



Signal Smoke

The Newsletter of Travis Audubon * VOL. 70, NO. 6 Nov./Dec. 2022



A Note

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Hello Travis Audubon friends and members,

Sometimes a book resonates more the second time one reads it. I'm rereading John Graves' *Goodbye to a River*, a book I first read 40 years ago, and can't quit thinking about this passage:

There is a pessimism about land which, after it has been with you a long time, becomes merely factual. Men increase; country suffers. Though I sign up with organizations that oppose the process, I sign without great hope...Islands of wildlife and native flora may be saved, as they should be, but the big, sloppy, rich, teeming spraddle will go. It always has.

As the oldest environmental organization in Central Texas, Travis Audubon (TAS) has been opposing the process for 70 years, and continues today. We have saved three islands of native flora – Baker Sanctuary, Chaetura Canyon, and Blair Woods – and are committed to assuring that birds will always have those places in which to breed, raise their families, and just be.

I confess that sometimes, like Graves, I'm pessimistic, like when I see bulldozers destroying another patch of Hill Country to make way for another subdivision. But I also have hope and pride when organizations like TAS step up and make their voices heard on issues that impact wildlife. For instance, TAS member Valerie Bristol, as a Travis County Commissioner in 1996, played a vital role in creating the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP). And Paul and Georgean Kyle graciously gifted their bird sanctuary, Chaetura Canyon, to TAS in 2006.

Although maybe not as visible as our field trips and education programs, but just as important, is the work our Advocacy Committee, chaired by John Bloomfield, does to identify and address issues in our community that pose threats to birds and their habitats. Earlier this year for instance, TAS appeared before the Austin Environmental Commission and City Council to oppose a massive commercial and residential project, including a 20,000-seat amphitheater, proposed to be built much too close to BCP lands. Just in the past few weeks, we appeared again before Council to argue for bird friendly design for the proposed development at the former Statesman property. We have appeared before the Planning Commission and Council to oppose a zoning request that would have allowed overdevelopment next door to Blair Woods, and we have opposed similar developments that would have harmed Circle Acres Preserve. We have met with and urged Tesla to incorporate bird friendly landscaping at their East Austin facility and have joined with PODER (People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources) and others to oppose Tesla's expansion that could threaten the Colorado River.

TAS will continue to stand up and speak out in support of wildlife and their habitat, and we're glad you're with us.



Chris Gunter
President, Travis Audubon Society

People

AT TRAVIS AUDUBON

Staff

Executive Director
Land Manager and Educator
Program Manager
Development Manager
Operations and Finance Coordinator
Program Coordinator
Design Director & Website Producer

Nicole Netherton
Chris Murray
Caley Zuzula
Cheyenne Moore
Annemarie Read
Teresa Johnson
Nora Chovanec

Committees

Advocacy
Baker Team
Blair Woods Core Team
Chaetura Canyon Management

Chimney Swifts
Commons Ford

Field Trip
Hornsby Bend
*Inclusion, Diversity, Equity,
and Access (IDEA)*
Memberships and Outreach
Purple Martins
Youth

John Bloomfield
Chris Murray
Mark Wilson
Paul Kyle
Georgean Kyle
Paul Kyle
Ellen Filtness
Michael Sims
Celeste Treadway
Eric Stager

(open)
Jane Tillman
Shelia Hargis
Mary Kay Sexton

Board of Directors

President Chris Gunter
Vice President Karen Bartoletti
Treasurer Celeste Treadway
Secretary John Bloomfield
Directors Jason Garcia
Chris Garza
Suzanne Kho
Richard Kostecke
Nitakuwa Barrett Orsak
Dennis Palafox
Flo Rice
Virginia Rose
Vidhya Sundar
Mark Wilson

Advisory Council

J. David Bamberger
Valarie Bristol
Frances Cerbins
Victor Emanuel
Sam Fason
Bryan Hale
Shelia Hargis
Karen Huber
Mary Kelly
Clifton Ladd
Susan Rieff
Andrew Sansom
Carter Smith

