

## Moth Night at the South Texas Ecotourism Center – A Nature Story

Article by Camille M. Rich, Rio Grande Valley Chapter

Saturday, July 22, 2023, marked the first event celebrating night pollinators during Moth Week held at the South Texas Ecotourism Center (STEC) in Cameron County. When I received the email asking if I could help with this first-time event, I was excited to be able to help STEC! Before I agreed, there was one key phone call I needed to make. I called my friend, and fellow breast cancer survivor, and “South Texas Sand Sheet Sister,” Cat Traylor. I knew that with her experience and my organizational skills, we could pull off this event, even if we only had less than two weeks to prepare.

After Cat graciously agreed to jump right in and help, I formally committed both of us to helping the STEC present their Moth Night to the public. Cat brought her years of experience with mothing, her skill with building moth setups, and her expertise in macro photography. By my



rough estimate, I would say that Cat donated easily over 100 hours of her time to this project, not to mention the financial donation of lending the STEC all her mothing equipment for their inaugural mothing event, right down to the reusable zip ties we used to secure sheets to metal frames for the moth setups.

Cat, Jake and Javi at “Small Fry” moth setup- photo by Camille M. Rich

Cat and I quickly compared calendars and set up a STEC scouting trip along with Roberto Gaitan and Barbara Peet. We all sat down with Mr. Edward Meza, Director of the STEC, to discuss the event, materials needed, logistics, and scope of layout. This meeting was instrumental in bringing many other activities and events together, set up, and in place for this inaugural moth night event.

As for the chance to be a part of the first event of this kind at the STEC, my teacher’s heart burst out of my chest with excitement. Educational opportunities surrounding this event abounded---numerous “teachable moments” to be planned for, fostered, supported, and promoted. A few of the “teachable moments” I was excited about were:

- Bringing awareness to night pollinators and their role in the pollination process.
- Promoting participation in an event that provided equal access to the public for a first-time mothing experience, regardless of their income, educational background, or socioeconomic status.

- Fostering community involvement in some of the things they might be able to be a part of if they were to want to become a Texas Master Naturalist.
- Enjoying the night with fellow Texas Master Naturalists while also learning from both their experience, expertise, and education.
- Supporting my Texas Master Naturalist chapter in this endeavor for the community we live in and serve---icing on the cake for me!

However, the most notable reason, personally speaking, for me being involved in this event is that I know this is what Uncle Frank Wiseman would have wanted. As a teacher, he and I shared that same passion for learning and helping others to learn. As many of you know, he was a pioneer in the Texas Master Naturalist program in the Rio Grande Valley, and this sort of “first time” event would have been right up his alley (and I would have been right alongside him). You see, when you are a teacher, that is the first cap you put on at the beginning of each day, and some of us never take our caps off. It is a cap we don daily and for a lifetime.

Admittedly, I am a novice when it comes to mothing experience. Nevertheless, I was not deterred from trying to make this a memorable, fun, educational event. In fact, in many ways, this event was no different for me than when I was planning lessons for my fifth and sixth graders years ago. Back when, as a rookie teacher, I taught all subject areas, which required self-guided research, pouring over teacher manuals and their accompanying workbooks, and



completing work behind the scenes to get materials ready for class. Teaching required impeccable organizational skills and logistics management ---Moth Night at the STEC would be no different.

STEC moth setup Cat and Camille named, “The Wall”- photo by Camille M. Rich

There was a lot of work to do in a very short amount of time. Regardless of how difficult I thought pulling off this event would be, and despite my lack of knowledge on the subject matter, I rolled up my sleeves and got to work. Cat and I were not alone in helping to pull this wonderful event together. Many individuals dedicated their time to Moth Night at the STEC. Pretty soon, after a blur of days in my hot carport where Cat and I assembled moth setups, to flurries of emails with questions regarding logistics to Mr. Edward Meza, STEC Director, and so forth, finally the day of the event arrived.

Just prior to sunset, the ultraviolet light “beacons” were switched on. Their neon glow popped in sharp contrast to the muted shades of habitat silhouetted against the last few remaining moments of sunlight hanging in the sky as the sun had just slipped down below the horizon. Pauraques began swooping and diving overhead as they hunted for their snack of insects on the wing. The barbed-wire cacti blooms unfurled and were visited by scores of tiny ants.



