



The Prairie Horned Lark

Newsletter of the Panhandle Bird Club

Vol. IX No. 10

October 10, 2008

Panhandle Rare Bird Alert
Connie Fordham (806 655-7034)
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Please call or e-mail Connie, with information on any unusual birds or first seasonal arrivals you see in the Panhandle.

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Annual Meeting-Fun, Food and Friendship!

What a treat was in store for those who attended the Annual Meeting on September 18. Ruth Beasley, famous for her newspaper columns and radio features called Learning the Birds, regaled us with interesting anecdotes and information about our favorite topic - birds, of course! Ruth's topic was Birding by Ear and she brought us a few challenges in birdsong identification. After we had successfully identified the birds on her CD (we have some great "ears" in our club!) some of us had a surprise – a copy of Ruth's CD taped to the bottom of our chairs! Afterward, the members had a fine time visiting with old friends and enjoying the refreshments.

Dues are due!

If you haven't paid your dues, now is the time to do it. At the annual meeting the members present voted a small increase in our annual dues in order to keep up with the rising costs of mailing the newsletter.

Please send your check for \$15. 00 (made out to Panhandle Bird Club) to Connie Fordham at 2404 11th Avenue, Canyon, TX 79015. The membership covers each household.



Tim Stroud (l) and Jim Luce visit with our speaker, Ruth Beasley

Canyon Area Field Trip Sept 6 2008

Participants: Susan Thompson, Carrie and Robert King and Judith Jones (Leader)

A misty cool fall-like morning with the temperature in the mid fifties was the beginning of the trip starting at the Southwest Library. Two Great Blue Herons and 17 Canada Geese were barely visible in the mist over McDonald Lake. Still not much light was available so we headed to the second meeting place which was Braum's in Canyon. No one was there and after a brief wait we proceeded on with the trip.

We drove through the park where the water treatment plant is and to our surprise there was a small road behind the plant that had lots of sunflowers that were covered with House Finches and numerous Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. It turned out to be a Scissor-tail Flycatcher day with them being found at almost every stop. A slow drive through the park took us on a Snipe hunt for the Kings and alas, as with most Snipe hunts it was a dry run. We did see Killdeer, Common Grackles and lots of "funny ducks" as Susan calls them (Mallard mixes). Robins were working the lawns for their morning worms, lots of Red Winged Blackbirds and a mixture of other black birds we scanned closely for any with yellow eyes thinking we might see a Brewer's Blackbird but did not find any.

Another stop was the Tierra Blanca Creek where we saw a single Snowy Egret, a Black-crowned Night Heron and were excited to get a fairly good look at a Green Heron, probably the same one I had seen a few days before at the exact same place. The trees along the railroad tracks had a Bullock's Oriole, Northern Flickers, and a dainty little Downy put on a nice show for us.

We headed toward Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge (BLNWR) via the road to Happy. Just out of the city limits are two rest stops side by side. On other occasions I had found a Barn Owl there and was hoping to add that to the Kings' bird list but no owl was to be found. The spot did have a very cooperative Yellow-billed Cuckoo that they were able to add to their first-time-to-see list. And believe it or not we saw the second Green Heron of the day. Not something you can often do here in the Panhandle.

A brief stop at a Prairie Dog Town added a Burrowing Owl and a nice Swainson's Hawk. We decide to make a change in plans when we reached Blessen Road and chose to check out the report of a full lake at BLNWR and that is exactly what we found.



Blind cut off by water! (Robert King)

. We saw several flocks of shore birds but all were too far away to identify. The blind at the back of the refuge could not be reached because of the water. Robert King has shared his photograph of the lake for those doubters out there. I called Kathy Payne at the refuge to get a little history about past water levels and was told that in 1998 the lake had about as much water in it then as it does now.

Susan Thompson is leading at field trip the 4th of Oct so we can have another chance to see how the birds are adjusting to the new water level at Buffalo Lake. Hope to see many of you on that trip.

A total of 38 species were seen. The most notable being the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, the two Green Herons and numerous migrating Scissor-tailed Flycatchers.



