




RIO GRANDE VALLEY CHAPTER, TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

# The Chachalaca

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## RGV TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

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NATURALIST PROGRAM JOINTLY SPONSORED BY TEXAS  
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## President's Message *by Frank Wiseman*

Spring is here!!! How do I know that? Besides the obvious date on the calendar of March 20<sup>th</sup>, I saw early signs back in January when the pink mint flowers started their annual show. Quickly following that, the bladder pod with its ground-covering mats of little yellow flowers started blooming all along the trails and roadsides. The *Eupatorium azureum* in January replaced the *Eupatorium odoratum* and brought out the butterflies.

Spring also brings blooms to many of our native plants and wildflowers. Some bloom early and some a little later. The Texas bluebonnets are beginning their show out along the roadway in front of Ramsey Park. It is too bad that our drought this year will hinder the roadside wildflowers, but they will return in another year.

Driving west on Old Highway 83, I see rows and rows of prickly poppies all along the railroad tracks. Elsewhere out in the countryside, the prickly pears are starting their annual blooms and the mesquite trees with their showy catkin blooms make a return to our Valley landscape. The huisache, huisachillo and black brush have put on their spring show and are now fading fast. To take their place we have the palo verdes showing off their blooms along with the retamas.

Many of our shade-loving cacti have started blooming and their purple-blue blooms only last a short time. It makes for haste to get out in our nature preserves to observe all of our spring plants putting on their finest greenery and colors.

As naturalists we can all appreciate what we see when we are out and about. New bird sightings have been reported by Bob Archer. A particular find was a Parauque and a Clay-colored Robin, soon to lose that name and become a Clay Thrush.



Clay-colored Robin *Photo by Robert Archer*

New plantings to redevelop the east side of Izyz's garden in Ramsey were undertaken by Tommy Peters and his tiller, mulching by Lou Osborne and Dick Roesler and Frank Wiseman along with the planting of some 30 or so new plants. To continue the area, help was gained from new RGVCTMN Trainees Bill Horton, and Cheri and Larry Horkman. The butterflies will soon have a whole new garden to feast on plantings of crotons, trixis, hibiscus, bernadettes, Texas torchwoods, potato tree, lantanas, skeleton leaf, and others.

Our new training class is fast approaching the end of its training cycle, and we hope to welcome all 32 members as full-fledged certified Texas Master Naturalists at our annual Pot-Luck Graduation ceremonies at Martha and Taylor Blanton's Los Ebanos preserve on May 12<sup>th</sup>.

I want to thank all of our presenters and a great job done by Cathy Budd, Education Chair, for putting this year's training program together. Thanks are also warranted to all who have helped with the training class.

Election of new officers and volunteers for board of directors will be approaching in August. Please think about offering your services to serve your chapter in some capacity to help maintain our chapter's strength as the best in South Texas.

## Some TMNs of Note (For more, see page 10!)



Frank Wiseman presents Cathy Budd, Education Chair, her award for completing 1,000 hours of volunteer work.



Licha Paz completes 500 volunteer hours and Virginia Vineyard completes 100.



Jolaine Lanehart and Jim Najvar recertify for 2008.



Julie Morris receives her certification from Frank Wiseman.

## Springtime is Sea Turtle Time on South Padre Island by Mary Ann Tous

Spring brings with it the promise of winter's end, warmer weather, and the celebration of Easter so what better time for the sea turtles to nest along the Texas coast as Nature prepares for its annual renewal ritual that is as old as the planet itself? Fortunately, the numbers of Kemp's ridley sea turtles returning to our Texas shores is definitely on the incline due to the intense efforts of all those who have partnered on their behalf under the direction of Dr. Donna Shaver, Chief of the Division of Sea Turtle Science and Recovery at Padre Island National Seashore. It is therefore quite encouraging that with each new year old records are broken and new ones are made. Indeed, as the magic month of April approaches, we become excitingly aware that the sea turtle nesting season is again nearly upon us and that, even as I write this, there are many sea turtles making their way here. The anticipation of their return is filled with the hope that they successfully make the treacherous journey and are able to deposit their precious eggs safely.

