Hello Travis Audubon friends and members,

One of the most comforting parts of life for me right now is noticing nature’s changes. It’s a good foil for the sometimes out-of-control-feeling-world of COVID life; migration often satisfies my simple anticipations.

Like all of you, I have some seasonal “marker” species that I look and listen for. I noticed the first Cedar Waxwing “zee zee zee” on December 17th this year—seemed a little earlier than I remembered. And I saw my first flock of Yellow-rumped Warblers working in some oaks on Halloween weekend! It always feels like saying hello to friends you haven’t seen in awhile to encounter these birds each year.

Recently I was delighted by a wintering lady Hooded Merganser at the pond at Blair Woods. She and a couple other Mergansers were spotted this time last year, and I like to think she remembered how much she enjoyed her time there and has convinced her beau and their friend (child?) to return, a little behind schedule. The construction of a water feature at Blair Woods is sure to bring even more interesting birds to the preserve, especially as we continue to manage and improve the habitat.

Though COVID is causing literal and figurative headaches again, I’m hopeful for the spring when things will change again and new bird friends will appear. I wonder when will I see American White Pelicans wheeling in the sky over I-35? Who will be my first Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and where will s/he appear? I eagerly await my annual text from Chris Murray when he hears the first Golden-cheek back at Baker—almost always during the second week of March. And not to play favorites, but how about those dazzling male Painted Buntings-- will I get my “usual” ones at Commons Ford or will I be delighted by someone somewhere else?

I say ‘welcome’ to all these birds and more. What delight they provide us humans as they simply do what they were born to do.

Good birding!

Nicole

Nicole Netheleton
Executive Director
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AT TRAVIS AUDUBON

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Caley Zuzula

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Travis Audubon Welcomes New Development Manager

Please join Travis Audubon in welcoming our new Development Manager, Cheyenne Moore.

It all started at the beginning of the pandemic when her now five-year-old son spotted a Red-tailed Hawk eating a squirrel outside of his bedroom window. For her son, it would become an obsession with birds of prey; for Cheyenne, it would lead to a new interest in (and passion for) birding that would dovetail with her career in fundraising.

Cheyenne has always been drawn to nonprofit work and has previously held positions at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, and the American Museum of Natural History. She has a dual degree in Classics and Archaeology from The George Washington University and a Master’s from Columbia University in Museum Anthropology.

Cheyenne is a born-and-raised New Yorker who came to Austin in 2016. She has two small children with her husband who hails from Australia.

She is proud of her multi-cultural heritage and enjoys cooking the foods of her mother’s country, Honduras, and can’t wait to resume travelling to share the wonders of the world with her son and daughter. She is excited to join the team and can be reached at cheyenne@travisaudubon.org.

Volunteer Spotlight: Mark Wilson

A sixth generation native Texan, Mark was born in Dallas and made his way to Austin via Houston. He grew up hunting and hiking with his outdoorsman father in places like the Big Bend country. Mark noticed a transition in his interest and relationship with the outdoors as he neared his fifties, becoming more focused on nature, conservation, and using his camera. He and his wife Dana took the Habitat Steward training course, and he began leading field hikes out of the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, meeting interesting people who kept talking about their experiences as Master Naturalists.
This spurred his desire to become a Capital Area Master Naturalist in 2009, allowing him to learn more about birds, ecology, and how everything fits together; ultimately putting him on his current path as a Board Member and volunteer through Travis Audubon.

I had the pleasure of speaking with Mark to learn more about his experience on the Board with Travis Audubon over the last six years and how he contributes to conservation and community engagement through the Blair Woods Nature Preserve.

Why did you get involved with Travis Audubon and what do you do as a Board member?

I have always had a real interest in birds, they’re so accessible. They’re interesting and it’s a lot of fun to work to identify them. I was in the Master Naturalist Program when I became aware of what an important conservation organization Travis Audubon is. The whole idea of Travis Audubon being a place where we can do conservation and restoration work. And advocacy, which is very important for birds, along with field trips, everything. So, to me, it’s just a great organization.

