



# The Chachalaca

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**RGV Master Naturalists** This chapter is an affiliate of the Texas Master Naturalist Program jointly sponsored by Texas AgriLife and the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department.

# The Gulf Coast Toad

-- An important garden addition or a biological wonder?

by Anita Westervelt, Rio Grande Valley Chapter



Gulf Coast Toad -- Ink and Watercolor by Chet Mink, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Toads are just fun to have around. I can't help but smile and whisper a cheery hello every time one surprises me as I work around the garden.

Toads are nocturnal; any time I see one in the day time is because I've unfortunately disturbed its rest. They hide in the most fun places, like an old irrigation standpipe. They frequent cracks in the soil around decaying stumps, vegetative debris, rotting logs, planters and anything that's collected a shallow bit of water. You're most likely to see them fleeing from the noise and vibrations of a lawn mower.

**The Gulf Coast toad (*Bufo nebulifer*)\*** is the prevalent garden toad in the Valley -- aptly named as they are found along the Gulf Coast from Louisiana to northern Mexico.

This time of year, the tiny, dark toadlets that could fit on a quarter coin are busy establishing territory. Adult Gulf Coast toads can reach to three and one-half inches in length -- measuring vent to snout.

Gulf Coast toads are immediately recognizable because they have a golden stripe down the middle of their back and a stripe at each side. The dorsal side of the Gulf Coast toad, the top side, varies in color from nearly black to a brownish-yellow.

A mid-sized Gulf Coast toad and a common Mexican tree frog have taken up a friendship in our courtyard. Both the young toad and the tree frog are of similar size, about two and one-half inches. In the evenings, they lurk behind the moth sheet that's propped up at the courtyard wall -- toad and frog alike probably feasting on the delectable smorgasbord of insects attracted to the blacklight set-up. It's rather exciting to see species in nature working alongside each other. Equally, it's thrilling to have a Mexican tree frog in residence; the Lower Rio Grande Valley is their northern most range.

Gulf Coast toads like a wide variety of habitats, from forests, swamps, barrier beaches and coastal prairies to urban areas, irrigation ditches, gardens and backyards -- anywhere they have moisture and cover. Common Mexican tree frogs are usually found in lightly forested areas near a permanent source of water.

Toads and frogs do not drink water; they absorb it through their skin. A shallow watering hole kept filled with water is an attractive way to keep toads hanging around. They'll repay your efforts. Both toads and frogs are carnivorous. They eat small fish, insects, flies, mosquitoes, grasshoppers, beetles, crickets, centipedes, millipedes, spiders, worms, grubs, slugs, snails and other small animals.



Toad soaking -- Photo by Anita Westervelt

**Don't pick up a toad, you'll get warts.** Perhaps you grew up with this warning, but it's not true. Toads have warty skin but don't cause warts in humans who pick up and handle them. But really, why traumatize a toad by picking it up? A real caution is that toads have a rather effective defense against threats and predators. They have a substance called bufotoxin in their parotoid glands that can cause skin, eye, and mucous membrane irritation to humans.

The parotoid glands are located just behind the toad's eye and ear on each side at the back of its head. When a toad is threatened, it forms a stance that projects these glands toward the predator. The poison is not shot but rather it oozes from the glands. True, humans aren't as threatened as dogs and cats with being affected by oozing toad toxins, still, why take a chance?

**Smoking the Toad.** Interestingly, the toxins toads can exude aren't all that tame -- they contain a psychedelic chemical tagged by scientists as 5-MeO-DMT. If you want to go to the trouble, "the liquid is extracted from the toad's glands, dried into a paste and then smoked," according to [addictioncenter.com](http://addictioncenter.com); but smoking's become so passé, and the process is labor intensive. And as you might suspect, 5-MeO-DMT is a controlled substance in the United States.

Also, you need to find the right toad. Although all toads have the venom, the drug possibilities are actually from a rare species of toad native to Arizona's Sonoran Desert, and not one we're likely to encounter in the Rio Grande Valley. *Bufo alvarius*, now classified as *Incillus alvarius*, is commonly known as the Colorado River toad, or sapo grande, in Spanish.

However, the cane toad (*Bufo marinus*) -- also called giant toad, marine toad and neo-tropical toad -- is a local toad of which you do want to be wary. It's quite recognizable -- mostly by its non-average-toad



size! The adult female of the species can reach lengths to eight inches, the male up to five inches. The cane toad may not produce the same psychedelic opportunity as the Colorado River toad, but it comes with a big whammy: it has caused deaths in humans when ingested.

