

# ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

*Journal of the Alabama Ornithological Society*

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# ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

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## TREE SWALLOWS, *TACHYGINETA BICOLOR*, FOUND NESTING IN NORTH ALABAMA NEAR DECATUR

Paul H. Franklin

On the morning of 18 July 1987, Ann Miller, my wife Rose Marie, and I were birding the Swan Creek Management Area north of Decatur when we encountered a large concentration of swallows. Present were Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*), Purple Martins (*Progne subis*), Bank Swallows (*Riparia riparia*), and Rough-winged Swallows (*Stelgidopteryx ruficollis*). In an area near the northwest quadrant of the main body of water, in a grove of willows, we located a significant number, at least 25, of immature Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) perched among the dead limbs of a willow. Also present were six adult-plumaged Tree Swallows.

In a nearby dead tree we found a circular hole and when we examined it with a spotting scope, we could see the heads of two flightless, young Tree Swallows. The nestlings exhibited "gaping" behavior—opening their mouths as wide as possible—at every passing swallow. We soon observed that the young swallows were being fed at frequent intervals (perhaps every five minutes) by a pair of adults who responded to the gaping young by filling their open mouths with food. When we closed to within ten meters or less, one of the adult birds would enter the nest cavity and cover the young.



Figure 1. Tree Swallow at nest cavity. Swan Creek Management Area, Decatur, AL (Photo by Ann Miller).

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### TREE SWALLOWS, Cont.

We were convinced that the presence of dependant, flightless young being fed by adult birds in a nesting cavity represented convincing evidence of the first successful breeding by Tree Swallows in the state of Alabama. Furthermore, the number of immature Tree Swallows present on the site would indicate a likelihood of several successfully fledged broods from the same colony of swallows in the Swan Creek Management Area.

The immature birds had a pewter color of greyish brown on the back, creamy white underparts indicative of Tree Swallows, and an incomplete buffy breast band. The adult birds had entirely creamy white underparts, but were in an intermediate plumage of blue and green "splotches" above. The dependant young were in a juvenal plumage as were the immature birds observed out of the nest, except for a band of white feathers over the base of the bill.

When Ann Miller and Harriet Wright Findlay returned to the site several days later to photograph the young swallows in the nest hole, they were disappointed to find that the nestlings had already fledged. Unfortunately, the first reported nesting by Tree Swallows in Alabama could therefore not be documented by photographs of the adults feeding the nestlings. A picture of one of the adults perched near the nest cavity was obtained, however, and is presented with this article as evidence of breeding (see Figure 1).





## NESTING RECORDS FOR LAUGHING GULLS AND CASPIAN, FORSTER'S, AND GULL-BILLED TERNS IN ALABAMA

John and Beverly Winn

On 10 September 1984 my wife, Beverly, and I attended a presentation by Mr. Dwight Cooley of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, on birds nesting on Gaillard Island in Mobile Bay, Mobile County, Alabama. Mr. Cooley stated that Gaillard Island was the first recorded nesting site in Alabama for the Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*), and Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*). He further indicated that the island was the site of the first substantial breeding colony of Gull-billed Terns (*Sterna nilotica*) in Alabama and that he expected Forster's Terns (*Sterna forsteri*) to begin nesting there in the future.

After hearing Mr. Cooley's presentation, further information was sought in Imhof (1976) and Clapp et al. (1983). I then reviewed my notes and found that on 15 July 1979, while conducting a shorebird survey for the Mahanomet Bird Observatory on Blakely Island in Polecat Bay in Mobile, Co., Beverly and I had recorded a large colony of Laughing Gulls (229), Forster's Terns (12), Caspian Terns (340), and Gull-billed Terns (64) nesting in the ALCOA Ponds. Nesting with them were Black-necked Stilts (*Himantopus mexicanus*) (100), Black skimmers (*Rynchops niger*) (56) and Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) (33). All seven species had eggs and young in all stages of development. Our records show that the birds were not present in 1978, nor have they returned anytime since 1979.

Only after hearing Mr. Cooley's talk did we realize that our sightings represented the first nesting records for Laughing Gulls and Caspian Terns, and for substantial nesting by Forster's and Gull-billed Terns in Alabama.

