Hello Travis Audubon friends and members,

Early this summer, things were looking good as I began to make preparations to resume our monthly Hornsby Bend bird walks, a very popular event that I have coordinated for several years. Then Austin took another plunge on the Covid rollercoaster, and Travis Audubon was back to virtual-only programs. A discouraging turn for sure, especially for an organization like TAS that always had a packed field trip calendar before the pandemic. Interest in birding has never been higher, and our membership rolls have grown significantly during the pandemic. Our staff and volunteers have been so eager to engage with these newly hatched birders to share our love for nature and all of the fantastic birding locations around Austin.

Now as we head into November, I am again cautiously optimistic that the worst is behind us, and that we will see a gradual resumption of our field trips and other in-person events. In October, we finally had our first Hornsby Bend field trip since the pandemic began, attended by 23 enthusiastic birders. A sign of better days ahead!

I can’t thank you enough for your support again this year at our virtual Victor Emanuel Conservation Award event, honoring Greg Lasley. Greg was a brilliant naturalist and photographer, and it was gratifying to have many of his friends from around the country join us for this event. If you didn’t get a chance to attend, please check out the recording of the program on our website.

Finally, I again have to thank our intrepid Travis Audubon staff and volunteers. Your enthusiasm and creativity have kept the TAS family engaged in our mission over this difficult time. I hope to see you all out on the trail soon!

Good birding!

Eric

Eric Stager
President
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**Thank You**

TO OUR BUSINESS PARTNERS
Upcoming Events
WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

06 NOV, 21
FIELD TRIPS
Beginners’ Bird Walk: Barkley Meadows Park
4529 S SH 138, Del Valle, TX 78617

06 NOV, 21
FIELD TRIPS, SANCTUARY EVENTS
Blair Woods Bioblitz: An Official Roots & Wings Pop-Up Event
5401 E Martin Luther King Jr Blvd, Austin, TX 78721, USA

10 NOV, 21
CLASS
“I Don’t Do Gulls” Gulls Class 2021 (FULL)

14 NOV, 21
FIELD TRIPS, SANCTUARY EVENTS
Commons Ford Bird Walk (FULL)
614 N Commons Ford Rd, Austin, TX 78733

17 NOV, 21
CLASS
Class: Bird Photography Workshop at Roy G. Guerrero Park

17 NOV, 21
CLASS
Class: Introduction to Birds and Birding Winter 2021

18 NOV
FIELD TRIPS, SANCTUARY EVENTS
Speaker Series: The Migration of Shorebirds with Dr. Chin-Ty Lee

20 NOV, 21
FIELD TRIPS, YOUTH & FAMILY
Young Birders Club: Richard Moya Park
Richard Moya Park, 10001 Burleson Rd, Austin, TX 78719, USA

21 NOV, 21
Ruffled Feathers Book Club Meeting

23 NOV, 21
FIELD TRIPS, SANCTUARY EVENTS
Commons Ford Bird Walk
614 N Commons Ford Rd, Austin, TX 78733

27 NOV, 21
YOUTH & FAMILY

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Chuck and Mary Kay Sexton

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Eric Stager & Friends
Texas Ornithological Society
Victor Emanuel Nature Tours

Young Birders Club: Roy G. Guerrero Colorado River Metro Park
480 Grove Blvd, Austin, TX 78741, USA

28 NOV, 21
FIELD TRIPS, LET’S GO BIRDING TOGETHER
Let’s Go Birding Together: Commons Ford

04 DEC, 21
FIELD TRIPS
Beginners’ Bird Walk: Richard Moya Park
10001 Burleson Rd, Austin, TX 78719

11 DEC, 21
YOUTH & FAMILY
Young Birders Club: Barkley Meadows Park
Barkley Meadows Park, 4529 TX-138, Del Valle, TX 78617, USA

20 DEC, 21
FIELD TRIPS, LET’S GO BIRDING TOGETHER
Let’s Go Birding Together: Commons Ford
Thank You
TO OUR 2021 VICTOR EMANUEL
CONSERVATION AWARD CELEBRATION SPONSORS

Swallow-tailed Kite Sponsor

Crested Caracara Sponsor

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TO THOSE WHO VOLUNTEERED IN 2021 FOR INSPIRING CONSERVATION IN THE HEARTS OF CENTRAL TEXANS!

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What Makes a Birder? 
Advait Marathe: Parallel Journeys

In this ongoing series we examine what motivates people to enjoy birds and birding, from back yard birders to chronic listers of all ages and abilities.

[Image of a bird]

One morning when he was a boy, Advait Marathe remembers standing on the balcony of his family’s home in Mumbai, India, where he spotted a brilliant bird: it was all crimson, yellow and green – a Coppersmith Barbet.

Although the name was beyond him at the time, the sighting helped spark a journey as birder that paralleled a personal journey that took him from India to Indiana to Austin, where he is pursuing a career in information technology.

An accomplished birder and photographer, Advait and I met at Commons Ford Ranch Metropolitan Park on a drizzly summer morning. “This is one of my favorite places, a good place for birds and photography,” he told me. “Here and Hornsby Bend and Reimers Ranch, these are the places I visit most. During migration, I love Riata Pond, near where I live. And Mills Pond too, of course.”

