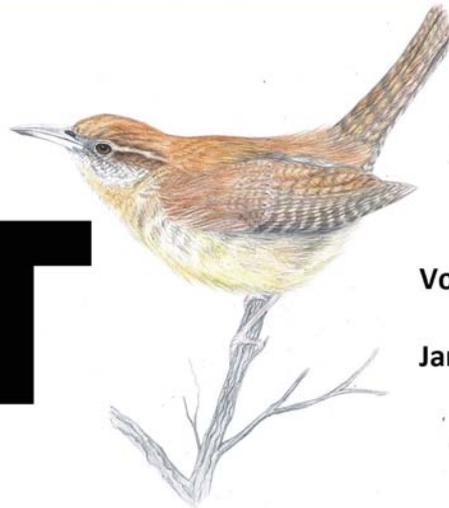


The CHAT



Volume 41, number 1

January/February 2015

Newsletter of the **Robert Cooper Audubon Society**, serving East Central Indiana



Snowy Owl in Muncie

By Barb Stedman

The big excitement around Muncie in mid-December was a Snowy Owl that visited for several days!

The bird was first spotted on the morning of December 12, eating a rabbit on the grounds of Canan Commons. For the rest of that day and the next, it perched on various downtown buildings and thrilled dozens of onlookers both days.

While it wasn't seen anywhere on December 14 – the day of the Christmas Bird Count, of course! – the owl made a couple of final appearances downtown the next day.

Based on the many photos taken of the owl, two bird experts in our area agree that the owl is a female, but we have no clear verdict on the bird's age (i.e., immature vs. mature adult).

For some nice photos and a discussion of Snowy Owl genders, visit www.birds.cornell.edu/crows/snowy.htm.

Bill Grummer, a former RCAS member who monitored various bird records in ECI, found one other confirmed observation of a Snowy Owl in downtown Muncie: on November 29, 1974, Willy Sturgeon "and many others" saw the bird downtown. Two days later, Dr. Robert Cooper saw it on the roof of Muncie's old gas company building.

The photo above was taken by chapter board member, Robert Williams. To see more photos of this beautiful owl, visit www.thestarpress.com and put "snowy owl" in the search box.

Mounds Reservoir Update and Special Invitation

By Sheryl Myers, Heart of the River

As 2014 comes to a close, the Mounds Lake Reservoir plan seems to have stalled. The Phase II feasibility study being conducted by DLZ Engineering in Indianapolis and commissioned by the Corporation for Economic Development may have already been completed but has not been released to the public. The Mounds Lake resolution has not been placed on the agenda of any of the seven local government units, which would have to pass the resolution unanimously before the commission could be created.

Thanks to the combined efforts of the Robert Cooper Audubon Society, the Heart of the River, the Hoosier

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Upcoming Events

Dawn Slack

Wednesday, January 14

Spring may seem like a long way off, but many of us are already planning our gardens in anticipation of the thaw. At January's meeting, endangered species biologist Dawn Slack will be speaking about the impacts of invasive plant species on Indiana birds. She will bring specimens from her personal herbarium to demonstrate how to identify native versus non-native species, and will offer pointers on choosing wildlife-friendly plants for your yard.

Chapter business and refreshments will begin at **7 p.m.** at **Kennedy Library**, speaker at **7:15**.

Chapter Meetings:

Tim Maloney

Wednesday, February 11

The Mounds Reservoir project is one of the most pressing environmental issues in our part of Indiana. Creation of the reservoir would flood Mounds State Park, resulting in the loss of wildlife habitat and precious archaeological artifacts. Luckily, a great alternative has been proposed: the Mounds Greenway plan. Tim Maloney, Senior Policy Director for the Hoosier Environmental Council, will speak about the environmentally-friendly Greenway and how it will benefit wildlife and the community at large.

Chapter business and refreshments will begin at **7 p.m.** at **Kennedy Library**, speaker at **7:15**.

Field Trips:

Our chapter has significant membership overlap with the East Central INPAWS (Indiana Native Plant and Wildflower Society). Beginning in 2015, we will be collaborating, rather than competing, in planning field trips. Look for combined RCAS/INPAWS trips in coming months. As always, RCAS, trips are open to all.

Minnestrifa Bird Walks

Sunday, January 11, 1 p.m.

