



# The Naturalist

*Celebrating 51 Years of Bird Conservation*

Volume 39, Number 4

July/August 2020



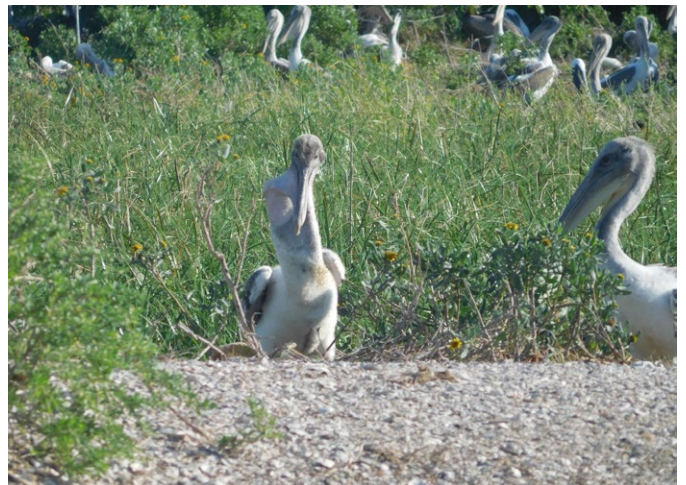
## Skip the Plastic, Save a Pelican

by Anna Vallery, Conservation Specialist

Every spring, Houston Audubon and other conservation organizations along the Texas Coast participate in the Texas Colonial Waterbird Surveys to help monitor population trends in our state's seabirds and wading birds. Houston Audubon, Audubon Texas and several additional undivided-interest owners co-own North Deer Island, the largest and most productive breeding colony in Galveston Bay.

During the 2020 survey of North Deer Island, Houston Audubon staff noticed a pelican chick with an unusual bulge in its gular pouch. Upon further inspection, staff realized it was caused by a discarded plastic bottle. Thankfully, Audubon Texas Warden Dennis Jones was able to approach and remove the bottle from the lucky young pelican's pouch.

Though this story has a happy ending, many of our coastal birds aren't as lucky. Single-use plastic poses a threat to wildlife and is particularly dangerous for seabirds and other marine animals. In fact, nearly every species of seabird has been documented ingesting plastic.



*Pelican chick in need of help on North Deer Island*

In some cases, like the North Deer Island pelican chick, large pieces of plastic will prevent the bird from being able to forage. Plastic of all shapes and sizes, though, can cause devastating damage to these birds, ranging from causing internal damage upon ingestion to entangling foraging birds.

The solution isn't easy. Kicking our single-use plastic habits at all levels is necessary to slow the flow of plastic into our waterways and oceans. Plastic Free July is an excellent opportunity to not only challenge yourself to limit the amount of single-use plastic you purchase and use at home, but to challenge local restaurants, stores, industries, and government to do the same.

Houston Audubon and partners will be participating in Plastic Free July for the second year. We invite you to join us! Throughout the month of July, we will be challenging our staff and volunteers to limit their use of plastic and sharing tips and tricks for limiting your use of plastic at home.



***Our Mission: To advance the conservation of birds and positively impact their supporting environments.***

*Houston Audubon is a financially independent 501(c)(3) charitable conservation organization registered in the state of Texas and a chapter of the National Audubon Society.*

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The Naturalist is published bimonthly.  
Editor: Susan Billetdeaux

A web version as well as a downloadable PDF  
are available on our website.

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## Unexpected Pleasures and Challenges

by Sam Smith, President

During the "stay home, stay safe" way of life, our neighborhood became the walking capital of Harris County. We, along with many of our neighbors, were out walking 2 or 3 times a day. I bet many of you had the same experience. All this walking gave us time to really stop and smell the roses, or, in our case, look up and study the birds. While doing so, we were delighted to make discoveries that during normal times we might have missed.



We were lucky to enjoy many Mississippi Kites flying overhead this spring. One tree always had one or two of them sitting there every evening. One morning we noticed a kite carrying a twig, and then another. It was building a nest near our house. We followed the bird and found a pair hard at work just around the corner from us. We had never noticed Mississippi Kites building a nest in our area before. After our third visit to the tree, the neighbors started asking questions, and now we have two new households keeping an eye on the nest. (They are birders now but do not yet realize it.)