As we began our walk alongside the prairie grass, we were treated to the sights and songs of Painted and Indigo Buntings. A vole braved out into the open, safe from raptors for the time being. We pointed our cameras at a Painted Bunting but the mist was too thick for a good shot. Advait sighed: “After two years I still don’t have a Painted Bunting photo that I like.”

As we walked together, Advait shared his personal journey with me as well as his evolution as a birder.

“No one in my family was into birds,” he said. “I picked it up on my own. I remember we used to do some birdwatching at summer camp, but I didn’t have binoculars, so it wasn’t the best experience.”

Eventually the binoculars came, and a small camera. A new world opened up for him.

Soon he was consuming field guides and doing internet searches to learn about what he was seeing. He began meeting other birders and was invited on field trips. Though his interest was growing, he had to balance it with Engineering Studies at the University of Mumbai. For a time, birding had to take a back seat.

But not for long. One day he was on Facebook when he stumbled onto some birding groups. He looked at me: “You know the ones, the ones where people share a photo and want to know what bird it is? So back to the field guides I went until I could start identifying them myself. That was when the birding really started to take hold.”

It didn’t hurt that Sanjay Gandhi National Park was a ten-minute walk from his house.
With its abundant plant- and wildlife, caves and waterfalls, the park attracts more than two million human visitors a year as well as nearly 350 recorded bird species, including exotic bulbuls, drongos and sunbirds.

Advait began helping on bird surveys at the park, soaking up more information on field marks and vocalizations. “It kind of snowballed after that,” he smiled. “So, looking back, it wasn’t one thing but a progression of things that made me a birder.”

Moving to the U.S. for graduate school presented new challenges. In addition to the cultural adjustments, the process of learning new sights, sounds and bird behaviors started all over.

“Here I was at Indiana University, and I didn’t know anybody,” Advait continued. “There was the challenge of being in school full time again after working for a few years after college. Not having a car limited my ability to go birding. But once I had my schedule and coursework figured out, I started tagging along with some awesome people who took me under their wing, so to speak.”

One of his favorite places was Goose Pond, a preserve south of Terre Haute with more than 9000 acres of marsh and prairie habitat. “I remember one day seeing thousands of Snow Geese there, one of the greatest wildlife spectacles I’ve ever witnessed.”

He did his first (and thus far only) Christmas Bird Count in Indiana with friends from Sassafras Audubon Society in Bloomington. “That’s when I first realized that no matter where I was, I could always check with the local Audubon chapter and go from there,” he said.

After two years in Indiana, it was another move, this time to Texas, another time to readjust, meet new people and learn the local birding landscape.

“I started going on field trips with Travis Audubon to places like Enchanted Rock, Pedernales Falls State Park and here at Commons Ford. Meeting like-minded people and enjoying the birding here helped me de-stress and meet the challenge of being in a new place on my own.”

Advait remembered seeing a Black Scoter on his first visit to Hornsby Bend. “I was so new I had no idea it was a rarity. I just photographed it and moved on. Then someone comes up to me all excited and asked if I’d seen it. I said, yeah, it was floating over there. I showed him the picture and he was amazed.”

Advait met fellow newcomer Nick Komar on a Travis Audubon walk and the two began to bird together. “Nick was doing a big year, and he was happy to have me tag along with him. We saw some awesome birds, and I learned a lot from him,” Advait recalled.

Reflecting on his own journey, Advait offered some advice for people just getting into birding and photography.

“Start with an inexpensive option in terms of cameras. There are many great point-and-shoot superzoom cameras that you can pick up to get started. Once you start getting decent photos, think of upgrading, but you don’t have to spend a fortune picking up the hobby.

“Investing in binoculars is a game changer. Some may argue that looking through the camera lens is the same thing, but there’s no comparison. Invest in a field guide and a good birding app like Sibley Birds. Most of all, be patient. Learning birds can be challenging, but once you get the hang of it, it is so much fun.”

As we were wrapping up, we saw a pair of Western Kingbirds, then Advait spotted their nest, with the beak of a tiny bird protruding. Being able to experience the joy of that moment is what makes him a birder.

*Featured image of Advait Marathe out in the field taken by John Bloomfield.*
Blair Woods and the History of Ft. Colorado

By Mark Wilson, Travis Audubon Board Member

Travis Audubon’s Blair Woods Preserve is a wonderful oasis in the middle of the Austin urban environment. Open to all every day from 9a – 4p, it offers a peaceful place to enjoy birds and nature. But Blair Woods is also a sanctuary for the history of the Austin community. One important part of that story is Fort Colorado.

Many people have noticed the Texas Centennial marker on East MLK Blvd, just outside the Blair Woods fence, marking the general location of this 19th century outpost. Fern Blair (she and her husband W Frank donated the preserve to Travis Audubon in their will) shared local stories she heard about the fort and its location near Coleman Springs, located in Blair Woods. It was said materials from the fort were used by area farmers in building their homes and barns. She found artifacts on the 10 acres she and W Frank owned, and donated to archeologists investigating the fort in the mid-1960’s.

