

THE YELLOWHAMMER

VOLUME 42, NO. 3 THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ALABAMA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY FALL 2022

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

FOUNDED 1952



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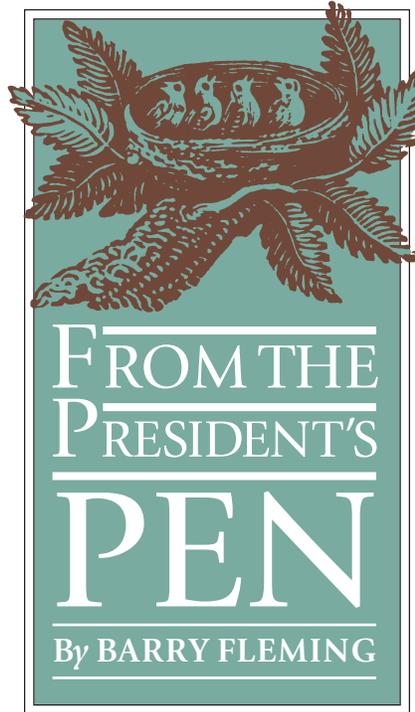
SCIENTIFIC PROCESSES OF BIRD knowledge and those persons that identify as bird watchers have both been changing, and at a rapid pace. The visibility of both is becoming more culturally mainstream. The other day, while watching Swallow-tailed Kites above a country road, a State Trooper rolled up and asked, "Are you bird watching?" "Yes! Yes I am!" For the first time in my forty years of birding, it was a pleasure not to have to explain myself. We are catching on.

Birdnote broadcasts on NPR provide a daily dose of scientific bird insight, Doug Phillips' *Discovering Alabama* recently produced a TV show on the birds of our state, and next year National Geographic will feature Alabama's birds and birders in a TV program. Apps, podcasts, movies, and TV shows have increased the range of folks interested in birds. People are coming to the bird world though many new entry points.

My spark bird was a Black-crowned Night-heron sitting on a branch above me as I crawled into a Tennessee creek to fish at eighteen years old. It had a magical headdress and seemed to be wearing a tuxedo. I was blown away that such a creature could exist but didn't even know who to ask about it. It turned out the small town library had a book. Chandler Robbins' *Golden Guide* even had plates of just warbler heads or sparrow heads. They were relatable because I knew all colors and patterns on the helmets of pro football teams. This entry way into birding is no longer common.

An app or a friend pointing the way is more often the path to birding today. The younger the birding convert, the greater chance that social media played a large role. Birding associations all over the world are working to make birding accessible to more youthful, more diverse audiences, asking the questions, "what stands in the way of the birding community reaching people, and what stands in the way of people connecting with the birding community?"

Issues of accessibility is an example of a current concern. Is the access associated with the physical, the logistic, or the monetary? Creative solutions to these contemporary



problems are increasing. Recently a field trip participant stated that she was legally blind. She asked me to state the name of the bird that was singing while she recorded the song through a sophisticated microphone. She had found her birding way. Later at home, she comes to know her area's birds through listening. AOS will stay tuned to the developing birding ecosystem and work to bring birding opportunities to an ever-expanding audience.

Known for our southern hospitality, AOS welcomes all to come as they are, with their own specific interests. Some use eBird, some do not. Some are daily listeners, some have a life list, others don't list at all. Some are competitive, some rarely use binoculars. Some study, photograph, draw, or write. Some just like to hang around other nature lovers because we are

a most pleasant people group. After all, the connecting element is experiencing, knowing, and learning from the birds. The birds always seem to know what to do.

In consideration of new potentials, the Membership Committee is announcing exciting initiatives in this *Yellowhammer*. Taking field trips to pop-up locations across the state and increasing social media presence are two. Please assist us in this pursuit and let me or the membership committee know of ideas to connect people with our birding community. And no one has more connecting power than you. Ask that friend that became interested in yard birds during the pandemic to come to the fall meeting. They just might say yes.

Neil Gilbert will be our keynote speaker at the fall meeting on Dauphin Island. He is an ecologist and one time denizen of Alabama where he birded widely, authored some papers, and attended university. He's a freshly fledged PhD working on cutting-edge science. His talk will speak to an interface between birding and behavioral ecology. The title itself, "The Science and Art of Pishing," has me intrigued and has already put a smile on my face.

