



# *Signal Smoke*

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**The Newsletter of Travis Audubon \* VOL. 71, NO. 1 Jan/Feb. 2023**



# *A Note*

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Hello Travis Audubon friends and members,

As we end another year and look ahead to a new one, we are so grateful for your support and encouragement.

There has been continuing bad news about the decline in biodiversity in the last couple of months, but the work we do at Travis Audubon is making a difference for birds. It can be overwhelming to consider the scope of many of these problems, but I find it helpful to get down to ground level to see the impact Travis Audubon and other engaged birders are making.

For example, our Advocacy Committee recently engaged with City Council and some local developers regarding the so-called Statesman PUD, and we were able to agree to work together on innovative bird-friendly design features for the development. We hope this will be an example that other Austin developers will be inspired by—Austin should be leading in protecting our amazing biodiversity by embracing safe and smart development. And we're proud that TAS will be a part of these successes.

Another happy tale: Tiffany Kersten, one of our monthly speaker series, described her journey for her 2021 Big Year. Not only did she set a new record (726 species for a Lower 48 Big Year), she was able to inspire other women birders and gift them personal safety alarms on her travels. She is making a difference as an ambassador for birds and inspires us to do the same.

Finally, something as simple as participating in community science makes a difference for biodiversity and the future of birds. Christmas Bird Counts, Project Feederwatch, and even logging your weekly birdwalks on eBird help us better understand population trends over time. On a recent walk in my neighborhood park, a group of us patiently waited to get confirmation of a Brown Creeper in some pecans near a well-loved playground. This is a bird I have never seen in my neighborhood (and anecdotally is reported as less common in our area)—so we were delighted to report it on eBird! Paying attention is perhaps the first step in conservation.

We hope 2023 is full of more conservation successes and inspirational stories for all of us. Thank you again for your strong and generous support.

Happy birding,



Nicole Netherton  
Executive Director

# 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*

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Caley Zuzula  
Cheyenne Moore  
Annemarie Read  
Teresa Johnson  
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*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

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Clifton Ladd  
Susan Rieff  
Andrew Sansom  
Carter Smith



# Upcoming Events

WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

January 2023

February 2023

**Jan. 4**

Wednesday Workdays at Blair Woods

**Jan. 7**

Beginners' Bird Walk: Commons Ford

**Jan. 11**

Wednesday Workdays at Blair Woods

**Jan. 12**

Birds in the Landscape at the Wildflower Center

**Jan. 14**

Commons Ford Bird Walk

**Jan. 18**

Reimers Ranch Park Wild Weekday Bird Walk

Wednesday Workdays at Blair Woods

**Jan. 22**

Let's Go Birding Together

Ruffled Feathers Book Club Meeting

**Jan. 25**

Wednesday Workdays at Blair Woods

**Jan. 28**

Blair Woods Restoration Day

**Feb. 11**

Class: Purple Martin Workshop

Young Birders Club: Hornsby Bend

**Feb. 15**

Reimers Ranch Park Wild Weekday Bird Walk

**Feb. 16**

Speaker Series: Native Host Plants for Texas Moths  
with Jim and Lynne Weber

**Feb. 19**

Commons Ford Bird Walk

**Feb. 26**

Let's Go Birding Together





# Thank You

*We are grateful to all of our members and donors who have supported Travis Audubon in any capacity in 2021-2022. Special thanks to our Lifetime Members and Leadership Giving Circle*

## **Lifetime Members**

*Membership at \$1,500*

The Aeschbach Family  
Ross Bee  
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Ryan Runkle  
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Paul Wade  
The Wadehra Family  
Jordan Weingarten  
Isabel Welland  
The Wheeler Family  
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John Wilson  
The Yates Family

## **Leadership Giving Circle**

*These members support our critical efforts in education, conservation, and advocacy. Members of this highest giving category set an example by making an annual gift of \$1,500 or more – over and above membership, celebration sponsorship, and Birdathon.*

Judith Bailey  
The Bloomfield Family  
Vera Bowen  
Elise Bright  
Frances and Oskar Cerbins  
Ann and Don Connell  
Stacia DeBill  
The Donovan Family  
Alice and Chris Gunter  
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Pam Smolen  
Holly Stewart  
Tom Taylor  
Robert and Lorna Terhune  
Jane Tillman and Mark Lyon  
Jo Wilson and Carol Bennett  
The Winkler Family

