



BACKYARD BASH

CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS
MAP & GUIDE
OCT 24—NOV 19, 2020

CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS



On a treasure map, “X” marks the spot, but if you could experience a bird’s-eye view of historic Marvin Grove, you would discover that it is a heart-shaped area marking the treasured green space at the heart of KU. Nestled behind the Spencer Museum of Art and stretching from Memorial Drive to Memorial Stadium, this wooded hollow takes on a nest-like quality on a campus-wide scale. It is a place of respite for all Jayhawks and migratory visitors alike, and as the Museum’s backyard, it is a site of celebration for the interplay of nature, culture, and the character of our community for our 5th Annual Backyard Bash.

This year’s Backyard Bash is anchored by the month-long installation *Conference of the Birds*, a series of 13 sculptural “nests” created by KU students, commissioned by the Museum, and situated throughout the Grove. The artists are graduate and undergraduate students representing architecture, physics, social welfare, and visual art.

Conference of the Birds borrows its name from a 12th-century poem by Farid ud-Din Attar in which a gathering of the world’s birds embark on a quest for a leader and spiritual truth to overcome the challenges of their world—many of which we face today. Different nests in the installation investigate themes of adaptation, shelter, sustainability, community care, and the human impact on our ecosphere. These ideas are also explored in the Museum’s exhibition *Audubon in the Anthropocene*.

This is your guide to embark on a quest for nests throughout the Grove. As the leaves fall, look up to spy nests created by inhabitants of the Grove and use this map to seek out and engage with their artistic counterparts.

1 NADIA AL-ANI / NEW AGE NATURE

New Age Nature draws on notions of the Anthropocene, a term proposed by scholars for our current geological period that is characterized by the impact of humans on our ecosphere. Al-Ani describes *New Age Nature* as “a nest at the end of its use, falling apart, back into nature.” Scraps of building materials are fitted together to form a broken circle that comments on our crisis of human shelter.

2 EMILY ALMLOFF / GIVE AND TAKE

A series of gently curved “ribs” rise from the ground like the skeletal remains of an ancient bird’s ribcage forming a cavity that doubles as a nest and community reflection space. Paper cranes and other origami birds made from recycled seed paper and imprinted with quotes and prompts are scattered across campus and the Grove to direct people to Almloff’s nest. She explains, “People are welcome to take these and plant them, but they can also give back to the project by hanging up their responses...These act as a skin to cover the bare ribs of the nest.”

3 KEVIN DUNNE / 95%

Rings of found rocks encircle data visualizations of three declining bird populations, telling their stories in stark terms. In the centuries since European contact, the whooping crane, North America’s tallest bird, has become endangered with a population decline of 95%. The population of the small and secretive black rail is estimated to have declined by 70%. The ruffed grouse, known for its “drumming” display, has decreased in population by about 30%. Dunne describes the slices of nests as “made from various naturally harvested materials, including cattails, bulrushes, sedges, sticks, and leaves...The loose straw may be used by birds to create their own nests.”

4 JODI GORE / SCAVENGER’S NEST

Evoking the teardrop shape of weaverbird nests and honoring the use of local materials and handmade construction techniques of traditional Indigenous architecture, Gore invites visitors into a comforting and nurturing space built from locally sourced and scavenged materials. Gore describes her design as “a statement on sustainability and how we as Americans import so much of our building materials.”

5 MARGOT LOCKWOOD / ANTHROPOCENE NEST

Driven by the question “What would a bird’s nest look like if the main resource a bird has is human trash?,” Lockwood crafted a nest entirely of her own trash, as well as litter she collected along nature walks. Lockwood challenges us to imagine a world where trash is easier to come by than a twig or a blade of grass. As urbanization increases, Lockwood fears “that humanscapes will be more common than landscapes.”