Upcoming Events

WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

November 2022

December 2022

Nov. 5

Beginners' Bird Walk

Austin Studio Tour: Birdy Graphics by Jason Garcia & Emily Galusha

Nov. 6

Birding at Roy G. Guerrero Park

Nov. 9

Wednesday Workdays at Blair Woods

"I Don't Do Gulls" Gulls Class 2022

Nov. 10

Plant and Bird Walk at Laguna Gloria

Birds in the Landscape at the Wildflower Center

Nov. 12

Young Birders Club: Barkley Meadows Park

Morning Canyon Crawl at Chaetura Canyon

Austin's 2022 Catio Tour

Nov. 13

Bird Walk at Joshua Springs Park and Preserve with Bexar Audubon

Austin Studio Tour: Birdy Graphics by Jason Garcia & Emily Galusha

Nov. 16

Reimers Ranch Park Wild Weekday Bird Walk

Nov. 18

Birding at Northwest Park

Nov. 19

Fall Migration Celebration

Blair Woods Restoration Day

Dec. 3

Beginners' Bird Walk

Young Birders Club: Hornsby Bend

Dec. 10

Birding at Northwest Park

Dec. 18

Let's Go Birding Together

Dec. 21

Reimers Ranch Park Wild Weekday Bird Walk



Thank You

TO OUR BUSINESS PARTNERS



Updates

FROM THE SIGNAL SMOKE BLOG

Review: “This is a Book for People Who Love Birds”, by Danielle Belleny

SEPTEMBER 1, 2022



This charmingly illustrated, travel-size book introduces readers to both birds and birding, including birds’ evolutionary history, anatomy, and behaviors and a substantial list of North American species and where to find them. For a novice birder or bird enthusiast, this little book is full of interesting information. The language is easy to understand, and many tidbits leave you curious to learn more (not to mention, upping your game at any potential bird trivia events!).

Author Danielle Belleny embeds a humorous voice throughout her writing, evoking the fondness many often feel when listening to their favorite teacher go on passionate rants. This isn’t a dry encyclopedic inventory of birds – this is an interpretive guide with vivid descriptions of the natural history and

behaviors of birds, as well as insightful observations into the world of birdwatching. You’ll no doubt enjoy imagining the clumsy Tufted Puffins “come in for a crash landing” at the end of a flight or picturing the variety of twig-related mating rituals displayed by White Ibises. You might learn something that gives you a sense of renewed appreciation for more familiar birds. For example, I’ve often wondered why Northern Cardinals seem to be one of the noisiest birds, and now I know they “call and sing frequently to keep in contact with their lifelong mate”. A heartwarming fact!

There is also plenty of food for thought, aspects of birding which you may not have considered before. I remember learning that male birds are the ones who sing to attract mates, and now I know female birds can sing as well, and their songs are drastically under-studied by comparison. And there is much work to be done in accurately and inclusively telling the history of birding, which typically tells the story of white European men from the last century and a half. However, the significance of birds in indigenous mythology, spiritual, and cultural beliefs, around the world, has existed for hundreds of years.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading “This is a Book for People Who Love Birds” and would recommend it as a perfect gift for any outdoor enthusiast, traveling bookworm, and both newbie and expert birders.

Let's hope this won't be Danielle's last project sharing her extensive knowledge and insight with the rest of us! [Purchase a copy](#) for yourself and find the author on Instagram [@bellzisbirding](#).

Youth Birding Camp a Success

SEPTEMBER 13, 2022

This summer, TAS hosted its first Youth Birding Camp. On June 8th, we welcomed 18 participants aged 8-12 to Richard Moya Park for a day of activities focused on birds & birdwatching. TAS staff and Youth Activities Committee volunteers arrived at the park bright and early to welcome attendees — each of whom received a folder with a “Birds of Central Texas” quick-reference guide and other information for them to keep for that day's (and future) birding adventures.



The program included opening icebreakers and bird charades, led by Mary Kay Sexton; a talk on what a bird is and why birds matter, led by John Bloomfield, and practice using binoculars; after which we ventured out on small-group bird walks across the park.

Highlights of the bird walks included: good looks at several Eastern Bluebirds, Yellow-Billed Cuckoo, Swainson's and Red-Tailed Hawks, and a surprise Zone-Tailed Hawk flyover! In total, we spotted more than 35 species on our walks.



The “Migration Challenge” game, facilitated by Louise Ridlon and Anna Stalcup, put participants in the shoes of a bird undertaking a lengthy migration. During this journey they might encounter challenges (like a thunderstorm blowing them off course) or good fortune (landing in a peaceful backyard habitat with plentiful food, water, and shelter) — all determined by the roll of giant dice.

The afternoon featured a visit by Sky Kings Falconry, which gave us a chance to see up-close and learn about the Kookaburra, Harris Hawk, Barn Owl, Black Vulture and Aplomado Falcon. All the activity at our pavilion even brought in some curious Black Vultures to see what the excitement was about!



The camp concluded with a talk about what we learned that day and how we can protect birds. We received positive feedback on the camp and requests for additional camps and/or youth birding activities in the future. We hope to have the opportunity to host another camp next year!

Compiled by Lauren Wojcik.

