

Anne Parrish

From: Anne Parrish
Sent: Thursday, July 4, 2019 3:56 PM
To: Ivalis Meza (Mayor Office)
Cc: Ron Nirenberg (Mayor)
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Elmendorf Lake Bird Island issue
Attachments: BAS Rookery Position SA.pdf

Hello Ms Meza,

The mayor asked me to send our Audubon Society's position statement to you and him on the Egret controversy at Elmendorf Lake (the same applies to the Brackenridge Park rookery) so that you both can become familiar with the issue at hand. I have already debriefed Judge Nelson Wolff and his policy director Nicole Erfurth on the situation.

I am President of Bexar Audubon Society and involved with helping to find a solution to the recent bird strike controversy program involving the City's Parks and Rec department at the request of JBSA and Ret. Gen Juan Ayala, Director of Military Affairs for the City of San Antonio. As our mission is to protect birds, we have been invited by the USDA and Texas Parks and Wildlife to weigh in on the subject.

The egrets and herons are 2 species of beautiful water birds that the Westside considers spiritual and park goers love watching the renewal of life at Bird Island each year. There has been a lack of public input so far on the situation and a lack of transparency to date in the City's efforts regarding these winged friends. **Even the SA Speaks web page FAQ presented to the public on the issue has several statements that are quite misleading.** We certainly understand the concern for safety of the military pilots and we do urge a more thorough study with wildlife biologists and environmental scientists to increase everyone's understanding of the situation is warranted before drastic measures are taken that upsets the community and disturbs the birds and their environment.

The target is the Cattle Egret but ranchers all around San Antonio love that bird for its superb insect eating capability, a food preference that has apparently gotten it in trouble over the airfields. Unfortunately this egret likes to nest near water and the habitat of Elmendorf Lake is perfect for them. **You cannot disturb that egret species without disturbing the fish eating egrets it likes to nest with- the Great White Egret and the Snowy Egrets.** The Great White Egret that graces our shores of San Antonio happens to be THE logo bird of National Audubon Society. **As you know, when you start trying to mess with Nature, often unforeseen consequences can occur.** So making sure the plan is sound scientifically, safe for other non-targeted animals and most importantly safe for people is essential.

The City and USDA are calling a Stakeholder meeting on the evening of this Monday July 8 to brainstorm solutions. **Our Audubon professionals will be at that meeting and we certainly hope that more scientific study and research can be accomplished before any further radical action is taken.** Ashley Alvarez is the city contact in case you would like to attend.

Thank you for taking a moment on this matter,

Anne Parrish



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Bexar Audubon Society is a science-based organization. We are an affiliated chapter of National Audubon Society. Our mission is “to promote the conservation of habitat for birds and other wildlife, support National Audubon’s initiatives, and encourage responsible local action through education, research, and advocacy”. In other words, we aim to protect birds and the places they live. In that capacity we have been asked to comment on the present situation of an urban rookery at Elmendorf Lake Park.

Joint Base SA and the City of San Antonio have determined that the cattle egrets nesting at Elmendorf Lake Park are flying across the Lackland / Port San Antonio airfields in the early mornings and evenings. We have been told that an egret brought down an air force training plane in Wichita Falls 6 years ago. JBSA and COSA have therefore identified the cattle egrets at Elmendorf Lake Park a Public Safety issue. The USDA APHIS contractor for JBSA states that they have visual evidence that the birds are coming from Elmendorf Lake. It appears they fly southwest about 8-9 miles, often in small flocks, across the runways to feed on insects at the Waste Management Covell Gardens landfill and agricultural lands beyond. When the current nesting season ends, the Department of Defense has all the permits in place to attempt to move the birds from the Bird Island in Elmendorf Lake and prevent their return using standard harassment methods. **The question remains ‘where will the birds go?’**

Bexar Audubon is disturbed that human-bird conflict issue has arisen in a well-loved, century-old park. We also take note of the West Side community’s great spiritual love for this rookery on an island in Elmendorf Lake and their strong desire to see the birds remain there. The community is also concerned about where these birds will go.

