



# MURMURATIONS

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The Newsletter of Travis Audubon \* VOL. 71, NO. 6 Nov./Dec. 2023



# *A Note*

FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT

Hello Travis Audubon Friends and Members,

What a great time to be a birder in Austin. With cooler temperatures on the way, we welcome the annual spectacle of waterfowl migration to our area, as well as the arrival of the wintering sparrows for which Central Texas is so well known.

It's also a great time to be a part of the Travis Audubon family, with both staff and volunteers enthusiastically meeting the needs of a diverse community of talented birders, through increased field trip offerings, advocacy, our monthly programs, youth activities, and educational opportunities.

The team deserves well-earned congratulations for a highly successful Victor Emanuel Conservation Award Celebration on October 12. We raised more than \$144,000 through this year's event, which honored George Bristol, a longtime advocate for state and national parks and a leading voice for conservation in Texas. Congratulations, George!

More than 100 people attended our annual Fall Migration Celebration at Hornsby Bend on October 28 for a morning of birding and pliriding (picking up litter while birding) and a presentation by Dr. Kevin Anderson on the history of birds and birding at Austin's premier birding location.

We reached more than 100 people through classes and workshops and continued to offer a diverse array of field trips for birders of all ages and abilities.

Going forward, we want to wish our friend and colleague, Nicole Netherton, the best as she embarks on a new journey as Pease Park Conservancy's new Chief Executive Officer. Nicole served as Travis Audubon's Executive Director for more than five years, leading our organization to a time of record growth and inspiring our vision for the future. We hope to share news on Nicole's successor in the coming months.

Good birding, everyone!

John Bloomfield  
Board President

# People

AT TRAVIS AUDUBON

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

Chris Murray  
Caley Zuzula  
Cheyenne Moore  
Annemarie Read  
Jessica Womack  
Nora Chovanec

## Committees

*Advocacy*  
*Baker Team*  
*Blair Woods Core Team*  
*Chaetura Canyon Management*

*Commons Ford*

*Field Trip*  
*Hornsby Bend*  
*Inclusion, Diversity, Equity,*  
*and Access (IDEA)*  
*Membership and Outreach*  
*Youth*

John Bloomfield  
Chris Murray  
Mark Wilson  
Paul Kyle  
Georgean Kyle  
Ellen Filtness  
Michael Sims  
Celeste Treadway  
Eric Stager

(open)  
Jane Tillman  
Mary Kay Sexton

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*Vice President*  
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Maura Powers  
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Sherry Wynn

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Mary Kelly  
Clifton Ladd  
Andrew Sansom  
Carter Smith

# Upcoming Events

WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

## NOVEMBER 2023

### November 2

Roots and Wings Official Event

### November 10

Autumn Family Storybook Trail walk

### November 11

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Survey

### November 12

Commons Ford Bird Walk

### November 15

Class: I Don't Do Gulls

### November 16

Speaker Series: How Climate Change is Affecting  
Extremes with John Nielsen-Gammon

### November 18

Beginner Bird Walk at Mueller

### November 19

Bird Walk in Hay County: Blanco Shoals and  
Aquarena Springs

Birding at Granger Lake

### November 20

Beginners' Bird Walk: Commons Ford Metro Park

### November 25

Young Birders Club

### November 26

Young Birder Club: Hornsby Bend



## DECEMBER 2023

### December 2

Blair Woods Family Event: Pond Science Fun

Beginners' Bird Walk: Berry Springs Park

### December 3

Young Birders Club: Hornsby Bend

### December 6

Baker Sanctuary "Wild Weekday Walk"

### December 9

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Survey

Bird Walk at NW/Sheffield Park

### December 10

Young Birders Club: Roy G Guerrero Park

### December 12

Commons Ford Bird Walk

### December 15

Bird Walk with the Trail Conservancy

### December 16

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Walk

Baker Sanctuary Restoration Day

### December 17

Beginners' Bird Walk: Commons Ford

Let's Go Birding Together

### December 21

Holiday Party

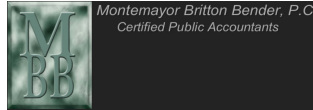
### December 30

Young Birders Club: Commons Ford



# Thank You

TO OUR BUSINESS PARTNERS



# Thank You

TO OUR 2023 VICTOR EMANUEL  
CONSERVATION AWARD CELEBRATION SPONSORS

**Palo Duro**

Shield Ranch

**Bastrop**

Dobbs Run Ranch  
Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation  
Peggy and Matt Winkler

**McKinney Falls**

Austin Water Wildland Conservation  
Clayton Korte

**Mother Neff**

Audubon Texas  
Karen Bartoletti  
The Bristol Family  
The Bristol-Nilles Family  
Joe Christie  
Friends of Blair Woods  
Gone Fishing  
Alice and Chris Gunter  
Karrie and Tim League  
Maura Powers and Scott McCown  
Carol Ray  
Nona and Dr. Andrew Sansom  
Spicewood Ranch - Chris Harte  
Travis Audubon Master Birders  
Victor Emanuel Nature Tours

**With special thanks to:**

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Beacon Nonprofit Consulting, Mauricio Callejas, Brenda Ladd Photography,  
Gayle Stallings and FUNAuctions, TCU Press, Twin Liquors, Zilker Brewing Co

# Bird of the Week: Brown Headed Cowbird

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SEPTEMBER 1, 2023

By Alexis Commiskey



The Brown-headed Cowbird is aptly named. The male is, well, a brown-headed cowbird. They have a glossy black body, an entirely brown head, and are frequently seen around cow herds. The beak of this species is short and sharp with a conical shape much like a House Finch. The females of the species are a muted grey-brown with streaking on their chest. Their song is very distinct; I have always thought it sounds like a robotic water drop. Short droplet plinks followed by an upward high-pitched whistle. The calls are similarly distinct and made up of high-pitched whistles or short chatters. Brown-headed Cowbirds are frequently observed in open fields and at forest edges. If you hear the bird before you see it, scan the top-most branches of nearby trees. They seem to have an affinity for the tops of the tallest perches in an area.

