



Signal Smoke

The Newsletter of Travis Audubon * VOL. 71, NO. 2 March/April 2023



A Note

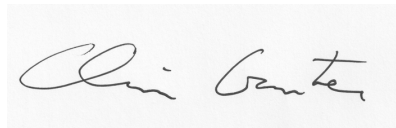
FROM THE PRESIDENT

Hello Travis Audubon friends and members,

Every year about now I head to Colorado Bend State Park, not to bird but to fish for white bass. Please don't misunderstand, Colorado Bend is an amazing place to bird, but the white bass begin their annual migration upstream in rivers and streams in Texas to spawn in shallow water when the days begin to grow longer...and they're *so* much fun to catch! So, a few days ago I found myself wading in the Colorado River on a beautiful Hill Country morning, trying to cast my fly just right in the hope of catching a fish. But try as I might to stay focused on what I was there to do, I couldn't help but hear the Carolina Wrens calling from the shoreline brush, and the wonderful call of their cousin, the Canyon Wren, cascading down from the cliffs. Yellow-rumped Warblers, Cardinals, Titmice and Chickadees were everywhere, while Ravens soared and croaked all day in the company of Black and Turkey Vultures. And I had to stop fishing momentarily as a Zone-tailed Hawk glided right over us! Of course, I couldn't help myself and had to be narrating to my fishing buddy all that was happening around us bird wise, interrupting his fishing and reverie.

As I reflected on the trip the next day, I realized how much of my birding happens while I'm doing something else, with no binoculars or spotting scope or bird guide anywhere around. Like during the recent ice storm when I noticed about a thousand Cedar Waxwings in the cedar elms in the H.E.B. parking lot, and of course I *had* to point them out to some poor woman pushing her shopping cart through the parking lot. I should probably be on one of the Progressive Insurance, "Don't be like your parents" commercials. Or like when I'm having lunch outside at Whole Foods with a friend and watching the grackles or monk parakeets out of the corner of my eye while trying to have a conversation at the same time with whoever I'm with. I always mean well when I occasionally interrupt who I'm with to point out a bird. But sadly, some people just don't find these things as entertaining as I do, and, in fact, some find me annoying, my wife included. After 37 years of marriage, you'd think I'd know better than to interrupt her to exclaim that a Pine Warbler just landed on our feeder as she's trying to tell me something important. Well, you'd be wrong.

It's not all my fault I'm this way. It's just that birding has become second nature for me. Dictionary.com says "second nature" means an "acquired habit or tendency in one's character that is so deeply ingrained as to appear automatic." Kind of like breathing, I suppose. I'll bet I'm not the only one around here like this.



Chris Gunter
President, Travis Audubon Society

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AT TRAVIS AUDUBON

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

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

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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
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(open)
Jane Tillman
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Upcoming Events

WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

March 2023

April 2023

March 1

Wednesday Workdays at Blair Woods

March 4

Beginners' Bird Walk: Camp Mabry

Young Birders Club: Commons Ford

March 8

Wednesday Workdays at Blair Woods

Class: Introduction to Woodpeckers

March 11

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Survey

March 15

Reimers Ranch Park Wild Weekday Bird Walk

March 16

Speaker Series: Falconry: A Modern Look at an Ancient Art with Hesper Fang

March 18

Cemetery Birding: Evergreen Cemetery

Young Birders Club: Mary Moore Searight Park

March 22

Wednesday Workdays at Blair Woods: Spring Clean!

Class: Empid Intensive 2023

March 26

Spring Nature Day at Blair Woods

April 1

Beginners' Bird Walk

April 8

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Survey

April 15

Commons Ford Bird Walk

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Walk

April 19

Reimers Ranch Park Wild Weekday Bird Walk

April 23

Young Birders Club: Hornsby Bend

April 29

Ecological Literacy Volunteer Day at Hornsby Bend



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Thank You

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Updates

FROM THE SIGNAL SMOKE BLOG

Thank You for Taking Action: Statesman Redevelopment

JANUARY 4, 2023



We wish to thank everyone who contacted the Austin city council to express opposition to plans for the redevelopment of the former Austin American-Statesman site situated on the south shore of Lady Bird Lake. Your collective voices made a difference.

Our primary concern with this project has been the huge potential for bird deaths likely to result from collisions with the several commercial and residential towers planned for the site, some of which are expected to be over 500 feet tall. Bird/building collisions are the second leading cause of bird fatalities in the U.S., the primary culprit being reflective glass. Endeavor Real Estate Group, the developers of the Statesman PUD, planned to ask the council to be allowed to use glass with higher reflectivity than that allowed by city ordinance. In our opinion this would have dramatically increased the risk of fatal collisions. And the fact that this project is adjacent to the Colorado River—a major migratory corridor—would have increased this risk even more.

