



The Naturalist

Celebrating 51 Years of Bird Conservation

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Greg Lavaty

Houston's a Bird City! Now What?

by Anna Vallery, Conservation Specialist

You may have heard the great news—Houston is one of the first four cities to receive the Bird City Texas designation. But what does this mean for the city, for Houstonians, and for the wildlife that also calls Houston home?

This designation demonstrates that our community cares about birds, habitat, and conservation. To receive the Bird City designation, applicants were required to describe what actions they have taken to support birds and wildlife in their cities. Each selected city had to have fulfilled a certain number of requirements from different categories to be considered. Each city then had to outline a plan to expand their efforts in these categories to better protect birds, educate the public, and restore habitat within their individual urban environments.

The growing popularity of planting native plants, restoring prairies, and bird-friendly education programs were among the many other efforts that helped Houston receive this inaugural designation. Houston committed to expanding our bird-friendly efforts in a number of different ways, from habitat restoration to increased advocacy and outreach.

Here are some events and activities you can expect to see over the course of the 3-year Bird City certification period:

- **More bird surveys and chances to get outside to connect with nature:** Houston Audubon and our partners already host 12 monthly urban bird surveys, but we aren't stopping there. Our newest survey will be held at Mercer Botanic Garden on the fourth Thursday of each month. These surveys not only serve as an opportunity to get people outside and birding, but our survey

leaders also enter their data into eBird. This data can be used to track changes in our bird populations and inform conservation decisions.

- **More bird-related educational content:**

The City of Houston has access to a number of excellent bird-related educational materials. Gary Clark writes a weekly nature column for the *Houston Chronicle* that regularly includes birds. Houston Audubon posts our weekly "Beak of the Week" and "Fun Fact" on our social media channels and website. But, being a new Bird City, we want to expand our initiatives. Already, Houston Audubon has launched the new Houston Audublog, and has friends and partners writing bird-related articles. New outreach and educational initiatives will be coming over the next 3 years, so be ready for more birds in your life!

- **Expansion of our Lights Out for Birds program:**

Houston has been one of the leaders for the Lights Out for Birds movement nationwide. Now, thanks to a partnership with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, we will be able to expand the program. This includes implementing bird collision monitoring and working with the city to get more buildings to turn their lights out at night during spring and fall migrations. If you're ready to join in, either as an individual or for your company, take the Lights Out for Birds pledge on the Houston Audubon website.

Thanks to so much work from our partners and the City of Houston, we can capitalize on our new Bird City Texas designation and continue to make Houston a truly wonderful place for birds to live and humans to enjoy.



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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CONTACT INFORMATION

Houston Audubon Office 713-932-1639
Education Office 713-640-2407
Fax 713-461-2911
E-mail info@houstonaudubon.org

houstonaudubon.org

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

Finding Hope and Inspiration Through the Resilience of Nature

by Helen Drummond, Executive Director

As we navigate these challenging times, I am reminded of Robert Jordan's quote, "The oak fought the wind and was broken, the willow bent when it must and survived." We, as individuals, as an organization, and as a region have weathered many storms over the years, and we've learned to be resilient, flexible, and adaptable. I believe today is no different. Amidst this global pandemic, we should be encouraged by looking to the subject of our mission—birds and nature.

Houston Audubon remains steadfast in our duties. While teleworking and social distancing have become a new way of operating to keep the organization's business and mission moving forward, we continue to be connected to each other, our donors, our members, and our volunteers through purpose and technology.

Team members are in regular communication with each other, coordinating actions to adapt spring programming and migration activities. Houston Audubon is abiding by county orders and federal guidelines as we provide virtual birding and educational experiences during these unprecedented times.

Houston Audubon's website and social media platforms are utilized to deliver lively and informative content to thousands of households across the world. The Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary and the Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary webcams bring an immersive nature experience to anyone with internet and a computer in the comfort of their home. The live sanctuary broadcasts from Smith Oaks Bird Sanctuary, Boy Scout Woods Sanctuary, and Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary are engaging and fun, and provide relief for those at home that miss the spectacle of migration on the Upper Texas Coast. With these offerings, we hope to bring the joy and wonder of birds to thousands regionally and around the world.