Buffalo Lake -full! (Robert King)

Bird List (partial):

Canada Goose
Mallard
Great Blue Heron
Snowy Egret
Green Heron
Black-crowned Night Heron
Killdeer
Swainson's Hawk
Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Burrowing Owl
Downy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher
American Robin
Red-winged Blackbird
Common Grackle
Bullock's Oriole
House Finch

Dalhart Field Trip By Jody McKenzie September 20, 2008

Participants: Robert and Carrie King, Susan Thompson, Barrett Pierce, Billie Shalvey and Jody McKenzie, leader

What a glorious day for birding! Weather-wise we could not have asked for a better day. We met at McDonald's at 8:30 a.m. to begin our day, but, we didn't stay true to our bird watching plans. After dropping off my truck at home, we went to Rock Island and 13th and on the way we spotted an immature Broad-winged Hawk sitting high in a tree enjoying the morning sun just off of Tennessee Blvd. Turkey Vultures were seen in the area, circling above and sunning in the tops of trees. We parked on Rock Island, a residential area with many trees and right away saw a Yellow-rumped Warbler, a Wilson's Warbler, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet and House Sparrows moving about in the trees above us. A Carolina Wren was heard close by and after much listening and stalking it appeared in the tree tops, allowing us a good view. Three Red-breasted Nuthatches climbed around a utility pole and a Common Nighthawk flew overhead. American Robins were seen and heard all around, most likely taking a much-needed break from their fall migration. Turkey Vultures and Barn Swallows flew overhead as we left this area at around 9:45 a.m.

We drove about 26 miles west of Dalhart and turned off the highway and drove north for 1 mile on a county road and saw many Barn Swallows on utility lines and Lark Sparrows on fences. Three Scissor-tailed Flycatchers made an appearance along with a mixture of sparrows consisting of Vespers, Brewers and Grasshoppers. Several Northern Harriers glided in the distance and small flocks of Lark Buntings flew alongside of our vehicles as our 2-car caravan stirred up the dusty road behind us. A Rock Wren held its place on a fence as did a Say's Phoebe and a Swainson's Hawk flew above the wheat fields on this beautiful sunny morning.



Swainson's Hawk

Photo by Jim Stevenson

When we reached our destination of a country home with large trees and a pond, we saw birds as soon as we lifted our bins to our eyes. Wilson's Warblers were plentiful as they had been in the past 2 weeks or so. We saw a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, an Orange-crowned Warbler, a Yellow-rumped Warbler, a Western Wood-Pewee, Scaled Quail, 2 Curve-billed Thrashers, a Green-winged Teal on the pond, 3 American Goldfinches, a Loggerhead Shrike and a Blue-headed Vireo. I wish I had been able to view the vireo myself but unfortunately I was saving a mini Yorkie from certain death as it followed close on the heels of the bigger dogs that were showing off their herding instincts in the horse pasture. I have watched for the vireo since this trip but have not been lucky enough to catch a glimpse. I haven't given up hope yet!

Due to the fact that I work at this farm, I was amazed at the number of birds we identified that I had never seen here prior to this trip. You can bet

that I will spend more time after work searching for birds to add to my life list. But what Susan said is very true. More eyes see more birds.

After eating our lunch on the front porch of the house on the farm, we left the property and drove west to hit the back road to Texline. We saw Swainson's Hawks, more Lark Buntings and a Chihuahuan Raven.

At Texline Barrett led us to a residential area with trees and a vacant lot. The owner of the vacant lot appeared in his front yard and spoke to Barrett and Susan briefly and gave us permission to walk through his lot. Our target birds for this area were the Mountain Chickadee and the Cassin's Kingbird. Bingo on the Cassin's but not so lucky with the chickadee. Susan referred to the Cassin's as the green dot on the Sibley's Range Maps. Glorious indeed! We also saw an Olive-sided Flycatcher, a Western Tanager and a MacGillivray's Warbler, just to name a few.



Western Tanager Photo by Jim Stevenson

This glorious day ended with 3 Inca Doves that Barrett pointed out in my front yard. He wanted to know how often I see the Inca Dove. These little brown doves have appeared in my yard several times a week for 2 or 3 years.

