



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.

Frog Fruit and the Hell Zone

Article & photos by Bill Rich, Class of 2022, South Texas Border Chapter

A few years ago my friend Sylvia Casselman told me that she was excited about some frog fruit that had established itself next to her house. As a novice to the world of native plants I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Frog fruit?” I thought. Is it something that frogs like? Is the fruit edible? Do frogs eat the fruit? The answer to all of those questions was “No.” Sylvia explained to me that frog fruit is a native ground cover that is excellent for areas of your yard with minimal or no foot traffic.

Plants of Deep South Texas, (aka the plant bible) says that Texas frog fruit (*Phyla nodiflora*) “...is a useful species, producing an attractive ground cover without being invasive”¹. Further research told me that **ground cover** refers to “...low-lying plants with a creeping spreading habit that are used to cover sections of ground while requiring minimal maintenance”².

Frog fruit sounded like just what I needed to fill in my yard’s Hell Zone; that ugly, difficult to maintain space between the sidewalk and the street. I had never had much success in getting grass to grow in the Hell Zone. It was always unsightly, consisting mostly of bermudagrass sprinkled with enough “stickers” that I never went to the mailbox barefoot. It was always dry, because the hot concrete on either side sucked the moisture out of it. I couldn’t water with a sprinkler without getting much of the water in the street and on the sidewalk. Additionally, the area is awkward to mow.



Sprinkler over-spray into street



My successful frog fruit patch is pleasing to the eye.

Frog fruit sounded like a solution to my problem. Being native to the Rio Grande Valley, it just might be able to withstand conditions in the hot, dry Hell Zone. I called Sylvia and asked her for some cuttings. She kindly obliged and with seven frog fruit runners.

I cleared a small area in the Hell Zone, planted the seven runners, and waited. Miraculously, they grew and were soon sending out their own lateral runners. I cleared a new area, dug up some of the new runners and repeated the process. Two years later I had filled in all 120 feet of my area with frog fruit. It only needed to be watered once every two weeks in the summer and once every four to six weeks when the weather was cooler. To irrigate it, I put in a drip irrigation system which attached to a water hose and a mechanical timer at the faucet. And, best of all, I no longer had to mow it.

I have been delighted with my Texas frog fruit. In addition to making a lush green contrast to the white sidewalk, it has given me many hours of entertainment. It is full of native insects; butterflies, spiders, wasps, flies, and a couple of species of native bees. (Interestingly, honey bees rarely if ever visit the little white flowers.)

My new favorite pastime is going out to the frog fruit patch to observe and photograph the many species of small butterflies that it provides nectar to. From spring to fall it supports a wide variety of skippers; fiery, tropical checkered, common white checkered, desert checkered, and Erichson skippers can be found flitting from blossom to blossom as they feed. Also joining the feast are southern skipperlings, gray and mallow-scrub hairstreaks, bordered patches, and little yellows. But my favorite butterflies in my frog fruit patch are two that use it as their host plant; the colorful little phaon crescent and the graceful white peacock.



Phaon Crescents (*Phyciodes phaon*)



White Peacock (*Anartia jatropha*)

Now, it is February. The flowering season is long past and, with the cooler weather, the vines have all but stopped growing; those nearest the ground are dead and turning brown. In a couple of weeks I will put the lawnmower in it and shave it down to the ground. But don't worry, in a few months it will be back to its full glory and ready for a new season of butterflies and bees!

1. Plants of Deep South Texas, Richardson & King, page 418
2. The Spruce.com, "What is a Ground Cover Plant?," David Beaulieu

Maybe Size Doesn't Matter

Article by James "Drew" Bennie
Rio Grande Valley Chapter

One autumn a few years ago, I was photographing butterflies and plants in Olmito when I noticed a yellow sulphur butterfly struggling like crazy, caught on a blue mistflower. I assumed it was in a spider web and as hard as it was beating its wings would soon get loose. It was puzzling, though, because I didn't see a web and blue mistflower has no barbs to catch a butterfly by the edge of its wing like this one was. Finally, the butterfly flew off so I approached the mistflower wondering what in the world had happened.



Jagged ambush bug photo by Drew Bennie

All I could see was a blue flower head with what seemed like a small yellowish brown ball of dead plant matter on it. "Is that alive?" I asked myself. As I stared at the brown ball I must have made it nervous because a little leg moved enough to tell me it was an insect. It was small, only about one-quarter inch in size, so I couldn't tell many details.

With my camera on macro, I eventually got a few shots in focus. When enlarged, I could identify the tiny body parts of this mighty insect. Its forearms were big, like Popeye the sailor, so I guessed it was a young praying mantis since they have similar features and are masters of camouflage. Like Popeye, it must have eaten its spinach, because it held the larger, struggling butterfly just by the edge of its forewing while anchoring itself to the flower head. No wonder insects have six legs! I was amazed at its strength for a tiny insect. Attitude and appetite probably also played a part. Maybe size doesn't matter.

Fast forward three years to the pandemic when I was busy cleaning closets and sorting old magazines. I glanced at a publication of The Xerces Society, an organization promoting insects, and on the back cover was a photograph of an insect on a flower head. I gasped as I realized this was the mighty diminutive creature I had seen in Olmito years before!

I realized it wasn't a mantis after all, it was a jagged ambush bug (*Phymata* species). Popeye arms and all! I knew of ambush bugs, but did not know about these little guys. An internet search indicated there are many varieties of these insects found all over the U.S. and Canada.

As camouflaged hunters, they sit on flowers and grab whatever insects appear. By injecting a poison into their victim they not only kill, but digest the insides, which are later slurped up by the hungry hunter's straw-like mouthpart. This poison allows them to eat insects larger than themselves. The one I saw only had the butterfly by the wing and hadn't been able to poison it before it escaped. These insects are considered beneficial to gardeners because they eat many different types of garden pests. They can, however, also eat other good insects such as bees.

Finding this small insect one sunny afternoon, I wonder how many other tiny living things are around us every day that we miss. Who knows what we might find if we only take the time to look! I feel so lucky to have accidentally found this tiny jagged ambush bug among the flowers.

Butterflies are in the pink – pink mint, that is!

