

James Hurst

Corpus Christi: a City for the Birds

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When people who live in Corpus Christi are asked to describe Corpus Christi, they often talk about the potholes and seemingly endless construction, the mosquitoes and the humid air. They might even mention the way our tap water shimmers under light from time to time. But if you ask a visitor to describe Corpus Christi, what do they say? They talk about our coastlines, the USS Lexington, and Ocean Drive. They might even know that Corpus Christi is officially the 'birdiest city in America'. The point is that the longer someone stays in Corpus Christi, the more likely they are to overlook the city's good side and instead dwell on the fact that it isn't Dallas or Houston, or San Antonio or Austin. But what rarely gets noticed by anyone I speak to is nestled in Corpus Christi's south side along the Oso River., and it has a beginning in 2008. I spoke to Sara Jose, Manager at the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve and Learning Center, to better understand her work and how she plays a role in giving locals a place where they can get away from the all the concrete in town without driving over a bridge. My name is James Hurst. Welcome to South Texas Stories.

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Jose: Sure, so the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve is a municipal nature center, so all of our staff here work for the city of Corpus Christi. We are in the Parks and Recreation department. It's a hundred-and-sixty-two acre area where our public is welcome to come out, recreate, dog-walk, jog, just take a walk, bird-watch, nature photography, play on the playground, come into the learning center and explore. The city started buying property in 2008, and prior to that, there was [an] Oso Bay–Oso Creek green belt conservation awareness plan. Basically the city just sort of put into writing, 'We know the city needs recreational access to Oso Creek and Oso Bay', so as opportunities to either set aside land or purchase land [came] up, they wanted to make sure the entire waterway did not get developed. There was going to be some sort of public access, and so when the three properties that are here at the Wetlands Preserve became available, they purchased it and then eventually developed into the nature center that most people who visited would see today.

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Sara grew up in the suburbs of San Antonio, and from a young age, developed a love for the outdoors.

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Jose: Yeah, so I don't know if outside itself was a hobby, but more just a good background to a lot of the things I did. My dad golfs, so he would golf often in a field behind our house and there was a playground there, so I'd be at the playground, he'd be golfing. Together we'd go to put-put or a three-par course and spend time outside, even when my mom was around and working. She worked retail, so he would take me to a park on the weekends for picnics. So outside was just kind of where we did things. So, I graduated high school from Converse Jetson High School and then went to college at Texas A&M Galveston, majored in marine biology, was really—thought I was [going to] be a shark person, shark researcher, watched a lot of Shark Week as a kid, finished that degree, realized I enjoyed telling people about science cutting and being involved in the more educational aspect. And so later I went on and got a Master's from Texas Tech University in informal science education. So most of us are a part of a formal education system whether we realize it or not. If you went to a K-12 school, if you went to a university, that's what we consider formal education; in the classroom as most of us picture it. If someone says they're a teacher, you probably picture a formal educator. Informal is anything, what we call out of the classrooms, so nature centers, museums, aquariums, zoos, all the nature preschools. There's lots of other places education happens, and so those are usually informal. Sometimes the term is also 'free-choice learning', so whether you can choose to be there or not.

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Informal science education, or, the learning that happens outside of a classroom. For Sara, the discipline became a passion.

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Jose: Yeah, so like I said, the marine sciences and the ocean have fascinated me from a very young age, so in eighth grade, we had to do a project, research a potential major and a potential university, and that's actually when I discovered A&M Galveston. [I] did apply and looked at some other campuses, but kind of, was on that track and had that as [a] plan, and then probably my sophomore or junior year of college was when I realized education maybe [was] where I was being drawn to. A&M Galveston is a direct part of College Station, so you can't get a double-major in education while you're doing marine biology without moving to College Station. [I] did really want to be in school longer, so when I left, I took an internship, that was partially helping [to] take care of an aquarium, and partially teaching to kind of figure out what I wanted to do next, and kind of cemented that the education side more than maybe the animal-care side, was what I was really passionate about.

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Sara's first professional role after graduating college was an internship at the University of Georgia. Her first full-time role was here in Corpus Christi where she worked for the Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program.

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Jose: Yeah, so I mentioned briefly that—an internship—and it was a year long. It's now a fellowship at the University of Georgia's Marine Education Center and Aquarium in Savannah, Georgia. So it's a year long program. They usually take four interns or fellows, and they work their way through caring for the aquarium, teaching their school-year programs, and then teaching summer camp. My first sort of fulltime job after that permanent was here in the Corpus Christi area. I worked for the Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries program, and I was an educator at their Nueces Delta Preserve. So when I first came over to work at the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve, I came as our Recreation Coordinator. I did not come—I got hired under a previous Preserve Manager, but that was the only other organization I worked for before I came to work for the city.

