

OKATIBBEE CREEK AUDUBON SOCIETY

July –August 2002

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Errors are probably the typist's (MY) fault and are deeply regretted. --*Sheila*

Again, those who have e-mail (and whose addresses I don't have), drop me a line. sthead@mississippi.net

See Seashells by the Seashore!

by Deanna Thead, age 8

Last time I went to the beach, I found a lot of interesting things. The things I like most of all are seashells.

I found a Gulf Scallop, a bivalve. It is 2 inches long and 2 inches wide. It has 19 ribs and is orange-brown on a white background. I also found an oyster. Oysters are silvery gray. My oyster is an inch long and 1/2 inch wide. Another really pretty shell with an interesting shape is a shark-eye moonshell. A shark-eye moonshell looks like a snail shell. I also found a spiny jewelbox, another bivalve. It has 8 ribs with spiny ridges and is about an inch in size.

Four of the most beautiful and common shells I found are the lightning whelk, the common nutmeg, the lettered olive and the auger. There are many, many more shells to find and collect, but the ones I talked about are an easy way to begin shell collecting.

We're Not Asking for Prairie Dogs....

by Joseph McGee

Just west of the town of Lawrence at the intersection of U.S. Highway 80 and Interstate 20 in western Newton County lies a tiny remnant prairie. This postage stamp-size prairie can be easily recognized along the south side of Highway 80 by occasional white areas of exposed limestone or, at least, chalky soil.

In the recent past it could also be recognized by the prairie plants which grow and, at one time, bloomed there. The “normal” or expected ranges of some of these plants are the prairies of some of the midwestern and western states!

Open (treeless) remnant prairies once dotted the Jackson Prairie physiographic region of central Mississippi, as well as the Blackbelt Prairie of the northeastern part of the state. There’s a lack of consensus among experts as to why these prairies remain treeless, but edaphic (soil) conditions and occasional, random fires seem to have played a natural role in their original creation.

Most of these open areas were long ago converted to human (usually agricultural) uses, but a few do remain in a more or less natural state. One of the best examples of a remnant prairie in central Mississippi is the Harrell Prairie Hill Botanical Area in Bienville National Forest in Scott County. But perhaps the most accessible and easily observed (even without leaving one’s car) prairie is the one at Exit 100 off I-20.

Among the wildflowers one could find blooming at this roadside prairie in spring (early to mid-April) were: spiderwort (*Tradescantia*), two species of blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium*), golden Alexanders (*Zizia aurea*), spider milkweed (*Asclepias viridis*), *Coreopsis lanceolata*, fleabanes (*Erigeron*), a species of native thistle, obedient plant (*Physostegia virginiana*; bloomed mid-spring), self-heal (*Prunella vulgaris*; introduced?), lyre-leaved sage (*Salvia lyrata*), Illinois bundle flower (*Desmanthus illinoensis*), an *Oxalis* or two, prairie phlox (*Phlox pilosa*), a species of *Houstonia*, and many others.

As the spring flowers faded and set seed, summer bloomers came into their own and the prairie revealed its true spectacle. Competing for attention were: agave (American aloe, *Agave virginica*), rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*), the aforementioned golden Alexanders (most intriguing in seed), wild petunia (*Ruellia*), black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), gray-head coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*), compass-plant (*Silphium laciniatum*), which, at a height of six feet, really defined the prairie in summer; a *Helianthus* (sunflower), iron weed (*Vernonia*; bloomed mid- to late summer) a *Liatris* (very late summer to early fall), several asters, a blue lobelia, a white morning glory (*Ipomoea*), flowering spurge (or prairie spurge, *Euphorbia corollata*), partridge pea (*Chamaecrista fasciculata*), white and purple prairie clovers (*Dalea* sp.), both prairie specialists; prairie pink (*Sabatia* sp., a type of Gentian), bee balm or wild bergamont (*Monarda fistulosa*), slender mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*), a wonderful nectaring plant for butterflies, maypops (*Passiflora incarnata*), the diminutive but always delightful American blue hearts (*Buchnera americana*), Culver’s root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*), and a number of others.

The prairie also had a diverse complement of invertebrates.

