

OKATIBBEE CREEK AUDUBON SOCIETY

June 2002

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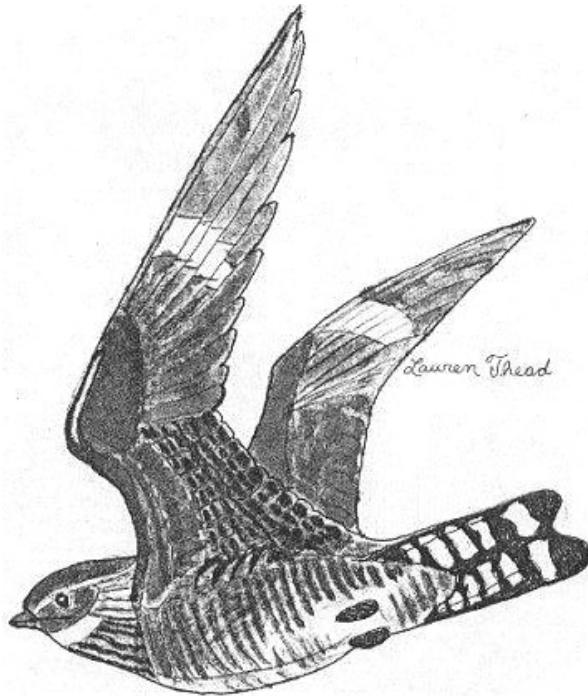
**...and articles by Brant Cunningham and
R. L. and Coralee Richardson**

The Common Nighthawk

By Lauren Thead

While outdoors on a late summer afternoon, you see a medium-sized brownish bird with long, pointed wings swooping down to nab an insect. As it maneuvers around the roof of a building, you can see broad white patches across the primary feathers of its wings. You hear a nasal *peeent* and notice a slightly forked tail. This swift hunter is, of course, the Common Nighthawk.

The Common Nighthawk



Nighthawks are closely related to nightjars such as the Chuck-will's-widow, but they are much less secretive and are often seen before dark sets in. Then they are out to capture flying insects, snaring them with the huge, gaping mouths that are characteristic of all nightjars.

Common Nighthawks nest on bare ground in open country. They may also be found nesting on the gravel roofs of city buildings. They lay two buff-colored, heavily blotched eggs. Because the young are mobile but remain at the nest, they are considered semiprecocial. They are fed regurgitated insects by both parents and are ready to leave the nest in three weeks.

If you're lucky, you might see the spectacular courtship display of the Common Nighthawk. The male dives downward, nearly crashing into the female, then suddenly

swoops upward with a booming sound that is produced by air rushing through his flight feathers. He performs this display off and on throughout the nesting time.

If you happen to see a perched Common Nighthawk, you will notice its distinctive horizontal posture. Its long wings extend past the tail, and it has a very tiny bill in comparison to the large gape. The male nighthawk has a white throat, but the female's throat is buffy.

Whether you see them darting overhead or hunched on a fence post, you will be pleased to observe these strange birds of the night.

Many, many thanks to Nell Covington and Russ Anderson for their work on the newsletter in the past, and to Coralee Richardson for her help with addressing and labeling. And if you guys are still available.....

Bluebird Notes

By Howard Malone

Some of us may think that we can “manage” Bluebirds. Our feathered friends don't recognize this fact and continue to do just what they want to do. Our efforts to help the Bluebird population must be in line with their natural lifestyles or they will be fruitless. The nesting season is well along and many BB families have fledged their first brood. We can help by cleaning out the old nest, which lowers the second nest in the box and makes it more difficult for predators to reach. The Bluebirds don't care what we do; they will build on top of an old nest.

If your nestbox(es) have not been used, check for wasps. I have never seen Bluebirds coexist with wasps. Bar soap smeared on the top of the box is reported to deter the pests.

Poor location may be the cause of inactivity. Keep boxes in the open as much as possible and placed on a post, not nailed to a tree. As a Boy Scout project I placed my first nestbox way up in a sweetgum tree. Never had Bluebirds, but had a succession of Carolina Chickadees and Tufted Titmice.

Water is a necessity. During the recent dry spell, the birdbath (with dripping water) was used heavily by several species. Again, the birds did not realize that it had been placed there for their benefit.

Bluebirds are insect eaters during the summer. I placed several broom handles throughout a small hayfield behind the house and was immediately rewarded by the sight of

the birds are through bathing and drinking. When the seeds come up, Debbie will be able to determine on what kinds of wild fruit the birds in her neighborhood--at least some of them--have been feeding. This time of year, some of those seeds should grow into wild (black) cherry and sassafras trees...a good way to obtain a nice sassafras or two for the landscape! Good luck with your experiment, Debbie!

