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Tallgrass Prairie Spring Trip Report **April 29-May 3, 2012 Daily Journal**

Ed and Sil Pembleton,
guides with participants, Madeline, Jan & Don

Sun., April 29, 2012-Arrival Wichita/Dyck Arboretum/Great Bend

The clock turns to high noon and everyone has arrived at the Wichita airport, so a light Italian lunch tops our itinerary. Then we head north to Hesston and the Dyck Arboretum where examples of prairie grasses and flowers are in great shape and many of them blooming despite dry conditions. It's ideal for an introduction to prairie plants and a few photographs before heading on to Great Bend, our welcome dinner and a good night's rest for an early start for birding at Quivira National Wildlife Refuge in the morning.



Mon., April 30, 2012-Quivira NWR/Cheyenne Bottoms: Great Birding, Great Bend & Great "Blew" Herons



We grab an early breakfast and head toward Quivira NWR despite developing fog that grows thicker as we head south. The fog grows so thick that we cannot see a prairie dog town where we planned on scanning for Burrowing Owls, so we soldier on toward the refuge. Cautious slow driving keeps us safe even if birding was limited to finding Western Meadowlarks, American Robins and Red-winged Blackbirds-or basically whatever is singing from the nearest fence or power line.

The fog lifts a little as we exit the rural blacktop onto the gravel road leading to Quivira and discover a

whole scene of activity. A multitude of Lark Sparrows is picking up grit along the margins of the road while flocks of Mourning Doves occupy most of the center. We pull to the side to watch. A Brown Thrasher enters in a flash of auburn feathers and a Turkey, who has spotted us first, exits left headed toward a distant windbreak like a winning 100 yard dash contestant. Now, White-crowned sparrows join the grit gathers. Then comes the not so often heard announcement of “Bob—white!” We spot a female Bobwhite quail, which demurely slips through the curtain of roadside vegetation in search of her calling mate. We advance up the road a bit to be halted by a Catbird who chatters and performs incessantly.

We creep on and by 9:30 am we finally reach the Quivira headquarters. A visit with refuge staffers provides us with yesterdays long list of bird sightings—including lots of shorebirds, and the possibility of finding a Cinnamon Teal! A walk in the wooded habitat around the headquarters produces a Baltimore Oriole, Northern Cardinal (a real treat for our westerners, Don & Jan), Wood Ducks and a Red-headed Woodpecker (a treat for everyone).



Following a delightful picnic lunch, we begin our search for shorebirds and waterfowl that are making use of the slightly saline wetlands found at Quivira. First up are the subtle and stately Avocets, sweeping their beaks side to side as they feed in the shallow waters. Then, the formally dressed Black-necked Stilts arrive and elegantly patrol the shoreline. A large flock of Long-billed Dowitchers swoops down and begins stitching up the bottom of the marsh as a whirly gig of Wilson’s Phalaropes spin and feed.



Baird’s Sandpipers feed along the shore among the cattails coming quite close to us and they are joined (conveniently for us) by a Least Sandpiper to provide comparison and contrast.

Our plans for an afternoon hike are suddenly doused by a Great Plains “shower” so we continue working our way north and take the “wildlife” loop which ends in a flurry of Marbled Godwits, Eared and Pied-bill Grebes, Coots and a single Wilson’s Phalarope feeding in a very photogenic pool

right next to the car. After a short walk to loosen up, the weather still looks iffy, so we decide on an early dinner in Great Bend followed by a sunset preview of Cheyenne Bottoms, where we will bird tomorrow.

We arrive at the west entrance to the Bottoms well ahead of sunset and decide a hike through the campground area could provide some interesting birding. A light rain begins about the time we get 200 yards from the car and we scurry back. As we drive east, the wind increases and the rain intensifies to horizontal downpour status. Madeline spots an improbable extension on a mound of cattails that turns out to be a Great Horned Owl enduring the rainstorm. The





rain diminishes. We discover Black-crowned Night Herons in one of the canals and Cattle and Snowy Egrets huddled down in the lee of cattails.

Clouds in the west lift and the sun breaks through with a rainbow for us as lightening punctuates the deep blue storm clouds to the east. We move on eastward to discover rafts of White Pelicans riding out the storm.



