

Nestbox Assembly Day

On January 9, Big Country Master Naturalists gathered at the Expo Center. Brian and Judy Hetherington were busy very early loading up their trailer and delivering all the materials necessary to put together another 250 bluebird nestboxes for the Texas Bluebird Society. Brian and Judy are the only State official producers of these bluebird nestboxes.

Many thanks to Robert Pritz, who came in early to get the heat turned on for us! Okie Okerstrom got right into the swing of building the nestboxes, as she had volunteered last year..... and it all came back to her. Shannon Roysden was quickly turning them



out as well. Roger Clark was there early and not only took some great pictures, but was busy helping Brian and Judy teach those of us who were new to this craft. Jimmy Shipp, Jean Dotson, and Carol Danko were ready with leather gloves, drills in hand, and a willingness to learn.

It did not take long before the quality control table was filling up and Judy was busy inspecting the nestboxes. The precut cedar

and the jigs provided by Judy and Brian helped to make the assembly process very easy.

Conversation slowed into near silence as the concentration on production increased. Judy had to remind everyone to take a break and enjoy some coffee and snacks. Everyone agreed it was a very successful and enjoyable day.

Another assembly day is planned for the near future.

(Submitted by Carol Danko)



Our Purpose...
...to provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within our community...

The Prickly Pear



(Photos by Roger Clark)

Winter Solstice at the Campbell Ranch in Paint Rock, December 21, 2010



(Photo by John English)

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The trip to Paint Rock is always a highlight of the Master Naturalist training, and assistance with the many visitors for the Winter Solstice provides an opportunity for us to return the favor to the Campbells. The event also provides a chance for us to experience the depth of knowledge of prehistoric peoples of North America. And there is no need to worry about snakes! Many thanks to Chip Morgan for organizing this service opportunity for us!

Kay, expecting us, outlined several duties for us to perform. The first light event occurs around 10:15. She had recommended that we arrive by 09:45 to help with the handouts and chair setup. She mentioned that the *Lubbock Avalanche Journal* had written an article about the event and if the weather cooperated there could be a crowd. She also suggested that those of us who have witnessed the light occurrences at previous solstices mingle with the new attendees to help point out the specific pictographs that are affected.

In addition to Chip Morgan and his daughter, Jimmy Shipp, John English, Brian and Judy Hetherington were present to help with handouts, direct the cars to appropriate parking spots, help set up chairs, answer questions, and generally assist the approximately 150 people who turned up for the event. We talked with one photographer who had travelled from Wyoming just for the solstice! It was a glorious day, with light winds and cool temperatures. Kay and Fred Campbell were enthusiastic about the totality of the winter solstice event, which began with the sunlight piercing through 'Four Horns' speaking bubble shortly after 10:00.

Chip Morgan had shared his knowledge of the local Indians and their lore as well as this Emily Dickinson poem in an email December 7, 2010:

<i>There's a certain Slant of light,</i>	<i>Heavenly Hurt, it gives us --</i>
<i>Winter Afternoons --</i>	<i>We can find no scar;</i>
<i>That oppresses, like the Heft</i>	<i>But internal difference,</i>
<i>Of Cathedral Tunes --</i>	<i>Where the Meanings are --</i>

-- Emily Dickinson

A while back a fellow Naturalist asked the question, "What do Indian pictographs have to do with conservation?" I thought it a good question.

