Dear Travis Audubon Members and Friends,

The holidays are a time to reflect on the year past, but in 2019 our thoughts went back a little further -- to Thanksgiving of 1959 to be exact, when a teenage birder named Frank "Poncho" Oatman went searching for arrowheads and instead found ducks. Lots of ducks, in fact! Poncho was the first birder to cast his binoculars on the Platt Ponds at Hornsby Bend. Poncho returned with fellow teenagers John and Rose Ann Rowlett, and in those first days at Hornsby Bend they located four species that were new for Travis County. Soon birding luminaries Edgar Kincaid, Fred Webster, and Ed Kutac were birding at the ponds, and Hornsby Bend became the center of the Austin birding universe, where it has remained for 60 years.

This November 23, Travis Audubon and Austin Water celebrated those 60 years of birding at Hornsby Bend. We enjoyed a full day in the field with morning and afternoon bird surveys and field trips, followed by an evening of stories about Hornsby from Greg Lasley, Victor Emanuel, Chuck Sexton and other birders who have built the legend of Hornsby over the years. Travis Audubon had the opportunity to recognize Austin Water’s Greg Meszaros, Daryl Slusher, and Kevin Anderson, whose support has been so critical in keeping Hornsby Bend accessible to birders.

Thanks to our fantastic Travis Audubon staff and volunteers who made this an event worthy of the milestone!

I spent much of the day in the field with a group of sharp young birders – appropriate considering the prominent role teenagers have played in Hornsby’s birding history. Near the end of the day we were lucky enough to find a Rusty Blackbird and a Pyrrhuloxia, the latter being a new bird for my Hornsby list. A nice surprise!

I lead many field trips at Hornsby, and beginning birders often ask me what makes Hornsby so great for birding. I think there are many factors, but for me this is the reason I love Hornsby. No matter how many times I’ve visited over the years, there is always the chance for a surprise!

Happy birding in the New Year,

Eric Stager
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Upcoming Events
WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

04 JAN, 20
FIELD TRIPS
Beginner’s Bird Walk: Pedernales Falls State Park

09 JAN, 20
Response of Vegetation and Ecosystem Services to the Commons Ford Prairie Restoration Treatments
3710 Cedar St., Austin, TX 78705

11 JAN, 20
CLASSES
Waterfowl Identification Course Winter 2020

11 JAN, 20
FIELD TRIPS
Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Count

12 JAN, 20
FIELD TRIPS
Winter Birding at Louis Rene Barrera Indiangrass Wildlife Sanctuary

12 JAN, 20
Ruffled Feathers Book Club Meeting

16 JAN, 20
Speaker Series: Is Birding Good for Your Health? The Role of Nature in Promoting Health, Wellness, and Healing with Amy Sugeno
4700 Grover Ave, Austin, TX 78756

18 JAN, 20
FIELD TRIPS
Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Walk

18 JAN, 20
SANCTUARY EVENTS
Baker Sanctuary Restoration Day

19 JAN, 20
FIELD TRIPS, SANCTUARY EVENTS
Commons Ford Prairie Bird Walk

01 FEB, 20
FIELD TRIPS
Beginner’s Bird Walk: Mary Moore Searight Metropolitan Park
907 West Slaughter Lane, Austin, TX 78748

