



The Spoonbill

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

February 2010
Vol. 59 No. 2

Monthly Meeting: Monday, February 1

Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet, Houston

Learning Corner -- 6:30 p.m.

7:00 p.m. – General Meeting

Program: Birding & Bird Conservation in the English Lake District

by Helen & John Baines

John and Helen Baines are from the market town of Penrith, Cumbria, located on the eastern edge of the English Lake District. They both attended the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School (founded in 1564!), and from there both went on to get B.Sc. degrees in Geology, John from the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Helen from the University of London. Helen then went into teaching and John earned a Ph.D. in sedimentology at the University of Keele, near Newcastle-under-Lyme. He has spent the last 35 years working for American oil companies, involving several overseas postings to Holland, Indonesia, California, finally arriving in Texas 17 years ago.

Helen and John started watching birds when they moved to Los Angeles and then became much more serious when they arrived in Texas. With the advent of affordable DSLR cameras and lenses they started to photograph the birds, usually for identification purposes, but also to illustrate trip reports, particularly their "Birding from a Cruise Ship" trips, such as the Inside Passage, Alaska; the Panama Canal; the Amazon River; and most recently a 28-day "Round Australia" cruise. Helen is involved in Texas Parks and Wildlife Hummingbird Roundup, and has been recording the numbers of species that visit her feeders for about nine years. She has Rufous Hummingbirds every winter, one female returning for five consecutive years!

Other Events

February 11-14: Quarterly OG Field Trip (San Antonio)

February 20: Monthly OG Field Trip (Katy Prairie)

March 1: OG Meeting

March 20: Monthly OG Field Trip (Sheldon Lake SP)

April 5: OG Meeting

April 29 - May 2: Quarterly OG Field Trip (LRGV)

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**Ornithology Group,
Houston Outdoor Nature Club
Minutes of Meeting
Monday, January 11, 2010
Bayland Community Center
Number of Attendees: 64**

- 1. Learning Corner:** Glenn Olsen discussed adding Native Texas plants to our landscaping to benefit birds and other wildlife. Because the birds migrate to and through this area, a year round supply of food and shelter is needed to sustain the birds. Plants and shrubs that produce fruit and seeds are beneficial. The Native Plant Society of Texas, Houston Chapter, has a list of top 100 plants for our area. Their website is www.npsot.org; click on Houston Chapter. Other resources Glenn mentioned are: *Native Texas Plants, Landscaping Region by Region*, by Sally Wasowski; *Texas Wildscapes, Gardening for Wildlife*, by Noreen Damude and *American Wildlife and Plants, A Guide to Wildlife Food Habits*, by Alexander C. Martin. Trees and plants that Glenn recommends includes: Live Oak; Swamp Chestnut Oak; Black Cherry Trees; Red or White Mulberry; Mesquite; Rough Leaf Dogwood; Eastern Redbud and American Beautyberry. Houston plant nurseries that have a good selection of native plants are Joshua's Native Plants and Buchanan's.
- 2. Sightings:** Rufous Hummingbirds; Fish Crows and Bald Eagles were spotted in the Humble area. Ten to eighteen Hooded Mergansers at the Willow Water Hole. Crested Caracaras, Orange-crowned Warblers at home feeders and a Rock Wren in Seabrook have been seen. A heat lamp was recommended for Hummingbird feeders during the cold weather.
- 3. Minutes:** Minutes from the December 7, 2009 meeting were approved as printed in *The Spoonbill*.
- 4. Spoonbill:** Al Shultz will be working on *The Spoonbill* this coming weekend and will need articles by the end of the week. Any articles on the

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:	Pam Smolen	832-212-1368
Vice-Chair:	John Schneider	713-952-3770
Secretary:	Lenore Alfredson	281-579-8551
Treasurer:	Jerry Stanislav	936-271-7772
Clearing House:	David Sarkozi	713-412-4409
Library:	Deborah Valdez	281-879-8668
Membership:	Margret Simmons	713-776-2511
Field Trips:	Adam Wood	713-515-1692
The Spoonbill:	Al Shultz	281-829-0970
	email:	ogspoonbill@sbcglobal.net
OG website:	http://www.ornithologygroup.org/	
ONC website:	http://www.outdoornatureclub.org/	

Christmas Bird Counts or birding trips over the holidays would be appreciated.