A few days later, we got a call from another neighbor just a few houses down about some big birds building a nest across the street. We took our birding tools to check it out and to our delight found a pair of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons hard at work on a new nest. The neighbors now have a new scope and issue daily heron reports.

We look everywhere for new nests on our daily walks. As of this writing, I can report we have located 2 Mississippi Kite nests, 1 Yellow-crowned Night-Heron nest, 3 American Robin nests, and a Red-bellied Woodpecker hole with little beaks popping out. We have spread the word and most neighbors are excited and glad to have a new hobby.

As with all urban bird stories, there is the "however." It has made me keenly aware of tree trimmers during nesting season. The number of chain saws heard over the past few weeks was alarming. How many nests could have unknowingly been destroyed?

In addition, a real pet peeve is a tree-trimming commercial on the radio about spraying your trees for bugs, ugh! Bugs are bird food. There is a sad story out of Corpus Christi years ago about a person calling the local bird rescue lady over to her house because she was finding dead birds. When asked about tree spraying, she admitted that just a few days before she had in fact had her trees sprayed. She was remorseful once she became educated on the connection of dead birds and spraying. (Don't get my wife started on mosquito misters and butterflies.)

These stories have a common denominator that aligns with an important part of our mission, Educate, Educate, Educate. In most cases, once someone is made aware of the cause and effects of things we humans do and what impact it has on birds, most people want and will do the right thing. We just need to keep fighting the good fight. And I want to thank all of you who try every day to make your home, city and area a better place for birds.

# A Very Different Spring Migration

by Richard Gibbons, Conservation Director

Each year we summarize a familiar spring migration, giving our best estimate of how many people made it to Houston Audubon's sanctuaries to discover and enjoy the miraculous migrations that wash over our region with waves of color and song. Taking the state and county guidance into consideration, and assessing what staff could do safely, we made the unprecedented decision to close the sanctuaries to visitors so that we could do our part to flatten the COVID-19 curve and keep staff and visitors safe during the global pandemic. The months of preparation, scheduled programs, and new workshops, as well as Tropical Birding and Houston Audubon-led bird walks, were all canceled.

Of course the birds weren't the slightest bit concerned about our absence, and I suspect it was even a little more peaceful for them in the higher traffic areas such as Boy Scout Woods and Smith Oaks. Houston Audubon quickly cobbled together some virtual programming to help ease the disappointment of the many birders, photographers, and nature lovers who were unable to make their scheduled trips to the Texas Gulf Coast.

Conservation Technicians Aidan Healey and Sarah Lefoley rose to the challenge and broadcast live from High Island twice daily. Program locations included a bird bath and drip and the rookery. We received great feedback from members and friends who were grateful to have an escape from the news and the many days of lockdown. Often, new challenges demand new solutions and although these live broadcasts weren't a replacement for the excitement, fellowship, and a hundred other things that birding is to us, it was a genuine gesture in the spirit of spring migration.



*Aidan Healey and Sarah Lefoley*

remained, and we found ways to connect in our own yards and nearby parks. It also brought into sharp focus how much we look forward to the rhythm and melody of life coursing across the landscape, reminding us of a world worth fighting for and a community of volunteers and friends worthy of our gratitude.

***Bring on Spring Migration 2021!***



*Nesting Roseate Spoonbills at the Rookery*

By the first of May, Texas was slowly reopening some parks and businesses and we decided to open the sanctuaries. We waived entry fees, and encouraged all to safely venture out into nature spaces with kindness and consideration. Volunteers and staff patrolled the trails and offered assistance. The reality was that the pandemic was far from over and most stayed home or very nearby.

The few intrepid travelers to the coast could see the Smith Oaks rookery with nest numbers not seen in many years. The recent project to deepen the shallowest areas of Claybottom pond and to add the ability to manage water levels has exceeded our hopes with birds nesting on the original island, the new Claybottom Pond Island, and throughout the now-flooded forest.

