



The Chachalaca

VOLUME 11 NUMBER 3 30 SEPTEMBER 2014

In this Issue

President's Message 2
Alicia Cavazos

Restoring Valley Habitat 3
Sharon Slagle

Sea Turtle Conservation 6
Joanne Del Vecchio

Dedication of Willow Lakes Boardwalk 7
Richard Ramke

New Web Photo Archive 11

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.

Officers

President	Alicia Cavazos
Vice President	Anita Westervelt
Recording Secretary	Heidi Linnemann
Treasurer	Jim Navjar
Past President	Virginia Vineyard

Advisors

Texas Sea Grant	Tony Reisinger
Texas Parks and Wildlife	Javier de Leon

Standing Committee Chairs

Outreach/Publicity	Jackie Field, Jr.
Host	Vacant
Membership	Jolaine Lanehart Virginia Vineyard
Listserv/Webmaster	Jimmy Paz
Historian	James Seguin
Lower Valley Education	Carolyn Cardile
Upper Valley Education	Sylvia Casselman
Newsletter	Sharon Slagle



President's Message

by Alicia Cavazos

Hello Texas Master Naturalists,

Hope everyone had a fun summer. The weather is finally cooling – well, even if the change is only a few degrees, at least the temperature is not in the 100's! We can finally enjoy the evening hours bird-watching or working in the yard. This is also an excellent time to take stock of your volunteer hours and see what you are lacking in order to re-certify for this year. The pin will be a silver armadillo.

Volunteer opportunities are always available with our partners, and the Rio Grande Birding Festival is coming up the first weekend in November. As usual we will have a booth there, and you can pick up some extra volunteer hours.

We need a slate of officers for next year as per the handbook practice. Our Past President, Virginia Vineyard, will assemble the slate. Please call her or email her to volunteer for one of the positions. We need a President, two vice presidents, and several board positions. Remember that the administrative part of our chapter is just as important as volunteering for our partners.

It is very rewarding to be a part of this team. You do not need any experience to do any job. We have a great board that guides well. The slate will be presented in the November General Meeting with the elections being at the December General meeting. So please think about taking an office.

The raffle is now under way. If you have not picked up your tickets, please attend the next general meeting so you can pick yours up. This is our main fund raiser. If you do not want to participate, please let us know so that we won't mail you a set of tickets, or if you just want to make a donation to the chapter, remember it is a tax deductible contribution. You can talk to our treasurer Jim Najvar and he can get you the paperwork needed.

Please stay safe as you are out and about enjoying nature....

Alicia

Restoring Valley Habitat at the LRGV NWR

by Sharon Slagle

One of the most significant public environmental events of the year in the Rio Grande Valley is coming up soon. On October 18th (rain date of November 1st), the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge will host its 23rd annual Rio Reforestation. Every year about 1,000 volunteers gather at a site prepared by the Refuge and its cooperative farmers and stocked with native trees all ready to be planted. The volunteers spend a morning planting the seedlings in prepared rows, in this way contributing to the Refuge's major effort to restore native habitat in our region.



In addition to major contributions from USFWS, the event is a focus of support from local environmental organizations that include the Valley Proud Environmental Council (www.valleyproud.org), the Friends of the Wildlife Corridor (www.friendsofthewildlifecorridor.org), Audubon Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary, Valley Nature Center, local HEB's, Labatt Food Service in Harlingen, Avant Water in Harlingen, the Coca Cola Distribution Center in McAllen, and many other local businesses and organizations that demonstrate their commitment to the environment by supporting this event.

Almost everyone in the Valley is aware of and grateful for the Santa Ana and Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuges. But in spite of the fact that it currently includes more than 90,000 acres, many residents are unfamiliar with the LRGV NWR, which was established in 1979 to protect biodiversity in an area where more than 95% of the native habitat had already succumbed to agricultural and urban development. Most of the Refuge is closed to the public to protect the wildlife that depends on it. To increase protected habitat, the Refuge has gradually acquired property as it becomes

