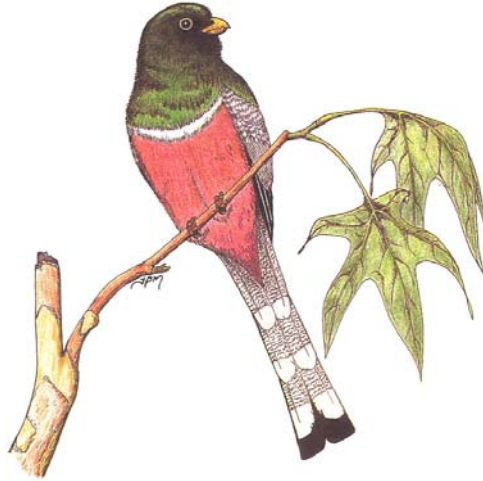


THE TROGON NEWS

HUACHUCA AUDUBON SOCIETY
Post Office Box 63, Sierra Vista, Arizona 85636
Volume XXXII Number 2, February 2004



President's Message

Has 2004 started out well for you? HAS started with a tremendous presentation and overflow crowd for our January meeting, thanks to Bob Behrstock! Hopefully, we all learned something about dragonflies and damselflies.

It's going to be a very important year for the environment, so I hope many of you will stay involved or perhaps become involved! In Arizona, Senator Mead has proposed an interesting bill, SB1060 (gas guzzler tax). It establishes a tax on the sale or lease of new vehicles for non-commercial purposes. The tax rate on the sale or lease of new vehicles decreases as the fuel economy increases. It ranges from 6.25% for vehicles getting 0-15 miles per gallon to 3.75% for vehicles getting over 50 miles per gallon. Although unlikely to get very far, Senator Mead deserves some praise for the effort. He can be reached at (602) 926-5261 or smead@azleg.state.az.us Or contact your own legislator indicating support or write a letter to the editor.

On the national level, the energy bill from last year will be back on the radar screen, probably starting at the end of January. Senator McCain stood up against this giveaway, which did pitifully little to support renewable energy as a start to dealing with global warming.

Mid-February is the Great Backyard Bird Count, which is a pretty fun thing to do. And both the San Diego and Salton Sea Birding Festivals take place this month. **Our new meeting date is the fourth Tuesday, no longer the first, starting in February, so come out February 24 at 7 p.m. to hear some stories about birding in Argentina.**

Local Programs and Events

Feb 24th PLEASE NOTE NEW DATE - HAS meeting, 7:00 p.m., Mona Bishop Room, Sierra Vista Public Library. Mike and Heather Guest will treat us to views of their trip to Argentina. For most of May 2003 three couples from HAS explored and birded Northern Argentina in the company of three other Americans and two top-notch Argentinean birding guides. Apart from a day long train ride aptly named "Train to the Clouds", travel for the 1800-mile journey was in two 4WD vehicles, enabling the party to visit some off-the-beaten-track national parks. The trip ended with three days at the spectacular Iguazu Falls on the border with Brazil.

Field Trips

Feb 8th 8:30 a.m. FSPR bird walk. Meet at San Pedro River Inn.

Feb 11th 8:30 a.m. FSPR bird walk. Meet at San Pedro House.

Feb 20th 7:00 a.m. Field trip to Los Cienagas National Conservation Area and The Audubon Research Ranch in search of LBJ's. See article below for more information.

Feb 20th -23rd Southeast Arizona Butterfly Association field trip to southern California's Anza-Borrego State Park. For trip information, please contact trip leaders Dee and Bob Parks at 619-284-5435 or dparks@sdnhm.org.

Feb 28th 8:30 a.m. FSPR bird walk to be led by HAS member. Meet at San Pedro House.

Feb 1st, 8th, 15th, 22nd, 29th 8:00 a.m. EOP bird walks.

