Alternate Plumage

What the heck is alternate plumage? What about basic plumage? Well, I’ve been birding for quite a few years and have been reading these terms for a long time; so I finally decided to research their meaning.

Many species of birds molt twice each year, replacing all their feathers during one of these molts and some selected feathers during the other. The complete molt happens in late summer and produces the basic plumage. The second, partial molt happens sometime after that and prior to the breeding season in the spring. Migratory birds generally complete this molt to alternate plumage prior to spring migration to their nesting grounds. As a result the spring migrants we see moving through Texas are at their most brilliant.

So alternate plumage is breeding plumage. To me that just did not seem right. Alternate seems somehow less important, and birds are at their most beautiful in alternate plumage. However, the explanation and the terminology are clear and unambiguous.

An interesting side story to this molting business is the complete molt to basic plumage by geese and ducks. These birds lose all their flight feathers at the same time and are unable to fly. At that point they must stay grounded (or afloat), and the drab basic plumage they wear is good camouflage. Shortly afterward, male ducks molt again into their alternate plumage; so that we see them in breeding plumage during the winter.

On the other hand, sparrows, warblers, etc. spend the winter in their dull basic plumage.

Interesting.

Gailon Brehm, President
A small group of very dedicated birders braved the elements on Saturday (Feb. 16th) to Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge. Neither lightning, thunder nor pounding rain could stop this group from getting 51 species.

Some highlights were a 2nd or 3rd yr. Bald Eagle, about 10 Brewers’ Blackbirds, a lone American Wigeon and Purple Finches at the visitors’ center. Also 3 of us got a Loggerhead Shrike on the way out of the refuge.

We watched a comical altercation between a Red-shouldered Hawk and a large flock of Geese. The geese were walking (all in the same direction like they do) with the hawk on the ground looking for bugs in the mud. The hawk was jumping up about a foot and would land about 3’ closer to the geese and doing this over and over all the while making headway toward the geese. They all stopped and warily watched the hawk. They lost their nerve and all turned around and quickly walked the other way. The hawk couldn’t have cared less – it was too busy chasing bugs!

What a fun trip we had Feb. 23rd to Greenville. Jennifer Maxwell graciously gave up her Saturday to lead 12 birders to the Greenville City Lakes to see what was in and around the lakes on this clear, cool winter’s day.

We got great looks at American Pelicans, Buffleheads, Ruddys and a few of us saw some very well hidden Wood Ducks.

Upon returning to Jennifer’s property, we spread out and walked the field to see what we could scare up; there were lots of Chipping Sparrows, a Lincoln’s Sparrow and a Pine Warbler, plus a Northern Flicker and many singing Eastern Bluebirds. We walked back to her house to catch a Brown Creeper, Dark-eyed Juncos, Carolina Chickadees among others. She also let us take a peek at her Wood Duck nesting box – there were 13 eggs in it! Be sure and start checking the Cornell nest box website – you may get to watch Jennifer’s ducks hatch!  http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/nestboxcam/

At dusk, we retreated back to the field for the “main event”. Lots of frogs were calling, Turkey Vultures and American Robins were flying overhead on their way to roost. Then, right before dark fell, we heard a nasally “peent”, “peent” and through our binos and squinting eyes we saw our target species, the American Woodcock fly across the road, spiral up, whistling wings all the way up, (250’-300’), twist around and zip out of sight! We continued seeing a few more of these shorebirds displaying until it got too dark to see and then we declared the day a total success!

We came away with 39 species for the day and cheers all around for Jennifer!

Now, as to how the American Woodcock got the nickname, “Timberdoodle”, I turned to my husband - that’s what they call them in his native land – Wisconsin. He doesn’t know where the name came from and I couldn’t find anything either. Sorry! But here are some facts about this odd little bird: they are considered a shorebird even though they live in wooded areas, earthworms are the main staple of their diet, and they are only about 10”-12” in size with a wingspan of 17”-19”. They look somewhat like our Wilson’s Snipe, have large eyes and very long bills. The bills are flexible to probe the earth for worms and they winter in East Texas.
Wow! What a fantastic trip 14 of us had down to Fort Hood on the first Saturday in April. Our search for the Golden-crowned Warbler and Black-capped Vireo was satisfied as well as adding to many of our life lists!

