Go birding with Sarah Flournoy and Houston Audubon (Ep. 20)

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Nivien Saleh: Why are some people so fascinated with birds?

I'm Nivien Saleh, with Houston and Nature.

If you're anything like myself, you may enjoy birds but find birders intimidating. They are usually focused, knowledgeable, and often equipped with a whole lot of gear that says, "I'm not messing around!" And then there's you, the beginner, the outsider, wondering if this is a club you can belong to and even want to join.

Enter Sarah Flournoy, who nowadays is an experienced birder but vividly remembers her own beginnings. She'll take you into her world of bird enthusiasts and of Houston Audubon, and she'll tell you just why birds are so magical.

Nivien Saleh: Welcome to Houston and Nature, Sarah.

Sarah Flournoy: Thank you so much, Nivien, I'm glad to be here.

Sarah's first steps into Houston birding

Nivien Saleh: I heard that you went to school in New England, and it was a little challenging for you coming back to Houston. Tell me about that.

Sarah Flournoy: I'm from Houston. I grew up in Houston. And I really was not very exposed to the nature of Houston through my young adulthood. I went to school in both Connecticut and Virginia. I loved the seasons there, the fall color, the leaves. I love winter, snow. I love that fresh spring look. I always associated nature with being outside of Houston.

When I first came back to Houston, I taught English. I thought I was gonna have to keep traveling to do anything outdoorsy. But then I started working at the Nature Discovery Center in Bellaire, you know, part of Houston. Gosh, that was about 10 years ago.

And I was the director of the Nature Center where they did a lot of bird related activities. But I personally did not know much about birds. So I thought, I better start to learn about this just to be a legitimate leader of this organization.

Heading the Nature Discovery Center at Russ Pitman Park

Nivien Saleh: How did you become the leader of the Nature Discovery Center? You must have been an environmentalist or conservationist of some sort, right?

Sarah Flournoy: I love education. I'm very passionate about human potential, how people learn, how people grow, develop - all that.

I knew I wanted to leave the traditional classroom. While I wasn't a birder until my adulthood, I've always loved nature and the outdoors. So I was able to link that primary love of nature and outdoors with education. That's what made me a good fit for the Nature Discovery Center. And, you know, any job like that, part of it is fundraising and relationship development, which I was also willing to commit to doing.

Then I met Marianne Beauchemin. She was doing these bird walks.

And I discovered birds. They connected me to the seasons. They encouraged me to get outside to see things bigger about the natural world.

I remember this one spring, I saw this rose-breasted grosbeak. I had no idea that these existed in Houston, never had seen them. I was in my thirties at that point, I was totally shocked, smitten, loved birding from then on.

How did you experience being a novice birder?

Nivien Saleh: And if you don't know who Marianne Beauchemin is, check out one of the past episodes, because there she is in an interview. And you'll understand what the attraction is.

So you were novice birder, inspired by Marianne. What was it like to be a novice among people who knew a whole lot more about birding than you did?

Sarah Flournoy: Okay. When I started, I had these tiny little binoculars. They served me fine for those first few bird walks. But finally, this nice man came up to me and said, "Sarah, if you're really interested in birding, you might want to get a slightly larger pair of binoculars, because they let in more light."

That was a good clue and helpful tip. Then the other thing I did is, I had this Sibley's Guide to the Birds of the Eastern U.S. Unlike a really big field guide with every bird in North America, it was somewhat limited. So that first year, any time I identified a bird, I'd go back to my field guide, I'd write in the date and the location where I first saw it. That Helped me process which birds I'd already seen. Then I started to know those common birds. And I got curious about learning more birds. One thing about

birding is, you're never an expert. I'm still a novice, always learning, always discovering new things.

So I remain humble. I know very little. But that's part of the fun of it.

In Houston you can start birding anywhere

Nivien Saleh: I'm more of novice than you are.

Sarah Flournoy: Well Nivien, I got to get you out birding. You could really go birding right across your street. You can go birding anywhere in Houston, but particularly those habitat niches, where there's more diverse plants, where there might be water. That's where you're going to see the most diversity of birds.

What's it like for a novice to watch experienced Houston birders?

Nivien Saleh: So I do have some experience with birding because I married someone who loves birds. And more importantly, who has a friend who knows a lot about birds. His name is Burgess Jackson. He lives in Austin. Once a year he visits us. It's about April, and then we go to High Island and he would lead us through the bird sanctuary and identify birds for us.

And first time I did it, there I saw these people clustering about this tree and they all wore binoculars and they had these birder clothes, these stickers that indicated that they've been to every bird sanctuary there is, and they all would stare at this tree. And I'm like, they're so odd. This is not very cool, all these people staring at a tree. What was it like for you when you saw that for the first time?

