



The Chachalaca

VOLUME 12 NUMBER 2 30 JUNE 2015

In this Issue

President's Message 2
Linda Butcher

Exciting News from Ramsey Park 3
Anita Westervelt

RGV TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

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President's Message

by Linda Butcher

Hello Master Naturalists,

A lot of good things have happened in the past few months. We have seen the formation of a new Master Naturalist Chapter in the Rio Grande Valley. This will give the people of the Valley a better opportunity to learn more about what we have to offer.

Our new graduates have already begun their adventures of volunteering. Some have been working at Hugh Ramsey Nature Park. They have been clearing new areas, planting, and maintaining some of the established areas, as you'll see in the story on the next page.

If you are still looking for a place to volunteer, visit the RGVCTMN website for our partners list. Remember that Volunteers Rock.

Some of our members spent time on the island doing intensive birding. Migration brought many different species to observe. In May we had a great field trip to the island with Dr. Richard Kline. We learned about beach ecology, our reefs and examined critters found in the Laguna Madre.

At our June meeting we learned about fossils, minerals and gemstones and the different places in which to find them. I'm looking forward to our July field trip to the Davis Mountains. Our members Jolaine Lanehart and Jim Najvar are park hosts at Davis Mountains State Park and have invited us to join them again this year. They have many activities planned for us. If you have not been on this trip, you should consider it. I've been the past two years and I can't wait to go again.

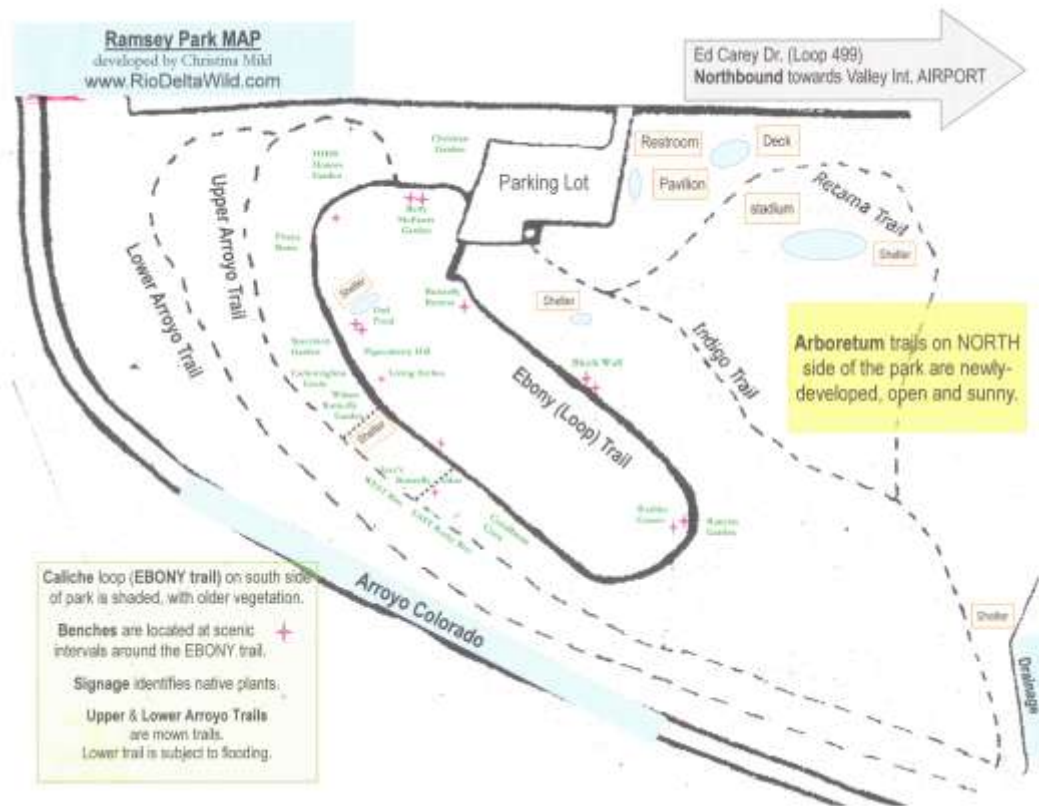
Have a safe and fun summer.

