



The Spoonbill

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

August 2010
Vol. 59 No. 6

Monthly Meeting: Monday, August 2 General Meeting -- 7:00 p.m.

Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet, Houston

Learning Corner -- 6:30 p.m. -- A Birding Identification Priority Checklist, by Bill Lindemann

Program: Birds of the Texas Hill Country Speaker: Bill Lindemann

The Texas Hill Country and the Edwards Plateau cover only seventeen per cent of the state; however the region has 40 per cent of the flora and 67 per cent of the bird species found in Texas. This rich diversity can be attributed to a number of factors, including overlap of eastern and western bird species' ranges, northward expansion of southern species, and excellent numbers of wintering sparrows, hawks and waterfowl. Variation in topography, rainfall, temperatures and geology also contribute to the diversity of both plants and birds. The presentation will feature the exceptional birdlife of the region, including species normally found in the Trans-Pecos, East Texas, lower Rio Grande Valley and South Texas, and North Texas.

Bill Lindemann worked for 32 years as a geologist in the oil and gas industry before retiring to Fredericksburg in 1994. He has written a weekly birding column in the Fredericksburg Standard Radio-Post and the Kerrville Daily Times since 1997, currently for the Kerrville Daily Times only. He is a former president of the Native Plant Society of Texas (2001 and 2006), in 2003 was awarded the society's Nancy Benedict Memorial Award for an act of Conservation/Public Service for establishing the Fredericksburg Nature Center and the Friends of the Fredericksburg Nature Center, and in 2006 was awarded the Benny J. Simpson Fellows Award for service by a member for the enrichment of the society. He is president of the Hill Country Land Trust and serves on the Board of Directors for the Hill Country Historical Foundation and has been recognized for his work in preserving the natural and historical heritage of the Texas Hill Country. He is a frequent speaker on natural history subjects for schools, garden clubs, professional and service organizations, and teaches classes on birding and nature at nature centers and adult education schools. His current focus is promoting historical and natural preservation in the Texas Hill Country through education, outreach and example.

Other Events

- Aug. 21: Monthly OG field trip**
Jones State Forest with Steve Gross
- Sept. 11: Beginning Birder Trip**
Willow Waterhole with John Schneider
- Sept. 13: Monthly OG meeting**
- Sept. 18: Smith Point Hawk Watch**
- Oct. 28-31: Quarterly field trip -- Austin**

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Ornithology Group Houston Outdoor Nature Club

Minutes of Meeting
Monday, May 3, 2010
Number of Attendees: 59

1. **Learning Corner:** Bob Honig discussed Species Codes, a handy tool for recording field observations. The two methods most used are Bruce Bowman's 6-letter system and Bird Banding Lab's 4-letter system. Bob will send out information by E-mail for the links to the code systems. Examples of the 4-letter system are: Dunlin, (DUNL), Gadwall, (GADW) using the first 4 letters of the bird name. Example for 6-letter codes: Killdeer, (KILLDE), using the first 6 letters or in a 2 word name using the first 3 letter of each word: Northern Cardinal, (NORCAR).
2. **Sightings:** Birds that were recently observed: 5 Monk Parakeets, Summer Tanager; a Bald Eagle nest with 2 fledglings; Fork-tailed flycatcher at Smith Oaks; Indigo Bunting, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles at El Franco Lee Park. Chuck-will's-Widow, White-tailed Kite, and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers.
3. **Minutes:** Minutes from the April 5, 2010 meeting were approved as printed in *The Spoonbill*.
4. **Library Report:** Deborah Valdez has 100 free issues of TOS Publications available if anyone would like a copy. Please email Deborah with any book ideas for the Library.
5. **The Spoonbill:** Al Shultz announced that the items for the August issue will be due by July 15. *The Spoonbill* will be on summer break until August.
6. **Membership:** Margret Simmons reminded members to please sign in. If anyone is not receiving OG meeting announcements by email, or if your email or mail address has changed, please email Margret to update her records.
7. **Announcements:** Pam Smolen announced birding opportunities at Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge: Birding By Ear (May 23) and walks through the Refuge (June 6).
8. **Past Field Trips:** Kevin Poling reported on the Field Trip to the Rio Grande Valley. Roy Rodriguez was the leader for the trip. Birds seen on the trip included: Rose-throated Becard, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and Northern Beardless Tyrannulet.
9. **Future Field Trips:** Kevin Poling announced the May field trip for Saturday May 15 at 8:00 a.m. to the Little Thicket Nature Preserve. Adam Wood will be leading the trip. Kevin will email everyone corrected directions to the preserve. Directions are also available in the ONC Yearbook.
10. **Treasurer's Report:** Jerry Stanislav presented the proposed budget for fiscal year 2010-2011 beginning June 1, 2010 and ending May 31, 2011. Copies of the budget were handed out to members. The budget was approved by membership votes. Changes made for next year were for the rise in *The Spoonbill* expenses, an increase in amount for supplies and an increase for donations to others.

