



# *Signal Smoke*

**The Newsletter of Travis Audubon \* VOL. 67, NO. 2 May/June 2019**



# *A Note*

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Travis Audubon Members and Friends,

Spring is my favorite time in Central Texas—outrageous sunsets, explosions of irises, the light-jackets-needed forecasts (sometimes), and the birds! My work at Travis Audubon keeps me at my desk most of the time, but I try to find moments, especially during the spring, to be outside. It helps me reprioritize, breathe more deeply, feel the restorative effects of walking around in the fresh air, but most importantly, remember and appreciate why we do our conservation work.

Two recent experiences highlight this for me: A couple weeks ago, I was able to observe Golden-cheeked Warbler banding on the BCP and I participated in the Master Birder Birdathon at High Island. The male GCWA who flew in the net was as handsome as they come and received some pastel bands perfect for the season. And while at the coast, we had amazing views of a Fork-tailed Flycatcher and a couple of wayward Whooping Cranes in a rice field, even catching them in flight! What I love about both of these experiences is that I get to enjoy the beauty of birds and their habitats with great people who I might not know except through our organization. I just celebrated my first year on staff at Travis Audubon and I can't tell you how happy I am to have landed here. The birds are pretty great, I'll admit, but the people might be even better.

So here's to more restorative time outside, and with all of you!

Nicole



Nicole Netherton  
Executive Director



*Golden-cheeked Warbler photo taken by Nicole Netherton*



*Whooping Crane photo taken by Lori Malloy*

# People

AT TRAVIS AUDUBON

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<i>Executive Director</i>	Nicole Netherton
<i>Land Manager and Educator</i>	Chris Murray
<i>Education and Program Coordinator</i>	Caley Zuzula
<i>Operations Coordinator</i>	Judith Allen
<i>Design Director &amp; Website Producer</i>	Nora Chovanec

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<i>Advocacy</i>	Christy Esmahan
<i>Baker Team</i>	Clif Ladd
	Chris Murray
<i>Blair Woods Management</i>	Mark Wilson
<i>Commons Ford</i>	Shelia Hargis
	Ellen Filtness
<i>Chaetura Canyon Management</i>	Paul Kyle
	Georgean Kyle
	Mark Wilson
<i>Adult Education</i>	Byron Stone
	Cheryl McGrath
<i>Field Trip</i>	Dennis Palafox
<i>Hornsby Bend</i>	Eric Stager
<i>Outreach/Member Meetings</i>	Jane Tillman
	Cindy Sperry
<i>Youth</i>	Virginia Rose
	Mary Kay Sexton

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	Suzanne Kho
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	Jo Wilson
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Bryan Hale  
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Mary Kelly  
Susan Rieff  
Andrew Sansom  
Carter Smith

# Upcoming Events

WITH TRAVIS AUDUBON

04 MAY, 19

FIELD TRIPS

Beginner Bird Walk: Big Webberville Park: 2305 Park Ln, Webberville, TX 78621

FIELD TRIPS, YOUTH & FAMILY, BIRDATHON

Birdathon: Berry Springs Birders

FIELD TRIPS, BIRDATHON

Birdathon: Birdability

05 MAY, 19

BIRDATHON

Birdathon: Prairie Chicks

FIELD TRIPS, SANCTUARY EVENTS

Commons Ford Prairie Plant Walk with Kirsti Harms and Terri Siegenthaler

08 MAY, 19

FIELD TRIPS

Wild Weekday at Charro Ranch Park, Led by Amy Sugeno & Christy Esmahan

11 MAY, 19

FIELD TRIPS, SANCTUARY EVENTS

Morning Canyon Crawl

FIELD TRIPS

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Count

SANCTUARY EVENTS

Baker Sanctuary Restoration Day: 12219 Lime Creek Rd, Leander, TX 78641, USA

FIELD TRIPS

Lockhart State Park Field Trip – Led by Judith Bailey & Cinda Crosley

SANCTUARY EVENTS

Swift Watch

12 MAY, 19

FIELD TRIPS, SANCTUARY EVENTS

Commons Ford Bird Survey

16 MAY, 19

FIELD TRIPS

Migratory Birds in the Landscape

18 MAY, 19

FIELD TRIPS

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Walk

YOUTH & FAMILY, SANCTUARY EVENTS

Baker Nature Day

SANCTUARY EVENTS

Chalupas and Chimney Swifts

25 MAY, 19

Ecological Literacy Volunteer Day at Hornsby Bend: 2210 S FM 973, Austin, TX 78725

