



# The CHACHALACA

RGV MASTER NATURALISTS

25 APRIL 2004

## WE HAVE A NEWSLETTER!

Good internal communications is essential to the operation of any organization. In a chapter such as ours, spread over three counties and a hundred miles, it is hard to keep up with what everyone is doing.

To promote our sense of community, we have taken two steps recently. One step was to establish this newsletter, so we could publish on-going and completed projects and activities. We hope to receive inputs from all our members who are volunteering in many different locations. At present we intend to publish quarterly, but if we get enough stories, we can publish more often. We are publishing primarily by email, but hard copy will be provided to those few members who do not have email.

Our second step was to establish the RGVCTMN listserv. This Yahoo group mail service enables us to have rapid communications with all members who subscribe to the list. Its main advantage is that it is two-way. Any member can send a message to the list and it will be echoed to all members of the list. It is a great tool for problem solving. You have the resources of all our members available. Training and volunteer opportunities can be distributed almost instantaneously. We believe it will continue to increase its value over time.

Tell us what you're doing! We'll print it.

### **"JOANNA, I WILL LOAN YOU A LAWN MOWER."**

Last week one of my favorite clients said those words to me. I am attempting to start a wildscape at my rural law office near Raymondville. I have Porter Weed and scarlet sage and Mother in law tears lining my walkway into my cedar office.

The wild olive tree and Fiddlewood are blooming.

My clients are starting to take note of the beautiful flowers and trees and ask me about them. I dig plants and give "starts". Many have remarked about the lovely colorful butterflies visiting my plants.

Bob, the Fed Ex man, now hurries up to my door since he is allergic to bees and I have wonderful fat bumblebees visiting my plants.

As one of my clients walked out the entrance door last week, we saw the tiny hummingbird scoot away.

I hand out native plant and butterfly lists and encourage friends to use native plants. One friend even took Frank Gonzales' wildscaping course and we exchange plants and ideas.

Each of us can encourage conservation and appreciation of natural resources in our own way. We, as Master Naturalists, can start small and show by example.

So when Billy comes to my office today, he will still see the native plants and the small patch of grass that has been mowed. I still own a mower, but maybe next year I won't need to even use it!

JoAnna Vernetti Troppy ,

Class of 2002

### RGV MASTER NATURALISTS

This chapter is an affiliate of the Texas Master Naturalist program jointly sponsored by Texas Cooperative Extension and the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department.

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## EL BARRETAL

Early one April morning, seven eager naturalists set out to explore the Barreta Hills, EI Barretal, near Rio Grande City. Four Master Naturalists, Frank Wiseman, Sharon Roesler, Dick Roesler, and Diann Ballesteros along with three plant experts, Dr. Alfred Richardson, Bill MacWhorter, and Christina Mild were on this particular trip. The Barreta Hills are just east of Rio Grande City and are part of the Bordas Escarpment. From the top of one of the hills, one can look down and see the beginnings of the Rio Grande Valley. The top layer of soil on the Bordas Escarpment is gravel, below which is sand and then caliche. The name, EI Barretal, comes from the Barreta tree, which can be found in this area. The Barreta is in the citrus family and is not found in the wild in the lower Rio Grande Valley, except in areas where it has been transplanted. It is actually threatened with extinction in the U.S. because of loss of habitat. The vegetation on the Bordas Escarpment has probably changed little in the last thousand years.

It was threatening rain when we arrived; but as soon as we stepped out of the car, the sun came out, forcing me to wear a hat, which I really hate. As we began to explore, a profusion of small to medium sized plants appeared. One of our first finds was the charming Blackfoot Daisy, which seemed to be growing everywhere. We quickly discovered other native plants such as Leather Stem, Oregano Cimarron, Cenizo, Shrubby Blue Sage, Desert Lantana, Guayacan, Manfreda, and Wild Olive. Heart-leaved Hibiscus added a splash of color to the hillside. Prickly Poppy was blooming in colors from white to yellow to light pink to almost red. Cacti were abundant and included Prickly Pear, Strawberry Pitaya, and Horse Crippler

Sad to say, the area where we were exploring is being developed into urban sprawl and may soon be lost. The loss of the Barreta in its natural environment is especially troubling. U. S. Fish and Wildlife do have three large tracts in the area, but none on the Bordas Escarpment and only one has Barretas present.