Because the Brown-headed Cowbird is easily identifiable and at the same time broadly disliked, I think they are quickly dismissed in the field without being observed for very long. Next breeding season, I implore you to sit and watch these birds if you hear a male singing. They perform a mating display where they puff out their body feathers, spread their wings, and dip forward from the branch they are perched on. Sometimes the displaying male will nearly flip completely upside down

in his efforts to woo a lady. I think these birds are fun to watch, and I have developed an appreciation for them despite their bad rap.

The Brown-headed Cowbird is widely disliked by those in the bird world. The reason for their infamy is their reproductive strategy. These birds are brood parasites meaning they do not build their own nests or care for their own young, instead they lay eggs in a host bird's nest, and the host bird will then raise the cowbird's chick. Most often, the host brood has reduced success due to their unwelcome guest. Female cowbirds will observe the host parents while they are making their nests. Later, when the host female is laying her eggs the Brown-headed Cowbird will sneak in and lay one of her own. The female cowbird can lay up to 40 eggs per season, and they've been recorded to parasitize over 220 host species.

Historically, the Brown-headed Cowbird would follow the bison of North America during their migration. This ultimately meant they were not in one location long enough to care for their own clutch. With the roaming bison herds gone and more suitable habitat available across the human-altered landscape due to deforestation and heavy cattle grazing, the Brown-headed Cowbird's home range now extends through all 48 contiguous states and up into southern Canada.

Photo credit: Mia McPherson,  
[OnTheWingPhotography](https://www.onthewingphotography.com)

## Travis Audubon Gives Thanks to Departing Board Members Dennis Palafox and Mark Wilson

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SEPTEMBER 6, 2023

The Board of Directors said goodbye this summer to two of our most dedicated board members, Dennis Palafox and Mark Wilson, as they left the board after several years of

selfless service to Travis Audubon Society. Together they served over 14 years as board members, and on behalf of the board and our membership I want to extend a heartfelt thanks to both men for all they've done for Travis Audubon.

Dennis joined the board in 2017. He was the chair of the field trip committee for five years and was instrumental in expanding the number and variety of field trips for Travis Audubon. Dennis was (and still is) one of our most popular field trip leaders, always bringing a joyful mix of enthusiasm and knowledge to the field. Upon completing the Master Birder program in 2016, Dennis immediately began giving back to that program, becoming a lecturer, leading MB field trips and organizing a MB table each year at the Victor Emanuel Award Event. His contributions to Birdathon cannot be overstated, including leading the Master Birders on a trip each spring to High Island; the Jester King Brewery; Camp Mabry; and the Pedernales River.



*Artist Emily Galusha (website: <https://www.eegcreative.com/>) donated watercolor paintings of meaningful birds for Dennis and Mark as their “see you later” gifts. Dennis holds his painting of a Yellow Warbler, one of his favorites during migration.*

Mark Wilson became a member of the board in 2015 and has filled many shoes, including serving as vice-president of the board and serving as chair of the search committee that hired our current executive director, Nicole Netherton. We are especially grateful for the work Mark has done for Travis Audubon's Blair Woods Sanctuary. He restarted the Blair Core Team which, under his leadership as chair, accomplished many things—stabilizing

historic buildings at the sanctuary; overseeing construction of the pier, water feature, pollinator garden, and the amazing new accessible trail system. He also played a significant role in procuring the archeological and historical study on the property. Mark serves on the Blair Build Team, which is leading the efforts to design and build a nature and education center for Travis Audubon. Mark can be found virtually every Wednesday at Blair Woods leading volunteer work projects. Mark also set up the donor brick program at Chaetura Canyon and served on the Chaetura Canyon Management Committee. He co-led Travis Audubon field trips at the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve and at a number of Water Quality Protective Lands owned by the City of Austin.

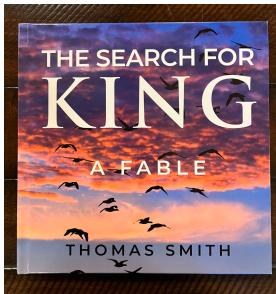


*Here Mark and his wife Dana show off his painting of a Baltimore Oriole, a bird that Mark has been delighted to see in great numbers during spring migration at Blair Woods.*

What we'll miss most about Dennis and Mark is the steadiness and common sense they brought to the board. No matter how spirited board meetings might occasionally become, both of them always listened calmly and quietly and then spoke with reason and good judgment. We will truly miss them but are so glad that they will continue to play important roles in our organization. Thank you, Dennis and Mark!

# Book Review: The Search for King

SEPTEMBER 8, 2023



By Emily Reyner

“The Search for King” by Thomas Smith is a birding book for all ages. The story follows the birds from the bird kingdom as they gather at the Meeting Tree to decide on a new king: the only requirement being that the new king must have black feathers. Each page is filled with beautiful real-world photos, informative blurbs, and witty poetry about each species that takes the stage. Beginning with each bird declaring why they should be king, the fable ends with a warmhearted lesson about character and leadership as well as ego, diversity, and inclusion. Between the captivating pictures, cascading rhymes, and clever wordplay, “The Search for King” provides something for all ages. And with more than 30 bird species making an appearance, I’m sure even experienced birders will see something unexpected.

