



# MURMURATIONS

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The Newsletter of Travis Audubon \* VOL. 71, NO. 4 July/August 2023



# *A Note*

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Hello Travis Audubon friends and members,

Celeste was spraying the oak trees with the water hose as we pulled up to her house. The drippy wet trees are magnets for Golden-cheeks. It was our home-grown warbler as well as Black-capped Vireos that Randy Barnes and his 16-year-old son Caleb had traveled from their home in Massachusetts to see. Anything else they might see during their whirlwind three-day birding adventure would be icing on the cake. Randy and Caleb, both avid birders, had booked a private five-hour walk with Travis Audubon to help them find their target birds.

I'd hoped to take them to Baker Sanctuary to see Golden-cheeks, but most of it was still closed because of damage from the freeze earlier this year, and the trails that were open were muddy due to recent rains. Celeste Treadway had mentioned a few days before that she and her husband, Harry, had baby Golden-cheeks regularly coming to their water feature, so when she graciously offered to let me bring Randy and Caleb to her house, I quickly accepted her offer. Within minutes of getting out of our cars, Caleb began adding birds to his eBird list as fast as he could type. Bewick's Wrens and White-eyed Vireos were singing, numerous hummingbird feeders around the house were swarming with Black-chinned Hummingbirds, and the seed feeders were covered up with Lesser-goldfinches, House Finches, Black-crested Titmice and Carolina Chickadees, most of which Caleb and his dad don't see at home. Even some of our ho-hum species like White-winged Doves were exciting for them, and an Ash-throated Flycatcher showed up and posed for a good look. But the whoops and high fives were saved for when the Golden-cheeks appeared in the oak trees, both scruffy looking juveniles and a couple of adults. Randy and Caleb were thrilled. Mission half-accomplished!

With 21 birds on our eBird list in less than an hour, we were off to the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge to look for Black-capped Vireos. Our first stop was the Shin Oak Observation Deck, but it was quiet, so we headed to Doeskin Ranch. Our new friends were happy with the choice, especially when twenty minutes into our walk up the Rimrock Trail they got to hear and see their first Black-capped Vireo. Once we made it to the top of the ridge, we found another vireo that everyone got good looks at and more whoops and fist bumps quickly followed. Mission accomplished! Blue Grosbeaks, Painted Buntings, Dickcissels and Summer Tanagers, as well as several other species, were also added to our list before we headed home, hot and tired. Randy and Caleb ended up with 78 species on their trip to Central Texas, including several life birds. Celeste and I made two new friends and Travis Audubon got two new members!



*From left to right: Celeste Treadway, Caleb Barnes, Randy Barnes, and Chris Gunter.*

In addition to our regular free bird walks open to anyone, Travis Audubon began doing private guided walks in February. If you'd be interested in booking a walk, more information can be found at <https://travisaudubon.org/special-events/request-a-birding-adventure>

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Chris Gunter'.

Chris Gunter  
President

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# Upcoming Events

WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

July 2023

August 2023

**July 1**

Beginners' Bird Walk: Commons Ford

**July 8**

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Survey

**July 12**

Birding at McKinney Falls State Park

**July 15**

Presentation: Put Out the Welcome Mat for Backyard Birds

**July 20**

Class: Introduction to Bird Behavior: Behavior, Life History, and More

**July 22**

Birding by Ear Workshop

**July 29**

Blair Woods Restoration Day

Ecological Literacy Volunteer Day at Hornsby Bend

**August 5**

Beginners' Bird Walk

**August 9**

Commons Ford Bird Walk

**August 12**

Blair Woods Restoration Day

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Survey

**August 19**

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Walk

**August 26**

Ecological Literacy Volunteer Day at Hornsby Bend



# Thank You

*We are grateful to all of our members and donors who have supported Travis Audubon in Fiscal Year 2023 (July 2022 – June 2023). Special thanks to our Lifetime Members and Leadership Giving Circle.*

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# Thank You

*We are grateful to all of our members and donors who have supported Travis Audubon in Fiscal Year 2023 (July 2022 – June 2023). Special thanks to our Wise Owl, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and Warbler Members.*

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# Thank You

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# Thank You

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# Updates

FROM THE MURMURATIONS BLOG

## Bird of the Week: Black-crested Titmouse

MAY 1, 2023



*Black-crested Titmouse* (*Baeolophus atricristatus*) Photo courtesy of Nate Chappell.

Black-crested Titmice like it hot – at least that’s how it seems when comparing their range to their cousins, the Tufted Titmouse, who occupy the entirety of the eastern half of the United States. Tufted and Black-crested Titmice diverged around 250,000 years ago, but often hybridize here in Central Texas where their ranges overlap. They are both small-ish songbirds with a non-descript gray back, lighter belly and trendy fauxhawk. The most notable distinction between the species is that trademark black crest jutting up from the foreheads of the aptly named Black-crested Titmouse- while the Tufted sports a sleek silvery fauxhawk, matching the rest of their body.

Black-crested Titmice feel at home in many parts of South and Central Texas – foraging on the forest floor in Oak Woodlands, hopping from branch to branch in Mesquite arroyos, or nesting in cavities in the Highland Pines. Their diet is varied- insects, berries, fruits, and snails – but they also have a taste for caterpillars in the summer. When the pickings get slim, they

are apt to stow food away like their cousins the Chickadees. Their cautious nature has served them well, making them ubiquitous – it’s unlikely you’d walk through any woods here and *not* hear or see one.