February Field Trip in Search of LBJs

On February 20, meet at the Sierra Vista City Hall west parking lot at 7:00 a.m. to car pool west to Los Cienagas National Conservation Area and The Audubon Research Ranch in search of "those little brown jobs" otherwise known as sparrows. Raptors? Probably. Pronghorn? Possibly? Grazed land? Certainly. Ungrazed land? Certainly. After exhausting our patience trying to identify those X* & \$% @ LBJs, we will travel to the Research Ranch for an orientation on what it is, why it is there, what they do and why and how they do it. Bird research and relations with ranching neighbors will be included. Weather permitting and if the group is interested a short drive around the Ranch will conclude the trip. Bring warm clothing and a picnic lunch that can be enjoyed in the warm setting of the education building. No reservations are necessary. Contact Sandy Kunzer (520) 803-8490 or sbkunzer@theriver.com for further information.

HAS Returns to Sonora

After a several year hiatus, the Huachuca Audubon Society will be returning to Sonora, Mexico this spring - April 22-26 - for what should be an exciting and bird-filled trip. Breeding birds and migrants should be abundant as we travel along the lush Rio Sonora and through Sonoran Desert and tropical deciduous forest into the pines and oaks of the northern Sierra Madre. The trip will be limited to 8 participants. The all-inclusive cost from Sierra Vista is \$600, which includes a \$50 tax-deductible donation to HAS. For a detailed itinerary or to register, contact Mark Pretti at 803-6889 or mpnaturetours@earthlink.net.

2nd Sunday Bird Walk -11 January 2004

With the prospect of a female Hooded Merganser that has been present at the San Pedro River Inn for several weeks, twelve participants -- the majority out-of-state visitors! -- embarked on the 2nd Sunday Bird Walk early in the new year with much anticipation. We were not disappointed as the merganser was immediately located at the reedy pond opposite the blind.

The calm, cool weather was favorable for good birding. Initially, the overcast and drizzle seemed to keep bird activity down, but as soon as even a bit of sun light shone through the clouds, there were

plenty of birds to enjoy. Unlike prior walks, the birds were most conspicuous along the river this time. The highlights included a Peregrine Falcon flying south along the river, a Merlin perched above a Red-tailed Hawk, at least two Lazuli Buntings at the edge of their winter range, and an uncommon visitor from the mountains, a Brown Creeper!

Bridled Titmouse, Yellow-rumped Warbler, White-breasted Nuthatch, Lesser Goldfinch, Black Phoebe, Ladder-backed and Gila Woodpecker, Curve-billed Thrasher, and three species of towhee (Canyon, Abert's, and Spotted) kept us on our toes, not to mention the usual winter sparrows and raptors. We were also treated to several Pyrrhuloxias and Loggerhead Shrikes, and on the drive out, Black-throated Sparrow by the entrance to the Inn at Hereford Road.

The next 2nd Sunday Bird Walk is scheduled to depart from the San Pedro River Inn at 8:30am on February 8, 2004.

-Robert Weissler

Sailing, Sailing, Over the Bounding Main!

On the morning of 11 December 2003, 15 sailor/birders embarked by land yacht from Sierra Vista, bound through the grassy seas to Patagonia Lake State Park. There we met four reinforcements and our Captain Ron Hummel, for the water-borne portion of our odyssey. Due to cramped quarters in steerage and the expected towering waves on "The Main", the group was divided in two and only the most fearless (and those who needed to be home early) braved the first voyage of aquatic avian discovery. The remainder of the group canvassed the shore especially to try to locate and contain the mythic Rufus-backed Robin (RBR) for viewing by the early voyagers upon their disembarkation.

As luck would have it, the shoreline scouts failed in their mission and embarked on their aquatic adventure without being able to give guidance to the early voyagers. Even worse, upon return to land, they learned that this second group had succeeded in finding the RBR, without their guidance. In spite of such infinitesimal disappointments (which really only leads to an excuse to return), a fine excursion was enjoyed with a total species count of 42 including the skulking RBR, which was seen by half the group. Numerous cormorants, both double crested and neotropical, multiple Black-crowned night herons and a Common Snipe were some of the birds not generally seen here in the San Pedro valley.

