



# MURMURATIONS

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**The Newsletter of Travis Audubon \* VOL. 71, NO. 5 Sept./Oct. 2023**



# *A Note*

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Hello Travis Audubon friends and members,

This summer heat and drought may be slowing all of us down (birds and people alike!), but we've enjoyed lots of engagement with members and friends during these dog days.

This year's Baker Nature Day held at the Baker Sanctuary kicked things off in early June and had record attendance. This event is held every summer and opens up the sanctuary, usually reserved for members-only access, to the local community. Event activities were great fun for families and educational for all ages. A newer summertime event, our one-day Youth Birding Camp, celebrated its second year at Richard Moya Park with 20 campers. This is another great opportunity to get kids outside and learning about our fascinating local birds.

July brought our annual Purple Martin parties, held at La Frontera in Round Rock this year, with about 1,000 people visiting the roost across three weekends of events. Amy's Ice Creams helped make this year even more special with their purple ube ice cream flavor. We also sold t-shirts with amazing Purple Martin artwork designed by Alex Moreland and Kevin Urrutia O'Reilly—our most successful party merch to date!

Looking forward to the fall, we have not only the thrill of migration but this year's Victor Emanuel Conservation Award celebration on October 12, 2023. We are delighted to honor George Bristol for his work with state and national parks and all the conservation success that entails. Tables and tickets are available now and we hope you'll join us.

October seems like a long time from now, but it will be here before we know it, hopefully bringing some restorative rain and some cooler temperatures. We hope to see you at Travis Audubon events as we move into the fall and we are, as ever, incredibly grateful for your time and support.

Happy birding,

Nicole



Nicole Netherton  
Executive Director

# People

## AT TRAVIS AUDUBON

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*Development Manager*  
*Operations and Finance Coordinator*  
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*Baker Team*  
*Blair Woods Core Team*  
*Chaetura Canyon Management*

*Commons Ford*

*Field Trip*  
*Hornsby Bend*  
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(open)  
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Carter Smith

# Upcoming Events

WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

September 2023

October 2023

**September 2**

Beginners' Bird Walk: Brushy Creek Lake Park



**September 6**

Commons Ford Bird Walk



**September 9**

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Survey



**September 10**

Class: Gardening for Wildlife

**September 12**

Class: Raptors 2023



**September 16**

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Walk



**September 21**

Speaker Series - Mountain Cedars: the Limestone Junipers of Texas with Elizabeth McGreevey



**September 23**

Young Birders Club: Commons Ford

**September 24**

Let's Go Birding Together (LGBT)



**September 27**

Barton Springs Bird Walk



Family Walk at Blair Woods: Tree ID with TreeFolks

**September 30**

Blair Woods Restoration Day

**October 3**

eBird Workshop Fall 2023

**October 4**

Joint Travis Audubon-Bexar Audubon Field Trip to Commons Ford

**October 7**

Commons Ford Bird Walk

Beginners' Bird Walk

**October 10**

Joint Travis Audubon-Bexar Audubon Field Trip: Mitchell Lake Audubon Center

**October 12**

2023 Victor Emanuel Conservation Award Celebration Honoring George Bristol

**October 14**

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Survey

Baker Sanctuary Restoration Day

Morning Canyon Crawl at Chaetura Canyon

**October 21**

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Walk

Family Walk at Blair Woods: Beginner Birding

Class: Birding by Ear Workshop

**October 28**

Young Birders Club: Commons Ford



# 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.*

## **Lifetime Members**

*Membership at \$1,500*

The Aeschbach Family  
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Patsy Turner and Tim Stuart  
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The Wadehra Family  
The Wiengarten Family  
Isabel Welland  
The Wheeler Family

Jo Wilson  
John Wilson  
The Yates Family

## **Leadership Giving Circle**

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

The Bloomfield Family  
Elise M. Bright  
Frances and Oskar Cerbins  
Ann and Don Connell  
Stacia DeBill  
Ann Friou  
Mr. and Mrs. William  
Gammon  
Alice and Chris Gunter  
Meta Hunt and Trent Miller  
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Susan Miller  
Jane and Nick Netherton  
Andy and Nona Sansom  
The Scruggs Family  
The Sexton Family  
The Terhune Family  
Jane Tillman and Mark Lyon  
Jo Wilson and Carol Bennett  
The Winkler Family

# ***Thank You***

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

## ***Wise Owl Sustaining Members***

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

Barbara Anderson  
Judith Bailey  
Alan Bair  
Kendal Barnard  
Robert Baumgardner  
John Bloomfield  
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## ***Scissor-tailed Flycatcher Members***

*Annual membership of \$500*

Elise Bright  
The Carson and Gallaway Family  
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Joanna Fried  
Carla Kenyon  
Suzie and Patrick McCann  
Rose Ann Reeser

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*Annual membership of \$250*

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Alissa Bassana  
Alyss Behrend

David Bowman  
Rogene Kay Burhdorf  
Cathleen Day  
Sandra Nicole Douglas  
Christel Erickson-Collins  
Claire Field  
Steve Frank Hejl  
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Mary and Lynn Moak  
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Martha T. Roman  
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Kim Soechting  
Mark Stadtherr  
Sally Swisher  
Paul and Ellington Tough  
Laura Tull  
Judy and Laurence Willcott  
Pat Yingst  
Rachel Sneed Zinn

# Thank You

TO OUR BUSINESS PARTNERS



# Thank You

TO OUR 2022 VICTOR EMANUEL  
CONSERVATION AWARD CELEBRATION SPONSORS

**Great Horned Owl Sponsors**

Shield Ranch  
Peggy & Matt Winkler

**Great Blue Heron Sponsors**

Dobbs Run Ranch

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Alice & Chris Gunter  
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Nona & Dr. Andrew Sansom  
Stacy & Carter Smith  
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# Thank You

TO OUR 2022 VICTOR EMANUEL  
CONSERVATION AWARD CELEBRATION SPONSORS

*Great Horned Owl Sponsor*



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# Updates

FROM THE MURMURATIONS BLOG

## Bird of the Week: Red Knot

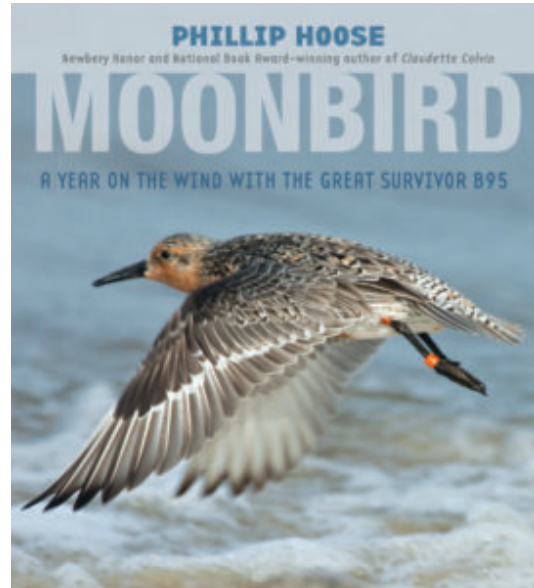
JULY 3, 2023



Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*)

Red Knots are sandpipers that migrate long distances. In fact, one Red Knot banded in Argentina in 1992 still “commutes” annually for 20,000 miles, flying between Tierra Del Fuego and Arctic Canada. Phillip Hoose wrote about B95 (his band number) in *Moonbird: A Year on the Wind with the Great Survivor B95*. He is the oldest known living member of his species, last re-captured in 2016. His name comes from the calculation that he has flown to the moon and back during his lifetime.

Red knots are found on every continent, except Antarctica, and spend non-breeding time on the Texas coast and, indeed, all of the US coasts. In Texas you are likely to find them along the sandy beaches or mudflats in May and September. Their non-breeding plumage is plain, gray and white, but they are plump, larger than Sanderlings and smaller than Willets, with a medium length bill.



Cover of the book, *Moonbird: A Year on the Wind with the Great Survivor B95*.

In the spring, they have a Robin-like red breast. Plumage is similar between sexes. Nesting in the far north, the first nest was found by Admiral Peary at the North Pole in 1909. Three to four olive-colored eggs are laid and both sexes incubate. It is thought that the male may do more of the incubation. After hatching, the young feed themselves and become independent at about 3 weeks.

They feed primarily on mollusks, often by sight but also by probing in the sand and mud using touch to get below the surface. A specialized sensory organ alerts them to changes in pressure, helping them to find a meal. Mollusks are swallowed whole and crushed in a gizzard. They have the largest gizzards relative to their size of any shorebird. Red Knots also eat insects and vegetation. During migration Red Knots may congregate in large masses, especially in Delaware Bay in New Jersey where they feed on protected horseshoe crabs. (A group is called a “tangle.”)



*Two Red Knots feeding in the wet sand.*

Known as “jump” migrants, Red knots may fly up to 5,000 miles between staging areas. During non-breeding times, they are more solitary, although a population of 1,500 was found on Mustang Island outside of Corpus Christi.

By Jeanette Larson.

References: [Cornell Lab All About Birds](#), [Audubon Guide to North American Birds](#)

## Bird of the Week: Chimney Swift

JULY 11, 2023



*Many Chimney Swifts circling the top of a chimney. Photo credit: Ben Cvengros.*

Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*)

The sleek, elegant, speedy Chimney Swift brings summer to life for many in the Texas Hill Country. Described by some as a “flying cigar”, Chimney Swifts appear as a dark gray silhouette playing across the sky. More closely related to hummingbirds than swallows, they have a tiny black body, curved wings and round head, making the bird very aerodynamic. The bird can also be identified in flight by its stiff wingbeats and fluid call.

