

## BIRDSCAPE OF SPRING CREEK

By Damien Carey

Spring Creek is viewed nearly everyday by residents of Greater Houston. Folks checking the local weather report see it. Few catch its white-sand beaches zipping over the North Freeway bridge. Most likely, few Houstonians could identify the squiggly line forming most of the boundary between Harris and Montgomery counties as Spring Creek.

Spring Creek starts in Waller County and ends at the confluence with Cypress Creek and the San Jacinto River. Springs feed it along the way and it flows year round. It also gathers water from small creeks, unnamed drainages, water pipes and roads. Spring Creek's waters are known for being crystal clear most of its length. Fish and aquatic plants and animals are observable from its banks and even from the bridges that cross it. At its end, Spring Creek is as wide as the San Jacinto River and is navigable many miles upstream from there.

Spring Creek's banks entice hikers and birders. Its waters attract anglers and paddlers. From its white, clean and soft beaches, all ponder the water's flow and the wooded beauty that surrounds them. When a breeze rustles the canopies of oaks, sycamores, willow and birches, Spring Creek will wash away road noise and lull anyone. While taking in the environment visitors find they are not alone. The surrounding bottomlands, generated by the creek over the centuries, are abuzz with the energy of a thriving ecosystem.

Though water is life for every living thing on the planet, it is more critical to the survival of birds than perhaps any other warm-blooded, land animal. Varieties of foods, from insects to fruit and nuts are readily found in Spring Creek's bottomlands and sustain

a wide variety of birds in all season. Spring Creek's regular flow of water quenches an avian thirst driven by their high metabolisms. Birds have been successful for epochs because of their ability to fly. Efficient flight requires birds keep bathing and preening with water to keep feathers in top working order. Spring Creek's flow supports several hundred bird species throughout the year.

Anglers tell of watching flashes of color moving over the creek or bouncing among the foliage. Paddlers drift to a serenade of various birdsong and chatter. The observant will conclude they move in an avian landscape; one that changes with the seasons.

Two-thirds of North America's bird species can be found somewhere in Texas during the course of a year. Three-quarters of Texas' birds can be found along the course of Spring Creek and its watershed. By the accident of geography and evolution, southeast Texas is on one of North America's busiest flyways and its complex of wetlands sustains wintering birds. Millions of individual neotropical birds ply above Spring Creek as they come north in the spring migration and even more return south in fall proceeding to Central and South America. Spring Creek's watershed also serves year-round, resident bird populations which include scores of woodland and wetland birds.

## **SUMMER**

Summertime and the bottomlands of Spring Creek heat-up early and get little respite until well after sunset. The woods get quieter in mid-June. With the year's young fledged, migratory, nesting songbirds no longer have the need to sing for mates or claim territory, but year-round resident birds become part of the summer chorale of cicadas, crickets and frogs. Most often heard along the wooded banks in summer are Carolina

wren, Carolina chickadee, Tufted titmouse and Northern Cardinal. They are perhaps on their last clutch of the year and use song to communicate with their mates and offspring.

The Spring Creek flow is very low in late July but it never goes dry. Resident birds have little fat storing capability and they move about stretches of the creek's woods checking the crop of berries, nuts and grass seed they will rely on in winter.

Woodpeckers work over dead trees known as snags. They pound the tree limbs and flip bark away to get to the dead wood. Dead and dying wood is soft, easy for insect larva to bore. When a woodpecker pounds, the shock wave goes into the wood, they feel the vibration return with their bill to locate buried grubs. Larva are usually ensconced inches under the wood. Prying the wood with their massive bills and strong neck muscles, woodpecker wait to deploy their harpoon-like tongue to spear then yank the larva out.

Northern mockingbirds take stock of ripening yaupon fruit, known as pomes, shocking-purple Beautyberries and dark Pepper vine berries. Should a hiker pass one of these pantries, the mocker will fuss.

Old oxbow lakes and cutoffs recharge with rainwater and Spring Creek's overflow. These small wetlands are dominated by Bald cypress. Wood Duck nest in these ponds. Elegant waders like the Little Blue heron, Great Blue heron, both species of night heron and their cousins Snowy and Great egret stolidly stalk the back waters and wetlands spearing fish, frogs, snakes and lizards.



