



# THE TENNESSEE WARBLER

Newsletter of the Tennessee Ornithological Society

December, 2020

Editor, Theresa Graham

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Hopefully all are safe and healthy in the difficulties presented in 2020. Whatever issues or problems that we have as members of TOS, they are insignificant if you have avoided the worst of the pandemic.

As we move toward colder temperatures, TOS has responded to the many challenges of functioning in a pandemic. We have become more adept at following socially distancing guidelines. It is fortunate that our group activities are outdoors and offer a safer environment for interaction with others. Field trips are being conducted with smaller numbers and with greater awareness of distancing. However, meetings have moved to online formats or become very cautious outdoor events. While birdwatching has become more popular with people who are seeking outdoor activities, it is challenging to interact safely with first-time visitors to TOS activities and to maintain contact with them with the uncertainty of group interaction.

As for the state TOS Board of Directors meeting, welcome to our online version. Please know that the Executive Board and various Committees have been conducting business on line or in small in-person meetings. We have taken a number of actions in support of birds and bird habitat as recommended by the Conservation Policy Committee. The Executive Board has voted to donate to the Swan Conservation Trust near Hohenwald to protect an area important as habitat to birds as well as important to native plants. Details of the area are available at the Swan Conservation Trust website.

As always, I want to encourage your involvement as a TOS member in the operation of our organization, either as an officer or as a member of various committees. Follow the leadership of Dr. Michael Collins, who has agreed to serve as the next President of TOS, and lend your skills and talents to this venerable organization. At this time, we have need of members to serve on the Bird Records Committee and the Finance Committee along with other positions. I believe that change in leadership, at all levels of volunteer organizations, is essential to the organizations to adapt and grow. Please consider doing your part. I look forward to working with Michael as he provides leadership in the future.

Danny Gaddy  
President, TOS

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## **Guidelines for Tennessee Ornithological Society 2021 Conservation and Research Grants**

The Tennessee Ornithological Society invites applications for Conservation and Research Grants to support projects that will directly or indirectly help to protect the birds of Tennessee, increase scientific knowledge, or educate others about the importance of Tennessee's birds. A total of \$6,000 is available to be awarded for the grants, which may be divided among multiple recipients.

Anyone with a bird-related project, including students, professionals, and individual workers, may compete for a grant. The project may already be in progress at the time of application. Applicants should submit a project proposal using the form that is available on the TOS Website ([http://www.tnbirds.org/downloads/GRANT\\_FORM.doc](http://www.tnbirds.org/downloads/GRANT_FORM.doc)). Needed information includes: name, address, telephone, E-mail address, topic, problem to be addressed, objectives, expected results and significance, project location, beginning and ending dates, estimated field time, estimated total cost of project, itemized budget, funds available from other sources, how grant is to be used, experience of applicant in the project area, willingness of applicant to share results at a statewide TOS meeting, and whether the work is under the guidance of a mentor or is independent.

A letter of recommendation from a mentor or a knowledgeable associate is strongly encouraged. Up to \$50 of a grant may be applied toward the costs of attending an appropriate scientific meeting to present results of the project.

Criteria for judging applications include:

- Significance of problem addressed
- Clarity of proposal
- Adequacy of project design
- Adequacy of experience/training
- Adequacy of professional guidance
- Financial need
- Chance for achieving objectives
- Potential benefit to the species/resource
- Potential for advancing career/studies
- Potential for sharing results at a future statewide TOS meeting

The application and letter of recommendation should be emailed (preferably) or mailed to Michael Collins, Department of Biology, Rhodes College, Memphis, TN 38112; [collinsm@rhodes.edu](mailto:collinsm@rhodes.edu); (901) 843-3557. The deadline for receipt of applications is February 1. Applicants will be notified of the Committee's decisions in early March. All grant awards will be announced in *The Tennessee Warbler*.

Respectfully,

Michael Collins

TOS Conservation and Research Funding Committee Chair

## MASSIVE BIRD DIE-OFF IN THE WEST

In September, an unprecedented number of dead birds were reported across New Mexico and some other parts of the southwest. The estimated numbers were in the hundreds of thousands, and the national media took notice. Most of these were migratory insect-eating songbirds (e.g., warblers, swallows and flycatchers), with some seed eaters also included.

Biologists at New Mexico State University were engaged in collecting the dead birds and investigating possible causes. Martha Desmond, a professor at NMSU's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Conservation Ecology was among them. "It is terribly frightening," Desmond said. "We've never seen anything like this."

