

Welder Wildlife Foundation Newsletter

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SPOTLIGHT ON A WELDER FELLOW

By *Evonne Schroeder*

B.S., Brigham Young University 2002;
M.S. candidate, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX

I am researching avian productivity and survivorship in two vegetation communities—riparian and scrub—on the Welder Wildlife Refuge. In addition to providing essential stopover areas for Neotropical migrants, riparian communities have been designated by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

as high-priority habitat for conservation. The scrub community provides breeding habitat for several declining bird species such as the northern bobwhite, dickcissel, and painted bunting.

Declining populations of breeding birds have been reported across the United States and Canada through the long-term monitoring of the Breeding Bird Survey. However, the causes of these declines are unknown. Are Neotropical migrants returning from their wintering grounds to breed? Are these adults producing fewer young? The



Evonne Schroeder holds a summer tanager (*Piranga rubra*) captured at her study site on Welder Wildlife Refuge in 2007.



Dickcissels (*Spiza americana*) are common in the Coastal Bend during migration. Evonne located their nests on WWF.

Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) program was established to address this lack of knowledge by facilitating long-term population monitoring to identify the causes of these population changes.

Banding stations established under MAPS adhere to strict protocols of operation for comparability between stations. Under this protocol, 10 mist-nets are operated once every 10 days during the breeding season. All birds captured are identified and banded with a uniquely numbered aluminum band. Banded birds that are

recaptured are identified by this number to location and year banded. The ability to identify these individuals is essential for estimating the population size of adults and survivorship of returning birds. To obtain productivity estimates, the number of adults captured is compared to number of hatch-year birds in the catch. Identifying the causes of the declines, whether on the breeding ground, wintering area or both, allows conservation efforts to be used more effectively.

Welder Wildlife Foundation's mission is wildlife research and education. Evonne is one of about 15 current Welder Wildlife Foundation Fellows.

BIRD CONSERVATION

By Dr Selma Glasscock, Assistant Director, Welder Wildlife Foundation

It is well-documented that many North American bird species are in serious decline, a fact quite disconcerting to the more than 40 million bird enthusiasts in the U.S. Recent reports reveal that songbird populations have declined by at least 50% over the past 40 years. In



Northern Bobwhite populations have declined by over 80% over the past 40 years.

Photo courtesy of Bill and Sharon Draker.

fact, as reported by the Audubon Society, data accumulated from Christmas Bird Counts and Breeding Bird Surveys indicate a 66% average reduction in populations among the top 20 North American birds in decline. Topping this list is the northern bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*), whose populations have declined by an alarming 82% from 33 million to 5.5 million birds. The northern bobwhite is native to much of the eastern half of the U.S. from southeastern Wyoming to southern Ontario and south through the central U.S. to Guatemala. Number 20 on the list is the ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*), which has declined 54%. See

<http://stateofthebirds.audubon.org/cbid>

Notably, this list contains a mix of grassland birds, game birds, songbirds, wading birds, and waterfowl, the diversity of which points to the challenge with which bird conservationist's struggle—how to reverse the downward trend of these plummeting populations. Since population declines are occurring among

many species within a diversity of bird groups, one would be inclined to search for a single ubiquitous cause; for example, global warming. However, the problem is much more complicated, and the solution may in fact be more problematical than reducing our dependency on hydrocarbons. Each bird species experiences a different array of factors affecting its decline; so, unfortunately, there is no single solution. For example, Neotropical migrant songbirds run the gauntlet of obstacles on their migration route between summer breeding grounds in the U.S. and Canada and wintering grounds somewhere in Mexico, Central America, or South America.

Imagine, if you will, running a distance of 500 miles nonstop. Sound impossible? Maybe for humans, but not for these little birds! This distance represents the shortest distance across the Gulf of Mexico from the tip of the Yucatan Peninsula to the Mississippi Delta. Amazingly millions of Neotropical migrants make this flight not once, but twice a year.

