

THE YELLOWHAMMER

VOLUME 25, NO. 4 THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ALABAMA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY WINTER 2005

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

FOUNDED 1952



IN THIS ISSUE

3

FROM THE EAGLE'S QUILL
FOILED AGAIN
by Col. Bob Reed

4

NEST CHATTER
by Stan Hamilton

5

ON THE ROAD AGAIN
DESERT CALIFORNIA
PART ONE
by Col. Bob Reed

6

AOS WINTER MEETING 2006
MEET THE SPEAKER:
GEOFF HILL
by Col. Bob Reed

6

HOW BIRDS GET THEIR
COLORATION AND
WHY SOME INDIVIDUALS
ARE MORE COLORFUL
THAN OTHERS
by Geoff Hill

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Foiled Again



WELL I GUESS I WILL GO DOWN in AOS history as the only president who had to cancel both October meetings. At least I hope I am. It was one of the most difficult decisions I have made, but everyone was very supportive, and for that I am truly and forever grateful.

Despite the cancelled meeting, the Board of Directors met and conducted Society business.

The Breeding Bird Atlas project is on firm footing and is in good shape to be successfully completed next year. Rick West has gotten a grant to help us with some of the expenses, particularly the hiring of one or more excellent birders to help for a few weeks during the peak season next spring.



The Board also unanimously approved a new slate of officers:

President: Stan Hamilton
 Vice President: Linda Reynolds
 Treasurer: Frank Farrell
 Secretary: Karen Wilson

We will vote on this slate at the next meeting, but I wanted to take this opportunity to introduce them to you now. And having reported that, I will turn the Society over to our new president, Stan Hamilton.

One other happening on my watch for which I can take *no* credit was the organization of the River Region Bird Club. Tommy Pratt had the idea and put it into motion. On our first field trip, to Fort Toulouse, we saw warblers galore, including the only Blackburnian Warblers and Wood Storks I saw all year. Good job, Tommy!

"On the Road Again" Articles

FOR SOME TIME I HAVE NOT NEEDED ANY "ON THE ROAD AGAIN" articles, as we had several in reserve. *The cupboard is bare.* Please send me your OTR stories. Electronic versions are easier for me to copy and paste, but send them by carrier pigeon if you have one. The addresses are on the back cover.

Please send other articles about your birding adventures, yard sightings, or just short things that were interesting, different, or funny.

Electronic Yellowhammer?

IT COSTS WELL OVER A DOLLAR AND A HALF TO PRINT AND MAIL the *Yellowhammer*. We are delivering, on a totally voluntary basis, *The Yellowhammer* via the Internet. If you would like to receive your *Yellowhammer*, in color, as a pdf file, please email the editor at Robert.Reed@psc.alabama.gov.

Important Dates

FOURTH FRIDAY—January 27-29, 2006
 Winter Meeting, Joe Wheeler State Park
THIRD FRIDAY—April 21-23, 2006
 Spring Meeting, Dauphin Island, Alabama
SECOND SATURDAY—May 13, 2006
 North American Migration Count
SECOND FRIDAY—October 13-15, 2006
 Fall Meeting, Dauphin Island, Alabama
2006—Last year for Breeding Bird Atlas Data

Deadlines for Yellowhammer Submissions

Spring 2006	February 14, 2006
Summer 2006	June 5, 2006
Fall 2006	August 15, 2006



IN THE ABSENCE OF A FALL MEETING, there has been no occasion to publicly acknowledge the outstanding job that Colonel Bob Reed has done as president and to express our gratitude to Bob and to the outgoing members of the Board of Directors for their efforts over the last two years, often through some pretty difficult times. It seems appropriate to take this opportunity to say thanks.

