

The **BARRED OWL**

Newsletter of the Baton Rouge Audubon Society

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How Will the Mississippi River Flooding Affect Birds, Bears, and Other Wildlife?

First published by Alisa Opar on The Perch, Audubon magazine's blog, May 18, 2011.

Many, many times over the recent weeks, I've been asked what the effect of the flooding in the Atchafalaya will have on wildlife. Although this article in the National Audubon Magazine blog was written before the peak of the flooding event, many of the points made herein still apply. I thought it was pertinent enough to pass along to our chapter members who have been asking these same questions. Interesting to note that things did not pan out as originally anticipated -- the drought conditions led to much more absorption of flood water as it made its way into the basin, and the water moved more slowly and did not reach the levels originally anticipated. Still, the effects were quite serious, and it will be interesting to see the outcome this year and into the future. ~ Jane Patterson

The Mississippi River continues to swell, and towns in the flood's path area are being evacuated as water levels rise and Morganza Spillway gates release millions of gallons of water. As the water spreads into the Atchafalaya Basin in south-central Louisiana, reports of wildlife on the run are pouring in.

"In the Mississippi alluvial valley flooding may displace a lot of different wildlife, from warblers to black bears," says Melanie Driscoll, Audubon's Director of Bird Conservation for the Gulf of Mexico and Mississippi Flyway.

"As birds start to lose habitat hopefully they will move out from flooded areas," Driscoll says. "Other animals can get stranded more easily. A couple of years ago when the Yazoo River flooded a lot of the area that's under water now, we saw alligators and cows, bobcats and deer, on levees within a short driving distance of each other. It was the only dry

ground, so everything just moved onto the nearest levee."

Many deer and at least four black bears have been spotted on the move since this weekend, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began opening the Morganza Spillway, which is located about 35 miles northwest of Baton Rouge and diverts water into the Atchafalaya Basin. The Corps is employing 16 of 125 gates, and may let water out of as many as one-quarter of them overall in order to protect Baton Rouge and New Orleans from severe flooding. On May 10, the Corps opened another spillway, the Bonnet Carré, (about 30 miles northwest New Orleans), but that alone didn't divert enough water to protect the city.

The only time the Morganza Spillway had been opened previously was when water levels rose perilously high in 1973. The Corps is releasing water at a slower rate this time around to allow wildlife time to get out of harm's way.

Still, mortalities are likely, says Paul Davidson, executive director of the Black Bear Conservation Coalition in Louisiana. "The young of the year for wild turkeys will be wiped out, and many newborn bear cubs will probably die," he says. The Louisiana black bear, a threatened subspecies of the American black bear, nearly died out in the 1950s due largely to habitat loss. Deer, which haven't had their fawns yet, will move outside the levee system for the next several months, he predicts. While drowning is an immediate concern for wildlife, starvation is another threat. "Summer plant foods normally available for bears, deer, and other species will be wiped out, requiring those animals to seek food elsewhere in the coming months" such as nearby agricultural crops, says Davidson. That, in turn, could lead to an increase in human/bear conflicts in populated areas.

Meanwhile, birds that rely on ground vegetation, shrubs, or low trees—

(Continued on page 8)





NAS NAMES NEW CONSERVATION BIOLOGIST FOR THE GULF OF MEXICO AND THE MISSISSIPPI FLYWAY!



Welcome to Erik Johnson,

I am pleased to announce that Dr. Erik Johnson has been hired as a Gulf of Mexico/Mississippi Flyway Conservation Biologist, effective April 29, 2011. Erik joins Audubon fresh from finishing his Ph.D. at Louisiana State

University, for which he examined effects of forest fragmentation on Amazonian bird communities. Erik is working from the Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Audubon office.

In his new role, Erik will work to understand baseline populations and trends of birds of conservation concern in the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi Flyway. He will also be an integral part of the conservation team working on conservation planning and implementation for this vital region.

During the Deepwater Horizon oil disaster, Erik worked with Jared Wolfe, another Louisiana State

University researcher, to organize a citizen science monitoring program in Louisiana to track the extent and frequency of oiling of waterbirds. Audubon expanded a modified version of the survey protocol as the Audubon Coastal Bird Survey—these combined efforts have created the only independent dataset of oiled bird survey data from the Gulf oil spill.