Moreover, as we get ready for this year's nesting season, we can't help but wonder how it will compare with years past. Will the first nester be fueled by strong onshore winds and abrupt shifts in the barometer as she was last year on April 12<sup>th</sup>? Will it be an Arribada or a loner? Will she be a return tagged nester or will she be a neophyte (meaning never tagged before)? And what lucky day will the first nesters be found this year? Furthermore, who will have the good fortune to find the first Kemp's Ridley nester? Will it be a chance discovery, by a visitor perhaps, or will a sharp-eyed volunteer on patrol sight the first nest of 2009? Last year it was one of our very own Master Naturalists, John Tierney, who found the first Kemp's ridley nester and tagged

her. More importantly, though, how many treasured eggs will the first nester leave us? Last year the first nester left a clutch of 86 eggs. Depending on how many eggs are left in sandy nests in the coming weeks, we can also speculate as to how many baby hatchlings will be released this year. As we do every year, we trust that the numbers will exceed the previous year's numbers.

This year we will learn the answers to these questions together as our Master Naturalist chapter eagerly awaits to embark into a season of personal discoveries and fascinating experiences. As a group, we will volunteer to help the Kemp's ridley to continue to survive and, in the process, will bond ever closer together as Master Naturalists. To be sure, the enthusiasm of our new class was evident during the recent turtle nesting patrol class which was held at Sea Turtle Inc. on February 7<sup>th</sup> where we were met by Lucia Guillen, the dedicated biologist who was our teacher for the day.

Few on South Padre Island are better suited than Lucia to prepare us to be careful patrollers and to meet any challenges that may arise. For many, this training patrol session was their first encounter with these mysterious sea creatures and it wasn't long before they were captivated by their new flippered friends as they responded to the turtles' unique beauty and grace. The day wouldn't have been complete if we hadn't taken photos with Allison, a four-year-old Green sea turtle who, having been adopted by the Texas Master Naturalists, is our unofficial chapter mascot. In fact, many of our group are now involved in her welfare by babysitting with her as she wears her new swimming device which allows her to better maneuver in the water than with her single flipper. We watched her with both compassion and admiration as she charmed us with her spunky attitude which has enabled her to make considerable progress in overcoming her disability.

We then proceeded to the beach where, unbeknownst to the group, some turtlettes in human form had come much earlier that morning and dug six turtle nests along the shore and planted a clutch of a dozen chicken eggs in each. These artificial

nests were covered carefully with sand and the telltale flattened circular area was left with turtle tracks to and fro, all reproduced for the benefit of the class. The tracks were especially significant because Kemp's ridley crawl tracks lead to their nests and so it is essential that any volunteers who patrol the beaches recognize them. On windy days these sea turtle tracks can be erased in seconds and since the Kemp's ridley crawl tracks are the smallest of all the species, they are exceptionally prone to the elements.

Therefore, it is not always a straightforward task for patrollers. They need to have Mother Luck riding on their shoulder as well as a keen eye to find crawl tracks and locate nests. Fortunately, on the day of the class all of the nests were found in a relatively short amount of time by the new Master Naturalist recruits. However, Mother Nature will not always be as easy to deal with given the fact that it is in the best interest of the species for the nests to remain hidden so that the eggs are protected from predators; hence, while the winds may hamper the efforts of those seeking to help the sea turtles, at the same time it also decreases the likelihood that they will be found by any natural enemies.

Overall, our training only scratched the surface of what we will actually encounter on beach patrols for sea turtle nesting behavior is a learning experience like no other. When the nesters swim up to our shores again this year and leave their eggs before returning to the sea, it will not be the end of the story but the beginning of yet another wonderful chapter in the saga of their survival.

By the way, after the class last month, Sea Turtle Inc. received several calls from alert onlookers who reported that there was a great deal of very early sea turtle nesting activity because they saw the tracks leading to nests full of eggs. Thank goodness that the public is aware enough, and concerned enough, to bring attention of the nests to the proper organization regardless of whether they were real or not. For this, Ila Loetscher would have been very proud. I, too, was quite glad because it is in this spirit that the legacy of the Turtle Lady continues.



## Salt Lakes by John Thaxter

How many salt lakes do you know of? I had heard of the Dead Sea, and have visited the Great Salt Lake in Utah twice. Until a couple of weeks ago that is all I knew of. I saw Eileen Mattei's program on a local salt lake, Sal del Rey at the February TMN meeting. Her presentation made the salt lakes, (yes, there are more in the area), sound fascinating. Then when I saw that one of our field trips was to the lake I signed up.

