



*The*

*"finding cooperative conservation solutions for birds and the natural world through science and education"*

# *SUTTON*

## *NEWSLETTER*

*Volume 19, Winter 2002*

## *Tracking the Chicks...*

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### What's Inside...

- 2 A Few Words from The Executive Director
  - 3 Bioblitz 2002 Eagle News
  - 4 Joel Sartore National Geographic photographer
  - 5 Lesser Prairie-Chicken
  - 6 Chicks Prairie-Chicken Prairie Falcons
  - 7 Sutton Centers Renovation Contributors Renovation
- 



*Cover:* Lesser Prairie-Chicken chicks were radioed and tracked for a study of brood mortality rates. It was determined that the radios had no deleterious effects on chick behavior or mobility. *Inset:* A comparison of the size of the transmitters used to an adult fingernail. *Photographs by Luke Bell.*

by  
M. Alan Jenkins

Continuing a trend that keeps surprising and pleasing us, the number of known nesting Bald Eagle pairs and the number of young fledged increased again this past nesting season. The scope of the increase itself was also very gratifying. The number of pairs attempting to nest increased from 28 last year to 38 this year, an increase of over 26%. Of the 38 pairs found, 33 were known to have laid eggs, and 26 laying pairs fledged 39 young eagles, a 30% increase over last year's 30 fledged young. With all these eagles almost standing shoulder to beak, they need more wingspace; they are expanding their range--so as not to get on each other's nerves. To the south of the eagles' previous range in the state, there was a nest near the Red River I heard about; but the location data given to me is not accurate enough to determine if those eagles are in Oklahoma or Texas (Sooners or Longhorns for you football fans). I am impatiently waiting for more detailed information. In the southwestern part of their Oklahoma range, Bald Eagles are now successfully nesting near Oklahoma City, actually within the city limits of McLoud on Wes Watkins Reservoir.

The worrisome new wrinkle in the field of bird biology is the spread of the West Nile Virus in the avian populations on this continent since 1999. 2002 is the first year West Nile Virus has been found in Oklahoma, and it is probably here to stay. Bald Eagles are known to be susceptible to West Nile Virus, and it has killed eagles in other states. What effect this will have

Continued on page 4

The Sutton Newsletter 3

## Bioblitz 2002

by Dan L. Reinking

The second annual Oklahoma Bioblitz was held September 13-14 at Beavers Bend State Park in far southeastern Oklahoma. This event is organized by the Oklahoma Biological Survey and was first held at the Sutton Wilderness Area in Norman last year. Biologists of all different specialties are recruited to attend the Bioblitz, and are collectively charged with locating and identifying as many species of living things as possible in a 24-hour time period and within a defined geographical area. The selection of some public lands in Oklahoma's heavily forested southeastern most county for this year's Bioblitz made the event dramatically different from the one held in an urban wilderness in central Oklahoma last year. For one thing, the area available for us to survey went from about 160 acres last year to 4,000 acres of state and federal lands along the west side of Broken Bow Lake. This larger, moister, less developed habitat provided a significant increase in the number of species potentially available to find.

The turnout of biologists was much higher as well, with some 140 people showing up to scour the woods and streams for signs of life, large and small.

The Bioblitz ran from 3 pm on Friday to 3 pm on Saturday. Naturally, my time (besides sleeping) was mostly spent looking for birds, and accompanying me were a number of other ornithologists and birders from around the state. Our first stop? The bird feeders at the park's nature center, of course! We picked up the first easy species there, including chickadees and several woodpeckers which were frequenting the large trees, along with seemingly innumerable squirrels (all the same kind, but that's one mammal for the list!). Inspection of some trees along a small watercourse near the nature center revealed a Worm-eating Warbler, a rather uncommon species we were all happy to find.

As the afternoon wore on, we plotted our strategy. Although our mission was to locate as many species as possible, there was one species we all felt compelled to seek out. The Red-cockaded Woodpecker is an endangered species that was once more widespread but in Oklahoma is now only found in the McCurtain County Wilderness Area. Because it establishes colonies for nesting, and during the rest of the year roosts each night in the same cavities, it is almost a sure thing to find if you know where the colonies are located. Fortunately, we had the help of the biologist who closely monitors Oklahoma's small population of these active woodpeckers, and as the sun went down we were treated to good views of several birds returning to their roost.

