



# The Chachalaca

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## RGV TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

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## President's Message

*by Virginia Vineyard*

Hello, Chapter Members,

The first quarter of 2012 has been busy. We began in January with the annual report to the state. We report on such things as new partners, number of volunteers and advanced training hours accrued by the chapter, number of trainees, and number of members recertifying. Sixty-eight chapter members recertified for 2011 and received the Texas Horned Lizard State Recertification Pin.

We held drawings for the annual raffle at the January meeting, and the winners were as follows:

5<sup>th</sup> Place: Private photography lesson with Ruth Hoyt – Paula Parsons

4<sup>th</sup> Place: Annual pass to Sabal Palms Sanctuary and SPI Birding and Nature Center – Jolaine Lanehart

3<sup>rd</sup> Place: \$100 gift card to Bass Pro Shops – Jolaine Lanehart

2<sup>nd</sup> Place: Handmade quilt donated by Virginia Vineyard – Diann Ballesteros

1<sup>st</sup> Place: Kindle Touch – Mary Ann Tous

First quarter milestone awards went to Virginia Domhoff, Karen Mencil, Judy Svetanoff, and Terry Weymouth for **250 hours** of volunteer service; Carolyn Cardile, Joyce Fowler, Ruth Hoyt, and Jean Pettit for **500 hours** of volunteer service; Wendie Allstot, Mary Jo Bogatto, Pam Cornett, Jorge Garcia, Dodie Greaney, Peggy Knopp, Virginia Vineyard, and Statira Wilmoth for **1,000 hours** of volunteer service; and Cathy Budd for **2,500 hours** of volunteer service.

Spring training got underway with the first class on January 18<sup>th</sup>. In addition to the 14 trainees at the San Benito location, 34 trainees participated in classes added in the Upper Valley. Graduation is set for Thursday, April 26, from 5-8 pm at Victoria Palms in Donna. As always, we appreciate the use of the Cameron County Annex meeting room for the San Benito classes. In Mission, Norman Winter of the National Butterfly Center provided facilities for classes in January and February, and Bentsen State Park was the site for March classes. Between the Lower and Upper Valley locations, trainees were able to choose from 21 classes and 16 field trips in order to fulfill their certification requirements.

A February highlight was the Karma Floating Classroom trip. This 57-foot teaching vessel, sponsored by Sea Grant Texas, gave us the opportunity to see the Laguna Madre in a way not usually possible. We were able to collect and observe marine life from microscopic plankton to adult fish, crustaceans, echinoderms, and more.

March has brought a final flurry of hectic activity with spring training coming to a close, a public scoping meeting on the proposed offshore wind farm (more on that next quarter), a Coastal Naturalist training on marine mammal stranding, and the anticipation of sea turtle nesting season.

So get your binoculars, field guides, hat, sunscreen, bug spray, and water, and get out and enjoy our Valley nature. And don't forget your tweezers.

Thank you.

Virginia

## Christmas Bird Counts – December 2011

by Mary Jo Bogatto

The Christmas Bird Counts at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and at my ranch were special for me this year – I did them with my granddaughter, Abby Jo, age 2. She had flown in the day before with my daughter and her 5-month old sister. Abby Jo was excited about birds, Santa, and reindeer here on Cactus Creek Ranch. The South Texas drought has been rough for the critters, but food and water are constantly replenished at different locations on the ranch, so residents and migrants visit as often as possible. From my kitchen table, you can look out and see two natural feeders made from mesquite.

During the CBC on December 18<sup>th</sup> at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Abby Jo got her first quail sighting – 11 Northern Bobwhite! Later, in the yard we saw Long-billed Curlew, Great-tailed Grackle, Green Jay, Northern Cardinal, House Sparrow, Northern Mockingbird, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Red-winged Blackbird, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Green Jay, and Great Kiskadee. I could not believe the joy of holding her and saying, “Look, my JoJo!”, with her little hand pointing at the birds.

My friend from the Valley Nature Center, Martin Hagne, helped me with the ranch bird count. We split up and were able to document the following birds during the day.