They also are frequent visitors to bird feeders in this part of the state. And as most folks with bird feeders know, black sunflower seeds are a favorite. As a result, sunflowers are prone to popping up all over the yard (and in our case, every crack and crevice within our deck as well). But in early spring, I noticed a small grove of sunflowers sprouting up in one corner of our yard that was very far from both our feeder and from the sunflowers that spread their own seeds last summer. After paying attention for a few days, I noticed that a Black-Crested Titmouse was responsible for this dispersal.

All birds are ‘optimal foragers’ in their own way. Optimal foraging theorizes that birds will modify their foraging behavior in a way that maximizes benefit while minimizing risk; in other words, birds are trying to eat and not get eaten at the same time. For Titmice, optimal foraging means conducting a thorough and split-second analysis when presented with multiple seed offerings- judging the weight, density, and caloric value of each. Heavier, larger seeds mean they are more difficult to transport and break apart – and in a world where a great many other creatures would like to eat you for breakfast or steal your food, these risks must be calculated.

Titmice also have a funny habit of not actually *eating* at bird feeders like other songbirds. They prefer to sort through their buffet until they’ve made their choice, and fly away with it, eating in a more inconspicuous spot (not unlike the guy who always has to face the exit in any given restaurant). When they feel safe enough, they hold the seeds between their toes and use their bill to hammer and pry them open.

This is exactly what I witnessed one morning while sipping my coffee on the porch – the mysteriously placed sunflower patch revealing the Titmice’s preferred booth at the restaurant that is our backyard.

Compiled by Abby West.

Sources include [All About Birds](#), [National Audubon](#), and *What It’s Like to be a Bird* by David Allen Sibley.

## A Bird’s Eye View of Feelings

MAY 3, 2023



*A Northern Cardinal pair. Courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

I experience various feelings when observing birds. Here, I share them along with examples of bird behaviors I associate with each of them, hoping it resonates with my fellow birders.

**Love** Bewick Wren’s mating song, Red-bellied Woodpecker’s courtship, Northern Cardinal pair kissing, sharing a bath, and the male shooing others away from the feeder.



*A Blue Jay, Northern Cardinal, and White-winged Dove at a bird bath. Courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

**Playfulness** Carolina Wren exploring bath nooks, Red-breasted Nuthatch hanging upside down on an oak, Blue Jay enjoying a splashy bath, Warblers playing peekaboo.

**Competition** Birds skirmish over the bath, Ruby-throated Hummingbird dominating the nectar feeder, Chipping Sparrows fighting at seed feeder, female Golden-fronted Woodpeckers feuding over a nesting spot, squirrels competing with birds for seeds and water.

**Collaboration** Flock of Cedar Waxwings, Common Grackle, or Franklin Gulls, Black Vultures congregating on an electric tower, different bird species simultaneously sharing our bird bath, Hummingbirds sipping together at our feeder, trading birding tips with fellow birders.

**Restlessness** Fast-moving Kinglets, White-eyed Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Warblers.

**Reward** Sighting the Golden-cheeked Warbler in Garner State Park after not spotting it in Lost Maples State Park, photographing a Nashville Warbler’s elusive chestnut crown, and its catch of a worm.



*A Golden-cheeked Warbler in Garner State Park. Courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

**Surprise** Warblers in winter, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks on the roof top, sunflower patch planted by birds by spilling seeds below our feeder, House Finch snacking on elm acorns, picturesque sunrise over Pikes Peak, Colorado, when responding to a call from Black-billed Magpies.

**Responsibility** Downy Woodpecker pair caring for young, Mama squirrel gorging seeds to nourish her quadruplet, Carolina Chickadee pair exploring a nesting spot, Blue Jay warning others of Red-shouldered Hawk, Muscovy Duck guiding her babies on a swim in Murphy Park.



*A Muscovy Duck guides her babies on a swim in Murphy Park. Courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

**Patience** Black-crested Titmouse eating one seed at a time from our feeder, Lincoln

Sparrow foraging for bugs under our rose bushes.

**Connection between Flora and Fauna** Salvia blooms in time so that migrating Ruby-throated Hummingbirds can nourish on its nectar for their journey ahead, Carolina Wren foraging on bugs that could harm roses, American Robin snacking on American Sweet Berry, Monarch Butterfly feeding on Lantanas.



*A Ruby-throated Hummingbird feeds at Autumn Sage; his gorget color varies. Courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

**Awe** Birds perching on one leg to conserve heat, techniques birds apply to migrate long distances for survival, gorgets of male Hummingbirds displaying varying colors depending on where light falls on them.

**Delight** First ever sights such as spotting Painted Bunting in Lockhart State Park, and Red-shouldered Hawk at our bath, a friend spotting and another photographing Vermillion Flycatcher, which I only heard when our 'Camping Gang' friend group visited the [Frio River](#).



*A Vermillion Flycatcher in the Frio River area. Courtesy of Srinivas Patil.*

**Luck** Rare sights such as Leucistic White Squirrel, Blue-headed Vireo, and Armadillo in our backyard.

**Resilience** [Birds brave ice storms](#), Yellow-bellied Sapsucker nonchalantly handles cold winds ruffling its feathers during Bomb Cyclone, multiple Egret types make their home in even small habitats such as Murphy Park.



*Great Egret, Cattle Egret, and Snowy Egret in Murphy Park Rookery. Courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

**Fear** Cooper's Hawk attacking White-winged Dove, Mississippi Kite and Red-shouldered Hawk munching their prey, even if these represent nature's cycle of life.



*A Cooper's Hawk attacks a White-winged Dove. Courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.*

**Sadness** Carolina Chickadee mourning a loss, Red-breasted Nuthatch departs in spring.

**Dependence** Birds rely on us to preserve their habitats just as we depend on them for pollination, fertilization, and much more.

