Rio Grande Valley Chapter, Texas Master Naturalists

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.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Norma Trevino

Greetings!

The past few months have been busy for all of us with many summer activities filling our days. Now our fall season will be busy as we continue to learn new things and welcome new members from our fall 2018 class.

As you may know, final preparations are underway for the 20th Annual TMN State Meeting in October. The committee has prepared a wide variety of seminars and activities for all members. If you haven't already done so, please consider attending.

We are not that far behind! Our first class, with 25 trainees, was sponsored in 2002 by Tony Reisinger and James Franco. Frank Weismann and Joe Lee Rubio are active members from the original class. They set the groundwork for our organization by writing the original by-laws and handbook for our local Chapter. Frank has served as our president, vice-president, secretary, and has continued to serve each year as a member of the board.

I assumed the role of President for our Chapter in July. For those of you whom I have not met, here's a brief summary. After being away from the Brownsville area for over 35 years, college, and living in corporate world, an opportunity arose, so I came home to South Padre Island. During my free time, I volunteer at Sea Turtle, do ATV Turtle Patrol during nesting season, am a Red Tide Ranger, and a Coastal Naturalist.

There is a picture of my dad and me when I was 3 months old at the Jetties. Since then, I have spent every summer enjoying the island and have watched it grow.

Not only has the island grown, but our Chapter continues to grow!

I am excited and humbled to lead this organization as we begin our 17th year!

Always feel free to reach out via e-mail, text, or phone. ♦

SOME LIKE IT HOT

Lou Osborne

Most native Texans, at least those native to the Rio Grande Valley, are familiar with the chiltepin (chile tepin), *Capsicum annum*. This is the only pepper native to the United States and is considered a Texas native plant. In 1997 the Texas Legislature designated it as the official state native pepper. To prevent confusion it is most commonly referred to as the *Chile pequin*.

The names chile pequin and chile tepin are a source of confusion to most people. They are closely related and for all practical purposes the name chile pequin is most generally applied to

both by most people. The chile pequin has slightly elongated fruits and its environs are slightly more humid than the chile tepin. The plants found in your nurseries will most likely be labeled Chile Pequin.

Pequin Bush

These tiny peppers are also called the bird pepper. They are a favorite of many species of birds. The Northern Mockingbird has a particular affinity for the small fiery peppers. Birds do not feel the effects of the heat as mammals do.

Speaking of fiery, these tiny peppers rank about 40,000 to 60,000 on the Scoville heat unit scale. Using the popular jalapeno as a reference point, the pequin is roughly 12 times hotter.

Most commercial pequin production occurs outside the United States, primarily in Mexico. Pequins grow wild in the Mexican mountains and are collected and sold commercially, so the total amount of Mexican production is not known. Pequins are not grown commercially in the United States because of the high costs associated with hand-harvesting.

Close up of the Chiltepin

Although a Texas native, the pequin can struggle with the intense summer heat and prefers light shade and needs regular watering (it will drop its leaves if it gets too dry). As stated earlier, this small pepper is a favorite of birds and must be protected by fine netting if you wish to harvest the fruit. Pequin blooms and sets fruit from spring through fall.

Close up of the Chile Pequin

In the Lower Rio Grande Valley the Pequin tends to be a perennial. In the coldest winters, it may revert to an annual. If a plant freezes back, its roots may survive. In case of a freeze, cut back the top brown growth and the plant may sprout again.

There are two basic ways the Pequin is utilized – ornamental and culinary. In its ornamental capacity the Pequin's abundance of colorful fruits makes it suitable for mass planting, accent planting, native gardens and xeric landscapes. In its culinary guise the Pequin adds a powerful kick to homemade hot sauces, salsas, soups, flavored oils and garnishes. The pepper is the chief ingredient in one of the most popular hot sauces on your grocer's shelf.

Although not inexpensive, pickled Pequins may be found on most food market shelves in the Rio Grande Valley. If you look around a bit you may also find the little devils mixed in among their other less volatile cousins in the fresh vegetable section. By far the cheapest way to find them is to make a trip across the bridge into Progresso. Of course you can also grow them yourself or search through the Valley's by-ways and wooded areas. Ramsey Nature Park has even been known to harbor the odd plant. For a few years I had the good fortune to be able to harvest from a couple of Pequin bushes that were so far back into the brush that they were unknown to the general population and, wonder of wonders, undiscovered by our ubiquitous mockingbird population. Unfortunately, they were eventually overcome by one of our numerous droughts. I am now growing them in a backyard flower bed.