Soaring at 70: Reflections by Georgan & Paul Kyle

POSTED ON SEPTEMBER 14, 2022



In this monthly feature, our members and friends have been invited to reflect on and celebrate Travis Audubon's 70 years.

We were born in Houston in 1950 and married on June 14, 1969. We grew up during the tumultuous 1960s: a formative time when folk music, anti-war protests, and counter-culture ideology influenced many in our generation. This was also the start of the modern environmental movement, and for us, when our strong ecological ethic was born.



In 1972, we accompanied friends to see their property in a new subdivision near Mansfield Dam and immediately fell in love with the Texas Hill Country. An agent offered us three contiguous lots for a staggering \$999 each and requested a deposit of \$75. We only had \$35, but our friends loaned us the balance. That is when we began our unimaginable journey. Three months later we quit our jobs in Houston, packed everything we owned into our Dodge van, moved to an apartment in Austin and found new jobs: Paul as a carpenter in Lakeway and Georgan as a data processor in Austin. Weekends were spent building the house with no electricity and using only hand tools. In 1975 we started Rootin' Ridge Toymakers where we manufactured and sold hand-crafted wooden toys for 40 years.



Our plan was to leave the property "as is", but we soon learned that management was necessary to improve diversity. We studied birds and the care of injured and orphaned creatures at the Austin Nature Center, and ultimately specialized in Chimney Swifts (*Chaetura pelagica*)-which became the namesake of the sanctuary.

Over twenty years we released more than 1,100 displaced nestlings back into the wild. In subsequent years, we published numerous articles and books to aid the conservation of this remarkable species and built more than 200 Chimney Swift Towers.



All income after expenses from our tiny toy business was used to purchase adjacent property, and by 2005 we had acquired 27 lots. We began to contemplate how it could be protected into the future. Travis Audubon readily accepted our offer of donating the property to be maintained as a sanctuary. On December 30, 2006, Chaetura Canyon Sanctuary was created. Under TAS, the sanctuary has expanded from the original eight acres to eleven.

Maintenance of Chaetura Canyon has been basically revenue-neutral due to donations and volunteer efforts by many dedicated supporters. In 2014, an Endowment Fund was initiated by a group of generous friends to maintain the sanctuary and support its future. We hope to grow this Endowment to carry

Chaetura Canyon and its many native residents safely and securely into the twenty-first century and beyond -and we are off to an amazing start!



We hope you'll consider [joining the effort](#) to secure the legacy of Chaetura Canyon. With your support, this magical place will be protected and sustained for many generations to enjoy.

By Georgean and Paul Kyle.

Variations on the Theme of Birding

OCTOBER 14, 2022

Seasons have come and gone since we got into birding. We have learned to attract birds using feeders, baths, and bird-loving native plants. We think we can recognize their calls, know where to look for them, and tell all-year ones from migrants. Still, birds surprise us with unpredictability and subtle changes in looks, calls, and behavior. Such variations sustain our interest in birding.

Birds vary in how they look, feed, take baths, move, and call. Northern Cardinal or House Finch expertly discards the husk when munching a seed. Downy Woodpecker, Carolina Chickadee, or Black-crested Titmouse, on the other hand, holds the seed with its legs, breaks it open by arduous persistent pecking, eats it, and repeats this process with the next seed. Blue Jays take a splashy bath, while the Carolina Wren takes a tiny dip. Red-bellied Woodpeckers have distinct gliding and vertical moves. When perching on our electric poles as usual, one's feathers flutter uncontrollably on a blustery cold day and another bends to preen itself, rendering different looks. Black Vulture typically perches on a rooftop, but one instead sits there like a duck. Carolina Wren makes a call we have never heard before.



Red-bellied Woodpecker.

Even all-year birds show behavioral variations. Northern Cardinals romantically court in spring, stay together in summer, but are by themselves in fall. White-winged Doves are absent one winter, but two dozen visit next winter. Too big to perch on our seed feeder, they forage on discarded seeds, but not in the fall. Red-shouldered Hawk worries me by resting on our patio oak for four hours, but eventually takes flight much to my relief. A juvenile one takes a bath, a first sight. Carolina Wren snacks on a worm infesting our roses. A dozen Common Grackles hop between trees calling for an hour once, but sometimes just one comes by – is it lost? Blue Jay and White-winged Dove sip together at our bath, unlike their past feisty skirmish over it. The usually boisterous Northern Mockingbird perches quietly one fall morning.



Red-shouldered hawk.