Linda ♦

Exciting News from Ramsey Park.

by Anita Westervelt

Harlingen's Hugh Ramsey Nature Park is getting an overhaul thanks to a successful coordinated team effort.



Last fall, a RGVCTMN Ramsey Advisory Committee was resurrected. Because several volunteer organizations are responsible for what the park is today, the committee includes RGVCTMN members Frank Wiseman, chairman, and Diann Ballesteros, cactus and rare plant consultant. RGVCTMN members representing the Native Plant Project and Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society are Christina Mild and Linda Butcher, respectively. RGVCTMN chapter secretary Heidi Linnemann is on the committee with RGVCTMN member Anita Westervelt, coordinator.

The inspiration to resurrect the Advisory Committee came while contemplating stipulations in Frank Wiseman's memorial scholarship to his friend and fellow RGVCTMN charter member, Dick Roesler. Frank will be the first to admit that the "Old Guard" no longer can provide the labor force required to maintain the Ramsey Park gardens that the original RGVCTMN members and other groups designed and implemented.

From my perspective as coordinator, the challenge was not only to find a labor force interested in working in the park but to find volunteers interested in learning everything that Frank Wiseman knows. I've always been an advocate of far-reaching possibilities.

As the committee formed last fall and field trips began to locate rare plants, assess current garden conditions and document all the native plants in Ramsey, it was immediately evident that the Old Guard Advisory Committee members had a wealth of information and were entirely willing to share it with volunteers. The challenge transformed into teaching Frank's knowledge, as well as Christina's, Diann's, and Linda's, plus imparting the history of the park itself.

Committee Goal: To provide mentorship and directed projects for RGVCTMN volunteers in order to maintain the park for a cohesive native nature experience in an aesthetic, natural, and safe environment.

Scope: Overarching purposes of Rio Grande Valley Chapter Texas Master Naturalist (all things native), Native Plant Project (native plant preservation and restoration), and Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society (birding diversity).

Projects (in no particular order):

- Establish a list of mentors for new trainees/volunteers.
- Designate dead limbs/trees to be removed where they pose danger to the public.
- Improve existing water lines/spigots and rejuvenate existing hoses.
- Remove invasive grasses and replace them with native plant colonies.
- Identify significant trees, plants, and wildflowers, and consider signage.
- Coordinate seed collection.
- Consider engineering/construction to certain trail heads.
- Create, coordinate, and schedule Ramsey Park educational opportunities.
- Prepare volunteers to lead educational field trips in the park.
- Improve aesthetics along park frontage.
- Clear paths and clean up/maintain existing gardens around Ebony Loop.

In January, we successfully recruited a handful of volunteers from the 2015 TMN training class. Since then, we have expanded the Ramsey Work Party Team e-mail list to 29 individuals. The list includes two high school students and a middle school science teacher as well as RGVCTMN members and Winter Texans.

The core group, which we call the New Guard, includes 2015 graduates Barbara Peet, Karren Scheiner, Pamela Gregory, Greg Storms, and Kim Kirby. Information gurus and work team leads are Frank Wiseman, Christina Mild, Linda Butcher, Heidi Linneman, and Anita Westervelt. Recently, Karren Scheiner was appointed to the

Advisory Committee for a New Guard perspective. Her familiarity with city officials over a lifetime in Harlingen is an important attribute.

To begin training the volunteers, a large team of workers cleared an area along Ebony Loop of over-growth. When it was time to quit, Frank mentioned that a huge patch of old prickly pear encroaching on the path needed to come out one of these days. The group looked at it and began hacking away until nothing was left but rich, friable soil. We'd already cleared enough rampant vegetative growth to build two big brush piles. We re-arranged those and ended up with three huge brush piles covered with cactus debris.

