

A Note

FROM THE PRESIDENT

We are delighted to announce that Travis Audubon has chosen Mashariki Cannon as its new Executive Director. Mashariki will officially join us on March 25.

Mashariki comes to Travis Audubon with more than 20 years of experience both in the small business and not-for-profit world. This includes senior roles with the YMCA of Metropolitan Fort Worth, YMCA of Austin, and Explore Austin. She brings a wealth of experience in leadership, operations, programs, and partnership development. Throughout her career she has demonstrated highly strategic, inclusive approaches that combine a passion for health, equity, love of the outdoors and the ability to build strong bridges across diverse communities.

“I’m thrilled to join Travis Audubon at such an exciting time in its history,” Mashariki said. “I believe helping people nurture their own connection with nature can serve as a powerful catalyst for environmental stewardship. I look forward to amplifying the mission and reimagining how and where we enjoy birding in Central Texas. I’m committed to building capacity and leveraging the organization’s capabilities to drive growth and impact.”

Mashariki holds a bachelor’s degree in Health Promotion from the University of North Texas and a master’s degree in Nonprofit Management from the University of Houston – Downtown. She is an ardent mental health advocate who serves on the board of the Austin Child Guidance Center. Mashariki is passionate about youth development and is a longtime mentor and literacy partner to students in Manor Independent School District. As an outdoor leader with Families in Nature, she elevates non-dominant perspectives and advocates for equitable access to nature and outdoor recreation. In her free time, she enjoys long hikes with her husband and adventure camping with family and friends.

The board strongly believes that Mashariki is the right leader to guide our members, staff, and volunteers through the next stage of our growth, enabling our mission of inspiring conservation through birding to be embraced by everyone in our vibrant community. She is eager to get out in the community in the coming weeks to gain a deeper understanding of our issues and opportunities, and to be in the field with you as spring migration unfolds.

Please join me in welcoming her to Travis Audubon.

Sincerely,



John Bloomfield
TAS President

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AT TRAVIS AUDUBON

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Land Manager and Educator
Program Manager
Development Manager
Operations and Finance Coordinator
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Baker Team
Blair Woods Core Team
Chaetura Canyon Management

Chimney Swifts
Commons Ford

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

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Thank You

TO OUR BUSINESS PARTNERS



Upcoming Events

With Travis Audubon

MARCH 2024

March 2

Its My Park Day with Austin Parks
Foundation
Birdability Walk at Mueller E Greenway

March 3

Water Feature Workshop

March 5

Commons Ford Walk

March 9

Forest Bathing

March 10

Young Birders Club: Reimers Ranch

March 16

Birding by Ear Workshop
Presentation: Place a Welcome Mat for
Backyard Birds

March 17

Beginner Bird Walk: Commons Ford

March 21

Speaker Series: Insects: Not Just Bird Food

March 22

Birding at Lady Bird Lake with the Trail
Conservancy
Cemetery Birding: Oakwood Cemetery
Blair Woods Happy Hour

March 23

Birding at Roy G Guerrero
Blair Woods Restoration Day

March 26

Meet the Author: Tough Broad

March 30

Blair Woods Nature Day

APRIL 2024

April 1

Birdathon Kickoff: Flap-py Hour

April 6

Blair Woods BioBlitz
Commons Ford Bird Walk
Birdathon: Camp Mabry
Young Birders Club: Searight Park

April 7

Birdathon: Bluebonnets and Black-throated
Sparrows
Birdathon: Lakeside Birding at Emma Long

April 8

Total Eclipse Viewing at Baker Sanctuary

April 13

Birdathon: Bird Behavior Walk at CL
Browning Ranch

April 16

Barton Springs Bird Walk

April 18

Speaker Series: Prairie Chicken Conservation

April 20

Birdathon: Birding the Upper Texas Coast
Beginners Bird Walk at Mueller
Baker Sanctuary Restoration Day

April 22

Beginners Bird Walk: Commons Ford

April 25

Wingspan Game Night

April 26

Birding at Lady Bird Lake with the Trail
Conservancy

April 28

Birdathon: A Wing and a Prairie
Let's Go Birding Together

Woodpecker Stories

POSTED ON JANUARY 2,, 2024



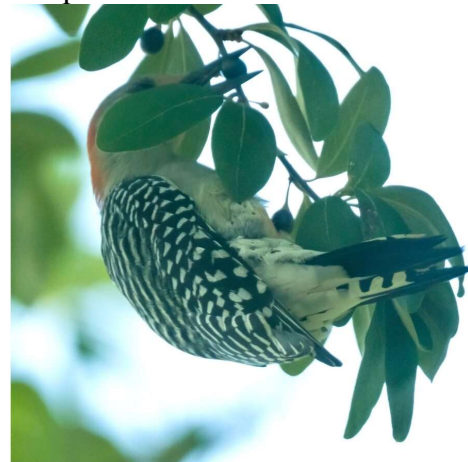
By Jaya Ramanathan

Winter is here, and we welcome migrant birds, trickling in from colder north. We also bid adieu to Monarchs that prefer warmer weather, south of us. While awaiting more migrant birds, I decided to reminisce and write about our sights of Woodpeckers.