But, alas and alack, all of the above is now in the past tense. In recent years (the past three or four, apparently) the Mississippi Department of Transportation has changed its mowing schedule and, in its diligence to see that every plant along the highway grows no taller than carpet pile, has been mowing the prairie (and beyond) in spring, summer, and fall. A late fall mowing would suffice! The spectacular displays of *Silphium*, *Rudbeckia*, *Ratibida*, *Eryngium* and *Sabatia*, etc., which one could observe from the highway and which made the little prairie such a pleasure to behold in summer are now a thing of the past, at least if the current mowing regimen continues. Even before the summer mowing began, the fall clip was too early from a botanizer's point of view as it eliminated at least one species of *Liatris* in full bloom, not to mention several species of native grasses at the peak of their autumnal glory.

This prairie was tiny to begin with, but, in 1994 (and apparently again three or four years later), a road was constructed across the west end of the tract to accommodate log trucks and other timbering equipment going for the pine trees south of the prairie. That road bed is now a virtual Bermuda grass monoculture. Even before the road was built, the prairie suffered encroachment of woody vegetation* on three sides (a result of the perpetual absence of fire?); and the construction of Highway 80 itself (and its accompanying parallel drainage ditches), which makes the prairie so accessible and which forms the north boundary of the remnant, no doubt eliminated a large area of the original prairie.

A sliver of prairie on apparently private land just south of an old fence line remained unmowed as of July, 2002. Here, compass-plant, prairie pink and scattered clumps of rattlesnake master were in full bloom amid a few gray-head coneflowers going to seed, revealing the beauty of a prairie that once was and could be again with a little restoration and a lot less mowing!

*But keep those machetes in their scabbards! A mystery plant--a small tree or large shrub in the Rose family (Rosaceae) is growing along that old fence row. Could it be one of our native crab apples or something else?

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### Audubon Bird Watch

Ashley Brown  
July 25, 2002

When you go on the Audubon Bird Watch, you can see thousands of birds. You may see Carolina Wrens, Bluebirds, and other bird species.

Also, you may sometimes see a Mist Net. This is a large net that catches different types of birds, then someone puts a tag on each bird's leg. These tags give the following information: when the bird was caught, where the bird was

caught, and which group captured the bird. In addition, the above information aids Audubon Bird Watchers in future bird counts.

That's all, until next time.

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## *Canebrakes*

by

**Joseph McGee**

(Note: Because of oversight on the part of the typist, this item was accidentally omitted from June's newsletter. Sorry, Joe!)

**A**n article of particular interest to Southerners appears in the Spring, 2002, issue of Wild Earth ([info@wildlandsproject.org](mailto:info@wildlandsproject.org) or PO Box 455, Richmond, VT 05477). "Canebrakes: Bamboo Forests of the Southeast" by Platt, Brantley, and Rainwater is a vivid description of an ecosystem (and some of its inhabitants) now nearly disappeared from the southern scene.

Accompanying the article is a short account ("The Eccentric Naturalist") by none other than John James Audubon of his experiences in a canebrake with the naturalist Rafinesque and a black bear!

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### **September Meeting**

**Just a reminder: the next OCAS meeting will be at 7:00 on September 9 at the EMEPA building in Meridian. Bring a friend!**

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## **Skaters, Swimmers, Hoppers and Scuba Divers**

By Larry Thead

**I** crept over the edge of the pond with my eyes almost glued to the surface looking for a creature I'd only seen in my books. Is that it? No, it's only a small blade of dead grass. Wait a minute--it's moving. There it is--the little creature I've been searching for, living its short life walking around on the pond's surface beneath the overhanging vegetation. There it is--a water measurer (family name Hydrometridae, Figure 1). Now, that is an appropriate common name. My excitement is no less than a child's on finding that first six-inch walking stick, which so adequately conceals itself that usually we don't see it unless it decides to show itself by climbing onto the side of the house. The water measurer reminds one of a tiny walking stick and, if seen by the inexperienced, could easily be called a baby walking stick. The water measurer is a true bug, a member of order Hemiptera, which contains the familiar stink bug. "Hemiptera" means half-wings. The order gets its name from the structure of the front wings. In most true bugs the basal portion (that part attached to the insect's body) is thickened and leathery, while the apical portion (the end or tip) is membranous (thin or more or less transparent). The mouth parts of Hemiptera are piercing-sucking (almost tube like) type and arise from the front

