

Keep Texas Wild

COME FLY WITH ME

Birds travel across continents to find food and warmth.



Red-breasted mergansers

» ON THE WING

ON A CHILLY WINTER DAY, have you ever wished you could just fly away to a place that's warm and sunny? Every year, millions of birds travel distances from a few miles to thousands of miles in search of more food, a better place to nest, milder weather or longer days. Many birds from the northern United States and Canada fly south to spend the winter in Texas. Some species travel further down to Mexico, Central America and even South America. Birds have natural instincts that tell them when to migrate. Just like you remember the way home from school, birds follow the same routes every year.

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WHERE DID EVERYBODY GO?

About half of the 634 bird species found in Texas migrate. Some birds from Canada and the northern states spend the winter in Texas. Some birds spend warm months here, then travel farther south during winter. For example, the yellow-billed cuckoo spends April through October in Texas, but migrates to the tropical forests of South America for the winter.



READY, SET, GO!

Birds inherit traits to help them migrate. Birds can sense changes in the length of the day and sunlight. Before birds begin migration, they start to eat more. Some build up enough fat to fly across the entire Gulf of Mexico in one day! Many migratory birds also have longer, more pointed wings and weigh less than non-migratory birds.

WHY DO THEY FLY SO FAR AWAY?

There are several reasons why birds migrate: to find more food, to find nesting space, to find milder weather and to enjoy longer daylight hours.

HEY, WAIT FOR ME!

Most birds migrate in groups. Even solitary birds will fly together while migrating. This keeps birds safe from predators. Have you ever looked up to see a "V" formation of migrating birds? These were probably geese, ducks, pelicans or cranes.



IS THERE A BIRD MAP?

Birds use landmarks such as mountains, rivers, coastlines ("topography") to find their way, but they use other means as well. They seem to have an inner compass that helps them stay on course. Birds may also use the position of the sun during the day or the stars at night to guide them. They notice changes in climate and ecology as well.

**ARE WE THERE YET?
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Most of the migrating birds we see in Texas travel along the Central Flyway and the Mississippi Flyway. (You can go online to see maps of these routes.)



NOT FOR SISSIES

Migration is dangerous. Nearly half of the birds that leave in the fall don't return the following spring. Some accidentally fly into buildings and high wires. Some are killed by predators (including pet cats). For some, habitat that was there the year before is gone, leaving them without food, water or shelter for a much-needed rest.

ILLUSTRATION © FIAN ARROYO



Spike's Activity Page



>> BIRD BRAINS

MEET AN ORNITHOLOGIST (BIRD BIOLOGIST) AND A FUTURE BIRDING GUIDE. THEY FELL IN LOVE WITH BIRDS WHEN THEY WERE YOUR AGE!

CLIFF SHACKELFORD

A lifelong Texan, Cliff Shackelford's interest in birds started when he was 9 years old. While walking through the woods, he spotted an incredible black-and-white woodpecker. He visited the local library and found a guidebook and found the bird – the pileated woodpecker. He checked out that guidebook so many times that his parents finally bought it for him. His parents thought Cliff would outgrow this interest, but he never did. Cliff became an expert who works for TPWD. Cliff says he'd love to spend every day observing birds in the wild, but he spends a lot of his time speaking on behalf of birds. Cliff says beginning birders need a bird book and binoculars, but should look not only with their eyes, but also with their ears. You can see if your family wants to build a wildscape to attract birds, with a birdbath and a feeder. Then you can watch birds while you eat your breakfast, just like Cliff!



JESSE HUTH

Jesse Huth, a 17-year-old homeschooler, has already made an impression on Texas birders. For a recent Eagle Scout project, Jesse built a large bird blind on a nature refuge in his hometown of Wimberley. A neighbor took Jesse under her wing when he was six, teaching him to identify birds by silhouette, calls or songs, and field marks. Jesse sat on that porch every morning, and says it quickly became the best part of his day. At age nine, Jesse competed in his first birding contest, the Great Texas Birding Classic. With a team of friends, they find as many bird species as they can along the Texas Coast. "Birding is something that can sound dull until you've tried it," Jesse says. "You just can't believe how many different species of birds there are and how much fun it can be trying to find them all. It's like a treasure hunt. Find some binoculars and just watch for awhile – you'll be amazed at what you can see in your own backyard!" Jesse will attend Texas A&M University and hopes to become a professional bird guide.



>> WILD MATH



Purple martins can migrate from Madison, Wisconsin, all the way to Bogotá, Colombia. If the distance from Madison to Houston is 1,226 miles, from Houston to San Salvador, El Salvador, is 1,176 miles, and from San Salvador to Bogotá is 528 miles, how far does the purple martin have to fly during its migration? Can you create another "migration math" problem to challenge your friends?

NEXT MONTH: Turtle Hurdles



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