

Idaho Magic Feathers[®]

Idaho's Birds and Beyond



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Volume 4 Issue 1
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Whomping Tents and Whooping Cranes

On the morning of March 27, 2005, while boarding the birding tour boat *Skimmer* for a wildlife viewing trip on the shallow waters of Aransas Bay in Rockport, Texas, one of the boat owners remarked, when she learned from us that we were camping, "Oh, you poor things! How did you do in that storm last night?" My tent mates Poo and Jean, still bleary-eyed and somewhat dazed like myself, borrowed a bit of Harry Potter reference and replied in unison, "It was the night of the whomping tent!" We explained that remark briefly and boarded the boat for our tour. It was still quite windy as we left port seeking our target birds, the Whooping Cranes of Aransas Bay. It was not, however, as windy as it had been during the night--a genuine relief to all of us!

We had arrived in San Antonio the previous day ready to bird! Outside the airport we had seen Great-tailed Grackles, Northern Cardinals, a Cedar Waxwing, and several Mockingbirds. On the drive to Goose Island State Park our enthusiastic party had spotted several 65 mph birds including the Black Vulture, Peregrine Falcon, Crested Caracara, Great Blue Heron, D.C. Cormorant, Loggerhead Shrike, and even a Brown Pelican. It was dark when we arrived at the state park where we set up camp on the narrow camping and R.V. strip of beachfront, seven tents in all. Shortly after we settled in for the night, a torrent of wind and rain set in. Gusts of 40 mph drove rain sideways! The external poles of our dome tent buckled with each gust of wind, and that side of the tent slammed down on us! For hours this whomping went on! At one point the wind blew the zipper open on the door of the tent, and the wind and rain pounded me as I struggled to grab the wildly flaying flaps of the door and screen. Then the rain-fly blew off and threatened to wrench loose from the one stake that was keeping it from launching into the bay! Jean managed to keep this from happening but got drenched in the process. The rain and wind subsided about the time the sun came up (this was also about the time we got to sleep), while overhead Laughing Gulls seemed to guffaw in delight at the sight of a tent completely collapsed upon us! All tents and campers had quite the night. What a welcome to Texas!

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**Thank you for your interest and appreciation of
the birds!**

As the *Skimmer* continued in the channel through the bay, we saw gulls other than the Laughing. Both the Ring-billed and the Herring followed the boat, and several of our team even saw a Gull-billed Tern. I missed it and hoped that I would get another chance! Other Terns were also skyward in the bay, and they were the Caspian, Sandwich, Royal and Forster's. Chimney Swifts and the only Tree Swallows we saw while in Texas accompanied them. Above the vast marsh Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and Roseate Spoonbills thrilled us. Small islands, mud bars, and mud flats held our fascinated, binocular eyes as we scanned through dozens of Black-necked Stilts, Willets, Spotted Sandpipers, Sanderlings, Short-billed Dowitchers, Long-billed Curlews, Greater Yellowlegs, and American Avocets to find the occasional American Oystercatcher, Black-bellied Plover, and Ruddy Turnstone. From the marsh we heard Clapper Rails, and nearby inlets in the channeled terrain hosted American Wigeons, Blue and Green-winged Teal, Buffleheads, Common Loons, Common Goldeneyes, and Mottled Ducks.

As the *Skimmer* drifted along the edge of the marsh, we soon spotted the magnificent winged jewels that we all hoped for, several family groups of the Whooping Crane! There they were, and they were heart stopping

Whomping Tents and Whooping Cranes continued

in their elegance and stature! Excitement reverberated among the passengers, and then a hush draped the spectators as several of the cranes took to the air. Their takeoff, with the grand sweep of their sail-sized wings emphasized by their shrill, trumpeting call, seized us all with wonder! Then, like the volley of a twenty-one-gun salute, camera shutters fired from stern to bow! Clearly many of us wanted to capture the moment in our photo albums as well as in our hearts and minds.

