -- by furiously paddling the water to gain speed for take-off. That is, they perform an energetic walk on water. Because of this, they require extensive open space. They seem to thrive here in winter on all kinds of lakes and at least on some of the largest ponds, just so there is plenty of open shallow water, aquatic vegetation, and a long runway – or I should say paddle way -- for a take-off when danger threatens. Danger, as in the sudden and unexpected appearance of a bunch of birders near the shoreline, or more often, a hungry Bald Eagle keeping a sharp eye out for a slow paddling coot.

First thing I noticed on the dead coot was the green legs and green lobed toes. It's a soft kind of green that reminds me of fresh days at the beginning of spring. There's nothing quite like a naturally green creature. It's one of the greens that make the plumage of a Painted Bunting so striking. The big lobes on the toes are very flexible and feather to a fine edge, like the best canoe paddles. The lobes themselves are a striking adaptation of a marsh walker (like other rails) for a life more committed to open shallow water. The green toes end with claws for gripping floating logs used as perches.

The bird was fresh enough that the deep red of the iris and the black pupil were visible, seeming to look at me, strange creature from a different time. Ivory colored bill, green legs, that blood red eye, toes mounted with paddles so effective in winter the birds seem to not be moving, even as they swim away. The whitish bill had some pied markings that reminded me of those on a Pied-billed Grebe. The head and neck was blackish set against various shades of mouse gray on the rest of the body. I opened a wing for the white trailing edge we see when they take off. In terms of gorgeous striking plumage, what more could we ask for? I have always taken coots, a very common winter bird here, for granted.

Elegant paddles on the coot's toes are perfect for swimming, but this doesn't work on a highway. Evolution never taught them about how light reflected off a wet highway looks a lot like big water. And once on the ground, coots are trapped in an unfriendly world not of their making and beyond their reasonable understanding. I feel that way myself at times.

SORTING SAVANNAHS October 14, 2010

I spent the morning at Chesney Prairie Natural Area. The most notable feature was the sparrow influx, and especially high numbers of Savannah Sparrows. The fields were full of them. In a couple of places I had 20+ perched up on barbed wire fences and 2-3 would perch briefly on sumac, bent over stalks of big bluestem grass, or whatever was available. Other sparrows included Vesper (3), Song (2), Lincoln's (2), Swamp (5+), White-crowned (~8 with a fine chorus of singing), and Dark-eyed Junco (1). The light was perfect for viewing the vast plumage variation in the Savannahs, from dark to light. It made for a fun hour of sorting.

I heard an American Crow ruckus behind me while watching. They were chasing a Great Horned Owl that had fled into an osage orange tree. Crows are big birds, but small compared to the owl. Undaunted, and quite determined, they made repeated daring swoops at this king of our local owls, who ducked and flinched in an undignified manner. I admit I did feel a little sorry for the owl, but the crows probably have good cause for this eternal enmity.

At one point I saw a dark bird with a nearly orange face much like Nelson's. At another place, a pale Nelson's that I at first mis-IDed as a Savannah. JUST KIDDING! Actually I didn't see Nelson's, but there's no under-estimating the vast plumage variation in Savannahs. It turns out there's no such thing as "a" Savannah Sparrow. Across the huge landscape where they nest, they vary greatly in size and color and there was interesting variety at Chesney this morning.

The engine driving Savannah Sparrows into the future seems to be looking for opportunities to fit ever better into the landscape. By contrast, our own construct seems to involve trying to fit everything into increasingly large, homogenized boxes supposedly for efficiency and the holy cause of low price. Pretty weird when you think about it. There's stuff we can learn from the birds.

LYNN AND IGOR October 17, 2010

Lynn Sciumbato of Morning Star Wildlife Rehabilitation Center near Gravette brought her big birds to Shiloh Museum in Springdale yesterday. The occasion was Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society's annual program of nature photography, conversations with bird guys and gals. She shared an hour of fact and humor concerning birds and people. A mesmerizing story teller, Lynn has a real tale to tell about northwest Arkansas and big birds to tell it with.

The core of these stories revolves around individual personalities of birds. With her favorite bird, a Turkey Vulture name Igor literally in hand, she shares Igor's story, which began 11 years ago, when Igor was one day out of the egg. With the successful humorist's pregnant pauses, voice inflection rising and laughing, facial features varying from remarkable to quizzical and natural timing—that chuckle or sudden silence— we learn Igor is not a buzzard and how calm Igor is compared to many other big birds.

As Lynn puts it, some want raptors want to tear you up, but Igor and his kind just sort of look at you and say "duh…" Then she moves on to hawks and owls.

Of yes, did I mention she is an expert, with decades of experience working with all kinds of raptors, song birds, small mammals, and the odd reptile that has come her way? And a retired school teacher?

She brought Ginny, a 7 year old Red-tailed Hawk. Lynn calls her the "diva bird…nothing makes her happy" and we soon have Ginny's story. She was hand-reared for falconry and treated then like a queen. But she lost her exalted status in life in a hunting accident. No longer able to fly, the usual outcome is to be "put down." Instead, Ginny came to Morning Star. Today Diva Bird shares the limelight with Igor. Lynn explains Igor and Ginny also share a cage. Maybe the vulture "duh" will wear off on the dethroned diva.

Nancy Harris from Fayetteville asks Lynn how she protects herself pecked in the face and really hurt? Lynn responds, "Well, do you want to see the scars [much laughter]. As a matter of fact…I don't really scar…Owls and hawks don't think to bite. That's not their first response…this beak is like their knife and fork. It's for ripping food apart…" Now she segues to difficulty handling really BIG birds, like Bald Eagles, that can get you.

She recalls released of a rehabbed eagle at Beaver Lake. "I was fixing to throw her up in the air and she ripped all the side of my face…I was fixing to fling the bird so I went ahead and flung her… [pause, then laughter] for SEVERAL reasons." Then she mentions something more common: puncture wounds. "Ah, puncture wounds. You don't get much sympathy for puncture wounds. They don't bleed near as well as rips from eagles…" She remembers something else, too. "I have been hurt worse when bitten by a cardinal. Really and truly. I mean, that brings tears to your eyes. They always get you right there…" indicating the sensitive flap of skin between the thumb and forefinger.

Before you get the idea that Lynn is just a skilled talker – she's certainly that – let me mention what a skilled observer she is as well. I noticed that Ginny didn't have much a "belly band," a dark band often seen on mature Red-tailed Hawks. I asked about this. They don't all have it, she explained. In fact there is a huge amount of variation. She recalled a time in the early 1980s in Decatur, at the mega-center of Arkansas's poultry industry.

"They had this huge hawk die-off at this one farm. They were finding hawks everywhere, you know, down or dead. Game and fish called and said, 'Do you have room for about 25 hawks?' I said, 'LUTHER! WHAT!!!???' There were all these hawks that had gone down on this one farm and we didn't know what the deal was. We had no idea why they'd all gone down. Finally figured out it was 'poor poultry husbandry.' This one farmer had dumped three truck loads of dead chickens. As the predators had gone down towards the bottom, there was botulism…and everybody who was working this pile of dead chickens was dealing with this botulism…I think I got in all totaled 26 hawks…I think 24 of them survived…"

"I had all of them in my big flight pen. It was a little crowded. They would all be sitting on the back perch in the back of the flight pen and you would look at all those birds and every one of

them was a different color. You know what I mean…the width of the belly band different, or it was a little tiny belly band, or a kind of peachy color…every one of them was different…"

Every bird she gets is an individual. And Lynn is that rare "bird" herself: an unabashed raconteur finding interesting fact and humor at every turn. We're just fortunate she long ago chose birds in trouble as her source of inspiration.

HERE COMES THAT BLANKITY-BLANK PLANE AGAIN? October 20, 2010

I'm out working in Middle Nowhere. Just me and a ridgetop in the National Forest. One moment it's all quiet, except for a few bluebirds flying over, then suddenly, unexpectedly, a dark shadow races over, followed by the screeching thunder of doom. I involuntarily jump and fall toward rocks, looking for cover. By then the low-flying A-10 "warthog" from the Air National Guard base at Fort Smith has diminished to a receding roar. I wonder how loud noises impact our behavior.

