

## Eight Days in Ecuador

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## Welcome

The Oklahoma City Audubon Society welcomes:

McKenzie Cowlbeck,  
Norman

**The speaker for our September 16 OKC Audubon meeting will our own Nadine Varner with her program “8 Days In Ecuador.”** That equatorial country stretches from the Pacific coast, up the western slope and across the Andes Mountains, then down the eastern slope into the Amazon basin. Tropical forests and a variety of altitudes provide excellent birding and exotic adventure. Nadine will take us along on a slide show of her exciting March 2024 trip to one of the most biodiverse places on earth.

In Nadine’s own words: “I grew up in eastern Oklahoma and received a Bachelor’s degree in Biology from NSU in Tahlequah. I lived in St. Louis for 12 years where I worked at the Saint Louis Zoo

and the World Bird Sanctuary. In 2006 I moved back to Oklahoma to work at the Oklahoma City Zoo. I have worked as a bird bander, zoo keeper and animal welfare officer. Every summer, I run a bird banding station at Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge and conduct several Breeding Bird Surveys. I am also the compiler for the Fort Gibson Christmas Bird Count. Currently, I live in Midwest City with my husband Jimmy Woodard.”



Our meetings are held September through June on the third Monday of each month. Meetings begin at 7 p.m. Visitors are always welcome.

### Meeting Location:

Our meetings are held at the Will Rogers Garden center, located at the intersection of NW 36th Street and I-44.

# President's Perspective

Welcome Back! Hope you had an enjoyable summer of birding—added perhaps a new bird you've never seen before and enjoyed the time spent with your favorite birds.

As for my summer, it has been so hectic I've hardly had a chance to even listen to a few birds in my back yard much less actually get out and spend time birding.

Now that migrations have been in full swing for a month or more, I'm really missing those pleasant days of wandering, listening, hoping to see a few feathered friends.

Son Hans has sent me the summary of all the latest splits and lumps that have been determined by the experts. Looks like I'll lose a species or two—at least the Hoary Redpoll. That one hurts the most. I traveled all the way to Churchill, Canada in June of 2003 to see it (along with a Ross's Gull). The trip was really fun—took the train up and flew back, but now except for the gull, not much to show for the expense. I guess that makes the gull one of my most expensive (v).



I see there are now 7 House Wrens. I have two of them, Northern and Southern but they're already counted so I have to find an excuse to hit up several Caribbean Islands to get the other five. It's time to do a bit of "armchair birding" and re-search all the other splits and see if I might be lucky and add a couple of the others.

At our meetings earlier this year, I have been missing a number of friend's faces. I hope now that we're back again from summer activities, ya'll will take a couple hours each month and come back and join us. Topics are fun and varied, fellowship is always great. I'm looking forward to each meeting, especially this month's—Nadine will be taking me down memory lane to Ecuador where my third son was born and where I've gone several times since both for work and for birding.

Among all the 96 countries I've been to, I rank Ecuador in the top 2-3 countries of the world for birding fun. The combination of high species count, inexpensive local travel, easy access, delicious food, and cheap lodging makes for a great trip. Come see and hear what Nadine will share—then make plans.

A note from Jimmy Woodard tells me he and Nadine will again host their "Big Sit" October 16. While we will be bringing this up at the meeting this month, I'm including it here as well for those of you who cannot make it to the meeting. It is always a fun day to be missed only under duress. On a sadder note, Nathan Kuhnert has indicated he cannot continue leading the Christmas Bird Count so we will need to get a replacement. If you are willing to pick it up or know someone who can, Nathan is willing to walk the person through what it entails. Please contact us or him. We must make that decision at this month's meeting.

That's All Folks...for now; see you during the upcoming months/meetings.

*Bob Holbrook*  
*President*





## Bird of the Month: Least Sandpiper

By Grace Huffman

Fall migration is in full swing, and millions of birds are on their way south. Now that summer is over, many have molted out of their flashy, bright colors and are now much duller in plumage. Some were never very bright to begin with and are even duller now as they probe around the mud, making identification a challenge.

One of the most common birds you'll see migrating south is the Least Sandpiper. They are the most common here in spring and fall migration, with the occasional birds lingering into the summer. You can also often find them in the winter. Typically, they winter in the southern United States down into

South America and breed in Alaska and northern Canada. They nest on the ground, with the male starting the process by hollowing out a scrape, and the female will line it. Young ones are capable of finding their own food, but typically the male stays with them until they are old enough to be considered fledged.

Least Sandpipers belong to a group of birds called "peeps." All of them are small shorebirds that look very similar to each other. On a drive around somewhere like Lake Hefner, 3 of the most common shorebird species you are likely to encounter are Least, Semipalmated, and Western Sandpipers. I'm sure there are more professional ways to tell them apart, but here are some of the things I look for when telling them apart:

- **Least Sandpiper:** the yellow legs are diagnostic. They also have a bill that is slightly drooped at the end.
- **Semipalmated Sandpiper:** similar in size to Leasts, they have dark legs and a shorter, straight bill.
- **Western Sandpiper:** the largest of the 3, they average paler in non breeding plumage with a larger bill than Least that droops slightly at the tip. In breeding plumage there are notes of rufous highlights on the head and wings.

