



The Chachalaca

VOLUME 12 NUMBER 4 31 DECEMBER 2015

In this Issue

President's Message <i>Linda Butcher</i>	2
The Beneficial Bat <i>Jolaine Lanehart</i>	3
My Personal Ramsey Park Project <i>Drew Bennie</i>	5
Sea Turtle Awareness <i>Mary Ann Tous</i>	6
San Antonio Chronicles <i>Kamala Platt</i>	7

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	Linda Butcher
1st Vice President	Anita Westervelt
2nd Vice President	Gail Dantzker
Recording Secretary	Heidi Linnemann
Treasurer	Jim Najvar
Past President	Alicia Cavazos

Advisors

Texas Sea Grant	Tony Reisinger
Texas Parks and Wildlife	Javier de Leon

Standing Committee Chairs

Outreach/Publicity	Anita Westervelt
Host	Susan Kerens
Membership	Jolaine Lanehart
	Sally Robey
Fundraising	Patti Pitcock
Listserv/Webmaster	Jimmy Paz
Historian	Barbara Lindley
Lower Valley Education	Carolyn Cardile

Newsletter	Sharon Slagle
-------------------	----------------------



President's Message

by Linda Butcher

Hello Master Naturalists,

It's hard to believe another year has passed. We've been successful in some great projects, including helping with the organization of the new Upper Valley Chapter. We graduated 35 new members who jumped in with both feet to make a difference. Our volunteers have helped in most of the parks and Nature Centers here in the valley.

One place in particular is Hugh Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen. We have a core group of volunteers there. They have made remarkable improvements on the Ebony Loop Trail, refurbishing old gardens and making new ones. Clearing and new plantings have also been done on Retama Trail.

We participated in the Yappopalooza event on South Padre Island spreading the word about our organization.

Our summer trip to Davis Mountain State Park was again a wonderful retreat. It was educational with the field trips and the scenery was inspirational. Thank you to Jim and Jolaine for hosting this event.

At the Texas Master Naturalist State Convention we were able to connect with other chapters all over the state. We learned what other chapters were doing and what makes them successful.

Many hours were logged at the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival. Our volunteers helped with the children's corner, the evening cordial, and in the booths. At our booth, we met many visitors and explained what it takes to be a Master Naturalist and how they could become a part of the team as well. Don't forget about the silent auction. A number of nice items have been donated from art work, books, field guides, T-shirts, and caps. This will be our main fund raising event. We need everyone's support.

I want to congratulate everyone who achieved milestones this year and thank you for all the hard work. I look forward to another successful year with us all working as one team.

Linda ♦

The Beneficial Bat

by Jolaine Lanehart

During the 2015 State TMN Conference, I had many opportunities to meet and speak with fellow TMN members from throughout the state and attend a number of informative sessions. One session that I especially enjoyed was “The Beneficial Bat,” presented by Rebecca Schumacher (Indian Trail Master Naturalist). Rebecca is a veterinarian technician involved in wildlife rehabilitation specializing in bats and has been trained to care for injured or orphaned bats through Bat Conservation, Inc. (BCI) and Bat World Sanctuary, Inc. She maintains a bat-friendly setting at her residence.



Bat handled by BCI-trained park ranger.

As members of the order of Chiroptera (meaning ‘hand-wing’), bats are the second largest group of mammals and constitute 20% of all mammals. Bats in our part of the world are members of Microchiroptera. Old world bats (fruit bats) are Megachiroptera. There are 18 families with a minimum of 1,331 species (15 new species have been identified in 2015). Texas has 33 of the 40 species in the United States. Two species are nectar bats, and the remaining are insectivores. For more information on 30 species, refer to TPWD Fact Sheets

(<https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/wild/species/>). Bat Conservation International (<http://www.batcon.org/>) and Bat World Sanctuary (www.batworld.org) are other great resources.

Most of us know that bats consume tons of insects during their nocturnal flights, eating about $\frac{3}{4}$ of their body weight. At Bracken Cave, it is estimated that the 20 million bats eat 200 tons of insects (including mosquitoes, larvae, crop pests).