**All toads are harmful to dogs and cats.** As humans, we have insight, discretion, and logic; not so our pets. The same toxins that may cause us irritations can cause more severe reactions, even death, in dogs and cats when they capture a toad in their mouth. As a matter of fact, because of the poisons in their parotoid glands, toads have few predators: chiefly, a few snakes, some birds of prey, and raccoons; raccoons eat only the underside of toads.

**Biologically, toads are quite a wonder.** According to sciencedirect.com, “The biologically active substances produced by *Bufo* toads include dopamine, epinephrine, norepinephrine, serotonin, bufotenine, bufagenins, bufotoxin and indolealkylamines. All *Bufo* species produce these substances,



but there is variation in the quantity of each substance produced by different toads. It is the indolealkylamines that have been characterized as similar to the hallucinogen lysergic acid diethylamide.”

The good news is that most toads in the United States are only mildly toxic to humans; unfortunately though, they can cause serious, life-threatening symptoms in dogs and cats. Quick action getting a pet to the veterinarian is mandatory in treating a pet sickened by toad toxin. Better still is to keep pets from chasing them -- and pigs being reconfigured with aerodynamic accoutrements is probably more likely to happen than training a natural hunter to not pursue a tasty morsel bopping through the grass.

Toad in Pipe -- Photo by Anita Westervelt

\* “Until the late 1990s, all Gulf Coast toads were the same species, *Bufo valliceps*. At that time, Joe Mendelson was studying this group and determined that the populations north of central Veracruz, Mexico (i.e. the U.S. and northwest Mexican populations) were actually a different species that correctly should be referred to as *Bufo nebulifer*. The species in the southern part of the range, from central Veracruz through the Yucatan and south to Costa Rica, was the “real” *Bufo valliceps*.” -- Frogcalls.blogspot.com/2014

Other Web sites researched for this article include: [aspc.org](http://aspc.org), [addictioncenter.com](http://addictioncenter.com), [sciencedirect.com](http://sciencedirect.com), [herpsoftexas.org](http://herpsoftexas.org), [texasvetpets.org](http://texasvetpets.org), [biodiversity.utexas.edu](http://biodiversity.utexas.edu) and [amphibiaweb.org](http://amphibiaweb.org).

## Cicadas

by Elizabeth Perdomo,  
South Texas Border Chapter

Who are these  
bold singers who attach  
crusty bits of summer  
to the gusty rhythm  
of green branches?  
Songsters who sway  
full voiced upon  
late season swells,  
transparent instars,  
leg & abdomen shells  
found well-attached  
as each entertainer steals  
onto the stage, sharing yet  
another size for another  
bold song?



Cicada exoskeleton -- Photo by Anita Westervelt



Superb Dog-Day Cicada -- Ink and Watercolor by Chet Mink

They once  
lived buried, now treasure clues  
mark oddly mapped wonders:  
the jewel cached just above  
a dripping birdbath, another  
clutched beneath a concrete  
garden bench, two clasped  
side-by-side on flowering  
milkweed stems, they cling,  
well secured upon summer  
brown sunflower stalks,  
performers well prepared,  
dressed up stylish  
for afternoon's  
antiphonal  
chorale.

*6 August 2018 – Pharr, Texas*





## Citizen Science: Parrot Rescue

by Alicia Cavazos, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Photos by Carmen Glasscock

Hurricane Hanna passed through the Rio Grande Valley on Saturday, July 26, 2020. We had lots of rain, most of which fell in the Upper Valley.

