RIO GRANDE VALLEY CHAPTER, TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

The Chachalaca

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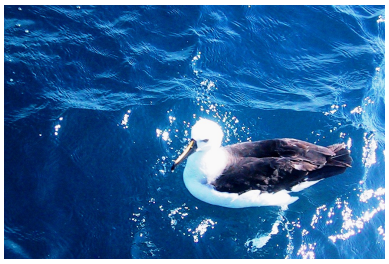

RGV TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS
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President's Message

by Frank Wiseman

This has been an exciting spring for our chapter. We have successfully trained and graduated almost 32 new members for our chapter. Cathy Budd did an outstanding job this year as our Education Chair. It was a pleasure to see how smoothly our training went this year and how pleased the trainees were with all of the new knowledge learned. We thank all of our speakers and tour guides for all of the hard work they did to make it a successful training.

Our graduation ceremony at Los Ebanos Preserve this year was enjoyed by all and the food was delicious as always. We thank once again our hosts and fellow TMN members Martha and Taylor Blanton for the use of the beautiful grounds and facilities of their nature preserve. We always feel so welcome out among its natural setting.

Our vice-president, Eileen Mattei, has done an excellent job with our general meeting programs and our other field tours this year. We thank her for arranging an excellent program year.

As we are now into our summer season of slack time, it is rewarding to know that many of our members are out there doing their volunteer work in the parks and at other locations to help preserve our plants and wildlife during the hot season of the Valley's weather. At Ramsey Park we plug along adding garden areas and refurbishing existing ones. We hear news that the new birding center and its accompanying boardwalk on SPI next to the convention center is nearing completion. They are certainly going to need more volunteers for all of their plans. So step up and offer your unique abilities.

Our turtle volunteers on the Island have done a great job in locating the turtle nests this year. Mary Ann Tous has done an excellent job of reporting the updates for us. The first release of new hatchlings has already taken place and I'm sure many of you have attended or will attend the future events.

In August we will hold elections for new officers for our chapter. Many of you have offered your services to serve in some capacity, and I personally want to thank all who have given in the past of their services to help keep our chapter the best in South Texas. If you want to serve in any capacity on the board or as an officer and have not been personally contacted by a board member or other chapter member, please step up and make that important decision to serve. We need new blood to help with new ideas and to keep our organization growing and thriving. As Uncle Sam says: " WE NEED YOU."

I hope all of you who are traveling this summer will enjoy your vacations and remember to help other nature organizations wherever you may stop along the way. Bring us back new ideas and projects for the coming year.

This is my last year as your president and I want to say how much it has meant to me to serve the chapter as a charter member and organizer. Now I will relinquish my position to another who will equally serve you all as your new president. Remember that you, the members, are the blood life of our chapter and each of you contributes skills of equal importance.

RGVTMN Photos

John Thaxter, TMN graduate; Mary Lori Davis, TMN class completion; Cheri Horkman, TMN graduate; and Larry Horkman, TMN graduate

Frank Wiseman presenting 250-hour pin to Paul Bryant

Eileen Mattei presenting RGVTMN mug to Dr. Juan Anciso in appreciation of his insect presentation.

Frank Wiseman presenting 100-hour pin to Eileen Mahoney.

An Earth Day Turtle Tale

by Mary Ann Tous

The Kemp's ridley species of sea turtles return to nest each year along the Texas coast beginning in April and continuing into September so for these four months the National Parks Services' Division of Sea Turtle Science and Recovery, led by Dr. Donna Shaver, coordinates frequent sea turtle patrols both on foot and on ATV.

Those wishing to participate in these patrols are required to attend special training sessions and so each Spring Dr. Shaver conducts classes for interns, volunteers and responders where she explains sea turtle behavior, teaches patrolling methods, and illustrates exactly what to do with a newly-found nest. Her class is not only motivational but it also provides the extensive preparation that is necessary to successfully manage the oncoming Arribada on South Padre Island and Boca Chica Beach.

