



The Naturalist

Celebrating 51 Years of Bird Conservation



Joanne Kamo

Volume 39, Number 2

March/April 2020

Mad Birding – Birding the Four Corners of Madagascar

Speaker: Steve Gast

Date: Thursday, March 12, 2020
Place: United Way Center, 50 Waugh
Time: Social at 7:00 p.m.
Presentation at 7:30 p.m.

A much-too-brief account of a long journey. Six birders spent 33 days seeking each of the endemic families and nearly every endemic bird species in Madagascar, using virtually every mode of transport to do so. Out of 110 fully endemic and 25 regional near-endemic birds, the team managed all but 5 species! Along the way, the parade of rare mammals and endemic reptiles seemed endless. Steve Gast will share a few photos of the many birds, other animals, and experiences from the first-ever marathon Mad Mega-tour of Madagascar.

Steve Gast is a retired geologist and lifelong birder. He has lived in 7 countries on 5 continents during his working years. Since his retirement in 2011, he has traveled and birded internationally several times a year. Steve uses eBird extensively and has recorded sightings from more than 75 countries. He currently resides in Houston and, when not traveling, he volunteers for several Texas conservation organizations, including the Katy



White-throated Rail by Steve Gast

Prairie Conservancy. He is a past member of the Board of Directors and currently on the Advisory Board for Houston Audubon.

This event is free and open to the public. Please let us know if you're coming by signing up on the Speaker Event page of our website.

Save the Date: Sunday, March 29, 2020

The Galveston Island Nature Tourism Council, Houston Audubon, and The Bryan Museum in Galveston cordially invite you to

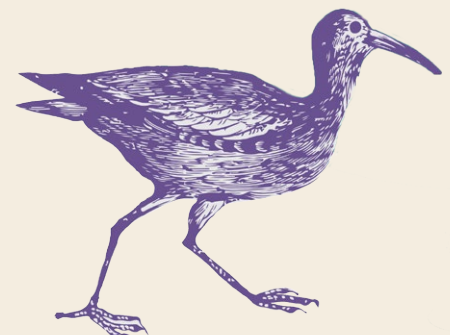
The Opening of the Lost Bird Project Exhibit

10:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. at The Bryan Museum: Tours, Speakers, Activities

The Grand Unveiling of the Eskimo Curlew Memorial Sculpture by Todd McGrain

4:00 – 5:00 p.m. at Galveston Island State Park

See page 6 for more information about the Eskimo Curlew and The Lost Bird Project.



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 also available in digital format on our website.

Sign up for E-News on our website for monthly updates.

Don't Give Up!

by Sam Smith, President

Recently the news media has brought forward what many of us have suspected all along—the bird population is dropping. While it is heartbreaking, it just reinforces to me how helping birds any way I can is so important. So here are my top five suggestions that we can all do to make a difference.



- 1. Pick it up.** Trash, especially plastic trash, isn't just an eyesore. For birds it can be deadly. As Anna Vallery, a Houston Audubon Conservation Specialist, presented last year, the amount of foreign materials found in a dead bird's stomach is alarming. They mistake trash for food and once it is in their systems, the outcome can be life-threatening. So let's avoid the problem and pick it up.
- 2. Make a habitat in your yard.** Understory is important for lots of birds, because that's where they find food. Make an understory in your yard where you can. Leave the leaf litter on the ground under trees and in your flower beds. Plant natives and avoid plants such as crepe myrtle that do not help birds. Water features that are bird-friendly are important as well. A Houston Audubon member who lives in West University, which is in the middle of Houston, has a small backyard. After they planted natives and added a water drip, they've been able to enjoy Ovenbirds in their yard. It does not take much, but it does take something.
- 3. Help birds avoid windows strikes.** Houston Audubon's Lights Out Program has had some great successes, but what I am talking about is bird strikes in my backyard. Nothing is more frustrating than coming home to find an imprint of a White-winged Dove on our glass French Doors because, more times than not, I will find a dead bird nearby. After trying a few different things, we found that once we hung a small spinning brass artwork thing (what I call it) from the eaves, bird strikes have been reduced about 70%. Sometimes when a hawk is in hot pursuit of a dove it happens anyway, but the numbers are down just by adding one small feature near the windows.
- 4. Educate your neighbors.** We really enjoy standing in our front yard and using a spotting scope to look at birds in our neighbor's big oak tree. It doesn't take long before people stop and ask, "What ya looking at?" You let them take a look and when they see the hawk or whistling-duck, their interest in helping birds is piqued. They are also more responsive to hearing about things they can do to make their yards bird-friendly. Plant a thought, an idea, a concept. Good things can come from a small suggestion.
- 5. Go to houstonaudubon.org and Birdfriendlyhouston.org.** Over the years, Houston Audubon staff and volunteers have made these two websites great places to go to for birding information, resources and ways you can help. They are loaded with activities and ways for you to get more involved in the birding community.

