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On the cover: Birders and other conservationists joined a broad coalition of citizens marching from Mission, Texas to La Lomita Mission along the Rio Grande on 12 August 2017. They all opposed new border wall construction because of the damage it would do to key birding areas, and they were a major presence at a rally at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge the next day. While Santa Ana has been temporarily spared, Bentsen State Park and other beloved birding hotspots remain under extreme threat. Photo © Jeffrey Gordon
Birder’s Guide is published by the American Birding Association, Inc., a not-for-profit organization that inspires all people to enjoy and protect wild birds.

The American Birding Association, Inc., seeks to encourage and represent the North American birding community and to provide resources through publications, meetings, partnerships, and birder networks. The ABA’s education programs develop birding skills, an understanding of birds, and the will to conserve. The ABA’s conservation programs offer birders unique ways to protect birds and their habitats.

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The American Birding Association will celebrate its 50th anniversary this coming year, 2019. At the time of its founding, the frontiers which the new organization explored had much to do with the status, distribution, and identification of many of the United States’s and Canada’s rarest and most sought-after birds and the fieldcraft involved in finding them.

But even then, there was a considerable social component to what the ABA community was doing. Questions of ethics and how best to behave in the field were prime subjects of debate, along with how to compile, share, and compare lists and various milestones. Early in its development, the ABA initiated a series of conventions and conferences that, in addition to being watershed events for the birding community, had a tremendous influence on the founding of the myriad birding festivals that crowd the calendar with temptations nowadays.

While I don’t think birders will ever tire of learning new things about finding and identifying birds, it is clear to me that much of the frontier for birders in the next half century will be cultural as much or more than ornithological. We’ve gotten very good at finding and identifying birds. What we and the birds really need most at this point is for us to get better at opening more eyes to the excitement of birding and the value of bird habitat and human access to it.

We need to become more effective, persuasive evangelists and advocates. Much progress has been made, but there is still far, far to go. We have made great inroads into reaching more young birders and into removing barriers to participation by all in leadership positions. But in many ways we are still in the very beginnings of knowing how to effectively build and strengthen our community and to help it more visibly and effectively contribute to conservation.

Here in the pages of Birder’s Guide to Conservation & Community, we present a survey of successes and challenges on all these fronts. We hope to inspire you to think of your fellow birders as a resource as important and worthy of care and enhancement as the wonderful open spaces where we go to find birds and to re-find ourselves. We challenge you to do what you can to advance the cause of birding—the next 50 years are going to be exciting and important ones. All of us at the ABA look forward to birding our way through them together with you.

Good birding,

Jeffrey A. Gordon
President, American Birding Association

Welcome to the fifth annual issue of Birder’s Guide to Conservation & Community. Our goal is to highlight the positive efforts being made in the realms of habitat conservation, community building, and environmental education—all of which lead to healthier bird populations. In particular, the popular “Conservation Milestones” (see p. 6) highlights the real accomplishments of birders like you. Consider nominating someone you know—or even yourself—for profiling in next year’s edition!

As always, let us know what you did and didn’t like in this issue, so that we may start planning for the future. If there’s a topic missing that you feel deserves coverage, please pass it along. Even better, write about it yourself for the next issue! Finally, please consider sharing this issue with a friend. You can gift your hard copy when you’re done, or simply send this link, where the entire issue is available online, and for free: bg.aba.org. Now let’s get out there and do even more for bird conservation!

Michael L. P. Retter
Editor, Birder’s Guide
Jennifer Howard was from 2015–2018 the director of public relations for American Bird Conservancy, which works to conserve birds throughout the Americas. She has been a senior reporter at The Chronicle of Higher Education and a contributing editor at The Washington Post. She has published fiction and nonfiction in a wide range of publications, including EdSurge, The Times Literary Supplement, Slate, VQR, Humanities magazine, and Bookforum. An enthusiastic backyard birder and novice native-plant gardener, she currently lives in a row house with her husband, their two children, two dogs, and two indoor-only cats. Follow her on Twitter at @JenHoward and read more of her work at www.jenniferhoward.com.

Tiffany Kersten is on the board of the Friends of the Wildlife Corridor and has spent the past 14 years as an environmental educator, planning and administering programs with the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, Massachusetts Audubon Society, Cape May Bird Observatory, and Quinta Mazatlan World Birding Center. Tiffany worked at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge from 2012–2013 and holds a B.S. in Natural Resources from Northland College. In her spare time, Tiffany enjoys competitive archery, training with a local running club, and performing as a member of Sorellanza, a Latin dance team.

An active birder since high school, Michael Slater has a lifelong interest in natural history, especially birds, insects, and native plants. He has been a member of the Baird Ornithological Club, for which he has served as president, since he moved to the Reading, Pennsylvania, area in the late 1970s. Michael writes a nature column called “Outside” that is published every Wednesday in the Reading Eagle’s weekly Berks Country magazine.

About the Authors

An environmentalist, entrepreneur, explorer, writer, painter, and vegan, Raymond L. VanBuskirk, whose love for the natural world was born in the pine forests of the Land of Enchantment. He is a New Mexico native and has spent the first 28 years of his life following his dream of creating a career around birding. Raymond co-owns and operates BRANT Nature Tours, a New-Mexico-based nature travel company with a strong commitment to both environmental and social justice. His career experience also includes multiple ornithological field research positions, including two summers as seabird research technician on the Arctic Ocean, past president of the Central New Mexico Audubon Society, board member of Western Field Ornithologists, ABA young birding camp instructor, and birding specialist for Leica Sport Optics. Raymond is a proud member of Queer Birders of North America (QBNA), the continent’s informal club for LGBTQ+ members of the birding community.
Valle de Oro NWR: Providing Playas for Peeps and People

New Mexico’s Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge, “VdO” as the locals call it, has had many important milestones in its short five years of existence—from its beginning as a grassroots community project, to becoming the first urban national wildlife refuge in the Southwest region, to breaking ground on the first phase of habitat restoration on the 570-acre former dairy farm. The site restoration plan began development in 2012, shortly after the refuge was established. Refuge staff, volunteers, and the Friends of Valle de Oro engaged the local community and partners to develop a shared vision for refuge restoration.

In early 2018, construction began on the first of five planned wetlands to mimic the seasonal wetlands that historically occurred along the middle Rio Grande Valley. More than 80% of the wetlands along the middle Rio Grande Valley have been lost in recent times, so the opportunity to place five surface water features back on the landscape, the first of which will mimic a naturally occurring playa, is a huge win for wildlife and the community.