Do not expect to see one of these swifts sitting still, because they neither perch nor walk along the ground. These birds are part of the family Apodidae, which translated means “footless”. Swifts were depicted in art and literature as creatures without feet until medieval times because of their quick speed and inability to perch. Instead, the small bird’s strong legs cling to vertical walls in chimneys, hollow trees, or caves.

In English poet [Anne Stevenson’s poem “Swifts,”](#) she writes a wonderful description of the small birds as created by a Great Raven:

*“So the Raven took their legs and bound them into their bodies.*

*He bent their wings like boomerangs, honed them like knives.*

*He streamlined their feathers and stripped them of velvet.*

*Then he released them, Never to Return*

*Inscribed on their feet and wings.”*

Like Stevenson’s above description, Chimney Swifts are one of the most aerial birds, flying at all times unless roosting overnight or nesting. They perform aerial courtship displays within 2 weeks of arriving on their North American breeding grounds, forming monogamous pairs for the season.

Often an unmated helper may assist a breeding pair with rearing the young. After the young fledge, small groups of parents and young from several chimneys join larger staging flocks in bigger chimneys nearby.

At the end of summer they gather into large groups to migrate to South America.

Before the arrival of European colonists, Chimney Swifts nested and roosted in large hollow trees. In 1682 the first swift was found nesting in a chimney at a colonist's cabin in Maine. Over the centuries, Chimney Swift nesting sites switched almost entirely to chimneys. [Naturalist John Burroughs](#) describes in 1904 the "thunder of their wings at all hours of the day and night" heard when Chimney Swifts nested in his cabin chimney. Later Burroughs describes the site of watching "10,000" Chimney Swifts funneling into a large smoke stack near Boston:

"...filling the air above a whole square like a whirling swarm of huge black bees, but saluting the ear with a multitudinous chipping, instead of a humming... After a great many feints and playful approaches, the whirling ring of birds would suddenly grow denser above the chimney; then a stream of them, as if drawn down by some power of suction, would pour into the opening. For only a few seconds would this downward rush continue; then, as if the spirit of frolic had again got the upper hand of them, the ring would rise, and the chipping and circling go on. In a minute or two the same [maneuver] would be repeated, the chimney, as it were, taking its swallows at intervals to prevent choking. It usually took a half-hour or more for the birds all to disappear down its capacious throat."

Due to the disuse of chimneys, ill-timed cleaning of chimneys and capping of chimneys, Chimney Swifts are in peril. Chimney Swift conservationists Georgan and Paul Kyle have [written a book](#) on how to help by building towers to compensate for the loss of habitable chimneys. The Kyles also created and currently steward the [Chaetura Canyon](#) sanctuary for Travis Audubon Society. It's a special place well worth a visit.

Compiled and written by Lindsey Hernandez.

Sources include [All About Birds](#), [Texas Parks & Wildlife](#), and the [Audubon Field Guide to North American Birds](#).

## Observations from a First-time Visit to Blair Woods

JULY 11, 2023



*Trail entrance with picnic benches.*

By Emily Reyner

In summer 2023 I made my first trip to the Blair Woods nature preserve in East Austin. While I had never visited this preserve before I was excited to see what the 10-acre sanctuary had to offer.

To get to Blair Woods you take a turn off busy East MLK Boulevard and onto a narrow gravel road. From the street it is a bit hidden, but as soon as you make your turn it feels like a whole new world. Trees and shrubs begin to rise around you and by the time you make it to the parking lot the urban hustle and bustle seems far behind. The end of the drive greets you with a small parking lot, the trailhead, and some historic buildings from a time before Dr. Frank Blair, a renowned herpetologist, owned the property. The buildings themselves, while clearly many decades old, still appear to be very well preserved and cared for.



*Historic shed and dairy farm.*

Approaching the trailhead, you can find an easy-to-read map, nature guide, and a message welcoming the public to explore and appreciate the nature within the preserve. The trails themselves are well maintained and some have even been recently renovated to be accessible for wheelchairs and strollers. While the preserve has more than a mile of mulched and paved trails, the winding, crisscrossing paths make it feel like each turn will bring you to something new. Trail signs pop up along the way, with information on native plants, land management, and wildlife habitats which provide insight into the environment around you. The signs provide details on the ongoing upkeep of the preserve and give you a glimpse into Travis Audubon's mission for managing the property.



*Signage regarding habitat restoration.*

Just a few minutes on the trails and it's not hard to spot the wildlife that calls this place

home. The park is filled with birdsong, the rustling of lizards in the leaves, and butterflies fluttering across the walkways. A small pond has also been created where you can see waterfowl on the banks, turtles basking in the sun, and dragonflies dancing on the water. An airplane overhead was the only reminder that I was still in the heart of the city and not surrounded by miles of wild nature. Aside from the trails, the preserve offers several other points of interest as well. A busy pollinator garden, a picturesque water feature, and a group of picnic tables that offer a great place to get out of the sun.



*View of pond from the pier.*

By the end of my trip, I found that Blair Woods is a great place to get away from the urban hustle and bustle without even leaving the city. The trails are welcoming, nature is abundant, and the quiet and calm atmosphere makes for a great escape. It is clear as well that so much love goes into maintaining this property and it has a strong connection to nature, history, and wildlife.

# Audubon Texas Honors Virginia Rose, Birdability Leader

JULY 11, 2023



Last month, Audubon Texas [announced](#) the 2023 honorees of the Terry Hershey Award, as part of the [Texas Women in Conservation Program](#), which debuted in 2015 to honor the role women play in the conservation field. The honorees this year included Virginia Rose, Travis Audubon Board Member and Founder of [Birdability](#). “Virginia [has] a passion for expanding accessibility and bringing down barriers to enjoying the outdoors. [Her] work and [her] leadership are more important than ever in the movement to protect birds,” said Lisa Gonzalez, Vice President and Executive Director of Audubon Texas.

The Birdability initiative works to ensure the birding community and the outdoors are welcoming, inclusive, safe and accessible for everybody. The group’s education, outreach and advocacy efforts focus on people with mobility challenges, blindness or low vision, chronic illness, intellectual or developmental disabilities, mental illness, and those who are neurodivergent, deaf or hard of hearing or who have other health concerns. In addition to

current birders, this movement strives to introduce birding to people with disabilities and other health concerns who are not yet birders so they too can experience the joys of birding.

In honor of receiving this esteemed award, Virginia Rose prepared some remarks reflecting on her experiences starting as a birder with Travis Audubon and growing into a leader of an international movement. Read her speech below.

*“Thank you, Texas Women in Conservation, for nominating me for the Terry Hershey Award. I am truly honored to join this amazing group of women in 2023. It is incredibly humbling to be nominated, especially when I look back at the women preceding me. Wow. Now I have to live up to it! I am so grateful for the work that TWIC has done. I have these women to thank for providing my birding opportunities and my ability to help others understand and practice conservation. I somehow did not realize I was the next generation of female conservation leaders helping to steward the next generation of female conservation leaders. Thank you for bringing it to my attention!”*

*Thank you, Travis Audubon, for accepting me on every level 20 years ago. Teachers, field trip leaders and field trip participants encouraged me. No one ever said no. Cliff Shackelford picked me up and carried me up the wooden stairs at Smith Oaks to see the rookery and burdened the poor guy behind me with carrying the wheelchair. Laurie Foss and Sheila Hargis hauled me up mountains and over fallen logs to see Swainson’s Warbler. Byron Stone with the help of other walking field trippers brought the LeConte’s Sparrow TO me. Jeff and Stan and George and Dennis and so many others have helped hoist me and my chair up and down hills, curbs, roots, mud, in and out of cars, trucks, boats and golf carts to see the Golden Crown Sparrow and through snow and ice in New Mexico to see purple finches. In short, it was through Travis Audubon that I found what I call my best self and my greatest happiness in birding.*

*Two Travis Audubon members had more to do with setting Birdability in motion: Frances Cerbins and Karen Bartoletti. Thank you, Frances, for insisting I call the Austin American Statesman to announce my Birdathon in 2018. All kinds of amazing opportunities found me thereafter. Frances continues to be one of my loyal champions. Thank you, Frances. Karen Bartoletti agreed to be one of the first board members. Her expertise and experience has been and continues to be the main rudder. She has worked tirelessly for years helping Birdability become a successful nonprofit. Thank you, Karen, again. Without these two women, Birdability would not be what it is today with 15 countries represented on the Birdability Map, 35 captains representing 25 states, 4 new board members, and a brand new Executive Director chosen after eliminating 69 other candidates!! Now can the two of you please take over Birdability?*

*I must thank people all over the country who were just waiting for Birdability. They picked me up, put me on their shoulders and sent me forward, providing the groundswell for the movement.*

*I obviously need to thank my family for instilling in me the love of nature, the early experience of backpacking and lessons in curiosity, exploration, independence and leaving things better than how I found them. Both parents taught me to change things that “weren’t right.” My sisters have been my guiding stars throughout.*

*It means so much to me that my passion resonates with others. It seems still so obvious and rectifiable to help people with disabilities get outside birding, the gateway to conservation. Did you know one in four people have a disability in this country? That’s a lot of people waiting to find their best selves and their greatest happiness! That’s also a lot of potential conservationists!*

*This award affirms my past, present, and future work, and I couldn’t be more proud. Thank you, everyone.”*

Congratulations on your well-deserved honor, Virginia!

