

Black skimmers by Sharon Evans

Galveston Bay Area Chapter - Texas Master Naturalists

December 2025

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President's Corner by Mary Dobberstine

First, I want to give a big shout-out to our members who coordinated chapter event days this year! One of the board's goals for 2025 was to create more opportunities for members to volunteer together and enjoy some time to visit.

We hosted several successful service days, including a chapter Hawk Watch Day with outreach showcase, a planting and outreach event at Galveston Island State Park, and a morning of gardening, invasive species treatments, and habitat management at University of Houston Coastal Center. We also launched our Dragonfly Bingo game to help new and long-time members discover the wide variety of volunteer activities available in our chapter.

Of course, these events are in addition to all the wonderful ongoing opportunities that our members lead and support—Training Classes, Beach Heroes, Thunderbirders Youth Birding, Bayside Regional & H-E-B Pollinator Gardens, Glow Patrol Firefly Surveys, Camp Wild, Monofilament Recycling, and so many more, including the necessary behind-the-scenes work on the board and committees. Thank you to everyone who makes these efforts possible. It's truly been a great year!

Now, I know our group. It's hard for us to turn down a marathon bird count, a shift at a plant sale, or a day helping at a fall festival! But, as the year comes to a close, take some time to recharge for the new year, our **25th Anniversary as a Chapter!** Sit in a pollinator garden, stroll along the beach, or wander through a nature center. Listen to the gentle rustle of leaves, the call of a bird, or the ebb and flow of the tide. These small moments of observation can ground us and remind us of the beauty that surrounds us every day.

As Henry David Thoreau once said, "It is a surprising and memorable thing to observe the world without interference and just see what is there." Let's give ourselves the gift of noticing. Take deep breaths, soak in your surroundings, and let nature be your companion in these last days of the year.

Thank you for your dedication, curiosity and love for the natural world and all you do for the Galveston Bay Area Chapter. May this season bring you peace, wonder, and a chance to simply breathe.

And to celebrate our shared love of nature and community, please join us for our Year-End Celebration at the Wayne Johnson Community Center at Carbide Park, an evening of food, fun, and friendship as we wrap up another wonderful year together!



Photo by Carlos Rios

Next Chapter Meeting

December 4

Annual Awards
Celebration
And
Officer Election

In person only

Wayne Johnson
Community Center
At Carbide Park

Women in Nature: Mother Neff by Meade LeBlanc

Visitors to one of the 90 state parks in Texas can thank the woman who started it all. In 1921, Isabella Neff bequeathed six acres of land to the State of Texas and the public “for religious, educational, fraternal, and political purposes.” There was no state park system yet, so her son, Governor Pat Neff, established the State Parks Board to create “a breathing spot for humanity.” He augmented her bequest by donating an additional 250 acres to create the Mother Neff State Park.



Isabella Eleanor Shepherd was born in 1830 on her grandfather's plantation near Roanoke, Virginia. As a young woman, she taught school and then, at age 24, married farmer Noah Neff, who owned land in Texas. In the early 1850s, the couple embarked by horse-drawn wagon to begin a new life in Texas on 900 acres near the Leon River in Coryell County.

The Neffs planted cotton and built a one-room log cabin next to a spring, keeping a constant watch for much-feared raiding parties. At first, Isabella wasn't so sure about her new home. In an 1855 letter to a friend in Virginia, she wrote, “I cannot say that I am much pleased with Texas... I think this is very pretty country, but like all new countries, has many inconveniences- everything is scarce and high, and nothing but bread and meat to eat, and cornbread at that.”

The Neffs and their nine children lived in their ever-expanding log cabin. Their youngest son became Texas Governor Pat Neff. According to Neff biographers Dorothy and Terrell Blodgett and David L. Scott in their

book *The Land, The Law, and The Lord: The Life of Pat Neff*, Isabella taught at a “common school,” where children from the area met in one of the cabins or under a tree for classes. After the Neffs took in three orphaned children to raise, family, friends, and neighbors began referring to Isabella as “Mother Neff.”

The Neff family and their neighbors loved to picnic, swim and fish from the shady banks along the Leon River. Community groups would occasionally ask the Neffs for use of the riverbank area. The Neff home was known for its hospitality to cowboys on the Chisholm Trail, whom Isabella would welcome with pie and coffee.