What this historical event reinforced for many of us was our need for nature. As our crazy busy schedules were decluttered down to the basics, our need for nature

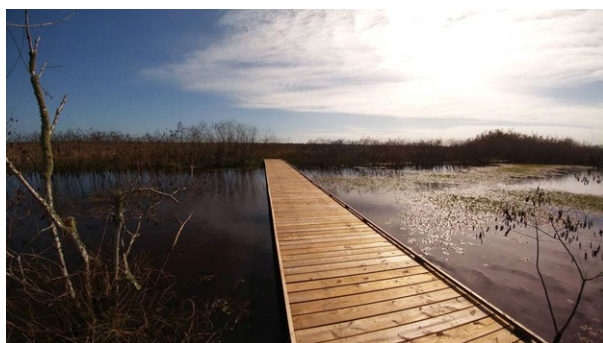
# New Trail Coming to Horseshoe Marsh

by Pete Deichmann, Coastal Sanctuaries Manager

**H**orseshoe Marsh Bird Sanctuary on the Bolivar Peninsula is Houston Audubon's second largest sanctuary. This 650-acre complex of salt marsh, coastal prairie, and a large tidal lagoon provides critical habitat for a range of bird species from the striking Roseate Spoonbill to the secretive Black Rail. Historically, public access has been largely restricted to a short trail with street parking on the east end of the property, but that trail was destroyed by Hurricane Ike in 2008. Since then, visitors have been limited to views from the adjacent public roadways, where passing vehicles posed dangers to pedestrians.



In 2017, after acquisition of a 17-acre lot adjacent to the sanctuary with frontage along Loop 108 in Port Bolivar, staff began working on a new trail to bring public access back to Horseshoe Marsh Sanctuary. Houston Audubon partnered with Texas Conservation Corps of American Youthworks to apply for a Recreational Trails Grant managed by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. We were awarded \$63,000 for the construction of a non-motorized, one-mile trail into the core of the sanctuary.

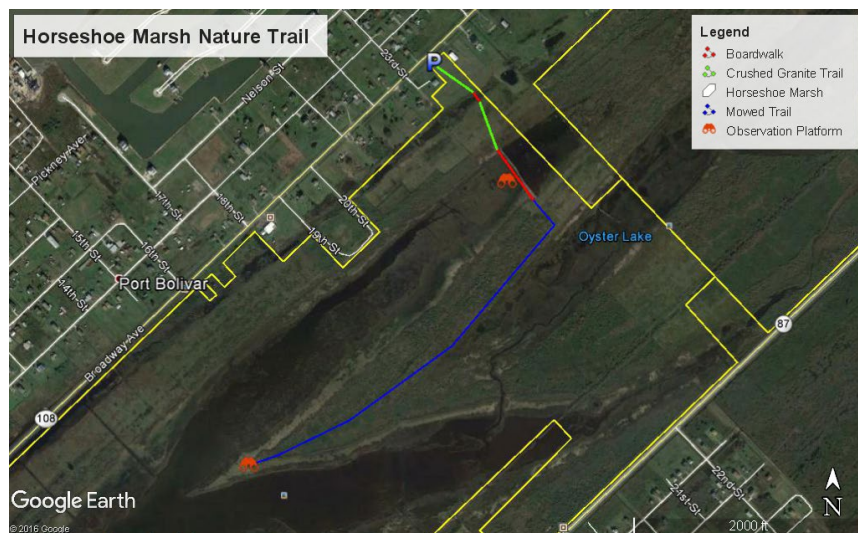


The new trail will include on-site parking at the trailhead, planting of a half-acre woodlot, five acres of prairie restoration, approximately 700 feet of boardwalk, two overlooks, interpretive signage, and a hard crushed rock surface on the first quarter mile for enhanced accessibility. We plan to start work on the trail in Fall 2020 with full completion by Spring 2023. Portions of the trail will likely open sooner as sections are completed.

This project is part of a recently developed and locally supported nature-based tourism initiative, the Bolivar Peninsula Nature Trail. Several stakeholder groups, including businesses, school districts,

a chamber of commerce, and environmental groups, worked with the National Park Services Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program to develop resilient nature-based economic activities which would benefit the local communities in a way that would preserve the important coastal wetlands and prairies.