- 5. Membership:** Margret Simmons reminded members to sign in. The 2010 Membership Dues are now due for names to appear in the upcoming yearbook.
- 6. Announcements:** Pam Smolen announced that Douglas W. Tallamy will be discussing his book, *Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants*, in March for a joint ONC and Houston Audubon Meeting.
- 7. Future Field Trips:** Adam Wood announced this month's Field Trip at Brazos Bend State Park. We will meet at 40 Acre Lake on Saturday, January 16, at 7:30 a.m. After lunch there will be a chance to see Palm Warblers at the Davis Estates. The Winter Quarterly Trip will be February 11-14 to San Antonio. Helen Rejzek and Georgina Schwartz will be co-leaders for the trip. Locations to bird include Braunig Lake, Calaveras Lake and possibly Choke Canyon State Park. Contact Adam to get your name on the list. More details will be on the OG website and in the February *Spoonbill*.

8. **Program:** John Schneider introduced Martin Reid, who has been President of the Fort Worth Audubon Society and a member of the Texas Bird Records Committee. Martin has a great interest in gulls, but also in butterflies and dragonflies. Martin presented the program, **Gulls in Texas**. Gulls are easy to look at and get close to, for longer looks to study these birds. Gulls that are usually found here are Ring-billed, Laughing, Franklin's, Bonaparte's and Herring. Small numbers of Lesser Black-backed, California, Glaucous and Thayer's Gulls are seen yearly. Very rare but regularly seen: Black-headed, Mew and Yellow-legged. Gulls that have been seen 6 or more times include Slay-backed Iceland and Kelp. Martin discussed ways to identify the different Gulls. Season and location are

important; looking for the aging sequences of the birds and learning to identify the basics for each age and type. Time out in the field to study is helpful in learning to identify the Gulls. Learn to assess the tail patterns which may look different if seen from above or below the bird. Eye color, orbital rings, "mirror" spots on primaries, bill shape and color are also important. Subtle difference occur on the birds during molting cycles and at different ages. Molting cycles start when the first primary is dropped, usually in April through July, and end between August and December. Martin recommends the book, *Gulls of the Americas*, by Steven Howell and John Dunn.

-- Lenore Alfredson, OG Secretary

William Dutcher and Bird Conservation

This month our adventure into the early conservation efforts continues with William Dutcher (1845 - 1920). Dutcher was influenced by George Bird Grinnell's efforts to educate hunters about conservation (January Spoonbill).

Dutcher started out an enthusiastic sportsman who shot ducks, geese, and shorebirds. During one hunting trip to Long Island, Dutcher shot a bird that he could not identify. He obtained a work on ornithology and discovered that the bird was a Wilson's Plover. This led him to identify all the birds he shot. Dutcher soon stopped shooting for sport and started collecting specimens. He became a prominent ornithologist, publishing many papers on the birds of Long Island.

Dutcher was stirred by Grinnell's articles in Forest and Stream and the information published by the Bird Protection Committee of the American Ornithologists' Union. The American Ornithologists' Union was established in 1883 in New York. Between 1876 and 1886 the A.O.U. estimated that 5 million birds of 50 species were taken annually. Meat and plume hunters were removing herons and water birds by the wagonload. In 1886 the A.O.U. founded the Model Law which was the basis for state laws to protect non-game birds from game birds

in order to protect water birds from plume hunting.

In 1900, while President of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, Dutcher began his conservation efforts when the portrait painter Abbott H. Thayer gave him \$1400 for the protection of sea birds along the North Atlantic Coast. Dutcher used the funds to hire game wardens to protect nesting birds, starting the warden and sanctuary system.

