It’s Breeding Season at the Smith Oaks Rookery, with Glenn Olsen (Ep. 22)

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Nivien Saleh: Where can you easily view bird chicks in the wild?

[Jingle]

Nivien Saleh: I’m Nivien Saleh, with Houston and Nature.

Spring has arrived, and breeding season is underway. Birds are building nests all around you, laying eggs, raising their young.

To see them you have to keep your eyes peeled because the bird parents take great care to hide their treasures.

However, there is a way to view chicks in all their glory, without having to search. For that, drive to the Smith Oaks Bird Sanctuary of the Houston Audubon Society, which is sixty miles east southeast of Houston. You’ll find the exact location in the show notes.

For today’s episode I went to Smith Oaks and met up with international birding guide Glenn Olsen. We took stock of what we saw.

Nivien Saleh: Welcome to Houston and Nature, Glenn.

Glenn Olsen: Thank you, Nivien.

The Rookery at Smith Oaks Bird Sanctuary in High Island

Nivien Saleh: We are in High Island at the Rookery of the Audubon Society. What we have in front of us is a small island filled with birds. Tell us about that, Glen, what are we seeing?

Glenn Olsen: This remarkable island is covered in birds, many species nest here. We call the birds that come here to the nest colonial nesting birds, because they nest in

colonies. But this island was not always abundant with birds.

In fact it was, just an afterthought. This is called Clay Bottom Pond, and it was dug for two purposes. One was to supply water to a sulfur-producing facility that was located on the island and also as extra water source for the island way back in the thirties, forties and fifties. They just left a small amount of this island here when they dug it.

There was two ponds actually. One was off to a right. And then this pond here, which is the Clay Bottom Pond. And this little island was just a remnant that was left over.

When Audubon bought the property, there were no birds nesting here. And just over time, birds started moving in and nesting. And now from March until September, there'll be thousands of birds coming here to nest and to roost in the evenings.

You're close to the breeding birds

Nivien Saleh: I've seen those birds over the last few years typically in April. And I always refer to the site as an apartment complex of birds.

Glenn Olsen: It does look like that. Actually it's more extensive because the birds nest not only on this island, but also in adjacent trees further away from us. So there's quite a few species of birds here. What's also special about this place is that we are so close to the birds, and the birds don't seem to be troubled by that.

Nivien Saleh: How many yards are we from the birds?

Glenn Olsen: We're only about 35 or 40 yards away from the birds right now.

Nivien Saleh: That is amazingly close.

Glenn Olsen: It is. There are several other places in Texas that I've been where we have these colonial nesting birds. Perhaps the next best-known place is in Rockport, Texas. But in Rockport, you can only get about 75 or 80 yards close to those birds. There's another place not far from here over in Wallisville. But you are probably 150 yards to 200 yards away from the birds. Being this close is phenomenal.

That brings many birders. But it also brings many photographers.

As you may know, I'm a bird guide. And one year had a woman from Oregon whose favorite species was roseate spoonbill. She had been to Mexico. She had been to Beliz, and she'd been to other places seeking good views and experience with roseate spoonbills. She was enthralled and overjoyed.

She had never been this close to roseate spoonbills nesting before. That's how special this place is.

One of fifty places to go birding before you die

Nivien Saleh: You're pointing to the fact that this has international draw.

Glenn Olsen: It does. In fact there's a book out called "Fifty Places to Go Golfing before You Die", "Fifty Places to Eat before You Die", and many others in that vein. One of which is "Fifty Places to Go Birding before You Die." And High Island is one of those places. Not just in Texas and not just the United States, but in the whole world.

Of 50 places throughout the whole world, High Island is one. And the Smith Oaks Rookery, where we're located now, is always a big draw because of the birds.

Nivien Saleh: So here in High Island, there are two locations that we typically go to. In the morning, we go to Boy Scouts Woods, which is maybe a mile from this location. And that is where you look for birds that migrate across the Gulf of Mexico and then land and drop out of the sky.