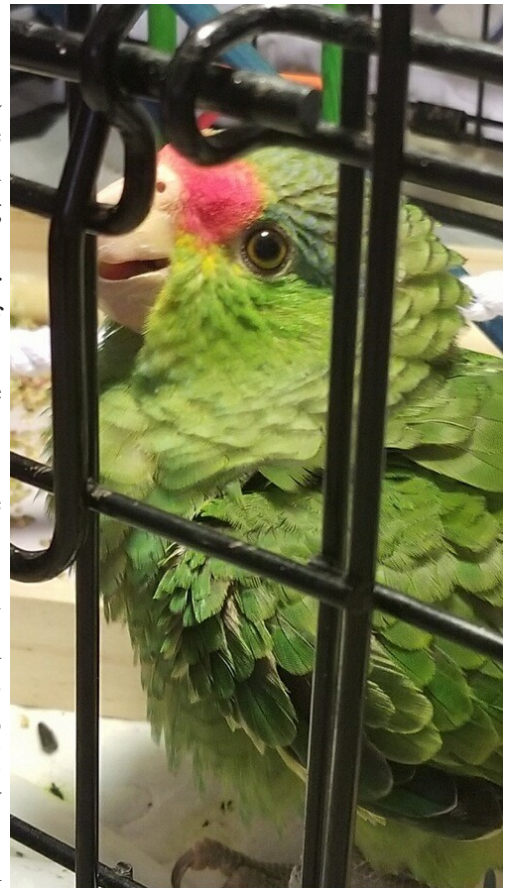
On **Sunday evening** I received a text message from a Carmen Glasscock from McAllen. I had met Carmen when Sue Griffin and I were gathering data for Simon Kiacz's Red-crowned Parrot research project. She had found a baby bird (possibly a parrot) in her yard, that might be injured and wasn't sure what to do.

Since the hurricane was still pouring down rain, I messaged her to put it in a box with some towels. I informed her the Gladys Porter Zoo was the only rehab center available in the area.

On **Monday morning** I was able to speak directly with Carmen. She still believed the bird had been injured. After exchanging a few snapshots, I was able to identify it as a baby parrot. As we talked further, she said some large elm trees had been knocked down by the high winds and she thought they may be the nesting trees. I explained to her that the parrots like to build their nests in the cavities of trees. Once Carmen said there were other parrots outside, it confirmed to me that there was a family of Red-crowned Parrots that had survived Hurricane Hanna in Mrs. Glasscock's back yard! I gave her the contact information of the Gladys Porter Zoo's veterinarian with hopes he could help.

On **Wednesday evening**, Carmen called with an update. She spoke to the Vet who suggested she take the baby parrot to the zoo in Brownsville. However, over the past 24 hours the baby had eaten and drank from a small syringe and appears healthy and active. In fact, she said that the parrots outside would *squawk* and the baby would respond inside. She was hesitant to take it away from its family, who were anxiously wanting to reunite with it, and the fact that it appeared healthy and lively. I suggested she place the cage near a window to see if the baby would reunite with its family. If not, then she would need to take it to the zoo. I continued to request pictures to assist her with assessing the baby's overall health.

**The next morning**, I was happy to get a short video of "Little Hanna" reunited with the family. From the sounds of the nearby parrots, there may have been at least 50. Once Mrs. Glasscock opened the cage, the parrot flew out and landed on some wires with her family. I'm grateful my involvement as a Citizen Scientist enabled me to make this connection with Carmen and provide valuable advice in the wake of the hurricane. Born Free...Be Free!!!!



# Texas Archeology Month Goes Virtual

by Donna Otto, South Texas Border Chapter

THC Archeology Steward, TAS Regional Director

[donnaotto968@yahoo.com](mailto:donnaotto968@yahoo.com)

**Celebrated in October, Texas Archeology Month (TAM)**, promotes the appreciation of scientific archeology, prehistory, American Indian cultures, and the stewardship of Texas' irreplaceable archeological resources. The Texas Historical Commission (THC), Texas Archeology Society (TAS) and other partners promote and support archeology fairs, lectures, demonstrations, and tours.

This year Texas Archeology Month is being reorganized by the THC in response to the pandemic by promoting virtual events and activities on the TAM website at [www.thc.texas.gov/TAM](http://www.thc.texas.gov/TAM). This website has a list of ideas and best practices for suggested ways to participate. Virtual activities and programs will be linked to a calendar at the above website.



Palo Alto Archeology Fair 2019 THC Booth Photo by Donna Otto

**Free archeology-related printed materials** can be requested through the Public Outreach Materials order form at <https://www.thc.texas.gov/public-outreach-materials>. Publications cover numerous archeology topics and can be downloaded as illustrated by the following example: <https://www.thc.texas.gov/public/upload/archeology-how-get-involved.pdf>.

Several TMN Chapters are involved in archeology activities and Archeology Stewards are also members of TMN. Chapter 2 of our book *Texas Master Naturalist* covers the general topic quite well, but lacks very much information about our far south Texas region.

Rather than an article about a specific site in our region, **here are regional links for you to explore** (Caution -- This could be the start of going down a rabbit hole!):

\*Texas Beyond History. Two articles are of special interest for our area: <https://texasbeyondhistory.net/brownsville/index.html> about an early tribe on the Rio Grande Delta and <https://texasbeyondhistory.net/falcon/index.html> about Falcon Reservoir: Ghost of Spanish Ranches.

