



Los Caminos



Cherry Blossoms

The Texas Master Naturalist program activities are coordinated by AgriLife Extension and Texas Parks and Wildlife. Texas Master Naturalist and Extension programs serve all people regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, disability or national origin.

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 Spring 2011

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Prairie Tracks, by Katherine Bedrich

Coyote

The scientific name *Canis latrans* comes from Mexico's Nahuatl Indians. It means, "barking dog"; we know it as coyote. The coyote is a member of the Order Carnivora in the Mammalia Class. It is in the genus *Canis* which also includes the domestic dog, Red Wolf and Gray Wolf. Sometimes it is called "Little Wolf".

Coyotes form strong families. A female accepts a male in early spring. They establish dens in thickets, hollow logs, brush and other hidden areas. One yearly litter of 2-8 pups is taken care of by both parents and other siblings. The pups open their eyes around day 10, walk by day 20 and run at 6 weeks. They eat solid food in 4-6 weeks. Family members teach the pups to catch insects, and hunt and catch larger prey. Coyotes diet consists of small rodents, snakes, insects, wild fruits and berries. They are nocturnal; most active before dawn and after dusk and excellent swimmers.

The coyote is the best runner among the canids. They can normally run at 25-30 mph; up to 40 mph at short distances. A coyote runs with its tail down. The ubiquitous coyote's range is throughout

North America. Its habitats include open grassland, woodland, and hills. A range of 20-30 miles in diameter is often the territory of a coyote. Coyotes communicate through vocal means- howling, barking, yelping and huffing.

A coyote can live an average of 4-8 years in the wild. Most deaths are from predation, parasites, diseases and humans. Owls, hawks, eagles, mountain lions and other coyotes can catch pups. Hunting and trapping by humans is the highest percentage of death among adult coyotes.

Coyotes are valuable members of the wildlife community; they are a necessary part of the balance of nature.

The coyote plays an important role in Native American storytelling. It can communicate a life lesson; it is an opportunist. Native Americans look to coyote behavior in nature as a guide to living a life of balance and happiness.

Our Motto

- Look
- Learn
- Teach
- Conserve

Our Mascot Green Tree Frog



Did You Know?

What is the world's most ferocious animal?

See the last page for the answer.

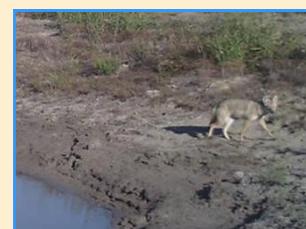


Photo of coyote at our tank - by Katherine Bedrich

2nd Annual Milam County Nature Festival By Don Travis

Ideas are flowing, planning is in high gear, excitement is in the air, and fellow naturalists are having loads of fun. Work on the 2nd Annual Milam County Nature Festival planned for **9am-3pm Saturday April 9** is well under way! Under the capable leadership of Sue Taylor and Donna Lewis, co-coordinators for this year's festival, a lot of last year's great activities are being enhanced and repeated, and many new ones are being introduced.

The Horned Lizard has been selected as this year's Festival Mascot, and we'll have a little extra attention given to these neat creatures and their habitats.

These are the list of activities, exhibits and presentations that are planned so far:

- **Welcome Tent**—sign in, days schedule of events, free backpacks loaded with goodies for kids
- **Photography Contest**
 - March 31 submission deadline, three age divisions, five nature categories, see <http://txmn.org/elcamino/naturefest/photo-contest/> for all the details and entry forms.
 - Awards Presentation 2pm at Ladies Auxiliary Building
- **Inside presentations** in the American Legion Building:
 - 9:30 am "Snakes alive, the reptiles of Central Texas", by Bill Brooks
 - 11:00 am "The Spirit of El Camino Real", by Lucile Estell and Joy Graham, and
 - 1:00 pm "Horned Lizards in Texas, our state reptile", by Carolyn Todd
- **"Wildflower Treasures" Presentation**,
 - 10:00 am and noon. At the Wildflower Patch, by Flo Oxley, Director Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center
- **Nature Presentations** on the hour from 9am-2pm, at booths around the lake, with ongoing exhibits.
 - Bees and Pollination
 - Horned Lizards

