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Los Caminos

Celebrating and sharing our experiences along "the roads" we take through nature.

Award Winning Newsletter of the El Camino Real Chapter

Milam County Texas Master Naturalist Fall 2016

Sweet Shenanigans by Sheri Sweet

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Did You Know?

What insect has teeth, flies backwards and sees almost 360 degrees?

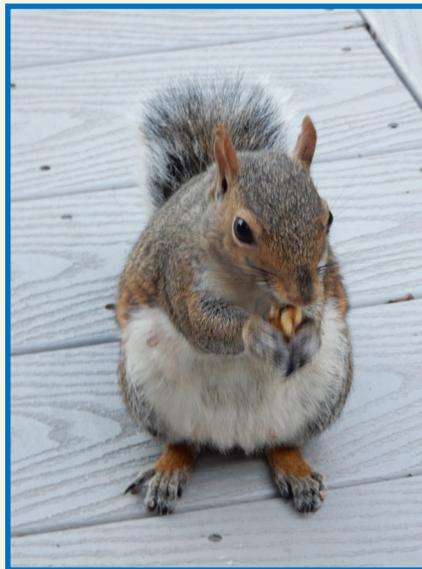
See last page for the answer.

I'm sure everyone has seen squirrels around this area. We have one that scampers around on our place from time to time. This little article is about the gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis pennsylvanicus*). While I haven't spent time following our squirrel around – it stays mostly down around our old ramshackle barn – I did get acquainted, up close and personal, with a couple of them out here in Virginia at the RV park where we are staying while visiting our daughter.

A few years ago, I was sitting out at a picnic table to get computer connections which I couldn't get inside the RV. A gray squirrel came around, jumped up on the table and eyed me. I happened to have some nuts with me and tossed one to it. Once you start feeding a squirrel, they become VERY friendly and pushy! This one came closer and closer – pretty soon it even ran across my keyboard! I gave it a few more nuts and finally had to go inside to get rid of it!

This year, I visited with a man camped down beyond us. He said the squirrels would eat out of his hand! Of course, I had to try this, too! One afternoon, one was squirreling around our campsite. I fed it its fill of raw walnuts. 5 or 6 raw walnuts does a pretty good job of filling up

a hungry squirrel! I'm pretty sure this one was a "she". A couple of days later, she was around again, so I took a mix of raw nuts outside and sat in a chair by the table. I clicked my tongue at her and she came right on over. Pretty soon, she was not 6" from my knee! I got some really cute pictures of her. I offered



her a pecan half. She put one skinny little paw with sharp little claws onto my finger and daintily took the pecan. She munched it down and came back for more. Several times she put her little paw on my finger and took nuts before she got full and left! Communing with nature, up close and personal! How fun!!!

The gray squirrel is 12" to 21" from nose to tail. This one was about 18" long. They range in color from gray to yellowish-brown

with lighter underbelly, chin, and hind legs. Their tails are gray with silvery-white edged longer hairs. They will weigh 1 to 1.5 pounds.

They have 1 or 2 litters of babies a year with 2 to 4 babies each time. They seem to be around most of the time with their peak activities at sunup and late afternoon.

(Continued on page 2)

Squirrels do not hibernate, but during severe weather will stay in leaf nests and tree cavities for protection from the elements. They will store up to 1,000 nuts in shallow holes they dig in the ground. If their food source is eliminated, they will move on to other forested areas.

Squirrels are mostly herbivores. They do have modified diets which will include nuts, seeds, plants, fruits, insects, eggs, and baby birds. They live in dense forests, open woodlands, grasslands, rural, suburban and urban areas.

My sources for this article were my personal experiences and <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/living/wildlife/species/squirrel.htm>.