Clapp, R.B., D. Morgan-Jacobs, and R.C. Banks. 1983. Marine Birds of the Southeast United States and Gulf of Mexico, Part 3, Charadriiformes, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C., xvi & 553 pp.

Imhof, T.A. 1976. Alabama Birds, 2nd ed. Univ. of Ala. Press, University, Ala.

## LITTLE DAUPHIN ISLAND - A NEW NESTING SANCTUARY

John Dindo and Ken Marion

Little Dauphin Island is a 3.6 km (2.25 mile) long tidal marsh 344 ha (851 acres) in size lying just north of Dauphin Island. The eastern end of the Island supports a small stand of loblolly and slash pine (*Pinus taeda*) and (*P. ellioti*), while the western end is a *Juncus* dominated marsh with shell mounds supporting growths of dwarf live oak (*Quercus virginiana* var. *geminata*). The northwestern portion of the island has a broad shoreline of sand flats.

Prior to Hurricane Frederick, Highway 163 from Mobile to Dauphin Island, crossed the western end of Little Dauphin and provided easy access to the island (see map, Figure 2). Adjacent to and east of Little Dauphin Island was much smaller Peavy Island, about 1.4 ha (3.5 acres) in size which was used by motor campers and others as sites for picnics and fishing. The frequency of utilization of these habitats by people had prohibited birds from using the island for nesting.

On 12 Sept. 1979 Hurricane Frederick's fury was felt all along the Alabama coastline, resulting in the loss of Peavy Island and sections of the causeway near Little Dauphin Island. With completion of the new bridge connecting Dauphin Island to the mainland in 1982, Little Dauphin was isolated from the causeway and became accessible only by boat.

As a result of the relative lack of disturbance by man, several species of birds began to colonize Little Dauphin including Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*), Great Egrets (*Casmerodius albus*), and Green-backed Herons (*Butorides striatus*). The Great Blue Herons began nesting in early March, 1986, in the tops of the dwarf live oaks and three young were fledged from ten eggs. Great Egrets established nests in early June and fledged four young from six eggs. The Green-backed Herons raised three young from four eggs. In addition to these three species, the sandy beach areas supported a mixed breeding colony of approximately 100 Little Terns (*Sterna antillarum*) and 50 to 60 Black Skimmers (*Rynchops niger*). Sand Island, a barrier island to the south of Dauphin Island, had previously been the major site of nesting for these shorebirds, but hurricanes over the past five years and increasing human



**LITTLE DAUPHIN ISLAND, Cont.**

disturbances reduced the available nesting sites by approximately two-thirds.

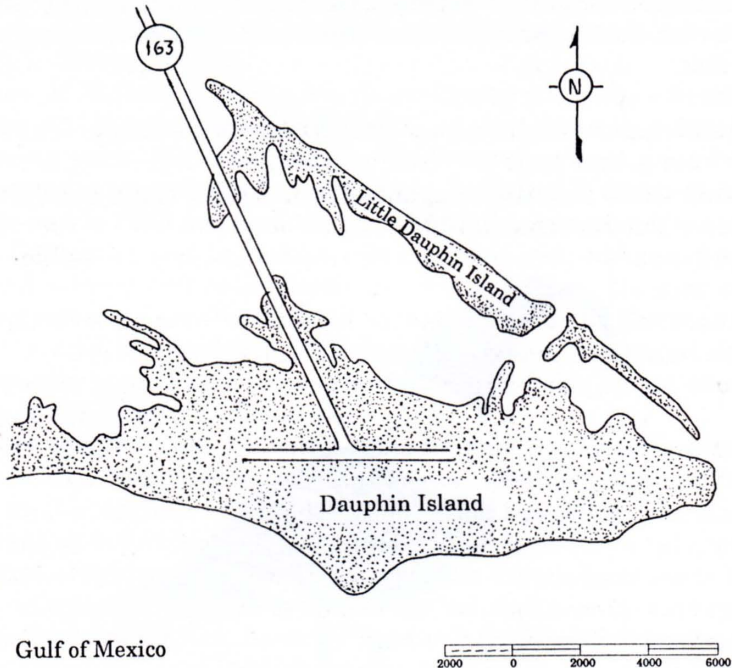
Little Dauphin Island's exposed shell mounds have also provided breeding sites for two pairs of American Oystercatchers (*Haematopus palliatus*) and feeding sites for a multitude of other wading birds, including plovers, sandpipers and gulls.

