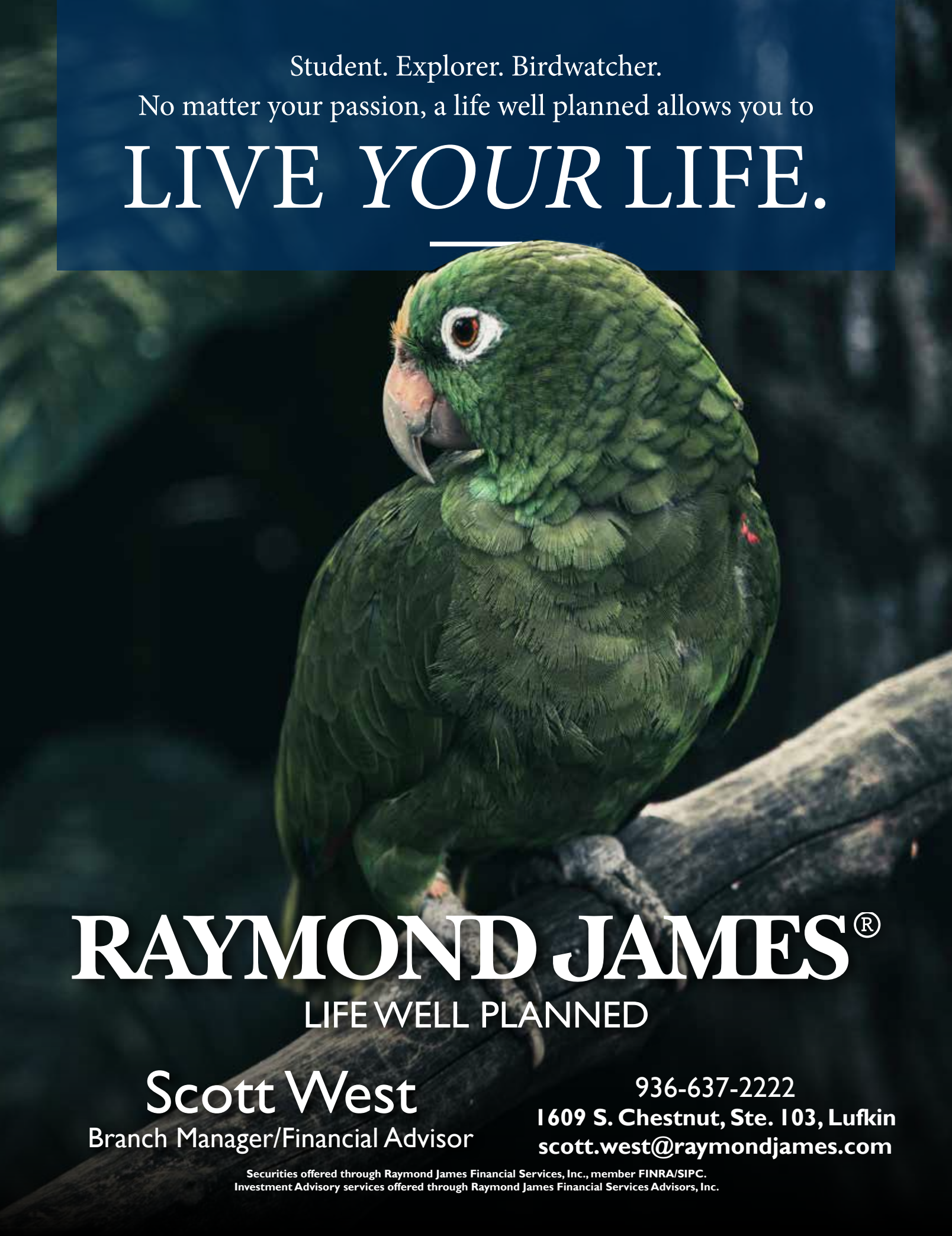
Animal Tracks

SPRING 2026 | VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 4
ELLEN TROUT ZOO | LUFKIN, TEXAS

Wings OF WARTIME

INHALE EXHALE

TURNING ART INTO *Conservation Action*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WHAT'S NEW AT THE ZOO?

As I reflect on my first-year anniversary as your Zoo Director, I'm amazed at how much the zoo team has accomplished in that year. The zoo's new strategic plan is completed, and we have already begun taking action to fulfill the goals outlined in the plan, which will be on the zoo's website soon.

I'm amazed at how much the zoo team has accomplished in just one year.

MAJOR PROJECTS

Tigers returned to the zoo this winter. Staff and contractors made upgrades to the viewing and containment areas for lions, jaguars and tigers. These improvements were needed as a precursor to bringing tigers back. A male tiger joined us from the Baton Rouge Zoo and has settled in nicely.

You will soon be hearing more about the Wilds of Africa project. Construction documents will be completed in March and the bidding process to make this a reality will start shortly after. Our goal is to open to the public in 2026, but we'll know more about the timing by late spring.

Staff started planning a new outdoor habitat for our Komodo dragons. We are consulting with contractors on the design and cost, and we hope to start work soon. This expansion will allow the dragons to go outside into a much larger space and experience sunshine and natural substrate. The completion date for this project is yet to be determined but we hope to finish sometime this summer.

LIVING LANDSCAPES

For the first time, the zoo will have a full-time horticulturist on staff. Everyone knows that the zoo campus has very diverse plant life and is part of the experience that guests have when visiting. We needed to find someone who will serve as the "zookeeper" for plants. While it may take some time, you will notice changes to the appearance and feel of the zoo. We want guests to be engaged and inspired by the beauty and diversity of plant life when you visit.

CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIPS

The zoo hosted the Texas Black Bear Alliance annual meeting in January and over 100 attendees took part in a daylong event that featured biologists from Texas and Louisiana. There was great excitement amongst those in attendance as the appearance of a black bear in East Texas over the last several months was discussed. The zoo has had a long relationship with TBBA and will continue partnering with them in the future.

Thanks again for your continued support and come see us as we work to make the zoo better every day for you the guests and the animals and plants in our care.

Ryan
Executive Director

TABLE OF *Contents*

03 What's New at the Zoo?

05 Zoo Calendar

06 Animal & Wildlife Conservation Days

10 Bird Buddies of the Pineywoods

14 Painting the Birds of a Young America: John James Audubon

18 The Roadrunner

20 Wings of Wartime

24 Parrots & the Pet Trade

26 Turning Art into Conservation Action

28 Toco Toucan Facts: Meet Linda

30 The Silence After the Shot

32 Vanished from the Sky: The Tragic Fall of the Passenger Pigeon

34 Cardboard Roll Birds

36 Skip the Bread: Healthier Ways to Feed Ducks & Geese

38 The Goose that Refused to Live Like a Goose

40 Wild Medicine: Inhale/Exhale

42 Coming Home

44 Wilds of Africa

46 Not an Owl at All

48 Zoo Brew

spring 2026

MARCH

21 **Raiders of the Lost Zoo,** 10AM - 4PM

APRIL

04 **Zoo Brew,** 6:30-10:30PM

18 **Behind the Scenes Tour,** 8:30AM
Tiger, Giraffe, Hippo, & White Rhino levels only

25 **Earth Day at the Zoo**

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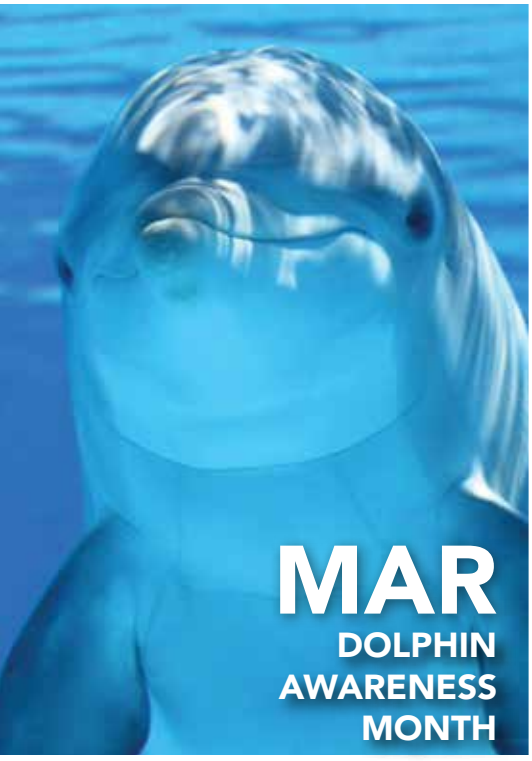
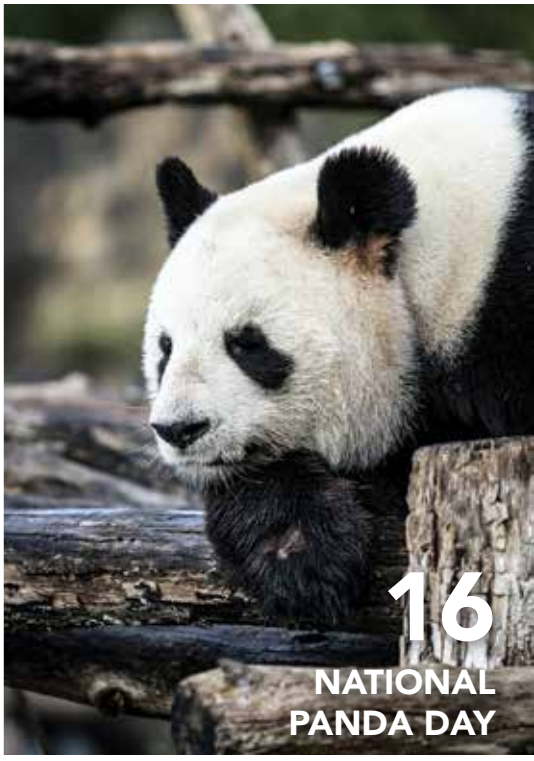
ANIMAL & WILDLIFE





