

# **HOUSTON AUDUBON 2022 SPRING NEWSLETTER**





Birdathon Team, Odd Ducks, on the McGovern Canopy Walkway



Great Egrets at the Rookery, Smith Oaks Sanctuary (JVSmith)



Natives Nursery volunteers with Bird-Friendly Spaces Sign

### **OUR FLOCK IN ACTION**

Spring was in full effect this year with the greater conservation and birding community excited to return and reengage in the workings and thrills of the season. Houston Audubon staff and volunteers were just as excited. We launched new programs like the Bird-Friendly Spaces recognition, expanded our community science efforts, organized new events like Evening on the Canopy, and fostered greater opportunities for schools to be involved in Birdathon. We broke ground on construction of the new Morse Field Station and celebrated the operational opening of the Entergy Coastal Natives Nursery. New partnerships were also forged to help advance piloted efforts to connect with more diverse groups and communities.

This edition of the Warbler, as eloquently narrated through the lens of members, volunteers, and program participants, vividly captures the growth and excitement we experienced and wonderfully reflects what makes Houston Audubon special–its people and their passion for birds.

Helen E. Drummond

**Executive Director** 

## THE FACES OF HIGH ISLAND

#### By Tony Dang, Houston Audubon Board of Directors, High Island Volunteer

Upon walking through the entrance of Boy Scout Woods and up to the friendly, familiar faces at the kiosk, my wife Marylene and I looked at our High Island patches and wondered how long it had been since our first visit. We heard of High Island by chance from a scuba diving instructor who was suggesting places to photograph nesting bald eagles. Since Marylene enjoys photography, we were curious and visited Boy Scout Woods in 2012. I remember passing the kiosk and the main grandstand, and the first bird we saw was a male Painted Bunting, followed by a male Indigo Bunting. We thought these birds were unreal. We passed Prothonotary Pond and the next bird we saw was a Hooded Warbler, which became my 'spark bird' because it triggered my passion for birding. We've been visiting High Island for spring migration ever since. 2022 marked 11 years!

This year we had the opportunity to stay near High Island on long weekends. I wanted to get involved, so I chose a few days to volunteer at the welcome kiosk at Smith Oaks. The most enjoyable moments of volunteering were spent chatting with visitors and hearing about their bird sightings, as well as getting to know the other dedicated volunteers. We met first-time visitors, committed birders, and visitors who were getting back to High Island after 10+ years. I also got to see many familiar faces and great friends who visit and support High Island each year. Many visitors were excited to see the McGovern Canopy Walkway for the first time, enjoying better views of warblers and nesting birds at the rookeries. Faces lit up when people talked about their rare and uncommon bird sightings and getting to check 'lifers' off their list. (A lifer is a first-time bird sighting).

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Hooded Warbler (Greg Lavaty)

Witnessing the sheer excitement of spotting a first-of-the-season bird and helping other people find it helped me discover a joy in sharing my passion for birding at High Island. My highlights from this season were directing visitors to a Prairie Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, and Cape May Warbler on the canopy walkway, a Black-throated Blue Warbler and Duskycapped Flycatcher at Grackle Pond, a Goldenwinged Warbler, Western Tanager, and Palm Warbler at Boy Scout Woods. This year gave me a new appreciation for all of the volunteers who commit their time to transform High Island into this magical, welcoming place.

I took for granted the time and effort it takes to prepare these sanctuaries for what we see during spring migration. Volunteers at monthly workdays maintain habitat by removing invasive plants, installing nest boxes, and planting native plants, shrubs, and trees. They upkeep the sanctuaries for visitors by clearing trails, repairing boardwalks, upkeeping the driveways and parking areas, installing benches, picnic tables, and signage, and much more. These workdays are critical and volunteers end the morning in good spirits with a banana and an excellent burger for lunch.



Volunteers at a trash cleanup in High Island 🥖



High Island Volunteers Assisting Visitors at Smith Oaks

The wonderful people you encounter at the kiosks at Boy Scout Woods and Smith Oaks and the helpful people on the canopy walkway are mostly volunteers. Kiosk volunteers assist with day passes and patches, merchandise sales, and provide sanctuary information and bird sighting locations to visitors. Smith Oaks birding volunteers are stationed along the canopy walkway and the levee trail to answer questions and to help visitors get a good look at nesting birds. There can be as many as 4 volunteers at each sanctuary for a duration of 8 hours every single day for 6-10 weeks.