Article & photos by Anita Westervelt, South Texas Border Chapter

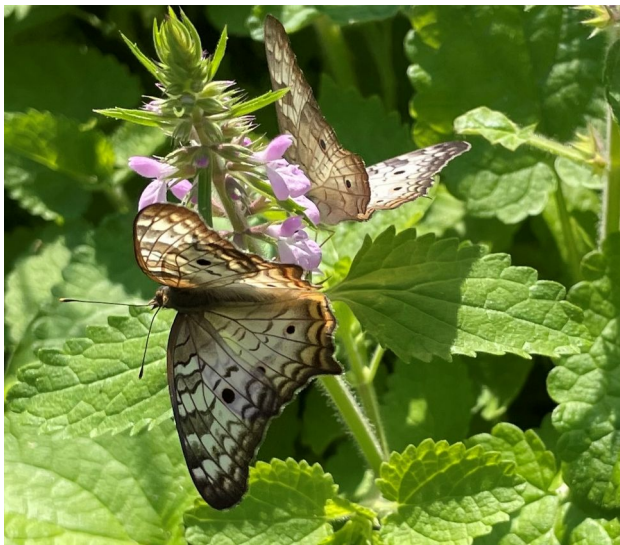
Several years ago, a pink mint plant (*Stachys drummondii*) popped up in front of the tropical sage patch in my yard. Our weekly volunteer team had just found them all abloom in various gardens in Harlingen's Hugh Ramsey Nature Park, so I knew what it was.

Pink mint was our harbinger of spring, foretelling warmer days after so many weeks of working in the winter weather.

Now, with time gone by, that single plant in my yard has re-seeded itself to near-savannah proportions, breaching the garden border, boldly staking its claim. I don't curtail it. By the time it wears itself out and disappears with the high heat of summer, it will have fed untold insects, provided safety for lizards, anoles, beetles and bugs within its dense, spring-green, crinkly foliage and added vivid pink color to a winter landscape.



Pink mint in bloom



White peacock butterflies on pink mint

I thought my plants were exhibiting yet another manifestation of the weird weather of 2021, when I discovered pink mint leaves pushing up through the soil – not at their scheduled time, as I thought – but on Thanksgiving day, seemingly three months early. The plants were blooming by Christmas and feeding a late-visiting Monarch butterfly. By the end of December and into mid-January, the patch of pink mint was feeding a dozen fresh white peacock butterflies. By time temperatures plummeted the second week of February, I documented 18 species of butterflies, a few flies and wasps, a Southern pink moth and a dusky herpetogramma moth.

According to our local authorities: Richardson, A., King, K. 2011. *Plants of Deep South Texas: A Field Guide to the Woody and Flowering Species*; Texas A&M University press, College Station, page 291, pink mint can bloom fall, winter and spring. Distribution is Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy counties.

The flowers bloom on erect spires around which multiple, two-lipped orchid-like half-inch blooms whirl; the bottom lip is larger and speckled with dark pink and white markings. Pink mint spreads via roots and readily reseeds itself. The fruit ripens into four, one-seeded small black nutlets that are ready to collect when they easily spill out of their bract. Plants transplant successfully during winter and spring, even while in full bloom.



Dusky Herpetogramma moth on pink mint

Butterflies, moths and wasps on Pink Mint

- Brown Longtail
- Ceranunus blue
- Cloudless sulphur
- Common buckeye
- Eufala skipper
- Fiery skipper
- Great Southern white
- Laviana white-skipper
- Little yellow
- Mallow scrub-hairstreak
- Monarch
- Orange-barred sulphur
- Orange sulphur
- Queen
- Southern dogface
- Southern skipperling
- Tropical checkered-skipper
- Vesta crescent



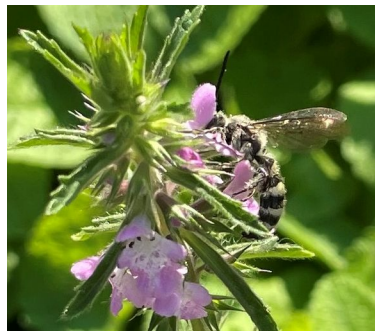
Common buckeye butterfly



Orange sulphur butterfly

- Dusky Herpetogramma moth
- Inornate Pyrausta moth

- Genus Dielis wasp
- Toltec scoliid wasp



Toltec scoliid wasp

Trash Lady's Escapades

Article & photo by Penny Brown, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Let me start by saying I have an active imagination. According to my adult children, I exaggerate, a lot. Having said that, the following tale is shooting about as straight as a pig's tail!

As you may have heard in August of 2020, the City of Rio Hondo received a \$650,000 grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for improvements to Boat Ramp Park. The planned improvements include a pier, dock, kayak launch, nature trails, pavilion, bird blinds and restrooms.

Currently the park is a ramp with two boat launch slots. The rest of the park consists of a parking lot and undeveloped lover's lanes – well, that part is the active imagination I was talking about. Anyway, I hadn't seen any progress occurring at the park so I approached both the naturalists and the city about combining forces for blazing the trails and improving the park. On February 8, 2022 I was curious if any stakes had been laid for trails or roads and I decided to grab a trash bag and head over to the park.

As I passed the Rio Hondo Fire Department, I noticed a big wrench truck coming out of the station in front of me. It turned down Harris Drive and into the park in front of me and that's when I noticed two or three police cars parked in the ramp as well. I slowed before pulling into the parking lot to get in all the "rubber necking" I could get.



Activity at Rio Hondo boat ramp

I grabbed my big trash bag, and gloves and got out of my vehicle. I proceed to pick up trash around the parking lot, but slowly began to nonchalantly meander toward the action. I just happened to glance over a few times hoping they wouldn't run me off before I could fulfill my curiosity. I saw the fire truck backed up and a truck and boat trailer backed up into the water. There was also a boat in the river which seemed to be blocking one of the docks. My imagination begins chattering "There must be a body and the boat has it trapped in the dock area but it's too heavy so they are pulling it out with the wrench truck!"

I pick up my phone to snap a few pictures, but I really can't see anything. Surely there must be trash closer to the action! I inch a little closer, but I hear one policeman advising another of my appearance and I hear him respond "I saw that!" So at that point, I proceed to continue to fill my trash bag and ignore the boat ramp shenanigans.

When my bag feels like it contains about 50 pounds of trash, I notice that the ramp activities have ceased. One of the police cars drove up into the parking lot near where I was picking trash. He calls out to me “Ma’am, we have city workers who get paid to do that. You don’t have to do that! I already called and got after them!” I explained to him that I wanted to pick up trash; I was a Texas Master Naturalist and we got volunteer hours for picking up trash. We spoke for a bit and of course, being my nosy self, I asked what was happening at the boat ramp. He explained that it was low tide and the truck/trailer had pulled too far into the water. The end of the ramp drops off into the river and the truck/trailer was not able to get out of the river. No dead body, which is a good thing of course, but not as exciting for storytelling purposes.

Thereafter, I continue to drag my 100-pound sack (remember the exaggeration part) of trash around the park and noticed a Rio Hondo Public Works truck appear and proceed to empty the trash barrel. I approach the truck and ask the occupant, who turns out to be named Juan, if I got him into any trouble. He shrugs which means “probably” in valley talk. I tell him I meant no harm, that I was a naturalist and this was just volunteer work. Juan then takes my huge bag of trash from me and places it in the back of his truck and hands me a new trash bag. OK! My plan was to pick one bag but I understand the assignment! I continue on my merry way collecting another fresh bag of trash.

