



# The Chachalaca

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## 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

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## **President's Message**

*by Virginia Vineyard*

Hello All,

I'm just taking a minute here to give all of you a great big THANK YOU for the privilege of serving as your chapter president for the past three and a half years. When I became a master naturalist in 2008, I knew I wanted to help in some administrative capacity but had no intentions of serving as president. Well, with some gentle prodding from my mentor, Frank Wiseman, I agreed, and I'm so glad I did. I have been a member of other service organizations, but none of them provides the kinds of opportunities for environmental volunteerism that the TMN program does. And as we all know, volunteering is not only beneficial to those entities where we work, but also to the hearts and souls of those who volunteer. I now look forward to supporting the new officers and the chapter from the audience side of the room!

I especially want to thank all the board members, committee chairs, committee members, and officers, past and present, who have given their time to take care of chapter business. Thanks to Javier de Leon at Bentsen State Park for helping with the Upper Valley RGVCTMN education group. And finally, thank you to Tony Reisinger, TMN advisor. Tony, you have been unfailingly and cheerfully supportive of me and the chapter and your efforts are truly appreciated.

Goodbye and Thank You all so very much.

Virginia

## RGVCTMN Moments and Milestones

*Photos by Wendie Allstot*

### General Meeting on October 9, 2012:



Marilu Trevino Alf and Alicia Cavazos receiving pin for 100 volunteer hours from Virginia Vineyard



Carol Dolan and Nan Persinger receiving pin for 250 volunteer hours from Virginia



Carolyn Cardile receiving pin for 500 volunteer hours from Virginia



Marci Fuller speaking on RGV Birding Festival

**General Meeting on November 13, 2012:**



Jackie Field, Jr., and Carol Hubing selling raffle tickets



Omar Landeros, Jolaine Lanehart, Veronica Guzman, and Terry Weymouth buying and selling TMN merchandise



Judy Weymouth receiving pin for 150 volunteer hours from Virginia



Adrian Ramos receiving pin for 100 volunteer hours from Virginia



Omar Landerson receiving State TMN certification from Virginia



Mary Renk and Ronald Renk receiving State TMN certification from Tony Reisinger





Maria Bonnin receiving pin for 500 volunteer hours from Virginia



Ken King, speaker on native plants, holding a copy of his book, *Plants of Deep South Texas* ♦

### General Meeting on December 11, 2012:



Meeting attendees



Joyce Fowler receiving pin for 1,000 hours from Virginia



Monica Barrera receiving TMN certification from Virginia



Sally Merrill receiving TMN certification from Virginia



Kathy Tonn and Carol Ann Schwartz receiving TMN certification from Virginia



Gloria Nelson receiving TMN certification from Virginia



Javier de Leon, new TPWD chapter advisor for RGVCTMN, with David Benn, Jade Rutledge, Monica Barrera, and Tom Butler



RGVCTMN Officers-Elect: Heidi Linnemann (Secretary), Jim Navjar (Treasurer), Alicia Cavazos (President), Cristela Wise (2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President)



Jade Rutledge, Volunteer Coordinator at Resaca de la Palma State Park ♦



Karla Dunlarp, Texas Sea Grant Program



John Yochum, presenter on dragonflies

## New Meaning for the Day of the Dead

by Mary Thorne



Día de los Muertos is a Mexican holiday on November 1<sup>st</sup> that celebrates friends and family members who have died. It coincides with the annual migration of billions of monarch butterflies to their winter residence in the mountains of central Mexico. Traditionally, the monarchs are imagined to be the souls of the dead returning to earth. This year the Day of the Dead has a different meaning for me. I think of dead butterflies.

School kids are taught at an early age about the importance of habitat. Every living thing needs food and water for nourishment, shelter from weather and predators, and space. In order for a species to continue, its members must mate and exist in an environment where its offspring can mature.

Nature has an amazing capacity to adapt. All butterflies go through four stages of metamorphosis: egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, and butterfly. Each species of butterfly has different needs, or different habitats depending on where it lives. Monarch butterflies are unique. During the summer they drink nectar from flowers and lay their eggs on milkweed. The eggs hatch into caterpillars. The caterpillars grow quickly and within two weeks they have finished growing and they change into chrysalises. After another two weeks, butterflies emerge from the chrysalises, ready to mate and start the cycle over again.

