



# 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 DEPARTMENT.

## Officers

<b>President</b>	<b>Alicia Cavazos</b>
<b>1st Vice President</b>	<b>John Thaxter</b>
<b>2nd Vice President</b>	<b>Cristela Wise</b>
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<b>Recording Secretary</b>	<b>Jolaine Lanehart</b>
<b>Treasurer</b>	<b>Jim Navjar</b>
<b>Past President</b>	<b>Virginia Vineyard</b>

## Advisors

<b>Texas Sea Grant</b>	<b>Tony Reisinger</b>
<b>Texas Parks and Wildlife</b>	<b>Javier de Leon</b>

## Standing Committee Chairs

<b>Outreach/Publicity</b>	<b>Jackie Field, Jr.</b>
<b>Host</b>	<b>Vacant</b>
<b>Membership</b>	<b>Wendie Allstot</b>
<b>Listserv/Webmaster</b>	<b>Jimmy Paz</b>
<b>Historian</b>	<b>James Seguin</b>
<b>Lower Valley Education</b>	<b>Carolyn Cardile</b>
<b>Upper Valley Education</b>	<b>Tom Butler</b>

<b>Newsletter</b>	<b>Sharon Slagle</b>
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## President's Message

by Alicia Cavazos

Hello Master Naturalists,

My first year as RGVCTMN president has passed, and it has been a most rewarding experience for me. I have learned so much from the current members. I had previously only served in a leadership role in my children's PTA's, and that was more than 20 years ago. So when I was asked to run for president, I worried that I was not ready. The helpfulness of all our members and their eagerness to share convinced me to give it a try.

We have simplified the Handbook and Student Handbook this year. Please take the time to log onto the website and read it. If potential members ask a question about our organization, you'll be ready to answer.

This quarter we worked at the Birding Festival both at the TMN booth and at Kiskadee Korner. We've also helped Valley Nature Center and Coastal Studies Lab by volunteering to lead school groups on nature trails or at the touch tank.

The cold weather has brought on lots of activity at the Sea Turtle, Inc. Several volunteers have helped with the cold-stunned turtles and turtle releases. Lots of work remains to be done before the end of the year. Christmas Bird Counts are underway at different locations in the valley, offering another fun way to volunteer and be a citizen scientist for a day.

Please don't forget to turn in your hours to Jolaine. We will have our re-certification meeting in January. This year's pin is a monarch butterfly, a one-of-a-kind, to represent all your hard work. It will be an honor to wear one.

Alicia



Lou Osborne and Alicia at the Birding Festival



John Thaxter and Stan Serba at Kiskadee Korner



Judy Svetanoff, Jean Pettit at UTB Volunteer Fair

## Moments and Milestones



Mary Ann Tous addressing the October 8<sup>th</sup> general meeting on her Aunt Ila Loetscher, the Turtle Lady (Photo by Frank Wiseman)

On December 5<sup>th</sup>, Rio Grande Valley Chapter Texas Master Naturalists Tom Butler, Carolyn Cardile, Veronica Guzman, Omar Landeros, Ben Nibert, and Sally Robey were recognized and presented certificates from Texas AgriLife Extension, Texas Sea Grant, and Texas A&M University at the Cameron County Extension Service Annual Volunteer Recognition Luncheon in San Benito, Texas. They were honored for distinguishing themselves through superior volunteer service and dedication to the chapter and the Valley nature community by planning, coordinating, and conducting outstanding and unique Master Naturalist classes, advanced trainings, field trips, and educational programs.



**Special Notice:** Congratulations to Frank Wiseman on achieving his 5,000 service hour milestone! ♦

## **New 2014 RGVCTMN Officers**

*by Virginia Vineyard*

Effective January 1<sup>st</sup>, new chapter officers are as follows:

### **Officers** (elected)

President - Alicia Cavazos

Vice President - Anita Westervelt

Treasurer - Jim Navjar

Recording Secretary - Heidi Linnemann

### **Additional Officers and Committee Chairmen**

Membership Secretary - Jolaine Lanehart

Past President - Virginia Vineyard

Outreach/Publicity - Jackie Field, Jr.