Additionally, some living birds during the event were observed behaving oddly, sickened on the ground, disoriented, or lethargic. The birds appeared extremely emaciated, with little or no fat reserves and barely any muscle mass.

There are a number of individual theories concerning the cause for the die-off. Some of these theories are linked to a combination of factors.

One of the factors some biologists suggest is that the wildfires burning in California and other western states may have forced the birds to migrate early, before they were ready. By "ready," the scientists suggested that the birds had not yet accumulated enough fat to successfully engage in the stresses of migration.

A second fire-related theory had to do with smoke and particle inhalation, and a third idea was that the fires reduced the abundance of available insects for birds to eat.

And finally, another potential reason could be an unseasonal cold snap that passed through New Mexico for one week. But as Desmond added, some observers were witnessing the die-off prior to the cold snap and continuing beyond it.

The investigation has grown into a collaboration that includes NMSU, the University of New Mexico, Department of Defense, Los Alamos National Laboratory, and many other state and federal agencies, and non-governmental organizations in New Mexico, as well as the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The bird samples have been sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services' Forensics Laboratory in Ashland, Oregon for further analysis.

It could be some time before results come back; depending on the findings, these could be serious ecological implications, especially if they somehow involve insect populations, fire and changing weather.

Courtesy of: The Birding Community E-Bulletin, October 2020.

An archive of past issues may be found at: <https://refugeassociation.org/birding-community-e-bulletin>.

## “Mean” Behavior in a Red Bellied Woodpecker Family

Lynn M. Hui

This spring, I noticed a male red bellied woodpecker that often visited our feeders. One day, he came along with a juvenile and started to feed it suet. From that day forward, the woodpecker would come almost every day, with at least one of his two fledglings at his heels, begging for food in a scratchy, shrill call.



The Reprimand

As summer wore on, the “bullying” got worse. A fledgling would approach the adult with fluttering wings and begging calls, but the adult would suddenly wheel around and chase the fledgling down the branch with mouth open, sometimes even pinching the fledgling’s beak or feathers. Faced with this aggressive behavior, the fledgling would emit a shrill whimper, like a dog’s whine.

As I observed them, I started to notice bouts of “mean” behavior that the adult was exhibiting towards his young. While there was the occasional sibling fight that birds (and people) often engage in, there were also frantic chases between adult and juvenile, with the adult aggressively shooing his young off every surface it landed on. A fledgling would be chased from tree to tree until it was at some distance from our yard.



Pinching beak

Pinching wing

It seemed that the fledglings’ behavior became unusual as well. Instead of immediately springing towards their father to beg, each kept its distance and tentatively inched toward him. When the adult hopped towards them to deliver food, they often retreated fearfully, unsure of whether he would deliver a reward or reprimand. An overly-eager fledgling would be chastised immediately. I once observed a juvenile (not sure if it was one of the 2 fledglings) approach an adult female, presumably its mother, only to see the female rush at the juvenile, attempting to peck or pinch its feathers.

Although I have observed other bird species rearing their young, I have never seen such kind of aggressive behavior. Was it caused by some built-in natural mechanism that people cannot understand, or was it simply some sort of avian child abuse? I usually sympathized with the fledglings, but sometimes thought that they were, perhaps, being reprimanded for stealing food from the adult’s caches or interrupting his work. Or maybe it was the incessant begging call that “annoyed” the adult. The fledglings were, after all, constantly following him like satellites around a planet. If the adult intended to urge the fledglings to their independence, the fledglings did not seem to understand and continued to follow the adult for several months.



One day, an interesting event occurred at the feeders that intensified my interest. One fledgling was having a snack at a platform feeder when a juvenile jay landed opposite the woodpecker. The jay did not seem to



Adult chased fledgling to the edge until it fell off (left to right)

mind the company, but the woodpecker was extremely disturbed by the jay's presence. It opened its mouth wide in a silent but hostile gesture and stuck its head towards the unperturbed jay, who only stared innocently at the fledgling. I was struck by the likeness

of the fledgling woodpecker with his father. Perhaps the jay came from a "peaceful family" in which its parents were not aggressive or mean towards it, and the woodpecker simply picked up its father's habits. In any case, I was very intrigued with all this unusual behavior, and decided to do some research. I immediately found an article summarizing a study in which female Nazca boobies attacked unrelated young.<sup>1</sup> These abused young, sadly, grew up to be bullies themselves. Another article mentioned feather plucking behavior in cockatiels (a parent plucks its chick's feathers at a dangerously young age), and as with the boobies, the abused cockatiel chicks grow up to become feather-pluckers.<sup>2</sup> I was amazed to find how much these behaviors resembles bullying and child abuse in people.



