

# The Pine Warbler



February 2009

Vol.29, No.2

East Texas Nature

## Who Goes There? by Diane Cabiness, Texas Master Naturalist

*"In all things of nature there is something  
of the marvelous" -Aristotle*

Stories can teach strength of character, as in this fable from the Cherokees of western North Carolina. One of these fables, told by Kathi Smith Littlejoy, describes how the opossum lost its tail.

"Back many years ago, the opossum had a very beautiful tail, but he loved his tail too much, not noticing that other animals had tails just as beautiful. The other animals didn't like how the opossum acted, so they decided to get rid of this tail. The opossum was chosen to be the lead dancer at the next dance, so he went to the cricket to get his tail made more beautiful. The cricket started to comb the opossum's tail, and the opossum fell asleep. As the opossum slept, the cricket shaved his tail and put a big bow on the end of it, telling the opossum to remove the bow at the dance, and the tail would be beautifully done. When the opossum started dancing, he removed the bow, and all the other animals laughed at what was now a very ugly tail. The opossum was so embarrassed that he rolled over and played dead."

This tale on the dangers of conceit introduces us to an unappreciated mammal the Virginia Opossum, *Didelphis Virginiana*. In reality opossums as you know are not saddled with the human non-virtue of conceit. But they are stuck with a tail that does not attract oohs and aahs.

You are probably asking well what are they good for if they do not have attractive bodily features? I am glad you asked that question about this more or less solitary critter.

"Opossums are sometimes referred to as the sanitation engineers of the forest. They help to keep the environment clean by consuming carrion and all kinds of bugs, including roaches. They help gardeners by consuming snails, slugs, and other destructive creatures." ([www.flex.net.com](http://www.flex.net.com)) They also eat over ripe fruit before it rots and catch and eat rats. These omnivores also consume mice, birds, insects, crustaceans, frogs, snakes, and vegetables.

Opossums are home on the ground or in a tree, although they prefer a forested habitat. These marsupials are active year-round at night. They give birth to tiny, undeveloped young and are in their mother's wombs for less than 2 weeks. The newborn opossums crawl from the birth canal to the mother's pouch, where they fasten tight to a nipple. The young

*cont. on page 3*

## February Presentation Pencil, Paintbrush and Pixels Presented by Suzanne Chapman

Members of the Piney Woods Wildlife Society will learn about "Pencil, Paintbrush and Pixels" at their February 17 meeting at 7:30 p.m. at Mercer Arboretum. Horticulturist Suzanne Chapman of Mercer Arboretum and Botanic Gardens will present a program of photographs of flowers and landscapes all taken with a "point and shoot" digital camera.

Suzanne will discuss a number of guidelines to help improve composition for a photo or a sketch, such as how to frame a scene to make it pleasing to the eye. Even the colors of nature can be harmonious or shocking. Suzanne will give tips on what to leave in and what to omit as well as showing examples of photos taken from various angles to make pictures more exciting.

Suzanne started her art career as a child by sketching in the margins of her schoolbooks. More recently, she has joined the Watercolor Art Society of Houston and the Art League of Houston to learn watercolor techniques from talented teachers.

The February 17 meeting will be opened at 7:30 p.m. by President Al Barr at the Mercer Arboretum and Botanic Gardens located at 22306 Aldine Westfield. There is no charge and the public is welcome. Visit [www.pineywoodswildlifesociety.org](http://www.pineywoodswildlifesociety.org). for more information.

<b>Date:</b> February 17	
<b>Time:</b> Social 7:00 p.m. Meeting 7:30 p.m.	
<b>Place:</b> Mercer Arboretum 22307 Aldine-Westfield	



Many are the stars I see,  
but in my eye no star like thee.





## The Power and the Beauty of Nature

This waterfall is historical and nostalgic to many Costa Ricans and foreigners that have stopped for a few minutes to marvel at the power and beauty of nature. I took this picture accompanied by my wife December 17, 2008. As the many times before, it was like walking into a church and having a spiritual moment.

On January 8, 2009 around 1:42 p.m. a 6.2 earthquake destroyed this waterfall and the lives of close to 100 people, some still buried under the landslides produced by another force of nature that lasted 20 seconds. Anybody that has experienced an earthquake knows 20 seconds is an eternity. The small coffee shop with a balcony where the owners allowed us to take these bird and waterfall pictures is no longer there. The shop is in pieces about 1000 feet at the bottom of the canyon. Those birds were photographed from this balcony while feasting on fruit provided by the owners of the coffee shop.