The following morning we continued our efforts, and slowly added a species here and two species there. After a catfish lunch topped off with chocolate cake, we headed back to the Bioblitz staging area for the final tally. Our total of 69 bird species was predictably higher than last year's Bioblitz bird total, but had we chanced upon a major migration day it could have been much higher. Of course the big numbers came from the people who had been counting plants and insects, but all of the species found by all of the teams helped achieve the grand total of 1,017 species for the 24 hours. Bioblitz again showed the great diversity of life that can be found within even a very limited area of our planet.



This group is busy identifying the different plant species collected during the blitz.

Dan Reinking

## A Few Words from the Executive Director..

Over the last few months, I have had the pleasure of attending scientific conferences, making presentations, examining field sites, writing reports, inspecting construction, attending staff and board meetings as well as several official social events, and responding to myriad inquiries related to birds and conservation. On this page are pictured appearances with BENSAR, one of our tame Bald Eagles, including Foundation for Excellence ceremonies in Tulsa on May 18 with OU President David Boren and philanthropist Henry Zarrow, a visit with Mary Lou Doudican and friends at the Sutton Center on June 7, and the Prix de West exhibition with artist and friend Ross Matteson at the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City.



OU President David Boren and philanthropist Henry Zarrow (right) pose together with BENSAR the Bald Eagle and Steve Sherrod (left) at the Foundation for Excellence Academic Awards banquet.

So the question is, "Just how are these things part of the Sutton Center mission?" Well, our mission statement is found on the front of this newsletter, and it can be interpreted in five parts.

The first is **Education**. The Sutton Center has given environmental slide shows and presentations for 20 years to schools, the general public, and at meetings or special events such as the USACOE annual Kaw Lake Bald Eagle Days. The newsletter you are reading is part of our educational efforts as well. Currently our public educational presentations are extremely limited; we are working on production of a statewide educational program, but we must identify necessary funding before it can be completed. Joel Sartore's presentation to more than 4,000 Oklahoma school kids is just part of our future education program.

The second aspect of our mission is **Monitoring** avian species suspected or known to be threatened, endangered, or simply declining. For example, with help from the Tulsa World and USFWS, Sutton Center Assistant Director Alan Jenkins conducts annual statewide surveys of nesting Bald Eagles. Sutton employees have conducted many surveys in the past, including those on raptors, Long-billed Curlews, Mountain Plovers, and Henslow's Sparrows, as well as inventories of birds at Ft. Sill, and Camps Gruber and Robinson. Dan Reinking and state volunteers have just completed the OK Breeding Bird Atlas which is being published by OU Press, and Reinking is now the state coordinator for the over 60 annual, OK Breeding Bird Survey routes.

**Research and Reporting** is the third leg of our mission. Studies of disappearing Greater and Lesser prairie-chickens in Oklahoma and New Mexico, studies of declining prairie songbirds, evaluation of Bald Eagle eggshell sizes and thicknesses both past and present, Swainson's Warbler studies by Dr. Mia Revels, and investigation in Venezuela of the pesticide levels in wintering Dickcissels that otherwise nest in Oklahoma and other states, along with many reports and papers are just a few of such efforts comprising this portion of our work.

Replacing lost or extirpated populations, where causes of declines are known, through traditional or creative programs, or **Restoration**, is the fourth category in our mission. The Sutton Bald Eagle Program that helped re-establish our native bird throughout the southeastern U.S. is the best example in this category. I currently serve on the Attwater's Prairie-Chicken Recovery Team for one of the two most endangered avian species (along with the California Condor) in the nation, and Assistant Director, Alan Jenkins, is a member of the Northern States Bald Eagle Recovery Team that is thankfully no longer active.

Finally, **Environmental Service** in a capacity to provide support or leadership for various environmental efforts/movements summarizes the last facet of our mission. Dan Reinking's service as president-elect of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society, Sutton's former Director of Research Wiedenfeld's service as editor of AOU's Ornithological Monograph Series, my own service as president of the North American Grouse Partnership, all employees' service in reviewing professional papers and books for publication, and Sutton Center's service as general reference for many local, provincial, and national bird problems including counsel to numerous zoos, federal agencies, and private parties are all examples of this kind of service.

In summary, there are many unseen, and often thankless aspects to conservation work, but we hope the collective efforts of Sutton Center employees contribute positively toward preserving the natural world. Your financial support is essential to help us complete our tasks.



