

Philadelphia Larus

the newsletter of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club

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Spotted Owl Madness

by DON JONES

It was a clear, beautiful morning as the "Z Team" (Phil Street has already reserved the "A Team" designation) wound its way slowly toward California Gulch.

We had left Patagonia early to arrive ahead of Arizona's blistering afternoon sun. The scenery along Ruby Road was impressive. The recent monsoon rains had brightened the parched grasses to lush green. Washes and canyons were dotted with live oaks. Streams ran full.

A quick stop at Lake Pena Blanca for ladies' relief (men, you know, relieve themselves anywhere; just look for who's not keeping up with the group and I'll give 2:1 odds he's not really trying for that warbler the group missed), and we were off again.

We had come prepared with a hastily drawn map by cartographer Serge LaFrance that purported to show the exact spot we would find Five-striped Sparrow. After numerous somber coin flips at road forks and considerable belief that we had no idea where in the hell we were, we miraculously arrived at the parking spot sketched on Serge's map.

Two other cars were already there. A quick drink quenched our thirst, then down into the gulch we headed to locate the promised land. One ford of the creek, a few yards farther, and we were there.

At the marked spot we found Dan George, binocular salesman (that's what you call covering the territory), his son and two birders.

In birding — and in life in general, for that matter — there's always good news and bad news. Being able to have Dan relate everything you always wanted to know about your binoculars but were afraid to ask was the good news. The fact related by the two birders — that, starting tomorrow, Fort Huachuca would be closed to birders for two weeks because of military exercises — was the bad news. Where else could we get Spotted Owl and Buff-breasted Flycatcher?

Starting tomorrow, Fort Huachuca would be closed to birders for two weeks because of military exercises. Where else could we get Spotted Owl and Buff-breasted Flycatcher?

A quick decision is made to leave California Gulch immediately and go for the flycatcher and owl. Ballpark estimates suggest it will take us about three hours to reach Sierra Vista, and it is already noon. We agree not to stop for other birds on the way.

The fastest route, we figure, would be via Arivaca, up I-19 to Continental, then over Box Canyon Road to Sonoita and so on. But what if Box Canyon Road is impassable because of all the recent rains? We decide to take the chance.

Paul Guris takes over the driving. (Those of you who know Paul will understand why.) An hour out, we violate our agreement for the first time to watch a Redtail and a Golden Eagle perform some aerial harassment maneuvers. We zip past the Continental School. Harold Jackson wants a better look at Rufous-winged Sparrow. We know they're here; we'd seen them just a few days ago. We don't stop. I feel bad. Will Harold get another chance?

Besides Harold and Paul, also in our Arizona caravan are Mary Mellon, Rick's mother; Anita Covington; and Myra Goldfarb of Allentown.

Box Canyon Road is no problem. We're back on hard surface, racing (that's why Paul is driving) toward Sonoita. The van screeches to a halt. Paul had heard the bouncing-ball song of Botteri's Sparrow. We violate the pact again, but manage field-filling views of the sparrow. Off again.

Twenty-five minutes lost. We reach the main gate of Fort Huachuca. The mountains are bathed in clouds, and it is obviously pouring where we intend to go. We get our pass.

Soon we enter the deluge. The wipers cannot keep pace. The washes are full of runoff. We pass a white car parked at the Sheelite Canyon trailhead, and a few minutes later arrive at the Boy Scout cabin at the head of Garden Canyon. The rain is subsiding to occasional drizzle.

We prepare for the short hike up to the Chihuahua pine grove where the flycatchers are usually easily found.

The white car we had passed earlier arrives. The occupants are Jake and Ruth Wade, a British couple on a several-week U.S. birding holiday. Their plan of attack is similar to ours. They have one of those hastily drawn maps (this one drawn by Smitty, who is known to many DVOCers) supposedly pinpointing today's exact roosting spot of the Spotted Owl in Sheelite Canyon.

They do not know the exact location of the flycatcher. We do. We agree to join forces. The flycatcher proves more elusive than normal. Finally, a bird is located and, after a brief but furious chase, everyone gets a satisfactory view. We drive to the Sheelite Canyon trailhead and park.