Sunday, February 8, 1 p.m.

Our second-Sunday Minnestrifa Bird Walks in conjunction with the Passenger Pigeon exhibit will continue in January and February. Meet at the visitor center.

BSU Orchid Greenhouse

Saturday, February 7, 10 a.m.

A combined field trip with INPAWS. Cheryl LeBlanc, winner of our Clyde W. Hibbs Conservation Education Award, will lead us on a tour of the Wheeler-Thanhauser Orchid collection at the new Rinard Orchid Greenhouse in Christy Woods. Meet at the **Greenhouse** at **10 a.m.**

Great Backyard Bird Count

Saturday, February 14, 9 a.m.

Sunday, February 15, 1 p.m.

We will be conducting our very own Great Backyard Bird Count at Prairie Creek. We will meet at the **parking lot for the Redtail Land Conservancy prairie**. We will hike the trail, looking for and tallying birds. We will then drive to the home of chapter member Annette Rose, who lives nearby. We will explore the trails near her home and end with a count at her bird feeders. Hike leaders will demonstrate the process of submitting bird observation data. More information about the GBBC can be found on page 4.



Photography "Workshop"

Saturday, February 28, 1 p.m.

We will gather at the home (and nature preserve) of Barb Stedman and Martha Hunt. Robert Williams will be demonstrating digiscoping techniques. Others of us who have trouble finding time to learn to use our 'point and shoots' will head out for some quality time with our cameras. (More details will be forthcoming).

The address is **5424 N County Rd 500 E., Albany**. Call (765)-288-2890 if you get lost.

To get there on your own: from the Muncie Mall take Broadway north and stay right at the Y. Go through one stop light and go under the Muncie Bypass. Almost immediately after that, turn right onto County Rd 350 N. (Look for the Desoto sign.) Go just over 3 miles to the second stop sign and turn right onto CR 500 E. Barb and Martha's is the second house on the left. There is a white picket fence and large Norway Spruces in front. Park in the front of the garages or along the picket fence.

A **carpool** will gather in the Cooper Science lot on the Ball State campus at **12:35**.

Audubon's Conservation Award Winners

The Robert Cooper Audubon Society honored the winners of its 2014 conservation awards at a banquet held on November 13. The annual awards recognize individuals and organizations in East Central Indiana that have served the natural environment in notable ways.

Robert H. and Esther (Munro) Cooper Conservation Award: The chapter's highest honor, for overall contributions to, conservation of, and appreciation for, the natural environment.

Winner: Don Gorney

Notable Accomplishments: Founder of "Lights Out Indy" and "Wings Over Indy" both of which have raised awareness about bird fatalities from striking windows and buildings.

- Long-time leader of the Amos Butler Audubon Society and has led Fort Harrison State Park bird walks since 1999.

- Currently working to introduce birds and birding to under-represented populations in Indianapolis.

Phyllis Yuhas Wildlife Habitat Preservation Award: For development or preservation of habitat that contains significant wildlife and/or native plant populations.

Winner: Limberlost Conservation Association

Notable Accomplishments: Has played a key role in a number of conservation projects in east central Indiana.

- Gave the Limberlost State Historic Site \$50,000 for the building of the visitor center.

- Helped buy land that is now the Music of the Wild Preserve, as well as other preserved properties around Geneva.

Richard Greene Public Service Award: For active involvement in serving the public's environmental interests and concerns.

Winner: Susan Eichhorn

Notable Accomplishments: Has been Education Coordinator for the East Central Indiana Solid Waste District (ECISWD) since 2001.

- Offers more than 75 programs each year on recycling, composting, green shopping, and more.

- Has served as a member of the Living Lightly Fair Planning Committee since 2008.



L-R: Chad Williams (Indiana Young Birders Club), John Velasquez (IYBC), Ceth Williams (IYBC), Susan Eichhorn, Don Gorney, Andrew Briggs (Limberlost Conservation Association), and Cheryl LeBlanc

Clyde W. Hibbs Conservation Education Award: For excellence in educating the area's children, youth, and/or adults on conservation issues and practices.

Winner: Cheryl LeBlanc

Notable Accomplishments: Has worked since 1993 as curator of the Wheeler-Thanhauser Orchid Collection and Species Bank at Ball State University.

