

# OVERVIEW

## INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE RESERVE NEARING COMPLETION

For more than 50 years, the United States and Mexico have talked about establishing an international wildlife reserve comprising over two million acres on both sides



Colima Warbler

of the Rio Grande. Now, at long last, the plan appears to be more than talk: The proposed park is one of the elements in the tentative United States-Mexico trade agreement.

Over one million acres are already protected in Texas, 800,000 of which are in Big Bend National Park, a naturalist's paradise. With over 450 bird species, including the Colima Warbler, Gray and Black-capped vireos, and Flammulated and Elf owls, Big Bend has a higher

diversity of birds than any other reserve in the country. Mexico is currently trying to figure out how to manage an equivalent wilderness area in the border state of Coahuila.

There is a proposal to declare the entire area one biosphere reserve, says Jim Carrico, regional representative to Texas Parks and Wildlife in Lajitas. "This area is one ecological community," he says, "with a man-made border running down the middle of it." While each country would administer its portion of the reserve, information and technology would be shared. The park would be considered a free zone although customs offices might be installed along the area's perimeters.

## INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL FOR BIRD PRESERVATION ISSUES ALARMING REPORT OF BIRD DECLINES

Leading ornithologists, who convened for the 20th World Conference of the International Council for Bird Preservation in New Zealand, issued an alarming report: According to their findings, two-thirds of the

world's 9000 bird species are declining, and more than 1000 are heading toward extinction. The main cause of decline, say experts, is loss of habitat, particularly rainforests and wetlands.

Countries facing the biggest crisis in bird conservation include Indonesia, Brazil, China, and Peru. Also announced at the conference was a conservation strategy for the entire South Pacific, a region that has the highest percentage of endangered bird species in the world. The plan, to be administered by the South Pacific Regional Environment Program, includes a regional database for birds, and a blueprint for conducting surveys.

## CAVE CREEK CANYON SAVED FROM MINING ACTIVITY

Arizona environmentalists scored a victory when they blocked a mining company from exploring for gold in Cave Creek Canyon located in the Coronado National Forest.

According to an 1872 mining law, companies can explore any area they choose as long as it hasn't been legally withdrawn from mineral entry. So when the

Newmont Mining Company applied for a permit to explore one of the most biologically diverse regions in the country, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was legally bound to supply it.

Local environmentalists, led by ornithologist Noel Snyder, undertook a massive campaign to stop the project. "This area is a mecca for all sorts of biologists and naturalists," says Snyder, who is currently working on a project to reintroduce the Thick-billed Parrot into the area. Birders visiting the Canyon can find 330 different bird species, among them Strickland's Woodpeckers, Vermilion Flycatchers, and many warblers including Painted Redstarts.

Newmont, faced with opposition not only from local activists, but also from the Fish and Wildlife Service as well as Congress, withdrew its request. To prevent another incident, petitions demanding that this area be withdrawn from mineral entry have been submitted to Congress and the Department of Interior.



Vermilion Flycatcher

# BIRDER OF NOTE

John J. Phelan, Jr.

**Age:** 60

**Profession:**

Corporate Director, Consultant (currently), Retired Chairman and C.E.O. of the New York Stock Exchange.

**Home:** Long Island, New York.

**How long birding?** 55 years.

**Favorite field guide:**

All of the Peterson guides.

**Why do I bird?** My father introduced me to it out at Oyster Bay Sanctuary, Long Island, when I was 5 years old. I birded with him as a kid and I do it today because it gives me an excuse to get out into nature. I characterize myself as a casual-to-serious birder today. My professional career inhibited me from becoming maniacal about birding early on.

**Binoculars:**

Swarovski 8 x 30.

**Life list?** Yes, I've kept a sort of "Lazy Life List" off and on over the years. Presently it has more than 500 species on it.

**My favorite birding habitat** includes areas on and near water; and my preferred method is on foot. I have special affection for Beaver Lake at Mill Neck, New York.

**My favorite birding companion**

is my wife, Joyce.