The journey part way around the lake was even better than Eileen had made it sound. We started from the parking area on highway 186 near Linn and San Manuel at about 10 AM. Our guide was Carolyn Sternberg who is a winter volunteer with Texas Parks and Wildlife. The walk down the access road was refreshing with the mesquite starting to leaf out and showing spots of yellow blooms. The access road ends at a wash coming into the lake from the west. There are some pools of standing water in the wash, and on the opposite shore were several kinds of birds including Greater Yellowlegs, Killdeer, and Least Sandpiper.



The first thing that caught our eyes was the number and variety of tracks in the soft sand and clay along the shore. The tracks continued for our entire stroll along the lake. Carolyn could identify most of the tracks. These included javelina, deer, raccoon, coyote, and possibly ocelot or bobcat. Some large wading bird tracks were either Great Blue Heron or Sandhill Crane.

Besides the evidence of living critters, we discovered numerous animals that had died from possible exposure to the salty environment. These

included several small rattlesnakes, one horned lizard, a couple of leopard frogs, and a mostly continuous line of small frogs along the high water line. Some of these had a pinkish tinge, and we learned that the brine shrimp in the lake are also pink. This color is possibly from minerals besides salt in the water.

The sea grass along the shore is home to quite a few funnel web building spiders. I had always called these tunnel spiders, but from some brief research on the web I have learned they are more properly called funnel web spiders, probably from the genus *Agelenopsis*.



Toward the end of our trek, we arrived at a fresh water spring that sits on a point jutting into the lake. That was a surprise, and seemed out of place in such an otherwise hostile environment as we had walked through. The spring sheltered minnows, some frogs, dragonfly and damselfly larva, and had a couple of clumps of cattails.

I had expected some unpleasant odors from the lake and its soft edges, but it was mostly odor free. Probably the best time to visit would be early morning or dusk, when the animals come down to the lake.

This was a very enjoyable field trip. The small size, and active communities of wildlife make it better for viewing than something as large and overwhelming as the Salt Lake in Utah. It is an excellent place to experience a wide variety of wildlife in the Valley.

*Photos courtesy of Sharon Swanson, field trip guest*

## **Cactus Creek Ranch Field Trip** *by Carol Hubing - RGVTMN trainee*

The March 1 Cactus Creek Ranch field trip was a pleasurable experience for 40 TMNs, trainees and guests. Owner Mary Jo Bogatto, her mother Mary Donahue and Ruth Hoyt (all TMN trainees) greeted us at the ranch lodge. Before the tour we had time to roam around the large lodge and view mounted fish, fowl and animals. The patio and backyard is RGV rustic and a very enchanting area to visit. The lodge and back yard are available for parties and receptions. The ranch is located 2.2 miles east of intersection 1847 and 106 near Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge.



Mary Jo told us that she and her husband purchased the 400 acre ranch in 1995. The previous owner had used the land for cattle grazing. The Bogatto's desire was to convert the acreage back to its natural state.

For our ranch tour, Mary Jo provided a wagon complete with benches to ride in. On a beautiful sunny cool Rio Grande Valley spring day we had time to appreciate what nature had to offer: mesquite trees starting to green out, blossoming wild lantana, cactus' forming their tuna, hawks flying above us, nine ponds with each pond has it own distinctiveness to attract wildlife. ( yes, there are alligators too).

During our tour we stopped at a secluded cabin in the wild with underground electricity for those that want to escape the fast pace of life and enjoy nature and tranquility . By the end of the tour we all knew

Mary Jo has a special fondness for her ranch rattlesnakes.



Following the tour, Ruth greeted us back at the lodge and presented an informational photography program. She illustrated wild flowers and wildlife pictures she has taken in the RGV. We learned what traits make a first-rate nature photo. Her professional camera equipment was on display...however she indicated any camera can be used to create good wild life photos. Ruth's advice was to go out - enjoy nature and experiment taking pictures. Her "Close to Nature Images" business card is unique. The card displays a photograph she took of an Anole biting a rattlesnake.

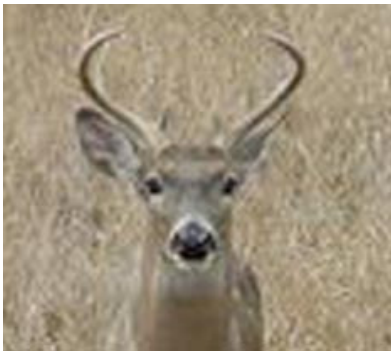


As we thanked our hosts for the special opportunity to explore the ranch, we were served cactus candy made from the tuna of a cactus.

