

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Mary Anne Weber

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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Google Voice [00:00:00] This call is now being recorded.

David Todd [00:00:03] This is David Todd.

Mary Anne Weber [00:00:05] Hi, David. How are you?

David Todd [00:00:08] Is this the one and only Mary Anne Weber.

Mary Anne Weber [00:00:12] It is. Hopefully there's only one.

David Todd [00:00:13] Good.

Mary Anne Weber [00:00:16] How are you doing?

David Todd [00:00:16] Thank you for calling. I'm fine, thank you. Thank you. I hope you're your well, also.

Mary Anne Weber [00:00:22] We are.

David Todd [00:00:24] Good, good. Well, I've wanted to just, at the very outset, thank you for indulging me here with this interview. And I'm really very grateful and look forward to learning more about your work and see if you can give me some insights about raptors, rodenticides, so on.

Mary Anne Weber [00:00:48] I will try my best. I actually was enjoying your web site. The other day and I saw a good friend of mine's name come up David Marrack. It was nice to read his thoughts and some of the others. So it's neat what you're doing.

David Todd [00:01:08] Oh, well good. I'm so glad you saw that. What a wonderful fellow. And so many great contributions.

Mary Anne Weber [00:01:13] Yes.

David Todd [00:01:16] You have good company in this collection of people.

Mary Anne Weber [00:01:21] Well, I appreciate you wanting to talk. So great.

David Todd [00:01:27] OK, well, why don't we dove into this? I usually start these interviews with a little preface about the fact that this is being recorded and the goal, and wanted to first get your approval on that. So if you don't mind, I'd like to recite a little.

Mary Anne Weber [00:01:50] Sure.

David Todd [00:01:51] Preamble. Okay. Well, with your approval, we are planning on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas. And that's our goal. But you course have all equal rights to use the recording as well. So that's that's my thought about this. I hope that's agreeable to you.

Mary Anne Weber [00:02:29] It is.

David Todd [00:02:31] Super. Well, let's get into the meat of it. It is July 2nd, 2020. My name's David Todd. I'm in Austin and I'm lucky to be conducting an interview with Mary Anne Webber, who has served as educational director for the Houston Audubon Society since 2000, I believe. And she works out of the Audubon Raptor and Education Center out on Sim's Bayou on Houston's southeast side, where she's been since 2005. And she has had a lot of experience visiting schools, libraries and other meetings to teach about bird and nature. And she cares for and shows great horned owls, Mississippi kites, barred owls, screech owls and other raptors who find work as mentors and ambassadors to the public.

David Todd [00:03:37] Today, I was hopeful we could talk about her education work and her career. And then just to focus on one small aspect of it, but an important one, to understand more about the impact of rodenticides on raptors, particularly screech owls, a common victim. So I hope that you might be able to help us in that regard.

Mary Anne Weber [00:04:05] I will try my best.

David Todd [00:04:07] Great. Well, so why don't we start with getting a sense of, of your early days and what might have introduced you, who might have introduced you, to an interest in wildlife and conservation?

Mary Anne Weber [00:04:30] Well, I really have to say, I grew up actually in England, outside of London and, you know, in a suburban setting. But there was always, you know, that, that classic park with the ducks that my mom would take us to go and feed the ducks. We never had pets at the house or anything. But I, feeding the ducks and the pigeons in suburban England and London just was always a very, made a big impression on me, and I think because to me, these birds were wild, but they are wild and have the freedom of flight but could be so easily attracted, you know, that had that stuck with me and as an animal lover, you know, I would bring home any hurt baby critters that I could find. And my parents were all, you know, what are we gonna do with you?

Mary Anne Weber [00:05:25] But my grandfather, who, when he retired and they moved from New Orleans to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, he had many hundreds of acres where he tinkered with his horticulture and had beautiful plants. Grandmother was an artist and he lived on a bayou and, and was a great fisherman and a great conservationist and was given awards for the state of Mississippi multiple times as a conservationist. And we would visit them in the summers. And it was like going to some wild place compared to suburban England

- you know, this deep, swampy, hot, humid coastal area of Mississippi. So that, that became kind of my Mecca. It's a place that I so loved the smell. I mean, I just can see it today: the textures, the, the heat.

Mary Anne Weber [00:06:27] And when I was in high school, I had the great fortune of working for the Y. C.C., the Youth Conservation Corps. At this time, we'd moved back to the States and we were living in New Jersey. And the Youth Conservation Corps is a program with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife, where they hire teenagers to work on their national wildlife refuges for the summer. And so I was, I spent several years on a Y.C.C. crew and as crew leader at the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, which is renowned as a waterfowl stop-over during migration - thousands, tens of thousands of acres. And I built bridges and fences, you know, with the crew, and was very much inspired by what the National Wildlife Refuge system stood for and its history and the land that it was preserving.

