A FIELD GUIDE TO WILD FAUNA OF DALLAS, TEXAS

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Artist's Note: While painting birds of prey and insects in my artist studio a few years ago for *War Garden*, my ongoing body of work examining American militarism, I began to wonder where I might be able to observe in the natural environment—and not just in my piles of library books or the internet—all the assorted hawks, eagles, dragonflies and butterflies I had been painting. That and an unswerving desire for beauty as a counterweight to the chaotic American political moment of 2016 had me wandering the fields, creeks, rivers and woods of southern Dallas near my home.

Armed with a cheap pair of binoculars, I began exploring the nearby Trinity River and its environs in search of radical beauty. Admittedly, I was astounded by the variety of wild fauna I was able to discover via our city's public green spaces. And I fell hard. Be it thousands of Tawny Emperor butterflies floating in the sunbeams of the Great Trinity Forest, a flock of White Ibis in silent poetic flight over a chain of wetland ponds, or a lone Wood Stork on the western bank of the Trinity River, a rather spectacular amount and variety of wildlife exists right here in our urban backyard.

This discovery led me in 2017 to create *A Field Guide to Flora and Fauna of Southern Dallas*, a public art project in fly-poster form available for free at southern Dallas branch libraries and public park rec centers. I've expanded the ongoing public art project in this 2019 iteration to include green spaces in other parts of Dallas such as a recently restored remnant of native Blackland Prairie hidden in a subdivision in North Dallas or a wide-open stretch of a public hike and bike nature trail between two of Dallas' most historic public city parks near the Trinity River, and other locations.

My artist version of a field guide, heavy on the history of place, is illustrated with watercolor paintings of discoveries made over four years of getting intentionally lost observing wildlife, scribbling field notes, taking photographs, making audio recordings. Unapologetically, the paintings are intended as singular meditations on beauty: the bright blue eyes of a White Ibis, the magnificent beak of a climate-threatened Wood Stork, a study of tiny-winged insects, all unforeseen beauty encountered in the wild.

- Cynthia Mulcahy, September 2019

White Ibis / Eudocimus albus, watercolor and graphite on Arches paper, 2017, courtesy artist Cynthia Mulcahy and Talley Dunn Gallery.

ELOISE LUNDY PARK / TRINITY SKYLINE TRAIL, EAST OAK CLIFF

My preferred spot for quick access to wild fauna in the Trinity River near my home in Oak Cliff is via the Bottoms neighborhood from one of Dallas' most historic parks, **Eloise Lundy Park**, founded in 1915 by sustained community activism as Oak Cliff Negro Park during the early years of racial segregation in Dallas, when black communities found themselves excluded from other public city parks.[1]

Painted Lady Butterfly / Vanessa cardui, (*after M*), watercolor and graphite on Arches paper, 2017, courtesy artist Cynthia Mulcahy and Talley Dunn Gallery.

Near Lundy Park's multi-purpose courts at the corner of Cliff and Comal streets, you'll find the currently unmarked entrance to a paved public hike and bike nature trail, the **Trinity Skyline Trail**. Head up to the top of the levee, the impending construction of which was made famous by Aaron Thibadeaux "Oak Cliff T-Bone" Walker, a native of the Bottoms neighborhood, in his wonderful 1929 debut recording, "Trinity River Blues."

From here I head south. The trail follows—with spectacular views of the downtown Dallas skyline—the flat floodway of the Trinity River's western bank for about two miles until it finally intersects with the Santa Fe Trestle Trail hike and bike nature path near Moore Park, another historic public city park. Depending on the season, I have marveled at wild birds of every kind seen from this wide-open section of trail between the two historic parks. Red-shouldered Hawks, American Kestrels, Black Vultures and Turkey Vultures, Double-crested Cormorants and Anhingas, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Red-winged Blackbirds—so noticeable by the brilliant flash of red on their wings seen in flight—ducks and shorebirds of all kinds, even magnificent flying flocks of American White Pelicans following the river channel in balletic v-formations. And this year especially, there have been huge numbers of egrets—both Snowy and Great Egrets—so graceful in flight or standing sentinel along wetland pond edges. But also coyotes, foxes, and wild hogs; this two-mile stretch of trail never disappoints.

During the extraordinary perennial beauty of Texas wildflower season—especially this year's super abundant and prolonged 2019 crop—the trail between the levees feels like one giant butterfly preserve with an admirable variety of species of all sizes and colors floating amongst the native flora.

