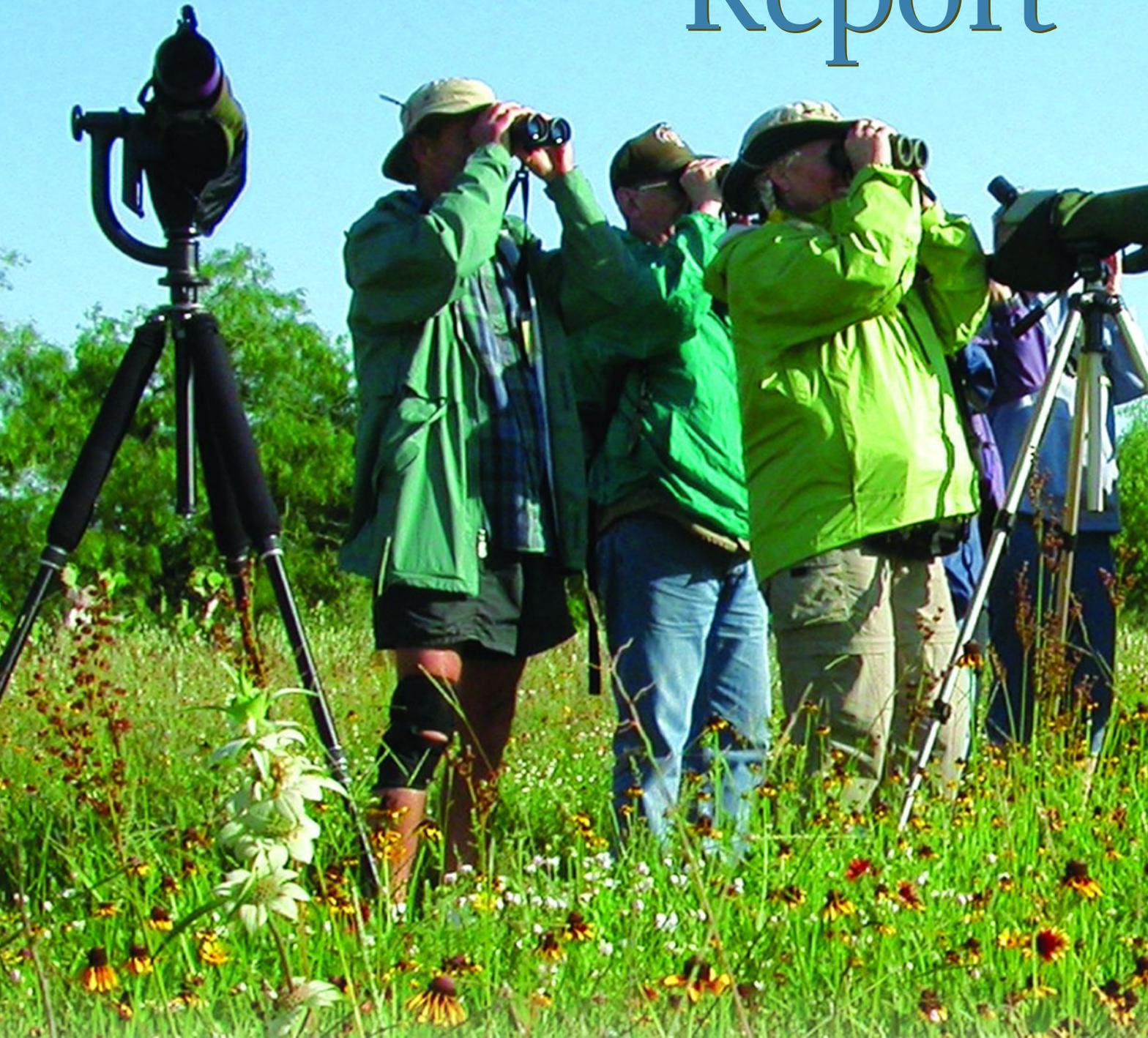

FLIGHT PATH

TRACKING THE WORK OF THE ABA

2004 ABA Convention Report



In airport terminals across the U.S. and Canada, ABA members boarded jet airplanes that would take them to their final destination, the ABA Convention in McAllen, Texas, held 26 April – 2 May 2004. During that time period, a strong cold front began its relentless push deep into the heart of Texas, grounding exhausted northbound trans-Gulf migrants in tiny woodlots on South Padre Island and other scattered pockets of vegetation along portions of the Lower Texas Coast. Participants

Bill Maynard

American Birding Association

P.O. Box 6599

Colorado Springs CO 80934-6599

bmaynard@aba.org

who arrived in McAllen before the convention were treated to one of the best South Texas avian fallouts in years. For example, an apparent Connecticut Warbler was videotaped, and if the record is accepted by the Texas Bird Records Committee, the sighting will represent the

500th species recorded from the Valley. Was this a portent of Convention avian delights?

Convention field trip leaders represented a Who's Who of Birding, their name tags merely a field guide to their legendary skills. The guides assisted 525 Convention participants, typically found scattered amid South Texas habitats, often in positions rarely described as graceful, willing to do almost anything needed to view South Texas specialties. Total birds recorded during field trips topped out at a whopping 260 species, a total that will be a challenge to top at any future Convention destination.

