



# The Spoonbill

A Publication of the Ornithology Group  
of the Houston Outdoor Nature Club

April 2021

Greetings! Although we maintain our 2021 reservations at Bayland Community Center, in an abundance of caution, we will continue to use the Zoom online platform for monthly meetings.

---

## 5 April 2021 OG meeting

The program, “**Birding in the Lower Rio Grande Valley at Estero Llano Grande State Park,**” was presented by TPWD’s John Yochum.

A native of Ohio, many of us have met John and benefited from his helpful advice for our birding endeavors in and around Hidalgo County.

This is Estero Llano’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, which would ordinarily be celebrated on June 26 (but for the COVID-19 pandemic), and 358 bird species have been identified in the park so far.

Current rarities include Elegant Trogon, Rose-throated Becard, Mexican Ducks, Yellow-faced Grassquit, and Black-throated Magpie-Jay (normally found on Mexico’s Pacific coast, so perhaps an escapee rather than a vagrant).

Zoom links are sent to registered OG/ONC members.



*Each month, the Zoom lobby opens at 6:45pm for check-in, and the meetings begin at 7:00pm.*

---

**April Trivia Q:** Before the white smoke was eventually released, **what bird species appeared on a Vatican chimney**, “signaling” (to international media) that the Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church had reached consensus and selected a new Pope in March 2013? (Answer at the end of this newsletter)

---

## Notes from John Yochum's Estero Llano Grande presentation on 5 April 2021

John introduced his list of 30 specialty birds seen at Estero Llano Grande SP (hereafter, "Estero"), and noted that Mary Gustafson's RGV blog designates 41 special Valley birds. John's list includes: Plain Chachalaca, Red-crowned Parrot, Yellow-headed Parrot, Green Parakeet, White-tipped Dove, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, Groove-billed Ani, Altamira Oriole, Ringed Kingfisher, Least Grebe, Muscovy Duck, Great Kiskadee, Clay-colored Thrush, Olive Sparrow, Audubon's Oriole, Tropical Parula, White-tailed Hawk, Couch's Kingbird, Green Kingfisher, Neotropic Cormorant, Black-bellied and Fulvous Whistling Ducks (Fulvous has a wider range in the US than BBWD), Gray Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk (in south Texas in the winter), Aplomado Falcon, Botteri's Sparrow (summer), Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Yellow-green Vireo, Tropical Kingbird, and Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl.

He quoted a study that found each visiting birder spends about US\$842 on a trip to the Valley, so there is a measurable economic impact of our birding activity.

Parrots- I was surprised to learn that parrots are specifically excluded from the US Migratory Bird Act. John believes that our nesting species need federal listing. TPWD still considers parrots in the Valley as wild birds. Red-crowned Parrots and Green Parakeets have self-sustaining populations and nest in dead palm trees in Estero's Tropical Zone, whereas Red-lore and White-fronted Amazons are escapees. Quarterly counts of Red-crowned Parrots led by the Valley Nature Center (Weslaco), suggest there are 650-700 in the area.

The ranges of some of these "Valley" specialties has been shifting northwards, John said. According to the Al Gore report, land-based plants and animals are shifting towards the poles at about 15 ft/day.

<https://constantine.typepad.com/files/al-gore--the-case-for-optimism-on-climate-change.pdf>

John and others host bird walks at Estero every Saturday morning at 8:30am. After an awfully long pandemic-related hiatus, they were finally able to resume these guided walks on April 3, 2021 and logged 95 species that morning!

## Notes posted on the deck at Estero Llano Grande State Park for identifying Mexican Ducks

"Although the core ranges of Mottled and Mexican Ducks only in a narrow sliver of south Texas, distinguishing the two (and their hybrids) can be necessary. Adult male **Mottled Ducks sport a small but diagnostic black spot at the gape, which is lacking in Mexican Ducks**. Mottled Ducks also tend to have a bright yellow bill, whereas those of Mexican are often duller olive-yellow. The face of the Mottled Duck is clean, while that of the Mexican Duck appears duskier due to fine black feathering.

"Further, **the eye-line of a male Mottled duck is noticeably shorter** than others of the Mallard complex. Another important feature **on pure Mottled Ducks is that the speculum lacks any white edging, whereas all Mexican Ducks possess some amount of white**.