Special thanks to Captain Ron Hummel, not only for sailing the boat (twice) and not losing anyone overboard in the towering seas but for all of the bird spotting and making all of the arrangements with the park personnel.

-Sandy Kunzer

Conservation Corner

Only two votes protected the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from oil and gas drilling in Congress in 2003. Two votes! The individual voice does make a difference in our world of large numbers. The oil and gas lobby is already at work to add Arctic drilling to the budget process for Fiscal Year 2005. The Arctic Refuge is the last remaining fully intact wilderness in America. Millions of birds nest, migrate through, or spend the winter in the Refuge. These birds migrate through all 50 states and travel to the lands and water of six continents. The Refuge is truly a natural treasure! The threat to this very special place is very real in 2004. We need your help to keep the refuge pristine and out of the hands of the oil and gas interests. You can instantly send a letter to our state senators and representative by accessing www.protectthearctic.com and clicking on "Take Action."

-Sondra Gardner

2003 Ramsey Canyon Christmas Bird Count (RCCBC)

Once again we had a great Christmas Bird Count. We had a record 76 participants and recorded 150 bird species, despite seeing only one irruptive species (Lewis's Woodpecker). We also recorded high counts for over 20 species and saw 3 species that we have not previously recorded on our count.

The day started early for our "owlers" and again owl numbers were well off pre-drought years. Over 50 of us then met for breakfast at the Lone Star Café, including folks who had traveled from Phoenix and Tucson to participate. The morning was quite chilly with temps in the mid to upper 20's, but the day slowly warmed to a high in the mid-50's. We had 23 parties out birding and were able to cover a couple of areas that we had not been able to address in recent years. We also had a dozen folks watching their feeders and reporting a number of bird species not seen by our parties in the field. We wrapped up the count with a dinner at the Quality Inn, where we had a quick compilation to estimate the results of the count.

The newly recorded species include the Hooded Merganser, Blue Grosbeak, and a swallow (species unk). The high counts included American Widgeon (298); Wild Turkey (36); Western Sandpiper (40); Feral (Rock) Pigeon (221); Anna's Hummingbird (23); 5 woodpecker species, including Lewis's Woodpecker (9), Gila Woodpecker (124), Red-naped Sapsucker (38), Williamson's Sapsucker (6), and Arizona Woodpecker (33); Verdin (82); Bushtit (249); White-breasted Nuthatch (99); Phainopepla (70); Rufous-crowned Sparrow (35); Chipping Sparrow (2253); Black-throated Sparrow (390); White-throated Sparrow (8); White-crowned Sparrow (4401); Lazuli Bunting (10); House Finch (1229); and Lesser Goldfinch (430). While some of these high numbers may be attributed to the increased number of participants, it probably doesn't account for all of these high counts.

As the number of our participants grows, my task has become a bit more complicated and I am fortunate that Robert Weissler has agreed to help me as our RCCBC secondary compiler. I also want to thank Mike Guest for volunteering to help with the updating of our count bird list and administrative form. Finally, I want to thank all of our participants for continuing to make our counts so successful.

-Ted Mouras, Compiler RCCBC

Lesser Prairie-Chickens, Shinnery Oaks, and More

It was 5:45 a.m., dark and cold outside, and I was sitting in a van with other birders waiting for "the event" to start. Within minutes I started hearing bubbling and clucking sounds, coming from all around the vehicle. We were parked at a Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek, and as the sun came up we were treated to the sight of about 35 birds, some so close I could not focus binoculars on them. Every female casually walking through the lek had a following of males eagerly strutting their stuff – inflating and "popping" their reddish esophageal sacs, clucking, stomping and scratching the ground, and raising and lowering the pinnae feathers on their necks. I was entranced.

