



## 2011 Annual Meeting Fast Approaching Kearney, Nebraska, March 11-13



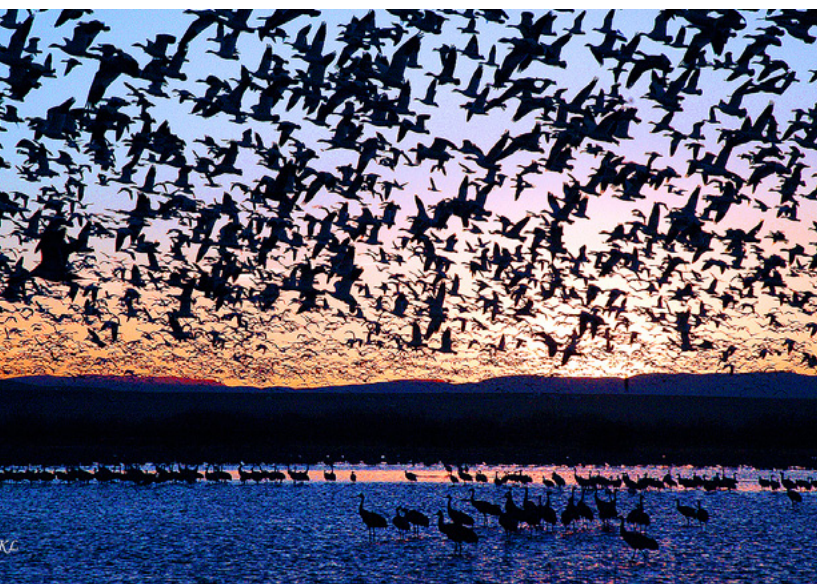
The Association of Field Ornithologists (AFO) will follow the lead of 500,000 Sandhill Cranes and head for Kearney, Nebraska, March 11-13, 2011 for its annual meeting. Joining the AFO at this meeting will be both the Wilson and Cooper Ornithological Societies.

The scientific program promises to be excellent. The AFO has invited Dr. Gary Krapu from USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center to give the plenary address, Sandhill Cranes and the Platte River: A Local and Global Perspective.

Four special symposia will focus on the breeding and migratory biology of the Cerulean Warbler, long-term effects of Piping Plover and Least Tern management on the Great Plains, avian conservation and ecology in agricultural landscapes, and the biology of prairie grouse. Attendees will also have the option of making a trip to the Nebraska Sandhills after the meeting to view Greater Prairie-Chickens and Sharp-tailed Grouse on their leks.

Attendees will witness one of the most magnificent wildlife spectacles anywhere on the planet. Joining the half a million cranes that converge on central Nebraska at this time will be 3-5 million geese (Canada, Cackling, White-fronted, Ross', and Snow), and 7-9 million ducks. Whooping Cranes, Bald Eagles, dancing Greater Prairie-Chickens may also be seen.

More details on the meeting and different options for traveling to Kearney can be found at the meeting's web-site: <http://snr.unl.edu/kearney2011/>. **Early registration (with lowest rates) ends, and abstracts are due on, 15 January.** For more information about the crane migration, Nebraska birding, and the greater Kearney metropolitan area, see [www.rowsanctuary.org](http://www.rowsanctuary.org), [www.whoopingcrane.org](http://www.whoopingcrane.org), [www.nebraskabirds.org](http://www.nebraskabirds.org), [www.nebraskaflyway.com](http://www.nebraskaflyway.com), [www.chickendancetrail.com](http://www.chickendancetrail.com) and [www.visitkearney.org](http://www.visitkearney.org).



*Sandhill Crane and Snow Goose photos by Kim Lowes,  
<http://www.kimlowes.ca/>*



# Message From The President

The 2010 meeting of the AFO was held this past August at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, with the Wasatch Mountains providing a stunning backdrop to events. The meeting was a great success from start to finish thanks to the efforts of John Cavitt, Valerie Frokjer and the rest of the Utah crew, and Andrew Farnsworth, who oversaw an engaging scientific program. Over 100 individuals attended, coming not only from the U.S. but also from Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica, China, and Portugal. The AFO provided \$5400 in travel awards to help students attend the meeting.