## Reflections on an Endless Summer

SEPTEMBER 8, 2023

By Jaya Ramanathan

Summer has been relentless, with 100+°F temperatures, and heat persisting until late evening. So I was delighted to spot early fall migrants, a harbinger for lower temperatures, and new sights. A perfect time to reflect on

this endless summer and anticipate new beginnings.



*Birds share baths.*

Our bird baths are a big hit this summer. We moved our ramshackle brick bath under an oak’s shade. Birds, Green Anole, and squirrels enthusiastically welcome this change. Red-bellied Woodpecker, slides down an oak tree, clings to its trunk, and cranes its neck to sip, under Blue Jay’s watchful eyes. Birds happily share, three White-winged Doves once, two along with Blue Jay another time. Immature Red-bellied Woodpecker and Blue Jay sip together. Another bird hesitates, going up and down the oak trunk, before summoning courage to dip, gingerly clinging onto the bath’s edge. Soon I see it confidently enjoying splashy baths. Carolina Wren continues exploring bath nooks for bugs. Birds share our copper bath too, four White-Winged Doves once. Lesser Goldfinch visits, adding a dash of color.



*Immature Black-crested Titmouse is curious about House Finch*

Juvenile birds grow independent as summer progresses, visiting without parent supervision. Young Northern Cardinal teaches me it has a gray bill. Little Black-crested Titmouse curiously observes House Finch discarding seed husks right from its beak and Red-bellied Woodpecker pecking an oak trunk. Tiny House Finch makes itself at home,



grooming on the patio oak, frequenting the seed feeder, and sipping bravely at the copper bath, unfazed by White-winged Dove. Immature Red-bellied Woodpecker lightly pokes a Blue Jay, twice at the brick bath, prompting it to share. Blue Jay does not protest, makes room, drinks, and leaves, after which the courageous little one sips.



*A female Summer Tanager*

Summer Surprises continue with the first sights of Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers together, Bronzed Cowbird, and Summer Tanager. Another Raptor Moment ensues when three Red-shouldered Hawks visit, two perch on wire for a while, with one calling -- a rare sight, as they typically visit alone.



*Black-chinned Hummingbirds feed at Turk's Cap and Plumbago*

Native plants show resilience to the heat. Butterflies frequent Plumbagos while Hummingbirds give it a try. Both compete at Lantanas and Desert Honeysuckle. Birds indeed bridge borders, as Hummingbirds sip from Turk's Cap in our backyard and our neighbor's. Autumn Sage, a spring favorite of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, stops blooming in summer, but restarts in time for Fall migration, as does Vitex. Yellow-breasted

Chat visits our purple American beautyberry. Rabbits munch on a few green blades of our otherwise dry backyard grass.



*Blue Jay and Northern Cardinal molt*

In this shoulder season, Northern Cardinals and Blue Jay appear bald. Our patio oak leaves frame the varied sights: Mississippi Kite high in the sky - they arrive in spring, stay through summer, and will soon leave for their South American wintering habitat; Ruby-throated Hummingbirds grasp tiny branches - we now see more of them as fall migrants pass through; and Red-bellied Woodpeckers on the electric pole - they are year-round residents.



*Patio Oak leaves frame a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird.*

Well settled Black-chinned Hummingbirds dwindle when skirmishing Rubys dominate. Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Swainson's and Broad-winged Hawks pass through. I spot a Monarch butterfly sip from our Lantana. Yellow Warbler plays peekaboo. They all signal that this endless summer will end after all.



*Broad-winged Hawk*

Photos courtesy of Jaya Ramanathan.

## Bird of the Week: Northern Cardinal

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SEPTEMBER 11, 2023

By Lisa S Graham



Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*)

Northern Cardinals are one of the most popular birds in North America, and many people confess that the Cardinal is the bird that got them started in birding. They do not migrate, so we enjoy their company year-round. They are popular wherever they live, and they are the state bird of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, North Carolina, West Virginia, and Virginia. Some believe that when you see a cardinal, you're being visited by a loved one who has passed on.

I love to photograph birds, and I have more photos of Northern Cardinals than any other bird. Their plumage is beautiful, males often perch atop trees (which provides great photo composition), and they are bold and curious, so they will appear quickly when you're on a bird walk. They prefer dense areas of growth such as forest edges, thickets, and ornamental landscaping.

You can easily attract them to your backyard feeder, and they are especially partial to sunflower seeds. They visit my backyard feeder probably more than any other birds, and they tend to hide among the bushes and forage for seed on the ground. During mating and nesting season, you may find them attacking their reflection in your windows or your car's rearview mirror. They are extremely territorial and raise their crest when agitated.

During breeding season, they spend most of their time with their mate – the male will often feed the female as part of pair bonding. The female determines the nesting site after making a tour of possible locations with the male accompanying her. She is also the primary nest builder, although the male will bring her nesting materials. She builds a four-layer nest: coarse twigs with leafy mat layered over it lined with grapevine bark then topped with grasses, stems, and pine needles. It takes her up to 9 days to build the nest with the final product being two to three inches tall and four inches across. Once nesting season is over, they will abandon the nest and build a new one the following year.

The female lays up to 5 eggs that will incubate up to two weeks before hatching. The nesting pair will generally raise one to two broods per season. The nestling will remain in the nest up to two weeks before venturing out to forage. After breeding season is over, Northern Cardinals may molt, often losing all their head feathers at once. Although it gives them a sickly (and what has to be an embarrassing) appearance, they are fine. Their new feathers will come in, and they'll be handsome once more.

Fun fact: the "Cardinal" in this bird's name was inspired by the similarity of the bird's

color to the robes and caps worn by cardinals in the Roman Catholic church. A group of Northern Cardinals is often referred to as a college, a conclave, or a Vatican.

