



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 Linda Butcher

Summer is here and there is so much to do. How will we ever have enough time? At least we've had some good rain recently.

Several weeks ago a group of TMN ladies and myself took a little road trip up the coast to Bolivar Peninsula and High Island. We went to all the birding hot spots in the area. My favorite place was the rookery at Smith Woods. It was very interesting to see all the nesting egrets with their cute little babies. I was surprised to see that some of the babies were tiny and some were as big as the adults but still begging for food. The spoonbills were so pink it hurt your eyes. As far as I could tell they were still sitting on their eggs. We also went to Moody Gardens Tropical Pyramid in Galveston. It has beautiful tropical garden specimens and tropical birds. If you are ever in Galveston, it should be on your must see list. We spent most of a week birding, eating fantastic seafood and having a great time.

We should be very busy getting our volunteer hours this summer. If you have the time I suggest you take the trip to the Davis Mountains in August. Our members Jolaine Lanehart and Jim Najvar are park hosts at Davis Mountains State Park. They have invited us to join them. They always have wonderful activities planned

The work at Hugh Ramsey Park is moving right along. The bio-retention basin is being planted and work on the ponds is almost complete.

I hope everyone has a safe summer and remember volunteering is fun.

Linda ♦

Participation Is the Key

by Madeleine Sandefur

Like many of my fellow Texas Master naturalists, I enjoy participating in Citizen Science projects in addition to just watching and photographing birds. For example, two birding buddies and I fielded a team in the Great Texas Birding Classic Tournament – we were the “Wingbeats” – and competed in the “Human-powered” category. We tallied 83 species in about six hours – all by simply walking and checking every nook and cranny of the wonderful habitat around the

South Padre Island Convention Center, as well as the adjacent boardwalk and surrounding mudflat areas.

Another project, the Waterbird Survey organized by the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program, piqued my interest, so I signed up for a couple of these surveys and joined Mary Jarvis and her husband at Boca Chica Beach one sunny afternoon in April. During the course of that adventure, not only was I lucky enough to encounter a very handsome Red Knot in breeding plumage, but was surprised to observe and photograph an endangered Piping Plover which prominently display some “jewelry”. Because I was familiar with the database maintained by the National Bird banding Laboratory, I submitted the information displayed on the banded shorebird and received a response which identified the bird as having been hatched in 2003 or earlier, and told me that it was banded on June 17, 2014 in North Dakota. They even had the name of the bander! Pretty cool, don’t you think? ♦



Male Piping Plover in Summer Breeding Plumage

Sea Turtle Inc. Has A Banner Year!

by Steve Fowler

With a poor season in 2015 all volunteers were hopeful that was just an “off” year. And wow- 2016 is going to be a record year for the South Padre area nesting season. As of May 26th sixty-two nests had been retrieved and protected in the fenced compound.

Many more nests are expected during the normally busy month of June. The writer has been fortunate to find 11 of those nests. The most exciting find was the huge tracks of a Loggerhead. The first recorded for the season. All other nests were the endangered Kemp's Ridley turtles. The loggerhead tracks have to be seen to be believed. A photo shows how they compare to the ATV tracks.



ATV patrols are a labor of love- We like to say it is the most grueling job you will ever love. In a typical season we will make that 64 mile run about 32 times. That works out to over 2000 miles on rough, hot, deserted beaches (well, some areas not so deserted).

It is an honor to work with such dedicated people at Sea Turtle Inc. Check their website (www.seaturtleinc.org) out for updated information on both nest status and upcoming Hatchling releases. If you have not made a public hatchling release you are missing the thrill of a lifetime. As Volunteers we feel this is our payday seeing the little critters scurry off to sea. This year there will be thousands of babies released to the Sea.

Steve Fowler - Patroller for 9 years ♦

Volunteering In the TMN System

by Heidi Linnemann

Giving back for those gifts you have been given is to volunteer your own time, resources, or abilities so that others may also move forward. (Byron Pulsifer)

As Director of Volunteer Services, I am tasked with identifying those activities which qualify for recognition as volunteer service. This is not as difficult as it may seem: if you are doing volunteer work that achieves our mission statement of education, outreach and service to our community, that activity will qualify for volunteer time. There are only two important caveats: one, you cannot be paid for your service (duh, paid work is not volunteer time) and two, the service must be performed in Texas.