Roseate Spoonbill / Platalea ajaja (*after JJ*), watercolor and graphite on Arches paper, 2017, courtesy artist Cynthia Mulcahy and Talley Dunn Gallery.

MOORE PARK/SANTA FE TRESTLE TRAIL, EAST OAK CLIFF

The Great Trinity Forest begins where South Dallas and Oak Cliff meet near **Moore Park**, one of Dallas' most historic parks founded as Eighth Street Negro Park in 1938 during a golden decade of black civil rights activism and later re-named for Will Moore, an important early 20th-century Dallas black civil rights leader and NAACP activist.[2] One of the largest urban bottomland hardwood forests in North America, the magnificent Great Trinity Forest is also the last old-growth bottomland forest in North Central Texas. Never logged or cleared for cropland, what survives today—over 6,500 acres right next to a major American metropolitan city—is an ecological marvel.

From Moore Park, head over to the adjoining **Santa Fe Trestle Trail**, the paved public hike and bike nature trail that will take you in less than a mile down to the Trinity River. Along the way, you'll pass groves of native hardwood trees, wetland ponds and native Texas grasses that provide important habitat for native and migratory birds like the majestic—and surprisingly enormous—Barred Owl I watched gracefully land on a tree branch near me one summer evening at sunset.

The river overlook of the converted old Santa Fe Railroad trestle bridge, originally built during Dallas' great railroad rush of the 1870s, provides incredible views of the Trinity River and the Great Trinity Forest that begins just south of the bridge. In warmer months, the converted train bridge is also a fail-proof location from which to spot on the riverbanks below magnificent Little Blue or Great Blue Herons, the subject of one of my favorite artworks at the Dallas Museum of Art: John-Baptiste Oudry's loosely and lushly painted French 18th-century oil on canvas, *Water Spaniel Confronting a Heron*. The nearly 6-foot tall painting can be found in the admission-free European Galleries of the public museum. While you're there, look in the adjoining galleries for Gustave Courbet's exquisite in every way *Fox in the Snow*, painted in 1860. Both paintings were beautifully re-hung in the European Galleries just last month in prominent new places.

JOPPA AND THE GREAT TRINITY FOREST, SOUTHERN DALLAS

The best way to experience the deep interior of the Great Trinity Forest is via the **Trinity Forest Trail System**, a series of twelve-foot wide paved concrete public hike and bike nature trails that wanders ribbon-like through the hardwood forest and along the Trinity and nearby wetland ponds and lakes including Lemmon Lake and Little Lemon Lake. The trail system can be easily accessed from a free parking lot located just inside the entrance driveway to the Trinity River Audubon Center.

One trail, the **Great Trinity Forest Way Trail**, takes you through portions of beautiful Joppa Preserve, an area originally settled after Emancipation as a freedman's town beginning in the late 1860s by formerly enslaved community members, including many whose forced labor built the wealth of nearby Millermore plantation owned by early Dallas elite William Brown Miller, the county's biggest cotton grower at the time and one of the largest enslavers in North Texas. The 307-acre preserve was established in 1986 as part of the Dallas County Open Space Program, which seeks to preserve, in the manner of the National Park system, vanishing wildlife habitats—a native forest of Bur, Shumard and Post Oaks and Black Willow, Green Ash, Eastern Cottonwood and Osage-Orange trees—and historically significant lands. Joppa is one of the last remaining freedman's towns in Texas.

The other trail, the **AT&T Trail**—which runs at times alongside what I consider one of man's follies: an exclusive private golf course recently built on public land—will take you deep inside the Great Trinity Forest. A May early morning bike ride on the trail had me surrounded by literally thousands of Tawny Emperor and Hackberry Emperor species of butterflies floating through the sun-dappled forest. Unforeseen beauty of the greatest magnitude. The experience left me speechless.

Fishermen at **Little Lemmon Lake** shared with me the best times—dawn and dusk—to catch sight of fantastically pink-feathered Roseate Spoonbills and prehistoric-looking Wood Storks, both climate threatened species of large wading birds that migrate from the coast 450 miles up the Trinity during the late summer and early fall seasons. Dallas serves as a major flyway for migrating and wintering birds and there may be no better place in Dallas to experience these phenomena.

