

Thoughts about Houston Audubon and High Island

by Ted Lee Eubanks (President 1987-1989)

(February 2, 2022)

Significant birding (as reflected in significant numbers of birders) began in High Island in the early 1970s. Of course, there had been limited visitation before then by residents (especially those from Beaumont) and a few from Houston such as Ben Feltner and Victor Emanuel. But, by the mid-1970s birding began to attract numbers of birders, especially from Houston. I remember a fallout in 1975, I believe, that attracted dozens of birders, the most that I had ever seen at one place along the coast.

Yet, all the birding there took place on private property through the good graces of people such as Louis Smith. At that time, Paul Nimmons, Fred Collins, and myself began to discuss the idea of a “necklace of pearls” or “chain of pearls” along the coast that would consist of properties especially focused on birding. High Island’s Boy Scout’s Woods is where this experiment began.

Until the 1970s, all property in High Island was owned by the Amoco Oil Company that developed the fields that surrounded the salt dome. However, in the mid-1970s they sold property to a few individuals, Louis Smith among them. At that time, he purchased the land that is Boy Scouts Woods. In addition, my family purchased three lots adjacent to his property. Our lots were later donated to Houston Audubon.

In the late 1970s (and I do not recall the date, or even the year), Louis Smith called me at home one evening and said that he wanted to sell his property (Boy Scouts Woods). He wanted the proceeds for retirement, and he asked me if I and other birders would be interested in the property.

Paul, Fred, and I first went to the Houston Outdoor Nature Club (ONC) to see if they would be interested in the property. We asked for help with funding (needless to say, none of us had a clue about raising money for buying a sanctuary). The ONC, in less-than-polite terms, declined.

We then discussed the matter with the Houston Audubon Society, and their board was enthusiastic about buying the land. I served on the board at that time as the conservation chair, and my fellow board members were eager about the prospects of owning this premier birding site in High Island.

Beginning in 1982, over the next few years we were able to raise the funds through donations, auctions, entrance fees, etc. Penny by penny, dollar by dollar, we came to own Boy Scouts Woods. I feel that it would be important to gather information from that period, especially the names of people such as Laura Singleton and Bessie Cornelius who worked so hard with those fundraisers. Unfortunately, most of them are no longer with us.

In 1987, when I served as president of Houston Audubon, a member of the family that owned Smith Oaks approached me about buying that property. I met with the board, and after being briefed by Paul Nimmons, I explained to the board that by purchasing this undivided interest we would have a measure of control over the property. More importantly, I believed that after one family member sold, the rest would follow.

This is precisely what happened. We bought Smith Oaks family member by family member.

These purchases, and the support that came for the purchases from around the state and even the country, transformed the chapter.

Soon after these purchases, I worked with TOS in the purchase of Sabine Woods, and Stennie Meadours worked with us to have Bolivar Flats leased to the chapter by the state. Winnie Burkett then became instrumental in managing the property and ultimately in expanding the lands. Stennie and Winnie can fill you in on those details.

Remember; at the beginning of the 1970s we owned none of this land. We birded through the generosity of private landowners, and we lost properties when these private landowners decided to use the land differently. For example, one of our favorite woodlots at Port Bolivar was completely cleared for drilling (dry holes, by the way), and George Mitchell cleared much of the land to the west of Eckert's Bayou (the remaining piece now being Lafitte's Cove) for a housing development. We were vulnerable, and Houston Audubon, with the help of countless members and supporters, now controls its own destiny with these properties.

I also suggest interviewing Steve Gast about the land at High Island later donated to the chapter through his incredible efforts.

On a completely different path, while serving as the president of Houston Audubon we were successful in defeating the proposal by the City of Houston to build an airport in the Katy Prairie. Our efforts evolved into the Katy Prairie Conservancy.

In addition, while I served as president, Texas Parks and Wildlife asked if I would try to contact a man named Elmer Kleb and help save his property. Elmer lived as a hermit (with a vulture as a pet, by the way), and had never paid property taxes. Once I made contact (and developed a friendship) with Elmer, we were able to involve Harris County and Texas Parks and Wildlife in saving the property. Elmer lived the remainder of the life on the property, and the land is now known as Kleb Woods Nature Preserve. Fred Collins can fill you in on recent years there.

I am certain that there are many, many more names that are needed to fill in the gaps, but this is an example of what we accomplished in about a decade or so.

