



The Chachalaca

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RGV TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

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President's Message

by Virginia Vineyard

Hello, All,

I hope this issue finds all of you healthy, happy, and looking forward to a new year. Many of you have worked to help our partners with your selfless spirit of volunteerism. Your time is invaluable, and your efforts, no matter how great or small, are appreciated.

2012 will see the expansion of training classes to the Upper Valley in an effort to make it easier for interested individuals to participate. Classes will be held in both San Benito and Mission. We hope the chapter will continue to grow with additional opportunities for all.

And a big thanks to all who will serve as an officer, committee chair, and board member for 2012.

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Thank you.

Virginia

The Dorothy Greaney Butterfly Garden

by Peggy Knopp

Sabal Palm Sanctuary is developing a butterfly garden to be named the Dorothy Greaney Butterfly Garden. Dodie, one of our master naturalists, is posing by the display announcement at the Sabal Palm Sanctuary Rabb House Visitor Center on December 4th. She continues to teach Birding 101 there. ♦



Photo by Jimmy Paz

Sabal Palms Sanctuary Live Video

by Jimmy Paz

Live, streaming video of the wonders of activity at the bird feeder of Sabal Palms Sanctuary is now available on the internet during business hours of the refuge. See <http://www.ustream.tv/channel-popup/sabal-palm-sanctuary>

The feeder camera is financed by our chapter! ♦

New Red Tide Rangers

In collaboration with Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, the United States Fish and Wildlife Department, and the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center, the UTPA Coastal Studies Laboratory offered a workshop in December to train volunteers to monitor coastal waters for red tide, an algal bloom that can threaten

marine life. For more information, see
http://www.utpa.edu/news/index.cfm?newsid=4483&utm_source=broncnnotes&utm_me



Volunteering as a Red Tide Ranger

by Jean Pettit

As part of my volunteer endeavors as a Texas Master Naturalist and a desire to be a Coastal Naturalist, I attended a workshop at the UTPA Coastal Studies Laboratory in July 2011 led by Tony Reisinger. Tony spoke about the history of red tide, theory of its causes and effects on fish, humans and other mammals. During the training I was able to observe actual specimens of the red tide organism, *Karenia brevis*.

Then in September red tide was spotted in the ship channel and other isolated areas. After attending a coastal ecology field trip led by Dr. Rick Kline in mid-October, I decided it was time to roll up the sleeves and get involved. Tony suggested I meet with Brigette Goza, Research Assistant and top Red Tide Ranger at the Coastal Studies Lab for more advanced training.

Each morning I labeled test tubes with date and site location and then headed out to collect six to eight water samples. At each location I filled out a "Bloom Monitoring Field Sheet" with specific observations regarding wind direction, water color, wave height, cloud cover, and details of any dead fish that were evident. Low tide posed its challenges and I had to get creative about my body positioning so that I would not have to lay down in bird droppings to reach deep enough into the water. The north jetties could be slippery with waves crashing against the granite blocks, and collecting samples from the surf wearing waders was one of the more fun experiences. Along the way I was able to meet numerous people who were curious about what I was doing. It was fun explaining my volunteer work and helping to educate the public about red tide. Every day was different, which kept my interest and enthusiasm from waning.

Staining the water samples and counting the cells was more tedious. I wasn't sure which was more difficult – the days when the cell count was extraordinarily high or when it was so low you had to count the entire slide. Either way demanded time and patience. After counting, labeling, and storing the samples, cleaning the slides and completing the Monitoring Field Sheets, I faxed the data to the head office in Corpus Christi.

Due to my other volunteer activities, I eventually had to reduce my hours at the Lab, and Joyce and Steve Fowler (RGVTMN) are now collecting water samples on a daily basis. Because of the unpredictability of red tide, time for collecting, monitoring, testing and reporting is not budgeted into the regular work day of the laboratory staff. In a red tide bloom, volunteer effort helps lab staff avoid getting behind in their other professional responsibilities and keeps us connected to our environment and our community.



Teacher workshop: Brigitte Goza (center back) and Pam Cornett (right).