Many thanks to the in-charge volunteers, Barbara Tilton and Winnie Burkett, as well as all of the High Island volunteers, staff members, and technicians who have devoted their time for many years. This dedication has allowed High Island to be a positive impact on birds and their conservation, as well as a welcoming place for visitors to connect with nature. Please consider volunteering at High Island during spring migration or at one of our monthly workdays.

# **NEW CONSERVATION DIRECTOR TAKES FLIGH**

Thank you all for welcoming me to Houston! As the new Conservation Director, I am excited to be a part of Houston Audubon's mission to advance the conservation of birds in our region. I have loved our High Island sanctuaries for many years. Before coming to work for Houston Audubon, I was a PhD student and teacher in north Texas. For the past few springs, I have organized a "Big Weekend" trip for my ornithology class, where we would camp on High Island and explore Boy Scout Woods, Smith Oaks, and Bolivar Flats across two days of intense birding.

When the opportunity arose to work for Houston Audubon, the answer was an easy yes! The difference that our sanctuaries make for both birds and humans is profound. I am happy to say that I've now visited all of our beautiful sanctuaries and can't wait to expand our science and monitoring initiatives-both in urban Houston and in our sanctuaries. I look forward to getting more involved in the science of bird conservation and engaging the community.

Kelsey Biles

**Conservation Director** 



**ADVANCING CONSERVATION ON THE COAST** 

Ribbon cutting for the Entergy Coastal Natives Nursery

The new Entergy Coastal Natives Nursery at the Hulsey Coastal Operations Center in High Island is operational! We were awarded an Environmental Initiatives Grant from Entergy Texas to build the new nursery, which will increase our native plant capacity to support restoration on our properties and allow for greater distribution in the Gulf Coast region.



Morse Field Station Groundbreaking Ceremony

We were excited to break ground on the new Clint and Mary Frances Morse Field Station in High Island, Texas. The new field station will serve as coastal headquarters for the staff and volunteers at High Island, as well as provide facilities for a variety of educational programs, workshops, and scientific conservation research.

### LIGHTS OUT FOR BIRDS

#### By Grace Trankina, Volunteer

On balmy spring mornings before the city wakes up, groups of dedicated volunteers walk the Lights Out Texas Collision Monitoring survey route of 10 buildings in downtown Houston. Building collisions present a great risk to nocturnally migrating birds, which are exacerbated by artificial light at night. The Lights Out Texas campaign takes place biannually during spring and fall migration, encouraging buildings, businesses, and homeowners to turn out lights at night in hopes of reducing collisions.

Collision monitoring surveys during peak spring migration (April 22 - May 12) are essential in understanding the impact of Lights Out Texas and gathering more information about where, when, and which bird species are affected. On my first morning volunteering as a Collision Monitor, there were buildings where no news was good news and others where our team documented the remains of a Hooded Warbler and miscellaneous feathers. Getting my steps in, learning about my fellow volunteers, and talking with building staff about their experiences were among the highlights of the 3-hour morning walk, in addition to the invaluable data collected. As a first-time downtown Houston visitor, it was a great way to orient myself in the city.



Collision monitoring volunteers patrolling downtown Houston for birds

I traveled to Houston from the University of Oklahoma to collect data for my Master's thesis. My goal is to analyze the iNaturalist collision data alongside sky quality data. Currently, there are sky quality light sensors at several buildings throughout downtown Houston, near Rice University, and at the Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary that measure the amount of light in the atmosphere at night. I am hoping to measure reduction in light during the Lights Out Texas advisory period and relate this to trends in the collision monitoring reports. Though the problem of collisions and light pollution feels insurmountable at times, it is the hard work of the volunteers who start their mornings combing through city streets investigating miles of pavement under stories of reflective glass that provide the data for science and progress. I had a wonderful experience as a collision monitor this season and look forward to returning. Thank you to everyone who participated.



