

## Run for your life – before the coyote taps you on the shoulder!

Article & photos by Anita Westervelt, South Texas Border Chapter

Rio Grande Valley grade school students aren't too young to learn about nature's dangerous predator/prey *modus vivendi*, especially when Texas Master Naturalists (TMN) like Bill Rich involve the children in a rowdy game of coyotes and rabbits.

Three actions protect rabbits from being a coyote's next meal:

1. Hide where you can't be caught, for instance a rabbit can hide amongst nopales (cactus patch) represented by two hula hoops strategically placed on the ground.
2. Freeze in place. Bill demonstrates the action and explains that predators look for things that are moving. They can't see prey that is completely still. The children demonstrate freezing in place with Bill.
3. Moving faster than a predator.

Estero Llano Grande State Park hosts grade school field trips throughout the school year. One hundred or more young students, with their teachers and parent chaperones, spend a morning learning about nature. Texas Master Naturalists assist park staff in leading four concurrent activities: skins and skulls presentation, guided nature walk, birds and other wildlife class, and the prey and predator activity.



TMN volunteer Bill Rich demonstrates freezing in place



Bill's choice is overseeing the prey and predator challenge. There are generally 20 to 25 children per group and four groups throughout the morning. Bill has a teacher divide the children into two groups so only 10 to 12 play/act at a time, for safety and control. Two children are chosen to be coyotes, the others are rabbits. Bill loosely ties a colorful bandana on the wrist of the two coyotes. A valid ratio is one coyote to every five or six rabbits.

Bandanas indicate players are coyotes in the game

Red, white and blue poker chips are tossed around at one end of the designated playing field opposite the starting line where the children line up. The chips are rabbit food. Bill instructs the rabbits that their main object is to gather food for their nest of babies.

When it's time to start, Bill says, "Ready, set, go," for the rabbits. Then after a beat, "One, two, three," for the coyotes.

There are some rules, like rabbits can only retrieve one poker chip/food per trip, they have to run back to base and deposit the chip in the teacher's hand, then go back for another chip – without getting tapped on the shoulder by a coyote. They can't run out of bounds. Two successful poker chips to the teacher and the rabbit is a winner.



Ready, set, go! Rabbits are on the run in a friendly game of predator prey

When there are only two rabbits left in the playing field, Bill waves his arms, declaring the round is over. The first team gets another round of the game and then the other group gets their chance to run for their lives, gather food for their babies – or become the predator's next meal.

Bill Rich certified as a Texas Master Naturalist in 2022 with the South Texas Border Chapter. He is a presenter with the chapter's speakers' bureau and gives presentations at the McAllen Library and during the spring Rio Grande Valley Home and Garden Show. He is known locally for his humorous delivery of "The Passion Diaries," about his sometimes-mystifying but successful experiences growing and caring for passion vines.