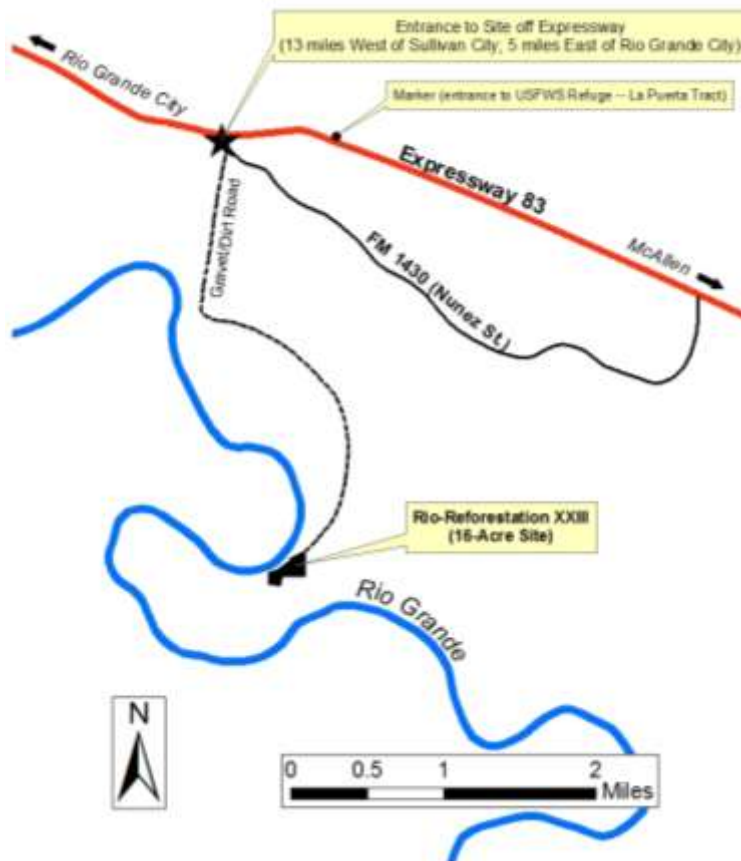
available, working to connect isolated tracts of land managed by private landowners, non-profit organizations, the State of Texas, and the other two Refuges, in an attempt to create a wildlife corridor along the lower 275 miles of the Rio Grande River. Creation of this corridor benefits the unique wildlife of the Valley, including 17 federally listed threatened, endangered, and migratory species such as the ocelot and jaguarundi. More than 530 species of birds, about 40% of all North American butterfly species (330+ species), and 1,200 plant species occur in the four-county project area. Creation of the corridor also financially benefits the region, which has a growing ecotourism industry. In 2011, non-consumptive nature tourism in the LRGV, which includes some of the poorest counties in the US, was \$460 million. The Valley also has one of the fastest growing populations in the United States, increasing the urgency and importance of the creation and completion of the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

The Refuge currently owns about 7,600 acres of cropland and will acquire an estimated 30,000 more farmland acres to complete its land acquisition goal. To reforest the acquired tracts, USFWS staff members manage the Refuge's Farmland Phase-Out and Re-vegetation Program, which has been in existence for 30 years. Each year, 300-500 acres of refuge cropland are re-vegetated with at least 600 seedlings per acre of up to 60 species of native trees and shrubs. All seeds used to grow seedlings are hand collected within the project area (the four southernmost counties of Texas). Species are carefully selected to match the soils, hydrology, and other location factors of each site. In a given year, USFWS staff and cooperative farmers plant up to 400 acres of cropland at 600-800 tree-seedlings per acre. Seedlings are grown in the Refuge nursery and by cooperative farmers. Refuge staff members determine planting sites, species compositions, and desired planting densities, and cooperative farmers prepare the sites for planting, help with the planting, and manage irrigation and weed control. Seedlings are also planted by public volunteers on one site per year during Rio Reforestation.



The program has been successful, with seedling survival rates averaging about 70%. Growth rates are rapid. Abundant wildlife use of re-vegetated areas is also evident immediately after reforestation efforts are completed. One site planted for ocelot habitat in 2008 already had documented use by these endangered cats in 2010. Chris Hathcock, LRGV NWR staff biologist, has overseen work of the Farmland Phase-Out and Re-vegetation Program for the past 5 years.

Rio Reforestation is one of the few opportunities for the public to visit the LRGV NWR and support it by helping plant trees. This year volunteers will gather at the environmentally important La Casita tract near the Rio Grande in Starr County.



We expect lots of volunteers, including representatives from local school, clubs, and businesses. And we hope to see lots of RGV Chapter Texas Master Naturalists. This is a great program, one that needs your support on October 18th. ♦

Sea Turtle Conservation: A Mix of Old and New Methods

by Joanne Del Vecchio, The Turtle Lady Legacy

In the same way that The Turtle Lady Legacy strives to connect the past with the present in order to ensure the future of sea turtle survival, current conservation efforts also unite the best of past practices with exciting new technological advances so as to create an effective strategy to protect these endangered creatures in an uncertain future.

