



Naturalist Notes



Downy Woodpecker

Walking amidst the trees on South Boulevard,
The rookery is lively, spring flowers in the yard,
The crows are lurking for eggs in the nest,
Their presence ensures for the herons no rest.

I search for the herons by looking down,
To see the white splotches on the ground,
A sure sign of a heron nest up above,
Outed by the waste they had to dispose.

Suddenly a movement catches my eye,
There's motion in a branch way up high,
And then the little bird flies nearby,
Revealed by the light of bright blue sky.

It's a small little woodpecker looking for food,
Its bill moving in and out, tapping that wood,
Searching for goodies within the oak's wrinkles,
The protein dispersed like candy sprinkles.

My smile spreads quickly across my face,
It's such a good feeling it's hard to erase,
The little downy showed itself to me,
And it's made me feel downright heavenly.

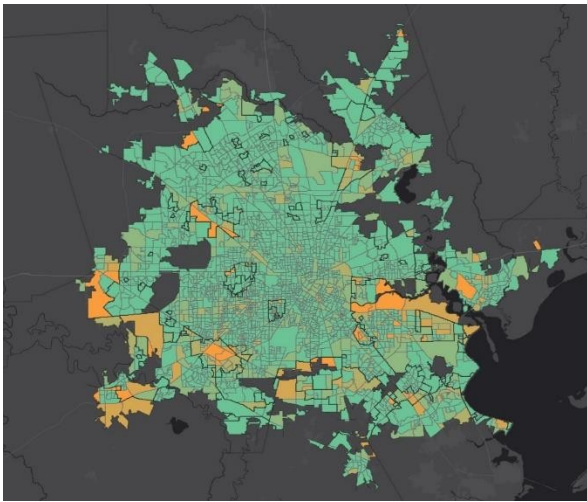
It's funny how seeing a unique little bird
Can make me feel so good – it's absurd,
But that's the way with the church of the Earth,
It warms the heart – it stokes my hearth.

The little woodpecker works on up the trunk,
Removing my blues, vanquishing my funk,
Liberating my head to fly up in the sky
Where I flutter my wings like a butterfly.

Fly up, fly higher, you magnificent butterfly,
That feeling of happiness you will magnify,
Each time you venture to Downy's temple,
It's not hard at all – the great stuff is simple.

So welcome to Earth church,
Pull yourself up a pew,
Here the Downy Woodpecker
Has a simple plan for you.

Jim Blackburn, Virus Vigil Day 300
Illustration by Isabelle Chapman



American Forests Releases Tree Equity Scores for Houston Neighborhoods

In general, socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods need more trees to benefit from everything trees have to offer, such as shade, flood mitigation, and decreasing pollution. These neighborhoods suffer from historic underinvestment in infrastructure.

For the interactive map, visit www.treeequityscore.org.



Puddles

A puddle forms where there is a depression, and the ground underneath is either less porous or already saturated. Puddles along paths form where there is more erosion. Gooley calls these puddles tracker puddles, because they allow the observer to figure out what traveled there and which direction it was going. Tracks around the puddle show whether it attracted animals.

If a puddle is persistent, the vegetation around it may be different from that a few feet away. At trail junctions, puddles can reveal which way people are more likely to turn.

The photographer Brian Podolsky uses the reflection in puddles to set his urban photography apart. Check out his work online.