By Jaya Ramanathan. Reviewed by Sarita Yeola.

## Bird of the Week: Barn Owl

MAY 9, 2023

Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*)

Silent predators of the night, Barn Owls have an eerie, raspy cry rather than the typical hoot of other owls.

They have a ghostly appearance with a disc-like white face, belly, and chest and buffy upperparts. Roosting in barns, nesting boxes, and crevices in trees during the day, Barn Owls hunt at night. Found throughout the world, they are declining in range due to habitat loss. Found throughout Texas, they can be difficult to spot but are prevalent along roads, especially near Granger Lake.

Despite their wide range, Barn Owls in America are very different from their European cousins, weighing 50% more and looking slightly different.



*Close-up of a Barn Owl face.*

Barn Owls prey on voles, rats, small snakes, squirrels, and other rodents. In fact, they are sometimes used for pest management as an alternative to toxic rodenticides. Place nest boxes in vineyards, orchards, and backyards and they will come. Since Barn Owls, and other birds, eat pests, it is important that we not use pesticides where they feed as the poison in the prey will kill the predator.



*Barn Owl eggs.*

Barn Owls lay 5-8 eggs, sometimes up to 12. The eggs are whitish but may become stained by the nest. Barn Owls don't build real nests; instead, they gather debris into a crevice or on the ground, finding a spot in a barn or other building, or even under bridges, as well as in nest boxes. Only the female incubates the

eggs while the male brings her food. Incubation is approximately a month. The female remains with the young for two weeks, relying on the male for food. After that she will hunt. By two months the young are taking their first flights.

In 2018, five Barn Owl eggs were brought to Wings Rescue Center (WRC) in Rockport, TX. Firefighters in Corpus Christi had seen the mother abandon the nest and rescued the eggs from a fire. One of the few rehabilitation centers that would incubate eggs and unsure of the age of the eggs, WRC monitored them carefully. Two eggs hatched but only one survived. Named Riggs, in honor of one of the firefighters, the baby owl was carefully tended to by WRC and the [Texas Sealife Center](#) until he was able to hunt for himself. The firefighter, Riggs, released the owl, Riggs, into Castro Sanctuary in Rockport.



*Riggs the owl as a hatchling.*

Unfortunately, many Barn owls die in their first year of life. Eggs and babies are prey for other raptors. Most only survive a couple of years but at least a few have been recorded making it to their teens. We can help them by providing owl boxes with predator guards. These can be bought ready to install or easily constructed with readily available plans. If you have Barn Owls nearby, it's unlikely you will have vermin!



*Riggs the owl in flight.*

All photographs courtesy of [Wings Rescue Center](#), used with permission.

Compiled by Jeanette Larson.

Sources include [Audubon Guide](#), [Barn Owl Trust](#), and [Cornell All About Birds](#).

## May Bird Forecast

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MAY 10, 2023

### What to watch for in May: Migration Continues!

#### Ground Warblers

Warblers are small birds and don't have much incentive to show themselves during migration. Plus, many are foraging high in the treetops and can be frustratingly hard to see. Birders look for key characteristics such as presence or absence of wingbars, bill and tail length, and color patterns. Without seeing the full bird they can often identify it, piecing the bird together like a puzzle from several quick views. Listening to its songs or chip notes helps clinch the ID.

Bird watchers who occasionally suffer from "warbler neck" are thankful that not all warblers are found in the high canopy. Some favor the midstory or lower vegetation levels, and the ground level is the habitat niche for others. Here are three warblers that spend much of their time on the ground. They come through Austin during May, en route to their

breeding grounds further north. None of these breed in Texas.

The **Ovenbird** is large for a warbler, with a short tail and large eyes accentuated by white eye-rings. It has an orange crown patch outlined by dark stripes. Its back is olive brown and its white breast is covered with black streaks. The Ovenbird often cocks its tail up, and it has a jerky gait. Ovenbirds spend most of their time on the ground, foraging in shaded woods. They have a distinctive loud chip which may alert you to start looking, but they are well camouflaged to match leaf litter. Ovenbirds are widely distributed across the forests of North America, and winter in Mexico and Central America. (Appalachian Ovenbirds winter in Florida and the Caribbean.)



*An alert Ovenbird. Courtesy: James Giroux*

#### FUN FACTS:

The Ovenbird gets its name from its dome-shaped nest which resembles a Dutch oven.

The female constructs it from the inside, so that its cup nest, side entrance, and roof are integrated. Then she decorates it with leaves and twigs.

Its song is a ringing "teacher, teacher, teacher," increasing in volume, but we don't hear it much in migration. Instead, you might hear a rapid loud chip.

The best way to find one in Austin is to look for a shaded forest floor with lots of leaf litter, then sit, watch, and listen.

The Nature Viewing Station at Mills Pond Recreation Area in north Austin is one of the better places to try for an Ovenbird, as is Circle Acres adjacent to Roy Guerrero Park.

The **Mourning Warbler** is a stunning olive green-backed, yellow-bellied bird with a gray hood. The male's hood is dark gray with a black chest patch. The female's hood is a pale gray. The adult male has no eye-rings while the adult female may show very thin broken white eye-rings. (There is a western warbler that closely resembles the Mourning, called the MacGillivray's. It sometimes shows up here in migration and it is mainly distinguished from the Mourning by the presence of broad, short white eye-arcs that really pop.) Mourning Warblers breed in dense thickets in forest clearings, so look for them in similar habitat in migration. They are one of the later warblers to migrate through since they are coming from lower Central America and northern South America. Some don't reach their breeding grounds until early June. Mourning Warblers forage for insects from ground level to about six feet, but also eat some fruits. These are fairly skulky birds, but put yourself in the right habitat, and listen for their rolling song.