With good friends Darlene and Doug Newton of Tucson, I was among the 125 or so participants at "New Mexico's 2nd High Plains Prairie-Chicken Festival" in Milnesand, a tiny hamlet in the southeastern part of the state. The April 11-13, 2003 festival coincided with the height of Prairie-Chicken courtship, although lek activities may span early March through late April. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish coordinated the festival, with important sponsorship by other governmental agencies and particularly private entities and ranchers. (Nearly all the dozen or so vans took birders to various leks on private property.)

We left the lek at 7:00 a.m., returned to the Milnesand Community Center, and “chowed down” on a wonderful breakfast catered by the ladies of Milnesand. Then we broke up into groups, for various field trips and presentations. Darlene, Doug and I went on trips involving archaeology and paleontology, botany and range management, and visited a Black-tailed Prairie Dog colony (with at least 10 burrowing owls in attendance.)

We were in the Llano Estacado (Staked Plains), a flat, almost featureless area east of the Pecos River once dominated by the Comanche Indians. Later, farming settlers would mostly be forced out by the “Dust Bowl” drought of the early 1900’s. We were told it now has among the lowest human densities anywhere in the lower 48 United States.

But we also learned of the vibrant community of native grasses, forbes, and birds that this harsh and stark land hosts, particularly during the summer rainy season. I am fond of oaks of all species, but the Shinnery Oak (a true *Quercus* with large acorns) forced me to revamp my personal definition of “oaks”. Each mature plant is a huge biomass of mostly underground roots, with many (probably hundreds) of twig stems above ground only a foot or so tall. Some plants grow lengthwise along hundreds of feet of fence, while others were expansive (but miniature) forests covering many square yards of substrate. One trip leader called them “old growth forests at our feet”.

Our trip provided other goodies as well, including at least 60 Pronghorn seen at various places on the Llano Estacado. We saw four beautiful Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and five Northern Bobwhite around Milnesand. We did fail to see any Blue Jays in Roswell (where the species is generally reliable) but made up for that with very close views of six spectacular Gemsbok standing by the road south of White Sands National Monument. (The Gemsbok, often called Oryx, is a large African antelope first introduced into New Mexico in 1969 that is now increasing to “problematic proportions”.)

The third annual High Plains Prairie-Chicken Festival will be held in Milnesand April 2-4, 2004. Readers interested in attending should call the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish at 505-476-8000 for all details on time frames, prices, and reservations. Milnesand has no motels, and the nearest lodging is in Portales, some 45 minutes driving time to the north. Check the Chamber of Commerce web site at www.portales.com for information. Campsites and RV spots without hookups are available near the Milnesand Community Center.

The New Mexico Wildlife Viewing Guide has information for people wanting to see these birds but cannot attend the festival.

-Alan McCready

Oaxaca Journal by Mark Pretti

Having long wanted to visit southern Mexico, Karen and I finally made a two and a half week trip to Oaxaca and Guerrero in early November. In addition to good birds, our arrival at the end of the rainy season was timed to the peak flower and butterfly bloom with a landscape as green as could be. We began our trip in Acapulco conveniently located just south of the amazing Sierra de Atoyac. With perhaps the best forest we've seen in Mexico, the Atoyac would become our Mexican Shangri-La. Known to birders as the only place to see short-crested coquette, it's not visited regularly due to the bad road and minimal, at best, infrastructure. The forest in the Atoyac is stunning - tall, thick, green, diverse, full of epiphytic orchids, ferns, bromeliads, lichens, mosses, etc., and rich in birds and other animals. We spent the night in the small town of Paraiso in something that sort of, if you tilted your head, squinted your eyes, and called upon your greatest powers of imagination, passed for a hotel. The near futile search for food and the night in the concrete box qualified as a true "Mexico

moment" but worth the "adventure" as Paraiso provides across-the-street access to great forest. Upon leaving town at dawn the next morning, we instantly started seeing and hearing birds. A large group of emerald toucanets was the centerpiece for a mixed flock that included orioles, tityras, collared trogon, becards, woodcreepers, grey-crowned woodpecker, boat-billed flycatcher, golden-crowned and fan-tailed warblers, black-headed saltator, russet-crowned motmot, white-throated magpie jay, yellow-winged cacique and more.