Sarah Flournoy: I'm laughing about it because you do have this image in your mind of people wearing vests and wearing their khaki clothes, their khaki hats, their binocular straps. And to be honest, that is my birding outfit.

And one thing about High Island: You mentioned the trees. High Island has these gorgeous mature live oak trees. And I will just stare at a tree, even if it doesn't have birds in it. So I may be considered dorky that way. Cause I love just trees. I consider myself a generalist, a naturalist. I love observing all that's there. Not just the birds.

One thing that Houston Audubon and other birding organizations are tackling right now is this idea of what is a birder. If you imagine that kind of traditional birder, he might be older, he might be white, male.

There's this image we need to break away from. If you like birds, if you see birds, you are a birder. Anyone can be a birder. There's no checklist or criteria that makes someone a birder or not. We'd like to see more and more people identifying themselves as birders because birds bring joy, they bring in connection in nature.

When you go outside, you improve your own health when you're birding. So we'd like to build our community of birders and not just have that little segment that you described of the vest wearing, binocular-strap wearing birders that I identify with. You can bird without binoculars.

You can bird just walking your dog down the street.

Birding is an accessible way of observing wildlife

Nivien Saleh: What helped me as somebody standing outside and then being pulled in by my community is to understand that birding is caring about wildlife. And a reason why there's so many birders and many fewer observers of rabbits or foxes or mammals is because birds are so much more easy to see. you're interested in wildlife, birds are a fairly easily accessible entry point.

Sarah Flournoy: Yeah. I agree with that. Birds can be observed around the entire world. You can observe birds in an urban setting, in a rural setting, while you're driving in a car. The challenges of birding never cease. A lot of people call themselves listers. So what that means is they like to keep a track of every single bird species that they observe.

This could be a worldwide. list, Or it could be a Harris county list.

Nivien Saleh: Every single one? You just noted the birds, when you first saw them. But there are people who do it every time they see a bird?

Sarah Flournoy: Yeah. Some of my friends do like a Harris county annual list.

They want to figure out how many bird species they can see in Harris county in the duration of one year

Nivien Saleh: That is commitment!.

Sarah Flournoy: It is commitment. And it's also a little bit of a competition. But it drives people to get outside everyday to debate, to share stories with friends. So those are listers. I wouldn't classify myself as a lister.

I'm more of an enjoyer. um,

But all different types are birders. So people that love to travel to see birds, people that really enjoy learning more the details or behaviors about birds in the Houston area and going deep. All different styles.

What have been some of your best Houston birding experiences?

Nivien Saleh: That is cool. Among all the many birding experiences that you've had, what are some of your best?

Sarah Flournoy: I love quiet. I live here in Houston. It's so loud in my neighborhood. So I love getting out into places where it's quiet and where I can hear the birds, where I can have a sense of peace. The memory that comes to mind was Houston Audubon has a new canopy walk. It's this beautiful, elevated walkway that gives you a unique perspective of the birds and the trees. And it was real mosquito-ey this day. So I wanted to be up on the canopy walk, where there weren't mosquitoes and my husband wanted to go explore the forest where you'd be covered in mosquitoes. So I decided I was just going to sit on the canopy walk. I was the only one there and I just sat there cross-legged, completely quiet. All of a sudden I started hearing these little chips and I started seeing movement in the oak trees. It was almost as if the birds were coming toward me. I didn't have to go out and seek the birds. I just sat quietly, and they appeared. These are birds like yellow warblers, summer tanagers, black and white warblers.

Sitting there by myself in the quiet, with just the birds around me, that's the type of experience I love.

Nivien Saleh: Maybe the birds weren't actually coming towards you, but perhaps they were there all along. It's just that you didn't notice them. And when you slow down and open yourself up, you see more.

Sarah Flournoy: I totally agree.

Houston Audubon's beautiful canopy walk in High Island

Nivien Saleh: In fact, the canopy walk that you're talking about that is in High Island, it's really beautiful, really well done. Audubon Society did a great job.

Sarah Flournoy: I know they worked really hard on it, and it's a wonderful destination. That canopy walk at High Island leads to a rookery. A rookery is this location where hundreds and hundreds of birds nest, cormorants, great egrets, roseate spoonbills, snowy egrets, tri-colored herons. And you can see year-round bird activity at that rookery.

It's a wonderful opportunity, not just to see birds during the famous spring migration, but to see birds in their habitat year round.

Nivien Saleh: Birds are essentially dinosaurs, right? And for me that is often hard to see, cause I've got these pictures of dinosaurs and then I've got these pictures of birds. And the birds are so much more pretty and colorful and feathery than the dinosaurs.

