

HABITAT HERALD

Wildlife Austin's monthly Newsletter



August 2014



Hello Everyone,

I hope everyone is staying cool in the summer heat.

In this edition of the Habitat Herald we have a special garden of the month that show cases a wildlife habitat patio design. This Garden of the Month brings hope to those of us with just a little piece of patio to offer our wildlife friends, but thanks to our garden of the month winner, we learn that sometimes a patio or balcony space is enough to create an urban wildlife habitat oasis.

We also have an introduction to our Park Ranger Cadets. Cadets are both high school students and graduates who use their free summer before returning school to learn more about what City of Austin Park Rangers do on a daily basis.

In Living in a WUI, Ranger Kuwamura discuss the decline of fireflies and list simple steps we can do to make Austin a more hospitable habitat for these unique critters. Lastly we have information on the upcoming Fall Habitat Steward Training, registration is open and will close around the 18th of August .

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Would you like to receive the newsletter?

E-mail us at wildlife@austintexas.gov



Wildlife Austin

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Parks and Recreation
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Austin, TX 78705
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wildlife@austintexas.gov

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Saturday August 9

7:00am - 11:30am
Hornsby Bend Bird Observatory Monthly Bird Survey
<http://www.austintexas.gov/cer>

9:00am - 11:15am
Lady Bird Lake Volunteer Cleanup

Tuesday August 12

5:30pm - 6:30pm
Volunteer Orientation
Sustainable Food Center
<http://sustainablefood.nonprofitsoapbox.com/calendar/event/115>

Free Composting Class City of Austin
6:00pm - 7:00pm
Willie Mae Kirk Branch Library

Saturday, August 16

10:00am - 12:00pm
Insect Visitors in Your Garden
Zilker Botanical Garden
www.GrowGreen.org

Saturday, August 23

9:00am - 12:30pm
Habitat Restoration Class
Northwest Recreation Center, 2913 Northland Dr., 78757
www.austintexas.gov/creekside

Saturday, August 30

9:00am - 1:00pm
Ecological Literacy Volunteer Day at Hornsby Bend
<http://www.austintexas.gov/cer>

Garden of the Month

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August's Garden of the Month goes to the Bellware's Balcony garden. The Bellware's are ushering a new (and increasingly useful) trend in providing habitat in Austin's ever increasing population. With the growth projections of Austin the effects of fragmentation on our local wildlife is sure to increase along with the effects of urbanization. According to the National Wildlife Federation there are three major types of habitat loss: destruction, fragmentation and degradation.

Habitat destruction is any action that destroys habitat so examples include such as filling in wetlands, dredging river bottoms, mowing fields and cutting down trees. While some of these actions may be necessary—like felling a hazardous tree to ensure the safety of park patrons—often times urban sprawl removes biomass completely decimating the chances of a habitat's regrowth. Habitat Fragmentation is the breaking up of continuous habitat. This is a particular concern for migratory animals who depend on specific vegetation to assist them in seasonal migration. The parceling of habitat for any animal makes reproduction, the security of food and shelter increasingly challenging. Fragmentation takes place when roads, developments or even parking lots are built. What once was a bio-rich landscape now becomes an ecological desert. The same development that contributes to more schools, hospitals and roads that reduces traffic congestion, also introduce challenges for our neighboring wildlife. Lastly, degradation occurs when habitat that previously supported wildlife becomes diminished. Often this is due to pollution and the introduction of invasive species that suck much need resources, like water and sunlight away from the native and adapted species which have supported the local wildlife for centuries. (for more information on habitat loss visit: <http://www.nwf.org/Wildlife/Threats-to-Wildlife/Habitat-Loss.aspx>)

Urbanization may contribute much to the cultural growth of Austin but also presents new challenges for the wildlife that have adapted to this environment. August's featured balcony serves as a much needed answer to the loss of habitat we face presently and in the future. By providing wildlife with the simple elements of a habitat—food, water, shelter and a place to raise young complimented by sustainable gardening practices—even in the smallest of spaces can offer hope and stewardship in Austin's changing landscape.

