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Avian Ink Contest Winners Announced
SEPTEMBER 1, 2017

It was a packed house at Blue Owl Brewery’s tasting room last Friday as we unveiled Golden Cheeked Wild Barrel, an experimental new beer celebrating the Golden-cheeked Warbler. The crowd raised their glasses to this inspiring tiny songbird, an endangered Texas native currently fighting for continued protection under the Endangered Species Act.

In honor of all the birds that inspire our lives, the crowd also toasted the winners of the Avian Ink Tattoo Contest. Five tattoos were selected for their creative depictions of birds in ink. The 1st place winner received a $100 Gift Certificate to Shanghai Kate’s Tattoo Parlor. Congratulations to the winners and thank you to all who shared your bird tattoos with us!

Texas Naturalist’s Notes By Bill Reiner
SEPTEMBER 4, 2017

An iconic sight, during the “dog days” of late summer in central Texas, is a statuesque Great Egret poised motionless at the edge of a stock tank. Flocks of Cattle Egrets speckle pastures, accompanying herds of cattle. Elegant Snowy Egrets stalk wetlands.

Ever wonder why egrets are white? One would think that being so bright would make them easy targets for predators, and natural selection would lead toward more muted colors. Evolution does seem to have played a role, but predation has apparently not been the deciding factor. Egrets are large enough to ward off attacks by most avian predators. They also roost communally at night, a strategy offering protection from Great Horned Owls. And they inhabit open environments – lakeshores, mudflats, marshes, and grasslands – where they can spot an approaching terrestrial predator from afar.

For egrets, visibility appears to be an advantage. Just as we can see bright white birds from long distances, so can other egrets. Some biologists think the white plumage of egrets is a way of signaling to other wading birds that food is present. A large assemblage of white birds is like a flashing neon fast-food sign to a bird flying overhead. But why would a bird want to signal to others that food is present? Would it not be better to keep the bonanza to itself? Not necessarily. Even when food is present, it is not always easy to catch.

Egrets and other herons are strictly carnivorous, feeding primarily upon fish, amphibians, aquatic invertebrates, and – especially in the case of Cattle Egrets – grasshoppers and other large terrestrial insects. The most common method for finding their food is to stalk slowly, or to stand statue-like and wait for prey to come within range. Since fish must keep water moving over their gills to obtain oxygen, they usually move around a good bit, so the herons’ method is often successful. Still, the prey don’t want to be caught, and can be quite secretive. It helps to have something flush them out of their hiding places. A large animal, such as an alligator, moving through the water will send fish fleeing –
often into striking distance of an egret’s sharp bill. The alligator is then unwittingly serving as a “beater” (as in “beating the bushes”) for the egret, a commensal relationship in which the alligator neither gains nor risks anything. Of course, following an alligator too closely can be hazardous. Ibises and spoonbills, which feed by probing in bottom sediments or sweeping their bills through the water, are also good beaters, and herons often follow these safer companions.

A neighboring heron can serve quite nicely, too. When herons congregate in a pond or marsh, the movements of one will often spook fish and other aquatic animals toward its neighbor. Observers have noticed that a heron will catch more food in the same length of time when foraging in a group than when feeding alone. Unlike the commensal relation between alligators and egrets, both parties may benefit from the association, so it is more properly termed a symbiotic relationship.

So why is it that all herons are not white? For many, there may be an advantage to darker or cryptically patterned plumage. Bitterns and Green Herons, for instance, stalk through dense marsh vegetation or along wooded streams. The night-herons hunt at dawn and dusk. White plumage would handicap these birds by making them more conspicuous to their prey.

Great Blue Herons will also sometimes hunt in more confined areas, such as along rivers and smaller ponds. In these areas, competition from other herons may outweigh the benefits of a beater. Intriguingly, the wide-open marshes of the Everglades have produced an all-white race of the Great Blue Heron – called the “Great White Heron.”

There was a time when a new predator made the white plumage of Great and Snowy Egrets a tremendous liability. In the late nineteenth century, human plume-hunters decimated populations of these birds all along the east coast of the United States, to sate the demand for egret plumes for fashionable ladies’ hats. Fortunately, public outcry against the slaughter, instigated in part by fledgling Audubon Societies, eventually made the wearing of these “aigrettes” — as the egrets’ spectacular nuptial plumes are called — as unpopular as wearing fur coats today. Legislation in the early twentieth century banned the sale of feathers, the market dried up, and egret populations rebounded — an early example of successful environmental activism. And the dazzling, big white birds are back again, now drawing human admirers as well as other herons.