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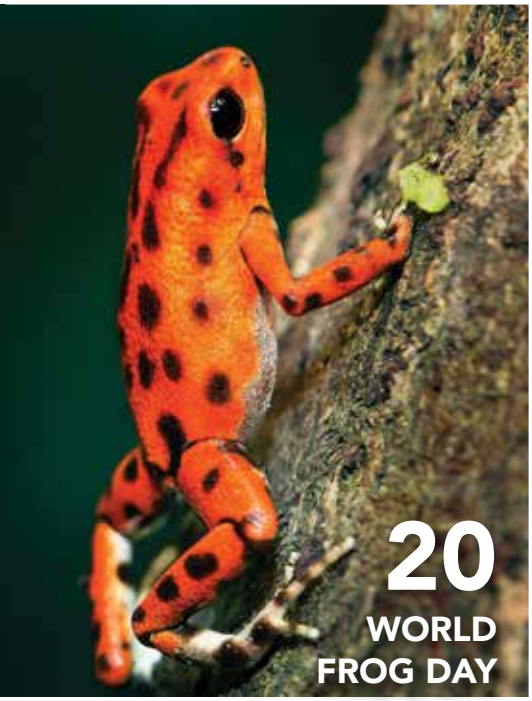
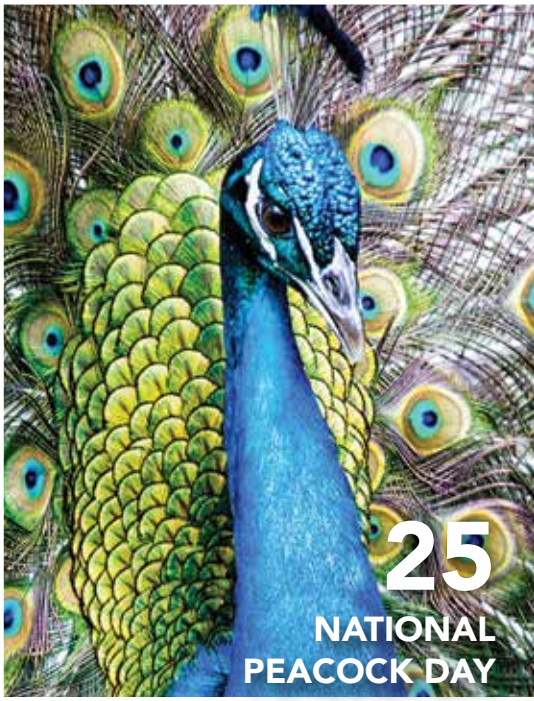
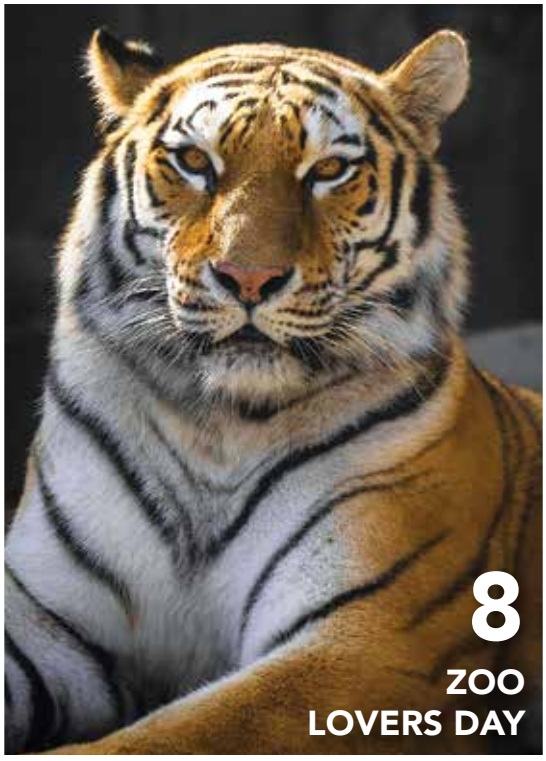
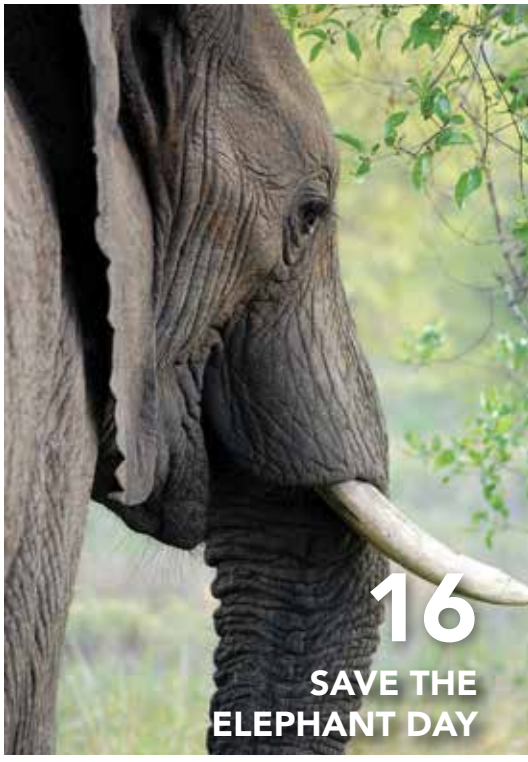




