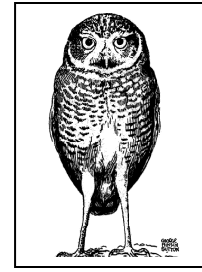


NEBRASKA ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION

Dedicated to the Study, Appreciation
And Protection of Birds



NOU Newsletter

February 2010

Number 1

The Winter of Our Discontent

It has to end sometime, and when it does, Chadron here we come

Actually, to call this “the winter of our discontent” would go too far, not to mention rip off Shakespeare and Steinbeck. But wintry gloom does drag on and birds are scarcer than we’d like. The NEBirds listserv carries reports of all-time-low Christmas Bird Counts and disappointing turnouts at feeders—though the Varied Thrush in Blair, it must be said, stands out as a bright spot.

Our consolation is the hope that the wearier the winter, the more sparkling the spring. And this spring promises to be a glorious one indeed, particularly the spring NOU meeting in Chadron May 14--16. As Janis Paseka wrote in this newsletter after our last meeting in Chadron, in May of 2000, “The area around Chadron is beautiful. It even smells good, as those of us from the tame, deciduous East discovered when we got out of our cars and inhaled the odor of the pines.”

The birding at the meeting was as pleasant as the scenery and the smells. You can’t see birds like Lewis’ Woodpecker, Rock Wren and Pygmy Nuthatch just anywhere in Nebraska, now, can you?

It’s not too early to make lodging reservations. We’ve included details of places to stay on page 4 of this newsletter. The signup for the meeting itself will come in the next newsletter, probably in mid-April.

* * *

We wouldn’t want to be known as a tease, but we can’t resist mentioning that

NOU will be getting a new website in the next few months. Development work on the site is almost complete. It will not only feature an enticing design and a more user-friendly template; it will be easier to update, which hopefully will mean the information on it will be more current and useful. Thank director-at-large Roland Barth, who has led the new-website initiative, Ann Johnson, the designer of the IOU site who is designing ours, and Kathy DeLara, who has agreed to become the webmaster of the new site. More details on the new website in the next newsletter.

In This Issue:

- On Skepticism, p.2**
- Chadron meeting update, p.4**
- NOU News Briefs, p.5**
- Renew now! p.6**
- County listers’ form, p.7**

Upcoming Events:

Spring Meeting: Chadron, May 14-16

Fall meeting: McCook, September 24-26

On Skepticism: Thoughts Inspired by *The Grail Bird*

Science contributes moral as well as material blessings to the world. Its great moral contribution is objectivity, or the scientific point of view. This means doubting everything except facts; it means hewing to the facts, let the chips fall where they may.

--Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

Confronted with doubts about his claim to have seen Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, Mason Spencer knew what to do. The Louisiana legislator and lawyer went out and shot an ivory-bill and plopped it on the doubter's desk.

That was in the early 1930s. Today, thankfully, birders who see endangered birds don't shoot them. But that puts them at a disadvantage, for they certainly face as many doubts as ivory-bill spotters in the past.

As Tim Gallagher's delightfully readable book *The Grail Bird* makes clear, the tradition of poo-h-pooing Ivory-billed Woodpecker sightings dates back decades. Certainly the reaction Gallagher and his colleagues at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology received to their 2004 sighting claims leaves no doubt the tradition lives.

I write not to agree, or disagree, with Gallagher's claims, which readers who attended the NOU meeting in York last May heard in some detail and can judge for themselves. I write, rather, to reflect on the tradition of skepticism Gallagher sketches.

"By 1920," Gallagher writes, "no one had seen any ivory-bills for several years and many ornithologists believed that the species was extinct. When people did report seeing ivory-bills, they were not believed."

Then, in the 1930s and '40s, came a series of sightings, mostly in Louisiana, that were believed. In 1942 one of the Louisiana crew, James Tanner, published *The Ivory-billed Woodpecker*, a book version of his Cornell doctoral thesis that is still considered the bible on the bird. In 1948, John V. Dennis took the last scientifically accepted photographs of the bird, in Cuba.