Sometimes you see birds, sometimes you don't, because depending on the wind, the birds might just try to ride the breeze and stay high in the air and not come down. In that case, you might not see that much. But you can always then come here and get some good action.

High Island features both migratory birds and local colonial nesting birds

Glenn Olsen: Absolutely. These birds that you're speaking of, many of them migrate across the Gulf, and we call those trans-Gulf migrants. Some migrate around the Gulf of Mexico. And those are circum-Gulf migrants. Many of them are what we call wood

warblers and thrushes.

These are species of birds that like dense woodland areas, not coastal marsh or not grasslands. They look for woodland areas.

High Island is a salt dome that sits about 32 feet above the sea level. And over the years, people who've owned the property have planted not only oak trees, but fruit and mulberry trees, hackberries and American beauty berries. They provide the woodland-type habitat that these species need to stop and rest after 600 mile migration across the Gulf , especially if they've encountered bad weather over the Gulf.

These birds they're anxious to get to their breeding territory and establish some ground for breeding. They want to get there, buy a piece of property, build a house, get a wife and raise their kids. So if they have a good tailwind, they may just pass over. But if the weather is either rainy or windy in the Gulf or rainy and windy when they arrive here on the shoreline, they oftentimes drop into this woodland area to seek shelter and to find food.

Nivien Saleh: In that case, you can find them in Boy Scout Woods with a good pair of binoculars and some patience.

Here in this area where we're standing right now we have colonial nesting birds. These are not migrants. They're a different kind of birds.

Colonial nesting provides safety to individual birds

Glenn Olsen: These are the egrets and herons and spoonbills and cormorants that we see here. They nest in groups like this to provide greater protection for each individual nest. Now there's predators here such as raccoons and skunk. Also the black crowned night heron nests across the way, and they're predatory birds. So they may come and steal a chick out of a nest. But with as many birds as they are here, the likelihood of one individual nest being predated by something is less likely than if it was a single nest. They can all work together. Many more eyes can alert other birds to predators.

Also this island being surrounded by water it's a little more challenging for mammalian predators, such as skunks and raccoons to cross this water and locate the nest and predate the eggs or the chicks. In addition to that, we have alligators. Raccoons know they may get eaten by the gator, if they try to swim this water. So that is a deterrent to raccoons. The gators act as a deterrent, the island itself acts as a

deterrent, but the gators do eat a few of the birds that are careless and get down to the water to close to a gator.

Nivien Saleh: Once I saw that happen. So I didn't see the alligator catch a bird, but it was swimming in the water with a big white wing sticking out of its mouth.

Glenn Olsen: Oh, my goodness. I've never seen that, but I've seen many gators lying in the waters at the edge of this island, just waiting for a careless bird to come down.

Nivien Saleh: The funniest thing is that the other birds you were just going on about their day. They're not like humans where they're like, "Oh my God. We need to mourn. We need to raise hell." No, it was just another day on the island.

Glenn Olsen: Yeah. Yeah. They just don't have the same consciousness that we do. But I'm sure that they're aware of it and take precautions.

Egrets are decked out in their breeding plumage

Nivien Saleh: What's the biggest bird that you see here on this island?

Glenn Olsen: The largest bird that we have nesting here is a great blue heron. But there's not many of them. And they usually nest on the backside. The second largest bird is the great egret, and we can see them out front here. They're the largest white bird that we have. Then we have a smaller white bird called the cattle egret, which is not native to North America, but it breeds here. We have the snow egret. Those are the white birds that we have nesting. And I'd just like to say one thing about these birds. If you notice right now, their feathers are at the most magnificent stage that they'll be, they're all new feathers. They're very fluffy looking, if you will. They're very elegant.

Nivien Saleh: Lacy.

