

LOS OFFICERS AND BOARD MEMBERS

OFFICERS:

President: **James Smithers**
420 10th Street
Lake Charles, LA 70601
jamessmithers.js@gmail.com

Vice-President: ***Paul Schaub***
221 Mercury Road
Morgan City, LA 70380
schaubpaulcarol@yahoo.com

Secretary: **Lawrence Datnoff**
2339 Horace Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70808
ldatnoff@gmail.com

Treasurer: **Mark Pethke**
5655 Hickory Ridge Blvd
Baton Rouge, LA 70817
225-772-5677
mdpethke@gmail.com

BOARD MEMBERS:

Cheryl Huner
130 Ashland Ct, Lafayette, LA 70508; 337-962-6015;
cheryllaney@cox.net

Joan Brown
41 Hays Dr., Rayville, LA 71269; 318-355-3915;
joanhbrown47@gmail.com

Harriett Pooler
2439 Creekwood Dr., Baton Rouge, LA 70808; 225-456-3106
extremadura2439@gmail.com

Past President:

President: **David Booth**
5524 Alexander Ln., Lake Charles, LA 70605; 337-526-0837
david@boothenvironmental.com

LOS SPRING MEETING

Hackberry, Louisiana
24 -26 April 2026

Let's have a fallout at the 2026 Spring Meeting in Hackberry. LOS is offering a "No Ice Storm Guarantee" for April in Cameron Parish! We can also guarantee great speakers, field trip leaders, food, and birding locations. So drive, fly, swim, or airboat your way to Hackberry for the 79th year of LOS and pass a good time.

Our host hotel will again be the MainStay Suites Hackberry Sportsman's Lodge. A room block is available through 1 April, so book promptly to make sure you get a room at the LOS discounted rate of $96/night. Register by phone at 337-762-3128; full registration details on page four.

Meetings will take place at the "old" Hackberry Community Center (address below). Registration is $20 online at **www.losbird.org** or by mail-in form.

Events for Friday, 24 April 2026:
Hackberry Community Center

986 Main Street, Hackberry, LA 70645
(337) 762-9313

6:00 - 6:30 PM. Registration. Sandwiches provided by Brown's Grocery, compliments of Cameron Parish Tourist Commission.
6:30 PM. Welcome Members and Field Trip announcements.
6:45 - 7:30 PM. Program: "Mosquito Pesticides and Their Impacts on Prothonotary Warblers" by Jeff Roth, LSU Graduate Student and LOS Research Grant Recipient.
7:30 til… Owling with Crystal Johnson. Crystal has again volunteered to take members owling; mosquitos are lagniappe.

LOS PUBLICATIONS

LOS News

Editor: **John K. Dillon**
183 Dance Rd., Athens, LA 71003;
318-243-2284; merlin183@yahoo.com

Issue submission deadlines:
Spring: 10 February
Fall: 1 August
Winter: 1 November

Journal of Louisiana Ornithology

Editor: **Robert C. Dobbs**
105 Beechwood Dr.,
Lafayette, LA 70503
rcdobbs@gmail.com

LBRC Newsletter

Editor: temporarily vacant.

LOS WEBSITE

LOS Webmaster: **Paul E. Conover**
zoiseaux@lusfiber.net

The LOS website currently has space for photographs, field notes, identification discussions, and general messages regarding the birding activities of LOS members. Fine quality photographs are solicited for the BIRDS OF LOUISIANA webpage. For information regarding graphical submissions, please send an email.

LBRC WEBSITE

LBRC Webmaster: **Rob Dobbs**
rcdobbs@gmail.com

LOS FACEBOOK

Group name: LOS - Louisiana Ornithological Society

Facebook Administrators:
David Booth, John Dillon, Cheryl Huner, and Mark Pethke
(emails on previous page)

LOS Committee Chairs

Awards: **James Smithers**
jamessmithers.js@gmail.com
Conservation: **Elise Read**
readelise@gmail.com
Education: **Jane Patterson**
seejanebird@gmail.com
Field Trip Series: **Melissa Weaver**
melissaweaverbird@gmail.com
LBRC: **Rob Dobbs**
rcdobbs@gmail.com
Membership: **Sarah Williams**
sewbirdlos@gmail.com
Hospitality: Vacant

Friday night presentation details: Jeff will be discussing the first two years of his field work monitoring Prothonotary Warbler occupation of nest boxes around Baton Rouge. This includes preliminary results on nesting success and results from avian malaria screening on adults and nestling birds over the first two years. Then he'll cover the future direction of the project going into the third and final season.



Jeffrey Roth attended SUNY Cortland from fall 2010 through spring 2014, where he obtained a Bachelor's of Science in Biology. Following graduation, Jeffrey worked as a field biologist on projects ranging from the Bering Sea to the Cloud forests of Costa Rica. In May 2023, he graduated from Angelo State University with a Master's of Science in Biology after studying the population genetics of Bewick's Wrens in New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Currently, Jeffrey is working on his PhD dissertation at Louisiana State University examining the effects of mosquito spraying on Prothonotary Warbler reproductive success.

Events for Saturday, 25 January 2026:

Field trips: Field trip registrations will be made Friday night at the meeting. Please be sure to give your cell phone number and your eBird user name to your trip leader. Remember to top-off your fuel tank before any field trip outing! Access to any Louisiana Wildlife Management area requires a lifetime, Senior or Louisiana Sportsman's license. Yearly license is $20 or a 5-day license is $5. https://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/page/wmas-refuges-and-conservation-areas

West side-only trip - Trip Leader is LOS Vice-President Paul Schaub
Meet in the parking lot of the MainStay Suites Hackberry Sportsman's Lodge by no later than 6:45AM. We will bird several locations all on the west side of Calcasieu Ship Channel, including as much of the Sabine NWR (Blue Goose Trail, Wetland Walkway, etc.) as may be open, Peveto Woods, the Holly Beach area, Deep Bayou Road, and other locations. Bathrooms available along the route. Limited to 15 participants.

Two East side-only trips - Trip Leader is LOS President James Smithers Please meet in the parking lot of the Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge Visitor's Center (about 2 miles north of Pintail Wildlife Drive) at 7:15AM. Each group will bird the same areas at different times to avoid crowded birding. We will bird several good spots like Cameron Prairie NWR, Rockefeller Refuge, Willow Island, Broussard Beach and Rutherford Beach/Road, cross the ferry (westbound fee is $1.00 per vehicle), and bird a few locations on the West side like Holly Beach area and Peveto Woods. Limited to 15 participants.

LOS leadership also asks all members present for the meeting to submit proper documentation of any Review List species to the Louisiana Bird Records Committee as soon as possible. The LBRC webpage is http://www.losbird.org/lbrc/lbrc.htm.

Hackberry Community Center

986 Main Street, Hackberry, LA 70645
(337) 762-9313

6:00 - 6:30 PM. Registration. Dinner is $20.00/person. Dinner will be a choice of baked chicken or smoked brisket, rice dressing, cheese potatoes, green beans, dinner rolls or cornbread, and banana pudding. Drinks: Iced tea and water. If you desire a special diet meal, you are welcome to bring your own. You may also BYOB. Deadline for dinner reservation is April 15, 2026.
6:30 PM. Welcome Members and Field Trip announcements.
6:45 - 7:30 PM. Program: "Louisiana's Whooping Crane Recovery: Successes, Challenges, and How Birders Can Help" by Irvin Louque.
7:30 til… Owling with Crystal Johnson.

Saturday night presentation details: Whooping Cranes are slowly re-establishing themselves as the tallest members of the wading bird community in South Louisiana's wetlands. 2026 marks 15 years of the ongoing reintroduction project managed by Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and with help from many partners spanning captive breeding facilities, conservation nonprofits, government agencies, rice and crawfish farmers, and supportive citizens. While they're still reliant on releases of captive-raised juveniles to offset mortalities, Louisiana's Whooping Cranes have been fairly successful in raising chicks in the wild. Like our many other wading birds, Whooping Cranes use both natural marshes and agricultural wetlands. Unfortunately, this also brings them into conflict with people, especially power lines and poachers. We hope that with the support of birders and local communities acting as their voices and protectors, our Whooping Crane population will become self-sustaining long into the future.



