



# 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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<b>New Class</b>	<b>Chuck Cornell</b>

<b>Newsletter Editor</b>	<b>Lou Osborne</b>
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# **PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**

*By Steven Lanoux*

One of our “blessings” here in South Texas is a long summer. Even our worst winters hardly qualify as brutal. Autumn may last only days, spring is short but incredibly beautiful—and then there are the months upon months of summer. It appears to have arrived early this year, even though the calendar tells us that it has barely begun. Ain’t that special? The recent torrential rains were a bit more than what was needed, but will the drought be really broken? We need a pattern of rain, not a flood.

As Master Naturalists, we need to be heeding our own advice if the drought returns. Mulch the gardens and flower beds. Figure out how little water the landscaping will tolerate and set sprinklers to that. If some of the exotics are stressed, let ‘em suffer a bit. If they perish, replace them with hardier natives. If you maintain a lawn, set the mower cutting height higher and change to a mulching blade if you have not already done so.

And take care of yourselves. Sunscreen, wide-brimmed hats, sunglasses, and lots of hydration! If you have even a mild sensitivity to the sun, long-sleeve shirts are the uniform of the day. One of the things I learned from time in the Middle East is that long, loose-fitting clothing protects against UV and allows the breeze to blow through, and is cooler and a lot healthier than T-shirts and shorts. A few thousand years of living in the desert have taught the residents a few things.

The Chapter is going to have a second class for new members this fall. We had several folks drop out of the winter class because of conflicts but who really wanted to finish, plus there has been enough general interest to justify trying it out. It’s going to be more compressed with Saturdays having regular classes scheduled at partner sites along with field experiences there. Joni Gillis and her co-chair Barbara Peet and the rest of the Education Committee have done yeoman work to put it together. If you are in a position to participate and support it, please do so. It is the enthusiasm of our members in mentoring new students that motivates their volunteerism.

For those of you who are not aware of it, our Chapter is incorporated as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. That means that any contribution that does not provide any material product as a result is tax-deductible. It also means that we are an excellent candidate organization for a corporate or a foundation benefactor. For many companies, the tax deduction is attractive. If you believe your employer is open to supporting TMN, please let one of the Board Members know who we should contact to explore the opportunity.

Thank you for all that you do for the region, the state, and the Chapter.

# **Texas Estuarine Resource Network (TERN)**

## **Monitoring**

*By Julia Osgood*

Pat Bowen and I moved here in the latter part of 2016. As long-time birders, we decided to live in the Rio Grande Valley year-round, so we could see some of the world's most amazing birds whenever we wanted – not just on an annual birding trip to the valley. We joined the Rio Grande Valley Texas Master Naturalist chapter right away. Even though we were both already Master Naturalists, the class coordinator allowed us to sign up and take the classes along with the newbies in 2017. After all, we had a lot to learn about nature in the valley.



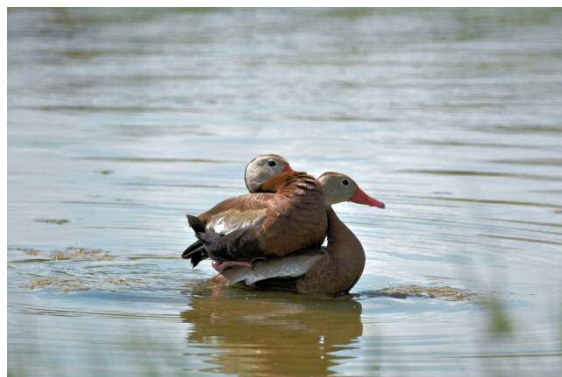
*TURN Volunteers: Julia Osgood, Pat Bowen, Elizabeth (Lizee) Cavazos & Andrea Villarreal*

One of the class speakers was Kari Howard from the Texas Estuarine Resource Network (TERN). After hearing her speak, we signed up for TERN training. In that class, Kari trained attendees how to identify common shorebirds and she explained how to login to the TERN website and enter data.

TERN gathers either foraging survey data or rookery census data. Most of the rookery census data is conducted by boat, so Pat and I chose to focus on foraging survey data. To gather foraging data, volunteers go to a site and count the number of shorebirds of each species, and list what the birds are doing. The categories are feeding, preening, flying over, and loafing. That last category might seem a little strange, but if a bird is just hanging out, catching some rays it means that it has had enough to eat.

After our training, we set out to find a spot with ample shorebirds that we could monitor on a regular basis. We chose Estero Llano Grande State Park. With an abundance of birds and water,

it was the perfect spot for us. As an inland site, it provides TERN with data that is a little bit different from their other sites, which are primarily along the coast.



