



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.

We Saw the Trees of Gold

Article & photos by Jose Roberto Palmos, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

In response to the frigid arctic air that reached down into deep South Texas, and the slightly warmer, seasonal temperatures that followed, the spectacle of spring has come early with much to show. The brushland trees and shrubs are already painting their colors against the formerly dry, unassuming chaparral in hues of whites, yellows, pinks, and more. Anacua, blackbrush, guayacan, huisachillo, mesquite, and palo verde are a few of the artists already at work in this annual exhibition.

Amongst them is one that will always stand out for me. Perhaps you have already caught a whiff of its aromatic scent in the air, or seen glimpses of its orange puffballs emerging from the greening brush as you venture by. I like to think of this species as the brushland equivalent of Japanese cherry blossoms. This honorable mention is our tell-tale sign that spring has begun - its blooms will fully peak in March before receding as other flowering natives step in to take its place. By now you may have already guessed - it's none other than the Texas huisache.



Huisache (*Vachellia farnesiana*) new foliage and blooms

Huisache occurs throughout the southern portion of Texas down into Mexico, inhabiting several of Texas' ecological regions. It is currently described as *Vachellia farnesiana*, reclassified from the genus *Acacia*. It is still referred to as sweet acacia, a misnomer carried on from its previous classification. The name huisache comes from Nahuatl, meaning "many thorns," a fitting description for this brushland native. A young tree will have characteristically large thorns on its branches, but as it grows, these thorns diminish in size and can be found in pairs at the base of their leaf petioles.

As a deciduous tree, huisache will lose most of its leaves during winter, but new growth of pinnate leaves can be seen on its slender branches at this time. As the trunks and branches mature, the bark goes from smooth to rough with uneven grooves - much like that of mesquite. Its rounded, orange flower heads appear in spring and eventually turn to hardy, thick seed pods.



Huisachillo, *Vachellia schaffneri*, "little huisache," or twisted acacia (another misnomer) is often confused with huisache. I will note, I myself previously confused the two.

Joshua Ekrut, a fellow iNaturalist botanist, gave some tips to differentiate the two: the key difference is huisachillo has its petiolar gland located at the base of its leaf stem. Huisachillo also has zigzag limbs with prominent nodules.

Huisachillo (*Vachellia schaffneri*) has zigzag limbs with prominent nodules.

I also noted that the seed pods are long and thin, while those of huisache are short and blunt, and usually curved in a crescent moon-shape. A slight difference in bloom color is noticeable, but would not be enough to distinguish the two species alone. Lastly, huisachillo is more shrub-like while huisache can mature into a tall tree reaching 20-plus feet tall.



Note the difference between the seed pods of huisache and huisachillo

The primary differences are important to learn when wanting to identify either plant, especially since they coexist in the same habitat. Huisache can also be found in various habitats alongside mesquite, blackbrush, and retama, for example, although it can notably be found near wetlands and riparian areas. I have observed them lining the Arroyo Colorado and growing near or close to ponds and canals. The USDA, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, and Native Plant Project all provide useful information in regard to plant description and ecological range/habitat.

A personal favorite among our native flora, huisache holds sentiment for me, and perhaps I owe it credit for sparking my interest native plants. It was the blooming huisache along the Arroyo Colorado River that captivated me back in March of last year. At a time of economic uncertainty, when gas prices were remarkably increasing overnight, I opted to bike to work as I had done once before. When you bike, you often get a closer encounter with nature that you simply wouldn't get from driving...the sights, smells, and sounds.

My daily route took me along Loop 499, passing Hugh Ramsey Nature Park and over the Arroyo Colorado. Having looked out over the nature park, what a sight it was to see the huisache in full bloom along those banks! Oh, and what a pleasant fragrance that filled the air! I made it a point then to visit Hugh Ramsey Nature Park to see the trees up close. I also recall the wonder in seeing a flowering coral bean for the first time. It was then, after seeing the other native flora in bloom, that I delved into learning about native plants of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The rest, as they say, is history.



Huisache tree in full bloom

I now volunteer frequently at the same nature park and am currently training to be a Texas Master Naturalist (Class of 2023), reviving a long-held passion for wildlife and finding appreciation for our region's unique ecosystem. As a full year comes around, the huisache blooms are yet again bursting into the color of a rising sun, saying farewell to those cold winter days and embracing the warming Texas heat.

I have learned so much since discovering the beauty of huisache, and yet, I still have far more to learn and appreciate. While it's not ideal for me to plant a huisache on my property, go for it if you can! I am enjoying another season of its blooms each day I ride past Hugh Ramsey Nature Park. Even the name, huisache, evokes some deeper appreciation...a Nahuatl word, a simple connection to a shared ancestry with the indigenous tribes who inhabited deep South Texas centuries before. I wonder their reaction to the huisache, and the possible eagerness they may have felt at the calling of spring. What trees now grow, I hope to help preserve for the next generations to enjoy and to hear them say "We saw the trees of gold!"

Winter Outdoor Wildlife Expo Honors and Thanks

Article by Carolyn Cardile, Rio Grande Valley Chapter & photos by Paul Cardile

On February 9-11, 2023 the SPI Birding and Nature Center hosted the 27th Annual Winter Outdoor Wildlife Expo (WOWE) at the Hilton Garden Inn of South Padre Island. For the past 15 years WOWE has recognized a member of the community for his or her outstanding contribution to the preserving and promoting the quality of nature in the Rio Grande Valley. Several members of the WOWE committee are also Texas Master Naturalists from our chapter.

This year I had the honor of presenting the annual award from St. Andrew's Episcopal Church to the person in the Rio Grande Valley who has made an exemplary contribution toward enhancing, preserving, and promoting the quality of life of the Laguna Madre. To find out how St. Andrew's Church is involved and who won the award, read the presentation speech below.

Presentation of The Winter Outdoor Wildlife Award

The Winter Outdoor Wildlife Expo was begun more than 30 years ago at St. Andrew's by the Sea Episcopal Church to teach Winter Texans about fishing in the Rio Grande Valley. For the past 27 years, WOWE has been recognizing a member of the community for his/her exemplary contribution toward preserving and promoting the quality of the Rio Grande Valley. A few years ago, WOWE became an education program and fundraiser for the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center. However, St. Andrew's continues to present this Wildlife Award each year.