Those who have hiked Sheelite Canyon know the trail is not a particularly easy one. The higher up the canyon you go, the steeper and rockier the trail becomes. It is prudent to start early and allow plenty of time. Neither of these conventional precautions was possible this day, and, in addition, because of the heavy cloud cover, nightfall would arrive early.

We begin our ascent. Smitty's map said the owls were roosting several hundred yards down (actually, up) the second small side path to the right and that we could identify the path since we'd have to navigate over, under or around — he wasn't specific

(Continued on Page 4)

The Bare Truth About Birding Martha's Vineyard

by HART RUFÉ

On Aug. 16 to 18, a group of us went to Martha's Vineyard, Mass., to search for the Red-billed Tropicbird sporadically reported there this summer. The last confirmed sighting was on Aug. 8, but we decided to take our chances anyway.

We took a small boat from Chatham to Monomoy Island, an eight-mile-long barrier island extending south from the "elbow" of Cape Cod. Spectacular shorebirding occurs on Monomoy during migration — last year's report of a Cox's Sandpiper, for

example. Our best bird was a Bar-tailed Godwit mixed in with a large flock of Hudsonians. Other than that, we studied vast flocks of shorebirds and found generally the same birds we might find in New Jersey.

The last day of the trip, we took a whale-watching boat out of Hyannis-Barnstable and in addition to numerous Hump-backed Whales, we saw Cory's, Greater and Manx Shearwaters, both Leach's and Wilson's Storm-Petrels and a flock of Red-necked Phalaropes.

However, the highlight of the trip was the

excursion to Martha's Vineyard. After the ferry ride to the island, which was unproductive for birds, we went to Gayhead Cliffs, a rocky promontory at the southeastern edge of the island where the bird had been seen. Visibility was sparkling — it turned out to be the first clear day in about two weeks.

As we were scanning the area for the tropicbird, we discovered a nude beach at the base of Gayhead Cliffs and, while watching for the tropicbird to put in its appearance, we decided to bird the nude beach. Of course, we were properly equipped: Included in our arsenal was a Questar, which everyone knows provides excellent close-up and personal views.

One of the first comments on nude-beach birding [*Editor's note: This phrase illustrates the extremely valuable role played in our language by the lowly hyphen*] is that it is absolutely untrue that the good Lord created all men (and women, for that matter) equal.

However, after diligent searching, we were able to compile the following bird list on the nude beach:

We saw both the Downy and the Hairy; the Greater, Lesser, Little and Least. (You could distinguish the Greater by the slightly larger, upturned bill. Several in the group, though, missed the Least for lack of interest.)

We also spotted the Brown-headed, Brown-capped, Brown-crested, Black-headed, Black-crowned, Black-capped and Black-whiskered, as well as the Yellow-crowned, Golden-crowned, White-fronted, the Ruddy and the White-headed, White-breasted and White-rumped.

We also were able to account for the Tufted, Horned, Great-horned, Hoary, Broad-tailed and both Buff-breasted and Buff-bellied.

But it was clearly the "reds" that provided the most excitement. We saw Red-headed, Red-faced, Red-naped, Red-necked, Red-eyed, Red-shouldered, Red-breasted, Red-tailed, Red-bellied, Red-cockaded, Red-legged, Red-footed and one magnificent Red-shafted.

We searched thoroughly for several extralimital species, such as both the Brown and Blue-footed Boobies (not cold enough for Blue-footed), as well as the Great Tit (several times we thought we had one) or the Blue Tit (still not cold enough) or the Coal Tit (surely a mountain bird not to be found at the beach), but without success.

Needless to say, the tropicbird did not show up (the last report remains Aug. 8), but it really didn't matter. When we gave this report at the Sept. 1 DVOC meeting and suggested a similar trip next year, it became obvious that we would need several buses for the outing.

PROGRAMS

Meetings are held the first and third Thursdays of the month at the Academy of Natural Sciences, 19th St. and Benjamin Franklin Parkway, unless otherwise indicated. Check with the guard for room location. For information, call Brian Moscatello, program chairman, 609-235-1739.

OCT. 6 — ROBERT DITTRICK of Anchorage, Alaska, leader of wilderness rafting and birding trips: "Birds of the High Arctic Wilderness."

OCT. 20 — DR. DAVID DOBKIN, assistant professor of zoology at Rutgers University-Camden and co-author of *The Birder's Handbook: A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds*: "Forests Fragmentation and the Conservation of North American Birds — Lessons From Nevada."