Erik has also conducted research on effects of fire on the winter ecology of Henslow's Sparrows in Louisiana and habitat associations of Bachman's Sparrows in fire-dependent longleaf pine forests in the southeast. He has long been a birder and conservationist, having conducted field studies from Pennsylvania and Louisiana to Australia, Costa Rica, and Brazil.

Please join me in welcoming Erik to Audubon's conservation team.

~ Melanie Driscoll
Director of Bird Conservation
Gulf of Mexico & Mississippi Flyway
National Audubon Society

Bayou Birding Bon Temps Winner's Report

by Richard Gibbons

The 2011 Bayou Birding Bon Temps results are in and we would first like to thank Baton Rouge Audubon and National Audubon's Louisiana Coastal Initiative for their support. This year was especially poignant with the anniversary of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. There were over 37,000 Louisiana April records reported to eBird and many of these were on the coast providing abundance estimates of coastal birds. The goal of the Bayou Birding Bon Temps is to encourage Louisiana birders to develop relative abundance bar charts for the many birding trail sites, national wildlife refuges, state parks, wildlife management areas, and important birding areas. Many locations have few birding reports and therefore birders have little information to help them decide where to go. The idea is to challenge birders to get off the beaten path. By doing so, we discover new birding experiences and provide data for eBird's growing database, which provides researchers and birders with information on Louisiana's birds in poorly documented parts of the state.



With the help of our sponsors, we have sent small commemorative ceramic tiles that were hand-crafted on the Gulf Coast. These medallion-like tiles feature the BBT logo and have a hang loop for easy display. We will mail these tiles to the top two winners of each category.

A special word of recognition is warranted for two outstanding birding efforts. First, the LSU Museum of Natural Science's "A-team" took the Louisiana Big Day prize with 198 species. Congratulations are in order to team members James Maley, Cesar Sanchez, Glenn Seeholzer and Ryan Terrill for an impressive effort.

The other standout was Mary Mehaffey. She was a birding machine submitting checklist for a record 21 (!) locations for the month of April. Wow, that's a lot of birding and many of these locations had very few checklists.

For a complete listing of the results, please visit the BBT website here:

<http://www.lsu.edu/departments/labird/index.html>



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Birding Basics Classes Return in the Fall

Do you know someone who isn't (yet) a birder but is interested in birds and would like to learn more? Jane Patterson will again be teaching the Birding Basics class this fall. Intended for beginners, this class will introduce folks to the tools of hobby (binoculars and field guides), discuss how to bring birds to your yard, talk about Louisiana's importance to migrating and breeding bird populations, and show off some of the cool birds we have here! There are 4 classes in the series, held on Monday nights from 6:30 to 8. Field trips on the following weekends are planned. Classes are offered through the LSU Leisure Class system. For more information, please visit www.lsu.edu/leisureclasses and look under "Play" and "Outdoors". If you have any questions, you may contact Jane Patterson at japatter@cox.net.

Louisiana Wild Stamp & Federal Duck Stamp

by Jane Patterson

I always set a reminder on my calendar for July 1 of each year to buy a new Louisiana Wild Stamp. Since I'm not a hunter or a fisherman, this is the permit I need to gain access to the refuges and wildlife management areas in Louisiana. At only \$5.50, it's a bargain, and the funds go to support the state's Natural Heritage program, which in turn, supports programs like the non-game bird program. You can get this permit online through the Wildlife and Fisheries website (www.wlf.la.gov) or you can buy it any place that Louisiana Hunting and Fishing licenses are sold. Be warned though, people often get quizzical looks when purchasing them at the store. It seems that most retailers don't even know they exist. Not surprising, but still a shame. I like to buy them just to make people ask questions!

