



Monthly Meeting March 4, 2019
Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet St, Houston, TX

6:30 pm Learning Corner: ***

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

7:15 pm Program: ***

Field Trip: King Ranch Weekender, March 9-10, led by Barbara Rapstein;
Shorebird Identification Workshop, March 23, 6:45 am, led by Ron Weeks; Beach
Babies Field Trip, April 27, 9:00am, led by Kristen Vale

***Information unavailable; check the website for updates later in the week at

<http://ornithologygroup.org/Meeting>

[Minutes of February OG Meeting](#) | [Minutes of January OG Meeting](#)

[Establishing a Purple Martin Colony by Larry Dybala](#)

[Upcoming Texas Birding Events \(link to web page\)](#)

[Hart Beat: Christmas Birds in St. Lucie \(link to web page\)](#)

[2019 Dues are Due! \(link to web page\)](#)

Spoonbill Issue Deadlines for 2019:

April Issue March 21

May Issue April 25

August Issue July 4

September Issue August 29

October Issue September 26

November Issue October 24

December Issue November 21

Any articles or information must be received on or before the listed date. Note that each deadline is 11 days before the monthly OG meeting date except for the August issue. I need information much earlier on that date because of travel plans. The meeting in September is on the second Monday because of Labor Day. All articles should be sent to the Spoonbill Editor at LarryDybala@gmail.com. All submissions are appreciated.

King Ranch Weekender, March 9-10

Led by Barbara Rapstein

Join us for winter birding on King Ranch's (Kleberg County) Santa Gracitus, Laureles, and a special invitation to a rarely birded (Brooks County) Encino Division. From farm to fields, wetlands to grasslands including upland habitats this weekend's trip will be pure enjoyment bird watching! Beginning birders welcome!

Trip cost includes tax and Sat Lunch. \$145.00 (Members) \$165.00 (Non-members)
Payable to Ornithology Group. Limit to 16 participants. There were 4 spaces available at the time of this publication.

Target species include our tropical favorites the Lower Rio Grande Valley.
Green Jay, Olive Sparrow, along with Sprague's Pipit, Burrowing Owl, Least Grebe, White-tailed Hawk, Cactus Wren, Audubon's Oriole, Lesser Goldfinch, Verdin, Curved-bill Thrasher and so much more.

Contact Trip Coordinator Teresa Connell for further details (505-280-7443) and mail her a check to reserve your spot. This trip will fill up fast.

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Shorebird Identification Workshop in Brazoria County, Saturday March 23, 6:45 am

Led by Ron Weeks

Limit to 16 Participants. Beginning Birders Welcome! 6:45 am to noon.

Come join Ron share his favorite hotspots and learn how to distinguish the many shorebirds and their calls. This trip start early because Ron's secret to success is starting just before sunrise. He will be focusing on sharing his fine tuned skills and being one of the top eBirders in Texas, were in for a real treat! The focus is on shorebirds; however we will get to see many other species too. Join us for lunch afterwards at one of Ron's favorite stops.

Contact Teresa Connell (505-280-7443) to get on this list including the meeting spot or location pinpoint for smartphones.

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Beach Babies Field Trip, April 27, 9:00 am

Led by Kristen Vale

Join American Bird Conservancy's (ABC) Kristen Vale at East Beach where she will guide you around the beach-nesting bird habitat that ABC and partner Houston Audubon have been protecting for 6 breeding seasons. Meet at R.A. Apffel East Beach Park, 1923 Boddeker Rd,

Galveston, TX 77550 at 9 am; the trip should end at noon. You can park in the free parking lot on the east side of Boddeker Rd (left side) directly before the East Beach entrance fee station.

The habitat is nesting grounds for a rare population of Snowy Plovers, as well as Wilson's Plovers, Least Terns, Willets, and Horned Larks. Love will be in the air and we are likely to witness courtship behavior, adults incubating nests, and if we're lucky Snowy Plover chicks. We will also walk around the South Jetty to observe migrating shorebirds, terns, gulls, and skimmers feeding and roosting along the shoreline. Migrating warblers are often spotted in the dunes as well. This fundraiser will help continue to fund conservation in action by putting boots on the ground, as well as signs and fencing around the sensitive nesting habitat to protect the habitat and increase nest success.