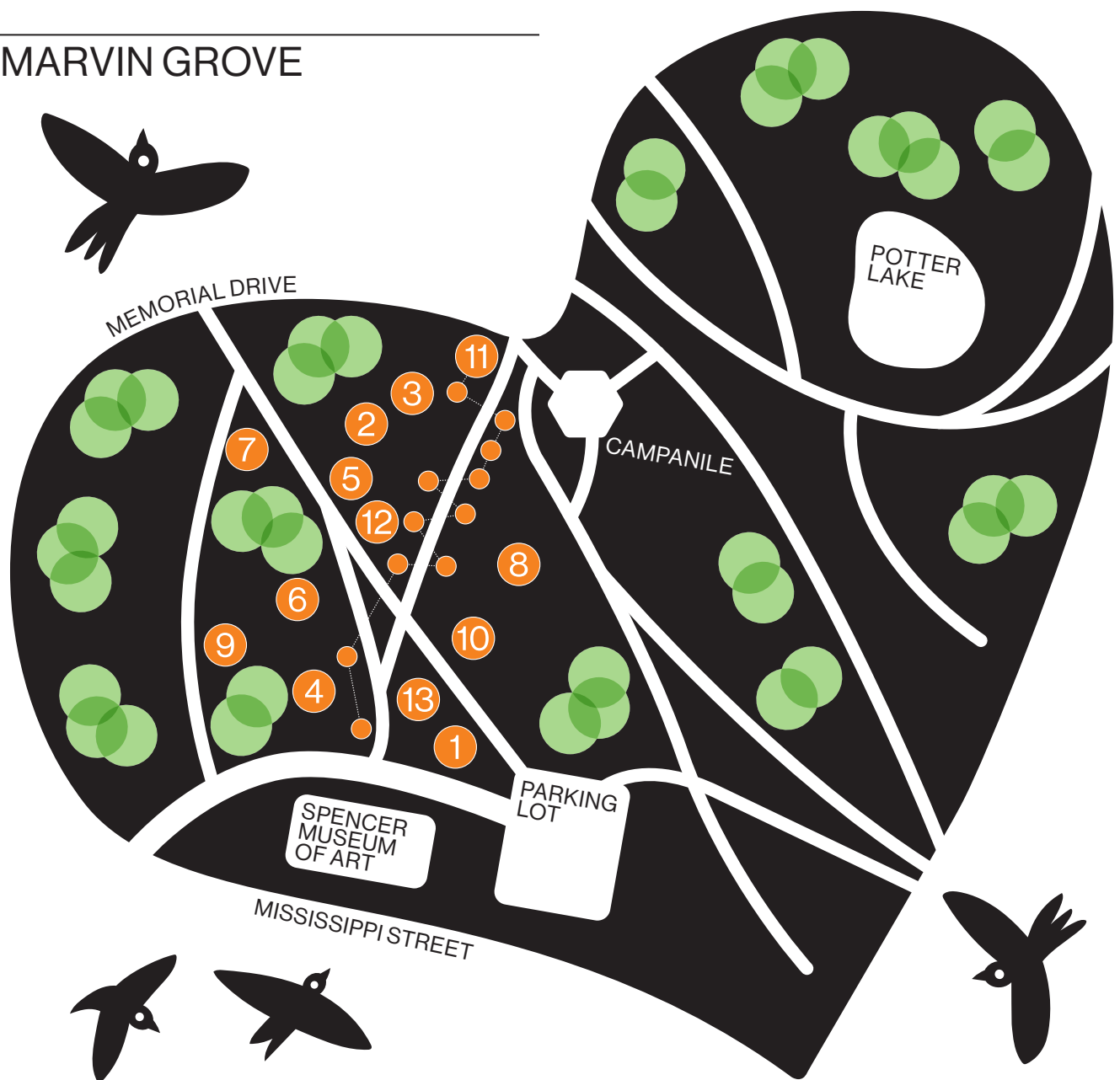
6 ALEX MARTIN / GAIJA’S LOOM

Invoking Gaia, the Greek name for the personification of Mother Nature, Martin’s design references the engineering of a weaverbird’s nest at a human scale. Layers of woven material flow between a series of posts, creating a web punctuated with small openings that Martin explains, “offer niches for birds to take refuge” and “read like sheet music, representing notes of birdsong.”

