



The Spoonbill

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

December 2006
Vol. 55 No. 10

December Meeting

Monday, December 4, 2006 -- 7:00 p.m.

Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet, Houston

6:30 -- Learning Corner

Program: The State of Texas State Parks

George L. Bristol is the founder and President / Executive Director of the Texas Coalition for Conservation. He has more than 35 years of experience in business as an executive, officer and board member and as a political organizer, fund-raiser and lobbyist, and conservation has played a significant part of that experience. He is also an award-winning photographer and poet, often using nature as the subject of his work.

As a young man he worked at Glacier National Park, which led to a lifetime commitment to parklands and conservation. He was named to the Texas Conservation Foundation by Governor Mark White in 1984 and chaired the Foundation until 1988. His experience includes a six-year appointment to the National Parks Foundation Board of Directors by President Bill Clinton and Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt. He presently serves on the Board of Directors of the Glacier National Park Fund, and was recently elected Chairman of the Board of Directors of Audubon Texas. He is Vice-Chairman of the Texas State Park Advisory Committee, which in August completed a report that calls for a bold ten-year plan to increase funding for our state and local parks.

Through the work and funding of the Texas Coalition for Conservation, George Bristol has been one of the leading advocates and educators for substantial and sustainable funding for parklands.

Other Events

December 16: Houston (Baytown)

Christmas Bird Count

...and many other CBCs
Dec. 14 – Jan. 5

January 8: LRGV Nesting Birds

OG Meeting with Dr. Tim Brush

January 20: Brazos Bend State Park

Monthly OG trip, with Bill Godley

January 26-29: OG Quarterly Trip,

NE Texas with Ron Baltzegar

Inside this issue:

About the OG	2
November Meeting Minutes	2
Christmas Bird Counts	3
Field Trips	4
A Secret	5
Clearing House Plans	5
Field Trip Reports	6
Membership Form	8

Minutes of the November 6, 2006 Meeting

Bayland Community Center

Attendance: 73

1. **Learning Corner:** Howard Laidlaw spoke on the differences between female dabbling ducks. He emphasized bill color and shape, patterns on the wings (most species show a distinguishing swatch of bright color on the speculum), eating habitats, and head shapes. Dabblers spring directly into flight.
2. **Welcome:** Chairman Michael Williams welcomed all new members, guests, and regular members to the meeting.
3. **Bird Sighting:** Canvasback Ducks, Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk, Sprague's Pipits, Cinnamon Teal, whistling ducks, MacGillivray's Warbler, Wilson's Snipe, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Groove-billed Ani, many Bald Eagles, Merlin, Vermilion Flycatcher, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds.
4. **Minutes:** Minutes of the October meeting were approved.
5. **Membership:** Margret asked all to please sign in and stated that dues could be paid now.
6. **Environmental Issues:** Chairman Michael Williams urged us to all vote in the November 7th election. After the election we need to write letters to our representatives stating our needs to have our State Parks taken care of.
7. **Newsletter:** Al stated that the newsletter should be out after Thanksgiving. It will have a list of the Christmas Bird Counts. Articles are due within a week.
8. **Library:** Andy said if there were any books that members want for the library, email him and he will purchase them.
9. **Field Trips:** Adam Wood spoke for Skip Almone, announcing that the mid-week Trip would be at Hermann Park on November 8th. Adam reported that the trip to ONC's Little Thicket Nature Preserve was enjoyed by 13 participants. It is a lovely area and belongs to all OG members as we are ONC members also. Twenty-three birders had a great day at Quintana/Brazoria NWR. The Quarterly trip to Granger had six participants and was an absolutely successful trip. A Red Phalarope, Reddish Egret (good bird for Granger area), and endangered Bewick's Wren were a few of the excellent species seen. Sheldon Lake trip November 18th promises to be exciting as the Quarterly Trip to NE Texas in January.
10. **Budget:** Jim Winn stated that we now have \$7,844 in the bank. The board has asked us to vote on donating \$500 to Smith Point Hawk Watch. It was approved by all.
11. **Speaker:** Howard Laidlaw, owner of Texas and Beyond Birding Tours, lived in Panama for five years. His knowledge of the birds (900 species), terrain, and people were most helpful in understanding why Panama birding is some of the best in the world. Accessibility and safety are big issues today and Panama is definitely safe with many opportunities to bird in five distinctive areas. Pipeline Road is one of the areas, and is world-renowned. Staying at the Canopy Tower is almost a must when birding Pipeline Road and surrounding areas. Howard's many colorful slides of the birds were enjoyed by all.
12. **Meeting adjourned at 8:45 pm.**
-- Shirley Mondshine

