HOUSTON AUDUBON · VOLUNTEER RESOURCES

Community Outreach Volunteer Training Packet

Houston Audubon · Native Plants · Lights Out for Birds · Sanctuaries · Programs & FAQs

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1 Your Role as an Outreach Volunteer

Thank you for representing Houston Audubon in the community. As an outreach volunteer at tabling events, you are often the first point of contact between Houston Audubon and the public, and that is a meaningful thing.

You don't need to be an expert birder. What matters most is genuine enthusiasm, a welcoming presence, and a handful of solid talking points so you can start a conversation, answer questions honestly, and leave people feeling connected to something larger than themselves.

YOUR JOB IN THREE SENTENCES

Welcome people warmly and invite curiosity. Share what Houston Audubon does and why birds matter. Connect people to ways they can get involved, whether that's a plant sale, a bird survey, or just following us on Instagram.

What to Do at a Tabling Event

- Greet people as they pass. A smile and "Hi! Are you familiar with Houston Audubon?" goes a long way.
- Offer printed materials and point people to relevant ones based on their interests.
- Answer questions using this packet as your guide. It's okay to say "I'm not sure, let me point you to our website" or "Our staff would love to answer that one."
- Collect email sign-ups or direct people to houstonaudubon.org to join, donate, or find upcoming events.
- Be a connector: if someone lights up about plants, tell them about the Natives Nursery. If they're into data or science, mention bird surveys. Meet people where they are.

ON NOT KNOWING EVERYTHING

Honest enthusiasm beats uncertain authority every time. If you don't know the answer, say so, and offer to connect them with someone who does, or point them to the website. Nobody expects you to have memorized everything.

2 About Houston Audubon

Houston Audubon is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to advance the conservation of birds and their habitats in the Greater Houston Gulf Coast Region.

- We own and manage over **4,200 acres of habitat** across **18 bird sanctuaries**, most of which are open to the public and free.
- We deliver **education programming for all ages**, from preschoolers through adults, in schools, community groups, and at our sanctuaries.
- We conduct **monitoring and research** through urban bird surveys, coastal bird surveys, and beach-nesting bird programs.
- We engage the community through **outreach, advocacy, and conservation programs** that connect people to birds and the natural world.

TALKING POINT

Did you know the Yellow-crowned Night Heron is the official City Bird of Houston? It lives here year-round, and you can find it along the bayous, foraging roadsides, or even in your backyard. They eat crustaceans, insects, frogs, fish, and turtles.

3 Why Birds Matter

One of the most common questions at outreach events is some version of "why should I care about birds?" Here are the answers that tend to land:

Birds Are Ecological Indicators

Birds are our early warning system. Their population trends reflect the health of entire ecosystems. When bird populations decline, it signals something is wrong with water quality, air quality, habitat loss, or food webs. Scientists can even detect environmental pollution from a single feather. Healthy bird populations mean a healthy environment for all of us.

Birds Are Pest Control

Birds eat an estimated 550 million tons of insects per year. Insect populations, including agricultural pests, would be dramatically harder to manage without birds.

Birds Are Nature's Cleanup Crew

Vultures alone provide waste disposal services worth an estimated $11,600 over a lifetime. Scavengers and decomposers keep ecosystems functioning and disease from spreading.

Birds Connect People to Nature

Birding is one of the fastest-growing outdoor activities in the United States. It's accessible, low-cost, and possible literally anywhere -- your backyard, a park, a parking lot. Birds are often the first wildlife people notice, and that noticing is the beginning of caring.

QUICK STAT

An estimated 3 billion birds have been lost from North American skies since 1970 -- a 29% decline. That's not a distant problem. It's happening here, in our lifetimes, and the choices people make in their own yards and communities make a real difference.

4 Why Houston Matters to Birds

Houston isn't just a great city for people, it's one of the most important places in North America for birds. Here's why:

- Houston sits at the crossroads of the **Central Flyway**. Birds traveling from South and Central America (often flying 600+ miles nonstop over the Gulf of Mexico) reach Houston Audubon's coastal sanctuaries as the first land they see. Our sanctuaries are literally life-saving rest stops.
- Nearly **400 species** of birds have been documented at Houston Audubon sanctuaries alone.
- **1/3 of all birds** migrating through the U.S. in spring, and **1/4 in fall**, pass through Texas.
- Houston's diverse habitats: coastal marshes, bottomland forest, prairie remnants, and bayou corridors, support birds year-round, not just during migration.

