



MURMURATIONS

The Newsletter of Travis Audubon * VOL. 72, NO. 1 January/February 2024



A Note

FROM THE PRESIDENT

As I am writing this message, it's 18 degrees outside with a wild chill of just five. There's a thin coating of ice, but thankfully it does not look like we will suffer the intense tree damage of other recent winter events. Still, we wonder how the birds are doing. Do what you can for them. Keep your feeders full and find a way to provide fresh water that hopefully won't freeze over.

Texas has been blessed with rarities this winter, and I was fortunate to get good looks at the Cattle Tyrant in Corpus Christi this past weekend. Travis County has seen some strangers to these parts as well, including a Green-tailed Towhee and Pyrrhuloxia at Roy Guerrero. I was lucky enough to see these birds on New Year's Day in the company of eight other birders independent of one another, a reminder of how birding can bring people together.

As soon as it warms up, go birding with someone you care about, and maybe introduce a friend to our magnificent obsession. It's so rewarding to see the smile on a person's face the first time they raise binoculars to their eyes and see the world that has been hiding from them in plain sight.

Birding is a tonic for loneliness, depression, and the stay-at-home winter blues. In the company of others, it can be a transcendent experience. We are lucky to live in a community where bird walks are happening every week, so even if you don't have a friend that's interested, you can sign up for any of these walks on our website and meet some like-minded folks that share your love of all things birds.

Whether it's a rarity or a familiar backyard bird, remember that each of them is unique as we are, and that all birds are great birds to see.

Meet you in the field,

John Bloomfield
Travis Audubon President

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We are grateful to all of our members and donors who have supported Travis Audubon in any capacity in 2023. Special thanks to our Lifetime Members and Leadership Giving Circle.

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Thank You

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

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Beacon Nonprofit Consulting, Mauricio Callejas, Brenda Ladd Photography,
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Upcoming Events

With Travis Audubon

JANUARY 2024

January 6

Birding at Dowell Ranch in Manchaca
Beginner's Bird Walk: Searight Park

January 10

Class: Intro to Birds and Birding

January 13

Bird Walk with the Trail Conservancy

January 17

Reimers Ranch Wild Weekday Walk
Wingspan Game Night
Class: Better Bird Photography

January 18

Speaker Series: Where the Crawdads Sing

January 20

Birding by Ear Workshop
Commons Form Bird Walk
Beginner Bird Walk at Mueller
Blair Woods Restoration Day

January 21

Beginner Bird Walk: Commons Ford

January 24

Wednesday Workday at Blair Woods

January 28

Let's Go Birding Together
Family Forest Bathing
Ruffled Feathers Book Club

January 31

Wednesday Workday at Blair Woods

FEBRUARY 2024

February 1

Beginners Bird Walk at Commons Ford
Fungus Fun at Blair Woods

February 7

Wednesday Workday at Blair Woods

February 10

Baker Sanctuary Restoration Day

February 11

Commons Ford Bird Walk

February 14

Wednesday Workday at Blair Woods

February 15

Birds in the Landscape
Speaker Series: Armadillos to Ziziphus

February 17

Hornsby Bend Bird Walk
Birding by Ear Workshop
Beginners Bird Walk at Mueller
Blair Woods Restoration Day

February 18

Beginners Bird Walk: Commons Ford
Great Backyard Bird Count with Families in Nature

February 21

Reimers Ranch Wild Weekday Bird Walk

February 24

Catio Tour 2024
Purple Martin Workshop

February 29

Introduction to Woodpeckers Class

Bird of the Week: House Wren

NOVEMBER 14, 2023



House Wren photo by Bill Radcliffe public domain

Written and compiled by Lindsey Hernandez

House Wren
Troglodytes aedon

The tiny brown bird, with its checkered brown and white tail, shot straight in the air, sings its loud song in backyards across the Western Hemisphere. The House Wren has a more subdued and consistent brown plumage than many other wrens. Its eyebrow is also a fainter white, at times blending into the brown, marking it distinctly from our resident Carolina or Bewick's Wren's bright white brow.

During the month of October, this wren migrates south to central Texas. Some may migrate further south as far as Central America, but many will choose

to stay for the winter. Look for it at the base of trees, shrubs, brushy tangles in more open areas and in less groomed park edges. However, the House Wren can live in a wide variety of habitats, from deciduous to coniferous forests and from swamps to mountainside elevations of 10,000 feet.