Membership - Virginia Vineyard

Lower Valley Education - Carolyn Cardile

Upper Valley Education - Sylvia Casselman

Historian - James Seguin

Listserv/Webmaster - Jimmy Paz

Newsletter - Sharon Slagle

Host - vacant

### **At-Large Board Members**

Drew Bennie

Linda Butcher

Tom Butler

Pam Cornett

Ruth Hoyt

Lou Osborne

Sally Robey

John Thaxter

Cristela Wise

### **Chapter Advisors**

Texas Sea Grant - Tony Reisinger

Texas Parks and Wildlife - Javier de Leon

## Sabal Palm Sanctuary News

*by Alicia Cavazos*

On November 17<sup>th</sup>, the Sabal Palm Sanctuary celebrated the opening of its newly restored 1892 Rabb Plantation Home, which will serve as the new visitor center for the Sanctuary. ♦



Jimmy Paz at the Grand Opening for Sabal Palm Sanctuary's new visitor center

## Nature and Natives at the 20<sup>th</sup> RGV Birding Festival

*by Anita Westervelt*

Three booths always seemed the busiest at the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival trade show in November – in no particular order, the Rio Grande Valley Chapter Texas Master Naturalist, the Native Plant Project, and the Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society booths. Numerous volunteers from all three organizations spent a combined total of more than 200 hours preparing, setting up, and tending the three booths for the four-day festival.



At the Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society booth, members Alicia Cavazos and Suzanne Schroeder discuss the annual ACAS photo contest and membership opportunities with festival visitors



The festival was a resounding success according to RGVBF Chair Marci Madsen Fuller. “This amazing, wonderful, stellar, and extremely successful event couldn't have been achieved without the valuable energy, time, support and enthusiasm of each volunteer.”



RGVCTM booth and visitors during the festival trade show

The festival is solely volunteer run. Celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, 100 volunteers helped coordinate and execute the event, with additional volunteers who supported the individual organizations' booths.

The number of participants who pre-registered for the 36 field trips and 12 seminars totaled 800. Registrants were from 40 states, three Canadian provinces, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Netherlands, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Two hundred trade show participants included two vendors representing Panama and two from Uganda as well as representatives from Peru, Portugal, Costa Rica, Belize, South Africa and England.



Native Plant Project booth



Volunteers offered kids and their parents projects and prizes at the Kiskadee Kids' Korner

More than 4,000 visitors from the local area attended evening shows, lectures, family activities, the silent auction, optics raffle, the raptors shows, and the trade show booths. ♦

## **New Classes to Start in January**

*by Alicia Cavazos*

New classes are being formed for 2014 for the RIO GRANDE VALLEY CHAPTER MASTER NATURALIST. Trainees must attend orientation and 30 hours of classes and 10 hours of field trips. The cost is \$150.00.

Lower Valley classes will be held at the Cameron County Annex building at the corner of Williams Road and Highway 77/83 in San Benito. Orientation will be January 8, 2014, from 6 to 9 pm, and the first class will be January 15, 2014 (Wed. classes). Upper Valley classes will be at Bentsen State Park, 2800 S Bentsen Palm Dr. in Mission. Orientation will be January 9, 2014, from 6 to 9 pm, and the first class will be on January 16, 2014.

To complete state certification, the trainee must perform 40 hours of volunteer work and complete 8 hours of advanced training. Information can be obtained from our website ([www.rgvctmn.org](http://www.rgvctmn.org)) or call 956-244-2347. ♦

## **Investing Wisely in Trees**

*by Christina Mild*

Most birdwatchers are aware of the many ways that birds use trees. Any tree can serve as a place to forage for leaf buds and insects, to call for potential mates, or simply to roost. Thorny trees provide the best-protected nest sites. Native trees provide the greatest potential for fruit (for example, the hackberry family) and nectar (for example, the Wild Olive), as well as tasty caterpillars munching leaves on their butterfly/moth host plant.

Thus, it's fairly obvious that trees, especially natives, are an important investment for those who wish to improve the welfare of birds, butterflies and other desirable critters. While many well-meaning individuals, businesses, communities, etc. spend considerable sums to plant

trees, the same dedication to managing a healthy tree is generally lacking. So what constitutes "healthy tree management"?

First, the tree should be planted at the proper depth, according to species. Soil type should be appropriate for the species and the amount of watering will vary according to species and season.