01 FEB, 20
CLASSES
Beginning Backyard Birding

08 FEB, 20
Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Count

09 FEB, 20
FIELD TRIPS
Winter Birding at Louis Rene Barrera Indiangrass Wildlife Sanctuary

15 FEB, 20
FIELD TRIPS
Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Walk

15 FEB, 20
FIELD TRIPS, SANCTUARY EVENTS
Commons Ford Prairie Bird Walk

15 FEB, 20
SANCTUARY EVENTS
Blair Woods Restoration Day

15 FEB, 20
CLASSES
Purple Martin Class

18 FEB, 20
NPSOT Meeting with Lee Marlowe and Martin Reid
2601 Exposition Blvd, Austin, TX 78703

20 FEB, 20
Speaker Series: Exploring the World of the Barn Owl with Scott Rashid
4700 Grover Ave, Austin, TX 78756

29 FEB, 20
2020 Catio Tour
Updates
FROM THE SIGNAL SMOKE BLOG

Why I Love Birding at Hornsby Bend

POSTED ON NOVEMBER 7, 2019
By: Jane Tillman, Travis Audubon Master Birder

I got my introduction to Hornsby back in 2001 when I took the Capital Area Master Naturalist training. Long-time birder John Kelly led our group out to the ponds to look at the ducks, which included memorable Northern Shovelers swimming around in rafts to stir up invertebrates and filter feed. I can’t say I fell under Hornsby’s spell immediately, but once I got over the fact that it was arguably not as pretty as other eBird hotspots, I’ve made many visits over the years. After all, the birds are aesthetically pleasing, and there are several different habitats to explore. Where else in Austin can you get such a diversity of birds in one spot?

One way to see all that Hornsby has to offer is to participate in the monthly bird counts. You get to see it in the slow times, cold times, hot times, rainy times and great times. You get a better understanding of the ebb and flow of bird life through the seasons. One month it might be a couple of hundred (at least) Yellow-rumped Warblers all chipping down by Pond 3. Another time it might be a noticeable movement of Yellow Warblers or orioles, or the massing of Scissor-tails over on Platt.

I’ve appreciated the willingness of birders who find a rare bird to alert the rest of us to its presence, often with helpful directions to where it is being seen. Purple Gallinule? – Pond 3. Red-necked Phalaropes? – Back and forth between ponds 2 and 1 West. Surf Scoter – Pond 2. Some reports are just painful though. Swallow-tailed Kite? Flyover. Wood Stork? Luck and timing. Long-eared Owl? You had to be there. Fortunately Hornsby is birded a lot, which increases the chances someone will find that something interesting. On those occasions when Hornsby is graced with a rare bird that sticks, you can count on some of your birding friends being there too, and not just from Austin. It’s the best kind of happy hour.

One memorable bird for me was the Ruff that top Hornsby birder Eric Carpenter found in early May, 2016. All I remember was the Rare Bird Alert said Ruff!!! It must have said Hornsby, but did not need to say more. It was a windy evening with lots of whitecaps in 1 West, and there she was out on a little exposed island, with a crowd of birders paying homage from shore. Other lifers I’ve seen at Hornsby and nowhere else were the two immature Sabine’s Gulls in 2016 and the Long-tailed Jaeger in 2017. I bet you have some lifers from there too.
A flock of Franklin’s Gulls is always memorable. Photo courtesy of Ken Zaslow.

It’s not just about the lifers though. You can get some wow birding in at Hornsby, like witnessing the sky full of Swainson’s Hawks at Hornsby’s 50th celebration, when over 3000 lifted off after roosting overnight in a hayfield nearby. You might get to hear the “rusty hinge” creak of a small flock of Rusty Blackbirds down on Pond 3. Or you may get to marvel at hundreds and hundreds of swallows coursing over the ponds, or a flyover flock of noisy Franklin’s Gulls on their way to Chile or the Dakotas depending on the season. Imagine!

We are so lucky to have access to Hornsby. More importantly, we are fortunate our beleaguered birds have a relatively safe haven there, as they face ever-shrinking stopover, summering and wintering habitats. Come out and show your support for Hornsby and celebrate our birds on Nov. 23. For sure you will see some good birds.

**VIP Trip to Cibolo Bluffs Preserve**

*POSTED ON NOVEMBER 8, 2019*

*By: Kelsey McKenna, Travis Audubon Development Manager*

Our fall VIP birding trip on November 2 at the Cibolo Bluffs Preserve, a Nature Conservancy property, was a hit! Situated about 20 miles northeast of San Antonio, this 2,765-acre preserve encompasses nearly three miles of Cibolo Creek. It was the perfect locale for a morning bird walk for 17 generous Travis Audubon donors led by Rich Kostecke and Eric Stager.