1.	Greater White-fronted Goose	200
2.	Snow Goose	1,000
3.	Ross’s Goose	2
4.	Northern Shoveler	75
5.	Redhead	1
6.	Northern Bobwhite	18
7.	Double-crested Cormorant	2
8.	Black Vulture	10
9.	Turkey Vulture	41
10.	Osprey	4
11.	Northern Harrier	3
12.	Sharp-shinned Hawk	1
13.	Harris’s Hawk	3
14.	White-tailed Hawk	4
15.	Red-tailed Hawk	1
16.	Crested Caracara	4
17.	American Kestrel	2
18.	Aplomado Falcon	1
19.	Sandhill Crane	491
20.	Killdeer	1
21.	Long-billed Curlew	48
22.	Gull-billed Tern	9
23.	Eurasian Collared-Dove	2
24.	White-winged Dove	2
25.	Mourning Dove	66
26.	Barn Owl	6
27.	Great Horned Owl	2
28.	Common Pauraque	3
29.	Golden-fronted Woodpecker	9
30.	Ladder-backed Woodpecker	9
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31.	Eastern Phoebe	3
32.	Great Kiskadee	3
33.	Loggerhead Shrike	6
34.	Green Jay	12
35.	Black-crested Titmouse	2
36.	Cactus Wren	3
37.	Bewick's Wren	3
38.	House Wren	1
39.	Northern Mockingbird	8
40.	Long-billed Thrasher	1
41.	European Starling	3
42.	American Pipit	4
43.	Sprague's Pipit	1
44.	Orange-crowned Warbler	6
45.	Yellow-rumped Warbler	3
46.	Olive Sparrow	6
47.	Cassin's Sparrow	1
48.	Savannah Sparrow	15
49.	Northern Cardinal	3
50.	Red-winged Blackbird	117
51.	Eastern Meadowlark	12
52.	Great-tailed Grackle	71
53.	House Sparrow	4

This year I reached out to my fellow ranchers through a program I started 16 years ago when we purchased the ranch and began cooperative conservation as a neighbor to the refuge. The program is called Ranchers for Wildlife. This year the Pair-o-dice Ranch joined the CBC. We extend a special thank you to the Swanberg family, especially Virgil and Carolyn Swanberg. Martin Hagne and I visited Pair-o-dice and documented the following for its first CBC.

1.	Snow Goose	600
2.	Ross's Goose	1
3.	Wild Turkey	19
4.	Black-crowned Night-heron	1
5.	Turkey Vulture	13
6.	Black Vulture	8
7.	Northern Harrier	1
8.	Sharp-shinned Hawk	1
9.	Harris's Hawk	1
10.	White-tailed Hawk	1
11.	Red-tailed Hawk	1
12.	Crested Caracara	1
13.	Killdeer	1
14.	Mourning Dove	4
15.	Common Ground-dove	2
16.	Belted Kingfisher	1
17.	Golden-fronted Woodpecker	3
18.	Ladder-backed Woodpecker	2
19.	Eastern Phoebe	2
20.	Great Kiskadee	1
21.	Loggerhead Shrike	1
22.	Green Jay	7
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23.	Cave Swallow	2
24.	Northern Mockingbird	3
25.	Long-billed Thrasher	2
26.	Orange-crowned Warbler	2
27.	Olive Sparrow	1
28.	Northern Cardinal	2

That evening participants were invited to a Chili Cookout at Cactus Creek Ranch and we compared notes and stories. Friends of Laguna Atascosa and Cactus Creek Ranch sponsored the First Annual Chili Cookout! The grand center piece was a 3-D cake in the shape of a Christmas tree decorated with edible Greater Roadrunners, Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Cardinals, American Goldfinches and others, as well as small presents. It was so beautiful that participants thought it was just a decoration. What a surprise when my daughter Michelle and I began to cut slices from the cake and hand it out for dessert.



Counters received gifts for finding the rarest bird – Mary Gustafson found the Greater Scaup, for sighting the most birds in an area – Bob and Mary Ann Severson saw 77 species, and for the counting the most of a single species – Bob and Mary Ann Severson counted 5,827 Pintails. Jonathan Moczygemba, Wildlife Biologist at the Laguna Atascosa NWR and count compiler, presented the awards.



A final gift went to anyone who could guess the height of the snowman, which was made from south Texas tumbleweeds and named Tumble. Robert Cohen guessed the height at 7 feet. Thank you to the snowman official, Chuck Swanberg.

After the awards, Jonathon noted that, “Despite muddy and very windy conditions, we had an amazing group of birders that stuck together and toughed it out to really make the count a success.”



We topped the evening off with a group photo in front of the Christmas tree exclaiming Merry Christmas to all. We will be back next year for the 2nd Annual CBC Bird Count and Chili Cookout.