Great Blue Heron (TX)

Copyright 1998 - Monte M. Taylor

Late summer sees the return of the Double-crested cormorant. They join Neotropic cormorant in submarine-fishing the deeper stretches of the creek and oxbows. Paddlers find Cormorants, flying in v-shaped wedges, up and down Spring Creek and roosting in the trees of its bank.

A birder working a high bank will be at eyelevel with herons and egrets navigating just below the tree line. Their long wings favor shallow strokes and their long bills lead them from one forage spot to another. The movement is most noticeable in late summer as the Spring Creek flow draws down and the fishing spots shrink.

## **FALL**

A birder will spot the first migrants traversing Spring Creek for the tropics at the very start of fall. The southerly migration is not nearly as concentrated as spring's, but many of North America's warblers, tanagers, flycatchers, orioles and vireos find Spring Creek a necessary stop to rest, fuel up and repair feathers.

Insects are still on the menu here in the southeast Texas bottomlands. A flock of Blue-grey gnatcatchers' buzzy calls can fill the air around fishermen along the creek's banks, as they glean leaves for bugs. A persistent, metallic chip-note in the oaks gives

Wilson warblers away. Black-and-white warblers hug Water and Red oak stirring up insects from the bark crevasses.



Canoeing the creek early in the morning will result in sightings of several species of migrating songbirds. Figuring out which species is which is especially difficult. Many of the year's young wear immature plumage, and adult males lose their breeding color for duller, eclipse plumage and many are between molts.

Careful roosting and alert foraging among the creek's River birch, Red bay and Sycamore is important for this congregation of small migrating birds, for overhead, also on their way south, are many of North America's raptors. Several species of hawk and kite, tens of thousands of individuals along the Upper Texas Coast, move to their South America wintering grounds. Accipiter hawks Coopers and Sharp-shinned, the nimble predators of the forest, can be seen crisscrossing the creek, especially as they settle into the tree cover for the evening.

## **WINTER**

Spring Creek's temperate, winter climate, harvest of fruit and seed combine with the occasional warm day's promise of insect blooms, to create an ideal bird wintering ground. By November, the titter of American goldfinch flocks will follow a fisherman as

they feed on the seed balls of the Sweet gum tree. The fuss of Brown Thrashers will greet any critter coming too close to its American holly tree or yaupon bush.

From the banks, Bald eagle and Osprey silhouettes are easy to pick out among the denuded branches and snags. These magnificent raptors are present year-round. They nest in southeast Texas, but starting in late December, more push down from the north for the flush of spawning White bass. The Osprey feeds only on fish. The Bald eagles prefer fish but will catch and eat just about anything including small animals and waterfowl and are not above feasting on carrion.



Bald Eagle (Alaska) Copyright 1998 - Monte & Christopher Taylor

Both large raptors need to work the watersheds of Spring Creek, Cypress Creek, the forks of the San Jacinto River and Lakes Houston and Conroe to satisfy their big appetites. The year's young of both species still accompany the adults for their first winter. A Bald eagle family group also may include fledges from previous years. They can surprise a hiker or fisherman with their abrupt appearance.

The tiny arrive in mid-December too. Aptly named Winter wren join House wren and flush from matts of fallen tree debris for passing paddlers. Their rattle like calling and hopping about can hold a child's attention. Golden- and Ruby-crowned kinglets mix

with other small passerines to forage together. There is safety in numbers. The winter woods still hold resident Red-shouldered hawks whose manic calls become more frequent as winter grows old and they start their mating rituals.

Come January, the big flocks of American robins have shown. They dot bare branches like unpicked fruit with their round shapes and stream overhead in long, unorganized columns. Their chatter can dominate a hiker's calm as they move about.

In deep winter, Barred, Great-horned and Eastern Screech owl begin nesting. Their hoots and territorial calls carry easily along the creek's banks. Owls can be heard starting at dusk and all through the long nights.

Winter bird counts have documented up to eighty species of birds along Spring Creek. Though the creek's watershed has one or two nesting sparrow species, up to ten species of these little, brown birds, or LBB's as birders call them, move out of the northern plains to winter here. LBB's are skittish by nature, but the motion and noise of paddlers moving down the creek will scare-up Song and Swamp sparrows. These two species want any critter passing to know a foraging or roost spot is claimed. A bit of patience will get some of the other shy sparrows, like Le Conte's and Lincoln's sparrow, to reveal themselves.

