



The Chachalaca

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RGV TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

THIS CHAPTER IS AN AFFILIATE OF THE TEXAS MASTER NATURALIST PROGRAM JOINTLY SPONSORED BY TEXAS AGRILIFE EXTENSION AND THE TEXAS PARKS & WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT.

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President's Message *by Virginia Vineyard*

Hello, Master Naturalists,

Happy Spring. I hope all of you are taking time to enjoy the many offerings of our Rio Grande Valley. The plants are greening up, and many are blooming. With luck, we'll get some rain to help out.

Many of you who are birders are enjoying the migrants, which are moving through. Bentsen and Santa Ana are sites for the HMANA (Hawk Migration Association of North America) hawk watches. If you get the chance, stop by between 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. any day of the week (at least at Santa Ana) through April 15. Even if you didn't sign up ahead of time, you're welcome to stop by and stay as long as you like. On Sunday, March 27, more than 7,000 raptors were counted at Santa Ana.

If you haven't been to Sabal Palms Sanctuary since it opened, I encourage you to visit this very special jewel. Not only can you see songbirds, raptors, and sometimes a herp or two; but also, you might see one of the resident bobcats. If you're there on a Saturday, Larry Lof gives a tour of the historical Rand House at 1:00 p.m.

On March 23, the IBWC held a public meeting about the plans to clear the Arroyo Colorado starting at about Business 77 in Harlingen. The short-term phase (funded) is set to begin April 4 and continue through June 6, 2011. This plan calls for the removal of trash and dead trees, and the trimming of live trees where necessary. The long-term phase (not yet funded, but will be) includes hydraulic analysis, research of alternatives, and completion of environmental documentation with construction of "improvements" to begin in 2013. We were told by the IBWC that the Arroyo Colorado was designed to carry 21,000 cfs (cubic feet/second) of water. As a reference on amounts of water, Hurricane Beulah caused a flow of 60,000 cfs, and the summer floods of 2010 maxed out at 5,460 cfs. The next public meeting is June 22, 2011.

On a happier note, the Spring 2011 Training Class will graduate on May 14. This will also be our May general meeting. We will meet at Cactus Creek Ranch at 4:30 p.m., and you are asked to bring a covered side dish. More information will be sent out later.

Thanks to all you wonderful chapter members who make RGVCTMN so great!

Virginia

Recent Milestones

photos by Frank Wiseman



Lou Osborne receiving his 500-hr. pin from Virginia Vineyard in January 2011. Also receiving awards in January for 500 hours of volunteer service were Paula Parson, Richard Ramke, and Beth Michele Wargo.



John Thaxter receiving his 500-hr. pin in February 2011.

Ramsey Park Update

by Frank Wiseman

Things in Ramsey Park have been slow since our recent freezes this year and also due to lack of much needed rain. In addition, we suffered the loss of city water for about a month, which caused further damage to plants badly in need of water.

Spring began to arrive for our hardiest native tree specimens – the huisaches, adelias, Texas persimmons, and palos verdes – which showed their annual blooms a little later this year than usual. However, with the arrival of March our mesquites began to green out, others began to show off their greenery, and a few burst into hardy blooms, like the anacuas. The lantanas welcomed a few butterflies here and there all over the park.

Lou Osborne has worked hard these past few months trying to keep Owl Pond in shape, and he put in many hours working in the Specimen Garden and Eatin' Garden. The *Mammillaria prolifera* cactus began to bloom in late February in that area, with such a big patch growing under a mesquite tree. Dick Roesler worked many hours to keep weeds under control with the weed eater along the pathways, and he managed to get Izzy's Garden watered when the city finally got the water turned back on.



Mammillaria prolifera

Linda Butcher kept working on the north side of the park; she invites all to take a stroll on that side of the park to see what she and a few volunteers have done to clear away cattails from some of the ponds.

Around the middle of March the mountain laurels began to bloom and the smells of “Kool Aid” grape they emit was a delight for all passers-by. The beautiful racemes of flowers attract a lot of attention from our many out-of-state visitors. The park has been playing host to more and more winter birders, who have discovered that it is a good birding spot in the Valley and centrally located. Our regular groups of hikers and joggers and just plain “out-for-the-day” visitors have been plentiful now that better weather has set in for a change.

Christina Mild and Frank Wiseman did a good job of pruning and trimming the area known as Butterfly Meadow recently. Linda McGonigle held her Journal and Sketching Class at the pavilion area and environs of the park on March 5th. That was the day that Ramsey did receive almost 4 inches of a good, hard rain. On Saturday, March 26th, Frank led this year's training class through the park on a three-and-a-half hour visit to ID plants and learn a little more about our native plant life.