Irvin Louque is the International Crane Foundation's Whooping Crane Outreach Coordinator in Louisiana. He's been a Louisiana birder for two decades and studied Natural Resource Conservation and Management at McNeese State University. He also attended McNeese for graduate school where he studied the distribution and abundance of map turtles in the Mermentau, Calcasieu, and Sabine rivers across Southwest Louisiana. Previously, he created and led conservation projects with the City of Lake Charles Recreation and Parks Department. In his Whooping Crane outreach work, Irvin has developed outreach materials for gun owners and hunters, sets up informational tables at festivals throughout South Louisiana, and organizes youth programs at libraries and with scouts.

FULL SPRING MEETING REGISTRATION AND LODGING DETAILS

LOS has reserved a block of rooms at the MainStay Suites Hackberry Sportsman Lodge for **$96.00/night plus taxes/fees if BOTH nights are booked**. That includes King and Double suites equipped with a kitchenette. Single night rates will be higher and not secured by LOS. Rates are subject to applicable state & local taxes. NOTE: The room block will be held until **April 1, 2026.** Register by phone at 337-762-3128. Breakfast is no longer served. *Brown's Market @ 620 Main Street opens at 5am and has a hot breakfast line.* Directions to hotel: from I-10: Take Sulphur exit 20 from I-10 to Hwy. 27/Ruth Street. Go south toward Cameron approximately 20 miles to Hackberry. In Hackberry, Hwy. 27 becomes Main Street and the Mainstay Suites Hotel is located at 700 Main Street on the right (between Ellender and Devalle).

As always, registration for the meeting may occur as late as the meeting itself, at the registration table. For planning purposes and to reduce the stress on your hard-working LOS staff, pre-registration is GREATLY appreciated.

Deadline for dinner reservation is 15 April, 2026.
Online registration link: http://losbird.org/meetings.htm
Or use the mail-in form at the end of the newsletter.

If you are rolling over your registration and fees from the 2026 Winter Meeting, you do not need to register again, but you DO need to email Mark Pethke you Saturday dinner choice.

Got some time Friday afternoon? LOS could use a little help with setting up for the weekend at the Hackberry Community Center. Contact LOS Treasurer Mark Pethke if you would be nice enough to offer your time and assistance: mdpethke@gmail.com or 225-772-5677. Much appreciated!

Please, please, please offer your thanks to all those who worked so hard to make an amazing winter 2026 meeting in Shreveport and who then had to make the responsible but extremely heartbreaking decision to cancel the meeting because of weather. In their own words, it was devastating to have to cancel. These members worked for months putting this meeting together, and they deserve our thanks and understanding. If you see them at the spring meeting, give them a pat on the back and a "thank-you."

Special thanks goes to Larry Raymond, Melissa Weaver, and Charlie Lyon in planning and orchestrating. And please also thank your LOS officers and board who, along with the others, had to make the decision to cancel.



Don't forget to visit LOS Sales online!

President's Message



Usually, I'd start my message off by talking about how much fun we had at the Winter Meeting, but unfortunately I have no meeting to speak of! Though cancelling was an extremely tough decision, we always want to do what's best for our members and attendees. After seeing what happened across north Louisiana from the winter storm, I'm glad we made the decision that we did. Regardless of whether we had the meeting or not, I still want to give a big thanks to everyone and all their hard work putting the meeting together. We had such an epic lineup of speakers and field trips. None of that would have been possible without the work of our great folks in Shreveport.

The birding has been exceptional this winter. We've had rarities all over the state, and birds are continuing to show up through February. I personally haven't turned up any rare birds in quite some time, but I sure am glad that y'all have!

I've probably said this in every newsletter in the past two years, but time is flying. It feels like spring was just a few months ago. I used to be able to remember my years based on what birds showed up that year, but now they are just blending. Birds that I thought I saw last year were two and sometimes three years ago! I'm glad that the birds at least keep me in line for what the current season is. We still have a little bit of time left this winter, and I plan on enjoying the abundance of sparrows while I can.

Spring is just around the corner. I don't know about you, but I can't wait 'til I hear my first Northern Parula singing in my backyard. Our Spring Meeting is shaping up to be a good one. We have some great speakers lined up and Cameron Parish in April is…Cameron Parish in April! It is my civic duty to remind you all that Cameron Parish can produce some of the most exciting birding in the country during spring. I consider myself very lucky to have experienced so many spring months on our coast. There is truly no place I'd rather be.

I hope to see you all in the spring, but until then…keep birding!

James Smithers

LOS President

The LOS Field Trip Series

LOS Members can sign-up for trips by sending an email request to: melissaweaverbird@gmail.com. Trip registrations will be on a first-received email basis; *Melissa will confirm your registration, so if you don't hear back then check the spelling of her email address*. The trip leader will contact you before the trip to review details. If you register and are a no-show then you will not be allowed to register in the future. Please make sure you cancel at least 24 hours *in advance so that your space may be filled by someone on the Wait List*. Also, please do not bring unregistered guests. Access to any Louisiana Wildlife Management Area (WMA) requires a Basic Hunting or Fishing License OR a WMA Access Permit. So, please ensure that you have one if your field trip visits a WMA (or want to support LDWF!): https://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/page/wmas-refuges-and-conservation-areas. Watch the LOS Website for additional offerings, changes to listed trips, or pop-up trips. If you would like to lead a LOS field trip, or suggest a destination for a field trip, then email Melissa.

Trips often fill up via email within the first 5 or 10 minutes of the opening registration date; to ensure a spot, please sign up quickly and not before the listed date and time. **Contact Melissa Weaver at melissaweaverbird@gmail.com to register.**

February 2026

Editor's note: To compensate LOS members who had planned to attend the 2026 Winter meeting in Shreveport, LOS is happy to offer several special field trips in the Shreveport-Bossier City area on 28 February.

Ford Park and Cross Lake Birding by Boat with Charlie Lyon. Shreveport, 28 February at 8:30 am. Meet at Ford Park, 5784 South Lakeshore Dr. at 8:30 am. The park is split across both sides of the street, so meet on the lake side of the park. An unlimited number of participants may bird Ford Park and follow Charlie to the nearby Yacht Club pier, where Charlie will have a scope to view birds on and near Cross Lake. At 10:30 am, Charlie will take six people on his boat for a better look at birds on the lake. If there is sufficient interest, an afternoon boat trip may also occur, also limited to six people. Email Melissa Weaver at melissaweaverbird@gmail.com to register for the boat portion of the field trip beginning at 9:00am on Feb 6. If you are not interested in birding byboat, there is no need to register; feel free to show up at Ford Park.

Red River National Wildlife Refuge with Caleb Persia, Bossier City. 28 February at 8:30 am. Join Caleb for a field trip around the trails at RRNWR along the Red River. Pick up lots of good winter species as well as some North LA targets. Be prepared in case trails are muddy. No local birder knows the refuge any better than Caleb, so be sure to take advantage if you want to see this property! Maximum participants: 12. Email Field Trip Coordinator Melissa Weaver at melissaweaverbird@gmail.com beginning Friday, February 6, at 9:00 am to reserve a spot.

Pinola Conservancy - self-guided. 28 February from 1:00pm to 3:00 pm The Pinola Conservancy, at 10451 Ellerbe Road, will be open Saturday, February 28, to LOS members and requires no registration. You may come and go as you please, but be aware that there is no signage identifying Pinola to the general public, just a nondescript mailbox with the address printed on it by the side of the road, so you may wish to take care as you navigate to the facility. There is no maximum number of participants, but you MUST register via email with Melissa Weaver no later than by 5:00pm February 26. melissaweaverbird@gmail.com See page 7 and 8 for more information about Pinola and why you should visit.

Burden Museum and Gardens with Mark Pethke and Harriett Pooler, Baton Rouge. 14 March at 6:30 am. Join Harriett and Mark for a birding field trip to Burden Museum and Gardens, 4560 Essen Lane in Baton Rouge. We'll meet at the Rural Life Museum to park, then explore some of the different habitats within

Burden's 400+ acres, right in the middle of Baton Rouge. At this time of year, a few early spring migrants are in, such as Purple Martins, Northern Parulas, and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds in addition to lingering winter migrants, including Yellow-rumped Warblers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Cedar Waxwings. Email Field Trip Coordinator Melissa Weaver at melissaweaverbird@gmail.com beginning Friday, February 6, at 9:00 am to reserve a spot. The field trip will last around 3 hours, though you are welcome to stay and continue birding. Closed toed shoes are best to wear. **Maximum participants: 10**. Email Harriett at harriett.pooler@gmail.com with any questions.

