



The Spoonbill

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

January 2007
Vol. 56 No. 1

January Meeting

Monday, January 8, 2007 -- 7:00 p.m.

Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet, Houston

6:30 -- Learning Corner:

Sparrows (part 1)
with **David Bradford**

Program:

**The Nesting Birds of the
Lower Rio Grande Valley**
with **Dr. Tim Brush**

Dr. Tim Brush, professor of biology at the University of Texas-Pan American, got interested in birds at age 14, when he saw a Turkey Vulture fly over the Delaware Water Gap in New Jersey. He majored in biology at Earlham College, and completed his M.S. in zoology at Arizona State University where he studied cavity-nesting birds in desert riparian habitat. Dr. Brush then earned his Ph.D. at Rutgers University through research on the foraging behavior and habitat use of birds in the New Jersey Pine Barrens. He spent five years at Marycrest College in Davenport, Iowa, before reaching the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the University of Texas-Pan American in 1991. He spent a few years studying shorebirds along the Laguna Madre before beginning his research for a new book, *Nesting Birds of a Tropical Frontier*, on the unique forest and woodland bird communities along the lower Rio Grande.

In his presentation, he will be discussing the changing bird communities and habitats of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Bring a copy of the book if you would like it to be signed.

Other Events

January 20: Brazos Bend State Park
Monthly OG trip, with Bill Godley

**January 26-29: OG Quarterly Trip
NE Texas** with Ron Baltzegar

February 5: Monthly OG Meeting
John Coffman on Aplomado Falcons

February 10: special trip to Lake Houston
(for Henslow's Sparrow)

February 17: Texas City Prairie Preserve
Monthly OG trip, led by The Nature
Conservancy, to see Attwater's
Prairie Chickens

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Minutes of the December 4, 2006 Meeting

Bayland Community Center

Attendance: 57

1. **Learning Corner:** Fred Collins gave a brief account of the splitting of Cackling Goose from Canada Goose. Both species have many subspecies, making ID difficult unless one sees the bill, which is more sloping and larger on the Canada Goose. Though most Canada Geese are larger than Cackling, one cannot always go by this as size varies considerably. Cackling are more common than Canada in west Harris County. Winter numbers of geese in our part of the state are dropping because of loss of rice farming lands.
2. **Welcome:** With a Ho Ho Ho, Chairman Michael Williams opened the meeting at 7:15.
3. **Bird Sightings:** Fox Sparrow, Cackling Goose, Cave Swallows, Great Kiskadee, White-tailed Hawk, Red Phalarope, Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Blue-Winged Teal, Redhead, Ring-necked Ducks, Red-tailed Hawk with squirrel in mouth, Red-shouldered and Cooper's Hawks, Osprey with a fish, Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, Blue-headed Vireo, Orange-crowned Warbler.
4. **Minutes:** Minutes of the November meeting were approved.
5. **Membership:** Margaret asked all to please sign in and stated that dues can be paid now.
6. **Texas eBird Announcement:** Robin Leonard is now at the helm of Texas eBird and asked all to please send rare sightings and stories to her and she will put these in *The Spoonbill*. Any images will be accepted.
7. **Newsletter:** Michael asked for submissions to *The Spoonbill* by December 10th. We now have new printer and mailer for *The Spoonbill* and expect to benefit from more efficient handling.
8. **Field Trips:** The OG trip to Sheldon Lake was a great success with great views of Le Conte's Sparrows. The quarterly trip in January will be to NE Texas; there are a few openings left. The SE Arizona trip in June is filled, with a waiting list. David Sarkozi needs volunteers for Houston Christmas Bird Count, especially for the San Jacinto monument area. Adam Wood will lead the Nelson's Farm area of the Katy Prairie CBC, and needs volunteers. Skip Almone reported the trip to Hermann Park was well attended and mosquitoes were out in force. The next midweek trip is to Edith Moore Sanctuary. Skip also asked for any old *Spoonbills* (50's & up) as he is compiling an archive. Volunteers are needed for FeatherFest, March 30 - April 1; Kevin Karlson will be back.
9. **Budget:** Jim Winn reported \$7,068 in the bank. He also had handouts on "How to Preserve Birds and Wildlife for Future Generations." This will help each of us to be participants in helping not only our State Parks but also surrounding parks. He urged all of us to be more active in contacting our state representatives about this very grave matter. His excellent presentation will be of great use.
10. **Speaker:** Fred Collins, creator and director of Kleb Woods Nature Preserve in Northwest Harris County, is well known throughout the area for his birding expertise and the many positions he has held. His talk, "Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in Texas – Fact or Fiction," was most informative and convinced us it may be Fact. In the 1970's when he began studying the Big Thicket area he was going on information from James T. Tanner's book, "The Ivory-billed Woodpecker." Tanner was the last to take photos of this bird. Recent tantalizing but inconclusive reports give hope that Ivory-bills may be found in Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Florida. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the Nature Conservancy, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are backing extensive searches. Fred believes the bird will be found in Texas.
11. **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.

