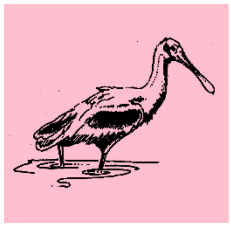
Monthly Meeting October 5, 2015

Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet St, Houston, TX



6:30 pm Learning Corner: To be announced

7:00 pm Ornithology Group (OG) Business Meeting

7:30 pm Program: What We Have Learned from Bird Banding by Susan Heath

Field Trip: Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, October 10, 8 AM, led by Jean Booth

Avian Crowd Control

What We Have Learned from Bird Banding

By Susan Heath

Susan is a Texas native who grew up in Houston. She has been an Avian Conservation Biologist at the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory (GCBO) since June 2007. Her main research interest is the American Oystercatcher, a large shorebird that nests in Texas bays. She also manages GCBO's Beach Nesting Birds project which focuses on the conservation of beach and bay island nesting species in the western Gulf and the Smith Point Hawk Watch which is aproject to count migrating raptors during the fall. Finally, Susan managed GCBO's Site Partner Network which is a group of 71 cooperating sites around the Gulf of Mexico that work together to conserve habitat for migrating and nesting birds.

GCBO has an ongoing research project investigating the status of the western Gulf population of American Oystercatcher (Haematopus palliatus palliatus), a migratory species of high concern in the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan and a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation priority species. Although much was known about the life history traits and threats to Atlantic Coast oystercatchers, little was known about the challenges faced by this species in the western Gulf until we began our investigation. As a result of our work, we have gained much knowledge about the life history of Gulf coast oystercatchers. Our observations have shown that western Gulf oystercatchers prefer to nest on bay islands rather than beaches, sandbars, shell rakes, and salt marsh islands as they do on the Atlantic coast. They are subject to similar threats as Atlantic coast birds such as overwash, predation, and human disturbance. Because of where western Gulf oystercatchers nest, avian predation by Laughing Gulls is a much greater threat than mammalian predation and pairs nesting on islands without large Laughing Gull colonies fare better than those on larger islands unless there is a significant weather event that causes nests on smaller islands to be overwashed. Human disturbance from recreational boaters and fisherman exacerbates the gull predation problem because it causes eggs and chicks to be without parental protection. The few pairs we have found nesting on the mainland or on islands that are connected to the mainland at low tide have been subjected to a number of predators other than Laughing Gulls including: coyote, opossum, and feral cat. We have found no oystercatchers nesting on beaches in the western Gulf.

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Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge Field Trip

Saturday, October 10, 8 AM

Led by Jean Booth

The Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is a wildlife conservation area along the coast of Texas (USA), west of the town of High Island, Texas. It borders East Bay, part of the Galveston Bay complex, behind Bolivar Peninsula at the Gulf of Mexico.

From Houston:
I-10 east to Winnie
South on 124
Watch for Anahuac signs-turn rt on farm road 1985 go 4.2 miles
Left turn into refuge entrance road about 3 miles
Cars park at Refuge headquarters by a small pond.
We will drive the loop road and out Frozen Point Road to the Bay

Lunch is at the Gazebo; we'll make more plans from there.

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Avian Crowd Control

By Hart Rufe (First Published September 1, 2015 by Hart Beat and St. Lucie Audubon Society with permission)

How do birds keep from bumping into each other when they suddenly ascend, as shown in this mixed flock. (photo 1)

Most frequent fliers have heard the dreaded "Our arrival at (insert destination airport) will be delayed due to (insert delay cause: storm, high winds, icy conditions, sleepy air controllers)." At that point the aircraft will join numerous others already stacked up circling the airport, making the skies in the area ever more crowded. Fortunately, the sleepy air controllers in the tower will direct traffic and prevent any collisions. Birds in crowded skies are on their own.

When large numbers of birds take flight at the same time it is amazing that they somehow manage to avoid each other and prevent collisions. Dense concentrations of shorebirds, particularly during migration, often take off in huge numbers when threatened by passing eagles or Peregrine Falcons, or sometimes by thoughtless beach walkers or uncontrolled dogs. The synchronization of their lift off from the beach is breathtaking, and the absence of birds crashing into each other in their haste is truly remarkable. Consider, by comparison, the occasional injuries suffered by human concert goers or European soccer fans, sometimes trampled in the crush of event excitement. (photo 1)

Even when airborne, birds often remain densely packed in close flying flocks, presumably for added protection from predators which may be confused as to which specific bird in the group to target as potential prey. Thus, it is important for each bird in the group to remain in the tightly packed formation, so that it may not be singled out as the Peregrine's next meal.

It is a sight to behold watching a Peregrine Falcon chase a flock of shorebirds off the beach and out over the surf, trying to determine if one of the sandpipers is not able to keep up, or will stray only slightly away from the tight group, and thus be easier to catch. Larger birds, such as ducks and geese often rise from the water or their feeding grounds when a Bald Eagle flies

over, and without an air traffic controller, they are still able to avoid running into each other, even when they occasionally fly in different directions. Nevertheless, sometimes the Bald Eagle wins. Smaller birds, such as Tree Swallows, also travel in large tightly knit flocks, particularly during migration.

Scientists have understood for some time now the advantages of birds, such as geese and cormorants, flying in V formations, as each bird following in the air stream of the bird in front of it gets lift from the draft of the forward bird. But do you know why - when birds fly in V formation, often one leg of the V is longer than the other leg of the V? Answer below. But only recently have studies revealed how birds flying in tightly packed formations are able to move in synchronization without crashing into each other.

Birds need only be aware of the seven closest birds surrounding them: on each wing side, directly in front right, left and center, and in front, just above and below. Birds eyes, located on the sides of their heads, enable them to do this, and their ability to react with split second timing enables them to maintain their position in the flight path. Perhaps the most remarkable demonstration of this ability can be observed in the murmuration of European Starlings as seen in this video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=eakKfY5aHmY. Enjoy the music as well.

And so, my friends, while airplanes in crowded skies need air traffic controllers to keep them from crashing into each other, and humans left on their own at concerts and European soccer matches occasionally trample one another, birds have mastered togetherness without assistance. Engineers are now working on driverless automobiles that are able to navigate crowded highways without crashing. Maybe we are finally getting as smart as the birds. Remember, "birdbrain" is a pejorative. Why is one leg of the V longer than the other? There are more birds in the longer leg.

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