Mary Anne Weber [00:07:22] And on one of those days. It was a, we were having a terrible heatwave. It was over 100 degrees. And as a Y.C.C. crew member, you had to wear steel-toed boots and long-sleeved shirts and jeans. And it was a pretty brutal summer. But they gave us a quote unquote, day off and they said, we're going to send you over to this bird sanctuary to volunteer for a day. And lo and behold, right around the corner from the refuge, bordering the refuge property, was this place called the Raptor Trust, run by Dr. Len Soucy, who became my ultimate mentor and guided my life's footsteps, so to speak. And we went over there and my job for that eight-hour day was to repaint a flight enclosure for great horned owls that were being readied for release. This was a bird rehabilitation center. I had never really experienced anything like this before. And they had, over many, many acres, all of these huge enclosures with raptors and other birds in them that were being rehabbed, some that couldn't go back into the wild. And that day spent with the great horns that were gonna be using that aviary were next door and they could see me. And they, you know, they watched me all day and I watched them.

Mary Anne Weber [00:08:46] And Dr. Soucy was an avid owl lover and probably the leading researcher of barn owls in New Jersey and their biggest champion for restoring and protecting old barns and water towers and other structures that barn owls traditionally nested in. And he made a huge impact in my life, so much so that I begged and begged and begged him to hire me, which he finally did. And I started working their summers off from college. And when it came time for college, I decided that instead of going more of a zoo, zoology route, I wanted to do wildlife biology and study our native species.

Mary Anne Weber [00:09:39] And so I worked at the Raptor Trust as a rehabber in the summers, and then they hired me. Well, I should say after I graduated college, I wanted a full-time job there. And they didn't have a full-time position in rehab. But they had an education slot, because they were opening up an education center. And I was scared to death. I said, "I can't talk in front of people". You know, I'm a fainter. I have fainted multiple times in my life in front of audiences and, but I was ready to risk anything to have that job and to work for Dr. Soucy at the Raptor Trust. And so he took a gamble and took me on and taught me how to give programs and how to work with the education birds.

Mary Anne Weber [00:10:24] And then I ended up moving out to Montana, after being there for several, many years, moved out to Montana and opened up. You know, I kind of fledged, as we say, from the Raptor Trust, moved to Montana and opened up my own Wild Bird Rescue out there, nonprofit. And was there for about seven years.

Mary Anne Weber [00:10:48] And in the meantime, my parents were in Houston, really wanted me to move back south and they had some, some connections with folks doing rehab down here and, and ended up coming down and finding out that Houston Audubon was hiring. So I said, "I'm going to try" and I really wanted to do what I was doing full-time because up in Montana, I had multiple jobs trying to earn my keep. I wasn't getting paid to do my education and take care of these education animals and rehabber stuff. So Houston Audubon took a big leap, you know, and a risk. I said, "I've got all these birds. They come with me." And they said, "OK." And that was kind of how it happened.

Mary Anne Weber [00:11:37] I started at the end of 1999. And then they formalized the position in early 2000. And it's grown ever since then. So I really you know, I certainly wouldn't be here where I am now without a tremendous organization, and many, many great people who have come and gone and supporting and really supporting the Education Department and knowing how important it was for them, for the future. So that's how I got here.

David Todd [00:12:12] What a great story. Well, tell us, maybe take us to the next chapter, so you arrive at Houston Audubon in late 1999 and you're education staffer, what what did that entail? What kind of work has the education director done in the years since?

Mary Anne Weber [00:12:31] Yeah, I mean, it started out, you know, very small. Houston Audubon was a lot smaller. There were only really three of us on staff. And now I think we're up to 17, so big changes since I started. And it was really, you know, programs on-site, and originally it was programs on-site at Edith L. Moore, our headquarters. And then it took about six months to move the birds. You know, I built aviaries on my, my property. You got to go through federal, you know, address changes and all that kind of stuff because the birds are under federal and state permits. So after all the permitting was done, we got the birds down here.

Mary Anne Weber [00:13:13] And then, you know, because Edith L. Moore, and now our site here, the Raptor Center, because they're small, and it was just myself and volunteers, to, to really try to reach the masses in the fourth largest city in the U.S., my focus really went on outreach and getting out to the schools. There were school districts that were teaching about birds, but they were really at a loss for what to do. And so developing curriculum, and it was no marketing at all. Just simple word got out that we would come to your classroom, come to your school and deliver programs that at that time nobody else was doing in the area. So my focus really became outreach to the community and not just to youth, but to adults, seniors at senior living centers, assisted living locations, things like that. You know, my motto was have birds, will travel. And we, and that, you know, we really built up our audience with outreach at the same time offering on-site experiences for smaller groups.

Mary Anne Weber [00:14:31] And. You know, then great partners - with Texas Parks and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife. Texas Wildlife Association helped us develop with them a traveling trunk that's now available statewide through the Texas Wildlife Association. And a multitude of partners in in and around the Houston area, Master Naturalist, etc., Katy Prairie. All these great people that, you know, in addition to mentoring me and helping Houston Audubon spread our education message. Really we all came together and, and the whole ability to teach about the environment in the public and private schools has really grown and really become much more valued.

Mary Anne Weber [00:15:26] And I guess about maybe six or seven years ago, we started launching live virtual programs from the Raptor Center after we were over here. This property was donated to us about 15, 16 years ago. Tonight, the education department was growing and we were outgrowing our space at the Edith L. Moore. So this was a perfect fit. And we wanted to reach more, more broader communities in and around the Houston area. So the Southeast side was perfect. And, and then we had this great donation of video conferencing equipment. And I discovered that I can teach across the hemisphere. And we started doing that, like I said, six or seven years ago.

