A Note
FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Members and Friends,

My nature walks have been one of the few things that have kept me sane in COVID times. Most days I don’t use binoculars, but just try to listen and look. My usual route means I cross Shoal Creek twice, stopping to see what I can see in the water. The seasonality of this ecosystem is one of my favorite things to observe—how tall is the ragweed? How tiny are the turtles? Which Herons are hunting along the edge? (often I get Great Blue, Green, and Yellow-crowned Night. An Egret or two never hurts.) Any shorebirds bopping around? How many snakes (shudder)? And of course, in February, how thick is that ice?

One morning this July I happened upon Mr. Great Blue Heron, a regular at the bridge near Sheffield Park, in battle with a snake. I thought for sure the snake was a goner—the Heron repeatedly tried to stab and grab. The snake would strike, wriggle, and dodge. Finally the Heron threw the snake in the air, but a little too high, and the snake did a drop-and-zoooooooom maneuver through the water to get to the brushy edge of the creek. The Heron failed to find the snake again, hidden in the plants. I imagined both the elation of the snake and the stomach-growl of the Heron. The whole scene was about two minutes in total, but it brought an awareness of how life and death is always present, all the time.

I have found it challenging to continually deal with the flood of bad news (read: death) that has accompanied the pandemic. And yet nature has provided me with healing and perspective in the midst of everything. We’re all just trying to stay alive the best we can. Live our lives, find something to eat, avoid getting (metaphorically) eaten ourselves. This is a season that, like all seasons, will end one day. Challenges and opportunities are present in the meantime.

Migration is upon us, bringing another season of change. Let’s hope the worst of COVID is behind us. Be well, friends.

Happy Birding,
Nicole

Nicole Netherton
**People**

**AT TRAVIS AUDUBON**

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Upcoming Events
WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

04 SEP 21
FIELD TRIPS
CANCELLED: Beginner’s Bird Walk
Richard Moya Park
Richard Moya Park, 10001 Burleson Rd,
Austin, TX 78719, USA

10 SEP 21
FIELD TRIPS
CANCELLED: State Park Field Trip Series: Buescher and Bastrop State Parks

16 SEP 21
CLASS
Speaker Series: Helping Birds Survive a Human World with Heidi Trudell

17 SEP 21
CLASS
Class: Intro to Raptor Identification Fall 2021

18 SEP 21
FIELD TRIPS
Hornsby Bend Bird Walk

22 SEP 21
CLASS
CLASS: Watching Birds: Identification, Life History, Behavior and More Fall 2021 (FULL)

26 SEP 21
FIELD TRIPS
Ruffled Feathers Book Club Meeting

02 OCT 21
FIELD TRIPS
Beginner’s Bird Walk: Berry Springs Park
Berry Springs Park and Preserve, 1801 Co Rd 152, Georgetown, TX 78626, USA

02 OCT 21
FIELD TRIPS
Birds, Bats, & Butterflies at Old Tunnel State Park

08 OCT 21
CLASS
2021 Victor Emanuel Conservation Award Celebration Honoring Greg Lasley

10 NOV 21
CLASS
“I Don’t Do Gulls” Gulls Class 2021

21 NOV 21
Ruffled Feathers Book Club Meeting

Thank You
TO OUR BUSINESS PARTNERS

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Meet Mariela Rodriguez, First Place Winner of the 2021 Birdathon Photography Contest

Ever since the Lilac-breasted Roller, Mariela has had some really special experiences photographing birds. To her, the most exciting bird she has ever photographed is a Venezuelan Troupial in Puerto Rico. Her favorite places to photograph birds in Texas are McFaddin National Wildlife Refuge, where she loves to watch the egrets and herons, San Bernard NWR, where there is a great driving loop where she's seen wild boars, alligators, and lots of spiders and butterflies, and the Smith Oaks Rookery on High Island where Roseate Spoonbills can be observed.

One of her favorite pictures is not of a bird, but has a cool story to match an equally cool photo. During her time at Kruger National Park, she saw an outline of a hippo in a pond from afar and, thinking it looked particularly large, snapped a quick photo. Upon reviewing the photo later, she realized that the hippo looked so big because it had a calf resting its head on its snout!