Most of us can detect clues that a tree is ailing. Harlingen's native plant nurseryman, Mike Heep, has often been called out to diagnose an obviously struggling tree. Most often, Heep discovers a specimen deeply-ringed by a weed-whacker. When the tree's outer bark is compromised, all sorts of detrimental organisms use this "open door" to a protective home and source of nutritious sap. Deeper abrasions decrease the tree's ability to conduct water, sugar and minerals between the roots, leaves, fruit, etc.



Weedwhacker damage to a young tree

There are many available products and methods for decreasing the likelihood that a tree's health will be compromised during routine and repeated yard care.

- The tree can be surrounded by a wide variety of available products, to create a zone of protection. Most nursery departments in big-box stores sell flat "tree rings" of heavy porous recycled rubber. They retard the growth of grass and weeds in an approximate one-foot radius of the trunk. They also remain flat enough for easy mowing.





This flat ring allows rain to flow through, while it is flat enough to mow around easily

- For those who enjoy gardening, a variety of edging types can be used to create a “weed-whacker” barrier (and!!!) a small gardening space. In the photo of my “pentagonal” tree-surround garden, I’ve used fake-brick interlocking plastic sections. I was able to push them into place in wet soil using my foot. I began the small garden, of course, by removing any hint of grass. Periwinkle was the easy planting choice for maximum blooms in full sun and the punishing heat of summer. The periwinkles died back as cooler temperatures approached and I was happily surprised to find a number of native species arriving on their own. That small garden now hosts plant species to feed all sorts of organisms.



Here's a simple pentagonal tree border, boasting about 12 species, planted and volunteer.

My garden-edging method was quick and cheap. Anyone with some bricks, large rocks or small logs can create a tree-surround garden which complements the landscape with imaginative beauty.



All too often, shrubs are whacked to death by weedeaters, which fail to control the unwanted grass. Maintenance workers should pull out grass, including the roots, to protect and beautify trees and shrubs. It may be wise to use RoundUp®, a Monsanto Company product, which will kill the grass without impacting woody plants.

**Pruning and Trimming.** A more difficult aspect of tree care is pruning and trimming. I begin with thoughts on palms, perhaps the most high-cost tree investment in Texas. In deep south Texas, at least 85% of the treasured tall Washingtonia palms are regularly and repeatedly brutalized by paid palm trimmers. Owners pay a considerable sum annually to ignorant palm workers. As yet, a way to educate the myriad roving palm-trimmers or the palm-owners has not been discovered.

It is too common to drive past newly-trimmed palms with only five remaining upright green leaves. After a few windy days, these same palms have three upright leaves and two with broken petioles (stems) hanging limp, showing signs of yellow and brown -- impending death.



Did the owners of this tree expect strong winds, which might break off unprotected palm leaves? This is a prime example of a recently violated palm.

I experienced the results of this ignorance in the fall of 1989 when palm trimmers appeared at my door to offer their services. As a first-time palm owner, I hired the guys and went inside

to do chores. When I returned to check on their progress, nine of our ten palms had been despoiled in the manner described above. A fellow was up the tenth palm, having already removed most of the protective brown skirt. Every expletive deleted you can imagine raced through my mind, and I proceeded to yell to cease and desist “inmediatamente!!” The LRGV experienced a hard, long freeze in late 1989. As things began to thaw out, nine of our ten palms died. Only the palm that retained most of its green leaves survived. Using the approximate cost of planting a mature palm and multiplying by nine, one can easily calculate the enormous cost of my mistake in hiring workers ignorant about palm tree growth but willing to scale and whack away at palm trees.



It is rare in deep south Texas to find a tree that retains the protective skirt (or petticoat), which insulates the tree from weather extremes and offers food and shelter to many animal species

Dead fronds that remain as a skirt below the living green “energy-factory” fronds provide preferred roosting sites for mosquito-eating bats. Hooded Orioles weave their nests below a palm frond in a position well-hidden from predators. Mark Conway tells me that green parakeets roost within the thick skirts of palms. A thick skirt also protects living upper leaves from wind. An intact skirt moderates temperature extremes. The trunk is shielded from direct drying rays of the sun, thus maintaining cooler temperatures for such roosting birds as the Eastern Screech Owls, which call from my palms.