Male Red-bellied Woodpecker with sunflower seed

Red-bellied Woodpecker visits us often, and we spot it frequently in our neighborhood Freeman Park. Both males and females have red nape, while males also have a red crown. Whenever I hear its call, [I check electric poles](#), as it loves to perch there, pecking for bugs, once turning its head a full half circle. It visits our sunflower seed feeder, [precariously balances itself](#), fetches one seed at a time, places it in our patio oak grooves, and pecks it open to munch. It once regurgitated a seed and chewed it, better this time around? I was surprised when I saw its long tongue, and when it ate fruits of our patio tree.



Female Red-bellied Woodpecker eating fruit

Woodpeckers have a distinct sliding movement, both vertical and horizontal. Red-bellied Woodpecker glides gracefully on oak, probing for bugs. Perching vertically, it cranes its neck to sip water from bath. Little ones venture to take an actual bath. It happily [shares](#), waiting patiently for its turn, while a brave Carolina Chickadee sips from bath. On a rare occasion, we

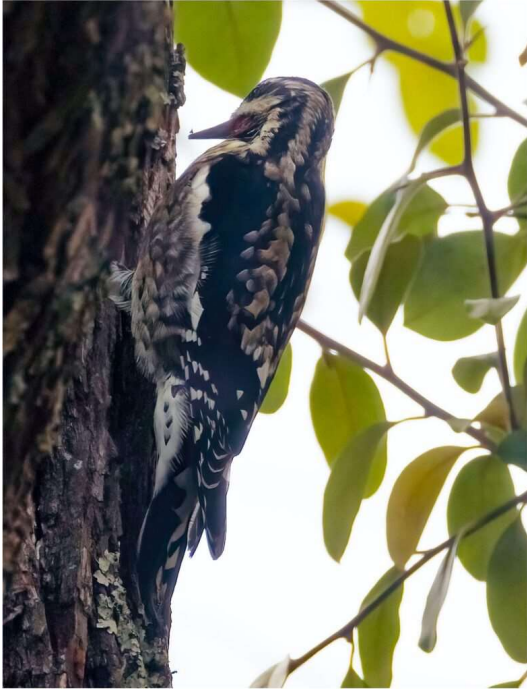
see it on ground, maybe looking for a bug? We have seen [juveniles](#), initially with parent, and later on their own, even bravely poking Blue Jay to share bath.



Male Downy Woodpecker at seed feeder
Our first nesting experience of Downy Woodpecker in Freeman Park, inspired me to [start writing blogs for Travis Audubon](#). Downy has long white stripe down the middle of its back. Males also have red spot on their head. Both parents care for young during nesting. Downy visits our sunflower seed feeder, perching easily. We spot it pecking for bugs on oak, but have not seen it at bath, or eating patio tree fruits.



Female Downy Woodpecker
Our first sight of Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was during the [Historic Winter Outbreak](#). Next time was during bomb cyclone, when temperature was 14F, but sunny with no freezing rain. It hugged our patio oak trunk then for a while, feathers ruffling in wind. One can identify it by vertical white wing patches along side of folded wing. Both males and females have red crown. Males also have red throat. It migrates south during winter, the only Woodpecker to do so in eastern part of North America.



Male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

We first spotted Golden-fronted Woodpecker in Garner State Park. They have yellow on forehead and on back of neck. Males also have red crown. We saw two females chasing each other, maybe they were competing for a nesting spot? We also spotted a juvenile in our backyard.



Female Golden-fronted Woodpeckers in Garner State Park

Woodpeckers always arrest my attention with their striking plumage pattern, vibrant colors, and unique movements, even after watching them

many times. Their visit during winter storms, when we are homebound, is an absolute delight. [Texas Parks and Wildlife](#) lists many more types that can be spotted in our state. An opportunity for more Woodpecker stories?



Male Downy and Female Red-bellied Woodpeckers during winter storm

All Photos by Jaya Ramanathan

Bird of the Week: Loggerhead Shrike

POSTED ON JANUARY 11, 2024



Written and composed by Lindsey Hernandez

Loggerhead Shrike
Lanius ludovicianus

Walking through a forest alone, you might see a clump of fur or feathers on a branch. Upon closer inspection, you identify the small clump as the corpse of a small animal impaled onto a thorn, sharp stick, or a barb of wire. If this happens to you, do not panic. You are not in the midst of a macabre artist with a rodent corpse fetish.

Instead, you would be in the territory of the Loggerhead Shrike, aka the butcher bird. A bird that, lacking a raptor's strong talons, skewers, or impales, its prey on thorns, barbed wire or wedges them in between tight branches. The birds will keep several prey impaled through winter as food stores. These stores are commonly

called "larders" or "pantries" and may also help a male shrike attract a mate.



Grasshopper prey/Photo By Danielle Brigida/USFWS

The *Lanius ludovicianus*, Loggerhead Shrike, from afar can be confused for the Northern Mockingbird. A gray, thick-bodied songbird with a fairly long and rounded tail, its size and color match the state bird of Texas. The Loggerhead Shrike, though, has a blocky head, a black eye-mask and a thick bill with a small hook.

To spot a Loggerhead Shrike, open country with scattered shrubs and trees is their typical habitat, but the species can also be found in more heavily wooded habitats with large openings and in very short habitats with few or no trees.

They sit on low, exposed perches and scan for rodents, lizards, birds, and insects. They eat smaller prey (such as ground beetles) right away, but they are famous for impaling larger items on thorns or barbed wire to be eaten later.