Decades passed. Over time several sightings were reported, some by reputable observers, but none were widely believed. In 1966, Dennis himself reported seeing the bird in the Big Thicket country of Texas. "How," Gallagher asks, "was his sighting treated by the ornithological community—a report from a person obviously familiar with the ivory-bill, a person who had taken the last accepted pictures of one? It was regarded as a mistake or, worse, a fabrication."

In 1971 a hunter in Louisiana took photos of a bird that George Lowery, a respected ornithologist who was director of Louisiana State University's Museum of Natural Science, believed to be an ivory-bill. Few others shared Lowery's belief. "Most declared the pictures a fraud," Gallagher reports. "They insisted that the man had climbed forty feet up a tree, set a stuffed ivory-bill in place, and snapped a picture of it—twice."

These and other plausible sightings were greeted with such disdain that some people who believed they'd seen the bird stopped reporting their sightings. What was the point if your reward was to be treated as a kook?

Skepticism, of course, is—as Leopold wrote—inherent in the scientific method. In general, it's a good thing. Even excellent birders make mistakes. That's why records committees must demand convincing evidence before accepting reports of rarities. It's natural to wonder whether those who search for “grail birds” don't have a tendency (conscious or un-) to turn pileateds or even red-headededs into ivory-bills. There's no sense fooling ourselves pretending the bird exists if it doesn't, so skeptics are presumed right until proven otherwise.

Still, the ornithological community's unwavering rejection of even plausible ivory-billed sightings from credible observers cries out for explanation. Gallagher doesn't offer one, at least explicitly. Reading between the lines, you can make an argument that Tanner's book is partly to blame. As the only major scholarly work by someone who saw the bird, it has taken on an air of infallibility. But is that air warranted?

Tanner, for example, believed the bird needed large tracts of virgin hardwoods. That's the habitat where he observed ivory-bills in the 1930s—in Louisiana's Singer Tract, which in the 1940s was tragically logged despite conservationists' efforts to save it. When others reported the woodpecker in cypress or pine, their failure to toe the Tanner line on habitat became a reason for doubt.

Hmm. Doesn't the scientific method say doubt everything but facts? Here reports are being doubted for failure to conform to received wisdom. Why don't the skeptics question the received wisdom? Tanner was a great ornithologist whose opinion commands respect, but it was based on observing ivory-bills in but one location. In Cuba, the birds Dennis photographed to wide acceptance in 1948 were nesting in pine trees. Doesn't that suggest that hardwoods might not be the only possible ivory-bill habitat?

It's different if doubters search the area of a reported sighting themselves. Tanner spent two weeks in the Big Thicket after Dennis's 1966 report and based his rejection of Dennis's claim on his own failure to find the bird. Scientific experiments are supposed to be replicable. Arguably, bird sightings should be, too, although perfectly valid ones sometimes aren't.

But many of the doubts expressed over the years emanated from armchairs. Without venturing out of their offices, doubters summarily rejected the sightings of observers who in some cases deserved a fairer hearing. The near unanimity of the rejections raises questions, as well. Man is a social animal. Skepticism is easy when everyone is a skeptic. There's safety in numbers.

Could it be that the doubts weren't based so much on scientific respect for facts as on an unwillingness to challenge received wisdom--or on following the crowd? After all, we all know the Ivory-billed Woodpecker is extinct. Don't we?

In the end, the doubters' motives are a side issue. The burden of proof remains, rightly, with the person claiming to see a bird. But in an age when any photograph can be fabricated and when birds can no longer be shot, you have to wonder what evidence will suffice to meet that burden once skepticism digs in.