- Offers programs to more than 1,000 children and adults who visit the greenhouse each year

- Heads a docent training program of 30+ volunteers.

- An accomplished artist and biological illustrator whose work informs much of the programming she offers to the public.

Charles D. Wise Youth Conservation Award: For excellence in conservation practices by youth.

Winner: Indiana Young Birders Club

Notable Accomplishments: Provides opportunities for young birders and nature lovers to connect with others that share their interests and provides opportunities for mentorship from birders of all ages.

- Currently serves around 50 members.

- Hosts the Indiana Young Birders Conference each fall.

- Has given away more than 150 bird guides to young birders who submit short essays.

For more information about our award winners, as well as a photo gallery from the awards banquet, visit our website, www.cooperaudubon.org

Spotlight on Citizen Science The Great Backyard Bird Count

By Danny Pirtle

During 2015, we will highlight a different citizen science project in each issue of the Chat. These projects are ways that anyone interested in birds and birding can collect data about avian populations and submit it for study by the scientific community. All projects that we will highlight are easy to get involved with. We'll tell you how!



18TH ANNUAL
GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT

Counting birds is a fun, free, family-friendly way to discover and help the birds in your community.

February 13-16, 2015 Visit birdcount.org to learn more.

Black-capped Chickadee by 2014 GBBC Participant Missy Mandel

Despite its name, data can be collected for the Great Backyard Bird Count beyond just one's backyard. In fact, anywhere that there are birds to be found, they can be counted and submitted as a part of this citizen-science project.

The Great Backyard Bird Count was started in 1998, a joint endeavor of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society. Since its inception, more than 100,000 people from around the world

have submitted data checklists to the online database. In 2014 alone, more than 144,000 checklists were submitted, which resulted in around 18 million individual birds being reported.

The Great Backyard Bird Count takes place annually over four days in February. During that time, people are encouraged to look for birds anywhere - the bird feeders in their back yard, a nature center, a nearby park, or along a city street. All that is asked of participants is that they count birds at their given location for at least 15 minutes, and submit a complete checklist of all bird species tallied when complete.

In 2013, the Great Backyard Bird Count database was merged with eBird, so any observations submitted via eBird automatically become a part of the GBBC database as well. If you are not a user of eBird, you can still easily submit data from the GBBC website. To submit a checklist, simply log onto www.birdcount.org and click on the "Submit Observations" tab in the green bar. Submitting the checklist is an easy and intuitive process - the website will walk you through all of the necessary steps.

The GBBC has become an essential tool for scientists looking at the population trends of various bird species. With worldwide participation, citizens are able to collect quantities of data unattainable by a single team of ornithologists. Because the data is collected during the same period of time every year, it provides an annual "snapshot" of the status of different populations. These snapshots are a tool for scientists to easily see if populations are at risk.

We encourage members to participate in the 2015 Great Backyard Bird Count. Anytime between February 13 and 16, you can observe birds anywhere and submit your observations online. We will also be leading two GBBC field-trips, specifically geared towards collecting and entering bird observation data (see page 2 for dates, times, and location). However you choose to participate, this is a great way to get outside, see some birds, and contribute to an important scientific dataset.

Mounds Reservoir Update - Continued from page 1

Environmental Council, and the Citizen's Action Coalition, the voice of opposition to the reservoir plan is being heard. We will not remain silent when developers want to desecrate the most pristine section of the west fork of the White River and one of the last significant wildlife sanctuaries in east central Indiana.

In celebration of this remarkable stretch of river corridor, HTR and the Citizen's Action Coalition are bringing celebrated environmental writer Scott Russell

Sanders to Anderson on Saturday, January 24, from 2-4 pm and YOU are the first members of the public to be invited. Seating is limited to the first 100 people who purchase a \$10 ticket. To find instructions for paying online, visit the Facebook page "Mounds Lake Reservoir? Dam no." Or, send a check for \$10 per ticket to Sheryl Myers, 1215 Garnet Dr., Anderson 46011 as soon as possible. Call 765-620-4166 for more details.