For her personal dedication and genuine compassion, Dr. Shaver is nothing less than a living saint in the troubled sea turtle world of today. She is assisted in her Herculean efforts by the staff and volunteers of Sea Turtle Inc. who serve as a much-needed partner.

Last year the first nester arrived on April 12th, propelled by wind gusts of 20 to 30 mph which surely must have been a big help to her as she was laden with a heavy cargo of eggs. On that day, which coincidentally occurred on South Padre Island's birthday celebration, she laboriously deposited 102 valuable eggs in her nest before returning to sea. What better birthday gift could Nature have given us?

All of the eggs were carefully recovered and put safely into the guarded kraal area to be meticulously monitored until they hatched and were subsequently released. This year, however, was different. April was quickly disappearing without a single nester on South Padre Island and, with each day that passed without a call to alert us that a new nest had been discovered, we grew more and more anxious.

Three weeks went by and before we knew it, Earth Day was upon us. Designated as a day to spread awareness about helping the planet, April 22nd is our collective opportunity to pay thanks to Mother Earth for all of the beauty which she gives to us and is celebrated with reminders of the urgent need to preserve and renew the threatened ecological balances upon which all life on Earth depends.

And so appropriately, as if on cue, the first nester at last reached our shores on Earth Day but it was to be a bittersweet homecoming. This particular turtle brought with her an important message related to Earth Day, though, and one which we should all heed. Obeying her natural instincts, this Kemp's ridley struggled to make it to shore and nest but her injuries prevented her from following the cycle of motherhood to completion.

When she was found, the poor creature was valiantly attempting to lay her eggs but she was simply unable to do so and was therefore transported, heavily laden with eggs, to the Gladys Porter Zoo for medical attention where it was determined that she had likely been the victim of a boat's propeller and, despite much deliberation about how to save her, it was ultimately decided that, given the extent of her injuries, the only humane thing to do was to euthanize her and try to save her precious eggs. Still, there was no guarantee that these eggs would incubate and successfully develop but we had to try.

At that point, all that anyone could do was to hope for the best. Then on June 12th, in the wee hours of the morning, there was movement in the nest. Sand stirred as each hatchling slowly made its way out of its egg and, one by one, tiny flippered orphans emerged into the world until 92 of the eggs hatched. When news of the hatching was released everyone was ecstatic that the eggs had survived their mother's ordeal and that the baby sea turtles would be given the chance to explore the great ocean which was their birthright.

Not long afterward, in the hours of early dawn the frenzied hatchlings were released into the glistening Gulf waters of South Padre Island and 92 little lives ventured forth out into their new home. Fortunately, it was a happy ending to a sad beginning but it is a dismal reminder of the plight of sea turtles from all-too-familiar dangers even in their protected status. Nonetheless, in honor of their Earth Day arrival, Mother Nature ensured that the life of this turtle was passed on in the form of her offspring and that her legacy will continue.

This type of situation is precisely why it is so crucial that we must all be vigilant and watch out for our visiting nesting sea turtles who blend in so well with the sand. Their strong maternal instincts override all else and, despite injuries or natural threats, they will endure almost anything to fulfill their duty. This is their secret to survival and we must respect it.

The first public hatchling release of this season took place on June 13th with a large crowd gathered to watch 279 Kemp's ridley hatchlings imprint on the sands of South Padre Island before diving fearlessly into the welcoming waves of the sea. This release also marks the dawn of a new group of ambassadors who will spread awareness and education, the twin tools used by the Turtle Lady in her quest to help the sea turtles to escape extinction. Her wish was to leave footprints in the sand that others could follow and, judging by what I'm seeing, that legacy has succeeded magnificently.