The House Wren's Latin name, *Troglodytes aedon*, breaks down to something close to "hole dwelling nightingale." Aedon being ancient Greek for nightingale. Troglodytes means hole or cave dweller. This genus entails most of the wren family. *Pan troglodytes* is a chimpanzee. While troglodyte refers to prehistoric cave-dwelling man or harmit. The classification *Homo troglodytes* is a name created by Carl Linnaeus for a creature he wished existed and tried hard to find; something kin to the missing link.

While the House Wren does prefer to nest in cave-like settings, the busy little bird would scarcely be thought of as hermit-like. Like many wrens, the House Wren has an energetic personality and loud trilling songs. While many describe this wren's song as happy and jubilant, other's find it more mumbled than other wrens and much more irritating. I find this wren's loud song joyous and useful in teaching my children to recognize birds by their song. The House Wren nests in cavities of trees, but will also use boxes, boots, old cans, and nestboxes. They use piles of brush or dense woods and shrubs for protection and to look for insects. A House Wren's nest may become infested with mites and parasites as their eggs hatch. Scientists have observed that spider egg-sacks are sometimes added to the nest. When the

spiders hatch, they help by eating the mites and parasites.

Come time for summer migration, the song increases in energy, nearly bubbling over in song up and down the scale.



House Wren painting by John James Audubon circa 1827-1838 from *The Birds of America*

Sources include All About Birds, Texas A&M's Texas Breeding Bird Atlas and "The Curious Case of the London Troglodyte" by Cat Bohannon

Bird of the Week: European Starling

NOVEMBER 14, 2023



Compiled by Lisa S. Graham.

Every European Starling in North America is descended from one of 100 birds released in Central Park in the early 1890s. Shakespearian enthusiasts of the day also released House Sparrows in a bid to introduce into America all the birds Shakespeare mentioned. Although I have a degree in English Literature, I'm not willing to go as far as introducing invasive species as part of my admiration for the Bard. As a result of these enthusiasts' actions, the European Starling is now among the most numerous songbirds in the United States – they live year-round across the lower 48.

This species goes from spotted with white in the winter to glossy and dark in the summer, but they don't molt like many birds do. They grow new feathers in the fall that have the white tips characteristic of them in the winter, and by spring those white tips have worn away leaving just the iridescent brown and purple. Scientists refer to this as "wear molt". Regardless of season, they have a long slender bill, short & pointed wings, and a short tail.

European Starlings coexist easily with humans, nesting in the holes and crevices of buildings as well as in birdhouses, purple martin gourds (if allowed to stay), and trees. The male starts the nest then brings the female around to check it out. She will complete the nest, often throwing out some of the nesting materials supplied by the male. She will lay 4 to 6 eggs and do most of the incubation which takes about 12 days. The nestlings get food from both parents and will fledge after approximately 21 days. The parents will raise two broods per year.

These birds are not finicky eaters – they’ll consume insects, berries, and seeds. On my backyard feeder, they are voracious and tend to arrive in groups of at least 4 or 5. Even if I’m not looking at the feeder, I can tell when they arrive by their raspy, squeaking call. They also forage in open areas by zig zagging rapidly across the ground and poking their bills into the ground every couple of steps.

Although I’m not a huge fan of the European Starling, since it’s an invasive species, I do admire their adaptability and toughness. They are not easily scared away by other birds and will fight for room on my feeder with mockingbirds and jays. Additionally, their murmurations are amazing, with thousands of birds swirling and diving in groups without colliding into one another. It’s quite the sight.

Sources include [All About Birds \(Cornell\)](#) and [Audubon Field Guide](#). Photo credits: Matt Davis – Macaulay Library
han. Reviewed by Sarita Yeola.

Our Visit with Betty Hendrix

NOVEMBER 16, 2023



By Frances Cerbins

Betty Hendrix is a long time Travis Audubon member and past president of the board. Her tenure shepherded the acquisition of Blair Woods in 1985. Not only that, she named it Blair Woods! Mark Wilson, Dana Kuykendall and I got to have lunch with Betty this week and really learned a lot! At that time Travis Audubon was an all-volunteer organization with no staff, no office, and no endowment. Volunteers did everything. Betty’s extra bedroom was the supplies repository. Dr. Frank Blair included Travis County Audubon Society in his will to inherit his estate including his home and its contents except guns and books. Frank Blair and his wife Fern had lived in on the property, an old dairy farm in eastern Travis County, for 25-30 years and he for two years as a widower. The bequest was a surprise to Betty though board member Ed Kutac, Blair’s friend, probably knew of this potential inheritance.

