

The Spoonbill

A Publication of the Ornithology Group (OG)
of the Houston Outdoor Nature Club

April 2005
Vol. 54 No. 4

April Meeting

Monday, April 4, 2005 -- 7:00 p.m.
Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet, Houston

Learning Corner, 6:30 p.m.
with David Poteet
Migrating Warblers of the UTC:
Where do they feed and when do they arrive??

Program:

Courting Birds and Bird-Watchers in the Big Thicket by Dr. Jane Packard

Ever wondered why males are the “showy sex” in many birds? Fascinating courtship rituals of exotic species from across the globe help us to better understand how our feathered friends choose and compete for mates. As an ethologist, Dr. Packard studies animal behavior in nature. She will share with us some of her favorite video clips of courting birds. She will also introduce possibilities for club members to participate in citizen-science activities associated with Big Thicket National Preserve, a window on the rich diversity of bird life at the intersection of coastal plains, rivers and pineywoods northeast of Houston.

Dr. Jane M. Packard is Associate Professor and Director of the Ethology Lab, Wildlife & Fisheries Sciences, Texas A&M University.

Other Events

Mar. 31 – Apr. 3: FeatherFest2005
Galveston

April 16: Field Trip to Quintana/Brazoria

April 23-24: Field Trip to Fort Hood

April 13-24: Great Texas Birding Classic
<http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/gtbc/>

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The Nominating Committee (Skip Almoney, Bill Saulmon, and Margret Simmons) recommends the following individuals for the listed offices for the Ornithology Group:

Chairman:	Michael Williams
Vice Chairman:	Bernice Hotman
Secretary:	Shirley/Raymond Mondshine
Treasurer:	Jim and Betsy Winn

Elections will be held at the April meeting and the new officers will be installed at the May meeting. The committee wishes to thank all who have agreed to stand for elected office and all those who have agreed to serve in appointed positions.

Highlights of March Meeting

The joint meeting of OG and Houston Audubon Society on March 9, 2005, at the Houston Zoo was well attended and included a stimulating program. As there was no OG business meeting held, there are no minutes to report.

The featured speaker was Kevin Karlson, internationally recognized birder and bird photographer. Kevin's talk on shorebirds was centered around his new insights into identification, to be detailed in a new field guide in preparation for publication later this year. His photographs and examples of identification solutions made a strong case for using a bird's size, shape, behavior, habitat, voice and general coloration rather than single specific field marks. This common-sense method helps beginners and experts alike, and works for many groups of birds besides shorebirds. Kevin will be conducting workshops at Galveston FeatherFest and elsewhere to provide further instruction to interested birders. *—Al Shultz*

About the Ornithology Group

The Ornithology Group (OG) is a division of the Outdoor Nature Club (ONC), a non-profit organization dedicated to greater knowledge about the environment and wildlife of the Upper Texas Coast. The OG is a club of individuals interested in all aspects of birding, including bird identification, listing bird sightings, competing in birding events, and preserving bird habitat. Some members study bird behavior, biology, distribution and migration, while others just enjoy watching birds. The organization is designed to accommodate these diverse birding interests. Monthly meetings and field trips provide an opportunity to interact with and learn from experts in local and international birding.

Chair:	Kathy Farr	713-939-9375
Vice-Chair:	Michael Williams	713-228-9064
Secretary:	Bernice Hotman	713-782-7889
Treasurer:	Iris Poteet	281-492-2659
Clearing House:	David Sarkozi	713-412-4409
Library:	Andy Scott	281-537-9690
Membership:	Pat Pease	713-789-3306

Spoonbill: Al Shultz 281-829-0970
Email: og_spoonbill@earthlink.net

OG website: <http://www.ornithologygroup.org/>

ONC website: <http://www.outdoornatureclub.org/>

Chairman's Message

Prior to the joint OG/HAS meeting on March 9, Sumita Prasad gave a presentation on a new tool for maintaining bird observation data that anyone can use. It's called eBird. Cornell Lab of Ornithology's eBird (www.ebird.org) and The World Birding Center's Texas eBird (www.ebird.org/tx/) are great websites, with information and instructions for use.