To see an area that has seen little change in a thousand years is a privilege. If any of you have the opportunity to visit this unique area, please do so.

I thank Bill MacWhorter for his technical help in plant identification.

**Diann Ballesteros**

## RGVCTMN MEMBERS UNDERTAKE MANY PROJECTS

Compiled by Frank Wiseman

We have a great group of workers out there in all of our areas of the RGV.

I have compiled four of the projects that are presently being undertaken by our members. I think you will find that these TMN members are getting with the program and volunteering their efforts in places that will make a difference. I hope this article will entice many of you to go out and participate where you are needed.

Cindy and Mike Johnson, new trainees in the class of 2004, report: Mike and I are working on a project named the *Gator Outdoor Habitat*. The objective of the project is to plant native shrubs and ground cover and to work on a system of paths. Our project is located at Garcia Middle School at 5701 FM 802, Brownsville. The students at our school will keep this as an ongoing project along with our help with guidance and ideas as supplied through our Master Naturalist learning process. The week of April 1<sup>st</sup> our school was awarded Campus of the Month and Campus of the Year by the West Brownsville Garden Club. I, Cindy, went to accept the certificate and talked to the Garden Club members about our school project. On March 23<sup>rd</sup> we applied for Wildscape certification from TPW. Mike and I have put in many hours on this project along with our students. We are all very proud of our achievement and owe much thanks to TMN and it's classes that have spurred us on the road to achieving the success now being enjoyed by the students and faculty at our school. We are all learning about native plants, the birds and butterflies and other insects that come and enjoy and feed off our garden. Just being outdoors is Great!!! I guess I forgot to tell you that the garden is named for our school mascot, the alligator.

This news came via JoAnna Troppy, a graduate of the 2002 class of TMN. JoAnna is a lawyer with offices in Raymondville. She reports: As many of you may know, I have lined my walkways to the office with butterfly and native plants. I explain native plants to anyone who comments on the butterflies and bumble bees when they drop by to see me, and then I get into discussions about native plants with them. This is an easy approach.

I think seeing how attractive native plants can be makes people realize what they have been missing all these years by now using them in their landscapes. I even try to emphasize the water savings and the fact that native plants do not freeze, usually.

I am a visual person and think many others also see the world in colors and textures that surround them. One of my clients and I took Frank Gonzalez' course on Wildscaping this past year, and several clients accompanied me along with Karen Chapman of Environmental Defense Fund to look at their properties to see if they were suitable for an ocelot program. Karen was especially interested in Willacy County.

Unfortunately, I don't have the extensive knowledge of plants and animals that many of the master naturalists in our chapter have, but I have opportunities to talk and help others contact specialists to preserve and enhance their properties. I think we can all help preserve our wildlife habitat to some extent, even in our own little backyards or our office areas.

Two members, Drew Bennie and Omar Rodriguez, of the class of 2004 have undertaken a tremendous project at Dr. Raul Garza Elementary School in San Benito. From their reports, I gathered the following:

Kindergarten teacher Carol Evans of San Benito is organizing the project. She obtained a donation to build a small patio area to be covered with latticework. This is to be surrounded by a 2' by 3' wide flowerbed in which will be planted with native butterfly plants and some non-native flowering plants. There is another smaller flowerbed located nearby between two doors and visible through two large windows that they also want to plant using the Valley's many varieties of butterfly plants. Drew and Omar did the bed's planning for plant placement, assisted with plantings, and added the mulch afterwards. Mike Heep, local nurseryman from Harlingen, compiled the list of plants for the garden and has been a big help in the selection of the needed plants. At least 90% of the plants are native and include host plants as well as nectar plants

The patio area was built during the week of April 4<sup>th</sup> with donated lumber. The plans called for the school's crew to dig up the flowerbeds and mix composted manure in them and prepare them for planting. Drew and Omar assumed they would have to do some of the final mixing and digging themselves along with the students' parents. Planting day was scheduled for April 17<sup>th</sup>, and it looks like it was a success.