As I have said before, every little thing matters. Never underestimate or take for granted how you can help birds.

High Island Spring 2020

The conservation staff, technicians, and volunteers along the coast have been hard at work the past few months on major improvements to the visitor experience at High Island. As part of the overall master plan to enhance stewardship and conservation of critical bird habitat and expand and enhance nature tourism, we are pleased to announce that the brand new Kathrine G. McGovern Canopy Walkway in Smith Oaks Bird Sanctuary will be ready for spring migration this April. Come out and enjoy a breezy vantage point along this 700-foot elevated boardwalk with commanding overlooks at both Smith and Claybottom ponds. We are also excited to announce new restroom facilities and a renovated Pump House Pavilion in Smith Oaks Bird Sanctuary!



We'll be working right up until early April, so please pardon any inconvenience as we make these visitor amenities. Please join us in High Island this spring and experience the wonder of birds!

Richard Gibbons, Conservation Director

Birding Walks



The Tropical Birding guides will lead three bird walks a day, five days a week (every day except Tuesday and Wednesday) in our High Island sanctuaries and surrounding hotspots. The walks begin on Thursday, April 2 and end on Sunday, May 3. Houston Audubon staff and volunteers plan to lead guided bird walks on the days that the Tropical Birding guides are recuperating and exploring. Visit our website for details.

Birding Optics



The knowledgeable staff of Land Sea and Sky will once again provide High Island visitors the opportunity to try out several binoculars and scopes in the field. They will be set up in Boy Scout Woods Friday through Sunday (April 10–12, April 17–19, April 24–26) and during Flight in Focus (May 2–3). A portion of purchases will go toward supporting Houston Audubon programs!

FLIGHT in FOCUS



High Island May 2-3

Join Houston Audubon in celebrating more than 50 years of bird conservation at this special weekend dedicated to bird photography. This two-day event includes workshops with top bird photographers, a live raptor photography shoot, exclusive in-the-field photography workshops, opportunities to try out the newest in camera equipment, and much more.

Registration covers both days of activities, lunch and dinner on Saturday and a two-day pass to all Houston Audubon sanctuaries in High Island. Register today at houstonaudubon.org.

Volunteers Needed

Help us prepare for the birds and birders of spring migration!

- March 14: High Island Work Party
- March 18: Dos Vacas Muertas Work Party
- March 21: Bolivar Beach Cleanup
- Sign up to be a bird walk guide or kiosk volunteer.

Details on the Volunteer page of our website.

Mural Painting at the Coop

Special thanks to Doug Hiser for this beautiful work of art, and thanks to his Houston Gateway Academy students for their help in painting the mural at the Hulsey Coastal Operations Center (COOP) in High Island. Photos of the mural as it was being painted are in the website newsroom. The Coop increases our capacity for visitor services and sanctuary maintenance. Features include a staff bunkhouse, RV facilities for volunteers, a workshop, and a community space.



Birdathon 2020

It's almost time for our annual spring fundraiser—Birdathon!

Similar to a walkathon, participants create teams and raise money for Houston Audubon to support bird conservation. However, instead of walking, you go birding! And you get to choose the day that works best for you—anytime between March 20 and May 11.



Pick a day for your team, then go out and count as many birds as you can! Prizes will be awarded at the celebration party on May 17.

We welcome birders of all experience levels. We'll even place solo birders on a team with an experienced guide.

Learn more at houstonaudubon.org/birdathon

For questions, please contact Zineera Seth, Marketing and Events Manager, at zseth@houstonaudubon.org.

Interested in being a sponsor or underwriter? Contact Aimee Friend, Development Director, at afriend@houstonaudubon.org.