Ladies used to think those feathers more valuable than gold

Glenn Olsen: "Lacy" is a great term for it, especially for the snowy egret. Back in the late 1800s and early 1900s, many of these birds, especially in Florida, were taken, killed for their feathers. They would go to these rookeries, which many of them were in the Everglades. Hunters would go out in canoes and pirogues, which is like a cross

between a canoe and a kayak. They didn't want to shoot these birds because that would get blood on the feathers and diminish the value of the feathers. So they had long poles that they would club the birds with. Speaking of that value, egrets' feathers, the great egret and the snowy egret, which has the most lacy and beautiful plumage was going at one time for $32 an ounce.

That doesn't seem like much right now, but at that time,

Nivien Saleh: Back then.

Glenn Olsen: Yes back then it was a lot of money. And not only that, but gold at that time was $16 an ounce. So this was twice the value of gold, these feathers.

The cattle egret

Nivien Saleh: That is amazing. One thing that you said about the cattle egret that it's not native to this area. I found it so cool to learn that it was originally from Africa, and it is thought to have flown across the ocean to the Americas and spread there. Have you ever heard of that?

Glenn Olsen: Yeah, What I've read about it is, they're not sure if it was blown across in some type of hurricane or other strong storm, or if maybe it perched on a ship. And then when the ship went out, the bird was too far away from land, and it just wandered around until it ended up initially in South America.

They started reproducing in South America, and then over the years moved up through the Caribbean and into Florida and then along the Gulf Coast and finally arrived here in Texas.

Nivien Saleh: And the cattle egret is called cattle egret because you can see it quite often around cattle, where it picks up the insects?

Glenn Olsen: Right. Yeah. And it's not only cattle, but any type of herbivore that would be moving in the grass and flushing insects. So they would congregate around these herbivores and eat the insects that were being flushed as the herbivores moved through the grass.

They still do that here, with the cattle. You can see that. And it's interesting to me that none of our egrets evolved that relationship with bison or antelope that we had.

The snowy egret

Nivien Saleh: So that's the cattle egret. A bird that is almost the same size and looks pretty similar to the cattle egret and that you can find here on this island, is the snowy egret. Tell me about the differences in behavior and lifestyle between the two and perhaps in how to identify the two.

Glenn Olsen: For me the easiest way to separate the two out is that overall the snowy egret is slimmer, more elegant and slender looking. It has a uniformly dark bill that is approximately the same size from the base to the tip. It doesn't taper very much.

In contrast, the cattle egret bill is never black and it's usually some type of a yellow, or in breeding plumage it could be yellow-orange. The bill is broader at the base than it is at the tip, and it's very noticeable.

Overall the cattle egret has a shorter neck and is just slightly more chunky, not as slender-looking as the snowy. And at this time a year in the breeding season, the cattle egret has kind of a cinnamon color on the head, on the breast, on the back. And the snowy egret is uniformly white with a black bill.

If you can see the toes of the snowy egret, normally they're yellow. But at this time of year when their hormones are at the max, the toes of the snowy egret can be yellow orange to reddish orange.

Nivien Saleh: How does the lifestyle of the snowy egret differ from the cattle egret?

Glenn Olsen: The snowy egret can feed both in brackish water, salt water and fresh water. In shallow waters they feed on minnows and small shrimp. In fresh water, it could be tadpoles. The cattle egret typically is not seen feeding in water. They are typically going to be in the grass fields because they feed primarily on insects. Both egrets are omnivores, so they'll eat whatever they can catch. But the primary food source for the snowy egret is going to be insects and animals found in the water. And the primary food source for the cattle egret is going to be insects found on dry land.

Is it breeding plumage or mating plumage?

Nivien Saleh: The snowy egret has this especially fluffy, lacy plumage that you call "breeding plumage". I wonder: Is "breeding plumage" really the best word, or should it be called "mating plumage"? Is it primarily for mating or does it have a function for breeding?

