



The Chachalaca

VOLUME 10 NUMBER 1 31 MARCH 2013

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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,

We are approaching the end of the first quarter. The class of 2013 is ending the classroom part of its program, and we are underway to new adventures. I feel so blessed to be a part of this organization that has given me more than I ever expected.

I have made new friends and had the opportunity to attend and participate in so many events that, if you had told me last year when I was still working all I would be doing this year, I would not have believed you. In the one year that I have been retired, I have gone on hawk and bird banding trips and gotten the opportunity to see birds up close, hold them, and release them.

I also spent several hours holding a sick melon head whale in a cold tank. This gave me a chance to reflect on how fragile life is and how important it is to help God's creatures when we can. I volunteered at the Holly Jolly Night Hikes at Resaca de la Palma last Christmas. It was fun to spend time with children and see the world through their eyes. I also helped with the wire installation at Rabb House at Sabal Palm Bird Sanctuary.

As my experience demonstrates, time spent volunteering can be as diverse and exciting as you want it to be. Your expertise and life experiences can always benefit projects that our partners are planning and completing. Being a Texas Master Naturalist has given me incredible volunteer opportunities and a great sense of accomplishment.

To the Class of 2013, I ask that you volunteer at every opportunity and attend every training session available; you will not be disappointed. And to the members who have not been able to attend our meetings or volunteer for a while, come back and meet our many new members.....

LET'S HAVE FUN.

Alicia

RGVCTMN Moments and Milestones

Photos by Wendie Allstot and Frank Wiseman

General Meeting on January 8, 2013:



Tony Reisinger awarding Wendie Allstot Certificate of Recognition for volunteer leadership to Cameron County Extension programs



Virginia Vineyard awarding Alicia Cavazos and Judy Emsley State certification



Virginia awarding Alicia Cavazos and Gail Dantzker State certification and 100 volunteer hours pin



Virginia awarding Veronica Guzman 100 volunteer hours pin



Virginia awarding Mary Thorne 100 volunteer hours pin (with Alicia Cavazos)



Virginia awarding Kathleen Mauer Tonn 100 volunteer hours pin (with Alicia Cavazos)



RGVCTMN group at January 8, 2013, Recertification social

General Meeting on March 12, 2013:



Alicia Cavazos awarding Judy Walton Texas Coastal Naturalist certification



Virginia Vineyard awarding Bea Alvarez State certification



Ruth Hoyt, providing tips on nature photography ♦

New RGVCTMN Classes

Lower Valley Class Schedule Update by Sally Robey

Here is an updated version of our schedule of remaining talks and field trips:

Date	Topic	Instructor	Location
Tuesday, April 2	Bat, Capture, Study and Release Demo	Jesús Franco, American Bird Conservancy	Quinta Mazatlan
Wednesday, April 3	Bird Banding	Mark Conway	San Benito
Saturday, April 6	Bird Banding <i>--by reservation only--</i>	Mark Conway	Cactus Creek Ranch
To be scheduled	Birds	Huck Huchens	La Sal del Rey
Tuesday, April 16	Graduation	Jennifer Owen-White, Refuge Manager of Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge	Victoria Palms

Join us! ♦

Upper Valley Class Update by Tom Butler

Nine weeks into the new training session, approximately half the class has obtained required field trip credits, and two members have also gotten field trip credits. Most of the upper valley class will reach their required class credit limits on Tuesday, March 19. All have diligently reported their perception of the quality of the presentations for classes and field trips, and their evaluations have been overwhelmingly positive.

Our final class on March 26 was on the topic of bats as presented by Jesús Franco with the American Bird Conservancy. We will follow up with an evening field trip at Quinta Mazatlan on April 2 titled Bat Capture, Study and Release Demonstration. You might think we are done at this point but we have several more interesting field trips coming.

