Hello Travis Audubon friends and members,

As I write this message, another spring migration season is coming to a close. This year, however, the end of the season is a cause for optimism, as I look forward with hope for a gradual return to normality in 2021. For the first time in more than a year, I took an out-of-town birding trip in April to visit my old stomping grounds on the Upper Texas Coast, where some of my most formative birding experiences took place back in the 1980s. It was great to reconnect with familiar places and familiar birds, as the rhythm of bird migration continued unaffected by the tribulations of the last year.

As we have for the past year, Travis Audubon has continued to move forward to carry out our mission as we await a full return to in-person programs. Our virtual programs and classes have continued to draw great interest from our members. We had a very successful Birding Brawl fundraiser again this year, along with other Birdathon events. We celebrated Travis Audubon’s 69th birthday with Golden-cheek Week, with several talks on current research on the warbler, both locally and in the wintering grounds in Latin America.

I was especially excited about the launch of the local and statewide “Lights Out” campaign, aiming to educate building owners, businesses, and homeowners about simple ways to reduce the hazards to migrating birds by turning off non-essential outdoor and building lighting during migration season. I encourage our members to learn more about this campaign on our website and help spread the word to your neighbors!

I want to thank our fantastic staff for all their hard work and creativity in coming up with these great events, and so many more, over the last year. And thanks to all our members for your continued support. I hope to see you out on the birding trails over the coming months!

Good birding!

Eric

Eric Stager
President
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Upcoming Events
WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

04 MAY, 21
CLASSES
FULL: Class: Spring Warblers

13 MAY, 21
FIELD TRIPS
FULL: Wild Weekday: City of Bee Cave Central Park

20 MAY, 21
Virtual Speaker Series: An Accidental Big Year with Janet
Davis and Jeff Osborne

23 MAY, 21
Ruffled Feathers Book Club Meeting

19 JUN, 21
CLASSES
Virtual Class: There's an App for That: Observing Nature for
Science with iNaturalist

19 JUL, 21
CLASSES
Virtual Class: Common Insects of Texas
Thank You
TO OUR BIRDS AND BUSINESS PARTNER

Thank You
TO OUR 2020 VICTOR EMANUEL CONSERVATION AWARD CELEBRATION
SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER SPONSOR

1938
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WILD FOR GOOD
Thank You
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Troy Moon
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Al Morgan
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Janel Nye
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Terri Siegenthaler
Michael Sims
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Lacey Smith
Colter Sonneville
Cindy Sperry
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Erin Swanson
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Updates
FROM THE SIGNAL SMOKE BLOG

Birdathon 2021
Photography Contest

POSTED ON MARCH 1, 2021 CATEGORIES: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

Submit your photos by sending them to birdathonphoto@yahoo.com. You will receive a reply that asks you a few easy questions and provides a link to pay the entry fee. The deadline to submit is Tuesday, May 11, 11:59 PM CT. Image of Green Heron courtesy of Alex Moreland. The photo won 2nd place in last year’s photography contest.

Do you enjoy birding through a camera lens as much as through binoculars? Show off your birding finesse AND your photography skills while supporting Travis Audubon!

Travis Audubon’s Birdathon will include a photography contest. There are some guidelines for the photos that can be submitted.
Photos should:
– contain birds (and no people!)
– be taken between April 1 and May 10, 2021 (you know, Birdathon dates!)
– be taken in Texas
– be submitted by the photographer (or guardian if the photographer is a minor)

Since this is a fundraiser, entry into the contest is $5 per photo.
Photos do not need to be taken during an official Birdathon excursion. If you have a great photo op while drinking coffee on your back porch, then that’s great!

What’s in it for the winners? The top five photos will be featured on Travis Audubon’s social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) with photographer recognition. The first place photo winner will be featured in our Signal Smoke blog and will have their photo included in our Annual Report.

Note: This year, photographers can only place once. So, the top five photos will be from five different photographers.
Who is judging the photos? We are in the process of securing judges. We will let you know as soon as we know!

