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AFO/WOS 2009 - Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania National Aviary hosts memorable meeting

The National Aviary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania served as host for the 2009 Association of Field Ornithologists' conference, held in conjunction with the Wilson Ornithological Society from April 8-12. Nearly 250 registered attendees enjoyed insightful plenary presentations from Bruce Beehler of Conservation International and Sidney Gauthreaux of Clemson University. Beehler delivered an inspirational AFO Plenary Address, urging attendees to embrace natural history studies while discussing his trailblazing conservation work and research in Papua New Guinea. Gauthreaux presented the Wilson Ornithological Society's Margaret Morse Nice Plenary and detailed his decades of cutting-edge migration research focused on using radar technologies in novel ways.

The poster session was held at the National Aviary, allowing attendees to learn about recent research while interacting with a Cape Thick-knee, Inca Terns, a Hamerkop, and other amazing birds from around the world. Students research was highlighted throughout the meeting, with many novel and memorable presentations (see pages 5-6 for information about student award winners). An abundance of migratory songbirds were passing through Pittsburgh during the meeting, and field trips to Carnegie's Powdermill Bird Banding Station provided attendees with up-close views of the birds. The AFO council would like to extend our sincere thanks to Todd Katzner and everyone at the National Aviary who contributed to such a successful meeting. Special thanks to Andrew Farnsworth and Bob Beason who organized the excellent scientific program.

The AFO Council was pleased to offer \$4,000 in student travel awards, with the funds divided among 14 students. AFO welcomed four new councilors following a vote by the membership in Pittsburgh. New councilors include Michael Lombardo (Grand Valley State University), J. Dylan Maddox (University of Illinois), Victoria McDonald (University of Central Arkansas), and Paul Rodewald (The Ohio State University). The Council would like to extend our special appreciation Dylan, who offered to completely overhaul the AFO website (www.afonet.org) while preparing to defend his dissertation! We encourage AFO members to visit the new website for the latest AFO information. We also thank Gary Ritchison for his herculean efforts as Editor of the *Journal of Field Ornithology*, and to our publisher, Wiley-Blackwell, for their contued support and professional assistance. The journal's impact factor continues to increase and the average submission to decision time is a remarkable five weeks!

All scientific societies are facing new challenges as economic forces and the increasing electronic access to journals contribute to a downward trend in membership. We encourage AFO members to renew and become actively involved in your scientific society. We have planned upcoming meetings at exciting locations (see pages 2-3), and we have earmarked significant funds to help support student travel. AFO is dedicated to scheduling meetings in affordable locations with unique birding opportunities. We look forward to seeing everyone next year in Utah for the amazing autumn shorebird migration at the Great Salt Lake!



Mountain Bluebird by Skip Winnipeg.

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Upcoming AFO Conferences

Promise Stunning Birds, Vistas, and Science!

Ogden/Salt Lake City, Utah

August 12-14, 2010

Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, is pleased to host the 2010 meeting of the Association of Field Ornithologists. Ogden is situated between the Great Salt Lake to the west and the spectacular Wasatch Range of the Rocky Mountains to the east. Birding in northern Utah this time of year will be impressive. Over 7.5 million birds, represented by 257 species utilize Great Salt Lake. It is one of the most important sites in North America for migrating and breeding shorebirds, waterbirds and waterfowl. In fact, Great Salt Lake is listed as a site of Hemispheric Importance, under the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network.

Fall shorebird migration will be well underway during the meeting. For some species, such as the Wilson's Phalarope, Great Salt Lake is the largest staging concentration in the world. Over 500,000 individuals have been estimated during July and August, representing 1/3 of the world's population! Recent studies suggest that $\geq 5,000$ Snowy Plovers nest on the alkaline flats surrounding the lake and typically begin staging during early August. Waterbirds are also beginning migration during this time and their numbers are equally impressive. Over 2.5 million Eared Grebes stage at Great Salt Lake during fall migration, at times representing over 1/2 of the North American population. Seeing these magnificent flocks of shorebirds, waterbirds and waterfowl amidst this rich ecosystem will be unforgettable experience.

