

Louisiana Natural Resources News

Newsletter of the Louisiana Association of Professional Biologists
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Recent Wildlife Research in the Bayou State: Gators, Ducks, Sparrows and Fire. Frank Rohwer, LSU.

Two recent papers were published dealing with 3 icons of Louisiana wildlife – namely Mottled Ducks, Alligators, and Henslow's Sparrows. Naturally we start with the duck work. Ruth Elsey, Phillip "Scooter" Trosclair, and Jeb Linscombe just published (2004 Southeastern Naturalist, 3:381-390) some surprising findings concerning Alligator consumption of Mottled Ducks. A startling 21% of gators sampled from Rockefeller Refuge in July and August had either Mottled Duck remains or the band from a Mottled Duck in their stomach. The authors note that the previous high for Mottled Duck remains in gator stomach contents was a paltry 1.3%, but they also caution that most prior Alligator diet composition work was done in the fall, well after Mottled Ducks have completed the wing molt, which is a period of



Photo by Guo-Jing Weng

flightlessness when ducks are probably vulnerable. Elsey and her collaborators also note that most studies collected Alligators from deep water, which is definitely not where Mottled Ducks spend much time.

Another surprising result of this diet study was the finding that larger gators were not eating ducks. None of the 14 gators over 2 meters in length contained Mottled Duck remains, but 6 of 16 medium sized gators (1.8 meters length) had eaten Mottled Ducks. Of the 13 gators in smaller size classes, only 3 had duck remains. Unfortunately, passage rates of Mottled Ducks are not known, so extrapolation to consumption is not possible. However, if you assume that about 25% of coastal Louisiana Alligators over 1.2 meters each ate only one Mottled Duck you are still talking about a pretty high mortality rate for Mottled Ducks. Stay tuned, Ruth and her colleagues have work planned to look at gator food habits during the Mottled Duck brood period – April to June.



Photo by Erik Johnson

Henslow's Sparrows, the focus of the second feature article, are probably a lot less well known to most LAPB members than are gators or ducks. Henslow's Sparrows are winter residents of the grasslands that occur in longleaf pine ecosystems in the southeastern US. Much recent work has suggested that growing season fire is the most effective way to maintain longleaf pine savannahs. Catherine Bechtoldt and Phil Stouffer recently reported (2005 Wilson Bulletin 117:211-225) on Henslow's Sparrow wintering at 8 sites in the Florida parishes that had all been managed with fire, but had a range of burn histories. The abundance of these rare birds was far greater (2.6 birds/ha.) on sites burned during the preceding summer than for sites burned 1.5 years (1.0/ha.) or 2.5 years (0.8/ha.) earlier. The sites burned over 3 years earlier had practically no Henslow's Sparrows. Sites

recently burned had low vegetation density at the ground and high seed abundance, both attributes preferred by the sparrows.

The researchers also radio-tagged 27 sparrows, but did not find that home range size was related to time since burning. Home range size ranged from 0.09 to 1.5 ha, but averaged 0.30 ha – about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre. These home ranges appeared to be stable during the winter period. Banding and recaptures showed that most birds remained near where they were first captured, and the two birds captured in subsequent years were on the same wildlife management unit.

The take home message – Henslow's Sparrows strongly prefer recently burned savannahs as wintering sites.

**Problems at the Chase Lake American White Pelican Breeding Colony.
Matt Pieron, LSU.**



American White Pelicans at Cameron Parish (Photo by Frank Rohwer)

After recently moving to Louisiana to begin graduate work at LSU, one thing that reminded me of my previous home in North Dakota was the abundance of American White Pelicans I encountered on fishing trips to the coastal marshes. My home in North Dakota was less than ten miles from the largest White Pelican breeding colony in North America, Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Banding studies and satellite transmitter data suggest that most birds from Chase Lake spend their winters in the Gulf States, especially Louisiana. Seems the pelicans and I had ended up in the same place to ride out the colder months. No doubt these birds have caught the eye of most Louisiana sportsman in the marsh; it's hard to miss a twenty pound white bird with a 9 foot wing span and a bill the size of a skate board. I was curious however, as to how many folks down this way were aware of the perplexing turn of events that have taken place where many of these birds nest, over 1500 miles to the north.