Please contact Jonathan if you would like to be part of the Laguna Atascosa CBC next year. Follow these links to learn more about Rio Grande Valley wildlife:

[www.cactuscreek ranch.net](http://www.cactuscreek ranch.net)

[www.friendsofsouthtexasrefuges.org](http://www.friendsofsouthtexasrefuges.org)

[www.valleynaturecenter.org](http://www.valleynaturecenter.org)

[www.southtexasnature.com](http://www.southtexasnature.com)

This year's event would not have been possible without the help and guidance of Jennifer Owen-White, LAWR staff representative to the Friends Group; Dr. Tom DeMaar, president of the LAWR Friends Group; Martin Hagne, Director of Valley Nature Center; and Jonathan Moczygemba, LAWR wildlife biologist.

I cannot wait until next year. A warm Texas thanks to all the ranchers, volunteers, and the friends group. Hope to see you next year at the CBC count and the Chili Cook Out at Cactus Creek Ranch. ♦

## Lucy's Bones

by Stan Sterba

Lucy was the common name given to a collection of bones found in Africa in 1974 and thought to be the earliest record of the modern human species. Lucy -- a good name for my baby African White-necked Raven.

Though you might think you could just zip on down to your local pet store to buy a native Common Raven, they are federally protected in the United States, and it's illegal to buy or possess the native raven species without a difficult-to-obtain permit. A waiting list of people wanted a baby raven, and the United States has only one breeder. Lucy arrived on May 31, 2007, and I felt like I won the lottery.

I'd had a pet crow in college in Oklahoma during the 70's, a bird I'd rescued from a young kid who kept it in deplorable conditions. Joe, the crow -- he learned to say his name, bark like the neighbors dog and endear himself to all who met him. He bonded with humans, which put him potentially at risk if he was released.

When I retired from my job in Portland, Oregon, in 2001, I moved to the Valley and bought a house with about 3 acres near San Benito. I had room for an aviary and decided to find a crow or raven to become part of the growing family of critters that call my place home.

Lucy arrived at the McAllen Airport, seven weeks old and hungry, incomplete raggedy plumage, a real noise maker. The shipping clerk thought she looked like a vulture, but she was beautiful to me. I bought her a huge indoor enclosure and built an outdoor enclosure as well. She grew into a gorgeous African White-necked Raven (*Corvus albicollis*), shiny coal black feathers with a clean white patch of feathers on the back of her neck and a huge white-tipped beak.



Lucy is always on the go, getting into everything and teasing, tweaking, looking, poking, prodding, stealing, finding, observing, doing, catching, killing, always on alert. She has a bit of the devil in her, and although I sometimes get mad, I can't imagine her not being around. For me she is what being alive is all about.

On December 2<sup>nd</sup>, Lucy managed to open the latch to her outdoor aviary and slip out into the wild for the first time. I'd forgotten to replace the padlock on the gate, and she'd learned how to open the latch from years of watching me do it. My slip-up gave her the chance for a breakout, and she took it. She'd been gone about two hours before I noticed her missing. I quickly got on my bicycle and searched the area near my house, and I continued the search by car the next morning with the help of Joyce Hamilton, but no luck. It seemed an impossible task to find one strong flying bird that could have gone in any direction, especially with me restricted to the roads.

I made up a "wanted poster" for Lucy and sent it out electronically via social networking sites. Joyce posted Lucy's escape information on Facebook. I also notified as many birders



and nature enthusiasts as I could. I was afraid I'd never see her again, and I was surprised at all the people who contacted Joyce and me with concern for Lucy, including:

- Darlene Campbell, a friend of Joyce's, works at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville. She told zoo staff members about Lucy. I got an email from Colette Adams, General Curator at the Gladys Porter Zoo, who said the zoo would let me know if it got information from the public regarding her location. It was comforting that Colette took the time to contact me.
- I got a phone call from Ann Arendarczyk, one of the original volunteers looking after Allison, the injured sea turtle at Sea Turtle, Inc. Ann thought she had seen Lucy behind the Convection Center on South Padre Island. I drove to South Padre Island early the next morning and searched the island extensively but no Lucy.

I worried that Lucy's lack of fear would put her in danger. On the morning of December 8<sup>th</sup>, I got a phone call from Emma Mitchell of the Gladys Porter Zoo. Emma thought my bird might have been found.

A David Sato had called the zoo to report a strange bird in his yard eating food he'd put out for the wild birds. His description matched Lucy right down to the leather bands on her legs (information I hadn't listed on Lucy's poster). I quickly got into my truck and headed off for David's house in San Benito. David's house is on a rural, wooded 15 acres, and Lucy was there. When I called her name, she immediately flew to me and landed on my fist. She wanted to go home.