Glenn Olsen: That's a good point. The terminology that is used in field guides is "breeding". But perhaps " mating" might be better because according to some theories, the attractiveness of males, either through color or through elaborate plumage - like in the peacock, but also in the snowy egret and the great egret - is a function of attracting a mate.

So "mating" might be just as appropriate or more appropriate than "breeding."

Nivien Saleh: Is it typically the male that has that lacy plumage or the female also?

Glenn Olsen: They both have it, but typically the males are going to be more elaborate and more attractive. Most male birds are more attractive than most female birds. There are some species where you can't tell the difference between male and female because they look the same. Then there's other birds where the females are more colorful than the males. In this case, though, it's the male that has the more elaborate beautiful plumage.

The other aspect of the bird that we haven't discussed is that right now, during breeding season, you may hear a sound that is like a person gargling with say water or mouthwash. That's the vocalization that the snowy egret makes during breeding season. You can hear one gargling now.

Another bird that's really beautiful is the roseate spoonbill. Their bill is very spatulate or spoonbill-shaped, very flat and wide at the tip. They use that to feed in shallow waters on small marine organisms. It's a really awkward-looking bill. It's amazing to me that they can fly with a bill shaped like that, but it doesn't seem to interfere with their flying.

Then there's of course their beauty. I'm not an artist, but I would not imagine where you could combine white, yellow, pink, and orange sherbet together in a package that's as beautiful as the roseate spoonbill. And those are the colors on the bird.

The cormorant

Nivien Saleh: I am partial to the cormorant. Most people would think, "Oh, the cormorant, it's not beautiful at all. The roseate spoonbill's so much nicer". But I looked at the cormorant once through my binoculars. And I saw it's beak, and it looked so dinosaur-like, I thought that is just wonderful.

Glenn Olsen: I agree with you. To me the most interesting thing about the cormorant is the eye. It has the most beautiful blue-green-turquoise colored eye of any bird I've ever seen. It's just stunning once you look at it. You need a scope to see that well. But once you see that, it's just an astounding eye.

That's what I like about the cormorant. But what's also really interesting about the cormorant is the way they feed. They feed primarily on small fish. They more or less dive under water. Not dive from the air straight into the water like a tern does, but they'll fly into the water, their body sets partially underwater, and they just dive like that and look for fish.

Think about this. This bird is a pretty good-sized bird relative to the fish. And it is able to outwit a fish and catch the fish. It's amazing. Of course the element of surprise is always helpful, but they are very strong swimmers. So that's a really cool thing,

Nivien Saleh: And what's also interesting about the cormorant, especially given that it is a bird for whom swimming is important, is that it doesn't have these wax glands with which it can cover its feathers. And as a result, you frequently can see it sit out in the sun and spread its wings simply to dry them off, which other birds that do have the wax glands don't need to do.

Glenn Olsen: Yeah. The wax gland or oil gland that you're talking about is located on most birds at the rump. That's where the tail meets the body. And cormorants they have a very reduced gland. They don't really use it like ducks do. But the big difference is that if their feathers were oiled or waxed and coated, actually that would interfere with their swimming ability underwater.

We have some anhingas flying over. The anhinga looks similar to a cormorant. But the anhinga is primarily freshwater, and the cormorant can be brackish or fresh water.

The purple gallinule and the common gallinule

Let's see here. We don't see one right now. But another really cool bird that we have that comes here from Mexico is the purple gallinule. This bird migrates from Mexico into this area and farther along the Gulf Coast to mate and to breed, and in the winter time moves back away from here, whereas these other birds are resident birds here year round. Although they collect here to breed in this colony, they're not going out of the country after breeding.

Nivien Saleh: And the purple gallinule, I find interesting, has fairly large feet in relation to its body.

Glenn Olsen: Huge toes, long toes, really long and narrow toes. Those long toes spread their weight, and they can walk on fallen trees, or it might be grass that's growing in there. They look like they're walking on the water. They're not really swimmers ...

