

LEONABELLE TURNBULL

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Service for birding center namesake Leonabelle Turnbull to be Sunday

BY MARY JUDSON SOUTH JETTY EDITOR

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"The Bird Lady" has taken flight.

Leonabelle Chaplin Turnbull, known in Port Aransas as "The Bird Lady," died Friday, Feb. 6, 2009, in Corpus Christi. She was 83.

A memorial service will be held at 3 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 15, at Community Presbyterian Church, 113 S. Alister St.

If you didn't know her, but think the name sounds familiar, it should.

The Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center was named in her honor.

Turnbull grew up in a family in tune with nature, but it was her daughter, JoLana Smith, who introduced her to birding. As a result, Turnbull racked up a life list of 401 birds - mostly in Texas, especially South Texas.

The 401 birds on Leonabelle's life list represent about 65 percent of the species that can be found in Texas today, according to Port Aransas birding expert Joan Holt.

"I first met Leonabelle when I joined the Port Aransas Christmas Bird Count team in the late '70s. She was proud of the fact that she had been on the very first Port Aransas CBC in 1977, and never missed an annual Christmas count until last year," Holt said.

"Leonabelle covered the birds in town since she knew all of the nooks and crannies, and most of the residents of Port Aransas in the early years of the count," Holt said.

Turnbull took people birdwatching on an informal basis for many years. Then, in 1995, then-City Manager Tom Brooks "called and said I would lead walks for the city," Turnbull was quoted as saying in a 2004 interview with the South Jetty.

"I said no," Turnbull said.

At the time of the interview, she'd been leading the walks for nine years.

On Monday, Brooks said, "She was quite good at giving the tours at the birding center, and made me look a little good also."

Turnbull was so good that what had been known as the Port Aransas Birding Center was renamed the Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center in April, 2004.

Over the years, Turnbull led birders from across the United States and around the world over the wetlands and along the boardwalk at the birding center that bears her name. Those birders included several from China, many from Germany and a large contingent from Canada.

"Her proudest accomplishment was leading the weekly guided birding tours on the boardwalk every Wednesday at the birding center that was named in her honor," Holt said.

"She was an unpretentious birder who helped many beginners to become more interested in birding as a result of her gentle guidance on the boardwalk every Wednesday. She will be greatly missed by the birding community of Port Aransas," she added.

Turnbull was born Oct. 25, 1925 in Arkansas City, Kan., where she was brought up and attended school. She graduated from Cowley County Junior College and went on to teach in a one-room rural school.

It was in that schoolroom where she contracted scarlet fever from one of her students. She went home where the family was under quarantine while she recuperated.

Her sister, Charlene Shaw of Ingleside, formerly of Port Aransas, recalled that when her sister gained strength, she would sit in the living room and look out the window. She watched people walk down the sidewalk toward the house, but when they got to the Chaplin home, they would cross the street, Shaw recalled.

"She never forgot that," Shaw said.

The fever caused permanent damage that Turnbull endured throughout her life.

When she returned to teaching, she resided in the home of one of the school board members, as was the custom at the time. As it turned out, the woman had a nephew who would become Turnbull's husband. She and Bob Turnbull married in 1956 and moved to Port Aransas where he became a butcher at his brother Roy's grocery store, the Island Food Store (where Cita Resort Interiors is now located). Turnbull died in 1984.

Her parents, C. Stedman and Hazel Chaplin, before their deaths, established the Chaplin Nature Center on the land where they had farmed outside Arkansas City, where the Wichita Audubon Society also is located.

She was predeceased by a sister, Shirley Kent, in 1992.

Survivors in addition to her daughter JoLana (Marvin) Smith of Marshall, Ark., and sister Charlene (Glenn) Shaw of Ingleside on the Bay, are another sister, Carol (Clarence) Milbourn of Roanoke Va. and Mesa, Ariz.; 12 nieces and nephews and a special niece, Dorothy Turnbull Hill of Allen.

Memorials in Turnbull's honor may be made to Aransas Bird and Nature Club, P.O. Box 308, Fulton, TX 78358; the Audubon Outdoor Club, P.O. Box 3352, Corpus Christi, TX, 78463; or the Chaplin Nature Center, c/o Wichita Audubon Society, P.O. Box 47607, Wichita, KS, 67201.