



Rio Grande Valley Chapter, Texas Master Naturalists

The Chachalaca

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The Rio Grande Valley Chapter Texas Master Naturalist is organized exclusively for charitable, scientific, and educational purposes, more specifically to develop a group of knowledgeable volunteers to provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the study of conservation of natural resources and natural areas within the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

A Surprise Plant after the Freeze

Article & photos by Frank Wiseman, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Among the first plants we placed in TMN's planting of the Runyon Garden in Harlingen's Hugh Ramsey Park was a wild zinnia. At the time, I believe that is what we called it. In 2007, I joined a group of the Native Plant Society of Texas members on a special bus trip to Mexico's El Cielo. It was a one-week tour of that area that included a rugged pickup trip up to the top of the El Cielo Mountain. The plants were varied along the road up the mountain, and we saw many wild orchids and lots of plants not native to Texas.

After our stay at El Cielo, we took a tour to the west side of that mountainous area which was more desert-like. There I discovered the same wild zinnia that we had planted in Runyon's Garden. I was happy to find it growing low to the ground and managed one good photo of it.



Mexican Creeping Zinnia in Mexico

Because of the freeze in February of this year, my yard, like most yards, was devastated to a great degree and had to be cleared of many dead shrubs, a couple of trees, and lots of forbs.

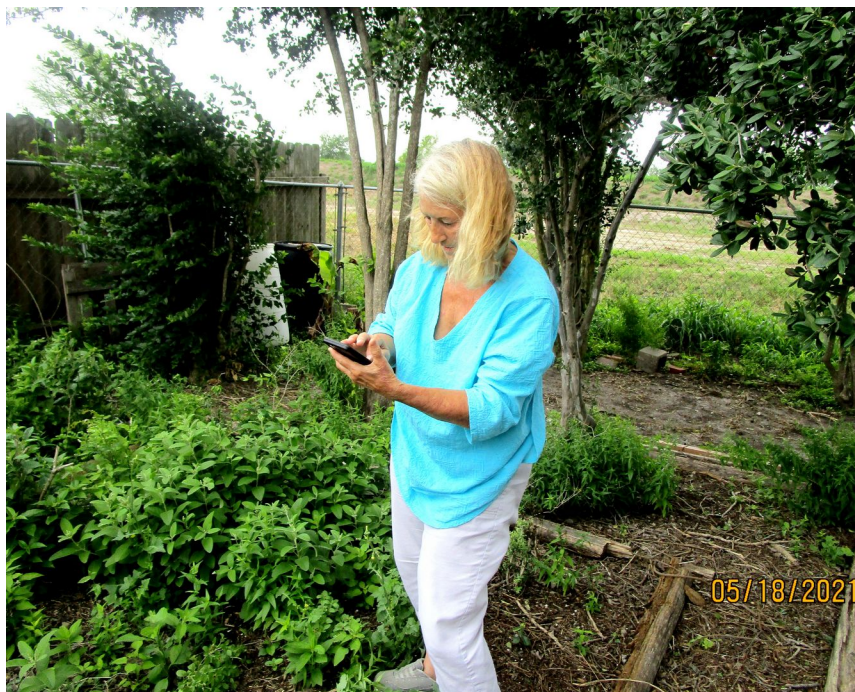


On May 18, 2021, I was sharing my yard and some plants with fellow Texas Master Naturalist, Anita Westervelt. We ventured to one area in the back part of the backyard to look for a Torey's Croton. As she was trying to dig up a small Torey's Croton, she discovered the wild zinnia. "It's a cute little sprawling plant," as Anita described it. She immediately snapped a photo and sent it to iNaturalist for an ID. Firstly, she got several names, but a final ID proved it to be the Mexican Creeping Zinnia (*Sanvitalia procumbens*).

Mexican Creeping Zinnia in Frank's backyard

<https://www.plantopedia.com/sanvitalia-procumbens/> describes this plant: “The *Sanvitalia procumbens* is also known as the Mexican creeping zinnia and is often identified as a miniature sunflower.” However, as I looked at this web page, I found the pictured plant and its flowers somewhat different from my garden’s wild zinnia. So, I am still not sure the scientific name is correct. After posting my photos on Facebook, I had a reply from Matt Kauffman, local plant grower, and he says it is a Mexican Creeping Zinnia.

As I see it, I am happy to have a plant come into my garden as a new species that planted itself by some means as of now unknown. I know that in addition to this little wildflower, I also found several other plants that had disappeared from my yard and are now back. One such plant is the native Ruellia.



Anita Westervelt using iNaturalist to ID plants in Frank’s backyard



We also found a little daisy that iNaturalist says is a Shortray Rockdaisy. In *Plants of Deep South Texas*, pg. 117, it’s called Short Ray Rock Daisy (*Perityle microglossa*). Who knows how it got planted? I think the freeze allowed long buried seeds to awaken and live.

What plant surprises await you in your backyard?

Short Ray Rock Daisy-- photo by Anita Westervelt

Spring Migration Surprise

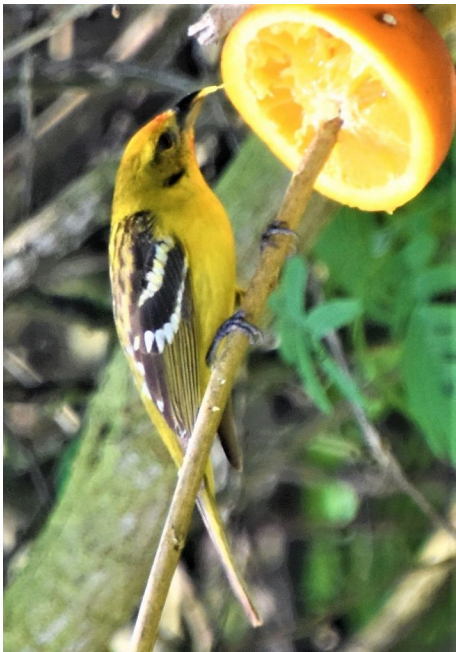
Article & photos by Carolyn Cardile
Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Since we moved to South Padre Island 15 years ago, spring migration seems to be lasting longer and longer each spring. A few years ago, it was typical for volunteers to stop putting out food at the convention center and the lots on Sheepshead Street on May 1, because migration was over. In recent years, the end of migration has moved into May.



(Above and below) Female Flame-colored Tanager on SPI

The biggest migrant surprise this year was the Flame-colored Tanager (*Piranga bidentata*). Most of these birds migrate from the mountains in Mexico to southeast Arizona, but occasionally they will visit south Texas. In early May, this beautiful female Flame-colored Tanager spent several days at the South Padre Island Convention Center.



The female Flame-colored Tanager is 7 ¼ inches long. It looks a lot like a female Western Tanager, except for its “streaked back, dark cheek patch, pale tips on tertials and tail, and dark beak” according to *Peterson’s Field Guide to Birds of North America*.

It was exciting to see this bird and add it to my life list without even leaving the island!

What to do with a lot of June bugs

Story & photos by Anita Westervelt, Rio Grande Valley Chapter



Growing up in Kansas, it was kind of fun to see a couple of June bugs bumping against the porch light in the evenings. I knew they wouldn't hurt me, because my momma said so, and with the arrival of June bugs, I knew summer -- and my birthday month -- had definitely arrived.

As an adult now, living in Texas and having access to a computer, the World Wide Web, research skills and a Texas Master Naturalist education, I know that June bugs are actually beetles in the scarab family and the *Phyllophaga* genus.