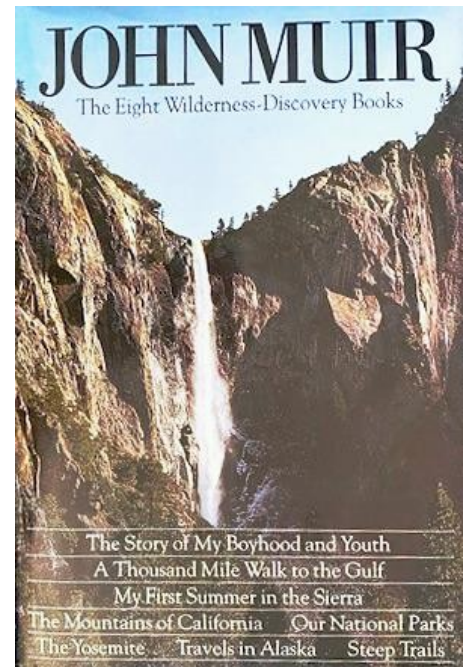
Book Review

The Story of my Boyhood and Youth

John Muir, 1913

Available on Google Books

In “The Story Of My Boyhood And Youth”, which is just one of Muir’s numerous writings, you get a very good insight as to how Muir’s dedication and drive for keeping our wild lands as wild and unspoiled as possible was established. It is a fun read as well as a fascinating story especially since it is told by Muir from the perspective of a young and clearly inquisitive mind. If you want to be reminded of what was perhaps your own journey of discovery regarding the environment that you found as a youth, Muir’s story will give you a good opportunity to relive that experience.



Muir was born in Dubar, Scotland, near Edinburgh in 1838. He writes that from his earliest days he spent much of his time in the fields, streams, nearby marshes, beaches and the seashore. He also greatly loved the trees he found which became the foundation for the exquisitely detailed description of the trees he studied in the Yosemite as an adult. While the areas that he grew up in were nowhere near the special characteristics of Yosemite and many of the other areas he explored as an adult, as a youth, he was fascinated by all the things he found even though they were of a common, everyday nature and without any particularly special features worthy of note. But to Muir these common or non-noteworthy areas were very special and he loved getting into a detailed study of them.

Muir had an innate ability to be able to see detail and purpose in the everyday flora and fauna that most of us would simply miss. And he was able to keep a detailed memory of the special features of what he studied. In doing so he started on his path to become a master student of his regional Biosphere as a youth and of the Yosemite as an adult.

Muir’s parents immigrated from Scotland to Wisconsin near the town of Portage in 1849. In his new surroundings Muir immediately immersed himself in the similar, yet to his keen eyes, structurally different meadows, streams, trees, plants and animals. Muir’s recollection of these youthful days of discovery clearly show a youthful ideal regarding the exploration and the discovery within his new Wisconsin environment and it is simply just fun to read his descriptions of these explorations and to put yourself in his shoes as he expresses his joy of discovery. One passage I found especially meaningful was his delight at watching for the first time a new, for him, species of bird found in Wisconsin and his delight at listening to its new sounds, songs, flight patterns, foods and food source, its active and rest hours, its molting period and just simply learning as much as he could about its behaviors and habits. The bird? A colorful and gregarious Blue Jay!

These youthful discoveries took me back to times in my own youth when I was, in a Muir-like fashion, fascinated by the discovery of the small and the large that was in my immediate surroundings. Muir's writing, while often detailed, is easy to read. It is also instructive. And his story gives hope that with the expenditure of opening one's eyes and mind a world of discovery and a life that is appreciative of conservation is within the grasp of each of us regardless of our age or where we are located.

Greg Brazaitis



Organism of the Month Western Mosquitofish (*Gambusia affinis*)

Western Mosquitofish (*Gambusia affinis*) is a small, live-bearing fish, dull grey or brown in color without bars or bands on the sides, and has a rounded tail. Its body is short, its head flattened, and its mouth pointed upward for surface feeding. It can grow to about 6.5 cm and is thought to be native to Texas. These fish are on view at most any pond near you.



Western Mosquitofish feed primarily on zooplankton and invertebrate prey at the top of the water column, including mosquito larvae. Adults are known to feed on their young opportunistically and is also well known for its high feeding capacity. Because of their reputation as

mosquito-control agents, *Gambusia* have been stocked routinely and indiscriminately in temperate and tropical areas around the world. In more recent years, government agencies have viewed the use of mosquitofish to control mosquito larvae as an attractive alternative to the use of insecticides.

Although widely introduced as mosquito control agents, recent reviews of mosquito control have not supported the view that *Gambusia* are particularly effective in reducing mosquito populations or in reducing the incidence of mosquito-borne diseases. Because of their aggressive and predatory behavior, mosquitofish may negatively affect populations of small fish through as both predators and competitors and benefit mosquitos by decreasing competitive pressure from zooplankton and predation pressure from predatory invertebrates. In some habitats, introduced mosquitofish reportedly displaced select native fish species regarded as better or more efficient mosquito control agents. Introducing mosquitofish also can precipitate algal blooms when the fish eat the zooplankton grazers.

