

MISSISSIPPI ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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In Memory of Shannon Knight, 1942-2022

This past October we lost Shannon Knight, a wonderful woman who did much to promote birding in Mississippi and the Mississippi Ornithological Society. She will be sorely missed by all those who knew her, and we as an organization owe much to her influence.

To celebrate her life, we collected some thoughts from current MOS members and have printed them below. Expressions of sympathy or memorial contributions in Shannon's memory may be made to the Parkinson's Foundation, 200 SE 1st Street, Suite 800, Miami, FL 33131 or online at <https://www.parkinson.org/>, or to the Oxford Animal Resource Center, 413 McElroy Drive, Oxford, MS 38655.

"My favorite memory of Shannon would have to be from 7 May 1994 when I got to spend a full day birding with Gene & Shannon and Jeff Wilson. We broke the Tennessee Big Day record that day with 169 species. That record stood for three years. She was a very sweet lady with a good sense of humor that will be greatly missed."

– Mark Greene, Trenton, Tennessee

"I knew Shannon for at least 30 years and was lucky to enjoy many birding outings with her and Gene over those years. Shannon was certainly an excellent birder and a good friend. She could compete with her husband, Gene, I think, in her ability to "spot" the birds quickly and i.d. them quickly also. She and Gene were very kind to me as a beginning birder at one of my first MOS meetings back in 1991, I believe, when Shannon invited me to ride with them on the Saturday field trip into places in the Delta. It was one of my first opportunities to bird with people who were so enthusiastic about birds and birding, and it helped me to realize that I loved it!"

– Marion Schiefer, Columbus, Mississippi

"I didn't know a soul when I moved to Mississippi from Maine. It could have been a lonely time, but I quickly met Shannon and Gene and I knew everything would be alright. Shannon was gracious and kind and caring and funny and a great cook and a good person. I'm lucky to have met her."

– Nick Lund, Cumberland County, Maine

"Shannon was just always a person you could count on, pleasant, gracious, reliable, considerate, capable. Not a splashy type."

– Martha Swan, Toccopola, Mississippi

"I loved Shannon. She was always the highlight of the MOS meetings for me... always laughing and welcoming MOSers to the meetings. I would always try to sit with Shannon and we would whisper and gossip about what was going on behind the scenes at MOS! We had fun. I miss Shannon."

– Mary Stripling, Vicksburg, Mississippi

"One of my favorite memories of Shannon was how she always prepared the best food for a birding outing! She always made sure we were well taken care of, even when she wasn't joining the group on a particular day. And she was such a sharp birder! Birding with her was always joyful."

– Jason Hoeksema, Oxford, Mississippi

"My first memory is that Shannon always kept her vehicle clean. She was more than willing to let Gene drive it on our birding trips, including travel down muddy roads and routinely tracking mud into the vehicle. But soon after each trip she had the vehicle detailed. I have fond memories of meeting at their home south of Oxford and piling into Shannon's large and comfortable SUV for a day of birding. On one such trip we had barely left their home and were driving into Oxford headed to – Continued on Page 2



Hurricane Landing when a baseball-sized metal object fell off of an oncoming vehicle, smashed through the rear passenger window (barely missing Shannon in the front seat), and landed in the back seat by me. We promptly turned around, loaded into a different vehicle at their house, and resumed the planned birding trip. The vehicle was a mess but Shannon had it cleaned and repaired the next week.

My second memory is of her (and Gene's) June 2002 trip to Montana to visit me where I was studying Mountain Plovers. The weather was horrible during their 2-day stay with torrential rain, wind, inaccessible roads, and other birding challenges. But this did not dampen Shannon's enthusiasm for birding! On the first day we somehow managed to find a singing Sprague's Pipit, a lifer for Shannon, and Gene and I used our bodies and an umbrella to shelter Shannon while she sought out the displaying bird high overhead. She was thrilled despite the less than stellar views. Later that day she slipped while we were walking into a convenience store and suffered some significant scratches and bruising. We bandaged her up and continued birding. I will always remember her cheer and positive outlook and the genuine enjoyment she got from birding and being outside."

