

# Wildlife by Design

## *Interactive Education in a Virtual World*

Article by ALI KUEHN and ADRIENNE PAQUETTE



Houston area kindergarteners act out what makes up a habitat (food, water, shelter, space) during a Virtual Wildlife by Design.

In March 2020, as COVID-19 safety recommendations emerged and a large number of students and parents chose remote learning and working-from-home as precautionary measures, the Texas Wildlife Association's Conservation Legacy (CL) team considered the possibilities for the future of conservation education. Amid uncertainty, the CL team rallied together to create programs that would continue to provide opportunities for Texas students to learn about native wildlife and natural resources.

After surveying Texas teachers, two new, yet familiar, programs were formed: Virtual Wildlife by Design and Wildlife

by Design Across Texas. By building upon already well-known and popular in-class Wildlife by Design presentations, teachers could continue to bring wildlife to their students even while being socially distant.

Wildlife by Design is a science TEKS-aligned program that has brought wildlife, habitats and natural resources into classrooms across Texas for more than a decade. Through hands-on lessons, students in kindergarten through 8th grade are able to experience bird and mammal adaptations, animal and plant life cycles, aquifers and even soil health on a personal level.



In mid-March, when schools began to close, parents and educators worried their students would be missing out on vital interactive instruction. The CL team of educators worked fast to find the best ways to reach these students virtually.

By the first week of April, the Virtual Wildlife by Design program began to offer teachers a way to continue to receive a personalized presentation through virtual learning. Then in the fall semester, the Wildlife by Design Across Texas program was launched reaching students across Texas who do not have a regional Texas Wildlife Association educator. The Conservation Legacy team has found an opportunity for growth and learning even under uncertain circumstances.

Immediately after schools began to shut their doors, CL educators put their heads together to figure out how teachers could still receive the benefits of conservation education programs for their students. After surveying teachers across Texas to find out which technologies schools and districts were using, the educators experimented with creating a program that could still be interactive through Zoom, Google Meets and other virtual face-to-face technologies. Using the outline of the already beloved Wildlife by Design program, the educators began to meet with schools virtually within three weeks of schools shutting down.

In fact, between April and December 2020, CL educators met with more than 18,500 students and 800 teachers in over 300 schools across 24 different counties in Texas. The virtual program's success can be attributed to the team's hard work maintaining an interactive and hands-on component to all of the lessons.

An unforeseen benefit of teaching students at their homes is that the youths, now in their "home" environments with perhaps more outdoor time, were able to relate these wildlife lessons to those animals they were seeing on a daily basis. Pets and stuffed animals have made appearances on the Zoom meetings to provide helpful discussion on the adaptations of different animals.

"Does your dog have eyes pointing to the front or to the side? Does that mean he

is a predator or a prey?" "How about that bird you can see outside your window—do the brightly-colored feathers mean it's more likely to be a male or a female?" In a way, these virtual lessons have opened the door to a wider variety of connections than normally used in a classroom.

One elementary teacher from Frisco ISD, north of Dallas, said the Skins & Skulls Virtual Wildlife by Design taught by Gwen Eishen was "a breath of fresh air for our teachers and students...You seamlessly weave what it means to be a good steward to plants and animals into your program which I loved. Also, the focus on Texas plants and animals is awesome because our students may start to notice these as they travel around our great state. I cannot thank you enough or express the value this brought to our students learning! THANK YOU!"

A teacher in East Chambers ISD (in the Houston area) said of Ali Kuehn's Virtual Wildlife by Design, "I had so many kids contact me afterward about how much fun they had, and how much they learned! I really appreciate you. Your presentation was AWESOME!"

Through their quick actions and creative thinking, Conservation Legacy educators can continue to safely provide exciting, interactive and TEKS-aligned programs to classes across the state.

As the end of summer 2020 neared and it became apparent that CL educators would not be returning to classrooms in person, the Conservation Legacy team began discussing how to expand offerings to reach even more students and schools across the state. Typically, Wildlife by Design program offerings are limited to the areas where there are regional educators: the greater Houston area, the Dallas/Fort Worth area, West Texas and South Texas. However, the potential for expanding beyond those areas using virtual programming quickly came to light and this fueled the development of the Wildlife by Design Across Texas program.

During the fall semester, each of the five Wildlife by Design programs was offered on a rotating schedule via Zoom, with educators taking turns teaching. The programs were available on a registration

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## **INTRODUCING DFW L.A.N.D.S. EDUCATOR ANNA SORELLE**

Hello! My name is Anna SoRelle, and I am thrilled to be the L.A.N.D.S. Educator for Tarrant, Wise, Denton and Parker counties!

I grew up in rural Georgia and spent many childhood days exploring the woods and getting covered in red mud. I received my bachelor's degree in anthropology from the University of Georgia, then moved to Texas to pursue a master's degree in museum science at Texas Tech University. Flat, treeless Lubbock was quite a change from the lush greenery of Georgia, but it wasn't long until I began to appreciate the plains landscape and the Texas native flora and fauna.