Important Dates

March 8	Kick-off Workshop
March 20 – May 11	Birding Period
May 14	Fundraising Ends
May 17	Awards Celebration

Kick-Off Workshop

Get excited for Birdathon 2020! Join us at the log cabin at Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary for the Kick-off Workshop to learn all about Birdathon and birding.

Meet other birders and nature enthusiasts, and maybe even sign up for a team! Newbies are more than welcome. This workshop is free and open to the public.



March 8, 2020
2 – 5 p.m.

Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary
Please RSVP online at
houstonaudubon.org/birdathon

HANPA

The Houston Audubon Nature Photography Association (HANPA) is an informal photo club for Houston Audubon members. We hold meetings monthly, September through May, on the first Wednesday at 7 p.m. in the Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary headquarters library.

March 4: The Wildlife Paradise of the Southern Ocean—South Georgia Island with Richard Wilbourn

South Georgia Island is a nature photographer's dream destination with huge colonies of penguins and seals set against snow-capped mountains and glaciers. Renowned photographer Art Wolfe said, "If I had just one place to visit in the world, it would be South Georgia Island." Located in the far southern Atlantic Ocean between The Falkland Islands and Southern Africa, South Georgia is pristine, isolated and hard to reach. Should this be on your bucket list? In this presentation, Houston Audubon member Rich Wilbourn describes his recent trip, how to get there, what to see, and photography lessons learned.

April 1: April Fool's Day: A Lucky Shot or a Photoshopped Trick? You be the Judge



Galveston
April 16-18, 2020

Houston Audubon will have a booth in the Galveston Island Community Center. We will be selling lots of fun/educational items plus High Island patches. Please stop by and say hello!

Announcing our new blog!

Subscribe to keep up with birds, conservation issues, and Houston Audubon happenings.



Houstonaudublog.blogspot.com

Mindful Mondays in the Forest

Join us for weekly mindfulness classes at the Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary! We'll begin each class in the cabin with a guided 20-minute lesson. Then we'll each go to a quiet spot in the forest to practice simply being mindful not mind-full. We'll meet back at the cabin for wild-collected tea and sharing.



Natives Nursery Open House

Saturday, May 2: 8 a.m. – Noon

Our annual Natives Nursery Spring Open House will be on Saturday, May 2. We will have native plant experts on site, ready to answer all of your questions and help you select the best plants to support wildlife in your yard. This year, we will have activities for all ages set up around the nursery and the cabin. Come learn tips and tricks for making your home and yard bird-friendly while enjoying activities and refreshments with Houston Audubon. A special open house discount will be given to all Houston Audubon members at this event!



The Natives Nursery is located at Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary. Parking for this event will be at Memorial Drive United Methodist Church.



Last year Houston came in first in the U.S. for the highest number of species identified (and third in the world). Participate in the City Nature Challenge and help us defend our title!

The Challenge will be held April 24 – May 3, 2020. The regional kickoff event is on April 22 at the Houston Museum of Natural Science.

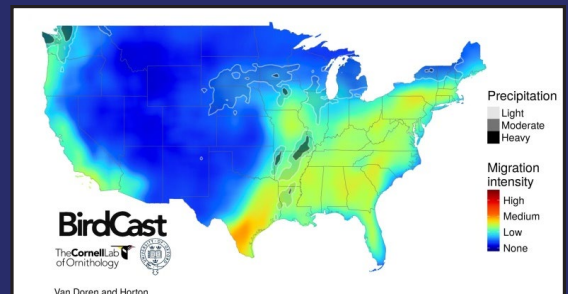
Lights Out for Birds!

Houston has been ranked as the second most dangerous city for migratory birds because of our location along the central flyway and the amount of light pollution we emit.

The goal of the Lights Out for Birds program is to reduce preventable bird deaths by alerting our community to periods of high bird migration. Lights Out Action Alerts are issued when weather conditions make collisions especially likely.

Now in the program's third year, Houston Audubon has partnered with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and several new partners to expand and enhance the program. A new project leader for Texas will help Houston and Dallas improve migration monitoring and communication to create a safer way for birds migrating through our cities.

Sign up for action alerts on our website and take the pledge!



The Lost Bird Project: The Eskimo Curlew

A six-foot permanent memorial sculpture of the Eskimo Curlew, commissioned by Galveston Island Nature Tourism Council, and a special exhibit of five extinct birds, all part of The Lost Bird Project by artist Todd McGrain, will be unveiled on March 29 on Galveston Island.

