

# Delivering Avian Conservation on the Upper Texas Coast

**Houston Audubon's 10-year  
strategic vision and priorities  
through 2023**



The flight and song we nurture today defines the quality of life and sense of place we share tomorrow. Houston Audubon aims to inspire a culture of conservation and a way of life that allows us to thrive in harmony with nature. Our vision is the creation of a healthier, more beautiful place to live by leading and nurturing a community that values and supports birds.



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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. Founded in 1969, Houston Audubon has a rich history of conservation achievement. We are committed to the people and places that enrich our communities and provide safe havens for birds to thrive. Our primary geographic focus comprises 11 counties surrounding Galveston Bay, which is an estuary of national significance as designated by Congress in 1988. We are headquartered at Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary in west Houston.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the spring 2013, Houston Audubon board of directors, staff, and advisors began a four-month strategic planning process to realign programs to streamline operations, adopt a more sustainable funding model that supports long-term continuity in operations, and direct mission-focused activities to maximize results of conservation efforts. Building on 44 years of grass roots conservation, a history of committed volunteerism, and a growing base of regional and local partnerships, this document describes Houston Audubon's vision and priorities for the next 10 years - 2014 to 2023. This strategic plan will be reviewed and goals will be assessed and updated every two years.

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

**Our VISION:** The creation of a healthier natural environment and more beautiful place to live by leading and nurturing a community that values and supports birds.

**Our GUIDING PRINCIPLES:**

- **Birds matter. They are important.** As pollinators, seed dispersers, and consumers of many pests, birds are an essential part of our natural system. The study of birds helps advance science and alerts society to actions needed to protect human health and the environment. Birds enhance our lives. Their beauty, color, song, and dance bring us joy. They have inspired literature and art for centuries and provide an important personal connection to nature.
- **Bird populations are in decline and they need our help.** Urban sprawl, deforestation, pollution, climate change, invasive species and habitat loss - including loss of wetlands and prairies - have negatively impacted birds and their survival. People have created most of these obstacles. They also have the power to stop, reverse or mitigate them.
- **Houston Audubon is uniquely qualified to aid such efforts and make a difference.** With the abundance of birds and diverse habitat in our region, along with the importance of the Upper Texas coast to neotropical migrants, we have a responsibility to help. Houston Audubon strives to provide such aid through our work in the protection and restoration of habitat, education programs and advocacy.

## INTRODUCTION

**Houston Audubon is unique to the Upper Texas Coast because of the scale and effectiveness of its focus on bird conservation.** Houston Audubon owns and manages 17 sanctuaries and two nature centers, the latter of which house staff who run our signature education programs and care for some of our live animal ambassadors. Houston Audubon's geographic focus extends along the Upper Texas Coast and is situated within the Central Flyway - a broad migration front that brings 300 plus species of migrant and resident birds into our region. The Upper Texas Coast is one of the most ecologically diverse areas in Texas and is where 10 eco-regions converge to form a rich, diverse tapestry of vital bird habitats. Millions of migrant and resident birds depend on these habitats to retreat, forage, rest and nurse their young.

Many species of birds, called neotropical migrants, nest in North America and spend the winter in Latin America. Twice a year, these birds migrate between their wintering grounds and spring nesting locations, stopping at Houston Audubon's coastal sanctuaries to rest and refuel along the way. Every spring, tens of thousands of visitors from around the globe visit these sanctuaries to witness the beauty and awe of spring migration. Houston Audubon's service area and the sanctuaries within this region are critical to the survival of these migrants as they make their long journey. Houston Audubon strives to provide birds utilizing this area a good chance to survive and reproduce.



## DELIVERING CONSERVATION: HOUSTON AUDUBON'S MISSION-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

Habitat protection and restoration, conservation advocacy and environmental education are the three ways Houston Audubon delivers conservation. Protecting Priority Bird Habitats, creating Bird-Friendly Communities, and inspiring Awareness, Appreciation, and Action are three core strategies we will employ to focus our conservation efforts and achieve our mission. We also will manage and mobilize volunteers, and forge strategic partnerships to amass greater capacity and resources.



