



A ♦ u ♦ s ♦ t ♦ i ♦ n
Nature & Science Center

Volunteer Handbook

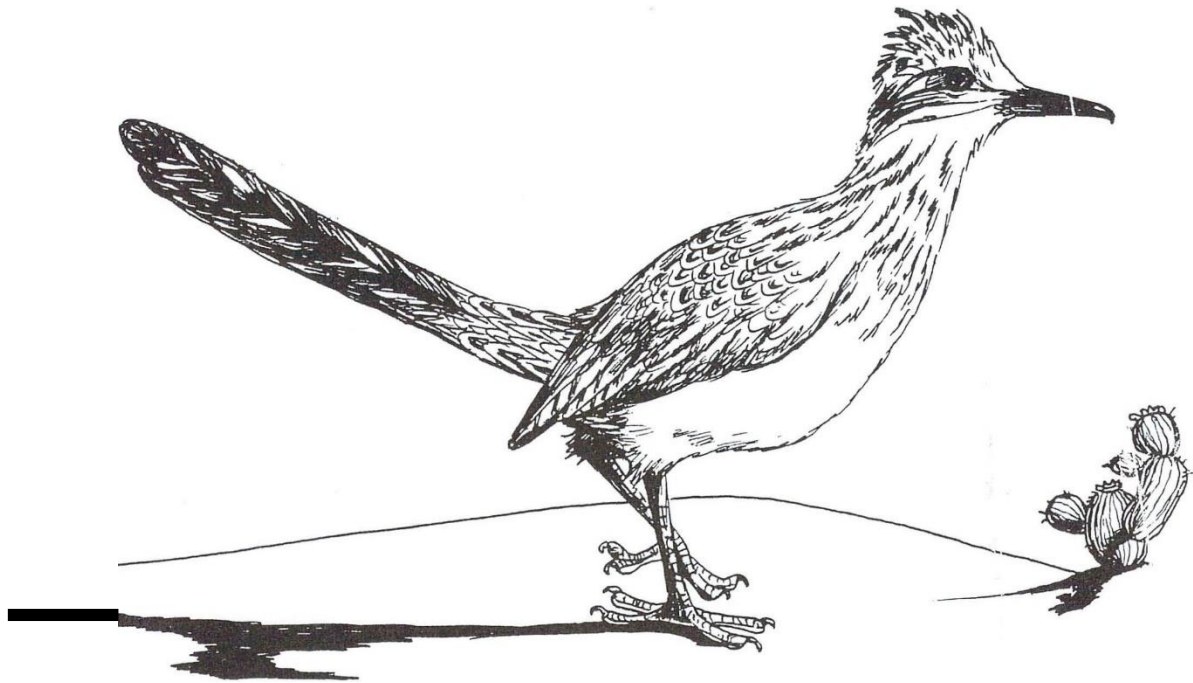


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Welcome to the Austin Nature & Science Center!

You are now part of a legacy of community-building centered on scientific inquiry, nature-based education, and ecological conservation.

In 1959, City of Austin Parks & Recreation Department (PARC) director Beverly Sheffield and special supervisor Dorothy Nan developed a Junior Nature Program to facilitate nature recreation and education in the hopes of inspiring new generations of environmental stewards for Austin's unique ecosystem. Through many different forms and iterations, this became what is now the Austin Nature & Science Center (ANSC). ANSC continues to serve the public by providing nature-based experiences, educational programs, and engaging science and art exhibits to spark curiosity and compassion for the natural world in visitors of all ages and from all walks of life.

Vision: It is our shared vision that we may continue to nurture our community's curiosity in the arts and sciences and facilitate a meaningful relationship to the natural world for all. We see a future guided by compassion, curiosity, and scientific inquiry to create a sustainable, inclusive, and equitable world.

Our Mission: To provide nature-based education and recreational opportunities that empower our community to foster meaningful relationships with and a sense of responsibility for the natural world through inquiry, play, and understanding.

"Conservation is not enough – the thing that is missing is love."

--Naturalist, Joseph Wood Krutch

Volunteer Program Overview

How do I apply to become a volunteer?