The Monarch butterflies that emerge in the fall in North America cannot survive the freezing temperatures of winter. Instead, they have adapted to become able to fly thousands of miles to a different habitat. They spend their winters in the mountains of Mexico.

Monarchs heading south for the winter still need food and shelter. They get their energy by drinking nectar from many types of flowers during the day. At night they seek shelter by roosting in trees. Millions of Monarchs migrate south through Texas in late October.

In the spring the Monarchs begin the return trip north. Butterflies leaving Mexico will only travel as far as south Texas before they die. However, somehow they manage to find milkweed and lay their eggs before they die. Within a few weeks the new freshly emerging butterflies continue migrating north for the summer. The cycle repeats itself until fall, when once again the migration south begins.

It seems so simple. Give them food, shelter, and a place to raise their young, and they will continue as they have in the past, for thousands of years.

I am a bit like the monarch. I don't like winter so I migrate south, too. I came to the Rio Grande Valley because of butterflies. Our natural habitat provides a safe haven for migrating Monarchs and a home for many other species of butterflies. And it is warm – I like warm.

Because I like butterflies, I planted many butterfly plants in my yard. Most of the plants I used are considered native plants: they occur naturally in this region. Native plants create a perfect habitat for native butterflies because they survive in the hot dry climate of the region.

My own return to the valley this year coincided with the monarch migration. Eagerly I returned to my garden anticipating the sight of hundreds of butterflies in all shapes and sizes gracefully floating around the plants of my garden. Before leaving in the spring I had carefully mulched around each plant to help them survive the summer. Mulch helps keep moisture in the soil and prevents weeds from popping up in unwanted places. I had even taken a class at Quinta Mazatlan in McAllen, and I proudly display my Backyard Habitat sign in my garden.

However, there were no butterflies in my garden when I returned, just mulch. No habitat. No butterflies.

What has happened in my yard is nothing new; it happens everywhere. Why? Maybe the habitat was destroyed because someone wanted to cement in a new drive way. Maybe someone cut down the tree because they thought they were too messy. Maybe someone sprayed insecticide to get rid of bugs. Maybe someone sprayed herbicide to get rid of weeds. Maybe someone just thought the flowers weren't pretty enough.

It doesn't really matter why. What matters is that it happens.

So I am mourning the loss of a habitat, which could extrapolate to mean the loss of a butterfly species, which could eventually alter a tradition that has existed for thousands of years. How can we celebrate the returning monarchs on the Day of the Dead if all the Monarchs are dead?

*Editor's note: For information on caterpillar care giving, see Mary's website at <http://www.caterpillarcaregiver.com/>. ♦*



## The Bi-National Owls of El Jardin

*by Kamala Platt*



According to the men who hold vigil  
over the sad wall-building in Hope Park,  
there are three white owls that live in Hotel El Jardín  
fly out predawn to hunt along the river;  
I suppose they'd flap wings slow by the Chisholm Trailhead,  
quicken their flight  
into Mexico each night  
and return over the river in the morning  
to roost in the abandoned (by people) garden hotel,  
to rest in the U.S. ♦

## Bird Banding at Cactus Creek Ranch: A Family Affair

*by Mary Jo Bogatto*

It was early morning with Mark Conway, Jolaine, Jim, Phil, and Jordan. The nets were set and we retreated to wait for the birds to a designated area we call "Mark's Place," a location distinguished by a sign made of weathered wood and chiseled with an insignia recognizing the work that Mark Conway has been doing since 1996 and on his own since 1999. It is refreshing to meet a person who is so devoted and passionate about his art.



Mark sees beauty in each bird and in the rounded edges of its feathers he sees and shares with us a vision of their lives. He explains how each aspect of the bird gives clues to who, what, where, and how we can live with it in our communities. The scientific information he possesses about each species, which he shares freely, is astounding. He helps us understand what the resident and migratory birds need to succeed and thrive. He is their story teller, and as he continues to collect data, the stories are developing into a feathered family tree of documented history.

