

## Monthly Meeting April 4, 2016

**Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet St, Houston, TX**



6:30 pm [Learning Corner](#): Sustainability, the New Buzz Word by Pat Tovsen and Vicki Sims

7:00 pm [Ornithology Group](#) (OG) Business Meeting

7:30 pm [Program](#): Bird-Friendly Communities by Sarah Flournoy

[Field Trips](#): Mad Island Marsh Preserve, April 9 and 10 (weekender), led by Steve Goetz; Sabine Woods, May 7, 8 am, led by Stephan Lorenz

[Minutes of May 7 Meeting](#) | [Stealthy Birds](#)

2016 Dues are Due: <http://ornithologygroup.org/Dues>

Birding Events: <http://ornithologygroup.org/Events>

Knowing Where You're Going Map at end of this *Spoonbill*

## Sustainability, the New Buzz Word

By Pat Tovsen and Vicki Sims

Pat Tovsen and Vicki Sims will present "Sustainability, The New Buzz Word." Pat Tovsen has been an environmental activist for many years. She and her husband live near Brazos Bend State Park. Together they received an award from the Sierra Club for their efforts to save Brazos Bend and its night skies from the undesirable routes the Grand Parkway was trying to push through. Pat is very active in volunteer work, including volunteering as a docent at the Houston Zoo, where she mentored a fellow docent, Vicki Sims. Pat will speak on why "Sustainability" has become the latest buzz word in the environmental community and help spur the Outdoor Nature Club members to review what each of us can do to make a difference in SMALL CHOICE CHANGES that make GREAT BIG IMPACTS.

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## Bird-Friendly Communities

By Sarah Flournoy

Houston's location along the Central Flyway is an opportunity for us to re-envision our backyards, parks, and public spaces with an understanding of the specific needs of resident and migrating birds. In this presentation, we'll discover favorite urban birding spots of Houston,

examine specific urban bird issues, and walk away with a few ideas on how to make Houston a better city for birds and for the people who enjoy them.

Sarah Flournoy is developing Houston Audubon's Bird-Friendly Communities Initiative, focused on Houston's resident and migrating birds. Prior to Audubon, Sarah served as Executive Director of the Nature Discovery Center, a local park and nature center in Bellaire. Bird-Friendly Communities centers on the concept that improving habitat for birds supports all urban wildlife and makes Houston a happier, healthier place for people. Sarah is a member of the Texas Regional Council of the National Parks Conservation Association, a board member of The Woods Project, and advisory board member of Houston Wilderness.

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## **Field Trip: TNC - Mad Island Marsh Preserve – Bay City, TX, Saturday, April 9 and Sunday, April 10**

**Led by Steve Goetz, Manager, MIMP**

Mad Island Marsh Preserve is a TNC property to which the public does not generally have access. Steve Goetz, Manager of MIMP, will be our guide. Smithsonian will be on the property banding our migrating birds and this will be a plus. As you all probably know MIMP ranks at the top for CBC Bird Counts. This will be considered a weekender and you can either come out for the day or stay over and we will be bird the area more and the surrounding Matagorda area. More details to follow regarding hotel, etc.

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## **Field trip: Sabine Woods, Saturday, May 7, 8 am, led by Stephan Lorenz**

Sabine Woods, a Texas Ornithological Society Bird Sanctuary, is an area of large oaks on a chenier ridge, a few miles west of Sabine Pass. Meet at Hwy 87 Entrance Gate at 8 am.

Jean Booth will make a list of participants so you will all know who is going to make the trip. She will send out a list and you can make arrangements to carpool due to the distance. Jean is out of town and will not make this trip. Stephan will be your guide. Please email Jean if you will help Stephan once on the property. You do not need to register in advance but helpful.

**Directions (please verify):** From the intersection of US 69 and Texas 73 in the northern part of Port Arthur, proceed west along Texas 73 (towards Winnie) about 3 miles. Take the left exit and proceed along Texas 82 south about 1.5 miles. At the light, turn right along Texas 87 (south) towards Sabine Pass. This takes you essentially through the middle of the Clark (formerly Chevron, formerly Gulf) refinery, then across a high bridge over the intracoastal Waterway and on about 9 more miles to Sabine Pass, through some interesting marshy habitat, especially on the approach into Sabine Pass. At the stop sign at the main square in Sabine Pass, turn right (west)

when Texas 87 turns right. From this point, proceed about 4.2 miles, until you see a woodlot on the right (north) side of the road, immediately past the Petroleum Helicopters base. Parking area is provided. Access to the woods is through a gate. Bring your lunch along with sunscreen and mosquito spray and a hat and maybe something for chiggers.

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## **Minutes of March 7 Meeting**

### **By Jean Greenhalgh**

The OG monthly meeting was held on Monday, March 7 at 6:30 and 34 people attended.

