Bluebirding in the Time of Covid

By Cathy Van Bebber

One of the most fun-loving and enjoyable activities volunteers do at Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge is to help monitor the 46 bluebird boxes that are set up each spring for nesting eastern bluebirds. The project is part of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology NestWatch program, a nationwide monitoring program. Participants in this citizen science program set up bluebird boxes and then track the status and trends in the reproductive biology of the birds. Volunteers monitor when the bluebirds build their nests, the number of eggs laid, how many eggs hatch, and how many hatchlings survive. They report their findings to the Cornell NestWatch website each week. The data from reports all over the United States is used to study the current condition of breeding bird populations and how they are changing over time as a result of climate change, habitat degradation and loss, expansion of urban areas,

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Refuge Update: Texoma Water Level: www.laketexoma.com/level

All roads and trails are open, but pond fishing is closed to protect wintering waterfowl, and boating is restricted to only non-motorized crafts and only on Big Mineral Creek. Fishing from the shorelines of Lake Texoma is allowed year-round throughout the refuge except from Plover, Tern, and Egret Roads which are set aside for wildlife observation and photography. Also: Don’t miss the Monarch Butterflies: good numbers migrate through the refuge’s Butterfly Garden each October.

October Second Saturday: BEES
A FREE Online Program, Saturday October 10th, 10:00am via ZOOM.

Did you know there are over 4000 native species of bees in the United States, around 700 of which are in Texas? From this webinar you will learn about not only their diversity and ecology but also how to support native bee populations.

To Register for the Presentation:
1. Click or copy/paste:
   https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUkd-2qrzwrGdB8pZ9eExjFWGkeW0eT55DB
2. Enter your information, press the blue REGISTER button
3. You will receive an email confirming your registration.
4. Download the APP called “ZOOM Cloud Meetings” to your preferred device (computer, phone, tablet, etc)
5. Use the link in the emailed confirmation message to open the meeting on October 10th, at 10:00 AM

Photo by Jeffrey Gladden
Wild Mammals of Grayson County—Mammal Classification
By Bryon Clark

Wild mammals are an integral part of the fauna of Grayson County, Texas, and most people are familiar with several of the species, such as the Virginia Opossum, Eastern Fox Squirrel, White-tailed Deer, and Bobcat. However, many of the over 60 species that are expected to be found in the county are not recognized because of their small size, nocturnal activity, and/or secretive habits. This is first of several articles that will discuss wild mammals that probably occur in the area. This article will provide a brief overview of the classification of mammals. In subsequent articles, specific details about the various groups and species will be discussed.

Even though mammals may look different, all occur in the Class Mammalia. Mammals are characterized by the presence of hair, females providing nourishment to young with milk-secreting glands, and teeth. These features separate mammals from other classes of vertebrates such as the amphibians, reptiles, birds, and fish.

All mammals are subdivided into smaller groups called orders. Members of an order have a set of shared morphological, anatomical, and/or genetic characteristics. For example, all bats can fly and are classified in the Order Chiroptera. Of the 11 orders of mammals found in Texas, 8 occur in Grayson County.

Each order may be subdivided into one or more families. White-tailed Deer and Pronghorn Antelope share features that place them in the Order Artiodactyla; however, they have some different features and occur in the Family Cervidae and Family Antilocapridae, respectively. Of the 36 families of mammals found in Texas, 25 occur in Grayson County.

The next level is the genus; there may be one or more genera in a family. Members of a genus share traits that separate them from other genera. For example, the Coyote and Eastern Gray Fox are in the Family Canidae; however, the Coyote is in the genus Canis; whereas, the Eastern Gray Fox is in Urocyon (the genus name is italicized and the first letter is capitalized).

The next classification level is species. Typically, a species is considered a naturally occurring group of interbreeding individuals that are reproductively isolated from other such groups. Although the Swamp Rabbit (Sylvilagus aquaticus) and Eastern Cottontail (Sylvilagus floridanus) look similar, they typically live in different habitats and do not interbreed (the italicized species name follows the genus but is all lower case). The genus and species of an organism comprise its scientific name; no two mammals have the same scientific name. Of the over 150 native and introduced species of terrestrial mammals found in Texas, more than 60 may be found in Grayson County.

The next article will discuss an order of mammal that only has a single species in Texas. As a hint, it has the most teeth of any terrestrial mammal in Texas and the United States.