*Black-bellied Whistling Ducks* (Photo by Lizée Cavazos)



*Blue-winged Teal* (Photo by Lizée Cavazos)

Each pond that we monitor at Estero Llano Grande is considered a site. We monitor Ibis Pond, Avocet Pond, Dowitcher Pond, and Grebe Marsh. However, when we started in the spring of 2017, Dowitcher Pond was so full of birds that we divided that pond into three distinct sections.

Typical birds that we see at Estero Llano Grande include Long-billed Dowitchers, American Avocets, Least Sandpipers, Black-necked Stilts, American Coots, White-faced Ibis, Soras, Green Herons, Great Blue Herons, and Little Blue Herons. The list goes on and on; we see lots of birds there. Even during the warmer months, we see enough birds to make it a fun day. It's one of those activities that you can't believe you're getting volunteer time to do. How can volunteering be this much fun? In fact, it's so much fun that Elizabeth (Lizée) Cavazos and Andrea Villarreal (Class of 2018) joined us this year. The four of us meet at least once a month and record data as we go from pond to pond. It has been helpful to have additional experienced birders with us.



*Stilt Sandpipers*



*Black-necked Stilt*

Of course, as we walk through the park, we encounter other types of birds and an abundance of wildlife, including dragonflies, butterflies, and even a bobcat mother and her baby. Just this May, Pat and I got a life-bird when a Groove-billed Ani perched in a tree near us. If that's not enough, there's always the screech owl on the way in.

If you're around when TERN training is offered again, I hope that you'll consider taking the training and claiming a site to monitor.

# SUCCULENTS ARE POPULAR – AND FOR GOOD REASONS!

*Story and photos by Anita Westervelt*

Succulents are in. They're fun, nearly care free and reproduce relatively easily on their own. They can make excellent ground covers and are just as interesting and easy to care for in pots and containers.

Succulents, unlike cactus, have no spines, thorns or spikey daggers.

The native habitat of the Rio Grande Valley has its own variety of succulents. One of the more popular species, although becoming harder to find, is **Texas stonecrop** (*Lenophyllum texanum*) [*Sedum texanum*], in the Crassulaceae family.

Sedums, also called stonecrops, are plants that have thick fleshy leaves, fleshy stalks and clusters of white, yellow or pink flowers. They generally root wherever they touch the soil. Alternately, their leaves fall easily and take root, forming new plants.

Texas stonecrop is a creeping variety of sedum. It is a perennial and excellent in a rock or succulent garden or as a ground cover.

Its native habitat includes the coastal plains, to the thorn scrub in the lower Rio Grande Valley and west.

Rabbits and tortoises eat this plant and you may want to consider growing it in a container where it will eventually spill over the sides. A very porous soil is important; good drainage is a must.

Stonecrops can get sun scald in extremely hot, dry Valley conditions. They can successfully be grown in partial shade. Texas stonecrop blooms in winter with very small, inconspicuous yellow flowers on upright slender spikes.

It propagates easily from seed, cuttings, and fallen leaves or rosettes. It is host plant for Xami Hairstreak butterfly (*Callophrys xami*).

Another succulent prevalent in the valley is one you may already have and perhaps have disregarded as an unwanted weed. **Common purslane** (*Portulaca oleracea*), a species in the Portulacaceae family, also called verdolaga, often sprouts in sidewalk cracks, between patio pavers and other unplanned places in the garden.

There are two varieties, upright and prostrate. The stems of the prostrate species are hairless and can be as long as 12 inches. It blooms spring through fall. Tiny yellow flowers with yellow anthers produce a many-seeded fruit.

An annual, it comes up from a taproot; it does not root at the stem nodes.

A more familiar Valley species in the Portulacaceae family is **chisme** (*Portulaca pilosa*).

Sometimes confused with its close cousin, moss rose, chisme is a prostrate succulent ground cover that blooms with purplish-red flowers spring through fall. The stems can reach to six inches in length. They are matted with white, wooly hairs. It is an annual, from a taproot.



Chisme likes partial shade to full sun and does well in rocky soil. The flowers provide nectar for small butterflies. The fruit is a tiny, many-seeded capsule, and when ripe, the seed pods can be pinched, scattering the seeds where you'd like to see the plant reproduce.

These three plants are excellent specimens for xeriscaping and good candidates for container gardening when planted in a fast-draining variety of potting soil.



*Texas Stonecrop*



*Common Purslane*



*Chimse*

## SOUND THE TRUMPETS FOR ALAMO VINE

*By Anita Westervelt*



*Alamo Vine (Merremia Dissecta)*

If you pass by irrigation ditches in your travels around the Lower Valley, you're probably familiar with seeing a wash of white dotting the road-side slope of the levees. You might be thinking morning glories, but chances are, you're seeing Alamo vine flowers.