The six-foot-tall bronze Eskimo Curlew, an elegant shorebird, will be installed in Galveston Island State Park, and five large bronzes, representative of the other permanent Lost Bird Project sculptures located throughout North America, will be shown in the gardens of The Bryan Museum. Galveston Island Nature Tourism Council, Houston Audubon, and The Bryan Museum have partnered to bring these elements of The Lost Bird Project to the island.

Each Lost Bird Project memorial is permanently installed near the last sighting of the bird. The last fully documented North American sighting of the Eskimo Curlew was in west Galveston in 1962 according to the Texas Bird Records Committee of the Texas Ornithological Society. Other permanent sculptures of the Lost Bird Project are the Great Auk in Newfoundland, the Passenger Pigeon in Ohio, the Labrador Duck in New York, the Carolina Parakeet in Florida, and the Heath Hen in Martha's Vineyard.

"Forgetting that these birds ever existed is another kind of extinction," McGrain said. "It takes real work to preserve habitat, raise awareness and mitigate the factors that adversely affect bird populations."

Original bronzes of each sculpture will be on view in The Bryan Museum gardens from March 29 through September 13. There is no charge to view the exhibit and learn about these once-thriving birds. The thought-provoking memorial links art with natural history and highlights humans' impact on biodiversity. The Lost Bird Project has been exhibited at 14 museums across the country, including the Smithsonian. It is also the subject of a feature length documentary.



*Eskimo Curlew by Linda Feltner
(See article below)*

Eskimo Curlew—Gone But Not Forgotten

by Linda M. Feltner

As a bird artist, I shall never paint this curlew from life. No one can, in all probability. Bringing an extinct bird back to life through scientific illustration was my way of paying homage.

My personal interest stemmed from my husband, T. Ben Feltner, who rediscovered the Eskimo Curlew on Galveston Island, March 22, 1959, along with his friend Dudley A. Deaver. This sighting shocked the ornithological world and encouraged research for further evidence that the birds might have a viable population.

Despite diligence on the part of many searchers along the Texas Coast, the last confirmed record in the contiguous U.S. occurred when two birds appeared on Galveston Island in late March 1962 and left a few weeks later in early April. Formerly



*Linda measuring curlews
at the Smithsonian.
Photo by Ikumi Kayama*

one of the most abundant birds in North America, the Eskimo Curlew is now listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List but is thought to be extinct.

Without personal knowledge of having seen a living bird, my research began by investigating resources that would supply crucial information. Observing and measuring specimens at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History provided a heavy-hearted but significant opportunity to get a feel for the size, coloration and variety. Further assistance from Dr. Dennis Paulson, Director Emeritus of the Slater Museum of Natural History enabled study of their specimens from which measurements could be made and details noted.

My aim is to provide a spark, to awaken curiosity and invite questions, to promote an appreciation of the complexity of nature, and to foster a desire to protect it.

Linda Feltner is an award-winning nature artist and educator with close ties to Houston Audubon. In 1988, she created the original design of our logo, and for the past 24 years she has donated the design for the High Island patch.

The full article where Linda describes the process she used to make her portraits of the Eskimo Curlew, along with accompanying photos, is in the newsroom of our website.

Bay-breasted Warbler—*Setophaga castanea*

by Glenn Olsen, GO Birding Ecotours

The male Bay-breasted Warbler is one of the most beautiful warblers we have even though the colors are not as electrifying as in some birds. The beauty lies in the exquisite subtleness of the colors.



In breeding (alternate) plumage the male's rich chestnut-colored crown, throat, breast, sides, and black face distinguish it from all other warblers. The back is grayish with a few black streaks and two whitish wing bars. This combination of chestnut and black is linked to the name. The term "bay" refers to a color in horses where the animal has a reddish-brown colored body and black on other parts. Our bird has a similar pattern.

Interestingly, the species name is the word for the genus of the North American chestnut tree (*Castanea dentata*) where chestnut refers to the medium, reddish-brown color of the tree's seed.

The genus name derives from Greek and means moth eater. Not surprisingly, during breeding season, our bird feeds primarily on the eastern spruce budworm (*Choristoneura fumiferana*), a species of moth found in the northern spruce forests (*Picea sp*) of Canada where about 90% of these warblers breed.