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

**Field Trip Announcement
Brazos Bend State Park
January 20, 2007**

40 Acre Lake Parking Lot – 7:00 a.m.
Park Admission Fee: \$3

This month's trip will be to Brazos Bend State Park. Most of the park is in the Brazos River floodplains, but there are also areas of flat upland coastal prairies. Numerous swales and depressions become freshwater marshes during periods of heavy rain. In addition to the Brazos River, Big Creek meanders diagonally across the park and is associated with sloughs and cutoff meanders called oxbow lakes. Other lakes have been created by levees. The creek and riverbanks are lined with sycamore, cottonwood, and black willow. Campsites and picnicking areas are located among huge, moss-draped live oaks; while trails run along the lakes and through bottomland hardwood forests. Nature lovers, birders, campers, and other outdoor enthusiasts will delight in an observation tower and platforms for wildlife observation/photography of more than 270 species of birds sighted; 21 species of reptiles and amphibians, including American alligator and 23 species of mammals including bobcat, white-tailed deer, raccoon, gray fox, and feral hog.

Bill Godley one of the State Park's naturalists will guide us around the park and surrounding areas in search of American Bittern, wintering ducks, Vermillion Flycatcher, Winter Wren, wintering warblers as well as a few lingering neotropical migrants (last years Brazos Bend CBC produced two Prairie Warblers), and sparrows. This park is one of the few places on the Upper Texas Coast where it is possible to see Henslow's Sparrow and we will make an attempt to see at least one. When we go to find the Henslow's Sparrow it may require lots of walking at a brisk pace over uneven terrain and through dense grass. So if you can not keep up with the line or don't wish to partake in the chase you can position yourself so that when the sparrow is flushed you will be able to see it. We will make all attempts to flush the sparrow into a tree near those who did not participate in the chase to give everybody the best opportunity to get a good look at the sparrow. In the afternoon after lunch we will be birding outside the park around Davis Estates and one of the areas we will be birding is great for sparrows but is a challenging walk along a narrow path with a fence on one side and a pit on the other side. If you feel like you are not up for that hike you may wait for us at the start of the hike. This will be an all day trip with a few not so easy hikes. If you stick with us for the whole time you will not be disappointed. This park is great to bird all year round but it is especially good to bird in the winter and we should have a great day.

Directions:

We will meet in the 40 Acre Lake parking lot at 7:00 am. The park is approximately a one-hour drive from downtown Houston. Take Highway 59 South to the Crabb River Road exit. You may also take State Highway 288 south to FM 1462 West. Follow FM 1462 to FM 762 North. From the south follow State Highway 288 North to the FM 1462 exit or take State Highway 36 to FM 1462 East. All routes are marked with brown signs to guide you.

Be sure to bring: Binoculars, a warm coat or jacket in case it is cold, rain gear in case it rains, sturdy pants or jeans, hiking boots if you plan to chase the Henslow's Sparrow, hat, sun block, camera, spotting scope, \$3 for admission into the park, water, and a lunch.

--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.