The weather was almost as breathtaking as the birds – chilly in the morning and warming up nicely by late morning. We had 3 fantastic trip leaders: Richard Kostecke with the Nature Conservancy, Gil Eckrich with Fort Hood Army Base and Anthony who all gave us lots of informative avian knowledge of local and migratory birds.

We came away with about 33 species – some seeing more or less than others. Some of us got a good fly-by look of a Merlin and all of us saw beautiful views of Spotted Towhees out in the open in the morning sun.

Thanks again to the field trip leaders and to Ft. Hood for allowing these walks!

Karen Carbiener, Field Trips
**Franklin's Gulls**

Have you seen gulls flying overhead? They are most likely Franklin's Gulls. Large groups of Franklin's Gulls have been seen flying over North Texas in April. They typically vocalize while they fly. Sometimes they're low enough to see clearly but other times they're just dots. They have complete black heads this time of year (breeding plumage) as they head north to their breeding grounds in the lakes of the north central US and southern Canada. They're distinguished from other black-headed gulls by crisp black triangles near the wingtips and by a darker gray on the top of the body and wings.

They are seen in migration every spring and fall here in north Texas, but they seem to be more prominent this year.

Gulls are interesting and hard to tell apart. There are more than 20 species of Gulls in North America and different species have much different habits. Franklin's winter somewhere way south of the US and quickly fly through the central flyway (where we live) in spring and fall. In the summer they stay inland. That's a lot different from the typical "seagull" that hangs around the coast year round. Every coastal area has their common gull, the Laughing Gull on the Gulf Coast, the Western Gull in California, the Glaucous-winged Gull in the pacific northwest and the Herring and Black-backed Gulls in the northeast. Our most commonly seen gull here is the Ring-billed Gull, another gull that stays mostly inland.

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**TogetherGreen**

The National Audubon Society and Toyota today launched TogetherGreen, a nationwide Audubon program to fund conservation projects, train environmental leaders, and offer volunteer opportunities to significantly benefit the environment.

A $20 million Toyota grant—the largest Audubon has received in its 103-year history—will fund TogetherGreen for five years, enabling Audubon to expand the scope and reach of its internationally-known conservation programs.

TogetherGreen will include three program components:

- **Innovation Grants** to fund dozens of on-the-ground projects each year that employ creative approaches and engage diverse communities to help achieve measurable land, water and/or energy conservation results. Grant requirements will broaden project participation and promote innovation by uniting Audubon’s national network with environmental and community partners.

- **Conservation Fellowships** to train and foster up to 200 promising environmental leaders who can serve as role models, expert guides and organizers for engaging new and diverse audiences in effective conservation action.

- **Volunteer Days** to be offered at Audubon Centers and other locations nationwide, providing hands-on opportunities to address environmental problems and take part in restoration activities.

TogetherGreen will also reach a diverse array of audiences through TogetherGreen.org, scheduled to debut later this spring. The site will help visitors discover dozens of individual conservation actions to help them independently “green” their lives.

If you have a grant proposal that you would like to submit through PTAS or if you know an environmental leader who would be interested in the fellowship contact Gailon Brehm, PTAS President.
PTAS Board Members Elected

At the February general meeting 4 members were elected to the PTAS board. We welcome Jerri Kerr newly elected to the board. Jerri has served many years as Membership chair. Mike Mizell returns as Treasurer continuing the outstanding job he has done over the past years. Roger Sanderson also returns as a board member and chairman of the Conservation Committee. Bobette Mauck was re-elected to the board as well and continues to serve as Publicity Chairman.

Bill Woodfin and David Griffin have volunteered to serve on the Conservation Committee. The committee is responsible for general awareness of environmental issues and environmental education. The committee is also responsible for our activities in habitat restoration at the Heard Museum and the Blackland Prairie Raptor Center on Lake Lavon.

Board members serve two year terms with 4 members including Treasurer being elected in even years and 6 members including President, Vice President, and Secretary being elected in odd years.

If you would like to be involved in our program, field trip, environmental and/or leadership activities talk to any board member. Board meetings are open to any active volunteer and we would love to have you.

