

Newsletter of the Orleans Audubon Society. Volume: XXXVIII Issue: 5

#### **OAS Zoom Programs**

## Science and conservation for birds and humans

#### on working lands in the Mississippi Delta

Presenter: Dr. Jason Hoeksema, University of Mississippi

Tuesday, June 21, 7:00 PM



June/July/August 2022

A Chapter of the National Audubon Society.

Jason Hoeksema recording shorebird vocalizations; photo by Larry Pace

Delta Wind Birds (DWB) promotes creation and protection of wetland habitat for migratory water birds in the Mississippi Delta region, especially by working with private landowners. They also work to educate the public about the value of wetland habitats for wildlife, and to promote ecotourism around wildlife appreciation. Dr. Hoeksema will highlight all of these projects in which DWB is currently engaged, including creation of temporary wetlands on corn and soybean fields after harvest, which may benefit birds, reduce pollution, and improve crop yields.

The Mississippi Delta was historically a vast wetland, covered with flooded woodlands, swamps, and oxbow lakes. These wetland habitats provided essential ecosystem services, including flood control and wildlife habitat. Today, most of these wetlands have been drained or diverted for agriculture, which supplies food and represents a key economic base in our region. Is there a way we can conserve and restore the ecosystem services of wetlands, while maintaining sustainable agricultural production? Delta Wind Birds (DWB) is a conservation non-profit based in Oxford, working to conserve existing wetlands and especially to create temporary wetlands on private lands in the Delta, including crop farms. Scientists from the University of Mississippi, the USDA-ARS, and Mississippi State University are partnering with DWB to study how these temporary wetlands may benefit migratory water birds, conserve soil, reduce downstream nutrient pollution, and improve crop yields.

Jason Hoeksema is a Professor of Biology at the University of Mississippi (UM), and is President of a Mississippi-based non-profit organization called Delta Wind Birds. Dr. Hoeksema received his Ph.D. in Ecology from the University of California, Davis in 2002, and then held positions as a post-doctoral researcher at the University of California-Santa Cruz and Duke University before joining the UM faculty in 2007.



Flock of Least Sandpipers. photo by Larry Pace



# **OAS Field Trips**

OAS is planning two birding field trips in May. Trip details will be emailed soon. Sign up for OAS email announcements here: https://mailchi.mp/faf69a03b4e9/orleansaudubon

#### Birding the Sankofa Wetlands

Saturday, May 14 from 9:00 AM to 11:00 PM Location: Sankofa Wetland Park, 6401 Florida Ave, New Orleans, LA 70117 Trip Leader: Dr. Peter Yaukey, pyaukey@uno.edu *Note:* This trip is sponsored by Sankofa. Join Dr. Peter Yaukey on a birding hike through the Sankofa Wetlands. Free, open to the public.

# **RECORDED OAS Zoom Presentations – Watch them anytime:**

Visit YouTube to watch OAS's recorded Zoom presentations, and subscribe to Orleans Audubon Society's YouTube Channel (free). Links to recorded programs are posted on the OAS website under the "Events" tab. Recorded programs are also available on OAS's Facebook page.

#### Birding Colombia's Southern Frontier—Putumayo

*Presented by* Joelle Finley and Ken Harris https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOgb\_4rXY44

#### Searching for Black Rails in Louisiana – a Race against Extinction

*Presented by* Dr. Erik Johnson, Director of Conservation Science, Audubon Delta https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ni1RFqkOgk

# Good News! Bayou Sauvage Just Got Bigger

By Jennifer Coulson

When greeted every morning with depressing headlines, from Russia's war on Ukraine to murders and carjackings closer to home, it's refreshing to have good news on an environmental front. On April 9, 2022, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service celebrated the historic expansion of the Bayou Sauvage Urban National Wildlife Refuge with the acquisition of the Little Pine Island tract.

**Secretary Haaland** said, "Today's celebration underscores the importance of the America the Beautiful initiative, which recognizes that urban green spaces are integral to our efforts to ensure that everyone can develop a meaningful relationship with the outdoors."

OAS Sanctuary Chair, David Muth, who began advocating for federal protection of the area decades ago, had this to say about the expansion: "The addition of the new property beautifully diversifies the habitat richness of the refuge by preserving some of the best mature natural levee forest left in New Orleans. It also provides a hugely important opportunity for habitat restoration, floodwater storage, and carbon sequestration. It fulfills a fifty year dream to provide permanent protection to one of the largest and best preserved prehistoric Native American sites in the Mississippi River Delta region: Big Oak Island.