Max Pons, Manager of The Nature Conservancy’s Southmost Preserve in Brownsville, adds: “In addition, detritus in the base of the leaf (boot) attracts many invertebrates. Small invertebrates become food for the before-mentioned animals (bats and birds). The skirt (I prefer “petticoat”) is advantageous to the health of the tree as well. It provides additional moisture to the palm as the added surface catches dew and fog precipitation and contributes to the cooling and warming of the trunk in inclement weather.”

Many years after my palm trees froze, I met William MacWhorter, who taught me many things about the growing and care of palms. MacWhorter was adamant that green fronds should not be removed from a palm (unless they threaten passersbys in an area where the palm was planted too close to walkways, which happens all too often). After all, green leaves are a palm's only source of energy. In comparison, few of us would pay or even allow someone to destroy a large portion of our vegetable garden!

MacWhorter also pointed out “toothpick” palms, grown too closely-packed by unscrupulous or ignorant nurserymen. Toothpick palms snap off like toothpicks when hurricane winds pass through. Stronger palms with thicker trunks have a great capacity to bend with the wind.

Other technical aspects of tree-trimming are beyond the scope of this article. However, if tree trimmers must be hired, it is crucial to seek out a licensed arborist with an insured workforce. Even with those criteria fulfilled, buyer beware.

Rather than a large crew, I'd a crew of three: trimmer, ladder-stabilizer and brush hauler (perhaps four, if a brush-chipper is in operation on site).

In conclusion, enjoy and protect your trees! Plant natives (when weather permits) if you have space for more trees or shrubs. Perhaps more importantly, become active in speaking out for better tree care in public spaces. Roadsides, parks, libraries, schools and shopping malls often have the most brutalized trees to be found anywhere! ♦

## **Always Something to Learn in the Valley**

*by Anita Westervelt*

A number of weeks ago, RGV Chapter Texas Master Naturalist member Frances Barrera mentioned a six-week backyard-habitat-steward class that was to be given at Quinta Mazatlan in McAllen. Frances thought it would be an excellent way to add to our native planting knowledge, so I, too, sent in my \$60 application fee.

Neither of us was disappointed. The classes were amazing and we had a great time commuting together, discussing the lectures and different plants and trees to add to our respective gardens and enjoying different places for lunch after the two and half-hour classes.

The new education director at Quinta Mazatlan, Carol Goolsby, held our attention every time she gave a presentation, and we hung on her every word of fascinating information. Some of you may already know her from her time at the North American Butterfly Association (NABA) in Mission. She is a noted educator for her hands-on, creative multi-media curriculum and most recently was with the private concern in La Joya's Rancho El Charco, where she developed a curriculum and taught nature science to school groups.





Carol Goolsby leading a walk

The habitat instruction was divided between classroom PowerPoint talks, hands-on activities, and narrated walks through different sections of Quinta Mazatlan. At one point on a weekly walk, Carol plucked a hole-riddled leaf from a tree. “Can anyone describe this?” she asked. “Leaf lace?” a tentative voice answered from the group. Turns out, it was a good description, and those holes depicted a healthy ecosystem. We learned that native plants and trees have native bugs that don’t generally destroy, but rather add to the health of the ecological system.

During the six-week course, we heard a number of interesting and knowledgeable speakers. Ornithologist John Brush, also a Quinta Mazatlan staffer, gave an informative talk about native trees, birds, and birding for urban landscapes. Carol’s husband, Dr. John Goolsby, PhD., a research entomologist with the U. S. Department of Agriculture, gave a presentation about Rio Grande Valley soils by county. He had tubs of different soils available for us to run our hands through. Many people learn to distinguish the different types of soil by feel.

Edinburg Urban Forester, Ed Kuprel also was an invited guest speaker. I thought I knew how to plant a tree until he demonstrated doing so on the Quinta Mazatlan grounds during class. The actual preparation, planting, and pruning took about 20 minutes, but he talked the entire time, imparting a vast amount of practical knowledge. It was quite impressive. His success rate for trees that stay alive is much higher than mine, and I didn’t take nearly enough notes.



Ed Kuprel planting a tree

All the speakers were impressive. Quinta Mazatlan has offered the Backyard Habitat Steward course each fall for a number of years and packs the classroom to its limit. As a matter of fact, if you ever get the chance to attend a lecture or workshop with those mentioned in this article, I highly recommend – oh, wait a minute. You will get the opportunity. The TMN committee has scheduled Ed Kuprel to speak at the February meeting, just in time to get trees planted during the recommended Lower Rio Grande Valley planting time-frame.