The renovated Dauphin Island Sea Lab facilities were perfect for our needs at the Spring Meeting and Chef Wilton's buffet has been brought back by popular demand. I hope to see you at the AOS annual fall meeting.

100 Birds for Every County

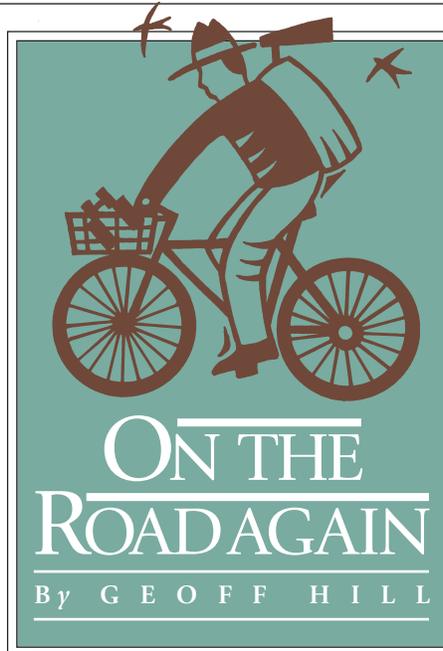


I STARTED PAYING ATTENTION to county lists in 2016, when eBird came out with their Profile feature that showed one's bird species totals for regions (countries, states) and included counties as one of the units in which a personal list was totaled. I'm a visually oriented person and seeing county totals presented on maps made me want to fill in any blanks on the maps. From the moment I saw my profile on eBird for Alabama, I became a county lister.

My first goal was simple: enter a complete eBird list for every county in Alabama. We have 67 counties in the Heart of Dixie, and I submitted a complete checklist to eBird for my 67th county on 27 October 2017. The 67th county of this quest was Franklin County, a county which features prominently in this story because it is the boring county most distant from my home in Auburn, Alabama. Before Franklin County residents start sending me notes that there is nothing boring about their county, what I mean by "boring county" is that it is not one of the approximately 10 counties with outstanding birding hotspots that regularly turn up mega-rare state birds. Those counties get birded a lot. Most counties in the state, including Franklin County, do not.

As I stated in an essay published in *The Yellowhammer* two years ago, my next goal for county listing was to record at least 67 species in each of Alabama's 67 counties. I achieved that goal in the fall of 2020. Again, Franklin County was the last county for which I submitted checklists needed to reach my goal.

Going into the summer of 2022, I was getting close to achieving the third and potentially final goal of my county listing hobby—100 species recorded in each of Alabama's 67 counties. It took a lot of birding trips over several years to get close to this goal. Some counties have very little publicly accessible habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds or marsh birds



(Butler County comes to mind) and getting to 100 species requires planning and some birding days during migration for those counties. But finally, coming out of the spring of 2022 I was very close. The lone holdout county for which I lacked 100 species as of June 1, 2022 was (you guessed it) Franklin County.

I still needed about 30 species to push Franklin County over 100, which sounds like a daunting challenge if I was only going to do a day trip. Fortunately, almost all of the birds on my Franklin County list were fall and winter birds. There was so much low-hanging fruit for a June trip it was making my mouth water (think Indigo

Bunting and Barn Swallow). Still, when I went over the list, I could see about 20 or maybe 25 impossible-to-miss birds, and then there was a very long list of birds that I was likely to run into but that were definitely missable.

I decided to drive up on the afternoon of Friday, June 17, so I'd have the morning of June 18 for most of my birding. It is a four-hour drive from my house to Russellville (county seat of Franklin County), so if I wanted to make the trip in one day, I'd have to be driving by around 2:30 a.m. Even with such an insanely early start, I still wouldn't arrive in time for Whip-poor-wills and Chuck-will's-widows. An overnight trip seemed necessary.

I didn't expect to get much done on Friday afternoon since daytime highs were running in the mid-nineties, and bird activity after noon was nil most days. But a Barn Owl was being reliably found in a barn just over the Franklin County line in Colbert County and I wanted to try to get that for my state year list on Friday afternoon. There were also a few late or early shorebirds on some mudflats in Colbert County, so even in the heat, I knew I could spend my time on the shorebirds.

I caught a huge break when a big thunderstorm grazed past the Russellville area an hour before I arrived on Friday.