\*Journal of Texas Archeology and History: [www.jtah.org](http://www.jtah.org). Scroll down the page and you can find an article about a shipwreck at Boca Chica. Information on other Spanish shipwrecks can be found at:

\*Texas State Historical Association: <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/padre-island-spanish-shipwrecks-of-1554>

**For historical archeology topics explore the following:**

Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools Program (CHAPS): [www.utrgv.edu/chaps](http://www.utrgv.edu/chaps) and for the Civil War Trail: [www.utrgv.edu/civilwar-trail](http://www.utrgv.edu/civilwar-trail)



Historically every year the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Park holds an archeology fair. To learn more about the culture of the park, check out: <https://www.nps.gov/paal/learn/historyculture/index.htm>

If your interest in archeology has been stirred, find out more about becoming involved through:  
Texas Archeology Society: <https://www.txarch.org/>  
National Forest Service: Passport in Time Volunteers: [www.passportintime.com](http://www.passportintime.com)  
Gault School of Archaeological Research: [www.gaultschool.org](http://www.gaultschool.org)



NFS Passport in Time School Group -- Photo by Donna Otto

### For Further Reading:

**A Field Guide To Archeological Sites of Texas** by Parker Nunley, Texas Monthly Press, 1989, in McAllen Public Library, call no. TX 976.401 Nun

**The Native American Peoples of South Texas**, Bobbie L. Lovett, Juan L. Gonzalez, Roseann Bacha-Garza, Russell K. Skowronek, eds., Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools Program (CHAPS), The University of Texas – Pan American, Edinburg, Texas, 2014.

**Texas Master Naturalist Statewide Curriculum**, Michelle M. Haggerty & Mary Pearl Meuth, eds., Texas A&M University Press, College Station, Texas, 2015. (Also available on Amazon)

Enjoy Texas Archeology Month in October!



## It's a Rare Treat When Wood Storks Visit

by Anita Westervelt, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*) is the only member of the stork family (Ciconiidae) native to America. There are 20 species in the Ciconiidae family, all generally found in temperate and tropical regions.

In America, Wood Storks breed primarily in the Florida Everglades and along the coasts of Georgia and the Carolinas. They have not been reported to nest in Texas since the 1960s, due mainly to habitat alteration. Wood Storks are found as far south as Argentina. They are not considered true migrants, rather they move in response to food availability. During the late summer and fall months, some Wood Storks travel to Eastern Texas presumably from breeding populations in Eastern Mexico, according to [Houstonaudubon.org](http://Houstonaudubon.org).



Wood Storks -- Photo by Anita Westervelt

Wood Storks are large water birds that stand nearly four feet tall. Their plumage is nearly all white. In flight, their shiny black feathers are visible along the entire trailing edge of their wings and tail. Their head and upper neck are devoid of feathers and the gray skin is rough and scaly. Their legs and bill are black; they have pink feet.

Extended visits to the Valley are rare, not only because they follow the food, but they are vulnerable to changes in water levels. They look for specific criteria in the wetlands, swamps, ponds, and coastal marshes where they choose to congregate. After heavy rains, they've been known to frequent fields of standing water.

Because of their feeding tactics, they prefer shallow freshwater bodies that are beginning to recede and dry up -- where fish are likely to be stranded, abundant, and easy to catch. Wood Storks rely on touch to catch their prey. They forage by walking slowly through the water with their bill open and dipped in the water. They push their feet up and down or flick their wings to startle prey. When they feel or see it, they snap their bill closed with an exceedingly fast reflex, swallowing the prey whole.

They are often seen feeding communally and with other species of water birds where they typically shuffle their feet to stir fish out of hiding for others to catch. Their diet consists mainly of fish, crayfish, frogs, tadpoles, and large water insects. Their daily intake of food is about one pound of fish and other aquatic prey.



It's not uncommon this time of year to view a muster of Wood Storks in flight as they search for those perfect bodies of water full of stranded fish. Although, look high -- they soar like raptors, climbing high into the thermals. They have strong, interrupting wing beats interspersed with brief glides. They can be distinguished in flight from herons because, unlike herons, they fly and soar with their neck and legs extended. Their wing span is about five and one-half feet.

Foraging Wood Storks - - Photo by Anita Westervelt

Sources helpful in writing this article: Texas Breeding Bird Atlas, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, North Florida Ecological Services Office, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Dallas Trinity Trails BlogSpot and Audubon.org.

