



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.

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President's Message

by Alicia Cavazos

Hello Master Naturalists,

The most rewarding part of being the President of the Rio Grande Chapter of the Texas Master Naturalists is being able to present service pins to the members. I have been privileged to present a 2,500-hour pin to Robert Archer; 1,000-hour pins to John Thaxter, Tommie Elum, and Steve Fowler; and 500-hour pins to Tom Butler, Sally Robey, Judy Svetanoff, Terry Weymouth, Mary Jean Garcia, and Ben Nibert. These are just ten of the people who have volunteered more than 8,500 hours. There are other members who are getting close to the 500-hour pin and 100-hour marks. We are an organization that is so generous with our time, and our partners have told me how thankful they are that we give so much to them. It is truly an honor to work with you.

I have also been busy volunteering at the Coastal Studies Lab and the Valley Nature Center. This time of year, bus loads of students go through there on end-of-the-year field trips. It is so much fun to see the faces of the children when they see something interesting or learn something new. It is as if their faces light up for a brief moment. I can see why some of you chose to be educators before you retired.

I have learned so much about nature since I became a TMN, and I have had so much fun volunteering. My friends ask me if I get tired inasmuch as I am so busy all the time. Well sure, I get tired....I take a nap and then I do what I need to do around the house. I am ready for new learning adventures the next morning, and I do it all over again.

Alicia

Moments and Milestones

April 2013 RGVCTMN Graduation Celebration

photos by Carolyn Cardile



June 11 General Meeting:

photos by Nan Persinger



Lydia Guerra, new Executive Director of Valley Nature Center, addressing the membership.



Alica Cavazos presenting Judy Svetanoff with her 500-hour pin.



Alica Cavazos presenting John Ebner with his 250-hour pin.



Alica Cavazos presenting Donna Horcher with her TMN certification.

Whoop-de-do!

by Terry Weymouth

On Sunday, March 3rd, my wife and I joined 21 other members of our TMN Chapter and traveled to Rockport for a four-hour Whooping Crane tour aboard the 75-foot long catamaran, “Wharf Cat”. For many of us the day started early because we faced a 180-mile journey and had to be in Rockport by 9:30 am. But we all made it, and the morning was sunny with calm winds and flat seas on the inter-coastal waterway. We were almost the only passengers although the boat was designed to carry 84, so we had lots of room to walk around without tripping over other people’s tripods, backpacks, and camera gear. We also had lots of personal time to ask questions of our guide.

It had been nearly 30 years since Judy and I had taken a similar tour on which we had seen about a dozen whooping cranes, a tour on which our captain had told us that we were looking at fully half of the world’s population. We were eager to see what 30 years of efforts to preserve this species had accomplished. On this trip, we learned that there are now about 250 whoopers in the area around Rockport, Goose Island, and Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, and that the world population is about 650.



Our tour guide was Ray Kirkwood, a member of the Mid-coast TMN chapter in Corpus Christi. Ray was knowledgeable about the whooping cranes and the other 41 species of birds that we saw as we traveled the inter-coastal waterway to the Aransas NWR. We also saw dolphins and a feral hog. The boat stopped several times for us to watch and photograph the cranes as we slowly made our way up to the Aransas area. As we approached the eastern-most stage of our trip, Kirkwood joked that we had seen the Franklin's Tern, the Caspian Tern, the Royal Tern, and "now the U-Turn". So we headed back. By this time the wind had picked up and we were heading into it at full-throttle, so everyone put on their hats and coats and looked for a place to get out of the wind.

The boat tour was scheduled to start at 10 am and end at 2 pm, and that is exactly how it happened. We all had a great time and would like to do it again someday. I think I can also say that after seven or eight hours in the car and four hours in the sun and wind, we all slept really well on Sunday night! ♦

Ocelot Conservation Festival 2013

by Mary Jo Bogatto

In 1995, my Cactus Creek Ranch began conservation practices to enhance the native habitat for species like the ocelot. In 1997, I worked with Richard Moore, Pete Moore, and others to establish the citizen-support group called Friends of Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. We started fundraising in 1998 at Cactus Creek Ranch. Among other activities, our Friends group hosts the annual Ocelot Conservation Festival held in Harlingen to help educate thousands about the plight of the endangered ocelot. All funds raised at the festival go to research and conservation to benefit the ocelot. We have come a long way in ocelot awareness since 1997.