The meeting was kicked off with a reception on Antelope Island in the Great Salt Lake, complete with a Dutch-oven dinner and Western music. On the causeway out to the island, participants viewed great flocks of shorebirds gathering during their fall migration, and then got close looks at the pronghorn, mule deer, and buffalo that inhabit the island. Many felt some guilt at being more thrilled by the charismatic mammalian megafauna than by the phalaropes and avocets. However, people had the opportunity to assuage their guilt by participating in extended birding trips to the Great Salt Lake and the Deseret Ranch after the meeting.

Plenary presentations were excellent but also sobering. Craig Benkman of the University of Wyoming reviewed his studies on the tight coevolution between crossbills and conifer trees, describing how his work now distressingly suggests that crossbills could be decimated by global warming. Charles Duncan of the Shorebird Reserve Network described precipitous declines in shorebirds and efforts to stem those declines by working collaboratively throughout the western hemisphere with academics, agency scientists, landowners, corporations, conservation groups, and community organizations.

At the banquet, John P. O'Neill, winner of the prestigious Skutch Medal regaled us with tales from a multi-decade effort to put together the newly published *Birds of Peru*. Admiration (tinged with envy!) swept the room as he described new bird species that he discovered along the way.

The AFO Council meeting was the largest and most dynamic meeting of councilors in the recent history of the AFO. The AFO welcomed new councilors Andrea Townsend (Cornell), Paul Hamel (US Forest Service), John McCarty (University of Nebraska-Omaha), Dan Ardia (Franklin and Marshall College), and Tom Gardali (PRBO Conservation Science). The new president of the AFO is L. Scott Johnson (Towson University). Kathryn Purcell (US Forest Service) was elected vice-president. David Bonter (Cornell Lab of Ornithology) steps down after highly successful terms as vice-president and president. David has played a major role in an on-going, complete review and overhaul of how the AFO functions. The AFO is certainly better off as a result of his hard work over the past several years.

Much was accomplished during the lengthy but lively council meeting. The council set its sights on several major initiatives for the coming year. Among them, the AFO will be making concerted efforts to increase its involvement in Neotropical ornithology and with Neotropical ornithologists. Actions being considered include inviting individuals based in the neotropics to join the council and having joint annual meetings with Neotropical societies.

The AFO Council will also continue efforts to improve the quality and status of the *Journal of Field Ornithology*. JFO has thrived in recent years with the unflagging assistance of the publisher, Wiley-Blackwell, represented by Jennifer Lynch, and with Gary Ritchison (Eastern Kentucky University) at the helm as editor. Gary recruited six associate editors this past year, including Daniel Ardia (Franklin and Marshall College), Juan Ignacio (Nacho) Areta (Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas, Argentina), David Brown (Eastern Kentucky University), Christopher Hill (Coastal Carolina University), Jeffrey Hoover (Illinois Natural History Survey), Miguel Ângelo Marini (Universidade de Brasília), Abby Powell (Alaska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit), and Tex Sordahl (Luther College). Together they are handling close to 300 manuscripts a year yet they still manage to maintain an average submission-to-decision time of less than 50 days. Clearly, JFO is the place to go to publish work without delay!

The next annual meeting of the AFO will be in Kearney, Nebraska, in March of 2011. It is timed to coincide with the spectacular gathering of Sandhill Cranes along the Platte River. The Wilson and Cooper Ornithological Societies will be joining us, which should result in another extensive and intriguing scientific program. We strongly encourage all members of the AFO to attend the meeting for a marvelous combination of science and birding.

**-L. Scott Johnson**



*Photos: Sunset over Great Salt Lake and American Avocet courtesy of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and Mike Gray.*

## E. Alexander Bergstrom Memorial Research Awards For 2010

Bergstrom Research Awards are given out every year to promote field research on birds, primarily work that focuses on avian life histories, uses data collected in whole or in part by non-professionals, and/or employs banding or other marking techniques. Both Domestic (U.S. & Canada) and Latin American research is supported. Domestic and Latin American awards can be up to \$1000 and \$1500 each, respectively. Further information on the awards and the application process is found at: <http://www.afonet.org/grants/Bergstrom/Bergstrom.html>. The **deadline for applying for a 2011 award is 7 January**.