Boy Scouts Build Chimney Swift Tower at Baker

POSTED ON MARCH 29, 2021 CATEGORIES: SANCTUARY NEWS, SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

Many thanks to Carter Corley, his parents Shannan and Curtis, and Troop 202 for installing Baker Sanctuary’s latest Chimney Swift tower! The project was undertaken to fulfill requirements for Carter’s Eagle Scout merit badge. The tower was completed this month and is ready to welcome the Chimney Swifts when they make their appearance in central Texas. This will be the seventh swift tower installed at Baker and the fifth constructed by the Boy Scouts.

Tales of a Texas Transplant, Episode 1

POSTED ON MARCH 30, 2021 CATEGORIES: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

By John Bloomfield
I need to plant my feet on the ground to know my place in this world.

I came to Texas early this year by way of the South Carolina Lowcountry by way of central New Jersey, where I was born. I have watched birds with intensity in each of those states, and have made a few unscientific observations along the way, which I will unapologetically share below.

Chief among those observations is that when you see the same species in a different state, it’s almost like seeing that bird for the first time. The experience can be both exhilarating and disorienting, until you relax and let the things you’ve learned about birds break through the confusion.

![Loggerhead Shrike in Kyle, TX. Photo by John Bloomfield.](image)

So many sparrows in Texas! Up north we know your Savannah Sparrows and White-crowned Sparrows (and Song and Swamp and many others) but some of your Savannahs are darker and I had to learn to distinguish them from Lincoln’s Sparrows, a rarity where I come from. Those bubble-gum pink legs on the Savannah ultimately leave no mistake.

Harris’s Sparrows and Black-throated Sparrows have been a delight. Already in Texas (thanks to Hornsby Bend) I have developed much more close-up experience with waterfowl and learned to sharpen my ID skills. Instead of sheep I am counting Northern Shovelers at night!

Your richly colored western Red-tailed Hawks almost made me think these might be an altogether different species than the hawks I saw back east. But the piercing call and stocky prowess leave no doubt about who this is.

![Ruddy Duck at the Southeast Greenway. Photo by John Bloomfield.](image)

To acclimate myself and learn to connect Texas birds with their habitats, I enrolled in Travis Audubon’s Master Birder class of 2021. In weekly Zooms, our class got an expert grounding in ornithology from Dr. Peter English, Texas habitats from Bill Reiner, local bird families from Jane Tillman and Eric Stager, and the gospel of bird conversation from Chuck Sexton.

Unfortunately we have not been able to put our newly honed skills to the test on field trips and volunteer assignments, but that day will come once COVID-19 starts to recede into the rear-view. In the meantime, look out for a Master Birder 2021 team in this year’s Birdathon!

![Golden-cheeked Warbler singing in the same spot where I saw it five years ago at the end of a Hill Country birding trip.](image)

Later that afternoon I spent time enjoying the birdsong at Baker Sanctuary. Travis Audubon is fortunate to have had visionaries like Chell Baker and many others dedicated to protecting this woodland oasis in the face of relentless growth.

What’s ahead? Bolivar in springtime, a trip out west to Big Bend, and a chance to visit many of the 200 or so counties in Texas I have yet to see.

**Zugunruhe** overwhelms me. With my feet more firmly on the ground, I am ready to welcome old avian friends and many new ones I have yet to see.

*A new resident of Texas, John has a long history with Audubon, having served on the board of New Jersey Audubon and Audubon South Carolina in addition to a term as president of Hilton Head (S.C.) Audubon. He is looking forward to sharing his passion for birds and the places they need in his newly adopted state.*

**Meet Juliet Whitsett, the Artist Behind the New Shirt**

If you saw the gorgeous green shirts we had for preorder in March, you saw the bright and cheerful Golden-cheeked Warbler design that won our 2021 shirt design contest. For the artist behind the design, Juliet Whitsett, this was not not the first time working with an endangered species as the focal point of a piece.
Since 2019, Juliet has been learning about, and bringing awareness to Endangered, Threatened and Species of Greatest Conservation Need with her conservation art series THREATENED TEXAS. This series is designed to celebrate the incredible diversity and importance of species in Texas. For this project, Juliet is dedicated to sharing what she learns about each of Texas' 147 Threatened Species, and 74 Endangered Species by sampling colors from their actual images, and creating original art inspired by their unique palettes. For these works, she researches the species, reaches out to experts in the field and creates original art inspired by each of their important links of our world's biodiversity at risk of being lost.