This year's events on March 23rd at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville were remarkable. Richard Moore produced and showed his new video, called "Phantom Cat of the Chaparral, Endangered Ocelot". You can visit his website (www.richardmooreoutdoors.com) for more information about the video.



The Cincinnati zoo provided an ocelot again this year. It's named Sihil, and its trainer, Alicia Sampson, is a great ambassador. With her help many students and individuals were able to see and learn about the ocelot. There were shows every few hours at the zoo.

Help keep the ocelot and its habitat healthy in Texas by purchasing an ocelot license plate to help fund the program. Go to http://www.txdmv.gov/vehicles/license_plates.htm . The plates are new, so you may have to keep checking back.

For more information about Friends of Laguna Atascosa NWR, visit <http://www.friendsofsouthtexasrefuges.org> ♦

Mary Jo Wins a Texas Environmental Excellence Award

Mary Jo Bogatto has been recognized by the State with a 2013 Texas Environmental Excellence Award for her wonderful work with and on Cactus Creek Ranch. With this award, she is acknowledged as a model for habitat conservation practices. Congratulations, Mary Jo!

See more about this award at <http://www.teea.org/winners/2013/individual/mary-jo-bogatto> . ♦

TMN Class of 2013 at Cactus Creek Ranch

by Mary Jo Bogatto

The class of 2013 arrived at Cactus Creek Ranch early on April 6th.

After coffee and treats and a look through the lodge's many wildlife displays, we showed them where the first Horned Lizard of 2013 was cited for CCR's research project. Commonly known as a horny toad, the lizard thrives on harvester ants, and we've identified 23 harvester ant beds on the Ranch. For more information about our horny toads, see <http://www.valleycentral.com/news/story.aspx?id=905121#>

For many students, it was the first time they had seen the wonderful critter!



Photo by Tom Butler.

Then the group separated for two different activities. The first group went on a hay ride courtesy of Jim Navjar and Jolaine Lanehart to the bird banding area. Mark Conway was waiting with several bird specimens to view and tag. Mark has been a certified bird bander in the State of Texas for almost two decades. He has been banding on CCR for the past few years and documenting the species that he finds. The bird in this photo is a common Ground Dove.



Photo by Carolyn Cardile.

Stacy Sanchez, Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, brought information and displays about the rare ocelot. She talked about the importance of private ranches like CCR as habitat.



Photo by Carolyn Cardile.

During breaks Leroy Overstreet talked and answered questions about the south Texas alligator. He displayed his book and showed items that had been made from alligator skins. Three of our TMN chapter helped Leroy with photography and editing for his book: Mary Donahue, Ruth Hoyt, and me. For more information on Leroy, see <http://www.richardmoorenature.com/Article/1011778> .

On the day of the visit, a Texas Commission on Environmental Quality film crew was preparing a documentary in honor of an award this year recognizing my 20-plus years of doing conservation and education in Texas. It was important to me that the TMN was part of the video. ♦



Photo by Tom Butler.

A Day at Cactus Creek Ranch

by Carolyn Cardile

We had a fantastic day at Mary Jo Bogatto's Cactus Creek Ranch! We divided trainees into two groups. Each group rode into the brush to watch Mark Conway band the birds he was catching in a nearby net.



Each bird was carefully removed from the net and placed in a bag to wait for its turn.



Each bird was weighed, measured, examined, and banded, with care not to keep it in the bag too long.

Mark explained what he was doing and made notes in his journal as he worked. I was surprised to learn that many of the birds he catches on the ranch already have his bands on them. Apparently birds return to the same location frequently. As we watched him, several of us took the opportunity to get some great photos.



While one group watched Mark banding birds, the other group was learning about the environment and wildlife of Cactus Creek Ranch. Stacy Sanchez and Marion Mason from Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge gave an excellent presentation, complete with animal pelts and other hands-on items.