John Goolsby will deliver a current presentation about invasive species at the April meeting, and Carol Goolsby is scheduled to be the August speaker with a program about the uniqueness of the Rio Grande Valley ecology, natives versus exotics and habitat loss. Mark your calendars! ♦

## **21 Years of Rio Reforestation**

*by Rick Ramke (photos by James Seguin)*

The 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Rio Reforestation Event was held at the Resaca del Rancho Viejo Tract of the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge (LRGV NWR) on Saturday, November 2, 2013. Rain delayed the original October 19 event date, but November 2 proved to be a clear, cool day for volunteering.

Between 8:30 and 10:30 AM more than 850 volunteers, mostly middle school and junior high youth and their families from around the Valley participated. They planted over 14,000 seedlings from over 40 species of native plants on 20 acres of refuge land. Their work contributed to the ongoing restoration of native habitat in south Texas for the benefit of the abundant varieties of native wildlife species.



USFWS staff direct volunteers

The USFWS provided seeds used to grow seedlings, which had been hand collected within the four counties of Hidalgo, Cameron, Starr and Willacy. Species were carefully selected to match the soils, hydrology, and other location factors of the re-vegetation site. Local farmers

provided site preparation, irrigation, and weed control by terms of a cooperative agreement with the Refuge.

Rio Reforestation is the only outreach event conducted by the LRGV NWR, which is otherwise largely closed to the public. Public participation in the reforestation not only increases the amount of land that can be re-vegetated in a given year, but also familiarizes the participating public with the Refuge and its staff and vests the public in the Refuge mission.



The soil was reasonably moist for digging

This event is planned for months by Refuge and Friends of the Wildlife Corridor (FWC) personnel. Prior to the day of the event, local farmers prepared the tract for planting, and Refuge staff members delivered seedlings to the site, arranging them for volunteer use. On the morning of the event, volunteers arrived at the site with gloves and spades, and they worked their way down each row, planting seedlings.

Rio Reforestation aims to attract students, who are encouraged to make a commitment to the environment by understanding the importance of native habitat and by supporting their national wildlife refuge. It also calls for support by the Valley's large population of Winter Texans, who often give freely of their time in volunteer projects. The event attracts local residents and depends on the support of local businesses, which provide food and beverages for event participants. These businesses generously donated goods to the 21<sup>st</sup> Rio Reforestation: Walmart #5165 of Alamo, Walmart #3320 of Palmhurst, Walmart #1958 of Rio Grande City, Reddy Ice of Harlingen, Coca-Cola Bottling Company of McAllen, and Avant Premium Water & Ice of Harlingen.



Time for a drink and a hot dog after a morning of planting

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. Friends of the Wildlife Corridor was established in 1997 to support the Santa Ana NWR and the LRGV NWR. A primary FWC goal is to protect lands for inclusion in the LRGV NWR. ♦

## **Winter Outdoor Wildlife Expo -- WOVE**

*by Carolyn Cardile and by Anita Westervelt*

Here's a great opportunity to earn volunteer and advanced training hours. Last year several master naturalists earned volunteer and advanced training hours at this event. I am hoping many of you will volunteer and attend the presentations there this year. Look for the following press release in local newspapers soon.

### **St. Andrews' 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary WOVE celebration set for Jan 24 and 25**

St. Andrew's by the Sea Episcopal Church is gearing up for its Winter Outdoor Wildlife Expo (WOVE) and in honor of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary will celebrate with more programs, more activities and more exhibits.

"This is a special year for us," said Ralph Ayers, chairman for the Expo. "We want to show special appreciation to the community that has supported us all these years by offering programs and workshops over two days instead of our previous one day expo."

More than 45 programs are scheduled for the event including special presentations for more than 200 local school children on the Friday morning.



Other programs include popular new trends such as digi-scoping and geo-caching as well as fishing's future, fly fishing, bait fishing, kayaking, bird watching and nature sketching. Activities include bird walks, a silent auction, 'bucket raffle,' nature-related vendors and more than 20 exhibits.