Volunteer applications are accepted on a rolling basis. We welcome you to fill out a volunteer application whenever you are ready. If you are selected for our volunteer program, you will serve as a “volunteer-in-training” for the 10-week new volunteer season.

What is a “volunteer-in-training”?

For Trade Counter, Landscaping, Wildlife, and Front Desk Greeter positions: During the 10-week new volunteer season you will receive an orientation to ANSC, safety training, and training for your specific volunteer position. This is an opportunity to find out if volunteering with ANSC long-term is a good fit for you. Volunteers-in-training are expected to volunteer an average of 9 hours per month (minimum) during the season and can always sign up for additional available shifts.

For Nature’s Way Preschool Hiking Volunteer position: Training consists of two 4-hour sessions, including in-person and virtual trainings, as well as class shadowing. Position is available until April 25, 2025 for this school year.

What happens after the 10-week new volunteer season?

For Trade Counter, Landscaping, Wildlife, and Front Desk Greeter positions: At the end of the 10-week new volunteer season, you will complete a feedback survey with your volunteer manager and discuss a plan to become a fully-fledged ANSC volunteer. Our goal is to create a mutually beneficial relationship with regular volunteers. Full volunteers are also expected to volunteer an average of 9 hours per month (minimum) and can always sign up for additional available shifts.

For Nature’s Way Preschool Hiking Volunteer position: This position will end for the school year on April 25. You will be asked to complete a feedback survey, and you are welcome to apply for other volunteer positions for the summer at ANSC and we will provide details regarding the 2025-2026 school year NWPS volunteer positions.

Volunteer Program Benefits

Volunteering is a great way to give back to the community by sharing your skills, knowledge, and time. Volunteering can also give back to you! In addition to the benefits listed below, we reward and recognize our volunteers starting at 100-hours of volunteer service time and regularly recognize volunteer hour accruals and achievements in service.

- **Continued Learning:** ANSC is an educational site. We hope you take advantage of the wonderful resources here to pursue your curiosities and expand your depth of knowledge. Please speak with your volunteer manager about any available trainings or special events to consider in support of your role as a volunteer.
- **Access to Staff Knowledge:** Our myriad staff are skilled and talented in many ways and are excited to share their knowledge and experience with you.
- **Volunteer Hours for Credit:** Volunteering here may earn you time that can be credited. Talk with your institution to learn about what they offer.
- **Special Events:** We host a variety of unique and exciting events that you are invited to attend. As a volunteer you will be among the first to know about these special events. Talk with your volunteer manager for details.
- **Volunteer Swag:** Each year we design a new volunteer T-shirt. To celebrate your hours of service, you can also earn pins and badges to show your volunteer pride.
- **Plant & Seed Rescue:** In the effort to reduce waste, we will offer any landscape plants that will no longer be on our site for you to take home and use in your garden following major landscaping projects. Here you can also connect with like-minded plant people and swap new plants and seeds.
- **Behind the Scenes Tours:** We happily host behind-the-scenes tours to give you a peek at all the different aspects of our site. Check out wildlife care areas, our planetarium program, gardens & landscape, and the natural history collections!
- **Volunteer Celebrations:** We recognize the contributions that volunteers make to our site and practice ongoing celebrations that culminate in our annual Volunteer Appreciation Party to recognize your hard work and dedication.

Expectations, Policies & Safety

We are a multi-faceted institution, delivering science and nature based educational programming, showcasing museum collections and exhibits, caring for wildlife animals, and housing an active pre-school all situated on a nature preserve. To ensure the safety and well-being of all staff, visitors, pre-school goers, wildlife, and volunteers our policies and expectations outline our basic guidelines to achieve and maintain the symbiosis of our unique site.