The Horseshoe Marsh Nature Trail project is one of the first to be developed specifically for the Bolivar Peninsula Nature Trail, a constellation of nature engagement opportunities. Please stay tuned for volunteer opportunities helping with trail construction and habitat restoration!



## Save the Date!

HOUSTON AUDUBON

# Bird Week

SEPTEMBER 19 — 26, 2020

*Join us and our local conservation partners for the second annual Bird Week, full of fun activities celebrating birds.*

# Birdathon 2020

**T**hanks to our supporters, participants, and sponsors, the 2020 Birdathon was a resounding success, raising over **\$45,000!**

Birdathon is a unique tradition that takes place at Audubon chapters across the country during spring migration. Because of your enthusiasm, we were able to keep this tradition alive even with unique challenges due to the COVID-19 crisis.

This year, with modified rules to follow social distancing guidelines, Birdathon teams found new ways to participate, and we are especially grateful for the efforts from everyone involved who helped support our mission to advance the conservation of birds and positively impact their environments. The resulting funds helped Houston Audubon recover significant revenue losses due to sanctuary closures and canceled programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A special thank you to our Birdathon Committee: Jonni Almoney, Cindy Bartos, Becky Smith, and Pam Smolen; to Ben Hulsey for providing the winners' plaques; and to our sponsors.

## Congratulations to the Winners!

### Oberholser Award—Most Species Identified by a Team

- 1st Place: The Masked Canaries, 187 species
- 2nd Place: Noddy Roadrunners, 171 species
- 3rd Place: Nighthawks at the Diner, 149 species

### Whittington Award—Most Funds Raised by a Team

- 1st Place: The Masked Canaries, \$11,851
- 2nd Place: Eager Egrets, \$5,275
- 3rd Place: Socially-distanced Sandpipers, \$4,292

### Individual Birding—Most Species

Gregg Whittaker, 120 species

### Digital Birding—Most Species

Judith Schott, 56 species

### Raven Award—Most Corvids

Noddy Roadrunners, 43 Corvids

## Event Sponsors



## The Latest at Edith L. Moore

by Lauren Miheli, Sanctuary Manager

**A**fter about two months of being closed to the public due to COVID-19 concerns, the Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary (home of Houston Audubon's headquarters) has been open since May. In an effort to better gauge visitation levels and encourage social distancing, we've limited our hours to 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. In June and July, in order to accommodate programs, the sanctuary has a delayed opening at 12:30 p.m. The only entrance is at the Memorial Drive United Methodist Church parking lot. The restroom and water fountain are closed, so visitors should plan accordingly.

Now that we are open once again, we're able to resume work on small improvements at the sanctuary. Some of the cedar shakes on the log cabin roof are being replaced due to rotting. You most likely won't notice a difference, but the cabin will be better prepared to weather spring storms.

Because of an increase in "social trails," we are installing new signs to keep visitors on the main path. When visitors cut new footpaths, important habitat for ground-dwelling animals (swamp rabbits, box turtles, green anoles, and armadillos, to name a few) is lost. Hopefully visitors will respect the new signs and allow forest floor plants to grow back.

Those who've been birding from home may have already noticed our upgraded bird cam. After a big storm in May took out our old camera, we needed to quickly replace it for those watching the action at our feeders. Thanks to improved technology, our new bird cam has sharper images, a larger viewing screen, and perhaps best of all, sound! Observers are now treated to not only the fun images of birds flitting around at the feeders but they can also delight in their songs.

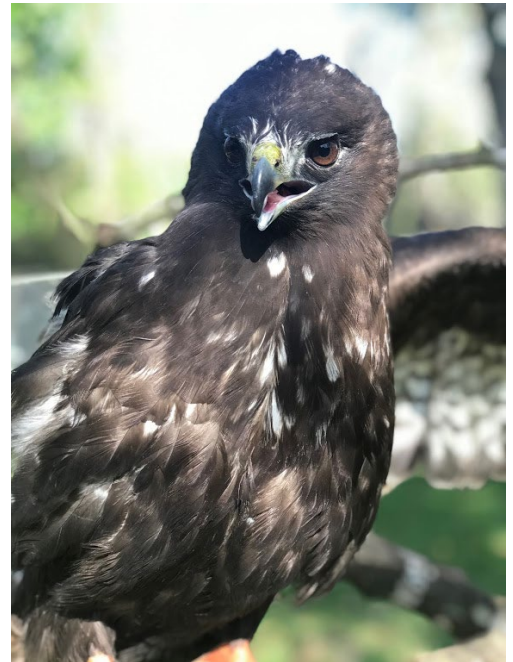
These are just a few of the things happening at Edith L. Moore. Keep an eye on our website or follow us on Facebook for the most up-to-date information, including when we return to normal hours, when the main gate opens back up, and our response to COVID-19.



