

# 'T WAS A CHILLY-*CHILI* BLUEBIRD WORKDAY AT TROPHY CLUB NATURE PRESERVE

Text and photos by Dorothy Thetford



steps to entrance

**W**hen volunteering personal time toward Master Naturalist Project No. P-130912, one quickly learns that the project is solely outdoors, and the project workdays are carried out regardless of weather. Case in point: Tuesday, January 21 arrived with a sudden

change in weather providing a high temperature of only 45 degrees, along with a 'feels-like' chilly temperature of 32. Did the committee wimp out? Nope, bluebirds need a place to build their nests in February, so the crew stood fast.

Thirteen Master Naturalist (MN) members arrived at the Trophy Club Park Pavilion 'incognito' by 10 a.m. Yes, they were bundled warmly (beyond recognition), and never stopped for a break for fear of frostbite. The determined crew drilled holes, attached metal straps to PVC pipes, cut and installed rabbit wire to aluminum baffling units and attached baffles to pipes while pre-built bluebird boxes got an inside coating of liquid soap.



Volunteers installing wire to baffles



Sandra Pepper applying liquid soap to interior of boxes



Volunteers showing last installation

Once the wire-fitting baffling units were completed, that assembly-line crew picked up T-posts and poll-drivers, and headed to the trails where Veronica Ruangskul (MN) had flagged designated locations for bluebird nesting box installations. The box-to-pole-attaching assembly-line crew quickly followed with the completed packages. As a finale to the project, volunteers followed the trails and installed all nine boxes onto T-posts before taking a short break on the bank of Marshall Creek, which flows into Lake Grapevine. Gorgeous day, even though crispy cold!

Under Veronica's detailed orchestration, the boxes are now installed and ready for bluebirds to select, inspect, claim, and begin nesting. Her plan includes monitoring the 9 boxes regularly and recording the nesting dates, egg-laying dates, hatchings, and fledgings.

Trophy Club Park consumes 877 acres on southwestern edge of Lake Grapevine, with 450 acres having been designated as the Trophy Club Nature Preserve. Kathy Trotter adopted these 450 acres as Project No. P-130912, and with the support of Elm Fork Chapter, MN members and interns, she is conducting trail development, maintenance, bird-watching, native plant preservation, etc. MN Veronica Ruangskul, adopted a 50-acre segment of this acreage to establish a Bluebird Trail as part of the overall plan, and, previously provided a bluebird class in December in preparation for the nesting-box workshop and installation on January 21.

However, bluebird box installation was only the prelude of the day as MN's Kim Orlandella and Kathy Trotter concluded the chilly day with a wonderful crockpot of hot chili and all the trimmings. Was it the perfect ending for a very successful workday? The answer is YES!

If you'd like to participate in MN Project No. P-130912, contact Kathy Trotter or Veronica Ruangskul.



Marshall Creek at end of trail

## LBJ GRASSLANDS BLUEBIRD TRAILS

*Susan Tartaglino Project Manager*

**T**he LBJ Grasslands Bluebird Trails is a long-standing project that is producing around a hundred bluebird chicks (fledged) per year from about 50 boxes. Many of our monitors live in the Grasslands already and have additional boxes up on private land, but these are not counted in the totals. Besides bluebirds, our boxes last year fledged tufted titmouse, Bewick's wrens and chickadees. Boxes are interspersed through the Grasslands to cover as many areas as possible. Much of the area is perfect bluebird habitat: is open meadows spotted with large trees.

Every year we try to add new boxes, repair old boxes, and replace very old boxes with predator-guard boxes (originals were mounted on fence posts and trees). We get together once a year after the February meeting to talk about the upcoming season, and any other Master Naturalists interested in bluebirds are welcome to attend. Last year our first egg was laid on March 4, but freezing weather in the spring ruined several broods of eggs. Many bluebirds will raise three broods. My most successful nestbox ever produced 15 chicks in one season, three broods of five eggs each. Every egg hatched and every chick fledged, though the mother started brooding when there was snow on the ground and the last chick from the third brood fledged in 108 degree temperature.

Monitoring is usually done once a week and includes checking for parasites, watching for predators, box repair and record keeping. We also report to the Decatur Forest Service office which administers the Grasslands.



Many thanks to the wonderful people who participate in this project: Jeanne Erickson, Betty Zajac, Becky Rogers, Margaret Lange, Karen Mazzei, Duane Reeves and Diane Blais. Although the Grasslands is a long drive away for those not living nearby, we can always use help from other Master Naturalists in putting up new boxes or replacing old ones. As a group we have a great deal of practical knowledge and can answer questions MNs may have.

## Texas Native Plant Art Exhibition 2013

**The** Texas Native Plant Art Exhibition 2013 is currently on display at the Elm Fork Education Center in the EESAT Building at UNT. The art exhibit features the beautiful paintings of Texas native plants by the fourth grade students of McNair and Newton Razor Elementary Schools.

**The** Texas Native Plant Art Exhibition 2013 is sponsored by the Native Plant Society of Texas, Texas Master Naturalist and the TWU College of Arts and Sciences. The purpose of the art exhibition is to teach students about the importance of native plants and raise public awareness. The students work on their painting early in the school year and complete them to coincide with Texas Native Plant Week which is the third week in October. The students are instructed about native plants by their art teachers, Jodi Dallas (McNair) and Kristin Williamson (Newton Razor) as they create their artwork.



*Display at TWU*



Display at TWU

The artwork was featured at a Keep Denton Beautiful event in early December and displayed at the Blagg-Huey Library at TWU from mid-December through January. The exhibit will be at UNT through February then displayed at the Emily Fowler Library in March. It will also be shown at the Redbud Festival on April 12th.

