

Skimmer

Aug.-Sept. 2010
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The Francis M. Weston Audubon Society

Challenging Times Face the Gulf Coast

Twelve years ago, as the newly elected President of the Francis M. Weston Audubon Society, I wrote my first *Skimmer* article, in which I reflected on my personal birding journey and philosophy on nature. In the next issue of the *Skimmer* (Vol XXVI [2]), I reported that at our annual planning meeting, your Board of Directors had developed a theme for the coming year's activities—"Right in your own Backyard." The lead article in that same issue, written by Amy Belanger, seems ironic in retrospect, especially as I write my first message to the chapter as the newly elected President of Francis M. Weston Audubon Society for 2010-2011. Titled "Last Chance for a Rig Free Florida", Amy's article warned of the need for action to stop a Chevron proposal to drill up to 400 oil wells 25 miles south of Pensacola Beach. The irony is, of course, as British Petroleum (BP) oil spill residue still laps at our coast, our chapter's focus is once again necessarily on our own backyard, and there is renewed pressure on our legislature to permit drilling along our coast.

Challenges faced by migrants:

We anticipate with no small apprehension the arrival of fall migrants at our oiled and stained coast—how will these birds be affected? How about the wintering waterfowl to which we usually offer a safe habitat? Not to mention the many resident birds and creatures that ply the Gulf waters, coast and marshes and whose lives are threatened. We hope that our members will monitor their backyards and surrounds to observe and document the lives of birds for these next few months.

Within our chapter we face some challenges:

Returning to a full set of officers after three years of past Audubon Presidents' Council leadership; reassignments of most committee chairs; a search for a new editor of the *Skimmer*; downsizing our support of the Roy Hyatt Environmental Center (RHEC) following completion of our educational grant initiative; seeking to strengthen our financial position to afford continuation of the Audubon Naturalist position at RHEC, and increasing chapter participation in our excellent programs and field trips.

We welcome Frank Butera to our Board as a Director, and the new committee chairs listed on page 8 in this issue.

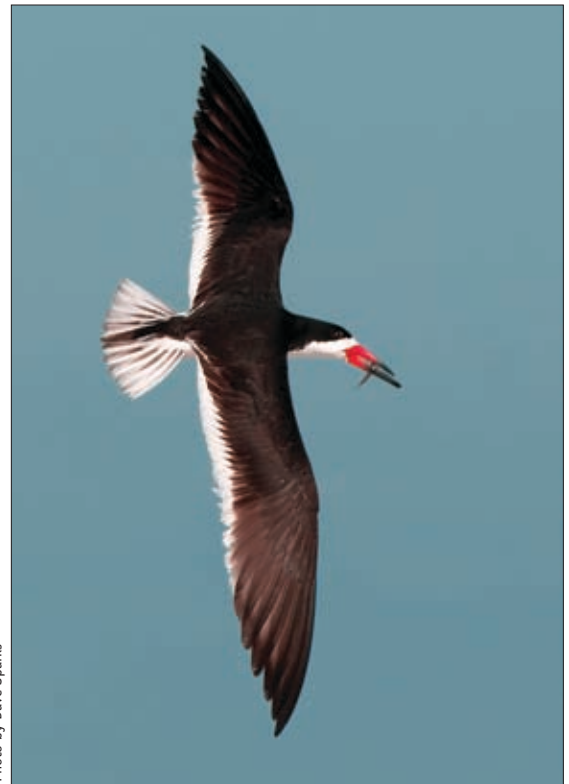


Photo by Dave Sparks

Beach nesting Black Skimmers depend on clean gulf and bay waters for fish and invertebrates to feed their young. FMWAS seeks to be a voice for them and a healthy ecosystem.

Visit our website: fmwaudubon.org for information on our activities. We solicit your comments and suggestions which may be directed to any board member. So, to both the birds and to you, good birding.

