

The Austin Music Scene

The Austin music scene for me begins before first light, when the resident mockingbird tunes up while I get the newspaper. He is followed by the male Carolina wren, who after sleeping under the eaves of our front porch, sings "teakettle, teakettle, teakettle, tea" in the courtyard to let me know that he has survived to greet another day. His mate answers with a buzzy fuss, so all is well there, too.

Then I start listening for other birds — if the jays are making a ruckus that could mean the neighbor cat is on the prowl. Or maybe they have found the roosting great-horned owl, which hooted all last night, and are broadcasting its presence to the avian populace.

Austin to me is not about the latest places to shop or eat. It is not about Sixth Street, Austin City Limits or University of Texas football. The allure of Austin is the beauty of the grounds at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, the golden-cheeked warblers of the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, the liquid notes of the canyon wren at my local haunt, Stillhouse Hollow Nature Preserve, and yes, the birds of the solid waste treatment plant at Hornsby Bend.

When my husband and I moved from Houston to Austin, I never expected that my life would become so attuned to the natural world. How did I get on the slippery slope to 4 a.m. wake-ups for birding field trips to points in and around Travis County, the Hill Country and beyond?

I can blame it squarely on one friend who told me that I should check out the Bright Leaf State Natural Area training program on topics like herpetology, soils, birds and native plants. So I did. Becoming a master naturalist entailed being outdoors for 10 Saturdays from January to April and visiting several natural areas around Austin.

In the quest for continuing education hours I discovered conservation organizations related to birds, native plants and butterflies and the birds just called to me. Austin is on the Central Flyway, the great migratory highway from Alaska to Mexico that traverses the midsection of North America, and you can expect to find more than 300 species of birds here during the year.

Most of those in our neighborhoods live here full time — like chickadees, cardinals and doves. But you never know what might turn up, especially during migration from mid-March through May and from August to November. Every day has the potential for a surprise.

The green violetear hummingbird that graced our yard for a week two Julys ago is a great example. It should have been somewhere between Mexico and Bolivia, but it was drinking from my feeder and visiting the scarlet blossoms of Turk's cap. And after it left, its characteristic chip notes lived on in the mockingbird's repertoire.

Such moments require no special expeditions or equipment — just attention. Like others before me, my mantra is "I don't go birding. I am birding." It is a daily pursuit, somewhat constrained by the workaday world, but even then one can be observant.

Red-tailed hawks on MoPac are recognizable at 65 mph, as are crows, great blue herons, starlings and vultures. The morning stroll from my parking garage to the UT campus is a game of listing birds seen and heard: the house finch's signature upward "zhree," the wolf-whistles of the starlings and the discordant jumble of grackle notes.

I walk quickly under the Littlefield House ligustrum when the cedar waxwings are in town, since they love the berries. At the right times of the year I keep an ear out for kingbirds, kinglets, warblers and gnatcatchers that move through UT's oak canopy, in their own world above the hubbub of university life.

People have asked me, what is the purpose of birds? At first I was taken aback by that question. I can list their environmental services, if we must discuss their utilitarian value.

But I would rather speak of them in more poetic terms: Birds are songs with wings for those who have the ears to hear.

There is so much natural beauty in Austin, if you are willing to stop, look and listen. Birds are going about their lives, reflecting the changing seasons in living, breathing color and song. Tune in.

From the Austin American Statesman by Jane Tillman who is a lecturer in dietetics in the Department of Nutritional Sciences at UT-Austin. She was gracious enough to include Jimma Byrd & Christine Bessent on a bird outing around Mason/Llano last year.