

# WOODDUCK WHISTLER



Volume 8 Issue 3  
March 2012

Greetings Folks,

With the winter months here there is a lot going on in the natural world. One thing that stands out is the winter migration of birds, lots of cool birds. I'm not the best on identifying our feathered friends, but I'm learning from other master naturalist and birders.

Another winter activity beside bird watching is winter twig and bud identification. Twig and bud identification is a great way to learn about trees and shrubs during their dormant period. A great opportunity for winter twig ID is a field trip (AT) on Saturday Feb. 25, 2012 (2pm) at Ron and Ruth Loper's home in Whitehouse. Sonnia Hill and Betsy Smith of the Native Plant Society of Texas will be leading the field trip.

If you're interested contact Helen Mar (hmparkin@gmail.com) to be put on the list and get directions. With the light winter we've had so far, I've been expecting the Spring Peppers and Gray Tree frogs to be out with their mating calls, but all is quite at the pond down the street. In talking with Mike Price he tells me that at his property the Spring Peppers and Cricket Frogs are out in full force. I wonder if the drought has affected the frogs in my neck of the woods. Normally they are singing away and hopefully there are still a few around. I hope that the winter rains have balanced things out a little to help the wetlands recover. Only time will tell. The effects of the drought are plain to see where I live in that many of the Pine Trees, some Dogwoods and Junipers have died. On Feb. 23, 2012, Daniel Duncan (Texas Forest Service) will be speaking about the effects of the 2011 drought on East Texas plants at our monthly meeting 6:45 pm. Till next time, enjoy the great outdoors.

Neal



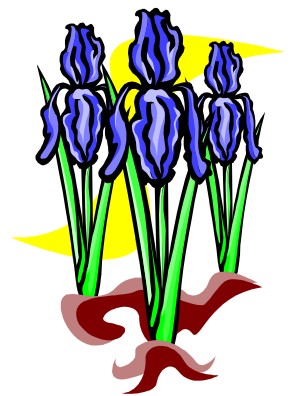
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**WE ARE ON  
FACEBOOK!**

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**We need to let everyone know that you East Texas Chapter dues need to be in by end of February 2012. They have been increased to \$20 for individuals, and \$35.00 for couples.**

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**We are happy to announce that it looks like our class for 2012 will make and with that the anticipation of new ETCMN members! February 23 (our evening program) we will have a sign up sheet for those wishing to volunteer to monitor classes, all day for some, AM and PM for others. Please help US make OUR Chapter grow!**

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**For questions contact Marsha May (contact info listed below)**

**Freshwater Unionid Symposium and Workshop  
University of Texas at Tyler  
Tyler, Texas  
16 - 17 March 2012**

**TPWD and several mussel researchers are organizing a one day unionid (freshwater mussel) symposium for anyone involved or interested in Texas unionid research on Friday, 16 March 2012, 9:00AM to 5:00PM with a social following. The goal of this symposium is to share ongoing unionid research and discuss important issues. A Texas unionid identification workshop will be held the following day on Saturday, 17 March 2012, 10:00AM to 5:00PM.**

**At the symposium, there will be up to fourteen 20-minute time slots available for sharing research. If you would like to present your research, please send a description of your research in 200 words or less along with your contact information to [Marsha.may@tpwd.state.tx.us](mailto:Marsha.may@tpwd.state.tx.us) by 5pm on 29 February 2012.**

**Space is limited, so registration will be required for both the symposium and workshop. There is no cost for the symposium but there will be a \$10 fee per person for materials for the identification workshop. This fee will be collected on the day of the workshop. The workshop will have beginning and advanced components.**

**Please contact me if you have any questions and to register.**

**Marsha E. May  
Texas Nature Trackers  
Wildlife Diversity Program  
Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept  
4200 Smith School Road, Austin, Texas 78744  
(512.389.8062)  
[marsha.may@tpwd.state.tx.us](mailto:marsha.may@tpwd.state.tx.us)**

So, the Super Bowl is over, now what are you going to do? Do you have 15 minutes of free time? Can you count up to 100? Do you need volunteer hours? If so, you can participate in the Great Backyard Bird Count. I'm sure all Master Naturalists have heard of the count and maybe some have participated in it, but just what is it and why?

