

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES Vs The Cattle Egrets Of Elmendorf Lake Park

By: Gloria Almaraz

We are coming to the end of the story on cattle egrets. Since February 2019, when the community surrounding Elmendorf Lake Park was first informed that a perceived problem existed with the cattle egrets, the City of San Antonio, the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Texas Parks and Wildlife, and Joint-Base San Antonio-Kelly Field (JBSA-Kelly Field) have tried their best to convince the public that the problem is real.

Three public meetings were held between February and July 2019 at which time similar presentations were made on their concerns of the cattle egrets, and the public was asked, time and time again, for recommendations to prevent the cattle egrets from flying over the Kelly Field runway. The organizers claimed that 800 to 1200 cattle egrets fly daily over the Kelly Field runway on their way to the Covel Gardens Landfill for feeding and return in the evening using the same flight path.

We were told that these birds were a hazard to air traffic at JBSA-Kelly Field due to possible aircraft bird strikes that could result in loss of crew life. To support their claim of potential aircraft disasters attributed to bird strikes, the organizers attempted to justify their allegation by preparing a script of aircraft bird strikes that had occurred throughout the U. S. and different parts of the world. None



Entrance to Elmendorf Park designed by Oscar Alvarado.

of the bird strikes shown occurred at Kelly Field.

Their rationale was that if the birds are no longer at Bird Island, then they have no reason to fly across the runway on their way to the Covel Gardens Landfill located more than 5 miles south of the runway. No matter that the numbers of egrets roosting at Elmendorf Lake Park are much lower than the numbers reported over the runway.

What was obvious to many in attendance at the first meeting was that the organizers already had a plan in mind to displace the birds. Various methods were discussed to which many in attendance were opposed. The feeling we got was that they were complying with requirements that mandated that the issue be discussed

with the surrounding community near Elmendorf Lake Park. It appeared that the plan they had discussed was a done deal.

The implementation of the deterrent measures scheduled for February 2019 was thwarted by the discovery of a bird's egg on Bird Island on February 22. By the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, a Federal law, no relocation efforts can be undertaken during breeding season when eggs are already present. Thus, the agencies would have to wait until nesting season was over and the hatchlings could be on their own—about 8 months later in October.

On August 21, 2019, the city's Government and Public Af-

Bird Island on Lake Elmendorf.



fairs Department released the plan to displace the cattle egrets and claimed it contained expert advice from several environmental agencies and concerned citizens. The plan was originally slated to be effective in mid-September, then mid-October, and now has been changed to mid-to-late-November; would continue through the winter months; and would end when the new breeding season for the cattle egrets would begin again. Interestingly, the final plan sounded similar to the plan that was discussed at the first February meeting.

Proposals from the community were all dismissed. Foremost among these was the proposal for a scientific study that would determine the movement of the cattle egrets so we would know if the egrets from Elmendorf Lake Park were the egrets crossing the runway or if there were egrets coming from elsewhere that contributed to the issue.

The goal of the final plan is to modify the habitat and relocate the cattle egrets from Elmendorf Lake Park. During November, Bird Island will undergo a major transformation with the clearing of the underbrush, removal of dead trees, and tree pruning.

The USDA will begin using visual and audible deterrents to displace the birds. Being proposed are the use of a fogging/mist application (which has been in place for over a year), propane cannons, horns/sirens, lasers, drones, mylar balloons, effigies, and a Scary Man electronic scarecrow. These tools would be used on a continual basis until the desired reduction of risk to aviation safety is avoided.

Whether the use of these deterrents will discourage cattle egrets from Bird Island, find a new home, and move to another location remains to be seen. Birds are unpredictable. However, they are not the only species on the island that will be affected by these bird-deterrent measures. Several other bird species also reside on Bird Island; and they, too, will be displaced. There is also the possibility that other wildlife, such as the ducks and swans may be scared off. The changes may affect the lake's ecosystem and other creatures that live there.

Additionally, the final plan does mention adjustments to flight operations. This is the first we hear that the military is willing to make flight operation adjustments due to the number of birds on the runway.

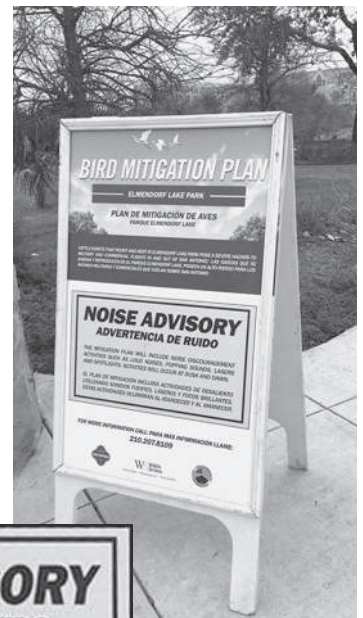
The military has alleged that the cattle egrets might be responsible for potential bird strikes that could result in major aircraft damage and loss of life. Yet, data they provided reflect the opposite.

Between 2010 and 2019, only 10 bird strikes were attributed to cattle egrets from a possible 500 bird strikes (an average of 50 per fiscal year). None were considered major disasters.

Information

from the Bird/Wildlife Aircraft Strike Hazard, or BASH program, indicates that the majority of Kelly Field bird strikes are due to doves, meadowlarks, grackles, bats, falcons and, on occasion, vultures. JBSA-Kelly Field reveals that only 5% of bird strikes result in damages. So why are the cattle egrets a problem? (NOTE: A recent bird strike occurred at Kelly Field in September 2019 that is still under investigation. Details are unknown at this time.)

Nine months after the prob-



The Noise Advisory at Elmendorf Park may be a cause for concern.

lem with the cattle egrets of Elmendorf Lake Park was made known to the community, there continues to be dis-

sension among local community groups, environmental and wildlife organization, and concerned bird supporters, who are not in agreement with the measures being considered to displace the cattle egrets and, for that matter, the other birds that will be affected.

In the area surrounding Elmendorf Lake Park, the citizens love their birds and are not in favor of efforts to harm or displace the cattle egrets and other species at the lake.

It doesn't help the situation to know that the city, USDA, Texas Parks and Wildlife, and JBSA-Kelly Field have been working on the problem for 2 years. And, it doesn't make the District 5 constituents feel any better knowing that their councilwoman, Shirley Gonzales, considers the cattle egrets a nuisance.

One new development recently made known by Dr. Kamala Platt is that, due to their migratory instincts, most of the cattle egrets left

Elmendorf Lake Park by late August. The remaining egrets are the snowy egrets and great egrets, and most will probably leave by winter. A

good number of cormorants remain on Bird Island, along with their maturing hatchlings; but they pose no threat to the Kelly Field aircraft.

Questions to ponder: Will the cattle egrets return? Would they want to return to Bird Island that will not have any foliage or trees? Where will they nest? Once the city's efforts to displace the cattle egrets begin, won't all the birds currently residing on the island and, possibly, in the surrounding area also leave? All along, has it been the intention of the City of San Antonio to rid Elmendorf Lake Park of Bird Island?

BIO: Gloria Almaraz, a former Federal employee, is a freelance writer who writes about community issues.