Instead of weather in the 90s in the mid-afternoon, it was 75°F when I pulled into Russellville at 3 p.m. and the birds seemed lively. I got the target Barn Owl in Colbert County and just driving backroads in Franklin County to and from the owl I tallied more than a dozen county listers including Wood Duck, Dickcissel, Kentucky Warbler, and Acadian Flycatcher, all birds that were on my could-be-missed list. I spent the evening birding along Old Water Plant Road, just west of Russellville. I picked out this road on Google Earth because it looked like nice forested habitat, and it turned out to be great. With no traffic at all, it had both early succession replanted pine that was packed with Prairie Warblers, Field Sparrows, Yellow-breasted Chats among others, and mature forest with Wood Thrush, Hooded Warbler, Barred Owl, and both Chuck-will's-widow and Whip-poor-will. It turned out that Barred Owl was my 100th Franklin County bird and completed my quest for 100 birds in every county in Alabama. I didn't even need Saturday morning birding to push over 100. I did, of course, bird the next morning, and I left Franklin County with 111 species.

When I started county listing, 100 birds in every county was my ultimate goal. Having achieved that goal, it is hard to know where to focus my birding energies. I've stated repeatedly that 100 birds in every county was the FINAL goal, the last thing to achieve related to county listing in Alabama. However, there is a truly audacious goal that I am hesitant to even mention because, if I mention it, I might start down that track, and it is a ludicrous track. The true, ultimate goal for county listing in Alabama is 10,000 total ticks. Total ticks are the sum of all the individual county totals, so 10,000 ticks mean an average of just under 150 species per county. That is no trivial challenge.

As I type this essay, I have 9308 total ticks—692 ticks short of 10,000. That is a lot of county birds to rack up when I've already got over 100 per county. But...there is still a lot of low hanging fruit. I have few or no winter birds for some counties and few or no summer birds for other counties. I have fall warbler days for relatively few counties. In quite a few counties I have zero waterfowl and there are sewage ponds I haven't visited. Maybe, just maybe...

Membership Initiatives

By LARRY GARDELLA, *Membership Committee Chair*



THE MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE MET RECENTLY and adopted Ken Hare's proposal to set up a speakers' bureau, a writers' bureau and a collection of potential bird guides. We also discussed various ways we could help the education committee increase our exposure to schools and birding, bird-feeding, and nature groups at schools. Finally, we committed to making much better use of Facebook and Instagram.

With respect to the speakers' group, we will look for members willing to make themselves available to speak before school, civic, church, youth, environmental groups, scouts, garden clubs—anything with a potential link to birding. We will assemble an outline and a collection of Alabama-centric photos for the speakers to use to design their presentations, and the publicity committee could offer help. We will need a volunteer coordinator who matches requests for speakers with the people who are able and willing to serve as speakers. Once we have a coordinator named and have started to

assemble a bank of volunteers, we can start publicizing the availability of the speakers. Speakers would have AOS pamphlets and checklists to hand out when they speak.

The writers group would produce regular columns to post on the AOS Facebook page and website. At least initially, Ken Hare and I would serve as editors for the writers group. The columns could include photos as well as text, and they would be informative—but aimed at new birders and the general public. We would also offer them to newsweeklies and local magazines and to partners such as DIBS, SALT, and Audubon groups. Each article published in newspapers and magazines would include a "shirttail" describing AOS and explaining how to join.

Shirley already has been working with schools at several different levels. Once we have a core group of people who are willing to be advisors for schools or classes, Shirley can help in getting out the word.

AOS could also serve as a resource for helping people who want to set up local birding groups, giving advice about

speakers, how to organize field trips, helping to lead trips, and more. We could even have some of this information available on our website and Facebook.

AOS already has groups such as NABS that conduct field trips open to the public. We could have field trips in the Black Belt, in the Eufaula area, in the Wiregrass, and so on, if we could put together a list of people willing to lead such trips. Having multiple leaders would be best, particularly when there could be large attendance. This all involves making use of our members as volunteers. Many members have checked

on their membership forms that they would be willing to volunteer to help AOS. This is a way we can use them.

Molly Caldwell volunteered to help us get the Facebook page hopping again and to help us break into Instagram. She will surely need help.