The 15<sup>th</sup> annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) will be held February 17-20, 2012. The event is hosted by the National Audubon Society, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Canadian partner Bird Studies Canada and sponsorship from Wild Birds Unlimited. This is a project that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are across the continent. Anyone can participate, from beginning bird watchers to experts. Last year, participants turned in more than 92,000 checklists online, creating the continent's largest instantaneous snapshot of bird populations ever recorded.

But why count birds? The results provide a snapshot of the whereabouts of more than 600 bird species and their movements. Think of it this way - no single scientist or team of scientists could hope to document the complex distribution and movements of so many species in such a short time so why not use the general public? Some questions the count can help answer are:

How will this winter's snow or the lack thereof, the cold or unseasonably warm temperatures influence bird populations?

How will the timing of birds' migrations compare with past years?

What kinds of differences in bird diversity are apparent in cities versus suburban, rural, and natural areas?

Bird research is important to help maintain and restore habitats necessary to sustain healthy migratory and resident bird populations.

Are any birds undergoing worrisome declines that point to the need for conservation attention?

So just how do you participate? The easiest way is to visit the GBBC web site at: <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/>. There you will find out that you can count 15 minutes on one day, or you can count for as long as you like each day of the event. All the information and forms are located on the website. You can count in your backyard, travel to different locations or count with another group. If you plan to count in your backyard, be sure to have full feeders with a variety of foods to attract the most birds. Besides a seed mix and sunflower seeds, suet, fruit and peanuts (or peanut butter) often attract birds. During freezing weather, fresh water or a birdbath heater will help draw in species. You can also send photographs of the birds you see and they will be included in the online gallery.

Another thing I like about the GBBC website is that it includes a wealth of information for the novice and experienced birder. There is an online bird guide where you can browse 600 species for identification tips, photos, sounds and maps. There are tips to distinguish between those pesky similar-looking species. You can also get tips on choosing/using binoculars and bird feeding tips. Also included is the Audubon WatchList.

So what happens to all those numbers? All information collected goes into a database that shows trends and health of the birds over time. There are more than 36 million bird observations, which are used by scientists, in the Avian Knowledge Network database. There is also a map showing the location of all counts. The GBBC Summary page of the website has year by year counts dating back to 2005.

But what I love best is that you can see the count online as it progresses. Since results are reported on the website you can see the numbers almost immediately. It is free, it is easy and it helps the birds. Oh, and, it is a lot of fun to be involved!

Ann Reynolds

## About the Expo Saturday, March 24 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**Lone Star College-Montgomery  
3200 College Park Dr.  
Conroe, TX 77384**

[Click here for directions](#)

A relentless drought and unprecedented wildfire season devastated much of the state during the past year.

Once vast and beautiful, many Texas landscapes are nearly barren. And though we've seen recent rains, forecasters say it could be another year before there is significant relief.

But there is help.

Texas Wildlife and Woodland Expo & Spring Fling is designed to help families learn a little about the land on which they live — and how to best take care of it — through hands-on clinics, live demonstrations and children's activities.

Though Expo & Spring Fling is an annual event, this year organizers have placed a special emphasis on helping residents recover from drought and wildfires.

It doesn't matter if you're a nature lover or outdoor enthusiast. It doesn't matter if you're an urban homeowner or a rural landowner. It doesn't matter if you've got just one tree in your yard or thousands of them. Texas Wildlife and Woodland Expo & Spring Fling has got you covered.

We've got free, hands-on [clinics and live demonstrations](#) that will teach you how to nourish your plants and trees, attract wildlife to your property, collect and use rainwater and protect your home from wildfires.