## July Bird Forecast: “Summer Singers”

JULY 12, 2023

It might be hard for us to celebrate the overwhelming heat, but some birds find something to sing about. Get up a little earlier to hear them as they often seek shade later in the day. Carolina Wrens and Northern Cardinals are some of the early risers, singing before and at daybreak. You may hear Northern Mockingbirds imitating other birds with three to six repetitions, before switching to another tune. White-winged Doves chime in with their “who cooks for you” calls. Keep an ear out for the House Finch’s musical song, too. In the late afternoon and early evening it’s not unusual for these species to sing again before going to roost.



*A Carolina Wren singing. Photo: Jane Tillman*

### **Red-hot House Finches**

The male House Finch is a noticeably red bird in the Austin area. It’s not completely red like the male Northern Cardinal and male Summer Tanager, though. It has a red-capped head and is also red on the throat. Its red breast can be stunning. When it flies the red on its rump is visible.

The 6-inch bird has a grayish brown back and wings, with blurry streaks on its belly and flanks. Alas, the female is drab gray-brown overall with blurry grayish streaks on its breast, belly, and flanks.



*A female Northern Cardinal singing. Photo: The Online Zoo*

While most male House Finches have bright red accents, in some males the reds are replaced by yellow or yellowish-orange. You might think you are looking at a different species! House Finches, like many birds, get their feather colors of red and yellow from carotenoid pigments in the foods they eat – they can't make it themselves. Females mate with the reddest males; perhaps their color signifies healthy, fit individuals capable of finding food and providing for young. (Female Northern Cardinals also prefer the brightest red males.)



*A male House Finch. Photo: James Giroux*

The House Finch originally only occurred in the arid Southwest. That changed in 1939 when a few birds were released from a pet

store in New York, where they were being sold as "Hollywood Finches." Subsequent generations gradually spread west. At the same time the southwestern birds spread east. In Texas they have now been recorded in every county, although they are still uncommon in parts of the South Texas Brush Country.



*A pair of male and female House Finches. Photo: Jim DeVries*

There are several reasons that House Finches may be such successful colonizers. They are flexible in nesting sites in both urban and rural areas. They make their cup-shaped nests in both deciduous and coniferous trees, but also on rock ledges, on building ledges and in building vents, and in vines and hanging planters. In addition, they will make several nesting attempts per year, from 1-6 broods! Compare this to a cardinal's or tanager's 1-2 broods.



*A yellow-variant male House Finch. Photo: Paul and Anne Wheeler*

This high number of nesting attempts may be attributed to food availability. Most songbirds feed their nestlings caterpillars to provide protein for the growing birds.

Usually these are abundant early in the breeding season. House Finches on the other hand almost exclusively feed their nestlings plant foods such as seeds, buds, flowers, and fruit. This lack of dependence on insects to raise their young opens up a much longer breeding season.

The House Finch song often ends with a “zhree” buzzy note. If you hear a long drawn out set of musical notes ending with this upslurred or downslurred “zhree” start looking for a House Finch. Females will occasionally sing, most often in spring. Not sure if you hear the “zhree?” Download the free Merlin app from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, point your phone towards the bird and start recording, while staying still and silent. If the app hears a House Finch well enough, it should identify it. Try to see the bird to clinch the ID. House Finch and summering Painted Bunting songs are somewhat similar. However, the ending of the Painted Bunting’s song just trails off, like the bird lost its train of thought, missing the signature “zhree.” Commons Ford Ranch Metropolitan Park is a good place to compare House Finch and Painted Bunting songs, and the birds themselves. Both species will be singing in July. Look for the House Finches perching on sunflowers in the prairie. The Painted Buntings often perch in small trees nearby.



*A Painted Bunting’s (pictured) song is similar to the House Finch’s. Photo: Jane Tillman*

House Finches are gregarious birds, attracted to black-oil sunflower seeds at backyard feeders. Unfortunately they are susceptible to an infectious conjunctivitis which is easily spread at feeders. The infection is visible as red, crusty, swollen or watery eyes. If you see

a sick bird, take your feeder down to limit the spread, [clean it](#) and wait a week or so to put it back up.

### **It’s Swallow Time!**

July brings lots of Purple Martins, North America’s largest swallow, to Austin. They form a migratory roost here, gaining weight and strength for their long journey to South America where they will winter. Travis Audubon volunteers are looking for the roost’s location, but it’s not obvious yet. Check the Travis Audubon website to find out when and where the [Purple Martin Parties](#) will be held during July and August.

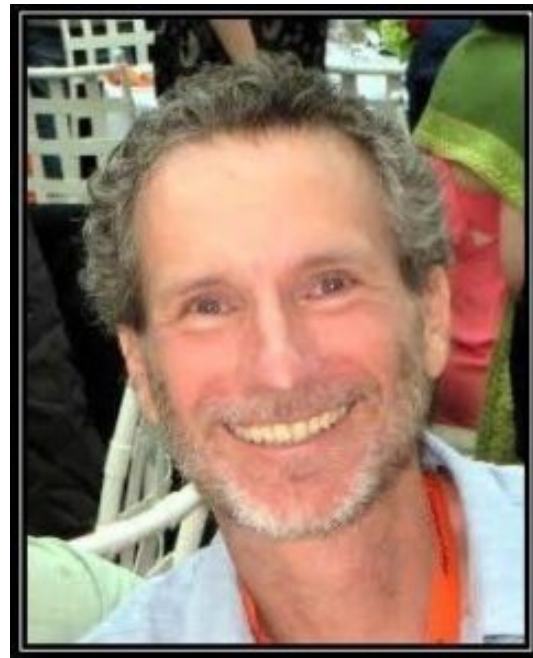
Compiled by Travis Audubon Volunteer Jane Tillman for [KXAN](#).

## **In Memoriam: Dr. Peter Beck and Susan Rieff**

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JULY 13, 2023

Travis Audubon lost two incredible friends and members earlier this summer, both after long battles with cancer. We are grateful for the time we had with each of them and send our love and condolences to their families.





Dr. Peter Beck, 59, was an inspiring educator and enthusiastic Travis Audubon Master Birder who passed away on June 22, 2023. A native of Southern California, Peter was educated at Occidental College, Yale, and Indiana University. Peter taught undergraduates in the Environmental Science and Policy program and graduate students in the Professional Science Masters program in Environmental Management and Sustainability at St. Edward's University. He often invited TAS staff to come speak in his class, and his students' passion for birding (inspired by Peter) was always a highlight. He did field work in Kenya, Uganda, and Panama, and led student groups to Costa Rica to study tropical ecosystems. Closer to home, Peter was a regular on field trips at Commons Ford and was also involved with Sustainable Austin and the Sierra Club. Peter was a lifelong nature lover with an adventurous spirit, traveling the world to hike, teach, study, and take photos of wild animals and birds. Birding was a favorite hobby that allowed him to enjoy just about anywhere, saying "there is always a new bird to see." You can read more in his [obituary](#) and on his [page at St. Edwards](#).



Susan Rieff, 67, was an accomplished civil servant and environmentalist who passed away on July 6, 2023. She served on the Travis Audubon Board of Directors (2016-2018) and Advisory Board (2018-2023). An Arkansan by birth, she ended up in Texas after being inspired to study environmental science at TCU and public policy at the LBJ School at UT Austin. Susan served as the first Director of Natural Resource Protection at Texas Parks and Wildlife, as Assistant Commissioner under Texas Agricultural Commissioner Jim Hightower, as Director of Environmental

Policy for Governor Ann Richards, and as Policy Director for Land Stewardship at the National Wildlife Federation. She served as Executive Director for the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center from 2004 to 2015, and under her leadership, the Center became part of The University of Texas at Austin in 2006. Susan was also involved in endangered species issues during her time with Governor Richards and helped to protect the Golden-cheeked warblers and Black-capped vireos we still enjoy today. You can read more in her interview with the [Texas Legacy Project](#) and watch a video of her profile as an inaugural recipient of the Terry Hershey award from [Audubon Texas](#).

## Window Strikes Take a High Toll on Birds

JULY 14, 2023



*Bird-friendly glass at The Audubon Discovery Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.  
Photo credit: Luke Franke.*

Bustling Austin is growing not only out but up, and that poses a deadly threat to birds — not just our native species but those migrating through here.

Window collisions are one of the chief causes of bird fatalities across the country.

Buildings with highly reflective glass windows and doors can be lethal because the glass acts as a mirror, reflecting trees or blue sky. Birds that mistakenly fly into these windows often die.

Even those that are able to fly off may have head trauma or a broken beak, which prevents eating or drinking. Young birds who are inexperienced fliers are particularly vulnerable.



*Victims of window collisions. Courtesy of [Madison Audubon](#).*

Austin’s building boom is drawing concern for the number of structures with highly reflective glass. Some projects are planned near major waterways or green belts where bird traffic is high.

Travis Audubon is actively reaching out to developers and suggesting ways to mitigate bird collisions. City planners and commercial builders need to remember that Austin is fortunate to be located in the Central Flyway — an aerial “superhighway” that birds use during their spring migration from south of the border to their northern breeding grounds. As cooler fall weather sets in, these migrants retrace their route on the flyway, returning to habitats as far south as Argentina.