Fledgling aggression at platform feeder

A month or two ago, the fledglings (there may have been more than two, for it appears that the adult raised a second brood) molted into their male and female plumages. It has been a while since I last saw them. Their visits to the feeders became less and less frequent until even the adult male disappeared. I hope they will not treat their future young as their father has treated them.

1. <https://www.livescience.com/16363-abused-baby-birds-bully-humans.html>

2. <https://petcentral.chewy.com/parents-pluck-baby-birds-feathers/>

Editor's Note: Special thanks to MTOS member Lynn Hui for contributing this article.

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## PLIRDING

If most of us are doing less birding during this continuing pandemic, we might want to consider adding an additional goal to the limited and local birding we may actually be doing. Enter the practice of “plirding.”

In Sweden a few years back, an effort called “plogging” emerged, encouraging runners to pick up trash along their runs. Plogging (a combination of Swedish plocka upp – “picking up” – plus “jogging” took off in popularity, with runners in many locations retrieving trash from forest trails, parks and shorelines.

Inspired by plogging, “plirding” means picking up trash while birding! As New England radio broadcast host of “Talkin’ Birds,” Ray Brown, has described it, “Picking up even a couple of pieces of trash while we’re out on the trail or in a park can help make a difference. And, as other see our example, they might be encouraged to pick up trash too – or perhaps even not throw it on the ground in the first place.”

Ray suggests that birders afield pay special attention to picking fishing lines, fishing tackle, single-use plastic (bags, bottles, six-pack rings, straws, etc.), cans, etc. And, of course, then there is the additional concern of where, exactly to keep the trash – in what bag or container – while you’re using your hands to steady your optics.”

The technique of “plirding” is well-described by Ray Brown here: <https://www.talkinbirds.com/plirding>.

And you can pick up more plirding details and techniques from Mike O’Conner of “The Birdwatchers’ General Store” (in Orleans, Massachusetts): <https://www.birdwatchersgeneralstore.com/NewYear2020.htm>.

Courtesy of: The Birding Community E-Bulletin, October 2020.

An archive of past issues may be found at: <https://refugeassociation.org/birding-community-e-bulletin>

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## BIRDNOTE ESCAPE

Birdnote, if you are not familiar with it, is a project for public radio stations around the country where listeners can experience a short bird-song story every day. It can also be found online at any time, and you can sign up to receive audio segments.

As a radio-oriented project, Birdnote is a perfect listening pastime for the COVID-homebound and folks sheltering in place.

Fortunately, the folks at Birdnote have revamped their website and included some new and longer programs. Among these are their “Soundscapes” episodes – each about a half hour long and specifically designed to “take us outdoors” with Gordon Hampton, an acoustic ecologist, who reminds us that outdoor sound in these unique times “can set us free.”

Give it a try: <https://www.birdnote.org>

Courtesy of Birdnote and The Birding Community E-Bulletin, August 2020.

An archive of past issues may be found at: <https://refugeassociation.org/birding-community-e-bulletin>

### BIRD-SAFE BUILDINGS ACT

We're closer than ever to getting the Bird-Safe Buildings Act across the finish line. The U.S. House of Representatives has now passed this bill twice! Most recently it was part of a promising energy package, H.R. 4447, the Clean Economy, Jobs and Innovation Act, which passed the House in September. Next it will make its way through the Senate. Bird mortality from building collisions is estimated at up to one billion per year in the U.S. alone.

This commonsense measure would direct that federal buildings incorporate bird-safe design and material, reducing collisions and potentially saving the lives of millions of birds.

Please consider asking your Senators to pass the Bird-Safe Buildings Act and make federal buildings safer for birds.

Courtesy of the American Bird Conservancy (ABC). Additional information at: [www.abcbirds.org](http://www.abcbirds.org)

Editors notes (1) TOS is a member organization of ABC.  
(2) At press time, the bill was still in the Senate.

### PROPOSED DOWN-LISTING OF RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER

For decades the U.S. Forest Service, in partnership with more than 30 public and private groups, has been focused on bringing back the Red-cockaded Woodpeckers' preferred habitat - longleaf pine forests, through such projects as the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative and the Million Acre Challenge. More than 1.3 million acres of new longleaf pine stands have been established and many hundreds of cavity inserts have been installed in these younger longleaf pine landscapes to help the Red-cockaded Woodpeckers' recovery. Now the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking input from the public on down-listing the species from endangered to threatened status.