Mary Anne Weber [00:16:16] And what's really impactful to me and the students that we teach with, whether they're in Canada or in South America, is that we share these birds. You know, I am talking to kids who, who are on the flyway with me and I'm telling them these birds are on their way to you, you know, they've just hit the upper Texas coast. And this is why they're important and why we need to conserve their habitat. When COVID19 hit, we were doing programs and we were live talking to kids in Brazil and Vietnam and China about birds. They had questions about birds. You know, so there's the Internet, I mean, when, when I first start with Houston Audubon, it was dial-up and we all had to take turns, the three of us in the office. But technology has really expanded our reach and birds expand our reach.

Mary Anne Weber [00:17:16] And that's what's one of the exciting things that I love about teaching about birds, is they're not they're not ours. We share them with cultures and people all across the world. They are our most common interaction with wildlife. They're incredibly important to the ecosystem. They have a big impact on the ecosystem on a daily basis, and they need to be conserved. And so if we can, we can do a whole lot of good things here in Texas. But if bad things are happening in Venezuela or Costa Rica or Canada or someplace else, it's all for nothing, because these birds travel these flyways. And it's not just my backyard that needs to be a great bird habitat. It's it's the whole you know, it's hemispheric. So it's exciting and challenging. And it drives me definitely every day and our education department and the goals that we have to reach and do more. And there's a lot more we can do.

David Todd [00:18:28] Well, so, it's amazing that the outreach program that you've got. I was wondering if maybe you could give us a couple of examples, maybe the two extremes, where say on the one end, you're at an assisted living center and you're reaching people who are pretty elderly and how you would do a lesson with them, versus how you would do one for very young children who might have different interests and experience.

Mary Anne Weber [00:19:01] Yeah. I mean, and it's one of the great things that Houston Audubon, as an autonomous chapter, we have our own board, our own staff, all of our fundraising efforts here can stay here on the upper Texas coast. And so we have a lot of liberty in our programs and flexibility. And so, you know, we might go to a school, let's say an elementary school, and they are studying birds. And so those programs are chock-full of vocabulary that, you know, that we're reinforcing with those kids that they're going to see on a standardized test coming up in the spring. You know, scientific method, how we study birds, how we conserve them, why they're important. A lot of, like I said, a lot of vocabulary and really looking at what the goals in their classroom or in their, on their grade level, what, what their science goals are, or social studies. Even math, etc., etc.

Mary Anne Weber [00:20:09] And then, you know, we might go to a middle school in a rural community. I remember going up to the Cleveland area and doing some programs for middle school students up there. And those, you know, that's a harder audience to reach that middle school age, even harder than high school, because a lot of stuff is happening in their world.

And in the rural communities, you know, what I experienced is kids who, who are poor, you know, and the teachers are buying food for them to take home on the weekends because they know those kids are not going to get three meals a day when they're, when they're at home.

Mary Anne Weber [00:20:56] And so you're trying to inspire them about birds, when you know that they're just hungry. And that's a really big challenge to get them to, you know, appreciate something that they, you know, try by, passed by, walk past, and that's a part of their world that they haven't really thought of, when they're, when they're not in a good place. So that's a, that's a huge challenge. And having the ambassador birds really helps to ignite a little bit of joy, a little bit of passion, in sometimes some very sad souls.

Mary Anne Weber [00:21:34] And then, for the seniors, when we go to maybe a memory care facility or assisted living or people in the twilight of their, their, their life. It's, it's, again, such a special experience because they are flooded with memories of their childhood, and their experiences with birds. Sometimes it's the hunting legacy that they're, that they grew up with, and that they love to share about duck hunting or pheasant hunting that they remember. Or, and maybe they had an experience with a hawk or an owl or something growing up on a farm. Or maybe their grandmother had parakeets or something, you know, something like that. But so many of them have a bird memory that is kind of reignited when we come with the birds and they.... we have birds that the participants can touch and feel. And it's like I mean, the staff will come up to me and say, you know, their faces lit up. They're just, everything went, became peaceful in their world. And it just brings a little bit of joy.

Mary Anne Weber [00:22:54] And we when we go to these facilities, we, of course, want to bring joy and happiness to the residents. But we're also teaching the staff who hopefully are going home and sharing it with their families and their young ones. And it's trickling down. And we're encouraging and assisting the groundskeepers at these facilities to plant native plants, give these folks a little butterfly and bird garden that they can look out on to. We help them set up bird feeders and bird baths, because we know how healing that experience with nature, even if it's through a window, how very healing nature can be.

Mary Anne Weber [00:23:40] And so we really, it's hard to explain that every audience is different, and we, you know, have to figure out the best way to reach that audience sometimes right when we get there, and we see what's sitting in front of us. And, and makes it it makes it challenging, but also exciting, presenting to all these different ages and people of different backgrounds and who have had different experiences.

Mary Anne Weber [00:24:14] And the birds help us bridge that sometimes big gap between ages or cultures or language. They are the hook, so to speak, that they don't need to speak a certain way or, you know, look a certain way. They are universal in their ability to ignite something very deep in all of us, I think.