EXPECTATIONS:

- **Time Commitment:** *For Trade Counter, Landscaping, Wildlife, and Front Desk Greeter positions:* Volunteer shifts start at 3 hours. Volunteers are expected to commit to at least 3 shifts per month (an average of 9 hours per month) over the course of a ten-week volunteer season. You can, of course, always volunteer for more shifts per month. We encourage regular volunteering at a rate that is sustainable for you.
For Nature's Way Preschool Hiking Volunteer position: Training consists of two four-hour sessions, followed by shifts of 2 hours - 10:30-12:30, with M/W/F, T/Th, M-Th, Fri, or M-F options available.
- **Scheduling:** Each volunteer will create an availability schedule with their volunteer manager and attend all committed dates.
- **Tracking hours:** Please make sure you are properly logging time in our volunteer timekeeping system and validating your hours with your volunteer manager.
- **Notification of Lateness or Absences:** While we encourage you to give as much advance notice as possible for any dates you will miss, some circumstances may not allow for that. In the event you are sick, please notify your volunteer manager **as soon as you know you cannot attend your shift**. If you plan to travel or have other engagements, please notify your volunteer manager at least **two weeks in**

advance. You will be able to schedule extra shifts to help maintain the minimum average commitment of 9 hours per month.

- **Excessive Absences:** If you miss more than 2 shifts without notice, or if you are frequently absent and/or fail to meet the minimum monthly time commitment, your participation in our volunteer program may be re-evaluated.
- **Preparedness:** Please arrive on time to your shifts, ready and able to volunteer. That means wearing appropriate attire for your role and bringing any necessary food or personal items.
- **Independence:** Volunteer managers will help define volunteer roles and responsibilities and maintain guidance, leadership, and availability, but volunteers are largely expected to perform their roles independently after orientation and training to the position and necessary resources.

POLICIES:

- **Criminal Background Check:** All City of Austin volunteers must pass a Criminal Background Check (CBI) before volunteering. *For Trade Counter, Landscaping, Wildlife, and Front Desk Greeter positions:* If you have lived outside of Texas in the past 10 years, you may also be required to go through the fingerprinting process as part of your CBI. *For Nature's Way Preschool Hiking Volunteer position:* ALL applicants are required to go through fingerprinting as part of their CBI.
- **Volunteer Code of Conduct:** As an ANSC Volunteer you are expected to represent our institution to the highest standard, upholding our values of respect & inclusivity, community, and stewardship of the natural world. As such you must behave appropriately, using your best judgement, and refrain from inappropriate workplace conversations and behaviors. If you find yourself in an uncomfortable situation or are unclear on what is appropriate, please reach out to your volunteer manager or to site supervisor Hayley Gillespie hayley.gillespie@austintexas.gov

- **Substance-Free Workplace:** The Austin Nature & Science Center is a substance-free zone, meaning all staff, visitors, and volunteers must not bring, use, give away, or sell any drugs, alcohol, or tobacco on our premises. If you are caught with or show that you are under the influence of illegal substances or alcohol you will be asked to leave and your participation in our volunteer program will be re-evaluated. All PARD facilities and parks are smoke-free zones. To protect the health of all staff and visitors, our wildlife, and the nature preserve smoking and vaping are not allowed anywhere on our site.
- **Dress Code:** Volunteers must dress appropriately according to their volunteer responsibilities. Wear comfortable clothing to perform your duties including close-toed shoes. Volunteers are required to wear their volunteer T-shirt, a personalized nametag, and a volunteer vest, all of which will be provided by ANSC upon starting the position.

SAFETY:

- **Personal Safety:** While on our site, your safe ability to enjoy your time here is our number one priority. All necessary safety and personal protective equipment as well as safety training will be provided to you by your volunteer manager.
- **Emergency Management:** Emergency plans and safety tools are in place in the event of natural disaster, power outages, fires, etc. and will be discussed with your volunteer manager at your specific site upon commencement of your position. If at any time you find you are not up to date on safety procedures or feel unsafe, please let your volunteer manager know immediately, or reach out to the site supervisor Hayley Gillespie hayley.gillespie@austintexas.gov.

Evaluation of inappropriate behavior, misuse of volunteer position, or abuse of any of the above guidelines is at the discretion of your volunteer manager, and misconduct may lead to dismissal from our volunteer program.

Volunteer Positions

With so many facets to our institution, volunteer roles and responsibilities vary greatly.