The learning experience included an intimate introduction to the flesh-tearing spines of granjeno and the annoying amount of stickers on a prickly pear cactus pad. It also included an introduction to the grueling eradication of invasive guinea grass; the amazing art and practicality of forest brush piles; and pack rat condo building and their dietary preferences for prickly pear cactus and guinea grass. Theory introduced demonstrated clearing overgrowth to showcase an important species so it could thrive instead of competing with aggressive scrub growth for nutrients, space, and sun. Frank thought the team had so much fun clearing the area that he suggested we dedicate the space to the core intern group. Because there was so much laughter involved in clearing the space that day, group members named their new garden, the Laughing Garden. With Frank's help, they chose and planted a grouping of native plants that would go well in that large area.

Subsequent Advisory meetings established a priority list of gardens for revitalizing.

Garden maintenance projects (in order of priority):

- The Laughing Garden
- New project Coral Bean Cove
- Ani Cut
- New project Crucillo Corner and Monarch-specific plants
- Izzy's Garden
- Re-vegetated area upper Arroyo Bank (behind Izzy's Garden) – on-going
- Carlowrightia Circle
- Runyon Garden
- Warbler Corner
- Butterfly Meadow
- Tom Wilson Garden

Anyone wanting to join the Ramsey Crew is welcome and will be added to the e-mail list upon request. We have been meeting Thursday mornings at 9:30 a.m. and work as long as we like. Volunteers are welcome to come at their convenience. Many times we stop for lunch at the Mexican restaurant across the highway from the park entrance. Lunch times have lasted up to three hours, sharing ideas, brainstorming, and learning Frank and Christina's vast information.

For the summer, we are trying out different shifts. An early crew starts about 6:30 a.m. Others meet at 9 a.m. and in the evening between 4 and 7 p.m.

Early shift: All of you who have seen the movie, “Little Shop of Horrors,” will know what I mean when I say the plot was inspired by Ebony Loop after a great, drenching rain. We have had several of those rains this spring. Although the park is magical with colorful blooms, butterflies, dragonflies, lizards, and birds, when volunteers try to exit the loop in their vehicles via the swing-gate side of Ebony Loop, tendrils of possum grape and milkweed vine; new growth branches of mesquite, granjeno and colima; and colonies of lantana, mist flower and prickly pear cactus snag at both sides of small conveyances. One barely survives with tires intact.

Earlier this year, January/February, many of us cleared that lane so we could get vehicles through to work in the gardens and haul tools, drinking water, bug spray, and other necessities. Because of the rains, it needs work again. Heidi has volunteered to lead the early team in clearing the loop of overgrowth. It entails using loppers, small hand saws, chainsaws, small garden clippers, and thick gloves. Also necessary is removing debris, whether building fun brush piles for critters, distributing green mulch to various areas, or hiding limbs and debris on the forest floor under vegetation to create unique ecosystems that will happily rot away.

9 a.m. shift: Frank and Anita continue as they have been, teaching plant identification, theory, garden maintenance, clearing overgrown existing gardens, and Latin (one of Frank’s many specialties). For the next couple of weeks, we will continue concentrating on improving Izzy’s Garden. Once that is done, we will go on to the adjacent gardens. When the rains stop for the summer, maintenance will include watering.

4 to 7 p.m. shift: Christina is happy to lead this group. Some activity will continue in the Coral Bean Cove make-over. Other activities will include plant rescue from areas that soon will be overcome by guinea grass or flooding – depending on this year’s hurricane season (which started June 1), re-vegetation, seed planting and collection, and work in areas along the Ramsey frontage hills. In addition, if anyone is interested to enter a “whole ‘nother world,” as Christina says, there are plants along the Arroyo bank where specialty plants like indigo heliotrope, basket flower, and heartleaf hibiscus need continuing protection from the encroachment of more common plants, especially guinea grass. Many plants are coming into seed at this stage. Some seed will be collected, cleaned, packaged, and stored for later planting, and other seed will be collected for immediate broadcasting in barren areas. Although we’ve devised a definite volunteer plan with priorities in order to maintain interest, offer variety, and provide structure, there are objectives that continue to crop up. We strive to remain flexible, changing with weather conditions, interests and abilities of our volunteers.