But there's one bird at the rookery - a cormorant. If you look at the cormorant through your binoculars and you see the beak, you're like, that's a dinosaur, that's a dinosaur right there.

Sarah Flournoy: Yeah. Cormorants, they're interesting-looking birds. They may be not the most beautiful of birds. They love to eat fish, and they honestly nest year-round at the rookery. So you can really see them in interesting behavior any day of the year.

What are your favorite birds and why?

Nivien Saleh: What are your favorite birds and why?

Sarah Flournoy: The birds that I really love are this group of birds called skulkers. These are birds that poke around in the leaves on the ground. So birds like American robin or a Swainson's warbler or an oven bird. They poke around in the leaves, find little insects, and they live in this darker kind of habitat or environment.

So when you're out birding, you scan that lower part of the landscape and look for little subtle movements. And you can find these brown birds poking around in there. I love to just imagine, what are they eating? What are they doing? I love finding them. They're typically brown to be camouflaged. People have a really hard time identifying them, but they're also a special challenge.

Nivien Saleh: So you like the leaf ...

Sarah Flournoy: ...skulkers.

Yeah. I love so many birds.

Handling and seeing a bird up close is something special

Nivien Saleh: Yeah. So we all have different experiences because I think we come from different parts of the world. So I grew up in Germany. And I had learned about hummingbirds, "Kolibris" in German. There are no hummingbirds in Germany, probably because it's too cold. So when I learned about hummingbirds, they always

had some sort of fairy tale connotation. They had something magical. And then I came to Houston and I saw hummingbirds.

And once I went to Costa Rica where stayed with a friend. And she had this house where birds could come in through an entry at the top. And at the bottom, there were these glass windows. So a hummingbird came in through the top and then tried to get out through the bottom and banged his head against the glass again and again.

And I'm like, you're not very intelligent, are you? And then in the end, the bird got exhausted and dropped down. So I could pick him up, carry him outside and let him fly. And it was just a magical experience.

Sarah Flournoy: There is something very special about handling a bird and seeing it up close.

Many people say that their spark bird moments were when they were able to see the bird really up close. So Houston Audubon tries to create experiences where people can see birds up close and connect to them so that they'll appreciate them more in the wild.

Sumita Prasad banded hummingbirds at Russ Pitman Park, and then children and adults were able to hold them and release them.

The beating heart of a hummingbird

You could feel the hummingbird heart beating.

Nivien Saleh: And they beat so fast, don't they? Hundreds of beats a minute or something.

Sarah Flournoy: That sounds right.

Nivien Saleh: Yeah. It's amazingly fast.

Sarah Flournoy: Hummingbirds are incredible to think about. If you imagine a ruby-throated hummingbird, a fairly common bird in the Houston area, leaving the Yucatan peninsula and crossing the Gulf of Mexico, this tiny bird traveling over 600 miles across the Gulf of Mexico and landing right on the upper Texas coast, like right in the Galveston Houston area, after it has flown nonstop, it makes you see these birds as little superheroes. Imagining the threats and the challenges of that huge journey.

I love that Houston Audubon and other organizations have bird sanctuaries, because if you imagine those birds making that journey, they need a place to land to rest and refuel.

Nivien Saleh: I agree with you and these tiny little hummingbirds, in fact, I think have a special status among the Aztecs, where Aztec leaders, if I'm not mistaken, would adopt the name "hummingbird" because they considered hummingbirds as ferocious defenders of their territory.

So they may be small, but they are mighty and the migration is very cool. And the wonderful thing about Houston is that we are on one of the migration routes. 40% of bird species migrate. Do you have any idea why that is?

Why birds migrate

Sarah Flournoy: The simplest answer of why birds migrate is food. Let's say in April you'll have birds reproducing and creating babies. They're feeding their babies lots and lots of insects, that protein-rich food to survive. So when the wonderful deciduous trees along the Eastern coast, for example, leaf out, the insect population then grows, and there's plenty of bird food to raise this next generation of young.

Once they raised their young, they can head back down south for the fall migration, head back down sometimes through the Houston area where they'll go find a wonderful place to winter where it's warmer and there's more food that's available there while the Eastern coast of the U S for example, doesn't have leaves or insect populations. So it's food availability.

Why Houston is so important for birds and exciting for birding

Nivien Saleh: And Houston is pretty important for migration, correct? I mean our city.

Sarah Flournoy: Yeah. I think it's fair to say that Houston and the upper Texas coast as a whole is crucial for migratory birds. Most of the research suggests so, because the way the central flyway works, the way the birds travel from Central and South America north in the spring, and then again south in the fall, a lot of those birds are funneling through the upper Texas coast area. Some of the birds will cross the Gulf of Mexico, some of them will go around: trans-Gulf migrants, circum-Gulf migrants. But they're funneling through this area.