January 2007	Cullinan Park	April 2007	Herman Brown Park
February 2007	Russ Pittman Park	May 2007	Hermann Park
March 2007	Jesse H. Jones Park		

Northeast Texas Quarterly Field Trip Announcement January 25-28, 2007

Meet: 7:00 p.m., January 25, 2007
Lobby of the Best Western Inn and Suites in Greenville, TX
Limit: 14 people

Our next quarterly trip will be to northeast Texas on January 25-28, 2007. Ron Baltzegar, a resident birder in northeast Texas, will lead us in search of Smith's and Lapland Longspurs, Golden Eagle, Rough-legged Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Prairie Falcon, wintering sparrows, ducks, geese, and other unusual birds such as odd gulls, Pacific Loon and Red-throated Loon. We will be visiting places like Lake Tawakoni, 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 find some also. You will not want to miss it. The Texas Ornithological Society's (TOS) winter meeting is also in NE Texas and the field trips will be to a lot of the same places we will be birding. However, if you attend the TOS meeting, you will visit only a few locations, whereas on this trip you will have the opportunity to visit more than just a few while still spending an adequate amount of time at each location. I would like to have everybody try and get to the hotel by 6:30 p.m. on Thursday so that we can meet in the lobby at 7:00 p.m., to head out for dinner and discuss how the trip is going to run.

Accommodations: We will be staying at the Best Western Inn and Suites in Greenville. I have ten rooms blocked off at a rate of \$60 per night. When calling in to reserve your room, make sure to mention you are with the Houston Ornithology Group to get the group rate. The number for the Best Western is: **903-454-1792**.

Directions: The hotel is located at 1216 Interstate Highway 30, Greenville, TX 75402.

Be sure to bring: Binoculars, spotting scope, warm cloths because it will be cold in NE Texas, rain gear in case it rains, hat, sunscreen, and a camera.

If you are interested in this trip please let me know and I will get your name on the list.

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

Field Trip Report Sheldon Lake State Park -- November 18, 2006

Damien Carey, a board member of the Friends of Sheldon Lake State Park, led 26 participants through the Park. We couldn't have asked for better weather -- it was a beautiful day and we saw some great birds. Before we started birding, Damien took time to explain a little bit about the history of Sheldon Lake and how it became a state park.

We started out by working our way around the fish ponds near the Environmental Learning Center, looking for ducks and sparrows. We did not see any ducks but did encounter one Golden-crowned Kinglet that a few of the participants got a look at, and an Orange-crowned Warbler. We hit one good sparrow hole where some of the participants got looks at Lincoln's, Swamp, Song, and Savannah Sparrow. Damien thinks he may have had a brief look at a Lark Sparrow as well. After birding the fish ponds, we went out and trudged through the prairie, hoping to scare up some Le Conte's Sparrows. Without too much work or trudging, we managed to scare up some Le Conte's Sparrows and push them into an area that all the participants could surround. We had great looks at at least six Le Conte's Sparrows. We also got a good opportunity to observe the Le Conte's Sparrow behavior of preferring to run on the ground rather than fly. It was truly the moment of the trip. I believe it was a life bird for most of the participants and what an experience they got to have with a lifer Le Conte's. Le Conte's Sparrows can be very tough to get good looks at. Other highlights in the prairie included good looks at two Sedge Wrens, and a few of the participants got a brief look at a Marsh Wren, Vesper Sparrows, fleeting glimpses of more Lincoln's and Swamp Sparrows, and half the group got a good look at a White-throated Sparrow. Damien believes he may have seen a Grasshopper Sparrow in that area as well. After wearing ourselves out walking through the prairie we stopped for lunch. After lunch we decided we would go and try and find where the ducks were and finished the day birding around Sheldon Reservoir. We did manage to find a few Ring-necked, Ruddy, and Wood Ducks as well as a Canvasback, a few Gadwalls and Northern Shoveler on the reservoir.

I would like to thank Damien for doing an excellent job leading this trip and sharing his knowledge about Sheldon Lake State Park with us. It is truly a nice place to go and bird, and it is not that far from Houston. I would also like to thank everybody who participated in this trip and helped to make it a truly wonderful one. Let's keep these good turnouts going. I hope to see everybody on future trips. The list of birds seen during the trip is below (71 species).

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck 10
Greater White-fronted Goose 50
Snow Goose 100
Wood Duck 2
Gadwall 6
Northern Shoveler 6
Canvasback 1
Ring-necked Duck 7
Ruddy Duck 3
Pied-billed Grebe 15
American White Pelican 15
Neotropic Cormorant 4
Double-crested Cormorant 3
Anhinga 5
Great Blue Heron 2
Great Egret 3
Snowy Egret 1
Little Blue Heron 1
Tricolored Heron 1
Cattle Egret 1
White Ibis 1 (Flyover)
Black Vulture 2
Turkey Vulture 7
Osprey 3