Nancy Ellington property, Pearl River. 28 March at 8:00 am. Join LOS life member Nancy Ellington and graduate student in Renewable Resources at LSU, Olivia Butler, at Nancy's residence exploring 30 acres in Pearl River. The property is a mixture of treed wetlands and pine forest. To date, 179 species have been documented at this location including Swallow-tailed Kites, migratory birds, and Louisiana's usual summer residents. Rubber boots are recommended as the trails could be slightly flooded and/or muddy depending on weather conditions in the days prior to event. There is limited parking by a metal shop at the end of the driveway at 35368 Pine St. Ext., Pearl River. Bring binoculars and spotting scopes. Nancy may be reached by email at katiebug1490@gmail.com or by phone at 985-503-0528. **Maximum participants: 10**. Feel free to contact with any questions. Sign-ups begin Sunday, March 8th at 8:00 am by emailing Melissa Weaver at melissaweaverbird@gmail.com.

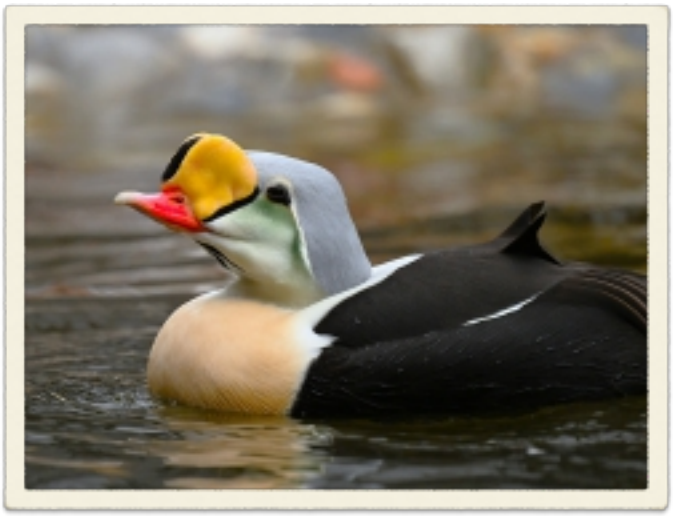
A special word about visiting Pinola Aviary

Pinola Conservancy is a private aviary containing nearly three hundred species of many families of birds from all over the earth, from the critically endangered to the common. It produces birds for zoos and other private aviaries. The facility includes enclosed free-flight community aviaries, open ponds and lawns, and focused facilities aimed at the needs of certain species.

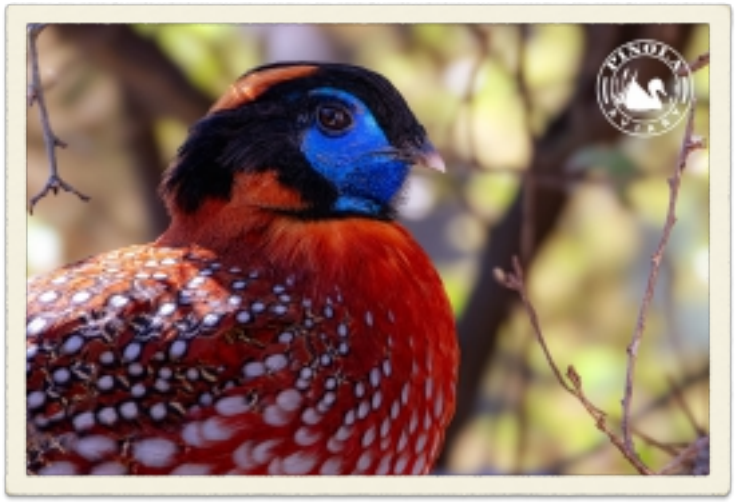
Primarily producing waterfowl, Pinola encourages each bird to reproduce and distributes its surplus to other qualified private, public and institutional aviaries and zoological parks. The aviaries contain lush natural vegetation, flowing water and ponds. A wide range of foods, nesting structures and careful species compositions assure a good quality of life for the birds kept there. Some incubate and rear their young and Pinola also collects eggs for care in its specialized incubation and rearing facilities, producing roughly 1000 young birds each year. Its purpose is the captive preservation and propagation of birds, not display, thus the facility is usually closed to the public. Take this rare opportunity to visit. This is also a rare chance to see North American waterfowl as close as you'll ever see them. Compare Snow and Ross's Geese, Lesser and Great Scaup, female Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, and others. You'll hear many of these birds vocalize and hopefully see them display for each other which is seldom possible in the wild. Prepare to spend the full two hours in complete amazement at this unbelievably impressive facility. Don't forget your camera!

Various Pinola facts: Accredited by Association of Zoos and Aquariums. 18 specially designed bird habitats and gardens. Contains 1500 birds of 261 species. The only private facility in the world to house North Island Brown Kiwi. World's largest and most diverse collection of Arctic breeding birds. Shares its species with 87 other US zoos and 11 other nations. Hosts national workshops and conferences for national and international aviculture organizations. Participates in 40 Species Survival Programs of the AZA and European AZA. See birds like the Hoopoe, Raggiana Bird of Paradise, arctic see ducks, cranes, shorebirds, songbirds, and much more.

Sample photos below, courtesy Pinola Conservancy Facebook page.











Louisiana on Verge of 500th species!

by John Dillon

If you look at the current LBRC Review List, it lists 493 species. And that's cool. But it's about to get a little cooler and a whole lot more dramatic.

The AOS recently split Yellow Warbler into Yellow Warbler and Mangrove Yellow Warbler. Louisiana already has a well-documented Mangrove Yellow Warbler on Grand Isle found during the 2017 CBC and documented into March of 2018. (https://ebird.org/checklist/S43946374)

The AOS also split Warbling Vireo into Eastern Warbling Vireo (which is what we have here) and Western Warbling Vireo. Well, guess what? We already have five records of Western Warbling Vireo, the first two of which were collected in Cameron Parish in 1987 are were classified then as *V. gilvus swainsoni* by the LSU Museum of Natural Science (https://ebird.org/checklist/S34223676). The most recent was a February 2021 individual well photographed in Baton Rouge over a period of five days. So, with the warbler and the vireo, we're at 495.

Enter the most recent additions from the LBRC, however. First, a South Polar Skua photographed by several people in August 2024 during a pelagic out of Venice (https://ebird.org/checklist/S191968478). Second and amazingly enough a Gray Gull found in 1987 for which some documentation was believed lost and which the LBRC accepted last year; this record will replace the Florida bird as the first North American record. Then, a second Gray Gull found and photographed by Dave Patton on the side of the road in Cameron Parish (https://ebird.org/checklist/S230307600). So….497.

Then comes Caleb Persia's Violet-green Swallow at Cross Lake in Shreveport with the required photos for a first state record. This bird is yet to be accepted pending a vote by the LBRC. https://ebird.org/checklist/S279593573. That puts us at 498. Excited yet? (Photo at right, courtesy Caleb Persia).



If the swallow is accepted, we will have 498 species on record for Louisiana. What will numbers 499 and 500 be, and who will get them? There are many possibilities to keep in mind. The AOS could lump two species like Canada Goose and Cackling Goose, and we'd go down one. Or they could separate current subspecies of birds Yellow-rumped Warbler into full species, and in that case, we'd go up one. I could look out my window and see a Brambling at my feeders and get 500, and then the AOS could lump Canada and Cackling, turning number 500 into 499, and then someone else could get the "new" 500. It's all very stressful, and I've had to spend too much time in Oreo therapy to deal with it. But whatever happens, the chances are farily good it's going to happen in 2026.

The Rare Birds and Where to Find Them

by Jack Rogers

Countless aspects of birding keep all of us coming back for more. Whether it be seeing a species for the first time and logging it on your life list, having your retinas scorched by the first male Scarlet Tanager of April freshly arrived on Louisiana's coast, finding friendship and personal experiences with others that share our interests, or any of the other countless birding-related experiences that fuel our dopamine-seeking brains. Finding a "rare" bird is, to me, among the most thrilling experience in this hobby. Putting your binoculars on a silhouette, the half-second gap between your eyes seeing something and your brain comprehending it, quickly followed up by a brief period of atrial fibrillation, and then a string of expletives and a fumbling for the nearest device with the ability to record audio or snap a photo. While a "rare" bird may be defined by different people in different ways, rare in this sense refers to a species that is not normally present in a given geographic area. And in the endless hunt for the next biggest adrenaline shot in birding, how can one give themselves the best chance to find the rarest birds?