In 1908, President Roosevelt set aside Chase Lake as a National Wildlife Refuge, after the Pelican breeding colony, as a result of uncontrolled shooting, declined from 500 to 50 birds in a three year period. Since that time, the pelicans have flourished at the refuge. Increasing at a rate of over three percent annually from 1966, the population reached a peak of over 35,000 breeding adults in 2000. Traditionally, the pelicans nested exclusively on islands in the middle of the nearly 2000 acre lake. High water, brought on by extreme rain and snow events in the nineties, flooded some of these islands. Expanded populations along with less island habitat contributed to adults beginning to nest on mainland peninsulas on the lake. The twentieth century had been good to the pelicans at Chase Lake.

In the summer of 2002, the colony's health came into question. Researchers with the National Wildlife Research Center at Mississippi State University, who were conducting a banding study aiming to link White Pelican productivity on the breeding grounds to abundances on catfish farms in the south, began to notice dead chicks at the colony. The Wildlife Health Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin confirmed that these deaths were the result of West Nile Virus. The summer of 2003 brought more of the same for the colony, as more pre-fledge chicks were confirmed to have died from West Nile. There was not a cause for major concern yet, as many young still fledged successfully in these years.



Nesting Pelicans at the Chase Lake Colony (Photo by Tom Pabian, USFWS)

In the spring of 2004 Chase Lake Refuge personnel and researchers from the U.S.G.S. Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center began to notice unusual behavior by the birds on the colony. Adults were abnormally skittish, and began to desert active nests on the mainland peninsula. By mid-May all nests on the peninsula had been abandoned. Adults were still tending active nests and brooding chicks on the islands. Then over a cold wet Memorial Day weekend, they too abandoned the Refuge, leaving their chicks behind. It is not possible that adults were abandoning chicks because of West Nile, because the mosquitoes that carry the disease had not yet emerged. There was a new problem, but what was it?

The pelicans at Chase Lake, or the lack there of, became quite the news story, both in rural North Dakota and internationally. The phone rang off the hook at the office with reporters from around the world wanting to know what had caused this mass exodus. Ultimately many possibilities were brought forth, including human disturbance, harassment by coyotes, unusually cold and harsh weather, disturbance by crop dusting planes, among others, but it was impossible to say what had caused their abandonment.

In 2005, no pelicans even attempted to nest on the mainland peninsula, but adults did settle and nest on the islands. This seemed to be a step in the right direction. Then, in mid-June there was a mass die-off of juveniles on the north island, and around the fourth of July the same fate came to the juveniles on the south island. Again, these events were both prior to the emergence of West Nile carrying mosquitoes, so that wasn't the problem. For a second year biologists and managers were left scratching their heads as to what was happening at the colony.

This January researchers, biologists, and managers came together to discuss what is known about the continental status of the AWPE population, and where to go from here. Representatives from about a dozen organizations from the U.S. and Canada attended the conference. One goal of the conference was to determine who is conducting any ongoing AWPE research, and to foster interaction and information sharing between such groups. It is important to determine whether what is going on at Chase Lake is an anomaly, or if other colonies are experiencing similar circumstances. Mass exodus from a breeding colony has been documented at Pyramid Lake in Nevada, and was determined to be a result of food supply. Pelicans at Chase Lake fly up to hundreds of miles to feed, which makes determining food preferences or limitations for the colony difficult. West Nile die-offs have been confirmed at other colonies, but researchers are unsure how serious this problem really is, and West Nile only seems to be a problem for juveniles, not adults. The group recommended population surveillance and monitoring at the 53 known White Pelican breeding colonies in the U.S. and Canada. This is lofty and expensive goal, in light of the scale of such an endeavor.

For now, the good news is that White Pelicans are long-lived birds, with many years of reproductive potential, so the set backs faced by the Chase Lake colony are a mere snapshot in the big picture of their reproductive lives. I'll be leaving Louisiana and heading back to North Dakota this spring to continue my research on waterfowl in the prairies. The pelicans will be making the same trip; what they'll do when they get there....we'll have to wait and see.