The potential of Bayou Sauvage as the nation's largest urban wildlife refuge is still largely untapped—but this will be a vital step in making it the premier destination it de-

serves to be."

The 2,543.7-acre tract lies west of the Maxent Canal, north of Chef Menteur Highway, and south of I-10, with portions extending westward to Michoud Boulevard. Although the tract is leveed and most of its marshes are drained, it adds tidal marshes and bottomland hardwood forests to Bayou Sauvage. According to the National Wildlife Refuge realty database, this latest addition brings the total protected area to 28,151 acres.



The Little Pine Island, Inc. acquisition was funded by the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The tract's former owner, John Cummings, a trial attorney from New Orleans, founded the non-profit Whitney Plantation and museum, which focuses on the history of slavery and enslaved people in Louisiana.

OAS has long advocated for the acquisition of Little Pine Island, Inc., primarily because of its importance to breeding birds. Bald Eagles have often nested on the property, and a wading bird rookery has persisted there for many years. The species composition and number of nests in the rookery changes from year to year. In 2021, the rookery consisted of 150 Anhinga nests, 90 Great Blue Heron nests, 125 Great Egret nests, 5 Snowy Egret nests, and 10 Cattle Egret nests. In 2020, 6 pairs of Neotropic Cormorants also nested in the rookery, possibly representing the first documented breeders for Orleans Parish (Coulson, unpubl. data).

The Little Pine Island tract hosts a most spectacular array of wildlife. North American River Otters swim effortlessly through tannin-stained waters. The Big Easy's rich wetlands afford them ample prey and highly successful hunting, leaving much time for courting, raising pups, playing, harassing other wildlife, and sleeping. A close encounter with a gigantic Canebrake (Timber) Rattlesnake along the ridge abruptly pauses the heart. Enormous, golden-eyed alligators wait patiently below heron nests for a misfortunate tumble. Those who grow impatient may give the tree a jolt. A pair of Great Horned Owls taxes the rookery: a Snowy's white breeding plumes litter the ground below the owls' live oak plucking post. Aerobatic Mississippi Kites hawk insects high overhead and rise in thermals with silvery-winged Anhingas. Outrageously colorful Painted Bunting males perch atop spring green black willows and sing their bursting, melodic tunes. During spring migration the bottomland hardwoods come alive with Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, wood warblers, vireos, cuckoos and other delights. In winter a troop of Groove-billed Anis skulk through the scrub staying within calling distance of one another. They and their homes are all protected now, and hopefully soon will be showcased.

The Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge protects two major archaeological sites of the Greater New Orleans area: Big Oak Island and Little Oak Island. These islands were used by Tchefuncte and later Marksville people as villages and/or camp sites. Big Oak Island was also a burial site. Both islands are largely comprised of shell midden: *Rangia cuneata* clams were a mainstay for these cultures, and the islands served as clam processing sites. Crescent-shaped Big Oak Island is approximately 650 feet long by 165 feet wide. My husband, Tom, remembers seeing Big Oak Island from I-10, as an island of forest rising above a sea of marsh grass. Stately Live Oaks proclaimed its grandeur. Sadly, Big Oak is now land-locked: once the marsh was drained and levied for development, the marsh grasses died and invasives took over, leaving Big Oak Island completely obscured by Chinese tallow.

The most notable excavations of both islands were by UNO anthropologist J. Richard Shenkel, beginning in 1972 through the early 1980s. The earliest Tchefuncte artifacts found on the islands date to 500-200 B.C. (2470–2150 B.P.). The Tchefuncte people were hunter, gatherers and fishers, dating from approximately 800-700 B.C. to 200 A.D. They were one of the first native peoples to intensively produce clay-tempered ceramics with various designs. Big Oak Island contained pottery representative of Tchefuncte, Alexander, and Marks-ville cultures, as well as some intriguing Tchefuncte-Marksville shards which may represent transitions between cultures.

Big Oak Island is of particular importance as a Marksville burial site. It hosts a mass ossuary, the final resting place for de-fleshed, bundled bones, which were interred around 55 to 90 B.C. (Shenkel 1984). Shenkel believed this to be a single event ossuary, housing the remains of at least 54 individuals. From his archaeological work, Dr. Shenkel surmised the following: "Something happened to the Oak Island inhabitants during the first to second centuries B.C. that is reflected in changes in burial behavior and ceramic preferences. Long-established decorative techniques were recast into new designs, emphasizing curves and including raptors. The practice of individual, unadorned burials gave way to ossuaries with occasional special items. The mortuary change is not particularly great. Most Tchefuncte burials were already bundles, so the change involves a shift from single interment to collective interment. Collective interment would presumably mean a larger ceremony with more people involved, perhaps a feast, with drinking, eating, or smoking of ceremonial material from containers of which a few were thrown in with the dead as a final gesture. The formation of the ossuary would have undoubtedly been an emotional time. All evidence suggests that Big Oak was abandoned immediately afterwards."