This year one person stood out as the obvious choice for this award. Before retiring, she worked as an engineer and service representative for AT&T. She was known for her green thumb and she planned to join the Master Gardeners when she retired. However, she met Tony Reisinger who convinced her to join Texas Master Naturalists. That's where I met Alicia Cavazos.



Alicia Cavazos, winner of the 2022 Wildlife Award presented by St. Andrew's by the Sea Episcopal Church

Alicia’s enthusiasm and passion for the outdoors led her to becoming an active member and leader in Texas Master Naturalists. Through the years she has pursued numerous citizen science projects, such as the Red-crowned Parrot monitoring program, re-vegetation of the spoil islands, and bird banding. Her knowledge, enthusiasm, and dedication are inspiring to others. While being an active volunteer at numerous parks and wildlife areas in our community, she has also turned her backyard into a haven for native plants and wildlife. In recent years she has become an interpretive guide at Resaca de la Palma State Park. You can join her there on Wednesday mornings for an outstanding tour. Congratulations, Alicia!

I want to thank all the members of our chapter who volunteered during WOVE. I appreciate all the work of our chapter members who worked as room monitors, asked survey questions, helped in the lobby, greeted our speakers and volunteers at the sign-in table, and volunteered at exhibit tables. Thanks to all of you, WOVE ran smoothly. I also want to thank the members of our chapter who have served on the WOVE committee with birding center volunteers and me for several years: Cristin Howard, Javier Gonzalez, Marilyn Lorenz, and Paul Cardile.

(Right) Carolyn Cardile (standing) with volunteers at WOVE Volunteer Check-in table



(Below) Robert Gaitan readies RGV TMN table at WOVE



(Below) Port Isabel - South Padre Island Shell Club was one of many display tables at WOVE 2023



Untamed

Story & photos by Anita Westervelt, South Texas Border Chapter

This is a story about a ranch, a donkey, a horse and a Texas Master Naturalist who loves the land and native habitat as only a Texas Master Naturalist could.



Camille with her horse, King, at El Mesteño Ranch

Camille Rich, a member of the South Texas Border Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists, is as knowledgeable as she is generous, truly embracing the creed of a naturalist, inviting groups to her ranch, and sharing the history and austere beauty of this ancient land with which she has been entrusted.

Upon Camille's invitation, our small group embarked on an adventure from the southern corner of Cameron County to Camille's ranch in the far reaches of northwest Hidalgo County, near Puerto Rico, Texas. A mere 70 miles, kind of as the crow flies, but worlds apart.

Upon arrival at the ranch, protocol was followed, and we were first introduced to the two resident Ranch Ambassadors. I expected to fall in love with the donkey, and of course I did. He is charming, funny, happy and friendly. Chicle is his name; he occasionally wears a hat and knows how to doff it to the ladies. Camille explained that chicle, in Spanish, means gum, used to describe someone who is always tagging along. Her analogy is like when gum gets stuck to your shoe.

Chicle is a Jerusalem Donkey who came to the ranch when he was about two years old to keep the horse company through thick and thin, according to Camille. Chicle is coming up on his 14th birthday.



Chicle, the donkey, says Hi!

Horses are herd animals, hence the companion. King, a powerful American Quarter Horse, registered with the American Quarter Horse Association, came to the ranch when he was around three years old. He will turn 25 on March 15. His full name is Bar King's Review; because of some of his personality traits, like curiosity, he has been dubbed, Snoop. King stands a magnificent 17 hands high and elicits his fair share of attention from visitors.

Besides Camille, King and Chicle are the only tame inhabitants of this 12-acre spread that fittingly Camille has named El Mesteño Ranch and Arboretum. Mesteño, she explains, means wild or untamed. As for arboretum, looking in any direction is like the who's who of trees in the Al Richardson/Ken King *Plants of Deep South Texas* book. Black brush, catclaw acacia, wild olive and Spanish dagger are blooming; brasil, granjeno, mesquite and colima populate the sandscape throughout – I think I spied a coma – all the old friends.

I say sandscape. For someone accustomed to mid-south Cameron County clay soil and its lush spring new vegetation each year, I was amazed at the contrast. We were standing on what appeared to be drought-parched red sand. Camille has done her homework. She participated in a soil survey



and found that the soil is called alfisol, and that the sands were actually deposited over the caliche; she offered a precise description from a University of Texas web presentation by Bob Harms on sand sheet plants that explained: "The region is defined by a sheet of eolian sand blown inland from the shoreline of the Gulf of Mexico during Holocene times, a sheet that covers most of Kenedy and Brooks counties as well as the northern tips of Willacy, Hidalgo and Starr counties."

Windblown red sand deposited over caliche

We see evidence of sand erosion, exposing boulders of caliche as we begin a walking tour through the scrub. The boys, as Camille refers to King and Chicle, have free range when guests aren't present – they tend to tag along and demand attention, so they are penned until the end of the trail tour. The animals have their special ranch duties: they maintain the trails as they go about their daily routines while Camille, who lives in Edinburg, is not at the ranch. There are many trails that the boys have carved; it's best to keep up with Camille and not get lost, but especially to hear all her stories, explanations, preservation efforts and identifications of the sand sheet flora, many that are unfamiliar to me.

Camille cautions us to watch our step where the trail is dotted with javelina, bobcat, donkey and horse scat – and maybe fox. Birds and butterflies populate the trees and blooming vegetation. Lizards scurry for cover. Camille is dedicated to protecting what she has to the extent of constructing sturdy, labor intensive areas for plants she wants to keep from going extinct. She has creatively devised, through trial and error – and shared ideas with experts like author Ken King –

various designs for enclosures to prevent javelina, rabbits and other critters from destroying rare cacti, manfreda and other plants.



(L-R) Silky evolvulus, bracted sida and round head broom weed brighten the sandscape.