Growing up, Juliet would go on road trips and camp throughout the US with her family. Her mother was in education, so she had summers off to explore. They always had a State Park Pass and her parents were dedicated to organizing family camping trips and spending ample time outdoors. Much of high school and early college, she worked at her local state park, Governor Dodge State Park in Wisconsin. Having the opportunity to go to work every day in one of the most stunning landscapes was spectacular. However, the real moment she understood conservation was when her high school science teacher became very passionate and dedicated to teaching about rainforest deforestation. Juliet and her best friend signed up for one of his first 2 week conservation trips to Belize, which ended up being a life-changing experience.

Juliet has spent her entire career weaving together Arts, Experiential and Environmental Education. She has had the honor to have worked in Arts & Environmental Education for organizations like the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, the High Line in New York, the Thinkery and Austin Discovery School. Juliet has had the fortune to have organized youth gardening projects as teacher and as an AmeriCorps VISTA* Volunteer. She holds a Masters in Community-Based Arts Education from The University of Texas at Austin (2015), and earned her BA in Arts Education from the University of Wisconsin at Madison (1999). Currently, she is an artist and the small-business owner of Giddyup Art Studio LLC, where she creates art, teaches, and consults.

When asked about her favorite bird, she said it tends to be whatever one she is creating art about at the time. However, she’s had multiple encounters with a Barred Owl at her Community Garden, and she looks out for him every time she goes, so he, specifically, is her favorite.

Featured image above is several of Juliet’s works from her THREATENED TEXAS project, including the Golden-cheeked Warbler piece featured on this year’s Travis Audubon shirts.

Birding Brawl 2021 Results

POSTED ON APRIL 9, 2021 CATEGORIES: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

Thank you to everyone who supported our 2021 Birding Brawl. Generous supporters fully activated Austin Subaru’s $5,000 match, bringing the total donations to $13,785! Get the full scoop on their day of birding on April 3rd from the competitors:

Laurie Foss – 1st Place (110 species)

When preparing for the big day, I knew that I wanted to acknowledge the many supporters who donated to Travis Audubon to support our team. I set up four draft emails for our donors that I would be able to send to Caley who had set up an email distribution list for us. I hoped that our supporters would enjoy receiving them as much as I enjoyed sending them.

Our day started just before dawn in Bastrop County where we were surprised with a vocalizing Chuck-wills-widow. As the sun came up, the dawn chorus was deafening! What joy! Bastrop County was hopping and provided many expected species along with some unexpected, like Upland Sandpipers and other migrating sandpipers. While birding this area, we watched with trepidation as clouds with active lightning rolled in. We could see rain falling in the distance, but we were spared the storm until just at the end of this portion of our day. We had already planned to drive for 45 minutes to far western Travis County next, so we had no rain delay while we drove through the storm. That’s the kind of luck that you need on a big day!
Our next birding location was Shield Ranch, a private ranch that I work for. We made one stop at the Bee Cave Sculpture Park on the way to look at their pond where we found Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, a much-needed species! Sharon and I had scouted the ranch the week previous and knew several territories for western species that we needed, as well as Golden-cheeked Warblers. Though the roads were muddy and wet, and bird activity was kind of low, we hit our targets on the ranch with only one or two exceptions. A surprise for us was a Brown Thrasher. Surprises always make a big day more fun!

Leaving the ranch our next destination was Hornsby Bend. We were in for a big surprise there! I had just scouted it the day before when there were several hundreds of ducks on the ponds. Today there were maybe 100 ducks still on the ponds. We found the shorebirds that we needed and added several waterfowl that contributed to our total. We only had to spend 45 minutes there to get what we needed.

Knowing that we needed more water-type birds, we opted to stop next at one of our optional locations, two ponds at the Mueller neighborhood. Though the Cinnamon Teal were gone, we were still able to add a couple of new species, including the Sora which has been spotted there lately.

Sharon had scouted a new detention pond in the Wells Branch area that we stopped at next to pick up a couple of new species. This was on the way to her house where her husband Jeff had picked up a quick dinner for us which we enjoyed while watching her hummingbird feeders.

Our next stop, Mills Pond, held a couple of species that we knew we still needed. This is Sharon’s home park and she knows it really well. There were birds on nests that we found without difficulty. Missing were American Robins! But Sharon had a known location picked out as our back-up and they were there. Tick!