The basic idea is brilliant! Set up an easy-to-use web site where folks can keep their personal birding lists, and add their information to state and national databases. This facilitates tracking of data that wouldn't ordinarily be available, giving us valuable statistics that can be and are being used to further our understanding of the life of birds.

The Texas eBird website explains its role simply. "With thousands of birdwatchers across the continent helping to construct it by contributing their sightings, eBird will soon become a vast source of bird and environmental information useful not only to bird watchers but to scientists and conservationists the world over. Want to find out what birds you'll see on your vacation? Want to know the closest spot to find a Least Bittern, or a reliable spot for Townsend's Warbler? Want to learn whether the crow population is growing in your state? Want to see if endangered Least Terns are continuing their decline?" With eBird, you will be able to get answers to these questions. You can access your own bird records anytime. The various options for graphing and presentation provide easy ways to organize observations, not just your own but from the entire dataset.

OG has been collecting this type of data for years. However, it has not been as widely available to the national and world birding communities as eBird will become. If just our Clearinghouse were integrated into this new database, our group could increase the impact of the vital contribution we already make. Maybe this is the next step in the evolution of our contribution to the scientific end of birding.

—Kathy Farr

Notes from the Field (March 12, 2005)

I always enjoy being out on Bolivar Flats. The great expanse of the waters of the Gulf meeting the long shoreline of the sandy beach under a clear blue sky with thousands of birds moving about is enough in itself to make me happy to be there. It's a rich bonus to be there with friends who are also enjoying the experience, and with experienced birders who can help us sort out the identification of all of those busy little birds.

Soon after we got off the bus at the beach, I was walking across the sand towards the bollards when I heard an Eastern Meadowlark singing. I turned and saw it standing on a fence post. It kept singing as I hurried to catch up with the birders ahead of me. This meadowlark's beautiful song set the tone for the day.

Every time I go out on the Bolivar Flats I think that I'm going to do better this time, and I'm not going to let all of those little birds baffle me. But then it happens again, the confusion of so many little birds running around everywhere sets in. Where do you start? Which one is which? It was a feeling of relief to hear Kevin Karlson explain that the plovers can be separated from sandpipers and other small shorebirds by their "start and stop" feeding style. I started watching and suddenly I was able to separate out a number of birds as plovers. Kevin gave us a lot of other great tips about Willets, Dunlin, Sanderling and sandpipers. I've got a long way to go, but this tip about plovers was a big help for me.

Later, while walking way out on the flats, I watched a small group of White Pelicans fly over. They were coming from over the land and heading to a small island where hundreds of pelicans were resting. Against the blue sky these huge white birds with black trim on their wings and gleaming orange bills were magnificent as they flew towards me with their slow and seemingly effortless wing beats. They looked like a squadron of planes flying in formation. Then, after passing over me and gliding out over the water, they banked slowly into the wind and settled gently one at a time onto the island. Such a beautiful sight.

The coming and going of White Egrets and Roseate Spoonbills in the afternoon sun at the rookery in Smith Oaks painted an ever-changing picture of activity. There are so many birds in the rookery that it's hard to focus on one bird, but I especially enjoyed observing one Great Egret standing on a nest in a spindly tree with its white plumes fanned out in the breeze and its body swaying over the nest. I plan to go back many times to the rookery this spring to see these birds and the other species that will soon join them.

This was another great field trip, and I extend my sincere thanks to Kevin Karlson, Bill Saulmon, Don Richardson, Winnie Burkett, Joy Hester and the many others who helped to make the trip such a great experience.

