

2007 ABA Convention Report

Lafayette, Louisiana • 23–29 April 2007

A merry *Laissez les bons temps rouler*—“Let the good times roll!”—welcomed more than 300 attendees to Acadiana for the 2007 ABA Convention in the heart of French Louisiana. Spring in Cajun Country finds many resident birds in the throes of courtship, while migrants continue to pass through to destinations beyond. Along with exciting field trip destinations to many varied habitats, convention attendees were privy to comfortable rooms, adequate meeting space, and the culinary delights of Chef Doug at the Hilton Lafayette. Hot breakfast buffets and mouthwatering Cajun and Creole dinners made the Lafayette Convention especially memorable.

The main attraction, of course, was the birding. Despite Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, we found great birds aplenty. With trips to the Gulf Coast beaches, marshes and wetlands, cheniere woods, rice fields, crawfish ponds, bayous, cypress-and-tupelo-bordered lakes, forested wetlands, and pine and hardwood forests, convention attendees had the opportunity to see an impressive variety of residents and migrants, by bus, van, and boat, as well as on foot. Field trip coordinators Judith O’Neale and Dave Patton organized several top-notch local birders to guide us to the hotspots of southern Louisiana. An impressive assemblage of professional talent accompanied the local guides and greatly increased the knowledge and enjoyment of all who traveled to the convention. Attendees were delighted by heron, egret, and spoonbill rookeries at several locations, Southern pine specialties like Red-cockaded Woodpecker and Brown-headed Nuthatch, and goodly numbers of great shorebirds and warblers. The master checklist tallied 238 species.

The Convention Conservation Project Award for 2007 went to the Acadiana Park Nature Station. The \$10,000 award, generated in part from attendee registration fees, will help to acquire a 52-acre tract that represents the last remaining undisturbed forested wetland system in Lafayette Parish. This tract will add to the 152 existing acres and further conserve shrinking habitat for more than 150 species of birds, increase area for storm water retention, and provide enjoyment for the more than 12,000 annual visitors to the nature trails and environmental education/nature center. L. J. Durel, Jr., President of

the Lafayette City-Parish Consolidated Government, welcomed the ABA to Lafayette, then accepted the conservation project award, and passed the check on to Bill Fontenot, Nature Station curator.

Evening presentations were launched with an introduction to the “Secret Lives of Gulf Coast Birds” by Bill Fontenot. The next evening, Dr. Peter Yaukey, from the University of New Orleans, presented “The Birds and The Hurricanes,” an overview of his research on the effects of the 2005 storms on birds. Richard Crossley, an Englishman who now calls Cape May his home, reflected on his life from naughty lad to coauthor of the recently published *Shorebird Guide*, illustrated by amazing photographic images, while also discussing birding by impression, not binoculars, and birding in the future. The keynote speaker was Douglas Carlson, recently retired to write full-time after 35 years of teaching. In his presentation, entitled “Roger Tory Peterson—A Bird Artist’s Life,” Carlson conducted a biographical examination of Peterson’s painting. Using samples from both field guide and “gallery” art and excerpts from Peterson’s correspondence, Carlson illustrated the various stages of Peterson’s career.

Convention workshops centered on technological advances for two of the presentations, while David Sibley gave his thoughts on “The Psychology of Bird Identification” for the third. Admitting mistakes himself, Sibley spoke of how pre-developed cerebral shortcuts, search images, and pattern recognition that allow us to quickly call out an ID can also deceive us into misidentifications. He urged us to look more closely before writing something off as a common species, as well as not letting target rarities morph out of something similar but common through want or suggestion.

“Technology in Birding” was presented by Brian Sullivan, project leader for eBird <ebird.org> and Photo Editor for both *North American Birds* and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s *Birds of North America Online* <bna.birds.cornell.edu/BNA>. Brian urged everyone to register and use eBird so that bird sightings, often kept in a field notebook and filed away when the notebook is full, can actually contribute to the record on bird distribution and abundance and be actively queried by researchers. Posting your sightings to eBird also allows you to keep track of where and what you have seen, and serves as an amazing way to contribute to citizen science. In addition to eBird, Brian discussed other useful birding websites and software, and demonstrated and provided hands-on

experience with gadgets like the National Geographic Handheld Birds electronic field guide for PDA (Personal Digital Assistant), GPS (Global Positioning System) units for precise location marking and finding, and the use of iPods and other mp3 players as ready field reference for songs and calls.

Considering the location and time of year, an especially well-received workshop was Dr. Andrew Farnsworth's "Sights and Sounds of Migration: A How-to for Identifying Flight Calls and For Interpreting Radar Imagery." As many, if not most, migrants travel under cover of darkness, Andrew's auditory and visual tools brought a new appreciation and understanding of the enormity of the twice-yearly phenomenon of migration in northern temperate latitudes. While many were intrigued by the nocturnal flight call recordings and the subtle differences visible in sonograms, the radar images showing northerly trans-Gulf flock movements as compared to easterly storm front movements piqued the migration thoughts of many attendees who considered a rapid flight to the coastal chenieres of Cameron Parish in hopes of a migrant fallout.