The Great Salt Lake is not the only site available for birding before, during, or after the conference. Utah has an incredible diversity of habitats within easy reach, ranging from alpine tundra to desert canyons, all of which play host to over 430 different bird species. Utah boasts five national parks, more than any other state in the lower 48, as well as eight national monuments and 48 state parks. In addition, Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks are just a (gorgeous) day's drive away. In short, Ogden's location provides a perfect starting point to explore this region of the country.

AFO members, their families and guests will find a community teeming with fun activities, beautiful mountain vistas and sites of both biological and historical significance. For example, Ogden is just minutes away from Golden Spike National Historic Site. This location commemorates the completion of the first transcontinental railroad. In addition, Ogden was listed by Sunset Magazine as the city with the "Best Access to the Outdoors." The mountain vistas are spectacular and provide plenty of activities for the extreme sport enthusiast or someone just looking for a nice walking path.

This meeting also promises to be one of the most affordable ornithological meetings in years. Salt Lake City, which is close by, is a major hub for Delta Airlines resulting in relatively low airfares. Low-cost dorm rooms will be also available. For further information, contact the Local Committee Chair, John Cavitt (jcavitt@weber.edu).



The Ogden, Utah meeting will feature field trips to the Wasatch Range (above, photo by Anthony Arrigo), and the Bear River National Wildlife Refuge / Great Salt Lake area (middle photo by Don Baccus, <http://www.fws.gov/bearriver/>), to see the amazing grebe migration (Eared Grebe photo by Tom Munson).



Kearney, Nebraska

March 10-13, 2011

The great spring Sandhill Crane migration will provide the backdrop for the 2011 joint meeting of the Association of Field Ornithologists and Wilson Ornithological Society in Kearney, Nebraska.

Every year the Platte River valley comes alive with birds. More than 500,000 Sandhill Cranes, 3-5 million geese (Canada, Cackling, White-fronted, Ross, and Snow), and 7-9 million ducks converge on the central Platte River and Rainwater Basin in Nebraska. Whooping Cranes, Bald Eagles, dancing Greater Prairie-Chickens, and prairie dogs can also be seen. This is, without a doubt, one of the most magnificent wildlife spectacles to be found anywhere on the planet.

More details on the meeting and different options for traveling to Kearney will be posted on an official meeting website in the near future. For now, please feel free to direct any questions to the chair of the Local Committee, Mary Bomberger Brown at mbrown9@unl.edu.

For more information about the crane migration, Nebraska birding, and the greater Kearney metropolitan area, see www.rowsanctuary.org, www.whoopingcrane.org, www.nebraskabirds.org, www.nebraskaflyway.com, www.chickendancetrail.com and www.visitkearney.org.

Do start making plans to join us in 2011; the cranes, geese, and ducks will be there, and this will be an ornithological experience of a lifetime.

Looking ahead...AFO will be joining the other major ornithological societies for the 2012 North American Ornithological Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia.



Sandhill Cranes on the Platte River, Nebraska, site of the 2011 AFO conference.

AFO UPDATES: NEW AWARD FOR "BEST STUDENT PAPER" PUBLISHED IN *JFO*

Starting with Volume 80, published in 2009, the Association of Field Ornithologists will be giving an award for the best paper authored exclusively or primarily by a student in each volume of the *Journal of Field Ornithology*. A committee of AFO officers and councilors will judge and rank papers based on the quality, significance and potential impact of the research.

Collaborative efforts between two or more students can qualify for a joint award.

The award will be announced at the AFO's annual meeting and in the *Journal of Field Ornithology*. The award winner(s) will be invited to give a special presentation of their work at the next annual meeting, and will receive \$500 to help cover the costs of traveling to the meeting.

For specific criteria and other details concerning this award, please see the Best Student Paper Award section of the website.