Birds Throughout History

Mozart and his Starling

By John L. McKillip

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) obtained (by some accounts, purchased) a European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) in the early summer of 1784, and with great delight, recorded much about his new pet in his diary, including his sentiment at the song the starling was singing those first few weeks – Das war schön (“that was beautiful!”). It is interesting to note that the beginning of the last movement of Mozart’s Piano Concerto in G major, K.453, written during this period, is remarkably similar to the song of his starling, indicating that (most likely) the bird had learned the theme from Mozart’s concerto, albeit a little off in the key of G (1).

Mimicry in birds is well-documented, and certainly the starling is an intelligent species capable of a wide variety of vocalizations, blurring the line between some fact and fiction for many anecdotal claims over the years of learned behavior in these invasive pests (2). Mozart’s starling was capable of long soliloquies that, according to some Mozart contemporaries, was interlaced with spoken English and Latin phrases that he taught it. Some could even say that Mozart’s starling was one of the earliest documented “studies” of vocal mimicry in a bird species. It is especially interesting because the bird was imitating human sounds *and* those from a manmade object (a piano), which represent a much more complex repertoire of sound qualities than simply mimicking other bird vocalizations in the natural environment. What has been evident over the years since Mozart is that starlings tend to improvise on specific notes or pitches during mimicry. In fact, starlings in captivity under study (experiencing a high frequency of human interaction) have been known to vocalize less intelligible but nevertheless astonishing voice-like utterances!

Mozart’s starling lived for three years. Upon its death, Mozart held a well-publicized funeral, complete with a full procession, hymns, and a myriad of veiled

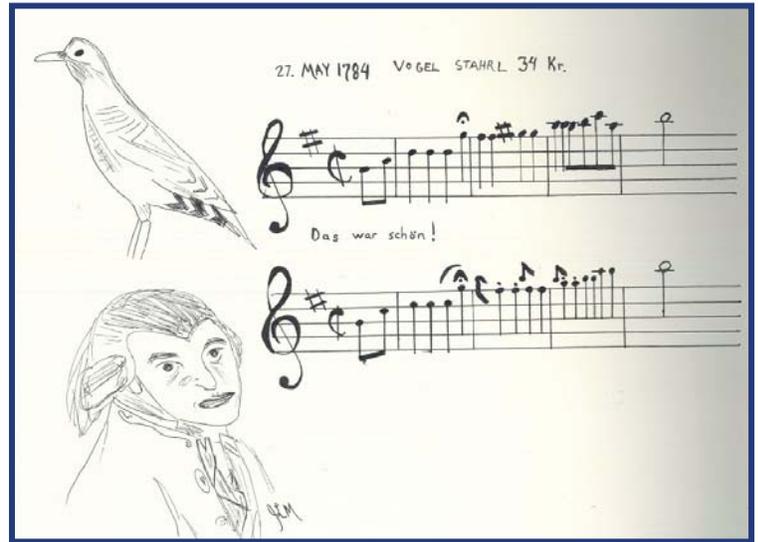


Illustration by John L. McKillip

guests and friends whose presence he had requested to mourn the loss of his beloved vocalist. Mozart even composed a poem specifically for this solemn occasion, and recited it as part of the graveside service (3). Much later, during the 1890’s, the European Starling was introduced to North America from England, presumably to add authenticity to the bird scenes of Shakespeare’s plays, which were becoming quite popular with affluent New Englanders during this time. At first, a few dozen birds were released into New York’s Central Park, and 100 years later, the figure was estimated to be 2×10^9 individuals. Mozart was happy with just one.

References:

- (1) West, M.J., & King, A.P. 1990. Mozart’s Starling. *American Scientist* 78:106- 114.
- (2) West, Stroud, A.N., & King, A.P. 1983. Mimicry of the human voice by European starlings: the role of social interactions. *Wilson Bulletin* 95:635-640.
- (3) Deutsch, O.E. 1965. Mozart: A Documentary Biography.



Facebook page for Indiana birders

Facebook users should check out “Birding in Indiana – NO RULES.” It’s a great place for both new and experienced birders to share information and photos with other Indiana birders. “There is no such thing as a dumb question on this page” that offers a friendly, unintimidating place for all bird-lovers.

Local Student Studying Bird-Window Collision Fatalities

By Danny Pirtle



Being a bird in a world dominated by humans is hard. One such way we have made things more challenging for birds is with our use of glass windows in buildings. Birds are often unable to sense the glass, so they fly directly into it, which may result in that bird's death. The American Bird Conservancy estimates that anywhere from 300 million to 1 billion birds die every year from collisions with glass.