By the same token, July is also the time to get your new Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, commonly called the "Duck Stamp". Duck Stamps are produced by the U.S. Postal Service for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. They are not valid for postage, but instead are the federal license required for hunting migratory waterfowl, Federal Duck Stamps have a much larger purpose today. Federal Duck Stamps are a vital tool for habitat conservation as ninety-eight cents out of every dollar generated by the sales of Federal Duck Stamps goes directly to purchase or lease wetland habitat for protection in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Understandably, the Federal Duck Stamp Program has been called one of the most successful conservation programs ever initiated and is a highly effective way to conserve America's natural resources. Besides serving as a hunting license and a conservation tool, a current year's Federal Duck Stamp also serves as an entrance pass for National Wildlife Refuges where admission is normally charged. Since 1934, the sales of Federal Duck Stamps have generated more than \$750 million, which has been used to help purchase or lease over 5.3 million acres of waterfowl habitat in the U.S. People, too, have benefited from the Federal Duck Stamp Program. Hunters have places to enjoy their hunting heritage and other outdoor enthusiasts have places to hike, watch birds, and visit. Moreover, the protected wetlands help purify water supplies, store flood water, reduce soil erosion and sedimentation, and provide spawning areas for fish important to sport and commercial fishermen. Visit www.duckstamp.com to purchase your Federal Duck Stamp online. They can also be purchased at Post Offices and hunting license outlets.

BRAS's Spring 2011 Bird Monitoring Workshop

by Jared Wolfe

"Hormonal cues for pigment deposition change during the pre-basic molt – that is why we see a color gradient from green to red throughout the



Jared Wolfe & friends...

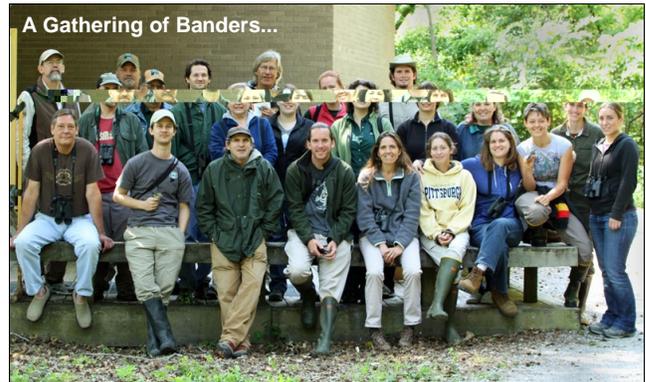
flight feathers" Peter Pyle told the group of excited bird banders eagerly peering at the wing of a captured Painted Bunting. *"What is the age of this bird?"* was Peter's follow up question. *"After-second year"* responded several confident participants.

Learning the intricacies of bunting molt was one of many subjects covered during the Baton Rouge Audubon Society's sponsored four day advanced bird banding workshop, held from 15 through 18 April 2011. The workshop's leader, Peter Pyle, is a world renowned field ornithologist who literally wrote the book on ageing and sexing North American birds. Accurately determining bird age and sex is an important component of bird monitoring. For example, age data, derived from banding efforts, is used to monitor "age ratios" of birds to ensure that enough young are being produced to sustain population viability. The sold-out workshop included 23 participants hailing from southern universities, non-profits, environmental consulting firms, state and federal agencies. The workshop's objective focused on instructing participants how to employ advanced monitoring techniques to better conserve Southern bird populations.



Swainson's Thrush

The workshop generally consisted of very long days: beginning at sunrise, 21 mist-nets at Bluebonnet Swamp were opened for five and a half hours where participants were subjected to a dizzying array of migrant and resident landbirds. Capture highlights included: Indigo and Painted Buntings, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Kentucky, Hooded,



A Gathering of Banders...

Magnolia and Worm-eating Warblers. After bird banding, participants ate lunch and would spend five more hours listening to Peter lecture on molt theory and application. The grueling pace of the workshop was punctuated by a fantastic Crawfish boil, hosted by Eric Liffmann, giving Peter Pyle a healthy dose of Louisiana food, culture and hospitality. The final day of the workshop was spent at BRAS's Peveto Woods Bird Sanctuary in Cameron Parish where participants practiced advanced banding techniques in near-fallout conditions. Capture highlights from Peveto included Blue Grosbeak, over 40 Indigo Buntings, Summer Tanager, and Orchard Oriole.