Just prior to traveling north to their breeding grounds, these birds gorge themselves in order to store enough fat for energy production to make this amazing flight. One of their greatest challenges is finding enough food to build these energy stores. In Latin America alone, 300 million hectares of native tropical forest were lost in the 20th century and Mexico has lost 95% of its tropical forests as these forests are being converted to agricultural fields and sun-grown coffee plantations. These new low-diversity habitats and coffee plantations do not produce the variety or abundance of insects or fruits necessary for migratory species to build the fat reserves necessary to propel them across the Gulf of Mexico. We Americans cannot disassociate ourselves from this issue, since our penchant for coffee is such that Americans drink 300 million cups of coffee per day, requiring U.S. importation of 3.3 billion pounds of coffee beans per year.

As a citizen, one way you can contribute to our knowledge about these bird populations is by participating in projects such as the Christmas Bird Counts and Breeding Bird Surveys.

WELDER CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT 2007

Dr. Terry Blankenship, Assistant Director, Welder Wildlife Foundation

The Welder Wildlife Foundation (WWF) conducted its 51st annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC) on the Welder Wildlife Refuge on December 14, 2007. Dr. Clarence Cottam initiated the count on the Foundation in 1956 with only 2 people. The beginnings of the CBC can be traced back to the late 1800's when men would gather on Christmas day to kill as many birds as possible to use as food during winter. As hunt participants diminished, Frank Chapman, an ornithologist and Audubon Society member, proposed a Christmas Bird Census to count birds rather than hunt them. This first count was conducted on Christmas Day 1900 with 27 birders. Today there are over 50,000 CBC volunteers from all 50 states in the U.S., every Canadian province and parts of Bermuda, the West Indies, Pacific Islands, and Central and South America. The CBC provides an important database for monitoring the status of resident and migratory bird populations.

Over the years the WWF has had a number of volunteers who have participated in these counts to help us monitor changes in bird species and populations over time. Foundation counts have documented the northern range expansion of the great kiskadee, green jay, and white-tipped dove. Great kiskadees have been a regular occurrence on counts since 1995. Green jays began showing up in 1997 and white-tipped doves have been recorded since 2000. This year we had one of our highest species counts at 129. Also, we had high counts for green herons, green kingfishers, and great kiskadees.

We have recorded 120-125 species annually during counts on the Welder Wildlife Refuge. The presence and absence of water in the lakes dramatically affects numbers of water birds on count day. Over the last 20 years the lakes have been dry on only 3 or 4 CBCs. This can significantly reduce the number of species counted. A review of the last 20 years of WWF CBC data indicates the vermilion flycatcher, eastern phoebe, and chipping sparrow have shown a general increase. However, logger-headed shrikes and Bewick's wrens have shown a downward trend over the same time.

The large number of species recorded on the Welder Refuge during annual CBCs is likely related to the WWF's primary management goal, which is to provide a variety of vegetation types to maximize the diversity of bird species and other wildlife species present on the WWF Refuge. In pursuing this goal, we continue to use fire and other means of brush control to maintain grasslands and provide diversity in the vegetation communities.

CONSERVATION EDUCATION PROGRAM

By Dr. Selma Glasscock, Assistant Director, Welder Wildlife Foundation

The Welder Wildlife Foundation's Conservation Education Program reached over 4000 people in 2007. The program focuses on wildlife science and conservation, as well as management of wildlife habitat with an emphasis on south Texas ecology. The program consists of several main components that allow us to reach a large segment of the population. These components include:

- K-12 Student Education Program
- K-12 Teacher Education Program
- University Student Education Programs
- Conservation Education Fellowship Program
- Naturalist Training Programs
- Land Manager Workshops
- WWF Volunteer Program
- Outreach Programs

Many K-12 and university students visit the Welder Wildlife Refuge during the school year. Our programs introduce them to wildlife and natural history of the region and engage them through hands-on activities such as collecting data, observing wildlife, and identifying plants and animals. Teachers are pleased that our programs most often cover one or more of the science Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS).

