



RGV CHAPTER, TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS


The Chachalaca

Volume 5 Number 3 30 September 2008

Much has happened since our last newsletter: hurricane Dolly, RGVCTMN elections, our first chapter field trip, the end of another year of turtle patrol, a Jabiru stork sighting. Check out these stories plus a lesson on using spider webs as educational tools.

--- Karen

In this Issue

President's Message <i>Frank Wiseman</i>	2
Boca Chica Beach Ecology Trip <i>Eileen Mattei</i>	3
Spotting Dignitaries <i>David Junkin</i>	3
Look at Those Babies!!! <i>Cheryl Owen</i>	4
Jabiru Stork in the Valley <i>David Benn</i>	5
Just Hangin' Around <i>Jolaine Lanehart</i>	6
Ramsey Nature Park Report <i>Diann Ballesteros</i>	7
Collecting Spider Webs <i>R. M. Hausman, Ph.D.</i>	8
The 2008 Arribada <i>Mary Ann Tous</i>	10
Award-winning TMNs!	11
	
Parting Shots of Sabal Palms Event <i>photos by Antoinette Budd</i>	11

RGV TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

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

Officers

President	Frank Wiseman
Vice President	Eileen Mattei
Administrative Secretary	Lupita Escobar
Membership Secretary	Mary Bindner
Treasurer	Juan Bonnin
Past President	Linda McGonigle
Sponsor	Tony Reisinger

Standing Committees

Education/Adv. Training	Cathy Budd
Public Relations	Dorothy Greaney
	Jackie Field, Jr.
Host	Janice Koning
Newsletter	Karen Fossom



President's Message *by Frank Wiseman*

By now all of our members know about hurricanes and their damaging effects. We need not dwell on that fact except to accept what Mother Nature throws at us and eventually appreciate the needed rain for our personal and native needs. As a volunteer at Ramsey Park in Harlingen, I saw that the destruction was relentless in many of our garden area spots and all around the loop area. (For more about Ramsey Park, see Diann Ballesteros' article on page 7.)

In other areas of our chapter's work, I want to personally thank all the 20 members who attended our board retreat at St. Andrews Episcopal Church in Port Isabel on August 23rd for an all-day session. Jennifer Hall did an excellent job of presenting us with a program on volunteering and appreciation of volunteers. If you remember to thank your fellow members for all they do, they always appreciate it.

We work for our love of nature, but we still like to know we are appreciated for our efforts. The board accomplished many needed chapter goals for the coming year and Juan Bonnin helped us clarify and establish a yearly budget. Cheryl Owen took care of our food and drinks for that day and our hats are tipped to her for that effort.

Another person who deserves a lot of praise for her efforts in taking over the Education Chair position is Cathy Budd. Cathy is doing a great job in organizing our training for spring of 2009. Our application, background check and information page is now on line at our chapter's web site at www.rgvctmn.org. Mention it to your friends and prospective new trainees. We have had several inquiries about our training for next year, and it looks like our program is gaining more wide-spread attention and support.

In December, we will be involved in the opening of the new Resaca de la Palma state park in Brownsville. Our new vice-president, Eileen Mattei, has already offered field trips for advanced training in several areas of the Valley. Jimmy Paz led a tour of Boca Chica and Dr. Jude Benavides will be leading a trip on Oct. 12th for a very

informative tour of the resacas and how they play an integral part to support our valley's wildlife.

Another person I need to thank is Lupita Escobar for taking over the position of chapter secretary. Lupita is an elementary teacher in Olmito. She is planning to try and establish a Jr. Master Naturalist Program in her school for her students. We all wish her the best of luck and, if you can help her, please step up as I'm sure she would appreciate all advice and help.

If you have ideas or plans that need to be mentioned at meetings or on our listserv, please do so. Cathy will always appreciate updates on volunteer opportunities. We will be sponsoring our annual booth at the Harlingen Birding Festival, November 6th -9th. We need volunteers to man our booth and to sell raffle tickets. Each member will be issued a book of 20 tickets as per our usual procedure and asked to sell them. Our profits will again go for conservation efforts in many areas of the Valley. We have bought a bench this past year and sponsored Rio Hondo students, who proudly represented our area at the state meet of a premier nature event and returned home winners.