The new acquisition adds enormous value to the already amazing Bayou Sauvage NWR, in terms of wildlife, habitats, natural resources, archaeology, and indigenous burial site protection. OAS will ask Southeast Louisiana Refuges to be included in the planning process for the "if, how and when" regarding public access to portions of the Little Pine Island tract.

### 2022 Swallow-tailed Kite Award presented to Dr. Tom Sherry

By Jennifer Coulson



Tom Sherry receives original water color painting by local artist, Joan Garvey.

Dr. Tom Sherry's April 18th retirement party under Audubon Park's grand live oaks provided the perfect setting to present Tom with OAS's Swallow-tailed Kite Award. Recently arrived Great Crested Flycatchers chimed in as we celebrated Tom's outstanding contributions to the conservation of Louisiana's wildlife and wild places.

During the party, Tom's colleagues, Donata Henry, Jordan Karubian, Renata Ribeiro and Hank Bart heralded Tom's accomplishments on the international stage, primarily highlighting his ecological studies on migratory bird populations and insectivorous bird competition and evolution in the tropics. The OAS award complimented this nicely by acknowledging Tom's contributions to ecology and conservation locally.

It was quite the honor for me to recount Tom's contributions to local ecology, ornithology, and conservation at the Tulane gathering. First and foremost, Tom mentored and inspired numerous conservation biologists, ecologists, ornithologists and teachers. Many of his graduate students conducted their research locally. Bruce Fleury, for example, showed that crawfish aquaculture was having a positive effect on the wading birds that eat crawfish, increasing their populations. Sally Spahn demonstrated that wading birds are good bioindicators of heavy metals and other contaminants. Colombia native, Carlos Valderrama, examined the effect of forest fragmentation on spider communities. Donata Henry compared breeding responses of the elusive Swainson's warbler in managed pine plantation versus natural bottomland hardwood forests. I studied population ecology and intraguild predation in a rare bird of prey, the Swallow-tailed Kite. And a portion of Cody Kent's dissertation work on interspecific competition in migrant birds involved natives. Tom was also Deborah Visco Abibou's dissertation advisor and while her research was in the tropics, after she graduated Deb became the Restoration Programs Director for the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana.

Tom has also advised Master's students and undergraduates who conducted research locally. For example, Sarah Chieko Hunter's Master's thesis focused on food-limitation and trophic cascades in insectivorous birds in bottomland hardwood forests. And Shannon Tanner's Senior Undergraduate Honors Thesis examined habitat selection of Swainson's Warbler in pine plantations.

Tom also conducted his own research locally, studying American Redstarts breeding in the Pearl River Basin. He and David Brown looked at Hurricane Katrina's impacts on the breeding bird community in a bottomland hardwood forest. Thus, the body of work Tom has directed in local environments is pretty incredible! And most of the publications resulting from these studies include conservation recommendations.

Tom's influence on students and co-workers is profound because he challenges them to think critically. Local geographer and ornithologist Dr. Peter Yaukey, said, "During the four summers I spent at Hubbard Brook Experimental Forest, Tom shaped my development as a field scientist more than any other single person."

I welcomed this opportunity to personally thank Tom for taking a chance on a non-traditional grad student like me. He helped me with population modelling, understanding the concepts behind the models, and by recommending innovative ways to test challenging field data. As a testament to his incredible dedication as a teacher and mentor, he visited kite nest sites while on crutches! In his teaching, research, and home life, Tom is passionate about climate change and other environmental threats. He developed two new conservation courses: a Service Learning course in Conservation Biology and also a senior-level course entitled "Climate Change across the Curriculum: Science, Stakes, and Solutions". Under Tracey's direction, the Sherrys completely remodeled their home to be an incredibly energy efficient model for the community.

Tom has interacted with local education and environmental organizations. He has given invited lectures to the New Orleans Society for Conservation Biology, Orleans Audubon Society, and the New Orleans Sierra Club. He has also given seminars at Tulane and the University of New Orleans. In 2016 he received the prestigious George H. Lowery Award from the Louisiana Ornithological Society. At A Studio In The Woods, he has served as a faculty liaison for artists in residence and was recently a scholarly resident himself. He also participated in local bird surveys such as Christmas Bird Counts.