# **Thank You**

*We are grateful to all of our members and donors who have supported Travis Audubon in any capacity in 2022. Special thanks to our Wise Owl, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and Warbler Members.*

## **Wise Owl Sustaining Members**

*These members support Travis Audubon through a monthly donation of \$10 or more.*

Barbara Anderson  
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The Zess Family

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*Annual membership of \$500*

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*Annual membership of \$250*

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Alyss Behrend  
Shelly Botkin  
Cathleen Day  
Sand Nicole Douglas  
Christel Erickson-Collins  
Claire Field  
Steve Frank Hejl  
Joanna Hitchcock  
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Donna and Kent Jones  
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Martha T Roman  
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Louise D Smyth  
Kim Soechting  
Mark Stadtherr  
Sally Swisher  
Laura Tull  
Judy and Laurence Willcott  
Pat Yingst and Tony Parchman  
The Zinn Family

# Thank You

TO OUR BUSINESS PARTNERS



# Thank You

TO OUR 2022 VICTOR EMANUEL  
CONSERVATION AWARD CELEBRATION SPONSORS

**Great Horned Owl Sponsors**

Shield Ranch  
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**Great Blue Heron Sponsors**

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# *Thank You*

TO OUR 2022 VICTOR EMANUEL  
CONSERVATION AWARD CELEBRATION SPONSORS

*Great Horned Owl Sponsor*



**SHIELD RANCH**  
WILD FOR GOOD

*Ruby-throated Hummingbird Sponsors*



# Updates

FROM THE SIGNAL SMOKE BLOG

## In Remembrance of Bob Barth

NOVEMBER 2, 2022



Robert H. Barth was a long-time member of Travis Audubon Society (TAS). He died on September 26, 2022 and will be deeply missed and fondly remembered by hundreds of students, friends, colleagues, family and especially by his life-partner Noreen Damude.

Bob was, above all, a scientist. He was also a serious conservationist. For decades he was a well-known and very popular professor of Zoology (Entomology and Ornithology) at The University of Texas at Austin. He once remarked to me that his greatest honor was that in 2017, one of his students received a Nobel Prize\*, and Bob was invited to the Nobel Prize event. Very few people in the world can say that!

*\*“The remarkable similarity between the fruit fly and humans was also revealed by the work of the 2017 Nobel Laureates in Physiology or Medicine. Jeffrey C. Hall, Michael Rosbash, and Michael W. Young used Drosophila to uncover molecular mechanisms controlling the circadian rhythm. Their discoveries explain how living organisms synchronize their biological rhythm with the turning of the*

*Earth.” With a little help from our (insect) friends – NobelPrize.org*

Bob was an expert entomologist with numerous publications including the landmark book *The Invertebrate World*, published in 1982.

Bob was also an expert botanist and co-founder of the Austin Cactus and Succulent Society that helped establish drought-resilient gardens and landscapes throughout Central Texas.

I met Bob through TAS in the early 1980s when we both helped with documenting county-wide bird records. He served on the TAS Board of Directors and expended much energy over many years to help purchase more land for the Golden-cheeked Warbler. Bob joins Ed Kutac and Marjorie and Red Adams as huge contributors to the TAS bird data base, as well as constant mentors and teachers to us all.

I took Bob’s ornithology course at UT and, thanks to much assistance from Bob’s longtime friend and colleague Bret Whitney, we began to offer TAS birding tours to see neotropical species beyond the US borders. I spoke Spanish, so I helped set up the tours. We co-led TAS birding tours and field trips throughout Mexico, Central, and northern South America.

Bob was also my PhD supervising professor, assisting in all aspects of my work, even managing to acquire Ant Thrush specimens from the vertebrate collections of his alma mater (Harvard University) and successfully sending them to my field site in Venezuela.

His years of retirement were spent primarily among his friends and colleagues while tending his extensive and famous succulent and cactus gardens in Austin.

A memorial service for Bob is being planned to be held at the Austin Botanical Garden probably in the spring 2023.

Bob leaves behind a tremendous list of achievements for science and the natural world. We will miss him, his knowledge, his dedication, and his wry sense of humor.

*By Jane A. Lyons*

## Native American History in East Austin

NOVEMBER 2, 2022



*Header Image: Archaeological survey at Blair Woods.*

November is Native American Heritage Month, and there is much rich Indigenous history and culture to celebrate in Central Texas. Travis Audubon has been lucky enough to have some excellent teachers in this field, and we've recently been exploring the importance of Native American communities and influence around the area of Blair Woods on East MLK.