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.

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

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

11. **Donations:** Pam Smolen led a discussion for OG's yearly donations to organizations. Membership votes approved donating \$300 to TOS Hooks Woods for restoration of trees and hay with seeds for planting in open areas. Also, \$300 will be given to Anahuac NWR to plant new trees in the Johnson's Prairie area.
12. **Program:** John Schneider introduced Bob Honig, a member of Board of Directors of the Katy Prairie Conservancy since its founding in 1992. Bob discussed "Summer Birding on the Katy Prairie." Some wintering birds are still being seen, such as the Sedge Wren, Cedar Waxwing and White-crowned Sparrow. The area has a great variety of caterpillars, butterflies and dragonflies; beautiful flora and grasses can also be seen. The KPC website has a check list of birds seen on the Katy Prairie. At the Mary Manor area, Mottled Ducks, Blue-winged Teal, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks and Fulvous Whistling Ducks can be observed. Bob discussed birds that mimic calls and songs of other birds. Northern Mockingbirds are known to mimic, but also Blue Jays, European Starlings, and White-eyed Vireos can be heard mimicking other birds. (White-eyed Vireos can mimic Gray Catbird, Wood Thrush and Tufted Titmouse.) The 3rd Annual Katy Prairie BioBlitz will be on Saturday, May 8. Check the KPC website for days and times for the Open Trails, Prairie Discovery Tours, and other events. Maps are available on the website. If anyone is interested in volunteering, there are always opportunities at KPC either giving tours or working in the plant nursery. The Field Office is open Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. The Matt Cook Viewing Platform at Warren Lake will be under construction this summer and fall.

-- Lenore Alfredson, OG Secretary

Summer Evening Birding

Welcome back to another exciting OG year! I hope everyone is having a great summer. During the month of August I would like to encourage everyone to enjoy a few evenings outside. The magic time is from right before sunset to right after civil twilight. In other words, the last 30 - 45 minutes of daylight. This is a great time for urban birding without the intense heat.

Civil twilight is the time between the moment of sunset, when the sun's apparent upper edge is just at the horizon, until the center of the sun is 6° directly below the horizon. The brightest stars and planets appear during civil twilight. Venus which is known as the 'morning star' and/or 'evening star' is present during swift counts. During civil twilight there is enough light from the sun that artificial sources of light may not be needed to carry on outdoor activities.

The most amazing late summer sight is thousands of Purple Martins gathering to roost! The sky is literally black with martins as far as the eye can see. This year it looks like the martins have again chosen the trees at the KBR buildings as their main roost site.

Summer evenings are also the time for watching Chimney Swifts. Nesting has finished up for the year and swifts are gathering in larger roosts. In addition, swifts are starting to migrate from the north. This year swifts nested at both towers at Russ Pitman Park. We also think we had swifts nesting at Whole Foods Market. Pershing and St Paul's were roost sites for non-nesting swifts. It does not appear that large numbers of swifts are using the sugar mill yet this year. I did find 500+ swifts at Lakeview Elementary School which is very near the sugar mill. It will be interesting to monitor the swift roosting activity in August.

