

Coastal Birds

Written by

David L. Ruple

Illustrations by

Betsy Washington

Book IX: Marine Discovery Series

1989

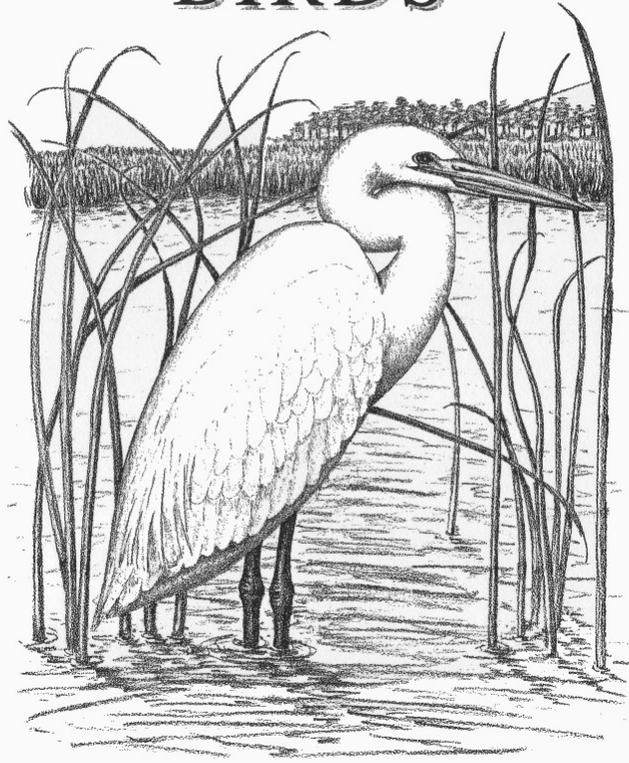
Produced by

David L. Ruple
Scranton Museum

and

The Department of Wildlife Conservation
Department of Marine Resources

COASTAL BIRDS



BOOK IX
MARINE DISCOVERY SERIES

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Marine Discovery Series, 1989

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Department of Marine Resources
1411 Bayview Ave., Suite 101
Biloxi, MS 39530

Coastal Birds

Anne Parker and Randy Hall, sixth grade students at Park Elementary are facing a major problem. They have never before been given a project quite like what Mrs. Brown was asking of their science class this semester.

Both Anne and Randy love science class and the outdoors. That is part of the reason picking a project will be so difficult.

"This planning session is harder than I thought," pondered Randy.

"You're right," said Anne, also deep in thought and only half listening to Randy. Pick an animal or plant and report on its life here on the Mississippi Coast. Where does it live, what does it look like, why does it live where it does, what does it eat? This could really be great, but what to choose so that we can learn the most from the project. Randy goes hunting with his Dad and I have a great insect collection. We both go fishing and exploring along the beach. We both feed birds at home.

"That's it," exclaimed Anne.

"What's it?" asked Randy.

"I have the perfect idea for our project. We'll report on the birds of the Mississippi Coast."

"We already know the birds that come to our feeders. We should do something really different," said Randy.

"No, I mean the birds that live in the marshes and on the beaches. Remember last year when we learned how important the wetlands are? We talked a little bit about birds that live in the marshes. I don't know if this will be too big a project or not, but let's try." Anne was getting more excited as she talked.

"Yeah, remember all the birds we see along the beach sometimes," said Randy. "I wonder how many different kinds live there. I know there are seagulls and then there is the Least Tern Nesting Area on the beach in Gulfport." Randy was also beginning to see that this might be a fun project.

Mrs. Brown was trying something new this semester with her class. She had set aside one science class each week for special projects. It was an experiment and she could only do it with approval from the principal. The students were told, of course, that the required science materials would still have to be covered. The class was an excellent group and she felt they could cover the required work in four days, each week. The special project day would allow them to tie together facts and concepts that they would learn in their regular class.

Now, as the teams of two held their first twenty minute planning session, Mrs. Brown could not help overhearing the excitement expressed by Anne and Randy. Mrs. Brown realized that birds of the Mississippi Coast would be a rather large project to undertake. She knew these two would do a good job, whatever they decided to choose. She would encourage them, though maybe she would suggest a specific group of birds. That is, if they sought her advice.

As she thought of specific groups of birds the students might choose, Mrs. Brown realized birds were not her strong point. She was not sure how many types of seagulls or ducks, or for that matter how many of any type bird lives here on the coast. She knew that this would be a project from which everyone would learn a great deal.

Anne and Randy did not ask Mrs. Brown for any advice that day. Their project title, "Coastal Birds" was approved by Mrs. Brown.

As Anne and Randy left school that Friday afternoon, they promised each other to spend some time over the weekend thinking about and looking up information for their new project.

Saturday morning Anne looked everywhere for their field guide to birds. She knew she had used it during the winter to identify birds at her backyard feeder.

When she finally found the book, she almost wished she had not. Before, she had only been interested in little birds in her yard. Now, looking at all the birds that live around the water, she was horrified. The guide had 440 pages, and of that, nearly one-third were devoted to some type of water bird.

Anne's mother entered the living room and immediately saw her daughter's long face. After explaining her project, Anne asked hopefully, "Any suggestions?"

"Why don't you call Mr. Williams? He belongs to the Magnolia Birding Club and I'm sure he will be able to help you and Randy."

Anne quickly called Mr. Williams. After long conversation with Mr. Williams about coastal birds and bird watching, she felt somewhat relieved.

Mr. Williams had said that the groups of birds they would be most interested in for their project would be wading birds, seabirds, shorebirds and ducks. These types include many of the birds that live in the marshes, along our beaches and on the water. A total of 362 species of birds have been recorded in the three coastal Mississippi counties (Jackson, Harrison and Hancock). About 160 of these birds are commonly associated with open water, marshes or beaches. About twenty of these are permanent year-round residents of the coast. Some of the others are either summer or winter residents, while many only migrate through the area in the spring and fall.

Anne then called Randy to tell him of their good luck. A field trip with Mr. Williams to observe coastal birds was scheduled for April 9th. Mr. Williams was also making available to them several reference books which would describe the species and habits of coastal birds.

The children had three weeks before their field trip, but there was much to do prior to the "big day." They wanted to become familiar with some of the birds they would see. First, they consulted field guides which described and showed pictures of all the birds in the eastern United States. As Randy thumbed through the field guides, looking at the various wading birds, shorebirds, seabirds and ducks, he realized how few of these birds he had seen.

"I think I've only seen 10, maybe 20 of these birds. They look so much alike," commented Randy.

"How close to the birds will we get?" asked Randy.

"Oh yes, Mr. Williams is bringing binoculars for us to use and also a spotting scope. Mr. Williams said a spotting scope is like a type of binoculars, though it only has one eye piece and is used with a tripod. It's for looking at small birds that are far away."

Anne and Randy spent many hours studying the books Mr. Williams had let them use. They also spent several days in the public library. Both children were worried because many of the birds they saw in the books looked similar, but at least they would be going on their field trip with experts. As they read through the reference books they learned much about the different birds found on the coast.

