



RGV CHAPTER, TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

# The Chachalaca

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## RGV TEXAS MASTER NATURALISTS

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## **President's Message** *by Frank Wiseman*

It hardly seems possible that another year is quickly coming to a close, and we will be getting ready to hold our annual certification/recertification/awards meeting on January 13, 2009. It will also be the night we hold our drawing for our annual raffle. I do hope you have all participated in that effort and sold your tickets and will attend the annual social event in San Benito.

It has been a tough year for many of us with the damage done by Hurricane Dolly, but we are surviving and our parks, yards and homes are coming back to normalcy again.

We can celebrate many of the good things that have happened to us and also forgive the bad and charge ahead with new ideas and hope for more accomplishments.

At this time I would like to single out four members who have earned our respect for the work they have done with our organization. Two members have been diligent volunteers at Ramsey Park. Robert Archer has done a tremendous job in one area that we designate as Humming Bird Trail. Robert has worked hundreds of hours in changing a piece of the park into a place of paradise for the birds who visit it. We installed a bench, and Robert has installed a small water feature, feeders and a host of native plants. Robert deserves a little recognition for this work, and I know he would appreciate your visiting that area just to the right of the loop area as you enter the park on the south side. Robert recently bought a chainsaw to help clear the park of much of the unwanted fallen trees after the hurricane. Since becoming a TMN member Robert has presented programs on Ramsey park utilizing his personal photos of the magnificent bird and plant life available in the park.

Another man who has given hundreds of hours of time to the park is Dick Roesler. Dick is a selfless worker and he tirelessly gives of his time along with his trusty tools: the weed eater, pruning shears, shovel, posthole digger, pitchfork and wheelbarrow. You will notice all of his efforts by taking a stroll

around the caliche loop area and observe how the areas on the south side of the park just keep improving. So many tasks that he has undertaken have made much of the other work easier for other volunteers to complete our garden spots. He also clears the bird banding paths for the netting that Mark Conway erects during bird banding season and in which our training classes have the opportunity to participate and learn about this important aspect of birding.

We have two new officers this year who deserve credit for what they are trying to accomplish in our chapter. Cathy Budd has taken over the position of Education Chair and has single-handedly gotten a training program ready for our spring training class which will begin on January 21<sup>st</sup>. For all of you who have undergone our training, you know that it is no easy task, but somehow our education committee makes it flow seamlessly and enjoyable. If you can help Cathy, give her a call and offer your help.

And lastly, we have to thank Eileen Mattei our new Vice-president, Program Chair and Advanced Training Chair for Chapter Field Trips for all of her planning to make our chapter learning experiences one of the best in the state. We are all going to benefit in 2009 because Eileen is going to offer us more chances to learn about new and different aspects of nature related activities.

I certainly don't want to forget all of the rest of our volunteer members and all the work that each and every one of you do all year long. We all appreciate every hour that you donate of your time spent in helping our natural preserves in the Valley.

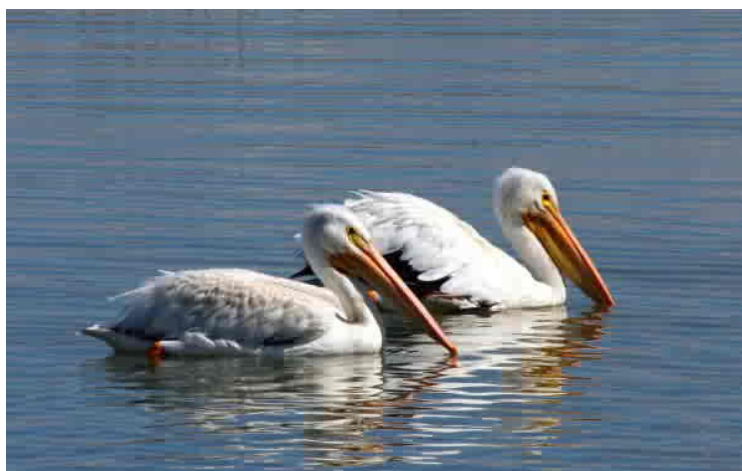
Our chapter is likely known as being a bit of a rebel in that we do things that others have yet to try. We accomplish a lot with so many of you in a short time, and we enjoy each other's company while volunteering together on projects and learn so much from each other.

Let's give ourselves a pat on the back for being such responsible and great nature lovers. We truly do make a difference wherever we are.