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

Photo credit: Lisa S. Graham

## September Bird Forecast

SEPTEMBER 11, 2023

Compiled by Travis Audubon volunteer Jane Tillman for KXAN.



### What to watch for in September – It's Transition Season

Migration is in full swing, and September brings the departure of several species that spent their summers in the US or Canada, and arrival of some wintering birds that may stay here or move further south. Let's take a look at four species that are all distinctive and use different habitats.

#### One Good Tern

Black Terns can be seen occasionally in the Austin area from late July through the end of September. These broad-winged small terns have a large summer range. They nest semi-colonially on marshy ponds and wetlands across most of prairie Canada and the northern U.S. from Washington down to northern California extending east beyond the Great Lakes region. In fall migration these terns are

molting from their black and gray plumage into non-breeding white-headed birds with gray bodies and white underparts. It's common and confusing to see them in various stages of molt. The juveniles look scaly dark gray on their upperparts. After the fall molt, both adults and juveniles look like they are sporting black ear muffs on white heads. Black Terns spend the winter along the Pacific coast of Mexico, Central America and northern South America. In summer they forage over ponds catching flying insects like dragonflies and mayflies, as well as aquatic insects, freshwater fish, frogs and tadpoles. In the days before pesticides, it was not unusual for them to forage over land where farmers were plowing or threshing. In 1986 one observer, Chapman Mosher, kept track of breeding foraging adults and found that they obtained 5.1 insects/minute. In contrast, it took 3-4 tries to catch a fish, averaging about .5 fish/minute according to another observer. During winter months Black Terns eat more small fish, often concentrating where predatory fish force smaller fish to the surface, but insects are still on the menu.



*Black Tern in Breeding Plumage – COURTESY: Jeff Osborne*

The Black Tern is an enchanting bird – it appears, often with others, swooping down to pick food off the water's surface – then disappears almost as quickly as it arrived. Here's how one early ornithologist, A.C Bent, describes it: "a restless waif of the air, flitting about hither and thither with a wayward, desultory flight, light and buoyant as a butterfly...as it skims swiftly over the surface of the water it reminds me of a swallow; and



its true relationship to the terns is shown as it hovers along over the billowing tops of a great sea of tall waving grass, dipping down occasionally to snatch an insect from the slender, swaying tops.”



*Black Tern in Fall Molt – COURTESY: James Giroux*

Since these striking birds are associated with water, spending time by a lake or large pond increases your chances of seeing them. Lake Travis, Lake Walter Long, and the ponds at the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Facility are good places to check.

### **A Long-winged Long-distance Flycatcher**

If you enjoy walking in a park or greenbelt and see a medium-sized very upright bird perched alertly at the very top of the tree, often on the highest twig, there's a good chance you are seeing an Olive-sided Flycatcher. With a closer view, you'll see a large-headed barrel-chested grayish-brown bird smaller than a cardinal, sporting a dark vest on a white breast and a white throat. This migrant summers in coniferous forests of the Rocky Mountains and across the boreal forests of Alaska, Canada and northern Appalachia. It is a long-distance migrant who winters in Panama and the Andes of South America. Some of these birds fly 7,000 miles from Alaska to Bolivia!



*Olive-sided Flycatcher – The Online Zoo*

On their breeding grounds, it's not unusual for both the male and female of a pair to aggressively defend a large territory of around 100 acres, which is large for a songbird. Olive-sided Flycatchers like high perches with unobstructed views, from which they fly out to catch flying insects, with their favorite prey being bees. They then often return to the same perch (sometimes referred to as Yo-Yo flight). Count yourself lucky if you see one of these striking birds.

### **Night-Herons all Around Town**

The Yellow-crowned Night-Heron is a common summer resident in Austin, and you don't have to be out after dark to see it. It's a slender heron, about half the height of the Great Blue Heron. The adult has a distinctive black head with a white cheek and yellow or white crown. Its body is gray and it has yellow legs. Young birds are brown with distinct streaks on their buffy breasts. This heron likes the shallows along shaded creeks and ponds and moist areas like ditches. After rains or irrigation, it can be found in wet lawns. Watch for it perched on branches or tree stumps over water, on the lookout for crayfish, its favorite prey. Good places to look for this species include Shoal Creek, Mills Pond at Wells Branch, and along the river at Roy Guerrero Park. Often it is quite tolerant of humans. Be aware that the Black-crowned Night Heron does occur here too, but is much less common. If you see a bird with, you guessed it, a black crown (also a black back, and a much stockier appearance) you've stumbled across one of them. The number of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons will taper off through the end of



October as the birds move further south across the Gulf of Mexico to Central and South America. Their migration pattern is not well understood, but we expect them to return next March!



*Yellow-crowned Night-Heron foraging –  
COURTESY: James Giroux*



*Yellow-crowned Night-Heron juvenile –  
COURTESY: James Giroux*



*Black-crowned Night-Heron adult –  
COURTESY: James Giroux*



*Swallow-tailed Kite – COURTESY: Jane  
Tillman*

### **Eye Candy**

There's a rare migrant that passes through our area that you just have to get lucky to see. eBird records indicate that the first and last weeks of September are good times to be on high alert while doing yard work, sitting at a stop light, or taking a walk. Take a moment to look up. Maybe you will spot one of our most elegant, distinctive and sought-after North American birds, the Swallow-tailed Kite. Most likely it will be catching high-flying insects like dragonflies.

## Bird of the Week: Yellow-billed Cuckoo

SEPTEMBER 11, 2023

Written and compiled by Lindsey Hernandez



Painting 1916 Robert Bruce Horsfall.

### Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*)

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo arrives in the Texas hill country in late spring and leaves in mid-September when they migrate to South America. The slender, long-tailed birds with yellow beaks stay silent during the day. They fly through dense woods and shrubs hunting for caterpillars, cicadas, and other insects. They remain hidden during the day by sitting very still and hunching forward, further concealing their white underparts. In flight, one may see rufous flashes of the bird's underwings.



Photo by Peter Pearsall/USFWS.

Though the bird stays hidden, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo has a distinctive drawn out knocking call that may be given at any time, night or day. However, during migration, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo stays mostly silent.

Many species of the cuckoo bird have long been a talisman of spring and summer time. Starting in the thirteenth century, poets wrote about the cuckoo bird in adulation for a return to verdant scenery and new life. The manuscript of “Summer is icumen” or “The Cuckoo Song” dates to 1262 and is written in middle English. The first stanza reads:

*“Summer has arrived*

*Loudly sing, cuckoo!*

*The seed is grounding*

*And the meadow is blooming,*

*And the wood is coming into lead now,*

*Sing, cuckoo!”*

The cuckoo is a favorite in Shakespeare's verse, who writes about the habit of the cuckoo to lay its eggs in the nests of other birds. In the first act of *King Lear*, the Fool says, “For you know, nuncle, the hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long that it had it head bit off by it young.”

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo species, though, participates in this parasitic egg behavior to a much lesser degree than the Eurasian Cuckoo. During times of food abundance, such as cicada or tent caterpillar outbreaks, Yellow-

billed Cuckoos sometimes lay eggs in nests of other cuckoos as well as in those of American Robins, Gray Catbirds, and Wood Thrushes.

Yellow-Billed Cuckoos don't lay their eggs all at once: the period between one egg to the next can stretch to as long as five days. This "asynchronous" egg laying means the oldest chick can be close to leaving the nest when the youngest is just hatching. When food is in short supply the male may remove the youngest bird from the nest, though unlike their relative the Greater Roadrunner, they don't feed them to the older siblings.

The cuckoo also makes its way into more modern literature, for example, in reference by novelist Haruki Murakami, who uses the absence of the cuckoo's song to set the scene in daytime, yet somehow something is off. However, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo's call may be heard during the day or night except during migration.

Sources include [All About Birds](#) and [eBird](#).

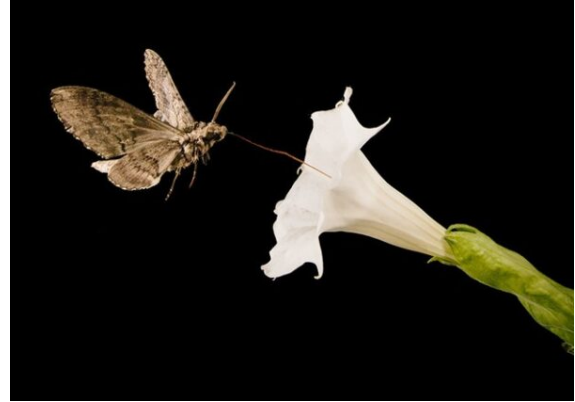
## Gardening for the Night Dwellers

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SEPTEMBER 26, 2023

Written by Emily Reyner

While you may know about pollinator gardens and how they provide resources for our butterflies and bees you may be unfamiliar with moon gardens - gardens that help our less seen pollinators.



Bats, moths, and even beetles and mice can play a huge role in supporting the growth and biodiversity of our environment. Plants that only bloom at night can be completely dependent on these nocturnal pollinators to continue their life cycle. Moths are highly efficient and great at pollination as the 'hair' on their bodies collects a lot of pollen, which they then carry from plant to plant. Nectar-, insect-, and fruit-eating bats are also great pollinators as they can fly farther distances than many insects, distributing pollen to much more distant areas.

Moon gardens can be used to provide food and resources to our nighttime pollinators while providing a relaxing space for people to enjoy as well. These gardens center around bundles of white or pale blooms and silvery foliage that shines in the moonlight. Fragrant plants are also incorporated in an effort to entice pollinators and help enhance the pleasant atmosphere.

Creating a moon garden starts with selecting your space. The area doesn't have to be large, but should be located in a place that receives plenty of moonlight and is accessible to view in the evening. Just as pollinators benefit from your garden, it can also be a relaxing and meditative space for you to enjoy during cooler temperatures. Choosing a space that is low-traffic or that can be seen gleaming from a window can maximize the benefit that you gain from the beautiful garden you create.





*Sacred Thorn-Apple*  
*Photo by: Cliffe, Harry*

Once your space is selected it's time to select your plants. Night-blooming flowers, bright white blooms, and silver foliage are the main components of a moon garden. Clustering your flowering plants together is recommended as they can create an impactful sight and stand out more than single blooms that may get drowned out in the darkness. The upright, fragrant blooms of Texas Kidneywood, broad petaled Showy Evening Primrose, and the small white blossoms of the Sweet Four O' Clock are great choices for a native Texas moon garden. Moonflowers such as the Tropical White Morning-Glory and the Sacred Thorn Apple provide big eye-catching blooms in the evening and make great centerpieces. Frogfruit, a popular pollinator plant, is a great choice for some ground cover.

Reflective, silvery, or fuzzy leaves and stems are also very effective at catching moonlight. Artemisia are great shrubs that provide a range of visual interest. From tall, feathery foliage to fuzzy white leaves, these plants are able to fill any space. Silver ponyfoot is another versatile plant. The small cupped leaves are perfect for catching light and can stretch out to create great ground cover. Put in a pot or container, the trendles can overflow to create height and contrast in your space.