Local experts will lead nature workshops covering topics from birds, dragonflies and butterflies, to native plants and gardening, animals, dolphins, shells, and beach combing. "We like to showcase the area's outdoor recreation opportunities and promote the great natural gifts that we have here," said Ayers. "Last year more than 1,200 people attended the workshops and activities, and visited the exhibits."

Danny Conner will bring his Reptile Adventures show down from the Texas Hill Country for three shows on Saturday that will provide entertainment for all ages.

Nature Photographer Richard Moore will be master of ceremonies Saturday for a recognition awards program presented to a person who has made outstanding contributions to ecology and environmental issues locally.

The 2014 WOVE will be January 24 and 25 at the South Padre Island Convention Center. Proceeds from this year's expo will go to the Boys and Girls Club of Port Isabel. Visit the Winter Outdoor Wildlife Expo on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/wowespi](http://www.facebook.com/wowespi). ♦

## **Cold-Stunned Turtle Rescue**

*by Mary Ann Tous*

Our recent cold snap threatened our sea turtles. On December 11<sup>th</sup> alone, 34 green sea turtles were recorded cold-stunned in or near the Lower Laguna Madre, 9 in or near the Upper Laguna Madre, and 1 on Mustang Island. Forty were found alive. By the 16<sup>th</sup>, they were all warmed up and ready to be released. Sea Turtle, Inc., hosted a public release for the turtle on December 19<sup>th</sup> at Isla Blanca Park, freeing about 100 juvenile greens.

Here they are being cared for in the bins at Sea Turtle, Inc.





And here they are a few days later swimming freely and all ready to be released into their natural environment. ♦



All sizes were affected



Beautiful carapace markings



Pit tagged and ready to go



Back to the sea in trucks



Crowd of more than 300 see them off



## A Sea Turtle Year

by Mary Ann Tous

A recap of sea turtle adventures this year on South Padre Island points up a most eventful and very fast twelve months. It started on April 18<sup>th</sup> with the first Kemp's ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*) mini-arribada on South Padre Island. One of our own Texas Master Naturalists, Steve Fowler, found the first nester, which left us a clutch of 98 eggs to watch over. We then transported the eggs carefully into Sea Turtle, Inc's, monitored corral to be protected 24/7 from predators. Two other nesters were also found on that windy day, making a total of three for our SPI mini-arribada.

Nests and nesters found along the Gulf Coast of Texas are studied, monitored, and recorded. Dr. Donna Shaver, Chief of the Division of Sea Turtle Science and Recovery at Padre Island National Seashore in Corpus Christi, creates files with the help of National Park Service staff and volunteers. Keeping accurate records helps ensure the future of these endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtles.

Files and their statistics that start in April continue into August when hatchlings are released. Approximately 54 days after the nesting date, hatchlings clamor out of sandy nests to forge forward like fearless little soldiers and get taken out by sea waves just as nature intended. But first the hatchlings imprint on our sands. It's hypothesized that imprinting on the sand may help their internal magnetic navigation guide them back to the same area where they were born after they have reached sexual maturity, which brings the cycle to a complete circle.

This year, summer months quickly faded into an early autumn and then our first severe cold front on November 25<sup>th</sup>. Dr. Shaver shifted into rescue and recovery mode and directed efforts to save approximately 40 cold-stunned Green sea turtles. In such rescues, timing can make the difference between life and death. Rescued turtles were quickly taken to a rehabilitation facility to be treated and documented.

Cold stunning occurs when the water temperature drops quickly to about 45-50 degrees F (7-10 degrees C) trapping these cold-blooded creatures in the shallow bay waters where, if exposed long enough, they will lose their mobility to swim and then die. Alternatively, they may be blown ashore where, in their cold-stunned condition and unable to protect themselves, they lay vulnerable to predators. Green sea turtles are herbivorous and feed on grasses on the coastal bay side, where they forage in shallow waters. This makes them particularly susceptible to cold-stunning.