Forty-four proposals were submitted for the 2010 competition, 30 from the U.S. and Canada and 14 from Latin America. The recipients and their projects are:

**Leah Finity**, Trent University, Canada: Habitat and diet as limiting factors for Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*) populations.

**Katherine Goodenough**, San Diego State University, USA: Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica vanrossemi*) diet and habitat use of San Diego Bay determined by VHF radio telemetry and stable isotope analysis.

**Sacha Heath**, Humboldt State University, USA: A bird-driven top-down trophic cascade in the context of riparian habitat restoration: does it exist and does it represent a “restoration service”?

**Hedwig Lankau**, University of Alberta, Canada: The impacts of seismic lines on the territorial behaviour and community composition of Neo-tropical migrants in the boreal forest.

**Kevin Oxenrider**, Frostburg University, USA: Habitat associations and nest site selection of Swamp Sparrows in western Maryland.

**Ellen Robertson**, University of Maine: The effect of waterfowl impoundments on Sora and Virginia Rail populations.

**Mariana Carro**, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina: Natal dispersal in the Southern House Wren, *Troglodytes musculus*.

**Eduardo Martín**, National University of Córdoba, Argentina: Promiscuity among birds with cooperative breeding: ecological and evolutionary implications in *Coryphistera alaudina* (Furnariidae).

**Natalie Sánchez**, National University, Heredia, Costa Rica: Population parameters and space use of White-breasted Wood-wren (*Henicorhina leucosticta*) in lowland tropical forests, Sarapiquí, Costa Rica.

**Rocio Sánchez**, National University of Tucumán, Argentina: Extra pair paternity and male quality as predictors of spatial distribution and male density in *Poospiza torquata* (Emberizidae).

**Marcelo de Oliveira**, University of Tocantins, Brazil: Distribution, biology and status of conservation of the Brazilian Merganser *Mergus octosetaceus* in Jalapão, Tocantins, Brazil

*Thanks to John Arvin for chairing the awards committee and to committee members Nacho Areta, Dan Brooks, Andrew Farnsworth, Jason Mobely, Kathryn Purcell, Lee Robinson, James Roper, and Bridget Stutchbury for reviewing proposals.*

## Skutch Medal Awarded to John P. O'Neill at the 2010 Annual Meeting

The Association of Field Ornithologists presented its 2010 Alexander F. Skutch Medal to John P. O'Neill at the 2010 Annual Meeting in Utah. The Skutch Medal recognizes career accomplishments, particularly in life history studies of Neotropical birds. Qualifying criteria include: encouragement and mentoring of students, particularly Latin Americans; making research accessible to the public through popular publications; and 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.

Dr. O'Neill is one of America's foremost bird illustrators, and his fieldwork in Peru has led to the discovery of more bird species than any other living naturalist. During his more than 35 years of expeditions and explorations in South America, John has mentored and trained more than a hundred students from U.S. and Peruvian universities, leading to many bi-national collaborations, publications, and discoveries. Among his many accomplishments is the recent publication of *Birds of Peru*, an outstanding field guide to the birds of this remarkable country.

Although many people write books, far fewer have books written about them. John O'Neill falls in the latter category, as he is the subject of Don Stap's *A Parrot Without a Name*. This book chronicles how O'Neill's unique brand of expeditionary science has helped place the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science at the forefront of Neotropical ornithology.

The next Skutch Medal will be awarded at the 2012 meeting of the AFO in Vancouver. Thanks to Michael Braun for chairing the award committee and committee members Mercedes Foster (USGS), Herb Raffaele (USFWS), Adolfo Navarro (Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico), Ken Rosenberg (Cornell University), and Daniel Cadena (Universidad de los Andes, Colombia).