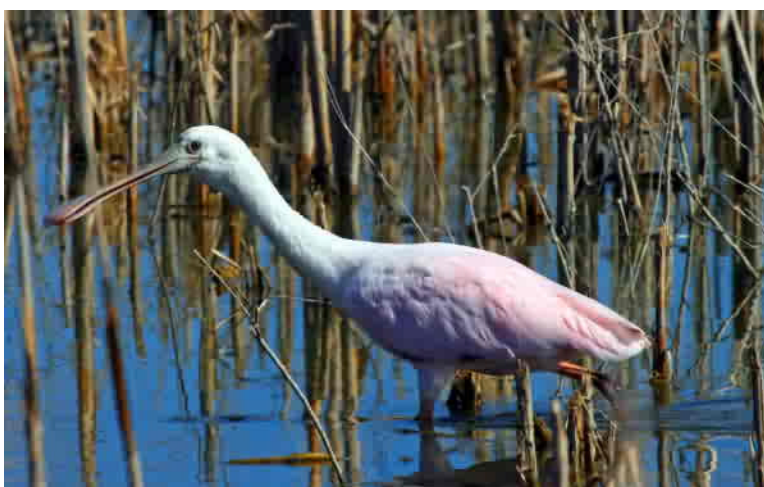




American kestrel



American white pelicans



Roseate spoonbill





Black-necked stilt



Black-necked stilt feeding



## OWL PELLETS: Exploring Nature's "Products"

by R.M. & B.J. Hausman

"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 youngsters' long-term, easily retrievable memories." (*Chachalaca*, June 2008.)

Another example of a fun and educationally useful activity is the collection and exploration of "Owl Pellets." But first, a few words on the 'wise old owl.' A wide-ranging group of birds, owls are most well known for their habit of hunting at night. Officially, they are classified in the order Strigiformes, and are most closely related to nightjars, cuckoos, and swifts. The order is divided into two families: Tytonidae or Barn Owls and 18 known related species, and Strigidae, to which the remaining 108-194 owl species belong. As avian predators, they are known as the silent hunters of the night because of the soft, downy fringe on their feathers. Found to range on all but one continent, owls live from 5 to 20 years. Their babies are called "owlets."

Owls' primary food source are rodents, which are rendered with a sharp, hooked beak and swallowed in large pieces. The prey is then digested in the owl's crop ('gullet' or sack at the base of the neck), while the indigestible bones, fur or feathers are compacted into 'pellets' that are then regurgitated (coughed up, usually daily) in the owl's roosting area. If a roost location is known, collection is easy. Wearing rubber or latex gloves, wrap pellets in tinfoil, then heat and/or freeze them to destroy any bacteria. Later, they make excellent study 'packets' for the purpose of analyzing owls' feeding habits. (A quick search for "owl pellets" on the internet will reveal a host of activities as well as commercial sources for owl pellets.)

For the most part, the recommended activities focus on dissecting pellets to find and identify the bones left over from previous meals. Task complexity varies with student age/skill levels but focuses on observation, measurement, record keeping and the use of the scientific inquiry method. But first, a word about safety: Always wear gloves (though some commercial companies provide sterilized

pellets) and safety goggles (since exuberant students may get a bit feisty and splatter pellet matter).

The tools needed include pellets, biology dissection kit (may use toothpicks, tweezers and magnifying glass instead) and some sort of working surface such as a work mat, newspaper or even a cafeteria-style Styrofoam tray. We recommend organizing students in pairs or trios to encourage cooperative learning and discussion. And then, begin.

Teacher: "Write down your hypothesis about the contents."

Student: "Teacher, this looks like lint."

Teacher: "Nope ... felt, sort of ..."

Student: "What's felt?"

Teacher: "Fur bound by glue or, in this case, digestive juices."

Student: "Yuck! Mouse hair and owl vomit!"

Student #2: "Can we save it all and make a hat?"

Next task: Gently separate the bones, teeth, feathers and fur. Working together, the search is on. Carefully! Slowly but surely! Student: "Look what I found! A hairy, mouse backbone! WOW!"

Bones, bones and more bones continue to be discovered and carefully sorted. And, then, look! "A Skull! Oh, my, what big/long yellow teeth you have ..." Using a guide, determine bone identities. (There are a host of "Bone-Sorting Guides" available via the internet, which are usually provided with commercial pellet kits.)

Adaptations. What if your student has limited use of his/her hands and/or has limited mobility? Their peers or attending adults may need to assist, e.g., with the student's permission, reposition the work pad and/or pellet to enhance access with the student's 'best' hand or working implement (a mouth-held pick) or lend a hand to steady the workpiece, etc. Yet again, what if one of your students were blind? Working in pairs or trios, the blind student could easily manipulate the owl pellet by touch with verbal guidance from one or both partners. All members of the group would need to verbalize detailed descriptions of the items found to



form a fuller picture in all their minds as to the full contents of the pellet.

Rule of Thumb: Require all youngsters to participate to the greatest extent feasible given their specific capabilities. Adapt the environment however necessary to enable their full participation! The basic principle of LRE (least restrictive environment) is to make sure that all youngsters participate to the fullest extent feasible and, **ONLY** where necessitated by student need, adaptations should be put into place to assure full student participation in the whole activity. For example, students with Learning Disabilities need to participate fully. Even if they cannot read well, they can participate in reference searches looking for key words, pictures, illustrations and then actively engage in subsequent discussions, etc.

Drill & Practice Activities &/or Evaluations. In my classrooms, I would normally have a host of electronic response boards located throughout the room's perimeter for fun review and/or actual testing purposes. For example, one may be a basic identification task involving 'things we found' in the pellets, or even, 'owls in general,' or, perhaps, 'little known facts' about owls (e.g., 'Do you know what an owl will NOT eat that a bald eagle loves?' or 'Do you know what color all owls' egg shells are?'). The latter is one of my favorite approaches to teaching.