Garden of the Month

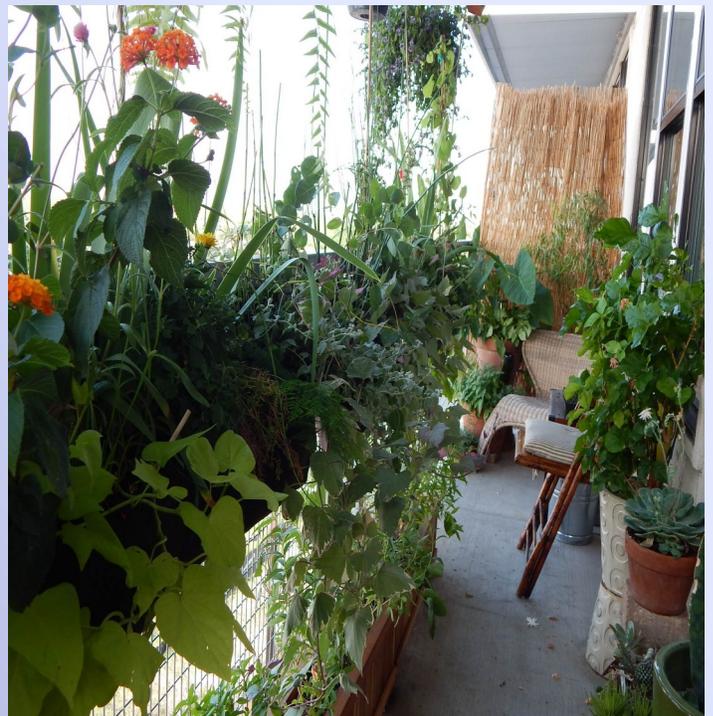
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The Bellware's Balcony by Lee Bellware

Austin's skyline is changing. It seems a residential high rise goes up in the city once a month and the parade of tall buildings have traveled boldly down South Lamar, where I live, in my new apartment on the fourth story of a monolith that would not win any architectural awards. When I first moved in, looking out on the city made me and my new husband feel like we were at the top of the world, but there was a trade-off, and its name was cement. Our gallery, as we call it, looks out onto what was once the lot of two defunct industrial businesses and a sea of pavement, neon signs, and glaring white rooftops.

The year we moved in, we counted 16 construction cranes that we could see from our gallery alone. 'Progress' was not pretty. But we also saw parrots that roosted nearby, kingbirds catching bugs in the accidental greenbelt at the edge of the industrial property, and nighthawks that would lope through the air, repeating their plaintive "peents" at dusk. There was still wild-life that used the corridors between these towers of residential progress, and we wanted them to come little closer, but how to attract them? Like the ball field in "Field of Dreams", if you build it, they will come. What began with just a few plants has led to one of the most unlikely, lively, and lovely gardens I have ever lived beside. It has even been certified by the National Wildlife Federation as a Backyard Habitat.

We used space wisely, lining the gallery with shallow wooden boxes and hanging soft, poly-wool planters on the inside of the rail. At either end of the balcony, we zip-tied bamboo fencing for privacy and set up large terra cotta pots of elephant ear and willow. We added long-armed macho ferns and a purple fan flower trailing from the overhanging metal roof, and set out smaller pots of succulents, catnip, and even a few tomatoes with a climbing cage for the vines.