David Todd [00:24:43] You say this so well. It's a wonderful story. So you mentioned these ambassadors. Can you tell us a little bit about how these birds have come into your life, where you know how you acquired them, injured, or donated in some way. Curious of their origin.

Mary Anne Weber [00:25:11] Yes, and they all have their own story. Two of them have been with me for almost 30 years now. They came with me when I moved here from Montana. They are both birds. Well, one my great horned now is turning 30. He came to my rehab up in Montana. He'd been hit by a car and had sustained two broken wings. The vets couldn't put everything back together, so he's unable to fly. And then the other, our red-tailed hawk, she

actually was in a different center in Montana. Her name is Spirit, and the center burned down, and she was the only surviving animal and she was brought to my center. And I took over her care back in 1993.

Mary Anne Weber [00:25:59] And, and so those two came with me, and others who have since passed on, and all of the birds are either, not all, I should say, most, all the rest of them since I've been here, have come from other rehab centers. When a bird, wild bird, is found injured, by law, they have to go to a licensed wildlife rehab center and then at that rehab center, they, by law, have to, you know, fix and release that bird, euthanize it if it can't be saved, or fix it to a point where it could potentially go into an educational program because it's different licensing.

Mary Anne Weber [00:26:44] There's rehab, licensing and educational licensing. And so here at the Raptor Center, we hold education licenses. And so when a bird is a potential for an education ambassador, they, the center, the rehab center, can call people that they know, or put that bird up on like a national database. And just through our work in the Houston area, we've become really good partners with our local rehab groups. And through my work in Montana with the rehab groups up there, and so several of our birds have come via rehabbers in Montana and Wyoming and the others have come from rehabbers in in Texas, as far away as Corpus Christi.

Mary Anne Weber [00:27:36] And, you know, you go through all the licensing procedures, et cetera. So we've got several birds that have been either illegally shot, or hit by cars, or potentially hit powerlines. We have a purple martin who's not a raptor or a songbird who struck a window during migration and sustained permanent brain injury, that can't be released back into the wild.

Mary Anne Weber [00:28:05] And then just last year, we had an opportunity to acquire two barn owls from Louisiana. And these are a brother and sister pair that had been raised in captivity at the Cincinnati Zoo. So amongst the zoo folks, zoos will raise different species to be used for education at other, at other facilities. And these two barn owls had been used for education in Chicago for 15 years before being sent to Baton Rouge. And the folks at the zoo in Baton Rouge never ended up, they had plans for like some kind of a special new exhibit. And that never happened. So they were just sitting off off-exhibit and through some connections, we found out that they had these two barn owls and we said, hey, "what would you be interested in transferring them over here?" Because we don't see barn owls very much. They're a declining species in many areas. But they're also probably the one of most recognizable owls on the planet. And so they said, "sure, we'd love to send them over to you." So last summer, they were transferred to us. So they are fully flighted. They're not disabled in any way, but because they were raised in captivity, can't go back into the wild or can't go into the wild I should say.

Mary Anne Weber [00:29:30] So it's a mix of stories and you know, I think the birds are sometimes a testament to, even though they have a disability, they have great ability to reach, reach others and do good. And, you know, they've got a second, second chance at life here. And just knowing how many people they inspire, whether it's visitors to the Raptor Center or when we're doing programs, you know, they live a very, very rich life, that's for sure.

David Todd [00:30:07] Also, so once you get some of these birds and they're at your aviary, what is the care and training involved?

Mary Anne Weber [00:30:19] So we, we have these beautiful facilities now that we just opened up, did the ribbon cutting last January of 2019, that we designed for each bird. So every enclosure is designed for a particular bird and its abilities or disabilities. And training when we get a bird involves sitting quietly with it. They wear little anklets and straps when they're, when they're being used for education. Some birds are much more laid back about it than others. And so it's just spending time in a quiet place, getting them used to noises and talking, getting them used to being transported in specially designed carriers for raptors. And then letting them hang out. You know, they, they have their enclosures where they can see the world go by and they get, you know, they get frozen mice and rats that are shipped to us in big shipments, every couple of months that we thaw out and they eat when they want to. They don't, they're not food-deprived. You know, they're not trained, like falconry birds. So they get a full meal every day. And so they're pretty happy. You know, the owls do love snoozing during the day. And the hawks like to sit out and watch the birds at the bird feeder and the squirrels running around and, and then when it's time to give a program or meet some people, they're, they're pretty, pretty good about knowing the routine and what's going to happen and pretty relaxed about it. Yeah, they do have they do have their moments when they don't feel like it. But, but it's usually, you know, everybody has a cranky day.

David Todd [00:32:27] So how do you deal with medical issues?

Mary Anne Weber [00:32:33] Well, we are very fortunate here in Houston to have probably one of the top avian vets and vet clinics in the world, Gulf Coast Avian and Exotics. And I've been, since I moved here because I have parrots also, they have been our vet and they are just, they're tremendous. I mean, it's not cheap when you're dealing with, with birds and other exotic animals but they, they are some of the best of the best, worldwide, and and known for their veterinary care of birds. And in fact, their lead vet came to Houston from a raptor center up in Minnesota. So they're well versed in how to care for these birds, and they helped us get through West Nile when West Nile hit and we lost one of our raptors. You know, when West Nile first hit, hit the Houston area and they recognized it right away and were on board with what we needed to do. So we're very lucky to be in this big metropolitan area and have access to some really great vets.