It is apparent that hurricanes can be viewed in more than destructive terms. The isolation of Little Dauphin Island as a result of storm activity has created a sanctuary for many birds and nesting activity in this area is likely to increase in the future.

This project was supported in part by the Birmingham Audubon Society, Walter F. Coxe Fund and the Dauphin Island Sea Lab.

John J. Dindo – UAB/Dauphin Island Sea Lab

Dr. Ken Marion – UAB – Biology



*Figure 2. Dauphin and Little Dauphin Islands*

## LAUGHING GULL OBSERVED EATING REPTILE

Scot Duncan

On 6 May 1983 on the grassy airstrip at Ft. Morgan, Baldwin Co., Ala., Bob Brown, Greg Jackson, Venetia Friend, Cecil Kilmer, Robert Duncan and I observed an adult Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) attempting to swallow a legless reptile, possibly a snake or large Eastern Glass Lizard (*Ophisaurus ventralis*). The reptile was partially ingested with about 180 to 230 mm (seven to nine inches) of its tail protruding from the bird's mouth. We observed the bird for a few minutes, then left and returned a short time later to find it being pursued in flight by a Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*), with the reptile still dangling from its mouth.

Although Bent (1963) describes the food of the Laughing Gull as quite varied, there is no mention of reptiles or amphibians being taken in the diet.

Scot Duncan, 614 Fairpoint Dr., Gulf Breeze, FL. 32561

Bent, A.C. 1963 Life Histories of North American Gulls and Terns.  
Dover Publications, p. 160.





## THE EASTERN BLUEBIRD: A DECADE OF RESTORATION

John Findlay

Although the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), never quite made the endangered species list, it declined as much as 90% over much of its breeding range during this century and for this reason it has been and remains a species of special concern. Loss of habitat, and other detrimental actions by man such as the use of DDT and introduction of the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) and European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), have been primarily responsible for the marked decline of the bluebird population.

An aggressive nest box program for this cavity nesting species has proven to be the single most important effort towards restoring the bluebird to its former numbers. Competition from House Sparrows and loss of suitable habitat, however, continue to adversely affect the bluebird's recovery in heavily urbanized areas.

Over the past ten years, I have maintained a "bluebird trail" in Jefferson and Shelby Counties, adjacent to the City of Birmingham, AL. The trail, which started in 1977 with seven dozen boxes brought down from Illinois, has expanded to as many as 160 boxes to meet the need of a growing population of Eastern Bluebirds.

The boxes were placed in suitable locations during the winter months and were monitored every seven to ten days from late March through August. Accurate records have been maintained for each box, and a summary of the data sent each year to the Department of Conservation Non-Game Wildlife Program in Montgomery, AL, and the North American Bluebird Society in Silver Spring, MD, as well as to other interested parties.

Over the ten year period from 1977-1987 more than 2200 bluebirds have been successfully fledged. In 1987, 363 young fledged from 152 boxes. Nine of the 152 boxes were utilized by other species, including five Carolina Chickadees (*Parus carolinensis*), two Tufted Titmice (*Parus bicolor*), and two White-breasted Nuthatches (*Sitta carolinensis*). Four boxes were taken over by House Sparrows, and their nests and eggs promptly removed and the boxes relocated. The principal competition for the boxes continues to be flying squirrels (*Glaucomys volans*) which occupied 51 or about 33% of the total!

In recent years special consideration has been given to placing boxes in Jefferson County where the decline in the bluebird population has

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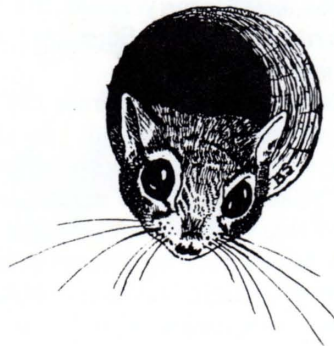
been most noticeable. In at least two such locations this year, fledglings were produced successfully for the first time in 15 years!