NOV. 3 — KATY E. DUFFY, owl bander, "Cape May's Secret Migration."

NOV. 17 — ANNUAL BANQUET. Ceded this year to the Jersey contingent, the banquet will be held at the New Woodbine Inn, Route 73 at Remington Ave., Pennsauken, N.J. The guest speaker is William Streeter, a raptor rehabilitator, who will bring with him a few feathered friends. For information, call dinner chairman Dr. John LaVia, 609-877-8025. See invitation elsewhere in this issue, and be sure to send your checks in early.

DEC. 1 — DR. FRANK GILL, curator of ornithology and vice president of systematics at the Academy of Natural Sciences and — what's important for this speaking engagement — chairman of the American Birding Association's Check-list Committee: "Species About to Be."

DEC. 15 — TOM SOUTHERLAND, club member and tour leader: "The Galapagos."

JAN. 5 — Annual meeting. Election of officers. Refreshments will follow.

FIELD TRIPS

Friday and Saturday, Oct. 7-8: Pelagic Trip sponsored by the American Littoral Society. *Miss Barnegat Light* leaves from Barnegat Inlet, 18th St. and the Bay, Friday night, Oct. 7, at 8 p.m., and returns Saturday afternoon. Cost: \$65. For information, call the society, 201-291-0055.

Saturday and Sunday, Oct. 8 and 9: DVOC Weekend. *Barnegat Light* to Cape May. Meet at Barnegat Lighthouse State Park on Saturday morning at 8 a.m. Leaders: Bob Sehl and Frank Windfelder. Overnight at Brady's Cape May Hilton, with extra charge for dinner. Dinner prepared by Kronschnabel/Brady.

Sunday, Nov. 6: Bake Oven Knob. Meet at the Lookout parking lot at 9 a.m. for traditional day of hawk-watching. Leader: Earl Harrison, 215-842-6315.

Friday and Saturday, May 26 and 27: DVOC-Urner Annual Hudson Canyon Pelagic Trip. Leave *Barnegat Light* (same place, same boat as October trip) Friday night, at 8:30, return Saturday around 6 p.m. Rain date: May 27-28. The 1988 trip produced skua, Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaeger, Northern Fulmar, four species of shearwater, Wilson's Storm-Petrel and Arctic Tern.

Cost: \$65. Send checks, payable to DVOC, to Alan Brady, Box 103, Wycombe, Pa. 18980. Include phone number on check; your check ensures your place. For information, call Alan, 215-598-7856 (home) or 215-968-2833 (work).

For information on any of these trips or to suggest other trips, contact field trip chairman Don Jones, 609-859-0281.

'Conservation' Is the Watchword

by JOHN HARDING

As the DVOC's 1990 Centennial approaches, celebration and reflection are the order of the day. Celebration will have a life of its own, no doubt, while reflection should offer insights and ideas to help chart the club's direction during its second century.

DVOC has always served as a haven where those interested in birds could share experiences and information in an atmosphere of camaraderie and fun. The club's members come from various backgrounds, careers and philosophies, yet all share a passion for birds.

Its members include ornithologists, both professional and amateur, concerned with the scientific inquiry into the nature of birds; most are probably hobbyists who consider birds their avocation.

Among these are birders whose traveling, listing and even competition add to the exhilaration of their sport. Others are bird watchers, more passive perhaps, but no less interested or committed. The joy of birds is the common thread that binds the club.

However, for that joy and interest to flourish, our club had had to be activist at various times throughout its history. Scientific inquiry, collecting birds for study and helping to stop mass hunting for market and fashion were necessary endeavors during the club's first 50 years.

The past half-century has witnessed club members active in preserving vast refuges for migratory birds, backing legislation to curtail poisoning our environment and raising concern about endangered species.

Habitat destruction is now the greatest threat to birds and to our hobby: draining wetlands, sodbusting and especially unchecked development have ravaged the Delaware Valley, as well as the rest of the Americas.

While we should be concerned about the greenhouse effect, the ozone layer and the destruction of tropical forests, there are organizations that we support — such as the Nature Conservancy and various land trusts — that deal with such insults by preserving habitat where unique or threatened species occur.