CONSERVATION DAYS





APRIL

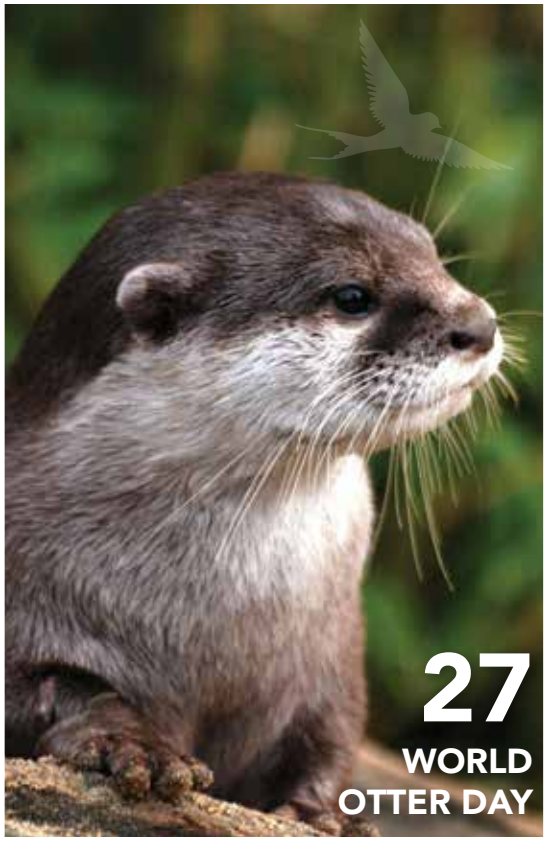

MAY
NATIONAL
DUCKLING
MONTH


1
SAVE THE
RHINO DAY


3
WORLD
KOALA DAY

MAY


20
WORLD
BEE DAY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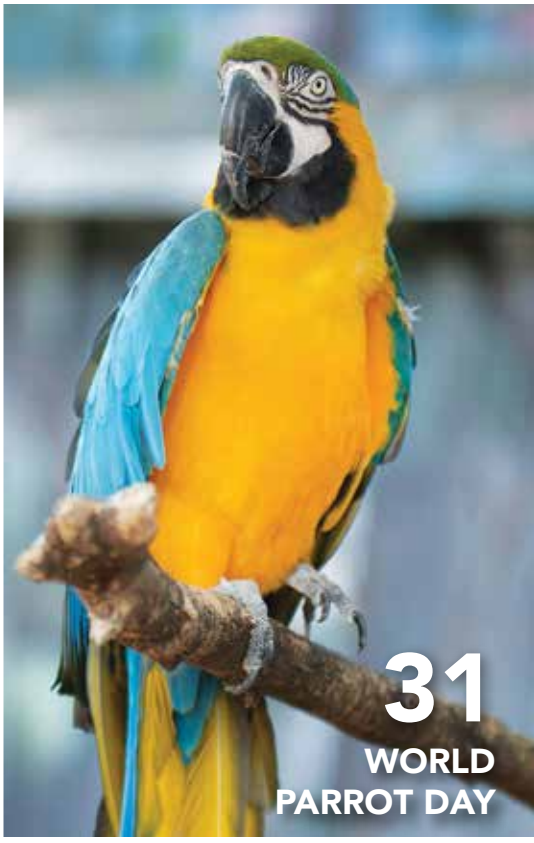
OTTER DAY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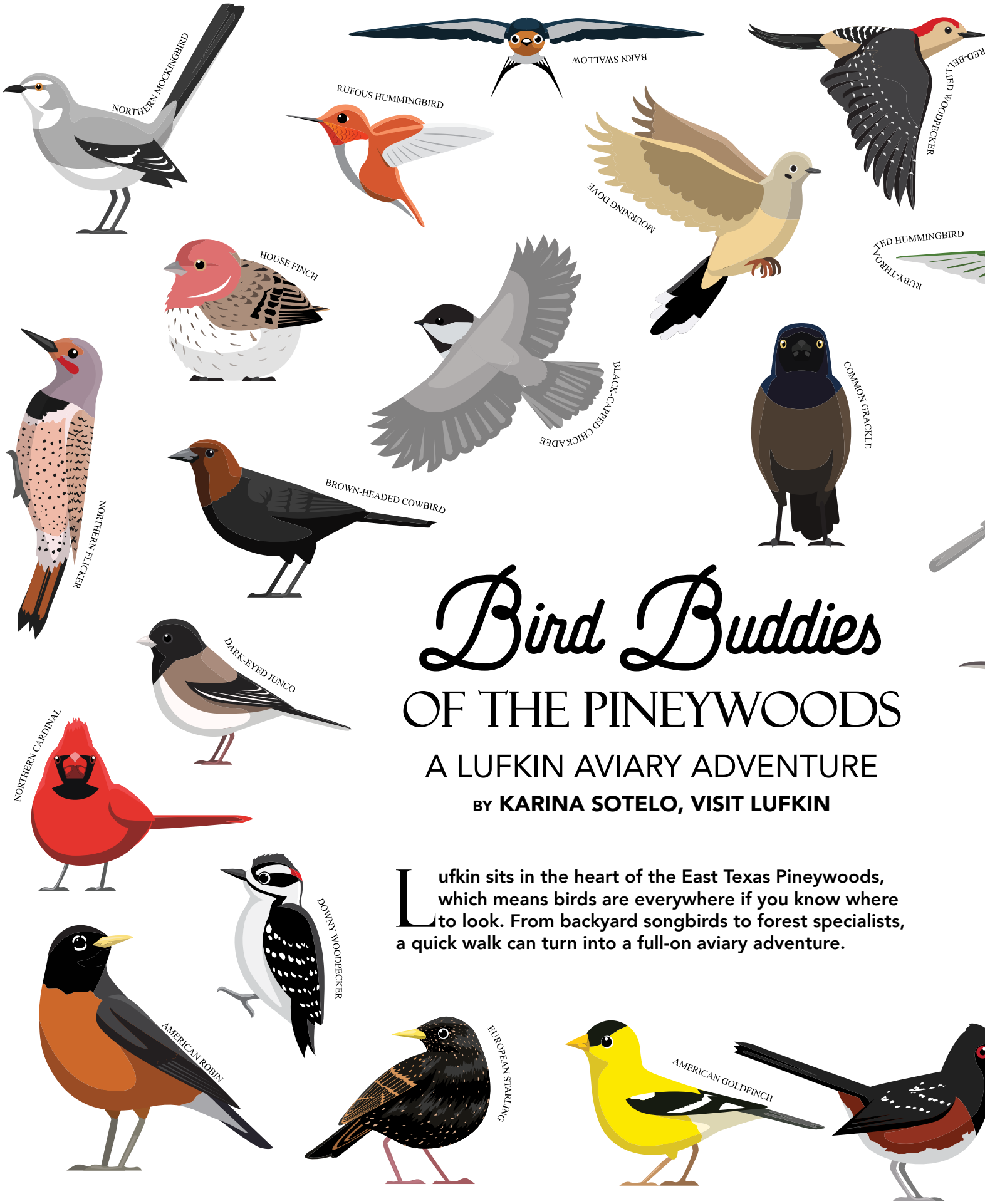
PARROT DAY

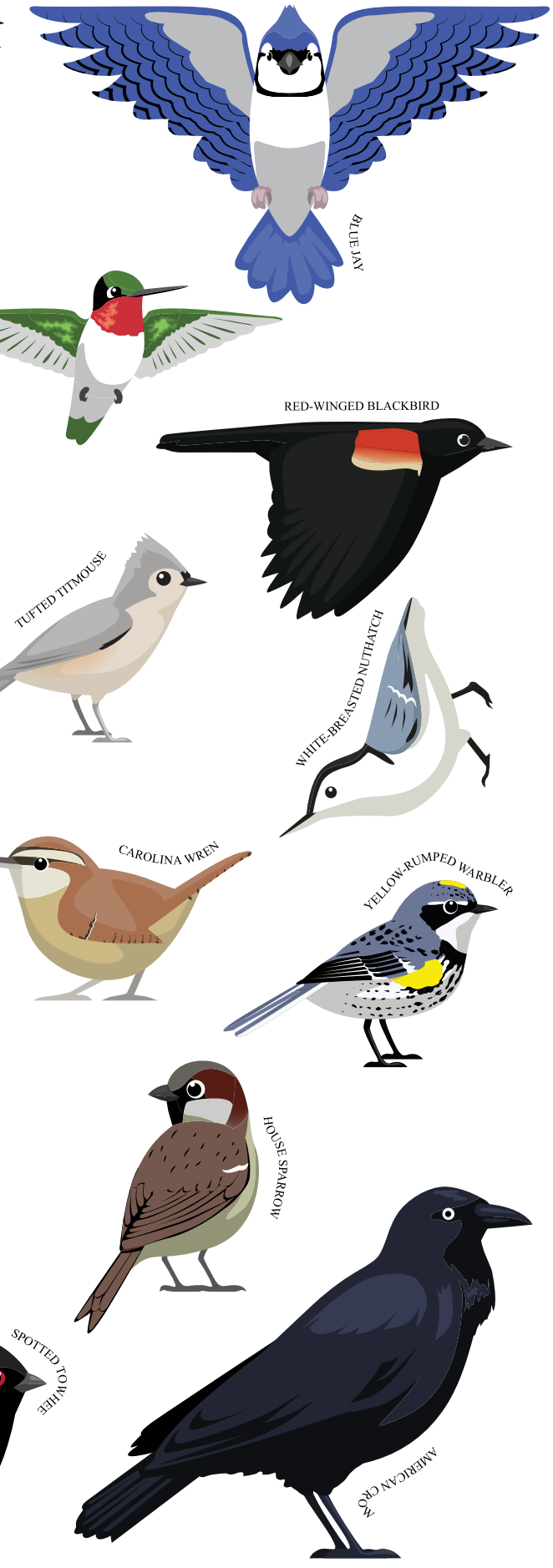


Bird Buddies OF THE PINEYWOODS

A LUFKIN AVIARY ADVENTURE

BY **KARINA SOTELO, VISIT LUFKIN**

Lufkin sits in the heart of the East Texas Pineywoods, which means birds are everywhere if you know where to look. From backyard songbirds to forest specialists, a quick walk can turn into a full-on aviary adventure.



WHERE TO GO FOR A GREAT BIRDING DAY NEAR LUFKIN

If you are building a bird-themed day trip for family or friends, these locations make it easy to plan.

1 ANGELINA CO. BIRDING BASICS

Angelina County has a mix of pine and hardwood forests, grassy areas, and big water nearby. That variety attracts a wide range of birds throughout the year.

BOYKIN SPRINGS RECREATION AREA 2

This area is known for beautiful longleaf pine habitat and a hiking trail system. It is a great place to listen for woodpeckers and spot forest birds while enjoying a classic Pineywoods landscape.

3 TEXAS FORESTRY MUSEUM & THE URBAN WILDSCAPE TRAIL

For an easy, family-friendly option in town, pair a museum visit with time outside on the trail. It is a great way to connect forests, conservation, and the wildlife that depends on them, including birds.

ELLEN TROUT ZOO & PARK 4

Walk the trail around the lake and scan the shoreline for wading birds and waterfowl. Keep your eyes on the treetops too, bald eagles are occasional visitors. When you are ready to keep the wildlife theme going, step inside Ellen Trout Zoo to spot even more bird species up close.

5 ANGELINA NATIONAL FOREST & SAM RAYBURN AREA

Forests and water together are a winning combo for birding. Plan an early morning walk, then finish with a lakeside stop to look for birds that prefer open water and shorelines.

DAVY CROCKETT NATIONAL FOREST 6

Another strong option for pine forest birding. It is worth visiting in spring and fall when migration adds extra variety.

LOCAL BIRDS YOU CAN SPOT AROUND LUFKIN

Here are a few birds commonly found in the Pineywoods that you may see in town parks, neighborhoods, and nearby forests:

Northern Cardinal	Red-bellied Woodpecker
Carolina Wren	Downy Woodpecker
Tufted Titmouse	Pileated Woodpecker
Blue Jay	American Crow
Mourning Dove	Eastern Bluebird

If you want a true Pineywoods bragging rights bird, keep your eyes open for the red-cockaded woodpecker. It is a threatened species closely tied to older pine habitat and is most often associated with public lands like national forests.

Ten birds are hidden in this issue. Can you find them all?

HOW TO PREPARE FOR YOUR AVIARY ADVENTURE

A birding outing can be simple, and it is more fun with a few basics:

WHAT TO BRING

- **Binoculars**
- **Water, hat, sunscreen, bug spray**
- **A small notebook or phone notes for "what did we see"**
- **A field guide or a bird ID app**

HOW TO BIRD LIKE A PRO

- **Go early for more bird activity**
- **Walk slowly and listen first**
- **Watch edges where trees meet open space**
- **Stay on trails and give birds space, especially during nesting season**

WHERE TO BUY GEAR IN LUFKIN

If you want to outfit a quick birding kit locally, Academy Sports + Outdoors in Lufkin is a solid stop for binoculars, hydration, hats, and outdoor basics. You can keep it simple and still feel prepared for a great day outside.

