



The Chachalaca

VOLUME 7 NUMBER 2 30 JUNE 2010

In this Issue

President's Message <i>Virginia Vineyard</i>	2
Chapter Milestones <i>Frank Wiseman</i>	3
First Texas Coastal Naturalists Certified <i>Tony Reisinger</i>	4
Turtle Hatchling Release <i>Mary Ann Tous</i>	5
Master Naturalists in Mexico Cloud Forest <i>David Benn</i>	6
Ramsey Park Update <i>Frank Wiseman</i>	7
Annual Nightjar Survey <i>Sharon Slagle</i>	9
Junior Naturalists on Earth Day <i>Peggy Knopp</i>	11
Backyard Habitat <i>John Thaxter</i>	12

RGV TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

THIS CHAPTER IS AN AFFILIATE OF THE TEXAS MASTER NATURALIST PROGRAM JOINTLY SPONSORED BY TEXAS AGRILIFE EXTENSION AND THE TEXAS PARKS & WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT.

Officers

President	Virginia Vineyard
1st Vice President	Eileen Mattei
2nd Vice President	Ed Tamayo
Secretary	Lupita Escobar
Recording Secretary	Mary Bindner
Treasurer	Carol Hubing
Past President	Frank Wiseman

Sponsor

Texas AgriLife Extension	Tony Reisinger
---------------------------------	-----------------------

Standing Committee Chairs

Education	John Thaxter
Communications	Jackie Field, Jr.
Host	Vacant
Web Master	Jimmy Paz
Historian	Patti Pitcock
	Sidney Beckwith

Newsletter

Sharon Slagle
Karen Fossom
Marylou Davis
John Thaxter



President's Message

by Virginia Vineyard

Hello, All,

When I left Colorado last week, it had warmed up to 37 degrees, and the Rio Grande River tumbled swiftly over rocks as it drained from the mountains. Now back in the Valley, it's heat, humidity, and a threatening hurricane. But it's also home, friends, family, and the best group of volunteer naturalists to be found anywhere. The following articles show just some of the work being done by chapter members. A core of individuals dedicated to saving, restoring, and maintaining habitats is even more critical now. The threat of an active hurricane season and the loss of habitat due to spreading oil (who knows where it will end up this winter) make what Master Naturalists do so very important.

Chapter volunteers keep our organization functioning at all levels, not only in the field but also as officers, committee chairs, committee members, educators, and anywhere needed. Thanks to Cathy, Antoinette, and Herman Budd, and to Karen Fossom for all you've done for the chapter. And, also, thanks to their replacements. John Thaxter is the new Education Chair (Cathy), Patti Pitcock and Sidney Beckwith are the Historians (Antoinette), and Sharon Slagle is now editor of the Chachalaca (Karen Fossom). Host Chair (Herman) is still vacant.

To all you Master Naturalists and your families, I wish you the best.

Virginia

Chapter Milestones

by Frank Wiseman

The June 2010 general meeting featured recognition of accomplishments by some of our members.



Sam Ortiz, receiving his State TMN Certification.



Ninfa Espitia accepting Class of 2010 Training Completion Certificates for herself and Kelly Cohen.



Milestone pins for Larry and Cheri Horkman (250 hrs), Jean Burgoine (100 hrs), Bill Horton (250 hrs).



Coastal Naturalist certification pins for completion of 3 different training sessions: Back -- John Tierney, Karen Fossum, Tim Bradshaw, Dave Robson, Antoinette Budd, Patti Pitcock, Sam Ortiz, Terry Weymouth. Front -- Wendie Allstot, Mary Ann Tous, Lupita Escobar, Judy Weymouth.

First Texas Coastal Naturalists Certified

by Tony Reisinger

June 8, 2010, marked a historic milestone for coastal South Texas. Twelve of 18 certified Texas coastal naturalists received pins from chapter Vice President Ed Tamayo designating them as coastal naturalists.

Coastal naturalists are certified in at least three first responses for coastal emergencies, and they have a choice of training in hazardous algal blooms, sea turtle cold stun events, oiled birds, marine mammal rescue, and sea turtle beach patrol.