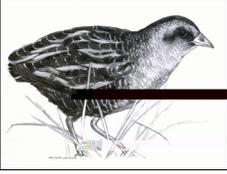


Worm-eating Warbler

In addition to improving our regions ability to accurately monitor and conserve bird populations, the four day workshop fostered a sense of community and camaraderie among participating Southern ornithologists. BRAS would like to sincerely thank all the volunteers for making the workshop a success: Kristin Brzeski, Dave Patton, Phil Stouffer, Sheri Utley and BREC Staff. The essential morning infusion of caffeine was generously donated by Highland Coffees.



Kristin Brzeski



YELLOW RAILS & RICE FESTIVAL



(with information excerpted from the festival website)

The Yellow Rails and Rice Festival 2011 is scheduled to begin Wednesday, October 26 and will run through Sunday, October 30, 2011.

The Yellow Rail is a notoriously difficult bird to see, even for the veteran birdwatcher. The second rice harvest provides a wonderful opportunity. As the combines work the field, the Rails that have migrated from northern climes are flushed out (temporarily) from the fields. This festival capitalizes on this activity, providing participants with a unique venue to view

Yellow Rails while at the same time bringing birders and farmers together to realize the value to birds of the area's "working wetlands." The festival schedule is casual and participants can attend all events or come and go at their leisure. We will have leaders at field sites to help spot birds and provide information. We will also offer local field trips, and two trips farther afield to the pineywoods and Cameron Parish coast. Based in Jennings, participants will be positioned in the heart of Cajun Country in Louisiana's southwest prairie region, an area known for great birding,

local cuisine, and a rich history and culture.

To register, visit the website at http://snowyegreterenterprises.com/Snowy_Egret_Enterprises/YRARF_2011.html

Please note that all festival documents must be signed and returned in order to receive your Field Pass to participate in the event.

View video from previous year's event at:

<http://vimeo.com/7408572>

Illustration Credit: Jen Brumfield



Bird Watching Workshop – Jane Patterson, center, a bird watching instructor for the LSU Leisure Program, presented a workshop on May 13 for WBR Senior Spirit members on "Bringing Birds to Your Backyard." The 4-hour class was held at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church Activity Center in Brusly. Shown walking through the neighborhood to listen to and identify birds was: Lucy & Walter Landry, Sara Grady, Patterson, Catherine Blanchard, Skipper Grady, and Janis Stoner. Senior Spirit is program sponsored by the West Baton Rouge Parish Parks and Recreation Department.

Are You A Plover Lover?

by Erik Johnson

It's summer, which means 'time to head to the beach!' Louisiana residents and people from all over the country flock to the few, but charming, beaches in southeast and southwest Louisiana. Indeed, our coastal waters have some of the best saltwater fishing in the country and the LA Department of Wildlife and Fisheries sells about 300,000 recreational saltwater fishing licenses each year. Wildlife abounds as well, with over 300 species of birds using coastal areas at some point in their life, making Louisiana a top birding destination. Coastal cheniers are famous for spring fallouts; marshes host a diverse array of birds like herons, spoonbills, waterfowl, and rails; and scrub patches attract an incredible variety of vagrant species. Louisiana provides globally important bird habitat, with 77% of the world's Tricolored Herons nesting in Louisiana, for example.

The sandy beaches we all enjoy visiting also provide critical habitat for birds and other wildlife. In Texas, Kemp's Ridley sea turtles now nest by the hundreds along their coast line, having been brought back from the brink of extinction due to a concerted management effort including adding turtle exclusion devices to fishing nets and beach stewardship programs. Nesting has expanded north to Galveston Bay and it is not impossible to think this rarest of sea turtles may one day nest in southwest LA. The loggerhead sea turtle actually has been seen nesting on Breton NWR, well offshore from most human activity, but near-shore islands, like Elmer's Island, may one day see a nesting loggerhead as its population grows.