There are so many areas with which Master Naturalists are involved that it is simply a matter of helping with those activities which interest you most. Those of you who know me recognize that I love to weed. Give me a patch of guinea grass or *Dicliptera*, and I am in my element! But you don't have to sweat to put in your volunteer time. Here are some other suggestions:

Like to talk on the telephone? You would be helpful volunteering as a mentor for the new class members. This involves taking a registrant for our training class under your wing, so to speak. Let this person know that we care about them having a successful experience with the Master Naturalist program. Answer their questions. Introduce them to other trainees and members who have similar interests. Give directions to the various events. Suggest ways that they can volunteer.

Like to write? Put together an article for this newsletter or one of the two newspapers in the area to which we contribute on a regular basis (The Valley Morning Star and the McAllen Monitor). You are encouraged to write a short article about a naturalist topic that interests you. There are members who have a background in writing and editing, and they are always willing to provide help and suggestions. AND we have members who can spell!

Interested in research? Help with the many environmental studies being held in our area! These are listed as FM opportunities on the drop-down menu of the volunteer form. Count migrating birds. Help track the ocelots. Check water quality of the Laguna Madre. Participate in one of the many research studies being done by Texas Colleges and Universities. Participate in the Cornell Citizen Science Program.

Enjoy working with children? All the nature parks in the area have school field trips with which they need help. Contact your favorite park and ask when they will have children visiting. Don't be afraid that you can't "teach" the students – by helping assist the instructor, you will learn how to do it yourself!

Have a special talent? – share it with others.
(I would be happy to teach you how to weed.)

Great on the computer? – develop power point presentations that you or others can use. We are always getting requests from area groups to provide them with presentations.

Like administrative work? There are lots of ideas kicked around at the Board meetings that just don't get done due to lack of volunteers. Should we have a calling tree? Do we need to update the information on the master membership list? Should we create a member's roster that includes pictures of the members and list their special interests/talents?

Like talking to people? Our outreach program sets up an information table about the Master Naturalist program at various Valley events to share what we do and encourage others to join the program. We recently had a table at the YappoPalooza event at the Brownsville Zoo where we spoke to over 300 attendees. What a great time helping the children get enthused about nature and meeting new residents in the area and sharing information about events that interest them. Our Outreach Chairman, Frank Wiseman, coordinates these events. Give him a call – he can always use help!

And the list goes on and on.....

The Master Naturalists in our chapter are great mentors. They are willing to share their time and expertise with you to help you develop any skills you may feel you are lacking. And if I haven't touched on an area in which you are interested, call me and we can brainstorm a way to make your naturalist love part of the volunteer service program.

Most of these opportunities are sent to you through our ListServe, but if you need help finding an opportunity that interests you, give me a call!

Volunteers don't get paid, not because they're worthless, but because they're priceless. (Sherry Anderson) ♦

Ramsey Park's Ebony Loop Update

by Anita Westervelt

photos by Frank Wiseman

The gardens around Ebony loop got a good soaking the first Thursday workday in June giving our great volunteer team a well-deserved day off.

Our guru, expert plantsman and historian, Frank Wiseman, stayed home evaluating Harlingen's thunderous sound show during the storms and calculating Guinea grass and dicliptera growth rate per inch of rainfall. Those two aggressive Ramsey problem plants will pull out easier after the good soaking.

Our hard work in the gardens around Ebony Loop last year is still evident and continued maintenance easier for it. Something new is always blooming around the Loop.

Renewing the Betty McEnery Memorial Garden is our on-going major project this year. This is the first garden developed in Ebony Loop by a few of the original Texas Master Naturalists about a dozen years ago. Frank orchestrates the progress. Restoration is about 75 percent complete.

After the electric company performed powerline maintenance over the winter, a much larger area was available for the garden. Emily McEnery Cox donated money for us to rejuvenate the memorial garden that was established in honor of her mother. The sub-committee is keeping the original concept: a habitat for birds.

The most amazing feat is Robert Archer's design and construction of a water feature. We chose an area that had a natural depression under an arching branch of a mesquite tree with adjacent bird-food-heavy anacua and granjeno in the background. It is easily viewed from the garden's two benches.