- Snakes and Reptiles
- Native Grasses
- Texas Parks and Wildlife
- Texas AgriLife Extension Service

- **Ongoing Nature Exhibits** around the lake

- Bats
- Birds
- Harvester Ants
- Knapping (making tools from stone)
- And special visitors from **Cameron Park Zoo**

- **Kids hands on activities**

- Archaeological Dig
- Pollinators
- Animal Track Molds
- Scavenger Hunts
- Junior Master Gardener
- Wildflowers, and
- Face Painting



- **Wildlife Control**—by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
- **Fire Prevention** with Smokey the Bear—by Texas Forest Service
- **Wonderful Food** vendors
- **Wildlife products** vendors

And there are several other very exciting possibilities that are still being pursued.

You won't want to miss telling all your friends, neighbors and anyone else that will listen about this fun and educational event for family members of all ages.

Go to our website <http://txmn.org/elcamino/naturefest/> and download and print off our Nature Festival 2011 flyer that is being posted around the county and elsewhere. And also get a map of how to get to the Festival. And **ENTER THOSE PHOTOS!**

Great Backyard Bird Count by Ann Collins

The Great Backyard Bird Count is an annual four-day event sponsored by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society. It engages bird watchers of all ages from all over North America in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of where they are across the continent. This year's event was held between February 18th and 21st.

Milam County was well represented by El Camino Real Master Naturalists who got great results from our four days of counting, identifying a total of 58 species!

Forty-nine were sighted by those who participated at the Frances Nabours Griffin Bird Sanctuary in Wilson Ledbetter Park in Cameron, Tx. Those nine participants were: Sandra Dworaczyk, Cindy Bolch, Phyllis Shuffield, Katherine, Bedrich, Jackie Thornton, Cindy Travis, Vivian Dixon, Tim Siegmund, and Ann Collins. They logged a total of 19.5 hours.

The species that were seen in the Park were:

- Mallard (domestic type)
- Blue winged teal
- Great blue heron (picture)
- Great egret
- Black vulture
- Turkey vulture
- Red shouldered hawk (nesting)
- Red tailed hawk
- Crested caracara
- American Kestrel
- Killdeer
- Greater yellowlegs
- Rock pigeon
- Eurasian Collared dove
- White winged dove
- Mourning dove
- Inca dove
- Red bellied woodpecker
- Yellow bellied sapsucker
- Downy woodpecker
- Eastern phoebe
- Blue headed vireo
- American crow
- Purple martin
- Carolina chickadee (picture)
- Tufted titmouse



- Carolina wren
- Eastern bluebird
- Ruby crowned kinglet
- Northern mockingbird
- European starling
- American pipit
- Brown thrasher
- Yellow rumped warbler (picture)
- Pine warbler
- Chipping sparrow
- Lark sparrow
- Savannah sparrow
- Song sparrow
- White throated sparrow
- Harris's sparrow
- White crowned sparrow
- Northern cardinal
- Red winged blackbird (picture)
- Eastern meadowlark
- Common grackle
- Great tailed grackle
- American goldfinch
- House sparrow



Jackie Thornton added from Minerva:

- Greater roadrunner

Rusty Thomas added from Rockdale:

- Eastern screech owl (picture)
- Blue jay
- American robin
- Field sparrow
- Dark eyed junco



Chris Collins added from Milano:

- Sandhill crane

Donna Lewis added from Gause:

- Northern bobwhite (picture)

- by Ann Collins, photos from the internet public domain
[For more information, see <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc>]

Who Who Who Is Visiting? By Paula Engelhardt

No bird has more myth and mystery surrounding it than the owl. This is partly because it is a nocturnal bird and night time has long been regarded by humans as mysterious. However, I have recently been privileged to view one of these creatures daily, as a Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) has chosen to nest on our property. I must say though, that this lovely bird of prey has retained her awesome and mysterious status with me, even in the daylight.