We have what's called "stopover habitat" for the migratory birds. What makes good stop-over habitat? It's plant diversity, clean, fresh water. It's anything you might want

if you've done an extended journey to rest and refuel. And that's what we need to be offering our birds and what we do in many areas.

But as Houston becomes, has more of that urban footprint, and we're expanding, and we're sprawling, we really need to think about these birds that have been using this area for so many years before we were ever here. We need to make sure that they have a place to stop and rest and continue on as they want to go raise their young.

Invite birds into your yard

Nivien Saleh: Yeah. And if you have a small garden, perhaps you live in an area where there are trees around you, you can see beautiful migratory birds coming into your garden. Especially if you have a little bit of water in the ground. They'll fight with each other to get into your water puddle, and you can take out your camera or your binoculars, and you've got a front row seat at birds that may have come from as far as Argentina. Yeah.

Sarah Flournoy: You were asking me about favorite birds. and really, one of my answers is: my favorite birds are those I see in my own yard. We have a native plant habitat, a tiny yard, postage stamp yard, and we have still had wonderful birds. Just the other day I had one of our wintering birds, a ruby-crowned kinglet. It just gave me so much joy knowing that we were offering a little respite for this bird, a little food for it to snack on.

Any size patch helps. We say every green space counts. Now that's for migratory birds, but it's also for our resident birds. There's a phrase that I really like that Cornell lab started called "Keep common birds common." These are your birds like your chickadees, your titmice, your cardinals, your blue jays.

If you have a healthy yard habitat, even a tiny patch, it's going to help those birds as well as the migratory birds. And we've got to keep our common birds common.

Our beautiful Northern cardinal

Nivien Saleh: We also have to appreciate the birds that are not migratory and resident. It's so easy to take what's right in front of you for granted and only admire what comes from far away.

The orange Baltimore oriole that migrates from South America through here is a fairly rare sight for us. We've got a beautiful, just as colorful bird in our backyard. It's a Northern cardinal and it's just delightful.

Sarah Flournoy: It is. I love cardinals.

They make a loud chip. That's a good one to try to identify by ear. It's a loud single-note chip, though they have a range of calls. And the Cardinal is gorgeous. I was thinking about ideating birds and what some tips are.

And for example, if you're looking at a cardinal, the cardinal's red and it has some black on the head and face, okay, that's your cardinal. But if you're looking at another red bird and it has, for example, black on the wing, that might be a scarlet tanager. The more you can observe about the details of the color and the shape of the bird and the bill, the more you can begin to identify these specific bird species.

How do birds prepare for their flight to Houston?

Nivien Saleh: It's like with plants. If you don't know anything, they all seem more or less alike to you. But as you get to know them, you can really see the distinction. It's a matter of familiarity. If you make the effort and get to know it a bit, then you're awarded with much greater insight.

Back to migratory birds who are very cool and just really powerful as they fly across the Yucatan. How do birds prepare for their flight to Houston?

Sarah Flournoy: Again, the simplest answer is food. If you were going to run a marathon, you'd be paying attention to a lot of food, quality and quantity. So birds fatten up before they fly. I've heard it's really fun to go in the spring to the Yucatan peninsula and to observe the birds there as they're getting ready for their journey north.

I would imagine they're eating lots of food. It depends on the bird, but they eat seeds, berries, nuts, and insects. Like I mentioned, insects are one of the most important food sources for land birds. A lot of people don't totally realize that. They envision birds eating berries and nuts, but insects are very important food source because they offer a different type of protein.

So they're just fattening up as much as they can because they will expend a lot of energy on their migratory journey.

Nivien Saleh: What you need to keep in mind is that bird have to strike such a fine balance between being light enough to easily travel and having enough fuel on their body to sustain them and to drive them forward.

One thing that I've learned - and I knew that about squirrel from a past podcast - animals change their organs in response to the season and what their needs are. Squirrels, for example, don't need to know where all the acorns are in the summer. So their brain shrinks. But in the winter it expands because they need to keep track of the many acorns they bury.

Apparently birds have similar adaptations. When it is not breeding season, for example, many birds, I've read, shrink their reproductive organs, like the male testes or the female has an ovary. They shrink so that they don't take up a lot of weight during travel. And then when they start breeding or as they get ready for that season, then these organs grow again.

Sarah Flournoy: That is very interesting. It makes total sense.

Nivien Saleh: I got to tell you, I do prepare for podcast episodes, so I know a little bit of something even though I'm not an experienced birder like you. There's this book that I read, it's called, "Beaks, Bones, and Bird Songs" by Roger Lederer.