The group arrived for a sunrise breakfast picnic and a brief history lesson at the preserve’s hilltop ranch house. We then set off on a short walk to the bluff’s water feature, where we delighted in crimson flashes of Northern Cardinals, the first of many Eastern Phoebes for the day, and a flock of Black-bellied Whistling-ducks overhead.

We took to navigating the preserve’s trails in high-clearance vehicles, stopping frequently to bird and admire the expansive scenery: prickly pear cacti glowing golden in the morning sunlight, and mature Oaks and Ashe juniper that make for pristine GCWA habitat. During our stops we were met by inquisitive deer, an Orange-crowned Warbler, Red-shouldered Hawk, and more Phoebes at just about every turn. The highlight of the day surely was the Hutton’s Vireo – a lifer for many, including me – who perched just off the trail for everyone to get a close-up view.

We caravanned back through the trails to reconvene at the ranch house, where we enjoyed snacks in the shade of a large oak tree. In three hours we covered 3.75 miles and saw 24 species (and at least 24 Phoebes!) with good friends… what a way to experience quintessential hill country!

We are so grateful to the generous donors who make Travis Audubon’s work possible. If you’re interested in joining us on VIP field trips like these, email me at Kelsey@travisaudubon.org to learn more about our levels of membership.

**Rainy Day Birding**

*POSTED ON NOVEMBER 26, 2019*

*By: Pat Yingst, Travis Audubon Master Birder*

We’ve had a lot of very cold, rainy weather lately, which makes it hard to get out with binoculars to look at live birds hunkering down inside trees or hiding in the reeds on cold, windy ponds. So what to do?
Ebird – that innovative group of people from upstate New York – offers an alternative: the “Photo and Sound Quiz” which you can get to by going to the ebird.org website, signing in, going to the EXPLORE page and scrolling to the bottom. This is a great learning tool for beginner or intermediate birders. I do have to warn you that it is a little addicting.

Each randomly generated quiz is different and consists of 20 pictures or audio clips of birds with multiple choice answers. The pictures and audios are from the Macaulay database – that huge database globally created by all of us when we post pictures or audio clips on our eBird lists. As you can imagine, if you’ve ever posted a grab shot of a duck on the other side of the lake, or shot a picture of a warbler flitting behind a bunch of branches, some of the pictures are not so good. It’s still your job to ID the bird – whether with one of the multiple choice answers or ‘none of the above,’ which throws a ringer into the effort. It’s not the kind of quiz that you can be guaranteed to ace even if you are an ace birder because some of the pictures are just impossible.

For each quiz, you designate a place and a day of the year. I’m using the quiz now to familiarize myself with birds I might see in January in Guatemala when I go on the Travis Audubon-sponsored trip to that country. Since most of these birds are totally new to me, I “cheat” by looking up all the multiple choice answers. Of course even looking them up doesn’t ensure a correct answer due to the multiple costumes that the 2 sexes of birds wear at different ages and in different seasons.

There’s something about having to come up with an answer and getting a “grade” in the form of CONGRATULATIONS YOU GOT 17 OUT OF 20 RIGHT that enhances learning – at least for my personality type. And it mimics real life because of the uneven quality of the pictures. You may not be able to see the tail feathers of a bird, or you may see a tiny image off in the distance, or a small black bird on the ground facing away from the camera, or the image may be out of focus. Some of the images are lovely and belong in bird books or on bird websites. And most are good enough that the bird can be identified.

If a picture is bad enough that you have to just guess the bird, you can get revenge. Before you can move on to the next question you have to rate the picture and you can give it a lowly 1-star rating. Ah, those Cornell eBird geniuses have found a way to extract a quid pro quo – we get to play the game and they get ratings for those millions of pictures in the Macaulay database. If a picture or sound clip is so good that it belongs on a birding website or bird book, give it a five-star rating and help the eBird fools find it. I would get a big kick out of seeing a picture of mine or of someone I know pop up. I’d be tempted to give it 5 stars even if it didn’t deserve it.