Teaching Reading the "Mountain Man Way"

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

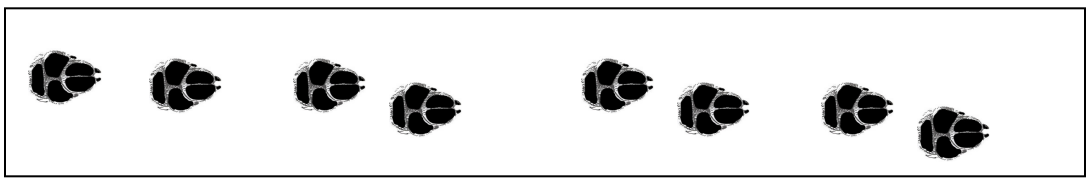
Some years ago, after I got tired of writing psychological reports that all too few teachers read and/or implemented, I became a special education teacher. My classes were comprised of youngsters who were violent and aggressive, elementary-age students with emotional disturbance; some were also diagnosed as having mental retardation or learning disabilities. Among them, many were identified as "non-readers." Due to the wide variety of presenting problems, I developed a curriculum focusing on 'live science,' with a 'research or discovery orientation.'

One of the activities that seemed to hook the students on learning was collecting and identifying animal footprints. A logical follow-up – at least in my way of thinking – was to develop rubber stamps from the footprints and exchange them with other footprint collectors in other geographical areas. Barbara reminded me of an old interest we had enjoyed teaching our children the art of tracking when they were young and wondered if that could be of any use in the classroom, and so the "Mountain Man" project began.

Initially, I laid out some 'short stories' in a mud patch in the brush area behind the school where I had my class, using the rubber stamps Barbara and I learned to produce. Then I took the students out on a short field trip where we "discovered" the tracks. A judicious use of directive questioning led the students to hypothesize what animal(s) made the tracks and what they were probably doing when they passed by our wet spots. Of course, all the students returned to the classroom covered in mud and more interested in talking about the animals they thought were playing on the back of the school playground late at night rather than resuming their classroom assignments. This, as I recall, was on a Friday.

Over the weekend, Barbara and I began laying out a series of black-inked animal tracks on long strips of butcher paper, all portraying one or more story lines. The following Monday, during my usual language-arts/reading periods, I laid out one of the paper strips and introduced the students to how the old Mountain Men and Indians were able to read. (They had already been exposed to the fur trade, mountain men, black powder flintlock weaponry, etc., in previous lessons.) Those students who could already read and write served as participants as well as scribes, writing what they and the others thought about the prints on the butcher paper alongside the prints. All questions and guesses were recorded. As points were clarified with additional input along the line of animal tracks, the scribes would go back and scratch out and/or write over the original information, inserting the corrections. Once the stories were completed, the students worked in pairs writing out the corrected versions of the stories, posting them on the bulletin boards as displays. Follow-up activities included additional research, arriving at conclusions to questions posed as well as using an old computer we had to type out and print individual copies of each story to take home … even the nonreaders mastered these activities, with their buddy's assistance. (One youngster with autism finally learned to tolerate being helped by a 'friend' he chose for the task.)

My favorite story was one that began with a series of round, furry tracks crossing a wide strip of snow.



Most students guessed that "a cat" made the tracks because they were small, round, and furry. Of course, one of our mandatory activities involved "categorization" so they had to determine that members of the "cat family" were "felines" or "Felidae."

By gently directing the students through several illustrated reference books that a very supportive school librarian had located and lent to our classroom, the youngsters engaged in a lively debate about the fact that the tracks were not as round as most cat tracks and there were claws readily visible. Further boisterous research and discussion lead to two possibilities: (a) The tracks were made by a cheetah, the only cat with dog-like feet or (b) it may be a small, really furry-footed dog ("Canid" or "Canidae" family) of some sort (with the latter explanation preferred sine the ground was covered with snow and cheetahs were normally found on the hot veldt of Africa.

As the story line was pursued, a new set of tracks crossed the first set … a large split-hoof,

with very broad pads. This was relegated to the possibility of a moose or other large, wild mammal, i.e., the "Ungulata" family. But, the students felt that it didn't have anything to do with the story because it crossed the first track and kept going off the paper. Using contextual clues, the question was posed as to which came across the area first, the small, furry tracks or the split-hoof? The group finally agreed that the unknown "ungulate" probably came later as the "cat?dog" would probably have varied its tracks to check out the other tracks, but it didn't.