In addition, valuable educational content through virtual experiences is provided on-line through Houston Audubon's website and the Center for Interactive Learning Collaborative (CILC). Live broadcasts and recordings are conducted by individual team members through Zoom at Houston Audubon's Raptor and Education Center. Bird Buddies (preschool program) continues to be held with live virtual programs every Friday. Live broadcasts and pre-recorded virtual programs are being delivered to senior living facilities that were normally visited in-person every month.

The above overview highlights some of our offerings. We invite you to visit our website and Facebook page for more. Meanwhile, we hope all of you will find joy in nature, whether it is in your neighborhood or through Houston Audubon webcams, live broadcasts, and virtual programs.

Our thoughts are with each of you—stay well!



A highlight from one of the Smith Oaks Rookery live broadcasts taken by Houston Audubon conservation technicians staying at the Field Station in High Island.

World Migratory Bird Day Saturday, May 9

World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) has been celebrated for over 25 years to bring

attention to one of the most important and spectacular events in the Americas—bird migration!

WMBD takes place each year on the second Saturday in May in the United States and Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean celebrate in October.

Public awareness and concern are crucial components of migratory bird conservation. Citizens who are enthusiastic about birds, informed about threats, and empowered to become involved in addressing those threats, can make a tremendous contribution to maintaining healthy bird populations.

This year, Houston Audubon and the City of Houston, along with our partners in conservation, will host the first online-only WMBD event. We will have art contests, birding competitions, workshops, presentations, and more—all in celebration of World Migratory Bird Day.

Join in on any and all of the events and activities to learn more about the importance of Houston for migratory birds and how you can celebrate, enjoy, and protect our migratory species from home!

The main landing page will be a Facebook event page where partners will list the activities they're sponsoring. Art contest entries will fall under the 2020 World Migratory Bird Day Theme, "Birds Connect Our World," and will be submitted a couple of days before the event, so that winners can be announced on May 9.

Partners: Houston Audubon, Houston Parks - HPARD, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Galveston Bay Foundation, Houston Environmental Resources for Educators, and Citizens Environmental Coalition

Visit our website for additional information and updates.



Save the Date!



SEPTEMBER 19 — 26, 2020

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

May Speaker Event Update

The May Speaker Event / Membership meeting has been canceled but Houston Audubon members will receive an email invitation to participate in online voting for the 2020-21 Board of Directors slate.

Natives Nursery Online Open House

Saturday, May 1 – Sunday, May 2

Our annual Natives Nursery Open House will have a different look this spring—we are bringing the sale online! The sale will run from 8 a.m. on May 1 to 5 p.m. on May 2. Plants purchased online will be available for curbside pick-up the following weekend at Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary. Please check our website for details.

Why Would You Burn A Wildlife Sanctuary?

by Pete Deichmann, Coastal Sanctuaries Manager

On March 5, 2020, we executed a prescribed fire at Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary with our friends at US Fish and Wildlife Service and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. When planning a prescribed fire, one becomes somewhat of an amateur meteorologist. There are multiple factors, both environmental and anthropogenic, that must fall into place to safely and efficiently conduct a prescribed burn, but first, why would we want to burn a wildlife sanctuary?

Most ecosystems in Texas, along with their assembly of plants and animals, have evolved with regular disturbance from wildfires. Historically, these fires were started by lightning strikes and carried across the landscape until they fizzled out. Native Americans would even set fire to large swaths of prairie to encourage the supple, nutritious, new shoots of warm season grasses to sprout, thus attracting herds of bison, deer and antelope.

Only recently, in the last 200 years or so, has fire on the landscape been suppressed. Forest understories are thickly overgrown, prairies have become shrub lands, invasive species are altering ecosystems, and the threat of more severe wildfires has increased due to the build-up of unburnt fuel. Some species like the Black Rail, which has recently been proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act, are seeing their habitat in the coastal prairies and marshes developed or degraded by lack of management that their populations are declining.

