HAZEL BAZEMORE COUNTY PARK

DECLARATION OF CONCERN

HISTORY

Gene W. Blacklock

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Being a patron, I have admired and appreciated Hazel Bazemore County Park since 1956. I was a teenager the first time I visited the park. Hazel Bazemore County Park was officially dedicated in 1977. I was so impressed with the amazing bird life occurring here that I started the first Christmas Bird Count for Corpus Christi in 1961 (Corpus Christi Christmas Bird Count: American Birds, Vol. 17, No. 2, page 241).

The riparian habitats that once dominated Hazel Bazemore County Park, and to some degree the low Tamaulipan habitats, some of which still remains on the hills, are different today than when I first saw it, and as it must have looked to the first Europeans. Hazel Bazemore once had significant numbers of big trees within the riparian forest. Unfortunately, the native forest occurring within Hazel Bazemore was removed when the site was converted into a “city” park. I know because I witnessed it; almost all of the trees were removed to make way for this significant change. The Tamaulipan habitats that once occurred on the hills were also altered in favor of the new park look.

During the past two decades, attention has been given to habitat protection, promoting nature and ecotourism, and keeping the river clear of trash within the park. I suggest that this has occurred mainly because of an interest in watching migrating hawks there. Please be aware that the forest at Bazemore once concentrated considerable numbers of migrating hawks as a roost site. I recall my experience one April first, which was a partly cloudy day. I witnessed an estimated one-hundred thousand hawks migrating south and flying north, all of this within a 30-minute time period. Most were migrating Broad-winged Hawks. Many of these hawks stopped to use the trees at Bazemore later that day (chronicled in Audubon Field Notes).

The native habitats within Hazel Bazemore Park have been altered and degraded since the park’s inception. For example, the upland Tamaulipan habitats have been altered and reduced in size (only elements remain today). For example, the Tamaulipan habitats at Bazemore once supported seven species of unique native cacti: Fish Hook, Devil’s Head, Alicoche, Turk’s Head, Twisted Rib, Nipple and two species of Prickly Pear. The small cacti that once occurred no longer exist within the park. The only cacti that remain at Bazemore today are the Prickly Pear Opuntia. All of the others were stolen by visitors or were inadvertently destroyed.

The transitional forest that once occurred within Hazel Bazemore Park were amazing and beautiful. The tallest trees were Sugar Berry Hackberry, but there were also some large Ash trees immediately adjacent to the river. A few Red Mulberry trees were present; the most numerous trees were Cedar Elm. All of the deciduous trees that occurred at Bazemore were covered with Spanish moss, I mean completely and totally covered with Spanish moss. The riparian understory was fairly open and it was dominated by Dwarf Palmetto and Catbrier. Disturbed sites there supported Bloodroot and extensive stands of Poison Ivy, also Mustang grape, Peppervine, small areas of Snail Seed (a semi-evergreen vine).

Today, if you look across the river and use your imagination to exaggerate the size and cover of the trees, it will give you an idea of what this riparian forest one looked like. The reason for the larger trees on the Bazemore side of the river is because of the topography. The Bazemore side of the flood plain is lower than anywhere else in the immediate area, therefore when the river floods Bazemore was and is the first to be go under water. More water there explains the reason for the elaborate tree growth that once occurred along the river at Bazemore.

Question: What happened to the forests that once existed at Hazel Bazemore County Park? I know the answer, the county decided to turn Hazel Bazemore into a beautiful park, something like what you see in Corpus Christi today, mowed grass with a few trees. Most of the trees were removed leaving only a few shaded spots where picnic tables were placed to accommodate visitors. Following the removal of most of the trees from Bazemore a hurricane occurred shortly after the park’s dedication; all of the remaining trees were destroyed.

After the vegetation was removed along the river, shrubs and trees that were once there attempted to recover. Thousands of seedlings attempted to grow, including hundreds of palmetto seedlings, but to no avail because the area was constantly mowed. Park management on two different occasions planted some small exotic Chinese Tallow trees near the picnic tables along the river, but they did not survive a drought period.

Question: Why am I presenting this information? 1) I am an old guy and I believe that someone may want to know about the magnificent habitat that once existed, and the management history of this park, 2) According to published literature, the park was declared a “nature park”. I would like to suggest that serious consideration be given to restoring the riparian forests that once existed at Hazel Bazemore County Park and other sites along the Nueces River.

When I first saw Hazel Bazemore Park in 1956, it reminded me of riparian forests that exist in parts of coastal Louisiana. But for me as teenager seeing the forest at Bazemore was astonishing! And today it is my hope that the forests that once occurred at Bazemore will one day be restored. Restoration of the forests there would be an exceptionally positive thing that would promote ecotourism and the park would be an outstanding educational laboratory for everyone.

Bazemore today continues to concentrate exceptional displays of migrating raptors. I first noticed this phenomena happening there before 1960, chronicled in several issues of Audubon Field Notes. If anyone is interested in knowing what the bird life looked like at Bazemore when forested please see bird survey report for Audubon Field Notes and see the many surveys and counts that I did there: EBIRD checklist that I did from 1960 through 1970.

In 1975 (estimated time frame), with volunteers from the Main Group Bird Club, Sinton, Texas, and some volunteers from the Corpus Christi Audubon Outdoor Club, Corpus Christi, Texas, I was encouraged by Hawks International to organize the first hawk watch of considerable coverage known for this part of the world. Count groups were stationed at various locations. I recall six particular count sit locations. The first count site was at Hazel Bazemore, the second count site was at the roadside park along US 37, San Patricio County, others along US 37, and the last station being located at the junction of US 37/59 (59 goes to George West). The objective for this endeavor was to learn something about hawk migration across South Texas and to count all migrating raptors passing by at that particular time of year. The study was accomplished on weekends and was done during the fall season, September and early October.

Prior to the removal of the trees from Bazemore I accomplished weekly bird counts there, and for a couple of years I did daily birds counts there (archived at EBIRD). Enclosed please see information for the Historical Plant and Bird Communities for Hazel Bazemore County Park, and an annotated checklist for the cactus that once occurred there. For additional information please see my counts archived in Audubon Field Notes and eBird.