The 3rd North American Ornithological Conference convened in New Orleans in 2002 largely because of Tom. The NAOC drew international attention to the wealth of bird life here in Louisiana and the need to conserve this critically important region. Tom served as the Co-Chair and Local Chair of the Conference. This was the largest ornithological conference yet: 1,400 ornithologists attended from 30 countries. High-lights included an amazing fallout of migrants in the hotel courtyard due to a surprise visit from Tropical Storm Isidore! I remember grabbing Donata by the shoulders to divert her attention from conference duties, and shouting, "Move your truck now, or it's going to flood!" How Tom managed to save the day by convincing the hotel to stay open and feed conference participants during the storm remains a mystery.

I then presented Tom with a newly designed plaque, thanks to the help of graphic designer, Dan Miller [https://danmilnerdesigns.net/], who graciously donated his services. And the fun continued. OAS Membership Chair, Joan Garvey then addressed the group, telling them how Tom and Tracey gardened for wildlife and opened their beautiful yard to host hummingbird banding sessions. Joan presented her original water color of a Rufous Hummingbird bathing to commemorate this additional contribution the Sherrys have made to local ornithology.



Tulane's Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology created a prestigious student conservation award in Tom's honor. My husband, Tom, and I enjoyed seeing friends *in person* again, including Anne Bradburn, John and Pam Caruso, Jean Cassels, Craig Hood, Joan Garvey, David Muth, David White and Peter Yaukey, all there to celebrate Tom. The Sherrys are moving to White River Junction, Vermont, but promise to migrate south for the occasional visit.

Jennifer Coulson, Tracey and Tom Sherry, Donata Henry

**Orleans Audubon Society's** 

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## Ponchitolawa's Life and His Demise in Mato Grosso Do Sul

#### By Jennifer Coulson

GPS-satellite transmitters reveal intimate details about the lives of Swallow-tailed Kites, allowing us to discover life history and demographic details that we could not know otherwise. These amazingly light-weight, high-tech tracking devices have a built in GPS which records geographic coordinates for the kites 7 times a day, providing also the bird's speed, bearing and altitude. The data are uploaded to the satellites every 3 days, so the data are not available real-time, but nearly so. The only kite still living and wearing a functioning GPStransmitter died this fall shortly after he arrived on the wintering grounds. What follows is a recount of what we know of his story and lessons learned from tracking him.

My husband, Tom, and I captured the Ponchitolawa male or "Ponch" at the end of May in 2019, with the help of project volunteers Jeanne and Andy Licausi and Hamy, my trained Great Horned Owl. We and the Licausis monitored Ponch's nests in Covington (2019, 2020) and Abita Springs (2021). All of his nesting attempts failed at or near hatching time. We suspect, based on the pair's behaviors, that the eggs were not viable and possibly even infertile in all three years. For example, in 2021, the female abandoned the nest at the time when eggs should have hatched. Then Ponch took over, suddenly and uncharacteristically spending a lot of time on the nest. The next afternoon he abandoned the nest.

Here's a little gem for the Gulf migration junkies: Ponch's tracks provide a window into the world of what kites do (Figure 1). On his three fall migrations, Ponch took three entirely different southbound routes: one western circum-Gulf, one trans-Gulf, and one eastern circum-Gulf! For the latter, he started to cross the Gulf of Mexico but turned east to make landfall near Orlando. He then flew south over peninsular Florida, crossed the Straits of Florida, flew southeast over much of Cuba, and then made a long water crossing over the Caribbean Sea to make landfall in Belize. His two spring migrations included a direct trans-Gulf crossing from the Yucatan peninsula to the Pearl River Basin, and another trans-Gulf crossing where his path was diverted and he turned eastward, making landfall in Florida west of Gainesville. And we wonder why we have difficulties predicting when and where tiny warblers will make landfall. Ha!

We have no way of knowing exactly how old Ponch was when we trapped him, but it is possible to calculate a minimum age. Based on plumage, Ponch was at least two years old when we captured him. My radio telemetry studies tracking kites tagged as nestlings indicate that kites delay breeding until they are at least three years old. This means that any breeding kite has completed at least 3 roundtrip migrations. That's roughly 30,000 miles on the kite odometer! During the tracking study, Ponch survived 871 days or 2 years, 4.6 months. Using a May 1st approximate hatch date, he was probably at least 5 years, 5.5 months old when he died, but he may have been 10 or 15 years old or possibly older. His lack of breeding success, with the nests failure at hatching time, makes me wonder if he was an older individual undergoing senescence and infertility.

