

The Spoonbill

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

March 2004
Vol. 52 No. 3

March Meeting

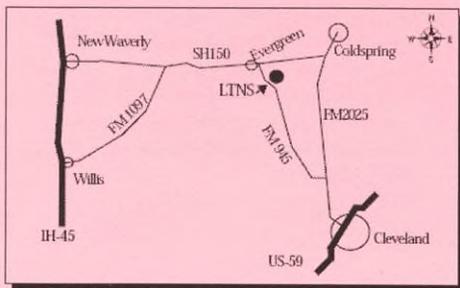
Monday, March 1, 2004
7:00 p.m.
Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet

Learning Corner – 6:30 p.m.:
Wintering Hummingbirds of the Texas Coast
--by Sumita Prasad, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory

Program:
The Outdoor Nature Club's Little Thicket Preserve
-- by Calvin Blakley, ONC President

The Little Thicket Nature Sanctuary is a wonderful asset of the Outdoor Nature Club, allowing one to get respite from the congestion of the city by getting absorbed into its more than seven hundred acres of piney woods that ONC has been preserving for more than fifty years. The presentation will illustrate its attractions through the seasons, including birds, wildflowers, mushrooms, butterflies, dragonflies, and activities. Discover why LTNS is a special benefit of ONC membership.

Calvin R. Blakley is a member of the Ornithology, Botany, and Conchology Groups of the Outdoor Nature Club, and has been President of the ONC since 1996.



Other Events

February 22, 2004 - OG Field Trip
Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR
Meet at 8:00 a.m. at refuge HQ. To reach the refuge from Houston, follow I-10 west to Sealy, S.H. 36 south, FM 3013 southwest 8 miles.

March 20, 2004 - OG Field Trip
Little Thicket Nature Sanctuary
with Connie and Calvin Blakley – see p. 3

April 1-4, 2004 - Galveston Featherfest
See p. 5

Monday, April 5, 2004
OG April Meeting
Program: Cecilia Riley on Spring Migration

Inside this issue:

About the OG	2
February Minutes	2
Field Trips	3
Environment	4
Chairman's Message	5
FeatherFest	5
The Spoonbill's Past	6
Trends	7
Clearing House	7
Membership Form	8

Minutes of the February 2, 2004 meeting Bayland Community Center -- Attendance 61

1. Learning Corner was presented by David Poteet and Rob Thacker, focusing on owls and their unique adaptations and calls. Emphasis was on the Houston area species, with study specimens from Brazos Bend State Park.
2. Chair Kathy Farr called the meeting to order at 7:03 pm.
3. Bird sightings included Whooping Cranes on the OG Rockport trip, Black Phoebe (the first in the city since 1987) at Beechnut & Braeswood, Rusty Blackbirds in Bear Creek Park, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks in Bellaire, a large flock of Sandhill Cranes on the Katy Prairie, White-tailed Hawks and Attwater's Prairie Chickens in Texas City.
4. The minutes of the January meeting were approved as printed in "The Spoonbill."
5. Kathy announced that Sumita Prasad will present a program Wednesday, February 4, at 7 p.m. at the Bellaire Nature Discovery Center.
6. The Great Backyard Bird Count is February 13 - 16.
7. Minutes of the January board meeting were on the reverse side of the agenda.
8. Iris Poteet presented the Featherfest budget. The bank balances are \$5773.71 in the checking account and \$3337.84 in an investment account. Binders for "The Spoonbill" and OG tri-folds are considered regular budget items. David Marrack moved and Andy Scott seconded the budget as presented; the motion carried.
9. Kathy Farr encouraged members to be Eleven Percenters and support the non-game and endangered species fund of TPWD administered by John Herron. See "The Spoonbill" (Feb. 2004) for the address to send donations.
10. Mary Ann Weber, HAS, is scouting parks for bird walks to be led by OG volunteers. Memorial, Hermann, and one park in each quadrant of the city will be part of the program whose goal is to involve people in birding and nature. Persons interested in leading the walks should contact Kathy Farr.
11. Al Shultz thanked newsletter contributors and reminded everyone of the February 10 deadline for the next issue.
12. Pat Pease reminded members that they should not only renew but also recruit new members. New members can pick up ONC handbooks tonight.
13. Andy Scott and Bill Saulmon are working on determining publishing dates of material in the library as a first step toward accessioning the library permanently.
14. On environmental issues, Mary Dodson announced that the Alaska Arctic NWR oil drilling bill has been resurrected and may be attached to a highway funding bill.
15. Duck ID handouts from last month's meeting were available.
16. Skip Almoney reported on recent field trips as follows:
 - In spite of early morning rain, the San Bernard field trip yielded good birds including Palm Warbler and Ash-throated Flycatcher.
 - 25 people participated in the quarterly trip to Rockport and had great close-up looks at 22 to 28 Whooping Cranes.
 - The group on the mid-week trip to the Katy Prairie saw three Bald Eagles.
 - There will be no mid-week field trip in February.