--Layton Guinn

Report of February 19, 2005 Field Trip to Brazoria NWR

A pleasant but breezy morning greeted about 17 folks who attended this field trip. The President of the Brazosport Birders, David Plunkett, was our guide for the morning and told us about recent developments at the refuge including the new visitor's center. The trip started with a scope view of a White-tailed Kite at the visitor's center. We then made the 1-mile trek around the Big Slough Trail where birding was slow. The auto tour route was more productive. We set up scopes at several ponds and had good numbers of waterfowl (including a Cinnamon Teal) and waders. After lunch we birded the North side of the refuge along an old railway bed that has been converted to a birding trail. We had nice views of a White-tailed Hawk on our way out of the refuge. We ended the day with about 73 species. – Bill Saulmon

FIELD TRIPS

For more information on any of the field trips below, contact field trip coordinator Bill Saulmon at 281-537-6924 or at dean1960@aol.com. You can also check out this season's field trip schedule on the OG website.

April 16, 2005: Field Trip to the Quintana/Brazoria Area - Mike Austin will lead this trip to one of the UTC's great birding areas at the peak of spring migration. We'll bird Quintana in the morning, including the Neotropical Bird Sanctuary, the jetty, and Bryant Beach. Later, we'll bird Brazoria NWR for spring shorebirds. Meet Mike at Oyster Creek Municipal Park at 6:30 AM. To get there from Houston take Hwy 288 south to FM 523 near Angleton. Turn east on FM 523 and travel south past the turnoff to Brazoria NWR until you come to the Village of Oyster Creek. The park is at the bridge over Oyster Creek. Bring your lunch, bug spray, etc. You shouldn't need rubber boots.

April 23 - 24, 2005: Field Trip to Fort Hood - We will drive to Temple, TX on Friday (4/22) and spend two nights at a local motel. We'll spend all of Saturday (4/23) and half of Sunday (4/24) on a guided birding tour of Fort Hood. The largest military installation in Texas may not sound like a great birding location, but Fort Hood has been identified by the American Bird Conservancy as a Globally Important Bird Area. Fort Hood is a 219,000-acre military installation, situated within Bell and Coryell counties along the border of the Edwards Plateau with the Crosstimbers and Southern Tallgrass Prairie ecoregions. The Nature Conservancy works with the Army to manage habitat on the base, including areas for Golden-cheeked Warblers and Black-capped Vireos. In fact, the largest populations of these endangered species under a single management authority occur at Fort Hood. Although the vireo and warbler are our target species, other interesting birds also occur on base, including a nice mix of Eastern, Hill Country, and South Texas species, as well as migrants. This trip will be limited to 20 people and a trip fee of \$25 will be charged. To reserve a spot on this trip, contact Bill Saulmon by phone or email as listed above.

May 21, 2005: Field Trip to Brazos Bend State Park - It's been a few years since the OG visited nearby Brazos Bend State Park, so it's time to get reacquainted with this great park. We will be targeting species that breed here such as Purple Gallinule, Least Bittern, Prothonotary Warbler, Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Vireo, Hooded Warbler, Indigo and Painted Buntings and Acadian Flycatcher among others. David Heinecke, who is the Senior Park Naturalist, and Bill Godley, the OG's own Brazos Bend "native," will lead this field trip. Meet them at 7:30 a.m. at the 40 Acre Lake restrooms. To get there from Houston, take U.S. 59 South to Crabb River Road (FM 2759) and turn south. Continue on this road (which becomes FM 762) to Brazos Bend State Park; look for the brown park sign on your left.

Don't forget about **Galveston FeatherFest**, March 31 - April 3

-Field trips, seminars, sales, fun ...

Contact Skip Almoney (skipalm@aol.com, 713-524-4285)

for more information, or to help out at the OG booth.

Great Texas Birding Classic

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), in partnership with the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory (GCBO), will host the 2005 "Great Texas Birding Classic," April 16-24. For the past eight years this event has raised money and awareness to protect critical habitat needed by millions of birds that migrate through the Americas. The GCBO's location in Lake Jackson and its outreach capabilities and sponsorship pool are expected to bring new resources to support this year's Classic.