- Saturday, April 6, we will see a bird banding demonstration by Mark Conway at Mary Jo Bogatto's CCR Ranch. Participants for this field trip are limited to trainees and the education committees from upper and lower valley.
- The final field trip of this session will be on Friday, April 12 at Sal de Rey. Led by Huck Huchens, USFWS, we will explore this Lower Rio Grande Wildlife Refuge property with an emphasis on birds. We will meet at the gate near US 83 on Highway 186 about 3 miles east of US 83. The field trip begins at 7:30 a.m. and will likely last for 2 to 2 ½ hours.

Graduation is scheduled for Tuesday evening, April 16, at Victoria Palms. This event will replace the regular second-Tuesday chapter meeting normally held in San Benito. We hope that many members will come out to enjoy the program presented by Jennifer Owen-White, Refuge Manager of Santa Ana NWR, and to meet our new TMN members. The chapter will provide the meat dish and table service, but all attendees are asked to bring a dish to share. Watch for further details on this event and others mentioned on the listserve. ♦

New-Class Photos by Nan Persinger



Basic Ecology class (01/15/13)



Beach Ecology class (01/26/13)



Beach Ecology class



Wildscapes, Nature Trackers, and Birds of the RGV class
(01/29/13)



Laguna Atascosa NWR field trip (02/02/13)



Rancho Las Lomas field trip (02/02/13)



Dragonflies and Butterfly Raising (02/05/13)



Texas Sea Grant floating classroom (02/09/13)



Field trip to South Padre Island (02/16/13)



South Padre Island Birding Center (02/16/13)



Sea turtle rescue class (02/16/13)



Invasive Plants class (02/19/13)



Nature Interpretation field trip (02/23/13)



Whooping crane tour (03/03/13)



Field trip to Sabal Palms Sanctuary (03/02/13)



Native Plants class (03/05/13) ♦

Member Accomplishments

Christmas Bird Count at Cactus Creek Ranch by Mary Jo Bogatto

Started more than 100 years ago, once-a-year all-day bird counts inventory wintering birds all over the country. Counts are within assigned 15-mile circles, and the Valley has nine in circles. Participants, who are mostly volunteers, count all bird species. The counts are a great way to document bird species on properties, and for landowners to begin biological surveys.

This year the Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society (ACAS) helped with the Christmas Bird Count on Cactus Creek Ranch, which is within a 15-mile circle and has participated in Christmas Bird Counts for years. The ranch count was on December 19th. Norma Friedrich, President of ACAS, and two other members, Cheryle Beck and Janice McConaha-Komer, arrived at Cactus Creek Ranch before daylight. Together we walked, drove, and watched the ranch for signs and sitings. Janice saw her first Aplomado Falcon. The rare bird I thought I saw turned out to be a Grasshopper Sparrow hiding in the salt flats, but it was exciting anyway. Here are the birds we saw:

Cactus Creek Ranch Christmas Bird Count

Golden-fronted Woodpecker, 6	Loggerhead Shrike, 4
White-tailed Hawk, 1	Aplomado Falcon, 1
Turkey Vulture, 23	Gull-billed Tern, 21
Black Vulture, 3	Sprague's Pipit, 1
Harris's Hawk, 3	American Kestrel, 3
Green Jay, 2	White-tailed Kite, 2
White-winged Dove, 2	Lark Sparrow, 2
Sandhill Crane, 210	Savannah Sparrow, 1
White Pelican, 614	Common Ground Dove, 5
Caracara, 5	Olive Sparrow, 1
Mourning Dove, 177	House Wren, 1
Northern Harrier, 6	Barn Owl, 4
Merlin, 1	Great-horned Owl, 1
Meadowlark Species, 14	Northern Mockingbird, 1
Red-tailed Hawk, 1	House Sparrow, 5
Long-billed Curlew, 10	Yellow-rumped Warbler, 1
Ladder-backed Woodpecker, 1	Grasshopper Sparrow, 1

After the day of counting, we all gathered to compare notes with the volunteers who had worked in the entire 15-mile area. CCR prepared and donated chili, and desserts were supplied by CCR, ACAS, and Friends of Laguna Atascosa. Special thanks to Norma Friedrich for the Creamy Coconut Cake! It was a joy to bring the volunteers, ranchers, and refuge staff together once again.