In 2020, the Travis Audubon Board authorized the use of grant funds to enable Sergio & Melinda Iruegas, archeologists and owners of GIT Environmental, LLC to explore the history of Blair Woods. Using archival research and shovel testing, Sergio and Melinda documented the amazing history of the preserve, and the high probability that part of the historic fort was located in Blair Woods.

Fort Colorado was constructed on land granted to Jesse Tannehill by the Mexican government in 1830 (he founded the community of Montopolis to the south). In 1836, after the battle of San Jacinto, General Houston appointed Colonel Robert M Coleman as commander in charge of the Republic of Texas’s ad interim government. Coleman built a series of forts circumventing the Coahuiltecan villages of the Rancheria Grande (central Texas), with Fort Colorado as the fulcrum. The purpose was to manage, maintain and protect trade along the El Camino Real, the traditional trading route running from Louisiana to Mexico.

Fort Colorado was occupied for 2 years. We have stories about life at the fort as handed down from Noah Smithwick, recorded by his daughter in 1900 when he was in his 90’s. He served as blacksmith, mechanic, interpreter and negotiator. He described negotiations and trade with neighboring Comanche and Coahuiltecan tribes, who camped in the vicinity of Coleman Springs. A swale, or depression formed in the land from years and years of continual traffic to and from the springs, can be seen today leading up from Coleman Springs towards the high ground used for camping and the fort.

Based on the investigations by Sergio and Melinda, and with the help of members of the Travis County Historic Commission, Blair Woods has been nominated for inclusion in the National Park Service’s El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail. This will be a multi-year process – stay tuned for updates. If you are interested in further reading, a copy of “The Archeology of Blair Woods Nature Preserve Historic Fort Colorado” by Sergio and Melinda Iruegas is available in the Travis Audubon Library, as well as the Austin History Center. Noah Smithwick’s memoirs “Evolution of a State” can be found on Amazon.

Our Strange Summer of Swifts and other Updates from Chaetura Canyon

POSTED ON SEPTEMBER 23, 2021 CATEGORIES: SANCTUARY NEWS SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

Our Strange Summer of Swifts and other Updates from Chaetura Canyon

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Featured image above is of Sergio and Melinda Iruegas doing a shovel test at Blair Woods.
There are 18 Chimney Swift towers on the Chaetura Canyon Sanctuary. Most are monitored only periodically and then nesting success is evaluated after the swifts have departed for South America in the fall. However, three of the towers are equipped with audio and visual equipment and are monitored throughout the nesting season: the cinder block castle and the two 24-feet tall wooden towers on the residence ("North" and "South").

We focus this tale on the South Tower. This year there was additional monitoring equipment installed by Dr. Carlos Rodrigues with the University of Texas to hopefully capture the ontogeny of the swifts and be able to study their vocalizations within the nesting structure – something which to date has never been done. It was a year like no other.

Chimney Swift eggs in their nest. Photo by Paul Kyle.

Swifts in the South Tower built their nest and laid two eggs in May. But each time an additional egg was laid, a third swift entered, and the territorial scuffle ended with the egg knocked out of the nest and broken on the bottom of the tower. By the end of the month, the pair was still in the South Tower and still working on the nest, but there were no eggs.

On June 22nd, a couple of weeks after the last egg was lost, the pair once again began to mate and continued to work on expanding the nest. Shortly thereafter, a new egg was laid. The parents returned frequently to check on and cuddle the egg. That evening a bird entered the tower and obviously, purposely ejected the egg from the nest using its mouth. In more than 30 years of observation, we have never before witnessed this behavior and pondered the situation.

So, what happened? Did an adult return without a mate, take another mate and the original mate showed up later? Swallows often toss out the eggs of rival mates, but to our knowledge this has never been documented with Chimney Swifts.

When we contacted Dr. Charlie Collins, co-author of the species account for Chimney Swifts in Birds of the World, he concurred. Charlie suggested that competing females were perhaps tussling out a rival’s egg.

If this was the case, as soon as two eggs were laid the activity would cease – since they could no longer distinguish their own egg from that of their rival. Turns out, he was correct.

We lined the bottom of the tower with soft material so that if the activity continued, we could hopefully retrieve and replace an unbroken egg. Fortunately, that did not happen and egg laying resumed. However, there were still several scuffles.

On June 26th, there were two new eggs in the South Tower nest – which was now much larger due to ongoing construction. Because a new egg is laid every other day, we expected a third on the 28th. But by mid-morning on the 28th there were four eggs... what? A female Chimney Swift is not expected to be able to produce enough calcium to lay an egg except every other day – their diet is calcium-poor. Had another female entered and laid her egg in a surrogate nest? On June 30th, a fifth egg was laid.

On July 1st, there were six eggs in the nest – again too soon for the same female to lay another egg, and two more were laid by July 4th for a total of eight. The most we have ever documented is seven, and never in such rapid, daily succession. Clearly two females were laying eggs in the same nest.