Following her husband's death in 1882 from pneumonia, Isabella designated a portion of her land as a community gathering space, hosting reunions and church groups. Some people even camped overnight at the area that came to be known as “Neff Park.” She loved sharing the tranquility of the natural world and believed that nature benefited everyone.

Isabella shared her love of learning with her children, too. Pat Neff described how his mother made sure he took a dictionary to the fields with him so he could study while the plow horses rested. Pat went on to graduate from Baylor University and receive a degree from the University of Texas School of Law in Austin. As Democratic nominee for governor in 1920, he sent a telegram to his mother expressing his admiration. “I am proud of my nomination for your sake,” he wrote. “The people properly ... give you much credit for raising me.”



Mother Neff State Park stands as a tribute to Isabella's generosity and serves as a testament to the Neff family's belief in the importance of preserving natural spaces for the benefit of Texans. As visitors explore the park's limestone hills, Central Texas prairies, and woodland ecosystems, they walk in the footsteps of Native Americans, Chisholm Trail cowboys, and pioneer families. The park is a reminder that even the smallest of gifts can become a legacy that gives back to their community for generations to come.

2025 State Meeting Recap by Cindy Howard

Eleven GBAC members survived Aggieland for the 2025 TMN State meeting - we learned how to “whoop,” “howdy,” forage and sleep through train horns. All in all, it was a fun experience for all.

The meeting started on Thursday 10/16 with field trips around the College Station area focusing on trees, birds, and habitat restoration. Thursday evening’s opening reception featured research poster presentations by TAMU students (and future TMNs) on wildlife, conservation and risk assessments.

Friday 10/17 and Saturday 10/18 we all attended AT classroom sessions from an amazing 170 choices. Our chapter’s Chris Anastas made a wonderful presentation with Evelyn Merz (UH Coastal Center) and artist Michelle Matthews on “The Houston Monarch Story” and Cindy Howard gave a talk on toxic marine life along the Texas coast. Our whole contingent attended many different AT sessions and gathered lots of ideas for future ATs for our chapter. Stay tuned!

The Saturday evening awards ceremony put the spotlight on our chapter over and over again. Ralph Fixel was recognized for 500 service hours, Mary Dobberstine and Mohammed Nasrullah for 1,000 service hours, and Chuck Snyder was recognized for 5000 service hours! And even though they were unable to attend the meeting, special recognition was given to Marie Asscherick for her 20,000 service hour milestone and to Tom Solomon for once again serving more hours than TMN has awards for

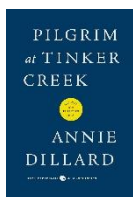
(35,000), far more than anyone else in the state! The icing on our very special cake came in the Chapter Projects category, where Mary Dobberstine and her team won first place for their “Upper Texas Gulf Coast Glow Patrol Firefly Survey Team”! Congratulations, all of our chapter award winners!



Photo by Chuck Snyder

Looking forward to 2026 now... Our 2026 recertification pin will be the bobcat and our 2026 TMN State Meeting will be held in Waco in mid-October (dates TBD). The State Meeting is an engaging and invigorating weekend full of food, fun and friendship. I hope you can plan to attend next year.

Heritage Book Club by TJ Fox



We are just finishing the last half of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, an interesting read that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1975. The author, Annie Dillard, is a stream-of-consciousness writer who can leave you wondering where she is going as she moves from topic to topic but

provides lots of interesting information on a wide range of topics.

More importantly, group members have chosen the books for 2026. They are (**not in reading order**):

Brave the Wild River: The Untold Story of Two Women Who Mapped the Botany of the Grand Canyon (2023) by Melissa Sevigny, 304 pages

The Time it Never Rained (2024) by Elmer Kelton, 416 pages

Not the End of the World: How We Can Be the First Generation to Build a Sustainable Planet (2024) by Hannah Ritchie, 352 pages

The Underworld: Journey to the Depths of the Ocean (2023) by Susan Casey, 352 pages

Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel (2015) by Carl Safina, 482 pages

Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures (2020) by Merlin Sheldrake, 368 pages

Please join us on the first Monday of the month, 1-3pm; however, we will not meet in December. The January book will be selected from the 2026 list, so please contact TJ Fox in December for the selected book. You only need to read or listen to the book and participate in the monthly discussion to earn AT hours.