– Stephen J. Dinsmore, Ames, Iowa

"I want to take this opportunity to thank the birding community for all the kind, loving and supportive words that were sent to me by email and texts for the death of my wife Shannon. Her relatives were awed at the number of friends (birding and teaching) that came out in support. Her chicken salad and birding expertise will be missed by the birding community. Again THANKS."

– Gene Knight, Oxford, Mississippi

Shannon Yvonne Knight

Shannon was born on July 29, 1942, to the late Edna Earl and Jess Gandy, formerly of West Point. She graduated from West Point High School and continued her education at The University of Mississippi and graduated with BA and M.Ed. degrees in Education and was inducted into the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society. Shannon taught in the Oxford City School District for 30 years, where she was awarded Oxford Elementary Teacher of the Year 2000-2001. She and her husband, Gene, have been members of the Mississippi Ornithological Society (MOS) for 35 years and Shannon served as President for two terms. Together they were awarded the prestigious Tucker Award for their significant contributions to MOS and Mississippi birding. For years they traveled extensively across the United States enjoying their birding hobby. She loved her pets (mostly cats) dearly, and even the local raccoons! Shannon was an annual contributor to the local animal shelter.

Shannon is survived by her husband of 42 years, Gene Knight of Oxford; two daughters, Cindy Woodall (Richard) of Madison and Tonya McLendon (Charles) of Crystal Springs; her two brothers, Dr. Eddie Gandy (Carmen) of Spring Hill, Florida and Jess Gandy (Bertha) of Alba, Texas; as well as nine grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

Shannon died peacefully in her sleep at her daughter's home. She had valiantly fought Parkinson's Disease for 16 years. A special thanks to her recent beloved friends who took such loving care of her; Joyce Hilliard, Tamaria Tyson, Emma Bell and Debra Bell. □



American Pipit
© Larry Pace



Red-shouldered Hawk at nest
© David Haraway

President's Corner

by JR Rigby, MOS President

Oxford, Mississippi – I have long told people that one of the reasons I love birding is that it gives me a reason to wander into many of the nooks and crannies of our state that might otherwise go unnoticed and unappreciated. In a recent case, rather than wandering through a corner of untrammelled wilderness, birding provided an invitation to briefly enter into and share the history of a couple of other communities in Mississippi both past and present.

The theme for the outing began with Delta Wind Birds' traditional offering of a winter sparrow ID workshop and field trip. The initial twist was that we had noticed a site near Sky Lake that always seemed to have nice grass in the winter for sparrows. Upon investigating, we realized that this grassy patch was all part of the land preserved around the Jaketown Mounds site. So, we combined sparrows and archaeology into a single field trip. In addition to stepping through sparrow ID, we invited local archaeologists along to tell us about the mound cultures who built, modified, and used the mounds at this site even as we birded around the mounds themselves. We were also treated to the stories of local residents, who told what it was like to explore the mounds half a century ago and how the landscape had changed. For me, at least, it was fun to contemplate the long history of birds and people sharing this little patch of ground for 3,500 years. Of course, we all know that people have been in the Southeast for a long time, but for me it was somehow more affecting to stand in the tangible presence of ancient communities on land that also has another recent history and memory, with local associations and significance – a place both familiar and exotic.

Because of this organized event, we were subsequently invited to a cultural museum in Belzoni where we were hosted by local residents and docents who shared the rich personal history of their community. The cultural museum provided both a space to archive photos and artifacts, and a place for regular social gathering and reunion. Despite the institutional setting (an old school building), it was a much more personal space than most museums, a place with a living memory of the community. The stories shared with us were clearly more than text on page. They were memories of individuals. Where much of history can feel as flat as the page it is printed on, these stories, remembered and recounted by each docent through their own lines of familial and community descent, were like the many facets of a gemstone reflecting the light of inspection from many directions.

In many ways, birding is an escape. It's a hobby and a chance to relax into familiar modes and interests. But, if we're doing it right, I suspect it will continually provide new opportunities to connect and explore not just the wild places of the state, but the people and communities of Mississippi as well.