The Learning Corner – Knowing Where You Are Going was very efficiently organized by Vicki Sims. Vicki had spread about a dozen maps of Harris County and surrounding areas on some tables and provided Post-It markers. Members wrote their favorite birding spots on the markers and then placed them on the maps in the correct places. This was very popular and Nina Rach had to recall us all to our chairs to start the meeting after 7. Vicki took photos of all the maps and is going to create maps for us all for the next meeting on Monday April 4<sup>th</sup>.

Michael Honel, our new Membership Secretary, was kept busy collecting \$20 dues from members.

Harlan Evans, our Treasurer, told us that OG has \$8,950 in its bank account.

Forthcoming field trips were listed including a trip to Bolivar Peninsular on March 12. April 21 will be our second bird survey of a new A&M property – Long Ranch in Richmond. Jean Booth emails details of field trips to all members. If you are not receiving emails, please let Jean know at [ljeanbooth@aol.com](mailto:ljeanbooth@aol.com)

Nina Rach told us that on April 5<sup>th</sup> the Attwater Prairie Chicken breeding facility at NASA will be open to the public on two tours as part of a Prairie Power Series. For information and to sign-up, go to the Prairie Partner website at <http://prairiepartner.org/page/prairie-power-series> .

The Texas Ornithology Society is holding its Spring meeting in Uvalde on May 6 – 8. The focus of the birding trips will be Golden Cheeked Warbler, Black Capped Vireo and Edwards Plateau specialties. Registration begins March 25, and details are on the TOS website.

In the absence of JoAnn Raine, Vice Chair (Programs), who is enjoying a trip to the Galapagos Islands, Nina introduced our speaker, Patrick Walthur, talking on Bird Studies and Ongoing Plans at Anahuac National Wildlife. He is Refuge Wildlife Biologist for the Texas Chenier Plain Refuge Complex, a job he has held since 1997. The Complex comprises Anahuac (38,000 acres), McFaddin (60,000 acres), Texas Point (8,900 acres) and Moody National Wildlife Refuges. All of these fresh water marshes are managed, but Anahuac is the most easily accessible with a visitor center and driving and walking trails. Moody NWR has no accessibility.

For some background information on Anahuac NWR please read JoAnn Rain's excellent description in March's Spoonbill. For further information and events, including the ever-popular Rails walk, go to the Friends of Anahuac website is <http://www.friendsofanahuacnwr.com/> and this site also has an excellent list of additional relevant websites.

Anahuac NWR has more management than any other NWR on the Texas coast. They have \$5 million in grant money, but are always looking for more. They have just bought land to either side of the entrance road to the main unit and hope to restore some of it to its historical state of tallgrass prairie.

One of the main problems for Anahuac NWR (and the other Chenier NWRs) is keeping salt water out. At 20 – 30% salinity the marsh starts dying. Although the highest parts are up to four and a half feet above sea level, much of it is lower than this. There are barriers to keep salt water out but these can be breached. After Hurricane Ike the refuge was 8 foot under sea water. Different areas are managed in different ways for different birds to use. Some areas are leased for grazing for leading to short vegetation, which is essential for Mottled Ducks and Willet. Other areas are not grazed to allow taller vegetation which is necessary for Seaside Sparrow nesting.

The largest spring roost of Whimbrels in North America is on the Robert Mueller tract north of Bolivar Island. Over 5,000 Whimbrels have been seen there. Patrick has seen 300 – 500 Whimbrels flying in at dusk to roost on the Skillern tract.

One of the bird studies being carried out is whether the strain of flu which infects poultry is present in Blue-winged Teal.

Sea levels are rising at Galveston at an annual rate of 5mm. Because the Sabine and Trinity/San Jacinto rivers have very long breakwaters at their mouths, the silt from upstream is dispersed miles out into the Gulf. Formerly this silt went into the marshes or was swept along the beaches which led to stabilization of the shore and marsh. This no longer happens and a water rise of 3 inches in the marsh is enough to drown the plants. The marshes along the Upper Texas Coast are eroding. Man-made changes such as roads, ditches and levees may have more impact over the next 25 years than rising seas.

McFaddin NWR has many more problems and is not managed as intensively, although some land restoration is taking place. It was 16ft under sea water after Hurricane Ike. McFaddin coastal erosion is up to 40ft a year. The only way to rebuild Hwy 87 is with a land swap and there are no plans to rebuild it. Part of old Hwy 87 is now many yards out in the Gulf.