Up close, you'd know you weren't looking at a standard morning glory vine. Alamo vine leaves are dark green and palmated (lobed, veined, or divided, by definition); descriptively, they're like miniature Midwest oak tree leaves, shaped by a cookie cutter. The leaf margins are deeply toothed. Reportedly, the foliage, and other plant parts, give off the essence of an almond scent.





*Alamo Vine Leaves*



*Alamo Vine Flower*

Alamo vine is a member of the morning glory family -- the Ipomoea vines -- although not an early riser like most of its cousins. Alamo vine flowers open in the heat of the day and close before sunset. The flowers are creamy white and funnel shaped with centers the color of bright raspberry. The petals are grown together; the pollen-producing anthers are artfully twisted like something you'd see in a Chihuly blown glass exposition.

Alamo vine is a fast-growing, twining perennial vine easily grown from fresh seed. It re-grows each year from a taproot and spreads by rhizomes. It also readily re-seeds.

Some say to stay away from this vine -- it can cover small structures, according to one report. Another report admitted it can get aggressive. The state of Florida, where it also is native, says it may potentially be a pest and admonishes gardeners to "please plant responsibly."

It is a profuse bloomer -- if the vine at the end of the levy just after you turn off South Sam Houston onto Pennsylvania, outside San Benito, is any indication. That Alamo vine patch has been a faithful bloomer for some 10 years, blooming steadily May through November each year. It has been left to amble down the slope, hugging the earth low enough where county mowers don't disturb it. Bees are attracted to its pollen; butterflies use the flowers for nectar.

Alamo vine's thigmotropic behavior makes it ideal for trellis or chain-link fence design where pruning can help direct and control growth.

The fruit is a coppery brown globose (globe-shaped or spherical, botanically speaking).



*Alamo Vine Fruit*



The dry fruit is really quite fun, itself resembling a flower -- a wooden flower, for that matter, which explains one of its common monikers: woodrose.

The dried fruit capsule splits open quite easily, spilling its four black (poisonous) seeds.



*Dried Fruit Capsules and Seeds*



*Close-up of Dried Fruit Capsule*

This Texas native is drought-tolerant and suitable for xeriscaping. It tolerates poor soil and alkaline soil, likes full sun to partial shade but needs good drainage. It is found on stream banks, shell deposits, thickets and other disturbed areas and in sandy, loamy, clay, caliche, shelly and well-drained calcareous soils. ♦

## **USFWS FEATHER ATLAS**

*By Lou Osborne*

Recently, as I was performing my usual computer pastime of becoming totally distracted and led astray, I ran across a really neat and relatively new U.S Fish and Wildlife Service website. The site, entitled *The Feather Atlas*, is totally dedicated to feather identification and research on the flight feathers of North American birds. To aid in the I.D. process the site provides high-resolution scans of the flight feathers of over 380 birds. This is an ongoing project and new species are constantly being added.

The site provides an image database that may be searched by the common or scientific name of a bird species or group. You may also browse by taxonomic group, e.g. owls or woodpeckers, by means of a list of available scans organized by taxonomic group (orders and families). There is also a section that assists you in identifying your feather by allowing you to run a database search once you enter your feather's characteristics against feathers with similar characteristics.

All in all, I found this to be not only a thoroughly fascinating but a very useful tool in identifying that odd feather you may run across while hiking or just puttering around in the backyard.

You can check out the site at [www.fws.gov/lab/featheratlas/index.php](http://www.fws.gov/lab/featheratlas/index.php). ♦

## LATEST RIPPLE IN THE VALLEY

*By Tamie Bulow*

Nothing gets the blood flowing in a birder like the presence of a rarity in the proximity. This sensation is fueled by the thrill of seeing a new bird to add to one's life list, and knowing it is within striking distance. The Valley is notorious for these opportunities. Such is the latest ripple in the Valley – the tiny Mexican Violetear.

Last year the rush to Quinta Mazatlan was stimulated by the presence of a Green-breasted Mango, another hummingbird with wanderlust. However, this Mexican Violetear (formerly known as Green Violetear) was special because it was perhaps the same bird that was photographed in Rio Hondo a month earlier during the iNaturalist Challenge. A notorious wanderer like the mango, this medium-sized hummingbird is a native of southern Mexico south to Nicaragua, with its metallic green body, and splotches of deep violet on the side of the head and on the breast. But, here it was, at Quinta Mazatlan!