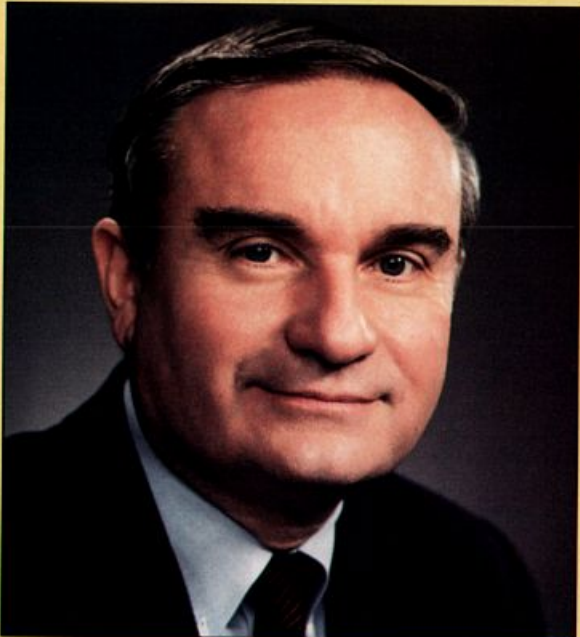
**My biggest birding thrill**

was just a simple incident of watching some interesting hummingbird behavior. My wife and I watched a little Purple-throated Carib repeatedly tear small strips off several silk lampshades in our house in Barbados. It took the strips and used them as nesting material. We supposed it was substituting this material for spider webbing. The lampshades were a mess.

**The most interesting place I've ever birded** in the United States is the Everglades, Florida.

**Quote:**

"Wherever you are or go in the world you can pursue birding. Birds are like old friends; when you observe them you also observe the environment in which they live. Through birds you can become more conscious of the ecosystem in which we all live. One of the ancillary benefits of birding is the opportunity to meet and interact with some very nice people who share a common interest. It is a wonderful hobby to take through life."



Palila

## UPDATE

### ENDANGERED HAWAIIAN HONEYCREEPER

The Palila, an endangered Hawaiian honeycreeper, was the subject of initial studies by Charles van Riper in the 1970s. Now Sandra Pletschet and Jeffrey Kelly have completed a study of nesting success in this species, as reported in *The Condor* for November 1990. They reported some points of good news: Elimination of feral goats and sheep has allowed regrowth of the manane forest in Mauna Kea Forest Reserve, and within this habitat the Palila was present in good numbers.

Nesting success was fairly good early in the season but declined to very poor levels by late summer, when eggs failed to hatch in 60 percent of nests. The late nesters may have been inexperienced young birds, but the other possible explanations offered by Pletschet and Kelly are less reassuring, including the possibility that inbreeding has weakened this small population.

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**BALD EAGLE FACES DOWNLISTING**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has set the wheels in motion for downlisting the Bald Eagle's status from endangered to threatened. On one hand, it reflects the Bald

Eagle's remarkable comeback, from 417 breeding pairs, with 0.59 young per nest in 1963, to 3010 breeding pairs, with 1.0 active young per nest in 1990. But there is concern that downlisting might actually reverse the Bald Eagle's progress. "Success could spoil the eagle's future," says Karen Steenhof, leader of the Pacific Bald Eagle Recovery Team, who worries that regulations may be loosened prematurely.

The bird is more likely to be downlisted—and eventually delisted—in the Pacific region, where it has made the strongest comeback, than in any other part of the United States. Steenhof's team has recommended downlisting, but only if it is accompanied by the following provisions: review of the existing recovery plan; continued research funding; annual monitoring; and, most importantly, aggressive habitat protection by government agencies.

Many environmentalists believe that, with or without provisions, the eagle's habitat is simply not secure enough to warrant downlisting. "We're encouraged that populations appear to be recovering," says Jim Waltman, Wildlife Policy Specialist for the National Audubon Society, "but the threat of loss of habitat is bigger now than ever."

## MIGRATORY SONGBIRD COMMITTEE FORMED

In the Spring 1991 issue of *American Birds*, we reported the well-documented decline of migratory songbirds, who are getting it at both ends of their flight: extensive deforestation in Central and South America, and forest fragmentation in North America. The federal government has responded by forming an inter-agency committee to come up with ways of protecting the birds before more of them reach endangered status.

Representatives from federal as well as private conservation groups, including the National Audubon Society, met in February to lay the groundwork for a cooperative monitoring and management program between the United States, Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean. If plans proceed smoothly, this may be the first time forest-dwelling birds are provided protection before they require endangered status.

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## SPOTTED OWL STILL BELEAGUERED

The list of players on the Spotted Owl Recovery Team was recently announced. In an unprecedented move, the Department of Interior made the recovery team appointments, a task up until now conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Although there are some widely respected biologists involved, the 18-member team includes economists, politicians, foresters, and agriculturists.

One of the members, John Beuter, previously conducted a survey for the logging industry in which he predicted that 100,000 jobs would be lost if Spotted Owl habitat were protected. (Most estimates hover between 30,000 and 40,000

jobs.) The recovery team also has a political overseer: Don Knowles, Deputy Under-Secretary, Department of Interior.