There are many more details to look at, and other similar peeps like Sanderling and Dunlin, but hopefully this will help you get started on identifying these challenging birds! If you can, take pictures of the birds to study at home later to make sure you got the ID correct. Good luck!



Least Sandpipers ©Grace Huffman

## While there is no denying 'survival of the fittest' still reigns supreme in the animal kingdom, a new study shows being smartest is pretty important, too.

Western University animal behavior and cognition researcher Carrie Branch and her collaborators at the University of Nevada, Reno and the University of Oklahoma tracked the spatial cognition and lifespan of 227 mountain chickadees for more than a decade. They found the birds with better spatial learning and memory abilities (when it came to understanding their surroundings and food storing or caching strategies) lived longer.

Chickadees are relatively small birds and correspondingly, have small brains. Despite this seemingly physical limitation, mountain chickadees performed extremely well in the series of experiments Branch and her collaborators designed for them at a remote field site in the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Chickadees are native to North America, where they are very common. A chickadee can hide as many as 80,000 individual seeds, which they retrieve during the winter.

### Living longer means more offspring too

Branch and her collaborators tested cognitive abilities in mountain chickadees using radio frequency-based feeders, which are spatially organized in groups of eight and feature motorized doors that open automatically for electronically tagged birds providing food reward when they land on the perch.

With more than a decade of data collected, the new study shows mountain chickadees with the best spatial cognitive abilities will live, on average, two years longer than those with the worst spatial cognition. Mountain chickadees breed once per year, with an average clutch size of seven eggs, and individuals with the best spatial abilities may produce more than double the number of offspring (i.e. 14 more offspring) than those with poorer cognition. In past studies, Branch and her collaborators reported females produce more offspring when paired with "smarter" males.

"This study shows that mountain chickadees with better spatial cognitive abilities are more likely to live longer, as these abilities allow them to successfully retrieve cached food while coping with harsh and unpredictable environments," said Branch.



## Save the Date: "Big Sit"

Jimmy Woodard and Nadine Varner will host their regular "Big Sit" on Wednesday October 16th. They will open their yard to visitors at 9AM and call it a day around 5PM.

Participants will need to RSVP in advance so they can get a rough head count. Jimmy and Nadine will provide a hot dish for lunch. Please bring a chair and any drinks/snacks/side dishes to share with the group.

## New Lumps and Splits

Every summer, birders anxiously await publication of the "Check-list Supplement" by the American Ornithological Society's (AOS) Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of North and Middle American Birds (a.k.a. NACC).

There's a lot to take in this year! The most noteworthy changes for birders in the ABA Area are the lump of Common and Hoary redpolls, and a bevy of splits: Cory's Shearwater, Audubon's Shearwater, Brown Booby, Cattle Egret, Intermediate Egret, Lesser Sand-Plover, Barn Owl, House Wren, and American Pipit. Splits of Gull-billed Tern, Black-capped Petrel, Northern Flicker, and Northern Wheatear all involve "daughter" species found further afield, and they don't result in name changes for the "parent", so birders who stay within the ABA Area won't notice a difference.

### Hyphen Removed from Night-Herons

Black-crowned Night-Heron to Black-crowned Night Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron to Yellow-crowned Night Heron

The rationale behind dropping the second hyphen in these names is that there are other things called "night-herons" that are not the closest relatives of other things called "night-herons."

### Split of and New Genus for Cattle Egret

Western Cattle-Egret (*Ardea ibis*)

Eastern Cattle-Egret (*Ardea coromanda*)

Birds in the Americas are Western Cattle-Egrets. Eastern Cattle-Egret is an Asian/Australasian species. (continued on page 6)

# Nest Boxes: Lessons Learned During Heat Events

In July 2023, biologist Felicia Wang was conducting surveys on nesting Tree Swallows in a nature preserve outside of Woodland, California. Under the warm morning sun, she approached a nest box on the edge of the marsh and peered at the contents inside. Instead of peeping, she was greeted with four dead nestlings, still and silent.

As the field season went on, Wang and her team continued to find casualties. By August, more than half of the nests in the preserve had one or more dead chicks—a much lower breeding success rate than what Wang typically sees.

Wang says that these deaths are likely related to heat. In the second half of the 2023 field season, temperatures around Sacramento averaged a searing 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Although hot, dry summers are typical in California, deadly heat waves are becoming more extreme there and throughout North America. June 2024 marked the thirteenth straight month of record-breaking global heat. Tree Swallow nest boxes, like the ones Wang surveys, are also often in direct, blistering sunlight.