Thanks to the new teams and the long-term faithful volunteers, we have made a healthy dent in listed projects, many of which are on-going. Lou Osborne, Greg Storms, and Pamela Gregory made vast improvements to each of the faucets along Ebony Loop, raising them above ground to improve access and safety, which has been much appreciated by all volunteers.

Frequent and abundant rains throughout winter and spring gave our volunteers the opportunity to make two trips to Christina Mild's Arroyo bank property (across the river from Ramsey) to rescue many native species growing in areas which would ultimately be mown. These provided sufficient plant material to re-vegetate several areas and brought additional plant diversity to the park. One of the re-vegetated areas is the Arroyo Bank Garden at the southeast end of Ani Cut, which was generously cleared of guinea grass by Harlingen park employees. Another re-vegetated section that received these plants was the initial portion of the Laughing Garden.

Fall mistflower was planted on hills that lie along the Ramsey Park frontage, and volunteers also worked to kill and remove guinea grass, especially surrounding re-vegetation specimens from a very early RGVCTMN project aimed at enhancing the beauty and diversity of that area.

Abundant bagged leaves and the availability of volunteers with trucks provided us with free mulch, which enhanced each of those gardens. Many plant specimens were also moved from pathways within Ramsey Park to newly-cleared areas ready for re-vegetation. A small raised garden of milkweed was recently created in the Crucillo Corner garden at Ani Cut to attract monarchs.

Volunteers skilled at handling chainsaws, pole saws, weed eaters, RoundUp sprayers, and hedge trimmers have made it possible to achieve goals that have been unattainable for the past several years. The most recent example is the clearing of competing mesquite from one of only two rare barreta bushes that are in the park. Collecting seed from rare natives is an important goal of the group and a good project to look forward to this summer.



Kim Kirby, Pamela Gregory, Greg Storms, and Louise Wilkinson clear an area for a brush pile that will be hidden from the pathway.



Velia Chavex, Tim Jarvis, Barbara Peet, Mary Jarvis, Karren Scheiner, and Linda Butcher chat prior to beginning their various volunteer jobs.



Large prickly pear cactus growing over Ebony Loop trail.



Greg Storms hauls off one of the heavy trunks of a large prickly pear cactus.



Louise Wilkinson, Barbara Peet, Pamela Gregory, Greg Storms, Kim Kirby, Karren Scheiner, and Mario Moreno scrape up the last of the prickly pear cactus.



Greg Storms, Karren Scheiner, Louise Wilkinson, and Pamela Gregory dig out guinea grass with garden forks in Coral Bean Cove.



Frank Wiseman checks out Stump Hollow for a brush collection point while Heidi, Bruno, and Greg await a decision.



Frank documents volunteer work with his ever-present camera while Louise Wilkinson, Pamela Gregor, and Mario Moreno tackle guinea grass.



Leaf mulch is spread over newly cleared ground before planting. Marine ivy and milkweed vines rescued during clearing were transplanted around the brush pile in the background where they will eventually camouflage the pile and provide nectar for butterflies and seed for birds.



Guinea grass brigade clearing Coral Bean Cove: Christina Mild, Karren Scheiner, and Barbara Peet.



Karren Scheiner and other volunteers get to learn skills they never dreamed about.



Christina Mild shares tips on seed collecting with Karren Scheiner, Greg Storms, Mary Jarvis, Jorge Gonzales, and Tim Jarvis.



Barreta bush rescue team, Greg Storms, Karren Scheiner, Christina Mild, and Jorge Gonzales.



Native Texas lantana, *Lantana urticoides*, have self-propagated to form a sea of color in a garden along Ebony Loop.



High school students learn the importance of brush piles in Ramsey Park.



Fulfilling a goal to provide educational opportunities in Hugh Ramsey Nature Park. ♦