It was with these concerns that Travis Audubon planned to appear before the city council on December 1st to oppose the request

to use the more reflective glass. We were surprised, however, when Endeavor reached out to us the night before and asked to meet with us before the meeting. We did so and were pleased when they announced they were withdrawing their request and would comply with the ordinance, using glass with no more than 20% reflectivity throughout the entire redevelopment. This was, of course, a win for the birds, but we were also very excited when Endeavor requested that we work with them and their architects moving forward to come up with other bird-friendly design features to be incorporated within the project.

We eagerly accepted their offer, and we look forward to working with them with the goal of creating a model that hopefully can set the standard for others to follow.

Chris Gunter
President, Travis Audubon Society

Remembering Dr. Pete Rose

JANUARY 25, 2023



By Mark Wilson.

Dr. Pete Rose, a friend of Travis Audubon, passed away this last December at the age of 87. In addition to being the father of our Board Member Virginia Rose, Dr. Rose contributed his expertise and time to deepen our understanding of the geology of our [Blair Woods](#) urban nature preserve and the historic Coleman Springs located there.

In the Fall of 2019, Dr. Rose contacted our Executive Director, Nicole Netherton. With a Ph.D. in Geology from the University of Texas, and 58 years as a professional geologist, he offered to visit and report on the geology of the preserve and springs. This included written reports, geological maps, and educational offerings, including precise locations for future interpretative signs regarding the hydrology of Coleman Springs. Here is an excerpt from an earlier TAS blog describing one of his walks:

“During an educational walk at the preserve Dr. Rose pointed out examples of the exposed river terrace deposits and the underlying clay formation. We examined an interesting ledge of a coarse conglomerate, looking much like concrete to the untrained eye, just north of the old springhouse. We also measured the depth and level of the springhouse well. All those present came away with a deeper understanding of the geological features and workings of Coleman Springs and the nature of the Quaternary aquifer that makes it possible.”

In the Summer of 2020, we were faced with a major housing development proposed on the preserve’s west property line. Travis Audubon turned to Dr. Rose and asked for help determining if this project posed any threat to the springs. His detailed letter helped us in our negotiations with the developer and contributed to the preservation of wetlands in the space between the project and Blair Woods.

Travis Audubon is greatly honored to have benefited from Dr. Rose’s expertise and efforts. Copies of his [Geological Reconnaissance of Blair Woods Tract](#) with

accompanying maps are available from Travis Audubon.

Blending Birding with Hiking

FEBRUARY 1, 2023



Photo: Canada Jay Pair, Mount Rainier National Park. Courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.

By Jaya Ramanathan. Review and photo editing by Sarita Yeola.

Birding and hiking both offer opportunities to explore and enjoy nature. Hiking typically involves time-oriented goals whereas birding is usually a relaxed activity.

Day hikers challenge themselves to complete a hike within a specific time. Backpacking hikers need to reach their overnight camping spot and pitch tents before dusk. Birders on the other hand take time to pause and listen for bird calls, look for bird movements, and track their behavior using binoculars. Both hobbies offer ample opportunities for photographers, with birds best captured using relatively heavy weight zoom cameras, hard to lug along on strenuous trails. I constantly experience this tug between birding and hiking, so I have thoughts on how to enjoy both when out in nature.

Just being attuned to birds helps in spotting them.

A friendly Canada Jay pair (photo above) perches near us during lunch on a hike in Mount Rainier National Park. Black-headed Grosbeak, Dark-eyed Junco, and Anna's Hummingbird visit feeders, and Song Sparrow visits the garden at Lake Quinault Lodge. Red-breasted Nuthatch greets us at our sunset spot near Lake McDonald, and White-crowned Sparrow arrives at Hidden Lake overlook, both in Glacier National Park. Mexican Jay, Cactus Wren, and Canyon Towhee appear near Chisos Lodge in Big Bend National Park.



*Cactus Wren, Big Bend National Park.
Courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

While hiking on quiet trails, frequented by birds unique to a park, using the right technology yields birding sights. Birds fly away when many humans are close by, so crowded trails are not the best option. One can catch rare sights such as Colima Warbler in Big Bend, and White-tailed Ptarmigan in Rocky Mountain National Park, by hiking on trails where they can be spotted. Technologies that help include binoculars, lightweight zoom cameras, and Merlin BirdID. We saw Canyon Towhee using binoculars, and photographed Mexican Jay, both in Big Bend National Park. Merlin BirdID helped us identify Pacific Wren on a hike in Alaska Inside Passage.



