...to foster a greater knowledge of birds and to promote conservation of all natural resources

FOUNDED 1952

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ALABAMA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY
P.O. BOX 1325, DAUPHIN ISLAND, AL 36528-1325

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COVER (TOP TO BOTTOM): MALE, IMMATURE, AND FEMALE CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLERS; MALE, FEMALE, AND IMMATURE BLACKPOLL WARBLERS; AND IMMATURE, MALE, AND FEMALE BAY-BREASTED WARBLERS BY WALTER ALOIS WEBER FROM BIRD PORTRAITS IN COLOR
I hope y'all have had a nice summer. This month’s message is going to be short and to the point, as there are some important happenings relative to AOS and our meetings.

Our fall meeting this year will be October 10-12 at Dauphin Island Sea Lab (DISL). However, we no longer have access to the DISL dorms as an option for lodging; we only learned of this in mid-July. To this point, we have not found a suitable on-island alternative either, as the Baptist church retreat is also not available. Possible lodging options on the island include the Gulf Breeze Motel, real estate rentals (such as houses and condos), campgrounds, and several economy hotels in Tillman’s Corner (about 30 minutes from Dauphin Island), among others. Contact information for these options is included in this Yellowhammer on page 11. I plan on continuing to communicate with members concerning this situation, through Albirds, email and regular mail, as needed, and I hope you’ll help spread the word concerning the change in lodging arrangements.

Otherwise, the arrangements for our meeting remain pretty much the same (details provided on page 11). We’ll have a mixer/potluck/slide show event on Friday evening in the Shelby Center. The Banquet/Presentation will be Saturday evening in the Shelby Center, with Wilton Caterers providing the food. We’ll have scheduled field trips on Saturday morning, on-your-own on Sunday morning and will meet for compilation at 12 noon Sunday.

I already mentioned in the summer newsletter that our speaker is going to be Greg Miller. Greg is best known as one of the Big Year competitors, along with Sandy Komita and Al Levantin, whose experiences were documented in the non-fiction book, *The Big Year* by Pulitzer Prize winning author Mark Obmascik. As most of you know, the book inspired a major motion picture by the same name, starring Jack Black, Steve Martin and Owen Wilson, which was released in 2011. Greg served as bird consultant for the movie. I am sure Greg will have an entertaining presentation for us; please see the “Meet the Speaker” section on page 9 for more information.

The winter AOS meeting rotates back to northern Alabama in 2015, and we’ll be at Joe Wheeler State Park. Joe Wheeler is a very nice venue and it’s ideally located to provide access to some great spots to include in field trips, such as the park itself, Wilson and Wheeler Dams, Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, Town Creek, etc., all of which provide excellent opportunities to observe waterfowl and other water bird populations in large concentrations, not to mention a variety of raptors and songbirds. We should have a lot of fun, and I hope you’ll join us.

I did want to take the opportunity to remind any members who may have forgotten and allowed their memberships to lapse to please consider renewing, as we’d love to have you back. We are in the process of figuring out a better way to get timely reminders out to the membership, especially those who don’t regularly attend meetings.

That’s about it; happy birding and we’ll see you in October, if not before.

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**Important Dues News**

For some time we have continued to send *The Yellowhammer* to people who have failed to renew their memberships. AOS cannot afford to keep doing this!

Please check the label on your issue and see when your membership will expire—and whether it already has. Then, if you are past due or approaching the end of your membership term, please send a check to renew. We really want to keep you as a member.

Remember, dues are for a calendar year.

While you’re at it, please consider becoming a life member, and then you won’t have to worry about it any more. Rates for membership categories are on the inside back cover of this *Yellowhammer*. Send your check, made payable to AOS, to our Treasurer:

Dr. Rufina Ward,
1689 Longleaf Drive, Huntsville, AL 35806

—Larry Gardella, Membership Chair
His past spring I had the opportunity to go to Big Bend National Park on the Rio Grande in west Texas to bird. If you have never been there, I highly recommend it for its rich history, beauty, varied habitat, and birds. Driving across the west Texas desert we began to overtake a very long train off to the south. It was in sight for fifteen or twenty minutes, and the speculation began as to whether we would get to the crossing first, or would the train? We got there just in time to wait. But it brought into focus the vast distances and how much of those vast distances were visible from one place.