To say the least, the last couple of years have been challenging times for AOS, birds and birding, and the gulf coast states in general. The decision to cancel a second fall meeting was certainly difficult for us, but necessary due to the damage to housing, area restaurants, and frequently visited choice birding spots. Additionally, we felt obligated to respect the needs of local residents trying to put their lives back together. The good news is that all indications are we'll once again return to Dauphin Island for our spring meeting, and hopefully (admittedly, quite stubbornly) plan on bringing Jon Dunn in for next year's fall meeting for a successful third attempt.

Our winter meeting this January at Joe Wheeler State Park promises to be a fine weekend with AOS member Geoff Hill as our featured speaker and with great Tennessee Valley winter birding.

We continue to make very good progress with the Alabama Breeding Bird Atlas, beginning our sixth and final year. A special thanks to all who have helped with this project to date and to all who will continue to do so. For those who have not yet participated, your help will be particularly valuable this year as we attempt to add species to areas previously canvassed and to canvass areas of special habitat. Please contact your area's Regional coordinator or Rick West; they will have no problem telling you how you can help. Rick's energy and dedication to this effort continue to amaze all involved!

Birding in Alabama continues to make good gains. The new North Alabama Birding Trail, the Upper Cahaba River Birding Trail, the Walls of Jericho Wilderness area, and the proposed Red Mountain Preserve near Birmingham create



excellent new opportunities to bird new areas and to bring nonresident birders to our state.

Unfortunately, it seems that a new threat to a historically significant habitat area arises almost weekly as of late. Currently, the future of Fort Morgan remains in question and there are near constant efforts to develop Dauphin Island. Woerner Sod Farms in Lowndesboro is being sold and will become a row crop farm, removing perhaps the best location in the state for shorebirds. Threats remain for reopening a road at Monte Sano State Park through one of the area's most consistently reliable spots for birding during spring and fall migration. Plans to log the state parks seem to be ongoing and new

plans to log the Perry County Lakes Park/Marion Fish Hatcheries area were unveiled just last month.

Bob Reid's efforts toward conservation of national and state bird habitat are a source of pride for all of the state's birding community. We've reached a point in time when we each need to ask ourselves how we can help. Over the next two years you will certainly be asked to consider contacting our local, state and federal officials to encourage them to vote with the birds. We're long past being allowed the luxury of waiting to see what happens. If we don't speak up for the birds, who will?

We hope to increase our efforts toward birding education programs for the state, not only to expose children to birding at an early age (there may be a young David Sibley among us), but to increase our youth membership. There are many of us that wish we'd had the opportunity to be exposed to birding as a child; you just can't begin too early.

The winter migrants are arriving daily. I heard my first Pine Siskin this morning and I'm told each day of newly arrived Purple Finches, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and Brown Creepers. Our first winter vagrants are showing up—we had wonderfully surprising looks at a Vermilion Flycatcher and a Red-necked Grebe recently at Wheeler Wildlife Refuge! Try to get out over the next few weeks. Join a local Christmas bird count. Go out and find some rarity for us all to go chase!

Desert California (Part 1)



AT AND I HAD THE OPPOR-
tunity to go to desert
southern California
in November. Our ulti-

mate destination was Joshua Tree National Park, where we planned to spend three days looking for birds as we enjoyed the incomparable scenery, but our first stop was at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. Morongo Canyon experienced a terrible wildfire in June, and much of it was still closed, but the part nearest the parking lot was untouched. As we got out of the car and retrieved the bins from our luggage, we were greeted by several

white-crowned sparrows. I pointed to the fence near the restrooms and commented that I'd seen my first black phoebe there eight years before when (the same?) one lit obligingly on the top of the light pole. We didn't have much time to enjoy its beauty before it hawked an insect and lit in a tree, obscured from our view.

We turned our attention back to the sparrows, hoping for something other than white-crowned. The sound of many wings immediately to our right rear made us turn slowly to see what had lit in the mesquite tree about five feet away. There were several birds, but one was much easier to see than the others. It worked its way toward us, until it saw us and flushed to a fence behind us. Its black face, seen from about ten feet, was diagnostic—an Abert's Towhee. A life bird for both of us. We hadn't walked 20 feet on the boardwalk and had a lifer.