We head back to the corral through a path where tiny blooming plants have pushed through the sand: silky evolvulus (*Evolvulus sericeus*), bracted sida, also called bracted fanpetal, (*Sida ciliaris*), bristleleaf pricklyleaf, also called tiny Tim, (*Thymophylla tenuiloba*), and cow pen daisies (*Verbesina encelioides*), dwarfed by the drought and taller roundleaf snakeweed, also known as round head broom (*Gutierrezia sphaerocephala*), with its brilliant yellow blooms atop hard, spindly-looking branches. We stop to examine all the tiny blooms and marvel as we explore new territory.

Being able to share what she has helps Camille fulfill her passion, dreams and goals for this sparse, enduring land.

She is available to be reached at txcrich@aol.com for those interested in a visit. Her website is ElMestenoRanch.com



The watering hole at El Mesteno Ranch.

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

The Pederson's Cleaning Shrimp

Article by Joseph Kowalski, Rio Grande Valley Chapter
Photos by Chris Pederson

When biology instructors teach taxonomy they delve into the how and why of classifying, or naming living things. At first glance this may be perceived as a simple task. It should be a straightforward task to tell one organism from another. In some cases, yes... in some cases, no. Identifying trees is easy enough if you use just the leaves, but using the flower or fruit is considered a more robust approach. Even then you have to be flexible enough to be willing to use other things, called characters, to sort out who's who. Sometimes characters change and the next generation of taxonomists discover new ways to better name things.

Back in 1991 I met Chris Pederson, a man with whom I would teach marine science for a number of years until his retirement in 2000. It was not at all surprising that Chris and I would become good friends, especially with our common background in marine science.

The Pederson's established a foothold in the Bahamas. This is prime territory for coral reefs and Chris and his father, Harry, explored the reefs off the west end of New Providence Island at Lyford Cay through many years. This is when things get exciting. Diving at New Providence Island, Bahamas in 1954, Harry photographed some remarkable fish-cleaning habits by some shrimp. While working on the reefs, the Pedersons noted the shrimp lived in association with a sea anemone, either *Bartholomea annulata* or *Condylactis gigantea*, living among the tentacles without harm. Fish, or any other unsuspecting animal, are rendered paralyzed and then consumed by the anemone. The shrimp "inoculate" themselves against the toxicity of the stinging nematocysts by pressing their bodies against the tentacles.



Pederson's cleaning shrimp *Ancylomenes pedersoni* (*Periclimenes pedersoni*)
Body length 3.8 - 5.0 cm (1.5 - 2.0 inches) Antennae are two to three times the body length.

Harry and Chris conducted some behavior studies while diving at New Providence Island, Bahamas. The text below is from Chris Pederson on the behavior of the shrimp.

I found this shot (the image below) and thought I'd send it to you because it is a much more typical example of how these shrimp are normally found. It could be different in other parts of the Caribbean, but in the Bahamas, we never observed the Pederson's shrimp in association with any anemone other than the one you see here and in parts of the other shots you already have.

*The anemone is *Bartholomea annulata* and the shrimp are most often observed in pairs... one female and one male. In this shot, I believe the female is the one slightly above center (she is gravid, or pregnant) and the male is just above her on a ledge. They wave their long, white antennae as a signal to fish that they are available for "cleaning services." I have seen them service small groupers of various kinds as well as other kinds of fish.*



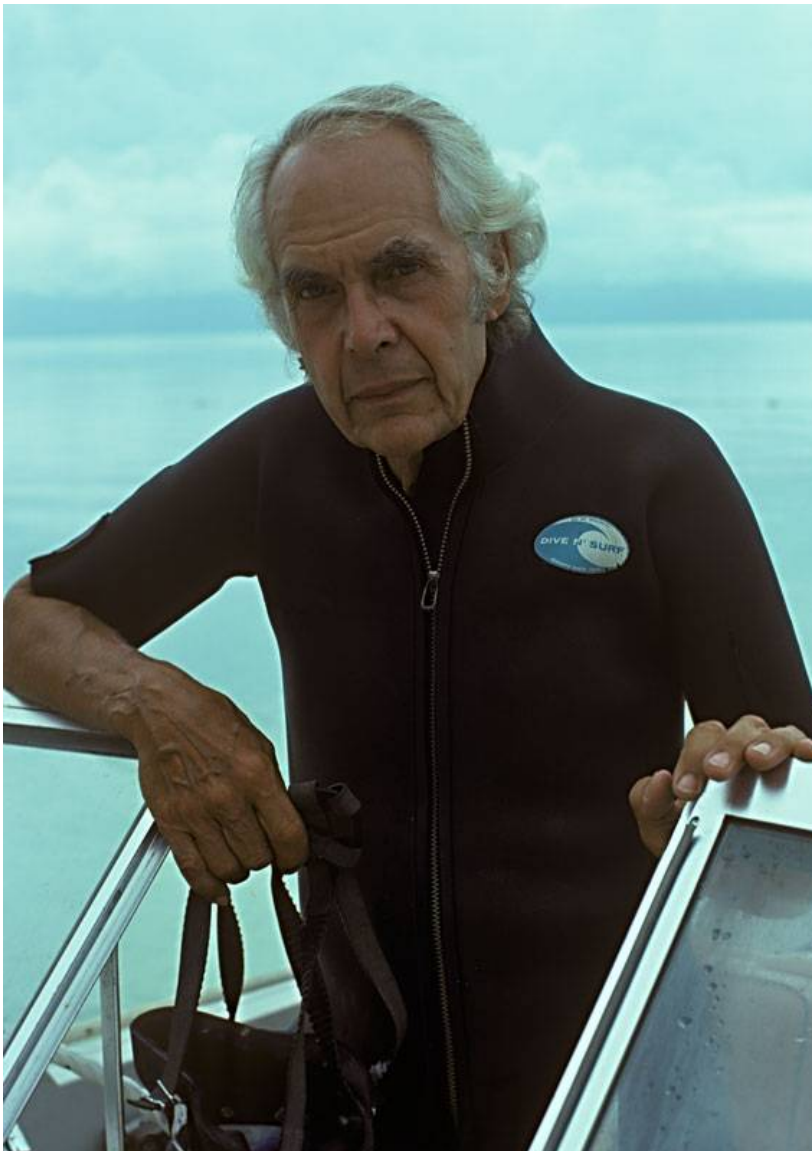
Pederson's cleaning shrimp wave their long, white antennae to signal fish.