June bugs are beetles in the scarab family

With a modicum of research, I've found that the beetles are still harmless to humans, but I've not yet found why they have come in in droves, like seventeen-year periodical cicadas, only quieter.

The beetles, which vary in size and color from one-half to five-eighths inches long and from reddish-brown to almost black, they have three pairs of legs, one on each of the first three segments behind the head. There are more than 100 species of scarab beetles from several genera, (for example, *Cyclocephala*, *Phyllophaga* and others), in Texas that are considered to be white grubs, May beetles and June bugs. The most common is *Phyllophaga crinita*, according to texasinsects.tamu.edu.

Species differ in distribution, habitat preference, length of life cycle and seasonal occurrence, but their biologies are similar. Other common species include the southern masked chafer (*Cyclocephala immaculata*) and the green June beetle (*Cotinis nitida*).

Currently, I have the opportunity to study hundreds of these beetles every morning. I've put my moth sheet and black light set up on the porch while it has been raining. For the past week, hundreds of June beetles have adorned the moth sheet, landed belly-up behind the sheet frame, on the deck and in the corners of the porch. Although June beetles are nocturnal creatures, they are attracted to light; they don't really survive all that much absorption of light, hence so many on the tile each morning.

June beetles cannot apparently survive extended periods of chlorine exposure either, as attested to the 300 or more discovered floating in the swimming pool in the mornings. It's not all without its fun element. Great Kiskadees, grackles and kingbirds provide morning and evening entertainment as they swoop down, skim the water and land poolside with a June bug in their beak. In addition, I sweep up the porch beetles in the morning and dump them in a shallow dish



by the pool. The birds take a break from their aeronautics and will pluck them from the dish.

Regardless the light and chlorine effects, June beetles live a very short time anyway. After they emerge from the soil in late May and June, the adult beetles live for only a couple of months, but they can be quite busy in those few short months! Peak flights occur in mid to late June in central Texas, according to texasinsects.tamu.edu -- earlier this year, here in the Valley.

Great-tailed Grackle dining poolside with June bug meal

June beetles, active at night, hide under leaves or in the bark of trees during the day, according to parkwestinc.com. Female June beetles are less attracted to lights; instead, in late summer, they will tunnel two to five inches into the soil to deposit eggs, and by the beginning of fall, the June bugs' life cycle comes to an end and they die off -- but the damage has already been done.

While the adult flying beetles do cause some damage to plants by feeding on the leaves and stems, the real problem lies in the immature larval phase of these insects. Known as white grubs, these larvae can wreak serious damage on the roots of lawn turfgrasses and other plants. June beetle grubs emerge from their eggs about three weeks after eggs are deposited in soil around shrubs and in lawns. The larvae are whitish, C-shaped, about one inch long, with cream-colored to whitish bodies and brown head capsules. The grubs live underground. Females can lay up to 75 eggs in their short adult life. As the larvae grow, they eat the roots of grass, depriving it of water and nutrients, according to totallandscapecare.com.

There's a formula for determining if the grubs are going to be a problem: Dig up a square foot section of lawn. If there are zero to five grubs, there is no need to take action. If six to nine

grubs are found and the lawn is otherwise healthy, there is no need to treat. If 10 or more grubs are found, then treatment is recommended in order to prevent severe damage to the grass. Not only will the grass begin dying off, another side effect of too many white grubs is that you may begin to see an abundance of wildlife that will dig and forage in the lawn for the larvae. Raccoons, skunks, armadillos and birds can worsen the situation by tearing up turfgrass looking for these grubs.

While there are remedies to capture June beetles and chemical and organic methods of control, like nematodes and milky spores that can be purchased, natural predators and a landscape that is bird friendly also is helpful in preventing lawn damage. Larger birds eat the adult June beetles. Large bats are nocturnal feeders and often consume June bugs. The presence of small predatory creatures, such as toads and snakes, can help control them, too.



One less June bug

Phyllophaga crinita is common in Texas turfgrass, particularly Bermudagrass and St. Augustine grass and tall fescue, according to texasinsects.tamu.edu. Be aware, the option to not take care of a potential problem is that grubs can severely damage lawns and also feed on the roots of weeds, vegetables and ornamental plants. In agriculture, they forage on corn, sorghum and sugarcane. The most severe injury to plants is caused by large, third stage grubs feeding on roots in fall and spring.

A home remedy, offered by thespruce.com website, suggests that a mixture of one-half cup molasses and one-half cup water placed in a narrow-necked container will trap June bugs cruising around the nighttime landscape. Curative insecticides and other chemical controls are available as well, but be cautioned that they can be toxic to pollinators.

For much more information about solutions to June beetles and grub inundations, type: “How to get rid of June bugs” into your search engine. As Texas Master Naturalists, we know to consider chain-of-events and long-term complications when messing with the natural order of things.

RGV Summer Night Skies

by Linda Butcher, Rio Grande Valley
Chapter

JUNE 10 – New moon and eclipse of the moon. Unfortunately, it will only be a partial eclipse in our area.

JUNE 21 – Summer Solstice. The sun will have reached its most northern position in the sky. It is our first day of summer in the Northern Hemisphere.



Full Moon photo by Jim Bonser

JUNE 24 -Full Moon Super Moon. It is known by the Native Americans as the Strawberry Moon, because it signaled the time of year to gather ripening fruit. This is the last of the three super moons of 2021.

JULY 10 – New Moon

JULY 24 – Full Moon. It was known to Native Americans as the Buck Moon, because the male deer would begin to grow their new antlers.

JULY 28-29 – Delta Aquarids Meteor Shower. It is an average meteor shower that can produce 20 meteors per hour. It runs from July 12 through Aug 23 and peaks on July 28-29. Meteors will radiate from the constellation Aquarius, but can appear anywhere in the sky.

AUG 2 – Saturn will be at its closest approach to the Earth. It will be brighter than any other time of the year.

AUG 12-13 – Perseid Meteor Shower. One of the best meteor showers to observe since it can produce up to 60 meteors per hour. The shower runs from July 17 through August 24 and peaks August 12-13.

AUG 19 – Jupiter will be at its closest approach to the Earth and will be brighter than any other time of the year.

AUG 22 – Full Moon, Blue Moon. There are normally three full moons in each season of the year. Since full moons occur every 29.53 days, occasionally a season will contain four full moons. The extra full moon of the season is called a Blue Moon. Blue Moons only occur on average every 2.7 years which gives rise to the term “once in a blue moon.”

The Newbies Tackle the Great Texas Birding Classic

Article & photos by Norma Friedrich, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

On April 27, 2021 five members of the RGVCTMN New Class 2021 participated in the Great Texas Birding Classic (GTBC). Selecting the Sunrise to Noon tournament, the team members sent in the \$30 registration fee for each member. This tournament required a minimum of 3 and maximum of 5 members. With the registration fee each received the GTBC 2021 t-shirt featuring a Belted Kingfisher.

The Newbies was chosen as the name for the team after submitting the name *TMN Newbies* which was not allowed due to the fact TMN did not sponsor the team. Deciding to do this shortly before the entry deadline did not allow us time to seek a sponsor.

South Padre Island was chosen as the location for our bird count, and we met at 7:00 am at the Convention Center on the Island. After one and a half hours and 20 some odd species of birds we headed to the SPI Birding and Nature Center. Here we birded in the parking lot, from the back porch deck, and a short way on the boardwalk. We added some special birds here with Blackpoll Warbler, Swainson's Warbler and a Black and White Warbler all in one tree. We continued our trek to the Valley Land Fund Lots on Sheepshead Street for even more species.