YOUTH & FAMILY, SANCTUARY EVENTS

Blair Woods Family Nature Day: Plants: 5401 E Martin Luther King Jr Blvd, Austin, TX 78721, USA

29 MAY, 19

FIELD TRIPS

Wild Weekday Woodlands Park and River Place Trail, Led by Christy Esmahan & Celeste Treadway: 8820 Big View Dr, Austin, TX 78730

08 JUN, 19

FIELD TRIPS, SANCTUARY EVENTS

Morning Canyon Crawl

FIELD TRIPS

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Count

FIELD TRIPS

Purple Martin Colony Visit with Laura Joseph

SANCTUARY EVENTS

Swift Watch

09 JUN, 19

SANCTUARY EVENTS

Cool House Tour Featuring Travis Audubon's Baker Sanctuary Residence

15 JUN, 19

FIELD TRIPS

Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Walk

FIELD TRIPS, SANCTUARY EVENTS

Commons Ford Prairie Bird Walk with Shelia Hargis

SANCTUARY EVENTS

Blair Woods Restoration Day: 5401 E Martin Luther King Jr Blvd, Austin, TX 78721, USA

29 JUN, 19

Ecological Literacy Volunteer Day at Hornsby Bend: 2210 S FM 973, Austin, TX 78725

# Updates

FROM THE SIGNAL SMOKE BLOG

## ***Whooping Crane Festival 2019***

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POSTED ON MARCH 7, 2019

By: Michael Jewell, Travis Audubon Master Birder

Janel Nye and I had an opportunity to make it to the Whooping Crane Festival in Rockport, Texas this year. We had both been down separately years before and were surprised at the numbers we saw compared to years past.

While we were there Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday morning, our Thursday morning, the first official day of the Festival, was spent on the Skimmer with Captain Ray. A number of people from the International Crane Foundation, [savingcranes.org](http://savingcranes.org), based in Baraboo, Wisconsin were on board and were quite informative concerning not only Whooping Cranes, but all 15 species of cranes worldwide, many of which are facing an uncertain future.



The best weather day, Wednesday, we spent at Goose Island State Park in The Big Tree area at the pasture across the road. The pond was full of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Roseate Spoonbills, Least Sandpipers, Sandhill Cranes, Willets, Blue-winged Teal, and Snowy Egrets, with Whooping Cranes flying in and out of the

area. We even saw an early Scissor-tailed Flycatcher hanging around, and many others species of birds.

Rockport is still bouncing back from Harvey, but many businesses including hotels/motels and restaurants are open for business, just waiting, hoping and needing our business.

It's hard to beat Rockport— it's always been one of my favorites places, great birding, food and people, just a little more than a three hour drive, we'll be down there again soon.

## ***Where does the Northern Cardinal get its stunning red color?***

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POSTED ON MARCH 12, 2019

By: Sarah Jenevein, Travis Audubon Volunteer

At this time of year, it's common to see a flash of red amongst leafless branches as Northern Cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) flutter from branch to branch. But where do these birds get their stunning colors?

Scientists have discovered the red in cardinals' feathers comes from chemical pigments called *carotenoids*—the same family of pigments that give carrots, ripe tomatoes, and autumn leaves their colors!

The red of a cardinal's feathers comes from the nutrients in its food, which means that the better a bird is eating, the richer its color! So bright plumage isn't just pretty... it's a sign of the bird's overall fitness, which can be attractive to potential mates.