CCR donated awards and door prizes that were given out to the rarest bird, most birds counted and door prizes to those who came to the Cactus Creek Ranch Chili Cook Out. This was the first time for CCR to have help with the Christmas bird Count, and it was a wonderful experience to have so many passionate participants! ♦

Walking a Melon Head Whale by Tom Butler

Last Friday when I was getting ready to bowl, one of the ladies in the league greeted me with, “I hear you were walking my whale.” It turns out that she and her husband are the ones who found the melon head whale on the South Padre Island beach. Now our bowling league is in Edinburg, a good 80 miles from South Padre Island, and here are three people, counting me, connected to this whale who are bowling on the same league. It truly is a small world.



Rick Vogelsang finding the Melon Head whale

On the whale's last night, I arrived at the Texas Coastal Studies lab at 2:00 a.m. and signed in for my 3:00 a.m. turn in the tank. After picking out a wet suit and getting suited up, I spent a few minutes outside observing the set-up and then took the place of one members of the crew ahead of me. With gloves, face mask with an eye shield, and a stocking cap, I probably looked like something out of a Super Bowl commercial.

The water felt cool, but as always with a wet suit, it quickly becomes comfortable. My eye shield kept fogging until I managed to readjust my stocking cap to allow my breath to circulate more freely away from it. My first assignment was to hold the tail, but I was quickly moved to the head when my partner, somewhat shorter than I, entered the tank. The head has to be held higher than the tail. Keeping the blowhole above water is an important task for the person at the whale's head. Keeping the whale from bumping its nose into the side of the tank is the second most important task. This was not easy with a mask fogging up and a whale that stretched 70% of the diameter of the tank. We also had to take the whale's pulse. I failed at this task and had to get help the first time.

Holding the whale above water didn't seem too difficult while I was in the water, but when I got out of the tank I could hardly lift my left hand to my face -- my muscles were completely fatigued. Despite the cool air temperatures and water temperature in the upper 50's, I was quite warm when I got out of the tank. When I left the tank at 4:00 after a one-hour stint, the whale was breathing at about the same rate as when I had come in and its heart rate was also similar. But it was not responsive for the most part other than occasional shivers and occasionally a slight wave from a pectoral fin.

After I cleaned up and checked out, the veterinarian arrived as I was leaving the building. In spite of long and strenuous efforts to save the melon head whale, it died sometime after I left that morning at 4:00 a.m. The stranded mammal training last spring stressed that survival chances are slim for a stranded animal. However, we hope enough will be learned from the necropsy to benefit future mammal stranding rescues.



Alicia Cavazos in the tank with the ailing whale ♦

Cactus Creek Ranch and Biology Classes by Mary Jo Bogatto

Under the direction of their teacher, Mark Conway, Harlingen South AP Biology class students Jesse Mata and Jordan McNutt visited Cactus Creek Ranch in February. They had been nurturing seedlings and plants for this special day for over a year. Each student cleared and prepared the soil for the new growth. They were anxious to start planting and they kept motivated until the tedious work was completed. They planted lots of seed and seedlings:

- Ebony seedlings — 53
- Ebony seeds — about 60
- Loma Lilies — about 70
- Turks Cap — 6



Mark Conway and students

Using the cuttings from the trees and plants that had to be moved for the planting they constructed structures for protection of the Texas Tortoise and Horned Lizards.

Having arrived at dawn on a Saturday morning, they were ready for a big lunch that was prepared as a special thanks by Mary Jo Bogatto. They ate chili dogs and played checkers, dominoes, and washers.

