

A Lark or Two • Shrike Out? • Flocking Effect •
The Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl in South Texas • Common Black-headed Gull Identification

American Birds

THE MAGAZINE OF RECORD AND DISCOVERY • WINTER 1993



WESTERN MEADOWLARK SINGS IN COLORADO, P. 1050

National Audubon Society





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American Birds

The Magazine of Record and Discovery

FROM THE PRESIDENT

THE ALMOST HEART-breakingly beautiful sight of cranes massing along the Platte River in Nebraska each March is witnessed by thousands at the National Audubon Society's Lillian Annette Rowe Sanctuary. Half a million Sandhill Cranes, and a small number of Endangered Whooping Cranes, use the Platte as a staging area in the ancient journey to breeding grounds in the north. Lucky birders see the cranes "dance," a social display that seems to serve complex purposes. To watch this wonder is to look history in its face: Cranes are among the oldest avian species to grace this planet.

Not every person who comes to witness this spectacle is a birder. But the issues that are concentrated on the Platte each spring remind us that folks concerned about conservation and environmental issues, no matter what the impetus, share the same goal: a world that is as safe for birds as it is for people. The health of our birdlife is linked to the health of our rivers, forests, and seas. And all are linked to the well-being of people. If we abuse natural resources like the Platte River, we lose our cranes. And if we lose both rivers and cranes, you can be sure that we will begin to lose ourselves.

This year is special at the Rowe Sanctuary. Manager Ken Strom and his staff are putting together a celebration of its 20th anniversary. The National Audubon Society was the first environmental group to buy land on

the Platte to protect cranes. Our concerns arose from the plight of the birds, and the debates over water use in the region. But our commitment goes back even further. In 1915, Audubon societies petitioned the head of the federal General Land Office (now the Bureau of Reclamation), asking that inland lakes created by a project on the North Platte be dedicated as refuges for birds, leading to the establishment of a federal "bird reservation."

In the 1940s, we sponsored Whooping Crane studies that became the definitive information base for this rare bird. In the mid-1970s, Audubon helped form an alliance between farmers and ranchers to defeat a needless water diversion project in Nebraska. Around the same time, Regional Vice President Ron Klataske began our annual River Conferences, which serve as an important forum for science and policy issues.

We've battled in the past decade for a regional conservation plan that would restore and maintain a healthy habitat for wildlife—and for people. One of the more important victories in recent years was the defeat of the Two Forks Dam. It was obvious from the start that there were far less devastating alternatives to satisfy water needs in the Denver area.

Our work continues today, because water is still being misused over the course of the Platte. In the *Nebraska v. Wyoming* water apportionment case before the United State Supreme Court, we are the only national environmental organization to argue on behalf of downstream interests. A first set of decisions

was favorable, but the case is still before the court. We will continue as long as it is there.

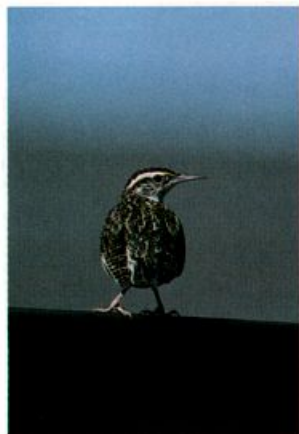
Now the longstanding call for a management plan for the basin has caught the interest of officials in the White House. Our concerns have been heard: Relicensing of controversial dams on the Platte cannot be slowed down, resulting continued abuse of water resources. Financial and human resources must be provided to ensure that a management plan works. We will not accept a half-way solution on the future of the Platte. The stakes are too high.

Ed Pembleton, our water policy specialist in Washington, D.C., puts it succinctly: It is Audubon's obvious and difficult chore to change the *status quo* on the Platte River system.

We invite you to watch the cranes on the Platte this spring. We hope you will join us in conserving and respecting the natural heritage that the cranes represent. Most people who have seen cranes dance describe it in terms of reverence and joy. We cannot turn our backs on this legacy. For the dance to continue, there is much that remains to be done.

Robert F. Schumann





Western Meadowlark, p. 1050

COLUMNS & DEPARTMENTS

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Yes, it can be very cold. And the birds can be scarce and quiet. But they are out there, waiting to be spotted. Read about some of the best winter "hot-spots."

OVERVIEW 1038

A rare Harpy Eagle is shot in Venezuela, British Columbia bans lead shot, and Hawaii hopes to lure Laysan Albatrosses to uninhabited islands. News about birds from around the world, as well as intriguing excerpts on avian behavior from the best journals.