Bats are also major pollinators of more than 300 species of fruit. The structure of their facial features is specialized and allows for a precise fit into night blooming plants, such as agave and saguaro. USFWS has a list of bat-pollinated plants (<https://www.fws.gov/pollinators/Index.html>). In fact, some plants, such as the cacao, depend upon bats for propagation. Bats consume the cacao beans and then distribute the beans (seeds) through normal digestion. And bat guano is considered a super-fertilizer.

Where do bats live? Many bats live in colonies wedged into crevices. These bats are typically dark brown, have no fur on their tails, have one pup a year, and are social, maintaining communal nurseries. Other bats roost in foliage. These are reddish brown, resembling dead leaves, and have fur on their tails. These bats live singly, except during mating. Foliage bats will have up to four pups and carry those pups with them when feeding.

Bats breed between August and October. Gestation is typically 45 days. If necessary, the female can hold the sperm in stasis during hibernation or migration and use it later to fertilize the eggs when conditions are optimal. Bats can live 25 to 40 years.



Pallid Bat, Davis Mountains State Park.

Threats to bats include loss of habitat, low reproduction, accidental grounding, white nose syndrome, and wind turbines. If you find a live bat on the ground, the best thing to do is get a cardboard shoe box, and using gloves, gently scoop the bat into the box, and then contact the BCI, a local bat expert, or the zoo. A bat cannot fly up from the ground, so it is especially vulnerable (bats actually drop and then swoop up on currents to fly). White nose syndrome, introduced by cavers, is a fungus that grows in the cold. Bats in torpor in a cave will arouse to scratch the area of the fungus. This scratching causes the bat to lose body heat by using its stored energy, and the bat starves as a result. Wind turbines were responsible for the loss of 6 million bats during a 6-year study. Turbines turn at 125 mph, creating suction that causes the bat's lungs to collapse. It has been found that running the turbines only during periods of high winds, when bats aren't flying, significantly reduces bat mortality.

Rebecca may be contacted by email: rebecca.schumacher@sbcglobal.net. ♦

My Personal Ramsey Park Project

by Drew Bennie

I started working at Ramsey Park in about 2005 after reading ads bragging on how many birds were at the park. I found the number of birds there disappointing and much of the park needed help at the time, so I decided to start working there.

First I consulted the local Audubon Society and our Master Naturalist chapter, and I received their blessings on my project. I began on one area along Indigo Trail where no one else was working. I got to work applying herbicide to invasive grasses, planting food plants for butterflies and birds, and encouraging a variety of plants to return to replace the monoculture of Prickly Pear, Guinea Grass, and Mesquite that had taken over after the flooding from the 1967 hurricane.

I also started growing native trees in flower pots at home to transplant so that I wouldn't have to buy them. (Being of Scottish ancestry, I am "frugal.") I bought the herbicide and many other plants, and I used my compost from home when planting in the sandy soil of the park. As I cleared one area, I moved to another.

Little by little, the trail has evolved from what it was to what you see today. Last spring was a wet one, and the area I have worked in looked incredible if I do say so myself. It was loaded with colorful blooming plants, most of which sprouted on their own from seeds dropped by birds or blown by the wind. All they needed was for the area to be cleared of invasive grasses so they could have a chance to grow.

Unfortunately, most of the trees I planted died due to one reason or another: drought or eaten by javelina, rabbits, rats, or girdling beetles. The sandy soil is difficult to water and does not hold moisture well, which makes growing plants there a challenge to say the least. The plants that have grown, however, do provide more variety and should attract a range of critters to live in and on them.

I have started working on a new area further down the trail and have planted and spread seeds in anticipation of rain. This project has helped me to learn more about the native plants I love by growing them, planting them, and seeing what grows and what doesn't as well as how the plants grow and which ones spread on their own. Over these 10 years of work, I now see more diversity of birds and insects as a result of my labors. I can't wait to see what the next 10 years will bring!



Sea Turtle Awareness

by Mary Ann Tous

In the early 1960s, Ila Loetscher was drawn to the effort to protect the Kemp's ridley sea turtles from an almost certain extinction, and soon her initial interest turned into a life-long passion. Her crusade on behalf of sea turtles ultimately spanned more than three decades and, through the Turtle Lady Legacy, has outlived the woman who was known worldwide simply as The Turtle Lady.

From the time that Ila first learned that the local sea turtles of the Texas Gulf waters were endangered until the present year, the number of sea turtle hatchlings who have begun their lives on the Texas coast have increased by an incredible amount. In fact, just from 1996 through the end of 2014, the number of hatchlings that were released rose from 369 to 10,067 according to the National Park Service official records.

