



The Spoonbill

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

November 2006

Vol. 55 No. 9

November Meeting

Monday, November 6, 2006 -- 7:00 p.m.

Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet, Houston

6:30 -- Learning Corner

Program: Birding Panama with **Howard Laidlaw**

This program will give an overview of the species that can be encountered and sites that are visited during a birdwatching trip to Central Panama. Howard Laidlaw will present some of the families of birds that have close cousins in the USA, and others that are not represented at all in the USA. Panama is reported to have the most accessible rain forest in the world, with 900 species of birds.

Howard was born and raised in Yorkshire, England, where his interest in birds and natural history developed from an early age. Before settling in Texas, he lived in Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil for a combined total of 17 years. His birding adventures have taken him from Alaska to the southern tip of South America, as well as Europe, Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific, and he has spent the equivalent of several years in the field. Howard has been guiding for a number of years and has organized and led bird tours in Texas and also to Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela. He speaks both Spanish and Portuguese fluently, and his language abilities, combined with his intimate knowledge of the region, allow him to travel in Latin America with ease. One of his keen interests is the recording and study of bird vocalizations and he has built up an extensive collection of sound recordings.

His company, Texas and Beyond, offers guided tours in Texas and to other destinations, including Mexico, Belize, Costa Rica, Panama, Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

Other Events

Wed. Nov. 8: Midweek Trip

Hermann Park with Skip Almony

Sat. Nov. 18: Sheldon Lake State Park

regular monthly OG trip

December 16: Houston (Baytown)

Christmas Bird Count

...and many other CBCs

Dec. 14 – Jan. 5

January 26-29: OG Quarterly Trip,

NE Texas with Ron Baltzegar

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Minutes of the October 2, 2006 Meeting

Bayland Community Center

Attendance: 67

- Learning Corner:** Winnie Burkett discussed ways to help us identify our long-legged beauties, the herons. Her emphases were on color, size, shape, behavior, leg and bill color, habitat, and eating methods. The white morphs of Reddish Egret stay white throughout life. Both reddish and white morphs breed together and the white morphs are mostly found south of here. Cattle Egrets, introduced in the 1950s, migrate in the Americas but not in their native Africa.
- Welcome:** Chairman Michael Williams opened the meeting stating that he would like our meeting this evening to be dedicated to the memory of Al Swarts, who had been a long-time member of the OG until his death in August. A motion to do so was approved. Al stood for all we love and cherish about birding and it is with this honor that we remember him.
- Bird Sighting:** Swainson's Hawk, Western Kingbird; many hummers on a bush at Boy Scout Woods; 28,000 Broad-winged Hawks seen at Smith Point; a kettle of Wood Storks; Peregrine Falcon, Yellow-breasted Chat, Orchard Oriole, Northern Flicker (yellow-shafted), Chimney Swifts, and Roseate Spoonbill.
- Minutes:** Minutes of the September meeting were approved.
- Membership:** Margaret stated dues are not due until January, but may be paid any time now.
- Environmental Issues:** Chairman Michael presented a letter of opposition to the plan of building a bridge from Galveston to Bolivar. He also said the website www.SaveTexasParks.com is new and we can access this site to help raise awareness about funding. Houston Audubon also has a website on the subject. It was noted that the LNG port at Quintana is expanding. David Poteet said there will be a clean-up at Hook Woods on November 4, 9:30 to 1:00.
- Newsletter:** Deadline for submissions will be October 14th.
- Field Trips:** Bill Saulmon reported on the Smith Point trip. Adam Woods stated that the Brazos Bend SP trip was a great success. A Western Kingbird and Vermilion Flycatcher were seen. Adam commented on the upcoming trips to Little Thicket and Granger.
- Budget:** Jim Winn gave us the good news; the club has \$8,254.00 in the bank. Donations are always welcomed, and please state on checks that the amount is for OG.
- Flash Bulletin:** Short-eared Owls are already being seen on the Katy Prairie, a month early.
- Speaker:** With a flourish and a red-carpet welcome, Chairman Michael Williams introduced our own Robin Leonard. She spoke on "The Birding Culture" from her thesis on "Following the Flock." The program featured a short film of interviews of our OG members, and Fred Collins and Ted Eubanks speaking about their thoughts on birding and some of their experiences. Robin's conclusions from the interviews, trips with birders, and OG meetings were that birders bird on the birds' terms – ironically, birds have control over birders. There are four types of birders: *Spiritual Birder* (birding transforms them), *Scientific Birder* (birding is intellectual for them), *Naturalist* (they love the whole experience of birding and are least likely to have a life list), and *Conservationist* (hard-core campaigners for conservation issues). Every birder has some of the characteristics of all four types.
- Meeting adjourned at 8:45 pm.**
-- Shirley Mondshine