Few wintering birds bother to sing but there are exceptions along Spring Creek. The reclusive Fox sparrow sings from thick bushes and can liven the morning along a stretch of the creek's bottomland on the greyest, deepest winter day with a send-up of sweet notes that evoke the springtime songs of orioles and buntings. White-throated sparrows are winter songsters too. They lazily whistle a song to the mnemonic "O sweet Canada, Canada, Canada."

Other small, gems add energy to weary winter along Spring Creek. Nestled in the thick blue stem and broom grasses of the creek's open banks are Sedge wrens. Anyone passing causes these mighty-mites to snap repeatedly and shuffle sideway up a stem of clump grass to further scold provocateurs.

The Upper Texas Coast's numerous wetlands host the majority of North America's waterfowl populations. As Spring Creek's flow increases from seasonal rains, the quiet oxbow ponds fill and hold scaup, teal and mallard duck species. When flushed, these birds shoot down the middle of the creek in panicked flight.

High "scee-scee" notes from overhead announce flocks of Cedar Waxwings; winter's most elegant songbird. They travel about in flocks descending on stands of yaupon, hawthorn and holly and consume the pomes in a twittering frenzy that can last until every fruit is ingested.

## **SPRING**

Spring is Spring Creek's best season. In mid-March, neotropic migrants begin moving north from Central and South America. This mass, concentrated movement of birds peaks from mid-April to mid-May and makes Southeast Texas a renowned destination for bird watchers. Birds, weighing ounces, make a thirty-six hour flight over the waters of the Gulf of Mexico to landfall on the Upper Texas Coast. Spring Creek is a stop for these migrants to refuel before continuing to their northern nesting grounds. Two dozen species of migrating passerines come then go, but some go no further. The onset of spring in the bottomlands is heralded by the fluted strains of the Wood thrush.

As they navigate the quick water, paddlers enjoy the pleasant weather and hear layers of birdsong. At the treetops, the ascending trill of the Northern parula drifts down.

From the forest floor, the quickly-whistled notes of the Hooded warbler. Stopping for lunch on a sand bar, offers a great opportunity to witness the manic activity of birds in the throws of nesting.

Along with new-growth green, most birders will say yellow is the other vernal color of the bottomlands. The plumages of Prothonotary, Hooded, Yellow-throated and Common Yellowthroat warblers flash in bright sunlight.

The Swainson's Warbler nest along Spring Creek too. Not very colorful, shy and elusive, this warbler is fond of the moist spots of the bottomlands. In the deep shade of thick woody areas they hop, happily repeating the loud, rapid chorus of their song while turning over dead leaves in search of hiding insects.



White-eyed, Red-eyed and Yellow-throated vireos favor the creek edges and are found in Sycamore, River birch, beech and Water oak. Vireos can be the most vocal in the woods as they will sing all day, even from the nest while sitting on eggs.

Anglers often here the loud “breep” of the Great-crested Flycatcher, followed by the motion of its short flight snatching a large insect from over the water. Lurking in the

trees is the Yellow-billed cuckoo many fisherman call “rain bird” because its jungle-like song is believed to predict spring showers.

No spring would be complete along the creek without the staccato “chitter” of the Belted kingfisher. They act as if they own the creek or at least every perch above it and every fish in it. They move up and down Spring Creek with rapid pumps of their wings, hunting and chasing rivals from their “fishin’ hole” like any good angler. The kingfisher is the lord of the creek. They watch over all who tread the creek’s waters or walk its banks.

Spring Creek is a different creek. It is one of Houston’s last, mostly untouched watersheds holding large stretches of habitat critical to the future of the birds of Texas and North America. In every season, the paddler, hiker, birder, angler or wanderer can appreciate birds, many of whom are on the survival side of the battle to keep Spring Creek’s habitat in tact.

For millennia, hundreds of species of bird have come to rely on the woods and waters of Southeast Texas as respite and home. By the modern accident of geography, Spring Creek is caught between two of Texas’ largest and fastest growing counties. The squiggly line on the map has meant life for thousands of generations of avian species. Development that takes Spring Creek’s clear water and bottomland wood and wetlands puts future generations in doubt.



Wood Duck -M- (BC, Canada) Copyright 1998 - Monte M. Taylor