

# THE YELLOWHAMMER

VOLUME 36, NO. 3    THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ALABAMA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY    FALL 2016

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

FOUNDED 1952



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P.O. BOX 1325, DAUPHIN ISLAND, AL 36528-1325

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ALTHOUGH I AM A DEVOTED birder, I've always loved cats, and I used to feel it was unfair not to give my cats their freedom to roam outdoors. One after another, they lived only a few years before losing out to contagious disease, or to fast-moving cars. But it was only when I learned the sickening statistics about the number of birds killed each year by cats that I decided I had to keep my cats indoors. According to the American Bird Conservancy, "cats kill approximately 2.4 billion birds every year in the U.S. alone, making cat predation by far the largest human-caused mortality threat to birds. This stunning level of predation is unsustainable for many already-declining species like Least Tern and Wood Thrush."

Think of it: 2.4 billion birds a year! Yes, it's necessarily an estimate, but whatever the actual number is, it's stunning. A recent estimate from the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service places the number somewhere between 1.4 and 3.7 billion. These are not numbers—or organizations—that we can dismiss. (The numbers of small mammals killed by cats is significantly higher. For more information, see [abcbirds.org](http://abcbirds.org).)

There's a good, sensible solution to this problem. The American Bird Conservancy's Cats Indoors Campaign has been around for quite a while, in partnership with the Humane Society of the United States. They've proved that keeping cats indoors makes sense for birds, and also for cats. Surveys show that free-ranging cats have an average life span of three years, versus 15 years for cats that are kept indoors. My two indoor cats, Snoopy and Arabella, are only three years old, but I know they have a good chance of surviving into their late teens. Butterfly, my last cat, died at the ripe old age of 19.

But while dog leash laws have come to be taken for granted, it's clear that most people still allow their cats access to the outdoors, where they are free to hunt on their neighbors' property. I know about this first-hand—four of my neighbors' cats use my yard as hunting territory. After designing my garden to provide bird habitat, I've had to take down my feeders to protect the birds!



But even if everyone with a pet cat keeps it indoors, we'd still have an enormous feral cat population. So many people still don't bother (or can't afford) to spay or neuter their pets, and so many just abandon unwanted pets. But cats are lethal predators, and the damage they cause to native ecosystems is real. The answer to the problem of an ever-expanding population of surplus cats can't be to support them as outdoor strays. Yet many bird-lovers I know are feeding at least one outdoor stray, leaving it free to hunt and kill.

Many bird-lovers also support Trap-Neuter-Release (TNR) programs around the country, on the grounds that this is a humane way to gradually eliminate the problem. Since the cats are neutered, the reasoning goes, they can be released without an owner, as long as they have supplemental feeding, and eventually the cat colony will disappear. Unfortunately, this is based on the mistaken assumption that it's a closed system and that no new cats are being carelessly abandoned. According to the American Bird Conservancy: "The scientific evidence regarding TNR clearly indicates that TNR programs are not an effective tool to reduce feral cat populations. Rather than slowly disappearing, studies have shown that feral cat colonies persist and may actually increase in size." But TNR supporters don't accept scientific evidence. Here's what one of the leading organizations behind TNR, Alley Cat Allies, has to say on their website: "Cats have lived outdoors for thousands of years—they are part of the natural landscape, and there are many biological and behavioral reasons why they are not a threat to other species." The truth is that domestic cats are an invasive species, brought to North America by European colonists just a few hundred years ago. Their numbers on this continent have tripled in just the last 40 years. Perhaps the most dangerous thing about TNR programs is that they offer a false narrative, and a false solution that allows people to avoid confronting the real and growing problem of unwanted stray cats and their impact on wildlife.

The Georgia Ornithological Society has taken a very strong stand against free-ranging cats, a stand that is endorsed by AOS: "Cat predation of birds is unlike that by any native predator in the United States, perhaps most



importantly because cats are maintained in numbers far above natural carrying capacity. Unlike similarly-sized native predators, cats typically kill prey regardless of whether or not they will consume it. Well-fed cats are no less likely to kill, and outfitting cats with collar bells or declawing them does not prevent them from killing birds and other wildlife. While similarly-sized native predators may take eggs or nestlings of birds, no native mammalian predator routinely hunts adult birds, as cats do."

In the same statement, the GOS also reminds us that "Most cat attack victims do not survive, and animals attacked but not immediately killed may be subjected to intense,

prolonged suffering before death." Tragically, I can confirm that statement from thirty years of experience as a wildlife rehabilitator. So many people continue to avoid this issue because they feel sorry for the cats, and don't want to see them suffer. But how can we ignore the terrible suffering inflicted on so many birds?

