



The Spoonbill

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

May 2010
Vol. 59 No. 5

Monthly Meeting: Monday, May 3 General Meeting -- 7:00 p.m.

Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet, Houston

Learning Corner -- 6:30 p.m. Species Codes - Get familiar with these codes to help you record your observations faster, and in far less space in your field notebook. Even if you don't use them, you should have fun learning how to form the codes and puzzling out what given codes mean.

Program: Summer on the Katy Prairie -- Speaker: Bob Honig

It seems that many people take a hiatus from birdwatching in the sweltering summer heat. But, if you choose your time and place judiciously, summer birdwatching can be very comfortable and very rewarding. In particular, you can observe birds during the period when they are nesting and raising young. This is certainly true of the Katy Prairie west of Houston, where the Katy Prairie Conservancy is working to preserve open space habitat -- roughly 18,000 acres are now protected. Learn about some of the summer birdwatching opportunities on the Katy Prairie, some interesting facts about our summer Upper Texas Coast birds, and get an update on KPC's activities.

Bob Honig has a passion for all of natural history, particularly ornithology and dragonflies and damselflies. He earned a B.A. in Biology (ecology emphasis) from the University of Pennsylvania and an M.S. in Zoology in the Aquatic Ecology Program at Virginia Tech. Bob has been a member of the Board of Directors of the Katy Prairie Conservancy, a land trust focusing its efforts just west of Houston, since its founding in 1992. Bob has conducted many bird surveys (including several seasons for the Texas Breeding Bird Atlas Project), as well as surveys for dragonflies and damselflies, and butterflies. He has served as OG Chairman; he was Compiler of the Buffalo Bayou, Texas, Christmas Bird Count (CBC) from 1984 to 2005; and he was a founder and Compiler of the Brazos Bend, Texas, CBC. Bob -- often with his wife, Maggie -- has led numerous natural history field trips and tours domestically as well as to the Neotropics, and he has regularly lectured to nature and conservation organizations. Bob's professional environmental experience began with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and continued in the natural gas pipeline industry and then environmental consulting. He has addressed diverse issues such as endangered species, erosion control, revegetation, wetlands, archaeology and historic preservation, water discharges, spill prevention and control, waste minimization and recycling, and sustainable development -- and his work has taken him to far-flung locales, including environmental surveys in Bolivia and the Algerian Sahara.

Other Events

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

May 3: Monthly OG Meeting
(Bob Honig on Katy Prairie)

May 15: Monthly Field Trip
(Little Thicket with Adam Wood)

*See you in August after
The Spoonbill's summer break.*

Inside this issue:

About the OG	2
April Meeting Minutes	2
May Field Trip	4
Summer Birding	5
Althea Sherman	6
Birds and Noise	7
Membership Form	8

**Ornithology Group
Houston Outdoor Nature Club**

Minutes of Meeting
Monday, April 5, 2010
Bayland Community Center
Number of Attendees: 38

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

1. Learning Corner: Pam Smolen discussed the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. She was motivated to discuss this topic because of a posting from Carolyn Ohl-Johnson on TexBirds regarding the removal of poles in the Christmas Mountains disturbing habitat of Elf Owls and other birds. The MBTA began in 1918 between the United States and Great Britain to protect migrating birds. Japan and Russia joined in later years. There are 836 birds protected under the act. No birds, feathers, nests or eggs may be taken. Highway Departments must obtain a permit to disturb or remove nests. Inactive nest removal may have to be approved by the United States Fish & Wildlife Service. Starlings and House Sparrows are not covered by the act. To report any harm or harassment to birds, call 1-800-792-4263 (game).

2. Sightings: Birds that were recently sighted include: Summer Tanager, Orchard Orioles, Hooded Warblers. An Indigo Bunting at Lafitte's Cove, 2 Pacific Loons at the boat ramp on 61st. A Palm Warbler was seen in Quintana. An Upland Sandpiper was spotted in Sugarland. Near the Evergreen Golf Course in Baytown a Bald Eagle nest was spotted with 2 young birds. Pam Smolen has begun the counting of Chimney Swifts this season at St. Paul's Church and Whole Foods Market.