I was asked to join the board in 2015. I was interested because to me, Travis Audubon was the coming together of a lot of things. My dad was into conservation, and that got me interested in it as well. When I joined the board, I was helping out at Chaetura Canyon for Paul and Georgean Kyle through the Austin Master Naturalist group. We would go out there before COVID and do work projects and workdays helping them spread mulch, repairing trails and fences, or whatever it was they needed. I also helped do some fundraising for Chaetura Canyon. I think some of that is why Travis Audubon asked me to join the board. Travis Audubon has good people dedicated to the mission of birding conservation. I continue to serve on the Management Committee for Chaetura Canyon. When I joined the Board, we needed a member to be part of the activities at Blair Woods and liaison with staff, volunteers, and those interested in the preserve. So that became my main function.

What is Blair Woods Nature Preserve?

I think it’s important that Travis Audubon owns and maintains our preserves, so we show a real commitment to the idea of conserving and restoring habitat.

Blair Woods is unique, it was given to us by Dr. W. Frank Blair, an accomplished zoologist and first Director of the Brackenridge Field Lab, and his wife Fern, who was an avid birder. It is an urban preserve, not a wildlands preserve. It is situated in a part of town with a community that is underserved for places to get outdoors and enjoy access to nature.

Blair Woods has a rich history that goes all the way back to the 1830s before Texas became a state. There’s good evidence that a portion of Fort Colorado was located there. Coleman Springs is on the property, still running today. It’s just a small but important piece of Texas history. We’re trying to pull all these threads together of education, advocacy, and conservation on this amazing 10 acres. Before COVID, Blair Woods hosted “back to nature” activities for area school kids and families. That is all planned to resume in the future.

What would you say people can expect from Blair Woods when they go there?

Well, I think they’ll be surprised. When they’re driving down the very busy East Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard and they pull in that old gate and drive down that gravel road, get out of their car and walk about 25 feet into Blair Woods, and they suddenly realize they’re in a little oasis; a little quiet spot. They’re going to see a lot of interesting plants, birds, dragonflies, butterflies, and mushrooms. I think it’s going to be something that they don’t expect to walk into that close to downtown. We’ve laid down a mulch path throughout Blair Woods, which is made up of the shredded invasive species volunteers have pulled up, so nothing goes to waste. We have a long-term vision to install an ADA accessible trail and build an education center for Travis Audubon.

What do you think is an aspect of your volunteer experience that you’ve really enjoyed?

Definitely the people I’ve been able to work with. I met the most amazing people in the Naturalist program and through Travis Audubon. They’re fun, they’re thoughtful, they work hard. I’ve gotten the most out of the teamwork.
If you’re ever interested in volunteering with Travis Audubon, Mark says you don’t need to worry too much about having expert ID skills—he is still working on his—those will come and it’s just one aspect of being involved in the birding world because without conservation and advocacy, we’re not going to have anything to ID. Enroll in a Travis Audubon course about birds and get started. There are many opportunities for you to get involved in different ways!

Birdy Books to Gift for the Holidays

POSTED ON NOVEMBER 11, 2021  CATEGORIES: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

By Jeanette Larson

It’s hard to go wrong with a book by David Allen Sibley and What It’s Like to be a Bird is no exception. While the book can serve as a sort of field guide—he takes a close-up look at about 200 species—the main purpose is to answer our questions about birds. What do birds see? Why do some species walk while others hop? It’s a book to browse and to share with young birders. For kids I want to start with recommending 1 Love Birds by Jennifer Ward. I’m mentoring a 6-year-old birder and this is a book I’ll be giving him. Although it is not a field guide, Ward offers 52 activities for birders ages 4-8. Make a bird feast or build a bird house. Kids can think, wonder, wander, explore, create, and nurture wildlife, often without leaving their neighborhood. Arranged by season, there is something for every week.

In Texas we are fortunate to have a ton of species of birds and lots of birding hotspots. Waiting for a Warbler by Sneed B. Collard III follows two young children who watch their yard for birds. They see Cardinals, Red-bellied woodpeckers, White-eyed Vireos and more. But where are the warblers? Migrating across the Gulf of Mexico, the warblers have been flying for almost twenty-four hours when they land in Owen’s backyard. An author’s note explains that the story is based on the author’s trip to the Texas coast and includes tips for being a birder.