Berri Moffett (left) and Grace Trankina (right) installing a light sensor at Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary

## THE WITNESS SERIES: EXPLORING AFRICAN AMERICAN CONNECTIONS TO THE LAND AND PLACE

### By Kristi Rangel, Visual Artist

The Witness Series was designed to explore past, present, and potential future connections between the African American community and the land in Southeast Texas. It incorporated participatory talks, art, hikes, bird walks, and other experiences. Each experience was designed to bring individuals, families, and communities together through the power of nature, to encourage greater access to and connection to nature-based opportunities.



Houston Audubon-led bird walk at E.R. and Ann Taylor Park

The catalyst for the Witness Series was a Houston Audubon Bird Walk at E.R. and Ann Taylor Park, a hidden gem Houston Audubon occasionally surveys for birds because it remains largely untouched by development. The park has a rich history that is traced back to one of Houston's founding families. It is also where a formerly enslaved woman of African descent lies buried with her two children, who did not live to adulthood. The reality is that the park has kept its natural resources because it has been forgotten.



Participants at the final event, Witness: Artists by Nature

The Witness Series was inspired by my "Seven" series, portraits of seven Black women featuring Funtunfunefu-Denkyemfunefu, a Ghanaian Adinkra symbol of unity in diversity and working together to shape a common destiny. As an artist, my work centers around my belief that environmental equity is a basic human right. I hope that the Witness Series sparks conversations and dialogue that inspire people to want to connect more with nature, others, and themselves. Through the beauty of nature and art, I hope there will be healing.

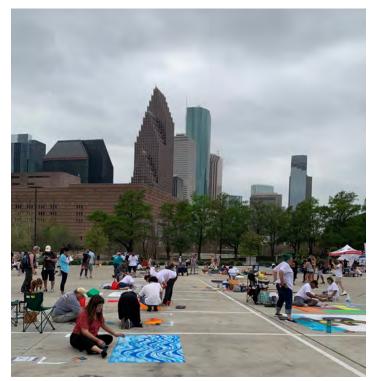
Engaging and supporting communities that reflect the diversity of our state and region are key to Houston Audubon achieving its mission of conserving birds and their habitats. As part of these efforts, we were pleased to offer nature-based experiences as part of the Witness Series in collaboration with partners including The Nature Conservancy in Texas, Houston Botanic Garden, Houston Coalition Against Hate, Houston Parks and Recreation Department, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Nature Heritage Society, and the Houston Health Department.

# BY MEANS OF COLOR

#### By Abra Ziegler, Houston Audubon Young Professionals Advisory Council

Spring was coming to Houston. I could tell because the temperatures start to search their mom's closets for trends from the 90s, the miasma from our bayous becomes inescapable, my forearms remember how to sweat, and the birds, the birds, the birds.

It was during this brief entre to Gulf Coast summer that Via Colori bloomed. The revival of this popular street chark art festival featuring works from various artists who bring their creations to life within a concrete square convinced attendees to appreciate the creation of art as art itself. The ephemeral chalk paintings brought spirituality, nature, color, diversity, growth, and even a Pokémon to life.



Via Colori street chalk art festival at POST Houston

Houston Audubon participated as a partner and decided to tell the story of the Bird of Houston to showstopping effect with art by staff members Javier Salas and Berri Moffett. In turn, that bird, the Yellow-crowned Night Heron, tells the story of Houston's resident birds–their symbiosis with humans and our infrastructure, the sensitivity of their populations to the choices we sow and the climate change reaped, their ability to survive and thrive intrinsically linked to our own.



Frequent guided meditations over the loudspeakers from first-time event sponsor and beneficiary, The Institute of Spirituality and Health, provided a pleasant background to talk to the steady stream of artists and attendees stopping by the HA table. Staff member Zineera Seth and fellow Young Professionals Advisory Council (YPAC) member, Madeleine Chaisson, joined me to answer and ask questions about birds and Houston Audubon.

