

PAS Young Birder Club

Young Birders Attend 44th Annual WFO Conference



Western Field Ornithologists (WFO) hosts an annual conference that young birders are encouraged and welcome to attend. In addition to great people, there are field trips, workshops, scientific presentations, sound identification panels, expert identification panels, a keynote speaker, a book auction, a banquet and more.

About 240 birders attended the 2019 meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico. There were a total of 22 young birders and 6 young birders from the PAS Young Birder Club (YBC). (L to R Teodelina, Dessi, Will, Justina, and Aaron). Will age 11, and Lily, age 16, attended the conference for the very first time. Will, received a scholarship from WFO's **Michael R. San Miguel Student Scholarship Fund** to attend.

The young birders participated in several special events including a young birder field trip to Tingley Beach-Bosque Ponds, followed by a behind the scenes tour of the **University of New Mexico's Museum of Southwestern Biology**, and a special young birder reception.

Here's what the young birders had to say about their experience at the WFO Conference:

Aaron, age 13: "The conference was an amazing experience. The first morning, I went to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. There were so many birds - our checklist at the end was nearly 80 species - many of them lifers. One of the best parts about the conference was that I got to be with other young birders. It was so much fun to be with other like-minded individuals who helped me to boost my passion and enthusiasm for birding. On Saturday was a young birder field trip. It was a lot of fun to be birding with so many other young birders, and it brought lifers as well - Virginia's and McGillivray's Warblers. We then got to go to see the bird collection at the Museum of Southwestern Biology. We heard the news that a Prothonotary Warbler had been caught and released by a banding team not far from the hotel at the Rio Grande Nature Center. Just having arrived back, the young birders organized ourselves and we were off to find it. We were unable to find the Protonotary, but we did see a Northern Waterthrush, a lifer for me."



Dessi, age 16: "I attended the Western Field Ornithologists (WFO) Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, from August 25th to August 28th, 2019. The conference offered amazing field trips, science sessions, and workshops. On Thursday, the meeting began with a field trip to New Mexico's second leading hotspot in eBird—Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge. At the refuge, I enjoyed seeing Scaled Quail, Stilt Sandpiper, and Black Terns in breeding plumage which are rare occurrences in Los Angeles. On Friday, I enjoyed watching singing Grace's Warblers and Hepatic Tanagers at Otero Canyon, where our group also had a close encounter with a Black-tailed Rattlesnake, which was a life reptile for me. After the field trip, the legendary sound challenge took place, where birders form teams and identify bird sounds recorded by moderator and sound identification expert Nathan Pieplow. This quiz was the highlight of the conference for me because it was very challenging. For example, one question was about identifying the juvenile begging calls of a Snow Bunting. My team, "Breaking Bird", took second place. During the quiz, I learned interesting facts about bird sounds. For example, MacGillivray's Warblers occasionally sing in flight,

and Townsend's and Hermit Warblers can sing each other's songs. After the quiz, the young birder's reception took place. It was inspiring to meet 21 likeminded kids who can share birding stories for hours. The young birders also got to meet with ornithologists Kimball Garrett, Jon Dunn and Guy McCaskie, who talked about the history of the WFO. What I most enjoy about the conference is that one minute, I can talk to such legends like Jon Dunn, and the next, recount the day's birding experience with the kids of the future. On Saturday, I participated Nathan Pieplow's bird sound workshop, which was not nearly as hard as his quiz but still very interesting. I learned what a "chip" is (it turns out most warblers don't chip, but most hummingbirds do). After the workshop I attended the science sessions, where ornithologists and students presented their research. My favorite presentation was about the rapid expansion of the Cave Swallow range through the Western United States. The final activity of the conference was the banquet, where all the young birders enjoyed sitting together. Chris Witt was the keynote speaker, presenting on how bird speciation occurs, combining ornithology and genetics. I am looking forward to the next year's WFO conference! Big thanks to Pasadena Audubon for the Grant!"



Justina, age 16: "The Western Field Ornithologists annual conference is a beautiful event filled with education, excitement, and love for birds. On Wednesday the 21st of August, I packed my bags and left for the airport with my sister Teodelina. The plane rose high into the night as we saw the shining city of Los Angeles meeting the ocean below us. At midnight we arrived in