On a bike ride this past Sunday morning, I watched a flock of Black-necked Stilts make several lyrical passes around the lake, their impossibly long bright pink legs extended in synchronized formation behind them. Magical. At dusk especially, you'll spot Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night-Herons silently patrolling for snails and crayfish in the shallow waters of the lake. Look also for hawks, vultures, and other birds of prey such as Ospreys, elegant Crested Caracaras (aka Mexican Eagles) and sleek dive-bombing Mississippi Kites. You can also observe White-tailed Deer, American Beavers and Nutrias, Cottontail Rabbits, Opossums and Raccoons, and many different species of snakes and frogs, all native fauna who have made their home here for millennia, long before us, in this thriving river ecology. And keep at least one eye peeled for alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*), too.

UPPER AND LOWER CHAIN OF WETLAND CELLS

Just north of the Trinity River Audubon Center lies the **Upper and Lower Chain of Wetland Cells**, a remarkable four-mile series of interconnected wetland ponds that follows the Trinity River's western bank. Created in recent years to provide needed flood control for heavy seasonal rains as well as an extended area of restored wildlife habitat, the managed ecosystem has been planted with diverse vegetation including native Texas grasses like big bluestem and switchgrass and dozens of species of native aquatic plants. Over 140 species of resident and migratory birds, attracted to the great plant diversity, have been reported to date. My preferred entry point to the lower wetland cells is from **South Central Park**, a public city park located in the historic Joppa neighborhood.

With the sighting of several White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) wading birds with their exaggeratedly-curved bright orange beaks on my first trail visit to the lower wetland cells, I was completely charmed. I had no idea we live amongst such ancient birds immortalized by artists for centuries in artworks such as a tiny bronze Egyptian amulet from 712-332 BCE that can be found in the Dallas Museum of Art's admission-free Egyptian Gallery.

Wood Stork / Mycteria americana, watercolor and graphite on Arches paper, 2018, courtesy artist Cynthia Mulcahy and Talley Dunn Gallery.

Ibis amulet, Egyptian, 712-332 BCE, bronze, bequest of Bill Booziotis located in the admission-free Egyptian Gallery of the Dallas Museum of Art. Reproduction courtesy of the Dallas Museum of Art.

My eventual conversion to one of "those birders" had, naturally, begun. To help identify what I was observing, I began checking out Texas bird, insect, reptile and animal field guides from my local Dallas Public Library branch and consulting websites like iNaturalist.org and Audubon's excellent online *Field Guide to North American Birds*. As my knowledge increased, each field trip became more absorbing; I was very quickly falling in love with the natural world I was discovering, ultimately changing the way I viewed my own city.

The highly sociable White Ibis and the more rarely spotted White-faced Ibis birds are usually seen in groups foraging for food with their bills in the shallow waters of the cells. In flight—a gorgeous occurrence I have witnessed often—White Ibis are easily recognizable by their black wing tips and outstretched beaks. I've also been in the cells walking with my friend Andrea as hundreds of Franklin's Gulls—the climate-threatened nesting gulls of the Great Plains with surprisingly sweet faces—were migrating through Dallas. Flying low foraging for insects on the water's surface of the wetland cells and melodically calling out to each other, it was a visual and aural symphony in the sky above the two of us, the only human species for miles amongst a majestic multi-species universe.

LEONHARDT LAGOON AT FAIR PARK, SOUTH DALLAS

Built with Works Progress Administration funds in 1936 for the Texas Centennial Exposition and named for philanthropist Dorothea Leonhardt, the man-made lagoon in Fair Park in South Dallas had fallen onto hard times by the early 1980s, becoming an algae-infested stagnant body of water, dangerous to human and animal alike. In a desire to rehabilitate the once beautiful lagoon, Director Harry Parker in 1981 invited New York environmental artist Patricia Johanson to re-envision the public green space steps away from the Dallas Museum of Art when it was located in Fair Park.

Known for her plant study drawings and large-scale ecological public artworks such as Cyrus Field (1970-71), a site-specific work in a New York forest, Johanson began site visits to Dallas, immediately observing, "There was no food chain; there were hardly any plants, animals, or fish. Basically the lagoon was dead."[3] The artist set about creating an ecological artwork by first building a functioning ecosystem in the environmentally degraded lagoon. Native Texas aquatic plants—bullrushes, water lilies, irises, and wild rice—were selected to help control erosion, improve the water quality, mitigate flooding and attract wildlife, the latter of which showed up immediately including species of birds never before seen in the lagoon.