Comments may be submitted electronically: [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov). Enter document number: FSW-R4-GS-2019-0018.

Source: Inside Bird Conservation, produced by The American Bird Conservancy (ABC).

For further information: [www.abcbirds.org](http://www.abcbirds.org)

Editor's note: (1) Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers were last reported in Tennessee during the mid 1990's  
(2) TOS is a member organization of ABC.

FALL BIRD COUNT DATA DUE NOW

Fall bird count data are due as soon as possible to allow me to get my report in to the editor of *The Migrant* in a timely fashion. Besides the actual count data, please be sure to include the following effort data:

- 1 - Hours and miles by car, foot, and any nightbirding
- 2 - Number of observers and parties
- 3 - Any feeder watching hours & names
- 4 - Start and end times for the count
- 5 - Weather data for the count
- 6 - Names of all the participants

Compilers: please try to use a bird checklist that is based on somewhat recent taxonomy. This greatly speeds up my job compiling these reports. Our green TOS field cards are usually up to date.

If you do not have a local compiler, you can send the data directly to me at the address/email below.

TOS appreciates your efforts to record and track our bird populations and abundance. Thanks for helping us to archive this data for future generations and researchers.

Ron Hoff • TOS State Count Compiler  
166 Chahyga Way • Loudon, TN 37774 • 865-567-9679  
[webe2brdrs@gmail.com](mailto:webe2brdrs@gmail.com)

FEBRUARY 28<sup>TH</sup> DEADLINE

The deadline date for the April issue of *The Tennessee Warbler* is February 28th. Please submit all articles, announcements, reports and items of interest by this deadline date.

**Submit Material To:**  
Theresa Graham, Editor  
PO Box 366, Oakland TN 38060  
(901) 465-4263 (home)  
e-mail: [2graham@bellsouth.net](mailto:2graham@bellsouth.net)



## CHAPTER NEWS

Out of an abundance of caution, the **CHATTANOOGA CHAPTER** ceased offering field trips and meetings in March of this year. We have now learned that outdoor gatherings are safer than indoors, so the October meeting took place at the Hubert Fry Pavilion of the Tennessee Riverpark (pictured below, right).

After a hiatus of several months, Mike Seeber, our new Vice President for programs (pictured below), presented a program on families of birds, their characteristics, and genetic relationships.

Gary Brunvoll, our new Vice President for field trips, scheduled three for the month of October and one in November. Soon it will be time for Christmas Bird Counts of which our chapter organizes three, Nickajack, Hiwassee, and Chattanooga.

The National Audubon Society initiated the annual Christmas Bird Counts more than 100 years ago and continues to coordinate them at an international level. This annual search for birds provides important data on the state of bird populations in our area and is an important resource for researchers seeking to find trends in bird populations.

Our officers and Directors for this year were selected by email voting.

President, Corey Hagen; VP for Programs, Mike Seeber; VP for Field Trips, Gary Brunvoll; Treasurer,

Fran Hiestand; Secretary, Ray Zimmerman; Historian, Barbara Johnson; Statistician, Keven Calhoon

Please note that election is not required for the following positions, but important duties are being fulfilled by these volunteers:

*Chattanooga Chat* Newsletter editor – Ray Zimmerman  
Facebook & website management – Jeffrey Schaarschmidt

Youth Advisor – Luke Thompson

Thanks also to Fiona Hubbard who proofreads our newsletter.

Ray Zimmerman  
Secretary and Newsletter Editor



## CHAPTER NEWS

**BIRDING KINGSFORT (BK)** activities remain very limited due to the pandemic. Our members, however, continue to enjoy nature and birding on their own. The birds carry on with their regular schedule, and it has been a source of pleasure and activity for us all. With increased time at home, many members have had interesting sightings in their backyards including Pine Siskins and Purple Finches during fall migration.

Several BK members helped the Elizabethon (Herndon) Club with the Fall Count in September. We also had a "socially distanced" barge ride around the lake at Bays Mountain Park where we saw many species including Wood Ducks, Pied-billed Grebes, Kingfisher, and Great Blue Heron. Bluebird nest boxes on local bluebird trails have also been cleaned out, ready for the next season.

We have had a couple of Zoom meetings and are planning more virtual meetings with programs for the upcoming future.

We look forward to starting our full schedule of activities when it is safe to resume. Information on Birding Kingsport can be found at [www.birdingkingsport.org](http://www.birdingkingsport.org).

Happy Birding!  
Helen Sirett, President

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The **LEE AND LOIS HERNDON CHAPTER** conducted two summer bird counts despite the ongoing pandemic afflicting Tennessee and the rest of the nation.