About 30 minutes later, I notice Juan returning the emptied trash barrel and see there is a second Public Works truck. The two men speak for awhile and I see them looking my way. My second bag is pretty full of trash so I approach the trucks with the intention of leaving the filled bag with Juan. At that point the second man begins conversing with me. His name is Murl. “Like Merle Haggard,” I ask? “Yes” he explains, “but I’m not an Okie from Muskogee!” (reference to a Haggard song for the non-country fans).

Turns out Murl is the Public Works Director and the one the police chief called about the crazy lady picking up trash. (Has no one else ever picked up trash before in this city?) He asked what crime I had committed that I was ordered to pick up trash for my community service. Ha ha! A million crimes flash through my mind – the most predominant one is that I had murdered the previous city employee who continued to ask why I was picking up trash! We laughed about that and I explained that all Texas Master Naturalist’s backgrounds were investigated and cleared prior to becoming a volunteer with the group.

I further explained that we are nature nerds and that we volunteer our time doing all things nature connected including picking up trash. He told me about the proposed trails and I explained that I had spoken to the City Administrator about assisting with the park. We talked for awhile all the time I’m picking up trash. Oh, have I forgotten to mention that somewhere along the way my second trash bag had been replaced by a third new one? Yes, needless to say I had an interesting day and I picked near an 18-wheeler load of trash! Who ever thought a day of picking trash for Texas Master Naturalists could be so fun!

Hands-on learning at Edinburg Scenic Wetlands

Article & photos by Rudy Escobar, Class of 2022, South Texas Border Chapter

Part of becoming a Texas Master Naturalist (TMN) and being one is to educate citizens about our environment and natural resources. As a TMN trainee, one of the requirements is to volunteer in order to become a certified TMN. Since I believe we should start early by educating our young, I chose to volunteer at the Edinburg Scenic Wetlands and World Birding Center.

One of the Center's projects is the Edinburg 5th Grade Wetlands Program set up by Veronica Guzman, Environmental Education Coordinator. The program consists of three hands-on presentations: how pollution affects our streams and lakes, conducting water chemistry experiments in the Center's Discovery Pond, and dip netting for macro invertebrates in the Center's Dragonfly Pond.



Edinburg Scenic Wetlands is a site for student field trips.

I met with Ms Guzman and her staff, Denice Galvan and Victoria Cruz, prior to the arrival of the students. My duties were to assist the environmental education team including distributing water chemistry material, helping students dip net for macro invertebrates, answering questions, and other duties as requested. As I became familiar with all three areas of instruction, I couldn't help but notice the enthusiasm of the students. As they went from one study area to another, the students' excitement about environmental science became stronger.



Discovery Pond is used as the site of water quality testing by students.

At the Discovery Pond, the program leader explained to the students that they would be involved in conducting five water chemistry tests (pH level, nitrates, phosphates, turbidity, and dissolved

oxygen) in order to determine the health of the pond. As the program leader asked questions, the students were more than eager to answer. I could see how hungry they were for information and anxious to volunteer their answers. They could hardly wait to get to the pond to do the water quality experiments.

Some of the comments I heard while they were conducting the pH test of the water, as well as the other tests were: “This is cool” (I didn’t think they used that phrase anymore) and “Wow!” The ability to get their hands dirty while conducting the experiments only heightened their enthusiasm. They wanted more! The students got that opportunity when each team presented their test results to the rest of the class. The overall conclusion from the test results showed that the pond was healthy. Again, I was struck by their enthusiasm toward what was happening around them and things that they had never noticed before.



Dragonfly Pond provides an ideal setting for students to use dip nets in search of aquatic macroinvertebrates.

The next phase was going to get dirty. At the Dragonfly Pond, the program leader, again, laid out the sequence of events in collecting macroinvertebrates from the pond using a small net or “dip netting.” As they collected the specimens, I often heard, very enthusiastically, “Look what I got!” After collecting specimens, the program leader helped the students in determining how many different species were found and their identification. The students really enjoyed participating in the investigation.

At the end of the course, I believe, the students had a better understanding of our environment and natural resources. The students came away with the knowledge that they play an important part in understanding the working of our environment. Ms Guzman and her staff, Denice Galvan, and Victoria Cruz, have developed an outstanding program for the students. Their presentations and demeanor made me very comfortable in assisting them in any way I could.

Great Blue Herons are Zen Creatures

Article & artwork by Sandra Mink, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

I see these slate gray birds with their long sturdy orange beaks hunched over, hiding in the thick tangled brush. I see them swooping up from the drainage ditch near my home, rising with their wide majestic wings extended four or even five feet, spindly legs hanging down beneath them. I am captivated by them as they lean out over the surface of the laguna with intense concentration waiting for the right second to snatch a mullet. Whatever they are doing, they are completely in the moment. They are truly Zen creatures, something I strive to be. Something I must work at, but they need not.

According to David Allen's book called *What it's Like to be a Bird*, light reflecting off of water bends at the surface displacing the images in the water. This means that a fish can appear to be as much as three inches away from where it actually is. Herons and egrets know how to position themselves so that their angle of sight is just right, allowing them to correct for this. We would,



according to Allen, have to use a mathematical calculation to figure this out. But, Zen creatures that they are, herons just know.

According to the Back Yard Biology website, bybio.wordpress.com, Great Blue Herons have a 90% to 95% success rate when fishing.

Great Blue Heron linocut by Sandra Mink

I like to imagine being a Great Blue Heron, alert to every rustle in the brush, every reflection of light off the water surface, every movement of the finning fishes underwater, every smell, every breeze, but not to the passage of time. I am grateful to the heron for allowing me to experience this vicariously.