THE "FIRST LAND THEY SEE" STORY

This is one of the most powerful things you can say. A tiny warbler weighing less than half an ounce has just flown through the night over 600 miles of open water with no food, no rest, and nothing below it but the Gulf of Mexico.

When it finally approaches land, ready for a much-needed rest, favorable conditions like northerly winds will bring that bird to the canopies of High Island – a small coastal town perched atop a salt dome, where the modest elevation makes it stand out across the flat shoreline (High Island is the highest point between Mobile and the Yucatan!).

Houston Audubon has stewarded that land for decades, rebuilding songbird habitat so weary migrants have somewhere to rest and refuel on their great journey. That is what conservation looks like.

5 Our Sanctuaries

Houston Audubon manages 18 sanctuaries across the Greater Houston region, totaling more than 4,200 acres. Most are open to the public and free. Here are the ones that come up most often at outreach events:

Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary	High Island Sanctuaries
A woodland sanctuary in the Memorial area of Houston, open to the public year-round. Free admission. Features forested trails, a log cabin, live bird cam, and the Natives Nursery. houstonaudubon.org/conservation/sanctuaries/edith-moore/	Boy Scout Woods and Smith Oaks on the upper Texas coast. World-renowned for spring migration "fallouts" of warblers and other songbirds. Smith Oaks hosts an active Great Blue Heron and Roseate Spoonbill rookery. houstonaudubon.org/conservation/sanctuaries/high-island/
Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary	**And 15 More...**
Critical habitat for shorebirds, wading birds, and gulls on the Bolivar Peninsula. One of the most important shorebird sites on the Gulf Coast. houstonaudubon.org/conservation/sanctuaries/bolivar-flats/	Houston Audubon manages over 4,200 acres across 18 sanctuaries — from coastal marshes to bottomland forest — most open to the public and free. houstonaudubon.org/conservation/sanctuaries/

EDITH L. MOORE — YOUR LOCAL CONNECTION

For most people you'll meet at outreach events in Houston, Edith L. Moore is the most accessible entry point. It's free, it's in West Memorial, it's open year-round, and it has trails, a bird cam, and the Natives Nursery on-site. It's a great first visit for Houstonians.

6 Native Plants & the Natives Nursery

Why Native Plants Matter for Birds

Native plants are the foundation of healthy bird habitat, and this is a message that resonates powerfully with gardeners, homeowners, and anyone who wants to do something tangible for wildlife.

- Native plants support the **insects that birds depend on**. A single native oak tree can support hundreds of species of caterpillars and insects. Non-native ornamentals often support very few.
- Native plants produce **berries, seeds, and nectar** timed to the seasonal needs of local and migratory birds.
- Replacing even part of a lawn or garden with natives creates **connected habitat corridors** that help birds navigate fragmented urban landscapes.
- Native plants are adapted to Houston's climate, which means **lower water use, less maintenance**, and no fertilizers needed.

THE DOUG TALLAMY FRAME

Ecologist Doug Tallamy's research found that chickadees raising a single clutch of chicks need to find 6,000–9,000 caterpillars. Most of those caterpillars only eat native plants. A yard full of non-native plants is functionally a food desert for birds. Native plants are the difference between a yard that supports wildlife and one that looks nice but doesn't.

The Natives Nursery at Edith L. Moore

Houston Audubon's Natives Nursery is located at Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary. These are not just any native plants, they are hyper-local plants grown from seeds collected by volunteers from unplowed prairies in our region. That genetic provenance matters: local ecotypes are better adapted to local conditions and more valuable for local wildlife.

- The nursery can be **shopped year-round** at Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary.
- Volunteer workdays in the nursery take place **Wednesday and Friday mornings** -- a great hands-on volunteer opportunity!
- Two large **plant sales** are held each year: one in **spring** and one in **fall**. These are popular community events worth getting on people's radar.
- More information: houstonaudubon.org/conservation/nursery.html

TALKING POINT

"These plants are the real deal. The seeds are collected by volunteers from unplowed prairies right here in our region — so when you plant them in your yard, you're bringing a little piece of native Houston back home."