# A Colorful Collection Grows

by Mary Anne Weber, Education Director

This past spring our family of Education Ambassadors grew. The birds assisting us in our educational programming are typically birds that are found injured in the wild. They have all gone through rehabilitation but are unable to be released for a variety of reasons. On Thanksgiving Day 2019, a very unusual raptor was spotted in Billings, Montana. It was a badly injured dark-morph Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk. He was rescued and went through rehabilitation including surgery on his injured wing at Ironside Bird Rescue in Cody, Wyoming.



*Standish*

He was named Standish because he was found on Thanksgiving Day. When he was found, it was discovered he was missing part of his wing. Perhaps he had been hit by a car or he had hit some powerlines. The surgery cleaned up his wound, but he can no longer fly. He was sent to Houston Audubon's Raptor and Education Center and has been busy helping us teach ever since.

We are very fortunate to be able to showcase three different colorations of Red-tailed Hawks at the center. When you visit you will see a rufous-morph western Red-tailed Hawk, light-morph Harlan's and a dark-morph Harlan's.



*Pierre*

being hit by a car. He suffered a major eye injury and the right eye could not be saved.

Thanks to the great work by the folks at Friends of Texas Wildlife, he was rehabbed and now is a great companion to Percy, our gray-morph Eastern Screech-Owl. Percy happens to have sustained a permanent injury to his left eye so they are a great duo.

Shortly after Standish arrived, we were notified that a rufous-morph Eastern Screech-Owl was in need of placement from the Friends of Texas Wildlife in Magnolia. Pierre was found on January 26 after



*Percy and Pierre*

In addition to the birds we take care of at the raptor center, we also have a handful of other animals to help us teach. These include some snakes, a large toad, a turtle, and now a very special opossum. She has become quite a star of our programs. Her name is Miss Violet Pickles. We call her "Pickles" for short. She has metabolic bone disease and a cross bite that deem her non-releasable. She was rehabbed by the great folks at Texas Wildlife Rehabilitation Coalition in Houston.

Opossums are the only marsupials found in North America. The Virginia Opossum has an incredible immune system. They are largely immune to rabies, although it can rarely occur. They're also largely immune to venom from snakes like cottonmouths and rattlesnakes. They are a beneficial member of the food web and help to control the spread of diseases by eating lots of ticks.

Opossums originated in South America. Pickles is a great addition to our program about our connection to the Amazon and our WILD about Texas show. Stop by the center to meet and fall in love with Pickles.



*Miss Violet Pickles*



On May 4 as considerations for reopening were being discussed, a special discovery was made at the Raptor Center. While performing the daily cleaning routines for our homing pigeon flock, an egg with a tiny pip was found. The egg was cold and abandoned. A quick decision was made to warm up the tiny bundle and see what would happen.

Six hours later, Corona Covid hatched into the world. She has grown up fast under the special care of the education team and has won the hearts of many.

Corona will be another great education ambassador especially when we teach about what happened to the Passenger Pigeon and how non-native species end up in new areas of the world.



Corona Corvid

## Summer Programs and Activities

Please check our website for details and updates

### Prowling for Owls

Ticket Price: \$20 per adult; \$15 per child. Maximum of 20 individuals. Held 6–8 p.m. on July 10 at the Raptor and Education Center and July 11 at Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary.



