



MURMURATIONS

The Newsletter of Travis Audubon * VOL. 71, NO. 3 May/June 2023



A Note

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Hello Travis Audubon Members and Friends,

Welcome to the first edition of Murmurations, the new name for our beloved Signal Smoke newsletter. You can read more about the choice of this new name in the first article. We hope you'll continue to enjoy reading about all the ways we collaborate and work in unison, much like the beautiful shapes of murmurations.

Exciting news—Austin is a Bird City! Thanks to a collaboration with the City of Austin's Parks and Recreation Department, Austin Water, Watershed Conservation, and other nonprofit organizations, Austin was designated an official Bird City in February 2023. This certification from Texas Parks and Wildlife and Audubon Texas celebrates the focus on bird conservation that Austin has long exemplified, as well as strengthens existing efforts and connects a new network of partners. Austinites have a long tradition of caring about the environment, and birds have always been a big part of that. When we start paying attention to birds, we see how they are connected to everything else in the ecological system, including us. We are thrilled to finally be named an official Bird City!

We have also been keeping a close eye on threats to Golden-cheeked Warbler habitat. If fewer and fewer juniper-oak forests remain to support the birds' efforts to raise families, then the population will continue to decline. We won't let that happen! Let your elected officials know that protecting Ashe juniper habitat for the Golden-cheeked Warbler is essential to the beauty and ecology of Central Texas.

The Board of Directors of Travis Audubon is honored to announce that the 2023 Victor Emanuel Conservation Award Hero is the longstanding Texas parks and conservation advocate, George Bristol. Mr. Bristol has been a political organizer, lobbyist, and successful entrepreneur for more than sixty years. Appointed to the National Park Foundation board by President Bill Clinton, Bristol was prolific in his efforts to fundraise and raise the public profile of America's extraordinary parks. We will host our [14th annual Victor Emanuel Conservation Award Celebration](#) on the evening of Thursday October 12, 2023, at The Junior League of Austin's Community Impact Center. We can't wait for this exciting event and hope you will join us for the festivities.

We've raised almost \$49,000 for this year's Birdathon, a record-breaking year! Both the fundraising and the birding has been top shelf. It's not too late to participate-- what better way to enjoy the glories of spring migration than to help support your favorite organization that inspired conservation through birding?!

Happy birding! Happy spring!



Nicole Netherton
Executive Director

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Baker Team
Blair Woods Core Team
Chaetura Canyon Management

Commons Ford

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

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(open)
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Upcoming Events

WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

May 2023

June 2023

May 2

Birdathon: Blair Woods

May 6

Birdathon: Camp Mabry

Birdathon: Photography Trip at Platt Lane

May 7

Young Birders Club: Roy G. Guerrero Metro Park

May 9

Birdathon: Hershey Ranch

May 12

Birdathon: Birds and Brunch at Baker

May 13

World Migratory Bird Day at Hornsby Bend

May 14

Birdathon: Bird Behavior Walk at CL Browning Ranch

May 18

Speaker Series: Ornithomycology Where Birds and Fungi Intersect

May 20

Blair Woods Restoration Day

Chalupas and Chimney Swifts

May 23

Class: Beginning Backyard Birding

June 3

Beginners' Bird Walk

June 7

Youth Birding Camp

June 10

World Swift Day at Chaetura Canyon

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Walk

June 17

Presentation: Austin's Amazing Purple Martins

June 22

Purple Haze: A Conservation Film Screening

June 24

Ecological Literacy Volunteer Day at Hornsby Bend

June 25

Pride Month Party at Commons Ford

June 28

Wingspan Game Night



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Thank You

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CONSERVATION AWARD CELEBRATION SPONSORS

Great Horned Owl Sponsors

Shield Ranch
Peggy & Matt Winkler

Great Blue Heron Sponsors

Dobbs Run Ranch

Painted Bunting Sponsors

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Austin Cake Ball

Ruby-throated Hummingbird Sponsors

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Great Horned Owl Sponsor



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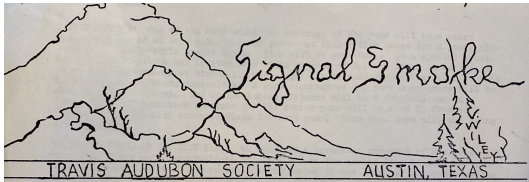
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Updates

FROM THE SIGNAL SMOKE BLOG

Travis Audubon's *Signal Smoke* Blog renamed to *Murmurations*



Earlier this year, our IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access) committee was asked why our blog is named *Signal Smoke*, and wondered if it could be considered cultural appropriation of Native American culture to continue to use it? The committee decided it was worth doing some research and talking with a Native American scholar to try to understand this question better.