We also sponsor scholarships for at least four or five members to attend our annual TMN state meet. This year's Texas Master Naturalist Statewide Annual Meeting & Advanced Training will be held at Mo Ranch, Hunt, Texas. If you wish to go as a chapter sponsored member, please notify me or any board member by Oct. 1st. Another scholarship that we try to award to a deserving person is for our spring training classes. If you know of someone who meets this category of need and is interested in becoming a TMN member, please notify me.

In closing, I want to thank all of our members for the great work you do, no matter how little or how much. Your contributions to help raise awareness of our area's need for conservation, landscaping, birding, butterflying, coastal turtle efforts and so much more go a long way to improve our image and our efforts to help our Valley's nature.

Boca Chica Beach Ecology Trip: First in Series by *Eileen Mattei*

The Boca Chica Beach Ecology trip, the first of a series of advanced training/field trips, provided 10 Master Naturalists with a 3 hour immersion in birds, shells, plants, and invertebrates.

David Benn contributed his birding knowledge. Diann Ballesteros advised us on plants, sea beans and shells. The other 8 participants supplied insights from their experiences.

Do you know that the seaweed-sargassum- that washes onto the beach is in fact a buffet for birds? Watch them search it for edibles. A ruddy turnstone lived up to its name, flipping over beach debris to find food. Besides observing an oystercatcher and a skimmer at work, we learned what differentiates various hard to-tell-apart shore birds... and we're still working on that. David put us on a "very cool bird," the rare juvenile snowy plover.

We had time to appreciate what nature had to offer: railroad vine with its pink flowers, beach morning glory with white flowers, a true sea bean, red mangrove seed pods, ghost crabs, the shell of lady in waiting, a gourd.

Thanks to Jimmy Paz and Licha who hauled our sightseeing trailer up and down the beach. The next AT/Field trip is to Resaca de la Palma SP with Dr. Jude Benavidez on October 12.



Laura and Alan Duval with Eileen Mattei in the background



Antoinette Budd and Diann Ballesteros

Spotting Dignitaries by *David Junkin*

Volunteering at the Wild Birding Center at Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park has many amenities. Dignitaries, as well as just folks, visit from all over the world because of Bentsen's reputation for rare birds, rare butterflies and many of the south Texas specialties in fauna and flora. Greeting and meeting many nice people is often more fun than the hawk watching on the Hawk Tower.

On March 29, 2008, three dignitaries visited the Hawk Tower while I was on duty. They were TMN members Antoinette, Cathy and Sue Budd. Their visit "made my day."

Editors note: David sent this article through regular mail along with a great picture of Antoinette, Cathy and Sue. Because I had problems with my scanner, I was unable to include the photo in the newsletter but passed it along to Sue who was pleased to receive it. (Note: Antoinette is pictured in above photo with Diann.)

LOOK AT THOSE BABIES!!!! *by Cheryl Owen, TMN 2008*

My first season as a turtle patroller was very rewarding. Although I never found tracks, nests, or turtles, I was excited each time I went on patrol. News of someone else finding evidence was encouraging and always refueled my interest. I learned so much about the beach, the weather, the birds I saw, and the people I talked with. Although we were told how difficult the patrolling could be, I did not believe it until I did it. It's amazing how much the beach changed from one hour to the next. I also have great respect for Madeleine and her scheduling accomplishments. She deserves a medal. My patrolling season culminated with a turtle release, MY FIRST! Nature is truly unbelievable and proves there really is a GOD up there. I will definitely be back next season.



Hatchling ready to go



Wendy Allstot and Judy Walton checking their progress



Off they go!

Jabiru Stork in the Valley *by David Benn*

On August 10th, during a conversation regarding a Red Knot study that will begin this winter, an Audubon employee mentioned to me that someone had told his wife that they had seen a Jabiru Stork in Willacy County the previous day. In the bird world, this is a big deal but his directions as to where the bird had been seen were vague and he did not know the reporter. I made email inquiries asking if anyone had heard of the bird as news of rarities gets around pretty quickly but no one had and I put it down as a likely misidentified Wood Stork. Wrong!

On August 21st I received a 7:30 a.m. phone call from Mary Gustafson. Mary is a Texas Parks and Wildlife employee who also maintains the Rio Grande Valley Rare Bird Hotline. Mary said, "You know that Jabiru you were asking about, I'm looking at it." That got me out of bed and moving. As it was likely the bird would soon be on the move as it searched out breakfast, I hit the road as soon as I could.

