Welcome
Daniel Carey-Whalen, Director

It is October and autumn is in the air. The weather has finally cooled down and midterms have arrived for many students. October is one of my favorite months in El Paso because the weather is beautiful and there are so many events happening throughout the city. This year, of course, things are different. Although there are limits to congregating in-person, plenty of events are still occurring online. For example, one of our long-time partners, the Tom Lea Institute, will continue to host Tom Lea Month, as they do every October. Speaking of partnerships, you can still check out UTEP Arts Alive on the College of Liberal Arts website. And the El Paso Community Foundation is hosting a virtual Chalk the Block, in addition to partnering with the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens and over 15 other institutions on the #ImagineElPaso campaign. Lastly, since the weather is delightful, you can always enjoy a socially distanced hike through the annual Celebration of Our Mountains. Certainly, there are lots of events happening in October.

In this newsletter, we check in with the Centennial Museum’s work-studies and interns to see how they are surviving this unique semester. Our students provide a real and raw response to their daily lives of working at the Museum, getting motivated for asynchronistic course material, and balancing school and home life. In addition, Kevin Floyd’s article highlights another fall tradition, the annual, southern bird migration.

Our newsletter will be taking a break in November as we transition to a bi-monthly newsletter. So, look for our next newsletter at the end of the semester. And get outside and enjoy the weather!

Be well,

Daniel Carey-Whalen

Chihuahuan rain sage
Fall migration is always exciting for bird watchers like me, with birds like Wilson’s and yellow warblers, olive-sided flycatchers and western wood-pewees passing through El Paso on their way south for the winter. This year has been especially great, with large numbers of the expected migrants and several unexpected ones as well. It was a shock when reports started showing up of large numbers of dead birds in New Mexico following the cold front that moved through in early September. This was a particularly extreme event, with temperatures dropping more than 40 degrees from one day to the next. However, cold fronts are not that unusual, and the number of birds that people were finding certainly was. The large expanse of wildfires up and down the West Coast were in the news at that same time, and many people thought that the mass mortality might be related to the smoke and possibly something toxic in the air. There had also been reports of bird die-offs at White Sands starting August 20th, well before the cold front.

Fortunately, researchers went right to work. When possible, carcasses were collected for examination and toxicology screening, including two birds that we found in the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens, a western wood-pewee and warbling vireo. Work in northern and southern New Mexico found that most of the affected birds were insect-eaters and appeared to be starving, with no fat and some muscle atrophy. Jenna McCullough concluded that the cold front reduced the number of insects available to the birds, either by killing them outright or reducing their activity. Migration is hard on birds, and they are often at the limit of their reserves. The lack of food for even a day, especially when they need to burn more energy to stay warm in the cold, probably caused most of the deaths. The tests to determine if there were any toxic effects from the smoke are pending, but the fires likely contributed to the die-off by changing the migration behavior of some of the birds. They might have had to leave early, before building up sufficient fat reserves, or shift their flight paths into less favorable areas. As Dr. Martha Desmond of NMSU put it, “[…] there might be multiple stressors coming together to create the perfect storm.”

What can we do to help protect the birds from unusual weather events like this? Given that starvation was the likely cause of most of the deaths, we need to focus on providing food. Excluding raptors, most birds you might have in your yard eat insects, seeds, fruits.

Feeding Insects to Feed Birds
Kevin Floyd, Botanical Curator

Fall migration is always exciting for bird watchers like me, with birds like Wilson’s and yellow warblers, olive-sided flycatchers and western wood-pewees passing through El Paso on their way south for the winter. This year has been especially great, with large numbers of the expected migrants and several unexpected ones as well. It was a shock when reports started showing up of large numbers of dead birds in New Mexico following the cold front that moved through in early September. This was a particularly extreme event, with temperatures dropping more than 40 degrees from one day to the next. However, cold fronts are not that unusual, and the number of birds that people were finding certainly was. The large expanse of wildfires up and down the West Coast were in the news at that same time, and many people thought that the mass mortality might be related to the smoke and possibly something toxic in the air. There had also been reports of bird die-offs at White Sands starting August 20th, well before the cold front.

Fortunately, researchers went right to work. When possible, carcasses were collected for examination and toxicology screening, including two birds that we found in the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens, a western wood-pewee and warbling vireo. Work in northern and southern New Mexico found that most of the affected birds were insect-eaters and appeared to be starving, with no fat and some muscle atrophy. Jenna McCullough concluded that the cold front reduced the number of insects available to the birds, either by killing them outright or reducing their activity. Migration is hard on birds, and they are often at the limit of their reserves. The lack of food for even a day, especially when they need to burn more energy to stay warm in the cold, probably caused most of the deaths. The tests to determine if there were any toxic effects from the smoke are pending, but the fires likely contributed to the die-off by changing the migration behavior of some of the birds. They might have had to leave early, before building up sufficient fat reserves, or shift their flight paths into less favorable areas. As Dr. Martha Desmond of NMSU put it, “[…] there might be multiple stressors coming together to create the perfect storm.”