As chairman of the Committee on Bird Protection of the American Ornithological Union, Dutcher helped urge Florida to pass the A.O.U. Model Law in 1901. In 1902 Dutcher was made the first chairman of the newly formed National Committee of Audubon Societies. At this time there were 36 individual Audubon Societies.

While he was chairman of the Audubon Societies he continued to work tirelessly to secure state adoption of the A.O.U. Model Law which became known as the Audubon Model Law. He was chairman until 1910 when he was stricken with paralysis and incapable of speech. Dutcher passed away in 1920.

-- Pam Smolen, OG Chairperson

Quarterly Field Trip to San Antonio February 11 - February 14, 2010

Our winter quarterly trip will be to San Antonio, TX on February 11 - February 14, 2010. Helen Rejzek and Georgina Schwartz, board members of the San Antonio Audubon Society, will lead us to some of San Antonio's hot spots including the famed Mitchell Lake Audubon Center. There, and at selected other locations, we will be in search of any overwintering neotropical migrants, winter residents and a host of other species that we don't commonly see on the Upper Texas Coast. You will not want to miss this trip, as it should be a great one. If you are interested, please let me know and I will get your name on the list and get more details to you when I get them. Descriptions of each location we plan to visit are below, along with key birds to look for.

Accommodations & Directions: We will be staying at the La Quinta Inn in Southwest San Antonio. I have ten rooms reserved under Houston Ornithology Group. The number to call to reserve one of the rooms is 210-922-2111. The hotel is located at 7202 South Pan Am Expressway, San Antonio, TX 78224. To get there: Take exit 572 of off I-10 to merge onto I-35 S toward Laredo; go 3.4 mi, then take exit 150A toward Zarzamora St; go 443 ft, then merge onto Interstate 35 Access Rd; go 0.3 mi, then turn left at S Zarzamora; continue 0.3 mi, then turn right at W Vestal Pl; go 0.3 mi, then turn right at Marek St. Proceed 446 ft, then turn right at Interstate 35 Access Rd; go 171 ft, then take the ramp on the left onto I-35 N; destination will be on the right. **We will plan on meeting in the lobby of the La Quinta at 7:30 p.m.** and then go out for a welcome dinner. If you will not be able to make it in by 7:30 p.m., please let me know.

Be sure to bring: Binoculars, a warm coat or jacket in case it is cold, rain gear in case it rains, hat, sun block, water, camera, spotting scope, \$20 for admission fees and \$20 dollar donation to the OG. You can bring extra money for a tip for the guides if you wish.

~ Adam Wood, OG Field Trip Coordinator, birdsondabrain@earthlink.net, 713-515-1692

Braunig and Calaveras Lakes, managed by the S.A. River Authority, are warm-water outlets from power plants with some wetland habitat surrounded by Tamaulipan scrub habitat and some open grassland. Look for Marsh Wrens, Swamp and Lincoln's Sparrows and Common Yellowthroats in the reeds along the lake. Also keep an eye out for Bittern in the reeds. Osprey and American White Pelicans are common on the lake. In the winter this is a good place to find out-of-range Gulls. The scrubby areas along the roads are good for Common Ground-Dove, Pyrrhuloxia, Bewick's Wren, and Sparrows.

Medina River Park is relatively new park is part of the old Applewhite Reservoir site and is fast proving a great birding spot. Green Kingfishers, buntings, warblers, orioles and tanagers are regularly found here in season, as well as many woodpeckers, vireos, wrens and sparrows throughout the year.

Mitchell Lake Audubon Center is a 624-acre complex with a mixture of brushland, grassland, mud flats, shallow ponds, deep ponds, and a deep-water lake. In summer, expect to see Crested Caracara, Harris's Hawk, Black-necked Stilt; Inca, White-winged, and Mourning Dove and Common Ground-dove; Cave, Cliff and Barn Swallows; one or more species of ducks; warblers, both night-herons, and several species of herons and shorebirds. The area is famous for the shorebirds that can be seen on its mud flats.