To be sure, there are many times when technology is certainly preferred, but nonetheless some of the early hands-on approaches still afford the best results and therefore continue to be used. For instance, in the 1960's and 1970's, Ila Loetscher and Dearn Adams would traverse the beaches of South Padre Island on foot or, if necessary to cover more distance, in 4-wheel drive vehicles, as they carefully scouted for evidence of nests. Today, more than 40 years later, each nesting season still finds dedicated volunteers patrolling the shoreline in order to locate the telltale signs of well-hidden sea turtle eggs left behind by their flippered mamas.

Another nod to Ila's successful methods is embedded within local sea turtle awareness campaigns. During her lifetime, Ila earned the nickname of The Turtle Lady by providing an early outreach program for the public. She played host from the rear yard of her home on Gulf Boulevard to groups of visitors who would sit on bleachers next to the specially designed tanks that were built just steps outside her back door. Ila knew how to make the turtles memorable, and so she not only named each one but often dressed them in turtle-sized costumes. Masquerading as Pancho Villa, Marie Antoinette, or even Yankee Doodle, these amphibious ambassadors for their species never failed to delight the crowds as Ila spoke about their individual personalities and described their behavior. To make an even more lasting impression, she allowed her attentive audiences to see the turtles up close, all the while emphasizing their precarious hold on survival as a species. After all these years, carrying on in Ila's spirit, Sea Turtle, Inc., provides regular educational sessions at its facility on South Padre Island where visitors can see resident turtles and learn about them.

Yet even as Sea Turtle, Inc., conveys the significance of the endangered status of sea turtles to the public just as Ila did so many years before, there is a significant difference between the organization and Ila. Notably, because there wasn't any local facility for injured and sick sea turtles when Ila first became involved in their welfare, she literally shared her home with the turtles that she nursed back to health with a mother's care. In fact, Ila was the only person in the state of Texas who was granted a special license to house sea turtles at a private residence.

But times change and great strides have been made in sea turtle conservation. Now, with satellite tracking, state-of-the-art aquariums, and innovative breakthroughs such as the first prosthetic turtle wetsuit, there are many new tools to aid in the never-ending struggle to prevent sea turtle extinction.

Cold stunning rescues represent one of the best examples of how a combination of old and new techniques are employed in a crisis situation. Upon notification that local sea turtles have been caught off guard during unusually cold weather, a highly organized troop of first-responders springs into action. Within minutes, they are at the water's edge, gathering the stunned creatures into donated blankets and taking them to Sea Turtle, Inc., where the turtles are immediately examined and put into small kiddie pools of warm water. Then, depending upon the number of these stunned creatures that are rescued, large trucks stand ready to transport them north to Corpus Christi, where more advanced care is available. Blankets and kiddie pools may be low technology, but the expert resources available in Corpus Christi are anything but low technology. Still, low technology and high technology must work together for a positive outcome.

Similarly, publicizing the plight of sea turtles is a marriage of the tried and true with newer methods. Just as Ila gave numerous interviews for magazine and newspaper articles, today The Turtle Lady Legacy continues to grant interviews to magazines and newspapers. But in addition to this means of broadcasting information, we now harness the power of the internet to amplify awareness on a global scale. A resource not widely available during Ila's day, a website permits us to share information, emphasize the importance of the crusade to help sea turtles and, maybe most importantly, to inspire others to build upon past accomplishments to help the sea turtle population as it faces the future in an increasingly unfavorable natural environment.

Note from the editor: You can visit the Turtle Lady Legacy website at theturtleladylegacy.org. You can visit the website of Sea Turtle, Inc., at www.seaturtleinc.org .♦

Dedication of Willow Lake Boardwalk at SANWR

by Richard Ramke

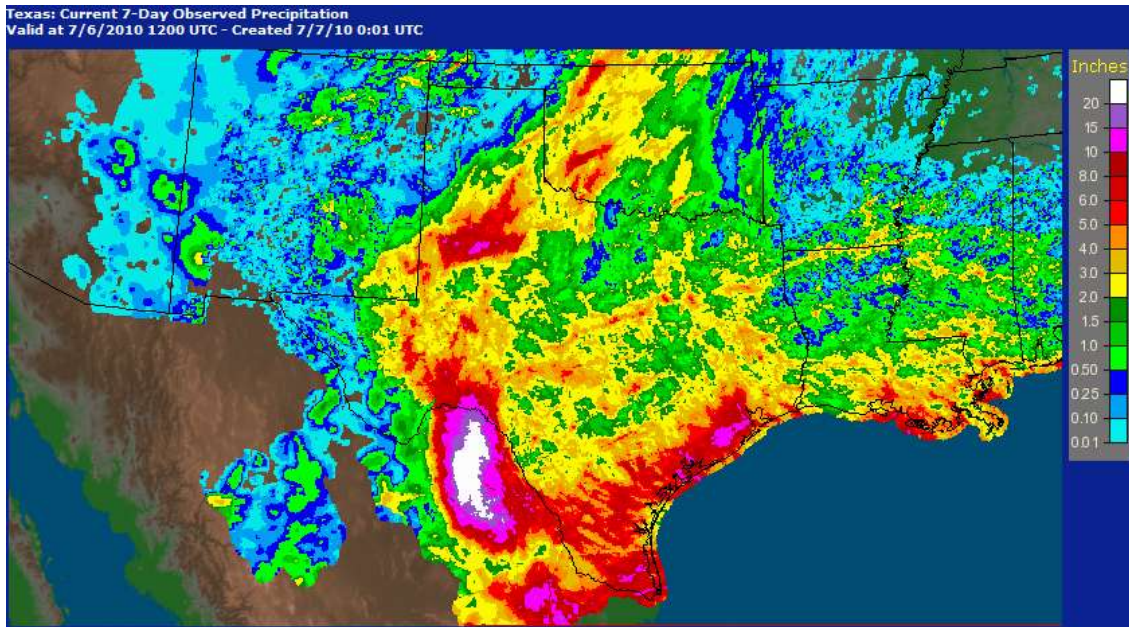
What: Ribbon cutting ceremony for new Willow Lakes boardwalk.