Bird Lists:

At Rock Island and 13th:

- Turkey Vulture – 20
- Broad-winged Hawk – 1
- Common Nighthawk – 1
- Blue Jay – 1
- Barn Swallow – 5



Inca Dove Pair Photo by Jim Stevenson

- Red-breasted Nuthatch – 3
- Carolina Wren – 1
- Ruby-crowned Kinglet – 1
- American Robin – 9
- Yellow-rumped Warbler – 1
- House Sparrow - 5

On the farm:

- Green-winged Teal – 1
- Scaled Quail – 6
- Northern Harrier – 4
- Swainson's Hawk – 8
- Red-tailed Hawk – 1
- Golden Eagle – 1
- American Kestrel – 2
- Burrowing Owl – 2
- Western Wood-Pewee – 4
- Eastern Wood-Pewee - 1
- Say's Phoebe – 5
- Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – 4
- Loggerhead Shrike – 1
- Blue-headed Vireo – 1
- Chihuahuan Raven – 1
- Horned Lark – 50
- Barn Swallows – 200
- Rock Wren – 1
- Ruby-crowned Kinglet – 1
- Curve-billed Thrasher – 2
- Orange-crowned Warbler – 1
- Yellow-rumped Warbler – 1
- Wilson's Warbler – 12
- Cassin's Sparrow – 60
- Brewer's Sparrow – 10
- Vesper Sparrow – 4

Lark Sparrow – 8
Lark Bunting – 20
Savannah Sparrow – 5
Grasshopper Sparrow – 4
White-crowned Sparrow – 2
Brewer's Blackbird – 1
Brown-headed Cowbird – 3
House Sparrow – 10

At Texline:

Red-shafted Flicker
Olive-sided Flycatcher – 1
Western Wood-Pewee
Cassin's Kingbird – 1
Bewick's Wren – 1
Yellow-rumped Warbler – 1
Blackburnian Warbler – 1
MacGillivray's Warbler – 1
Wilson's Warbler – 2
Western Tanager – 1
White-crowned Sparrow – 1