Sweet Shenanigans—Part 2

By Sheri Sweet

Never a dull moment in the country:

1. We have been noticing a “throw-away” yellow tabby cat down around our tank the last couple of weeks. I noticed that it was very thin and boney. I told Wes about it, so off we went to Dollar General to get some cheap cat food and a bowl. When we got home, we filled the bowl and placed it in the old ramshackle barn. The next day we checked it and all the food was still there. We moved the bowl over onto the dam on the tank. When we checked it the next day, some of the food was gone. The following day, something had turned the bowl upside-down and the food was all gone. We filled the bowl again and left it. Last night we rode down to the tank after dark to check it. Wes had a strong flashlight and as we came up towards the bowl, he flashed the light towards it and on beyond. I said, “there’s the cat.” He said, “it’s a ‘possum.” Huh? I said, “it’s the CAT!” He said, “no, it’s a ‘POSSUM! Look!” Well! There was a young ‘possum with its nose in the bowl AND I’d also seen the cat about 50-75 feet farther down the way!

OK, so we know we’re feeding two things now! This evening, the cat was eating out of the bowl. I took some old hamburger down there to the bowl. The cat ambled away into the bushes. I left the hamburger and drove past where the cat disappeared. I could see it through the leaves and bushes – it went only about 10 feet away. I stopped about 50 feet farther down and looked back to see the cat dining happily!

2. Our neighbors’ ducks come over to our tank to paddle around all day and bask in the shade of our trees– and eat our bugs of various kinds. The neighbor told me they have two sets of ducks and the two groups will not mix. One of the males really wants to join the group that comes to our

pond. I observed him come flying in and landing, “splat!” in the middle of the group of five here one day. They immediately circled and attacked the interloper! They were pecking on him, pulling his feathers and nipping his feet! They were all over the poor guy! He finally got away from them and flew back home. (“Mom! They won’t let me play with them!”)



3. And then there’s the mockingbird that sits at the highest point in the tree or up on the electric line – singing his little birdie brains out! He sings and sings – and then suddenly leaps up into the air and comes back down, still singing away!



4. Our “greeters” are still around here at Sweet Acres. When we drive in the gate, there are generally anywhere from 1 to 3 jackrabbits awaiting us! I love to see and watch them! When they run, they don’t really run, as such.



They lope along. And they also think if they put their ears down, you can't see them! They come up and eat right outside the front window. And they will sit under a tree for several hours during the day, semi-napping!



5. We have some Eastern Cottontails living out under one of the containers that comprises the RV barn. We see them out and about in that area and watch them come in and out of a hole under the corner.

6. I bought a pretty basket of Purslane and Wes hung it at the top of a plant stand. Pretty soon I noticed a mockingbird hanging around the basket. There were two of them – a pair. You guessed it! They built a nest – right smack in the middle of my Purslane basket! I guess the female likes flowers. Next thing we knew, there were four dark turquoise eggs with brown splotches on them. I went out a couple of days later to check on the eggs – I climbed up on a ladder to look in – no eggs, no shells, no babies. I guess a snake got them.



7. A cardinal built a nest in our largest fig tree. Pretty soon, there were 3 white eggs with brown speckles on them. I checked every few days. Pretty soon, there were two hatchlings. The next morning I took the camera out to take a picture – no babies, no eggs, no shells – empty nest. I guess a snake got them, too.
8. Speaking of snakes, I went out to the garage to do some washing a few days ago. I noticed something sticking out under the edge of the washer. It looked like a molted skin. I yelled for Wes. He came and lifted the washer, telling me to pull it out. Not with my hands, I won't! I fished around and pulled out a 4- or 5-foot long snake skin! I guess I won't be going into the garage anymore without shoes on!
9. I drove in through our gate off FM 696 the other day and noticed the grass moving beside the lane. I stopped and

watched. Out stepped a turtle! It ambled across in front of me into the grass on the other side of the lane, then stopped. I pulled up beside it and took a picture of it – a Red-eared slider.



10. We continue to feed the stray cat. (No animal is going to starve on my property!) We went out the other evening to feed it – it was after dark. Wes shined the flashlight towards the dish. There were two sets of eyes glowing back at us! The young o'possum and the feral cat!

11. After the rains one day I drove the mule across the dam on our tank. On the other side was a bullfrog sitting on top of the junk that collected around the base of a tree in the water. I took a couple of pictures of it and ended up getting too close. It took this enormous leap off the pile, flying through the air – peeing – as it sailed down into the tank! Hmmm! I didn't know one little bullfrog could hold that much water! And I was laughing so hard I couldn't get a picture of it! Oh, well . . .!