*Canyon Towhee, Big Bend National Park.
Courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

Hiking on trails near bird habitats such as wooded forests and wetlands increases the chance of spotting birds. Herons thrive in the wetlands of Brazos Bend State Park, and Great Egrets along the San Gabriel river. During migration season, wooded trails in Lockhart and Colorado Bend parks teem with birds such as Painted Bunting and Vermillion Flycatcher. Local parks with such habitats afford the luxury of repeat visits, such as our neighborhood Freeman Park where we enjoy seasonal variations in foliage, as well as Brushy Creek, with birding sights such as hooting Barred Owl, nesting Downy Woodpecker, and fluttering Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets.



Dark-eyed Junco. Courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.

Birds are wildlife just like Brown Bear, Hoary Marmot, or White-tailed Deer.

By being attuned to them, we can experience their migratory journey firsthand, such as seeing Red-breasted Nuthatch and Dark-eyed Junco in our backyard in winter, after also spotting them in summer in northern national parks. A hike to find and photograph a unique bird can be as challenging and rewarding as one to feel the spray of a waterfall, or see a glacier-clad mountain up close. Birding and hiking, when blended together, can create a wholesome nature experience.

Volunteer Spotlight: Flo Rice

FEBRUARY 8, 2023



By Leslie Menikoff.

Flo Rice has an infectious love for nature and volunteering. Born in Dallas, she moved to Austin in 1962 when “the only thing that was really in the skyline was the UT tower and the capitol.” She went to UT and then worked as an architect. Upon retirement, Flo started her volunteer work in earnest. After a trip to Costa Rica where she was “birding, birding, birding,” I had the privilege of speaking with her to learn more about her and how she gives back to our city.

What is it that drew you to birding?

“I’ve always gone camping and hiking, but birding is this whole other layer of interest. It embellishes that enjoyment. I can remember hiking around and being outside, and I’m sure there were birds singing and flying around and I wasn’t aware. It tunes you into a whole other level of activity that I had been oblivious to.

Even just hearing birds and seeing them, it just draws you in, wondering: What are they doing? What is the activity that’s going on? Are they foraging for food? Are they gathering nesting material? Birding has so many layers of intrigue...It can also be kind of daunting. It’s a challenge, but I think that’s part of the fun, too. It’s not necessarily easy. You sort of have to work at it, both studying and being out in the field.”

How did you get started birding?

“I started birding about ten years ago. I went with a group of friends to [High Island](#). I wasn’t really much of a birder before then. I tried birding before, but it didn’t really take. But I went to High Island with some people, and they were all better birders than me, so I was kind of challenged. You know, their abilities to get on the birds. I struggled some to get on the birds but we had a really good fallout that year. We had lots and lots of warblers and other beautiful, colorful neotropical birds, so that was the hook. And once I did that, I decided I wanted to bird all the time, so I started taking a bunch of [Travis Audubon classes](#) and then continued on from there.”

I understand you serve on the Board of Travis Audubon, how else are you involved?

Active at [Blair Woods](#), Flo “helped plant the initial pollinator garden” in 2019. Her background in architecture is what drew her to join the TAS board in 2020, as the organization hopes to build a permanent facility at Blair. She has “been working with the Blair core team and Blair build team which is planning for that future project.” In the meantime, Flo has volunteered her time to help with trail improvements, as well as the renovation of the old barn. She adds, “we’re under construction right now... to improve access to the pond, water feature, pollinator garden, and other areas of the preserve.”

Do you volunteer anywhere else?

Flo became a [Capital Area Master Naturalist](#) in 2019, a Texas Parks and Wildlife program which promotes conservation, restoration, and education outreach.

A “big gardener,” she’s had a plot at [Deep Eddy Community Gardens](#) for almost 20 years. She observes, “it has really good, well-draining soil and good sun, so it’s a nice place.” Spoken like a true gardener! Volunteer hours are required both there and at her other garden, [New Day Community Garden](#). At the latter, all gardeners help to maintain the donation vegetable beds. The produce of which is donated to [Casa Marianella](#), an organization that supports displaced immigrants.

Do you have a favorite spot where you like to bird?

“I like [Hornsby Bend](#) a lot just because it has so many different kinds of habitats. It has the ponds where you can see all the shore birds and the ducks, and then Platt Lane has the more wooded area that goes along the edge of the river. It’s also not very well trafficked, so lots of times you can go out there and kind of feel like you have the place to yourself. I also go to Blair Woods pretty often, too. It’s not very big and it doesn’t have quite the diversity that Hornsby does, but it’s not very well trafficked either, so lots of times you can go there and have this nice, little quiet preserve to yourself. I like those kinds of places.”