The second issue of the newsletter, from [May 7, 1952](#), was the first one called *Signal Smoke*. We don't have a clear explanation of the name in any of the early issues of the newsletter, but the connection to Native Americans' communication is apparent from occasional indirect references in the newsletter and from [the masthead of the July 1953 issue](#), which was the first to feature the name *Signal Smoke* drawn as though it was smoke.

The IDEA committee discussed how the name didn't come across as disrespectful or intentionally harmful, but that it also didn't point either to our conservation work or to anything specific about Native American culture. We then

decided to consult with an expert to find out whether the name could be seen as cultural appropriation.

The Board invited University of Texas at Austin professor and Native American scholar Dr. Circe Sturm to speak at our January 2023 meeting, and we explored the meaning behind the term "smoke signal" as it relates to Native American history. During this discussion, we learned that referring to smoke signals isn't necessarily cultural appropriation, but it does refer to technologies of the past, which can reinforce stereotypes of Native Americans as perhaps being trapped in an "old world" instead of being a part of our current one. Dr. Sturm shared information about other examples of stereotypes of Native Americans that did cause harm and agreed that though this example wasn't racist or discriminatory, it didn't really shed a positive light on Native American culture either. Plus, we noted that the name doesn't have a strong connection to birds or conservation, and the committee recommended that we take the opportunity to connect the blog name more directly to our mission.

In light of this research, our Board of Directors voted to officially change the name of *Signal Smoke* to something that feels more in line with the spirit and mission of our organization: *Murmurations*. This name was proposed by TAS Board member Jason Garcia, who explained how he came up with the idea:

“For the new name, I wanted to try to think of something that pertained to birds but could also reflect what we were trying to do with the blog. While brainstorming, I happened upon the word “murmurations”, which I thought was a great encapsulation of these ideas. Birds (specifically starlings), perform a murmuration as a flocking behavior, which for the blog could also apply as getting people on the same page. I also liked that it included the word “murmur,” as ideas or sounds bubbling under the surface.”

Murmurations are also different from a flock—they are usually large gatherings of birds making coordinated movements, which feels a lot like the work we hope to do for conservation. They are also beautiful to look at, resembling a choreographed dance. This also feels like what we do as we connect with our members and partners in both the enjoyment and conservation of birds. It is true that European Starlings, an invasive species in North America, do make murmurations, but we discussed how Starlings are some of the most common birds beginners will encounter in our ecosystem and how there is much to be learned from them. Even Starlings can be a part of inspiring conservation through birding!

Thank you to Jason, the IDEA committee, and the TAS Board for helping us reconnect to our mission through our blog and newsletter name. We hope you'll enjoy reading *Murmurations* as much as we will.

When it comes to the Golden-cheeked Warbler, Don't Get Caught Up in a Numbers Game

MARCH 7, 2023



By Members and Staff of Travis Audubon, Audubon Texas, and Bexar Audubon.

Seeing or hearing the first Golden-cheeked Warblers of the season is one of the pure joys of springtime in the Texas Hill Country. Known for its striking yellow-and-black plumage and buzzy song, the species has delighted birders and nature enthusiasts since it was first identified in the United States during the Civil War era. And it shares its home with us: [the only place in the world it breeds is in Central Texas.](#)

Yet as soon as the late 1800s, biologists began voicing alarm at the rate at which the bird's Ashe juniper habitat was disappearing. They need the oaks that host insects for their young and the strippable bark from mature Ashe juniper for building their small nests. When the first rare and endangered species lists were compiled in the U.S. during the 1960s, Golden-cheeked Warblers were already being described as rare.

They were officially [listed as endangered](#) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 1990 because of the loss of their habitat.

If not before the species was listed, and certainly ever since, people have been debating how many Golden-cheeked Warblers there are. The estimates have ranged widely from fewer than 15,000 pairs to more than 250,000 males. These numbers have been estimated by various scientific means and statistical methods. No one really knows for sure, but with the loss of habitat, we can be reasonably certain that the population is declining. However, strategies such as the creation of the 33,000 acres of the [Balcones Canyonlands Preserve](#), as well as the voluntary protection of thousands of additional acres through private conservation easements, may at least be giving the bird a fighting chance. Clearly more needs to be done to make it a fair fight.



