

The Spoonbill

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

February 2005
Vol. 54 No. 2

February Meeting

Monday, February 7, 2005 -- 7:00 p.m.
Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet, Houston

Learning Corner – 6:30 p.m.
with Al Shultz, “Raptor Nests”

Program: “Quest for Warblers”

Gary Clark has seen all the warblers that occur in the lower 48 states. The focus of this talk will be Gary's 20 year quest to find the Connecticut warbler, the last warbler on his list. North American warblers in general will be discussed, along with tales of adventure with friends to locations near and far.

Gary Clark is a well-known and respected Houston birder. He writes a weekly column, “Wonders of Nature,” every week for the *Houston Chronicle*, often with illustrations by his wife, photographer Kathy Adams Clark. His articles have also appeared in popular magazines including *Birder's World*, *Birds & Blooms*, *AAA Journeys*, and *Texas Highways*. He is a dean at North Harris College, and a member of the board of directors of the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory.

Other Events

Sat., Feb. 19: Brazoria NWR Field Trip

Feb. 18-21: Great Backyard Bird Count
see p. 6

Feb. 25-27: Whooping Crane Festival
Port Aransas, Mustang Island
1-800-452-6278, www.portaransas.org

Wed., Mar. 9: Joint OG-HAS Meeting
at Houston Zoo

Sat., Mar. 12: Special OG-HAS Field Trip
leader – Kevin Karlson

Sat., Mar. 19: Field Trip to Texas City

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Minutes of the January 10, 2005 Meeting

Bayland Community Center

Attendance 59

1. **Learning Corner:** David Poteet discussed bird identification by grouping birds according to head markings, bill shape and color, wing bars and patches and length, tail, leg color, and breast markings or lack thereof. The quiz he distributed (attached) made his point.
2. **Business meeting** called to order at 7:05pm by chair Kathy Farr.
3. **Bird sightings:** Vermilion Flycatcher and Yellow-throated Warbler at Arthur Storey Park; Wood Storks at Anahuac; Eared Grebe; a Great Blue Heron taking a Pied-Billed Grebe; Barn Owl and Cooper's Hawks in town; Woodcock at Warren Ranch; an escaped Fisher's Love Bird (Africa) near Richmond Ave and Timmons Lane. Houston CBC had eighth highest national count of Laughing Gulls and Texas high of Yellow-rumped warblers but a decrease in sparrows. Buffalo Bayou CBC had 2 Vermilion Flycatchers, Orchard Oriole, and adult male Calliope Hummingbird at Braun home.
4. Richard Rhodes will speak on his book about **J. J. Audubon**, January 13 at 6 p.m. at the Museum of Fine Arts.
5. **Minutes** of the last meeting were approved as printed in the January *Spoonbill*.
6. Pat Pease announced that 100 members have already renewed their **membership** and encouraged others to do so. She also asked that members consider volunteering to serve as an officer of Outdoor Nature Club.
7. Al Shultz requested submissions for the next edition of **The Spoonbill** as soon as possible since the deadline is tonight. He hopes to include CBC summaries in this issue.
8. For **environmental issues**, Mary Dodson distributed a handout of current issues and noted that drilling has begun on South Padre National Seashore. Skip Almoney added that President Bush is attempting to open the Redwoods National Monument to logging.
9. **Field trip** coordinator Bill Saulmon reminded members of the January 15 trip to the Kingwood area led by Damien Carey, and the February 19 trip to Brazoria. The quarterly trip to Granger Lake area has a waiting list. The March 12 joint trip with Houston Audubon Society is led by Kevin Karlson. Reservations may be made starting at 10 a.m. on February 1 at a cost of \$50.
10. **Warren Ranch tours** will be January 22, 3pm to dusk, and February 19, by reservation.
11. Before introducing the speaker, Michael Williams thanked Kathy Farr for her letter on behalf of the group protesting the **oil drilling on South Padre**.
12. **June Osborne** is a naturalist, free-lance writer for 20 years, popular speaker, and April resident birder at Neal's Lodges in Concan, Texas. Her presentation was "The Treasures of the Texas Hill County." Through slides, narrative and birdsong, Mrs Osborne shared the landscape, flora, and fauna, especially the birdlife, of this area west of San Antonio.
13. **Gary Clark** will be February speaker. Meeting adjourned at 8:20p.m.

