Hello Travis Audubon friends and members,

As we head into the fall, it's hard to believe that it's been six months since the COVID pandemic upended our world. I've gradually settled into a new normal, working from home, seeing my colleagues and family only through a video screen.

I have perhaps taken for granted how much birding has helped me mark the passage of a year. I did little birding this spring as the pandemic kept me close to home, but have gradually been getting back out to engage with the seasonal rhythm of the birds. The Purple Martins were back at their mega-roost in July. In August I made a solo trip to the Upper Texas Coast to see how the shorebird migration was progressing.

One thing I've missed the most has been leading the monthly Hornsby Bend field trips and seeing the familiar faces, as well as the new birders or out of town visitors, and showing them around my favorite local patch.

But as one door closes, another opens. Our staff has worked hard to produce some amazing virtual events and educational opportunities this summer. There has been a steady stream of our regular classes, as well as some new ventures, like Jeff Patterson's Be a Better Birder class, and Christy Esmahan's Spanish for Birders. The Summer Lunch Series has been a huge hit, with more than 1,000 participants registering for the talks throughout the whole summer. Although we can't meet in person, I have been very impressed with how engaged our members have been in these events.

Our biggest virtual event yet is coming up on October 2, when we honor Shelia Hargis with the Victor Emanuel Conservation Award. Shelia has been active with Travis Audubon for more than 20 years, and no one has done more to bring new birders into our family. I hope you will join us to recognize Shelia's contributions to birding in Texas, and help spread the word to those in your birding network. There will be a silent auction as well as sponsorship opportunities. Registration for this event is free and the more the merrier – invite all your friends and birders! Your generous contributions will help Travis Audubon continue our mission to inspire conservation through birding as we navigate these trying times. Please go to travisaudubon.org for all the details.

Be safe and good birding!

Eric
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AT TRAVIS AUDUBON

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Bryan Hale
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Susan Rieff
Andrew Sansom
Carter Smith
# Upcoming Events

**WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON**

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<td>17 OCT, 2020</td>
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<td>28 OCT, 2020</td>
<td>CLASSES</td>
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**Thank You**

**TO OUR BIRDS AND BUSINESS PARTNERS**
For most people, unless they’re farmers, raising chickens is unlike any other animal keeping project they’ve ever undertaken, and the learning curve can be much steeper than anticipated. Luckily, those who have kept birds before, even parakeets, have a leg up over people whose entire definition of pets, before deciding to get chickens, stopped at cats and dogs and maybe hamsters on the outside. Even seasoned bird keepers, though, will have a few extra things to keep in mind when getting started on their first backyard chicken flock.

**Breed and Egg Selection**

Although, in the common parlance, “chickens” just means... chickens, they actually come in hundreds of unique breeds, each with its own advantages, disadvantages, and personalities. Unlike other pets, choosing a chicken breed is about more than just personality and aesthetic – chicken keepers also have to decide between broilers (meat birds) and layers (egg birds), what kind of production capacity they want, what size eggs they’d prefer, etc. Lots of good beginner breeds are also excellent layers, like the leghorn, Plymouth Rock, and the famous Rhode Island Red. When chicken keepers refer to “good layers,” they usually mean birds that will consistently produce between 4-6 eggs a week. Of course, that may be too many eggs for some families, so egg laying capacity is far from the only consideration in choosing a chicken breed.

Chicken breeds also have distinctive personalities, or at least tend to specific personalities, though almost any bird raised from a chick or an egg will be friendly and docile with its owners. The Rhode Island Red is famous (or infamous) for bullying other hens in the yard, while the shy Dorking breed is much more likely to be the one being kicked around. Breeds like the cochin, which were bred to be ornamental birds or pets, rather than producers, tend to be especially friendly, if not cuddly, and can be an excellent choice for someone looking to introduce their children to chicken keeping.

Another key consideration when picking a chicken breed is climate and breed hardiness. Because cultures all around the world have been optimizing their own chicken breeds for their own purposes for hundreds of years, it's no surprise that there are chicken breeds adapted to all sorts of climates. One of the big draws of New England birds like the Rhode Island Red and the Plymouth Rock is their hardiness, having been bred to withstand the variable temperate climate of the American Northeast. Some breeds, like the Russian Pavlovskaya, can suffer in warmer temperatures, while breeds from around the equator can be delicate hothouse flowers – which tropical bird keepers will certainly understand. For the most part, though, birds with a good coop can thrive wherever they’re raised, which raises the question – what does a good chicken coop look like?