I got to thinking about the physiological impacts of noise during this year's Blues, Bikes, and Barbecue motorcycle rally in Fayetteville. Several hundred thousand people ride very large machines in a small space. Machines compete to dominate airspace. As in lions, louder is dominant. The city air shakes and vibrates. My house rattles and vibrates until 2 AM, when most bikers retire. Big supporters of such events are those who directly profit from alcohol sales. It may be that elevated consumption is a necessary palliative for nerves so jangled and tortured. I don't ride a Harley, but after BBB thunder, I am myself ready for serious palliatives.

One evening I set up a sound recorder near a spring peeper pond in another seemingly paradise of forested Nowhere. Low flying military jets find that place, too. Now experienced, I hear it coming and get braced. I feel pressure and vibration from powerful engines. The world is shaking, like just before a volcanic eruption. A Barred Owl calls as the noise volume escalates. At home I listen to the recording. It makes my subwoofer rattle. You feel that plane passage just putting your hand on the speaker. I knew it was an airplane. I wonder what the owl thinks? Armageddon? The End of the World? Or maybe just, "Here comes that blankity-blank plane again"?

Devil's Den State Park is a great birding spot. It's set in Lee Creek valley, nestled in the Boston Mountains, and more or less enclosed by the Ozark National Forest. If there is any place in Arkansas far from the maddening crowd, and within an hour from Fayetteville and Fort Smith, the Den is the place. I set up a sound recorder by a spring and go birding elsewhere for two hours. At home, listening to the recording, I am amazed at how many planes have flown over – more than I noticed when I was birding. Some planes make my subwoofer rattle and vibrate. All kinds of birds seem to be reacting as the sounds become elevated: Blue Jays, American Crows, and several woodpecker species.

I'm not going to claim here that I know what this means. My impression from reading some auditory research literature is that in the main, science doesn't know. We certainly impose what are termed "energy costs" on birds and other wild creatures. Red-cockaded Woodpeckers are flushed from their cavities by artillery blasts. Sonic booms cause some turkey hens to leave nests. Songbirds became silent as a result of sonic boom, then gave what were terms "raucous, discordant cries." I guess that's what I got in my recordings at Devil's Den: raucous, discordant cries.

Overall, I think the aircraft noise impacts on birds just aren't known. Most people don't notice the noise, or don't care about it, so it will probably remain that way, for now at least. Blasts from Harley engines at BBB caused me to become agitated and want to leave town. It's hard to imagine other creatures with whom we share the planet feel much different about blasts that suddenly and unexpectedly dominate their world.

YODELING, WHEEZING, AND SQUAWKING: BENTON COUNTY'S GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE SONGFEST October 21, 2010

Great-tailed Grackles vocalizations are, blessedly, out of this world, antidote to other mundane, in-this-world realities. I take the medicine at all opportunities. That's why I'm parked on a gravel road in Benton County where several hundred Great-tailed Grackles are also parked. They're above, in the trees. I'm outside with a sound recorder.

The grackles have left the morning roost and are surveying the fields. I assume they ask, Where should we go today? They may also be deciding on breakfast. WHACK! WHACK! WHACK! Grackles check out acorns, some of which make the 40 foot drop onto my car. Mostly they are vocalizing. That's just great, because that's exactly what I've come for.

In flocks, they perform weird acoustic alchemy, avian science-fiction. They say seeing is believing: so is hearing. Yodeling, wheezing, squawking, chattering, bugles & whistles, and something like puffing -- words barely scratch the surface, a poor substitute for reality. I humbly offer feeble attempts to bend this natural sci-fi into words: chuck-chuck; clack, clack, clack; wheee wheee wheee; dEE, dEE-bee, bee, bee; ruoo; zzzut zzzut, geee gee. I forgot various rattles. How does sound bend into so many shapes? Where, in all of that complex neurological wiring, in that long and super complex evolutionary history – where in the heck does it come from? Where's it going? How could it just land, like an alien spaceship, in northwestern Arkansas? OK – I admit these are weighty questions to pose on a gravel road in western Arkansas, but how can they be avoided?

Great-tailed Grackles in western Arkansas, and especially at a few regular places in Benton County, are now part of the big Great-tailed homeland. It's like being in McAllen, Texas, or in Mexico, and take that on down into Central America.

I know everyone in Arkansas isn't going to be happy about this. I can just hear it: "Oh no! Not another blackbird!" My car isn't going to lose any of its value over a few acorn hits and a few juicy bird plops. Blackbirds fascinate and help describe the landscape. I wonder about energy flows involved. What is it that pushes Great-tailed Grackles northward? Something inside them, an instinct to explore and colonize new worlds? Does this sound familiar? In our case, we called it Columbus, Plymouth colony, and Jamestown. And what nurtures acoustical alchemy and its direction?

Some of the flock has settled into a couple of leafless walnut trees across the road. Now I have a landscape view with grackles, open fields, and grasslands of a former prairie. I can see the bluish-purplish shiny, long-tailed males, mostly across upper branches, some bills open (WHOOOOEEE). Mostly below, the brownish females are preening and watching. Both have striking bright eyes in the crisp fall early morning light, pure blue beyond. And then, a sudden rush of wings, a clatter of…well…clatters, squawks, and whistles, and our Great-tails are off for the day.

MAYSVILLE SNAPSHOTS October 27, 2010

These snapshots are from the former Beaty Prairie (Maysville) and former Round Prairie (Cherokee City), both in Benton County.

I usually do the former Round Prairie along Floyd Moore Road, within sight of the 500 foot stack of the SWEPCO electrical generating plant. I had a Clay-colored Sparrow in a mixed species sparrow flock that was mostly White-crowned, but also included Field and Song Sparrows. A Bewick's Wren (brown backed eastern form) popped up while I was watching Swamp Sparrows.

It was a day with low wind and great listening. Eastern Meadowlarks were singing everywhere. I saw one flock north of Maysville with at least 40 birds. Overall, I had at least six different Western Meadowlarks in widely separated areas. As for singing, White-crowned Sparrows were a good match for the meadowlarks. I had a minimum of 71 for the day and their singing was universal, often joined by mockingbirds in the same shrubby open habitat.

I was disappointed to see only one harrier all day, but I had great looks at a very black Red-tailed Hawk with a bright red tail, two Harlan's Hawks, and a white Red-tailed Hawk that I decided was probably just a light phase bird rather than a Krider's. Plus there were plenty of standard red-tails.

I was counting a big Killdeer flock (40+) out in a recently harvested bean field, then noticed pipits – up flew a cloud of 70+ American Pipits (could have been 200). I was watching and listening in amazement when a car rolled up and stopped. Just before, I thought I had seen a Pine Siskin foraging on the ripe seed heads of sawtooth sunflowers. Siskin? Siskin? I hadn't seen one in a while and I was wondering about that when the car stopped. It was an older man and his wife and he politely asked if I needed help? I did, but not in the usual way. Then a small flock of 10 sure-enough siskins settled into the sawtooth patch. It was like the old prairie returned

from the dead. This land still belongs to the prairie; we're just passing through. Hard to convey that in roadside chats with strangers, even friendly ones. As they drove away, I noticed their bumper sticker: I AM NOT A REPUBLICAN, I AM NOT A DEMOCRAT, I AM A CHEROKEE.

Other birds very common: high numbers of Yellow-rumped Warblers – they just filled the roadside trees – at least 60 for the day. Savannah Sparrows were widespread. At one spot, 15 savannahs bathed in a water-filled rut made by a CAT D5C parked nearby. The birds also perched on a low slung phone wire adjacent the rut when disturbed by passing cars -- adaptive management.

Here's the sparrow list for the day: chipping, clay-colored, field, vesper, savannah, song, Lincoln's, swamp, white-throated, white-crowned, junco. The only thing I would complain about on this front is that none of these former prairie areas have any protected public lands where you can roam grasslands for Le Conte's, etc.