While away on vacation during the latter half of February, my dog-sitter informed me, during a phone call, that a hawk was nesting in our pampas grass. Later, he changed his story - it was an owl. I will explain more about the confusion later. Although I was enjoying our trip immensely, being a bird lover, I found myself anxious to get home and check this out.

My first day back, I armed myself with binoculars and camera and "stalked" my clump of pampas grass (pardon the pun) as quietly as I could. Sure enough, a large bird flew silently from the grass and soared into the air high above me. I trained my lenses on it and viewed a wide, whitish wingspan of several feet. At this point I hadn't made a positive I.D. That came later, when she landed in the field across the road and I spied the feather tufts, called plumicorns (which are often mistaken for ears or horns and in fact, are neither), on either side of her head. These feather tufts have earned this species their common name as well as the nickname "cat owl." There are several subspecies of the Great Horned Owl, but their differences are mainly in color and size.

I was impressed by her size. Great Horned Owls are not only the most common owl in the Americas, they are one of the largest in the world, reaching up to 27" in length with up to a five foot wingspan. Females are usually about 20% larger than males. Her throat and

breast were white and her wings and body were gray and reddish-brown with black bars. She was stunning.

Her eyes, large and yellow, have three eyelids including the upper lid they blink like a human's and the translucent nictitating membrane that blinks sideways to keep the eye moistened while allowing the bird to see. At night, they can see approximately one hundred times

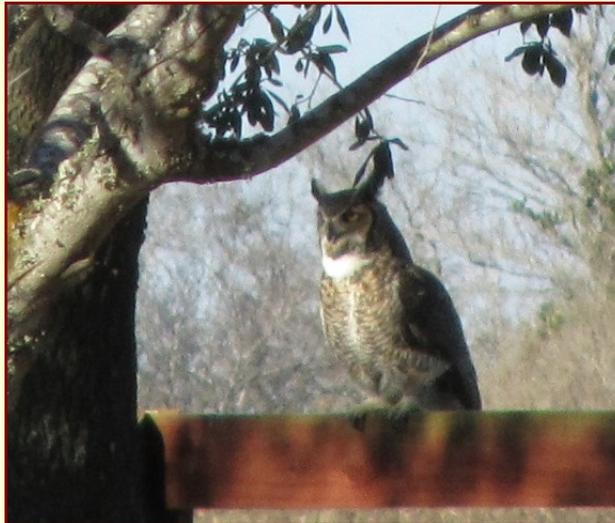
better than humans can. An owl's eyes are fixed forward so if they want to see something off to the side, they must turn their heads. A flexible neck with 14 vertebrae allows them to rotate their head 270 degrees.

Her short facial feathers were arranged in a rounded pattern that formed a facial disc which acts like a satellite dish, funneling sounds to her ears to aid in hearing. An owl's ears are hidden beneath feathers on

either side of the skull and one is positioned higher than the other. The higher ear detects sounds from above and the lower detects sounds from below. This is known as asynchronous hearing. This helps to explain why I can't get very close to her nest before she flies off.

I am keeping my distance so as not to disturb this beauty and her eggs but I did get a close initial look and she has two

white eggs roughly the size of extra large chicken eggs. They typically lay between two and four eggs which are incubated for 26-35 days. At 6-7 weeks, the



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young begin to roam to nearby branches (they are now called "branchers") and fly at 9-10 weeks of age. I was surprised to see the owl's nest so low to the ground but they are known to nest in a variety of places and only utilize the nests of other large birds such as crows, hawks and herons - which could explain why my dog-sitter initially thought this was a hawk's nest - maybe it was!

Great Horned Owls have a large repertoire of sounds but their distinct and resonant "hoo-hoo hooooo hoo-hoo" call can be heard for miles on a still night. Often, both sexes call to each other at dusk or before dawn during the winter mating season, with the male's call being lower-pitched. I heard these haunting night calls a few months ago and can't help but wonder if it was "my" owl and her mate.