We have tremendous respect and gratitude for Robert for sharing his time and talent in building this wonderful focal point. Mario Moreno, Greg Storms and Volker cleared branches and roots for a path to install plumbing. Greg used his heavy grub-hoe to dig the trench. Anita Westervelt installed the plumbing with Greg's assistance, encouragement and moral support. Robert configured the pond end to provide a continuous drip. The whole process was a great team effort.

The initial clearing and cleaning up of the expanded area happened thanks to Louise Wilkinson and Anita during the winter months and dicliptering continues with help from Mario, Rolando and new team-member Delia Lowe along with the rest of the Thursday morning regulars. A good variety of existing native plant species have been identified and retained thanks to team-member Christina Mild.

The team is developing a plant list to complement our objective. Recently we planted Yellow Sophora, *Sophora tomentosa*, and Potato Tree, *Solanum elaeagnifolium*, propagated respectively by Frank Wiseman and Anita Westervelt. Velia Chavez took cuttings of White mistflower, *Fleischmannia incarnata*, from Butterfly Meadow and we soon will be planting her successful crop of those propagated plants.

Frank keeps a weekly update of our team's Ebony Loop progress on Facebook. If you haven't joined the chapter's Facebook page, type in **Rio Grande Valley Texas Master Naturalists** in the Facebook website's search field.

We always welcome new volunteers to our Thursday morning team. We meet at 9 a.m. in the parking lot of Harlingen's Hugh Ramsey Nature Park on North Ed Carey. If you'd like to get a weekly e-mail notice, contact jjvanm@gmail.com. ♦



Greg Storms, Robert Archer and Volker clear roots for pond frame.



Robert Archer evens up the sides.



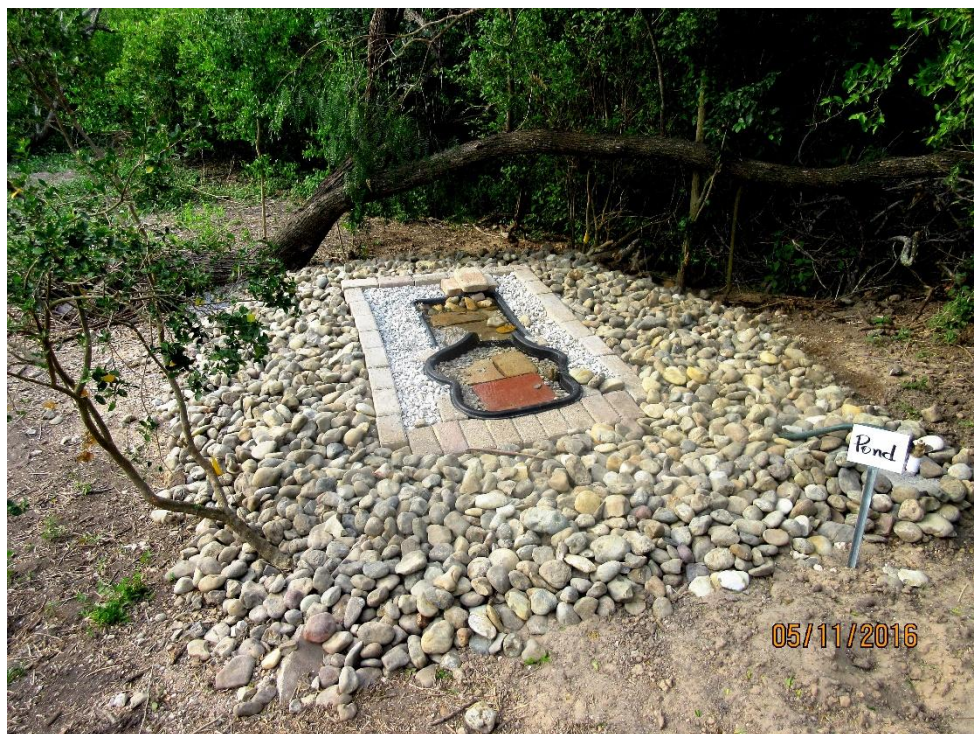
Volker barrowed loads of rock and brick while Robert Archer designed and built pond.