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Have you seen the most recent panel of stamps issued by the U.S. Postal Service in its "Nature of America" series? No doubt philatelists among us Auduboners will be thrilled to learn the fourth sheet of stamps in the series depicts a composite scene of the longleaf pine forest ecosystem of the Southeast. (It would make a beautiful poster for classroom or den if only the Postal Service would issue it in that format!) Many plants and animal inhabitants of the longleaf forest appear in the art work including two orchids, yellow pitcher plants, toothache grass, fox squirrel, gray fox, gopher tortoise, Bachman's Sparrow, Northern Bobwhite, Red-bellied and Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, Eastern Towhee, Brown-headed Nuthatch, but, alas, no Pine Warblers (tsk, tsk!). The information on the back of the sheet of stamps is quite good. The Postal Service characterizes this series of stamps as featuring "the beauty and complexity of plant and animal communities in North America."

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The June, 2002, issue of Birder's World has a most interesting essay, "The Truth Is Out There," on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, written by world-renowned woodpecker expert and former Mississippi State University biology professor Jerome A. Jackson. The article speculates on the possibility that the Ivory-billed, recently considered extinct in North America, may not be so after all.

"Living On Earth" (Wednesdays at 6:30 p.m. on PRM) recently devoted one half-hour to the ongoing search for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in southeast Louisiana and featured an interview with Dr. Jackson.

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Also in the June Birder's World is a book review by Dr. Jackson of The Red-cockaded Woodpecker: Surviving in a Fire-Maintained Ecosystem by Conner, Rudolf, and Walters (University of Texas Press, 2001). The review is an excellent read, and word from Red-cockaded Woodpecker clusters is that the book is, too! Seriously, reading the book review will make one want to own the book or, at the very least, read it.

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A new field guide devoted entirely to North American hummingbirds has recently been published in the Peterson Field Guide series. This guide could prove useful, even to birders in Mississippi. Though we usually have only one species in summer, other species of hummingbirds can and do show up here in fall and winter in difficult plumages (just ask the Richardsons or the Rosamonds who have had Rufous Hummingbirds visit their feeders in late fall!). Also, should you find yourself vacationing out west, especially the Southwestern U.S. where over a dozen species of hummingbirds occur in summer, the field guide should prove indispensable.

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If you have any time or energy left over after gardening chores, mowing the lawn, shelling butter beans (does anyone shell butter beans anymore?!), etc., why not read a good book with a conservation theme this summer? May we suggest some “old” books for starters? A wonderful read would be Wild America by the late Roger Tory Peterson, an account of a 30,000-mile tour Peterson and British naturalist James Fisher took in the ‘50’s. (Some of their journey retraces one originally taken by Audubon himself.) Another book for armchair birdwatcher-travelers might be The Bird Watcher’s America edited by O.S. Pettingill, Jr., in which some eminent naturalists write about the best areas for birds in the U.S. and Canada. (These two books are out of print; check the library or used-book stores. They are well worth seeking out!)

Or what about a couple of real classics? One can’t go wrong with Aldo Leopold’s A Sand Country Almanac or Henry David Thoreau’s Walden. Both of these works are inspirational, thought-provoking and (need one say it?) great literature and bear reading and re-reading. (Shouldn’t they be required reading somewhere in the curriculum?)

Conservation literature continues to be written, of course, and one can’t go wrong with anything by Alabama-born E.O. Wilson. For starters try his Biophilia or perhaps his The Diversity of Life. Wilson’s latest book The Future of Life has just recently appeared in bookstores.

Amateur viewing

By Coralee and Rich Richardson

On our return to Weslaco, Texas, from our mission trip to Mexico in May, we visited the Valley Nature Center. This is a five-acre center (right in the downtown section of the city) set aside for wildlife, including birds, snakes, butterflies, rabbits and the Texas Lizard, and so on. Varied habitats were built to attract different species. Our goal originally was to view the red parrots returning to roost nearby. (We didn’t stay the additional two and a half hours to witness this, as it was 98 degrees at 5 p.m.!) It eventually rained later in the evening--one inch, doubling their year’s rainfall.

This center is well laid out with winding trails through local vegetation shutting out views of traffic. We were fortunate to encounter a local volunteer that alerted us where and what to look for at that time. One of the trails was blocked off due to two nests of Yellow-Crowned Night Herons. We were able to view both nests with the birds on the nests watching us! Other birds we saw for the first time were the Greater Kiskadee, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Black-and- white Warbler, Buff-bellied Hummingbird and Inca Doves. That day 48 different species had been seen by “birders” here.

REMINDER! As the weather heats up and conditions continue to be dry, keep water available for your feathered visitors.

much else can be heard. The beauty found in all this noise is not with each individual call, but when multiple calls are combined to form a chorus of frog melodies for all of nature to enjoy.

There are many other nocturnal species scurrying about in the darkness of the night, just waiting to entertain the naturalist in all of us. So take a nighttime field trip for a change. You will be amazed at what is out there. However, if all else fails, just look up--there is an ocean of galaxies and stars to be viewed in the beautiful night sky.

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Of Crop Circles and the Back Lot

**“Hey, we’ve been visited by aliens! Crop circles!”** I called out to my neighbor, who’d stopped his tractor and bushhog near the fence dividing our properties. He looked skeptically at me. Well, okay, it would’ve had to be a visit by some of the most unimaginative artists in the galaxy, as rows of cut grass lay in boring, mostly straight, even lines around us, stretching onward toward the top of the hill.