Mexican Violetear (*Colibri Thalassinus*)



Watching the Violetear

Although I missed seeing this bird on my first 5-hour attempt, additional postings on eBird inspired me to return to Quinta for another chance at seeing this little beauty. I approached the cluster of birders, recognizing several other Texas Master Naturalists in the group, and took my place of surveillance. Upon hearing its clacking noise overhead as it approached, the Mexican Violetear finally showed itself in the sun, in the shade, full frontal, back end, hovering, perching, preening and plain putting on a show. Oooohs and aaaahs came from the peanut gallery, sprinkled with a few high fives. This time I left with a smile!

Unfortunately, this Mexican Violetear has not been reported as seen for the past two weeks. The lesson learned is that surprises lurk behind each bough, at each water feature, under that branch, or around the bend. I have learned this is the magic of living in the Valley. ♦

## HELP US PREPARE FOR NEXT YEAR'S GLOBAL CITY NATURE CHALLENGE

The two Valley Texas Master Naturalist chapters are looking forward to entering the annual City Nature Challenge in 2019. This was the first year LRGV entered. We are better prepared for the next time and have some ideas for promotion which will help to attract more citizen observers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

We can't request from iNaturalist a list of our chapter members who uploaded information during the global challenge.

To help us promote the spring 2019 event throughout the Valley, we are considering creating a PowerPoint using our members' photos that were submitted during the challenge. Since we don't know the number of chapter participants, nor their names, we ask that those who submitted photos, please select five of their favorite entry photos and send them to Anita Westervelt at [jjvanm@gmail.com](mailto:jjvanm@gmail.com).

Please identify the subject of the photograph by common name and scientific name, for example:

- Lotebush (*Ziziphus obtusifolia*)
- Keeled Earless Lizard (*Holbrookia propinqua*)

Each photo used in the PowerPoint will include photographer's credit. ♦

## Partner Update: Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge

*By Jolaine Lanehart*

**Bayside Drive:** Most of us are anxiously waiting for our beloved Bayside Drive to reopen for vehicle access. Well, it does appear that the much needed construction will begin during July and the drive will be open in 2019. The drive will be closed to all visitors and most staff during construction.

Closure was due to the deaths of two ocelots struck by cars. Delays have been the result of funding issues, archeology study, various assessments, and the coordination of multiple entities at federal, state and county levels. The construction will change the route to a two way drive that directs vehicles away from the areas most used by ocelots. Days and hours of access will also be limited to further protect ocelots. Hikers and bicyclists will have greater access, but final schedules will be determined at a later time.

**Buena Vista Road:** Construction on Buena Vista from 510 to the Cameron County airport is in process. Please avoid that section of road! Alternate routes include 106 and Ted Hunt Road. Buena Vista from 106 to the Refuge is not yet under construction. This is a county road but construction is planned. Concerns should be addressed to the County Commissioner.



**Holly Beach Clean-Up:** July 14, meet at Roloff Park in Laguna Vista at 9AM and carpool to Holly Beach. Hat, sunscreen, water bottle, closed-toe shoes are essential. Gloves, trash bags, water provided.

**Bahia Grande Clean-Up:** July 28, 8-10AM, on State Hwy. 48 at paved parking area 5 miles south of Port Isabel, near Gayman Restoration Channel. Hat, sunscreen, water bottle, closed-toe shoes are essential. Gloves, trash bags, water provided. This is being sponsored by ACE and SCA interns from LANWR.

**Staff Changes:** After a long drought due to hiring freezes and funding issues, Laguna Atascosa is finally able to fill some positions. There is a new assistant manager, Sergio (Sarge) Vasquez, and a third maintenance worker, Christian Delgado. Both have Valley connections and bring a lot of experience for their respective positions with them. The new position of Urban Ranger was filled by Georgie Garcia who is working half-time with LANWR Visitor Center and half-time with Brownsville ISD schools. The Positions of Wetlands Biologist (formerly, Katrina Marklevits) and Park Ranger (formerly, Marion Mason) are in the process of being posted. If you know someone qualified, please let them know.

**Hours of Operation:** The Refuge is open from sunrise to sunset every day. The Visitor's Center (VC) is open Thursday through Monday, 8AM to 4PM.

**Volunteer Opportunities:** The Refuge is always in need of volunteer help. Of course, trail work and maintenance are at the top of the list, but the VC and administrative staff need help as well. To volunteer, contact Boyd Blihovde, Manager. The Nature Store, operated by the Friends of Laguna Atascosa, also needs help with the store, especially during August (contact me). ♦

## **LOWER VALLEY PLACES 10<sup>th</sup> FOR SPECIES COUNT IN GLOBAL NATURE CHALLENGE**

*By Anita Westervelt*

The Lower Rio Grande Valley placed 10<sup>th</sup> in April's City Nature Challenge in competition with 67 other cities around the globe.