During a recent venture of putting up a supply of jalapeño-peach jam, an idea popped into my head. Why not experiment with chile pequin-peach jam? I had the peaches and a supply of pequin peppers. As they say, "The rest is history."

The following is a modified version of the jalapeño-peach jam recipe I usually use.

PEQUIN-PEACH JAM RECIPE

Ingredients:

Makes about Seven (8 ounce) jars

4 cups – finely chopped peaches, pitted and peeled

2 tbsp – lemon juice

1 – Box (1.75 oz) of regular powered fruit pectin

5 ½ cups - granulated sugar

1-2 tbsp – mashed chile pequin pulp (see note)

Instructions:

1. Prepare canning jars and lids

2. In a large stainless steel saucepan, combine peaches and lemon juice

3. Add the pectin and whisk until it is dissolved

4. Bring to a boil, stirring frequently

5. Add sugar and return to a full boil

6. Boil hard for 1 minute, stirring constantly

7. Remove from heat and skim off foam

8. Ladle the hot jam into the hot jars, leaving ¼ inch headspace

9. Remove air bubbles

10. Wipe rim of jars

11. Place lids on jams and screw down the bands (finger tight)

12. Place jars in canner and make sure they are completely covered with 2 inches of water

13. Bring to a boil and process for 15 minutes (see note)

14. Remove canner lid and let cool for 5 minutes

15. Remove jars, cool on a towel or other pad and allow to sit for 24 hours before storing.

Note: The amount of peppers is what I used. As stated before, Pequins are a very hot pepper. I suggest you experiment a bit before making an entire batch of jam. The actually amount of peppers may be increased or decreased according to your taste and tolerance. The processing time given is for altitudes at less than 1,000 feet above sea level.

If you are a novice at the canning process I highly recommend that you obtain a copy of the Ball Bluebook on canning. It is an excellent source of recipes and advice.

This jam makes an excellent appetizer when spread over a block of cream cheese and served with crackers. It is also very tasty when used as a grilling sauce on pork tenderloin. ENJOY! ♦

NEW RULES PROHIBIT COMMERCIAL HARVEST OF FOUR TURTLE SPECIES IN TEXAS

AUSTIN – The Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission recently voted to prohibit the commercial collection of four species of freshwater turtles in Texas—the common snapping turtle, red-eared slider, smooth softshell and spiny softshell.

Previous state rules passed in 2007 prohibited commercial collection of wild freshwater turtles in Texas, but exempted these four species on private waters, meaning they could still be collected from private ponds. The new rules prohibit wild collection of the four turtles anywhere in Texas.

On Oct. 3, 2017, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department received a petition for rulemaking saying that continued commercial harvest of the four turtle species is unsustainable. Scientific evidence bears this out, since localized turtle declines have been documented in parts of Texas, and research in recent years has shown these species are vulnerable to overharvest.

In 2008, the state agency funded a 5-year research investigation of freshwater turtle populations in Texas. This showed turtles are highly sensitive to commercial harvest, that even modest commercial harvest leads to long-term population declines, and that illegal commercial harvest of turtles continues.

The department received 1,184 public comments on the new rules since they were published as a proposal for comment in the Texas Register earlier this year. Of those comments, 98 percent supported the new rules to restrict harvest and protect the turtles.

Also, this year the department received a letter from eight concerned scientists located across the nation, a group with collective expertise in conservation biology, ecology, population dynamics, wildlife management and other areas relevant to turtle conservation. They said, “freshwater turtles cannot sustain any significant level of wild collection without suffering population declines,” and they asked the commission to “promptly ban for-profit exploitation of the state’s turtles.”

Under the new rules, recreational collection of wild turtles by children or individual citizens remains allowed, captive breeding and sale of lawfully obtained brood stock remains legal for permitted nongame dealers, and private property rights remain unchanged.

The rules will take effect this fall. ♦

This article is presented courtesy of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

PURPLE PERPLEXITY

Christina Mild

In mid-July 2018, during one of the hottest periods on record, many wildflowers, grasses, trees, shrubs and vines were bestowed with a profusion of leaves, blooms and fruit. These, of course, were the result of unusually abundant rain which fell in most spots around deep south Texas only weeks before.