In a letter, Brock Evans, a vice-president of the National Audubon Society, reminded Manuel Lujan, the Secretary of Interior, that according to a 1988 amendment to the Endangered Species Act, "the development and content of recovery teams (should) be based solely on biological considerations." He also expressed concern that the team was given too much time to come up with a proposal: A final draft isn't due until July 1992.

Some environmentalists remain hopeful that the team's biologists will be able to develop a credible scientific plan. "I can't say anything complimentary enough about those biologists," says Jack Thomas, who headed up the Jack Ward Thomas Interagency Scientific Committee. "Don't make any assumptions about what they'll come up with." Meanwhile, though, time may be running short for the Spotted Owl.

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## SPOTTED OWL AND CANCER

Spotted Owl conservationists are casting a wary eye towards another group: the National Cancer Institute. Taxol is a new cancer drug which many specialists are viewing optimistically: In laboratory studies, it's shown to have a remission success rate of 30% to 35% among previously treated ovarian cancer patients. That's the good news; the bad news is that so far, the substance is only found in the bark of Pacific yew trees, many of which happen to be in protected Spotted Owl territories.

According to Saul Schepartz, a biochemist at the Na-

tional Cancer Institute, the harvesting of Pacific yews doesn't pose a threat to the owl. But he does admit that an extraordinary amount of bark needs to be collected in order to meet this year's taxol production goal of 25 kilograms: There is one kilogram of taxol in 30,000 pounds of bark, which means the Institute needs



Spotted Owl

750,000 pounds of it. Since there's approximately 10 pounds of bark per tree, 75,000 Pacific yews will probably be cut down this year alone. (These figures are also a cause of alarm to forest conservationists who recently tried, and failed, to have the tree listed as endangered.)

Researchers are searching for other sources of taxol—including yew needles—but Schepartz says it may take five years before they come up with another stable compound.

## AUDUBON REPORT

### HAMMOCK FRAGMENTATION

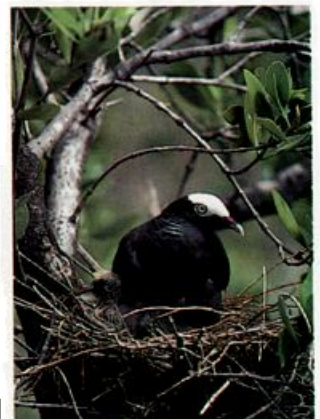
Audubon research biologists Wayne Hoffman and Mary Carrington have green thumbs. Field work for them means picking seeds out of feces found in tropical hammock forests and replanting them in a laboratory, located at Audubon's

## OVERVIEW

Ornithological Research Unit in the Florida Keys.

Large portions of the Keys were once covered by tropical hammocks. They now merely pock the Keys landscape through a maze of commercial and residential development. Hammocks consist of characteristic trees, shrubs, and vines. Their fruits are an important food source for resident and migratory birds. By testing which seeds grow after being digested, Hoffman has found that catbirds, White-crowned Pigeons, vireos, and some warblers are important seed dispersers in the hammocks, helping to maintain the diversity of the ecosystem.

"Fragmentation of the hammocks has caused a redistribution of breeding birds," says Hoffman, "which potentially influences the diversity of flora." He is working with county land-planning agencies in identifying parcels of hammock for protection and in updating zoning standards for development in the Keys.



White-crowned Pigeon



Whooping Crane

**PLATTE RIVER**

Audubon scientists—ornithologists, hydrologists, biologists, geologists, and policy analysts—and staff lawyers have united to protect wildlife along the Platte River in Nebraska. The information gathered by their analyses is being put to use in a legal proceeding to relocate Kingsley Dam. The dam, which enables water to be diverted for irrigation, municipal use, and hydroelectricity, is what now regulates flows down the river.

Audubon made protecting the Platte River a high priority because it is an important staging area for more than 500,000 Sandhill Cranes—80 percent of the world's Sandhill Crane population. The river is also used by endangered Whooping Cranes for roosting and feeding, threatened Piping Plovers and endangered Least Terns as nesting habitat, and Bald Eagles for winter feeding. According to a never-before-applied 1986 federal law, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is required to give equal consideration to power needs and wildlife concerns when it issues licenses. Audubon has recommended that the Commission attach conditions to the new

licenses that would control the timing of water releases to provide better support for wildlife, restore wildlife habitat, provide more efficient irrigation, and improve water conservation measures.