Great Horned Owls are monogamous but solitary except during the mating season. The female incubates the eggs while the male will keep her (and the owlettes) in a steady supply of food. Some sources say that both sexes will incubate. I have yet to glimpse the "hunter" bringing our "incubator" food, but I am hopeful that, if I am diligent with my watch, I will witness this.

Speaking of food, I have so far been unsuccessful in finding an owl pellet but will keep up my search. Owls have an incredible digestive system and often swallow their food whole. About 6-10 hours after consumption, the unusable parts, such as bones and fur, are regurgitated in the form of a pellet. Careful dissection of these pellets can reveal what delicacy was recently enjoyed. It may have been a raccoon, rabbit, small rodent, bird, snake or even a skunk. Great Horned Owls don't have a sense of smell so they often dine on skunks, possibly being the only creature that does!

This species is a ferocious and powerful hunter. Efficient at night, they strike from above, using their large sharp talons to instantly kill their prey and can carry off animals three times their weight. They sometimes hunt for smaller game by standing or walking on the ground.



This silent-flying night creature is highly adaptable and lives from the Arctic to South America. Their habitat ranges from woods to parks to suburbs to farmland, thus they are a common site. They may occupy the same territory as the Red-tailed Hawk, one using it by day and the other by night. They are non-migratory except for some northern populations. They may live up to thirty years in captivity and 13 years in the wild. Their only natural enemies are other Great Horned Owls and, occasionally a Northern Goshawk or Peregrine Falcon. Most mortality, not surprisingly, is related to man.

From an ancient and folkloric perspective, the owl is a symbol of the feminine, the moon, the night. It had been worshipped as an idol and hated as a reincarnation of the devil. In North America and on other continents, it has been believed to have great healing powers. It is the bird of magic and darkness, prophecy and wisdom. It has ties to fertility and was associated with the goddess Athena.

The Great Horned, specifically, is known as the harbinger of spring, of new cycles and change. They alert us that growth opportunities are on the horizon and encourage us to step out into the light of a new day. They represent the power to hear things that are unsaid and to see what is hidden. As they filter light from darkness, they remind us that both exist at the same moment and give us greater insight into life's experiences and lessons.

I have yet to see what, beyond the physical, this magnificent creature has to offer but I can tell you that I am "over the moon" about her presence. I have already been afforded magnificent glimpses of her and am waiting with immense anticipation and hope to be blessed to see her offspring - from a safe distance, as the Great Horned is a fierce protector! If I am so lucky, maybe this article will have a "Part II."

- story and pictures by Paula Engelhardt

Spring has Sprung by Melanie Reed

Spring has sprung, all around us is blooming
Songs are awakening from the sleep within
We anxiously await the first of each ebbing flower
Looking, saying, is spring truly here

Wild Plum trees are blooming their white flowers peek
A reminder that in June we will have an amazing sweet tart treat.
Redbud trees the pink flower catches your eye
As they awaken our senses from winter's country side
Reminding us of color and Spring's delightful feast
With its palette beginning to tantalize our sense of pleasure to seek



In Texas it Bluebonnets, bonnets awaiting their colors
So graciously adorned, flowers that reminds us of such a great place to be born
Indian Paint brushes brilliant orange, bring thrills to our soul

Reminding us of Gods perfection in each flower that grows
How simple, but complex the velvety petals, the blending of colors,
Oh the miracle never ending.

Buttercups popping up from the warmth of the sun
Scattering their butter making it known
They've arrived to continue their lineage...their right
To bring color and ambiance through the country side



First Iris, oh my, what a beauty she is
The white ones are early birds, purest in form

Black butterflies scurry here to and fro
And as naturalist we chase them to ID them and
Make sure they have a home

The honey bee circling any flower that blooms
Hungry for spring's first tasty treat

Needing the energy to continue their work
As they rested all winter and there is work to be done

Texas Star's appear in yellow delight
Dancing and swaying to the tunes of the night
Hardy and strong are these flowers that grow
Again we are grateful for the bounty they behold

Dewberry vines a Milam County favorite treat
They're double the pleasure...you know...
Once to see the white flowers,
And then once to eat.