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
Clearinghouse:	David Sarkozi	713-520-5906
Membership:	Pat Pease	713-789-3306

Spoonbill: Al Shultz 281-829-0970
Email: kashultz@earthlink.net

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

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

17. Michael Williams introduced the speaker George Regmund, naturalist and biologist of Armand Bayou Nature Center and founder of Skimmer Nature Tours. For 27 years George has been on the staff of the 2500 acre nature center bordering the Johnson Space Center. The establishment of the center is due largely to the efforts of one man, Armand Yramategui. The center, which opened in 1977, has three ecosystems: bayou (brackish water), riparian forest, and prairie. The bayou has lost much of its marsh due to subsidence which leads to a loss of productivity. Restoration efforts are underway with non-native plants being the largest problem. The riparian mixed forest is the smallest ecosystem and requires the least management. Overpopulation of white-tailed deer is the greatest threat there, complicated by the hunting restrictions in the city of Pasadena. The native prairie is the rarest, most closely monitored, and most diverse ecosystem. Development, fire suppression, and grazing by cattle rather than bison have all contributed to the loss of prairie. David Marrack offered personal reflections relating to the establishment of the ABNC. George offered information on his Skimmer Nature Tours. Don Richardson introduced George as the new leader of the beginning birding classes offered by HAS.
18. Meeting adjourned at 8:30 p.m.

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.

Saturday, March 20, 2004 -- Field Trip to Little Thicket Nature Sanctuary – Join us for a tour of ONC's rustic nature preserve near Lake Livingston. The Little Thicket comprises 655 acres of wilderness with flowing creeks and trails through quiet forests of huge magnolias, towering pines, holly, and dogwood. Wear your comfortable shoes since we'll do lots of walking. You can primitive-camp onsite that night (no electricity & bring your own water). Meet at the Little Thicket at 8:00 AM. To get there, travel north from Houston on I-45 to New Waverly, and turn right (east) on SH 150. Go 17 miles to FM 945 (Evergreen) & turn right (south). Go 2 miles to the Little Thicket entrance on your left. For more directions and map, see your ONC directory or the OG website. Allow about 1.5 hours to drive there from Houston.

Saturday, April 17, 2004 -- Field Trip to Sabine Woods – Experience spring migration at one of the Upper Texas Coast's premier migrant traps. See details in next month's *Spoonbill*.

Please note: The dates for our quarterly weekend field trip to the **Big Thicket** with leader Fred Collins have been changed to **May 8-9, 2004**. Sign-up starts at the March 1st OG meeting.

San Bernard Field Trip Report – On Saturday January 17, 2004, 12 OG members met guest leader Ron Weeks under threatening skies for a tour of the San Bernard NWR. Woodland birding at Bobcat Woods was somewhat slow but we did see Grey Catbird, Blue-headed Vireo, White-throated Sparrow, and Wilson's Warbler among others. The auto loop around Moccasin Pond produced close-up scope views of LeConte's Sparrow, Sprague's Pipit, and a Great Horned Owl; in addition to numerous Snipe and the expected waterfowl species. The Scissor Tail walking trail provided good looks of an Ash-throated Flycatcher and Palm Warbler. Everyone enjoyed Ron's expertise and great ear for bird calls. We had 85 species for the trip.

–Bill Saulmon

Katy Prairie Mid-week Field Trip Report – On January 21, 2004, seven members of the OG waited patiently at Paul D. Rushing Park for the Mid-week Field trip leader, Skip Almoney, to show up. Despite this late start, the birding was very good.