The geological history of Big Bend is exceptional. This tectonic plate crashed into that plate, and poked high into the sky, then got worn down over eons. Volcanoes erupted and changed the land even more. Wind and water have played their part, and the resulting landscape is one of understated beauty and of surprises around every turn. The riparian habitat along the Rio Grande lies alongside grassy meadows, which are replaced by desert with the largest plants being a fantastic variety of cacti. Other parts, the result of the volcanos, look more like moonscapes than a landscape.

The Park offers only one restaurant; so we ate most meals there. The food was really quite good, but each evening the setting sun stole the show. The sun would drop down into a notch called the Window. The desert colors changed by the minute. The serenity of the scene was wonderful. And as an added bonus, a Say’s Phoebe pair was feeding very hungry nestlings in the roof overhang.

It had been many years since I have seen the Milky Way in the US, but the night sky in Big Bend was awe-inspiring. I
arose early every morning to soak it in, accompanied by bats and calling birds. The lighting at the park is very discreet, and does not destroy the view.

The birds weren’t bad either. As we stopped to pay our entrance fee, we photographed a very skittish Greater Roadrunner right outside the window. The first full day we hiked the Window Trail where we had terrific looks at a Black-chinned Sparrow, Scott’s Oriole, and Black-chinned Hummingbirds. A few of us got brief but sufficient looks at a Black-necked Gartersnake. We averaged a little over a snake a day, none of them poisonous. Mexican Jays accompanied us much of the way. The trail starts at just above 5100 feet elevation, and drops to about 4350. The trail follows a canyon formed by steep mountains on each side. The Window is a spectacular place, where the streambed abruptly drops almost 100 feet over a waterfall (when there is water) to the desert below. You can stand near the drop-off, which is glassy slick from billions of gallons of water and sand, and look out over the desert several hundred feet below. It is a breathtaking experience. Later in the trip we viewed the Window from the other direction, from the desert.

After the Window hike, we headed to Rio Grande Village, which is an oasis on the river with wonderful riparian habitat. Every few hundred yards we would see a covey of Scaled Quail, which would run a short distance off the road and wait for us to leave. Nesting birds ruled at the Village. A pair of Common Black-hawks was nesting in a cottonwood tree, well out of sight. While we tried to out wait the Black-hawk, a handful of Collared Peccaries darted across the road, and a beautiful California Sister, a butterfly, danced around the bush. Both Black-hawks were soon in evidence, allowing fairly good pictures. (The National Park Service had erected a sign and set up a cordon around the nest. The sign read “Protected area, nesting Common Black-hawk,” but with a picture of a Zone-tailed Hawk!) A very curious Vermillion Flycatcher stayed well within the cordoned area, but still allowed full binocular looks. We rounded a curve and found several people staring intently into a tree—an unpassable situation for birders. The attraction was an Elf Owl nesting in a small cottonwood tree. A light scratching at the base of the tree had the owl looking about as we snapped pictures.
Next was a pair of Great Horned Owls who delivered an unrecognizable chunk of dinner to the owlets. We also saw the first Gray Hawk of the trip, although it was distant. Returning from the Village, we spotted a small flock of Lark Buntings in the ocotillo on the way.

The first evening I spotted an extremely tame Scott’s Oriole feeding on the ocotillo blossoms in the parking lot. We worried that it might be sick, but it came and went during our whole stay, and seemed to have simply chosen the plant as his. The next day was spent visiting and exploring such places as Panther Junction Dugout Wells, and Cottonwood Campground. On the way, we passed the Burro Mesa Pouroff, the Lost Mine Trail, Casa Grande, and the Homer Wilson Ranch.