**CORE STRATEGIES TO FOCUS CONSERVATION EFFORTS  
AND ACHIEVE MISSION**



## PROTECT Priority Bird Habitats

Houston Audubon's 17 sanctuaries contain natural, cultural and historical assets that have intrinsic and extrinsic economic value. Our sanctuaries at High Island, Bolivar Peninsular, Galveston and Edith L. Moore in Houston are some of the nation's top locations for viewing spring migration with thousands of people from around the world visiting the sites each year.

The management of Houston Audubon's sanctuaries for birds is paramount and is something the organization has a long tradition of doing. Ranging from direct protection of critical wildlife habitat to advocating for reasonable policies and practices in the region, Houston Audubon is an engaged regional conservation partner that continues to work for a better conservation return on the investment. Such efforts are needed more than ever, according to Audubon's 2007 State of the Birds report, which identifies the species at greatest risk and in need of immediate conservation help.

Based on the report, 176 bird species are in need of conservation help. Fifty-nine species are considered red-listed, which means they are declining rapidly and/or have very small populations or limited ranges. Red-listed species also face major conservation threats and are typically of global conservation concern. The other 117 species are yellow-listed, which means they are either declining or are rare. These birds are typically species of national conservation concern. Ten of the 59 red-listed species and 24 of the 110 yellow-listed species have been seen in the Houston Audubon service area.

Our Priority Bird Habitats strategy aims to maximize habitat value for these species of global and national concern as well as support other priority bird species significant to the Upper Texas Coast, and do so in a way that builds on national and gulf-wide avian conservation efforts. Under this strategy, enhancing human recreational and educational uses will be explored and developed to parallel our conservation mission.



## Protect Priority Bird Habitats

<b>Strategic Priority 1</b>	<b>Improve and maintain avian conservation habitat value of landscapes owned and/or managed by Houston Audubon.</b>
<b>Goal 1</b>	<p><b>Develop, implement and maintain habitat management plans for Houston Audubon-owned sanctuaries.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Conduct triennial reviews and updates of existing management plans with initial reviews and updates of keystone** sanctuaries completed by January 2015 and remaining sanctuaries completed by December 2016.</li> <li>+ Create new management plans for relevant sanctuaries by December 2016.</li> </ul>
<b>Goal 2</b>	<p><b>Restore 350 acres, or 50 percent, of Houston Audubon-owned coastal prairie habitat by 2023.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Plan and execute monthly to quarterly project work days at Horseshoe Marsh to restore at least 15 acres per year.</li> <li>+ Coordinate with The Nature Conservancy, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and others to plan and organize control burning.</li> <li>+ Hire contractors when needed to maintain a restoration target of 115 acres every three years starting in June 2017.</li> </ul>
<b>Goal 3</b>	<p><b>Increase the carrying capacity of Houston Audubon-owned rookeries to support more colonial waterbirds by 25 percent by 2020.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Develop a project budget and timeline to create an additional rookery island at Smith Oaks Sanctuary by January 2015. Pursue funding and execute the project by June 2020.</li> <li>+ Create new channels to transport water from naturally flowing areas to feed and maintain the levels of ponds supporting existing rookeries by June 2017.</li> </ul>
<b>Goal 4</b>	<p><b>Remove invasive species (IS) annually, and enhance and maintain 10 acres of forested habitat in priority areas within Houston Audubon sanctuaries.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Conduct a baseline vegetation survey using aerial photography and define target areas by June 2014.</li> <li>+ Develop and implement annual IS projects within sanctuaries based on budget and survey results.</li> </ul>
<b>Goal 5</b>	<p><b>Pursue conservation of land inholdings within existing coastal sanctuaries, and conservation protection for priority habitats east of Galveston Bay.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Explore and capitalize on opportunities to acquire lands within coastal sanctuary boundaries by 2018.</li> <li>+ Develop additional conservation tools such as conservation easements by 2017.</li> </ul>