Anita Westervelt completes the plumbing.



Greg Storms and Anita Westervelt packed in the 25 feet of water line.



Project complete. Rock discourages Javelina from eroding edges of the pond.

Stinging Nettle

by Barbara Peet & Robert Gaitan



For those who have not had the displeasure of meeting *Urtica dioica*, commonly called stinging nettle, it is an encounter you do not forget. I can still feel the near microscopic hypodermic needles of this plant from my first encounter a year ago. It irritated the fingers of my right hand as I was trying pull it from our yard...yes, I was not wearing gloves. It caused considerable pain. The image of this terribly hostile plant is permanently etched on my



conscience while the pain still haunts my subconscious. I have cleared this nuisance from every corner of our two acres.

That is until I met *Vanessa atalanta*, the Red Admiral butterfly. I will never fully grasp how evolution has led to this beautiful creature using this plant as its host. The butterfly seeks this nasty plant as a host to lay single eggs on the underside of the leaves. As the larvae hatch, they construct a silken nest around them and feed on the leaves of the stinging nettle. You can identify these nests by looking for rolled leaves. Do not mistake them for anything wrong with your plant, it is simply serving its role as a host for the larvae. In a short matter of time, you will see feeding damage as the Red Admiral larvae consumes its nest. When the caterpillar can no longer be fully concealed, it will open its shelter and move on to make a new nest. Since the caterpillar keeps its frass (waste) within its home, it must move on.



The caterpillar will molt multiple times and look slightly different each time. At first glance, I thought we had multiple species as even the yellowish spines would disappear. After its fifth molt, the Red Admiral caterpillars will hang by a silken cremaster, or support hook, before forming a chrysalis.

By this time, our stinging nettles look like scraggly stems, still with needles, and mostly eaten leaves. Not very attractive at first glance but well worth it when you see the Red Admiral butterfly emerge.

No, these plants are not the ones you run to buy from the nursery, even if they did sell them. But they are the native plants we must



learn to identify and live with if we want more Red Admirals. Stinging nettles now have a special spot in the low traffic corner of our property. We visit it daily to see the black and silver caterpillars claim their spot in our yard. ♦

Update on Rare Sea Bean Find

by Linda Butcher

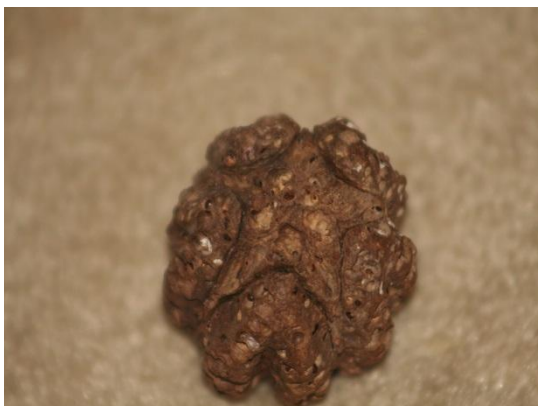
On a recent trip to Ft. Worth, I visited the Botanical Research Institute of Texas at the Ft. Worth Botanical Gardens. The herbarium has over 990,000 preserved plant specimens.

I finally got to meet Barney Lipscomb, editor of the BRIT Journal published twice a year. We had been emailing over the past year in regard to the rare sea bean I had donated to them. I was excited to get a personal tour of the climate controlled vaults where the specimens are kept.

He confirmed that they had received my sea bean from Dr. Raymond van der Ham of the Naturalis Biodiversity Center in the Netherlands. There were ten of this species of sea beans found worldwide over the past few years. He had completed his research. His scientific paper was published in last July's issue of the BRIT Journal. I was excited to see that I was given credit in the journal for donating one of the sea beans.

After months of his research, he determined that these sea beans (seeds) were in fact an unidentified species. It is not known what kind of plant the seed comes from but is thought to grow somewhere in Northeastern Brazil. No scientific name has been assigned as yet but is in the *Sacoglottis* family. It will be commonly called Furrowed Blister Pod.