Birders in 1952. The Founders of Travis Audubon noticed the disappearance of Golden-cheek habitat in the early fifties.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF) on behalf of the Texas General Land Office has been working to delist the Golden-cheeked Warbler for many

years. They argue that the bird's population has increased and that its habitat is no longer in danger of being destroyed, despite the dramatic expansion of housing and infrastructure in the Hill Country. Even if there are more birds than previously thought, relaxing protections for the species when its habitat is rapidly disappearing is not a strategy for long-term success. If fewer and fewer juniper-oak forests remain to support the birds' efforts to raise families, then the population will continue to decline. No matter how many of the birds there are today, their long-term survival is endangered as their habitat vanishes.



A Golden-cheeked Warbler feeding its young.

Disappearing habitat is what led to the Golden-cheeked Warbler's protections under the Endangered Species Act in the first place. And with it, efforts were put in place to guard against exactly what is happening. According to a [recent study](#) by Defenders of Wildlife, ongoing habitat loss and fragmentation remain existential threats to the recovery of the bird. Another [recent study](#) found that suitable habitat for the species declined by an alarming 29% in a mere decade, from 2000 to 2010. Without the protections of the Endangered Species Act, that number would likely have been much higher.

“Our findings demonstrate a need to strengthen current conservation measures and identify priority lands for conservation protections within Golden-cheeked Warbler habitat. This will help ensure the availability of more suitable habitat, which should aid in species recovery,” said Bryan Bird, southwest program director for Defenders.

So where do things stand?

In 2019, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced that it would conduct a [status review](#) of the Golden-cheeked Warbler. This review will evaluate the bird’s current population and habitat, continuing threats, as well as the effectiveness of conservation efforts. The review is expected to be completed in 2023 and is likely to go a long way toward determining whether to remove or maintain its current protections. In addition, the TPPF once again has sued the USFWS in its ongoing effort to delist the bird based on political math rather than actual recovery.

What you can do to help

- Voice your support for expanding conservation initiatives to protect the bird, from the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve and [Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge](#) to new land acquisition and voluntary conservation easements on private lands within warbler habitat.
- Let your elected officials know where you stand. They need to hear from you. One way to urge them to help protect habitat for the Golden-cheeked Warbler is to contact your state representative to

support the [Texas Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Fund](#) and the [Texas Land and Water Conservation Fund](#).

- Contact the new [Texas Land Commissioner, Dawn Buckingham, M.D.](#), and ask her to consider the disappearing habitat for the Golden-cheek, and to resist the temptation to get caught up in a numbers game.
- Protect migrating birds by keeping cats indoors, making windows safer for birds and participating in [Lights Out](#) actions during migration.

Birding Brawl 2023 Results

APRIL 11, 2023



Thank you to everyone who supported our 2023 Birding Brawl. You helped us raise over \$7,500 that will go towards this year’s Birdathon total!

Get the full scoop on their Big Day of birding on April 1st from the competitors:



The Surf Scoters, Janet Davis and Jeff Osborne – 1st Place (140 species)

We strategized by poring over the eBird bar charts for aggregate probable species in specific hotspots in early April – targeting places we already knew well. Jeff also made a spreadsheet with likely species in the entire Birding Brawl domain. Further, we plotted our route based on time of day: some hotspots were very time-sensitive, such as Commons Ford, where booming boat traffic and parties arrive by midday on warm weekends. Additionally, we learned that April 1 was going to be an exceptionally busy day in downtown Austin. Thus, we avoided the area. With these factors in mind, our route took shape.

April 1 started early. As we prepared to leave home at 5:00 AM, we heard a pair of Eastern Screech-Owls trilling in our front yard. Minutes later we pulled into Sheffield Northwest Park, where, to our horror, we found three blazing trash fires at the playground. I immediately called