And don't forget to take your little ones to the [Family Adventure Zone](#), where they can climb a rock wall, take a peek at a live screech owl and learn how to kayak.

At Expo & Spring Fling, you'll play for a day but learn for a lifetime.

## BLUEBIRDS

The following is a summary of a lecture given by Keith Kridler on February 4, 2012, at Rubicon Wild Birds and More in Flint, Texas. Keith's talk focused on the natural history of bluebirds in Texas and the importance of providing nest boxes.

There are three species of bluebird: Eastern, Western, and Mountain, all in the Thrush family (Turdidae). Eastern Bluebirds are found year-round in east Texas and all three species may be seen in central Texas in winter. Not all bluebirds migrate, but those that do travel straight south from their summer ranges. For example, Eastern bluebirds that start out in Maine end up on the eastern seaboard. Diet consists of fruits, smaller berries (3/8" to 7/16" in diameter) and insects. Mistletoe, Yaupon, Chinese tallow, Sumac, American and Buford Hollies, Dogwood, and Eastern Red Cedar (Ash Juniper or Virginia Juniper) are favorites. The birds eat the fleshy part of the fruit but they cannot crack the seed because of their soft beaks. Instead they swallow the seeds whole, grind them up, and either regurgitate or eliminate them. In a severe winter, bluebirds die out because of the scarcity of these foods. If there is snow on the ground, supplemental food is a necessity. In summer, bluebirds eat insects, including caterpillars, crickets, millipedes, centipedes, June bugs, wolf spiders, cicadas, lizards, and baby snakes. Bluebirds are opportunistic feeders and parent birds will bring all these creatures to their nestlings.

Bluebirds are cavity nesters. They look for a dark spot, such as a hole on a tree trunk or an opening under the eaves of a house, to build their nests. They will also take up residence in manmade objects such as electrical boxes or hanging tomato planters and, of course, nest boxes. The males flash their brightly colored wings (wing waving) to attract the females and warn other males away. After mating, the female begins building the nest, which takes about a week. She lays one egg a day until there are five, then incubates the eggs (at 99 degrees Fahrenheit) for thirteen days until they begin to hatch. Bluebirds begin laying their eggs when the soil temperature is high enough to make insects available. When you see daffodils, you know the bluebirds are laying their eggs. The eggs are white when they form, but as they are laid they are bathed in a blue dye that provides camouflage. (Similarly, chickadees speckle their eggs as they are laid.) In 4-5% of bluebird nests the eggs will be white. Eight out of ten eggs will hatch. When the nestlings emerge, they start immediately to beg for food. The babies with the biggest mouths that can reach the highest are the ones that get fed. After thirteen days, the sex of the baby can be determined. (Males have more blue.) After sixteen to eighteen days, the babies are ready to fledge and will spend the next ten days on the ground being fed by the parents. Two weeks after fledging, the babies are still reliant on their parents for food. If conditions are favorable, bluebirds may nest up to four times a year. Most bluebirds are monogamous, but some polygamy does occur. Males are killed more often than females, who stay safe in the nest. The oldest bluebird on record was seventeen years old.