Western Bexar County - Mechler & Jungman Roads are good spots for winter birds of open, plowed fields and fencerows. Burrowing Owl has been regular here, as have American Pipits, Mountain Plovers, and longspurs. Watch for

Merlins among the ubiquitous American Kestrels, along with Say's Phoebe, Horned Larks, Vesper and Savannah Sparrow, and Brewer's Blackbirds.

Castroville Regional Park is a great birding place any time of year. The ponds at the top of the hill (walkers only) on the west may have Osprey and Egrets, and Black Phoebe has been seen here regularly. (Look for the bench with the SAAS name on it!) New ridge-top trails were opened in early 2006. A walk around the paved perimeter road will touch many kinds of habitat. The little ditch on the right always has water and usually has Green Kingfisher and warblers. This ditch ends at the baldcypress-lined Medina River, which you can follow on around to the left. Couch's Kingbirds have nested in the pecan trees and Westerns have nested on the power poles. Eastern Bluebirds, Ash-throated and Great-crested Flycatchers, Vermilion Flycatchers, Verdins, and orioles--even an Audubon's--may be seen. Check the new gardens near the parking areas for hummingbirds.

Choke Canyon State Park has a lot of good South Texas specialties. The park has two "units," the South-Shore Unit and the Calliham Unit. You need to go about 10 miles west of the South-shore Unit to get to the Calliham Unit. The Calliham Unit is usually more birdy, and includes a nature trail that can have many of our 'glamour' species, like Great Kiskadee, Couch's Kingbird, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Curve-billed Thrasher, Long-billed Thrasher and Cactus Wren. The camping/picnic area below the dam at the South Shore Unit has Green Jays, Audubon's Oriole, and Green Kingfisher.

Katy Prairie Field Trip February 20, 2010

Nelson Farms Viewing Platform: 5:00 a.m.
or Paul Rushing Park: 8:00 a.m.

For this month's field trip we will be visiting the great land that is the Katy Prairie including accessing some of the Katy Prairie Conservancy properties (Barn Owl Woods, Nelson Farms, Mary Manor, and the KPC Field Office). In order to bird these properties all participants must print out and sign the release form http://www.katyprairie.org/assets/pdf/Release_adult_2008_wMediaRelease.pdf and bring it with them on the day of the field trip. During the trip we will be in search of all the birds that call the prairie their home as well as some specialties like Ross's Goose, Canvasback, American Woodcock, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Bewick's Wren, Winter Wren, Sprague's Pipit, Short-eared Owl, Northern Bobwhite, Henslow's, Grasshopper, Harris's, LeConte's, and Fox Sparrows, Spotted Towhee, Dark-eyed Junco, Lark Bunting, and Lark Sparrow. I will be willing to bird as long and as intensely as the group wishes to make sure we find our target species as well as other good birds. Those of you who may only want to stay for half the day will have the opportunity to leave after lunch. However, once we start birding after lunch there may not be another chance to leave until the end of the day or when everybody is ready to call it quits. For those die-hard birders we will be doing some early morning owling on this trip. So come out and enjoy what should be a great day of birding.

The Katy Prairie lies in the Texas Coastal Plain, and encompasses over a thousand square miles, (Wermund, 1994) bounded by the Brazos River on the southwest, pine-hardwood forest on the north, and the city of Houston on the east. Historically, the Katy Prairie was characterized as a poorly drained tall-grass prairie subject to periodic fires and containing a considerable amount of wetland areas. The Katy Prairie comprises a variety of habitats, including agricultural wetlands, depressional wetlands, creek corridors, and coastal grasslands. The diversity of habitats on the Katy Prairie allows for the coexistence of a variety of people and wildlife.

Directions: Directions and a map can be found at the following link: <http://www.katyprairie.org/directions.html>. For those birders who want to have a broader birding experience by learning about owls, we will meet at **Nelson Farms Viewing Platform off of Sharp Road at 5 a.m.** sharp to start our owling. To get to the viewing platform take US 290 to FM 529 and head west on FM 529 past Highway 6, Barker Cypress, Fry Road, and Mason Road. Keep going west until you come to Katy Hockley Cutoff Road and turn right (north). Drive north (2 miles from FM 529) and turn left onto Katy Hockley Road (at Paul D. Rushing Park). You will come to a stop sign; go straight. The road turns into Sharp Road, which has several sharp turns. You will pass Hendrick's Kennels and a sign for Cypress Creek. The road will turn to gravel and the viewing platform is about 200 feet down the road to your left.