© Carlos Hernandez

*Red-headed Barbet (male)*

The earthquake affected hard working people. The town La Cinchona near the waterfall had 90 percent of the houses destroyed. Those were hard working farmers and they lost everything.

If PWWS wants to help with a small amount as a token of ap-

preciation for the happiness that such place brought to us, it will be appreciated by the people of Costa Rica.

Contributions can be made directly to The Costa Rican bank designated to collect at:

**Account holder: Banco de Costa Rica**  
**Account #: 001-250-0**  
**SWIFT CODE: BCRICRSJ**  
**Phone # 2287-9044**  
**Fax # 2255-0221**  
**Bank address: Ave 0 y 2, Calles 4 y 6**  
**San Jose**  
**Under remarks: Help for victims of the January 8, 2009.**

- submitted by Carlos Hernandez



© Carlos Hernandez

*Emerald Toucanet*



© Carlos Hernandez

*Silver-throated Tanager*

## January Field Trip Paul Rushing Park

### February 21st Field Trip - Paul Rushing Park Area

Join Pineywoods for a trip around the prairie. We will be looking for wintering ducks, sparrows and raptors. We will meet at Paul Rushing Park at 8 a.m on February 21st in the parking lot and then walk to the new Chain of Lakes at the park and see what we can find.

The park requires lots of walking to get from one lake to the next, but the paths are paved or cross water on boardwalks. When we finish, we will have walked about two miles. After the park, we will drive down Sharp Road to the Katy Prairie Conservancy boardwalk where there are benches and we can have lunch. In the afternoon, we will check areas that are good for wintering sparrows and raptors.

Temperatures tend to be several degrees cooler there than the Houston suburbs so have warm clothes with you. Bring rain gear, lunch and plenty of water. There are no stores or restaurants nearby. Besides binoculars and camera, you may want a scope for the lakes.

**Directions:** From Houston, go west on Highway 290 to Katy-Hockley Road. Take that exit and go under the freeway going south on Katy-Hockley for about 8.5 miles. Turn right on Katy-Hockley Road. The park will be on your left. At the park, the road splits. Katy-Hockley Cut Off continues south while Katy-Hockley Road turns right. You will need to turn right on Katy-Hockley Road to the parking lot. This trip will let us see the work that Precinct 3 has been doing to provide habitat for waterfowl and preserve the prairie.

- submitted by Jennifer Backo

## Spring Creek Christmas Bird Count 2008

This was the 23<sup>rd</sup> year for the Spring Creek Christmas Bird Count. We had clouds and intermittent rain most of the day. A front blew in about 2:30 in the afternoon, and some of the counters got soaked by a brief thunderstorm. We had a great turnout with 34 of us trying to scare up the uncooperative birds. We counted a total of 96 species with three species that had not been seen on the count before.

We had 6 Ross's Geese, one Black-crowned Night-Heron, and two Roseate Spoonbills as new birds to the count. In almost all cases the maximum numbers of individual species this year were less than those counted in previous years. Out of the 96 species, only seven species were greater than those counted in previous years. We counted a total of 5,888 individuals.

To put this in perspective, of the species seen this count, 27 of those species had numbers of more than 200 individuals in previous counts and five species had previous counts of more than 1000 individuals. The largest number of individuals of one species seen on this count was 1594 Snow Geese; the next largest number of species was Red-winged Blackbirds with 294 individuals. We had 47 species with 10 or less individuals this year.

The four groups had the following numbers of species. The Hooks Airport group led by Jennifer Backo had 66 species. The Woodlands group led by David Henderson, had a total of 65 species. The Jones Forest group led by Bill Saulmon had 50 species, and the Mercer group led by Al Barr had 48 species.

Thank you to all those who participated in the count this year.

*opossum from page 1*

stay there, attached to the nipple up to 2 months. A female opossum usually has 13 nipples and litters generally are smaller than that, but a baby that cannot attach to a nipple dies.