Anyone willing to help in any of these areas please contact:

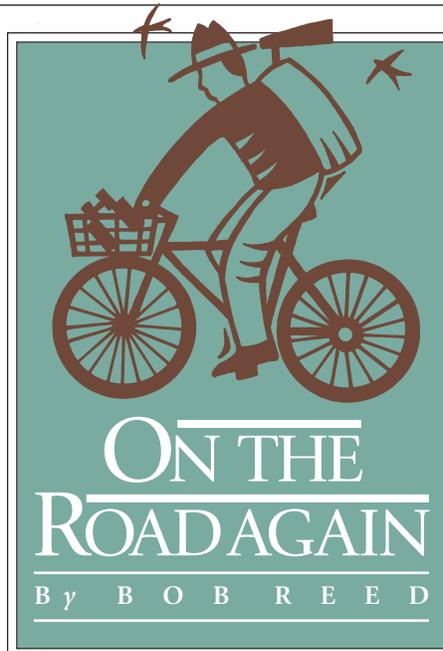
- Larry Gardella (334-450-9790, lfgardella@gmail.com)
- Ken Hare (334-549-5576, kmhare46@knology.net)
- Shirley Farrell (205-617-4739, shirfarr@gmail.com)

Can Painting Bunting Be a Trash Bird?

AFTER MISSING THE SPRING AOS meeting because Pat had the crud, we were glad that she had recovered enough to go on a long-planned trip to Texas, Oklahoma and back home through Arkansas, six states in all. We avoided interstates whenever possible, and during the 2,600 miles, we were on “backroads” for all but 250 miles.

The primary purpose of the trip was to visit relatives and friends whom we had not seen since pre-Covid. Our secondary goal was to make some Texas-related purchases that necessitated taking the truck. Of course, binos, spotting scope, and camera are always aboard. My personal goal for the trip was to document as many living things as possible in Texas for my iNaturalist account. For that, I needed to photograph or vocally record as many species as possible, within the constraints of time and other activities. And as Pat’s mobility is a little limited right now, many of the photos were taken either from the truck or while standing near it.

After visiting our cousins in Madisonville, we drove due west to Fredericksburg. As we were checking in to the hotel, we spotted a Great Horned Owl across the parking lot—a good omen, we thought. In Fredericksburg, our first venture was to the Lady Bird Johnson Municipal Park. It has a small



flower garden of native plants. It was a little early in the season, or poorly tended. But the streamside birding was not bad, and a small, but nicely tended bird feeding area with blinds to hide behind was nice. Lincoln’s Sparrow, American Goldfinch, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Carolina Chickadee and a surprise Yellow Warbler were generally unaware of our presence. There was an active Purple Martin colony, and a Swainson’s Thrush in the riparian habitat.

From there, we headed south along Old Kerrville Road. This road has been productive in the past, and it didn’t disappoint. Besides Wild Turkey, Vermilion Flycatcher, Tufted and Black-crested

Titmice, and ever-present Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Painted Buntings were actively establishing territories. Few females were evident, but males were common. We counted 111 White-tailed Deer, both on the trip to Kerrville and the return trip via a different route. Nine-lined Armadillos were common, as many as a half dozen grubbing in a single field. There were Diamond-backed Water Snakes and Texas Map Turtles.

The next day, we traveled north a few miles to Enchanted Rock State Park. Other than Turkey Vultures soaring overhead, the most common birds were singing Bell’s Vireos and Painted Buntings. Black-throated and Lark Sparrows, both collecting

nesting material, were evident, as were Black-chinned Hummingbirds at cactus flowers. The ranger told us that Orchard Orioles had been seen the day before, and we saw them, plus Common Yellowthroats, Blue Grosbeaks and White-winged Doves in the dry streambed. (The Texas hill country was in an extreme drought, even though we drove for five hours southwest the day before through drenching, windshield wiper-flopping rain before crossing I-35 into the hill country.)

From there we traveled up and over to the Willow City Loop, a very narrow, remote, but paved, road leading through several ranches and some beautiful scenery. We saw two long Gopher Snakes, several Crested Caracara, Chipping, Clay-colored, and Rufous-crowned Sparrows, a what-I-believe was a hybrid Black-crested/Tufted Titmouse, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, at least a dozen Painted Buntings, and Bison. White-tailed Deer and Fox Squirrels were common. We also saw Summer Tanager, Bell's and Yellow-throated Vireo, Wild Hogs, and Wild Turkey.