MINI CHALLENGE: PINEYWOODS BIRD BINGO

Try to spot 5 birds in one outing. Extra points if you hear a woodpecker before you see it.

Birding is one of the easiest ways to explore Lufkin like a visitor and a local at the same time. Pack your curiosity, step outside, and let the Pineywoods do the rest... and do not forget to

Visit Lufkin!
















Painting the Birds of a Young America

JOHN JAMES AUDUBON

As we celebrate birds this spring, Audubon's legacy reminds us that noticing nature is the first step toward protecting it.

In the early 1800s, long before binoculars, field guides, or nature documentaries, one man set out to show the world the birds of North America in a way no one had ever seen before. His name was John James Audubon, and his work forever changed how people saw birds—not as distant curiosities, but as living, dynamic creatures worth noticing and protecting.

Audubon was born in 1785 and grew up with a deep fascination for the natural world. While many artists of his time focused on portraits or landscapes, Audubon was drawn to feathers, wings, and song. Birds, he believed, were full of motion and personality, and he wanted to capture them exactly as they lived in the wild.

A Different Way of Seeing Birds

At a time when most scientific illustrations showed animals stiffly posed, Audubon did something radical. He painted birds mid-flight, feeding, hunting, and interacting with one another. His illustrations showed owls swooping, herons stalking fish, and songbirds perched naturally among leaves and branches. These weren't just pictures—they were moments frozen in time.

Audubon often traveled for months at a stretch, exploring forests, wetlands, rivers, and coastlines across the growing United States. He observed birds closely, sometimes studying a single species for days to understand how it moved and behaved. This attention to detail gave his artwork an energy and realism that captivated audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Birds of America

Audubon's life's work became The Birds of America, a massive collection of hand-colored illustrations depicting hundreds of bird species found across North America. The pages were printed at life-size, meaning large birds—like eagles, cranes, and flamingos—stretched across the page in dramatic detail.

The book was unlike anything published before. It was scientifically valuable, artistically stunning, and astonishingly ambitious. Even today, original copies of The Birds of America are considered some of the most valuable books in the world.

Birds Lost and Lessons Learned

Some of the birds Audubon painted no longer exist. His illustrations of the passenger pigeon, once the most abundant bird in North America, are among the only detailed visual records we have today. At the time Audubon lived, the idea that a species could disappear forever was almost unthinkable.

The skies once darkened with migrating pigeons—and then, within a few decades, they were gone.

This is one of the quiet but powerful legacies of Audubon's work. His art preserves not only beauty, but history. It reminds us that abundance does not guarantee survival, and that careful stewardship of wildlife matters.

A Complicated Legacy

It's also important to acknowledge that Audubon was a product of his time. Some of his methods—such as collecting specimens for study—would not align with modern conservation ethics. Today, we observe and protect birds in far less invasive ways. Recognizing this complexity helps us better understand how science and conservation have evolved.

What remains undeniable is the impact of his work. Audubon helped spark widespread interest in birds and nature, inspiring generations of artists, scientists, and conservationists who followed.

Why Audubon Still Matters Today

More than two centuries later, Audubon's work continues to resonate—especially in spring, when birdsong, nesting activity, and migration fill the landscape. This season, visitors will have a rare opportunity to see Audubon's legacy up close, as select works will be on display at the Museum of East Texas in Lufkin, bringing his remarkable birds from the page into a local gallery setting.

His illustrations encourage us to slow down, look closely, and appreciate the incredible diversity around us—whether it's a brilliant flamingo, a quiet owl, or a familiar backyard songbird. Long before cameras could capture flight in motion, John James Audubon showed the world that birds were not just something to identify, but something to marvel at. And that sense of wonder remains at the heart of conservation today.

Audubon painted a world rich with birds. Today, our responsibility is to make sure that world still exists.

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SCAN TO APPLY

THE ROADRUNNER

Fast, clever, and unmistakable, the roadrunner is one of the most recognizable birds of the American Southwest. With its long tail, expressive crest, and lightning-quick stride, this ground-dwelling bird has earned a reputation for speed and survival in some of the harshest landscapes in North America.

It's no surprise that the roadrunner has become a powerful symbol of determination and resilience—qualities that resonate far beyond the desert.

BUILT TO RUN

Unlike most birds, roadrunners prefer running over flying. Strong legs and a long stride allow them to reach speeds of up to 20 miles per hour, zigzagging across open ground with remarkable agility. Flight is typically reserved for short bursts, such as reaching a low perch or escaping danger.

Roadrunners are opportunistic hunters, feeding on insects, lizards, snakes, rodents, and other small animals. Their sharp eyesight and quick reflexes make them effective predators in environments where food can be unpredictable.

DESERT SURVIVAL SMARTS

Living in arid regions requires smart adaptations. Roadrunners regulate their body temperature by basking in the sun during cool mornings and seeking shade during the heat of the day. Specialized glands help them manage salt and conserve water—an essential skill in dry habitats.

Their streaked feathers provide natural camouflage among rocks, brush, and cactus, while their crest can be raised to signal alertness or aggression. Every feature reflects a life shaped by heat, scarcity, and constant motion.

MORE THAN A BIRD: A CULTURAL SYMBOL

For centuries, roadrunners have appeared in Indigenous stories and Southwestern folklore as symbols of cleverness, protection, and endurance. Their distinctive X-shaped tracks were even believed to confuse evil spirits, hiding which direction the bird had traveled.

Today, the roadrunner continues to represent speed, perseverance, and adaptability—qualities that make it a natural emblem for teams, schools, and communities.

Here in East Texas, those traits are proudly reflected in the roadrunner mascot of Angelina College, where the bird symbolizes forward momentum, determination, and resilience—values shared by both students and the broader community.

A BIRD WORTH KNOWING

Even if roadrunners aren't common backyard sightings, learning their story helps us better understand how birds adapt to specific environments—and why protecting diverse habitats matters. Each species plays a role in its ecosystem, shaped by the challenges it faces.

As spring brings renewed activity across the bird world, the roadrunner reminds us that success in nature doesn't always mean taking flight. Sometimes, it means staying grounded, moving fast, and adapting wisely.

Before most people ever spotted a roadrunner in the wild, they met one on Saturday morning television. The Road Runner, star of Looney Tunes, became one of the most recognizable bird characters in animation history — and helped turn a real desert bird into a pop culture legend. While the animated version exaggerates nearly everything, one detail is surprisingly accurate: roadrunners really are fast. In the wild, they can sprint up to about 20 miles per hour, impressive for a bird that prefers running to flying. The rest? That's pure cartoon magic.

Wings OF WARTIME

Before satellites, before encrypted radios, before instant communication became an expectation, messages traveled on wings.

During the chaos of the First and Second World Wars, when wires were cut and radios failed, armies turned to an unlikely ally: the homing pigeon. Small, fast, and astonishingly reliable, pigeons became living lifelines—trusted to carry critical information across battlefields, cities, and enemy territory. Among them was one bird whose story still echoes more than a century later: Cher Ami.

WHY PIGEONS?

Homing pigeons possess a remarkable ability to find their way back to a specific location over long distances. Long before modern navigation, people recognized this instinct and learned to work with it. By the early 20th century, pigeons had already been used for communication in journalism, business, and the military. When war disrupted every conventional method of contact, pigeons offered something radios could not: silence, speed, and reliability. They could not be jammed. They required no electricity. And they often succeeded when every other option failed.

CHER AMI'S FLIGHT

In October 1918, during the final months of World War I, American troops from the U.S. Army's 77th Infantry Division found themselves trapped in the Argonne Forest of France. Surrounded by enemy forces and mistakenly shelled by their own artillery, the battalion—later known as the "Lost Battalion"—was running out of options. Messages sent by runner were intercepted or lost. Earlier pigeons had been shot down.

Cher Ami was the last pigeon available. Released into a storm of gunfire, Cher Ami flew with a message tied to his leg: a desperate plea to halt the barrage and reveal the unit's position. He was hit almost immediately. Despite severe injuries, he continued flying and delivered the message.

The artillery fire stopped. Nearly 200 soldiers were saved.

Cher Ami did not survive unscathed. He lost a leg and was blinded in one eye, but he lived long enough to become a symbol of extraordinary courage. For his actions, he was awarded the French Croix de Guerre, and after the war his preserved body was placed in the Smithsonian Institution as a testament to the role animals played in human survival.

PIGEONS IN WORLD WAR I

Cher Ami was not an exception—he was part of a vast, organized effort. During World War I, thousands of pigeons were trained and deployed by Allied forces. Mobile pigeon lofts followed troops into battle, and birds routinely carried coordinates, troop movements, and requests for aid.

Their success rates were astonishing. Even under heavy fire, pigeons often completed their missions. Soldiers quickly learned to trust them, and in many cases, pigeons became the only reliable link between isolated units and command.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR: WINGS BEHIND THE LINES

Two decades later, pigeons returned to service. In World War II, pigeons were used by Allied forces and resistance groups across Europe. They carried intelligence from occupied territories, transmitted information from downed aircraft crews, and delivered messages when radio silence was essential. Birds were transported on ships, submarines, and planes, ready to be released if communication systems failed.