Female Mottled Ducks are similarly difficult to distinguish from their Mexican counterparts. **The bill color on the female Mottled is more reliably solid orange, the face is a brighter, unmarked buffy, the eye-line is shorter, and the speculum lacks white edging. Female mottled Ducks also have the distinctive dark gape spot of males.**"

– Jack Bushong, on American Birding Association's website, ABA.org

"Mexican Duck was considered a separate species for almost a century." – Texas Breeding Bird Atlas

See David Sibley's website for field guide updates, suggested Raymond Buskirk (NM)

<https://www.sibleyguides.com/bird-info/>



## Birding Festivals this month – in-person!

April 15-18: 19<sup>th</sup> Annual **Galveston FeatherFest**, 234 species were recorded during the field trips this year! <http://galvestonfeatherfest.com>

April 29 – May 2: **Birding the Border**, with Texas A&M Agrilife Extension, Del Rio. Speakers on Friday and Saturday, field trips in Val Verde, Kinney & Edwards Counties <https://wildlife.tamu.edu/birding/birding-the-border-2021/agenda/>

## Texas Ornithological Society (TOS) Virtual Spring Meeting – 29 April – 2 May 2021

This Spring meeting includes a 3-day, collaborative, state-wide birding blitz (for reference, 339 species were tallied during the Winter meeting birding blitz in January 2021.)

Registration opened March 18 and closed on Earth Day, April 22.

Details are in the Spring 2021 TOS Newsletter:

[http://texasbirds.org/publications/newsletters/newsletter\\_spring\\_2021.pdf](http://texasbirds.org/publications/newsletters/newsletter_spring_2021.pdf)

## Upcoming OG Field Trips

Thursday, May 6 – Powderhorn (Ranch) WMA, Calhoun County. Led by Texas Parks & Wildlife staffers Dan Walker & Tori Haynes.

Saturday, May 8 – Bolivar Flats, Galveston County. Led by Prof. Cin-Ty Lee, with \$10 (min.) donations to Nature Discovery Center requested.

## Upcoming 2021 Ornithology Group meetings (Monday evenings, on Zoom for now)

May 3 – Rich Hoyer, WINGS, “Oregon Birding in Midsummer”

June 7 – TBA

July 5 – TBA

Aug 2 – Prof. Tim Brush, UTRGV

## Ornithology Group - [www.OrnithologyGroup.org](http://www.OrnithologyGroup.org)

Chair	Nina Rach	Nina.Rach@yahoo.com
<b>Vice-chair (Programs)</b>	- <b>OPEN – interesting job!</b>	<b>Your email here!</b>
<b>Field Trips</b>	<b>Lisa Li</b>	scissortailed20@yahoo.com
<b>Secretary</b>	<b>Jean Greenhalgh</b>	Jeanbrit01@yahoo.com
<b>Treasurer</b>	<b>Harlan Evans – leaving soon</b>	HarlanJ42@sbcglobal.net
<b>Membership</b>	<b>Michael Honel</b>	MichaelHonel@sbcglobal.net
<b>ONC Board Represent.</b>	<b>Tira Overstreet</b>	Oddbird47@comcast.net
<b>The Spoonbill Editor</b>	- <b>OPEN</b> – temporarily Nina -	Nina.Rach@yahoo.com

### Trivia Q answer:

After weeks of deliberation, on Wednesday, 13 March 2013, international media widely reported the appearance of a gull perching on a copper chimney atop the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. Perhaps grasping at anything potentially newsworthy, this was heralded as a sign that the College of Cardinals had come to a decision and elected a new Pope.

Michael Peppard, of *Commonweal* magazine, wrote, "The white bird signals white smoke later today."

Indeed, moments after the gull departed, white smoke appeared, and Argentinian cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was designated as the next pontiff. He took the name Pope Francis, after Catholic friar Francis of Assisi (b. 1181 or 1182, d. 1226), the patron saint of animals and the environment, who is often portrayed holding a bird.

But which gull was it? There are four gulls seen in the Vatican City:

[Black-headed gull](#), *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*, [Mediterranean gull](#), *Ichthyaetus melanocephalus*, [Yellow-legged gull](#), *Larus michahellis*, and [Lesser black-backed gull](#), *Larus fuscus*

The gull that alighted on the chimney appears to have a white head, yellow bill, yellow legs, and medium-gray back and wings, all of which suggest **Yellow-legged Gull** (YLGU), based on photos by Adam Taylor of *Business Insider*.

### Trivia references:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_birds\\_of\\_the\\_Vatican\\_City](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_birds_of_the_Vatican_City)

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/conclave-bird-distinctively-roman-omen>

<https://www.businessinsider.com/seagull-on-vatican-chimney-2013-3> - photos of actual gull