Happy Birding, *JR Rigby*

Submitting Articles and Photos for the Newsletter

The *MOS Newsletter* is published biannually to inform members of upcoming meetings and birding events. The editor invites you to participate by submitting articles and/or photographs for possible publication. Some suggestions for articles might be:

- Birding trips: in-state, out-of-state, or out-of-country
- Life bird experiences
- Bird locales or special birding events
- Any interesting story about birds or bird behavior.

Articles: Please submit neatly handwritten or typed articles, not to exceed two single-spaced typed pages. You may contribute as many articles as you would like. **Photos:** Please send images in jpeg format, at least 180 dpi, to the email address listed below.

Articles and photos may be sent any time of the year, but if you would like for it to appear in a specific issue then it must be received by the following deadlines: **Spring Issue – March 1, Fall Issue – September 1.**

Send your articles and/or photos to Cullen Brown, 2144 Lakeshore Drive, Apt 45 B Ridgeland, MS 39157 or brown2cu@gmail.com

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Leucistic Purple Finch
© QB Gray



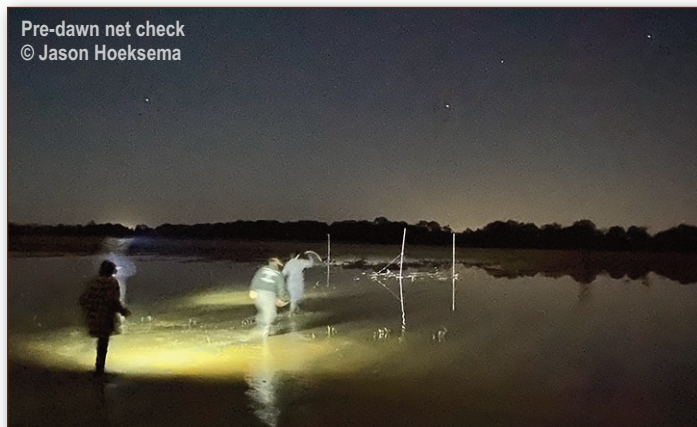
Sandhill Cranes
© Robert Briscoe

Shorebird Banding Success in the Mississippi Delta

By Jason Hoeksema, MOS Vice President

Delta Wind Birds successfully launched their Mississippi Delta Shorebird Tagging Project this fall. On September 23 and October 14, we captured, banded, and radio-tagged shorebirds at our farm habitat site on James Failing's farm in Indianola, Mississippi. We used standard mist nets, working from about 5:00 a.m. until 9:00 a.m. each morning, led by our lead bird bander, Kristina Mitchell, and our partners from the USGS. The majority of shorebirds captured were Least Sandpipers, which will be radio-tagged in future sessions, but on these initial days we focused on tagging medium-sized species such as Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Killdeer. Other species captured incidentally and banded included Sora, Swamp Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird, and Brown-headed Cowbird.

The goal of the project is to better understand migratory shorebird movements in and out of the Mississippi Delta, and especially to estimate how long particular individuals of different species remain with us during migration and winter. This information will allow more accurate assessment of the conservation benefits of temporary wetland habitats created – through DWB's work with private landowners – as stopover feeding sites for these birds on working lands in the Delta. The radio tags emit a signal every few seconds, which should be detected by the nearby MOTUS tower (erected by DWB board member Hal Mitchell), as long as the birds remain in the immediate area. MOTUS towers elsewhere might also pick up the signals, but the tags will likely fall off the birds, or have dead batteries, after about 6-8 weeks.



The data are already proving illuminating, as one Pectoral Sandpiper tagged on September 23 was still present three weeks later, definitely a longer stay than expected. A Long-billed Dowitcher and a Stilt Sandpiper tagged on October 14 were both still present nearly two weeks later, when this article was written.

DWB is grateful for the support provided by individual donors, a contribution from the Memphis Chapter of the Tennessee Ornithological Society, and a State Wildlife Grant (SWG) from the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks, which will allow the project to continue for at least the next two years, providing valuable information for the conservation of migratory shorebirds.