While out counting Purple Martins and Chimney Swifts you can also enjoy the other summer birds.

Common Nighthawks, Killdeer, and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks are frequently seen on summer evenings. Western Kingbirds were also seen in crepe myrtles near the KBR buildings.

I hope to see you some August evening!



OG Chairperson

Swift Awareness Events for 2010

August 25: Swift Night Out in Sugar Land

Meet at 7:30 pm at the Sugar Mill for special activities and information about chimney swifts. The Swift Night Out may move to Lakeview Elementary.

August 26: Swift Night Out in Dayton

Meet at 7:30 pm at the Rice Dryer in Dayton for special activities associated with the weekly count.

August 31: Swift Night Out

at Whole Foods Market / Pershing
Activities will begin at 7:30 pm at the Whole Foods Market parking lot.

September 24: Swift Night Out

at St. Paul's Methodist Church
We will meet at 7:00 pm at the parking lot at St. Paul's Methodist Church.

Weekly Chimney Swift counts are held Tuesdays at several Houston locations, and Thursdays in Dayton at the Rice Dryer.

At the end of August and early September we typically count over 500 Chimney Swifts. The events are sponsored by Houston Audubon Society, the Nature Discovery Center, and Whole Foods Market.

For details on these and other Chimney Swift events, check www.houstonaudubon.org

August Field Trip -- Jones State Forest

Aug. 21, 2010

Forest Service Office Parking Area

5:00 a.m. for Chuck-will's-Widow

6:00 a.m. for General Birding

The first trip of the new OG year will be to [W.G. Jones State Forest](#) in Montgomery County. Steve Gross has graciously volunteered to lead this trip. August generally is not a good month to bird in this region, but we will have a few target species: Chuck-will's-Widow, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker (rare), Brown-headed Nuthatch, and any lingering warblers like Hooded Warbler. Since August is one of the hottest months in this region, this is going to just be a half day trip with the trip ending after lunch. Those who wish to bird after lunch are certainly welcome to do so, and Steve may be willing to accompany those die-hard birders, but he may have other commitments so you may be on your own. This is the first trip of the new OG year and it should be a great one. So start the year off right by coming out and joining us for a wonderful morning of birding looking for the specialty birds of the Piney Woods including the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker.

This forest was purchased in 1926 and named after W. Goodrich Jones, the founder of the Texas Forestry Association and considered the father of Texas Forestry. The healthy and productive forest that exists today is the result of public forest stewardship after heavy logging, devastating wildfires and insect epidemics that were common at the turn of the century. W.G. Jones State Forest contains the Sweetleaf Nature Trail with State Champion Sweetleaf Tree, Red Cockaded Woodpecker (RCWO) Management Area, and two small lakes with limited fishing and picnicking. Forest management demonstration sites exist throughout the forest. The primary purpose of this forest is resource education for all Texas citizens and visitors. Sound scientific forest management that protects and perpetuates native flora and fauna is practiced. The W.G. Jones State Forest is a working forest owned and administered by the Texas Forest Service. However, the 1,745-acre Jones State Forest has long been known as one of the easiest sites in Texas at which to find the endangered RCWO. The small black-and-white bird is a specialist of mature pinewoods, and Jones, encompasses areas of loblolly and shortleaf pine ranging from sixty to one hundred years old. In 2003 there were fifteen clusters, or small family groups, of RCWOs on the forest. One cluster was located adjacent to the forest office on Texas Highway 1488, just 1.5 miles west of I – 45, southwest of Conroe. Another cluster was less than a quarter mile northwest, and the birds were often seen foraging in the pines around the office. Early morning and late afternoon are best for finding RCWOs, and knowing their raspy call is very helpful. Try to visit Jones on a weekday if you can, when the office is open. The staff welcomes visitors, and personnel are happy to provide maps and a bird list and to provide directions and advice for seeing RCWOs.

