



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,

Another quarter has passed, and chapter members have been busy with various projects and volunteer efforts. Some are the specialized events such as the RGV Birding Festival or the annual raffle fund raiser, and others are the ever important things like leading bird walks, working with sea turtles, clearing trails, and keeping up with Ramsey. With a new training class set to begin in January, please consider adding some volunteer time to help out with classes and field trips. In February the Ocelot Festival and the Coastal Expo will need volunteers in various capacities. If you prefer not to work outside or are unable to do so, please consider helping in some way with chapter business.

As the year comes to a close, I extend heartfelt thanks to all you wonderful master naturalists. Thanks especially to our board members. OFFICERS: Eileen Mattei, 1st Vice President; Lou Osborne and Mary Jo Bogatto, 2nd Vice Presidents; Mary Bindner, Recording Secretary (with support from Jolaine Lanehart); David Benn, Secretary; and Carol Hubing, Treasurer. COMMITTEE CHAIRS: Education, John Thaxter; Host, Judy and Terry Weymouth; Membership, Wendie Allstot; Newsletter, Sharon Slagle; Outreach/Publicity, Jackie Field; Listserv Moderator/Webmaster, Jimmy Paz; Historian, Sid Beckwith. AT-LARGE Board Members: Drew Bennie, Juan and Maria Bonnin, Lupita Escobar, Bill Horton, Ruth Hoyt, and Patti Pitcock. *agri*LIFE EXTENSION ADVISOR: Tony Reisinger. It has been a pleasure working with you, and I look forward to another year as chapter president.



David Benn, Secretary; Mary Jo Bogatto, 1st Vice President (6 mo. -- May 1st to Oct 31st); Eileen Mattei, 2nd Vice President (programs); Virginia Vineyard, President; Carol Hubing, Treasurer; Lou Osborne, 1st vice President (6 mo. -- Nov1st to April 30th). Not shown: Mary Bindner, Recording Secretary.

Virginia Vineyard

Recent Milestones

photos by Frank Wiseman



Paul Bryant receiving his 1,000-hr. pin from Virginia Vineyard.



John Tierney receiving his 500-hr. pin from Virginia Vineyard.



Joyce Hamilton receiving her 500-hr. pin from Ed Tamayo.



Virginia Vineyard and Linda Butcher receiving their 500-hr. pins.



Mary Jo Bogatto receiving her 500-hr. pin from Virginia Vineyard.



Mary Ann Tous receiving her 500-hr. pin from Virginia Vineyard.



Pam Cornett receiving her 250-hr. pin from Virginia Vineyard.



Heidi Linneman receiving her 100-hr. pin from Ed Tamayo.



Susan Kerens receiving her 100-hr. pin from Virginia Vineyard.



James Seguin receiving his 100-hr. pin from Virginia Vineyard. ♦

A Morning with Bill Clark

by Juan Hernandez, photos by Cecilia Hernandez

Ever wonder why hawks and vultures fly and hover over burnt sugar cane fields? Well, thanks to the Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society, 25 participants had their questions on raptors answered by Bill Clark, an international authority on hawks.



We gathered at Ramsey Park/Arroyo Colorado World Birding Center on December 14, 2010. Mr. Clark showed us a captured Harris' hawk, and talked about the methods used to catch, band, and release hawks. He also answered several questions related to the Harris' hawk, like age, diet, hunting, and mating.

After the lecture, the group exited Ramsey Park to see the hawk banding process out in the field.



We followed Mr. Clark to four sites, beginning in Harlingen and ending in Raymondville. The goal was to observe and capture a hawk near a telephone pole or in a sugar cane field. The hawk would be lured down to a small wire cage baited with two enclosed live mice. The talons would then get entangled in several loops attached to the top of the cage. A weight tied to the cage ensured that hawk and cage would remain grounded. The hawk would then be placed head first into an aluminum cylinder so that it could be safely banded and then released.

Unfortunately, neither the weather nor the hawks cooperated, but all was not lost. Bill Clark taught us hawk identification and the value of the sugar cane field as a unique ecosystem. He explained the five-year rotation of sugar cane planting, burning, and harvesting, and how vultures, caracaras, and hawks benefit by feeding on squashed or charred remains of rodents and other small animals.

We also learned to identify hawks based on plumage and flight. That Saturday morning we sighted and identified: Cooper's hawk, Peregrine falcon, White-tailed hawk, Black turkey vulture, Northern harrier, and Crested caracara. We were fortunate to see five caracaras fighting for a morsel of food in mid air. While the morsel was torn from one beak to another, Bill talked about the highly competitive struggle between hawks, vultures, and caracaras, to find and then eat the tiniest unit of food.