First, in 2020 we partnered with Sergio and Melinda Iruegas of GTI Environmental, as well as Steven Gonzales, Executive Director of El Camino Real de los Tejas, on an archival and archaeological study near the area of Blair Woods where Fort Colorado was located from 1836-1838. The Centennial Marker on MLK claims that the Fort was built to protect the Anglo colonizers from the “savage Indians,” and this racist narrative has been passed on for almost 200 years. But the Iruegas’s research illuminates a more complex story. The Fort was built near Coleman Springs, and even today you can see the swale that people have been creating/ following for hundreds of years to get to the water. The Camino Real de los Tejas is also nearby, and the way to the Springs and the Fort formed an ancillary path known by the Coahuilteicans, Sana, Apache, Comanche, Waco and other peoples in the area. And we know that Indigenous people interacted with Anglo, Mexican, and Spanish colonizers in many ways that were not about conflict and violence. We can easily imagine and document activities related to commerce, trade, language exchange, and more. And all of this in what is now East Austin!



*Location of Fort Colorado and Coleman Spring. Map created by Amy Heath.*

Second, in 2021 we partnered with scholar, geographer, and member of the Caddo Nation Amy Heath on a story map project that explored even more connections between local tribes and the landscape in Austin.



We now know a lot about Indigenous people’s use and understanding of El Camino Real de Los Texas, and Blair Woods fits into this story. This project, called [To Relate and available online](#), helps explore more of this unique history of cultural collaboration and the geographic evidence we can see of it today. You can also [watch a documentary](#) created for the project—the section on Blair Woods starts at about 26 minutes in.



*Artifact found at Blair Woods.*

And what does the future hold? We continue to reach out to historians and experts in Native American culture to be sure we are including these stories and voices in the signs, interpretation, and re-contextualizing information we are planning at Blair Woods. We are working with the National Park Service to become connected with the El Camino National Historic Trail. And in everything we do at the Preserve, we wish to honor those original stewards of the land who cared for the trees and the Springs long before

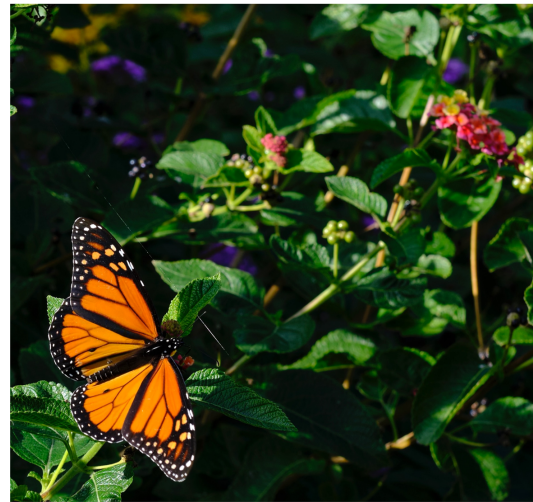
Travis Audubon, or Dr. and Mrs. Blair, or any of us. We will continue to honor this land and the stories of these ancestors who first cared for it.

*By Nicole Netherton, Executive Director.*

## Learning Through Birding

NOVEMBER 14, 2022

Birding provides opportunities to hone our artistic and scientific skills. Learning the scientific connection between flora and fauna helps us create habitats that are critical for the survival of birds. Science also helps us understand the behavior of birds. Art inspired by nature exists historically and in modern times and enables sharing of nature experiences.



*Monarch Butterfly, courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

The Audubon Society and park organizations help us learn how to create a habitat for birds using native plants. We learn that Lantanas and Vitex attract not only birds like the Black-chinned and Ruby-throated Hummingbird but also pollinators such as the endangered Monarch butterflies.

These keep us company during the lull between the departure of fall migrants and the arrival of winter ones.

We learn about birds by just observing them or using information from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Audubon Society. A Northern Mockingbird stands on one foot and made us worry it could be hurt until we find out it does so to conserve heat. A Ruby-throated Hummingbird's red gorget becomes visible only when light falls on it at a certain angle. A Carolina Chickadee perches at our bath for almost half an hour, not taking a single sip, just mourning the fatal loss of a friend to a raptor, doing so multiple times, a day after we notice several feathers of the victim strewn in our backyard.