Patrick also talked about the proposed closure of the channel at Rollover Pass, which was originally dug to increase fishing opportunities. He, and the Federal Government have no official position on the closure, or otherwise, of the channel. Salt water coming in from the Gulf mixes with the fresh water coming down the Trinity, San Jacinto and Sabine rivers into the Intra-Coastal Waterway and East Bay. The bay was fresh water before the channel was cut and has

become more saline since, which affects the marshes of the NWRs. The type of fish in the bay has changed over the years from Sailfin Mollies (freshwater species) to Anchovies (saltwater species). If the channel is filled in, fishing piers will be built.

The next Ornithology Group meeting will be held on Monday April 4<sup>th</sup> when the speaker will be Glenn Olsen talking about Woodpeckers.

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## Stealthy Birds

By Hart Rufe

First published March 1, 2016... Contact Hart at [hartrufe@gmail.com](mailto:hartrufe@gmail.com)



The Reddish Egret uses the canopy method of stealth.

It was big and black and it blotted out the sun. It came in low and silent, just above the horizon, and even though the Navy's newest version of the Stealth Bomber was just coming in for a landing several hundred yards from the road we were travelling upon next to the US Naval Station at Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, it briefly darkened the sky, and was very ominous and awe-inspiring. One could easily comprehend the fear it would create in enemy souls below who would realize that it meant to do them harm. Perhaps like the Peregrine plummeting from the sky on the poor hapless Pigeon, one could well imagine the dove's last view of daylight, briefly darkened, just before its lights went out forever.

Stealth has been an important element of warfare ever since man began fighting with his fellow man. Certainly “shock and awe” and overwhelming might and firepower have always been important; but equally important has been the element of surprise, the sudden shock of an unexpected attack out of nowhere. History is full of examples of much larger forces being defeated because a small stealthy force, utilizing the element of surprise, emerged victorious by catching the larger army off-guard. Here in Fort Pierce, Florida, where the US Navy Seals first began their development and training during World War II, the Navy Seal Museum stands as testament to arguably the most effective military use of stealth in world history.

In the bird world, there are two kinds of birds: those that survive by catching and eating other living organisms, such as small mammals, fish, insects, reptiles and herptiles, and even other birds; and those that survive by eating foods that are stationary and not able to escape, such as flower nectar, plants, seeds, fruits, nuts, snails and crustaceans and even carrion from road kill. The everlasting dance between predator and prey bird species undoubtedly has been going on since birds evolved from dinosaurs. And in that dance, predators rely on stealth and the element of surprise as a key to their success, while prey species rely on alertness and constant awareness to survive.

I will never forget the day I was in my photography blind by our bird feeders when a Cooper’s Hawk made a surprise attack on the feeding birds, scattering them in all directions, except for one poor hapless Brown-headed Cowbird, that was carried off in the hawk’s talons. The attack was so quick and sudden that I was not even able to press the camera release to record the event. I can only imagine the degree of stealth the hawk, a relatively large bird, must have exercised to get in position, unobserved, to launch its attack.



Stealth attacks take different forms with different species. Some raptors tend to cruise the skies, often typically at different altitudes until appropriate prey are found, at which time they dive or swoop, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. This Bald Eagle (*right*) appeared to be cruising for fish when suddenly he dove on this poor Common Gallinule and carried it off, just affording time for a quick photo.

More typical stealth activity is that of the Northern Harrier (*right*) which cruises low over fields searching for small rodents, dropping quickly as the opportunity arises. Some species, such as kingfishers (*below*), Kestrels, Ospreys and terns, often hover in place until prey comes into view, and then dive down after it.



The Reddish Egret (*top*) uses a technique called “canopy feeding” - spreading its wings over its head, thereby shading the water. The shade attracts small fish out of the sun and provides an easy meal for the bird. Yet other species simply lie in wait until prey comes along unsuspectingly. This Green Heron (*right*) was in this standby, ready for a strike position, at Viera when we first saw it early one morning, and was still there in the same identical position and pose an hour later when we made our second trip around the refuge. We don’t know if it had a meal in between or not.



Flycatchers typically station themselves at a good vantage point where they can swoop out and grab a passing insect, and return to the same perch to devour the meal. While this Scissors-tail Flycatcher (*right*) looks like an outfielder ready to catch a fly ball, it actually flew out from this fence wire, caught the bug, and returned to the same spot. It played briefly with the insect just before this photo of tossing it in the air and down the gullet.



But the very essence of stealth, to me, is exhibited by the American Bittern, (*below*) which is capable of creeping along very slowly and silently in search of whatever it was looking for. We never did find out.

Stealth is not a particularly common attribute of modern man, apart from the occasional cat burglar, cheating spouse, high school freshman peeking in the girl’s locker room, or some other illicit or anti-social behavior. But I must admit that when my neighbor, who is an excellent cook, bakes a scrumptious cake, or delicious cookies, I do entertain thoughts of surreptitiously sneaking into her kitchen and sampling some, without getting caught. Unlike the birds, I probably couldn’t pull it off.





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