The first order of business was to get the courts to agree that “Travis County Audubon Society” was indeed legally “Travis Audubon Society” Kutac was instrumental. Betty, a biology teacher, recalls driving downtown from Crockett High School after the school day to sign the legal papers. In short order, Travis Audubon owned property besides the small part of what is now Baker Sanctuary and had funds for an endowment. This was certainly a turning point for the organization.

Betty told us about the immediate tasks at Blair Woods. First it got its name from Betty; then they needed to start the labor of clean-up. Some of the projects included:

- The barn clean-up: It seems there had been no city trash pickup through the years when the Blair's lived there. A lot of trash had accumulated and had to be put in a dumpster hauled off.
- Raccoons: Dr. Blair had had a dog that he fed outside; the food was a big draw for raccoons which multiplied into a pack. The raccoons were caught and taken to Animal Rescue.
- House contents: The house needed to be emptied. Dr. Blair's books were collected to go to the Chihuahuan Desert Museum of which Dr. Blair was a founding board member. His guns were also gathered for his brother. Upon gathering the books, they found family silver hidden behind the books. They had an estate sale for all the remaining contents. Some items were purchased by members including Betty.
- Property cleanup: The property was very overrun and access was very difficult. The pond was there but no trails around the property. A Boy Scout Troop laid out some trails and volunteers did a lot of invasive removal. One invasive seemed to be planted way at the back of the property; volunteers found a patch of marijuana that got cleared. Blair had built the pond which was fed by the spring and he built a dam which he called the "Dam of Words" because the dam was structured from student papers; it is still there.
- Usage: How was the organization going to use Blair Woods? From the beginning neighborhood school groups came out to the property for nature studies. There are pictures

of Travis Audubon events that were held there. There were some classes held in the house but the house was not a good location for public activities because of the poor access for emergency vehicles.

With the current interest in Blair Woods as an inner-city nature sanctuary, we are grateful for the Blairs and for Betty and the Board Travis Audubon for taking on this challenge.

Bird of the Week: Ruby-crowned Kinglet

NOVEMBER 21, 2023



Photo by Kenneth Cole Schneider

By Abby West

We've camped at Enchanted Rock at least once every year for the past ten years. Except this time, I'd been paying attention to birds for the better part of a year and every glimpse of an unfamiliar bird sent me feverishly thumbing through my David Sibley book I carried everywhere (it is way too hefty to be considered a field guide). This particular hike, I left my bird book back at camp, having snuck away by myself to the

opposite side of the dome, escaping from the unrelenting noise of our two boys who felt the pressing need to narrate every thought that came into their head. Satisfied that I was finally surrounded by peace and quiet, I tucked myself under the canopy of a shrubby oak tree. The sweet relief of total silence was immediately pierced through with high-pitched bird chatter, and a little drab bird fluttered to the branch a couple feet in front of my face, twitching relentlessly. Annoyed, I did my best to ignore him. He flicked his tail, then his wings, then his tail and looking straight at me, a flash of firetruck red flashed on his forehead just for an instant. I blinked hard, wondering if I had just imagined that momentary glint of color. My eyes followed his movements as he hopped from shrub to shrub; he wasn't hard to spot considering he was in constant motion, reminding me distinctly of my four-year-old who embodies very much the same quality. Again, the startling flash of red.

Satisfied with this curious encounter, I mosied back to camp and he followed me the whole way. I soon learned he was a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, likely recently having flown all the way from Canada where they are known to breed in boreal forests during the summer. Females can lay up to their body weight in eggs. In summer, they migrate south all over the United States, arriving in Texas mid-September and heading back north around May. Apparently, science says that males flicker their bright red crests when seeking a mate or when agitated—but I say they do it whenever they please, perhaps just for attention or because they like seeing human's eyes widen in response.

Despite their restless motion, metabolic studies on these tiny birds have found that they consume a whopping 10 calories a day, eating many things we tend to grimace at: spiders, wasps, psuedo-scorpions, poison ivy berries (like it or not, it's a beneficial plant!) Every single night, they lose 10% of their body weight— more on hot nights, due to evaporation. Then over the course of the next day, they gain it back. Astoundingly, they can lose up to 30% of their body weight without suffering any physical harm.