Next time I see a hawk or vulture soaring in the sky near a burnt sugar cane field, I'll remember Bill Clark's knowledge and passion for hawks. What a pleasure it was to be guided and taught by an expert in the field. Thanks also to the Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society for making it possible. ♦

Sabal Palm Sanctuary to Reopen January 3, 2011

The Gorgas Science Foundation (GSF) of Brownsville will reopen the Sabal Palm Audubon Sanctuary to the public on Monday, January 3, 2011. Audubon Texas will help raise funds for operating expenses during an initial transition period, and GSF will rely on help from students and volunteers as well as donation to reopen the trails, operate the visitor's center, and keep the sanctuary open. Jimmy Paz will serve as a volunteer sanctuary manager.

A 527-acre tract of land on the Rio Grande River in Brownsville, the Sanctuary is one of the most uniquely biodiverse habitats in the country, containing one of the last vestiges of original Sabal Palm forest in the U.S. The Sanctuary provides breeding habitat for many endangered or high-priority birds and is a critical source of shelter and food for migrating and wintering species.

The sanctuary will be open 7 days a week, Monday–Sunday 7:00 AM – 5:00 PM. Entry fees will be \$5 per person. ♦

Star Cactus Restoration Project

by Paul Bryant



The endangered Star Cactus is a small, inconspicuous cactus that can recede below the ground level in dry periods. Its scarcity is due to its very specific habitat and the fact that it is often mistakenly collected as Peyote cactus. There are thought to be only a few thousand in Starr County and another small population in Mexico.

In the last few years, the Nature Conservancy established an

agreement with several private landowners to help map, monitor, and protect the little gems. In 2005, the Nature Conservancy was able to collect seeds and grow a few hundred Star cacti in pots with the help of a private consultant, the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, and the Plant Materials Center at Texas A & M University at Kingsville. The need to use the potted stock arose when in the summer of 2009 an oil exploration company, with the permission of the landowners, inadvertently destroyed some of the cactus as they crossed those properties.



On October 16th and 17th, a crew of two people flagged locations where the new star cactus would be planted on the previously destroyed sites. The next three days included a cooperative effort with a joint crew from USFWS, the oil exploration company, the Nature Conservancy, and me. We planted 320 Star cactus plants on three different, private ranches.



Planting the Star cactus entailed a very specific procedure. Photos of each of the four plant micro sites were taken before and after the specimens were planted. Each plant's tracking number was recorded and then transferred to a

metal tag. The diameter of each cactus was measured and recorded to its assigned number. Potting medium was washed off the roots and as they were planted the local soil was water packed around them with a measured amount of water. The new metal tag was anchored beside each plant. Plans for the new star cactus include photographic monitoring of the sites for several years to come. ♦



Ramsey Report

by Frank Wiseman

Over the past few months, Ramsey Park has suffered from the drought situation again. The lack of occasional rainfall has hampered the growth and general greenness of the park. Efforts to water our most endangered species have continued by our staunch volunteers, but it is difficult to see so much beautiful plant life fade after the generous supply of rain from this summer.

In November we welcomed back Lou Osborne to the park and his work at Owl Pond. He has done wonders again cleaning up that area and getting the pond that he

reworked this last spring into better shape. The birds and other wildlife surely appreciate it as do many of our regular Wednesday morning bird walk attendees. Phil Nelson leads a bird walk every Wednesday morning beginning at 7:00 a.m. for all interested birders out there.

Bob Archer has returned to work in Hummingbird tail after recovering from a hand accident earlier this summer. So many of the Park's visitors really enjoy sitting on our Texas Master Naturalist-donated bench to admire all of the birds that flock to that area with the pond and feeders that attract so many species. Once in a while, if you are lucky, you might spot the Bob Cat lurking around this area, too.

We still see damage from Armadillos and Wild Pigs or Javelinas in many areas of the park. A recent sighting of a mother Javelina and four little ones was reported by a jogger on the east end of the trails.

Dick Roesler, Diann Ballesteros, and Frank Wiseman have continued working at Izzy's Garden and planted another 15 species of plants. This area was damaged considerably after the flooding of the Arroyo this summer. So much of that area was under water for over three weeks, and we lost 90 percent of the native plants there.