*Female Mourning Warbler. Courtesy: Jane Tillman*

#### **FUN FACTS:**

The Mourning Warbler has distinct dialects, sometimes called regiolects. There are four distinct types with unique songs based on geography. Newfoundland and Nova Scotia each have a regiolect. The eastern regiolect, ranges from Manitoba and the Great Lakes states to the Appalachians and West Virginia,

and the western regiolect spans western Ontario, the prairie provinces of Canada, and British Columbia. Males recognize the different regiolects, with more antagonism shown to those of their geographic origin.

Mourning Warblers prefer early successional habitat for breeding, so after it matures in seven to ten years, they have to look for new sites. Clear cutting and natural forest disturbances like fire and windfall supply this.

Adult Mourning Warblers are known to feign a broken wing to lure predators away from their nest. Can you think of a common shorebird that also uses this broken wing tactic?

The **Northern Waterthrush** is well-named. During migration you will find it along wooded streams and pond edges where its loud "spwik" call note broadcasts its presence. Then look for a brown bird about six inches long bobbing its tail as it forages along the edges, or flies to a floating log to glean insects. It has a white eyebrow and dense dark streaking on its underparts including its neck. A very closely related warbler is the Louisiana Waterthrush, but they barely overlap in their summer ranges.

The Northern breeds much farther north across most of Canada while the Louisiana breeds in the eastern and southern states and even here in Austin. The Northern Waterthrush that migrates farther generally migrates through Austin later in the season – it does not make sense for it to arrive on the breeding ground before the weather supports the foods it depends on.





Northern Waterthrush. Courtesy: James Giroux

**FUN FACTS:**

Northern and Louisiana Waterthrush are very similar and will test your bird watching skills. You could say they are a graduate level identification challenge. Take a photo and consult a field guide for help.



Louisiana Waterthrush. Courtesy: James Giroux

Northern Waterthrush prefer standing water in boggy, swampy bogs while Louisiana like rushing streams.

Good places to look for Northern Waterthrush during migration are Circle Acres adjacent to Roy Guerrero, which has standing water. The boggy parts of Mills Pond are also a good spot for them. Louisiana Waterthrush breed along Bull Creek and other streams in the Hill Country.

**When to Go Birding during Migration?**

If you want to know exactly how many birds might be in the air, night by night, during migration, check [BirdCast](#), a collaborative effort to understand and predict bird movements based on weather radar surveillance. You can even check to see whether birds will be migrating over Austin in low, medium, or high densities with the [local migration alert](#) feature. Keep in mind that even though a large number of birds might be moving through, they may not stick around the next day. Birds are in a hurry to get to their breeding grounds to get the best territories.

Compiled by Travis Audubon volunteer Jane Tillman.

## Bird of the Week: Inca Dove

MAY 16, 2023



Inca Dove. Photo [public domain](#).

Inca dove *Columbina inca*

The cooing of doves permeates most of Texas, particularly in the fall. In fact, once while working for the Temple Daily Telegram, the publisher called a special reporters' meeting because the owner of the paper had driven through so many flocks of doves on her way to work that she demanded a front page story on why so many doves were descending on the Hill Country.

Texas is home to eight dove species, and only three are protected from hunting. Among the three is the Inca Dove.

Austin's most well-known doves are the White-winged Dove and the Mourning Dove. The Inca Dove, however, can be spotted year-round in more urban and suburban areas, thickets, woodland edges, and savannas. The Inca Dove calls the southwest home, but in recent years, this dove has expanded to the north and is now being seen as far north as Colorado, perhaps due to increased human settlement.

Inca Doves have a striking scale pattern and a pale sandy color that makes this bird stand apart from other ground doves. This scaled pattern allows the dove to blend in with either its suburban or desert habitat. In flight, however, the Inca Dove makes a show flashing rufous underwings and sporting long, white-tipped tail feathers. When this bird does take flight, the wingbeats sound similar to the rattle of a rattlesnake.

They generally avoid forested areas, seeking bare ground with short vegetation instead. They eat almost exclusively seeds. They walk along the ground picking at seeds from grasses, flowers, and shrubs. They also eat grains and seeds from bird feeders including black oil sunflower seeds, cracked corn, millet, and nyjer seeds.

Inca Doves nest in trees and shrubs as well as on utility poles, houses, and other structures. Nest height ranges from half a foot to 50 feet above the ground. The male gathers grasses and twigs for the female. He walks up to her with pieces of nesting material in his mouth, climbs up her back, and passes it to her or lays it by her side.

She then arranges the grasses and twigs into a nest and occasionally collects nesting material herself.

The eyes of an Inca Dove may give away what it is feeling. Inca Doves have red eyes, but their red eyes become even brighter when they are threatened by an intruder.

Inca Doves, like other doves, feed their young "pigeon milk" or "crop milk." Both males and females produce this substance in their crops

(the pouch just above the stomach that birds use to store food). The walls of the crop swell with fat and proteins until the cells in the crop wall begin shedding, producing a nutritious, milky-colored secretion. Despite its appearance, it's not related to the milk produced by mammals.

Compiled by Lindsey Hernandez.

Sources include: [eBird](#), [All About Birds](#), and [Texas Parks and Wildlife Department](#).