Now that I've learned to put a name to this twitchy little bird, I see them on almost every hike I go on in the fall, and they always remind me of that first encounter. Seeking tranquility and silence, this bird reminded me that nature doesn't only exist in some kind of romanticized vacuum, separate from our human experience. Noisiness, restlessness, agitation are a part of the deal too. Whether that's coming the squeals from my own excited children or from the chattering little birds spying on us, it all belongs.

[RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET | The Texas Breeding Bird Atlas](#)
[Ruby-crowned Kinglet Life History, All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#)
[What It's Like to Be a Bird](#) by David Allen Sibley

November Bird Forecast: Do owls live in Austin?

NOVEMBER 22, 2023

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

Fall migration continues.

A number of western species turned up in Austin during October. Possibly due to the prolonged drought even further west, these birds are searching for more plentiful food sources to get them through the winter. One very cooperative bird called a Sage Thrasher (sometimes mistaken for a Northern Mockingbird) hung around Commons Ford Ranch Metro Park for several days in late October. Check [Travis County eBird](#), the citizen science database of sightings, to see what surprises show up in November.



Sage Thrasher Photo: James Giroux

Who lives in your neighborhood?

Austin is home to three common owl species — Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl and Eastern Screech-Owl. Owls intrigue people for many reasons: they have large forward-facing eyes like humans, are active at night unlike most birds, have silent flight, and can turn their heads 270 degrees. They have excellent hearing, amplified by their facial discs which direct sound waves to their ears (hidden by feathers.) Owls also have distinctive calls which announce their presence and allow us to easily identify them.



Great Horned Owl Photo: James Giroux

The Great Horned Owl is our largest owl, at 22 inches in height. It has golden eyes and ear tufts on the sides of its round head. (Ear tufts on many owl species are thought to help in camouflage.) This bulky brown owl with a white throat is mainly nocturnal but can fly and hunt in daylight. It often perches on roofs at dusk and hoots its characteristic “hoo hoo hoo hoo hoo.” Early morning just before daybreak is another good time to listen for them.

Fall is the time of year to listen for the male and female duetting, a call and response that strengthens their pair bond, and helps maintain their year-round territory. Listen carefully for the deeper, richer and more mellow call of the male and the higher call of the female. Interestingly the female is the larger of the pair, which is true for many raptors. Why? Egg laying, incubation and raising of young require a lot of energy. In fact it's common for individual Great Horned females to skip breeding every third year due to the toll it takes on their bodies.



Great Horned Owl on Day Roost Photo: Jane Tillman

Great Horned Owls have a huge range across North America, only avoiding the high Arctic, and are found in a variety of habitats from woodlands to suburban landscapes and even the desert. They occur all around Austin from the cliffs above Lady Bird Lake below the Tom Miller Dam to wooded neighborhood greenbelts. They don't build their own nests. Instead, they use old crow and hawk nests, broken-off cavities in trees, and even nest on the ground and on cliff faces. At least one Great Horned Owl nested on a second-story balcony in Austin, in an empty flower pot! Athena, at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, has nested almost annually on the arch over the entrance to the courtyard.



Great Horned Owl Fledgling at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center Photo: James Giroux

The Great Horned Owl is a formidable predator that will eat an amazing variety

of prey. It hunts from a perch, swooping down to catch rabbits, rodents, birds as big as themselves, house cats and skunks. It also eats much smaller items like insects and frogs, walking along the ground to get around obstacles. During the breeding season, the male catches prey and brings it back to the female who tears it up to feed to the nestlings.

When does nesting start? In Austin, it is not unheard of for Great Horned Owls to be on eggs in late December, January or February. A couple of factors may drive this early nesting: foraging success is higher since there is less leaf cover, making prey more visible, and prey abundance may be higher. This helps ensure the resulting owlets get a well-nourished start on life, and more time to learn hunting skills. What happens to young owls? They are driven from the parents' territory in the fall, and try to establish territories elsewhere. Often they are "floaters" waiting on the fringes for a territory to open up.

The two other common Austin owls are the Eastern Screech-Owl and the Barred Owl. Listen for the Screech-Owl's descending whinny like a small horse, and its tremolo call all on one pitch. Sometimes it may sound like an ambulance siren in the distance. This small gray or reddish owl about eight inches tall has yellow eyes. It likes treed cover with open understory where it can watch for prey and then pounce on it. Like the Great Horned Owl, it has a wide variety of items on the menu including birds, mice, rats, insects, frogs and earthworms. Eastern Screech-Owls readily use nest boxes if squirrels don't claim them first.