The first stop was Warren Ranch Lake, where we saw numerous duck species, plus White Pelicans, White Ibises and other wading birds. There was a long discussion about the identity of a raptor sitting on a lonesome tree near the middle of the lake. The bird was variously identified as a Golden Eagle (not likely), an Osprey, a Ferruginous Hawk, and an immature Bald Eagle. The consensus was nearly reached that it was an immature Bald Eagle when the bird flew, and a Crested Caracara flew into the field of view. The size difference between these two birds convinced the skeptics that it was an eagle. Immediately following, this identification was confirmed by the appearance of two mature Bald Eagles, one of which perched in the same spot the immature had previously occupied.

We left Warren Lake and headed north and turned onto Betka Road. In a field on the northern side we a large flock of Sandhill Cranes (approximately 300). We then traveled to the Katy Prairie Conservancy's Manor property to look for Short-eared Owls. We had no luck with the owls, but we did get some very good looks at Le Conte's Sparrows.

We finished the morning by returning to Rushing Park. Just at the corner of the park some of the group got to see the two Great Kiskadees, but when those who missed them returned we were unable to locate them. Everyone picked up their own cars and most folks went on to Longenbaugh Road where we were greeted by some skeet shooters down by the creek. Here we saw a White-tailed Hawk and a Peregrine Falcon, but we didn't find the hoped-for Henslow's Sparrow.

Other species seen during the day included: Pied-billed Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant, Neotropic Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Cattle Egret, Greater White-fronted Goose, Snow Goose, Ross's Goose, Canada Goose, Green-winged Teal, Mottled Duck, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck, Black Vulture, Turkey Vulture, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, Merlin, American Coot, Killdeer, Greater Yellowlegs, Long-billed Curlew, Dowitcher species, Rock Pigeon, Mourning Dove, Common Ground-Dove, Belted Kingfisher, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, Blue Jay, American Crow, Carolina Chickadee, Carolina Wren, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Northern Mockingbird, American Pipit, Loggerhead Shrike, European Starling, Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Northern Cardinal, Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird, Eastern Meadowlark, Brewer's Blackbird, Great-tailed Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird, House Sparrow.
--Skip Almoney

Rockport Field Trip Report: A Super Weekend – Twenty-five members of the Houston OG left the Super Bowl hype behind and journeyed to Rockport for a weekend of birding on the Texas Gulf coast. The focus of this winter field trip was to bird the hotspots of the area, as well as to view the Whooping Cranes that winter on the salt marshes along the coast. Saturday's highlight was a four-hour narrated boat trip on the *Wharf Cat* through Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Of special interest was the opportunity for a very close view of a Whooping Crane family of four – two parents, and two juveniles from the same clutch – a highly unusual occurrence in this species. Various OG members reported spotting from 22 to 28 of these majestic birds during the trip. Some of the many other species seen on the boat trip were Sandhill Cranes, Ospreys, White-tailed Hawks, Common Loons, Double-Crested and Neotropic Cormorants, American Oystercatchers, Reddish Egrets and Tricolored Herons. Afterward, the group birded some other spots around Rockport and Copano Bay, including Oystercatcher Point and Cape Valero, looking for ducks, shorebirds and whatever else that could be seen. The day ended with a seafood dinner at a local restaurant as members relaxed and tallied the day's sightings.

The destination on Sunday morning was the Birding Center in Port Aransas. The boardwalk and viewing platform provided the perfect venue for spotting numerous ducks, wading birds, shorebirds and passerines. Other creatures sighted included a napping nutria and a very large alligator. The trip ended with a visit to the beach and a walk on the jetty in the sunshine. The final tally for the weekend was 97 species, including 18 species of ducks. Kudos to Bill Saulmon and Kathy Farr for a very well organized and most enjoyable weekend!

--Betsy Winn

Environmental News

A proposed "wind farm" on Galveston's Pelican Island will generate 150 megawatts from five to seven turbines. The plan brings a local focus to concerns over dangers to wildlife, particularly local wetland and migratory birds, in an effort to develop alternatives to fossil-fuel energy sources. The project is to begin with a risk assessment of bird collisions in March.

--CEC Environmental Exchange

http://www.cechouston.org/newsletter/2004/nl_02-04/windfarm.html

Chairman's Message

By Kathy Farr

In the past several months we've all heard from Skip Almoney about his work on OG's participation in Galveston's FeatherFest. He's put a lot of effort into this event because he has a vision of OG becoming a more robust, visible group. He's asked for money for professional presentation equipment and our help manning the booth. We've given him the money. Now we need to help "person" the booth.