Brigitte Goza heads the Coastal Studies Lab's Educational Outreach Programs, which include teacher workshops and student field trips. Pam Cornett (RGVTMN) and I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to assist Brigitte with shark dissections, red tide training, touch tank talks, and field trips to the SPI Birding and Nature Center and Laguna Atascosa Wildlife Refuge. Pam is also in the process of reorganizing their extensive shell collection. ♦

Note on January 2012 RGVCTMN Meeting

by David Benn

The January 2012 general meeting will serve as the chapter recertification meeting and annual social. There will not be a speaker and advanced training hours will not be earned. Members are requested to bring a covered dish/finger food to the meeting. The chapter will provide plates, utensils, ice and beverages. ♦

Volunteering at the Coastal Studies Laboratory

by Steve Fowler

Joyce Fowler has volunteered to assist the Coastal Studies Lab by monitoring the red tide in Laguna Madre. After some training by Jean Pettit, Joyce has taken over the sampling of several sites in Laguna Madre. She checks the water salinity and temperature, and she counts of red tide cells under a microscope. This information is assembled by the Lab for monitoring the red tide in our area. Additional volunteers are always needed for this important work! ♦



Yardbirds

by Marylou Davis

Here are some photos I took in late November in my Brownsville yard. The cardinal was a surprise, the first time I've seen one here in more than 20 years. ♦



Northern Cardinal on a brush pile.



Couch's Kingbird on an ash tree.

SPI Convention Center Sighting

by Lou Osborne

Here's a photo I took in late November at the South Padre Island Convention Center. It's unusual to see both the butterfly and the caterpillar together. ♦



Queen butterfly with caterpillar.

South Texas' Christmas Cactus

by Frank Wiseman

If you happen to be out with your camera at this time of the year in one of our Valley's native parks, remember to look for—not stumble upon—our local Tasajillo Cactus. The scientific name for this plant is *Opuntia leptocaulis*, but it bears many common names, including Christmas cholla, pencil joint cholla, holycross cholla, diamond cactus, and darning needle cactus. In Mexico, from the Indians who spoke Nahuatl, it was named *tzazahuistli*. One of our local common names is Jumping Cactus because it seems to want to jump right at you with its spiny tentacles.

At this time of the year we call it Christmas cactus because of its red fruit. It blooms in the spring, some summer, and some fall blooms may appear. Watch for blooms in the late afternoon. The flowers are radial and less than an inch across, and they vary from greenish to yellow in color. The leaves are almost non-existent for most of the year, making the plant harder to see in the brushy parts of our trails. The stems are cylindrical and are either erect or falling over in all directions. The cactus can grow

up into the shrubs or along tree trunks to gain support. Its spines are long and they hurt when you accidentally hit a stem without looking.



These large clumps of cactus can be quite attractive and, at first thought, you might think of propagating the plant into your own landscape. However, it tends to spread, and once established it is very difficult to make disappear where not wanted. Its fruit is beneficial to our wildlife, like bobwhite quail and wild turkey and some smaller mammals. White-tailed deer also eat the joints as well as the fruit.

It mostly grows in sunny areas but will grow in the shady spots, too. It stores water very well and uses a type of photosynthesis called *crassulacean acid metabolism* that allows it to make efficient use of available water. It can be propagated by either seed or cuttings. Historically, Native Americans gathered the fruits and ate them raw or cooked them into a jam. It is said that the Apache tribes mixed the crushed fruits with a beverage to produce narcotic effects.

However you see uses for the cactus, just remember that it is in our parks and may be blooming where you travel while birding or just out for a stroll one day over the Christmas time holiday period. Drag your friend and a camera along with you. ♦



Goodbye RGVCTMN!

by Cheri and Larry Horkman

We will be moving away from the Valley in January and want to say goodbye to everyone. We went through the Texas Master Naturalist program in 2009 and from there became involved in one of the most amazing volunteer opportunities around: we had the pleasure of assisting bird banders Mark Conway and William Clark with their banding projects and research. As novice birders we have had the joy of learning from Mark and Bill, and each time we held a bird in our hands we were filled with awe at each creature's beauty and perfection. Mark was especially wonderful and a dear friend, and we will miss our weekends with him very, very much. We became involved in banding because of TMN, and we will be forever grateful for the doors that TMN opened for us. It has been a pleasure knowing everyone associated with such a fine organization. Thanks especially to Frank and Cathy, who were the hard-working leaders of our 2009 class. Here are some pictures from our experiences over the past 3 years. If any member is interested, I know Mark is looking for volunteers. It is hard work but very rewarding! ♦



Cheri and a Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk, banded with William Clark.



Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk, banded with W. Clark.



An angry hawk.



Cooper's Hawk that flew into the mist net when we were banding with Mark Conway.



Red-tailed Hawk.



A magnificent Red-tailed Hawk.



Larry holding a White-tailed Hawk. The dirty tail feathers are from hunting burned sugar cane fields for carrion. The beautiful white feathers are covered in ash.



Close-up of a Green Jay just before Cheri released him.



Hatch-year Eastern Screech Owl, caught while banding with Mark.



Groove-billed Ani, one of Cheri's favorite birds.



Inca Dove.



Female Ladderback Woodpecker.



Cheri with White-tailed Hawk.

Troy Jingles

by Terry Weymouth

What a strange name for a dolphin! But then Troy is not just any dolphin. Troy is a 3 year old, 7-ft long, male, Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphin who beached himself near access #6 on South Padre Island on the morning of Dec 21st. He was found and taken to the UTPA Coastal Studies Lab. When Judy and I arrived, blood work was being analyzed but the results had not yet been confirmed. It was known that he had some kind of an infection and that while he was in shallow water he had been attacked by sharks. His body was covered with lesions, but fortunately none of them were life-threatening. However, he was sick, weak, and unable to defend himself. He was even unable to stay afloat. He would have drowned without intervention to keep him afloat. The call went out for volunteers urgently needed to assist in his care.

Judy and I had each completed the Coastal Naturalist TMN training, and we called the lab to volunteer. They needed help for two 1-hour shifts, 3–4 am and 6–7 am. We agreed to be there by 2:30 am and to bring swimsuits and towels. When we arrived we were issued wetsuits and briefed on the protocol.

The protocol was familiar to us because we had attended a Dolphin Rescue training session. We appreciated a review of the instructions, but there is nothing like actually performing them. In addition to the wetsuits, we wore surgical gloves, masks, and face shields. Getting into a 4-ft deep tank of 65-degree water gets the heart beating almost as fast as the first moments of holding this fabulous creature. He was very

weak and unable to swim on his own but docile, and our task was to keep him afloat so that he wouldn't drown. Judy supported his nostrum (nose) and dipped his head under water each time he breathed. I supported him from under his mid-section just behind the dorsal fin and kept his tail flukes under water so that he could pump his tail to help swim if he had the strength. I had expected his skin to be rough but was surprised at how slick it felt. For an hour we walked slowly around the perimeter of the tank. Judy talked quietly to him and frequently he squealed or clicked back at her. On my end he pumped his tail occasionally but was generally motionless.

At the end of the hour, the next pair of volunteers entered the tank and began their own unforgettable adventure while we hurried to the warm showers and then waited to repeat the experience at the 6 am shift. By late afternoon on Dec 22nd a truck arrived from the Texas Marine Mammal Stranding Network Headquarters in Corpus Christie with TMMSN Biologists and staff from the Texas State Aquarium. After examining Troy and the results of his blood work, they decided that the infection was controllable and that he was strong enough to be moved to Corpus Christi where he will be cared for at either the TMMSN facility or the Aquarium.

Judy and I were impressed by how well the TMMSN dolphin rescue training prepared us for this experience and how comfortable we felt knowing what to expect and what to do. Hearing the Coastal Lab staff tell us essentially the same things we had learned earlier made us feel confident that we were helping a knowledgeable and caring cadre rescue and care for this beautiful dolphin. It was very rewarding to be a small but vital link in the chain of care for one of the world's truly special creatures. This was a volunteer experience we will never forget. ♦



Terry and Judy Weymouth with Troy.

