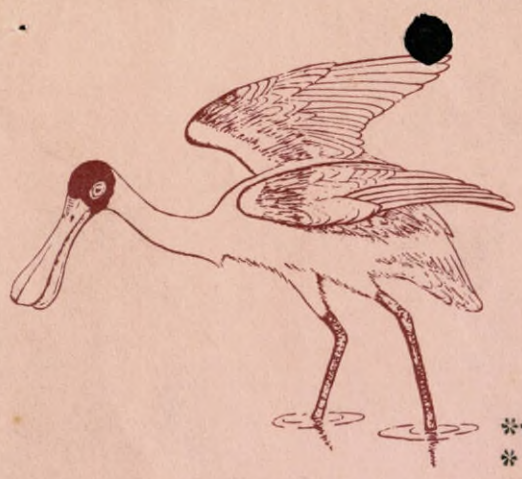
N. P.



THE SPOONBILL

Volume III Number 5

SEPTEMBER 1954

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* The outward symbol of bird watching is *
*a pair of binoculars—the indespensable *
*"weapon" used by birders for the purpose *
*of "bagging" new "trophies", i.e., adding *
*new species to their life list... *
****

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FORTHCOMING ACTIVITIES

Lunar Watch.....See "Clearing House"
Sept. 19, 6:00 A.M..Field Trip to Galveston-High Is....Buffalo Stadium
Oct. 7, 8:00 P.M..Business Meeting.....5815 Schuler

REPORT OF AUGUST 14 FIELD TRIP

Hot weather (it was 96° in Houston) didn't stop the 11 birders who followed Field Trip Chairman Josiephine Wilkin along Miller Road near Juliff on a late afternoon bird watching "Safari." However, like our Houston weather, birds can be most unpredictable—as the members of this particular field trip soon found out. Few of the birds anticipated in the August SPOONBILL were seen (probably due to the extreme heat and drought) and virtually all of the birds observed were in the process of moulting.

Oddly enough, two of the three highlights of the trip did not involve birds! The first was the discovery of a snake caught in a spider's web some 7 feet above the ground! True, the snake was small (about 7 inches long) and the spider large (about a 5-inch leg-spread) but it was still a most unusual sight to behold. The second highlight took place shortly after this and it, too, involved a snake—a Copperhead to be exact—which our daring young Chairman, Mac Ramsey, immediately seized by the neck with his bare hands! Of course, the snake was rather small (about 14 inches long), and Mr. Ramsey did use a stick in order to pin its head down, but even so the incident aroused considerable anxiety for the welfare of our "too-young-to-die" Chairman on the part of the female contingent of the "expedition"! Before releasing the reptile (a move of which the general public would not approve—but which the O.G. felt was justifiable in that reptiles are the ancestors of birds!) Mr. Ramsey carefully pointed out the characteristics of the poisonous species.

So much for the herpetological highlights of the field trip—and back once again to the birds. A Summer Tanager chasing a Bluebird at fairly close range provided the group with an interesting red and blue color contrast between two birds of widely-separated families. Other species of interest recorded during the trip included Crested Flycatchers, a Wood Pewee (feeding Phoebe-like along a fence), Barn Swallows (vanguards of the big fall movement described under "Clearing House"), and Barred Owls (heard calling).

At dusk, Mrs. Wilkin opened her ever-ready picnic basket, and everyone enjoyed a late snack by the light of a beautiful, full Texas moon—a most appropriate and memorable way to wind up the day's activities...

The ardent birders who defied 90-plus temperatures in order to make the trip: Jerry Baker, Betty Crowley, Conrad Deats, John Frels, Harriet Hunt, Ruth Moorman, James Murray, Norma Oates, Noel Pettingell, Mac Ramsey, and Josiephine Wilkin.

"MYSTERY BIRD" IDENTITY SOLVED AT MEETING AUGUST 5

During the last week in June and the first two weeks in July John Frels of 1518 Caywood Lane (NW Houston) watched and photographed a brightly-colored exotic-type finch feeding on bread and grain he regularly puts out for the birds in his back yard. It was yellow-breasted with a green back, a long black crest, black throat, and had a yellow line over the eye and a narrow black mask across the eyes. Its identification remained a mystery until the O.G. Meeting, at which time the colored pictures of the bird taken by Mr. Frels were shown and then compared with an illustration of the Green Cardinal in AVIARY AND CAGE BIRDS—THEIR CARE AND BREEDING by M. L. and Flora Flowers (Bird Haven, Reseda, Calif.). The text gave the following description of this interesting South American Species (P. 74; Part I: Finches, Quail and Doves): Green Cardinal (Gubernatrive cristata).