But wait, what’s a playa, you ask? While it is, in fact, the Spanish word for a beach, that’s not exactly what we’re talking about in this context. Playas (pronounced PLY-ahs) are shallow, temporary lakes that collect and clean runoff from the surrounding environment during large rain events, providing important stopover habitat for migrating shorebirds and waterfowl along the way. These ephemeral lakes serve many important functions beyond providing surface water for wildlife: native grasses on the playa’s perimeter filter sediment from runoff, thus cleaning the water destined for the basin, while the large cracks that form on its surface during dry spells allow for the recently cleaned water to easily seep down through a dense clay lining, providing a second level of dissolved contaminant filtration, before recharging the aquifer below. After enough rainfall, these large cracks become completely saturated and close, creating a watertight lake bottom. Evaporation starts the playa’s life cycle over again.

Many partners have joined the refuge for this habitat restoration project. The U. S. Bureau of Reclamation completed the wetland construction, while the New Mexico Youth Conservation Corps, WildEarth Guardians, and Rio Grande Return helped with the initial planting of native saltgrass. Additional planting will happen this summer with the help of Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, the Youth Conservation Corps, Audubon, Coca-Cola, the Friends of VdO, Albuquerque Young Naturalists, and many other groups. Once the perimeter vegetation is established, this wetland unit will be managed as a playa, which hopefully means that natural forces will do most of the work, and the
refuge staff can oversee and intervene as needed. Since its completion earlier this year, the playa has enticed 17 species of migratory shorebirds—based on eBird reports—to stop in for a visit along their route to northern breeding areas, including the first county record of American Golden-Plover.

To learn more about the incredible work happening at VdO and to support them by joining their Friends organization, go to friendsofvalledeoro.org or check out their Facebook page. Make sure to stop by and see the progress next time you’re in Albuquerque.

**Safeguarding Boulder’s Barn Owls: Bigger (Nest Boxes) are Better**

Barn Owls have long been nesting in Boulder County, Colorado. While many local populations are in decline across their global range, likely the result of urban development and the removal of nesting habitat such as old dead trees and dilapidated human structures, overall the Colorado population seems to be on an upswing—based on recent findings from the second Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas. So why the increase in Colorado? Surely some of the increase can be attributed to projects such as the one spearheaded by Scott Rashid and members of the Colorado Avian Research and Rehabilitation Institute in Estes Park, which is organizing volunteers to build, place, and monitor Barn Owl nesting boxes in Boulder County and beyond.

In 2014, 10 horizontally positioned boxes (15” depth x 15” width x 30” length) were constructed based on blueprints from credible online sources. Tiny cameras were placed in the boxes to get a closer look at the owls’ courtship behavior, nest timing, chick development, fledging success, and mortality, among other things. Of those 10 boxes, only one was active in the first year of the project.

In early May of 2014, a male Barn Owl was filmed inside the nest box belting out seductive screeches and screams to the dark outside world. He left frequently and returned with the desiccated bodies of deer mice and voles, which he placed in a pile as an offering to potential mates. It wasn’t long before a prospective mate answered his cries. And who could resist a pile of day-old rodent carcasses? The owls did what owls do and nesting season was under way.

Ten eggs were laid—on the high end of what’s reported for the species—and all 10 of them hatched. Nesting continued as expected, with the male owl bringing gobs of small rodents for the first few weeks. Eventually the demand for food was higher than what the male could provide on his own, at which time the female began leaving the box on nightly hunting escapades. With so many owlets eating so frequently, their regurgitated pellets were really piling up, and despite the mother’s attempts to clear the nest box, things were getting awfully crammed. The nest which started with a depth of 15 inches had been reduced to only 7 inches near the entrance. The overly cramped quarters ultimately led to the death of three owlets, which were seemingly trampled by the seven older individuals. The nest successfully fledged seven, though the deaths may have been avoidable. It was back to the drawing board.

Based on observations made in the 2014 nest, and after reconsulting the literature, the decision was made to replace the boxes with boxes of larger dimensions (18” depth x 15” width x 40” length). Success! Since the replacement of the smaller boxes, there have been zero owlet casualties as a result of box cramming. In 2017, Scott and his team monitored 17 nest boxes, seven of which were active, resulting in 38 successfully fledged owlets.

To watch live streams of the Barn Owls in their nest boxes, and to donate to the cause, visit carriep.org/nest-cams.

**Amy Simso Dean:**

**Inspiring Young Birders Through Project FeederWatch**

Summers are short in Minnesota and once the winter grabs hold there are few opportunities for Minneapolis elementary school students to explore the outdoors. That didn’t stop Amy Simso Dean from ensur-
Amy installed a gourmet feeding station—thistle, suet, and sunflower—in the nearby tree grove, and wrangled a classroom-size set of binoculars and scopes for better viewing. She also created pocket-sized, laminated field guides with information on the most common birds of the area.

“I usually start our observation time by prefocusing all the binoculars, although they rarely stay that way, and tapping drop-ters in place, because little hands can’t resist twisting,” says Amy. “I also hang different-colored feeders so I can announce, ‘There’s a Goldfinch on the yellow feeder.’

The development of the students’ interests in birds has grown beyond the rigid scientific structure of Project FeederWatch. Although Amy and her students follow a strict survey protocol for tallying birds at feeders, they can’t help but count everything they encounter—even the flybys that couldn’t care less about the seed. Amy has fallen into the routine of maintaining additional lists of all birds seen during observation time, not just those that visit their feeders, which the kids enjoy comparing to species reported in previous years. This gives way to discussions about differences in abundance between years, and the kids hypothesize reasons for these observed differences.

Amy's years of hard work, problem solving, and patient guidance have truly paid off. Now, when Amy walks through the classroom doors, she is met with cheers of excitement from dozens of budding birders eager to lay their eyes on their feathered friends.

“I am simultaneously relieved and regretful when our FeederWatch season ends. It takes a lot of time for me as a volunteer, but the payoff more than makes up for it. I get to introduce 300+ kids to the wonders of birds every year,” Amy says.

To learn more about Project FeederWatch or to bring it to your school, household, or community, visit FeederWatch.org.

Central New Mexico Audubon: Window Warriors

Based on a comprehensive study by scientists at the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, it is estimated that between 365 and 988 million birds are killed each year in the U. S. after flying head first into buildings. Those casualty estimates are striking, and frankly a bit overwhelming to think about, but a group of Albuquerque window warriors is making moves to solve this problem one square foot of glass at a time.

Several months ago, staff at the Albuquerque BioPark Botanic Garden approached the Central New Mexico Audubon Society (CNMAS) for advice on how to treat glass on a building that was a “major bird-killer”—everything from ducks to hummingbirds.

Managers at the Botanic Garden felt that showcasing a building posing significant danger to wildlife was inconsistent with the BioPark’s values, and they were eager to find a solution. The building’s façade was 660 square feet of glass reflecting a lush native landscape from 20 feet away, inviting birds of all kinds over for their last flap. An initial observation noted 23 collision impressions on the glass, an unacceptable number of window strikes given the location of the Botanic Garden, a stone's throw from the Rio Grande, an important greenspace for migratory and resident birds alike.