Listen, Look and Learn --A lesson in observation

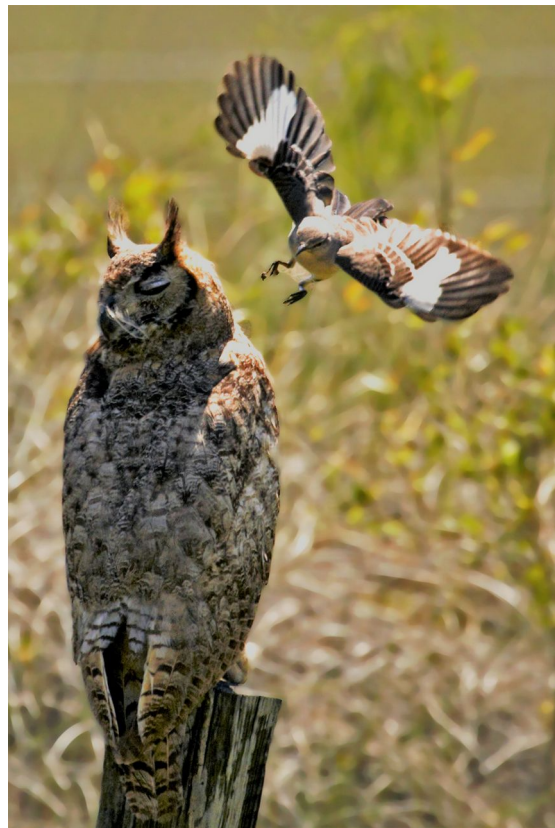
Articles & photos by Diana Lehmann, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Have any of you taken First Aid training? I am sure many of you have. For those of you who haven't, let me educate you in one of the first things people are taught in this training--how to recognize an emergency or dangerous situation.

So what does that have to do with Master Naturalists, you ask? Take that training and transfer the idea into the bird world or into the interactions between species in nature. Can you recognize their emergency and observe what happens in that situation? In some instances, it may not be an emergency, but just an alert to a behavior that you would not want to miss. You will be amazed at what you see and what you can learn from simply keeping your mind clear and your eyes open to nature's little emergencies around you. Read on and I will tell you of some of the occasions where I caught that emergency alert and it paid off big time.

Mockingbirds seem to be real sentinels of the bird world. On three separate occasions, by listening to the incredible raucous they were making and then observing, I caught some amazing photos. I also learned a bit about their parenting skills and observed the behavior of protective parents. Each time the mockingbirds perceived a danger to their nest, they acted upon it.

The first was a Great Horned Owl that unsuspectingly decided to take a nap too close to their nest. The owl was seemingly unconcerned by all the noise, continuing to nap even with the mockingbirds pestering him and flying at him to drive him away. He finally got tired of the feathers pulling and the dive bombing him and he flew off to continue his nap elsewhere.



Mockingbird dive bombing Great Horned Owl



The next alarm was directed at a White-tailed Hawk, a predator that they regarded as a danger to their babies. The hawk was only flying by on the way to one of the favorite perches birds have around my house, however, the parent's thought it was too close for comfort. An emergency alert was sounded and the intimidation tactics began. Had I not been listening and paying attention, I would never have been blessed to see this unique hawk in my backyard.

Mockingbird alarmed by White-tailed Hawk

The third alarm fire was expressed over a different kind of predator. A beautiful, big indigo snake was looking for fish in the canal, but decided to take a bit of a detour. This move was a huge error on his part. Again, the mockingbirds took offense and went on the offensive against this sneaky snake. No matter where he went, the mockingbirds were sounding the alarm and flying down at him. An opportunity finally presented itself and one of the birds flew down to take a big bite of the snake's tail. This attack precipitated the snake's escape into the grass where he stayed for a little while but because I was still observing what was transpiring, I eventually saw a little sneaky snake head peek out of the grass. I swear he looked both ways as if looking to see if it was safe to come out. Apparently, he decided to look elsewhere for his supper and he disappeared into the grass.



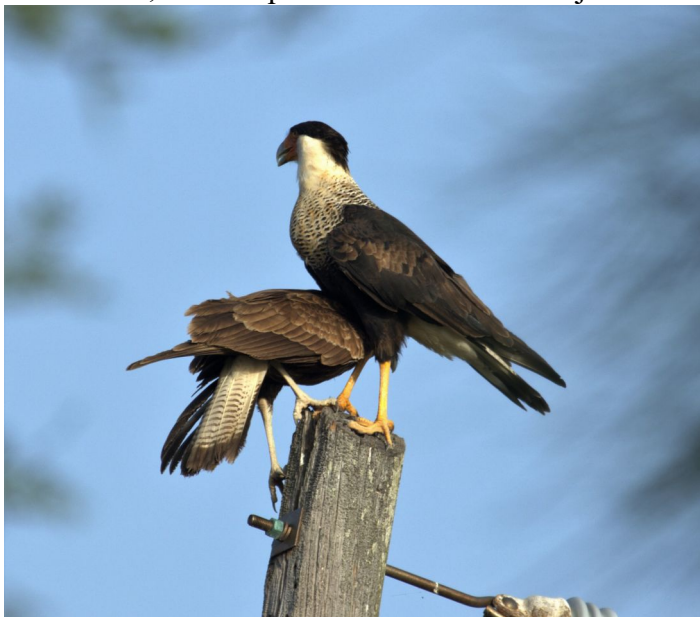
Indigo snake peering through the grass

So as not to give mockingbirds a bad rap – let me include this attack as well. Again, the sound of an alert from a bird gave me pause and I looked to see where it was coming from. Low and behold, not one but two Kestrels were very upset with an apparent transgression from a Harris Hawk. Both of the little falcons bickered at the hawk and challenged him on a number of occasions. I had not seen a Kestrel in my back yard since I had moved here, yet there they were. The hawk decided it was better to retreat than to make a stand and flew off. One of the little falcons stayed a bit just to make sure the coast was clear and that is when I was able to take some photos of this beautiful little bird of prey.



American Kestrel in flight

On another occasion, I heard the strangest sound from the telephone pole behind our house. To my amazement, I saw a pair of Caracaras and a juvenile that they were teaching to fly, feed, and fend



Crested Caracaras

for himself. The parents flew off but this juvenile wasn't smart enough to follow yet. He just perched himself on top of the pole and made the strangest distress call I had ever heard from a large bird. He sounded so pathetic, however, mom and dad were apparently showing tough love that day and never returned for him. You could observe them flying off in the distance looking after him should he have gotten in trouble.

Perhaps the most amazing observation I have witnessed is the mating dance and calls of the Bronzed Cowbird. What a character he is! It was the sound of his wings that caught my attention that day. He was so distracted by the love of his life, I was able to snap a number of photos of him in his mating dance and then when rejection came from the female he was trying to win over. The look of rejection on his little face was downright comical.



Bronzed Cowbird courtship



Bronzed Cowbird with “The Look”

These are examples of what happens when you stop – not to smell the roses – but to listen to nature and hear the alerts that are being sounded. The ability to observe and document the interactions between species in nature is a privilege that one should not ignore.

Listen, Look, and Learn. I promise you will be rewarded with amazing sites and sounds of nature that many may miss.

Behind the Gates

by Richard Loya, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Behind the Gates, an educational component of the East Foundation, has been hosting field lessons for thousands of fifth grade students for several years. The 27,000-acre El Sauz Ranch near Port Mansfield is now the home of Behind the Gates thanks to a dedicated education center. Hands-on learning experiences help students learn about what happens behind the gates of a working ranch and how it impacts their lives.