Christina Mild and Diann Ballesteros have done some clean up in the Lily Agave Hill area where many of our endangered species are located. Linda Butcher has continued all of her efforts on the north side of the park and has had some help from a winter visitor or two this fall. Bill Horton has also contributed with work with the chain saw and the weed eater in many of the trail areas as has Dick Roesler with his trusty weed eater. Drew Bennie has donated and planted another 20 or so plants in that main trail area leading down from the main entrance trail area.

Ginger Byram has worked at maintaining the Entrance Garden this summer and fall season. So much work is needed before our spring season arrives and all of us who volunteer in the park appreciate all who come out and volunteer their services. So many of our walkers and joggers and birders often stop to ask us questions and thank us for all the work we do in the park.

The birders were surprised at our own Nature Park, again. It just keeps getting better by all reports from our annual Bird Fest Visitors. These kinds of welcome comments from so many of our far away visitors to Harlingen are always appreciated. Thanks again to all of our TMN volunteers. ♦

Cactus Moth Training

photos by Cathy Budd

Rio Grande Valley Chapter Texas Master Naturalists attended Cactus Moth training on December 14th, 2010. This pest, which is now in southern Louisiana, is a serious concern for Texas, particularly south Texas. Offered at the Estero Llano Grande State Park, the free training was focused on informing, training, and activating agency personnel and the public on the cactus moth. ♦



Dr. Baron Rector



RGVCTMN attendees included Pam Cornett, Paul Bryant, Linda Butcher, Lou Osborne, Virginia Vineyard, Mary Donahue, Mary Jo Bogatto, Carol Hubing, and Antoinette Budd, as well as (not shown) Judy Weymouth, Terry Weymouth, Herman Budd, Ray DeLorme, and Cathy Budd.

RGV Birding Festival

by Terry Weymouth

For my wife and me, one of the really high points of this time of year is the five-day RGV Birding Festival in Harlingen, held November 10-14, 2010. The seminars are entertaining and educational, the vendor booths are enlightening and fun to peruse, the field trips are very well organized, and lots of birds and butterflies are seen. The trip leaders are literally world class, many having led birding trips all over North and South America and other parts of the world as well. Seminar presenters are all well known authors or lecturers, and this year event even included James Currie, the host of the television series *Birding Adventures*.

Each day a variety of field trips and seminars were offered, and it was difficult to choose among them. We chose the Big Day and Raptor Banding field trips. The objective of a Big Day is to identify as many bird species as possible in one day. Our trip leaders were Cameron Coy from Florida and Michael Retter from Indiana. Our “day” was from 6 am to 4:30 pm, and we were really excited. Participants met at the convention center in Harlingen and divided into four teams for a little friendly competition. Each team set its own agenda and destinations and, with engines warmed and coffee cups full, we left at exactly 6 am heading in different directions.

We started by listening for owls in the pre-dawn glow near San Benito. From there it was just go, go, go. Our sites included Laguna Atascosa, South Padre Island, Estero Llano Grande State Park, Frontera, Valley Nature Center, and Tiocono Lake, with other brief stops along the way. We drove almost 200 miles, identified 151 species of birds, returned to the convention center at 4:15, birded the park across the street until 4:28. We handed in our list at exactly 4:30. I’m not bragging too much, but we were delighted to learn that our team won with 151 species, 2nd and 3rd place teams tied with 134, and the 4th place team had 114.

A highlight of the day occurred along Smith Road, near SH 100 and the town of Laguna Vista. We had stopped to scan the area and had flushed a pair of Aplomado falcons. While they were flying around chasing each other and hunting, they flushed a Least Sandpiper and took chase. In less than 30 seconds a White-tailed hawk joined the fray and the Least Sandpiper was forgotten as the falcons and the hawk discussed territory. Within a minute the hawk conceded and headed toward Mexico.



Aplomado falcon, flared and sitting.

Sunday we participated in the Raptor Banding field trip. The trip leader was Bill Clark, who literally wrote the book on raptors – in fact he has written two books on these amazing birds. Because of the raptor population here, he has chosen to live in the LRGV. Unlike the start of the Big Day trip, we left at the reasonable hour of 9 am heading for Old Port Isabel Road east of Los Fresnos. Finding no raptors there, we moved eastward to Smith Road where we again observed a pair of Aplomado falcons, perhaps the same ones. One was already wearing a band; to prevent undue stress on the bird, the bander's regulations prohibit intentionally trapping a banded bird again. The other bird was apparently not hungry as it was uninterested in the baited trap.