An interesting feature of the bluebird trail has been the banding of the nestlings (and some adults) during the past five years. The 237 bluebirds banded in 1987 brought the total banded to date to 1215. Those individuals responsible for placing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services's bands on the bluebirds were "Buss" Peavy initially, then Tom Imhof and finally, this year by John and Harriet Wright Findley. It is interesting to note that of the thousands of birds banded by these Federal Banding permit holders, none of them had ever banded bluebirds before doing so on this trail!

Virtually all bluebird bandings have been of nestlings ten to 14 days old while still in the nest. Some incubating adult females have also been successfully banded as well as protected non-bluebird species' young found using the nest boxes.

A noted biologist and author, and friend of many of us, Chandler Robbins, with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service once said, "There is not much that ordinary citizens can do to save the Bald Eagle, the Loggerhead Shrike, or the Whooping Crane, but they can help save the Bluebird."

Providing properly placed nest boxes for our Eastern Bluebird has proven to be a tremendous step in the right direction for the restoration of this beautiful and desirable species. If we cooperate in this effort, and motivate others to help, we will indeed have renewed hope for its future.





## JSU BLUEBIRD PROJECT A SUCCESS

Bill Summerour

As part of a nesting box project during the spring semester, 1987, an ornithology class at JSU constructed 100 bluebird boxes, 43 of which were placed on campus and adjacent farm country. These were checked periodically from 1 March through 31 August to determine the number of fledgings produced.

In all, 23 of the 43 boxes were used during the nesting season, 17 by bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*), three by House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and two by Tufted Titmice (*Parus bicolor*). Nine titmice fledged from the two boxes. One box was occupied by Brown-headed Nuthatches (*Sitta pusilla*), but all six of the nestings died due to a heavy mite infestation.

Bluebirds began investigating the boxes in early February with some nest construction getting underway by mid-March. Time for nest construction ranged from a few days to two weeks, depending on delays due to weather conditions. Second nests generally required less time to build than first nests. All of the nests were constructed of pine straw and lined with grasses, but this varied somewhat with the materials at hand.

Egg dates were from 31 March–4 August with the average clutch size being 4.75 eggs for the first brood and 4.0 for the second. Eggs were laid during the morning hours from daylight until 11:00 and the laying interval was one egg per day. The female alone incubated the eggs and the incubation period began upon completion of the clutch and lasted 13 days. The young remained in the nest for about 17 days and the last young of the season fledged on 22 August.

Seventy-three young fledged from 77 eggs in the first brood and 39 to 48 eggs in the second brood, For a total of 112 young fledged from 125 eggs, or a success rate of 89.6%.

## AOS FALL MEETING

The Society's fall meeting was on Dauphin Island on 9-11 October, and was enjoyed by approximately 85 birders from Alabama and many other southeastern states. We were entertained and educated about hummingbirds at the evening banquet by Nancy Newfield of Metairie, Louisiana. Nancy, an expert in the field, taught us techniques of attracting and identifying these incredible birds, and showed excellent slides of North American as well as some tropical species.

Field trips during the weekend visited sites on Dauphin Island, Fort Morgan, and Blakely Island. The preceding two weeks of fair weather made searching for migrants a more difficult than usual task, but we still managed to see 172 species in three days. Highlights included: **Eared Grebe, American White Pelican, Anhinga, Reddish Egret, White Ibis, Snow Goose, (blue phase), Mottled Duck, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, American Avocet, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, White-winged Dove, Western and Gray Kingbirds, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, 21 species of warblers including Connecticut, and two noteworthy sparrows, Lark and Le Conte's.**

The next meeting of the Society is tentatively planned for 22-24 January at Guntersville, AL. Details will be mailed to members prior to the meeting.





## IN MEMORIAM

## WILLIAM J. CALVERT

1901-1987

The academic and ornithological worlds lost one of their most beloved and respected members on 7 April 1987 with the passing of William J. Calvert, former Professor of English Literature at Jacksonville State University and charter member of the AOS. He is survived by his wife, Palmer, and a son, Donnie, who now resides in New York.

Dr. Calvert was born in Pittsboro, N.C., on 3 July 1901, received his B.S. degree from Virginia Military Institute in 1920, and his M.S. and Ph.D. degrees from Harvard University in 1922 and 1927. While working on his Ph.D. he taught at Washington and Lee University and U.C.L.A. After graduating from Harvard, he was employed by Williams College in Massachusetts.