## Wanted--Rare Sea Bean

by Linda Butcher, South Texas Border Chapter

Due to the recent hurricanes, I'm in hopes that there have been lots of sea beans washing ashore. For those who are interested in sea beans, there is a special one you need to look for.

Several years ago, I found a very rare sea bean. I normally would not have picked it up. You see, I am a sea bean snob. I usually only pick up the pretty ones like sea hearts, hamburger beans, Mary's beans and sea purses. This one was different. I had never seen one like it before.

Many of you know Diann Ballesteros, our sea bean expert and my beach buddy, she had never seen one like it either. I posted a photo on the Sea Bean Facebook page. To my surprise, one other had been found on the Texas coast, as well as, five or six in Florida, one in Bermuda, and one in the Netherlands. No one knew what they were or where they came from.



Furrowed Blister Pod Sea Bean - - Photo by Linda Butcher

To make a long story short, Raymond Van der Ham of the Natural Biodiversity Center in the Netherlands was doing research on them. He asked if we would send our specimens to him for further study. After months of research it was determined that it was a new species, never before described. It was most closely related to the fossilized *Sacoglottis costata*. It is still not known where they come from or what plant produces them.

For now, it is being called Furrowed Blister Pod. There are several sea beans similar in appearance, but the feature that separates it from the others is a perfectly shaped star on one end.



Starry end of Furrowed Blister Pod - - Photo by Linda Butcher

If anyone should find one, please contact me, Linda Butcher, at [thetxbirdlady@netscape.net](mailto:thetxbirdlady@netscape.net).

If you would like more information, the article describing this sea bean can be found in the *Journal of the Botanical Research Institute of Texas*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2015, pp.137-147.



## New Garden Worth the Wait

Photos and information by Heidi Linnemann, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Flower beds at the City of La Feria's Bailey H. Dunlap Memorial Library have received a face lift through the efforts of the Rio Grande Valley Chapter of the Texas Master Naturalists.

The front of the La Feria Public Library was looking a little desolate with the designated flower beds remaining empty for years. Heidi Linnemann, a La Feria resident and Rio Grande Valley Chapter member, wanted to do something about it, and the library staff was fully supportive. Unfortunately, it took three years (and a change in city administration) to get approval from the City of La Feria to allow the work to be done.



One of the empty flower beds at La Feria Library

Once city approval was obtained, we received excellent support from Alfonzo Rodriguez, the city's Public Works Director. The first chore was to ensure that the new plantings would receive water. Al directed the city employees to provide a faucet for each bed which would tie into the existing irrigation system. Wanting to be able to control the water source, we replaced the standard faucet with a locking system which would allow us to separately water each bed as needed. Keys for the locks were provided to both the city and the library staff in case of an emergency need.



The next step was designing the flower beds, keeping in mind that the areas were mostly shaded, and the beds were lined with three layers of ground cloth which was effectively keeping out the weeds. Seeking advice from Mike Heep, a planting guide was devised and staked.



And then another snag: Providing planting holes was going to be difficult.... Three layers of ground cloth covered truly compacted soil! Happily, Al Rodriguez came to our rescue once more. The City rented a commercial auger, and three strong workers drilled holes for 31 plants in less than two hours!

Creeping sage and other new plants in library flower beds

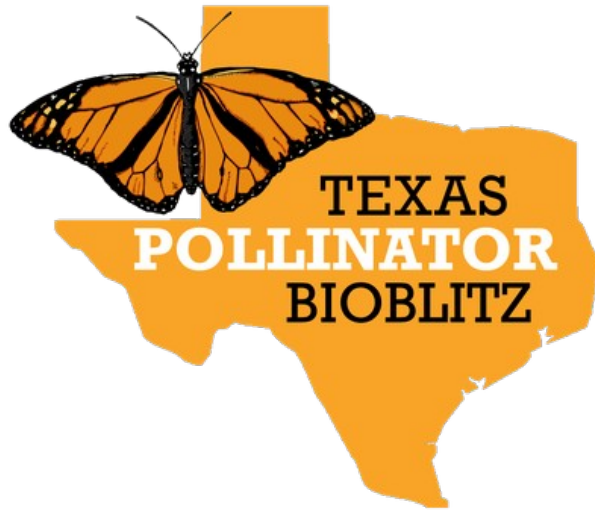
Diane Hall, Rio Grande Valley Chapter member, and other friends planted the featured plants. Diane and her husband, John, helped install the drip irrigation lines, and we were ready to go. The plants are in and doing well. Stop by and have a look!