In Britain, pigeons were so important that a National Pigeon Service was established to co-

ordinate their care and deployment. Some birds were even parachuted into enemy territory to support resistance efforts.

Their bravery did not go unnoticed. Several pigeons were awarded the Dickin Medal, an honor often described as the animal equivalent of the Victoria Cross.

MORE THAN TOOLS

What makes these stories endure isn't just the novelty of pigeons in war—it's the recognition that these birds were partners, not equipment. They were cared for, trained, protected, and honored. Handlers developed close bonds with them, understanding that a successful flight could mean lives saved.

In an era defined by destruction, pigeons represented trust—between species, between individuals, and between hope and survival.

WHY THIS STORY STILL MATTERS

Today, pigeons are often overlooked—or worse, dismissed as pests or vermin. That perception is largely a human-made one. After centuries of selectively breeding pigeons for communication, companionship, and labor, people abandoned them when technology made them seem unnecessary. Left behind in cities and stripped of their original purpose, pigeons adapted the only way they could—by surviving alongside us.

Their wartime history reminds us that value isn't measured by rarity or beauty alone. Intelligence, resilience, and partnership can appear in the most familiar forms. The same birds once trusted with saving lives are now among the most misunderstood.

As we work to understand and protect birds today—whether watching them along forest trails or learning their histories—we're continuing a relationship that stretches far beyond recreation. Birds have shaped human stories in ways both quiet and profound.

Cher Ami's flight was brief, but its legacy endures: a reminder that sometimes, the smallest wings carry the greatest weight.

Parrots have a way of drawing us in. Their eyes seem to meet ours with intention, their voices echo the sounds around them, and their intelligence feels unmistakably familiar. For centuries, people have been captivated by these birds—and in that closeness, something complicated began to unfold, blurring the line between admiration and impact.

Today, parrots are one of the most heavily traded groups of birds in the world—and the pet trade plays a major role in their decline.

Why Parrots Are So Appealing

Parrots are highly social, long-lived, and intelligent. Many can mimic sounds, solve puzzles, and form strong bonds with others. In the wild, parrots live in complex social groups and spend their days flying long distances, foraging, communicating, and raising young.

These traits make parrots endlessly interesting to watch—but they also make parrots especially difficult to keep as pets. A parrot is not a decorative animal; it is a highly emotional, mentally active being with needs that can last for decades.

The Impact of the Pet Trade

For many years, parrots were captured directly from the wild to supply the pet trade. Chicks were taken from nests, adults were trapped, and entire flocks were disrupted. The result was devastating: some species experienced dramatic population crashes in just a few generations.

Although international laws now restrict or ban the capture and sale of many wild parrots, illegal trafficking still occurs. Habitat loss, combined with continued demand for exotic pets, means parrots remain among the most threatened bird groups worldwide.

Even parrots bred in captivity can be affected indirectly. When people purchase parrots without fully understanding their needs, many birds are later surrendered due to noise, biting, long lifespans, or complex care requirements.

A Lifetime Commitment

One of the most misunderstood aspects of parrot ownership is longevity. Many parrots can live 40, 60, or even 80 years. That means caring for a parrot is often a multi-decade commitment, requiring time, patience, enrichment, social interaction, and specialized veterinary care.

Without proper mental and physical stimulation, parrots can develop serious behavioral and health issues, including feather plucking, anxiety, and self-injury. These challenges are not signs of a "bad bird"—they are signs of unmet needs.

Conservation Beyond the Cage

Parrots play vital roles in their ecosystems. Many species are important seed dispersers, helping maintain healthy forests and plant diversity. When parrot populations decline, entire ecosystems can be affected.

Protecting parrots means protecting forests, regulating trade, supporting ethical breeding practices, and educating the public about what responsible care truly looks like.

How Zoos Help Tell the Story

Zoos play an important role in parrot conservation by providing lifelong care for ambassador birds, supporting conservation programs, and helping people understand the realities behind the pet trade.

At Ellen Trout Zoo, parrots help spark conversations about responsibility, conservation, and respect for wildlife. By learning their stories, visitors gain a deeper appreciation for parrots—not as novelty pets, but as complex animals deserving thoughtful protection.

Choosing Curiosity Over Ownership

Not every beautiful animal belongs in a home. Sometimes, the most responsible choice is to admire wildlife without possessing it.

As we celebrate birds this spring, parrots remind us that intelligence and beauty come with responsibility. Protecting them starts with understanding—and choosing actions that help keep parrots where they belong: thriving in the wild, and cared for ethically when under human care.

TURNING ART INTO *Conservation Action*

For most people, birds exist on the edges of daily life — a movement overhead, a sound in the trees, a presence noticed only when it's pointed out. Bird Collective was built on the idea that those fleeting moments matter. That learning to recognize a bird, even casually, can change how people relate to the world around them.

The company emerged from within the birding and conservation community, shaped by people who understood that connection almost always comes before concern. If someone knows a bird's name — or even just notices its shape or color — it stops being anonymous. It becomes familiar. And familiarity is often where care begins.

That belief shows up most clearly in how the birds are depicted. Accuracy isn't treated as a bonus or a selling point; it's the baseline. Species are illustrated with attention to identifying features and natural posture, not stylized into something symbolic or abstract. The goal isn't to dramatize birds, but to make them recognizable — to bridge

the gap between something seen on a page and something encountered outdoors.

The conservation work behind the scenes follows the same philosophy. Support isn't limited to a single issue or moment in time, but spread across organizations and efforts that address habitat protection, research, and education. It reflects an understanding that bird conservation is complex and interconnected — that migration, breeding, food sources, and climate pressures are all part of the same story.

Just as important as where support goes is how information is shared. Rather than relying on urgency or alarm, Bird Collective consistently frames conservation as a shared responsibility rooted in awareness. The emphasis is not on what's already lost, but on what can still be protected when people understand what they're seeing and why it matters.

That approach carries through to the objects themselves. These aren't designed to be precious or static. They're meant to exist in everyday spaces — handled, worn, shared, and noticed by people who may not consider themselves birders at all. A bird seen repeatedly in daily life has a way of sticking. It invites questions. It invites recognition. And over time, it invites concern.

In a moment when many bird species are experiencing quiet but significant declines, this kind of engagement matters. Conservation doesn't always begin with action plans or expertise. Sometimes it starts much earlier, with the realization that birds aren't background — they're neighbors.

A curated selection of Bird Collective items is available in the zoo gift shop, offering one more way for that familiarity to take root beyond the trail.

TOCO TOUCAN facts

WHERE ARE THEY?

Toucans are found across South America, primarily in Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Northern Argentina, and parts of Peru.

DIET

SAY WHAT?

Toco toucans are noisy birds, with a deep, frog-like croak and clacking calls used for communication.

The toco toucan is one of the most recognizable tropical birds and has been used as a mascot in advertising, most famously by Toucan Sam from Froot Loops.

Their beak plays a role in thermoregulation—toucans can adjust blood flow to their beak to release excess body heat.

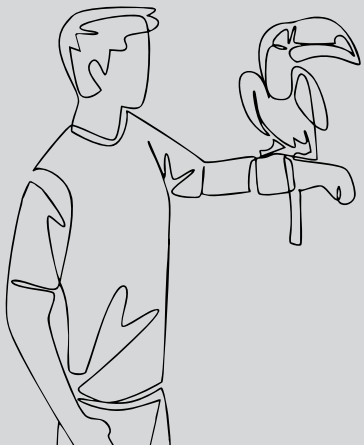
LC

The toco toucan is currently listed as "Least Concern" by the IUCN Red List. However, habitat loss from deforestation and land conversion continues to affect local populations. In some areas, toucans are also impacted by illegal capture for the pet trade.

HABITAT

Toco toucans live in open woodlands, savannas, and tropical forests, often near river systems and fruiting trees.

SIZE



LENGTH:
21-26 inches

WEIGHT:
19-30 ounces

WINGSPAN:
35-39 inches

BILL LENGTH:
7-8 inches

A group of toucans is called a

DURATION

however, this term is very rare and not widely used—in fact, toucans are generally solitary or found in small, loose flocks, especially outside of breeding season. When they do gather, it's usually around fruiting trees or roosting sites, rather than as a coordinated group like a "flock" of starlings or "murder" of crows.

Meet LINDA

ELLEN TROUT ZOO
ADOPT AN ANIMAL

Linda was hatched at Audubon Zoo 19 years ago and made her way to Ellen Trout Zoo on February 6, 2007. Since then, she has fully embraced her role as one of our most eye-catching residents.

