



The Chachalaca

VOLUME 11 NUMBER 1 31 MARCH 2014

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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 Alicia Cavazos

Hello Everyone,

We are three months into the new year, and things are moving at a fast pace. It is almost graduation time for the new 2014 class. The San Benito and Mission class will include about 56 new Master Naturalists, combined with our active members of about 130, and I think this year we will have record breaking volunteer and AT hours.

I have gone on several field trips with the new class and, as usual, everyone raves about the quality of the training, speakers, and field trips. We are lucky to have such a dedicated group of individuals who love nature so much and are willing to give so much of their time to make this a success.

One of the requirements that we implemented this year was group projects for the class. This gave students time to get to know each other better outside of the classroom, and an opportunity to create projects that benefit our partners. They will present their projects to the membership at graduation. Again this year, the graduation will be open to all members and will be held at Victoria Palms, Donna, Texas, on April 16th at 6:00 pm. Please bring a side dish, salad, or dessert. Come and meet the new 2014 class of the Rio Grande Valley chapter of the Texas Master Naturalists.

One of the perks of being a Master Naturalist is meeting other people with like interests. For example, I have been so fortunate to make friends with members of Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society, and I have become a member myself. ACAS is also our RGVCTMN partner. I was invited on a road trip to San Diego for the birding festival. It was an awesome 10-day trip spent birding through four states. Being a new birder, I saw over 200 new species. I would especially like to let the new members know that our organization offers an opportunity to make lifelong friends and to do things you enjoy doing.

Alicia

Lower Valley TMN Class Gets Off to a Great Start

by Carolyn Cardile

When the Education Committee met last summer, its members decided to invite speakers to cover at least 10 different chapters of the curriculum. The committee also wanted to invite some new speakers to build a larger group of possible presenters for future years. So far, our plan has been successful. Dr. John Herron returned to start the year with an excellent presentation about ecology and biodiversity. Dr. Benavides gave us an informative presentation about hydrology, and Mark Klym did a great program about urban wildscapes, as well as information about hummingbirds.

Dr. Alexander from UT-Brownsville returned and told us about the progress of her plant studies and prescribed burnings at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Once again, Ruth Hoyt taught the class about wildlife photography. Although I've heard these speakers in the past, I enjoyed each presentation and learned new things each evening.

The new presentations were also a treat. Chris Hathcock's geology presentation was very informative. I wished I could join him on his field trip to learn more. This year our ichthyology presentation was given by Dr. Bob Edwards. It was fascinating.



Michael Delesantro introducing birds in the RGV using some of his outstanding photographs.
Dr. Edwards giving an excellent presentation, combining interesting information with outstanding photos.

Dr. Tom deMaar, the veterinarian at Gladys Porter Zoo, led an outstanding tour of the zoo and then came to share several short presentations that address questions he is frequently asked. For example, "What do I do if I find an injured bird?" Michael Delesantro gave us a special introduction to birding that he developed for our class using his broad knowledge and excellent photos. Finally, Mayra Oyervides from UTPA (Edinburg) brought a number of snakes, turtles, and frogs to teach us about herpetology in the RGV.



Mayra Oyervides from UTPA helping the class learn about local snakes, turtles, and other reptiles. Lorena Longoria and Renee Rubin enjoying the hands-on part of our herpetology class.

We spent one morning at Estero Llano Grande State Park. After an excellent bird walk where I got to see a paraque, many of us took a second bird walk into the old trailer park to see even more birds. Here's a group photo and a photo of the paraque. The class could get credit for 8-11 or 8-12 that morning. The afternoon class gave them 3 more hours. Not only did they learn about Valley Nature Center, they got firsthand knowledge of how to work with large school groups. Students who attended everything were able to get 7 hours of field trip credit in one day.



Can you see the paraque?



At Estero Llano Grande State Park.

There are only a few weeks left, and we're looking forward to hearing our new and returning presenters.

Updates to the Lower Valley TMN Class

by Anita Westervelt

Mesmerized is the general feeling in the 2014 Lower Valley class of Texas Master Naturalist trainees. Education Chair Carolyn Cardile did an amazing job scheduling speakers and coordinating events to teach the state-required curriculum. The Valley is truly fortunate to have so many professionals willing to impart their knowledge and give up an evening or weekend of their time each year in order to educate new members and strengthen our chapter.



Seth Peterson explaining photography equipment to Lower Valley trainees after his presentation on Plants and Wildlife of the Rio Grande Valley.



Zane Handley holding a bull snake during John Thaxter's presentation.

The Lower Valley education committee spent last summer and fall discussing ideas to help the program retain its historic momentum and incorporate some changes to streamline events and administrative details.