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:	Michael Williams	713-228-9064
Vice-Chair:	Bernice Hotman	713-782-7889
Secretary:	Shirley & Raymond Mondshine	713-774-1413
Treasurer:	Jim Winn	713-464-8057
Clearing House:	David Sarkozi	713-412-4409
Library:	Andy Scott	281-537-9690
Membership:	Margret Simmons	713-776-2511
Field Trips:	Adam Wood	713-515-1692

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

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

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

**Christmas Bird Counts in the Upper Texas Coastal Area
Dec. 2006 – Jan. 2007**

Guadalupe River Delta - McFaddin Family Ranches	Thursday, Dec. 14, 2006
Brent Ortego, brent.ortego@tpwd.state.tx.us 361-576-0022 ext. 24	
San Bernard NWR	Friday, December 15, 2006
Ron Weeks, empidonax@sbcglobal.net (evenings)979-299-0066 or Jennifer Wilson, Jennifer_Wilson@fws.gov (daytime)979-849-7771	
Houston	Saturday, December 16, 2006
David Sarkozi, david@sarkozi.net 713-412-4409	
Brazos Bend State Park	Saturday, December 16, 2006
Fred Land fredland@sbcglobal.net 281-379-1050	
Freeport	Sunday, December 17, 2006
Mike Austin, mausti5@houston.rr.com	
Matagorda County Mad Island Marsh	Monday, December 18, 2006
Brent Ortego, brent.ortego@tpwd.state.tx.us 361-576-0022 ext. 24	
Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR	Wednesday, December 20, 2006
Sumita Prasad, sumita@alumni.utexas.net 713-666-3297	
Bolivar Peninsula	Thursday, December 21, 2006
Bill Graber, 409-866-5452	
Armand Bayou Nature Center	Saturday, December 30, 2006
Christine Battan, cbattan@hmns.org 281-316-0808	
Buffalo Bayou	Saturday, December 30, 2006
Luc Bouffard and Michael Williams http://www.houstonarboretum.org/cbc/txbfsimplemap.htm	
Spring Creek	Saturday, December 30, 2006
Carlos Hernandez, carlania@swbell.net (w)281-874-1115, (h)281-353-9170	
Cypress Creek / Katy Prairie	Sunday, January 1, 2006
Fred Collins, fred_collins@hctx.net phone 282-357-5324	

For information on groups and meeting places for any CBC, contact the count leader/compiler. CBC results are compiled and published by National Audubon Society. A participation fee of \$5 is due from each participant, and may be paid to the area leaders or compilers on the day of the count. --*Editor*

Texas did extremely well in last year's CBCs. Matagorda County Mad Island Marsh again led the nation with 250 species. Corpus Christi followed with 227 and Guadalupe River Delta-McFaddin Family Ranches had 223. Freeport was 4th in the nation with 212 and its neighbor San Bernard NWR was 9th with 196 species. – *Brent Ortego*

OG Field Trips

December 16: Houston Christmas Bird Count

The holiday season is upon us once again and it is time for another fun and exciting round of Christmas Bird Counts. The official OG field trip for December will be the annual Houston Christmas Bird Count. This year's count will be held on December 16. The count covers a circular area 15 miles in diameter, centered in Baytown, and is divided into ten areas. Each area leader will determine a meeting time and place. I strongly encourage all of you all to participate in the Christmas Bird Count, even if it is only watching your feeder in your back yard. This is a chance for all of us to practice citizen science and to contribute information to the scientific community that will help in tracking population changes in bird species. The information gathered during the counts will help determine how bird species populations are doing year to year, and may indicate bird species whose populations are declining significantly. The more eyes we have out there, the less chance for a bird to go by unnoticed. I further suggest that everybody try to participate in other Christmas Bird Counts besides Houston's. For more information regarding the Houston Christmas Bird Count, please contact David Sarkozi, the compiler for the count, by email at david@sarkozi.net or phone at 713-412-4409. More information on various Christmas Bird Counts in our area is posted on Houston Audubon's website at: www.houstonaudubon.org and Texas Ornithological Society's website at: www.texasbirds.org/index.html.