Blessed are we...
I would say so...

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For we live in the country with fields of colored snow
Roadsides with natures color send such a delight
Bringing joy to the soul with each colorful graceful sight.

- poem by Melanie Reed
- photos from the internet public domain



Butterflies Awake

by Donna Lewis and Linda McBride

Our fields in Milam County are slowly showing a sign of cool green grasses now that spring is on its way. You can almost hear Mother Nature as she stretches her arms after a long nap. Naturalized, Wildflowers, and other kinds of naïve flowers will soon be transplanted from nursery pots as they shake off a dry and yellow coat of winter and emerge their heads to an approaching warming sun.

It will not be long before our fields, and "Wildscape" garden erupt into a wave of pinks, purples, yellows, blues, reds, and whites. The sizes and shapes of their pedals and leaves distinguish the uniqueness that sets each one apart from all the other



plants. Without careful observation it is as the old saying goes, "You can't see the forest for the trees." Unfortunately there are many in life, unlike the "El Camino Real Master Naturalist" and other "Master Gardners," who never take the time to observe and learn the lessons that "Mother Nature" teaches us.

flowers. Any time now, our fields and garden will host a constant flight of butterflies that visit each year. Today while taking my daily walk around our property and yard to speak with nature, I observed a Tiger Swallowtail enjoying the dark green leaf and purple head of a wild Henbit (*Lamium amplexicaule*) plant. To some people it is considered an unwanted weed but not so to this admiring butterfly.

- story by Donna Lewis and Linda McBride,
- photos from the internet public domain



Yellow and black, Tiger Swallowtail are starting to grace our pastures and plants as they battle the winds of March to visit the first signs of wild-



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Certifications, Etc. By Cindy Bolch

2011 is getting off to a fast start so far! Our re-certification pin this year is the Horned Lizard, our State Reptile.



Achieving 2011 Annual Re-Certifications to date include: Cindy Bolch, Katherine Bedrich, Lucy Coward and Sue Taylor

Lifetime to date Milestone Achievement Levels Awarded include:

250 Hours—Paul Unger, Ann Collins, Katherine Bedrich, Cindy Bolch, Paula Engelhardt, Don Travis, Debbie Harris, Joy Graham, Lucile Estell, Shawn Walton, Anne Barr, Ed Burleson, Connie Roddy, Dorothy Mayer, Lucy Coward, Donna Lewis, Sue Taylor, Phyllis Shuffield, and Sandra O'Donnell

500 Hours—Paul Unger, Ann Collins, Katherine Bedrich, Cindy Bolch, Paula Engelhardt, Don Travis, Anne Barr, Donna Lewis and Phyllis Shuffield

1000 Hours—Paul Unger, Ann Collins, Katherine Bedrich, Cindy Bolch, and Don Travis

2500 Hours—Paul Unger

Congratulations to All!

Did You Know?



the strong survive. And native peoples would catch them and use their razor sharp teeth as weapons and tools. Some people who are attracted to their grisly nature and aggressive behavior actually keep them as pets—I assume for their entertainment value and not as pets in the usual sense! Keeping them well fed is the key to keeping them mellow. Got any kids, pets or neighbors you don't like? www.extremescience.com

What is the World's Most Ferocious Animal?

According to Extreme Science, it's the **Piranha** (*Pygocentrus nattereri*). When a school of piranha are in a feeding frenzy the water appears to boil and churn red with blood. They attack with such ferocity that they strip an animal of its flesh within a matter of minutes, even taking bites out of each other in the process. Adult piranha will eat just about anything—other fish, sick and weakened cattle, even parts of people. Sickly cattle that have stooped their heads down to drink have been grabbed by the mouth and nose and pulled into the water, completely devoured minutes later. As wicked as all this sounds, piranha have a useful function in nature like other predators in the wild—part of the checks and balances Mother Nature employs to eliminate the weak and sick so only

