

Great Texas Birding Classic

WINNERS REPORT



April 9-17, 2011

John D. Pyle, Jr.



Mission Statement

To increase appreciation, understanding and conservation of birds along the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail through education, recreation, nature tourism and conservation fundraising.

For More Information

For more information about how you, your business or community can be involved in the event, please contact the Birding Classic Staff:

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www.birdingclassic.org

Tournament Coordinator

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Cover Artwork

Original artwork by John P. O'Neill featured on the cover is a Red-headed Woodpecker, an East Texas specialty.

THANK YOU!

The Birding Classic staff would like to extend a warm thank you to all participants, our host community, the Beaumont Convention & Visitors Bureau, our Awards Brunch host the Stark Foundation, our sponsors, and special guest Master of Ceremonies Jeff Gordon (ABA president) for making the 15th Annual Great Texas Birding Classic such a great success! Thank you for your support in our effort to conserve coastal habitat and wildlife along the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail.

- ☞ We had the financial support of eight Texas coastal communities.
- ☞ We had 65 additional sponsors, including corporations, small businesses, artists, foundations and individuals.
- ☞ 225 people participated in the competition.
- ☞ A total of 40 teams with birders from 10 states (TX, PA, OK, CO, CA, MI, FL, IL, MA, OH) competed in all categories.
- ☞ We had 14 youth teams participate and 11 Big Sit! teams.
- ☞ The combined species total seen or heard by all teams during the Birding Classic this year was 339! To see which birds were seen by the winning teams, go to www.birdingclassic.org.
- ☞ Through the past 15 years, winning teams have donated \$789,500 to avian habitat conservation along the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail! This is a significant accomplishment—one that cannot be celebrated enough. The creation and continuation of this event, has benefited birds, other wildlife and people as well.



MISSION STATEMENT

To increase appreciation, understanding and conservation of birds along the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail through education, recreation, nature tourism and conservation fundraising.



Tropicbirds. Photo by Jeff Gordon.

Thanks to the Beaumont Convention and Visitors Bureau for being our local host and the Stark Foundation for our Awards Brunch on Sunday, April 17. Our special guest Master of Ceremonies, American Birding Association President Jeff Gordon, was also instrumental in making the concluding event a wonderful celebration.

2011 GTBC CONSERVATION GRANT GRAND PRIZE WINNERS



Photo by Mike Gray.

Swarovski Fabulous (EL) Fifties

**Swarovski Optik
North America**

Clay Taylor
Joel Simon
Brian Bielfelt
David Simpson
Andy Bankert
Mike Bergin (driver)

\$10,000 Conservation Grant

The winning team received the first-place prize of framed 15th annual special art for the 2011 Classic, Walkstools donated by Scandinavian Touch Walkstool, and Far West Texas Wildlife Trail maps donated by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD).

Number of species: 312

CONSERVATION GRANT PROJECT

The real winners of the Great Texas Birding Classic are the birds and the habitat that supports them. Through increased awareness of birding and nature tourism, we hope to bring to light the importance of habitat conservation. This awareness, along with the money donated directly to habitat conservation projects each year, will preserve and protect important coastal habitat for many years to come.

The top place in the Weeklong Tournament won the privilege of awarding \$10,000 to the habitat conservation project of their choice. The following project was the recipient of the Weeklong Conservation Grant Grand Prize.

Brazilian Pepper-tree removal Port Aransas Nature Preserve – City of Port Aransas

This project will continue work to remove and prevent spreading of the exotic and invasive pepper-tree. The plant is listed on the Texas Department of Agriculture's noxious plant list and control is of utmost concern. Suitable plants such as mesquite, lantana, prickly ash, bay tree and coral bean will be planted.

It's On!

Clay Taylor

It started innocently enough – in January 2011, Bill Baker (six-time winner of the Great Texas Birding Classic) told me that he wanted my Swarovski Optik team to enter the GTBC five-day competition so his team could have some decent competition. I looked over at Joel Simon, he nodded, and it was on!

Back in 2002, the GTBC changed the Classic format from birding three days, one day for each segment of the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, to a 5-day free-for-all anywhere within the coastal trails. We entered a team, but scheduling problems made pre-event scouting impossible, so we competed and ended up in a tie for fifth place. The 2011 event would be different – we would field a team of five birders, we would scout out our routes and schedule, and hope to give Bill a tussle.

Joel Simon has competed in the GTBC since the very first year, so he was an easy choice. Brian Bielfelt is an excellent birder, former hawk counter at the Hazel Bazemore Hawk Watch in Corpus Christi, and is currently working on his degree at Texas A&M, Kingsville. The last two team members were David Simpson and Andy Bankert from Florida, chosen in part for their great birding skills, but mostly because they love doing birding Big Days, and the GTBC is the ultimate in timed birding competitions. We also had a driver for the first three days – Mike Bergin of the birding blog “10,000 Birds,” whose job it was to drive the overnights, and let the Internet world know what we were up to. I named us the Swarovski Fabulous (EL) Fifties, in part to commemorate the new EL 50 Swarovision binoculars that we would use on the Classic.

We started Day 1 in the woods of East Texas, ticking off those species that could only be found there – Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, Bachman’s Sparrow, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and others. On to the coast and Sabine Woods and High Island sanctuaries for migrant species, down the Bolivar Peninsula for shorebirds and coastal specialties like Seaside Sparrow. The jetty at the Bolivar Ferry was host to a Long-tailed Duck that was found a few days earlier.