There has been some grumbling about why it's necessary to do these types of activities. For some, this outreach thing is a detractor from birding. To date we have 174 renewing members, with 76 not yet renewed, but anticipated to do so. We lose about 10 members a year and gain about 10. That's a fairly stable group of 250, with an average age of about 55. This doesn't bode well for longevity and robustness. It's tough to fill leadership positions because so many of us have already been the leaders. Many of us "just want to go birding." So who is going to organize Learning Corners, meetings and field trips for us to join if no one is willing to lead?

Recruiting new members increases the pool of future leaders and requires some form of organized outreach. There are not a lot of local venues available, but we participate in the four most fertile options: Earth Day, Audubon's Sunday in the Woods, FeatherFest, and City Park Bird Walks. Being visible at these events improves our ability to add new blood and increases OG's stature in Houston's birding community. OG contributes the Learning Corner, excellent programs, and wonderful, inexpensive field trips that deserve to be shared. We have a lot to offer birders at all levels of experience. But we have to be physically present at these events to successfully recruit significant numbers of new members.

Also, remember those folks who helped you get started in birding. What if they had "just wanted to bird" rather than getting involved in reaching out to share their passion with you? Think about the biggest names in birding. Don't most of them actively engage in outreach to the non-birding community? And, come to think of it, don't most of us recruit new people because we're so enthusiastic about birding? Helping with the booth at FeatherFest is just another opportunity to infect others with our love of birding. So get in touch with Skip and help out.

A Great Birding Event !

April 1-4, 2004

Galveston's FeatherFest

Check the FeatherFest Website
<http://www.galvestonfeatherfest.com/>

Four days of tours, field trips, seminars, children's activities, contests, films, Birders' Bazaar...

Lots to do – and the OG will be there!
Contact Skip Almoney and help with the OG booth:
email: SKIPALM@aol.com phone: 713-524-4285

❖ Photo Search

Do you have any photographs that you'd allow the OG to use in our display at Featherfest? An interesting bird photo, or a great piece of habitat, maybe even a back yard or feeding station?

Particularly welcome would be photos of your fellow OG members, caught in the act of searching, observing, visiting, or just enjoying the outdoors on one of our fine recent field trips.

Contact Skip Almoney, our Featherfest coordinator (see box at left), or Kathy Farr (phone 713-939-9375).

From The Spoonbill's Past

Compiled by Skip Almoncy



THE SPOONBILL

Fifty Years Ago:

REPORT OF THE "NATURE CARAVAN"

An outstanding Nature Club project for this year was the "Nature Caravan" on December 5th. Early in November, Dr. Preston Brandt of the Bay Area Council solicited the aid of the Club for this trip to be conducted in Brazoria County with experienced bird observers as leaders. Consisting of slightly over 100 Scouts and Leaders, this was probably the first activity of its kind in the State and we hope the fore-runner of many such annual events in the future.

Each boy attending was authorized to wear an embroidered insignia entitled "Nature Caravan". The District also purchased 200 Checklists, recently published by the Ornithology Group, and distributed the checklists to all participants. Each leader directed his group to the various habitats found in Brazoria County, and among the 107 species of birds seen were: - several Bald Eagles - Vermilion Flycatchers - Brown Creepers, Gold Finches, Eared Grebes - Caracaras - Glossy Ibises --and many flocks of Snow and Blue Geese. Some reptiles were seen too, namely - Tree Frogs - Leopard Frogs - Green Frogs - and Water Moccasins.

The interrelationships of the various forms of animal and plant life, and the need for their conservation were demonstrated in the field, where such instruction is most effective. The leaders were amazed at the sustained interest and enthusiasm displayed by the boys, and all are hoping to participate in a similar event with the Scouts next winter. It's hoped that more Club members, specialists in any field of Nature, will participate and thus broaden the scope of this project.

The Group leaders were - Joe Heiser, Carrie Holcomb, Norma Oates, John Rehbein, Frank Watson, Josephine Wilkin, Steve Williams, Richard Wright, and Armand Yramategui. Frank Watson's son, David, and Victor Emanuel, Jr. were very capable assistants to the leaders. Although Darris Massingill was unable to serve as a leader, the success of the Caravan and the turnout of leaders were largely due to her efforts as Field Trip Coordinator.