Data Collection. One significant time-saver is electronic feedback through Survey Monkey. Survey Monkey is an online data collection tool that allows users to write their own questionnaire and get tabulated results automatically. Sara Reibman presented the idea, and Sally Robey was willing to give it a try. "It is going swimmingly well," said Robey, who is responsible for keeping the Lower Valley class information flow, attendance, and administrative duties organized. "According to the Survey Monkey data, most trainees spend from 30 seconds to five minutes completing each evaluation. Very time-efficient."

The system saves time at the administrative end as well. Robey can quickly extrapolate data and easily send summaries of each event's scores as an attachment by e-mail when the information is required for various reports. "It sure is cutting down on the use of paper," Robey said. The new evaluation format has been well received by the trainees for the most part. Robey said that she has responses from all but two or three and within a few days of the event.

"The comments and scores are overwhelmingly positive," Robey said. Comments like, "thought it would be boring, but not the case," "excellent leader," "learned why it's important" are not unusual, and the presentations showing a lot of bird photographs generate really favorable comments, according to Robey's Lower Valley tabulations. "Some are very insightful and will be useful when planning next year's

classes. The only downside I see is that it costs \$24 per month for the time that we use it each year, a total of three months.” She hopes to find a way around that cost.

Field Trips. This year, through careful selection, field trips for the Lower Valley were chosen by geographic proximity and doubled into two sessions for each of six Saturdays, with a lunch break in between morning and afternoon sessions. The thought behind this was to offer the same number of field trips over a period of six weeks instead of half day trips over a 12-week period. Cutting down on travel time and gasoline usage also factored into the consideration.

Lower Valley trips included combining Sabal Palm Sanctuary and a behind-the-scenes tour of Gladys Porter Zoo; Estero Llano Grande State Park and Valley Nature Center; Coastal Sea Labs and Sea Turtle Inc; Ruth Hoyt nature photography training at Hugh Ramsey Nature Park with an afternoon tour of the park with Linda Butcher; Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and Cactus Creek Ranch; and South Padre Island Birding Center and the NOAA facility.



Students on tour of new Valley Nature Center facility.



Yellow-crowned Night Heron at Valley Nature Center.

Trainees say that combinations make for a long day, but the payoff is that fewer weekends are disrupted for the trainees and committee members alike. So far the idea has been popular.

Group Projects. A third change to this year's training was to require group volunteer projects. It can be daunting for a trainee to make a cold-call and offer to volunteer at a new place or seek out a spot to contribute in an ongoing project. Sara Reibman took on the job of facilitating the group project idea. Trainees learned early on the parameters of organization-sanctioned volunteering, about TMN partners, and they brainstormed and presented project ideas. Classmates formed groups choosing which project best suited their interests.

"Class members were excited about the group projects and had over a dozen suggestions," Reibman said. "Trainee Ed Langley spearheaded a kayak launch site project that is well underway." Langley's group is working with Harlingen Parks and Recreation Department's Park Superintendent Jeff Lyssy, who is supplying labor and supplies for the project. "Carol Rausch and her group are hard at work getting a new tank for the Coastal Studies Lab. Sherry Wilson's group is relocating plants at Resaca de la Palma," Reibman said.

The projects are to be completed by graduation. Trainees work on the projects outside of class time, earning volunteer hours toward certification requirements. A recap of their projects will be presented at the April 16 graduation ceremony.

The Education Committee will review this year's changes to the training when discussions get underway for future classes. Members of the 2014 Education Committee are, Chair Carolyn Cardile, Sally Robey, Virginia Vineyard, Beverly Anastosof, Barbara Lindley, Alicia Cavazos, Sara Reibman, Thadea Corkill and Anita Westervelt.

Reminder. Please attend the trainee graduation dinner on Wednesday, April 16, 2014, in a meeting room at Victoria Palms RV Resort, 602 Victoria Palms Boulevard in Donna from 6 to 8 p.m. Contact Nan Persinger for more information. ♦

RGVCTMN Class at Coastal Studies Lab

Photos by Mary Ann Tous



Mary Ann and Pat Nichols. ♦

Kindred Spirits at CCR

by Mary Jo Bogatto

Kindred spirits met on Cactus Creek Ranch, Sat. March 8, 2014. I had the pleasure of a visit from John and Gina Hess and got to tell him how much I enjoy his email that arrives through the TMN listserver. His wife, Gina, asked me which one I had read first.

I've been reading John's email through the TMN listserver since 2012. The first one I read was on April 6th and started, "I found this feather along the trail a couple of days ago." Then he continued to teach, ponder, and entice me with his beautiful writing and photos of natural things that I indulge myself with daily. This wonderful biologist can state the obvious, the romantic and the scientific at the same time. His life partner is his number one fan, elegant, sophisticated, and focused on the importance of giving back to this world.