Unequivocally, the best way to find rare birds is simple: go outside as much as your mental, personal, and monetary budget allows. That next state/parish/hotspot first will almost certainly not appear in your living room, approximately halfway between your couch cushions and the television screen. And, at the end of the day, wouldn't you rather be enjoying unique experiences in the outdoors than having your brain embroidered with whatever gobbledygook is being broadcast to your screen?

Now that we have established that rare birds tend to live outside, let us consider where the rare birds tend to live outside (generally always, but one of Colorado's first Black-throated Blue Warblers was found in Concourse C of the Denver International Airport…). One of my favorite and most productive ways to find rare birds is to first find the rare habitats. A quick scan through the archives of Louisiana's rare birds will show that a number of select locations tend to host rarities; the stately oaks of Peveto Woods are some of the only large and lush woody vegetation in coastal Cameron Parish, and thus a magnet for forest-preferring passerines; woodlots and roadside brush of southern Plaquemines Parish is the last glimpse of habitat for a wayward western warbler before it is met by hundreds of miles of open ocean, if our lost bird should want to consider moving south; after flying over hundreds upon hundreds of miles of forests, pastures, and agriculture, Lake Pontchartrain sure does look like a great home to a Pacific Loon or White-winged Scoter that has been blasted around by an arctic cold front. With this in mind, continue your rarity searching at every turn, but focus your efforts in areas that have the most bird diversity and/or the most birds total.

And, when pondering when a rare bird may suddenly appear consider this: what time of year is it, and what has the weather/climate been doing lately? We know from many tracking studies that weather has one of the greatest effects on predicted when and where birds move long distances; if you take nothing else from this article, at least take that you should **always bird the fronts.** Many rarities tend to appear when a given trend in seasonality and/or weather also appears; e.g., Gray Kingbirds generally appearing on the Louisiana coast in the mid-late spring when winds blow from the east, or rare waterfowl appearing on waterbodies following strong cold fronts that freeze up their more northerly ranges in the late fall or early winter. Herein lies the rub; in considering the time of year and the weather, in our search for a rarity, we must also consider the life history of the rare bird that lives in the back of our minds. Somewhere in space and time, there exists a mathematically-brained scientist that has somewhere created a model in which the probability of finding a given rarity is equal to the interaction of a slew of covariates; the big 3 being time of year, weather conditions, and species life history. However, we do not yet live in this time and place, and thus must attempt to predict and search



for rarities like a despairing sports better placing his next "surefire bet" trying to dig himself out of a deep hole.

"But dear author!" you may cry, "how can I learn when, where, and what kind of rare birds may be occurring soon?" Thankfully, in the age of the internet, there is an inconceivable amount of data, life history information, and identification at your fingertips. With resources like Birds of The World and eBird, it has never been easier to learn and see so many things about rare birds than it is today. With a simple search of a target rarity to find, one can see where it has occurred in an area historically (who knew the extreme northwestern reaches of Louisiana have had the vast majority of Smith's Longspur records?), what sort of movements the species is broadly exhibiting in a given year (is it a Green-tailed Towhee invasion year, a la 2011-2012? Are Red-legged Honeycreepers once again invading the southern reaches of the United States? Are other Gulf states rolling in Brown Noddy records this summer? Do Henslow's Sparrows prefer certain species of grass?), and what sort of habitats those rare birds tend to turn up in (you are much more likely to find Louisiana's next Red-throated Loon on a large, deep reservoir or on the coast than you are at your neighborhood retention pond)?

In considering all of these variables that are entirely out of our control, the final aspect to consider is your own knowledge. Do you know what a Green-tailed Towhee sounds like (you are much more likely to hear one before seeing it)? Do you know how to separate an as-of-yet unreported-in-Louisiana Arctic Loon from the much more expected Common Loon? How do you separate a first-year Thayer's Iceland Gull from a first-year American Herring Gull? The tough questions and identification confusion in rare-bird searching are endless. And yet, both our knowledge of and access to identification marks and audio recordings are easier than ever. Accurate and digestible knowledge exists in so many places now; field guides are better than ever, Merlin has thousands upon thousands of free audio clips to listen to for any species you can imagine, eBird's Macaulay Library has countless individuals to compare, and so many true experts exist at both a statewide and national scale (most of them will even let you go birding with them if you ask nicely!).

The final aspect of finding rarities is one that we certainly have the absolute least control over: luck (not to be confused with a lack of skill). Who could have possibly predicted that the United Kingdom's first Golden-winged Warbler would have lived in a Tesco (the British equivalent of Walmart) parking lot? Did Kathy Rhodes purposefully flatten her tire, which then caused her to pass the time waiting for its repair by walking around the Lafitte Woods, which turned into her finding Louisiana's 3rd Painted Redstart? I surely wasn't planning on finding Louisiana's second Trumpeter Swan when I took a class of LSU students to a state property to show them how to separate Ross's Geese from Snow Geese.

There is an absurd amount of plain old luck that goes into finding rare birds. Countless cold fronts and spring storms have failed to produce interesting records for me and countless other birders. And, in acknowledging this luck, certain attitudes have to be kept in mind when searching for rare birds. Not finding a rare bird every time you go birding does **not** make you a "bad" birder (if such a term exists); this is a mentality I have noticed myself take in the past and occasionally see seeping through the subconscious of other birders around me. People desperate to find their own rarities and grasping at straws or submitting questionable reports in order to think that they are somehow a "better" birder. The best birders out there are the ones that enjoy birding for what it is, share it with their community, and help protect what we have now for the birders of tomorrow.



I Learned So Much from Just One Bird; Hopefully, We All Did; Post-mortem of a Great Blue Heron.

John Dillon

I have a life blessed with many pursuits. Two chief ones are birding and teaching. I'm not sure which one has taught me more, especially when they happen to overlap.

In my sophomore honors English class this semester, I began with a lesson on cognitive biases. That's not traditional, exactly. But I try to teach kids how to think, not merely to be passive or learn rote. My goal was eventually to get the students, at 15 or 16 years old, to analyze fictional or even real-life characters based on such irrational biases. It should be quite interesting when we get to "A Streetcar Named Desire" later.

The other goal is for the students to be aware that these biases exist so they can hopefully recognize them in their lives, even within themselves. It's not easy to do. But few things worth doing are easy.

It was quite coincidental, then, while I was teaching cognitive biases to my students that hundreds of birders and nature photographers and biologists were captivated by a dark heron in Slidell and further captivated by discussion and disagreements about the bird. If the internet has proven one thing, it's that we're all biased to some degree. And honestly, I was amazed to see the continued and widespread call for a consensus about the bird (assuming that a consensus is literally an agreement and an adherence to it) while many of the same people calling for consensus were adamant that no consensus could ever possibly be reached, the bird ever remaining a mystery, baffling all experts. Shakespeare didn't exactly call bias out by name, but he did say, "Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works."

Nevertheless, I think we need to see this bird now for what it was and for what so many wanted it to be. It died of unnatural causes; even while we await the necropsy results we still are faced with that truth. Its chances of our saving it are gone and went mostly unrecognized by hundreds of well-intentioned people. So if we take our roles as conservationists seriously, I think we should have a serious discussion. Some of this may be uncomfortable. For that, I apologize. No one wants to feel like we let that bird suffer and die. No one wants to feel the guilt of hesitating because we weren't' sure. If these thoughts sting you, know that they sting me, too. I apologize and commiserate. But I won't apologize for addressing ignorance or bias; we must hold ourselves accountable because the birds can't.

Part One - Identifying a Great Blue Heron.

A former student, now 34, was visiting from Oregon for Christmas. I had taught her birding many years ago, and she was in the first group of students in my high school Nature Club back in 2007. I held up my iPhone to her with a photo of the black heron, and I showed her a video of it walking taken the day it was first found. As she looked at my busted screen measuring 2 1/4" x 5", I said, "Ignore the fact that it's black. Look at it, and tell me what it is." In about ten seconds she said, "It's a Great Blue, right?"

Quoting international bird guide and LSU MNS researcher Dan Lane, "In my interactions with birders of all stripes, I have learned that most of us have difficulty estimating size in the field. I suspect that getting close to this bird, as many seem to have done, made them assess its size as smaller than expected for a Great Blue" (LOS Facebook; comment to Erik Johnson).