This was a big day in terms of the number of people who stopped to offer assistance: six. They: "Is everything OK?" Me: "Not sure." Then, noting the binoculars, they ask politely, "What are you looking for?" I can't quite decide how to answer. "The meaning of life." Just kidding – I left my wise countenance and saffron robe at home. Just saying I'm birding seems so lame and even somewhat dishonest – a supposedly grown up man, out in the middle of "nowhere," watching sparrows. I don't know whether to rejoice at the helpfulness of my fellow citizens or weep that I look so much in need of help, celebrate or lapse into despair that in this landscape I am as strange as a Vesper Sparrow.

Often, folks catch on and quickly change the subject to eagles. EVERYONE in western Benton County takes pride in winter eagles. I saw four today. These would be called talking points if I was a politician, the eagle thing I mean. Even solid citizens notice eagles.

Finally, the persimmon trees have mainly lost their leaves. Roadsides through these former prairies are now extravagant with fruit, and a heavy crop it is.

VESPER SPARROW October 29, 2010

Jacque Brown, Joanie Patterson, David Oakley, and I did a marathon road trip to The Nature Conservancy's Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in northeastern Oklahoma yesterday. Met at David's in Springdale at 5 AM, two Great Horned Owls singing in the dark on his street. Loaded birding and camera gear into Jacque's new Chev; binoculared, scoped, and shutter-snapped TGPP non-stop frost burning off 8 AM to balmy, coats off sun going down 5:30PM; back to David's 9 PM.

Missed rushed hour at Tulsa. Hit rush hour at Pawhuska: 3 people buying gas at the ez mart. Pulled into TGPP as 10 Pine Siskins settled onto the tall, heavily-seeded heads of a Maximilian (?) sunflower patch. Cameras running fast as speeding bullets. Then hit sparrow migration head on.

Sparrows rose in mass from frosted grass for sun lighted perches on bison fences and low scattered trees. First we spotted a cluster of 4-5 Vesper Sparrows, then scores of Savannah Sparrows. David & Jacque especially were creeping, creeping for the “Ah!” camera shots when David yelled “Le Conte’s!” There was one, then two, and within a few minutes, at least 6-7, in one small area of bluestem grass and indigo bush.

Bison have made all kinds of bare ground wallows and especially long, winding open trails through the grasslands. Vespers and Savannahs found this natural habitat in a big grassland. So image Vesper foraging along a bison trail. As we walk toward it, Vesper pauses to notice us. Our own field marks are bare faces with big eyes, Vesper the bold eye ring and chestnut face patch. One Vesper hopped up on a fence and perched there watching us. I figured this would be another one I wouldn’t have a chance to digiscope since the scope and camera were in the car. David and Jacque had collected a hundred images, yet Vesper stayed put. Joanie & I hustled back to the car, returned, and collected our own images. Back in Canada next spring, this situation will give Vesper a story to tell about an other worldly encounter with weird creatures out in the Flint Hills of Oklahoma.

Joanie puts all field data into the ebird database, so how many meadowlarks of each species? How many sparrows? With counts in main limited to roadsides or near – where we could tell for sure which sparrows we were seeing – we had 155 Savannahs, 7 Le Conte’s, 20 Vespers, plus Chipping, Song, Field, Fox, White-throated, White-crowned, Harris’s (1 – first of season), junco, and possibly Clay-colored. Singing by Eastern Meadowlarks was universal in TGPP’s vast openness. We heard (and saw) at least three Westerns among them.

Bison are corralled now for the annual roundup, so we had an open run. In one big field we watched a black-tailed jackrabbit as it raced out of our view. I haven’t seen one in northwest Arkansas since the 1960s. It’s still a little early for some winter specialities like Rough-legged Hawk and Smith Longspur, but we saw two Bald Eagles and both times in association with small duck flocks, mainly Gadwalls and Green-winged Teal.

It may very well be that huge seed-heavy sunflowers attended by siskins, or say even a Vesper Sparrow passing through on its way south, carries on life without specific consciousness of their impacts on the world. But if we humans expect to have a future here, we can’t afford to be ignorant or dismissive of our impacts. I think this understanding is what motives the folks and the tremendous efforts behind places like the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve. Thank goodness.

NOVEMBER

QUESTIONS OF LIGHT, WEIGHT, BALANCE November 1, 2010

Pine Siskins started showing up in northwest Arkansas at least by 27 October. I saw a flock foraging on sawtooth sunflowers near Maysville, but couldn't study them that day because a car came down the road with a resulting visit -- and birds gone. However, it did wet my appetite for siskins. I found them again, yesterday, in the same place, this time without significant disturbance. Siskins were mixed with American Goldfinches, so I got a study of both, but because we have goldfinches all year, I watched the siskins with intensity.

There was a modest wind, which periodically whipped the 8-9 foot tall sunflower heads – and the birds on them – back-and-forth. One bird foraged near me and for part of that time was functionally upside down. The main part of its body was relatively level, but the siskin's neck and head were bent all the way around so that it could remove seeds from a dangling flower head. This was no brief exercise, either. One foot grasped the flower stalk, the other planted right on the flower head. The bird remained there well-balanced in the back-and-forth, plucking seeds with its pointed bill. I saw no reason to think it couldn't do this all day.

The light was great for watching – a lovely, sunlight blue sky fall day behind, illuminating heavy dark streaking, whitish thick wing bar, patch of gold in the flight feathers, deeply notched tail, and a dark eye. Overall, the birds look quite substantial – they must have well-developed muscle & skeleton to accomplish, to make their livings, with such acrobatics – yet they dangle delicate as ballerinas from thin flower stalks, plucking seeds! Despite all the life, all of the energetic activity, they maneuver as though they weigh no more than the illuminating fall light.

And the question of balance? Oh well, I might as well say that it has been a VERY long time since I was so nimble, so flexible – actually I never was – to hang upside down, bent in a "U" in order to pluck anything, much less all of the food needed for a day of flight. But it's something to think about, isn't it? I mean this magical world of which we are a part. To mingle with light, wind, and flowers?

THE BREAKFAST CHEKFEST November 5, 2010

Yellow-rumped Warblers flood into the Fayetteville area in October and early November. They come full of excited CHEK CHEK CHEKs. Big energetic flocks announce something important is happening in the world: summer is over and we are off and running into fall and winter. You can bet on the fact that if there is poison ivy around with lots of berries, that's where they gather for the breakfast chekfest.

I like just watching them and all of that energy in motion. Poison ivy gets a bad rap in our twisted, anthropocentric view of creation. It's an undesirable invader of waste lands. It's just bad, bad, and no amount of Roundup is likely to be spared in eradication. We happily poison it with clever chemicals -- and in wiping out a poison ivy patch, don't we feel like we have really accomplished something? Spared ourselves or our kids a bad rash! "Garden" centers at Walmart, Home Depot, and Low's would probably go out of business if they couldn't sell herbicides to kill poison ivy. Come on now – we're all guilty of this – and as soon as you've read this you'll head out and kill some more. Of course. We all love our Yellow-rumped Warblers, but very few feel the love for poison ivy. Welcome to our world.

But now just ask any Yellow-rumped Warbler. They do "feel the love" of all those big juicy clumps of white berries, hanging conveniently – bird's eye view actually – in twisting and turning vines well sheltered from prying Cooper's Hawks. These are hints to me personally about learning to appreciate the actual (as opposed to the anthropocentric) nature of reality -- not just what I see myself...but what is actually there – the wholeness -- or something...

It's not easy to keep all this in mind, by the way, while looking at Yellow-rumps in trees and vines above, trying to see if their throats are white or yellow. White is typical, what we used to call Myrtle Warbler. A yellow throat means it's what we called Audubon's Warbler, a bird from the far west. A fun puzzle to work out, but a little tricky under big poison ivy vines.

OK, I know I'm off in woo woo land on this, but hopefully at least for a moment it might be salubrious to see the planet from yellow-rump's viewpoint. Also, I like the white berries and red leaves as part of the fall foliage display. I take a good long look, but standing back a few feet of course from artistically twisted and reddened leaves and avoiding the white berries that fall while yellow-rumps greedily dig through fruit clusters above.