After one more drive to look for waterfowl we called it a day. We had birded from 6:30am until 7:30pm. That was enough! 110 species for the day far exceeded our expectations. We ended our day with one more video to wrap-up our day to send to our supporters.

First bird of the day was a Chuck-will’s Widow heard in my neighborhood, followed quickly by Great Horned Owl, Eastern Screech Owl and Northern Cardinal. Final bird of the day was the adult Black-chinned Hummingbird visiting my feeder at home at dusk.

Best bird was the male Hooded Warbler that Tim Fennell and I had on the south shore of Granger Lake. The bird came in to a screech owl whistle with a mixed flock of birds, and then we heard it singing later and saw it again. I missed quite a few birds that would often be seen on this date, but had a few nice surprises, including the Hooded Warbler (only my second ever in WilCo), and adult Bald Eagle on Granger Lake, and a Common Raven along Loop 360 on the drive home.

Many thanks to my “assistant” and good birding buddy Tim Fennell, who was good company during the morning, and suggested great locations for the Williamson County portion of my day.

Hopefully we can bird again as teams for Birdathon next year once everyone gets vaccinated and the virus is under better control.

Thanks to all my donors for supporting this worthy cause.

Victor Emanuel – 3rd Place (101 species)

(Written by Barry Lyon): The Big Day birding event that was Travis Audubon’s “Birding Brawl” was a fun and productive occasion that featured four of the Austin area’s standout birders. Serving as assistant to Victor Emanuel, I considered myself fortunate to be a part of the fun!

Our route for the day would take us from the far northwest corner of Travis County to the far east side, with selective stops in between at sites we knew would yield birds we wouldn’t see elsewhere. As many Austinite birders/naturalists are aware, this part of Texas is remarkably diverse for its habitats and attendant birds, and our route paid homage to this fact. Whereas Friday, April 2, was beautiful, sunny, and warm, Saturday dawned overcast and stormy with scattered rain. While these conditions would not have been our first choice, the cooler weather probably worked to our advantage later as bird activity remained high all day.

Byron Stone – 2nd Place (107 species)
In addition to recording most of the expected resident species, the early spring date of this event enabled us to log lingering winter birds and a number of first-of-the-year migrants.

Our day began at the Warbler Vista area at Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge, where between flashes of lightning and scattered showers we spotted our first Golden-cheeked Warblers of the season. We then worked west to Cow Creek Road, where highlights included several more westerly occurring birds such as Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Common Raven, Bewick’s Wren, and Lesser Goldfinch, in addition to a surprise male Wild Turkey and our first Scissor-tailed Flycatchers of the year.

From the Balcones area we made a straight shot for Webberville Park near the Travis-Bastrop county line. Winding our way to the park via highways 45 and 130, a back-country road north of FM 969 produced a pair of Redheads on a housing development pond, and Loggerhead Shrike and American Kestrels nearby. In most years, the large pastures along Post Oak Road, just west of Webberville Park, are reliable places to observe American Golden-Plover and Upland Sandpipers in the early spring. Sure enough, with a bit of scope work we located small groups of each.

Webberville Park proved a bonanza. Not only did we add a slew of birds to the day list, but a number of species that easily could have been missed. We had a wonderful time simply walking around the park “ticking” standout species Bald Eagle, Swainson’s Hawk, Barred Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, White-crowned Sparrow, Common Grackle, and large flocks of Brewer’s Blackbirds.

In the afternoon we returned to Austin via Hornsby Bend, arguably the single-most productive birding location in the county. A short walk on the River Trail at the end of Platt Lane produced scores of Lincoln’s Sparrows and a lovely group of White-throated Sparrows. From Platt we made our way south through the agricultural fields en route to the ponds in the heart of the facility. Typically, the late March to mid-April period is a time to watch for Sprague’s Pipit at Hornsby Bend, as the hay fields there are an ideal height for hosting the species on its northward journey. As we passed through the area, several individuals vaulted from the roadside. On the ponds we observed a fine mix of waterfowl, among which were a drake Cinnamon Teal, several American Wigeon, and a group of Ruddy Ducks. On the shorebird front we were pleased to find more Golden-plover, large numbers of Pectoral Sandpipers, and a group of 50+ Lesser Yellowlegs. The standout bird in this area was Wilson’s Phalarope, seemingly early and represented by four individuals. One of the birds was an adult female, radiant in high plumage. Overhead, a flight of the season’s first Franklin’s Gulls was a welcome surprise.