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS: ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH MEDAL

The Alexander F. Skutch Medal recognizes career accomplishments, particularly in, although not limited to, research relating to life history studies of Neotropical birds. Criteria may include encouragement and mentoring of students, particularly Latin Americans, and making research accessible to the public through popular publications, as well as publishing work in scientific journals. A goal of the award is to recognize individuals whose careers will stand as models of excellence in Neotropical ornithology.

The first award was presented by Dr. Skutch in 1997 to F. Gary Stiles at the 75th AFO meeting in San José, Costa Rica. Subsequent medal winners have been Herbert A. Raffaele (1999) and Mercedes S. Foster (2006). The award consists of a silver medal engraved with an image of the Fiery-billed Aracari (*Pteroglossus frantzii*) and a honorarium of \$1000 US.

The AFO Council will consider nominations received by September 1, 2009 for an award to be made at the 2010 annual meeting in Ogden, Utah. Nominations may be made by letter to the Council and should address the candidate's contributions to Neotropical ornithology with particular reference to the criteria mentioned above. Supporting materials may include biographical information, publications of the candidate, supporting letters from other ornithologists, and/or other relevant information.

Please submit nomination materials to the chair of the Skutch Medal Committee, Dr. Michael Braun, by e-mail (braunm@si.edu) or by regular mail (Dept. Vertebrate Zoology, National Museum of Natural History, 4210 Silver Hill Rd., Suitland, Maryland 20746).

Bergstrom Memorial Research Awards 2009

E. Alexander Bergstrom (1919-1973) was Vice-President of the Northeastern Bird-Banding Association (now the AFO) and the Editor of Bird-Banding (now *Journal of Field Ornithology*) for 21 years. These awards are named after him to honor his memory. They are intended to further field research on birds by both students and amateurs.

Both Domestic (US & Canada) and Latin American research is eligible for support. Approximately five Domestic awards (maximum \$1000 each) and approximately three Latin American Awards (maximum \$1500 each) are awarded annually. For further details and application materials and deadlines, see the Bergstrom Awards section of the AFO website.

Bergstrom Awardees for 2009

Antonio Celis Murillo (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), *Evaluation of habitat associations, disturbance impacts, and population trends of endemic Yucatan birds via bioacoustic monitoring*

Torre Hovick (Iowa State University), *Determining post fledging survival and habitat use in Grasshopper Sparrows (Ammodramus savannarum)*

Allyson Jackson (College of William and Mary), *Survival in a created landscape: radio-tracking fledgling bluebirds on golf courses*

Kacy Ray (Virginia Tech University) *Radio tracking Wilson's Plovers on Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina: an improvement to a study of demography and habitat use*

Calandra Stanley (York University – Canada), *Tropical deforestation and the Wood Thrush (Hylocichla mustelina): exploring the consequences of winter habitat quality and determining migratory connectivity*

Renzo Piana (Peru Program of Birdlife International), *Abundance, distribution and the impact of cattle grazing on the Endangered Grey-backed Hawk (Leucopternis occidentalis) in the North Western Biosphere Reserve, Peru*

Sueli Souza Damasceno (Federal University of Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais, Brazil), *Biology and population estimate of Stresemann's Bristlefront (Merulaxis stresemanni)*

Myriam Velázquez (Fundacion Moises Bertoni – Paraguay), *Ecology and Conservation of Black-masked Finch (Coryphaspiza melanotis) in Paraguay*

The AFO thanks Mike Brawn, Andrew Farnsworth, Andrea Jones, and Lee Robinson for reviewing proposals this past year.

Pamela and Alexander Skutch Award 2009

The Pamela and Alexander Skutch Award for Studies in Avian Natural History is offered annually by the AFO. The award is intended to support the study of life histories, especially social relations and reproduction, of little known birds of the continental Neotropics (including Trinidad and Tobago) with a minimum of disturbance.

Dr. Skutch wanted to encourage researchers who would follow in his tradition of patient, careful documentation of avian behavior and natural histories, the type of study for which very little money is currently available, especially in Latin America. The grantee may be an amateur or professional ornithologist of any nationality. One award of up to \$10,000 is given annually.