However, it turns out not all cardinals have a classic red wardrobe! *Albinism* in cardinals can lead to a failure to produce red pigment on most or all of the body. Albino cardinals have

white bodies with spots of red on their crests and wings.



And it gets even weirder! Recently, [this cardinal](#) was spotted in Alabama with a complete set of banana-yellow feathers. Scientists are still arguing about what might have caused the bird's condition. While most scientists think the yellow color is the result of genetic mutation, some have hypothesized a poor diet and environmental stressors. Luckily, the bird's bizarre color seems to have had no effect on its mating prospects—it has produced at least one chick this year!



## ***Guatemala with JB Journeys***

POSTED ON MARCH 21, 2019

By: Michael Jewell, Travis Audubon Master Birder

Janel Nye and I had the pleasure of joining a few other Travis Audubon members for 11 days and 10 nights of birding in Guatemala with JB Journeys. We were in the later group of two, with Eric Stager hosting the first group on January 3-13, and Jean and Bob Warneke hosting ours January 15-25.

Central America is so easy to get to— it takes exactly the same time to fly to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as it does to fly to Guatemala City, Guatemala.

Our local guides were Rob and John Cahill. Rob runs Community Cloud Forest Conservation (CCFC), and his son, John, is the top birder in Guatemala (see his story in *Birder's Guide*, October 2014) and at age 23, he is part of the new generation of birders. John is a rock star in Central America birding circles; everywhere we went, he was called out, greeted and hugged by every bird guide we ran into. Growing up, John was Rob's son— these days, Rob is referred to as John Cahill's father.

CCFC focuses on agro-ecology, training local subsistence farmers in sustainable practices. They also run a leadership training program for girls at their campus near Cobán, where we stayed for three nights. The program trains girls and young women in sustainable farming, nutrition, cooking, health and family planning, and career and educational options, with the goal of helping them stay in school and continue their education. Rob Cahill will be presenting information concerning this important program at Travis Audubon on September 19, 2019.

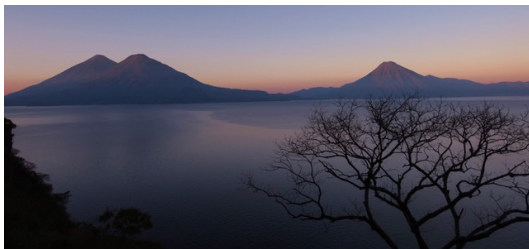
It can be cool up in the Guatemala Highlands, and a couple of days we were there were in the 40's all day, damp cold weather.

Birding was wonderful. We visited wintering grounds for Golden-cheeked, Wilson's and Black-throated Green warblers, which were abundant along with Magnolia, Hooded and Yellow warblers. Two White "Snowy" Hawks put on a show against the blue skies one beautiful afternoon. A very, very rare Bicolored Hawk was spotted at Tikal. The hummingbirds were amazing— Rivoli's, Green-throated Mountain-gem, Azure-crowned, Violet Sabrewing, Rufous-tailed and more. Azure-hooded Jays, Unicolored Jays and Bushy-crested Jays. We even spotted the elusive Great-tailed Grackle.

One of our favorite days was at Los Ranchitos where we arrived before sunrise to see Common Chlorospingus, Golden-browed Warbler, and others before an amazing family style breakfast. We had some of the best hot cakes I have ever had, I think we all had our share of hot cakes, honey, jam, grilled plantains and more, then someone mentioned apple pie. I was so full, I had to pass– when a Mid-west boy passes on apple pie, you know he’s full.

After breakfast, we ran up and down the mountain chasing the Resplendent Quetzal. Tikal, an ancient Mayan citadel, was awe-inspiring, truly a sight to behold, and the birding was spectacular also. One starlit night a few of us decided to call in some owls. John Cahill and our Tikal guide, Pablo, lead the way. As we were making our way through the dark, we realized we were looking at the same skies the Mayans looked at many centuries before. It was one of my favorite memories of hundreds on this trip.