When asked for advice for birders who are interested in photography but don’t know how to start, Mariela notes the rich knowledge birders have of bird identification, calls, and behavior that provide a huge step up in locating and photographing birds. Just find a camera you’re comfortable using and get practicing!
Mariela’s work has been featured on KingBirder.com with a “Top Shot” from their “A Pair or Greater” photo contest and Friends of Brazoria Wildlife Refuge, where a few of her bird photos earned first place in select categories. You can follow her on Instagram at marirod_pics.

*Featured image is of Ruddy Turnstone, Mariela’s 1st Place photo in the 2021 Birdathon Photography Contest.*

**Barn Restoration at Blair Woods**

*POSTED ON JULY 6, 2021  CATEGORIES: SANCTUARY NEWS, SIGNAL SMOKE HOME*

The barn at Blair Woods is thought to be about 110 years old and was originally used as a dairy barn when the Moehr family owned the property in the early 1900’s. Frank and Fern Blair bought a 10 acre tract from the Moehr family in 1951 and then donated what is now known as Blair Woods Nature Preserve to Travis Audubon in 1985. Blair Woods and the surrounding area is rich in history that includes connections to the Camino Real, Fort Colorado and Fort Prairie. Coleman Springs, which is an active terrace gravel aquifer fed spring, is located on the preserve and has likely been used well before any of these settlements.

In 2020, Travis Audubon secured grant money from the St. David’s Foundation for repairs to the barn that were beginning to be urgent. A contractor was found and work was about to begin when the 2020 pandemic put everything on hold. 2020 was a difficult year for all of us, and the barn continued to deteriorate during that time. Fortunately, TAS was able to get the repair work restarted in mid-March this year, and we are very happy to see this structure revived and ready to serve a new purpose. Some of the existing materials in the barn may have been salvaged from Fort Colorado (circa 1836) that was located across MLK Boulevard with a corner of the fort possibly on the Blair property.

The intent for the repair work on the barn was to save as much of the existing fabric of the building as possible using new material to stabilize the structure and stitch the building back together. By reusing as much of the old materials as possible the finished result maintains the patina developed over a century of exposure to Texas weather. The work was completed with help from Nathan Quiring, Clayton/Korte, Jerry Garcia, and Justin Roppolo. The finished building will be used as a pavilion, shade structure and outdoor classroom for public gatherings once TAS is able to resume those activities. The completion of this project is the first step of more improvements to come at Blair woods. The developing master plan for this site includes accessible trails through the preserve, bird blind, water feature and eventually a headquarters for TAS.

*Inside of barn during construction.*
Travis Audubon Welcomes Two New Board Members

This May, the Travis Audubon Board of Directors appointed two new members to one-year terms. Meet our newest board members, Jason and Vidhya:

**Jason Garcia**

For as long as he can remember, Jason has been interested in birds. As the firstborn of three, his mother had a lot of time to take him on walks, pointing out all the plants and animals along the way. He also had the benefit of growing up near one of the best zoos in the world, the San Antonio Zoo, and was fascinated with the aviary there. Jason was the kid who pored over bird field guides at the breakfast table, who pointed out rare birds to groups of Audubon Society retirees on field trips. He put birding on the back burner for a while in the 1990s and early 2000s to focus on music, although he still enjoyed it occasionally when he could. After his grandmother passed away in 2014, getting back into nature felt like a good way to find peace in her passing, but he also wanted a new challenge. Jason had seen a lot of the same species living in Texas his whole life, so he decided to start taking photos of the ones he’d seen. After a few years and an equipment upgrade, he’s excited to finally be taking what he considers professional shots of some of his favorite subjects. Jason tries to capture each bird in its natural environment using minimal editing, with a goal of raising awareness of the birds in the area and to pique others’ interest in birdwatching and conservation.

**Vidhya Sundar**

Vidhya has inspired hundreds of people into birdwatching globally by combining her interest in birds with her artistic talent of making Rangolis, an Indian art form involving colorful decorative patterns usually made on the floor.

Her birding mania started in India back in 2012 when she set eyes on flocks of Rose-ringed Parakeets during a Sunday birding event organized by the Bangalore birders club. Since joining eBird in 2014, she became more involved with the thriving birding community in India. It has only strengthened since her move to Austin in 2019. One of the first things she did after arriving at Austin was looking up the local birding community and joining the Travis Audubon society events. Her perseverance in birdwatching wouldn’t be possible without her supportive family. She has continued her daily birding streak for more than 1500 days, received eBirder of the year 2016, India, and several eBirder of the month awards.

