

## Falling in Love with the Rio Grande Valley...(er...Flood Plain)

Article by Mary Grizzard, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

For two years now, my husband, Jim, and I, have become Peregrine Falcons. When the aspen trees in our beloved home range of Colorado exchange their murmuring golden tresses for shimmering crystals of frost, we are now joining the peregrines on their autumn migration to warmer climes. Sometimes I wonder if the supersonic peregrines hunting along Texas 100 are the same ones we watched fledge their young from the red rock cliffs above our home. Yet wherever they are from, these “Winter Texans” know and understand the geography and ecosystems of the Rio Grande Valley just as intimately as they do the Colorado Rockies. The same has not been true for us. We know the natural history of our own corner of Colorado very well. The Rio Grande Valley? Not so much!



While Jim and I have purchased several guidebooks on the natural history of the region, this year we decided what better way to come to know the climate, geology, waterways, plants and wildlife of Deep South Texas than to join a Texas Master Naturalist class? We are five weeks in, now, and have been completely captivated learning about the rich diversity of natural history that abounds here in the four county region of Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy Counties. Yes, sometimes the course does feel a little bit like the proverbial “trying to take a drink from a fire hydrant,” but most of the time it’s more like working a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle. When you start off you can only link together the obvious straight edged border, but as you keep working on it, gradually more and more pieces begin to fit together and snap into place and suddenly a beautiful picture begins to unfold.

Mary volunteering at SPI Birding & Nature Center—photo by Jim Grizzard

And while that 20 pound Texas Master Naturalist textbook is loaded with an incredible amount of fascinating information about *all eleven!* eco-regions of Texas, our advanced degreed classroom speakers and outstanding field trips to nature parks and sanctuaries, state parks, and wildlife refuges have kept our focus here on the Rio Grande Valley. Of course Jim and I already knew how special our winter home on South Padre Island is, where we have spent these last two winters, but we have been so delightfully surprised to discover just how lovely, unique, and fascinating the entire area is. “I’m falling in love with the Rio Grande Valley,” I told Jim last week.

Yet perhaps our most enjoyable source of learning about the area has happened in conjunction with all the local volunteering opportunities available to us here. In fact, we have never lived anywhere with half so many opportunities to serve the community through natural history and environmental education. I have started volunteering at the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center. Jim has volunteered with UTRGV's Coastal Studies Lab and is over at Sea Turtle Inc. volunteering today, as I write.

I know that Jim and I will most likely never understand the Rio Grande Valley as well as our peregrine neighbors, but through the Texas Master Naturalist program we're off to a great start on the journey of lifelong learning.

"In the end we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we are taught," the Senegalese forester Baba Dioum famously wrote in 1968. And for me, that's the real magic of becoming a Texas Master Naturalist. As we are taught, as we understand, and as we come to love, we cannot help but be moved to protect and conserve. And then? And then we are given the tremendous privilege and responsibility of passing on this wonder to others.



Jim Grizzard volunteering at beach clean-up.--photo by Mary Grizzard