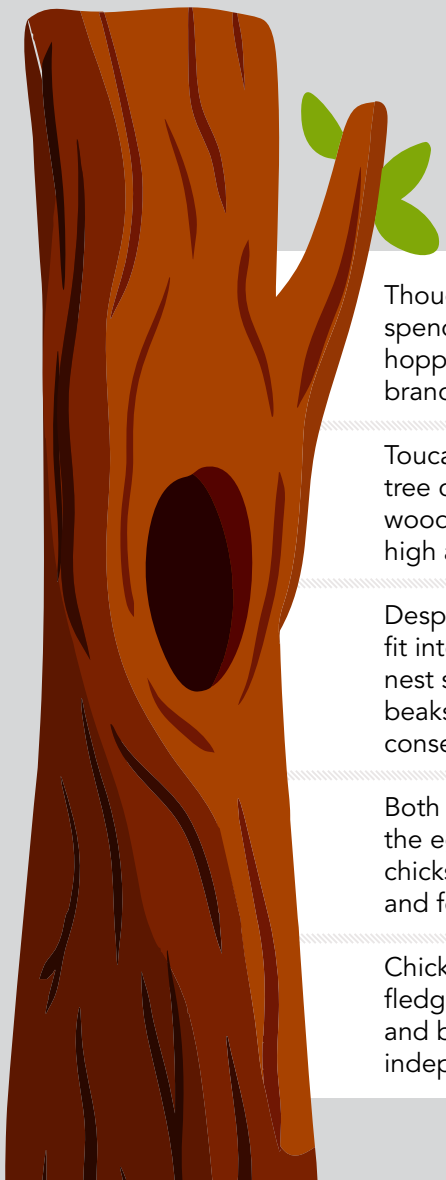
During the summer months, Linda eagerly awaits the arrival of education groups, especially when they come bearing her favorite treat—grapes. To Linda, nothing in the world tastes better. She will patiently perch and wait for her keeper, and if they're late, she isn't shy about letting them know with a few well-timed vocalizations. After enjoying a diet of grapes, cantaloupe, apples, bananas, and specially formulated pellets, Linda turns her attention to what she does best: looking fabulous. She takes great pride in her appearance, spending time each day grooming and feaking—rubbing her beak against surfaces to clean it, shape it, and keep it healthy.

Once her grooming routine is complete, Linda can often be found admiring her reflection in the nearest mirror or reflective enrichment ball. These shiny objects are among her favorites—after all, they give her the chance to appreciate her exceptional beauty all day long.

Sabrina Chapin
PRIMARY KEEPER

Their bright beaks and bouncy flight have earned them the nickname

FLYING BANANAS



Though they can fly, they spend most of their time hopping from branch to branch in the canopy.

Toucans nest in natural tree cavities or abandoned woodpecker holes, often high above the ground.

Despite their size, they fit into surprisingly small nest spaces, tucking their beaks under their wings to conserve room.

Both parents help incubate the eggs and feed the chicks, which are born blind and featherless.

Chicks grow quickly, fledging after 6–8 weeks and becoming fully independent not long after.

WILD ADOPT

animals depend on people too

Our goal is to continue to connect everyone to the world we live in, and to bring joy to not only the animals, but the surrounding communities as well. Your ADOPT Sponsorship helps provide new or improved homes and enrichment for the animal of your choice and all the animals at the Zoo.

The Silence After the Shot

Across much of Africa, vultures once served as an unmistakable signal in the sky. Their circling flight marked the presence of a carcass and the natural rhythms of life on the savanna. Today, that same behavior has made them targets.

As poaching has intensified, so has a disturbing tactic designed to keep it hidden: poisoned carcasses. Poachers lace animal remains with toxic chemicals to kill vultures and other scavengers before they can gather and alert law enforcement to illegal activity. What follows is often not the loss of a single bird, but the sudden collapse of entire local populations.

POISON AS A TOOL OF POACHING

Vultures are extraordinarily efficient scavengers. With keen eyesight and strong social behavior, they can locate carrion from miles away and consume it quickly. This efficiency also makes them visible—and visibility is dangerous.

To avoid detection after killing elephants, rhinos, and other large mammals, poachers deliberately poison carcasses using agricultural pesticides or other readily available toxins. When vultures arrive to feed, dozens—or even hundreds—can die within hours. In some cases, carcasses are placed solely as bait, with the intention of killing scavengers before any animal is poached.

Because vultures feed communally, a single poisoned carcass can wipe out an entire breeding population in one event.

A RAPID AND WIDESPREAD DECLINE

Africa is home to several vulture species, many now listed as endangered or critically endangered. Some populations have declined by more than 90 percent in just a few decades. Unlike many birds, vultures reproduce slowly, raising few chicks and relying on long-lived adults to sustain their numbers. When mass poisoning occurs, recovery—if it happens at all—takes generations.

Adding to the crisis is how easily poisoning goes unnoticed. Events often occur in remote areas, carcasses disappear quickly, and the true scale of losses is frequently underestimated.

WHY VULTURES MATTER

Vultures play a critical role in ecosystem health. Their highly acidic stomachs destroy dangerous pathogens, including those that cause anthrax and rabies. By rapidly removing carcasses from the landscape, they prevent disease from spreading to wildlife, livestock, and people.

When vultures decline, carcasses linger longer. This attracts animals such as feral dogs and rats—species far more likely to transmit disease. In areas where vultures have disappeared, increases in rabies and other health risks have followed.

The loss of vultures doesn't just affect wildlife; it creates real dangers for human communities.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Poisoned carcasses rarely kill only vultures. Lions, hyenas, jackals, eagles, and other scavengers are often caught in the fallout. Entire food webs can be disrupted by a single poisoning event. In some regions, toxins have also contaminated water sources or caused illness and death in people handling poisoned animals.

What begins as an attempt to conceal illegal activity often becomes an indiscriminate ecological disaster.

CONSERVATION, AWARENESS, AND ACTION

Across Africa, conservation groups and wildlife authorities are working to confront the crisis by banning the most dangerous chemicals, training rapid-response teams to investigate poisonings, tracking vultures to detect mass deaths, and partnering with local communities to reduce human-wildlife conflict.

Education is essential. Many poisoning incidents stem not only from poaching, but from fear or retaliation against predators. Understanding the unintended consequences of poison use—and the vital role vultures play—can prevent future losses.

Zoos and conservation organizations help bring this story closer to home. By sharing the reality behind vulture declines, they challenge misconceptions and highlight how deeply human actions are tied to ecosystem health.

WHEN THE SKY GOES QUIET

The disappearance of vultures is not dramatic. There are no empty landscapes or sudden silences—just fewer wings overhead and ecosystems left without one of their most important safeguards.

Protecting vultures means confronting the hidden costs of poaching and the far-reaching impact of poison.

Sometimes the most important warning signs are the ones that vanish first...

Passenger Pigeon.

COLUMBA MIGRATORIA. Linn

Male 1. Female 2.

Drawn from Nature & Published by John J. Audubon, F.R.S. F.L.S.

Engraved, Printed & Coloured by R. Havell.

Vanished from the Sky

THE TRAGIC FALL OF THE PASSENGER PIGEON

Not long ago, the skies above North America could darken for hours as billions of passenger pigeons passed overhead — a living river of wings so vast that early settlers compared it to a solar eclipse. The thunder of their flight could be heard miles away, and daylight dimmed as flock after flock streamed past. Once considered the most abundant bird on the planet, the passenger pigeon's fall from the heavens to extinction stands as one of the most sobering cautionary tales in conservation history.

In the early 1800s, passenger pigeon flocks stretched hundreds of miles long and miles wide, with individual gatherings containing hundreds of millions of birds. These immense colonies transformed entire landscapes. Trees snapped and collapsed beneath the weight of nesting birds. Forest floors were buried beneath inches of droppings, stripping vegetation and altering soil chemistry. Farmers watched helplessly as flocks descended on fields, devouring entire crops in minutes. To many Americans of the time, the birds seemed not just numerous, but inexhaustible — a natural resource that could never run out.

That illusion of endless abundance proved fatal. As America's population expanded westward, the passenger pigeon became a target of relentless commercial exploitation. Easy to kill, easy to preserve, and available in staggering numbers, pigeons were harvested by the millions and shipped by rail to feed growing cities. Nesting colonies were attacked with sticks, nets, and fires; eggs and squabs were crushed or collected by the barrel. Some hunters even used explosives or sulfur to suffocate birds roosting in trees. Beyond food, pigeons were slaughtered for sport, competitive shooting, and the feather trade — casualties of an era that placed no limits on nature's bounty.

What made the passenger pigeon especially vulnerable was its reliance on overwhelming numbers for survival. The species evolved to live, nest, and migrate in massive flocks, using sheer scale as protection against predators. When those numbers were reduced, the birds struggled to reproduce and defend themselves. As forests were cleared and colonies fragmented, the pigeons' social system unraveled. By the 1870s, nesting grounds that once spanned miles had shrunk dramatically. By the 1890s, sightings became rare and fleeting — whispers of a species already slipping away.

The last confirmed wild flock was likely destroyed during a shooting competition in Ohio in 1896, an event that now reads as both tragic and grotesque in hindsight. A handful of solitary birds may have survived briefly in remote areas, but by 1900, ornithologists understood that extinction was no longer a possibility — it was inevitable.

The final chapter came quietly. The last known passenger pigeon, a female named Martha, died in captivity on September 1, 1914. Her body was preserved and sent to the Smithsonian, where she remains on display today — a silent witness to a species that once filled the skies beyond imagination.

Legends and rumors linger, including claims that a flock was seen in Virginia as late as 1907, but none have ever been verified. By then, the passenger pigeon existed only in memory, museum cases, and fading stories passed down by those who had once watched the skies go dark.

Its disappearance helped awaken a nation. The loss of the passenger pigeon forced Americans to confront a startling truth: nature, no matter how vast it seems, is not limitless. Its story helped inspire the modern conservation movement and reshape how wildlife is protected. In the emptiness left behind, a powerful question emerged — one that still echoes today: If a bird that numbered in the billions could vanish so quickly... what else could we lose?