part of the head. Most true bugs also have a triangular structure called a scutellum that is visible on the top of the bug. This triangular structure is readily apparent in most true bugs and, along with the wings and mouth parts, distinguishes the true bugs from other insects. The water measurer is indeed a strange-looking creature, 1/4 to 1/2 inch in size (note line showing approximate size to left of figures) with a long and slender head. The eyes bulge away from the head (almost look like small beads glued onto its sticklike head) about halfway between the mouth and the thorax. It is usually wingless. It lays its tiny eggs, about 1/4 the size of the adult, singly and glues them to vegetation and other objects near the water. Here it quietly goes about its life, hidden from all except the curious.

Much more visible and known by most are the water striders (family: Gerridae, Figure 2) that busily skate over the water's surface. These hemipteran insects also go by other common names including "pond skaters", "water spiders" or "wherrymen." Don't confuse them with the whirligig beetles (family: Gyridae). Winged and wingless adults occur in many species. The best way to recognize them is to notice that the front legs, used to capture small insects, are short, while the middle and hind legs are long and are used for locomotion. The body is also long and narrow. Different species can be found along wooded streams and rivers.

If you find yourself next to a fast-running stream or in the quiet backwaters of streams and ponds, don't forget to look for another very different kind of water strider, the broad-shouldered water striders or ripple bugs (family: Veliidae, Figure 3). These water striders are small (about 1/10 inch to 1/5 inch), brown or black in color and sometimes have silvery markings. They have short bodies, seldom have wings, and have a body widest near the base of the middle and hind legs with the abdomen being narrower. You seldom see only one of these insects, but, instead, hundreds.

You might also see other common true bugs moving about on the water's surface, the water treaders (family: Mesoveliidae, Figure 4), and the velvet water bugs (Hebridae, not pictured). Near the water's edge don't overlook that fascinating true bug that thinks it's a toad. The toad bugs (family: Gelastocoridae, Figure 5) are represented by about seven species in the U.S. You can't miss this insect, as long as you don't mistake it for a toad. They live on the mud and sand along the margins of ponds and streams. They have prominent bulging eyes, front legs that grasp and antennae that are hidden below the head. They also hop about. The color of the common species varies from uniformly yellow to almost black, but usually it is a dull mottled brown and black. The color usually agrees with the ground where it is found and amazingly resembles the color of toads. Don't miss this fascinating little fellow.

Another common true bug you are likely to see while pursuing the toad bug is the shore bug (family: Saldidae, Figure 6). There are a lot of different species of this insect. You can recognize them by their black and white or brown and white color, oval shape and large protruding eyes. The easiest way to distinguish this insect from other true bugs is that the apical or tip of the front wing has veins that are closed, or the wing veins don't

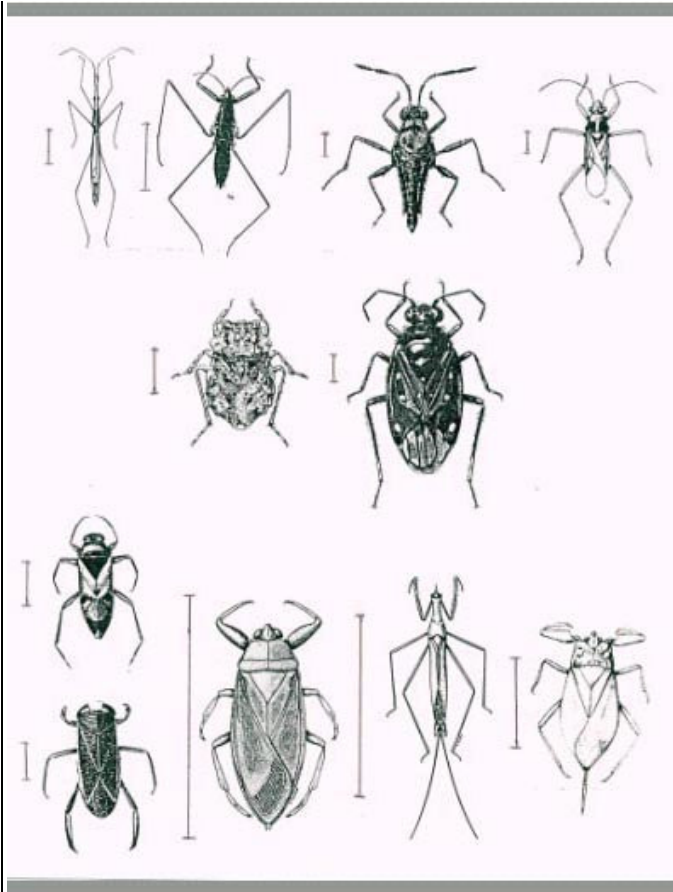
project to the wing's edge. They are also fast, fly quickly and pounce upon their small insect prey. This insect is a true challenge to capture.