The next morning, we traveled the 90 miles to Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge, where Golden-cheeked Warblers are regular. We saw and heard a few, but none of the observations were satisfying, just fleeting glimpses of flying birds that had been singing from dense foliage. We got skunked completely by Black-capped Vireo; the area had been (prescribed) burned last year, and as entry is denied past the observation gazebo, a couple of hours searching yielded nothing.

The following day was more of the same, the park, riding back roads, Luckenbach, Texas, and German food.

On our last day in Fredericksburg, the two percent chance of rain was very wet. We ventured out between showers to the wildflower center, where I was able to photograph Black-chinned Hummingbirds, Clay-colored Sparrows, and a Black-crested Titmouse. A pair of Ash-throated Flycatchers were perched very accommodatingly on a wire on the way.

We went north to Fort Worth to visit another friend. We stayed at the Fort Worth Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base, on Lake Worth, where Killdeer, including babies, Brown Thrasher, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, a Forster's Tern, Snowy Egret, Great-tailed Grackles and a Spotted Sandpiper were all visible from the parking lot or picnic table. Then on to Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge. It was a Sunday, and full of fishermen, but still quite birdy. A short hike yielded Prothonotary Warbler and Red-headed Woodpecker. Back

in the truck we watched Northern Shovelers and Pintails swimming, while dozens of Dickcissels covered the fields. We saw a few Bobolinks and one Yellow-headed Blackbird. The side ponds held Great and Snowy Egrets and Little Blue Herons. The stars of the day were a hundred or more Wilson Phalaropes, spinning in their little circles. We spotted three distinct flocks.

The only Bald Eagle was as we approached the Mississippi River in Arkansas.

We ended the trip with 97 species of birds, 192 species of living things on my iNaturalist account—including birds, mammals, reptiles, and plants—well over four dozen Painted Buntings, and good memories. I learned a very hard lesson: I tried to download the Texas pack for eBird in the field, which proved to be impossible—far too big, and the hotel where we were staying had internet issues. I didn't have eBird for the entire trip.

New Members

Sonya Auer • Betty and Gary Bailey • Tiffany Baugh
 Anita Bean • Thomas Beard • Dr. Curt Burney
 Patricia Burns • Nick Cantrell • Rebecca Davidson
 Gabrielle Dunham • John Faggard • Amy Gaddy
 Evelyne Coronado Guillaumet • Douglas Hamm
 Shannon Harney • (William) Todd Harvey
 Darlena Hnizdil • Pamela Hodges • Becky Humphries
 Lester Jensen • Riley Kilpatrick • Margaret Kneisley
 Laura Kramer • Jennifer Mann • Mary Mefferd
 Gregory Meiman • Ramona Mohle
 Lin and Jim Musgrove • Emily Myers • Jameson Overton
 Thomas Powell • Clare Shannon • Elise Smith
 Marilyn Steelman • Cortney Weatherby
 Randy and Kathy White • Joe Wujcik
 Andie Unger • Michelle Zeeman

NEW LIFE MEMBERS

Ann Boutreis • Franklin Chalk • Scot Duncan
 Jared Sapp • Jeff Taylor

HONORARIA AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Donations to DIBS
 Joe Wujcik • Nick Cantrell

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

AOS Fall Meeting Schedule



UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED, ALL ACTIVITIES FOR the AOS Fall Meeting begin or occur at the Shelby Center, Dauphin Island Sea Lab, 101 Bienville Blvd, Dauphin Island, AL 36528.

To register online for the Winter Meeting, go to:
www.aosbirds.org

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7

6:00pm **BOARD MEETING** (Via Zoom)

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14

5:15pm Registration/Social hour at Shelby Center, Dauphin Island Sea Lab
 6:00pm Member Social Shrimp boil and sides. Monetary contributions are welcome.
 6:45pm Announcements/Discussion of Weekend Field Trips
 7:00pm Members Photography Show

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 15

6:30am **FIELD TRIPS**
 1. Exploring Dauphin Island with Neil Gilbert and Barry Fleming
Where: Green Park (next to Ship & Shore)
 2. Birds of Pelican Bay Peninsula with Larry Gardella
Where: Public Beach and Pier parking lot
 5:15pm Registration at Shelby Center, Dauphin Island Sea Lab
 5:30pm **BANQUET AND KEYNOTE SPEAKER**
 Shelby Center, Dauphin Island Sea Lab
 5:30pm Social Hour
 6:30pm Banquet Buffet
 7:15pm Announcements & Discussion of Field Trips
 7:30pm Keynote Speaker: Neil Gilbert on the Art and Science of Pishing