Migrations, Hawks and Hawk Watchers by Diane Humes

As Texas Master Naturalists, we will be interested to know that scientists and other naturalists estimate that all species currently alive on Earth may number over 11 million - most of them neither described nor even discovered. This is a difficult number to calculate and includes a myriad of unfamiliar species; even as naturalists, we most often consider plants and vertebrate animals, which include birds, fish, mammals, amphibians and reptiles. After that we remember the invertebrates, especially butterflies, dragonflies, fireflies, ants, mosquitoes, bees, wasps, ticks and chiggers.

Unless they float on water, plants are mostly rooted in the soil; therefore, they pretty much stay where they began. However, a subset of all mobile animals - good swimmers, runners or fliers - live a migratory lifestyle, performing heroic global transits to breed and take advantage of food abundances across the globe. In his 2008 book, *No Way Home*, ecologist David S. Wilcove relates the migratory journeys of whales, red knots, Kemp's Ridley sea turtles, Atlantic salmon, hoofed mammals and Monarch butterflies, along with the successes, obstacles and challenges facing these animals in today's human-dominated world.

Speaking just of birds, around 1800 - 2000 of the 11,000+ known bird species are adapted to a migratory lifestyle, including the migrating raptors and others seen at our Sylvan Beach Spring Hawk Watch. Most American migrants spend the winter in Central or South America and, from our perspective, return to North America in spring to breed, then reverse course in the fall. Writer and bird researcher Scott Weidensaul relates fascinating details of bird migration around the globe and his travels with some of the many dedicated bird researchers in his 2021 book, *A World on the Wing: The Global Odyssey of Migratory Birds*. Every good hawk watcher, bird lover, turtle patroller, or milkweed grower will be fascinated by these two works.

The Sylvan Beach Hawk Watch (March 1 - April 30) was founded in 1996 by Dick Benoit, an avid hawk watcher from Michigan who scouted around until he found a spot fairly close to home here with the "right stuff." During spring migration, the "pretty birds" fly by night over the Gulf waters at low altitude, such that, according to Wilcove, one could step outside and hear them chirp or call as they pass over and even identify them! The raptors, however, rely on thermal lift created by sunlight on the land and avoid high-energy flapping, so they soar by day, rarely crossing water, while following the shore. When the winds are right - that is, from the northwest - if migrants have skirted the Gulf on their journey through Mexico, they will get pushed to Galveston Bay on their journey north and fly right over our heads at Sylvan Beach, sometimes in spectacular numbers!

Our 30-year-old hawk watch follows a fine tradition of counting hawks begun in 1934 by Rosalie Edge, founder of the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Pennsylvania (see: *Women in Nature, The Midden*, April 2023.) Migrating raptors follow leading lines, such as coastlines or mountain ridges, and were frequently (and still are in some places) targets for shooters. The Hawk Migration Association (HMA) compiles count data from over 300 watch sites. Some sites count in spring, others in fall - some do both. All the data resides at hawkcount.org. We mostly see broad-winged hawks (BW), Mississippi kites (MK) and Swainson's hawks (SW).

The Gulf Coast Bird Observatory (GCBO) in Lake Jackson, TX sponsors the Smith Point Hawk Watch each fall (August 15- November 30) on the east side of Galveston Bay, a long drive south of Anahuac from here. Boasting a hawk watch tower with great views, several chapter members volunteered to watch this season in order to give Bob Baez, the professional counter, a day off each week. Unlike Sylvan Beach, Smith Point is at the end of the road, very rural, surrounded by water on two sides with lots of resident birds. It is difficult to know which course the birds will take. They tend to slosh

