

Spotlight on a Volunteer Opportunity

Story and photos by Anita Westervelt, South Texas Border Chapter

“Who knows what this is?” asks Eileen Mattei, Rio Grande Valley Chapter, Texas Master Naturalist, as she displays a raptor’s leg and talons to a group of grade school students at Estero Llano Grande State Park in Weslaco, on the last cold day (hopefully) of winter.

In answer, a cacophony of children’s voices yells out: turkey, bird, chicken. As the children settle down, they listen attentively while Eileen explains about raptors and how they use their strong talons to capture prey; she then asks, “Prey or predator?” They get it right: a resounding “predator,” is the response. Hands go up quickly when Eileen quizzes the children about camouflage.



Raptor leg and talon used for education

Estero Llano Grande State Park hosts hundreds of school children to their park to introduce them to nature. A recent February Friday event offered three 45-minute sessions in a round-robin routine of about 30 students each, where the children learned about birds in a classroom presentation of “Fill-the-Bill,” while another group looked for things in nature during the guided “Coyote Walk,” and Eileen shared her knowledge on the park’s deck in a “Skins and Skulls” demonstration.

The most often asked question: “Is it real?” Yes, the specimens are real, or rather, they once were, except for the molded but life-size alligator head. The realistically sized teeth promote a lot of interest. The park has a collection of skins, skulls, stuffed birds and animals and feathers acquired via orders from professional suppliers as well as items park rangers find in the field and donations.

Eileen also brings various found objects from her own acreage, like a partial jawbone suspected to be from a young opossum, a shed snakeskin, feathers and other finds.



The children's favorite is a beautiful coyote fur. The specimens are meant to be handled and the children are excited for the up-close opportunity to pet a skunk or coyote pelt, touch the skin of a rattlesnake, listen to its rattles, carefully feel the sharpness of a raptor or owl talon and stroke the softness of the feathers on the underside of a Great Horned Owl's wing.

TMN Eileen Mattei presents "Skins & Skulls" to school children at Estero Llano Grande State Park.

Eileen has been a Texas Master Naturalist since 2005. She has found a niche with introducing youngsters to the natural world through her skins and skulls presentations. She also leads very young children through trails at Valley Nature Center in Weslaco, making the sessions into a game by watching ants carry seeds and leaf segments along a tiny dirt path, feeling the texture of an anacua leaf compared to a potato tree leaf, and standing in the Boy Scouts of America Eagle Scout-built tower and have them pretend to be a baby bird in a nest awaiting food.