OK, great birds, wonderfully funky places to stay and delicious food. We also met the nicest and warmest people during the trip, including Don Salvador at Cabana Suiza, Max at Reserva Natural Privada Chajbaoc (“the place where you wash your feet”), Don David of Casa de Don David, Jennifer at Jenna’s River Bed & Breakfast, and many others. Jean and Bob took very good care of us along the way. This was certainly one of our favorite trips.



Sunrise at Lake Atitlan

The numbers: thirteen days with our extension of three days spent at Jenna’s River Bed & Breakfast on Lake Atitlan, four thousand plus photographs to wade through, over two hundred forty species of birds, ten new friends, and hundreds of memories.



Note: JB Journeys and Travis Audubon will offer this trip again in January 2020. Stay tuned for details!

## *A Bewick in my Backyard*

POSTED ON MARCH 28, 2019

By: Christy Esmahan, Travis Audubon Master Birder

It’s nesting time for our local birds here in Austin and there’s a Bewick’s Wren working busily in my back yard. Last year he tried making a nest in the Eastern Screech Owl house in my front yard before its larger occupant returned. Every day the wren sang mightily and carried beakfuls of twigs into the box. Then one day the pint-sized owl was peering serenely from the hole. Had she found a complimentary lunch?

So, this year I ordered a wren nesting box and my husband hung it. However, it wasn’t wrens who first got interested in it, but rather an adorable Black-crested Titmouse. It flew right up to the hole and stuck its head inside, looking around, and trying to see if it could use the house. Finding the hole too small, it pecked at the edges, but alas, the protective steel plate around the entrance hole deterred that effort.

Meanwhile the Bewick’s Wren occasionally passed through my yard, nibbling on an insect or two in the leaf-litter, but paying no mind to the gorgeous wooden abode we had provided. I wanted to say, “Look up! That box has your name on it.”

For several weeks my husband and I agonized over the box and the clue-less wren. When would it figure it out? Would it try to build a

nest in the owl-box again? This week, we suddenly heard the wren announcing its trilling call loudly, persistently and from much closer. We looked out the kitchen window and saw it perched on the roof of the box. Finally!



These last few days we've spent blissfully watching as it muscles up twigs, sometimes hop-flying to nearby branches before making a last push for the tiny hole. Often the twigs are too large to fit through the hole as he holds them cross-wise in his beak and we agonize as he shoves with all his might. "Turn, your head," I want to advise, but as a mother of four, I've learned that the youth need to make their own mistakes. The wren leaves with his beak still full and tries again later. Eventually, he finds more pliable materials like pieces of soft ashe juniper bark and dried grasses that he can shove in. And all the while he sings loudly for a mate to come see this master nest he is building.

According to Birds of North America (BNA), Bewick's Wrens are on the decline, having virtually disappeared east of the Mississippi, and decreasing in the western part of their range. Nowadays they are mostly found in the Edwards Plateau of central Texas, southeastern Arizona and the southern coastal areas of California. Who's to blame? "[...] competition from the nest-destroying House Wren whose range has accompanied the quiet exit of Bewick's Wren," says the BNA article.

But as I sit sipping my morning tea, I see an optimistic little Bewick's Wren diligently belting out his song as he ferries in more

twigs. Hopefully one day soon we'll be grandparents!

## ***Chaetura Canyon Featured on Texas Parks & Wildlife TV Series***

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POSTED ON APRIL 1, 2019

Chaetura Canyon Sanctuary Stewards Georgan and Paul Kyle were featured this past weekend on the [Texas Parks & Wildlife TV Series](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9kbGVQLjso). See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9kbGVQLjso> for the Saving Chimney Swifts – Texas Parks & Wildlife [Official] video.

## ***Travis Audubon Announces 2019 Victor Emanuel Conservation Award Hero Chris Harte***

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POSTED ON APRIL 2, 2019

AUSTIN, Texas– Travis Audubon announces the selection of the 2019 Victor Emanuel Conservation Award Hero.