David Todd [00:33:48] Well, you know, it's interesting you bring up the West Nile virus. I was hoping that you might be able to talk about some of the ways that these birds, through their existence or just through how you explain their story, are kind of a canary in the coal mine. You know, that they can help you explain West Nile virus or, you know, one of the topics that I'm interested in, is rodenticide exposure. But I imagine there are lots of things that, you know, they're wonderful teachers about. Can you give some examples?

Mary Anne Weber [00:34:28] I think, you know, they all, like I said, have their own story about what happened to them. And for the, especially the younger audiences, elementary kids, when, when they meet a bird that's been hit by a car, they, and then I talk about, you know, what are some of the threats that birds face? And, you know, they say, hit by a car or getting caught by a cat. I think kids, everybody, kind of knows those things. And I said, well, you know, if there are simple things we can do to help prevent those collisions or those threats. One is just not to litter, because when we litter, we are attracting prey, mice and rats and squirrels, etc., are into our streets. And guess what? Those are attracting the raptors. And, you know, unfortunately, in the big city of Houston, we have a tremendous problem with littering. And kids are going to follow the example of their parents. And, you know, I see all the time just adults throwing stuff on the ground as they walk along. And if I can, with, with a kid meeting like our great horned owl, one of our new birds, Simon, she's so magnificent. When kids

understand that that was probably swooping down to catch prey in the road, maybe that prey had been attracted there by roadside litter, you know, that can be very, that can have a great impact.

Mary Anne Weber [00:36:01] And there are, you know, a multitude of threats that birds that birds face that we bring up in our presentations, that we hope seeing these birds, understanding their threats, will do something to prevent threats in the future. So having that kind of one-on-one experience with a live bird and understand this bird will never fly free again. But what can we do to prevent that from happening to other birds in the future?

Mary Anne Weber [00:36:39] And, in an urban setting in particular, there are so many threats that wildlife face on a day-to-day basis. And as their habitats are getting smaller or change, you know, they're kind of getting squeezed into smaller and smaller spaces. And I also, in turn, I should say, I talk about the good stuff that's happening. And there are birds that are benefiting from the parks that we are building with our, with the water features that started out as simple flood detention areas and then people realized it's a great area for wildlife and they built trails. And it's good for recreation. It's good for people. And and so there are birds, a lot of birds, that are benefiting from how we are now building parks and green spaces. And so the news isn't all bad, but it certainly is bringing wildlife closer to us and closer to suburban pockets. And like we talked about the rodenticide problem, you know, we're building these wonderful green spaces in and around even the big cities, Houston, which is attracting the birds, that it's also bringing them closer to dangers, whether it's secondary poisoning from rodenticides or getting hit by cars or being caught by cats. There's a lot of dangers out there for them.

David Todd [00:38:13] Well, so talk a little bit, if you would, about the cat issue, which I know is big for many birds and I and I gather raptors, too.

Mary Anne Weber [00:38:25] It can be an effect, in particular for owls like screech owls that capture their prey on the ground, that teach their kids to capture their prey on the ground. So in areas where there's big feral cat populations or housecats that are allowed to roam free, you know, that's, that's a big issue. The birds are, are vulnerable when they're on the ground and cats, cats are very good hunters. So, you know, we're, people want to have owls, love owls, want to have owls around, they want to attract them. But you've got to be real aware of what's going on, on your property. There's actually here in the city of Houston, a leash law on cats that nobody knows about. So we certainly have a healthy population of feral cats across our city. And it's not just the small songbirds, and the other wildlife reptiles and amphibians they're going after, but they certainly impact bird populations greatly and more and more research is proving that. And, you know, we're always teaching that if you have a cat, your cat will live a longer, healthier life, if it's kept indoors as opposed to letting it roam around outside. But the feral cat population is an issue. And there's always the conflict between the folks who believe in trap, neuter and release that you that, you know, might prevent a bigger population. But it also releases cats out there who are hunting to survive. And certainly for our smaller raptors, that's an issue, whether it's a kestrel or a screech owl, they're at great risk when they're down on the ground catching their prey.

David Todd [00:40:26] Oh, are you familiar with this case from a number of years ago down in Galveston, where there were feral cats who were hunting piping plovers? A fellow shot a cat, and was tried?

Mary Anne Weber [00:40:41] Yep.

David Todd [00:40:44] Do you recall what you know about that case? It's such an interesting and tragic exploration of the whole problem.

Mary Anne Weber [00:40:53] Yeah, it really brought the problem to light when, you know and I know the person who was involved and I know you know - passionate birder. But it really kind of inflamed the issue in terms of like the cat people and the bird people. But it also brought to light this issue of feral cat populations and their impact on bird populations. I remember it was, you know, it was a heated argument among those different, among those different groups, that I think it's still very much alive and well today, that I don't think it really was ever resolved. And probably will never be resolved, but it certainly brought to light the issue of cats and birds.