Jim Brady, President

Francis M. Weston Audubon Society

Field Trips

■ **Saturday, August 28, Bay Cliff Nature Preserve Native Plants.** James Burkhalter will lead us on a walk to observe native plants and summer wildflowers along a nature trail in Gulf Breeze. The nature trail is in upland oak forest and adjacent to swamp forest. A boardwalk allows access to the edge of Pensacola Bay. Expect easy walking. Insect repellent may be needed. Meet at 7:30 a.m. at the north end of the Pensacola Bay Bridge at Wayside Park near the Pensacola Visitor Center. We plan to finish by noon.

■ **Saturday, September 11, South Baldwin County Birding.** Morris Clark will lead us through south Baldwin County in search of fall migrants. We hope to see Black-bellied Plovers in breeding plumage, and Pectoral and Buff-breasted Sandpipers. Also, with a little luck we might see Upland Sandpipers and American Golden-Plovers. Expect easy walking and possibly some wet conditions. We plan to eat lunch at a restaurant. Meet at 7:30 a.m. in the Big Lots parking lot located on the east side of Navy Blvd. south of Highway 98 in Warrington. We plan to return by mid-afternoon.

■ **Saturday, September 25, Haines Island Park Native Plants.** James Burkhalter will lead us to look for native plants, including many rare plants, on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers property along the Alabama River northwest of Monroeville, Alabama. Expect easy walking. Bring a picnic lunch and beverages for the day. Meet at 7:30 a.m. in the parking lot of the Publix Store located on the corner of Nine Mile Road and Pine Forest Road. Carpooling is encouraged. We plan to return by late afternoon.

■ **Saturday, October 9, Ft. Morgan Birding.** Merilu Rose will lead us to look for migrants at one of the best places along the upper gulf coast. We plan to spend some time at the Sargent's bird banding station. Expect some moderate walking in sand. There will be a small entrance fee to the fort. Bring a picnic lunch and drinks for the day. Insect repellent is a very good idea. Meet at 7:30 a.m. in the Big Lots parking lot located on the east side of Navy Blvd. south of Highway 98 in Warrington. We plan to return by mid-afternoon.

How to Become a Member of FMWAS

Fill out the form on page 8 to become a member of the National Audubon Society. With membership you will receive *Audubon Magazine*, the *Florida Naturalist* and the *Skimmer*. Mail your check to Francis M. Weston Audubon Society, P.O. Box 17484, Pensacola, FL 32522. Thank you.

Chapter Meetings

Pensacola State College, (formerly PJC), Main Campus, 7 p.m., Baroco Science Center, Room 2142, unless otherwise noted. Guests are welcome!

■ **Thursday, August 26, 7 p.m., "Mississippi Sandhill Cranes,"** presented by Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge biologists. Come learn about this non-migratory population of sandhills and how they and the refuge have fared since recent environmental upheavals.

■ **Thursday, September 23, 7 p.m., "Shorebirds of Northwest Florida,"** presented by Dr. John Himes of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Come learn about the birds that are found along our shores. From Oystercatchers to Sanderlings and everything in between, we will discover which ones have nested successfully and which ones need our help and constant monitoring.

Board of Directors Meetings

■ **Thursdays, 7 p.m.** August 12, September 2, October 7 at the Baskerville-Donovan Building, 449 West Main Street, Pensacola. Open to all members.

Other Events

■ **Friday-Sunday, October 8-10. Alabama Ornithological Society Fall meeting,** Dauphin Island. There should be some good birding on the Alabama coast in early October with field trips to top migrant spots including coastal woods, shores, and marshes. The guest speaker will be Marshall Iliff, the national coordinator for eBird. Registration required. See <http://www.aosbirds.org> for information soon.