We eased on down toward another patch of grass, talking in hushed tones lest we spook the birds, and spotted several more white-crowned, but something was different about one sparrow. It had a yellow wash about the forehead—a Golden-crowned Sparrow. We worked on down to the end of the boardwalk. We got fairly good looks at a Bewick's Wren and saw several Ruby-crowned Kinglets, which proved to be one of the most abundant birds of the trip. Three very



important-acting people clumped along the boardwalk, talking very loudly about weighty (I'm sure) matters. They passed us going in, and when they began to make their noisy way back, we decided to move on and come back Saturday for the bird walk.

We stayed on Twenty-nine Palms Marine Corps Base. The first morning there, because of the difference in time zones, we were up waiting for the dawn. When it arrived, it was breathtaking; the mountains on the facing valley turned purple, and then every shade from there to gold. While the colors were still awing us, we headed

off base to our first stop on our well-mapped-out itinerary. Our plan was to hike the Joshua Tree National Park looking for birds. As we drove down the hillside from our quarters to the main gate we were greeted by hundreds of ducks and geese on the sewage lagoons.

Now when we travel, I always take Pat to the nicest possible places, so of course we had to go. I don't know if it was the desert air, the breeze, or what, but those lagoons were identifiable to the dullest noses immediately. As we parked and made our way through marines assembling for their morning PT, almost the first sight to greet us was a flock of 30 Brants circling the water, with two Canada Geese following at a discreet distance. The water was not deep, only a few inches in many spots. There were hundreds of American Avocets and Black-necked Stilts, and both dowitchers wading in the shallows. In the deeper parts we saw Lesser Scaup, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Ruddy Duck, Eared Grebe, and two gulls. On the surrounding desert habitat, which was almost totally barren, we saw Bewick's Wren, American Pipit, and some of the closest and brightest Horned Larks we've ever seen. By the time we left the lagoons two hours later, we had seen 40 species of birds, almost half the species we'd see for the entire trip. Where there is water in the desert, there will be birds. *(To Be Continued . . .)*

AOS WINTER MEETING 2006

Meet the Speaker: Geoff Hill

By COLONEL BOB REED



Geoff Hill has been an avid birder since he was about 14 and was an enthusiastic herper for several years before that. He went to college at Indiana University in Bloomington where he got his first taste of academic ornithology working on juncos with Dr. Val Nolan and Dr. Ellen Ketterson. He wrote an honors thesis on the function of distress calls in Tufted Titmice that was published in a leading journal. He got his master's degree at the University of New Mexico studying the function of colorful plumage in Black-headed Grosbeaks and his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan studying coloration in House Finches. He's been the ornithologist

at Auburn for 13 years, holding the rank of full professor.

With his grad students and postdoctoral students, he's published 140 papers in bird journals. In 2002, he published his first book, *A Red Bird in a Brown Bag: The Function and Evolution of Colorful Plumage in the House Finch*. In January 2006, he will publish the first comprehensive review of coloration in birds ever completed: *Bird Coloration*. Much of his research focuses on plumage coloration in birds but he has also studied and written papers on bird-habitat associations in the south, the ecology of Henslow's Sparrows and Bachman's Sparrows in Alabama, and avian diseases, especially encephalitis viruses.

How Birds Get Their Coloration And Why Some Individuals are More Colorful than Others

By GEOFF HILL



The coloration of the feathers and bare parts of birds is the result of either pigments or microstructures. The two most common and widespread pigments used as colorants by birds are carotenoids and melanins. Carotenoids produce the bright red, orange, and yellow color displays of birds, such as the reds of cardinals and House Finches and the yellows of goldfinches. Melanins produce the brown, black, gray, and rusty coloration of birds, such as the black cap of a goldfinch or the rusty breast of a bluebird. Many of the purple, blue, and green colors of feathers result from the microstructure of the feather interacting with light. Examples of structural coloration include the blue speculum of a mallard's wing, the purple sheen of a grackle, and the blue breast of a Blue Grosbeak.