--Bernice Hotman

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:	Kathy Farr	713-939-9375
Vice-Chair:	Michael Williams	713-228-9064
Secretary:	Bernice Hotman	713-782-7889
Treasurer:	Iris Poteet	281-492-2659
Clearing House:	David Sarkozi	713-412-4409
Library:	Andy Scott	281-537-9690
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OG website: <http://www.ornithologygroup.org/>

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

FIELD TRIPS

For more information on any of the field trips below, contact field trip coordinator Bill Saulmon at 281-537-6924 or at dean1960@aol.com. You can also check out this season's field trip schedule on the OG website.

February 19, 2005: Field Trip to Brazoria NWR - Brazoria NWR is located about 15 miles east of Lake Jackson. The refuge consists of over 43,000 acres of coastal prairie, marsh and lakes, which provides habitat for wintering waterfowl and other birds. There is a 7-mile driving loop in addition to observation platforms, birding trails, picnic and restroom facilities. We'll meet at the refuge visitor center at 8:00. To get there from Houston take Hwy. 288 South to Lake Jackson and turn left (East) on FM 2004, then turn right (South) on FM 523, then turn left (East) on CR 227 and look for the refuge sign and entrance road on your right. Remember to bring your insect spray, scope, drinks and lunch or snacks. You won't need rubber boots unless you want to get off the beaten path on your own.

March 12, 2005: Joint Field Trip With HAS - This is a special field trip which will be led by noted birding photographer, author and guide Kevin Karlson. Bus transportation to the Bolivar Peninsula will be provided for a fee of \$50. Registration begins on February 1 at 10:00 a.m. by calling the HAS office at 713-932-1639. Attendance will be limited to 40 people.

March 19, 2005: Field Trip to Texas City - We'll bird the Texas City Dike area in the morning and then tour the Nature Conservancy Preserve after lunch. We'll take the 5-mile drive out the Dike into Galveston Bay. Loons, diving ducks, and winter gulls should be seen. We'll also drive down the storm levee (Skyline Drive) to check for pipits, waders and ducks. After lunch in a nearby park, we'll have a guided tour of the Nature Conservancy's Texas City Preserve. This 2,263 acre preserve features rare coastal prairie habitat and is home to the endangered Attwater's Prairie Chicken (which we won't see on this trip). Meet at 8:00 at the beach park at the base of the Dike. To get there from Houston, take I-45 south to Hwy. 1764 and exit to Texas City. Stay on Hwy. 1764, which becomes 9th Avenue, until it dead-ends into Bay Street. Turn right for one block and then turn left on Dike Road. Continue over the levee and look for the small beach park on your right. Bring your lunch, binoculars and scope for a great day on Galveston Bay.

Correction: *The Spoonbill* for November 2004 carried an article on the "Scenic Galveston" marsh clean-up and restoration program, in which Barbara Rapstein was identified incorrectly as representing GOS. She is actually with Galveston County Audubon Group (GCAG). We regret the error.

Winter Wood Storks

On Saturday, January 8, 2005, I decided to go for a leisurely day of birding along the upper Texas coast. My first stop would be the Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge to stir up some rails. I got there shortly after 8:00 a.m. and it wasn't long before I was seeing some good birds. In fact, just before the visitors' center on the Entrance Road, I was greeted by a juvenile Wood Stork flying overhead.

Having never seen a Stork in Texas before, I immediately followed it. Fortunately it landed in a field just to the right of the road about 100 feet away. I pulled up to it and took out my Nikon D70 digital camera with a 300 mm lens, and was able to get some good shots of the bird from about 30 feet. I had seen storks on numerous occasions in Florida, so I knew what I was looking at. It was about the size of a Great Blue Heron with long dark gray legs. It had a long lightish-gray neck and a dark gray, rough face, like a Black Vulture, and a long thick lightish bill slightly down-turned at the tip. It stooped like a Heron, and in flight it had a long stretched-out neck like an Ibis, but it had black lining across its primaries and secondaries as well as its wing fingers; White Ibis only have black lining along their wing fingers. Its feet extended well beyond its short tail. I eliminated its being a Jaribu Stork, the only other stork remotely possible in the area, because it lacked the red throat patch and the heavy straight black bill.

A Boy Scout I am not--I had left the house without my important phone numbers-- so I had to call home to get them. I was able to obtain Kathy Farr's number, but when I called her I found out she was in the Valley chasing after the Social Flycatcher. I finally did get in touch with her Sunday night and she recommended that I contact David Sarkozi, which I promptly did. He told me that the storks were a great winter sighting and that he would like me to email him my photos. He also mentioned that he would report the sighting to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Biologist on staff at the refuge.