Houston Audubon, in partnership with Texas Parks and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, recently set out to restore this historic fire regime to Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary on the Bolivar Peninsula. A burn plan was developed and necessary permits acquired. Fire breaks were constructed using a Marshmaster, a "tank-like" mowing machine on tracks, to contain the fire to a specific area, and fire crews were put on notice. When weather conditions were favorable, an army of Houston Audubon, TPWD, and USFWS crews assembled with a fleet of Marshmasters, UTV's, and fire engines to put fire on the ground.

It was the first time Houston Audubon has used prescribed fire as a habitat management tool. In all, a patchwork of about 100 acres was burned. A "patchy" burn is ideal as it creates safety zones for any wildlife unable to completely escape the fire. In the end, we achieved our goals of reducing hazardous fuel loads, reducing woody vegetation in a coastal prairie system, and beating back invasive species like Macartney Rose. Prescribed fire is an extremely useful tool that Houston Audubon plans to use more frequently in the future.



Find more photos of the prescribed burn on the Houston Audublog (houstonaudublog.blogspot.com) where this article first appeared. Spring native plant gardening and window collisions have been among the other recent topics. We welcome volunteer bloggers! Contact Zineera Seth at zseth@houstonaudubon.org for more information.



INTRODUCING TWO NEW CATEGORIES: DIGITAL BIRDING & INDIVIDUAL BIRDING

We know staying at home can be tough, and birding is a great outlet. Therefore, Birdathon is continuing this year with some modifications to allow participation while staying at home or social distancing.

We greatly appreciate your help in fundraising for the birds during this challenging time.



Visit houstonaudubon.org/birdathon for more information and to register.

Spread Your Wings at Home!

We remain busy at work, but invite you to experience the joy of birds and nature from your own home.

Stay connected with our new digital library of resources on our website. Games, interactive activities, and learning tools are included, many prepared by Houston Audubon staff.



Webcams are also set up at Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary and Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary for a virtual birding experience.



The Rookery at Smith Oaks is one of the favorite locations of our live broadcasts.

In April we produced live broadcasts from our High Island sanctuaries for our Facebook page.

Meanwhile, know that Houston Audubon continues to work behind the scenes to advance our mission. If you would like to support our efforts, please consider joining as a member or making a donation. Stay safe and be well!

New Monthly Bird Survey: Mercer Botanic Gardens

Led by longtime birder Paul Gregg and Mercer staff member Christy Jones, the Mercer survey will take place on the fourth Thursday of each month. Birders of all skill levels who are at least 12 years old are welcome.

Mercer Botanic Gardens is a Harris County Precinct 4 park spanning more than 400 acres along lower Cypress Creek with viewing opportunities for birders in cultivated gardens, mature riparian woodlands, open grass meadows, and includes water features such as ponds, oxbow lakes, and Cypress Creek. Mercer is surrounded by more than a thousand acres of protected forestland which will eventually connect to the Cypress Creek Greenway.

Birders at Mercer can expect to see a variety of southeast Texas favorites, such as the Red-bellied Woodpecker, Green Heron, Carolina Wren, and Eastern Bluebird, as well as opportunities to view uncommon or migrating species, such as the Inca Dove, Cliff Swallow, American Woodcock, and Bald Eagle.

We hope to resume our monthly bird surveys soon. Please check our website for updates.



SAVE THE DATE

FOR OUR ANNUAL FUNDRAISING DINNER



THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2020

6:30 PM – 9:30 PM

THE REVAIRE

CO-CHAIRS:

SARAH FLOURNOY & CULLEN GEISELMAN

Celebrating Our Volunteers

by Lauren Miheli, Sanctuary and Volunteer Manager

Houston Audubon has a staff of less than 20 people and over 150 active volunteers, so to say that volunteers are important to our mission is an understatement. Houston Audubon relies on volunteers every day of the year to help us with education, restoration, administration and everything and anything you can imagine.



Karen Hoffman and Les Pearce

Each year we celebrate the contributions of these valued volunteers at a picnic at the Edith L. Moore log cabin. On top of recognizing the work of all volunteers collectively, each year we select one (and sometimes two) distinguished volunteers who went above and beyond to support our work in a way that stood out to staff and board members, who we honor with the Laura Singleton Exceptional Volunteer Award*.