One of the great things about the GTBC is that teams competing can share information about bird sightings, so we were equipped with wireless Internet and monitored



Photo by Mike Bergin.

TexBirds and eBird for updates about rarities and sighting information. I took digiscope photos of rare and interesting birds that we encountered, in case they would be needed to verify any of our sightings – two Masked Ducks on the King Ranch, an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull at Quintana, the famous Tropical Kingbirds nesting in the parking lot of the Rockport HEB.

The last day found us breaking the 300-species barrier, as we revisited the Pineywoods, picking up late-arriving breeders that we missed four days earlier – Acadian Flycatcher and Wood Thrush, plus the Hairy Woodpecker that we missed on Day 1. After that, it was back to High Island for more migrants – our only American Redstart of the trip, the Yellow-headed Blackbird coming to the feeders at the High Island RV Park (it took us five visits to find it!). We were scanning the mudflats at Anahuac NWR at day’s end, picking up Baird’s Sandpiper in the process, when we spotted a bird we had given up on – two American Wigeons! Great!

Our last-gasp try for Virginia Rail at Anahuac was in vain, but the birding gods smiled upon us by giving up a calling Black Rail – Species # 312. We took that to be a good omen, retired to dinner, filled out our checklist and required Rare Species Verification Sheets, and pulled into the finish line at Beaumont, comfortably in time before the midnight deadline to turn in our list. Now the wait until the Sunday Awards Brunch.

We knew we had a very good list, but Bill’s team had scored as many as 340 species in other years, and Bill was wearing his poker face. When his team was announced as being in second place, I gave Joel a big smile, and he gave me a big “Thank You.” He had been waiting a long time to hoist the Roger Tory Peterson Memorial Trophy, and it felt really good.

Now, we have to defend our title in 2012. ...

SECOND PLACE

Environmental Partners

GenOn Energy

Bill Baker

Tom Roberts

Andy Dietrich

Individual prizes for second place were *Hummingbirds of Texas* books donated by Cliff Shackelford, hummingbird feeder kits donated by Best “1”, and runner-up certificates with special art for the 2011 Classic.

Number of species: 306



Photo by Mike Gray.

THIRD PLACE

California Thrashers

Naylor & Company
Investments, LLC



Photo by Mike Gray.

Steve Frank

Andrew McClung

Chad Naylor

Individual prizes for third place were birding trail caps and Far West Texas Wildlife Trail maps donated by TPWD.

Number of species: 217

The California Thrashers Take On the Birding Classic (and Twitter) for the Second Time!

In 140 characters per post or less, here's an entertaining look at their week on the Texas coast.

April 11:

Here we go again. The Thrashers are back for a second go at the Great Texas Birding Classic. Our team is the same as 2009: Woody, Doc and me.

Last time, 2 of us were married, this time 1. If we do it again, it may be 0.

Woody and I are en route: Frisco to Harlingen. Doc, flying from Hawaii, will meet us there.

The Thrashers are reunited for the 1st time in 2 yrs. Film crew expected at airport but AWOL.

Pulling off highway to buy cowboy hats.

Have hats and boots. We look good. Asked by clerk at saddle shop, "Where you fellas from?"

Had dinner at place called "Hooters." Disappointing. No owls in sight. Plenty of perches though.

Sleeping in Rio Grande City where we were asked again, "Where y'all from?" Our third time tonight.

April 12:

Rolling toward Roma. Very dark out.

Leaving Roma. Zero birds. Next stop Salineno.

Leaving Salineno with 44 species and 7 mosquito bites.

Another run in with authorities. Talked our way out of any fines.

Leaving Falcon for Bentsen. Spent ten minutes with a roadrunner studying the oddities of the California Thrashers.

After Bentsen we hit Frontera then the big parrot roost in McAllen where we are toasting the day's successes.

Our day total is 79. A fine day filled with a kettle of a thousand MS kites and ending with some crazy parrots. Saw a bobcat too.

Two of the three Thrashers are spent, crashed here at the motel. Woody is owling. First stop tomorrow: Santa Ana.

Continued on the next page



The California Thrashers, continued

April 13:

Aplomado Falcon on Old Port Isabel Road - fantastic!

At Santa Ana we reported nesting clay-colored robins. After our report, a ranger went to close the nesting area. Take that, competition.

South Padre Island - birding and wild public drunkenness don't mix.

Hit Laguna + South Padre, where we saw the GenOn team we love but want to hate, forcing ourselves to let the air out of their tires.

Overall it was a banner day for us. Our total is at 138, aided by accomplished birders who pitied us. Thanks, Trevor.

Now we are off to Corpus where we hope to find more birders like the nice ladies from West Texas who fed us homemade cookies.



April 14:

Port Aransas - no gators but 1 more yellow-throat, yellow warbler, a black-poll, another pied grebe - who knew sewage

could be so attractive?

Leaving Corpus for Brazos Bend with 163 species, ahead of schedule for our 200 target.

Highlights today include sea turtle and bottlenose dolphin, escorting us off Mustang Island.

April 15:

Hit Brazos where we strutted with gallinule. Then Bolivar where the oldsquaw hid from these old men.

Finally High Island spoon fed us countless warblers helping us to 196 just a handful short of our 200 goal.

Next up is the red-cockaded woodpecker which Bill Baker has guaranteed. Thanks in advance, Bill.