But the work is still far from done. Despite the many successes over the years, sea turtles continue to remain on the Endangered Species List and their survival is not yet guaranteed. For the past decade, we at the Turtle Lady Legacy have made it our mission to broadcast awareness of the ongoing situation of sea turtles through hands-on activities and educational community outreach programs. Via our website (<http://www.theturtleladylegacy.org/>), we have reached a worldwide audience and we are pleased to see that interest in protecting sea turtles continues to grow.

Even as we still hear from people who had attended Ila's "Meet the Turtles" program as children many years ago, we also have the privilege of introducing Ila's legacy to new generations. Following in Ila's footsteps, we believe that every one of us has the potential to make a difference. Even if it is as small as driving more carefully along a coastal highway during sea turtle nesting season or sharing the link of a website about sea turtles, every act contributes to a ripple effect that eventually adds up to a meaningful result. ♦



San Antonio Chronicles: Native Habitat Health and Growth

by Kamala Platt

Although my Texas Master Naturalist experiences and loyalties are rooted in the Rio Grande Valley, in the last few years I've found myself staying put in San Antonio for the bulk of the year. Yet when I learn new concepts or shore up old ones, I continue to think myself south. Maybe it is the fact that I live just blocks south of the line dividing Hill Country to the north and Coastal Plains, on the south-side, or maybe it is all the far-South Texas plants thriving in my San Antonio yardscape. Whatever the cause, I find myself transposing what I'm learning to other places I've been, most often to the south.

I'm not sure whether regulation changes next year, or my own financial situation, will allow me to continue my active RGVTMN membership, so I wanted to share some photos and a two-part article this year. In the first part, I share some ideas on "Land Health" I've learned while living in San Antonio; in the second section, I share some photos of the continued growth of South Texas natives in my own yard.

Learning About Land Health near Bandera and Thinking Myself South. Last weekend, attending a "Land Health Workshop" held at two properties not far from Bandera TX, provided the most recent example of my "thinking myself south." I caught myself wondering several times whether the tenets we were discussing and demonstrating were being considered in brushland, coastal plains, and other habitats further South in "El Valle." After an autumn spent largely in San Antonio's metropolitan region, I was enthusiastic about the short road trip to this workshop put on by the Quivira Coalition, based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in conjunction with our own Texas Parks and Wildlife at the Chapas Group Site, Hill Country State Natural Area and the Williams Property, where we were hosted by Dorothy (Dee) and Vick Williams.

Despite my enthusiasm, my obligations as District 5 representative to attend the monthly meeting of the San Antonio Citizens Environmental Advisory Committee delayed my arrival until the end of the first (Friday) morning. I missed Introductions, Overview of Landowners' Resources, and the Hope for the Monarchs presentation but joined a cold, pole barn full of 40 students to learn recent developments in healthy soil management while wolfing down sandwiches, fruit, and other snacks, before embarking on a tour of the two properties to see on the land what we had been hearing about in lecture.

The two days exposed us to land health practices such as "reading the landscape" for indications of balance, or conversely problems, using roots to determine soil health, innovative erosion control techniques (we laid a rock wall to stop a head-cut) and berms and swales to control storm water runoff to allow rainwater to soak into the earth and recharge ground water beneath, and prescribed fire to bring back land health. As I listened to the counsel, I imagined myself further south, trying out the next step.

How would these approaches, clearly working well in the caliche and limestone soils and sloping riparian areas and grasslands of this region transfer to the brush-lands (virgin, denuded, or replanted), the riparian areas, and river deltas and other features of RGV land? Many of the messages of organic, holistic approaches to land stewardship make sense to me in a universal

sense because of their base in both regional and planetary considerations. Yet for the details to be worked out would take research, experiment, and discussion.

On the last afternoon, as we were preparing to leave I found myself conversing with new acquaintances. We were all impressed with how the facilitators of the workshop had extended the invitation to us as students to share what we knew and to help formulate new knowledge. So I learned even more than what was on the agenda, power-points, and planned tours and demonstrations—from laser marking of contour lines upon which to lay berms to origami envelopes for seed storage, I learned new techniques and approaches to maintaining land health.