The challenge rated three levels of competition: most observations (of nature), most individual species and most people participating.

Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy counties entered as one entity and placed 10<sup>th</sup> for most species, 15<sup>th</sup> for most observations and 26<sup>th</sup> for most observers with 195 participants.

Individuals photographed nature and uploaded images to the California-based iNaturalist website. In Texas, the Nature Tracker wildlife diversity division of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department helped host the multi-city challenge within the state.

The overall winner of the 2018 City Nature Challenge was the San Francisco Bay Area placing tops in all three categories: most observations: 41,737; most species found: 3,211; and most participants: 1,532.

Closer to home, it was steep competition comparing the four Lower Rio Grande Valley counties with the populations of the five top contenders like San Francisco Bay Area; Dallas/Fort Worth; San Diego; Klang Valley, Greater Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Washington, D.C.

The total observations from the Lower Rio Grande Valley reached 8,760; number of species, 1,660. More than 50 Texas Master Naturalists were included in the Lower Valley's count of participants 195.

Six of the top ten Valley observers and species contributors were from the Valley's two Texas Master Naturalist chapters. Two members of the 33 from the South Texas Border Chapter came in as the top two for most observations.

Third place for most observations and top observer for the Rio Grande Valley Chapter, Texas Master Naturalist was Anita Westervelt, with 337 observations, ranking eighth in species documented at 149.

Seventh place for most observations was Christina Mild with 305 observations and fourth place for most species with 232.

New chapter member Chuck Cornell rated 10<sup>th</sup> place in most observations at 217 with 144 species.

Individuals uploading species relied on experts to help name and identify entries if they were unknown to the photographer. Christina Mild was the top identifier of entered species identifying and verifying 1,759 entries; Frank Wiseman was in fifth place, having identified 309 entries; and Chuck Cornell placed seventh with 271 entries identified.

The iNaturalist.org is a repository of valuable habitat information. Those using the electronic database may connect with experts who can identify observed and photographed organisms. Citizens help create useful data which helps scientists and researchers understand when and where organisms occur. For more information visit [www.iNaturalist.org](http://www.iNaturalist.org).



Turk's Cap

The leading species observed in the Lower Rio Grande Valley during the City Nature Challenge was a hummingbird favorite: Turk's cap (*Malvaviscus drummondii*), which had 49 observations. Tropical sage (*Salvia coccinea*) had 47, cenizo (*Leucophyllum frutescens*) 46, Texas wild olive (*Cordia boissieri*) 46 and honey mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*) had 33 observations submitted by Lower Valley observers. ♦

## **TMN Volunteer Service Hours from January to June, 2018**

### 100 Hours

Ana Coster  
Volker Imschweiler  
Kat Lilie  
Teresa DuBois  
Jack DuBois  
Chuck Cornell  
Elizabeth Cavazos  
Doug Crist  
Michael Elfarnawani  
Javier Gonzales  
M. Kathy Raines  
Angelica Tomayo

### 250 Hours

Philip Dodson  
Chris Freeman  
Steve Lanoux  
Paul Cardile  
Andrea Fazioli  
Stephanie Bilodeau

### 500 Hours

Paul Cardile  
Cristin Howard  
Sherry Borrayo

### 1000 Hours

Barbara Peet  
Madeleine Sandefur  
Justin Spaulding- LeClaire  
Greg Storms



# **PLANT NATIVE PLANTS**

*BY DREW BENNIE*

IN TEXAS THERE IS HEAT AND DROUGHT  
BUT OUR NATIVE PLANTS ARE REALLY STOUT  
PLANT NATIVE PLANTS AND YOU TOO WILL SHOUT  
“ORNAMENTALS WE CAN DO WITHOUT!”

TO KEEP THEIR ROOTS WET REALLY DEEP,  
WATER SLOWLY AT A CREEP.  
TO HELP KEEP THEM LOOKING FINE,  
IN SUMMER WATER ANOTHER TIME.

MAKE YOUR COMPOST AND USE IT OFTEN  
SO THE HARD CLAY SOIL WILL SOFTEN  
AND THE MICORIZZAL FUNGI CAN STRIVE  
TO HELP YOUR NATIVE PLANTS TO THRIVE.

IN GARDENING, ONLY TIME WILL TELL  
IF YOU’VE PLANNED YOUR LANDSCAPE WELL.  
IF YOU KEEP YOUR PLANTS REAL HEALTHY  
WITH NATURES BOUNTY YOU’LL FEEL WEALTHY!