CNMAS did an evaluation and prepared a report with options for retrofitting the glass with collision-deterrent materials. The options varied in cost, but all were products tested or recommended by the American Bird Conservancy and were deemed appropriate for this case. Botanic Garden managers selected Solyx® Bird-Safety Window Film, which uses thin horizontal lines to break up image reflections. The film was professionally installed this spring, just in time for the migration season. CNMAS is optimistic that the treatment will substantially reduce bird...
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Photos: Coquerel’s Sifak and Collared Aracari, Peg Abbott; Gulf Fritillary, Mahlon Hale; Large Niltava, Carlos Sanchez.

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mortality on this façade, and the group is now focusing on influencing Albuquerque’s building code in the future.

To help CNMAS with their mission of protecting New Mexico’s birds and educating the community along the way, please check out their website at cnmas.newmexicoaudubon.org. For more information on bird collisions, visit abcbirds.org/threat/bird-strikes.

Klee Bruce:
Birds and Literacy in the Ozarks

Sometimes kids make the most effective teachers, especially when they’re both passionate about their subject and sporting a super rad undercut. At 16, Klee Bruce is an accomplished birder, a dedicated conservationist, a bright and hardworking conservation communicator, and an avid community volunteer in Springfield, Missouri.

Falling in love with birds at an early age, Klee found deep connection with the folks of Greater Ozarks Audubon Society, where she graduated from their Green Leadership Academy for Diverse Ecosystems (GLADE), a nationally acclaimed conservation leadership academy. GLADE is well known for inspiring new generations to get involved in connecting people to nature and inspiring them to work to protect it. Klee is a shining example of the program’s many successes.

As part of her own efforts in local community service, Klee created and spearheaded a literacy unit based on birds for K-5 students attending selected Springfield public schools. She effectively sparks student interests in reading and birds by hand-picking books for their lessons that lead to discussions on bird diversity, physiology, and global importance. Her older students are exposed to more complex concepts of ecology, endangered wildlife, habitat destruction, and extinction.

Klee receives outstanding reviews from her students and their teachers—so much so that other schools in the area want in. She was recently awarded a $500 grant from GLADE in coordination with the Community Foundation of the Ozarks to expand her literacy program to more schools in the Springfield district.

To find out how you can support Klee in her goals of purchasing more books and reaching more students, please contact her at birdsolafeather89@gmail.com. To learn more about GLADE or to apply, check out the May 2015 issue of Birder’s Guide to Conservation & Community or go to greenleadershipacademy.org.
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For elementary-school teacher Keomailani Case, the landscapes on and around Mauna Kea on the Island of Hawai‘i are the perfect place to take her fifth-grade students. The forests and animals there, including native honeycreepers like the yellow, gray, and white Palila, help her convey a lesson that might help save Hawaii’s endemic species: Mālama ʻĀina, or “Take care of the land.”

“I grew up viewing the land as one of my older relatives,” said Case, a native Hawaiian raised in nearby Waimea. She evokes an old Hawaiian expression that the land is the chief and humans are its servant. It’s a reminder that everything—birds, forests, mountains, people—is connected. That spirit keeps bringing researchers, birders, and volunteers to Mauna Kea to join forces in the ongoing effort to keep Palila from going the way of the Kioea (last observed in 1859), the Lesser Koa Finch (1891), the Kona Grosbeak (1892), the Greater Koa Finch

Of the many finch-billed Hawaiian “honeycreepers” that evolved on the main Hawaiian islands, only the Palila still lives. Photo © Jacob Drucker
(1896), or the ‘Ō‘ū—the most abundant honeycreeper in all Hawaii in the 1800s, but gone from the Island of Hawaii in 1986 and completely extinct in 1989.

With their golden heads and thick bills—an adaptation that allows them to crack open the tough seed pods of the māmane tree, a primary food source—Palila were once known on both O‘ahu and Kaua‘i. They were familiar enough to be invoked in an 1882 song composed in honor of a visit by Queen Emma to Mauna Kea, which features lines about “the sweet voices of the Palila, those birds that dwell upon the Mountain”.

But those sweet voices, traditionally thought to be harbingers of rain, have been heard less and less often in recent decades as introduced sheep and other introduced species took a toll on the native forests. For a relatively big bird—6 or 7 inches long—Palila can be tough to see. The species used to inhabit O‘ahu and Kaua‘i, as well as the Big Island. Today they’re found only in a 25-square-mile area on Mauna Kea.

Palila have been the focus of conservation concern since 1967, when the species became one of the first to be listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. Critical habitat was designated in 1977. Thanks to an annual survey carried out every year since 1980, researchers know a lot about how the Palila population has fared over the past three decades.

The short answer is: Not well. Palila have declined from 4,000–5,000 birds in the 1990s to fewer than 2,000 today.

“That’s not very many when we’re talking about the entire global population of the
species,” said Chris Farmer, director of American Bird Conservancy’s Hawaii Program. “There’s a very strong downward trend over time, but it is starting to look as though their decline has leveled out.” This year’s Palila count, just completed in February, will give conservationists more data on how the population is faring, though the data will take some time to analyze.

Data are among the best weapons conservationists bring to the fight to save the birds. “Palila is one of the best-studied birds in the world,” said Farmer, who participates regularly in the Palila counts.

The surveys wouldn’t happen without the help of volunteers who brave the rough, often rocky terrain of the dormant volcano’s upper reaches. The slopes are made of ‘a’a, which is sharp, jagged lava broken into pieces that can be as big as a basketball or as small as a golf ball or smaller. Imagine “hiking uphill while trying to balance on a footing of marbles,” Farmer said.

Palila favor habitat found at higher elevations on the mountain—above 6,000 feet (1,829 meters). So far, that has helped protect them from diseases like avian malaria and avian pox, spread by non-native mosquitoes that prefer lower, warmer areas.

The birds are most active in the morning, when the sun begins to warm things up. Over the course of a week, the surveyors are dropped off near the high-elevation sites (7,000–10,000 feet or about 2,100–3,000 meters) and then hike down several thousand feet, a trek that usually takes 4–6 hours.

For the count, the mountain is divided into a series of transects, almost like a pie cut into wedges. Each transect contains a series of listening stations spaced about 490 feet (150 meters) apart. The counters pause at each station for six minutes, and record everything they see and hear. “Then you hike as quietly as you can to the next station and do it again,” Farmer said. If there are enough volunteers, the core areas of Palila habitat—on the western slope of Mauna Kea—are surveyed twice to get the most precise count.

Volunteers must be both sure-footed and knowledgeable, able to identify Palila by ear as well as by eye. “You have to be able to hear a Palila at 150 meters and know that it’s at 150 meters,” Farmer said.