Eastern Screech-Owls readily use nest boxes
Photo: Jeff Osborne

The Barred Owl is most frequently found along waterways like Shoal Creek and the Colorado River. It's slightly smaller than the Great Horned Owl, has dark eyes, and a rounded head with no ear tufts. Barred Owls often call during the day, so get to know their "who cooks for you, who cooks for you allll" call.



Barred Owl COURTESY: Jeff Osborne

A good way to find owls is to let other birds find them for you. In a behavior called "mobbing," birds that discover a roosting owl in the daytime will start fussing and scolding until more birds are drawn in to gang up on it, often causing it to fly away. Whenever you hear a racket like this, check to see what predator is causing the commotion. In addition to owls other predator possibilities around Austin include fox, housecat, bobcat, snake, hawk and raccoon.



Eastern Screech-Owl harassed by a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Photo: Gil Eckrich

It's a bird-eat-bird world out there and that is true for owls. Great Horned Owls will prey on both Barred and Screech-Owls and Barred will prey on Screech. Fortunately all three manage to share the habitats that Austin provides. Henry David Thoreau said "I rejoice that there are owls," and many people agree.

Bird of the Week: Yellow-Rumped Warbler

DECEMBER 1, 2023



Written and comprised by Lindsey Hernandez

Yellow-rumped Warbler
Setophaga coronata
Crowned moth-eater

Winter weather here in Central Texas brings unpredictable weather, predictable allergies and splashes of yellow in the trees. The Yellow-rumped Warblers, still known to some by their more common name “butter butts”, swoop into the Hill Country in the fall and stay through April when they migrate northward. These warblers winter across most of central and southeastern U.S.

In winter, their colors are a more subdued brown with pops of yellow on the face, sides and rump. After their spring molt, their plumage matches the splashes of flowers with a brighter yellow, jet black and white.

Adult males also have a patch of yellow on their crown. The scientific name *Setophaga coronata* roughly translates to crowned moth-eater. The most common and numerous wintering warbler in the US, the Yellow-rumped warbler can be seen quickly moving and sharply chirping in the shrubs and trees. They often forage in

small groups known as a “bouquet”, “wrench” or “confusion” of warblers. The bouquet of warblers may forage alongside titmice, chickadees and kinglets.



Illustration by Mark Catesby circa 1729 for his book *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*.

The painting above shows a dead Yellow-rumped Warbler hanging by a string tied to a rosebud orchid. This painting was used in the aforementioned book published in 1729. To paint the bubbly bird in such a way is thought, then and now, to be an odd choice by Catesby.

The Yellow-rumped warbler has a distinct survival advantage in foraging. Not only do they feast on insects, but in fall they switch to berries including the bayberry and wax myrtle berry. The Yellow-rumps are the only warblers with the ability to digest those two berries.

During courtship, the male will follow the female incessantly, fluffing his side

feathers, raising his wings and his yellow crown feathers. He will call and flutter all while accompanying the female everywhere. The female usually lays 4 greenish to cream-white eggs. She incubates them for 12-13 days, and the young birds will leave the nest at 10-14 days after hatching. Both parents feed nestlings. A pair may attempt more than 1 brood per year. According to the Texas Ornithological Society Handbook of Birds (2004), Brown-headed Cowbirds, may parasitize as many as 31% of nests.



The Yellow-rumped Warbler has two distinct subspecies that used to be considered separate species: the “Myrtle” Warbler of the eastern U.S. and Canada’s boreal forest, and “Audubon’s” Warbler of the mountainous West. The Audubon’s has a yellow throat; in the Myrtle subspecies the throat is white. Male “Audubon’s” Warblers have more white in the wing than the “Myrtle” Warbler. Female Audubon’s have less distinctly marked faces, lacking the dark ear patches of the “Myrtle” Warbler. Both male and female Audubon have a pronounced yellow patch on their crown.

To bring butter butts to your backyard, offer sunflower seed, raisins, suet or peanut butter.