Although So You Want to Be an Owl by Jane Porter is a picture book, it is a good book for older readers (ages 6 to 10) because it has a lot of text. Professor Olaf Owl tells readers about everything owl—what they do, how they fly, what they hear, what they eat—all with cartoonish illustrations. We hear owls at night almost everywhere (although not all owls are night owls) so this is a delightful look at birds we rarely see.

Remember that books don’t require batteries, have no moving parts, and last for years. They can also be shared with other birders. Happy holidays!
What Makes a Birder?
Arman Moreno: Reclaiming One Yard at a Time

POSTED ON NOVEMBER 15, 2021 CATEGORIES: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

By John Bloomfield

Not every birder chases rarities far and wide, but nearly every birder with a yard is a back yard birder. And few have back yards like Arman Moreno. What makes a birder? For Arman, it’s a passion for bringing nature home.

* * *

Arman Moreno is one of Austin’s most prolific birders. His Travis County life list stands at 364 and counting, with a lot of counting still to be done. What you might not know is that he has seen more than 140 species from his home in Northwest Austin. That includes flyovers, but still, that’s a lot of birds.

When Arman and his wife bought their home in 2018, they knew they wanted to create an outdoor space that was both beautiful and nature friendly. Arman began reading. He talked with friends in the birding community. And slowly he put together a plan.

It has been a labor of love.

“Lots of people are planting native as a way to reduce water usage and in doing so are creating bird-friendly, native habitat. But getting started can be daunting,” Arman says. “How do you start? What are the right kinds of plants for my yard? And where in the yard should I be planting them?”

Austin is fortunate to have many great resources to help people get started with native plants. There’s the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. The Austin Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas. Many local nurseries also have experts in native plants.

“Travis Audubon also has a great network of people who can give you good advice,” Arman notes, “and if you are lucky, starter plants. Several close friends and fellow birders gave me tons of small natives when I started. A native plant exchange program would be a great way to spread natives while motivating others to convert portions of their yard into wildlife-friendly habitat.”

Arman describes how he and his wife got started.

Part of Arman’s backyard in which turf was removed for planting native shrubs. Photo courtesy of Arman Moreno.
“We spent the first few months figuring out the lay of the land,” he explains. “Where does the sunlight hit, what are the shady areas, what plants work best in each of these environments – we didn’t want to just plant things and rely on trial and error, so we really did our homework.”

He adds: “One of the plants I really enjoy when I go out in nature is evergreen sumac, and I wanted it for the yard. It’s really hard to find, but we were fortunate that a local nursery specializing in natives had some, and they’re doing okay.” Other features include woody perennials and shrubs, including fragrant sumac, spicebush, Texas mountain laurel, milkweed and sea oats. He uses no pesticides and only organic fertilizers.

“One of the things we created was a native hedge along the fence line that would encourage songbirds and sparrows to feel safe and come into the yard,” he says. “Birds need to have a corridor to travel along as they move through different yards. We also made a mini pocket prairie with native grasses and wildflowers. It takes time and patience, but after three years it’s looking a lot better and attracting many pollinators and seed eaters.”

Arman grew up in Austin, went to Texas State University and now works as a project manager for Apple. “That wasn’t the intent when I started out,” he says. “Earlier in life I really wanted to work for the park service. So, the interest in nature was always there.”

He started birding about 15 years ago, and over time has become increasingly drawn to the correlation between birds and the habitats they need.

Arman’s back yard is compact, maybe just a tenth of an acre, but he says the size of the yard doesn’t really matter. “Any action you can take will have an impact,” he says, “whether it’s reducing your footprint, not having to mow and water all the time or just feeling better that you’re doing something for the environment.”

Arman is passionate about habitat loss, especially in booming areas like central Texas. He also believes you can reclaim habitat one yard at a time. It’s a philosophy espoused by University of Delaware Professor Douglas Tallamay, who advocates in books like Bringing Nature Home for creating home gardens that bridge the gaps between parks and preserves in providing habitat for native species.

Tallamay writes: “If we humans are capable of turning hundreds of millions of acres of rainforest into depleted grasslands, and extirpating millions of buffalo from the plains, and billions of passenger pigeons from the skies and cod from the North Atlantic, we are also capable of returning natives to our gardens.”