Flo has two grandchildren to whom she is passing on her love of nature and birding, taking them with her to Blair Woods to explore. It’s easy to catch Flo’s passion for birding and volunteering.

Birding in South Padre Island

FEBRUARY 8, 2023

By Vidhya Sundar.

I have always wanted to explore birding in the Texas Gulf Coast, so our winter vacation to South Padre Island was a perfect opportunity to do so. I was expecting to see just a few lifers there as this is not the peak migration season for birds. But the number of lifers I saw, fourteen in all, was totally unexpected. It

gives me immense pleasure to see a lifer, a sight of a bird for the first time ever. Not only South Padre but other birding spots near it were all wonderful too.



Great Kiskadee, Vidhya Sundar.

My first lifer was the Great Kiskadee, a colorful bird that literally came toward me when I entered the [South Padre Island birding center](#). Many shore birds like the Dowitchers, Marbled Godwit, and Piping Plover were also my lifers. I keep checking the eBird lists for birds seen there, and found American Oystercatcher spotted by many birders, but I could not spot it there. However, just the day before we left, I saw the Oystercatcher while driving on TX 48.



American Oystercatcher, Vidhya Sundar.

Tropical Kingbird is a local resident in South Padre Island, however, I was not confident in identifying it. I later learned that the best way is to listen to their call to differentiate them from the Couch’s Kingbird, which I precisely did, and added it to my lifer list.

A visit to [Laguna Atascosa](#) is also a must-see for any birder.

Altamira Oriole, Tropical Parula, and Olive Sparrow were my lifers there which were enjoying a nice splash in the water. Green Jays were plentiful too. It was so convenient to watch them all just by sitting in the bird blind.



Altamira Oriole, Vidhya Sundar.

We also visited [Oliveira Park](#), Brownsville to see the Amazon Parrots. Even though they are not native but introduced species in Texas, they are a feast to our eyes with their colorful appearance. During sunset, we saw flocks of these parrots visiting the residential area near the park and gobbling the citrus fruits in the yards. I even forgot to view them through binoculars as I was busy trying to photograph them.

My next visit was to the [Estero Llano Grande State Park](#). Here, thanks to a local birder, I spotted my next lifer, Common Pauraque. It was beautiful and perfectly camouflaged in the same spot that I had been searching for more than 15 minutes. White-tipped Dove was another great addition to my lifer list.



Common Pauraque, Vidhya Sundar.

Once I returned back home, spotting these birds inspired me to create [Rangoli art](#) designs about them, to capture their colorful beauty. Within a week, I created Rangoli designs of seven lifer birds, one per day. I feel happy to share a few of them here for my fellow birders to enjoy. Birds are a great inspiration for any artist.

How to Be Bird-Friendly: Brush Piles for Birds

FEBRUARY 17, 2023



By Lily Rerecich.

Earlier this year, my family had to trim some branches from our trees. Instead of immediately carting them away, we put the trimmings in a bare spot in our yard. Since we made this small brush pile, we have had the pleasure of watching an array of birds shelter in the wood or hop among the branches and twigs like a little wooden jungle gym. From the fluffy forms of Carolina and Bewick's Wrens to the bright color of a Cardinal, the sight of birds in the brush is fun and entertaining throughout the year. When we hear the phrase "reduce, reuse, recycle," we usually think of just putting cans and bottles in a bin. But setting aside trimmings is a natural way to reuse wood and give it a second purpose.

In the natural environment, dead wood and trees become a part of the habitat and are used by birds as shelter and places to forage. While the branch's time as part of a living tree may be over, it can become part of a habitat and a bird's life as shelter and resource. You can do the same thing with extra wood or trimmings in your yard by simply placing the brush outside. Moreover, brush piles support birds and provide them with a crucial sanctuary in a challenging world.



Now, following the ice storm, our city is a bit of a mess of damage and downed wood. We may want to clean it up as fast as possible and “fix” it – and some things will need fixing. But we have an opportunity to reuse the fallen wood for a second – greater – purpose. Many people have a lot of downed branches, and no immediate or easy way to dispose of them. We can take this opportunity to give the branches a use.



From all the losses of the storm, you can make something that protects and supports birds. If there is an HOA or other organization regulating where you can put things in your yard, a backyard brush pile may be a better option, as it was for my family. Whether a simple wood pile, or a few big branches for perching, consider using some of the fallen wood in a brush pile for the birds! While the playful amusements of avian antics are delightful to watch, more fulfilling still is the knowledge that the simple repurposing of the wood is helping birds right in your backyard!