Every year Travis Audubon honors an individual who has made an extraordinary contribution to promoting environmental conservation, education, or advocacy. These heroes are recognized at our annual Conservation Award Luncheon, named after



legendary birder and conservationist Victor Emanuel. The honorees are influential leaders who have inspired us to greater community involvement and environmental awareness through their work.



On behalf of the Board of Directors of Travis Audubon, we are pleased to announce that the 2019 Conservation Hero is Chris Harte of Austin, Texas. A retired newspaper publisher with a passion for native species restoration, Chris has worked to restore prairie and savannah at his ranch near Spicewood for more than 30 years.

Harte grew up in San Angelo and Corpus Christi. He received a BA from Stanford and an MBA from The University of Texas at Austin. Harte's earliest environmental education came from his father Ed, who led local efforts to create Padre Island National Seashore in the 1960s and was chairman of The National Audubon Society. Harte was also influenced by Ned Fritz, whose Texas Committee on Natural Resources he served on in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In 1972, Harte and his brother convinced their father and uncle to buy 286 acres between state highway 71 and Lake Travis seven miles west of the Pedernales, just north of the old town of Spicewood. In 1984 Harte completed the purchase from other family members of what was by then about 500 acres. Since then he has purchased about 35 nearby and adjacent parcels to create a 1,300-acre restoration project.

Restoration expertise has been provided by his late wife, Kay Wagenknecht Harte, and David Mahler and his team from Environmental Survey Consulting. Kay began urging Harte to remove cattle from the ranch, begin burning and clearing brush mechanically where fire wasn't safe, and high-fencing to keep deer numbers low enough that native flora could survive and, where it had been completely eradicated by sheep, goats, deer and overgrazing by cattle, re-introduced successfully. Mahler and his team have carried on the program he and Kay developed since her death in 1997. Spicewood Ranch received the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's 2018 Lone Star Land Steward award for the Edward Plateau. The Hill Country Conservancy is working with Harte to develop a conservation easement application for the largest part of the ranch where the majority of intensive restoration efforts are taking place.

Harte worked at the *Austin American-Statesman* in the late 1970s and then at the *Miami Herald* in the mid-1980s before becoming a publisher of Knight-Ridder's paper in State College, PA, *The Centre Daily Times* and a publisher of *Akron Beacon Journal*. He was subsequently publisher of the *Portland Press Herald* in Maine and, most recently, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.

Harte has served on a number of public and private corporate boards and on the boards of Outward Bound USA, the Austin Community Foundation, Austin Achieve Public Schools, and numerous other non-profit boards in each of the communities where he's lived. He is a past chairman of the University of Texas Development Board and has been a member of other UT Austin advisory boards.

He has been very involved with Audubon chapters throughout the United States, including serving on the board of the National Audubon Society, on state Audubon boards in Texas and Maine, and on state boards of the Nature Conservancy in Texas, Florida, and Maine.

Harte's accomplishments will be celebrated at the 2019 Victor Emanuel Conservation Award

Luncheon on October 12, 2019 at the Austin Country Club. We hope you will join us for this wonderful celebration of Harte's passion and dedication. Sponsorships are available and table sales open May 1st.

## ***Hornsby Bend Project Update***

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POSTED ON APRIL 3, 2019

Compiled by Eric Stager, President of Travis Audubon

On March 25, Austin Water held a stakeholder's meeting at Hornsby Bend to discuss upcoming projects that will impact access to portions of the property for birding.

Assistant Director Daryl Slusher greeted the group and introduced the speakers: Kevin Anderson, coordinator of the Center for Environmental Research at Hornsby; and John Mitchell, the Hornsby Bend facilities engineer.

Kevin gave us an update on the tree removal program. Under order from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Hornsby Bend has been removing smaller trees (6 inches in diameter and less) as well as dead or dying trees from the embankments around the ponds. This is required to maintain the structural integrity of the embankments, which are considered dams by the TCEQ. The tree removals will resume in September, after bird nesting season is over, and continue until March. There may be limited, temporary road closures during the tree removal project.