Diane Hall assisting with project

# Texas Pollinator BioBlitz returns October 2 - 18, 2020

by Anita Westervelt, Rio Grande Valley Chapter



<https://tpwd.texas.gov/education/bioblitz/>

Participation begins with registering. Open the above link to register and learn more about the BioBlitz.

This is a Texas Parks & Wildlife event. Participation counts toward volunteer hours.

“Find pollinators and nectar-producing plants, take photos, upload to iNaturalist, Instagram or Facebook event pages. -- Pollinators (butterflies, bees and moths, bats, hummingbirds, wasps, flies, and beetles) sustain native plant species, human food crops, and even crops for livestock.”

More information and links to informational resources can be found at the above link.



“Smiling” Sulphur Butterfly - Unaltered photo by Grace Flores, South Texas Border Chapter



## Two Valley Frogs

-- Night hunters help control the insect population

Photos and information compiled by Anita Westervelt, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

### Common Mexican tree frog



The Lower Rio Grande Valley is the northern most range of the **common Mexican tree frog (*Smilisca baudinii*)**. Their range includes the Sonoran Desert in Arizona, Cameron and Hidalgo counties in the Valley and south to Costa Rica. They inhabit forested or brushy areas near permanent water sources such as resacas and roadside irrigation ditches.

Frogs do not drink water; they absorb it through their skin. Common Mexican tree frogs are nocturnal. Their diet includes insects, flies, mosquitoes, moths, ants, beetles, crickets, spiders, and other small invertebrates.

Full grown, these frogs measure about two and one-half inches long -- measuring vent to snout. Females are larger. They range in color from brownish grey to green and are known to change color. They retain their pattern of irregular dark blotches that spread across their backs and legs when conditions warrant a color change. Their skin is smooth.

During the heat of the day, common Mexican tree frogs shelter under loose tree bark, in tree holes and in damp soil. They mostly live in the tops of palm trees and in the leaves of banana plants and other plants with banana-plant type leaves. The frog's round, silky toe pads work like suction cups to help them cling to slick leaves and other smooth surfaces.

These small frogs are most active following rains when they move to and from wetlands to breed -- these migrations can occur at any time of the year. They are most vulnerable to predators when traveling to and from their breeding grounds. Predators include raccoons, squirrels, hawks, possibly bats, fish, and some snakes.

### Rio Grande leopard frog



Another nocturnal local frog is the **Rio Grande leopard frog (*Rana berlandieri*)**. It is the only leopard frog found in the Valley. Their range is southern New Mexico to western and central Texas and south to northern Mexico.

Texas has three species of leopard frogs; their territory is distinctly defined with minimal overlap. Plains leopard frog (*Rana blairi*) is scattered across the panhandle and the north central portion of Texas. Southern leopard frog (*Rana utricularia*) is confined to east Texas which is its western most range.

All leopard frogs in Texas are found near permanent or temporary water sources and standing water; the Rio Grande leopard frog can tolerate dry conditions. Their habitat includes shrub lands, grasslands, savannas, deserts and grasslands with trees.

# The 120<sup>th</sup> Year of Christmas Bird Count

by Anne Mayville, South Texas Border Chapter

If you have never participated in the Annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC), you really should consider doing so this year. This is the 120<sup>th</sup> year of the American Audubon Society's CBC. It is the longest running Citizen Science Project in existence. No matter where you live, there is a CBC going on near you. This year it is being held between December 14 and January 5. Each count group picks its own date to run their count.



Couch's Kingbird -- Photo by Anita Westervelt

Each CBC group has captains who have a small group of volunteers to assist them, usually consisting of one to five people. A compiler assigns the area the captain and team covers in one section of a 15 mile circle. Each compiler is assigned a date by the Audubon Society who tries not to assign the same day in each section of the state. This way each compiler can draw off birders who also participate in other counts nearby.



Curve-billed Thrasher -- Photo by Anita Westervelt

On the day of the CBC, volunteers gather at the meeting place, usually a state park office. Here the captains receive their paper work and map and meet their volunteer helpers. Volunteers follow an assigned route given to them by the compiler. Each captain and their group go to their assigned area and count every bird they see. Not just the species, but every bird they see or hear, if they can be identified it by its call. Every bird gets counted. They are finished when the group has covered their assigned route. This usually takes several hours. Some like to stay all day taking their time. If you live within a count circle, you can stay home and count all the birds that visit your feeder, as long as you have made arrangements with the compiler in your count area.