They, too, deserve our support, and many individual club members do so. What still is needed is closer monitoring of our local environment, the tristate area with its varied and susceptible ecosystems, with appropriate action taken before the 11th hour.

Irresponsible developers and planning commissions are the "evil Empire." A recent article in the *New York Times* pointed out that

the increasing scarcity of our woodland breeders may be only partially due to tropical forest and wintering ground destruction.

Optimally, eastern deciduous woodlands should be more than 100 acres in size and nearly square in shape; if not, predators such as raccoons, cats and blue jays have easy access to our nesting thrushes and warblers.

How many such tracts still exist in Philadelphia and its surrounding counties? What we do have is an increasingly thin trail of such preserves throughout the area that are becoming more isolated from each other because of unbridled development.

If responsibility does not prevail, we eventually will have, in essence, wildlife parks and "living museums" where local populations continue to interbreed with ever-decreasing genetic diversity and the threat of ultimate extinction.

If our birds are to remain and our hobby to continue, the DVOC should once again become activist as the times dictate. The DVOC recently upgraded its Conservation Committee under the able stewardship of Clay Sutton. This has been invaluable in raising the club's awareness and in beginning to organize concerted battle plans.

However, we need more eyes and ears because of the scale of the threat. Instead of one individual covering each state, we should consider several for each county. Something similar to the model used in the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas project may well be efficient.

The pessimist in me wonders if we shouldn't concentrate on the more outlying areas, as perhaps our adjoining counties may well be doomed already. This expanded core of Conservation Committee members would continue to be activist: educating both our club and the local communities, writing letters on the club's behalf, forming liaisons with other interested parties and attending planning commission meetings and other hearings on a regular basis. *Help make policy, not just react to it.*

The club as a whole should support such an expanded, activist committee, both philosophically and financially. Not every member nor even most members need serve on the committee, but the club's attitude and budget priorities would dictate any appropriate directives for action.

The main purpose of our club will always be to share the joy of birds and meet with others akin in mind and spirit. It is time again to ensure that that continues.

Extra-Credit Trips: DVOC Goes South

Alan Brady has dreamed up a mid-winter vacation for those who need a little help after they return from the traditional President's Day weekend in New England: Costa Rica, from March 6 to 21.

His itinerary includes Monteverde, Hacienda La Pacifica, Palo Verde, Bijagua, Volcan Cacao Field Station in Guanacaste and Rara Aves Biological Station on the Atlantic Slope.

Some of the more stunning birds that might be seen are Resplendent Quetzal; Three-Wattled Bellbird; Purple-throated Mountain-Gem; four species of mot-mots; trogons; Boat-billed Heron; Jabiru; Long-tailed Manakin; Spotted Rail; Collared Forest Falcon; Ornate, Black and Black-

and-white Hawk-Eagles; Laughing Falcon; Scarlet Macaw; Great Green Macaw; Spectacled Owl; and Great Curassow. Get the picture?

Costa Rica is noted for a wide variety of mammals, butterflies and spectacular plant life, as well.

The bottom line: about \$1,200 door to door. This price includes all air fares, ground transportation, hotels and most meals. For information, contact Alan Brady, Box 103, Wycombe, Pa. 18980; 215-598-7856 (home) or 215-968-2833 (work). Space is limited.

Armas Hill also is working on a trip to Venezuela for June. Catch him at a meeting for details.

Philadelphia Larus

Send information you would like considered for publication in Philadelphia Larus to:

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Spotted Owl Madness in Arizona

(Continued from Page 1)

— a fallen tree blocking the way.

It was obvious after 10 minutes that we were not what one would describe as a compatible hiking group. Paul and Anita were so far ahead they couldn't be heard, the middle of the pack was already strung out over 200 yards and poor Jake was in obvious discomfort, having to stop every 50 yards, gasp for breath and mop beads of sweat from his brow. We later were to learn he had ulcer problems and had been ill the past two days.

This, then, was madness at its finest — everyone in pursuit of a hoped-for, several-minute look at a creature who, in past visits, was so unmoved by the human encounter that it seemed like an unbearable burden for the owl to open his eyes and stare back at the thousands of dollars worth of optical and camera equipment trained on him from but a few feet away.

Onward. The group was now strung out over a half-mile. Ruth had abandoned Jake and was now up with the leaders. There were more frequent stops, and talk of abandoning this crazy mission grew more serious.

