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.

Milkweed: from Aphids to Zizotes

Article & photos by James “Drew” Bennie, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

As the plight of the Monarch Butterfly in North America is discussed, the conversation always includes their host plants in the Milkweed family. An excellent source of information on these plants and their impact on nature is a booklet that is, unfortunately, no longer in print *Milkweed, Monarchs and More* by Ba Rea, Karen Oberhauser, and Mike Quinn (formerly of the RGV).

This booklet was updated in 2010 and some used copies can still be found online. The original book was small enough to fit in your shirt pocket and was great to take into the field. The 2010 edition is the size of a regular book and perhaps more suited for teaching or for children to use.

Ladybug larvae eating aphids on *Zizotes*

Brightly colored milkweed bugs on *Zizotes*

This book inspired me to make a photographic record of the insects that inhabited a *Zizotes* milkweed patch which I had access to a few years ago. Here is what I observed.

Tiny yellow **oleander aphids** are not native but now inhabit almost all milkweeds and provide a meal for others such as ladybug larvae. Numerous **parasitic flies and wasps** checked out the plants for victims to lay their eggs on, various **spiders** were waiting to pounce, and I found a **click beetle** at night looking for a snack.

Orange and black **milkweed bugs** were everywhere and huge **tarantula hawk wasps** sipped at the flowers as did **giant swallowtail and dusky blue hairstreak butterflies**.

Tarantula hawk wasp on *Zizotes*

One sunset, a pair of insects flew in looking sort of like wasps. The book identified them as one of 3,322 North American species of **Ichneumons**, the largest family of insects! I had never heard of these parasitic insects before.

Besides the **queen and monarch caterpillars** that I expected, I also discovered several moth caterpillars chowing down on *Zizotes*. **Milkweed tussock moths** stripped some plants to bare bones and another caterpillar of a type of tiger moth named a **salt marsh moth** also was found hiding in the shadows. These vulnerable caterpillars are more active at night when there are less predators around.

Voracious milkweed tussock moth caterpillars

Salt marsh tiger moth caterpillar on *Zizotes*

Years ago before digital cameras, I also found and imprisoned a quarter-inch long, ugly, rusty caterpillar with a few long scary hairs. Soon after I caged it, the tiny creature rolled a leaf down over itself and turned into a small pinkish triangle shaped moth a few weeks later.

Who knows what other moths use our native *Zizotes* milkwed plant as a host plant?

I have not noticed such an assortment of insects on the tropical milkweed that I have grown, even though it is an excellent host plant for monarchs. It makes sense that local insects would prefer the local *Zizotes* milkweed they have evolved with. This is an illustration of why local native plants matter to our local environment. Plant *Zizotes* milkweed in your sunny garden for the monarchs and see who else shows up for dinner.

Porpita porpita and the naming of things

Article & photos by Anita Westervelt, South Texas Border Chapter

Scientists, as we were taught in the early days of our Texas Master Naturalist training, use a two-name system called a Binomial Naming System, naming plants and animals using a system that describes the genus and species of the organism. The first word is the genus and the second is the species. It's as simple as that.

It's all about nomenclature – which comes from a Latin word meaning the assigning of names – so no matter where in the world, the naming system brings clarity to discussions about organisms. Synonymous with nomenclature are other words, like classification and taxonomy.

A tautonym, on the other hand, is a scientific name of a species in which both parts of the name have the same spelling, such as *Anhinga anhinga*, which is a large local waterbird similar to a cormorant.

In accord with the current Code of Nomenclature, tautonyms are explicitly prohibited for botanical names, but allowed in zoology. Marine life is full of tautonymously-named critters; some periodically come ashore and have fun names like ***Porpita porpita***, which is a striking-looking, vibrant blue sea creature commonly known as **blue button**. It is found along our beaches and other parts of the Gulf of Mexico, the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian oceans.

Blue button (*Porpita porpita)*

It is not a jellyfish, although superficially similar. It is in the Phylum Cnidaria, which is the group of animals that also includes corals, jellyfish, sea jellies, sea anemones and sea pens.

Blue button has two body parts, a float and a hydroid colony. The gas-filled float is a disc-like shape about one inch in diameter and considered the main body; the hydroid colony are the branches that extend out and look like tentacles. They can be bright blue, purple or turquoise in color. Each branch ends in knobs of stinging cells called nematocysts.

Blue buttons don't swim; they live on the surface of the sea, floating, drifting and moving with the winds, currents and tides; they usually wash ashore during the summer months. Blue buttons eat plankton and other small organisms.

The scientific name for **Portuguese man-o'-war** (***Physalia physalis***) is not a tautonym because the genus and species names differ – by one letter, a common practice. Regardless, these sea creatures are quite likely to be found beached on our Texas shores. They are a study in blues, clears and pinks – a pretty and interesting looking beach find that is exciting to photograph but not to touch!

