

### An Exceptional Teaching Experience

Giving a talk or teaching a course on some aspect of nature, including birding, has been a part of my life since retirement; however, today I had the opportunity to speak to a group of visually impaired students from West Texas. Lucy Gould, executive director of the West Kerr Chamber of Commerce, asked me to spend an hour with these students, age 8 to 17 years old, at the Homer Martin Ranch in Mason County. The students were spending a week of summer camp on this exceptionally beautiful ranch which is transected by the Llano River.

This summer camp is being operated by the Division for Blind Services under the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitation Services field office in Odessa. This office operates in a seventeen county area including Del Rio, Midland/Odessa, San Angelo and eastward to Mason County. The students, for the most part attend local schools in their hometowns; however, a few attend the Texas School for the Blind in Austin. All of the students are considered legally blind, but there is a broad range of vision impairment among the students.

From the time I arrived at the camp, I was impressed with the students including their manners, intellect, enthusiasm, and happiness as they were enjoying their summer camp activities. The teachers, counselors and chaperons were very gracious in welcoming us to their camp. Homer Martin, owner of the beautiful camp facilities was most appreciative of our joining the activities of the camp. Lucy and I felt honored and privileged to be included in this summer camp program. Normally my comfort zone in giving talks is the power point presentations I have put together on various subjects, but not today. I left all of that equipment and slides at home. My wife had let me borrow some life-size wood carvings that I made for her years ago. I began by allowing the students to handle the carvings to get an understanding of size, bill shape, tail length and shape and other features needed in identification. I also hoped that handling a hummingbird, wren, scrub jay and scissor-tailed flycatcher would allow students to appreciate the differences in our many bird species. The main objective of my presentation was to give the students a chance to learn bird vocalizations and how these sounds are used in the bird's daily lives. I wanted to share my love for birding by emphasizing the importance of recognizing the vocalizations birds use to mark territories, attract mates and communicate with other birds. I pointed out the differences between bird songs and calls and how important these vocalizations are in the day to day activities of the birds' lives. I also explained that some birds use non-vocalizations to achieve similar results, such as woodpeckers drumming on dead tree limbs that resonate the drumming sounds over large areas to attract mates, or establish territories.

Using my iPhone bird sound app, I played various common bird songs and calls to encourage the students to learn to identify bird songs and calls of common birds. What I didn't take into account was that my presentation would be outdoors. When I played the songs of birds that lived nearby, the resident birds answered my tapes like echoes. The students very much enjoyed the inter-reaction between real and recorded sounds.

We went through the vocalizations of back yard birds (cardinals), birds that give their names (phoebes), owls, doves, woodpeckers (including drumming sounds), warblers, vireos, and many other interesting sounds. They enjoyed the eerie sounds of the Common Loon. When I was finished with my list, I played the songs of birds requested by the students. I hope through the presentation that people with impaired vision can become birders and enjoy the birds as we do.

I suspect that it will be a while before I will have another opportunity to be a part of a special learning experience – an experience of sharing the love of birding with students eager to learn about nature around them and opening doors for a lifetime of birding experiences. I, too, added a new experience today.

Bill Lindemann

You can only see straight ahead, but you can hear in all directions at once. Learning bird songs is a great way to identify birds hidden by dense foliage, faraway birds, birds at night, and birds that look identical to each other. In fact, when biologists count birds in the field, the great majority of species are heard rather than seen.

Go outside & play!