7 ARIANNA MCCUE / SLALOM RIBBON

Cascading down the slope of Marvin Grove, McCue’s shock of bright, shiny red fabric contrasts with its natural surroundings and weaves between the poles signifying how birds today have adapted to knitting together a dismaying mix of natural and human-made materials. It conjures, as McCue states, “the iconic image of a bird flying with a piece of red ribbon in its beak...while simultaneously symbolizing the ‘cut’ or wound that humans have made in their natural environment.”

MARVIN GROVE



8 SAM PHILLIPS / MOMENTARY FLOCK

Is the essential quality of a nest its physical structure or the sense of togetherness created among a group? Phillips’s *Momentary Flock* suspends time and reminds us of different ways we can create community. Rising from the ground as if taking flight, winged windcatchers respond to the breeze with an improvisational choreography and invite us to imagine ourselves momentarily as one of the flock, sharing, as Phillips states, “a sense of freedom and weightlessness.”

9 ANNIE ROUSE / TIED TOGETHER

Twin archways gracefully bound to one another create a threshold between two environments or frames of mind. Beneath the arches, one finds a liminal space, much like a fledgling’s last moments before leaving a nest mark a transitional moment. Rouse’s *Tied Together* takes its inspiration from the tiny tailor bird nest; curling a single leaf and stitching its edges together with spiderweb silk or plant fiber, it holds a cocoon of fine grass.

10 RACHEL SANDLE / RITUAL FOR NESTING

Where do our rituals originate and how do they relate to the ecology of our environment? Sandle’s interactive poetry experience draws on native birds’ nesting habits to invite visitors to perform a guided ritual in the Grove. By recording your sequence of actions as a poem, prose, drawing, or by other means and sharing it with Sandle through a web link, a communal database or conceptual nest of ideas emerges. Sandle describes the result as “a collaborative exercise in imagining and creating and an open exchange of both creative and intimate thought relating to shelter.”

11 MADISON SCHAEFER / A POEM IN THE GROVE

Twelve rings of split logs, each inscribed with a line from Sara Teasdale’s 1918 poem “There Will Come Soft Rains,” encircle twelve trees from the Campanile to the Spencer Museum. Birdseed scattered within brings wildlife into the work. Experiencing it as a whole engages you in a rhythm of observation, reading, and movement. Schaefer prioritized sustainability, explaining “one of my primary focuses was to create a sustainable design, not impeding on nature but to make it of nature, using simply bird seed that will be consumed and wood which can be reused and repurposed.”

12 MEGAN STONESTREET / BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Stonestreet’s papier-mâché albatross is a messenger from the seas, carrying with it a dire warning about plastic pollution and its impact on seabirds. Stonestreet explains, “As the weather erodes the papier-mâché of the bird, its wire frame will begin to show, revealing a stomach made out of recycled window screen filled with bits of plastic trash.” The albatross skims the ocean surface for food, picking up plastics it cannot digest. With 90% of the world’s seabirds consuming plastic today, little room is left for nutritious food, resulting in death from starvation on a massive scale.

13 KIRSTEN TAYLOR / WHERE WILL THE SOFT RAINS FALL

Raw, unfired clay betrays an inner structure mimicking barbed wire, offering, as Taylor suggests, “a meditation on the lost habitat of grassland nesting birds and the way humans claim land for their own uses, unconcerned for the other life that also depends on the land.” The nest references the state bird of Kansas, the Western meadowlark, and the red clay recalls the Dust Bowl and loss of fertile soil. As the clay dries, cracks, or dissolves after rain, the barbed wire emerges.

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Visit our website to learn more about this year's Backyard Bash and download a digital version of this guide. Check the website and our social media for hints about free activities and other surprises appearing in the installation throughout the month.

Conference of the Creatives

Sunday, November 8, 2PM

Join us for an informal conversation with the student artists featured in *Conference of the Birds* about their nest designs. Details are on the Museum's website.

Backyard Bash: Conference of the Birds is generously supported by The Beach-Edwards Family Foundation, Steve Sears, and the Linda Inman Bailey Exhibitions Fund. Additional programming support is provided by KU Student Senate.

