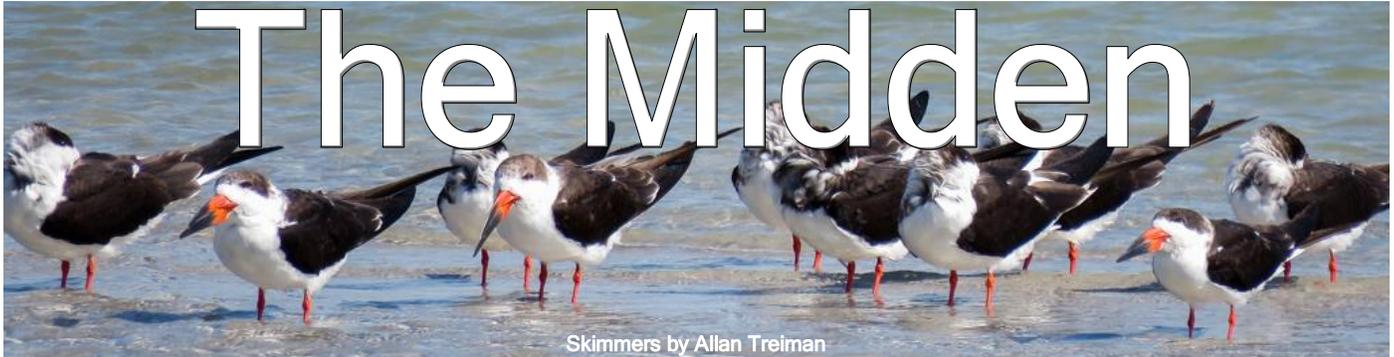


# The Midden



Skimmers by Allan Treiman

Galveston Bay Area Chapter - Texas Master Naturalists

April 2017

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## President's Corner by George Kyame, President 2017

Greetings fellow Naturalists. It is that time of year again where the Chapter really starts to swing into full stride. I hope you all share in my enthusiasm as the season begins to change and spring brings the multi-dimensional opportunities for stewardship and service that makes us the well-rounded Chapter of which we are so proud!

So please do not forget to check your messages for all things beach, bay, water, prairie, and sky. Cave? You get my point. I did say sky. After a wonderful Advanced Training by Lynn and John Wright on Diurnal Raptors, we will embark on some quality citizen science recording the northward migration of hawks, kites, falcons and their ilk. Seven days a week, two months, nice!

Not to go bird heavy, but coastal island nesting is underway. Audubon Tern and NICK-AMOY will get you involved. The book that inspired my love of this regional naturalist treat is *Nesting Birds of the Coastal Islands, A Naturalist's Year on Galveston Bay*, by John C. Dyes. Every word seems to apply to us, and that read is truly inspirational, and informative.

Please do not hesitate to visit and play on our many coastal prairies. Sometimes play equals pot and plant. Trust me, dirt and comradery make a great pairing! Our training class is about to get a crash course, heck, some have already started.

"And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children", from *Black Elk Speaks* by John G. Neihardt.

Until the next time, your friend,

George.



Photo by Larry Brasfield

Food Fun and Fellowship at the first 2017 Training Class

## Next Chapter Meeting

April 6<sup>th</sup>

Alligators: Top Predators

By  
Mark Kramer

ABNC  
Stewardship Coordinator

At Carbide Park

## Prairie Ponderings: Spring on the Prairie by Diane Humes

Texas is a prairie state wherein at least eight of ten of its ecoregions native grasses are or were dominant vegetation. Our Texas coastal tallgrass prairie may have covered 6.5 million acres in pre-settlement times - an excellent area for cattle grazing, once the bison were removed.



Photo by Lana Berkowitz

Although less than one percent of Texas prairies remain, you can still find bits of them, mostly along railroad or highway rights of way or on steep or rocky hillsides which were never plowed or, sometimes, in old cemeteries. Place names give clues from the folks who named them - Woods Prairie, Prairie Valley Road, Mullins Prairie, Rabbs Prairie, Prairie View, Prairie 2908.

Or, some of the street names within a subdivision, perhaps named for the land it has now replaced; Basketflower Bend, Soap Winecup Mallow Trail, Blackeyed Susan Trail, Prairie Verbena Lane - developers seem to like to do that. You have to study the history of the land to know for sure, unless you can still see the plants growing there.

Intact prairies - those with undisturbed soil - have a very high diversity of plant species, which, in turn, creates habitat for a great variety of insects, birds, and other critters. Prairie diversity extends underground to the unseen community of invertebrates, fungi, and bacteria. At the NPSOT-CL meeting February 13, 2017, speaker Barbara Willy alluded to the importance of fungal connections - mycorrhizal connections - with plant roots to support the growth of milkweed plants. Fungal species connect their own hyphae with plant roots - an arrangement beneficial to both, as nutrients flow both ways along this connection.