We need to take this issue seriously, both in speaking out about it, and in the example we provide to others through our personal actions. Like many other big national issues, it won't be solved easily or quickly, but only through steady pressure to gradually change public opinion. AOS members, if you love birds, this is an issue you just can't ignore.

#### IN MEMORIAM

## John Walter Stowers, Jr.

***John Walter Stowers, Jr., "Sto," 67, a longtime resident of Montgomery, Alabama, died peacefully Saturday, July 9, 2016, in Asheville, North Carolina, following a brief illness.***

I FELT THE NEED TO PASS ALONG this second-hand story about Sto. One of the couples in my church told me they had been to Dauphin Island for a vacation and had met the nicest man. The mechanism to mount their scope to the tripod had broken and they were in Ship 'N Shore trying to find a way to jury-rig it so they could watch birds. When the salesman couldn't help them, a nice gentleman asked if he could help. He told the couple to follow him to his home on D.I. and he thought he could fix it. When they arrived at his house, he told the wife to go up on the deck and use the scope to watch the birds while he and her husband went into his "workshop" in the basement to make repairs. In just a few minutes, he had fashioned a way to mount the scope. He told the couple to come by anytime they were on the island. He gave them his name and number in case they needed him again while on the island. You guessed it—it was John Stowers who helped complete strangers have a wonderful birding experience on D.I.

This is just one of many nice things that I know of Sto doing for others. He touched so many lives in so many ways!!

Just one more personal note about Sto. One time when we were storing all the AOS supplies in Sto's garage, I spotted his little silver VW bug convertible. I started goggling at it because my first car had been a VW bug and I've always loved them.

He immediately told me I was welcome to use it anytime I was on the island. Of course, I never dreamed I would take him up on such a generous offer. However, the weekend when I was leaving the presidency of AOS he informed me at lunch that Saturday that the car was waiting on me to celebrate being free to bird again. He insisted that I take the keys and gave me orders to enjoy it like it was my own. I don't think I need to tell you that I had the best time driving all over the island and surrounding area with the top down and my friend Charlotte as my passenger. As we cruised the island, the years just melted away from us as we acted like teenagers with a new "hot" car. So if you saw a little silver bullet speed past you one weekend on the island with two passengers giggling their heads off, just know that it was Charlotte and me truly enjoying the generosity of John Stowers.

Charlotte and I had a ball driving around all weekend in that cute little car thanks to Sto's generosity!! Such sweet memories of such a sweet, sweet man.

*Bianca (bj) Allen*

I DIDN'T GET TO RIDE AROUND in the Bug but when John Porter was in the Rehab facility last year I would come home so exhausted every afternoon. Several times a week Sto would call and say "I am bringing you...." Sometimes

it was soup, sometimes a roast but always GOOD!! He truly helped me survive physically during a very difficult time. Just last April after feeding all the birders his special gumbo he brought a big pot to John and me with all the condiments!!! Truly a kind and gentle man. He will be missed by all of us. God Bless, Sto.

*Mary Flint and John Porter*

WE MET STO WHEN HE WAS RUNNING his boat back and forth between the beach at Isle Dauphine and Pelican Island to ferry birders for a Saturday morning AOS field trip. He had even placed bottles of cold water and bananas on the south end of the island for the birders. It was not unusual to see Sto mowing the trails in the Shell Mounds or Goat Tree grassy areas on the day before the AOS meetings. He would stop by the old Chamber Hall before the AOS meeting to ensure that we had plenty of help setting up the tables and chairs for the meetings. He gave of his time and efforts so freely, without expecting anything in return.

Sto's and Jennie's generous hospitality is legendary and unrivaled. We all lost a friend with Sto's passing. Our deepest condolences to Jennie and the family.

*Stan and Dana Hamilton*

WE ALL KNOW STO WAS ONE of the most thoughtful people you could ever meet, inviting total strangers to come over for lunch or for a ride to Cat Island. One day when Karen and I had the house on the island, Sto stopped by with a handful of black-eyed-Susans he had picked on the roadside somewhere and gave them to Karen to put in a vase. It didn't matter where he was or what he was doing, he was always thinking of doing something for someone else. Sometimes the smallest things say the most about a person. We are heart-broken and will miss him always.