Just an incredible positive outcome; I witnessed firsthand the actions of the compassionate, caring folks at the Gladys Porter Zoo, I met a good soul in David Sato, and Lucy came home with not a scratch on her.



Incidentally, I have altered Lucy's outdoor aviary so she won't be able to release herself in the future. ♦



## **Bentsen Squirrel**

*by Kathy Tonn*

While volunteering at Bentsen State Park on Friday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the day the temperature reached 94 degrees, I noticed a squirrel who thought it was "way too hot". Here's a funny picture of the little guy just hanging out on a branch trying to catch some cool air. ♦



## Ramsey Park Update – March 18, 2012

by Linda Butcher

With help from several Texas Master Naturalists and trainees, we've pruned and removed most of the dead plant material left from winter, allowing plants to come out fresh and new. They look great. Most are in full bloom now. Cacti are about a week or two from blooming. With all the blooms, I am seeing a lot of butterflies. Spring migration starts in only a few weeks, so the birds will be here before we know it.

Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society and Texas Master Naturalist volunteers had a meeting with Jim Vallely from Harlingen Water Works System on Tuesday, March 13<sup>th</sup>. He told us that construction has started for running reclaimed water to Ramsey Park for the ponds. Construction should be complete by the end of May. On Wednesday, March 14<sup>th</sup>, several volunteers moved some grasses and cacti out of the construction zone. Having ponds full of water at all times will greatly increase the wildlife population in the park.

If you'd like to volunteer at Ramsey Park, please give me a call at (956) 423-1802. ♦

## It's Tracking Time Again – Arribada!

by Mary Ann Tous

South Padre Island seashore is a haven for the Kemp's Ridley sea turtles (*lepidochelys kempii*) as they continue in their struggle for survival. From April to August female Kemp's Ridley sea turtles make their way to nest on our shores. They return to crawl laboriously across the hot sands to nest, and they leave behind their treasured eggs. Once their mission is accomplished, they must quickly return to the cool sea waters, never looking back.

This is a much anticipated time for TMN volunteers who are on call to patrol the beaches both on foot and by all-terrain vehicle, protecting the nesters and their precious cargo of eggs, knowing that 54 days or so later tiny Kemp's Ridley hatchlings will emerge from the nests, weighing less than an ounce. Without any guidance other than their innate senses, the hatchlings will make their trek into the sea, knowing it is home and bravely engaging the waves. The experience is truly a wonder to witness and to support.

Last year we found the first nest on April 29<sup>th</sup> on SPI shores on, of course, a very windy day. Who will find the first nest this year?...and where? It's an exciting time for volunteers to venture out to help this endangered species in its annual arribada.

Here's a picture of RGVCTMN members attending the Kemp's Ridley sea training session presented by Cynthia Rubio of Padre Island National Seashore. More than a hundred people were in attendance. This story will be continued. For more information, please visit [theturtleladylegacy.org](http://theturtleladylegacy.org) ♦



## Science Rocks at Sullivan!

*by Marie Montalvo*

Sullivan Elementary School in San Benito, Texas, is having a great time with its Explorer's Science Club. The children have enjoyed guest speakers and learned about native plants (Dr. Sally Merrill and Jonathan Rodriguez), fossils (Mrs. Cristela Wise), turtles (Ms. Alicia Cavazos), and birds (Ms. Marie Montalvo). All of the aforementioned are fellow Texas Master Naturalist trainees.

In spite of cuts in education budgets, Sullivan continues to move forward. Our awesome parents have stepped up to the plate and provided transportation and met other needs for the children. Our first field trip was to Ramsey Park on January 28<sup>th</sup>, and the parents and children had a great time. Some grandparents were also involved, turning the occasion into a family affair. It was one of the greatest teaching experiences I have ever had! Many of the parents had never heard of Ramsey Park. The group was rather large, so we divided into several smaller groups to have a better chance to see the wildlife. It was awesome, and the children loved it.

Ms. Laura De La Garza (from the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife, Santa Ana) gave us a presentation on endangered species in the Valley and brought pelts. The children took away an appreciation of nature and a strong desire to protect it. The parents are just as excited as the children, and that's good news. Parents sometimes need an excuse to get away from their busy schedules to enjoy time just being with their child in nature, and education is a good reason. The most important outcome is that they are connecting with their children and with nature.

We went to Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge on March 5<sup>th</sup>. Everyone had a wonderful time, especially walking across the rope bridge.