BIRDING FOR FUN 1044

Today's rapid pace of development worldwide has led to increasing numbers of habitat "islands," or patches, surrounded by human settlement. *Paul R. Ehrlich* considers what we know—and don't know—about how birds react to the increasing patchiness of their landscape.

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Is it science or is it ideology? *J.P. Myers* warns what can happen when spin doctors for the radical right seek to thwart environmental knowledge with distortions of fact.

THE PRACTICED EYE 1156

Many North American birders love to scan through flocks of Bonaparte's Gull to find that special treat, a Common Black-headed Gull. But *Kenn Kaufman* points out that one of the best ways to recognize a Black-headed is know your Bonies.

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A LARK OR TWO 1050

A graduate student from the East Coast stumbled upon a thesis in Wisconsin when he asked a faculty adviser about the meadowlarks he heard singing in his new community. That discussion over lingering questions on the status of the Eastern and Western meadowlarks occupied the next 26 years of *Wesley E. Lanyon's* life.



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FRONT COVER: Western Meadowlark in Colorado. Photograph by *Sherm Spoelstra*.

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FROM THE EDITOR

American Birds was born in February 1971. It incorporated *Audubon Field Notes*, which had

been issued by the National Audubon Society, as a publication in its own right, since 1947. The magazine traces its origins, in various incarnations, back as far as 1899 and *Bird-Lore*, the publication of the earliest Audubon societies.

During the past 23 years, we have had a wonderful adventure bringing you more than 1425 articles, columns, and features. These included nearly 330 on bird distribution, 275 on bird conservation, 125 on bird behavior, more than 100 on history, 75 each on identification and bird finding, and at least 55 showcasing photos or art. We've published 95 Changing Seasons, more than 250 book and record reviews, and upwards of 30 Pictorial Highlights, and a miscellany of other articles. That averages out to more than 60 features a year in addition to the Regional Reports.

It has been fun, fascinating, and very rewarding for us to publish this abundance of riches, and you've responded with fierce loyalty. You've genuinely believed this was the one ornithological publication you simply could not do without. *American Birds* has been proud to offer dedicated amateurs a forum.

AND SO, IT IS WITH GREAT REGRET THAT I MUST INFORM YOU THAT THE LAST ISSUE OF *American Birds*, IN ITS CURRENT FORMAT, WILL BE PUBLISHED IN THE SPRING OF 1994.

In these tough fiscal times, the National Audubon Society has had to examine critically the economic viability of all its

activities, including its publications. The Board has concluded that *American Birds* is no longer financially viable. Therefore, reluctantly, Audubon has decided to scale back the magazine, but to continue publishing the quarterly Regional Reports and Christmas Bird Count issue. This will not include the photography, color, illustrations, columns, science articles, and features that have made it so attractive to many of our readers.

TO HONOR OUR SUBSCRIPTION OBLIGATIONS, *American Birds* WILL SOON BE SENDING YOU A LETTER OFFERING ONE OF SEVERAL OPTIONS.

It has been tremendously satisfying for me to be part of the *American Birds* team for the past 20 years. Its success is due in part to an unparalleled staff, a host of talented columnists, authors, regional and Christmas Bird Count editors,

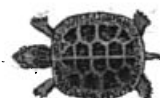
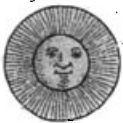
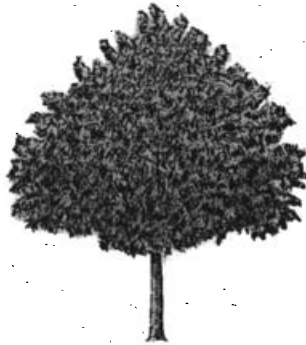
artists and photographers, referees, and countless subscribers whom it has been my great privilege and pleasure to work with and to know. I cannot overemphasize the value of their contributions, which have been fully appreciated by those who regularly devoured every issue. To one and all I extend the warmest and most sincere thanks, especially for sharing my love of and interest in birds. Thank you most of all to you, our readers, for your very important part in making a great publication for many years.

I am, above all else, optimistic, and, in spite of our financial difficulties, still hold out hope that in the not-too-distant future, like a Phoenix, a reincarnated *American Birds* will rise again. Look for this resurrection. Support us and it if you so choose. In the meantime, you can count on me to continue to fight for better communications in the birding community and, as ever, to strive to make of every birder an environmentalist.

Stay tuned!!