This is an OG fundraiser for the American Bird Conservancy; suggested donation is \$10.

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Minutes of February 4, 2018 Meeting

by Jean Greenhalgh

The February 2019 meeting of OG was held on February 4, 2019 at the Bayland Park Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet, at 6:30 pm. 23 members were present.

Nina Rach presented the Learning Corner on Game Birds in Spain during the Golden Age. Nina will submit a report of her talk.

Field Trips

March 8 - 10 will be a Weekender at King Ranch birding on the Santa Gertrudis, Laureles and Encino Divisions. Encino is not on the regular King Ranch tours. These divisions are in Kleberg and Brooks County. Teresa Connell is the contact person for reservations and details.

March 23. Ron Weeks will present a Shorebird workshop. Details will be on facebook. There are places for 16 participants and Teresa Connell will be the contact person.

Larry Dybala had his first Purple Martin scouts on Sunday February 3rd.

The main program was "Bird extinction and the fate of Guam's tropical forests" given by Amy Dunham PhD. Amy is Associate Professor in Bio-Sciences at Rice University, specializing in tropical rain forests.

Guam is one of the Mariana Islands in the western North Pacific Ocean which belong to the U.S.A. It is 30 miles long and 12 miles wide.

Amy was part of a five-year study conducted in Guam's tropical rain forest to determine the role of birds and mammals in the tropical rainforest and what happens when they disappear.

In 1945 one female snake with eggs escaped from a cargo supply ship. Snakes were first seen in the 1950s and were thought to be feeding on rats and mice which fed on the garbage left in the forest.

1960 - birds inhabited the whole island and snakes were in the southern part

1969 - there were no birds in the southern third of Guam; and the snakes were moving north

1980 – no birds in southern two thirds; snakes covered the whole island

1986 – no birds on Guam

This was one of the most dramatic extinctions in the world. There are no snakes on the other Mariana Islands and a careful watch is kept on them to keep any snakes from reaching them.

The Brown Tree Snake became known as the snake that ate Guam.

The study looked at the services provided by birds and the effects on the ecosystem when the services disappear.

Birds were being hunted as food for the people and this was no longer available. This was sustainable as only a couple of the larger birds were hunted.

Pollination. Nectar feeding birds were thought to pollinate around 10% of tree species, with insects pollinating the remainder.

Seed dispersal. Frugivores were thought to disperse seeds away from the parent tree for 90% of trees. Passing through a bird's digestive system leads to a higher germination rate. Seed dispersal is particularly important as cyclones occur every one to two years which fell trees leading to forest gaps. Tree seed dispersal is needed to germinate, fill and stabilize the gaps with quick growing, pioneer trees. Without this dispersal, trees do not grow and the gaps get bigger with each cyclone.

Birds as predators. Insects are a major pollinator in Guam but in the absence of birds the spider has become the insect predator and the forests are covered in webs.

Solutions

Trapping, which is not easy as the snakes live in trees.

Snake-proof fencing. This is in place around a military base and must be constantly maintained.

Poisoning – Tylenol kills the snakes but the only way to deliver this to the trees where they feed is to put a pill in a dead mouse and drop them onto the trees by helicopter.

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Minutes of January 7, 2018 Meeting

by Jean Greenhalgh

The January 2019 meeting of OG was held on January 7, 2019 at the Bayland Park Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet, at 6:30 pm. 29 members were present.

The meeting started with social time while raffle tickets were distributed to attendees. Attendees received one ticket for each Christmas Bird Count in which they participated. There was a drawing for prizes, of which there were a couple of dozen.

The main program was A Wonderland of Winter Waterfowl given by Kristine Rivers. Kristine was Birding Instructor for Pearland Parks & Recreation from 2015 through 2017 and is currently the Birding Instructor for the City of Missouri City. She also leads nature events for the City of League City and is a field trip leader for Galveston FeatherFest. She founded or Fun in 2015 to provide educational services, field trips and guided tours.