Determined to spread the joy of birding, she found captivating ways to engage kids and elders alike. Organizing and leading plenty of educational bird walks, conducting birding activities for school kids, leveraging social media to influence countless others. Along with the support of organizations such as Bird Count India, Birding Buddies, National Conservation Foundation India, she channelized her passion into bird conservation and spreading its importance.

To enhance her understanding of birds, she took part in the Basic Ornithology certification course, bird educator workshops, and regional birders’ meets. She participated in surveys such as the Asian Waterbird Census, which took part in the East Godavari region, one of the most significant wetlands in all of Asia. She is looking forward to creating a local impact by joining the Travis Audubon Society Board.
What Makes a Birder?
Hannah Mindeman Shuman: Music in the Air

POSTED ON JULY 15, 2021 CATEGORIES: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

By John Bloomfield

Some travel the world and amass huge life lists. Others travel as far as their backyard and may not list at all. Some bird with expensive optics and big camera lenses. Others use modest bins and maybe a point-and-shoot. Some hike miles in search of a rarity. Some take pleasant walks and just enjoy whatever they see. Some bird from a wheelchair or walker. Others enjoy birdsong from an open window.

Birders. They come in more flavors than an ice cream store. Yet they share one thing in common: an unabashed love for all things birds.

In this new series we explore the diversity of our local birding community. We wanted to know what ignited their interest and what keeps them going. We call it: "What Makes a Birder?"

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When Hannah Mindeman Shuman thinks of birds, she thinks of music. She listens to the tones, the notes, the trills of birdsong with the ear of someone who has been playing the piano since the age of 6. She watches the arial ballet and the skipping of warblers from branch to branch, moving like fingers on a keyboard.

A music teacher and performer, Hannah remembers enjoying the sight of birds from when she was a child, but she did not become a serious birder until about two years ago, when she and her husband relocated from Arkansas.

Then along came COVID-19, and Hannah was working less and spending more time at home. Like many others, she turned to birding for solace.

“When you’re birding, you tend to close out the rest of the world and you’re just focused on one thing,” she said. “I find that extremely therapeutic. I think that’s true for a lot of people now, and I hope that as things open up, many of those people will keep up their interest in birds.”

In her brief time as an avid birder, Hannah has seen more than 230 species, all of them in Texas. Her favorite places to bird include Mills Pond, Little Webberville Park, Choke Canyon State Park in South Texas and the Copperfield Nature Trail near her home.

“This trail is definitely underbirded,” she said. “I like to think of it as my private little sanctuary.”

We caught up with Hannah recently at Copperfield, where we were trying to relocate a Black-billed Cuckoo she had seen just days before. More than once we thought we had found it, but we had to content ourselves with excellent looks at a Yellow-billed Cuckoo instead (pictured left).

“I don’t get disappointed when I can’t find a target bird, and I don’t get all wrapped up in doing crazy things to find them,” she said. “I like to really take my time as I walk, you know, kind of stand still and just watch and listen for whatever birds come to me. That’s something that demands a lot of patience, and not everyone can do that.”

As Hannah began to learn more about birds, she took Travis Audubon’s beginner’s birding course with Laurie Foss and Sharon Richardson to help jump-start her skills.

“I learned so much from them, which kind of shows how much you can pick up from good, experienced birders,” she recalled. “I kind of went into it thinking, well, I’ve been birding for a little while and maybe I know some of this, but then I realized how much I still needed to learn. Laurie and Sharon are not only good, but they’re fun. I recommend this class for anyone who’s just getting into birds.”
Hannah credits her musical training with helping her identify birdsong but admits it can be tricky and recounted a tale many birders know all too well.

“I thought for sure early on that I could tell a Red-shouldered Hawk’s call from a Blue Jay’s imitation,” she said. “I thought I could hear that difference in tone. Then one day I went after what I was sure was a Red-shouldered Hawk. I just chased that sound all over – and it was a Blue Jay. Yeah, well, Blue Jays do a good Red-shouldered Hawk.”