For those of you who wish to get a later start, we will meet you at **Paul Rushing Park at 8 a.m.** for the general birding portion of this trip. Paul Rushing Park is located at 9114 Katy Hockley Road, Katy Tx. 77493. The Park is off of Katy Hockley Road just north of Longenbaugh Road. To get there take US 290 to FM 529 and head west on FM 529 past Highway 6, Barker Cypress, Fry Road, and Mason Road. Keep going west until you come to Katy Hockley Cutoff Road and turn right (north). Drive north (2 miles from FM 529) and turn left onto Katy Hockley Road and the entrance to Paul D. Rushing Park will be on your left. Go in the second gate.

Be sure to bring: Binoculars, **SIGNED RELEASE FORM**, scope, camera, sturdy shoes, sunscreen, hat, water, snacks, rain gear, and a lunch. (We will break for lunch around noon, so make sure to bring a lunch if you plan on staying for the whole day.)

~ Adam Wood, OG Field Trip Coordinator; birdsondabrian@earthlink.net, 713-515-1692

Christmas Bird Count summaries for the Upper Texas Coastal Region

Mad Island CBC and Guadalupe Delta CBC

Bad weather usually happens about one year in four for individual CBCs. Mad Island and Guadalupe River Delta are using up lots of bad weather credits. They both experienced bad weather days last year.

The Matagorda County Mad Island Marsh CBC was held for the first time on 14 December and experienced thick fog all day. Comments from one birder indicated if we were going to see gannets or jaegers they would have to be a land bird because visibility near the coast was about 100 yards most of the day. We appeared to have a record turnout of birders and they got after it throughout the day despite the fog and reported 232 species at the countdown banquet held in Wadsworth. Some of the better species reported were Aplomado Falcon, Franklin's Gull (photographed), Chuck-will's-Widow, Western Kingbird, Red-eyed Vireo, Wood Thrush, Yellow Warbler (photographed), Ovenbird, Lark Bunting, Henslow's Sparrow (photographed), Painted Bunting and a very well described Swainson's Warbler that was observed for several minutes.

In contrast to the fog at Mad Island, Guadalupe River Delta - McFaddin Family Ranches had its worst weather day on 17 December. They experienced light rain for 36 hours leading up to the count and through 1 p.m. of count day during a day in the mid 40's. Fortunately the wind was light and the record number of birders in attendance just worked through it and found some very nice birds. They reported at least 215 species which included: Whooping Crane, Pectoral Sandpiper, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Western Kingbird, Green Jay, Western Tanager (photographed), Summer Tanager (photographed), Yellow Warbler, American Redstart, Prothonotary Warbler, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak (photographed).

--Brent Ortego, Compiler

San Bernard NWR CBC

The 25th annual San Bernard NWR Christmas Bird Count was run December 18th. Clear skies and relatively calm winds allowed us to tally a total of 199 species. Our record high official total is 201 species so it was a very good year for species diversity. The only species never before reported for the count was a Ladder-backed Woodpecker. Other highlights included Lesser Black-backed Gull, jaeger species, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Eastern Screech-Owl, Couch's/Tropical Kingbird, Western Kingbird, Northern Parula, Ovenbird, Spotted Towhee, Western Meadowlark, Rusty Blackbird and Black-headed Grosbeak.

High counts included Mottled Duck (229), Ruddy Duck (280), American White Pelican (1669 breaks record high of 1200), White Ibis (1797 breaks record high of 1604), Osprey (32 breaks record high of 28), Bald Eagle (6 ties record high), Crested Caracara (42 ties record high), American Oystercatcher (11 breaks record high of 10), Black-necked Stilt (37 breaks record high of 26), White-winged Dove (62 breaks record high of 50), Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (75 breaks record high of 74), Least Flycatcher (3 ties record high), Blue-headed Vireo (40 breaks record high of 33), Palm Warbler (27) and Black-and-white Warbler (5).

