

Bird Calls

Newsletter of the Evanston North Shore Bird Club

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Northern Shrike by Nancy Halliday

A FEATHERED RIVER ACROSS THE SKY: AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR JOEL GREENBERG

By Eleonora di Liscia

ENSBC is fortunate in having several distinguished authors in our midst, among them Joel Greenberg. Joel's fourth book, ***A Feathered River Across the Sky: The Passenger Pigeon's Flight to Extinction*** takes on a national topic and has just been released by Bloomsbury.

Described by the Chicago Tribune as "a brilliant, important, haunting and poignant book," ***A Feathered River*** marks the 100-year anniversary of the species' extinction after its most famous member, Martha, passed away in the Cincinnati Zoo. The book serves as a cautionary tale, still relevant today, about what happens when we take abundance for granted and fail to protect the riches before us.

Joel's book has also inspired a documentary, ***From Billions to None: The Passenger's Flight to Extinction***, produced by David Mrazek. As of this writing, the documentary

was in final editing mode for a 2014 release, but still in need of funding. To help get the word out on this important topic, you can make a donation at http://e-int.com/billionstonone/1-about_film.html, or visit the site for a progress report on the film.

Below, Joel talked about his experience with the book.

ENSBC: What attracted you to writing about the Passenger Pigeon?

JOEL: I have been interested in birds since the age of twelve, and more recently I have been looking at historical natural history, or how the status of plants and animals have changed over time. The Passenger Pigeon was native to the eastern half of Canada and the United States. It was unlike any other bird for three reasons: First, with a population that likely reached or exceeded 5 billion, it was the most abundant bird in



Joel Greenberg Photo by Tim Wallace

North America and probably the world. Second, it aggregated in flocks that comprised hundreds of millions, if not billions, of birds. And third, although a single flight in 1860 near Toronto probably numbered more than a billion individuals, the last wild birds were

wiped out by the first few years of the 20th century, and the very last of the species died in the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914.

ENSBC: What were the challenges in researching this book?

JOEL: The passenger pigeon literature is vast. There are four earlier books about the species, most particularly Schorger's 1955 monograph which involved thousands of sources. I made it a point to try to discover references that had not been part of the previous record. So, for example, I made requests for info on birding listserves in 20 states. In reading these sources, it is clear that the birds were never studied in the wild so the species' impacts on its ecosystem are not known. And neither are the impacts caused by its rapid destruction. But there are interesting conjectures, and I tried to find as many of those as possible.

ENSBC: How did your experience on this book differ from your other books?

JOEL: This is the first book I have done with a trade press (not a university press), and it is the first book I have done that does not have "Chicago" in the title. The book also led me into other engaging Passenger Pigeon activities such as co-producing and appearing in the documentary ***From Billions to None: The Passenger's Flight to Extinction***, which we hope will air on numerous PBS affiliates. I have also been a founder and principal of Project Passenger Pigeon which

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JOEL GREENBERG INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM COVER

has brought together 150 organizations across Canada and the US to mark the 2014 anniversary through a variety of programs and exhibits.

ENSBC: What attracted you to a movie?

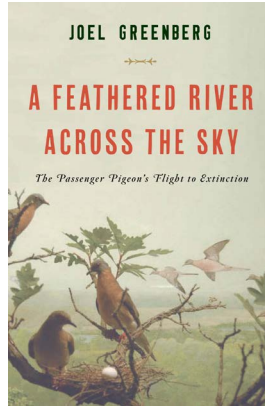
JOEL: After being immersed in those amazing descriptions of the birds, it seemed that a movie could convey some of that to an audience. I reached out to David Mrazek, and he thought it was a good idea. The movie is mostly about me trying to engage others in the story.

ENSBC: What was the most surprising thing you learned about the Passenger Pigeon from doing the book?

JOEL: Perhaps the most surprising thing is how much we don't know about the bird's life history. So one example is that we know the bird nested in pairs like Mourning Doves, and by the hundreds, thousands, and millions. All we really know anything about are these huge aggregations but nothing about how successful these smaller groupings were.

ENSBC: What do you consider the most important conservation lesson to come out of the Passenger Pigeon's story?

JOEL: To me the most important lesson is this: No matter how abundant something is, be it water, fuel, or a living organism, we can exhaust the supply if we are not good stewards. Here was a species that literally went from hundreds of millions or even billions to zero in forty years.



Joel's new book has been favorably compared to Rachel Carson's Silent Spring.