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/>

November 18: Field Trip to Sheldon Lake

This month's trip will be to Sheldon Lake State Park on November 18, 2006. A Texas Parks and Wildlife Department official stationed at the Park will be our guide for the morning and will give us an introduction to the natural history of Sheldon Lake State Park, and of course will help us find wintering ducks, geese, and sparrows as well as other interesting birds. Sheldon Lake State Park and Environmental Learning Center is a 2,800 acre outdoor education and recreation facility located in northeast Harris County. The park is split into two units: Sheldon Lake is accessible from Garrett and Pineland/Fauna roads, and the Environmental Learning Center is accessible from Beaumont Highway. The reservoir levees encompass 1,200 acres, of which 800 are permanently inundated and 400 acres are marsh and swampland. Sheldon Reservoir, located on Carpenter's Bayou, a tributary of Buffalo Bayou, was constructed in 1942 by the Federal government to provide water for war industries along the Houston Ship Channel. Texas Parks and Wildlife acquired the reservoir in 1952 and opened it in 1955 as the Sheldon Wildlife Management Area. Sheldon Lake was designated a state park in 1984. This should be a great trip, so you will not want to miss it.

We will meet in the parking lot for the Environmental Learning Center at 8:00 a.m. Heading northbound on Beltway 8 East, proceed under the overpass of US 90 (Crosby Freeway) for one-quarter mile and take the "JCT 90 (Business)" exit. Turn right on Business 90 (Beaumont Highway) and head east for two miles to Park Road 138. Look for the flagpole on the north side of the road. There is also a brown highway sign on the right. Turn left over the railroad tracks to the park entrance.

Alternatively, if you are coming from the north, heading southbound on Beltway 8, turn left and head east on Garrett Rd. for one-half mile to Fauna. Turn right and head south on Fauna which will change its name to Pineland. On your left will be the Sheldon Lake levee. After 2.5 miles, cross over the railroad tracks to a stop light. Turn left at the traffic light onto Business 90 (Beaumont Highway) for one mile to Park Road 138. Look for the flag pole on the north side of the road. There is also a brown highway sign on the right. Turn left over the railroad tracks to the park entrance.

Be sure to bring: binoculars, a hat, sunscreen, raingear (in case it rains, but we will bird rain or shine), camera, scope, water, and snacks and a lunch if you plan on birding after lunch or just enjoying a picnic lunch with your fellow birders before leaving.

January 26-29, 2007: Quarterly Trip to NE Texas

Our next quarterly trip will be to northeast Texas on January 26-29, 2007. Ron Baltzegar, a resident birder in northeast Texas, will lead us in search of Smith's and Lapland Longspurs, wintering sparrows, ducks, and geese, and other unusual birds that have a habit of turning up during the winter in northeast Texas. We will be visiting places like Lake Tawakoni, The Village Creek Drying Beds, and Mount Vernon. If you follow TexBirds then I am sure that you have seen Ron and Matt White's posts from these locations. They have found some great birds, and this trip should give us a chance also. You will not want to miss it. More details will be in the December *Spoonbill*, so stay tuned. If you are interested in this trip, please let me know and I will get your name on the list and get more details to you when I get them.

--Adam Wood, OG Field Trip Coordinator birdman_570@yahoo.com 713-515-1692

OG Mid-Week Birding Trips

The OG will sponsor a midweek birding trip the second Wednesday of each month from September through May. These will be informal birding trips with Skip Almoney as the leader. Skip will be at the site at 8:00 a.m. and the trip will not last beyond 12 noon. Depending on the birds and the number of participants, the trip may not be a full 4 hours. Each location listed below is in or near the city of Houston with only a few outside Beltway 8. Anyone is welcome and we will meet unless the weather is seriously inclement. The following are the locations for each month of the upcoming season.