So named because its inflated pneumatophore, which can float half a foot above the ocean surface, resembles the sail of an 18th-century Portuguese warship. The enlarged float is filled with carbon monoxide and air and is used as a sail that can be blown by the wind for thousands of miles, dragging long tentacles behind it, that deliver a deadly venomous sting on contact to fish. The tentacles can stretch 165 feet below the surface, although the average length is 30 feet – still a significant length to anything or anyone tangling with them. Portuguese man-o'-war feeds mainly on young fish or small adult fish, shrimp and other crustaceans and other small animals in the plankton.

Portuguese Man-O'-War (*Physalia physalis*)

It is not a jellyfish but is closely related; it is a species of siphonophore. A floating hydrozoan, it is actually a colony consisting of four types of polyps: the float, tentacles, feeding zooids and gonozooids which produce gametes for reproduction. Cnidocytes, the stinging cells, are located in the tentacles, the cells of which retain their potency long after the creature has been washed ashore.

Atlantic sea nettle (*Chrysaora quinquecirrha*) is a jellyfish. They aren't blue and can easily be missed in the sand: they are mostly translucent with symmetrically placed brownish patterns on the body. The body itself is perfectly symmetrical. Sea nettles live in oceans worldwide. There are 15 known species that differ in size, color and tentacle number, depending on the species. They are subject to the whims of the ocean currents and are particularly abundant near the surface in coastal waters. Like other jellyfish, they are carnivores. The tentacles are covered with nematocysts; each having a trigger that injects venom upon contact.

Atlantic sea nettle (*Chrysaora quinquecirrha*)

Water jelly (*Rhacostoma atlanticum*)

Another colorless critter to find on local beaches is listed as **lined water jellyfish (*Rhacostoma atlanticum*)** by www.iNaturalist.org and as **many-ribbed jellyfish** in Texas A&M University's Texas Marine Species log. Wikipedia has a short write-up about it, saying that *Rhacostoma* is a genus of *aequoreid* hydrozoans. It is monotypic with a single species: *Rhacostoma atlanticum*. It has been found from the Atlantic coastline of North America, Columbia, western and central Africa.

Also called water jelly and crystal jelly, it is not a true jellyfish, but a hydroid. It has no color and can be translucent to transparent and on land, could be described as a thick-set, gelatinous blob the shape of a hockey puck. It has wart-like bumps on the underside of what would be considered the bell if it were afloat. The underside center has a smooth circular area devoid of ridges. Hydrozoa are carnivorous, feeding mostly on small crustaceans, fish eggs and other larvae. It has very fine tentacles that do not sting – many beach finds of the gelatinous sort would do well with being photographed and not handled and left for the next beachcomber to come along.

Excitement grows at STEC

Article & photos by Ed Meza
Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Since the opening of the South Texas Ecotourism Center (STEC) in Laguna Vista this past February, there has been a lot going on at the Center. We are receiving a steady amount of visitors to the Center as well as holding a number of events.

San Isidro Grade 6-8 tour (photo by Paula Guzman)

RGV Chapter meeting at STEC in May

Events at STEC have included: Volunteer Training Class, Texas Master Naturalist 2022 Class Graduation, Cameron County Parks Department Job Fair, the showing of two Richard Moore documentaries, RGV Texas Master Naturalist Chapter Meeting, and a number of school tours. In addition, many birdwatchers and visitors are looking for all kinds of birds and other wildlife which inhabit the area.

The Center's main sign was placed on the premises in early May. The sign is 22 feet high and has a digital screen. The staff designed the STEC logo and is working on several projects including: preparing the gift shop in the lobby area, designing a brochure, and creating summer programs for our youth. A rental agreement/contract is being created and the school curriculum for grades 2nd to 8th is almost completed.

In the outdoor areas, additional signage which welcome and direct visitors and identify plants are being created. There are several animal sculptures that are almost completed and include an alligator, pelican, owl, hawk and deer. With spring and summer kicking in, the plants and trees have sprouted and are blooming. What a difference since the winter time!

New digital sign installed in May

Killdeer eggs camouflage well in rocks

Wildlife can be observed here. We have had two Killdeer nests with successful hatches. The mommas and their babies have been seen in the Savannah outdoor display and the parking lot. We have a nest of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers on our cedar elm trees at the Amphitheater. Our two resident jackrabbits sometimes welcome our visitors who are lucky enough to see them. We also had a baby opossum visit us and then wander off to hopefully join its mother.

Many wildflowers are in full bloom. Our horse cripplers bloomed beautifully earlier this season.

A Sticky Situation

by James “Drew” Bennie, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

One late spring, I was volunteering at Hugh Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen and noticed a man walking along the trail followed by his three sons. The boys were each about two years apart and were in stair step order, the smallest one trying to keep up. As they passed me, the man asked me what I was doing. I replied that I was removing Guinea grass (what else?) so the other plants would have less competition and a better chance to grow. I wished them a good day and off they went down the trail.

Within a couple of minutes the middle boy, about seven years old, came running down the path yelling, “Sir! Sir! You have to come help! A bird is caught!” I dropped my tools and hastened to the path. With a puzzled look I asked “What do you mean caught?” “It’s caught in a bush,” he hastily said as we hustled down the path.