Mary Anne Weber [00:41:56] Similar, in a similar way, that what happened in Galveston with the bird strike on the building two years ago when 400 songbirds died, when they hit the, hit the building. Nobody, you know, a lot of people didn't know that building strikes were a huge problem for birds. And so these little cases, these live scenarios, bring to light some big problems. I don't think it ever, like I said, I don't think it ever resolved itself. There's you know, cat people are still out there. The bird people are still here, so, the struggle continues to find a way to help the cats and protect the birds.

David Todd [00:42:51] Well, have you. You run into these same sort of conflicts or maybe in a better light, teachable moments with birds and rodenticides?

Mary Anne Weber [00:43:03] Yeah. I was going to say, when we first got the Raptor Center, our next door neighbor here in the neighborhood had a huge cat colony. And it was many years before we were finally able to, you know, trap them and convince that elderly couple, who love the cats, but that this is not a good thing, you know. And they were seeing, you know, those cats were breeding, they were feral, but they were feeding them. They were coming over to the Raptor Center, to our nature center and killing birds, et cetera, et cetera. But, you know, they were seeing kittens that would get killed in the road and, and they finally realized that this was not a good situation so that we were able to trap them and get them to shelters better. So that was a good thing.

Mary Anne Weber [00:43:53] And as far as rodenticides, even from my early years in rehab in the '80s, when I started, you know, we would get birds in suffering from poisonings. And it's, it's a it's a terrible way to die. And of course, when I first started, they didn't have all the research there is right now. It's still a huge problem across the world. And I think, I think back on when, when I'm teaching and we talk about bald eagles because I follow several nests here in the city of Houston and kids get real excited because they don't know that we have bald eagles in Houston. And I show them photographs I've taken and talk to them about them, the active nests. They come here in the wintertime to breed and raise their families and their population is growing. And I give them the history, like the brown pelican and the peregrine falcon with DDT and the fight to eliminate DDT from the environment was a lengthy one. And it's still occurring.

Mary Anne Weber [00:45:07] And even after the Endangered Species Act went into place and these raptors were fully protected, because I do give a little history lesson (I love history) to the kids about the Migratory Bird Treaty Act that was passed in 1918. You know, this wonderful law that's been around for over 100 years. In those early years, it did not protect raptors. Raptors were the bad, the bad bird. And up until the mid, early '70s, in over half of the

states in our country (so the 1970s really weren't that long ago), you were you were paid by your local game warden, five dollars for any dead owl that you brought to the, to their office.

Mary Anne Weber [00:45:55] So this whole idea of understanding raptors in their role is almost, you know, a new thing. And even when the protection went into place and DDT was outlawed for use in our country, we were still the number one manufacturing, manufacturer of DDT and we just shipped it south of the border. And again, that whole idea that our birds are migratory. Number one, we're sending DDT down to the countries that are making food that they ship back to us. That's a problem right there. But that our birds are traveling. And you know, so the battle was, and probably is far from over.

Mary Anne Weber [00:46:38] And then the whole rodenticide situation on top of that, you know, warfarin, of course, was the anti-coagulant that was the first generation. But as is very much like, I don't know what the word would be. Humans don't like to have to pick up their messes. You know, they'd rather just kind of sweep it under the rug and not deal with it. And certainly to create a poison where they wouldn't have to deal with the mouse or the rat problem anymore, you know. See no evil, hear no evil, kind of thing. There's these great new second-generation poisons that were created where the mouse would eat it. They didn't have to come back multiple times. They would go off and die somewhere else. Seemed like, you know, to many, the perfect, the perfect scenario. They didn't have to get their hands messy, deal with a dead body, deal with a dead mouse or a rat. And those second-generation anticoagulants, you know, were welcomed and embraced.

Mary Anne Weber [00:47:53] But what people didn't realize was their impact on wildlife and not just raptors, but lots of different lots of different wildlife. And that is still a huge problem out there today, even though in 2015, some of the worst of the worst were taken off the shelf for regular consumer use. They're still fully used in agriculture and commercial use and by commercial companies. So I don't think we've really done much to eliminate them from the environment. All it takes is a commercial license to use these second-generation rodenticides.

Mary Anne Weber [00:48:43] And again, it's black box, nobody really knows what's in there. Nobody understands its impact. And when you when, you know, a raptor is an opportunistic hunter and if they see a mouse, you know, hobbling along, they're going to go for it. They are, you know, it's much easier to catch a sickly mouse than a healthy one that's racing all over the place. And because birds fly and can leave an area and it's not an instantaneous death. That's one of the problems in tracking how these poisons are, are getting out into the food chain, just like it took Rachel Carson and her Silent Spring book, and a lot of hard work, you know, a decade of hard work after that was published, before people finally agreed that DDT, you know, was bioaccumulating in the environment in these organisms. There's plenty of research being done to show these rodenticides can bioaccumulate in tissues and have long-lasting impacts. But it's tricky because with birds, you know, they will consume a mouse or a rat that's been poisoned, and it might not kill them, but it could, but it could sicken them and birds with their incredibly high metabolic rate, they can't go very long without eating or drinking. These rodenticides make them extremely thirsty, which brings, could potentially put them in danger from other predators, which again, keep things going up the food chain. And if they're not feeling well enough to hunt, they're not going to last very long in the environment, but they've flown away from where it was that they caught that mouse or that rat. So to be able to pinpoint what caused their death, it's extremely hard. I think that, you know, the research is there, we know what goes on, and I and I was looking at, recently, some standards for school IPMs, you know, their pest management, and a lot of schools, of course, have ag programs and these second-generation rodenticides are fully used in agricultural settings. So they are

around our schools, around our kids, around our youth, around our birds, agricultural areas and, and are a favorite haunt for many raptors because the mice and the rats are there.