Carol Jones, who will handle the tournament coordination at the GCBO, said "Having the GTBC tournament co-hosted will help us reach even more people with our conservation message. The numbers of neotropical migrants continue to decline and we want to do everything we can to turn this trend around. Conserving migratory bird habitat positively impacts habitat for all our native flora and fauna along the Texas coast."

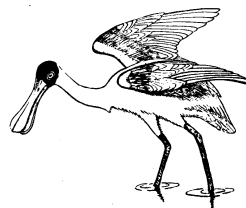
Organizers say the week-long tournament is the longest competitive birding event in the United States, with an impact that reaches far beyond Texas. This is because the Texas coast is an important stopover area for migrating birds that continue up the Central, Mississippi and Atlantic flyways every spring. Since TPWD started the Birding Classic in 1997, winning teams have directed more than \$400,000 in prize money to buy, restore or improve Texas coastal bird habitat. The event typically draws hundreds of birding competitors from across North America; one year it even included birders from Europe. Teams are also eligible for a variety of prizes, such as binoculars, cameras and field guides, which are donated by event sponsors. Classic prizes and tournament categories are set up to accommodate birders of all age groups and skill levels.

For more information about the Birding Classic, call (512) 389-4500, or call the Tournament Coordinator, Carol Jones, at 1-866-482-2527. You can also visit the GCBO Website www.gcbo.org or visit the TPWD website <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/gtbc/>.

From The Spoonbill's Past

Compiled by Skip Almone

Fifty Years Ago



THE
SPOONBILL

Field Trip March 13

Although over 100 miles were covered on this all-day excursion to

Cove in NW Chambers County, the most spectacular find was spotted by Carl Aiken at the Buffalo Stadium parking lot before the group got under way! It was a Burrowing Owl. Other less spectacular birds seen en route -and at Arlie K. McKay's birding area in Cove included a Barn Owl, Golden-crowned Kinglets, Warbling Vireo, Black-and-White and Parula Warblers and White-crowned Sparrow.

Birdbrain has long been a colloquial term of ridicule. The common notion is that birds' brains are simple, or so scientists thought and taught for many years. But that notion has increasingly been called into question as crows and parrots, among other birds, have shown what appears to be behavior as intelligent as that of chimpanzees.

An international group of avian experts, writing in the journal *Nature Neuroscience Reviews*, is issuing what amounts to a manifesto. Nearly everything written in anatomy textbooks about the brains of birds is wrong, they say. The avian brain is as complex, flexible and inventive as any mammalian brain, they argue, and it is time to adopt a new understanding of the different anatomies of bird and mammal brains.

Avian brains got their bad reputation a century ago. Studies of comparative anatomy proposed that brains of animals evolved by adding layer upon layer, from fish to amphibians to reptiles to birds to mammals. In mammals, the bottom third of the brain contains neurons organized in clusters. The top two-thirds of the brain, called the neocortex, consists of a flat sheet of cells with six layers. This new brain, the seat of higher intelligence, lies over the old brain, the seat of instinctual behaviors. Birds' brains are composed entirely of clusters, therefore birds could not possibly be intelligent.

Scientists have come to agree that birds are indeed smart, but those who study avian intelligence differ on how birds got that way. One group claims that bird brains use their cluster cells with pathways that resemble those in layers in mammal brains. Another view is that upper clusters in the avian brain are an elaboration of two structures that are also found in mammalian brains but that in birds have evolved entirely new ways to support intelligence.