I recently participated in the Behind the Gates event at El Sauz Ranch. Texas Master Naturalist are always needed as volunteers. This event allows kids from around the Valley to be one with nature. Over 1000 kids from IDEA School system, mostly fifth graders had a week long opportunity to learn about ranch operation and management.

In addition to TMN, East Foundation Ranch staff were also assisted by the following East Foundation partners: UTRGV Coastal Studies Lab, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Texas Wildlife Association, Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, Museum of South Texas History. From proper grazing techniques and water quality to natural habitats/natural resources to ranching as an art/science, Behind the Gates reconnects students to the land.

In addition, members of the community volunteered their time and expertise to teach the kids what to do to keep our lands safe.

Invited guests to the grand opening of the site included Willacy County Commissioners, local and area dignitaries, members from statewide and many more. One of the invited guests was Mary Pearl Meuth, Program Coordinator for the Texas Master Naturalist Program.



David Batot, Mary Pearl Meuth, Emma Gonzalez & Richard Loya at El Sauz Ranch

Raptor Banding with Bill Clark

Article & photos by Chuck Cornell, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

In 2015, my friend, Gus Rentfro, mentioned that he knew a guy who banded raptors. “Would you like to go out with us some time?” he asked. “Yes” was my reply and thus began my adventures with Bill Clark and raptor banding.

On the first outing, I drove my car and followed Bill and Gus out to Hwy 4 near Boca Chica. Using walkie talkies to communicate, we drove until they spotted a hawk perching. While I parked on the shoulder, they would drive past the hawk, do a U-turn, and drop traps on the side of the road opposite the hawk. Upon returning to where I was, we would watch the traps. The first hawk was really responsive. It was down on the trap in a flash and was caught. I was hooked! On this day, we got four Harris’s Hawks and one American Kestrel. Altogether a wonderful day.



Bill Clark with Kestrel

Since that day, I have become a helper to Bill and have learned a lot. In fact, I learn something every time I go and now feel fairly confident when making an ID of a hawk be it a juvenile or an adult. Bill is a patient teacher and allows you to learn at your own pace and within your comfort level. During the first few outings with him, my main tasks were to watch for hawks as he drove and straightening out the nooses on the traps after we caught a bird.

Whenever I talk about banding raptors one of the first questions is “What kind of traps are used to catch the birds?” The traps that Bill mainly uses are called Bal-chatri or BC traps. They are based on the traps first used in India for falconry. India has had falconry for at least 600 years and somewhere in that time frame the Bal-chatri trap was developed in order to capture hawks. The original trap was a cage made from cane and on top were horsehair nooses. Mice or birds were placed inside the cage and when the hawk tried to get the critter their toes would become ensnared in the nooses.

Today’s traps work the same way, but they are usually made from hardware cloth and the nooses are monofilament. Bill usually packs three to five traps in the car and they are baited with a variety of lures to be attractive to the variety of raptors we have here in south Texas. Lures are the term used instead of bait because they are not killed (usually) during the capture.

Lures used are mice, gerbils, house sparrows, collared doves, and pigeons. Usually there will be one or two traps with a sparrow/mouse combination. The sparrow keeps the mouse moving and movement is what attracts the birds. Doves or pigeons are solitary and have their own style of trap. Gerbils are generally in pairs although they can be in with a sparrow as well. Two mice together is another common combination.

The Bal-chatri traps are weighted with a dumbbell so that the bigger birds don’t fly away with them. Kestrels are too small and light to fly with the traps so they don’t need weights on them.

The three most common styles of trap Bill uses are square shallow traps, a dome, and what he calls Quonset hut which are oblong traps with a curved top. In the United States only those who are permitted through a trapping permit, banding permit, or falconry permit may trap a raptor.



Dome style Bal-chatri raptor trap



Collared Dove in Quonset style trap

Another trap I've seen used is a bow net. Bill has one that at this time is used exclusively for Kestrels. It has a small wire box that holds the lure and a net that when tripped will cover that bird and hold it until it's retrieved. These work amazingly well and are quick. The trap operates with a set of springs; the bird trips the trap when it hits the wire cage. He also has a bow net that is triggered manually with a tug of a rope. These require more of a setup as opposed to the easily used Bal-chatri traps which are simply tossed out the window of a moving car.

The way we most often do banding is road trapping. This is simply driving through an area and looking for raptors perched in trees or telephone poles along the roadside. Bill is exceptional at spotting birds and he is usually correct in his ID at a long distance. He will usually stop back a ways and check the bird with binoculars to confirm what it is. He will then call out what traps he wants to use. "Give me two mice and the sparrow/mouse" and I will reach into the back seat and grab the requested traps.

Depending in which side of the road the bird is on will determine where the traps go. The traps are placed opposite the bird so that they don't see them being placed on the ground. Usually if it's on my side I will open the door and toss them out. Tossing from a lower height gives a better chance that they will land upright, although that's not always the case since the traps are tossed as the car is moving. We then drive a short distance and U-turn again to watch the hawk.

If it's hungry and eager they will already be at the trap and caught by the time we turn around. This is of course the textbook situation, it doesn't always go that way. We have sat as long as a half an hour waiting for the bird to come down. Sometimes they will come down, land, and just stare at the trap. Other times they will hover over it and maybe land or maybe just make a pass and go back up to the wire. Birds that have already been banded will no longer go after the trap. They have a long memory about the experience. On rare occasions we have caught banded birds but usually they were birds that were banded as chicks and as such were banded in the nest and have no memory of traps.

The majority of hawks we capture and band are Harris's, American Kestrels, Gray, Red-tailed, and White-tailed. Other raptors caught include Merlin, Red-shouldered, Cooper's, and Swainson's

Hawks, and White-tailed Kites. Some we have unsuccessfully attempted are Roadside Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk, and Common Black Hawk.

After the bird is caught we drive quickly to the trap to retrieve it before it becomes too stressed or drags the trap into traffic. I usually grab the bird and the trap while Bill pulls the car to the shoulder and opens the back. He then collects the remaining traps while I release the hawk from the nooses. The bird is then put into a can until we can move to a quiet area to process the bird.



Once captured, the bird is quickly untangled and placed in a receptacle for processing

Bill handles all the banding processes and I take the trap and straighten out the nooses. The bird gets a silver band that is the official USGS Federal band. In addition, there may be a color band if the bird is to be part of a graduate student study. Color bands typically have either two digits or a digit and a letter. The codes are easy to read from a distance and with the different colors provide a positive identification.