PERFECT SOUNDS FALL MORNING November 7, 2010

It's on the frosty side this morning at Lake Fayetteville. I see coots and a few grebes, and Canada Geese I can't see. Wind-wise it's calm, and for Fayetteville-Springdale, quiet. I hear YA HONK YA HONK, punctuated by a deep, booming, resonating base: basso profondo. That voice resonates the whole world, at least the part I can see & hear. I forget how cold my hands are. Basso is the first chair bass goose in a great choir.

Just behind me and all around the Environmental Study Center are robins: 10 acres (maybe more) of caroling, chuckling, and some singing. They're in honey suckle bushes plucking red berries, chugging down hackberries from up in trees. In bunches of 5-6 and 10, they perch and vocalize away, maybe like me, waiting for sun-up. There is welcome light above the trees by 8:00, and more robins flying in from the blue north in dozens, all silver underneath, reflecting new sun.

Usually I don't have trouble feeling glad to be alive, but I have my times and don't we all? This morning there is basso profondo and Turdus migratorius as reminders, if nothing else. But I'm not done.

I heard soft WHO WHOs of a female Great Horned Owl when I first arrived. Now I hear raucous CAWs of 5 excited American Crows, coming from the same area. All the cawing tells me they found 'em an owl. Little better defines our crows than owl parties. The resulting uproars add charm to the landscape. Mall and freeway may not be far away, but it remains a wild place with an owl and a pack of hyper excited crows.

Beyond geese, robins, and an owl-crow event lay brushy old fields. In the bright fall sunlight, Fox Sparrows sing the morning: sure cheer CHEER WEE WEE cheerEE. Then, from thickets, when I try to move in for a close look, CHOCK CHOCK.

This afternoon there is a memorial for my old friend, Eleanor Johnson, who passed at 99. I knew her for 40 years. Among many good causes she supported was Arkansas Audubon Society. Her motto was, "One person's problem is every person's problem." She walked the walk. I think the singing this morning is for her, and her kind, who notice the world is a complex place, and leave it a little better than they found it.

ORGANIC BIRD WATCHING November 9, 2010

A death sentence for the day's attempts to get out and see fall waterfowl migration: throughout northwest Arkansas, southwest winds gusting into low 30s-miles-per-hour; today, tomorrow – forever. I know they're not lying because wind chimes outside sound like they're hanging from the tippy-top of earth's topgallant mast.

I'm not against our mother earth and I'm sure not against the wind – I mean, what else is going to sweep clean our parking lots of all of those Walmart, Target, and Walgreens plastic bags? Who else but these bags will decorate our leafless trees and a million miles of barbed wire fences? What other kind of tumbleweed do we have here except the Ozark Tumbleweeds of Home, plastic bags blowin' in the wind? But high winds kill plans to hunt up mid-continent riches with a couple of visiting San Francisco birders: Cackling Goose and Red-breasted Merganser – forget it.

One of them has medical screens and doctor's appointments. A meeting time of 1:30 turns to 2:30, then 3:30. Meanwhile I check wind-whipped Lake Fayetteville: American Coots, Pied-billed Grebes, and a few Mallards. But, it's a warm sunny day and I wait and -- suddenly and shockingly in our modern age of texting and twittering -- relax. I wander out of the wind, into the woods, looking for a tree as suitable prop. A leafless and now nutless hickory welcomes the casual sitter. I'm no longer the modern stalking birdwatcher with field guide, tripod mounted spotting scope, digital camera, etc etc ad nauseum. I sit for about 30 seconds, then I'm flat on my back, hickory nut lumps and all.

I can remember other second weeks in November over the years when Lake Fayetteville was cold, choppy, and crowded shore to shore with 16 duck species, plus loons, plus excited overflights by Snow Geese, flock after flock, the Arctic emptying its treasures right over Walmart Country. I had hoped for such a day when in September the San Francisco folks called me about their trip.

A couple of runners jog by, casting suspicious glances. What's the old man on the ground in the woods up to??? I have binoculars in my hands. The world's frame is the deeply blue sky with a few wispy clouds. Framed not by my camera or scope, but twisted branches and leafless twigs. Seems "organic," All Natural, or maybe at least 90%, out here among the creatures – oops, five Gadwalls over -- instead of high tech stalking.

My old friend, now passed, loved the "blue, blue sky" maybe because at the end it was all she could see or wanted. Or maybe it is where, at the end of our seemingly endless busy-ness, we must go – 8 Cedar Waxwings over -- couple of small jets and their trails over – then silently overhead a behemoth B-52 earth-killer, I guess training? Then a few close goldfinches, CHIPPITY-CHIP, CHIPPITY-CHIP (and as my friend Kim Smith would add, "flies with the dip"). Then thoughts and thinking break off into blue sky.

LOST BRIDGE FOUND BY VULTURES! November 11, 2010

I took advantage of a warm and relatively windless day to check for water birds on the north side of Beaver Lake. From Lost Bridge North: 3-4 Common Loons, 7 Horned Grebes, and a raft of ~30 ducks bewitchingly too far away. From Lost Bridge South: 1 adult Bald Eagle, 2 Common Loons, 8 grebe species (?), plus at least 139 vultures (both Black and Turkey).

Some vultures were standing on the shoreline, some perched in scattered small snags and large trees up on the ridge, some decoratively lounging on roofs and railings of $500,000 homes. Finally there was also a vast kettle of mixed species vultures drifting above the fall reds and yellows that mark ridges around Beaver Lake today.

The lake is way down now, with broad shoreline exposures of limestone bluffs at Slate Gap, just perfect for relaxing and enjoying a quiet Veterans Day. Visibility (and hear-ability) was the best I've ever experienced on Beaver: 1-2 Common Loons, 140 Horned Grebes, ~150 duck species at distance (at least: scaup sp-14, Green-winged Teal-35, Gadwall-40, Ring-necked Duck-3, Northern Shoveler-10; a bunch more oh too far away). I was surprised by a relatively late Spotted Sandpiper.

These were ingredients for an enjoyable morning: calm wind, scattered clouds, temps in the 70s, scarcity of boats with big engines, entire colorful ridges with fall leaves artistically reflected in flat water, yellow butterflies flying low and south. I could hear chatter among Horned Grebes and the first yodeling this fall from loons. Bluebirds, Myrtle Warblers, Northern Flickers, Carolina Wrens were all calling.

The calm was punctuated only by a few planes overhead and the occasional passing garbage truck. But by mid-morning the leaf blower army grew restless and started firing up. Leaves may have been falling harmlessly in these Ozark hills for a million years, but not now baby. There are fine homes built above each of these coves that require leaf removal. Blow Baby Blow! Leave no leaf unblown! The American economy may be in the pits, but leaf blower stocks remain high.

Members of Leaf Blowers Unlimited (LBU), please note: The Arkansas Homes and Wildlands Commission has declared open season on leaf blowers. The daily bag limit is 12 leaf blowers per day. Taking leaf blowers at Home Depot and Walmart doesn't count.

ONE HAND FREE-E-E-E TO THE SKY November 14, 2010

My impression is that Arkansas Audubon Society held a very successful fall meeting this weekend at Russellville. It's not because a bunch of rare birds were found (for example, where was "ole tufty"!) or that Lake Dardenelle yielded up her avian treasures during the barge trips – they were cancelled because of high, north winds that made difficult seeing anything. The optimistic nature of the programs on Saturday night brought success.

For the Red-cockaded Woodpecker award, biologist Frances Rothwein from the Ouachita National Forest gave an introduction to awardee Larry Hedrick in what, in my opinion, is the classic example of considering a problem (Red-cockaded Woodpeckers facing extinction) and noticing that even with bad news, some folks (in this case, Larry Hedrick) take the road of crafting and nurturing solutions. That's why Larry got the Shugart RCW Award. He has been a key player at the leadership-management level in nudging the RCW population in the Ouachitas from near extinction (1990) toward a steady growth (2010) that should eventually lead to full recovery.