More birders as well as surveyors are likely to be venturing out to the slopes of Mauna Kea in search of Palila soon. In 2016, the ABA’s membership voted to include Hawaii in the official ABA Area. That’s likely to encourage more birders to visit the islands in search of native birds to add to their life lists, and to head to the Big Island in search of Palila.

There is an easier way to see these birds than scrambling down the rough slopes of the mountain. Opened in 2016, the Palila Forest Discovery Trail takes visitors on a one-mile loop through the high-elevation dry forest where the birds live. The state’s Department of Land and Natural Resources constructed the trail, with support from American Bird Conservancy. The trail lies at 7,000 feet, and you’ll need a four-wheel-drive vehicle to get to it.

Many long-time residents of Hawaii live at lower elevations and never get a chance to see the forest species that live higher up. But Palila are among the more easily seen of Hawaii’s endangered forest birds, according to Paul Banko, if you know where to look—or have someone knowledgeable to take you into the protected areas that shelter the birds. A research wildlife biologist with the U. S. Geological Survey, Banko has spent much of his long career studying Palila and its habitat.

Banko explains that Palila have evolved in tandem with the dry, high-elevation forests dominated by the indigenous māmāne tree. Specialist feeders, Palila rely on māmāne seeds, which they’re able to crack with their thick bills. The seeds are highly nutritious, but they’re also loaded with secondary compounds that make them...
potentially toxic to birds,” Banko said. If you’re not a Palila, he recommends skipping the māmāneseeds because the alkaloids they contain will likely prove fatal.

Rodents avoid the seeds altogether. Palila, though, love the seeds so much that they seek out what Banko calls “restaurant trees”, those with an especially tasty or abundant selection. Palila may even be able to tell which trees’ seeds have lower levels of the alkaloids, he said. The birds also like to feast on the caterpillars of a native species of moth that lays its eggs in māmāneseedpods.

“The female moths may also be particular about what trees they lay their eggs in, because some trees get hammered by caterpillars in the seeds and others don’t,” Banko said. “It just opens up all sorts of questions about what’s going on in this trophic system.”

Four-Footed Invaders

Over decades, invasive species have thrown the balance of the māmāne forest system out of whack and hastened the decline of Palila and other forest-dependent birds. As Banko explains, ranching took its toll. Introduced sheep turned feral and did heavy browsing damage, reducing available habitat for the birds.

In the 1930s and 1940s, a state legislative push to protect watersheds led to some 47,000 feral sheep and other ungulates being removed from Mauna Kea, and the forest began to regenerate.

The reprieve was temporary. “In the 1940s, the whole paradigm for conservation began to shift away from watershed protection,” Banko said. “The sheep population built back up rapidly and covered the mountain again.” Mouflon—a popular game species of sheep introduced in the mid-1960s—compounded the problem.

Legal battles in the 1970s and 1980s ultimately forced the state to step up its efforts to contain and remove the sheep.

That work has paid off for the forest. “It’s clear there are way, way fewer animals now,” Banko said. “So we’re back into the cycle of regeneration.”

That’s good for the trees and, ultimately, conservationists hope, for the birds. It will take time to know. Like other Hawaiian forest bird species that are also food specialists, Palila tend to lay small clutches of eggs, and the population, if it does grow, is likely to grow slowly. The birds have also had to contend with a recent long drought, part of what Banko calls a drying
Conservation in Hawaii

trend related to a changing climate.
Unlike the Palila count, which requires volunteers with expert birding skills, the planting required to restore the mānane forest can be done by anybody who is willing and has the time. The Mauna Kea Forest Restoration Project, part of the Hawaii Division of Forestry and Wildlife, leads that work, with major support from the American Bird Conservancy, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Forest Service. The Laura Jane Musser Fund Environmental Initiative Program and the Dorrance Family Foundation have also been major contributors to Palila conservation.

Kalā Asing, Mauna Kea Forest Restoration Coordinator, oversees the project. The forest crew has a lot of ground to cover: there are two major restoration areas—a 1,400-acre (567-hectare) former ranch on the west slope of the mountain that is designated Palila Critical Habitat and some 5,140 acres (2,080 hectares) on the north slope—and the 15,914 acres (6,440 hectares) of core Palila breeding habitat.

Asing’s team and volunteers plant the same mix of native trees and shrubs, including mānane, koa, ‘ili‘ili, and ‘a‘ali‘i, in both units. “We rely on volunteers for a lot of our restoration work,” Asing said. It takes time to reverse the damage done by decades of ecological abuse inflicted by non-native sheep, cattle, goats, and pigs. “What used to be dry alpine forest is now just grassy savannah,” Asing said. Restoring the forest means “starting from step one”. He estimates that about 40% of one focus area, called Ka‘ohe, has been restored, along with about 20% of another area, Pu‘u Mali.

But the labor, though far from complete, is paying off. “The mountain is looking awesome,” Asing said. “The mānane forest is really filling in on the upper elevations.”

Hunting and Volunteering

Birds and people use the forest for different purposes. Mauna Kea’s introduced sheep and mouflon became popular game animals, and some members of the traditional hunting community did not support attempts to remove them from the landscape. It took a long series of court battles to have critical Palila habitat protected and to begin removing the non-native ungulates.

But as time has passed and more residents have seen the benefits of the forest work and have pitched in to help, those hard feelings appear to have softened somewhat. “I can have adult conversations with people who have opposing views,” Asing said.
He often emphasizes the cultural importance of the native forest birds, and the fact that humans are ultimately responsible for throwing things out of balance. “The real root of the problem isn’t animal versus animal,” he said. “It’s not the sheep’s fault. It’s not the goats’ fault. It’s not the Palila’s fault. It’s our fault.”

He also puts the plight of the Palila into the broader context of what’s happening to the Big Island’s ecosystems. Asing belongs to the native Hawaiian community and hails from Waimea, near Mauna Kea. The mountain used to have many springs and streams. Now there are no streams, he said, and only a few springs left.

“You don’t know what you’ve got ’til it’s gone,” Asing said. That makes the forest-restoration work even more urgent. “The mountain needs to be reforested.”

People come from all over to pitch in and help the Mauna Kea Forest Restoration Project. Some make it an annual trip. The Sierra Club sends a group regularly, for instance, and a teacher from Idaho brings a group of science students every year, according to Asing. But help also comes from closer to home. “We have some diehard volunteers from different communities on the island that come out and help us,” Asing said.

Among those stalwarts is Keomailani Case, the fifth-grade teacher whose students study Palila and its forest habitat. “We talk about how the Palila and the māmane evolved on the slopes together, and how if you take one component out of that system it can impact the systems around it,” she said. Steeped in the lore of the land, she brings that sensibility and experience to her work as a teacher at the Kanu o ka ʻĀina (“Natives of the Land”) school in Waimea.

“My class is actually named Papa māmane, which is after the māmane tree of the Palila,” she said. “Mauna Kea and the forest are very dear to me.”