When a Great Blue Heron stands with neck fully erect, it's about 4.5 feet tall. But they are only about 3 feet tall at the shoulder. I'm 6', and at 36" with a relaxed neck and head level with the shoulder, any Great Blue Heron would not reach my waist. One reason Great Blues seem so huge to us is that other herons are so small by comparison, but we seldom get close enough to any of them to get a true sense of size. An erect Little Blue Heron would only reach just above my knees. A Roseate Spoonbill actually wouldn't be much larger. Pull up at any photo of a Great Blue Heron. Look at the bill. Take your best guess how long it is. From the tip of the bill down the upper length to where the feathers start. If you could hold up a tape measure, how long do you think it would be? Peter Pyle is the leading authority on North American bird species measurements, measurements taken from multiple specimens for each species. And he cites that Great Blue Heron bill length varies from 120mm to 170mm depending on sex. That's 4 3/4" to just over 6 1/2". A Little Blue's bill is 3 inches long. A Roseate Spoonbill's bill maxes out at 7 inches. Brown Pelican bills vary from 10 - 15 inches long. All measurements are from Pyle. The bottom line is that these birds simply aren't as big as we like to think they are.



Above: Still shot from YouTube video of a zookeeper and adult Roseate Spoonbill in North Carolina. The bird is standing on his left hand. Below: Taken from maine.gov website as state biologists tag a pair of GBHEs.



Regardless of size, how were some birders able to identify the black heron correctly from photos, while others were unable to identify it even by being just a few feet away? The correct birders looked at proportions and a suite of features instead of focusing on just one field mark. They also completely ignored color because it could not be relied upon in this case.

Let's all keep in mind that the easiest field mark for GBHE isn't always size, and let's remember that size is misleading because it's relative to distance, experience, and possible land marks. The most common field mark for a GBHE is usually coloration. But when any one field mark becomes obscured, you should ideally be able to fall back on all the other field marks. That's possibly *only* when you pay attention to *all* field marks when they are *not* obscured and *all other* field marks when one or more *is* obscured.





Here's what I see in these two images. Two heronids. Ignoring the slight difference in pose, the one on the left has somewhat heavier legs, a more robust body, and a thicker and somewhat shorter neck relative to the body. The bird on the left's bill is heavy and very large from top to bottom, and I can see feathers extending nearly halfway down the lower mandible. The angle from the crown to the bill is very, very shallow. The bird on the right has a more slender neck, giving it a longer appearance relative to its body. The bill is large but not heavy looking and not very tall from top to bottom. The angle from the crown to the bill is still shallow but noticeably less shallow that the same feature on the bird on the left. Finally, I see chest plumes on the bird on the left but none on the bird on the right. Great Blue Heron to the left; Great Egret to the right.

Of the dark Great Blue, in what I believe to be the first set of photos posted of it on the LOS Facebook page on 30 December, the poster said the "consensus from other groups seems to be melanistic Little Blue Heron." Jane Patterson responded first, saying, "I think it's a melanistic Great Blue Heron. Bill is too stout for a little blue. And the overall proportions and posture favor great blue over little blue."

I commented soon after, "When you ID any bird, let alone an anomalous one, you have to have reasons for it. As Jane pointed out, the large, heavy bill and proportions support GBHE, not LBHE. And I don't believe I've ever seen chest plumes on a LBHE, but it's common on GBHE. If you brighten the photo that shows the bill at an angle, you can see feathers about halfway up the underside of the bill, which also supports GBHE. I haven't yet seen a reason someone has given for LBHE. Wouldn't be my first time being wrong, but let's keep this from an all-out guessing game"

Only a handful of others, Dan Lane most notably, also pointed out early not just that the bird was a GBHE, but why it was. Many others were reserving judgment given the conflicting reports of size, especially by those who saw the bird first hand and were adamant it could not possibly be a Great Blue Heron. Other identifications that I personally saw were melanistic Little Blue Heron, Great Blue x Little Blue hybrid, melanistic Cattle Egret, melanistic Little Blue Heron, "size of a Little Blue, Tri-color, snowy, reddish," melanistic Reddish Egret, melanistic Great Egret, Black Heron from Africa, Black Heron from a zoo, one obviously humorous comment that Merlin identified it for someone as a Magnificent Frigatebird, and one that said Merlin identified it as a Great Blue Heron. All these incorrect guesses were due to a misinterpretation of size and the reliance of size as the only possible determining factor.

My opinion was and still is that this was never a difficult ID to make. After all, it was a Great Blue Heron. Two factors complicated things. One: it was black. But as stated before, when one field mark is aberrant or unseen, you should be able to rely on other field marks. Two: dozens of people were either making wild guesses with no actual supporting evidence, or they were refuting evidence from experts with no evidence of their own. This latter concern may be an inherent, even perennial, issue of social media, but it should absolutely not be an issue of birding or ornithology, which is something I think people lost sight of. The famous sociologist Marshall McCluhan said of digital media, "Now, all the world's a sage." That was in 1967, and it accompanied his prediction that digital media would create an overflow of opinion that would pass for information. If that's not bias, I don't know what is. Social media can also create an environment that becomes an echo chamber of misinformation, even if someone has good intentions. As Van Remsen put it to me, "…when someone posts an opinion on FB, they might not necessarily be claiming it as fact — just their opinion or guess. People like to be part of the conservation. And as long as they don't claim it to be fact, I don't think that's bad. The problem is that other people then mistake opinion for fact, and from that point trouble is inevitable."

Part Two - What is Evidence?

This should be a simple, straightforward concept. Evidence is objective, consistent, duplicative, and universal. Reasons fitting that description were given for the identification of this bird, as well as reasons that it was possibly oiled or stained or at least not melanistic. Dan Lane was one of the first to point out the latter, saying on December 31, "By shape, this is a Great Blue Heron. The plumage looks like it's been stained (heavily!) by some pollutant to make it black like this. Feather edges look unnatural, suggesting that they are oil-coated or something. I wager this is a Great Blue that has suffered some sort of event leading to this unnatural color (I see a few paler feather interiors on the wings, suggesting that this is not a pigment-related coloration). Could it fly?" (LOS - Facebook).

I took his comments seriously, but I found it difficult to be certain from photos. Some were suggestive of oiling or staining. Others were enhanced to be artistic. All that I saw, though, seemed to taken more for novelty and less for documentation. In birding and conservation, anything aberrant should generally be documented first as a method of gathering objective evidence. If instead photographers make attempts at turning an aberration of nature into art *before* the aberration is explained, the attempt at art may confuse one's interpretation of the evidence.

Also keep in mind that photos themselves may be misleading because they often do not show everything necessary to establish certainty. Furthermore, if the photographer doesn't really understand what he's taking photos of and is focused solely on the novelty of the object, he is probably less likely to take photos that are

useful and more likely to take photos that are misleading to others and not just to himself, even if he has the best of intentions. Many birders believe eBird has driven us to put far too much emphasis on perfect photos and consequentilly to neglect photos that could aid in ID or merely as documentation of a species' presence. If eBird users value top 100 lists and photos rated on aesthetics or popularity instead of usefulness for others to learn more about the birds, then we should question our motives in using eBird in the first place.



(left: Photo of something normal that could be interpreted as artistic. A large plane.)

(below: Photo of something not normal that dhould strictly be interpreted as documentation and not articist - They're the same photo.)



Presentation counts, even and especially as evidence. And evidence is objective but only if you can recognize it as evidence. Art may influence bias; it as after all a subjective relationship between artist and spectator. Documentation should be objective and unbiased. That was largely missing with regard to this bird.

Part Three - Priorities.

It is not my intention to lecture. Although I admit my propensity for it, being a career educator. But I have always felt that birding is an extension of ornithology. If we take that view, then it makes sense that science's priorities extend to birding, as well. Are birding's priorities exclusively ones of science? Not at all. This is because birding itself is a hybrid activity that lies somewhere between science with its objectivity and any number of personal pursuits with their subjectivity. Among these pursuits are art, competition, travel, meditation, spirituality, love of nature, love of conservation, and a taste for knowledge. Each of these is as subjective as any other, I suppose. However, when we use the activity of birding to contribute to science or to any body of information (even Facebook), we must make our best attempts at aligning the priorities of contributing with the priorities of science, and the main priority of science has always been knowledge of the world. For example, if you submit a checklist to eBird, the observations on your list should be objective and unbiased. When you identify any species, it should be based on objective and established field marks, not on your feelings or your urge to find a rarity. On this, I hope we can all agree because we all understand that birding is based on an honor system regardless of levels of skill or experience.