Chimney Swift hatchlings in their nest. Photo by Paul Kyle.

By July 20th, seven of the eight eggs had hatched. The nestlings grew rapidly, and we often observed three adults feeding them.

On July 31st, the nestlings’ feathers were covering their previously naked, pink bodies, their eyes were beginning to open, and they completely obscured the nest where they clung steadily. Normal development continued over the next few weeks, and by the end of August “The Magnificent Seven” had successfully fledged.

Meanwhile, to our delight, in the North Tower a sizable roost formed. It fluctuated nightly from 150 to 318 individuals.
But the South Tower family preferred to remain in their own tower at night – often joined by half a dozen or so others who perhaps did not enjoy the rowdy crowd in The North.

Chimney Swift fledglings in their nest. Photo by Paul Kyle.

We have been studying, watching and wondering at the Chimney Swifts of Chaetura Canyon since we built our first tower in 1989. And every year they still teach us some new.

The relatively mild summer was kind to the vegetation, and with 6.54 inches of rain August was our wettest month of the year to date. This fall promises to be very colorful with great stands of Prairie Agalinis and a ridiculous amount of Plateau Goldeneye – the latter of which has been over-performing. Although the local pollinators would likely disagree.

We have worked on our own for months to clear the trails following the ice and snow damage from the February storm, but there is still much residual damage and a large quantity of slash to be hauled out and chipped. We are hopeful that once the weather cools, we will be able to host a few Stewardship Days. But with the Delta surge, we will have to wait and see...

Georgean and Paul Kyle
Sanctuary Stewards
Chaetura Canyon

Hornsby Bend Stakeholder Update September 2021

This update includes the following:

- Update on the tree removal project and mowing along the treatment pond embankments
- Update on construction project progress and road closures
- Progress on the old aquatic greenhouse and pump station demolition

Although we had hoped to be restarting the Hornsby Bend Stakeholder Public Meetings this month, the current COVID stage prevents meeting in person, but we want to update everyone on construction project progress and the annual pond road closures for the tree removal project.

Tree removal and treatment pond embankment mowing -

- We are required by the TCEQ to remove all trees from the treatment pond embankments because they can threaten the stability of the embankments. Only trees under 6” trunk diameter or diseased, damaged, dying trees larger than 6” trunk diameter are being removed. Larger healthy trees will remain until they begin to die or get damaged. As embankments are cleared, we must move them to control tree regrowth.
- To prevent negative impacts on bird nesting, we only do the tree removal and embankment mowing outside of migratory bird nesting season as delineated by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (March 15 – September 15), and so all work on the pond embankments can only be done between September 16 and March 14 each year.
- This year the contractor has begun the pond embankment work September 28th starting at the east end of the pond road between Pond 1 and 2. While working on an embankment, they will close that section of pond road for the safety of visitors. Other pond roads remain open for visitor access.
- Over the coming weeks, the contractor will work on to other sections of the pond embankments and temporarily close sections of pond roads while they work.
Construction project progress and road closures –

- Over the last two years the side stream plant has been rebuilt to help improve the water quality of the "side stream" water (the water removed from the sewage sludge as we thicken it for treatment and recycling) before it enters the treatment ponds. Construction work on the side stream treatment plant at the west end of Pond 1 and 2 has finishing, and the new plant has begun operation. However the western pond roads will remain closed during the transfer pump station construction.

- The new transfer pump station construction project began this spring 2021 and is scheduled to be done in 2022. It will be located on the embankment at the west end of Pond 2 and will replace the old pump station below Pond 2 near the aquatic greenhouse. The transfer pump station will do two things. Firstly, it will pump treatment pond water from Pond 2 to our new center pivot irrigation units which are currently being installed in the hay fields to the north and south of the main entrance road. Secondly, it will allow us to pump treatment pond water in a pipeline under the river which will connect to a large wastewater line that goes to the South Austin Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant. This new pipeline will assure that, even with ever increasing inflows to the Hornsby Bend Plant, the treatment ponds will never overflow.

- The western pond roads will remain closed to visitor vehicles until the completion of the transfer pump station construction project.

Aquatic greenhouse and pump station demolition

- As part of the new transfer pump station project, the old aquatic greenhouse and pump station are being demolished. That work is expected to finish by the end of this year. You can follow the progress of the demolition through photos on the CER Facebook page. After demolition and site cleanup, the area will be allowed to return to riparian forest.

- We have temporarily closed the River Trail which runs next to the greenhouse and pump station during this demolition, but, when demolition is complete, the construction fences will be pulled back to the area where the new pump station and pipeline are being built, and trail access through this area and to Pond 3 will be reopened.

Lastly – the CER is open 7 days a week for restroom access, and the Hornsby Bend site (both the main gate and Platt Lane) is also open 7 days a week dawn to dark for visitors to chase birds, bugs, and other wildlife or just to sit by the river and do no chasing at all. We look forward to everyone getting vaccinated and COVID levels dropping to where we can restart our weekend activities again. Watch our Facebook and Instagram pages for updates on restarting river survey trips, field trips, and volunteer work days.

- Kevin M. Anderson Ph.D.