## Bird of the Week: Blue Jay

MAY 22, 2023



*A group of Blue Jays. Courtesy of Suzanne Labbé – [Macaulay Library](#).*

Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*)

Draw a line on the map north and south of Austin then all points east, and you pretty much have the US year-round range of the Blue Jay. Growing up in the South Carolina low country, the "jeer jeer" or "jay jay" call of this large and handsome songbird was often my unwelcome weekend morning alarm, and I knew once they got going, they would continue all day. These bold and aggressive birds appear to fear nothing; it's not uncommon to see them chasing and bumping into hawks in flight. One of my favorite bird [cams](#) is a Leucistic Red-tailed Hawk nesting somewhere in Tennessee, and the neighboring Blue Jays torment the parents daily.

A very social and intelligent bird of the corvid family, studies indicate that the Blue Jay can recognize and remember human faces, much like ravens and crows.

They can also recognize one another – the black brindling on their face and throat vary, so it may be that there are no two alike. They prefer oak trees and are credited with helping spread the oak due to fact that acorns are one of their favorite foods, and they cache them underground for feeding on them later. They also eat seeds, fruits, grains, and sometimes even other birds. On my backyard feeder, most birds will fly off when a Blue Jay lands to grab peanuts or a mouthful of suet pellets, but the Jay doesn't hang around the feeder to eat – its M.O. is fly in > grab the food > fly off.

Their crest tells the story of how they are feeling – the higher the crest, the higher their aggression level. It's almost always up when they are calling. Interestingly, they tend to be silent when flying; if you hear them calling, they are most likely sitting in a tree. In the wild, they also mimic the Red-Shouldered and Red-Tailed Hawks, either to warn other Jays of the hawks' presence or to fool other birds into thinking a hawk is nearby. In captivity, they learn to mimic human voices and meowing cats and have even been observed using tools.

Blue Jays nest in deciduous trees, like live oak or pecan, or coniferous trees, like pine, between 10 and 25 feet up. Both the male and female participate in nest building with the male mostly bringing in the materials and the female mostly building. They hatch only one brood per year of 2 to 7 eggs. Eggs incubate approximately 18 days (only the female incubates), and the nestlings remain for about 20 days. The parents will feed the nestlings only if the baby birds are in the nest – if one wanders away from the nest and begs, the parents will not feed it until it returns.

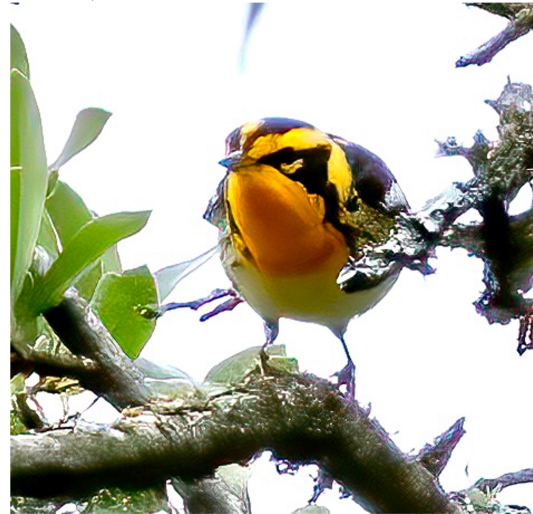
If you are looking to make a corvid friend (and who isn't?), provide peanuts, fresh water, and native oak trees where they can glean acorns, sit, and observe. These birds may not be the actual blue bird of happiness, but they sure are fun to watch.

Compiled by Lisa S. Graham.

Sources include [All About Birds \(Cornell\)](#) and [Audubon Field Guide](#).

## Warblers Play Peekaboo

MAY 22, 2023



*A Blackburnian Warbler.*

A recent Cornell Lab of Ornithology newsletter said “*A fleeting glimpse of a Warbler flitting among branches is enough to get any birder’s pulse racing. Their small size and constant motion can make them tricky to lay eyes on*”. Exactly how I feel about [warblers](#). Photographing them is challenging too but rewarding.



*A Nashville Warbler peeking around leaves.*

My first study was a Nashville Warbler, distinguished by its fully closed eye ring and gray head. Initially, I could only photograph it partly, as it was hidden behind leaves. Then I learned to keep pace with its movement, focus right when it appeared in gaps between leaves, use the camera's burst mode, and avoid full zoom so it stayed within the view zone. After many attempts, I photographed its chestnut crown and its snack of a worm.



*An Orange-crowned Warbler.*

The Orange-crowned Warbler, characterized by its broken eye ring, further shaped my photographing strategies. Its tail was hidden in my initial photographs, so it appeared to be small. When it perched close by, I noticed its tail is as long as the rest of its body.



*A Chestnut-sided Warbler dappled in sunlight.*

Even a short visit from warblers leaves me mesmerized by their beauty. A Chestnut-sided Warbler scanned our oak only briefly, so did the Magnolia and Yellow Warblers on first visit, but they left me elated.



*A Magnolia Warbler.*

Warblers share similar features but their differences are subtle, so identifying them requires analysis. One with black and white stripes ambled briefly on our oak branches; it looked like a Yellow-rumped Warbler that we saw during the [ice storm](#) and in the spring. However, a screenshot taken from video identified it as a Black-and-white Warbler.



*A Black-and-white Warbler.*

Warblers sometimes surprise me. A Yellow Warbler appeared when I was photographing a Yellow-crowned Night Heron.

I wanted to capture a juvenile Tufted Titmouse, but it flew away before I got my camera. Another started whistling and when I was done recording it, I saw something yellow move and started photographing. Its yellow cheek reminded me of the [Golden-cheeked Warbler](#) we saw in Garner State Park. Instead, this was a male Blackburnian Warbler with a flame-orange throat.