The interesting thing is that groupers normally will take shrimp as a meal, but not these. We even tried releasing a shrimp up in mid water, just to see what would happen, and the result was that all the predator fish, groupers, snappers, etc. made a rush toward the shrimp, but stopped short and simply followed it down to the seafloor. No harm done and the shrimp made its way back to its station. When they are working on a fish, they will go inside the mouth which the fish kindly holds wide open, and they will also go under the gill covers while the fish holds them open.

So matters stood until 1958 when samples were sent to the taxonomist, Dr. Fenner A. Chace Jr. of the Department of Invertebrate Zoology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution. Dr. Chace knew he was looking at a previously undescribed shrimp. He called it *Periclimenes pedersoni*, or Pederson's shrimp. So it's been known ever since... Not exactly. Recall the beginning of this essay and how, with the recognition of new characters the naming must be re-shuffled a bit. And so it goes. Taxonomists now use characteristics of DNA and "family trees,"

combined with behavior. This cleaner shrimp is now known as *Ancylomenes pedersoni*. It remains a great collaboration between two great men, Fenner Chace and Harry Pederson.

This is my dad (image left). The shot was taken in the Summer of '74 and he was 66. He was not as stern as the photo might suggest but rather had a terrific sense of humor and a very creative wit.



Harry Pederson (Chris Pederson's father)

He graduated from the University of Minnesota with a degree in 18th century English Literature with plans to become a writer. However, WWII got in the way and he wound up in California working as a staff photographer for Consolidated Aircraft Company where they built B-17s. His brother also worked there and it was in the waters off the coast of California that they became interested in underwater photography.

They were both refused entry into the armed services because Dad had rheumatic fever when he was at the University and his brother had been involved in a motorcycle accident when he was in high school which left him with a number of metal plates in both of his lower legs.

Dad passed away in 1996 at the age of 87 and not a day goes by that I do not miss him. He had an insatiable curiosity for undersea creatures and lectured on his undersea films for many years for the Audubon Society, and, by his third year, he had replaced Roger Tory Peterson as the most requested lecturer on the Audubon circuit.

It has been a blessing to me to spend time with Chris studying the Laguna Madre and Rio Grande. I am grateful for his help in the field and fellowship.



Chris Pederson and Joe Kowalski share a common background in marine science.

Extra Credit: What do you see in the image below?



TMN Joy!

Article & photo by Joyce Baer-Halpern, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

My husband and I have been coming to South Padre Island (SPI) off and on for 39 years. It has been the beach and its environs that draw me back... and the restaurants and things to do and ease of being here...and the Roseate Spoonbills and Sanderlings and the monarch butterflies and....Sea Turtle, Inc. We had the privilege years ago of seeing Ila Loetscher "the Turtle Lady," explain her mission: conservation of the Kemp's ridley sea turtles and ecological concerns.

An advertisement in the local paper said.....you might be interested... in becoming a Texas Master Naturalist with the Rio Grande Valley Chapter. What surprising, delightful, unexpected new adventures I've experienced by joining the current Texas Master Naturalist Trainee Class. What joy! Can you see it reflected in the photo below on my first day of volunteering?

So, there's **discovery**. And work, too. There are classes, speakers, textbook reading, field trips and volunteering, such as being willing to write this article to convey my excitement about this adventure. It amazes me how much there is to do and to learn.

The South Texas Ecotourism Center (STEC) in Laguna Vista is relatively new, celebrating its one year anniversary in February. Experiencing, restoring and preserving the natural landscape...its "mission is to encourage the exploration of South Texas by highlighting its assets, spreading across the counties." It is a spectacular place to watch the sunset. STEC is where I first met Barbara Peet, the 2023 New Class Training Director. Barbara's breadth of knowledge and enthusiasm is motivating and contagious.

Exploring – the state parks and national wildlife refuges, the world birding sites. Our field trip to Resaca de la Palma State Park was eye opening with color - Green Jays and Altamira Orioles, and ...live armadillos. A picture of the Green Jay is featured on the cover of *The Birds of South Texas including the Lower Rio Grande Valley* field guide that I have carried around for years. It does not begin to do justice to the experience of standing open-mouthed behind the bird blinds watching the feeders attract flocks of Green Jays...their color, iridescence, the markings on their face, animation, calling to one another. It all makes me want to observe more and learn more.

Volunteering – I have chosen to volunteer at the SPI Birding, Nature Center & Alligator Sanctuary. I feel like I am welcoming people to share this adventure. I was excited and satisfied to be able to help visitors identify birds on my very first day.

And the joy of it is that everyone loves something different. What do you love?



Author (center) sharing the joy on her first day of volunteering with (L-R) Jake Reinbolt, Becky, Cristin, and Javi Gonzalez at SPI Birding Center

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.

Nighttime Gems

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

One night this December, I noticed two dazzling gems feeding upon the fruit of my backyard Turk's cap. One, with its crimson head and patchwork of black, white and yellow on its abdomen, was a Turk's cap red bug. The other, a smartly-dressed spot-sided coreid, wore nestled cream and brown triangles on its head and wing tops, which ended in beige. A leaf-shaped chocolate drop adorned its back, and six spotted legs grasped the leaves. Several times since, I've seen both bugs on the Turk's cap at night and during daytime.

Both the Turk's cap red bug (*Dysdercus concinnus*), also called pale red bug, and the spot-sided coreid (*Hypselerotus punciventris*) join the 4,500 or so North American species in the order Hemiptera, for "true bugs." Distinguishing these insects are their beaks, or sucking mouthparts, with which many drink juices from plants. Also, between a true bug's two wing sets, its back forms a triangle-like shield, the scutellum. Additionally, with its incomplete metamorphosis, this insect undergoes neither a larval nor a pupal stage. Rather, bugs hatch as nymphs, or miniature versions of adults, which grow and molt, shedding their exoskeletons, in stages called instars.