BANDING HUMMINGBIRDS

by Lloyd Davidson

A recent edition of the Wall Street Journal carried a lovely article on banding hummingbirds in the New Orleans area for study and counting. The 78-year-old citizen scientist Nancy Newfield, who is one of only 250 people in the U.S. licensed to tag hummingbirds, began her studies because she couldn't convince other birders and bird experts in the area that hummingbirds wintered over in this region of Louisiana.

The hummingbirds are first carefully trapped in boxes with doors that can be "shut by specially programmed car-door openers." Then the birds are removed, measured and banded, using tiny aluminum bands that are attached with the aid of magnifying lenses and only weigh about 1/200th of a gram. The hummingbirds themselves only weigh about 5.5 grams. In one case, Ms. Newfield and her coworkers (mostly volunteers) re-captured the same Buff-bellied Hummingbird nine years in a row, quite old for a wild hummingbird.

In spite of their small size, these birds can be remarkably resilient and tough; two were found alive one year in Lynchburg, VA. at 4 degrees below zero centigrade. One Rufous Hummingbird was banded in Tallahassee, FL and then trapped the next year again in Alaska. Remarkably, they often return to the same feeder, year after year, and in cases when they arrive before the feeder has been hung, or if it was moved, they sometimes stalk the windows of the house, trying to alert the resident that they are not pleased by the loss of their feeding station.

The studies have discovered that the Rufous Hummingbirds that winter in New Orleans breed in Langley, Washington, which is a "traditional breeding ground for the species."

Source: Templin, Neal. A Hearty Band of Volunteers makes Hummingbirds Count; Birders Band Tiny Creatures and Changed the Way Science Sees Them. WSJ, Thursday, January 23, 2014, pp A1,A10.

ENSBC ELECTION TIME:

Every April, ENSBC elects a slate of officers. Thanks to their dedication, ENSBC offers many fine programs and field trips as well as our much respected Christmas Bird Count. But we are always looking for new ideas. If you are interested in any position, particularly those marked OPEN, please contact Gary Hantsbarger, ghantsbarger@yahoo.com or 847-374-8022, to put in your nomination. The current slate of nominees is:

PRESIDENT:
GARY HANTSBARGER

VICE-PRESIDENT:
JENNIFER SCHMIDT

TREASURER:
JOHN HOCKMAN

SECRETARY:
NANCY HALLIDAY

CORRESPONDING SECRETARY:
OPEN

PROGRAM CHAIR:
LIBBY HILL

FIELD TRIP CHAIR:
LIBBY HILL

ASSISTANT FIELD TRIP CHAIR:
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ELEONORA DI LISCIA

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Hummingbird Photo by Lloyd Davidson

PARADISE LOST: THE BATTLE FOR THE TOUHY CLAY PITS

By Eleonora di Liscia

(Special thanks to ENSBC member Glenna Eaves, Chair of the Collections Committee for the Rogers Park/West Ridge Historical Society, who contributed substantial research for this story.)

This is not a happy story.

It is a story of a backyard paradise lost. And it is a reminder of why we as birders must share the love of what we do. Because only when the public learns to value a Blue-winged Teal or a Black Tern will we save some other backyard paradise.

Once upon a time there was a wetland called the Touhy Clay Pits. The Touhy Clay Pits covered most of the area between Pratt, Touhy, Sacramento and McCormick Blvd. The Illinois Brick Company owned the land but had ceased operations there in 1930, leaving a 77-acre hole. In time, the Clay Pits evolved into a nature area containing shallow marshes, swathes of cottonwood and willows, islands, a honeysuckle hedge and a pond about 30 to 50 feet deep, except in the center where two natural springs fed the pond to a depth of 130 feet.

Then, in 1946, Chicago proposed buying the land for a garbage dump.

"An ugly hole in the ground had quietly, almost imperceptibly become a place of rare beauty," stated a petition to then Chicago Mayor Kennelly, circulated by the Evanston Bird Club (ENSBC). "Do the people of Chicago want the stench and ugliness of a garbage dump for years to come in this neighborhood? Or do they want to preserve a generous and beautiful gift of nature?"

The Club wrote Chicago City Hall urging that the hole instead be purchased as a sanctuary. The Clay Pits hosted Black and Common Terns, American and Least Bitterns, Soras, Virginia and King Rails, "Florida" Gallinules, Blue-winged Teal and Marsh Wrens. Even a Barrows Goldeneye appeared in spring, 1947.

"The members of the Evanston Bird Club would be much relieved to hear this marsh, so teeming with wild life is not to be turned into another garbage dump! We even hope that it will not be "improved" and turned into a formally laid out park, but may come to be appreciated in its present natural wildness and finally suitable protected and reserved as a perpetual refuge!" Dorothy S. Helman wrote in a September 23, 1946 letter.