Steve and BENSAR visit with the Doudicans and friends at the Sutton Center. Mary Lou Doudican won this visit through an auction to benefit the Tulsa Ballet.

Mary Lou Doudican



This colorful mudsnake was one of the species seen at the blitz.

Dan Reinking

*Steve Sherrod*

Steve Sherrod, Executive Director



BENSAR "poses" for renowned sculptor Ross Matteson at the Cowboy Hall of Fame's "Prix de West".

# An Evening with *National Geographic's* Joel Sartore

by Becky Dixon

It was a picture-perfect evening for supporters of the Sutton Avian Research Center as F&M Bank hosted a fund-raiser for the Center featuring world-renowned wildlife photographer, Joel Sartore. On October 3rd, Sartore entertained the Tulsa audience with wild tales of his work for *National Geographic* magazine and exhibited a collection of his favorite photos. "*An Evening with Joel Sartore*" kept the audience spell-bound as Sartore gave listeners a behind-the-scenes-look at his award-winning work. The audience traveled with the photographer on assignment for one of the world's greatest magazines as he dodged a dangerous musk ox and fended off flesh-eating parasites in the rainforest. A silent auction including a *National Geographic* photo shoot on location with Sartore, as well as other fascinating trips, sporting events, and art-work were also a part of the evening's festivities.

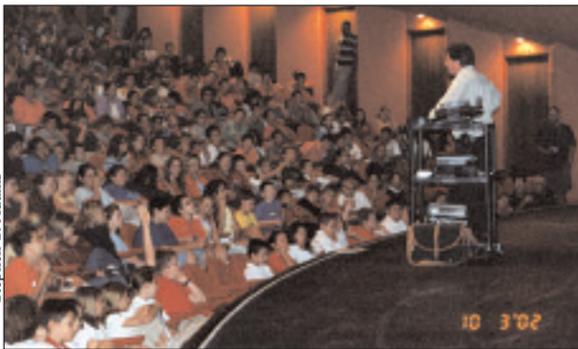
In addition to providing captivating stories and photos, Sartore's intent was to provide a message of concern for wildlife populations world-wide. "Geographic has sent me all over the world, and I have witnessed firsthand the loss of habitat and the declines of wildlife species" he said. "What happens to wildlife will eventually happen to people, and we should care about that." An Oklahoma native, Sartore's adventures have been the subject of several national television shows including *National Geographic Explorer* and *CBS This Morning*. He first became acquainted with the Sutton Research Center when he photographed their work for a major article on Bald Eagles in the November 1992 issue of *National Geographic*, and he has continued to stay involved with Sutton since that time. Sponsored by F&M Bank, one hundred percent of the proceeds benefited Sutton, and plans are already underway for next year's fund-raising event.

While in Oklahoma, Sartore also made educational presentations to 4,000 students in schools at Jenks, Tulsa and Bartlesville.



Stephen S. Adams

President of F&M Bank and sponsor of the event, Tony Davis peruses the auction items with event chairman Gary Neal of Riggs, Abney, Neal, Turpen, Orbison and Lewis.



Stephen S. Adams

Joel Sartore speaking to a filled auditorium of students from Bartlesville, Collinsville, Dewey and Pawhuska and OSU Okmulgee at the Bartlesville Community Center.

## Eagle News (Continued from page 3)

on the population of Oklahoma's nesting eagles will probably be seen next January when we make our first nesting eagle flight counts. We will keep you posted via this newsletter.

The results of the nesting eagle surveys I report here summarize the entire state's population. These hard figures, however, omit the emotions and personal feelings I often experience while becoming familiar with individual wild eagles. I look forward each nesting season to renewing old, but distant and one-sided friendships with "my" eagles. It's rewarding, unscientifically speaking, when a pair of eagles nests successfully after years of trying or when I find an abandoned nest alive again with incubating eagles. Or, it can be depressing when a pair, having failed year after year but still trying, is broken up due to lightning striking the incubating male that I helped to hack upon first release. You, who can only read the often dry, statistical summary that condenses my entire field season into a couple of paragraphs, rarely get to experience "my" eagles on a personal basis. Now, though, if you are in the vicinity of Tulsa, can get to know a special eagle.