By now it was getting late in the day and we had time for two more stops. The first stop thereafter was the river overlook at Roy Guerrero Park, a favorite site of Victor’s. As expected, the birding did not disappoint. Several species of waterfowl, Snowy Egret, Chimney Swift, and a variety of swallows filled in more blanks on the list!

Our day ended with a visit to the Peninsula Trail area on the south shore of Lady Bird Lake. Here, we located the pair of Couch’s Kingbirds which are now resident, more or less, and Blue Jay and Eastern Phoebe (finally!). Our last new bird of the day was a Peregrine Falcon perched atop a power pole across the lake down by the dam.

In all, we recorded 101 species of birds, a total with which we were pleased. It was an honor to be a part of the proceedings in support of Travis Audubon and its fund-raising efforts. Of course, we thank everyone for their support, not only that shown to us, but to all of the teams. It is this support that helps keep Travis Audubon and its programs strong.

Celeste Treadway – 4th Place (85 species)

I started the day at my very favorite place to enjoy birds, my own front yard in Leander, listening just before sunrise to hear the Dawn Chorus. The Northern Cardinals started off first, quickly followed by our usual Hill Country birds. Sadly missing since the February storm were our Eastern Phoebes, as well as our Great Horned Owl and Screech Owls. This morning was cloudy and threatening rain, and the birds were a bit slow to get started. Our Wild Turkeys, who we usually hear early, were silent and refused to answer my gobbling. Ladder-backed Woodpeckers were no-shows. And our Golden-cheeked Warblers, which are usually reliably singing very shortly after the other birds, were also strangely silent. The time came for me to leave home to go meet my birding partner Sarah, and still no GCWA’s. But as I slowly pulled down our gravel road with my windows down to continue listening, one finally sang out, a bright “A” song, just once, as if to wish me good luck. I was very happy, as I would have been disappointed to not get a Goldie on my list for the day!
Meeting Sarah at Lake Creek Parkway with warm breakfast tacos made by my wonderful husband Harry, we started our day of birding together. This was the first time either of us had done a “Big Day” on our own and we were pumped! Unfortunately, the wet, windy weather seemed to be causing the Lake Creek birds to stay hunkered down when we were there. We picked up only 20 species; but we did get the Couch’s Kingbird that I’d spotted the day before, and also got on the one and only White-throated Sparrow of the entire day, singing his soft “Oh-Sweet Canada-Canada-Canada”.

Leaving Lake Creek, we headed to Roy G. Guerrero Park in east Austin. The rain started dumping down hard on our way there. We had to sit in the car for a while after arriving, waiting for it to let up. Once the rain eased up a bit, we entered Circle Acres, where we hoped the heavy tree cover would keep some of the rain off us. We struggled to keep our bins dry and de-logged, but managed to get 24 species here, including three vireo species singing beautifully. We heard Ruby-crowned Kinglets actually singing—as opposed to their usual typewriter-like alarm call—and that was both delightful and instructive, as neither of us was very familiar with their song. I tried really hard to convince myself there was a Prothonotary Warbler in the area, I really WANTED there to be one, but alas, there was not. We saw our one and only Eastern Phoebe of the entire day—a grim reminder of how many birds are missing since the February freeze, as we should have had dozens of EAPH’s. Back at the parking lot, we saw numerous Scissor-tailed Flycatchers in action—just beautiful! We ate a quick lunch in the car; then heading to the playground, we picked up a few Eastern Bluebirds—again, dramatically reduced numbers compared to normal years. Finally, we headed to Secret Beach, but the river was very high and fast-moving, and we did not get any new species there.

By now it was mid-afternoon, we’d spent longer at Roy G. than I’d anticipated but we’d had fun. Next, we headed to Hornsby Bend. Neither of us feels particularly strong about shorebird identification, but we picked up as many species as we felt confident about. Sarah is really good with identifying ducks and I learned a lot from her! We got great looks at some Eared Grebes that were moving into their breeding plumage, and some pretty little Wilson’s Phalarope. We spent a long time trying to figure out what we were seeing with the sandpipers and plovers, and I took way too many pictures of Pectoral Sandpipers and one Spotted Sandpiper that was super close. After seeing all we could at the ponds, we walked the River Trail, but the only new species we picked up there was Monk Parakeets calling from across the river. I was hoping to see a Pileated Woodpecker but no luck.