“Austin’s location on the Central Flyway is why we see such a huge variety of birds in the spring and fall as many migrating species stop here to rest and bulk up before resuming their journey,” says Chris Gunter, president of the Travis Audubon board of directors. “Birds tend to stay close to waterways, such as the Colorado River, and wooded areas. That’s why placing highly reflective glass buildings in their path is a recipe for disaster.”

One important deterrent is to incorporate bird-friendly design in new buildings. Travis

Audubon is consulting with Endeavor Real Estate Group on redevelopment plans for the former Austin American-Statesman site at Riverside and Congress. The 19-acre property, which sits on the banks of Lady Bird Lake, is slated to contain multiple high-rise buildings as well as green space.

Endeavor representatives have been receptive to strategies such as reducing the degree of glass reflectivity, Gunter said. Discussions with the developer and their architects produced an agreement to use glass throughout the project with a lower exterior reflection than what was originally proposed. Now the entire project will use glass with no more than 20 percent reflectivity, Gunter said.

Travis Audubon has been invited to suggest other bird-friendly design features for the redevelopment, which is moving forward with the Austin City Council’s approval.

Another building project in the sights of Travis Audubon is a major mixed-use redevelopment proposed in East Austin at the home of the Borden Dairy. The 21-acre site at East Cesar Chavez and U.S. 183 is adjacent to the Colorado River Park Wildlife Sanctuary which sits next to the Colorado River. The project, also represented by Endeavor, would feature buildings up to 120 feet tall, if existing plans are approved by the city council.

Gunter said Endeavor has also expressed a desire to work with Travis Audubon on this project to identify bird-friendly design features that might be incorporated.

Meanwhile, bird-safe design features can garner points toward earning a LEED designation for sustainable commercial buildings, as determined by the U.S. Green Building Council. Many cities including Portland, Philadelphia, San Francisco, New York, and Toronto already have embraced bird-safe guidelines.

The American Bird Conservancy has issued a comprehensive manual, “Bird-Friendly Building Design,” which offers recommendations for not only bird-safe windows but other design features that could reduce bird mortality.

## How to make yards and homes safer for birds

Tall buildings aren’t the only threat to birds in flight, so are glass windows and doors in houses and apartment complexes. National Audubon offers these suggestions to avert crashes:

1. Paradoxical as it may feel, try placing your bird feeders close (1.5 feet or less) to your windows. This will make birds slow down as they approach.
2. Apply a thin film to the outside of windows ([www.collidescape.org](http://www.collidescape.org)). The glass will become visible to birds but remain transparent for you. As a bonus, the film will cut down on incoming infrared radiation so it lowers summer cooling costs.
3. Keep curtains or shades drawn during the day to reduce reflection.
4. Place window decals, sun catchers, tape strips, ribbons, or anything of your choosing in a dense pattern in the “2×4” format (multiple markings 2 to 4 inches apart are recommended). A single decal will not work. Even painting windows with tempera paint, chalk markers, or marking them with soap will prevent collisions.
5. Move indoor houseplants back from windows as they may attract birds.
6. Install a screen or net a few inches outside of windows to lessen the impact.

## Travis Audubon Board Member Nitakuwa Barrett Orsak Recognized as a Net-Zero Hero

JULY 17, 2023



*Photo credit: Sustainable Austin Blog*

The City of Austin’s Office of Sustainability recently recognized Travis Audubon Board Member Nitakuwa Barrett Orsak as a Net-Zero Hero. The [Net-zero by 2040 initiative](#) aims to reach a “goal of net-zero community-wide greenhouse gas emissions by 2040.”

Nitakuwa was featured on the [Sustainable Austin Blog](#) where she discussed her work illuminating the connection between environmental conditions and how those conditions affect both individual and community health. She explained how she accomplishes this work:

*“Central Texas has a strong community of skilled, knowledgeable, and action-oriented people. My role in the Department of Population Health at Dell Medical School allows me to intentionally seek partnerships with community members. This means building trust, creating meaningful relationships, and establishing shared leadership in our projects and initiatives. There are so many people and organizations working towards building a healthier environment.*

*I am currently working on the [Austin/Travis County food planning effort](#).*

*I think many people understand the importance of healthy food. However, there are so many aspects of the food system that have an impact on health. Food production can be beneficial or harmful to the Earth and the people who grow and harvest it. Food distribution can impact climate when produce and other goods are shipped hundreds or even thousands of miles. There are many solutions to these issues, and I really enjoy working with people who are passionate about doing the work. There are many ways for community members to join in this effort. I encourage those reading to [explore opportunities to get involved](#).”*

Nitakuwa also talks later in the article about what birds and birding mean to her — read more about the impressive work she is doing for the Austin community and with Travis Audubon [here](#).

## Bird of the Week: Black-chinned Hummingbird

JULY 18, 2023



*Photo credit: Tim Zurowski/Shutterstock*

Black-chinned Hummingbird (*Archilochus alexandri*)

Regardless of the species, it's always a thrill to see hummingbirds at my feeder. Their graceful flight coupled with their active defense of the food source is always fun to see. You can attract these birds easily during breeding season by providing nectar sources. If you set up a feeding station, be sure to change out the nectar before it gets cloudy – during our hot summers, freshen it daily. Fermented sugar water is toxic. If you can't commit to changing the nectar daily, plant nectar-providing

flowering plants instead, such as honeysuckle, trumpet vine, Indian paintbrush, and red buckeye. Get more information on plants from the [Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center](#). Black-chinned hummingbirds are probably the easiest to identify due to their characteristic black chin and bill. Their backs are a dull metallic green and their undersides are grayish white. When the lighting is right, you can see flashes of purple at the base of their chin. This little bird can be found in the suburbs as well as in town – provided there are tall trees and flowering plants. Central Texas is part of their breeding range, so keep an eye out for small cup shaped nests below the tree canopy.

The male courts the female with a pendulum flight display and buzzes back and forth in front of her. Should she select him, she'll build a nest of grasses, spider webs, and plant fibers, lining the inside with plant down. She lays two eggs which incubate for approximately 15 days with the nestlings remaining for 21 days. Hummingbird nests expand as the nestlings grow, stretching from a deep cup to a wider shallow cup. The female feeds the nestlings by sticking her beak into their mouth and regurgitating tiny insects with some nectar mixed in. The pair will raise up to three broods per mating season.

Adults feed while hovering and extending their bill deep into the flower – they also catch small insects by snatching them out of the air or picking them off foliage. They've also been known to pick insects out of spider webs. On feeders, they may hover or perch while feeding. On my feeder, there's often one who sits on the feeder and chases others away, even when they aren't actively eating.

Black-chinned Hummingbirds migrate south for the winter and stay in western Mexico before making the trek back north to breed the following year. In flight, their wings beat at 15 to 80 times a second, and their hearts beat an average of 480 beats per minute. In cold weather, they may consume three times their body weight in nectar per day.

To make hummingbird nectar, use one fourth cup table sugar to one cup water.

Do not add red food coloring – it has been shown to be toxic to hummingbirds.

Black-chinned hummingbirds are common in our area and should be easy to attract with fresh nectar and flowers they like.

Compiled by Lisa S. Graham.

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

## Summer Surprises

JULY 18, 2023



*Photo: Immature Black-crested Titmouse fed by parent*

By Jaya Ramanathan

Once [Warblers](#) and migrants depart, I prepare myself for a listless summer. But nature fills summer monotony with surprises – baby birds, dashes of color, fauna sightings, sunflowers, and birding connections.

Baby birds steal the show. An immature Black-crested Titmouse is fed by its parent, flutters to announce itself, takes short flights between branches, and eventually feeds on its own, dropping seeds messily. Other immatures delight us like Carolina Wren on the seed feeder dome, House Finch on the bath and atop Acacia, and Red-bellied Woodpecker on an electric pole.



*Immature Red-bellied Woodpecker and Parent*

An immature Red-Shouldered Hawk stares right at me when I photograph it. Its distinct call greets me on many mornings. Blue Jay fearlessly chases it, constantly calling to warn other birds. As the day warms up, even a typically active squirrel just lazes in the shade. A Northern Cardinal pair cool off by dousing themselves with water droplets left on Plumbago by the sprinkler.



*Immature House Finch*

Migrants add color. Mississippi Kites look golden at sunset. Black-Chinned Hummingbird dances on our Desert Honeysuckle, fluttering constantly, sipping from one flower and then another, competing with Gulf Fritillary.

The male hummer plays peekaboo with its gorget in the morning light, displaying its purple color only when it takes flight.



*Mississippi Kites lit by sunset.*

Some unexpected behavior from backyard fauna: Green Anole sips from the copper bath, then takes refuge in hydrangea blooms. I learn it turns brown when inactive, in moist and cool conditions. Gray Fox hurriedly hops off our fence when it spots me. Another scares me by suddenly peeking from near our hydrangea. Rabbits, munching grass, stay still when I stroll nearby. Butterflies and pollinators feed at their favorite Lantana and Verbena.