**Bird of the Week: Great Blue Heron**

SEPTEMBER 6, 2017

Great Blue Herons are the largest herons in North America, and a common sight on streams, lakes, and marshes across the continent. These wading birds, which may grow to be four feet high or taller, hunt in shallow water, their slow and deliberate steps belying
their agility. Specially shaped vertebrae in their necks allow them to spear fish with their heavy bills with lightning speed and precision. Though they are solitary hunters, Great Blue Herons nest communally, and often in great numbers: heron colonies may comprise five hundred or more individuals. These colonies are the scenes of elaborate courting ceremonies during mating season, during which the males will raise their deep blue feathered crests and snap their bills to establish their territories. While Great Blue Herons are normally a gray-blue hue, a pure white variation can be found in southern Florida and the Caribbean, which looks very much like a Great Blue Egret.

Compiled by Owen Moorhead. Sources include the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society.

**You’ve Made a Difference: 2017 Annual Report**

SEPTEMBER 7, 2017

Dear Members and Friends,

I am pleased to present Travis Audubon’s most recent Annual Report summarizing the fiscal year ending March 31, 2017. Please visit our website to view the Annual Report. The report recounts many significant accomplishments and progress in Education, Conservation, and Advocacy. With your support, we are doing more than ever to ensure that birds and native habitats survive for future generations to learn from and enjoy.

Our successes are made possible by the dedication of our Board, Volunteers, Members, Donors, Staff, Partner Organizations, and passionate supporters across the nation. Together we are making a difference.

Thank you for your continued commitment to conserving Central Texas wildlife.

With best wishes and Happy Birding,

Joan Marshall
Executive Director


**Bird of the Week: Red-shouldered Hawk**

SEPTEMBER 13, 2017

Red-shouldered Hawks are often heard long before they are seen, their insistent territorial calls echoing through the forests they call home. Smaller than their common cousin, the Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawks prefer woodlands with open understories, and are commonly found near bodies of water. They hunt from perches above the water or in the forest canopy, watching for signs of the small creatures that constitute their diet—mice, frogs, lizards, and the occasional fish. While birds in the northeastern extent of
their range may winter in southern states, Texas hawks are generally residents, often “refurbishing” and occupying the same nest year after year. In the air, Red-shouldered Hawks are easily distinguished from other buteos by the translucent crescents near the tips of their wings, though the smaller Sharp-shinned Hawk is a close lookalike and can make for difficult IDs where their ranges overlap (an area which includes central Texas).

Compiled by Owen Moorhead. Sources include the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society.

Ask a Birder: How do birds survive hurricanes?
SEPTEMBER 15, 2017

With this year’s active hurricane season, Ask-a-Birder volunteer Dan Smith answers your questions about how birds fare in these severe weather events:

Many birds are sensitive to barometric pressure, and lots of them – especially nomadic birds like pine siskins – simply leave after gorging at feeders. Cavity nesters may simply hide. Many small birds find a sheltered branch and just lock on for the duration of the storm. This last strategy is risky of course, but uses virtually no energy since perching birds’ toes lock when they alight on a branch.

So not all birds leave, but this can lead to catastrophe. In 1940, the White Lake resident whooping cranes in Louisiana were widely dispersed or killed by a hurricane and only six returned. This loss of one of only two remaining flocks was part of the reason for the creation of the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge.

Pelagic birds, or those that frequent coastal waters and the open ocean, tend to avoid hurricanes by flying around them. Some may seek refuge in the eye and get carried long distances from their normal ranges. Some strong-flying migrants are really determined: in 2011 scientists tracked a radio-tagged “intrepid whimbrel” as it flew straight through Hurricane Irene on its way from the Arctic to Venezuela.

While hurricanes are undoubtedly hard on the birds, they often afford opportunities for unusual and exciting sightings. Arman Moreno, who manages the Austin Area Rare Bird Alert, on August 31 noted sightings in the Austin circle of large numbers of Magnificent Frigatebirds, a Long-tailed Jaeger at Hornsby Bend, a Sooty Tern at Decker Lake, multiple species of other unlikely terns, and a White-tailed Hawk in Hays County, all following Harvey’s landfall.

Have a question? Contact the Travis Audubon office!

