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MOS NEWSLETTER

Fall (October) 1991

Volume 36, Number 3

LOOKING AHEAD:

NOVEMBER MOS MEETING

The Gulf Coast beckons! MOSers will converge on The Beach at Gulfport come November 1st through 3rd. Headquarters for out-of-towners and the Saturday evening dinner meeting (7:00 p.m.) will be the Holiday Inn Gulfport Beachfront on highway US 90. A block of rooms will be available at \$39.00 singles/ \$46.00 doubles/ \$51.00 for three or more per room. Reservations phone no. there is (600) 868-8200; mention the MOS when reserving; the system reservation no. is 1-800-Holiday.

The Friday evening hospitality time will be held 7:00 to 9:00 at the home of Lyle and Millie Page, 2600 Evergreen Lane in Biloxi. A map is provided herein, and copies will be available at the Holiday Inn should you arrive without yours.

Reservations for the Saturday evening meal should be made by sending check (made out to Holiday Inn) for the appropriate amount to Millie Page at 2600 Evergreen Lane, Biloxi, MS 39531. Two options are: (1) "Very large seafood buffet", \$15.75, tax and tip included; or (2) "2-Entrée buffet", \$12.05, tax and tip included.

After-dinner speaker extraordinaire for the dinner meeting will be Judith A. Toups, freshly returned and restored from a successful six-week expedition to the Far North Country, i.e., subarctic Alaska and Northwest Territories. We will look forward to hearing about her "Alaskan Adventures."

Saturday field trips will likely focus toward both Hancock and Jackson Counties. Most "beach birds" will be readily at hand near the Holiday Inn and elsewhere along the course of US 90 in Harrison Co. Aim to be ready for "round 'em up and head 'em out" in the Holiday Inn parking lot at 7:00 a.m. Food and drinks will be fairly readily accessible to wherever the morning's wanderings have taken us when hunger and/or thirst sets in, or lunchtime arrives. Further Sunday a.m. field trips may be planned on Saturday evening.

Christmas Bird Count Season Approaching

Attention CBC compilers/organizers: It is anticipated that we may be able to publish the next, and last for 1991, vol. 36, of the MOS Newsletter in time for CBC dates to be announced for the sake of promoting wider cross-participation among our members. This depends upon the Editor receiving such information from you!! The period begins Sat. Dec. 14th and runs through Jan. 2(or 3?). Grenada CBC, Th 19th and Sardis Lake, Sa 21st are only ones yet at hand. Let's hear from you by Nov.10th.

Bird Problems in the United Kingdom:

An April issue of a prominent British journal of medicine included a paragraph under the heading "The thieving magpie (and jackdaw)," which aroused too much of your Editor's curiosity to be ignored. It seems that in cities over there a.m. delivery of milk to the customer's doorstep still occurs. The bottles are closed by "glittering metal-foil tops" that attract the corvids and arouse their curiosity and acquisitiveness. (Corvids are known for collecting shiny objects.) In the course of such nefarious efforts, the milk may become contaminated with the bacterium Campylobacter jejuni. Customers are advised not to drink milk from containers so attacked; to avoid having to arise with or before the milkman, it is suggested that the customer leave empty yogurt cartons for him to place over the milk bottle at delivery so as to foil the sly Corvids! Some years ago, it was reported that the smart and cute local Parids were trying to get past the lids to share the cream, but I never heard of their being accused of spreading nasty micro-organisms. Anti-corvidism perhaps?

Calling Attention to Recent Depressing Ornithological Literature:
(which you might consult at the Library of a University near you, but it won't be "fun reading")

1. "The Red-cockaded Woodpecker: On the Road to Oblivion?" by the AOU Committee for the Conservation of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, in The Auk, vol. 108, no. 1, pp. 200-201, Jan. 1991.
and.
2. "Signs of Trouble in the Largest Remaining Population of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers" by Frances James, in The Auk, vol. 108, no. 2, pp. 419-423, April 1991.

These two articles combined present a somber view of the woodpecker's status, which is concluded to be far more in danger of extinction than is the celebrated Spotted Owl of the Pacific Northwest. The Committee feels that "emergency measures are needed now." They urge readers to become involved in exerting pressure on politicians to see that the Endangered Species Act is enforced in the Southeast, as others have been striving to do in the Pacific Northwest. It is suggested that the action, or lack of it, on such U.S. conservation issues will determine our nation's credibility in seeking to urge actions upon other nations re. their environmental/habitat conservation issues.

3. "Population Trends of Some Northeastern North American Landbirds: A Half-century of Data." N.P. Hill and J.M. Hagan, in Wilson Bulletin, vol 103, no.2, pp.165-182, June 1991. Based on field data from Massachusetts, the authors conclude that "many species are in fact declining, but that declines in the past 20 years might be part of normal, shorter-term population fluctuations."