**Birding with Jack**

**September 9th:** We are in one of those slow times of year for finding birds. A lot of birds are not near as active now, having completed nesting, some molting and some starting to migrate etc. So as a result we had a low species count. Herons and Egrets are still much in evidence with a total of 109 Great Egrets, 89 Snowy Egrets, 397 Cattle Egrets, 8 Little Blue Herons, 11 Great Blue Herons, 2 Tricolored Herons and a hybrid that we feel that is a cross between a Snowy Egret and a Tricolored Heron. Hybrids of this nature are extremely rare. At Deaver Pond we found a Black-crowned Night-Heron that had caught a catfish and was trying to figure out how to finish it off. Mississippi Kite numbers are down and we only saw 2. We did see a Broad-winged Hawk, a species that has been scarce this year. We had 2 Pileated Woodpeckers on Harris Creek Trail along with a Red-headed Woodpecker. There was a Belted Kingfisher at Meadow Pond. We located a couple of American Kestrels on the west side of the refuge. We saw a total of 4 Lark Sparrows, finishing the day with a low count of 48 species. Photos are of hybrid heron and immature Black-crowned Night-Heron.

**Sept 12th:** Closeup shot of Roseate Spoonbills

**Sept 13th:** The morning was quite pleasant with light winds. We started out our census today a bit different, taking the road behind the maintenance buildings leading to Raasch Trail. That turned out to be a great choice because after crossing the creek we came upon a large group of feeding birds. The first bird to catch our attention was a Pileated Woodpecker that lit in a Hackberry tree and proceeded to feed on the berries of the tree. There were also Eastern Bluebirds and House Finches in the tree. Then nearby a White-breasted Nuthatch flew in. It was a good day for Pileated Woodpeckers with a count of 4. We finished the day with a count of 24 Wood Ducks most of which were sitting on the dike at Mineral Marsh. We once again saw the immature Black-crowned Night-Heron at Deaver Pond along with a Red-headed Woodpecker and an Olive-sided Flycatcher. There was a pair of Belted Kingfishers at Meadow Pond. We saw two warblers today, one a Nashville Warbler on the way to Meadow Pond and a Yellow-throated Warbler sitting on, of all places an oil tank on Terry Lane. We saw 6 Wild Turkeys on Short Road. The resident Bald Eagles were seen earlier in the day on the pads but we missed them. Shorebirds that we saw were, 3 American Avocets, 36 Killdeer, 38 Least Sandpipers, 16 Pectoral Sandpipers, 14 Long-billed Dowitchers, 2 Spotted Sandpipers and 2 Greater Yellowlegs. We finished the day with 61 species. Today’s photo is a White-breasted Nuthatch on a Lichen covered tree.

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**Sept 23rd:** Today was an unseasonably cool day for September and was great for birding. As we started out there were 44 White-faced Ibis feeding in the shallow pool just north of headquarters. As we proceeded down Wildlife Drive and turned onto Plover we found a Wilson’s Snipe in the reeds near the road and saw 6 more flying. We found a good number of shorebird species although numbers were low, including Solitary Sandpiper, Western Sandpipers, Stilt Sandpipers, Pectoral Sandpipers, a Long-billed Dowitcher, a Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and Least Sandpipers. American White Pelicans are starting to arrive with a total of 76 today. On the road to Meadow Pond, we saw a female Orchard Oriole, a Nashville and a Wilson’s Warbler. We saw 2 Red-headed Woodpeckers at Deaver and a Belted Kingfisher at Meadow Pond. There were lots of swallows flying over the marshes and we identified 2 Tree Swallows, 2 Bank Swallows, 24 Cave Swallows 107 Barn Swallows and 12 Cliff Swallows. We saw one of the resident Bald Eagles near L pad. We finished the day with 65 species. Today's photo is Wilson’s Snipe.

**Sept 30th:** The recent cool front brought about some noticeable changes at the refuge. First of all large numbers of ducks are arriving and then moving on farther south. Day before yesterday there were hundreds of ducks in Silliman Marsh and Mineral Marsh. Species identified were Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Northern Shovelers, Northern Pintails and American Wigeons. The same is occurring with American White Pelicans with over 1000 counted before they continued on south. We saw a very early Swamp Sparrow and Lincoln Sparrows are beginning to arrive. We found 3 late season Yellow-billed Cuckoos on the way to Meadow Pond. We saw a migrating kettle of Swainson’s Hawks and an Osprey along with some Red-tailed Hawks. We found a couple of Red-headed Woodpeckers at Dead Woman Pond. The lake level continues to drop and is now below normal exposing vast amounts of mudflats. As for shorebirds, we saw a late season Buff-breasted Sandpiper, several Black-bellied Plovers, Stilt Sandpipers, Least Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitchers, Spotted Sandpipers, Pectoral Sandpipers, a Greater Yellowlegs, a Wilson’s Snipe and a total of 95 Killdeer. Good numbers of White-faced Ibis are still present as well as Egrets and Herons. We finished the day with 69 species. Photo shows a small portion of the ducks that were hanging out in Silliman Marsh.

*What Else Did They See? See the most recent Weekly Bird Census Results in its entirety on Page 6 or visit: [www.friendsofhagerman.com/BirdSurvey]*
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and the introduction of non-native plants and animals.