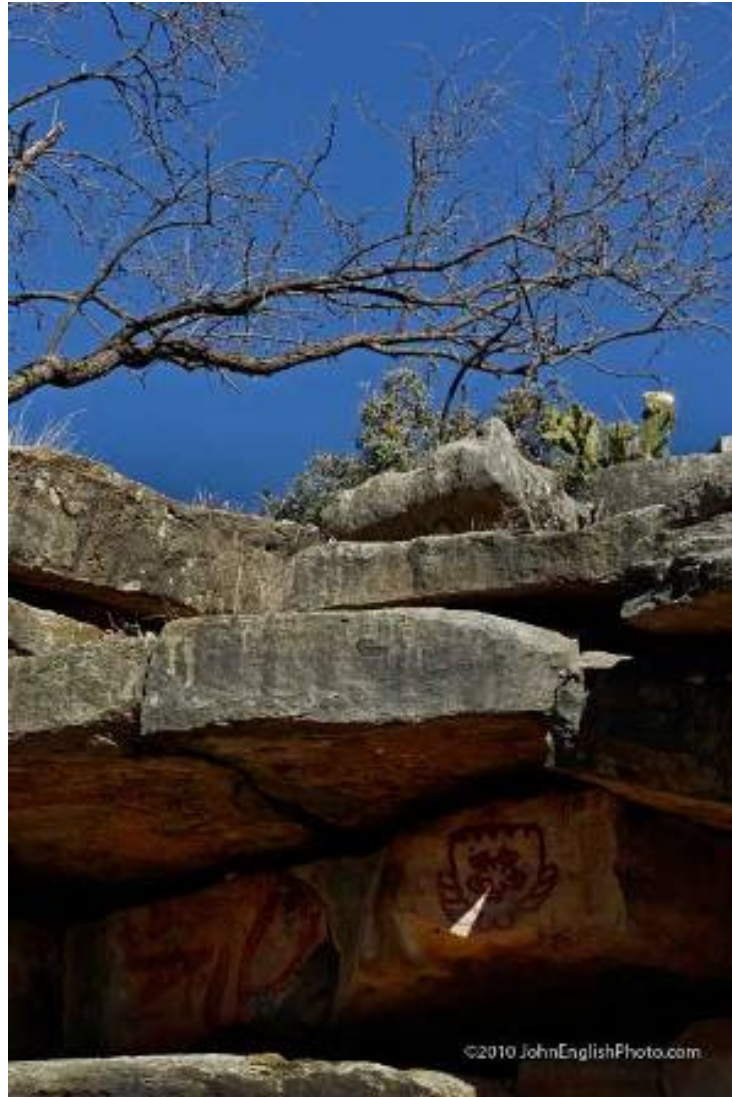
Most of us think of historic West Texas as cowboys, longhorns, settlers, and the Indians chasing buffalo on horseback across the plains. But there was a time, a pre-Columbian time, a time before Cabeza de Vaca shipwrecked upon Galveston Island, when existed no horse, no cow, no roads -- only the trading routes and buffalo trails that never strayed far from water.

Imagine living a nomadic existence in West Texas without the aid of a beast of burden. Only your back and two feet to carry your possessions across the miles of Texas. Would you carry a bulky tepee with poles to keep you dry when it snowed or rained? Would you carry a heavy buffalo robe to warm you when it turned cold? What could you carry? What would you possess?

At 12:37, corrected to GVT, a light dagger pierces the shadows and touches the center of a turtle emboldened upon a shield. It is Solstice at Paint Rock and a look into the lives of the Jumanos -- the aboriginal people who traveled the rivers of Texas, West Texas's first conservationists. This event provides a glimpse of their celebration, a rejoicing at the passing of the shortest day, and the hope of longer, warmer days to come.

Additional photos by John English are on the next page.

(Submitted by Judy Hetherington)



Our thanks to John English for sharing these photographs of the Winter Solstice at the Campbell Ranch in Paint Rock.

Native Plant of the Month: The Native Poinsettia A Member of the Euphorbiaceae (Spurge) Family

Not just for Christmas — Poinsettias: the Texas Natives

The end of the year culminates in a plant-buying frenzy. The Christmas Poinsettia is only sold for the last six weeks of the year, but tens of millions of them filter through stores and nurseries to make it by far the best selling flowering plant in the United States.

The Christmas Poinsettia is indigenous to Mexico, originating in a rather limited region near present day Taxco. It was named for the first United States minister to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, who brought the plant to the U.S. in 1828 and sent some to President Andrew Jackson for a Christmas display at the White House, making it a Christmas tradition. The scientific name, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, translates as “the most beautiful Euphorbia,” but the Christmas Poinsettia is not the only plant that bears the poinsettia name. Close cousins north of the Mexican border have their own special beauty and vibrancy. In particular, Texas has four native poinsettias that may have a place in your garden.

But first, a little family history. Euphorbias are named after Euphorbus, a first-century physician and friend of King Juba II of Mauritania (52 BCE – 23 CE). But what makes the family so unusual is that they all have this peculiar flower structure called “cup-flower” or cyathium, and they are the only plants that have this unusual flower shape. Look closely at the cup-flower of any of the poinsettias and you’ll recognize what makes a Euphorbia so different. They also all share another family trait of a thick, milky sap that can be a skin irritant.

Texas Natives

The native poinsettia most deserving of cultivation and a place in the flower-bed is a close relative of *pulcherrima*. The Painted Poinsettia, *Euphorbia cyathophora*, has bracts that turn an intense day-glow orange-red, and the most amazing fiddle-shaped leaves. This annual re-seeds freely with seed capsules that throw the seeds a great distance when the capsule dries and bursts open.

In the garden, the Painted Poinsettia makes an excellent tall background plant of deep green, unusual-shaped leaves with the red bracts forming in mid-summer. In the flowerbed, rich soil can make it lanky and weak, causing it to lie down when wet. Keeping it a background plant gives some support from other plants to hold it upright. And the



intense red bracts around the cup-flowers are eye-catching – enough to give it another common name of Fire-on-the-mountain., leading us to another native poinsettia.