She notes that it can be more than 6.3 degrees Fahrenheit hotter inside of a nest box than the outside air, driving temperatures well above 107 degrees Fahrenheit on hot days—a level that is lethal to nestlings. Even if these dangerous levels are not surpassed, prolonged exposure to high temperatures can cause dehydration, heat stress, and impair or stop the development of an egg or chick.

Thankfully, there are adjustments that can make nest boxes more heat-resilient. Although these interventions only help offset one of the many impacts climate change has on birds, making nest boxes more habitable is one small step to help them survive a warming world.

**Avoid direct sun :** Sunlight, especially in the late afternoon, can easily bake boxes to uncomfortable temperatures. One of the most straightforward ways to make nest boxes cooler is to pay attention to their location.

Try to orient the opening of the nest box toward the north and east, away from the afternoon light. Bowers also recommends putting out more than one nest box, if possible. Cavity nesters can't build their own nests, so they often have to take what they can get. "Let's give our birds a chance to choose what they like," he says.

**Mind the gap:** What do you do when it gets too hot in your home? You might crack open a window. Similarly, openings such as holes and slits in a nest box top can help nestlings keep cool.

Stumpf uses modified nest boxes with a gap between the box's roof and the top of its walls. As hot air rises, it escapes out the slits. another method to add ventilation to a nest box. For his nest boxes, he makes the entrance a long and narrow opening, rather than a small round hole. These "slot" nest boxes allow more airflow while minimizing the danger of predators or parasites. Plus, when chicks get large enough, more than one can gather at the entrance for a breather—or dinner.

Adding a double roof to insulate a nest box or shields to reflect the sun can also help offset heat. With a double roof, insulation slows the transfer of heat, keeping hot air out and cool air in. To make this additional structure, the North American Bluebird Society recommends using a slab of wood or Styrofoam. For a shield, place a sheet of white or reflective material (polystyrene works well) above the roof, using spacers to leave a gap for airflow. You can also use heat shields on the sides of boxes.

**Paint it white:** For one easy way to cool down your nest boxes, all you need is a fresh coat of paint. White pigment, specifically, can reflect incoming sunlight, reducing the temperature within.

Whether an extra coat of ivory can boost nesting success, however, is unclear. Wang also painted all the Tree Swallow nest boxes exposed to direct sun at the nature preserve she works at. She's currently monitoring the boxes for breeding productivity this year and will have a better idea of their effectiveness at the end of the summer."

"The ultimate goal of providing a nest box is to have a home for a bird who wants to nest," Wang says. "We want to make sure that, to the best of our abilities, we're providing good suitable nesting habitat for birds."

# Minutes of the OKC Audubon Society Meeting June 18, 2024

The meeting was called to order at 7:00PM by President Bob Holbrook.

Attendance: 37

Treasurer's report for May from Nancy Vicars was approved as read.

If interested in helping with atlas surveys, contact Nancy Vicars.

She also reiterated how important knowing bird sounds is, especially for surveys.

Hal detailed his birding in central Pennsylvania and highly recommends it.

No scheduled field trips, and we will be taking our summer break until September.

The main speaker was Eli Bridge, who shared his work studying the changing migration patterns and nesting activity of cliff swallows, particularly through South America.

The next OKC Audubon Society meeting will be held Monday, September 16, 2024 with Nadine giving a talk on birding in Ecuador.

—Cole Penning, Secretary

## Lumps & Splits (cont.)

### Re-Lump of Redpoll

All redpolls are now in one species, Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*). This action lumps three former species: Common Redpoll, Hoary Redpoll, and Lesser Redpoll. Genetic work has shown that redpolls are almost completely undifferentiated except for a single chromosomal inversion that does not prevent interbreeding.

### Split of Barn Owl

American Barn Owl (*Tyto furcata*)

Western Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*)\*\*

Eastern Barn Owl (*Tyto javanica*)\*\*

Plumage variation in barn owls is complex, but recent genetic and vocal analyses help to paint a clearer picture. In particular, only American Barn Owl gives the cleak-cleak flight call. The other two species don't occur in the Americas.

### Split of Northern Flicker

Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*)

Guatemalan Flicker (*Colaptes mexicanoides*)\*

This may not be the split you were expecting. It doesn't have anything to do with red- vs. yellow-shafted birds, but rather, rusty- vs. gray-naped birds. Compared to "Red-shafted" Flickers, birds south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Guatemalan Flickers) have rusty crowns and napes. Females differ further by always having bold rusty "moustaches"; note that some female "Red-shafteds" have a comparatively subtle buffy moustache.

## Refreshments

Thanks to the September Refreshment Volunteers:

**SNACKS:** Larry Mays, Nancy Vicars, Steve Davis/Mary Lane & Jeanne/Mike Mather

**ICE & DRINKS:** John Eagleston/Cathy Chernausek