Meanwhile, examples of brilliance in birds continue to flow from fields and laboratories worldwide. Corvids are comparable in intelligence to apes. Magpies, at an earlier age

than any other creature tested, develop an understanding of the fact that when an object disappears behind a curtain, it has not vanished. Crows can make and use tools to extract food from hidden crevices. At a university campus in Japan, Carrion Crows line up patiently at the curb waiting for a traffic light to turn red. When cars stop, they hop into the crosswalk, place walnuts from nearby trees onto the road and hop back to the curb. After the light changes and cars run over the nuts, the crows wait until it is safe and hop back out for the food. Clark's Nutcrackers can hide up to 30,000 seeds and recover them up to six months later. Nutcrackers also hide and steal. If they see another bird watching them as they cache food, they return later, alone, to hide the food again. Some scientists believe this shows a rudimentary theory of mind - understanding that another bird has intentions and beliefs.

Pigeons can memorize up to 725 different visual patterns, and are capable of what looks like deception. Pigeons will pretend to have found a food source, lead other birds to it and then sneak back to the true source. Parrots, some researchers report, can converse with humans, invent syntax and teach other parrots what they know. Researchers have claimed that Alex, an African Gray, can grasp important aspects of number, color concepts, the difference between presence and absence, and physical properties of objects like their shapes and materials. He can sound out letters the same way a child does.

"There are still puzzles to be solved," said Dr. Peter Marler, a leading authority on bird behavior at the University of California, Davis. But the realization that one can study mammal brains by using bird brains, he said, "is a revolution."

"I think that birds are going to replace the white rat as the favored subject for studying functional neuroanatomy," he added.

(Condensed from "Minds of Their Own: Birds Gain Respect," by Sandra Blakeslee, February 1, 2005, *The New York Times*)

Clearing House

by David Sarkozi -- david@sarkozi.net -- 713-412-4409

Not a lot of data this month. I had trouble with the OG website, which was mostly responsible. That trouble has been resolved now.

We're getting into the big spring migration season now. I would like to challenge everyone who goes birding in the months of March and April to submit at least one report to the Clearing House. If you go out, count the birds at one site, not even every place you visit that day. Slip over to a local park for a little birding, then try counting the birds you see that day.

Reporters this month are: Al & Kathie Shultz, Darrell W Vollert, Derek Muschalek, Rob Thacker, Howard Laidlaw, Katherine & Katie Enloe, Kathy Reiser, Ken Hartman, Richard Rulander

Species that are listed as abundant to uncommon for the whole month are summarized. Records for rare to vagrant status are listed in full. Those records that are very rare for that week of the year are in bold; those that are new for that week of the year are bold and underlined.

Please enter your reports via the OG website at www.ornithologygroup.org You can also send reports to me via regular mail and e-mail.