In February of 2011 the STSSN (Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network) recorded the largest hypothermic stunning in Texas when more than 1,600 Green sea turtles were documented as hypothermic stunned. Indeed, studies show that the leading cause of Texas sea turtles being washed ashore or stranded is due to hypothermic stunning. Sea turtles in the passes have access to deeper warmer waters while those in the Laguna Madre may become trapped. During these cold fronts the alert goes out to locate the cold stunned sea turtles ASAP in order to document information, to transport them to a rehabilitation facility where they are cared for, and then ultimately to release them back into Gulf waters as soon as warmer weather permits. Fortunately, many heroes enter the picture at this point. The good news is that if the hypothermic stunned sea turtles are rescued quickly, they have an excellent chance for recovery and release. Cold-stunned Greens, once rescued, are brought in to be evaluated, documented, pit-tagged or flipper-tagged, and then put into holding bins where they will gradually warm up. Many other facilities open their doors to aid in the rescue and rehabilitation, such as Padre Island National Seashore (covering the Upper and Laguna Madre waters), Animal Rehabilitation Keep of the UT Marine Science Institute, Coastal Studies Lab on South Padre Island, and the Gladys Porter Zoo, to name a few.

When the second cold front hit us this year on December 7<sup>th</sup>, the numbers of cold stunning escalated quickly into the hundreds. Calls came into Sea Turtle, Inc., from the jetties, from Pier 19 boat ramp, and from the mud flats directing rescuers to the location of cold-stunned turtles in distress. All rescuing volunteers, agencies, and organizations took an active role, working diligently as teams to save these magnificent turtles. Hundreds of hands pitched in from Corpus Christi Bay, Mansfield Channel, and from the Laguna Madre Bay to South Padre Island to make these Green Turtle rescues end in releases.

A week or so later, Sea Turtle, Inc., reported that 100 Greens with their sunburst radiance had been rehabilitated and would be publicly released on December 18<sup>th</sup>. A crowd of 250 gathered to cheer them as the turtles were trucked in and released separately and gently into the Gulf waters, back into their natural habitat. I found it both humbling and surreal to help carry a few into the Gulf waters, watching them engage in the waves with a flippered good-bye as they disappeared. What a feeling to experience during our holiday season. To think that all of this occurred before winter even officially arrived.

I know the Turtle Lady would be proud of all the rescuers: her vision and passion were instrumental in initiating the crusade to help sea turtles. The new year will bring new challenges, but whatever happens, the sea turtles of South Padre Island can count on the support of their many human friends.



## **Brief Look at an RGVCTMN Newcomer's Year**

*by Anita Westervelt*

**January** – Beach sand is an entire universe in and of itself.

Tony Reisinger's South Padre Island field trip. (I will be more careful when I next burrow my feet in the wet surf.)

**February** – Not all litter should be cleared away. I am learning to leave rotting logs and fallen branches in place no matter how tempting it is to make the forest look as neat as a Marine Corps parade ground.

Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge field trip with Ranger Marion Mason

**March** – Drought in the Lower Rio Grande Valley is cyclic, which makes it less scary.

Climatology lecture, Jason Straub, Texas Weather Service

**April** – Disturbances aren't just loud car radios at city intersections at midnight.

Various ecology lectures and workshops

**May** – A bird fall-out does not mean massive death and hoards of dead birds on the pavement as the term suggests.

Warbler migration field trip to South Padre Island with Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society President Norma Friedrich

**June and July** – Working disaster recovery in Minnesota is not nearly as challenging as trying to manage what nature does to the homestead during an absence.

Author's personal experience

**August** – I learned a number of things about weed eating: 1) Weed eaters are mighty powerful tools; 2) Protective gear is affordable no matter the cost; and 3) Fashion isn't everything.

Stan Serba, Rio Grande Valley Chapter Texas Master Naturalist

**September** – Native plants will live and bloom in spite of drought.

Numerous lectures from learned experts and eye-witness results in the heat of a parched summer

**October** – Bugs should be kept.

Dr. John Goolsby, PhD., research entomologist, U. S. Department of Agriculture lecture. (It certainly makes gardening chores easier.)

**November** – See February, an especially hard lesson for me to learn. I learned that it is best to let leaves lie where they fall.

Harlingen Native Plants Nurseryman Mike Heep lecture

**December** – Ichthyology really isn't boring after all.

Tony Reisinger RGVCTMN meeting presentation

In addition to the amazing information I learned as a TMN trainee and during the rest of the year through its members, partners, various lectures, and workshops, I discovered that maintaining my own yard (as opposed to hiring a yard person) gave me insight into every square yard of our property. I discovered important things that needed attention like what tree might be ready to fall down, where branches needed to be removed from hanging over roof-tops, and where the ripe plantains were.