The Texas Coastal Naturalist Program is sponsored by the Rio Grande Valley Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists, but you do not have to be a master naturalist to participate. Don Hockaday, with the University of Texas Pan American Coastal Studies Laboratory on South Padre Island, first conceived the idea several years ago and, together with the help of our chapter, it has become a model for Texas and the Gulf Coast.

Jeff George at Sea Turtle Inc., who gave a class in cold stun response for sea turtles, praises the program saying we have long needed trained volunteers to respond to coastal emergencies such as sea turtle strandings after cold weather events.

Dr. Lisa Campbell an oceanographer at Texas A&M University, conducted a hazardous algal bloom class for the program and is excited to have an expanded volunteer base on the coast to identify, collect, and count hazardous algae during blooms.

Future training will include oiled bird workshops in conjunction with Dr. Tom De Maar at Gladys Porter Zoo, possible HAZWOPER (**H**azardous **W**aste **O**perations and **E**mergency **R**esponse) training (if we can procure a sponsor to absorb the cost) and repeats of hazardous algal bloom, sea turtle, and marine mammal training.

We have designed certificates and should have them ready by the next general meeting so plan to be there.

Congratulations to all of our new Texas Coastal Naturalists, and may you have a busy and productive year in your new and historic role. ♦



Designed by Cathy Budd, the Texas Coastal Naturalist pins are in the shape of Texas with a dolphin representing the letter "C" for Coastal.



Sea turtle hatchlings heading out to sea at South Padre Island on Father's Day 2010.

Turtle Hatchling Release

by Mary Ann Tous

The year's first hatchling release occurred on Father's Day, no less, sending 81 babies out to sea. More releases are scheduled: check <http://www.seaturtleinc.org/Nesting%20Season.htm> for more information. Pictured with me, below, is Wendie Allstot, all decked out on her ATV patrol. A veteran patroller, Wendie is participating in her 4th year. ♦



Master Naturalists in Mexico Cloud Forest

by David Benn

Rio Grande Valley Master Naturalists Beth Wargo, Sid Beckworth, Michelle and Dave Robson, John Tierney, and Wendie Allstot were part of a group of ten adventurers from as far away as New York City who traveled to the cloud forest of Northern Mexico this past January. The group, led by Master Naturalists David Benn and Jimmy Paz, joined with Gorgas Science Foundation staff to spend four days and nights at the foundation's biological research station, Rancho Del Cielo, located in the heart of the El Cielo Biosphere, and two nights at Ranch Cielito, its site on the Rio Sabinas in the tropical lowlands adjacent to the biosphere.

The trip began in Brownsville where we met in the early morning of January 3, 2010, to load vehicles. Everyone was on time, and our three-vehicle convoy was soon crossing the Rio Grande River. After a brief stop at Mexican immigration and customs, we were quickly south of Matamoros and well on our way. Early afternoon found us south of the Tropic of Cancer in the small foot-hill village of Gomez Farias. Here we transferred from our vehicles into rugged, high-clearance trucks for the 6-mile, two-hour trip up the mountains to the Ranch.

Rancho del Cielo is located at about 3,700 ft. elevation on the eastern front of the Sierra Madre Oriental in southwestern Tamaulipas, Mexico. Under the direction of a non-profit organization, the ranch is operated as a biological field station by Gorgas Science Society of Texas Southmost College, Brownsville, Texas, for education and research in natural history. The project is dedicated to the preservation of America's northernmost tropical cloud forest, in which it is ideally situated.

The designation "ranch" may be misleading. Rancho del Cielo is a small acreage within the oak/sweet gum forest. The clearing is just large enough to accommodate a small orchard, flower gardens, and a few small buildings. Beyond the clearing the forest reaches in all directions, laced by a few old lumbering roads and primitive trails. The cabins at the ranch are rustic but comfortable. Each has an indoor bath with hot water and wonderful views of the forest.

Rancho Cielito is a compound of three homes located directly on the banks of the crystal clear Rio Sabinas, just a few miles below the river's headwaters. It is several miles from the nearest pavement and is surrounded by tropical deciduous forest. The river banks are lined with large mature Montezuma Bald Cypress.