This year the award went to Karen Hoffman and Les Pearce. Our nominating committee was in complete agreement that these two were deserving of this honor, and for good reason. Les and Karen started volunteering with us in 2011, both in the Natives Nursery and as ELMNS Workday volunteers. It wasn't long after getting started that they went from participants to leaders, taking the initiative to thoroughly educate themselves

about native plants and Houston Audubon's work and offering suggestions for ways we could improve as well as guiding and mentoring other volunteers.

Two of our newer staff members, Anna Vallery and Lauren Miheli, credit Karen and Les with teaching them about our native plants and the history of the Edith L. Moore Sanctuary.

Recently retired Volunteer Coordinator Juanita Perkins had this to say: "Karen has effectively participated in the formation and expansion of the Natives Nursery. She brings much knowledge about plants and the natural world. She and Les have done so much to keep the ELMNS trails in tip-top shape by overseeing the mulching and maintenance of the trails at many Saturday workdays."

Karen and Les have also been instrumental in getting our new Sanctuary Stewards volunteer program established at Edith L. Moore.

Some words that have been used to describe them include hard working, positive attitudes, enthusiastic, humble, dedicated, ready to volunteer, driving force, biggest supporters, excellent and deserving candidates. Aside from all this, Houston Audubon staff and volunteers appreciate that they share Hatch Chili foods when in season!

Congratulations Karen and Les, and thank you to you and all of our volunteers for your work in 2019.

** The Laura Singleton Exceptional Volunteer Award is an annual tribute and memorial to Laura Singleton, a long-time Houston Audubon volunteer who passed away in 2002. The criteria for the award mirrors what Laura herself represented—the best of volunteerism.*

Summer Volunteer Opportunities

We hope to welcome volunteers back to our sanctuaries this summer with regularly scheduled work parties.

For Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary, we have a particular need for sanctuary stewards. The people of greater Houston have found our beloved nature sanctuary, and our quiet little walk in the woods has become a bit of a local destination.

New visitors often aren't familiar with the difference between a nature sanctuary and a public park. We are looking for volunteers who believe in our mission and enjoy interacting with the public to be sanctuary stewards. Help us connect with these first-timers and teach them what it means to enjoy nature while being a good steward of the habitat!



Birds of Our Backyards

by Glenn Olsen, GO Birding Ecotours

In our historic time of this threatening pandemic, I am reminded of the famous words: "These are the times that try men's souls." Those memorable words were penned in 1776 by Thomas Paine in his pamphlet "The Crisis" which was written in ardent support of the American Revolutionary effort and to summon the support of the soldiers and citizens during their unprecedented and perilous years.

So, how do we summon strength to make it through our weeks of social distancing and stay-at-home orders? Here are a few of my suggestions for relieving stress or boredom and enjoying birds in your backyard. I'm sure that many of you have already discovered these or have your own equally rewarding activities.

I think we often overlook and even discount the birds that we see in our backyard and neighborhood. But how well do we really know them? A few of the birds that have been coming to our backyard include the gorgeous Cedar Waxwings (devouring yaupon berries), Chipping Sparrows and House Finches. We've had a resident Mockingbird, a pair of Cardinals, and a Pine Warbler singing in the trees behind our house. Additionally, we're blessed to have a pair of Eastern Bluebirds in the trees just next to our backyard. I built a nest box for them and placed it in a pine tree. They've been taking nesting material to it so I'm watching for further developments!

These are all fairly common birds and you may be familiar with them. But how familiar are you with the different age-based plumages of Chipping Sparrows? In our yard, we have at least three different plumage patterns. One appears to be approaching breeding plumage with a dark chestnut crown and bright white eyebrow. A few others have typical winter plumage: pale reddish-brown, streaked crown, dull eyebrow, thin black eyeline. And we have several first winter birds: duller brown crown, less pronounced wing bars. The differences are more apparent when you see all three of them feeding together. And you may not have this opportunity if you're out in the field. This advantage goes to backyard birding!