Atchafalaya Basin Birding Project. Jay Huner, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

A three year survey of the birds of the Atchafalaya Basin was completed in June 2004. Funded by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (LDNR) under the Atchafalaya Basin Program, the project was organized and coordinated by Bill Fontenot while I acted as the director. The purposes of the study were to 1) assess the composition and seasonal status of the Basin's bird community and 2) determine the best potential bird-watching sites contained therein. The overall objective of the study was the provision of accurate baseline data to be utilized in producing an Atchafalaya Basin Birding Trail guidebook. Secondly, the data provide a foundation from which additional bird research projects might be launched.

A number of field ornithologists participated in the project and provided data that we utilized to produce the final report to LDNR. Over 260 species of birds, about 60% of the state's avian fauna, were recorded from an area that represents less than 3% of the state's total "land" mass. The bulk of the survey work was done in areas that are accessible by land, as most visitors to the area do not have access to water craft to take them into the recesses of the Basin.



Photo by Frank Rohwer

Birding sites of interest with public access are highlighted in the final report. These locations include sites both within and outside the current levee system. Sites and approximate locations include:



Photo by Frank Rohwer

Cotton Road, St. Mary Parish near Patterson;
University of Louisiana at Lafayette Experimental Farm, St. Martin Parish near St. Martinville;
Lake Martin, St. Martin/Lafayette parishes near Breaux Bridge;
Lake Fausse Point State Park, Iberia Parish near Coteau Holmes;
Brownell Park, St. Martin Parish near Morgan City;
Lake End Park, St. Mary Parish “in” Morgan City;
Atchafalaya Welcome Center, St. Martin Parish at Butte LaRose;
Sherburne Wildlife Management Area/Bayou des Ourses Natural Area/Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge, Point Coupee and Iberville Parishes west of Ramah and east of Butte LaRose;
Indian Bayou Natural Area, St. Landry and St. Martin Parishes north of Butte LaRose and south of Krotz Springs;
South Farm Complex, Iberville Parish near Ramah;
Morganza Spillway/Forebay, Point Coupee Parish north of New Roads;
Spanish Lake, St. Martin and Iberia Parishes north of New Iberia;
Stephensville Road, St. Martin Parish beginning in and running east of Stephensville;
“Charenton Beach”, St. Mary Parish due east of Charenton;
Bayou Teche National Wildlife Refuge, St. Mary Parish with 5 units near New Iberia;
Morgan City Walking Trails, St. Mary Parish in Morgan City;
Berwick Walking Trails, St. Mary Parish within Berwick;
Catahoula/Bayou Benoit Landing Area, St. Martin Parish near Catahoula;
Spring Bayou Wildlife Management Area, Avoyelles Parish east of Marksville;
Pomme de Terre Wildlife Management Area, Avoyelles Parish near Marksville;
Grassy Lake Wildlife Management Area, Avoyelles Parish near Marksville; and
Lake Ophelia National Wildlife Refuge, Avoyelles Parish near Marksville.

LAPB PARTICIPATION IN THE LWF RESOLUTION PROCESS. Paul Whitehead and Larry Reynolds, LDWF.

A primary purpose of the Louisiana Wildlife Federation (LWF) is to ensure that natural resource conservation policy and the laws and regulations that establish and implement that policy are fair, based on sound science and, most importantly, serve to sustain natural resources over the long term at optimum levels of productivity and abundance. In carrying out that purpose, LWF acts to influence decisions on natural resource and conservation issues, serves as a watchdog over various government bodies and private enterprises whose actions affect natural resources and the quality of the environment, and informs the public of issues through its quarterly magazine, press releases, and testimony before legislative bodies.

LWF action is essentially directed by the conservation policy resolutions adopted by the delegates to its annual convention. These resolutions are submitted by LWF affiliates and board members. The LWF has issued a notice soliciting resolutions for its '06 convention (Mar. 3-5 in Alexandria) by the deadline of Jan. 27th. Resolutions must be in a standard form with a subject or title followed by a number of "whereas" statements providing rationale and justification for the final "resolve" statement/s. A resolution does not state specific action or strategy for the LWF to take in implementing the resolution, but expresses a position on conservation policy or urges specific action to be taken to address a conservation issue.