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**TOP:** Kalā Asing, MKFRP Coordinator, briefing the annual Palila counters on Mauna Kea. Photo © Chris Farmer/ABC

**BOTTOM:** MKFRP staff planting a māmane seedling in the northern Mauna Kea forest restoration area. Photo © Rob Stephens/MKFRP
An unexpected visitor prompts birders to work with local community members for respectful access.

Sometime before January 26, 2017, an orange, black, and white bird arrived in Green Valley Estates near Reading, Pennsylvania, and made itself at home in a neighborhood of nice, neat houses on relatively small lots. The bird found feeders at 20 Indiana Avenue, where Susan and Richard Hybki were feeding birds with a seed mix that included raw peanuts and raisins. Their yard has plenty of trees and bushes around for shelter, too. The Hybkis were impressed when they saw this stunning bird at their

Pennsylvania’s Black-backed Oriole
feeder in the dead of winter, so they mentioned it to their friend, Liz Cates, who is an active birder and member of the Baird Ornithological Club, Berks County's local birding club.

I was club president at the time and learned about the bird as we were chatting before a club board meeting on January 30, 2017. Liz said, “My friend Sue has an oriole visiting her bird feeder.” We asked for details and if we could visit to check out the bird because of the likelihood that an out-of-season bird like this could also be a species outside its normal range. We had no idea how far out!

Unfortunately, it was cold and flu season, and there was a delay in communication, but two days later I heard from Liz that we were welcome to come visit the bird at the Hybkis’ home in Green Valley Estates.

BB’s visit provided a great chance for people of all ages to see a really rare bird. You can tell from his big smile that 8-year-old Gus Fetterman (sitting on the ground with the green coat) was having a great time in the Binder’s driveway! Photo © Alison Feterman
This is only about 15 minutes away from both my home and my workplace. I passed this information on to the twitchers in the bird club and managed to get to the Hybkis' on my lunch break on Thursday, February 2.

I sat in my car from noon until 1 p.m. watching the feeder by their front window, where they had been seeing the oriole. It was sunny but cold and windy outside. Just as I was getting ready to give up and head back to work, the bird flew in to the feeder. I watched it for a few seconds and took a photo through the car window. I got out of the car to attempt a better view, but the bird was shy and flew to and hid in a crabapple tree in the next yard. After a few minutes, it flew out and down to a concrete birdbath at the back corner of the Hybkis' place. It took several drinks of water and I got some more photos. It was a beautiful male oriole: black above and yellow-orange below with a large, white wing patch. I was pleased with our luck of having such a beautiful Bullock's Oriole with a lot of white in the wings, but the auricuals are black, and overall the head is black except for orange spectacles. Is this within the normal range of variation for an adult male Bullock's, or is it maybe a hybrid? We will be trying to get homeowner permission for more people to visit.

I checked back in a few minutes and saw the first comment was from Birder's Guide editor Michael Retter: “THIS IS A BLACK-BACKED ORIOLE!!!! It’s a Mexican species!!!” After some quick Googling, I knew Michael had nailed the ID. As more comments came in on Facebook, I learned that there were no accepted records for this species in the ABA Area! (One previous ABA Area record in San Diego County, California in 2000–2001 was not accepted as wild by the California Bird Records Committee.) I now knew that what would have been a bird of merely local interest had become a really big deal. I needed advice and had some serious planning to do when I got home that evening. Many questions were running through my mind: Would the Hybkis give permission for possibly hundreds of birders to come and stare at their house? How many people would come? Were there enough parking spaces?

I have been occasionally going on rare bird stakeouts for many years, and I've hosted two smaller-scale rare birds of my own, a Northern Wheatear that I found on the campus of Reading Area Community College in October 2012 and a Rufous Hummingbird that was visiting my yard. For the latter, I welcomed some local birders into my yard and kitchen to see it. I had also read about many rare bird stakeouts, both ones that went well and ones that had
problems. I had my own ideas of what to do, but for a possible first ABA Area record, I really wanted some advice from other people with more experience in these events, so I consulted with many people for advice, including local birders Frank and Barb Haas, as well as ABA President Jeff Gordon. Putting this all together gave me a tentative plan for a set of goals and rules for visitors to follow.

The goals I outlined were:

1. Keep visitors safe (fortunately Indiana Avenue is a low-traffic, low-speed street).
2. Keep “B.B., the Oriole” safe (he was skittish, and he would stop visiting the feeder in front of the Hybkis’ house while birders were present on the sidewalk across the street).
3. Keep the bird hosts and neighbors happy and not wishing the bird had never arrived or that it had been kept a secret. We did this by allowing the bird hosts and other neighbors to control the situation and set the rules, which I had compiled and offered as suggestions to be accepted or modified as they wished.
4. Make it possible for every birder who came to have an equal opportunity to see the bird. Photography was secondary to having people see the bird.

Avoiding environmental damage wasn’t an issue at this location, as it can be at other places when visitors may be tempted to stray into wetlands and thickets or onto steep hillsides.

I called Liz Cates and arranged to go to the Hybkis’ house at 9 a.m. the next day. The meeting went well, they were gracious and very pleased that people were interested in their bird. I explained how rare the occurrence was and that there would be a lot of birders who would want to see their beautiful oriole. Definitely hundreds, and maybe a lot more. In the end, it was over 1,800 visitors! No one wanted the residents to feel overwhelmed, so I suggested we use the rules (listed below) that I compiled for visitors to follow. After reviewing them, the Hybkis readily agreed to announce the Black-backed Oriole’s location to the world.

**THE RULES:**

- Visiting hours: 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. only.
- Parking on Indiana Avenue and adjacent streets.
- Be courteous: Don’t block driveways or mailboxes.
- Sign the logbook. (The homeowners were interested in knowing who came to see the bird and where they came from.)
- Don’t stand right in front of the house, to keep from scaring the shy bird away.
- Stay on the sidewalks, and don’t enter people’s yards.
- Respect the neighborhood’s privacy and property.

After leaving the Hybkis’ house, I contacted the people I had promised to let know the address, including Ted Nichols II, who helped me contact email lists and Facebook with the address and visitation rules. But I had one more important job to do before I could stop and watch for the bird again myself, and that
was to inform the local police. I took my old Peterson Field Guide to Mexican Birds to the Lower Heidelberg Township Police Station and met with the chief detective, who was fortunately just coming in the door when I arrived. I explained the situation and told him that we expected many visitors. He thanked me very much for letting them know and then asked about the bird, so I showed him the picture in the book. Every non-birder I talked to was curious about what this special bird looked like, so having my Mexican field guide in hand was helpful.

When I arrived back at Indiana Avenue, I found several local birders who already had the address plus some of the people who had been waiting to hear from me. Some of them had even already seen and photographed the bird. That was when we all met Tom Binder, who lives at 21 Indiana Avenue, for the first time. Tom had come outside in the cold to see what all these people were doing on his sidewalk. Tom and his wife, Linda, like and feed birds, but they had no idea how immersed they were going to be in the world of birding for the next few months! They quickly became the most welcoming rare-bird hosts I’ve ever had the pleasure to meet.