Chalk art of Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Bird of Houston (Javier Salas & Berri Moffett)

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If you are a birder, it's sometimes easy to forget the greater population doesn't spend time discerning between the peeps distinguishing an Alder Flycatcher from the Willow; many people had to dig deep to scrape the name of even one bird species from their memories. Their bird blindness was matched only by their enthusiasm for learning about them. Brochures and flyers about Birdathon, spring break and summer camps, and Raptor Center educational programs were grabbed by eager parents and teachers as fast as we could replenish them. Ice cream and rainbow chalk-covered hands attached to shorter-than-the-table children sneakily snatched brightly colored and holographic HA stickers. Young couples were thrilled to discover HA sanctuaries (with their Houston-rare boardwalks and trails). Everyone was eager to talk about birds, their habitats, how we can work together to protect our natural environment, and how those efforts intersect with our own lives. Via Colori, the confluence of art and spring, of Buffalo and White Oak Bayous, of city and nature, of HA mission and public outreach, created the perfect place and time to remind me of my own favorite form of meditation- watching the birds, the birds, the birds.

### FIRST GRADERS TAKE FLIGHT By Laura Bradham, Bird Survey Leader

My husband and I lead the Houston Audubon bird survey at the Lorraine Cherry Nature Preserve, formerly West 11th Street Park, that runs from September to May. To celebrate the end of the survey season, we invited 100 first graders from a local elementary school to the nature preserve for a year-end field trip. The students came full of energy, curiosity, and questions. We started with a big group presentation with an introduction to birding, then broke up into five smaller groups led by teachers and parent chaperones. We took full advantage of the Wireless Wilderness Tour inside our forest so that the children would be able to see things in real life that they learned about during the school year. Finally, in celebration of the upcoming Independence Day, the kids learned about our faithful Red (Northern Cardinal), White (Whitewinged Dove), and Blue (Blue Jay) birds which live in our forest all year long-seeing what they looked like, and hearing them sing, coo, and call.



Introduction to Birding group presentation for first graders from a local elementary school



Winners of the spring coloring contest held by the Friends of the Lorraine Cherry Nature Preserve

## BIRDATHON: COUNTING BIRDS BECAUSE BIRDS COUNT

Birdathon is Houston Audubon's annual spring fundraiser where participants compete to count as many bird species as possible in a 24-hour period while fundraising for bird conservation. This year, we had 54 adults and 174 students participate. Increased efforts to engage teachers resulted in 10 new classrooms this year.



Birdathon Team Larks & Lagniappe

"Birdathon 2022: good friends, beautiful birds, and plenty of cookies, aka fuel! The highlight for me was walking on Houston Audubon's new canopy walkway in High Island and seeing people of all ages, colors, backgrounds, and physical abilities. My heart swelled with pride and happiness to share the experience with others in such a special setting."

#### Sarah Flournoy, Odd Ducks

"We got to High Island and went directly to Smith Oaks (with a brief Inca Dove interlude), which brought us numerous migratory species including the attached Blackpoll Warbler, which was a lifer for me!! Highlights included Summer Tanager, a very cute armadillo, Magnolia Warblers, nesting Anhingas, and more!"

Stuart Nelson, Larks & Lagniappe

"We visited local sites such as Houston Audubon's High Island sanctuaries, Anahuac NWR, JJ Mayes Trace Park and Rollover Pass. Birding highlights included young Pileated Woodpeckers sticking their heads out of a nest hole and a Bald Eagle flying over us at a gas station stop."

#### Pam Smolen, Odd Ducks



Birdathon team Odd Ducks



Visitor on McGovern Canopy Walkway Birdathon team Odd Ducks



"In Port Bolivar, we found Seaside and Nelson Sparrows flitting among the reeds while scores of shorebirds preened and fished. We lingered next at Bolivar Flats, mesmerized by a Serengeti of shorebirds. In the dunes, a pair of Horned Larks strutted to the accompaniment of an Eastern Meadowlark. Finally, we took a break for lunch at Boy Scout Woods. Near the parking lot, a Common Nighthawk slept on a tree branch. In the trees we found cherished migrants — orioles, tanagers, warblers, and more. Gray Catbirds turned up in almost every nook and cranny. At Smith Oaks, a Purple Gallinule stealthfully hunted near hundreds of nesting egrets, herons, and cormorants."