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Suburban Biological Recycling

by

William H. Turcotte

In the last week of June 1990, after tilling in compost, I set out twelve tomato plants in my garden. A night or two later, the tomato row was covered with dog tracks, several plants were destroyed, and nearby cantaloupe and pepper plants also were broken. About June 1 we discovered the remains of a dead house cat, which had decomposed, near the yard and garden fence. I removed and disposed of the hide and bones leaving a pile of housefly larvae on the ground.

On July 6 I noticed seven Eastern Bluebirds flying down and feeding on the larvae or pupae where the cat carcass had lain. There were five juveniles with two adults; the latter were feeding on the larvae and pupae as well as taking them to feed a late brood of five young in the nest box on our opposite lot.

I presume that the straying cat was caught one night "doing its business" in the garden and killed by the neighbor's two pit bulldogs. The five juvenile bluebirds from an earlier nesting were remaining in the vicinity of their natal nestbox while the parents were busy raising a further brood.

[Editor: Bill, I didn't know that you lived in such a "wild and untamed" area as to have pit bulls running loose. Be careful, it may be very dangerous out there! 'Course you already have a fractured clavicle to demonstrate the hazards of yard work! Quit speeding around corners on that lawn tractor (if it survived the crash), and get healed soon.]

EXPEDITION REPORT

Meanderings in Michigan and Minnesota

by

Cheryl (Mrs. J.N.) Randall

This past June, J.N. and I enjoyed a week of birding in the State of Minnesota. We prepared for the trip by consulting our friend and mentor, Judy Toups, who designed our itinerary and constructed our "hit list" (40 species). She suggested that we digest the contents of Kim Eckert's Birds of Minnesota, an 8.5 by 11 by 1 inch tome that strains the eyes and boggles the mind for the massive amounts of detailed birdfinding information, but remains the definitive source for that purpose for Minnesota.

We first an obligatory side trip to stop at Grayling, Michigan seeking the endangered Kirtland's Warbler. This mission can be readily accomplished by merely showing up at the Grayling Field Office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at 7:00 a.m. any morning from May 15 through July 5, viewing a short slide show

about efforts to conserve the habitat for Kirtland's, and then following the ranger to a nearby nesting area. After a half-mile walk through a sandy, gnat- and mosquito-infested pine savannah, we spotted a singing male at the top of a tree some distance from the trail. Our party of 15 lingered, amid biting insects, for 30 minutes attempting to get more than a fleeting look at him through our scopes before returning to our cars. There we came upon two singing males not 10 feet from the roadway! After a general exchange of chagrined looks, we quickly dispersed--hustling into our cars and away toward the next "hotspot."

Continuing north along Lake Michigan (Mute Swan, Common Merganser), we crossed the Straits of Mackinac into and across Michigan's Upper Peninsula, across a bit of northern Wisconsin and entered Minnesota. There birding began in earnest at a place called McGregor Marsh in search of "almost guaranteed" Yellow Rails. After a couple of midnight-to-2 a.m. vigils (it doesn't get dark until 10:30 p.m. in Minnesota near mid-summer), we left the Marsh sans that lifer, but we did manage to spot Mourning Warbler, Black-billed Cuckoo, Gray Jay and Sharp-tailed Grouse at nearby Rice Lake NWR. The drive up the North Shore (Lake Superior) from Duluth to Grand Marais was lovely but failed to offer many opportunities to pull off the road to scan the lake for Little Gulls, nor did we encounter the Northern Hawk-Owl along the route as many birders have. However, the Gunflint Trail (Hwy. 12), a 60-mile drive on from Grand Marais to the Canadian border, yielded 16 species of warblers, including a life Nashville, and several Spruce Grouse, in addition to what is debatably the most beautiful scenery in Minnesota.

Traversing the State, we then left behind the spruce bogs and dense woodlands of the Superior National Forest, and entered the more prairie-like environs of the northwest, where at the town of Roseau we were blessed with a fleeting but sure glimpse of the Great Gray Owl. In search of his evening meal, he flew across the road and into a stand of trees exactly where Kim Eckert's guide had promised a sighting! I ceased to curse the guide that got me there.

At Roseau WMA we added Clay-colored Sparrow, Franklin's Gull, Western Meadowlark and Red-necked Grebe. Farther south, at Agassiz NWR, a Western Grebe, several Upland Sandpipers and hundreds of Grasshopper Sparrows prompted checks on our "hit list," and we very nearly added a literal "hit" of a Greater Prairie Chicken while driving through Rothsay WMA.

Our final birding destination, and favorite area of the whole trip, proved to be the Felton Prairie. At one streamside oasis there, we flushed a half-dozen Am. Woodcocks, delighted in the songs of Warbling Vireos, and were given a private lesson in distinguishing between the "songs" of the Willow and Alder Flycatchers. But it was the sight of scores of singing Chestnut-collared Longspurs, skylarking across a golden prairie sunset, that we hold most dear among our many memories of Minnesota birding.