"Shortly after a young one begins to nurse, the nipple swells and completely fills its mouth, thereby firmly attaching it to its mother. It remains attached until it is about 7 weeks of age, at which time it has grown large enough to detach itself."  
([www.nsrl.ttu.edu.com](http://www.nsrl.ttu.edu.com))

The Virginia Opossum is noted for its reaction to threats, which is to feign death. This critter will enter a near coma if sufficiently frightened, which can last up to four hours. Playing possum seems to be quite involuntary on the part of the opossum. It lies on its side, mouth and eyes open, tongue hanging out, emitting both a green fluid from its anus and an odor putrid to most predators. On the whole this kind of behavior discourages most predators.

If you can get past their dull grayish brown coats, their long, hairless, prehensile tails (which can be used to grab branches and carry small objects), their hairless ears, that long, flat nose and all 50 teeth when being snarled at, you might just find them as charming as I did recently. This past December when the weather brought us some unexpected snow, I came home that afternoon to find a young opossum eating the sunflower seeds that had been left by the birds in the bird feeder. It was a tight fit. It even let me get close and snap a few pictures but wisely he or she kept its eye on me. After the seeds were gobbled down the little opossum soon fell asleep while on the feeder. Maybe like me you would have found yourself saying, "Oh isn't it cute!"

*"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart."* -Helen Keller, author, activist and lecturer



Please share your nature experiences with me at [dianecabinessplants@consolidated.net](mailto:dianecabinessplants@consolidated.net)



## Heart Happenings

The Galveston County Daily News published an article on January 3 that I felt compelled to write addressing the ques-

tion "Will the turtles return to nest on the upper Texas coast in spite of Hurricane Ike?"

After Christmas and New Year's celebrations are past, we look toward to spring. For some of us, one of the most exciting events each year is the return of nesting sea turtles to the upper Texas coast. Last year was especially memorable with the endangered Kemp's ridleys leaving six nests of eggs on Bolivar Peninsula, six more on Galveston Island and a total of 195 on the Texas coast breaking all previous records.

Things are different this winter. Hurricane Ike was devastating not only to Texas residents but to the beaches where they lived. Tons of sand were washed and blown away leaving hard clay behind. Government agencies including Galveston County, Corps of Engineers, Texas General Land Office and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department are evaluating beaches and preparing to restore sand in order to attract tourists and residents, and, yes, the sea turtles. Although some people may not care about the nestings, many do and have a number of vital questions. Will the sea turtles return? Will enough sand be moved in time and will it be the right kind of sand? What about the debris that may still be floating about in the Gulf? Yes, sea turtles have maneuvered in the Gulf of Mexico for centuries but did they have to face kitchen appliances and tons of lumber floating along with them?

Dr. Andre M. Landry, Jr., of Texas A&M University of Galveston points out the importance of renourishing beaches "whose integrity must provide favorable nesting habitat, a buffer from storm related events and a source of revenue through tourism and ecotourism to support communities like Galveston and Bolivar."

When marine debris is present, the shrimp industry is quick to ask for a waiver from the use of turtle excluder devices (TEDs) which makes sea turtles even more vulnerable to a shrimper who chooses to break the law by disabling the TED. This is another hazard resulting from Hurricane Ike.

There is much to do before spring and the time for sea turtles to reappear. The rehabilitation building and water supply to the sea turtle facility at the Galveston Laboratory of National Marine Fisheries Service was heavily damaged in the storm and needs immediate repair. At present, injured or ill sea turtles are taken to the University of Texas Marine Science Institute at Port Aransas, already crowded with sea creatures of all kinds needing help. Galveston needs its own facility repaired and standing ready for spring.

At this point, we can only hope that man, assisted by Mother

Nature, will restore the sand that Hurricane Ike removed in time for the arrival of the sea turtles. It has been a miracle that they visited our beaches in the past and it will be a greater one if they return this spring.

## With the Rolling Stones!



The Rolling Stones family visited the World Birding Center near Mission the week after Christmas. A side trip to Boca Chica Beach brought the sighting of a piping plover with a band. Jane sent a photo to Wildlife Biologist, Greg Pavelka of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers who answered: "The green flag on the upper right leg of the plover is a regional marker for piping plovers banded on the Missouri River below Gavins Point Dam. Gavins Point Dam is located on the southeast South Dakota - northeast Nebraska border, about five miles upriver from Yankton SD. The plover was banded by researchers from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute. The researchers are studying piping plover use of sandbars constructed by the Corps of Engineers to provide habitat for the plovers and least terns. I will forward your report and pictures on to the researchers and hopefully they will be able to provide you more information as to when and where on the Missouri River the plover was banded."