12. And then there's the pornographic Sago Palm growing next to one of our doors! What's really funny is that there is also one growing right next to the front door of Round Top State Bank in Lexington!



NEVER A DULL MOMENT IN THE COUNTRY!!!

Road Runner Journal Entry by Cindy Bolch

Have you ever watched a Road Runner? No, I mean have you ever *really* watched a Road Runner? Maybe you only get to see one for an instant as it darts off into cover and you say “Heh, there went a Road Runner!”. Or maybe as you approach, it glides from a branch down to the ground and then darts into cover. And once again you get to say “Heh, there went a Road Runner!”. Well, until I *really* watched the one that has been hanging around my place for the past 3 or 4 months, I did not truly appreciate the Looney Tunes depiction of the Road Runner in the Wile E.

Coyote cartoons. Whenever the Road Runner takes off running away from Wile E., his little legs become invisible in this whirl of motion while he leaves Wile E. in a blast of dust. Well I’m here to tell you it’s all true!

Almost every morning for the past couple of weeks when I am driving out my long road from the house to the last gate, my Road Runner joins me. He appears out of nowhere and begins to trot down the road ahead of me. As I speed up he speeds up and as I slow down he slows down. He begins with a trot and then levels out his head and body keeping them parallel to the ground. Soon his feet and legs become invisible and there he goes. I will slow down again just to make sure he still has feet



and legs and voilà, there they are! My Road Runner (I am going to have to give him a name) will soon tire of zipping ahead of me on the road and dart off into the brush to never be seen again until, of course, tomorrow morning.

But I digress. We were talking about watching a Road Runner – not our engaging in road running. What I want to talk about is watching a Road Runner playing. One morning when he was up close to the house, I watched from a window as he played with a stick. He would pick the stick up in his mouth, turn his head, and throw the stick up into the air. The stick would fly in the air maybe 5 or 6 feet ahead of him. He would race toward the stick, spread his wings to stop, turn in mid air, and jump up to catch the stick. I must have watched him for 15 or 20 minutes as he ran about the yard playing with his stick. He never missed. When he finally tired of that game, he dropped his stick and went about exploring the rest of the yard.

They say that you can tell the intelligence of an animal by whether or not it plays. Well, I can tell you that if this is true, then without a doubt the Road Runner is one of the most intelligent of all critters around.

The Fall Sky

by Don & Lynn Hagan

There are several things that are apparent in the fall sky. October, November, and December are full of some very interesting, and easily observable events. Hang on, because as we go through the celestial events, you might get a bit of whiplash.

Supermoon

For October, the focus is all about the moon. The autumn sky is a perfect time to see what is known as a supermoon and it all has to do with the elliptical orbit of the moon around the earth. Technically, to be a supermoon, the moon must be a full or new Moon and is less than about 223,694 miles) from the center of the Earth. In other words, a Supermoon is a full Moon or a new Moon at its closest point to Earth. The point at which this closeness occurs is called the perigee.

October 16 brings the first of the year’s three supermoons. Remember, though, as you do your skywatching, these dates for the supermoons are the peak and the moon’s brightness will extend a couple of days before perigee and a few days after perigee. For the skywatcher, that means that during that

time, seeing other deep space objects are often washed out by the light of the “silvery moon”. The second supermoon of 2016 occurs November 14 and is the closest full moon to the Earth since 1990. It is also the closest the moon will get to Earth until 2021. December 12 marks not only the final full moon of the year, but is also the last of the 2016 supermoons.

Meteor Showers

As we discuss autumn meteor showers, please note the discussion of the supermoons. Most of the usually impressive meteor showers of autumn will be a bit washed out by the moon and be perhaps less spectacular than usual. That being said, there are some pretty good shows in store.

October 21-22 marks the height of the Orionid meteor shower but the 22nd will probably be best viewing before dawn, again due to the moon. You can expect to see about 10-20 per hour and they often have trains. If you trail the meteors backwards, they appear to originate in the club of the constellation Orion

(Continued on page 5)

(hence the name). Of particular interest is that the debris producing the meteors of the Orionid meteor shower comes from Comet Halley, last passing Earth in 1986.

