



Naturalist Notes

American Oystercatcher

The water is asleep.
The tide has not yet begun
To move through the pass
To fill the bay.

The birds loll complacently
On low exposed sand flats,
Waiting, ever waiting,
As am I in my kayak,
Watching for the movement,
Waiting for the moment.

The reef is above the water surface,
The oysters grey-black and shiny,
A squirt of liquid flying skyward,
Proof of life within the shells.

A pair of oystercatchers sit together,
Orange beaks like neon lights
In the dying afternoon sunlight,
Waiting, patiently waiting,
For the tide that will open
The shell that holds the meal.

And then it happens.
An alarm has rung that I
Cannot hear.

Two snowy egrets glide before me,
Extending black legs with yellow boots
To claim their fishing spot on the shells.
A great egret joins the reef fishers,
Followed by two fussing willets,
All coming to fish in pools
Within the oyster lattice,
Pools slowly, ever so slowly,
Being filled.

Well after they do, I perceive it,
The changing water line,
The motion of the tidal current
That the birds perceived
In ways beyond me.

Jim Blackburn



SKY OF THE MONTH

Serious cloud watchers frown on sunrise and sunset pictures as too cliché. However, reflected in a puddle on an evening walk, the altocumulus clouds, purple and mauve against a pale blue sky and dark leaves, make for a striking picture.

Shorter wavelength light is scattered more strongly by the atmosphere. As the sun is low in the sky in the morning and evening, it goes through more of the atmosphere. This leaves the redder wavelengths.

The sun can only illuminate the clouds where you are if there are few clouds where it is rising or setting. 'Red sky at night, shepherd's delight. Red sky at morning, shepherd's warning.' Weather systems in temperate regions tend to move from west to east, so red clouds at sunset mean that the sky to the west is pretty clear, and fair weather is coming. In contrast, red clouds overhead at sunrise mean that while it is clear to your east, more clouds may be on the way.

This picture was taken August 22nd, 2020.



Unusual Sighting

My son and family were visiting from San Marcos and we decided to take an early morning walk at Jesse Jones Park on Tuesday September 1. The park was pretty quiet as we moved down the Canoe Trail and walked out on the deck by the Turtle Pond. One of our party spotted a Barred Owl (we believe) resting in a branch overlooking the pond. Everyone was silent and my son Patrick began taking a video. After what seemed like forever, the owl swooped down into the water and enjoyed a bath. None of us had ever seen that before so we thought we would share.

John Egan

Video available from John

Buffalo Bayou Trail Repair – Part 1

Buffalo Bayou Park flanks the bayou on both sides as it wends its way between Shepherd and Sabine Streets, a distance of about three miles. Situated just west of downtown Houston, in the middle of a huge urban area, the park has long been a popular destination for bikers, runners, joggers, and others preferring exercise routines in the fresh air. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have led many more to take advantage of the park's trails and open spaces.

Fewer know that it is also an excellent place to observe nature. While there is a general awareness of Waugh Bridge's sizable Mexican Free-tailed Bat colony, not as many recognize the remarkably diverse and surprisingly healthy ecosystem sustained within the park. Notably, 635 different species of plants, animals and fungi have now been observed within Buffalo Bayou Park. (See iNaturalist's Buffalo Bayou Park project at <https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/buffalo-bayou-park>.)

Extensive construction began in the park last summer, much of it in the park's area bounded by Shepherd and Montrose. The construction is being contracted and overseen by the Harris County Flood Control District in coordination with the Buffalo Bayou Partnership. The purpose of this effort is "to stabilize the channel [of Buffalo Bayou within Buffalo Bayou Park] and prevent further erosion and damage to the channel." (See <https://www.hcfd.org/Recovery/W100-00-00-X068-Buffer-Bayou#>)

The photo to the left, taken from the northeast, includes the south end of Waugh Bridge, home of the Waugh Bridge Mexican Free-tailed Bat colony. Taken on March 9, 2020, before construction began there, the photo shows how the extensive silt bank under the mature Sycamore had been washed away by bayou flooding. Unchecked, erosion would eventually topple the tree into the bayou, after which the stability of the lower path under the bridge may have been threatened as well.



By April 28, 2020 a significant amount of work had been done on this site. This photo, taken from closer to the bridge, shows the same site after major construction had been completed. Note that the two larger trees and the bushes near the bridge had been removed but that, further to the east, large trees remain. Stones were used to extend the end of the concrete apron under the bridge, restoring the bank's original edge.



