



Naturalist Notes

President's Note

Hi all,

I hope this finds you all staying healthy and safe!!

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension has mandated that ALL AgriLife face to face events, programs and meetings be cancelled through May 4th (at the earliest). This includes Texas Master Naturalist face to face events, programs and meetings. If there is any extension of the social distancing/"stay home, stay safe" order, our May chapter meeting will be held as an online, live webinar.

Regarding hours, there are currently no changes to the required number of hours for recertification. All Texas Master Naturalists will be asked to complete the standard minimum of 40 volunteer hours and 8 advanced training hours for recertification this year. There has been one noted modification for advanced training hours. All 8 of the advanced training hours may be obtained from online classes or webinars. Before signing up for any online training, please send a note to have the training pre-approved to Advanced.Training@txgcmn.org unless the training event was sent out via email by myself or Julia.

When you are reporting hours, both volunteer and advanced training, please be sure to include as much detail as possible. Don't assume the person approving your hours knows all the details of the event, even if you had it pre-approved. Include links to the program if possible, and contact names and/or details.

In closing, I would like to say thank you, to the finest TMN chapter in the state. Houston has had its share of hardships and we will get through this with the grace and optimism we share. I look forward to seeing you all again soon. Please let me know if you have any questions. You may reach me directly at rebecca.lloyd@txgcmn.org or your board of directors at boardmembers@txgcmn.org.

Stay safe and healthy everyone. I hope we can be together again soon.

Fondly,
Rebecca Lloyd
President
TMN - Gulf Coast Chapter

Book Review

Feathers: The Evolution of a Natural Miracle

Thor Hanson, 2011, Basic Books
Amazon, Houston Public Library

“Vultures made me do it.” So begins the preface to this book, describing the author’s encounter with vultures feeding at a carcass in Kenya, and again, on a run near his home in the Pacific Northwest. In Kenya, he observed how distribution of feathers related to feeding behavior. On his run, a departing vulture dropped a feather, which the author took as a sign the topic for his book had chosen him.



Divided into five sections, evolution, fluff, flight, fancy, and function, this book deftly combines insights from various fields of science with stories of human use of feathers throughout recorded history. One of the many stories Hanson includes is the experiment conducted by Commander David R. Scott on the moon during the Apollo 15 mission. Scott dropped a hammer and a peregrine falcon flight feather from shoulder height. The film shows that both hit at exactly the same time, testing Galileo’s hypothesis that the shape of an object does not matter when it falls in a vacuum. The feather was left on the moon.

Another story stays right in Vegas. The Rainbow Feather Company has dyed feathers by hand for more than 50 years. Located in Las Vegas, it supplies feathers for costumes of all kinds, from Vegas showgirl bodices to Mardi Gras headdresses. A secret chemical process removes the natural pigment from feathers before new pigment is added. However, iridescence arising from the feather structure itself is not affected by dying. Perusing the website left me more aware of the many different shapes of feathers, both within and between species.

I highly recommend this book.



April 17th is National Haiku Day

While all of April is National Poetry Month, the 17th is dedicated to this Japanese form. I’m including two different ones here.

Untitled

A squawk from black wings
The soundtrack to warm sunsets
Near the H-E-B

Maribel Molina -

<https://www.statesman.com/photogallery/TX/20190417/ENTERTAINMENTLIFE/417009995/PH/1>

Camp Haiku

Wake up under mesh
Black leaves against a white sky
A monochrome view.

Sun rising, light grows
Green leaves, brown branches, pine boughs
Ordinary day.



Irmi Willcockson



Sheldon/Jesse Jones Updates

My wife and I enjoyed overseas travel to the Holy Land and returned March 12 with no incidents. Nevertheless, we self quarantined for 14 days during which Sheldon Lake SP, my favorite volunteer location, suspended both group and individual volunteer activities. They remained open for public visits, but subsequently closed completely. I knew I was missing the spring "show" there, but was lucky enough to get a walk on the boardwalk before they finally closed. I observed the prairie was still very wet and quiet, but the wetlands had some views that were waning, but were nevertheless still good for a few photos. There were more displays of Iris then I recalled from the past. And the Spider Lily were scattered everywhere.

Looking for opportunities to keep busy while also maintaining separation, I noted Jesse Jones was still open for visits. And they were happy for me to walk solo any and all their trails and mark or remove invasives. So that is my new normal. I did take a few photos there. The Common Snapping Turtle (covered in duckweed) was a new observation for me. And the stand of Roughleaf Dogwood we cleared off last year as part of our Chapter Adopt-a-Trail effort looked to be doing well.

John Egan





Organism of the Month

Fir Tussock Moth (*Orgyia detrita*)

The Fir Tussock moth, also known as the Live Oak Tussock moth, is found along the east coast of the US from Long Island to Florida, and west to Texas.

Male moths are mostly brown, while female moths are covered with white hair, have tiny wings, and cannot fly. The females of several species look very similar and are only distinguished based on their egg masses.

Caterpillars eat the leaves of coastal live oaks, and can defoliate trees when present in large numbers. Although the caterpillar is not one of the stinging caterpillars, the hairs can nonetheless cause an allergic reaction to sensitive skin.

Cocoons can be found under the eaves of houses, or associated with *Tillandsia* bromeliads in the host tree.