I hadn’t considered it all that overgrown, and enjoyed looking at it anyway, that field of thigh-high grasses and wildflowers that swayed in the wind and provided cover for a multitude of birds and small creatures. The hay would have to be baled now, or it would just lie there and ruin; nobody kept cattle out here, and the nearest horses were a couple of miles up the road.

But, after all, it wasn’t my own particular eyesore to deal with. All foolishness about alien crop circles aside, my neighbor had put in his bimonthly afternoon of taming the field again, had stopped his bushhogging and was obviously working his way tactfully into an offer he didn’t think I’d be able to refuse. I thought I could just about hear the scurry of little field mice running for nonexistent cover...or, more likely, for my yard, where my cats were apt to dispatch them with efficiency and leave their remains on the porch.

“So...what you gonna do with that back lot? You growing pines?” my neighbor pressed gently, leaning against his tractor, staring at the edge of the back six acres of our land, where lawn gave way abruptly to a dark, shadowy expanse of young maples, oaks, sweetgums, and, yes, pines. I considered his point of view. It did look like a real mess. Just on the other side of the tiny creek, a tangle of blackberry bushes and honeysuckle competed with seedling sassafras and willow oaks. If you pushed through the thicket, you came to patches of knee-high grass and, occasionally, carpets of pine needles fallen from the trees we had allowed to grow unimpeded for eleven years. There was neither rhyme nor reason to the madness of our decision to let nature reclaim that area--at least, not from our neighbor’s point of view--and pretty soon he got to the gist of his proposition.

“I’ll cut it for you if you like,” he offered. “For free.”

You can find the most amazing things on the Internet. Long after we'd decided to quit mowing six unused acres of land, I discovered a website that pulls up aerial photographs of large parts of the countryside. After some effort, I found, on my own little road, my own little neighborhood with neat rectangular blocks of land partitioned off, blank and featureless, uniform and clean-- nice little civilized clones of suburban lawns, except out here in the country.

And then there was our land, surrounded by those manicured and neatly-trimmed stretches. Even from thousands of feet up in the air, trees and shrubs, bushes and thickets all resembled a four-days' growth of beard. It reminded you of a hippie letting it all hang out in the company of his stodgy, proper neighbors. From high up in the atmosphere, that strip of stubbly-looking, scraggy land was almost horrifying. I wondered if whoever took the photos had thought the world's laziest people must live on that piece of ground, much to the dismay of their neighbors.

--One of whom was standing right here, waiting for me to give him permission to drive his tractor through that mess and clean it up for the sake of the neighborhood. I hesitated. "Well, you know, it's more like it originally was, this way...."

"I don't want mine to get back the way it was when I bought it. I worked too hard to clean it off," he said, mildly reproachful.

I started to tell him that a couple of months earlier, I'd gone for a stroll back there, choosing to do it in the spring before those blackberry brambles got too thick for me. I'd taken two of my daughters with me, and we meandered along avenues in the dead, tan grass, paths that must have been made by deer or other animals, unbeknownst to us. The trees, left to their own devices, had thrived...some gums, some oaks of several varieties, a sycamore or two. The pines were tall and healthy for the most part but not exceptionally numerous. We saw places where rabbits had left signs of having rested, caught the flash of a Blue Grosbeak's wing, heard Carolina Chickadees and Black-and-white Warblers in the trees. An Eastern Bluebird box we'd put up back here, not really hoping for anything much, had eggs in it; the parents warily scolded us from their perch nearby.

The girls and I pushed onward toward the back property line, a quarter of a mile from the main road that passed in front of our house and our neighbors'. The ground was clearer here for some reason, and as we approached the fence, we were rewarded with a view of the hillside sloping away from us--and of a covey of Northern Bobwhite that flew up and away, startled at our proximity. I hadn't seen quail out here since I was a girl.

His life was as busy as mine, so I just mentioned the quail as he waited for what he had assumed would be my quick, grateful assent to his offer. He frowned a little and glanced back once more towards the thicket near the creek.

"Besides, I don't want all my trees gone, and they're likely too big now for you to maneuver around them with your tractor," I added. "It's fine back there. I think I'll just let it be."

In a moment, he nodded. "It's a while since I've seen quail, too," he said before he cranked up the tractor and took it back to his house.

*-Sheila Thead*

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NOTE: Errors are probably the typist's (MY) fault and are deeply regretted.

--*Sheila*

We very much appreciate the additional contributors this month. So many of you have such interesting experiences to write about!

Anybody who knows of someone who ought to get (or just wants to get) the Audubon newsletter by e-mail, drop me a line and I'll add them onto the list.

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PERSONAL NOTE FROM LAUREN THEAD: I'd like to thank the Okatibbee Creek Audubon Society for allowing me to teach in College for Kids this summer! I've been busy preparing for the ornithology class and am looking forward to the experience. I hope to live up to your opinion of my ability. You guys are really great! --*Lauren*