Janice Barlow
Source: nas.er.usgs.gov

Member Profile – Candice Donahue

Class of 2020...and class of 1999? Huh?

Particulars: Born in Houston, then overseas, back to Montgomery Co for 6th thru 12th grade. Choose Texas Tech for her Accounting/CPA degree. Later returned to Rice U. for a Masters in evolutionary biology and ecology.

She wasn't an outside girl growing up, no scouts, camping, or nature vacations. But she caught up quickly when she became a Girl Scout leader and began a relationship with Houston Arboretum. The Arboretum staff led her to a "Naturalist Certification". This TMN

forerunner held classes, field trips, books to read, essays to write and tests to pass. About 2 years later she was in the first or second TMN class in Houston. She had a chance to be inspired by John Jacobs and work with Marissa at ABNC. For years she worked on a sedimentation study in ABNC prairie. BIG holes were dug with collection metal containers that Marissa used for studies of water permeability and flow rates. Candice stayed on the study till the project ended.

The prairie years followed with many aspects of improving ABNC prairie diversity with Dick Benoit and others, They spent a day a week in a tenuous van pulling a tenuous trailer to collect for the center. They were collecting right up to the week the area they were collecting from got plowed into a water detention pond. She is certified in controlled burns (as her picture shows), laid out the original transect grid at ABNC with Dick and others, and generally loves prairies.

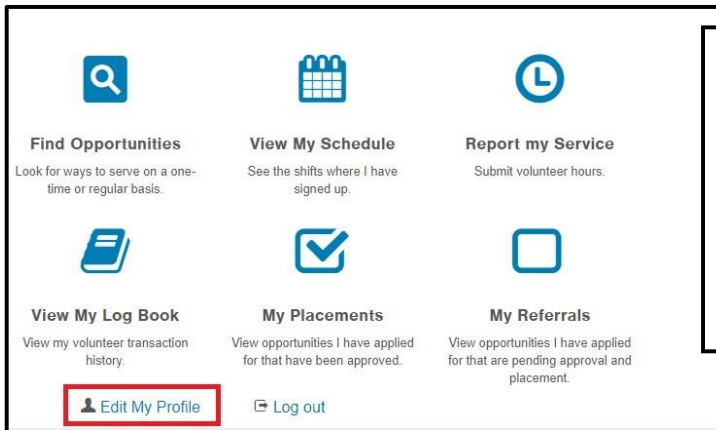
Her interests changed, she moved from Clear Lake to Houston. Her membership lagged. Recently she wanted to get reinvolved. She is a member of our class of 2020, who unfortunately only had one field trip and few in person classes before the Virus changed all our lives.

Now she is waiting in the wings for volunteer opportunities to pull her back in and make and rekindle friendships. So if you are doing prairie work right now, encourage Candice to join you. She can tell you a lot about our chapter's history and probably the prairie too.



"There is nothing better than burning a prairie!"

Bev Morrison



Moved? Changed phone number? Email? – Update Your Profile

Log into the Hours Reporting Site, then click on Edit Profile on the Home screen. There are multiple pages to your profile. Click Save when you are done.



The Story of Willow Waterhole Greenway

This is the way to do it! Community and government groups partnered over 20 years to create something much more than just **six deep detention ponds along Willow Waterhole Bayou**. The nearly complete 291-acre Willow Waterhole Greenway has trails, pavilions, picnic areas, fishing, restored wetlands, preserved prairie and native trees. And, the ponds can hold 608 million gallons of stormwater that would otherwise have flowed into Brays Bayou at the Southwest corner of Loop 610.

After Hurricane Alicia in 1983, community leaders came together and created the Brays Bayou Association (BBA) to promote flood control projects in the Brays Bayou area. At the same time, the US Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) studied Buffalo Bayou and surrounding areas and concluded a flood control project was needed. The Corps joined forces with the Harris County Flood Control District (HCFCD) to form Project Brays and began to develop a plan. The Willow Waterhole Greenway story starts with the BBA (the community group) and Project Brays (HCFCD and Corps).



In the mid-1990s, the BBA and the HCFCD worked together to help Congress pass the Water Resources Development Act of 1996. This act allowed local control of flood projects with the idea that time and money would be saved. Importantly, the act also permitted aesthetics to be considered. The community would have a stake in local projects and could consider more than flood control.