Celebrating a Naturalist’s Legacy

By Robert McLemore

Because of the generous contributions of the members and community of Travis Audubon, we have been able to pivot during the pandemic and continue to fulfill our mission of conservation, education and advocacy. A hallmark is the beautiful and professional production of this year’s Victor Emanuel Conservation Award Celebration held “At Home” honoring Greg Lasley. If you want to watch or re-watch this Celebration, you can see it at this link.

Greg started out his outdoor enthusiasm as an Eagle Scout earning the Birding Merit Badge and continuing thru his career in law enforcement. But it wasn’t until he “retired” that it truly blossomed into a passion and friendship across the globe. Twenty years with Victor Emanuel Nature Tours and tens of thousands of people helped on iNaturalist truly gave our local hero a world-wide reach. Like many of us, Greg’s passion for birding took root when he saw a Painted Bunting on his feeders. It is only appropriate that much of this year’s fund-raising imagery features a Painted Bunting as well as a dragonfly. Many will agree that his passion for “bird, bugs, and the outdoors” has gone a long way towards many birders also having the same joys with dragonflies. Chuck Sexton served as the Emcee for the event and started off the Virtual FOG (Friends of Greg) meeting. Lots of his friends shared wonderful, loving and inspirational stories of their shared memories birding, pursuing dragonflies and his photography. “Every time I see a dragonfly, I think of Greg.” “I miss you, Greg”. Throughout the celebration we were touched with the impacts that Greg had on his friends and community. Austin Mayor Steve Adler even declared the day of October 8, 2021 to be Greg W Lasley Day!

Eric Stager and Kevin Anderson kicked off the storytelling of Greg’s conservation legacy from Hornsby Bend, their natural habitat. I’ve been there dozens of times but never realized that the artwork in the visitor’s center was from Greg until now. Personally, I can picture Greg at Hornsby Bend with his intensity while photographing the fall migration. I’ll reflect on those times as the fall season begins in earnest.
Victor Emanuel warmly recognized his good friend and helped segue to just a handful of the many lives touched by Greg. Victor is also the consummate professional in his reminder that the event is both an opportunity to remember and help to contribute to the on-going work of Travis Audubon.

Gayle Stallings was the fundraising host as she has done “in person” over the last 12 years. You could donate at a select level or choose your own amount. The goal of this year’s fundraising was $110,000 and there were a lot of wonderful auction choices. At the time of the recording we had reached $85,000 and now it is over $97,000! Wow. And the best way to continue Greg’s work and legacy is to help support Travis Audubon at this link. At the bottom you can ensure that your tribute goes to the memory of Greg Lasley.

Remember – Travis Audubon has been around for almost 70 years and Greg was a part of that legacy for 40. Those were 40 years actively helping with our friends and community

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What Makes a Birder?
Lauren Stokes and Colby Watkins: Love of Seabirds

In the latest installment of our blog on local birders and what inspires them, we follow Austin birders Lauren Stokes and Colby Watkins on their first pelagic journey in the gulf waters off Port Aransas this September. The trip was led by Garett Hodne, veteran of 25 years of birding in the Gulf of Mexico.

Dawn was slow in coming on September 18. Or maybe it just seemed that way since we were on the water at 5 a.m. Just when it seemed like the darkness would never lift, bursts of yellow-orange light, like heat lightning in the morning, pierced the ink-black sky. It was shortly after 7 a.m. Soon the sky turned pink and light blue, and you could finally see the waters of the Gulf of Mexico below.

When the sun broke through, we soon saw our first birds: Royal, Sandwich and Black Terns plus Magnificent Frigatebirds milling around a shrimp boat, our first of several Masked Boobies, even a migrating Dickcissel speeding on a long-distance run over the gulf.

Pelagics. Birders love them or hate them, and either way they are the subject of lore. On this day, aboard a boat called the Kingfisher, thirty birders including some of the best in Texas, joined Garett Hodne and a group of expert guides for the second of three pelagic trips run this year by Garett’s Texas Pelagics. Garett has been birding off the coast of Texas since 1994 but was really bit by the pelagic bug four years later when he joined the legendary Debbie Shearwater for tree trips off the California coast. On one he saw an estimated half-million Sooty Shearwaters “in a huge swirling cloud” that their boat cruised below. A Yellow-nosed Albatross off South Padre Island in 2003 sealed the deal for him.

By John Bloomfield
Garret Hodne, coordinator for Texas Pelagics. Photo courtesy of Todd White.

He started the Texas Pelagics website in 2007 to help advertise the trips, and in 2014 succeeded Eric Carpenter in organizing them.

“We get a lot of first-time pelagic birders, and we really enjoy helping people find seabirds and get good looks at them, especially if they’re lifers,” Garret said. Of course, we hope some will get hooked on pelagic birding and want to come more often.”

Among the first timers were Lauren Stokes and Colby Watkins, a young couple from Austin who have been birding since 2019. Among their spark birds was a California Condor spotted above a high rock formation at Zion National Park.