The true bugs have not only made the shores edge and surface their home but have also mastered the underwater world. Our above-ground pool, even with chlorinated water, is a temporary home for backswimmers (family: Notonectidae, Figure 7), and the water boatmen (family: Corixidae, Figure 8). The back-swimmers are named backswimmers because they swim upside down and rest upside down, carrying a bubble of air underwater with them. The hind legs are long and fringed with long hairs that act like oars. They have fully developed wings and fly readily. Whatever you do, don't pick these insects up. They often bite, inflicting a painful sting that feels much like a bee sting, giving them another common name of water bees. Backswimmers are less dense than water, and if they come up with their upper surface on top, they will break through the surface film and either crawl on an object or fly away. The water boatmen, the largest family of true water bugs, contains over 120 species occurring north of Mexico. They are similar to the backswimmers in appearance but do not swim upside down, and they do not get air by coming to the surface rear-end first, but with their head and thorax out of the water surface. Varying species occur in all types of water, even water with a high salt content. They have a broad head with large transverse eyes that overlap the front part of the thorax. The mouthparts or beak is broad, conical and not segmented. The front wings are of a similar texture throughout, which is different from most true bugs. Sometimes you will see great numbers of these insects at lights. Unlike the backswimmers, they do not bite. The best place to really see their unique swimming habits is in the clear water of a swimming pool, where they frequently visit.

The most notable of the true aquatic bugs is the giant water bugs (family: Belostomatidae, Figure 9). The largest member of this family in the U. S. can reach a length of 2 inches (a 4 inch species occurs in South America) and is an impressive insect by any standard. The giant water bugs are brownish in color, oval and somewhat flattened with front legs raptorial. They are common in ponds and lakes, feeding on insects, snails, tadpoles and even small fish. They are also good flyers and might be seen at lights. Giant water bugs can bite. You might see them beneath the water surface with their posterior ends at the water surface. This is their method of remaining concealed while getting air for breathing. It should be noted that this insect is fried and eaten in many societies where it is considered a delicacy.

The next of kin to the giant water bug is the water scorpion (family: Nepidae, Figures 10 and 11). This insect has an aquatic life similar to the giant water bugs, but differs in that it has forelegs that are raptorial-looking, much like those of a preying mantis. It also has a breathing tube at the posterior of the body that is as long as the body of the insect. The breathing tube separates into two halves when the insect is outside of the water. The appearance would remind you of a soda straw that had been cut lengthwise. When the water scorpion is underwater, the breathing tube becomes strawlike allowing the insect to breathe underwater. In the eastern U. S. the water scorpion will be slender and sticklike (Figure 10). If you are west of the Great Plains, a scarce species (Figure 11) more closely resembles the giant water bug with a long breathing tube.

Whenever you are outside enjoying the treats of nature, don't forget to occasionally focus your eyes away from the skyline and into the unsung world of the semi-aquatic and aquatic bugs that thrive in and around the ponds, lakes and streams all over the world.



Semi-aquatic and aquatic Hemiptera. Original drawings from How To Know the True Bugs. J. A. Slater and R. M. Baranowski. 1978. Drawings have been reduced in size. Line to the left of each drawing shows approximate size of typical insect. From top left row 1, Figures 1-4: water measurer, water strider, broad shouldered water strider and water treader. Row 2 from left, Figures 5-6: toad bug and shore bug. Row 3, Figures 7-11: backswimmer above and water boatmen below followed by giant water bug, a water scorpion you might find in the eastern U. S. and a water scorpion you might find in the western U. S.