Yet the finding of a single aberrant bird greatly tilted scientific priorities toward fully subjective ones. For about a week, dozens and dozens of people rushed to see this bird first-hand. Some drove from two or three states away. Hundreds if not thousands saw dozens of photographs of it online. Photos of it graced out-of-state Facebook groups on birds and birding. And at its core, this experience is something we've all done and all debated. At its core, the phenomenon of this bird was the a perfect example of listing frenzy. In other words, everyone wanted to see it, but very few actually took the time to look at it. For many, many people, the bird was an arbitrary list tick of sorts. It was a novelty and little else, a chance to say, "I saw it, too" This bird was a victim of listing for the sake only of listing, and that is what I personally find so troubling.

If we are to use the same priorities of science as a basis for birding, we will inevitably create a set of mixed priorities, objective and subjective. But if our subjective ones become higher, then it's the very definition of bias. Mixing priorities does not mean they must be relative or arbitrary in terms of order. Conservation should come first. If it doesn't, I argue that you're not really birding because you're not really contributing. That's not always bad. I have looked out my home office window with binoculars a dozen or more times while writing this just to take a moment to watch birds at my feeders. I am not keeping a list. It's enjoyment only. And I certainly wouldn't consider it conservation. My home is adorned with paintings or photographs of birds. But when I make an eBird list or count during a CBC or go see a stakeout rarity or lifer, I'm contributing information that might be used by others for conservation. I'm not solely doing those things for myself.

Largely, any idea of contribution did not happen with this bird. Popularity happened. The LOS Facebook page gained over 30 new followers during those 8 or 9 days; that normally takes at least a couple months to occur. Its uniqueness made it popular; its popularity and novelty took center stage, and it did not have to be that way. Yet when various experts spoke out, their voices were drowned out with noise. They were immediately doubted with, "But have you gone and seen the bird yourself?" which was largely if not completely a way of validating bias instead of authenticating expert opinion.

Later on December 31, a few hours after Dan Lane made his point about the bird's coloration being unnatural, I looked at several photos of the bird and used some of them in the following post I made on the LOS Facebook page, saying, "Not to burst anyone's bubble, but this bird seems more likely stained and/or oiled than melanistic. Daniel Lane also pointed this out. Look closely at how the feathers are clumped together unnaturally. If it's oil or some kind of chemical staining, I suspect the bird would be miserable and unhealthy. May account for why it seems unbothered by people. I should add this post is made of cropped shots of other people's photos in the group."

The first response was, "Have you actually seen the bird in person? It did not look oily or stained to me. I have seen oiled birds from the [Exxon] spill." And immediately after by the same photographer, "Best dye job on earth… not sure who's photos you posted but what i see in those photos is a ton of noise reduction and high contrast . That combo can make things a little off sometimes particularly when cropped. In my photo you can clearly see feather detail. I'm happy to send anyone the full [resolution] file be warned though at 64 megapixel its a huge file."

Then came all these, all on the same post of mine (in order with some misspellings corrected and names omitted):

-When a LSU bird doc says he thinks it is a melanistic GBHE and the Audubon person from our area observed it from a very close distance your opinion is wrong.

-I have not seen it in person either but the color seems much too uniform to be an oil stain. The feathers you're highlighting may just be wet. I do agree that allowing close proximity is odd. It has reportedly moved on this afternoon.

-Look at my photos on my profile one is pre dunk the other is post looks like normal wet plumage to me

-It can eat with no trouble there is video of it eating I witnessed it eat multiple minnows it walks and wades with no trouble the bird waded about 40 feet towards me then another 40 past me and another. I did not see it fly or attempt to fly but did not see any evident issues with wing placement or position

-To me the color seems too even for it to be oiled. Although I am suspicious about no one seeing it fly.

-It didn't look or smell oiled to me yesterday.

-No sheen on the water either. And was eating fine today. I got pics of minnows and crawfish. Just doing its thing.

-I spent quite a bit of time with it this afternoon and absolutely not oiled

-The birds back feathers seem normal and not oiled or stained. Its feathers from its head to chest do seem very shiny and matted. Some of my images show this. I don't know if that's because it's wet or it can't get to those feathers as easily. It seemed to move OK when walking.

-If these are your pictures I will stop telling people that everyone that has seen it in person has felt it isn't oil or dye. I really feel it isn't.

-If that bird was oiled it would have oil blotches at the least on its beak from all that preening. The coloration of the beak is comparable with the melanistic coloring of its feathers. Oil would not come off without assistance from humans. I've seen oiled birds first hand and I believe this bird is not oiled. Besides, if he got dunked in oil, which he'd be really sick or dead by now, you'd see some other color in the feathers as he's preening, like blue, white, or gray indicative of a GBHE. He's melanistic! Very pretty bird

-The experts have made this clear. Move on to the "tragedy " to push your agenda. God bless you!

-I used to work in the oil cleanup industry and I've seen many oiled birds. While I haven't seen this bird in person, it does not look oiled in these pictures. There is not a single feather that is not black. In order to get that kind of complete coverage, the bird would be Miserable and in NEED of our assistance.

-I'm going to chime in. I am an amateur birder and no expert. I drove 5 hours round trip to see this bird. I don't think it was stained or oiled. At first I thought it was acting strange by not flying when someone approached it. But then just 100 yards away was a great egret who exhibited the same feeding behavior. He was not shy at all and let me walk up to him and take his photo. Which makes me think he was a melanistic great egret.

Many of these folks had no bad intentions, but these kinds of unsubstantiated claims influence the beliefs of others, and the problem grows. These next final comments are, in my opinion, even more irresponsible.

- Guidance needed regarding sharing the location of the goth heron and disturbing the habitat minimally to document this rare phenomenon. Someone posted on [name deleted by editor] page that a cleanup of the area is scheduled for Jan10 at 10am. Can the cleanup be stopped?

Author's note: This was in response to this post: *We're hosting a trash cleanup where this bird is located if anyone is interested. The trash is really bad and we need a lot of help! Jan 10th @ 10 am.*

- So unnecessary !! I hope y'all don't plan on doing this anywhere NEAR THE BIRD for crying out loud. Yes, I am well aware of both the litter and the bird. I just cannot make sense of trying to clean it up, now, when this is where the bird has made it's home recently.. It's a little late for a clean-up operation imho. It's a great idea but really inconsiderate considering the bird's safety or overall well-being.

- I went to see this bird yesterday and yes, the area is filthy with trash. But for goodness sakes, use common sense and don't schedule a clean up while the goth Heron is in the area!! By the way, she is a beautiful bird!

My final example was written by a nature photographer in the same post in which he comments it was found dead on 5 January.

- I have been in contact with LSU's School of Natural Sciences and shared multiple images for review. Based on that correspondence, the bird appears consistent with a Great Blue Heron, and staining or environmental contamination was considered unlikely given the intact feather structure and normal behavior. I was also informed that no documented examples of melanism in Great Blue Herons could be located in the readily available scientific literature, and that no comparable case was personally known to them. While definitive confirmation would require examination in hand, the consistency of the bird's appearance and behavior over time points toward a rare genetic condition rather than an environmental cause. Encounters like this are extraordinarily uncommon. Based on current research and expert feedback, this individual bird may represent one of the very few known examples ever documented, and possibly the only one of its kind ever recorded. On National Bird Day, it is a powerful reminder that even our most familiar species can still surprise us, and that genuine mystery still exists in the natural world, often closer to home than we expect. My hope is that, although this bird is now gone, its documentation may help advance scientific understanding and contribute in some small way to what we know about these remarkable animals..

Again, "Now all the world's a sage." Notice, too, that neither Dan nor I nor any other expert (as far as I know) stated the bird was definitely oiled, but also notice how many people read it that way. Of course, when news broke and spread that the bird was dead and smelled heavily of chemicals, namely creosote, these comments stopped, andI asked on the LOS Facebook page for people to refrain from commenting or giving opinions until the necropsy could be performed and the results made public. I did see comments sympathetic to the bird pour in; however, I did not see any comments expressing apologies for errors or insults. And for the record, no members of LOS Facebook were suspended or otherwise given punitive treatment of any kind for any of the posts or comments.