And he has this interesting accounts of how birds function.

Sarah Flournoy: I need to read that book. That's really so interesting and cool.

How do birds find their way to Houston?

Nivien Saleh: As the birds are at the Yucatan and they want to go to Houston, have you ever thought about how they navigate to find Houston?

Sarah Flournoy: Researchers are beginning to understand that birds migrate through celestial navigation. So through the sun and moon and stars, and also through the magnetic force of the Earth, those are two ways that they know where to go.

Nivien Saleh: Yeah. And here is a cool thing Roger Lederer points out in his book. He says birds also use low-frequency sounds: So many birds can hear very low frequency sounds that we can't hear. Apparently the ocean waves have a hum, a really low hum that the birds can detect. And that hum is constant. But what happens is, it may get interrupted by mountains or islands. And so birds might be able to use that hum and its interruptions to create a soundscape that helps them find their way.

Sarah Flournoy: That is so amazing. I had not heard much of that. Particularly about the ocean and the soundscape and just as you're describing it, I was thinking about just how humbling that is: the talents and the skills that these little birds have that we don't know too much about.

It just makes me appreciate these natural systems, makes me want to know more about them. It makes me have deep respect for these creatures.

Nivien Saleh: Me too. And remember how I told you earlier when I saw this hummingbird and I said, "You're not very smart. Are you?" That was a few years ago.

By now I tend to think that there's all kinds of intelligence that this hummingbird may have that I know nothing about.

I've become a little more humble too. As the birds come to Houston, people have opportunities to see them. More in the spring than in the fall, correct?

Spring is an exciting time for seeing unusual birds in Houston

Sarah Flournoy: So if you want to see migratory birds, of course, if you want to see resident birds, just go outside or go to your park.

But if you want to see migratory birds, the spring is what I'd say is the most exciting time. And late April through mid-May is the peak. Then we also have fall migration. It's just more protracted or more drawn out. So the birds are less condensed in this certain time period. They are traveling back down south more of an extended time.

So spring is a great way to start because you have more of a chance to see these exciting birds. Like for example, in the spring, let's say mid to late April, you might want to go on a bird walk to Russ Pitman Park at the Nature Discovery Center. Or you might want to go to Brazos Bend State Park. Or you might want to go to High Island, one of the Houston Audubon sanctuaries there. And you'll discover birds that you wouldn't see for example, in the winter.

It's interesting where exactly these migratory birds land on the upper Texas coast. So much of migration depends on weather patterns. Let's say there's a weather front, and these birds are blocked up and all of a sudden have a chance to fly and then land at High Island directly on the coast - the first land they see. That is a wonderful experience for birders called "fallout." But it is challenging for the birds themselves.

So sometimes when you have a fallout of migratory birds, it's actually because these birds are so tired and challenged that they've dropped right down. Many birds may migrate beyond that first bit of coastal habitat and go on into Houston. So there are some days depending on

Nivien Saleh: Wind.

Sarah Flournoy: Exactly. There will be more action in Houston than on the coast. So if you have just one hour at lunch at the peak of spring migration, it's worth going to your local park and looking around because you may discover some very exciting activity. And of course we birders like to talk a lot during the spring via Facebook and eBird on where the birds are and who's seeing what, where. And you can tune into that to learn more about where to find some fun bird activity.

The links between plants and birds: The wax myrtle tree

Nivien Saleh: That's a good suggestion. Thank you.

Sarah Flournoy: Something I am very interested in. And I know you're involved with the Native Plant Society, is the link between plants and birds. And there are many links between plants and birds.

For example, we've already talked about plants being food source for insects and insects being food source for birds and their babies. In the Houston area right now we have wax myrtles, a great shrub that's in Houston. There is a warbler, a yellow-rumped warbler that's also called a myrtle warbler. If you look at our wax myrtles right now, there is a very good chance that you will find a myrtle warbler or this yellow rump warbler. They are feeding on those berries of the wax myrtle.

So I love that plant bird connection. Another plant bird connection I love is related to pecans. We have lots of pecans in Houston and they are deciduous. So they lose their leaves. They are kind of late to leaf out in the spring. But what I have noticed is when they start leafing out those fresh young green leaves, those leaves are then providing food for caterpillars.

So these pecans are covered and little beneficial insects. And the warblers show up right at that time. So another tip for where to find migratory birds is go look at your pecans in April.

The blue jay is essential for creating oak forests

Sarah Flournoy: Another plant bird interaction that I love is about bluejays and acorns. Bluejays have these throats that expand and can hold up to five acorns. They take the acorns from the oak trees and then they stash them all around. Actually many people think that blue jays are essential for spreading oak trees and planting them.