*A Yellow Warbler.*

Warblers are usually found on trees, so when I spotted an Ovenbird, a [ground warbler](#), I thought it was a Thrush. It stayed still even when I was nearby, making me wonder if it was hurt. I was relieved when it flew off.



*An Ovenbird spotted on the ground.*

Sometimes identifying warblers feels like solving a jigsaw puzzle. I photographed one with a yellow cheek and thought it was a Golden-cheeked Warbler. But another photo showed its neck was black and its back olive green, revealing it to be a [Black-throated Green Warbler](#).



*Photos to solve the Black-throated Green Warbler puzzle.*

I wonder sometimes if I should just enjoy warblers using binoculars. But photos help both to re-live experiencing them and with identification, as it is hard to recall details from brief sights. Thanks to a Mother's Day weekend treat of photographing a Canada Warbler in Freeman Park, I realized its black-striped necklace distinguishes it from the Magnolia Warbler.



*A Canada Warbler in [Freeman Park](#).*

I enjoyed sharing warbler stories with new and experienced birders. BirdID, All About Birds, and discussion with birders helped with their identification, as well as deciding which pictures to showcase here. I hope to observe more warblers in the future, including a [Colima Warbler in Big Bend National Park](#).

Written by Jaya Ramanathan. Reviewed by Sarita Yeola.

All photos courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.

## Birdathon 2023 Winners

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MAY 24, 2023



© Deepa & Shyam

A HUGE thanks to all who participated in and donated to Birdathon this year! **You helped us raise over \$52,000** – above and beyond our previous record! This has been our most successful Birdathon to date, and we could not have done this without you.

After much deliberating and verifying submissions, the Birdathon Committee has determined the 2023 winners:  
Most species (full day): Gone Pishing (141 species)

Most species (half day): A Wing and a Prairie (54 species)

Most Funds Raised: Gone Pishing (\$12,649 – a record!)

Rarest Bird: Rio Grande Valley Birding (Elf Owl in Hidalgo County)

Reveling in Raptors: Gone Pishing (9 species including vultures)

Wrangling Wrens: Long-Lensed Photographers (22 individuals)

Neatest Non-bird: Los Madrones (Great Texas Earless Lizard)

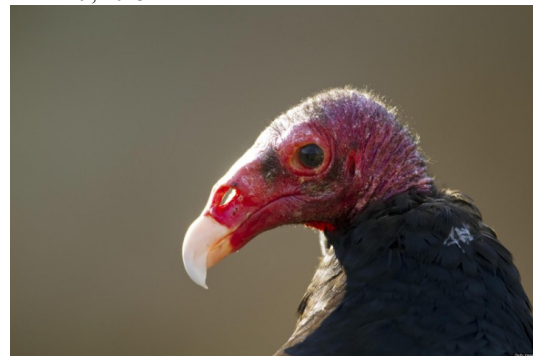
Rookie of the Year: Long-Lensed Photographers

*Photo credit: Elf Owl by Deepa and Shyam Chandra, taken during the Rio Grande Valley Birdathon.*

## Bird of the Week: Turkey Vulture

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MAY 29, 2023



*Photo courtesy of South Dakota Turkey Vultures (Facebook).*

Another name for Turkey vulture is *Cathartes Aura*- emanating catharsis; purifying breeze. Catharsis: to purify, to purge. Perhaps vultures *are* the emblem of purity, which of course, would mean we've had it all wrong. Here in Central Texas, Turkey Vultures are ubiquitous and easy to spot. You're most likely to spot these large, dark birds with bald, red heads perched on top of power lines or riding the thermals with wings outstretched. They are categorized with other predatory birds like Hawks and Eagles because they, too, eat carrion.

Turkey vultures can smell rotting flesh from miles away. Their stomachs are armed with a substance *so* acidic, it wouldn't be a stretch to compare it to battery acid. And this is their superpower- enabling them to ingest diseases like anthrax, rabies, tuberculosis, tetanus, gangrene, botulism- to name a few. As a result of their powerful gut microbiome, their excretions are anti-bacterial.

Every time they defecate, they cover their legs with sanitizer. This enables them to stand directly inside of the decaying body of a diseased cow, without risking getting a lethal infection in their feet or legs.

Vultures *are* the immune system of our one, precious planet.

Purity is not defined by all the things we so dutifully avoid or run from; purity is entering into the coyote body; it is taking, and eating. Transforming what disgusts and threatens to destroy, into that which cleanses and protects.

Apparently, in the visible plane at least, only vultures are ordained for this sacred task. When vultures disappear, other scavenger populations explode. Unarmed with the same cleansing digestive superpowers, these scavengers spread diseases amongst their own communities, and eventually humans. Can you see the paradox? The bald-headed bird- whose scaly red face skin is indistinguishable from the dried blood on his beak- eviscerating coyote intestines on the side of the road; *this* is purity embodied. He does not look away, repulsed- every cell in his body is finely tuned to the register of the dying and discarded. Through his willingness and instinctual drive to consume what we despise and discard, *he* has become our purifying breeze.



*Photo courtesy of James Hammen.*

The irony is that vultures are the single most threatened group of birds on our planet. Here in Central Texas, this can be hard to believe. Some days, it feels like vultures are the only bird in the sky. But this is the reality.

The cause? Poisoning. Vultures have co-evolved over thousands of years with the naturally occurring diseases they miraculously digest, but they are not immune to the poisons we manufacture. This poison comes in many forms. Here in the States, the rapid decline and near extinction of the California Condor was due to “toxic lead bullet fragments in the gut piles left behind by hunters after animals had been field-dressed.”