As Randy and Anne left Park Elementary on Friday afternoon, April 8th, a light rain began to fall. They parted, knowing Mr. Williams had said, "Meet at 7:00 A.M. at the McDonald's on Highway 90. Don't be late."

The steady rain which had fallen all night slackened around dawn as the children awoke. They had not slept well, anticipating the day to come and worrying about the rain.

Two weeks after their field trip, Randy and Anne made a presentation to their class and submitted the following report to Mrs. Brown.

Coastal Birds

Birds are warm-blooded vertebrate animals that have feathers. Most birds release an oil that keeps the feathers waterproof. Bird bones are hollow and air-filled, yet strong. Feathers and light bones allow most birds the freedom of flight, a type of movement not shared by most other vertebrate animals.

We studied the coastal birds of Mississippi that live in or near the water and those that eat primarily aquatic animals. These include birds that live in the wetland areas of our coast; the marshes, swamps, beaches and open water. Most of the birds that live in marshes and swamps feed at the water's edge or hide in thick grasses.

Our report is a combination of what we saw and learned on a field trip and the research we have done on the coastal birds of Mississippi.

Mr. Williams and Mrs. Spencer of the Magnolia Birding Club spent April 9th showing us some of the birds that live here on the coast. We looked for birds along the beaches and in the swamps and marshes of Jackson, Harrison and Hancock Counties. Special aides that we used to help identify the birds included: binoculars, spotting scopes, field guides, a cassette tape player and tapes of bird calls. We saw 67 different species of birds. Omitted from this total are birds we saw that are not usually associated with the water.



Loons: Many Common Loons spend the winter here on the Mississippi Coast, mostly in the Mississippi Sound. Birds in winter are light gray and have a very thick, pointed bill. We saw one swimming in the Sound off the beach in Ocean Springs. Its feather or plumage were beginning to look like they will in summer, when this bird will be in Canada with a mate. Mr. Williams played us a tape of the loon's call, a yodeling sound, usually not heard here in Mississippi.

Grebes: Three types of grebes, rather small, grayish seabirds, are seen here in the winter months. We saw a Pied-billed Grebe swimming in the bayou at Gulf Islands National Seashore and several Horned Grebes in Bay St. Louis, along the beach. Grebes are duck-like and are sometimes seen diving underwater for food. A few Pied-billed Grebes

nest here in the summer, building their nests along the edge of a marsh.

Shearwaters: These gull-sized birds are true seabirds and are rarely seen from shore. They have very long wings for their body size. Most shearwaters are dark above and light below. Two species have been seen here, but only during tropical storms or hurricanes.

Storm-Petrels: These small, blackish birds of the open ocean are rarely seen in Mississippi. They flutter over the top of waves, picking food from the water's surface.

Gannets and Bobbies: These large seabirds are not often seen from shore. Mrs. Spencer saw a Northern Gannet way off in the distance over the Mississippi Sound, but we could not find it. She said they are white and black, with narrow wings and a tapered bill and tail. Like many seabirds, gannets dive into the water from great heights to catch fish.

Pelicans: Both White and Brown Pelicans are found in Mississippi. These huge water birds are best known for their large bill and throat pouch. We saw many Brown Pelicans today along the entire coast. One



MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD

was even feeding on small fish, diving into the water with folded wings and open beak. Water sprayed everywhere. We wondered how it did not hurt itself. We did not see any White Pelicans. When White Pelicans are seen soaring overhead, they appear and disappear as sunlight reflects off their feathers.

Cormorants and Anhingas: These large, blackish goose-like birds are very unusual looking. There were several Double-crested Cormorants along the beaches with wings outstretched as they stood on pilings. Mrs. Spencer said they were drying their feathers after diving underwater for fish or crustaceans. The feathers of cormorants and Anhingas are not as waterproof as on most birds, so they have to dry their wings before they can fly. Otherwise, it is very hard for them to take off and fly. Their bones are relatively heavy, helping the bird to submerge when diving. Anhingas look



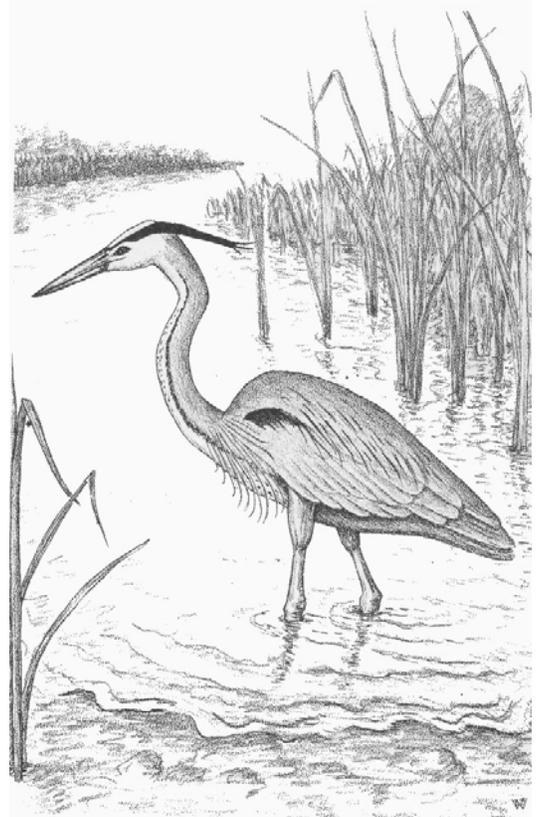
DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT

similar to cormorants, but have a more snake-like neck and live near freshwater.

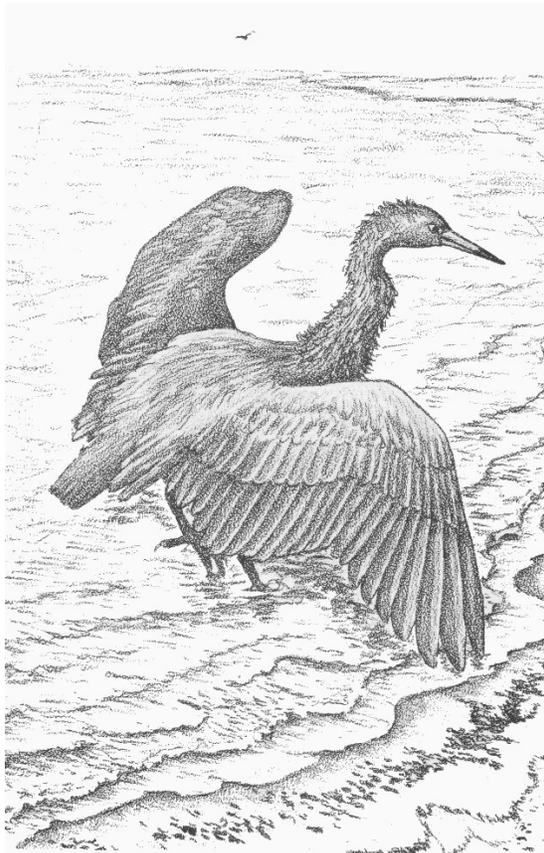
Frigatebirds: Several Magnificent Frigatebirds were soaring high over Deer Island the morning of our field trip. We had to stop for a closer look. We had read that these birds have the longest wingspan (8 feet) in relation to their light weight of any bird in the world. Looking closer, they really were magnificent. They hardly ever seemed to flap their long, black wings, as they flew overhead. Their long, hooked bill is good for catching squid or fish from the water's surface.