## *Friday Evening in My Backyard*

As I was taking the family trash out on Friday, June 28, 2002, the usual, I noticed something was different. Thinking, I went on to the trash can. I stopped - it clicked in my head as I looked around, and sure enough it had happened. If you want to find out follow me. Come on!

I had a couple of bluebirds that built a nest in my backyard, and they had five babies. The babies would be ready to fledge around the end of June. However, on June 28, 2002, it happened - right after the family trash! I finally realized, and could not believe what my eyes and brain were telling me. I found myself walking over to an empty hole with a box beside it.

In the blink of an eye, all of a sudden, out of the middle of nowhere, came a mother bird diving right at me.

Then, I came to my senses, the family's cat had joined me in the ordeal. So, he was smelling while I was yelling! I told myself, "Nicole, there are some babies still in this box." My sister appeared just in time to give me assistance.

Meanwhile, my sister watched the feaster cat and protected the babies. I called my Papa since Daddy was on wildfire detail in Arizona. We put the house back up. After this we had two grateful parents and five bluebird "tots".

Nicole Brown

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#### News Briefs

Strawberry Plains Audubon Center at Holly Springs now has a new director. She is Madge Lindsey and she is moving to Mississippi from Texas. Auduboners all over Mississippi are looking forward to meeting Madge and welcoming her to our state!

\* \* \*

An immature Wood Stork, fitted with a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service radio transmitter and bands, is headed our way! Well, maybe. The stork was banded in South Carolina this past spring and was last reported hanging out somewhere along the Georgia-Alabama border. Keep an eye out for that stork!

--Joe

## *The Purple Gallinule*

By Lauren Thead

I stood on the overgrown grass at Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge, staring out at the quiet waters of Lake Loakfoma which seemed to be alive with hundreds of darting dragonflies skimming the surface, whirligigs turning fast circles near the shore, and, of course, many species of birds.

I looked around, noting a large flock of Barn Swallows swooping through the air, a female Wood Duck swimming slowly near a nest box, and the Great Egret patiently hunting in the shallows. But, wait! There was something else moving on the lily pads near the egret. I jerked the binoculars up to my eyes and suddenly saw a colorful adult Purple Gallinule. It walked a little too close to the fishing egret, then flew off with its legs trailing and its bright, white undertail coverts flashing.

I thought it was gone but then saw it stick its head through the cattails. It stepped carefully back onto the lily pads, flicking its tail the whole time. It looked almost exotic with its yellow-tipped red bill, pale blue frontal shield, glossy blue and green plumage,

chickenlike shape, and bright yellow legs with long toes. I watched it pick something off the lily pads and turn around and disappear again.

Purple Gallinules are related to rails and coots. They are less secretive than rails but do not swim out in the open as much as the American Coot. Marshes, swamps, ponds and lakes with plenty of vegetation provide habitat for this species and the more widespread Common Moorhen which has black and gray plumage, white on only the outer undertail coverts, a thin white line on its side and a red frontal shield.

You're unlikely to find the Purple Gallinule's nest, which is built in the aquatic vegetation over water more than four feet deep. They build a ramp leading from the nest to the water. The buffy-pink eggs are about an inch and a half long, and the hatched young are able to move about freely.

Gallinules feed on seeds, fruit, grain, plants, and small animals such as insects, snails and frogs. In the fall they'll eat mostly rice. Purple Gallinules breed in parts of Mississippi but winter from Florida to Argentina.

Wetlands can be excellent places for birds. If you take time to explore them, chances are you'll be rewarded with a wonderful surprise as I was at Noxubee.

The Purple Gallinule



## Upcoming Events

by Joe McGee

**T**he annual Hummingbird Festival at Strawberry Plains Audubon Center near Holly Springs will take place from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on September 7 this year. The festival is scheduled to coincide with the southbound migration through Mississippi of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. Organizers have a number of activities planned for visitors including tours of Strawberry Plains, nature walks, slide shows and, of course, lots of

hummingbird watching in and around the Audubon Center's hummingbird gardens!  
Here's an opportunity to pick up a few new ideas for your own hummingbird garden!  
For more information on the festival, contact Anna Morrison at Strawberry Plains (662-252-4143) or [amorrisson@audubon.org](mailto:amorrisson@audubon.org).

