



# Naturalist Notes

## President's Note

To all of our Gulf Coast Chapter members,  
It's not easy writing the president's message this month. We find ourselves in uncertain times and the situation seems to only get worse by the hour. I hope you are all staying healthy and well and continue to do so. Continue to follow the guidelines regarding social distancing and gathering in groups. This is difficult for us as we thrive on socialization and get so much accomplished when we work together. But it's for the best. Stay safe everyone and I hope we can all gather together soon.  
Cheers,  
Rebecca



**\*\*\*\*APRIL CHAPTER MEETING CANCELLED\*\*\*\***

## The relationship between connectedness to nature, sustainable behavior, and happiness in children

Disconnection from nature makes people less likely to care for it. That is true for both children and adults. But does it affect other areas of life?

The correlation between feeling connected to nature, sustainable behaviors such as altruism and frugality, and happiness has been studied extensively in adults, less is known about children. In a study published in *Frontiers of Psychology*, researchers in Mexico asked 296 children questions about these three things. Children who felt more connected to nature reported more sustainable behaviors and happiness.

### So what?

Getting children more connected to nature is important to raising future stewards. It also makes them happier and better citizens. While this study did not address HOW to increase connectedness to nature, other studies have shown that spending time in nature and environmental education have positive effects. So, carry on!

Reference: Barrera-Hernandez et al, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 26 Feb 2020

## Getting to Know You

There's a new kid on the block. Literally. A juvenile red-shouldered hawk has been a pretty constant presence on the north side of the bayou just west of the Jackson Hill bridge. Last week, he or she decided to sit in the open at eye level and not fly away even if I got within 15 feet of him. This was such a patient bird that I was able to wave passersby over to share such a good look at this lovely bird.

I was very much hoping to catch a photograph of the bird as he lifted off, but lifting off wasn't on his agenda. Sitting still was. He eventually did fly to a higher perch nearby and then again to a low thicket where he once again placidly settled in.

All of this was slightly surreal. For one thing, birds just don't usually let you hang around close to them. He was so relaxed about everything, it made me wonder if this was last year's nestling. Perhaps he's been in the Park his whole life.



credit Alisa Kline

But that is really unlikely because juvenile red-shoulders usually move miles away from their birth territory (the nest is just a quarter-mile west). And half of them don't make it to their first birthday.

I know this hawk is less than 18 months old because he is in juvenile plumage. After birds hatch, they quickly replace their downy fluff with functional feathers. For some species, mostly hawks, gulls and wading birds off the top of my head, the first set of feathers looks only somewhat or nothing like the adult plumage.

Most birds molt all their feathers over the course of a year. This ensures that feathers that are broken or worn can be replaced. For birds with juvenile plumage, they will eventually molt into adult plumage during their first or second year. Whenever their molt cycle comes along.

### By the way...

This is the third hawk I've seen recently ball up their foot and hug it to their breast. The first one I saw, I thought the bird might be injured. By the third, I figured it out. All perching birds are constructed so that when they bend their leg, their claws automatically snap closed. This is really useful for not falling out of trees when sleeping. I think that birds probably tuck a leg close to keep it warm (I've only seen this on cold days); the act of tucking it close automatically balls up the claw.

Alisa Kline <https://buffalobayou.org/blog/getting-to-know-you/>



## SKY OF THE MONTH

Stratus clouds are the lowest of the ten main cloud types. When it forms at ground level, Stratus is known as fog or mist. These clouds don't generally produce much precipitation. They are featureless, and can either completely hide the sun (opacus) or show the outline of the sun or moon (translucidus).

This photo was taken in Houston on Mar 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019.



### Upcoming Outreach Events

Here are the April outreach events. Please **check with Cassie as to the status of each event.**

- **University of Houston Sustainability Fest** April 14, 11:30 AM - 1:30 PM
- **TPWD Community Outdoor Outrace Program (MacLean Park - Lake Jackson)** April 18, 1:30 PM to 3:30 pm
- **Spring Outdoor Celebration (City of Mont Belvieu)** April 25, 11:00 am - 3:00 pm
- **Houston Arboretum Earth Day 2020** April 25, 10:00 am - 2:00 pm



### International Dark Sky Week is Apr 19-26, 2020

The International Dark Sky Places program, founded in 2001, encourages communities, parks, and protected areas around the world to preserve and protect dark sites through responsible lighting policies and public education. To find a designated location, visit <https://www.darksky.org/our-work/conservation/idsp/finder/>.

## **Bird City Texas Certifies Four Inaugural Communities**

### **Communities Rise to the Challenge in the Name of Conservation**

AUSTIN – Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Audubon Texas, partners in the Bird City Texas Initiative, are proud to announce that four communities have received certification during the inaugural application cycle. Bastrop, Dallas, Houston, and Port Aransas have been recognized as the leaders in community action and bird conservation. These certified communities took action in three categories: community engagement, habitat management, and threat reduction for birds. The Bird City Texas certification lasts through 2022.

“We’re excited to join Audubon Texas in recognizing these four communities for the incredible work that they’ve done for birds, wildlife habitat, and connecting people with nature,” said TPWD Urban Wildlife Program Leader Richard Heilbrun. “It’s not easy to become a Bird City Texas community; it takes dedication and vision. We are confident that their accomplishments will lead to stronger, more resilient communities for people and birds.” The sponsors would like to recognize some accomplishments and commitments these communities have made.

Houston has done a fantastic job of creating nature centers throughout their entire community, providing outreach and bird-friendly resources for a wide range of demographics. This includes providing substantial resources about bird-friendly buildings. They have also promised to increase the number of prairies that are restored within their city limits.