Among the birders I was glad to see was Holly Merker, Pennsylvania’s eBird review coordinator. I had planned to call her to set up an eBird hotspot for the stakeout, but she was ahead of me and just wanted to know what rules or visiting hours I wanted to include as part of the hotspot’s name. In the end, the hotspot got 649 checklists with 66 species of birds.

Frank and Barb Haas were also there, and a visitor logbook was set up at Barb Haas’s suggestion with a notebook she provided. A donation can was put out to collect money for The Nature Conservancy and local conservation organizations. Over $2,000 was raised and split equally among The Nature Conservancy, Berks Nature, and the Baird Ornithological Club.

After a few days, I realized it was getting hard for me to keep updating all of the birding groups with the details of when and where the bird was being seen, so I decided to crowdsourcethe job and give the bird his own Facebook group (tinyurl.com/BBOriole) and encourage people to put their observations up themselves. To do this, the group needed a name and I decided on “B.B.”, which seemed appropriately descriptive and short.

Over time, I met many of the other neighbors. They were all friendly and interested in hearing about the bird. We got to recognize and say hi to all of the regular dog walkers and joggers in the area. Fortunately, it wasn’t lawnmowing season, so only once or twice did people working in their yards keep B.B. from coming in to feed. We always gave the locals a chance to look through our scopes so they could see what all the excitement was about.

Neighborhood resident Tom Binder may have been B.B.’s biggest fan. Over the next two months, he would announce the time of the bird’s arrival in B.B.’s Facebook group every morning. He really enjoyed the visiting birders. He and Linda also provided hot coffee on cold days, and snacks and even hot dogs on a few busy weekend days. They were always very friendly and didn’t seem to mind people standing in their driveway all day long. Tom couldn’t bear to have someone miss the bird, so he often hosted birders in his sunroom, which had a view of his otherwise-obstructed feeder.

While Tom and Linda Binder welcomed the visitors and shared the view from their driveway, Susan and Dick Hybki, who don’t go outside much in the winter, still enjoyed watching the birders from their living room. Even though they lived across the street from each other, the Hybkis and Binders didn’t know each other, but now, thanks to a stray oriole, they have become friends.

On 11 February 2017, Susan Hybki posted in B.B.’s Facebook group: ‘The weekenders. They started again at 8 a.m. this morning and will be there on and off ‘til about 4 o’clock. The neighbors
B\nack-backed Oriole (Icterus abeielii), also known as Abeille’s Oriole, is endemic to central Mexico. It is a short-distance migrant that spends the summer in riparian corridors on the Mexican Plateau and moves south to wooded areas in highlands, such as around Mexico City, for the winter. Interestingly, this species and Black-headed Grosbeak are the only species of bird known to routinely eat monarch butterflies at their wintering concentrations.

The first record of a Black-backed Oriole in the ABA Area occurred in the Tijuana River Valley in San Diego County, California, in 2000 and 2001. The California Bird Records Committee at first accepted the record as a wild bird because it appeared to have migrated and returned to the same spot the following summer; but later it was found to be wintering, and the committee reversed its decision, instead concluding the bird was likely an escapee from the wild bird market across the river in Mexico.

With their big, white wing-patches and orange facial markings, Black-backed and Bullock’s orioles appear somewhat similar, and, indeed, Black-backed has been considered a subspecies of Bullock’s in the past. Adult male Black-backs differ in having much more extensive black above: on the auriculars (cheeks), rear flanks, and rump. Females and immatures are very difficult if not impossible to identify in the field, and, thus, if one showed up in the ABA Area it would probably be mistaken for one of its more expected relatives.

Bullock’s and Black-backed orioles interbreed occasionally in Durango, but, according to DNA evidence, Black-backed is most closely related to Baltimore. Not only that, but Black-backed Oriole is now thought to have arisen from a population of Baltimore Orioles that gave up long-distance migration and took to shorter movements instead. All three species were formerly lumped by the American Ornithological Society as Northern Oriole.

Of course, many people were (and still are) skeptical of the provenance of this bird and suspect it isn’t likely to be accepted by the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee and, subsequently, the ABA’s Checklist Committee. Much discussion occurred about the improbability of a Black-backed Oriole showing up in winter in Pennsylvania without human assistance. Only a few instances have been found of this species occurring as a caged bird in Mexico. One ornithologist noted that, “Members of this genus, even the non-migratory lineages, are prone to wandering and have managed to colonize most of the islands of the Caribbean Sea area.” (K. Omland pers. comm.)

After B.B. left Pennsylvania on April 11, 2017, he apparently flew to Massachusetts and wandered briefly into northern Connecticut. The Massachusetts Avian Records Committee has rejected the sighting as likely an escapee, but as this article was going to press, Pennsylvania’s committee announced it had accepted the record. The ABA Checklist Committee will now almost certainly weigh in.

who own the house that they are standing at have been amazing. This morning they supplied coffee and doughnuts to the birders. All Dick and I have to do is provide the seed, oranges, and feeder. Even then, the birders have been very generous with donations.” Tom Binder replied, “Good morning, Susan. Thanks for your kind words. This has been a wonderful, rich experience for Linda and me. All of the people have been very kind and warm and enthusiastic which, in turn, warms our hearts. But we couldn't do this without lots of support from Mike and Jan Slater. Getting coffee ready for today’s visitors!”

Many birders brought thank you gifts and presents for the Hybks and Binders. Cookies and birdseed were popular gifts. Since red grapes, raw peanuts, and orange halves were the bird's favorite foods, I provided both families with these supplies and also helped by filling feeders when the snow got deep. My wife, Jan, baked a lot of cookies, pumpkin bread, and other treats to share with both the hosts and the visitors. Seabird McKeon of Code 5 Design gave all four of them a Black-backed Oriole T-shirt. Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, which isn't too far away, gave them gift memberships.

The oriole stakeout was a great experience for kids. Many young birders came with their parents to see B.B. Alison Fetterman, who brought her son, Gus, wrote in an email to me:

This was a spectacular event last winter that provided me with the opportunity to bring my then-eight-year-old son to see a truly rare bird. He has been a birder and naturalist since he could use binoculars, and it was a true pleasure to be able to bring him to such a supportive community and positive atmosphere. The fact that so many people were gathered to see one bird, and so welcoming to a young boy, will forever to be imprinted in his mind. Attached is a photo of the crowd, with my happy boy on the ground (in the green coat on opening photo, page 19) on the afternoon of Feb. 11.
Black-backed **Oriole**

There were very few incidents where people wanted to get too close or go into yards without permission. The rules gave me and the other local birders whom I deputized some authority to ask people to comply with the rules, and the vast majority of visiting birders did cheerfully. The only rule that wasn’t just common courtesy or common sense was the visiting hours, but, still, people obeyed this guideline. There were a few days when we all agreed to “stay open late” for TV crews to arrive and film. And a number of articles, authored by Bill Urich, appeared in the local newspaper, *The Reading Eagle*.