First, second and third place ribbons were awarded to each classroom at both schools. All of the students that participated will be recognized and receive a certificate at a reception at the Emily Fowler Library in March.



Best overall at Newton Razor



Best overall at McNair



Newton Razor



McNair



McNair



Newton Razor



McNair

Marilyn Blanton, Project Manager

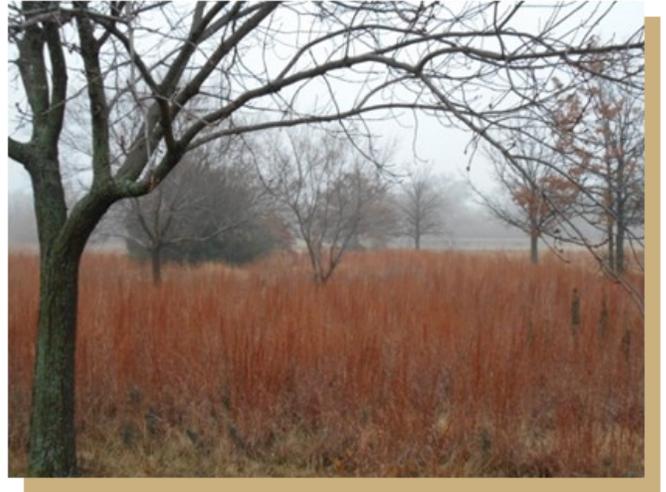
## Features . . .

### Where's the party?

**J**ust when you thought the party was over, another friend arrived on the prairie. Our native prairie grasses have had a tough year for showboating, and some of them were not able to produce plumes. Plus, those that did produce plumes struggled to provide seeds. Scant indeed.

However, there never seems to be a dull moment on the prairie, regardless of rain or drought, sleet or snow. After being under the spell of ice and below-normal cold temperatures, our native Little bluestem grass (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) recently took center stage by evolving into its winter wardrobe.

What had been a mirage of blue-green colored stems and leaves during the summer eventually mellowed into an unnoticeable beige color with beautiful, fluffy, curled tops holding tiny seeds during the fall. However, when we assumed the prairie was going to sleep, the plants miraculously turned into an amazingly gorgeous, bright rusty-red color. It's finale turned into a showstopper when found in abundance across the prairie. And, with the recent colorful sunsets, the color became even more intensified in late evening. WOW oh WOW!



Little bluestem is a native perennial grass that's classified as a 'warm season' plant that blooms from August through December. It is considered one of the "big four" grasses and is a dominant forage of the prairie, plus, is good forage for cattle while also providing screening and nesting cover for wildlife species. With normal rainfall, its normal Texas height ranges from three to four feet.

It's now available in a prairie nearest you; enjoy the party.

Dorothy Brown Thetford

*Photos courtesy D.Thetford*



## An Evening in the Woods

By Bob Ross



**I**t was the 1960's. The Cold War was in full force. The Vietnam War was escalating daily. I was a young Marine, a teenager. I was all about being serious. It was a matter of life and death.

I had just returned to the United States and was heading to Camp LeJeune, North Carolina to my new duty station. After a mechanical delay at Love Field I arrived late into Atlanta's airport. It was 2:00 a.m. in the morning when my plane landed. As I walked through the terminal and got to my departure gate I discovered my connecting flight did not leave until 6:00 a.m. I had four hours to kill. Toting my sea bag I continued to walk down the terminal corridor and saw a restaurant was open. Great! A chance to get some coffee and try to stay awake while waiting for my later flight.

As I entered the restaurant I noticed a guy, similar in age to me, in his Army uniform. He was sitting at a table drinking coffee. I walked over to him and asked if it was okay to sit with him. He said yes and that he would enjoy the company. After shaking hands and introducing ourselves I sat down and ordered a cup of coffee for me. I quickly learned he was headed in the opposite direction to California. I also learned his home was Harlem, New York.

As we exchanged our military experiences I learned he had gone through his Army basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana. For someone who had never been out of New York City prior to enlisting in the Army he explained that upon his arrival to the Louisiana woods and bogs of Fort Polk seemed as if he had arrived upon another planet besides Earth. It was a culture shock for him.



He continued by telling me that during his infantry training his platoon went out into the woods one evening on night maneuvers. His job was to lie in a prone position on his stomach and look out into the woods for possible "enemy" and try to be stealth. As he was lying there in an environment where he did not feel comfortable and was somewhat scared of being alone in the total darkness he began to hear something in the woods coming toward him. Whoever or whatever it was made no attempt to try to be quiet. It was getting closer and closer. It was making more and more noise. He reminded himself that his duty was to remain quiet and stealthy.

Suddenly, he saw that it was not a human making the noise but some type of prehistoric animal, unlike anything he had ever seen, was walking toward him. Its head was down in the leaves finding and eating insects and totally void of the fact that it was nearing the young infantryman. It was a nine banded armadillo. Having poor eyesight the armadillo got close to the young man lying on the ground before it saw the person causing it to take an immediate right turn and go a different direction.

The soldier began to explain to me how frightened he was of this unknown creepy crawler in the woods. We both began to laugh and laugh. The laughter gave both of us a few minutes of ease and relaxation. The New Yorker had overcome the exercise of this "enemy" on the battlefield.

Hopefully, this story will remain with each of us as a Master Naturalist. Remember, if you are taking hikers along a trail you may be introducing them to the natural outdoors for the first time. You may be hosting children and adults who have never seen an armadillo, opossum, skunk, or coyote. One of our many responsibilities as Master Naturalists is to help educate the general public about our surrounding wildlife. It is an enjoyable, challenging and daunting task.

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*Bob Ross, Class of 2013, has been an educator and has worked in the publishing industry.*

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*A warm welcome to the newsletter's newest contributor*