January 26-29, 2007: Quarterly Trip to NE Texas

Our next quarterly trip will be to northeast Texas on January 26-29, 2007. Ron Baltzegar, a resident birder in northeast Texas, will lead us in search of Smith's and Lapland Longspurs, wintering sparrows, ducks, and geese, and other unusual birds that have a habit of turning up during the winter in northeast Texas. We will be visiting places like Lake Tawakoni, The Village Creek Drying Beds, and Mount Vernon. If you follow TexBirds then I am sure that you have seen Ron and Matt White's posts from these locations. They have found some great birds, and this trip should give us a chance also. You will not want to miss it. More details will be in the December *Spoonbill*, so stay tuned. If you are interested in this trip, please let me know and I will get your name on the list and get more details to you when I get them.

--Adam Wood, OG Field Trip Coordinator birdman_570@yahoo.com 713-515-1692

OG Mid-Week Birding Trips

The OG will sponsor a midweek birding trip the second Wednesday of each month from September through May. These will be informal birding trips with Skip Almoney as the leader. Skip will be at the site at 8:00 a.m. and the trip will not last beyond 12 noon. Depending on the birds and the number of participants, the trip may not be a full 4 hours. Each location listed below is in or near the city of Houston with only a few outside Beltway 8. Anyone is welcome and we will meet unless the weather is seriously inclement. The following are the locations for each month of the upcoming season.

December 2006	Edith L. Moore Sanctuary	March 2007	Jesse H. Jones Park
January 2007	Cullinan Park	April 2007	Herman Brown Park
February 2007	Russ Pittman Park	May 2007	Hermann Park

Learning a Secret

One day last June, I was surprised by a sound. It was a heavy flapping, and it came from somewhere behind my left shoulder. It wasn't sudden or startling, really; not like a grouse or quail flushing from underfoot. It was just odd, along a woodland path in the midday summer heat, as I stood and listened absent-mindedly for songbirds. I turned and saw a Black Vulture settling onto a limb half-way up an oak tree. That's odd too, I thought: I could not ever remember seeing a vulture deep in the woods like this.

Could it have been feeding on the ground near the path? I stepped to the side to look around, bracing myself for the sight or smell of some flyblown carcass. But there was nothing, just a slight opening in the woods where a large tree used to grow, its hollow stump now rising like a vine-clad monument from a thicket of palmettos and brambles. The vulture stayed perched, eyeing me, as if testing my character before making the next move. Then I understood its secret—actually I guessed, but the guess was thrilling in an irresistible way. Excuse me, I thought, I will be quick, but I have to know. One side of the fifteen-foot-tall, three-foot-wide stump had a slit in it, where a piece of rotten wood had fallen outward, like a gangplank from a pirate ship. I peered into the darkness, and saw two vulture nestlings staring sideways back at me.

A couple of days later, I returned to the nest. I saw no adult, but one of the young vultures was now perched on a branch just a few feet away. Another day later, and its sibling was out also. They looked fully feathered, but still had some patches of gray wooly down on their heads and shoulders. They were still and solemn, like a couple of monks who had made vows of silence. I was relieved to see them fledged. Finding a nest always burdens me with a worry that I have interfered with something vital. I guess my interference here had not been too bad.