There was only one complaint from a neighbor that I heard about: Someone apparently parked too close to a mailbox, and that house didn’t get mail delivery that day. After hearing that, we made sure to keep reminding people not to block driveways, mailboxes, or garbage cans. A few people wanted to stand on the Hybkis’ side of the street close enough to see and photograph the bird better. The rules we had agreed to with homeowners helped me justify asking people to be courteous and move back across the street. I agreed with them that, “yes, it was a public sidewalk, but we didn’t want people complaining to the police, and the bird is shy”. Having people stay across the street worked out pretty well: Over the next two months, more than 1,824 visitors saw the bird.

One especially interesting thing to come out of the visit involved an analysis of the economic impact of B.B.’s visit. Corey Callaghan, a doctoral candidate at the University of New South Wales–Sydney, obtained data from the logbook and performed an analysis to see how far people had traveled and to gauge economic impact. His analysis was published last fall in the journal *Human Dimensions of Wildlife* (see tinyurl.com/Callaghan2018). He concluded that visiting birders spent $223,000 or more.

With the help of homeowners and the cooperation of visiting birders, everyone stayed safe, including B.B., who was last seen in the neighborhood on April 10, 2017. All involved seemed to gain something positive from the experience. So, in the end, did we meet the goals? Enthusiastically, yes! 😊
Sanctuaries: Parks, Preserves and Places of Refuge in the World chronicles some of the world’s well-known and not-so-well known lands under conservation. Mary A. Hood describes over 60 different protected areas representing all the varied ways that have been used to create safe habitats for endangered, threatened or vulnerable birds, wildlife and plants.

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POWERED BY BIRD WATCHER’S DIGEST
Santa Ana is safe for now, but more work remains

As I walk, Texas spiny-lizards skirt by my feet and American snout butterflies cloud my line of sight. Off to my left, a trio of Groove-billed Anis debates its sunset plans. I continue further. Pink-and-purple roseate skimmer dragonflies glide past. Killdeer call angrily from above, and Least and Pied-billed grebes quietly voice their pleasures (and displeasures) in Willow Lake. Green darners fight for territory on a twig a few feet away, by the water’s edge. A sabal palm rustles in the wind—the same palm where, three years ago, I spent a full hour watch-
ing a one-eyed Summer Tanager (who clearly hadn’t learned her lesson) continue to feast on a hive of bees. Further down Chachalaca Trail, I find the tree which houses an immense Great Horned Owl nest, viewed by thousands of birders who quietly watched from a distance a few winters ago. Barn Swallows feed hungrily over the lake. A Great Kiskadee shrieks nearby. The wind picks up, and the dragonflies hunker down. For a moment my cares drift away, all is still.

Walking back to the visitor center from the trailhead, I note the depth of vegetation which would be cleared. A border wall here would have required the standard 150-foot enforcement zone for a cleared, dirt, militarized road, nearly eliminating the entire trailhead path among a total of 44 demolished acres. Only 3% of the U.S.’s Tamaulipan thornscrub habitat remains.

Yet my walk is thankfully met with some semblance of serenity for the first time in many months. It’s strange: the way in which we appreciate something so much more when we know that we might lose it. My dozens of visits here from June 2017 to March 2018 have felt frantic, anxious, and nauseating, as each time I wondered whether our resistance efforts would be enough to keep this place open to public visitation, and to allow wildlife to move freely from Mexico, into the refuge, and through the rest of south Texas.

At least 44 acres of imperiled Tamaulipan thornscrub habitat would have been bulldozed at Santa Ana NWR in order to make way for the border wall.

Photo © Vince Smith
This place, so dear to my heart, is Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), which protects the U.S.’s largest tract of Tamaulipan thornscrub along the Rio Grande. With over 400 species of birds and more species of butterflies on its list than any other state, Santa Ana is often understandably referred to as the crown jewel of the nation’s national wildlife refuge system. And this special place has now become a flashpoint in the current U.S. immigration debate.

**WILDLIFE VS. BORDER WALLS**

Today, the lower Rio Grande Valley is heavily populated, and as with most of Texas, privately owned. As such, there are few public access points to the Rio Grande. Private landowners with land on the south side of the wall fear that they will either lose their land or be sentenced to living a life in “No Man’s Land” completely walled off from the rest of their country. Many issues accompany the building of a border wall on private land. Indeed, there are still about 80 (out of 300) open court cases with private landowners from the first round of border wall installed a decade ago during the second Bush administration. Public land, on the other hand, can be built upon almost immediately. This was the current administration’s impetus for targeting Santa Ana and other national wildlife refuges.

In December 2017, Border Patrol sector chief Manuel Padilla stated publicly that if any funds were allocated for border walls, the very first segment would be installed at Santa Ana NWR. Receiving about 150,000 visitors annually, the 2,088-acre refuge spans about three miles west to east and is the longest linear tract of federal land in the region, meaning that the Trump administration can waive the environmental laws and build a wall there at will. (This was made possible by the regulations set during the last round of border walls during the second Bush administration.) If a wall were built at Santa Ana, it would destroy much of the refuge’s habitat and slice the visitor center from the entirety of the refuge.

Plans for new border walls were released in summer 2017 and outlined 28 miles in Hidalgo County, which, added to the pre-existing 22 miles, would wall off the entire county from the river—placing homes, farms, businesses, and 8,600 acres of conserved public green space in “No Man’s Land”. In some
places, the proposed wall would be over a mile and a half from the Rio Grande—the actual U.S.–Mexico border.

In order to understand the impact of a border wall on wildlife, one first needs to understand how things are now, and how things would be if the wall comes to pass. The current flood control levee consists of a road atop a mound, gently sloped on both sides and covered in native vegetation. Endangered Texas indigo snakes and Texas tortoises can crawl up and down this slope at will. Ocelots, bobcats, and javelinas cross with ease.

Installation of a border wall would eliminate the southern one-third of the levee and replace it with 18 feet of vertical concrete wall, topped with 6” x 6” steel bollards to reach a total height of up to 30 feet. Clearing space for a border wall would mean the destruction of more than 300 acres of imperiled habitat. Perhaps even more concerning is that the vertical concrete will make it impossible for terrestrial creatures to pass through. At best, this will limit the natural movements of creatures and thus decrease their genetic diversity. At worst, many animals will be trapped by the wall and drown when the area floods (as Santa Ana and Bentsen State Park did for four months in 2010). Anything which cannot fly would be affected. Ocelots, of which an estimated 50–75 remain in the U.S. (all in the Rio Grande Valley), would likely become extirpated in the U.S. over time due to inbreeding caused by the elimination of gene flow from the much larger Mexican population.