Mary Jo also introduced us to LeRoy Overstreet, the author of *How to Catch an Alligator*. While all this was going on, a film crew was making a documentary about Mary Jo and the Ranch, related to her Texas Environmental Excellence Award. ♦

More News from Cactus Creek Ranch

by Mary Jo Bogatto

These young ladies were part of the original Envirothon team that started training here on Cactus Creek Ranch four years ago. Krystyn (left) is a student in Ecological Restoration at Texas A&M, a program she calls Envirothon on steroids! Jacqueline is in her senior year at Rio Hondo and is training the rookies in the Envirothon class.

The photo shows one of the native plants they planted with teacher Tira Wilmoth a few years ago. The plant is healthy and growing with a little support from Krystyn and Jacqueline. We all enjoy watching the plant and the young women grow healthy and strong.



The Las Huellas Association was organized to serve as an advocate for the benefit of South Texas wildlife and for the rights of South Texas wildlife managers, landowners, and sportsmen in educational and wildlife habitat-related arenas. Since its establishment, Cactus Creek Ranch has supported fund-raising activities for Las Huellas, to the extent of donating a cabin, the Cactus Pad, located on the Ranch to raise money for relocation of Rio Grande Valley turkeys. For several years the turkeys have been relocated onto Cactus Creek Ranch.

This Golden-fronted Woodpecker was born the spring of 2012. His plumage is nice because he molted earlier in the fall. He is showing off his crown of red feathers. The white feathers on top cover his main tail feathers and make me think of a cotton tail rabbit! The main tail feathers are used for balance, along with his feet. On February 23rd, this bird was recaptured at Cactus Creek Ranch. It had been first caught on November 3, 2012, in the same location. ♦



Ramsey Park Update

by Robert Archer

We have done lots of work in Ramsey Park this year, and I encourage you to come and see it. In January, we removed several low hanging, head bumping limbs from the pathway leading into Hummingbird Trail. To fill in the gaps we put in two lattice screens: an 8-ft by 8-ft one near the main trail and a 4-ft by 8-ft one where the pathway opens into the garden. They cut down disruption caused by foot traffic passing by on Ebony Trail and allow visitors to approach the inner garden with fewer distractions for the birds at the feeders.



We also placed two sections of cut-off tree trunk at the back of the garden as rustic seating. They give visitors a shady place to rest or view and photograph wildlife in the afternoon with the sun behind their backs.

In February we started work a little further down Ebony Trail on an area originally called Butterfly Retreat. It had not been taken care of for several years and was overgrown. Two mesquite trees and a wild olive tree needed trimming, and numerous thorn bushes had to be removed to open a view.

Linda Butcher coordinated with the Harlingen Parks and Recreation Department to rotate a bench located at the front of the area so that it is now facing in. She also arranged to have a load of river rock dropped off as material for a water feature. Then, with Christina Mild's permission, I moved a bench from the abandoned "Garden of Eating" and placed it facing out from the back side of the new area.



We installed a section of rail fencing on the front perimeter to prevent pedestrians from cutting through the shrubbery, along with two sections of rail fencing to form a corner boundary in the back. The inside pathway connecting the two benches was graveled using the fine gray gravel that was left at Ramsey several years ago by the Texas Highway Dept. We used landscaping timbers to help delineate the pathway from the open mulched area. We used more than fifty bags of no-float, cypress mulch to cover the open area.



We put in a raised flower bed near the front to add color and to cover up the exposed roots of a leaning mesquite tree. We chose plants that require very little water and lots of sun to go in the flower bed and elsewhere around the new area. There is a plan to plant a variety of lantanas to complement the native lantana already growing in there. We planted several species of flowering vines to attract butterflies and hummingbirds, and to screen off a large brush pile created when clearing the over growth.



While clearing the new area, we found several interesting glass bottles, on or near the surface, that date this part of the old landfill to the late 1950's or very early 60's. One unusual item is a blue plastic coin issued in late 1959 and commemorating the Los Angeles Dodgers World Series Championship. The coin features Johnny Podres, a pitcher, on the heads side and gives his stats on the reverse. It is one of a series featuring each member of the team. The individual coins were given out in packages of Armor hot dogs as a sales promotion. The coin is in remarkable condition considering it was found after more than 53 years in the ground. A baseball memorabilia website places its current value around \$35.