You might say, "Consider the source. What else do you expect from Facebook?" Fair enough. It's not the same as an LOS meeting. And certainly not all 3800 followers are paid LOS members. I'm not claiming we can use LOS or Facebook to end bias; I'm no fool. But the benefit of hindsight itself is not a bias. It is clarity. And we need to use it. Our goal in this post-mortem should be to look at what we did wrong, admit it, and plan how to do better next time. If bias and ignorance can't be addressed front and center in a scientific

organization, public forum or not, then I'm done. LOS has been putting conservation first for nearly 80 years, and think it's appropriate and ethical to remind ourselves of that obligation. Before listing, before photography, before posting to Facebook, before rushing to see a life bird, even before membership. Again, not every single action in birding must be serious or scientific. But birding builds on scientific priorities of evidence, not popularity. And we must support that.

Part Four - Voices of concern.

Not all who posted and commented were cavalier about the bird's health and safety. After my post of 31 December (above), and among the flood of other comments were these:

-Shore bird trained wildlife rescuer here. I'm in N. LA now. Please don't put this bird through the stress of a rescue unless it's first determined that it cannot fly or eat. Rescue myopathy is a stress it may not recover from.

-I'm all… Aaron Nevill and don't know much but it seems to me that the bill makes a good case of having been oiled. It certainly seems to have the higher areas rubbed off from preening, hunting, etc. and remained darker/stained with the parts of the bill in relief/low lying areas darker. My extensive research of like… six images on Google reveal no such pattern on unoiled birds. Happy new year

-I have been bothered by these photos from the start. This is not what melanism looks like. There is something very odd going on here that is not of natural origin.

That last comment was from Paul Dickson, founder and owner of Pinola Conservancy, another expert. Notice Paul did not make a claim of what was wrong because he did not know for sure. No one actually knew (expect for the species identity), yet many still insisted on knowing. I gave this response to the one of the comments previously listed, "It may certainly be melanistic. But also, most everyone who was looking directly at the bird was also saying it was a Little Blue Heron or Reddish Egret and not heeding the experience of all the ID experts who were saying GBHE. The first rule of birding is to differentiate between knowing and guessing." As a matter of fact, the only assertions that experts made were that the bird was a Great Blue Heron, giving evidence why, and that it did not seem to be melanistic, also giving evidence why. Even after I made that clear, I was told "It's not oiled!" And I replied twice to different people, "Oiling and staining are not the same," because I never said the bird was oiled.

The most impressive voice of concern came from Sandra Akhtar on the Louisiana Birds Facebook page, who was one of the people who recovered the bird. Sandra is also an educator and was the head bird keeper at a zoo, totaling over 30 years experience working with parrots. She also worked for International Bird Rescue and Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research. After the bird died and was collected, Sandra decided to tell her very sincere, full account on 6 January. In it, she wrote,

"Pics show up last week. Oil is mentioned. Most, like myself, thought, 'It's not saturated, it's not clumpy, slimy, and matted, so must not be oiled.' But it still looked off to me somehow. I'm a low key local birder and not nearly as confident in our native birds as I am with parrots so I tried to look for opinions from others more knowledgeable than me about mutations in herons/egrets… until I could go see the bird for myself.

"I went out Friday afternoon, but couldn't find it. I did meet a nice photographer that had been out multiple times. He'd keep me posted on things and prefers to remain unnamed at this time.

"Saturday there were better pictures and videos available and it seemed more obvious to me that there was something on the bird. Due to the commotion the bird was causing, I didn't want to call it in until I saw for myself and/or had more reliable opinions from experts- not birders, photographers, or even biologists who have not worked with oiled birds before (no offense, I'm a birder, photographer, and I've worked with oiled birds and couldn't tell myself)."

When Sandra finally saw the bird two days earlier on 4 January, she wrote, "I spent over two hours with the bird watching it along the ditches. It was completely unconcerned with anyone being close to it. Not completely unheard of for these birds, but it was definitely less concerned than normal and had almost no concept of fear. I got a few zoomed in pictures of feathers/beak/legs and sent to IBRC. Bill had signs of residue with wearing off on edges consistent with oiling, an inch wide bald/matted spot all the way down the back of its neck, stiff brittle looking fringe feathers, feather splitting, lack of fear, minimal flight capabilities- all signs of contamination." The next day, the bird was found dead.

This is conservation work. This is documentation. Sandra was not excited to see this bird because it was different. She was *worried* about seeing this bird because it was different. Notice that while others were seeing a bird described as beautiful, healthy, breathtaking, and melanistic (i.e. otherwise normal), and giving it affectionate nicknames like "Rougarou" and "Goth Bird," Sandra saw what everyone else *should* have seen. This is the priority we all should have had. While others repeatedly posted that the feathers were all normal and merely wet, Sandra's observations were unbiased and detailed.

Sandra continued,

"I feel that we all failed this bird in different ways. As someone who has responded many times over the years to rescue scenarios, I've never hesitated. I've caught the bird and taken it in whatever it took, going in muck, canoes, machetes, rubber boots, pelican lice. This time I hesitated. Partly out of uncertainty on my own account, but largely due to the literal thousands of others insisting that it was not oiled because of x,y,z or so and so who knows about birds says so. I knew I didn't trust any of these opinions, no matter how well-intended they were, which is why I reached out to those who I knew would have valid insight. But still I hesitated when I knew in my heart and mind the bird was in need. I should have caught the bird Sunday morning- even though others were there and going to be mad at me. I should have called LWF earlier in the week when all I had was suspicion and 95% of the bird community were pretty adamant it wasn't oiled. These were my mistakes and I'll have to process them.

For many others, the mistake was being too excited to step back. I was excited, too and optimistic that I was wrong, but not willing to ignore the signs. I also believe that several experts may have contributed (probably unintentionally) to this mind set when their area of expertise may have been more limited than they realized. I didn't witness this personally, but saw multiple comments about this ornithologist said, or this biologist said. They may very well be highly qualified and excellent resources, but if they didn't have experience with oiled wildlife, they shouldn't have made a judgment. Or maybe their judgment was tentative, but taken as fact. I also said I believed it was oiled, but couldn't pinpoint why and could be wrong. I was very open to other possibilities. Someone could have quoted me as saying this or that as well. I did try to make it clear that I had some experience in this area, but since it was limited I would be reaching out to those that I knew were the actual experts.

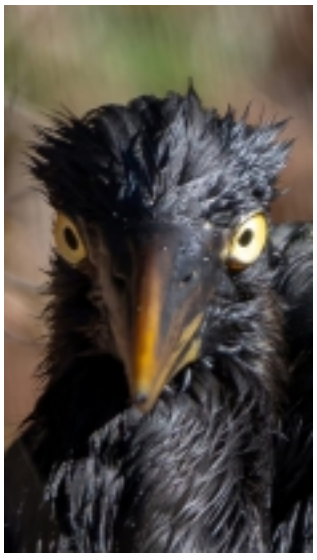
I think we are all going to learn something from this and I know we are all upset. Hopefully, we can be kind to each other and stop with the blame. We are all at fault in some way this time."

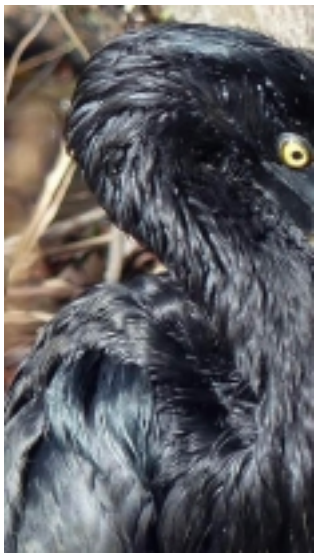
Part Five - Final thoughts.

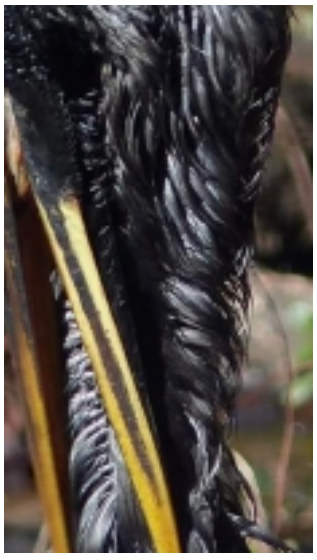
I was very angry about all of this. If I'm being completely honest, on my post to LOS Facebook of 31 December, I considered including the sentence, "This bird will probably be dead in a week." And I thought to say it only because I was growing infuriated with the reckless, biased attitudes of so many other posts and comments, however well-intentioned. I didn't say it, though, because I knew people would be furious and because my goal was not to make that worse. But exactly one week to the day, the bird was found dead. I certainly couldn't have been the only one to think that would happen. But none of us was willing to say it only because we didn't want to hear all the backlash. Even without the comment, I still had to endure flippancy from some and one accusation of having some kind of "agenda."