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Although Sara is the Manager here at the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve and Learning Center, the work she does goes far beyond administrative duties. She ensures that the Preserve is kept in a state of natural growth despite being located very near to Corpus Christi's suburban neighborhoods. She says that they serve...

Jose: K-to-grey, or, you know, from our youngest visitors all the way to our oldest in our community. We have both an education and a recreation program team. We have educational programs for as young as three. Our Growing Up Wild program is a preschool program where we start to get toddlers and their parents just used to being outside an exploring. You know, some people have that fear of bugs, or the fear of creepy-crawlies, and we just want to get them used to saying, "It's okay to be outside and watch this ant climb around and, see what it does, and we don't need to pick it up, necessarily, but we can watch it". As you mentioned, our school field trips and our homeschool days that we do for both our formal and our homeschool audience, up to our lecture series and our wetlands workshops where we invite adults in to dig deeper into certain topics. And then on our recreation side, we've done everything from have a 5k, you know, we want safe places to run. You mentioned when you and I first met that you've run out here, right? No one wants to get run over by a car. We want to look at enjoyable things. We've done yoga out here. We've done some ukulele lessons out here. We have birthday parties, and so, again, what we want is our community to understand that this is a space they can enjoy by saying, "I really like running through these things and maybe seeing some birds while I'm running versus running around my neighborhood and having to worry about being hit by a car". All of a sudden, you're valuing that natural space whether you can name the birds and plants you ran by or not. And so, we try to offer that diversity—nothing, again, that's going to go against our mission statement of preserving the habitat. but it's pretty easy to say when we say we want you to understand why it's important [that] the space is here, that you be able to do lots of things here.

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What makes a nature preserve like this one so unique, is its location in the Central Flyway. “Twice a year, billions of birds migrate vast distances across the globe. Typically, these journeys follow a predominantly north-south axis, linking breeding grounds in arctic and temperate regions with non-breeding sites in temperate and tropical areas. Many species migrate along broadly similar, well-established routes known as flyways” (Bird Life International, 2022).

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Jose: Yeah, so Corpus Christi is really uniquely located in what’s called the central flyway. Most people who look at birds and bird migration in the U.S. think of us as having three flyways. Most of our birds—not all—migrate from central and south America, you know, to the northern latitudes. They go north in the spring, spend their summers wherever their appropriate habitat is breeding, and then return south this time of year—fall—and spend the winter at the lower latitudes. So we’re in the central. Birds don’t love to fly over mountains. They’re more than capable of it, but, obviously, the more altitude they can save, the better. And so if you picture the country as a funnel, Corpus Christi is right there at the bottom of it, before you get to the gulf. You know, we have water on the one side, and the mountains in Mexico, on the grand sense of the scale, are not that far away, and so it kind of helps funnel. We’re also really lucky to have several different habitat types. You know, again, we just mentioned [that] we’re right next to the Gulf—we have marshes, but we have thorn-scrub, we have urban area, and so Corpus really can encompass these different habitat types in a relatively small space. So about six-hundred species in a normal year are seen in Texas. There are more that have been documented—rarities, and the birds who quote-unquote “get lost”, but Corpus—or, here at the Preserve—we’ve documented two-hundred-and-seventy-seven of those about-six-hundred regular species of birds. And so, again, even here, there’s a microcosm of that. We’ve got some prairie, we’ve got some open bayfront, we have plenty of healthy thorn-scrub, we have the urban building next to the neighborhood, and so you can get a lot more than you might if you had only one habitat type, and then benefited by where we are on the globe of being sort of subtropical and in that flyway.

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If you have not taken the time to get out here, you are missing out. The Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve and Learning Center is open and ready to welcome you into the wild Tuesday through Saturday, eight a.m. until five p.m. and the outdoor grounds are open from sun-up to sun-down. Much of Corpus Christi is urban. It is industrialized. But there are people who make it their duty to offer something different. So get your sunscreen; get your mosquito repellent; pack an extra pair of socks; and I’ll see you on the trails. As part of the South Texas Stories series, this has been Corpus Christi: A City for the Birds, by James Hurst. For information on migratory birds and flyways, thank you to BirdLife International. For music, thank you to *K4000*. Finally thank you to Sara Jose, Manager at the Oso Bay Wetlands Preserve and Learning Center in Corpus Christi, Texas.

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