The peak of the Leonid meteor shower occurs November 17 (seeming to originate in the constellation Leo), but might be washed out by the supermoon of November 14. These meteors are usually large, yellowish-green, and fairly slow-moving as they go across the sky. Even with the moon being bright in the evening sky, you should still expect to see about 10-15 meteors per hour with pre-dawn viewing probably the best.

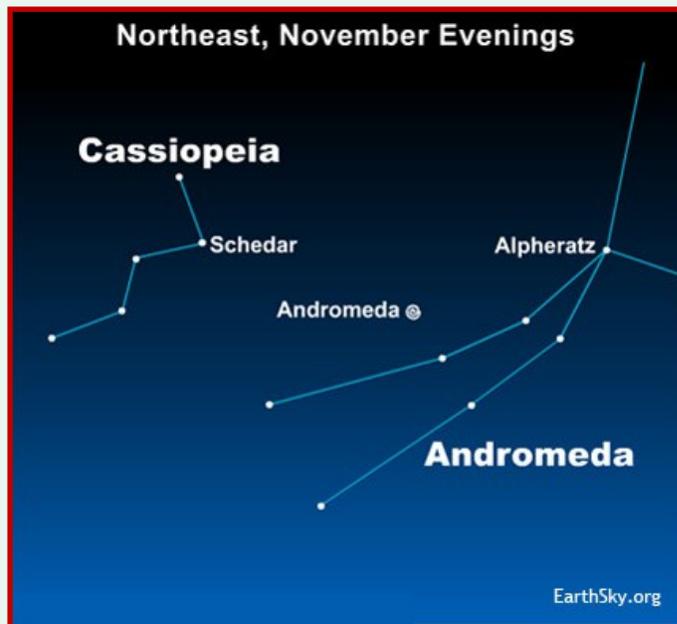
The Geminid meteor shower will peak around 2:00 am December 13 (again coinciding with a supermoon). Even so, you should be able to see about 120 meteors an hour. They burn fast, bold, and bright – making for a spectacular show (as long as it is not washed out by moonlight). Astronomers anticipate that the moon will be out all night which could cut the number of viewable meteors.

Andromeda Galaxy

As we approach November, the Andromeda Galaxy can be seen easily with the unaided eye in dark sky as a faint, misty, oval patch near the star Mirach in Andromeda. Many use the constellation Cassiopeia, which is shaped like an M or W to help to locate it. Andromeda is a galaxy like our own Milky Way, though somewhat larger, with some 200 billion stars. The light from the Andromeda Galaxy has been traveling through space for 2 million years before it enters our eyes.

October 30 will bring 2016's only black moon, also known as the second new moon in a calendar month. If it is a clear night,

black moons are a great chance to look for deep sky objects like the Andromeda galaxy or the Orion nebula (in the sword of Orion).



For More Information: <http://earthsky.org/astronomy-essentials/earthskys-meteor-shower-guide> <https://www.timeanddate.com/astronomy/moon/super-full-moon.html> <http://www.heavens-above.com/>

Plant ID and Taxonomy at TAMU

By Linda Jo Conn

ECR Texas Master Naturalist members interested in becoming proficient in plant identification and taxonomy met at the TAMU S. M. Tracy Herbarium in College Station on a September Saturday morning with Dale Kruse, curator of the herbarium, and Monique Reed, author of "Key to the Angiosperm Flora of Brazos and Surrounding Counties".

Attendees were given instruction



and practice on using taxonomy keys to identify plants. Kruse and Reed on the left in photo gave pointers and confirmation to plant identities. TMN members Nancy Webber, Cheryl Lewis (Brazos Co. chapter) and Joyce Conner work to identify specimens. Not pictured are Ann Collins and Linda Conn.



Bog Trotting with Dale and Monique 9-24-16

By Linda Jo Conn

[Editor note: This is a couple pages out of Linda's personal scrap book she maintains, hopefully we'll see more in the future?]