Finally, the day we had been waiting for: the hike up the Pinnacles Trail into the Chisos Mountains in search of the Colima Warbler. The hike up was not nearly as demanding as I had expected. And the birds were cooperative. We eventually saw well over a dozen of these beautiful little creatures, many of them within 20 feet. The view from the mountaintop was absolutely magnificent. At the crest of the first mountain there is a roofless organic outhouse. A very different experience that I will leave to your imagination.

After leaving Big Bend, we headed toward the Davis Mountains, and a delightful oasis at Carolyn’s house, which was reached after three plus bone-jarring, boulder-strewn miles, where I had a wonderful look at a Lucifer Hummingbird. Several others got fair looks at this little monster that led us on a merry chase through the cacti; some of us probably still have the scars.

We continued to Alpine, Texas, a little jewel in the midst of the desert. After fueling up on food, gas, and other necessities, including wine (they offered Green Chili Wine, but I wasn’t willing to spend $18 to try it), we continued on to Fort Davis in search of Montezuma Quail. While looking for the quail, we watched a very frustrated Greater Roadrunner who had discovered two—count ’em—two opponents in the outside mirrors of an aging Thunderbird. He would search in, behind, under the mirror and anywhere else he could think of trying to find the other bird. Then he would suddenly remember the foe waiting on the other side of the car, and he’d go over there and repeat the process. He was very entertaining to us, but the hound dog on the porch looked like he’d seen it all before, and offered the spectacle little more than a passing glance before resuming his nap, head resting on paws.

After striking out on the quail except for a distant response to a tape, we called it a day. That night we watched the space station fly over, among the thousands of stars visible in the lightless environment of the desert.

Early the next morning, we headed out determined to see a Montezuma Quail, and we did. It was behind a chain link fence, but there was an observation platform where we climbed up high enough to see the gentleman well. He was holding court on top of the highest terrain around, a mound of dirt about three feet high, and calling the whole time we watched. He got no response, and we decided that we might be interfering with his love life, so we went back to enjoy a not so late breakfast.

As I write this, I have referred to the Park website, where I see that each guest is allowed five gallons of water a day, and they recommend that you bring your own. I’m glad I went when I did.

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**Have You Read a Good Bird Book Lately?**

*If you have read a good bird book lately, please tell us about it. It doesn’t have to be about birds exclusively, but about conservation, nature in general, or other related topics. I’m not looking for a review, necessarily, but just recommendations of good books you’ve run across. Let the rest of us know, so we can read them too.*

---

**Thanks for the Stories**

*The Yellowhammer must be printed in four-page increments. Thus we are always in need of your articles, both short and longer, to make the pages come out right. We have been using input from the editor only because those are all we have at the moment.

If you have an article, story, or amusing incident you would like to share, please send it to the editor. Electronic versions are much easier to copy and paste, but send them by snail mail or paper airplane if you need to. The addresses are on the back cover.*

*Please send other articles about your birding adventures, trips, yard sightings, or just short vignettes that are interesting, different, or amusing.*
His past winter, birders throughout the United States and Canada were solicited to participate with the Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz, a national monitoring program developed by the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group to spatially document Rusty Blackbird observations during the spring migration months. This initiative builds upon an earlier initiative (Rusty Blackbird Winter Hotspot Blitz) by identifying important migratory stopover sites throughout the species’ range and gathering other key information. The data gathered will help support conservation planning to ultimately guide on-the-ground actions with the objectives of halting and subsequently reversing the long precipitous decline of this troubled species.

For Alabama, the migration survey period was the entire month of March although later observations were also accepted. Participation was solicited through several newsletters and social media outlets prior to the start of the survey period. The protocols were simple: focus birding trips to habitats favored by Rusty Blackbirds and report observations and effort using eBird, whether Rusty Blackbirds were detected or not.