April 16:

Thrashers have exceeded our goals so are visiting the Janis Joplin exhibit in Port Arthur. Great museum.



Leaving Texas for Louisiana. Will be back for banquet tomorrow.

Had second thoughts. Headed back to Sabine Woods. We missed them nice Texas birdies.

Our birding is done. The return to Texas netted 2 new species giving us a day's total of almost 20.

It was a glorious end combining Janis Joplin memorabilia with red-cockaded, bald eagle, red-headed woodpecker and swallow tail kite.

We are off for celebratory cocktails before turning in our forms. See you soon, kind folks at GCBO.

April 17:

Headed to awards banquet, with a final tally of 217 species covered over 5 days and 1400 miles.

The Thrashers placed a distant 3rd behind the GenOn team at 306 and Swarovski at 312. We take our cowboy hats off to both.

April 18:

Another Classic is a wrap. We have left Texas with heavy hearts, thanks to the fine hospitality of GCBO and Texas Parks and Wildlife.

On the return flight, Woody and I talked about next year's Classic, wondering what might be next. He paused and said one word: motorcycles.

So, until next year, I sadly sign off, consoled by my friends nesting 30 feet away.

From the Birding Classic staff, we can't wait to see y'all back next year!

HUMAN-POWERED – COAST WIDE

In 2011, the Birding Classic staff made the leap to include another tournament that had been requested by past participants for some time. The teams that participated had a great time, so we are glad we took a chance! We were not able to fund a conservation grant for this new tournament but plan to reassess grant funding for 2012 based on number of teams registered for this tournament next year and fundraising success by the Birding Classic for the conservation grants.

1. Eagle Eyes

Independent

Ron Weeks, John Hale, Jason Oehring, Eleanor Kwik
Chaperones: Linda Hale, Vickie Oehring, Cynthia Kwik
Number of species: 152 And they rode 51 miles by bicycle!!
Individual prizes were first place framed special art certificates for the 2011 Classic, Kenn Kaufman's *Advanced Birding* book donated by Houghton Mifflin, and birding trail caps and lens cloths donated by TPWD.



Eagle Eyes. Photo by Vicki Oehring.



Green Kingfishers.

2. Green Kingfishers

Independent

Monica Bererra, Marisa Oliva, Teresa Sova, John Dale, Diana Sova
Number of species: 61
Individual prizes were runner-up certificates with special art for the 2011 Classic and birding trail t-shirts donated by TPWD.

Biking and Birding: A Great Way to See the Texas Coast

Ron Weeks

Our Birding Classic team began our day at 0500 in southern Chambers County listening for owls under a moonlit sky and calm winds. Yours truly, Ron Weeks, was joined by three participants of the Texas Ornithological Society (TOS)/Harris County Parks sponsored youth birding program: John Hale (15) of College Station, Jason Oehring of Houston (15) and Eleanor Kwik (16) of Sugar Land.

We walked the roadway, hearing Eastern Screech, Barred and Great Horned Owls. And as dawn approached we were serenaded by several Chuck-will's-widows. We added our needed woodland species one-by-one: American Crow, Red-bellied, Downy and Pileated Woodpeckers, Blue Jay and the like. Eleanor spotted our first surprise of the day, a Crested Caracara, oddly placed on a snag over dense woodland. It was then time to break out the bikes which would be our transportation for the rest of the day as we had chosen the new "human-powered" category for the Classic competition.

Once we broke out into the coastal prairies, John spotted a true surprise – an Anhinga winged its way along the road. The bikes allowed us to add many species by ear as we

worked our way eastward ... Eastern Bluebird, Sedge Wren and Eastern Kingbird, but alas, no Northern Bobwhite where one had been calling the previous morning. We headed on in to Anahuac with 70 species and spirits high.

Once at Anahuac, we rode to where some of the last remaining fresh water remained, in hopes of ducks and shorebirds. Some were there as we added Green-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gull-billed Tern, Least Bittern and, best of all, American Golden-Plover to our list. By this time the winds had begun to blow out of the north at 15 mph. And unfortunately, we were now headed into the teeth of them meaning we made slow progress back to F.M. 1985.

Continued on the next page

ENERGY SAVER – COAST WIDE

This tournament has a green twist as well, with the basic rule that a team had to travel a minimum of 50 miles and turn in their mileage with their Official Checklist. Once the judges assessed the species list, we then calculated the number of species seen per mile driven. Both Gliders and Adult teams were eligible to compete in the coast wide Energy Saver tournament. A \$10,000 Conservation Grant was awarded by the team with the highest number of species per mile. The teams that participated had a great time and enjoyed the challenge of determining a very birdy route. And this year one of the teams extended their route by doing a significant piece of their birding by bicycle.



Weslaco Slice of Good Lifers.

1. Weslaco Slice of Good Lifers

Weslaco Chamber of Commerce

Martin Hagne, Huck Hutchens, John Yochum,
Kyle O'Haver

Number of species per mile: 3.48 (174 species)

Individual prizes were first place framed special art certificates for the 2011 Classic, Owl Shacks, birding trail caps and lens cloths donated by TPWD.

\$10,00 Energy Saver Conservation Grant: Southmost Preserve Habitat Restoration – The Nature Conservancy

This project will focus on herbicide treating invasive grasses on 22 acres of the preserve. Five acres will be replanted with native plants from their native plant nursery.