Birds use these beaches, too. Of course we are all familiar with Laughing Gulls, which are actually predators of the eggs and young of more reclusive species like Wilson's Plover (photo below). Wilson's Plovers lay their eggs right on the sand, only carving out a small depression a few inches wide and an inch deep. Their eggs and young are so camouflaged that it is nearly impossible to see them until you are right next to the nest. In fact, lots of beach nesting species, like Least Terns, Black Skimmers, and American Oystercatchers, lay their eggs on the ground, each being unbelievably camouflaged. The young cannot fly until several weeks old, but they begin walking and leave the nest when only a few hours old. To avoid predation, they drop to the



ground motionless hoping their camouflage will save them. Not a good idea if a car is headed their way.

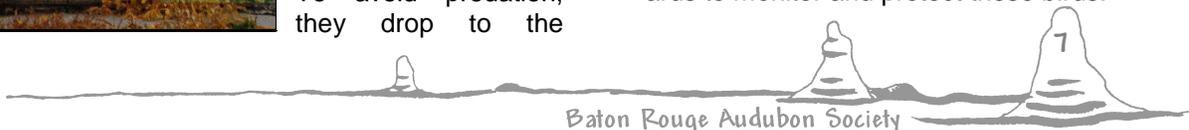


Camouflage has long been advantageous for the survival of beach nesting birds, that is, until humans arrived. Because it is so hard to see these eggs and chicks, they get stepped on and run over by ATVs and cars. In many places, this has been happening for so long, that these birds no longer nest there. Even if one does not directly crush the eggs, flushing an incubating adult can cause the eggs to boil in the summer heat in less than 15 minutes! The result has been dramatic population declines. The Piping Plover along the Atlantic coast and Snowy Plover on the Pacific Coast have both been declared as endangered, now protected under the Endangered Species Act. Although not yet officially endangered, Wilson's Plover is on that trajectory unless we do something about it. Beach nesting birds, as a group, have among the fastest declining populations in the U.S. Increased human disturbance on beaches coupled with projected sea level rise, these birds will soon run out of safe places to nest.

Conservation organizations like LA Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program, and the Audubon Society are working to protect these birds. These programs are gaining momentum, especially in the wake of the 2010 oil spill crisis.

Here is a list of things you can do to help save these birds:

- Be respectful of fencing and signage that prohibits entry to nesting areas at all times of the year. Even during the non-breeding season, walking on dunes creates erosion, destroying critical nesting habitat and storm protection for human communities.
- Minimize driving on beaches. If you must drive, slowly drive below the wrack line. This will prevent you from driving over nests and is the easiest place to spot chicks that cannot fly.
- Do not feed gulls. These are common birds that don't need your help and are predators to sensitive species.
- Become involved in this conservation effort! Baton Rouge Audubon in partnership with the National Audubon Society is looking for volunteers and stewards to monitor and protect these birds.



How Will the Mississippi River Flooding Affect Birds, Bears, and Other Wildlife?

(Continued from page 1)

such as Swainson's warblers, hooded warblers, and Kentucky warblers—will lose habitat in flooded areas. "For the more southern-breeding species, they may start to lose habitat and lose an opportunity to breed," says Driscoll.

There may be some positive conservation outcomes, too. The flooding could take a heavy toll on feral hogs, which cause a lot of environmental destruction, says Davidson. It might also wash out aquatic invasive species like giant salvinia and water hyacinth.

The inundated floodplain may benefit many fish species that depend on such areas for spawning habitat and food. Unfortunately, says Davidson, it might also allow the highly productive and invasive carp, which have taken hold in the northern reaches of the Mississippi, to move in.

Though some birds will take a hit in the coming months, Driscoll points out that flooding can also be beneficial to birds. "Floods are what have built the habitat historically, and they renew, create, and destroy habitat all

at the same time," she says. For instance, water gushing down the Mississippi River will scour sandbars, scraping them clean of vegetation. "This makes them better places to nest for birds of conservation concern, like the interior least tern and piping plovers," says Driscoll.

Shrub-nesting species will lose habitat initially, but flooding deposits nutrient-rich sediment that spurs vegetation growth, creating suitable habitat within a couple of years. The influx of sediment can also create new sandbars. "A new sand bar is a place that hasn't been discovered by predators, and then again maybe for a year or a couple of years, a safer place to nest, until predators find it."