Feed the Raptors

The board at its February meeting voted to continue its support of the Blackland Prairie Raptor Center with an $800 grant to help feed the raptors. These hawks, owls and falcons are well trained, and with the assistance of BPRC education specialists, give presentations on what makes them an important part of our environment. The presentations are available to all schools, home school groups, youth organizations and community groups.

Dogwood Canyon Audubon Center Groundbreaking

Audubon Texas completed its $7.4 million capital campaign for the Dogwood Canyon Audubon Center in Cedar Hill and celebrated the groundbreaking on April 23. The Center is expected to open to the public next spring. The Center will be used for environmental education and will have hiking trails through the surrounding 270 acres of wildlife habitat. Five million people live within a 50-minute drive of Dogwood Canyon. As the area continues to be developed, Texas Audubon hopes to forever conserve this beautiful natural area, while providing educational programs for people of all ages and backgrounds.

When the Center opens in 2009, education programs Audubon currently offers at Cedar Ridge Preserve will be moved there. Audubon’s science-based programs improve critical thinking skills and focus on local ecology and habitat study, scientific observation and identification, and stewardship of natural resources. Education curricula are aligned with TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) objectives mandated by the state.

Located 16 miles south of downtown Dallas in Cedar Hill, Dogwood Canyon is part of the White Rock Escarpment. Nowhere in North Texas can one find a greater variety of rare species than in Dogwood Canyon. Plants and animals from east, west and central Texas converge here, making the Canyon the only place in the world where one can find the Black-chinned hummingbird of west Texas nesting in the flowering dogwood tree of east Texas.
Raptors Come to February PTAS Meeting

At our February meeting Blackland Prairie Raptor Center used live raptors of the same species to demonstrate up close the many differences between them. Sizes, plumage and behaviors were discussed while viewing these amazing birds side-by-side. Two red-tailed hawks, two American kestrels, and two screech owls gave an excellent show but let Erich Neupert the executive director of Blackland Prairie Raptor Center do all the talking. The raptors mingled with the audience and posed for photographs.

All of the raptor ambassadors have come to BPRC with circumstances that make them non-releasable. Due to their injuries or conditions, they would not be able to survive on their own in the wild. They have become the ambassadors for all wild birds of prey by educating the public about the issues concerning their future. Their purpose is to inspire their audiences to think about and actively participate in helping preserve raptors and the environment for generations to come.
Note: If you would like to receive email notifications when the newsletters are available, or to update your email address, please contact Merrick Darley at hmdarley@prairieandtimbers.org.

PRAIRIE & TIMBERS AUDUBON SOCIETY

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When shopping at our advertiser’s stores please let them know you saw their ad in the PTAS newsletter.

Membership Application

___ I would like to be a member of Prairie and Timbers Audubon Society (PTAS), knowing that my annual membership dues will be used to support local bird-related projects and habitats. Enclosed is my check for $12 (includes all family members at a single address) made out to: PTAS. PTAS is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization; your membership fee and any donations made to PTAS are tax deductible.

___ I would also like to support the National Audubon Society, where my annual membership dues will be used nationally and globally. Enclosed is my check for the special new-member introductory price of $20, made out to: National Audubon Society

Name_________________________________________________
Address_______________________________________________
City____________________________ State__________________
Zip ______________________
Phone________________________ Email_______________________

(E-mail addresses are used to notify members of updated website newsletters, upcoming field trips, and important local bird-related issues. E-mail addresses are NOT shared with, or forwarded to, any other source.)

How did you hear about Prairie and Timbers Audubon Society?

_____From a member of PTAS
_____From the PTAS website
_____Other (please specify)___________________________________

Mail to: Prairie and Timbers Audubon Society
c/o Mike Mizell, 800 Edgewood, Denton, TX 76201

SEND US YOUR UPDATED E-MAIL ADDRESS

Email is the most efficient way for us to let you know about events, meetings and last minute changes. We send only 1 or 2 emails per month, and we do not share our mailing list with anyone. If you are not on our email distribution list, or if your email address has changed recently, please contact Merrick Darley at hmdarley@prairieandtimbers.org

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