This ecological nightmare has been met with conservation efforts, resulting in a slow but steady rebound in populations. But, due to their slow reproductive timelines, it is much, much harder to recover a vulture population that is already declining, than it is to prevent these declines in the first place.

Our cultural opinion of vultures as repulsive and despised doesn't diminish the fact that they are one of *the* single most important species on our planet- more essential to the health of all than humans, to be sure. Since vultures are the immune system of our planet, then let us value their necessary work, which both purifies and protects.

By Abby West.

Sources include: [Smithsonian Magazine](#), [Loudoun Wildlife](#), [The University of Utah](#), and [Radiolab](#).

## Bird of the Week: Plain Chachalaca

JUNE 5, 2023



*Photo courtesy of [Texas Parks & Wildlife Department](#).*

Plain chachalaca (*Ortalis vetula*)

I admit that part of my attraction to Chachalacas is that I love saying their name. Go ahead and say it! But other than a cool name, they are very plain birds with loud voices. You will often hear them before seeing them, with their “song” sounding much like their name (*cha-cha-lac!*). They sing in the morning and the evening and use their song to communicate with other Chachalacas. They also sing to announce storms, which can be a useful thing for the humans they live near. Although they allow people to get near them, they are also furtive and wary and will run from perceived danger. When necessary, a group may gang up on a predator.

Living in wooded areas of South Texas, the Plain Chachalaca is the only member of the *Cracidae* family found in North America. Often found in groups of 15 or more members, they feed in trees or on the ground, eating bugs, fruit, flowers, and seeds.

Often described as a long-tailed tropical chicken, Chachalacas are medium-sized, about the size of a pheasant, and males and females look virtually alike. Aptly named, they are, to put it plainly, plain, having a greyish head and neck with a dull olive-brown body and wings. Their belly is pale to ochraceous, and the tail

is blackish with green gloss and buffy-white tip. In the wild, they live up to eight years. A few have been introduced into other areas of South Texas and even in Georgia, but they are considered invasive there, often damaging crops. Fortunately, the introduced group in Georgia are on an island, and since they don’t fly far, seem contained.

During breeding season, the Chachalacas bare throat patch turn dark red on both males and females, indicating they are ready to mate. Males and females gather nesting material, primarily use the leftover nests of other birds, adding to and enlarging the nest. It is often mistaken for a squirrel’s nest or a pile of leaf refuse. They mate and lay eggs from March to September, usually nesting near food sources. The female lays a clutch of 3-4 white eggs that take about 22-25 days for the eggs to hatch. The young stay with the parents until October, and they appear to be monogamous during mating season with both sexes caring for the young.



*The red throat patch on the Chachalaca.  
Photo by John Arvin.*

Although they can fly, they do not migrate and only fly short distances. They fly faster than many other birds, but because of their preference to stay close to home, there is little flight data available. Other than people, their only predators are snakes, raccoons, and large owls. Although not as popular with hunters as other game birds, it is legal to hunt Chachalacas.



As would be expected in the Rio Grande Valley, Plain Chachalacas are most active in the mornings and quiet in the heat of the day. One of the best places to view Chachalacas is at [Quinta Mazatlan](#). A world birding center in McAllen, TX, the grounds of this mansion attract many species not easily found anywhere else in the United States. Although not the most colorful or charismatic of birds, the Plain Chachalaca is a great find!

Compiled by Jeanette Larson.

Sources include [All About Birds](#) and [Texas Parks & Wildlife](#), and [World Birding Center](#).

## Bird of the Week: Eastern Whip-poor-will

JUNE 14, 2023



Photo credit: Tom Murray, [Flickr](#).

Whip-poor-will (*Antrostomus vociferus*) Snuggled down in forested ground, the Whip-poor-will blends in perfectly with their surrounding of decomposing leaves, twigs, and brown earth. Finding themselves a star in poems and country ballads, the Whip-poor-will's song can be heard clearly in the night, a sweet repetition, but actually seeing this nocturnal bird is a tricky task.

The Whip-poor-will is a nightjar with a rounded head and a complicated pattern of brown and gray plumage. The bird has a stout chest making it appear front-heavy. Because the plumage camouflages the bird so well in

its surroundings during the day, the best time to see the bird is on a moonlit night.

Whip-poor-wills forage visually and are more active during brighter nights. This cycle of creativity has linked the bird's breeding to the lunar calendar. Hatching tends to occur with a waxing moon, thus the first weeks of the nestling's life are synchronous with the greatest periods of moonlight.

At night they rest on the ground or perch horizontally on low trees and fly up to catch moths and other aerial insects. They chant their loud, namesake "whip-poor-will" song continuously on spring and summer evenings. The song may seem to go on endlessly; a patient observer once counted 1,088 "whip-poor-wills" given rapidly without a break. By day, the bird sleeps on the forest floor, or on a horizontal log or branch.

Perhaps due to its elusiveness and humans catching only glimpses of the Whip-poor-will at night, lore has formed around the Whip-poor-will and its bird family Caprimulgidae. Dating back to Aristotle who is credited with creating the bird's nickname "goatsucker." In AD 77, Pliny the Elder wrote of the bird as a night thief who visits the goat pens at night to suck on goats' udders.

Later lore attributes the Whip-poor-will as the harbinger of death and is featured in HP Lovecraft's *The Dunwich Horror* and Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*.

Whip-poor-wills are visitors to Central Texas. Look and listen for them when they pass through during spring migration.

Compiled by Lindsey Hernandez.

Sources: [eBird](#), [All About Birds](#), [Texas Breeding World Atlas](#) and [Sibley Guide](#).