*Northern Mockingbird, courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

Many birders take photos to identify birds using apps such as [Merlin Bird ID](#). Birds fly away if we get too close to them, so a zoom lens works best as it allows us to keep a distance and still take sharp pictures. Butterflies on the other hand are unperturbed when we stand right next to them to take photos, but they constantly flutter so it is hard to get a sharp photo of many of them feasting simultaneously on

a single plant. Birders also learn processing tools to crop photos to highlight key aspects and adjust for inadequate light. Action photography of birds requires patience, skill, and knowing the perfect time to take a photo such as Ospreys being more likely to catch a fish at low tide.



*Osprey, courtesy of Sarita Yeola.*

Birders combine their art and nature interests in surprising ways such as creating picturesque bird designs using Rangoli, an art form that uses colorful powders from various materials. Others write blogs that foster creative writing by challenging them to define a topic and write about it concisely, so the reader finds it both fun and interesting. I wonder what art genres other birders have explored.



*Crimson-backed Sunbird, courtesy of Vidhya Sundar.*

Numerous artists have been inspired by nature. Think of your favorite melodious music that sounds like bird calls, picturesque paintings of gardens and flowers, elegant dances choreographed to bird movements, spectacular photographs taken in various nature spots, vivid writing that conveys the beauty of nature using just words, sculptures, and petroglyphs. Such art inspires us to seek and enjoy experiences they depict, learn about their science, nurture, and protect them, and even create our own art about them.

*By Jaya Ramanathan. Reviewed by Sarita Yeola.*

## Birding Away Winter

DECEMBER 2, 2022

Winter is cloudy, cold, and windy with sunny days sprinkled in. When we first started birding, we wondered if birds reside here in winter. We realized we can spot both all-year residents and winter migrants in parks, and even in our backyard if we make it bird friendly.



*Ruby-crowned Kinglet*

Freeman Park recently welcomed us with gorgeous yellow fall colors and a carpeted trail of fallen yellow leaves. I stopped often to look and listen for birds, spotted a dozen using binoculars, but their constant movement challenged my quest to photograph them. After visiting the gushing Brushy Creek, I heard a bird call, found it hopping continuously, stood right next to it for a while, and photographed it, a beautiful experience. Merlin BirdID identified it as Ruby-crowned Kinglet, a perfect prize. Other winter migrants we spotted include Golden-crowned Kinglets, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Eastern Phoebe, and American Goldfinch.



*Red-breasted Nuthatch*

Our backyard is bird friendly – even a brief visit by birds makes us act like empty nester parents.



Our feeders with different seed types cater to varied tastes of winter migrants and minimize competition. Chipping Sparrows crowd at our feeder, and skirmish when it is almost empty. Pine Siskin visits too, but Red-breasted Nuthatch is the winner. One explores all around and below the feeder. Another enjoys its gentle sway in the wind. They are picky, discard seeds they don't like, take their favorite one to our oak, patiently peck it open to remove the husk, and enjoy the treat. Once settled, they leisurely preen themselves, and challenge competitors.



*Hermit Thrush*

Birds welcome our baths even in winter. An all-year Blue Jay bravely takes a splashy bath, to fend off dreariness?

A migrant Hermit Thrush perches during a drizzle, not perturbed by rain falling gently in the bath, watches all around, calls twice, sips once, and eventually flies away. Dark-eyed Juncos forage for bugs under our shrubs. Birds love our oaks that house insects and produce acorns.



*Pine Siskin*

Backyard birds kept us company during the pandemic's winter freeze. It started with icy rain which lasted longer than the usual day or two. Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers, and fluttering Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets explored our icy trees in the chilly air. More snow fell, and we were homebound and disconnected without power and heat for a couple of days, camping inside our home, and preserving food outside. First sights of Hairy Woodpecker, American Goldfinch, and Cedar Waxwing brought cheer. Birds perched nonchalantly on ice and snow-coated trees. Carolina Wren foraged in oak trunks, Pine Siskin in the nook near our snow-covered patio. Our gnarly oak's ice and snow laden branches drooped low to appear like shrubs near which Northern Cardinals explored the snow. Overall, we were far luckier than others who unfortunately experienced prolonged hardship.



*Northern Cardinal*

Birds migrate long distances, and need habitats to survive, both along the way and where they winter. Backyards welcoming birds create a bird friendly neighborhood. Parks also serve as a refuge for birds. These habitats make “birding away winter” a delightful experience.