Why Santa Ana? Jennifer Owen-White and her staff have a commitment to connect with people through the art of nature interpretation. I had the good fortune to attend her workshop. Many people of the Rio Grande Valley want to be connected to nature, and they are just waiting for the connectors. That's us, the Texas Master Naturalists! ♦

## Sullivan School Science News on the Web

by Cristela Wise

TMN trainee Marie Montalvo updates the school website for Sullivan Elementary School in San Benito weekly with photos, slideshows, and reports about club field trips, and guest speakers. See information about the Science Explorers at <http://sullivan.sbcisd.net/category/science-explorers/> ♦

### A Rare Stray from Mexico

by Carol H. Dolan

The *Field Guide to Butterflies of North America* notes that the “Mexican Silverspot is more at home in mid-elevation tropical woodlands but reported to breed sporadically in the lower Rio Grande Valley.” This rare stray decided to breed in my butterfly garden. She is a Brush-footed (Nymphalidae) butterfly and belongs to Subfamily of Fritillaries (Heliconiinae).

I grabbed my camera and rushed to her host plant, corkstem passionflower. Her fluttering about the leaves of the vine made it difficult to get a good picture. She would not land, and all the pictures of her fluttering about were blurred. Then she flew by one of the corkstem’s tendrils that had not started to curl, hung upside down, and started to lay eggs (ovipositing). The picture shows 3 eggs.



Because of the freeze warning that night, I took the eggs inside to raise. The next few days were cool and cloudy, and butterfly activity in my garden was slow. However, five days after the eggs were deposited, a Mexican Silverspot visited my garden again to nectar on my lantana. This time I was able to get a good picture. I do not know if it was the same butterfly that had oviposited the eggs.





The caterpillars eclosed (insect larva hatched from the eggs – eclosion also refers to the emergence of an adult insect from its pupal case) on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> days. This picture of all three caterpillars was taken on the 8<sup>th</sup> day.



This picture was taken on the 20<sup>th</sup> day. Notice parts of shed skin on the leaves and stem. A caterpillar will shed its skin five times. In other words, the insect must wear and outgrow five skins. Each skin is called an instar. Also, notice that the caterpillars are growing at different rates.



Before a caterpillar forms a chrysalis, it attaches itself to a surface and hangs in a “J” shape. The chrysalis is formed in several hours. On the 27<sup>th</sup> day, the first caterpillar started to hang in the “J”. On the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup> day, it was a chrysalis.



The three Mexican Silverspots are developing at different rates. Here is day 28.



The second caterpillar formed a “J” on the 34<sup>th</sup> day, 6 days after the first caterpillar had formed a “J”. In that 6-day time period, we had a cloudy cold spell, and the inside house temperatures were below 70 at night. Possibly this is why it took 6 days for the second caterpillar to form a “J”.



The second caterpillar started to form its chrysalis on the 35<sup>th</sup> day. Notice that it is not fully formed. The third caterpillar looks like it will attach to the stem.



The third caterpillar attached on the 36<sup>th</sup> day, forming a “J”. The 37<sup>th</sup> day it started to form its chrysalis. This picture shows the chrysalis fully formed.



Compare the Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae incarnata*) chrysalis (left, below) with the Mexican Silverspot (*Dione moneta poeyii*) chrysalis (right, below). Both fritillaries use the corkstem passionflower as their host plant. They look similar in the caterpillar and chrysalis stages.



At 3:32 AM, the night before eclosion, the chrysalis changed color and appeared semi-transparent. The wing patterns were visible through the semi-transparent pupal shell. On the 41<sup>st</sup> day around 8 AM, the butterfly eclosed. I missed getting a picture of the pupal shell splitting and the Silverspot dropping out. When the adult emerged, its wings were wrinkled, wet, and deflated, but the abdomen was distended with fluid. The butterfly pumped some of this fluid (hemolymph) into the wings through veins to inflate them. At 8:05, the newly-emerged butterfly is sitting on the empty shell to rest and let the wings dry out.



An adult butterfly emerges full-grown from the chrysalis, often losing reddish meconium fluid as it leaves. This picture shows the excreted excess fluid that was dropped during the resting stage. The fluid that the butterfly excreted changed colors from dark red-brown, to orange, to clear.





The butterfly continued to rest, coiling and uncoiling its proboscis. This picture shows a drop of fluid on the proboscis.



At the end of the day, I released the butterfly on the corkstem passionflower.



On the 46<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> the other two butterflies eclosed. The butterflies were being taken care of by another Texas Master Naturalist because I was on vacation. She got some good pictures before she released them. Here is one of her pictures. ♦