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck birds=8 reports=2	Lesser Black-backed Gull 2/11 Galveston(Texas City Dike) 1 Richard Rulander	Carolina Wren birds=13 reports=3
Blue-winged Teal birds=24 reports=2	Royal Tern birds=1 reports=1	House Wren birds=1 reports=1
Red-breasted Merganser birds=5 reports=1	Forster's Tern birds=12 reports=2	Ruby-crowned Kinglet birds=4 reports=1
Pied-billed Grebe birds=6 reports=3	Black Skimmer birds=26 reports=2	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher birds=2 reports=1
American White Pelican birds=29 reports=2	Rock Pigeon birds=25 reports=1	American Robin birds=66 reports=4
Brown Pelican birds=12 reports=1	Mourning Dove birds=20 reports=5	Gray Catbird birds=1 reports=1
Neotropic Cormorant birds=51 reports=2	Burrowing Owl 2/20 Hardin(Pelican harbor subdivision, Te) 1 Kathy Reiser	Northern Mockingbird birds=5 reports=2
Double-crested Cormorant birds=26 reports=3	Barred Owl birds=1 reports=1	European Starling birds=40 reports=2
American Bittern birds=2 reports=2	Rufous Hummingbird 2/20 Harris(west Barker Reservoir) 1 Al&Kathie Shultz	American Pipit birds=2 reports=1
Great Blue Heron birds=2 reports=1	Belted Kingfisher birds=3 reports=1	Yellow-rumped Warbler birds=39 reports=3
Great Egret birds=9 reports=5	Red-headed Woodpecker birds=22 reports=1	Black-and-white Warbler 2/13 Harris(Jesse Jones County Park) 1 Derek Muschalek Rob Thacker
Snowy Egret birds=6 reports=4	Red-bellied Woodpecker birds=9 reports=3	<u>Louisiana Waterthrush 1/20 Harris(Jesse H. Jones County Park, Houston) 1 Darrell W Vollert</u>
Little Blue Heron birds=4 reports=2	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker birds=1 reports=1	<u>Western Tanager 2/12 Harris(backyard, Houston, TX) 1 Ken Hartman</u>
Tricolored Heron birds=4 reports=2	Downy Woodpecker birds=4 reports=2	Chipping Sparrow birds=12 reports=1
White Ibis birds=24 reports=2	Pileated Woodpecker birds=2 reports=2	Savannah Sparrow birds=2 reports=1
White-faced Ibis birds=6 reports=1	Eastern Phoebe birds=6 reports=3	Song Sparrow birds=5 reports=2
Black Vulture birds=2 reports=1	Loggerhead Shrike birds=8 reports=4	Swamp Sparrow birds=3 reports=1
Turkey Vulture birds=23 reports=5	Blue Jay birds=3 reports=1	White-throated Sparrow birds=6 reports=1
Cooper's Hawk birds=1 reports=1	American Crow birds=22 reports=4	Northern Cardinal birds=43 reports=4
Red-shouldered Hawk birds=4 reports=3	Purple Martin 2/20 Harris(west Barker Reservoir) 1 Al&Kathie Shultz	Red-winged Blackbird birds=12 reports=2
Red-tailed Hawk birds=8 reports=4	swallow sp birds=2 reports=1	Boat-tailed Grackle birds=11 reports=3
American Kestrel birds=3 reports=3	Carolina Chickadee birds=16 reports=3	Great-tailed Grackle birds=32 reports=4
Common Moorhen birds=50 reports=2	Tufted Titmouse birds=8 reports=3	Brown-headed Cowbird birds=45 reports=2
American Coot birds=15 reports=3	Red-breasted Nuthatch 2/13 Harris(Bear Creek Park) 1 Derek Muschalek Rob Thacker	<u>Streak-backed Oriole 2/16 Fort Bend(Brazos Bend SP) 1 Howard Laidlaw</u>
Killdeer birds=1 reports=1	Brown-headed Nuthatch 2/13 Montgomery(Jones State Forest) 1 Derek Muschalek Rob Thacker	Purple Finch birds=1 reports=1
American Oystercatcher birds=2 reports=1	Brown Creeper birds=1 reports=1	American Goldfinch birds=19 reports=3
Willet birds=1 reports=1		
Ruddy Turnstone birds=2 reports=1		
Sanderling birds=1 reports=1		
Laughing Gull birds=120 reports=2		
Bonaparte's Gull birds=2 reports=1		
Ring-billed Gull birds=27 reports=2		

Outdoor Nature Club
Ornithology Group
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Houston TX 77277-0894

Comments or suggestions for *The Spoonbill*?
How about a story or news item?

E-mail: og_spoonbill@earthlink.net

**Birders of a Feather will
Flock to GALVESTON ISLAND for**

FeatherFest 2005

March 31-April 3, 2005

*Visit the Featherfest2005 Website
www.galvestonfeatherfest.com*

TO START OR RENEW A MEMBERSHIP:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

E-Mail: _____

	<i>Individual</i>	<i>Family</i>
ONC Annual Dues:	\$ 8.00	\$ 15.00
OG Annual Dues:	\$ 14.00	\$ 19.00
Total:	\$ 22.00	\$ 34.00

Send dues to:

Outdoor Nature Club
PO Box 270894
Houston TX 77277-0894

Membership questions? Contact Pat Pease....
phone 713-789-3306
popeace@aol.com