Scientists studying plant-fungus interactions found an astonishing number of fungal species, identified primarily by their microscopic spores, present in a prairie field. Fungi appeared to have species specificity to their plants and may influence the species composition of the above-

ground plants. Mycorrhizal connections may exist for many years; once disturbed they may require many years to be restored, with long-term implications for prairie restoration success.

Driving between Clear Lake and Austin, prairie remnants are visible everywhere to the discerning eyes. At this time of year, look for the rusty brown color of the Little bluestem growing along the hills. The red-brown leaves and stalks of last fall's Little bluestem contrast strikingly with the pale white stalks of the King Ranch (KR) bluestem planted by the highway department and the bright green growth of imported lawn turfgrasses.

These strips of prairie can persist forever, barring too much mowing or disturbing of the soil. They may be only a few feet wide, but extend for miles. Obviously they were spared during highway construction!

Prairie species are nearly all perennials, diverse in their habits, blooming in waves throughout the year. Most of the climax prairie grasses are warm season grasses (C4) and will not start their growth until the soil truly warms up. Big bluestem, Little bluestem, Yellow Indian grass, and Switchgrass are tall plants and shade out shorter ones, which have many strategies for acquiring their necessary water and sunlight.

The early spring growers and bloomers stay low to the ground - never over-topping the climax grasses. These cool season plants grow quickly and finish their business before the warm season species start greening up.

The summer species bloom while the grasses begin growing, sometimes reaching over them for available light, but the fall bloomers, such as compass plant, soar above the prairie grasses, blooming alongside the Big bluestem.

Prairie harbingers of spring - the earliest bloomers - are the spiderworts, *Tradescantia* spp., spider lilies, *Hymenocallis liriosme*, Eastern gama grass, *Tripsacum dactyloides*, and some milkweeds, *Asclepias* spp. - green, aquatic, and slender. Look for these plants and the brilliant yellows of wild indigos, *Baptisia* spp., and you will be sure that spring has arrived on the prairie, amid the russet colors of last fall's bluestems.

"As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of winestains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running." Willa Cather, *My Antonia*

## Wetland Wanderings: Don't Drain the Swamp by Lana Berkowitz

We know our favorite wetlands are valuable, however Caddo Lake is the only site in Texas that has earned a Wetlands of International Importance designation under the Ramsar Convention.

Residents have long appreciated the beauty of the 8,000 acres of flooded bald cypress forest. "It's a mystical place," said Stella Barrow, Cypress Basin TMN chapter president who can launch a boat from her home on Caddo Lake. "You have to experience Caddo Lake to get why the adventures are special. The bald cypress trees and the Spanish moss provide the quiet peace and the mystical beauty. I swear as soon as we push off my blood pressure drops. The sunsets are breathtaking. I don't know the words. It's just another world."

Members of the Cypress Basin chapter are among those working to preserve the wetlands. Chapter members maintain the walking trails on the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge and conduct most of the training for new members at the refuge. The chapter is a sponsor for the Earth Day, April 22, paddling regatta.

"Our chapter and the refuge Friends group received an \$11,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to install an e-bird kiosk, build two bird blinds and a walking trail on the refuge," Stella said. "We are super excited!"

Having the Ramsar designation gives Caddo Lake an advantage to get federal grants, attract research projects and obtain technical support for long-term protection of wetland resources, including the ongoing fight against giant salvinia (*Salvinia molesta*). The Ramsar Convention was formed by countries and international organizations concerned about the loss and degradation of wetlands habitat for migratory birds.

A call for a global environmental treaty began in the 1960s. The language of the convention was negotiated for eight years before the first conference was held in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971 and a treaty was signed. Australia's Cobourg Peninsula became the first Ramsar site in 1974. Today there are 2,250 sites and 169 member nations. The U.S. has 38 sites.

In 1993, Caddo Lake became the 13<sup>th</sup> Ramsar Site in the U.S. The original designation area included about 8,000 acres of public land, 500 acres in Caddo Lake State Park and 7,500 acres in the Caddo Lake State Wildlife Management Area. In 1998, the site was expanded to include about 11,700 additional acres, including 1,400 acres of the old Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant, which became the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge, and some private lands.



Photo by Lana Berkowitz

To earn the designation, a Ramsar site must contain a unique example of natural wetlands, support important populations of plant and animal species, support animals at critical life stages, and support indigenous fish to contribute to global biological diversity.

According to the Caddo Lake Institute website, the Texas site meets the criteria because:

- It is one of the best examples of mature flooded bald cypress forest in the U.S.
- The area supports about 216 bird, 47 mammal and 90 reptile/amphibian species, including peregrine falcon, alligator snapping turtle and Eastern big-eared bat. Bald cypress trees up to 400 years old are stars among the diverse plant life.
- It is popular on the Central Flyway for migrating birds, including wood ducks and prothonotary warblers.
- Lake diversity includes up to 86 fish fauna and 18 species of game fish.

When you visit the area, plan to get on the water to experience the unique environment, said Richard Lowerre, Caddo Lake Institute executive director. "That means a boat."