3. Minutes: Minutes from the March, 1, 2010 meeting were approved as printed in *The Spoonbill*.

4. Treasurer's Report: Jerry Stanislav reported that the OG balance is \$10,179.00. Jerry received a check for \$815.00 from ONC for the OG's share of the membership dues on 4-5-10, that will be added to the total.

5. Spoonbill: Al Shultz will check with the mailer of *The Spoonbill* regarding the late mailings of the newsletter again this month. Items for the May issue are due by April 15th. The May issue will be the last one before summer.

6. Membership: Margret Simmons reminded members to sign in for credit so that the OG meetings can still be held in the Center's large room. OG cards are available to pass along with club and website information.

7. Announcements: David Sarkozi mentioned that work has been done at

the Anahuac NWR. There is still salt damage on the Willows and Cedars. A small trail through a wooded area is planned for the future. David reminded everyone of the upcoming TOS trip to Rockport-Fulton, April 15-18.

Information can be obtained on the TOS website. He also mentioned that Hook Woods on High Island is open and has trees. To visit the TOS Sanctuaries, a once a season charge can be paid to visit all of their sanctuaries.

Skip Almoney announced FeatherFest in Galveston, April 8-11. OG will have a booth and display to hand out information regarding the organization. If anyone is interested in volunteering to help at the booth, please contact Skip. He reminded OG members of the HAS Membership Meeting on Wednesday April 14 presenting the program, "Coastal Update 2010," by Jim Blackburn. High Island sanctuaries are in good shape and the roosts are overflowing.

John Schneider knows a member who is interested in participating in "Birdathon", either to start a team or to be on an existing team. Please contact John if you are interested.

Free Spring Walks will be held on High Island and Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary this season. The HAS website has further information.

- 8. Upcoming Field Trips:** Adam Wood announced the April Field Trip is on Saturday April 17 to the Matagorda County Birding Center. Birders will meet at the center at 8:00 a.m. searching for warblers, orioles and buntings. Adam

remarked that even if it rains that day, the birding may still be good. If anyone would like to carpool, please contact Adam or Kevin Poling. They can be met at the KPC office at 5:30 a.m. and then travel to Matagorda.

The Spring Quarterly Trip to the Lower Rio Grande Valley is now full. Adam has a waiting list for anyone interested.

- 9. Program:** John Schneider introduced Dr. Richard Peake who presented the program "Birding Namibia." Dr. Peake began his program by reading two poems, "Namibian Photography" and "Namibian Feast" from his book of poems, *Birds and Other Beasts*. In March of 2000 he traveled to Namibia and South Africa for almost a month, observing the local birds during the beginning of migration season. He was guided by Terry Stevenson in Namibia and Ian Sinclair in South Africa. Dr. Peake's slides showed the different terrain and habitat in both countries. He visited Etosha National Park and Spitzkoppe Park in Namibia and Halali Camp, Heldenberg Park in South Africa. His travels took him from coastal regions to dunes, from dry areas to wet regions. A large number of bird species were observed, including Dusky Lark, Southern Red Bishop, Grey-lined Hawk, Blacksmith Plover, Sociable Weavers, Red-footed Falcon, Cape Sugarbird, White-necked Raven, Yellow-billed Duck and Black-footed Penguin (formally named Jackass Penguin). Mammals seen included mountain zebras, puku antelope, spotted hyena, giraffe, lion, Thompson's gazelle and a rhino.

-- Lenore Alfredson, OG Secretary

Field Trip to the Little Thicket Nature Preserve

May 15, 2010

Meet at Little Thicket Nature Center, 8:00 a.m.

The last trip of this OG Year will be to our very own Little Thicket Nature Preserve. The preserve is owned and maintained by our parent organization the Outdoor Nature Club. The Little Thicket Nature Sanctuary comprises 655 acres of wilderness with trails and flowing creeks through quiet forests of huge magnolias, towering pines, holly, and dogwood in the San Jacinto National Forest. There are five meadows comprising a little more than fifty acres and more than twenty miles of foot trails and undeveloped roads. Just a heads up this trip will be birding in woodlands, which can be rather difficult birding due to the lower bird diversity and density and where birding by ear skills is important.