Spend some time to truly look at common birds. Learn the facial pattern and bill shape of the female House Finch so you can quickly separate her from the female Purple Finch which we sometimes have in the winter. Study the birds around your home and check your field guide. When the Mockingbird starts singing, as he will soon, listen intently and see what bird calls or other sounds you hear him mimicking.

For any of the birds that you know well, look at them with new eyes and an open mind. Try to find something about the bird that you hadn't noticed before. It may be bill shape, a



House Finch by Greg Lavaty

behavior, or a vocalization. How does it interact with another bird? How does it feed? Knowing the real details of a species, not just the classic field marks, will elevate your identification skills, especially at those times when the bird is partly concealed by leaves, branches, or grass. An excellent way of focusing your attention on the details is to try and sketch the bird. You don't need to try to imitate a field guide illustration. The object is not so much the actual sketch, but the focusing on the details that sketching brings to our mind.

In the immortal words of the great baseball philosopher, Yogi Berra, "You can observe a lot just by watching."

This also is an excellent time to improve or create habitat in your yard to benefit and attract butterflies, birds, and pollinators. I am adding plants to my yard. Both seeds and plants can be ordered online and either picked up locally, delivered, or shipped.

If you don't already have a water feature in your yard, I highly recommend one. Even a simple bird bath will be welcomed by the birds. If you do not want to get out and buy one, just a clay saucer (the kind that fits under clay pots) has the proper depth and will work. If you can arrange for a drip of water (a trickle is all that's needed) into the bath, that will entice the birds even more.

Although we may not be able to visit our favorite birding haunts this spring, we can still enjoy seeing and learning about birds in our backyard or on walks in our neighborhood.

Birding Classes with Glenn Olsen

Many of you have been disappointed that the pandemic forced us to cancel Glenn's popular spring birding classes. We have good news! We hope to offer his classes online soon.