November 2006	Hermann Park	March 2007	Jesse H. Jones Park
December 2006	Edith L. Moore Sanctuary	April 2007	Herman Brown Park
January 2007	Cullinan Park	May 2007	Hermann Park
February 2007	Russ Pittman Park		

Trip Report: Brazos Bend State Park

Eight participants fairly new to birding enjoyed a lovely morning of birding in Brazos Bend State Park on September 23. I challenged the participants to take a stab at identifying each bird seen without being afraid of misidentifying it. Throughout the course of the morning the participants learned to observe the whole bird in its environment and not just focus in on its field marks. Highlights for the trip were a Western Kingbird and a juvenile male Vermilion Flycatcher seen within 100 yards of each other about 200 yards shy of the observation tower on 40-Acre Lake. Also of note was one flock of about 50 Blue-winged Teal that flew by us several times during the hike. I believe they were migrants just arriving for their winter stay on the upper Texas Coast. There were still several adult as well as numerous juvenile Purple Gallinules still around 40-Acre Lake. No Wood Stork was seen during the morning unlike the previous mornings where a large kettle of Storks was observed flying out of the park. Thirty-one species were observed well by all during the trip. I believe that all participants learned some new birding techniques, and also found out about other upcoming opportunities to continue learning and improving their birding skills, like the Christmas Bird Counts and the monthly surveys at Armand Bayou and Bolivar. --Adam Wood

West 11th Street Park

OG members Ed and Barbara Hickl urge others to consider supporting the effort to preserve an important tract of habitat near Houston's urban core. --Editor

This 20-acre tract of land, located between T. C. Jester and Ella, has been owned by the Houston Independent School District (HISD) for past 55 years. Neighborhood residents have used the green space as a *de facto* park, creating a habitat for an exciting range of birds, butterflies and wildlife, with one of the largest stands of uncut native trees inside the 610 Loop. In 2005, the City of Houston entered into a contract with HISD to purchase the property for \$9 million, \$4 million of which was to be funded by the City and \$5 million is to be raised by the Houston Parks Board. The Houston Parks Board is a private non-profit organization, recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization; every project of the Houston Parks Board is funded by the generous contributions of private donors, including individuals, families, neighborhoods, foundations and corporations.

Fundraising for the park is continuing and you can help! Donations can be made by mail to Houston Parks Board, 2001 Kirby Drive, Suite 814, Houston, TX 77019; or online at http://www.houstonparksboard.org/online_donation.html

The Chase, or Confessions of a Lister -- Part 3

Bob Ohmart's account of his Year of the Chase continues with the search for Ruddy Ground-Dove in southern Arizona and New Mexico, in February 2003:

I tried the Patons, made a brief stop at San Pedro House east of Sierra Vista, and then again checked the area around Cotton City. By this time I was rather frustrated. That evening I called the homeowner in Luis Lopez south of Socorro, even though my last information was that that dove had apparently left, on the off chance that the bird had been found again. It had been seen and he invited me to his home. This resulted in another early morning drive to meet him about 7:30 or so. Though numerous birds were coming to his feeders the RG Dove did not show up. He had to leave but said I could hang around as long as I liked. After three hours I was about ready to give up but first walked further into his back yard to get a better view of an old corral next door and up popped a male Ruddy Ground-Dove which perched on a pipe no more than fifteen feet away. As usual my camera was in my truck.

Leaving there I birded the nearby Bosque Del Apache NWR for a while and headed for Albuquerque where all three rosy-finches were being seen at Sandia Crest east of the city. They were not feeding in the late afternoon but the next morning I had good looks at all of them – Black, Brown-capped, and Gray-crowned – plus a number of other species. Heading towards home I decided to detour up to Canadian, Texas, and drive some areas known to contain Lesser Prairie Chickens. I had seen them on a lek in Kansas but had never found one in Texas. There were several inches of snow on the ground the next morning and I was not sure I wanted to venture off the highway, but finally decided to try a few country roads. Luckily a chicken flew across the road right in front of me. This six-day trip covered parts of three states and over 2800 miles and yielded approximately 95 species, one life bird and one new Texas bird.

On March 12 there was a report of a Slate-throated Redstart in Pharr, Texas. Leaving home about 2:30 a.m. on the 13th I saw this life bird by 9:00 or so.

There were about 25 people there and it seemed strange that most seemed more interested in watching the Blue Mockingbird that was also there even though I am sure most had seen it before. I guess by the time I arrived they had all the looks they wanted at the redstart. This bird taught me not to procrastinate if at all possible, as the bird was not seen again after that day.