Kristine began the program by reviewing the identifying characteristics of various types of waterfowl. Although waterfowl refers to swans, geese and ducks, she expanded this to cover birds that are seen on water, fresh and salt, in winter on the upper Texas coast.

Loons, Grebes, Coots and Gallinules

Loons are specialized for swimming and diving and have heavy bones for diving. They have floating nests and are not seen on land. In winter the Common Loon is regularly seen at Texas City Dike and Offat's Bayou, Galveston.

Grebes are specialized for swimming and diving and the young can swim at birth. Pied-billed, all year, and Eared, in winter, are seen locally on both fresh and salt water. Eared grebes can form a large raft all swimming in the same direction.

Coots are common locally on both fresh and salt water. They have a white facial shield. They have strong legs and lobed feet. The lobes fold back when the feet are lifted to run on land.

Gallinules are smaller than Coots and have a red frontal shield. They are common locally on salt and fresh water. Their feet are not webbed or lobed but they have very long toes for walking on mud, lily pads and other vegetation.

Waterfowl

Waterfowl have long necks, narrow, pointed wings and most have short legs. They have webbed feet and flattened bills with serrated, tooth-like edges for straining water.

Swans are the largest waterfowl and rarely seen in the Upper Texas Coast.

Geese are intermediate in size between swans and ducks. Their legs are further forward than some waterfowl because they are adapted for grazing. Locally wintering species include Snow, Ross's, and Greater White-fronted. Snow are seen in white and blue morphs, Ross's also have

white and blue morphs and are smaller than Snow. Comparing size when they are seen together, whether on the ground or in flight, is diagnostic. The other identifying factor is their bill color, with Snows having a black gape between upper and lower mandibles. Greater White-fronted are mostly brown with orange legs.

Ducks can be split into a number of different types.

Whistling ducks are taller waterfowl between geese and ducks and are more closely related to geese. They feed by tipping and grazing. Black-bellied Whistling-ducks are now common in our area and, when flying, are recognizable by large white wing patches.

Surface feeding ducks, also called dabbling ducks do not dive. These are in shallow water, ponds or lakes, so they can feed on aquatic vegetation on the bottom. They can leap and take off straight up. Species include Blue-winged, Green-winged and Cinnamon Teal, Northern Pintail, American Widgeon and Northern Shoveler, and Mottled Ducks.

Diving ducks can be seen on both fresh and salt water and some can be seen at sea as well as in bays, lakes and ponds.

Bay ducks dive in shallower water and have legs set further back to enable their expert diving. The plumage of males has solid blocks of color and the females are smooth brown or gray with no light feather edges.

Species include Ring-necked, Redhead and Canvasback.

Sea ducks dive deeper than bay ducks and feed more on mollusks. They are strongly patterned and have puffy feathers.

Species include Common Goldeneye and Bufflehead.

Stiff-tailed ducks have short necks, large bills and look chunky. Ruddy duck winters on the Upper Texas Coast.

Mergansers eat fish and dive in clear water so they can see the fish they pursue. They have long, slender bills with serrated edges. They fly with their head, body and tail in a straight line. Red-breasted Mergansers winter locally and both sexes have shaggy heads.

Identification

Some of the things to look for to aid identification include

Head shape – rounded or peaked; is there a crest; is the neck long or short.

Bill shape; color including different color tip, how bill connects to the head.

Eye color. Foot or leg color.

On dull plumaged birds, like many females, all the above plus whether feathers have different colored edges; face is there a pattern or is it plain; and wing color or pattern.

Kristine then displayed photos of wintering birds for us to identify.

Kristine's website is birdingforfun.com

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Establishing a Purple Martin Colony

By Larry Dybala

This is the time of year to start a new Purple Martin colony. Many of the scouts, which are two-year-olds (called after 2nd year Martins), have come, bringing other after 2nd year Martins with them. If you are lucky, you can start a colony with some of these birds, but only if their original colony has been removed or is in terrible shape (either in bad repair or infested with House Sparrows or Starlings). Most new colonies are started with birds that were born the previous year, called 2nd year Martins. These 2nd year Martins usually arrive 4 to 6 weeks after the older birds. And they are much poorer parents, often making multiple small nests. During the six previous years here are my scout arrival dates:

2019	February 3
2018	February 23
2017	February 27
2016	February 29
2015	March 20
2014	April 2

Note that they have been arriving earlier each year. And that in 2014 and 2015 I probably had 2nd year Martins. This year, my scouts were the first reported in non-suburban Houston.