911. The Great Horned Owl had retreated to the hillside and was softly singing. The firefighters arrived minutes later. At 5:50 AM, we entered Commons Ford. Northern Cardinals sang periodically, while at 6:10 AM, someone raced a squealing truck in circles across the river. By 6:20 AM, we moved to the hillside, where we heard and recorded an Eastern Whip-poor-will singing before dawn. Within minutes, we heard a Common Poorwill singing, two pairs of Great Horned Owls duetting in different locations, and stereophonic Wild Turkeys gobbling. At sunrise, the dawn chorus swelled. Later, we heard the A-Song of a Golden-cheeked Warbler and the low singing of a male Greater Roadrunner, among many other species seen and heard, including an Eastern Towhee in the tangle near the river trail. We pressed on to Reimers Ranch, where we saw Canada Geese, Northern Parula, Swainson's Hawks, Verdins, Bell's Vireos, Vermilion Flycatcher, and abundant sparrows at the Pavilion and old entrance areas. Nonetheless, we were so focused that we forgot to eat and drink. As the heat and sun intensified, we listlessly looked/listened for a Woodhouse's Scrub Jay (along with Common Ground Dove and Canyon Towhee) on the Turkey Loop without success. We rehydrated and ate in our car as we drove to Hornsby Bend. Enroute, we saw a Broad-winged Hawk. Now revitalized, we visited the Hornsby ponds, CER Building, and two sections of the river trail. Among the species we saw/heard were American Golden-Plover, Wilson's Phalarope, Cinnamon Teal, several sandpiper species, Sora, Wood Duck, Common Yellowthroat, Marsh Wren, and Swamp Sparrow. Yet the light began to fade, and we realized we were running out of time.

Consequently, we ditched our Bastrop plans in favor of short visits nearby, including Platt Lane; the 969 and 130 bridge swallow colony; Walter E. Long Lake; Southeast Greenway, Mueller; and the spillway at Longhorn Dam — where night would be virtual day owing to the bridge lights above. Thankfully, our change in plans added twenty species to our Big Day total. Overall, we missed several common species, including Orange-crowned Warbler and Vesper Sparrow, but we still found 140 species during our Big Day.

Our heartfelt thanks to family and friends and to everyone at Travis Audubon for making Birding Brawl 2023 such a wonderful experience!



The Brawling Bristols, Jennifer and Valarie Bristol – 2nd Place (119 species)

The Brawling Bristols started the Birding Brawl before dawn in Jennifer’s yard as both the Great Horned Owl and the Eastern Screech Owl called softly from the woods. We then drove to Doeskin Ranch which is part of the Balcones National Wildlife Refuge to listen and look for the Golden-cheeked Warbler and Black-capped Vireo, along with a list of sparrows. The morning was cool and still which made it easy to hear the calling males of a variety of species.

From there we ventured over to Devine Lake Park for a cornucopia of shorebirds and waterfowl. We were surprised by how close the new development will be to the park. After recording all we could at Devine Lake we went in search of the Couch’s Kingbird at the Lake Creek Trail, however, it was teeming with young kids sports so we did not find the kingbird or many other birds for that matter. At the Macedonia Cemetery near Granger, we made a sandwich in the back of the “bird bus” aka the mini-van, and then motored out to Bastrop State Park to check off a variety of woodpeckers. The drive east was spectacular with the fields of wildflowers and vibrant spring green of the grasses and trees.

Hornsby Bend was one of our late afternoon stops where Valarie excitedly spotted the Yellow-headed Blackbirds that were mixed in with other blackbirds. One of the final birds of the day again came from Jennifer’s yard as a pair of Chimney Swifts hunted for insects in the evening sky. The entire day felt like we were standing on the edge of the migration, but not yet immersed in it. That said, it did feel like a wonderful kick-off to Birdathon and we celebrate the many other teams and wish them luck as they set forth in the days and weeks to come to discover as many birds as they can during one of the most amazing natural events in the world- the spring migration.



South Austin Starlings, Matt Law and Richard Deulofeut – 3rd Place (115 species)

After considering a few options for our Big Day, we ended up deciding on a general east-west route, with the goal of covering a wide variety of habitats.

Departing at 5:00 AM, our first stop was Longhorn Dam, catching a stately Black-crowned Night-Heron in ambient light. We then headed to a friend's bucolic 70-acre private ranch in Fayette County. As the dawn fog lifted, we heard dozens of cardinals, the hooting of Barred and Great Horned Owls, and observed 40 additional species (plus terrific native vegetation) over a couple hours. Most captivating was a beautiful flyby pair of Pileated Woodpeckers. A brief stroll at Alum Creek in Bastrop County didn't yield the usual Red-headed Woodpeckers, but we enjoyed the singing of our first Summer Tanager and Black-throated Green Warbler of 2023. Jetted into Buc-ee's afterwards, picking up some common parking lot birds (plus

lunch forks we forgot) and originally planned on then driving to Hornsby Bend. We audibly instead to quickly browsing other very familiar locations for extra chances at our targets. Straggling Hooded Mergansers (at Mueller Southeast Greenway), gorgeous Wood Ducks (at Roy G overlook), and swirling Northern Rough-winged and Cave Swallows (at the dam) were among two dozen species added over our late morning and early afternoon.