His brothers and dad were there looking down at something as we approached. I looked and there was a humiliated but scared half grown Kiskadee flycatcher entangled in a healthy native Plumbago bush covered in sticky seeds. The stems of the plant had stuck both to each other and to the bird thus preventing the bird’s escape.

Great Kiskadee (photo by Chuck Cornell)

The man suggested that if we used a t-shirt we could grab the bird and untangled it. Before I could say yes the older boy had his shirt off and shoved it to me. I placed it over the bird and as I held it, they helped untangle the stems. The bird worked his head out and gave me a tentative peck on the hand. Do you suppose the Kiskadee had second thoughts about making me mad and got nervous?

As we tried to remove the copious amounts of sticky Plumbago seeds from the little guy, he began to wiggle more. I moved him over to the other side of the path and put him on a low branch of a mesquite tree thinking he would prefer to be in a tree. He had other ideas and dropped into the Guinea Grass below him to hide from us.

As I turned to the boys to thank them I noticed the mama bird in a distant Ebony tree watching us. “You boys probably saved that bird’s life. You should be proud of yourselves!” I said as the three puffed out their chests a little. I told them that I had seen the mother bird and she would be able to help the little one now. As the bare chested older boy picked Plumbago seeds from his shirt, we said our good byes and the group walked on to new adventures. I guess Good Samaritans come in all sizes.

Spring Migration 2022 Champion Plants

Article & photos by Javier Gonzalez
Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Tennessee Warbler in huisache tree

Spring was back this year! There was so much missing in the landscape last spring after the "Big Texas Freeze" as the habitat struggled to recuperate through the season. I remember how the migratory birds had little to no food available for them in their passing. The insects were hardly there, and some of the plants didn't have enough time to flower and fruit on schedule for the migration. There even were a few plant species that normally flower in the spring that never bloomed at all!

To mitigate the dire situation, and with the help of gracious donations and volunteers, we impaled hundreds of orange halves onto the ends of dead tree limbs and supplemented the edges of the garden hedgerows with hundreds of store-bought mealworms to help the tired and hungry migratory birds as they passed through the SPI Birding & Nature Center.

This time around, the spring felt so much better as the expected blooms, fruit, and insects were present again, and some in abundance! An amazing sight after two years! I had almost forgotten how spring was really supposed to look and feel. It also seemed like some of the plants were trying to make up for the skipped flowering and fruiting season last spring; and the wildlife took advantage!

My favorite sight and the one I had missed the most were the flowering **coral bean (*Erythrina herbacea*)**. These trees only bloom in the spring and are such a unique and attractive looking plant in the landscape. Their greenish and thorny trunks, bare of leaves from the winter, shoot out spikes of pinkish tubular flowers that completely cover the tree.

Carpenter bee attracted to coral bean

The locally breeding Hooded Orioles seem to have a keen affinity for the flower's nectar and you can often get amazing looks at them just by hanging around a coral bean. For most of April, these trees can also be absolutely swarming with big, black, female Southern carpenter bees. They were completely buzzin' for the blooms, but they rob the nectar by piercing a hole at the base of the flowers.

This spring I learned that migratory tanagers are also attracted to coral bean. The attraction is not for the nectar, but for the buzzing carpenter bees! Tanagers love to eat bees and wasps and the sight of a bright male Scarlet Tanager snatching carpenter bees from the flowers was one of the memorable moments of this spring migration for me. It serves well to know where the flowering coral beans are in the area to find some cool birds!

One of the things I like about Port Isabel and SPI is that a good number of coral beans have been planted in yards as ornamentals even though all parts of the plant are poisonous; they are just so pretty and grow so well! Making passes by them during spring migration can be fruitful most of the time.

During a birding run around the neighborhoods on SPI, I found my highlight migratory bird of the season on a coral bean. A Painted Redstart, a migratory warbler that one usually must hike up a mountain and into canyons along the western border lands to see in the US, was hooked to a flowering coral bean outside of a friend's house! It was my first for Cameron County!

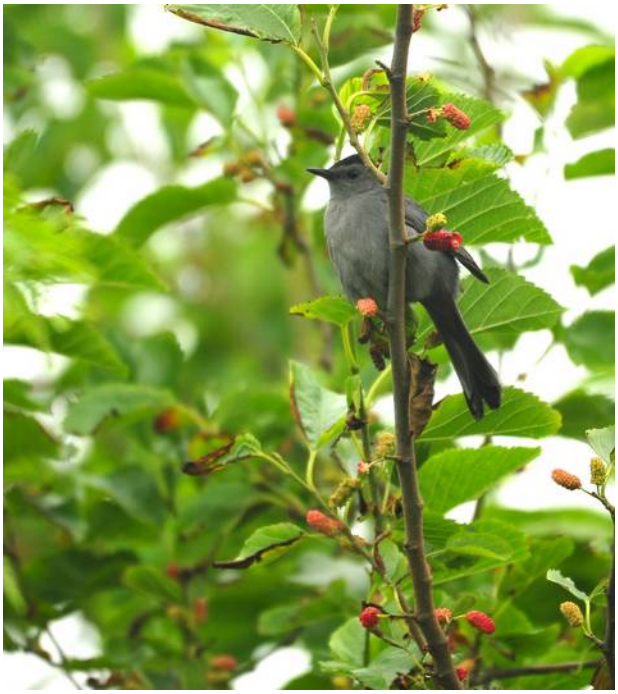
Painted Redstarts are very rare in our area and the bird was seen by more than a hundred birders in the following days as it simply just hung out by the coral bean. It makes spotting a bird so much easier when they have a favorite tree! Special thanks go out to Shane and Stephanie Wilson, who were so nice in welcoming birders to their yard to see the Painted Redstart and for creating such an amazing environment for the migrants.