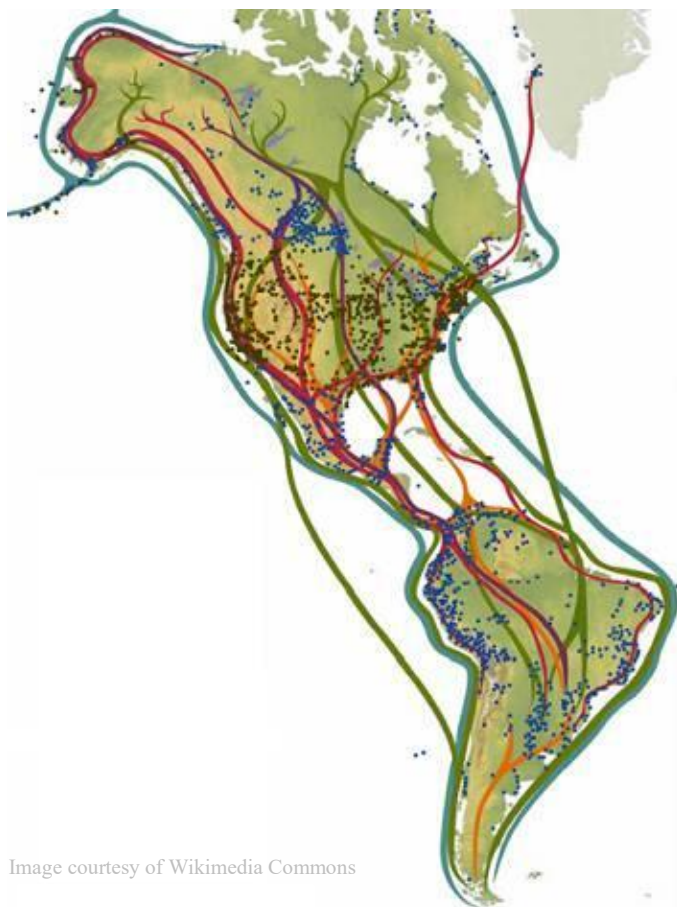


Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

around for a while, deciding; sometimes they settle in the trees and just wait. With chances of sighting different birds, it is a good experience outdoors; years ago, it is where I spotted my first Magnificent Frigatebird!

I arrived for my first time on September 9 to learn the ropes. Aside from raptors, the most extraordinary sights were the “gazillions” of large dragonflies and conjoined lovebugs in the air. No kidding. Every cubic foot (or less) of airspace had insects in it, swirling around, occluding views of any birds that might have been flying. They weren’t going anywhere, remaining a constant presence until late afternoon.



Photo by John Wright

The dragonflies were probably green darners and saddlebags. At least 50 species of dragonflies are thought to be migratory, and swarms have been seen in North America, along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, the Great Lakes and along ridge lines of the Appalachians and Catskills. Wilcove mentions a phenomenon similar to ours at Cape May, NJ during a fall hawk watch (September 11, 1992, to be precise) when a biologist there estimated 400,000 dragonflies passing by in a 75-minute period - mostly green darners, black saddlebags, and twelve-spotted skimmers. He also said that “a single swarm of migrating dragonflies observed in Argentina in December 1991 was estimated to contain four to six *billion* individuals.” Maybe “gazillions” was not so far off!

The lovebugs (*Plecia nearctica*) were present for about 3 weeks, but in diminishing numbers. Some are actually still on my car. Lovebugs have been in Texas for just over 100 years, spreading from Central America and eastward to Florida across the Gulf Coast. Adults have short lives, living to mate and lay eggs in patches of grass thatch. Larvae hatch and eat the thatch for a few months, then mature to have nuptial flights, which happen in April-May and August-September, and repeat the process. The species is kept in check by a parasitic fungus living in the grass, which seems to have followed them, as they are less common than previously. They were quite a sight during those first weeks in September at Smith Point.

As of October 22, 2025 at Smith Point, we have counted 5,364 Mississippi kites (MK), 6,409 broad-winged hawks (BW) and 190 Swainson’s hawks (SW), plus 545 more sharp-shinned hawks over the past few weeks than I have ever seen before, plus a merlin! The 2024 season totals were: 3,481 MK, 28,495 BW and 551 SW.

Each Hawk Watch Station is different. The Corpus Christi count season runs from August 1 - November 15. Last season’s impressive totals were: 659,361 BW, 29,852 MK and 9,874 SW. This season, Corpus Christi Hawk Watch counted 182,409 BW on 9/27/25 and 250,802 BW on 9/28/2025. Mississippi kites arrived earlier: 5,718 MK on 9/2, 2,900 MK on 9/3 and 3,537 MK on 9/4.