They have promised to return to CCR and visit again. How important it is to connect with others who feel the same way about nature, people with love and compassion for the outdoors. If we continue sharing recipes and ideas, they are sure to nurture the future. John's website is <http://brawleycreek.com/artist.htm> . His new book can be purchased at <http://www.amazon.com/The-Gal%C3%A1pagos-Exploring-Darwins-Tapestry/dp/0826218377> .

Here's a lovely quote from him:

Arriving at CCR, Gina and I found a rare bird. A woman who has given herself to a small bit of land and now belongs to it rather than the other way 'round. We feel the same way about our much smaller 30 acres in Missouri, Brawley Creek, but the dimensions don't really matter in this context. I'm currently working on a book about our little spot. It is a long way from done, but I have found the soul of it and the photos and text will follow in due time. I mention it because I've given a lot of thought to the relationship between humans and the land they occupy, and how satisfying it is to know one place at a deeper level. Her love of the land explains, I think, the instant attraction we felt for Mary Jo and for CCR. What a marvelous place she is tending."
– John Hess

Also, that day CCR had a visit from Jim Foster, an outdoor writer and photographer, former resident of RGV. He and his wife moved to Idaho but continue to visit. Jim does public speaking events on photography and the outdoors. His website is: <http://jimfosteroutdoorsphoto.com/>. Look for his new book, *Birding Trails Texas – The Texas Gulf Coast*. This book lists and gives directions and information on the top birding locations from the Louisiana Border to the Mexican Border on the Rio Grande. Watch for it – He is in Texas in 2014 on a Speaking and Book Signing Tour.

That same morning, Rio Grande Valley bird bander, biologist, and teacher, Mark Conway, banded 39 birds on CCR with the help of the following volunteers:

- Phil Nelson
- David Junkin

- Bill Richardson
- Stephanie Galla
- Tim Forman
- Rick Mears
- Mary Jo Bogatto

Banded Saturday March 9, 2014:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| • Golden-fronted Woodpecker | 1 |
| • Green Jay | 1 |
| • Northern Cardinal | 1 |
| • Red-winged Blackbird | 26 |
| • Great-tailed Grackle | 1 |
| • House Sparrow | 1 |

Recaptured March 9, 2014

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| • Golden-fronted Woodpecker | 1 (previously captured in Oct. 2013) |
| • Red-winged Blackbird | 1 (previously captured on April 2013) |





Texas cities Go Green, Partner with Nature

by Anita Westervelt

Approximately 60 people from Rio Grande Valley federal, state, county, and city governments, and Rio Grande Valley Chapter Texas Master Naturalists Eileen Mattei, Anita Westervelt, and Linda DesRosier attended a February 20th all-day Natural Environment Stewardship for Sustainable Economic Growth seminar.

The seminar was hosted by UT-Pan American in Edinburg. Presenters included Texas city officials, private landscaping firms, and local and mid-Texas forestry and wildlife specialists who have recognized the economic benefits of partnering together to go green in urban areas.

Keying on environmental economics, recurring themes from the presenters included taking care of land and water, fundamental principles of green infrastructure, urban forest values and nature tourism – all of which either save resources or bring in money.

Trees and plants not only release oxygen into the environment, they create natural air filters for a cleaner environment; metabolize harmful toxins and pollutants such as carbon dioxide, benzene, and nitrogen dioxide; and they also increase humidity and reduce airborne dust.

Urban forests combat heat islands, reduce storm water runoff and flood damage, and can significantly impact energy costs reducing energy bills for a building as much as 35 percent. It was noted also that tree-lined avenues and parks can reduce blood pressure and improve overall emotional and psychological health. Tree-lined streets also increase real estate values of neighborhoods.

One interesting tool communities can use to analyze and assess urban forest benefits is a program from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that gauges the environmental services that trees provide. It's worth a brief look to check it out at www.itreetools.org.



All the presenters delivered professional, information-packed lectures with a tremendous amount of viable statistics. UT-PA's Office for Sustainability coordinated a really good seminar, including a catered continental breakfast and enjoyable lunch. This Office periodically offer seminars throughout the year and is making noises to repeat this seminar annually due to its popularity. Based on the seminar I attended, I

would recommend signing up and attending if the subject matter is of interest to you. Seminar and workshop information may be found on their website at www.utpa.edu/sustainability or www.facebook.com/UTPASustainability. ♦

Santa Ana NWR Willow Lakes Boardwalk and Overlook

by Rick Ramke

Hurricane Alex flooded the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in June of 2010. One of the casualties of the flood was a boardwalk at the edge of Willow Lakes. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the Friends of the Wildlife Corridor obtained funding to rebuild the boardwalk and add an overlook. During the 6-month Winter Texan volunteer season at Santa Ana I've been volunteering on the construction of the new structure. Most of the work is being done by volunteers. One of the volunteers has a construction business in Rhode Island, but most of us have little or no experience in construction other than our own backyard projects.