*Mike and Karen Wilson*

MANY YEARS AGO, perhaps the second time Sto had ferried us across to Pelican Island for a wonderful half-day of birding, Bob said to him on the trip back, "John, I want to buy you a tank of gas for your boat." Sto laughed and replied, "No, you don't know how large this tank is," whereupon Bob said, "Yes I do (he actually did), but you don't understand how very much you have added to the pleasure of our weekend by taking us out there." After some banter back

and forth, Sto finally said, "Listen, Bob, what you like to do is look at birds, and what I like to do is drive boats. So forget it, we're both happy!" What he didn't say, which I always suspected was the whole truth, was that what Sto really like to do was make others happy. He made us doubly happy when he became a birder himself.

What a truly wonderful friend we have all lost!

*Elberta Reid*

MAUREEN AND I had so much help from Sto and Jenny in carrying paraphernalia back and forth from their house to set up for the AOS meetings at the Sea Lab, and of course, they have stored so much of our stuff there for many, many years.

*Anne G. Miller*

I DID NOT KNOW HIM ALL THAT WELL but I cannot imagine what grief Jennie must be going through right now. Our prayers and thoughts are with her and all her family.

*Alison and Charles Glascock*

WORDS CANNOT EXPRESS the sorrow I feel for Jennie, AOS, Dauphin Island, and the birds.

*Shirley Farrell*

BY HIS EXAMPLE, Sto showed us what it means to be kind and generous, and by extension, how we should treat one another. My condolences to Jennie and family.

*Greg Harber*

I AM SHOCKED and so saddened to know of John's death. AOS will never know the many things John and Jennie did for the birders of Alabama. I am always grateful for having known many of the members of AOS. I am truly glad I knew John.

*Tommy Pratt*

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS that happened after I became president of AOS several years ago was a conversation with Sto telling me he was available to help me in any way he could. When he took Pat and me over to Cat Island to see the spectacular nesting of hundreds of birds, he took one look at our sandals and insisted on carrying us ashore on his back! I had understood we would get our feet wet, but

Sto wouldn't hear of it. I was both embarrassed and blown away by this incredible man. We will all be poorer for his loss, but much, much richer for having known him.

I grieve for Jennie—and for all of us.

*Bob and Pat Reed*

I AM SO SADDENED to hear of Sto's death. He befriended me when I was representing one of his tenants in an eviction, which led to us going out birding on his boat on the Alabama River. And many good times since.

*Larry Gardella*

## IN MEMORIAM

# John Finley Porter, Jr.

***Dr. John F. "Bunny" Porter, Jr. passed away Tuesday, August 2, 2016. Born in Birmingham, Alabama, Dr. Porter served as a captain in the US Army during the Korean War and graduated from the University of Alabama with a master's degree in physics and Johns Hopkins University where he earned a Ph.D. in physics.***

MEMBERS OF THE AOS are mourning the passing of John Finley Porter, Jr., on August 2, 2016. John began attending AOS meetings in 1986, served as president of AOS in 1992-1993, and was an active and influential AOS board member for many, many years. John played a leading role in developing the Coastal Birding Trail, which has since become an essential part of the Alabama Birding Trails system. John also had a lasting impact on birding in Alabama as editor of *A Birder's Guide to Alabama*, published by the University of Alabama Press in 2001, at a time when very little information about where to find birds was available for birders across Alabama.

John was the founding president of the Friends of Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries (FODIAS) that later evolved into Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries (DIBS). Working first as president, and later as executive director, John brought a profound love of birds, a genial temperament, and special knowledge and skills from his distinguished career in academia to the task of acquiring lands on Dauphin Island to provide long-term protection of habitat for migrating birds, and for people who love birds. Above all, John was a good man. He loved birds, and he loved birders. His personal kindness and integrity inspired people, and he made them want to support the cause he believed in so deeply. John Porter was an outstanding leader for all of us across the state who work for the preservation of Alabama's environment. His friends at AOS are deeply grateful for his many years of leadership.

IN ADDITION TO SERVING one term as president John was on the board forever, providing a great historical perspective

on many issues. The Alabama bird-finding guide deserves some elaboration, too. John's role as editor was a huge one, since the book was written by so many authors (AOS members from around the state) each writing about a part of the state that they knew well. He had to make sure that these various pieces fit together as a whole. Very little birding information was on the website at the time, so the book was essential. I still look at it today, particularly the bar graphs but also on parts of the state I don't bird much.