Turk's cap red bugs (*Dysdercus concinnus*)

Members of the Turk's cap red bug's genus, *Dysdercus*, are known as cotton stainer bugs, since some genus members puncture and drink from young cotton bolls, leaving brownish stains and causing most bolls to drop to the ground. The Turk's cap red bug, however, feeds on mallows—flowering plants in the hibiscus, or mallow, family—particularly the Turk's cap, a resilient shrub which appears to suffer no grave damage from its occupant. Those concerned about their Turk's cap, though, can shake the bugs off into soapy bucket water.

The Turk's cap red bug, and other cotton stainer bugs, lay clusters of yellowish eggs in sand or decaying plants. The bugs undergo five instars, the first four lasting from four to five days, the last, double that time. They spend the first stage underground.

The Turk's cap red bug occurs from coastal South Texas to Northeast South America. It is in the family Pyrrhocoridae, which derives from the Greek "pyrrho" for "fire," so named, presumably, for its fiery colors, and "coris" for "bug". The bug's vividness may allow it to mimic a creature that is particularly unappetizing to birds.



Spot-sided coreid (*Hypselerotus punciventris*)

The spot-sided coreid occupies the family Coreidae, for leaf-footed bugs, which have leaf-like hind legs. Family members have large, four-segmented antenna and big compound eyes, as well as simple eyes. They suck on plant juices and, when distressed, emit a foul odor.

This bug, found in Arizona and the southeastern U.S. down to Central America, feeds on mallows like Turk's cap, as well as other shrubs. It flies well, opening its wings to reveal a red patch on its dorsal abdomen.

I welcome these stunning and benign bugs to my yard, and I am grateful to have my ever-burgeoning Turk's cap, a plant native to this area, for them to happily feed upon.

Coahuilteca Foraging

Article by Jim Grizzard, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

With her eyes wide open for a rattlesnake, Akeye crawled on her stomach - the sharp thorns of the low blackbrush and mesquite branches scraping across her back as she gathered mesquite screw beans and Texas ebony bean pods. The strongest Coahuiltecas had disappeared with their bows, arrows and nets before sunrise.*



Thorn scrub habitat – photo by Diane Hall

Akeye, four other children and three elders foraged for agave bulbs, tunas (prickly pear cactus fruit rich in carbohydrates and vitamin C), cactus pads (an excellent source of calcium and vitamin A) and all that was edible within a long stone's throw from their squat dome huts. Two elders tightly wove a durable fabric from the sabal palm fronds, various grasses and young cedar elm and desert willow branches to replace the worn covers (as a skin) and ropes (as connective tissue) of their squat dome huts and netting for hunting and fishing.

The low, dense forest of Texas ebony, huisache, palo verde, wild olive, Texas persimmon and other gnarly trees provided the sticks to make skeletons for their circular portable homes, bows and arrows, clubs and camp fires, as well as the habitat for the birds, rabbits, turtles and other animals that had fed them for thousands of years.

Survival drove almost every action from sunrise to sunset. Special moments were reserved for story time, singing, dancing and recreation. Ocha, grandmother of Akeye, called Akeye to collect leaves, flowers and roots from many of the plant species surrounding them and to learn about them. Almost every plant had vital medicinal properties to keep them alive.

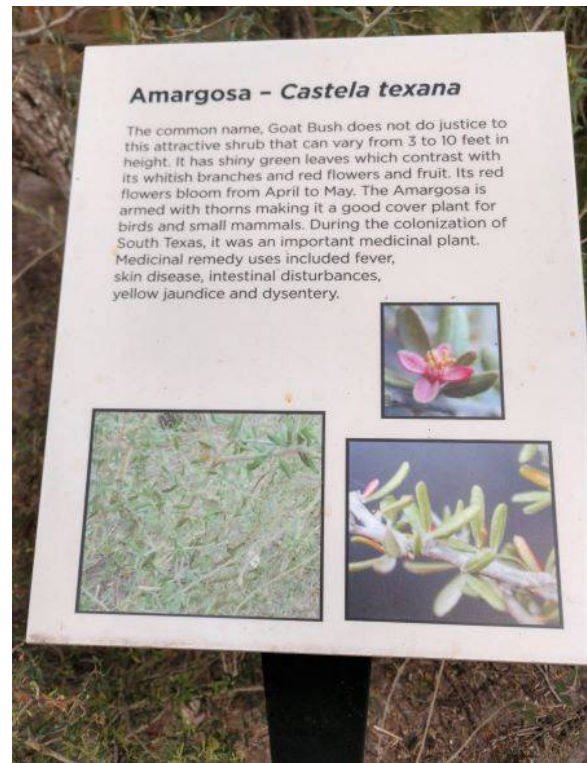
Prickly pear was not only used as bread and vegetables to them, but also medicine. The pads could treat diabetes, boils, and prostatitis. In addition, it was used to reduce the rate of sugar absorption and insulin shock, lower cholesterol and prevent glycemia. *Lantana camara*, *Parthenium hysterophorus* and other plants repelled swarms of mosquitoes and other biting insects.



Prickly pear cactus in bloom – photo by Diane Hall

Wax mallow (*Malvaviscus arboreus*) could help cure bronchitis, cystitis, diarrhea, fever, gastritis, hypertension, kidney, liver and gall bladder diseases, tonsillitis and skin lesions. Leaves of the Texas mountain laurel (*Sophora secundiflora*) could be ground into powder to cure ringworm, psoriasis and skin lesions. Rheumatism and bronchial congestion could be relieved with leaves of the Texas olive, and its fruit, though not savory, was food. *Plumbago scandens* leaves would help remove warts and treat skin diseases. Its roots would aid toothache and ulcers.

Over 85 percent of the plant species now found at Hugh Ramsey Nature Park offered them and now us medicinal value. In addition to the infinite treasure of nature to feed our souls, the reality that some 25 percent of all prescribed drugs are derived from plants, calls us to preserve native plants and their habitats. The Coahuiltecan needed these plants to live. So do we.