Unpredictable migrant sights are another variation. Six Ruby-throated Hummingbirds don't compete but simultaneously sip from our nectar feeder. Cedar Waxwing and American Goldfinch cheer us up during a winter freeze power outage. Numerous Chipping Sparrows crowd our seed feeder. Dark-eyed Juncos forage near our roses. Northern Parula hops on our patio oak. Like clockwork, Black-chinned Hummingbirds disappear when Ruby-throated ones arrive in fall. Baltimore Oriole visits after two years and this time sips from our nectar feeders. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, usually found in water-based habitats, surprise us one morning. Eastern Phoebe comes by with its distinct flapping tail. We wonder which migrating Warblers we would spot.



Baltimore Oriole.

When we observe birds, we also watch garden friends such as armadillos, rabbits, foxes, and pollinators, and even notice a green anole ignoring a Ruby-throated Hummingbird shooing it away from its nectar food source. This varied wildlife inspires us to grow plants to nurture them. Birds thus foster an expansive and enriching nature experience.



Black-throated Green Warbler.

Composed by Jaya Ramanathan. Reviewed by Sarita Yeola. Photos courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.

Volunteer Spotlight: Chris Gunter

OCTOBER 19, 2022



By Alexis Puchek

Chris was born in San Marcos, Texas and moved to Austin when he was just six months old; he's lived in our capital city his entire life – 67 years strong. Chris worked as a practicing attorney for 40 years before retiring two years ago. He has many interests, including, of course, birding, as well as reading, hunting, fishing, and spending time with his family.

Chris bought his first set of binoculars in 1982 and has been birding ever since. He branched

out from backyard birding after he read [Stephen Harrigan's *Jacob's Well*](#) which sparked a strong interest in Chris to pay closer attention to the natural surroundings in and around Austin. While he's been outdoors most of his life, Chris really started to get more serious about birding in the last 10-15 years, taking classes and connecting with Travis Audubon.

Tell us about how you got connected with Travis Audubon.

Although Chris has been a member of Travis Audubon for over 30 years, his volunteering began at [Wild Basin](#) about 20 years ago when an opportunity came up to become a trail guide. He went through the Wild Basin training program and started leading walks out there. Chris became a regular volunteer and was leading walks every month until the program faded out. After his time at Wild Basin, Chris began spending time at [Commons Ford Ranch Park](#), including participating in Travis Audubon walks.

One day, one of the Commons Ford committee members, Shelia Hargis, asked Chris if he would be interested in joining the committee and leading field trips there. Thus began his volunteer work with Travis Audubon. He is also part of [Travis Audubon's speaker's bureau](#) and enjoys giving talks to different community groups about birds.

Chris became a Master Naturalist in 2013 and went through the [Master Birder program at Travis Audubon](#) in 2017 to build a bit more of a formal education in ecology. While not a requirement, it was a great way for him to build stronger ties to an organization he had been so closely connected to. The Master Birder program helped introduce Chris to the broader Travis Audubon community.

Why is volunteering important to you?

Chris just loves being around other people. Whether he's leading a field trip or not, he loves walking with other people, being outside, and the fact that he learns something new every single time he goes out. Volunteering for Chris is very gratifying – when somebody sees a bird they've never seen before and gets excited about it, it's so fulfilling for him.

He's so very proud to work with Travis Audubon and the wonderful crew of field trip leaders that volunteer with the organization.

You have an important role with Travis Audubon, Board President, can you tell us about it?

In 2019, Vice President of the Travis Audubon Board Karen Bartoletti asked Chris if he would be interested in serving on the Board. At this time, Chris had retired from his law practice and had really fallen in love with the mission of Travis Audubon. Not only would being on the Board give him an opportunity to give back at a leadership level, it would also present more volunteer opportunities for him to engage with. Chris became President of the Board this year.

Travis Audubon has an [incredible staff](#), including an Executive Director and five full-time employees, a [community of volunteers](#), and [four sanctuaries](#). Two of the Board's primary priorities are to 1) leverage their expertise to keep moving Travis Audubon forward; and 2) trust the staff and stay out of the way so they can do the things they do so, so well. As with any organization, especially a non-profit, complex considerations come up on a regular basis. The Board meets every two months to provide any needed help or guidance to the Executive Director and staff. They help maintain oversight of the budget and talk through policy decisions. When the Covid-19 pandemic first started to surface, for instance, the Board and the staff of Travis Audubon used their collective thinking to put into practice safety protocols, measures, and changes to programming.

Chris truly does just appreciate being a part of this driven organization. As Board President, he helps keep meetings on track through facilitation, but he really uses his role as an opportunity to bring everyone's voices to the table to build a shared understanding and directional guidance in the best ways to support the staff of Travis Audubon.