It may appear, from the second photograph, that the eroded silt bank was simply replaced with more silt. However, the same sort of rock that appears at the water's edge was carefully sloped to match the bridge's apron before a few inches of silt were smoothed over the top of it to create the pictured bank. In other words, a huge quantity of rock underlies the finished bank, making its further erosion an extremely unlikely possibility. The silt bank was subsequently seeded.

Part 2 will be in the October newsletter.

David Strong



Heart at Buffalo Bayou Park

This was built on the Green Tree Trail near Waugh Drive. It's been getting bigger and bigger. Just something nice to see in tough times. - Jane Wood



Environmental Services presents
**Smarter Choices Webinar 2020:
Healthy Landscapes, Healthy Watersheds**

- Water efficient delivery equipment and metering
- Improving irrigation methods for efficiency
- Testing and improving soil to reduce chemical use
- Choosing native species for local growing conditions
- Choosing local climate- and soil-appropriate turf grass
- Capturing rainwater to irrigate landscapes

Lawns and urban landscapes serve important ecological services including erosion control, cooling the atmosphere, providing habitat, and acting as biological filters. Make yours healthy!

Webinar format; registration is required. Register at www.thewoodlandstownship-tx.gov/environment. For details call Environmental Services at 281-210-3800.

**Saturday, October 3
8am to noon
Registration Required**



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Your Insect Allies: Meet the Beneficial Insects Controlling Pests in your Garden - Webinar Review

Jennifer Hopwood, Senior Pollinator Conservation Specialist, of the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation presented an informative and beautifully illustrated webinar on beneficial insects in the garden. Xerces Society maintain that “the fate of the world’s insects is inseparable from our own”.

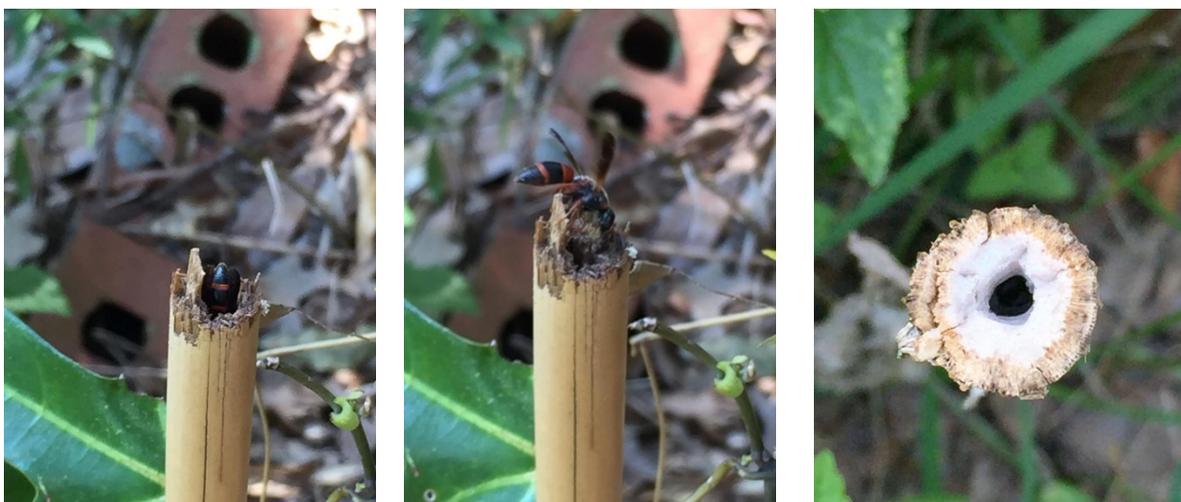
She reported that while invertebrates make up 95% of all animal species on earth, and insects are 80% of the world’s species, only a small fraction (ca. 2%) of insects are pests. The rest are beneficial to humans or important for food webs.

She introduced the concept of conservation biological control, ie. managing pests with practices that enhance their natural enemies. The value of pest control by wild beneficial insects is estimated to be \$4.5-12 billion annually for U.S. crops, and \$100 billion worldwide!

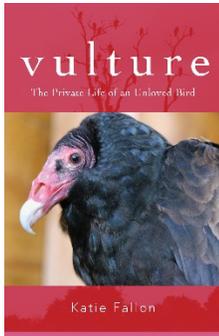
A few common beneficial insect groups were explored, namely insect predators and insect parasitoids. An understanding of the individual insects, including their life cycle and habitat needs, is key to knowing how best to support them. Methods discussed ranged from landscaping with diverse native plants (pests thrive in monocultures, crops or lawn!); providing flowering plants (particularly early flowering species, in order to build up beneficial insect populations prior to the pest arrival); open floral structures which enable best access for insects with short tongues. Creating shelter and overwintering habitat was simply summarized as “Leave the leaves, save the stems, and plant a log”!