2. Whooping Craniacs

Independent

Greg Mason, Lalise Mason, Jamie Schubert, Woody Woodrow, Jeff Dallarosa

Number of species per mile: 3.22 (161 species)

Individual prizes were runner-up certificates with special art for the 2011 Classic and birding trail shirts donated by TPWD.

Biking and Birding, continued

Once the wind was at our side, we increased our speed and starting clicking off birds again. I spied a Western Kingbird on a wire and finally some Upland Sandpipers rose out of grasslands. We next made the turn onto SH 124 and *finally* had the winds at our backs. The next major obstacle for our tiring legs was the High Island Bridge. I shifted down and was able to keep pedaling, but we strung out and then regrouped at the top of the bridge. We coasted into High Island and Jason immediately spied us our only White-winged Dove of the day. Overall, High Island was good as we added several warblers including lingering Palms and Yellow-rumpeds. Surprises there included Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Swainson's Warbler, Yellow-headed Blackbird and Bronzed Cowbird pushing our total to 145.

Our next stop was Rollover Pass – our last chance for gulls, terns and shorebirds we needed for our list. The problem was that the wind had shifted and was once again working against us for that last seven miles. It took us nearly an hour, but shortly before the sun set we rolled into town to the cheers of our supporters. Once there we added American Avocet, American Oystercatcher and Sandwich Tern. The last stop was Yacht Basin Road, one mile farther, to add a Clapper Rail that landed in the moonlight.

The long day was finally over. In all, we had logged 152 species (we won the human-powered section!) and a grueling 51 miles on our mountain bikes.

ADULTS – Upper Coast Only

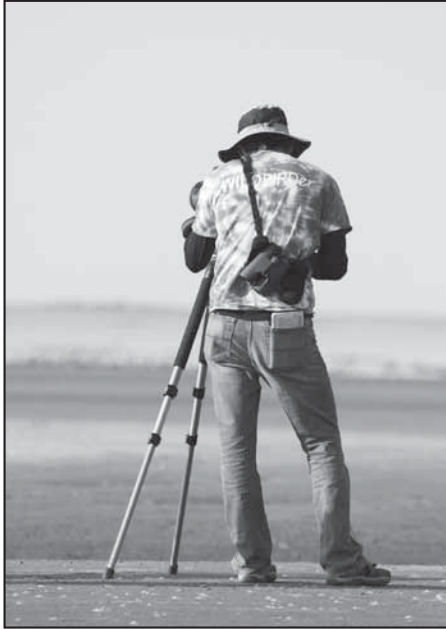
1. Free Falling Falcons

Independent

Tony Frank, John O'Brien, David Sarkozi

Number of species: 200

Individual prizes were first place framed special art certificates for the 2011 Classic, Crossley Bird ID Guides donated by Princeton Press, and Far West Texas Wildlife Trail maps donated by TPWD.



2. TAMUG WildBirders

WildBird and KOWA

Susan Knock, Chuck Folden, Jason Perry, Katie St. Claire, Laurissa Noack, Andrew McInnes (driver)

Number of species: 194

Individual prizes were runner-up special art certificates for the 2011 Classic, Ghost Bird DVDs, and birding trail t-shirts donated by TPWD. They selected the winning \$10,000 conservation project being the highest place sponsored team (listed on page 13).

TAMUG WildBirders.

Photo by 2AM Photography/Andrew McInnis.

3. Rice Loony Nooners

Independent

Cin-Ty Lee, Greg Hirth, Blake Dyer, Alex Kirshner (driver)

Number of species: 172

4. The Grey Feathers

Independent

Patricia Bowen, Shirley Smith, Carol Scherer, Jo Ann Andrews

Number of species: 151

5. Whooping Cranes

Mike O'Brien, TOS, Houston Audubon Society, Wimberley Birding Society & Others

Jesse Huth, Hannah Smalley, Richard Dunn, Sean Wong, Sara Otruba

Number of species: 149



Whooping Cranes. Photo by Jaci Kroupa.

ADULTS – Central Coast Only



Dallas Scissortails. Photo by James Walker.

1. Dallas Scissortails

Audubon Dallas

Christian Walker, Austin Walker, Amy Lindberg,
Dr. Marcy Brown Marsden

Number of species: 201

Individual prizes were first place framed special art certificates for the 2011 Classic, tours on the Skimmer to see Whooping Cranes and other birds donated by Captain Tommy Moore, birding trail caps, Far West Texas Wildlife Trail maps, and lens cloths donated by TPWD.

First Place – \$10,000 Conservation Project Award
(listed on page 13)

2. Port A Pipits

Port Aransas Chamber of Commerce

Scott Holt, Joan Holt, Cecilia Riley

Number of species: 172

Individual prizes included runner-up special art certificates for the 2011 Classic, *Extreme Birder* books signed by the author and donated by Texas A&M Press and Lynn Barber.

3. Aplomado Falcons

Independent

Ray Allen, Vicki Allen, Jay Pruett, Marilyn Rhodes, Kiki Widjaja

Number of species: 112

ADULTS – Lower Coast Only

1. Swarovski Roadside Hawks

Swarovski Optik NA

Clay Taylor, David Simpson

Number of species: 147

Due to family issues the third team member was unable to participate, and therefore, the team did not meet the requirement of 3-5 members to be an official team.

Awards Brunch.

Photo by Reba Craft.



SECTIONAL CONSERVATION GRANTS

Sectional Conservation grants of \$10,000 were awarded by the winning sponsored team on the section of the coast where they competed to the habitat conservation project of their choice.