I find the work extremely rewarding for several reasons. First, my fellow volunteers are extraordinarily interesting, kind, and knowledgeable people. The work itself is enjoyable (if hard!). Knowing that the structure will be a useful and safe platform for education and pleasure for many visitors is very satisfying.

The following series of pictures illustrates the progress of the project to date. We expect to finish the project by the end of March. The work that remains is to finish the decking, the handrails, and the roof (which will cover half the overlook). The engineering of the structure has been substantial: manhandling 4" x 12" timbers and drilling 1-1/2" diameter holes for 18" bolts is a chore. The boardwalk and overlook are bound to survive whatever challenges nature offers for many years to come. ♦



Willow Lake trail closed for construction.



Early stages of construction.



The concrete pour.



The overlook.



Decking.



Almost done!

Master Naturalist in Afghanistan

by Adrian A. Ramos

About nine months ago I made a decision that will forever affect my personal and professional life. I volunteered for duty in Afghanistan as a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project engineer to support the construction mission in Afghanistan.

I knew there would be challenges in meeting all the training, medical, and professional prerequisites. The decision required more than 80 hours of training on cultural awareness, counter-insurgency, first-aid, contract administration in a contingency environment, and escape and evasion training. I had to pass stringent physical qualifications ranging from eyesight and hearing to blood sugar levels and weight standards (I lost 25 pounds before I could go). Professionally I was ready to deploy, having previous experience in construction project management and contract administration.

After a week of in-processing, gear issue, and training at Fort Bliss, Texas, I and 70 Department of the Army, Department of Defense, USACE civilians, and 200 Soldiers departed for the long plane ride to Afghanistan.

First stop was Pease International Airport in New Hampshire where we were greeted by the Pease greeters – a volunteer group of patriotic Americans who welcome men and women serving in Afghanistan and provide them with a star (from an American Flag) as a reminder that they are not forgotten. Since 2005, they have met more than 600 flights and welcomed approximately 170,000 people.



We had other stops in Germany, Kuwait, (where we all crammed into a huge, loud and cold C17 aircraft), then to Bagram, Afghanistan. I was transported to Camp Phoenix in Kabul, Afghanistan, in full body armor via helicopter.

As a project engineer I served as the government's construction manager ensuring that Afghan and international contractors, who were building facilities for the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, were building them according to plans and specifications. The initial pace was grueling. We worked 70-75 hour per week, seven days a week. Security and logistic issues were constant challenges as we had to travel to restricted and remote construction sites. Additionally, poor material availability, lack of a skilled construction labor force, language and cultural barriers, unreliable communications, and a general lack of understanding of the Afghan culture also contributed to the challenges.

Daily, I am surrounded by a multi-national force comprised of the International Security and Assistance Force troops from Guam, Albania, Romania, Hungary, Canada, Australia, Soviet Georgia, Germany, Turkey, France, and America (Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines) just to name a few. They are fit professional service members dedicated to the mission of helping this country provide its own security.

I am privileged to work with intelligent, hard working, motivated people, many who have sacrificed years to see the mission through. During my time here I have gained more contract administration experience in the last six months than I have in the last 2 ½ years.



From a master naturalist's perspective, the environment here in the winter time is not so friendly for wildlife (or people for that matter). I have not had the opportunity to really explore the countryside so I have seen mostly birds, cats, a few dogs, and donkeys. Not really wildlife. Up in the mountains in the springtime I would imagine there would be lots of wildlife – but not in Kabul. Kabul is a city the size of Houston

at 6,000 ft altitude at the foot of the Hindu Kush Mountains. The winters can be harsh and summers hot and dusty. Pollution and air quality are constant challenges.



As I prepare to return to the Rio Grande Valley Resident Office, I am changed forever because of my time here. I see and appreciate the sacrifices of military and civilian alike and will not take for granted the liberties and freedoms we enjoy. Professionally, I am more proficient and have increased my capabilities and upper limits. I miss my family and friends in Texas and the Port Isabel Resident Office, the volunteers I work with at Sea Turtle Inc., and my master naturalist friends.

My wife, family and friends have been, and still are, very supportive of my decision and for that I am very grateful – their sacrifices have not gone unnoticed. But I'm coming home soon; I will be back in early May ready for the next chapter in my life and career. ♦