"But a place I take people to get a feel for the system is the Mill Pond at the Caddo Lake State Park. It is the easiest place to find, and you can drive to it," Richard said. "There are also great CCC cabins to rent at the park, and you can put in your canoe or kayak or fish off the fishing pier. The lake is 26,000 acres, and there are many different environments and conditions to explore."

## Beach Patrol: If You Build It – They Will Come ... by Maureen Nolan-Wilde

Over the past months, our Nesting Island Clean-up by Kayak - American Oystercatcher & More (NICK-AMOY) team has been busy partnering with Scenic Galveston (SG) and others to create unique habitat for nesting shorebirds.

Late last year, SG completed work on a breakwater situated just off the Virginia Point shoreline. Alan Wilde and John Wright thought this might be a good place to test out an idea they had for creating badly-needed nesting habitat for American oystercatchers. Why not create nesting pads on top of the breakwaters? Upon approval from SG to test this approach, the NICK-AMOY team went into action.

The pilot project consisted of dumping a layer of oyster shell on top of the breakwater to fill in gaps between existing rocks. The team then placed crushed shell (cultch) on top of the oyster shell to complete the nesting pad, hopefully providing a suitable habitat for oystercatchers.



Photo by Alan Wilde

After one of our partners generously donated the oyster shell, team members loaded the shell into buckets (with over 30 pounds of shell in each) and transported them to Virginia Point. Some team members carried buckets out to the breakwater by kayak, while others collected buckets of cultch from the neighboring shoreline.

As kayakers reached the breakwater, they had to get their buckets to the top to be emptied, negotiating the breakwater's slippery, moving rocks with amazing displays of grace and balance (think Tai-Chi with weights).

This was not an easy task but team members including Tim Long, John Wright, Maureen Nolan-Wilde and Alan Wilde were determined to get it done. As kayakers returned to shore with empty buckets, others loaded them with oyster shell or cultch until the pads had been completed.

Then we waited ...

Several weeks later, during a scheduled monitoring trip with Gulf Coast Bird Observatory (GCBO), John and Alan found that a pair of oystercatchers was already using one of the nesting pads, vigorously defending their new territory from an encroaching bird. There should be eggs any day now!

What a great success, proving that if you are willing to build it (with help with your partners), they will indeed come!

Future plans include trying out alternative materials, building large-scale nesting pads, and even providing a food source for the nesting oystercatchers.

## Feathers, the Law, and Ceremony by Verva Densmore

Feathers of different birds have long been used by Native Americans as symbols of speed, strength, hunting prowess, and more. But many of our native birds were hunted to near extinction around the turn of the last century. To save birds, the Audubon Society applied intense pressure to get laws passed that offered deep protection for birds and feathers, which became illegal to possess, initially even for the native peoples.

As a bit of background, ninety-nine years ago the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) was signed into law, and since then, according to Audubon's website, "millions, if not billions, of birds have been saved from depredatory human activities." The MBTA provides that it

is "unlawful to pursue, hunt, take, capture, kill, possess, sell, purchase, barter, import, export, or transport any migratory bird, or any part, nest, or egg or any such bird, unless authorized under a permit issued by the Secretary of the Interior. Some regulatory exceptions apply. Take is defined in regulations as: "pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or attempt to pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect." Visit [Audubon.org](http://Audubon.org) for a good explanation of this act.

Because of this law, the beautiful Roseate Spoonbill feather that I found on the beach had to stay on the beach. Even taking it home with me would be a federal offense. Finding a bird that is already dead does not

justify collecting it or its feathers. Part of me wants to protest the seemingly unreasonable nature of this rule, but another part understands that to make exceptions for “found” items opens the door to abuse.

However, adjustments have been made to the law and now there are legal ways to possess feathers. For example, permits for research are available for some scientists. Also, ceremonial feathers used in Native American ritual are now available through Sia: The Comanche Nation Ethno-Ornithological Initiative. At Sia, collection is controlled and distribution meticulously documented. (The word Sia is Comanche for feather.)



At the Material Culture of the Plains, Prairies and Plateaus conference in Canyon, TX, Bill Voelker, curator of Sia, spoke about the significance of the work that is done there. Much of the work involves research of the spiritual meanings of the feathers, understandings that have often been distorted during the years of Indian forced captivity. This distortion was so effective that

today, according to Mr. Voelker, many Indians believe the distorted white version of the symbol and haven't even heard the traditional way. He said that in the early days of captivity anything historically authentic was discouraged, driven from free existence.

One example that Mr. Voelker gave was the story of the owl. Many Indians today see an owl as a “bad” omen, harbinger of the death of the viewer or of a loved one. He said that early interviews with elders who told stories from a pre-captivity viewpoint revealed far more complex understandings. Some said the owl was a link with those who have passed into the spirit world. Others said that the strength and silence of the owl as a hunter was valued and wearing owl feathers connected the wearer to those qualities.