Start Planning for Chadron Now

By Alice Kenitz

The 2010 Spring NOU meeting will be held at Camp Norwesca, a United Methodist Camp on the south edge of Chadron State Park. The camp sits in a beautiful spot among the pines. All of our meetings and meals will be in the lodge. There are 16 double-occupancy sleeping rooms--very nice motel-style rooms with twin beds. There is one bathroom/shower for every two rooms. Linens are provided. Two of the sleeping rooms and their shared bathroom are handicapped accessible, as is the lodge itself.

Look for the signup sheet for the meeting, as well as for the lodge, in the next NOU Newsletter, which should be in your hands by mid-April. The lodge aside, there are two other lodging options.

Cabins at Chadron State Park are close to Camp Norwesca. Those reservations can be made directly with Nebraska Game and Parks at 402-471-1414 or online at www.OutdoorNebraska.org

Those who prefer motel rooms can drive about 7.5 miles north to Chadron where there are a number of nice motels. A Google search produced this partial list:

- Olde Main Street Inn (308) 432-3380 115 main St
- Super 8 (308) 432-4471 840 W Highway 20
- Motel 6 (308) 432-3000 755 S Highway 385
- The Westerner (308) 432-5577 300 Oak St
- Best Western West Hills Inn (308) 432-3305 1100 w 10th St
- Pine View Motel (308) 432-5591 901 E 3rd St
- Economy 9 Motel (308) 432-3119 1201 W Highway 20
- Chadron's Log Cabin Motel (308) 432-3032 750 E 3rd St
- The Grand Westerner (308) 432-5595 1050 W Highway 20
- Blaine Rentals (308) 432-5568 159 Bordeaux St

Field trips are still in the 'thinking' stage. Wayne Mollhoff will likely lead one to the White River south of Crawford--a really beautiful area. (Not too many places in the Pine Ridge *aren't* in a really beautiful area, in my opinion.) We will be going to Gilbert-Baker and Sowbelly Canyon. Target species will include Mountain Bluebirds, Western Tanager, Pygmy Nuthatch, Cordilleran Flycatcher, and Plumbeous Vireo. We'll also try for some prairie species--Chestnut-collared and McCown's Longspurs and Brewer's Sparrows. Birders can't really go wrong by just birding around Chadron State Park.

The program is also still in the "thinking" stage. The next newsletter, which you should receive by mid-April, will contain details.

NOU News Briefs

Calling All Listers

Records Committee chair Mark Brogie is doing his annual list compilations and welcomes your contributions. He has even added a new category this year.

1. Nebraska Life List: How many of the 453 species on the "Official List of the Birds of Nebraska" do you have? (Magnificent Frigatebird and Fish Crow may be added to the list, depending on records-committee approval.) This is a total Nebraska list (not annual). Report only totals of 250 or more.
2. County Life List: Only report totals of 125 or more, as of December 31, 2009. Don't include 2010 ticks. There's a county list form on page 7 and also on the NOU website.
3. Total Nebraska County Life List: This is the total number of species for every county visited. Only report totals of 500 or more. To calculate your total, add your totals for every county visited (including those below 125). If you've seen 100 species in every Nebraska county, your total is $100 \times 93 = 9300$.
4. Annual (2009) Species Total: This is the number of bird species you identified in Nebraska in 2009.
5. All 93 counties species total: This is the number of species you've seen in all 93 counties.

Call, send, or e-mail totals to:

Mark A. Brogie
508 Seeley, Box 316
Creighton, NE 68729
(402) 358-5675
email: mbrogie@esu1.org

"It's a fun game. It is a lot harder now to get new life list birds now than it used to be. But the county game brings that part of the fun back into birding for us. We can celebrate each time we find a new county bird now. That is what makes the county life list game so much fun."

--Lanny Randolph -- 2003

Notice

Every three years NOU compiles a directory of members. If you'd prefer not to be included, please notify Neal Ratzlaff, nratzloff@cox.net.

Welcome New Members...