Arriving at the spot a few miles southwest of Raymondville, I found three or four cars of birders set up on the side of the road, including Raffa Flores, who originally found the bird back on the 9th of August. He told photographers about it but they were uninterested. Next time he sees a rare bird I suspect he will tell birders.

Seeing the bird was as easy as walking up to a spotting scope someone had set up and peering through the lens. The bird was a fairly distant image but as we watched, it took to the air and flew toward the southwest. We all piled in our cars and set out on the search, practically piling into each other when we crested a rise in the road and spotted

the bird in a field only a hundred feet or so from the road. It soon flushed from this dry field and moved to a flooded field, landing only 60 feet from the highway where it slowly walked across a clearing and into sorghum stalks, hunting frogs and other tasty critters before majestically soaring west on it's 90" wingspan.

At 52 inches in height and with an almost 8 foot wingspan the Jabiru is reported to be the largest flying bird in the Americas. It has a bald head and neck with a large red patch at the base of the neck and a huge upturned bill.

The Jabiru normally restricts itself to tropical America, occurring as far south as Argentina and nesting as far north as the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. Records indicate that this is the 8th Jabiru known to have occurred in Texas and the second occurrence in the Rio Grande Valley. Interestingly, all the Texas birds have been found between late July and late October. There have been two known sightings in the United States outside of Texas, a bird in Oklahoma and a sighting in Louisiana in July of this year.

There was, of course, sentimental creatures that we are, speculation that perhaps this was the Louisiana bird making its way home. Not so. The Louisiana bird showed the pure white back and wings of an adult bird and the Willacy County bird showed streaks of brown in it's plumage that indicate a young bird.

As if a Jabiru wasn't enough, the flooded fields held hundreds of egrets, herons and shore birds that would have been worth the drive on their own.

Just Hangin' Around *by Jolaine Lanehart*



It pays to keep your camera handy, along with fresh food and water for our feathered friends! While volunteering at Davis Mountains State Park, I saw this hummer hanging upside down from a feeder near our trailer. I took the photo, and thought that maybe another hummer had knocked him out in a battle for the feeder, or that he was ill. I knew the solution was fresh because we had a large number of hummers and Scott's and Hooded Orioles visiting our site and I had to fill the feeders at least once a day.

After a couple of minutes, he flew away. I showed the photo to the Park Superintendent, Maria Trevizo, and she knew what the little guy was doing (although she had only seen this behavior once before). Maria said he was sunning or drying his feathers.

Ramsey Nature Park Report *by Diann Ballesteros*

Harlingen's Arroyo Colorado World Bird Center, better known as Ramsey Park, sustained wind and flooding damage during and after Hurricane Dolly.

Flood waters from the Arroyo Colorado covered the lower and upper mown trails and even reached parts of the Ebony Loop Trail. By August 30th, parts of the lower trail were still under water. Some plants that were lost to flood waters were heart-leafed hibiscus, prickly pear, and Padre Island mistflower.

The winds, which reached gusts of 95 miles per hour, caused a lot of damage. Trees were uprooted and many branches were broken. Mesquite trees were particularly affected as were hackberries and wild olives. Rapid-growing shrubs and trees suffered many broken limbs. Some of those included granjeno, tenaza, palo verde, and tepeguaje. Cedar elms and anacuas came through just fine. Ramsey had eight to ten large mesquites down over our gardens or blocking the Ebony Trail.

Texas Master Naturalist volunteers spent many hours cutting, clearing and hauling away those trees and branches. Frank Wiseman, Diann Ballesteros, Dick Roesler, Robert Archer, Drew Bennie and Tim Bradshaw and others have all spent time working in the park since the storm. Working conditions were difficult as it was very hot and humid. Robert

bought a new chain saw to help with cutting some of the larger trees. Bill Horton, a non-TMN-member volunteer at Ramsey, also acquired a chain saw to help us with our work. We owe a big debt of gratitude to these volunteers who have made a lot of progress in reestablishing our park to its former beauty.

Since Dolly, Ramsey has received an additional 12-14 inches of rain. This has caused enormous growth of everything from herbaceous to vines to invasive plants. Among the bad growing invasive plants, the dicliptera and false ragweed have been particularly bad. Guinea grass and castor beans have re-grown in leaps and bounds.