September Bird Forecast: A River of Birds
SEPTEMBER 19, 2017

Hawks, falcons, kites, shorebirds, hummingbirds, orioles, and warblers are some of the
birds flying south in September. Since Texas is on the central flyway we see a remarkable
diversity of species, some of which are going to fly across the Gulf to points south, while
others will travel around the Gulf. One has to be paying attention though, as these
migrants are not calling attention to themselves. Some species like shorebirds and
warblers are much drabber in fall, and hawks may be so high up that they have even been
confused with migrating butterflies on occasion. So where can you go to experience fall
migration? One of the best known places is the hawk watch at Hazel Bazemore County
Park in Corpus Christi. At Hazel Bazemore the peak concentration of raptors occurs
between September 23 and 30, depending on the weather. If you are lucky, you might see
a hundred thousand birds pass by in one day. Most of the birds are Broad-winged Hawks
which are heading to northern South America for the winter. The species composition
changes in October, with Swainson’s Hawks, falcons and accipiters (forest hawks)
present. During the “hawk watch” season from August 1 through November 15 Hazel
Bazemore averages 720,000 raptors.

Although most raptors are solitary much of the year, many species flock during
migration. They are just sharing the same air space, using thermals and updrafts to
migrate, spiraling upwards on the rising air, then gliding until they pick up another
thermal. A group of birds soaring on a thermal is called a kettle, and the birds are
“kettling.” If you see a kettle be sure to check all the birds out, as often more than one
species is represented. Thermal-dependent raptors won’t lift off from an overnight roost
until the air has sufficiently heated up to create strong thermals. Often these birds fast for
days as they continue south, so conserving energy by riding on thermals is critical to their
survival. Otherwise they would have to resort to energy-expensive powered flight.

To see kettles of migrants in Austin ideally you will have a somewhat cloudy day so you
can get contrast between the clouds and the birds. A pure blue sky makes for difficult
viewing. If we have stormy weather, it may stop birds in their tracks and the next
morning is a good time to look up. Go to a location that has a big vista where you can
scan the skies. Even the top of a parking garage works.

Anhinga, the Snake Bird
If you head to Hazel Bazemore Park in mid-September you might see migrating
Anhingas. They are striking water birds with long necks and dagger-shaped bills. They
are short-distance migrants that are dependent on wetland habitat with good perches.
Anhingas are uncommon in Austin, but occasionally can be seen perched in the trees of
the pond at Barkley Meadows, a Travis County park.

Two Common Hummingbirds in Austin
Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are the spectacular hummer of eastern North America and
many are passing through Texas now on their way to Central America. Take a walk
around your neighborhood and look for blooming red tubular flowers. Chances are there
is a hummingbird close by. As the name suggests, the Ruby-throated has a bright red
throat. However, depending on how the light hits the feathers it may look black or
orange. If you see a bird with a purple chin, that is its cousin, the Black-chinned
Hummingbird.
Again, the lighting will influence the color of the throat or gorget. What about the hummers with no color on their throats? Those are females or young birds. Generally Ruby-throated are brighter green on the back and have some green on the head, and Black-chinned are grayer on the heads. Black-chinned hummers usually pump their tails more while hovering. The best place to see a large concentration of hummingbirds is at Rockport’s annual Hummerbird Festival usually held in mid-September. It is cancelled this year due to extensive hurricane damage, but is an event that should be on every bird watcher’s bucket list.

Looking Back – Did Any Unusual Birds Show up in Austin after Hurricane Harvey?
It is interesting to note that several species of coastal birds were swept inland on Saturday, August 26, and some lingered for a few days before presumably heading back to the Gulf, helped by the strong north winds. Notable sightings included fifteen Magnificent Frigatebirds and a Sooty Tern at Walter E. Long Metropolitan Park in east Austin. Magnificent Frigatebirds are ocean-going birds that soar over the Gulf, looking for opportunities to steal food from other birds. They have long wingspans of 90 inches, longer even than Turkey Vultures or Bald Eagles. The Sooty Tern is a large tern with black wings and back, and white underparts. It was the first time one has ever shown up in Travis County.

COMPILED BY JANE TILLMAN, TRAVIS AUDUBON VOLUNTEER
REPOSTED WITH PERMISSION FROM KXAN’S WEATHER BLOG

**Bird of the Week: Ruby-throated Hummingbird**
SEPTEMBER 20, 2017

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is a beautiful and hyperactive little bird, sometimes mistaken for an insect due to its small size and ability to remain stationary while in flight—an ability shared with no other family of birds. In much of their breeding range, which covers the eastern United States, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is the only hummingbird you are likely to see. In central Texas, however, its range overlaps with the Black-chinned Hummingbird—which has a frustratingly similar appearance. The chief difference between these two diminutive birds is an iridescent patch of color at their throats, which is red on the Ruby-throated and purple on the Black-chinned.