Public domain photo//Photos by Rhododendrites

Sources include All About Birds, Texas A&M’s Texas Breeding Bird Atlas, and Audubon Field Guide

Bird of the Week: Spotted Towhee

DECEMBER 14, 2023



Photo by Gregory Vinyard *Written by Abby West*

Hiking around with my family at Enchanted Rock last January, we were all startled by a sudden flurry of leaf litter that shot out at us from beneath some bushes several feet away. Kneeling down, I took a peek under the brush, expecting to see a fidgety squirrel. Instead, I saw one beady, bright red eye glaring back at me.

A Spotted Towhee, I later learned. In the sparrow family, but larger than most sparrows and dawning jet black wings with highly contrasted white spots, auburn flanks and a white belly. And of course, bright red eyes. Eye colors in birds vary widely among species- and scientists are still discovering why that is. Other birds with red eyes have been

studied, and even if the bird's irises are the exact same color red, they can have completely different causes. For example, the red of a cowbird's eyes comes from unusually large blood vessels, whereas vireos depend on two different types of pigment compounds. As far as I can tell, the cause of the Towhees iris coloration hasn't yet been studied.

Here in Texas, Spotted Towhees breed in the Trans-Pecos regions in the Chisos, Guadalupe and Davis mountain ranges and can be found in Central Texas during the winter months, usually leaving again around late Spring. During breeding season, they build their nests either directly on the ground, or in brush less than 5 feet off the ground. For a creature with wings, Towhees spend an awful lot of time on the ground; startled females have been seen *running* away instead of flying. To build a nest, they'll dig a small depression in the ground, and the female will spend 5 days lining it with pine needles, leaves, and shreds of bark.

In fact, digging is sort of what they're known for. Well, not digging *exactly*—it's more like something halfway between digging a hole and dancing a jig, and it has its very own terminology: the *double-scratch*. In search of food crawling around in the leaf litter, Towhees jump straight up, reaching their feet forward when they do, quickly rake behind them all the duff and then do this once more before they pause to search what they've uncovered for some squirming treat. I could think of many more creative names for this peculiar hunting strategy, like *the rake bounce*.. but I think *the towhee two-step* takes home the gold (although I can't claim to have come up with that- I saw it floating

around on the internet once). In any case, this process results in a rambunctious scattering of leaves on the ground, and that is often the giveaway that this otherwise secretive bird is nearby.

Sources:

[Bird Eyes Come in Amazing Arrays of Color, But Why is a Mystery](#)
[All About Birds guide](#)
[Texas Breeding Bird Atlas- Spotted Towhee](#)
[What It's Like to Be a Bird](#) by David Allen Sibley

December Forecast: What to watch for in December: Ducks

DECEMBER 18, 2023

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

Lots of ducks of fifteen regularly occurring species are arriving to spend the winter here. If you need to walk off a holiday meal this month, take some time to look for some of these interesting birds in area retention ponds, lakes, creeks and the Colorado River. Lady Bird Lake, the river below Longhorn Dam at Pleasant Valley Road, the Roy Guerrero Metro Park overlook west of the playground off Grove Boulevard, the [Hornsby Bend Bird Observatory](#) at the biosolids treatment plant, and Lake Travis – Bob Wentz Windy Point all have a variety of duck species. The ducks at the Mueller ponds at Southeast Greenway across from the Morris Williams golf course are somewhat

accustomed to people, and the trail there is especially pleasant in late afternoon. Two duck species in particular look like they are decked out for the holiday season. Both the male (or drake) Wood Duck and the drake Northern Pintail are spectacularly plumaged to attract the more subtly colored females (hens). Austin hosts Wood Ducks year round, but the pintails are only here for the winter. They both are the eye candy of the duck world in our area. If you prefer multicolored holiday lights, you'll enjoy the colorful Wood Duck, with its green crest, red eye, red and white bill, chestnut breast, golden buff sides, and white highlights. If you like the clean, minimalist look of white lights, the elegant drake Northern Pintail will be more your cup of tea. Its white breast and white neck stripe emphasize its chocolate-colored head, and it sports a slender grey body and long black tail.



The Multi-colored Wood Duck Male COURTESY: The Online Zoo

The Wood Duck is well-named for its preferred habitat of small wooded ponds, as well as wooded swamps and creeks. It won't typically be out in the middle of a large expanse of water. It is one of the few ducks that have webbed feet with claws for perching on tree branches where it can easily blend in with the scenery. Wood Ducks are adapted to

flying through dense wooded areas unlike ducks of more open country.