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The fall, 2002, meeting of the Mississippi Ornithological Society will take place at Starkville September 27-29. MOS meets twice yearly, once in the fall and again in spring. Each get-together is held at a different location in the state, giving members who attend an opportunity to sample birdlife in various regions of the state. (Organized field trips are one of the main activities at MOS meetings.) Consider joining MOS! It's one of the best ways to get to know other people from around the state who are interested in Mississippi's avifauna. Individual memberships are just \$15./year. For more information contact Shannon Knight, MOS President (79 Highway 9W, Oxford, MS 38655) or Janet Dubuisson, MOS Treasurer, 22410 Glad Acres, Pass Christian, MS 39471.

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The 2002 Fall Migration Count will be held on Saturday, September 14. The Fall and Spring Migration Counts are attempts to obtain a "snapshot" of where birds are all over North America on the designated days. Migration Counts are similar to Christmas Bird Counts but differ in that participants choose the area or route in which they wish to count birds--there is no "count circle" per se (though participants could designate their own circle or route). As with a CBC, birds are counted during a specified 24-hr. time period. If you would like to do a migration count this fall, contact Terry Shiefer at 662-324-3748 or by e-mail at [tschiefer@entomology.msstate.edu](mailto:tschiefer@entomology.msstate.edu)

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## *College for Kids, 2002*

By Lauren Thead

*(I kept a journal of my experiences teaching the ornithology class at MCC's College for Kids this past June. Here, for the benefit of the Okatibbee Creek Audubon Society which was kind enough to sponsor me, is a summarized account of the class.)*

**M**onday, June 17. After a week of helping out with "Critters and Insects," I finally get to teach my own class. I'm told I may use my birding software on our laptop computer with the lessons. I also have two nature experts with me today—Joe McGee and Thomas Williams of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

My students are Kyla and Ellie, age 7, and Robin, age 6—a small class, but that's okay. We plan to head outdoors to look at birds or whatever else we can find.

**T**uesday, June 18. Yesterday we managed to hear Blue Jays and see Red-headed Woodpeckers. My students even got a chance to see a Green Heron near the lake. Thomas pointed out a chipmunk as it scurried across a log with a nut in its mouth. Back inside, I showed some birds from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [Guide to Birds of North America](#). (Michael Dawkins of MSU-Meridian helped me set up the laptop and loaned me a very expensive projection system to use in my classroom.) Joe asked me to

play the sound of a Barred Owl, and Ellie recognized it—she said she'd heard one at night while camping once.

Today, Tuesday, Kyla has brought binoculars. I give the students small ring-bound notebooks for field use. As Thomas and I go outside with them, we hear Eastern Kingbirds in the pine trees and watch them fly back and forth.

Near a thicket, Thomas calls Eastern Towhees, Carolina Wrens and Tufted Titmice closer to us. They get very agitated and flick their tails nervously. Then we watch a Killdeer that has taken up residence near the sidewalk on the east side of the drive to the MSU building.

**W**ednesday, June 19. Today I'm teaching the class completely by myself. I hope to have Kyla, Ellie and Robin learn some bird sounds. They say they want to imitate the calls of the Northern Bobwhite, American Crow and Barred Owl, but right now they're a little shy about performing. Today, outdoors, they're able to identify most of the birds by sound and sight. However, we hear something new. In the thicket I call up this noisy bird which happens to be a White-eyed Vireo. I help the girls record their sightings in their field notebooks.

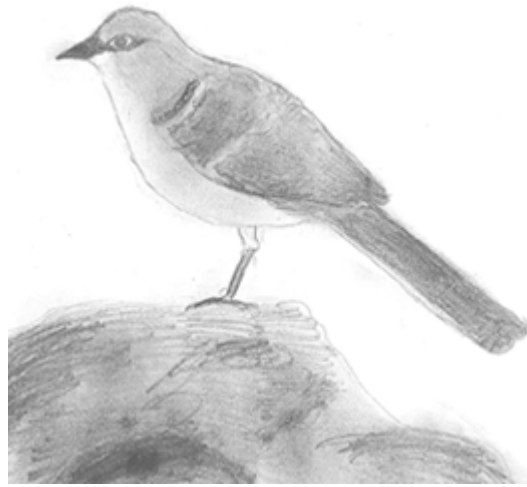
Back in the classroom we put together paper birds, and the girls color them. Ellie's bird is a Red-eyed Vireo; Kyla makes a hawk; and Robin's bird is her own colorful creation. As we clean up, I remind them to practice their bird sounds.