Next, an efficient 90 minutes at Hornsby, highlighted by a spectacular Peregrine Falcon athletically hunting coots and terrorizing shorebirds across Pond 1W's flats. American Golden-Plovers and two male Yellow-headed Blackbirds were also striking. A lucky Cooper's Hawk flyover upon departure inspired us to head into the city and check Nicholas Dawson Park for returning Broad-winged Hawks. A half hour at this lovely urban pocket park did provide a nice Broadie up on a powerline, and a handful of others.

Just shy of triple digits at that point, our last stops were to our respective favorite Travis County hotspots. At Commons Ford (Matt's favorite), we were challenged by large, noisy pedestrian crowds, particularly at the riverfront where we'd been hoping for Yellow-throated Warblers and Vireos in the cypresses. Nevertheless, we got another ten birds in just over an hour, featuring a Belted Kingfisher's rattle and surprisingly, our lone Eastern Phoebe of the day before we continued west.

Despite a very quiet late stroll around Reimers Ranch (Richard's favorite), the weather held off and we joyously found several of the area's iconic species, including Verdin, Black-throated and Rufous-crowned Sparrows, and Canyon Wren and Towhee. Our Big Day ended just after sunset, as Richard's sharp ears picked up bobwhite and poorwill calls near the entrance booth. Thrilled with and proud of our journey as we arrived home at 9:00 PM, we observed 115 species total, including 15 first-of-years, and interestingly, a new "park bird" for at least one of us at almost every location. What a fun and memorable day in the field. A huge thanks to our many donors for supporting a most worthy cause, to Travis Audubon for organizing, and to our amazing fellow birders. Good birding to all y'all this season!



Star-crossed Plovers, Hesper Fang and Lino Mendiola – 4th Place (110 species)

Birding has always been about moving slowly for us. When someone asks, "Why do you bird?" we often reply, "because it's relaxing to walk slowly in the outdoors for three or four hours with the sole purpose of peacefully looking and listening in nature."

Then the Birding Brawl happened.

We set an optimistic goal to see 100 species. Outside of the tropics, we had only hit the century mark in a single day once before when we stitched together a visit to High Island, Sabine Woods, and Anahuac NWR.

Our plan was to start east and move west throughout the day. Starting at Bastrop State Park before sunrise, we listened for the Dawn Chorus and then saw a Red-headed Woodpecker at first light from the Pine Warbler Trail. We logged Pine Warbler and heard a Northern Parula singing loudly. Conspicuously missing were the Black-and-white Warblers, though; we had heard them singing on our scouting trip just the night before.

We next birded the Utley Rd. area, where we picked up Harris's Sparrow and a Ruby-throated Hummingbird doing its display dance with wide U shapes sweeping across a small tree as if someone had it on a string.

Platt Ln and Hornsby Bend turned out to be fruitful, as usual. The highlight of the day was seeing a Peregrine Falcon diving and tail chasing peeps around Pond 1E. Hesper has been hunting with Peregrines, but even she thought this particular hunt was very exciting! The short trek down the River Trail was worth it to see the Monk Parakeets.

Next was Roy Guerrero and Circle Acres. Hesper had scouted out Circle Acres the day before and spotted a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron which we were hoping would still be in the area. Alas, it wasn't, but we got good looks at a surprise Swainson's Thrush.

We also thought we found a Winter Wren, but when we looked at the photo, we discovered it was actually a newly fledged Carolina Wren with a short, nubby tail.

We continued west toward a setting sun, hitting up Mueller for the Hooded Merganser, Wilson's Snipe, and Marsh Wren. We took a gamble at Wild Basin, hoping for a Golden-cheeked Warbler, but it was so quiet we might as well have been birding on the moon. After a quick stop at Commons Ford for the Golden-fronted Woodpecker, we took a 10-minute break at a taco truck outside of Reimers Ranch and logged a Lesser Goldfinch that flew over. Reimers Ranch was quiet when we arrived, but we were able to count some of the birds we needed via very careful listening and searching.

At 111 species (counting the titmouse hybrid), we were thrilled to have beaten our initial goal and happy to have kept pace with our competition. We crushed our personal record for birds counted in a single day and were grateful for the opportunity to spend the day birding and walking (quickly) around nature in support of a great organization.

We appreciate the generosity of our friends and family who made donations to support this good cause.