The native plants given to Cactus Creek Ranch will benefit the environment and inhabitants for years to come. ♦

January 26th Beach Ecology Field Trip by Steve Fowler



It was a sunny day, a great day for discovering the mysteries of the beach and dunes. The Upper Valley class met at the Coastal Studies lab for the morning class. Joyce Fowler and Tony Reisinger explained that this class counts toward a Texas Coastal Naturalist program. Other training sessions included cold-stunned turtles, red tide, and marine mammal stranding. Any three training sessions will qualify a trainee to be certified as a Texas Coastal Naturalist. A number of attendees signed up to start their qualifications. Congratulations!

Dr. Rick Kline presented an informative lecture and slide show explaining the formation of barrier islands and the importance of sand dunes for protecting the mainland in times of storms. The salt-tolerant plants and grasses with their matrix of root systems help stabilize the dunes. The dynamics of currents, tides, waves and wind, however, all make the barrier islands an ever-changing ecosystem.

The lecture was followed up with a beach exploration. The group concentrated on the strand line of the beach and wave wash areas. Using buckets, shovels, and nets, the group closely examined several small sea critters, including a number of Ghost Shrimp. ♦

Envirothon Students at Cactus Creek Ranch by Mary Jo Bogatto

In January, Tira Wilmoth brought a group of her Rio Hondo students to begin to prepare for this year's Envirothon, to be held here in the Rio Grande Valley. Our schedule was full and we were determined to get as much done in one day as possible, including gathering plants for pressing, identifying trees, discussing ranch land management, and enjoying a chili lunch.



The group walked and collected plant specimens, stopping along the way to find and identify animal signs and tracks. We were in luck: we identified armadillo, deer, skunk, nilgai, coyote, wild pigs, pack rats, great horned owls, barn owls, and screech owls, just to name a few.

After we returned to the lodge to prepare leaves for pressing and to identify the specimens we'd found, Mary Jo Bogatto gave a talk on how she is restoring the land and principles of range land management. It was helpful because this year's Envirothon is on range-land management. Finally, Tira Wilmoth showed us how to press native plants to be used for identifying plants for the competition. It was an enlightening experience! ♦

January Raptor Workshop by Terry Weymouth

Friday, Saturday, and Sunday -- January 25-27 -- Judy and I joined a Raptor Workshop sponsored by the Valley Nature Center and conducted by Bill Clark, who has written several books on hawks, including the Peterson Field Guide. He lives in Harlingen, where he specializes in the raptors of Texas and does a lot of banding of raptors. Only 7 participated in the workshop, so we had a lot of individual time with Bill. On Friday evening the workshop consisted of a 2-hour Powerpoint presentation and explanation of planned activities, and then on Saturday and Sunday we had a 2-hour Powerpoint presentation followed by 8 hours of fieldwork.

When sugarcane fields are ready for harvesting, they are first burned to get rid of the leaves and then they are harvested clear down to bare earth, a lot like harvesting corn fields. Naturally, a lot of small rodents and other prey are caught in the fire and then exposed by the harvesting, and this draws a lot of raptors. We drove about 150 miles each day as we visited several sugarcane fields that were being harvested. We also drove a lot of levee walls, visited Anzalduas County Park, and found the Aplomado Falcon along Old Port Isabel Road. Altogether we covered the valley from Mission to Laguna Vista and from Progreso to north of Raymondville. We saw both species of Vultures, the Crested Caracara, 3 species of Falcons, and 8 species of Hawks.



White-tailed hawk



Zone-tailed hawk

A highlight of the workshop came just east of the town of Progreso when Bill saw a Red-tailed Hawk on a power pole and decided to try to trap and band it. We stopped the car some distance back to watch as Bill dropped a trap containing two mice from his moving car and drove away slowly. No more than 10 to 15 seconds after he dropped the trap, the hawk dove for it and was snared. We all watched as Bill carefully extricated the hawk from the trap, took all of the required measurements, and then displayed the bird as he explained many of the

color and feather characteristics. Bill allowed one of us to hold the bird as he talked about it and then allowed another one of us to release it back into the wild.