*Black-chinned Hummingbird feeds on Desert Honeysuckle (left) and displays its purple gorget in flight (right).*

Sunflowers always surprise us, four different blooms one year, plants taller than us once, and multiple blooms from a little one. Backyard birds created this year's surprise. Ever since our son introduced us to seed feeders, we keep them stocked. This spring we noticed tiny plants below one. We identified them as a sunflower patch, planted by birds by spilling seeds. White-winged Doves and squirrels that typically forage on these fallen seeds had left some uneaten. Several sprouted in spring, each blooming just once. The last standing one bloomed several times, even in summer, in spite of squirrels gorging some of its buds.



*Sunflower planted by birds*



*Green Anole peeks out of a Hydrangea*



*Gulf Fritillary feeds on Lantana*

We are attuned to birding connections during summer travel. In [North Cascades National Park](#), we spot [birds](#) we have seen in our backyard, both migratory like Yellow Warbler, and winter migrants such as Cedar Waxwing, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Rufous Hummingbirds competing over a feeder brings us memories of Hummingbird skirmishes back home. Violet-green Swallow reminds us of Chimney Swift, and Western Tanager of Summer Tanager. Nature enriched our summer with surprises. I hope this blog inspires readers to reminisce about their own nature experiences this summer.

All photos courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.

## Update on the Texas Centennial Historical Marker at Blair Woods

JULY 20, 2023

By Mark Wilson



If you have been to Travis Audubon's Blair Woods recently, you may have noticed a large stone marker encased in burlap cover near one of the trail segments. What's going on?

This June 30th, at the request of and in collaboration with the Texas Historical Commission and the Travis County Historical Commission, a 1936 Texas Centennial historical marker was moved from the Martin Luther King Jr Blvd right-of-way, adjacent to Blair Woods, into the preserve itself. This marker notes the location of old Fort Colorado from 1836 to 1838. The marker was restored and moved by Gilbert Beall of Beall Memorial Art in Austin. The move was funded by grants from Preservation Austin and the Travis County Historical Commission.

The presence of the old fort was known to Frank and Fern Blair. Fern told stories handed down to her by neighbors whose predecessors scavenged building materials from the remains of the fort. Coleman Springs, located in Blair Woods, was considered to be a primary reason for locating the fort in the area.

Over the last few years, the Blair Core team has dug into the rich history of Blair Woods with the help of historians and archaeologists. Due to the efforts of many, the Preserve has been deemed eligible to be an official stop on the El Camino de los Tejas National Trail. In consultation with the National Park Service (NPS), the consensus was to secure the marker by moving it into the preserve.



## Bird of the Week: Belted Kingfisher

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JULY 24, 2023



*Photo credit: Johann Schumacher*

By Abby West

Belted Kingfisher (*Megascops alcyon*)

Why the cover? Travis Audubon feels strongly that the inscription on the marker, written in 1936, referencing “savage Indians” and protecting the “Anglo-American race” is both historically inaccurate and offensive. The historical record around the fort’s presence is both rich and complex, and involves cooperation, trade, and communication among all the peoples who moved through Central Texas at that time.

What to do? With the help of the NPS, the El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historical Trail Association, the historical commissions, and local experts in the history of Texas indigenous peoples, we will develop an interpretative educational display for the marker site, exploring fully the role of the fort in the lives of all the peoples of historical “Tejas.” The cover will be removed when the display is installed, hopefully within the next year.

You can learn more about the rich history of El Camino and Fort Colorado [in this video](#).

There’s no shortage of gorgeous photos of kingfishers on the internet. These peculiar birds fly sort of like a hummingbird, dive a little like an osprey, and burrow like a mole. Not to mention they are vibrantly colored and interesting to look at because of their oversized heads and stout bills. Here in Central Texas, we’re lucky to have kingfishers year-round along our waterways— especially the Belted Kingfisher. There are three species of kingfisher here- Green, Belted, and Ringed— Belted being the most common and widespread. These small, quick birds have blue backs, white bellies, and patches of rusty orange under their wings. The “belt” likely refers to the blue band that encircles their otherwise white chest, just like a feathery necklace.

Kingfishers live their lives near water of any kind – ponds, lakes, rivers, creeks – as watery creatures like small fish, crustaceans, and amphibians comprise most of their diet. Here in Central Texas, they’re somewhat picky, preferring habitats which have *some* trees but aren’t overgrown, clear enough water to see into, which moves but not *too* fast.



They hunt fish either from a bare perch along the riverbank or hovering over the water, holding their head completely still as they flap their wings and tail, searching for prey beneath the surface. They are one of only a handful of birds that have evolved exquisite proprioceptive abilities to stabilize their head while their body moves. Not only that, but they are completely distinct among birds in the way they beat their wings at irregular, unpredictable intervals but maintain an overall level flight path.

When they *do* spot a meal, they decisively fold their wings and dive underwater to catch it. After catching a fish, they fly to the nearest branch with it, clobber its head onto the branch to stop it from flopping around, and swallow it whole. Whenever the going gets tough (or perhaps they're feeling lazy), they will also eat insects and berries.



*Photo credit: Charles Wheeler*

Although their diet is somewhat flexible, breeding season (here in Central Texas that's April-July) is when their finicky nature is most evident. "For nesting they require the eroded face of a sandbank soft enough for the birds to burrow deep into it, and tall and steep enough to make it hard for predators to reach the burrow. As rivers and streams are dammed and channelized, the right kind of sandbank is getting scarcer, thus becoming a limiting factor in the population of Belted Kingfishers", writes David Sibley. While building a nest, a monogamous pair will both work on digging the burrow, until it is 3-6 feet deep and sloping upward (so rainwater doesn't collect in it), and ends in a small unlined chamber, about 12" in diameter. This whole process can take up to 3 weeks, and as such

they are very particular about the placement of these burrows but have also demonstrated an ability to adapt: they'll burrow along roadsides, gravel pits, or even in landfills. The biggest issue here is that they're prone to (understandably) abandon their nests with too much human activity or disturbance. As a result of human encroachment on their habitats, kingfisher populations across North America have been in decline for a number of years now, although their conservation status for the time being remains "low concern".

Despite their relatively high-maintenance nature, they have been known to travel far and wide throughout the world, and they've been here a long, long time: "Pleistocene fossils of Belted Kingfishers (to 600,000 years old) have been unearthed in Florida, Virginia, Tennessee, and Texas. The oldest known fossil in the kingfisher genus is 2 million years old." The next time you spot one, take a moment to admire the ways of this *very* peculiar bird.

*Sources include [All About Birds Guide](#), [The Texas Breeding Bird Atlas](#), [Audubon Field Guide](#), and [What It's Like to Be a Bird](#) by David Allen Sibley.*

## Bird of the Week: Pyrrhuloxia

AUGUST 1, 2023



*Adult female Pyrrhuloxia. Courtesy of [Mike Charest](#).*

Pyrrhuloxia (*Cardinalis sinuatus*)

Often called the Desert Cardinal, the Pyrrhuloxia is gray or brown with flashes of red that vary in amount. Both sexes have a yellowish bill and red highlights in their wings. They are about the same size as a Northern Cardinal but are clearly different, as seen in the photograph captured by Jeff Clow. Even when compared to the duller colors of a female Cardinal, the differences are easily noted. While they are frequently seen with their cousins, the Cardinal, Pyrrhuloxia have a narrower range and are restricted to the southern part of Texas and the desert Southwest, as well as northern Mexico. If the desert gets really hot (118 degrees), they will find a breeze on terraces and other overhangs.



*Adult male Northern Cardinal and adult male Pyrrhuloxia. Courtesy of Jeff Clow, Jeff Clow Photo Tours.*

Feeding primarily on seeds at or near the ground, Pyrrhuloxia will also dine on available insects. Flights are short and they undulate as they move between areas of coverage. They can often be seen on cacti and mesquite trees. Their song is sharp and cardinal-like, making chipping notes. Unseen, their sound can be mistaken for that of a Cardinal. Pyrrhuloxias do not fight with their cousins and outside of breeding season may join in flocks of up to 1,000 birds to forage for food. Although most of their water comes from bugs, they will go to pools of water to drink and bathe.

Nesting occurs in May, June, and July. Nests are built almost entirely by the female and consist of twigs, weeds, bark strips, lined with fine grass and fibers. The nest is placed 4-15'

above the ground, usually in a thorny shrub or a low tree. The female lays 3-4 eggs, which are pale grayish white to greenish white with brown and gray spots. Incubation is about 14 days and is the job of the female. The male may feed the female during this time. Both parents bring food to the nestlings, which will fly about 10 days after hatching. Pyrrhuloxia do not migrate but will defend their territory during breeding season.

Its odd name, which is a bit difficult to pronounce (peer-uh-LOX-ee-a), combines the Latin term for the Bullfinch with a Greek reference to the bird's bill shape. Their relationship to Cardinals is found in their scientific name, *Cardinalis sinuatus*. Although the population is decreasing due to climate change and habitat loss, Pyrrhuloxia are still easy to find in their desert home. [The Texas Breeding Bird Atlas](#) has even confirmed sightings as far north as just below the Texas Panhandle.

Compiled by Jeanette Larson.

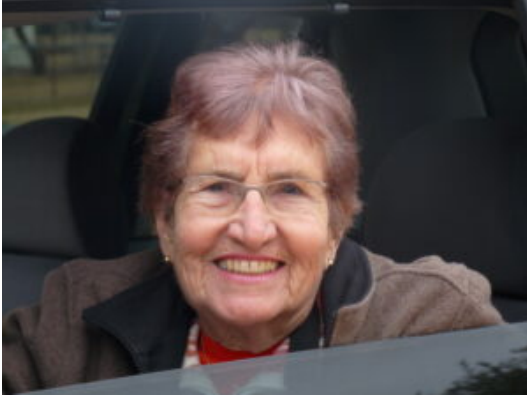
Sources include [The Cornell Lab: All About Birds](#) and [Audubon Guide to North American Birds](#).