Bill Horton is preparing to plant a dozen or so pots of “Sacaton Grass” along the upper Arroyo trail and on the west side of Izzy’s Garden. Bill has grown this grass from seed he has collected from trips out to Green Island.

Now it is time for all of our visitors to try and catch some of our native cacti species in bloom. The *Echinocereus pentalophus* at the Hanging Wall site were in full bloom along with a big patch of *Echinocereus berlandieri* (Bierlandier’s Alicoche) cactus near Butterfly Meadow. Diann Ballesteros’ planting of a *Echinocereus reichenbachii*, var. *fitchii* and some horse crippers on Lilly Agave Hill were blooming in March as well. The prickly pears (*Opuntia engelmannii*) have started with a grand show of yellows and reds now that March is coming to an end and April is beginning. These are the best two months to view the cactus species in the park.



Echinocereus reichenbachii, var. *fitchii*



Prickly Pear Cactus



Alicoche, *Echinocereus berlandieri*
Runyon Garden

There is a nice showing of some of the wild flowers in the park this year, and it might behoove you to take the upper Arroyo trail along the Arroyo to view some of the flowers at their best this time of the year. One area is still showing some of the purple heliotrope that has flourished along there since the floods and freezes. Other areas of the park also have some wild flowers blooming now such as the gaillardias, verbenas, Texas vervains, rock daises, bladderpods, Texas thistle, basket flower, sow thistles, white poppies, sand parsley, pepper grass, Mexican hat, patches of tiny blooming nama, and others will start in short order. It’s time to get your cameras and start venturing out to see all the wild life available in Ramsey Park and get some much needed exercise. And if you are available, you can get in a few volunteer hours at Ramsey Park.

If you are available, you can get in a few volunteer hours at Ramsey Park. A job is always waiting for you there. ♦



Mammillaria pentalophus

Park Benches Honoring Sue Budd

by Cathy Budd

The family of Sue Budd thanks all of the Texas Master Naturalists of the Rio Grande Valley chapter who contributed to a memorial fund to honor Sue's life and her involvement as a member of the Texas Master Naturalist program. With the money, we were able to purchase five sturdy park benches that will be placed around the nature center at Bentsen State Park.

Floodwaters that deluged Bentsen Park this past summer delayed delivery of the benches to their new home. Now they are installed, and we hope that these benches will allow visitors to comfortably observe and contemplate their surroundings or simply rest for a few moments during their nature explorations.

As a person who lived with physical limitations for many years, my mother deeply appreciated the little things – like a place to sit – that kept the out-of-doors accessible to her as her health declined. She was happy being able to interact with others who shared her love and fascination for learning about our planet earth. We know that she would have been especially grateful to all of you whose generosity has now made it a little easier for many people to enjoy the natural wonders preserved in our parks. ♦



Christmas Bird Count 2010

photo by Jimmy Paz



Virginia Vineyard and David Benn doing the Christmas Bird count at Sabal Palm Sanctuary, December 27, 2010.

Photos – RGVCTMN Class Coastal Ecology Field Trip at Isla Blanca with David Hicks

photos by Steve Fowler



RGVCTMN Tidbits

by Jolaine Lanehart

Did you know that we have a mission statement?

“The RGVCTMN 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 and conservation of natural resources and natural areas within the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas.”

Did you know that we have 43 partnerships?

That adds up to a lot of places to volunteer and/or earn Advanced Training! To find the complete list, check out pages 5-6 in our newly revised Chapter Operating Handbook.

(http://www.rgvctmn.org/assets/pdf_files/RGVCTMNOperatingHandbook_Revised_Mar_1_2011.pdf)

Did you know that being an active member means more than paying your dues?

The Handbook states that, “A member who has not completed the required 40 volunteer hours and 8 advanced training hours for recertification may remain an active member of the chapter if his/her dues are paid and the member is working toward recertification in the future (has earned at least one hour towards recertification).”

Did you know that our website has an updated online calendar?

Find activities for earning advanced training and volunteer hours at <http://my.calendars.net/rgvctmn>. General Meeting topics are posted as well as field trips and events hosted by our partners. If you know of an event that should be posted, email our webmaster, Jimmy Paz (jppaz@sbcglobal.net). ♦

Photos – RGVCTMN Class Bird Banding Trip to Las Palomas Wildlife Management Area with Mark Conway

photos by Jean Pettit



Rescue, Recovery, and Release

by Mary Ann Tous

Whenever I drove over the causeway on my way to Port Isabel, I often thought about Lil' Alex, the little Green sea turtle survivor (*Chelona mydas*) that had been rescued in June 2010 during the landfall of Hurricane Alex, for which he was then named. Lil' Alex was found by state troopers on the Gulf side out by access four, totally disoriented after being jostled around by giant debilitating waves. He was probably suffering from hypothermia, complete exhaustion, and shock.