Though we experienced some cold January days, one day in particular offered plenty of proof that we were in a cloud forest. That day the cloud was so thick it was often difficult to make out details 30 feet away. While not ideal for birding or hiking, thick cloud moving through the forest seems to give it a mystical feel that I always enjoy.

Days at the Ranch were taken up with bird walks on the trails around the Ranch, a hike to the site of a former settlement known as San Pablo, and early morning hikes to the overlook, a small wooden deck perched on the side of the mountain looking east out over the flat coastal plain. It is a favorite place for watching the sunrise.

One rare sunny day we loaded up the trucks and traveled farther and higher into the mountains to La Perra, the former location of a saw mill. In the high oak and pine forest we were lucky enough to see a small flock of the hard-to-find Maroon-fronted Parrots. Other highlights included Crested Guans, Mexican Jays, Golden-browed Warblers, and Crescent-chested Warblers. ♦

Ramsey Park Update

by Frank Wiseman

Ramsey Park has enjoyed the spring rains this year. Our Training Class of 2010 had a nice field trip at the end of March, and, I hope, they learned a lot about our Valley's native plants. The group that attended the wildflower field trip north of Raymondville certainly learned more about our native Texas wildflowers. On our tour of Ramsey we saw many of our local wild flowers along the trails and most of our locally blooming cacti were starting to blossom.



Horse Crippler Cactus (*Echinocactus texensis*)



Pin Cushion Cactus (*Mammillaria heyderi*)

David Junkin did an excellent job of routing out eleven new gardens pot signs for us. We owe him a big Thank You. We have always been proud of the excellent signage work David does not only for Ramsey Park but

several other parks as well. Dick Roesler and Frank Wiseman managed to successfully mount the signs on metal legs and “plant” them in the garden spots, so now when you stroll through the park you can admire some of our Naturalists’ handiwork for maintaining what we have strived to accomplish over the past eight years.



David Junkin hard at work on signs



One of the new Ramsey Park signs

All of the signs are located on the Caliche Loop. When you stop by at the front entrance garden you will find one in that area that says Hidden Garden. Ginger Byram has been faithfully taking care of this area mostly by herself although several

members fill in for her when she is away or busy elsewhere. We have to thank Diann Ballesteros, Dick, and Frank for helping a little there to keep things trimmed and ship shape. First impressions of the park mean a lot to our chapter and to the visitors. Our volunteers hear compliments from total strangers about how nice they think our park is. We are proud to say that we have more native plants in Ramsey than any other park in the Valley area.

Others of our new 2010 training class who deserve some credit for their hard work are Susan Kerens, Ninfa Espitia, and Kelly Cohen. Some of our “older” members who have given of their time are Drew Bennie, Sister Sharon Horace, Ginger Byram, Linda Butcher, Christina Mild, Bill Horton, and Robert Archer. Ramsey Park owes a lot of its beauty to our TMN members who diligently offer their time and efforts to see that our chapter spreads the word about the use of our Valley’s native plants.

With the new chain saw and weed eater that the chapter donated to our group, we have been working hard at trimming limbs of trees that we would not have been able to do without the saw. These necessary tools are now in the care of Bill Horton who seems to be our expert chain sawer in the group. Bill and Dick both have done a lot of the weed eating along many of the trails and paths in the park. Many of the sawed off logs are put to good use as border edging for our garden spots. Thanks TMN members for donating equipment that is put to very good use.

By the reports we hear, this summer appears to be another hot one. So our volunteers would appreciate any other TMN members, especially Harlingen area members, to come out and help us water plants that need a little drink to survive over the summer. This job is easy and not back-breaking work for those in need of volunteer hours. ♦



Ladyfinger Cactus (*Echinocereus pentalophus*)

Annual Nightjar Survey

by Sharon Slagle

The University of William and Mary's Center for Conservation Biology coordinates an annual survey of nightjars to collect information about distribution of these birds and to determine the stability of the populations. Started in 2007, the survey now includes data gathered in 38 states; results are posted on the University's web site: <http://www.ccb-wm.org/nightjar/Results.htm>

Nightjars are odd-looking birds, with beaks that open wide to catch insects, and they are mostly active in the late evening and early morning or at night. They are more easily heard than seen, and for the survey, volunteers count all the nightjars they hear during 6-minute periods at ten points along a preset route. Valley routes are special because one of our nightjars, the common pauraque, is found within the United States only in south Texas.