By undertaking these actions, these newly certified communities help their residents and their birdlife. Bird City Texas communities can use their bird-friendly designation to attract more of Texas’ 2.2 million birdwatchers who are major drivers in the state’s \$1.8 billion wildlife-viewing industry.

In the coming months, certified communities will host a variety of events to continue promoting the importance of birds and healthy habitats. We encourage interested participants to visit each community’s Chamber of Commerce website, as well as TPWD and Audubon Texas’ websites for updates.

For communities interested in applying for certification, the 2020 Bird City Texas application cycle begins in early summer. Please visit [www.birdcitytexas.org](http://www.birdcitytexas.org) for more information on how to apply for certification.

Community Contact Kelli Ondracek [kelli.ondracek@houstontx.gov](mailto:kelli.ondracek@houstontx.gov)

TPWD News

## Why Long Walks will Change Your Life

“In nature, you leave yourself behind. You are nobody in the woods. When faced with a particularly difficult problem, I find it’s always healthier to just get out of the house and go for a walk rather than trying to force the answer. For in the repetition of walking you empty yourself out, free yourself of opinion and expectation, and embody once again humanity’s innate character.”

Harry J. Stead

<https://humanparts.medium.com/walking-is-medicine-why-long-walks-will-change-your-life-59297e955a49>



credit Irmi Willcockson



## Organism of the Month

### White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*)

This sparrow is a winter visitor, hopping around wood edges and visiting birdfeeders. It breeds across Canada and the far northeastern US.

Adults have two different color morphs, known as white-striped and tan-striped. They differ in the color of the crown, crown stripe, supercilium and auriculars. Interestingly, mating usually occurs among partners of opposite color morph, and the white-striped is more aggressive than the tan-striped. The bird in the picture appears to be the tan-striped form.

White-throated sparrows eat mainly seeds, insects, and berries. Predators include



credit Adrian Medellin

mammalian carnivores as well as sharp-shinned hawks and eastern screech owls.

The species is listed as globally secure.

Source: wikipedia

## Book Review

### Nature's Best Hope: A new approach to conservation that starts in your yard

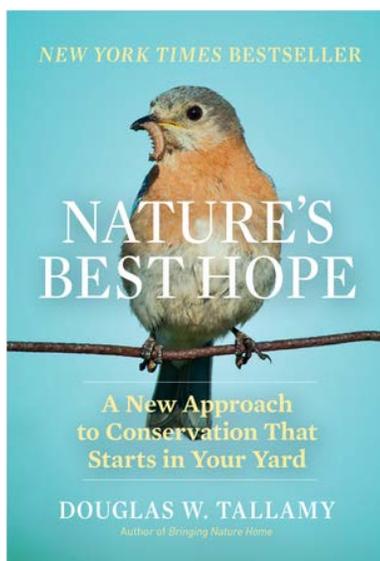
Douglas Tallamy, 2020

Douglas Tallamy's new Book, Nature's Best Hope - A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard, is well written, addresses each of us personally and is hugely informative and very persuasive. It shows us what we can do as individuals to collectively have a significant impact on the current extinction and climate crises. *"... this is not a book about the pox we have delivered upon the environment and thus upon all of our houses. It is a book about a cure for that pox—a cure that will require small efforts by many people but that will deliver enormous physical, psychological, and environmental benefits to all."* (p 7)

*"In the coming pages, I have tried to personalize our conservation challenges and our responsibility to meet them. One of my central messages is that effective conservation is not beyond the reach of the individual; indeed, it is your efforts as an individual that will determine if we succeed or fail, and whether we live in a world thriving with life or in one in which little stirs.*

*"In short, this book is about fixing problems. The good news is that we can fix our ecological problems by indulging rather than sacrificing."* (p. 12)

The chapter headings indicate the broad topics that are each covered with a wealth of information and richly illustrated with photos:



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In Chapter 2, A New Approach to Conservation, Tallamy points out the long history of our view of nature as something dangerous ( pp. 29-31) and in Chapter 4, Shrinking the Lawn, very importantly focuses on the psychological obstacles and challenges, that is, the cultural constraints on change and gives examples of how culture has been and can be changed in important ways over shorter time scales (pp. 52-59)

Here are some highlights from some of the other chapters (although every chapter has substance and moves the discussion forward in an organic way).

Chapter 6, Rebuilding Carrying Capacity, is a brief but sobering look at the facts: "*Although our culture denies it, perpetual growth defies the laws of physics.*" (p. 88)

Chapter 7, Are Alien Plants Bad?, is extremely informative on a very important subject. He reports, for example, on the results of research that show that "*...berries from introduced Eurasian plants such as..., Japanese honeysuckle,...contain very little fat, typically less than 1 percent. while berries from natives such as Virginia creeper, wax myrtle,...are loaded with valuable fat, often nearly 50 percent by weight. ...the pattern is clear: berries in the introduced plants studied so far are high in sugar at the time of the year when our birds need to consume berries high in fat.*" (p. 117)

Chapter 10, Will it Work?, focuses, among other things, on nature's resiliency: "*Nature's inherent resiliency is the primary source of my motivation to change the landscaping paradigm from one that excludes the natural (local native] world to one that embraces it. Nature is constantly affirming that this is not a pipe dream; it will work, despite the enormous scale of change I am proposing and regardless of the ecological starting point! If left on their own, even areas from which nearly all life has been removed will eventually heal, but the healing can be unbelievably fast when we help.*" (p.183)

In summary, this is a book of empowerment. It gives us information on which we can base informed and purposeful changes, evidence that these changes will truly be effective, and provides us sufficient motivation to indulge ourselves in nurturing nature.

Bob Romero