Dee Williams shows the rock berms constructed to slow the flow of rainwater off of the Williams property. This increases the diversity and abundance of grasses and forbes.



Participants laying stones to slow field erosion by stopping a head cut on the Williams property at the Land Health Workshop while other participants and Quivira Coalition coordinator, Mollie Walton, look on.



Landscape along a trail: Chapas Group Site, Hill Country State Natural Area.



Participants use a laser level to mark contours where berms will be laid to slow, spread, and sink water into the landscape to increase landscape productivity, decrease erosion, decrease sediment runoff and floodwater volume during heavy rain. (Bryan Hummel, who has installed such projects on over 2,000 acres in Texas is in the orange Tshirt.)

Documenting South Texas Growth in a San Antonio Yard. This part of my article is a continuation of a September 2013 photo newsletter essay (see p. 13, <http://rgvctmn.org/assets/archive/ChachalacaSep2013.pdf>). I have acquired no new land (except in building top soil and additional mulch from neighborhood trees) but the plants are growing, in some cases maturing, in some cases multiplying. I am hoping to do more propagation and sharing of young plants, and in this way I hope to multiply urban habitat, providing more spaces for gulf fritillaries, bees, dragonflies, mockingbirds, wrens, finches, cardinals, anoles, salamanders, toads, frogs, and the many other regular visitors and occasional special guests that my yard hosts.

Years back, I had certified my yard as a National Wildlife Federation Habitat and now I am finally getting around to writing up the certification application for a Texas Wildscape. In my 2013 article, I described my search for milkweed in San Antonio nurseries when I discovered my plant was being consumed at a greater rate than it could sustain, and the

subsequent plant friendship that resulted when I did find milkweed in the back of a backyard greenhouse. Last year, I made my small monarch offerings official by joining on as a Monarch Waystation host. (I was proud to read that many RGVTMN members were growing milkweeds along with the many hosts throughout the monarch range across the continent.)

I grew enough milkweed seedlings this spring to share milkweed around town, and for four years now, I have been selling plants alongside the plant friend I found through that milkweed hunt, at the Esperanza Center's annual Peace Market <http://www.esperanzacenter.org/artepeacemarket.htm> . All are invited to make the trek next year to this handmade, "hand-grown" alternative to the malls on Thanksgiving weekend. Our plant table has been successful in selling plants, particularly houseplants this time of year, in a largely art-and-craft market; my next step is to expand the growing interest in native plants and butterfly gardens, yardscapes and urban habitats.

The photos that follow document the continuing growth of a few of the plants whose life started under the caring hands of Far-South Texas Botanists/Native Growers (you know who you are) whose plants came back North with me, some of them, nearly a decade ago by now...



Heart-Leafed Hibiscus, Tulipan del Monte, *Hibiscus martianus*, of the Mallow Family, is not easy to propagate here, but it is a long-lived perennial that does flower after rains, most of the year. This plant is not common in San Antonio but has flourished in a pot by my front walk for the last five or more years since I purchased it at the Native Plant Project meeting one night.



Purple Passion Flower Vine in bloom late last spring....



The Texas Ebony in my front yard has grown tallest of the RGV transplants.
Here I did not capture its full height.



A UTPA student gave me a chili pequin, which blossomed profusely for several years. The mockingbirds beat me to the berries, and the plant succumbed to a hard freeze around 2011. Subsequently, though, I have had many chili sequin plants establish themselves, throughout my yard. This one by the front sidewalk is picked by passersby and neighbors. I also shared leaves from the maguey next to it with people preparing to make barbacoa. The native ground cover has nearly taken over the bermuda.



This Tamaulipan Fiddlewood, *Citharexylum berlandieri*, of the Verbenaceae Family has thrived in my yard. Recently, I found a sapling that must have gotten its start from this one as I don't see others around town.



Cenizo to the left, Turks Cap to the right, and volunteer sunflowers that reached 12 feet last May. The Turks cap is a favorite for the gulf fritillaries.



This *Agave Americana*, or Maguey, was a small start from a friend (in San Antonio). I'll end with this recent photo of its sculptural beauty. Although in this photo the nopal on the left is dwarfed, they are also abundant and sculptural and were here when I moved here in 2001. The pads on some stretch beyond 18 inches. These are older Mexican varieties that offer a great food source for me and others (people and other animals).◆