We admired and photographed the cranes for about twenty minutes, all the while aware of the conservation efforts that made these moments with the cranes possible. In the 1880's the Whooping Crane population was estimated to be at about 1,500. But as a result of habitat loss and the hunting of cranes for their meat and feathers for hats, by the 1940's the Whooping Crane population only numbered fourteen to sixteen birds. Today because of decades of work to save the Whooping Crane, the birds number around 500. Aransas Bay is the winter (November to March) home to the majority of the 500, and Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada (2,400 miles north) is their summer home and breeding area. The Whooping Crane is North America's tallest bird at 52 inches with a wingspan of 87 inches. They mate for life, can live to be twenty-five years of age in the wild, and are the rarest of the world's 15 species of cranes. Sadly, of those 15 species worldwide, eleven are in peril of extinction. Fossils indicate that cranes have existed from the prairies of Alberta to Central Mexico for several million years.



Whooping Crane, Texas

In 2004 surveys conducted at Buffalo National Park revealed that 54 nesting pairs fledged 40 chicks. In mid-August, these cranes flew south from the Park to Aransas with 33 of the young arriving safely to spend the winter maturing and preparing for the return trip to Canada.

In the last two years several criminal types have decided to defy the Migratory Bird Act and have elected to shoot Whooping Cranes. Most recently in November, 2004, seven men who said they thought they were shooting Sandhill Cranes continue to wait for sentencing by the Federal Government. (Some states have a hunting season on Sandhill Cranes.) They may well spend time in prison and pay thousands of dollars in fines following their conviction for shooting two Whooping Cranes in Central Kansas near the Quivira NWR. In Dallas a man received a six month sentence, a \$2,000 fine, and is prohibited from hunting in the United States for the rest of his life. He still faces civil penalties brought forward by the state of Texas. In this case the man also claimed that he thought he was shooting at a Sandhill Crane. In both of these cases the cranes died. It is hard for me to imagine how anyone can mistake a Whooping Crane for a Sandhill Crane, and it is even harder to understand why anyone would desire to shoot a crane of any kind. Furthermore, an ethical hunter will not shoot anything that can't be identified.



A Sandhill Crane in captivity, Florida.

From the deck we all continued to enjoy the crane families foraging in the tall marsh grasses and tidal inlets. We even saw a male chase another male out of his territory and learned from the boat captain that Whooping Cranes are extremely territorial. Egrets and Great Blue Herons stalked the soggy land, and we saw a coyote and a European Wild Boar far off in the marsh as we headed back to port. A myriad of flashing feathers, diamond water droplets, and raucous calls kept pace with us as we spied many of the species we had already seen in reverse order. At the dock we saw a Great Egret in high breeding plumage, its yellow eye shining radiantly from the turquoise-blue breeding color of the skin around it. This seasonal blue around the eye was something that none of us had seen before, and we are not likely to for-

get it.

When we disembarked, the co-captain said, "Well, I hope you get a better night's rest tonight than last night."

And I responded, "Oh, what's a little wind and rain when there may be a Whooping Crane ahead at daybreak!"

Welcome to Texas, indeed!

Chapter Two, next issue.



Whooping Crane

Spring Into Summer 2005 Photo Essay



Roseate Spoonbills soar over Aransas Bay, Rockport, Texas.



A male Cassin's Finch eyes a feeder from his rainy day perch.



From March to August the Ruddy Duck's breeding plumage, distinguished by its bright blue bill and cinnamon body, makes it a stand out in any marsh. Market Lake WMA, Idaho.



Field marks to look for when identifying the Common Tern are: dark wedge on primaries (not visible in this shot), orange-red bill with dark tip (dark tip is often lost July-Sept.), and the gray body blending with the gray back. Snake River, near Buhl, Idaho.



Black Skimmer in flight at Rockport Beach State Park, Rockport, Texas.



Lewis's Woodpecker, May 6, 2005, visits the seed feeder in my front yard. This photo was taken through the window.



Here are three wary Great Horned Owl chicks on Picabo Road south of Bellevue during the branching phase of the fledging process.



A close-up view of an Atlantic race Brown Pelican in breeding plumage, Texas.



An American Coot chick floats effortlessly in the main canal at Market Lake.



The broad black mask and short stubby bill are two of the field marks that differentiate the Loggerhead Shrike from the Northern Shrike.



Just outside the gates of the San Ygnacio Bird Sanctuary a Couch's Kingbird perched on a utility wire.



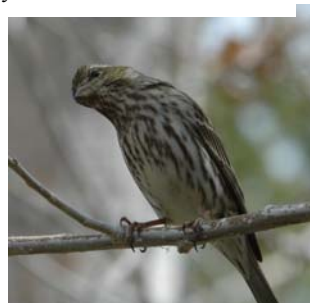
In Hailey, Idaho, a Clark's Nutcracker takes a break above a backyard feeder.