7 Lights Out for Birds

Why Light Pollution is a Bird Problem

Most songbirds migrate at night, navigating by the stars. Artificial light from buildings, streetlights, and lit windows disorients them, causing birds to circle lit structures until they collide or exhaust themselves. Glass collisions kill an estimated 1 billion birds per year in the United States, and light pollution is a major contributing factor.

Houston sits directly in the Central Flyway. During peak migration, hundreds of thousands of birds are flying over the city on any given night. What happens to our lights during those nights matters.

What People Can Do

- Turn off **non-essential interior and exterior lighting** from 11 PM to 6 AM during migration season, especially during peak periods in spring (March–May) and fall (August–November).
- Close **blinds and curtains** at night to reduce light spill.
- If you need outdoor lighting, use **warm-toned, downward-directed fixtures** on motion sensors.
- Subscribe to **BirdCast alerts** at birdcast.info — they send notifications when high migration nights are predicted, so you know exactly when to turn the lights off.
- More information: houstonaudubon.org/conservation/bfc/lights-out.html

THE BIRDCAST PITCH

BirdCast is a free tool from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology that uses weather radar to forecast bird migration in real time. It tells you how many birds are flying over your area tonight — sometimes millions in a single night over Houston. You can subscribe to alerts so you know exactly when to turn off your lights. It's free and takes 30 seconds to sign up.

FOR BUILDING OWNERS & BUSINESSES

Lights Out is especially impactful at the building scale. If someone you meet owns or manages a commercial building, the City of Houston has a Lights Out Houston program, and Houston Audubon can connect them with resources. This is a great lead to pass along to staff.

8 Bird Surveys & Community Science

Houston Audubon coordinates over 25 bird surveys across the greater Houston region every month. These surveys are community science efforts, gathering data that helps scientists track population trends, evaluate habitat quality, and identify which species may need special conservation attention.

Survey leaders engage participants of all skill levels. You don't need to be an experienced birder to join! Just be willing to show up, look around, and record what you see.

Urban Surveys

Monthly surveys at parks, nature centers, and green spaces across Houston and the surrounding area. Many run year-round; some take a break May through September. Locations include Hermann Park, Memorial Park, Houston Arboretum, Mercer Arboretum, Armand Bayou, and many more.

THERE IS PROBABLY A SURVEY NEAR YOU

With surveys spread across Harris County and beyond, there's likely one within a few miles of wherever someone lives or works in the Houston area. The full list with leaders, locations, and schedules lives at:

houstonaudubon.org/programs/birding/bird-surveys/surveys.html

Targeted & Seasonal Surveys

- **Christmas Bird Counts** — annual winter counts across the nation!
- **City Nature Challenge** — April iNaturalist bioblitz; Houston competes against other cities worldwide
- **Great Backyard Bird Count** — February global count, doable from your own yard
- **Project FeederWatch** — winter feeder monitoring for Cornell Lab of Ornithology
- **Red-vented Bulbul Survey** — a local survey with Harris County Precinct 4 to monitor populations in the Heights neighborhood, typically he first week of June
- **Swift Night Out** — community count of Chimney Swifts entering their roost chimneys in the summertime

9 Houston Audubon's Programs

Houston Audubon delivers programming for all ages, connecting people to birds and nature through hands-on learning.

Youth Programs

- **Preschool programs during the school year** — bringing nature education to young children
- **Field trips to Edith L. Moore** — schools can bring students for guided nature experiences
- **Summer camps at Edith L. Moore** — hands-on outdoor programs for kids
- **Stories and Crafts in the Cabin** — Fledgling Friends, and other family-friendly events throughout the year

Adult Programs

- **Speaker events and The Perch webinar series** — expert talks on birds, conservation, and natural history
- **Member field trips** — guided birding trips for Houston Audubon members
- **Senior bus trips** — accessible birding experiences for older adults
- **Birding 101** — birding intro classes for adults, offered at local libraries and community partners
- **Summer Series at Houston Botanic Garden** — classes for adults including Birding 101, native plants for birds, and nature-inspired art

Find What's Coming Up

The full calendar of events, programs, and field trips is always at houstonaudubon.org. Encourage people to check it out and sign up for the e-newsletter to stay in the loop.