Red-tailed hawk ♦

Hilltop Garden Photos by Mary Ann Moore

I took these photographs in November on a tour of Hilltop Gardens in Lyford. ♦



Raising Butterflies by Carolyn Cardile

Mary Thorne is well-known in the Rio Grande Valley for her enthusiasm for raising butterflies. For several years she has enchanted people at the Winter Outdoor Wildlife Expo with her butterfly program, complete with caterpillars, milkweed, and a mesh butterfly cage. This year I was disappointed to miss her class for the lower Valley education program, so I visited her booth at WOWE. To my surprise I came home with my own caterpillar and cage. I added water in an old margarine container and cuttings from my own milkweed plant to the cage, put it on the kitchen counter, and began waiting for my caterpillar to make its chrysalis. In a few weeks I hoped to see a queen butterfly appear. I guess I thought of it like taking care of fish in an aquarium— just add food and watch. Well, that's not what happened.

A few days later my caterpillar had six companions, all smaller than the one Mary gave me and all eating milkweed leaves voraciously. Apparently, there were eggs on the leaves I used from my yard. The population explosion looked like it might cause a food shortage. My lone milkweed was barely keeping up with the demand for fresh leaves. Then disaster struck. Caterpillars living in my yard ate every leaf on my milkweed plant in one day. A neighbor

gave me enough leaves to get them through the night, and I moved the caterpillars to the Episcopal Day School where I was in the middle of a six-week substitute-teaching assignment with first graders. The school has a butterfly garden, lots of native plants, and kids who would love to watch the caterpillars, so it seemed like a perfect solution to my problem. It was. The kids loved watching the caterpillars.

Soon a chrysalis formed, not on the top of the cage but on the plastic butter container that holds the water. It attached right where the lid connects to the side of the dish, making it impossible to change the water. I just let it stay there and added another plastic container to hold new plants. The other caterpillars continued to eat and eat and eat. When I couldn't find the milkweed on campus, I made an emergency trip to the local nursery. The next morning I discovered one new caterpillar living on my new plant and added it to the cage. It joined several caterpillars of various sizes, one chrysalis, and two J-shaped caterpillars preparing to attach themselves to the top of the cage.

I soon learned that overpopulation causes problems. The inside smelled yucky and was filled with caterpillar poop. Two of the caterpillars died, but the rest continued eating. I did my best to clean up the inside after school without disturbing everyone inside the cage. The new milkweed plant could not keep up with the demand for leaves, and its leaves were turning yellow. I finally found the milkweed on campus and began using it to feed all those hungry caterpillars. I put the classroom plant outdoors in the sun and forgot to take it inside until the next morning. The plant looked healthier, so I took it into the classroom and put it near the cage on a Friday. I thought the remaining caterpillars would soon either die or enter the chrysalis stage an end my ongoing hunt for new leaves, but I got a surprise.

On Monday morning as I prepared to cut some stems on my classroom milkweed to feed the caterpillars in the cage, I realized that my classroom milkweed had at least five tiny caterpillars on it. To my surprise the new caterpillars were monarchs, not queens. The kids and I were delighted!

Then two exciting things happened. The first butterfly emerged from its chrysalis, and the class released it in the school's butterfly garden. A few days later, nearly all of the new caterpillars started forming their own chrysalises. The children got to watch this process in the classroom. It was really exciting!



This has been a great learning experience for the first graders and for me. We've been watching the caterpillars, chrysalis-formation, and the milkweed plant every day. The children have observed, drawn, painted, and written about butterflies. They've colored butterflies to learn about symmetry and watched a Power point presentation about monarchs. We've picked milkweed leaves together and visited the butterfly garden frequently. We know the difference between a queen and a monarch at both the caterpillar and butterfly stage. The children and I owe this wonderful experience to Mary Thorne and her enthusiastic demonstrations and presentations at nature programs in the RGV. Her excitement was contagious. It led me to buy the cage, to start a new adventure for myself, and to share it with others. If you get a chance to listen to Mary speak about raising butterflies, I hope you will take advantage of this opportunity. ♦

Cookout at Cactus Creek Ranch by Mary Jo Bogatto



Cactus Creek Ranch and Laguna Atascosa Wildlife Refuge honored interns and volunteers this year at a cookout at Cactus Creek Ranch on February 1st. Once again this year the Refuge and the Ranch combined to have a wonderful outdoors feast. The Refuge's Stacy Sanchez and Mary Jo Bogatto acted as hostesses for the event.