*John P. O'Neill and wife, Letty, accepting the Skutch Medal.  
Photo by Mike Gray.*



# Best Student Presentation Awards, 2010 Annual Meeting

## Jason Townsend - Best Oral Presentation #1

Jason is a Ph.D. candidate at The State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Syracuse New York. His presentation was titled ***Catharus thrushes as bioindicators of mercury hotspots: from the Catskills to the Caribbean***. Jason's advisor is James Gibbs, and co-authors on the presentation were Charles T. Driscoll, Syracuse University, Center for Environmental Systems Engineering, Christopher C. Rimmer, Vermont Center for Ecostudies, and Kent P. McFarland, Vermont Center for Ecostudies.

Jason's research documented mercury bioaccumulation in a densely forested watershed of the Catskill Mountains, NY. Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that accumulates in the environment as a result of global atmospheric pollution. While many studies have documented mercury accumulation in aquatic ecosystems, little is known about mercury cycling in strictly terrestrial ecosystems. Jason's study showed that mercury accumulation in the soil and leaf litter increased with elevation in this watershed. Thrushes of the genus *Catharus*, which are arrayed along this elevational gradient, also showed increased blood mercury content with increasing elevation. High elevation Bicknell's Thrushes (*C. bicknelli*) and Swainson's Thrushes (*C. ustulatus*) showed significantly greater blood mercury levels than did lower elevation congeners, Hermit Thrush (*C. guttatus*) and Veery (*C. fuscescens*). This finding could have particularly important health and conservation implications for Bicknell's Thrush, which is generally restricted to forests above 1000 m in the northeastern United States. Furthermore, blood mercury levels in all species declined with season, indicating that early-season thrushes either carry mercury from their winter grounds or consume a diet higher in mercury during the early part of the breeding season (May –June 15). An additional analysis of mercury in Bicknell's Thrushes wintering on Hispaniola showed the highest blood mercury levels of any birds in this study and also wide, site-specific variance, potentially reflecting local pollution patterns.



## Linda Lait - Best Oral Presentation #2



Linda is a M.S. candidate at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada. Her presentation, ***The population structure and postglacial expansion of the Boreal Chickadee (Poecile hudsonicus)***, was co-authored by her advisor, Theresa Burg.

Explaining the geographic distribution of birds is an enduring pursuit in ornithology. Linda's research examines the geographic distribution of Boreal Chickadees across northern North America. During the last glacial period, much of North America was covered by large ice sheets. Throughout this time, both fauna and flora survived in ice-free regions known as refugia. Two large refugia were known to have existed in North America—one south of the ice sheets, and one in Beringia (western Alaska). A number of smaller, disputed refugia may have also been present on both the east and west coasts of Canada. Many studies have looked at how mountain ranges and large bodies of water can act as barriers to gene flow. Obstacles such as these may have impacted the recolonization following the melting of the ice sheets, and may still play a role in limiting dispersal. The Boreal Chickadee (*Poecile hudsonicus*) is a small songbird that resides in the boreal forests of Canada and the northern United States. Linda used mitochondrial DNA from both field and museum samples covering all of the chickadee's range to study the postglacial expansion of this species, and how physical barriers may affect the population structure. The mitochondrial DNA showed a general east/west split in the populations; the British Columbia/ Alberta/Alaska populations forming a 'western haplogroup' while the Newfoundland/Nova Scotia/

New Brunswick/Quebec populations form an 'eastern haplogroup'. The Rocky Mountains do not appear to have acted as a barrier to dispersal in this species. Interestingly, both Alaska and Newfoundland were found to be distinct from all other populations. Microsatellite data supports Newfoundland as a distinct population, with little variation seen within the mainland populations.



(continued from page 4)

## Christopher J. W. McClure - Best Poster Presentation, Graduate Student



Christopher is a Ph.D. candidate at Auburn University where he is advised by Geoffrey E. Hill. The poster, *Interpreting Breeding Bird Survey data in the face of climate change*, was co-authored by Nathan D. Burkett, Cadena, Russell A. Ligon and Geoffrey E. Hill.

