

Is San Antonio Not Big Enough for a Rookery?

By Greg Harman,
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With a growing list of false and stretched statements justifying its war on migratory birds, it's time for the City of San Antonio to stop with the poop scares and make room for a bit of wildness in our parks.

Also: The wading zone at the celebrated San Pedro Culture Park is really, really foul. Why did the San Antonio River Authority just stop testing it?

On Friday, members of the Texas Historical Commission voted to table a request by the City of San Antonio to destroy about 50



Egret nests removed from Bird Island to be relocated to Mitchell Lake Audubon Center on San Antonio's Southside. Photo: Greg Harman

trees at the San Antonio River's headwaters in Brackenridge Park for a bond-funded project. Meanwhile, later this month, kayaks, canoes, and paddleboards will be available for rent at Elmendorf and Woodlawn lakes on San Antonio's Westside.

The first event is yet another setback for a city that has proven ready to misrepresent itself repeatedly about the redevelopment effort contingent on eliminating birds and trees to better “tell the story of water in San Antonio.”

The second bit of news may signal for some that San Antonio's waters are getting safer for swimming. While creeks and rivers to the far east and west of San Antonio—mostly outside our highway loops—are known to sometimes meet contact recreation standards, the waters across the bulk of the city center remain anything but safely swimmable.

Generally, Elmendorf looks good for paddling above the water. At Woodlawn, maybe less so.

“We simply don't have enough data points at Woodlawn Lake at this time to make statements on water quality with high levels of confidence,” Shaun Donovan, San Antonio River Authority's environmental sciences manager, told *Deceleration*.

The reality of our dense urban environment means that *E. coli*, a bacteria that thrives in the digestive tracts of animals, finds its way daily into our rivers and lakes. Urban wildlife, outdoor dogs and cats, failing sewer lines (we have a few), and migratory and nesting birds all play a part. The U.S. Department of Interior summarizes the risk by writing that “usually harmless, *E. coli* can cause illnesses such as meningitis, septicemia, urinary tract, and intestinal infections.

A recently discovered strain of *E. coli* (*E. coli* 0157:H7) can cause severe disease and may be fatal in small children and the elderly.”

SARA data on Woodlawn Lake is limited to three recent samples, all of them higher than advised for contact recreation. Two of the three are higher than advisable even for canoeing or kayaking with limited water contact.

Source tracking for many years by the San Antonio River Authority confidently assigns blame for nearly half of *E. coli* in local waters to non-avian wildlife. Fifteen percent is traced to wild birds, by comparison. This fact hasn't stopped the San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department, however, from promoting a message of avian fouling to justify its campaign to drive migratory birds out of city parks and along portions of the San Antonio River using pyrotechnics, lasers, mylar balloons, chemical sprays, and more.

Such efforts began quietly around 2018 in Brackenridge Park with installation of chemical sprays on retired (though still publicly utilized at the time) playground equipment. Here efforts to dislodge a rookery of cattle egrets (a riotous space often shared by other species, including snowy egrets, cormorants, yellow-crowned night herons, and others) expanded alongside efforts to remove more than 100 trees at the park for a bond-funded redevelopment project.

While the City adamantly disputed any linkage between bird displacement and the proposed tree removal, the City's own project descriptions and testimony originally included both tree and bird removal as a goal of the project. A member of the US Army Corps of Engineers that came to San Antonio for a workshop on the project wrote in his personal meeting notes that the effort in Brackenridge was mainly about displacing the birds. Open records work by *Deceleration* also showed staffers at the Texas Historical Commission disputing internally statements by City of San Antonio officials suggesting the proposed tree removal was being required by state and federal regulators. (We made all these records publicly available.)

After a year-long delay and slight reduction in proposed tree-removal numbers thanks to strong public opposition and a resultingly skeptical Councilmember Jalen McKee-Rodriguez, City workers descended on Brackenridge in force last month and, still without clearance to remove any trees, began chainsawing large limbs to make nesting more difficult.

Phase one, which would have required destroying 50 trees, including some towering heritage trees, was tabled last week at the Texas Historical Commission meeting in Austin after dozens of San Antonio residents voiced their displeasure—a consistent message from a core group of residents committed to protecting the birds, trees, and waters of the park. Residents of River Road neighborhood showed up before the THC with technical arguments, *Deceleration* was told, as to how the river wall can be restored without removing towering heritage trees as proposed. Time would be needed to review, THC members said.