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The final tally boasted 143 species for our Minnesota state list, including half of the species on our "hit list." We regretted leaving behind the other half, including the Boreal Chickadee, Sprague's Pipit, Baird's Sparrow and both Black-backed and Three-toed Woodpeckers--all pursued diligently but in vain, and all giving us the more reason to return!

GOLDFINKER SPY SYSTEM PROVES WONDROUSLY EFFECTIVE

We all have heard about operations of federal and state forces in the War on Drugs, which attack that problem by actions to reduce the supply, not only of imported but of home-produced contraband. One of these targets is that of finding and destroying US crops of marihuana before they can be harvested. To locate patches of "the weed" grown in out-of-the-way places, aerial surveillance has been employed quite successfully to give direction to "search and destroy" efforts.

Development of such a method for locating a small patch of the target crop is not so original a human achievement as we might compliment ourselves by thinking. As in many other cases, we find that "nature did it first" in terms of the actions of other life forms. A proof offered for that assertion comes from Lafayette County, 1991.

There a certain country-dwelling citizen decided to grow a new crop in his garden, devoting to it a goodly space--eight rows 90 feet long. Before the crop was quite ready for the planter to think of harvesting it, from "out of the blue" came a force 200+ strong to waste the crop in "one swell foop." The attacking regiment, which came resplendent in bright yellow and black uniforms, made sure that the grower would not have occasion to reap a harvest this year! Their intelligence system, which must have involved aerial surveillance, operated without the grower suspecting that his crop had been detected prior to the moment when he realized that the aerial attack force was landing and eliminating the crop.

In case you haven't deduced "the rest of the story" (my apologies to Paul Harvey), let it be clear that the crop was not illegal "Mary Jane," but rather, black oil sunflowers! And that tells you that the attack force consisted of alternate plumage Am. Goldfinches, in a number unprecedented for such an early date as September in northern Mississippi. How did they know? How did they gather? How far did they come? I suspect that they would regard those answers as "classified"--a dietary secret of the Goldfinker Spy System! Not a secret is the identity of the garden grower of our story. He is the newest recruit to membership in MOS, Mr. Robert E. Briscoe, who lives about seven miles west of Oxford. Robert converted from hunter to birder several years ago through some events involving the Oxford Bird Club. Hopefully, he may describe that switch in writing one of these days. WELCOME, Robert!

[Have you invited a friend to join MOS this year??]

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD:

Our last Newsletter noted a fine "double-play" by a member; this time we have a "hat-trick" to report, if you will pardon the switching of sports allusions. Memphis-area TOS/MOS member Jeff Wilson scored that trick with all 3 phalaropes not only seen but photographed on one day, 15 September! Unfortunately, we can't claim that feat for Mississippi--he did it in two counties of extreme west Tennessee, at and near the Mississippi River. He has now seen every shorebird species ever found in Tennessee except for the Purple Sandpiper, which he naturally is now seeking avidly (when he is not giving his popular slide-lectures on shorebirds in the US or his tropical bird-adventures).

Rumors filter upward to N. Miss. that there were unusual mainland sightings this September of Gray Kingbirds at Greenwood "Island" in Pascagoula. It has definitely been an exceptional season already for Red-necked Phalaropes in the Miss.-Tenn. area; Terry Schiefer reports a single and a trio near Starkville, and Jeff W. indicates that at least seven have been noted in west Tenn. It also has been an extra good season for the no. of sightings of Buff-breasted Sandpipers in Lafayette Co. and elsewhere. The A & D Turf Farm south of Oxford also attracted Upland Sandpipers and Lesser Golden Plovers.

Mickey Baker is our source for highlights of a 26 September outing with Judy T. et al., which turned up a Marbled Godwit at Gulfport beach near the marina (later near Holiday Inn), and an immature Cape May Warbler at the Waveland lagoon. Both were still remaining on Oct. 2, and godwit to 10th, farther east.

A new early arrival date (by 17 days) for the Bonaparte's Gull at Sardis Dam (Lower Lake) was an immature with juvenile plumage head markings (shown in Grant's gull book) on 28 September (Davis). On 5 October at the same spot there were 3 imm. Franklin's Gulls, extra early arrivals, and 9 Common Terns, extra many transients; neither species remained to the next p.m.

Vic Theobald had one ad. and one imm. Bald Eagle at Sardis Lake ca. 5 Oct. There was also a late September record of an imm. Such very early Fall records began only recently. Last reports for hummingbirds at several feeders around Oxford, barring any late-appearing stragglers, were for 5, 6 and 7 October, coinciding with the major influx of cold northern airflow that weekend.