Bitterns and Herons: Twelve different bitterns and herons are found on our coast. These medium- to large-sized wading birds are often seen feeding on fish and other aquatic animals along the edges of marshes and bayous. We were lucky and saw an American Bittern, a medium-sized white and brown bird. It stood motionless in a ditch with its bill pointed towards the sky. It was almost invisible the way it hid in the grass.

The herons we saw included the Great Blue Heron, Little Blue Heron, Green-backed Heron and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. Several Great Blue Herons were seen feeding



GREAT BLUE HERON



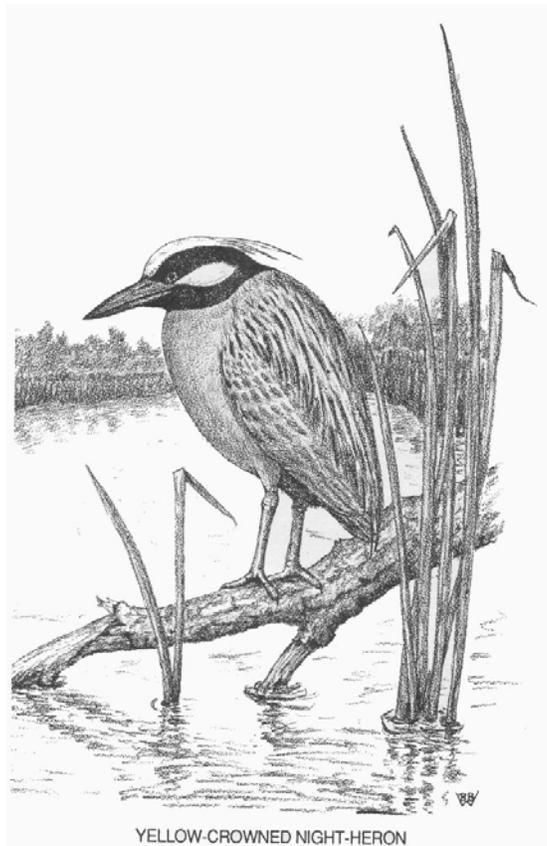
REDDISH EGRET

in the coastal marshes and standing on the beaches. They are the largest wading birds that live here, standing nearly four feet tall. They are bluish-gray in color and are often mistaken for Mississippi Sandhill Cranes, which are rarely seen by most people. In the winter many Great Blues migrate south from Canada and the northern United States to live here. They fish by standing motionless in shallow water waiting for prey to swim by.

Egrets are large wading birds that scientists classify as being related to herons and bitterns. We saw four kinds of egrets: Great Egret, Cattle Egret, Snowy Egret and Reddish Egret. Great Egrets are tall, white wading birds with a long, yellow bill and black legs. They are our tallest egret and are often seen standing in ditches along

the roadside. The Snowy Egrets we saw acted funny, in the way they fished. They are medium-sized white birds with black legs and bright, yellow feet. Along the Pascagoula River we saw one fishing in shallow water. When it saw a school of fish or shrimp it would run after them, stabbing its bill into the water. The Reddish Egret that we saw on the Gulfport beach did the same thing, except it ran along flapping its wings, trying to scare the fish. They are tall wading birds, mostly grayish-red and are usually only seen on the beach. The Cattle Egrets we saw were in an Ocean Springs cow pasture. Mr. Williams said these medium-sized white egrets follow along behind the cows and eat insects that are disturbed as the cows walk through the grass.

We saw several Yellow-crowned Night-herons standing quietly along the water's edge on Davis Bayou in Ocean Springs. These medium-sized grayish herons are most active at night when they hunt for crabs, crayfish and other aquatic invertebrate animals. Unlike most herons they do not eat very many fish. They look similar to the Black-crowned Night-Heron, especially the young birds, which are brown and white.

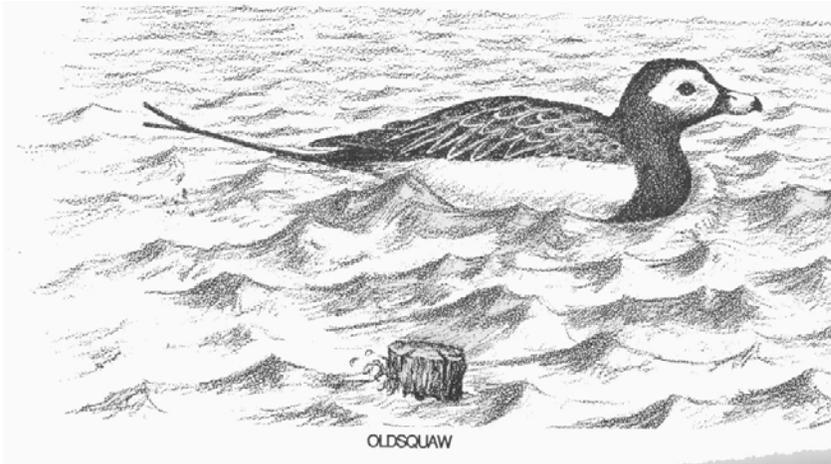


Ibises: We saw a whole flock of White Ibis flying high overhead while driving in Hancock County. They must have been a mile high. We believed Mr. Williams who said they were Ibis, because we could barely see them. When seen from closer range these large, white wading birds have a long, thick down-curved bill. Earlier, when we drove through Gautier, Mr. Williams stopped at a good place to see Ibis close-up. But the small, marshy pond was partially filled with dirt and most of the trees were cut down around the edges. There were no Ibis in the pond and Mrs. Spencer said that it had been some time since she had seen any at this location. Mr. Williams stressed the importance of suitable habitat for birds and other animals. Without proper habitat, the birds will have to go elsewhere or live in less desirable areas.

Spoonbills and Storks: These large wading birds are hardly ever seen in Mississippi. They are as unusual looking as they are rare. The Wood Stork has a white body. Its head and neck are dark, totally lacking feathers. The Roseate Spoonbill is pink and white. Its bill is long, flat and spoon-like in shape. Spoonbills swing their open bills through the water, snapping them closed when they "feel" their prey.

Swans, Geese and Ducks: One type of swan, four species of geese and twenty-one different kinds of ducks have been seen along the Mississippi Coast. Swans are very rare here. Neither Mrs. Spencer nor Mr. Williams have ever seen one on the coast. We did not see any geese,

though we had hoped to see some Snow Geese flying overhead. Snow Geese are usually only seen on the coast as they migrate to and from their wintering grounds. Many spend the winter in south Louisiana and Texas. These geese can occur in two different colors or morphs. They may be either white or dark. The dark morph is called a Blue Goose.