AFO is pleased to announce that the 2009 winner of the Skutch Research Award is **Noemí Esther Huanca Llanos** for her project: Breeding biology and habitat use of the endangered endemic Cochabamba Mountain-finch (*Poospiza garleppi*).

Noemí is from Cochabamba, Bolivia and has studied the natural history and reproductive behavior of high Andean birds since 2001. She is currently working on a Master's degree in Geoinformation and Land-use Planning. Since 2006 she has been the coordinator of the Cochabamba Mountain-Finch project for Asociación Armonía, the Bolivian partner of BirdLife International. Armonía is a volunteer-based non-profit association dedicated to the study and conservation of birds.

Noemí has initiated awareness of conservation efforts for the Cochabamba Mountain-Finch in local communities and with school children, especially through educational activities. She has also conducted field investigations that led to the first description of Cochabamba Mountain-Finch nesting.

Noemí's immediate goal is to develop and apply a conservation strategy for the mountain-finches. Ultimately she intends to obtain her doctorate degree and have a career in which she works towards the conservation of other threatened birds in her country.



2009 Skutch Award recipient
Noemí Esther Huanca Llanos.

Best Student Presentation Awards 2009 Annual Meeting

Best Oral Presentation #1

ALEJANDRO RICO-GUEVERA – Ph.D. candidate – Univ. Connecticut (Advisor: Dr. Margaret Rubega)

Evolutionary insights about the bill structure of nectivores

Alejandro's research is focused on the evolutionary ecology of nectar-feeding birds. He is especially interested in both the morphological and ecological adaptations of nectivores and integrates the morphological study of museum specimens with performance experiments to test the functional significance of various traits. The research project he presented at the AFO meeting was aimed at examining the link between feeding mechanisms and social systems of nectivores. Studying arthropod foraging in hummingbirds with Gary Stiles, he decided to closely study hummingbird bills and found a puzzling set of hidden bill traits and hypothesized how those traits could be involved in feeding performance and social organization. Encouraged by his advisor, Margaret Rubega, Alejandro expanded his survey to all specialized nectivorous birds and found evolutionary convergences not previously reported. Features that improved feeding efficiency included structures finely tuned by physical laws in the nectar extraction process (e.g., forward projecting serrations, flexible tomia, and internal projections). Other traits, related to social systems, are sexually dimorphic backward serrations, bill tip daggers and hooks that Alejandro hypothesized were used as weapons by males during fights for resources. In short, nectivory in birds seems to favor the evolution of novel traits by coupling bill and tongue morphology to affect high nectar extraction efficiency, while dominance interactions over resources seems to favor the evolution of weapons in males.



Best Oral Presentation #2

JASON HILL – Ph.D. candidate – Pennsylvania State University (Advisor: Dr. Duane Diefenbach)

Co-Author: Chris Elphick – University of Connecticut.

Post-fledging movement, behavior, and habitat use of adult Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows

The behavior of birds during the postfledging period is largely mysterious. Jason studied the postfledging movement and habitat use of adult female Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows (*Ammodramus caudacutus*) in Connecticut. This globally red-listed species occurs only in salt marshes along the Atlantic coast of the U.S., and is highly unusual in a number of regards. Both males and females are non-territorial and males provide absolutely no parental care—females do it all. Salt marshes are highly productive ecosystems, which allow females to raise 3-5 young per brood. Tidal flooding often accounts for greater than 50% of nest loss for this ground-nesting species. To study the behavior and habitat use of females, Jason radio-tracked female sparrows during the postfledging period when they were providing care to fledglings that cannot fly for the first week or so. He also sampled vegetation where he daily flushed females and also in random locations within each female's home range. Females, on average, used ~ 0.5 ha of space during this time. They used areas of the marsh quite unlike what they use for nesting habitat. Nests are generally placed in areas of relatively high ground towards the center of the marsh. Jason thinks that this strategy may minimize nest losses from flooding and nest predation by mammals such as raccoons and house cats patrolling the edge of the marsh. During the postfledging period, however, females moved towards the edge of the marsh and were strongly associated with artificial ditches and natural channels. At low tide these water features generally empty out exposing mud that is likely to be a highly productive foraging area. In addition, these water features often have very tall vegetation (e.g., *Spartina alterniflora*) growing in them that may provide cover for the fledglings. Moving towards the edge of the marsh may also reduce drowning risks for fledglings before they are able to fly. These findings demonstrate the importance of using a broader view when describing and protecting a species' "breeding" habitat. Female Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows use a very different habitat during the nesting and postfledging periods. Management and conservation strategies should recognize this broader view of "breeding" habitat to ensure the long-term survival of this species.