During ceremonial use, Indians are connecting with the spirit of the bird or animal that they choose. In Sia's brochure it states that “reconnecting cultures with the living bird in ways supportive of the species conservation is a primary goal.” In addition to breeding and protecting a large variety of eagles, Sia is a non-eagle migratory repository licensed by the federal government and developed to provide access to legal feathers. They get the feathers from zoos, rehabilitators, falconers, and researchers. They use cutting-edge technology such as feather micro-chipping and DNA analysis to assure the legality of the feathers they collect and provide to indigenous people for ceremonial use.

So the next time you are tempted to collect that feather, stop and reflect on the law and also imagine the spirit of that bird lifting your imagination higher and enriching your spirit. Then - leave it where you found it.

For more information about Sia visit their website [www.comancheeagle.org](http://www.comancheeagle.org) or listen to the YouTube interview with Bill Voelker at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtN41yJ2\\_mw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtN41yJ2_mw)

## Earth Day is April 22 by Diane Humes

This year Earth Day, April 22, will celebrate its 47th year. Consider if you will, what was happening in the 1960's before the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970.

The Vietnam War was wildly unpopular, especially among those likely to be drafted, who thought they should be allowed to drink and smoke and vote, if they were going to be sent to war. Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, warning of the dangers of pesticides such as DDT. Bald eagles, our national bird, were nearly extinct; no brown pelicans flew over Galveston.



A massive oil spill near Santa Barbara, CA fouled beaches and killed wildlife. The Cuyahoga River in Ohio, highly polluted and devoid of life for decades, caught fire and burned - not for the first time, either. The Champion Paper Company was filling

waste pits along the San Jacinto River with dioxins, but nobody was watching. Air pollution and smog were the "smell of money".

There are actually two Earth Days.

A newspaper publisher and activist, John McConnell, at a UNESCO meeting in 1969 suggested that a global holiday called Earth Day be held on March 21, 1970, a day of equal day and night for all people to contemplate their shared responsibilities as environmental stewards. In 1971, U. N. Secretary-General U Thant, proclaimed the annual observance of Earth Day on the Spring Equinox, "May there be only peaceful and cheerful Earth Days to come for our beautiful Spaceship Earth as it continues to spin and circle in frigid space with its warm and fragile cargo of animate life." Each year the Peace Bell is rung at U.N. headquarters at the precise moment of the vernal equinox.

A second proposal for an Earth Day came from Senator Gaylord Nelson, who wished to organize a day of teach-ins - environmental education and activism. He chose April 22, 1970 for the first Earth Day because of warmer weather, no holidays, and few conflicts with student calendars. Organizers got the word out, weather was perfect across the entire country, and 20 million people from all walks of life joined local marches, rallies, parades, protests, and "happenings".

The exuberant first Earth Day made news everywhere, successfully demonstrating the importance of a clean and safe environment to everyone. Within a few months, Congress passed dozens of important environmental laws, including the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and Safe Drinking Water Act; within three years the Environmental Protection Agency was formed.

Earth Day celebrations kept growing: Earth Day 1990 went global with 200 million people in 141 countries participating. Earth Day 2000 saw 5000 environmental groups in 184 countries sponsoring activities and Earth Day 2010 brought 250,000 people to the National Mall for a climate rally. On Earth Day 2016, 195 nations signed the Paris Climate Accord, binding themselves to the goals of limiting global average temperature increases to less than 2°C above pre-industrial levels, preferably limiting increases to 1.5°C.

Today more than one billion people participate in Earth Day activities on April 22; it is the largest civic observance in the world. In three years, on Earth Day 2020, the celebration for the planet will be 50 years old. Has it made a difference?

The huge Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969 has been dwarfed by the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989 and Deepwater Horizon blowout in 2010. But, the Cuyahoga

River is a clean home for fish and hasn't caught fire in 47 years. Bald eagles are off the Endangered Species list and Galveston has more Brown pelicans than we can count. Manufacturers no longer dump toxic chemicals with impunity, although their industrial legacy continues to linger. Our air is much cleaner and the San Jacinto waste pits have been capped, but await a permanent solution.

The Houston area is currently leading the nation to a future of cultural and ethnic diversity. Inspired by Terry Hershey, it also led in protecting the environment **before** the first Earth Day.

In 1966 Mrs. Hershey stopped the bulldozers at Buffalo Bayou, with help from her congressman, George H. W. Bush. Described by him as "a force of nature for nature", she founded the Buffalo Bayou Preservation Association, now Bayou Preservation Association, the Park People, and the Citizens Environmental Coalition (CEC), a contact site for all area environmental information, and had a hand in the beginnings of other area environmental organizations, including Armand Bayou Nature Center and, recently, saving the Lawther Deer Park Prairie. Appointed to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission, Mrs. Hershey promoted conservation easements as a way to protect special places in Texas.



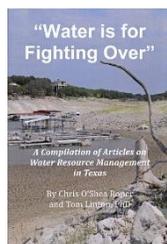
Photo by Johnny Hanson. Provided by Houston Chronicle.

Terry Hershey passed away January 18, 2017 at age 94, but her impact will be felt far into the future. Modestly, she said, "I made little differences here and there. That's all you can do as one human. You can help by joining groups that do good things, and you can give your time if you're lucky."