The next of the Texas native poinsettias is actually a pair of plants so closely related they are often mistaken for each other and even interbred. Even their names are close — Snow-on-the-mountain (*Euphorbia marginata*) and Snow-on-the-prairie (*Euphorbia bicolor*). At the end of summer, entire fields suddenly appear to be waist-deep in a lacy white blanket of snow. Both the small cup-flowers and bract edges are white.

Snow-on-the-prairie — Photo by Marilyn Sallee

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(Continued from page 4) **Native Plant of the Month**



Marginata — Photo by Joseph A. Marcus, Lady Bird Johnson Plant Database

You can tell the “snows” apart by the leaf shape: *marginata* is broad-leafed and pointed (ovate) while *bicolor* has a long, narrow leaf with a rounded tip (spatulate). They both have three-lobed seed capsules which fling the seeds when dry in fall. These are annuals whose seeds are worth gathering for a native garden.

Our final Texas native, *Euphorbia dentata*, is a humble, unassuming little poinsettia. While its cousins can often be waist tall, *dentata* is usually about a foot tall. Its leaves are simple, lanceolate with toothed edges and well spaced up the stem. And while its cousins are quite showy when in bloom, *dentata* is subtle – the bracts near the green flower-cluster turn a powdery silver-white, much as though the center of the plant has been dusted with powdered sugar, with green seedpods forming cleaved balls clustered in the center.

And *Euphorbia dentata* can't help but reveal a family secret in its common name – Toothed Spurge. Yes, all these poinsettias are spurges, usually considered weeds. But what are weeds but under-appreciated native plants? Painted Spurge, Snowy Spurge, Toothed Spurge – all deserve a place in a diverse native garden.



Bicolor — Photo—Bruce Leander, Lady Bird Johnson Database



Euphorbia dentata — Photo by Henry Cliffe, Lady Bird Johnson Plant Database

Growing tips

All need full sun to partial shade, in well-drained soil. Keep well watered but allow soil to dry between waterings. The plants are native to poor soils and do not need fertilizer or excessive water; too much water or fertilizer will provide lanky growth and few flowers. Collect seeds after the pods have fully formed, but before they dry and pop open.

Marilyn Sallee is a member of the Cross Timbers NPSOT chapter, a Master Gardener and a Master Naturalist. She lives with her spouse and cats on a certified wildscape in Annetta, Texas.

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From the President

The year ended with an opportunity for service hours and good times! The New Year has started with service opportunities that could fit any of our members. In December, our chapter helped Kay and Fred Campbell with the Winter Solstice at Paint Rock (article in this newsletter) and then celebrated Christmas with a party at Abilene State Park. Okie Okerstrom, our TWPD sponsor, figured out a way we could even have a fire with the purchased fire logs that have no sparks. There was lots of great food (of course) and good white elephant presents and good discussions, leading to good times by all.

On January 9, a group of us met at the Big Country Hall to assemble 250 nestboxes. Brian Hetherington was doubtful that we could complete all 250, but the group quickly came up to speed and we finished in just over 4 hours. There will be another opportunity to help with assembly in February, so hope to see you there! More information as we figure out when we'll be ready.

There are multiple opportunities for service hours and advanced education in February, starting with the **Farm & Ranch Expo**.

February 21	In the afternoon, we need a couple of people to set up our booth
February 22	The booth needs to be staffed from 9am to 6pm
February 23	The booth needs to be staffed from 9am to 4pm Robert Pritz needs assistance with registration at the Tools session, starting at 7:30am Robert also needs assistance with registration at the Backyard Gardening Seminar Need volunteers to bake cookies for afternoon snack

We will also have another batch of 250 **bluebird nestboxes** to assemble in February.

Training Committee

Brian Hetherington has agreed to lead the Training Committee. He will be recruiting several people to work with him on the 2011 Fall Training sessions, incorporating any changes/improvements from the 2010 feedback sheets. If you would like to work with Brian on training, please send him an email at heth76933@gmail.com.

Big Country Master Naturalist Webmaster

Amy McCullough has agreed to be our new webmaster for our site on the state webserver. Amy is attending WordPress training on January 27th and will be ready to start accepting content and ideas. If you would like to work with Amy or even send your ideas and content for the website, please contact her at sjtwxgirl@gmail.com.

Secretary and Historian for 2011

Due to family circumstances, Beverly Armstrong submitted her resignation as Secretary in December. Carol Danko has agreed to be our secretary through the end of the current term (December). Carol has also agreed to be the Historian and work on the scrapbook for 2011 assuming that a couple of the other members will help her. All of the members are invited to send pictures, articles, flyers, etc. to Carol (bdanko@clearwire.net). Thank you, Carol, for volunteering for these jobs!

