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# Idaho Magic Feathers®

Idaho's Birds and Beyond



A Cameron MultiMedia, LLC Publication © 2005 Kathleen Cameron, Author & Editor  
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## Texas, More Trials, & Great Birds!

### Chapter 2 of the Texas Birding Adventure

In the last issue of *IMF* the spring birding trip to the Texas gulf coast and Rio Grande area was well underway. Our group had boarded the Skimmer, thoroughly explored the Aransas Bay, and found the Whooping Cranes to be totally captivating. The night of the Whomping Tent had come and gone. In the days that followed our intrepid group loaded and unloaded our amazing, rented, fifteen passenger van a multitude of times as well as loaded and unloaded our camping equipment and supply of food from the small U-haul trailer hitched behind.

It would be wonderful to say that the night of the Whomping Tent was the last of the uncomfortable nights, but that was not to be the case. It may have been the most dramatic, but it was not to be the last uncomfortable night of the Texas adventure. We endured "The Night of the Unclean and Weary Birders" at Adolf Thomas, Jr. Co. Park where we could not use the shower house because Easter weekend revelers had totally trashed the facilities, leaving eggshells and debris covering the campsites and trails. Then came "The Trouble with Raccoons," a two night stay at Bentsen Rio Grande State Park, so named because midnight marauding raccoons made it necessary to stack all the coolers and boxes of perishables in the tent, now referred to as the Whomping Tent... the one that Poo, Jean, and I were sharing. This arrangement made negotiating within the tent a shin-bruising and ankle-twisting two-night affair. Next came "Starry, Starry Night Turns Wicked." This was at Falcon Dam State Park where the time before slumber was noted to be the loveliest temperature yet for sleeping, the sky was studded with white diamonds, and the open tent flaps provided a vivid view by which to drift off to sleep. What a shock it was to be awakened a few short hours later to a howling silt-filled wind-storm! What a mess! At this point, though I loved the birding part of the trip, I was quite tired of the unrestful nights that kept us just one step ahead of fatigue and guessing at what

the next night might hold for us.

Yes, the birding was great! Not only were we all adding to our life lists with great aplomb, but, also, we were having such a good time getting to know one another in the way that a group of friends does in a situation which is a combination of intense bird identification and environmental challenges--challenges like high temperatures and humidity, mosquitoes, ticks, and chiggers, just to mention a few. Yep, once these little demons entered the picture, our relationships became more intimate. Oh, and Lyme Disease paranoia just served to multiply the general dis-ease of the heat, humidity, and itching...that would be itching like your legs are on fire chigger-itching!

But the birding, as I have said, was wonderfully great! By the end of the third day of the trip I had added 38 new birds to my life list! What a thrill it was to see these birds for the first time: Seaside Sparrow, Painted Bunting, Upland Sandpiper, American Golden Plover, Green Jay, Great Kiskadee, White Ibis, Reddish Egret, Tricolored Heron, and Little Blue Heron, just to name a few.

### Inside This Issue

Preenin', Itchin' and Scratchin' Photo Essay  
Bird News From Around The Globe

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

## Texas, More Trials cont...

The Reddish Egret was seen at Rockport Beach State Park. What a standout bird! We had great views of the breeding colony at the park, and it was simply electrifying to experience these egrets in full breeding plumage! But, as if this were not thrilling enough, a white morph adult was found in the colony! The shaggy, flowing plumes on its breast, the tremendous pink and black bill, and pure white of this bird caused it to appear regal among its slate-gray, reddish, colony mates. It was an amazing sight! I think it was the highlight of Monday, March 28, for me. What would the next five days bring? Oh, just armadillos, hispid cotton rats, raccoons, a collared peccary, wild boars, skunks, alligators, various snakes (both of the friendly and poisonous types), turtles, bullfrogs, fence lizards, and birds, birds, birds!

On the night of the 28<sup>th</sup> we arrived at Adolf Thomas, Jr. State Park near Arroyo City, Texas, just as the last bit of daylight hung in the sky. The place was filthy, as I have already noted. It was just plain icky. However, the fun part was that we could hear Eastern Screech Owls, so once we had our tents set up, several of us set out in search of the owls. We wore headlamps to aid in our trek along the beer can, crushed eggshell strewn trail as we hopefully searched for the screech owl that always seemed to be just ahead of



Aplomado Falcons, Laguna Atascosa NWR.

us. Poo is very interested in flowers as well as birds, and while we were stealthily stepping down the path, she paused and drew our collective attention to the amazing, exotic, white-tendrilled flower she had lit up by her lamp. As she reached to touch it, I screeched, "Don't touch it! It might be poisonous!" Everyone jumped back! Then someone said, "Oh, for hell's sake! It's part of a piñata!" We all burst into laughter over my hysterical response to the dangerous piñata flower and laughed until we cried... travel weariness can do this to you!