Hope to see you at Earth Day! Visit [cechouston.org](http://cechouston.org) for a list of local groups and environmental activities and give thanks to Terry Hershey's foresight in setting up this area environmental asset. Terry Hershey championed environmental causes for fifty years; can we do any less, if we care for our only home?

## Heritage Book Study – Review of *Water is for Fighting Over* by Madeleine K. Barnes

*Water is for Fighting Over* by Chris O'Shea Roper and Tom Linton, PhD, is a compilation of newspaper articles written between November 24, 2011 and August 1, 2015 that address water resource management in Texas. Ms. Roper is a GBAC master naturalist, freelance writer, and editor with experience in water stewardship. Dr. Linton is a marine scientist, teacher, researcher, and marine resource manager, in the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Science at Texas A&M and currently at TAMUG. They have also co-authored articles on flood insurance and open beach access.



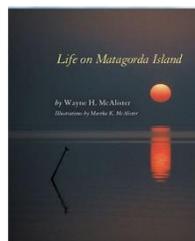
The old phrase, “whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting over” includes elements of truth - all of us in the state of Texas need water, and you can't make whiskey without it either! The authors investigate a variety of aspects of water rights, providing useful definitions, historical perspectives, and current legislation. Their geographical coverage is broad, beginning in Galveston and spreading throughout the state, including an examination of the impacts beyond Texas' borders.

Do you know where your drinking water comes from? How does it get to your glass? Who has authority over its life-sustaining molecules? Surface water, in any watercourse, is owned by the state. Diffused surface water, which is rainwater before it enters a watercourse, and groundwater are owned by the surface landowner. In terms of groundwater volume, the landowner with the biggest pump gets the water. Broadly, Texas laws seem straightforward, but when you consider the multiple levels of municipal, regional, state, and national jurisdictions, the roles and responsibilities of the individual water owner are more complex.

In the 2012 Texas State Water Plan, demographic projections for the population of Texas would approach 50 million people by 2060 with a concomitant decrease of water supply of 10%. Suggested strategies to increase

water availability included aquifer storage and recovery, newer, more efficient water treatment plants, inter-basin water transfers, and water “reuse” plans. Other future considerations included expanded conservation efforts, improved environmental flows (a flow regime that maintains essential processes to support healthy river ecosystems), more efficient irrigation practices, new desalination plants (depending on costs, energy, and brine disposal), construction of additional reservoirs (there are 196 currently in Texas) and stronger infrastructure maintenance. Environmental management approaches would address issues such as evaporation rates, subsidence, and fracking. The State Water Implementation Fund for Texas (SWIFT) has dedicated \$2 billion dollars to meet project demands for the entire state. The public needs to be more engaged to appreciate the real value of water and the critically important actions that are needed to preserve and extend Texas' water resources.

Each article in this book is well-written, concise, and provides additional sources of information for the reader to investigate. The intent is to help us understand the consequences of our actions by presenting thoroughly researched facts from a non-judgmental perspective and by identifying the critical Texas water issues along with possible solutions. I recommend this book as a top choice for understanding critical water resource issues at the local and statewide level.



Our current reading selection for April 3rd is the first half (pages 1-116) of *Life on Matagorda Island* by Wayne H. McAlister. We will meet on May 1st to discuss the second half of this selection, pages 117-233. We welcome your participation each month for two hours on the first Monday of the month starting at 10:00a.m. at the Agrilife Extension office. We look forward to seeing you and let us know if you have read any good naturalist books lately! Happy trails!

## The Whooping Crane Story by T.J. Fox

We are very fortunate to have the winter home of the whooping crane, *Grus americana*, less than 200 miles southwest of Houston at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). The whooping crane is the tallest bird in the Americas and one of only two crane species native to North America; efforts to bring the whooper back from the brink of extinction have been in progress since the early 1940's. On January 21, the AT Committee hosted a

program for GBAC members to introduce them to these magnificent birds, inform them of past successes and failures and what will be required in the future to build on past successes.

Ray Kirkwood, a Texas Master Naturalist from Rockport, and Dr. Elizabeth (Liz) Smith with the International Crane Foundation presented a three-hour program to sixty-eight

GBAC members. Ray has been closely involved with whooping cranes for over twelve years, beginning when he took the position of principal narrator on winter tours out of Rockport on the catamaran *Wharf Cat*. During this time, Ray has, through self-study, accumulated an amazing amount of knowledge about whoopers. Liz joined the International Crane Foundation (ICF) in 2011 with the task of increasing foundation involvement in habitat conservation, coastal ecosystem health and stakeholder leadership in Texas.



Photo by Chuck Snyder.

Ray began our program with the history of whoopers, reasons for their steady decline to a low of fourteen birds in the early 1940's and their recovery to a population of almost 500. Over the course of one and one-half hours, Ray described efforts to identify the whooper summer nesting area unknown for many years and, once located, to "steal" eggs for captive rearing. He told the story of the captive born chick named Tex, her "romance" with Dr. George Archibald, founder of ICF, and the subsequent attempts to form a second migrating flock from Wisconsin to Florida.