The bog we trotted on an uncomfortably hot and humid morning with Dale Kruse and Monique Reed from the S. M. Tracy Herbarium at Texas A&M University at College Station is a previously mined peat bog located in eastern Milam County. It contains many interesting and unique plants that flourish in such perpetually wet locations. This late September visit was the second made to the site to collect and press specimens by several members of the El Camino Real TMN chapter with Dale and Monique.

Nits and Lice (*Hypericum drummondii*)Meadow beauty (*Rhexia mariana*)Bigpod sesbania (*Sesbania herbacea*)

After meeting and organizing at the bog site, rubber boots, bug spray, sun screen and hats were donned by participants. Then the bog trotting (i.e. sloging along in high grass on uneven and sometimes slippery areas) began.



(L) Dale discusses a monocot identification with one of the three TAMU students who joined the bog trot to further their knowledge. (C) Monique chooses representative samples of each specimen and judiciously collects the less-populated species. (R) Some plant specimens such as Small sundew (*Drosera brevifolia*) were brought in by the handfull.

As plant samples were brought to the central location for processing, Brazos County TMN chapter member Cheryl Lewis carefully numbered and recorded the required data for each. The plants were then given to Ann Collins and Darlene Anglen to select a sample for the El Camino Real Chapter collection. The best samples were passed to Nancy Webber and Joyce Conner to press for the S. M. Tracy Herbarium. Prior to placing the samples between sheets of newspaper, the samples were cleaned of excess soil and debris. Each newspaper sheet was labeled with the corresponding number and description and then added to the plant presses.



(L) Dale Kruse gives necessary identification information to Cheryl Lewis.

(C) Ann Collins places a plant between sheets of newspaper.

(R) Nancy Webber smiles for the camera. Joyce Conner helps her process the plants.

After processing the last handful of collected plant material, the plant presses are

straightened, tightened, re-tightened and readied for transport. The hard work will be performed in the near future: Gluing specimens to herbarium quality paper, verification of identification, and preparation and addition of voucher labels.



(L) Monique brings in the last bouquet of plants to process. (C) Dale puts the final squeeze on a plant press headed to the S. M. Tracy Herbarium. Note that it is evident by the condition of Dale's jeans that bog-trotting can be an experience subject to slips, trips, and falls. (R) The ECR chapter plant press ready to load and transport.



I Feel Guilty for Possessing "Weeds"

by Linda Jo Conn

First Confession: I have been a little apprehensive for the past two months. I am worried about what might happen because I enjoy observing and identifying native plants.

Second Confession: I am disorganized, a horrible housekeeper, and even more deplorable caretaker of my truck. My 2004 Chevrolet Colorado is usually cluttered with a folding chair or two, several bottles of water, a roll of paper towels, a few plastic bags, partial roll of toilet paper, old bath towels, a garden trowel, a pair of hand pruners, a jacket or coat according to season, a pair of rubber boots, a pair of worn out (i.e. disposable) tennis shoes and other items deemed necessary at various times. A Canon camera, cell phone and reusable shopping bags follow me into and out of the truck as needed. It has been at least two years since I thoroughly cleaned the interior of my vehicle.

Third Confession: I am a distracted driver because, whether traveling along an interstate highway or a rub board country road, I usually have one eye focused on the plants growing along the roadsides. I would like to believe that I make safe U-turns and navigate careful pullovers off the road when I am compelled to stop for a closer look and documentation of a plant.

Fourth Confession: I frequently gather an occasional plant specimen for later study. I lay it on the passenger side floorboard. By the time I return home, the sample may be a bit dry and crispy. Any plant fragments left behind in the truck cab languish there.

Fifth Confession: Since I so seldom clean out my truck, there is a substantial amount of desiccated plant materials inside, especially on the passenger floorboard.