One way we can help ensure the success and survival of bluebirds is to build and install nest boxes made from hardwood (to discourage squirrels and woodpeckers), PVC, or gourds grown in your garden. White PVC has the advantage that boxes are fairly cool inside. The more boxes that are available, the more birds will nest. Furthermore, according to Keith, the more bluebirds survive each year, the more boxes we need to provide; we are responsible for providing homes for all those bluebirds we helped raise. The Texas Bluebird Society website at [www.texasbluebirdsociety.org](http://www.texasbluebirdsociety.org) has building plans for boxes. Their Mission is to spread "Bluebirds (and other native cavity-nesting birds) Across Texas...one nest box at a time." It is best to have three or four boxes in your yard, spaced at intervals. Bluebirds are territorial, so it is important to have a tree, shrub, or fence between boxes to allow them sufficient space. Female bluebirds are finicky; do not be surprised if they inspect every box before making a decision on where to build their nests. Place the box so that it is shaded in the afternoon. Nestlings are cold-blooded until nine days of age. If the nest temperature reaches more than 109 degrees, the babies will get heat stroke. Turn the box to face the tree or shrub so that the fledglings will have a place to land when they leave the nest. Resist the urge to orient the box so that you can watch the opening from your house. Fledglings fly from 15 to 100 feet when they leave the nest and may fly straight into your window! Don't place boxes on trees. Ants (not to mention larger predators such as raccoons and snakes) can easily climb trees and invade the boxes. It is best to mount boxes on metal pipes, flattened at the top and secured to the bottom of the box, and greased with high temperature disc brake grease (to discourage fire ants). If there are any cats in your neighborhood, make sure the pipe is 8' tall. Install a 6-7" diameter metal tube around the pipe to act as a predator guard. Make sure the distance from the entrance hole to the floor of the box is 8-10" or that the box itself is long. Opossums have long arms and can reach in five inches. Raccoons can reach in six inches! Alternatively, attach a length of PVC pipe on the front of the box (creating a vestibule for the birds) to deter these critters. If you build your own box, do not forget to leave an air gap at the top for ventilation. Rubicon Wild Birds and More has all the supplies Keith mentioned for building nest boxes, as well as an excellent selection of very good seed.

(continued)

Other cavity nesting birds, as well as tree frogs, flying squirrels, and bats, often use bluebird houses. Some birds, such as House Sparrows and European Starlings, are parasitic to bluebirds, out-compete them, and consume all their food. The Texas Bluebird Society website has information on trapping House Sparrows, which are particularly aggressive toward bluebirds. Woodpeckers will roost in the boxes in winter and squirrels get in as well. (By the way, be advised that Carolina wrens will not nest in a box that you put out in the open especially for them. Hide the box somewhere to make it more enticing.)

Monitoring nest boxes weekly to observe the progress of the babies can be a lot of fun. Be careful opening the box, especially if babies are present. Tap gently, then stand aside. Open the box slowly and look in. Do not leave the box open too long and do not check the box at dusk, as this is when the female returns to the nest. If you know the babies are almost ready to fledge, do not open the box. Avoid handling the babies unless the nest is infested and you must replace the nest material. In that case, use gloves to remove the eggs or babies, discard the infected material and replace it with dried grass clippings, then replace the nest contents. Not all spider infestations constitute a problem. Some spiders feed on tiny insect parasites and are therefore beneficial. Black widows, on the other hand, are not and should be removed. (Keep those gloves on!)

Helen Mar Parkin  
February 9, 2012

**EAST TEXAS CHAPTER MASTER NATURALISTS  
P.O. BOX 131184  
TYLER, TEXAS 75713  
PHYSICAL ADDRESS TO TEXAS NATURE CENTER:  
OFF LOOP 323 ON STATE HWY 248( OR IT'S  
CALLED UNIVERSITY BLVD). RIGHT ON FM 848  
(BASCOM ROAD) ON THE RIGHT.....**

I encourage everyone to submit articles, photos, quotes, (with permission web links , and other forms of submission with written consent).

TMN.EDITOR@GMAIL.COM  
Deadline is 15th of every month!!

**HEY WE ARE ON FACEBOOK!**

*\* East Texas Chapter Master  
Naturalists*



**We're on the WEB!!**

**<http://txmn.org/etwd/>**



## Our Officers, Committee Chairs, & Meeting Dates

The East Texas Chapter Master Naturalists meetings are on the 4th Thursday of every month @ 6:45 pm. Texas Nature Center

**Neal Stilley - President  
Janet Cook - Secretary  
Cindi McCullough - Database Mgr**

**Mike Price – Vice President  
Laura Wilson - Treasurer  
Helen Mar Parkin - Membership Mgr.**

### *Our Advisors:*

**Kevin Herriman    Chad Gulley**