Nivien Saleh: Squirrels get acorns and bury them, but they probably do it fairly close to the tree. Perhaps a bluejay can pick up acorns and fly away and so disperse the oaks more widely.

Sarah Flournoy: Yeah, I think that's probably right. If you see an oak tree growing where there's no oak tree around, maybe it was planted by bluejay.

Nivien Saleh: What are the time periods when you see the myrtle warbler in that tree?

Sarah Flournoy: The yellow-rumped warbler is one of our wintering warblers. It's a migratory bird, but it's a terminal migrant. It comes here in the winter. This is it's healthy habitat for the winter. I typically start seeing the yellow rump warblers in

November, I think. Maybe a little bit earlier. And then they'll stay for a number of months.

So in Hermann Park near that boat launch there's a number of wax myrtles. We always count all the yellow rump warblers in those wax myrtles, getting hundreds.

Nivien Saleh: Wow. I did not think of wax myrtles as big trees, and yet there are hundreds of war bras in them.

Sarah Flournoy: Yeah. They have multiple shrubs of wax myrtle. These are more the shrub style of wax myrtle, but throughout Hermann Park, I think our account has been in the one hundreds.

What is the role of the Audubon Society on the landscape of American conservation organizations?

Nivien Saleh: Very cool. You did work at the Nature Discovery Center, but you also worked for the Houston Audubon Society. And the Audubon Society has been very important in protecting birds. What would you say its role is within the landscape of conservation organizations that we have in the United States? Where does the Audubon Society fit in?

Sarah Flournoy: I worked for Houston Audubon for about four years in their Bird-Friendly Communities Initiative, which was focused on urban birds and linking people to birds in this urban setting.

Then I transitioned due to my desire for more travel and flexibility to working for Audubon in a volunteer capacity. I'm still very involved and I absolutely love Houston Audubon and the work it's doing and impact it's having. So Houston Audubon is one of the largest chapters of national Audubon and really functions as its own organization.

National Audubon coordinates a lot of the smaller, more volunteer-led chapters. It does some advocacy work. Another national organization that you might be familiar with is American Bird Conservancy. It really focuses on the most crucial conservation efforts needed to help birds. And then Cornell Lab of Ornithology, another national organization - international, really - focuses on research and science and citizen science in particular. That's the national landscape among others.

Houston Audubon enables birding in 11 counties

Sarah Flournoy: And at Houston Audubon, we have 17 sanctuaries throughout the upper Texas coast. There's an eleven-county region that we cover. We have two urban bird sanctuaries where people can go birding and take programs.

We have the famous High Island sanctuaries that during the spring bring in people from all over the world, and what goes on there every day now is habitat restoration. The High Island sanctuaries were overcome by Chinese privet and other invasive plant species. So right now we have technicians and staff members on the ground. They're doing removal and ensuring plant diversity on a daily basis, which is what that challenge requires.

Houston Audubon also does education work. We have an education team and bird ambassadors. These are rehabbed birds that can provide joy and delight to people of all ages. We have, at our Raptor Center, places where families can come see birds up close.

We offer guided bird walks throughout all of our sanctuaries. I think there's a couple of sanctuaries that aren't yet open to the public, but we're working on that. We do some local advocacy when needed. But Houston Audubon does a lot and is a very important organization for helping birds and connecting people to birds.

What is the impact of Houston Audubon?

Nivien Saleh: I hear about it again and again, but it's a little hard to wrap your head around what exactly is its impact.

But I guess you can just say it's big, right?

Sarah Flournoy: Well, we really focus on three areas: land conservation, advocacy and environmental education. One thing we try not to do is silo those three pieces. They all work together. So if we're conserving land, we can teach about land conservation at those sites. We can connect people to birds because the birds are being drawn to those healthy habitats. We must advocate for the protection of green spaces so that we have birds. Environmental education: you've got to spark a joy or a love and appreciation of birds so that people will be more invested in helping to support birds and other nature spaces.

It's all integrated, and it all works together. But I totally agree that it's big.

One of the challenges is that there's so much that needs to be done. And Houston Audubon has many resources, but sometimes it feels like it's never enough, because habitat destruction, a growing population, people concerned about their basic needs and maybe not having time to connect to the natural world. You see these challenges, and it feels like a lot.

And when you love birds, and you love nature, and you want to do anything, you can to help them, you have to be very strategic.

Is it easy to become a volunteer with Houston Audubon?

Nivien Saleh: You know the organization both as a staff member and as a volunteer. What's it like to be a volunteer? Is it easy to become a volunteer at Houston Audubon? It seems like it's got its doors open and it's really inviting of people. How would you describe that?