Unfortunately, these patches are generally only visible in bright sunlight, and are entirely absent on females! Despite their size, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are heroic fliers during migration season: some birds will cross the Gulf of Mexico in a single flight!

Compiled by Owen Moorhead. Sources include the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society.

**Historic Project at Wild Basin**
SEPTEMBER 22, 2017
Travis Audubon member Allan Seils is capturing history. He has been working on a Capital Area Master Naturalist service project that involves the digitizing of all the flora and fauna records found in the file cabinets at the Wild Basin Wilderness Preserve office. He is uploading these records into electronic public databases like eBird and iNaturalist so that others can use these records.

If you have any birding checklists, records, field log notes, or remembrances of birding events from Wild Basin, Allan is willing to upload these observations into an accessible public database. Please contact him at endores17@gmail.com for more information. Your records will help build a comprehensive historic fauna record very useful to current and future environmental land managers at Wild Basin.

**Bird of the Week: Red-bellied Woodpecker**
SEPTEMBER 27, 2017

Red-bellied Woodpeckers are conspicuous residents of any woodland they call home, both visually and vocally. With a crisply striped black back and vibrant red cap, these medium-sized woodpeckers are easily seen and identified, even from a distance, and their chattering call is loud enough to be heard from even farther away. Like other woodpeckers, Red-bellied Woodpeckers feed on insects and other food they glean from tree limbs, scooting along the limb with their tails as they go. Their tongues are longer than their heads, barbed and sticky, which allows them to extract insects from deep crevices, and even steal nectar from bird feeders! Central Texas represents the western edge of the Red-bellied Woodpecker’s range, where it overlaps with its desert cousin, the Golden-fronted Woodpecker. In this zone, the two species hybridize, producing birds that resemble both species.

Compiled by Owen Moorhead. Sources include the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society.

**Bird of the Week: Summer Tanager**
OCTOBER 4, 2017

The Summer Tanager is our only completely red bird, making it easy to distinguish. However, it tends to spend most of its time high in the canopy of open woodlands, especially oaks, looking for flying insects, so it can be tricky to spot. Much easier to recognize is its song, a sweet and flowing whistle similar to the American Robin. Summer tanagers breed in North America but may winter as far south as Peru, flying over the Gulf of Mexico to reach their wintering grounds. This means that they bulk up significantly before starting their migration–tanagers captured in South America have arrived with enough fat to fly hundreds of miles further! Bees and wasps are their preferred food source, which they scrape against trees to remove the stinger before eating. Enjoy these beautiful birds while you can; by September, they will have begun their long journey south.
Rare Bird Alert: October 5, 2017

OCTOBER 6, 2017

This is the Austin Area Rare Bird Alert and has been updated through 10/5/2017. To report rare or unusual bird sightings in the Austin area, provide recent sighting updates, or inquire about location details on birds listed below, please send an email to armanmorenobirds@gmail.com. If submitting a bird sighting, please include species name, location details, and contact information.

Rarities Found Through the Month of September

A juvenile REDDISH EGRET was found along the Colorado River at Hornsby Bend, Travis County, on 9/16. Presumably the same bird was refound at the Colorado River Preserve on 10/1 and continues through 10/3. The main access point for the preserve is under the US 183/Montopolis Bridge but parking is located along the road as the entire area is under construction. Another bird was found at Canyon Lake Park, Comal County, on 10/3.

A SWALLOW-TAILED KITE was observed flying over a private residence in North Central Austin, Travis County, on 9/26.

A HARRIS’ HAWK was photographed flying over FM 969 near Weberville Park, Travis County, on 9/16 and was last seen flying toward the direction of Hornsby Bend. Another bird was seen in Gonzales County on FM 108, four miles north of Smiley on 9/20.

A juvenile RED-HEADED WOODPECKER was found at Weberville Park in Travis County on 9/11. The bird was reported again on 9/13.

A SAY’S PHOEBE was photographed at Commons Ford Park, Travis County, on 9/22.

A GREAT KISKADEE was photographed at a private residence in Gonzales County on 9/13 and continued for at least 3 days, visiting the homeowner’s water feature. The same residence also had a HUTTON’S VIREO drop in on 9/14.

A VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW was photographed at Hornsby Bend, Travis County, on 9/10 and continued through at least the next morning, but never seen again.

CERULEAN WARBLERs were found at Hornsby Bend, Travis County, on 9/5 and also at Warbler Woods, Guadalupe County, on 9/3.

A WESTERN TANAGER was found at Lake Fayette, Fayette County, on 9/9.

A female SCARLET TANAGER was photographed at Warbler Woods, Guadalupe
County, on 9/10. This species is uncommon in Central Texas in fall.