Swainson's Warbler (*Limnothlypis swainsonii*)



Bobolink (*Dilochonyx oryzivorus*)

Reviewing our list at this point we headed to Isla Blanca Park for some shorebirds and achieved our goal with Ruddy Turnstone and Sanderlings. The bird of the day and biggest surprise was seen as we left the park. Sandra mentioned that she had seen birds in the grassy area by the church early in the week. We pulled into the drive and started scanning and near to us was an odd-looking bird that turned out to be a Bobolink. Hoorah!

We were running low on time and returned to the SPI BNC to hurry farther down the boardwalk for some of the birds being seen in that area. We found them with in minutes of our deadline of noon adding Least Bittern and Purple Gallinule to our list. Seconds after we closed our eBird submission we saw a Solitary Sandpiper. Our total official accepted count was 70 species of birds. Not too bad for five hours of birding.



Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*)

After the June 2 Virtual Awards Ceremony winners will be posted on the Birding Classic website and the Birding Classic Facebook Page.

Team *The Newbies* participants included Leader Norma Friedrich with Molly Smith, Sandra Trevino Crespo, Betsy Hosick, and Barbara Peterson. All the team members contributed with spotting birds and identification. We enjoyed every minute and are already looking forward to next year, April 15 – May 15, 2022.



Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*)



Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)

The Fungus Among Us, Yes Even in the R.G.V.

Article & photo by Drew Bennie, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Recently, I read the new book *Entangled Life* by Merlin Sheldrake which is about the latest research findings on Fungus. Thus I had mushrooms on my mind when this current rainy spell hit. I remember previous unusually wet periods with sustained storms that resulted in quite a flush of mushrooms of all sorts. One year I counted over 30 different types in Ramsey Park over a few weeks. Some were ones I never thought to find here in dry, almost treeless South Texas.

Even edible ones were growing at Ramsey Park. Of course, you should never eat any mushroom unless it is positively identified by an expert. Even then it could be a risk. Mushrooms also absorb all sorts of things from the environment including toxins, pesticides, and heavy metals. Tests showed that mushrooms growing along a highway contain lead from the gasoline fumes that accumulated in the soil. Ramsey Park was once an informal trash dump for construction waste and toxins from this would show up in any mushrooms that grow there.

Even though most mushrooms are not edible and the ID books say they are poisonous, it is safe to handle them. You can make spore prints with ones you find by placing the fresh mushroom cap gills down on a white piece of paper overnight covered with an overturned glass. When the cap is carefully removed, the spores will leave a print on the paper. This can aid in identification of the mushroom by showing the color of the spores.



I remember a Lattice Stinkhorn mushroom that erupted from an egg-like structure to form a baseball sized reddish globe with what looked like mucus-lined holes in it. Stinkhorns live up to their name by smelling putrid to attract flies. The flies then spread the spores to real putrid things to germinate. It was quite a sight near Runyon Garden at Ramsey Park. I wish for a repeat this year of this wonder of nature.

Lattice Stinkhorn (*Clathrus ruber*)

I am hoping the current wet period will bring forth another flush of mushrooms at the park or even in your yard. Keep your eyes open and if the rains continue and we are lucky, we might get another chance to get a peek at the fungus that is growing just below our feet among us.

Surprises along the edge of the road

Story & photos by Anita Westervelt, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

The City Nature Challenge 2021 has come and gone. More than 1,270,000 observations were uploaded to the www.iNaturalist.org database from individuals in 419 cities from 44 countries worldwide.

The challenge is in its sixth year and the fourth year that the Lower Rio Grande Valley participated. This year, 146 local participants logged 7,966 observations of 1,730 individual species of plants, birds, creatures and critters found in the four-county area of Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy.

I got the idea for this following story from a brief survey I found on a Facebook page asking for feedback about this year's City Nature Challenge. One of the survey areas asked for an account of a favorite experience and requested the link to the observation be included -- and limited the entries to three. I had more than three exciting experiences this year; the observation links to those experiences are included.

First of all, some of us native plant aficionados in the Rio Grande Valley Texas Master Naturalist chapter are saddened by the absence of what should be a common and prevalent sight: Southern Indian blanket, *Gaillardia pulchella*. <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/76618949>

On my way back from Boca Chica Beach, I was startled to see a large patch of Indian blankets, just at the edge of the road. Thinking they have become exceedingly rare, I thought I should take advantage of the photo opportunity. I whipped the car off the road, unleashed my seatbelt and bounded out of the car and over to the patch of wildflowers. I heard shouting -- I took my first shot -- and only shot! Space X security personnel were yelling at me; two security cars were heading my way. I jumped back in my car. After a couple of bumps, I was off the verge, back onto the road and speeding away, which is when I noticed chunks of metal in the distant field -- obviously debris from the latest wreckage. I kept one eye on the road ahead and the other on the rearview mirror. The security cars turned back; they did not follow.



Patch of Southern Indian blanket (*Gaillardia pulchella*) at Boca Chica

Back home, in the safety of the road at the edge of the neighboring farm field, I was excited to see something blue peeking out from under a row of false ragweed (*Parthenium hysterophorus*). The flowers were of ivy-leaved morning-glory (*Ipomoea hederacea*) <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/76235622> -- Native to Central America, ivy-leaved morning-glory has naturalized in tropical, subtropical and warm temperate regions throughout the globe and is found in 46 states in the United States. It is an annual twining vine. It can climb fences, neighboring plants and other supports but is commonly found creeping along the ground and under other vegetation. The habitat includes abandoned fields, along roadsides and railroad tracks and quite commonly along the edges of cultivated fields near the roadside, which is where I found my observation.



Ivy-leaved morning-glory (*Ipomoea hederacea*)

The ivy-leaved morning-glory flower is somewhat small for a morning glory, measuring from one and one-quarter inch to two inches at the flare of the funnel-shaped flower. The petals are blue with five violet markings that radiate from the white center and create a star burst effect.



White-blooming Pinkladies (*Oenothera speciosa*)

This was a which-way-do-I-look-first event because directly across from the blue flowers, right at the edge of the road, was a large splash of white flowers, low to the ground. After taking multiple shots of the morning glories, I crossed the road and photographed the white flowers, which turned out to be the rare, white-blooming form of Pinkladies, (*Oenothera speciosa*) <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/76268336> -- at first, in the sun-glare on the face of the phone, using the iNaturalist app, I thought I had come upon silky evolvulus, (*Evolvulus sericeus*), but three identifiers corrected that observation.

On the last day of the challenge, after the incident coming back from Boca Chica Beach, I thought I'd play it safe and spend a couple of hours in the confines of a gated community at our county park, Isla Blanca Park on South Padre Island. I wasn't disappointed -- and I was safe -- not even a bumble bee chased me. I found more Indian blanket observations and some incredible blooms of Northern seaside goldenrod, *Solidago sempervirens*, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/77262596> -- Perhaps not incredibly thrilling but exciting just the same because the blooms of goldenrod are so beautiful. Pressed for time, I didn't stop at other goldenrod opportunities that afternoon.



Lonestar Four O'Clock (*Mirabilis austrotexana*)

What was really exciting was the discovery of something new to me: Lonestar Four O'Clock (*Mirabilis austrotexana*) <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/77269746>

Leaving the beach and park and heading toward the center of South Padre Island, I swung by Sheepshead Street. As soon as I approached the north side entrance, a gentleman whispered and motioned for me to come quickly. We both quietly sidled over to the fence, placed our heavy cameras on the top rail and captured photos of a vibrantly colored Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*) <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/77241704> -- what right-time-right-place luck for me -- I finally have a good photograph of the Summer Tanager.