“The condor represents two things for us,” said Colby. “First, we have an ever-present awareness that the earth is undergoing major changes, and there’s a sense of urgency for us to see as much of nature and wildlife as we can before it goes away or is altered forever. The second is a notion of what is possible when people care about something and try to correct course, as the California Condor was nurtured back from the brink of extinction by people that decided it was worth saving.”

Soon after their visit to Zion, Colby and Lauren began to connect with other birders in Austin, going on a Travis Audubon beginner’s walk at Hornsby Bend and participating in monthly surveys there. From the start, they felt the strong sense of community among local birders. Said Lauren: “We love how when you see someone else birding you know for a fact that you share at least one thing in common with that person, so everyone feels like a potential friend.”

There’s plenty of time to meet and talk with new friends on a pelagic, but when everyone starts scurrying around like paparazzi, you stop talking and get ready for action. That happened midway through our trip, when everyone rushed to the front of the boat as jets of water began spewing at 45-degree angles from an otherwise calm sea.

Sperm whales.

For a good ten minutes, a small pod tantalized us with a slow dance near the surface, nearly breaching the water many times, offering glimpses of their enormous backs and tails flipping in a gentle but powerful rhythm.

Sperm Whale. Photo courtesy of Garret Hodne.

Sperm whales are resident in the Gulf of Mexico, but their presence is threatened by busy shipping channels, noise pollution and climate change, among other factors. Said Garret, “We only see them on about ten to 20 percent of our trips, but when we do, they are always the main attraction.”

Lauren agreed, stating it was incredible to see the whales in their element. It was the topper to a day where they saw six lifers: Brown and Masked Booby, Magnificent Frigatebird, Audubon’s and Cory’s Shearwater and Band-rumped Storm Petrel.

“The best part of the experience was the shared sense of excitement whenever the opportunity occurred,” Colby said. “It was nice to be in the company of other people who understand why seabirds and birds in general are worth getting excited about.”

Masked Booby. Photo courtesy of John Bloomfield.

He added: “There were so many skilled birders on the boat calling things out that there wasn’t really a moment that we were looking at something unidentified. The biggest challenge is that you are never really stationary.”
There is a constant rock of the waves, so it’s a challenge to keep your binoculars still and take good pictures for ID. We were fortunate, though, to get many close views of the birds we were seeing.”

For Garret and his team, the satisfaction of turning on new birders and getting repeat participants year after year is worth the long hours spent chartering boats, determining locations, breaking in new captains, keeping the website up-to-date and communicating with participants.

“I probably do a lot more work than is necessary, because I always want to try to expand the number of trips I run and make sure they run smoothly and successfully,” Garret said.

His approach seems to be paying off. Lauren and Colby will be out with him for another pelagic in October, and they’re also thinking about trips to North Carolina and California with other companies next year.

“It was a unique and awesome experience,” Lauren said. “We’re hooked.”

**Remembering Ethel Kutac**

Posted on October 29, 2021 Categories: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

Ethel Kutac, a birder, environmentalist, and member of Travis Audubon for over 40 years, passed away on September 25th of this year. Described as a "force of nature," she touched so many within the Austin birding community alone. Here we have stories celebrating her wit, strength, and sense of humor from friends she made throughout her life.

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I met Ethel in the early 90’s. I had joined Travis Audubon with my son, Scott, who was working on his Bird Study merit badge on his way to attain the rank of Eagle Scout. I became a member of the bird records committee assisting Ed Kutac, his sister Ethel, and other early birder participants. When Ed left Austin, Ethel hosted those monthly events. I’ll always remember her special baked cookies she served.

During the 90’s I took a day off from work on occasion to join the weekly birder group. In 1994, Lawrence Buford took over from Ed and changed from Thursday to Wednesday. Ethel was a major part of the group, always needing a breakfast taco to begin the day. Her final outing was Friday, July 2nd, 2021, to Taylor which included BBQ for lunch. Ethel volunteered at Westcave Preserve. She helped organize the Christmas Bird Count and served with me as a coordinator for ten years beginning January 3rd, 2004. She helped arrange for participants to lead the many areas of the count circle. And she always managed to find the perfect restaurant for the countdown. For several years she hosted a group of birders at a family home in Galveston the last week of April which coincided with bird migrants in the area. She always knew the best restaurants for seafood. Ethel was a world traveling birder. She enlightened us all upon her return. She had a strong will and character and didn’t mind speaking her opinion on various matters. She never let her failing health deter her from one of her favorite passions. Ethel was one birder we’ll never forget.

– Dan Callaway

My favorite memories of Ethel are from the Wednesday morning birding outings. There was never a dull moment when Ethel was there. When the Wednesday group came to our ranch, the walking was a little rugged for Ethel. She eagerly talked John into taking her around in the Ranger. They usually returned for lunch with tales of birds that the rest of us never saw. Ethel was never shy about asking the men in the group to help her into whatever vehicle was going where she needed to go. She enjoyed knowing that they all loved to come to her aid. Ethel added good ideas and fun to any group she joined. We will miss her but enjoy remembering the fun she brought to us.