*Silver ponyfoot*  
*Photo by: Marcus, Joseph A.*

Succulents and cacti are also great additions to a moon garden. Yucca and agave, both evergreen in warm climates, come in varying shapes and sizes and provide great food and habitat for pollinators. Yucca plants specifically are very particular and can be fully dependent on a select few species of moths and butterflies for pollination. The broad, waxy leaves of agave reflect well and can add significant light to your moon garden. In



addition to plants, your moon garden can benefit from the incorporation of other features such as lighting or water features. Dim lighting can help accentuate your garden on nights with little moonlight, and the sound of running water is a great way to increase relaxation.

Moon gardens not only provide food for wildlife but can provide shelter and habitat as well. Insects, which serve as pollinators for plants and as a food source for other animals, have been in decline for several decades. Planting native vegetation is a great way to support biodiversity and provide resources to wildlife that may be impacted by the spread of invasive species and other threats.

Sources include [Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center](#), [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services](#), [Austin American-Statesman](#).

## Bird of the Week: Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

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OCTOBER 4, 2023

Written and compiled by Lindsey Hernandez



*Yellow-bellied Sapsucker - Sphyrapicus varius*  
Photo Credit: Public Domain

A common woodpecker on the smaller side, averaging 8 ½ inches in length. It drills horizontal rows of small holes in live trees. The Yellow-bellied sapsucker will start to be seen in central Texas during October and through the winter months. While wintering in central Texas, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker is

relatively quiet. These woodpeckers are completely migratory, and they will migrate south as far as Panama in the winter.

This sapsucker can be found in yards, parks, woods, and gardens during winter and fall. Both sexes have a stout black bill with vertical white wing patches. Males have a red crown and throat. Females have a red crown with a white throat. The underbelly varies from white to pale yellow.

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker leaves behind rows of tiny holes in trees' bark, at times looking like a grid or a scantron sheet. The round holes are made by the sapsucker to harvest sap. The rectangular holes are shallow and are made to keep the sap flowing. The sapsucker as well as other birds and insects will feed at these sap wells. The bird licks up leaking sap as well as cambium from trees and any trapped insects using its brush-tipped tongue. It will also eat fruits and berries. At times, these sapsuckers can also be seen perched at the edge of a branch where it will launch off and chase after flying insects.

During mating season, it will become much noisier making cat-like calls and using its strong bill for staccato drumming. The male will even drum with its beak on metal street signs and chimneys to make its territory known. The beak seems to be unharmed by this behavior.

Unlike most woodpecker species, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers don't rely on dead trees for feeding but they do search for trees with dead limbs in which to make their cavity nests. The nest sites are most commonly picked out by the males and may be reused for several breeding seasons, up to seven years. The males do most of the work excavating the nest site in the tree, making an entrance hole averaging 1 ½ inches in diameter with an inside hole around 10 inches deep. The clutch of 4-6 eggs are laid on wood chips left over from pecking the next.

The etymology of this sapsucker's name goes back to 1858 when the American naturalist Spencer Baird named the bird Yellow-bellied

Sapsucker, or *Sphyrapicus varius*. The genus *Sphyrapicus* combines the ancient Greek *sphura* meaning “hammer” and *picus*, a genus of woodpecker first categorized by Carl Linnaeus in 1758. By the time of Linnaeus, *picus* was the name already attached to the woodpecker.

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, *Picus*, an ancient deity of agriculture, rejects the love of the goddess and witch *Circe*. As a punishment for this rejection, *Circe* turns *Picus* into a woodpecker: “He saw wings appear on his body...The feathers of his crown and nape took on the colour of his crimson cloak, and what had been a golden brooch, pinning his clothes, became plumage ...

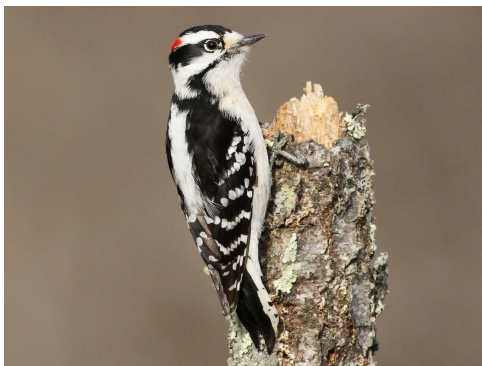
Angered at his sudden transformation to a strange bird... he pecked at the rough oak wood with his hard beak and in fury wounded the long branches.”

Sources: Texas Parks and Wildlife, All About Birds, Travis Audubon Society, American Bird Conservancy, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*

## October Bird Forecast

OCTOBER 17, 2023

Compiled by Travis Audubon volunteer Jane Tillman for KXAN.



*Male Downy Woodpecker – Courtesy James Giroux*

### What to watch for in October: Crowd-pleasing Woodpeckers

Fall migration continues. Check BirdCast to see what birds are forecast to be migrating tonight. Help them along their way by participating in Lights Out for Birds through November 30.

### Watch for Woodpeckers

Woodpeckers appeal to lots of people as they are vocal and often easy to see at backyard seed and suet feeders. They have distinctive features that help with identification, like sharp pointed bills, which are used to dislodge bark to find insects and to excavate nest cavities. They also use their bills to drum on wood, your gutters, and siding, etc., to advertise for mates and establish and maintain territories. How they avoid concussions might be a question you have pondered. A typical behavior to watch for is a woodpecker working its way up a tree trunk (called hitching) using its stiff tail feathers as a prop. The arrangement of its four toes, with two facing forward and two back, allows it to hold onto bark and climb.

The Austin area has several species of woodpeckers that live here year round. If you notice a bird flying across the sky with an undulating pattern, rising as it flaps, then falling as it brings the wings in close and glides, there’s a reasonable chance it’s a woodpecker. Keep an eye on where it landed and track it down. Neighborhoods with a mix of mature, dead and dying trees are especially attractive to woodpeckers.