Two other groups opposed the dump: the North Boundary Home Owners League and the West Rogers Park Property Owners Association. Their interests were somewhat, but not completely, aligned with the bird club's. Both resident groups worried about drownings. Two drownings had occurred ten years before, and residents fretted about repeat incidents because children were attracted by the fishing. (The Brick Company had been pumping the water out until the city announced its plans for the dump.)

In 1940, Illinois Brick resumed dumping but ceased because of complaints about odors and rats. The company started again a year

later, but stopped after citizens became aroused. In 1945, the West Rogers Park association filed an injunction against any dumping.

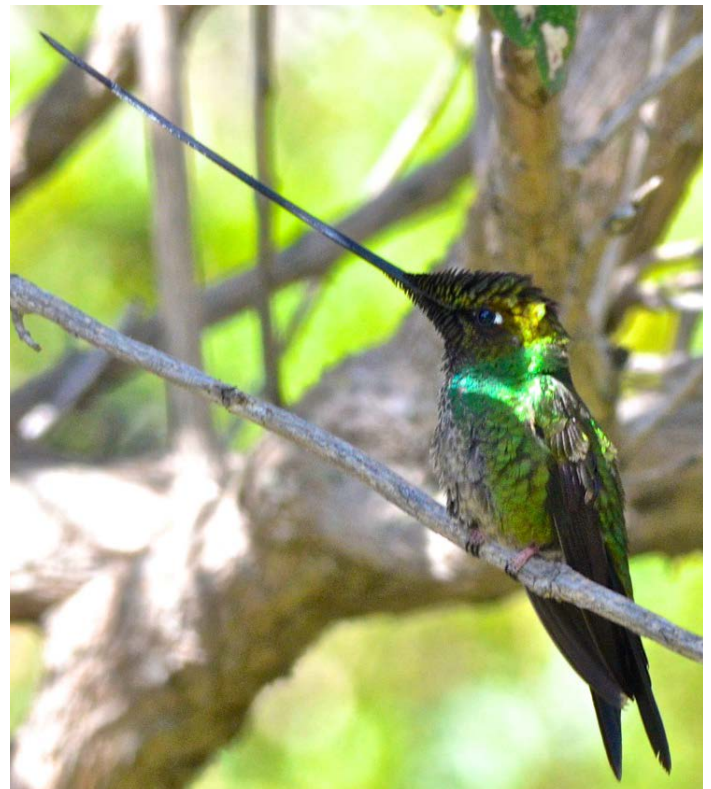
Residents also successfully blocked the city's plans for a dump after marching on city hall. But in 1948, Fleming-Sexton, a material removal company leasing from Illinois Brick, sought a permit to fill the hole with "clean dry fill."

After the city refused the permit, Fleming-Sexton took the city to court. Unfortunately, residents lost that battle when a Superior Court judge forced Chicago to issue the permit, (although garbage and combustible material were specifically barred).

Instead, city officials proposed a plan to end the battle by developing homes and a park. Despite huge support--Illinois Audubon Society proffered a petition with 3,000 signatures--the wildlife sanctuary was not to be. Mayor Kennelly declared that the \$325,000 needed to buy the property from Illinois Brick "was too much to spend on feeding the birds."

And that is the crux of the matter. You see, the City would have paid \$325,000 to dump its garbage, but not to save its wildlife.

By September, 1949, the battle for the Touhy Clay Pits went out with a whimper. The Chicago Daily Tribune reported that "Everything is peaceful and serene at the Touhy Av. Clay pit which last year was the cause of a stormy battle between residents of the area and the Fleming-Sexton company." Filling of the area had begun.



Sword-billed Hummingbird Photo by Richard Paulson

C A L E N D A R

PROGRAM NIGHTS

All programs are held on the fourth Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. at the Evanston Ecology Center, 2024 McCormick Blvd., Evanston, IL. Free admission, parking and refreshments. For more details on programs, check our website at www.ensbc.org.

February 25, 2014: "Basically Bats 101." Scott Heinrichs is the Founder of Flying Fox Conservation Fund in Chicago. Bats are one of the most beneficial and misunderstood of all animals. Our program is filled with information about where bats live, what they eat, and the vital contributions they make to the ecosystem. He will bring us up-to-date on White Nose Syndrome and will bring live bats for us to touch and photograph. Bat T-shirts available.

March 25, 2014: "Amazonian Brazil." Jason Weckstein will report on his summer with the 2013 Field Museum expedition to this endangered and usually unvisited area of Amazonian Brazil to discover and record the diversity of birds that make it their home.