When you go to the beach, keep your eyes open, you never know what rare or unusual thing you might find. ♦



The Case of the Flying Tree Limb

by Anita Westervelt



Those of us not born in the Rio Grande Valley probably think the trees here aren't very big. If you were to put one of our gorgeous Honey Mesquite, *Prosopis glandulosa*, trees up in an old-growth forest in New York, yeah, it would be dwarfed.

Put that same mesquite tree next to a single-story house in the Valley, and it can tower over the roof, providing shade and cooler interiors. Graceful branches with feathery leaves gently sweep along the roofs in our South Texas gentle breezes - a nap-inducing scene if you've tied a hammock between two trees.

In stronger winds, those same branches dance and waft, scraping the grit off roofing shingles, eventually (quicker than you think) compromising the durability of the roof. Homeowner insurance agents don't like to see that type of roof scarring which could mean less insurance money coming your way if you have a claim.

In my alter-ego, I'm an External Affairs Officer for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) during federally declared disasters, deploying when called.

The Hurricane Season is June 1 through November 30.

I'd be remiss not to mention a couple of things. Like, it's too late to prepare when the weather reporter begins broadcasting a hurricane sighting.

Sure, there's about 10 days to prepare, and always the possibility the hurricane will change course at the VERY LAST MINUTE -- and no one should gamble that closely whether to prepare or not.

You can help protect your home from a hostile weather environment.

Remember the wonderful mesquite tree branches? Mesquite trees are great at self-pruning. They drop limbs at random like a tin robot self-destructing piece by piece.

Detached tree limbs, in the emergency management field, are known as projectiles. In war, bomb debris are projectiles. Put the speed of a hurricane-force wind behind a tree limb and it sounds like a war zone bouncing around on your roof or crashing through a wall or window.

Check your roof line and trim tree branches off it. At the same time, dislodge dead wood from the canopy if possible.

While you're laboring, check the power line to your house. Lop off swaying branches away from over or under the powerline.

Even a slim branch, with enough wind power behind it, can cause a powerline to snap. The neighborhood may not be without electricity, but you could be. After a storm has passed, power companies begin restoring power where state emergency managers direct them, generally to the hardest hit areas and the heaviest populations first.

Some people who responded to this article on our chapter's website blog suggest contacting your power company to see if they will remove tree limbs from powerlines around your house.

Tree trimming projects should be done well in advance of a pending storm to give debris collection companies time to collect would-be projectiles from residential curbs and county roadsides. You don't want your debris to damage neighboring structures.

Another recommendation by those in emergency management is to have a disaster supply kit.

Those are fun. Check it out at www.ready.gov . ♦

Monarch and Milkweed Group Formed

by Anita Westervelt

Carol Goolsby from McAllen's Quinta Mazatlán spoke recently at a Native Plant Project meeting about milkweeds and monarchs.

During her talk, she mentioned that the National Wildlife Federation issued an open letter to mayors encouraging cities to help promote the monarch butterflies and native milkweeds.

A number of NPP, TMN members and general public were so impressed with her milkweed presentation that a group was formed that night. That group met and established their first three priorities:

1. Gardening with native milkweed, applying the term "native" in a strict sense.
2. Informing and teaching those people who plant non-native milkweeds about the problems involved for the health of monarch butterflies.
3. Designing and planting small native milkweed gardens at appropriate locations.

According to Carol Goolsby, there are two known milkweeds in the Rio Grande Valley that monarchs use as host plants. That is not to say that the other 14 RGV milkweeds are not used. It means documentation is not available.

The two known milkweeds are Climbing Milkweed, *Funastrum cynanchoides* and Prairie Milkweed (Zizoes) *Asclepias oenotheroides*.

Anyone can become a member of the Monarch and Milkweed group, but more importantly, each one of us can establish a small native milkweed garden of our own. The presentation did limit the use of tropical milkweed, citing more research into the detrimental effects on monarch caterpillars and butterflies. Tropical Milkweed, Veintiuñilla, Butterfly weed, *Asclepias curassavica* is not considered a native milkweed for this push to promote native milkweed food for monarch larvae.

The group expects to meet quarterly and already have begun promoting. Anyone interested may contact Quinta Mazatlán at 956-681-3370. ♦



Prairie Milkweed



Climbing Milkweed



Monarch on Tropical Milkweed