Heading out to the convention center proved a worthwhile stop. I added a number of birds to my observations:

- Chestnut-sided Warbler
- Wilson's Warbler
- Eastern Wood-pewee
- Baltimore Oriole
- Orchard Oriole
- Northern Parula
- Painted Bunting
- Great Crested Flycatcher
- Scissor-tailed Flycatcher



Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*)

At home, on the first morning of the City Nature Challenge, I was able to photograph our three common nighthawks as they hawked for breakfast in the field across the road and later that morning, one of our white-tailed kites in flight with a photo clear enough for identification.

Most of the observations during the four-day bio blitz were without incident. I was rather disappointed (frightened) to discover so many big dogs quietly stalking me as I photographed along the side of the roads near our house where it used to be safer. After a near-too-close encounter with a pretty, but scary-looking Rottweiler, I learned to keep the scooter running while I dismounted to capture photos along the road with my phone.



Eastern black nightshade (*Solanum emulans*)

Closer to home -- in my own back yard, as a matter of fact -- I was thrilled to observe a two-foot tall Eastern black nightshade (*Solanum emulans*), <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/76519047> -- which brings my yard species of nightshade to three. I also have Texas nightshade (*Solanum triquetrum*) and silverleaf nightshade (*Solanum elaeagnifolium*) -- good quail food, if only the quail would return.

One last exciting find was during the hours of darkness. I set up a moth sheet with black lights. One of the more significant night visitors was the Theodore carpenterworm moth (*Givira theodori*) <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/76908784> -- a pretty white, black and gray moth that I had not seen before.

This was the fourth year that I have participated in the City Nature Challenge, and it is always a fun way to spend time and see what new there is to discover.

The City Nature Challenge is run by the Community Science teams at the California Academy of Sciences and the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

Check out the results of the Lower Rio Grande Valley participation at the links below.

<https://rgvctmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CNC-2021-Review.pdf>

<https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/city-nature-challenge-2021-lower-rio-grande-valley>



Theodore carpenterworm moth (*Givira theodori*)

Reporting Bird Bands

Article & photos by Dr. Tim and Ki Brush, South Texas Border Chapter

Green Jays and Clay-colored Thrushes are two tropical bird species which folks can see in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and adjacent areas of South Texas. They are part of the tropical flavor of the Valley! They are well-known to live in natural habitat, but people have been seeing them in some of our cities as well. We would like to know how they are doing in the cities—are they nesting successfully, do the same birds stay in an area, or is there a large transient population?

As many of you know, Ki and I have been doing a color-banding study of Green Jays and Clay-colored Thrushes for a few years now. Color-banding allows us to recognize individual birds, because each gets a unique combination of colored bands as well as the numbered USGS metal band (that can only be read if the bird is recaptured).



Green Jay with color bands

So far there seems to be a lot of movement, with thrushes occasionally spotted in different cities, and Green Jays moving generally less than a mile. Some birds "stay put" and probably nest in the same area where they were banded. Some birds are re-sighted months after they were banded, and we don't know what they were doing in the meantime. Many birds have seemingly "disappeared" but may be quite close by. You can contribute by looking for and reporting color-banded birds. Both species seem to be doing well, but again we would like to learn how individual birds are moving around (or not!), and the more eyes looking, the better!

We have banded most of our Clay-colored Thrushes at Quinta Mazatlan, in southern McAllen, and a few near our home in Edinburg. Birds have been resighted in Mission, McAllen, Edinburg, Pharr, and Weslaco. We have banded Green Jays at our rural property north of Edinburg, near our home, and at Quinta Mazatlan. So far birds have been resighted within a mile of where they were banded. Any re-sightings of either species would be much appreciated. Even if you don't see all the colors or which leg, partial information is valuable! Anyone is welcome to contact me at colorbandingrgv@gmail.com with any questions about the birds or the study.

Use the banding card pictured below as a guide to report your findings.

Which species of bird did you see? (circle one)

Green Jay Clay-colored Thrush

Your Sighting Info

When (date/time) _____

Where (address location) _____

Who (your name) _____

Color Banding RGV

Reporting color banded birds

1. Record the species
2. Record the color band combination
3. Record your sighting info
4. Report it to:

- colorbandingRGV@gmail.com (956-318-1501)
- OR
- Center for Urban Ecology at Quinta Mazatlan (956-681-3386)

Thank you!

The University of Texas RioGrande Valley

Diagram of a bird with leg bands:

Bottom right band is silver* (rarely on left leg)

R L

Right: Top: _____ Bottom: silver* _____

Left: Top: _____ Bottom: _____

Possible color bands:

- red
- orange
- yellow
- green
- blue
- black

Congratulations!!



Hunter Lohse, UArizona student

Follow the link below for the full story:

<https://capla.arizona.edu/studio/hunter-lohse-rainwater-harvesting-analysis-prize>

My TMN Experience – Opening New Paths

Article & photos by Mario Fierro, South Texas Border Chapter

While working at Quinta Mazatlan as an Environmental Supervisor, I was first introduced to the world of birding and nature appreciation. The amount of information was overwhelming at times, but the beauty was even more so. This only made the desire to continue learning about the natural world around me even greater and led me to the Texas Master Naturalist Program.

Upon completing certification as a Texas Master Naturalist this year in the class of 2021, I realized how I have just scratched the surface. One of my thoughts that comes to mind often is: The more I think I have learned has, in reality, left me with many more questions than I had at first. I am grateful to have such a predicament and to be in such good company.



Blackpoll Warbler life bird for Mario

What has been reassuring and encouraging is that there are like-minded individuals that are excited to share what they have learned with each other and the community. This call to action, that has been fostered by volunteering with our South Texas Border Chapter, has allowed me to interact with people that have such diverse backgrounds. The enthusiasm in the projects we take on is sincere and contagious.

I have had opportunities to develop relationships with nature centers that previously were places I primarily enjoyed walking at. Now I have been able to contribute back through community science using iNaturalist and eBird. I was also motivated to represent our organization at the Dia de Los Niños event hosted by the City of Edinburg and was glad to work alongside the Edinburg Wetlands and World Birding Center education staff. We crafted bookmarks using native leaves and flowers as decorations

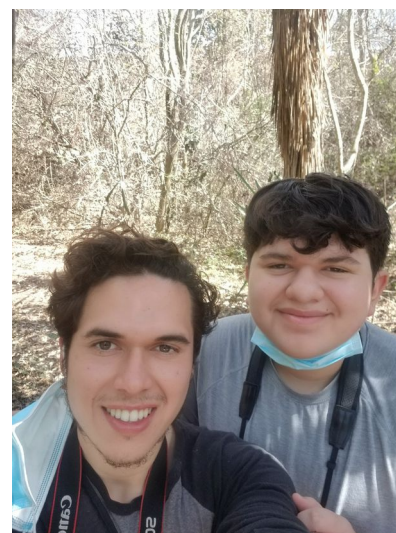


Mario volunteering at Sea Turtle, Inc

with the kids and were met with requests for more nature activities!

Once a month I make my way to South Padre Island and Sea Turtle, Inc. to serve as an Allison Lifeguard and Information Specialist on the hospital side. As I volunteer, I find that I learn so much from the staff there. I am also rewarded as I see understanding and comprehension in the eyes of the visitors as they leave with a renewed appreciation of the roles these animals have in the natural world. Children and adults alike, it's great to see their curiosity sparked.