Northern Harrier 5
Sharp-shinned Hawk 1
Red-shouldered Hawk 5
Red-tailed Hawk 1
American Kestrel 3
Common Moorhen 10
American Coot 200
Killdeer 9
Laughing Gull 150
Ring-billed Gull 25
Belted Kingfisher 1
Red-bellied Woodpecker 2
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 2
Downy Woodpecker 5
Northern Flicker 5
Eastern Phoebe 10
Vermilion Flycatcher 1
Blue Jay 2
Tree Swallow 50
Northern Rough-winged Swallow 5
Carolina Chickadee 2 (Heard)
Tufted Titmouse 2 (Heard)
Carolina Wren 2
Sedge Wren 2

Marsh Wren 1
Golden-crowned Kinglet 2
Ruby-crowned Kinglet 10
American Robin 5
Northern Mockingbird 5
Brown Thrasher 1
American Pipit 5 (Flyovers)
Cedar Waxwing 5
Orange-crowned Warbler 2
Yellow-rumped Warbler 20
Common Yellowthroat 1
Vesper Sparrow 6
Lark Sparrow 1
Savannah Sparrow 25
Grasshopper Sparrow 1
Le Conte's Sparrow 10
Song Sparrow 3
Lincoln's Sparrow 5
Swamp Sparrow 5
White-throated Sparrow 1
Northern Cardinal 15
Red-winged Blackbird 5
Eastern Meadowlark 2

The New American Peregrine

The Peregrine Falcon is an iconic raptor -- legendary for its speed, and familiar in its sleek bold appearance. Birders consider themselves lucky to see a Peregrine at any time, even though the species can be seen regularly during migration at various hawkwatch sites, and irregularly through winter along the Gulf coast and Texas coastal prairies. For the non-birding public, familiarity with the Peregrine might well take place in a city center: at a nesting ledge beside a window of an office skyscraper, or in a high-speed chase after a pigeon through a 'concrete canyon.' In recent years, Peregrines have increased in numbers and in distribution, and arguably represent the single most successful recovery of an endangered species. How did this recovery come about?

In a recent press release, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Director H. Dale Hall credited the recovery of the Peregrine to "the ban on the use of the pesticide DDT, protections afforded by the Endangered Species Act, and the extraordinary partnership efforts of the Service and state wildlife agencies, universities, private organizations and falcon enthusiasts. These partnerships greatly accelerated the pace of recovery through captive breeding programs, reintroduction efforts and the protection of nest sites during the breeding season." The Peregrine was removed from the endangered species list in 1999, and now breeds in 41 of the 50 states.

The recovery of the Peregrine is a more complex story than one might assume from this tidy summary, and the partnership efforts were not always cooperative. The many organizations and the egos of their leaders were often in heated conflict, and scientific reputations combined with political ambitions in some petty rivalries and unlikely alliances. Suffice it to say that birders and newcomers to hawkwatching should understand a few points about the Peregrine's recovery that are not always brought out. I write this as one who was involved in falconry and falcon breeding in the early 1970s, and was therefore an insider to a relatively small but influential group.

Placing the Peregrine on the endangered species list in 1970 was in itself highly controversial. At that time the Peregrine comprised three distinct subspecies in North America: *tundrius*, the tundra falcon that breeds in the Alaskan and Canadian

Arctic; *pealei*, the Peale's falcon, a nonmigratory population of the northern Pacific coast; and *anatum*, the "American Peregrine" of much of the rest of the continent. Around sixteen other subspecies of Peregrines are found worldwide, and all experienced some degree of population decline following the introduction of DDT and related pesticides in the 1940s. By the mid-1960s the *anatum* Peregrine had completely disappeared from all of its known nest sites in the eastern US, and only a few breeding pairs remained in the western states. This was the call to action for protecting the Peregrine. Populations of *tundrius* and *pealei*, although less well documented historically, were seemingly less affected.

North American raptor biologists in 1970 included a large number of falconers, who had long experience with Peregrines that was vital to understanding falcon reproduction and possible recovery. However, many of these individuals also wanted to be allowed to continue to capture wild Peregrines for use in falconry, and therefore opposed not just the 'listing' of the Peregrine but any efforts (by supposedly ignorant bureaucrats) to manage its populations. Another traditional practice of falconers is the swapping, trading, buying and selling of wild-caught raptors. Although these activities were restricted when all native raptors received federal protection in 1972 under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, falcons obtained legally overseas could still be marketed.