Isn't life always throwing this at us? To yield to our fears or to move forward? To go negative or to go positive?

Doug James seems to have consistently chosen forward. Following the award to Larry Hedrick, Kim Smith – once Doug's graduate student and now for decades his colleague – provided the society with an affectionate sketch of Doug' ornithological career in Arkansas (starting in 1953). One story Kim told was that Doug could have taken any one of three ornithological jobs, but chose Arkansas. Poor, academically backward, and wholly and proudly segregated Arkansas.

Then it was Doug's turn. He provided us with nuts and bolts about academic life: travels, research projects, students, etc. This is expected, of course; after all, he is Doktor University Professor Douglas A. James. But what powers his career? He quickly put the Doktor stuff behind and ran with the fun.

I mean, what can you say about a zoologist who just puts it out there that starlings are his favorite bird, including various starling species encountered in foreign travels? And puts it up there on the screen as part of his Powerpoint? And what about his playful cartoons gracing

early editions of “Arkansas Birds”? And can that really be the august Dr James? I mean, that lean guy in his Captain American running togs, tiny American flags stuck in his red-white-blue head band? And yes, that’s Doug and his student Kannan in a boat, on dry land, in Belize, waving to the camera like they’re riding broncos, one had free to the sky.

During the Great Depression, FDR famously said that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. In that time some rode fear into nothing, negative, impossible and a world war. I’m thinking life often tosses us onto this strategic crossroads. Shall we just let the little woodpeckers go extinct? Shall we commit a career to teaching and learning across a global landscape? Shall we ride fear? Shall we ride one hand free-e-e-e to the sky?

ROBINVILLE November 17, 2010

Today and for the past few weeks, robins have been our stars for sure. They have so completely occupied Fayetteville that we must change the signs: “Fayetteville, pop. 68,000” to “Robinville, pop. 6 million.” Counting robins in cedar thickets, amur honeysuckle fields, all across the trees and bushes of neighborhoods and parks – I guess it would be like counting stars in the universe. There’s a roost north of Fayetteville; maybe somebody will count them. It could be a career.

Today busy flocks I’ve been seeing and hearing at Lake Fayetteville and along the Scull Creek bike trail had full run of my yard. Robins were vigorously billing aside fall leaves for tasty bits below even in a cool light rain. Robins with swooping flights and sudden twists and turns among limbs and between bushes. Robins in twos in hard tight chases like spring. Flocks overhead in 12s and 20s. Robins in trees, colorful and animated on limbs now bare of leaves.

I’m no musician but that didn’t keep me from trying to compose what I was hearing: bek bek bek bek, gee g g g g geek! Cheery-up cheery-up, wah wah wah, ber ber, che-chet! Robinville is a mobile, seemingly limitless communal soundscape. A fine male perches up close. His is a big dark eye framed by two clean white crescents, set into a black head and an artistic throat of wavy dark and light streaks, like life itself. The “red” breast is fall orange, a harvest orange. I can see his bill opening and closing, so I assume he is singing or I suppose he could be lip synching… Cheery! Cheery! Bick bick bick…

The singing and calling happily obscures College Avenue rush hour in pre-Robinville Fayetteville. But suddenly, silence falls upon the living earth of birds and deadly rush hour resumes it dominance. Why the silence? I’m thinking it’s the little Big Bang. I can see these robins exploding out from a distant spot; maybe not 14 billion light years back as with the big Big Bang, but at least in my neighbor’s yard and out of my sight. Robinville’s Silencer must lurk in the far distant vast thicket, probably Cooper’s Hawk.

But Robinville returns to business-as-usual in 5. Singing and calling, chasing, gobbling down bright red amur honeysuckle berries – that's the main business today in Robinville.

SNOW GEESE FLYING November 18-19, 2010

Snow Geese were flying over my house in Fayetteville at 3 AM today and also when I got up, 5 AM. Then off & on during the day. I saw one flock of ~175, and another of ~50. This is the first time this fall that I've noticed so many flocks. It was a gray day with north wind, so I headed for Beaver Lake.

SLATE GAP: Horned Grebe-45; Bald Eagle-1.
LOST BRIDGE SOUTH: Horned Grebe-21; duck species~35 (too far away; they all look black).
LOST BRIDGE NORTH: I saw nothing but Pied-billed Grebes close, but at distance, looking toward Indian Creek, I could see gulls, loons, and many more ducks.
INDIAN CREEK: Common Loon-15; Horned Grebe-15; Ring-billed Gull-4; Bonaparte's Gull-25; huge raft of ducks toward the dam, but too far off to make out anything for sure.
BEAVER DAM SITE: an enormous raft in which I could just make out ~250 Mallards, ~100 Gadwalls, Ring-necked Ducks~65, Northern Pintail~12, Hooded Merganser-6, Green-winged Teal~75, American Coot~50. Pretty sure I also saw at least one male American Wigeon. As I watched an adult Bald Eagle sailed low and direct into the raft, swung back, dropping down, trying unsuccessfully for duck or coot while I was there.
ROCKY BRANCH: another huge spreading raft of ducks, but too far out for counting. From what I could see the composition was mostly dabblers (2 scaup species), as in the one at the dam. Two adult Bald Eagles perched on handy nearby snags. Ruddy Duck-6; Horned Grebe-7. There were 42 coots near the campground, resting uncoot-like on a rock. I assume they were weary from last night? Loon species-1 (far away).

The way back into Fayetteville goes right through LAKE ATALANTA in Rogers, so I finished off there: Canvasback-3, Redhead~10, Ring-necked Duck~12, plus Gadwall, Mallard, etc.

My favorite bird of the day: coots at Rocky Branch, thankfully close. Since they were standing on the rocks, I had great views of their strange green legs and huge toes with paddles. Wonder what they thought of me, in my strange green car with cyclops bulging out (AKA, window-mounted spotting scope)?

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It was late in the afternoon yesterday when I went through Lake Atalanta and I did not do justice to the waterfowl there. This morning, in good light, Richard Stauffacher and I spent a couple of hours photographing and enjoying waterfowl there.

Greater White-fronted Goose -1 (been there for a while); Ross's Goose -1 (been there for a while); Snow Goose -1 (white form, been there for a while); Gadwall-4; Mallard-7; Canvasback-3; Redhead-12; Ring-necked Duck-35; Greater Scaup-3; Bufflehead-1; American Coot-12; Pied-billed Grebe-6

Lake A is a small place. Waterbirds can be easy to see and study, frequently at close range. Today we could see Canvasbacks and Redheads close up and study their differences. The Greater Scaups are very accessible and provide quick studies of bill and head shape. The three geese mentioned have been on the lake a long time; it is easy to study Ross's and Snow Goose together; the white-front is immaculate. You can often see birds very well just sitting in a vehicle, and especially if you can use a window-mounted scope, but bins are often enough to take most of it in.

Also today, an adult Bald Eagle made a pass over the lake, stirring up coots and ring-necks, but not catching anybody, at least while Richard and I were there.

SANDHILL CRANES OVER LAKE FAYETTEVILLE November 20, 2010

Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society hosted a waterfowl-oriented field trip to Lake Fayetteville this morning. A very surprising last bird was Sandhill Crane (6) at about 11:15, when most folks had left. Andrew Scaboo first spotted then got his scope on them. Those left on the field trip (Doug James, Elizabeth Adam, Sara and Bob Caulk, and Joe Neal) all had scope or bin views as they flew SW over the area. This is a very rare bird for NW Arkansas.

We did see waterfowl and other birds of interest: Gadwall-10; Green-winged Teal-1; Northern Shoveler-15; Lesser Scaup-15; Bufflehead-20; Common Goldeneye-1; Hooded Merganser-5; Common Loon-1; Pied-billed Grebe~20; Horned Grebe-1; Double-crested Cormorant-9; Bald Eagle-1 adult; Sharp-shinned Hawk-1. There was a large falcon species very early that we couldn't identify with the look we had.