The webinar was recorded and is available on the Xerces Society YouTube Channel ([youtube.com/xercessociety](https://www.youtube.com/xercessociety)), via this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pvc1sfOyz0c>.

Julie d’Ablaing



Red-marked Pachodynerus Wasp (*Pachodynerus erynnis*) entering a bamboo cane, and a dead American Basketflower stalk left for insect habitat. (Photo credits: Julie d’Ablaing)



Book Review

Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird

Katie Fallon, 2020, ForeEdge

Is vulture on your top-ten list of favorite birds? It might be when you've read Katie Fallon's *Vulture: the Private Life of an Unloved Bird*. She likens her love for vultures to being a fan of an obscure rock and roll band, but Katie's enthusiasm for vultures is more contagious. Her voyeuristic account of events in the life of a

female turkey vulture intersperses the chapters. This vulture is Leo, whose movements were tracked for nearly 10 years by researchers at Hawk Mountain who outfitted her with a transmitter in 2007. Each year she spent the breeding season at a site near Leoville, Saskatchewan, Canada...

"The attic was warm and musty. Dust particles suspended in the sunbeams that streamed through the windows; the glass had shattered years earlier, leaving an opening wide enough for her and her mate to slip through, into the silent house. She hunkered down on the attic's wooden floorboards, two cream-colored, brown-speckled eggs between her feet."

...and returned to the same grove of palm trees in Venezuela by November.

"The skies, which had once belonged only to her, grew crowded. She smelled the salt in the air, and far below she saw the jagged edge where land met ocean."

Katie herself travels far from her home in West Virginia's mountains to visit the Eagle Temple in India where the absence of vultures has led to a public health crisis. And to the Vermillion Cliffs of Arizona to catch sight of a California condor. And, of course, to Hinckley, Ohio where the annual Buzzard Festival welcomes the vultures' return each spring. She covers topics from "Vulture Culture" about people's understanding of vultures, to migration, roosting habits, care and feeding of vulture chicks, lead poisoning, research studies and rehabilitation of injured vultures. Throughout the book, Katie shares her own thoughts and feelings about living with "the perfect creature, neither prey nor predator."

"Watching a soaring turkey vulture is like meditating. Gently rocking with the breeze, wings fixed in a shallow dihedral, a vulture's flight looks peaceful and elegant, almost contemplative. Although their movements are purposeful, the birds appear relaxed and unhurried, like long, slow breaths. In times of stress or struggle, gazing at a vulture overhead is a reminder to glide, to sail, to use the prevailing winds."

Back at home, Katie and her veterinarian husband Jesse run the nonprofit Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia (ACCA) where they care for injured birds from wrens to raptors and keep a few that cannot be returned to the wild, like one-eyed Lew the turkey vulture, for educational programs. Vulture taxonomy even inspires the name of their second child (hint: black vulture *Coragyps atratus*).

Katie will be joining us for the Texas Master Naturalist 2020 VIRTUAL Annual Meeting on October 16, 10AM – 12PM to share more about her personal experiences with vultures and the natural history of our most common vulture species, the turkey vulture.

International Vulture Awareness Day is the first Saturday in September (Sept. 5, 2020). Many vulture species are listed as endangered or critically endangered. Go to vultureday.org to learn more about vultures of the world and for some fun, downloadable activities.

Excerpts from *Vulture: the Private Life of an Unloved Bird* by Katie Fallon
<https://books.apple.com/us/book/vulture/id1525307977>

Iris Poteet



Organism of the Month

Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*)

Green Herons (*Butorides virescens*) stand motionless at the water's edges as they hunt for fish and amphibians. Compared to other herons this species does not wade as much. They can generally be found around wooded ponds, marshes, reservoirs, estuaries, and rivers. In this case, I spotted this green heron at Buffalo Bayou Park under a bridge. From a distance, green herons appear dark but in better light they are deep green on the back with a rich chestnut color on their breast and neck. The wings are a dark grey. The Green Heron is one of the worlds few tool-using bird species. It often creates fishing lures with bread crusts, insects, and feathers, dropping them on the surface to entice small fish. Green Herons sometimes pay visits to ornamental fishponds. A length of drainpipe placed in the pond can provide fish with a place to hide from feeding herons.

Adrian Medellin



Credit Adrian Medellin