John Mitchell gave us an introduction to two major projects that will limit birding access to portions of Pond 1 West and Pond 2. The first project will include a complete rebuild of the sidestream plant, located on the west side of Pond 1 West and Pond 2. New gates have been installed to keep vehicles out of the area. Birders may park and walk past the vehicle gates up to the chain link fence that encloses the work area. Please do not try to walk beyond the chain link fence! Fortunately, this project will not affect any of the trails along the river. The trails will remain open

throughout the project. Also, we were happy to hear that the old concrete structure near the sidestream plant that is being used as a roost by Chimney Swifts will be preserved. The sidestream plant project is expected to continue until Fall 2020.

The second major project involves building a new pump station near the northwest corner of Pond 2, and will include demolishing the greenhouse building and filling of the ponds within the greenhouse. This project will not start until the sidestream plant rebuild is complete in late 2020.

Another Hornsby stakeholder meeting will be scheduled for September. Travis Audubon appreciates the efforts of Austin Water to keep us informed about these projects.

## ***Backyard Hybrid?***

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POSTED ON APRIL 4, 2019

By: Beth Arnold, Travis Audubon Master Birder



A few days after Stephen Shunk entranced me with his amazing facts about woodpeckers, I spotted a mystery at the suet feeder. At first I recognized a red-bellied woodpecker. But as I continued to observe the bird, things didn't look exactly as expected. It was a male with the expected red s, but the nape seemed to have two parts. It was subtle, but while the part at the crown of the head looked bright red, the part going down the back of the head to the nape appeared to be red orange with a yellow tinge at the edges. Or was it my eyes... or the light...? Yikes! It turned to face my direction

and flashed a bright yellow patch on its underbelly. But wait, aren't those those red-bellied retrices? Could this be what Steve had talked about? Could I be observing a hybrid red-bellied/ golden-fronted woodpecker?



Steve literally wrote the book on woodpeckers, *Peterson Reference Guide to Woodpeckers of North America* to be exact. He lives in Bend, Oregon. TAS field trip organizer and leader Judith Bailey arranged to have Steve share his expertise in Austin on a sunny February morning at Hornsby Bend.

That morning we watched a ladder-back woodpecker couple fly around and into a cavity in a snag and learned about the essential need for snags (dead trees) for woodpecker housing as well as for housing for a long list of other birds that take advantage of the woodpeckers' initial excavation work. Steve explained that since Austin is a location where eastern birds meet their western genus counterparts, the ladder-backs we observed sometimes hybridize with downy woodpeckers. Identifying hybrids can be subtle, so he suggested to look and listen closely. Sometimes the hybridization is evident in the call or song alone.

We heard other woodpeckers that morning as well, but we kept getting distracted by bald eagles, a zone-tailed hawk, caracaras and other raptors. What a morning! Steve did not mind

the distractions. He professed to be an “equal opportunity” birder.

During his afternoon workshop Steve elaborated more on the amazing anatomy and adaptation of Texas woodpeckers. Steve had some very experienced birders in that workshop, but regardless, he had us all practically sitting on the edge of our seats to learn the next woodpecker fact. Steve's passion for woodpeckers is evident and contagious.

Steve arranges birding tours in Central Texas, as well as in Central Oregon—boasting of 11 woodpecker species—and many other places. You can find out more about Steve's work at [woodpeckerwonderland.com](http://woodpeckerwonderland.com) and [paradisebirding.com](http://paradisebirding.com).

## *Video Premiere at Chaetura Canyon*

POSTED ON APRIL 5, 2019



Photo taken by Rafael Ruiz

Travis Audubon hosted a sold-out Video Premiere event on March 24, where Paul and Georgan Kyle, the Sanctuary Stewards of Chaetura Canyon, were featured on a Texas Parks and Wildlife TV Series. The Kyles have taken on the challenge of providing habitat for the endangered Chimney Swift species, which has had serious decline in numbers throughout the years as their Central Texas hill country habitat has been disappearing.