Nowadays, as I drive to work on the Katy Freeway and dawn is just beginning to lighten the autumn sky behind the Westlake office towers of the “energy corridor” in the Houston suburbs, I can see vultures starting their daily movements. They are not really conspicuous until mid-day, when they will be soaring by the dozens. But seeing them in the shadows reminds me of that summer discovery, that they each have home lives in darker private places. Maybe one of these birds is from the woods where I walk, a bird that I had worried in passing. So I make a point of thinking again, sorry for the bother. We are really alike after all – living in our obtrusive flocks, held in suspicion, but individually sometimes peaceable and tolerant. Let's hope we can keep it that way.

-- Al Shultz

Clearing House

As noted in previous issues, David Sarkozi is looking at changing the way in which the OG handles compilation of bird records for the Upper Texas Coast. The recent rise of **eBird**, a web-based tool for managing bird records, means that most observers are now submitting their bird records via eBird rather than the separate Clearing House website. David plans to continue the Clearing House reports, but using only materials from eBird. Observers should submit their records via www.ebird.org/TX/index.html instead of the old OG or TexasBirding Clearing House sites.

This month, in place of a complete Clearing House report, *The Spoonbill* presents a bird list from a recent OG field trip, courtesy of Adam Wood. His field trip reports follow on the next two pages.

-- Editor

Field Trip Reports

October 14: Little Thicket Nature Sanctuary

The second beginner/new member trip gave 13 participants the chance to experience woodland birding in the Outdoor Nature Club's Little Thicket Nature Sanctuary on a very pleasant morning. It was the first time many of the participants had visited the Little Thicket Nature Sanctuary, and I believe the participants were impressed with how nice the Little Thicket Nature Sanctuary is and by what a good job the ONC is doing in managing the sanctuary. As for the birding, it was a typical day of woodland birding: a few birds here and a few birds there, mostly heard with a few visuals. The emphasis for this trip was that birding is more than just about the birds -- it is about the beautiful places birding takes you. We totaled 12 species for the trip with the highlight being a Hairy Woodpecker, which I believe was a life bird for most of the participants. In the very same spot (and actually on the same tree where the Hairy Woodpecker was seen), we also observed several Downy Woodpeckers, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and a Red-bellied Woodpecker. It was quite a spectacle to have four woodpecker species on one tree, and great for comparisons as well. A big thanks goes to Aaron Stoley for assisting me with leading this trip and showing us around the Little Thicket Nature Sanctuary.

—Adam Wood

October 21: Quintana and Brazoria NWR

Twenty-two participants had a great day of birding on the OG's field trip to Quintana and Brazoria NWR. We were greeted by voracious mosquitoes and frequent rain showers that were heavy at times at Quintana but the rain did clear out around 10:30 and it got quite warm. In spite of the weather 59 species were seen at Quintana by most of the participants. The highlights were one completely soaked Golden-crowned Kinglet that afforded everybody good looks at its golden crown. A Peregrine Falcon and Magnificent Frigatebird flyover. On the migrant front we had ten species of warblers: Magnolia Warblers that had me scratching my head for a little bit but thankfully Steve Gross happened to be there to help me with the ID, an early Palm Warbler, Nashville Warblers, Wilson's Warblers, a Black-throated Green Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, several Common Yellowthroats and American Redstarts. A male Rose-breasted Grosbeak gave us quite a show and we also saw female Summer Tanagers and Scarlet Tanagers. Also, we had a very cooperative Warbling Vireo that hung around all morning.

We then went over to Brazoria NWR to drive the auto loop. We had 51 species at Brazoria and the

highlights around the auto loop included great looks at a King Rail by all participants and a brief look at a Clapper Rail by some of the participants. A Reddish Egret, Broad-winged Hawk and Seaside Sparrows were also nice finds along the auto loop.

For the whole trip we totaled 96 species. I was surprised by the absence of ducks, geese, and sandpipers at Brazoria -- it may still be a bit early for them. Also, after checking Texbirds, I found it interesting that we were seeing so many Blue Grosbeaks at Quintana compared to Indigo Buntings, while at other locations along the Upper Texas Coast Indigo Buntings were being reported in much greater numbers than Blue Grosbeaks.