April 22, 2014: Learning to Bird by Ear: Recognizing and Identifying Birds by Their Vocalizations. Geoff Williamson, recipient of the 2013 Ludlow Griscom Award from the American Birding Association, will introduce us to "birding by ear." This presentation describes basic concepts in bird vocalizations and provides organizing principles for learning to bird by ear.

FIELD TRIPS

MARCH 16, 2014 - SUNDAY

5th Annual Memorial Ralph Herbst Duck Trip: Bird the lakes and ponds of the Palos region for a variety of spring waterfowl. Meet at 7:30 a.m. From I-55, exit south on to US Rte. 45/LaGrange Rd. Head straight south to the McGinnis Slough parking lot on the west side of LaGrange Rd. Leader: Jeff Sanders.

MARCH 22, 2014 – SATURDAY

Air Station Prairie Woodcocks. Come out to see the spectacular aerial displays of the American Woodcock at dusk! Meet on the deck of the interpretive center at 6:45 pm. Leader: John Leonard or Jennifer Schmidt

APRIL 6, 2014 – SUNDAY

Looney Trip, Lake County. A Dave Johnson specialty! Loads of loons and lots of lakes. Expect other birds as well. Meet at 8:30 a.m. at Diamond Lake Rd at Diamond Lake across from Mundelein boat launch at Gale Street Inn Restaurant parking lot.

RSVP with Leader by email: djohnsoda@comcast.net or phone: 224-567-9650. Bring Family Radio Service walkie-talkies or radios with the second security channel if you have one. Leader: David B. Johnson.

APRIL 12, 2014 – SATURDAY

North Glenview. Tour the better birding areas that North Glenview has to offer (most likely Techny Basin Conservation Area, Lake Glenview, and The Air Station Prairie) for early migrants and lingering waterfowl. Techny Basin is located west of Waukegan Rd., south of Willow Rd., and east of Ravine Way in Glenview. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at the gravel parking lot on Claire Ct. off of Ravine Way. Leader: Jeff Sanders

APRIL 26, MAY 3, MAY 10, MAY 17, 2014 - SATURDAY

Spring Saturday Mornings at Northwestern University's campus. This area is a stopover for migrants of all kinds heading north. Park on the lake side of the upper deck of the south parking lot off of Sheridan Rd. and Clark St., north of Clark St. beach, at 8:30 a.m. Leaders: April 26: Libby Hill & Josh Engel, May 3, Libby Hill and Jason Weckstein; May 10, Wayne Svoboda; May 17, Libby Hill & Nancy Halliday. Note that May 10 will also be part of Spring Count.

APRIL 27, 2014 - SUNDAY.

NEW TRIP! American Golden Plovers and Smith's Longspurs. Trip to nearest locations to find high breeding plumaged American Golden-Plovers and Smith's Longspurs. All day trip. Meeting time and location to be announced. Most likely we'll be birding Champaign and/or McLean counties. Limit 12 participants. RSVP to leader David B Johnson at djohnsoda@comcast.net or 224-567-9650.

MAY 2, 9, 16, 2014 – FRIDAYS

Fridays at Skokie Lagoons. These Friday trips pack a great list of warbler species during spring migration. Meet at 7:30 a.m. at the Forest Preserve parking lot north of Willow Rd. just east of the Edens Expressway. Leader: Lynne Carpenter May 2 and 9, Wayne Svoboda May 16.

MAY 7, 2014 – WEDNESDAY

Ryerson Woods. Check out the spring migrants and returning breeders at this beautiful Lake County forest preserve. Meet at 7:00 a.m. at the Brushwood parking lot. Ryerson Woods is on Riverwoods Rd, northwest of Deerfield. Leader: Gary Hantsbarger.

MAY 10 AND 11, 2014 – SATURDAY AND SUNDAY

Illinois State Spring Bird Count. Contact Joel Greenberg for Lake Co. assignments (630-725-6660). Contact Alan Anderson for Cook Co. assignments (casresearch@comcast.net or 847-390-7437).

MAY 14, 2014 – WEDNESDAY

The Grove, Glenview. Expect warblers and other passerines. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at The Grove, east side of Milwaukee Ave., just south of Lake Ave. in the second parking lot that leads to the Interpretive Center. Leader: Nancy Halliday

MAY 15, 2014 – THURSDAY

Perkins Woods. NEW TRIP! Look for warblers and other migrants. Meet at 7:30 at the corner of Ewing Avenue and Grant Streets. Park along Ewing Avenue. Leader: Jason Weckstein.



"What, me worry?" Photo by Eleonora di Liscia