I have asked the city for a sign designating the new area as the "Charles Ira Manning Memorial Garden." Charles Manning was a Harlingen police officer for more than 30 years. He rose from patrol officer to the rank of Lieutenant. As a young patrol officer, he was stabbed while attempting to detain a group of criminal suspects. His wounds were serious, close to fatal. Years later, when he retired, he was in charge of the Criminal Investigations Division. During his years of service, he was highly regarded for his honesty, intelligence, and devotion to duty. As a supervisor, he was respected and esteemed by his subordinates and contemporaries alike. Mr. Manning passed away May 3rd of this year. ♦

A Special Hardware Store

by Terry Weymouth

I love hardware stores. I have always loved them. Probably because I am an engineer, they have always been my favorite kind of store to meander through and just look at stuff. But now I have found the ULTIMATE in hardware stores—the Lowe's Hardware in Sierra Vista, Arizona, more specifically, its Garden Department.

This Great Horned Owl pair has been nesting and raising chicks in the outdoor portion of Lowe's Garden department for the past FIVE YEARS. The staff pays particular attention to their presence and even marks their location to avoid injuring them and to help interested customers find them more easily.



When we were there, one adult was high above the entrance while the other adult perched high along the back wall. Both adults watched us but seemed used to the attention. One chick sat on top of a stack of boxes, very tolerant of me and others who were easily within six to eight feet of it. The other chick was high up in storage racks ignoring us. And the staff went about business as usual, aware of where the owls were but generally ignoring them until someone asked a question about them.



Home Depot, eat your heart out! ♦

Sea Turtle, Inc., Interns Are Here!

by Adrian Ramos

Every year Sea Turtle, Inc., chooses eight interns from universities around the country to work at its South Padre Island facility. Interns must be in a biological science program or be graduates at a university or college. Curator Jeff George and his staff review applications and then conduct countless interviews to pick the brightest and the best in the nation. If selected and they accept, the interns are

rewarded with experience critical to their future success. They are provided housing on the island and a daily stipend for their six- or three-month tour as well as invaluable hands-on experience in conservation, research, public education, sea turtle medical care, and wildlife interpretation. Countless applications came in for this spring's and summer's two internship terms.

Internship duties range from working in STI's turtle hospital, conducting public education, providing medical treatment, triaging, calculating dosages, assisting in gift shop sales, and tagging sea turtles. The interns get an opportunity of a lifetime to work directly in conservation efforts to bring the Kemp's ridley Sea Turtle off the endangered species list. During turtle nesting season, interns conduct ATV beach patrols from South Padre Island to Port Mansfield and along Boca Chica Beach, looking for momma turtles and their nests. If they find a turtle, they tag and document it, and then harvest the laid eggs for safe incubation and hatching.

The resulting baby turtles are released around 54 days later when the eggs hatch. A lot of the hatchling releases are open to the public at county beach Access #3 just north of town. Check the STI Facebook page every day at 6am for hatching release notices. Come by STI on 6617 Padre Island Blvd to see the turtles, and meet the interns and staff.

Arribada and Alpha

by Mary Ann Tous

Each year the Kemp's ridley sea turtle announces the arrival of spring in its own voice. Decades ago the natives of Rancho Nuevo in Mexico who first witnessed this particular day called it *Arribada*, meaning "arrival by sea" in Spanish. Endless waves of sea turtles churn the coastal water in a frenzy of activity, yet each nester waits its turn to leave its clutch of eggs in the warm sand of the welcoming beach. It is indeed a remarkable sight with so many sea turtles arriving in a vast migration simply to nest, to leave their treasured eggs at Rancho Nuevo in Mexico, and then quickly to return to the safety of the sea.