Friday's special presentations varied in topic from more technology in the form of digiscoping, to Louisiana's Natural Areas, and, finally, to the ABA Special Programs of Birders' Exchange and the Institute for Field Ornithology (IFO) workshops. Clay Taylor, from Swarovski Optik N.A., presented "The Secrets of Digiscoping Revealed" on using digital cameras and spotting scopes to photograph birds, butterflies, and other wildlife. Clay discussed equipment, techniques, and strategies before leading a special Swarovski-sponsored field trip on Saturday to put the information into practice. A special dual presentation on Louisiana's Natural Areas was presented first by author and photographer Nancy Camel, whose presentation title duplicated her recently published book, *The Nature of Things at Lake Martin*, and, second, by Dr. Keith Ouchley, Executive Director of the Louisiana chapter of The Nature Conservancy. Dr. Ouchley discussed Louisiana birds and habitats and bird-centered conservation initiatives in progress as well as those needed in the future, in his talk entitled "Bird-focused Conservation in Louisiana: An Unfinished Agenda." Veteran IFO instructor Wayne Petersen gave a mini-workshop as a lesson from one of IFO's seminal weeklong workshops on "East Coast Shorebirds." Birders' Exchange featured Xicotencatl Vega Picos, Director of Conservation in Sinaloa, Mexico for Pronatura Noreste Mar de Cortes, in a presentation on shorebird and other

conservation in Mexico and elsewhere. Xico took time to present in between long hours working to finish his dissertation in the Hilton Lafayette! Please consider donating new or used birding equipment to Birders' Exchange as we redistribute it to researchers, conservationists, and educators working to preserve birds and their habitats across the western hemisphere with an emphasis on Latin America and the Caribbean. More information can be found online <aba.org/bex/index.html>. And while helping others through donations to Birders' Exchange, please think of helping yourself and increasing your knowledge through one of the amazing IFO workshops <aba.org/ifo/index.html>.

Several awards were presented throughout the week. Dr. Gerard Bertrand, with a long history of work with several federal agencies, the World Land Trust, Mass Audubon, the American Bird Conservancy, and Birdlife International, was awarded the Chandler Robbins Award for significant contributions to bird conservation. Ruth C. Green, a long-time Nebraska birder involved in many aspects with the Inland Bird Banding Association and Nebraska Ornithologists' Union, including past President, was awarded the Ludlow Griscom Award for dramatic achievement in advancing the state of ornithological knowledge in a region. The Robert Ridgway Award was presented to William S. Clark for excellence in publications treating field identification and bird distribution for all his fine work regarding raptor identification, distribution, and conservation.

Saturday night culminated with a convention wrap-up featuring a silent auction and raffle winners. Event sponsors and exhibitors donated some amazing prizes and all the winners were ecstatic. This year's exciting photo quiz was won by Karen O'Neil of Prescott, Arizona. George Zepko of Middletown, Connecticut, was once again acknowledged for his dedication and longevity, having attended every ABA Convention except the first, while Tyler Bell and Jane Kostenko, our tireless volunteer crew, once again whipped us all into shape and formed the glue that kept it all together during the week. Thanks, Tyler and Jane! Convention and Tours Manager Tamie Bulow did a fantastic job of emceeing each evening's announcements and presentations as well as organizing the entire event. Hats off to Tamie!

All in all, the 2007 ABA Convention in Lafayette was a resounding success. The birds, the food, and welcoming ways and *joie de vivre* of the storm-battered Louisiana people

made for a wonderful and birdy time in Acadiana. Where were you? We look forward to seeing you at our next convention or conference.

C'est tout.

Chip Clouse

American Birding Association
4945 North 30th Street, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado
80919

Highlights from the Field Trips

Mild weather and a few storms produced the right formula for wonderful birding during Convention week. The breeding birds of south Louisiana were in full song, and some migrants were seen on every trip. All of the trips into the woods and swamps of Louisiana were rich with songs and sightings of our breeding warbler species, including high densities of Northern Parula and Yellow-throated, Prothonotary, Swainson's, Kentucky, and Hooded Warblers. The Alexander and Chicot State Park groups got the much-wanted Red-cockaded Woodpecker and Brown-headed Nuthatch (at a nest), plus a few migrants such as Cerulean and Blackburnian Warblers and Philadelphia Vireo. The Audubon Country trip had nesting Eastern Bluebirds and Swallow-tailed Kites. The McGee's Landing participants were delighted with a roadside rookery with 30 or so Roseate Spoonbills on nests. Atchafalaya boat people were treated to three young Bald Eagles on a nest, with the male and female watching from nearby trees, plus numerous good looks at Swainson's Warblers. The Lake Fausse Point trip had a nesting Red-shouldered Hawk, Yellow-throated Vireo, Red-eyed and White-eyed Vireos, and Prothonotary Warblers everywhere. A visit to the Avery Island Bird City rookery included hundreds of nesting Great and Snowy Egrets. The Lacassine ricefield trips were really off the charts with outstanding shorebirding. Area farmers granted special access to fields covered with thousands of birds. Up-close viewing of the different species were

ideal for the shorebird field trips and for developing identification skills. Many participants enjoyed their first-time look at some of the 21 sandpiper species sighted, including Buff-breasted, Upland, Pectoral, Western, Semipalmated, Least, White-rumped, and Baird's. Plovers included American Golden-Plover and Black-bellied, Semipalmated, Wilson's, Snowy, and Piping Plovers. The open countryside also provided treats such as Crested Caracaras, Swainson's Hawks, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, and singing Dickcissels. The Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge freshwater marsh was spectacular with its Purple Gallinules and American Bitterns. Although the hoped-for coastal fallout occurred on an afternoon with no scheduled field trips, many Convention attendees made the run for the coast. Even without a real fallout on a field trip day, coastal woodlots were never without a good variety of migrant vireos, warblers, tanagers, buntings, grosbeaks, and orioles. The Migration Gamble had the top one-day total of 138 species, including rare sightings of Glaucous, Great Black-backed, and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Mississippi Kites entertained people by flying over the Hilton hotel, and the Swarovski scopes had an impressive "window list" from the fourth floor of the hotel.

— Dave Patton and Judith O'Neale, Field Trip Coordinators