Habitat—The Argentine to northern Patagonia. Size about the same as the North American Red Cardinal, but slightly more slender. The Green Cardinal or Black-crested Cardinal as they are sometimes called, is probably the least common of all the Cardinals. They are hardy and long-lived in an aviary. They are the easiest to become acclimated and become very gentle, more so than other Cardinals. They can be bred in an aviary, but the difficulty lies in securing sufficient live food for the young while being reared. They seldom reach adult age unless this type of food is supplied them in abundance.

And so away from the escaped South American cage bird and back once again to our familiar feral species, viz., Leonard McWhirter whose motion pictures of birds, taken in the wild on some of his "expeditions", were marveled at by the group. The film portrayed the booming of Prairie Chickens and the American Bittern stalking its prey. Although the Bittern's stalking appeared exaggerated Mr. McWhirter assured us the film had not been doctored in any way.

ORNITHOLOGY GROUP MEETING SEPTEMBER 2

Although advertised as a "Business Meeting", it is not "strictly business." So as part of the program a phonograph and bird records were brought to the meeting. Members of the group requested bird songs that they had not heard, or a bird song they wished to verify still in mind from their vacation (a number of minds were soon set at ease).

John Frels showed some of his prize slides taken from a blind (a blanket thrown over a clothes line) in his back yard. These were everyday birds that each of us enjoy, but it is surprising what details a good picture will portray. By popular demand he again showed the Green Cardinal slides. He then allowed us "inside" to see some of the pitfalls encountered by the photographer while trying to photograph our feathered friends. They can do the most undesirable things at the most inopportune moment while our photographer sweats and fumes in his blind.

For the benefit of those who had not seen them at a previous meeting, Leonard McWhirter was asked to show some of his bird slides which were enjoyed by all.

We took time out for refreshments and a magazine clipping entitled "Flash Identification" from BOYS LIFE was passed around, and each one tried his skill at identifying the silhouettes. The artist had definitely set out to trick us, but we were "on our toes." As one member stated, "I hate to say it but that looks like a bat" which indeed it was.

SEPTEMBER 19, (SUNDAY) - FIELD TRIP TO GALVESTON-HIGH ISLAND

Meet at the Buffalo Stadium parking lot where cars not needed to carry passengers can be parked. From past experience it has been found that during the summer the best place to be certain of seeing birds is along the beach. The last trip made to this location was about two years ago; therefore, this trip should prove interesting to old and new members alike.

CLEARING HOUSE

LUNAR WATCH - MEMORIAL PARK

Under the leadership of Francis and Eleanor McMahon, the O. G. members are again participating in the nationwide lunar count (watching migrating birds pass across the moon). Twelve observers were present August 13. There will be another watch between Sept. 10 and 12. You are invited to call the McMahons for full particulars.

MORE ON SWAINSON'S WARBLER

...Edgar Kincaid, in the September T.O.S. NEWSLETTER, passes along some interesting data he received from O. C. Sheffield of Tyler, who saw and heard a Swainson's Warbler in a dense brier-and-brush thicket (same as Houston site) in a swamp about 4 miles SE of Tyler from April 7 through July 18 of this year...

...Arlie K. McKay reports Swainson's Warblers at Cove (NW Chambers Co.) on the following dates:

June 1, 1941 (One bird; singing)
Aug. 17, 1947 (" " ")
Aug. 31, 1947 (" " ")
June 17, 1951 (Two or three birds; singing)
July 15, 1951 (One pair - two birds)
July 11, 1953 (Two birds; singing)

* * * *

August 1 - Frigate Bird (female) reported at Bolivar Point Ferry docks (5:30-6:30 P.M.) by Jerry baker, Ruth Moorman, and Norma Oates; also seen by Armand Yramategui at same site and time a week later. (Note: One seen May 2 over Galveston Causeway by Mr. and Mrs. Charles Hamilton.)

August 1 - Spoonbills (3) seen at Sheldon Reservoir by Mr. James Murray about 200 yards south of Garrett Road near the newly-constructed Lake Houston canal. (Note: Egrets—including Reddish—and several species of herons also frequent this area.)

August 21 - Barn Swallows apparently spectacular as these birds were reported migrating by Ruth Moorman and Norma Oates near Katy. Also, observed in Austin by Josiephine Wilkin, Edgar Kincaid, and Gladys Taylor.

August 22 - " " observed migrating at Bolivar Point by Ruth Moorman and Norma Oates.

Sept. 1 - Oystercatcher (3 - one pair and a single) seen SE of Jones Lake along the Intracoastal Waterway (on spoil banks between channel markers 86 and 96) Leota Stilwell, Mac Ramsey, and Josiephine Wilkin...A first-hand account of this field trip follows...