Sarah Flournoy: I would describe it as open and inviting. I love being a volunteer for Houston Audubon. There's a whole volunteer program, but really they try to fit people into where their interests lie.

So for example, you can volunteer at the Houston Audubon Natives Nursery if you're passionate about growing out plants. You can volunteer for the trail crew if you want to help build boardwalks or clear trails. You can volunteer in the office if you are more of that administrative skillset. We are developing a new program for nature guides.

What we want to accomplish with that program is that if you come to a sanctuary and know very little about birds, you're maybe not even comfortable in the outdoors, you'll have someone that's trained that can greet you and guide you with maybe a few questions or just a little bit that will help that entry point into our sanctuaries.

If you've never been birding before they can help you find that first bird. So we're going to have a training program to develop that nature guide effort, which I'm looking forward to. High Island is almost totally led by volunteers in the spring, whether it's people greeting or people collecting payments or answering questions.

Houston Audubon is filled with volunteers. It's the heart and soul of the organization.

How you can get started with your Houston birding adventure

Nivien Saleh: And let's say somebody is not yet a volunteer but they think, oh, what Sarah says sounds really interesting. I'd like to wet my beak, get my foot in the door or ...

Sarah Flournoy: "My beak," I love that. Wet your beak by going to HoustonAudubon.org. I think there's a button that says "volunteer," where you can identify your specific interests.

Nivien Saleh: I will put a link to the website in the show notes of this podcast. Continuing on the beginning birders. What do you need to start out?

Sarah Flournoy: You really don't need much. A comfortable pair of shoes and a desire to learn and observe, I would say, are the most important. Then from there I would recommend a pair of binoculars, and they come in a whole range of prices, as well as a field guide. A field guide can be book form or online form.

I love Sibley's field guides both in book form and online in an app. I like the app because you can compare and contrast two different species at the same time on your phone. So you start out with your binoculars and your field guide, and then you need a place to go. Okay. So go to any of our parks where you might find birds. But then that might not get you quite as far along as you hope. You might want to join a structured bird walk and learn from watching others.

Houston Audubon offers more than 10 monthly bird surveys. "Bird surveys" is a fancy word for a bird walk. It's just that someone on the bird walk is monitoring the birds and counting the species and putting it in eBird. But also it's a chance for people to just get together and go birding together.

If you go to the Houston Audubon website and look up bird surveys, there's a list of exactly when those monthly bird surveys take place and where, and you can find one that's near you and show up at the time and then be able to go on a bird walk with experienced birders who will be welcoming and happy to have you and will be so excited to point out birds to you.

Nivien Saleh: What I've noticed is that when you ask an experienced birder questions, they're really happy to give you answers. My experience has been, they take time for you.

So if you go on a bird walk, you have an opportunity to ask people who know more than you, some questions, but you also maybe learn the basics of how to identify a bird. The bird has so many parts. It has a beak and a head and wings, and there are different kinds of feathers. Where should I look to figure out if it's this bird or that bird? That combined with a book will get you off to a real good start.

Sarah Flournoy: I think that's right. I learned from birding the same park almost daily. I got very familiar with the birds of that park. I became very comfortable with four acre park. Then I started expanding out from that. I went to High Island and it was mind-blowing because it was so many new birds, different habitat. And so I expanded my knowledge of that place. Then go onto the next place and expand your knowledge there.

I'd recommend getting very comfortable with one location.

Great apps that help the birding novice

Nivien Saleh: Yeah, that's a really good point. And I think also ... I'm a recovering academic, so I'm used to books. But I actually like using apps where I don't have to leaf through pages and pages until I found what I look for.

And there are some really cool apps. Maybe the coolest app for birding is Merlin, where you just record a bird sound and it'll give you an ID. That is for example, how I found out that we had a Carolina wren in our garden. I couldn't see it, but I could hear something. And that app told me what it was.

Sarah Flournoy: It's very new technology. I was at High Island this last spring and met the team from Cornell that developed that piece of the app, which is the sound recognition app. I thought they seemed so cool. And they're really proud of their work. And so I have found it works pretty darn like you said, in your yard for one of your more common birds. I've been having a lot of fun with it with my husband.

I typically don't like to pull out my phone that much when I'm birding or if I'm on a hike, but he does. He'll pull it out and use his Merlin ID. It really hears things that we're not hearing. So we've had a lot of fun learning with that. We don't always trust it a hundred percent.

When there's any sort of question, we try to observe that bird with our eyes to confirm the ID. But yeah, it's really neat technology.

Nivien Saleh: You can't rely on it. But to me, these apps are a little bit like having a person with you that maybe doesn't know everything, but that person is more experienced than you and can say I think this is what it is. And they give you a much better starting point than you would have if you were just completely left to your own devices.