Then, a short distance along the track line, the tracks gathered into a small group, and then pounced once, twice, trice … landing each time with all four feet close together and finally stopping at the end of a trail of bird tracks. The bird tracks were almost invisible in the snow due to the heavy coating of feathers on both feet. Also, there were two sets of wing patterns in the snow and no evidence of bone, blood or feathers at the site. Then, the unknown dog/canid tracks continued on.

This final section of the track-line answered three basic questions: (a) What type of bird was it likely to have been, and (b) did the bird get caught. Further, (c) what made the tracks the students had been following all along?

First, the bird track looked like some sort of ground bird with extensive feathering of the toes. Since the area involved snow and the tracks were almost blurred out due to heavy feathering, the students decided it was more than likely a ptarmigan. Since there were no bones, blood or feathers on the snow, it must have flown away, leaving only the tracks of its wing tips in the snow.

What took the longest time was identifying the dog/canid tracks that the students had been following. Eventually, one pair of student researchers, looking up canid behavior in a college text (one of mine on comparative physiology that had been included on the reference text shelf) found that the only member of the canid or dog family that pounces like a cat (with all four feet close together) is a fox. This track reading activity had taken the whole week of language arts/reading periods but the students had all stuck to it avidly and had fully participated … something that had never happened with any other language arts activity before! A most successful activity over the long run.

As the youngsters were leaving for the weekend (carefully clutching the printed copies of the story to share with family and friends at home), a question was posed as homework, due the following Monday. A choice reward was to go to each of the students who could identify what color and/or type of fox made the tracks!

And that, dear friends, is how you can use your Texas Master Naturalist knowledge and skills to teach reading "the old Mountain Man way."

References:

Murie, O.J. (1974). Animal Tracks (Peterson Field Guides), Houghton Mifflin Co.

Chattering in the Chimney *by Tony Reisinger*

Chimney Swift Nest View, Looking Up the Chimney

Presently my house is filled with chattering in the chimney every few minutes which has been going on for almost two weeks. I opened the flue a few days ago and saw a nest inside the chimney with possibly two baby chimney swifts. They do make a lot of noise and I will be glad when they grow up and fly away. I've read this species has expanded its range and includes chimneys in place of hollowed out trees, which are getting scarce. The chattering is worth the weight in bugs these birds consume and I hope they stick around for the rainy season, just not in my chimney.

Junior Naturalists' First Adventure *by Tony Reisinger*

Twenty-seven of us had ventured to "la boca del rio", the mouth of the Rio Grande on Boca Chica Beach, walking west upriver on June 3rd, trying to find a rare red mangrove amidst a forest of black mangroves. The Mexican light house on the south side of the river was visible and fishermen dotted both banks, catching snook and redfish. Suddenly the sea-oxeye daisies rattled and shook as something scurried crazily across the sandy ground, seeking safety in the mangrove trees. One of the students in Master Naturalist Sister Sharon Horace's Junior Naturalist class shouted, "It's a bird."

And it was a bird, a big one at that, almost a foot long with a gray back and a buff brown belly, turning to a cream color toward the throat. As we followed the bird to the edge of a canal, another Junior Naturalist exclaimed, "It has a mask!" I saw the mask, and the bill was recurved and yellow on the lower portion. The tail feathers and primaries were long and it was moving, then pausing momentarily about halfway up the mangroves, trying to elude our pursuit. I whipped out my point and shoot, fumbling to take a couple of hurried shots before the bird flew low across the canal into the mangroves on the other side.

I had never seen anything like this in my thirty-five years of observing birds. It was a mystery and the only thing I could think of (until I arrived home later that night) was a thrasher because of the recurved bill and noise it made in the underbrush.

The mangroves, our mystery bird was seeking as refuge, are small trees that grow in saline habitats of the tropics and subtropics; they contribute to the overall production of estuaries. There are numerous species but we are limited in Texas to only two: the black, being the more common, and the rarer red species.