On a more personal level, my hobby of going for nature walks has grown to include photography. This is something that I thoroughly enjoy doing on my own as a way to refresh; sharing this experience with friends and other TMN members always adds a unique touch to the memory. The perspective others bring enhances the detail of the setting around us. Whether it is the Old Hidalgo Pump House, Resaca de la Palma, or the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center, there is always a different and new experience at these sites which has become dear to me. Sharing my photos of wildlife with family members has opened up a whole new experience. It is a privilege hearing my family recount birds they have begun to notice more and encounters they've had with wildlife in their daily lives.



Mario and his brother enjoying a walk at Frontera Audubon

Two more activities that have contributed to my TMN experience and the pride I have in being a member include serving on the STB Chapter Board and working on the TMN St. George Pollinator Garden. Seeing the inner workings of how group decisions are made toward our goals and mission has really solidified my sense of identity as a Master Naturalist. So much so, that I have been favoring the certification dragonfly pin as my go-to for work and casual wear. This action often leads to a conversation about what the pin represents, who we are, what we strive to do, and why I'm proud to wear it as often as I can. I also value the work I do at the pollinator garden and view it as a continuation of all the work that was put in before me by previous members and other volunteers. The garden to me represents the results of our group and community effort. I was fortunate to receive a scholarship that allowed me to certify with the Texas Master Naturalists. The organization invested in my naturalist education and together we invest our joint knowledge and talents for anyone who has the interest.

Finally, I'd like to share one of my most favorite aspects of this TMN journey which is best encapsulated by the following examples: As I'm driving to work, I notice a Great-tailed Grackle gliding over an agricultural field overgrown with beautiful sunflowers...Waiting at a red light underneath the expressway and enjoying the show as the Cliff Swallows swoop over the cars...Worrying about the drama the Mockingbird causes at my seed feeders and smiling as the hummingbirds chase each other away from a nectar feeder...Looking for the Red-crowned Parrots during my lunch break as they squawk in the distance. These creatures and naturally occurring moments of beauty transform the mundane into exciting discoveries which brings joy when you least expect it, and I find, at the times when I need it most.

What an interesting journey this has been...from a memorable night walk at Quinta Mazatlan to a year later giving that same tour as the educator...from one day during my time at Quinta seeing a group of visitors in green t-shirts and asking who they were... to a year or so later and I'm proud to say I've joined ranks with those great people. I'm grateful and privileged to have found the Texas Master Naturalist group.

Introducing Señor Pelé

Article & photos by Pat McGrath Avery
Rio Grande Valley Chapter

The RGVCTMN formed the Pelican Squadron Committee earlier this year to educate the public about the danger that cold and windy weather poses for Brown Pelicans. Highway 48 becomes a death trap for pelicans due to the wind currents.

The committee's mission is to inform and educate the public of the need for slower speeds to prevent pelican deaths. To encourage public awareness, the committee asked Port Isabel High School art students to create the pelican that would be a mascot speaking for all the species. Mr. Holland, the high school art instructor, and his students rose to the challenge.

Under his guidance they produced some creative and beautiful works that made the decision-making process hard. After considerable debate, the committee selected Señor Pelé, the representative for our 'Save the Pelican' project.



Winning Señor Pelé artwork by Lilliana Cisnero

On May 8, the Pelican Squadron held an Open House at the Laguna Madre Art Gallery in Port Isabel to officially introduce Señor Pelé. Winning artist Lilliana Cisneros's pelican will be featured on informational materials we distribute. Honorable mention went to Alina Boling for her beautiful portrayal of our Brown Pelicans. Her work will also be used in our materials.

Both young women graciously accepted their awards and our profuse congratulations. It was our honor to showcase their talent. "It was a smashing success," the committee members all agreed.



(L-R) Port Isabel H.S. art students, Alina Boling (Honorable Mention) and Lilliana Cisneros (First Place) with Pelican Squadron members Diana Lehmann, Pat McGrath Avery, and Kate de Gennaro.

Special thanks goes to our sponsors, Tony Reisinger and Javier de Leon, RGVCTMN President Robert Gaitan, and Port Isabel High School art teacher, Mr. Holland. We appreciate the generosity of the Laguna Madre Art Gallery and their commitment to our local art students. Please take time to visit the gallery when you are in Port Isabel.



Thank you to all who participated! The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension are sponsors for the Texas Master Naturalist program. Working together, our Rio Grande Valley TMN Chapter, the Laguna Madre Art Gallery, and the Laguna Madre Art League brought this project to fruition.

(L-R) Tony Reisinger, Lilliana Cisneros, Robert Gaitan, Diana Lehmann, Javier de Leon, and Mr. Holland at Laguna Madre Art Gallery for Señor Pelé Open House.



Lilliana Cisneros (left) and Alina Boling (right) with winning Señor Pelé Brown Pelican artwork.

The Green Heron

Article & photos by Pat McGrath Avery
Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Have you fallen in love yet with the Green Heron? I've always searched for the Great Blue Heron for photographic opportunities rather than what I thought was the less spectacular bird.

Earlier this year, fellow TMN Diana Lehmann and I visited the South Padre Island Birding Center in search of the Mangrove Warbler (which we did see). Little did I expect to leave with a new respect and love for a bird I have so casually photographed and dismissed in the past.

The Green Heron is stocky and I've usually seen them hunched down patiently waiting for a potential meal to swim by. Although I've noticed their unique coloring, I've found them less impressive than the tall, stately Great Blue. That changed with this visit.



Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*)



Green Heron preening

I find the Green Herons harder to spot, especially in the mangroves, but Diana has a much better eye at identifying them. As we observed, they hunt as patiently as the Great Blue Heron, typically staying close to the water's edge. Their long, pointed bill is perfect for spearing their prey. In researching them, I found that they are one of the world's few tool-using species, creating fishing lures with insects, feathers, or breadcrumbs to entice the fish.

But all that information doesn't do justice to their remarkable beauty. A blend of a chestnut front, green back, and dark bluish head is striking and grabs the observers attention before it brings the eye to the striking clarity of the wing pattern. Their wings look like each feather was individually fashioned to form a geometric design highlighted in white.

Unfortunately, according to *All About Birds*, the Green Heron population decreased by about 50% from 1966 to 2010. The largest threat to their survival is the destruction of their wetland habitat.

In 2015, the Green Heron was the American Birding Association's (ABA's) bird of the year. After spending an extended time watching and photographing them, I came home to marvel once again at this beautiful bird. Reading about their intelligence was like putting icing on the cake! I want to study them as they study their prey. I want to save them. I can't wait to go back!

A Look into the Athel Tree – Friend or Foe?

Article & photos by Janis Silveri
Rio Grande Valley Chapter

When I moved to Texas in 2004, I noticed several large trees with vast root systems growing on the east side and near the Resaca as a continuation of the neighbor's landscaping. They divided the property in the 1960s. Texans use these large trees as barriers and buffers in rural areas. I was told they were Australian Pines by many including the Cameron County Master Gardener president.



Tall Athel trees behind house



Athel needles browned after freeze

Recently, I got some tree work done by an arborist who informed me they were Athels (*Tamarix aphylla*), not Australian Pines (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) and they belonged to the Salt Cedar family. He had testified on behalf of a plaintiff suing a neighbor for the damage his Athels had caused to his landscape. I started noticing how pervasive Athels were in the Rio Grande Valley. Since I live in Bayview, I wrote a point paper for the Town Council but, decided not to present it. I thought it would be better to educate those interested in native trees and they could educate others.