■ **Florida Ornithological Society Fall Meeting, Tallahassee.** Field trips are offered to Tall Timbers Research Station, St. Marks, Wakulla Springs, Alligator and Bald Points, St. Joe Peninsula State Park, and Tallahassee hotspots. Special presentation: "Herbert Stoddard and the Origins of Ecosystem Management" by Jim Cox, and "From Oystercatchers to Oyster Beds—the Tragedy of the Deep Horizon Oil Spill" by Dr. Felicia Coleman, Director, FSU Coastal and Marine Laboratory. See <http://www.fosbirds.org/> for information soon.

■ **Saturday, October 16. Roy Hyatt Environmental Center open house,** 1300 Tobias Road, Cantonment, Fla. 32533.

Protecting Shorebirds

by Dr. John Himes

Florida's shorebirds are vulnerable at any time of the year, particularly when they are nesting on the beaches from April through August.

This year shorebirds faced unprecedented challenges as the impacts from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill were felt in the waters and beaches of the Panhandle. Any disturbance of birds on the beach that causes them to take flight also threatens their survival. In addition to the normal disturbances on the beach cleanup crews for litter and oil product removal brought added stresses. The birds also faced the possibility of ingesting oil or becoming drenched in oil.

Many species of Florida's water birds, including gulls, terns, skimmers, plovers, willets and oystercatchers, nest on the beach. When these beach-nesting birds are flushed off their nests by people or dogs, eggs and chicks are exposed to temperature extremes and predators, such as other birds, raccoons and dogs.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has taken every precaution to ensure that the shorebirds of the Northwest Florida Gulf beaches are given a fighting chance to survive. Biologists have developed "Best Management Practices" to provide the safest and most effective methods for taking care of birds. Protocols are in place to handle oiled birds.

SPECIFIC HAZARDOUS-MATERIALS TRAINING IS REQUIRED FOR ANYONE COMING INTO CONTACT WITH OILED WILDLIFE. It is important to have training in handling wildlife because animals can sometimes cause serious injuries when they are under the stress of captivity. If you spot a shorebird or its nest in harm's way, it should not be moved. Removing eggs from a nest will cause the birds to abandon the nest. Only highly trained personnel are equipped with the skills and resources necessary to rescue eggs or hatchlings.

CONTACT WITH OIL. Direct contact with oil, or consumption of oil-tainted items by birds can cause health problems, such as organ failure, skin irritations, breathing and other health problems that can lead to death. Indirect contact through bioaccumulation of oil in the food chain is of high concern. Typically higher-order animals accumulate toxic levels of these poisons from eating many items that have smaller, less-toxic levels of the poison. Reduced egg production, abnormal larval development, poor health and death can occur from exposure to oil.

If shorebirds ingest oil, it can cause an irritation to the lining of the mouth, esophagus and stomach. It also interrupts the intestines' ability to absorb nutrients, proteins and water. Dehydration causes organ failure by blocking the normal flow of liquid in the kidneys, liver and spleen, which further leads to a buildup of toxic fluids that can cause death. Weakened and emaciated birds also are more susceptible to fungal and bacterial diseases.



Photo by Dave Sparks

Least Terns look serene on their nests—a shallow scrape in the sand—but will defend their vulnerable scrapes with vociferous attacks. Unfortunately, they are no match for people and dogs.

IF YOU ARE INVOLVED WITH LITTER REMOVAL AS PART OF OFFICIAL CLEANUP ACTIVITIES, please follow the guidance for shorebird nesting areas developed by the FWC at http://www.myfwc.com/OilSpill/OilSpill_Shorebirds_BestPractices.htm

Timing for removal of beach wrack in oil-spill response is critical. It should be left on the beach in areas of active nesting as long as possible but removed immediately prior to beaches becoming oiled. In areas distant from active nesting, cleanup of wrack and other natural debris can be performed to better facilitate future oil removal.

Dr. Himes will address our Audubon Chapter at the September meeting. See page 2 for details.

INTERESTED IN EFFORTS TO REHABILITATE OILED WILDLIFE?