No one wanted to hike down in the dark. We passed both locations where I had seen the owl previously, but no owls were there this time — and worse yet, we had not even located the first side path. One by one, people made the hard decision to go no farther and head down. But since we were strung out over such a distance, no one knew where anyone else was or whether they were going or coming. Madness.

I left Mary and Harold to try to let those farther up know what was happening. Soon I met Myra. She was quitting. Higher yet, I found Anita, whose bad knee had forced her down.

Perhaps an hour remained before dark. I worried about Jake, somewhere below, and then figured that as long as he had kept to the trail, someone surely would trip over his body on the way down.

Soon I encountered Paul. He and Ruth had found the first side path and intended to push on. I told Paul I'd go on to the first side path and wait there for him and Ruth on their descent.

The side path led into a small wooded canyon. Paul and Ruth could not be heard; they were obviously a fair distance ahead. I scanned the path into the side canyon with binoculars. It looked as if a fallen pine lay across the path several hundred yards in, but I couldn't be sure. How I wished Dan George were here! I could have asked him how to see through solid objects with my binoculars. I decided to explore the side path.

The path, if you could call it that, was narrow and treacherous because of the

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recent rain and mud. Could this be the second path on Smitty's map and not the first? I pushed on a short distance, rounded a bend, and there, seven feet directly over the path, sat a Spotted Owl.

I returned to the main trail and shouted for Paul. After several tries, I heard him answer from far up the canyon. In a few minutes, he was traversing the side path. Ruth was on her way down as well. It appeared that only three of us would see the bird.

Once Paul saw the owl, he left to try to catch Anita. Ruth arrived shortly. I told her I'd wait and walk down with her after she'd seen the bird.

Just then, as if out of nowhere, we heard someone coming. Probably Paul and Anita, I thought. Then, from behind a rock, out stepped Jake. It was a wobbly step.

Jake was now resting several minutes after each third step. Night was now less than 45 minutes away at best. Certainly he would not try for the bird in his condition, even though it was but several hundred yards away. He and Ruth conferred. They would try for the owl. I promised to wait until they returned to the main trail.

As I watched Jake inch his way along the side trail with frequent help from his wife, I

wondered what utter madness must possess this Brit. I reached into my pocket and discovered I had the keys to the van — a big help to those now probably at the bottom and wanting access to the cooler.

An eternity seemed to pass. Finally I saw Jake and Ruth returning. Jake was now on all fours, crawling his way back. At several stops, Jake became physically ill. They finally arrived at the main path, but not before Jake was sick again.

Ruth inquired as to whether we had any torches in the van. She was certain darkness would overtake them before they reached the car. It took me a while to realize she was asking for a flashlight. I told her we'd wait for them at the bottom or come back up with lights if darkness came. On the way down, I met Paul coming back up to see what happened to me. He continued on up to help Jake and Ruth.

Thirty-five minutes after I got to the bottom of the path, the trio finally appeared. Jake slouched into the seat behind the wheel of his car and sipped on a cool drink from our ice chest. Ruth sat next to him, and the following conversation, in full British accent, was overheard:

"Jake, it was absolute madness to do that 'ike in your condition."

"Well. I got the bloody bird, di'n't I?"

"Right, Jake, but you could 'ave died in the process."

"I know, luv, but what a way to go!"

Typically English. Sort of make you wonder why we're still not a colony, doesn't it?

P.S. — Harold did get his good look at Rufous-winged Sparrow. And, in case you're wondering, at the marked spot on Serge's map, in addition to Dan George, his son and the two birders, we also found Five-striped Sparrow. Thanks, Serge and Cindy!

You are cordially invited to the DVOC Annual Dinner

Thursday, November 17, 1988

Guest speaker: William Streeter, Delaware Valley Raptor Center, Milford, Pa.

Topic: "Northeastern Birds of Prey"

Place: New Woodbine Inn
Route 73 at Remington Ave.
Pennsauken, N.J.

Cash Bar: 6 p.m.

Dinner: 7:30 p.m.

Indicate choice: Veal piccante/capon with wild rice

For information, call dinner chairman John La Via, 609-877-8025

Mail checks to:

John LaVia

56 Millbrook Drive

Willingboro, N.J. 08046

Cost: \$16

Checks payable to DVOC