Interpretive sign at Hugh Ramsey Nature Park
—photo by Diane Hall

*The Coahuiltecan roamed the expanse of the Rio Grande Valley as hunter gatherers in small nomadic bands for well over five thousand years. As many as 15,000 Coahuiltecan may have lived in Rio Grande Valley by the time the Spanish arrived. After a Texas census in 1824, the Coahuiltecan were thought to be extinct, though a few had assimilated into other native populations. Smallpox, other old world diseases and slavery decimated the Coahuiltecan. Spanish missionaries regarded them as peaceful and approachable (unlike the Apache and Comanche). Coahuiltecan slaves, encomiendas (families indentured as servants) or converts purportedly built the Alamo mission. Reportedly, at least one soldier who fought with the Texans attempting to defend the Alamo in 1836 had Coahuiltecan heritage.

The Perils of Peter the Pelican

Article by Roberto Gaitan, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

After a long day of field trips with our Class of 2023 Trainees, I received an email from Ethel Cantu (Class of 2017). She had been contacted by a friend, Ruth, who lived on Town Resaca in Brownsville and was trying to find help for an injured American White Pelican, aka, Peter, but had not been successful.

On behalf of Ruth, Ethel was wondering if I might know someone that could help Peter. As her friend asked Ethel, did we “know anyone in the birdwatcher world who could rescue a sick or injured white pelican in our resaca and take it to the zoo?”

Peter had been sitting on top of a dredging conveyance link for two days. He had not been seen fishing and apparently could not fly. It would occasionally stand and preen but that was it.



Peter on dredging pipe in the resaca—photo by Ruth Anne

Ruth had contacted the zoo that was willing to care for injured animals, but they couldn't go get it. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department person passed Ruth to the game warden. She also talked to Dr. Hines who wanted to help, but didn't have space for another bird and also didn't go out to get injured birds. The Public Utilities Board helped educate Ruth on the operation of the dredging equipment, but they didn't have boats or training to get Peter and neither did Animal Control.

So then, Who You Gonna Call?...Texas Master Naturalist! (I know. Doesn't quite have the same ring to it; too many syllables.)

Ethel is fortunate to know Barbara and I to ask for help. We are fortunate to know some caring people in the birdwatcher world. As I told them, I have a canoe and kayak, but like the dog that chases squirrels, I wouldn't know what to do once I got there. Lucky for all of us, we have folks like Justin LeClair, who on his day off and with his dad Gary visiting, was willing to help.

We agreed to meet at Ruth's at 10:30am the next day to assess the situation. Ruth was so happy to know we were willing to help!

So the next day, Peter was still on the dredge pipe right behind Ruth's house but across the resaca. By the time we arrived, Ruth had already contacted the zoo so they would be ready for our patient.

And what happens when the pelican sees the three new strangers? He slides into the water from the pipe. He starts to paddle around! Ruth had not seen Peter move off his roost for three days!

Unfortunately, this didn't mean Peter didn't have an injured wing, a hook in his feathers, a problem with his webbed feet, etc. Justin decided the best thing to do would be to go catch the American White Pelican and give him a thorough examination. Time to get the kayak in the water...and prepare to get close and personal with Peter.



As if knowing what we were planning, Peter paddled around the bend of the resaca by the time we had the kayak in the water and Justin and I had settled aboard. We paddled across and down the resaca to get near the pelican. Justin, an expert at this, informed me of his game plan. Paddle to get close and then paddle quickly to get near Peter fast. Peter had an advantage in the water but we had Justin's net. If we could get close, we might have a chance.

Robert Gaitan and Justin LeClair setting off to help Peter-- photo by Ruth Anne

It was a bit funny. As we are paddling to get close, Peter would paddle left, then right, then left and always had one eye on us. I'm sure he didn't know what to make of this weird creature green creature with blue arms and two heads coming at him. We did worry that Peter might swim through the tunnel that would take him to the next branch of the resaca. This might turn into quite a marathon. Lucky for us, Peter turned around. (I know Justin is in much better shape than I, but I don't think he wanted to paddle Peter and myself back to shore!)

Several times we thought we might get to pin Peter to a corner of the resaca, but he would quickly dart the other way. He clearly could paddle without too much effort. Unfortunately, when he tried to take off and fly away, he couldn't. That was a bit of concern and we needed to make sure he was okay. So Peter paddled on and so did we...getting a bit tired and wet as we turned into the wind.

At one point, we had him! He approached the shore that was thick with branches. He couldn't climb up the shore. No he couldn't, but he could easily swerve around the Brazilian pepper branches in the water and make his way around us and back into the resaca. He moved on while we struggled to back paddle from the branch trap.

Back in the open and heading into the wind that picked up as we left the shoreline, Peter made a mistake. With his head turned to keep an eye on us, he lost some of his streamlined profile. We closed the gap until we were right behind him. When he zagged left, we made a hard push forward until Peter was right next to Justin. As he quickly but gently netted the pelican, I worked to slow us down before we shot right past him. At the last minute, as we slowed down, I placed my paddle blade behind Peter to keep him moving forward and to keep him within the net. Justin was able to reach out and secure Peter next to the kayak. We could stop and breathe.



Returning to shore with captured pelican-- photo by Ruth Anne

Justin looked for any obvious fishing line, hooks, and injuries but couldn't see any. Peter looked good for a white pelican. To have a better look, we headed to shore. Justin kept an eye on our passenger and we fought the wind to make it back.

Once we reached the retaining wall of Ruth's home, Justin handed the pelican to Gary. Justin took hold of Peter as Gary helped me up and we hoisted the kayak out of the water. On land, Justin looked at Peter's wings, feathers, beak, eyes, feet, and everywhere he thought an indication of injury might appear.



He noted Peter was strong; if Gary had not been holding the upper mandible, the pelican would have clearly found his strength. Justin noted the bird didn't have any hidden lines or hooks, didn't flinch when he extended his wings and his crochet or bill-tip, was perfectly fine. Peter looked very good for a white pelican.