At this point, it was late afternoon, and we felt like we’d missed out on a fair number of raptors (hello Osprey?) and common waterfowl that we would normally have expected to get, so we decided to head to Decker Lake, which was relatively close and usually has good birds. This is where it became really obvious that I should have spent more time scouting sites and planning our itinerary—Decker Lake (Walter E. Long Park) was closed to the public. Bummer! So, we made the impromptu decision to head back into town, and hit Longhorn Dam (more Roy G., we just couldn’t get enough of it). At the dam, we picked up a few more species, and just when we were about to give up on finding it, what should rise up into our view but a beautiful Osprey, hunting just below the dam—gorgeous!

We made a quick stop at a park near Sarah’s neighborhood to see if we could catch a Barn Owl that has occasionally been seen there in the past, but no luck. Another quick stop in Sarah’s house for a bathroom break and to pet her sweet dog Rita (who gives great kisses), and then we headed back to our starting spot at Lake Creek, where we had left Sarah’s car. Arriving after dark, we sat in my car with the windows down, compiling our list and listening hopefully for owls. Just as Sarah was loading her things back into her car, we FINALLY heard the hoots of a pair of Great Horned Owls, calling and answering each other. Yay!

Tired but happy, we parted ways, having learned a lot, and excited to try another Big Day together in the future!

**Virtual Field Trip: Green Gate Farms April 2021**

*POSTED ON APRIL 14, 2021  CATEGORIES: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME*

Have you heard of **Green Gate Farms**? They’re a community-based certified organic farm established by Skip Connett and Erin Flynn in east Austin in 2006. Their vision is to cultivate an organic farm that feeds mind, body, and soul. Travis Audubon Board Member Dennis Palafox visited recently to go birding – join him for a virtual field trip: Special thanks to Evan Bratton for creating this video! Check out his YouTube channel: [Low Standard Outdoors](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ).
Meet the 2021 Board Nominees

Learn more about the 2021 Board Nominees by reading their bios below! Election will take place at the virtual May Member Meeting—more details for that meeting coming soon.

Karen Bartoletti

Karen is a native of Western Pennsylvania who migrated to Austin in 1971. A retired business lawyer, she has been active in the community and served in leadership positions on boards of a number of nonprofit organizations, including The SAFE Alliance, HAAM (Health Alliance for Austin Musicians), Trinity Episcopal School, and Trinity Center. Among other honors, she was selected Austin’s outstanding corporate and securities lawyer by the Austin Business Journal (2006), was named a Woman of Distinction by the Girl Scouts of Central Texas (2008) and received the SAFE Alliance’s Guardian Award (2016). Karen became interested in birding in the 1980’s when she attended Fred Webster’s informal UT birding classes. Although her enthusiasm for birding vastly exceeds any talent for it, Karen is proud to have served on the Travis Audubon board for the past five years. Currently she serves as Board Vice President and as Chair of the Governance Committee. She has been nominated to serve an additional three-year term as director.

Suzanne Kho

An avid birder ever since she took Travis Audubon’s Introduction to Birding course, Suzanne joined the TAS board in 2018. She is currently Executive Director of Keep Texas Beautiful, a nonprofit dedicated to inspiring and empowering Texans to keep their communities clean and beautiful. Suzanne has over 30 years of experience in the nonprofit sector and has held leadership positions at EarthShare of Texas, The Livestrong Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts and the University of Pennsylvania. She holds an AB from Vassar College and an MSEd from the University of Pennsylvania. In her spare time, Suzanne can be found birding in her local patch, the West Bouldin Creek Greenbelt.