If field trip leaders were the stars of the show, the birds were superstars. Like most superstars, some of the birds were gaudy and liked to show off their colors. Unlike the names of the tour leaders perhaps, images of the superstar birds will likely remain etched in the memory long after the Convention is a faded memory. Field trip coordinator John Arvin forged the battle plan, ensuring well-appointed stops along each itinerary. Legendary birding locations such as the King Ranch, Sabal Palm Audubon Sanctuary, Santa Ana and Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuges, and Bentsen / Rio Grande State Park were no

El Canelo Ranch was a particularly popular destination for many of the convention participants. El Canelo is home to several Valley "specialties", and it is also a superb place for getting close-ups of many of the more-common upland species of South Texas. 2 May 2004. © Bill Schmoker.

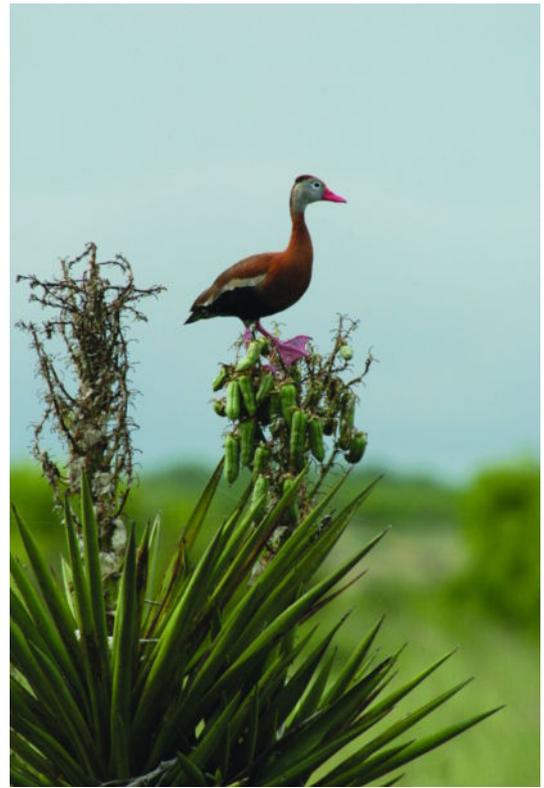


more and no less important than other destinations such as Salineño, San Ygnacio, Chapeño, and Anzalduas. Each destination had its specialties that allowed new species to be added to the accumulated total and often to a life list.

Birds were frequently abundant. Birds were often colorful. Birds were sometimes easy to see, a case in point being the now-legendary Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls at Monica and Ray Burdette's El Canelo Ranch. Some of the birds were ABA-area rarities, such as the family group of Brown Jays at the RV Park at Salineño, the last family group of that species known to exist in the U.S. These Brown Jays were cooperative for everyone, every day. Not yet countable, Aplomado Falcons were observed, by their nest, on the coastal prairie. Normally reclusive Botteri's Sparrows sang on grass stalks, and often-difficult-to-view Hook-billed Kites flew over a thorn forest during a raptor workshop and were seen elsewhere. The very small U.S. population of White-collared Seedeaters in San Ygnacio was observed each day, in spite of the flooding that had threatened the birds' nests. Muscovy Ducks and Red-billed Pigeons were observed flying on the U.S. side of the Rio Grande, the river that creates two political boundaries but does nothing to restrict avifaunal comings and goings. Tamaulipas Crow, recently reported as absent from the U.S., made a special appearance for one of the groups. The poster bird of the convention, the stunning Green Jay, was seen daily. The 34 species of warblers, including Gray-crowned Yellowthroat at two separate locations and a "Mangrove" Yellow Warbler near the mouth of the Rio Grande, were rivaled in diversity only by the 35 species of shorebirds. Forty specialty bird species were cited as a "tease" to attend the McAllen Convention, but in typical ABA fashion, far more than 40 bird rewards were given to those who accepted ABA's invitation to go birding.



You are the ABA. Some of your birding milestones included #700 for Russ Tkachuk of British Columbia, #600 for Laura Wathen of Colorado, and a whopping 108 lifers during the week for Sherry Leslie of North Dakota. ABA Conventions, though, are much more than listing. For the first time, the ABA offered a butterfly workshop. And why not?—South Texas has more butterfly species than anywhere else in the U.S. or Canada. Based on your evaluations, the butterfly workshops were wildly popular, with 65 species observed, as Pat Sutton taught us how to spot (and identify) butterflies. While Pat taught about the hindwings of butterflies, her husband Clay taught us about Texas raptors. Another new offering, Bill Schmoker's digital photography workshop, was a hit (check out the photos, all of them digitals, that accompany this article). All of us who attended are now thinking about the wonders of



More than 500 ABA members descended upon "The Valley" of extreme southern Texas for our 2004 annual convention. The week's tally was an impressive 260 species, the majority of them—like this Black-bellied Whistling-Duck—seen well by almost all conventioners. *Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Texas; 25 April 2004. © Bill Schmoker.*

The 2004 ABA convention coincided with a superb fallout of trans-Gulf migrants. The convention total was 34 species of warblers, most of them on South Padre Island. Left: Blackburnian Warbler. *South Padre Island, Texas; 25 April 2004. © Bill Schmoker.* Below: *South Padre Island, Texas; 1 May 2004. © Bill Schmoker.*



Away from the migrant traps, **South Padre Island** provided conventioners with superb views of scores of species of waterfowl, herons, rails, shorebirds, and larids.