The following projects were recipients of the Sectional Conservation Prizes.

CENTRAL TEXAS COAST \$10,000 – Donated by Dallas Scissortails

Restoration of Avian habitat on the Welder Wildlife Refuge – Submitted by Welder Wildlife Foundation

This project will focus on controlling invasive species, particularly catchclawvine, Chinese tallow, huisache and Chinaberry. These plants have created a canopy which has led to less diverse herbaceous vegetation. The basal stems will be cut and hand treated with herbicide. The naturally occurring native vegetation can recover thus restoring threatened avian habitat.

UPPER TEXAS COAST \$10,000 – Donated by the TAMUG WildBirders

Northern Bobwhite habitat restoration at the Sandyland Sanctuary – Submitted by The Nature Conservancy – Big Thicket Program

This project's goal is to conduct restoration treatments of prescribed burn, herbicide and mechanical control and feral hog removal to improve the upland forested habitat to benefit the Northern Bobwhite.

BONUS CONSERVATION GRANT SELECTIONS

With additional tournament funds raised for Conservation Grants, Classic staff got together and chose two projects for the remaining \$10,000.

\$7,000 Conservation Grant

Freeport Wetlands Habitat Improvements – City of Freeport

This project will serve the dual purpose of improving the habitat with plantings of natives such as spike rush, cordgrass and wax myrtle as well as educational signage displaying common birds that can be seen from various locations along the trail.

Property size: 50 acres, Brazoria County

\$3,000 Conservation Grant

Russ Pittman Park Enhancement – Nature Discovery Center

Exotic plant species will be removed and replaced with woody and herbaceous natives. The project will increase the amount and diversity of understory vegetation to create higher quality habitat for insects and avifauna.

Property size: 4 acres, Harris County

GLIDERS TEAMS (14- to 18-year-olds)

Being around the youth teams is a special treat each year; young, enthusiastic birders are invigorating and fun. A special “thank you” goes out to all of the mentors, teachers, parents, and sponsors for taking the time to help guide these young people into the field and educate them about birds and conservation along the Texas coast.

1. Tropicbirds (upper coast)

Independent

Ethan Gyllenhaal, Galen Frank-Bishop, Maia Paddock, Sarah Toner, Chip Clouse and Jen Brumfield mentors

Number of species: 180

Individual prizes were first place framed special art certificates for the 2011 Classic, Kaufman Advanced Birding donated by Houghton Mifflin, Audubon Nature Texas App donated by Green Mountain Digital and birding trail caps donated by TPWD.



Tropicbirds. Photo by Mike Gray.



TOS Valley Specialtiess. Photo by Kyle O'Haver.

2. TOS Valley Specialties (lower coast)

Texas Ornithological Society, McAllen Chamber of Commerce
Kyle O'Haver, Gabriel Silva, Clara Patt, RJ Flores, David Flores, Marissa Latigo (driver)

Number of species: 147

Individual prizes were runner-up framed special art certificates for the 2011 Classic, headlamps donated by the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and Far West Texas Wildlife Trail maps donated by TPWD.

3. Towhees (central coast)

Travis Audubon, Texas Ornithological Society, Victor Emanuel Nature Tours

Irene Smith, Eamon Decker, Anja Thomsen, Madeline Stager, Joren Brown

Number of species: 127

4. John Jay Blue Jays (central coast)

Independent

Christine Chen, Alyssa Bennet, Nick Grebenor, Mike Scully (mentor)



Towhees. Photo by Mr. Smith.

The Winning

Ethan Gyllenhaal

The start to any proper Big Day is the night. We started at an amazing marsh that we had Sora at during the day before. It was silent. Despite our best efforts, we failed to get any rails to call. We did, however, see a Great-horned Owl perched on the horizon. We eventually gave up, and headed for the Pineywoods.

We got to a main Pineywoods stop (Boykin Springs), and heard tons of Chuck-will's-widow's after finding a dead one. We even paused for a minute and watched two having fun in the headlights of our van. We then failed to find much of anything in the way of night birds.

Finally, we started to see some light! We staked out a Red-cockaded Woodpecker nest, and after listening to a chorus of Bachman's Sparrows and Brown-headed Nuthatches for a while, we heard the excited yelps of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. They gave great views, but we soon had to leave these awesome woodpeckers for other targets. After turning up a few basic Pineywoods birds as well as a couple migrant (Blue-headed Vireo, Nashville Warbler, and Yellow-breasted Chat were the best). We then headed off to various other Pineywoods spots, picking up most specialties, including Swainson's Warbler. Then, at an overlook of a lily pad filled bay at Martin Dies, Jr. SP, we saw two Swallow-tailed Kites! We made a stop at Jasper Fish Hatchery too, producing many herons and a few surprises (Hooded Merganser, especially). We then sped away to our shorebird fields, picking up a few raptors including ANOTHER Swallow-tailed Kite!!! The fields had lots of stuff, including Whimbrels, Golden-plovers, Upland Sandpipers, and Buff-breasted Sandpipers.