**Continuing Bird(s) From Previous Week**

At least five LEAST GREBES continue in Williamson County through 9/30 off Parksville Way and Fairweather Way.

A HUTTON’S VIREO continues at Warbler Woods, Guadalupe County, on 9/17.

*Reports for the Austin area RBA cover a 60-mile radius, centered on the Capitol in downtown Austin. Bird sightings mentioned here have been filtered and scrutinized by the compiler and are believed to be genuine. Photo or audio documentation for species with challenging IDs will be mentioned if they are known to exist.*

**Creating a Learning Laboratory at Blair Woods**

**OCTOBER 9, 2017**

Have you been to Blair Woods lately? Our 10-acre sanctuary in East Austin is transforming into a community hub for hands-on nature immersion. Upgraded trails and new interpretive signage featuring mascot Rusty the Lizard will create an engaging learning environment for school groups that will visit the sanctuary throughout the fall. This new youth and family programming is being presented with Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center with support from University of Texas Dell Medical School as well as these generous foundations: Shield-Ayres Foundation, Winkler Family Foundation, and Hershey Foundation.

NEW Blair Woods Nature Days will take place on October 21 and 28, November 4 and 18. These family fun events are free and open to the public! We’ll be discovering the Central Texas landscape through Habitats, Water, Trees, and more. Find more info here.

**Claude’s River Survey: October 7, 2017**

**OCTOBER 9, 2017**

Claude Morris leads ecological surveys on the Colorado River. Participants bring their own canoes and kayaks. On Oct 7, 2017, from 9:00 AM – 2:30 PM, they surveyed 9 miles of the river (Big Webberville to Howard Lane, Bastrop, Texas, US). Claude sent us the following report:

We boldly set out on a quest to find early migrants. Our hope was to find the skies filled with Hawks and warblers of all kinds as well as a flow of Monarch Butterflies..... screeching of tires.....then came reality. The enthusiasm was dampened by silence. Eerily silent. Not even a Cardinal was heard. Yes, it was that kind of day. I think we happened to catch one of those days when there was just not much moving around.

We did manage to find 36 species that included a juvenile Bald Eagle and two American
Coots. Belted Kingfishers and Osprey are starting to have good numbers. Also found were 5 Pileated Woodpeckers and a Green Kingfisher. The best we could do for a migrant was one Swainsons Hawk. I know there are a few resident Swainsons in Bastrop County but doggonit I want to call it a migrant.

Remember last October we found 11 Water Moccasin. We found only 2 today. A few Red-eared Sliders and another unidentified water snake were all we got for Herps.

Lots of Sulfur butterflies. Viceroyys were everywhere and only two confirmed Monarch.

We have to thank everyone who helped today. Alexis Baldera, CR Smith, Nate Long, John Barr, Denis Brenning, and Bob West were the team.

**Bird of the Week: Painted Bunting**

**OCTOBER 11, 2017**

The male Painted Bunting is almost too beautiful to be believed, looking as if he has just flown out of a Matisse painting. His blue head contrasts sharply with a vibrant red body and vivid green wings, and his French name—nonpareil, or “without equal”—is well-earned. It’s little wonder these birds are highly prized for their beauty. Their good looks seem to breed vanity as well; male Painted Buntings are highly territorial and prone to violent fights over their territory. Sadly, their beauty and pride have made them vulnerable to the illegal wildlife trade. Easily tricked into traps by decoys, Painted Buntings have been victims of poachers since the time of Audubon, who described a cottage industry of trapping birds and shipping them to Europe, where they fetched high prices as pets. The practice continues to this day, with significant effects on regional populations. Fortunately, population decline seems to have leveled since the turn of the millennium, and diligent enforcement of wildlife smuggling laws will ensure that wild and free Painted Buntings return to our woods and feeders year after year.

Compiled by Owen Moorhead. Sources include the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society.

**Congratulations to Mickey Burleson, Conservation Hero!**

**OCTOBER 14, 2017**

Congratulations to Mickey Burleson! Today she receives Travis Audubon’s Victor Emanuel Conservation Award for her extraordinary contributions to conservation in Central Texas. Thanks to Mickey’s exemplary leadership in prairie restoration, a small but crucial part of Texas’ natural history remains and thrives ensuring that generations to come will know a world filled with birdsong. Mickey is a true Conservation Hero!