While at Williams College, Dr. Calvert became ill with tuberculosis and was sent to a sanitarium in Gadsden, AL, where he spent two years recovering. After returning home to North Carolina during the depression years, he learned of a job opening at Jacksonville State Teacher's College and in 1933 accepted the position, sight unseen.

Dr. Calvert arrived in Jacksonville equipped with a Harvard education and a lively and enthusiastic interest in birds. He soon began keeping records of his observations on local birds and by the time of his death he had accumulated 12 volumes of notes on species in the Jacksonville area. These records served as the basis for an eventual survey of the Birds of Calhoun Co.

Over the years Dr. Calvert's home became the meeting place for people with a wide assortment of interests. Birders gathered before dawn in the warmth of his dining room for hot coffee, donuts, and conversation before heading out to brave the elements on cold, wintry mornings. Nights were frequently spent with friends listening to music or recordings of bird songs or discussing the status of various species such as Orchard Orioles, Bewick's Wrens or Bachman's Sparrows.

Bird song was one of Dr. Calvert's greatest pleasures in life. Among his favorites was the Veery. He also liked the closely related Wood Thrush, which he said lifted his spirits and helped him through the dark

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### Calvert, Cont.

days following the start of World War II. He was particularly fond of the campus Mockingbirds, which he referred to as "marvelous" singers because their songs were amplified by the buildings on campus. The Brown Thrasher was another of his favorites, which he considered overlooked because of the vociferous Mockingbird.

In 1945, Dr. Calvert was named Head of the English Department at JSU and in 1972 was selected as the first Dean of the newly formed School of Humanities. He retired in 1973 after 40 years of service to the university and community. During those 40 years, Dr. Calvert saw the school grow from a dozen faculty members in 1933 to over 300 by the time he retired. The student enrollment increased from around 300 to 7,000.

During his lifetime, Dr. Calvert touched the lives of many people. Those of us who were fortunate enough to have shared with him his enthusiasm for life and his interest in nature will carry with us many fond memories. His company and contribution to the knowledge of birds in Alabama will be missed.





**IN MEMORIAM****WALTER F. COXE**

1898-1987

Walter F. Coxe, formerly of 3923 Eighth Court, South Birmingham, passed away 12 August 1987. He was 89. One of Alabama's leading conservationists, Mr. Coxe devoted a lifetime of efforts to preserving a higher quality environment for Alabama and Birmingham, including preservation of wilderness areas, protection of parks, improvement of air and water quality, and bringing an increased awareness and appreciation of the natural resources of the state to people of all ages. He was widely known through his many appearances on radio and other public programs. Walter Coxe produced, directed and narrated a full-color motion picture, *The Bankhead Forest - An Alabama Adventure*, and was commended by Congressmen on his testimony in support of the initial Sipsey Wilderness in the Bankhead Forest. He was honored by the City of Birmingham in 1976 for "his numerous civic and community services and his dedicated and untiring efforts to preserve our streams, rivers, trees, and wildlife..." and in 1984 received one of the prestigious Sol Feinstone Environmental Awards, given nationwide to a few citizens "who, by their voluntary action, and on an unpaid basis, have made an outstanding contribution to improving the physical environment."

Mr. Coxe was President and longtime Board member of the Birmingham Audubon Society, Director for many years of its Audubon Wildlife Film Series, President of Alabama Ornithological Society, member of the first Board of Directors of the Alabama Conservancy, and for many years participated in ornithological surveys for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Audubon Society. He initiated a program to purchase natural history films for placement in the Birmingham Board of Education Film Library to be seen by school classes and other groups, and published Blanche Dean's *Trees and Shrubs in the Heart of Dixie* (still in authoritative text on trees in Alabama). The Audubon Society's fund for scientific research in various fields of biology is named for him. He was also very active in the scouting program, having been scoutmaster for many years of a Boy Scout troop in Elyton Village that was distinguished by its high percentage of Eagle Scouts.