Best Oral Presentation #3

SARAH KINGSTON – Ph.D. candidate – University of Maryland & National Museum of Natural History (Advisor: Dr. William Fagan)

Co-Authors: William Fagan – University of Maryland, Michael J. Braun – National Museum of Natural History.

Genome-wide levels of introgression and divergence across Mexican Towhee hybrid zones

Sarah is interested in the evolutionary importance of introgression of genes across species boundaries and the interaction of hybridization with available habitat. To study this problem, Sarah's research focuses on hybrid zones between two towhee species, the Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*) and Collared Towhee (*Pipilo ocai*), in montane habitat in Mexico. These two species hybridize in two main areas: the Teziutlán and Transvolcanic gradients. The towhee system is a unique and interesting one to address questions about the evolutionary importance of introgression. A unique characteristic of the towhees in Mexico is an intersection of the two different hybrid areas and an area just south of the peak of hybridization, where each parental species exists in sympatry, but shows little evidence of interbreeding. This special area of sympatry offers an opportunity to contrast the habitats associated with hybridization and lack of hybridization. Much of the morphological variation across the hybrid gradients has been quantified, but a broad genome survey has not been completed. Sarah used a genomic approach to assess the prevalence of introgression in these towhee hybrid zones. Multi-locus analyses revealed not only a genetic differentiation between parental types, but also the divergence of populations within the areas of hybridization. Sarah also found evidence of bi-directional introgression across the species boundary which indicates that this boundary is porous to a portion of the genome. Finally, Sarah's research with towhees suggests that the exchange of genes between species may be an important factor along the evolutionary trajectory of species.



Best Poster Presentation

KRISTEN M. LEAR – undergraduate – Ohio Wesleyan University (Advisor: Dr. Jed Burt)

Co-Authors: Ananda B. Ellis - Lewis and Clark College, Charles R. Brown - University of Tulsa.

Netting Methods Influence Age Distribution in Samples of Cliff Swallows

The way in which an organism is captured may affect the subset of the population sampled. When sampling birds such as Cliff Swallows, *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*, mist netting is often the preferred method of capture. Because the birds must fly into the net, the sample population could be biased for traits associated with such flights. Kristen and her collaborators set out to determine whether their netting method influenced the subset of the population they captured. They set up mist nets at the opening of the culverts within which Cliff Swallows establish large nesting colonies. To determine if netting methods influenced the identity of birds captured they either allowed Cliff Swallows to voluntarily fly into nets as they exited the culverts or actively flushed them into nets. Flushing involved walking through a colony and driving the birds into the net. Flushing may eliminate the potentially skewed results given by voluntary capture. Data collected from 3 sites, using a summed sample size of 3,062 birds, found that flushed birds tended to be older than birds that made voluntary flights into the nets. Kristen's results show that the method of netting can give a skewed perspective of a population's age structure and that researchers who use mist nets should keep this in mind when asking questions about population dynamics.



The AFO thanks the following individuals for judging student presentations this year: Michael Lombardo and E. Dale Kennedy (committee co-chairs), Dan Ardia, Deb Beutler, Mary Bomberger-Brown, Mike Braun, Jameson Chace, Carla Dove, Greg Farley, Mary Garvin, Keith Tarvin, Doug White, Meg Hatch, Margaret Voss, Kathryn Purcell, Dan Lambert, and Alex Mills.



AFO Afield

July, 2009 • Volume 14 • Number 1

www.afonet.org

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