Whether or not Athels are classified as invasive, they do nothing for the environment. They overgrow nearby trees blocking the sun. They kill nearby trees and plants due to their expansive root system that sprouts new trees. They are of no value to insects and birds and nothing grows under them. The only animal activity I have seen is Turkey Vultures roosting on their branches and a few squirrel nests. Below is the point paper on Athels with information provided by the local Forest Engineer and Arborist, Salvador E. Alemany.

DISCUSSION PAPER ON ATHEL IN TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY (RGV)

Should I remove Athel trees (*Tamarix aphylla*) from my property or ask my neighbors to remove theirs if they are or have the possibility of negatively affecting my property?

PROS: Prevent destruction of other plants and trees

- Maintain property value – Large, ugly, aggressive trees that destroy other plants, trees
- Increase growth of natives, bringing in more birds and butterflies
- Frees up the land under the trees to grow new plants since nothing grows under Athels
- Increases size, blooms, production of trees/plants where Athels blocked water and sun
- Town could support with ordinance against planting invasives like other municipalities

CONS: Expense of tree removal and landscaping after Athels are gone; alienate neighbors

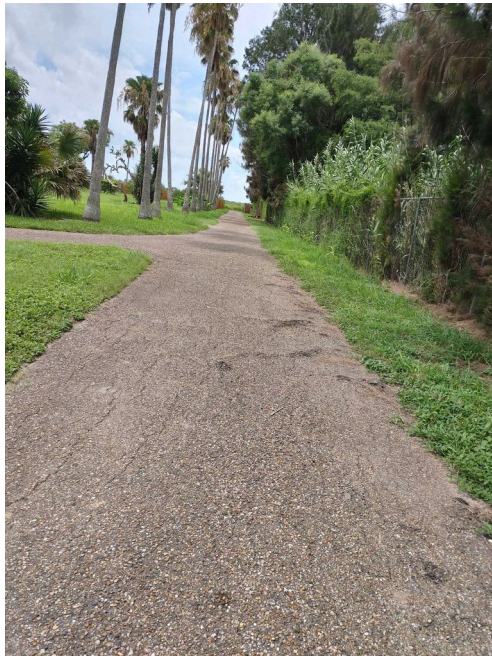
Athels are huge trees (between 60 to 80 feet, 18 to 22 inches in diameter) with no value. Sometimes Athels are confused with Salt Cedars or Australian Pines. They are an invasive species in Texas due to their uncontrollable growth. Its reproduction by seeds or buds is extremely aggressive. Their fallen needles exude salt extracts into the soil preventing existence of other plant species. The network of very shallow root systems can be easily observed up to a distance up to 350 feet from the tree. They are of no value to humans or animals. Athels contain few insects so they're of no value to birds which don't even nest in them.

Athels can have a negative effect on property value as they are an unwanted, invasive species. Aesthetically, these invasives are detrimental to the general property landscape since it limits and gradually destroys nearby plants and trees forming compact clones in the area. It is not a species to plant in urban areas and is not recommended in many landscape city codes.

BACKGROUND

Athel (*Tamarix aphylla*) belongs to the Salt Cedar family and grows in the arid areas of north and northeastern Africa, the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and other areas nearby. Arid habitats with cold winters and summers with hot extremes and little precipitation, alkaline soils, and saltires are perfect habitats for their development and growth. In American nonresidential tropical areas, it was grown for its resistance to alkaline and saline soils and rapid growth. Most of the Athels in the RGV were grown for buffers and barriers that worked in rural--not urban areas.

When planted in areas of greater precipitation or resacas, the amount of water the tree absorbs by volume and density of wood is monumental. This feature and its invasive manner and harmful effects on vegetation have resulted in Athels being classified as invasive in Texas.



Driveway damage from Athel sprouts

The Athel's radical root system can spread through the owner's and/or neighbor's property negatively affecting the landscape and all the vegetation therein. This can affect the aesthetic and property values and can be a significant financial loss in landscaping and possibly citrus crops. In South Texas, its expansion is mostly due to outbreaks from its roots, making it undesirable in urban areas because of the problems it causes.

The species has an ability to regrow and respond to incredible stress known as epicormic growth. Athel control requires total removal and poisoning of the tree. Cutting or pruning will promote a greater problem, due to its aggressive epicormic response and radical flare-ups. These are inherent characteristics of the species to stay and expand responding to stress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Educate RGV residents and property owners about Athels

Offer tree removal and root poison options

Include an ordinance or guidance on what trees and other vegetation are considered invasive

Provide a list of native plants and trees that attract birds and butterflies

No Bad Birds

Article & photos by M. Kathy Raines

“Did you see any birds?!” an enthusiast asks. Another replies, resignedly, “No, not really, just trash birds.” While we may not say this, we often think it. And no birder looks fondly upon a squawking Great-tailed Grackle devouring pulp from oranges lovingly set out for famished little migrants.

This April, a few gorgeous Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, a Summer Tanager and assorted warblers graced our backyard feeders, along with rampaging migratory red-wings. Now we’re back to our usual customers: Great-tailed Grackles, House Sparrows, Black-crested Titmice, Curved-billed Thrashers, various doves and mockingbirds, Starlings, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Great Kiskadees, Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, and the occasional oriole. And I love them no less.



Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*)

It seems we human beings delight not only in classifying our fellow creatures, but in assessing their beauty and goodness as well as their rarity—though, ideally, we do what we can to assure the survival of those who struggle. Anyway, we rate everything—food, movies, cars, even ourselves—so why should our fellow creatures escape our judgment? And, of course, no bird takes offense at being called humdrum or a “trash bird.”

We come to our judgmental views of creatures honestly. Aristotle believed a ladder of life forms ascended from lowly to godly, with mankind, naturally, at the top. Then nineteenth century Swiss-American biologist Louis Agassiz alleged that an accurate hierarchy of organisms shone light on God’s intentions and perhaps instructions. He also judged other creatures on, for example, the care, if any, they lavished upon their young. Said creatures had no say-so in this matter. Oddly, though, we humans often expect them, like us, to be upright, respectful, honest, and attentive to their families.

We do lots of anthropomorphizing—giving human attributes to creatures. Sometimes, rather than admiring the Great-tailed Grackle, which is savvy enough to scour parking lots for crumbs and cannily dives for a morsel of dog food the second it appears, we condemn it for its opportunism—for devouring treats set out for its betters—and for occasionally killing baby birds. Attentive observers of grackles thrill to their sky-pointing, range of vocalizations—clicks, whistles, shrieks, croaks—and the male’s inimitable fluffed-out, hunched-over, chattery pursuit of females. And the huge males, with iridescent purplish feathers, reflect colors magnificently.

Yes, House Sparrows and European Starlings—both imported from Europe in the 1800s—are not even natives, the latter having been transported in a well-intended attempt to populate America with all of Shakespeare’s birds. But they didn’t ask to come. And House Sparrows have such handsome brown and white patterns. Shimmering glitter, it seems, adorns the backs of male Starlings. Many exult at Starlings’ spectacular winter murmuration, or intricate patterns of mass swooping, and what a pleasure to see their thousands sitting companionably—well, with some altercations—on power lines.



European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

It is not only House Sparrows, Starlings and such which are undervalued. Astounded by the vivid males, inexperienced birders like me may overlook the often duller-colored females—the greenish Painted Bunting or the brown-streaked Rose-breasted Grosbeak, for instance.

Now the Bronzed Cowbird, a handsome, red-eyed blackbird, is indeed problematic. Not deigning to build a nest of its own—in itself, a fascinating phenomenon— it lays eggs in nests of other birds, and, naturally, the cowbird has no idea that some of these birds face possible extinction. This cowbird wreaks plenty of damage.