I remember John's passion for birds and for securing property (or easements) for them on Dauphin Island—and then delighting when a "good bird" showed up at one of the DIBS properties. I remember going out with John to see many great birds on Dauphin Island, including the only record of a wagtail ever in Alabama (Yellow Wagtail sp.). I remember John's fun interacting with birders, both at his house and behind the bar at AOS meetings.

*Larry Gardella*

I FEEL COMPELLED TO ADD that John was the founder of the Friends of Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries (FODIAS) that later evolved into Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries (DIBS) and remained as executive director until just a couple of years ago. He also served as president of AOS, and his wife Jackie served as treasurer. He was a giant amongst us and did more for the environment and bird habitat than could ever be described. His daily trips to the Dauphin Island post office endeared him to the residents and business people of the island, and he learned of land available for preservation and made contacts that enabled him to pursue those

important parcels of land. He was a persistent persuader on the behalf of the birds!!

He always said he wanted DIBS to completely own the Steiner lots before he left this earth. Maybe memorial donations to DIBS will enable that wish to be granted as a grand memorial to John and all he did for this world.

*BJ Allen*

FOR THOSE OF US WHO KNEW JOHN, we already know his tireless contributions preserving vital areas of the island not just for the birds, but as spaces for people to explore and bird.

*Bob and Lucy Duncan*

JOHN'S YEARS OF EXPERIENCE as a college administrator gave him the knowledge and skills to raise funds and acquire land for FODIAS and DIBS. He knew how to bring together all the agencies and parties. He knew who to communicate within the agencies to make sure the right people were involved, and he understood the people he was dealing with. He had just the right amount of tact—he was never abrasive with anyone. He always presented the best side of the argument, but always avoided controversy. Above all, John was a good man. John inspired people to do the right thing; he made them want to support the cause he believed in so deeply.

*Linda Reynolds*

JOHN WAS TIRELESS and fearless in his quest for habitat for the birds on Dauphin Island. He had a vision when many of us could only see issues, and he turned that vision into a reality that will be around for decades if not centuries. Very few people leave such a legacy. And we were privileged to know him.

*Bob Reed*

### *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.

### *New Members & Memorials*

Richard and Debra Beil  
Powers McLeod  
Debra L. Tromblee  
Martha & Tom Rogers  
(new life members)

*Memorials in memory of John Stowers received were:*

Linda Reynolds  
(for the Dan C. Holliman Research Fund)  
Harriett Wright

### *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](mailto:BobReed1987@gmail.com).

### *Deadlines for Yellowhammer Submissions*

Winter 2016	November 10, 2016
Spring 2017	February 10, 2017
Summer 2017	June 10, 2017

### *Upcoming Meetings*

FOURTH FRIDAY—January 27-29, 2017  
Winter Meeting, Lake Guntersville State Park

THIRD FRIDAY—April 21-23, 2017  
Spring Meeting, Dauphin Island

Second Friday—October 13-15, 2017  
Fall Meeting, Dauphin Island

A O S F A L L M E E T I N G , O C T O B E R 1 4 - 1 6 , 2 0 1 6

# AOS Fall Meeting Schedule

## FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2016

- 7:00 a.m. Field Trip with Erik Johnson to Blakeley Mud Lakes, Historic Blakeley State Park, and Meaher State Park  
(*Field trip details on facing page*)
- 5:00 p.m. Registration
- 5:30 p.m. Social Hour (non-alcoholic beverages only)
- 6:30 p.m. Potluck Supper  
Please bring a dish to share! Bring your favorite appetizer for the social hour, main-course dish for supper, a dessert, or all of the above!
- 7:15 p.m. Photography Contest Awards and Slide Show of Winning Entries
- 8:30 p.m. Adjourn
- Location: Registration, Pot Luck Supper and Workshop Meeting Hall of the United Methodist Church 302 Key Street, Dauphin Island, AL 36528

## SATURDAY, APRIL 16

- 7:00 a.m. Field Trip 1: Exploring Dauphin Island with Kimball Garrett  
Field Trip 2: Birds of Pelican Bay Peninsula with Andrew Haffenden  
(*Field trip details on facing page*)
- 11:30 p.m. Lunch: Join us for lunch at the home of Jennie Stowers
- 1:30 p.m. Dedication of Memorial Bench honoring John W. Stowers, Jr.
- 3:00 p.m. Board Meeting  
Meeting Hall of the UMC Church, 302 Key St.