**Be a 2020 Master Birder**

December 6 is the deadline for applying for the Travis Audubon 2020 Master Birder program. If you are at least an intermediate birder, love birds, and have the time for the 3 months of evening classes (total of 10 sessions), Saturday morning field trips (total of 8), and time throughout the year to contribute at least 30 hours of volunteering to Travis Audubon, you should check it out. **Information for applicants, the 2020 syllabus, and the application are available on the website here.** As a graduate of the 2019 program, I talked to a lot of people at the Sixty Years of Birding at Hornsby Bend Celebration last Saturday. Following are some of the questions that visitors asked me.

**If you are a Master Birder, are you expected to lead bird walks?**

Absolutely not. Although the name implies a special Godlike knowledge of bird species, that is a mischaracterization. There is a lot to do that does not involve leading walks. On the other hand, if leading walks is something you want to do, the Master Birder program is a gateway into that. At least 2 people from my Master Birder class are now leading walks or helping to lead walks.
What are the volunteer opportunities?
Here’s an incomplete list: being on a committee, tabling at events, writing blog posts for the website (like this one), clearing invasive plants from sites like Baker Sanctuary, participating in or leading children’s programs, giving presentations. Of course, you can help out with many of these things without being a Master Birder, but as a Master Birder, you are in a direct line to hear about the opportunities. The most fun one for me was getting to be a bid spotter at the Victor Emanuel Conservation Award Luncheon. We learned the ins and outs of auctioneering from a professional auctioneer and then got dressed up and came out dancing to “Rockin’ Robin” carrying flashy lights and wearing big smiles. It was a glitzy moment of show biz.

What is the age limit?
The person who asked this had a 13 year-old relative who was an avid birder and was very interested in doing the program. I didn’t know the answer so checked with Caley Zuzula, the Travis Audubon Program and Education Coordinator. She thought about it a little while and said “Well why not?” So I think the answer is that there isn’t really a specific age limit: a teen that demonstrates maturity and a strong interest in birding can apply. On the other side of the age spectrum, I am over 70 and I don’t think I was the oldest person in the group.

What are my personal take-aways from the Master Birder experience?
Knowledge about feathers, bones, internal organs, genetics, migration, molting, and more. Plenty of tips about how to look for birds, how to ID them and where to find them. How to use eBird. Then there are many intangible benefits like ramped up enthusiasm, companions, elevated comfort level on bird outings, and, last but not least, good snacks.

For questions regarding the Master Birder Program, please contact Caley Zuzula at caley@travisaudubon.org.

Thank You, TAS!
POSTED ON DECEMBER 9, 2019

I wanted to give thanks to Travis Audubon Society and TAS birders for all their support and bird book donations to The Texas Blue Jay Project!

We were able to raise 200 bird books to donate to schools and communities.

Today, with the support of generous Texas birders we were able to drop off our last collection of donated bird books to Marbridge residents. I am also thrilled to announce that The Texas Blue Jay Project collected over 2,500 signatures from Texans throughout Texas who pledged to explore birds & birdwatching!

Above is a photo at Marbridge Dec. 2019.

Thank you, again TAS!