Here in Indiana, one undergraduate student is doing her part to bring awareness to the issue of bird-glass collisions. Sarah Fischer, a biology and print-making major at Ball State (and member of our Audubon chapter!), has been leading an effort to survey the campus for bird carcasses that have resulted from window collisions.

"I knew about window collisions," says Fischer, "but I never knew how big of a problem they were until I started actually seeing bird carcasses on campus. I researched more into it online and figured out that it really is a huge problem...so it gave me the idea to conduct the surveys."

Under the guidance of ornithology professor Dr. Kamal Islam, Fischer and a team of volunteers have gone out every morning during the fall semester to systematically survey for dead birds. They walk a pre-specified route around certain buildings on campus, collecting any dead birds that they find, carefully noting location, species, and other relevant information.

While not ready to share specific results, the students have found many birds so far. The most common species found to date is the American Robin, followed by the Ruby-throated Hummingbird. However, Fischer notes that warblers of all species have also been a common find.



Interestingly, no invasive species (Rock Doves, European Starlings, or House Sparrows) have been recovered.

Fischer plans to continue the survey in the spring semester in order to compare the effects of the fall and spring migrations.

After compiling the results of the surveys, Fischer hopes to raise awareness to Ball State and beyond about the effects of the current building design and glass-use on the local and migratory bird populations. Currently, no buildings on campus incorporate bird-safe glass into their design. Says Fischer, "I would be really interested to present the data to [Ball State] and say that this is a big problem and we need to be incorporating bird-safe design."

There are some options available to do that. On the more expensive side of the spectrum is glass infused with UV; it looks no different to the human observer, but birds would easily be able to see and avoid such glass. Less expensive methods include applying paint to the windows, or a special kind of tape that reflects UV light.

Fischer is also tapping into her artistic side to raise awareness about this project. "Every bird specimen that I find," she says, "I am going to draw it and etch it into glass and present every single one of those prints in glass panels as evidence of window collisions, so that [we] can raise awareness of the issue."

If you are interested in learning more about the research project, or becoming a volunteer surveyor (Sarah still needs volunteers to join the survey team for the spring semester!), e-mail sefischer@bsu.edu.



Book Review: Under a Wild Sky by William Souder

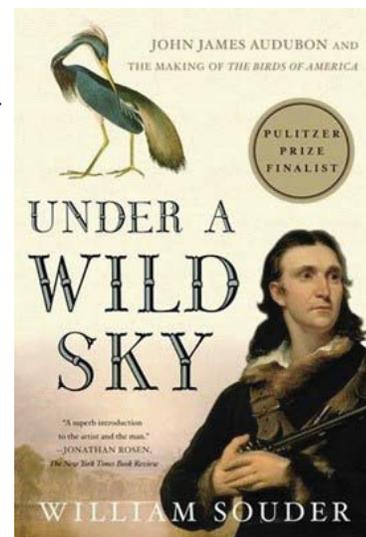
By Willy De Smet

As a *naturalist*, Audubon made great contributions to our knowledge of the birds of America and their natural history. He spent much of his time outdoors, hunting and observing the wildlife around him. Many of these observations found their way into "Ornithological Biography," the book he wrote with descriptions of the species included in "The Birds of America." He did get to know these birds very well from his personal observations, but unfortunately he sometimes made up details in order to fill the gaps or make a stronger impression. The American scientific establishment was weary of him, partly because of a personal rivalry with Alexander Wilson - who was also working on a collection of depictions of American birds - but also because of his apparent lack of scientific rigor. Ironically, he finally gained acceptance by the academic establishment based on lectures he gave on the Turkey Buzzard (Turkey Vulture) at the Wernerian Society in Edinburgh, Scotland. Many of his claims in this lecture are untrue, and it is doubtful that he actually ever carried out the experiments he describes.