Along with the bad comes the good. Many fruiting trees and shrubs are loaded with plentiful, larger than normal fruit. Butterflies, dragonflies and toads can be seen in large numbers. Butterflies are especially numerous. Birds can be seen in good numbers as fall migration is currently being experienced. Hummingbirds seem to be everywhere.

Many months of weeding and trimming still lay ahead for volunteers to bring Ramsey back to what it was before Dolly came calling.



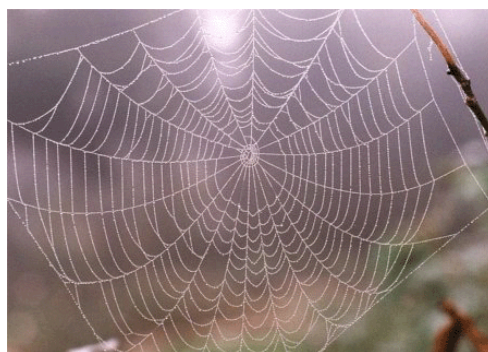
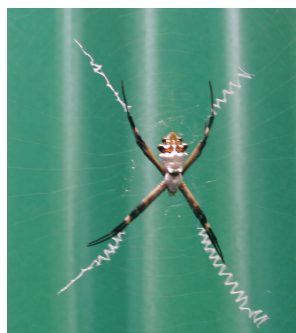
RGVTMN bench at Ramsey

Collecting Spider Webs by R. M. Hausman, Ph.D.

“Texas Master Naturalists are in an ideal position to use natural, renewable resources in the development/production of hands-on, inexpensive educational materials for the children in our area ... materials that will solidify youngster’s long-term, easily retrievable memories. Having youngsters on a field trip work with you further enhances the value of the learning experience.” (*Chachalaca*, June 2008.)

One example of a fun, educationally useful activity is the collection and preservation of **spider webs**. This, in turn, should then entice young learners to expand their interests to learning about spiders and other arachnids. (Trivia question: Do you and/or your children know the difference between arachnids and arthropods?)

Commonly found throughout our area are a wide variety of Orb Weavers (also called “garden spiders” of the “Argiope” family) that tend to spin large, readily accessible webs.



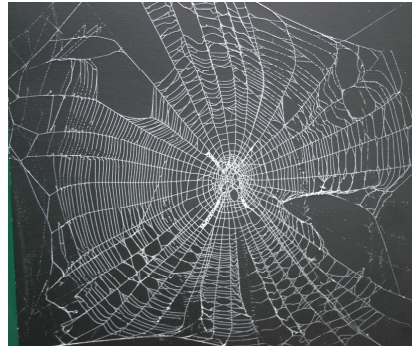
After you have located an appropriately sized web, assemble the equipment you need, then carefully shoo the spider away. The first step in the collection process involves coating the web with spray paint (staying far enough away to gently mist the paint onto the web ... if you spray close up, the web may tear or distort). I used white paint to apply to a black-painted background; with a light-colored background, use black, red, or even gold to enhance the contrast.



If the paint is still wet, you could apply the backing at this point. However, I prefer to add a layer of spray adhesive to the web (to thicken the web strands as well as assure full web adhesion to the backing material).



As soon as possible after applying a layer of adhesive, press your backing material (ideally, colored poster-board) directly into the web ... bending the poster-board so that the center of the board contacts the center of the web initially, if feasible.



Push forward until the entire web is firmly against the poster-board backing, then hook a finger around one of the support strands and pull around the edge of the board, smoothing the strand onto the back-side of the backing board until the strand separates from its original anchoring spot. Continue with each anchor strand to secure the web to the board.

If you follow the steps outlined above, but with gentler handling than I used, you will get less tearing/distortion. On the other hand, many webs found 'in the wild' already have tears that haven't been repaired yet that seem to add additional possibilities to the stories youngsters can fabricate to 'explain' each rent in the web texture. A final coat of clear Krylon or other spray fixatives will increase the life span of your collected web.

Activities following web collection: Compare/contrast different webs from same type of spider as well as between different types of spiders. Research spiders – classification, types, characteristics, habitats (where do spiders live around the globe/or don't live), etc. This would also be a good way to focus on which types are dangerous to humans, etc.

References: *Peterson Field Guide to Insects* by Borror and White.