Hawk Ridge in Duluth, MN, my other favorite hawk watch, perched high above the north shore of Lake Superior, gets a very different mix of birds. This is the place to see bald eagles (BE) and sharp-shinned hawks (SS) during their count season, which runs from August 15 to December 1. In 2024, they counted 15,657 BW, 1 MK, 2 SW, but 6,199 BE - you can see them any day - and 15,738 SS. Moreover, this September they had huge numbers of blue jays, totaling 30,702 between 9/10 - 9/19, but on 9/10 they declared a Great Blue Jay Day of 15,280 birds! Amazing! They seem to count anything in the air over the ridge, including migratory helium balloons, for a season total of 16, with 3 on one day.

Fall migrants are southbound and must pass Veracruz, Mexico which has two hawk watch sites: Chichicaxtle (western) and Cardel (eastern). Fall 2024 totals included: 669,252 BW, 377,670 MK and 508,289 SW counted at Chichicaxtle and 180,902 BW, 307,304 MK and 91,872 SW counted at Cardel. Wow! Hawk numbers tend to peak at the end of September, while kites peak in the first two weeks.

It seems quite clear that “our” birds are a small subset of those flying over Corpus Christi Hawk Watch, although they may be some of the Duluth birds. The Veracruz birds are further augmented from other flight pathways. Estimates about population numbers for all 11,000+ avian species suggest that there may be over 50 billion individual birds, with probably 4 billion migratory. That’s a lot of birds to keep track of!



Photo by Diane Humes

Can’t wait to see you at Sylvan Beach.

In Memoriam: Members Lost in 2025 by Carolyn Miles

With fond memories, we reflect on the passing of our chapter members since November 2024.

Davis Clay (Spring 2018)



Stewart Coffman (Spring 2003)



Beach Heroes Celebrate GISD Artists by Kathleen McClean

"My sister said I'm famous!" - an exclamation among many others overheard at the 5th Annual Beach Heroes Art Exhibit making its second appearance in September at the McCullough Hall of the historic First Presbyterian Church of Galveston. A record number of families and teachers enthusiastically viewed the more than four hundred works of art created by GISD and the Ambassador Academy elementary students inspired by the Beach Heroes mission to combat plastic pollution. Said Burnet principal Mr. Frank Brown: "I had no idea what to expect, but this is truly wonderful!"

McCullough Hall, festooned with brilliant art pegged on clotheslines wrapped around its stately columns, burgeoned with a celebratory and festive air. Each artist was welcomed with a merry "Artist in the House" and then ushered with their family entourage to find their displayed work of art. Photographers Carlos Rios and Chuck Snyder were on hand to commemorate the event as the artists posed in all number of ways with their families, classmates, prizes, teachers, and especially getting their books signed by chapter member and local author Jane Downs. Soon all the smiling parents, aunties, and grandparents had their smartphones out taking all manner of selfies and photos as well. It's no

wonder the young artists felt famous; they were the stars of many hundreds of photos that day.

The Beach Heroes Exhibit was quite an interactive experience for all who came, with multiple stations offering opportunities to create freestyle art, sea creature finger puppets, windsocks, and turtle headbands. On display for the first time was a realistic replica of a turtle skull that everyone was encouraged to examine. Many parents settled in at the craft tables and gamely participated in coloring and gluing alongside their children. The event culminated in an exciting raffle of art supplies and island curios, so all attendees left with some sort of prize or handmade creation commemorating the Beach Heroes call to keep the beaches clean.

Educators complimented the positive impact of the Beach Heroes' presentations on their students' civic and environmental awareness and expressed an eagerness to maintain their partnerships with the Beach Hero Program. Said an Austin Elementary teacher, "Can't wait to sign my students up again!" Teachers were especially appreciative of the classroom supplies so generously provided by the Galveston Bay Area Chapter of TMN which greatly facilitated their students' participation in the Beach Heroes Art Project.



12th State of the Bay Symposium 2026 by Diane Humes

The National Estuary Program (NEP), part of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), is a non-regulatory program added to the Clean Water Act in 1987 that oversees 28 major national coastal estuaries, including Galveston Bay, the seventh largest in the nation. The Galveston Bay Estuary Program (GBEP) joined the NEP in 1989 to watch over the health of Galveston Bay and manages the Galveston Bay Plan (GBP).