**Coops and Runs**

A coop is, unsurprisingly, one of the essential elements of starting a chicken flock. Along with the coop, most chicken keepers elect to build a run as well, a protected outside area.
where the chickens can exercise and get fresh air – which is critical, as chickens tend to be highly susceptible to respiratory diseases. While chickens can do very well without a run, they will need a slightly bigger coop to compensate, so they still have enough room to exercise.

The key elements of any chicken set up are a feeder, waterer, nesting boxes, and perches. While there are different kinds of feeders and waterers, they’re fairly self-explanatory; the feeding habits of chickens aren’t much different from other kinds of birds, with one key exception – grit. While most pet birds being fed bird food have no need of either soluble or insoluble grit, chickens, unless they’re allowed to free range, actually need both. The most common form of soluble grit for chickens is oyster shells; they need the extra calcium in order to lay strong eggs. Insoluble grit can be purchased by the bag pretty much wherever chicken feed is sold.

Nesting boxes and perches are also a must-have for any chicken coop, in order to keep the chickens happy and healthy. The big benefit of nesting boxes is that, if most of the hens lay their eggs in the nesting box, they become much easier to find, rather than having to search all the out of the way corners shy hens might find to lay their eggs in instead. A good rule of thumb is to have one nesting box for every three hens. Perches serve the chickens’ evolutionary need to sleep and rest as far off the ground as possible; perches should be the highest available roosting space in the coop, otherwise the hens will find somewhere else to sleep – including nesting boxes, which can cause a whole host of problems with cleaning, health, and egg production.

**Common Mistakes**

Anyone launching into the unknown with a new animal to take care of will have some ups and down, make some mistakes and suffer some mishaps. Many of these, however, can be avoided with careful planning and research.

Perhaps the most common and most serious mistake is neglecting to check the bylaws of the town or county, which can often have specific rules and regulations controlling who can raise chickens, and where. These might be animal ordinances, similar to dog licenses, or building regulations that cover outbuilding like coops. Chickens and especially roosters also often fall under noise ordinances. Thorough research in this area before launching their chicken-raising venture can save owners major legal headaches in the future.

Another common mistake, especially for people used to raising indoor birds, is to forget to protect their flock from predators, like foxes and hawks. Luckily, this is relatively easy: Birds can be frightened off by anything shiny and fluttery hanging outside the coop, and burrowing predators can usually be foiled by sinking any fences or walls at least a foot into the ground.

Overall, raising chickens can be a difficult but rewarding experience – but it’s significantly less difficult and more rewarding for people who are thoroughly prepared for it...and of course, a little extra bird experience can only help with that.

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**Filming a Hummingbird Nest**

**POSTED ON JULY 13, 2020**

By Sachin Aggarwal

My life is all about travel, and the COVID-19 pandemic brought a sudden halt to all my travel plans – Costa Rica, Botswana for work (birding trips) and personal travel trips to Ecuador and Peru.

However, the change also brought our twin girls back home from college – much to their chagrin and our pleasure! We also have more time now to try our hand at some new things
like organic gardening in our backyard using permaculture practices.

This story is about an adventure that started off during our everyday evening walks in the neighborhood, which have been a regular feature that we look forward to after being home most of the day. We Austinites are so fortunate to live in a city in the midst of so much greenery which gives the sense of living in a forest.

Two weeks ago we were walking our regular route, which takes us up and down neighborhood streets and past many wonderful live oaks. We crossed some low hanging oak branches with several moss balls. One of the moss balls caught my eye because it seemed more conical than round.

I stopped, went back a few feet, and examined the moss ball more closely. My eyes widened as I saw two sticks coming out of two fuzzy balls. Awestruck to say the least, I had stumbled upon a nest with two nestlings. The sticks were the beaks pointed upwards. The nest was the smallest and the most beautiful I had ever seen. It seemed so much a part of the branch and was decorated with bits of lichen all over it.

I had never seen a nest like this before and my heart was full of joy like a boy scout on his first adventure. I looked on the internet to confirm what I suspected to be a hummingbird nest. We have two hummingbird feeders in our backyard and have been enjoying the company of the hummingbirds every year for the last several years. To stumble upon this hummingbird nest was such an incredible treat! I think they have one of the most beautiful nests.

Surprisingly, the nest was at the end of a branch right at the sidewalk at about eye level. I set up my scope in our front yard from where I could see the activity at the nest, but since it was about 200 feet away and the view was not the best, I decided to take my camping chair and set up on the sidewalk about 50 feet away so as not to disturb the nest and enjoy this most wonderful experience through my binoculars.