I didn't see any rails, but did see two more Wood Storks flying over Shoveler Pond later that morning. Another bird of note was a Marsh Wren I saw in the reeds along Shoveler Pond. The ponds were loaded with Northern Shoveler, Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, and a few Gadwall and Mallards. Coots and Moorhens also filled the ponds with life and color. Greater White-fronted Geese and Snow Geese continually flew overhead all morning long. Savannah and Swamp Sparrows kept flushing up from the road along Shoveler Pond and diving back down into the tall grasses as I drove along. It was a good morning of birding in the refuge. I totaled 53 species.

--Adam Wood (new OG member)

Chairman's Message

This is an irruptive year for birds, i.e., many areas of the U.S. are seeing unusual species this winter. Texas is having a banger irruptive winter, with at least six species not normally expected: the Goshawk in Quanah (northwest of Wichita Falls); Blue Buntings in Laredo; Crossbills in central west Texas; and Crimson-collared Grosbeaks, a White-throated Robin, and a Social Flycatcher (resembles a half-pint Kiskadee) in the Rio Grande Valley. Some species come farther south than normal, and some come up from Mexico farther north than normal. Irruption is unpredictable, and there are many theories as to why it occurs. Irruption years are somewhat predictable and species-dependent. They occur every 8 to 12 years. This winter is an irruptive season in Texas.

Having just returned from my first rarities chase, several concerns popped up while driving 750 miles in 30 hours to see two of four possible birds in the Valley. If you are new to the chase, here are a few thoughts to consider before jumping in the car and blowing down the highway.

--continued on p. 5

Chairman, continued...

Chasing rarities means dropping out of your normal life on short notice. It may mean going alone if birding buddies can't also drop out to join you. It can mean leaving after a full work day or week, driving long distances, finding the bird(s), and returning home immediately.

Irruptives typically stay in an area for at least short periods, giving us more time to organize our lives and the chase trip. Thus going without sleep, food, etc. aren't issues. But, given that extra time, what are the goals of the trip, especially if the destination is a much-visited birding location? Should the trip focus only on target irruptives? Or should the local regulars be included?

One of the birds I chased showed up 2 hours after I headed for home after spending 1 ½ hours looking for it. This begs the question of how much time should be allocated searching for each bird. It depends on whether future chances of seeing the bird are high or low, and the importance of the species to your birding career. In chasing, the purpose is to see a small number of specific birds, not to bird an area for all possible species. It's also important to think about how hard we'll kick ourselves for having traveled to see the bird and not having been patient enough to wait for the bird to show. A very good tour leader, David Bradford, has said to chase the rarities and fill in time between them with the regular local birds. It's good advice.

All that being said, chasing birds is exciting. The Social Flycatcher in Bentsen State Park was drawing crowds of 50 to 70 people, many having traveled long distances just for this bird. It's invigorating to be around large groups of very good birders, hearing them discuss the bird, and hearing past chase stories. There's nothing like being infected with other birders' enthusiasm while searching for or seeing a new bird species!

--Kathy Farr

Notes from Recent Christmas Bird Counts

Freeport CBC -- This was the 48th year of this famous count. A total of 216 species (unofficial) were recorded by 80 participants. The best bird of the Count was a Pectoral Sandpiper; a close second was a Blue-winged Warbler. Both these were new to the count, bringing the total species counted since 1957 to 343! Six species of hummingbirds were reported by Sherry Collins, leader of the hummingbird team. The Freeport League sponsored the count dinner. I have stepped down from my co-compiler role which I served for the past 25 years. Dick Peake has also stepped down. Replacing us will be Mike Austin. --Tom Collins

San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge CBC -- Over 50 birders took to the water and woods around San Bernard NWR, finding an unofficial total of 200 species. New birds for the count included Broad-winged Hawk (a calling adult that was photographed), Hairy Woodpecker and Rusty Blackbird. Other exceptional species for this count circle included six Least Grebes, Horned Grebe, Glossy Ibis, two Least Bitterns, Surf and Black Scoters, Pomarine Jaeger, Groove-billed Ani, Eastern Screech-Owl, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Couch's/Tropical Kingbird, Black-throated Green Warbler, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush and House Finch.