Whether you're just getting started or if you're interested in the Master Birder program, Chris encourages you to come out and spend some time with Travis Audubon, in any capacity.

It's an organization full of dedicated and passionate people that want to build a caring community. There's no need to feel like you need to meet some sort of 'requirement'. In fact, the majority of Travis Audubon members don't have a background in ecology – they're there for the love of the birds, for the interest in the environment, and for the opportunities to get connected and give back.

Soaring at 70: Reflections by Jane Lyons

OCTOBER 31, 2022

The first bird I remember seeing was when I was about 9 years old. It was a Ruby-throated Hummingbird that my father pointed out to me in our front yard on Tower Drive in Austin. He seemed fascinated by it, so of course I felt fascinated also. From then, as I explored our neighborhood and the local park, I noticed birds.

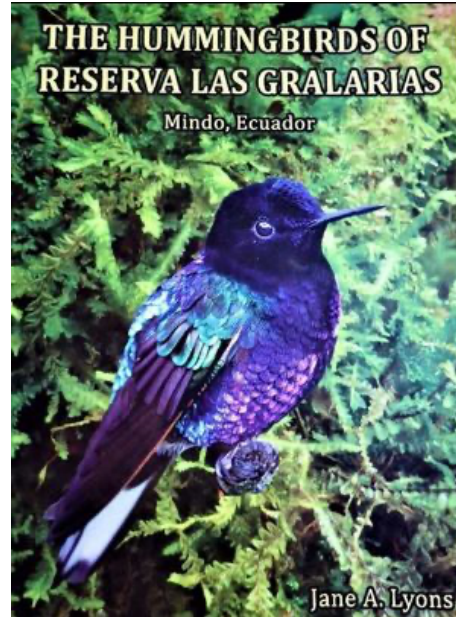
Fast forward some 20 years, as I just happened to be looking out the large back windows of my house, I heard a loud thud and saw something drop from the window. I went outside and saw a bird on the ground, seemingly stunned but with no obvious injuries. It was the strangest bird I had ever seen, and I really had no idea what it was. I felt like I had found a treasure. Thankfully I was eventually put in contact with Suzanne Maven of the wildlife rehab group in Austin, who then put me in touch with the 'bird people' of Travis Audubon and folks at the Natural Science Center. I was astonished to find out the bird was a Yellow-billed Cuckoo. It lived, but could not fly, and so I kept it and took care of it for years. That bird changed my life.

My lucky charm bird, Connie Cuckoo as she was named, caused me to buy bird books and binoculars and led me to lobby the Austin City Council to buy Steck Valley as a park instead of putting a road through it, which the Council agreed to do. That bird led me to become part of an amazing group of nature-loving people who are still lifelong friends. Several of them

are founding board members of my own foundation which is dedicated to bird and nature conservation in Ecuador.



In 1979 I began working at the Natural Science Center as their raptor specialist and went on to become the Wildlife Coordinator, Director, and construction manager for the new Austin Nature Center. During those same years as an active TAS member, I documented bird records, conducted annual Christmas Bird Counts from a canoe on the Colorado River and elsewhere in Travis County, served on the TAS Board, and was editor of Signal Smoke for 8 years. I led many birding trips for TAS and for the Nature Center, from Texas and Mexico to Central and South America. From there I went to work for National Audubon Society as coordinator for Texas and Latin America. We all worked hard together to help pass the Clean Air Act, the Wetlands Protection Act, and the Endangered Species Act. I was a member of the Balcones Habitat Conservation Plan Committee and studied and banded Black-capped Vireos. As part of my job for National Audubon, I went to Mexico to search for the Golden-cheeked Warbler (GCWA) in Chiapas. I wrote the official petition for the listing of the GCWA as an Endangered Species and was Co-Founder of Texas Partners in Flight. I eventually got a PhD from UT Austin in bird conservation in Latin America with field work in Venezuela and Argentina/Uruguay.



In 1998 I bought a small farm in Ecuador and established Reserva Las Gralarias which has grown to some 1500 acres of protected cloud forest habitat in the mid-elevation Andes. This is where I now live. All of this is because of Connie Cuckoo, with of course much help from Auduboners, and many other bird and nature enthusiasts across the world. I have had visitors to my private reserve from 40 countries. These are people who come to Ecuador and to my reserve just to see birds. There is a fraternity of folks worldwide that love birds enough to spend their lives and money protecting them, studying them, photographing them, watching them, and TAS has been a major part of that group for many decades.

How lucky we all are!

By Jane A. Lyons

Travis Audubon former Board member and founder of Reserva Las Gralarias.