Nivien Saleh: And we have two different kinds of gallinules, the common gallinule and the purple gallinule. How do you tell the difference?

Glenn Olsen: The common gallinule, except for extremely young birds, has a white stripe on the side of its body. When they fold their wings, you could see that white stripe that runs parallel to the water, if they're in the water.

In adult birds the common gallinule have what I call a candy corn bill. It's a yellow bill with a reddish tip to it. So that's pretty obvious. They're also bulkier, heavier-looking. Additionally, the sheen on the head of the common gallinule is blackish looking, whereas the sheen on the purple gallinule is very purplish- looking.

Nivien Saleh: I would assume that these are both birds that nest in the brush. And the reason why I'm saying that simply because I cannot see them nesting on the island in the tree canopy or in the artificial canopy that's been created by Audubon.

Glenn Olsen: If you look out, you may see some cattails growing along the edges of the island. So they may nest in these cattails, or they may nest in the small brush that's right at the edge of the island where it's real brushy. They do not nest up in the trees though. They're ground nester.

Nivien Saleh: Are they then at greater risk of predation by alligators that swim around?

Glenn Olsen: No, because they're going to be in the brush. Of course, if they're out feeding, yes, they could be easy prey for a gator, but these birds are always on the lookout for any kind of predator. They face predation from hawks, gators, raccoons and even snakes. There's not too many snakes on the island, but elsewhere.

And throughout their lifetime, they're not always here. So whenever they're out elsewhere, they know that there's always predators around, and birds are ever observant for that.

Nivien Saleh: Except a few stupid ones, maybe juveniles that just come close to the water and then boom.

Glenn Olsen: And even adult birds sometimes are just not paying close attention and end up taken over by a gator or a raptor or something like that.

Furniture shopping, bird-style

Nivien Saleh: If you stand here for a while, you might see a great egret gliding by, and it looks so majestic.

Glenn Olsen: They are. And another interesting thing: It's not only about the identification of the birds coming here and just seeing them, but it's also watching the behavior. You can see one out here right now. They're often doing what I'll call furniture shopping. That is they're going out and collecting sticks to bring back and add to the nest. And of course in the case of the great egret, both the male and the female help build the nest. The male may go out and find a nice stick that it likes and brings it home to add to the furniture. But the female may think that's not going to fit in the living room quite so nicely and reject it. So off he goes to find something else.

The spoonbills do this. The snowy egrets do it also. And even the cormorants.

It's interesting to watch the behavior of all these birds. Another really interesting aspect of these birds at this time of year during the mating-breeding season is that they're at their best color - in terms of the plumage, but also in terms of their facial skin areas. The great egret has one of the most beautiful colors of green in the face,

right at the base of the bill in front of the eye. It's just beautiful.

Nivien Saleh: To see that you should have a pair of binoculars with you.

Glenn Olsen: Absolutely.

Who gets the best nesting spot?

Nivien Saleh: Speaking of furniture shopping: The nests: I would imagine that there's maybe a pecking order among birds who gets the best spot. Do sometimes the big birds kick the small birds out to take their nests? Or is this all pretty peaceful?

Glenn Olsen: One of the strongest factors is who gets here first. The cormorants nest the longest of any of the bird species that we have here. They may be nesting in early March, and they'll be nesting all the way through September. The egrets and the herons start arriving in March and building nests. So the earlier birds that arrive early March, mid-March, they're going to have the pick, and the birds that arrive subsequently wi ll take what's left over. There is some vying for a nest that's already started. But typically there's not a lot of squabbling and fighting that goes on, or at least none that I've seen here.

Occasionally you'll find a heron stealing a stick from another nest. But they don't really fight about that, which is good.

Nivien Saleh: You mentioned before great blue heron predators. And you said the great blue heron does not really nest on this island. It nests further back. And I wonder why? If its food is right here, why doesn't it nest here so that it can have easy access to its food source? Or would the other birds just chase it away?