Along the edge of fields and in some yards, a profusion of purple blooms appeared, on upright plants which are generally less than 2 ft. in height.

One of these is typically found in places which have been less-disturbed by human interaction, i.e. the absence of turf grass, bulldozing, tillage and constant soil compression.

The other appears in the worst of our soils, lacking in organic matter, often repeatedly compressed by heavy machinery, perhaps high in salts of such inhospitable minerals as boron, and sometimes farmed without the useful application of crop rotation or composting.

From a distance you may not observe the differences in these two types of purple profusion. On closer inspection these lovelies are simple to distinguish.

Native petunias, several species of the genus Ruellia, occur throughout this area. They adorn sunny places which have suffered lesser abuse by humans. These thornless beauties

serve as hostplants for such butterflies as Common & Tropical Buckeye and Pale-Banded Crescent.

Blooms are composed of 5 petals, partially fused at the base to form a funnel which mostly obscures the male and female flower parts located in the base of that funnel.

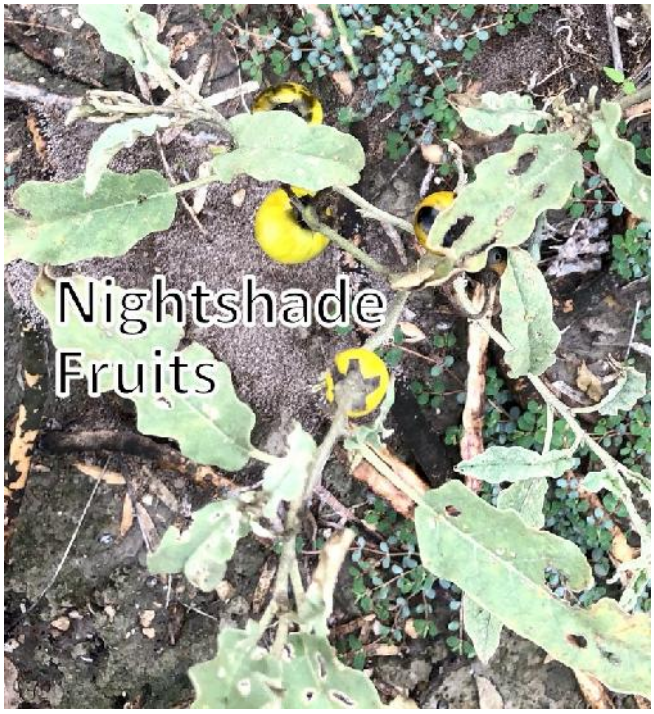
Their seed capsules are hard, elongated, with pointed ends, enclosing rows of seeds and opening lengthwise when hit by drops of moisture. One might call these capsules “Chachalaca pop rocks,” as putting such capsules into the mouth brings on the immediate explosion which disseminates seed away from the parent plant. Each seed is covered with a substance which becomes gelatinous and sticky in contact with water. (It’s fun to observe this fact by placing dry seed capsules inside a clean clear jar and introducing drops of water.) Such sticky seeds, if fortunate enough to land on a bit of soil, will stick into place, ready for growth.

By contrast, the purple blooming specimens which indicate extremely poor soil quality bear nasty prickles along the stem. These are of the Solanaceae family, relatives of tomato, potato, pepper and eggplant. Gardeners familiar with this family will recognize the typical bloom type seen in Silverleaf Nightshade (Trompillo), Solanum eleagnifolium.

The purple blooms of silver nightshade have five petals united to form a star shape. Male and female flower parts are not hidden, but obvious, bright yellow pollen-bearing anthers and a white pistil which protrudes beyond them. Silverleaf describes the color of the elongated, pointed leaves, which are covered with tiny hairs, arranged in star-like clusters on the leaf surface.

One does not repeatedly make the mistake of attempting to pull silverleaf nightshade from the hard soil in which it grows, as the prickly stem causes unpleasant injury to one’s fingers. This is a well-adapted survivor to tough conditions. The root system includes fleshy nodes which almost always remain in the ground, allowing the plant to return after mowing or other attempts at removal. It is also believed that this species produces chemicals, released into the surrounding soil, which deter the growth of other species.