Cardboard Roll Birds

BY HEATHER HATTON, MUSEUM OF EAST TEXAS

Materials

- TOILET PAPER OR PAPER TOWEL ROLL
- HOT GLUE GUN & GLUE
- ACRYLIC PAINT
- PAINT MARKERS
- GOOGLY EYES
- SCISSORS
- PENCIL
- PAINTBRUSHES

Instructions

FORM THE BODY: Flatten one end of the paper roll, add hot glue to one side, press closed, and hold 20–30 seconds.

SHAPE THE HEAD: Flatten the open end in the opposite direction. Trim to length and cut a gentle curve for the head.

ADD THE BEAK: Cut a small cardboard beak, glue it into the curved end, add a dab of glue inside, and press closed.

FIND YOUR INSPIRATION: Decide what type of bird you want to create. Look through this issue of Animal Tracks for inspiration, then lightly sketch wings on both sides and a line dividing the body and chest colors.

PAINT: Paint the top and wings one color and the chest and underside a second, complementary color. Add a second coat if needed.

FINISH: Paint the beak, outline wings with a marker, add feather details, and glue on googly eyes.

Skip the Bread

HEALTHIER WAYS TO FEED DUCKS AND GEESE

For generations, tossing bread to ducks has felt like a harmless tradition. A bag of old sandwich slices, a handful of crackers, a few happy birds paddling closer—it looks like a win for everyone. But while birds may eagerly eat bread, it's actually one of the least healthy things we can offer them.

The good news? Feeding waterfowl can still be a fun, educational activity—when it's done the right way.

Why bread is a problem

Bread fills birds up without giving them the nutrients they need. Over time, diets heavy in bread can lead to malnutrition, poor feather development, and weakened immune systems. Uneaten bread also sinks or rots in the water, contributing to algae growth and poor water quality that affects fish, turtles, and other wildlife.

Birds aren't being picky when they eat bread—they're being opportunistic. It's up to us to offer better choices.

Healthier foods birds can eat

If you're visiting a lake or pond and want to feed waterfowl responsibly, these options are much closer to what birds naturally eat:

- Grains
- Rolled oats (uncooked)
- Birdseed mixes (without added salt or flavoring)
- Finely chopped carrots, radishes, tomatoes, asparagus or zucchini
- Chopped lettuce, kale, or spinach
- Fruit like blueberries or grapes (cut up)
- Cracked corn
- Peas or corn (thawed or fresh)
- Duck pellets or waterfowl feed (available at feed stores)
- Cooked rice or pasta (no salt or seasoning)

Always offer food in small amounts. Birds should forage naturally; feeding should be a supplement, not a meal replacement.

What not to feed

Some foods can be harmful or dangerous to birds and should always be avoided:

- Bread, crackers, chips, or baked goods
- Anything salty, sugary, or seasoned
- Processed foods
- Moldy or spoiled food

If you wouldn't feed it to a wild animal on land, it likely doesn't belong in the water either.

Where and how to feed responsibly

Scatter food on the ground or shallow water, not in large piles

Avoid feeding during nesting season if birds appear stressed or aggressive

Never chase birds or encourage crowding

Observe quietly—watching natural behavior is just as rewarding as feeding

Better yet: watch, don't feed

One of the healthiest choices you can make is not feeding at all. Waterfowl are excellent foragers, and simply observing them—especially during spring—offers a chance to see courtship, nesting, and chick-rearing behaviors that feeding can interrupt.

Bring binoculars, sit quietly, and let the birds do what they do best.

A small choice with a big impact

Feeding birds comes from a place of kindness. By choosing healthier options—or choosing observation instead—we help protect not just ducks and geese, but the entire ecosystem they depend on.

A little knowledge goes a long way toward keeping our lakes, ponds, and feathered neighbors healthy for generations to come.

THE Goose THAT REFUSED TO LIVE LIKE A GOOSE

If you dropped a typical goose into the middle of a Hawaiian lava field, it wouldn't last long. But the nēnē did more than survive there — it evolved to belong.

Known as the Hawaiian goose, the nēnē is unlike any other goose in the world. It doesn't migrate across continents. It doesn't spend most of its time swimming. And it certainly wasn't shaped by quiet ponds or grassy plains. Instead, this bird adapted to volcanoes, wind, and sharp, unforgiving rock — and in doing so, became one of the most unusual waterfowl on the planet.

A Goose That Walks More Than It Swims

The nēnē's body tells its story at a glance. Its feet are only partially webbed, trading paddle power for traction. Its toes are strong and flexible, built for gripping uneven ground rather than pushing through water. Even the feathers on its neck are different — softer and grooved, helping protect the bird as it squeezes through rough vegetation and lava rock.

Rather than grazing lush wetlands, nēnē feed on grasses, seeds, berries, and native plants scattered across dry, open landscapes. They walk — a lot — navigating terrain that would challenge most birds their size.

In many ways, the nēnē isn't just a goose living in Hawaii. It's a goose reshaped by Hawaii.

When Isolation Becomes a Risk

For thousands of years, isolation was the nēnē's greatest strength. With few predators and limited competition, the species thrived. But when humans arrived in the islands, that isolation became a vulnerability.

Introduced predators like rats, mongooses, dogs, and cats preyed on eggs and goslings. Habitat loss reduced safe nesting areas. By the mid-20th century, the nēnē population had collapsed to fewer than 30 birds in the wild — a number so small that extinction felt inevitable.

This wasn't a dramatic overnight disappearance. It was a quiet unraveling.

The Comeback That Almost Didn't Happen

What followed was one of the most remarkable conservation turnarounds in bird history. Through careful breeding programs, habitat protection, and long-term management, conservationists gave the nēnē a second chance.

Today, thousands of nēnē once again roam parts of the Hawaiian Islands. The species is still considered threatened — recovery is fragile — but the nēnē exists because people refused to accept its loss as unavoidable.

It is a reminder that extinction is not always instant, and survival often depends on noticing the danger in time.

Why the Nēnē Matters Far Beyond Hawaii

The nēnē's story isn't just about one species. It's about how quickly abundance can vanish, how evolution can produce extraordinary specialists, and how recovery takes patience measured in decades, not years.

Birds like the nēnē also challenge our assumptions. A goose that doesn't migrate. A waterfowl that prefers walking. A survivor shaped by fire and stone instead of wetlands and water.

Seeing One Changes the Story

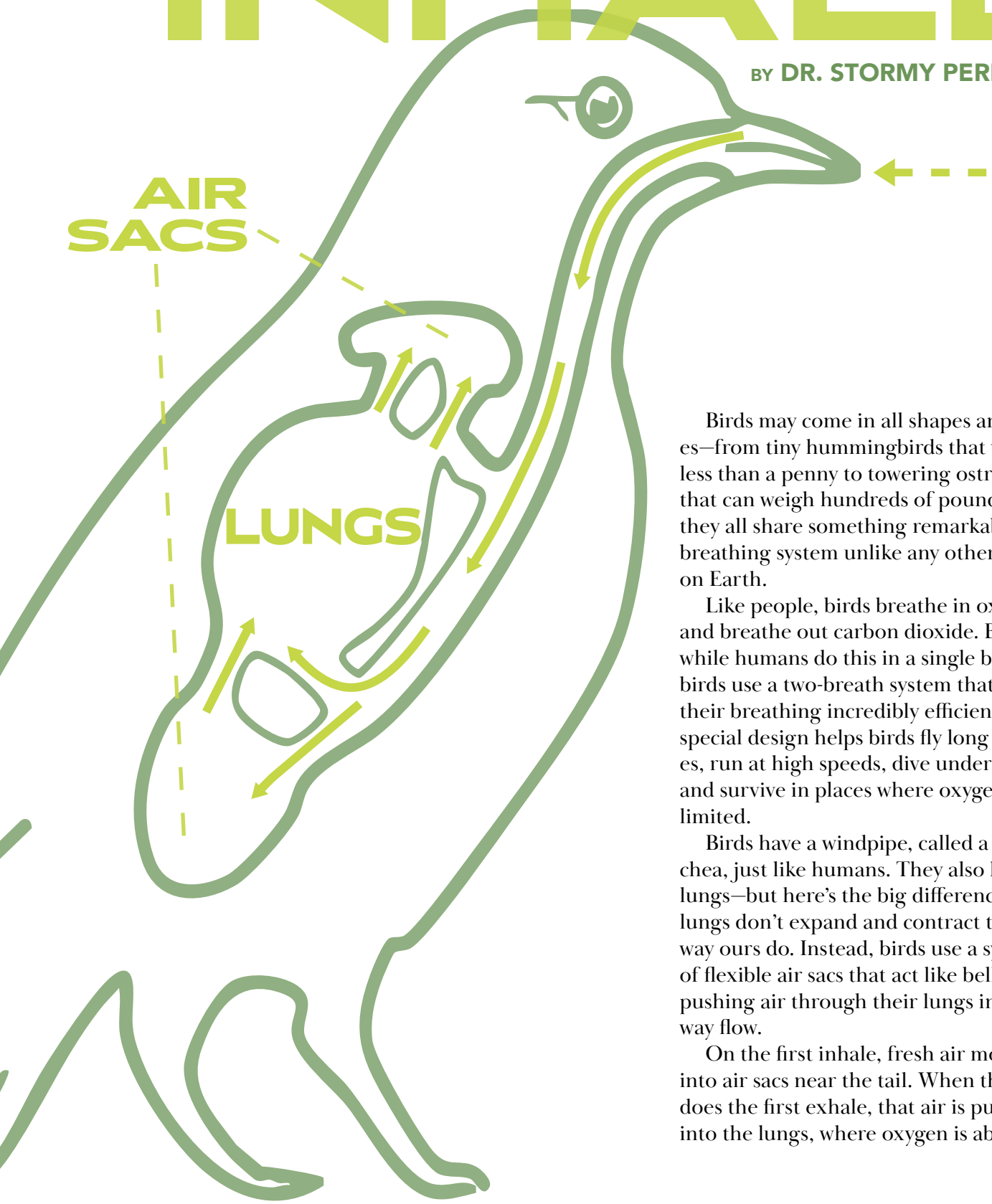
At Ellen Trout Zoo, the nēnē serves as a living reminder that conservation success isn't always loud or obvious. Watching one move — deliberate, alert, perfectly adapted — tells a story no sign or statistic ever could.