National Wildlife Federation Field Guide to Insects and Spiders & Related Species of North America by Arthur V. Evans.

National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Insects & Spiders by Milne & Milne.

IMPORTANT: This activity requires **close, responsible adult supervision.**

The 2008 Arribada by Mary Ann Tous

February began on an exciting note as I prepared to embark on a ten-week training period with the Rio Grande Valley Chapter of the Texas Master Naturalists (RGVCTMN). From the very beginning I was never disappointed, finding myself swept away by the exceptional training program where each session was a doorway opening to an exhilarating new experience.

Even better, I had the pleasure of embarking upon this wonderful journey with the guidance of recognized mentors and devoted volunteers, all generously sharing their remarkable expertise with our class. In May as we celebrated our graduation at the breathtaking Los Ebanos Preserve I wondered if they realized the indelible mark which they had left on us. What a difference they made in all of our lives!

While the program was underway, I continued my work with the sea turtles, carrying on as much as possible in the spirit of my aunt Ila Loetscher who was known far and wide as the Turtle Lady of South Padre Island. It wasn't long before March winds brought with them the promise of Kemp's Ridley nesters on South Padre Island and, in anticipation, Dr. Donna Shaver of the U.S. National Park Service and her dedicated staff trained and instructed us for the upcoming arrival of the Kemp's Ridley sea turtles who would make their nests on the shores of our Island before slowly returning to the sea. These annual arrivals of mature female Kemp's Ridleys are known, logically enough, as *arribadas* from the Spanish word for "arrival."

Then miraculously on April 12th during South Padre Island's 35th birthday celebration, no less, we had an honored visitor who arrived bearing gifts in the form of 102 turtle eggs. The first Kemp's Ridley nester had arrived and left for us her treasure to care for. This particular nesting lent considerable proof to the theory that arribadas are propelled by windy days because it is speculated that the wind is a sea turtle's best ally for it quickly erases any tell-tale signs of a nest as well as any tracks leading to it in mere minutes. This is Nature's protection of the fragile eggs from predators so that they will remain

unmolested until they hatch. Thus began our record nesting season of 195 nests along the Texas coast which surpassed the 128 nests that had been documented the year before.

About fifty days or so after our first nester arrived we would be awakened by a most anticipated call at daybreak. Baby hatchlings were ready for release! In response to the call, before dawn, we met at Sea Turtle Inc. under the direction of Jody Mays from Parks and Wildlife to record the babies prior to sending them on their journey across the beach and toward the sea which would henceforth be their home. Each one was carefully counted, recounted, measured, and weighed. I couldn't help but notice that Jody proved to be a most vigilant surrogate mother, caring for every little hatchling with maternal tenderness. Once this was completed, we all gathered at Access 4 on the beach where we gently encouraged the tiny creatures on their trek as they imprinted on the beaches of South Padre Island before diving fearlessly into the warm enveloping waters of the Gulf of Mexico. We all watched in awe and wished them well on their perilous journey.

In the end, as volunteers we had all bonded together and I know that we will miss that early wake-up call ringing with excitement and comradeship. Through all of this, though, I remembered the Turtle Lady recounting when Alpha, the first documented sea turtle mother to successfully return to South Padre Island, marked the beginning of Project Ridley on May 5, 1974 when she left 117 eggs at Rancho Torturgita which is about eight miles from where we held this year's hatchling release. Moreover, I have never forgotten how fondly she would recall how, on July 4th her beloved Yankee Doodle Dandy was the first hatchling to break through, making him a star of hope. She said that it was a moment, which no matter how many times she witnessed it, was always a "first." Personally, I think we can all attest to that.

So, on behalf of their little flippered friends who are adventuring the Gulf, many sincere thanks to all of the volunteers who made their story possible.

Award-winning TMNs!



Pictured left to right: Jolaine Lanehart, Jim Najvar, Tim Bradshaw, Lupita Escobar, Janice Koning, Sue Budd

Parting Shots

Sabal Palm Event Photos *by Antoinette Budd*



Setting up



More setting up

and more parting shots



Sue Budd with snake



Jimmy Paz checking in



Licha Paz with animal tracks



Peggy Knopp and Dodie Greaney with nature necklaces



Julie Morris with mystery nature boxes



Eileen Mattei with native plants

Happy volunteering!