LWF Executive Director Randy Lanctot is available to provide assistance in drafting resolutions. Resolutions are assigned by subject matter to the pertinent convention conservation committee where they will be initially discussed and debated. Two to four weeks prior to the annual convention, the resolutions that have been submitted are sent to all LWF affiliate organizations and directors for review. At the LWF annual convention, resolutions are heard in committee, discussed, modified, and then either passed or rejected. Approved resolutions are submitted to the General Assembly of Delegates for final consideration the following morning. As a "Flat Rate" Affiliate, the LAPB delegate or alternate may cast one vote on each resolution in each committee and in the General Assembly.

Resolutions that the LWF adopts are implemented in various ways. Some require legislation, some require action of the executive branch of government or by rulemaking bodies, some provide input to other decision-making processes, some show appreciation and support to encourage the continuation of good work or policy. An implementation strategy is developed for each resolution adopted in collaboration with the resolution sponsor. The opportunity and role of the LAPB in participating in the Federation's resolutions process is to help insure that the position finally adopted is informed by sound biological science and natural resource management principles. It also allows LAPB to be involved in an

advocacy process affecting laws and rules that, because many LAPB members are employed by government, we are not able to do collectively or individually. LWF welcomes input from Louisiana's professional biologists and natural resource managers in developing concepts and policies to advance natural resource conservation and environmental quality in our state through the annual resolutions process.

The recently concluded LWF Convention included 3 resolutions from LAPB that passed unanimously. It was great to see our growing participation and the response we received when crafting/editing the resolutions. However, according to our bylaws, that is not the final action required of our Association. Approved resolutions are to be sent to The Wildlife Society, the Southeast Section President, and the Southeast Section Representative within 15 days. Furthermore, our Association's statements shall conform to The Wildlife Society's policy regarding conservation affairs, and thus we cannot issue statements in conflict of that policy without permission of The Society's Council. As President, I did not confirm the latter, but I'm confident our resolutions were consistent with Society policy. I want to encourage use of this resolution mechanism to publicize our concerns and hopefully influence the concerns of other participants with sound scientific and biological information.

SUMMARY OF 2006 LWF RESOLUTIONS

Twenty resolutions were submitted for consideration at the 2006 meeting of the Louisiana Wildlife Federation. Resolutions from the LWF Convention and their fate in the General Assembly of Delegates are summarized as follows:

1A Hunting Carts On Wildlife Management Areas – Failed in committee.

2A Physically Challenged Waterfowl Hunting Areas On Wildlife Management Areas – Urges the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) to develop sites on Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) throughout the state to provide waterfowl hunting opportunities to physically challenged hunters. Amended in committee to change "physically challenged" to "wheelchair bound". Passed unanimously.

3A Enhanced Penalties For Certain Hunting Law Violations – Urges consideration of increasing penalties for hunting from a moving vehicle, hunting from public roads, and hunting during illegal hours. Amended in committee to change "deer hunting" to "hunting in general" and change the request from an increase to Class 7 violations to Class 4 violations. Passed unanimously.

4B Preserving The Swamp Forest Character Of The Lower Atchafalaya Basin Floodway – Urges prioritizing stands of trees in the Basin and acquiring timber rights from private landowners on a willing seller basis. Passed unanimously.

5B Restoring Natural Features Of The Coast To Enhance Hurricane Protection In The Pontchartrain Basin – Urges several government agencies to integrate the Pontchartrain Coastal Lines of Defense plan into future coastal restoration and hurricane protection efforts. Passed unanimously.

6B Compliance With Standard Specifications For Roads And Bridges To Prevent Pollution And Siltation Of Waterways – Urges adequate monitoring to insure compliance with existing regulations on highway projects. Amended in committee to urge aggressive prosecution of violations. Passed unanimously.

7C Restocking Program For The Tributaries Of Lake Maurepas – Urges LDWF extensively restock fish in tributaries of Lake Maurepas. Passed with one vote against and one abstention.

8C Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management – Urges the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission (LWFC) to modify proposed regulatory changes to take into account majority angler preferences where resource conservation is not an issue. Passed unanimously.