If you are selected for a volunteer position at the ASNC, your volunteer manager will help guide you in your daily responsibilities. You are expected to follow the general policies and expectations in this handbook. If at any time you believe you are not in the correct position for your skillset and abilities, please speak with your volunteer manager and we will work together to find the best solution. Please make sure you are available for the times required by your desired position before applying for that position.

Trade Counter Volunteer

Are you interested in natural history, have a keen eye for detail, and love to engage others while learning about nature? Consider joining the Trade Counter in our Naturalist Workshop! The Trade Counter is a unique program that gives visitors the opportunity to collect, investigate, and trade natural objects to cultivate a deeper relationship to the natural world. As a volunteer here you will engage with visitors to facilitate trades of natural objects: visitors bring in natural objects and volunteers help them with the identification process, award them points for their objects and knowledge, and help them use their points to trade for other nature items we have here.

Position Requirements:

- Ability to engage comfortably and patiently with the public, including children, families, and groups
- Love of learning, inquisitive and curious about the natural world, and see challenges and unknowns as a fun learning opportunity
- Must be able to work independently after training
- Must be comfortable in settings that may be loud and crowded with visitors, while also comfortable during slow periods

Shifts Available:

- Wednesdays – Fridays: 10:00am - 1:00pm
- Saturdays: 10:00am – 4:00pm
- Sundays: 1:00pm – 4:00pm (new Sunday volunteers will be required to have at least two training sessions on another day of the week before starting Sundays)

Landscaping Volunteer

Do you want to help to beautify and enhance the Austin Nature and Science Center's grounds with native plants and nature-based landscaping practices? We are seeking enthusiastic volunteers interested in sharing their passion for eco-friendly gardening and learning new skills while working hands-on with experienced landscapers. Our volunteers assist with many outdoor maintenance tasks such as planting, watering, deadheading, composting, using natural treatments for pests and diseases, weeding, digging, raking, leaf blowing, trash and debris removal, and seed collection and sorting. Our landscape volunteers will gain knowledge of organic time-tested gardening practices, learn about Texas native plant species, meet new people, take home transplants, and make a positive impact on the environment and community.

Position Requirements:

- Interest in landscaping and outdoor maintenance,
- Willingness to work outdoors in various weather conditions
- Ability to bend, stoop, kneel, and lift up to 35 pounds

Shifts Available:

- Variable Tuesdays, Thursdays, and/or Saturdays; will be determined upon application.
- Shifts will favor mornings and may change seasonally.

Wildlife Volunteer

Are you an experienced animal keeper or aquarist? Are you comfortable regularly cleaning up animal waste, cleaning habitats, and following detailed instructions? Are you familiar with the daily chores necessary to provide a healthy, safe, and enriching environment for animals in captivity? If so, you might be a great fit for our wildlife support team.

Position Requirements:

- Extensive background working with animals. Please provide detailed information about your experience in animal care when applying.
- Ability to work in a variety of indoor and outdoor conditions, including inclement weather
- Ability to work with and learn about a variety of animals including rescue/rehab animals

Shifts Available:

- Variable depending on volunteer and staff availability; will be determined upon application.
- Most shifts likely to favor mornings.

Nature's Way Preschool Hiking Volunteer

Do you love working with young children and inspiring an early start to nature stewardship? Do you love working in the outdoors, hiking, climbing, playing, and learning & teaching about nature? If so, this volunteer position may be right for you! Nature's Way Preschool (NWPS) is our unique enrichment program that provides young children with an immersive experience into the wonders of the natural world. Children experience outdoor adventures with fun, hands-on nature and science experiences designed to connect them to the natural world. In this nurturing and safe environment, children are motivated to take initiative, express their ideas, and solve problems. We are seeking volunteers to assist with hiking and other activities in our classes for children ages 4-5. Children take part in both structured and unstructured play while on hikes. **Position Requirements:**

- Must be familiar with or are willing to learn more about philosophies associated with outdoor play and learning, such as risky play. Risky play is defined as play that involves uncertainty and exploration – bodily, emotional, perceptual or environmental – that could lead to either positive or negative consequences.
- Must be able to keep pace with a class of 8 children ages 4-5 for approximately one hour. Hikes typically take place in the Zilker Nature Preserve, where terrain can be uneven and slippery. Occasionally hikes take place to spots around the Nature Center, including the stream, Dino Pit, and pond.
- Ability to climb, slide, run, lift, and balance.
- Patience and high comfort level and experience working with children/early childhood education.
- *Criminal Background Check: CBI and Fingerprinting required.*
- *Training:* Two 4-hour sessions, including in-person and virtual trainings, as well as class shadowing.