Cowbird chicks—large, plentiful, and early-hatching—often demand all the attention and resources of their unwary hosts, to the expense of the birds’ own offspring, which often die. In South Texas, these duped parents often include Green Jays, Long-billed Thrashers, Northern Mockingbirds, Cardinals and various orioles. Still, Cardinal parents have been observed tending to their own chicks, along with the cowbird adoptees.

While it’s tempting to view the cowbird as lazy and heartless—why doesn’t it, like other birds, build its own nest?—the bird, like us, is getting along in this world as it best knows how.

Then we have the glorious raptors. Many of us thrill to watch a White-tailed Kite hover like a marionette or Harris’s Hawks resting, sometimes one atop another, but do not so relish the sight of a crew of Turkey or Black Vultures tearing into a dead javelina. And while many athletic teams are named Hawks and Falcons, very few adopt the vulture as a mascot. Still, these intriguing, resilient birds scrub our world clean.

Granted, I feel some dismay when a flock of Red-winged Blackbirds shoves everyone out of the way to engulf my bird food. And my heart stirs more at seeing an Altamira Oriole than a Great-tailed Grackle. Still, these generalists, these spunky survivors, disturb beloved and endangered species through no fault of their own. As Aristotle proclaimed, we are the top species. We do appear to be in charge of affairs, at least for the present. And, as such, it is our onus to provide and preserve rich, unfractured habitat for our fellow creatures, who, like us, are making a living as best they can.

The Company Car

Article by Susan Upton, Rio Grande Valley Chapter
Photos by Alicia Cavazos, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

After recently completing the 2021 Texas Master Naturalist class, my mentor Alicia Cavazos and I headed over to Resaca de la Palma State Park to do a little birding. Before leaving, we made it a point to visit with the park Superintendent, Kelly Cummings-Malkowski. Since we had volunteered in the past, we once again offered to help, if needed.



Alicia and Susan at Resaca de la Palma

As the world began emerging from the clutches of Covid-19, it wasn't long until Kelly reached out to us, ready to get the park activities and events started back up, including the tram tours and children's programs. Alicia had conducted tours in the past and I was ready and willing to learn. It was a great opportunity to apply some of my newly-acquired knowledge from class.



We received our training on March 31st; Kelly gave a brief tour of the park and handed us the keys to the "company car" - an electric open-air tram that holds eight!...and the rest, as they say, *is history!*

As I write this, we are in our second month of conducting tours and loving every minute of it! Watching the flora and fauna evolve from the effects of the drought and recent freeze, has been nothing short of amazing. Each week another native tree seems to generate a massive bloom to the thrill of passengers.

Open-air tram at Resaca de la Palma State Park

Mating season has also been very active this spring with multiple sightings of Texas Indigo snakes posturing for territory, Inca Doves doing their mating dance, and Crested Caracara and Altamira Orioles pulling choice grasses and tree fibers to build their nests. It goes without saying, several bobcats have been sighted on the hunt for a mate and of course, the resident Rio Grande Turkeys are active! The Groove-billed Anis have recently arrived and will soon be nesting here, as well.



Crested Caracara gathering nesting material



Altamira Oriole building its nest

Tram tours are conducted on Wednesday through Sunday. Check in at the front desk to reserve your seat.

Hope to see you out on the trails!

Contact info:

Resaca de la Palma State Park
1000 New Carmen Ave.
(off Hwy. 281 or FM 1732)
Brownsville, TX 78521

Latitude: 25.996275
Longitude: -97.5712694

(956) 350-2920

Each week we find ourselves discovering something new to share with our passengers, in order to create an emotional connection between them and the park's trails and natural resources. Each tour takes on a persona of its own, based on the interest of our fares. Some have a thirst to learn about our native trees, flowers, and animals; while others have their bins up, in search of the Altamira Oriole and its long, hanging pouch nest.

Alicia and I can be found operating tram tours on Wednesday and Thursday mornings! We are also assisting with school-sponsored field trips to the park and looking forward to cultivating a new crop of naturalists!



Resaca at Hunter's Lane in Resaca de la Palma State Park

A Smell of Vanilla in the Garden

Article & photos by Frank Wiseman
Rio Grande Valley Chapter

If you are ever out in a park or brushland and you smell something sweet, it might be the smell of vanilla coming from a Whitebrush shrub. *Aloysia gratissima*, also called Beebrush, and other common names, is a member of the Vervain family.



Blooming Whitebrush shrub (*Aloysia gratissima*)

My first experience with this plant was at Harlingen's Hugh Ramsey Nature Park back around 2000 when I joined other volunteers with Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society (ACAS) to help preserve, enhance, and maintain plants in the park. One morning while I was in an area that had been dubbed *The Christian Garden*, I saw this beautiful white-flowering shrub draped with butterflies. No wonder the butterflies liked this sweet-smell-of-vanilla plant for pollen gathering, for as a human, I, too, was attracted. I found out the plant's name and decided that if I wanted a butterfly attracting plant in my yard, it had to be a Whitebrush shrub.



White Peacock Butterfly on Whitebrush

Back in 2002, when I helped form our chapter of Texas Master Naturalists, one of my training class table mates was Max Pons, director of the Nature Conservancy in Brownsville—located just east of Sabal Palms. Max allowed our chapter members to do volunteer work at the Conservancy in those days. He had a special area near the huge barn and office where he grew a variety of seedlings and larger plants to use in habitat restoration. One of these was a large grouping of Whitebrush shrubs. Again, I saw how the butterflies were drawn to it like a magnet.

To describe the shrub that you, too, may want in your garden, know that it grows easily in our soil here in the Valley which can vary from clay, sandy, caliche, or gravelly. It is a slender, densely-branched shrub with long spikes of white flowers, blooming from spring through fall. Look for it to bloom especially after a rainfall.

It is not wide-spreading, but can reach heights of 10 or more feet. It often can suffer wind-blown effects to its shape. Its smooth branches mean it's safe for kids to be around. The leaves are small, green, slender, rounded to pointed tips, and the seeds are a small berry that has two nutlets enclosed in a calyx.



Painted Lady Butterfly on Whitebrush

It can be planted in an area requiring very little water. It could be planted in groupings as a hedge or screen to hide an unsightly area or a nosy neighbor. It is not toxic to humans, but is toxic to deer, horses, mules, and burros. So, your yard is a pretty safe area. Other characteristics to know about this shrub: it is deciduous and freeze and heat tolerant. It is rather fast-growing-- something good to know for the impatient gardener. If you think of propagation, remember it is best to use cuttings since planting by seeds is very difficult. You probably will want to try buying your plants from one of our local nurseries, like Mike Heep.



Sickle-winged Skipper on Whitebrush

This is only one among hundreds of bee, butterfly and bird attracting plants that you might select from the myriad Valley natives available to you. Just remember: Plant Natives in your own landscape, whether it be small or large.

Horridulum -- what kind of name is that for a pretty plant?

Article & photos by Anita Westervelt, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Latin plant names, we've learned, often clue us in about the nature of a plant. See Eileen Mattei's article, page 13, "Enough Latin Names to be a TMN," at the December 2020 Chachalaca newsletter: <https://rgvctmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/The-Chachalaca-Winter-2020.pdf>

The Latin word *horridulum* isn't as bad as it looks; it translates to: "somewhat rough; unadorned," according to latin-is-simple.com. The word *Cirsium* derives from the Greek word *kirsos* meaning: swollen vein. Thistles were used as a remedy against swollen veins, according to Wikipedia.org. The translation for *cirsium* becomes more involved the more links that are followed -- but that's not what this story is about.