#### Diana Strassmann, The Thieving Magpies

Birdathon team The Thieving Magpies

"We ended the day in a house overlooking Bolivar Flats where we started our shorebird list. When we talked about our best bird some favored the great looks at the Bobolinks but most were pleased with the warblers and shorebirds." **Winnie Burkett, Muddy Buddies** 



Third graders visiting the Houston Audubon Raptor Center

"Students explored birding books appropriate to their age level, were introduced to allaboutbirds.org as a source for information about birds and their bird calls, and learned how to use binoculars. Each class reserved the school's class set of binos for one day and spent their playground time watching for birds."

Ann Hightower, The Branch School

"I participated in Birdathon this year with my 13 3rd-grade students. They studied bird structures and behaviors. We went out birding a few times and visited the Houston Audubon Raptor Center!"

Kim Vetter, School, St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal



Students from St. Thomas birding during Birdathon

# **BIRD-FRIENDLY SPACES FOR BIRDS & PEOPLE**

### By Robin Nagy, HCCS

In May of 2022, Houston Community College's West Houston Institute (WHI) became the first college campus to be recognized as a Bird-Friendly Space by Houston Audubon. The Bird-Friendly Spaces program recognizes community members and organizations who are actively supporting birds and wildlife in their personal spaces. This designation was the result of a number of projects completed on the campus by both HCC and Alief ISD students participating in IDEAS Academy, a program created at WHI to foster more creative mindsets in participants through collaborative project-based work.



Students from Alief ISD planting native plants at the WHI campus



Students putting up window stickers to prevent bird collisions



West Houston Institute campus with Bird-Friendly Spaces sign

Students spent the fall semester developing their own creative identity and understanding the sustainability challenges faced by the Houston community. They learned about the value of biodiversity and the connection between nature and mental health. At the end of the semester. they were challenged to improve local resilience by transforming the campus to support One Health and Well-Being for ourselves, other living communities, and the natural environment. Each group began to brainstorm projects based on their interest and expertise - Engineering students researched bird feeder designs, Aquatic Science students planned a pond, and Seniors from Alief Early College High School sought to engage students in the outdoor spaces on campus following the extended isolation of the pandemic.

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Attaining the Bird-Friendly designation became a unifying goal and the lens through which they focused their approach to this campus challenge. Ultimately, their projects included: a native plant garden, a bird feeding station (designed and fabricated in the campus makerspace), a water feature (constructed entirely by students), and stickers to mitigate window strikes (also fabricated in the makerspace). Alief Early College Seniors also planned Seedchella, a "celebration of the native ecosystems on our campus" to highlight their projects, engage attendees in learning more about the local native ecosystem, and get feedback on the community's vision for the future of a sustainable, bird-friendly West Houston Institute campus.



Seedchella event at WHI campus

Take bird-friendly actions and apply for the Bird-Friendly Spaces recognition for free at birdfriendlyhouston.org/spaces



### MARK YOUR CALENDAR FOR OUR UPCOMING EVENTS!

#### July - September

Join us at a Purple Martin Watch Party this summer to witness the migration spectacle of up to 500,000



Purple Martins coming together to roost at dusk. Grab your friends and family, bring a lawn chair, and join us for a unique experience! Learn more at *houstonaudubon.org/purplemartins* 



#### **September 17 - 24**

Get excited for Houston Bird Week 2022! Bird Week is a celebration of the important role Houston plays in the journey of billions of birds. Free and low-cost events centered around birds offer something fun for everyone to take part in! Learn more at houstonaudubon.org/birdweek

#### October 20

Support Houston Audubon at our annual fundraising dinner, Avian Affair, which will celebrate the connection



between art and nature. Learn more at *houstonaudubon.org/avianaffair* 

### THANK YOU TO OUR SPRING VOLUNTEERS

Houston Audubon's spring activities are many, and so are the wonderful volunteers that make them happen! From sanctuary cleanups to managing visitors to spring events and everything in between, we couldn't do it without you.