Call 866-557-1401 for more information or register online at www.DeepwaterHorizonResponse.com.

Please use the following numbers for further information

- To report oiled wildlife, call 866-557-1401.
- To discuss spill-related damage, call 800-440-0858.
- To report oiled shoreline or to request volunteer information, call 866-448-5816.
- For information on BP's Vessels of Opportunity Program (for fishermen to help with cleanup efforts), call 281-366-5511.
- To submit alternative response technology, services or products call 281-366-5511.
- To report problems with work crews on the beaches, call 251-445-3009.



F I E L D N O T E S

by Bob Duncan

■ **THE NESTING SEASON**—The oil spill’s effect on locally nesting birds is difficult for me to determine at this time. Lucy Duncan and I have made numerous trips to Ft. Pickens and the Opal Beach tidal flats since the last *Skimmer* report and found that a large colony of **Black Skimmers**, perhaps about 50 nests, with scattered **Least Tern** nests and a few Gull-billed Tern nests, had been established early in the nesting season near the entrance to Ft. Pickens. We watched it closely with high hopes, only to find it was abandoned overnight. The reasons? We were told by park personnel that they had trapped three of four coyotes which could have been the culprits. But the area had also endured eight straight days of rain that might have flooded nests. Also, oil clean-up efforts nearby could have been a contributing factor as could have the crowds on Memorial Day weekend. The reason for the abandonment is unknown.

That did not deter **Least Terns** from nesting throughout Santa Rosa Island. Judging from our numerous trips to the island, they had another productive year, with many recently-fledged birds seen all along the island. **Snowy Plovers** appear to have had a good year, judging from the number of young we encountered. **Wilson’s Plovers** had another great year with many young running around the tidal flats at Opal Beach and at Ft. Pickens. However, **Black Skimmers** appear not to have fared well, as we have seen only a couple of juveniles. As far as encountering oiled birds, the only ones we have seen so far were two fully functional **Willetts** and one **Wilson’s Plover** with oil on their undersides.

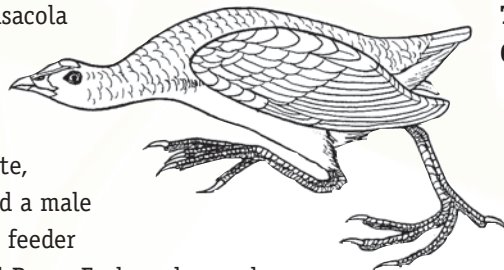
Encouraging was an observation by Rhonda and Arianna Robbins of **Loggerhead Shrikes**, a threatened species, raising two broods in the Big Lagoon area by 2 July (fide Chris Davis). Two pair of **Northern Flickers**, another declining species, raised young in north Pensacola (James Pfeiffer).

■ **RARA AVES**—Providing the first June record for the entire state, Norene and Warren Gideon watched a male **Black-headed Grosbeak*** at their feeder in Navarre 4–5 June. Les Kelly and Bruce Furlow observed a bird more common in the past, a **Purple Gallinule** at the Air Products Sanctuary in Pace on 11 June. Extremely rare

in summer, as well as the rest of the year, an **American Woodcock** was flushed from a yard in Gulf Breeze by Johnny Green on 16 June and James Pfeiffer flushed another (or the same bird) on 15 July. I found the bird again on 16 July. A **Black-whiskered Vireo***, rare but regular along the coast in early summer, was in the Duncans’ yard in Gulf Breeze 5–8 June. Betsy Tetlow reported three **Gray Kingbirds** in downtown Pensacola 26 June near Jefferson and Tarragona Streets where they were subsequently seen by three generations of Duncan birders. James Pfeiffer reported a group of 2 adults and three juveniles of these rare but regular birds near the Crab Trap restaurant on Main Street on 18 July.