Painting by John James Audubon, circa 1838, for his book *Birds of America*. A male and female Loggerhead Shrike vie for a dead mouse under one's talon.

The Loggerhead Shrike is an endemic songbird to North America and one of only two species of shrike. They are a strong indicator species of grassland habitats, and therefore useful for understanding and managing grasslands in Texas. Loggerhead Shrike populations have declined by 76% since 1966.

It was previously believed that the female Loggerhead Shrike killed the male after mating. This erroneous information was the inspiration for the 1955 noir film *Shrike*. A film where a wife drives her husband to failure and insanity.

Sources include *All About Birds*, John James Audubon's *Birds of America*, and texanbynature.org

Bird of the Week – Barred Owl

POSTED ON JANUARY 19, 2024



Image courtesy of Alabama Ag Extension

By Abby West

Owls have captured the imagination of humans for thousands of years, apparently striking fear, or at the very least a kind of reverence into our hearts. For centuries, Native cultures across the world have crafted this reverence into stories where owls embody restless spirits of the dead, or are harbingers of death, or (my personal favorite) consume the spirits of the dead and carry them into the afterlife.

This reverence could be explained by their increased activity at night or perhaps their near-silent flight. To me

though, owls live their lives above us in every way, and we seem to know that. In a literal sense, they nest in tree cavities or abandoned nests typically 20-40 feet off the ground, well above eye level. Energetically though, I have *never* seen an owl before an owl saw me. Every time, I am shocked into silence, wondering how long it's been watching me and what it knows that I don't.

Owls, fundamentally, are masters of sound. Virtually all of their highly specialized adaptations revolve around minimizing the sound they make and interpreting the sonic landscape around them with startling accuracy.

In terms of reducing their own noise, they have specialized flight feathers that are extra flexible and fluffy at the edges. This extra softness makes all the difference—allowing air to pass over them with hardly any turbulence and virtually no noise. I know from personal experience how eerie this 'adaptation' is. As I wandered along the woods skirting a small stream at dusk a couple years ago, a barred owl appeared suddenly six feet right above my head, swooping low over me and coming to a noiseless landing on a branch only ten yards away. The total stillness it immediately settled into left me wondering if I'd imagined the whole thing or if this creature was merely a figment of my imagination. Barred owls also disappear into tree canopy easily due to their feather patterning: brown and white feathers streaking vertically on their chest like bark, with horizontal bands across their neck (like a cozy scarf) and lining their back.

Perhaps their most unique adaptation is their specialized ability to locate *exactly* where a sound is coming from, both on horizontal and vertical planes. In some species of owl, their ears have evolved a kind of asymmetry— with their left ear canal slightly higher and angled up, and their right ear canal lower and angled down. Rotating their heads at all sorts of strange angles, they hone in on where exactly their prey are.

Amazingly, experiments have shown that barn owls can pinpoint the exact location of a tiny mouse from over 30 feet away. They fly to where the mouse last made a noise, and it's not until they are hovering directly over the mouse that they have a strong need for their vision at all. In fact, their color vision isn't very good, as they opt for better sensitivity in low-light conditions instead. This low-light vision is the largely the reason they hunt at dusk and dawn, when the gap between *their* visual acuity and that of their prey's is widest.

Apparently, these adaptations allow them to settle down and stay put. Barred owls don't migrate. One study showed that of 158 banded birds, none of them moved any farther away than 6 miles from their original location. Barred owls love large swaths of mature forests, ideally close to water—the most likely place to find the wide variety of prey they eat: mice, rabbits, birds, squirrels, birds, frogs, snakes—you name it. They also need mature forest because they'd rather let other species do their home-building leg work; when they locate a tree cavity or old nest and take up residence, they

often do very little, if anything to improve it. Originally a bird of eastern North America, during the twentieth century owls spread out Northwest and then south into California. Likely, their territorial expansion was hindered by wildfires and logging. Because of their need for old-growth forests, they are an indicator species for forest management.

Barred owls feel above me in every sense of the word- settled, patient, their own simple needs hidden inside their motionless bodies. Driven by silence, stillness, and listening, they seem like avian monks, disentangling with ease what's necessary from what's not, avoiding any frivolous action or effort. Waiting in watchful contentment, responding only to the demands of each moment.

Sources:

[Center of the West: Owls in Native American Culture](#)

[The Cornell Lab of Ornithology,](#)

[Barred Owls](#)

[What It's Like to Be a Bird](#), David Allen Sibley

Bird of the Week: American Woodcock

POSTED ON JANUARY 23, 2024



Photo by James Giroux – Austin, TX – August, 2019

By James Giroux

One of the strangest birds in North America is the American Woodcock. At rest, the bird is shaped like a football, and appears to have no neck. Its large, dark eyes are near the top and back of the head, and it has a very long thin beak. It's in the shorebird family, but you won't find it on the shore. Instead, this bird spends its time in eastern forests, probing for earthworms under the leaf litter. Those large eyes at the top of the head are useful in preventing aerial attacks. The bird is also extremely well-camouflaged for the forest floor. Many birders in the eastern half of the U.S. have had the pleasure of seeing and hearing the dawn/dusk displays that the males perform in springtime. But recently I had the rare opportunity to see and hear this display in the Austin area. The bird begins by making a nasally "peent" sound. It then takes off vertically climbing to a height of 200-350 feet. As it climbs, the wings make a twittering sound. The bird descends,

and as it nears the ground makes a different twittering sound. It has not been confirmed whether this sound is made by the wings or by chirping.