Bill attaches a Federal bird band to captured hawk



Measuring the talons with calipers

Record keeping is important. Bill records the band number and location of the bird when caught. He measures and records several identifying features on each bird using calipers and rulers. Measurements of the beak, talons, wing and tail lengths and other things that help determine the sex and age of the bird.

Several photos of the bird are taken to record details of the outstretched wings and tail. If it's a color banded bird he will also take a photo of the color band with the numbers visible. If we have caught an unusual bird or there are other people along watching he will take a group photo with the bird or birds. The bird is then released to go about its business. The birds are not harmed in any way during the banding process. The only real downside for the bird is they don't get the meal that they were hoping for.



Bill photographs details of plumage with help from Gus Rentfro



There are two other additions to the banding process, at times, to support graduate students' projects. One is drawing blood from a vein on the underside of the wing for DNA tests. Another is to fasten a harness to them that holds either a VHF or GSM type transmitter. VHF transmitters are the cheaper of the two costing about \$200 with a two-year battery life. They have a limited range and you must be nearby the bird in order to get a signal. GSM transmitters are up to 10 times the price of VHF, but last much longer. Some are solar powered and can transmit data to a cell phone.



Transmitters (GSM on left and VHF on right) are attached for certain raptor studies

All in all my experience with Bill has been wonderful. I have learned so much and had such a good time in everything we have done. Sometimes other helpers or interested folks accompany us as we road trap. The car is small and full of traps and equipment so there is a maximum of two passengers. There are two other methods that are used to band hawks, but they deserve their own article. They are trapping in sugar cane fields and banding of chicks in the nest which doesn't involve trapping. More later.

Did You Know?

Article by Chuck Cornell, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

I learn something new every time I accompany Bill for raptor banding. Here's a few things that are not always known about raptors and a couple of truths about banding in the Rio Grande Valley.

- Female raptors are larger than males. This is noticeable when you see a pair together. When banding, weight and measurements are used to determine the sex.
- White-tailed Hawks take four years to achieve their adult plumage. They go from juvenile to basic two and then basic three with each plumage being different.



Chuck with banded Gray Hawk-- photo by Bill Clark

- Harris's Hawks hunt cooperatively in groups of three to seven. Not all do this but certain ones do. When the female is nesting the male or a helper will bring her food to the nest. They will also bring food to the babies, but there the female may meet them away from the nest and carry the food herself to feed the youngsters.
- Juvenile Red-tailed Hawks do not have a red tail.
- Juvenile Gray Hawks are not gray.
- Although they arrive in September or October, Kestrels will not come to the traps as long as they have an ample supply of bugs to eat. It's usually January that the cold drives them to go after mice and other prey.
- When using a dove as the lure for Harris's Hawks, only the females go after them. The males ignore the dove and will go after the other traps containing mice, sparrows or gerbils.
- Many of the hawks seen here are winter only visitors and don't breed here. These include, but are not limited, to Kestrels, Red-tailed Hawks, Swainson's Hawks, Ferruginous Hawks and Broad-winged Hawks.

2022 Winter Outdoor Wildlife Expo- (WOWE)

- a great success!

Article by Carolyn Cardile, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

WOWE was held at the South Padre Island Birding and Nature and Alligator Rescue Center from Tuesday, February 8 through Saturday, February 12. More than 1600 visitors, over 40 Texas Master Naturalist(TMN) volunteers, and numerous members of Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society (ACAS), our TMN chapter, and other nature organizations helped make this years WOWE an outstanding event. Thank you to all our chapter members who volunteered their time!

There were some significant changes in WOWE for its 26th year. For several years, the committee had hoped to expand the program to include field trips and this year we did. The trips were a big success. We also reduced the number of guest speakers and added a meal. In the past, there were several speakers per day in at least two rooms at a time. Each had 45 minutes to speak and 15 minutes to answer questions. Unfortunately, the speakers felt rushed to finish on time and yield the room to the next presenter.

Since the Birding Center now has an alligator program, we were able to offer three alligator programs per day, in addition to three days with Jonathan Wood's Raptor Project programs. These programs along with the 10 speakers we had a full day for participants. This improved the quality of the speaker program by allowing enough time for questions after each talk.

The last three days of that week we offered the opportunity to buy a BBQ meal and eat it on the deck. On Saturday, we spent the last hour listening to an outstanding cello concert by Jenuine Cello aka Jen Mulhern in the main lobby.

Each year, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, the originator of WOWE, presents an award to one person in our community who has made a significant contribution to nature in the Rio Grande Valley. This year the award was presented to Stephanie Bilodeau. She received her award after she gave her presentation about her studies at Boca Chica. Thank you, Stephanie, for your outstanding service to wildlife on Boca Chica and your outstanding presentation.



Stephanie Bilodeau receives award from Carolyn Cardile, WOWE committee chair—photo by Cristin Howard

My WOVE Experience

Article by Michelle Cano, Class of 2022, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

The 26th annual Winter Outdoor Wildlife Expo (W.O.W.E.) was held from Feb 8-12, 2022, at the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center and Alligator Sanctuary. A special appearance from some feathered guests were one of the main attractions.

Jonathan Wood, wildlife rehabilitator and master falconer, brought his entourage of eagles, hawks, falcons and owls. The Jonathan Wood's Raptor Project put on a fabulous extravaganza for three days. He entertained the crowd with his raptors and sense of humor, and even had volunteers from the audience feed Uncle Sam, the American Bald Eagle.

Some of his feathered buddies included two Aplomado Falcons, an Antarctic Gyrfalcon, a Red-Tailed Hawk, a Crested Caracara, a recently rescued Harris Hawk, a Black Vulture, several owls and his new family member, an African Augur Buzzard.



Jonathan Wood and his raptor friends—photos by Michelle Cano

After the show, the birds were on display for everyone to take photos. You could even pay a small fee, like I did, and take a photo with one of the raptors. Susan, Jonathan's wife, used your own personal cell phone so you would have your photo right away. Isn't that just amazing?

When it was all over, my day of volunteering ended with helping them clean, pack up and load the trailer with all the beauties in their cages safely tucked away for the long journey home. My first day of volunteer work as a TMN trainee is one I will never forget and always cherish. Bird on!!!

South Texas Ecotourism Center: A Vision Becomes A Reality

Article & photos by Ed Meza, Class of 2022, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

What was a vision three years ago for David Garza, Cameron County Commissioner for Precinct 3 became a reality on Tuesday, February 22, 2022 with the grand opening and ribbon cutting for the 10 acre South Texas Ecotourism Center (STEC) located at 501 W. State Texas 100, in Laguna Vista, Texas.