During the survey period, a total of 51 checklists from Alabama reporting at least one Rusty Blackbird were submitted to eBird. Checklists were submitted by 24 different observers with dates ranging from 1 March to 11 April. Alabama checklists accounted for a total of 2,137 individuals from 19 counties (see table on page 8). Highest numbers of individuals reported were from Limestone (1,186), Elmore (353), Montgomery (201), and Colbert (127) counties. Sites with the most individuals included Wheeler NWR (682; 340) and Fort Toulouse (200; 125). Counties with the most checklists submitted included Montgomery (13), Limestone (7), and Elmore (4). Compared to other southeastern states, Alabama submitted more checklists than only Florida (12) and Mississippi (23) and fewer than Virginia (608), Tennessee (210), Georgia (193), North Carolina (181), South Carolina (134), Arkansas (93), Kentucky (78), and Louisiana (57).

Nationally, all but seven states submitted a combined total of 10,894 checklists, and of those Alabama ranked near the bottom in submissions.

Despite being an important state for Rusty Blackbirds, Alabama’s participation with the Spring Migration Blitz was, at best, minimal. This may be due to the limited number of people in Alabama that regularly use eBird to report bird sightings. Alabama generally ranks near the bottom in eBird participation compared to other states. Another factor may be the Rusty Blackbirds themselves, which are generally regarded less charismatic than other bird species, thus not appealing enough to focus survey efforts on. Nonetheless, the
**More Creekside News**

Many generations of Brown Thrashers and Eastern Towhees have exercised squatters’ rights in my lengthy hedgerow. Recent landscaping projects here opened many grassless areas, and thrashers thrash about in them on dry days, creating mini dust storms. After this they bathe in the birdbath with gusty fluttering. It needs cleaning often. Eastern Towhees also share my acres, among the abundant azaleas, bridal wreaths, beautyberry, holly and cherry trees. They are most audible when courting, claiming territory, and tending nests. I’ve learned not to prune shrubbery during these months. Homeless ground-dwelling feeders are worrisome.

My creekside forest land is visible from US 90. Despite this, a pair of Wood Ducks spent the summer in the city-built drainage ditch and pond there. I intend to buy a Wood Duck box to lure them back.

Floating plastic debris caused endless uproar locally, but the birds stay, and neighborhood fisher folks willfully persist in enjoying their catches from Moore Creek.

—Jean Golden, Mobile

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**Electronic Yellowhammer?**

It costs well over a dollar and a half to print and mail The Yellowhammer. We are delivering, on a totally voluntary basis, The Yellowhammer via the internet. If you would like to receive your Yellowhammer, in color, electronically, as a PDF file, please email the editor at BobReed1987@gmail.com.

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**Alabama Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz Results**

(March–April 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County Observed</th>
<th>Number of Checklists (eBird)</th>
<th>Number of Observed Individuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baldwin*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barbour</td>
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<td>Chambers</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cleburne</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colbert</td>
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<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dale*</td>
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<td>Hale</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lauderdale</td>
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<td>Limestone</td>
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<td>Macon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobile</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Sumter</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>2,137</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Denotes Rusty Blackbird observations reported only in April.

Rusty Blackbird is in trouble and scientists are reaching out for our help. The Spring Migration Blitz is scheduled to be performed for two more seasons, and it is my hope that birders across Alabama become united and dedicate more time searching for this species. All 67 counties in Alabama possess habitat favored by Rusty Blackbirds and all it takes is a little planning and effort for more comprehensive coverage across the state. As a challenge to Alabama birders, I’d like to see the number of submissions doubled next year. Lastly, I thank those who participated this past season and hope others will consider joining this effort next year. If you have questions, please don’t hesitate contacting me at eric.soehren@dcnr.alabama.gov.

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**Upcoming Meetings**

**SECOND FRIDAY**—October 10–12, 2014
Fall Meeting, Dauphin Island, Alabama

**FOURTH FRIDAY**—January 23–25, 2015
Winter Meeting, Joe Wheeler State Park

**THIRD FRIDAY**—April 17–19, 2015
Spring Meeting, Dauphin Island, Alabama
I have been birding since... umm... well I can’t remember because I was too young. I do not remember getting my first pair of binoculars or my first birding trip with my dad. It was my father that got me into birding at an early age. I have been birding for over 50 years and have birded in all 50 states and much of Canada. I have always been smitten by the birding bug. I love to get outside and go find birds. Every trip out is an adventure!