General patterns of color expression are under genetic control. No matter what environment a House Finch grows up in, it will still have the typical color pattern of a House Finch. In some birds, individuals display distinct color morphs, such as the blue and white phase of Snow Geese

and dark and light morphs in jaegers. These morphs are controlled by simple Mendelian mechanisms of inheritance—individuals inherit either a dark morph or a light morph. Within a morph or plumage type, however, individuals can be highly variable in expression of plumage coloration. Such variation in expression is largely shaped by environmental variables. In general, individuals in good physical condition will display more colorful plumage and bare parts than individuals in poor condition. Such condition-dependent color expression is central to the function of ornamental coloration; females use male coloration to find good males for mates because such coloration reflects the condition of prospective mates.

Environmentally induced color variation can cause problems for bird watchers, however, when color expression is used as the key for species identification. In my talk at the Winter AOS meeting, I will describe in more detail how genes and the environment regulate expression of different types of coloration and how this explains some of the common patterns of color variation observed by birders.

AOS WINTER MEETING 2006

Joe Wheeler State Park, Alabama, January 27-29, 2006

FRIDAY, JANUARY 27

- 3:00 p.m. Registration in the lodge lobby.
- 5:00 p.m. Social Hour in the Cypress Room
- 6:30 p.m. Dinner from menu in dining hall (open 5:00- 8:00)
- 7:30 p.m. Announcements and Members Slide Show in the Cypress Room

SATURDAY, JANUARY 28

- 7:00 a.m. Field Trips - meet in the lobby
- 3:00 p.m. Board Meeting in the Cypress Room
- 5:00 p.m. Social Hour in the Cypress Room
- 6:30 p.m. Dinner from menu in the dining hall (open 5:00-8:00)
- 7:30 p.m. Business Meeting and Program in the Cypress Room

SUNDAY, JANUARY 29

- 7:00 a.m. Field trips—meet in the lobby
- 12:00 p.m. Compilation (location to be announced)

ACCOMMODATIONS AND INFORMATION

The next AOS meeting is at Joe Wheeler State Park January 29-29, 2006. Geoff Hill is the speaker.

Rooms are reserved at the lodge for a convention rate of \$62/night. The reservation numbers are 800-544-5639 or 256-247-5461. Please indicate that you are with AOS.

Joe Wheeler State Park is about 27 miles east of Florence, Alabama, and 22 miles west of Athens on US 72 (*not* US 72 Alt). We have *only 30 rooms available*, so members should make reservations early at 1-800-544-5639. There are also several motels in the area. There is an Economy Inn in Rogersville, 256-247-5416, and several places to choose from in Athens and Florence. While both of these are about 30 minutes away, they may be better than the immediate local fare.

All meals will be on your own (but see schedule at left). We hope to have a continental breakfast available Saturday and Sunday, but there are no definite agreements with the lodge at press time. Details will be available at check-in.

There will be no Friday Night Pot Luck Supper.

AOS WINTER MEETING 2006 REGISTRATION FORM

Complete and return to:

Frank Farrell, 2744 Darlene Circle, Birmingham, Alabama 35235

Telephone: (205) 815-3554 • E-mail: frank_far@msn.com

Please make checks payable to AOS and remit by January 13, 2006

Name(s) _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

E-mail Address _____

AOS DUES Student: \$10 • Individual: \$20 • Family: \$30 • Sustaining: \$40
 Life (individual): \$300 • Life (family): \$500

Registration @ \$15 per person	\$
AOS 2006 Dues	\$
Coastal Birding Association 2006 Dues (\$5)	\$
DIBS Land Purchase Contribution	\$
TOTAL ENCLOSED	\$

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