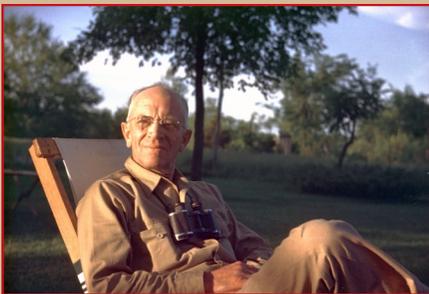
Reason for my Concern: In late July, the weekly city police report published by my local newspaper included the following incident:

"Officer made a traffic stop near a local business and observed small amounts of a green leafy substance scattered about the center console of the vehicle. He conducted a probable cause search and located a glass pipe and a grinder. No usable amount of marijuana was found but the driver was cited for possession of drug paraphernalia and disregarding a stop sign."

Conclusion: If I am ever stopped for a traffic violation, I hope that I have not inadvertently added any suspicious or illicit plant materials to the jumble of "green leafy substances" that are likely to be found on the floorboard of my truck.



Aldo Leopold Says:



"Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild and free." Foreword to A Sand County Almanac (1949)

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Los Caminos is a quarterly publication of the "El Camino Real Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists", a 501(c)(3) nonprofit volunteer educational organization.

Certifications, Etc. By Cindy Bolch

New since the Summer 2016 newsletter **are in this color.**

2016 Re-Certifications (Guadalupe Bass pin). Lucy Coward, Don Travis, Cindy Bolch, Donna Lewis, Cindy Travis, Katherine Bedrich, Ann Collins, Linda Jo Conn, Joyce Conner, Darlene Anglen, Barbara Cromwell, Wesley Sweet, Sheri Sweet, Sherry Colley, Mike Conner, Debbi Harris, Kim Summers, Nancy Webber, **Dorothy Mayer, Pam Neeley and Kathy Lester.**



Highest Level of Lifetime-to-date Milestone Achievement Levels earned by current members as of September 2016 include:

5000 Hours—Katherine Bedrich, Cindy Bolch

4000 Hour Presidential Award—Donna Lewis

2500 Hours—Don Travis, Ann Collins, Debbi Harris and **Lucy Coward.**

1000 Hours—Joyce Conner, Sue Taylor, Lucy Coward, Dorothy Mayer, Phyllis Shuffield, Sandra Dworaczyk, Linda Jo Conn.

500 Hours—Barbara Cromwell, John Pruett, Sheri Sweet and Wesley Sweet

250 Hours—Cindy McDaniels, Janice Johnson, Gary McDaniels, Kim Summers, Rusty Thomas, Cindy Travis, Sherry Colley, Kathy Lester, Pam Neeley and Darlene Anglen.

Our September 2016 Year-to-Date Volunteer Service and Advanced Training hours are **4,250** and **1110** respectively (47 current active and eligible members) and Total Accumulated hours for Volunteer Service and Advanced Training hours are **54,804** and **7,395** respectively (91 total volunteers past and current since 2008).

Congratulations to All

Did You Know?



What insect has teeth, flies backwards and sees almost 360 degrees?

The Dragonfly arrived about 300 million years ago and was one of the first insects on our planet. Dragonflies and damselflies are in the order Odonata, meaning "toothed ones." The reason for the title is their serrated mandibles. When hunting, dragonflies catch prey with their feet, tear off the wings with their sharp jaws so it can't escape, and scarf the sorry bug down, all without needing to land. They can fly in any direction, including sideways and backward, and can hover in a single spot for a minute or more. This amazing ability is one factor in their success as aerial ambush predators — they can move in on unsuspecting prey from any direction. Not only are they agile, but they're fast, with some species reaching a top speed of 18 miles per hour. They're also up for feats of endurance. One species called the globe skimmer, *Pantala flavescens*, flies across an ocean during migration, logging 11,000 miles and snagging the title of world's longest insect migration. If you look at a dragonfly's head, you might

notice one thing in particular. Or rather, 30,000 things in particular. The area of an odonate's head is comprised primarily of its enormous compound eyes, which contain 30,000 facets, each bringing in information about the insect's surroundings. Dragonflies have near-360-degree vision, with just one blind spot directly behind them. This extraordinary vision is one reason why they're able to keep a watch on a single insect within a swarm and go after it while avoiding mid-air collisions with other insects in the swarm. For more info visit Mother Nature Network (mnn.com) or go directly to this url for the Dragonfly article I used and quoted for this summary. <http://tinyurl.com/hq2wjoj>