There are many species of ducks that live here on the coast. Some are permanent residents that live here all year and some only spend the winter or summer here. We saw Wood Ducks and Mottled Ducks on our field trip. They are both year round residents. The male

Wood Duck is one of the prettiest birds in the world. Mr. Williams said they are one of his favorite ducks. They are usually seen in freshwater swamps, where they build nests in hollow trees. They eat more fruits and nuts than other ducks, plus some aquatic plants. The Mottled Duck prefers to live and nest in salt marshes. Both the male and female are dark brown in color, with a lighter head, yellow bill and blur-green speculum or wing patch. Mottled ducks feed by "dabbling" or tipping up their tail in shallow water to feed on aquatic plants, seeds and snails found underwater. They nest in marsh grass at the edge of the water.



Other ducks we saw on our field trip were Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Lesser Scaup, Oldsquaw, and Red-breasted Merganser.

The Old-squaw is a diving duck of the open ocean. They are the only seaduck with large amounts of white on its body. We spotted two Oldsquaw off the beach in Biloxi, near the lighthouse. It repeatedly dove to the bottom for clams, snails, shrimp and other invertebrates. These birds can dive to depths of 200 feet, propelling themselves with their wings. They are uncommon here on the coast during the winter and spring.

The Red-breasted Merganser is another diving duck we found in the marshes and the Mississippi Sound. They are most common here during the winter. All mergansers have

unusual bills in that they are long, narrow and the margins are saw-edged. Some coastians call them "saw-bills". This special bill allows them to catch small fish which they chase underwater.

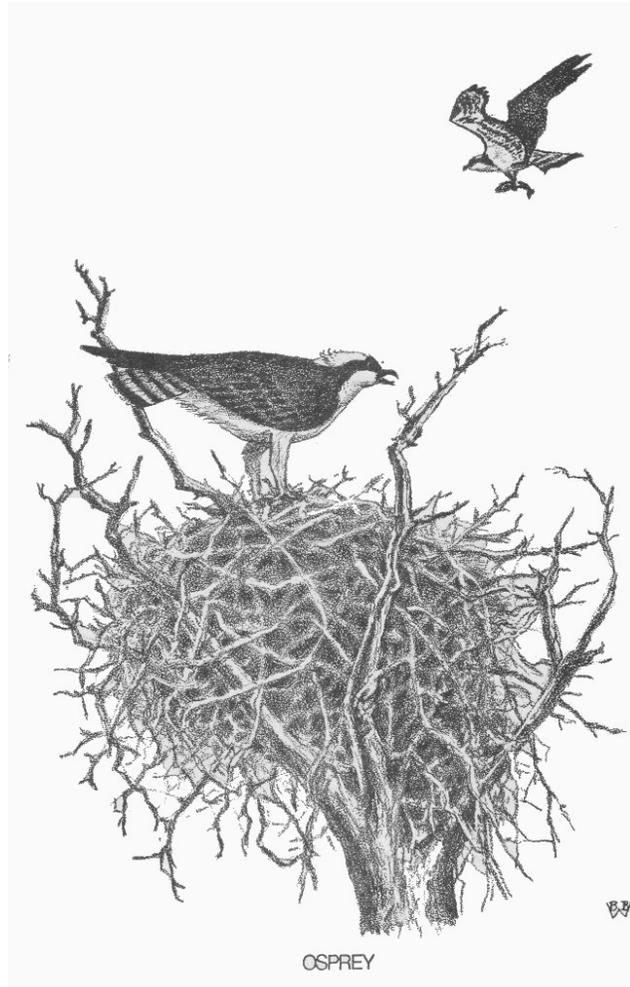
Most of the ducks that spend the winter on the coast had left by our April 9th field trip. Mrs. Spencer explained to us how important the marshes and wetlands are to the ducks during the winter. They feed here and gain strength for their spring migrations back to their breeding grounds in the northern United States and Canada. Once they reach their breeding grounds, they also depend on wetlands for food, water, shelter and a place to raise their young.

Mr. Williams pointed out some important differences between many male and female ducks. Usually, the males are prettier and more colorful than the females. This was true for all the ducks we saw except the Mottled Ducks, where both sexes look similar. Mrs. Spencer added that this was true for many birds. Females spend considerable time caring for their young, hatching eggs and raising chicks. The duller color found in females helps to conceal their location, thus providing some degree of safety for the family.

Eagles and Hawks: Most of these birds are generally found in our forests and fields, but three, the Osprey, Bald Eagle and Northern Harrier are found in association with our coastal waters and marshes. We only saw Ospreys today, but were very excited to see a pair of them at Beardslee Lake in Jackson County. They were building a huge nest in an old dead tree at the edge of the lake. We also saw the male Osprey swoop down, feet first, and catch a large fish in its talons. We watched the Ospreys for about thirty minutes as they ate, collected large branches for nest material and soared over the lake.

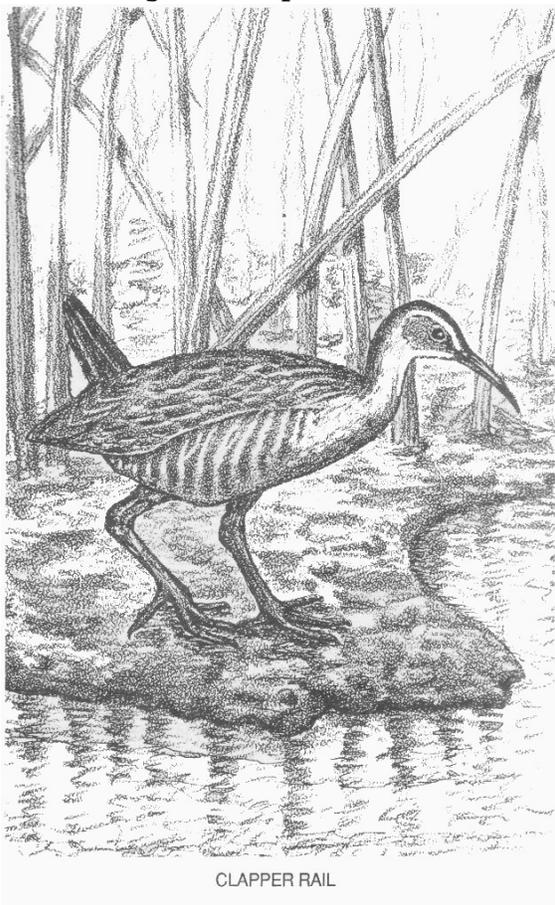
Bald Eagles are endangered in the United States. Rangers at Gulf Islands National Seashore are raising and releasing young eagles on Horn Island. It is hoped that these birds will mature and return to the Mississippi coast to breed.