The benefits of range maps

Sarah Flournoy: I think that's right. And one thing we haven't talked about yet are range maps. A lot of the apps and books they'll show you the bird species, and then they'll show a range map.

So this is where the bird will exist either year-round or in the winter or nesting or on its migratory path. And you think it's this one bird, but then if you look in the field guide, and it's completely out of range. You're most likely going to need to revisit that species. So for example, there was this young boy who's the cutest birder.

And he recently in Houston thought he saw a wild turkey flying overhead. Through asking him a few targeted questions, we were able to get that he was going to rethink

that ID. It's not that you can see every bird at every time. You can begin to narrow it down with the range maps.

Nivien Saleh: Yes. And also, if you know that the bird is a skulker, which likes to be in the leaf litter, it's probably not the one that you see flying high over your head.

What do birders mean by “jizz”?

Sarah Flournoy: That's right. When I first started birding, the other birding mentor I had was my now husband Don. He would take me birding and taught me so much. One term he used was"jizz." it's a funny word, but what it means in birding is the general impression of the bird. So you see a bird moving around, just pay attention to its overall size, how it's moving, how it's foraging, where it's located in the landscape. All those details add up to helping you identify what it is. For example, warblers move around very quickly in the trees. They're just constantly moving, where a virio may move a little bit more slowly, a little bit more deliberately.

They're not that unlike in size, but they move differently. Once you start paying attention to that, it can help you. Those clues help you identify the bird.

Find the tools that work for you

Nivien Saleh: Yeah. And I got to say different people have different approaches. So Terry, my husband, he would see a bird and then look it up in his bird book to identify it. And that's never really been that interesting to me. I like books that tell me a story about the bird.

So somebody tells me, oh, this is such and such a bird. Then I can go home to my book by Reader's Digest. They published a book which I really like. It's got beautiful illustrations of the birds and small stories. For me that works better than just, 20 images of birds.

I think you need to know what your approach is. And I think you can accommodate just about any approach to learning about birds.

Sarah Flournoy: I agree that the stories about birds can be really engaging. I'm thinking about a book right now.

I think it's called "Bird Life of the Upper Texas Coast" by Ted Eubanks and Ron Weeks. It provides those stories about the birds of the Upper Texas coast. It has beautiful pictures, and it provides ecological details that are very interesting. So you might …

What's your dream for Houston?

Nivien Saleh: I'm reading that. I will look it up and I will put it in the show notes.

Imagine you just dream for a second. We've got birds, many native birds, but also many migratory birds. And we've got a city that is expanding and growing by leaps and bounds. What would be your dream for Houston with respect to our relationship to birds?

Sarah Flournoy: The word that comes to mind is "interconnected." I dream of a world, not just in Houston, where we realize our interconnection with each other, with birds, with plants, with the whole natural world that we're all a part of and respect that. My vision for Houston would be that our leaders and decision makers have deep respect for birds and the natural world and how crucial they are to our own existence, that we conserve and grow green spaces, healthy green spaces for people to enjoy, and also to keep us safe by providing their ecological services.

I dream of a Houston where people have a sense of peace and wholeness and harmony, where people aren't overly busy and stressed out. Maybe birding can be a part of that, where people can go for a nice peaceful walk and just feel happier and healthier, can be kind to each other.

To me, connecting with nature is kind of big. It's like about a new world order, honestly, where we move from being destructive and greedy to being life giving and seeing ourselves as part of something bigger.

Nivien Saleh: Wow. I'm impressed.

Sarah Flournoy: But That's too much. It's not really about birding, but these do bring up really big issues for me about wanting to see a different type of environment as we move forward. Anyone who works in conservation and environment feels the pain of watching things be destroyed.

And so it's " what will it take to create a healthy planet?" And I think it does take reinvisioning that dreaming.

Nivien Saleh: Well, and if we get many more people who have dreams like you, maybe they all become volunteers at the Audubon Society. Maybe we can get there.

Sarah Flournoy: Yeah. I feel hopeful. Emily Dickinson did say "Hope is the thing with feathers." I do feel hopeful right now. I think more and more people are starting to ... We're building our team of birders and people that love nature. I really am maintaining a sense of hope.

Nivien Saleh: Seeing you so passionately, that gives me hope too. Thank you, Sarah.

Sarah Flournoy: Thank you, Nivien.

Nivien Saleh: We have arrived at the end of this episode. To find out more about the locations and resources we mentioned in this interview, and for the episode transcript, head to houstonnature.com/20. That's HoustonNature.com, a slash, and the number 20. And if you enjoyed this episode, as always, share it with friends!

For Houston and Nature, I'm Nivien Saleh.