■ **EARLY FALL MIGRANTS**—**Prairie Warblers** appeared at Ft. Pickens 14 July, beating the typically earlier **Yellow Warblers** that didn’t show up in Gulf Breeze until 24 July. Also present in Gulf Breeze on the 24th was a **Yellow-throated Warbler**, beaten out as the first of the season by Lucy Michel’s life **Yellow-throated Warbler** seen a week earlier on 17 July!

■ **SHOREBIRDS GALORE**—Opal Beach mudflats continued to produce excitement for shorebird aficionados. Some of the 19 shorebird species encountered in the last few weeks of July were **Wilson’s**, **Snowy**, **Semipalmated**, and **Piping Plovers** and many richly-colored, rusty bellied **Short-billed Dowitchers**. Among the less common species were **Marbled Godwit**, **American Avocet** and **Whimbrels**. In the same area along the island’s north shore have been several **Reddish Egrets** canopy feeding in the shallow pools, **Tricolored Herons**, **Snowy Egrets**, and breeding **Clapper Rails**.



*Species with asterisks require documentation so that they may be processed to become part of the ornithological record. The *Skimmer* welcomes reports of noteworthy birds. If you have something to report, please call Bob or Lucy Duncan at 932-4792.

AUDUBON ADVENTURES *for* EVERY BOOKBAG

by Peggy Baker

Enhancing environmental education for Escambia and Santa Rosa County students is a major Francis M. Weston Audubon Society goal. We accomplish this in two important ways: we supply the Roy Hyatt Environmental Center with an Audubon Naturalist teacher, and we purchase *Audubon Adventures*, the environmental education newsletter, for use in local classrooms. We could not do either of these without the financial generosity of our membership.

In addition to providing *Audubon Adventures* for teachers who request them, we ALSO supply an issue set that follows up on the lessons each classroom receives at the Hyatt Center. Classes visiting the Hyatt Center for the day receive three lessons on environmental topics. If one of the lessons taught by our Audubon Naturalist that day is about birds of prey, the classroom teacher will receive a set of *Audubon Adventure* newsletters about "Raptors," and if the Escambia County teacher at the Hyatt Center, Molly O'Connor, teaches the lesson on turtles the set theme will be titled "Reptiles."

Back at their school, the teacher uses *Audubon Adventures* to review and expand the Hyatt Center lesson, and every child has his own special Audubon newsletter to take home and share with parents and siblings. With your donations last year, we purchased sets for every requesting classroom and over 6000 single copies for students who visited the Hyatt Center!

A classroom set includes four different *Audubon Adventures* issues and a teacher guide for \$50. You may designate a set for a specific classroom or school by providing us with the teacher's name, grade, and the school name. Or, for your \$50 contribution, we can purchase 160 single copies for the Hyatt Center student visitors. Every contribution is appreciated, whatever the amount.

Thank you for supporting the Audubon Adventures project for children in our area!

Please send your check to the Francis M. Weston Audubon Society, P.O. Box 17484, Pensacola, FL 32522, and include the following:

Your name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Audubon Adventures and teacher guide: \$50:

Other: \$ _____

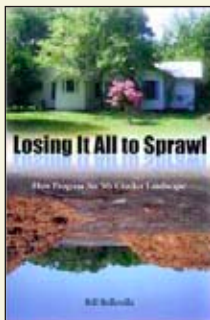
If you request *Audubon Adventures* for a specific teacher include the following information:

Teacher's name _____

Grade taught _____

School name _____

BOOK REVIEW



LOSING IT ALL TO SPRAWL: How Progress Ate My Cracker Landscape

Bill Belleville, University Press of Florida, 2006.