Back to southeast Arizona – a Crescent-chested Warbler was found in Madera Canyon south of Tucson in late April. Apparently the bird was first seen on Friday. Sunday I drove fifteen hours to Benson and was in Madera Canyon by 7:00 (9:00 Central Daylight) on Monday. Though numerous good birds were seen including Elegant Trogon, several Painted Redstarts, Townsends, Hermit and Red-faced Warblers, Hepatic Tanager and Scott's Oriole, the Crescent-chested did not cooperate. I returned for most of the following morning but none of the many birders there found the bird. That afternoon I worked my way east to Sierra Vista for the night.

Morning found me and several others up in Miller Canyon to look for a Flame-colored Tanager that had been seen there along with some apparent hybrids. We first heard it calling, and then had good looks at it by 8:00, another life bird. I briefly stopped at Beattys at the end of the Miller Canyon road to check for hummingbirds and then to Mary Jo's B&B in Ash Canyon where she had numerous hummers including a Lucifer. I had seen one in Big Bend National Park several years earlier but had never seen one in Arizona. After observing the Lucifer and numerous other birds I headed for home in a roundabout way, stopping at Portal and Cave Creek Canyon and on to Deming, New Mexico, returning to Katy the next day. This five-day trip of 2300 miles yielded one lifer, five or six Arizona birds and perhaps 40 year birds.

Mid May – a Thick-billed Parrot was reported on a ranch (apparently one of Ted Turner's) in Sierra County, New Mexico. This resulted in a quick two

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and one-half day trip. I left home about noon on the 14th and drove to Las Cruces. The next morning I was at the ranch by 7:00 and saw several birds including the parrot. Then I stopped at Elephant Butte Lake State Park and then went on to Del Rio for the night. The next day I stopped briefly at Garner State Park and then on home. Unfortunately, the New Mexico Bird Records Committee did not accept the parrot as a "countable" bird. Oh well, I saw lots of other good birds in both New Mexico and Texas.

June – another trip to southeast Arizona as Buff-collared Nightjars were being heard and seen in the California Gulch area. On the way I stopped at Wilcox, Arizona, where there is a wetlands area on the south side of town. Then I went on to the Aravaca Cienega, part of the Buenos Aires NWR, just east of the small town of Aravaca. Though I had seen Rufous-winged Sparrows there a few years earlier, none were seen this time. Still it was a great spot with Gray Hawk, Phainopepla, Bell's Vireo, numerous other species and Lucy's Warblers everywhere. At the edge of the refuge I encountered a rancher picking up trash apparently left by border crossers. After discussing whether or not to spend the night up in the nightjar area he said the gate to his ranch was just down the road from the refuge entrance and he would leave it unlocked and I could spend the night there if I wanted.

The road up to the old Oro Blanca mine site is probably the worst road I have ever driven. I had driven to California Gulch with Bob Luckner for Five-Striped Sparrows in 1995 when we attended an ABA conference in Sierra Vista. At the time I thought never again. Arriving at the mine site in mid-afternoon I went on to California Gulch and had no more than exited my truck when I spotted a couple of birds in some nearby brush. For once I had enough sense to not try to get closer but simply to observe from where I was. These birds turned out to be a Varied Bunting and a Five-striped Sparrow. That evening I heard a nightjar calling but did not see one. On the way down I flushed

several Common Poorwills and (fairly certain) a Buff-collared Nightjar. I did spend the night on my friendly rancher's property.

The next day I decided to try again so spent most of the day birding around the Buenos Aires Headquarters area north of Sasabe (in the news then and later because of the large number of people crossing the border there) and at the Cienega. Late that afternoon I went back up that lovely road. A few other birders showed up and again we heard and saw at least one though we were not able to get a spotlight on it. I had planned to spend the night at a rest stop on I-19 but signs prohibited this. However, there was a tiny shopping center at the intersection of I-19 and the Arivaca Road, so I pulled in there for the night. Since I left early, no one bothered me. In the morning I stopped briefly at Madera Canyon where a pair of Flame-colored Tanagers were hanging out just above Santa Rita Lodge. These were much easier to see than the one seen in Miller Canyon on my previous trip.

The June issue of *Winging It* which I had with me had an article on birding the Gila National Forest north of Silver City, New Mexico, so I decided to stop there. Since I needed a shower and some better food than my usual camp meals, I stayed at the Grey Feathers Lodge mentioned in the article. Late that afternoon I birded around the lodge, a nearby lake, and some campgrounds in the forest. The next morning I had only a few hours to bird, as I had to be back for the included breakfast by 9 or 10 as I remember. However, I had some of my best looks ever at Grace's, Red-faced, Virginia's and Olive Warblers and several other species. This would be an excellent location to spend several days but I had to head for home. On this trip of nearly 2500 miles I saw one life bird (BC Nightjar), and though they were not all new state birds, about 80 species in Arizona and 30 in New Mexico. I wish I could spend more time in both states.