I will be your guide for the day and I have been birding for 18 years and have been a member of the Houston Ornithology Group for the past five years and am currently serving my third term as Field Trip Coordinator. I have been birding the Upper Texas Coast and surrounding counties extensively since 2004. I am largely a self-taught birder and will do my best to answer participant's questions. This trip will be a chance for inexperienced birders to get more experience in a low pressure environment where we will not be worried about finding target birds or trying to see as many species of birds as possible. Last time we visited the preserve, it was in the fall of '06. This trip is during a different season and should allow us the opportunity to see a different complement of birds. So come on out to the Outdoor Nature Club's Little Thicket Nature Preserve for what should hopefully be a pleasant late spring morning of birding.

Directions: We will meet in the parking lot for The Little Thicket Nature Center at 8:00 a.m. The park is approximately a one and a half-hour drive from downtown Houston. Take Highway 59 north to Cleveland and take the FM 2025 exit and head north until you get to FM 945. The Little Thicket Nature Center is located on the left hand side of FM 945 before you get to SH 150. We will bird for as long as the group wishes and I will be willing to stay as late as the last person to make sure everybody sees most of what they want to and gets all there questions asked.

Be sure to bring: Binoculars, hat, sunscreen, water, snacks, camera, scope and rain gear in case it rains.

~ Adam Wood, Field Trip Coordinator

birdsondabrain@earthlink.net

713-515-1692

Summer Birding Events

The Ornithology Group does not hold monthly meetings or field trips during June or July. However, check the OG website, www.ornithologygroup.org, or contact Adam Wood or Kevin Poling, for updates on plans for the Quarterly Trip.

Houston Audubon trips:

[Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary](#): Wednesday bird walks at 8:30 a.m., through mid-May; childrens' camps, May - Aug.

Saturday, May 22: [field trip to Sheldon Lake](#)

Houston Audubon bird counts:

[Armand Bayou](#): monthly surveys, second Saturdays

[Bolivar Bird Count](#)

[Hogg Bird Sanctuary](#) (Bayou Bend): first Mondays, 9:00 a.m.

[Houston Bird Survey](#): Submit any lists for June. Coordinated by Robert McFarlane.

[West 11th Street Park](#): HAS Bird Survey, third Tuesday of each month; May 18 (8:30 a.m.), June 15 (7:00 a.m.), July 20 (7:00 a.m.)

[Willow Waterhole](#): third Saturdays; 8 a.m. on May 15; 7 a.m. on June 19, July 17.

Swifts over Houston -- Tuesday evenings at various locations in the metro area, including:

Pershing Middle School, 3838 Blue Bonnet Blvd., Bellaire

Whole Foods Market, 4004 Bellaire Blvd., Bellaire

Imperial Sugar refinery, 198 Kempner St, Sugar Land

St. Paul's United Methodist Church, Main & Binz, Houston

Katy Prairie Conservancy:

2010 Bioblitz, May 8: teams will survey KPC land for birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates and plants. Contact Jaime Gonzalez at KPC, 713-523-6135, or e-mail jgonzalez@katyprairie.org.

The Original Citizen Scientist

What can we, as citizen scientists, do to help further ornithological research? Althea Sherman was one of the first citizen scientists to help answer this question. She observed and meticulously documented the bird life in her Iowa dooryard for over 38 years starting in 1908. She recognized that loss of habitat was the fundamental cause of the decline in numbers and species of birds.

Althea Sherman was born in 1843 in National, Iowa, which is near the Mississippi and Turkey Rivers. She taught in county schools and went on to teach art. In 1895 she went back home to Iowa to tend her ailing parents. After her parents died, she remained in National to keep house for her sister who practiced rural medicine.

Sherman studied screech owls, eastern phoebes, red-winged blackbirds, gray catbirds, brown thrashers, American robins, alder flycatchers, sora rails, house wrens, chimney swifts, ruby-throated hummingbirds, and American kestrels in her "Acre of Birds". She identified a total of 162 species in her dooryard of varied habitat including a marshy area. Her first long published article was "At the Sign of the Northern Flicker" in the Wilson Bulletin in 1910.