Missed species included Northern Bobwhite, Eared Grebe, Common Tern and Rock Pigeon (perhaps a good thing). Low counts included Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (2), Green-winged Teal (27), Anhinga (10), Sora (1), Black-bellied Plover (42 breaks record low of 47), Sanderling (32 breaks record low of 50), Long-billed Dowitcher (6), Wilson's Snipe (9 ties record low), Bonaparte's Gull (2), Vesper Sparrow (1) and White-throated Sparrow (21).

Many thanks to ConocoPhillips for sponsoring the seafood gumbo dinner

made by a host of fine cooks. And also to the many refuge staffers that helped out with the count this year.

--Ron Weeks, Compiler

Brazos Bend CBC Results

The "Silver Anniversary" Brazos Bend CBC on December 19 saw a record 72 participants who were able to enjoy perfect clear cool weather as 151 species (pending review) were recorded. In the count's history, this is the second highest total exceeded only by 154 species recorded in 2000.

The coveted "Big Bird" award was not difficult to choose as a very late Purple Gallinule was clearly seen and photographed at Elm Lake. This is a "first ever" for this species on the CBC and raises the historical total species to 239.

The "Countdown BBQ Dinner," sponsored by NRG Energy and provided by the Swinging Door was exceptional. Featured was a short briefing by Bob Honig, a cofounder of the count, on "How we counted 20 million incoming blackbirds and other roosting species at sunset." This winter dusk phenomenon occurs in little over an hour at the 40 Acre Lake Observation Tower. Bob's astonishing story occurred in 1986; this year the figure was perhaps 1% of that total but still very impressive.

Hope to see you next year on the 26th CBC! Mark December 18, 2010 on your calendar. Thank you for your support.

--Bill Godley, BBSP volunteer and CBC compiler

Freeport CBC

The 53rd Freeport CBC was held Sunday December 20. The count total was 203 species. Best bird of the count was a Red-throated Loon which gave good views, both close-range in flight and through scope on the water, before flying northeast toward Galveston. Other highlights

were Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Yellow-breasted Chat, Great Crested Flycatcher, Ladder-backed Woodpecker and a Whip-poor-will which posed for frame-filling camera shots.

Many thanks to the participants and particularly the area leaders. Special thanks to Dow Chemical who graciously allowed access to their extensive landholdings in the area.

--Mike Austin, Compiler

Houston (Baytown) CBC

I joined a group of determined birders that braved bone-chilling weather and dark, overcast skies on December 26 for the Christmas Bird Count at Baytown Nature Center. As we moved out of the nature center after lunch we were rewarded with a pair of exciting sightings. We stopped at a pond to admire a Hooded Merganser that was swimming out in the open and gave great looks. Moments later, a pair of Bald Eagles appeared, circling high overhead in an aerial ballet. We made such a commotion over the eagles the merganser bolted. Can't blame him.

--Bob Becker

Trinity River CBC

We had a record number of participants (22) at the Trinity River CBC on December 28. Even with more observers, we still did not break the 100 species mark for this 13 year old count. We did reach 93, which is the third highest so far. You know we had a great day when we saw more Bald Eagles (5) than brown-headed cowbirds (3). We also saw a single Henslow's sparrow which hasn't been seen on this count for seven years. The count for this year will be Tuesday, Dec 28, 2010. Please mark your calendars.

--Stuart Marcus, compiler

Outdoor Nature Club
Ornithology Group
P.O. Box 270894
Houston TX 77277-0894

The Spoonbill Wants Your Help...

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

ogspoonbill@sbcglobal.net

TO START OR RENEW A MEMBERSHIP:

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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.

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Membership questions?

Contact: Margret Simmons
phone: 713-776-2511
email: msimmons@compassnet.com