New high counts included: Brown Pelican (562), Neotropical Cormorant (684), Anhinga (79), Bald Eagle (6), Yellow Rail (22), Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (74), Ash-throated Flycatcher (16), Gray Catbird (92), Cedar Waxwing (2522), Yellow-rumped Warbler (3140), Pine Warbler (45) and American Goldfinch (1573). Shorebirds were difficult due to the very high water levels. Woodland birds were plentiful, but a few such as Brown Thrasher (10) were down. We were expecting more irruptive species, but were disappointed as we had just two Golden-crowned Kinglets and no Brown Creepers, juncos or Purple Finches. -- Ron Weeks

Old River CBC -- We had 29 observers with a final tally of 141 species, which is up from the last couple of years. It was nice to have an American Bittern, Purple Finches and Pine Siskins which we don't have every year and, for the first time in at least 10 years, an Indigo Bunting. We had Cedar Waxwings at almost every stop we made. -- Barbara Tilton

Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge CBC -- This count, sponsored by Fermata Inc., was held on Wednesday, 22 December 2004. The weather was rather uncooperative all day: scattered showers in the morning, temperatures dropping all day long, wind gusts -
-----*continued on p. 6*

CBCs, continued...

at times, and even a little sleet falling! Despite the uninviting cold, wind, and rain, a good crew of birders persevered and managed a nice list of birds, totaling a rather impressive 170 species. We had 7 woodpeckers (including Red-headed and Ladder-backed woodpeckers), Couch's Kingbirds [9], Ash-throated and Scissor-tailed flycatchers, 6 species of wrens (including Bewick's, Winter, and Marsh wrens) 13 species of sparrows (including Grasshopper, Le Conte's, Fox[14], and Harris' sparrows[16]) and Pyrrhuloxia. Other noteworthy birds recorded on this CBC include Common Loon, Greater Scaup, 14 Bald Eagles, 3 Ferruginous Hawks, 5 Greater Attwater's Prairie-Chickens, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and Purple Finch. Many thanks to our 35 brave participants--and for those of you who couldn't make it this year, we hope you'll join us next year.

--*Sumita Prasad*

Cypress Creek CBC --The Cypress Creek Count was again highly successful, thanks in large part to the efforts of the Katy Prairie Conservancy. This year we were able to put 3 parties on their newly acquired Warren Ranch and it paid off with more exclusives than the balance of the entire count circle. Warren Ranch is a special place. Thanks also to Commissioner Steve Radack for a great meeting place, Paul Rushing Park, where we could stage, park and car pool as well as have access to a clean restroom. I would also like to acknowledge the great help of Tracy Keltonic in assisting me and posting the count on line. Thanks too for Carolyn's Country Cafe, which opened to provide our countdown dinner. The Count was

covered by the Houston Chronicle's "This Week" in the Katy and NW areas and also we enjoyed the participation of Melissa Landrum who was researching an article for Katy Magazine this coming December in time to advertise next year's count. She was treated to an incredible daytime response of an Eastern Screech Owl, which she photographed for her upcoming article. The count found 142 species, ranking it among the top five all-time counts. We had three count-week species bringing the total to 145, within one species of our all-time high. The 57 observers was only surpassed by last year's 59. Highlights included Short-billed Dowitcher found by Sandy Dillard who came down from College Station for the count, and a Short-eared Owl reported by Mike Creese who drove in from San Antonio for the count. Ducks and geese were lower than average; Bald Eagles were about average with 14. We established a number of all-time high counts: 161 Pied-billed Grebe, 510 Great Egret, 8 Roseate Spoonbill, 426 Black Vulture, 109 Crested Caracara, 294 Greater Yellowlegs, 3 Spotted Sandpiper, 4 Ash-throated Flycatchers, 3 Couch's Kingbird (3rd year in a row for this species at two or more locations), 7 Bewick's Wren, 68 House Wren, 10,734 Am. Robin, and 188 Chipping Sparrows. Some notable misses included: White Pelican, Wood Duck, Bufflehead, Ferruginous Hawk, Western Sandpiper, Dunlin, Horned Lark, and Eastern Towhee. We again were unable to locate the Kiskadees that are believed to reside on the western edge of Paul Rushing Park. It is clear that this count has good potential to exceed 150 species. We will give it a try January 1, 2006-- hope you will join us. --*Fred Collins*