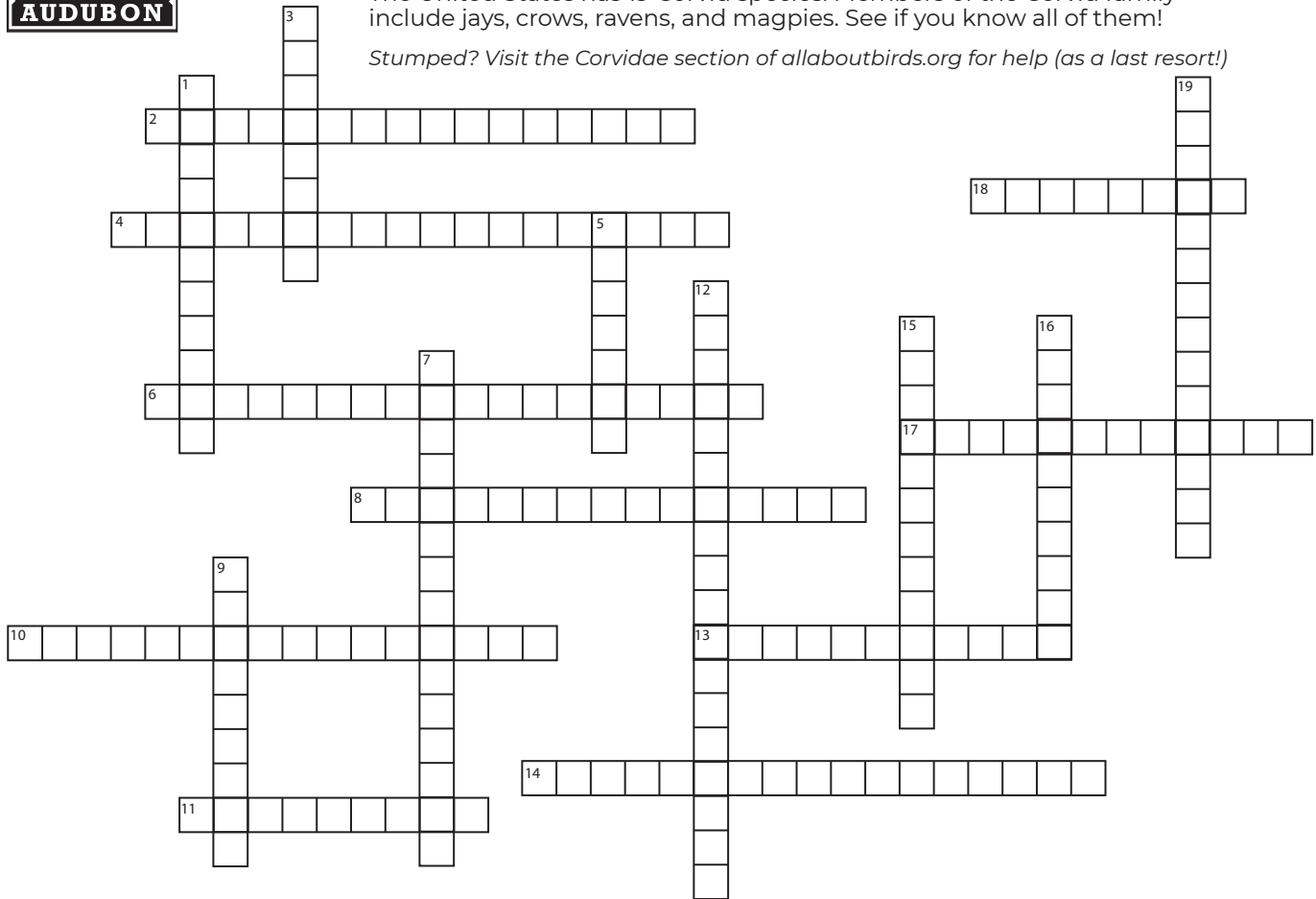


CORVID-19 Crossword

Did someone say CORVID? We bird nerds at Houston Audubon keep hearing Corvid - and we immediately think birds - so we thought we would make a fun and educational crossword puzzle for those stuck at home.

The United States has 19 Corvid species. Members of the Corvid family include jays, crows, ravens, and magpies. See if you know all of them!

Stumped? Visit the Corvidae section of allaboutbirds.org for help (as a last resort!)



ACROSS

- 2 only found in coastal regions from Pacific Northwest to Alaska, slightly smaller and deeper-voiced than it's more common and widespread cousin
- 4 sometimes referred to as the "Blue Jay" of the dry lowlands, thought to be the same species as its Californian cousin until 2016
- 6 only found in California, has been hard-hit by habitat loss and West Nile virus
- 8 distinguished from its cousins by the white, not gray, base of the neck and body feathers
- 10 found in the subalpine mountain forests of the western US, foraging on seeds they rip from pine cones
- 11 known for living at high-altitudes and stealing the snacks of hikers, had its common name changed in 2018
- 13 found in forests, parks, campgrounds, and bird feeders of the wooded western US, one of only two crested corvids
- 14 a familiar species around their western US range, identified in flight by trailing tail feathers and bright, flashy, white wing patches
- 17 fairly common and conspicuous throughout the lower 48, easily recognized by its loud cawing
- 18 bright green, yellow, and blue, found in Texas & Mexico

Use common names; no spaces or punctuation.

DOWN

- 1 all-black, announce themselves with a deep, croaky call
- 3 often hard to tell apart from its "American" cousin, easily identified by its short, nasal, double "cah" call
- 5 well-known and loved, often fools passersby into thinking there is a Red-shouldered Hawk calling
- 7 the only bird species living exclusively in Florida
- 9 found year-long in large, noisy flocks in pinyon-juniper and scrub-oak woodlands of the Western US
- 12 sometimes called the "Blue Jay" of the dry lowlands along the Pacific seaboard, loves sunflower seed and peanuts
- 15 also known as the 'Alalā, recently extinct in the wild, but is currently being reintroduced in its habitat thanks to intensive conservation efforts
- 16 named for the country that encompasses most of its range, also found in the Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, lives in social groups consisting of multiple breeding pairs
- 19 considered endemic to their namesake region of Northeast Mexico, they can also be spotted in the very southeastern portion of Texas, often visiting garbage dumps