Females often present a nice challenge for identification since they, like many female warblers, lack the noticeable colors of the males. Their colors range from creamy, buffy underparts with a faint hint of chestnut color along the sides to no chestnut. They can appear quite similar to young and fall Blackpoll Warblers and to young and fall Pine Warblers.

The best time to see this understated but gorgeous warbler is during spring migration, from mid-April to mid-May. Fall migrants are rare. In spring they depart their winter range of southern Central America and northern South America, with most migrating across the gulf.

Prime locations to find the Bay-breasted Warbler and other wood warblers in spring migration are the sanctuaries at High Island and Galveston, Brazos Bend State Park, and other sites where there are large oaks and other trees that create habitat for them.

Upcoming Classes with Glenn Olsen

- Introduction to Birding: March 17 and 21
- Warbler Identification: April 7 and 11
- Breeding Birds of the Upper Coast: May 12 and 16
- A Natural History of Texas & the Gulf Coast: March 19 – April 30

Birding classes consist of an evening session at Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary and a field trip on the following Saturday. The Natural History course is at the Glasscock School of Continuing Studies.

Visit our website for details.

Member Field Trips

Cullinan Park in Sugar Land
Saturday, March 21

High Island
Saturday, April 18

Houston Audubon field trips are open to members and a limited number of guests. Field trips are free but reservations are required.

Bus Trips for Seniors

Aransas NWR for Whooping Cranes
Thursday, March 26

High Island
Monday, April 13

Bus trips are for Houston Audubon members who are over 50.

Free Sanctuary Walks & Monthly Bird Surveys

Scheduled monthly at urban and coastal sites. Nature enthusiasts of all skill levels are welcome. Many are family-friendly. Details and dates are in the birding section of our website.

Galveston County Audubon Group

Presentation: March 19
Update on the Beach-nesting Program

Speaker: Kristen Vale, TX Coastal Program Coordinator for the American Bird Conservancy

Kristen will give an update on the beach-nesting bird work done by the American Bird Conservancy and Houston Audubon at our established sites, at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, and San Luis Pass. She will also share insights gained from our banded Wilson's Plovers in their wintering grounds in Central America.

Field Trip: Saturday, March 21
Galveston's East End

Meet in the Fort San Jacinto Historic Point parking lot and the far east end of Seawall Blvd.

Presentations start at 7 p.m. at the Rosenberg Library in Galveston. Our meetings and field trips are free and open to all. Details at houstonaudubon.org

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Calendar of Events

- Weekly Mindful Mondays
- Weekly Titmouse Club on Tuesdays
- Weekly Bayou Buddies on Tuesdays
- Weekly BIRD Buddies on Fridays

March

- 4 After School Nature Explorers Club
- 4 Nature Photography Meeting
- 7 Bolivar Beach Ramble
- 7 Raptor Photo Shoot
- 8 Birdathon Kick-off Workshop
- 12 Speaker Event
- 14 High Island Work Party
- 14 Owl Prowl, Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary
- 17 Birding Class: Introduction to Birding
- 18 High Island Birding Tour Guides Volunteer Training
- 18 Dos Vacas Muertas Work Party
- 19 Galveston Co. Audubon Group Meeting
- 20 Birdathon Birding Period starts
- 21 Bolivar Flats Beach Cleanup
- 21 High Island Tour Birding Guides Volunteer Training
- 21 Houston Audubon Members Field Trip
- 21 Raptor and Education Center Work Party
- 21 Galveston Co. Audubon Group Field Trip

- 21 Birding Class Field Trip
- 26 Bus Trip for Houston Audubon Seniors
- 27 Kiosk opens at Boy Scout Woods
- 28 Raptor Center Behind-the-Scenes Tour
- 28 Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary Work Party
- 29 The Lost Bird Project Opening and Sculpture Unveiling

April

- 1 After School Nature Explorers Club
- 1 Nature Photography Meeting
- 2 Free bird walks begin at High Island
- 4 Bolivar Beach Ramble
- 7 Birding Class: Warblers
- 11 Birding Class Field Trip
- 13 Bus Trip for Houston Audubon Seniors
- 18 Houston Audubon Members Field Trip
- 18 Raptor and Education Center Work Party
- 25 Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary Work Party

May

- 2-3 Flight in Focus
- 2 Natives Nursery Open House
- 5 Kiosk at Boy Scout Woods closes
- 11 Birdathon Birding Period ends



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