Justin assesses the health of the Peter the pelican with assistance of his father, Gary, and is declared healthy – photos by Ruth Anne

In the end, Justin and Gary agreed, the best thing to do would be to return Peter back into the resaca. He was moving well, eating well, and clearly doing fine except that he had a problem flying. After a few more photos, I was given the honor of holding Peter's top beak, holding his body gently to my side, and releasing him forward while letting go simultaneously. He landed gracefully, with wings outstretched, and after a parting glance, paddled away.

We packed up, cleaned up a bit, and chatted with Ruth for a while. We let her know to contact us whenever she had a question in the future. I offered to share information about the Texas Master Naturalist program to her, to any group she was a member of, and to her neighbors. We are here to help and if we don't know what to do ourselves, we have an excellent network of experts we are privileged to call friends and colleagues..."this is the way."



Robert releasing Peter-- photo by Ruth Anne



(Left) Pelican Crew: Robert Gaitan, Justin and Gary LeClair – photo by Ruth Anne



(Right) Peter and company-- photo by Ruth Anne

As another month of my final year as chapter president, goes by, I'll have to say I won't miss the administrative side of running our chapter. I know it has to be done to keep our chapter moving forward but I've had my turn. It is time for someone else. I want to find more pelicans to save and I want to engage with the other "Ruth's" out there.

Our mission is to develop a great network of volunteers but we equally need to be sharing what we know with our community. While outreach is an administrative function, we need to be out reaching the public and helping make an impact. We should all be jumping at the chance to help the Texas Children in Nature Network execute their initiatives. We should be championing the City Nature Challenge to educate the community and to generate critical data for our region. We should push ourselves to introduce the Junior Master Naturalist program in our region. In the absence of anyone else collecting injured animals and getting them to where they need to go, we should be willing to fill in when the need arises.

When I shared my expectations and hopes early on, someone replied that we were a small, podunk chapter. I hope I'm not the only one that rejects that premise. While some may chose to view the world as a pessimist, I refuse to accept the way things were as the best we can achieve. It may take getting wet and sweaty, it may mean taking your family member on your day off on an adventure, and it may mean Peter returning with his friends to glare at the site where he was assaulted, but the result is a satisfaction you can't replace with another slideshow, spreadsheet, or even another article.



Backyard Observations

Article & photo by Eryn Reddell Wingert, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

The Texas Master Naturalist classes offer insight into what's going on in my own backyard. For example: mutualism. Years ago I noticed carpenter bees spending time at the base of the flowers in our backyard as opposed to entering the front door, so to speak. My son who studies entomology at Texas A&M said the bees were puncturing the base to draw out nectar.

Fast forward to Ecologist John Brush's presentation to the RGVCTMN Class of 2023 in February. Brush spoke about third party mutualism: how nectar-robbing carpenter bees might actually be of benefit not only to the plant, but to third parties. The day after that presentation I noticed an Orange-crowned Warbler darting in-and-out of the cape honeysuckle; it appeared to be taking advantage of the easy access to nectar from the blooms. My husband asked what I was looking at, and instead of naming the bird I said, "I think it's third-party mutualism!"

Brush had invited the class to share observations to his on-going research projects on [iNaturalist.org](https://www.inaturalist.org). I submitted photos of the warbler with notes on the observation to which he responded, "I think there's a good chance it is opportunistically taking advantage of the nectar access."

If it hadn't been for Brush's presentation I would have simply wondered what the warbler was doing. Instead, I was able to take a class lesson and apply it to my own backyard.



Orange-crowned Warbler seen taking advantage of nectar at the base of a cape honeysuckle flower.

McAllen Home and Garden Show

Article & photo by Robert Hernandez, South Texas Border Chapter

The South Texas Border Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists (STBC TMN) will participate in the 32nd Annual Rio Grande Valley Home and Garden Show scheduled to take place at the McAllen Convention Center from **March 31 through April 2, 2023**. The three day event will be host to businesses and organizations that promote home improvement and gardening projects. South Texas Border Chapter promoting native plants at Home & Garden Show



South Texas Border Chapter TMN will have an outreach booth where we will promote the Texas Master Naturalist's goals and objectives while at the same time providing information on the beneficial use of native plants in their home landscapes. They will also make recommendations to the attendees on which species of native plants work best in a pollinator garden.

There will also be native plants available for sale at the booth. Plants will be donated by chapter members and a local native plant nursery will also provide plants to have a broader variety. All funds made through the sale of plants will go to the chapter's operating funds and will be used to further educate the public on the advantages of using native plants in their gardens.

A Gardening Stage will be set up where speakers from the Texas Master Naturalist and Texas Master Gardener organizations will make presentations throughout the event on gardening tips. STBC members Anita Westervelt, William Rich and Jennifer Rektorik have signed up to make presentations related to native plants. Others who would like to present may email Anita at jjvanm@gmail.com. The presentation requirement is a perspective of native gardening. We encourage members to lend their support to these speakers by attending the sessions while visiting the show. TMN members who attend these seminars can chalk them up as advanced training. A seminar schedule will not be available by the organizer until a week before the event. We will keep you informed. Show hours are: Friday 2pm-6pm, Saturday 10am-6pm and Sunday 11am-5pm.

Outstanding Volunteer Award presented

Article by Robin Gelston, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

The Texans for State Parks (TFSP) was incorporated in November 1997 and was the first statewide not for profit organization formed to work exclusively in support of preservation and enhancement of State Parks, State Historical Sites, State Nature Areas of Texas. TFSP developed an award program to positively recognize persons for their exemplary service to our state parks. The service groups are for the outstanding park supervisor, staff, volunteer and partner group. For 2022, Region 2 Outstanding Volunteers winners were our very own Alicia Cavazos and Susan Upton.

Kelly Ann Malkowski, Resaca de la Palma State Park Supervisor and Lauren Acevedo, Resaca de La Palma State Park staff, nominated Alicia and Susan for their volunteers service. The staff indicated that Alicia and Susan are always in a good mood, very knowledgeable about birds, flora and fauna of the state park, and are outstanding spokespersons for the park even when the park does not have water or there are not many birds around the day they are volunteering. Alicia and Susan have served as the Wednesday morning tram guides at Resaca de la Palma for over a year and are always available to help with school groups or other special events, such as night walks. So, let me tell you a little bit about both of them!