Predators: Great blue heron and black-crowned night heron

Glenn Olsen: For the great blue heron, they do nest in mixed colonies also. But I've never seen one in the forefront of this island here. And there's only a few in the back. That may be because there are just so many other birds here. There's not suitable nesting habitat for them, not adequate room for them. Cause they're a much larger bird.

But the bigger predator here, I think, would be the black-crowned night heron. The black crowned night heron occasionally nests amongst the egrets and herons here. But typically they nest on the banks of this pond, further away from the colony here.

Nivien Saleh: And they go for the chicks and the eggs?

Glenn Olsen: Yes, they will. Mainly the chicks, though. Mainly the chicks.

Nivien Saleh: When can you see chicks here?

Glenn Olsen: April, May and June are the prime months for chicks. But in the meantime, you can come and see the beautiful colored eggs. You can watch the adults. Oftentimes they'll be standing up on the nest, and you can see them rotate the eggs. The eggs need to be rotated so that they're developing properly.

You can watch the males bring food to the female that's sitting on the nest. For those birds that share duties you can watch them change. And the incubation period typically ranges from 21 to 27 days for different species.

All these here are typically in that range.

Things you can do at Smith Oaks Bird Sanctuary

Nivien Saleh: Other things that you can do here, is you can take a walk. There is a beautiful path through the forested area. And there is this beautiful skywalk that the Audubon Society built maybe two years ago. It feels like you're walking through the canopy, and you can see warblers when the migration happens in April, right?

Glenn Olsen: Yes, April is the prime month for the warblers, tanagers and thrushes to come through and other woodland species such as virios. These species are more colorful birds and more challenging ones to find and see, and... and that's always an excitement and a draw for many birders. And as you indicated, you can walk on the canopy, and you'll be up in the tree top levels, closer to these wonderful, beautiful migrants that come through.

Nivien Saleh: Coming here is $10, I think, for a day pass. And it doesn't matter if you're a senior citizen or a non senior citizen, it's $10 a day. Or you can buy a patch. Every year Audubon sells patches, and they have these beautiful stitched images of

birds. And that costs about $30, a little more than $30, I think, per person.

And it gets you into those sites all year round.

Glenn Olsen: Yes. It's an unlimited number of entrances, and it is just a great value for what you have an opportunity to experience. All the people that come here, they're in awe about what a great value it is. nobody leaves dissatisfied or unhappy. Come out and enjoy this beautiful scenery, the Rookery or the woodland species in April. And I just want to say that according to research that's been done on these birds, especially the snowy egret and the great egret, these are real treasures because back during the heyday, when bird feathers were used for millinery trade, 95% of the great egrets were eradicated. So their population was almost wiped out. Same thing for the snowy egret and the roseate spoonbill. Where are you going to find pink feathers? Nowhere else in North America. Many of these birds were just on the brink of extinction up until about 1910, when the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was passed - it might've been 1918 when it was actually passed, but the effort was started before that. So we saved these birds. And to be able to enjoy them when they were almost gone is just a real treasure.

Nivien Saleh: And when you stand on these platforms here, looking across the lake, especially in the morning 9:30, 10-ish, when the sun reflects its rays in the water, it just looks so beautiful.

All that is what you can see if you come here. So come and take a look if you haven't done so yet. And thank you, Glenn, for being on Houston And Nature.

Glenn Olsen: Nivien, Thank you so much.

Nivien Saleh: This is it. If you feel the urge to visit the Smith Oaks Sanctuary and its rookery, head to the show notes, which you can find at HoustonNature.com/22. That’s HoustonNature.com, a slash, and the number 22 for episode 22. There you can also view the episode transcript and sign up for the Nature Memo, which is my newsletter to keep you informed of new episodes. If you enjoyed this episode, please share it with a friend.

Till next time, for Houston and Nature, I’m Nivien Saleh.