Two particular native plants, the Delta Duck-Potato (*Sagittaria platyphylla*) and a Texas fern (*Pteris multifida*) served as the artist's models for two large-scale sculptural works situated on opposite ends of the lagoon that invite meandering from wild fauna and humans in equal degree. Pathways and bridges provide access around and into the lagoon, while small niches and islands create habitats for plants, fish, birds and other wildlife. The whole environment is strangely poetic in the manner of Oscar Niemeyer and Roberto Burle Marx's plant-informed public space interventions in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Badly in need of repair today, Johanson's environment deserves conservation and art historical attention for its role as one of the earliest bioremediation artworks.

The lagoon remains one of my favorite places in the summer to observe native Texas dragonflies, of which so many species can often be spotted in a single visit here. In like manner, native lizards like the Texas Spiny or Green Anole species can be found on their favored Mesquite trees growing along the lagoon's edges. Many seasonal and migratory birds such as Canadian Geese, Green Herons, and one of my favorite small birds, Belted Kingfishers, are frequent visitors to the artfully restored environment. Notably, five different species of turtles—Red-eared Slider, Common Musk, River Cooter, Spiny Softshell, and Common Snapping Turtles—make their home in the lagoon. You'll spot them in great numbers sunning on the artwork's emergent sculptural elements.

Insect Study (*after J van K*), watercolor and graphite on Arches paper, 2018, courtesy artist Cynthia Mulcahy and Talley Dunn Gallery.

Egg of the Sharp-shinned Hawk / Accipiter stratus *and legs of the Black-necked Stilt* / Himantopus mexicanus, watercolor and graphite on Arches paper, 2017, courtesy artist Cynthia Mulcahy and Talley Dunn Gallery.

BLACKLAND PRAIRIE REMNANT, FRANKFORD CHURCH, NORTH DALLAS

Tucked away in a subdivision in North Dallas next to a beautiful 1897 church, is a hidden magical meadow, a restored remnant of the Blackland Prairie that once covered all of North Texas. In 2010 during an exquisite restoration of the historic one-room church, volunteers made a decision to stop the mowing of an adjacent field on the advice of local landscape architect Rosa Finsley. Soon native big bluestem—one of the four major Blackland Prairie native grasses—appeared suggesting perhaps that the land may never have been plowed. Another adjoining meadow was allowed to flourish and Kathy Power, the president of the Frankford Preservation Foundation, the non-profit organization restoring the church and grounds, and volunteers arduously removed non-native species from the two meadows in order to help native species prosper. One day in the spring of 2012, a field of light blue flowers emerged—wild blue hyacinths (*Camassia scilloides*), a native plant of the vanishing Blackland Prairies of North Texas now rarely seen growing.

I first ran across this story researching local flora and fauna online in my Dallas studio one morning early this year. I immediately hopped in my truck and drove straight from my Oak Cliff studio to the old Frankford church, located just inside the Bent Tree North housing subdivision, just a few streets off of the North Dallas Tollway. My timing was perfect; it was an early April morning as I made my way from the parking area to the meadow, and to my great surprise, the entire field was in peak bloom with the rare and beautiful wild blue hyacinths, wildflowers that I had never seen before in all my wanderings in Dallas green spaces.

I watched for over two hours as Barn Swallows, Red-tailed Hawks and other birds—too many to name—attracted to the great diversity of native prairie plants landed in the meadows. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers also known as the Texas bird-of-paradise, lovers of open grasslands, perched on nearby wooden fence railings waiting for insects—dragonflies, damselflies, grasshoppers—to fly by so as to catch them in mid-air, their signature move known as hawking. Butterflies, moths, spiders, wasps and bees of every variety darted and dangled amongst the native flora.

Twelve-spotted Skimmer / Libellula pulchella, watercolor and graphite on Arches paper, 2017, courtesy artist Cynthia Mulcahy and Talley Dunn Gallery.

This engrossing avian and insect street theater I was observing brought to mind the widely published scientific studies over the last few months—many undertaken by committed citizen-scientists—that point to the possibility of radical insect population declines worldwide, new findings that have surprised scientific communities and forced new considerations of the term defaunation.[4]

I left the meadows to explore the nearby creek and natural springs, a tributary of White Rock Creek. Just follow the trail that runs alongside the church towards the tree-lined ravine and look for a small footbridge near a Texas Historical Commission marker, which tells the history of white settlement of the area and the founding of the town of Frankford. But, as the marker leaves out, the area is also known as Indian Springs, so named for the cool waters of the natural springs just below the bridge that first drew the many distinct indigenous populations of North Texas—Caddo, Comanche, Cherokee, Wichita, Anadarko, Kiowa, Creeks and other Native Americans—before white settlers began arriving to the area in the mid-1800s. When they did arrive, the white settlers' desire for conquest and colonization of North Texas often resulted in native populations being expelled—often violently—from their ancestral homelands.