Susan Roney Drennan





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HOW TO READ THE REGIONAL REPORTS

Birds have no respect for range maps. Bird distribution in North America is constantly changing, as birds expand their ranges into new areas, disappear from former strongholds, or alter their patterns of migration.

Our knowledge of bird distribution is also changing constantly, as discoveries continue to come in. Keeping up with all these developments is a challenge for ornithologists, conservationists, and birders.

The Regional Reports, published four times a year, contain a wealth of information about our dynamic birdlife. To those seeing the reports for the first time, they might appear difficult or technical, but they are not; anyone with any birding experience will find the reports easy to understand. If you have hesitated to dip into this section of the magazine, we invite you to read the report from your area of the continent; we predict that the information there will alternately surprise you and confirm your ideas about birdlife in your region. To help you get started, here are answers to some questions that may occur to first-time readers.

What kind of information is included, and do the Regional Editors just report everything that's reported to them?

Regional Editors do not report every sighting of every bird. Such a list would be huge, unwieldy, and not very useful. Instead, they solicit reports from as many observers as possible, screen the records for accuracy, choose those that are most signi-

ficant, look for trends and patterns of occurrence, connect scattered bits of information, and ultimately come up with a concise, readable summary of the real bird news—the important avian events and trends of the season throughout their region.

Why are there so many abbreviations in the text?

We abbreviate some frequently-used words and phrases to save space. Most of these are easy to understand and remember. (See the list of abbreviations at the end of this section.) In addition to these standard abbreviations, some Regional Editors use shortened versions of the names of some birding hot spots; they list these local abbreviations in a separate paragraph, just after their introductory comments and just before their main species accounts.

What do the initials in parentheses mean?

Most records published in each report will be followed by initials, to indicate the source: the person(s) who found or reported the bird(s) mentioned. The initials may be followed by et al. (short for et alia, meaning “and others”), or preceded by fide (literally, “by the faith of”—meaning that this is a second-hand report, and the person initialed is the one who passed it along to the Regional Editor). A dagger (†) before the initials means that this person turned in written details on the sighting.

There are good reasons for giving credit to the observers involved. Readers may be reassured about the accuracy of surprising sightings if they know who the observers were; researchers who want to know more about a certain record may be able to contact the observers directly.

Who are the people who send in their sightings?

All observers are invited to send in notes to their Regional Editors: details on rare sightings, species that were scarcer or more numerous than

usual during the season, unusual concentrations on migration, and so on. Reading the reports for your region for a few seasons is the best way to find out what kinds of information are desired. Although the Regional Editors cannot cite every record that they receive, every contributor helps them to produce a more thorough and accurate summary.

Why are some bird names in heavier or blacker type?

We use boldface type to draw attention to outstanding records of rare birds. General categories of birds that the Regional Editors would place in boldface would include: any species that has been recorded fewer than 10 times previously in a given state or province; any new breeding record for a state or province; or any bird totally outside established patterns of seasonal occurrence. (For the most part, records are not boldfaced unless they are backed up with solid details or photographs.) Birders who like to know about rare birds (and most of us do) can get a complete rundown of the season's outstanding rarities by scanning all the Regional Reports for those boldfaced birds.

What are the boxes marked “S.A.”?

“S.A.” stands for “Special Attention” (and, by coincidence, is pronounced “essay”). The purpose of the boxed essays is to draw attention to particularly noteworthy phenomena or trends.

Likely topics for essays include new population trends or new patterns of bird distribution, unusual invasions or migration events, field research projects that have yielded new data, specific conservation problems that have an impact on birdlife, or detailed discussion of some outstanding (or perplexing) rare bird record. Experienced readers of *American Birds* make it a point to flip through all the Regional Reports and read all the S.A.s, even in regions where they do not read the rest of the text.

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E. Total distribution (sum of C & D)	15,826	16,061
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2. Returns from news agents.	235	509
G. Total (sum of E & F)	17,517	17,688

I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

(signed) Susan Roney Drennan, Editor

Shakespeare's

soaring verse often used imagery of birds or birding (as falconry was then known). Screw your quill to the task: See if you can recognize these high-flown metaphors.

By James R. Polson

THAT'S BIRD & BARD ENTERTAINMENT

1. Slain by his own poisoned rapier in *Hamlet*, Laertes compared himself to which game bird considered foolish by the Elizabethans?

2. "Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day." Romeo and Juliet's first marital argument is over the call of which two birds?

3. Henry VI prophesies that rivalry between his wife and York, protector of the realm, will cost him his crown and a graver injury, like one inflicted by ———?