**Bird of the Week: Scissor-tailed Flycatcher**

**OCTOBER 18, 2017**

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers are a common sight in summer—though their beauty, both in
flight and at rest, is anything but common. The bird’s long, forking tail—often longer than the bird’s body—gives it an unmistakable silhouette when perched, and its drab wings hide vibrant pink flanks, visible when it takes flight. These flycatchers, like their cousins the kingbirds, spend much of their time on power lines or fences, from which they sally out to catch insects. They are surprisingly agile, using their long tail feathers as rudders to help them follow the erratic flight paths of their prey. Scissor-tailed flycatchers are common within a fairly limited summer range which includes Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Despite this somewhat restricted range, however, these birds can wander far afield during migration: scissor-tails on their way from Central America to Texas have been found as far away as British Columbia and Nova Scotia!

Compiled by Owen Moorhead. Sources include the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society.

October Bird Forecast: Absent Birds, Departures and Arrivals
OCTOBER 18, 2017

Where Have All The Birds Gone? Lure Them Back with Native Plants
October can be a slow month for bird watchers. Many of our summering birds have flown south for the winter, and those in transit are not calling attention to themselves. The birds that will winter here are beginning to arrive, dependent on favorable winds. Resident birds like Northern Cardinals and Lesser Goldfinches seem to abandon our feeders since there is plenty of natural food available in the wild, like seeds, insects, spiders and berries. In fact, since most birds don’t come to feeders at all, it makes sense to provide the natural, sustainable foods they prefer. Choosing native plants, those that have evolved over generations, and that were here long before Columbus, will provide sustenance timed for our birds’ needs as they migrate through, or get ready for winter. The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center has its semi-annual native plant sale the weekend of October 20 and 21. It may seem counter-intuitive if you are not from Texas, but fall is a great time to plant perennials, shrubs and trees so they can establish their root systems over the cool winter months. Black-thumb gardener plant choices include White Mistflower (also known as Shrubby Boneset), an arching shrub with white flowers in the fall. It is a butterfly magnet, and goldfinches like to eat the leaves. It blooms best in full sun, is drought tolerant, and can be grown in a pot. In natural areas it occurs along woodland edges. Another easy to grow native is the Yaupon, a small evergreen tree with bright red berries. It will keep your mockingbirds busy fending off other berry lovers like robins this winter.

Departing Scissor-tailed Flycatchers
If you live next to open fields or on the outskirts of town, you may see several long-tailed, slender birds perched on wires, with their heads pointing into the prevailing winds. These white or pale gray-headed, dark-winged birds with a salmon blush on their bellies are beginning to gather into flocks for their journey to Mexico and Central America. Males have the longest tails, and juveniles the shortest. Scissor-tails typically sally out from perches to catch grasshoppers and other insects, swallowing small bugs on the way back to the perch, but whacking large ones against the perch to subdue them before eating.
When they chase insects their tails open to give them more maneuverability. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers are breeding birds of Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas as well as western Louisiana, Arkansas and Missouri. Watch for them now, and again next April.

Arriving American Kestrels
At nine inches, the kestrel is our smallest North American falcon. It is also one of the most numerous and widespread raptors. In the past, kestrels typically were only winter residents in Austin, but recently there have been a few breeding attempts, notably at 45th and Guadalupe. Kestrels are cavity nesters and the openings on high transmission towers appear to be attractive. In any event, kestrels that summered in Canada and Alaska will soon migrate south, with most wintering in the lower 48. Some will continue to Central America. Look for them in areas with few trees such as pastures and open parkland where they perch on wires. They bob their tails often, perhaps to maintain balance. Kestrels primarily subsist on insects, but they also take small songbirds and voles. The female has an all rufous back and wings, while the male has a rufous back and blue-gray wings. The head is rounded and is strongly marked with vertical bars on the cheeks. You might hear them defending their winter territories with a loud “klee klee klee” or “killy killy killy” call.

COMPILED BY JANE TILLMAN, TRAVIS AUDUBON VOLUNTEER
REPOSTED WITH PERMISSION FROM KXAN’S WEATHER BLOG

Rare Bird Alert: October 19, 2017
OCTOBER 20, 2017

This is the Austin Area Rare Bird Alert and has been updated through 10/19/2017. To report rare or unusual bird sightings in the Austin area, provide recent sighting updates, or inquire about location details on birds listed below, please send an email to armanmorenobirds@gmail.com. If submitting a bird sighting, please include species name, location details, and contact information.

Rarities Found This Week:

A female-type HEPATIC TANAGER was an excellent find at Commons Ford Park in West Austin, Travis County, on 10/17. The bird continues through the evening of 10/19 and has most reliably been seen around the old barn and fence line by the covered picnic table.