Forty Years Ago:

I thought I was seeing a covey of quail when I saw 3 or more but I have since learned it is a bevy of quail and a covey of partridges. Also, it isn't a mess of sparrows in my back yard but a host of sparrows. From the LIFE Nature Series "The Birds" here are more terms describing birds in groups:

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| a siege of herons or bitterns | a badelyng of ducks | a gaggle of geese |
| a sord (or sute) of mallards | a spring of teal | a muster of peacocks |
| a herd of swans, cranes or curlews | a company of widgeon | a cast of hawks |
| a brood of chickens | a nye of pheasants | a congregation of plovers |
| a covert of coots | a wisp (or walk) of snipe | a desert of lapwings |
| a bazaar of murrets (guillemots) | a fall of woodcock | a murmuration of starlings |
| a flight of doves or swallows | a watch of nightingales | an exaltation of larks |
| a chattering of choughs | a building of rooks | |

--unknown author

Trends Around Town

The 27th Buffalo Bayou Christmas Bird Count on 3 January 2004 established or equaled all-time count highs for Neotropic Cormorant, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbill, Turkey Vulture, Osprey, Cooper's Hawk, Spotted Sandpiper, American Woodcock, Ring-billed Gull, Eurasian Collared-Dove, White-winged Dove, Barred Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Carolina Chickadee, Marsh Wren, Gray Catbird, Yellow-throated Warbler, and House Finch. To some extent this likely reflects the high participation level (123 total participants = second highest for the count; and likely making this count the most popular in Texas for the second consecutive year). However, for some of these species (e.g., Eurasian Collared-Dove, White-winged Dove, Ring-billed Gull, and House Finch), these numbers appear to be a reflection of increasing local populations; this may also be true for Neotropic Cormorant (or is it just a mild winter?). Also, is the return of Northern Bobwhite to the count an indicator of improved conditions for this species? I have heard reports that Bobwhite are doing very well on the Katy Prairie, just west of the count circle; contrast this to what seemed to be the prevailing opinion just a few years ago, when it appeared that Bobwhite on the Katy Prairie were not doing so well, with fire ants and flooding during nesting season being implicated as contributing factors.

--Bob Honig (Compiler, Buffalo Bayou CBC)

Clearing House – January 2004

by David Sarkozi -- david@sarkozi.net -- phone 713-412-4409

The Clearing House did not receive many reports this month; there were not enough to do the usual report by species. There was a problem with the website for reporting, and I know that hurt things. The website has been fixed, and reports should be working fine now.

Still, there were some very good birds in the area. A **Bewick's Wren** was reported by Eric Carpenter on Longenbaugh Road in West Harris County, January 31. A **Summer Tanager** was observed at Russ Pittman Park in Bellaire on the 27th by Richard Rulander. Steve Gross reported the **Great Kiskadees** at Katy-Hockley Road and Sharp Road on January 19 (seen by various observers in mid- to late January).

Mike Austin found a **Great Black-backed Gull** at East Beach in Galveston; his details are printed below.

Common and scientific name: Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*)

Number of individuals, sexes, ages, general plumage: 1 first winter

Location: Rain pool in middle of East Beach, Galveston

Date and time observed: 1-31-04 1553-1604

Reporting observer Michael J. Austin, Friendswood, TX

Head: White with fine horizontal dark markings behind and above eye reaching almost to crown. Eye dark. Bill thick, heavy but rather short with pronounced gonydeal angle; black with some flesh beginning to show irregularly at base. Eye dark.

Underparts: Chest white faintly barred brown. Flanks more heavily barred. Undertail white with many widely spaced fine dark bars. Legs pink.

Tail: Black terminal tail band. Inner 2/3 of tail white. Rump white, with the most distal row of feathers with pale gray oval centers. (Seen extremely well when bird preened while looking away from observer.)

Upperparts: Back feathers mostly brownish with notched white borders. A few dark feathers are admixed. These have very dark centers, concolor with the tertials. There is a horseshoe-shaped crescent at the feather tip, brown in the center (at the feather tip) and white on each end). These few darker feathers appear crisper and fresher than the other back feathers. Primaries blackish. Lesser coverts very crisp, predominantly white with three narrow dark bands crossing each feather horizontally. Tertials dark brown (lighter than primaries) with three wide white scalloped areas at tips.

Outdoor Nature Club
Ornithology Group
P.O. Box 270894
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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

*Membership dues are
now payable for 2004 –*

*If you have not renewed,
this Spoonbill issue will
be your last!*

**Save these dates !
April 1-4, 2004**

Galveston's Featherfest

Check the Featherfest Website
<http://www.galvestonfeatherfest.com/>