Shifts Available:

10:30am – 12:30pm with these options:

- Monday/Wednesday/Friday
- Tuesday/Thursday

- Monday – Thursday
- Monday – Friday

Site Information

The Austin Nature & Science Center is open to the public daily:
Monday – Saturday, 9:00AM – 5:00PM
Sunday, 12:00PM- 5:00PM

Visitor & volunteer parking is available in the lot under Mopac at Stratford:
2389 Stratford Drive, Austin, TX 78746

Headquarters Building (HQ): Is located behind the Visitor’s Pavilion on the path towards the pond. Our staff offices, staff & volunteer break room (with fridge, microwave, dishes, coffee maker, tea kettle, ice machine), and two restrooms with showers and personal care essentials are located on the second floor. The ground level has 3 classrooms, two public restrooms and vending machines.

Nature’s Way Preschool: The *Nature’s Way Preschool*, situated in the historic Ashford McGill house, has been providing nature-based education and childcare since 1992. Enrollment is open to the public and on a first-come first serve basis. This building is sometimes called the Trailhouse, and it is located on Trailhouse Drive inside the main entrance to ANSC.

Visitor Pavilion: The Visitor Pavilion (VP) is the main building on our site. This acts as our entrance and throughfare to the pond, Dino pit, classrooms & HQ, and wildlife exhibits. The VP has a front desk where visitors can sign in, administrative offices, and two restrooms. Featured exhibits in the VP include the *Observational Beehive*, *Tile Mural*, *Nano*, *Nature of Austin*, *The ANSC Seed Library*, and the “Moon Room” (typically weekend and special events programs only). The VP is also the site of the *Naturalist Workshop & Trade Counter*.

Naturalist Workshop: The *Naturalist Workshop* is our mini natural history museum. Here we have displayed all types of collections ranging from taxidermy and insects to plants, rocks and minerals, highlighting the natural history of central Texas and beyond. There are many self-guided interactive activities available, and reference learning materials as well.

Trade Counter: Part of the *Naturalist Workshop*, the *Trade Counter* is an active site where naturalists of all ages can bring their findings from the field to discuss with other nature enthusiasts and earn points redeemable at the *Trade Counter*. Points can be earned by trading nature items, naturalist observations, or iNaturalist entries, and may be traded for a multitude of treasures at the counter. The Trade Counter is currently open Wednesdays – Fridays 10:00am – 1:00pm; Saturday 10:00am – 4:00pm; and Sundays 1:00pm – 4:00pm.

Animal Aisle: Part of our wildlife exhibits that are outdoors facing the pond. Some current residents overlooking the pond include a bobcat, birds of prey, ducks, a pigeon, porcupines, and a raven. Our wildlife residents on display to the public have typically undergone rehabilitation and are unable to return to the wild. The Wildlife staff continually work to maintain a comfortable and safe home for these animals.

Small Wonders: Part of our wildlife exhibits inside the Living Systems (aka “small wonders”) building. Current residents include two species of box turtles, a tarantula, young alligators, aquatic turtles, toads, a tiger salamander, a hognose snake, a rough green snake, and an American eel.

Birds of Prey: The outdoor *Birds of Prey* exhibit features vultures, hawks, and owls, as well as a Road Runner. There is also an access point to the Zilker Nature Preserve and Preserve Overlook. These gates are closed at 5pm.