Falcons: Falcons are among the swiftest hunters of any bird. They may dive from great heights, at speeds up to 200 miles per hour, to capture a smaller bird



from mid air. They are hawk-like birds with pointed wings. The Merlin and Peregrine Falcons can be found on the coast during spring and fall migrations. The Peregrine Falcon is about the size of a crow. Merlins are several inches smaller. Both birds may be seen flying very fast over the marsh or perched on a dead tree branch. The Peregrine Falcon is sometimes called Duck Hawk, because it does catch and eat ducks.

Rails, Gallinules and Coots: Rails are small wading birds of the marshes. They are very secretive and are only occasionally seen walking along the edges of the marshes. They feed on plants, insects, and other invertebrates that live in the marsh. We saw two species of rails today, the Clapper Rails and the King Rail. They are both permanent residents along the coast. While we only saw one Clapper Rail, we heard many calling in the saltwater marshes that we visited. They are grayish-brown in color and are sometimes called "marsh hens" for their chicken-like appearance. At dusk and during the night they are especially vocal as they call from the marsh with a loud kek, kek, kek...noise. If you clap your hands near a marsh, they will often answer with their call.



King Rails prefer freshwater marshes, which is where we saw one at Port Bienville in Hancock County. These birds look very similar to Clapper Rails but are slightly larger and have a more rusty colored breast.

The American Coot and the Common Moorhen are related to the rails, but are more duck-like and are usually seen swimming in ponds, marshes or bayous. They are mostly gray and black in color. The Common Moorhen has a bright red and yellow bill.

Cranes: The only crane usually seen here is the Mississippi Sandhill Crane. Like the Bald Eagle, these birds are endangered and are protected by law. They like to live in freshwater wetland savannah habitats. Savannahs are wet grassy areas with few trees. About 55 of these birds are all that remain in the wild. They spend much of their lives at the wildlife refuge in Gautier. Many people mistake Great Blue Herons for our Sandhill Cranes.

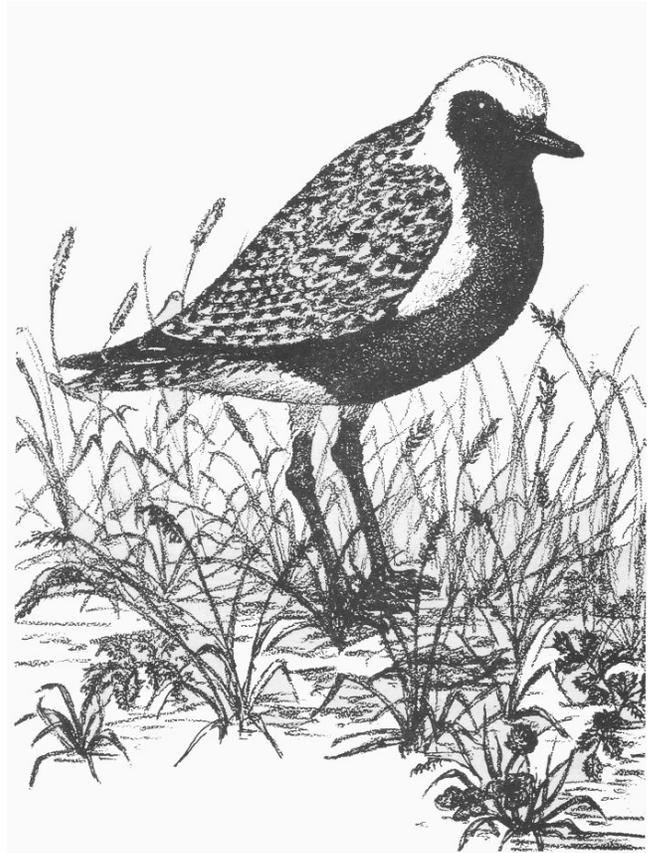
Plovers: Seven types of plovers are seen on the Mississippi coast and we saw six of those today. They are compact, fairly small wading birds found at beaches, marshes and in wet fields. Most of them appear to have no neck. Several species have a dark breastband or black breast and belly during the summer. These characteristics, plus a short bill

are helpful in separating the different plovers from other small shorebirds.

We saw several Killdeer in muddy areas and in wet grassy fields. They are easy to tell from other plovers because they have two breastbands and a rusty colored tail.

Black-bellied Plovers and Lesser Golden Plovers look very similar. In the summer months, both have a black breast and belly. In the winter months, both species have white underparts. We could only tell them apart when they flew. Black-bellied Plovers have white tail feathers, while Lesser Golden Plovers do not. Both of these birds are often found in wet grassy areas, like the Jackson County Airport. Black-bellied Plovers might also be seen on the beach.

The spotting scopes we used on our field trip helped us find Wilson's Plover and several Semipalmated Plovers on the mud flats at the Pascagoula River Marsh. Two Piping Plovers were seen scurrying along the beach in Bay St. Louis.



BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER



BLACK-NECKED STILT

Piping Plovers are very light colored, about the color of dry sand. We failed to see any Snowy Plovers, as they are an endangered species in Mississippi and are very hard to find.

Plovers found on grassy areas eat primarily insects, while those feeding along the beach and on mud flats eat marine worms, crustaceans and mollusks.

Oystercatchers: We had hoped to see an American Oystercatcher on the beach in Hancock County, but we did not. Oystercatchers are large, stout shorebirds with long flattened, bright orange bills. They use this bill to pry open oysters and clams. These birds are rare and most likely to be

seen on Bay St. Louis beaches in the winter.

Stilts and Avocets: The American Avocet and the Black-necked Stilt are two of our most graceful shorebirds. They have very long legs, sleek bodies and long, narrow bills. At the Pascagoula River Marsh mud flats we saw over one hundred of each of these birds. This is one of the best places in the state for seeing these birds. Both species walk along in shallow water catching aquatic insects, crustaceans and mollusks. They use their long bills to probe the shallow water for food. Mr. Williams told us that it would be easy to find baby stilts later in the summer. They are often seen walking behind their parents near their nesting area. If people or predators get too close, the adults fly about screaming a kyip, kyip, kyip...call.