9D Expansion Of The Boundaries Of The Barataria Preserve Unit Of The Jean Lafitte National Historical Park – Urges support of the “Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve Boundary Adjustment Act” (HR 1515). Passed unanimously.

10D Joint Application Of Cost-Share Incentives For Restoration Of Longleaf And Other Forest Ecosystems – Urges modification of state law to allow the State Forester to share costs of eligible tree planting practices with other agencies, as long as doing so will not increase the cost of the state’s forestry incentive/tree planting programs. Passed unanimously.

11D Louisiana Prescribed Fire Council – Endorses development of a Louisiana Prescribed Fire Council. Passed unanimously.

12D Louisiana Native Plant Initiative – Supports and recommends expansion of the Louisiana Native Plant Initiative. Passed unanimously.

13D McElroy Swamp Restoration – Urges LDWF and DOTD to restore the natural hydrology to restore the McElroy Swamp watershed. Passed unanimously.

14D Forest Stewardship Council Certification – Urges Weyerhaeuser Company, Plum Creek Timber Company, and Kisatchie National Forest to qualify and apply for certification. Passed unanimously.

15E Support For Increased Funding Of The Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection And Restoration Act – Expresses support for increased funding of the CWPPRA. Passed unanimously.

16E Lifetime Hunting And Fishing License – Requests study of the feasibility of continuing the lifetime hunting and fishing license program with respect to financial needs of LDWF. Passed unanimously.

17E Evaluation Of The Suitability For Inclusion Of Drake's Creek (Vernon Parish) In The Louisiana Natural & Scenic Streams System – Requests evaluation of Drake's Creek for potential designation as a scenic stream. Passed unanimously after amending.

18E Protecting The Threatened Pearlshell Mussel Under The Endangered Species Act – This was, by far, the most contentious resolution. Basically, it urges the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to update and implement the recovery plan for this species. Additional funding is also requested to accomplish this. After extensive revision, it was passed with one abstention.

19D (Late) Comprehensive Habitat Management Plan For The Ponchartrain Basin – Supports the conservation goals of the Comprehensive Habitat Management Plan for the Ponchartrain Basin and urges cooperation to achieve these goals. Passed unanimously.

20A (Late) Bobcat Conservation And Harvest Regulations – Urges the LWFC to withdraw the recommendation to expand the hunting season to year long instead of the current season which runs concurrently with deer season. The original resolution also requested withdrawal of the proposed increase in the limit from one to two animals per hunter, but was amended to remove this request. Passed unanimously.

29th Annual Southeast Deer Study Group Meeting Held in Baton Rouge. Scott Durham, LDWF.

The 29th Annual Southeast Deer Study Group Meeting, held February 26th through the 28th was a huge success, with 364 attendees. After welcoming remarks from LDWF Secretary Dwight Landreneau, The American Sportsmen Against Poachers and the Quality Deer Management Association provided an all you could eat boiled crawfish and jambalaya dinner, with the South Louisiana QDMA Chapter doing the boiling.



Photo by James C. Davis

The following 2 days included 37 deer management and research technical presentations from biologists and students from South Carolina to Texas to Minnesota. These presentations represent the cutting edge of the deer world. One goal of the meeting was to provide the latest scientific information to managers and enhance their abilities to better manage resources.

A lively “shoot from the hip” session was held Monday night where everyone was able to ask questions and voice their opinions. It was evident that not everyone had the same opinions on several issues. High fences, antler restrictions, deer aging techniques, and population indices are still topics of great interest and debate.



The Louisiana Association of Professional Biologists funded 2 student travel awards to the meeting. The recipients of these awards were Heather Green from McNeese State University and Elizabeth Moore from Northwestern State University. The LAPB also presented cash awards of \$300 to Gino D’Angelo from UGA, and \$200 to John Rohm for their first and second place presentation awards, respectively.

Bill Armstrong from Texas receives the Career Achievement Award from the Southeast Deer Study Group. (Photo by James C. Davis)

Thanks go out to all the LDWF employees and many others that helped make the event such a success. Thanks also to James C. Davis who captured the event on camera. The 2007 meeting will be in Ocean City, Maryland. Copies of the meeting abstract book can be obtained from the Deer Section, LDWF.