– Ann Donovan

Wednesday birding on a slow day: We all meet and set out. We pile out of the cars at the first sound. We find a few birds and keep looking, hoping for the best. Folks start chatting. A few of us start giving “maybe we should move on” eyebrow raises to each other.

Ethel: Aren’t we done here yet? We’re burning daylight! Let’s go! Always count on Ethel to keep the group moving! Ethel loved to eat at Donn’s BBQ on FM 969 before birding. She also loved Lee (Wallace). He was her favorite personal stability device and if she really wanted to see a bird, she called him to find it for her. We will miss her.

– Deb Wallace

We met Ethel about five years ago when we started going birding with the Wednesday group. She was a lot of fun! She was always so interested in what we had been doing, even though it was only a week since we had seen her last. The thing I will always remember was how we worked to get her on the birds. Deb would set up her scope low for Ethel and we would start to work.
Sometimes she would take pity on us and say “Oh yes, I see it,” but you knew she did not. You could always tell when she did. The excitement in her voice and the way she would linger at the scope appreciating the bird. The group would all cheer. I also remember the TOS meeting in Alpine where she came up and told me about the Western Screech Owl that she had seen and how some in the group had not. I believe this picture (below) was taken at Reimer’s Ranch. We had walked about as far as Ethel was willing and she flagged down this young man to give her a ride back. She really enjoyed the ride.

– Lee Wallace

Ethel was a force of nature. She was a world traveler, a teacher, a devout Catholic, a yellow dog Democrat, an avid reader, a volunteer, a Kutac legend, and a BIRDER! I first met Ethel in 2006. I lived close to her so had the honor to give her rides to TAS events and some of her Wednesday Birding group trips. Every trip was an education and adventure! I miss her every time I pass her street; I miss her wonderful laugh and strong opinions!

– Frances Cerbins

I was a fan of Ethel Kutac’s and cherished the times I got to be with her. She was an exceptionally caring person, an avid birder, a passionate educator, an adventurous woman and refreshingly outspoken. I knew her to be a quick study of people with a gift to easily connect across many spectrums. She was so curious and loved hearing others’ stories. Her voice was strong, her interaction direct, her sense of humor fantastic, and her laugh contagious. I felt drawn to her right away, 20+ years ago. One of my Ethel memories that isn’t about birding: On a cold evening in December with a chance of precipitation, I showed up for the Travis Audubon holiday party and silent auction to help with set-up for the event. Ethel was already there setting out the auction items. We chatted and caught up with each other while working, and I mentioned that I had made a very expensive mistake at a well-known social service organization’s silent auction once. Ethel turned to face me and said “Oh tell me!” I shared that I thought I had read the large gala crowd well and sensed a lot of money in the room.

Many people kept filing past the bid sheets and bids were quickly increasing on many high-value items. I wanted to participate and not just walk through the line so I added my bid to a 6-night hotel stay for two in Hawaii, assuming I’d be out bid. Well I wasn’t! And I ended up giving that organization a huge donation that night for the Hawaii item I couldn’t afford to use at the time because it didn’t include airfare. I told Ethel I learned my lesson. She laughed and laughed. And then she said “Let me tell you, I learned my lesson too!” and she told me that she made an even bigger mistake. At a previous TAS silent auction when she was setting out the items with bid sheets, she went through and put her name on EVERY bid sheet to get the bidding started, and not just at the recommended starting bid. On that night, it was cold and icy, and hardly anyone came to the event because of how treacherous the roads were. Much to her embarrassment, she had to shell out a lot of money for nearly all the items! She said, “I love Travis Audubon and in the end I didn’t mind giving them all that money, but I’LL NEVER do that again!” We both had fun laughing about those silent auction experiences.

– Terri Siegenthaler

Ethel was my roommate for several Texas Ornithological Society meetings. Mostly she rode with Jane Tillman and roomed with me. However, the year that TOS went to Amarillo, she rode with me as well. I enjoyed the company of her family in Amarillo and I appreciated her low key style of traveling. I can hardly believe that she will not be calling me up on some Sunday afternoon any more. I was so glad to read so many things I did not know about Ethel in her obituary. It seems like the end of an era with Ethel gone.