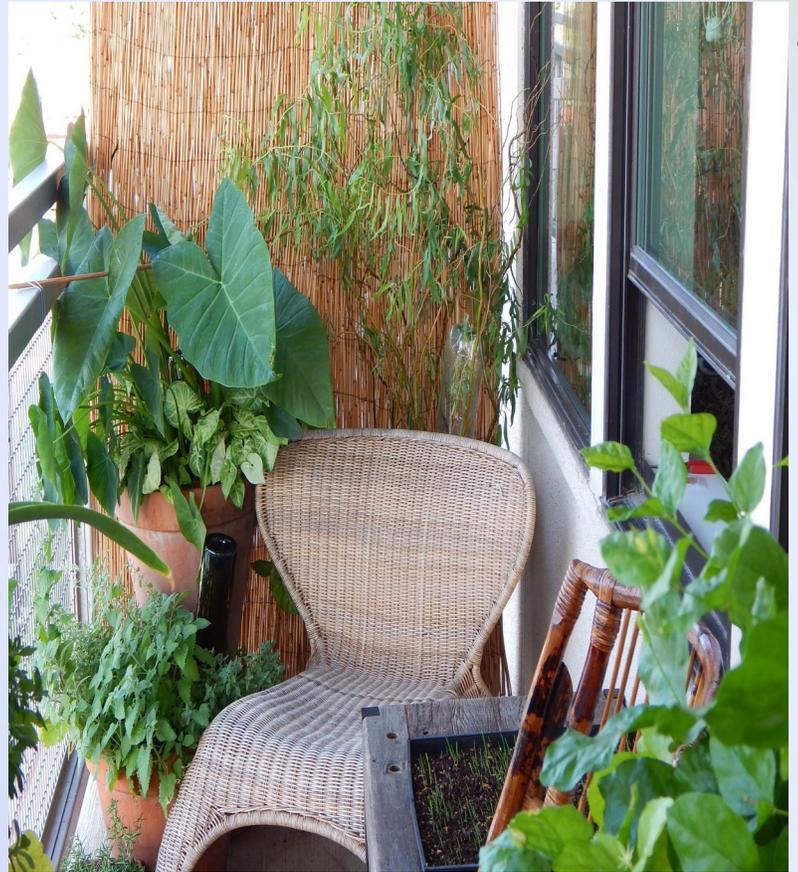
Garden of the Month

We left just enough room for chairs the end of the gallery for ourselves--the perfect perch for two city-dwelling biophiles. All this and it is four stories up in the air, only a few feet wide, and a stone's throw long.

Very quickly after the first plants were put in their containers we had our first insect visitors. Honeybees and dirigible-like bumblebees found the blossoms of the milkweed, cucumber, and bachelor's buttons to be arranged in a nice buffet. Roy Schider, our garden spider and one of our first residents, grew three sizes bigger in the space of a month and settled on a permanent place for his web, out of the way of the misting wand. A minute anole arrived unannounced in a nursery plant and quickly became part of the landscape.

He particularly liked the netting we used to dissuade the indoor cat from leaping onto the railing where the birds congregate. Using the net as a highway, he travels unseen and has the run of the garden. A regular procession of house finches and white winged doves comes through twice a day, and the cat is always there to see the show

from her hideaway below the canopy of green, completely entertained and equally as completely



at



Garden of the Month

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The Bellware's Balcony

Admittedly, when we began the garden, were really hoping to attract parrots. They flew by achingly close and eyeballed our gallery, but didn't stop. We forgot all about them when we began to attract hummingbirds with a few nectar-filled feeders. We now have a family of three ruby throated hummingbirds who perch on the tiny grapevine twigs we secured to the railing. They visit most aggressively at dinnertime, unfazed by our presence.

Our cat spends most of her gallery hours snoozing on her one-by-two-foot patch of lawn, planted in a nursery tray and set in the few sunbeams that make it through the ferns. She insists on drinking from the small bird bath even when she has a perfectly good water bowl in the kitchen. If it sounds like an ideal situation, it is. Watering is easy, weeding is non-existent, and I get to keep my otherwise invasive colocassia and dangerous feline far away from Texas soils and native wildlife. The temperature of the gallery is always balmy, easily ten or twenty degrees cooler than it was when it had no vegetation to shade it. It is a miniature paradise. Why doesn't everyone with a gallery in Austin do this?



Apartment dwellers are often considered transitory, yet with the New-York-like transformation of our city, more and more people will be living in these properties for years. Even a tiny effort to put out a humming bird feeder or a few flowers for the bees would green up the barren balconies of this new, urban Austin. But people think that they don't have time, that it isn't allowed, or that the wildlife will not come. Wildlife will come to your urban Austin balcony, no matter how much development is going on around it. Trust me. But you have to give them something to work with. You would be amazed how little it takes to please a small, wild thing.

Garden of the Month

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The Bellware's Balcony

And just imagine! If every other balcony in town had a garden, we could get back vertically some of the green space we have lost horizontally. Migratory birds and insects would again find some Austin hospitality as they pass through the city, and perhaps a few more creatures might just make it through the winters with our efforts to feed them and provide them with water and shelter.

Other cities--New Orleans, Montreal--are known for their balcony gardens. If our success on one small balcony is any indicator, Austin could become as green overnight. It is something my husband and I daydream about when we sit at sunset high above the city in our deep green shade with the cat curled up on her tiny lawn and the nighthawks and bats beginning their flights.



For more information on how to transform your apartment or townhouse into a wildlife-friendly oasis, go to:

<http://nrspad.sc.egov.usda.gov/distributioncenter/pdf.aspx?productID=646>

If you are interested in certifying your Wildlife Habitat email: wildlife@austintexas.gov for a prepaid National Wildlife Federation Habitat Certification application.