Bill Belleville writes about his home in Central Florida with homespun emotion, love of the commonplace, respect for nature, and a pithy awareness of foregone doom. It is the last of these that makes the other characteristics of his writing so much the more poignant. Here in what should be the slow and natural culmination of man and environment, he confronts a rapid tide of change that is sweeping up from Orlando, replacing unique with commonplace—a kind of 'normal' that has become omnipresent throughout Florida, as well as much of the nation. For Belleville it is an unnatural, abnormal wasteland of cookie-cutter sameness in both commercial and residential development—the same stores, houses, churches, streets, even the same trees. Here the demographers that have created a world of make believe are spreading that alien world from Orlando throughout Central Florida, with as much sense of adventure as thirty rides on the Pirates of The Caribbean, where "nothing changes, and the pirates all raise their plastic arms and rum bottles at the same time, and drink deeply of nothing at all." Poet Jim Harrison once wrote: "the danger of civilization, of course, is that we piss away our lives on nonsense." The nonsense of Disney World is that we have come to assume it to be the idealized reality, and as a result, according to Belleville, we cannot understand, and thereby cannot preserve, the truly unique and beautiful reality of the real Florida.

—Review by Jere French

Tripping *down* Baja *for* Pelagics *or* Heave Ho

By Ann Forster

Just back from a successful five-day June cruise down Baja Peninsula in Mexico, in search of pelagic birds and whales. It was a Legacy Tours Baja Pelagics and Weight Loss Clinic. Twenty-seven intrepid sailor/birders and I boarded the long narrow boat—The Searcher. The trip started in San Diego, then ranged southward down Baja with side excursions to some islands and seamounts. The weather prediction was good: overcast, cool, no rain. We had our orientation meeting, found our teeny rooms which fortunately had a teeny lavatory, and stowed our satchels.

At 4:00 p.m., we headed out past Point Loma for our adventure. We passed an incoming submarine which had about 40 Western Gulls riding on the exposed deck. Once we cleared the harbor and turned south it became apparent that there was considerable ground swell causing considerable rolling and yawing. We had been introduced to the chef who was indeed a gourmet cook ... or so I heard. We were wearing the highly recommended anti-seasickness wrist bands and sure enough, my wrists felt fine. Unfortunately the rest of me noticed the rolling and refused to participate in dinner. The teeny lavatory and teeny bunk and I became best friends. After two days, the leader pressed a prescription disk behind my ear and lo, on the third day I rose again and staggered out on the deck ready to bird. The good news was that everything that had been seen in small numbers the first two days was seen in good numbers on the third, fourth, and fifth days.

The trip had been advertised as a birding experience, so seeing the whales was a big bonus for us. We had Fin Whale, even a mother and

The highlight of the trip around the islands was a trio of Pigeon Guillemots flying right next to the boat and landing only a few feet away. They were new birds for Mexico for every birder on the boat including our leader, Michael Carmody, who has seen more than 1000 species in Mexico.

Photo by Dan Forster



With a 6 ft. wingspan and weighing 6 lbs, this Laysan Albatross was one of many pelagics the Forsters saw off the coast of Baja, Mexico.

baby. There were multiple sightings of Humpback Whales and, best of all, multiples sightings of Blue Whales, which are the largest and least understood whales of all. We passed huge pods of Common Dolphin leaping and chasing.

The birding was wonderful with numbers of Laysan Albatross, bigger numbers of Black-footed Albatross, hundreds of Leach's Storm-Petrels, several South Polar Skua, various auklets, murrelets, and other storm-petrels. When we got back to the Coronado Islands, Calif. we were entertained by a territorial dispute among six Black Oystercatchers. They flew at each other in a strange bill-down posture calling each other bad names.

SKIMMER EDITORSHIP OPEN

Your chapter is looking for a new editor for the newsletter, the *Skimmer*. While I have enjoyed my years at its helm, it is time for me to pass the opportunity along as I delve into other projects. My term as editor has been greatly rewarding, and I stand ready to assist the new editor in every way possible.

We have in place a defined process with detailed instructions to guide the new editor and staff. In addition, the *Skimmer* has a talented art director who prepares the layout and sends it to the printer. The bimonthly issues of the newsletter are the main means of communication with the chapter membership and the community. If you are looking for an effective and creative way to become involved with the Chapter and affect local environmental issues, please



Lucy Duncan

contact me to discuss this position.