In a world where many bird stories end in loss, the nēnē stands as proof that paying attention, changing course, and committing to long-term care can still make a difference.

Not every species gets a second chance. The nēnē did — and it's still walking forward.

INHALE

BY DR. STORMY PERRY, DVM



Birds may come in all shapes and sizes—from tiny hummingbirds that weigh less than a penny to towering ostriches that can weigh hundreds of pounds—but they all share something remarkable: a breathing system unlike any other animal on Earth.

Like people, birds breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. But while humans do this in a single breath, birds use a two-breath system that makes their breathing incredibly efficient. This special design helps birds fly long distances, run at high speeds, dive underwater, and survive in places where oxygen is limited.

Birds have a windpipe, called a trachea, just like humans. They also have lungs—but here's the big difference: bird lungs don't expand and contract the way ours do. Instead, birds use a system of flexible air sacs that act like bellows, pushing air through their lungs in a one-way flow.

On the first inhale, fresh air moves into air sacs near the tail. When the bird does the first exhale, that air is pushed into the lungs, where oxygen is absorbed.

EXHALE

On the second inhale, the air moves into air sacs near the head. The second exhale pushes the air back out of the body. Because air is always moving through the lungs, birds get oxygen both when they breathe in and when they breathe out.

This continuous airflow makes bird breathing more efficient than even ours. It allows birds to soar for miles, fly at high altitudes, dive deep while swimming, or sprint away from danger without quickly running out of breath.

Birds have many other amazing adaptations too—like hollow bones to reduce weight and specialized beaks shaped by their diets. These features didn't appear overnight. They evolved over millions of years and are even shared with some dinosaurs.

Understanding how birds breathe is especially important in veterinary care. Because their respiratory systems are so different from ours, birds require special attention during anesthesia and when treating respiratory illnesses. Learning how these systems work helps veterinarians provide the best possible care for our feathered friends.

coming home...

For centuries, the colorful and charismatic Atlantic puffin was a common sight along the coast of Maine, where it nested on rocky islands and bobbed on the waves like tiny, tuxedoed fishermen. But by the early 1900s, puffins had all but disappeared from the region due to overhunting for their meat, eggs, and feathers. Their charming presence was nearly lost—until one determined scientist set out on an ambitious mission to bring them back.

In the 1970s, Dr. Stephen Kress, a young ornithologist, launched Project Puffin, a groundbreaking effort to restore these seabirds to their former nesting grounds. But how do you convince puffins to return to a place they had been missing from for generations? The answer lay in an ingenious technique called social attraction. Kress and his team transplanted puffin chicks from Canada's thriving colonies to Maine, hand-rearing them in artificial burrows until they were ready to fledge. Because puffins tend to return to where they were raised, the hope was that these young birds, after spending several years at sea, would come back to Maine to nest as adults.

But that wasn't enough. To further entice the puffins, Kress used decoys—wooden puffin replicas placed on the islands—to make it look like a thriving colony already existed. Speakers broadcast puffin calls across the cliffs, creating the illusion of a bustling seabird community. Slowly but surely, the puffins were tricked into believing that Maine was once again a safe place to call home.

After years of patience, in 1981, the first puffin returned to nest on Eastern Egg Rock, an island off the Maine coast. One bird became two, then a dozen, and soon, an entire colony was reestablished. Today, thanks to these efforts, hundreds of puffins breed along Maine's coast, delighting birdwatchers and proving that with dedication and creativity, humans can help nature reclaim what was lost.

The success of Project Puffin has inspired similar efforts worldwide, showing that conservation isn't just about protecting what remains—it's also about restoring what we once lost. Now, each summer, visitors can glimpse these resilient little birds, their bright orange beaks glowing against the sea, a testament to the power of human ingenuity and the enduring spirit of wildlife.

WILDS OF AFRICA

For years, the Africa section at Ellen Trout Zoo has invited guests to slow down—watching giraffes move across the savanna, spotting rhinos in the distance, and taking in the scale and presence of some of the continent's most iconic wildlife. Now, that familiar landscape is entering a new era.

Welcome to Wilds of Africa—a reimagined and expanding section that reflects not only Africa's remarkable biodiversity, but also how modern zoos continue to evolve in their care for animals, their engagement with guests, and their role in conservation.

A Stronger Home for Crocodilians

One of the most significant upgrades in Wilds of Africa centers on the zoo's crocodilians. A new Nile crocodile winter house and exhibit expansion provides improved indoor space during colder months while creating a larger, more dynamic habitat overall. The expanded exhibit now allows all three of the zoo's Nile crocodiles to be on exhibit simultaneously, each representing a different regional form of Nile crocodile found across Africa. This rare opportunity improves animal care while giving guests a unique chance to observe the diversity, behaviors, and interactions within one of Africa's most iconic reptile groups.

A Pavilion at the Heart of the Savanna

At the center of the remodel is a new savanna pavilion, designed to immerse guests directly into the landscape. From this elevated space, visitors will be able to experience the savanna from a whole new perspective — including the opportunity to feed giraffes.

This pavilion isn't just about a memorable moment (though it certainly will be). It's about connection. Standing within the savanna space, watching giraffes approach, and participating in feeding creates a powerful reminder of just how closely linked people are to the natural world.

A New Savanna Layout and a Big Move

As Wilds of Africa takes shape, the savanna itself is being thoughtfully redesigned. Chitabe the male rhino will be relocated into the savanna, with the space divided to meet the needs of all its residents. One half will be occupied by the giraffes, while the other will be dedicated to Chitabe — giving him expanded room while maintaining safe, species-appropriate separation.

Alongside this move comes a new and exciting feature: a rhino interactive platform. Accessed via a limited-access offshoot pathway, this experience is available during select days and times for an additional fee. From this space, guests can safely

engage with Chitabe under keeper supervision, learning firsthand about rhino care, behavior, and conservation. These guided moments foster understanding and empathy—and often become lasting memories long after a visit to the zoo.

A Forest Returns to the Plains

With Chitabe's relocation, his former habitat — a more shaded, forest-style space — is finding a new purpose. That area will soon welcome new okapi, one of Africa's most elusive and unique animals.

Okapi are perfectly suited to this quieter, wooded environment, echoing the dense forests of the Congo where they live in the wild. Their arrival adds a new layer to Wilds of Africa, revealing that the continent is not only defined by open plains and sweeping savannas, but also by lush forests that shelter lesser-known species in need of protection.

More Than a Remodel

Wilds of Africa is about more than new buildings or new names. It reflects a broader shift toward animal-centered design, immersive guest experiences, and conservation storytelling that feels personal and immediate.

Each change — from expanded exhibits to interactive platforms — is designed to help animals thrive and to help visitors understand why these species matter. When people connect with animals, they care. And when they care, conservation becomes something real, not abstract.

As construction progresses and new spaces open, Wilds of Africa will continue to grow into a place where discovery happens at every turn — where the familiar feels fresh again, and where the future of African wildlife is told through thoughtful design, meaningful encounters, and shared responsibility.

The Wilds of Africa are taking shape — and the journey is just beginning.

Not An Owl At All

At first glance, the tawny frogmouth looks exactly like an owl. Big eyes. Stocky body. Perched upright on a branch. But despite appearances, the tawny frogmouth is not an owl at all—and its survival strategy couldn't be more different.

Owls are active hunters. They rely on speed, silent flight, and powerful talons to capture prey. Tawny frogmouths, on the other hand, are ambush specialists. Instead of chasing food, they sit perfectly still and wait. Their secret weapon isn't flight or strength—it's camouflage.

During the day, tawny frogmouths stretch their bodies upright, narrow their eyes, and align themselves with tree branches, mimicking broken limbs or bark. Feathers patterned like lichen and wood grain complete the illusion. When they don't move, they virtually disappear.

At night, the disguise drops. Frogmouths feed primarily on insects and small animals, using their wide, frog-like mouths to snatch prey rather than grasping it with talons. That oversized mouth—one of their most distinctive features—is exactly what gives them their name.

Even their eyes tell the story. Owls have forward-facing eyes built for depth perception and precision strikes. Frogmouths' eyes sit slightly more to the side, better suited for detecting movement while remaining still.

The confusion is understandable. Both are nocturnal. Both are quiet. Both look serious at all times. But while owls dominate the night sky, tawny frogmouths survive by becoming part of the tree itself.

Sometimes, the best way to stay alive isn't to hunt—it's to vanish.

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