To support DWB's work to help migratory shorebirds, please visit our website: <https://www.deltawindbirds.org/take-action> □



Look to the Oaks!

By Cullen Brown, MOS Newsletter Editor



I remember feeling rattled at the onset of this past fall's warbler migration. I was in a completely new location, far away from my familiar birding haunts in Lafayette County, my home for the past seven years or so. I recall feeling distinctly uneasy leaving work each day in September. I hadn't seen birds that I would have seen scores of just the year before. In a fit of despair, I decided that the best course of action was to just pick a spot and hope that the migrants would arrive. Luckily, I had plenty of places to choose from on this front.

In the end, I decided to prioritize sitting underneath a mature Water Oak (*Quercus nigra*) on my workplace's campus. My choosing this location wasn't accidental, but was rather borne from my reading of Douglas Tallamy's *The Nature of Oaks*. Tallamy's contention is simple: "Oaks support more forms of life and more fascinating interactions than any other tree genus in North America" (12). This applies especially to many species of birds, both migratory and resident alike. As Tallamy notes, oaks support a bevy of insects, which birds depend upon to raise clutches of young and fuel their migrations. Citing a study completed by one of his students, Tallamy writes: "Warblers foraged three times longer in oaks than in pines, the next closest competitor, and six times longer in oaks than in birches; they spent very little time foraging in any of the other 12 tree genera" (76). "Keep in mind that birds don't care two whits which tree they forage in," Tallamy pithily offers, "as long as there is food there" (76).

My sit spot underneath the Water Oak quickly produced the migrants I was so desperately missing. Over the next several weeks, I watched our usual migrants forage within the expansive oak. I saw numerous Tennessee Warbler, Redstart, Magnolia Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, Northern Parula, and, to my immense delight, Golden-winged Warbler make use of this tree. I also saw scores of White-eyed Vireo, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher compete with the more efficient warblers for caterpillars amidst the Water Oak's limbs. And I also learned more about our permanent residents, appreciating the peculiar grace of foraging Carolina Chickadees and the subtle strangeness of Eastern Bluebirds. I also learned more about our stunning Mississippi insects. I will never forget seeing Great Purple Hairstreak, an otherworldly stunning butterfly species, interact with the mistletoe growing upon the oak's boughs, nor my delight discovering Crematogaster ants, which possess a heart-shaped gaster, going about their busy lives along the oak's trunk. With delight, I led my students in my birdwatching club to the oak time and time again throughout September and October, pontificating on the coolness of oaks and our native flora and fauna in general. I'm not certain that I made any converts, but perhaps I can do so here.

It is a truth universally acknowledged amongst birders that birds depend upon native plants, yet how many of us put effort into learning and indeed protecting these plants? How many of us incorporate them into our outings? How many of us could pick out, say, an oak from an ash? (up to this summer, I was quite unable to make this distinction) My point with this jeremiad isn't to castigate, but rather to provoke a more plant-centric birding. I believe the rewards for adopting such an ethos to be immense, both from the deeper insight plants afford us into the ecology of a given place as well as to the prospect of listing as many birds as one can during a given year. Spring migration is right around the corner, and many of us will be devoting countless hours to welcoming our usual host of summer residents as well as looking for more elusive migrants. I recall benighted springs and falls where I would scan any patch of greenery as if it were equally likely to produce a harder to find species as any other, but I now think of this approach as somewhat misguided. As I noted, I found many migrants (including Golden-winged Warbler, a species that I hadn't seen in over two years), by simply isolating myself beneath an oak. I tried to replicate this practice at LeFleur's Bluff State Park and was rewarded with views of two additional Golden-winged Warblers foraging – again, in a mature Water Oak!

Of course, one could chalk this up to a happy coincidence – and perhaps it is – but I read in it a timely lesson that we don't need to resort to hours of wandering aimlessly (though I do admit to enjoying this immensely) or deploying playback to locate good birds. Knowing our native plants arguably offers a more efficient way of finding birds and learning about ecology simultaneously! ▣

Some notes on the Spring 2022 MOS meeting



By Cullen Brown, MOS Newsletter Editor

Our Spring MOS meeting took place on Mississippi's coast between 29 April 2022 and 1 May 2022. Among other places, members traveled from Oxford, New Albany, Tupelo, Jackson, and Pass Christian for a weekend of birding, learning, and reconnecting. What follows are some of the highlights.

