

First Ever Birdfest Takes Flight

C.L. Cotter, Contributor

As students walked to 10 a.m. classes, they found an unusual sight surrounding the Sombrilla. Replacing some of the usual club tables handing out fliers, booths offered avian themed zines, displaying traditional Native American feather prayer fans and a table full of headphones only playing birdsongs. If this event seemed unfamiliar, that is because it was the first ever UT San Antonio Birdfest, hosted by the **Urban Bird Project**, a local environmental justice initiative.

The event began around 9 a.m. with a Campus Birdwalk, in which Urban Bird Project volunteers walked students across campus, pointing out local birds and describing their importance to the San Antonio ecosystem.

"I wish I could have stayed longer and seen more birds," junior cybersecurity major Will Almendarz said after leaving the walk where students were shown local birds, such as cardinals and mockingbirds.

Seven stations were located at the Sombrilla. The table closest to the MH building offered students a chance to visit all seven tables and enter a raffle. Table three allowed attendees to learn about the dangers San Antonio birds face such as microplastics and the methods the Urban Bird Project uses to combat them. Table four, hosted by **Coahuiltecan Indigenous Elder Masauki Zepeda**, explained indigenous feather keeping. The booth demonstrated how tribes use feathers in religious ceremonies by creating fans utilizing feathers. Just east of the John Peace Library, **Last Chance Forever**, a local non-profit organization, hosted a live birds of prey show.

"We're doing an educational demonstration," Raptor Technician Ian Joplin said. "We're demonstrating live flying hawks, eagles, falcons and vultures as well as talking about their place in the world and why we want to keep them around." The initiative behind Birdfest is led by faculty and doctoral students from UT San Antonio and community members from across South Texas and the greater Mexico area.

"The Urban Bird Project is a transdisciplinary project that's focused on raising awareness about birds and the environment through bringing together arts, culture and science," UT San Antonio Assistant Professor of Practice Amelia King-Kostelac, one of the volunteers, explained. "We've also been doing important work on microplastics and doing bio-acoustic monitoring of birds as they're flying over at night."

Although Birdfest is over, Roadrunners can support these organizations in other ways.

"We are always happy to have volunteers," King-Kostalac noted. "We also run a spring scholars program where students can join us and learn different approaches to research methodology across different kinds of disciplines, and in exchange, they get a \$5,000 stipend."



Jalay Jones

If students are more interested in hands-on work, Last Chance Forever accepts volunteers.

“They can contact us at lastchanceforever.org,” Joplin indicated, “We are always taking in volunteers. But if they also find an injured bird, we take them in free of charge.”

The birds must be transported directly to their headquarters as the organization is unable to do pick-ups.

“This is what we hope to be the first annual Birdfest, so we absolutely intend to keep it going.” King-Kostalac said. “We’re really excited to have the diversity and expertise that we have here on campus.”

The Urban Bird Project hopes to host another Birdfest around the same time next year, with visions of the second annual festival soaring to new heights.