<b>Protect Priority Bird Habitats</b>	
<b>Goal 6</b>	<p><b>Establish nationally-recognized standards and practices for land management activities by 2017.</b></p> <p>+ Conduct a Land Trust Alliance “Assess Your Organization” assessment by June 2014.</p>
<b>Goal 7</b>	<b>Support and promote the protection and appreciation of birds and their habitats. Support and promote avian interests in federal, state and local policy and regulatory matters affecting the protection and restoration of priority bird habitats.</b>
<b>Strategic Priority 2</b>	<b>Provide unique educational and recreational experiences for people at Houston Audubon’s keystone** sanctuaries.</b>
<b>Goal 1</b>	<b>Improve existing trails, viewing platforms, and educational space and signage in highly-used areas at the keystone** sanctuaries by 2018.</b>
<b>Goal 2</b>	<b>Create water- and land-based recreational opportunities compatible with habitat conservation goals at keystone** sanctuaries.</b>
<b>Goal 3</b>	<b>Build community goodwill and support around keystone** sanctuaries.</b>
<b>Strategic Priority 3</b>	<b>Establish a science-based monitoring program to help inform avian conservation management decisions.</b>
<b>Goal 1</b>	<b>Develop and standardize avian monitoring protocol for priority and common bird species by 2015 for use by conservation staff, volunteers, and partners.</b>
<b>Goal 2</b>	<b>Prepare a Houston Audubon “state of the birds” conservation report in 2016 and assess the benefits of future reports.</b>

**\*\* Houston Audubon’s keystone sanctuaries include Boy Scout Woods (at High Island, Galveston County), Smith Oaks (at High Island, Galveston County), Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary and Horseshoe Marsh (Bolivar Peninsular), Dos Vacas (West Galveston Island), Edith L. Moore (West Houston) and Sims Bayou (East Houston).**



## CREATE

### Bird-Friendly Communities

Houston Audubon is situated in the fourth most populated city in the United States. Population growth and associated development is expected to increase at the same or greater pace as previous years. Impacts of development to natural resources in a growing area like ours are inevitable. However, opportunities exist to reduce impacts and build and enhance communities that support birds, wildlife and certain ecological functions important to ensuring such biodiversity.

Through Bird-Friendly Communities, or BFC, Houston Audubon aims to enhance the quality of life for birds and people through habitat enhancement, hazard reduction, education and citizen science strategies that will engage people of all ages and backgrounds in stewardship of nature. Houston Audubon's BFC strategy is adapted from National Audubon's BFC concept but is tailored to the needs and culture of our region.

<b>Strategic Priority</b>	<b>Engage citizens and communities in actions that help improve the outlook for watch-listed birds, keep common birds common and enhance our sense of place and quality of life.</b>
<b>Goal 1</b>	<p><b>Create new and enhance existing habitat areas that provide food, water, cover and safe nesting areas in backyards, school grounds, parks, and along corridors such as waterways and right-of ways.</b></p> <p>+ Target 10 organizations a year and work with residents, community-based organizations, businesses and educational institutions to increase the ecological value of urban landscapes.</p>
<b>Goal 2</b>	<p><b>Increase the spatial coverage for bird counting and monitoring in urban areas, and increase the number of volunteers participating in citizen science and community-based bird monitoring.</b></p> <p>+ Target five neighborhoods a year and promote and engage communities in bird monitoring programs such as the Christmas Bird Count, Great Backyard Bird Count, and eBird..</p>
<b>Goal 3</b>	<p><b>Increase the number and diversity of Houston-Galveston area residents engaged in hands-on activities to protect birds.</b></p> <p>+ Conduct 10 presentations a year on the importance of birds and how to help protect them at libraries and meetings of community-based organizations and neighborhood associations.</p> <p>+ Target five community-based festivals or events a year and provide bird watching opportunities within the Houston-Galveston area that help connect children and families to the outdoors. Examples of such opportunities include owl prowls, purple martin madness, family nature explore club and the Texas Nature Challenge.</p>
<b>Goal 4</b>	<p><b>Increase awareness of hazards to birds from window collisions, power lines, towers and pesticides.</b></p> <p>+ Work with City of Houston, businesses, and others to implement measures to provide safer, more nurturing environments for birds and other wildlife.</p>

<b>Goal 5</b>	<p><b>Foster youth environmental education with a focus on birds and community engagement at sanctuaries in communities within a 10-mile radius of keystone sanctuaries**.</b></p> <p>+ Train, empower, and engage teachers and students at schools near Houston Audubon’s keystone sanctuaries** in conservation activities in and around sanctuaries.</p> <p>+ Increase children’s awareness of birds and their importance through Flying Wild Workshops and school presentations in communities surrounding keystone sanctuaries**, and summer camps at Sims Bayou sanctuary and ELM sanctuary</p>
<b>Goal 6</b>	<p><b>Support and promote federal, state and local policies and actions that help protect birds from current and emerging threats.</b></p>