I guess the only sad part of the day was good news: we are losing Dr. Andrew Scaboo from the NW Arkansas birding community. He will head off to a new job early in the new year. We are glad for you, Andy, and will miss your presence here. The new job, and the new community, are the winners.

EYEBALLS TO THE SKY November 22, 2010

Addendum to my post about the Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip to Lake Fayetteville on November 20: the Sandhill Cranes (6) that we saw were flying relatively high, and INTO a SW wind that was pretty strong. This is contrary to how migration is 'spose to be. So what was going on with the wind where the cranes were flying? Doug James was puzzled by this, too, and checked into the situation.

It was a very warm day and Doug found that the stationary warm air mass we were experiencing covered the area with the notable EXCEPTION of an edge that was in far northwestern Arkansas. So the cranes had likely taken off with the winds to their backs, as expected, and probably just hit the warm air and SW breeze about the time they reached Fayetteville and about the time we were standing around on the dam at the end of our field

trip. Hence they were still flying and still trying to go south. Since the extent of the warm air mass was considerable, they probably stopped off in a handy flat spot with some suitable fields, like the Arkansas River valley.

The same situation probably impacted ducks we were seeing, too, though not so dramatically. I was at Lake Fayetteville the following day, trying to see the goldeneye again – our look was not a very good one – and since several of us saw the Barrow's Goldeneye at Tulsa last winter, I have wondered about any single goldeneye here that is not in obvious male type Common Goldeneye plumage.

I didn't manage to sort that one out (yet), but there were many more ducks and more species on the 21st as compared to the 20th. For example, Lesser Scaup numbers had gone from 15 to 41; Ruddy Ducks from 0 to 34, and Red-breasted Merganser from 0 to 6. Maybe these additional birds were already in the area, or maybe they, like the cranes, had to stop migrating when they hit the warm air mass.

Finally, I got to thinking about why such interesting things seem to happen more often on field trips than when we are just out birding in 1s and 2s. It must be a boots on the ground thing, or in our case, eyeballs to the sky. Andrew Scaboo was looking at Cedar Waxwings up in a tall sycamore tree with his spotting scope – and offering others of us who were yakking (and not really birding) the chance to see them, too – when he spotted far beyond and above the sycamore what proved to be six Sandhill Cranes.

On field trips more people are looking more places, with a wide variety of skills and interests, with various optical instruments. I would argue that when we move together toward a useful goal as a society – in this case, NWAAS – we are more likely to have success in taking care of business. That is, we are more likely to get the job done in locating birds of interest, or rare, or needed for that special list.

Also, our personal birding interest seems best served when we work to make sure everyone has a chance to succeed: from the novices on their first field trip, to birding vets, to those who are very young or very old, to those who run in their spare time, to those who have trouble walking. And after all, isn't that what we want: to have a good day and a good life, too.

FUN WITH LOONS November 28, 2010

Opening Day for Loon Season in Arkansas caught me unprepared. Loon Opening, often early-to-mid-October, found me with a dusty spotting scope buried deep in the closet. Loons are scope work, but with one quick shirttail wipe and my trusty black Sharpie to X out all previously agreed-to appointments written on my calendar, I was ready to go forth and screw my good right eye to the 30 power eyepiece. For sure I was late for season opening, but fear not!

Now it's ALL about cold wind, big water, objects seen and unseen and imagined, near and far, about the possibility that the Far North –or maybe it was early Santa and his reindeer -- has delivered unto us some very cool freight in the form of rare birds.

2 November at Slate Gap on north side of Beaver Lake: 2 Common Loons
11 November at Lost Bridge North and South on Beaver Lake: 5 Common Loons
18 November at Indian Creek on Beaver Lake: 17 Common Loons
20 November at Lake Fayetteville on NWA Audubon Society field trip: 1 Common Loon
22 November at Bob Kidd Lake: 1 Common Loon

For looners, or maybe I should say loonies, in northwestern Arkansas, Tenkiller Lake is a necessary evil of driving and carbon emission. Tenkiller, after all, is one stop shopping for four loon species. Jacque Brown and I made a Saturday pilgrimage, the Day After Black Friday. We got two loon species: at least 65 Common Loons and 3 Pacific Loons. Off and on during the day I was sure we had 'em all.

For me it's just axiomatic that with eyeball screwed to eyepiece and brain in loon over-drive, what comes upon me is a vision of almost religious certainty that the pale loon with the big upturned bill is a Yellow-billed. That is, the further away loons are – and they can get VERY far on a big lake-- the more likely I am to turn what's common into minor miracle. Funny how the closer we get, the more we find the wide range of Common Loon ages and plumages, which is just what you'd expect if the brain's rational side was engaged. But if it was engaged, why would you even be looking to begin with? Etc.

After all the driving and all the scope work, I'm just plain nutty. Isn't all this pretty extreme? Edgy? Here it's Black Friday Weekend, just a day or two before Cyber Monday, and what am I doing? Why, I'm out having fun with loons! They've flown a long ways to get here, out of the ice and snow, and I've driven long to get away, far away, reasonably and even unreasonably, from Black Friday Weekend, not to mention to upcoming Cyber Monday.

'Tis the season, after all, to buy-buy-buy. But all the holiday hubbub 'mongst the superior species is not evident in a big loon raft. I don't hear a single Christmas jingle, but loons are yodeling and barking in warm afternoon sun. Myself, I'm thinking new scope, if only in my dreams. I'm wondering if ole Saint Nick has heard about the new enviro-smily HD glass? And way, way out there, near the far shore, isn't that a Red-throated?

DECEMBER

BEANS TO GOLD December 1, 2010

It takes me about 20 miles to leave behind the town mode. Sure, I glance up and notice starlings on wires, an urban distraction like balancing a coffee cup or using a cell phone. But then the glances become more frequent. Yesterday I knew I'd left town mode where a "chocolate warrior" conveniently perched along the highway near Siloam Springs, 20 miles from home. A bird "not of these parts," as they say, an adult rufous morph red-tail from out west. I guess I'm in bird mode, in some weedy landscape where Arizona meets northwest Arkansas. It's a space with no name in particular, surprises, clocklessness, with hopes rather than fears.

North of Siloam, I made a pass along the county road at the Safari north of Gentry – 200 Great-tailed Grackles were hanging out with 70 black-tailed prairie dogs, but no Burrowing Owls as far as I could see. In the same field were 35 Egyptian Geese and across the road, roars and rumbles from bison who'd noticed the arrival of a tractor carrying hay. A big pond was partly frozen, and both grackles and Ring-billed Gulls (4) seemed content on the ice.

Just west of Safari, Floyd Moore Road bisects the once Round Prairie, all the way west toward Cherokee City and the Oklahoma line, a big flat country notable for the 500 foot tall stack of the SWEPCO coal-fired electrical generating plant. I pulled up at a recently harvested bean field, with new growth of wheat (?) about one inch high. A bird I couldn't see flew over with TEWS & rattles – Lapland Longspur. That's a winter bird for sure. I stopped, heard chucks from 2-3 Western Meadowlarks and knew it was time to get out of the car.

It's just a plain and very flat bean field with lots of exposed damp soil – in one respect. But then I hear more tews & rattles and a big, energetic flock of small birds sweeps low in artistic wheels, settling near, and totally out of sight in the stubble. Surprisingly, the field has accrued wholly unintended wealth, beans to gold. A small falcon gives chase (probably a kestrel rather than a Merlin). A few Horned Larks are part of the flock. After more dramatic sweeps, I settle on 225 birds, a good count for northwest Arkansas.

Near the intersection of Floyd Moore and highway 43 I made a stop to try and pish-up a Bewick's Wren. No Bewick's, but 13 American White Pelicans sailed over. We don't often see them here so late. In a roadside thicket just beyond, 40 White-crowned Sparrows, at least 3 Harris's Sparrows, and Savannah Sparrows along the road and barbwire fences. A curious, friendly guy driving a truck full of chicken litter pulls up and we converse about winter sparrows.