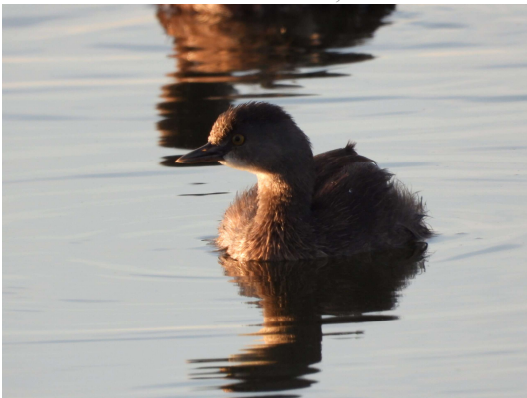
Photo by James Giroux – Austin, TX – August, 2019

Other names for the Woodcock include the Timberdoodle, Labrador twister, Night partridge, and Bog sucker. Strange indeed.

Source: All About Birds website – The Cornell Lab

Bird of the Week – Least Grebe

POSTED ON JANUARY 30, 2024



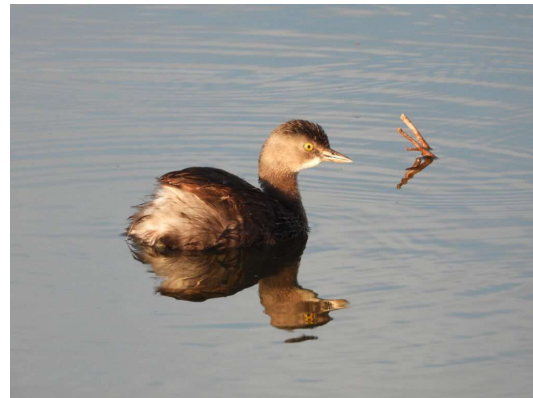
Least Grebe *Tachybaptus Dominicus*

By Eliana Patt

A flash of movement, and the little bird is bobbing at the surface again.

Unlike the last few times it has done this, the bird does not dart below the water after a few moments. Instead, it begins to preen itself, stretching out its bizarre feet and flashing the small white mark below its bill. The early light of dawn catches in its brightly colored eye.

To those of us in Travis County, this bird is an expected sight, if not a particularly common one. Least Grebes have undergone a striking range expansion in the last several decades, pushing north from along Texas’s southern coast and interior. Relatively recent arrivals to the county, Least Grebes are difficult to find in Austin, but can be spotted if you’re lucky- and you know what to look for.

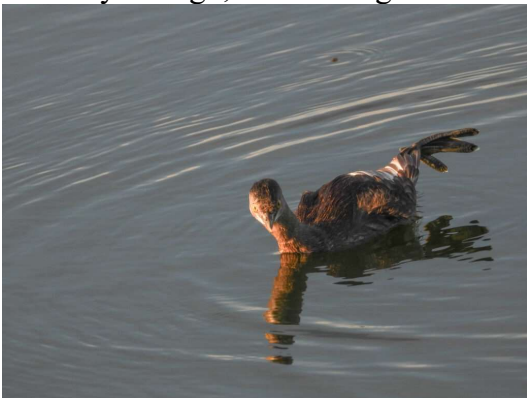


While the morning light has certainly made the colors look warmer, a non-breeding Least Grebe is really a rather neutral shade of gray.

Photo by Eliana Patt

Least Grebes, as their name might suggest, are the smallest member of the grebe family, weighing in at an average of barely six to as low as under three ounces, and rarely measuring more than ten inches in length. Unlike some of their flashier cousins, they do not exhibit bright ‘ears’ or striking patterns upon their bills. Instead, their breeding plumage is a dark gray with an almost metallic luster, a near match for the slightly lighter shade (with the addition of a small white marking) sported outside of the breeding season. At either time of year, the only pop of color is the vivid yellow of their eyes.

In the depths of winter, three out of the twenty-two species of grebe generally call Travis County home. A Least Grebe is best distinguished from these other two species (Eared and Pied-Billed Grebes) by its diminutive size, its bill shape, and its overall uniform gray color. During other parts of the year, a lucky birdwatcher might catch sight of a Horned Grebe, lost from further to the east. The most *ridiculous* relatives of the Least Grebe, however- the closest group to the grebe family as a whole- are, absurdly enough, the flamingos.



Can you spot the feet? Photo by Eliana Patt

Unlike their vivid pink cousins, the feet of grebes aren’t webbed. Instead, their toes are lobed, similar to those of American Coots. Despite this strange adaptation, one which sets them instantly apart from most other diving birds, grebes are well-suited to a life on the water. In fact, the legs of all grebes- including the Least Grebe- are set so far back on their body that, like loons, they often struggle to walk.

Least Grebes spend most of their lives in slow-moving bodies of water, especially those with heavy vegetation cover. Here in Travis County, the best place to find these secretive birds outside of the breeding season is the ponds our very own Hornsby Bend Bird Observatory. If you are keen to search for these tiny silver delights, keep your eyes peeled- a sharp observer there might also be able to spot a number of other species, including Wilson’s Snipes, Crested Caracaras, Black-Bellied Whistling-Ducks, and many more!

