

NTRC

North Texas Research Coalition

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Green Heron (Butorides virescens)

Greetings from the NTRC!

Greetings from the North Texas Research Coalition (NTRC)!

I am under the increasing apprehension that no one actually reads these newsletters – a reality for which I certainly cannot fault anyone since were I not the one writing them, I would undoubtedly toss them upon the infinitely swelling midden heap of spam that I already receive as a result of my professional life. Consequently, I've decided to have a bit more fun with these and am going to be taking a much less professional stance in my preparation thereof.

Instead of the usual corporate-speak (now rapidly being replaced with AI-slop) that is the "professional newsletter" of today's academia, I've decided to largely ignore NTRC business in these moving forward. Sure, I'll include any relevant information (if it comes up) and will keep sending out our scholar spotlights (as that's the only thing here that is really interesting), but otherwise, I will be using this newsletter to play host to a seemingly random assortment of thoughts and comments.

WHAT'S NEW

THOUGHTS ON TEXAN TOOL-USING CREATURES

While we don't have many tool-users in North America (present company excluded), the Green Heron provides a fun example of intelligence in the animal world

PROSELYTIZING FOR PNIN

Did you ask for a book recommendation? No, but I'm doing it anyway

SCHOLAR SPOTLIGHTS

Highlights of some of the recent work published by our members

Texan Tool-Users

There aren't that many tool-users in the Americas. Lacking primates (with the exception of the all-too ubiquitous *Homo sapiens*), animals that actively use physical objects to achieve a goal are few and far between. This list becomes even shorter when you zoom in to focus on the state of Texas (and given the state of our schools, I'm not sure *Homo sapiens* will stay on that list for long)!

There are a few under-reported examples, however, that I think are interesting to note. Both Blue and Green Jays are known to occasionally use twigs or strips of bark to obtain food out of crevices (1) while in East Texas, Brown-headed Nuthatches are known to habitually use flakes of bark to pry the bark off of living trees while foraging (2). Ranging a bit further south, reptilian tool-use has been documented among alligators baiting nesting birds by balancing sticks on their heads (3). In a surprising revelation, limited tool usage has now even been reported among cows (4)! However, the tool use that I'm most keen to highlight comes from the Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*).

Green Herons are prevalent throughout Texas and in the warmer months are common across North Texas. You have likely seen them before while strolling near quiet water in a public park or as they flew across your field of view even if you didn't take particular notice of them. These diminutive herons can be hard to see despite their bold coloration as they skulk in the shadows of overhanging foliage, peering into muddy water for the small fish, invertebrates, and crawfish they feed on.

However commonplace they appear, these reclusive birds hide a level of intelligence not observed in many creatures across the entire globe. Green Herons actively fish for their food! They will deliberately place natural (e.g., pieces of bread or other floating foodstuffs) or artificial (e.g., small twigs resembling an insect) lures on the water to attract fish and then patiently wait for their prey to draw near before lunging in for the catch (5). Surprisingly enough, these birds have essentially invented angling, using bait to catch their next meal. While documented occasionally among other heron species, the Green Heron (and it's close relative the Striated Heron, which does not live in Texas) are most commonly documented practicing this behavior.

The hidden intelligence present in the world around us never ceases to amaze. I hope that those of us in the NTRC can show as much innovation as these little birds (although perhaps that's a bit much to ask for mere primates).

Proselytizing for Pnin

The recommendation you didn't want and don't need



I recently had the pleasure of reading "Pnin" by Vladimir Nabokov and enjoyed it so thoroughly that I thought I would inflict an unsolicited recommendation on any of you fool enough to read my newsletters. Nabokov is undoubtedly one of the greatest writers of the 20th century even if his work will leave you doubting the honesty of everyone around you, including yourself. Pnin is not an exception.

I know what you'll say: that you haven't the energy to read for pleasure after wracking your eyes with articles for your latest lit review all day. But this is an easy lift (only about 170 pages) and is worth every bit of the time.

The titular character is an aging and somewhat hapless professor whom I often found myself identifying with (particularly in the hapless bits). Nabokov presents him with such reality and warmth that you can't help but be drawn in. And the prose! Such incredible prose.

Read it (or don't), but I expect you will enjoy it if you do ... it's certainly better than reading articles.

Scholar Spotlights

As we close, we want to highlight some of the terrific work our members have published recently. Take a look and if you feel inspired to discuss their research or are interested in collaborating with them, reach out; that's what the NTRC is for. If you're not, then take a look anyways as we're trying to brag on our members!

Julene Paul



<https://www.uta.edu/academics/faculty/profile?user=julene.paul>

Paul, J., Mistur, E., Bhattacharjee, A., & Grant, A. (2026). Fracking for kids? Environmental injustices in proximity to fracking wells among Texas public schoolchildren. *Applied Geography*, 192, 104032.

Abstract

Via hydraulic fracturing, companies inject sand, water, and chemicals into the ground to extract natural gas and oil from shales. Fracking can impose health burdens on nearby communities, and some research suggests that racial minorities and low-income communities face greater exposure to fracking. Texas provides a unique case for studying the geographic distribution of fracking and environmental justice. While cities nationwide have banned fracking, the state's natural resource code preempts municipalities from doing so. Furthermore, unlike most U.S. regions where shales are located far from cities, many fracking sites are located in and around major population centers in Texas, including the Dallas-Fort Worth region.

To evaluate the burden of fracking in Texas, we examine levels of proximity to active sites among schoolchildren in 2025 and confirm these results with a spatial analysis. First, we find that 3.3% of Texas public schools are located within 1 km of an active fracking site, and 31% are located within 10 km. Using spatially weighted statistical modeling, we predict exposure to fracking wells for public non-charter schools located on gas shales. Among this subset, schools enrolling more non-Hispanic Black students are more likely to be located near active fracking wells, while Hispanic students and poverty have somewhat ambiguous relationships with fracking proximity. Upon controlling for other factors like population density, school level, and enrollment, schools with more Black and Hispanic students have greater exposure to fracking, while schools with more poor students have less exposure. Geographically Weighted Regression (GWR) suggests geographic variation across Texas.

Elizabeth Searing



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Grasse, N. J., Searing, E. A., & Phillips, S. D. (2026). Walking the Regulatory Line: The Effects of a Disbursement Quota on Foundations. *Public Administration Review*.

Abstract

Foundations exist to support charitable causes over an extended period, allowing investment returns to improve social conditions. In many countries, this is regulated by a required payout percentage each year. The existing research, overwhelmingly from the United States, has examined foundations' regulatory compliance under the static conditions of the longstanding rule of distribution of 5% of assets annually. Drawing on regulatory behavior theory, this research takes advantage of the rare opportunity presented by a decrease in the disbursement rate in Canada to determine whether foundations altered their behavior and assesses the factors associated with differential responses. This facilitates the assessment of whether a mandated disbursement quota functions as a floor, a norm, or is irrelevant in guiding payouts, which will assist practitioners and policymakers in assessing the policy relevance for foundation compliance or over-compliance.