He is remembered as the *gifted artist* who created "The Birds of America." Audubon's depiction of the birds in active poses and in natural settings impressed his admirers and was quite a break with the standard side views common in scientific publications of other artists (like Wilson) at the time. He occasionally took some liberties with these settings as well, showing birds in activities deemed highly unlikely by

modern day ornithologists, which were intended to increase the appeal of his plates to the buyer. He also painted them life size, repeatedly refusing to produce to scale depictions, which made his plates huge and expensive, as well as impressive. The prints were produced and shipped in installments. He was involved in the whole publishing process, even traveling around the country to collect payment from his customers and to sell upcoming publications.

Although this book covers his whole life story (from his illegitimate birth in Haiti, his French upbringing, his commercial projects, his marriage to Lucy Bakewell, and so on...) the emphasis is on the period during which he worked on "The Birds of America." *Under a Wild Sky* tries to get beyond the simple facts of his life to the conflicted and sometimes tormented man he was. His tremendous work still earns our admiration and inspires us, but he had his flaws. *Under a Wild Sky* helps us to better understand Audubon, the man. It makes for fascinating reading and along the way we get a feel for the time and place in which he lived.



RCAS receives National Audubon Society collaborative funding

By Sarah McKillip, President

I'm pleased to announce that RCAS has received a grant in the amount of \$604 from the National Audubon Society. The education-focused grant, entitled *About Birds*, brings a multi-faceted nature program to students (K-age 8) who are living and studying in Muncie's historic Whitely Neighborhood district. This spring, children attending after-school programs at Huffer, Motivate our Minds, Buley Center, and Precious Hearts will participate in a group reading of a bird book, followed by a walk outside to find urban

birds. Each after-school program will get to keep multiple copies of the book (*About Birds*, by Cathryn Sill), and two pairs of new binoculars from Eagle Optics. Danny Pirtle, Ball State University biology graduate student and RCAS board member, is overseeing the project and collaborating with retired educator Mary Dollison, a member of the Whitely Community Council's board. RCAS hopes to expand the program to include summer activities for the children of Whitely.

Monthly Mounds State Park Hikes Continue in the New Year

Our monthly hikes at Mounds State Park continue to be a popular event. The hikes will continue in 2015, on the last Sunday of every month at 9 a.m. The visi-

tor center will not be open in January and February, so we will meet outside. As always, these hikes are family friendly and accessible to birders of all ages.

Robert Cooper Audubon Society

Robert Cooper Audubon Society
P.O. Box 1635
Muncie, IN 47308-1635



Dates for Your Calendar

- Jan. 11:** Minnetrista Bird Walk
- Jan. 14:** Invasive Plants Program/Meeting
- Jan. 24:** Scott Sanders Presentation in Anderson
- Jan. 25:** Mounds SP Bird Hike
- Feb. 7:** BSU Orchid Greenhouse
- Feb. 8:** Minnetrista Bird Walk
- Feb. 11:** Mounds Reservoir Program/Meeting
- Feb. 14 & 15:** GBBC Hikes at Prairie Creek
- Feb. 22:** Mounds SP Bird Hike
- Feb. 28:** Photography Workshop

Chapter Website: www.cooperaudubon.org
Find us on **Facebook!**
Email: cooperaudubon@gmail.com

Program meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month (except July, August, & September) at
Muncie Public Library, Kennedy Branch
1700 W. McGalliard Rd., Muncie, IN
7:00 pm: chapter business & refreshments
7:15 pm: scheduled program

The Chat is published 5 times a year by the Robert Cooper Audubon Society, a chapter of the National Audubon Society serving Blackford, Delaware, Grant, Henry, Jay, Madison, and Randolph Counties

Plan Ahead! On Sunday, March 8, at 1 p.m., we will have a field trip to Summit Lake, where we will bird at some of our favorite areas. If there is time, we will also swing by Prairie Creek.

Officers

President:	Sarah McKillip	765-287-8464
Vice-President:	Willy De Smet	260-726-6693
Recording Sec.:	Carol Islam	765-284-9872
Treasurer:	Robert Williams	765-730-8427

Directors

2013-2015:	Kamal Islam	765-284-9872
	Jim Jeffery	765-747-9699
2014-2016:	Annette Rose	765-741-8376
	Kevin Tungesvick	765-354-2775

Committee chairs

Conservation:	Jon Creek	765-348-4019
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Program	Claire Nemes	301-775-6528
Publicity and Newsletter Ed.:	Danny Pirtle	920-917-4293