We launched the boat at the LaFrance Fishing Camp on Highlands Bayou and went directly to the small islands (spoil banks) in Jones Lake. There were quite a number of abandoned Egret and Heron nests, and a few eggs were lying on the ground. We were downhearted to see so many dead birds on the islands which were apparently young birds and fully feathered. After lunch, we went along the Intracoastal Waterway and were surprised to see two Black Vultures on a cross bar on one of the islands (later flying over the salt water).

Leota noted a bird and pointed him out to me. We asked Mac to turn the boat around and go back to the island. When we were near enough he cut off the motor—we looked and screamed, "Oystercatcher!" The bird turned, looked and gave a piercing "wheep! wheep!" as he flew past us. It was the second time Leota and I had seen this species, which was really a thrill. We later saw a pair and I naturally had to get close enough to get a picture (I hope) as they fed on a shell reef along the shoreline.

Along Highlands Bayou, Seaside Sparrows were singing and came right to the edge of the shore, seemingly to look us over. As Mac was busy piloting the boat we were busy scanning land, sea, and air. A rail was spied behind a post (12X12), surrounded by grass, taking a bath (obiously very well chosen). We insisted on seeing him better, so again Mac had to move the boat into position in order that we could verify the species. It was a tough battle for Mac (and the boat) but we won—Clapper Rail.

By observing birds from boats they do not become as easily frightened and I believe others in the O.G. would enjoy such a trip. If any of the members are able to furnish a motor boat please let me know, and perhaps a field trip can be arranged. (J.W.)

Omitted from August "Clearing House"

July 20 - Common Loon reported in Offatts Bayou, Galveston Island (E of 61st St.) by Fred and Ada Marie Webster.

* * * *

Your editor received a lengthy and enthusiastic letter from Mabel Todd describing her visit to Mrs. E. O. Guenther some three miles from Wharton on Caney Creek, July 21 thru August 1. Mrs. Guenther's place is notable in that it is situated along the route followed by the rare Whooping Cranes in their migrations to and from Aransas Refuge...

* * * *

MIGRATING BIRDS

Broad-winged Hawks, which are to be watched for between Sept. 20-25.
Olive-sided Flycatchers -Last Year (Sept. 13) one was seen along the Tri-City Beach Road, near Optimist Camp (where a Western Kingbird was later seen on Oct. 25), and off Evergreen Pelly Road south of Baytown (same date—Sept. 13, 1953)...

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Listen for the Peggy Lee recording of "Autumn in Rome" (Decca 29076) which features a songbird in the background. I am not familiar with the song of the Nightingale—which the bird on the record is doubtless intended to be—but I still suspect the singer in this instance to be our own American Mockingbird. Be that as it may, it's still good to hear a "sequel" to "Ebb Tide" (see this dept. in Oct., 1953 SPOONBILL). Listen, too, for Richard Maltby's recording of "Meadowlark" (label "X" No. X-0016) and notice how closely the melody follows the pattern of the Eastern Meadowlark's song. Then imagine how much more appealing the orchestration would sound with the actual voice of a Meadowlark blending with the music at the beginning and end of the arrangement...

* * * *

THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, scores again with, "The Solemn, Sociable Puffins"—September 1954, by R. M. Lockley, who has spent many years studying the life of the Puffin.

This proves to be a very enlightening and amusing article about a pair of Puffins observed on the island of Skomer, which the author prefers to call "Lundaland" a Norwegian word meaning "Land of the Puffins."

His observations are throughly explained and well-illustrated with beautiful color plates. He tells of the family life of the pair of Puffins from the mating to incubating of the egg, feeding the young bird, playful antics of the young birds, and the relaxation period enjoyed by the parents each afternoon. Finally the parents fly out to sea and leave the young bird alone. A week later, he in turn leaves by night for the open sea.

* * * *

The following excerpt from BIRDS AND THEIR ATTRIBUTES by Glover M. Allen (P. 81) reveals instinctive behavior patterns as complex as those of the Honey-guide bird of Africa, recounted in this dept. back in May:

New Zealand is a place of strange birds. One species—the Huia (Neomorpha), (a black bird the size of a pigeon, with a curious oval wattle on each cheek)—shows the unusual trait of having the bill of different shape in the two sexes. These birds, now believed to be nearly extinct following the destruction of the forests, were said to mate for life, and the pair always kept in close comradeship. They fed on a certain species of grub living in dead wood. The tunnels of these grubs were dug open by the male with his straight sharp beak, and often if he laid bare the burrow the female, with her longer, more slender, and downward-curving beak, reached in and extracted the dainty. In this way the two birds were said to work together, feeding on the common spoil in a sort of cooperative housekeeping.

* * * *

DID YOU KNOW

...That in the Ruffed Grouse, the toes are provided in winter with a curious fringe of horny points which act as a support, like snowshoes?

* * * *

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