**T**hursday, June 20. Today I have to cut patterns for bird mobiles out of construction paper before my students arrive. They can attach string to the 3-D paper birds and hang them up somewhere at home.

The students come in looking excited. I immediately head outside with them again. We look for the Killdeer, but it doesn't show up. Instead, we spot four Turkey Vultures soaring overhead and a Downy Woodpecker on a tree. We come back and look at those birds up close and listen to the horrible call of the Turkey Vulture with the CD software. The girls practice their bird calls again.

**F**riday, June 21. The week is over! It seems to have gone by too fast for me. Today Thomas is back to help us hang up the bluebird boxes made for my class. The students write their names on three of them, and Thomas nails them to three hickory trees on the MSU grounds. We spot a Gray Catbird mewing in the cherry tree. As we head back to the building, Kyla notices a mud dauber's nest over the door. Thomas knocks it off and opens it to demonstrate the life cycle of this insect. I give each student a bluebird box to take home.

Later on, outside the WEBB Center, parents and kids and instructors all congregate for an on-the-ground picnic and recap of their classes. When my turn comes, the girls proudly make the calls of American Crows and Barred Owls into the microphone, and Robin even produces the call-up sound that Thomas used to bring birds within our line of sight the other day. It's been a short but good week.



Northern Mockingbird  
By Karen Thead

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### “Down at the CAR Wash, Yeah...”

**OK**, let me make something clear right now: Never once did I ever fall for that “snipe-hunt” scam when I was a teenager. I am not gullible. I really am not.

Well, but, on the other hand, I am not the walking encyclopedia Joe McGee and my daughter Lauren both are. So anyway, there we were, staking out the huge old oak tree next to the car wash. In downtown Hickory, Mississippi. At 9:00 at night.

For those of you not in the know about these things, Hickory, Mississippi, is one of those places where everybody knows everybody. Where you can open the hatchback of, say, your old Mazda van and sit in the open cargo area, dangling your legs off the back, and the sheriff pays you no attention. Where people just drive by and wave at you.

Or maybe shake their heads and roll their eyes. Hard to tell in the dark, you know.

Joe had discovered some time back that a family of Barn Owls had made their home in one of the big trees beside the car wash. Not wanting Lauren to miss this opportunity to see the juveniles and possibly even adults, he'd suggested we take a nocturnal field trip and be patient.

It was a really pleasant summer night, for Mississippi--humid as always, but not too bad. The mosquitoes and flies must have been taking vacations elsewhere as we hung our legs off the end of the van and sipped ice water. Tree frogs began their raspy, rhythmic calls.

"Wraaaaackkkk! Wraaaaackkkk!" I thought they sounded kind of neat over there across the road.

"Well, they're here," Joe said quietly.

OK, I said I wasn't an encyclopedia. So that was what Barn Owls sounded like; you could've told me they were tree frogs with sinus infections and I wouldn't have known any better. We listened to the rasping for a while and finally located one of the juveniles, shifting back and forth on a limb about twenty-five feet over our heads. "Wraaaaackkkk!" This was apparently his way of signaling that it was suppertime. Or, at this hour, breakfast time, at least for owls. I could relate. I hear that kind of din a lot in my kitchen around 5:30 or so in the evening.

The bird was really a stunning sight --even at night, and at that distance, it looked enormous, and it turned its head around this way and that, its light-colored breast coming in and out of view as it fidgeted on the tree limb. It seemed to be doing what my kids do: Can I at least have a cookie while you're fixing supper? I'm hungry, Ma!

We realized its brother or sister was now calling, too, somewhere out of our line of vision. We sipped the cool water. "The parent ought to be coming in pretty soon," Joe whispered. A car rolled up to the stop sign.