Great Backyard Bird Count

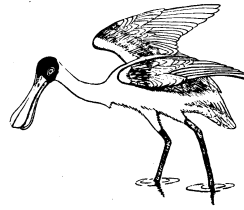
During the weekend of February 18 - 21, people across the North American continent are encouraged to count the birds in their backyards and report them over the Internet, as part of the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC), one of the world's largest volunteer efforts of its kind. In addition to its value as a research study, the GBBC allows people of all ages and backgrounds to celebrate birds and provide vital information about North America's birds. This is the eighth year of the popular event, developed and managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society, with sponsorship from Wild Birds Unlimited store owners. This year's theme, "North America's Great Backyard," was chosen as a way to celebrate the beauty of birds found across the continent. People are encouraged to enjoy the birds around them by going out into the "Great Backyard" during any or all of the count days and keeping track of the highest numbers of each bird species they see, then reporting their counts at

www.birdsource.org/gbbc

"We call it the Great Backyard Bird Count to make the point that anyone can participate," says John Fitzpatrick, director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "But really, a 'backyard' can be anywhere you happen to be, a schoolyard, a local park, the balcony of a high rise apartment, a wildlife refuge. No matter where you go in this 'Great Backyard,' you're almost certain to find birds in all their beauty."

From The Spoonbill's Past

Compiled by Skip Almoney



THE
SPOONBILL

Forty Years Ago

MANGROVE CUCKOO IN GALVESTON - Jim Ellis

The following is the text of an account written for submission with the Galveston Christmas Count report.

"On Wednesday, December 30, 1964, my wife, Pat, and I observed a Mangrove Cuckoo (*Coccyzus minor*) in the city of Galveston, Texas. The bird was first discovered by Pat in a large live oak tree at the front of the Menard house at the corner of 33rd and N ½ Streets. When she first saw the bird it was partially hidden in the foliage, with only the tail clearly visible. She called to me that she had found a cuckoo. As I approached, the bird moved into the open. The buff underparts struck us immediately. As the bird moved from limb to limb we were able to see that there was no rufous in the wings.

"We knew that there is a third species of cuckoo which occurs in the United States other than the Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) and the Black-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*) with which we are familiar. We knew that the bird occurred in Florida but we did not know any of the distinguishing field marks. Unfortunately, we had with us only one field guide, "Field Guide to the Birds of Texas" by Peterson. This book of course does not contain this bird. Pat stayed with the bird while I went to the nearby house of Mrs. Stewart LeBlanc, Jr., 2911 Avenue O, a Galveston birder, hoping to get from her a copy of "A Field Guide to the Birds", "Audubon Land Bird Guide" or any other book with a description of the Mangrove Cuckoo. Mrs. LeBlanc had no books that could help so we went to the Galveston Public Library and checked out a copy of the Audubon Guide. We returned to the Menard where Pat still had the bird under observation.

"Immediately after we arrived at the house, a mockingbird began harassing the cuckoo and drove it from the grounds of the Menard house. It lighted in a large live oak tree across the street. As we read each field mark from the book, all three of us studied the bird to verify that the bird bore the mark. We did this for each of the marks described in the book. Mrs. LeBlanc then left us to try to find the other two members of our party who were covering another part of our Christmas Count area. Pat and I continued to observe the bird as it moved from tree to tree. We found the bird at approximately 10:00 AM and had it under almost continuous observation until we lost it at about 1:00 PM. Mrs. LeBlanc searched unsuccessfully for the other members of our party until other duties forced her to give up about noon. At 1:30 we went to a prearranged meeting with 5 other members of our count group and immediately returned with them to search the area. We were unsuccessful. The following day eight people from Houston, joined by Mrs. LeBlanc again searched futilely. The next day I returned alone with no success."

The Clearing House report of bird records for the Upper Texas Coast was still in preparation at print time. The report for December 2004 will appear in the next issue of *The Spoonbill*.

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

Comments or suggestions for ***The Spoonbill?***
How about a story or news item?

E-mail: og_spoonbill@earthlink.net

TO START OR RENEW A MEMBERSHIP:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

E-Mail: _____

	<i>Individual</i>	<i>Family</i>
ONC Annual Dues:	\$ 8.00	\$ 15.00
OG Annual Dues:	\$ 14.00	\$ 19.00
Total:	\$ 22.00	\$ 34.00

Send dues to:
Outdoor Nature Club
PO Box 270894
Houston TX 77277-0894

Membership questions? Contact Pat Pease....
phone 713-789-3306
popease@aol.com

****** Time to Renew ******

Membership dues are paid on a calendar year basis. Unless you have just renewed (or have joined since October 1), your membership expired at the end of 2004.

Dues payable are the total of the OG and ONC amounts shown at left, for either single or family membership. Thanks for paying promptly!

Share a Story!

Do you have a birding story, memory, observation, comment or news item to share with other readers of *The Spoonbill*?

It's **your** newsletter – please consider submitting something. In 2004, *The Spoonbill* included items sent in by 17 members. If you were not among them, why not join in?