I am sure people driving by were wondering what this fellow was doing sitting on a camping chair on the sidewalk with binoculars, peeping into what could have been mistaken as a neighbor’s house. But I was not planning on giving up on witnessing the amazing phenomenon of hummingbirds nesting.

I enjoyed watching the chicks while they waited for the mother to return. The most fun, however, was watching the activity when the mother returned to feed them. The nestlings, like all other bird species, would get all excited! They did not have loud squeaks like those that wren chicks have. It was so nice watching the mother feeding them nectar that she had labored to collect over the last 10 – 12 minutes. The hummingbird adult female raises the chicks alone so it was only the mom that fed the chicks. It was simply fascinating to watch.

After watching all this activity for some time, it dawned upon me that it would be great if I could capture these precious moments on a video using the movie feature of my DSLR camera and my scope tripod.
My tripod is not very tall, so I had to figure out a way of setting the camera up in a way that I could get a good view of the nest. I convinced my daughter to help me carry an assortment of things across the street in the vicinity of the nest. We had the camera, the tripod, two chairs and a step stool.

We placed the chair some distance away so as to not disturb the nest and its residents, and then placed the small chair on top of the dining chair and then the tripod on top of the small chair. That day I got some new appreciation for what it takes for a crew to rig up the cameras when shooting for BBC Earth or Nat Geo!

I finally stepped on the wooden stool to be able to see through the camera's view finder. I zoomed in and focused on the nest before changing the camera setting to video mode and starting the video. Phew! I was happy to get the camera rolling, I had no idea what kind of footage I would get and so I walked away and sat down 100 feet away hoping that my precarious setup would not get blown over by the breeze that had started to pick up.

All went well, and I was happy to get our dining chair back in the house before my wife noticed it was missing. Turned out that she was as excited as me about the hummingbirds and I need not have worried about that to begin with.

I could hardly wait to put the video SD card into my laptop to see what the camera had captured. The first few minutes were the chicks waiting patiently but that changed when the mommy hummingbird showed up. There was a yellow spot on the beak and I thought, Black-chinned hummingbirds don’t have yellow spots on their long thin beaks! And then it struck me – it was yellow pollen from a flower! Duh! It was wonderful to watch the beauty of a hummingbird feeding its chicks on a high resolution video zoomed into the nest. I repeated the video setup every two days and was able to create a video of several clips over 6 days showing the quick growth from small nestlings to ready-to-fly fledglings. On the 7th day the little ones had fledged.

Lucky are those who have happened across a live hummingbird nest because it really is a very special birding experience!

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**Geology of Blair Woods**

POSTED ON JULY 15, 2020

Did you know that Blair Woods, our Travis Audubon urban nature preserve, is the site of an important historical spring? Coleman Springs, cited in Gunnar Brune’s 1981 *Springs of Texas*, served Frank and Fern Blair as a source of water. And like most habitats and natural features, the spring is heavily dependent on the geology of the area. Dr. Pete Rose (Ph.D. in Geology, University of Texas), professional geologist for over 58 years (and father of our own Travis Audubon Board Member, Virginia Rose) visited Blair Woods last fall to further our understanding of the natural history of the preserve. Dr. Rose found that the northern part of the preserve has an underlying outcrop of Upper Colorado River terrace deposits, sand and gravel in nature, generally 10-15 ft thick. This terrace is roughly 1 million years old, remnants of river gravels deposited by the ancient Colorado River when it was at a higher level than today. Underneath the sand/gravel terrace is a clay/mudstone layer, 75 million years old, that does not allow water to move through easily. Importantly, the edge of the sand/gravel terrace, sloping to the south, comes out along a small gully in the preserve, the site of Coleman Springs. Unlike the well-known aquifer springs found in western Travis County, Coleman Springs is a Quaternary (gravel) spring. Surface water filters down through the topsoil into the
gravel layer and is slowed or stopped by the underlying clay formation. The water then moves slowly down the slope until it finds a natural place to exit—a place like our Coleman Springs.

During an educational walk at the preserve this last February, Dr. Rose pointed out examples of the exposed river terrace deposits and the underlying clay formation. We examined an interesting ledge of a course-grained conglomerate, looking much like concrete to the untrained eye, just north of the old springhouse. We also measured the depth and level of the springhouse well. All those present came away with a deeper understanding of the geological features and workings of Coleman Springs and the nature of the Quaternary aquifer that makes it possible.

Dr. Rose has graciously donated an expert geological report on Blair Woods to Travis Audubon, along with maps and drawings. This report is available in digital format and can be requested from Travis Audubon. Our plans are to use this information in future educational exhibits at the preserve.