Sources: iNaturalist, bugguide.net, Moth Photographer's Group, <https://brazoria.agrilife.org/live-oak-tussock-moth/>



Caterpillar on railing at Tom Bass Park

credit Irmi Willcockson



SKY OF THE MONTH

Cirrus clouds are the highest of the ten major cloud types, and also the fastest moving. Formed from falling ice crystals, they often look stationary, but in fact are moving at around 100 mph. They don't produce precipitation that reaches the ground.

This particular variety is called 'vertebratus', resembling a fish skeleton. The picture was taken April 22, 2019.



Exploration Green Update

While we have suspended formal work events at Exploration Green, lead volunteers continue to work at the park on individual projects. As you can imagine, there are maintenance issues at Phases 1 and 2 and the tree nursery that we have addressed. Bev, Rich, Paige, Chuck, Jessica, Allen, George, my wife Susan, and I have worked in the park regularly over the last month. In addition to weeding pots and checking the irrigation system in the nursery, we have repaired broken water lines and bubblers, uprighted and replaced dead trees and shrubs, pruned and otherwise maintained established trees, and planted native grasses and wildflowers in eroded areas.

In addition, we have taken the time to enjoy the unique beauty of springtime in Houston. The attached photos capture some of those activities, and I hope the images inspire you to visit the park soon.

If you have been to Phases 1 and 2 recently, you undoubtedly noticed an explosion of interest in the park. People are enjoying the green spaces more than ever.

Jerry Hamby



Green Infrastructure Video Features Sheldon Lake SP and Exploration Green

Texas Coastal Watershed Program has produced the following six-minute video on the importance of green infrastructure. In addition to providing a good overview of the benefits of rewilding urban spaces, the video features footage of Exploration Green and Sheldon Lake State Park:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huVJUHWygVc&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR1h1KThSvnVKV787h7mRLku9LQbiOZT9L1PiJeryme_h7EidMrkgDsiJ_g

Jerry Hamby

Tiny Safari

Sometimes I go to the Park to look for something particular that I plan to write about. But often, I simply go on a tiny safari. Safari is a Swahili word for a journey that has come to mean an expedition in search of interesting animals. Mine are tiny safaris because they take place in the Park's small wooded areas or fields of flowers and grasses. What I find are usually tiny things. But they are voyages of discovery none the less. The full drama and beauty of the natural world exists on almost every scale.

This week, I found something both mysterious and not particularly photogenic. But I want to write about it anyway because it's totally cool. ...

The text is about holes in the ground. Very small holes. They are bee nests!



You probably think of bee nests as the hives made by European honey bees. But they alone among bees make honey and live in a hive and they aren't native to North America (the word *European* in the name was the clue). Even before Europeans brought their delightful little bees to America, crops were still pollinated and flowers bloomed and went to seed. That work was done by native bees and other native pollen/nectar eaters.

We have over 600 species of native bees in Texas and 70% of them nest in the ground either on their own or in small groups. Each bee burrows a tunnel often with individual rooms branching off. Some bees line their nests with secretions, others drag in the tiny hairs off plant stems and fashion a cozy nest from those. Some section their tunnels into individual rooms with small snippets of leaves they have cut for this purpose. However the bee makes her nest, she carefully excavates and prepares it. This is her life's work.

Once she has her nest prepared, she can begin to lay her eggs. She has already mated with a male bee and has stored his sperm to mix with her eggs once the nest is ready. When you see a bee visiting flowers, gathering pollen and nectar, she is making dinner for her yet-to-be-born children. She makes a loaf out of the nectar and pollen, one for each offspring. She fashions the rooms of her nest and fills each with an egg and a loaf. She will never see her offspring, likely dying not long after laying her eggs.

A bee lives for about a year, but most of that time is spent below ground as an egg, larva and pupa all the while living off that loaf that mom left behind. Once the adult bees emerge, they will usually live only a few months. Just long enough to find a mate and, if you are female, make a nest.

All of these bee nests were found in the wonderful meadow full of wildflowers on the south side of the bayou between Jackson Hill and the bat bridge. I was carefully walking through the meadow, entranced by the flowers, the bees and everything else that was feasting on the abundance of pollen and nectar when I began to notice small mounds of sand and silt. I carefully brushed away a little pile and found a small round hole bigger than a hole ants would use, maybe the diameter of your pinky finger.

I began noticing them all over. Some were solitary, others in groups. This is what you might expect. Some species of native bees nest in colonies and others nest alone. Last year, I ran into a velvet ant on the other side of the bayou. These nests are exactly what she was looking for. She lays her eggs right on the bee eggs. Her larva hatch first and eat the bee, and then feast on the loaf our mother bee has so carefully prepared.

If you do go off the trail to look for interesting things, please don't dig up a bee nest. It would be amazing to see what's inside, but a bee gave her entire life for that nest.



A single bee's nest

Alisa Kline

<https://buffalobayou.org/blog/tiny-safari/>



I See Change

This site was featured on NPR's Science Friday on April 10th, 2020 in honor of citizen science month.

As the climate continues to change, it's critical to understand *how* and what we can do to adapt. ISeeChange is dedicated to empowering communities to document and understand their environment, weather and climate in order to increase resilience. Our platform, tools, and investigations provide equitable, iterative ways for residents to personalize, measure, and track climate change impacts and better participate in community adaptation decisions.

ISeeChange is a global community that posts about what they notice changing in the environment using our platform and mobile tools. Each post is synced with weather and climate data and broadcast to the community to investigate bigger picture climate trends. Over time, community members can track how climate is changing, season to season, year to year, and understand the impacts on daily life.

If you check it out, please let me know.

Irmi Willcockson