This \$12 million project was funded by the Cameron County Hotel Occupancy Tax and in part by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and supported and voted on by the entire Cameron County Commission. The 10 acre site was generously donated by the Town of Laguna Vista. STEC mission is to give visitors, students and locals the opportunity to experience the beauty of nature in one location interpreting the four major types of habitats found in the Rio Grande Valley which are the coastal prairie, lomas, savanna, and thorny brush forest.

The center includes an 8,000 square feet indoor classroom, exhibit, and event space. Another feature will be a “water lab” to be used for local training of potable and wastewater plant operators, and to test water samples locally instead of sending them off elsewhere.



Multi-purpose room and lab (left)

Bird blind (below)



It also features bird blinds; a pond system that collects water from runoff; outdoor exhibits with interpretive panels with over 48,000 plants and stainless steel sculptures of native animals; a large look out boardwalk with interpretative panels and viewers; an outdoor classroom created with left over material; and WiFi connection. The interpretive panels in the displays feature QR codes readable by smart phones and pads to show information about the exhibits.

Education is the major goal of the center and will offer curriculum for grades 2-8 online free to teachers covering nature and ecotourism and approved by the Texas Education Agency.



Outdoor classroom with seating (above)
Interpretive panels describing habitats (left)
Inviting Lookout boardwalk (below)



A major component of the center is also to promote tourism and economic development and keep visitors longer and spending more on lodging, restaurants and sights which will help in the long run to generate more HOT tax revenue to fund the center.

And lastly, STEC is an information promoting other nature related sights and venues.

Our Visiting Sharp-shinned Hawk

Article & photos by M. Kathy Raines, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

“Where are our birds?” I cried. Last winter, Cardinals and Green Jays joined our usual customers—House Sparrows, Curve-billed Thrashers, Black-crested Titmice, various doves—on the lawn or branches, at the feeder and among papery bamboo leaves. I opened my window so my cat and I could enjoy their morning calls and chatter. Now, I gazed upon eerily silent, bare limbs, devoid of all but an occasional sparrow or, when I set out peanut butter, a few Golden-fronted Woodpeckers and Great Kiskadees—whose heft may enhance their confidence.

Were birds happily feeding elsewhere on insects or naturally produced seeds and fruit? Perhaps. Had birds become ill? Poisoned? Had our house exterminator ventured too far into the yard? Cats? Not likely. They don’t know our boisterous lab has become senile. Ah, were we harboring a hawk?



Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)

Then I recalled a sudden flurry of wings and a possible pursuit by a dove-sized bird, but, unaware of how small hawks can be, I pooh-poohed this, attributing it to regular jostling at the feeder.

Then, one morning, I saw it—a Sharp-shinned Hawk, on a branch, half-veiled by olive leaves, plucking, tearing and devouring a sparrow morsel-by-morsel, frequently looking up, then continuing its chore. It returned for a morning or two. Then it, or another, appeared across the street, then a couple blocks down. During the Great Backyard Bird Count, when I zoomed in on what I thought was a Northern Mockingbird alighting in our olive tree, I was astonished to see a dark, hooked beak; it was, rather, a Sharp-shinned Hawk tucked into the greenery. As I attempted to take its photo, though, it vanished like smoke; I never heard or saw it flap away.

I’m enchanted by hawks, and the backyard birds, in becoming scarce, are doing what they must. I hope, though—since most bird-eating hawks return to their northern breeding grounds—our usual birds, as well as vivid spring migrants, will indeed reappear. Songwriter Joni Mitchell asked, with perennial relevance, “Don’t it always seem to go, that you don’t know what you got till it’s gone?” After this temporary deprivation, I’ll warmly welcome squealing Great-tailed Grackles and the throngs of raucous, ravenous Red-winged Blackbirds due sometime in March.

Prior to consulting knowledgeable birders on Facebook’s Rio Grande Valley Birding site, I assumed this raider to be the more notorious Cooper’s Hawk, another diminutive migrant with a penchant for small birds. In fact, Sharp-shinned Hawks, or Sharpies, though somewhat smaller than Cooper’s Hawks, are almost indistinguishable from them. While a Cooper’s is crow-sized and a Sharpie, the size of a jay, a female Sharp-shinned may be as large as a male Cooper’s, since

female hawks outsize males. A Sharpie's head is more rounded, smaller and less dome-shaped than a Cooper's, and its tail is straighter-edged. A Sharp-shinned wears grayish and dark feathers on its head and neck, while a Cooper's are lighter. A juvenile of either species has yellow eyes, while adult eyes are red.

The Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), North America's smallest hawk, joins the Cooper's and Northern Goshawk as the only three North American raptors in the genus *Accipiter*, which includes long-legged hawks with short, rounded wings—highly maneuverable birds that use their long tails like rudders. “*Accipiter*” is Latin for “hawk”, while “*striatus*” likely refers to the underside streaks on juveniles. The Sharp-shinned Hawk's name stems from a sharp ridge on its legs.

A solitary stealth hunter, a Sharpie sits, partially concealed, on a branch or occasionally, the ground, and awaits attainable prey—a perched or ground-feeding bird or one on the wing. Then, astonishingly, it bursts forth, deftly flying through webs of branches and foliage, using its lengthy tail as a rudder. With long toes armed with deeply curved talons, it stabs and secures its victim. Seated on a branch, raised root or the ground, it plucks, then eats it. A Sharpie may also cruise hunt, hiding in vegetation and flushing out prey. A speedy short-distance flier, it gives up on prey that it doesn't capture quickly. About 90% of the Sharpie's prey is warbler-sized. Though this small hawk has been villainized as and even dubbed “chicken hawk,” it likely does not concentrate on such hefty prey. While dining primarily on birds, the Sharp-shinned may also eat small mammals, frogs, lizards and insects.

In their northern breeding grounds, Sharp-shinned Hawks prefer dense, primarily coniferous forests but are less choosy with winter grounds. They breed in Alaska and Canada and as far south as southern Alabama, New Mexico, Arizona and California. They migrate long distances, but some are now wintering farther north, perhaps due to milder winters and the proliferation of feeding stations along their paths, which offer up ready meals.

Once viewed as a tyrant—John James Audubon himself called it a “marauder”—the Sharp-shinned, along with other hawks, was not protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 until an amendment passed in 1972. Ravaged, it appears, by shell-thinning DDT, as well as being frequently shot, numbers seriously declined, then rebounded, with some ups and downs, and the hawk is now considered “Of Least Concern” by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Being small, Sharp-shinned Hawks—and especially their young—are vulnerable to raptors such as owls, but their concealed nests and general secretiveness may protect them. Some Sharpies have died near vineyards and oil refineries due to chemical ingestion. Also, they, like other birds, crash into windows and are run over by vehicles.