Painted Redstart appears in Cameron County

Another champion tree this past migration was the **white mulberry (*Morus alba*)**. This non-native was introduced from China into the US in the 1600's and is considered invasive in some parts of the state. They don't seem to be a problem in the RGV and instead seem to be a great help for spring migrants. Mulberries start fruiting right around the start of spring and the pink berries ripen purple around mid-April. After an extremely wet summer and winter, they had a bumper crop of berries this spring!

This tree is commonly planted in coastal yards for several reasons: it grows fast, tolerates the salts well, has broad and dark green leaves, lacks thorns and prickles, attracts birds, and because people seem to also enjoy eating them.

We planted a six foot mulberry about four years ago at the SPI Birding & Nature Center and now it is about 25feet tall or so! The tree was constantly visited by Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Gray Catbirds, Summer Tanagers, Scarlet Tanagers, and Orioles through the month! By early May the tree had been picked clean of berries. I think it especially helped a poor Summer Tanager that had lost its tail during its migration. It hung around and ate from the tree for almost two weeks before it moved on.



Mulberries provide food for Gray Catbirds

Other notable mentions this spring include the profusely blooming **yellow sophora (*Sophora tomentosa*)** and **scarlet sage (*Salvia coccinea*)** that were fancied by migratory Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, monarch butterflies, and brought back the black swallowtails, who I hadn't seen in a couple of years at the SPIBNC.

In addition, accolades to the **huisache (*Vachellia farnesiana*)** and **tepeguaje (*Leucaena pulverulenta*)** for providing insects for the warblers in their dense and tiny leaflets, and **pigeonberry (*Rivina humilis*)** for having the perfect size berry for a Philadephia Vireo on the go.

Scarlet sage is a nectar source for black swallowtails

Spring migration is such an amazing thing to witness. A flush of plants, flowers, fruit, and bugs to help the birds along, here and gone in a short whirlwind.

City Nature Challenge 2022 & Spiders

Article and photo by Joseph Connors, South Texas Border Chapter

The City Nature Challenge is an annual global competition to document urban biodiversity and engage people with nature in its many forms. Birds, plants, insects, and fungi are some examples of the observations that are uploaded to iNaturalist.org.

Observers in the 15 participating Texas regions identified 7,500+ species over the two phases of the challenge. Phase 1 was four days to photograph and make observations. Then we had the next week to finish uploading and get things identified on iNaturalist. The Rio Grande Valley finished fifth in the state with 1,868 documented species and 10,956 observations thanks to our region's abundant biodiversity. This year, 2022, was our best year by far in observations and species count.

In the Valley, at least 23 of the top 30 observers for this year's City Nature Challenge were TMN members, relatives, or friends of our two TMN chapters. The more eyes we have out there the more we can document. You don't have to go as crazy with over 1000 observations like Roberto Gaitan and I did. You can post a bit of everything or just focus on your favorite subjects. This year, I concentrated mostly on insects and spiders. Many of our members specialize in birds or butterflies. You can do bioblizes alone, but it is more fun with friends. I spent a lot of time at Oleander Acres Butterfly Garden with Seth and Candi Welliver. Seth did mostly plants while Candi did some of everything. The three of us documented 771 species in their park.

Varacosa shenandoa wolf spider

During this challenge, I recorded about 30 species I hadn't documented before. My favorite is a species of wolf spider that wasn't even listed on iNaturalist yet, *Varacosa shenandoa*. It looked just like a regular wolf spider to me out in the field, but when I uploaded it, Eric Neubauer, a wolf spider enthusiast from El Camino Real Chapter TMN commented that it looks unusual and tagged someone who was able to identify it.

I got excited when nearing my previous challenge's arachnid totals. I picked up several on the last day and once things got identified, I had more than I realized. There were 53 species of spiders and four other arachnids, including a tick that came home on me. It was great to see the entire RGV recorded a total of 79 species of arachnids this year. This is nearly four percent of our total species and more than half a percentage point higher than the rest of Texas.