At first this Arribada was thought to be nothing more than a myth handed down from generations of villagers, but in 1947, the event was captured on camera by Señor Herrera, an adventurous aviator who had long believed the storytellers and wanted to see it himself. His patience paid off when, while flying over Rancho Nuevo to explore the uninhabited coast, he saw what looked like thousands of sea turtles migrating toward shore. After reaching the brink of extinction due to predators awaiting the turtles as they arrived on shore, today Kemp's ridley has recovered significantly. But the recovery was achieved only by years of work by a devoted group of individuals with the foresight to understand what was at stake. Fortunately, the sea turtles are now protected by the US Government through the Endangered Species Conservation Act and with help from many organizations linked by dedicated volunteers. Each year

volunteers recover thousands of eggs, protect them, and then release hatchlings into the Gulf waters.

The Arribada is also known as a *Grito* (Spanish for shout), a local way of announcing the beginning of the nesting season. El Grito Arribada sends the word echoing along the Gulf coast that the Kemp's ridleys have come ashore. Preparations made all the way back to the previous season's hatchling releases ensure that everyone is ready for the new nesting season. The minute the hatchlings vacate their nests, planning begins for the next year's sea turtle nursery. The plan will be well executed: Dr. Donna Shaver of the US National Park Service, Chief of the Division of Sea Turtle Science and Recovery at Padre Island National Seashore, is responsible for all sea turtle operations on the Padre Island National Seashore.

The history of Arribadas is interesting, particularly the role of a special sea turtle named Alpha. In the early 1960s, Ila Loetscher, in her four-wheel drive, and Dearl Adams led a convoy to a rookery in Rancho Nuevo, which was little more than a barren stretch of sand. They gathered sea turtle eggs to transport them to South Padre Island. They had negotiated with the Mexican government authorities for permits to take the eggs out of Mexico and managed to fly the eggs into the United States.

This was the beginning of Project Ridley, which established a protected camp area for the eggs to incubate unmolested at a site approximately nine miles north of Andy Bowie Park. Named "Ranchito Tortuga," the small camp flew an American flag high over a fenced corral that measured a mere ten-by-ten feet with a wire fence supported by four wooden posts. As the first corral for Kemp's ridley eggs erected on South Padre Island, Ranchito Tortuga was basic and provided volunteers with few comforts or protection from the elements or nightly predators. The cots they slept on offered no relief from mosquitoes and the heat was oppressive, yet these conservation pioneers cut a path to be followed by today's TMN volunteers, originating many of the ideas about turtle conservation that have evolved over the decades.

The most successful year for Project Ridley was 1967, when it released 1,102 hatchlings in a single week. But the success also ended an era. Dearl Adams and others believed that they had released enough hatchlings back into the sea over the decade and that it was time to close Project Ridley. They were ready to wait and see if hatchlings would survive and return to South Padre Island to nest once they matured.

So Dearl retired the project, and Ila began educational programs of "meeting the turtles" at her home using tanks she had built in the back yard of her beachside house. She kept watch for the Arribada along the shore and continued to visit the camp, and she always told us to watch out for her sea children for she was certain that they would return.

On May 12, 1974, a lone Kemp's ridley was spotted nesting. Ila named her Alpha, borrowing the Greek word for "first," and quickly a plan that had been devised earlier went into effect. Alpha was promptly tagged and measured (26 inches across with a

weight of 80 lbs.) before she triumphantly made her way back to sea, oblivious to cameras that were rolling to document the momentous occasion. Seemingly unaware of the crowd of people that had gathered to cheer her on, she continued slowly toward the water and disappeared from view. Ila had tears in her eyes but in her own words the story ended in July: “54 days is a long time to watch a sand nest, but we did and on the 4th of July one lone baby crawled out of the sand. I named him Yankee Doodle Dandy.”

I wish you all a happy Fourth! Thank you, TMN volunteers and congratulations to our very own Steve Fowler who found the first nest this year with 98 eggs. ♦

Tarantula Hawk

by Nan Persinger

I have learned more about the Tarantula Hawk, a spider wasp, since my close encounter with one on a field trip to Sal del Rey with the Texas Master Naturalists. Here is information I gathered from guides and the internet. I have seen them throughout the six years I have lived in the Rio Grande Valley; in fact, I noticed one today while hiking through Chihuahuah Woods. Spending time in the outdoors provides numerous opportunities to observe different forms of wildlife. I admit that I don't always take the time to research what I see, but I always find it so much more rewarding when I do.