However, we did meet one of Bill's acquaintances who had trapped an American Kestrel. We were shown how the bird had been trapped and we watched as it was banded, weighed, and measured. The Kestrel was to be released at the exact spot he was trapped because some research indicates that Kestrels may have "site fidelity" to their relatively small territories.



Just as we were preparing to return to Harlingen, Bill telephoned our caravan to say that he had trapped a Harris's Hawk, so we got to watch the process all over again.



I was amazed by how calm the hawk was. I was expecting it to be stressed, calling noisily, and constantly struggling to escape. Instead, in Bill's hands, it simply laid quietly and seemingly calm while he banded, weighed, and measured it, and then spread the wings to examine the feathers. When he was finished, he handed the bird to Judy Weymouth, showing her how to hold it so that BOTH she and the bird were safe, and then how to release it. Once released, the hawk circled and landed on a nearby power pole where it preened, watched us for a while, and then took off to continue its hunt – a perfect ending to our marvelous field trip. ♦

Canoeing the Rio Grande River

by Juan Hernandez, photos by Cecilia Hernandez

I received notice from Nancy Brown, Public Outreach Specialist of Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), that this year's canoe season would be cancelled because of damaged infrastructure due to flooding. Although I am disappointed, I understand that safety is a priority. I will miss canoeing the smooth current of the Rio Grande, and I long to see its lively banks. So until repairs to roads and ramps are completed, and a new canoe season opens, I'll remember and share the following highlights of two seasons as volunteer canoe guide at Santa Ana NWR.

My first trip down river as a canoe guide was on January 16, 2009. Eight visitors and two guides piled into a faded blue 1978 Chevy passenger van and towed canoes to the river. We put in the canoes and hardly had to paddle as the current led us downstream past muddy banks marked with raccoon and heron tracks. The visitors enjoyed seeing the Ringed, Belted, and Green kingfishers. We marveled at the wingspan and flight of the Great Blue heron. Other birds sighted included the Great Kiskadee, Black crowned Night heron, and Spotted Sandpiper.



Juan and Greg, guides.



Canoeing the Rio Grande River.

Most of the refuge visitors canoeing that winter and early spring came from the midwest region of the United States. Cold temperatures, mist, and an occasional drizzle on the Rio Grande didn't stop them from enjoying a float down the river. Seven months later would bring a different experience.

On August 7, 2009, I canoed with a group of thirteen teenagers from the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC). The teens were treated to the canoe trip after a summer of clearing trails, painting, and doing other refuge projects. Cliff Link, YCC team leader, explained the goal was to get local kids out of the city to learn about and appreciate our natural resources and conservation efforts.

The canoe trip was completed in record time as the teens paddled vigorously, joked, and laughed past river cane, ebony, and willows. November would bring a much more serious group to the river.

Summer ended and fall migration began. Birders from the Annual Birding Festival arrived at Santa Ana NWR on November 15, 2009. Unlike the easy-going Winter Texans and the feisty YCC youth of summer, these visitors arrived with cameras, binoculars, and field guides in hand.



Little Green heron.

Seven canoes slipped into the Rio Grande carrying 16 birders scanning shore, brush, and tree lines for elusive birds needed for life lists. I learned so much from the expert guides who identified birds by song, flight, and other obscure field marks. By the end of the trip, the life lists included Green kingfisher, Gray hawk, Red Shouldered hawk, White-tailed hawk, Little Green heron, Black-crowned night heron, Great Kiskadee, Eastern Phoebe, Anhinga, and the ever present, Spotted sandpiper.

During early 2010, our visitors included groups of winter Texans, teachers and social workers, middle school students, and members of a local church. They witnessed a variety of wildlife sightings on the Rio Grande River such as, a Bobcat stalking along the Mexican shore, two barn owls nesting in a bank burrow approximately 15 feet above the river, and a Great Horned owl perched on a high limb scanning the refuge floor. Greg Koenig and I paired up as guides January through March 2010.



Barn owl flying over the river.



Great horned owl watching us.

Then the rain came. Although I'm disappointed about the cancelled canoe season, I know that flooding has its purpose in nature. I look forward to canoeing again and noting what has changed on the river since. I am also grateful to the Texas Master Naturalists and Refuge staff for providing the education and opportunity to share and interpret the unique riparian environment to our visitors at Santa Ana NWR. And when the refuge roads and canoe ramps are finally cleared and open, I'll be ready.