On October 20<sup>th</sup> of this year two Black-crested Titmice that had been banded previously were caught together within inches of each other. Most astonishing is that both birds had been caught earlier on July 21, 2011, at the same location just inches apart! One was an adult, and one was a juvenile. Mark was not able to sex the adult, but he explained that the two were a parent and child returning to the same place, a place where the family could teach its young how to exist and survive.

Black-crested Titmice are permanent residents on Cactus Creek Ranch. They nest in cavities, so if you want more of them, all you have to do is put up some bluebird houses and they will nest in them.

Being a part of the banding is life-affirming and reassures me that work being done on the ranch is more precious than jewels, as are all places we call home. CCR is a home that will continue to nurture its inhabitants and habitat for years to come

## **13<sup>th</sup> Annual Statewide TMN Meeting** *by Alicia Cavazos*

On Friday, October 26, at 7:00 am, Virginia Vineyard and I set off for Camp Allen in Navasota, Texas, site of the 13<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Texas Master Naturalists. We wanted to get an early start so we could attend some of the advanced training classes being held in the afternoon. We made a quick lunch stop at the wonderful barbeque at Prasek's in Hillje and arrived at Camp Allen at about 2:30 pm. After checking in, we made our way to some of

the classes that were already in session. I attended a class conducted by Dr. John Jacob of Texas Sea Grant on community development patterns and the value of open spaces while Virginia went on to a session on the Texas Conservation Action Plan.

The evening began with the welcome and keynote speaker, conducted by Michelle Hagerty and John Davis of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. It was an interactive presentation with everyone in the audience participating with a handheld remote control. After it was dismissed, we all headed to dinner in the huge dining room.

The evening training sessions began at 7:00 pm. I attended the “Night Hikes 101, Planning and Conducting” session, and Virginia went to the session on “Texas Conservation Issues and Grass Roots Aspirations.” We reunited in our room about 9:30 after a long day.



Even though Camp Allen is actually a camp, the rooms look more like 4-star hotel rooms than cabins. The grounds are immaculate with huge pine trees and beautiful plants. The dining halls accommodated all 380 attendees and instructors. The food was the best comfort food I have eaten. It reminded me of a Luby's cafeteria.



Saturday morning sessions started after breakfast. I attended the session on “Tracking Hummingbirds across Texas” with Mark Klym, and Virginia attended the session on “Feral Hogs: Friend, Foe or the Ultimate Survivor.” The morning went by quickly and it was lunch time before we knew it. I attended a workshop on “Working in Groups, Facilitating Meetings.” TPWD personnel lead these sessions. Virginia attended a workshop on “What’s New in Texas Wildscapes.”

The awards ceremony in the evening was lively. There was the roll call of chapters, and the members present from each chapter stood up and cheered when their chapter was called. Most chapters in the state were represented, some with more members than others.

The Sunday morning workshops continued after the Chapter President's breakfast. I attended the photography workshop led by our own Ruth Hoyt, and Virginia attended the workshop on ecological consequences of artificial light at night on nature.

After the sessions ended, we went to the awards ceremony, special presentation, and conference closing. Awards were given for best pictures, scrapbooks, artwork, and brochures in all sorts of categories. There were a few cash awards for projects. Some of these projects were awesome.

Several members received pins for their service. Several were awarded the 5,000 hours service pins, and two received the new 10,000-hour pin.

A huge silent auction featured items donated from all chapters. Items included jewelry, birdhouses, artwork, T-shirts, posters, and other nature items. I bid on several items but was the winner on only one—a body lotion spa kit for only \$4.50.



After another awesome lunch, we headed back to the Valley. While driving back we talked about all the new people we met from other chapters and brainstormed on what we can do to contribute some of our talented members' artwork and service projects at next year's meeting, which will be held October 25-27, 2013, in New Braunfels Texas. ♦



## Photo Essay Excerpt

by Kamala Platt



The first three of these photos are from a field trip near Rio Grande City, and the third is a heartleaf hibiscus blooming near my house.



I believe we learn the most by unraveling the complexity through turning to three main experts--ourselves, our natural world and the combined teachings and wisdom of innovation and traditions of those with whom we can establish genuine trust. This paradigm is going to look a little different for each of us and we will get to it by somewhat different creative and analytical means. My poetry and the images I make and preserve, and what I live amongst show a little of what this has looked like to me. ♦



## **RGV Birding Festival, 2012**

*by Susan Kerens*

Each November for the past seven years, I have looked forward to the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival. This year I volunteered. I usually try to attend some of the wonderful trips available through the Festival, but I was housebound with a broken ankle this past summer and needed to make up some of the hours required for my Master Naturalist recertification. In past summers, I have spent many hours patrolling the beach at South Padre Island looking for nesting sea turtles.