- Jeanine Lackey, Valparaiso;
- Candace Havelly, McCook;
- Susan & Ron Whitney, Lincoln
- Don Mabie, Pickstown, SD
- Letitia Reichart, Kearney

... and New Life Members

- Paul Dunbar, Hastings
- William Flack, Kearney

Board Nominees

The nominating committee (Don Paseka, Loren Padelford, Alice Kenitz) submits, for election at the Chadron meeting: Urban Lehner, president; Nancy Leonard, vice president; Betty Grenon, treasurer; Kevin Poague, secretary; Janis Paseka, editor; Anita Breckbill, librarian; Jan Johnson, director.

NEBRASKA ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

Membership renewals are due for 2010. Please check your mailing label; you will find a date there. It is the year that our records indicate you have paid for, so if it is 2010 or later, no payment is due. If it is 2009, please be sure to renew as soon as possible. We don't want to lose anyone

Please enter my membership in the category checked below:

_____ One Active Member \$15.00 _____ Family Active \$20.00
_____ One Sustaining Member \$25.00 _____ Family Sustaining \$30.00
_____ Student Member \$10.00 _____ Life Member \$250.00

CHECK ONE OF THE FOLLOWING

Yes, I'll receive the newsletter electronically _____ *(email address must be filled out below)*

No, I'd prefer to receive the newsletter on paper _____ *(email address below optional)*

Name _____
Address _____
City, State, Zip Code _____
Telephone _____ e-mail _____

Make checks payable to Nebraska Ornithologists' Union and return with this form to:
Betty Grenon
1409 Childs Road East
Bellevue, NE 68005

The NOU Records Committee
Did you know? The current committee members are:

Mark Brogie, Chair
T.J. Walker, (Second term ends 2011)
Paul Dunbar, (Second term ends 2011)
Bill Huser, (Second term ends 2012)
Loren Padelford, (Second term ends 2012)
Ross Silcock, (Second term ends 2013)
Joe Gubanyi, (First term ends 2011)
Joel Jorgensen, (First term ends 2012)

County List

- | | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| 1. _____ Adams | 32. _____ Frontier | 63. _____ Nance |
| 2. _____ Antelope | 33. _____ Furnas | 64. _____ Nemaha |
| 3. _____ Arthur | 34. _____ Gage | 65. _____ Nuckolls |
| 4. _____ Banner | 35. _____ Garden | 66. _____ Otoe |
| 5. _____ Blaine | 36. _____ Garfield | 67. _____ Pawnee |
| 6. _____ Boone | 37. _____ Gosper | 68. _____ Perkins |
| 7. _____ Box Butte | 38. _____ Grant | 69. _____ Phelps |
| 8. _____ Boyd | 39. _____ Greeley | 70. _____ Pierce |
| 9. _____ Brown | 40. _____ Hall | 71. _____ Platte |
| 10. _____ Buffalo | 41. _____ Hamilton | 72. _____ Polk |
| 11. _____ Burt | 42. _____ Harlan | 73. _____ Red Willow |
| 12. _____ Butler | 43. _____ Hayes | 74. _____ Richardson |
| 13. _____ Cass | 44. _____ Hitchcock | 75. _____ Rock |
| 14. _____ Cedar | 45. _____ Holt | 76. _____ Saline |
| 15. _____ Chase | 46. _____ Hooker | 77. _____ Sarpy |
| 16. _____ Cherry | 47. _____ Howard | 78. _____ Saunders |
| 17. _____ Cheyenne | 48. _____ Jefferson | 79. _____ Scotts Bluff |
| 18. _____ Clay | 49. _____ Johnson | 80. _____ Seward |
| 19. _____ Colfax | 50. _____ Kearney | 81. _____ Sheridan |
| 20. _____ Cuming | 51. _____ Keith | 82. _____ Sherman |
| 21. _____ Custer | 52. _____ Keya Paha | 83. _____ Sioux |
| 22. _____ Dakota | 53. _____ Kimball | 84. _____ Stanton |
| 23. _____ Dawes | 54. _____ Knox | 85. _____ Thayer |
| 24. _____ Dawson | 55. _____ Lancaster | 86. _____ Thomas |
| 25. _____ Deuel | 56. _____ Lincoln | 87. _____ Thurston |
| 26. _____ Dixon | 57. _____ Logan | 88. _____ Valley |
| 27. _____ Dodge | 58. _____ Loup | 89. _____ Washington |
| 28. _____ Douglas | 59. _____ McPherson | 90. _____ Wayne |
| 29. _____ Dundy | 60. _____ Madison | 91. _____ Webster |
| 30. _____ Fillmore | 61. _____ Merrick | 92. _____ Wheeler |
| 31. _____ Franklin | 62. _____ Morrill | 93. _____ York |