Whoopers nest in northern Canada in Wood Buffalo National Park. They generally mate for life and produce one chick per year. In the fall, family groups make a yearly 2,500-mile migration from the wetlands of northern Canada to the Texas coast at ANWR. Once the various family groups arrive at the refuge they settle into their established home territories. They will defend their 200 to 500 acre "ranches" against any whooper intruders. A preferred site is mostly shallow wetlands where food is easily available and predators are at a disadvantage.

While at ANWR for the winter, they will gain weight and strength on a diet of Carolina wolfberries and blue crabs supplemented with fish, snakes, reptiles and almost anything else they can find. The family will only leave their territory if low fresh water inflows cause the water to

become too salty. Then they move inland to find fresh water to drink.

In the spring, beginning in March, they will start their return to northern Canada and their summer nesting ground.

Liz continued the presentation with the challenges faced by government and private organizations who work to protect the whooping cranes. As always, habitat protection and environmental quality are continuing problems.

Not only is it necessary to protect their summer nesting grounds in Canada, which is within 150 miles of Canada's oil sands deposits, and their winter home at ANWR, the known stop-overs along the flyway must be surveyed for environmental health. The need for adequate fresh-water inflows into the San Antonio Bay system adjacent to ANWR is an ongoing concern.

In Texas, the success of the program has created a space problem. Because of the whoopers territorial needs, newly mated pairs are constantly looking for new territory. Now whooper "ranches" are spilling over into privately-owned land where they may or may not be secure.



Photo by Debbie Reptsz

If you have witnessed the awesome sight of a five-foot tall whooper launching into flight and the precision of its seven-foot wings in motion, count yourself in debt to all those who have worked for over seventy-five years to make it possible.

## A Valentine's Day with the Birds by Andrea Stromeier

For most people, Valentine's Day is a day for celebrating relationships and romance. Couples typically participate in such traditions as dining at upscale restaurants and exchanging cards and trinkets to show appreciation and love for each other. One cannot miss the appearance of red and pink hearts, cupids, chocolates, or other distinguishable symbols sprinkled throughout most shops in the weeks leading up to Valentine's Day.

Seventeen members of the Galveston Bay Area Chapter Texas Master Naturalists (GBAC TXMN), however, took a completely different approach to the holiday. We participated in a whooping crane observation field trip and traveled to the seaside town of Rockport, Texas. Our first stop was to the Bay Education Center where we utilized the University of Texas Marine Science Institute's Science on a Sphere technology to learn how marine debris picks up currents and flows easily from continent to continent.



Photo by Andrea Stromeier

The following morning we headed out into the Aransas National Wildlife Reserve, the winter home of the whooping crane, aboard the *Wharf Cat*. It was chilly, but I was ready for the adventure. We saw a number of cormorants, white pelicans, ibises, skimmers, and a plethora of other species. Suddenly Ray Kirkwood, our guide, spotted a mated pair of whooping cranes. The

smoothly curved white neck and body and long black legs contrasted with the flat, low-growing vegetation and ponds that make up their preferred overwinter habitat.

Trios comprised of one juvenile whooper with their two parents were spotted as we continued further into the reserve. Whooping cranes are precocial in that they are able to swim and feed themselves immediately upon hatching, but are somewhat altricial in that they will stay with their parents through that winter. Mr. Kirkwood told us that the parents sometimes have to kick them out of the nest if the juveniles are still sticking around at the start of mating season.

The Aransas National Wildlife Reserve is not just an ideal place for spotting whoopers. On the journey back toward Rockport from the reserve we were treated to a quick view of a peregrine falcon in flight. Other species of note include the red tail hawk, great blue herons, and the crested caracara, among a host of others.

The elegance and majesty of the whooping crane has captivated me since I was a child. I never thought I would have an opportunity to see them in the wild since numbers have been declining until recently. When I received the email invitation to join the GBAC members, I jumped at the opportunity. This trip was an important milestone in my thus-far short Texas Master Naturalist journey because I realized that, while I had not previously been much of a birder, are all elegant and significant in their own way. I was surprised that, by the time we turned back to shore, I was actively searching for other avian species and I found myself not only interested in spotting them, I became interested in learning about them. Needless to say, I will be searching for other advanced training opportunities to learn more about these feathered creatures.

I can confidently say that, as a Texas Master Naturalist in training, trading the extravagant dinner and chocolates from my significant other in lieu of spending it with the whooping cranes was a wonderful way to celebrate the holiday. Besides, whooping cranes mate for life, and that's romantic.

### Special Note from George Kyame, President 2017

Do be informed of our presence on social media. We have a Facebook page where we share our experiences as Galveston Bay Area Texas Master Naturalists. Collect and trade your favorite photos of everything we do in the field, having a prideful humor at a job well done, while inspiring others and each other! And be successful with it.