The CBC has an interesting history. It began in 1900 on Christmas Day by Frank M. Chapman an early officer of what is now called the American Audubon Society. Chapman proposed a new holiday tradition a "Christmas Bird Census." Prior to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, hunters engaged in a holiday tradition know as "Side Hunt." Hunters would choose sides, go out with their guns, and shoot birds. Who ever brought in the most birds won. Even then there was a concern for the decline of some species - - this new tradition would count birds rather than and kill them.

Ever since I first came to the Rio Grande Valley 12 years ago, I have participated in CBCs at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, Estero Llano Grande State Park, and Harlingen. There are also CBCs at Brownsville and Falcon State Park. If you wish to participate, you must make arrangements ahead of time to join the CBC.



At the end of each CBC, the whole group of volunteers gets together at a Compilation Party, usually a Pot Luck dinner to go over the numbers. It's a fun time getting to visit with other birders and talking about your day out in the "field." You learn from other more experience birders and it's just a fun day all the way around. The Count has room for all level for birders from beginners and novices to experience birders. We learn from each other and increase our knowledge of birds.

If you are interested in joining any of the CBCs, visit <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/join-christmas-bird-count>. All compilers names for each CBC site are listed with their contact information. They will give you the date of their count and all the info you will need.

I hope to see you out there on one of those CBCs. I'm not sure with Covid 19, how this will all work out, but I'm sure in spite of the pandemic, the CBC will still go on -- changed but still on.



Green Jay - - Photo by Anita Westervelt



Altamira Oriole -- Photo by Anita Westervelt

# Five Year Update on My Ramsey Park Project

by Drew Bennie, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

My goal has been to create habitat for insects, birds, and other critters, including humans, in a portion of Hugh Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen. I have been earning my volunteer hours recently by clawing back a section of the park from the grips of dreaded guinea grass and replacing it with native plants. I have been working in general along Indigo Trail, the central path leading down from the parking lot. My recent project is towards the end of this path (Lower Indigo Trail), where it turns to the Arroyo Colorado and leads back along the waterway. On your way to see my work area you will pass an uncleared part that will give you an idea of what the area looked like before I started.



Little by little, I used herbicide on the invasive grass. Once it was generally cleared and the season was right, I spread seeds from native plants. I collected seeds in other parts of the park that I thought would propagate on their own. I also planted a few store bought plants and ones I grew myself to provide more variety. Plants that could provide food for birds and butterflies were also a priority. Once these seedlings began to grow, however, it meant more work for me. Any guinea grass seedlings that pop up now, I will have to pull up by hand. If I use herbicide, it will kill off too many native plants due to “friendly fire.”

Before clearing -- photo by Drew Bennie

As I am working pulling up the invasive plants, I am able to see the other seedlings that are sprouting up on their own, spread by our mentor Mother Nature. Once the shroud of guinea grass was lifted and sunlight reached the area, many small plants revealed themselves and seeds were able to germinate. Various Lantanas, Potato trees, little Anacua trees, a few Turks Caps and Passion Flowers, and the ever present Granjenos are growing on their own. The birds know what they like to eat and spread those seeds providing more food for themselves. Other seeds are spread by the wind such as Blue Mist, White Mist ground cover, and Vining Milkweed. Native Plumbago, Balloon Vines, Heart Leaf Hibiscus, and Cow Pen Daisies have been found as well.

The past several years have been dry and this has discouraged the seeds I have spread from germinating or growing well. It also has discouraged the guinea grass and probably aided me in my quest of eradication.

In this climate of limited rainfall, however, the native plants have done well enough to stay alive and grow even if they didn't thrive. Now that we are having rain more frequently, the natives have taken off. Many butterfly plants are doing well and with butterfly season upon us, I feel optimistic that the sky above this area will be alive with butterflies in October.



After clearing and planting -- photo by Drew Bennie

I invite you to visit and see the fruits of my volunteer labor and let the butterflies know they are appreciated. I hope to see you there -- at a social distance with a mask, of course.



# Harris's Hawks Along the Brownsville Historical Battlefield Trail

Photos and information by M. Kathy Raines, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Resembling stern lifeguards, an array of Harris's hawks surveys grassland rabbits and rodents from opposing poles and brush piles of an evening-- sometimes two or three hunched raptors to a post.