## Saturday Evening: Banquet and Keynote Speaker

- Location: Meeting Hall of the United Methodist Church 302 Key Street, Dauphin Island, AL 36528
- 6:00 p.m. Social Hour  
(Please note that only non-alcoholic beverages will be available. Donations

benefit the Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuary)

- 6:30 p.m. Banquet
- 7:30 p.m. Keynote Speaker: Erik I. Johnson, Ph.D.  
Director of Bird Conservation  
Audubon Louisiana, National Audubon Society, *Conservation of Nesting and Migratory Shorebirds in the Northern Gulf of Mexico—A New Era*

## SUNDAY, APRIL 17

- 7:00 a.m. Field Trip with Andrew Haffenden to Grand Bay Area
- 12:00 p.m. Compilation, hosted by Ann McLaurin and Lynne Fitzgerald, across street from Goat Trees

## ACCOMMODATIONS

Accommodations on Dauphin Island are limited, so be sure to make reservations early.

**Websites** [www.gulfinfo.com](http://www.gulfinfo.com)  
[www.dauphinisland.chamber.com](http://www.dauphinisland.chamber.com)

**Motels** Gulf Breeze Motel: 251-861-7344 or 1-800-286-0296  
Harbor House B&B: 251-861-2119

**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) 861-3331  
Air BnB has lots of rentals: [www.airbnb.com](http://www.airbnb.com)

**Camping** Dauphin Island Park and Beach Board:  
251-861-2742 (fully equipped for both camper and tent camping)

**Note: Until further notice, the banquet is limited to the first 95 registrants.**



# AOS Spring Meeting Field Trips

*Friday Morning, October 14*

**Blakeley Island Mud Lakes, Historic Blakeley State Park, and Meaher State Park with Erik Johnson, AOS Keynote Speaker**

Trip Leader: Andrew Haffenden

Meeting Time: 7:00 a.m.

Erik Johnson and Andrew Haffenden will share their birding skills as we visit a number of sites in Mobile and Baldwin Counties. We'll start at Blakely Island Mud Lakes, a mecca for shorebirds such as Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, and Stilt Sandpipers, as well as Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, ibis, and occasional Merlins and Peregrine Falcons. Then we'll move on to Historic Blakeley State Park, where we'll bird among ancient Live Oaks draped with Spanish Moss for migrants and observe gulls, terns, eagles and ospreys on the Tensaw River. Our next stop (around 12:30 p.m. is at Felix's Fish Camp Grill on the Causeway, where you can bird from the deck overlooking Mobile Bay while eating some of the best seafood in Mobile. Time permitting, after lunch we'll backtrack a short distance along the Causeway to Meaher State Park to observe birds from a boardwalk providing views of water and wetlands along the shoreline of Mobile Bay. We should see shorebirds and waders as well as gulls, terns, etc. We'll head back to Dauphin Island by 3 p.m. Those coming south Friday morning and those staying in Tillman's Corner can meet at us at Blakely—please email Andrew at [andrew@natasp.com](mailto:andrew@natasp.com) if you plan to meet us there, so directions and any last minute changes can be sent to you.

**NOTE: All field trips meet at the Methodist Church Meeting Hall, 302 Key Street, Dauphin Island.**

*2017 Membership Dues are due January 1, 2017*

*Saturday Morning, October 15*

**Field Trip 1**

**Exploring Dauphin Island with Erik Johnson**

Meeting Time: 7:00 a.m.

Explore the varied habitats of Dauphin Island with Erik Johnson. We'll bird along the beach and around Fort Gaines, the Shell Mounds, Audubon Bird Sanctuary, the Airport, etc., concentrating on neotropical migrants.

**Field Trip 2**

**Birds of Pelican Bay Peninsula**

Trip Leader: Andrew Haffenden

Meeting Time: 7:00 a.m.

Join DI resident and world nature travel specialist Andrew Haffenden to explore the birds along one of Dauphin Island's richest bird habitats, the shoreline of "Pelican Peninsula," formerly a separate island, and now a spit of land attached to Dauphin Island. Viewing is best on the beach a little later than for land birds, so we'll begin with a quick trip to the Shell Mounds before heading to the beach at about 8 a.m. Late sleepers can join the tour at 8 at the Public Beach parking lot next to the schoolhouse. Expect to see and learn about a variety of plovers and sandpipers, as well as wading birds such as Reddish Egrets and a variety of gulls and terns.

*Sunday Morning, October 16*

**Field Trip to Grand Bay Area**

Trip Leader: Andrew Haffenden

Meeting Time: 7:00 a.m.