WHAT THEY SAY

“I hope you love birds too. It is economical. It saves going to heaven.” –Emily Dickinson

“When thou seest an eagle, thou seest a portion of genius, lift up thy head.” –William Blake

“A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.” –Chinese proverb

“One swallow does not make a summer.” –Aristotle

“If one cannot catch a bird of paradise, better take a wet hen.” –Nikita Khrushchev

Nebraska Ornithologists' Union
 3745 Garfield
 Lincoln, NE 68506-1028

Address Service Requested

 Nonprofit Org.
 U.S. Postage Paid
 Lincoln, NE
 Permit No. 756



<u>President and Newsletter Editor:</u> Urban Lehner, 15526 Pierce Cir., Omaha NE 68144	<u>Phone:</u> 402 301 6143	<u>Email address</u> urbanity@hotmail.com
<u>Vice President:</u> Nancy Leonard, 15526 Pierce Cir., Omaha NE 68144	402 301 6143	neleonard@gmail.com
<u>Secretary:</u> Kevin Poague, 379 So. 46 th Street, Lincoln NE, 68510	402 570 6851	kpoague@neb.rr.com
<u>Treasurer:</u> Betty Grenon, 1409 Childs Rd. E., Bellevue NE 68005	402 731 2383	grenon925@aol.com
<u>Directors:</u> Steve Lamphere, 3101 Washington St., Apt. 98, Bellevue, NE 68005 Kathy DeLara, 170188 Spring Creek Rd., Mitchell, NE 69357 Roland Barth, 4002 Hunters Cove, Omaha, NE 68123	402 291 9149 308 632 3047 402 292 6291	kingfisher65@aol.com renosmom@charter.net rebarth@cox.net
<u>Past Presidents:</u> Lanny Randolph, 2028 34 th Road, Minden, NE 68959 David Heidt, 1703 Hilltop, Norfolk, NE 68701	308 216 0427 402 371 3412	snowbunting@rcom-ne.com daveh@northeast.edu
<u>Editor of The Nebraska Bird Review:</u> Janis Paseka, 1585 Co. Rd. 14 Blvd., Ames NE 68621	402 727 9229	paseka76@gmail.com
<u>Librarian:</u> Anita Breckbill, 3237 R Street, Lincoln, NE 68503	402 438 1300	abreckbill1@unl.edu
<u>Seasonal bird report compiler:</u> Ross Silcock, P.O. Box 57, Tabor, IA 51653	712 629 5865	silcock@rosssilcock.com
<u>Breeding Bird Atlas and Nest Records Committee:</u> Wayne Mollhoff, 2354 Euclid St, Ashland, NE 68003	402 944 2840	wmollhoff@netscape.net
<u>Records Committee Chairman:</u> Mark A. Brogie, 508 Seeley, Box 316, Creighton, NE 68729	402 358 5675	mbrogie@esu1.org
<u>Nebraska Birding Trails</u> http://www.NebraskaBirdingTrails.com		
<u>NOU Website</u> http://RIP.physics.UNK.edu/NOU		