Albuquerque and carpooled to the hotel with our mentors Susan and Frank Gilliland, along with our friend Dessi. After four hours of sleep, I walked to the registration desk to confirm my trips and pick up a boxed lunch, when all of a sudden my friend Jack jumped out of nowhere to surprise me! We gathered with other field trip participants and headed towards Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Through the windows of the van, the morning sun was shyly peeking from behind the Sandia Mountains, as Chihuahuan Ravens perched on electric poles nearly blurry from the speed. Our leaders drove us to our first stop in Mesa Rest Area, where we witnessed glorious views of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Lark Sparrows, Western Wood-Pewees, and a curious little MacGillivray's Warbler. On our second stop, we hopped out of the van to point our scopes at a Mississippi Kite far across the alfalfa fields of Roswell. On the other side of the road, a Gray Fox ran through the brush, sending butterflies and grasshoppers flying out

of its way. Then we arrived at Bitter Lake, spotting multitudes of shorebirds including Wilson's Phalaropes, Stilt Sandpipers, and American Avocets. Imagine standing on red-tinged earth, sweat on your brow, holding binoculars heated from the sun. Bushes quiver only slightly from the gentle winds, and you look up to find Variegated Meadowhawks hovering above the masses of water, causing the surface to ripple. After more birding, we got in the van for another three hour ride back to the hotel. The young birders decided to use a plastic pocket guide to snakes, to swat all the flies that flew into the car - but that led to all of us swatting at each other instead, to which we laughed for the rest of ride back! After this amazing field trip, we joined with the rest of the many WFO attendees to head towards the University of New Mexico's Museum of Southwestern Biology. There, I met the rest of the young birders and scholarship recipients, and happily greeted some longtime friends. We analyzed the bird collections of Witt Lab, and learned from some researchers about their current/upcoming bird-related projects. Afterwards, we headed to the Student Union Building to enjoy refreshments and chat with people.



The next morning, I attended a field trip to the Sandia Mountains. I encountered several beautiful wildflowers there, including sunflowers that greeted us wherever we walked. To my right, an Abert's Squirrel hybrid rushed up a tree, where it later sat and preened itself. To my left, Mountain Chickadees hopped from one branch to another. Right in front of me, a Red Crossbill landed on the top of a tall pine tree. At one point of the field trip, I decided to go up to a young Ponderosa Pine and take a gentle whiff of its bark. The fragrance was very pleasant, smelling just like butterscotch! There was a flowing creek on the right side of the trail where we walked, and just as I looked there, an Evening Grosbeak landed on the bank for a drink of water. After a delightful morning in the mountains, we headed back to the hotel where the science sessions would take place. One presentation by Ted Floyd particularly stood out to me, because he was explaining the misidentification of a bird by one classical composer who supposedly named one of his works after it. My family is very big on music, and that is why I especially admired this talk.



Following these presentations, Nathan Pieplow organized another absolutely fantastic and very challenging birdsong identification quiz. People who chose to participate formed into groups of six, and needed to agree on a team name. Some names of this year were ridiculously funny, such as "Wumpus Warblers", "Passerine Cream the Dream Team", and "The Inadequate Bananaquits". Each team was required to identify a list of bird songs from three rounds, and in some parts of the quiz, we even had to identify the category for three specific birdsongs played, for example "bird songs during flight". The Inadequate Bananaquits won the game, and after congratulating them I rushed with my friends to pick up some dinner. Afterwards, we walked back for the young birder's reception, involving Jon Dunn, Kimball Garrett, Guy McCaskie, WFO president Kurt Leuschner, and several other members. It was a night to remember. On my last full day, my sister and I headed for the Student field trip to Tingley Beach-Bosque Ponds, where it mostly involved interesting spiders, dragonflies, and frogs. Later, we headed for a private tour around the Witt Lab again, where many of the young birders could identify a good amount of the specimens in the blink of an eye,



which was very impressive. Before the second set of science sessions began, I chased a Prothonotary Warbler seen nearby with my friends, but a lone Garter Snake was what we found instead. I left to see my sister take her early plane back home, in order for her to prepare for dorm orientation at college! Then I enjoyed the bird photo identification panel, where six chosen experts described a photographed bird and explained why the bird fit a certain species. That night, the unforgettable banquet took place in the ballroom of the hotel. We enjoyed a delicious dinner, gave a round of applause for members who were distinguished for their hard work, and listened to a fascinating presentation by Christopher C. Witt about the "Hidden Forces in Bird Evolution". After many hugs and heartfelt goodbyes, I headed to my hotel room for a good night's sleep before my flight the next day. I closed my eyes, thinking back to what a beautiful conference it had been, and thinking of the upcoming morning, where I would travel with my friends back home and see my sister off to college. A special thank you to Susan and Frank Gilliland for taking care of us during the conference, and for always bringing happiness into our lives. Hoping to make it to the conference in Reno, Nevada next year!"