Meanwhile, radical

A lone egret peers out at Bird Island at Elmendorf Lake Park on San Antonio's Westside, recently dripped in bird exclusion flags and balloons. Photo: Christo Salazar



Elmendorf Lake Park, December 2019.
Photo: Greg Harman

anti-nesting efforts continue at Brackenridge where the City has screened the public out of large areas of the park. Similar efforts have also returned to both Elmendorf Lake Park and Woodlawn Lake.

The first major escalation in this war on migratory birds came in December 2019 when City workers laboring alongside state and federal wildlife officials razed Bird Island at Elmendorf Lake Park. That summer, a past local president of the local Audubon chapter warned that cattle egrets

could not be assaulted without doing harm to other egrets, including the great white egret, symbol of the Audubon Society itself. Anne Parrish's letter to Mayor Ron Nirenberg noted the Westside community's "great spiritual love" of the decades-old rookery at Elmendorf and asked of then-gathering efforts to remove the birds:

"The question remains: Where will the birds go?"

Audubon at the time recommended a series of actions that could have been pursued, included banding and tracking birds to ensure the right birds were even being targeted in the first place, modifying or moving the landfill supposedly attracting the birds and leading them across military flyways, and investing in bird radar to better protect pilots.

"Since bird strikes are pervasive in military and commercial air operations and many strikes are not the result of nesting birds such as those at Elmendorf Lake, we feel that more research of long-term technical solutions is mission critical and can help the entire US with this ongoing problem," Parrish wrote at the time.

COSA preferred, to exclusion of most other listed options, the final recommendation. It urged a response to "induce the birds to relocate" by "radically altering the habitat."

Former City Councilmember Shirley Gonzales and others at the time justified the destruction as necessary because of a supposed threat posed by the birds to Air Force traffic at Kelly Field. Most of the residents engaged at the time were skeptical of such justifications and opposed the effort.

The dislocation advanced due to four recorded strikes involving cattle egrets over nine years at Kelly Field—a drop in the bucket compared to roughly 500 total wildlife strikes documented at Kelly by the US Air Force during that same period.

Even with marginal strike count and no definitive tracking of those birds back to the rookery at Elmendorf Lake Park rookery, lake-area neighbors had their homes flyered on the City's dime with strained warnings about the risk of exploding planes over the Westside.

So the violence went forward and Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation ending up taking in more than 50 young birds from the eviction process, most of whom did not survive.

The Brackenridge rookery (which increased in size after the Elmendorf displacement) is an ideal location for the birds. No air traffic being impacted. No neighbors complaining. So the City's message about Brackenridge Park's rookery is not as shrill.

The Express-News sounded the poop alarm on Brackenridge last month. In a lengthy article with no counter arguments provided, current Audubon chapter president Britt Coleman was quoted at length as to where he would like the harassed birds to relocate (spoiler: both were private parks on the Southside charging entry fees).

Considering it is beyond our technical ability to lead the birds to any desired new rookery location, entertaining this line of discussion only provides more smoke for the City's demonstrably dishonest campaign against the birds. (Audubon itself took many of the cattle egret nests seized during the decimation of Bird Island at Elmendorf in 2019 only to watch them rot in place, unoccupied, at their Mitchell Lake reserve.)

As Grant Ellis of the City's Parks Department told the *Current* last week, the City is powerless to direct the birds anywhere.

"Birds may end up going wherever they go. It is impossible to know," Ellis told the *Current*.

Displacement efforts could very well drive these birds into private neighborhoods resulting in an escalating of bird-directed violence.

The Express-News suggested driving out the rookery of migratory birds could "improve bird biodiversity," and offered a possible return of cardinals and mockingbirds to the park, if this effort is successful. Cardinals and mockingbirds.

If they chose to, the City and Brackenridge Park Conservancy could simply rope off the area of the rookery and invite the Witte Museum and San Antonio Zoo to collaborate on interpretive signage for the public. Where else can people observe a living wild rookery? With no Air Force complaining, the only real tension here is one of desired end use.

It could be COSA is anxious to launch kayaks on the river's headwaters after its redevelopment work is complete as is happening at Elmendorf and Woodlawn.

That should be on the table for debate, as well. Every park has unique character and denizens worthy of consideration.

It's interesting that, all poop warnings aside, limited water quality data at Elmendorf Lake suggests the quality there has not changed since the destruction of Bird Island and displacement of hundreds (thousands?) of regularly roosting birds in December 2019—and maybe even got a bit worse over 2020 and 2021.

Woodlawn is more of a black box.