As an equal-opportunity birder, I welcome the occasional hawk—especially knowing that it will likely migrate away this spring. However, birders can dissuade a hawk, most conveniently, by temporarily removing feeders. They can also use a caged, roofed or umbrella-ed one that prevents spillage, since ground birds make easy prey. Also, they might construct a brush pile, 20 feet off, if possible, as a retreat for victimized birds.

You're invited: RGV Home and Garden Show McAllen Convention Center, April 8 – 10, 2022

Article & photo by Robert Hernandez, South Texas Border Chapter

The South Texas Border Chapter of Texas Master Naturalist has accepted the invitation to participate in the annual Rio Grande Valley Home and Garden Show once again.

Our chapter has been assigned a 10 foot by 10 foot booth space during the three-day event. We will use the booth to inform the public about the use of native plants in our landscapes. Pamphlets, brochures and other literature will be available for the public to inform them about the use of native plants, island habitats for native and migratory pollinators, and other critters beneficial to the environment.

Native plants will be for sale to the public at our booth as part of a fundraiser. We encourage anyone who already has a pollinator garden established and who might be finding baby plants sprouting, to put them in containers and donate them as part of this fundraiser. Funds earned will be used for upcoming projects that focus on our Texas Master Naturalist (TMN) mission of outreach and service that benefits the conservation of our natural resources and areas within our communities.



Native plants will be for sale

We are also providing the show's organizer with speakers from our TMN speakers' bureau to conduct seminars related to propagation, use and care of native plants in creating native garden spaces. One of the featured speakers will be Texas Master Naturalist Anita Westervelt. Her presentation, "Living with the Natural World," will focus on the importance of different creatures and critters coming together in a native plant garden. She will also present ideas on how to start your own native plant habitat.

Members and families of both Texas Master Naturalist chapters are invited to visit our booth during this event and to listen to our speakers during the seminars. We have two speakers currently assigned. Anyone who would like to be a presenter about native habitat or pollinator gardens is encouraged to contact the chapter event coordinator, Robert Hernandez, at hernaang1@gmail.com. Those interested in working at the booth, please contact Robert also.

The Home and Garden show is a great outreach opportunity; visitors come from all over the Valley. Time spent potting up native plants for the booth sales, helping prepare for the event, working up presentations and working the booth during the event count as volunteer time and advanced training for master naturalists who attend native presentations.

Be on the Lookout

Article & photos by Anita Westervelt, South Texas Border Chapter

Native annuals are beginning to appear, like Pennsylvania pellitory, a benign, unassuming plant that doesn't seem to do anything except exist. It's a plant that once you see it and hear its name, you don't have to remember it because it's just always there, ready to be enunciated.

Pennsylvania pellitory, like its alliterative eight-syllabic moniker that tumbles off the tongue with the freedom of a summer summersault, shifts and stretches from a shallow taproot in polygamous colonies, fair covering a moist shaded landscape in silent sways, making its appearance in January and February.



Pennsylvania pellitory (*Parietaria pensylvanica*)

Alliteration is fun -- a literary device that reflects repetition in two or more nearby words, like Lois Lane, Daffy Duck, Pennsylvania pellitory. Alliteration can create emphasis, attention, significance and importance in poetry, prose or speech. It makes written work melodious, interesting, and musical, creating flow, impact, feeling, mood, balance, rhythm, discord and harmony in the mind of the reader.

Alliteration is a subliminal memory tool. The sing-song repetition of similar sounding words is a powerful device that allows the brain to remember phrases and concepts even if they are somewhat dissonant ideas.

Marketers use alliteration for brand memory to engage customer recall at point of purchase opportunities – think Coca-Cola, Krispy Kreme Pennsylvania pellitory's professional name is just as lyrical and melodic: *Parietaria pensylvanica*, silently emulating the undulating swell and ripple of a gentle seaside surf.

The plant reflects its two alliterative names in its layers of small repetitious deltoid-shaped leaves that seem to be cut by the same cookie cutter in varying sizes. A deltoid is the shape of the Greek letter delta; the Pennsylvania pellitory leaf is not round as it first appears; nor is it heart shaped, but more the shape of the highest-ranking suit in a classic deck of cards: the spade -- in brilliant colors of jade.



The plant grows on slender succulent-like stems that grow upright and then fall over, lengthening as they travel along the ground. The plants bloom in winter and spring, but you'll be hard-pressed to notice the tiny green flowers.

The author, Delena Tull, in *Edible and Useful Plants of the Southwest, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona*, revised edition; University of Texas Press, Austin, pgs138-139, invites readers to "try a nibble of the small leaves and juicy stems of *Parietaria* (Pellitory, *Parietaria* species). Though not related to the cucumber, the flavor of this tiny herb comes close to that of the garden cucumber. The herb provides a refreshing addition to salads (Fleming 1975; Scooter Cheatham, interview, September 1984)." Tull prefers the plant fresh, saying it becomes bland when used as a cooked green.

Pennsylvania pellitory (*Parietaria pensylvanica*)

I caution anyone tempted to eat from the wild because of unknown allergies or sensitivities. As for a pretty plant to pervade a void, Pennsylvania pellitory fills the bill.

T E X A S



**Milestones & awards for September
2021, October 2021, and November 2021**

Congratulations!

Newly Certified Texas Master Naturalists

Sandra Mink '20

100 Hours Milestones

Barbara Rodriguez '20

250 Hours Milestones

Pamela Bradley '20

Norma Friedrich '21

500 Hours Milestones

Amy Daley '16

Diane Hall '20

2,500 Hours Milestones

Robert Gaitan '14

Barbara Peet '15

Well done!

Contributors to this issue of The Chachalaca



Drew Bennie



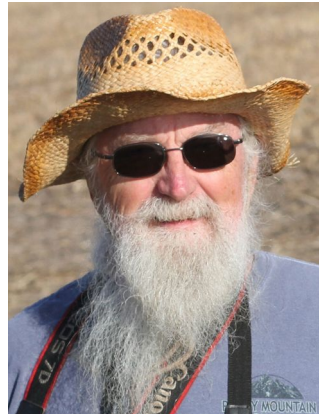
Penny Brown



Michelle Cano



Carolyn Cardile



Chuck Cornell



Rudy Escobar



Joni Gillis



Diane Hall

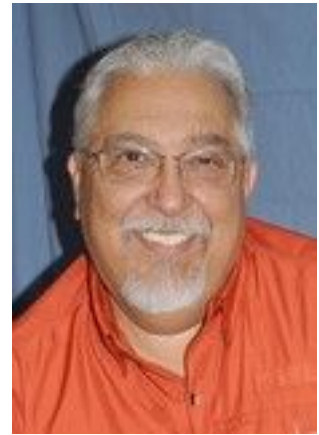
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Sandra Mink



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Bill Rich



Anita Westervelt

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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.