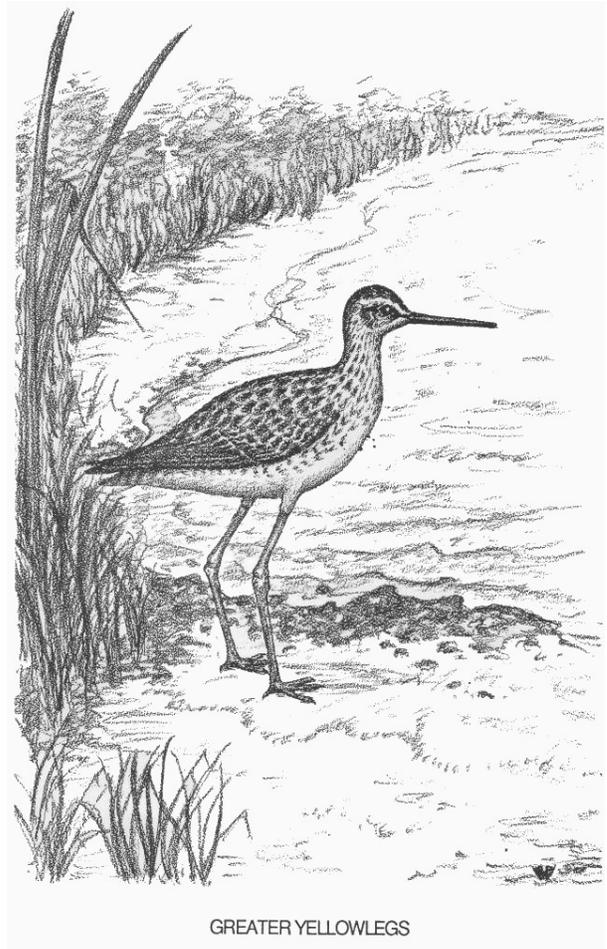
Sandpipers: Sandpipers are a large group of small- to medium-sized shorebirds. They are similar to plovers, but most have longer and narrower bills. Thirty-one species have been seen on the Mississippi coast, including birds with such names as yellowlegs, curlew, godwit, turnstone, phalarope and snipe.

One of the best places to see sandpipers on the coast is the Pascagoula River Marsh, near Ingalls Shipyard in Jackson County. Dredge material from the Pascagoula River has been pumped into large holding ponds to create this habitat. Many migrating birds rest and feed here en route to far away places.

The sandpipers were probably the hardest birds to identify of all those that we saw on our trip. Mr. Williams said not to be discouraged because many expert birdwatchers have trouble separating some of the sandpipers. Mrs. Spencer added that she has been studying birds for twelve years and still learns something new about sandpipers every time she watches them.

While many sandpipers do look similar, a close examination of important characteristics usually will reveal the bird's identity. Characteristics such as size, color of body, color of legs, shape of bill, behavior and the bird's call help to tell sandpipers apart.

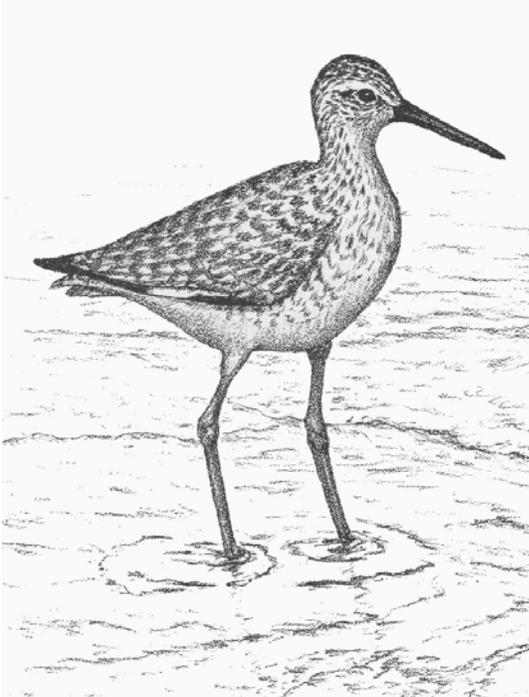
We were able to find fifteen kinds of sandpipers on our trip, but it would not have been possible without help from Mr. Williams and Mrs. Spencer. They said anyone could learn to identify sandpipers, with a lot of practice.



GREATER YELLOWLEGS

The Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs we saw were interesting. They really do have long, yellow legs like their names suggest. Both are slim, grayish sandpipers. The Great Yellowlegs is slightly larger and has a thicker bill than the Lesser Yellowlegs. They also make different calls when they fly. These birds can be found along the edges of marshes or ponds, feeding on small aquatic animals. They do not probe the ground with their long bill, but rather snatch up what they can

see. The Greater Yellowlegs sometimes will swing its bill back and forth in shallow water to disturb its prey. Yellowlegs usually eat small fish, aquatic insects, snails, crabs and worms. They are most common on the coast during spring and fall migrations.



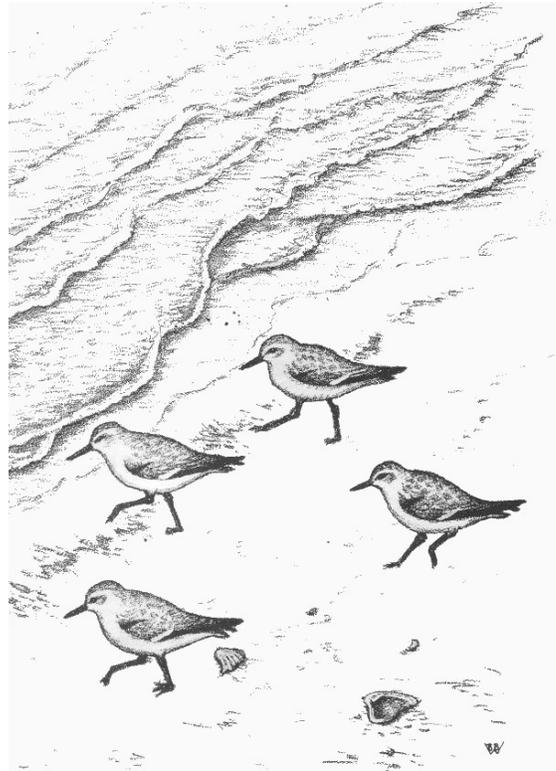
WILLET

Willetts are generally found along our sandy beaches, wading in shallow water. This medium-sized sandpiper looks similar to the yellowlegs, but has bluish-gray legs, a heavier body and a thicker bill. Like many sandpipers, Willetts probe the sand or mud with their bills to capture small aquatic animals.

We saw several along the beaches in Ocean Springs and Biloxi. They can be found along our beaches any time of the year. One was standing on a drain pipe with its bill tucked under its wings, balancing on one foot. We thought that maybe it had lost one of its legs in an accident, but soon it stood on both

feet. The missing leg had been tucked up under the body. Birds resting on the beach will often stand on one foot. Sometimes though, they are badly injured or die when their legs get tangled in marine litter, such as fishing line or nets.

We stopped to look for birds at the Pascagoula River Marsh and saw thousands of birds flying around and running about on the mud flats. We found many of the little sandpipers: Western, Least and Semipalmated. These little birds are only about five to seven inches long and look very funny as they run around in the mud. They are brownish-gray with white bellies. It is nearly impossible to tell these birds apart in their winter plumage, especially by beginners like us. Many of the sandpipers look like miniature sewing machines, as they run around probing the ground with their bills.



SANDERLING

The Sanderling, another of our small sandpipers prefers the sandy beaches to the mud flats. We saw several along the beaches, running along the water's edge, searching for food. They ran back and forth, with the waves lapping onto the beach. They like to eat "sand fleas", worms, small crabs and mollusks. Most Sanderlings do not spend the summer months on the coast and are seen here in their pale gray, winter plumage. These birds are easy to recognize on the beach because of their light color and active habits.