January Chapter Meeting January 20, 2011

There was an enthusiastic turnout to hear Bruce Kreidler give a presentation on Trees. There were 16 people present, including 2 guests. Unfortunately I was unable to attend due to that dreaded stomach virus, but Vice President Shannon Roysden stepped in and did a great job leading the meeting. Bruce will complete his Trees presentation at a future meeting. Hope to see all of you at the February meeting!

Submitted by Judy Hetherington, President

Upcoming Programs

Shannon Roysden shares these prospective topics for the next monthly chapter meetings:

<u>February</u>	Judy and Brian, Bluebirds
<u>March</u>	Phil Watkins, Horned Lizard Certification Bruce Kreidler to finish Trees presentation
<u>April</u>	Larry Millar, Birds program
<u>May</u>	Roger Clark, Grasses/Bobwhite, Quail

These were suggestions/interests mentioned at the January chapter meeting:

- Fishing/ Fly fishing
- Water Quality
- Interpretive trails
- Amphibian Watch
- Birding
- List of all certifications available
- Field Trips

If you have any suggestions or are willing to give a talk at the chapter meetings, please feel free to contact Shannon Roysden at Shannon.Roysden@tpwd.state.tx.us.

Rodney's Corner

Word of the Month: dimorphism (di = two + morph=form) — A species that exhibits two distinct forms which can be color, sex, size, or organ structure.

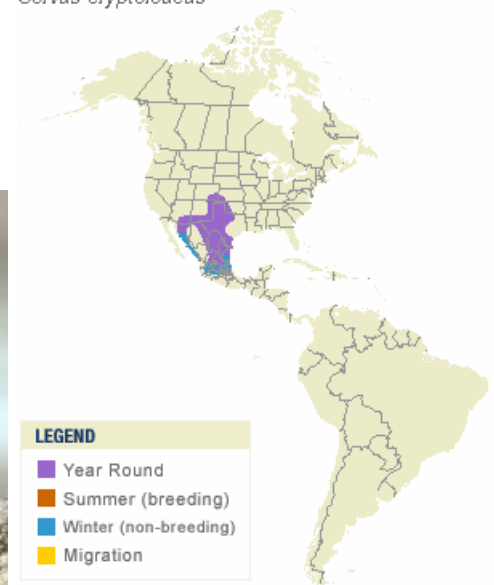
Bird of the Month: Chihuahuan Raven (*Corvus cryptoleucus*)

A large black bird that inhabits the Southwest. Most of the “crows” around here are actually Chihuahuan Ravens. The Chihuahuan Raven’s voice is more like a croak than the classic caw. Although a black bird, the bases of the feathers are white, hence the species name crypto = hidden and leucus = white.

Trivia: The cheetah is the only cat that cannot retract its claws.



Chihuahuan Raven
Corvus cryptoleucus



Map by Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Range data by NatureServe

(Submitted by Rodney Sturdivant)



Christmas Party

Photos by
Roger Clark

Johnston Elementary School Butterfly and Hummingbird Garden Workday, January 29, 2011

On Saturday, January 29, we met Jean Dotson at Johnston Elementary School to plant native grass and wildflower seeds in the Butterfly and Hummingbird Garden outside of Jean's science classroom. Jean uses the garden to show her students all kinds of science principles including lifecycle of butterflies, decomposition of materials, the rain cycle, and lifecycle of plants. Helping Jean were Carol Danko, Cherrie-Lee Phillip, and Brian and Judy Hetherington. Although the winter garden doesn't look the most inviting, it will really come to life in the next few weeks.



We planted seeds of Yellow Indiangrass, Eastern Grama grass, Prairie Muhly, and Big Bluestem in the holes of concrete blocks which had been filled with dirt. Several bluebonnet seeds were added and the holes were topped with sifted compost. The bluebonnets should grow and bloom while the grass seeds are opening. The grass seedlings will be transplanted to their permanent homes in the tires at a later date.

Lots of native wildflower seeds were planted in the various large pots, some for later transplanting and some just for show.

(Continued, last page)

T E X A S



The Prickly Pear is produced every two months by

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Texas Master Naturalist**

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To make comments or to suggest content for future issues, please contact Mary Burrows by email at mary.burrows@dishmail.net

Johnston Elementary Workday (continued)



The lengths of flannel were laid over the mulch to help discourage the spread of Bermuda grass from the playgrounds. A couple of Jean's former students arrived to spread mulch over the flannel and fill the hole where soil had been removed.

(Submitted by Judy Hetherington)