Now to his demise in Brazil. Ponchitolawa had only just arrived on the wintering grounds in Mato Grosso Do Sul, near the Paraná River, in southern Brazil, when things took a turn for the worse. The last transmitter report indicating that he was alive and flying was from October 17th. Then followed a nerve-wracking gap of two days of no data reports. The first indication that he might be dead came from October 20, when the transmitter reported him staying in one place. It soon appeared likely that he was dead, when more reports showing no movement. The transmitter was reporting from a field about 35 miles west of Bataguassu. The good news was the solar panels on the unit were receiving enough sunlight to power the battery.



Ponchitolawa's Routes over and around the Gulf of Mexico during 3 fall and 2 spring migrations.

I contacted my colleagues, Ken Meyer and Gina Kent, at the Avian Research and Conservation Institute (ARCI) in Gainesville, Florida, to inquire about field biologists in Brazil who might investigate. Gina reached out to raptor biologist Alex Jahn of the Environmental Resilience Institute at Indiana University. He put me in touch with Rafael Souza of the The Laboratory of Spatial Ecology and Conservation (LSEC) at the Universidade Estadual Paulista, Rio Claro, São Paulo. Rafael and his colleague, Claudia Kanda, came to the rescue, offering to look for the kite and transmitter.



Seriema] Red-legged Seriema at one of the small ranches Ponchitolawa visited. Photo courtesy of Rafael Souza.

We communicated across continents and in the field using WhatsApp, a free messaging and video calling app that is popular in Latin America. Rafael didn't have a cell phone but Claudia did. At approximately 7:00 a.m. on October 31, Rafael and Claudia arrived at the farm where Ponch died. The owners, Mr. Abel, nick-named Bilinha, and his wife Lisneia, like birds and nature and were quick to grant access. Claudia messaged a video of a tractor plowing a field. The farmer began plowing the field on the previous afternoon. Unfortunately, he had plowed over the kite's remains!

Rafael messaged a photo of a few sun-bleached feathers from Ponch's tail and wing, enough to confirm that he died here. But without a carcass the cause of death would be impossible to determine. I was really hoping the \$4,200 transmitter might still be there, but it was nowhere to be found.

Claudia messaged asking if the transmitter had reported a new location. I contacted Gina, and she checked, but there wasn't. The unit either flipped over, got buried, or was damaged by the tractor or plow. Ken suggested searching for it with a metal detector. Rafael and Claudia drove back to lab to get a metal detector and returned to the farm around 5:00 p.m. They made a thorough search but did not find the transmitter.

Rafael and Claudia interviewed the owners in an attempt to determine what might have happened to Ponch. Rafael reported that Bilinha and Lisneia liked Swallow-tailed Kites and viewed them as the farmer's friend: they had seen them on many occasions feeding on the caterpillars in the nearby cassava plantations. According to the owners, when the cassavas are big it is possible to see between 30 and 40 kites feeding on caterpillars in the plantations. My Brazilian colleagues were thoroughly convinced that Ponch had not been shot.

They then inquired about farming practices to determine whether insecticide poisoning might be a possibility. The farmers here are poor and cannot afford pesticides. Weeds are removed by hand from the small cassava plantation and most of the property and region are used for pasture. The region primarily consists of small farms and a few ranches, settlements which originated from the redistribution of land through government programs and social struggles such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST, or Landless Workers Movement). Rafael surmised that if the kite had been poisoned, it would have to have been on one of the large farms, and not at the site where he died.

Rafael and Claudia also checked out the last sites Ponch visited in the days before died. These included small, rural ranches having pastures with low densities of cattle, and a young corn field. At one site they found the nest of a Southern Crested Caracara. A farmer told them about a Swallow-tailed Kite nest, but upon investigation it turned out to be the nest of a White-tailed Kite.

They observed Swallow-tailed Kites in the area, including one adult Swallow-tailed Kite that first morning, where Ponch died, and then Rafael saw a group of 9 nearby late in the afternoon. A local farmer sent Rafael a mind-blowing cell-phone video of a gathering of hundreds to thousands of kites, taken when the kites had first arrived.

We learned much for from Ponchitolawa than what I've summarized here. OAS hopes to deploy two GPSsatellite transmitters on Swallow-tailed Kites in 2023. If this project gets funded, we hope to collaborate with Rafael and LSEC to study the types of crops tagged kites are feeding over and habitats they use on the wintering grounds in Brazil. The SE Louisiana Chapter of the

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