

COLUMNISTS

A rare flower, indeed. One found in Callahan County draws interest

Randy Deming Big Country Master Naturalists

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What do the cities of Buenos Aires, Luxemburg, Tokyo, Adelaide, Liverpool and Abilene have in common?

They all took part in the 2022 City Nature Challenge. Between April 29 and May 2, participants uploaded sounds and photographs of their nature observations using the iNaturalist app. From May 3-8, participants could spend time on iNaturalist and help to identify all the plants, flowers, and animals that had been recorded.

The Abilene area had 1,880 observations of 600 species. More than 50 people participated.

This is not just a competition between cities. The information gathered is being used by scientists to do research. The goal is to advance our knowledge of the natural world, learn how to protect it, and teach others. This is my reason for being a part of the Big Country Master Naturalist Chapter.

I am not an expert in any specific area or field, but I can take pictures.

During challenge, I took a picture of a very pretty wildflower on my property. It was identified as the “Large Flower Beardtongue” (*Penstemon grandifloras*). A few months later, I was contacted by some interested biologists who told me that my observation was one of just two in the state of Texas. It turned out that this particular flower is extremely rare.

They sent me this message: “We would like to inform you that your population of *P. grandiflorus* is the last known population to be found in the state of Texas. Only one plant was seen this year from another dwindling population, and it may not still exist. Your population sighting will be featured as part of a paper being presented on August 10th, 2022, at the Botanical Research Institute of Texas (BRIT).”

After exchanging emails with pictures of flowers as they now appear, Bill Freiheit from Tarrant County College, Erin Flinchbaugh from BRIT, and Dr. Allen Nelson from Tarleton State University visited my property in Callahan County on Aug. 15. They spent an entire morning, locating plants, mapping them and collecting seeds. They plan to return in April, when the plants are in bloom.

This experience, which resulted from my participation in the City Nature Challenge, has released in me a few ponderings:

The area where these plants are found is in extremely poor soil with lots of dry bare ground. The “Large Flower Beard Tongue” is a perennial, and it takes a few years before the plant blooms. If I had been zealous about keeping my property mowed, there may not be any flowers. I do try to mow around a lot of my flowers. I almost titled this article, “Zero-Turn Mower Saves Rare Flower.”

My property seems like an unlikely place to find any plant or animal of any significance, but our backyards are exactly the places where the rare and exotic can be found.

We cannot take any form of life for granted. I keep thinking I could have easily destroyed good habitat for a beautiful flower.

I managed to earn a degree in biology without taking a botany course and life’s twists and turns took me away from using my degree for most of my adult life so there is a lot that I do not know but this does not keep me from making contributions to understanding and improving life on our planet.

Upcoming events

Friday: New training member testing and graduation, 6 p.m., Extension office; banquet and business meeting to follow. Chapter meeting, Extension office, following new member graduation.

Saturday: Star party (weather permitting), Abilene State Park. Plan to arrive around dusk. Meet near swimming pool (unless otherwise directed by park staff).

Dec. 3: Abilene State Park Hike (stay tuned to *our local Facebook page @BCTXMN for updates!*)

Dec. 17: Star party (weather permitting), Abilene State Park. Plan to arrive around dusk. Meet near swimming pool (unless otherwise directed by park staff).

Randy Deming is a member of the Big Country Master Naturalist program. All master naturalists are volunteers interested in the great Texas outdoors. From our backyards to

natural spaces across the state, master naturalists are learning, sharing, and protecting our natural resources. To learn more about the Texas Master Naturalist program and how you can get involved go totxmn.tamu.edu or our local Facebook page @BCTXMN.