Rich Kostecke

Rich has a BS in Biology from the University of Kansas, MS in Zoology from North Dakota State University, and PhD in Wildlife Science from Texas Tech University. Over the last several decades, mostly employed with The Nature Conservancy, his work has focused on the conservation, ecology, and management of birds and their habitats in Texas, as well as land conservation in general. Rich has long been involved with recovery efforts for the Black-capped Vireo and Golden-cheeked Warbler and has also worked on grassland birds and on sky island bird communities in west Texas. Rich has been an avid (ok, occasionally obsessive) birder since 1995 (species: 540 TX, 697 US, 1,993 world) and is currently the eBird reviewer for Terrell and Williamson counties in Texas. Although birds are his foremost passion, Rich is interested in all biodiversity, is active on iNaturalist (moths and other insects are a new-found interest) and spends a fair bit of time and effort in propagating/landscaping with native plants in his NW Austin yard.
Virginia Rose began birding in 2003 after her sister, Cathryn Rose, a birder and former Tucson Audubon board member, encouraged her to try it. After hearing a lecture on the breeding success of the House Finch in Austin, sponsored by Travis Audubon, she was hooked! She took every TAS class and went on as many field trips as she could, working around her busy teaching career. Virginia remembers furiously grading in the back seat between birding stops on field trips!

As a child, Virginia was injured in a horseback riding accident and has continued her life as a paraplegic in a wheelchair. Still, the Travis Audubon teachers and field trip leaders took her everywhere the other walking birders went. When she could not join her fellow classmates in the field to get to the LeConte’s sparrow, the leader Byron Stone and classmates encircled the bird and moved it to within 6 feet of Virginia, who was sitting on a dirt road nearby. It was a lifer for her.

She joined the Travis Audubon Board of Directors in 2017 and founded Birdability in 2018. National Audubon found out about Virginia and Birdability soon after, and the rest is history! Travis Audubon supported her at every step and very recently became the Fiscal Sponsor and Founding Sponsor for Virginia’s new Texas Non-profit Corporation. Thank you, Travis Audubon!

Spring Migration at Blair Woods

Each month, a survey is conducted to track the bird species that are using the ecosystem and resources that are found at Blair Woods. Thank you to all of the volunteers who have lent us your eyes and ears throughout the last few months.

February Survey: It is nearly springtime at Blair Woods and the first signs of new bright green life are starting to push through the ground. The cleavers (Galium aparine), despite being just seedlings, are already happily clinging to your socks as you walk along the path. In late February, the only other signs of the oncoming season are the delicate feathery leaves of yarrow (Achillea millefolium) that have strong young stalks but won’t start flowering until mid April. The thick brambles from last year’s growth are full of White-crowned Sparrows (Zonotrichia leucophrys) loudly singing but always from a safe distance. White-crowned Sparrows winter in Texas but will soon start migrating north in late April to their Canadian breeding grounds. Lincoln’s Sparrows will also begin migrating in the next two months but in February you can still spot them along the edges of the path or hear their metallic chips from the underbrush. This year, there have been record numbers of American Robin (Turdus migratorius) in the Austin area, Blair Woods being no exception. The American Robins are everywhere, from hiding in the thick brush, running along the pathway, to covering the branches of the upper canopy. Although American Robins are here in Austin year round, their high numbers this year has been a wonderful treat.

By Emily Novak
March Survey: By March, Blair Woods has few remaining signs that there was a cold winter. The cleavers are in full swing 1-2 feet high and dotted with tiny delicate white flowers. The air is heavy and sweet from the wisteria (Wisteria sinensis) hanging along the pathways. There are significantly fewer Yellow-rumped Warblers (Setophaga coronata) chirping from the tops of the trees as most have already begun to migrate.

Similarly, there is a noticeable decrease in the numbers of Cedar Waxwings (Bombycilla cedrorum) that whistle as they fly overhead. One of the smallest wintering birds, the Ruby-crowned Kinglet (Regulus calendula), is still present in March but there are fewer than last month as they too begin to migrate. New arrivals appear, adding different songs and calls making your ears perk up. The Barn Swallows (Hirundo rustica), for example, swoop overhead, constantly chittering away. The pond has drawn a male and female pair of Wood Ducks (Aix sponsa), year-round residents settling in for nesting season.