The chapter held its seventh annual Unicoi County Summer Count on Saturday, June 6, with 26 observers counting in 10 parties. The count tallied 110 species, which is near the 6-year average of 109. Totals for this count have ranged from 104 to 112 species.

The 27th annual Carter County Summer Count was held Saturday, June 13, with 28 observers in 10 parties participating. In addition, two feeder watchers assisted with the count, which tallied 121 species, which is above the 26-year average of 113 species. The all-time high for this count was 123 species in 2017.

As with the Unicoi County count, the club benefitted from more field parties than normal because of COVID-19 social distancing protocols. As a result, numbers for numerous species were higher than on past counts.

Count compiler Rick Knight, however, noted that if one were to calculate numbers by unit of effort (party-hours) he thought most of the numbers would be near average with some exceptions, of course.

The arrival of autumn brought the annual five-county Fall Bird Count conducted in the Northeast Tennessee counties of Carter, Johnson, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington. This count, the 51st consecutive one of its kind, was held on Saturday, Sept. 26, with 48 observers in 18 parties. Once again, participants were dispersed more than normal due to social distancing protocols. This marked the third seasonal count conducted since the start of the Covid 19 pandemic. A total of 132 species was tallied, which is above the recent 30-year average of 125 species. The all-time high on this count was 137 species set in 1993.

The chapter continues to meet remotely each month thanks to Zoom and other remote technologies. The chapter is readying publication of its 2021 bird calendar, a fund-raising effort that features full-color photographs taken by chapter members. The calendars sell for \$15, plus \$2 for postage. This year's calendar cover features an Ovenbird photographed by chapter member Roy Knispel. For more information on the calendar, email [ahoodedwarbler@aol.com](mailto:ahoodedwarbler@aol.com).



With surplus treasury funds available this year, the chapter made three donations to bird and nature-related endeavors. Members voted to give \$400 to each of the following: Wynnwood Wildlife Rehabilitation, East Tennessee State University Eagle Cams, and Wildlife Ambassadors Program at Roan Mountain State Park.

Bryan Stevens, Editor

## CHAPTER NEWS

The **HIGHLAND RIM CHAPTER** had a small group meet in June and July to work on our Planning Program Yearbook. We are hopeful that 2021 will see us gathering together once again. We have canceled our December banquet; better to be on the side of caution than regret.

Our Chapter may not be able to meet in person, but we will continue onward as if our time being together is closer than further away.

Without much news to report I thought a poem by Mary Oliver might brighten our winter days.

### *Red Bird*

*Red bird came all winter  
Firing up the landscape  
As nothing else could.  
Of course I love the sparrows,  
Those dun-colored darlings,  
So hungry and so many.  
I am a God-fearing feeder of birds,  
I know He has many children,  
Not all of them bold in spirit.  
Still, for whatever reason-  
Perhaps because the winter is so long  
And the sky so black-blue,  
Or perhaps because the heart narrows  
As often as it opens-  
I am grateful  
That red bird comes all winter  
Firing up the landscape  
As nothing else can do.  
Mary Oliver*

Mask up and keep your binoculars handy!

Janie Denis,  
Secretary

Like most of the other chapters, the **KNOXVILLE CHAPTER** shut down all meetings and field trips last spring due to Covid. In October, we resumed monthly meetings with our first virtual Zoom meeting. Ron Hoff gave a talk on his last trip to Australia with Dollyann Myers. We plan to continue with virtual meetings for the foreseeable future until it appears safe to resume in-person meetings.

Birding over the last 2 months has been excellent in East Tennessee with one big exception. The repeated hurricanes and tropical storms that hit the gulf states and brought heavy rains to East Tennessee kept the area lake levels near full. Rankin Bottoms on the upper end of Douglas Lake, which is normally wonderful for fall shorebird migrants, has been a bust. In August and early September, though, there were 3 good birds that did show up at Rankin. East Tennessee's first Neotropic Cormorant, a Tri-colored Heron and a small group of Egyptian Geese all hung out in the embayment pond on the left at Rankin for 3-4 weeks.

Some of the other good birds seen in East Tennessee over the last couple of months have been Upland Sandpiper in Knox County, American Avocets in Blount County, Ruddy Turnstone and Sanderling in Sevier County and Western Kingbird in Roane County.

KTOS finally elected officers for the current year in October. Morton Massey as President, Bill Keeler as Vice President, Laura Tappan as Secretary, and Tony Headrick as Treasurer.

Morton Massey,  
President



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plasley@comcast.net

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