The most important factor in getting Purple Martins to use your housing is location. It is important that they are in an area that is as far away from any large trees as possible. This will obstruct their flight path and provide a perching area for predators (notably Cooper's Hawks). If you don't have a completely open area, you need at least one unobstructed direction for their flight.

My colony has an unobstructed flight path in the east, with some distance from trees in the west. I had to remove trees to achieve this. I also have to trim shrubs, vines, and small trees (notably a Crepe Myrtle) down to the fence line (5 feet) to keep the flight path clear.



Housing should not be too close or too far from your house (40-100 feet is ideal). I had an addition made to my house after the colony was established and my nearest housing is now only 20 feet away. I have had no problems and have the advantage of a close view from my deck. They may have been more hesitant to start the colony with the house this close.

The second factor is housing. This can be multi-compartment Purple Martin houses or gourds. I started with an aluminum Trio Castle. It has 6-inch square compartments and round holes. I added plastic gourds (different kinds from S&K Manufacturing Company). All of my gourds have Starling-resistant entrances and all but three have tunnels. (I could not use tunnels for the three hanging beneath my Trio Castle because they were hung with wire instead of inserted in rods; this made it impossible to balance the hanging gourd with a tunnel.) Starling-resistant entrances are not required on my house because the small compartments keep Starlings away. But since the gourds are larger and provide more protection from predators (notably owls), Starlings love them and will often displace or kill resident Purple Martins. This means that a Starling-resistant entrance must be used. This is a crescent or modified crescent. It must be an exact size and located flush with the porch.



All housing must be on either telescoping poles or fixed poles that allow the house or gourd rack to be raised or lowered with a wench or pulley. You must be able to open the house compartment from the front and open the gourd. This is so that you can check on your birds, make nest changes if nests become infested with parasites, and trap house sparrows (by inserting a nest-box trap). I have two permanent nest-box traps on my Trio Castle (left pole in photo). They have smaller holes than regular Martin doors and ensure that I never trap a Purple Martin. The House Sparrow usually investigates all of the holes in the house, so it is rare that I have to insert a trap in a compartment that the sparrow has started to build a nest in.

Last year and this year I have not had a single House Sparrow in my colony. It has taken years of vigilant trapping and killing. (You must kill the male House Sparrow or he will return; the female can be spared. I usually destroy both). You cannot simply remove House Sparrow nests, as this makes the males angry and blame Purple Martins; they will destroy the Martin's eggs (called House Sparrow revenge syndrome). I have done this in the past, and always with bad consequences. If you will not kill the male House Sparrows, you can let them nest and then refrigerate their eggs for a day and then replace them. Be sure to remove only half the clutch at a time as they may become angry or start to lay more eggs.

The only other major predators that you must be concerned with are snakes, usually rat snakes. If a snake climbed up the pole, it could eat all of the Martin eggs and chicks. Often Martins will not return to a colony that has been ravaged by a snake. The easy solution to this is to wrap some

plastic mesh around the pole. This is bird or deer fencing that can be obtained at garden stores. If a snake climbs the pole, his scales will become emeshed in the mesh and cannot back out. You will have to cut him out if this were to happen.



Now that you have a good location and great housing, the next thing is to induce Purple Martins to come to your site. The most effective inducement is to have other Purple Martins there. But since you are still trying to get your first Martin, you have to act like Purple Martins are there. The best way to do this is by playing the Dawnsong every morning until they show up. In addition, you can place Purple Martin decoys around your housing. A second benefit of decoys is that Coopers Hawks will often attack them instead of your Martins. Another way to attract Martins is with mirrors. Martins think that their reflections are other Martins.

Resources: S&K Manufacturing Company (<http://www.skmfg.com>), Purple Martin Conservation Association (<http://purplemartin.org>), Troyer's Birds' Paradise (814-587-2756).

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