# June Bird Forecast

JUNE 15, 2023

## What to watch for in June: Cheerful Chickadees and Colorful Cardinals

The Carolina Chickadee is a familiar bird in Austin. It is common in neighborhoods and parks with mature deciduous and/or evergreen trees. Chickadees readily visit seed feeders too. They are partial to black oil sunflower seeds. It's easy to take these perky birds for granted, but learning more about them may increase your enjoyment of these small active birds.



*Carolina Chickadee with Sunflower Seed.*

*Courtesy: [The Online Zoo](#)*

Carolina Chickadees are about 4.75 inches long and weigh about 1/3 ounce. You get the idea of how light these birds are if you imagine holding four sheets of 8.5 x 11 paper in a business envelope with one hand and three chickadees in the other! It's difficult to tell the male from the female by looks alone. They both have black caps, bright white cheeks, and black bibs. Their backs are pale gray with whitish underparts. Studies show that the males are slightly larger, but that is hard to see unless you have the bird in hand. The male sings, especially during the breeding season, while the female makes a variety of calls including the snake display. The snake display includes a call similar to white noise, and sometimes includes sounds produced by the bird hitting its feathers and head against the nest materials and cavity. It might make a

predator think twice about entering the nest hole.



*Carolina Chickadee Excavating a Nest Cavity.*

*Courtesy: Jane Tillman*

Carolina Chickadees are found across the eastern 2/3 of Texas, up to Kansas and across the southeastern U.S. but ranging into New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Its northern relative is the slightly larger Black-capped Chickadee.



*Carolina Chickadee with Caterpillar.*

*Courtesy: [The Online Zoo](#)*

Carolina Chickadees typically only have one brood per year. They begin nesting in March. They are cavity nesters, using natural holes, such as where tree limbs have broken off, but they will use nest boxes and nesting tubes. Occasionally they do some excavation of natural cavities. Typically their nests will be found about 9 to 10 feet up in trees. The entry holes are small, and therefore chickadees are not generally a host for the Brown-headed Cowbird which lays its eggs in other species nests.



*Carolina Chickadee Gleaning. Courtesy: [The Online Zoo](#)*

The female chickadee lays an average of six eggs, and she does most of the incubation. Birds fledge between 16 and 19 days after hatching. Amazingly, after 2 to 3 weeks the fledglings are independent and disperse. Most of them will be capable of breeding the following year. It takes between 6,000 and 9,000 caterpillars to raise one chickadee brood from eggs to fledglings. If you like chickadees eliminate or reduce pesticide spraying.

Have you noticed fewer chickadees at your bird feeder in the summer? Like many birds, Carolina Chickadees switch their diets with the seasons. In the spring, summer and fall, 80-90% of their diet is insects and spiders. In winter their diet is about 50/50 animal and plant matter. Carolina Chickadees are acrobatic in their foraging. They glean insects like caterpillars from leaves and dried leaf clusters, hanging upside down to grab them. Less often they probe bark and branches for tasty morsels. Do you ever see chickadees foraging on the ground? It's very rare to see them there, although sometimes they do move to shrubs and vines to check for invertebrates. Note their feeder behavior too. Titmice, cardinals and jays are all dominant over the chickadees and will cause them to scatter. Does the bird stay at the feeder to eat the seed, or does it fly away? Take time to watch and see. Some research has shown that supplemental feeding at backyard feeders improves survivorship in chickadees. If you do decide to feed them, be sure to keep feeders clean and seed fresh. Moldy seeds can be fatal.

### Seeing Red

The red male Northern Cardinal and its more subtly-colored brownish mate with red highlights are also familiar neighborhood birds. Females and males both sing, so as a fun summer goal see if you can find her singing. (Often she will be on the nest.) Unlike chickadees, cardinals do raise second and even third broods in a single year. If you see a male cardinal feeding a begging bird in June take a look and check to see if the begging bird (fluttering its wings and following the adult around) has a black bill. Fledglings have black bills but otherwise look very much like adult females. Roughly 70% of the cardinal's diet is animal matter and 30% is invertebrates. Like most songbirds, cardinal nestlings are raised on invertebrates. Learn more about this beautiful bird [online](#).



*Male Northern Cardinal. Courtesy: James Giroux*



*Juvenile Northern Cardinal. Courtesy: Jane Tillman*

**Lights Out continue through June 15**  
Most migrating birds have passed through Austin already this spring.

However, there are late migrants that perhaps have the farthest distance to travel or are tarried along the way to get fitter for the remainder of their journeys. [Keep lights out](#) from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. to give them the best chance of safely finding their way through central Texas.

Compiled by Travis Audubon volunteer, Jane Tillman.

## Greg Lasley 2023 Photography Contest Winners Revealed

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JUNE 21, 2023



Thank you to everyone who submitted their work this year's Greg Lasley Photography Contest!

We received nearly 200 photos – and our judges Nora Chovanec (Travis Audubon Design Director) and Brad James (Master Birder and Photographer) scored the photos based on the following criteria:

Technical: Focus, Exposure, Lighting, Print Quality

Subject: Creative Use of Subject, Composition, Impact, Uniqueness

### **HERE ARE THE WINNERS:**

**5TH PLACE: VERMILION  
FLYCATCHER BY JEFF  
PATTERSON**



**4TH PLACE: SCISSOR-TAILED  
FLYCATCHER BY REBECCA LOUISE**



**3RD PLACE: REDDISH EGRET BY  
MARK LAUSSADE**



**1ST PLACE: CASSIN'S SPARROW  
BY ALISON STOKES**



**2ND PLACE: LITTLE BLUE HERONS  
BY KATHERINE DANIELS**