When more regular testing was happening (way back in 2007) E. coli levels at Woodlawn were measuring the in the hundreds around the boat dock but in the tens of thousands pretty consistently nearby. (Check our reads with the SARA Bacteria Dashboard.)

It's curious that SARA has not been testing at Woodlawn Lake regularly given the steady rise of interest in restoring contact recreation and the ongoing re-naturing of so many miles of waterway. SARA only committed to regular weekly testing going forward now that water sports have been approved. In other words, the policy changes appear to be trumping science. So after folks have been paddling for a year or so we'll know more about how well advised that was.

What is troubling is that SARA does not appear prepared to post notices on high bacteria days.

Steve Graham, assistant general manager of the San Antonio River Authority, told the San Antonio Report that, even in the absence of such data, recreation is a matter of personal responsibility.

"Really, it's up to the individuals who are recreating on that water to make that decision,"

Graham said. "And the vast majority of the time, the water quality is very good."

And this is precisely what is wrong with the children's wading area at the celebrated San Pedro Culture Park's Plaza de Fundación.

San Pedro Culture Park

In the shadows of a stacked I-10 interchange on the western edge of downtown there is no teeming rookery. Avian contribution to water E. coli levels here is believed by SARA to be minimal. A towering metal sculpture

San Pedro Culture Park Photo: Greg Harman

releases a steady sheet of recirculated creek water into a natural aquatic playscape.

Since the San Pedro Culture Park opened with a designated wading area for children, the levels of E. coli here have been monstrous. We don't know how bad the levels are this month because after years of chronic documented exceedences of state standards for even modest levels of human contact, the San Antonio River Authority stopped testing the water.

A decision was made to stop trying to respond to heavy bacterial load periods by drying out the area. Instead, the agency opted to let the water flow and direct attendees to discreet warning signs sharing visual space with an image of happy children splashing: "Wade at your own risk."

That message reads like a legal contract:

"The Plaza de Fundación may be used for responsible water contact—shallow wading only. Caution, wading area may be slippery, there is no lifeguard on duty, and the creek water may occasionally contain high bacteria levels. By entering the Plaza de Fundación wading area, you take full responsibility for your protection and safety."

Some may recall that after opening in 2018, SARA shut the park down to fill in some deeper features to dissuade people from submerging themselves in the water. Wading had been expected; swimming had not. The public was told at the time that the changes were no big deal. It was a response to unexpected uses and (secondarily) a single "spike" of bad water, the former director of the San Antonio River Authority told the Express-News at the time.

"The water quality testing went through every loop and had just one big spike," said Suzanne Scott, now serving as director of the Nature Conservancy's Texas chapter. "But now the water quality is good. We don't have a concern about that."

Similar to the use shift at Woodlawn, SARA only had a handful of water quality tests for the location before the Culture Park opened.

The park quickly reopened. Broad shallow lanes of free-flowing water were left open for wading children to splash and others to cool themselves in the lengthening summer heat of San Antonio. But the water quality didn't get better. The "poop," it turned out, is a consistent feature of the park's waters.

On a recent visit, City workers were spraying the area with a potent algaecide, which they confirmed they do "every couple of weeks." If it's helping, it wasn't apparent several days later, when the water was thick with ropes of algae. SARA staffed blamed that on a light rain followed by deepening drought.

The average level of contamination here (or geomean) is listed as 722 MPN/100ml. MPN stands for "most probable number," a statistic method employed to understand the concentration of an organism like E. coli. The Texas standard for wading (defined by state water code as "primary contact recreation 1") where likelihood of ingestion of water is considered high tops out at 126 MPN/100ml. Wading activities where water access is more limited or less frequent (defined as "primary contact recreation 2") has an upper threshold of 206 MPN/100ml. Paddling above the water is limited to 630 MPN.[for detailed information and table, *E. Coli Count at San Pedro Culture Park wading area (2021-2022)*, go to (insert bit.ly)]

Of course, children are not supposed to drink the water or get it up their noses.

E. coli is a convenient indicator for general water quality and also points to other likely concerning contaminants beyond the scope of this assessment. But it's worth a note: The brain-eating ameba, *Naegleria fowleri*, has been found in poorly chlorinated "swimming pools, splash pads, surf parks, or other recreational venues that are

poorly maintained,” according to the CDC. Some may remember the death of a six-year-old child from a brain-eating amoeba ingested at a splash pad in Lake Jackson a couple years ago.

Previously, SARA itself had been fairly aggressive about monitoring the water here—and trying to limit public access during periods of high bacteria load.