Then as we prepare to exit and call it an evening well spent, we discover about a dozen Great Blue Herons striking identical postures as they face into the wind straining to hold their positions. Sil suggests we refer to them as “Great Blew Herons.”

Darkness falls. We head back to Great Bend and call it a long day of Great Birding.

***Tues., May 1, 2012-Cheyenne Bottoms to Lindsborg:
A first Bunting, Toadstool Rocks and Swedish Charm***

The day arrives (as do we) refreshed, clear and cool. After an early breakfast and checking out of the motel, we head back to the west entrance of Cheyenne Bottoms and again search the camping area for woodland birds. Blue Jays come to scold our arrival and delight Don and Jan, who are more familiar with their Western counterparts. It’s good to be reminded that our Great Plains fauna can be a new experience for others.

We go to a local prairie dog town in search of a Burrowing Owl. A few days before, Sil and I had found Upland Sandpipers here and that would also be a treat. We search the dog town, neither bird is found, but Vesper Sparrows sing quite boldly from fence posts on either side of the road and feed along the edges. We are about to head west when a wonderful gift in the form of a Lark Bunting lands on the fence. A bird listed as “uncommon” at the Bottoms—and one that we have rarely seen here and a new species for our participants. Stay tuned, “bunt” and “bunting” will play a different role later in this trip.



We proceed slowly west across the dike roads searching through the “peeps” and stop to study a pair of Semipalmated Sandpipers. Just as we pull away, an American Bittern riding a stiff tailwind flashes past



and lands about 60 yards behind us in the cattails. We back up, find the bird and in a bit he flies southwest into the wind giving us a full view of his considerable flying skills. We continue toward the east entrance and the Kansas Wetlands Education Center. American Avocets patrol the shallows and the air is filled with, Cliff Swallows while sunshine bright Yellow-headed Blackbirds hold territories in offshore clumps of cattails.

We explore the Wetlands Education Center exhibits and the staff invites us to use their break room for our picnic lunch. Afterwards, we depart for an hour-long drive to Mushroom Rocks State Park, searching fence posts bordering the prairie for Upland Sandpipers and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. No luck with these prairie species—maybe later. But, Eastern Blue Birds and Harris’s Sparrows welcome us to this geologically stunning little gem of a park that charms everyone. We all pose for pictures and then depart for the Swedish Country Inn in Lindsborg where we will spend the evening.

After an enjoyable dinner at Jalisco we strolled the streets to take in the Swedish character and charm, as well as walk off a few calories. In case you noticed—that is not a Swedish restaurant. Surprisingly, small and charming Lindsborg with its Swedish heritage is very much an “international” town and home to National Geographic Photographer Jim Richardson to boot.



**Wed., May 2, 2012-Maxwell & Tallgrass Prairie National Preserves:
From Krider’s to the Chase County Courthouse**



We’re up and ready for the 7 am first seating to savor the traditional Swedish breakfast with fresh coffee, Swedish meatballs, lingonberries, eggs, porridge, cheese, cold meats, pickled herring, fruit, beets, waffles and fresh baked Swedish Rye bread with lingonberry jam. We head east to Kansas Game and Parks’ Maxwell Game Preserve, which provides tallgrass prairie habitat for a herd of 200 Bison and 50 Elk. Tours out into the bison pasture have not started this time of year, but we can see the herd and a few of the new russet colored calves in the south pasture from our

vantage point on top of the hill. As usual, the elk refuse to put in an appearance.

We note that Yucca plants are in full bloom outside the fence where they are protected from grazers. Chipping Sparrows join our bird list along with Red-bellied Woodpeckers, which are tending their nestlings just a few feet above our heads. On our departure a raptor topping a power pole draws serious scrutiny and proves to be the pale Krider's phase of the Red-tailed Hawk, a Great Plains specialty new to all our participants.

We move on to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve north of Cottonwood Falls, arrive a little past noon, and start looking for a place out of the wind to eat our picnic lunch. The National Park staffers are very considerate and with few visitors allow us to slip into the large historic barn. We're out of the wind, have seats, a barn cat, historical tools and an exhibit of "tall" grasses that show their full growth potential, which they have not reached this early in the growing season.



