

COLUMNISTS

Spring into the great outdoors with the master naturalists

Marianne Marugg Special to the Reporter-News

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Spring is officially here, and if we don't blow away in the wind, it's time to go outside to enjoy nature around us as it comes to life.

April is a special month for our Big Country Master Naturalist group. We will host two of our favorite public events: the Wings On the Wind Spring Festival and a Big Country project for the worldwide event called the City Nature Challenge.

Wings On the Wind Spring Festival began in 2017 to celebrate the nature that flies, floats or otherwise moves through the air. It quickly expanded to include other aspects of the natural world, specially designed to allow children and families to learn about the natural world around us while having fun outdoors. Though floods in the park in 2019 and the COVID-19 restrictions have eliminated the festival for several years, Wings On the Wind is back this year with more activities than ever!

Join us for year's festival at Abilene State Park on April 23, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Children can compare their own "wingspan" to that of a variety of birds; learn to cast a fishing rod; explore the solar system; try to follow the monarch butterfly migration; see an insect wing through a microscope; fly paper airplanes; and many more activities. The Texas Buffalo Soldiers will also visit the park on the day of the festival and bring the history of early Texas alive for park attendees.

Admission to Abilene State Park is \$5 per car, and the festival is free. Bring a picnic lunch and enjoy the fun at our lovely state park.

Our second event, the City Nature Challenge, begins April 29 and lasts through May 8. The City Nature Challenge is a worldwide event in which participants attempt to find, record and identify as many different local plants and animals as possible.

Wild critters may sound like a strange thing to look for in a city environment, but the term “wild,” in this case, just means not domesticated. Plants and flowers that you grow in your yard are domesticated, as are your pet iguana and snake. However, birds and toads that visit your yard are wild.

This is our second year to sponsor the City Nature Challenge. We will again include five counties of the Big Country in our project: Taylor, Callahan, Shackelford, Jones and Nolan. Anyone within this area may participate in the project just by creating a free account on iNaturalist.org or by downloading the iNaturalist app on a smartphone.

You can then photograph any non-domesticated animal or plant and upload it to your iNaturalist account. The project will automatically collect your data for the City Nature Challenge Texas Big Country Project. All pictures must be taken between April 29 through May 2. From May 3-8, work on identifying as many of the documented specimens as possible. Participants can use iNaturalist or other sources of information, such as field guides.

The information on local flora and fauna collected by City Nature Challenge is available for use by scientists, students, land managers and anyone who uses iNaturalist, including you. The results will be available on the City Nature Challenge website after May 9.

Additional information on the project is available at CityNatureChallenge.org. Excellent instructions for use of iNaturalist are available on their website at iNaturalist.org.

We hope you will come out to celebrate spring with us!

Big Country Master Naturalist April Events:

- ▶ April 2 – Lake Hike at Abilene State Park, 9 a.m., check in at park headquarters gate.
- ▶ April 16 – Cedar Creek Waterway Hike, 9 a.m., meet at South 11th Street entrance.
- ▶ April 23 – Wings on the Wind Festival at Abilene State Park, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m..
- ▶ April 29 through May 2 – City Nature Challenge.

If you're planning to attend hikes or star parties, be sure to check [Facebook.com/BCTXMN](https://www.facebook.com/BCTXMN) in advance for special directions, weather related changes or COVID-19 restrictions.

Marianne Marugg is a member of the Big Country Master Naturalist chapter. All Master Naturalists are volunteers interested in the outdoors. Learn more about the Texas Master