Self-explanatory!

We did not actually see anything that screeched, other than me, in the woods, but we heard the owls all night long. In the morning we packed up and headed off to explore prime birding hot spots en route to our next campsites at Bentsen Rio Grande State Park. We spent a very productive morning and afternoon at Laguna Atascosa NWR, Rio Hondo, Texas. This NWR is the largest protected area of natural habitat left in the lower Rio Grande Valley. There are 45,000 acres in the refuge, and the habitat includes coastal, desert, and subtropical areas. The refuge offers both walking and driving birding, and we made the most of it that we could. Our exploration resulted in the addition of 11 birds to my life list! All of them were fun to find and identify, but I think the best species of the day for me was a pair of Aplomado Falcons. We found the pair perched on a huge yucca and had to use our scopes to get a good look at them. The Aplomado is a real beauty! At a length of sixteen inches and with a wingspan of 35 inches it closely resembles the Peregrine Falcon but is slightly grayer, and its rufous underparts quickly distinguish it from the Peregrine. The Aplomado has a pale supercillium that extends behind the eye, and the whitish cheeks and throat are separated by a dark malar stripe. The belly has a dark band across it, and the thighs and lower underparts are rufous. The legs and cere are yellow. When the Aplomado is in flight, its longer-than-usual-for-a-falcon tail is apparent. The tail is blackish with five off-white bands and a white tip. The trailing edge of the wing is also white. This falcon was once a common sight along the southern gulf coast of Texas, Mexico, and throughout large portions of the southwestern U.S., but habitat loss, human persecution, and pesticides led to its disappearance as a breeding species in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in these areas. The last recorded nest within the United States was in

Apparently government is smaller in Texas and signs are not to be molested! Photo of the author by Dave Spaudling. Anzalduas County Park, Texas.



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## Texas, More Trials cont...

1952. The Aplomado falcon was placed on the endangered species list, and in 1978 the Peregrine Falcon Fund, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife, and private landowners began the work of restoring the species. Due to these efforts this species is once again breeding along the gulf coast of Texas, which includes Laguna Atascosa NWR. With all the territory in the NWR we were lucky to get to see the falcons at any distance.

Later that day we arrived at Bentsen Rio Grande State Park. It used to be a huge R.V. park, the temporary home for hundreds of people. Recently the R.V. camping was relocated to private campgrounds outside the state park. Now there are only a few places for primitive camping within the park. Tent campers and their belongings are moved into the park on a tram. Going in and out of the park is limited to walkers, bikers, and folks on the tram. We caught the last tram of the day. It dropped us and all our coolers, tents, and boxes of food by the side of the road about a mile into the park. It was a haul to our camping site, but once we got all the stuff situated, we set off for an evening of birding. The entire place was very quiet. In fact, our leader, Larry, who had visited the park many times, remarked that it



Larry Barnes frames and shoots a Digiscope image at Goose Island State Park.

was eerie, like the Rapture had come, and we were the only people left on earth. Would we soon be finding evidence of evaporated people, like crumpled clothes in action postures? Apparently, in the past, the entire place was a huge, noisy mass of humans and very interesting birds. As we strolled about in the Revelation-like landscape, it wasn't long until I added 7 more birds to my life list! They were: Couch's Kingbird, Zone-tailed Hawk, Green Kingfisher, Least Grebe, Elf Owl, Altamira Oriole, and Cave Swallow. Though not quite Elysia, thanks to the marauding raccoons, Bentsen Rio Grande is a birders' paradise.

In the forty-eight hours that followed we birded our way through Frontera Audubon Sanctuary, where I added a Crimson-collared Grosbeak to my list. Then came the Olive Sparrow, Black-crested Titmouse, and Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet at the Santa Ana NWR. Later at Anzalduas County

Park, which borders a tight loop of the Rio Grande, a Bronzed Cowbird was spied with a flock of Brown-headed Cowbirds. Near Salineno, Texas, at El Rio's R.V. Park, the Common Ground Dove made an appearance along with several White-tipped Doves and some displaying Green Jays. After visiting the R.V. park we walked down to the Rio Grande and trained our scopes on an island in the river that is included in the ABA listing area. On the island, perched high in the trees, we could see a flock of Red-billed Pigeons. A visit to the San Ygnacio Bird Sanctuary, where we hoped to see a White-collared Seedeater but did not, did result in seeing the Brown Jay and Ringed Kingfisher. At some point in this forty-eight hour period we camped at Falcon Dam State Park and saw both the Common Pauraque and Pyrrhuloxia. This was also the location of the driving, silt-laden windstorm!