John Brush, Urban Ecologist at Quinta Mazatlan, is our local coordinator for the challenge. You can check out his report at the link below:
https://cuefornature.wordpress.com/2022/05/10/summary-of-the-city-nature-challenge-2022-lower-rio-grande-valley/

There's a new book in town

Article & photos by Anita Westervelt
South Texas Border Chapter

An aura of grey-olive drab fur on the moth sheet caught my eye in the early dawn light. The lone moth was on the sheet long after the other night flyers had scarpered off to their daytime venues. I took advantage of the opportunity to capture photos from several angles. I rely on www.iNaturalist.org to help identify what I find on my moth sheet/black light apparatus.

Identification was quick: **Heiligbrodt's mesquite moth (*Syssphinx heiligbrodti*)**.

Some years ago, I photographed **Io moths (Automeris io) and caterpillars.**

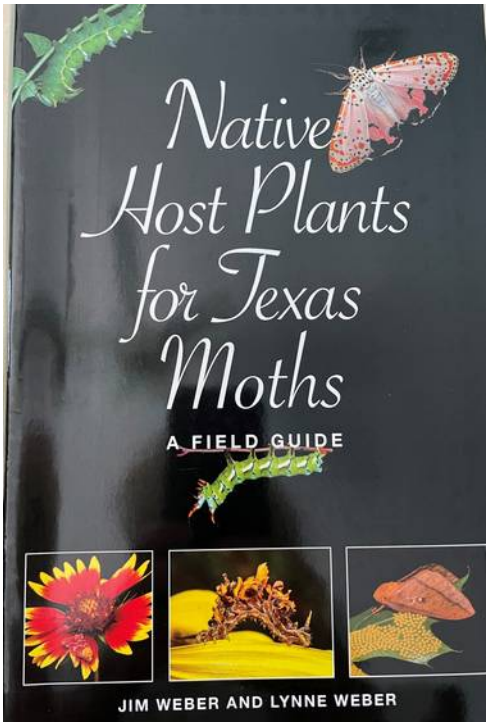
A frequent flyer to the moth sheet is the **Indomitable Graphic (*Melipotis indomita*)**. If you're into Art Deco, the wing markings of this moth fit richly into that era.

Interestingly, these three moths have something in common: They use the **honey mesquite tree (*Prosopis glandulosa*)** as a larval food plant.

Indomitable Graphic Moth

I know this because I have a new book – a quick reference to some of my favorite moths and favorite and not so favorite plants. Because of this valuable book, I have a bit more incentive to keep some of those less appreciated plants because they are food for moth caterpillars – like snailseed vine feeds moonseed caterpillars and climbing hempvine feeds scarlet-bodied wasp moth larvae and *Condica confederata* caterpillars.

Here's the book that's flying off the bookshelves and winging its way to Texas moth fans:
Weber, Jim and Weber, Lynne. "**Native Host Plants for Texas Moths: A Field Guide**." 1st ed., Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 2022. Here's a quick link to the university press for your own copy: https://www.tamupress.com/search-results/?category=TAMUGG



This is more than a moth book. I would recommend first-time and veteran moth enthusiasts, and native plant lovers alike, to go through the book page by page. It won't take long to breeze through the 288 pages; you'll be at the end all too soon.

The book is designed in double-page spreads. Look at the Texas range map at the bottom of the left-hand page; if there are black dots at the tip of Texas, read up on the plant and the moths it attracts. The left page also has three photos of a plant: an overall view, and close ups of leaves and fruit or of the seed pods or flowers. The right-hand page describes the plant and shows photos of the moths and caterpillars that use the plant. Check out the photo credits of the caterpillars and moths; where the authors used stock from local experts, you'll see familiar names of Texas Master Naturalists and friends of our TMN chapters, like John Brush, Berry Nall and Seth Patterson.

The book is sectioned by plant categories: wildflowers, trees, shrubs, vines and ferns and grasses; the fore edges of the leaves are marked by different colors to distinguish each section.

The back of the book has an amazing appendix that provides Texas moth and native host plant associations, helpful because many moth caterpillars eat more than one type of native plants.

Following the appendix is a glossary of helpful botanical terms, an alphabetical index of native host plants and a separate alphabetical index of moths.

This is an excellently put-together book: it's informative, the photography is clear and colorful, and the layout and design of the pages makes it inviting and easy to use.

Tiger of the Treetops

Article by Diane Hall, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

The Tiger of the Treetops glides silently through the dark forest, its bright yellow eyes searching for a meal. Perhaps a mouse, bird, rabbit or even a skunk will fall prey to this feathered predator during the many hours of darkness.

Great Horned Owl pair – photo by Anita Westervelt

This nocturnal "tiger" is not beset with orange and black stripes, whiskers and a long tail, rather its densely barred and mottled brown body sports a white throat bib, large ear tufts and a wingspan of nearly five feet. This Tiger of the Treetops, more commonly known as the Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*), is found throughout North America in a variety of habitats from forests and deserts to city parks. It is the largest common owl in Texas.