—Adam Wood

October 27-29: Granger (Quarterly Trip)

Tim Fennell showed six participants around Granger and surrounding areas in search of the Mountain Plover, Sprague's Pipit, and the Burrowing Owl. We were hoping for cloudy cool days with no wind, but we were greeted with cool sunny days with slight to moderate winds, which is about the worst conditions for looking for Mountain Plovers. However, on the first morning of the trip, after driving up and down CR 346 three times, Tim finally spotted a flock of 32 Mountain Plovers. We watched them fly around low, and then land in the middle of the field about 200 meters out, allowing us decent views through scopes. After we watched them for about 30 minutes, they took off and flew to another field nearby. This time some were as close as 50 meters from us and were visible to the naked eye. Tim stated that that is about the best look we could have hoped for. All participants got very satisfying looks at the plain but magnificent plover, which was a lifer for all of us.

After watching the plovers for another 15 minutes we decided to go chase the Red Phalarope that was being seen daily for the past week on Stillhouse Hollow Lake at Union Grove Wildlife Management Area. Within half an hour we had the Red Phalarope. To describe where the Red Phalarope was, we used a juvenile Reddish Egret -- a rare bird for the central Texas -- as a point of reference. There are not too many times that you can use a rare bird as a point of reference to describe where an even rarer bird is.

The afternoon was spent looking for other good central Texas birds that we would not encounter on the Upper Texas Coast. We decided to go to Lake Georgetown Dam, where we were rewarded with both

the Rock and Canyon Wren. At one point they were right beside each other and you could see both of them at the same time in the scope. However, other highlights from the first day included a White-breasted Nuthatch that called back to my iPod, a juvenile Red-headed Woodpecker, singing Eastern and Western Meadowlarks, and two Burrowing Owls standing near culverts. After the first day we had already tallied 85 species, which is a high day count for October in central Texas, and it seemed like we found almost every bird that we targeted without much effort. We tried unsuccessfully to find the Ringed Kingfisher at San Gabriel City Park.

The second day was a much tougher day. However, we did manage to add 16 more species to the list to bring the total species tallied for the trip to 101. Highlights from day two included another Burrowing Owl in a culvert, a Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk flying over a field with several Turkey Vultures, 177 Sandhill Cranes in a large field with cattle (and some of the cranes were actually sitting down like the cattle), at least one Eastern Bewick's Wren (the endangered race),

Brewer's Blackbirds, Sprague's Pipit flying directly over head, and a Virginia Rail at Hornsby Bend. The main highlight of the day was seeing several Sprague's Pipits performing their distinctive flight and giving their traditional 'squeak squeak' in flight. They afforded us good looks at the necklace between the breast and throat and the extensive white on their outer tail feathers.

This was a great trip; Tim was an excellent guide, and we learned a lot from him. I for one never knew that the best place to look for Burrowing Owls is in culverts, provided that you are in the proper habitat. I was amazed by the rows and rows of expansive agricultural fields and just wondered what the Granger area must have looked like 200 years ago when it was still native blackland prairie. Everybody added at least one bird to their life list, had a wonderful time and saw some truly wonderful birds. A big thank-you goes out to Tim Fennell for leading this trip and getting everybody good looks at the Mountain Plovers. The bird list for the trip is below. -- Adam Wood