Descending the mountain, we found many more birds, the highlights being white-winged tanager, the endemic white-tailed hummingbird, golden-crowned emerald, many starthroats, Audubon's oriole, bat falcon, Colima pygmy owl, bright-rumped attila, barred woodcreeper, red-crowned ant tanager, flocks of red-legged honeycreepers feeding at tulipan trees, and more squirrel cuckoos than we could count. Streams, many with fish and tadpoles, seemed to be everywhere. Road-killed birds included white-throated magpie jay, russet-crowned motmot, and a third unidentified bird that was carried off by a scavenging coati before we reached it. The most striking feature of the Atoyac, however, was the abundance of spectacular butterflies. We never imagined there could be a place where you'd say, "Oh, it's just another morpho", but the Atoyac is that place. Almost all the butterflies seemed to be among the who's who of gaudy, show-stoppers, with wild shapes, colors, and patterns that only evolution could create. Daggerwings, morphos, bluewings, 88's, clearwings, heliconids, peacocks, malachites, huge Caligo butterflies, and many flavors of skippers were everywhere. The "I could die happy right here, right now" butterfly was a longtailed skipper that resembled the brightest neon-highlighted tropical fish you could imagine - mostly dark blue-black with a pair of white stripes in the wing, an intense iridescent blue through most of the tail, and neon-pink splashes at the base of the tail.

From the Atoyac, we headed east to Oaxaca and the Puerto Angel area. Here we found the wonderful Rancho Cerro Largo, a place that is more an artful creation and lifestyle than a lodge. Perched on a forested cliff above the expansive Pacific, Cerro Largo has simple but beautiful cabanas with ocean views throughout, including from the cleverly-designed showers and composting toilets. What butterflies are to the Atoyac, lizards are to Cerro Largo. Green iguanas, ctenosaurs, basilisks, geckos, several whiptail species, skinks, anoles, and spiny lizards were thriving amidst the rock piles and leaf litter of the tropical deciduous forest. Marine toads large enough to make a snack of a Chihuahua, tree frogs, and fireflies were our nocturnal neighbors. The birds around the cabanas and along the trails, though not particularly abundant, were great. Lesser ground cuckoos were abundant and gorgeous. Rufous-naped and banded wrens, olive sparrow, russet-crowned motmot, the stunning orange-breasted bunting, white-lored gnatcatcher, striking altamira and streak-backed orioles, white-throated magpie jay, Colima pygmy owl, citreoline trogon, scissor-tailed flycatcher, and golden-cheeked woodpecker were among the species on and around the property. An osprey and a common black hawk patrolled the cliffs daily while brown boobies and angelic red-billed tropicbirds circled a rock islet just offshore. Mario Corella, the Cerro Largo host, has created a delicious menu of fresh, healthy and creative dishes. Did I mention that there's also a pristine beach with no people or palapas? Cerro Largo is one of those places whose isolation, solitude and scenery quiet your mind and change you.

From the coast we traveled north into the Sierra Miahuatlan. With a well-paved road and minimal traffic, we enjoyed thick forest with shade-grown coffee in the mid elevations and lush pine forest at the summit. Stopping to walk quiet sidetracks, we found some good birds - red-headed tanager, tufted flycatcher, crescent-chested, rufous-capped, red, and golden browed warblers, golden vireo, common bush-tanager, slaty vireo, happy wren, green jay, blue mockingbird, the endemic blue-capped hummingbird, white-collared swifts and the minute bumblebee hummingbird whose wing trill and high-pitched Costa's-like call added to its charm. At the summit of the Miahuatlan, we stayed at a wonderful little hotel set into a hillside at 8000 feet with a broad view extending for miles to the Pacific. The