Animal Ambassadors: Outreach animals are also housed on site behind the scenes in our Wildlife Exhibits Building (aka “WEB”) and the Small Wonders building, including various species of snakes, lizards, insects, and small mammals. Our wildlife residents on display to the public have typically undergone rehabilitation and are unable to return to the wild. The Wildlife staff continually work to maintain a comfortable and safe home for these animals.

Outdoor Exhibits: Around the site are various points of interest including, *The Human Sundial*, *The Forest Trail* (marked with signage), *The Dino Pit & Overlook*, *Preserve Overlook*, and the *Pond Walk*.

Gardens: While the whole ANSC site could be considered a garden, there are a few intentional gardens to note while working on this site including the *pollinator gardens* (marked with signage), the *meadow*, and the *Forest Trail*.

Zilker Nature Preserve: ANSC is bordered by the Zilker Nature Preserve. There are multiple access points to the trails – one of these is a gate from our Birds of Prey exhibit. Guests are welcome to hike and return to our site but should note the gates will close at 5:00pm and they will have to use the other access points after hours.

Beverly S. Sheffield Education Center & “Splash” Exhibit: Our satellite exhibit and classroom facility next to the Barton Springs Pool entrance, the aquifer exhibit *Splash!* is on display here. The immersive cave exhibit has interactive games, videos, and signage, as well as 4 aquarium tanks housing local Texan aquatic life. The Rotunda offers rotating art and historical exhibits. There are two classrooms here for programs related events.

Frequently Asked Questions

There is often a lot going on at the Austin Nature & Science Center. Here are some FAQs to help familiarize you with the site and prepare you to answer visitor questions.

When are you open to the public?

- Monday to Saturday 9:00am – 5:00pm, Sunday 12:00pm – 5:00pm

Where can I park?

- Public parking for ANSC is located under the Mopac overpass across from our main entrance at 2389 Stratford Dr. Handicap accessible parking is available

directly along the road at our main site entrance, and there are accessible ramps throughout the site.

Is there food available at the site?

- No. We have limited snack offerings from vending machines, but do not have food stands or a gift shop. You may bring food to eat on our site at the picnic tables in the meadow, but please clean up after yourselves. We are a PACK IN PACK OUT site and visitors cannot dispose of garbage and litter here. All trash and recycling must be packed out.

May I bring my pet?

- No, pets are not allowed at ANSC. We are located on a nature preserve, and all City of Austin nature preserves do not allow pets. We have strict guidelines to protect our resident wildlife and exhibit animals. Service animals are allowed on site but must check in at the front desk upon entry.

When is the preserve open?

- The Zilker Nature Preserve and its trails are open from dawn to dusk. The preserve can be accessed by the public from the “Steep and Rugged” trail outside the Visitor Pavilion on Nature Center Dr., and from other access points outside our direct site – the gate to the preserve from our Birds of Prey area is now closed and locked at all times. Staff can open and allow volunteers through if needed, but gate is locked to the public.

Do you have volunteer or internship opportunities?

- Yes! We love having volunteers and encourage you to apply. Visit our website for a listing of available positions and instructions on how to fill out an application. We currently do not offer internships.

Important Contact Information

General Questions:

512-974-3888

anscprograms@austintexas.gov

Hayley Gillespie, Site Supervisor

Office: 512-974-3868

Hayley.Gillespie@austintexas.gov

Megan Lappe, Exhibit Coordinator (Landscaping volunteer manager)

Office: 512-974-9410

Megan.Lappe@austintexas.gov

Israel Valle, Landscape Technician (Landscaping volunteer manager)

Office: 512-974-3801

Israel.Valle@austintexas.gov

Kristi Cantu, Exhibit Specialist (Trade Counter volunteer manager)

Office: 512-974-3884

Kristi.Cantu@austintexas.gov

Christina Burkovich, Exhibit Coordinator (Wildlife volunteer manager)

Office: 512-974-3888

Christina.Burkovich@austintexas.gov

Alec Larkins, Administrative Specialist (Front Desk volunteer coordinator)

Office: 512-974-3888

Alec.Larkins@austintexas.gov

Sterling Coats, Office Attendant

Office: 512-974-3888

Sterling.coats@austintexas.gov