A BROWN BOOBY was found at Lake Buchanan in Llano County on 10/13. This could represent a first county record. No additional information regarding the specific location on the lake the bird was observed.

WHITE-TAILED KITEs were observed in farmland in both South Williamson and Northeast Travis Counties, both on 10/14.
A WHITE-TAILED HAWK was found in northeast Travis County off of Sandeen Rd near the intersection of Brita Olson on 10/14. The bird was perched on a fence post and remained stationary for over an hour before lifting off. It has not been relocated but could easily still be in the area.

A SAY’S PHOEBE was photographed on Sayersville Rd in Bastrop County on 10/14.

A GREAT KISKADEE was found on Lake Creek Trail in Williamson County on 10/14 and continued through at least 10/17.

Continuing Bird(s) From Previous Week

At least four LEAST GREBEs continue in Williamson County through 10/16 off Parksville Way and Fairweather Way.

A male CALLIOPE HUMMINGBIRD continues at a private residence in New Braunfels, Comal County, most recently observed on 10/14.

Reports for the Austin area RBA cover a 60-mile radius, centered on the Capitol in downtown Austin. Bird sightings mentioned here have been filtered and scrutinized by the compiler and are believed to be genuine. Photo or audio documentation for species with challenging IDs will be mentioned if they are known to exist.

Ask-a-Birder: Look up for migrating hawks!
OCTOBER 23, 2017

Hawks are on the move and filling the skies above Austin. Ask-a-Birder Expert Dan Smith explains how you might catch a glimpse:

This is the time of year when hawks and vultures are moving south en masse, and Austin and surrounding areas have seen their share. Brush Freeman recently reported from Cedar Park “a river of birds” flowing south that lasted an hour. As Texbirds is popping up on my email all the time, I sometimes step out to take a look and have on several occasions been rewarded with good views. Some of them also apparently are comfortable spending overnight in the trees in town. While it hasn’t happened this year, on three occasions from my home in the Brentwood neighborhood (north central Austin), I have gone out about 9:30 and been rewarded with Swainson’s Hawks lifting off in the neighborhood. Jordan, at the Society offices, tells me how they observed birds from horizon to horizon on one day recently. So keep an eye out. Especially when the wind turns from the north.

Bird of the Week: Snowy Egret
OCTOBER 25, 2017

Smaller and more delicate than the Great Egret, to which it bears a passing resemblance, the Snowy Egret is easily distinguished by its black bill and bright yellow feet (their
name in Spanish, garceta de pie oro, means “gold-footed egret”). They use their feet to stir up small fish and crustaceans, which they then strike with their bills. Though small and plain-looking outside of breeding season, these birds develop dramatic and beautiful breeding plumage on their backs and crests. These feathers were once worth more, ounce for ounce, than gold, and led to massive depopulation as the birds were hunted nearly to extinction. Fortunately, reforms in the 20th Century led to a significant rebound in Snowy Egret populations, and they are now quite common across the eastern half of the state. Compiled by Owen Moorhead. Sources include the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society.

Exploring Chimney Swifts at Chaetura Canyon
OCTOBER 27, 2017

There’s a chittering in the chimney. This sounds like something from a Dr. Seuss book, but it’s actually a sign you might be host to a remarkable bird above your fireplace. Travis Audubon Master Birders recently visited Chaetura Canyon, the 12-acre bird sanctuary located near Mansfield Dam, for an up-close look at Chimney Swifts. These charming birds can be found in the Eastern half of North America and display an endearing set of human-like qualities. Mating pairs exhibit teamwork and affection (and occasionally impatience) while raising their young. Not to mention cameras placed on and in Chimney Swift towers have captured spectacular aerial shows at dusk followed by restless sleepovers.

Georgean and Paul Kyle, who donated the sanctuary to Travis Audubon in December 2006, hosted Master Birders to breakfast and a presentation followed by a hike of the property, which includes nearly 20 Chimney Swift towers. Along the way they shared their extensive knowledge of Chimney Swifts, conservation and tower construction.

Master Birders also got a hands-on experience with Chimney Swift nests. These small, saucer-shaped roosts are constructed using tiny twigs glued together with saliva (you read that correctly) and affixed to vertical walls. Chimney Swift saliva is a key ingredient not only for assembling nests, but also for inoculating their chicks against disease.

Interested in checking out the Chimney Swifts of Chaetura Canyon for yourself? The sanctuary is only open for special events and programs. Visit the Travis Audubon Calendar for upcoming opportunities.

Written by Ellen Cox, a participant in the 2017 Travis Audubon Master Birder Program.