Sherman's day-to-day observations filled sixty notebooks. She spent 200-300 hours studying soras alone. Sherman excelled with her studies of nesting birds. Her studies included details such as weighing the eggs and then the young birds. She was published in the Auk and Wilson Bulletin and was a member of fifteen scientific societies. She also gave talks about her bird work to local groups as well as to organizations such as the Linnaean Society and the AOU.

Her most impressive accomplishment was the construction of a 28 foot tall, 9 foot square chimney swift tower which enclosed a 2 foot square wooden chimney, a winding staircase from bottom to top, and four floors. The tower included numerous peepholes and windows which allowed observation without frightening the swifts. Prior to the construction of the swift tower no one had ever witnessed the entire nesting cycle of a chimney swift. Her studies represent some of the most extensive studies of chimney swifts.

I hope Althea Sherman's remarkable story helps inspire you to participate in citizen science.



OG Chairperson

Who's Singing Now? Bird Behavior and Urban Noise

We all know that noise is a problem. We know that we humans, when exposed to loud noise for long periods, or extremely loud noise occasionally, can lose our hearing. We also have heard friends and relatives complain about losing sleep, becoming ill, or generally experiencing stress from noise. In our increasingly urban lives, city traffic noise is a factor that is more and more obtrusive. At the same time, it is clear that many types of birds adapt well to city life. They can find food, shelter, and company in a very unnatural setting. Not all birds do as well in cities as pigeons, starlings, grackles and doves. But what effect does noise have on birds, especially songbirds that invest so much energy and, seemingly, expression in their vocal communications? Field studies provide some interesting suggestions, and some surprises.

A report published in 2006 (Wood & Yezerinac, *Auk* v123) studied song varieties in Song Sparrows in and around Portland, OR. Song Sparrows are good subjects -- they are widespread, and are uninhibited and persistent singers. Each singing male has a variety of song patterns, adding another dimension to the vocal styling of the species. Wood and Yezerinac recorded songs from 28 Song Sparrows, along with the background noise of their territories. Songs from noisy places tended to emphasize higher pitches. There may be many factors in this change, including behavioral and evolutionary modifications to the pitch the song, or the intensity of its high notes. Birds may learn songs with low notes obscured by noise, or females may choose mates whose songs rise above the noise. In any case, the findings have led others to seek other instances of bird song adapting to noise.

Sarah Goodwin of University of Delaware reported at last year's AOU meeting that woodland birds with low-pitched voices are likely to avoid noisy areas near highways (Science News, 12 Sept 2009). Of eight species surveyed at 30 sites in both noisy and quiet woodlands, White-breasted Nuthatches and Yellow-billed Cuckoos were significantly reduced in number at the noisy sites. Coincidentally or not, these are species with relatively low-pitched calls that overlap in frequency with traffic noise. Rather than adapting to the noise, these birds appear to avoid it in favor of places where they can hear and be heard.

A third kind of response is reported for European Robins (Fuller and others, *Biology Letters*, 22 Aug 2007). This species is one of many that will sing at night, often around towns. Many people assume that the Robins sing all the time, or that they sing at night where there are bright street lights. However, this study of 121 sites in Sheffield, England, found a stronger correlation of night singing to daytime street noise than to light or any other factors. Daytime noise seemed to be a stronger factor than nighttime noise in the places with singing Robins. The results suggest that some birds may change their daily singing cycles to avoid noise by waiting for quieter times of the day (or night).

-- Al Shultz

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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:

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

Additional contributions are welcome in any amount.

Send to:
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Members who do not wish to receive a printed copy of *The Spoonbill* can save \$4 off their dues:

	<i>Individual</i>	<i>Family</i>
ONC	\$ 8.00	\$ 15.00
OG	\$ 10.00	\$ 15.00
Total	\$ 18.00	\$ 30.00

Membership questions?
Contact: Margret Simmons
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