## Deer Antlers ... A Renewable Educational Resource

by Ralph M. Hausman, Ph.D. and Barbara J. Hausman M.T.(ASCP)

White-tail deer, the most abundant large game species in North America, are made up of approximately 30 subspecies. The Texas White-tail is one of the largest groups, particularly in Texas, where an estimated three to four million of the deer reside. Fawns (young deer less than six months of age) have bright white spots scattered on their coats, whereas the adults typically show a body color that is reddish-brown in summer and grayish-brown in winter. Males, or bucks, possess a pair of antlers (although an occasional antlered doe has been recorded).



Like other deer species, white-tail bucks grow a new set of antlers every year beginning in April or May, and shedding the old ones between January and March, after the breeding season, or “rut”, is over. Their antlers are comprised of one main beam per antler; with separate tines sprouting from the main beams as the bucks mature. While growing, the antlers are covered with velvet, containing thousands of small blood vessels that nourish the growing antlers.

Antlers are true bone, and are the fastest growing body tissue known. Reportedly, the shortening daylight in late August to early September triggers a hormonal response, shutting off the blood flow to the velvet. The bucks then shed the dying velvet, usually by rubbing the antlers against trees and brush, leaving polished bone. Each spring, the antler bases slowly harden, allowing them to fall off or ‘shed’ in preparation for the new set to begin to develop.

Now comes the educationally relevant question: If there are approximately 4 million white-tail deer in Texas, with anywhere from 5% (200,000) to 10% (400,000) of them being bucks, and if each buck sheds a pair of antlers EACH YEAR (400,000 to 800,000), why don’t we find ourselves hip-deep in shed antlers when we take our hikes into deer habitat?

Whenever you do find a naturally shed antler or a buck’s skull, they are usually weathered to the point that they are soft or even have become chalk-like to the touch. This is simply part of the life cycle wherein the antlers are dissolving back into the soil.



In addition, when the hard bony antler becomes soft, they serve other animals’ (rodents, or even other deer) needs for calcium and other trace minerals. If you look closely, you might be able to “read” the antler’s history and determine what creature might have chewed on this antler.



So, you can see that the answer to the question posed, i.e., “why aren’t we hip-deep in ‘used’ antlers”, is simply that it’s Nature’s way to acknowledge the environmental value of recycling.



## At Bentsen Gate *by Leo Garrett*

I've been volunteering lately at Bentsen SP as a gate watcher. This task has several attractions for me, not the least of which is that it requires very little exertion or mobility. I am able to be useful without being too active.

Another attractive feature is the birding. There is a feeding station right in front of the gatehouse and every Valley special shows up sooner or later. Just bring your camera and wait. I have seen Clay-colored Robins (thrushes), Altamira Orioles, Green Jays and Great Kiskadees. Also Golden-fronted and Ladderback Woodpeckers, Olive Sparrows, and Orange-crowned Warblers. Those are just a few of the birds sighted.

The big attraction, of course, is the opportunity to

meet our visitors. Only foot or bike traffic comes through the gate. Most of the visitors ride the tram. It is important that *all* our visitors be counted. The people who allocate funds like to see firm numbers. If the visitors pay at the office or ride the tram, they are counted there. If they have a pass, they may come in directly. During the season it is not uncommon to have more than 400 people come directly through the gate. The Park needs to know how many.

The visitors may stop and bird-watch and usually will chat a bit too. We have opportunities to hand out maps and activity schedules as well as talk about the Valley as a whole. If you know me, you know I like to talk. The Bentsen SP gate duty suits me fine!



The Altamira Oriole, a Valley special



Another special, the Great Kiskadee



A Chachalaca helping himself to the peanut butter!



Ralf is enjoying his first donut of the morning, when the bell over the door tinkles and in walks Rollo.

**Ralph:** “Is it just me or is it blueberry donuts?”

**Rollo:** “What do you mean Ralph?”

**Ralph:** “I mean every time I start to have a nice warm donut alone, especially a blueberry donut, someone shows up to distract my thoughts.”

**Rollo:** “Who showed up this time Ralph?”

**Ralph:** “Never mind Rollo,...Good morning.. ...and how are you this almost fine morning?”

**Rollo:** “I’m just fine Ralph.....I was thinking about them things we was discussing a while back about doing fun stuff out of doors and calling it some kind of science, ...you remember don’t ya’?”