Regardless of the approach you use, it should have a hands-on quality and be active, interesting and have the potential of leading the student to learning more and more interrelated details.

### **2008 Local Wildscaping Tour** *by Diann Ballesteros*

Every year the RGV Birding Festival includes a local landscaping tour as part of its field trips. Christina Mild and Diann Ballesteros led the 2008 tour. Christina Mild is an honorary Texas Master Naturalist, and Diann Ballesteros has been a Texas Master Naturalist since 2003.

The day was sunny as a group of Valley residents left the Municipal Auditorium for a five hour tour of local wildscapes on the west side of Harlingen. The first stop was at the home of Jennifer and James Wilson. Jennifer specializes in growing heirloom roses. The couple's large yard also has many native plants, trees, and flowers. An attractive water feature can also be found in the backyard. Our second stop was at the home of Master Naturalist, Joyce Hamilton. Joyce created her wildscape from a bulldozed new home lot. Her yard also includes some adaptive plants which are not native, but are well adapted to growing conditions and soil. After touring Joyce's yard we moved to the home of Ava Whittington. Ava has created a wonderful bird-watching mecca on an almost empty lot. From initial native plant gardens on the left side of her home, she has expanded annually. With the birth of each grandchild, she creates a new garden in that child's honor. Her yard also includes a nice water feature. Mike Heep's Native Plant Nursery was the fourth stop on our tour. Mike specializes in native plants of the LRGV. Mike gave the group a tour of his nursery and pointed out some of his favorite plants. He also took questions from members of the tour. The last two stops were at the homes of Master Naturalists Frank Wiseman and Diann Ballesteros. Frank and Diann both have their yards certified as Texas wildscapes. Frank's plants are defined in garden plots, leaving grassy areas between each plot. Diann likes to plant lesser known specimens.

All of the properties visited use native plants as a draw for wildlife. Even a few native plants mixed in a landscape make a difference in the number of birds and butterflies seen by their owners.



## **R & R - At it Again** *by Tim Bradshaw*

The other day Ralf and Rollo were in the quick shop buying coffee and donuts at the same time. Rollo was eaves dropping and overheard Ralf telling an acquaintance about a project that he was working on and how it could be called a citizen science project. Let's tune it to that discussion.

**Rollo:** "I overheard you talking with that dude that just went out the door. You were telling him something about a science project. Heck, Ralf, you ain't been in a science project since you was in high school. What was ya'll talking about anyway?"

**Ralf:** "Well Mr. Nosybody, if you must know...as if it is any of your business. It was not about a science project. I told that guy that I was working on a project like a citizen science volunteer."

**Rollo:** "What the heck is a citizen scientist...some kind of a nerdy Dr. Frankenstein?"

**Ralf:** "No bucket-head! Wikipedia....."

**Rollo:** "Wiki who?"

**Ralf:** "Just a minute dude. Wikipedia...that's an Internet encyclopedia. Anyway it explains it like this. "Citizen science is a term used for projects or ongoing programs of scientific work in which individual volunteers or networks of volunteers, many of whom may have no specific scientific training, perform or manage research-related tasks such as observation, measurement or computation. The use of citizen-science networks often allows scientists to accomplish research objectives more feasibly than would otherwise be possible. In addition, these projects aim to promote public engagement with the research, as well as with science in general. Some programs provide materials specifically for use by primary or secondary school students. As such, citizen science is one approach to informal science education."

**Rollo:** "Wow! All that. Well then can you tell me just one thing, just one project that I, even a bucket-head like me might have heard about? Well, can you?"

**Ralf:** "Sure! You know when it gets really cold and some of us folks here in the neighborhood say that we are going out bird watching and you call all of us nuts. Well that is the annual Christmas Bird count. It is the longest-running science project currently active today. It was started in 1900 by the Audubon Society and planned to be an annual bird count in as many places as possible, of all birds, on the same day. That's one that you know about, and then over there on the beach is where all them beach loving sunshine folks watch for turtles, count nests and eggs, and help release little ones, and keep records of all that stuff. That is excellent science taking place on the beach. So see you do know more than you think."

**Rollo:** "Heck, I thought all that stuff was just about having fun outdoors."

**Ralf:** "Well, it is Rollo, but when you take the extra minute and make a note, or keep a record, or take a photo, or fill out a bird checklist, ...then you are actually participating in science. If you share that information with others, and with leaders in those areas, then your information gets added to everyone else's information and it all can be utilized to create a historic record of events. That is how scientific study begins. Now you get it ....right?"

**Rollo:** "Yeah, I get it now, but what is your project that you are working on ?

**Ralf:** "Look dude, my coffee is getting cold and my donut is stale by now, let me eat & drink and think on it a bit, and I will get back to you. I'll see you later...ok?"

Created by Coffee & Donuts

Issue # 1



## Award-winning TMNs



*Photo by Frank Wiseman*

David Robson, Michele Robson and Eileen Mahoney became certified TMNs and Wendie Allstot completed 500 hours of volunteer service.

## And Who is This?



*Photo by Robert Archer*

(To learn more about this photo, ask Robert at the January general meeting!)

***Happy New Year!***