Jane soon received a second message from a Virginia Tech Lab Technician: "I work for Dan Catlin of Virginia Tech and am responsible for going through any winter piping plover band resightings that he receives. Dan is the graduate student who has been banding Great Plains piping plovers with green flags since the summer of 2005. The bird you sent in, W Y, -: GF, - was banded on July 6, 2005 in Vermillion, SD as a chick. We hadn't seen this bird on the breeding grounds since then, so it's good to know it is still alive."

It took only a few minutes for Jane to send the photo but it means a lot to plovers, banders, the Corps of Engineers and birders.



## The Great Backyard Bird Count of 2009

Join birdwatchers across from across North America for The Great Backyard Bird Count. It will occur on Feb. 13-16, 2009. If you are interested, you can go to the following website for all of the information on how you can make a contribution to scientific information about bird populations.

<http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/howto.html>

### Red-cockaded Woodpecker Artificial Cavity Project

W.G. Jones State Forest located adjacent to The Woodlands is home to a small number of endangered Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (RCW). The Texas State Forest Service received grant funding in 2008 to install a number of artificial cavities in trees at Jones Forest. It is hoped that these artificial cavities will provide additional roost and nest sites for the RCW. The Forest Service needs volunteers to monitor these cavities for RCW activity. The Houston Audubon Society has agreed to coordinate this volunteer monitoring effort. If you are interested in participating in this monitoring project or would like further information, please contact Bill Saulmon at [dean1960@aol.com](mailto:dean1960@aol.com) or 281-537-6924.

### Education Chair Needed

PWWS needs a new education chairperson, someone with energy, enthusiasm, and resourcefulness. The challenge is how to "hook" more people into protecting our environment. Contact Al Barr, president; or Karen (281 444 0343).

## SEA TURTLE SATURDAY 2009

Saturday,  
February 28, 2009

Brown Education Center Auditorium  
Houston Zoo

8:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

For more information

contact:

[rrommel@houstonzoo.org](mailto:rrommel@houstonzoo.org)



### 2009 PWWS Dues are Due January 1 Please renew your membership today

Membership dues for 2009 are due on January 1 so please take a few moments to fill out the enclosed renewal form, write your check, and return them to:

Piney Woods Wildlife Society

P.O. Box 189

Spring, TX 77383-0189

Also, donations to the Piney Woods Wildlife Society are always welcomed and appreciated.

Members who joined in the last quarter of 2008 are paid up through 2009.

## Piney Woods Wildlife Society Membership Form

Last Name(s):		First Name of Members(s):	
Street Address:		City:	State and Zip:
Home Phone No:	Work Phone No:		Email Address(s):
Annual Membership Fee \$15.00*		Mail this form and check made payable to PWWS to:	
Additional Contribution \$ _____		Piney Woods Wildlife Society	
Total \$ _____		P.O. Box 189	
*Per Household - Includes <i>The Pine Warbler</i> newsletter		Spring, TX 77383-0189	
New <input type="checkbox"/>	Renewal <input type="checkbox"/>	Rejoining <input type="checkbox"/>	



Piney Woods Wildlife Society  
P.O. Box 189  
Spring, Texas 77383-0189

## Piney Woods Wildlife Society Field Trips

### Paul Rushing Park Area

February 21, 2009 - Jennifer Backo

### The Great Backyard Bird Count of 2009

Feb. 13-16, 2009

### Sea Turtle Saturday

February 28, 2009

**Bird Walks** with Al Barr - 2nd Saturday of every month through May, 2009. 8:30-10:30 at Mercer Arboretum. All that participants need to bring is some binoculars and mosquito repellent if it is needed.

Visit: <http://pineywoodswildlifesociety.org>

### 2008 Board of Directors

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Heart Hotline.....281444-6204



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**The deadline for submissions is the 25<sup>th</sup> of the previous month, earlier if possible. Always add "PWWS" in the subject line. All emails will be resonded to with in 3 days. If you do not recieve a response please call 832 717-3276. All articles are subject to approval by the PWWS Board.**

**Please send new address changes and corrections to Mike Drummond at [drummond@thedrummonds.com](mailto:drummond@thedrummonds.com) and add PWWS to the subject line. Thank you.**