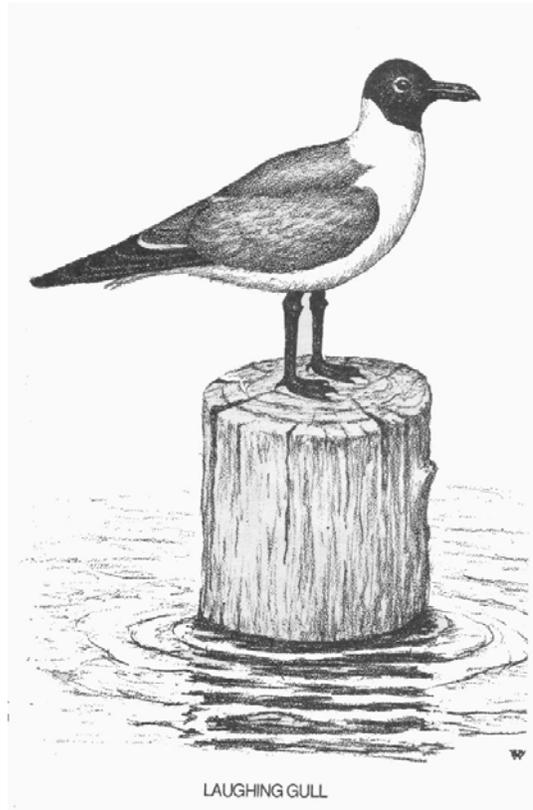
Some of the most interesting birds we saw on our whole trip were several Wilson's Phalaropes at Pascagoula River Marsh. They are small, gray and white sandpiper-like birds. When they feed in shallow water, they spin in a circle, disturbing plankton and other aquatic animals, which they eat. They look like toy tops as they spin in circles.

Jaegers: These dark medium-sized, hawk-like birds are rarely seen on the coast. They have the bad habit of chasing other birds and making them drop their food. They act like pirates of the bird world.

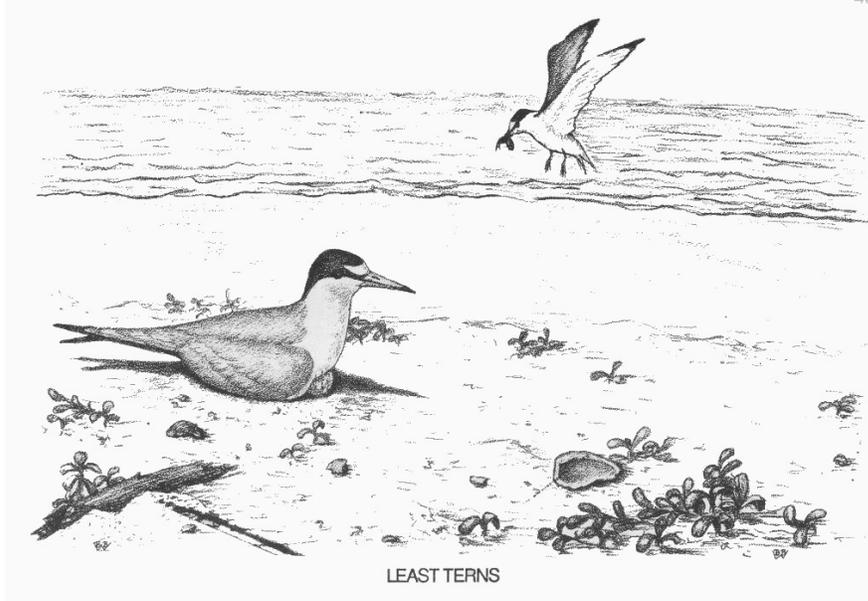
Gulls and Terns: Seagulls are one of the kinds of birds that we are all familiar with. We all see them as we drive along the beach. But, all those medium-sized, white and gray birds are not seagulls. Many of them are terns. Terns are more streamlined than gulls. They usually have more pointed wings and forked tails. Gulls usually swim, terns do not. Gulls are omnivorous and will eat plant and animal food, plus garbage disposed of by man. Terns eat insects and small fish which they catch by diving into the water.

We only saw three species of gulls on our field trip: Laughing, Herring and Ring-billed. These are the most common gulls found on the coast. They can be seen in a variety of different plumages. Several of the Laughing Gulls we saw had their typical black cap, but some were still in winter plumage, with a white head and only traces of black. Later in the summer, most of the gulls that will be here will be Laughing Gulls. Many will be young birds and will have different plumages than the adults. An important source of food for Laughing Gulls is small fish. They can often be seen in flocks following behind shrimp boats, eating discarded fish.

Neither of us knew much about terns before our field trip. We saw five different terns including the relatively large Royal and Caspian, plus smallest of all, the Least Tern. We saw lots of Least Terns, especially at the Least Tern Nesting Area on the beach in Gulfport. Thousands of Least Terns nest on the bare sand here each year. This is one of the largest nesting areas for these birds in the United States.



The birds like to nest where there is no grass on the beach. During the times when terns are not nesting, the county plows the grassy vegetation in this area, making it just right for the birds when they return. The grass begins to grow again during the summer, while the birds are nesting. The grass is not plowed then, because doing so would destroy the nests. Mrs. Spencer wanted us to be sure and remember that Least Terns do not like grass on the beach. Vegetation on the beach includes sand spurs and other plants which may harm the chicks as well as serve as hiding places for predators.

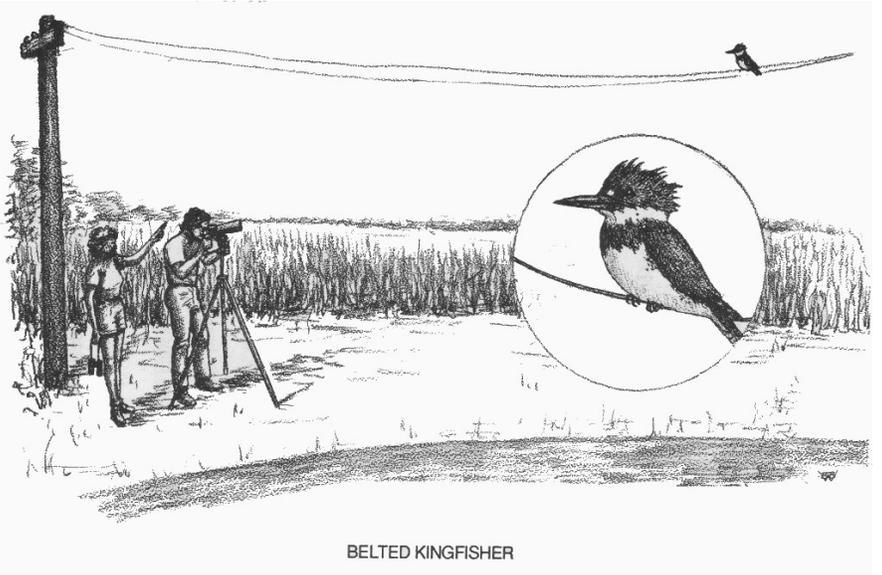


Least Terns appear on our beaches in April, after spending the winter in South America. Mating and nesting begin soon after they arrive here. Both the male and female adults spend time incubating 2-4 eggs which are laid in a sandy nest. Incubation of eggs lasts for

about three weeks. After the eggs hatch, the adults are busy caring for the chicks for up to six weeks. By the middle of August most of the terns have left our coast to return to their traditional wintering grounds.