Lily, age 16: To me, the WFO conference was like the grand finale to my road trip after my family and I made some fun stops in Arizona and New Mexico. I got to bird in Southeast Arizona and saw so many exciting birds I have never seen before. At the conference, I birded Las Vegas National Wildlife Refuge and saw birds I have and have not seen before. The next day, I birded around the Rio Grande Nature Center, happy to see some familiar birds as well as some new birds. A couple of highlights were Calliope Hummingbirds and a Belted Kingfisher. Listening to some of the conference speakers was interesting, and I had fun doing the bird sound challenge with my team the Inadequate Bananaquits. I was not sure how I would do in the contest as bird sounds are not my strength, but being on a team with two renowned experts and three smart young birders was so much fun. My knowledge put to the test, I had an awesome time

(and we won!) At the youth only reception, it was nice to hang out and socialize with the other young birders and bird pros who spoke to us and gave us great advice. Together, the following day, we went on a field trip for young birders only to Tingley Beach and saw many memorable birds. At Witt Lab, it was cool to see all sorts of amazing bird specimens including a Pygmy Parrot. At the Bird Photo ID Panel, it was fun watching the bird experts identify birds. I tried to identify some myself, too. I was also excited to have dinner and hang out with the young birders while we listened to the speakers at the banquet. Finally, since I love urban nature, my parents and I created some time to bird Downtown Albuquerque. There I discovered a Brewer's Sparrow, a Rufous Hummingbird, and a Broad-tailed Hummingbird. Reno 2020, here we come!



The Inadequate Bananaquits

Will, age 11: "Attending my first WFO conference was a blast. I was welcomed by the community, and everyone was asking me questions. I had a LOT of lifers there. I liked hearing the stories of other birders at the YB meeting. Can't wait to go to Reno!"



Parents loved the WFO Annual Conference too.

Denise, mother of Lily. "In August, Lily, George, and I attended our family's first (and certainly not last) WFO Conference. We excitedly anticipated the scheduled events and field trips Lily had chosen for us, looked forward to that which would be new and perhaps unexpected, and enjoyed that we would be connecting with familiar PAS friends, including some of Lily's fellow Young Birders, in Albuquerque, New Mexico.



A highlight for me was exploring new terrain—like standing on the edge of the Great Plains and breathing in the amazing and seemingly never-ending horizon, then taking what seemed to be a ten-minute drive around the corner and winding up to where we were now looking down into a beautiful mountain valley. On a more meandering kind of excursion, we strolled through a river-side nature center—the home to many beautiful birds including several Hummingbird species. We saw amazing birds, made new friends, asked many questions, and learned so much.

We had really fun experiences at the conference site, too. One was the nail biting, hand-wringing, shoulder-tensing Bird Sound Competition during which Lily and Will were teamed up two young birder alumni/university students and experts Kimball Garrett and John Dunn! We also enjoyed the Bird Identification Panel and were in awe over the display of panel member knowledge.

While Lily is the true birder in our family, George and I feel grateful to get to be by her side and experience her love of birds, birding, our earth, and all that's connected. We never would have expected that an organization like the WFO would welcome young people to their annual conference. That they do makes so much sense and is so important. Not only were Lily and the other young birders made to feel welcome, they were embraced and encouraged by well-known experts, by each other, and by fellow attendees alike. I'd venture to say that George and I aren't the only parents who sensed that."

Ingrid, mother of Aaron. "This was the second time chaperoning Aaron to the WFO conference and another wonderful experience. The community of birders is extremely warm and inclusive, making the kids feel valued and respected. The young birders have a unique opportunity both to learn from experienced adults with all sorts of bird related paths and backgrounds, and to meet and reconnect with peers who share their passion. The youth field trip on the Saturday serves to cement the peer connections; the birding field trips provide a great opportunity to explore new territory and acquire new "lifers"; and the science sessions expose the kids to the results and methods of research. All of the activities provide a fun and accessible way for the young birders to develop their passion. Aaron did not miss one minute of any of them. We look forward to the conference next year!"



Katie, mother of Will. "I had a great time at my first WFO Annual Conference. I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to attend with my son, Will. Our tour guide, Weizel, did a fantastic job leading our trip up Sandia Peak. We learned a lot and saw many different birds along with some amazing scenery. Will and I attended Nathan's Bird Sounds class on Friday morning, and again, learned so much. Then how fun it was to watch the Bird Sound competition that same afternoon! I'm so grateful that folks like Jon and Kimball were willing to join a team of young birders. This was such a special opportunity for the young birders! I was glad to have the chance to meet other parents at the parent only reception. Again, a friendly group of people who enjoy supporting their kids. Will and I also attended the Bird Banding field trip on Sunday morning at the Rio Grande Nature Center. This was a completely new experience for both of us, and again we learned a lot. This experience has Will motivated to get involved with a local banding station. The adults were all so eager to share their knowledge with Will! I really appreciated that. I have to add that one of my most exciting "birding moments" was seeing a Road Runner for the first time! We're already talking about attending next year's conference in Reno! Can't wait for my first "life bird" in Reno!"



Young people interested in birds and nature are welcome to join the Young Birder Club with their parent. Monthly meetings are held the 3rd Wednesday of each month from September through May (though not December). Meeting convene at 6:45 pm in Classroom 1 at Eaton Canyon Nature Center. To learn more about the Club please contact Susan Gilliland at gillilandsusan@gmail.com and see our website: <http://www.pasadenaudubon.org/?q=youngbirders>