Sources:

Least Grebe | The Texas Breeding Bird Atlas [A&M’s Texas Breeding Bird Atlas](#)

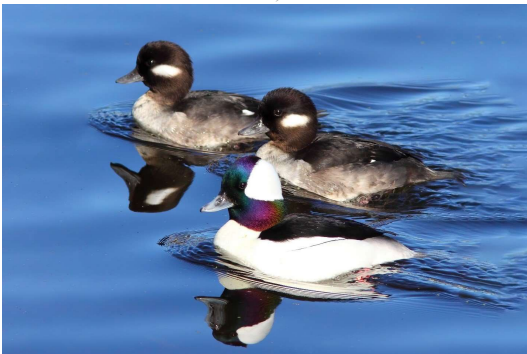
Cornell Lab’s All About Birds – Least Grebe [All about birds’ Least Grebe Overview](#)



Least Grebe *Tachybaptus dominicus* Photo by Eliana Patt

Bird of the Week – Bufflehead

POSTED ON FEBRUARY 5, 2024



A male and two female Buffleheads. Photo by Mick Thompson, downloaded from audubon.netx.net

Bufflehead

Bucephala albeola

By Rajiv Jauhari

Among the duck species that spend winters in Central Texas, one of my favorites is North America's smallest diving duck, the Bufflehead. If the sun is shining just right, Buffleheads (especially the males) can be identified

from a distance even without binoculars. The males have a large white patch on a dark head, with white chest and flanks and a dark back. Their heads can look disproportionately large, which also helps in identification. The contrast between the white and dark parts of their bodies is so vivid that to me they sometimes appear to be generating their own light, like little black-and-white lamps floating on the water. From a distance the dark parts of the heads can appear black, but they are actually glossy green and purple. Females are smaller and less striking, with mostly dark brown heads and backs, but can usually be identified by the single horizontal white patch behind the eyes.

The name Bufflehead comes from the archaic word “buffle,” meaning buffalo. Apparently the relatively large heads of the males appeared to resemble buffalo heads to some. They have also been called “spirit duck,” “butterball” and (in Japanese) “princess white wing.”

Buffleheads breed mostly in boreal forests and aspen parkland of Canada and Alaska. They are secondary cavity nesters, occupying holes excavated by other birds such as Northern Flickers. Buffleheads will also use nest boxes if available. Their small size may have evolved with the habit of nesting in tiny cavities. In non-breeding season, they have been seen as far away as Japan, Central Europe, and Portugal. Buffleheads breeding west of the Rockies tend to migrate to the West Coast, while those breeding in Central Canada tend to migrate to the east or south, including Texas. They migrate

at night like many other ducks; overnight migratory flights of several hundred miles are probable. Ground speed during migration is estimated at 40 miles an hour.

Buffleheads are monogamous, and retain the same mate for several years. Females often re-use the same nest site year after year. The oldest Bufflehead on record was a male over 18 years old. Less sociable than many ducks, they tend to be seen in small flocks. Both males and females disappear for a few seconds as they dive for food (insects, crustaceans, and mollusks), and re-merge some distance away.

The next time you are near a duck-frequented watery spot, keep your eyes open for these cute little ducks visiting from Canada. In Travis County, the Longhorn Dam area can have numerous Buffleheads, and Hornsby Bend often has some.

Sources:

www.audubon.org
<https://www.10000birds.com/what-makes-you-stare-so-bufflehead.htm>
birdsoftheworld.org

Volunteer Spotlight – Mary Kay Sexton

POSTED ON FEBRUARY 6, 2024



By Marissa Pensirikul

Background

Mary Kay grew up in Texas with a big love for the outdoors and nature. She holds a degree in Aquatic Biology and a Teaching Certificate from Texas State University. Her interests in birding didn't take flight until attending university where she started noticing the different birds on campus. During this time, she traveled on a friend's trip to Port Aransas and immediately was in awe of the coastal birds that dotted the shoreline. This inspired her to pursue learning about the birds of Texas and the importance of getting outside.

Nine years ago, Mary Kay retired from teaching middle school science and started volunteering for Travis Audubon. Since then, she has volunteered for numerous events including banquets, family days, and youth programs.



Involvement with Travis Audubon

After retiring from teaching, Mary Kay continued to make a difference with kids and the environment. She participated in the Blair Woods youth education program which focused on bringing a classroom approach to the outdoors. The program encouraged students to receive education on wildlife and plants while learning at the Blair Woods Nature Preserve. This project was in partnership with Travis Audubon and Norman Elementary to bring environmental awareness, conservation, and scientific knowledge to connect kids with nature.

When asked if volunteering has taught Mary Kay anything about herself, she joyfully responded, “reaffirms that I really love nature and kids!” Mary Kay loves getting people excited over nature and loves to share nature with others. She goes on to describe herself as a social birder – one to appreciate birds as is, not pining to check off a list, nor chase a rare bird, but rather enjoy chatting with others about birds. Speaking of, her favorite bird is the scissor-tailed flycatcher.

Is there anything you wish you knew when initially considering volunteering?

Mary Kay emphasized that “birding skills don’t need to be ‘good enough’ to participate in birding activities.” She reassured herself that it is okay to not know everything about birds to attend an event and wants others to know all skill levels are welcome. She explained the value of getting mentored or asking to be an assistant when going on birding trips.