Flowering Black Mangrove

Our adventure continued for the Junior Naturalists, learning the importance of sand dunes and estuaries, and netting fish with a seine along the beach. When the net was pulled to the shore they were around the catch like a flock of seagulls. Small Florida pompano and jacks were the catch of the day. Learning a lesson in conservation, the young naturalists watched one fisherman catch and release a snook that did not make the slot limit. Emphasizing fish are a renewable resource; he proudly showed them a keeper redfish.

Junior Naturalists Pulling in the Seine Net at la Boca del Rio

On the way to Boca Chica the class stopped along the Rio Grande and observed fiddler crabs in action on the river bank. They learned about "finger" mullet a fisherman had caught for bait, a lesson in predator - prey relationships. Highway 4 was fraught with roadside raptors; a special treat between the highway and the river was an Altamira oriole perched in a yucca. From

solitary big blue herons fishing on the beach, to scampering sanderlings following the last gasp of a wave, the students had a spectacular time with memories they may never forget.

The adventure was filled with valuable lessons complimenting the first Junior Naturalist class in the state of Texas (that we are aware of). Sister Sharon has embarked on a historic venture using the Gorgas Science Foundation curriculum as a base text. She is beginning lesson two this week which includes a field trip to Bahia Grande, and she is in need of old or new field guides. Ed Tamayo is approaching a local bank for donations to supply the Junior Naturalists with note books. Master Naturalist Lupita Escobar in Los Fresnos has also started a Junior Naturalist program which we hope to report on in a future issue.

Speaking of field guides, I consulted several upon returning home late that evening of June 3rd and found the mystery bird could not have been a thrasher, which is a smaller bird than what we saw, and was more likely a rare member (for this area) of the cuckoo family, a mangrove cuckoo. My pictures were not good and I have not had a response to an inquiry to confirm our sighting. One of our Master Naturalist bird experts can't positively say it is a mangrove cuckoo based on my pictures. However, I know what we saw and it now resides in my life list as a mangrove cuckoo, topping our adventure at la boca del rio.

Ramsey Report *by Frank Wiseman*

Since January, Ramsey Park volunteers have kept a steady stream of TMN workers busy with their many garden spot projects that our chapter has been involved with over the past seven years.

Several members including Tommy Peters, Dick Roesler, Diann Ballesteros, Cheri and Larry Horkman, Frank Wiseman, Christina Mild, and Bill Horton, have done extensive work in the Izzy Garden project. Izzy's Garden started off as an Eagle Scout project. The young man who initiated this spot in Ramsey Park did so in order to receive his Eagle Scout Badge. Izzy had to leave Harlingen in order to serve his country with the U.S. Navy.

Unfortunately during Hurricane Dolly this spot was severely damaged and had to be completely dug out and replanted. That's when the above members took over and redid and enlarged the original garden with the planting of new native plants to replace everything that was washed away or drowned due to the hurricane. Among the many of the 120 or more new plants added have been lantanas, crotons, heart-leaf hibiscus, skeleton leaf daisy, bernadettes, mountain laurels, desert yaupons, purple heliotropes, leather stems, Mexican trixis, Tamaulipan olive, wild olive, pigeon berries, and salvias. All of the plants have been donated by TMN members and the work has been accomplished by our hard-working weekly TMN volunteers.

This has always been a mid-point stopping place along the Caliche Loop, and we hope that our members and the public enjoy the tranquility and peacefulness of the garden that butterflies and birds seem to enjoy also.

Also benefiting Ramsey with their endeavors have been Linda Butcher who works on the north side of the park, Ginger Byram who maintains the entrance garden and hidden pond area and Robert Archer who maintains his beautiful and calming bird watching area, Humming Bird Trail.

Our chapter does a great service for the visitors to this nature center and all of their hard work is appreciated. Come and visit to see for yourself. Remember to bring your camera to capture that special picture you have been wanting to add to your collection.

Can You Name this Bird?

Taken 7/4/01, offshore South Padre Island *photo by Tony Reisinger*

Answer: Yellow-nosed albatross