## ALABAMA BIRLDLIFE

### **Coxe, cont.**

Walter Coxe was named an alumnus of Georgia Tech and served on its National Alumni Board of Directors. He began his career in advertising and public relations in New Orleans where he had many famous clients and was a member of the Sugar Bowl Committee. On moving to Birmingham, almost 50 years ago, he became a member of the Presbyterian Church City Sales Club, served as officer of Civitan International for many years and was a founding member of the Downtown Club. In addition, he was a recognized authority on the life of George Washington and the American Revolution and gave many programs on those subjects.

Mr. Coxe is survived by his son, Walter F. Coxe, Jr., and granddaughter, Barrie Coxe, both of Jacksonville, Fla.





## IN MEMORIAM

## M. WILSON GAILLARD

1898 - 1986

Alabama lost one of its outstanding conservationists and ornithologists with the passing last year in Mobile of Dr. M. Wilson Gaillard. A long-time prominent conservationist, he was a founding member of the Mobile Bay Audubon Society, the Mobile County Wildlife Association and the Mobile Bird Club. He had been an officer and director of AOS for a number of years and was a member of the Alabama Wildlife Federation, having served as an officer, director and editor of its newsletter. In 1967, he received the Governor's Award as State Conservationist of the Year. He was also a member of the National Audubon Society and had been compiler of the Mobile and Dauphin Island Christmas Bird Counts and a participant in surveys of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for many years.

Also an author, he wrote *Moving the Earth - For a Song*, a widely-acclaimed book on the need for conservation practices to protect birdlife and what an individual can do to foster conservation. By profession a dentist, he practiced dentistry in Mobile for over 58 years and had been Past President of the Alabama Dental Association.

Dr. Gaillard was especially active in developing land preservation projects for wildlife. His was the leading force in establishing, out of an abandoned golf course and through much negotiation and personal effort, the Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuary, which provides a resing place on that barrier island for Trans-Gulf migrants in their journeys across the Gulf. Gaillard Lake in the sanctuary is named for him. He also developed the bird sanctuary at nearby Bellingrath Gardens. From spoil materials dredged from Mobile Bay, he convinced the government agencies to create an island near the Mobile Ship Channel, which is now used as a nesting and resting place for thousands of seabirds, including the formerly (and still in part of its range) endangered Brown Pelican, and he was instrumental in having marsh grass planted off part of the island to create feeding and breeding grounds for shrimp and other sea life, the base of the marine food chain and our seafood industry. In 1983, the Alabama Legislature, in recognition of his efforts, named the island

**Gaillard, cont.**

Wilson Gaillard Island. It is hoped that this island will continue to be managed for wildlife — both of the air and water — as a natural resource for the Mobile Bay area as Dr. Gaillard wished it to be.

Dr. Gaillard was a student of Alabama's avifauna throughout his life, as is attested by the numerous records reported under his name, and he was always interested in ornithological research and wildlife preservation in all its forms. For his work, he received tributes from many eminent officials, and a major oil company commented in one of its public messages, "Next time you hear a bird sing, it could be through the courtesy of Dr. Gaillard and his friends."

He will long be remembered for his many accomplishments and his contributions in making our natural world a better place in which to live. AOS extends its deepest sympathy to his sister, Mary, a long-time member of AOS, and to the other members of his family.





## MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

All AOS members are encouraged to submit articles to the editor. This is our means of staying in touch and sharing records, observations and studies on birds. Authenticity of sightings is of course of outstanding importance. Any unusual record should be verified by a reliable field observer and preferably by a photograph.

Submit typed manuscripts double spaced on unlined 8 1/2 x 11" paper. Common names of birds should be capitalized and should include the scientific name when first used, e.g. Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*). Spell out numbers ten and under and use numerals for numbers 11 and above. Use a 24 hour clock and dates should be written as follows: 13 April 1933. When using measurements, metric units should be given first, followed in parenthesis by the English equivalent, e.g. 3.6 km (2.25 miles), 344 ha (851 acres), one meter (39.37 inches), etc. If you have less than five references, incorporate them in the text if possible.