Alicia & Susan operating the tram—photo by Margarita Guevara

Alicia, is an avid birder from San Benito, she joined Texas Master Naturalist as part of the 2012 class, she also received her 100 hours milestone in 2012. In 2013 she received her 250- and 500-hour milestone pins. In 2014 she became President and earned her 1000-hour milestone pin. She continued as President in 2015 and served from 2015 to 2016 on the Education Committee. She earned her 2500-hour milestone pin in 2017, was a member of the New Class Committee in 2018 to 2019, was Historian and earned her 4000-hour milestone pin in 2019. In 2020 she earned her 5000-hour milestone pin and was AT/VMS Director. Alicia also won the 2022 Outdoor & Wildlife Preservation Award at this year's Winter Outdoor Wildlife Expo (WOWE).

Susan is an avid birder from Los Fresnos and joined Texas Master Naturalist as part of the 2021 class, she was her New Class Representative and earned her 100-, 250- and 500 hours milestone pins in 2021. In 2022 she earned her 1000-hour milestone. Both are members of the Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society and help with their Annual RGV Birding Festival. They are great friends and I personally have learned a lot from them.

We are very proud of you both. Congratulations on the Region 2 Outstanding Volunteer of the Year award - it was well deserved!



Rodney Franklin, Texas State Parks Division Director presented the 2022 Region 2 Outstanding Volunteers Award to Alicia Cavazos and Susan Upton – photo by Amy Rangel

Kevin Good, President of Friends of State Parks, was on hand to congratulate Alicia and Susan -photo by Amy Rangel



Congratulations, Susan and Alicia!! – photo by Amy Rangel



Milestones & awards for December 2022,
January 2023, and February 2023



Congratulations!

Newly Certified Texas Master Naturalists

Nadine Byram '22
Ed Meza '22

Jerald Garrett '22

Well

100 Hours Milestones

done!

David Batot '21
Yvette Cano '22

Jeff Bradley '20
Rebecca Guerra '18F

250 Hours Milestones

Cheryl Brummett '22
Mimi Romero '21

Michelle Cano '22

500 Hours Milestones

Barb Peterson '19

Carolyn Woughter '14

5000 Hours Milestones

Linda Butcher '09

Re-Certification for 2022*

Carolyn Cardile
Teresa DuBois
Rebecca Guerra
Sandra Mink
Kamala Platt

Kathy Raines
Marsha Ralston Wood
Adrian Ramos
Carolyn Wroughter

*69 members earned the Lightening Whelk seashell re-certification pin for 2022 throughout 2022.

Contributors to this issue of The Chachalaca



Joyce Baer-Halpern



Carolyn Cardile



Roberto Gaitan



Robin Gelston



Joni Gillis



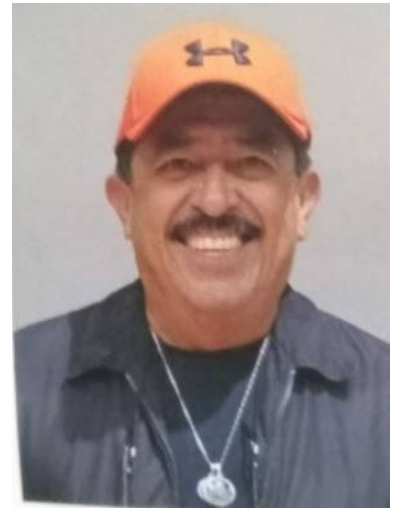
Jim Grizzard



Mary Grizzard



Diane Hall



Robert Hernandez



Joe Kowalski



Jose Palmos



M. Kathy Raines



Eryn Reddell Wingert



Anita Westervelt

RGVC Leadership Team 2023

Officers

| | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| President | Roberto Gaitan |
| 1 st Vice President | Robin Gelston |
| 2 nd Vice President | Adrienne Wheatley |
| Secretary | Carolyn Cardile |
| Treasurer | Betsy Hosick |

Directors

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Membership | Joni Gillis |
| New Class | Barbara Peet |
| Communications | Diane Hall |
| Advanced Training | Teresa Du Bois |
| Volunteer Service | (open) |
| New Class Rep | Mara Lee Moats, Sofia Garza |
| At-Large: Winter Texans | Carolyn Woughter |
| Outreach | (open) |

Committees

| | |
|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Membership | Adrian Ramos, Norma Trevino |
| Training | Robin Gelston |
| Communication | Diane Hall, Roberto Gaitan |

Advisors

| | |
|------------------------|----------------|
| Texas AgriLife | Tony Reisinger |
| Texas Parks & Wildlife | Javier de Leon |

Would you like to help? Please contact us at riograndevalleychapter.tmn@gmail.com

RGV Chapter Texas Master Naturalists: This chapter is an affiliate of the Texas Master Naturalist Program jointly sponsored by Texas AgriLife and the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department.

South Texas Border Chapter Leadership Team 2023

Officers

| | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| President | Donna Otto |
| First Vice President | Joseph Connors |
| Second Vice President | Jennifer Rektorik |
| Secretary | Leslie Tuxhorn |
| Treasurer | Bill Rich |

Directors

| | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| At-Large Director | Pierre Tessier |
| Communication Director | Anita Westervelt |
| Immediate Past President | Robert Hernandez |
| Membership Director | Rohny Escareno |
| New Class Director | Anne Mayville |
| New Class Director | James Gerry |
| State Program Representative | Kathy Tonn (Tessier) |
| Volunteer Service Project Director | Susan Coleman |
| At-Large Winter Texan Director | Mary Baker |

Committee Chairs

| | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Archivist/Historian | Kathy Tonn |
| Website/Webmaster | Joseph Connors |

Advisors

| | |
|--------------------------------|----------------|
| Texas Parks & Wildlife Advisor | Javier DeLeon |
| Texas Agrilife Advisors | Tony Reisinger |