Captive breeding provided a new source of birds. Captive breeding was pioneered in the 1970s by falconers and raptor biologists through a murky combination of self-interest, science, luck and commerce. Private breeders furnished young falcons for government-operated restocking programs to augment wild populations. However, because captive-bred falcons can be sold, new markings and documentation had to be developed to ensure that wild birds were not being taken and sold as captive-bred. A sting operation by the USFWS in 1984 implicated some prominent Peregrine experts as participants in illegal international trafficking of falcons. Almost no convictions resulted, but reputations were damaged and many cooperating falconers became disgruntled, seeing the state and federal agencies managing the falcon restoration programs as the real villains in driving the international falcon market. The large restocking

programs ended in the 1990s, but commercial falcon breeding continues. Falconers now use large numbers of captive-bred falcons, some of which are interspecies hybrids not previously found in nature. Listeners, beware: the possibility now exists that a large falcon seen in the wild may be an escaped exotic, even a non-species (Gyr Falcon x Peregrine)!

Thousands of captive-bred Peregrines were released into the wild in the US and Canada in the 1980s and 1990s. Most of these were placed as downy nestlings into artificial nest boxes on cliffs or towers, or in the scattered remaining *anatum* nests in the West. However, breeding stock for this reintroduced population was derived from a blend of Peregrines from several subspecies, including many from other continents. (Most Atlantic and Gulf coastal migrants, however, are *tundrius* Arctic migrants just as before.) Although the USFWS refers to all breeding Peregrines in the former *anatum* range as *anatum*, and thereby claims an impressive 'recovery' for this subspecies, it has not so much recovered as it has been replaced.

Initial indications are that wild Peregrine populations are healthy and are assimilating these new genes. And, politics and bloodlines aside, more falcons in the air are a happy sight. Still, pesticides and habitat loss remain critically serious problems, and many Peregrines continue to experience poor reproductive rates. Only time will tell how sustainable the recovery really is.

--Al Shultz

References:

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CELEBRATE BOXING DAY BY RECYCLING

(A message for the New Year, from Ella Tyler of the Citizens' Environmental Coalition)

In British countries, the first weekday after Christmas day, generally December 26, is a public holiday called Boxing Day. When I was a child, we lived in a Crown Colony and I thought Boxing Day was the day you rewrapped gifts you didn't want and gave them to someone else. It seems to me that recycling fits right into the spirit of Boxing Day. There's plenty to recycle -- the unwanted gifts, the towels that have been replaced with new ones, and the half-roll of wrapping paper you now hate. And it's a start on a New Year's resolution to be more green in 2007.

If you are in doubt as to whether an item you don't want has a second (or ninth) life, check out the wish list for several local nonprofits. Places that have education programs for children appreciate simple items such as 2-liter bottles, buttons, egg cartons, fabric scraps, flat cardboard, meat trays, nature magazines, neckties, shoeboxes, and wrapping paper scraps. Shelters for people and pets need bedding, clothing, and personal care items.

A newly formed Houston nonprofit, Techs & Trainers Incorporated, reuses old computers as training tools for special needs workers. The refurbished computers are then used to bring technology to people with disabilities. The group can be reached by calling (713) 839-7177 or sending a note to techs1234@yahoo.com. For the holiday season, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality updated its list of places to recycle electronics. The list can be found at:

http://www.tceq.state.tx.us/assets/public/assistance/P2Recycle/electronics/recyclers_nonprofits.pdf

The City of Houston will provide Christmas tree recycling drop-off sites throughout Houston from Dec 27 to Jan 9. See <http://www.houstontx.gov/solidwaste/christmastrees2005.html> The city will also pick up trees from houses that have yard trimmings pick up.

The Houston Westpark Recycling Center, 5900 Westpark, is close to a one-stop shop for recycling. It accepts Christmas trees and electronic waste as well as other recyclables.

The Houston Galveston Area Council's recycling guide for our 13-county area is on-line at: <http://www.h-gac.com/HGAC/Programs/Solid+Waste/2006+Recycle+Guide.htm>

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The Spoonbill Wants Your Help...

Stories, notes, trip reports, or other materials for future issues are always welcome. Send to the Editor at

og_spoonbill@earthlink.net

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