## Ethel Kutac Memorial Bench Installed at Blair Woods

AUGUST 9, 2023

By Jane Tillman

Ethel Kutac was a long-time Travis Audubon member who passed away in 2021. She was a regular fixture at Travis Audubon meetings and participated in many field trips, especially of a "Wednesday group" of friends. She loved getting out of town for Travis Audubon field trips and Texas Ornithological Society meetings and traveled overseas to bird and see the sights too. She served on the Bird Records Committee for Travis Audubon in the years before eBird became the database for sightings.



I was very fortunate to have known Ethel for several years, and hardly a day goes by where I don't think of her. She was a great role model for aging independently and living with zest. She stayed engaged and interested in her family, her friends, her church, travel, the Lady Longhorns, politics, world events and birds. She was fun and a great conversationalist—sharp as a tack until the end. Ethel rarely talked about her aches and pains, even as she became frail. She did complain that doctors' appointments were getting in the way of her birding though.



Ethel slowed down a bit with age, and loved to sit and rest a while. When Frances Cerbins took her to see the first phase of the accessible trail at Blair Woods, she remembers Ethel saying “You better put benches along the way, especially for the uphill parts.” Ethel would be so pleased to see the location of the memorial bench commemorating her life, up at the start of the trail behind the shed. It's well situated for those waiting to be picked up, for conversation with other visitors, and to just sit and listen to birdsong and enjoy “the cathedral of nature” that Ethel loved so much. Next time you visit Blair Woods, sit with Ethel's spirit a while. Thanks to all who contributed to Travis Audubon in her memory.



*The commemorative plaque reads: “In honor of our friend Ethel Kutac 1926 – 2021”*

Are you new to Travis Audubon? Learn more about Ethel [here](#) and [here](#).

## Catios: Bridging the Gap Between Feline Needs and Bird Well-being

AUGUST 9, 2023

### **The Impact of Domestic Cats on Bird Mortality**

Domestic cats are one of the most significant threats to bird populations in the mainland United States. It may seem hard to believe, especially when considering the lovable feline curled up on the couch. Yet, a startling [study](#) published in 2013 disclosed the vast scale of bird mortality caused by cats. It is estimated that a staggering 2.4 billion birds are killed annually, with domestic cats accounting for around 30 percent of these deaths.

Although feral cats have traditionally been the focus of debate, it is clear that pets also play a significant role in the decline of bird populations, qualifying them as one of the world's most [invasive species](#). Many cat owners, despite these statistics, argue that these behaviors are natural for cats. Cats are predators with ingrained hunting behaviors such as pouncing and stalking. While this assertion holds true, it doesn't negate the fact that cat predation has a significant impact on bird populations.

Finding ways to mitigate this behavior is part of responsible pet ownership. Mitigation of hunting is important but also very complex: owners must consider their cats' well-being, their instinctual behaviors, and their environmental impact. How can cat owners reconcile their pet's predatory instincts with the impact on local bird populations? Is it possible for cat lovers and those keen on birds to unite in seeking a mutual solution?

### **Bridging the Gap Between Cat Enrichment and Bird Conservation**

[Studies](#) show that neutering and keeping cats indoors make a significant impact in mitigating the hunting behavior of cats. But another great solution is building "[catios](#)." Catio is an enclosed outdoor space that provide a stimulating environment for cats. These fully screened spaces, typically attached to a house from a window insert or a cat door from a wall, prevent cats from exiting and other wildlife from entering. Catio, filled with toys and shelves, offer an enriching environment for cats.

Furthermore, catios are not just a safe haven for cats, but also an avenue for pet owners to actively contribute to bird conservation. While allowing their feline companions to relish in the stimulating sights, sounds, and smells of the outdoors, catios effectively prevent them from preying on unsuspecting birdlife. This creative solution marries the essential needs of both domestic cats and wild birds, redefining the boundaries of responsible pet ownership. Through catios, perhaps bird conservationists and cat enthusiasts can coexist harmoniously with nature, fostering an environment that both enriches our pets and safeguards our wildlife.

### **Implementing a Catio: How to Get Started**

The initiation of a catio begins by determining the type that would best suit the needs of the cat. Options include free-standing catios, window-box catios or even converting an existing porch into a dedicated cat patio. Each of these catios is designed to fulfill the cat's instinctual needs while not comprising wildlife.



*A window-box [catio](#) which is secure for both birds and cats with a thin-meshed pet screening that does not allow critters or birds to enter.*



*A free-standing [catio](#).*

The following steps should guide you in building a catio:

- **Assess Your Space:** The first step in implementing a catio is to assess the available space. Catio can be built in various sizes and shapes and can fit in many different spaces like windows, porches, yards, or balconies.

- **Decide on a Design:** The design of a catio should be tailored to the habits and preferences of one's cat.
- **Ensure Safety for Birds and Cats:** Safety should be the top priority. Make sure the catio is escape-proof and built with materials that are quality and withstand weather changes. Using pet screening that prevents birds, pests, and rodents from entering the enclosure is of the utmost importance.
- **Enrich the Environment:** Fill the catio with a variety of elements that will help in the stimulation of the cat's senses. This might include toys, scratching posts, or even safe plants that they can sniff.
- **Introduce the Cat to the Catio:** Begin with short and supervised visits, gradually increasing the time they spend there.

Through solutions like catios, we can enjoy the playful company of our pets and still safeguard the diverse bird species populating our skies. This harmony encourages us to redefine pet ownership in the modern age while respecting and protecting the wildlife that shares our environment. It's not just about compromise—it's about innovating to ensure that all creatures, whether domesticated or wild, can thrive in the world we share.

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## Raptor Moments

AUGUST 11, 2023



By Jaya Ramanathan

Over the years, I have observed [raptors](#), experiencing their beauty, tenderness, ferocity, and playfulness.

Red-shouldered Hawk, an all-year resident, has been a constant fixture in our backyard. Its radiant plumage catches one's eye, especially when sunlit. It flies low between trees, making me wonder how it never runs into obstacles. One sits on our oak, unperturbed by hummingbirds fluttering on our nectar feeder. Another perches for hours, worrying me if it was unwell. It was just resting and eventually [flies away](#). Many a time, it stomps on grass, invariably finding and slurping up a long worm – or is that a snake?



*A Red-shouldered Hawk catching its prey in the grass.*

After some rain, we see one with drenched feathers. Another spreads its wings to dry. Sometimes it surprises us by perching on our electric pole or sipping from our bath. I was shocked when I saw one prey on a smaller bird – nature’s cycle of life. Juveniles appear in the summer, practice their calls, and playfully dunk in our bath.

Our first sight of a [Barred Owl](#) occurred at Freeman Park, when its hoot, joined by another, caught our attention. We initially saw just its back, then it turned around but appeared asleep. It opened its eyes when it heard us, turned away, and then looked back at us. We left after watching it for a while, but returned again to enjoy this rare sight. It rewarded us then with a long hoot, moving its head in sync with this call.



*A Barred Owl in a tree at Freeman Park.*

We spotted a Great Horned Owl on a rooftop one evening, another first ever sight. We heard it again another evening, searched, and spotted it atop a tree. Before we could focus our camera, it flew over our home and away, leaving us with just a distant picture of its flight.



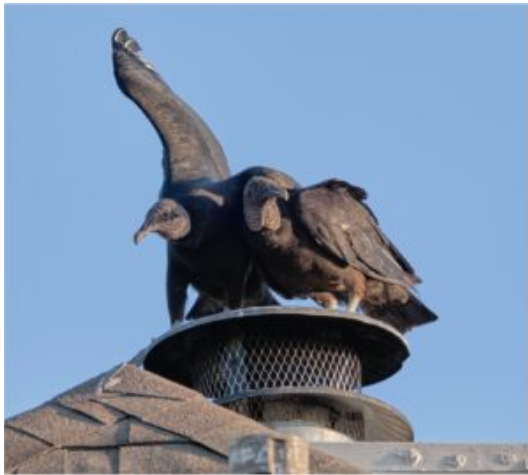
*A Great Horned Owl on a rooftop.*

Mississippi Kite arrives in spring and stays through summer. One evening, we counted twenty five on a tree – did they all just end their migratory journey? Some mornings we see one perch there, fly in a circle to catch its prey, and return to munch it. A pair perched there in the evening [look golden at sunset](#). Spotting their courtship was a highlight. They also frequent our backyard wire, sometimes holding a victim. Blue Jay calls to warn other birds about them and Hawks.



*A Mississippi Kites with its victim.*

All-year resident Black Vultures circle the sky and perch on rooftops. On a rare occasion, they share rooftops or sit there instead of perching. We saw many congregate on an electric tower, at sunset, near the Barton Creek Greenbelt. We also spotted several scavenging in Brushy Creek. It is fascinating to see them balance and fly in spite of strong winds.