But why don't we have an agenda? Shouldn't we? Shouldn't we as birders or photographers or biologists have the same agenda of conservation first? Why was that meant as an insult to me? Why did Sandra Akhtar have to be afraid to comment given all her expertise and her genuine concern? We can do better. We owe that to the wildlife we love so much. We see ourselves as stewards, but this time, look what happened.

I end with this note. And it is encouragement, nothing else. Galatians 6:2 is "Bear one another's burdens." I like that. It's basically an incarnation of the Golden Rule. And I believe that if we are stewards of wildlife, then we have to bear those burdens, as well. If we focus on that, and like Sandra said, "be kind to each other and stop with the blame," then maybe next time will be different. Having the Ivory-billed Woodpecker on our logo implies conservation to me and the admission that we can do better. And we can do it still while having fun and sharing photos and meeting up. But the next time we go taking photographs, we could study the birds more closely, maybe post some bad photos as bird ID quizzes. Those of us who don't submit to eBird because it feels like a burden might recognize that there's a thin line between a community's burdens and our obligations to the same community. Maybe we start there. Poet Jane Hirshfield's poem "The Heron" offers this line, "I know that hope is the hardest love we carry." Hope itself is a burden. A heavy one in this instance. But it gets lighter when we lift it together.





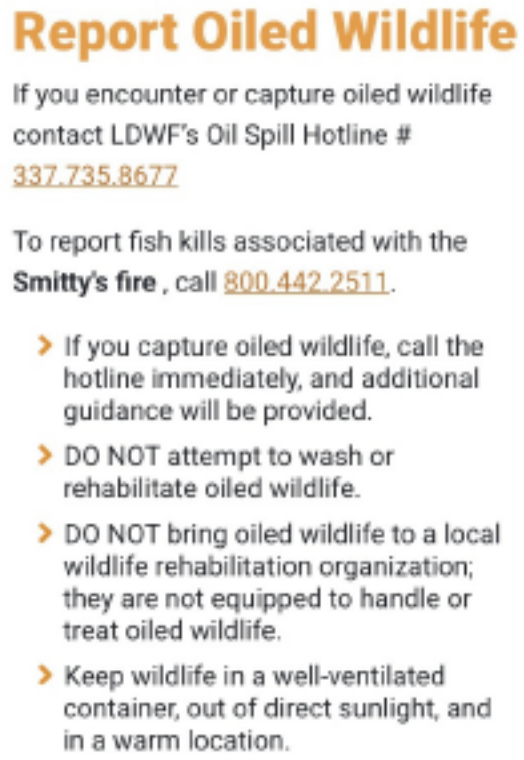


If you find or suspect oiled or otherwise contaminated wildlife:

The International Bird Rescue is based in California, but its website (https://www.birdrescue.org/contact/found-a-bird/helping-a-debilitated-bird/) has helpful instructions and contact info for anyone who has found a contaminated bird. It specifically covers Bird Flu and aquatic bird species. It also provides a link (below) to the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association website (https://www.nwrawildlife.org/page/Found_Injured_Wildlife).

I would like to thank the following people who provided assistance and feedback on this article: Sandra Akhtar, Paul Conover, Jennifer Heard, Dan Lane, Mark Pethke, and Van Remsen.





Saturday night speaker Irvin Louque has let us know that there will be a beach clean-up in Cameron Parish on 25 April, the Saturday of our Spring Meeting.

If you'd like to assist, go to Mae's Beach along Hwy 82, 4.5 miles west of Peveto Woods.

Registration is from 8:30am to 9:am. Clean-up begins at 9:00am.

2026 LOS Research Grant Recipients!!

CONGRATULATIONS to Amanda Harvey, a second year PhD student in the Mason Lab at the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science and our 2025 Cardiff/Dittmann Scholarship recipient, who has been awarded an LOS research grant of $2000.00 to support her studies of heavy metal poisoning of birds along the Mississippi River's industrial corridor. Birds experience lead poisoning at relatively low exposures, leading to neurological issues, anorexia, and, in high exposure levels, death. Since Louisiana's Mississippi River is a vital region for avifauna, serving as critical breeding, wintering and stop-over sites for millions of birds who use the Mississippi Flyway migratory corridor annually, the study will examine Red-winged Blackbirds nesting upriver, in, and downstream of the industrial corridor and compare them with prior samples to determine incidences of lead pollution in different areas and over time. The study aims to provide information about the role of the Mississippi River's flow in transporting and distributing ecotoxins throughout Louisiana's habitats, identifying specific sites of poor environmental quality that merit increased conservation efforts.

CONGRATULATIONS to Olivia Butler, an LSU graduate student pursuing an M.S. at the School of Renewable Resources, who has been awarded an LOS research grant of $2000.00 to support her studies continuing work previously conducted with Audubon Delta, using geolocators to study interactions between passerine flight height and inclement weather in the context of potential offshore wind turbine collision risks.

CONGRATULATIONS to Zhiyuan "Jerry" Su, an LSU doctoral candidate, who has been awarded an LOS research grant of $1045.00 for DNA extraction to support his research examining the consequences of hybridization between White-faced Ibis (*P. chihi*) and Glossy Ibis (*P. falcinellus*) in Louisiana. He expects to map fine-scale admixture across the genome to estimate how genetic differences are structured spatially, identify regions where introgression is occurring and determine reproductive barriers across the genome; and examine the genetic basis of the phenotypic differences observed among *P. chihi*, *P. falcinellus*, and their hybrids. The results will shed light on the evolutionary dynamics of the early phases of secondary contact and provide critical insights into the avian speciation process.

LOS Research Grant Funding

The deadline for applying for an LOS grant is January 15 of each year. Thanks to those who submitted grant funding applications this year. The LOS board will let you know results sometime soon after the spring meeting. All proposals must be based on Louisiana Birds and the study should be a situation unique to Louisiana. Priority is given to studies addressing current problems and issues in Louisiana ornithology or bird conservation in Louisiana habitats. Further Details can be found on the LOS website http://losbird.org/bulletin/grant.htm. Email your grant to Lawrence Datnoff, LOS Secretary, at ldatnoff@gmail.com.

LET'S WELCOME OUR NEWEST LOS MEMBERS!!
So glad to have you!!

Joey and Amy Bamburg, Bossier City, LA
Laiden Broadway, Princeton, LA
Anna Caldwell, Pineville, LA
Holly Eubanks, Keithville, LA
Cindy Gwin, Ferriday, LA
Katie Kamp and Ray Whitesell, Tunkhannock, PA
Mackenzie Kleinpeter and Alejandro Torres, Crawfordville, FL
Leonard Knapp, Lake Charles, LA
Beth Kramer, Lake Charles, LA
Steven Latta, Gibsonia, PA
Barbara Morris, Lake Charles, LA
Heather and Robin Richard, St. Joseph, LA
Rhodes Stipp, Shreveport, LA
Dana Teepell, Gonzales, LA
Evangeline Welch and Bob Aucone, Shreveport, LA

AND LET'S GIVE A BIG "THANK YOU!" TO OUR NEWEST LIFE MEMBERS!

Brandon and Yipin Johnson, Baton Rouge, LA

LOS MEMBERSHIP FORM
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___Sustaining - $100.00/yr.
___Life - $300.00
___Family Life - $500.00 (installment plan available)

To renew or register for memberships online visit http://losbird.org/join.php

Please add $2.00 for foreign subscriptions
Make checks payable to the "LOS" and send to:

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5655 Hickory Ridge Blvd
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Dues are payable in January of each year; please check your mailing label.

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LOS Spring 2026 Pre-registration Form - Must be received before 21 April, 2026

Name(s) _____

Address(s) _____

Email:_____

Number registering for meeting @ $20.00 per person	=	$_____
Number registering for meeting @ $5.00 per student	=	$_____
Number registering for Sat. dinner @ $30.00 per person	=	$_____
(See p. 3 for menu info)		
Meeting total	=	$_____
Additional donation	=	$_____
Dues enclosed	=	$_____
TOTAL enclosed	=	$_____

Make check payable to LOS and mail to: Mark Pethke, LOS Treasurer
5655 Hickory Ridge Blvd., Baton Rouge LA 70817 If you are rolling over your 2026 Winter registration and fees, simply email Mark your Sturday dinner choice. You need to register again.
mdpethke@gmail.com
Online registration: www.losbird.org