Exciting species on the Gulf Coast RBA (Rare Bird Alert: 467-9500) on 10/10 included an ad. female Vermilion Flycatcher, and a W. Wood Pewee at Ansley chenier, but "You gotta hear it!" [copy-cats, you wouldn't let the "northerners" stay one species ahead of the coasters, would you!] Snowy Plover was on the Harrison Co. beach. Others were Black-billed Cuckoo, Lark Sparrow, Merlin and Peregrine.

You didn't find your sighting listed here? Tell us about it!

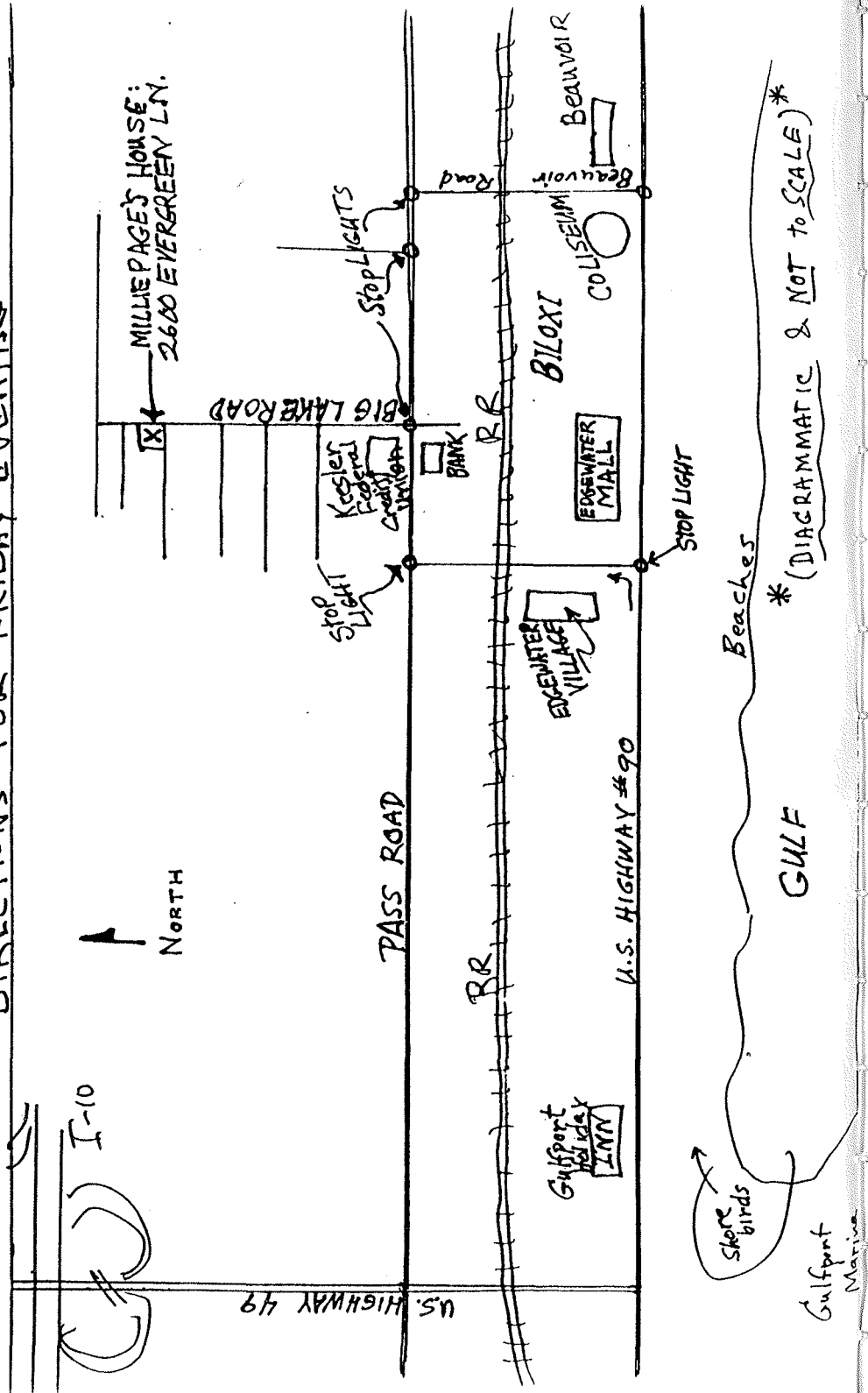
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All persons interested in Mississippi bird life are invited to join the MOS. Annual dues: Life, \$100; Sustaining, \$20; Individual, \$10; Family, \$15; (Junior/Golden Age: Individual, \$4, Family, \$8); Subscribing (Institutional) \$10. Please send 1991 dues not yet paid to the Treasurer.

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