10 How People Can Help & Get Involved

This is often where conversations land! Someone is interested, they want to do something to make a difference for birds and their habitat. Here's your menu:

In Their Own Space

- **Plant natives** — especially host plants for caterpillars. Even one native plant makes a difference.
- **Put out a bird feeder** and/or a water feature — birds need both food and clean water, especially in summer.
- **Keep cats indoors** — outdoor cats are one of the leading causes of bird mortality in the United States.
- **Lights Out** during migration — see Section 7.
- **Reduce window collisions** — window strikes kill hundreds of millions of birds a year. Simple deterrents like window tape or screens make a big difference.

With Houston Audubon

- **Become a member or donate** — membership directly supports our conservation work. houstonaudubon.org/about/ways-to-help/
- **Volunteer** — sanctuary workdays, Natives Nursery (Wednesday & Friday mornings), event volunteers, High Island spring migration, trail crew, and bird surveys.
- **Shop the Natives Nursery** — at Edith L. Moore, open year-round. Plant sales in spring and fall.
- **Attend a program or field trip** — check the calendar at houstonaudubon.org.
- **Follow us on social media** — a great low-effort way to stay connected and share our content.

11 Frequently Asked Questions

Questions you'll likely encounter at community tabling events, with suggested responses.

Is Houston Audubon part of the National Audubon Society?

We're an independent, local organization, not a chapter of National Audubon. We share a name and a love of birds, but we operate independently with our own staff, budget, and conservation priorities focused specifically on the Greater Houston Gulf Coast region.

What does Houston Audubon actually do with donations?

Donations support land conservation (we own and manage over 4,300 acres across 18 sanctuaries), education programs, community science, outreach, and the staff and operations that make all of it run. We're an accredited land trust, which means our land conservation practices are held to a rigorous national standard.

I'm not a birder. Is Houston Audubon for me?

Absolutely. You don't have to be a birder to care about birds or to benefit from what we do. Our sanctuaries are great places to walk and connect with nature. Our Natives Nursery is for anyone who wants to garden for wildlife. Our Lights Out program is for anyone with a window. Birds are an entry point. The goal is connection to the natural world, however that looks for you.

What native plants should I start with?

The best answer is: come to the Natives Nursery and ask! The staff and volunteers there can recommend plants based on your specific yard conditions: sun, soil, size. That said, native oaks are among the most valuable plants you can grow (they support hundreds of insect species), and native wildflowers like Turk's Cap, Salvia, and Gulf Coast Muhly are great, low-maintenance starting points.

How is light pollution actually bad for birds?

Most songbirds migrate at night and navigate by the stars. Artificial light disorients them, causing them to fly toward lit windows and buildings, leading to collisions or exhaustion. Houston is in the Central Flyway, so on peak migration nights, hundreds of thousands of birds may be flying over the city. Turning off non-essential lights from 11 PM–6 AM during migration season is one of the most direct actions an individual or building can take for birds.

How do I join a bird survey? Do I need experience?

No experience necessary! Survey leaders welcome participants of all skill levels. The surveys are a great way to learn birds while doing something that matters scientifically. Find the full list with locations, leaders, and schedules at houstonaudubon.org/programs/birding/bird-surveys/surveys.html. Many surveys run monthly and are free to attend.

Can I visit the sanctuaries? Do I need to pay?

Most of our sanctuaries are free and open to the public. Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary in Memorial is open year-round with no admission fee. The High Island sanctuaries charge a small seasonal admission fee during spring migration. Bolivar Flats is free, but a beach parking permit ($10, available at local stores) supports the shores! Check our website for hours and seasonal details before visiting.

What is the Natives Nursery and where is it?

The Natives Nursery is located at Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary (440 Wilchester Blvd, Houston 77079) and is open year-round. It sells hyper-local native plants grown from seeds collected by volunteers from unplowed prairies in our region, so these are the real deal, not just plants labeled "native" at a big-box store. Major plant sales happen in spring and fall. Volunteer workdays are Wednesday and Friday mornings. More at houstonaudubon.org/conservation/nursery.html

How can my company or organization get involved?

Houston Audubon offers corporate workdays at our sanctuaries, a corporate partner program, and opportunities for sponsorship and employee engagement. Direct them to houstonaudubon.org/about/ways-to-help/corporate/ or encourage them to reach out directly.

THANK YOU

Your presence at outreach events is how Houston Audubon reaches people who might never find us otherwise. Every conversation you have, even a 30-second one, is a seed! Thank you for being here.