**Ralph:** “Yeah.....I remember. Is there something special on your mind this time...or anytime?”

**Rollo:** “Well, ya’ see.....my granddaughter is nine years old, and she knows how to use a computer, can spell, reads and writes like she is in high school and is just smart as a whipper snapper.”

**Ralph:** “Is she adopted?”

**Rollo:** “No...Ralph...you know her, she is my daughter’s girl....anyway, she is too young to go places and get outside alone, and my daughter.....you know she is a single parent.....well she just don’t have the time to take her places and I was wondering what she could do here in town or just at home. You seem to know all that kind of stuff, and I thought you might know about something that she could do.”

**Ralph:** “Well....it just so happens that at Christmas time I was up at my sister’s in Philly. Marlene is really a good ole girl, but just a little touched. She seems to think that everybody can be something and do something. She is one of those community organizers and really gets worked up about getting people involved in stuff outdoors.”

**Rollo:** “Ok,..Ralph...but how does that help my granddaughter?”

**Ralph:** “I was just getting to that....Ya’ see she told me about 2 programs that she gets people involved in who are either shut-ins or are just limited to getting to the city park, or a corner parking lot.”

**Rollo:** “Well....what can you really do at either of those places...they ain’t really outdoor activities?”

**Ralph:** “But that’s just it...She gets everyone involved. First of all she told me about this program called Pigeon Watch. It is a citizen science project where folks in towns, cities, even the country try to count and identify pigeons. And all you have to do is see ‘em and count ‘em. She has a bunch of ladies that meet every Thursday just to throw out bird seed and count pigeons. They have a ball.

Then she was telling me about some kids who found out about Feeder Watch. You don’t even have to leave the house to do that one. All you do is get a kit in the mail, feed the birds from November through March and record what and how many you saw.

And the best part about all of this is that anyone who can use a computer.....Duuuuhhhh like your granddaughter, can look it up for yourselves, get lots of information, and find out more things than just these two. Here let me write it down for you on this napkin. You can take this to your daughter’s house and let your granddaughter educate you on some of the things that kids and shut-ins can do concerning outdoor fun and citizen science projects. Who knows....maybe you will actually learn something from her.

Try out this website: <http://www.birds.cornell.edu>. Then just click on ‘What we do’. She will be amazed at all of the opportunities that she can participate in. Now please don’t loose this napkin.

## Some more TMNs of note



Jennifer Owens-White with Indigo snake.



Jim Najvar receives 250 hour pin.

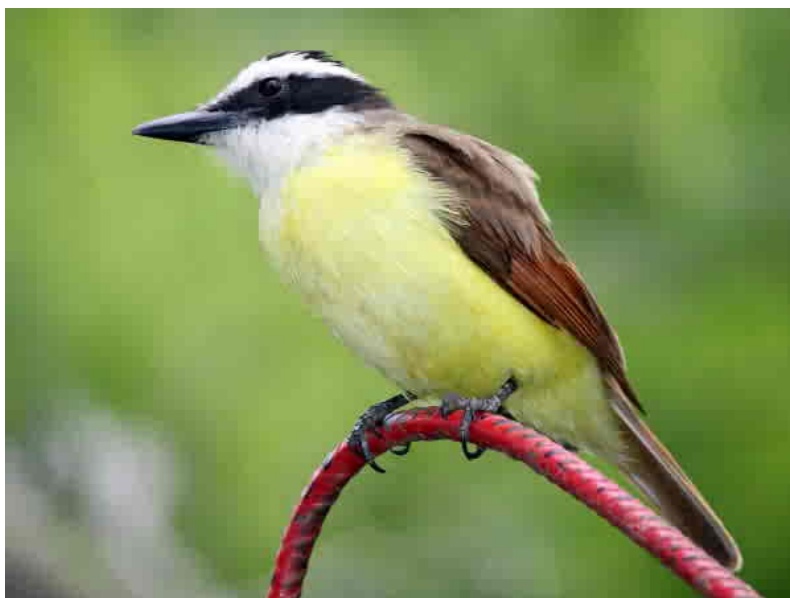


Frank Wiseman presents certificate to Lisa Adams.



Eileen Mattei awards Sherman Lee a \$50 gas card for selling the most raffle tickets.

## Final Photo



Great Kiskadee *by Robert Archer*