We expect to have more information on the historical importance of Coleman Springs later this year. Look for future blog pieces on what part our Blair Woods and Coleman Springs played in the lives of the historical peoples of Texas.

Stop Them from Dying

POSTED ON JULY 23, 2020

Last Thursday was a tough day. I got news that my brother-in-law, my cousin’s daughter and my son-in-law, all living in different cities, had Covid-19. And then when I went to check the mail, I found a dead little Barn Swallow in front of my neighbor’s house. I came home and cried.

“Focus on what you can control,” my husband gently reminded me.

As it turns out, thankfully, all three of my extended family members are doing fine. The little swallow, however, recently fledged and with its tail feathers not yet long enough to be deeply forked, will never make it to its family’s wintering home in South America.

Every year in the U.S. outdoor cats murder billions of birds, breeding and wintering habitats are destroyed by humans, and another billion birds are killed when they fly into windows. These are problems we can and should focus on.

Travis Audubon’s Advocacy Committee is working with the City of Austin to encourage the adoption of a bird-friendly building resolution, and soon we will be asking our Council members to sign it. We encourage you to help us get the word out to them. Likewise, many cities throughout the US and Canada are also implementing bird-safe building legislation.

In addition, there’s fantastic news from Congress: on July 1st, the US House of
Representatives passed H.R. 919, the Bird-Safe Buildings Act. This Act, which requires that all federal buildings incorporate bird-safe building materials and design features, has been circulating in Congress for years and, thankfully, largely has bipartisan support. Now it is attached to H.R. 2, The Moving Forward Act, as an amendment. Designing buildings to be bird-friendly is not expensive. Neither is retrofitting them with films that make glass visible to birds. Saving a billion birds from needless death each year is within our grasp. That's why when the Bird-Safe Buildings Act is introduced to the Senate soon, regardless of your political affiliations, I hope you'll join me in reaching out to our senators and urging them to support this Act. Watch for the weekly Travis Audubon e-bulletins and we'll let you know when to do so.

Meanwhile, now's a great time to take action in your own home. The American Birding Conservancy has a slew of easy ways in which to make our windows visible to birds. I love the non-sticky decals from Artscape for my glass doors and windows, but there are lots of ideas from which to choose. Also, encourage friends and family to make their windows visible to birds, keep their cats indoors and plant native plants to feed and shelter our birds.

Oh, and one more thing: wear your mask! Let's all stay safe so we can continue birding for many years to come!

**Book Review: The Thing With Feathers: The Surprising Lives of Birds and What They Reveal About Being Human by Noah Strycker**

**POSTED ON AUGUST 19, 2020**

By Jeanette Larson, Travis Audubon Master Birder

Strycker is often described as a "birder at large" and he has birded around the world. In 2015 he completed a worldwide big year, seeing almost 60% (6,042) of the world’s 10,400 bird species on all seven continents. That, along with his degree in
Fisheries and Wildlife Sciences and many field trips, allows him to explore the behaviors of different bird species and how their behaviors connect with that of humans in *The Thing With Feathers.*

Each chapter focuses on a single species, and it should be noted, those included are often not the "rock stars of ornithology." The chapters are divided into three sections: Body, Mind, Spirit. Strycker focuses on experiments and studies that support his ideas that “[b]ird behavior offers a mirror in which we can reflect on human behavior.”

He explores how pigeons learn to find their way home and the navigational skills of other species and why bower birds decorate their nests and appreciate their own version of art. Magpies are able to recognize themselves in mirrors and nutcrackers have amazing memories and can recall literally hundreds of locations where they have stored seeds. Especially interesting is the examination of pecking order in chickens. Vultures can distinguish taste, preferring to eat the carcasses of herbivores rather than carnivores. Without anthropomorphizing, Stryker explains these behaviors and frequently connects it to our world and helps us learn what it means to be human.

Each chapter includes a drawing of the bird being discussed. End Notes explain the sources for his research and describes themes that are based on Strycker's own interpretations from his field experiences. Each note offers additional readings and films for those who want to further explore the described behaviors.

The book's title comes from an Emily Dickinson poem ("Hope" is the thing with feathers) and Strycker's writing is equally poetic and passionate. The chapters are easy to dip into and encourages readers to reflect on our own behaviors. Note that Dickinson’s poem has served as inspiration for several books with the same, or almost the same, title so be sure to check the author.

*Image of Black Vulture featured above courtesy of Jeanette Larson.*