This sort of land-building process has been largely restricted by flood control measures such as levees. "Historically the river spread out over millions and millions of acres in a big flood year like this," says David Ringer, communications coordinator for Audubon's Mississippi River and Gulf of Mexico programs. "But we have constricted the floodplain to about 10 percent of what it was historically by putting levees down the

lower Mississippi River."

Flood control systems protect communities, and allowed for the swamp forests of northern Mississippi and Louisiana to be cleared for cropland. Yet constricting the floodplain has had negative consequences for wildlife. "Swallow-tailed kites used to range much farther up the river," says Driscoll. "They're very restricted to the southern forests now. It's led to many of the population declines. There's simply not enough housing." In the delta, flood control has cut off that land-building process, says Driscoll. "Habitats are getting more stagnant and less productive and they tend to be sinking and degrading in quality."

To take pressure off the flood control system and help build new habitat, Driscoll advocates building more spillways and diversions that would increase the floodplain. "If you had more and more possibilities to connect the river to habitat at specific desired locations, you could more safely manage the river in flood years to protect human communities," she says. "We'd be better to build those structures ahead of time, and give us control through deliberately letting down the level of the river upstream."

That would likely mean inundating more cropland in heavy flood years. Currently, about three million acres of farmland are under water, destroying crops of corn, wheat, rice, and cotton across the South and lower Midwest. "The upside is that this water will deposit all sorts of sediments and nutrients that will increase the productivity of the Basin for the next several years," says Davidson.

As for wildlife, he adds, "Mother Nature's critters tend to be very resilient, so much will remain to be seen as this scenario unfolds over the coming weeks."



New BRAS Board for 2011-12

(Left to Right) Back row: Jay Guillory, Jeff Harris, Eric Johnson, Jared Wolfe. Front row: Donna LaFleur, Melanie Driscoll, Jane Patterson, Richard Gibbons, Eric Liffmann, Duncan Kemp. Not pictured: Dave Patton, Beverly Smiley

Congratulations, Melanie!



Melanie Driscoll, Audubon's director of bird conservation for the Gulf of Mexico and Mississippi Flyway, was recently honored at National Audubon's Women in Conservation banquet in New York. This was the 8th annual event that recognizes women for outstanding contributions to conservation. Forty-three women at the forefront of the last summer's oil disaster rescue response were given special recognition as "Women of the Gulf." Melanie is pictured here (second from right) with other award recipients. Congratulations, Melanie, and we, too, appreciate your hard work!

photo by Cutty McGill/Audubon

LSU Students Attend Power Shift 2011

by Matt Wyatt

This past April, eighteen LSU students, sponsored by the LSU School of Renewable Natural Resources (RNR), LSU Student Life, and the Baton Rouge Audubon Society, joined nine other Louisiana campuses to attend Power Shift 2011, the nation's largest youth environmental leadership and climate summit. There in Washington D.C, they gathered with over 8,000 youth for three days of workshops and panels on leadership development, coalition building, and sustainability topics such as alternative transportation, sustainable food systems, and renewable energy production. Three RNR seniors, Lauren Hull, Jessica Seaman, and Matt Wyatt, served as the trainers during the conference, leading workshops and small group breakouts to rooms of over 300 youth.

"It was a great opportunity to teach others and learn from a diversity of experiences. Overall, it instilled a feeling of justice and equality in our ability to protect our planet's vibrant species and vital natural resources." Said Lauren, conservation biology senior and Power Shift trainer.



Other events included keynote speakers such as Al Gore, Bill McKibben, renown environmental author, and Lisa Jackson, Director of the EPA, and a job and graduate school fair with universities and non-profits both in the U.S. and abroad.

"I found it extremely informative and empowering. It gave youth the knowledge that they have power to influence climate legislation and get involved to help communities." Said John Tracy, a natural resource ecology

and management senior and Co-President of ECO, the Environmental Conservation Organization at LSU.

The students plan to take the skills and knowledge learned in Washington D.C. and apply it to working on improving LSU and Baton Rouge's sustainability, including a campus-wide dining hall composting program, on-site renewable energy production, and other projects.



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