A-13 may have been an unlucky number for his band, but somehow he experienced enough good fortune to be carefully transported from Alachua County, Florida as an egg in December of 1985. That egg hatched and the resulting eaglet was successfully hacked at Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge, Vian, Oklahoma in April of 1986, to fledge, migrate, mate, successfully nest with another GMSARC-banded eagle (a photo of her landing at their nest graces our website), and produce 7 fledgling eagles in 6 years. The name I lifted off the topographic map for their nest, and which also belongs to a nearby creek, is "Go Get 'Em." In May of this year, 16 years and 1 month after his release, A-13 was found injured at Hopewell Park on the Arkansas River a scant 21 miles, as the eagle soars, from his hack tower. He was given to rehabilitators Kathy and Gary Siftar who were unable to mend his wing. Now "Sutton," as the Tulsa Zoo has named him, is on display at the zoo with another unreleasable male Bald Eagle, and I hope he has shed any bad luck his band provided. I also hope his mate will keep her "Go Get 'Em" attitude and continue to fill her eyrie with young eagles for years to come.

# ... in the shortgrass prairies of New Mexico

## Survivorship and Microhabitat Use by Lesser Prairie-Chicken Broods in Southeastern New Mexico

by Luke Bell

Luke Bell recently graduated from Southeastern Oklahoma State University with his B.S. in Conservation of Wildlife/Fisheries. He is currently working on his M.S. in Range Ecology at Oklahoma State University studying brood survivorship and microhabitat use by Lesser Prairie-Chickens.



Luke Bell

Microchips planted subcutaneously can be read by the pit-tag reader. This will aid in the long term monitoring of individual birds.

PIT tags were used to mark additional chicks in each brood for future identification purposes. Since data for chicks in the same brood are not statistically independent, only 2 chicks per brood were radioed. The radioed chicks were followed every other day using radio telemetry equipment to determine microhabitat and thermal refugia preferences for the initial 3 stages of their life.

Investigation of the first 30 days, known as the *chick stage*, was a new frontier for LPCH studies since little information is available for this period. Chick habitat use fluctuated depending on the time of day and whether the chicks could fly. At day-break, chicks foraged in a grass/forb mix within 10-20 feet of the hen. As the temperature increased throughout the day, the hen led her chicks to the shinnery-oak covered sand dunes where the chicks found shade. The dunes appeared to provide a cool resting place for chicks and adult birds. In the late afternoon the hen and her chicks moved down from the dunes into a similar grass/forb mix where they spent the night. Almost all the chicks slept under the hen's wings with the occasional chick or two sleeping within a foot of the brood. At 14 days of age, chicks can fly but still show similar habitat use patterns.

Finding cryptically-colored chicks in dense habitat was a challenge. A recording of chick peeps was made while processing a brood. When the chick peeps were played, the hen rushed for the recording. This technique allowed for a quick visual on the chick's location before the hen had a chance to lead us away.

At 30 days old, the chicks were recaptured and fitted with a 3-month lived *poult* radio transmitter. In order to collect the vegetation and weather data we needed, an exact location was vital at each stage. Whereas the *chicks* would remain in their location when approached, most poults would flush. To acquire an exact location for poults, a kiting technique was developed. With a technician flying a raptor-silhouetted kite 15-25 feet above the poults, the poults remained motionless, allowing us to determine a non-biased exact location. This technique was only used on birds that were frequent flushers to avoid habituation to the kite. Poult habitat use was very similar to chick habitat use, except that the poults and the hen began to move greater distances between checkups.

At 91 days old, the poults were considered *juveniles*. For the last time, the birds were recaptured and fitted with an adult radio transmitter and leg bands. Only three of the original 17 radioed chicks had survived and will be followed until spring to determine what percentages of chicks made reproductive stages.



Lotus Altman



Luke Bell

A Lesser Prairie-Chicken hen looks out from the native brush that is such a critical part of her brood's habitat on the short-grass prairie.

# Prairie Falcon, *Falco mexicanus*

by M. Alan Jenkins

The Prairie Falcon is a large falcon, mostly brown and creamy-white. Although capable of taking larger species it preys primarily on ground squirrel-sized mammals and meadowlark-sized birds, along with an occasional lizard or insect. Prairies nest almost exclusively on cliffs, where they use a natural ledge or pothole. This species is only mildly migratory, and is restricted to western North America, primarily the U.S. Nesting populations can be locally dense where the favored ground squirrel prey is abundant.

