

BAYOU CITY BIRDING
ZINE #16
A FEW MORE
WATERBIRDS

Photos by
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and me

Waterbirds come in every size and shape. Three big birds with spectacular bills are shown first. Next, a gull that sometimes flies in flocks through town. Lastly, a little plover and two of the sandpipers who can often be found feeding at the edge of our bayous.

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LAUGHING GULL



BROWN
PELICAN



KILLDEER



ROSEATE
SPOONBILL



SPOTTED SANDPIPER



WHITE IBIS
(Juvenile)

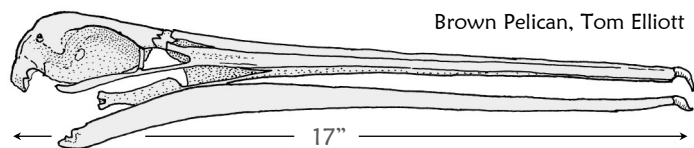


LEAST
SANDPIPER



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Bills allow birds to catch prey, groom their feathers, build nests, and feed their young. Bills are made of sections of bone that are honey-combed inside to keep the weight down. These bones are covered by keratin, the same substance as in our fingernails. This outer layer grows continuously and sometimes changes color before and after the breeding season.



Brown Pelican, Tom Elliott

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BROWN PELICAN

WHEN: Year round

LOOK FOR: A huge bird with a long bill and gular pouch. Adults are mostly gray above and black below, with a brown neck stripe added for winter and spring. Young birds are brown above and white below.

FIELD NOTES: Brown Pelicans sometimes fly in from the coast—who knows why? Thankfully, they made a remarkable recovery after having disappeared from the Upper Texas Coast in the 1960s as a result of pesticide use, habitat loss, and persecution by those who thought that the birds hurt the fishing industry.

1st SEEN ON AT

ROSEATE SPOONBILL

WHEN: Year round

LOOK FOR: This one is easy. It's the pink bird with the big spoon-shaped bill. Note that young birds are a lighter shade of pink, with spoonbills getting their pink pigments from their diet—just like flamingos do.

FIELD NOTES: Spoonbills feed in shallow water, sweeping their bills back and forth. They snap their bills shut when they sense movement and have one of the fastest reaction times in the animal kingdom. They were almost driven to extinction in the 1800s before the possession of most birds' feathers was made illegal.

1st SEEN ON AT

WHITE IBIS

WHEN: Year round

LOOK FOR: Adults (see the cover) are all white except for their black wingtips, long/curved pink bill, the pink skin around their eyes, and pink legs. Young birds are mostly brown above and white below.

FIELD NOTES: Ibis feed while standing in shallow water or wet fields, probing the mud and sweeping their bills back and forth to find crayfish, crabs, snails, frogs, insects, and other critters. Ibis fly with their long necks stretched straight out, while egrets and herons fly with their necks folded back into their breasts.

1st SEEN ON AT

LAUGHING GULL

WHEN: Year round

LOOK FOR: In summer, an adult Laughing Gull has a black head, white eye arcs, and dark red bill, with the folded wingtips showing white dots. In fall, the head turns white with gray streaks, and the bill turns black.

FIELD NOTES: While a dozen species of gulls can be found in Galveston, only three regularly travel into Houston. In summer, a flock of gulls are probably Laughing Gulls. In winter, the best bets are Laughing Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls, or maybe Herring Gulls, which can be IDed by the amount of black on their wingtips.

1st SEEN ON AT

KILLDEER

WHEN: Year round

LOOK FOR: Killdeer are mostly brown above and white below, with four dark bands crossing the forehead, bill, neck, and breast. Killdeer are plovers, having bigger eyes and shorter bills than sandpipers.

FIELD NOTES: Killdeer hide in grassy fields, where they build their nests and feed on insects and other critters, often coming to the water's edge. When something scares them (like a hawk), they may burst into flight, calling Dee-dee-dee-dee or Kill deer! Kill deer! (Or are they maybe just whistling for Bill dear?)

1st SEEN ON AT

SPOTTED SANDPIPER

WHEN: July through early May

LOOK FOR: Spotteds are brown above and mostly white below, with the white arcing up in front of the wing. They add brown spots to their breasts/bellies just before they travel to their breeding grounds in spring, and then lose the spots soon after they return.

FIELD NOTES: Spotteds feed on insects/critters at the water's edge, usually trying to keep their feet dry. They bob their back ends up/down almost constantly, acting like they've had too much coffee and earning nicknames like "teeter butt." They keep to themselves.

1st SEEN ON AT

LEAST SANDPIPER

WHEN: Mid July through May

LOOK FOR: Leasts are various shades of brown above, with a slightly down-curved black bill, light brown breast band, white belly, and dirty yellow legs.

FIELD NOTES: Leasts hang in small groups, feeding on tiny crustaceans, snails, insects, etc. while walking through mud or shallow water. Leasts are the smallest shorebirds in the world! They have four look-alike "cousins" who have black legs and usually stick closer to the coast. As a group, these five little sandpiper species are nicknamed the "peeps."

1st SEEN ON AT