

LeConte's Sparrows

By Mike Scully, mike.scully@nisd.net

Thirty-five years ago, I used to go birdwatching regularly at Bryan Utilities Lake outside Bryan/College Station. One of my favorite winter birds at that time was the LeConte's Sparrow (*Ammospiza lecontei*). In good light, the yellow/gold wash of the plumage recalled a springtime warbler rather than a sparrow, and they were not difficult to find in a low lakeside area of sedge and wet grass, often flushing up from right at your feet. At the time I didn't recognize how fortunate I was. In my subsequent decades here in Bexar County, I have not yet seen another.



LeConte's Sparrow by Laura Erickson, C.C.
by 3.0, Wikipedia

Close to a Chipping Sparrow in size, this elusive denizen of dense meadows is one of our four species of similarly elusive grassland sparrows, along with the Baird's Sparrow of the Northern Plains, the Henslow's Sparrow of the Midwest, and the more generally distributed Grasshopper Sparrow. Surprisingly, only two of these ostensibly similar species, the Henslow's and Baird's, belong to the same genus.

The Grasshopper Sparrow's closest relatives are native to Central and South America, while the LeConte's closest relatives are the Nelson's, Saltmarsh and Seaside Sparrows, all of which inhabit freshwater or coastal wetlands.

The breeding range of the LeConte's Sparrow centers upon the Northern Plains of Canada up to the Yukon, extending south and east to North Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Isolated breeding populations occur to the east in Canada as far as James Bay and the St Lawrence Seaway. Across this range, LeConte's Sparrows occupy a variety of open, usually moist habitats such as sedge meadows and wet grasslands. Little range overlap exists between this species and those Henslow's Sparrows breeding immediately to the south in the Midwest. An extensive area of range overlap does exist with Baird's and Nelson's Sparrows, although in general Baird's Sparrows prefer drier habitats, whereas the Nelson's breeds in actual wetlands.

Unlike many songbirds, LeConte's, Henslow's, Baird's and those populations of Grasshopper Sparrows breeding in areas of range overlap with these species do not exhibit any degree of site fidelity upon their return to the breeding grounds each spring. It may be that their grassland habitats are so subject to alteration by fire and other factors that no competitive advantage would accrue from returning to a previous territory, even where they had successfully nested.

The elusive habits of the LeConte's Sparrow has made observation difficult, so much of its breeding behavior remains unknown. The related Nelson's and Saltmarsh Sparrows are unusual in that they do not form pair bonds, males do not defend breeding territories and the females raise the young alone, with the sexes coming together only to copulate. So far as has been determined, LeConte's Sparrows do form mated pairs. Upon arrival on the breeding grounds, the males appear to establish breeding territories. Male LeConte's Sparrows

have also been observed feeding young, another indication that some degree of paternity provided by an established pair bond exists. Although song flights have been observed, most often the males sing their brief, buzzy insect-like song from cover. Presumably, the female builds the nest and incubates the eggs, with the cup-shaped nest of dried grasses being placed within a clump of grass sheltered by overhanging vegetation.

On the breeding grounds, male LeConte's Sparrows are persistent singers, singing well into August despite the northern latitudes of their breeding grounds. Nelson's Sparrows breeding at those same latitudes are known to initiate second broods in late summer, but it is unknown if this is also true of LeConte's Sparrows.

Most LeConte's Sparrows winter in the South-Central U.S. across a range extending from Southern Illinois and Missouri south to the Gulf of Mexico, west to Central Texas and east to Western Tennessee. Fall migration appears to be a protracted affair, as some birds do not arrive on their winter quarters until November. LeConte's appear to be among the most asocial of our sparrows; flocking behavior or feeding assemblages have not been observed at any time of year. Even where significant densities may be present in winter, individual birds will invariably be spaced at least a few meters apart. No data exists pertaining to site fidelity on the winter range. Here in Texas, moisture appears to be critical, with more birds occurring in a given area during wet winters.

Annual Budgets for 2021 (12/11/20)

The SAAS Board of Directors approved the 2021 budgets for both the General Operating Fund and the Special Projects Fund.

In 2021, we continue to operate the General Operating Fund in the black. We have removed Bexar Audubon as an Income Source for 2021. Expenses are showing an increase in Mail Box and Website Support, but a decrease in Honorariums, Education Outreach and Miscellaneous from 2020. By year end we anticipate a net increase of \$1,556.

Donations are made from the Special Projects Fund with the approval of the Board of Directors. This fund has a deficit of \$2,910 so SAAS can fund important conservation projects. The Special Projects Fund received \$5,000 in 2017 from the estate of Sue Bayley and there was a \$1,000 withdrawal from this fund in 2020. The Judson Nature Trail Fund had an audit correction of \$500 from 2019 in 2020. No monies were spent from the Carbon Offset Program in 2020. The dedicated accounts will be monitored and approved by the SAAS Board of Directors.

If you have any questions, please contact Treasurer Debra Engler at denglernb@yahoo.com.