We also saw several Black Skimmers along the Gulfport beach. We had hoped to see these medium-sized, black, tern-like birds fishing in their own unique fashion, but they were all resting on the beach. When Black Skimmers fish, they "swim" along the water's surface, holding their lower bill in the water. They catch small fish and shrimp in this manner. Black Skimmers nest along our beaches in the summer.

Kingfishers: We saw about twenty Belted Kingfishers on our trip. Most of them were perched on wires over a roadside ditch or bayou. These small, solitary birds perch on the wires searching the water below for food. Kingfishers have a large crested head with a thick pointed bill. Their backs are blue-gray and the belly is white with a



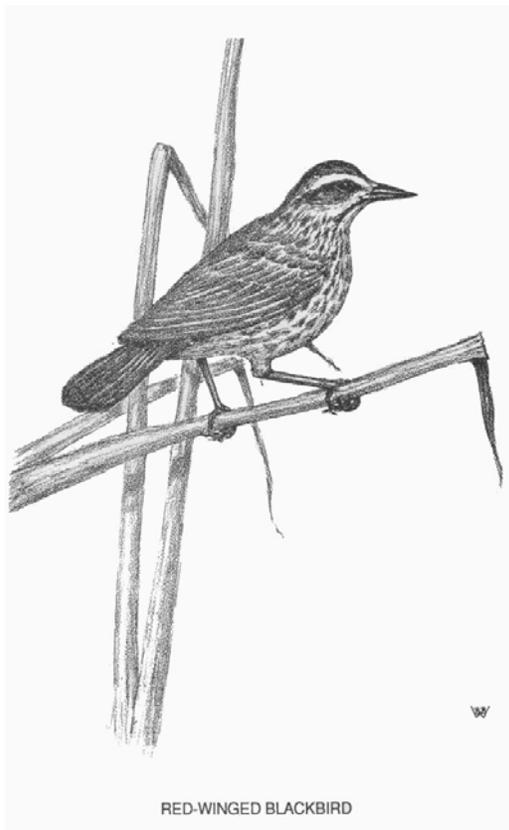
blue breastband. Females also have a rusty breastband. When not perched on a wire or dead branch, Belted Kingfishers may be seen hovering over the water or diving after small fish. It was really exciting to see them splash in the water to catch a fish.

Jays and Crows: While the Fish Crow is primarily a land bird it does live near tidal marshes and is often seen scavenging for food along the beach. They look just like the American Crow, solid black with a short, thick bill. These two crows are best identified by voice, the Fish Crow making a more nasal call than the American Crow.

Wrens: Marsh Wrens are permanent residents of our coastal marshes. These small, brown and white bundles of energy are difficult to see as they stay well hidden in the marsh grasses. We saw three of them in the salt marsh at Gulf Islands National Seashore, but they all disappeared from sight within ten seconds.

Warblers: Warblers are the most brightly colored group of birds found on the Mississippi Coast. Most warblers are birds of the forest and only migrate through our area. A few species nest in our inland freshwater swamps. Only the Common Yellowthroat is associated with the woody edges of our marshes, bayous and swamps. Like other warblers, the Common Yellowthroat is quite small. Their back is olive-brown with a yellow breast and white belly. Males have a black mask on their face. They have a sharp bill which helps them catch insects, a main source of food for most warblers.

Sparrows: We were lucky to see two very shy sparrows, the Seaside and Sharp-tailed Sparrows. Like the



secretive Marsh Wren, these sparrows hide in the thick marsh grass and rarely come out into full view. Most of the twenty kinds of sparrows that occur on the coast live here only during the winter. Seaside Sparrows live in our marshes all year. They are small, brown and white birds with lightly streaked breasts. The sparrows' short, thick bill is good for cracking seeds as well as catching aquatic invertebrates and insects.

Blackbirds: Boat-tailed Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds are at home in and around our coastal marshes and swamps. The male Boat-tail is our largest blackbird. It is all black and has a very long tail. Females are smaller and more brownish. Red-winged Blackbirds are familiar to most people on the coast, especially the male, which is mostly black with a bright, red patch on its wings. They are common in town as well as in our marshes and swamps. They have thick, sharp bills, good for catching insects

and eating fruit or seeds. The females are streaked brown and white, very much different than the males. The female is inconspicuous and would be well hidden while sitting on a nest, like many of the ducks we have discussed.

Our field trip in search of Mississippi's "Coastal Birds" was one of our most exciting outdoor activities. Of course, Mr. Williams and Mrs. Spencer helped with their sharp eyes and expert information. As we drove along the coast, we never knew what bird we might see next. The rain that had persisted all morning long had not dampened our spirits. Actually, it helped attract more birds to the wet grassy fields. While looking up information on the birds we learned a lot, but seeing the birds themselves was the most fun. We had never seen most of the birds before or even imagined so many different species lived here.

Anne and Randy's report on coastal birds caused a great deal of excitement in their science class. They showed slides of some of the birds they had seen on their field trip. The slides were very helpful. The other students were given a chance to see some unusual birds that they had not seen before. As it turned out, several of the students were interested in birds, but they did not know much about them.

The two new birdwatchers provided the class with some very interesting facts about coastal birds. Mrs. Brown was very proud of her students' presentation. They had done an excellent job of preparing their report. She was especially proud that they had related the birds they had seen with other coastal resources. Like other animals, birds depend entirely on the environment in which they live.

Anne and Randy answered questions from their classmates after their presentation. Questions like, "What's that big gray bird that flies over our house every evening?" were difficult, if not impossible to answer.

As the presentation concluded, Anne asked, "Who would like to join a birding club, just for kids?" Five of her classmates raised their hands.

"Mr. Williams invited us to form a Junior Magnolia Birding Club. He and Mrs. Spencer said they would help us get started, and with field trips." explained Randy.

"The Magnolia Birding Club wants to get more young people involved in birdwatching and enjoying nature," Anne said. "It should be fun. The first meeting will be next Wednesday, after school."

Anne and Randy had done an excellent job, just as Mrs. Brown had predicted. Mrs. Brown was doubly proud because the school principal had sat in on the presentation. As Mr. Powell left the room, he had nodded his approval to Mrs. Brown.

"Thank you so much for a wonderful report," applauded Mrs. Brown. "I learned a great deal about a very important coastal resource. Mr. Powell was also very impressed."

Anne and Randy beamed as they returned to their seats. They were also very pleased.