To learn more about gardening for wildlife and to meet others who are passionate about creating wildlife habitats sign up for this fall's Habitat Steward's training : <https://www.formstack.com/forms/?1616799-ry9nftdrmD>

Living In a WUI Without All the HOOEY

Summer Lights: Fireflies

Ranger Kuwamura



Photo credit: Firefly.org

Summer always finds a way to trigger your senses into remembering childhood. The smell of BBQ, the blankets of wildflowers, fireworks and snow cones on the 4th of July always hold a special place in our memories. All of these things return every summer, so what things are we forgetting that are fading fast? I can think of a few things like getting to play outside until the sun comes down, but the thing I miss the most is catching fireflies.

Fields of grass used to light up with these magical insects at summer camps and back yards all through the summer. I remember running with a net and a jar to get a closer look at the ‘lighting bugs.’ If you noticed that you are seeing less than you remember seeing as a child, than you are right.

Urban development and light pollution are factors that are playing into the decline in Firefly populations. Fireflies communicate and find mates by mimicking each other’s light patterns, and studies have shown that passing cars with shining headlights have thrown off the sync of Firefly light patterns as they pass by. These flashy insects also thrive in environments such as rotting wood and tall grasses that are

being shoveled away and record speeds by new developments.

How can we help? You can help fireflies thrive by providing a habitat in your own yard, and by changing a few habits in your summer routines. Here are a few tips to get fireflies in your yard:

1. **Provide a water source:** Fireflies enjoy moist areas to lay eggs, and for their larvae to thrive.
2. **Stop using chemical fertilizers:** Not only can this be hazardous to Fireflies, but certain fertilizers can harm other wildlife.
3. **Turn off your lights:** Avoid using your porch lights once the sun goes down, so fireflies can communicate without distracting light that can make it harder for Fireflies to find a mate.
4. **Cut your grass less:** Who can say no to fewer chores? Provide taller patches of grass for fireflies to hang out in during the day, so they can have good cover until they fly into the taller tree branches at night.

Leave piles of rotting wood or debris: Fireflies like to eat worms and slugs that live in these habitats. Leaving piles of debris will provide an area of good food sources.

Source: <http://www.firefly.org/>

If you are interested in becoming a steward and turning your yard into a certified habitat, you can look at the [National Wildlife Federation](#) for more information.

Park Ranger Cadets

As part of the Park Ranger cadet curriculum, cadets learn about an array of land management perspectives. Rangers Tucker and Rowe took cadets to Blunn Creek Nature preserve to learn the importance of invasive species removal. After which cadets assisted in hauling ligustrum piles closer to the trail head in order to facilitate removal. Mulching invasive species at this location helps to prevent and stop the spread of erosion.



After learning about invasive species at Blunn Creek, Cadets met Meredith Gray at Festival Beach Community Garden. Meredith is the City of Austin's Conservation Program Coordinator for Sustainable Urban Agriculture, Community Gardens & Wildlife Austin Program. Cadets discovered a different side of land management from the community garden perspective. Meredith explained the community garden design process and the important role these gardens play in the local food movement.



By exploring the various sides of land management cadets can educate the public—as well as their peers and family—about the different aspects of land management, which we hope



will inspire other young people to become stewards to our precious Austin land.

Become a Habitat Steward!



Share your passion for wildlife and help to Keep Austin Wild!

The 2014 Wildlife Austin Habitat Stewards' Training registration is open! Become an important part of YOUR city's efforts to Keep Austin Wild! Austin is one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country to receive the designation as a Community Wildlife Habitat™ by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF). This success has been made possible by people like you, who have made the effort to create native wildscapes at their homes and in public places and to teach and assist others. That's what the Wildlife Austin Habitat Stewards' Training is all about. Becoming a Habitat Steward™ not only means that

You'll Learn About:

- How to Create Wildlife Friendly Habitats
- Native and Invasive Plants
- Landscape Design Principles
- Ways to Support Habitat in the Community
- Beneficial Insects
- Native and Local Wildlife
- Water conservation and riparian restoration



Habitat Stewards Receive:

- 25+ Hours of Intensive, Hands-On Training
- Engaging Field Trips and Habitat Activities
- A Comprehensive Training Manual with Local Resources
- Instruction from Local Conservation Professionals

An important part of becoming a Habitat Steward is giving back. We ask that each Steward commit to 30 hours of volunteer habitat work in the community within 1 year of graduating. The course fee is \$45 and covers the cost of materials.

To register please visit <https://www.formstack.com/forms/?1616799-ry9nftdrmD>

For questions please call 512-978-2606 or e-mail us at wildlife@austintexas.gov.