**\*\* Houston Audubon’s keystone sanctuaries include Boy Scout Woods (at High Island, Galveston County), Smith Oaks (at High Island, Galveston County), Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary and Horseshoe Marsh (Bolivar Peninsular), Dos Vacas (West Galveston Island), Edith L. Moore (West Houston) and Sims Bayou (East Houston).**





## INSPIRE

### Awareness, Appreciation, Action

Houston Audubon's education platform fosters awareness and appreciation of birds and wildlife and their supporting habitats. It also seeks to get people outdoors and in nature.

Programs are designed to move participants through a continuum of awareness, appreciation and action. Our goal is

to inspire stewardship in daily living and engagement in conservation action through this continuum. Combining adventure programs with environmental education and recreational activities, a series of programs for children, adults, families, teachers, students, homeowners, professionals and elected officials are offered to help build a larger constituency of leaders, volunteers, and community stewards for conservation.

<b>Strategic Priority</b>	<b>Create an integrated and cohesive education platform to advance bird conservation on the Upper Texas Coast</b>
<b>Goal 1</b>	<p>Establish, enhance and conduct educational programs that build “Awareness and Appreciation” of the importance of birds, their ecosystems and their meaningful impacts on quality of life and the economy throughout the Upper Texas Coast.</p> <p>+ Develop criteria to assess the effectiveness of programs by July 2014.            + Enhance existing programs that have seen success and develop new programs to achieve goals of targeted audiences. Also, begin phasing out programs with limited impact by December 2014.</p>
<b>Goal 2</b>	<p>Engage 10 percent of targeted audiences experiencing “ Awareness and Appreciation” programming in conservation ACTION, which is a commitment to behaviors that benefit bird conservation and habitat protection with meaningful impacts on quality of life on the Upper Texas Coast.</p> <p>+ Develop tools to enable and incentivize audiences to transition and move through the “Awareness*Appreciation*Action” continuum.            + Maintain a list of things people can do to help at home, work and at Houston Audubon to benefit bird conservation and that would advance goals two and three under Bird Friendly Communities.</p>
<b>Goal 3</b>	<p><b>Foster youth environmental education with a focus on birds along Upper Texas Coast in targeted areas.</b></p> <p>Increase children’s awareness of birds and their importance through Flying Wild Workshops, school presentations in targeted areas beyond surrounding sanctuaries.            + Conduct virtual presentations and field trips using web-based technology to extend reach and reduce costs.</p>
<b>Goal 4</b>	<p><b>Maintain a strong collaborative alliance among scientists, communicators and educators dedicated to bird conservation education to advance Houston Audubon goals.</b> Example partnerships include Get Outdoors Houston, Connecticut Audubon and Cornell Lab of Ornithology.</p>
<b>Goal 5</b>	<p><b>Promote educational opportunities to connect children with nature.</b></p>

## **CHARTING A COURSE TO SUSTAINABILITY, INCREASED CAPACITY, AND GREATER EFFICIENCY**

Houston Audubon was one of the first locally-based national conservation organizations in Houston. Formed by a dedicated group of 18 men and women who saw the need for environmental education for youth and environmental advocacy for wildlife habitat, the organization was for decades largely run by volunteers. Over time staff was employed to take over essential functions as the organization grew in size, scope, function and complexity. Today, Houston Audubon has 12 staff housed in three locations, two urban nature centers in Houston, an historic cabin in Houston and a coastal sanctuaries center in High Island. We own and manage nearly 3,400 acres of habitat spread throughout our 11-county service area.

The growth and evolution of Houston Audubon has given the organization an ability to garner greater conservation impact. To maximize the potential of these organizational developments and chart a course for sustainability a set of administrative priorities were also developed under the strategic planning process. The administrative priorities are 1) build partnerships and strengthen our volunteer corps, 2) strengthen financial resource development, 3) grow and diversify membership, 4) build a broader base of public engagement, and 5) enhance human, infrastructure and technology resources to deliver services and conservation outcomes of the strategic plan.