Our Teacher Education Program includes courses and workshops intended for science and outdoor education teachers interested in learning more about the natural world and techniques necessary to take their students into the field to participate in place-based science education programs. The Welder Foundation has been providing science- and conservation-based workshops and courses for teachers for 50 years. Teachers may obtain Texas Environmental Education Advisory Committee (TEEAC) and Texas State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) credit for the workshops and courses we provide.

One of the newest components of our Teacher Education Program is **Conservation Across**



Volunteer Jennifer Mohr assisting with the 2007 CAB program

Boundaries®, a graduate-level course for teachers from across the U.S. Teachers travel from Montana to Texas in exploration of the unique ecosystems at both sites. The course also addresses issues underlying conservation of wildlife species inhabiting these great landscapes. This grant-supported course is a partnership between the Boone and Crockett Club and the Welder Wildlife Foundation. To learn more about this program and download an application visit www.boone-crockett.org. In addition to **Conservation**

Across Boundaries®, we also offer workshops such as Project WILD and Project Learning Tree.

The WWF Conservation Education Fellowship Program trains young professionals in the skills and techniques of conservation education. Through this program we are building future conservation leaders. Participants in this program are masters-degree students supported by WWF fellowships. These students also spend about 1.5 years at the WWF in an internship-assistantship capacity and serving as the WWF's Conservation Educator. We are proud of the accomplishments of Jaime Cupit, WWF Conservation Education Fellow, who completed her master's degree at Texas A&M Corpus Christi this past summer. Alyssa Taylor, another WWF Conservation Education Fellow, attends the University of New Hampshire and has done an outstanding job in the position of WWF Conservation Educator this year. Amy Potts, our newest Conservation Education Fellow, attends Tarleton State University and will begin her assistantship at WWF in January 2008. We thank each of these young professionals for their dedication to providing innovative and outstanding education programs.

Each year we provide workshops and trainings for Texas Master Naturalists, Master Gardeners, and other individuals wanting to learn more about the natural world. The Naturalist training program includes workshops on birds, wildflowers, grasses, and other similar topics. Some of the naturalists who go through these programs go on to participate in the WWF Volunteer Program.

We thank the following special volunteers for their dedication to the Foundation's mission: Jane Wicker, Chris McLean, Jennifer Mohr, Cathy Eckert, Kris and Ray Kirkwood, Mary and Paul Meredith, Betty and Marlin Frederick, and Sandra and Neil Johnson.

If you are interested in any of our programs and would like more information, please visit our website or contact us:

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FROM THE WWF SCRAPBOOKS

In "The Crow's Nest" column in the *Corpus Christi Caller* Sep '56: "When Welder Wildlife Foundation was only an idea in Rob Welder's mind, [Dr. Clarence] Cottam visited Corpus Christi: 'I had been here scarcely 24 hours when I went down to breakfast and picked up a copy of the *Caller*,' the Doctor likes to tell his audiences. 'And over on one of the back or inside pages, under a modest headline, was a short story announcing the birth of the crown prince of England. But on page one, under a glaring three-column headline, was a story announcing that Rusty had been born to Jo and Crip, two of the Aransas Refuge whoopers. I said to myself, then and there: 'Here in south Texas are people who place a true evaluation on proper values,' and I made up my mind that if the opportunity ever presented itself, I would jump at the chance to live and work among them. So here I am.'"

Dr. Clarence Cottam was the first WWF Director.

WELDER VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

By Alyssa Taylor, Conservation Educator

The Volunteer Program is up and running! On February 8, 2007, WWF hosted its first Volunteer Workshop for volunteers Betty and Marlin Frederick, Neal and Sandra Johnson, Ray and Kris Kirkwood, Chris McLean, Paul and Mary Meredith, Jennifer Mohr, and Jane Wicker. Since then, we have been lucky enough to have their unique skills and assistance around the Refuge.