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 16

6:30am **FIELD TRIP: BLAKELEY ISLAND MUDLAKES**
 Noon **COMPILATION** (Includes all bird sightings in Mobile and Baldwin Counties from Friday, October 14 to noon, October 16, 2022)
Where: Goat Trees

ACCOMMODATIONS AND INFORMATION

Accommodations on Dauphin island are limited, so be sure to make reservations early for AOS Meetings.

Websites:

www.gulfinfo.com
www.townofdauphinisland.org/where-to-stay

Motels:

Gulf Breeze Motel: 251-861-7344 or 1-800-286-0296

Bed and Breakfast:

Dauphin Island Harbor House: 251-861-2119
 Air BnB has lots of rentals! www.airbnb.com

Rentals:

Boardwalk Realty, Inc.: 877-861-3992
 Tyson Real Estate: 800-865-8312
 ACP Real Estate, Inc.: 866-861-3311

Camping:

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

Fall Meeting Field Trips

ALL PARTICIPANTS MUST EMAIL BARRY FLEMING AT FLEMIBA@auburn.edu to advise of your participation and your cell phone number if you plan to attend any field trip so we know how many to expect on each trip, and so any last minute changes can be sent to you. Due to the nature of some sites we may restrict the number of participants on a field trip. Please check the AOS website for updates.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 15**EXPLORING DAUPHIN ISLAND****Trip Leader:** Neil Gilbert and Barry Fleming**Meeting Time:** 6:30am**Meeting Place:** Green Park (next to Ship & Shore)

We'll bird the varied habitats of Dauphin Island with our Keynote Speaker starting at the airport for rails and sparrows, then to the Shell Mounds for warblers, vireos, tanagers and any other Neotropical migrants we can find. In addition to the Shell Mounds we'll check out the Audubon Sanctuary and other island hotspots, aided by the cellphone network of sightings by other birders on the island. Other than Audubon Sanctuary, which is a circuit of one mile, there is not a lot of distance walked on this outing, though almost all of our time is spent on foot.

NOTE: *It is important for all participants to meet at Green Park, and not arrive at the airport independently. Early airport arrivals can cause rails and sparrows to retreat into the marsh before the rest of the group arrives.*

BIRDS OF PELICAN ISLAND**Trip Leader:** Larry Gardella**Meeting Time:** 6:30am**Meeting Place:** Start of pier in the parking lot at Public Beach (next to school)

Join Larry Gardella to get to know the birds of Alabama's richest beach habitat, Pelican Island, formerly an island, but now a peninsula. With an eBird count currently standing at 186 species, Pelican Island is exceptional for a strip of beach and dune 100-150 yards wide and just over 1.5 miles long at low tide. We'll take the opportunity to turn the walk into an easy mini-workshop, quickly learning to separate the small plovers from the small sandpipers and from each other, separating often confusing species such as Caspian and Royal Tern, and learning many ID points rarely seen in the guide books. It's an easy walk on flat sand, and our distance traveled depends on how close the birds are to the pier. The island is growing longer once again, and given the tide, the far end, which often has most of the birds, will be about 1 to 1.3 miles from the pier. Participants can return to their cars at any time. There'll be several spotting scopes for general use, which can quickly ramp up your shorebird ID skills.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2022**FIELD TRIP TO BLAKELEY ISLAND MUDLAKES****Trip Leader:** Larry Gardella**Meeting Time:** 6:30am for a departure at 6.45am sharp.**Meeting Place:** Green Park (next to Ship & Shore).

Parking is very limited at the Mudlakes so some carpooling is necessary. Participants staying overnight off the island can meet at the Mudlakes. Please advise when signing up, and you will receive directions and start time.