**FLYING FOR THE BIRDS**

Audubon's Tom Bancroft and Wayne Hoffman have spent a lot of time in the air. For four years, every season, they have surveyed the birdlife, vegetation, and water levels of south Florida in a four-seat Cessna. The program is part of a cooperative study with the South Florida Water Management District, Everglades National Park, and Florida Game and

Freshwater Fish Commission.

In an effort to restore some natural order to south Florida's marsh systems, the Army Corps of Engineers, along with state agencies, has proposed changes in water releases to improve conditions for wading birds. How much water and when, are the critical questions these studies are helping to answer by determining how colonial wading birds react to different water levels in the remaining freshwater marshes of the Everglades and Big Cypress Preserve.

**SATELLITES FOR SONGBIRDS**

Using satellite technology, Audubon ornithologist George Powell and collaborators have devised a new study technique to determine how much forest is being lost and which bird species are particularly sensitive to this deforestation. Just how migratory songbirds are being affected by the destruction of their tropical forest habitats in Costa Rica and elsewhere has, until now, been difficult to assess.

Early results from the study show that flycatchers and Wood Thrushes are especially in danger because they rely exclusively on forested areas for their wintering grounds. Conversely,

shrub-dwelling Common Yellowthroats and Yellow Warblers may benefit from conversion of primary forest to open habitat. The scientists hope their findings and high-tech methods will lead to a better understanding of how to preserve the ecological balance of tropical forests.

**DIRECTIONS**

**HONORED**

Thomas Lovejoy has become president-elect of the American Institute of Biological Sciences, this country's largest independent natural science organization. Lovejoy, a champion of biological conservation and



Thomas Lovejoy

diversity issues, will chair the organization's long-range planning committee, consult with Congress on wildlife legislation, and work to promote science education. In 1992, he will take over, for a one-year term, as president of the American Institute of Biological Sciences. He is presently Assistant Secretary for External Affairs at the Smithsonian Institute.

**HONORED**

Ruth Beck, biology professor at the College of William and Mary, has received the Commander's Award for Public Service, presented by the Norfolk District of the United States Army Corps of Engineers. The award, one of the highest bestowed on civilians by the Corps,



Snowy Egrets

PHOTOGRAPHS TOP D. M. ZIMMERMAN BOTTOM © DUSTY PERIN

was given for Beck's work with the endangered Least Tern on Craney Island, Virginia, at a Corps-operated disposal site. Through her intensive efforts, suitable nesting habitat for the terns was established away from the disposal site.

**HONORED**

Les Line has received the National Audubon Society's Hal Borland Award for distinction in the field of natural history. Mr. Line recently stepped down as editor of Audubon magazine after 25 years, during which time he challenged and delighted readers. Line, 56, is also a nature photographer.

**RETIRED**

Louis Lock has retired after 31 years as a wildlife pathologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He began his career at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland, where he worked on a team that studied the effects of environmental contaminants on migratory birds. That research was later instrumental in the Environmental Protection Agency's decision to restrict organal chlorine pesticides, such as DDT. In 1975, he went to work for the National Wildlife Health Research Center in Madison, Wisconsin. There, he examined the problems of lead poisoning in waterfowl.

**ELECTED**

The Ornithological Societies of North America, this continent's largest network of bird organizations, has elected Fred Lohrer as its new director. Mr. Lohrer, 51, is the librarian and information manager at the

Archbold Biological Station. He will maintain and update OSNA's membership and subscription databases, and collect and distribute membership funds. Lohrer replaces Sandra Gaunt, who has been in charge of OSNA since its inception 10 years ago.

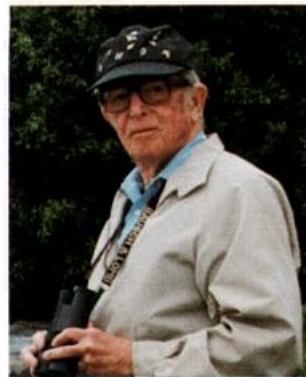
**DEATHS**

James T. Tanner died of a brain tumor on January 21, 1991, at the age of 76. His lifelong work involved the search for rare bird species, particularly the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Rumored sightings of the nearly-extinct bird took Tanner from northern Florida to eastern Texas, and finally to Cuba in 1986. He became the first director of the University of Tennessee's ecology program in 1969, and was head of its graduate program from 1970-1974.