forest, a mix of pines, oaks, and other broad-leafed trees, had a few cleared areas thickly carpeted with nectar-producing flowers. Among the hummingbirds foraging around the hotel grounds were blue-throated, magnificent, rufous, white-eared, berylline, garnet-throated, bumblebee, and green violet-ear. Cinnamon-bellied flower piercers were common and nesting. Madrean birds like hepatic tanager, grey silky flycatcher, yellow-eyed junco, russet nightingale thrush, "black-eared" bushtit, and greater pewee, were in the area as were spot-crowned woodcreeper, brown-backed solitaire, painted redstart, and chestnut-sided shrike vireo.

Descending from the Miahuatlan, we entered the broad valley of Oaxaca, which interestingly didn't look all that different from the upper San Pedro valley. If you could ignore the occasional banana and papaya, and forget that there was coffee growing in the mountains above, the grasslands and arid scrub might remind you of southeast Arizona. Even the avifauna shares some similarities. Just like home, curve-billed thrashers are there, but they're joined not by crissal but instead ocellated thrasher. Cactus wren is replaced by Boucard's wren, canyon towhee by white-throated towhee, and Gila woodpecker by grey-breasted woodpecker. Western and Cassin's kingbirds and eastern meadowlark are around as are lesser goldfinches, which are at their southern limit. Among the plants, we found sideoats grama and cane beardgrass, and seep willow was growing in the riparian areas. In the arid foothill scrub, green this time of year, we found dusky hummingbird, bridled sparrow, black-vented oriole and scrub jay, whose vocal repertoire was recognizable but with a definite accent at this southern point in its range.

Oaxaca City, though a bit crowded, was a great home base with excellent food, colorful markets, and beautiful art. One of the must-see tourist stops in the valley is Santa Maria del Tule, the home of what may be the world's largest tree, El Tule. Prior to serious human settlement, this part of the valley was a wetland with emergent vegetation and riparian trees, including the Montezuma cypress (*Taxodium mucronatum*). Though we've seen some pretty impressive examples of this species in Sonora, we were floored by the grandeur of El Tule. We've seen the big drive-through redwoods, and believe us, those are midgets compared to this. Despite the profound alteration of the area from wetland to city and the tree's age (at least 2000 years old), it appeared to be in the prime of its life. Though only about 150 feet tall, its horizontal span and the breadth of its trunk were unimaginable. The trunk's 164 foot circumference and 52 foot diameter has a footprint of about 2123 square feet or 3 times the size of our house.

Perhaps our favorite location near the city was the nearby Sierra Juarez. Atop the Juarez were windswept ridges blanketed by a damp, intermittent fog that sustained an enchanting epiphyte laden forest rich with avian treasures and an understory rich in flowering plants and enormous agaves. Access to the best forest and roads is controlled by local community members who have opted to protect their forest resources by charging a day use fee to birdwatchers, hikers, and mountain bikers. It was encouraging to see that many of the forests in the area were being managed this way. The weather conditions were perfect for birds who were abundant and active. As in the Miahuatlan, hummers were numerous, especially white-eareds, which were everywhere. The beautiful amethyst-throated, a cousin of the blue-throated, was also seen. Northern pygmy owl, spot-crowned woodcreeper, rufous and chestnut-capped brushfinches, collared towhee, hooded yellowthroat, grey-breasted wood wren, and large mixed species flocks were there. Red warblers (of the race with the shiny white cheek patches) were amazingly abundant and often traveling with crescent-chested, golden browed, hermit, Townsend's, and olive warblers. Though we found Steller's jays, the endemic dwarf jays weren't to be seen. As dwarfs often travel with Steller's, we raced down the trail in pursuit of the noisy Steller's each time we heard them, but with no luck..... this time.

We can't wait to return and are planning a trip for HAS members in Dec., 2004 or Jan., 2005.

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