– Georgina Schwartz

I first met Ethel over a decade ago. She was a longtime member of Travis Audubon and the Wednesday Birding Group led by Dan Callaway. At the time I was a fledgling birder and the Wednesday Birding Group helped me satisfy my driving need to learn more about birds and birding. The group would hop in someone’s car and spend the whole day birding, an adventure that I loved and I have never quite found anything like since. I don’t know how long Ethel had been a birder, but it had been a long time. Her brother, Ed Kutac, had a following in the Austin Birding community as one of the state’s best birders, a wonderful teacher, and someone who had a passionate interest in birds. Ethel followed along, and she became just as passionate as Ed. Ethel was a strong environmentalist, and the love of birding fell right along with her passion for the environment. During our trips, we would all talk, and I liked listening to Ethel talk. She was from a different age than I was, an age in between my grandparents and my mother, and I liked to hear her talk about her life growing up in Yokay where she and her family pretty much took care of themselves while their widow mother went to work to support the family.
In my mind’s eye I see Ethel in a sleepy little town, running around the neighborhood having fun yet at the same time taking care of the chores her mother had assigned the children. She said that the whole community kept an eye out for the Kutac brood, making sure they were okay. Ethel got her education as a teacher in a time when women really didn’t get education beyond high school, and she went to live in Europe and taught in the American schools overseas. Again, that was not a common choice for a woman to make in those days. I guess she must have picked up her love of travel during those years because for as long as I knew Ethel she was always going somewhere exciting, usually on a birding trip. I loved hearing her stories of those times. Yes, Ethel could talk about her past and her travels, but Ethel was not only rooted in the past – she had a good knowledge of current events, much better than mine, and she frequently asked me if I “took the paper” (I confessed that I didn’t and she would shake her head.) She was a staunch democrat and as the license plate sticker said on the back of her car, “I vote for the environment.” Her conversation was always lively, and she was fun to be with; she would always be smiling, joking, teasing. During our adventures birding she would start conversations with people who we met up with, and she was always curious about what other people thought and she would talk about birds and birding with them. Once, I brought my daughter along birding with us, and Ethel took her under her wing and explained birding to her – she was a kindly older person who had patience with young children. I took a couple of longer trips with Ethel – one year we went on a Whooping Crane Cruise in Rockport, and another time we took Tim Fennell’s fantastic shorebird class together. She was always a good travel companion, fun and excited about the adventure, willing to do anything to see a bird or learn about birds. Yes, she was always learning and perhaps that is what I liked most about her. Even when she was confined to her house after surgery she would tell me about the interesting programs she would watch and the people she met along her life’s various adventures. (Voting at 90+ years in the time of COVID, conversations she had with her priest, the people who would come to see her,) I love the fact that she could go back and forth in her mind between present times and her past life, and to the end she was sharp, curious, and optimistic. I will miss her and her stories, the fun person she was, and the adventures we had.

– Terry Banks

I can’t say when I first met Ethel, but thanks to eBird.org I know that she accompanied my husband, Mark, and me to the Davis Mountains back in August 2010 on a Texas Ornithological Society trip. Ethel shared several birding adventures and Christmas Bird Counts with us over the years. When you spend long days together and in the field you get to know someone. Ethel was always fun and easy company. (It never ceased to amaze me how compactly she traveled – just three tiny bags at most – not even a suitcase. I guess she learned that skill with all her overseas travels earlier in life.)

One of the more memorable trips that Ethel and I took was to chase a rare Collared Plover down near Raymondville, TX in August 2014. I picked up Ethel, we made the 4.5 hour drive (probably with a stop for coffee as Ethel was never far from a cup), and set up on a levee overlooking a dried playa in late afternoon. The temp was 103 degrees when we arrived, and it was windy – Ethel and her chair almost blew over. The plover was not easy to see, and I was not that talented in getting the scope focused on it at Ethel’s seated level. Thankfully, up walked Eric Carpenter who took charge and got her on the bird. (Later she always called him, “such a nice young man.”) The back story was that Ethel attended a Texas Ornithological Society meeting near Uvalde several years prior in May, 1992. Her field trip leader asked the group if they wanted to make a side trip to the Uvalde Fish Hatchery to see the first U.S. record of Collared Plover, and one woman said “I believe I’d like to get back to the hotel.” That did not sit well with Ethel, and I am glad she finally got to see one. Before we went to the hotel we had to go find a beer for her to celebrate. Ethel liked her beer. During COVID I did weekly grocery shopping for Ethel at HEB and often visited afterwards. It was a pleasure to talk of mundane things like good recipes, good foods, happenings in our families, movies, and current events. Ethel had interests in so many things, and it never flagged. She could talk about the Lady Longhorns, UT football and baseball, recent books, what was right or wrong about politics and politicians, etc. I loved it when she’d lower her voice and say a little more slowly “in My Opinion.” Religion was very important to her, but whenever Ethel had to miss Sunday Mass, due to a birding weekend, she said she was thinking of the divine out in the Cathedral of Nature. I always liked that expression. It tickled me that Ethel had such a network of friends, who each helped her in various ways – someone did her Randall’s and Walgreens runs, others took her to various appointments, someone brought her newspaper up to her home, someone brought the trash cans up from the curb, and others helped with plant watering, changing filters, etc. She never overworked any one of us, whether by accident or design. Those of us who knew Ethel know how she could squeeze a penny. Stretch leftovers from restaurants into 2 or 3 meals, always buy the least expensive brand of x, y or z unless you have a really good reason for the higher priced item, and don’t take the toll road when regular roads just take a little bit longer.

Terry Banks, Ethel Kutac, and Ingrid Huskey on a birding trip.
These economies were part of her game in life, and they allowed her to travel well into her 80s and support charities she loved. What's not to like about that? It was a privilege to know Ethel. She knew how to live life fully.

– Jane Tillman

Burnet Christmas Bird Count (January 4, 2013). From left to right: Terry Banks, Jane Tillman, Janene Rowan, Ken Zaslow, Dan Callaway, Ethel Kutac, Dave Seal, Ingrid Huskey and Catfish Kelly.