Most bird monitoring programs rest on an assumption that bird species are not becoming harder (or easier) to detect as years go by. One can imagine that if a species is growing progressively quieter each time a survey is conducted, fewer individuals will be detected with each survey. This trend in fewer individuals being detected could then be misinterpreted as a population decline. Such a systematic change in bird detectability – the probability of detecting a bird, given that it is present – seemed unlikely until recently. Studies have shown that many bird species are breeding and migrating earlier, presumably due to climate change. Because bird song rate is tied to breeding stage, a progressively earlier breeding date could potentially shift the timing of peak song rate, thus causing birds to be progressively harder (or easier) to detect during survey dates each year. To address this issue, Chris and his co-authors first had to determine how bird detectability changes within a single breeding season. They used audio recordings within their study site in Tuskegee National Forest, AL to examine seasonal changes in the detectabilities of 31 species during the breeding season of 2008. Next, they calculated the effect of a one-week shift in breeding activity by shifting the timing of peak detectability one week later and determining the

effect of that shift on the detectability of each species during the month of June and then tested whether changes in detectability were correlated with population trends reported using Breeding Bird Survey data within the state of Alabama. Chris's results indicated that migrant species show greater variation in detectability than year-round residents within a breeding season. Therefore a shift in breeding date should cause migrant detectability to decline more sharply during fixed survey dates than resident detectability. However, their assumed annual changes in detectability were not correlated with the population trends reported by Breeding Bird Survey data within the state of Alabama. Chris and his co-authors concluded that the Breeding Bird Survey is a useful index of bird populations.

## Luis E. Vargas - Best Poster Presentation, Undergraduate Student



Luis is a student at the Universidad de Costa Rica where he is advised by Gerardo Ávalos. His poster, *Forest structure and territory size relationship in the Neotropical understory insectivore White-breasted Wood-wren*, was co-authored by Natalie V. Sánchez, Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica, and Gerardo Ávalos, The School for Field Studies, Salem, MA.

Ornithologists have long been interested in the factors that affect territory size in birds. The Neotropical terrestrial insectivore *Henicorhina leucosticta* (Troglodytidae) maintains long-term territories through vocalizations and forages among leaf litter trapped in the understory vegetation and ground litter. As part of a Research Experience for Undergraduates project, Luis, a 2008 graduate of the Universidad de Costa Rica, studied the relationship between forest structure and *H. leucosticta* territory size in La Selva Biological Station, Costa Rica, during the non-breeding season in 2009. Forest structure was measured by assessing canopy openness and leaf area index (LAI) using hemispherical photography. Territory size was estimated with playbacks using local conspecific vocalizations. Luis and his co-authors found that territory size decreased as median LAI within a territory increased. Since LAI indicates the foliage area over the respective area of ground, territories with higher LAI are more likely to have greater leaf fall and leaf litter accumulation over the understory plants. The leaves trapped over the understory plants, the 'areal leaf litter', provide an important reservoir of arthropods available to understory insectivorous birds. Moreover, *H. leucosticta* frequently searches for nest materials within the areal leaf

litter. Therefore, the long-term capacity of a given territory to supply enough arthropod prey and nest material is of great importance and likely to affect territory size, with larger territories found where there is relatively lower LAI, and consequently lower supply of food and nest materials. Within the context of the 'structural cues hypothesis', which proposes that birds adjust territory size using habitat structure as a predictor of prey abundance within a given site, Luis suggests that greater LAI in tropical rainforests can be used to infer higher arthropod abundance or more potential prey microhabitats for *H. leucosticta*, as well as other insectivorous birds with similar foraging behavior. Luis is currently in the process of applying to graduate school where he intends to study animal communication.

*The AFO thanks Reed Bowman, Courtney Conway, J. Daniel Lambert, Michael P. Lombardo (Chair), John P. McCarty, Diane Neudorf, T. David Pitts, Kathryn Purcell, and Paul Rodewald for judging student presentations at this year's meeting.*



# Pamela & Alexander F. Skutch Research Award



The Pamela and Alexander Skutch Award for Studies in Avian Natural History, offered annually by the AFO, is intended to support the study of life histories, especially social relations and reproduction, of little known birds of the continental Neotropics 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.** For the 2010 competition, 23 proposals were received for research in 11 different countries.