IMPORTANT NOTE: *This trip is planned, but for the last couple of Octobers bird activity has been very quiet at this usually very productive site. The site will be visited just a little before the trip, and if similarly quiet a different outing may replace this one.*

The Blakeley Island Mud Lakes are a complex of disposal ponds that attract large numbers of shorebirds and waterfowl. We'll carpool to the site and walk the dirt road up and along the dikes to view rows of ponds of varying depths. Expected birds are American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Stilt Sandpiper, and a variety of other shorebirds, as well as Gull-billed Tern, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, and raptors, often including Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Mississippi Kite and Northern Harrier, are often seen. We'll return to Dauphin Island in time for compilation at noon. Walking distance is about two miles in the open with no shade. Terrain is good, level dirt road. Mosquitoes and biting flies may be present. If there has been recent rain places may be muddy. Once on the site participants must stay on the roads, not even going into the immediate vegetated verges. AOS and individuals could lose the hard-won permission to bird here if this occurs.

NOTE: *A permit form must be lodged with the State Docks Authority prior to your arrival and the permit displayed inside the windscreen. Go to <http://www.aosbirds.org/alabama-birding/blakeley-island/> to register in advance. Registration is valid for the rest of the calendar year.*

Deadlines for Yellowhammer Submissions

Winter 2022

November 10, 2022

Spring 2023

February 10, 2023

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

Meet the Speaker: Neil Gilbert

NEIL GILBERT is an ecologist and lifelong (well—since age 6) birder. He lives in Duluth, Minnesota, and can often be found looking for migrants at Park Point (Minnesota's Dauphin Island). He is a postdoctoral researcher affiliated with Michigan State University and is involved in projects aimed at modeling relationships between biodiversity and disease risk using large datasets. He completed a BS in biology from Calvin College (2014), an MS in biology from the University of Alabama (2018), and a PhD in wildlife ecology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison (2022). During his time in Alabama, Neil was an enthusiastic AOS member, and so he is excited to return to enjoy barbeque and Gulf Coast birds.

The Science and Art of Pishing Neil Gilbert

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG KID—8, I THINK—I ATTENDED MY first Audubon field trip. I followed Karl, the leader, with rapt attention and did my best to keep up with the stream of birds he was announcing. Karl led the group into a clearing within a woodlot and stopped; no birds were evident. And then a strange thing happened. Without warning, Karl broke out into “pshhhhh pshhhhh pshhhhh” sounds. And then, birds starting appearing out of nowhere: a few chickadees at first, followed by a flurry of warblers and kinglets. This, I thought, is an amazing trick.

I learned that this strange behavior is known as pishing and that birds interpret pishing as the sounds of other birds mobbing a predator. Birds will gang up on a predator and try to drive it away. I learned to make the sounds myself, and now, years later, I like to recreate the scene from that first field trip. When I'm hiking with non-birding friends, I'll lead them to a quiet spot in the woods, start pishing, and watch the bewilderment on my friends' faces morph to delight as birds appear.

But pishing is more than a party trick. Pishing is a science. By that I mean pishing—and observing birds' responses to it—can reveal insight into how the natural world works.

Avian mobbing behavior can be a matter of life and death. Exhibit the “right” behavior and you survive to produce offspring; exhibit the “wrong” behavior (like mobbing a predator that will eat you instead of tolerating the annoyance) is a death knell to your lineage. Nuances abound. For example, some species eavesdrop on other species to learn about predation risk. Social history has been shown to influence mobbing behavior—birds are more likely to join in mobbing activity with neighbors who have “helped” them mob in the past. Much remains to be known about avian mobbing behavior, and some of that might be learned through pishing.

Pishing is also an art. By that I mean that it takes practice to master. You cannot sit down at a piano for the first time and flawlessly reproduce a Beethoven symphony. In the same way, it takes practice (and perhaps some coaching) to produce effective pishing sounds. And knowing the context of when pishing will and won't work comes with experience. And finally, the conscientious birder must consider the ethical aspects of pishing. If your pishing causes undue stress—like distracting a parent bird from feeding its young—it is better to refrain. Navigating these situations benefits from experience and practice.

My talk at the AOS fall meeting will explore these topics. I'll provide practical advice to advance your pishing skills. Pishing is more than a quirky birder habit: it is a way to connect with birds and learn about the natural world.

Upcoming Meetings

WINTER MEETING—January 27–29, 2023
Lake Guntersville State Park

SPRING MEETING—April 21–23, 2023
Dauphin Island, Alabama

FALL MEETING—October 13–15, 2023
Dauphin Island, Alabama

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