4. "Hist, Romeo, Hist!" During the balcony scene, Juliet calls Romeo as if he were what bird?

5. As his assassins stalk Banquo, Macbeth counsels his wife, "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed." To what bird does his term of endearment refer?

6. In the bombastic courting scene of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Kate and Petruchio hurl avian pejoratives like brickbats. What are the first two birds they mention?

7. Feigning insanity, Hamlet declares, "I am but mad north-

wit," observes cross-dressed Viola in *Twelfth Night*. She compares the court jester with what courtly bird?

9. In *Merchant of Venice*, Portia remarks that the music of her court ensemble sounds better at night, referring to the song ability of which three birds?

10. Bearing his ostensibly dead sister in his arms, Arviragus, in *Cymbeline*, promises to bedeck her grave with flowers as charitably as would this bird.

11. Challenged by her father Cymbeline to defend her choice of a husband, Imogene uses a metaphor in which she compares an eagle with which other bird of prey?

12. Investigating the murder of Duke Humphrey in *Henry VI, Part 2*, the Earl of Warwick likens the duke to which game bird?

13. After likening the arrogant Mortimer to a parrot in *King Henry IV*, Hotspur imagines training what bird to torture him?

14. Lady Macduff, angry that her husband has left her and his son unguarded against Macbeth's assassins, compares Macduff unfavorably to what bird?

15. What bird is said, by the company of *Love's Labor's Lost*, to mock married men?

16. "What angel awakes me from my flowery bed?" asks Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 'Tis Bottom, singing of seven song-birds. Which bird has an "orange-tawny bill"?

If you answer less than 8 correctly, no seat for you in the theater: Stand with the groundlings. If you answer 8 to 12 correctly, strut and fret no more an hour upon the stage. If you correctly answer 13 or more, the Weird Sisters foresee reward in your future.

Answers to That's Bird & Flora Entertainment, Vol. 47, No. 3, Fall 1993 American Birds:

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 1. Canary creeper | 11. Gooseberry |
| 2. Cardinal flower | 12. Hawkweed |
| 3. Storksbill | 13. Henbane |
| 4. Wakerobin | 14. Ragged robin; <i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i> , flower of the Cuckoo |
| 5. Wild cranesbill | 15. Ostrich fern |
| 6. Prairie Larkspur | 16. Water Crowfoot |
| 7. Partridgeberry | 17. Dove Tree |
| 8. Heron's bill | 18. Cockspur thorn |
| 9. Chickweed | |
| 10. Turkey-beard | |

north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a _____ from a hand-saw."

8. "This fellow is wise enough to play the fool, And to do that well craves a kind of



Silence on the Prairie



A great quiet is hushing America's heartland. Where is the song of the Eastern Meadowlark greeting the Nebraska morning? The cry of the Loggerhead Shrike from its perch in the Oklahoma Osage orange? The call of the Bell's Vireo along the Kansas fence row?

The music of America's prairie birds is being silenced as their numbers dwindle. The statistics are as familiar as they are saddening: Over the past ten years in sections of the central United States, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers have been declining by 5 percent *a year*; Orchard Orioles by 9 percent *a year*; and Lark Sparrows by 4 percent *a year*.

The George Miksch Sutton Avian Research Center is dedicated to finding the reasons why more than a third of prairie-associated birds are suffering marked population declines. Nationally renowned for its highly successful restoration program for the Bald Eagle, the Center is now focusing its scientific resources on birds in prairie ecosystems.

The Prairie Bird Project is the most extensive of its kind, scheduled to last five years with

implications for species ranging from Texas to Saskatchewan. Now in its third year, the project is based on the rigorous monitoring of 62 test plots by ornithologists, biologists and technicians.

Founded 10 years ago and headquartered in Oklahoma, the Center and its programs have been the subject of articles in *Life*, *Reader's Digest* and *National Geographic* as well as birding journals. The facility has been selected as one of four breeding centers for raising California Condors for release into the wild.

Supported in the past primarily by corporate and foundation grants, the Sutton Center has never asked for financial help from the birding community. Until now. The expanding scope of the Center's work has brought additional demands that cannot be met without support from those who understand the precarious state of bird populations. This is your invitation as a concerned birder to become part of this comprehensive and critical research effort.



Yes, I want to support the work of the Sutton Avian Research Center to help halt the decline in prairie bird populations.

☐ \$250 ☐ \$100 ☐ \$50 ☐ \$25

Sutton Avian Research Center
PO Box 2007
Bartlesville, OK 74005-2007

Name _____ Address _____

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