Mary Anne Weber [00:51:45] It's a big problem and the fact that commercial use is still rampant. The pesticide companies have a lot of pull in, in Washington, D.C.. So it's a tough, it's a tough sell to get them to stop. And again, people aren't, people aren't interested in having traps, so to speak, to, and then, to dispose of a body. They, they would rather have it just wander away, which says something about our psyche - you know, not taking responsibility for a problem that we've really caused by our sprawl, if that makes sense.

David Todd [00:52:36] You know, this absolutely does, and it's so interesting that impacts on the larger world where our need for convenience and uneasy attitude about death and dying in rodents.

David Todd [00:52:53] Well, let me ask you something else that I think has to do with raptors and chemicals, was this problem with Swainson's hawks back in the 90s? And you remember the issue about monocrotophos, I guess a organic, organophosphate insecticide. Can you tell me much about the controversy?

Mary Anne Weber [00:53:22] Well, I do remember, you know, in the '90s, I mean, Swainson's hawk became kind of the poster child for the dangers of insecticide, insecticides. And again, I think it was a wakeup call that we share our birds with cultures, countries, people all across the hemisphere. And so what happened in the 90s down in South America and the massive poisoning, the deaths that occurred for these hawks, it really opened up this whole idea that what we do here and what we do, what happens there impacts on migratory birds. It was a big eye-opener. And one of the things I remember learning, again, similar to DDT - OK, so we banned this, this poison that would poison the grasshoppers, etc. and we banned it here in the U.S., but we're still, and it's still so widely used in other parts of the world, including Latin America.

Mary Anne Weber [00:54:50] And I remember sitting in a class or a lecture, you know, when we send when we were manufacturing these things, we would send these products south of the border with all the instructions in English. And we were sending these to countries where, you know, people applying them probably didn't speak or read English, and they were just, you know, kind of figuring out as they go. And one thing that I stressed, especially to the diverse audiences we have here in the Houston area, and so many people have a connection with countries, to their families, south of the border, whether it's Central America, Mexico, South America, is that, you know, not only do we need to be good stewards of our land and our birds, but it is impacting your family, your heritage.

Mary Anne Weber [00:55:44] If we can lessen the pesticides that these people are applying in, on the coffee farms, on the agricultural, banana farms, et cetera, it is going a long way to benefiting those people also. They're not out there wearing hazmat suits when they're applying pesticides. You know, they're probably using bare hands. And I'm sure that's impacting families and their own health. So the, to me, these birds, they are, like you said, kind of the canary in the coal mine. But it's not just. It's not just protecting the birds. It's really having a long-term impact on protecting the earth, what's grown, growing from the earth and the people, all of us that are tending there, the gardeners. You know, better surviving on this one planet.

Mary Anne Weber [00:56:41] And those Swainson's when that massive poisoning occurred, you know, that was a real wake-up call. And it, it became international. And I think, to, to make a positive impact, it takes an international effort. It can't, like I said earlier, can't just be that, you know, my backyard has been certified as wildlife habitat and I can, I can kind of check that off my list and sleep well at night. It's because these birds move and we're all connected, it's an international effort to make the world a better place. But certainly Swainson's hawks, what happened to them with that pesticide insecticide, was, was a big wake-up call and made, and was beneficial in making some changes. I think we still have a long way to go. Those pesticides are still in use. Just like for diphcinone, brodifacoum, and these second-generation rodenticides are still widely used. You know, even though they were taken off the mom and pop shelves for the local, you know, local consumer, they're still very much manufactured, and applied to the, to the ground. So we have a lot of work to do, for sure.

David Todd [00:58:15] Well, I love what you told us. And, you know, from the examples of, of these birds' life histories. And then also there are the risks they face of being in our world, that they share with us. You know, whether it's collisions with cars or buildings or exposure to insecticides, rodenticides, and so on. But I wonder if you can make it look back on your efforts to use these birds, or the birds are using you, to teach a lesson. Are there any sort of take away notions that you have brought away from, gosh, working on this since the '80s and trying to teach the public?

Mary Anne Weber [00:59:09] Yeah, I mean, I certainly have had, and I continue to have, many, many experiences where people will come back and say, you know, we stopped using this like my neighbor who lives next door, me, who was convinced to put out rodent bait boxes and had dead screech owls in her yard within a week, you know. You know, that made a huge impact on her. And she'll never do that again. But even, you know, through our teaching and our programs and when people visit here, they'll come back years later and say it made an impact in how they do things, how they think about things, their reduced use of pesticides, their wanting and willingness to appreciate the outdoors, make their own yard a better place for the birds, bring, you know, bring their cats in. I think when people see what these birds face every day, you know, we get letters and notes and e-mails from people. You know, we've had people will cry. Not that I want people to cry. But, you know, when they hear what's happened, what's happened, what's happening to our birds.