We finally arrived at High Island, which started off with some warbler activity, but I soon realized that although it was somewhat active, it was far from the legends I've heard before. I started to get worried, and we only picked up about a dozen species (way less than we should have). Evidently it was a good day there, but the warblers were few and far between for us. We then headed to the coast, hitting up Rollover Pass on our way to the famous Bolivar Flats. It was low tide! The water level had receded, as has shorebird/tern diversity. We did manage to pull out a few tougher

species, including the Red-breasted Merganser found during scouting. Then it was time for Bolivar Flats. We instantly found Wilson's Plovers, which we soon learned were everywhere. There were tons of great shorebirds, which we quickly processed then moved on from. We found such great birds as Baird's and Buff-breasted Sandpipers, Piping Plover, Long-billed Curlew and Red Knot. I spotted a very interesting first cycle gull that had Lesser Black-backed like plumage but had the wrong structure. It was most likely a life hybrid (LBB x Herring Gull). Sadly, we had to leave it, and headed out to a couple more stops of White-tailed Kite and Clapper Rail. With the last photons of light, we sped on to High Island, visiting the Smith Oaks Rookery. We picked up Barred Owl and Swainson's Thrush, and were able to barely make out the bright red shoulders of spoonbills at the rookery. We then spent a while exploring various marshes for our day nemesis: SORA! We couldn't find any, but did find a King Rail we hoped would be a Virginia Rail. We were at 179 species. Desperate to get to 180, we picked a random park and went there. Our Red Tail pulled over and took a long nap on the side of the road, but we were able to hear two Screech-owls!!! We went to the park (Double Bayou), and Maia was able to hear a Screech-owl over the wind! We then entered our totals at an IHOP (as well as ate a lot). We also decided to try double windmill high fives and made a top secret high five as well.

Tropicbirds. Photo by Jeff Gordon.



The team sports the swallow-tailed kite sign.

Tale of the Twenty-Eleven Tropicbirds

Maia Paddock

The setting: upper Texas Coast. The time: mid-April. The team: Ethan Gyllenhaal, hailing from Chicago; Sarah Toner, who adds to the large troop of Michigan birders; Galen Frank-Bishop, emerging from Middle of Nowhere, Massachusetts; and Maia Paddock, from Pennsylvania. The leaders: Chip Clouse and Jen Brumfield, both fearless beasts. The goal: to see birds, or more specifically, enough birds for Chip to let us shave his head.

Our scouting days were full of birds, camera wars, bad puns, pop culture quote references (winning!), yelling into ditches for bitterns, and remarking about how redneck everything was. Thursday, we cleaned up at Anahuac, getting both species of bitterns and many gators, which Ethan suggested we should “curb stomp.” Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were exciting for the first 20 or so, but were soon ignored. Rollover Pass was swarming with birds, including a Laughing Gull that Ethan spent 30 minutes changing to a Franklin’s Gull. That night we spent eating shrimp gumbo with the Tropical Birding crew. The big bird



on Friday was found over the small town of Fred—a Swallow-tailed Kite less than 20 feet away, circling close to the road. We piled out of the van, took some pictures, and gave life bird punches all around. That night we slept three hours before starting the big day.

On the big day we were stalked by Jeff Gordon. He drove a red Kia Soul behind us, leading to him being dubbed the Red Tail. The big day started with an average of one bird every three hours. The marsh where we had decided to start was eerily dead, besides a distant Great Horned Owl. We were all fairly sure this silence was caused by the black demon fox with glowing eyes that we saw there. However, with the break of dawn, the birds came out and we scored Brown-headed Nuthatch, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Pine Warbler, and Bachman’s Sparrow in a matter of minutes. We continued throughout the Piney Woods, Martin Dies Park, and the fish hatchery, scoring almost all specialties. Scanning the Purple Gallinule area did not get us a gallinule, but “double Swallow-tail Kites all the way across the sky!” made up for that. By this point we were running a little over an hour late.

After “rolling through the ’hood” to get House Sparrow, Rock Pigeon, Fish Crow and American Robin, we sped to Anahuac. We power-birded the fields on the way, mopping up all of the specialty species such as Upland and Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Our stops at each field only lasted about a minute plus the three seconds it took to get in and out of the car. Anahuac itself was not as productive, Boy Scout Woods was extremely crowded and yielded a disappointing 12 species, and Rollover Pass filled only a few checklist holes. We spent our last light on the Bolivar Flats, finding most of the missing plovers, Baird’s Sandpiper, and plenty of gulls. The Wilson’s Plover and Baird’s Sandpiper were coming very close to us, which lead to a quick abandonment of the “no cameras on the big day” rule. At each gulling spot Ethan would laboriously scan every gull and tern, trying to pull out a rarity.

At this time we were facing 174 birds and darkness. A lack of Roseate Spoonbill was fixed by a trip to a rookery where a Swainson’s Thrush was also heard. Easy Barred and Barn Owls helped for the night birds. A Clapper Rail called in a roadside marsh. This left us with 179 species and roughly two hours until midnight. From this point on, the deal was to bird until 11:00 p.m. or 180 species. Chip’s phone GPS guided us to Double Bayou Park in the middle of redneck land. A sign said that this park was under “constant surveillance”; we wondered if the barking dog was the surveillance system. As we sat there, Sarah asleep, Galen nodding towards that direction, and Ethan and I completely hyper on lack of sleep, I heard it. We all piled out of the car for three individual screech owls, giving us the 180th bird. It was 10:50 p.m.

Back at an IHOP, we ate pancakes as we entered our checklist online. It was past 1:00 a.m when we all finally got to sleep. Compared to the rest of the days, the awards day was inconsequential besides finding out that we had won with what we thought was a measly 180 birds. Finally, because of our victory, our end goal was reached: we shaved off Chip’s hair.