I am incredibly fortunate to have been an educator at a wonderful variety of places, including an archaeology site and nature preserve, science museum and botanical garden. My passion for educating has been informed and strengthened by the experiences I've collected along the way, including snake bites, live-water kayak rescues and teaching outdoors in all manner of Texas weather. I'm so grateful to continue teaching and sharing my deep affinity for wildlife and nature conservation as an educator with the Texas Wildlife Association.



## **MEET CL PROGRAM ASSISTANT AND WEST TEXAS EDUCATOR BRITTANI DAFFT**

My name is Brittani Dafft, and I am excited to join the Texas Wildlife Association in a dual role as the Conservation Legacy Program Assistant and as the West Texas L.A.N.D.S. Educator. I will be teaching the importance of land and wildlife stewardship and conservation to young minds throughout 18 counties in the West Texas region.

Growing up in the East Texas pines, I spent more time chasing animals through dropped needles and creeks than I spent indoors. My interest and appreciation for the variety of Texas native plants and animals and the effects of the changing seasons were driving forces in my desire to understand and be a part of sound land stewardship.

I graduated from Texas State University with a bachelor's degree in wildlife biology and a minor in geography. During college, I was able to travel and assist with field research in wildlife management areas and state parks across the state, furthering my passion for understanding and sharing knowledge of our state's natural resources.

If I wasn't traveling, I was working at a nature park on our mighty Colorado River teaching young and adult minds about Texas' flora and fauna through interpretive hikes, animal programs and recreation activities. Through these experiences, I came to accept that there would be nothing as fulfilling as spending my time teaching others to value and take care of our habitat and wildlife.

It is an honor to work for TWA which is committed to serving Texas' land and wildlife while promoting education and conservation of the state's natural resources. I look forward to educating our next generation of conservation leaders.





L.A.N.D.S. Educator Ali Kuehn demonstrates how much of our world's water is useable by humans and wildlife during a "Where Is Our Water?" Virtual Wildlife by Design.

basis to classroom and homeschool students across the state and were promoted via email, Facebook and the TWA website.

Because of the potential for multiple classes from different schools joining the same program, security was a larger concern. As a side effect of the increased security, the ability to interact with the students was reduced. To combat the reduced interaction, the poll function on Zoom was utilized to be able to ask students questions throughout the program.

Although initial registration was low, interest has picked up and numbers have increased throughout the semester. From September through December, more than 76 teachers and 1,800 students across the state were involved in the Wildlife by Design Across Texas program. These are students and teachers who otherwise would not have had access to TWA's Wildlife by Design programming.

Moving forward into spring of 2021, educators plan to continue offering Wildlife by Design Across Texas with a few modifications. In the fall, programs were offered at set times, 9 a.m. and 2 p.m., two to three days each week. For the spring, educators will be offering Wildlife Wednesdays, with a different program topic offered each week, and educators

will make themselves available for the entire day.

Teachers will be able to contact that day's educator to set up a time that

works well for their class, hopefully eliminating scheduling conflicts and issues. Conservation Legacy educators look forward to seeing this program evolve and having the opportunity to educate more students across the state about our native animals, our ecosystem and stewardship.

The unprecedented circumstances during this pandemic have caused difficulties for everyone. However, rather than getting mired in the "we can't's," the Conservation Legacy team saw this as an opportunity for creativity and innovation and is proud of what has been created.

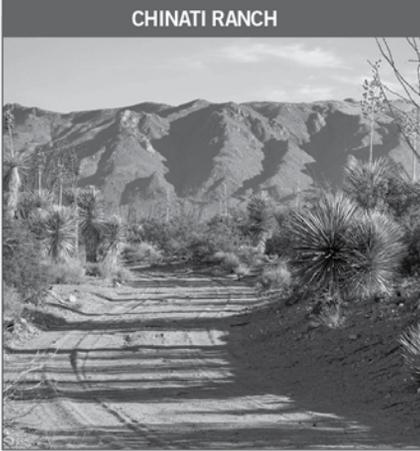
While TWA educators hope to return to in-person programs in the near future, lessons will continue to be learned, programs will continue to be developed, TWA will continue to educate—whether in-person or virtual—and natural resources conservation and stewardship will continue to make their way to Texas teachers and students. 🌱



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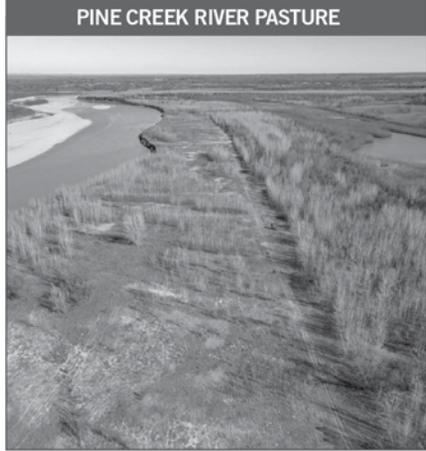
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