

## San Benito Wetlands: Helping Shape Its Future

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The San Benito Wetlands is 165 acres of ponds that were previously used to treat the City of San Benito's wastewater. Many are unaware of the site so *let's begin with the backstory*. . .



Black-necked Stilts (photo by Sylvia Canales)

*A little history of the wetlands:* In 2005, the city was facing a 3 million dollar fine due to sewer water improperly flowing into the Arroyo Colorado downstream. The solution was to create a new Wastewater Treatment Plant. In partnership with Texas Water Institute and TCEQ (Texas Commission on Environmental Quality Standards) the effluent water then flowed through the ponds that are filled with rocks where any remaining sediments were deposited. Clean water then flowed into the Arroyo Colorado. The new facility was built in 2008. This was done in phase 1-3 which met the clean-up requirements and waived the fine.



Great Blue Heron (photo by Sylvia Canales)

*ACAS support:* The Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society was invited to help plant trees and shrubs along the banks of the ponds in 2018, the beginning of development for local recreational use such as birding and fishing. Several bird surveys were conducted during this time. Unfortunately, once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, development was halted. Soon after, the older structure at the entrance collapsed and the city restricted access to ensure the safety of visitors.

*That brings us to the present:* Jaime Flores, Program Coordinator for the Texas Water Resource Institute, has initiated the next phase of development and is preparing grant requests to include a parking area, new caliche trails, restrooms and drinking fountains.

Jaime has been escorting ACAS volunteers on *the third Saturday of each month* (until July 2022) to the wetlands to document birds being seen. Our eBird lists are evolving with each trip due to seasons, weather, water levels, etc. Earlier this summer, 192 species of birds have been observed at this eBird hotspot.

Jaime is utilizing this information to keep the city informed about the value and interest in the San Benito Wetlands Project. As a group of birding enthusiasts, we know all-too-well what a hotspot the wetlands can be. In November 2021, there was a Fork-tailed Flycatcher spotted in the area. Many birders were able to view it since it perched near the front of the property. Also, a pair of Groove-billed Ani spent the 2021 winter close to the road bridge and were viewed by many.

Although the site will remain closed to the public until the enhancements are completed, the RGV Birding Festival got special permission to visit the site during the festival. We had 386 visitors from 39 states and six countries. During this time the bird species increased to 209.



Neotropic Cormorants and American White Pelican  
(photo by Sylvia Canales)