*Black Vultures together on a rooftop.*

Other raptors we saw include [Cooper's Hawk](#), Swainson's Hawk in [Chaetura Canyon](#), and Crested Caracara. These fulfilling raptor experiences inspire us to also observe them during travels, such as spotting Bald Eagles interlocking talons in Alaska and Ospreys in Georgia. We missed Condors in [Zion National Park](#) as we were not birders then. We hope to sight more raptors such as the Common Black Hawk in [Big Bend National Park](#).



*A Crested Caracara soars overhead.*

All photos courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.

## Bird of the Week: Ladder-backed Woodpecker

AUGUST 14, 2023



*Photo credit: Edward Plumer – Macaulay Library*

Ladder-backed Woodpecker (*Dryobates scalaris*)

Like their name suggests, the Ladder-backed Woodpecker has stripes of alternating black and white running along their backs, and the males sport a striking red cap on their crowns. They grace us with their presence year-round as arid country serves as their habitat, and central Texas certainly meets that criterion, especially this year.

Once known as the "Cactus Woodpecker," the Ladder-backed Woodpecker is at home in desert scrub, thorn forests, pinyon pine, and pinyon-junipers. I've had a nesting pair in my backyard for the past four years, and the male lets me know when the suet is missing or too dried out to be appetizing, giving me his "peek" call. If I refill the suet while he's around, he will attach to my suet feeder even when I'm standing close by. The female is a little shyer. Females are generally smaller than the males, who also have a noticeably longer beak.

The Ladder-backed Woodpecker is smaller overall than most woodpeckers, being slightly smaller than a robin but larger than a sparrow.

Outside of suet, these handsome birds eat mostly insect larvae and sometimes adult insects – including leafworms, ants, caterpillars, and wood-boring beetles. They glean their food while hanging upside down or balancing with their wings spread. They rarely dig deeply into wood, and unlike other species of woodpeckers, they do not cache food or hunt while on the wing.

A mating pair will remain together throughout the year, and the males do a majority of the work in preparing the nesting cavity, generally found 2 to 30 feet up and measuring up to 14 inches deep and 3 and a quarter inches across. They don't build a nest in the cavity, but they may soften it with a few feathers. The female will lay 3 to 4 eggs which will incubate for up to 14 days before hatching. Both parents are active in feeding the young, bringing insects to the nest.

Nesting boxes won't help you attract this species since they generally don't use them, but if you put out mealworms and suet, you may be able to entice them to your feeder. Planting native vegetation and leaving dead trees standing may also attract them for nesting season.

Compiled by Lisa S. Graham.

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

## August Bird Forecast

AUGUST 14, 2023



*Yellow Warbler, courtesy: James Giroux.*

### **What to watch for in August: Miscellaneous Migrants**

It's hard to believe, but several bird species have already started migrating south from their breeding grounds to their wintering grounds. August is the month when many returning shorebirds drop in around Austin. Judging from late July sightings, they are right on schedule. The best places to look for shorebirds are the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant ponds and Bob Wentz Windy Point Park on Lake Travis. Three of the more common species to look for are Western, Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers. There are subtle differences between these three species and identification can be challenging, especially since they are often seen at a distance. It's okay to just call them peeps.



*Western Sandpiper. COURTESY: Jeff Osborne*



Western Sandpipers are one of the most abundant shorebirds, with an estimated population of 3.5 million worldwide. They are small birds, about 6.5 inches in length, with a 14 inch wingspan. Long distance migrants, they breed only along the coastal tundra of western Alaska and far eastern Siberia. The fact that they concentrate in such a small area, putting all their eggs in one basket so to speak, is cause for conservation concern, as one disaster or disease could jeopardize the species. They winter across a broad range of the U.S. Pacific, Atlantic and Gulf Coasts and down into Central and South America primarily along the coasts. In winter they can also be found in smaller numbers along inland lakes, where they can find aquatic invertebrates along muddy shorelines. Females are often larger than males, and have longer bills. Females also appear to winter further south than the males do. It is hypothesized that this gives the males an advantage in staking out a breeding territory before the females arrive. Adults leave the breeding grounds before the young of the year do, which is fairly common in shorebirds.

Western Sandpipers have been well-studied at a stopover site in Kansas called Cheyenne Bottoms/Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. Adult migration there runs from early July to late September, peaking in mid-August. Juveniles start arriving in late July, and continue through early October. Adult birds stay longer at fall stopover sites than at spring sites. This allows them to molt their flight feathers so they can more easily complete their journeys. If you are wondering how you can tell juveniles from adults, juveniles don't have the heavy spotting of the adults' breasts in breeding plumage, and their faces are pale with no rufous on their crowns.



*Semipalmated Sandpiper. COURTESY: Jeff Osborne*

An interesting fact about the Semipalmated Sandpiper is that this species totally vacates the U.S. in the winter months. Contrast that with the Western and Least, in which at least part of the population can be found in U.S. inland and coastal habitats in winter.

Semipalmated Sandpipers summer in the high Arctic all across Canada and Alaska. They are long distance migrants, wintering in northern and central South America on the coasts. A part of the population makes a 2,000-mile nonstop trans-oceanic hop from New England to northern South America. Unfortunately, this sandpiper has had recent population declines and numbers about 2.3 million individuals worldwide.



*Least Sandpiper. COURTESY: Jeff Osborne*

The Least Sandpiper, which is the world's smallest sandpiper, has a larger summer range across Canada and Alaska than the other two species, and can easily be found during winter in inland and coastal mudflats in Texas and other states from California to the Carolinas.

Least Sandpipers are also considered long-distance migrants, with some of the eastern population flying nonstop to South America in the fall. The worldwide population is estimated at 700,000. The Least Sandpiper is more difficult to count than the Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers because it does not gather in huge flocks at key migratory stopover points like the others do.

The Least Sandpiper has yellowish green legs, not always easy to see, while the Western and Semipalmated legs are black. It is the brownest of the three in breeding and non-breeding plumage. The Least Sandpiper has short legs which give it a crouching look. It does not typically wade, preferring drier grassy and weedy vegetation near mudflats.

Drought conditions like Austin and much of Texas have been experiencing make migration more difficult for these and other migrants, as stopover wetlands and ponds dry up. If you make an effort to see these birds, such as on the Hornsby monthly bird walk mentioned below, give them a wide berth so that they can live to fly another day.

### Other August Migrants

Mississippi Kites, Broad-winged Hawks, and Peregrine Falcons are raptors moving through Texas in August. Expect migrating Ruby-throated Hummingbirds to vie with Black-chinned Hummingbirds at your feeder and Yellow Warblers, an early migrant, might pop up at your bird bath.



*Juvenile Mississippi Kite. COURTESY: Jeff Osborne*

Compiled by Travis Audubon volunteer Jane Tillman for [KXAN](#).

## Bird of the Week: Green Heron

AUGUST 21, 2023



*Photo by Daniel VanWart*

Let me introduce you to the Green Heron, my favorite bird. The few times I've mentioned this fact to my friends after we spot one wading in the reeds or flying overhead they look at me.. puzzled. That's because at first glance or from a distance, these birds look drab and unremarkable in every way.

Only when you slow down and look closer you're rewarded with their gorgeous plumage. Rich green-ish blue wings, each feather carefully outlined with a glint of gold; chestnut-maroon necks, a bold navy blue head and a splash of mustard coloring their legs! A tasteful palette— one I may have chosen myself if Creator bothered to ask. But I digress.

Here in Central Texas we're likely to see them most frequently in summer, wading in the shallows alongside tree-lined creeks, rivers, or ponds.

For several years now, a small group has chosen the stand of trees right next to the Vic Mathias Auditorium Shores bathrooms along the Lady Bird Lake trail as their nesting site in early-mid summer. This is typical, as they nest in isolated pairs or groups close to water where they hunt.

Like other herons, their menu options are mostly watery creatures— small fish, frogs, crayfish, and the like. But take a moment to consider the visual acuity and precision involved in this process: imagine catching a minnow just below the surface, with a pair of tweezers (and then gulping down a slimy, wriggling fish whole.. without teeth!) Identifying exactly where an object *is* below the water is challenging enough, taking into account the glare and movement at the surface of the water. Beyond that, minnows are speedy little guys, so there is no room for error. But the Green Heron has a few tricks up her sleeve. For one, her weird, spindly legs that look *exactly* like reeds or branches from a fish's perspective. And for two, her smarts: Green Herons are one of the few birds known to use bait to lure their prey close enough to the surface to catch them! If you watch closely (and have the patience of a saint), you might get lucky enough to witness a heron tossing a twig, leaf, or live insect into the water to do just that.

Which brings us to the third trick up her sleeve: infinite patience. This is perhaps the real reason that Green Herons are my favorite birds. When I have the time and mental fortitude and I spot a Green Heron slinking along the riverbanks, I make myself stop and just sit there. Sit there, completely still, just watching. Waiting, with her. Marveling at the fact that this is the pace at which this bird lives her entire life, doing just this. Looking, observing, fishing, patiently waiting, striking and occasionally- eating. A few times I've been lucky enough to witness that split second between the time a fish is caught and swallowed. In that moment, I share in the thrill of success, of satiation. Satisfied, I pack up my binoculars and continue on my way, noticing that the pace of her life is infectious; that she is teaching me patience.

By Abby West.

Sources: [The Clever Way Green Herons Lure Prey](#) and [Audubon Guide to North American Birds](#)

## First Year Purple Martin Hosts

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AUGUST 24, 2023



This was our first year as official Purple Martin Landlords. For those that don't know, Purple Martins are secondary cavity dwellers (they make their nests in pre-existing holes), and those east of the Rockies depend on human-provided housing for their nests. Landlords provide this housing via nest boxes and gourds.