Have you ever encountered a Great Horned Owl or seen or heard its sign? During the daytime, listen for mobbing crows or small birds which will scold roosting owls to drive them away, At night, listen for their deep resonant monotone *hooo, hoo-hoo-hoo, hoo hoo.* Often Great Horned Owls are seen at dusk or dawn perched on a tree, pole or wire. Another clue for spotting an owl or at least its roosting location is to find an owl pellet on the ground.

Owl pellet – photo by Anita Westervelt

Obviously owls don't get out a knife and fork to create bite-size pieces at meal time nor do they have teeth for chewing. Instead, owls eat their prey whole and later regurgitate the indigestible material in a compact pellet several inches long. Dissecting owl pellets to examine the bones, feathers and fur allows scientists and students alike to identify the diet of the owls. I have enjoyed the awe of discovery by students with this activity over the years. It's also fun to find owl pellets when taking a walk in the woods or if you're lucky, in your own yard.

There are several adaptations which make owls such effective feathered mousetraps. Large eyes take in the ambient light and allow owls to see at least 35 times better than humans, in some cases 100 times better. According to the TPWD website, "Studies have shown that the Long-eared, Tawny, and Barn Owls can see their prey from six feet away with as little as .00000073 foot candles of illumination." In comparison, the illumination of a moonless, cloudy night rarely drops below .004 foot candles. Wow, that's pretty impressive!

Since the owl's eyes are located on the front of its head, rather than the sides of the head like prey animals, binocular and three dimensional vision is possible. And in case you are wondering, no, owls can't turn their heads all the way around like you see in cartoons. They do have very flexible necks however, which allow them to rotate 270 degrees.

The owl's excellent eyesight is complimented by its exceptional hearing. The National Wildlife Federation notes that the owl "can detect a mouse stepping on a twig from a distance of 75 feet." The tufts on the head of the Great Horned Owl are often mistaken for ears. These tufts are for camouflage and perhaps body language communication. Actually the owl's ears are simply slits on each side of the head at the edge of the facial disk. One ear is positioned slightly higher than the other allowing the owl to triangulate and locate the source of the sound easier.

Once the prey is detected by sight and/or sound, the adaptation of silent flight allows the owl to take their prey by surprise and grasp them with razor sharp talons. Comb-like serrations on the leading edge of the owl's wings break up the air flow over the wings and allow silent flight.

Although Great Horned Owls have excellent eyesight and hearing, they have a very poor sense of smell. What a fortunate lack of ability as a predator of skunks! Everyone else might notice the smell, but the owl doesn't.

Great Horned owl on silent wings —photo by Anita Westervelt

My favorite experiences with owls involves owl calling. It all started in high school Science Club when our advisors took club members on a camp out with an evening Owl Prowl. We sat still and silent with eyes and ears searching while recorded calls of owls were broadcast in the night air. Over and over we tried and tried to call in an owl on several occasions, but there was *never* a response from a wild owl. Nevertheless, I was intrigued with the owl calling concept and tucked it away in my memories.

Years later with myself as the naturalist, I repeated the owl calling activity with my own students. I prefaced the activity with my Science Club experience just so the students or adults would know we may or may not hear or see an owl. *Hooo, hoo-hoo-hoo, hooo….*"Did you hear that? That's the real Great Horned Owl!!!" I gasped. What a thrilling experience for my students and me as we connected with nature! In years hence, I've had Screech Owls fly over the group, Barred and Great Horned Owls land in nearby trees to investigate, owls reply to our calls from a distance and yes, just silence.

Whether or not you're blessed to see or hear an owl or find an owl pellet, I encourage you to take an evening or early morning walk to connect with nature. Whoooo knows what you may discover?

In Search of the Painted Bunting

Article & photos by Julia Jorgensen
South Texas Border Chapter

For me, this year's City Nature Challenge (CNC) was the best. I began to feel the thrill that I suspect real birders feel when they add a rare species to a Life List, because I was dazzled by some out-of-the-ordinary birds. At least they were out-of-the-ordinary for me---this is also a story about my naïve enthusiasm.

The CNC adventure began at the McAllen Nature Center where my husband and I had close encounters with adult and baby cottontail rabbits, spiny lizards, muddy paw prints, and many, many diverse piles of rain-melted poop. But we saw only a few birds.

Early the next morning something much more exciting happened by a McAllen hike and bike trail, as I saw what turned out to be a lone Yellow-crowned Night Heron striding very slowly beside the creek. Of course I didn't know it was a Yellow-crowned Night Heron, only that I'd never seen anything that spectacular on my frequent visits to our creek. It had bright orange legs, piercing red eyes, and the bearing of a VIP. By the next day it was gone.

Yellow-crowned Night Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*)

Two days later, I would see another Yellow-crowned Night Heron at the Edinburg Wetlands (or could he be the same fellow?), along with a lone American White Pelican, and a big flock of Wilson's Phalaropes, who appeared to be swarming like insects on the water's surface. Later I learned that they have a special feeding technique---quickly spinning in the water to create a whirlpool that sucks up their dinner---and it is worth seeing. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has a video: https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/wilsons-phalarope-foraging/

But it was on April 30, in the midst of these other fine events, that my husband spied a male Painted Bunting sitting in our grapefruit tree. He got a single, quick picture, but forty minutes later it reappeared, alternately foraging in our flowerbed and swinging from the stem of a pink cosmos, where it stayed for about ten minutes.

Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*)

Painted Buntings have been nicknamed "nonpareil" ("without equal") and called the most beautiful bird in North America. They are brilliantly eye-catching. Sadly, their beauty has led to their sale as pets in Central America.

This was the only Painted Bunting we've seen at our house in eleven years, in spite of daily observation of our yard. And it was only my second sighting ever. The first, at South Padre Island, was so remarkable that I can still picture the location.

With a bit of research, I learned that Painted Buntings breed all over Texas but winter in Mexico. In fact, Texas and southeastern Oklahoma are the breeding strongholds of the western population of Painted Buntings. They seem to prefer semi-open country with scattered trees and shrubs, or brushy habitat along the edges of waterways, although they also nest in woodlands. Several experts said they are "hard to see" and "shy at the feeder."

Consulting eBird's current Relative Abundance statistics for Texas, I see that from March 29 to November 9, they appear in 78-87% of our state, about double the area occupied by the Great-tailed Grackle. Mean relative abundance during breeding season is 1.36. This is defined as

the count of individuals of a given species detected by an expert eBirder on a 1 hour, 1 kilometer traveling checklist at the optimal time of day. Relative abundance predictions have been optimized for search effort, user skill, and hourly weather conditions, specific for the given region, season, and species, in order to maximize detection rates.

So we may picture a skilled birder encountering a Painted Bunting slightly more than once per hour of birding during the breeding season. (Unfortunately, this mean is calculated across all the varied habitat zones of Texas.)

Now I was puzzled. My childhood (1950's-60's) memories of North Central Texas contain no such bird. In fact, the most exotically colored birds I believe I ever saw were Blue Jays, Orioles, and Cardinals. And I was an outdoor child who loved bright-colored things. How would I not remember a Painted Bunting? Or, alternately, how were so many other people somehow observing them and not telling me? Were the buntings actually all around us then? Or are they relative newcomers to Texas?

So I needed information about the Texas past, not the present. I had already been wondering about the earlier natural environment of East and North Central Texas, particularly in the mid-1800's, when my family first arrived; I had wanted a more vivid sense of what they encountered. So I read naturalist Gideon Lincecum's account of his remarkable Texas adventures in 1835, but Lincecum's focus was on plants and game, and he mentioned few birds. I was beginning to see how hard reconstruction of past landscapes might be.
Well-known historic bird counts did not help with the bunting problem. Audubon's Christmas bird counts began in 1900, but the data are sporadic for Texas, and Painted Buntings would normally not be expected in North Texas in the winter. The North American Breeding Bird survey does not begin until 1968 over the full continent, and the data are hard to access and interpret. North Central Texas Bird Records (Stillwell, 1939), sparse as they are, do record the Painted Bunting as "Common-Fairly Common" in spring and summer.

Seeking more complete answers, I began exploring eBird and learned that eBird does incorporate some historic data from individual naturalists' checklists and samples, and there is a movement afoot to salvage more of this old data. Without it we have little way of interpreting future changes in species' range and abundance. (For an overview of historic data in eBird, see https://www.audubon.org/news/how-birding-lists-deceased-are-finding-new-life-ebird .)

Here's part of what I found. In the two main decades of my childhood, 1950-70, a few extraordinary birders were traveling in parts of Texas and other states when and where the buntings breed and keeping records, as follows:

Mary Anne McClendon reported plentiful painted buntings from Travis County and surrounds, 1958-60, and in the LRGV and Corpus Christi in the mid-60s. Gene W. Blacklock reported around 25 painted buntings per year in Corpus Christi and surrounds. Tim Gollob birded in the Fort Worth area in the late 1960's, observing a maximum of 58 painted bunting sightings in 1967. Lee Jones and others reported many sightings in the LRGV in the same period.

And even through the late 1940's, a birder labelled "MTOS-Shelby" observed many painted buntings in their northerly strongholds in the Wichita Mountains of southern Oklahoma and along the Mississippi River near Memphis. Shelby even made it to Edinburg in 1955, reporting buntings there.

Although these observations are scattered and eBird doesn't tell us anything about who these birders were or how they structured their work, I am satisfied to say that, yes, there were Painted Buntings around during my childhood summers. If I didn't see them, it's probably because my

parents weren't prone to take me exploring brushy verges in the country. And we weren't lucky enough to have a backyard bunting visitor. Which is too bad!

But what's more important is the inspiration I've taken from these pioneering naturalists who worked so hard to leave us data that is increasingly important, given climate and habitat change. I went on to find out more about those reachable through Google (sadly, Mary Anne McClendon was not to be found).

