First phase of bird study ends
Hi-tech methods being used in $1.6-million project

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INTRACOASTAL CITY — The first phase of a three-year, $1.6-million study of migratory birds that fly across the Gulf of Mexico each spring and fall has been wrapped up on five offshore oil and gas platforms.

Prominent birders from across the nation will be back on the production platforms from Aug. 15 through Oct. 15 for the fall migration of songbirds and other species that winter in the tropics and nest in North America.

The partnership project among the LSU Museum of Natural Sciences, South Carolina's Clemson University and the oil and gas industry is designed to fill study gaps about how migratory species interact with the platforms, what species use the structures most and the bird mortality rate on platforms.

Villere Reggio of the federal Mineral Management Service, the arm of the U.S. Department of the Interior in charge of oil and gas lease regulations, said the agency provided about $500,000 in seed money to hatch the project with the hope of gaining insight into plummeting populations of migratory birds worldwide.

Ornithologist John Arvin, 54, of Driftwood, Texas, who was raised around Johnson Bayou on La. 82's “Cajun Riviera” between Holly Beach and the Texas border, came ashore May 15 after spending the two prime months of the spring migration on Exxon’s Vermillion 265 platform about 80 miles south of here.

The spring and fall migrations of hummingbirds, purple martins, cattle egrets, swallows and various species of warblers, vireos, tanagers and buntings, to name a few, are “spectacular phenomenons visible in the U.S. only along the northern Gulf coast, involving about 100 million birds a year,” Arvin said.

Bob Russell, 33, of Baton Rouge, LSU's lead scientist on the project, and Van Remsen, curator of birds at the Museum of Natural Sciences, said Exxon, British Petroleum, Mobil, Phillips and Texaco have pledged more than $900,000 to the study to add to about $100,000 contributed by LSU and Clemson.

The study is utilizing Doppler radar avian research techniques pioneered by Clemson ornithologist Sidney Gauthreaux, according to Don Norman, 45, of Shoreline, Wash., a wildlife toxicologist and the project’s public relations coordinator.

Dave Patton of Lafayette, well-known in Acadiana birding circles, served as a relief observer during the recent spring phase of the study.

Observers said one highlight of the phase was the rescue of a female ruby-throated hummingbird felled by a late cold front in early April, coaxed back to health with the help of warm air from a hair dryer, flown to shore on a helicopter and released to resume its spring flight.