Open fields and freshwater ponds in the Grand Bay area provide wintering habitat for Whimbrels. Andrew Haffenden will take us to several locations to look for these, plus Bald Eagles, several species of ducks, sparrows if it's a good winter for them and wintering warblers. We'll also visit Point aux Pins and the Coden Belt Road overlooking Mississippi Sound if time allows. We'll return to Dauphin Island in time for Compilation at noon

A O S F A L L M E E T I N G , O C T O B E R 1 4 - 1 6 , 2 0 1 6

## Meet the Speaker: Erik I. Johnson, PhD

*Erik is the director of bird conservation for Audubon Louisiana, the state conservation office of the National Audubon Society. Before joining Audubon in 2011, Erik's Ph.D. research at Louisiana State University involved understanding the effects of forest fragmentation on Amazonian bird communities. Erik is active in Louisiana's birding community and serves as Louisiana's Christmas Bird Count regional editor, a member of Louisiana's Bird Records Committee, vice president of Baton Rouge Audubon Society, and director of the Louisiana Bird Observatory.*

### **Going the Distance: Shorebird Conservation on the Gulf Coast**

Erik I. Johnson, Ph.D.

As many birders brush up every fall on "confusing fall warblers," some of us also have our eyes on muddy fields and wave-defined beaches for "confusing fall shorebirds." Distinguishing among 54 species of warbler found in the U.S. during fall migration is certainly head-spinning, but now let's also throw in 52 species of LBJs in the sandpiper and plover families, and their relatives.

What if I were to tell you that warblers and shorebirds were really quite similar in many ways. First, both groups are dominated by migratory species. Second, both groups are largely insectivorous. Third, both groups follow what's called a "Complex Alternate Molt Strategy," which includes a spring (breeding plumage) molt as well as a fall (winter plumage) molt.

Where shorebirds amaze me, is in their migrations. Warblers, for their petite size, are certainly not slouches. A single Prothonotary Warbler we tracked made a 5,000-mile round-trip flight that included two crossings of the Gulf of Mexico and one over the Caribbean Sea. Similar in size, Semipalmated Sandpipers make similar trips, but start from north of the Arctic Circle. Eastern Red Knots, traveling between the Arctic Circle and Tierra del Fuego in Argentina, travel close to 20,000 miles a year; a famous Red Knot named "Moonbird" has done this trip so many times that it is equivalent to the distance of traveling to the moon and much of the way back.

Some Bar-tailed Godwits that breed in northern Alaska make a direct flight to New Zealand, over 7,000 miles of ocean.

These migratory journeys are demanding, and every single stop is a potential refueling site critical for these birds to continue their journeys. International Shorebird Surveys established in the 1970s began showing declines in shorebird populations by the 1980s and 1990s. Today, at least half of the U.S. shorebird species are experiencing population declines. Eastern Red Knots are at the point where perhaps less than 20,000 exist today. Piping Plover numbers are fewer than 10,000. A new type of Silent Spring may be upon us.

The largely east-west coastline of the Gulf Coast is a central stopping location for many migratory shorebirds. When coastal erosion, oil spills and pollution, and human disturbance impact these habitats, a link in the chain is broken.

How important is this link? We are only just starting to understand. Conservation and research organizations have ramped up monitoring and protection efforts after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill as funding has been made available to recover these species. Red Knots that migrate through and winter on the Gulf Coast have been more intensively studied by organizations like the Coastal Bends and Bays Estuary Program and the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program. Climate change modeling by an interdisciplinary team of researchers from around the country has shown how nesting Snowy Plovers in Florida will be impacted under sea level rise scenarios. Birds that nest on beaches, like Wilson's Plovers and Snowy Plovers, are at ever-increasing risk to human disturbance and development. Organizations like the National Audubon Society, American Bird Conservancy, and Conservian help identify nesting areas and educate the beach-going public about the importance of this work. Each of us can play an important role in the recovery of shorebirds.

Whether you're perpetually frustrated by shorebird identification or an expert in the minutia of stint scapular patterning, take an extra moment to ponder the next shorebird you see. Where has it been? Where is it going? Why does it matter? It matters only if we say it matters. To me, it matters.

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EDITOR.....Bob Reed  
DESIGN.....Robin McDonald  
ILLUSTRATIONS.....Annabel Markle

### CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Jane Allen  
Greg Harber  
Ken Hare  
Greg Jackson

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Address correspondence concerning membership to:  
Rufina Ward, Treasurer  
1689 Longleaf Drive NW,  
Huntsville, AL 35806  
e-mail: phinken@wowway.com

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