Recording birding data is important
--- photo by Diane Hall

Gene Blacklock is a famous bird photographer and author of two field guides to Texas birds. H. Lee Jones is a professional biologist, bird photographer, and now novelist, whose research centered on the birds of Belize. Tim Gollob is a recently retired Dallas priest. According to a *Dallas News* article, "Birding is Father Tim's greatest passion, but this life-long recycler also delights in bringing home whatever he finds in his path: a sparkly shoe, railroad nails, tinsel, a random bell. 'I'm like the crows,' he said. 'I find something shiny and take it to my nest here.'" (Sharon Grigsby, 4/9/2021)

My exploration has encouraged me to keep contributing shiny things to iNaturalist, and, even better, to gain enough skill to contribute to more scientifically useful sites such as eBird or eButterfly. And I will keep an eye on my backyard.

Rio Grande ground squirrel enjoys fruits of the dunes

Story and photos by Anita Westervelt, South Texas Border Chapter

Cameron County's Isla Blanca Park, on South Padre Island, offers an abundance of species and is a grand place to explore during the annual City Nature Challenge. The parking lots themselves offer their own special diversity, and where we're most likely to see a Rio Grande ground squirrel (*Ictidomys parvidens*) -- and hopefully photograph the quick and illusive rodent. They blend in with the sandy landscape, scurry at speed and disappear without warning.

It was nearing late afternoon when we spied one feasting on wedgeleaf prairie clover (*Dalea emarginata*) at the edge of the curb as we traversed a parking lot. We stopped about 15 feet from the critter; the idling vehicle alerted it to flee. We waited, trying to see where it had gone, when there it was again, back at the clover.

Rio Grande ground squirrel alert while feeding

It was intriguing to watch the tiny creature sit upright on its haunches and gnaw on a cover pod like we might eat corn-on-the-cob. Wedgeleaf prairie clover is a sandy soil legume native to the Texas Gulf beaches and coastal dune grasslands.

Rio Grande ground squirrels populate the southern and western areas of Texas. They are less than 11 inches in length, their moderately bushy tail is about four and one-half inches long; they usually have nine rows of squarish white spots on the back of their coat and whitish buff underparts. Males weigh less than three-quarters of a pound, nearly twice as much as the female.

The squirrels like our coastal sands. Midland Rio Grande ground squirrels like brushy or grassy areas, mesquite and cactus flats, golf courses, cemeteries, city parks and along highway rights-of-way. They prefer sandy or gravelly soils for digging burrows; the entrance will be unmarked, without mounds of earth around it; a burrow can be one to several feet deep and may have an additional opening. There may be several burrows in its range, with one considered the homesite; the others are temporary refuges – which may explain how our subject kept disappearing and reappearing. Their home range is a radius of about 50 yards.

Note Rio Grande squirrel's spotted coat

They are hunters and gathers. In early spring, their diet consists mostly of green vegetation. They feed on mesquite leaves and beans, berries, Johnsongrass, seeds and cultivated grains. In early summer, about half their diet includes insects. They are active all year in south Texas and hibernate in the rest of their range.

Milestones & awards for March 2022, April 2022, and May 2022

Congratulations!

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Frank Aguirre
Bobbie Brown
Chery Brummett
Nadine Byram
Yvette Cano-Adams
Michelle Cano
Carolina Cuellar
Amanda Dave
Jerald Garrett
Victoria Grayson
Joe Kowalski
Georgia Lee
Juan Lopez
Dan Martin
Ed Meza
Catherine Olvera
Trish Paine
Javier Parra
Ricardo Parra
Raul Ruiz-Arce
Laura Tyndall
Thania Ugalde
Remy Vargas
Adrienne Wheatley

WELL DONE ALL!

Newly Certified Texas Master Naturalists

Bobbie Brown '22
Chery Brunnett '22
Michelle Cano '22
Yvette Cano '22
Audrey Hicks '21 (Rio Brazos Class)
Andrew Hicks '21 (Rio Brazos Class)
Georgia Lee '22
Patricia Paine '22

100 Hours Milestones

Chery Brummett '22
Michelle Cano '22
Sondra Leigh '20

250 Hours Milestones

John Romero '21

500 Hours Milestones

Evelyn Alpert '21
Robin Gelston '19F
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Re-certified for 2022

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Dana Allamon
Eveyln Alpert
Shelby Bessette
Pamela Bradley
Penny Brown
Chery Brummett
Michelle Cano
Alicia Cavazos
Amy Daley
Norma Friedrich
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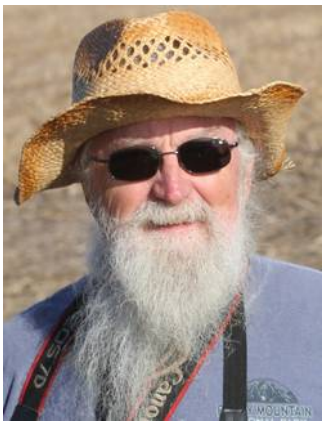

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Texas AgriLife	Tony Reisinger
Texas Parks & Wildlife	Javier de Leon

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.