# CHARTING A COURSE TO SUSTAINABILITY, INCREASED CAPACITY, AND GREATER EFFICIENCY

<b>Strategic Priority 1</b>	<b>Partnerships and Volunteer Corps: Build partnerships and strengthen volunteer corps.</b>
<b>Goal 1</b>	<p><b>Leverage financial resources and expand outreach capacity to achieve goals outlined in the strategic plan through partnerships.</b></p> <p>+ Identify and forge partnerships that specifically advance goals in the strategic plan.</p>
<b>Goal 2</b>	<p><b>Increase the number of individuals and the number of groups volunteering and involved in Houston Audubon such that a steady, well-trained corps of individuals and groups are available to cover a wide range of activities throughout any given year.</b></p> <p>+ Identify and capitalize on existing opportunities to engage (as volunteers and/or members) individuals and families participating in Houston Audubon programs, activities, and projects starting January 2014.</p> <p>+ Identify priority needs and develop a volunteer engagement plan to guide volunteer recruitment, utility, training, retention and recognition of volunteers by August 2014 and begin implementation in October 2014.</p>

<b>Strategic Priority 2</b>	<b>Development: Strengthen the strategic focus and long-term sustainability of fund and resource development.</b>
<b>Goal 1</b>	<p><b>Increase revenue from fee-based services by 20 percent by 2018.</b></p> <p>+ Evaluate cost and value of existing services, and develop a fee schedule for services provided at High Island, SIMS Bayou Nature Center and Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary and through off-site education programming by January 2014.</p> <p>+ Develop and advertise low-impact use of ELM cabin by January 2014.</p> <p>+ Increase capacity and production at ELMNS native plants nursery by July 2014.</p>
<b>Goal 2</b>	<p><b>Establish operating endowment by July 2016.</b></p> <p>+ Develop and implement five-year campaign to grow endowment annually by December 2016.</p>
<b>Goal 3</b>	<p><b>Develop long-term funding opportunities.</b></p> <p>+ Create Legacy Society by December 2014.</p> <p>+ Evaluate and improve planned giving options.</p>
<b>Goal 4</b>	<p><b>Establish three-year budget and operating goals to facilitate and inform associated fundraising needs.</b></p> <p>+ Develop three-year work plans with costs and timelines.</p>

# CHARTING A COURSE TO SUSTAINABILITY, INCREASED CAPACITY, AND GREATER EFFICIENCY

<b>Strategic Priority 3</b>	<b>Membership: Grow membership and increase revenues generated from membership services.</b>
<b>Goal 1</b>	<p>Increase membership by 73 households (or 10 percent of the 2013 baseline) annually, doubling the number of supporting members by 2023.</p> <p>+ Develop membership campaign for board approval by July 2014.</p>
<b>Goal 2</b>	<p>Increase the rate of supporting member retention from 50 in 2013 to 75 percent by 2019; and the number of members moving up the membership ladder by 10 percent annually.</p> <p>+ Improve the quality and value of Houston Audubon membership, and increase public and member awareness of membership options and benefits.</p>

<b>Strategic Priority 4</b>	<b>Public Relations and Marketing: Build a broad base of public engagement using a strong, consistent brand.</b>
<b>Goal 1</b>	<p>Increase awareness of and involvement in Houston Audubon conservation action.</p> <p>+ Grow corporate involvement by 20 percent by 2016.</p> <p>+ Collaborate with conservation and education on communication needs to advance goals for Priority Bird habitats, Bird-Friendly Communities, and Awareness, Appreciation, Action.</p>
<b>Goal 2</b>	<p>Increase media coverage of Houston Audubon activities and successes.</p> <p>+Develop a comprehensive media plan, targeted primarily to radio and print, to build Houston Audubon brand.</p>

<b>Strategic Priority 5</b>	<b>Personnel, Infrastructure and Technology: Improve operating systems and performance capacity to implement strategic plan.</b>
<b>Goal 1</b>	Provide board and employee training to develop workforce capacity and performance.
<b>Goal 2</b>	Maximize effective use of facilities and cut cost associated with assets not strategically contributing to strategic vision of organization.
<b>Goal 3</b>	Evaluate needs and explore technology updates to improve services and efficiencies.
<b>Goal 4</b>	Evaluate and cut programs not directly linked to or advancing strategic plan goals by December 2014.