When: Friday, October 24, 2014, at 10 AM. Rain date is December 4, 2014, at 10 AM.

Where: At Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. Participants will be shuttled to new boardwalk area (approximately 0.6 miles hiking distance from Visitor Center).

Why: A dedication event for the construction of the Willow Lakes boardwalk, a project made possible by the support of the Friends of the Wildlife Corridor, United Airlines, volunteers, and US FWS.

From July 1 to July 5, 2010, the remnants of Hurricane Alex dropped 10 to 20 inches of rain in the upper Rio Grande basin and mountains. An additional 3 to 7 inches of rain in the Rio Grande Valley of Mexico and Texas flowed into the Rio Grande. Then from July 8 to July 9, tropical depression number 2 brought even more rainfall to South Texas and the Rio Grande Basin. According to the National Weather Service, “The Rio Grande crest of 42.45 feet surpassed the 35-foot reading recorded after Hurricane Charley in August 1998 and the 39-foot flood crest of late June 1971, both of which many long-time residence recall as major flooding.”



Rainfall total from June 30 through July 6, 2010.



Track of Hurricane Alex from June 25 through July 2, 2010.

In the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge (7 miles south of Alamo, Texas), the flood waters damaged signs, stranded animals, and killed trees. The foundation of the boardwalk overlooking the Willow Lakes was ruined.



Flooded Willow Lakes Boardwalk, Santa Ana NWR.

When flood waters finally subsided, the Refuge undertook a project to rebuild the boardwalk and the overlook to allow expansion of the lakes, increase capacity of the wetland to support birds and other wildlife, and expand public understanding of wetlands by giving visitors, including teachers and their students, safe access for observation. The project was made possible by the support of US Fish & Wildlife Service, USFWS volunteers, United Airlines, and Friends of the Wildlife Corridor.

The Santa Ana NWR maintenance staff was determined to use green technology. According to Art Tovar, Facilities Manager for the 190,000-acre South Texas Refuge Complex, “The deck boards are the latest in green technology, replacing wood products, which come from live trees, with recycled materials, which come from the plastic-waste stream. The United States generates over 32 million tons of plastic-waste every year.”



USFWS volunteers Dean Snyder, Doug Hewitt, Bob Carmichael, and Mike Lownsberry.

Annually about 40 USFWS volunteers come to the Santa Ana NWR refuge from around the United States to help with projects such as the Willow Lakes Boardwalk and Overlook. The Refuge is one of 560 refuges in the United States that conserves, protects and enhances fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.



Newly built Boardwalk and Overlook.



Newly built Boardwalk and Overlook seen from across Willow Lakes.

The public is invited to the dedication of the Boardwalk and Overlook on October 24, 2014, at 10 AM. The rain date, if needed, is December 4, 2014, at 10 AM. The dedication will be held at the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. Participants will be shuttled to new boardwalk area (approximately 0.6 miles hiking distance from Visitor Center).

The refuge is located seven miles south of Alamo, Texas, on FM 907 about 1/4 mile east on U.S. Highway 281. The lat/long is [N 26.08522, W 098.13448](#). ♦

New Web Photo Archive

Thanks to Jimmy Paz, our chapter website – www.rgvctmn.org – now features Photo Albums of chapter pictures from 2004 through 2011, with more coming. The albums demonstrate our years of working hard and making a difference, and they bring back lots of memories. You can view them from the “Photo Albums” of the website’s Gallery drop down menu. ♦