Most of us met for a potluck dinner at the Pascagoula Audubon Center. While we waited for other members to arrive, we took advantage of the Audubon Center's trail and viewing platform to do a little late afternoon birding. Some of us were treated to close views of a nesting Blue Jay and flyovers from some of our common coastal residents. After dinner and reconnecting with members, we decided to go on an outing to Presleys Outing Road in Jackson County to search for Whimbrel and Common Ground Dove – alas, we were not to see either that evening!

The following morning, many of us met at Clower Thornton Nature Trail, where we were led on a birding hike by Abby Darrah. We were hoping that strong easterly winds, peppered with a spate of Cape May Warbler sightings along the barrier islands, would produce a strong warbler showing, but warblers were few and far between on our outing. Still, members enjoyed seeing some of our more common species and getting acquainted with the coastal flora along the walking trail. There is always something to see!

After birding the trails, our group reconvened at the ferry to embark for Ship Island. A number of us were eager to relocate Cape May Warbler in addition to looking for some other migrants pushed west by the strong easterly winds. But the ferry trip was a treat in and of itself. All members got stellar looks at Northern Gannet and other pelagic birds on the trip out. When we disembarked on the island, we quickly located a handful of Cape May Warblers foraging in the scrubby vegetation along the island path. From there, we walked the boardwalk traversing the wetland and heard raucous Clapper Rail, Sora, and what many of us were convinced was an elusive Black



Northern Gannet
© Cullen Brown



MOS on the beach
© Meredith Wulff



Cape May Warbler
© Cullen Brown

Rail vocalizing from the dense vegetation. Buoyed by these wonders, we traipsed the beach, locating White-rumped Sandpiper, Snowy Plover, Piping Plover, and a Whimbrel.

Later that evening, our group met to hear Nick Lund, our featured speaker, discuss the complicated legacy of State Birds. After an entertaining and enlightening discussion, many of us made plans for the following morning. A number of us joined Gene Knight to see some additional rarities and locally common coastal species. Aided by Holly Cox, our group got to see Inca Dove before journeying to see Scaly-breasted Munia. Undeterred by the rain, our group then made the trek to see the Cave Swallows suspected of nesting in Hancock County. And we finished our outing at Ansley with lifer looks at Bronzed Cowbird and Common Nighthawk!

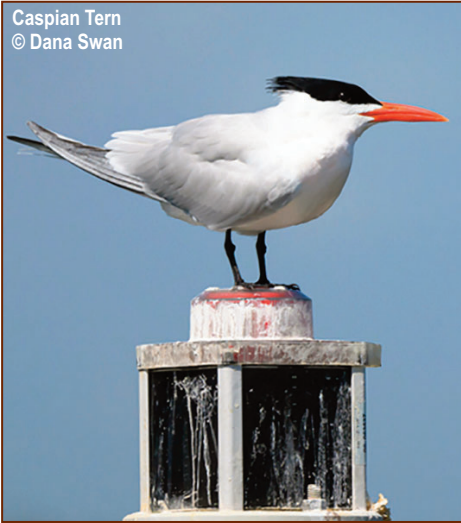
All in all, the trip was an encapsulation of all that makes birding in Mississippi great: bonding and seeing birds with lovely people who feel like family. □

MOS Member Photos

MOS members are invited to submit photos for publication in the Newsletter. Send yours to the editor at brown2cu@gmail.com.



Bald Eagle
© Gene Knight



Caspian Tern
© Dana Swan



Say's Phoebe
© Larry Pace



Stilt Sandpiper
© Jason Hoeksema



Ruddy Ducks
© Gene Knight



Carolina Wren fledgling
© Tom Hoar



Swainson's Thrush and Indigo Bunting (having words)
© Tom Hoar



White Ibis adult and juveniles
© Larry Pace

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