It's been cold enough the past few days to freeze shallow ponds. The SWEPCO plant at Gentry is in high generation mode. The lake provides water to cool the plant; high generating means big

mudflats. Soaring in the steam and parked on snags, Bald Eagles (5-6 at 2 PM). On the flats, a small flock of Least Sandpipers (12), two Wilson's Snipe, and a cloud of American Pipits (~75). On snags, at least two Red-headed Woodpeckers, all regal in their reds, blacks, and whites.

MORE LONGSPURS -- MAYSVILLE December 2, 2010

The great virtue of Maysville is that it is as far north and as far west as you can get in Arkansas. Any further north, welcome to Missouri. Any further west, welcome to Oklahoma. Not far to Kansas. When in the 1830s Cherokees were forced west, Maysville was Tallgrass Prairie, a short hop from the Great Plains. Elements of that past remain: decaying pioneer era farm houses ("little houses on the prairie") and along fencerows and highways, poignant reminders like Big Bluestem grass and Sawtooth Sunflowers.

Some of that old prairie has been turned into soybeans. Harvested fields yesterday were packed with Lapland Longspurs, American Pipits, and Horned Larks, about in that order. I was out of the car watching a dark chocolate colored red-tail (4 for the day) when a cloud of rattling and tewing longspurs sailed over and claimed a harvested bean field. Counting longspurs like this is like counting starlings. I settled on 325, then 325-400, then after 30 minutes of trying, realized I was out of my league. I saw pipits and larks, too, but when I got my scope on the flock it was almost pure, busy longspurs. Sometimes one longspur would perch briefly on a tall bean stalk – a first for me. A quarter mile north, same thing: I counted 415 longspurs on the ground, part of a continuously moving flock.

I'm pleased to report the Maysville Handi-stop has reopened, very good news indeed, because I was ready for a break! To the north, along Wet Prairie Road, at least 43 meadowlarks flew over, including 2-3 Westerns, which were singing and chucking in the warm afternoon sun.

It was a blue sky day with wispy cloud strings and the clouds turned pink at sunset. I was in the going home traffic, but my mind was around Maysville. We live with the conceit that winter longspurs and meadowlarks are some sort of fancy ornaments or oddities in northwest Arkansas. But this is only because we assign to ourselves primary rights to the land. I'm headed to my house and heater, they are out there now, on and of the land, as night comes.

A TOAST TO PLAIN OLD GADWALL December 7, 2010

I look across a lake and on the far side see a large, grayish black-tailed duck, with now and then a white patch, the speculum, displayed. Gadwall. Then move on.

Gadwalls show up early in fall on just about any pond or lake with shallow water and some emergent aquatic vegetation. Numbers remain high most winters – overall, among the most numerous of waterfowl we see on the Fayetteville Christmas Bird Count.

My view would linger if it was something like a male Wood Duck, with that eye candy coloration. It would linger if it was unexpected and rare, like a Long-tailed Duck. But no, over across the lake ducks are tipping up in the shallows, including some Gadwalls. Typical bird watcher -- my senses remain in neutral. I note how many are present and seek something of greater interest.

I got a healthy corrective recently at Lake Atalanta in Rogers. A ragtag bunch of barnyard ducks and geese there provide free entertainment for folks, often with children, who bring out bread scraps and toss it to appreciative fowl. There is an energetic gathering of these weird feathered tribes round the bread-throwers. The birds honk, cackle, and toot in joy as they jockey for front row and squabble to the last crumb.

Tawdry scene it is, but it seems to calm the naturally nervous sensibilities of our hunted -- and therefore wisely wild -- ducks, like Gadwalls. They swim up much closer than I ever see them at Lake Fayetteville or anywhere else. So I have a good close view of truly wild Gadwalls, view as striking as the bread fights are, well, forgettable.

Yes, as in my distant views, Gadwall males are grayish overall with distinctive black rump. But there are smart, sharp, buffy tinged feathers on the back and a clean white patch in the speculum. The side feathers exhibit a tweedy pattern of various gray shades. The breast looks scaly tinged in white. The head is a speckled brownish-gray set off by a jet black bill. A bird as handsome as a formal gentleman with his tux and gold-headed walking cane. Of course the female is more subtle overall, the general plan in nature, but she too has buffy edged grayish feathers and an orangish bill artistically mottled in black. And both have dark eyes.

So here's my toast to what was "plain old" Gadwall! I've never seen you! Wow, what a view.

ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD, A CHRISTMAS TALE December 11, 2010

Out of the blue, out of the Far Western Ether, a star is born, a few ounces of feathered reality finds a feeder at a farm near Fayetteville: Anna's Hummingbird. The world of the western Ozarks in Arkansas has never seen anything like it. Those of us with an interest in such undertake the journey, from afar if necessary, not on camels exactly, but we hear the message, we can't resist the pull of celestial gravity.

Sara Cain-Bartlett has made her front porch available to both the bird and to visiting birders. Bob and Martha Sargent traveled from afar (Alabama) to band it and to document it in the way of scientists. Observers and photographers have turned the Bartlett front yard into a sacred space. We hope for it on the Fayetteville Christmas Bird Count on December 19.

As curator of bird records for Arkansas Audubon Society, I can tell you in a quantitative way that this bird represents one of a very few records for the whole great Natural State. Despite all the feeders, despite ardent bird watchers, despite the presence in Fayetteville of the Natural State's greatest institution of higher learnin', this is the first Anna's in "these here (Ozark)

parts". So does this mean the world is warming? Does it mean Anna's has lost its way? Does it mean we have more feeders? Does it mean that despite thinking we know EVERYTHING that needs to be known, we don't? Maybe there's still this one thing, a few ounces of feathers and a few thousand miles of travel, that we just don't know the WHY of?

And, can it survive winter in the Ozarks? Those of you who are connoisseurs of the arcane may appreciate that the same Ozarks now hosting Anna's in December has also hosted winter Say's Phoebe, another westerner. One bird has returned three years to a farm in Boone County! We saw one in February during a Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society field trip. On 7 January 2010, I photographed Say's Phoebe as it foraged alongside a chicken house in the middle of an ice storm. This Anna's Hummingbird, too, may benefit from the near presence of cover, poultry houses, farm animals, and a welcoming family, not to mention a heat lamp!

As I was taught as a child, the original Christmas story extolled the virtue of hope and possibility in a world where even a pregnant young woman was denied room at the inn. Instead, she gave birth in a manger. Sara could have blocked all of us from coming to her home to see her hummingbird, but didn't. Bob could have refused to evaluate pictures or to band the bird – but didn't. Birdwise, it is a season of generosity.

It's a hopeful sign, when just as we think we know it all, out of the Far West –and straight out of the heart of quantitative improbability -- comes Anna's Hummingbird. A young male, he's a creature with star power, on a farm, in a small community, in Arkansas. Birdwise at least, it's a hopeful season.

LONGSPURS AND THE CULTURAL CONTEXT December 14, 2010

On the ground west of Gentry yesterday I had direct count of at least 190 Lapland Longspurs, along with 45 (+?) Horned Larks. This is the fifth spot I have found big longspur-dominated flocks since 1 December, always on former prairies in western Benton County, always in big, flattish plowed or harvested fields with modest plant cover. Around these flocks, I keep an eye out for snooping (oops, stooping) falcons and saw one yesterday. It flew with swift power close to the ground, like it had been fired from a shotgun.

Longspurs and larks occasionally formed tight low, spinning flocks over the broad expanse of mostly bare soil marked by rows of just emerging green -- winter wheat. This is the former Round Prairie. It is also immediately south of our most significant landmark: the 500 foot stack of SWEPCO's coal-fired electrical generating plant. With heavy snow up north, an Arctic blast here, the plant is churning.

I notice all this stuff when I'm birding, but it's longspurs, not electrical demand that is my raison d'etre. But the cultural context matters. I was parked on a gravel road more or less in front of a weathered farm house whose porch has fallen, whose windows have no glass, whose memories belong in generations past. I see a giant old, spreading post oak, now leafless on the west side; on the right and to the north, the out-sized industrial stack. From one angle I could look

through the living room and out through the back, but I couldn't get the SWEPCO stack lined up so it showed in the opening. It was a game, some fun and distraction for eyeballs that had been too-long sorting distant flocks of tiny birds. That tree could date to bison times and it must have supported a swing, and some kids.