Both sexes are similar except for size; females average about a third larger. The plumage is dark brown on top; below on the breast it is buffy with dark brown streaks (juveniles), to creamy white with dark brown spots (adults). All individuals have narrow "cheek" stripes and dark patches beneath their wings in the "arm pit," the patches being visible from beneath when the bird is flying. Adults have yellow skin in unfeathered places such as the cere, and legs; juveniles have gray-blue skin in these areas. This species measures 39-50 cm in length, 89-109 cm in wingspan, and weighs from 760-975 grams. Males average smaller in all measurements (64% of female body weight).

Prairie Falcons nest in open shrub-steppe deserts, plains, and montane (including alpine) habitats, especially those areas having cliffs in prey-rich habitats. They do not nest in urban areas, areas lacking cliffs, or heavily forested regions. They are cold and heat tolerant, and do not need to breed near water, nor do they usually nest on the seacoast or islands.

Prairies are very rarely tree nesters. The stick nests of other large raptors and ravens are sometimes used; usually, however, eggs are laid on bare soil in a bowl-like 'scrape' situated on a cliff ledge, or more often in a cavity or crevice. Cliffs utilized vary from quite low to extremely high. Some traditional nest sites are used over many years.

The nesting season, depending on the area, is March-July. Only one brood of young is produced each year. Clutches consist of 3-5 eggs, with an average of 4.5. They are handsome white or creamy, with variable dark brown markings ranging from spots to large splotches and bands. Incubation requires 31 days, mostly by the female. Young are provisioned primarily by the male early on, and by both parents later in the 38-40 days before fledging; a post-fledging dependency period of about 25 days follows.

The Prairie Falcon nests from south-central British Columbia, southern Alberta and southern most Saskatchewan south to western North and South Dakota, western Nebraska, Colorado, Cimarron County of Oklahoma, western third of Texas and the Sierras Madre Oriental and Occidental of Mexico, west to Baja California Norte, California, Oregon and Washington; it is mostly absent from the Pacific coastal slopes. The species winters farther east out onto the Great Plains and farther south into Mexico from the breeding range. It is estimated there are 4,000-6,000 breeding pairs, excluding non-breeders and juveniles, in an area of 4-4.5 million sq. km. There has been no apparent change in distribution or abundance in recent history except locally, where prey habitat has been destroyed or disturbance is a factor. In general Prairie Falcon populations appear stable.



M. Alan Jenkins

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## Memorial Funds

In memory of Jim Pielsticker: Stephen Adams, Barbara Bates, Carol McGraw, Ken Read, Steve Sherrod and H. Tom Sears. In honor of their children Dan, Pam and Brian: Carl and Nan Reinking. In memory of Marge Cartland: Jack Cartland. In memory of Harley Mangles: Ken Greenwood. In memory of Earl Sneed: James Sneed.



## Renovation Update

We want to once again thank **Flintco Constructive Solutions and Matrix Architects, Engineers, Planners, Inc.** for their involvement in this project. The renovation effort is progressing steadily. Two new office spaces complete with shelving and bookcases have been constructed in the north end of the building and additional shelving and bookcases were installed in two more existing offices. Work on two wheelchair accessible bathrooms has been completed and everyone is looking forward to the remodel of the upstairs into a conference room.



No, its not the twilight zone. Calab Rummel is replacing a circuit panel and fixing other electrical problems.

Dan Reinking

Our gratitude also goes to **Founders and Associates, Inc., H.A. and Mary K. Chapman Charitable Trust, J.E. and L.E. Mabee Foundation, Inc., John Steele Zink Foundation, H.C. and Sandra L. Price, and the Phillips Petroleum Company** for supporting this effort.



Dan Reinking

Glass fireplace covers were installed to increase heating and cooling efficiency.



Dan Reinking

The plumbers found an unpleasant surprise when they discovered the slab of the administration building was about 18" thick.

## Christmas Bird Counts Around the Corner

The 103rd Annual Christmas Bird Count period will be from 14 December 2002 through 5 January 2003. Once again, there will be two CBCs in the Bartlesville area. The Hulah CBC will be held on 14 December, and the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve CBC will be held on 4 January 2003. Anyone interested in participating can contact Don Wolfe at 918-336-7778. For those people not in the Bartlesville area, we encourage you to find a CBC near you. For more information on Christmas Bird Counts, go to: [www.audubon.org/bird/cbc](http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc).

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Joel Sartore/National Geographic

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