Meanwhile the City of Houston was developing plans to improve the area around Westbury High School. The area

along Willow Waterhole Bayou contained abandoned buildings and industrial lots. The BBA proposed implementing the city's park concept along with the Project Brays flood control basins, and in 1997 the BBA hired noted landscape architect Kevin Shanley to create a conceptual design.

In 2000, \$480M was authorized for Project Brays which included \$75M for the Willow Waterhole detention basins. The agreement provided for cost-sharing, and for the HCFCD to maintain the projects when completed. The HCFCD purchased the property, but funding was still needed for the recreational greenway. In 2000, Houston Parks and Recreation partnered with HCFCD to get a \$750,000 grant from Texas Parks and Wildlife. The grant process took heroic efforts from Karen Cullar of Houston Parks and Recreation, and letters of support from the BBA and many other community organizations.

In 2001 the BBA founded the non-profit Willow Waterhole Greenway Conservancy (WWGC) <http://www.willowwaterhole.org> to support the park in partnership with neighborhoods, environmental groups, and local government organizations. The WWGC has a great website with history, information, an events calendar and a newsletter.

Ground was broken in 2004. In the first year, the area was cleaned up and the first trails, picnic areas and benches were installed using the Parks and Wildlife grant. The first Fun Run was held in 2005. Houston Audubon began a monthly Willow Waterhole Bird Survey in 2007. The WWGC began organizing volunteer work-days in 2009. **Triangle Lake** was completed in 2011 and has a lovely arboretum with labeled native trees, plants, and benches in the shade, as well as a small pocket prairie.

In 2012, the WWGC obtained a \$400,000 federal grant for more amenities including parking, trails, signs, educational outreach, and plants. **Westbury Lake** was completed in 2015. Westbury Lake is the largest of the Willow Waterhole lakes and hosts outdoor music festivals and holiday activities. The gazebo is named after Bob Schwartz, one of the founding members of the BBA.

Construction on **Prairie Lake** began in 2015. An environmental assessment found remnants of original coastal prairie that contained an endangered species. The endangered species, Texas Prairie Dawn (*Hymenoxys texana*), is a tiny flower in the aster family found only in the Houston area. A Prairie Management Plan, prepared in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, included input from the Texas Gulf Coast Master Naturalists, Houston Audubon, Coastal Prairie Partnership and others. 15 acres were set aside for the prairie preserve (which is fenced but visible). Surveys have identified over 300 species of native plants in the area. WWGC has a master plan for improvements to Prairie Lake including parking, benches, picnic areas, and an outdoor classroom.

In 2016 and 2017, 4445 native trees were planted, mostly on the upper 1/3 of the channel slopes. In the larger basins the trees were planted in



groups to mimic natural mottes and allow drainage flow. The trees are still small but were full of birds on a recent visit!

All the retention basins were completed in 2019. Future plans include more trees, real restrooms, a dog park, fishing pier, new trails, and nature themed play areas. In 2019, the City of Houston purchased the 29 acre Shell E&P property west of Westbury Lake. The plan is for a music pavilion which will offer free concerts. Part of this land may be used for additional detention and wetlands.

If you visit, check out the map on the WWGC website: <http://www.willowwaterhole.org/map> There are no restrooms yet but there are portable toilets near the parking lot at Westbury Lake. Currently, Prairie Lake has mowed trails and the only parking is in the neighborhood.

Mimi Posey

Willow Waterhole Greenway Conservancy Website: <http://www.willowwaterhole.org/home-new>

Harris County Flood Control District: <https://www.hcfcd.org/Find-Your-Watershed/Brays-Bayou/Willow-Waterhole-Prairie-Management-Area>

Project Brays Fact Sheet May 2015 (HCFCD, US Army Corps of Engineers)

The Watering Hole: The Willow Waterhole Greenway Conservancy Quarterly Newsletter Fall 2020 and Winter 2020.

Houston Audubon Willow Waterhole Bird Survey: <https://houstonaudubon.org/birding/bird-surveys/willow-waterhole.html>

iNaturalist.org Texas Prairie Dawn: <https://www.inaturalist.org/taxa/163947-Hymenoxys-texana>



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Sheryl Mills Treasurer sheryl.mills@txgcmn.org