I have a pedal boat. It's light enough for my husband and me to launch it onto the resaca waters and then haul up. We carpeted a section of retaining wall to use as a launching pad. After docking the boat, we prop it up and tie it to the trunk of a large Washingtonia palm tree that is next to the launching pad. That's neither here nor there, either, but included to set the scene.



Flower bud begins to form in rosette

The rosette continued to expand but do little else as the months went by. And then suddenly, several weeks ago, a baby rosette appeared in front of the propped up boat.

Before I knew it, a huge bud pushed out of the center of each rosette, like a Phoenix rising, and voila! Both plants bloomed. And they were beautiful!

This time, iNaturalist told me it was thistle, and not just any thistle. Nor was it the Texas thistle, *Cirsium texanum*, of which I am so familiar. The spectacular new-to-the-yard plant is **bristle thistle**, *Cirsium horridulum*!

About 18 months ago, a rosette began appearing in the shade of the propped boat, right at the base of the palm. I began photographing this rosette and iNaturalist kept telling me it was thistle. Of course I knew that was wrong because the leaves of this new plant were sturdier, more gray than green and certainly more wicked-looking than any thistle I'd ever come across.



Mystery thistle beginning to bloom

My policy is to not eradicate new plants until they bloom, and I can get them identified. If the plant turns out to be on the invasive list, I don't keep it.

This thistle has a number of common names other than bristle thistle: bull thistle, purple thistle, spiny thistle, yellow thistle and horrid thistle. It's really only horrid if one touches its leaves-like-serrated-daggers.

Bristle thistle is larval host to little metalmark and painted lady butterflies, a rich nectar source for bees and butterflies, and birds eat the seeds.



Bristle Thistle (*Cirsium horridulum*) in bloom

Wildflower.org describes it as a tall branching stem with large yellow or red-purple flower heads and very spiny, clasping leaves. It grows one to five and a half feet tall, and the leaves are eight to 24 inches long. The yellow blooms are rare. Bristle thistle is often found along the edges of salt marshes; in the South, it also is considered a pasture weed.

Surprisingly, the blooms on the bristle thistle plants I'd been observing for so long rather quickly turned to seed, and the flower stalk withered and drooped. I will attempt to collect some of the seeds once they dry out from our rain storms that left the large seed heads in a sodden mass.

Wikipedia.org describes *Cirsium horridulum* as a North American species of plants in the thistle tribe within the sunflower family. It is an annual or biennial -- both of which I believe I witnessed in our yard. It is native to the eastern and southern United States from New England to Florida, Texas and Oklahoma as well as to Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and the Bahamas.

Bristle thistle has a large taproot and fleshy side roots that sometimes sprout new shoots, which explains the junior plant in front of the boat. There are usually several flower heads, also with sharp spines. Both my plants had several flowers on each plant. As long as it took to push out the flower heads, they didn't last long. Not as long as the bloom period of Texas thistle.

I have not seen bristle thistle before, and certainly not anywhere around our neighborhood so it is a mystery how the first one simply appeared one day and continued to grow for so long in the shade of the pedal boat before attempting to flower, and then the smaller plant, which bloomed within a couple of months after appearing.

Interestingly, Wikipedia.org writes that *Cirsium horridulum* is endangered in Connecticut, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania and threatened in Rhode Island, while Arkansas and Iowa list the *Cirsium* genus as a noxious weed.

It will be interesting to see where the wind blows the seeds, since the plant is so close to the resaca. Will they be captured by the north wind during these recent sporadic cold fronts, or will the southerly trade winds send them elsewhere?

T E X A S

Master
Naturalist™
Rio Grande Valley Chapter



**Milestones & awards for March 2021,
April 2021, and May 2021**



Congratulations!

Graduates of the 2021 Class

Evelyn Alpert
Pat Avery
David Batot
Norma Friedrich
Kate de Gennaro
Betsy Hosick
Ethan Hultgren
Diana Lehmann
Gilberto Montes
Diana Owens
Maya Rasmussen

John Romero
Noemi Romero
Linda Scales
Richard Shuey
Virginia Shuey
Molly Smith
Sandra Treviño-Crespo
Susan Upton
Shadrach Villafranca
Carolyn Wolfer

**WELL
DONE
ALL!**

Newly Certified Texas Master Naturalists

Evelyn Alpert '21
Pat Avery '21
Jeff Bradley '20
Norma Friedrich '21
Betsy Hosick '21
Diana Lehmann '21
John Romero '21
Es Jimenez '20

Noemi Romero '21
Linda Scales '21
Molly Smith '21
Sandra Treviño-Crespo '21
Susan Upton '21
Carolyn Wolfer '21
Tonya Tallard '20

100 Hours Milestones

Evelyn Alpert
Betsy Hosick
Norma Friedrich

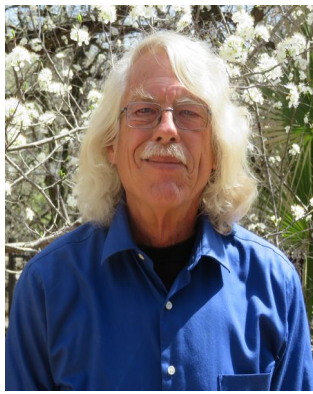
Skippy (Norma) Palmer
John Romero

Molly Smith
Susan Upton

Contributors to this issue of The Chachalaca



Pat Avery



Drew Bennie



Dr. Tim & Ki Brush



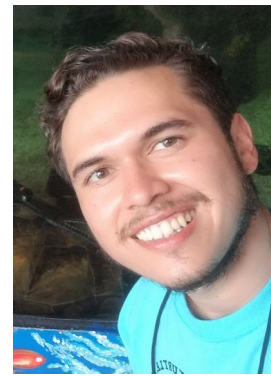
Tamie Bulow



Linda Butcher



Carolyn Cardile



Mario Fierro



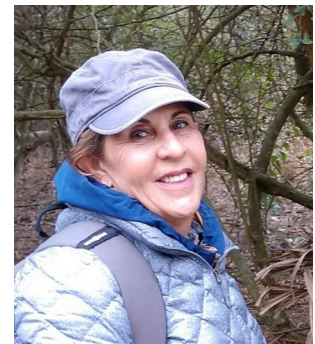
Norma Friedrich



Joni Gillis



M. Kathy Raines



Janis Silveri



Susan Upton



Anita Westervelt



Frank Wiseman

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President	Roberto Gaitan
1 st Vice President	Tamie Bulow
2 nd Vice President	Barbara Peet
Secretary	Carolyn Cardile
Treasurer	Maria Reyna-Gomez

Directors

Membership	Joni Gillis
New Class	Barbara Peet
Communications	Diane Hall
Advanced Training	Teresa Du Bois
Volunteer Service	Alejandra Gomez
New Class Rep	Susan Upton
At Large: Winter Texans	Carolyn Woughter

Committees

Membership	Adrian Ramos, Norma Trevino, Heidi Linnemann
Training	Robin Gelston (chair), Pam Bradley, Barbara Peterson, Emma Gonzales
Volunteer Service	Tira Wilmoth
Communication	Diane Hall, Chet Mink, Tamie Bulow, Robert Gaitan

Advisors

Texas AgriLife	Tony Reisinger
Texas Parks & Wildlife	Javier de Leon

Can you help? We can always use additional help on our committees!

Please contact us at riograndevalleychapter.tmn@gmail.com

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.