Helmut Sick, one of South America's greatest ornithologists, died in March at the age of 83. A native Berliner, Sick did his doctorate work in southeastern Brazil in the late 1930s, and was interned there for the duration of World War II. At war's end, he chose to stay in Brazil rather than return to Germany, and became the National Museum's foremost ornithologist. He spent time trekking through Brazil's rainforests, and was the first person to rediscover the rare Lear's Macaw after decades of intensive searching.



Helmut Sick



Gordon M. Meade

Gordon M. Meade died of congestive heart failure on November 30, 1990, just short of his 85th birthday. A physician, Dr. Meade was one of New York State's most active and productive birders. He helped found the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs, and twice served as the organization's president. He was instrumental in the compilation and publication of *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*.

**WORLD BRIEFS**

**VIETNAM**

The White-winged Duck (*Cairina scutulata*), which had not been reported in Vietnam for 60 years, was one of the threatened species sighted in a survey of birds conducted in protected areas. The survey yielded some other noteworthy and encouraging sightings which included the Imperial Pheasant (*Lophura imperialis*) which local authorities are trying to protect. Other threatened species seen were Germain's Peacock Pheasant (*Polyplectron germaini*) and

the Green Peafowl (*Pavo muticus*). The survey team also listed the Collared Laughingthrush (*Garrulax yersini*) and the Yellow-billed Nuthatch (*Sitta solangiae*) both of which are threatened endemic species.

The Forest Birds Working Group, with the support of the Vietnamese government and the International Council for Bird Preservation, conducted the survey.

**NEW ZEALAND**

Ten years ago, the Black Robin was at the edge of extinction, with only five birds remaining. Today, thanks to intensive conservation efforts, there are between 70 and 80 Black Robins. But New Zealand's Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society says that deforestation and predators still threaten the species. They are currently campaigning for the purchase of Mangere Island, to be used as a predator-free Black Robin sanctuary.

**SCOTLAND**

Ten years ago, the Shetlands were dotted with more than 34,000 breeding pairs of Arctic Terns. Since then, the population has been badly damaged. In 1990, the terns had their worst breeding season on record, with only a few birds attempting to nest and no surviving young. Ecologists blame the breeding failure on the overfishing of sand eels—vital to the terns' survival—which are used to produce food for salmon on fish farms. Local activists are urging the British government to ban sand eel fishing.



Dalmatian Pelican

#### ROMANIA

Birders of the world unite: Romania's first bird protection organization was established this year following that country's revolution. The Romania Ornithological Society, headed by Dan Munteanu, is currently making recommendations for nature reserves, campaigning to protect the Danube Delta, and collecting material for the country's first breeding bird atlas. Among other things, Romania has the largest colony of pelicans in Europe. It is also home to many globally threatened species, including the Red-breasted Goose and the Dalmatian Pelican.

With a membership of only 150 active birders, the society is looking for additional support. Fundraising efforts are being conducted by the International Council for Bird Preservation. For more information, write to Richard Grimmett, ICBP, 32 Cambridge Road, Giron, Cambridge, England.

#### COSTA RICA

The battle to preserve Central America's Resplendent Quetzal is even more daunting than experts had previously thought. National Audubon Society ornithologists George Powell and Robin Bjork have been tracking the birds' movements with the aid of radio transmitters. Their research shows that the quetzal is relatively safe in Costa Rica's Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, where it nests from March until late June or early July. But the rest of the year, the birds migrate all the way from Costa Rica to Western Panama, apparently in search of ripening fruit. Much of the quetzal's habitat, it now appears, includes deforested, unprotected lowlands. Powell and Bjork say that many Central American countries, including Costa Rica, Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras seem interested in protecting the quetzal.

#### QUOTES

**"I don't believe in endangered species. I think the only ones are sitting here in this room."**

*-T.S. Ary, head of the United States Bureau of Mines, to a conference of miners, loggers, ranchers, farmers, and other land development advocates.*

**"If educated, affluent Austin can't protect these few thousand acres, how can we expect nations of the Third World to protect their rain forests?"**

*-William G. Bunch, a lawyer with the Texas Center for Policy Studies, on land vital to Blackcapped Vireos and Golden-cheeked Warblers.*

**"Louisiana has the dubious distinction of being the only state in the country to have its state bird extirpated."**

*-Richard Martin, a Louisiana government zoologist, on the demise of the Brown Pelican.*