Greg Lavaty

### Raptor Photo Shoots

- at Edith Moore  
September 23, November 18
- at the Raptor Center  
July 2, July 18, August 5, September 24

### Behind the Scene Tours at the Raptor Center

- July 11, July 25
- August 1, August 22

### Family Nature Explore Club

Ticket Price: \$15 per child per session. Parents or an adult must accompany and stay with child. Held 9 a.m. to Noon on Wednesdays at Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary and on Thursdays at the Raptor and Education Center.

- Art of Nature  
July 8 at Edith Moore; July 9 at Raptor Center
- Give a Hoot  
July 15 at Edith Moore; July 16 at Raptor Center
- Wild about Texas  
July 22 at Edith Moore; July 23 at Raptor Center
- Vultures and Nature Recyclers  
July 29 at Edith Moore; July 30 at Raptor Center

### Purple Martin Migration Watch Events

- Sunday, July 26
- Friday, August 7
- Sunday, August 23
- Sunday, September 23



Joe Smith

## Eastern Bluebird — *Sialia sialis*

by Glenn Olsen, GO Birding Ecotours

From comments that I have received, many of us are paying more attention to the birds in our backyards because of travel restrictions due to COVID-19. There have been four species in particular that I have focused on as they visit my backyard. These are the Fish Crow, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Carolina Chickadee, and the Eastern Bluebird. We now live in Humble where the habitat is open park-like spaces with numerous loblolly pines, yaupons, and southern wax myrtles. They're set among live oaks, southern magnolias, a smattering of other plants, and the ubiquitous crape myrtle. Fortunately, the four species of birds mentioned above seem to be doing well here.

In March, I noticed a pair of Eastern Bluebirds investigating an old Downy Woodpecker cavity in a loblolly pine about 30 feet from our house. I was surprised that both the male and the female could enter the small hole with ease. I thought that perhaps the cavity might be too small for them to successfully nest. We humans often remove dead or dying trees and limbs that are nesting habitat for many species of woodpeckers. When we do so, we're also depriving nesting sites for bluebirds, chickadees, screech-owls, wood ducks and many others who appropriate abandoned woodpecker holes for their nests.

Shortly afterward, I noticed a pair of chickadees competing with the bluebirds for access to the woodpecker cavity. To help them out, I built a bluebird house and installed it on another loblolly pine a few feet from the tree with the contested cavity. Within a couple of days, the bluebirds were inspecting the nest box. But they were not immediately sold on it since they continued to visit the woodpecker cavity. Upon being evicted by the pair of chickadees, the bluebirds gladly took up residence in the nest box.

The pair of bluebirds visited the box daily for regular inspections but would leave after a short time. If I went outside to try to get close enough for a good photo, they would immediately fly away. I was a bit surprised that they did not immediately move in. I'd observed Eastern Bluebirds along nest box trails created for them. The bluebirds seemed to readily accept boxes and were not concerned about people being around as long as they (me) did not get too close.

To soothe the bluebirds in my yard, I bought one of their favorite foods—meal worms. After having placed the meal worms several times on top of the brick fence in the backyard—less than 10 feet from the nest box tree and in full view from the box where they sometimes perched—not once have I seen them hop down to gobble up the tasty treats.



Greg Lavaty

However, I did learn that our Northern Mockingbirds and Fish Crows also love meal worms! Once I watched a mockingbird stuff itself with meal worms. The bird ate them the way we go through a whole bag of popcorn while engrossed in a tense moment of a movie.

The bluebirds did eventually take up residence and we see them regularly, but they are still quite skittish and will not allow me to get close for a good photograph. We have watched bluebird activity entering and exiting the nest box and it appears that they have recently been bringing food into the nest. Once I saw the male leave with a fecal sac. I was surprised that this pair has nested so late. We have not noticed any bluebird chicks yet. However, one day we had one chickadee fledgling in the yard under some shrubs.

The parents were above it in a tree and calling to it. The chick nestled into the soil and almost disappeared! I was able to get a few good images.

So, if you have Eastern Bluebirds in your neighborhood, think about helping them out. A nest box is one way. But you could also plant native plants that flower and fruit. Bluebirds feed quite a lot on insects, especially when nesting. In the fall they supplement their diets with berries and fruit from our native trees and shrubs.



Eastern Bluebird at nest box by Glenn Olsen



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