A CAUTIONARY TALE
Santa Ana isn’t the only NWR at risk. The Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR was first established in 1979 and has grown to protect tracts of land along the final 275 miles of the Rio Grande. The idea behind its creation was to conserve smaller tracts of land which are close enough to one another to permit wildlife movement among them, thereby increasing the quality and quantity of wildlife in the area at large. But part
Walling off **Wildlife**

Of this dream has already been severed.

In 2008, a segment of border wall was built between the quaint Hidalgo World Birding Center and a 54-acre tract of the Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR; the proximity and contiguous nature of the two sites was the very reason the birding center was created in the first place. Border Patrol installed a gate there with the promise that it would remain open during business hours so people could access the birding center. But that promise was broken. The entire tract of land, including a one-mile paved nature trail, is now completely closed to the public. The same fate could befall other beloved birding sites and natural areas, such as Bentsen Lower Rio Grande Valley State Park, Anzalduas County Park, and the National Butterfly Center.

**ADVOCACY**

A short time into my term as a board member of Friends of the Wildlife Corridor (the non-profit support group for Santa Ana and Lower Rio Grande Valley NWRs), talk was ramping up about the possibility of 60 additional miles of border wall in the Rio Grande Valley. An informal border wall resistance coalition, which includes the Sierra Club, Friends of the Wildlife Corridor, immigrant rights groups, and others, was formed. In August 2017, our coalition held a “Save Santa Ana” hike. Over 682 people walked to the observation tower and back to the levee, where we lined up and held hands, instead forming a “wall of humanity” where the proposed border wall was proposed to be built.

In October, two other members of the Friends of the Wildlife Corridor and I went to Washington, D.C. to lobby members of Congress. There, we were joined by ABA President Jeff Gordon, and together we educated lawmakers about the negative environmental and economic impacts that new border walls in the Rio Grande Valley would create. We spent three days visiting with staff from offices of lawmakers both Democratic and Republican. Additionally, we hand-delivered informational packets to all 528
offices of the House and Senate.

The response to our efforts was mostly positive, but for me the most poignant insight was the lack of understanding about the area. “What do you mean a border wall wouldn’t go on the border?” was a common question. While installing a border wall on the actual border would be a pretty straightforward (albeit still very damaging) endeavor further west, a wall cannot be built in the Rio Grande, as the river’s path is meandering and ever-changing.

We held another national rally on 27 January 2018, the day of Santa Ana’s 75th anniversary. With over 900 people in attendance at and adjacent to the refuge that day, the event was a success. Visitors enjoyed speakers, music, poetry, and a free community barbecue put on by Congressman Filemón Vela, Jr. (TX 34-D). The national media were also in attendance.

Throughout the year, we encouraged everyone we know, and many whom we didn’t, via paid posts on social media to call their senators and representatives. We also gave them pre-stamped postcards to fill out and address to their senators.

Democracy only works if we make our voices heard, both at the ballot box and with advocacy. Santa Ana NWR, we learned in March, has for the moment been spared a border wall. After over 10 months of our working to save the refuge, an exemption was written into the omnibus funding bill. It’s a reminder that “Yes, we can make a difference!” While we birders, along with a diverse coalition of local residents, can be proud of working together to save Santa Ana, we need to remain vigilant; the Santa Ana portion of the border wall represents only 9.5% of the wall which would be built through southern Texas’s imperiled habitats.

When the 2018 budget was released in March, Santa Ana NWR was exempted from the building of a border wall. But included in the 2018 budget was funding to wall off the rest of Hidalgo County: a 50-mile stretch of 18- to 30-foot-tall border walls, with a three-mile gap at Santa Ana. Our work begins anew, as we now have the opportunity to save the precious remaining wildlife habitat in the Rio Grande Valley. There is so much more we can lose. Only together can we save the valley’s remaining natural places.

**CALL TO ACTION**

Santa Ana has been spared, but many tracts of public land are slated to end up behind border walls. Here is a list of the federal, state, county, and non-profit green spaces which could soon end up behind and/or be bulldozed to be replaced by the segments of border wall that are now fully funded:

- La Parida Banco Tract (447 acres)
- Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park (797 acres)
- El Morillo Banco Tract (654 acres)
- National Butterfly Center (100 acres)
- Madero Tract (273 acres)
- Granjeno Tract (3 acres)
SAFETY IN THE VALLEY

Six years ago, I moved to the Rio Grande Valley to work at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. I was a 26-year-old small-town Midwesterner who was afraid of her own shadow. I had never been anywhere near the border, let alone worked or lived on it. Friends fed me false stereotypes and unfounded fears that, regretfully, clouded my first impressions.

Since moving here, I have experienced not a single border-related incidence in which I’ve felt threatened or in danger. I have walked the closest road that parallels the border, just a few miles from my home, solo, at least 500 times over the past four years. To me, the Valley is safe. The Valley is my home. And my home is not a war zone. While it should be noted that undocumented migrants commit crimes at a lower rate than U.S. citizens, unlawful border crossings are hovering near a 40-year low, and our border towns are safer than most large U.S. cities—all of this despite what some media outlets would have you believe.

In my personal experience as a resident of the area, a border wall will do more harm than good. The environmental degradation and loss of access to some of our most cherished and celebrated birding sites, such as Santa Ana, would be a major blow to the birding community. And an overwhelming majority of my fellow local residents agree. We do not have a border crisis. We have a crisis of misinformation.

HERE IS WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY

Educate • Talk with your friends and family on the issue; every moment of every day is a chance to be an advocate.

Call • Each of us needs to call both of his U.S. senators and her U.S. representative. Spread the word and ask others to do the same. If you get a recording, leave a message. Even though funding is allocated, enough voices can still stop this ecological disaster.

Email or Send Postcards • Send a message about why you are opposed to border walls, and make sure to add your name and full mailing address to the card. It’s important that your full address and ZIP code be included.

Share on Facebook • Join and follow the “Save Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge” group on Facebook in order to stay up to date with news articles, events, and updates on funding regarding the border wall everywhere in southern Texas—not just Santa Ana. We very much appreciate you liking and sharing our items on Facebook, but don’t forget to also follow through with one or both of the items above! If Congress doesn’t hear from you, your opinion doesn’t affect decision making. Use the hashtags #NoBorderWall, #SaveBentsenStatePark, and #SaveTheWildlifeCorridor in your social media posts.

The total area of natural habitat slated to be forfeited to “No Man’s Land” (between the fence and the Rio Grande) is, according to the omnibus bill passed in mid-March 2018, over 6,525 acres. This acreage is equal to 5,019 NFL football fields. We must all make our voices heard, loud and clear, that we do not want a border wall slicing through some of the most diverse habitat in the entire country.
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