Fortunately, the plant can be used by several kinds of wildlife. Fruits are eaten by white-tailed deer, javelinas and feral pigs. Seeds are eaten by bobwhite quail. Thus, animals help to spread these seeds to new areas. The bit of fertilizer they provide is probably essential to seed success in the tragic sort of soil these plants often inhabit. (Fruits were present in mid-September.)



There must be some reason behind the "nightshade" epithet, and I would avoid eating any part of the plant in the belief that a nightshade might be drawn permanently on my own life. As I'm sure you're aware, it is unwise to believe that something a feral pig consumes will be advantageous to your own health. ♦

LAS YERBAS DE ZIZOTES

Drew Bennie

LAS YERBAS DE ZIZOTES
SE VUELAN SUS SEMILLAS GRANDOTES
Y VIVEN EN EL CAMPO CON LOS CHAPOTES,
TAMBIEN CON LAS AVISPAS Y LAS CHUPAROSAS
Y LOS GUSANITOS DE LAS MARIPOSAS.

Loose English translation:
THE ZIZOTES MILKWEEDS
LETS FLY BIG SEEDS
AND LIVE IN THE WILD WITH THE CHAPOTE TREES
ALONG WITH BIG WASPS AND HUMMINGBIRDS TOO
AND THE LITTLE CATERPILLERS WHERE THE BUTTERFLIES FLEW.

WINTER OUTDOOR WILDLIFE EXPO

Each year we like to start off with a bang. At the South Padre Island Birding & Nature Center WOWE gives us an opportunity to show all the residents, and Winter Texans as well, just what we have to offer in the Rio Grande Valley. It also offers an excellent opportunity for Master Naturalists to accrue both volunteer hours and AT hours.

Volunteers are needed at all levels of the event structure: selling tickets at the door, counting visitors, giving information, monitoring the presenters, leading guide walks, and plenty more. As many hours as you care to give will be greatly appreciated.

When considering earning AT hours the most difficult decisions are choosing which topics you are most interested in and how much time you have available. First of all, Jonathan Wood will be there with his raptors for three days, also one full day will be dedicated to birds and birding. There will be a day of plants and pollinators which includes bees and butterflies. There is a day of all things fishy, including catching and cooking. A day will be devoted to the Gulf of Mexico and Laguna Madre; this will have presentations on coastal monitoring, sea shells, turtles, seaweed, invasive species, dolphins, kayaking, beach maintenance, and more. One day will be focused on nature in the RGV, a very broad topic with many specialties included. There will also be trips to local places of interest, as well as boat trips on the Ridley.

See anything you like? Then save the dates Jan 22–26, 2019.

Contact: Carolyn Cardile at P42339@aol.com.

The Joy of Volunteering

M. Kathy Raines

Learning of the forty hours of volunteer work I must complete to become a certified Texas Master Naturalist left me a bit daunted, but excited. Being a recent retiree, I relished having plenty of time to complete it, but wondered just where to work and what to do. Having lived the life of the mind for decades as an English teacher, I longed to do physical labor, and I did—yanking out guinea grass, trimming hedges, cutting off dead limbs, and toting off refuse, palm fronds and cactus. I have also fed fish, helped prepare diets, and measured salinity, Ph and water temperatures. But I find that I excel at what I excelled at as a teacher—interacting with and educating others, speaking and writing about what I have learned.

Initially, the question arose: do I volunteer for the many opportunities presented to us via announcements and emails—from counting hawks to planting gardens — or do I find something semi-permanent and create a schedule I can maintain?

Since I'd just sprung from teaching high school, where, as part of a community, I enjoyed regular conversations with colleagues, I opted for volunteering, for the most part, at regular venues, and I have maintained these activities in my schedule.

Since last spring, I have spent Tuesday mornings at Gladys Porter Zoo Aquatic Center, which includes all Texas creatures—after all, we are Texas naturalists—another morning at Sabal Palms Sanctuary, and I frequently substitute at the information booth at South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center. Also, I have worked with the dedicated crew at Ramsey Park. And I usually contribute a few hours to the zoo on Sunday afternoons, most recently, selling fish cones which feed the resaca's catfish, tilapia, carp, Texas softshell turtles and red eared sliders, among other Texas wildlife.