Photo by Tom Butler.

What draws your immediate attention to the Tarantula Hawk is its bright rust-colored wings flitting about as the wasp searches brush lands for tarantulas. The coloring on the wings warns potential predators that the wasp is dangerous. Its long legs have hooked claws for grappling with its victims. It is a big wasp, two inches, making it among the largest of wasps. I have never feared them, but have learned to give them their own space as the stinger of the female can be up to 1/3-inch long and the sting is painful.

The female captures, stings, and paralyzes the spider, and then either drags her prey back into her own burrow or transports it to a specially prepared nest, where she lays

a single egg on the spider's abdomen and then covers the burrow entrance. When the wasp larva hatches, it creates a small hole in the spider's abdomen and then enters and feeds voraciously, avoiding vital organs for as long as possible to keep the spider alive. After several weeks, the larva pupates. Finally, the wasp becomes an adult and emerges from the spider's abdomen to continue the life cycle.

Tarantula wasps are also nectarivorous, and consuming fermented fruit sometimes intoxicates them to the point that flight becomes difficult. While the wasps tend to be most active in daytime summer months, they tend to avoid high temperatures. The male does not hunt; instead, it feeds off the flowers of milkweeds, western soapberry trees, or mesquite trees (females feed on these same plants as well). The male has a behavior called hill-topping where he sits atop tall plants and watches for passing females so that they can reproduce.

The Tarantula Hawk is relatively docile and rarely stings without provocation. However, the sting is among the most painful of any insect, though for humans the intense pain only lasts about 3 minutes. Because of its extremely large stinger, very few animals are able to eat the Tarantula Hawk; however, one of the few animals that can is the roadrunner. Because predatory animals avoid these wasps, many other insects mimic them, including various other wasps and bees as well as moths, flies, and beetles.



In 1989, the US state of New Mexico chose the insect as its official state insect. The choice was prompted by a group of elementary school children doing research on states that had named state insects. In the video game “Fallout: New Vegas,” the Tarantula Hawks have mutated inside a research facility known as the Big MT into deadly new creatures called Cazadores, which means “hunters” in Spanish. The adult Cazador is approximately the size of an adult human and very aggressive. ♦

Handbook Revision

by Alicia Cavazos

A simple statement by a board member—“There is some redundancy in the handbook”—triggered recognition that it needed to be examined again and edited. A subcommittee made up of Heidi Linnemann, Frank Wiseman, Jolaine Lanehart, Virginia Vineyard, and Alicia Cavazos met at Jolaine’s house in March and started the task. The original handbook had been written in 2005 to reflect the State handbook, including most of the verbiage of the state handbook while keeping the original local information, which caused the redundancy. The handbook has been amended several times since, which created even more redundancy.

We started our task by reading each word, and we created new sentences that are more relevant to the chapter today. After about five hours, we decided to let it rest. Jolaine typed the new version and sent it to the committee members for review. The members sent additional revisions, and a new handbook was created in three parts, segmented by audience: handbook for trainees, handbook for members, and a partners list.

The new organization allows necessary changes to be made, or a partner to be added or deleted, without affecting the whole handbook. We asked Wendie Allstot to do an additional edit, and her very good ideas resulted in more changes. Finally, we sent a version to education committee members Carolyn Cardile and Tom Butler, and we incorporated their suggestions.

Jolaine typed the final draft, which was presented to the board on May 14, 2013. More ideas and changes were incorporated, and the final draft was approved on May 16, 2013. The newly approved handbook will be placed on the website so that everyone has easy access to it when a question arises. Thanks for everyone’s input; we hope revision this will serve us for many years to come. ♦



Looking Ahead to 2014

by Carolyn Cardile

The 2013 Education Programs for both the upper and lower valley classes were fun and informative. Sally Robey and I are looking forward to continuing on the Education Committee for the Lower Valley with the assistance of several volunteers. Tom Butler and his committee are excited about next year as well. Both groups have already started planning for next year. We believe we can make a few improvements to make our program even better than it was last year. If any Master Naturalists want to participate in the planning, please contact Carolyn Cardile. ♦