September Bird Report **By Connie Fordham**

American Bittern

1 on 9/13/2008, Lipscomb Co., Monty Schoenhals

White-faced Ibis

45 on 9/1/2008, Hansford Co., Rudy Cadra

Wood Duck

2 on 9/13/2008, Lipscomb Co., Monty Schoenhals

Blue-winged Teal

150+ on 9/1/2008, Hansford Co., Rudy Cadra

2 on 9/13/2008, Lipscomb County., Monty Schoenhals

Osprey

1 on 9/11/2008, Hutchinson Co., Rudy Cadra

1 on 9/13/2008, Lipscomb Co., Monty Schoenhals

1 on 9/17/2008, McClellan Crk, Gray Co., Manual

DeLeon

Mississippi Kite

100+ on 9/24/2008, Dumas, Moore Co., Carolyn Stallwitz

Northern Harrier

2 on 9/24/2008, Dumas, Moore Co., Carolyn Stallwitz

Prairie Falcon

1 on 9/24/2008, Dumas, Moore Co., Carolyn Stallwitz

Sora

1 on 9/21/2008, Amarillo, Potter Co., Judith Jones

Wilson's Snipe

1 on 9/13/2008, Lipscomb Co., Monty Schoenhals

Sabine's Gull

1 juv. 9/1/2008, Lk.Rita Blanca, Hartley Co., Brian Gibbons

Forster's Tern

2 on 9/13/2008, Lipscomb Co., Monty Schoenhals

Inca Dove

2 on 9/16/2008, Amarillo, Potter Co., Don McColl

Eastern Screech-Owl

1 heard 9/13/2008, Lipscomb Co., Monty Schoenhals

Great Horned Owl

1 on 9/3/2008, Amarillo, Potter Co., Don McColl

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

1 on 9/13/2008, Canyon, Randall Co., Monty Schoenhals

Black-chinned Hummingbird

1 on 9/1/2008, Amarillo, Potter Co., Don McColl

3 on 9/11/2008, Amarillo, Potter Co., Don McColl

Rufous Hummingbird

1 on 9/15/2008, Sanford, Hutchinson Co., Patricia Collins

Northern Flicker

2 on 9/24/2008, Dumas, Moore Co., Carolyn Stallwitz

Western Wood-Pewee

1 on 9/4/2008, Canyon, Randall Co., Ray Matlack

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher

many on 9/13/2008, Lipscomb Co., Monty Schoenhals

Rock Wren

1 on 9/24/2008, Dumas, Moore Co., Carolyn Stallwitz

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

1 on 9/27/2008, Dumas, Moore Co., Carolyn Stallwitz

Loggerhead Shrike

1 on 9/1/2008, Hansford Co., Rudy Cadra

Yellow Warbler

1 on 9/2/2008, Canyon, Randall Co., Monty Schoenhals

1 on 9/13/2008, Canyon, Randall Co., Monty Schoenhals

1 on 9/15/2008, Amarillo, Potter co., Don McColl

4 on 9/24/2008, Amarillo, Potter Co., Don McColl

several on 9/24/2008, Dumas, Moore Co., Carolyn Stallwitz

several on 9/27/2008, Canyon, Randall Co., Monty Schoenhals

Yellow-rumped Warbler

1 on 9/27/2008, Dumas, Moore Co., Carolyn Stallwitz

Wilson's Warbler

1 on 9/2/2008, Canyon, Randall Co., Monty Schoenhals

1 on 9/15/2008, Amarillo, Potter Co., Don McColl

several on 9/24/2008, Dumas, Moore Co., Carolyn Stallwitz

Yellow-breasted Chat

1 on 9/4/2008, Canyon, Randall Co., Ray Matlack

Chipping Sparrow

100+ on 9/22/2008, Pampa, Gray Co., Jan Elston

Black-headed Grosbeak

1 on 9/27/2008, Canyon, Randall Co., Monty Schoenhals

Painted Bunting

1 on 9/2/2008, Canyon, Randall Co., Monty Schoenhals

Bullock's Oriole

1 on 9/3/2008, Amarillo, Potter Co., Don McColl



Yellow-breasted Chat Photo by Jim Stevenson

outside irrigation circles and weedy roadsides; which makes them all the more difficult to observe. Several of my favorite areas for longspur viewing are: South of I-40 on Arnot Road, west of Amarillo in Randall County; all the back roads around Buffalo Lake Natural Wildlife also in Randall County; the back roads south and east of Amarillo outside of Loop 335 in Randall and Armstrong Counties; any of the farmed fields in Hartley, Moore and Dallam Counties, north of the Canadian River, but especially those along FM 281 between Dalhart and Etter; and best of all, Cactus Playa and the nearby farmland and pastureland in Moore County.



McCown's Longspur Photo by Jim Stevenson

PANHANDLE LONGSPURS

By Barrett Pierce 1/07/2008

Three longspurs winter in the Texas Panhandle: McCown's Longspur, Lapland Longspur and Chestnut-collared Longspur. Finding longspurs is not much of a challenge from November through March. I just drive out to an area of farmland or pastureland with good access via public roads. I search for flocks of birds flying in the typical undulating longspur flight pattern. Larger flocks of longspurs will swirl or wheel around in the sky. If it seems like the flock will never find a suitable landing site, they are longspurs. Even if you cannot find longspurs flying about, it may be helpful just to stop at any likely field, pasture or prairie dog town. A few moments watching and listening will often prove fruitful. Preferred sites for McCown's and Lapland are very short, sparse grass, winter wheat, plowed fields, freshly manured fields and grain fields with standing stubble. Chestnut-collared favor prairie dog towns, short grass pastures, grassy corners

Identifying longspurs can be challenging. I start by listening to their calls and looking at the flocks as they flare their tails when they land or abort a landing. McCown's sport a black "T" on a white tail; Lapland have white or at least lighter outer tail feathers; and Chestnut-collared have a lot of black in the tail, sometimes appearing black tailed in flight. I can usually pick up on the "finch like" call of the Chestnut-collared which contrasts with the rattle of the other two.

Getting good looks at longspurs is usually difficult. After locating an area where longspurs are foraging, I chose a location that gives me some hope of being able to see them once they land. I use my scope to study them on the ground trying to pick out the odd ones in each group. It is best for each person to have their own scope because it is very difficult if not impossible to get on a single longspur and allow someone else to look at it through my scope. On the ground, longspurs scurry along furtively like feathered mice. Any bird perched vertically on the top of a furrow or clod

will not be a longspur. Horned Larks or American Pipits are likely candidates for the vertical sentinels. The revealing views of longspurs are brief and fleeting. I scan through the flocks with my scope as they forage, trying to verify my first impressions of the flock by looking at the males. Laplands are the easiest to identify with their boldly streaked flanks, white belly and strong contrasting triangular face pattern. McCown's are very dull and plain, although many of the males still have a "shadow" of the dark bib on their upper breasts through the winter. Chestnut-collared are nearly as dull but lack the bib; and they have a weak facial pattern, white shoulder patch (male), faint streaking on the flanks (female) and a smaller bill.