Mary Anne Weber [01:00:32] And sometimes it's hard for us to understand that one hundred years ago, the sport hunting of raptors was, was the thing, especially on the East Coast, along the Appalachian Mountains. The gunners would set up their, their blinds that they would build and it was great sport to shoot the raptors as they migrated. And you say that to people today, and they're like, that's dumb or that's horrible. But that was the 1920s and 1930s. And it took people like Rosalie Edge who set up Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania to, to start the process, even though the birds were still not protected in the '70s, you know, decades later. People realize their important role in the environment.

Mary Anne Weber [01:01:28] And so I still think we have a long way to go. And every little bit that we can do. And I think having these ambassador birds people come back and they'll say, "I remember when you showed, showed us those birds. And it really changed the way I thought about birds." And we get that from, from kids who are really young when we taught them and who come back as high school kids who remember fondly. And they say, "you know, you really made an impact." Or adults, who maybe make a change around their home about not putting out rat poison or mouse poison because, "I didn't know that. I didn't it could, you know, cause other harm to other wildlife." And I think it's, you know, having, taking a

hard look inside ourselves and being responsible for our own actions. And, how can we eliminate or mediate a problem that we've caused, whether it's rats or mice, what have you, in a safer way? You know, it's these pesticides and insecticides, rodenticides are not the cure. The problem's still there. So it's taking a deeper look at what we're doing.

Mary Anne Weber [01:02:54] And I think even in this age right now of COVID-19, and people are at home, they're craving the outdoors. The research is there about how healing and beneficial exposure to nature is for, whether you're sick or not, for our mental and physical health it's critically important. And I think families are craving, you know, that outdoor time. And I'm always so happy when we, when we do our bird surveys down here in Houston, and we go to these city and county parks and we see families out there and they ask us, what are, are you watching these birds? Tell us about these birds that you're seeing. And people are excited about it. And they want to know.

Mary Anne Weber [01:03:39] And one thing I learned a long, long time ago is if you can teach young or old the name of an organism: that is not just the bird, that's a red bellied woodpecker. And watch what it's doing and look at its pattern and listen to its call. Or that, that's a cottonwood tree. Listen to the wind in its heart-shaped leaves. Look at the shape of its bark and the size of this tree. It, it really becomes personal and people take ownership of it. It's not just a tree, it's not just a bird, it's not just a bug. When they can identify, and we see this over and over again in our classes. Kids get so excited when they can say, "that's a northern cardinal, or that's a blue jay." They might have always called it a bluebird before, you know, they can actually put a name on it and identify it. That's very empowering. And if they can't do that, they're never gonna really treasure it or understand it.

Mary Anne Weber [01:04:45] So, it's not that we're teaching high-level collegiate ornithology, even though I sneak some of that in sometimes. But it, this simple act of helping somebody identify what's in their yard can make, make a huge impact in their wanting and willingness to care about those species.

Mary Anne Weber [01:05:17] If that answers your question.

David Todd [01:05:18] It does and it's admirable what you're doing to teach and help people care. And I guess I just have one more question, if you might have anything to add before we wrap up.

Mary Anne Weber [01:05:37] Well, I think it's, I think it's really important what you're doing. And I think the history is really important, you know, where, where we were and the potential for where we're going. Which is why I always love to share the history of John James Audubon and the history of our conservation laws and what brought people to that point.

Mary Anne Weber [01:05:59] We have wonderful exhibits here, the Raptor Center from the 1800s, the Victorian era of collecting birds from around the world and stuffing them and using them as ornaments and decorations in homes.

Mary Anne Weber [01:06:17] And at first, people like, ooh, that's kind of gross. And that's what people, that's what people wanted. That's the age of the railroad and the fashion magazines and feathers on hats. And so I think it's important what you're doing in preserving the history of wildlife and wildlife conservation so that people can understand where we were and understand how far we have to go. And we don't go backwards.

David Todd [01:06:46] That's important. Don't go backwards.

Mary Anne Weber [01:06:48] It's very important not to go backwards, but to have a good understanding of how we got here, how we got to this point, and that there are a lot of players in in a situation, good or bad, especially when we're talking about birds, because they are global species in many cases. And that impact, it's a global issue, I should say, and there's a lot of players that are in the mix and it goes on up to politics and who's lobbying for what. And that has a big impact on everything you guys are talking about with wildlife conservation. So I commend you for getting all of this down and preserving it, for sure.

David Todd [01:07:46] Well, you're very kind to spend time and share your thoughts and memories, and I wish you all the best and hope to see you in your avian friends real soon.

Mary Anne Weber [01:07:59] Come on out, we'd love to have you.

David Todd [01:08:02] Thank you so much. Have a good day, Mary Anne.

Mary Anne Weber [01:08:05] You too. Thanks so much.

David Todd [01:08:09] Talk to you later. Bye now.