## Hawk Watch AT by Lana Berkowitz

Which raptor is that soaring above? Another Broad-winged hawk, a Turkey vulture or a perhaps it is a hawk watcher's favorite, the Swallow-tailed kite.

The Sylvan Beach Hawk Watch is in full swing with teams setting up every day 9:30 a.m.-1 p.m. to count migrating raptors going north to breed. The spring hawk watch was established by chapter member Dick Benoit in 1996.

Last year 30,600 raptors were counted during the watch, which is conducted March 1 through April 30, according to John and Lynn Wright, who maintain the Sylvan Beach Hawk Watch page for Hawk Migration Association of North America. The average number of raptors counted during the two-month period is 21,169. And 80 percent of those are Broad-winged hawks.

A full house turned out for the AT on Diurnal Raptors of the Galveston Bay Area conducted by John and Lynn. The Wrights discussed the vultures, eagles, buteos, accipters, falcons and kites common in the Galveston Bay area. The 18 that the hawk watchers look for are Turkey vulture, Black vulture, Bald eagle, Osprey, Swainson's hawk, Red-tailed hawk, Broad-winged hawk, Red-shouldered hawk, Cooper's hawk, Sharp-shinned hawk, American kestrel, Merlin, Peregrine falcon, Mississippi kite, White-tailed kite, Swallow-tailed kite, Northern harrier and Crested caracara.

Learning the sizes, shapes, color patterns, markings, behaviors, habitats and calls are skills you can learn with the hawk counting teams.

"Hawk watch is really challenging. I don't care how many years you have been doing it," Lynn said.

If you were reluctant to sign on for the annual hawk watch but are interested in learning, this is a good time spend a morning with a team to see what it is all about. Contact [lynn-wright@comcast.com](mailto:lynn-wright@comcast.com) to get information on daily team leaders. Or keep up with their work at [hawkcount.org/SylvanBeach](http://hawkcount.org/SylvanBeach).

"Most first-time hawk watchers put themselves under too much pressure worrying about accurately identifying birds," John said. But there is no mistaking a Swallow-tailed kite soaring through.

"If you're a hawk watcher the Swallow-tailed kite is easy to love. There's no question as to what it is when you see one approaching and this allows you to just lean back in your chair and enjoy its effortless soaring and beauty," he said.

"Hawk watchers are usually a pretty chatty bunch, and when hundreds or thousands of raptors are sighted and approaching, it's common to hear lots of 'Oh, Wows' or 'My Gods.' My recollection is that when even a single incoming Swallow-tailed kite is sighted there's just a lot of silence. Lynn and I love all raptors, but it is not just us that are so taken with the Swallow-tailed kite."



Photo by John Wright

Audubon calls the Swallow-tailed kite "our most beautiful bird of prey, striking in its shape, its pattern, and its extraordinarily graceful flight. Hanging motionless in the air, swooping and gliding, rolling upside down and then zooming high in the air with scarcely a motion of its wings, the Swallow-tailed Kite is a joy to watch."

During the past two years, about 18 Swallow-tailed kites are sighted annually during the watch. "We had our highest number of sightings, 27 birds in 2009 and our lowest in 2014 with only two birds sighted," John said. "Most of the North American population migrates through Florida to Cuba and then toward the Yucatan peninsula, but we do see many of those that nest from Texas to Alabama," he said.

The Swallow-tailed kite population seems stable, and its greatest threat seems to be from loss of nesting habitat.

John recalls when he and Lynn took his mom with them to a Sylvan Beach Hawk Watch in 2012.

"She saw her first, and probably only, Swallow-tailed Kite gliding in just overhead, came running to us and just kept pointing at the bird," John said. "Mom's 89 now and sometimes can't remember what she did yesterday, but she still remembers that Swallow-tailed kite! Once you've seen one flying in low it just kind of stays with you."

## Guppies from Julie

### Thank You from Dolphin Challenge 2017!

Nine teams from across Texas and Arkansas rolled into Galveston for Dolphin Challenge in early February! These high school students had been preparing for the ocean sciences quiz bowl for months and the time had arrived!

First to the beach! Twenty of the Dolphin Challenge students and their teachers hit the beach and bay to enjoy a field trip at Galveston Island State Park! The kids from Arkansas and Waco seined, explored and had a great time thanks to Galveston Bay Area Texas Master Naturalists & Friends of Galveston Island State Park volunteers!

On competition day, Master Naturalists and Texas A&M Galveston (TAMUG) students arrived early ready to volunteer. The high school competitors were ready - many wearing team t-shirts!

With buzzers in hand, the students were nervous as were the volunteers. After a practice round, everyone settled in for a long, brain teaser of a day! Finally, Dolphin Challenge was off and running!

Texas Master Naturalists and TAMUG Sea Aggies served as officials during the competition. They were moderators, science judges, rules judges, score keepers, time keepers and runners. The Galveston Bay Area Chapter sponsored snacks and goodies for the students. Thank you!

In the final round, the team from Arkansas won with Coppell High School coming second place! The Arkansas team will make the trip to Oregon for the national finals in April.