Satiated, we tour the magnificent stone ranch house and learn about the Jones family's early development of the Spring Hill Farm and Stock Ranch and ranching history in this prairie region.

After the tour, we hike the nature trail east from the ranch house to the one room Lower Fox Creek School. The Jones family constructed this school at the request of local people who wanted to provide their children an education while

continuing to work on or for the ranch.

The acres around the school were not grazed for years and hence contain a great diversity of prairie plants not found on much of the rest of the ranch land. The trail is not long, but our progress is inhibited by frequent stops to identify and photograph prairie plants.



After our hike, we head a few miles further north to gain a view of tens of thousands of acres of prairie from the top of the Flint Hills, which harbors the largest remaining tract of tallgrass on the continent. This is also an area known to host the tallgrass prairie signature birds, Upland Sandpipers, which have eluded us so far this trip. After seeing the extensive reach of this region, but finding no Upland Sandpipers we head back south to Cottonwood Falls for a visit to the beautiful Chase County Courthouse and an excellent dinner at the restored, historic Grand Central Hotel and Grill.



We arrive back in Lindsborg in time to drive out to a local high point known as Coronado Heights for a brilliant sunset, punctuated by a Night Hawk coursing back and forth garnering a nightly supply of flying insects.

All in all, a grand day with a grand ending.



**Thurs., May 3, 2012-Konza Prairie and a special visit:
“Terwilliger Bunts One!”**

After another delightful Swedish breakfast we head north toward Manhattan, home of Kansas State University, to explore Konza Prairie Biological Station, an 8,600 acre tallgrass preserve owned by The Nature Conservancy with K-State facilities dedicated to long-term ecological research. We encounter intermittent rain showers on our way, but skies are clearing by the time we reach the Konza nature trail that follows King’s Creek.



We begin our walk up King’s Creek and encounter excited high school students returning from taking water samples and collecting freshwater invertebrates for laboratory analysis. Once the group has left us—quite is broken by birdcalls. We begin to hear and see Red Starts, Yellow-billed cuckoos, Summer Tanagers, Northern Parulas,

Phoebes and other woodland birds that concentrate in this valley. As the heat increases, our appreciation deepens for the Basswood, Chinquapin and Burr Oaks that provide shade along the trail. We arrive back at the car and arrange to meet Ron Klataske for lunch in Manhattan.



Ron, now the executive director of Audubon of Kansas, has worked for decades to protect tallgrass prairie in the Flint Hills. Rising temperatures cause us to reconsider our plan to hike an open sunny trail across a local prairie known as “Mount Mitchell.” Instead we visit Ron’s farm north of Manhattan. His farm has similar prairie and does not require a long hot walk with no shade. Just as we are admiring the blooming Prairie Ragwort and Rose Verbena, our attention is suddenly shifted by the “wolf-whistle” call of an Upland Sandpiper. Often these calls lead to the frustration of trying to sight a bird that is somewhat of a ventriloquist, but not this time. We spot the bird calling from the top of a snag and then it lands on the prairie just a few yards away and struts over its territory. Our hopes for the signature prairie bird are met!!



We head back south to Council Grove, a stop on the Santa Fe Trail and the site of many meetings between European settlers and Native Americans, for our farewell dinner at the Trail Days Café and Museum housed in the historic Terwilliger* House. The profits from the Café support the restoration of the historic house and museum. Built in 1861, this was the last house that people saw as they departed down the Santa Fe trail. The focus here is on restoring the building to its original condition and presenting a delicious meal with a history lesson--right down to the menu selections.



It is growing dark as we start back to Lindsborg. Our return is delayed when we spot a Barred Owl on a power line. Another owl added to our birdlist!

* Here’s the other Bunt: If you have read Annie Dillard’s book, ***An American Childhood***, you know her Mother’s favorite comment in a strange situation was, “And Terwilliger, bunts one.” The proprietors indicate that the builders of the house are related to the baseball player.

Fri., May 4, 2012-Back to Wichita & Fond Farewells:

Our last day starts at a more leisurely pace with a final opportunity to absorb one more Swedish breakfast and some of Lindsborg’s charm. We reluctantly head to Wichita for lunch and to catch our flights home.