Conservation Educator Alyssa Taylor teaches new volunteers how to lead a tour of Welder Wildlife Foundation

Ray and Kris Kirkwood, Marlin Frederick, and Paul Meredith did a wonderful job clearing brush and renumbering posts on our Nature and River Walk trails. Sandra and Neal Johnson helped prepare for the wildflower workshop and were on hand assisting, along with Paul and Mary Meredith, Cathy Eckert, and Jennifer Mohr. Chris McLean has been regularly assisting with larger school groups by leading night drives and educational walks and has also been helping with setting up for and cleaning up after activities. Kris Kirkwood has begun to lead public tours and is responsible for the design and layout of this newsletter.



Volunteer Ray Kirkwood assists with Welder wetlands education for local students

Ray Kirkwood has been co-leading visiting school groups, adding his considerable expertise to the WWF education program. With Chris, Ray made it possible for two classes from the local high school to visit the WWF simultaneously for the first time. One group went with Ray to sample aquatic populations and the other went kayaking with Chris and Alyssa. Jennifer Mohr and Cathy Eckert generously donated over a week of their time this summer to assist with Conservation Across Boundaries®. Jane Wicker continues to catalogue our plant collection. Hugh Turner, a document management specialist, volunteered his time to demonstrate storage solutions and Betty Frederick will be helping with Welder document preservation and management.

“In addition to her other contributions, we are excited to announce that Kris

Kirkwood has accepted the position of Volunteer Coordinator. She will be working with Foundation staff to further develop and refine the volunteer program at the Welder Wildlife Foundation. Plans are in the works for more volunteer projects, including building a Native Grasses Garden for use in teaching grass identification and revamping the Butterfly and Hummingbird Garden. Another project will archive valuable Welder documents and photographs.

Everyone at the WWF appreciates the hard work and time our volunteers give us. We thank you all!

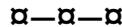


FROM THE DIRECTOR, DR. LYNN DRAWE

We are proud to announce the donation of the Donald L. Bowman bird collection to the Rob & Bessie Welder Wildlife Foundation. This premier bird collection consists of 405 birds, each a unique mount in a natural position and perfect to the critic's eye. Donald L. Bowman, a research chemist, has made a lifetime hobby of mounting birds collected in his travels and is considered one of the top ten bird taxidermists in the world.

The collection contains many raptors, quails, grouse, and waterfowl of North America, along with birds from other parts of world. It contains specimens of two extinct species—Passenger Pigeon and Heath Hen—and amazing reconstructions of four others: Labrador Duck, Great Auk, Pink-headed Duck, and Korean Crested Shellduck. The collection represents 25 families, 92 genera, and 170 species.

The Smithsonian Museum was interested in the collection but Bowman preferred to donate it to the Welder Foundation. His stated reasoning was, "if I give it to the Smithsonian, it will be placed in some storeroom and will never see the light of day. If I give it to Welder, it will be proudly and properly displayed." He was correct! His donation has stimulated us to build a new museum, collections, and educational facility, the driving force behind our "Conservation for the Future" funding campaign.



We have some very sad news concerning our friend and long-time employee of the Foundation, James Cox. James passed away of a massive heart attack while tending his horses on January 18, 2008. He is survived by his wife, Linda, two children, a son Kevin and daughter Melanie, and one granddaughter, Ariana.

James had worked as the Maintenance and Operations Foreman for the Foundation since February 1975. There was no task James could not accomplish. His friendship and skills will be greatly missed.

James was a member of the Sinton First United Methodist Church. He was very active in the local community. He was a 4-H leader, Chairperson of the San Patricio A&H Horse Show, and President of the San Patricio Riding & Roping Club.

Memorials can be sent to the San Patricio Riding & Roping Club Scholarship Fund, Sinton First United Methodist Church, or the Rob & Bessie Welder Wildlife Foundation.

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