Thank you, Texas Master Naturalists, for making Dolphin Challenge a great success and so memorable for the students! Dolphin Challenge would not have happened without you!



### *The Midden*

Published bimonthly by the Galveston Bay Area Chapter - Texas Master Naturalists. The purpose of *The Midden* is to inform, communicate and educate chapter members and the community. If you have an article that contributes this purpose or want to join the team, please contact Diane Humes, [treimanhumes@gmail.com](mailto:treimanhumes@gmail.com),

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*The Midden* is posted on the GBAC-TMN chapter website: [www.gbamasternaturalist.org](http://www.gbamasternaturalist.org) two weeks prior to chapter meetings. Archived issues also on chapter website. If you prefer to receive *The Midden* in hard copy and are not currently receiving it, please contact: Julie Massey, [julie.massey@agnet.tamu.edu](mailto:julie.massey@agnet.tamu.edu).

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### *The Midden Deadline*

for the next issue

**April 27**

If you have Advanced Training or Volunteer Opportunities, please submit information to Ron Morehead, [ronmorehead@yahoo.com](mailto:ronmorehead@yahoo.com)

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Educational programs of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, or veteran status. The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Court of Texas cooperating.

## April and May Activities

### ADVANCED TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

**Chapter Meeting** - Thursday, April 6; Alligators: Top Predators

Presenter - Mark Kramer

6:30 Social, 7:00 Meeting, 7:30 Speaker  
AgriLife Extension Office; 1 AT hours

**Oysters and Shrimp** - Saturday, April 29

10-noon; 2 hours AT

Location: Extension Office

Presenters - Nathan Veatch, Bill Ashby, Julie Massey  
Register with Emmeline Dodd [txdodd@aol.com](mailto:txdodd@aol.com)

**CoCoRaHS** - Saturday, May 6

10-noon; 2 hours AT; Rainfall Monitoring at home

Location: Extension Office

Presenters - CoCoRaHS staff

Register with Emmeline Dodd [txdodd@aol.com](mailto:txdodd@aol.com)

#### Ongoing

Galveston Island State Park

10 am at the Welcome Center

Every Saturday- Beach Explorations

Every Sunday- Bay Explorations

Tours 1 to 1 ½ hours long. Bring water and family.

Heritage Book Study Group

First Monday of every month. AgriLife Extension Office

10am-Noon; 2 hours AT

Contact: Elsie Smith (409) 392-7003

See Pg. 7 for meeting dates and books.

### STEWARDSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

#### Ongoing Activities:

Mondays - Galveston Island State Park, Contact: Chatt Smith [chattsmith@gmail.com](mailto:chattsmith@gmail.com)

Tuesdays -

- Sheldon Lakes State Park, Contact: Tom Solomon [crandtr@sbcglobal.net](mailto:crandtr@sbcglobal.net)
- Texas City Prairie Preserve, Contact: Jim Duron [wishkad@yahoo.com](mailto:wishkad@yahoo.com)
- Environmental Institute of Houston at UHCL, Contact: Wendy Reistle [reistle@uhcl.edu](mailto:reistle@uhcl.edu)

Wednesdays - Wetland Restoration Team, Contact: Marissa Llosa, [mllosa@tamu.edu](mailto:mllosa@tamu.edu)

Thursdays -

- Stormwater Wetland Team, every Thursday, 9 - Noon. Contact: Mary Carol Edwards [mary.edwards@agnet.tamu.edu](mailto:mary.edwards@agnet.tamu.edu)
- San Jacinto State Park, Contact: Jim Duron [wishkad@yahoo.com](mailto:wishkad@yahoo.com)

Fridays - Prairie Friday, ABNC, 8:30 - 11:30am, Contact: Chatt Smith [chattsmith@gmail.com](mailto:chattsmith@gmail.com)

### EDUCATION - OUTREACH VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Bay & Island Adventures - Volunteers teach six in-class hands-on modules on a once a month basis in Dickinson and Galveston Schools. Presenters and helpers are needed for eleven 4th and 5th grade classes. Contact: Sara Snell [snellsw@verizon.net](mailto:snellsw@verizon.net).

Education and Outreach Committee - Lots of work to do and we can use your help developing a speakers bureau; responding to requests for exhibit booths, fieldtrip guides and presenters, planning Camp Wild and Treasures of the Bay; and developing a library of education-outreach materials. Contact Sara Snell [snellsw@verizon.net](mailto:snellsw@verizon.net)

Partner and Associate Programs - Many organizations sponsor guided walks and education programs or need volunteers to staff their nature center. Go to <http://txmn.org/gbmn/partners/> for the list, then click on the link to the organization's website.

### BOARD AND COMMITTEE MEETINGS

(Monthly at Extension Office unless specified)

**Board Meetings** - First Tuesday, 2-4p.m.

#### Committee Meetings

Communication - May 1, 9-Noon

Advanced Training - Third Monday, 10-Noon

Education/Outreach - Third Tuesday,  
10 to 11:30a.m.

Stewardship - Meets quarterly.



# Happy Spring!