At Market Lake in eastern Idaho an American Coot chases a Black-crowned Night-Heron out of its territory and away from its young.



Near the Stockard Road bridge in the Silver Creek Preserve, one of three Great Horned Owl fledglings observes me as I snapped its picture. Picabo, Idaho.



A female Cassin's Finch.



From its perch on a wheel line, this first year Swainson's Hawk will not miss a scurrying field mouse.



The mottled, dark gray feathers emerging on this Little Blue Heron identify it as a first spring bird. Silver Springs, Marion County, Florida.



A Great Kiskadee at the Santa Ana, NWR, Texas.

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Bird News From 'Round the Globe

Birds continue to make news in Idaho and 'round the globe. Here are a few interesting bits of news from here and there. A Kookaburra, strongly believed to be an escapee, was seen and photographed by David Head of Eagle, Idaho. The Kookaburra was in Head's yard for approximately one week beginning on May 12th. Several regional zoos were contacted, but none reported having lost a Kookaburra from their exhibits. However, the bird's well-worn bill strongly suggested many years in captivity.



Kookaburra, Eagle, Idaho. Photo by D. Head, 2005.

A nesting pair of Great-tailed Grackles at the home of Joel Parker south of Rupert, Idaho, in Minidoka County has fledged six young. The presence of Great-tailed Grackles is a county first record! The birds were drawn to the attention of *Idaho Magic Feathers* by Marsha and Nick Hallet, Joel's neighbors, and were also reported to the Idaho Bird Records committee.

Poo Wright-Pulliam had a Pygmy Nuthatch in her yard beginning on May 6th. This bird is rarely reported in central Idaho.

From May 15th to the 17th Brian Sturges, Hailey, Idaho, had a Scott's Oriole in his yard. This species is very rare outside of the far southeastern corner of the state.

Cliff Weisse reported seeing a Yellow-throated Vireo at the Camas NWR in eastern Idaho. This was only the second record for this species in the state. Many birders from around the region enjoyed the opportunity to see this bird. Found also at Camas on June 12th by Darren Clark was a Glossy Ibis which was, as far as I know, a state first! On June 17th a Least Bittern was observed and reported by Cliff Weisse. This species is not often seen in Idaho either.

Larry Barnes from Hailey, Idaho, found a Baltimore Oriole on June 9th near the Stone Reservoir Campground on the south end of the Curlew National Grasslands in southeastern Idaho. This is also a very rare find in Idaho.

A survey conducted by the National Wildlife Federation of some of the nation's top birders revealed that the ten top species they desire to see are (by rank starting with #1) the Spectacled Eider, Ross's Gull, a white morph Gyrfalcon, Snowy Owl, Black-footed Albatross, White-tailed Tropicbird, Atlantic Puffin, Elegant Trogon, and the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. (Editor's Note: I bet the rank of this bird has dramatically changed with the sighting of one in Arkansas!)

Ohio has beaten its record for both Eagle nests and chicks. In 2004 Ohio officials recorded 131 eaglets, and this year they recorded 134. In 2004 there were 108 nests and this year 125. Hurray for Ohio Eagles! Meanwhile, in Ohio the numbers of Double-crested Cormorants has increased to the point that in May Ohio Division of Wildlife officers shot 500 on an island in Lake Erie. The plan is to kill thousands more next year. The main reasons for the move to reduce the population are: cormorant droppings are ammonia-rich which kills trees and vegetation, they are driving away other birds, and many people do not appreciate competing with these birds for the one pound of fish that they consume daily to survive.



A Double-crested Cormorant dries its wings after several dives to pursue schools of fish at Wakulla Springs State Park in Florida.

In Singapore a count of the bird species at Istana, the office of the President of the Republic of Singapore on Orchard Road, has revealed that 67 species of birds can be found on the grounds. Included in residence are: the Stork-billed Kingfisher, Blue-throated Bee-eater, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, and Yellow-crested Cockatoo. Eight years ago 50 birds were spotted. President S.R. Nathan is so pleased by the birds that he has commissioned a book to help readers become acquainted with Istana and its birds.

Keep your eyes peeled! You never know when your birding day might result in big birding news!

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