Since I'd already begun taking classes at Gladys Porter Zoo to become a docent and was starting to make the rounds of required areas, I volunteered one Sunday afternoon supervising the crowd while an employee swam as a "mermaid"; since all creatures—a Ridley's sea turtle, our native diamond-backed terrapin, gars, among others—are native to our waters. While supervising those touching stingrays—not grabbing but giving them the requisite "two finger salute"— I chatted with some of the extraordinarily friendly crew, one of whom, Brenda Pena, invited me to look around behind the tanks and appear that next Tuesday to learn about measuring salinity, Ph and temperatures, then supervise the touch tank while the employees held their regular meeting.

Tuesday I appeared, and Brenda patiently demonstrated these skills, ones many have practiced in high school or college labs, but which I found new and rather exciting— so unlike anything I'd ever done. I enjoyed the precision of doing measurements, finding it rather meditative. In the 40 seconds or so I give the instrument to measure Ph and temperatures, I relax and observe the fascinating creatures.

Of course we Texas Master Naturalists, in addition to helping out in various capacities, love to learn. And I have found the supervisor, Dan Goggin, and employees Brenda Pena, Samantha Silvestri and Amanda Perez, eager to talk about their various residents—a couple of fascinating ones I'd never encountered being the guitar fish—a seemingly transparent, mostly triangular fellow with a linear mouth—and an electric ray; I'd no idea we had other than stingrays in our Gulf. Oh, and the interestingly shaped, tiny-mouthed cow fish is a delight.

Some days I also help "feed out", my favorite one to feed being a large alligator gar dubbed Venti. While we drop the designated cut-up fish and such in the tanks of most of the fresh and saltwater creatures, we feed two—this gar and the somewhat disabled Kemp's Ridley sea turtle—fish from tongs. The huge gar seizes the food with a sudden and inevitably astonishing snap of jaws.

Intrigued by the interaction of wild and captive creatures at the zoo, I interviewed a few employees and volunteers and wrote an article on this for the zoo's newsletter and am working on a story on the recently deceased, very bright but short-lived octopus, Marvin (named thusly before she laid eggs).

By the way, those interested in volunteering at the zoo should contact the zoo's Education Department; classes are held the second Thursday of each month.

I chose to volunteer at Sabal Palms Wildlife Sanctuary for its familiarity—I'd been a member for years—and its proximity, not quite a half hour's drive—to my home. At first, under the guidance of manager Pablo Quintanilla, I did yard work—my stated preference: pulling grass, raking palm fronds and trimming hedges. Then, using the center's library, I researched designated native plants, creating descriptions for signs, a fascinating activity, then, using another's notes, writing about insects and arachnids. When time allowed, I did my own research, writing articles on possums, grackles and the masked booby—the latter of which was published online in the Island's *Parade*.

Substituting at the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center, learning about birds from knowledgeable and enthusiastic Javier Gonzalez, the onsite Naturalist Educator, has been a pleasure. I also cherish speaking with wildlife enthusiasts from around the world.

I have enjoyed twice volunteering at Ramsey Park, with its weekly itinerary and well-organized and most welcoming work crew. Though my skills are minimal—I've never run a chain saw—I've been given useful chores to do, and the camaraderie is most pleasant. And a fellow worker can invariably name that bird, plant or butterfly I don't recognize.

We Texas Master Naturalists want to contribute to assuring that wildlife thrives and to educate and inspire others to do the same. But also, we are all curious and love learning and sharing our knowledge about wild creatures and their habitat. The volunteer venues and activities I have chosen have inspired me to discuss, read, write and communicate about it. Through my continued volunteer work, I feel myself part of a vital community of caring, knowledgeable and avid nature enthusiasts. ♦

TMN VOLUNTEER SERVICE HOUR HONOREES from JULY to SEPTEMBER 2018

100 Hours

Andrea Villareal

Mark Salvatore

Shelby Bessette

Julia Osgood

250 Hours

Frances Barrera

Peggy Walker

500 Hours

Carol Rausch

Kit Doncaster

1000 Hours

Norma Trevino

Joni Gillis

2500 Hours

Heidi Linnemann

4000 Hours

Linda Butcher

WE ARE PROUD OF YOU!!!

THE END