Happy Birding,
Sebastian Casarez
The Texas Blue Jay Project

Undertakers Wear Black
POSTED ON DECEMBER 12, 2019
By: Jim Pauff, Travis Audubon Master Birder

In Asia and Africa vultures are in decline, because the drug Diclofenac, given to cattle, is lethal to vultures eating dead cows. Poisoned bait set out for predators also kills them. India lost ninety-eight percent of its vultures in some provinces. Worldwide, seventy-three percent of vulture species are declining. But North American black and turkey vultures are increasing. A study in an area of North Carolina in 2014 found black vultures increasing ten percent a year. Both turkeys and blacks are long-lived, intelligent, and sociable. They soar together an average of 535 to 375 feet up. Yet their personalities are different. Turkey vultures eat nothing but carrion. Black vultures are more aggressive.
Not long ago a university student told me that vultures hunt. He’d seen them kill small animals. Restraining myself, I smiled benignly down at him, as he was no doubt spouting a countrified Texas myth his grandfather told him. It’s good I kept my mouth shut because he was correct. Black vultures are sometimes predators. With a minor population explosion going on they are stirring up trouble in Illinois and Arkansas. Both states are discussing how to control them. They’ve killed deer at a deer ranch and lambs and calves up to two months old in pastures. It doesn’t happen often but it happens enough that farmers are complaining about it. The birds go after small animals’ eyes. After blinding them, they peck away at their rectums until they bleed to death. Those are the reports, anyway. Black vultures are audacious, the first vultures to appear in forensic “body farms” where scientists monitor human decomposition. Vultures recently ate a television actor in Oregon who was hiking and fell off a cliff into a tree. They ate his pug dog, too. The dog’s name was Boo Boo Bear. Requiescat in pace. It’s a good bet black vultures landed first to investigate the dead guy wedged in a tree.

On a lighter note, black vultures don’t soar as well as turkey vultures because they have heavier wing loadings; studies show they spend more time perched. Both are communal but blacks hang out together more. They famously don’t have a sense of smell. Instead, they keep their eye on neighboring turkey vultures which have extraordinary olfactory senses, and follow them down when they find something. Both are beneficial. After moving through their guts, bacteria for swine flu, botulism, and anthrax are killed. Home ranges of turkey vultures are twice the size of black vultures except during the breeding season (January through June), when blacks’ ranges enlarge and turkeys’ shrink a bit, presumably because of chick-rearing. Both ranges contract from June to October when food is plentiful. They enlarge again in winter and stay that way through the breeding season. Turkey vultures soar more during cold months when there are presumably less olfactory clues leading them to food. Vultures in forested areas spend more time soaring to find food than in agricultural areas—which explains the many vultures circling the Hill Country.

If you’ve always wanted to go birding at Caddo Lake, but haven’t gotten around to it, a great opportunity is coming up soon. RESERVE YOUR CABIN NOW for this April event! More detailed information to come, but here’s the general outline:

Caddo Lake State Park Bird-a-Thon (fundraiser for TAS)
April 2-5, 2020. Trip begins officially early evening Thursday, April 2, with wine and cheese happy hour and ends noonish as we head home on Sunday, April 5.
Leaders: Terry Banks, Virginia Rose, Celeste Treadway.

Registration will be limited to 12 people in addition to leaders, so first come first served! Registration is $250, which includes 2.5 days of birding and a Pontoon boat tour. Reserve your spot here. If you’d like to stay IN THE STATE PARK, click here to see cabins and registration information. NOTE: Registration does not include cabin reservation. You are responsible for reserving your cabin, and the registration will not be refunded due to inability to secure a cabin. Cabins fill up quickly! Once they’re gone, choices will be non-cabin camping site or shelter if still available, or out-of-park lodging.

We usually wait until March to open registration for Birdathon teams, but since this event is dependent upon securing quick-filling lodging, we are posting this early! Watch the TAS site for more information around Birdathon time. Until then, good birding!
Thank You
TO OUR 2019 VICTOR EMANUEL
CONSERVATION AWARD LUNCHEON SPONSORS

Chris Harte
We were thrilled to honor Chris Harte for the 10th anniversary of the Victor Emanuel Conservation Award Luncheon for his conservation work at Spicewood Ranch.
Thank You
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These members support our critical efforts in education, conservation and advocacy. Members of this highest giving category set an example by making an annual gift of $1,500 or more – over and above membership.

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