What advice would you give someone new to birding?

“Take classes, take classes, take classes, then go birding!” Mary Kay reiterated the phrase because not only are those courses for becoming a better birder, but as a chance opportunity to meet new people and new friends to surround yourself with in nature. A special thank you to Fred Webster and Ed Kutac for their teachings.

Notes from Chaetura Canyon – January 2024

POSTED ON FEBRUARY 8, 2024



By Georgan and Paul Kyle
Sanctuary Stewards

Since the late 1980s we have started each month with an avian Point

Count: visiting five set points on the property for 10 minutes making notes of every bird we see and /or hear. As the area around The Canyon has developed, numbers of species and individuals has diminished, and the Point Counts have added little if anything to daily observations. Going forward we decided to take a different approach and keep a cumulative monthly record – noting first-of-the-season sightings. January yielded just 20 species of birds with the usual suspects of year-round residents. The few wintering species included Orange-crowned Warblers, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Chipping Sparrows. We did record a Field Sparrow for the first time in many years. They used to be regulars back in the 1980s and 90s.

This January could not have been more different than January 2023. About this time last year, we were hit by an ice storm of epic proportions. Although we did have some very cold days (17.5 degrees!) and more than 5” of rain, thankfully the two did not overlap.



Early January was relatively mild, and we were able to get back to work on habitat restoration – primarily cleaning up more of the storm damage from 2023. At 70+ years we no longer climb ladders with a chain saw. But thanks to some grant money released

by the TAS office, we were able to hire two arborists and a laborer from Maas Verde Landscape Restoration for a day to help with the high canopy damage. We can handle all the work ourselves with volunteers once the damaged materials are on the ground.



Mikael Behrens led one of his Birding by Ear classes for some hearty souls on January 20th just as we were coming out of the coldest part of the month (still a chilly 35 degrees that morning). But we fired up the gas pit on the covered part of the deck which made it reasonably comfortable for the sitting portion. The trip around the sanctuary trails was a bit quicker than usual, but everyone was in good spirits and seemed to have a great time.



By the end of the month, we had processed a good portion of the material downed by Maas Verde (cutting into 3’ – 4’ pieces and stacked in neat little piles) and were fortunate to have a great group of volunteers from the Hays County Master Naturalists and two of our docents (Hilary and Willow) join us for the haul out to the road for chipping on

January 28th. In addition to toting 800 cubic feet of Juniper slash uphill, the volunteers spread mulch on 1400' of the Upper Canyon Trails. By noon the trails through the wooded area and Chimney Swift Glade across the street from the residence looked as good or better than they did before the January 2023 ice storm.

With this work behind us, we will start moving down further into the Canyon to also get those trails ready for the spring and early summer events at the Canyon. We expect to start hosting again in April with a Morning Canyon Crawl and Birdathon (with Mikael!). Check the Travis Audubon calendar over the next months for a complete list of happenings at The Canyon.

Featured Image: The Hays County Master Naturalists. Photo by Paul Kyle

Rare Delights of Winter

POSTED ON FEBRUARY 14, 2024



By Jaya Ramanathan

Winter brings us cold and dreary days, with a couple of freezes as well. Luckily, migrant birds join all-year residents to double our birding fun. [Variation](#) in what we observe, sustains our interest, which in turn has rewarded us with some rare sights over the years. I am sharing here such winter delights.



Ruby-crowned Kinglet in air, at Freeman Park.

Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, are named as such because males have a colorful crown. However, it is hard to spot the crown of the constantly moving Kinglets. So it is exciting to photograph their crown, and their movement in air.



Cedar Waxwing Flock.

Cedar Waxwing, loves to party, and is typically seen as a big flock. Their distinct, subdued crest helps us identify them from afar, even when they all perch on a leafless tree at a distance. Just once, we spotted several on our patio tree, and enjoyed their beauty in close proximity.



Dark-eyed Junco snacks on elm acorn.

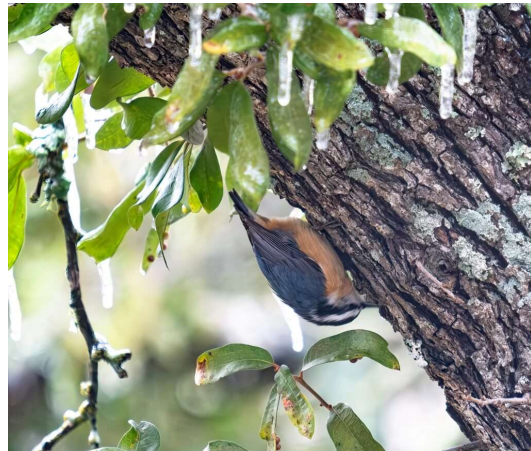
Dark-eyed Junco, typically forages in shrubs, or scans oaks, looking for bugs. Seeing a few snack on elm's acorns, one morning, was a rare sight. We have never seen it at seed feeder or baths. On the other hand, Chipping Sparrows crowd at seed feeder, typically feeding together peacefully. Once a belligerent one chased others away so it can have the feeder to itself. Another time, Bewick Wren chased

away all Chipping Sparrows from feeder, but flew off without feeding – was it just being playful?



