Asphodel Plantation becomes bird haven

By ESTHER S. WILCOX

Asphodel Plantation's 500 acres have been declared a bird sanctuary by Owen Couhig Kemp, who took over operation of the inn and restaurant 30 miles north of Baton Rouge in 1986.

"A flock of 30 eastern bluebirds were on that holly bush yesterday," said Glenda Gerald, who runs the gift shop. "They stay year-round as long as there's food out for them. And the wrens are forever in my shop!"

"We also have families of wild turkeys that walk through here," says Kemp, who grew up in the 150-year-old "big house," and knows the plantation's woods, creeks and hills by heart. "Last season, wrens nested in one of the planters on the gallery right where guests sitting out in the rocking chairs after their meals could watch them.

Warblers, cardinals, redheaded woodpeckers, goldfinch, pine siskens and scarlet tanagers also call Asphodel home or come visiting. Many bird feeders and small logs, each drilled with several two-inch holes and filled with a high-protein mixture, keep the area alive with birds and bird calls.

Kemp's son, Michael, 9, takes an avid interest in checking on which new birds have been spotted. He likes to tell visitors the recipe for the special mixture used during winter when the birds can't find their usual complement of protein-rich bugs: Three cups of cornmeal, one cup of flour, one pound of pure lard and one-half cup of peanut butter.

While the Audubon Society does not designate bird sanctuaries as it used to, it still does provide guidelines for creating successful ones. These include combinations of bushes, trees, open spaces, water and food to attract birds.

"The Baton Rouge Audubon Society has expressed an interest in sharing the expertise needed in deciding such things as what plants should be put in, what bird house to build and how to space them," Kemp says.

Kemp knew she already had all the right geographical elements when she decided to create the bird sanctuary. There are two ponds, the Carr's Creek flows through the hilly acres' woodlands and clearings. The creek is fed by Asphodel's own little tributary, Children's Creek.

Asphodel Plantation backs up to the Audubon State Commemorative Area's Oakley House Plantation. This was where John James Audubon stayed while he collected some of the specimens he painted for his "Birds of America." So, making this into a bird sanctuary, providing protection for the birds, and incidentally pleasure for the guests, is simply going back to the good old days for the birds.

In addition to keeping all the feeders full, Kemp intends to put in flowers attractive to hummingbirds — such as salvia, shrimp plants and impatiens — as soon as temperatures warm up enough. Brook Gerald of Clinton, who has had good results with having eastern bluebirds permanently adopt his bluebird houses at home, is making some bird houses for Asphodel, plus other bird houses to position strategically along the woods trails.

"Nest sites are the most critical factor for bluebirds," says Ron M. Knaus, president of the Baton Rouge Audubon Society, "even more important than pesticide control or other factors. In one area of farmlands where they replaced wooden fence posts with metal ones, the bluebirds' population plummeted. It started right back up when they restored wooden posts."

"Murrell Butler, who is a well-known wildlife artist, has offered to give group tours," Kemp says. During the summer, birders can be provided with picnic hampers if they want to go off on their own. In the hampers, they will find fried chicken, ham and cheese sandwiches, fresh fruit and homemade cookies. And it's BYOB: bring your own binoculars.

In addition to having its year-round birds, Louisiana is host to the great fall and spring migrations down and up the Great Mississippi Valley Flyway.

"For small birds, we're in the thick of things," says Knaus. "Louisiana's cheniers and shorelines are the staging ground where they gather and feed to store energy for the 600-mile flight across the Gulf of Mexico. In the fall, all kinds of birds, from herons to hummingbirds, jump off from our coast and go south. In the spring, their staging ground is Yucatan and Campeche, from which they fly north again, direct to Louisiana and Texas."

But a lot of Asphodel's birds have no interest in moving on. They're totally in tune with Kemp's Tennessee-born son Reese, 6. When he was four, Kemp moved back to Asphodel with her two boys, and Reese said, "I've been waiting all my life to live here."