As I was standing in the cool shade of the creek admiring the gurgling water sounds, an enormous Great Blue Heron landed on a tree branch above me. A short time later, I locked eyes with a coyote who had wandered down for a cool sip of spring water. For centuries you would have also seen the largest mammal in the Americas—the buffalo. Vast herds of American bison made their way through the Blackland Prairie's lush grasslands during great spring and winter migrations. But after Dallas received its city charter in 1856, the hunting of bison for commodities—meat, hides and bones—began to threaten the animal's very existence.

John James Audubon, *American Bison*, plate LVI, Volume 2 of *The Quadrupeds of North America*, New York: V.G. Audubon, 1856. You can view this rare book by appointment at DeGoyler Library at Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

An 1860 notice in *The Dallas Herald* advertised: "A Rare Chance for Fun: The White Man makes the following call for a 'Grand Buffalo Hunt,' and invites the public generally to take stock." The winter season public hunting party would leave from Dallas with targets that might include certain "bipeds" in addition to "quadrupeds." That same "sport" of buffalo and Indian killing would become a popular subject for decades of not just newspapers, but dime novels and traveling stage productions, especially the Wild West road shows—ugly populist spectacles for the masses—starring "Buffalo Bill" Cody and his partner John Burwell Omohundro aka "Texas Jack."[5] We know the rest of the story.

Footnotes:

1. For more information on Dallas' historic black parks, see Peter Simek's article, *The Lost History of Dallas' Negro Parks: Two artists were commissioned to explore the city's segregated past. What they found proved a bit too stark for the powers that be*, published in the June 2016 issue of D Magazine, available online: https://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/2016/june/dallas-negro-parks-history/
2. See above, Simek, *The Lost History of Dallas' Negro Parks*.
3. See Patricia Johanson website: http://patriciajohanson.com/projects/fair-park-lagoon.html
4. Brooke Jarvis, *The Insect Apocalypse Is Here: What does it mean for the rest of life on Earth?*, The New York Times Magazine, November 27, 2018, available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/27/magazine/insect-apocalypse.html
5. November 3, 1860 and July 13, 1872 editions of *The Dallas Herald*, https://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/DSDHD/

For more information, maps and entry points to all of the above Dallas public parks and hike and bike nature trails, please visit the website: www.DallasParks.org/35/Parks-Trails. For more info on the Frankford Preserve, visit: https://frankfordpreservationfoundation.org/ **Nota bene:** some portions of public hike and bike nature trails are still under construction and unmarked at the time of this publication.

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City of Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs

Cynthia Mulcahy is a Dallas-based conceptual artist and independent curator. Her intermedia works range from large-scale public interventions to small quiet gestures and often defy categorization. Be it a community square dance, farming as street theater, or an evening of musical performances to recognize a public city park's forgotten history, Mulcahy's research-driven practice often begins in the archive with a desire to re-investigate the historical record for the present moment. Questioning the divisions between various forms of art-related practice, the artist's work also promotes the concept and practice of art as activism. Mulcahy's commitment to platforming the work of others through organizing exhibitions has focused on pressing contemporary subjects such as modern warfare and American militarism.

Mulcahy's recent projects include *War Garden: United States of America 1917-2017*, a solo exhibition that examined the last 100 years of U.S. wars (2018, Dallas); *Performance as Gesture: Songs for a City Park* (2015, Dallas); *Engines of War*, an exhibition that examined the United States wars in Iraq and Afghanistan co-organized with Charles Dee Mitchell (2013, NYC); *Seventeen Hundred Seeds*, a site-specific collaboration with Robert Hamilton in a vacant city block (2012, Dallas); and *Square Dance: A Community Project*, co-organized with Leila Grothe at the Trinity River Audubon Center (2011, Dallas). *Square Dance* was the recipient of an Idea Fund Grant from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Mulcahy's work has been reviewed in The Dallas Morning News, D Magazine, Glasstire, The New York Times, The New Yorker, and New York Magazine. The artist is represented by Talley Dunn Gallery in Dallas, Texas.