The usual suspects are the Red-bellied, Golden-fronted, Ladder-backed and Downy Woodpeckers. Red-bellied and Golden-fronted Woodpeckers are closely related medium-sized birds, about the size of a robin. They both have barred black and white backs but their head patterns are different. The male Red-bellied has a red stripe of color from the nape (back of the neck) to the crown all the way to the bill. The female Red-bellied only has red on her nape, and a red splotch above the bill. Many people think a better name for this bird is the Red-headed Woodpecker, but while Austin occasionally hosts a Red-headed, they are rare here. Its head is completely red, unlike the limited red on the Red-bellied.



*Male Red-bellied Woodpecker*  
 COURTESY: James Giroux

A Red-bellied is so named for the pale reddish blush on the belly above the legs. Early ornithologists shot birds to identify them in the hand rather than with binoculars, and noticed the red blush. The Golden-fronted male has a yellow/gold nape, with a red crown cap, and yellow above the bill. The female is similar but lacks the red crown. When these two species are foraging high, with their heads and bellies facing tree limbs, it is challenging to tell the species apart. The answer is in the tail feathers, with Red-bellied tail feathers having black and white barring, compared to the solid black in the Golden-fronted. They do have slightly different calls too. The Merlin app can help. Fun fact: Red-bellied and Golden-fronted are partial to orange halves.



*Red-headed Woodpecker*  
 COURTESY: James Giroux



*Female Golden-fronted Woodpecker*  
 COURTESY: James Giroux

The Ladder-backed is slightly larger than the Downy Woodpecker, the smallest North American woodpecker. If you see these two species well, they are easy to tell apart. The Ladder-back's back has black and white barring while the Downy's back has a central white stripe set off by black back feathers. The Ladder-back's bill is much longer, and it has streaks on its buff-colored breast and flanks. The Downy is clean white below. The birds have different calls too. The Downy's is thinner and higher pitched. In these two woodpeckers red on the crown denotes the males. The red is all across the crown on the Ladder-backed while there's just a red dot on the crown of the male Downy.





*Male Ladder-backed Woodpecker*  
 COURTESY: James Giroux



*Male Downy Woodpecker*  
 COURTESY: James Giroux

It's fun to contemplate the different bill lengths of these woodpeckers that allow the species to exploit different habitat niches within the same area, so they can coexist.

### **Wintering Woodpeckers Arrive in October**

Northern Flickers and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers arrive in October and November and will be here through the winter. The Northern Flicker has a huge summer range from Alaska to the Canadian Atlantic coast. It's also a permanent resident across most of the U.S. from the Pacific to the Atlantic and down along the eastern Gulf Coast. Unlike more arboreal woodpeckers, the flicker often forages on the ground. As a result, the northern populations in Canada and the

northern U.S. must leave locations with deep snow that stays through the winter and migrate south to warmer climes. There are two distinct subspecies of flickers – the Red-shafted of western North America, and the Yellow-shafted of eastern North America. We get both in Austin. The best tipoff that you are encountering a flicker is to listen for a loud “kleah.” Start looking for a substantial bird the size of a White-winged Dove often perched up high, hugging a tree branch with typical vertical woodpecker posture. The flicker has a noticeable curved bill, a rich golden barred back and a white breast and belly with black speckling.



*Northern Flicker*  
 COURTESY: Jeff Osborne

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are not cowardly as the name might suggest. Some may migrate all the way to Panama, not a journey for the faint of heart. On both its summering and wintering grounds, this sapsucker visits the evenly spaced sap wells it drills in trees, and then laps the sap and insects that get trapped in it. Many other species from butterflies to hummingbirds to warblers take advantage of unguarded sap wells for nourishment. Besides supporting other species particularly during inclement weather, the sapsucker excavates nest cavities on its breeding grounds in the northern U.S. and much of Canada. Eventually those cavities become homes for other cavity nesting birds.

The Yellow-bellied is slightly larger than a Ladder-backed Woodpecker. An adult has zebra barring on a black back with distinctive white wing patches visible when the bird is foraging. It is fairly well camouflaged, but listen for its distinctive mewing call, and look



for the sap wells which can be fairly low on tree trunks. An interesting fact about the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker is that although it only gets about 20 percent of its diet from sap, it spends the majority of its time creating, tending and defending its sap wells.



*A Yellow-bellied Sapsucker tending a sap well  
COURTESY: Jeff Osborne*

Good places to look for a variety of woodpeckers include Commons Ford Ranch Metropolitan Park, Emma Long Metro Park, Roy G. Guerrero Colorado River Metro Park and the adjacent Circle Acres Nature Preserve (accessed off Grove Blvd.)

## Bird of the Week: Downy Woodpecker

OCTOBER 18, 2023

By Abby West

Downy woodpeckers can be found here in Central Texas year-round. Downy woodpeckers are common in any woods, especially near rivers or groves of deciduous trees. Perhaps this is not the right crowd for this confession, but here goes: if you're

anything like me all woodpeckers look more or less.. the same. Well, not all, but most! The

4 most common species in Central Texas are hard to differentiate due to the black and white striped wings, death grip claws, and red patch on or near the head. Well, here's a fun tip (if you need it) for narrowing it down to a downy: only downy and hairy woodpeckers have a large white patch on their back. Also, downys are the smallest of all woodpeckers, with a very short bill. They may or may not have a red patch on the back of their head. They're more frequently seen moving horizontally or downwards on a tree trunk than other species of woodpecker. White back, short bill, small body— you're welcome!