Weather and wind cooperated for one day: partly cloudy, fog over-night, low of 55 degrees, 5 mph ESE wind. We cooked fajitas over an open fire and roasted marshmallows. You could not have asked for a more beautiful night. ♦



Tira Wilmoth kneeling by the campfire.

Changes at Sabal Palms Sanctuary by Anita Westervelt

When four Texas Master Naturalist trainees asked Sabal Palm Sanctuary Interpreter Seth Patterson about volunteer projects, without hesitation he described his vision for a butterfly garden surrounding Rabb House, the sanctuary's prospective new visitor's center.

Trainees Louise Wilkinson, Frances Barrera, Kris Burkhart and Anita Westervelt looked over initial plant compatibility plans with Patterson, discussed various ideas, and took up the challenge to help begin the project. They join Lower Rio Grande Valley Texas Master Naturalist volunteers Wendie Allstot and John Tierney who also are involved in the planning and implementation of the gardens.

Phase one of the project includes designing a water feature, an irrigation scheme, a foot bridge, and meandering paths through groupings of native butterfly plants. The paths will lead to the sanctuary's current nature trail.

Renovations to Rabb House are nearing completion and Patterson is preparing to have the visitors center moved to that location in the next couple of months.

After the initial butterfly garden is planted, the acreage leading to the nature trail will need to be cleared of Guinea grass, according to Patterson. He would like to expand the native butterfly garden to that entrance.



Guinea grass that will eventually be replaced by butterfly gardens and paths leading visitors from Rabb House to nature trails

The butterfly gardens eventually will extend to the north side of Rabb House and around back where a seating area will be incorporated with the current patio, providing visitors a quiet observation area.



Gwyn Carmean, Seth Patterson, Louise Wilkinson, Kris Burkhart, and Frances Barrera marking off initial paths for butterfly gardens that will connect Rabb House with nature trails

Fifteen-year veteran volunteer for Gorgas Science Foundation and local high school science teacher Gwyn Carmean joined the group and will be plant coordinator for the project. Anyone wanting to offer native butterfly plants or seeds is encouraged to contact her at gwync6@gmail.com. Anyone who would like to volunteer their expertise in the construction and design phase of this project, please contact project coordinator Anita Westervelt at jjvanm@gmail.com. Volunteers also will be called upon during other phases of the development.

For more information about Sabal Palm Sanctuary, please visit www.sabalpalmsanctuary.org and www.facebook.com/sabalpalmsanctuary. ♦

Postings

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge Needs Help by Rick Ramke

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge has these volunteer opportunities:

- Environmental Education volunteers -- Help with visiting school groups in the months of April and May. 8:30 AM to 2:00 PM on needed days. Emails will be sent out in advance and volunteers can sign up for specific days.
- Fee Booth/Visitor Center volunteers -- 8- or 4- hour shifts on a regular basis (one or more days per week) in the refuge fee booth greeting visitors, taking fees and answering questions. This is an important job for the refuge and a big part of keeping funding up and collecting fees.

All training will be provided. If interested, please contact Jennifer Owen-White at Jennifer_owenwhite@fws.gov. ♦

Bentsen State Park Volunteer Opportunities by Nan Persinger

Need volunteer hours? We need help with up-coming school programs and beautifying the gardens. Volunteers are needed to help lead and assist school program activities. If you have never done a school program, you can sign up as an assistant and learn some of the different outdoor activities we use to help connect kids with nature.

Please email Melissa Chadwick at Melissa.Chadwick@tpwd.state.tx.us if you can help out. Your life will be enriched in helping these school children. ♦