When not birding, Hannah is known as a highly regarded collaborative pianist and music educator. As a performer, she debuted at Lincoln Center in 2013, performing in a multimedia concert that combined 20th century flute-piano repertoire and original visual art. She also teaches both individual and group lessons using the Suzuki method. She credits one of her graduate school teachers, Dr. Allison Gagnon, herself a talented performer, as one of her main musical influences.

“Coincidentally,” she added, “she’s also a birder.” When the pandemic struck, Hannah started teaching online, and only recently resumed in-person classes. She and her husband have also moved into a new home. With the summer here and lots to focus on, she still looks forward to getting out in the field.

“There’s good birding year-round in Austin,” she said. “Even though it’s baking outside, there’s a lot going on in the morning. You can still hit your favorite spots; you just need to be smart about what you’re doing. Although honestly, I can’t wait for fall migration.”

Raptor Renesting with Austin Wildlife Rescue

With raptors, a special challenge is presented in that we must avoid imprinting/habituation to people with these animals, as well as nurturing them to a point of strong flight and predation skills. At the end of the day, nothing is a replacement in learning these skills as being raised by the parent or a wild surrogate parent.

When AWR receives baby birds of prey, they make every possible effort to nest the baby with the parents if appropriate, but many times they are unable to do so. Circumstances such as a felled tree, unknown location of nest, or lack of contact information when these babies are brought in prevent AWR from reuniting these raptors with their parents. A wonderful alternative would be to find other nests of the same species that these babies could be placed with.

Surrogate renesting can often times be very successful and offers the young raptors the best possible chance of success in the wild where they can learn their life skills from a wild parent, even if it was not their original parent. Austin Wildlife Rescue is willing to nest new young raptors to surrogate nests, but they need help in actually finding these nests. This is where our local birding community could help immensely. There are several points that must be addressed in order to set up a successful renesting:

1. Finding the appropriate species nest site. AWR can send a list of species currently in need of renesting.
2. Finding a nest site that is the appropriate age. Babies must be around a similar age in order for the wild surrogate parent to appropriately care for their own babies as well as the foster baby. AWR can send pictures of the young raptors as a reference point to identify similar aged babies.
3. Finding a nest where no more than 2 babies currently already exist (since 3 is really the limit that parental raptors can take care of without getting overwhelmed).
4. Accessible location. We would be using an extension ladder and must have a way to approach the site. Often times we wait until babies are of branchling age (just out of the nest and moving about the branches). This way, a baby can be placed on a lower, more accessible branch, and the baby can start to climb the tree to where the rest of the family is.
5. Permission from landowner to go on the property in order to do the renesting.
6. Someone to check on the baby for at least 3 days in a row. Not all renestings are successful. If the baby does not move from the lower branch to reach the family unit, or the baby falls from the tree due to weakness or being rejected by the parents, the baby would need to be brought back in to AWR. Usually within 3 days it’s clear if the baby has been accepted or not.

Austin Wildlife Rescue (AWR) is committed to the rehabilitation and release of injured, orphaned, or sick Texas wildlife. Their focus is always on releasing animals back into the wild.
Working together, a passion for birding and a passion for rehabilitation of these animals has a unique opportunity to positively collide with surrogate renesting. If our birding community could assist with the 6 points listed above, then Austin Wildlife Rescue could attempt to unite babies with foster parents, giving them an even stronger chance of survival in the wild.

Watch for specific information about birds in rehab in future weekly eBlasts and start noting where you find raptor nests! If you’d like to assist with this project, please contact Sheila Hargis at sheila.hargis@gmail.com.

Thank you, 2017 Master Birders!

On July 17, we celebrated the all-stars from the Master Birder Class of 2017. To reach permanent Master Birder status, they had to volunteer a minimum of 90 hours across 3 years following graduation from the Master Birder course. Master Birders are responsible for thousands of volunteer hours every year, and it is because of them that we are able to do so much outreach across Travis County.

Here’s the list of 2017 Master Birders who reached permanent Master Birder status this year:

Ellen Cox, Sarah Fekete, Lucy Flanagan, Marc Frazier, Chris Gunter, Laura Heartwood, Jeannine Marshall, Lino Mendiola, Jasmine Mills, Glen Novinger, Tracy Novinger, Sharon Richardson, Mary Ann Robalino, Virginia Rose, Celeste Treadway

Thanks again for your dedicated work for Travis Audubon!