A popular misconception about nature-friendly back yards is that they are messy and overgrown. Arman says that doesn’t need to be the case.

“I think there’s a way for you to strike a balance between the formal and informal look,” he says, “like having certain areas that look more natural, interspersed with more formal features. We’ve tried to strike that balance in our yard, figuring out what looks nice but is also beneficial to wildlife.”

Some of the more interesting birds to visit his yard are Bullock’s Oriole, Black-headed Grosbeak, Scarlet Tanager and more than 20 warbler species, including MacGillivray’s. They have also seen dozens of different butterflies and dragonflies.
“In all of this effort,” he says, “you can see you are having an impact, not only for your own enjoyment but for the real satisfaction of knowing that you’re making a difference. These critters are in our yard because we’re making space for them to forage and to live.”

Arman recommends the following resources for those interested in creating nature-friendly yards:


**Attracting Birds, Butterflies and other Backyard Wildlife** by David Mizejewski, Design Originals, 1st edition (January 2004)

**Attracting Songbirds to Your Backyard** by Sally Roth, Rodale Books; 1st edition (May 2012)

**Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center: Native Plants of North America:** Comprehensive online native plant database

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**Steve Scott, Friend of Travis Audubon, Passed Away November 9th**

**POSTED ON NOVEMBER 16, 2021 CATEGORIES: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME**

We are deeply saddened to report the passing of Steve Scott, a selfless and important supporter of Travis Audubon. He died on November 9 after a long battle with heart and kidney disease. Steve was the brother of Valarie Scott Bristol, a former president of the TAS Board of Directors.

In the mid 1970s, Steve and two friends, John Bernardoni and Chuck Eckerman, co-founded the successful effort to save and renovate Austin’s historic Paramount Theater on Congress Avenue. That renovation jump-started Austin’s downtown revitalization which continues today.

Steve and Judy, his wife of 45+ years, had their own real estate agency in Austin for decades, assisting many families to find just the right home. They used that expertise on behalf of Travis Audubon in recent years, working countless hours to assist in the purchase of six lots to add to Travis Audubon’s Chaetura Canyon Sanctuary. These acquisitions protected the water quality in the sanctuary and expanded its boundaries to better protect important bird habitat. They donated their time and expertise and greatly assisted with the closing process. Travis Audubon is very grateful for those efforts. Paul and Georgean Kyle, stewards of Chaetura Canyon, recently honored Steve and Judy with the gift of one of Georgean’s beautiful art works (see above picture).

We are very grateful for all that Steve did for Chaetura Canyon. Travis Audubon will miss him.
Virginia Rose’s Tips and Tricks for Birding in a Manual Wheelchair

POSTED ON DECEMBER 6, 2021  CATEGORIES: SIGNAL SMOKE HOME

Based on Real Life!

By: Virginia Rose,
Founder of Birdability and Travis Audubon
Board Member

1. Allow yourself more time than you think you will EVER need...famous last words!

2. Have a backpack big enough to carry a coffee mug, water bottle, insect repellent, sunscreen, field guide, bandana, wallet, gloves, an apple. Be sure the backpack isn’t so heavy that it pulls you over backward! Yeah...don’t ask. I use a Quickie Backpack for Sunrise, size small. Super durable and spacious. Available at various locations.

3. Attach a Quickie front pouch to your chair to hang under your knees to carry keys (two sets just in case) chapstick, pens, phone, bandaids, rubber bands, Swiss army knife, extra glasses, field battery, snacks.

4. Tubeless back tires eliminate the chance of flats in the field on a rough trail in 100 degrees trying to remain cool, calm and collected, but...I wouldn’t know anything about that!

5. Wider casters (front tires) help to manage more difficult surfaces.

6. Straps placed behind (and/or in front of) legs keep feet on the footplate. You don’t want to miss the bird fussing with your feet!

7. Go on or off sidewalks at a 90-degree angle (perpendicular) to avoid getting stuck.

8. If you can do and hold a wheelie, it helps to get through short sections of grass, mulch, and other tough surfaces. If you need help, ask someone to just help you manage the chair in a wheelie. Be sure you don’t go over backwards. Once I went over in very tall reedy grass with a little shriek; the tips of my shoes were all you could see of me!