April Survey: The bright saturated blues and purples of the prairie verbena (Glandularia bipinnatifida), Texas bluebonnet (Lupinus texensis), and bluecurls (Phacelia congesta) are all attracting pollinators. The trees that were bare in February are providing good cover, adding an extra challenge to spotting birds at Blair Woods. The few wintering residents lingering include the Lincoln’s Sparrows and White-throated Sparrows. A new arrival, the Nashville Warbler (Leiothlypis ruficapilla) sings through the high canopy. Central Texas’ breeding residents are just arriving, including Scissor-tailed Flycatchers (Tyrannus forficatus), Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (Polioptila caerulea), Great Crested Flycatchers (Myiarchus crinitus), and many more. The flora and fauna at Blair Woods are always in a state of flux. No matter what time of the year, there will always be something interesting that catches your eye. Feel free to join us on the next survey (apply to be a volunteer) so we can explore the changes in the woods together.

Featured image above of Wood Ducks. Photo courtesy of Emily Novak.

Pine Siskins and Salmonellosis – How to Identify and Prevent the Spread

POSTED ON APRIL 23, 2021 CATEGORIES: NEWS CORNER, SIGNAL

UPDATE (4/23/21): As long as you aren’t seeing visibly sick birds at your feeder, it is safe to start putting out feeders again.

By Anna Vallery, Conservation Specialist, Houston Audubon

Reposted from Houston Audublog

Backyards across the United States have had an unusually high number of small, heavily striped finches, known as Pine Siskins, making a recent appearance. This year’s irruption of Pine Siskins has been one of the largest in recorded history! An irruption typically occurs during periods of food shortage in a species’ home range, causing them to spread out southward in search of resources. Pine Siskins, whose range is typically limited to the boreal forests of Canada and the northernmost U.S. states, faced an extreme shortage of conifer seeds, resulting in their takeover of bird feeders in a yard near you! Learn more about the irruption.

Unfortunately, these birds are facing yet another threat across their irruption range. Salmonellosis outbreaks in Pine Siskins have been documented heavily in the Pacific Northwest, resulting in mass die-offs of this species and others that use feeders alongside them. This disease has now, unfortunately, made its way to Texas.

Salmonellosis is caused by the bacteria many people are very familiar with – Salmonella. This bacteria is primarily transmitted through populations of birds via fecal contamination of food and water by infected birds (though bird-to-bird contact can also result in transmission). Salmonellosis in birds can be tricky to identify, but is important to be on the lookout for as it can cause mortality in birds and spreads quickly.
Birds infected with Salmonellosis can show a number of different symptoms, from displaying swollen eyelids to acting lethargic and being slow to react. Other symptoms include sitting on the ground, appearing thin or fluffed up, and having pasted vents (feces caked under tail). Some birds, however, don’t show any outward symptoms.

Infected birds can shed bacteria at feeders and water features, turning those areas into disease vectors. If you see any indication of Salmonellosis infection in your backyard birds, take down any bird feeders or water features immediately and leave them down for a few weeks or until the Pine Siskins are gone. Bleach anything a bird could have come into contact with, and pick up any discarded seed or chaff from your backyard. If you prefer to keep the feeders up, clean and disinfect feeders daily and ensure they are completely dry before adding food. These actions will help prevent further spread of Salmonellosis through contaminated feeders and by limiting bird-to-bird contact that occurs in areas where birds gather. Though Salmonellosis is appearing at high rates in Pine Siskins, this disease can spread to any other species that share feeders with these birds. We will be posting updates with guidance from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

If you interact with birds that may be sick, be sure to thoroughly wash your hands with an anti-bacterial soap. If you have more questions about preventing Salmonellosis in your backyard, feel free to contact our Bird-Friendly Communities Program Manager, Anna Vallery, at avallery@houstonaudubon.org.

**Summary of Actions to Prevent Salmonellosis:**

- Keep your eyes peeled for birds that appear sick or lethargic
- If you think a bird in your backyard is sick, take down and disinfect all feeders and water features immediately
- Clean up any seed shell or chaff from around your yard
- Keep cats indoors
- Keep an eye on dogs when they’re outside
- Be prepared to continue to clean and disinfect feeders and water features

We will update this post with further guidance from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department regarding the Salmonellosis outbreak.

Feeder cleanliness isn’t just important during times of disease outbreak like this one, but year-round. Routine cleaning of your bird feeders and water features is important. Feeders should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected at a minimum of 1-2 times per month, preferably weekly. To prevent overcrowding at your feeder, consider adding a few more, spread out around your backyard, including different types of feeders to encourage different species of visitors with varying feeding behaviors.