Birding the Davis Mountains

POSTED ON JULY 27, 2021 CATEGORIES: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

By Jason Garcia, Travis Audubon Board Member

Acorn Woodpecker. Photo courtesy of Jason Garcia.

Featured birds:
Black-headed Grosbeak
Acorn Woodpecker
Cassin’s Kingbird
Say’s Phoebe
Hepatic Tanager
Plumbeous Vireo
Zone-tailed Hawk

The Davis Mountains, a loose association of peaks in West Texas, form what is known as a “sky island”, an oasis of wetter, forested area in an otherwise desert environment. This diversity of habitat allows many different species of birds to thrive. I first visited as part of a Victor Emanuel Nature Tour when I was a young birder in the 80s, and the area left such an impression on me that I couldn’t wait to return.

Indian Lodge. Photo courtesy of Jason Garcia.
I finally made the return trip in mid-July of this year, and better late than never! I first arrived at the town of Fort Davis, a quaint, historical site at the foot of the hills. From there it's just a short 3-mile ascent to Davis Mountains State Park, where I was staying at the on-site Indian Lodge.

The park has several trails as well as a few Wildlife Viewing Areas, which make for great cover from the heat of midday. Birds easily seen in the park include Cassin’s Kingbird, Vermilion Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee, Blue Grosbeak, Black-headed Grosbeak, Acorn Woodpecker, and Woodhouse’ Scrub Jay. I had a family of Say’s Phoebes living right outside the lodge, and a Hepatic Tanager singing in a tree nearby. There is a trail named for the celebrated Montezuma Quail, although they are apparently hard to spot and I did not encounter one on my visit. One day I spotted a Common Black Hawk soaring overhead at the park entrance.

From there, I drove the winding roads up the mountains past the McDonald Observatory (which has the well-known Star Parties, unfortunately they were sold out the weekend of my trip), and in about half an hour I ended up at the Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Area and the entrance to the Madera Canyon Trail. This is the part near the Davis Mountains Preserve that is still open to the public; as of my trip the Preserve was still closed to day visitors. The picnic area is a little higher in elevation, so you start to see more pinyon pine and other tree cover. Here is a great place to look for Ash-throated Flycatcher, Hepatic Tanager, Plumbeous Vireo, Gray Flycatcher, Scott’s Oriole and Rock Wren.

On Sunday, my trip came to an end. I finished lunch at the Stone Village Market in Fort Davis (which features a great sandwich deli) and was about to turn out of town when I noticed a few Turkey Vultures soaring low in a field alongside my car. Experience has taught me to always look more closely at Turkey Vultures in the western part of the state, just in case they might be the very similar-looking Zone-tailed Hawk. Sure enough, I was surprised and delighted to see the tell-tale black heads of Zone-tails! I quickly stopped the car and got my camera ready, but I was too late, as the birds turned and sailed immediately over me. I watched them drift over town for a few seconds, and decided to get back in my car and see if I could intercept them. I turned down a side road I thought might be in their path and waited. After a few minutes, they came gliding over, but this time I was ready. I was thrilled to get the photo I’d always wanted of my favorite hawk, which put a great cap on a fantastic weekend trip.

If you go:

- Staying at the lodge is recommended! In addition to being able to wake up and be in the park, there’s also an in-house restaurant and swimming pool.
- Take a cooler with you and plenty of water. It was always nice to have cold water on-hand after returning from a hike. The mountains are temperate but if the sun isn’t mitigated by clouds, it can get rather hot in summer.
- The Davis Mountains are about a 6 1/2 hour drive from Austin, and there are limited fuel and rest stops along the way. I recommend topping off the gas tank any time you stop, whether you need gas or not. Don’t wait until you get close to E.

See the full gallery from this trip on Jason’s website.

Featured image: Say’s Phoebe by Jason Garcia
Travis Audubon’s New Code of Conduct

POSTED ON AUGUST 5, 2021 CATEGORIES: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

By Chris Gunter

One of Travis Audubon’s missions is environmental education, and this necessarily involves staff and volunteers having frequent contact with members and non-members alike in classes as well as on field trips. Our board strongly believes we have a responsibility to assure that everyone feels welcome, safe, and comfortable whenever engaged in Travis Audubon-sponsored activities. For this reason, our board appointed a task force to explore whether it was time for Travis Audubon to create a formal document setting out expectations for staff, volunteers, and participants. The result is a newly enacted Code of Conduct, which you can read below. We encourage everyone to take a look at it and let us know if you have any questions about it. Staff, volunteers, members, and participants in TAS programming will be expected to comply with the provisions of this code.