Nature Photographer Richard Moore filmed the event, and it will be shown on TV in the near future. We hope this will give our chapter a bit of its needed recognition

The kindergarten students and their parents plan to do most of the ongoing planting as Drew and Omar continue with their project.

Drew took the teacher to Mission and to Santa Ana to view butterfly gardens there to confirm some of the plants she wishes to plant and to give her an idea of how the end product will look one day very soon.

The school also has a xeriscaped flowerbed that was planted previously by a teacher. This area was overgrown, with dead plants and grasses, and needed some attention in general. The principal of the school stated that she wasn't sure she wanted a native plant butterfly garden because the area of native plants they already had looked so bad. She asked if anything could be done to the existing area as well. Omar and Drew dug up the area and removed the grasses and dead plants, planted the area with 15 new plants that were bought by the school and 5 plants grown by Drew and hand watered the area. Later the area was mulched with mulch donated by Omar and watered the plants again. The plants are butterfly plants to sup-

plement the other planned areas. More flower seeds and other plants will be added at a later date. The principal of the school returned from Spring Break to find the area cleaned up and was very happy, indeed.

Up to this writing, Drew has tallied over 15 volunteer hours and Omar another 10 plus volunteer hours. Great going guys!! We all appreciate your efforts and I'm sure the school, students, teachers, and parents do likewise.

TMN member Linda Frank, from the class of 2003, is doing another effort in the McAllen area. Linda's husband works for Weyerhaeuser off Business Highway 83 in McAllen. The company's idea is to plant an area of almost 5 acres with plants to attract all kind of local butterflies, birds and insects. It will also be a resting place for company employees and their families. Linda reports:

The project has not been completed as yet. However, we had three anchor trees planted on March 22<sup>nd</sup> and at the next planting on April 3<sup>rd</sup> we placed 14 more trees and 32 shrubs as well as various other varieties of plants that volunteers brought along. The watering system is in place and we have two ponds set up for drinking. On April 17<sup>th</sup> we had a few of our TMN members come and help us with more plantings of the smaller variety of plants which can withstand full sun as there isn't much shade yet.

The project will not be "completed" for a while, but we are making a good start. We will have to take a summer break because the plants won't transfer well in the heat; however, I will be working on starting plants by seed and then planting in the fall.

Personally I have logged in well over my 40 hours of volunteer time required during a year. I hope I can encourage more of our upper Valley members to come out at our next planting in the fall to see what a great joy it is to work with good people in the out of doors. We had about 25 volunteers from the families and employees of the Weyerhaeuser Company help during the first two planting sessions. They were certainly a great help. As far as recognizing individuals in our community, it has been pretty much a group effort. The Company stresses environmental responsibility and awareness and supports my husband, Steve, in his efforts to do so at his facility.

Of course, the project NEVER goes as planned, but that is the beauty of it. We readjust our plan when needed and let it dictate its needs to us. Already the space looks like "something", and we are taking photos to show the complete process. I recommend all project leaders to do the same.

One last project that began last year in Ramsey Park in Harlingen had a renewed effort to its ongoing completion back in the month of February. Many of our TMN members from all classes helped on Saturday, Feb. 28<sup>th</sup> to add about 20 yellow sophora plants to our roadside planting that was started in February of 2002. We also put in a group of 20 or so brasil trees

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behind our roadside area up along the ridge area. In addition, the group added some mesh wire protectors to the new seedlings to keep the rats and rabbits from chewing up our newly planted areas. The cenizo and lantanas and ebony trees we planted in 2002 have grown well and everyone comments as they drive by at how nice the roadside area looks. They have bloomed along with many of our wildflowers this year. We also planted some 100 or so transplants of American germander donated by Frank Wiseman along the trail's fenced area on Indigo Trail. These plants have taken off like wildfire and are already blooming. You might take a look sometime when you are on your way to the airport along Ed Carey Drive in Harlingen.

Our next quarterly newsletter will include projects undertaken by Robbin Trumble at one of the Rio Hondo Schools and our own TMN Butterfly Garden at The Nature Conservancy in the Southmost area of Brownsville. I do hope more of our members will submit their own articles about their personal projects that were not covered here.

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RGV CHAPTER, TEXAS MASTER  
NATURALISTS

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