The driver didn't even glance at us. With a sudden quiet flurry, the juvenile soared off the branch and winged into the back part of the oak. There was more activity now, more calls; evidently the owl equivalent of grits and bacon was being served. "Wraaaaackkkk!"

I giggled. "They sound horrible."

Lauren and Joe exchanged a glance. I should have known right then the trap was being baited. "That and another vocalization are all they have," I was told. Oh. Okay.

I did say it was a pleasant summer night, didn't I? Well, it got late, and with some reluctance I told them we had to roll on out--I needed to get back home at least before eleven. In our operation, I am merely the chauffeur. Knowing only a paragraph's worth about birds in comparison to her volumes of knowledge, I mostly provide transportation to my daughter who can't drive yet. Joe looked thoughtfully at the big old oak where we could still hear sounds of some sort of owlish dinner-table conversation going on. "I suppose we could walk down there"--some fifteen yards, maybe-- "and try to get closer, but when we do, I imagine we'll flush them out, and they'll probably fly up this way."

"OK," I said cheerfully. "You two go on, and I'll just stay here and protect the granola bars."

Another glance passed between them. "But if we do that, then *you'll* be the only one to get a good look when they fly."

Well, fine, I see where this is headed. "All right, the nonbirder will walk to the owls' perch and let you two experts enjoy seeing them," I said. I crept as silently as a person can down a paved small-town street. I thought I was doing pretty well. I had got right under the tree branch where I knew the owls--or at least one of them--had to be, when it happened. If you remember the movie *E.T.*, and if you remember the little girl Gertie screaming when she first sees the extraterrestrial in her closet--well, that would be the sound the owl made as it flew out right over my head.

I didn't make *any* sound. I don't believe I was breathing at that particular moment.

As they'd predicted, the bird flew in a great ellipse towards them and then back around to the other side of the oak. Collecting myself, I turned casually, as if this were an everyday event for me, and headed back to my van, its hatchback high in the air like a gull's wing, where Lauren and Joe sat as cool as clams, discussing the event that had just occurred. "That was really neat," she said. Joe asked if she saw its breast as it flew toward them. "Yes," she said, "and I didn't know it would make that sound when it wasn't even in a field."

Oh, yeah, they'd *forgotten* to tell me that part--the *other* vocalization a Barn Owl would make. "Did it scare you?" Lauren asked kindly. Not really, I lied. Just kind of, well, startled me, you know. And old ladies do not forget; you two might remember that.

We headed back out on the interstate to town, talking a little about the evening, mostly enjoying the feel of the late, humid air. In a while, Lauren said thoughtfully, "You know, it's good they were juveniles and there wasn't any more nesting going on."

Why, I asked.

"Because they probably would've attacked you, then," she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

It had been rainy for a few days before that, and bugs and mud were splattered on everybody's cars, but, you know, all the time we were there, nobody even came near that car wash. I can't imagine why. *-Sheila*

#### ***Note from the typist:***

This newsletter was an experiment both in numbers of articles and graphics and in the format of the document physically mailed to members who indicated they preferred the paper copy. As my printer will accept nothing but 8-1/2" wide paper, the only option I had was to use legal-size sheets, which fold nicely but are smaller than the traditional bifold newsletter many groups publish. Nevertheless, we did manage a less clumsy edition this time, I think.

Another new feature was our asking for articles from our young members. R.L. Richardson and I thought this would be a wonderful opportunity for the beginning Auduboners to write about their experiences in nature. As I said once before, so many of you have very interesting things to say about your journeys here and there, and this is

YOUR newsletter, after all. And these articles don't have to be about exotic trips up jungle rivers—Joe McGee has given us plenty of interesting material from our visits to the Hickory sewage lagoon (!) and the Main Street car wash. So arrange a field trip with him, and then write about it! The one warning I can for sure pass on about that kind of thing, though, is this: Make him tell you what kind of behavior you may expect from the creatures you're going to observe, because you might end up with an angry owl diving at your head in the middle of the night, and trust me: that's something you'd definitely want to be prepared for.

Thanks to R.L. and Coralee (and all the rest of you) for the advice and suggestions. There are no egos among us (are there?), so criticism is good. Please tell us what we should do to improve the newsletter, what you don't like, and, better still, what you DO.

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