



Aerial photo of an egret rookery on Bird Island in Elmendorf Lake on April 3, 2019.
Photo Credit: William Luther, Express-News staff photographer



A Bird Buffer next to a pathway at Elmendorf Lake Park. Photo Credit: David Martin Davies, Texas Public Radio

“Bird Island, Presente: ‘We Shall Not Be Moved’”

By Kamala Platt

Is it inauspicious to yell “presente” for a place, before it is gone? What constitutes the death of a place? Who has the right to make a prognosis for the lifespan of an island? a heronry? a barrio?

In the last 6 months, I’ve asked myself these questions with increasing frequency as I have witnessed the rhetorical and empirical attacks on “Bird Island,” Our Lady’s Lake Ardeidae Colony, the Place of White Herons, Elmendorf Lake’s tiny piece of Aztlan. Most of the summer, my disquiet was stilled in walks around the lake, particularly at the height of nesting, when I would descend down the bank that faces the backside of Bird Island where the protected channel between the island and the lake’s shore hosts a “nursery.” A small Abuela tree that branched out over the hyacinth-flocked water housed several nests where, with binoculars, I could catch an intimate view of the goings-on between parents and their chick children, and later between the fledglings. Threats and speculations about the death of “Bird Island” were diminished by egrets prancing and dancing on island’s backslope. The perils facing my city and even the planetary peril of global warming would be placed in perspective by my engagement with a fragment of avian ecosystem comunidad. Time would slow down for me while I was there, a few feet from the island, engulfed in the vibrant sounds of flourishing life, communication across generations among birds whose family ancestry dates back to the lower Eocene, 55 million years.

Meanwhile, on the sidewalk yards east of the island, Bird Buffer spray wafts out of a metal box, placed by COSA Parks and Rec. Dept.—a metronome marking time in intervals of pesticide releases that smell of purple Kool-aid, its ingredients unrevealed, coming on and off every 4 minutes into seeming eternity. Will the spray from the bird buffer box installed without public knowledge onto an aeration system in the newly renovated park in May 2017 outstay the egrets at the lake? The poison ruse of park protection may keep wafting onto the sidewalk, the shoreside rushes and the lake, itself, continuing through months or years of habitat destruction, and sound and light harassment displays. Recent mitigator estimates of the time to get rid of the birds was two or so years—whether mitigation would continue, throughout, was unclear, as was the basis of the estimated time. Alongside the spray, bird harassment become an ongoing park activity chasing away vulnerable park goers, avian and non-avian, alike, if several COSA offices and



The warning sign located in Brackenridge Park indicates, “Prolonged presence in this area is not recommended.” Photo Credit: David Martin Davies, Texas Public Radio

the USDA (that has planned the habitat destruction and harassment) have their way. While threatened attacks on Elmendorf Lake’s cattle egrets, and, as of late, birds in general, have been publicly attributed to the military, JBSA, as far as I can tell, is involved only tangentially by the bird harassers’ professed association with BASH, (Bird/wildlife Aircraft Strike Hazard) an international program JBSA works with to slow bird strikes, a program that generally does not go after barrio community parks miles from any airfield with no tested, demonstrated, or logically determined “bird strike risk.”

“We Shall Not Be Moved,” the words from the Human/Civil Rights folk/protest song, with childhood associations for me, plopped themselves down beside one of Alesia Garlock’s egret images on a yard sign in my mind, as I watched Bird Island birds going about their daily routine, one triple-digit, near-autumn day. The honorary Great Egret, emblem of Elmendorf Lake Park, and the Audubon Society, alike, is surely earning its place as a symbol against displacement in San Antonio’s neighborhoods that are under siege of displacement and gentrification campaigns that are likely a large reason for the COSA’s displacing Westside egrets, as well. Posted next to “*Mi Barrio No Se Vende*” signs, across the city, they would deliver multiple messages—“*All Our Relatives*,” all of us, are here to stay, migrate, return, at will—we protest and protect, even as our continents heat up, GHG-intensified storms rage, and some so-called leaders, ignore, or worse. Not long after the yard sign image came to me, musician friends at the Climate Strike in front of San Fernando Cathedral gave a fabulous performance of “*We Shall Not Be Moved*,” in voice and drum, and I was enthralled. I announced then, “this is just what we shall broadcast, loud and proud, at 24th and Commerce” if mitigation by pollution with cannon fire noise and bright lights begins in mid-October, as currently scheduled (despite fledgling cormorants still in nests with the harassment start date a week away). *Todos Somos Presente* and *We Shall Not Be Moved*. (Stay tuned— your presence may be requested!)

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NOTE: For background information on this article, email lavoz@esperanzacenter.org