The survey began to include information from Texas in 2008, and this year Rick and I completed our third survey under an almost full moon in late May. We heard a common pauraque and numerous common nighthawks, mostly around fields under irrigation. The survey is a great excuse to get outside in the full moonlight, and if you are interested in participating, see <http://www.ccb-wm.org/nightjar/mapping.htm> ♦

Junior Naturalists on Earth Day

by Peggy Knopp

The junior master naturalist class in the Cameron Park area of Brownsville celebrated Earth Day by planting palm trees. Dodie Greaney taught hands-on classes about plants and seeds. Under Sister Sharon Horace's leadership and guidance they learned how to plant trees. The Nature Conservancy in Brownsville donated sabal palm trees encased in biodegradable plant bands. Before taking their individual trees home, the class members planted a sabal palm on the grounds of the Proyecto Juan Diego, where the classes are held. ♦



Sister Sharon Horace distributing trees to Junior Naturalists.

Backyard Habitat

John Thaxter

Almost every place I've lived, I've had a garden filled with flowers, vegetables, and herbs. When I went through Master Naturalist training last year, I began making plans to make our yard a 'Texas Wildscapes Certified Backyard Habitat'. That involves planting or preserving enough native plants to make up at least fifty percent of the total in the landscape.

At first that seemed like a simple thing to do. As I gathered plant lists and figured out what kind of space each would need, things began to get complicated. One of the four requirements for a backyard habitat is space -- that was fixed by the size of our lot. Another requirement is shelter -- the dense growth and sharp spines, thorns, burrs and barbs of many native plants help provide that. Food comes from the plants and is supplemented by feeders with seeds, fruit, and nectar solutions. For water we have bird baths, a fountain and plans for a small water pond with circulating flow.

One of the first things my wife, Sue, does when we have moved is to start beautifying the yard. Most plants already in place weren't natives; some would have to go. Another consideration was that the grass was well-tended St Augustine. We began to work around the flower beds, expanding most into the lawn area. We put a ring of edging around the trees and planted those areas to flowering plants. We replaced the hedge in front of the porch with Tamaulipan Fiddlewood. The large trees are two live oaks and a Rio Grande ash. On the other side are two orange and two grapefruit trees.

In back is a raised bed for vegetables and herbs. In front on one side is a butterfly garden with lantanas, mist flower, salvia, copper canyon daisy, and ruellia as natives. There are also hibiscus, fennel, basil, an antique rose, amaryllis and petunias. Also in front is a jasmine shrub with mist flower and frog fruit planted underneath. At the other side in front and down the side is a bed with esperanza, red bird, blue plumbago, yarrow, parsley, and a bay tree, all mixed with Mexican trixis, heartleaf hibiscus, silene, lion's ear, chili piquin, Mexican milkweed, coat buttons, white plumbago, crucita, and Drummond's Turks cap. The bed around the Rio Grande ash has bear's breeches, (acanthus) and gazanias. Back by the two oaks are African iris, canna lilies and caladium, with pigeon berry, whit brush, cork-stemmed passion vine, and yellow passion vine.

As we prepared each bed we amended the soil with sand and compost. We started getting compost from the McAllen composting facility more than two years ago; it sells three grades of compost and a couple of varieties of mulch. Any time we disturb the soil in a bed, we add more compost to the mix. In addition we spread about a half inch of compost over the lawn a couple of times a year.

Here (next page) are some before and after photos of some areas of the yard. It is still a work in progress, but we regularly see hummingbirds, doves, woodpeckers, kiskadees, green parakeets, red-crowned parrots, and lately a couple of chachalacas. The butterfly gardens have attracted a variety of butterflies, bees, spiders and other insects. Last fall we had so many queen butterflies on the mist flower and Mexican milkweed that we couldn't count them. ♦



John and Sue's butterfly garden – Before



John and Sue's butterfly garden -- After



John and Sue's front patio garden – Before



John and Sue's front patio garden -- After



John and Sue's side patio garden -- Before



John and Sue's side patio garden -- After