ROUGHWINGS (13-year-olds and younger)

1. Rockport Roadrunners (central coast)

Rockport-Fulton Area Chamber of Commerce

Savannah Rozacky, Emily Duprie, Olivia Smith, Caden Rozacky, Dale Pogue (mentor), Gayle Rozacky (driver)

Number of species: 143

Individual prizes were first place framed special art certificates for the 2011 Classic, Peterson *Birds of North America* and *Young Birders Guides* donated by Houghton Mifflin and birding trail lens cloths donated by TPWD.



Rockport Roadrunners. Photo by Gayle Rozacky.



Rockport Raptors. Photo by Katrina McLeod.

2. Rockport Raptors (central coast)

Aransas Bird & Nature Club

Kyler Friebele, Britney Goodwin, Evan Knapp, Jesse Sprinkle, Martha McLeod (driver), Bron Rorex/Robert Edwards (mentors)

Number of species: 125

Individual prizes included second place special art certificates for the 2011 Classic, Raven binoculars donated by Eagle Optics, and *Young Birders Guides* donated by Houghton Mifflin.

3. Curlew Cousins (upper coast)

Deep South Marine

Victoria Baker, Ryan Baker, Lauren Copeland, Bill Baker (mentor)

Number of species: 117

Individual prizes included third place special art certificates for the 2011 Classic, Peterson *Field Guides to the Birds of Eastern North America* donated by Houghton Mifflin, and suet feeder cages and suet cakes donated by Bass Pro Shops.



Curlew Cousins. Photo by Bill Baker.



TOS Seaside Sparrows. Photo by Cindy Jordy.

4. TOS Seaside Sparrows (upper coast)

Texas Ornithological Society

Travis Younts, Owen Bradford, Matthew Simpson, Dylan Trevino, Drew Trevino, Fred Collins (mentor)

Number of species: 111

5. Uncommon Terns (central coast)

Port Aransas Chamber of Commerce

Hank Brennan, Kyle Jones, Charlotte Ramsden, Eric Anderson, Traver Truax, Joan Holt/Julie Findley (mentors)

Number of species: 100



Uncommon Terns. Photo by Carol Jones.



HAS Accipiters.

6. HAS Accipiters (upper coast)

Houston Audubon Society

David Young, Caleb Drew, Maggie Schweis, Stennie Meadours (mentor)

Number of species: 90

7. TOS Fulton Falcons (central coast)

Texas Ornithological Society

Cindy Nguyen, Alexis Grogan, Ian Brewer, Andrew Gardner, Robert Edwards/ Bron Rorex (mentors), Martha McLeod (driver)

Number of species: 80



TOS Fulton Falcons.

Photos by Katrina McLeod.

8. Winning Warblers (central coast)

Independent

Hannah May, Ashley Norris, Elena Crawford, Bristol Harrison, Josh Parker, Julie Findley (mentor), Reta Pearson (driver)

Number of species: 73



9. Sparkling Sparrows (central coast)

Independent

Hayley Kinsner, Sunny Maynard, Alice Appling, Jackson Waight, Dylan Denton, Julie Findley (mentor)

Number of species: 69

BIG SIT!

The Big Sit! Tournament continues to be a popular event. Teams came out in all sections of the coast identifying birds within their 17-foot circle. As part of the Big Sit! Tournament, the \$3,000 Lone Star Bird Award was created. The Lone Star Bird Award is chosen by randomly drawing the name of a bird that can be seen along the entire Texas coast. Any Big Sit! team that sees this bird then goes into a drawing to determine the winner of the Lone Star Bird Award. This team then picks which habitat project will receive \$3,000. This year's Lone Star Bird was Dunlin. Individual prizes are also given in this tournament category.

1. Southmost Sitters

Eagle Optics

Mary Gustafson, Jennifer Owen-White, John Yochum, David Benn, Huck Hutchens, Javier de Leon, Roy Rodriguez, Martin Hagne, Joe Uribe, JD Cortez

Circle location: Southmost Preserve

Number of species: 106

Individual prizes were All Weather Birder Journals donated by Write-In-the-Rain and birding trail caps donated by TPWD.

2. McRee Ford Thunderbirds

McRee Ford

Bill Baker, Lauri Baker, Dennis Meyers, Camy Meyers, Breck Sacra, Jeff Dallarosa, Melinda King, Lea Baker, Carolanne Smith

Circle location: Cedar Bayou cooling pond

Number of species: 98

Individual prizes were Best "1" Hummingbird Feeder kits donated by Best "1".



McRee Ford Thunderbirds.

Photo by Carol Jones.



Port Aransas Spoonbills.

Photo by Mikael Behrens.

3. Port Aransas Spoonbills

Port Aransas CoC/Visitors Bureau

Scott Holt, Joan Holt, Ann Vaughan, Becky Corder, Mikael Behrens, Georgia Neblett, Bobby Sherwood, Bob Fisher, Tony Amos

Circle location: Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center

Number of species: 89

Individual prizes were Spot-N-Jot note cards donated by Linda Grant and Far West Texas Wildlife Trail maps donated by TPWD.



Black-whiskered vireo. Photo by Mikael Behrens.