Directions: We will meet in the parking lot for Forest Service Office at 5:00 am for those that wish to partake in the Chuck-wills-Widow search and then at 6:00 am for the general birding portion of the trip. The park is approximately a one and a half-hour drive from downtown Houston. Take Highway 45 north past the Woodlands to FM 1488 and take the FM 1488 exit (Exit 81) and head west for about 1.5 miles to Peoples Road and the Forest Service Office which will be on your left. The Forest Service Office is located on Peoples Road For more detailed directions from your residences please follow the following link: <http://maps.google.com/maps?saddr=77043&daddr=30.22306%2C-95.48806+%28W+G+Jones+State+Forest%29&hl=en>.

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

~ Adam Wood, Field Trip Coordinator

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713-515-1692

Field Trips

I hope you all had a great summer and are ready for another great OG Year that should be loads of fun. On that note I have the new OG Field Trip Schedule posted to the [OG Website](#). It can be found under the upcoming field trips tab. Kevin and I have another great slate of trips lined up for you all this year. We hope to see lots of you all on various trips this year. As always, suggestions are welcome for future trips.

I would also like to take this opportunity let everyone know that this will be my last year as Field Trip Coordinator. It has been a blast and I have really enjoyed it, but my schedule has gotten so hectic at work that I feel that it is time for me to move on and turn over the position to Kevin Poling. He will do a great job and continue to make the field trips better than they have been before. I would just like to say that it has been an honor serving as Field Trip Coordinator for this wonderful organization. I want to thank everyone who went on any of the trips over my tenure as Field Trip Coordinator because you all really did make this a very pleasurable job. Thank you for allowing me to be your Field Trip Coordinator.

-- Adam Wood

Visitors are always welcome on regular monthly field trips. You do not need to sign up for the monthly field trips -- just show up at the designated meeting location at the designated time, ready to have a good time birding. Quarterly field trips are for members only.

- Aug. 21: Jones State Forest (Steve Gross)
 - Sep. 11: Beginning Birder Trip I: Willow Waterhole (John Schneider)
 - Sep. 18: Smith Point Hawk Watch Counties (Hawk Watch Volunteer)
 - Oct. 9: Beginning Birder/New Member Trip II: Kleb Woods (Fred Collins)
 - Oct. 16: Seabrook & Armand Bayou (TBD)
 - Oct. 28-31: Austin (TBD)**
 - Nov. 20: Bolivar (TBD)
 - Dec. 18: CBCs
 - Jan. 15: Brazos Bend State Park & Davis Estates (Bill Godley)
 - Jan 27-30: Throckmorton County to Fort Worth (TBD)**
 - Feb. 19: West Harris County (TBD)
 - Mar. 19: Jasper County (TBD)
 - Apr. 16: Quintana & Brazoria NWR (TBD)
 - Apr. 28-May 1: Corpus Christi & Port Aransas (TBD)**
 - May 21: Katy Prairie (Adam Wood)
- (Dates in **Bold** are Quarterly Field Trips)

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Sandy, Bailey, and Aristotle

Tracking migrating birds has become a global phenomenon. Perhaps it is not as obviously revolutionary as tracking airline flights or Facebook friends, or getting driving directions via a GPS receiver in the dashboard of a car. Still, it is more than a curiosity that birds carrying small electronic devices can be tracked as they move from breeding grounds to wintering grounds and back.

A recent New York Times article described the migratory routes of Bar-tailed Godwits, Bristle-thighed Curlews, Arctic Terns and Ruddy Turnstones. Birds of these species were captured in the Arctic on their breeding grounds, and fitted with small light-sensing geolocators which they carried until their recapture a year later. Once released wearing their geolocators, the birds soon disappeared from view over the Pacific Ocean. But the geolocators logged a precise record of sunrise and sunset times, and this data file was downloaded when the birds were recaptured. The data allowed calculation of latitude and longitude, retracing the birds' movements over the course of a year. These light-sensing geolocators were developed by the British Antarctic survey for tracking wildlife movements in remote regions. Calculated locations are a little imprecise (give or take a hundred miles) and can be confused by rugged topography, dense vegetation or prolonged bad weather, but these are minor problems over thousands of miles of migration over the ocean. Weighing only about a gram, geolocators are tiny enough to be carried by songbirds the size of thrushes.