Guests enjoyed the hill country smells of fresh spring as they strolled through the trails of Chaetura Canyon, catching glimpses of fluttering friends in the trees. One of the most popular areas of the canyon was the Windows on Nature view: a covered sitting area where guests could enjoy a variety of birds flitting to and fro.



Windows on Nature: Photo taken by Rafael Ruiz

This is a very special place for the feathered friends of the Kyles; 56 species have been sighted at the Windows on Nature since April 2017. “We had Black-chinned Hummingbirds and Broad-winged Hawks nest very close to the Windows last year, and Red-breasted Nuthatches have been there all winter,” Paul remarks. Many guests mentioned how truly special this place is; to the birds, the wildlife, the Kyles, and the friends who get to experience this native hill country oasis. As the video premiere got closer, guests made their way back to the house for snacks and refreshments. Guests enjoyed popcorn, snacks, and fresh air as they sat down to watch the video premiere. The video was shown on the outdoor deck, which overlooks the canyon that the Kyles have called their home for many years.

Texas Parks and Wildlife videographer, Abe Moore, took guests on a video adventure of the Kyle’s conservation work at the Video Premiere event. With never-before-seen footage, the video premiere offered over 50 guests a peek into the behind-the-scenes work that the Kyles have been up to.

As the Video Premiere evening drew to a close, there was one more heart-warming surprise that night. As guests parted ways and

headed home, there was a sound that resonated through the hill country air. Georgean took off to make sure she and Virginia Rose, a long-time friend had heard right... The first Chimney Swift of the season was heard at the Windows on Nature!

## Catbirds

POSTED ON APRIL 8, 2019

By: Jim Pauff, Travis Audubon Master Birder

It isn’t that banders don’t like gray catbirds (*Dumetella carolinensis*), it’s that some days there are so many of them dangling in the nets one gets sick of looking at them. You get sick of hearing them complain about being caught. They use avian profanity equaled only by red-eyed vireos. If you walk past them to untangle another bird first they cluck loudly at you like insulted hens. Catbirds are interesting not because they are so delicate or rare or beautiful but because they are so self-aware. Look into the eye of a gorgeous little magnolia warbler and nothing glimmers back but a shiny black void. Look into the chestnut-colored eye of a catbird and it sizes you up, like a tiny dinosaur. Catbirds know who and what they are, and nets and banders get in the way of them being themselves.

When singing, gray catbirds typically sit hunched over, babbling rather quietly to themselves. They are the poorest impersonators of the three eastern Mimidae. But research shows their lack of precision is fine with them. Specifics have not been worked out yet but it seems song deviation is a mating strategy for male catbirds. According to a study done at the University of Massachusetts in 1997, catbirds put more emphasis on developing unique repertoires than getting other birds’ songs down note for note—à la mockingbirds. Catbirds are born with imaginations. Baby catbirds in the study were raised in isolation but developed repertoires of 400+ bird song variations, without ever hearing adults mimicking. They did not care to imitate other lab catbirds’ songs, either, but personalized their performances. Furthermore, their songs were not atypical of the species

even though composed in a laboratory cage. This was tested by recording them and playing them to wild catbirds in the country, who mobbed the speakers looking for rivals. That each lab bird sang differently backed up the reported lack of regional dialects among catbirds nationwide. Scientific supposition is individualization of gray catbird mimicry is connected to males attracting a mate. Although both sexes sing, it is the males that have repertoires of hundreds of variations.

Another recently confirmed thing about catbirds is they are egg thieves. This was accidentally caught on video in 1998 by Mark Huber at Cornell. Huber wanted to tape the frequency cowbirds removed eggs from vacant nests and replaced them with eggs of their own. He wired several phony nests to limbs filled with plastic eggs. He found 87% of them had been raided by something, but that no cowbirds eggs had been substituted. Huber set up a video camera to watch one of the nests and, to his surprise, filmed two gray catbirds trying to eat the plastic eggs: "The recording showed that at 17:14 a Gray Catbird landed on a neighboring branch, erected its feathers, and approached the artificial nest. Within 20 seconds it grasped one of the eggs in its beak, lifting it from the nest, apparently trying to swallow it. It failed to do so and the egg fell to the ground (where it was later recovered). At 17:15 a second catbird arrived, hopped on the nest, and pecked into it six times, while the first bird moved away from the nest but remained within the camera's field of view. After 15 seconds the first bird approached the nest again, displaced the second individual, and delivered 19 visibly powerful pecks at the eggs. It lifted one of the eggs up to the perimeter of the nest three times before finally flying off at 17:17."