The Galveston Bay Plan is a blueprint for the health of Galveston Bay and informs our chapter's mission. Originally approved in 1995, the GBP was updated in 2020 in time for the 11th State of the Bay Symposium, as reported in *The Midden*, April 2020.

We live within an enormously productive estuarine ecosystem supporting shrimp, blue crab and oyster fisheries, ecotourism and hunting, AND home to the Houston Medical Center and Johnson Space Center, plus a massive concentration of chemical plants and oil refineries, 3 ports and the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, attracting a steady stream of new residents.

So, every five years or so, all stakeholders - those who live, work, or play within the Galveston Bay Watershed -

are invited to attend the mandatory meeting to review and discuss the Plan's goals and progress toward them.

Registration is now open for the 12th State of the Bay Symposium, to be held at the Moody Gardens Convention Center, February 24 - 25, 2026, Galveston, TX. Hope to see you there!



Proposed 2026 Slate of Officers by Carolyn Miles

The nominating committee, Gene Fisseler, Meade LeBlanc and Lisa Hardcastle, propose the following slate of chapter officers for 2026 to be voted on at the December chapter meeting:

President - Mary Dobberstine
Vice President - Jenny Dudley
Treasurer - Karen Garvin
Secretary - Lisa Hardcastle

Nominations Open for 2025 Treasures of the Bay Awards by Mary Dobberstine

It's time to celebrate the amazing people who make our chapter shine! Each year at our December meeting, we honor members and partners with the Treasures of the Bay Awards, recognizing those who go above and beyond in service to our community and natural resources.

Take a few thoughtful moments – maybe with a cup of coffee or tea – to reflect on your fellow Galveston Bay Area Master Naturalists. Who deserves a little extra recognition this year?

Submit your nomination using this [nomination form](#) by **Friday, November 21**.

Award categories include recognition for leadership, education, research, community impact, and service.

Thank you for helping us honor the treasures of our chapter!



December and January Activities

ADVANCED TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Chapter Meeting - Annual Awards and Officer Election
6pm Social, 6:30pm Dinner, 7pm Program
Wayne Johnson Community Center at Carbide Park
In person only; no AT

Attwater's Prairie Chicken Recovery: Conservation in Action

Wednesday, January 7 at 2pm via Zoom
Presenter: Kyle McAuliffe

Spring Migration

Tuesday, January 20 at 6pm via Zoom
Presenter: Kristine Rivers

Ongoing

Heritage Book Club

First Monday of every month via Zoom; 2 hours AT
Contact: TJ Fox, tj.fox39@gmail.com
See Pg. 3 for meeting dates and books.

STEWARDSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

For a complete list of stewardship activities, see our chapter website, <https://txmn.org/gbmn/what-we-do/>.

EDUCATION - OUTREACH OPPORTUNITIES

For a complete list of education - outreach activities, see our chapter website, <https://txmn.org/gbmn/what-we-do/>.

CHAPTER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Calendar - <https://txmn.org/gbmn/gbac-events-calendar/>
Includes meetings, AT and volunteer activities

Board - <https://txmn.org/gbmn/board-of-directors/>
Contact information for the Board of Directors. **Board Meetings** - usually first Tuesday of each month (via Zoom), verify on the calendar

Committees - <https://txmn.org/gbmn/board-of-directors/>
Contact information for the Committee Chairs

Volunteer Service - <https://txmn.org/gbmn/volunteer-service/> Volunteer Opportunities

Advanced Training - <https://txmn.org/gbmn/advanced-training/>

Midden Archives - <https://txmn.org/gbmn/> Go to The Midden on the top menu.

Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/gbactmn>



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The Midden

The Midden is published bimonthly by the Galveston Bay Area Chapter - Texas Master Naturalists to inform, communicate and educate chapter members and the community about our natural world and serve as an archive of chapter activities. To submit an article or join the team, please contact Diane Humes, treimanhumes@gmail.com.

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The Midden is posted on the GBAC-TMN chapter website: <https://txmn.org/gbmn/> 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 the extension office at 281-534-3413.

Midden Team - Diane Humes, Editor

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Carolyn Miles	Chuck Snyder

The Midden Deadline for the next issue

December 22