A larger but more accurate type of device includes a GPS position sensor and a satellite transmitter, so that movements of its bearer can be followed continuously and more accurately. These transmitters are too large for songbirds, but can be carried by larger waterfowl and shorebirds. In April 2009, two Long-billed Curlews on their nesting grounds in western

Nebraska were fitted with these transmitters as backpacks. "Sandy" and "Bailey" were tracked through their migration to wintering grounds in Tamaulipas, Mexico. (These curlews stopped in Texas for only a few days in their passage, so we can imagine that the curlews that winter on the Katy Prairie must nest somewhere else and have their own stories.) Although Sandy's signal was lost in October, Bailey returned to Nebraska this spring, and in late June headed south again to Mexico. The Nebraska Curlew Project posts updates of her location.

So what? Long-distance migration has been known as long as ornithology has been around. Every field guide shows summer and winter ranges of bird species that migrate. A century of banding records and recoveries have piled up evidence for migration, with the multitudes of birds banded in one place and found wintering in another. We take this for granted, but it wasn't always so accepted. Long before numbered bands were in wide use, Audubon tied silver threads to the legs of young Eastern Phoebes in Pennsylvania; they flew away to parts unknown, but returned in the spring to the same woods where they had fledged.

Although Aristotle is credited with first describing bird migration, he simply inferred it. Travelers reliably reported cranes in different places in different seasons. After all, these are large birds, and often can be seen flying great distances, so their migration is easy to believe. Not so most songbirds, whose seasonal disappearance was less plausibly explained by long flights. Aristotle inferred that swallows hibernated because they disappeared in the winter, and that redstarts and robins were the same species in different seasons because one, a summer bird, disappeared around the time the other, a winter bird, appeared. (Think Painted Buntings and Field Sparrows here in Texas.) These theories persisted through the Middle Ages, for lack of any evidence against them and

because it did not seem reasonable that small birds would fly long distances. We think of these as ridiculous ideas, but really: is it any less ridiculous to declare that curlews fly over a thousand miles in only a few days, or that godwits fly from the Arctic to New Zealand, non-stop?

Certainly, one of the surprises of the new geolocator and transmitter studies is the revelation that some birds manage much longer flights with fewer stops than had been supposed. As a birder I've tended to think of the prolonged migration of shorebirds as a leisurely passage rather than an ultramarathon. But binoculars don't show much about what the birds are doing between sightings, and whether individual birds

hang around or are seen only once. On the other hand, some birds have more wanderings and stopovers than the range maps would have us believe, with nearly constant movements. There's no way one could figure out such things from observational records, and it's one of the amazing findings in modern ornithology. It shows us behavior of birds as individuals, not just as dates and numbers.

-- Al Shultz

References:

NY Times (Science), [*Flying far from land.*](#)
May 24, 2010

www.BirdsNebraska.org

J. Lienhard, R. Armstrong, [*Ancient explanations of bird migration.*](#) *Engines of our Ingenuity*, No. 2228, Univ. Houston.

A little bird quiz...

1. Put these birds in order by weight, from smallest to largest*:

- Mississippi Kite
- Cooper's Hawk
- American Coot
- Cattle Egret
- Blue-winged Teal

2. Put these birds in order by wingspan, from smallest to largest*:

- Killdeer
- Purple Martin
- Long-billed Dowitcher
- Wilson's Phalarope
- Black-necked Stilt

3. What birds are (or were) named for these people?

- Coues
- Merriam
- Fuertes
- Aiken
- Stephens

* Sizes according to Sibley Guide. Answers in next month's Spoonbill!

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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

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ONC Annual Dues:	\$ 8.00	\$ 15.00
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