The Nestbox Program at Hagerman began in 2011 and, at the end of that summer, reported a total of 124 eastern bluebird fledglings. In addition, each year has reported small numbers of Carolina Wrens, Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, Prothonotary Warblers and Bewick’s Wrens who have successfully left their nests.

At the beginning of 2020, Hagerman had 46 scheduled volunteers ready and able to nestwatch the 46 boxes on 2 different trails—Harris Creek and Raasch. All of them are members of either the Friends of Hagerman or the Bluestem Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists. Unfortunately, right when the bluebirds were at the beginning of their breeding season, Covid-19 hit the United States and Hagerman was closed in March with all volunteer work suspended.

Usually, two people are paired to count the nests each week. The virus prevented that. Kathy Whaley, Refuge Manager, informed the Nestbox Committee that we could still do the monitoring, if, and only if, couples who lived in the same household would take on the responsibility. So instead of 46 people volunteering over the season, there were only 8 people—4 couples who were broken up into 2 teams—1 for Harris Creek and 1 for Raasch Trail. Wes and Teresa Crawford, Gene and Nancy Cushion, Bill and Kathy Nance, and Cathy and John Van Bebber went out every other week to count the nests, eggs, hatchlings and fledglings. The other 38 volunteers awaited eagerly in the wings for the pandemic to end, alas, to no avail.

But the Nestbox monitoring got done, and in August we concluded another successful season; the 8 of us worked 79 hours and reported 136 successful fledglings. The number of fledglings has fluctuated throughout the last ten years. In 2014 we had our all time high of 272 fledglings and in 2015, our low with 92 fledglings. The total for all 10 years is 1507 bluebirds which averages to 150.7 birds per season.

Hopefully the year 2021 will see us back to a new normal where we can all resume our activities without fear of Covid-19.

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Bird Census Results

Each Tuesday a team of expert birders, led by Jack Chiles, take a refuge Bird census by recording the birds they encounter throughout the refuge. They report their findings to The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, for use in research.

Visit [www.friendsofhagerman.com/BirdSurvey](http://www.friendsofhagerman.com/BirdSurvey) for the most recent Bird Census results!

Thank you: Jack Chiles, Mike Petrick and Nancy Riggs.

Findings for Sep 29, 2020, Protocol: Traveling, 30.402 mile(s) 69 species (+1 other taxa)

- Canada Goose 4
- Blue-winged Teal 130
- Northern Shoveler 18
- Mallard 5
- Northern Pintail 9
- Green-winged Teal 14
duck sp. 80
- Pied-billed Grebe 7
- Eurasian Collared-Dove 4
- Mourning Dove 5
- Yellow-billed Cuckoo 3
- Ruby-throated Hummingbird 4
- American Coot 217
- American Avocet 10
- Black-bellied Plover 3
- Killdeer 95
- Stilt Sandpiper 19
- Least Sandpiper 46
- Buff-breasted Sandpiper 1
- Buffy face and underparts. Thin dark bill, yellow legs. Have photo.
- Pectoral Sandpiper 2
- Long-billed Dowitcher 22
- Wilson's Snipe 1
- Spotted Sandpiper 4
- Greater Yellowlegs 1
- Neotropic Cormorant 33
- American White Pelican 1065
- Great Blue Heron 36
- Great Egret 79
- Snowy Egret 11
- Little Blue Heron 2
- Cattle Egret 6
- White-faced Ibis 25
- Black Vulture 23
- Turkey Vulture 14
- Osprey 1

- Northern Harrier 1
- Sharp-shinned Hawk 1
- Bald Eagle 1
- Red-shouldered Hawk 2
- Swainson’s Hawk 8
- Red-tailed Hawk 11
- Barred Owl 1
- Belted Kingfisher 2
- Red-headed Woodpecker 2
- Red-bellied Woodpecker 4
- Downy Woodpecker 3
- Pileated Woodpecker 2
- Northern Flicker 2
- Eastern Phoebe 9
- Scissor-tailed Flycatcher 3
- White-eyed Vireo 1
- Blue Jay 2
- American Crow 46
- Carolina Chickadee 4
- Tufted Titmouse 6
- Tree Swallow 2
- Barn Swallow 2
- Ruby-crowned Kinglet 2
- Blue-gray Gnatcatcher 1
- Carolina Wren 3
- European Starling 1
- Brown Thrasher 1
- Northern Mockingbird 1
- Eastern Bluebird 11
- Lincoln’s Sparrow 1
- Swamp Sparrow 1
- Gray face, white throat, rufous wings.
- Eastern Meadowlark 1
- Red-winged Blackbird 20
- Brown-headed Cowbird 12
- Northern Cardinal 5