Since I was in the neighborhood, I made a visit to Eagle Watch Nature Trail on the north side of the plant. Since the water in SWEPCO lake is warmed by cooling the generators, there's always opportunity here, and especially on a freezing day. But then there's the required 18 layers of clothing and therefore waddling, rather than walking. For me, 18 are usually not enough.

I'm thankful Bald Eagles – I saw 4 or 5 here -- are too big to even always require binoculars. I'm thankful a certain, tail-wagging, bobbing small brown bird of such places is endowed with a distinctive PIPIT PIPIT call, easily heard even through 4 layers of headgear. And you can't miss a Red-headed Woodpecker perched and calling on a low snag, even if your human form has disappeared under the requirements of a frigid day.

SAWBILLS December 16, 2010

Andrew Scaboo's posting about male & female sawbills (Common Merganser) at Bob Kidd Lake near Prairie Grove got me out yesterday. He saw them in the open by the dam. Despite a lot of searching there and elsewhere, I never saw the two birds, but eventually I did see a female that was hidden in the shoreline lotus near where I had been for an hour.

She flushed suddenly, but didn't fly. She swam, mostly underwater, across the lake and perched and preened behind a bunch of snags, along the far shoreline. Despite watching her for an hour, I never saw the male. I had the impression that her left wing was injured, but I couldn't tell for sure. Other divers: Ring-necked Duck (14), Lesser Scaup (4), Common Goldeneye (1), Ruddy Duck (17). At one point the goldeneye male swam right past our sawbill. Quite a contrast in color, shape, bill function, and life strategy. Also, one juvenile Bald Eagle.

Powerful cold is great for birding here because smaller bodies of water freeze, concentrating birds, so off I went to Lake Sequoyah. It was only half frozen and unfrozen water was waterfowl. There was constant, pleasant yacking by female Mallards, some standing and walking on ice. I got 10 duck species, with the highest numbers of Mallards and Gadwalls (combined, 300+), but I also saw a high number (74) for another sawbill species, immaculate female and male Hooded Mergansers. Also a big surprise: 3 male Wood Ducks, common through the fall, but not after such weather.

The main part of Lake Fayetteville was open. I saw an immaculate Eared Grebe -- black-looking, with white contrasts even on a heavily overcast day, and an amazingly blood red eye.

DESPITE THE GOOD WEATHER… December 20, 20I0

It’s fun to walk around in the cold dark. We started Fayetteville’s CBC day, December 19, for owls. I had 18 layers, including 3 coats, and the 4 of us, all suited up, looked 2X our size and could have been penguins. We got the expected owls, then heard a sharp call in the dark that sounded like someone had stepped on a cat's tail. Was that a Long-eared Owl??? I stayed warm, but by mid-morning, with sun, I felt like I was wearing, or maybe cooking in, a crock pot. But, hey, it's the second half of December and who is complaining???

And:
--Despite some last minute scrambling to get parties into our traditional sectors;
--Despite some unexpected stress & illness;
--Despite remarkably mild, warm, sunny, calm weather that makes it a joy to be outdoors, BUT can really put the proverbial chill on a CBC;
--Despite missing species we expect or least sometimes "get": bobwhite, cormorant, Horned Lark, etc;
--Despite needing to arrange things so someone else plays with the kids while mom goes birding--

We still crossed the magic 100 species threshhold; 102 it looks like this morning. Possibly a few Count Weeks birds more to come. This is a Great Result for our count. Thanks to Doug James and Elizabeth Adam for allowing us to use their home again for the tally.

Big stars of the day: Anna's Hummingbird still coming to the feeder at the home of Sara and Coy Bartlett; a very yellow Palm Warbler that Mike Mlodinow has been seeing since November; a female Red-breasted Merganser tallied by Joanie Patterson's group; a Grasshopper Sparrow seen by Andrew Scaboo and Brandon Schmidt and amazingly photographed by Andy; a fine, black-necked, unmistakable Eared Grebe tallied at Lake Fayetteville, and 3 Greater White-fronted Geese, happily for us, mixed with Canadas.

More big stars: all of you public-spirited folks who gave a long day to record and formally document the many earth treasures in our neck of the Ozarks. Thanks for the generosity, wit, intelligence, skill.

One of the potential holes in our count involved a party that has long been a productive stronghold for UA-Fayetteville biological sciences grad students. Christy Slay stepped in as leader and a strong party went in the field. Part of their area includes Tontitown, “most” especially, the Waste Management landfill. WM has been most helpful in providing us free access on the CBC, including the fabled environs of Eco Vista, the trash mountain created entirely from what we have putting out on the curb in northwest Arkansas. Christy’s group found most of the gulls around Eco Vista and they also tallied several birds found nowhere else that day. WM is her favorite spot on the count, Christy told me. Despite her youth, this is a sign of a veteran who knows it is all about habitat.

So we had a great day with relatively balmy weather, providing no support for the oft-stated hypothesis "good weather equals bad birds" or "bad weather equals good birds." This year celebrates the 50th local count, which dates to 1961.

CHANGES IN THE CIRCLE:
FAYETTEVILLE'S CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT AT 50 December 23, 2010

The modern CBC at Fayetteville began in 1961 and has been held each year (except for 1970). The center is near the intersection of Gregg Street and I-540; radii extend 7.5 miles. The circle changed from modestly urban and open farmland to heavily urban and forested in this half century. In the 1960s, we counted within a human population of 20,000. In 2010, we were part of 74,000. Here are examples of changes drawn from our CBC on December 19, 2010.

Birds of open fields, farmlands, and thickets like Eastern Towhees, Field Sparrows, Loggerhead Shrikes, and Northern Bobwhite were quite numerous on early counts, but began to decline by the mid to late 1980s, parallel to accelerated human population growth and development ("urbanization") . Shrikes dropped from the 40s to the 1s & 0s. Bobwhites went from hundreds to 0s. We had one Harris's Sparrow this year, illustrating their long term decline within the count circle.

Steady foresting of the circle – that is, trees replacing open land including prairie -- has contributed to increase in the number of forest-dwellers. An obvious case involves Red-shouldered Hawks. We had 22 this year, a tie with the previous high of 22 last year. Another forest dweller, Hermit Thrush, reach a new count high of 20 this year, as did Winter Wren, another forest bird, with 10 this year.

Water impoundment associated with human population growth has contributed to an expansion of waterfowl tallies. This year's 269 Ring-necked Ducks is the second highest (273 in 1995). The 4 Greater Scaup ties our former high (2002). The Red-breasted Merganser marks the third time this uncommon transient has remained this far north. The Eared Grebe was only the 4th CBC record since 1961. No Greater White-fronted Goose was tallied on the count until 2001. They have been tallied in 7 subsequent counts including 3 this year associated with the expanding local Canada Goose population.

The Anna's Hummingbird is our first local record and one of only a handful for Arkansas; the bird was photographed, captured and banded. The Grasshopper Sparrow was also a first, though this species nests in northwest Arkansas. It was photographed in the field. The Palm Warbler is the third for our CBC (first in 1985). The yellow eastern subspecies typically winters along the Gulf coast, so perhaps it lingers at behest of moderate weather.

Overall, the 102 species tallied on December 19, 2010, is the highest ever for the Fayetteville CBC. Good weather and good skills helped a lot. Interest in birds and ability of birders who explore the avifauna has grown along with the human population. Protection and enhancement

of remaining grassland habitat is needed. Bringing in and offering skills enhancement for new birders is essential as we head into the next 50 years.

Data scientifically collected and analyzed can quantitatively answer questions about our world. That said, CBC day is also about having fun. Here comes 2011. Let's go on out and spend another fun winter day with birds next December.

Joe Neal, field trip to Ninestone Land Trust, October 6, 2013. Photo by Martin Miller