SARA’s website still reads:

When rainfall in the watershed that flows into the San Pedro Creek is equal to or greater than a quarter of an inch, the San Antonio River Authority will suspend water flow into the Plaza de Fundación and initiate a daily water quality testing protocol recording the E. Coli levels until the levels no longer exceed the State Standards. Once the levels are within the standard, the water flow to the plaza will resume.

However:

SARA stopped testing the water at the Culture Park wading zone this year and also stopped cycling the fountain on and off to limit water exposure, SARA’s Donovan told Deceleration. There is now consistent water access, no testing, and (still) no public notices of dangerous exceedences.

Again, personal responsibility is extended into the a question of obviously heightened risk.

Donovan said the risk at the Plaza playscape is “basically none.”

He wrote:

“Recreating in public spaces is always the choice of the individual. Whether someone is swimming at the Culture Park or a lake or a river, cycling on a greenway trail or walking/hiking in a public park, they have to make the choice that’s best for them. ... [T]here is always an inherent risk to outdoor recreation. Bacteria contamination is a concern primarily as it relates to the possibility of someone ingesting water, by eliminating the realistic possibility of submersion at the Cascadia feature, the chances of ingesting water are basically none. In summary, if people choose to wade at the Cascadia, they have an extremely low risk of adverse health impacts due to water quality.”

For our money (and much of this is created and maintained with our money, yours and ours) we’d prefer entering into risk relationships with local waters with up-to-the-date data available. Call it informed responsibility.

And while, yes, we plan to paddle these waters, the lakes at Woodlawn and Elmendorf should have public signage where any would-be paddler could check recent water quality, minimum. Any area designated a wading area for children should have clean water, minimum. We can recommend the splash pad at Hemisfair that draws on a regular supply of SAWS potable water and integrates treatment technology in its recirculation system, as the park’s spokesperson told us.

As for the birds, the City of San Antonio and its supporters seem to have made up their minds that our city will not host a rookery, a decision that puts us at odds with the birds at Brackenridge Park today but appears also to be settling in as a policy norm without any significant public discussion. Deceleration objects.

This decision—not one pitting “passion” against science, but one of diverging values—deserves an honest public airing just as the proposal the fell the elder trees in the park received last year. That process improved the City’s proposal at Brack-

enridge, reduced the total tree “take,” and continues to be refined through public challenge in ways that could save even more of the towering heritage trees.

It could be water quality issues in the headwaters are impacted by the rookery beyond what is observed elsewhere. Preliminary data collected over about six months and shared with Deceleration by SARA suggest bird poop may have a slightly outsized role in causing high bacteria levels in the headwaters, but it’s far from understood. The limited amount of data (about 30 data points at Joske’s Pavilion, closest to the rookery) is why SARA doesn’t make “definitive statements” about the contamination source, we were told. (The Zoo’s outfall remains roughly as significant here.)

Given that recreational use at Brackenridge isn’t a thing, E. coli in the waters there is not a human health concern. And if there are residual ecological fallout, it’s limited. It’s also, you know, what rookeries do. They don’t exist to smell nice for us or even play well with others. But: “If that becomes about swimming [at Brackenridge],” Donovan said, “that’s another thing.”

And that should be part of the community conversation. Just as we did for the tree “chop” proposal, we need a public conversation about the birds, whose natural habitat in and around the city we continue to improve as a community and make more attractive to them.

While some are forecasting the end of the rookeries inside of San Antonio, the reality is that this is a choice we are making even as we await their return from the Gulf Coast and points further south. It’s worth reflecting that right now there are more than 100 trees still standing in Brackenridge Park because a handful of residents—mostly unaffiliated with traditional environmental organizations, mostly women, many Indigenous identifying—refused to accept the official plan for them. These birds deserve the same determined resistance until such a point as we have a truly community-led rookery management plan in place that recognizes the City itself as the original colonizer of the land with all the incumbent responsibilities to wild nature that entails.

Any who would be willing to forgo a recreated “story of water” in exchange for a bit of a wilder San Antonio experience courtesy of our feathered relatives could check out our previously published “In Praise of Nuisance Heronries.” Honestly, we don’t know about you, but we’ve got plenty of “cardinals and mockingbirds” in our ‘hood already. But a full-on rookery? Now that is a marvel to behold. As the birds begin to return to their place of birth to raise new families in San Antonio this season, we say let them nest.

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The story of water. What eliminating a migratory bird rookery and 100 trees will get you. Concept drawing for Phase One of Brackenridge Park 2017 bond-funded redevelopment project.

Concept Drawing