4. The Bitterns

Shintec

Cecilia Riley, Mike Gray, Felipe Chavez-Ramirez, Jennifer Sanchez, Aaron Sanchez, Sasha Munters, Sue Heath, Kay Lookingbill, Robert Lookingbill
Circle location: San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge
Number of species: 85

5. Knight Birds

Corpus Christi CVB

Jo Creglow, Leah Pummill, Robert Creglow, Mel Cooksey, Carmen Hagapian, Phyllis Hibdon, Margie DeClemente, John Shreves, Claudia Dorn

**LONE STAR BIRD AWARD WINNER –
\$3,000 CONSERVATION GRANT**

Circle location: Packery Channel
Number of species: 82

LONE STAR BIRD AWARD

\$3,000

Knight Birds

(sponsored by Corpus Christi CVB)

**Packery Channel Oak Motte Sanctuary
habitat enhancement –
Audubon Outdoor Club of Corpus Christi**

This project will consist of the installation of a drip fountain and connection to the city water supply as a source of fresh water for times when rainfall is low.
Property size: 5 acres, Nueces County



Sword Plumbing Piping Plovers. Photo by Terrell Sword.

6. Sword Plumbing Piping Plovers

Sword Plumbing

Don Verser, Betsy Black, Marcy Brown, Mary Ann Beauchemin, Gary Gray, Pam Smolen, Flo Hannah, Terrell Sword, Julie Gold
Circle location: Smith Oaks Sanctuary
Number of species: 76

7. Playeros

Independent

Cullen Hanks, Jeff Raasch, Brian O'Shea, Stephen Hanks, Jesse Lasky
Circle location: Boliver Peninsula
Number of species: 72

8. Coastal Bend Audubon Society

Corpus Christi CVB

Scott Large, Jon Anderson, Kristen Pavelka, Judd Curtis, Blair Sterba-Boatwright, Rosalie Rossi, Emily Williamson, Matt McCauley, Lauren Schneider, David Newstead
Circle location: South Texas Botanical Gardens
Number of species: 62

9. Brazosport Birders

Freeport LNG

Tom Taroni, Charlie Brower, Olivia Brower,
Jennifer Wilson, Tom Morris, Bea Harrison,
Jim Harrison, Tad Finnell, David Plunkett, Gary Brooks
Circle location: Quintana Neotropical Sanctuary
Number of species: 60

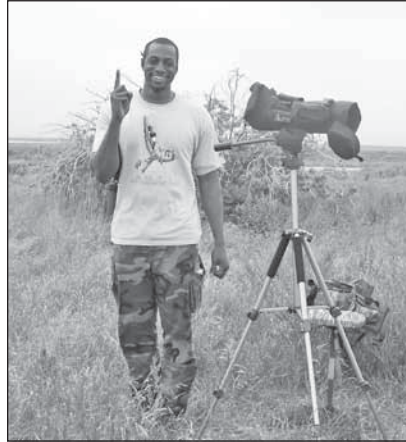


Brazosport Birders. Photo by Carol Jones.

10. Tyranus Tyranus

Independent

Alexander Anderson
Circle location: Justin Hurst
Wildlife Management Area
Number of species: 54



Tyranus Tyranus.
Photo by Carol Jones.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

We could not do this event every year without the continued support of our corporate and community sponsors, prize donors and all of the participants who come down to the Texas coast each year to compete on behalf of coastal habitat conservation.

We hope you are able to join us in the years to come!

16th Annual Great Texas Birding Classic:

April 14-22, 2012

17th Annual Great Texas Birding Classic:

April 20-28, 2013

**For information on the Great Texas Birding Classic,
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In Lake Jackson: (979) 480-0999

By mail: The Great Texas Birding Classic, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory,
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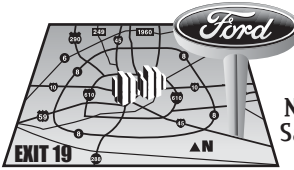
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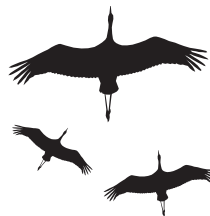
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The Great Texas Birding Classic is co-hosted by the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. We would like to extend our gratitude to the following people for making this year's event fly!

GULF COAST BIRD OBSERVATORY:

Cecilia Riley - Executive Director
Carol Jones - GTBC Tournament Coordinator
Reba Craft - Office Manager
Sue Heath - Web site assistance
Felipe Chavez-Ramirez - Director of Conservation Programs

Additional GCBO Volunteers:

- Michael Gray
- Don Rosebury
- Susan Severance
- Deniese Slaydon

TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT:

Shelly Plante - Nature Tourism Manager
John Davis - Wildlife Diversity Program Director
Cliff Shackelford - Texas Partners in Flight Coordinator
Darcy Bontempo - Marketing Director
Chris Hunt - Layout and design of event publications

OFFICIAL ARTIST FOR 2011:

John P. O'Neill

JUDGES:

Cliff Shackelford - TPWD ornithologist,
Texas Partners in Flight
John Arvin - GCBO

ADDITIONAL BEHIND THE SCENES HELP:

Reba Craft, Karen Cornelius and Bryan Plante

Thanks to all of our community partners for helping coordinate the Awards Lunch: Elizabeth Eddins, Director of Tourism, Beaumont Convention and Visitors Bureau
Jay Jones, Lutch Stark Foundation
Stark Museum of Art

Special thanks to the following for opening their gates to Classic competitors: Coastal NWRs, Coastal WMAs, Jasper Fish Hatchery, Texas City Prairie Preserve, Shangri La, and Private homes of our birding friends throughout the Texas coast



Photo by Reba Craft.

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