Harris's hawks apparently own the fallow grasslands east of the trail along Paredes and just south of Palo Alto Battlefield--or at least during the spring and summer months I've ridden my bike there. Competing raptors have not appeared.

Nothing escapes the hawks' attention--certainly not me, as I dismount, rest on the embankment or brake on the overpass, peering with binoculars, or focusing with camera. Hawks closely attend to a train rumbling down the tracks.

If I peer too long or approach too closely, a hawk may flutter away, but the raptors' tolerance is impressive. Recently two juveniles occupied a pole, chattering with one another, undaunted, as I stood right underneath. Ah, the brazenness of youth!



From the Paredes Line overpass, I photographed the same banded female, the number on her green band clearly visible, in April, then August, reporting the finding to this site: <https://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBL/bblretrv/>. I also communicated with Andrea Gibbons, a graduate student at the University of North Texas, who is investigating Harris's hawks' colonial nesting habits. Two years previous, she had banded that bird nearby. It's gratifying to know the hawk is continuing to thrive.

During summer, with temperatures in the high 90s, these non-migratory hawks generally hunt early mornings and evenings. This summer, though, with its rains and a few cooler days, has been unusual. As I veered around a corner one sweltering noontime, a hawk began a stoop--feathery legs lowered, talons at the ready--but, spotting me, it abruptly retreated to a pole. At the Battlefield one afternoon, one hovered right above me.

Sometimes, riding this leg of the trail in the evening, I see a Harris's hawk, or maybe five or six of them, soaring or on the look-out. Occasionally, Harris's hawks perch atop one another for a few minutes. Some evenings, I see nary a hawk. Their plans mystify me.

Harris's hawks, sometimes likened to wolf packs, often breed and hunt communally. Adaptable creatures, these raptors may nest any time, but most regularly breed in the spring. With one couple forming an alpha pair, as many as seven adults may hunt together and safeguard the young.



A cooperative hunt often begins with an assembly of birds perching together. One wonders just how they manage to communicate their strategies. Hawks may attack prey from different directions, and a hawk or two may flush out quarry as others mount an ambush. Sometimes, two birds converge on prey simultaneously. In pursuing a fleeing rabbit, hawks may, like in a relay race, rush to replace one another. When hunting alone, hawks tend to sit and wait or fly from perch-to-perch.

Habitually riding the same leg of the bike trail, accustoming myself to one habitat, has shown me how fruitful it is to explore the same area every day, observing subtle alterations. Watching Harris's hawks and other creatures in these fallow fields during the relative isolation wrought by the pandemic has brought utter joy. I thank the hawks for the privilege.

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Your RGVTMN Board is inviting you to our first ever “Drive-Thru” Awards to be held October 3<sup>rd</sup> at Hugh Ramsey Nature Park. We would like to see you and know that you are doing well. For everyone, we will have a few “free” handouts. For our 2020 Winter/Spring Graduates we will have your certificates of graduation. Are you a recently certified graduate? We will have your certificates, pins, and name tags. Have you reached a milestone? Come receive your pin.

Won't you come by and celebrate all your hard work with us? We would certainly like to see you (it's been too long), even if it is just through your car windows. Please remember your mask and name tag.



RGVCTMN AWARDS\*  
2020 Winter/Spring Graduates

Ruben Arteaga  
Delina Barrera  
Emilio Barrera  
Jeff Bradley  
Pam Bradley  
Frank Chavez  
Denise Cornell  
Michael Gillespie  
Rosana Gomez  
Diane Hall

Nancy Wolf

Es Jimenez  
Ken Koch  
Sondra Leigh  
Sandra Mink  
Skippy Palmer  
Butch Palmer  
Justin Richardson  
Melissa Robell  
Barbara Rodriguez  
Tonya Tallard

2020 Newly Certified Texas Master Naturalist

Ruben Arteaga  
Pamela Bradley  
Michael Gillespie  
Diane Hall

Ken Koch  
Skippy Palmer  
Butch Palmer  
Nancy Wolf

100 Hours Milestone

Aaron Godfrey  
Alex Gomez  
Barbara Peterson

Elizabeth Romero  
Janis Silveri  
Pam Smith

250 Hours Milestone

Dana Allamon  
Shelby Bessette

Chet Mink

Marsha Wood Ralston  
Elizabeth Romero

500 Hours Milestone

Deborah McCoy

Pete Moore

1000 Hours Milestone

Chuck Cornell

5000 Hours Milestone

Anita Westervelt

\*Awards attained since the "Shelter-in-place" of March 2020.