Eared Grebe GL (1), HB (1)	Killdeer CR 346 (5), SF (5), GL (5)	heard
Pied-billed Grebe SH	Black-bellied Plover SH (6)	White-breasted Nuthatch PG (1 Heard)
American White Pelican GL	Red Phalarope SH (1)	Sedge Wren SH (1 Heard)
Double-crested Cormorant GL (7), SH (5)	Long-billed Dowitcher SH (5)	Canyon Wren LG (2)
Reddish Egret SH (1-juvenile)	Dunlin SH (3)	Rock Wren LG (2)
Great Blue Heron SH (2), GL (1)	Least Sandpiper SH (10), SF (15), GL (15)	Carolina Wren PG (1 Heard)
Great Egret SG (1)	Western Sandpiper SH (1)	House Wren PG (1 Heard)
Snowy Egret SG (1)	Wilson's Snipe SH	Eastern Bewick's Wren 1
American Wigeon SH (60), GL (5)	Spotted Sandpiper SG (1), HB (4)	Ruby-crowned Kinglet PG (2)
Canvasback SH (4), GL (4)	Greater Yellowlegs 5	Eastern Bluebird PG (5)
Gadwall SH (30), GL (5)	Long-billed Curlew GL (1)	Northern Mockingbird GS
Ring-necked Duck SH (5), GL	Ring-billed Gull SH (10)	European Starling SG (4), HB
Redhead SH (30), GL (15)	Franklin's Gull GL (6)	Sprague's Pipit CR 346 (2 Flyover)
Ruddy Duck SH (25), GL (10), HB (10)	Forster's Tern GL (5)	American Pipit CR 346 (10 Flyovers), SH
Northern Shoveler GL (2), HB (20)	Inca Dove PG (4)	(30), SG (1), GL (5)
Bufflehead GL (1), HB (1)	Rock Dove GS	Cedar Waxwing GL (3)
Lesser Scaup GL (15)	White-winged Dove GS (3), HB (5)	Orange-crowned Warbler 2
Mallard 2	Mourning Dove GS (10)	Yellow-rumped Warbler PG (5)
Blue-winged Teal HB (15)	Burrowing Owl CR 346 (1), CR 124 (1), CR	Northern Cardinal MC (1)
Green-winged Teal HB (50)	354 (1)	Savannah Sparrow CR 346 (50)
Northern Pintail HB (3)	Great Horned Owl 1 (Heard)	Song Sparrow SH (1), SF (1)
Turkey Vulture CR 346 (1), GS (10)	Belted Kingfisher SH (1), SG (1), MC (1)	Chipping Sparrow PG (1), SH 95 (8)
Black Vulture GS (10)	Red-bellied Woodpecker SG (2), PG (1), SH	Vesper Sparrow 10
Northern Harrier CR 346 (1)	95 (1)	White-crowned Sparrow SF (4)
Crested Caracara GS (2)	Red-headed Woodpecker PG (1)	Swamp Sparrow SF (1)
American Kestrel GS (2), SH 95 (1)	Downy Woodpecker PG (1 Heard)	Lincoln's Sparrow SF (1), SH 95 (1)
Cooper's Hawk GS (1)	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker GL (1)	Western Meadowlark CR 346 (50)
Osprey SH (1)	Eastern Phoebe CR 346 (1), GS (1)	Eastern Meadowlark 2 (Heard)
Red-tailed Hawk (1-Harlan's) SH (2), CR 124	Scissor-tailed Flycatcher MC (1)	Red-winged Blackbird 50
(1), SH 95 (1)	Loggerhead Shrike CR 346 (1)	Brewer's Blackbird 25
Red-shouldered Hawk SH 95 (1 Heard)	Blue Jay PG (1 Heard)	Great-tailed Grackle GS (50)
Virginia Rail HB (1)	American Crow GS (5), HB (4)	Common Grackle GS (100), SG (100), HB
American Coot SH (2,000), GL (50), HB (20)	Barn Swallow 1	(100)
Sandhill Crane 177, SH (30 Flyovers)	Carolina Chickadee PG (1), several more	Brown-headed Cowbird GS (50)
Mountain Plover CR 346 (32)	were heard	House Finch SH 95 (1)
	Tufted Titmouse sp. PG at least one was	House Sparrow GS

Locations: Granger to Salado (GS), Stillhouse Hollow Lake (SH), Lake Georgetown (LG), San Gabriel City Park (SG), Mankin's Crossing (MS), CR 337 Pecan Grove (PG), Sore Finger WMA (SF), Granger Lake (GL), SH 95 near CR 337 (SH 95), and Hornsby Bend (HB).

*Birds in **Bold** were target birds for the trip and birds in *italics and Bolded* were rare birds in the area they were seen.

Outdoor Nature Club
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Houston TX 77277-0894

TO START OR RENEW A MEMBERSHIP:

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Address: _____

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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

Additional contributions are welcome in any amount.

Send to:

Outdoor Nature Club
PO Box 270894
Houston TX 77277-0894

Membership questions? Contact Margret Simmons
phone 713-776-2511
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