

The RGVBF Giving-back Projects:

Two Worthy Causes

Our two projects for 2018 focus on two favorite Valley species: Red-crowned Parrots and Harris's Hawks. The Tejano Parrot Project is putting telemetry backpacks on Red-crowned Parrots to find out where they go when they aren't roosting, and where they feed. The Harris's Hawks project is banding the hawks in trying to determine each hawk's role in the rearing of the family. Both studies are important in gathering research of the birds of South Texas.

Tejano Parrot Project

Red-crowned Parrots! While these parrots are protected within the city limits of Harlingen by ordinance, birds see no city limit signs. Harlingen is very fortunate to host several flocks of Red-crowned Parrots year around, and changes in their distribution range are making these flocks even more important. As Mexican flocks dwindle south of the border, the Valley flocks seem to be growing. In order to determine if this is a trend in distribution or a result of changes in historic territories, much information is needed. The challenge has been gathering information. The parrots leave their roosts early in the morning, but where do they go? Seeing parrots in the daytime is unusual, if not impossible. Then, magically at dusk, they appear in numbers, squawking and playfully dangling off phone wires, as if transported to the roost sites with Dorothy and Toto.

To protect our parrots, we need to solve the mystery of where they go in the hinterland to feed. With the donations we generate, we anticipate funding parrot telemetry harnesses for gathering the data necessary to track their movements during the day before they return to their roosts in Harlingen. Many of our volunteers for the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival participate in parrot surveys throughout the year to assist with this undertaking. Your contribution to this project is very much appreciated!



Photo by: Jan Wyrick

The Mystery of Helper Harris's Hawks at the Nest

Harris's Hawks, perhaps the coolest birds of prey in the South Texas region, exhibit cooperative breeding in which more than two hawks are associated with an occupied nest. This phenomenon has been studied in Arizona and New Mexico, but results have been mixed and debated. Recent research by raptor connoisseur, Bill Clark, documented that at least 56% of the Harris's Hawk groups in South Texas included one or more "extra" hawks attending nests. However, few of the breeding hawks that Clark observed were color marked and he was unable to determine the origin or the roles of extra hawks attending nests. With this project, we intend to employ modern science techniques and to finally solve the mystery of helper Harris's Hawks at the nest! Importantly, understanding this mystery will provide key information in formulating conservation measures to ensure the unique social system of this very cool raptor is not disturbed by alteration of habitat or other human activities.

To solve this mystery, Bill Clark has teamed up with researchers and students from University of North Texas (UNT) and Cornell University. These researchers have begun to trap and mark hawks with coded color bands, collect blood for DNA analysis, and put up time-lapse cameras at nests all in effort to determine if the helpers are returning young or are unrelated, as well as the evolutionary basis of this unique social strategy. Your donations will greatly help these researchers cover the costs of marking and monitoring hawks, doing the DNA analyses, and obtaining more nest camera systems to closely spy on the secret social interactions of Harris's Hawks. Any contribution to this project will be greatly appreciated!

In addition to helping with the costs of this research, please report any sightings of color-banded Harris's Hawks (including the 2-character code if possible) or nesting sites, along with GPS coordinates or a description of the location, to: andreaqibbons@my.unt.edu.



Andrea Gibbons (graduate student, UNT) and Samantha Hagler (Cornell University) collecting blood and data from a brood of 3 chicks of Harris's Hawks in south Texas.



Harris's Hawks are banded with a colored anodized band with a 2-character code; here blue "N/X."