Rohit Agarwal Mara Alcantara Jonni Almoney Skip Almoney Ricardo Azevedo Grecia Azoulay Kelsey Baird-Campos Della Barbato David Barrow Lucy Barrow **Cindy Bartos** John Bartos Mary Anne Beauchemin Lynn Bell Vasudha Bharadwaj Beth Black John Black Judith Black **Tinsley Blando** Peggy Boston Joanne Bradbury Laura Bradham Michael Bradham Mark Brazzil Anders Brock-utne Marcy Brown Rodger Brown Simone Brown David Burkett Winnie Burkett

Debbie Burnett Jack Burnett Angela Busceme Andrew Busker Claire Caudill John Caudill Diana Cauley Luke Cauley Colleen Cavanaugh Danielle Cavender Madeleine Chaisson Marylene Chan June Chen Carlton Collier Dan Coombs Ellen Coombs Daniel Courtney David Crabtree Julie D'Ablaing Tony Dang **Royce Daniels** Ashley Dao **Robert Davies** Mary Elizabeth Davis Gerard del Junco Rafi Dela Cruz Linda DelAngel Melita Delgado Donna Diggons Lucy Diggons

Molly Dillingham Geraldine Donadio Larry Dybala **Betty Espinosa** Alessandra Fernandez Josh Finch Paul Foster Julie Francis Twilight Freedman Olivia Friend Joanna Friesen Gene Fritts Graves Gardiner Elaine Garner Julia Garrett Matthew Genotte Elena Glassberg **Tim Goings** Mary Goldsby John Gray Tom Greer Mark Greske Hannah Gross Veda Hackell **Hilary Haines** Hunter Hammil Betsy Harwood Herbert He Doris Heard Elizabeth Hensley

Susan Herman Karen Hoffman Gloria Hokett Michael Honel Madeline Howard Roger Howard Ben Hulsey Felix Ibegbulam Charlona Ingram Bernice Jackson Ed Jackson Patricia Jeffers Bruce Johnson Nancy Jones Vivian Kaufman Connie Kellev Susan Kennedv Joe Keusenkothen Paul Keusenkothen Melinda Kincaid James Koski Steve Krebs Heather Lambert James Larocque Parry Lauzon Bette Lester Paul Lester Eva Lin Frank Lin Lilian Lin

Andy Liu Cecilia Ljungberg Lucy Loa Luis Loa Erin Lynch Helen Manners Rosila Martins-Gama **Bill Matthews** Michael McGinity Jill McGowan Patrick McMahon Mark Meyer Sandra Moore Janet Neath Elise Nishikawa Joe O'Driscoll Carol Oeller Maya Ortiz Lester Pearce Frank Perkins Juanita Perkins Howard Persky **Dolores** Peterson Vaughn Phillips Carl Poldrack Mindee Poldrack Lvnda Polk

Benjamin Portnoy Greg Poston Ju-Ling Poston Gene Prejean Melinda Pumpelly Lisa Purnell Nigel Purnell Rebecca Rabon Magda Rajszewski Alejandro Ramirez JR Ridgway **Rachael Rivas** Mila Robinowitz Michelle Romedy Theresa Rooney Hank Rossouw Katherine Rubiano Ethan Rubin Lorissa Saiz Justin Sandt Judith Schott Alan Schwartzbard Kari Shearer Bernard Silgardo Spencer Simons James Sirois Letha Slagle

Houston Sliger **Becky Smith** Sam Smith Pam Smolen DeDe Snavely Mary Spolyar Stephen Stakemiller Jerry Stanislav Jacob Steele Barbara Stern Skyler Stevens Linda Stiegler Jim Stirling **Billie Strickland** Katherine Swarts Margaret Swarts Lily Sweet Mondira Tangri Sherri Taxman Gretchen Thoman Mike Thoman Barbara Tilton Regina Tippett Celia Tomlinson Jim Tomlinson Melissa Torbet Grace Trankina

Lynn Travis Peter Tsan Aaron Tuggle Dana Turner Stephany Turner Unyime Usua Krien VerBerkmoes Vicki Vorisek Joan Ward Wallace Ward Randolph Watson James Whaley Joseph Whaley Jennifer Wheeler Betsy Winn Jim Winn Jake Wolf Janet Yauch Lisa Yelenick Naomi Yoder Abra Ziegler Noel Zinn Pauline Zinn Elizabeth Zivley





Get involved as a volunteer! Check out current opportunities at houstonaudubon.org/volunteer