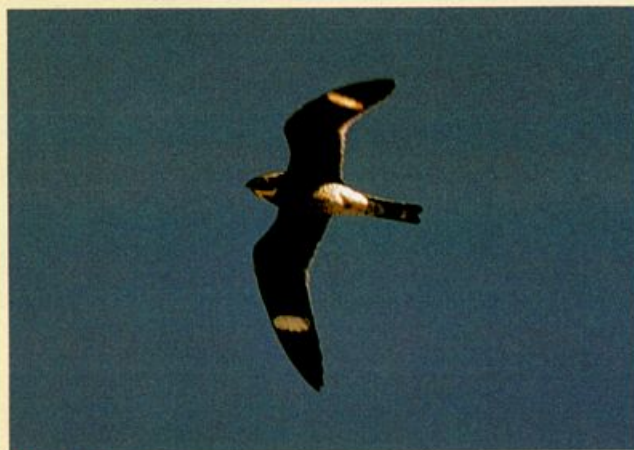
**"The ecosystem in the gulf has been stressed out for decades. There are species living on the brink now and it won't take much to push them over."**

*-Thomas M. Miller, spokesman for Marine Conservation in Washington, D.C., on the Persian Gulf oil spills.*

**BEHAVIOR WATCH**

**INTERIOR DECORATING  
AT ITS BEST**

Bowerbirds have long been a source of fascination to wildlife biologists. Now, scientists Clifford and Dawn Frith have made an important new discovery: In an effort to attract the female of the species, Archbold's Bowerbirds decorate their bowers with plumes. Not with their *own* plumes, but with those belonging to King of Saxony Birds of Paradise. Drs. Frith and Frith made their observations in the New Guinea cloud forest, the only place in the world where both birds exist. They found six out of twenty Archbold's Bowerbirds decorated with an average of three and a maximum of six feathers, an amazing number given the fact that birds of paradise have plumes only between the ages of four to seven, and molt no more than once a year. The scientists observed aggressive Archbold's stealing feathers from other bowers, and protecting their own nests fiercely. Apparently, the more decorated a bower, the more likely the female of the species will be attracted to it.



Common Nighthawk



Swainson's Thrush

**SOME COMMON  
NIGHTHAWKS MAY NOT  
LIKE GRAVEL ROOFS**

In a three-year study near Okanagan Falls in British Columbia, R. Mark Brigham (*Condor*, vol. 91, no. 3) found that all 27 Common Nighthawks he trapped and fitted with radio transmitters roosted on the ground or in pines. All the nests he found were on the ground. Sixty-five buildings in his study area had gravel roofs larger than 35 meters square, but no nighthawks ever used them. His study shows that at least in places with little human disturbance, nighthawks may prefer natural sites to rooftops. The impression that nighthawks prefer gravel

roofs may reflect the relative ease with which nighthawks are found in towns, or may only apply to places in which undisturbed natural sites are not available.

**WHY ARE MOST  
BERRIES  
RED OR BLACK ?**

We usually take it for granted that red and black, the most common colors of the fruits many shrubs set out in summer or fall, attract birds more readily than other colors, and that red and black fruit colors have evolved because birds prefer them. Taking a close look at these assumptions, Mary F. Willson, Daniel A. Graff, and Christopher J. Whelan (*Condor*, vol. 92, no. 3) offered captive Gray Catbirds, Swainson's Thrushes, and Hermit Thrushes a choice of small cubes of food dyed with these and other colors.

They found that while the birds often preferred certain colors to others, all other things being equal, they did not favor red and black over blue or yellow. Willson and her colleagues concluded that something other than the choices of birds must be the reason red and black are the most common fruit colors.

**EASTERN WOOD-PEWEE  
TRIES TO FEED  
YOUNG KILLDEERS**

When two one-day-old Killdeer chicks were placed in an open-air pen on High Island in Lake Michigan and gave distress calls, an Eastern Wood-Pewee made two visits to the pen with insects and tried repeatedly to feed them. Abby N. Powell (*J. Field Ornithol.*, vol. 61, no. 2) reports that the young chicks flinched and refused the food. Older chicks in the same pen crouched and froze when the wood-pewee approached. The wood-pewee never tried to feed the older chicks, which were not calling, and stopped visiting the younger ones when they stopped calling. This suggests that the calls were what stimulated the wood-pewee to attempt to feed these young Killdeers even though they looked so different from young wood-pewees.

*American Birds* extends an invitation to all of its readers to contribute items to our new Overview department. Tell us about something of particular interest to birders: new products, relevant legislation, exhibits, grants, awards, honors, career transitions, or interesting quotes about birds and ecology taken from articles and speeches. Use this issue as a model for items we'd be likely to publish. Send items to: Overview, *American Birds*, 950 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022