Recent Educational Events at Commons Ford Prairie
OCTOBER 30, 2017

Learning about Monarch Butterflies and the Travis Audubon Master Birder Program
If you have been out on the prairie lately, you may have noticed groups participating in educational opportunities uniquely suited to the native environment established at Commons Ford Prairie.
On October 13th, one of Dr. Amy Contillo’s classes from St. Edwards University visited the prairie to learn about the monarch butterfly migration and its habits from Steven (Chip) Harris, a Commons Ford Prairie Committee member. The monarch butterfly migrates an amazing +2,500 miles from Canada to Central Mexico each fall. The insect passes through Central Texas in mid-October, where it is often witnessed in mass numbers looking for blooming, native wildflowers on which to feed. Chip explained the life-cycle of the butterfly to students, discussed the importance of the plants as a source of fuel, and caught and tagged one insect at the end of the tour. A tagging and tracking system for the monarchs has been in place for many years by Monarch Watch, an organization dedicated to the science behind the monarch life-cycle and migration. If the tagged insect is found later, the number on the tag will be traced back to records showing it was caught, tagged, and recorded at the prairie in October in Central Texas. Monarch Watch can then determine the movements of the butterfly, helping to understand the incredible migratory habits of this insect.

On October 21, Shelia Hargis and Ed Fair led a field trip for this fall’s Travis Audubon Society’s Master Birder Program (TAMBP). The Master Birder Program at Travis Audubon Society is designed to help participants increase their understanding of birds and their habitats, while also developing the skills and opportunities for sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm for birds and the natural world with others. This year’s group witnessed a Hepatic Tanger, which has been recently spotted at the prairie. Additionally, an Eastern Phoebe became friendly with one of the participants and Ed was able to photograph the bird in an unusual display of man-bird communion.

Travis Audubon launched their program in fall 2016. The training, similar to that of the Master Gardener’s Program, includes a series of in-class sessions, study assignments, several field trips, and volunteering and keeping up with continuing education credits for the first three years after completing the curriculum. The instruction is designed to focus on native habitat and vegetation, the distribution of bird species in the area, and conservation issues affecting those communities and species in Central Texas. Participants also receive special instruction on flight and bird behavior, anatomy, and migration.

**UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS & CLASSES!**

November 1, 2017 - CLASS: Sparrow Identification

November 2, 2017 – INTERNATIONAL TRIP: Travis Audubon’s Malawi Bird Safari

November 4, 2017 - Beginner’s Bird Walk at North East Metro Park

November 4, 2017 – Blair Woods Family Nature Days: Native Trees & Plants

November 5, 2017 – FIELD TRIP: Commons Ford Prairie Bird Walk with Lee and Deb Wallace
November 7, 2017 - FIELD TRIP: Super Tuesday at Commons Ford Ranch Metropolitan Park with Ken Zaslow

November 11, 2017 - FIELD TRIP: Camp Mabry with Dennis Palafox

November 11, 2017 – Blair Woods Restoration Day

November 12, 2017 – Young Birders Club: Return to Lake Creek Trail

November 13, 2017 – Wells Branch Bird Walk

November 14, 2017 - FIELD TRIP: Super Tuesday at Barkley Meadows Park with Dan Callaway


November 18, 2017 - FIELD TRIP: Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Walk

November 18, 2017 – FIELD TRIP: Wells Branch Bird Walks

November 18, 2017 – Blair Woods Family Nature Days: Wildlife

November 19, 2017 – Ruffled Feathers Book Club: Mind of the Raven

November 21, 2017 – FIELD TRIP: Two hour Tuesday at Old Settlers Park, led by Ray and Ginny Steelman

November 26, 2017 – McKinney Falls State Park

November 28, 2017 – FIELD TRIP: Super Tuesday at Pedernales Falls State Park, led by Terry Banks

November 30, 2017 – INTERNATIONAL TRIP: JB Journeys: Trinidad & Tobago

December 2, 2017 - Beginner’s Bird Walk at McKinney Falls State Park

December 2, 2017 – Austin’s Inaugural Catio Tour

December 5, 2017 – FIELD TRIP: Two-hour Tuesday at Big Webberville Park with Jane Tillman

December 9, 2017 - FIELD TRIP: Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Count

December 9, 2017 – Baker Sanctuary Restoration Day
December 10, 2017 – Annual Holiday Party and Volunteer Recognition Party

December 11, 2017 - Wells Branch Bird Walk

December 16, 2017 - Wells Branch Bird Walks

December 19, 2017 – FIELD TRIP: Super Tuesday at the Shield Ranch

CLASSES