The 2010 awardee is **Gustavo Londoño** for his project: How does avian nesting behavior change along an Andean altitudinal gradient? Gustavo is a native of Colombia and currently a PhD candidate at the University of Florida. Funding will support transportation, food and lodging for the Gustavo and 19 field assistants at three field sites along the Manu Road. Gustavo's work should add greatly to our knowledge of life histories of Neotropical bird species and of how birds adjust their life histories to deal with changing environmental conditions at increasing elevations.



*Photos: Lanceolated Monklet (top, Micromonacha lanceolata), Tawny-faced Gnatwren (above, Microbates cinereiventris), and Gustavo Londoño, left. Photos by G. Londoño.*





## New Councilor Welcomed

Tom Gardali has joined the AFO Council, Class of 2012. Tom is Director of the Central Coast and Valley Division at PRBO Conservation Science, a non-profit organization founded in 1965 as Point Reyes Bird Observatory. PRBO does bird ecology research, creates management tools, leads field science training programs, and develops and delivers bird science education programs to advance biodiversity conservation in the west on land and at sea. Tom's work focuses on the long-term dynamics of bird populations in relation to natural and human caused changes in the environment, including changes in weather, climate, plant succession, and restoration. Tom has over 18 years of experience studying birds, their habitats, and the factors that limit their populations. In addition to contributing regularly to the scientific literature, Tom strives to make conservation research more widely available through conservation plans, newsletters, periodicals, and via face to face interactions. He recently co-edited a monograph on California's most at-risk birds entitled *California Bird Species of Special Concern*.

## Best Student Publication Award

The AFO is now giving an award for the best paper published by a student in each volume of Journal of Field Ornithology. A committee of AFO council members and evaluates student papers based on the quality, significance and potential impact of the research. To be eligible for the award, the lead author on the paper must have been an undergraduate, M.S., or Ph.D. candidate at the time that the data were collected and analyzed and when the first draft(s) of the manuscript was completed. The lead author must also have played a significant role in data collection, data analysis, and preparation of the manuscript. Collaborative efforts between two or more students can qualify for a joint award.

The recipient of the award is announced at the AFO's annual meeting and in the Journal of Field Ornithology. The recipient is invited to give a special presentation of their work at the annual meeting, and receives funds to help cover the costs of traveling to the meeting.

For further information, please see: <http://www.afonet.org/JFO/bestpublication.html> or contact Dr. Diane Neudorf, Chair of the Best Student Publication Committee, at [neudorf@shsu.edu](mailto:neudorf@shsu.edu).

## New Membership Category – "Early Professionals"

The AFO, like other ornithological societies, has long had reduced membership rates for students—\$15 instead of \$20-25 for "regular" members. However, the AFO is the now the first society to extend the low student rate to individuals who obtained a degree within the last five years. The AFO recognizes that one's first years after graduation, be it in a post-doctoral fellowship or new job, are not necessarily going to be lucrative! We would very much like to retain such individuals as members by keeping their cost of membership low.

## Please Renew Your Membership in AFO For 2011

Renewal notices were recently sent to members by email or regular post. Please renew your membership in the AFO. As you can tell by the content of this newsletter, the AFO does much more than hold an annual meeting and publish the *Journal of Field Ornithology*. The AFO supports ornithological research in multiple ways throughout the year. ***Without the support of our members, none of this is possible.*** To renew your membership online, visit: [www.osnabirds.org](http://www.osnabirds.org).

AFO Afield is a publication of the Association of Field Ornithologists (AFO), and is freely available on the AFO website, [www.afonet.org](http://www.afonet.org). Please direct comments, questions, suggestions, etc. regarding this newsletter to editor Dan Lambert <[thelamberts@vermontel.net](mailto:thelamberts@vermontel.net)>. **Send address changes to OSNA Business Office**, 5400 Bosque Blvd, Suite 680, Waco, Texas 76710 USA, or send email to <[business@osnabirds.org](mailto:business@osnabirds.org)>. For information about membership in AFO, contact OSNA at the address above or call (254) 399-9636.

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