In Austin breeding gets underway in mid-February. Wood Ducks usually nest in trees near water, but have been known to nest as far as a mile away from it. The hen selects a natural cavity while the drake looks on. She lines it with breast feathers and lays a clutch of six to sixteen eggs, at one per day usually. After an incubation period of twenty-eight to thirty-seven days the chicks hatch over a period of six to eighteen hours. Just one day after hatching the hen goes to the ground or water and calls her chicks with a kuk-kuk sound, and the ducklings leap from the nest cavity. (There is one record of a 226-foot drop; between two and sixty feet is the norm.) She leads them to water where they learn how to forage; the hen does not feed them. She also watches for danger and broods them in inclement weather for a few weeks. The hen and her brood stay together for a range of thirty-one to fifty-six days, with early season broods staying together longer. The drake does not take any part in raising the brood. It's possible that its flamboyant colors could attract predators.



Typical Wood Duck Habitat COURTESY: Jane Tillman

The Wood Duck is a dabbling duck, feeding from the water's surface with its head and neck submerged and its rear end in the air. This behavior is called "tipping up." The adult Wood Duck's diet is about 80 percent plants, but they will eat caterpillars, snails and other invertebrates. Insects are the prime food source for very young ducklings.



Male and Female Wood Duck COURTESY: Jeff Osborne

Good spots to try for Wood Ducks in Austin are along Shoal Creek and Boggy Creek, the pond in Sheffield Northwest District Park, Circle Acres Nature Preserve and Camp Mabry.

The Northern Pintail is a dabbling duck with omnivorous tastes, eating aquatic invertebrates, snails, seeds of aquatic plants, and grains. Its core breeding range includes Alaska and the prairie pothole region of southern Canada and the Great Plains. It also breeds across northern Eurasia! While wintering here, pintails often gather in flocks of twenty to forty plus birds. As an early breeder they leave the Austin area by late February, so now is the time to enjoy them.



The Elegant Northern Pintail Male COURTESY: Jane Tillman

The pintail's nickname is "sprig" referring to the male's long tail feathers that remind hunters of plant stems. According to Allaboutbirds.org the longest nonstop flight of a pintail is 1,800 miles. A fairly reliable place to see them in Austin is at Roy Guerrero Park overlooking the river.



Male Northern Pintail in Flight COURTESY: Jeff Osborne

Fun Facts about Ducks

Ducks hitch rides on the north winds of fall. Their typical speed is 40-60 mph. A tail wind boosts that speed, and ducks take advantage to travel farther with less energy expenditure.

According to Ducks Unlimited, a leader in duck conservation, ducks typically migrate at an altitude of 200 feet to 4,000 feet. The documented record for

highest North American altitude achieved by a duck is a Mallard over Nevada that collided with a plane at 21,000 feet!

Ducks have excellent eyesight. Their eyes are placed on the sides of their heads giving them an excellent field of vision, able to see in all directions at the same time. Their eyes are saucer shaped which allows sharp vision of both close and distant objects. No wonder it is hard to get close to them to get a better look. Their survival instinct kicks in since they are hunted throughout the country. Ducks have around 12,000 different skin muscles which they use to control their feathers! Humans have 600 muscles. They use the muscles to fluff or compress their feathers to regulate temperature, dive for food, and engage in courtship or aggression.

Some species of ducks lay eggs in other ducks' nests, leaving the foster parent to raise their ducklings. Many species of cavity nesters like Wood Ducks, Hooded Mergansers, and Buffleheads participate in "egg dumping," which is more scientifically called brood parasitism. Often this occurs because there is a shortage of available cavities. There are cases of Wood Duck nests with fifty eggs within; clearly they are not all one female's. Sometimes those eggs are not even from the same species. Up north Hooded Mergansers may lay eggs in Wood Duck nest cavities for example. Other species besides cavity nesters use this strategy too. Sometimes hens don't have enough body fat to both lay eggs and incubate them so they decide to lay their eggs elsewhere, gambling that maybe a few of their eggs will bear fruit. Brood parasitism has some negatives for the host hen in that her eggs may be pushed out, or not incubated well

enough to hatch. The Redhead hen is considered the Parasite Queen, with healthy hens sometimes both parasitizing nests first, and then laying and brooding their own eggs. (Redheads winter all over Texas, with a large part of the total population wintering in the Laguna Madre where flocks of 60,000 have been counted.)



Redhead Females COURTESY: Jeff Osborne