Yellow-rumped Warbler takes a splashy bath, Pine Warbler explores oak.

Warblers are exciting to spot in winter, as we mostly see them during migration. Pine Warbler cheered us up by visiting our seed feeder on Bomb Cyclone day. One revisited our patio oak on a sunny day. Yellow-rumped Warbler surprised us one winter by taking a splashy bath.



Red-breasted Nuthatch explores oak during freeze.

Some migrants visit us just one winter, leaving us reminiscing about them during subsequent years. I miss how Red-breasted Nuthatch stylishly flipped a seed and caught it, within its beak, also nonchalantly hung upside down, pecking our patio oak, while freezing rain fell. [Rusty Blackbird foraged](#), just one afternoon, in our

backyard grass. We spotted Brown Creeper only one winter.



Black-crested Titmouse and American Goldfinch at bath.

Not to be left behind, all-year resident birds too display rare winter behavior. Braving cold, Black-crested Titmouse takes a bath, while American Goldfinch patiently waits to sip – did they converse? Northern Mockingbird plays hide and seek within a dense holly shrub.



Northern Mockingbird plays hide and seek in holly shrub.

Early in winter, we are delighted by the changing colors of Red Oaks and Crepe Myrtles. A weed creeper colorfully drapes oak. Last few migrating butterflies feed on Lantanas. Soon after, leaves fall, and after freeze, most trees and shrubs turn barren, except Live Oaks.



Painted Lady and Red Admiral Butterflies at Lantanas, Weed creeper colorfully drapes oak.

The last month of winter, seed feeders empty faster, with wintering birds fortifying themselves for their migration up north. Red-tailed Hawk perches on leafless elm for a while, our first ever sighting of it in our backyard. A brave Carolina Chickadee enjoys two consecutive baths, signaling warmer weather will be here soon. I step outdoors, and hear many birds call. They invite me to listen and look out for more such delights, before spring arrives.



Red-tailed Hawk on a leafless elm.

All Photos by Jaya Ramanathan.

Bird of the Week: Black-crowned Night Heron

POSTED ON FEBRUARY 15, 2024

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

By Lindsey Hernandez

Among the many egrets and herons spotted around Lady Bird Lake (or any body of water) this time of year, the squatty Black-crowned Night Heron will likely be there, hunched under the cover of leaves, neck scrunched into its body, faintly resembling Danny Devito's portrayal of Penguin. The nocturnal Black-crowned Night Heron spends the night feeding, and the day standing still in the plants, trees and marsh near the water's edge making the bird harder to spot.



Photo by Joao Saplak

However sinister the bird's positioning may seem during the day, when the Black-crowned Night Heron takes flight, it's contrasting pale gray belly and wings with black back and cap with a white long plume shimmer in the light. During breeding season, the

black feathers from the head and back emit a bluish-green gloss and the legs become red.

During the night, the noisy and social heron feeds on fish, frogs, crustaceans, small mammals and even the young of other colonial-nesting waterbirds. Their digestive acids are so strong that bones that are consumed simply dissolve in their stomachs. The Black-crowned Night Heron is one of seven herons that "fishes" for fish by tossing a stick, or similar implement, onto the water as bait and then waiting to catch the animals who swim to the surface.



Photo by Joao Saplak.

Black-crowned night-herons usually nest colonially among reeds in marshes, or up to 160 feet above the ground in trees. Their nests are seemingly haphazard piles of reeds, sticks or twigs that may, over the years, become very bulky.

The Black-crowned Night Heron is the most widespread heron species in the world, breeding on every continent except Australia and Antarctica. In Travis County, the species may be seen year round.

Feature Drawing by Orville Rice circa 1960.

Sources include [All About Birds](#) and [The Texas Breeding Bird Atlas](#)

Bird of the Week: Golden-Crowned Kinglet

POSTED ON FEBRUARY 21, 2024



Golden-Crowned Kinglet *Regulus satrapa*

By James Giroux

Most Texas birders are familiar with our winter resident, the Ruby-crowned Kinglet. But, there is another Kinglet that winters in Texas that is less-often seen: The Golden-crowned Kinglet. The two birds are very similar in coloring, except in the head area. The Golden-crowned sports a black and gold "helmet" while the Ruby-crowned has a plain green head with a baby-faced look.



Golden-Crowned Kinglet (left) Ruby-crowned Kinglet (right). Photo by James Giroux

The males of both species flash their orange/red crowns when agitated.



Golden-crowned Kinglet (left) Ruby-crowned Kinglet (right). Photo by James Giroux

Both birds are very small, but the Golden-crowned is the smaller of the two – only 3.9 inches in length compared to 4.1 inches. Both birds also have black legs and *yellow feet* – just like the Snowy Egret! Worldwide there are six Kinglet species scattered across the globe: 2 in North America, 1 in Eurasia, 1 in Europe to North Africa, 1 endemic to the Canary Islands and 1 endemic to Taiwan.

Despite its small size the Golden-crowned is a tough bird when it comes to the cold. It routinely endures nighttime winter temperatures of -40°F in the high country. The range map shows that it prefers cooler weather, spending summers in Canada, and the mountain areas in the east and west.