*Above:* Pyramid moth setup beckons insect visitors

*Left:* Barbed-wire cactus under UV light- photos by Camille M. Rich

While I was busy interacting with visitors, even guiding some of them out to the Tamaulipan thornscrub installation in front of the STEC building, Cat dutifully and methodically surveilled the moth set ups for moth activity. Visitors also gathered around the moth setups—scouring them for insect activity. Everyone waited on bated breath for that first moth to show up, and then it did! The first moth showed up at a setup that Cat and I named “Small Fry.”



Cat and Jake at “Small Fry” moth setup  
-photo by Camille M. Rich



*Left:* First moth of the night---a fuzzy, pretty Theodore Carpenterworm Moth. (*Givira theodori*) –photo by Cat Traylor

*Right:* Lichen under UV light - photo by Camille M. Rich



As the night wore on, many other insects visited the moth setups, but they did not show up as quickly as one would have hoped. While we waited for them, many other incredible nature stories were unfolding. For instance, while taking a break from the moth setups, several of us had the good fortune of sitting on a bench together and being dazzled by fellow Texas Master Naturalist, Drew Bennie, on how lichen glows under ultraviolet light. Who knew? I, for one, did not.



Fellow Texas Master Naturalists Javi Gonzalez and Jake Reinbolt arrived and almost immediately---and spontaneously---began nature talks and tours with visitors—pointing out all manner of both flora and fauna alike to the visitors at their side! Magical, teachable moments that they did not waste. They even guided walking tours with visitors out on the trails with their black light flashlights and came across some dazzling scorpions that fluoresced. Many thanks to both!

*Left:* Scorpion photographed under black light -photo by Cat Traylor

*Right:* Chestnut-banded Wave (*Idaea pervertipennis*) –  
-photo by Cat Traylor



Time continued to tick by, and our patience paid off. Many other insects showed up, including several more moths.

Where there is prey, there will be predators. This is the way of things in nature, and on this night, that relationship would prove itself out at about ten o'clock. At the moth setup that Cat and I had named “The Wall,” a young visitor and her father were enjoying the nature stories unfolding right before their very eyes when a little crab was observed by them on the ground at the base of the moth setup.

The young visitor brought this little crab to my attention, and I do not know what I marveled more at---her bravery to pick up the little crustacean or the fact that the little predator had shown up for a snack. After all, it makes perfect sense that a predator would show up where there were certainly enough insects (prey) there to make a fine meal for it! A moment captured in time. A memory made.

*Right:* Small crustacean ready to prey on insects  
-photo by Camille M. Rich



*Below:* *Oxacis bernadettei* – photo by Cat Traylor



Nature stories are both complex and interdependent. The nature story of night pollination does not begin and end with only moths; it also involves many other insects like beetles. Beetles are incredibly diverse and dazzling, and Cat captured

a few spectacular portraits of some of these beetle visitors to the moth setups.



Seaside Lady Beetle (*Naemia seriata*) -photo by Cat Traylor

As this nature story comes to an end, even though Uncle Frank was not with me in a physical presence, I felt his strong support in this endeavor every step of the way. I would like to think that he was most pleased with this celebration of moths, and that he looked down upon the whole “Moth Night at the STEC” scene with a sense of happiness and satisfaction—his teacher’s heart bursting with pride at the continuation of his legacy of learning and sharing with the community.

On that note, and in the spirit of community, I would like to thank everyone that contributed to this event. Whether you showed up prior to the event to help set up tables to display and share information on both the Texas Master Naturalist program and the Rio Grande Valley Pollinator Project, or to help Cat and I build the moth setups, to bringing items to share with visitors, or staying until the very end to help us load my truck to take everything home after midnight. Your presence, support, and contributions were valued, respected, and greatly appreciated.

Going forward, I am excited to continue to work with STEC on ideas and information to empower them to begin working on activities that will bolster, support, and facilitate their future mothing events. As for Moth Week 2024, mark your calendars for July 20-28. I already have some bright ideas for next year’s event. I hope to see you there, and if you have never been to the STEC, please do not wait until Moth Week 2024 to do so. The sooner the better!