The troopers called in the Turtle Lady Legacy rescue team at the height of the storm, and when we got Lil' Alex safely home through the torrential rains and flooded streets, we put him in the Turtle Lady's bath tub with lukewarm moist bath towels. He was lethargic, and I guessed his weight to be close to 10 lbs. I wondered if he would make it through the night.

It was evident he had been through another battle in his short life as his right rear flipper was missing, but the old injury had healed. He recovered quickly at the Sea Turtle, Inc., rehabilitation center with medications and lots of TLC. He got his very own identifying pit tag on his left front flipper, and on July 15th Ray and I helped release him back into the Laguna Madre bay off the platform of the rescue boat. As we saw him swim enthusiastically away, we felt a happy tug at our hearts. End of story, or so we thought.

Seven months later – February 2011 – comes in with icy vengeance. Temperatures drop quickly, and we find ourselves in the middle of a major Green turtle stranding event in South Texas, by far the largest cold-stunning event since the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network was established in 1989. Dr. Donna Shaver, the Texas Coordinator of STSSN, is the Chief Director of the Division of Sea Turtles Science and Recovery for the Padre Island National Seashore, located in Corpus Christi. There they maintain records of sea turtles found stranded in the State. They help counseling in the protocol activities conducted in the State, and they help with the necropsy of stranded sea turtles found in South Texas that don't survive.

February's cold-stunning event was truly overwhelming. Many volunteer heroes braved the harsh winter conditions to save the trapped turtles. The turtles varied greatly in size and weight, with some over 100 lbs. and others, such as young juveniles, barely tipping the scale. Size did not seem to matter, for they were all in the same predicament, bobbing like corks in the bay at the mercy of the ice storm. As the numbers of rescued Green turtles rose, with the full boats continuously transporting them to different facilities for care, the facilities began to fill and run out of capacity.

Turtles needing more medical attention were left at Sea Turtle, Inc., and others were sent to Texas Parks and Wildlife, Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, even as far away as the Gladys Porter Zoo. I stayed at the UT Pan American Coastal Studies

laboratory to help, and I couldn't help wondering if Alex would turn up. I thought he would be easy to identify with his missing rear flipper. Sadly, I never found him.

It was gratifying to see so many caring people working around the clock 24/7 to save the Greens, but everyone had their hands full. Many TMN volunteers responded to a call for help from Tony Reisinger, as did many of Turtle Lady Legacy friends.

When the weather broke and the sun warmed up the Gulf waters, it was time to release them. So the 3 R cycle in the Sea turtle world – Rescue, Recovery, and Release – had again completed.



Tony Reisinger and Don Hockaday at the Coastal Lab congratulating themselves on a job well done!



A big Green sea turtle, weighing over 100 lbs.



A room of sea turtles waiting to be released.

As I watched the last turtle eagerly hit the waves, I again wondered if Lil Alex had survived the ordeal. A month later I got a call from Adrienne McCracken, the zoologist at Sea Turtle, Inc., who had some great news: one of the Green turtles that

had been taken up to Gladys Porter Zoo had been identified as Lil Alex. He had been identified by his pit tag and his previous rescue stranded forms – now how great is that! So again he had survived Nature’s fury and has been again released back into Laguna Madre.

Visit www.theturtlelegacy.org to read Alex’s amazing story of survival during the 2010 hurricane. ♦

February 2011 Cold-Stunned Turtle Rescue *by Steve Fowler*

The sudden arrival of a very cold norther caught many Valley residents by surprise. For us Naturalists in training, it was clear that our skills would be needed to help with cold-stunned fish and turtles. A call for volunteers was immediately issued and hundreds of volunteers answered. Setting my birthday plans aside, I called my neighbor, Bob Cutter. We put on all the clothes we owned and headed out in the boat to collect turtles for Sea Turtle, Inc.



Our boat, “Sea Esta”, collected 41 turtles for rehabilitation. The dedication of the volunteers under such demanding conditions was amazing. The reward for frozen fingers was the turtle release a few days later. We all agreed that this is what Naturalists are meant to do. ♦



Photos of Cold-Stunned Turtles Rescued on February 2011
by Mary Ann Tous