Cactus Playa and its surrounds is my preferred area to view longspurs. Cactus Playa is one mile east of US 87/287 on the north side of FM 281 in Moore County. The surrounding farmland and pastureland hosts many large flocks of all three species (smaller numbers of Chestnut-collared) during the winter. Huge numbers of longspurs come to Cactus Playa to drink. I have seen all three species drinking over a two or three hour time span. Longspurs drink by dipping their bills into the water and then raising their head up to swallow. In the process they tilt up into a vertical position exposing the belly and giving a brief view of their face. This is as good as it gets and they may only take a couple of swallows. They prefer shallow muddy areas on the northwest and northeast shores of the playa. Several times, I have set up my camera on a tripod and photographed them both in the air and on the ground, on the northeast area of the playa where the drainage gully empties into the playa.

A good snow cover will concentrate longspurs in the areas where the wind has exposed the bare ground and in uncovered areas along the roadsides. A light snow cover will move the longspurs up to the furrow tops where they are much easier to locate and observe.

McCown's are by far the most prevalent wintering longspur in the Texas Panhandle. Moderate numbers of Lapland occur each year and at times great numbers are present. Chestnut-collared are the rarest of the Panhandle longspurs. Longspurs may occur in flocks from 4-6 birds up to flocks of several hundred. Huge flocks and concentrations of flocks of McCown's and Laplands occur from time to time. The flocks of Chestnut-collared will be much smaller, often only 20 to 30 birds.



Chestnut-collared Longspur Photo by Jim Stevenson

Chestnut-collared arrive earlier and leave later than other Panhandle longspurs. At these times the flocks are less likely to be mixed, so this may help with their identification. Likewise, Laplands arrive later in the fall and depart earlier in the spring than the others. Chestnut-collared are the only Panhandle longspur that will perch on our barbed wire fences and some may do so briefly after being flushed. Most of the McCown's Longspurs and Lapland Longspurs will flush all at the same time. Chestnut-collared Longspurs will be spread out in an area and will flush in singles or up to 5 to 10 birds at a time. Longspurs wear their feathers off to expose their breeding plumage. This makes it much easier to identify them later in the winter or early spring as their breeding plumage begins to show. A good measure of patience is required to study longspurs. I often devote my birding lunch break to longspur observation. A sandwich and some hot coffee always mitigate the frustration.

Many thanks to Candy Myers and Ken Seyffert for their help in preparing this article.

The Prairie Horned Lark

Panhandle Bird Club
1213 S Bryan St
Amarillo, TX 79102

Application for membership in the Panhandle Bird Club \$15.00 Annually September 1 to August 31
Make checks payable to Panhandle Bird Club, Mail to: Connie Fordham, 2404 11th Ave., Canyon, TX 79015

Name: _____ New: _____ Renew: _____ Telephone: _____ email: _____

Address: _____ City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Field Trip Calendar for Oct and Nov 2008

11 OCT Lake Tanglewood: Meet at 7:20 a.m. at the west side of the Southwest Branch Amarillo Public Library parking lot (nearest to McDonald Lake). Alternate meeting spot will be at Lake Tanglewood front gate at 8:00 a.m. Bring lunch. **Leader: Tom Johnson**

8 NOV Greenbelt Lake & vicinity: Meet at 7:20 a.m. at the west side of the Southwest Branch Amarillo Public Library parking lot (nearest to McDonald Lake). Alternate meeting spot will be at The Outpost in Clarendon at 8:30 a.m. Bring lunch. **Leader: Susan Thompson**

29 NOV Canoncita: This is the land acquired a few years ago by Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept., adjacent to Palo Duro Canyon State Park, and not yet open to the public. Meet at 7:20 a.m. at the west side of the Southwest Branch Amarillo Public Library parking lot (nearest to McDonald Lake). Our leader will meet us at 7:50 a.m. at the alternate meeting spot - the parking lot of United in Canyon. Bring lunch. **Leader: Mark Hassell**

We won't have any Panhandle Bird Club field trips in December because we want to encourage everyone to take part in Christmas Bird Counts. Individual count dates are to be announced, but will fall between December 14, 2008 and January 5, 2009.