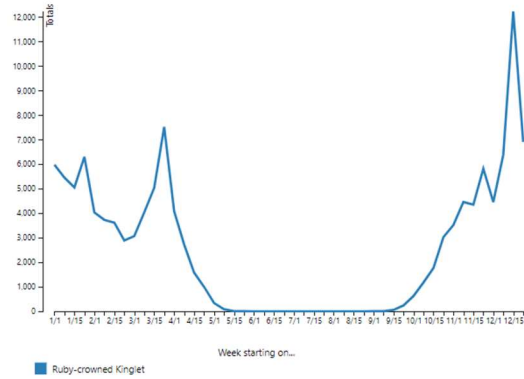
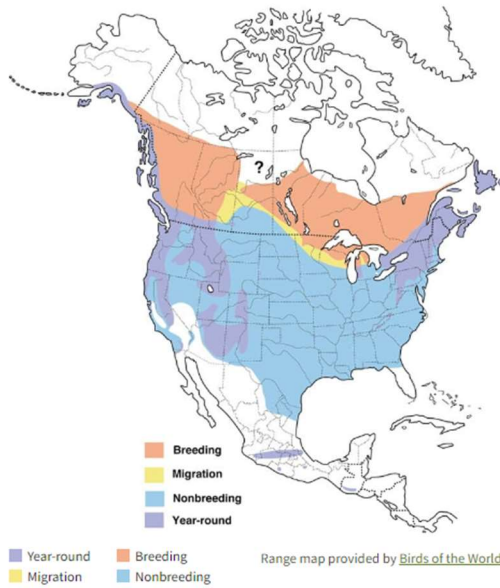


Photo by James Giroux

In the spring, the bird usually raises two broods of young in batches of 8 to 9. How do nine eggs fit in this tiny little bird!? Tiny little eggs I'm guessing.

In Texas, look for this bird in wooded edges. It often associates with Chickadees, Titmice, Brown Creepers, and its cousin the Ruby-crowned Kinglet. In the Austin area, you will have to sift through about 10 Ruby-crowned Kinglets to find one Golden-crowned. But the search is worth it.

Featured photo by James Giroux

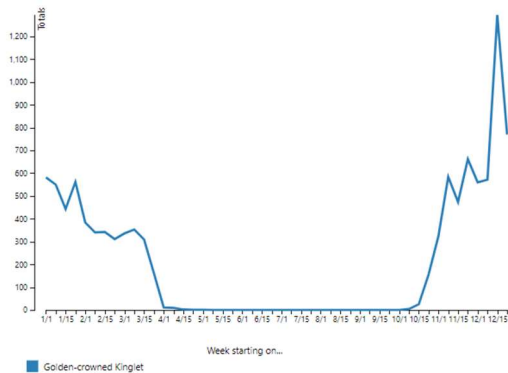
Sources:

<https://allaboutbirds.org>

<https://eBird.org>

National Geographic: Complete Birds of North America

Average Daily Totals for Travis County from eBird



Bird of the Week: Northern Cardinal

POSTED ON FEBRUARY 27, 2024



By Abby West

Northern cardinals are a gateway bird, introducing many of us to the nerdy and fascinating world that is bird watching. That bright red flash has caught many an eye and led us into the realization that this world, as it turns out, is full of all *kinds* of interesting birds.

Cardinals are unique in that, during winter, they do little to protect themselves: they neither migrate nor molt into a duller plumage for increased camouflage during these leafless months like many other birds do. This means in winter time, they're taking immense risks in drawing such attention from predators: a bright red target contrasted against a backdrop of gray and brown.

Apparently, being fire engine red is pretty important for males. As you may have guessed, it signals to females that the redder he is, the better offspring he's likely to produce. To develop red feathers, he needs to eat seeds or fruit containing pigment molecules called

yellow carotenoids. For cardinals here in Central Texas, sunflower seeds are a major source of carotenoids, which might explain why cardinals are frequent bird feeder visitors.

(Fascinating pitstop: his body transforms yellow carotenoids into red plumage somehow, which I tried for about 60 seconds to understand before I decided such biological alchemy was above my paygrade, but you're welcome to take a stab at it. All I know is that I personally find it incredible that this same molecule turns flower petals yellow and his feathers red.)

These molecules, surprisingly, do a lot. They not only give orangey-yellow fruits, flowers and vegetables their color, they are essential in human diets as well, bestowing us with all kinds of gifts: increased immunity and improved eyesight, as well as protecting our skin from UV damage. But for cardinals, do redder feathers really indicate they are healthier birds? Turns out, yes. According to The Audubon Society, "research indicates that carotenoids are concentrated in the mitochondria. And bright coloring is linked to mitochondrial performance.

In general, birds with the brightest color also tend to have better immunity, winter survival, foraging ability, and skill at avoiding predators."

I first was turned onto the cardinals' perilous lifestyle several years ago when my family and I began reading a beautiful Advent book, *All Creation Waits*, written by Gayle Boss. She

expresses beautifully what I admire most about this particular bird:
“When nearly all the world tamps down its color, this male cardinal flares– an extravagant gesture considering the hawk, whose dark eye snaps to him faster than mine. His brilliance shouts his unshakeable expectation of spring.”

Featured Photo by Susan Pike

Sources

For Male Cardinals, The Redder the Better, Audubon Society

Eat Right With Color: Orange and Yellow for Carotenoids, Smart Eater
How Did the Cardinal Get His Red Feathers

All Creation Waits by Gayle Boss