Budget 2021 - General Operating Fund

Income	
Membership Dues	\$3,500
Tax Exempt Sales	\$200
Taxable Sales	\$50
General Donations	\$780
Bexar Audubon	\$0
Miscellaneous	\$70
Total Income	\$4,600

Expenses

Paypal Expenses	\$90
Newsletter	\$1,200
Postage	\$20
Mail Box	\$225
Office Supplies	\$50
Website Support	\$450
Sales Tax	\$20

Treasurer Bond	\$109
Picnic Supplies	\$30
Gifts/Awards/Honorarium	\$450
Equipment Purchases	\$100
Education Outreach	\$200
Miscellaneous	\$100
Total Expenses	\$3,044

Income – Expenses **+1,556**

Duck Stamp (Net)	\$450
Annual Dinner (Net)	\$ 0
Pass Through (Net)	\$ 0

Budget 2021- Special Projects Fund

Income	
CD and MM Interest	\$200
Donations	\$50
Donations to JNT	\$90
Carbon Offset Donations	\$100
Total Income	\$440

Expenses

Donation Requests	\$1,000
Carbon Offset	\$250
MLAC Donation	\$1,000
LHI Donation	\$250
Warbler Woods Donation	\$500
JNT	\$150
GEAA	\$200
Total Expenses	\$3,350

Income – Expenses **-\$2,910**

Dedicated Accounts in Special Projects Fund

Sue Bayley's Estate	\$1,671.95
Judson Nature Trail Fund	\$425.68
Carbon Offset Bird Program	\$4,333.40
Total Dedicated Accounts	\$6,431.03

Money Market Account	\$11,362.47
Less Dedicated Accounts	\$6,431.03
Money Available for SPF in MM	\$4,931.44

Credit Human FCU CD (11/27/23)	\$8,042.04
Security Service FCU CD (09/1/21)	\$7,000.00

Thursday, January 7, 2021 @ 7:00 PM
SAAS Monthly Meeting

Birding in Belize

San Antonio Audubon member Desi D'Orsogna and David Sarkozi of KoziBirding Birding Tours in Houston will tell us about their birding trip to Belize in February 2020. Desi provided the photos of a Red-capped Manakin and of the Belize birding group. Debra Engler of SAAS was also on the trip.

To Join the Zoom Meeting:

Click [here](#) to access Zoom on January 7 at 7:00 PM.

Meeting ID: 840 6815 4188

Passcode: 703373

To dial in: 1 (346) 248-7799



SAVE THE DATE!

Thursday, February 4 @ 7 PM

Pauline Tom of the [Texas Bluebird Society](#) will be the guest speaker for our February online meeting. Information about joining the Zoom meeting will be sent to you by email a few days prior to the event.



SAAS-Y Notes

1. SAAS Used Book Sale, November 8, brought in \$214.50. Thanks to all who contributed books to the sale and all who bought them, as well as to those who worked at the sale at the Judson Nature Trails. Photo by Chuck DuVal.



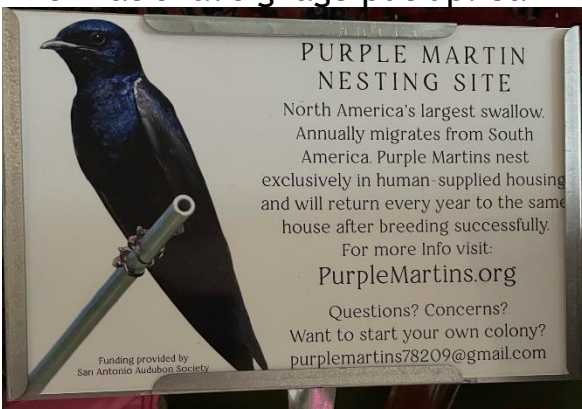
2. Thanks to those of you who contributed aluminum cans, we collected \$11.10 from recycling.

3. Check Texas Ornithological Society's [webpage](#) for their latest newsletter containing information on a virtual meeting to be held January 15-17. Deadline for registering is January 7th. They are going to bird all over Texas and have virtual speakers to watch.

4. The Friends of Hondo Canyon at Tarpley were successful in their meetings with the TCEQ. The new camp will not discharge their wastewater effluent into Commissioner's Creek. Thanks to all who signed up to defend this creek.

5. San Antonio Audubon presented graduate student Eres Gomez a \$1,000 check for her UTSA owl project, made possible by the money we received from Sue Bayley's estate.

6. At the Judson Nature Trails, the Purple Martin houses have been restored and informational signage put up. San Antonio Audubon paid for one of the signs.



7. We gave \$500 to Mitchell Lake Audubon Center.

8. The December 3 holiday party drew 25 people for a virtual meeting. We saw photos taken by Roel Loera, Xavier Adame, Patsy Kuentz and Brad Wier. We were brought up to date on a lot of interesting bird sightings in the area. And we elected new officers to lead us in 2021.

Welcome New SAAS Members!

Suzanne Gamboa

Olive Whelan

Mitchell Lake Audubon Center

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Mitchell Lake Audubon Center is open with limited hours. Please review the new guidelines at our [Plan Your Visit webpage](#). Purchase your tickets today [HERE](#).



Please note, due to a long-term SAWS wetland project, the majority of ponds are dry at this time. However, the lake has a considerable amount of water. [Click Here](#) for additional information. [Check eBird for up-to-date bird sightings](#).

Migratory Bird Fest and Birdathon 2021 March 12 - March 30, 2021

We are excited to bring back Migratory Bird Fest and Birdathon 2021, after a short break due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This year we celebrate Migratory Birds while social distancing—through a Birdathon and virtual events. If safe to do so, we will include small group guided tours. This three-week event will consist of virtual workshops, guest lectures, virtual bird tours, contests, and competition. Check the Mitchell Lake Audubon Center [website](#) in January for more details!

Registration for [Birdathon 2021](#) begins February 1, 2021.

Join the Great Backyard Bird Count February 12-15, 2021

Each February, for four days, the world comes together for the love of birds. Over these four days you are invited to spend time in your favorite places watching and counting as many birds as you can find and reporting them to the Great Backyard Bird Count, sponsored by Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society. These observations help scientists better understand global bird populations before one of their annual migrations. Click [here](#) to learn more.

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SAAS Membership

The SAAS newsletter is sent by email only to all members who have provided an email address. You will also receive a membership renewal notice by email. We no longer mail a printed membership directory to everyone, but a PDF copy is available by email from the membership secretary at saasforbirds@gmail.com

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