Black Skimmers. *South Padre Island, Texas; 1 May 2004. © Bill Schmoker.*



Sandwich Terns. *South Padre Island, Texas; 2 May 2004. © Clay Taylor / Swarovski.*

This highly cooperative Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl was enjoyed by all who made the visit to El Canelo Ranch. 29 April 2004. © Clay Taylor / Swarovski.



In recent years, **El Canelo Ranch** has emerged as one of the top birding spots in South Texas. To be sure, it was among the most popular of destinations for this year's conventioners.



Although South Texas is most famous for its tropical woodlands and coastal habitats, the dominant habitat here is actually desert scrubland. Numerous desert species, such as this *Pyrrhuloxia*, reach the eastern limit of their ranges here. *El Canelo Ranch; 29 April 2004. © Clay Taylor / Swarovski.*

digiscoping and/or 35mm digital photography. Always popular during conventions, Wayne Petersen reminded us that all of us should improve our birding skills, and he taught us how to do so. Bill Evans told us that birds migrating at night can be identified by their species-specific flight calls, and he gave us some examples that we can use during that next Big Day competition. Charter ABA member Ro Wauer explained in his workshops why South Texas birding is so special, and later, on field trips, we found out for ourselves.

Best evening presentation was a multi-way tie. Bill Evans presented his data on the nighttime migration of Dickcissels over Valley high schools, and local folk hero Roy Rodriguez showed us why he is beloved in the Valley, with his presentation on avian and cultural diversity in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Five local blind and/or visually impaired birders, sponsored by ABA Board and Staff, were given Green Jay t-shirts by ABA Sales and were treated to dinner and Roy's inspiring speech. Noble Proctor, Attu

Island's beloved field trip leader, gave a presentation that kept the audience laughing, while our keynote speaker, Van Remsen, moved us to tears as we learned about the extinction of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in the U.S. and Cuba.

Special programs included a program on birding trails by Ted Eubanks and on the interesting biology of blackbirds and orioles by Alvaro Jaramillo. Also, Birder's Exchange's guest from Argentina, biologist Patricia Gonzalez, charmingly told us about her shorebird studies from the Arctic to Tierra del Fuego.

The 2004 McAllen Convention will be a tough act to follow. But we'll try to outdo ourselves, all the same, at our 2005 Convention destination: Tucson, Arizona. The dates of 18–24 July have already been set. Butterflies and other insects will be present, and next year's stars and superstars should rival those of South Texas. Elf Owl and Elegant Trogon, anyone? Red-faced and Olive Warblers? And more hummingbirds than you can shake a stick at? See you there.

ABA Awards

During each ABA Convention, our most prestigious commendations are presented to the current year's award recipients.

Bret Whitney, of Field Guides, Inc., received the **2004 ABA Ludlow Griscom Award** for Outstanding Contributions in Regional Ornithology, sponsored by Leupold. Bret has made significant contributions to the ornithology of Brazil, including the discovery and published descriptions of several bird species new to science. Bret was presented with a Leupold Golden Ring 15–30×50mm Compact spotting scope.

Leica Sport Optics sponsored the **2004 Chandler Robbins Education and Conservation Award**. The award was presented to **Jerome Jackson**, Ph.D., for his outstanding work with woodpeckers—in particular, his work on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Jerome received a Leica 8×42BR/Black Ultravid binocular.

Victor Emanuel, founder of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, was presented with the **2004 ABA Roger Tory Peterson Award** for Promoting the Cause of Birding. In his acceptance speech, Victor recalled the influence that his mentor, Roger Tory Peterson, had on the development of his life-long interest in birding. Bushnell presented Victor with an Elite spotting scope and tripod.

The **2004 Robert Ridgway Award** for Publications in Field Ornithology was presented to **Susan Smith**, Ph.D. ABA board member John Kricher outlined the highlights of Susan's storied career, which has focused on the behavioral ecology of the Black-capped Chickadee. Susan, who has published several influential books and scores of scientific papers, was presented with an 8×43 DCF SP binocular by the award sponsor, Pentax.

The American Birding Association is proud to recognize the following corporate sponsors for the 2004 McAllen, Texas, Convention: **Leica**, the Gold Sponsor of the 2004 Convention; **Zeiss**, the Silver Sponsor; and the Bronze Sponsors, **Brunton** and **Swarovski**. Associate Sponsors included **Bushnell**, **Kowa**, **Leupold**, **Pentax**, and **Steiner**. The American Birding Association would like to thank all of its corporate sponsors for their continued support of our organization.

— Steve R. Runnels, President & CEO

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