Why did we feel like the time was right to formalize these expectations? The task force learned that most Audubon chapters in the U.S. have such codes of conduct or statements of ethics and determined that it was time for us to do so as well. Several of those codes were reviewed, and it is fair to say that many of the ideas in them have been incorporated into our own. The board also believes that our new Code of Conduct compliments our IDEA statement that was created last year, wherein we affirmed our commitment to create policies and strategies prioritizing inclusion, diversity, equity, and access in all of TAS’s mission and activity. Formalizing this code confirms what we already know: friends and members of TAS are kind, conscientious, and responsible, and help us fulfill our mission every day. This statement serves as a way for us to be even more welcoming and open to everyone who wants to join us in the protection and enjoyment of birds.

Have questions or comments? Please email our Executive Director Nicole Netherton at nicole@travisaudubon.org.

Travis Audubon’s Code of Conduct

Travis Audubon offers many programs and activities to its members and the public to share our passion and connect people with nature, inspiring everyone to be good stewards of birds and the environment. These programs are led by either staff or volunteers. We provide this statement of expectations for staff, volunteers and participants in Travis Audubon programs and activities because it is our goal to provide an enjoyable experience for those who participate in these programs and to provide a model of respect for birds and other wildlife.

Travis Audubon is committed to providing programming and field trips to members as well as non-members free of discrimination and harassment based on race, color, creed, religion, sex, pregnancy, national origin, ancestry, citizenship status, age, disability, sexual orientation or identity, marital, or military service status, genetic information, or any other status protected by applicable local, state, or federal law. Participants in Travis Audubon programming are welcome to share their preferred pronouns with trip leaders or class instructors, if so desired, and those pronouns will be acknowledged and used.

Travis Audubon strictly prohibits discrimination and harassment, including but not limited to sexual harassment. Any staff member, volunteer or participant experiencing, observing or becoming aware of conduct that violates this policy should immediately report the possible violation to the Executive Director or any officer of Travis Audubon.

Travis Audubon expects all staff, volunteers, and program participants to:

- Use kind, welcoming, and inclusive language, regardless of another participant’s birding knowledge, personal background, or new association with Travis Audubon.
- Not engage in or use racist, sexist, ableist, classist, homphobic, sizeist, or xenophobic behaviors or language.
- Be respectful of differing viewpoints, experiences, and cultures.
- Be mindful of others in your group and your surroundings.
- Show respect for all flora, fauna, and habitats encountered, according to the ABA birding code of ethics.
- Respectfully use cellphones and other electronic devices; engage in the ethical use of playback only with leader-approval.
- Be prepared for your own safety and comfort by wearing clothing and footwear suitable for the environment and weather.
• Remain aware of how others are using the space around you, including other members of the public; stay with the group, and avoid blocking trails or pathways.
• Acknowledge that staff and volunteer leaders have responsibilities to the entire group; make sure to leave space for other voices.
• Remember that the space where you bird and any loaned equipment you use are assets that many people use; please treat all with respect, care, and with safety as your priority.
• Respect all other relevant Travis Audubon policies. If you’re unsure, please ask.
• The following will NOT be tolerated:
  ○ Any form of harassment, sexual or otherwise, including the use of sexualized language or imagery, any unwelcome physical contact, sexual attention, or advances, offensive or degrading language;
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Featured Image: American Avocet by Evan Barrientos/Audubon Rockies

What Makes a Birder? Byron Stone: Escow Field Mark Cronyism

By John Bloomfield

Some travel the world and amass huge life lists. Others travel as far as their backyard and may not list at all. Some bird with expensive optics and big camera lenses.

Others use modest bins and maybe a point-and-shoot. Some hike miles in search of a rarity. Some take pleasant walks and just enjoy whatever they see. Some bird from a wheelchair or walker. Others enjoy birdsong from an open window.

Birders. They come in more flavors than an ice cream store. Yet they share one thing in common: an unabashed love for all things birds. In this new series we explore the diversity of our local birding community. We wanted to know what ignited their interest and what keeps them going. We call it: “What Makes a Birder?”