Egg predation by catbirds had been reported as far back as 1884. Arthur C. Bent mentioned it in 1948. Not many took it seriously until Huber caught it on film.

If there is a moral in this information it is that gray catbirds are a more complicated organism than bored banders generally suppose. The

catbird tribe is idiosyncratic, with emphasis on song individualization. Other birds' songs are just jumping-off spots for them to begin improvising. Although low-key, catbird song is based upon theme and variation rather than mimicry. And, catbirds are not above being scoundrels if opportunity brings a free meal.

## ***Birding at South Llano River State Park***

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POSTED ON APRIL 10, 2019

By: Michael Jewell, Travis Audubon Master Birder

South Llano River State Park has become my favorite birding/camping park. It's an easy drive from Austin through the Hill Country, past the Wildseed Farms, through Fredericksburg, and onto I-10, usually under a three hour drive. Junction is the seat of Kimble County with the courthouse at the town square. The North Llano and the South Llano Rivers meet up here. The population is around 2,500 people, with quite a few gas stations, restaurants, grocery stores and motels— good info, as my tent leaked one night during a storm and I ended up at a clean, dry motel for \$45.00 a night.

South Llano River State Park is about five miles out of town to the west. Drive carefully during dawn and dusk due to the large populations of deer in the area. This is fall deer hunting territory; I've seen a herd of deer crossing in town.

It is best to make reservations ahead of time for the 58 campsites with electricity, 8 walk-in sites with water, and 5 primitive sites. I camp at one of the sites with electricity and water. I like having a fan in my tent and the ability to charge my phone, laptop, camera battery, etc. Yes, camping is not like it used to be. The reservation system allows you to pick your site. The state park has 4 comfortable bird blinds: Juniper, Acorn, Agarita and Lora's. All can be good, since it's all about timing. The Park Rangers usually have good info on current bird sightings and offer informed advice on your best chance to see a specific

bird. At the Visitor Center, ask for Rhandy Helton's book "Finding Birds in Junction." It is packed full of places to bird around town, the when and the where (goat pens, tennis courts and water treatment), and birds in the area, including Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Bullock's Orioles, Bell's Vireos, Cassin's Sparrows, etc.

This camping trip I had great views of Black-capped Vireos and Golden-cheeked Warblers along with Black-throated Sparrows, Scott's Orioles, Fox Sparrows, Lark Sparrows, Vermillion Flycatchers, Woodhouse's Scrub Jays, and a Wild Turkey displaying. I was a little early for Painted Buntings, Bell's Vireos, Ash-throated Flycatchers, and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, but did pick up a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher the second to the last day.

## ***Warblers at Baker... and more!***

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POSTED ON APRIL 23, 2019

Second time was indeed the charm on April 20th as 16 Birdathon supporters joined co-leaders Cindy Sperry and Celeste Treadway for a great hike along Harris Creek in the northwest section of Baker Sanctuary. After a major rain-out on the original date, the weather could not have been lovelier for the second attempt. The hike was book-ended by great looks at the famously noisy but elusive

Hutton's Vireo that hangs out near the newly-built house for the Steward, and, near the end, a banded male Golden-cheeked Warbler who was so busy singing his "dare you!" B-song to the neighboring male that he let us all get great looks and photos to boot. In between we saw or heard 29 species, including at least 4 singing Golden-cheeked Warblers, and enjoyed loads of blooming flowers and butterflies. All in all, a fun morning spent in a good cause— supporting Travis Audubon and its Baker Sanctuary.



Photo courtesy of Shivarama Shetty