I would like to thank all the members and the Board of Directors for the opportunity to serve FMWAS in this capacity. Special thanks go to each of you who write for the *Skimmer*, to those of you who help proofread the articles, and the faithful group that gets together to visit while we fold, tab, and label over 800 copies of each issue. Those of you who let us know what you'd like to see within the folds of the *Skimmer* insure the diverse, significant and interesting content.

Thank you all! Lucy Duncan (932-4792).

Bugs I have known

Late summer afternoons may find me reading under our old hickory, not moving much, hoping for a breeze off the bay. A tiny insect no bigger than this comma, strolls aimlessly up and down across my page. I tap my finger and it picks up the pace. Something, somehow within that miniscule brain has set off a warning signal.

Insects will eventually conquer us, I have no doubt, but I don't think they know it yet. We, with our big brains and the advantage of foresight, recognize the challenge coming from the insect world, but we don't know how to confront it. We've tried to eradicate them, or at least control them but we've repeatedly failed, as every technological thrust by us is genetically parried by them. They simply adjust to whatever we throw at them—and probably resent having to do so.

I've had a few encounters which suggest, at least to me, that insects really do have it in for us. Once, while birding in a south Florida marsh I stepped on a fire ant hill. In less time than I can write this they were all over my lower half, and I was shoeless and pantsless in just about the same length of time. Angry bees attacked me as I came out of an Arkansas cave one summer day, and chased me across the county line—and I never even touched their precious hive. I can remember tick attacks too, especially the one at scout camp that took up residence in a particularly personal location requiring the sensitive services of the camp nurse; nor could I ever forget my first Yellow-breasted Chat in an Arizona wetland that also brought me my first hundred or so chiggers, which laid me up for three days. And there's those August dogflies on Pensacola Beach, mosquitoes all summer long, and even on rare occasions, spiders. A wasp stung me once for no good reason at all.

Then there's the competition for food, and as anyone who has ever grown vegetables outback knows, bugs and people like to eat the same things—and thus we poison them at our own peril. Still they come, at the first ripening tomato. We've even grown parsley just for the discriminating palate of the swallowtail butterflies. They, and others, seem to have no trouble locating anything else desirable—through a complex barrage of coded signals—sound, smell, sight—day and night, involving every insect interest from sex to food to vacation specials.

Which brings me to roaches. I read somewhere that they flee from light (the one you turn on in the kitchen on your way to a late night snack), because light reacts in their brains like a switch, which supposedly drives the legs harder on the side nearest the source of light, thus causing the roach to scurry toward darkness. This is surely hokum. I've chased roaches through the kitchen with a broom, failing to land a blow as they keep changing direction faster and more accurately than Richard Jaeckel escaping Japanese machine gun fire in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*.

I don't say I like roaches but I have to admire their resilience—and their discretion, as I've also read they quickly learn where the fresher leftovers can be found, shunning the old stale stuff. They even clue in their friends and family, which is why we usually encounter two of them, during our own night raids on the pantry. But despite their presumptive impertinence, at least one positive aspect of their behavior prevails: Compared to all those disputatious bees, ants, ticks, mosquitoes, dogflies, wasps, and chiggers out there, roaches always run away from me. For an insect, that seems an almost endearing trait.

The cicadas have started their orchestrations now, and I have no doubt, that within the timbre and tempo of their concert individuals are sending coded messages to which other individuals are responding. It seems a primitively repetitive rhythm—beautiful and daunting.



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photo by Jack Rogers

Ruddy Turnstones feed along the shoreline and can become contaminated from oil-coated sand, seaweed and flotsam. This adult male is in normal breeding plumage.

Our online edition of the *Skimmer* is in full color at www.fmwaudubon.org
<http://www.fmwaudubon.org>



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