My dad taught himself bird songs and calls. The significance of bird songs was sparked in me when our family took a trip to Grayling, Michigan, to try to find the very rare Kirtland’s Warbler. The year was 1969. There were only about 300 singing males of this species at the time. There was no government program to show visitors around. Our best resource was some information from a forest ranger. He told us to drive along forestry roads and look in young Jack Pines (from 6-15 feet tall).

In 1969 we didn’t have smartphones, MP3 players, CD players, or even a cassette player. And the Peterson Bird Songs on an old vinyl record lacked a recording of a Kirtland’s Warbler. Nevertheless, our family station wagon rumbled slowly down a dirty, bumpy forestry road with a stand of appropriately sized Jack Pines—with the window rolled down.

Within the first 5 minutes my dad proclaims, “That’s it!” “What?”

“A Kirtland’s Warbler. Singing somewhere in front of us.”

“Really? How did you know that?” I asked skeptically, knowing he was like me—neither one of us had ever heard the song of a Kirtland’s Warbler.

“Well. By the quality of its song I could tell it was a warbler. And, it is one I did not recognize. Therefore I am quite certain that what is singing is a Kirtland’s Warbler”.

We had hardly finished our conversation. And I was still swimming in doubt. How could my dad just make such a big leap? He had never even heard a single recording of the song.

“There it is! On top of that Jack Pine!” he said with constrained excitement, not wanting to startle the bird.

I raised my binoculars as one still in disbelief. But I was shaken out of my doubt when I saw this Kirtland’s Warbler throw its head back and open its mouth and uttered the very bright, staccato notes we had been hearing all along. And then I succumbed to that feeling a birder gets when he makes a life encounter with a new species. It is not unlike the adrenaline rush one feels when truly scared. Maybe a little shiver down the spine, and your skin kind of tingles, and you finally exhale as you realize you have been holding your breath. The sense of awe and wonder at this first encounter can burn itself into one’s memory where it may last vividly for years.

That day, I saw my father with new eyes. He had made huge gains in my respect for his ability at identifying patterns in songs and calls. My estimation of him went from very good birder to one that possesses skills uncommon to most. And I set my mind to being a better birder by ear.

My dad and I always kept year lists. It was nothing fancy. We kept our lists on yellow pieces of legal pad taped up on the inside of one of the closet doors at home. His list was next to mine. And we’d record species names in the order in which we saw them. But the most fun was seeing the totals at the end of the year. Each year we would try to best the number achieved in the previous year. It was a goal. Something concrete to shoot for. And a way to measure our experience.

And keeping a list is like a poor man’s journal. I still remember my experience with that very first Kirtland’s Warbler like it was this year! Seeing a bird on the list reminds me of places I have been and experiences I have had. Other people collect things. I collect memories. The species names are merely the keys that unlock the experiences in my mind.

My little year lists got larger when I discovered the Lane Birdfinding Guides in the late 1970s. I started to travel for birding. And with the planning that I was able to accomplish because of the nature of these guides, my trips became more and more successful. And exciting, too.

I came to a pivotal point in my life in the late 1990s. When I got to the place where I felt I didn’t have anything to lose, I
set out to do a Big Year. In 1998 I zigzagged across the continent—traveling 130,000 miles while trying to hold down a full-time job at a nuclear power plant—to try to see as many species of birds in one calendar year as possible. It was an incredible experience passing the 700 species mark—an achievement many birders aspire to in a lifetime.

But there was competition. Two other birders, Sandy Komito and Al Levantin also did Big Years the same year as me and also broke the 700-mark. Our competitive quests are documented in the 2004 nonfiction book, *The Big Year*, by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Mark Obmascik. The book won a number of awards, not the least of which was Best Books of 2004 by *USAToday*.