I delighted in finding what was here without my help such as frogfruit, wild aster, heliotrope, powderpuff, climbing milkweed, passion vine. It also gave me the opportunity to choose what to keep and what to "disturb."

And, importantly, I would have missed the intensity of the butterfly migration had I not been so often on the riding mower. In the far reaches of the yard, Mexican Bluewing butterflies enjoyed the density of pittosporum bushes (who would have thought), ignoring my purposefully planted Vasey Adelia. I found where the Tropical Leafwing and Guava Skipper liked to hang out so I could go back and photograph at my leisure. Giant swallowtails entertained while I mowed around citrus trees.

I learned that our yard is host to at least four different species of frogs, about eight of lizards and at least one big, beautiful Indigo snake, all of which had no problem out-maneuvering a lawnmower. Most of this wouldn't have meant much to me had I not signed up for the 2013 Texas Master Naturalist class. What an enchanting year! ♦

## **South Padre Island Birding Center Expands Gardens**

*by Carolyn Cardile*

Next time you come to South Padre Island, plan to spend some time at the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center, which opened in September 2008. New water features and gardens are both in front and back. The butterfly garden has been expanded, and two fresh water ponds with attractive water features are near the deck.



This 43- acre site includes both salt marshes and fresh water wetlands, and it features a boardwalk that is more than half a mile long. For the past five years visitors have enjoyed watching shore birds, crabs, fish, alligators, butterflies, jack rabbits, raccoons, and other wildlife in their natural habitat.

However, the Center's board was not satisfied: its members wanted to attract more migrating birds. That dream is now being realized thanks to a \$375,000 grant from the Coastal Impact Assistance Program for creating a supporting brush habitat for migratory birds. Southern Landscapes of McAllen was awarded the contract to develop the brush habitat, obtain any necessary permits, construct the landscaping, and install the irrigation system. SSP Designs from Brownsville oversees the landscaping and construction of the ponds. The grant funds addition of such plants as Huisache trees, Coma del Sur, Seagrape, Tenaza, Tepehauje, Torchwood, Milkweed, Texas Sabal Palm, and Mexican Fan Palm. New plants were added to the grounds this fall, and butterflies and birds soon arrived to enjoy them.



Since August I've watched construction of the sprinkler system and gardens, as well as expansion of the butterfly garden, with increasing excitement. They are beautiful. Great Southern White butterflies found the lantana and mist flower the day they were planted. I sneaked into the butterfly garden while it was closed for completion of a new entrance ramp, and my stealth was rewarded. One morning I spotted a Red-eyed Vireo, looking right at me only a few feet away. Another day a Wood Stork stood at the edge of the garden while Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and Carpenter Bees fed on bright yellow esperanza blooms.



The birding center's new manager, Cristin Howard, is working hard to add programs and improvements. Shortly after she started working at the Center, Cristin set up a luncheon to become better acquainted with the volunteers and to learn from them. She understands the importance of volunteer work at the Center, and she wants to work with volunteers to improve and expand programs. If you have been looking for a place to volunteer, please consider the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center. Volunteers are needed to greet visitors, work in the gift shop, lead nature walks, and do outreach education. ♦

## Exciting Butterfly Day -- 2<sup>nd</sup> US Record

by Linda Francis

At noon on Wednesday, November 6, 2013, I stepped out my side door with my camera to check for any new butterfly species in our yard. I was stunned to see this one, the same size as a Great Purple Hairstreak on our Dove Croton by the patio. I knew it had to be from Mexico because I had never seen it in any guide. (I don't yet have a Mexico guide but guess I need to get one.) I snapped several pictures and quickly called Melissa Chadwick who was at home on her lunch break from Bentsen while I wondered how long it would stay. Melissa lives across the road from us so she rushed right over. Then I called the North American Butterfly Association (NABA) in Mission. Within an hour about 40 people had shown up and were taking their turns on my patio, where they had to stand to see it. My street was packed with cars, raising many questions among our neighbors, all of which I am happy to answer! It turns out, that our sighting is the second US record. The first was at NABA last year and the third was at NABA within the hour after I called about mine.

This beautiful butterfly is a Zebra-striped Hairstreak, or a Zebra-striped Cross Streak, *Panthiades bathildis*. What an exciting day! ♦

