

COLUMNISTS

Goin' on a nature hunt - join the City Nature Challenge

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Spring brings an exciting change of seasons, but it is even more welcome after the isolation of this last year and the severe winter weather we rarely see. Many folks are venturing out to enjoy the spring sunshine and may be looking for ways to spend time in nature with family.

The local Big Country Master Naturalist group is joining the City Nature Challenge in an international urban bioblitz, or search for wild plants and animals, in Abilene and its surrounding areas.

City Nature Challenge began in 2016 with a friendly competition between teams from the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. During the 2018 Challenge, more than 41,000 participants made 815,000 observations of living organisms. In 2021, groups from more than 350 cities worldwide, including Abilene, will participate.

The Challenge provides valuable information for scientists and municipalities. Further information about City Nature Challenge is available at citynaturechallenge.org.

This year's challenge has two parts: observation and recording of findings from April 30 to May 3, and uploading and identification of findings from May 4 to 9. We will use the iNaturalist app to record all information collected and identify as many organisms as possible.

The best part of the City Nature Challenge is that anyone may participate. Due to ongoing concerns over COVID-19, there will be no large group activities planned, but this is a perfect opportunity to take your family outside to investigate and document your surroundings.

All you need to take part in City Nature Challenge is a smartphone and the free app, iNaturalist. You can also use a camera and upload your photographs to the website

iNaturalist.org. The website has tutorials and flow charts to help you learn how to use the app. iNaturalist also has a children's version, SEEK, on the website.

All observations entered into iNaturalist from Taylor and the surrounding counties from April 30 to May 3 will automatically be entered into the Big Country Abilene project associated with the Big Country Master Naturalists. On May 10, results will be announced on the City Nature Challenge website.

City Nature Challenge has a few basic rules. Each observation must have a photograph to be counted. An audio recording may be substituted for bird songs or frog calls, but a photograph is usually easier to obtain. Only observations made within the specific challenge dates will count towards the project.

Don't worry if you can't identify the organism; that's what the iNaturalist community does. There are many users of the app in Texas and the Big Country learning together. Watch your app for input from other enthusiasts about your observations.

Get the best picture you can. Get close, focus well and take more than one picture if you need to show different views. You may need a photograph of plants' seeds or flower, stem, leaf and the entire plant for successful identification. Remember, all organisms entered should be wild and not cultivated or captive.

To prepare for the challenge, explore and practice with iNaturalist. One of our local master naturalists prepared a step-by-step guide for using the iNaturalist app. Try it at this link: <https://bit.ly/2OxCJJe>.

Just think of all the plants and animals you see and are curious about — iNaturalist is a great way to learn more about our local wildlife. Most of all, have fun sharing nature with your family.

The Big Country Master Naturalist chapter is one of 48 chapters in the Texas Master Naturalist Program. All master naturalists are interested in the great Texas outdoors across the state, even in our backyards. We are learning, sharing, volunteering, teaching and protecting our natural areas and resources. To learn more, go to our state website at txmn.tamu.edu or on Facebook, @BCTXMN.