What can we do to help protect the birds from unusual weather events like this? Given that starvation was the likely cause of most of the deaths, we need to focus on providing food. Excluding raptors, most birds you might have in your yard eat insects, seeds, fruits.
or nectar. And although it does not play a role in the migratory bird story, lots of bird species feed their babies insects even if the adults eat seeds or nectar. Providing insects for birds probably does not occur to many people, likely because we do not like having most insects in our yards and we do not see insectivorous birds at our feeders. Especially given recent studies showing declines in insect populations, any actions we can take to increase insect populations will help the birds. We need to feed the bugs to feed the birds! This means changing our yard management and what we consider to be acceptable damage to plants. Instead of using insecticides at the first sign of insect damage, try to only treat when necessary to protect the life of the plant. Consider having some plants that can be sacrificed to the insects. Avoid including non-native plants that have no insect herbivores. Not being eaten by pests is a good selling point in plant nurseries, and because insects and their host plants are often very specific, bringing in non-native plants reduces the potential insect damage. But no damage means no insects, which means fewer birds!

Of course, pay attention to whether the insects are invasive pests that need to be controlled to prevent them from causing a lot of damage. The message is not to allow all insects to destroy all your plants, but rather to work to find coexistence between the plants you want to be healthy and the need to feed the birds. Reducing insecticide use and working to increase the number and variety of native plants in our yards and parks are important actions we can all take to protect birds. You can learn about which plant species support birds by using the Audubon Native Plants Database and by visiting the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens and observing which plants have the most birds. Learn more about birds and support bird conservation by joining the National Audubon Society and our local El Paso/Trans-Pecos chapter.

Orange-crowned warblers migrate through El Paso in the spring and fall. Most warblers move through trees and shrubs looking for insects to eat, a feeding method called gleaning.

Western wood-pewees are a type of flycatcher. Flycatchers perch, usually in an open area, waiting for an insect to fly by. They then fly out to snatch the insect from the air, often returning to the same perch or one nearby to watch for another insect.

Warbling vireos also glean insects from trees. This one is in a honey mesquite. Mesquites are great trees for attracting a variety of insect-eating birds.
2020 Fall Semester Experience

Museum and Garden Work Studies

I was one of those “positive” people who thought that the pandemic situation would be over by August, if not much sooner. I was keeping this positive attitude because in my heart, I really wanted to come back to campus because I hate online classes. Once I knew that for sure we will all be “attending” school by online format, I knew it was going to be tough. In all honesty, if I knew that this was going to be this hard, I would not have registered as a full-time student. I have taken summer courses since I started college and one can feel the difference, the pressure, and the difficulty of the semester if you are doing summer or a “mini-mester.” I feel like this semester is like an extended summer course. I am taking two upper-division classes for my major and I am not enjoying them nor learning as if I would be listening in person. Another class that was supposed to be entertaining is turning out to be harder than my upper division courses. I am constantly failing to keep up to date with the lectures because most of my classes are asynchronous and some of my professors just post everything at once and it feels like “here you go, do it whenever.” I think this is both an advantage and disadvantage. I have also missed being able to work physically at the research lab that I am part of it. Sincerely, I really hope I can be on campus for my last semester.

Fall 2020. A time of constant change. I won’t be the first nor the last student to admit that since entering confinement academic life has become significantly difficult. While it is understood that remote learning is the safest way to protect university students from the dreaded COVID-19, the effect it has had on learning is noticeable. On a personal level, learning certain materials has become a challenge due to incongruences and schedule mix ups. A lack of preparation has become noticeable within certain classes; just like the students, teachers never really expected the classes to be totally virtual. It has been a difficult adaptation for both students and staff of all academic levels. However, I’m sure nothing will be cherished more than quality education and interaction once we begin a new normality.
So far, my first semester at the University of Texas at El Paso has been rather interesting. None of my classes have set instruction times for lectures or instructional time and therefore most learning is done at one’s own pace which is a huge relief; especially when you’re living with a newborn baby brother and a four month old puppy. I can say with full certainty that the biggest lesson I’ve learned from this experience is how to efficiently manage my time and tasks. A daily to-do list on my notepad has been my best friend during this pandemic, but I think it'll still be an incredibly practical and useful tool even after this blows over. Sadly, I still don't enjoy online classes very much, but I acknowledge my privilege of being able to continue my education and I'm vastly grateful for it. I hope the situation of the world improves, but until then I'll keep pushing and moving forward.

The fall 2020 semester thus far has been uneventful yet more stressful than I could've possibly imagined. Three of my classes are online and another meets in person once a week. My in-person class practices social distancing measures and provides students with hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes to help ease any worries. Having to juggle these classes and still try to maintain a sense of balance in my life has proven difficult to say the least. It's good to know that professors understand what we're going through, and some have stated that they're willing to work with students.

I feel as though I should also mention campus itself. The once lively energy has been replaced with an eerie silence that is almost deafening. I was always a bit weary of crowds before the pandemic but now I miss the music and the laughter that made me enjoy coming onto campus every day. Having both my in-person class and the museum to come to each week has helped me maintain a sense of normalcy in my life. I'm sure every one of us has already experienced some form of cabin fever and look for any excuse to get out of the house. The museum has provided me this little escape and I am grateful for the support that I have here from the staff and my fellow work-study students.

I am fortunate enough to have not been horribly affected by the pandemic, but I'm afraid other students can't say the same. Consider donating to UTEP's food pantry or to El Pasoan's Fighting Hunger.