Sharon Richardson, Jeaneane McNulty, and I assumed stewardship of an already established community just south of Mills Pond in the Wells Branch neighborhood of Austin, TX. We're novices; we still have a lot to learn about Purple Martins and being hosts, but we thought sharing our perspective might be interesting and might encourage others to host Purple Martins.

I wasn't comfortable with the "landlord" moniker; I preferred to think of us as Purple Martin Hosts, running an extended-stay AirBnB for the birds. We thought we would share our experiences and the "reviews" of our community from our Purple Martin visitors.

## Property Description

Well-established and popular Purple Martin Community under new management. Excellent and safe location with 54 units in community; water and food nearby and no problems with rude Sparrow or Starling neighbors.

## Reviews

### **Purple Martin Scout – 2/21/2023**

"While I liked the location and our particular gourd, I did have one major complaint. I was one of the early migrants from Brazil, (sometimes you humans refer to us as scouts, but we're just the first migrants). I was hoping for an early check-in but the gourds were not even ready. I understand there was new management so I hope this will be remedied in the future."

**Host Response** – "Our apologies. As new managers, we were a bit late in getting the gourds ready for our visitors this year, but we did have them ready by February 21 as you can see in the photos below. In the future, we will strive to have them ready for the earliest scouts, which we understand arrive as early as late January."





**Host Response** – “We do apologize for the Cooper’s Hawk threatening the gourds, and we fully understand how that could negatively impact your stay. In the future we will explore additional options for deterring predators.”

**Purple Martin Momma – April 2023**

“While I do appreciate the hosts checking in on us regularly to see that we have everything we need, there was one instance when they really invaded our privacy. We didn’t even have time to leave when they brought down the gourds for a nest check.”



**Scared Purple Martin – 3/5/2023**

“The description said this was an “excellent and safe location”. How do you explain this?”

**Host Response** – “Our apologies for this invasion of privacy.

We do come around regularly to ensure that all of the tenants are safe and to count active nests, eggs, and hatchlings. We also try to make a racket to announce our presence, but unfortunately it was not effective in this circumstance. Again, please accept our apologies.”

### **Purple Martin 1 – May 2023**

“We had a problem with mites, which I know is somewhat common. The Hosts treated our gourd on one of their regular visits and that took care of our mite problem. Thanks for the attention.”

*Host Response* – “We understand that mites can occur occasionally; so glad we could help out.”

### **Well-fed Purple Martin**

“Really loved all of the snacks available in the area”



### **Purple Martin Dad**

“Great place for children”



*Host Response* – “We are so glad that you and your babies enjoyed the stay. We really enjoyed watching them grow up so quickly.”

### **Purple Martin A3**

“During our stay, one of our chicks died and unfortunately was blocking the entrance to the gourd so we could not reach the other 4 hungry chicks that were inside. Thank you for removing our deceased baby so we could successfully feed our other hatchlings, who all successfully fledged BTW. While I was heartbroken to lose one of our young, I was glad that you helped us ensure the survival of our remaining babies.”

*Host Response* – “We were so sad to see the death in A3, and glad we could help with access to the remaining hatchlings.”

### **Sweaty Purple Martin**

“I know it didn’t mention cooling in the property description, but it seems like some form of cooling, be it solar-powered fans or ice packs, is becoming more common in properties around town. Just like you probably expect Wi-Fi, we expect cooling in Texas. You should definitely investigate this for next year, particularly with the climate change thing you humans are causing.”

**Host Response** – “I know it got hot. We will explore cooling solutions in the future.”

### **Thankful Purple Martin 17**

“Absolutely loved the community, the hosts checked in on us regularly, but they also let us do our thing without interference. We appreciated their approach. Was glad to see that over 85% of our babies fledged. Will definitely be back next year!”



### **Missed the Party**

We left and began our long journey back to Brazil after our babies fledged, but we heard about the rocking party at La Frontera Roost with tens of thousands of our friends (and some humans too). Sorry we missed it, but we’re glad so many Austinites came out to see the action.





We totally enjoyed our first season as Purple Martin hosts. It was fulfilling to play a valuable role for these wonderful birds and see their entire nesting lifecycle. And being a Purple Martin host is a great way for people of all ages to connect with the wonders of the natural world and help out these amazing birds.

## Vote to Grow Texas Parks on November 7

AUGUST 30, 2023



Every year, Texas loses nearly one quarter of a million acres of farms, ranches, and open space to development. To protect habitat crucial for the survival of birds and other wildlife, we need to acquire more state park land, which currently constitutes only .37% of Texas' acreage.

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

#### 77 GROUPS COME TOGETHER TO LAUNCH EFFORT TO EDUCATE TEXANS ABOUT \$1 BILLION CENTENNIAL PARKS CONSERVATION FUND

*The fund will be on the November 7 Constitutional Amendment Ballot as Proposition 14*

**AUSTIN, TEXAS** — On November 7<sup>th</sup>, Texans will have the opportunity to vote statewide on Proposition 14, a Constitutional Amendment that will create the Centennial Parks Conservation Fund. The \$1 billion fund will help secure new parks for future generations of Texans to explore and enjoy without increasing taxes. To educate Texans about this amendment, the Texas Coalition for State Parks — a diverse range of 77 organizations from around the state — has come together to support this once-in-a-generation effort to grow Texas parks.

“The Centennial Parks Conservation Fund would provide dependable, long-term funding for new park acquisition that will protect the unique natural and cultural treasures of Texas, creating the opportunity to ensure our state parks thrive for generations to come,” said State Senator Tan Parker, who filed the Senate bill that paved the way for the fund to make it on the November ballot.

“The fund would be an essential tool in ensuring Texans have access to public park lands for generations to come,” said State Rep. Armando Walle, who sponsored the bill in the Texas House. “This effort is a transformational effort, a Teddy Roosevelt kind of initiative.”

Earlier this year, legislation to place the fund on the ballot passed both chambers of the Texas Legislature with overwhelming bipartisan support. In every poll on parks in the last two decades, Texans have signaled strong support for state parks. In fact, 77% of voters said they would support the constitutional amendment in a poll conducted this summer.



“Open spaces are critical to our quality of life,” said Joseph Fitzsimons, former Chairman of the Texas Parks & Wildlife Commission and Co-Founder of the Texas Coalition for State Parks. “The Centennial Parks Conservation Fund would help protect the places we love to hike, bike, fish, picnic, view wildlife, and spend time with family. I encourage all Texans to vote yes on Proposition 14 so more Texans will have the opportunity to enjoy and appreciate the great outdoors.”

Texas State Parks attract nearly 10 million visitors annually, and the current supply of state parks cannot keep up with the demand of our growing population. The fund will allow the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to buy land from willing sellers when unique properties that would make for beautiful state parks become available. Investing in parks conserves land and water resources, which protects Texas’ quality of life so future generations can enjoy our land, water, and natural beauty the way we do.

The [Texas Coalition for State Parks](#) is a diverse range of organizations from land and water conservation to business, agricultural, wildlife, and sportsmen’s organizations. A full list of organizations involved in this effort can be found below.

**Texas Coalition for State Parks Members:**

Access Fund | American Farmland Trust | Apache Corporation | Association of Nature Center Administrators | Audubon Texas | Austin Outside | Austin Parks Foundation | Austin Ridge Riders Mountain Biking Club | Backcountry Hunters & Anglers | Bayou Land Conservancy | Bayou Preservation Association | Bexar Audubon Society | Bike Houston | Bike Texas | Blunn Creek Partnership | Braun & Gresham, PLLC | Buffalo Bayou Partnership | Caddo Lake Institute | Cibolo Nature Center and Farm | Coastal Prairie Conservancy | Comal County Conservation Alliance | Creating Common Ground | Defenders of Wildlife | Ducks Unlimited, Texas Chapter | El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail Association | Environment Texas | Environmental Defense Fund | Fellowship Southwest | Fin & Fur Films

| Friends of the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge | Frontera Land Alliance | Galveston Bay Foundation | Great Plains Restoration Council | Great Springs Project | Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance | Green Spaces Alliance | Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust | Gulf of Mexico Trust | Hershey Ranch | Hill Country Alliance | Hill Country Conservancy | Houston Audubon | Houston Parks Board | Houston Wilderness | Lone Star Chapter Sierra Club | McMacCX | National Parks Conservation Association | Plateau Land & Wildlife Management, Inc. | Safari Club International – Houston Chapter | San Marcos River Foundation | Save Buffalo Bayou | Stewards of The Wild | Texans for State Parks | Texas 2036 | Texas Agricultural Land Trust | Texas Center for Policy Studies | Texas Children In Nature | Texas Conservation Alliance | Texas Foundation for Conservation | Texas Impact | Texas Interfaith Power and Light | Texas Land Conservancy | Texas Land Trust Council | Texas Outdoor Partners | Texas Parks & Wildlife Foundation | Texas Recreation and Park Society (TRAPS) | Texas Rivers Protection Association | Texas Travel Alliance | Texas Wildlife Association | The Conservation Fund | The Nature Conservancy | The Watershed Association | Travis Audubon Society | Travis County Parks Foundation | Trinity Edwards Springs Protection Association | Trust for Public Land | Zilker 351

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