According to the USDA, the unfortunate placement of the Waste Management Covell Gardens landfill near Lackland Airforce Base in the 1990s has been drawing these birds across the runways creating the aviation threat. The cattle egret have found a home to raise their young just roughly 8 miles north of this feast of insects at the landfill and agricultural fields

beyond. Bexar Audubon recognizes bird mitigation is highly regrettable but sometimes unavoidable given our crowded human-built environment.

Bexar Audubon prefers a multi-pronged approach to the rookery problem:

- **Band and track** the current crop of egret chicks to find out exactly where the birds posing the aviation risk are coming from and going to. Use Cornell University's eBird data to crowd source reputable sightings.
- **Put technology in place to help pilots**, including
 - scheduling to avoid morning / evening transit times by the birds.
 - Recognize that large birds such as vultures, migrating hawks and Mexican Eagles will often fly at 2500+ altitude over San Antonio and keep Air Force missions above this danger zone to limit the public safety issue posed by training over a populated area.
 - Utilize the latest in Bird Radar. We understand this technology has limitations for the \$250,000 cost. If the alternative is the loss of expensive aircraft and human life, we think the cost-benefit analysis is worth another look. 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.
- **Remove / modify all obvious attractions**, including considering phasing out Waste Management's Covell Gardens Landfill and moving operations to a place far away from the military and commercially important airfields of Port SA and Lackland Airforce Base. This is extremely important as San Antonio attempts to attract more business to the airfields.

-The Waste Management landfill in its present location will continue to draw birds for its insect food source and may result in continued aviation threats even if the Elmendorf Lake rookery is relocated. Ongoing management of the birds will require yearly

financing from the city and the federal government if the landfill is not moved.

- Conduct scientific studies to determine if the birds would continue to cross the airfields for the agricultural lands south even if the landfill is moved.

- Bexar Audubon is concerned that even with pushing the birds to an alternative location, many birds would return to nest in the vicinity north of Lackland following their strong homing instinct in breeding season. If their current habitat is destroyed, there is always the chance that the birds would relocate to an even more undesirable location as long as the landfill feeding source is still available.

- It is unknown if reducing the numbers of birds crossing the airfield would be sufficient to remove the danger posed to aviation since bird strikes are random. Destroying the Elmendorf Lake rookery would only be a temporary fix. **Birds fly.** We know that other cattle egrets would eventually move in to fill the empty habitat, especially since appropriate habitat is becoming more and more scarce as development continues in our cities.

- **Induce the birds to relocate** for the nesting season by

- radically altering the habitat on Bird Island as the lifespan of the trees is already coming to an end.

- encouraging the relocation of the birds to a more suitable nesting site such as Mitchell Lake Audubon Center. This may be able to be done by saving the nests used this year and relocating those nests to the preferred site. This is a big experiment as there are no studies on moving rookeries in this kind of situation. The Mission Reach will in the future be another rookery site when newly planted trees mature.

-employing standard harassment methods in sufficient time to discourage future nesting attempts. Cattle egrets start looking for nesting sites as early as January; methods to discourage nesting at a particular site must be employed before the birds lay eggs. It is illegal after an egg is laid.

-BAS does NOT approve the use of the Methyl Athranilate spray (BirdBuffer, EcoBird4) because of its danger to sensitive park goers, its off-label use on egrets and herons and potential unknowns on toxicity to fish and invertebrates.

We recognize that the agencies involved have a 'takings' permit which would allow them to kill the birds, and **we appreciate very much** that both agencies have said they are not planning such action. Attempting to move the rookery and closing or strictly controlling insects at the Waste Management landfill is by far a better solution than eradication.

Bexar Audubon expects conflict to continue as wildlife is pushed to live at the edges of our developed world. Therefore, the time and effort we expend now to find realistic bird-friendly solutions will pay off in the long-term. The problem is not going to go away if we just ignore it. However, action taken should be based on scientific research, realistic assessments, and with the consideration for both the welfare of humans and wildlife.