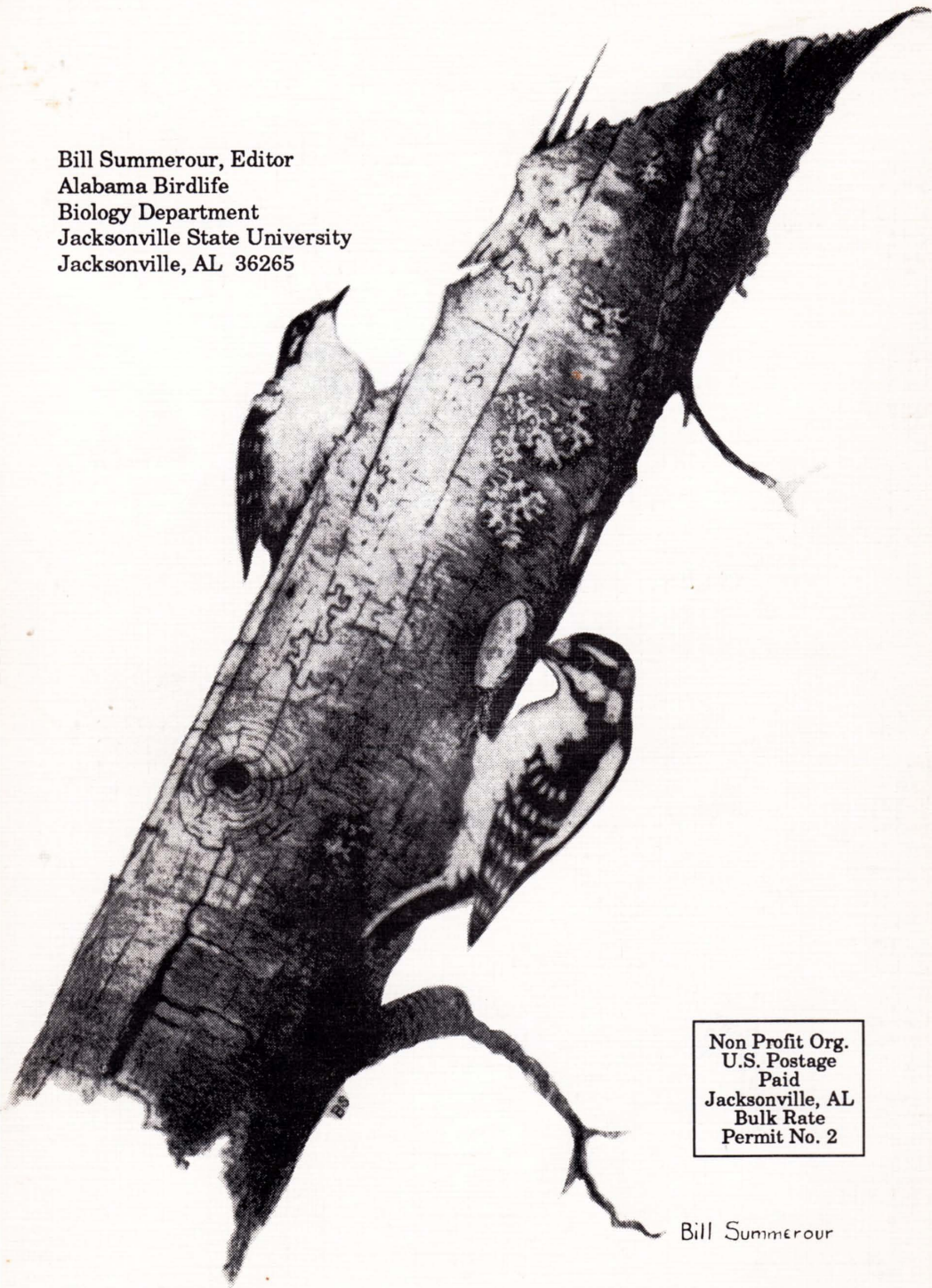
This is somewhat of an experimental issue, costing about \$1.90 per copy. With our present membership we can probably afford two or three issues per year, providing I have enough material to work with. Your comments and suggestions are needed for us to improve with each issue.

**Please submit your papers including maps, tables, and figures exactly as you wish to have them published. This minimizes changes or interpretations by the editor which might alter the meaning of what you intended to say.**

## CALL FOR PAPERS

With this issue, our backlog of articles will be exhausted except for several checklists and Christmas Counts which will be published in a special issue. The frequency and quality of future editions will depend on your contributions.

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Jacksonville, AL 36265



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