Byron (Doc) Stone grew up in Austin, at a time before open space was at a premium, and he spent his boyhood days at Shoal Creek fishing and exploring the outdoors.

“Shoal Creek was about 10 minutes from where I lived, and I still live nearby,” Byron said on a recent morning when we talked by the creek at Beverly S. Sheffield Northwest District Park. “I’d go down and look for fossils and I’d fish for tiny bluegill and big American eels – some weighed up to seven or eight pounds. My mom used to cook them for us, but she never ate them. She said they smelled like DDT.

“We used to see indigo snakes along Shoal Creek, and they were awesome. My mother was a naturalist who earned a degree from Texas Tech, so she knew about things like that.”

Byron’s mother was interested in birds, and she passed that interest on to her son. “She got to know some of the local birders,” he recalled. Her circle included people like Ed Kutac, who wrote Birders Guide to Texas in the 1990s, and ornithologist Edgar Kincaid, a charter member of Travis Audubon and editor of Bird Life of Texas in the 1970s.

“But the people that we knew best and who gave me some of my early introduction to birds were Fred and Marie Webster, who lived just a mile or so away.” He remembers them both as very thoughtful, careful observers, a trait Byron retains to this day. Fred was a former president of Travis Audubon and longtime editor of the South Texas region column for National Audubon’s American Birds.

Despite these early influences, as a boy Byron was mainly interested in what he calls consumptive outdoor recreation. “I was a kid, and my thinking at that time was if you could catch it or eat it, I was interested in it. My childhood dream was to go to Montana to hunt moose and elk.”

Byron’s remembers a time when his mother saw a Painted Bunting on one of their Sunday drives. “She was really excited, and the binoculars got passed around, but by the time they were passed to me, the bird had flown.”
A Vermilion Flycatcher at age 13 made “a wee bit of an impression,” but it wasn’t until he was in college and could not afford a hunting lease that he began turning to birding as an alternative. “It offered the same thrill,” he remembered, “without having to kill critters.”

While at the University of Texas he took an informal class called “Introduction to Birding.” The instructor? Fred Webster, who became a mentor, and once Byron had finished medical school, he began having more time to devote to birding. It became a lifelong passion.

Today, the kid catching critters along Shoal Creek has a thriving psychiatric practice (he has been treating patients since 1987) treating what he calls kids of all ages. He also has built impeccable birding credentials, including tenure as President of the Texas Ornithological Society, a member of the Texas Bird Records Committee and as a statewide and regional eBird reviewer.

Byron is also one of a small group of birders to have counted 100 bird species in 100 Texas Counties – the 100th species in his 100th county was a Harris’s Sparrow. Not content to stop at 100, he has surpassed 101 in 101 counties and is now working on 102 species in 102 counties.

While listing has always been fun, Byron’s passion for birds runs deeper, and he enjoys sharing it with others. “Maybe it was some of my mother’s influence rubbing off on me,” he noted, “but I felt like my birding needed to be more meaningful than in just a personal way, and I wanted to find a way to share.”

He began teaching a course on sparrow identification for Travis Audubon. Then, after getting involved with the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge, he, Chuck Sexton, the staff biologist at the refuge, and City of Austin biologist Bill Reiner worked to establish a festival devoted to the wintering sparrows in the restored grassland and prairie environments of the refuge. A total of 21 sparrow species were seen at the inaugural event, which one of the participants wrote about in The Wall Street Journal. Now an annual highlight for birders, Sparrowfest was taken virtual in 2021, but Byron looks forward to an in-person revival next year.

As our time together drew to a close, Byron offered some advice – not just for new birders but to everyone who lifts binoculars in search of birds.

“I tell people that everybody makes ID mistakes,” he said. “We’re human – we’re gonna make mistakes! If you never make mistakes, you probably aren’t trying very hard. Also, don’t just focus on one field mark and assume you’ve got the ID. Be democratic, or at least populist in your approach, and eschew what I call ‘field mark cronyism.’ And learn how to describe what you saw. It will make you much more confident in the field.”

He also left this advice for parents: “If your child shows any interest in the outdoors, please buy them a pair of binoculars. They don’t have to be expensive; you can get starter pair from any local sporting goods store. It might turn out to be the best investment you could make.”