*By Jaya Ramanathan. Reviewed by Sarita Yeola. Photos courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

## Soaring at 70: Reflections with Chris Murray

DECEMBER 2, 2022



In the spring of 2010, Julie and I moved our family out to Baker Sanctuary from our home in south Austin. At the time, our eldest son was three years old and his brother, eighteen months. Twelve years later, we are still at the Sanctuary and in a new residence, but memories of the original housing still loom large. I can still clearly recall the day when we met with then-TAS president, Valarie Bristol, and Executive Director, Nancy Manning, at the Sanctuary following my initial interview for the Steward position. While I didn't know it at the time, they intended to offer me the job as Sanctuary Steward but were concerned that when Julie and I saw the old, single-wide manufactured home that would be our new residence, we would bolt. So, instead, we initially met at Baker Cabin in an expansive field of what

I would later learn was Malta Star-thistle, a non-native invasive plant that would haunt my dreams over the next eight years. They spoke about the job, the beauty and importance of the Sanctuary, and the history of TAS with the Bakers. Finally, they offered the position and when they had a tentative 'yes', only then did we go to the other side of the road to see the 'trailer' and where we would live.



For those who never witnessed the trailer firsthand, it was located just inside the 12219 gate, underneath two ancient, gnarled Plateau Live Oaks, one of which we would later learn was inhabited by a grumpy Eastern Screech Owl who we named Jeebus. The trailer was flanked by several large Texas Redbud trees on one side and a huge Yaupon on the other whose abundant fruit was ferociously guarded by a bumptious Northern Mockingbird. The setting was idyllic. Unfortunately, the exterior of the trailer gave the impression, not of a preserve headquarters, but more of a methamphetamine lab. The windows were small and few, the siding and roof were composed of weathered, patched tin, and the trellis skirt a mere ghost of its former plastic, off-white grandeur. Since we met in Hawaii, Julie and I had lived in our share of dubious housing as we worked in various field biology positions (tents in a snowbank, moldy field stations, a Hanta virus-infested shed, Killeen, Navy barracks, and more).

So we were not easily dissuaded, but the difference this time was that we would also be choosing for our children, which made the decision a bit more complicated.

I remember glancing back at Valarie and Nancy when we were on the back porch and about to open the trailer door for the first time, they shared a look that I read as, “well, this is it. I hope they don’t run!” It is true what they say, scents have a strong grasp on the amygdala and memories. I can still vividly remember the smell of the trailer to this day. It had been shuttered for several months and when the door creaked open, a heated plug-in air freshener scent, possibly Febreze Excelsior, rushed out like the last dying, berry-infused gasp of some denizen of a flowery crypt. It was like a punch in the guts, and it made our eyes water. When our vision cleared of tears and adjusted to the gloomy interior, we were simultaneously intrigued and repulsed by the electric blue shag carpet, which had seen better days back in the Reagan administration, and how it set off the grayish, ‘Country Living’ themed wallpaper. The wallpaper had strands of vines, flowers, and maybe even barbed wire. (A shout out at this point to my high school English teacher, Mr. Grodus, for teaching *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Gilman, for I knew if that wallpaper did not go, I would inevitably scratch and probe it until I succumbed in madness to its berry-scented embrace. As far as I knew, that may have been the fate of the prior Steward.)

While these thoughts bounced about my head, I also kept a close watch on Julie because she would ultimately make the call. Valarie and Nancy watched us, I watched Julie, and Julie watched her footing in the menacing blue shag carpet as the minutes silently ticked off.



Little was said as we quickly toured the remainder of the trailer and retreated to the yard to catch our breath. If I recall correctly, we told Valarie and Nancy we would have to think about it.

Over the next week, we decided to make the move, under the condition that we could renovate the trailer and dispose of the carpet and the wallpaper. It turned out to be an excellent decision because over the next eight years, we made the trailer our home and the epicenter for countless memories as the boys grew up and we settled into life at the Sanctuary. After the new residence was built on the other side of Lime Creek Road, the trailer finally met its demise under the cold, indifferent claw of an excavator in February of 2020, but it had had a good run.



In its final years, the roof leaked, creeping black mold made in-roads into the bedrooms, the heater was condemned by an exasperated HVAC technician, and a menagerie of wood rats screeched and wrestled about in the crawlspace. Prior to its ultimate demise, we visited the trailer one last time as a family, reminisced, and, if a tear was not shed, some eyes were certainly damp, even without the Febreze Excelsior.

*By Chris Murray, Land Manager & Educator.*

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