And then the unbelievable happened. Twentieth Century Fox made a full feature motion picture inspired by the book! The movie has A-list actors Jack Black, Steve Martin, and Owen Wilson and a really strong support cast. It was produced by Ben Stiller and directed by David Frankel (who also did *Marley & Me* and *The Devil Wears Prada*). Worldwide release date was October 14, 2011. It became available on both DVD and Blu-ray as of January 31, 2012 and on both Netflix and Redbox on February 28, 2012.

As if that wasn't enough, I had the fortunate opportunity to be the bird consultant for the movie, *The Big Year*. It was filmed in spring and summer of 2010. I was on the set for three weeks with many of the actors and crew and got a chance to meet and talk to the stars, Jack Black, Steve Martin, and Owen Wilson. It was truly a treat to watch the movie being made and to have a part in the creation of a story for the silver screen.

So when I talk about “My Big Story” I put it all together with those special times growing up a birder under my dad’s tutelage, how I came to do a Big Year, some funny stories within the year itself, how it became a book and a movie, and finally, what it was like to be on a movie set with Jack Black, Steve Martin, and Owen Wilson.
AOS FALL MEETING 2014
Dauphin Island Sea Lab, Alabama, October 10-12, 2014

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 10
3:00 p.m. Registration at Shelby Center
6:00 p.m. Social hour/Potluck at Shelby Center
7:00 p.m. Members Slide Show at Shelby Center

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 11
7:00 a.m. Field Trips—meet in front of Shelby Center
11:30 a.m. Lunch at Stowers’ house, 1618 Cadillac Ave.
1:30 p.m. Board Meeting—Galathea Hall
6:00 p.m. Open bar social—Shelby Center
6:45 p.m. Banquet—Shelby Center
7:45 p.m. Program—Greg Miller

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 12
12:00 p.m. Compilation—Lynne Fitzgerald and Ann McLaurin house across from the Goat Tree

FRIDAY NIGHT POT LUCK IS BACK!!!—Bring your favorite appetizer, snack, dessert, etc. for the social hour.

NOTE: Until further notice, spring and fall banquets are limited to the first 120 people.

ACCOMMODATIONS AND INFORMATION
Motels
On Dauphin Island: Gulf Breeze Motel and Harbor Lights Motel: (800) 286-0296
Near Dauphin Island: Baymont Inn, Econolodge, Holiday Inn, LaQuinta Inn, Motel 6, Super 8. All are located at Tillmans Corner, about 30 minutes from Dauphin Island.

Rentals
Boardwalk Realty, Inc: (877) 861-3992
Dauphin Island Real Estate: (888) 707-6444
Tyson Real Estate: (251) 861-8312
Pickett Real Estate: (800) 861-3646
Island Real Estate: (877) 219-7392
ACP Real Estate, Inc.: (866) 861-3311

Websites
www.gulfinfo.com and www.dauphinisland.cc

AOS FALL MEETING 2014 REGISTRATION FORM
Complete and return to:
Rufina Ward, 1689 Longleaf Drive NW, Huntsville, AL 35806
Telephone: (256) 837-5646 • E-mail: phinken@wowway.com
Please make checks payable to AOS. Checks must be received by October 1, 2014.

Name(s)____________________________________________________________________
Address____________________________________________________________________
City_______________________________________ State____________ Zip____________
E-mail Address____________________________________________________________

AOS DUES Student: $10 • Individual: $25 • Family: $40 • Sustaining: $50
Life (individual): $350 • Life (family): $550

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<th>Description</th>
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<td>Banquet @ $21 per person</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIBS Land Purchase Fund Contribution</td>
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<td>TOTAL ENCLOSED</td>
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Registration @ $25 per person
Banquet @ $21 per person
AOS 2015 Dues
DIBS Land Purchase Fund Contribution
TOTAL ENCLOSED

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