It was now Friday, April 1, and our final birding and camping site at Lost Maples State Park was our next stop. On the drive to Lost Maples, Chihuahuan Ravens were seen in fields adjacent to the highway. In the van Larry had us vocalizing in unison the song of the Black-capped Vireo, the target species of our next stop. Our enthusiastic mimic was comical to say the least. When we arrived at Concan, Texas, which is in the hill country on the Edwards Plateau, we headed out with the song of the Black-capped Vireo ringing in our ears. We did not find the vireo, but a Rufous-crowned Sparrow was added to the trip list.

After dining at Neal's Lodge we loaded up and departed for Lost Maples State Park, Vanderpool, Texas. Our campsite there was established in the dark, and I was instantly aware of just how much cooler the Texas night was going to be at this altitude. Cooler turned out to be an understatement! Having come prepared for nights with temperatures in the lower 50's, I was in trouble when the temperature bottomed out at 32 degrees! Even dressing in all the clothes and jackets that I had did not bring warmth, and Poo was also in this same bone-chilling situation. So, our last night of the trip, the night of perhaps two hours of sleep, will be forever known to me as "The Hypothermic Nightmare!" I truly thought that my teeth would be cracked by their uncontrollable

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## Important Notice!

A big change is coming with the publication of the next newsletter. *Idaho Magic Feathers* is changing its name to *Majestic Feathers*.

The reason for the change is to make the newsletter more marketable outside of Idaho. Though I am sad to stop using Idaho and the word “magic” in the name because both have great significance for me and for many of my readers, I believe that more readers can be reached by not making it seem that the newsletter is only about Idaho. It is clear that this is not the case, but to potential new readers outside of Idaho the immediate response is often to discount the newsletter because of the current name.

The newsletter will continue to include stories about Idaho birding, will continue to be written and published in Idaho, and will continue to carry the same types of birding-related stories and photography that you have read and seen to date.

Thank you so very much for the support that you are giving me in the publication of my newsletter! I enjoy writing for you all!

## Happy Holidays

This holiday season  
give your bird-loving friends  
a subscription to  
*Majestic Feathers*.  
Your ten issue gift  
is sure to be a big hit!

Gift Subscriptions are available  
via email or by U.S. mail.  
\$12.72 for email  
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Recipients will receive a personalized gift card.  
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to request a subscription form  
or call: 208-578-1757

## An Itchy Bunch

Recently I have been quite amused by the contortions of birds scratching. It seems to me that they are a particularly itchy bunch, but perhaps the truth is that all the members of the animal kingdom, humans included, are. Like primates using a pole or a tree to scratch their backs, I have noticed that birds, too, employ various styles of scratching, so I decided to look into this to find out more about it. I consulted the Manual of Ornithology Avian Structure and Function and the Birdwatcher's Companion to North American Bird Life and found out some interesting things about how and why birds scratch. Not only is scratching one of the innate behaviors of birds, often seen within hours of their hatching, but it is, as a birdwatcher might suspect, part of their preening practice.

Preening is the cleaning and straightening out of feathers using the bill. During this process birds grasp an individual feather at its base and nibble along the entire length to the tip. In doing so the separated barbs in the feather are reattached, and dirt and water are removed. Ectoparasites are also discovered, removed from the plumage, and eaten. During this maneuver oil gathered from the uropygial gland, which is located beneath the rump at the base of the tail, is spread on the feathers after the bird touches the gland with its bill to gather the oil. There are two theories about what the application of this does for the bird; one is that it aids in insulation and waterproofing, and the other is that it is lubrication for the bill to minimize flaking deterioration. But back to that comical scratching.

Scratching, too, is part of the cleaning, straightening, and oil spreading process, but it is also simply a response to an itch, especially an itch on the head, a place that can't be reached by the bill. It turns out that there are two basic head-scratching methods: direct and indirect. A bird engaged in the direct method raises its foot directly to the head below the wing, and doesn't make any adjustment in the position of the wing when it does this. When engaging in the indirect method, a bird extends its wing downward, and the leg is extended over the base of the wing to reach the head. In general most passerines use the indirect method, though there are some exceptions. The majority of birds, however, are direct scratchers.

It is good to know that there is some method and rationale to the amusing contortions of the scratchings of birds, which leads me to this issue's photo essay on page 5.

# Preenin' Itchin' and Scratchin' Photo Essay



A Yellow-crowned Night Heron asleep in mid-scratch? Florida.



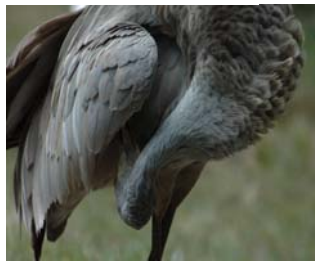
Along the causeway at Antelope Island, Great Salt Lake, Utah, an Eared Grebe (non-breeding plumage) catches some rays and tends to its plumage.