*Photo by Evan Lipton*

They're most noticeable when they're banging their heads against trees. Have you ever wondered why they don't get concussions? So has David Sibley, and he lays it out for us: they have tiny brains for one, their brains have evolved to absorb impact from front to back, and they have a little extra cushion inside their upper mandible for extra shock absorption!

If you do see a woodpecker banging against a tree, he is most likely doing one of three things: drumming, excavating, or foraging. Drumming is a woodpecker's way of making music, mostly in spring, and mostly aimed at communicating to potential suitors or rivals. It's loud but generally doesn't damage wood. Excavating a nest on the other hand, does a fair amount of damage as they chip out large holes in tree trunks. This process takes several weeks and lots of effort, so they often select trees that are deciduous and/or rotting to make the task a little easier. They chip away at the

wood until there's a round inch-wide hole they can fit through, then continue to excavate until a cozy 6-12" cavity is complete and ready for eggs.

Lastly, foraging. In summer when insects abound, they tap and chip at the bark eating any little creepy crawly they come across. In winter though, when the going gets tough and insects and larvae burrow deeper into the bark, they're more likely to tap into their true superpower: they're freakishly long, retractable tongue. I bet you didn't know that woodpeckers have (compared to their body size) some of the longest tongues of any animal on earth! This comes in very handy for probing through tree bark, as it has a barbed and sticky tip and can bend in any direction, following insects through all kinds of tunnels and trapping them. Whenever they're done using their tongue, it just rolls up on the inside of their skull, similar to a measuring tape! It's really very weird.

So the next time you see a downy woodpecker, I hope you take a moment to appreciate the absurdity of this creature with death grip claws, a football helmet skull and a sticky measuring tape tongue.

Sources: Audobon Field Guide, All About Birds Guide, What It's Like to Be a Bird by David Allen Sibley

## The Fall Rhapsody

OCTOBER 30, 2023

**The Fall Rhapsody**  
By Jaya Ramanathan

Fall is finally here after a summer that seemed endless. Before I got into birding, every Fall, I eagerly anticipated the change in color of leaves on trees. I even visited national parks such as Zion in Fall to experience colors. Now, I look forward to not just trees changing colors, but also migrating birds, butterflies, and blooms on shrubs.



*Baltimore Oriole and Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird, both display orange color*

Birds display the characteristic orange, red, and yellow Fall colors, but also blend in other colors. Baltimore Oriole pair visits, the male's orange plumage catching our eye. Male Ruby-throated Hummingbird displays its red gorget, while female, not to be left behind, surprises me with its gorget's orange spots.



*Nashville Warbler and Yellow-breasted Flycatcher, both display yellow color*

Nashville and Yellow Warbler, Yellow-bellied and Great-crested Flycatcher, and Eastern Phoebe, all add a splash of yellow, with gray, reddish or dark brown accents. Black-and-white Warbler brings a striped contrast to Carolina Chickadee, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Blue-headed Vireo sport a variation on Blue Jay's white with blue.



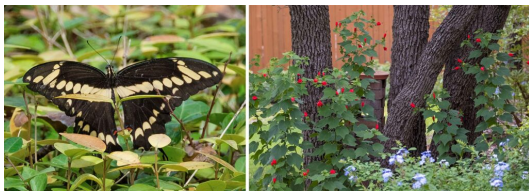
*Blue-headed Vireo and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher*

Out of all the birding colors we enjoyed this Fall, Wilson's Warbler, hands down, is the most exciting. I had mused just days earlier that it would be cool to see it in our backyard, when reminiscing about spotting one in the Willow Flats area in [Grand Teton National Park](#). A few days later, one morning, I spot something yellow on our Elm. I crane my neck to photograph it to no avail. I give up, telling myself it was just Yellow Warbler which I had photographed [this past spring](#). Then another yellow bird visits the same Elm, in clear sight. I click away, taking almost two dozen photographs. I am ecstatic to see through the viewfinder that it has a distinct black cap. BirdID confirms it is indeed Wilson's Warbler.

Hummingbird's skirmishing chee-dit, House Finch's sharp cheep, Northern Mockingbird's single chirp or long mimicry, all serenade us (these call descriptions are from [AllAboutBirds](#)).



*Northern Mockingbird enjoying American Sweetberry, White-winged Dove's wing contrasts with leaves turning color*



*Yellow of Giant Swallowtail and Red Blooms of Turk's Cap*

Perceiving both birds and Fall colors together, renders us a more holistic experience. When White-winged Doves congregate, we observe their wings contrast with leaves turning yellow. We notice the matching orange, a common Fall color, when Red-bellied Woodpecker and female Northern Cardinal share our seed feeder.

Butterflies and shrubs also display typical colors of Fall. [Monarchs](#) are orange, Giant Swallowtail yellow, while the many red blooms of Turk's cap frame our bath.



*Female Northern Cardinal and Red-bellied Woodpecker match in orange color, Red Oak Fall colors lit by morning sun*



*Eastern Phoebe and Great-crested Flycatcher, both display yellow color*

Birding has enriched our anticipation and enjoyment of Fall. Previously, we would only observe the colorful leaves on our red oak glowing in morning sunlight, and our Elm leaves changing color. Now we immerse ourselves in a broader canvas that nature paints and sounds for us – a colorful and melodious Fall rhapsody.

Birds also treat us to new calls in Fall as migratory birds join all-year residents. Eastern Phoebe's raspy call, Great Crested Flycatcher's emphatic rising whistle, whisper of Warblers and Lesser Goldfinch, Red-bellied Woodpecker's rolling churr when it comes by our seed feeder or to feast on our patio tree's fruits, Blue Jay's hassling call to Red-shouldered Hawk's kee-aah, Ruby-crowned Kinglet's two-parted scold, Ruby-throated

*All Photos by Jaya Ramanathan*