At the Festival this year, I helped with the Master Naturalist's booth and had a great time with my fellow naturalists. I also spent time talking with those who came to the Festival to take advantage of the trips, and I got lots of information and wares from various booths.

The Festival offers such a variety of booths. The native plant booths are my favorites, as I like to gather plants that will attract butterflies. I also look forward to seeing the birds of prey. I am amazed by the attendees who are not from the Valley, who treasure some of the flora and fauna that we sometimes take for granted. One young man from Minnesota in an adjoining booth told me that one of his favorite birds is the Great Kiskadee. Others were enchanted by our other colorful birds and tropical plants.

Of course, it goes without saying that they all enjoyed our great weather. You can always tell the winter tourists; they are the ones wearing shorts when we natives are all bundled up after the temperature has dropped into the 70's! Many of the participants have come back to the Valley for many years and have found something new each year.

I think that many people in our community don't realize what treasures we have here in the Valley. Do they realize that we have to do all we can to protect what we have? It will take all of us to educate, to volunteer, and to care about our "magic Valley". Being a volunteer is rewarding and fun, and it provides invaluable service to so many organizations. Limited funding to parks and refuges makes adequate staffing impossible to fund. The Birding Festival provides our communities with an economic boost with the draw of our natural resources. It benefits all of us here in the Rio Grande Valley. I am already looking forward to next year's festival! ♦

## **Taking Time for the Little Things in Life**

*by Nan Persinger*

During this busy season of the year, we all need to take a break and notice some of the little pleasures in our lives. As we prepare for the new RGVCTM 2013 class with much anticipation and with all the knowledge gained from the 2012 class, I take a break and go for a walk with camera in hand. That's when I usually see something I wouldn't have thought would bring me such happiness.

Whether you find time to walk around your yard or garden or drive to one of the Valley's beautiful parks or nature sites, you'll always find something intriguing to see. Our eyes tend to focus on the bigger items, like birds, butterflies, and fauna, but if you take time to look closer, you will find many smaller treasures.

Here are a few photos of some of the small treasures that have brought me peace and joy.  
Hope your Holidays are filled with many blessings!



Ebony beans



Early morning dew on cobwebs



Egg cases



Mesquite sap



Milkweed seeds



Rain drops, rare sight this year



Sedge in bloom ♦

## **A Note from Our President-Elect**

*by Alicia Cavazos*

I would like to thank everyone for giving me the opportunity to serve as your new president for the RGVCTMN Texas Master Naturalists in 2013. As a graduate of the most recent class of 2012, I admit that I am a little apprehensive about taking on the job, but the fact that everyone is so helpful and friendly reassures me. It will be a privilege to serve. The past year has brought new experiences for me and has given me opportunities to learn so many new things.

After working for AT&T for 33 ½ years, I decided to retire. I did not know how I was going to fill my days. I like to work in the yard and spend time with my dogs and family. Joining the Texas Master Naturalists has given me a chance to learn something new every day. I am just amazed at the bird behavior around the feeders in my backyard. Learning about all the different species has stimulated my curiosity to learn more about each.

Visiting the state parks like Resaca de la Palma and Estero Llano Grande and the national parks like Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge and Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge has sparked my interest in volunteering at these locations to learn more. The fact that we live in the Valley gives us an opportunity to enjoy a range of habitats, from the coastal area at South Padre Island with its great variety of shore birds to the awesome hawks and green jays that are further inland.

Learning about the different plants and cactus that are unique to the Valley has also made me more aware of everything around me. I just want to learn it all. After reading all this, you probably think I had my head in a sand hole somewhere – I guess I was just too busy working to have time to enjoy my surroundings. I am so blessed to be able to do it now. I would like to thank all the members for helping me out and answering my questions about all the flora and fauna. You are all so experienced and I would like to tap into all that knowledge. Again, THANK YOU. ♦