Two Trumpeter Swans at Ottawa NWR in Ohio pretzelize their necks to get to those hard to reach spots.



A Green Jay demonstrates the indirect method of head scratching. Photo taken at Laguna Atascosa NWR, Texas.



In a corkscrew-like maneuver this Sandhill Crane cleans the area near its vent. Homassassa State Park, Florida



1



2

Two views of Great Blue Herons tending to itchy spots. Great Blue Heron 2 looks like scratching its itch is a mind-numbing pleasure! Photos taken in Florida.



At the Wilderness Center in Wilmot, Ohio, a Green Heron raises its leg and lowers its head for a vigorous head scratching.

**Nikon D70 Digital Images  
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Kathleen Cameron**



After spending several hours diving for small fish along the Jersey shore, this Forster's Tern takes a break to clean up.



A first summer White Ibis uses the direct approach to alleviating its head itch. Photo taken in Florida.



A Wood Stork stretches its long neck up and back to preen the feathers of its breast to the point that it appears it will fall out of the tree backwards at any moment. Florida



A hatch-year Wood Duck fresh from the water takes a moment to get its feathers into order. Wakulla Springs State Park, Florida.

### Texas, More Trials *cont...*

chattering! “The Night of the Whomping Tent” had been a walk in the park compared to this night, and I don’t believe that I have ever been so glad to see the first rays of dawn.

We had a few hours of birding time available in the morning before we started the drive back to the San Antonio airport. Exhausted and in ill humor I joined in on the search for the Golden-cheeked Warbler, our Lost Maples target bird. While on our search, the Black-and-white Warbler, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Yellow-throated Vireo were added to the trip list. Then it happened! First we heard their song; then we saw them--a small flock of Golden-cheeked Warblers! Their conspicuous yellow cheek patches shown like tiny beacons in the trees. My weary state lifted as I realized that I had reached a personal milestone in my birding career as I added number 500 to my life list, the endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler!



The Plain Chachalaca is a noisy camping neighbor. Bentsen Rio Grande State Park.

A few hours later at the airport Larry asked me if there was anything that I would change about the trip if I had the chance. I said, “Yes, I would ignore the suggested temperature rating for the sleeping bag and bring one for colder weather!” Larry rhetorically remarked, “You lived through it, didn’t you? Well, then it all turned out okay.” Yes, it is true. I lived through a full-blown, territory-devouring, birding expedition in Texas in the spring, and it was more that okay. It was stupendous!

### Texas Trip Factoids

- Total mileage just over 800 miles
- 7 of the 10 members got 1 to 4 tick bites
- 9 out of 10 reported chigger bites
- 5 to 80 life list birds were added to participants ind. lists
- A total of 198 species were observed
- The cost per species was \$2.95 on average per person
- Experience...priceless!

#### References:

- <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/laguna.html>
- <http://www.arthurgrosset.com/sabirds/aplomadofalcon.html>
- [http://www.peregrinefund.org/notes\\_category.asp?category=Aplomado%](http://www.peregrinefund.org/notes_category.asp?category=Aplomado%20Falcon)

- According to the Sept/Oct 2005 issue of Audubon, Idaho will be launching its Birding Trail next May in time for International Migratory Bird Day! Hurray for Idaho! Stay tuned for more information about the Idaho Birding Trail.
- Great news out of Michigan! Trained bird counters found 1,415 singing, endangered Kirtland Warblers during this year’s season count. Last year 1,348 were counted, and in both 1974 and 1987 only 167 were found. Source: Birders Digest.com 2005.
- In an effort to prevent the needless death of as many Albatross as possible, Birdlife International has launched operation Ocean Task Force. Trainers will be placed on longline fishing vessels to show the crews simple and practical methods to prevent seabird deaths. 19 of the 21 species of Albatross are currently facing global extinction. Around 100,000 albatross a year - approximately one every five minutes - drown when taking bait from hooks suspended on longlines up to 80 miles long. For more information visit [www.savethealbatross.net](http://www.savethealbatross.net)
- Hurray for Ireland! For the first time since 1912 a pair of breeding Golden Eagles has nested and laid an egg in Ireland. The normal incubation period has passed, but the female continues to sit on the egg. Researchers plan to take the egg in an effort to discover what went wrong, but it is a hopeful sign nonetheless. Birders Digest.com 2005.
- The 2005-06 Project Feederwatch begins in November! Click on [www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/) and become a citizen scientist by simply feeding the birds and doing some counting and recording. By doing so you will be making a valuable contribution to conservation!

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

**Why was this issue six pages long instead of the usual four pages?**

**Because the staff at Idaho Magic Feathers wanted the last issue that carries that name to go out with the fluttering of many pages!**

**Idaho is a great place for birding, and we intend to continue to spread the word!**