--Bob Ohmart

From The Spoonbill's Past

Compiled by Skip Almoney

---Thirty Years Ago---

HIGH ISLAND -- A PERSPECTIVE

by Ted. L. Eubanks, Jr. (October 1976)

To measure a community's value to society, one must take into account far more than just a monetary assessment of its capital holdings. The area's historical heritage, the talents and resources of its inhabitants, the critical irreplaceability of its unique eco-system; all are necessary contributors to a broad, well-informed appraisal. Fifty miles to the southeast of the metropolis of Houston, Texas, at the northeastern base of the Bolivar Peninsula, conspicuously stands a live oak shrouded mound known historically as High Island. Presently recognized for its fiscal importance to the petroleum industry with the surrounding coastal plains containing some of the oldest active oil fields in the State of Texas, this immense elevated salt dome more importantly offers both a singular ecological significance and a historical legacy that has all but disappeared from the Texas Gulf Coast.

To a historian with an abiding interest in Texiana, such as local resident Annabelle Nicar, High Island holds a key position in the overview of events that have shaped Texas and its people, particularly in the coastal region. Long used by the Karawanka and Atakapa tribes as a haven from the storms which cyclically sweep the Gulf expanse, the non-flooding crest of the dome (approximately twenty-five feet above the surrounding wetlands) subsequently was utilized by assorted pirates, fishermen, and trappers who occupied the region periodically, including the infamous Jean Lafitte. In the early 1800's the Mexican Government finally granted the dome and all of the coastal lands toward the southwest to one Martin Dunman and his brother Joseph (the region is still recognized as the Martin Dunman Survey). The township of High Island became officially sanctioned in 1835, but the community didn't flourish until 1901, when the Guffey Company drilled the first oil well in the area. This venture combined with the famous Spindletop field that had been brought in earlier in the year by Captain Lucas, initiated the era of the "East Texas all Boom". The settlement rapidly prospered with the influx of workers and jobs brought in by this fledgling industry, and tracts such as the "Old Townsite" (located adjacent to what is presently known as "Boy Scout Woods") developed in the ensuing years.



THE
SPOONBILL

Perhaps one of the most ecologically captivating areas of High Island, certainly to regional naturalists and birders, is a dense live oak motte on the northern edge of the crest known as Smith's Woods. The fresh water supply that it offers was the primary reason for it first being settled in the late 1800's by George E. Smith (the old well house still stands just south of the main entrance to the estate). The property is presently owned by the four granddaughters of the original Mr. Smith: Mrs. Eveline Tuttle, Mrs. Bernice Bolin, Mrs. Sadie Stanley, and Mrs. Lucille Guidry. All of these gracious ladies still reside in the High Island area, and it is by their good graces that the interested public is allowed to enter the woods. Two of the area's most avid and knowledgeable birders, Mr. and Mrs. Wesley Brannon, reside on the ground and do much to maintain and protect it.

To the scientists and educators of the region, in particular those with more than just a passing interest in bird life (as seen in John Tveten, Jim Ashcraft, Mike Hoke, Michigan's Dr. Novy, et al.), High Island offers the opportunity for field observation and research that cannot be duplicated in the laboratory. The overgrown thicket of lantana and honeysuckle, in combination with the live oak, hackberry, and yaupon mottes located there, seasonally harbor and replenish thousands of migrating land birds on their way both to and from Central and South America. In addition to these "migrant traps", the coastal wetlands that encircle the mound provide essential nesting grounds for water fowl. And finally, to that scrupulous, exacting, and seemingly possessed section of humanity known among the local inhabitants simply as "those birders", the overriding importance of the High Island eco-system can be demonstrated best in memories of mulberry trees abounding with northern orioles and scarlet tanagers, pecan and live oak aments teeming with vireos, and the exhilaration of observing in a solitary tree, twenty or more species of the family of birds responsible for selling more field guides than the entire remaining A.O.U. checklist combined, the warblers.

(I would like to thank Annabelle Nicar and Mrs. Ruby Vance for access to their irreplaceable historical resources and memories).

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