9. Set a brake whenever you stop, THEN get on the bird! Otherwise, sure, I got the bird, but wound up halfway in the nearby creek!

10. Don’t be afraid to say kindly, “Excuse me,” and make your way to the front. Don’t take offense if people are oblivious. Just help them learn...and get yourself on the bird!

11. If you get stuck, don’t be afraid to ask for help.

12. Use gloves to save your hands if the wheeling is rough. I wear Rim Sports weight lifting gloves. www.rimsportsgear.com or 1 800-656-6817.

13. Keep checking the path in front of you. An acorn, stick, small rock or pecan shell can stop you in your tracks and keep you from getting the bird!!

14. If a bird blind is full, my advice is to enter, make your presence known, and if no one makes a move to make room, then exit and wait a few minutes outside. Watch for people to exit the blind and re-enter. At that point I would expect some people would exit to make room. If they do not, try to make your way to an accessible viewing window. If benches need to be moved and no one offers, ask.

15. If you encounter a gate that requires some maneuvering, and you can’t do it alone, ask for help.

16. If you encounter one small step and can’t do it alone, have someone help you. More than one step may be asking too much, depending.

17. To keep from chasing a hat on a windy day, I have a 24” cord with an alligator clip on either end; one goes on the hat and the other is on my shirt.
A Tale of Two Prairies

By John Bloomfield

Fall mornings are made for this. The sun burning through the clouds after an evening rain, the wind gently blowing the tall grasses, a Cooper’s Hawk flying past to foretell good things to come.

In late October, a team from Travis Audubon – Executive Director Nicole Netherton plus volunteers John Bloomfield, Bill Reiner and Jane Tillman – were invited by Matt McCaw, Land Management Program Manager, Austin Parks and Recreation Department and Park Ranger Patrick Chaiken to tour the Decker Tallgrass Prairie Preserve and the Louis René Barrera Indiangrass Wildlife Sanctuary.

Both of these sites are located near Walter E. Long Lake and are closed to the public except for special events such as pre-approved birding walks and, at the Indiangrass location, stewardship opportunities such as volunteer workdays.

We were there to discuss potential stewardship opportunities as well as ways to raise awareness of these hidden gems of the Austin parks system. The sites are very different. Parts of Indiangrass look like pure prairie, rolling grasslands dotted with wildflowers sloping down toward the lake. The preserve was set aside to help preserve and restore Blackland Prairie habitat, and according to Bill, “shows what can happen with some fairly intense management.”

In 2019, Indiangrass was renamed in honor of the late Louis René Barrera, a tireless conservation advocate and former preserve manager for the City of Austin.

Large-scale restoration activities at Decker are just beginning. Poking through overgrowth choked with invasives, Jane pointed out “impressive stands of Tropical Sage and other plants of note, including Maximilian sunflower, frostweed, camphorweed, bluestem and Southwestern bristlegrass” as well pockets of Indiangrass that foreshadow what may be possible with a sustained restoration effort.

“Prairies are one of the most threatened ecosystems in the world,” says Travis Audubon Executive Director Nicole Netherton. “Travis Audubon hopes to partner in future restoration projects at Decker to create another prairie success story in our community.”

Travis Audubon has conducted field trips at the Barrera site in the past. In January 2020, Park Ranger Owen Moorhead led a group in search of wintering sparrows and raptors. On our visit we were enchanted by an unexpected Common Raven as well as Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk and several Crested Caracaras cavorting overhead.

Currently, Austin park rangers are preparing for their annual grassland bird surveys at Barrera and are looking for volunteers to help lead them. The surveys last from 7:45 a.m. until 10:00 or 11:00 and are carried out once a month in December, January, and February. Our first survey was held on December 5.

Experience identifying sparrows and other wintering birds is helpful but definitely not mandatory, according to Owen.

You can read more about the survey protocol [here](#), and you can email Owen at [owen.moorhead@austintexas.gov](mailto:owen.moorhead@austintexas.gov) for more information or to sign up.

*Photos provided by Bill Reiner.*