NATURALIST NOTES

FEBRUARY 2024

Beautify the Bucket

Registration for the Beautify the Bucket is open now through May 1st. For more information, please visit Artist Boat.

Red Buckeye
Echocreek on iNat

Check out our website

https://txmn.org/gulfcoast

March Field Trips – Red Buckeye Trail @ Brazos Bend SP 16th & 17th with Katy Emde

The Red Buckeyes begin blooming in Brazos Bend State Park in March, along with Purple Rockets and Meadow Rues, among other things. The trail that wanders among these plants is shaded and green and it makes for a lovely and interesting walk.

Space will be limited, hence two opportunities to participate, and Katy Emde, who will lead the trip, will send instructions for registering around February 25.

SPLASh's Beach Sign Art Contest

The contest is open to children ages 4-18. For more information, please visit https://www.splashtx.org/artcontest

Nature has a big fat crush on you. She wants you to

check her out, notice her many outfits and feel her naked.

- Jaime Westendarp

Organism of the Month

Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*)

On a recent visit to the Arboretum, I noticed a couple standing along the road, looking at a flowering tree. I walked over to what turned out to be a red maple (*Acer rubrum*). Bees were buzzing around the flowers, one of the earliest abundant nectar sources. The bright red flowers appear in clusters along young branches before the leaves grow out. Both male and female trees have flowers, although the anatomy is slightly different. In male flowers, stamens extend beyond the reddish petals and are covered in yellow pollen. The long stigma extends beyond the petals in female flowers. The tree I saw is male.

Both sexes produce nectar to attract pollinators, but only female trees produce fruit. Reddish samaras hang from slender threads in spring or early summer. The leaves turn shades of red in the fall.

In addition to producing flowers to feed early emerging pollinators, fast growing red maples provide native color all year. While it can grow to 100 feet, most red maples are 60-80 feet at maturity.

Sources: Houston Area Urban Forestry Council, University of Maine Cooperative Extension

First Field Trip – Mercer Botanical Center and Botanic Gardens

The first field trip of 2024 was to the Mercer Botanical Center and Mercer Botanic Gardens. The first stop was the library which is open to members of the public who are able to make an appointment to visit. The library contains a large number of books on plants and the environment, papers, and journals. One can check out the catalogue of what is there by going to opac.libraryworld.com, the library name is Mercer Library.

The group then began moving through the building, visiting various work areas in the building. As they walked, they saw beautiful, detailed botanical drawings and paintings on the walls, representing many of the native plants found in the collection.

Herbarium specimen from 1791

The next stop was the herbarium - which is basically a systematically arranged collection of dried plants that can be used for documentation and research. In the various cabinets - there are over 40 cabinets - there were pressed plant specimens still tucked between layers of newspaper, waiting to be properly prepared, and highly organized plant specimens that had been professionally mounted for storage. The specimens range in age from 1791 to specimens recently collected. Anita had pulled out some mounted specimens that we are likely to see on the March field trip to Brazos Bend SP so the attendees got a preview of some of those. As for the plant from 1791, the history of how and when Dr. Vines acquired it is unclear, so it is a bit of a mystery.

The group also visited the room where a very talented intern has a set up for photographing each of the more than 50,000 specimens located in the herbarium - and many of the prints are life size and have been laminated so they can be passed around during a tour or used in presentations by the Mercer staff.

It took years for the herbarium owned by the Spring Branch ISD R. A. Vines Environmental Science Center to be loaned and relocated to the Mercer Botanic Center and upon receiving it Mercer took on the huge responsibility of organizing and cataloguing everything so that the collection will ultimately be available for use online. Mercer has done a marvelous job of moving towards that goal and has thereby honored Dr, Robert Vines and Dr. Larry Brown, and all the others, professional botanists and amateurs alike, who contributed plants in the past and continue to do so today.

Lastly the group drove back to the Botanic Gardens and went on a tour of the Native Plant and Endangered Species Garden, which was created in 1994. Since then, Mercer has teamed with the Center for Plant Conservation in order to provide care and a home for 28 threatened or endangered species that are native to Texas. Mercer also helps with the care for such species from botanic gardens around the country. Mercer uses these gardens to teach about diversity of habitats and conservation to the more than 2000 visitors to Mercer each year.

Thanks to Anita Tiller and Kari Hernandez, who graciously showed the group around. Thanks to all the attendees for their enthusiasm for the visit. And a special thanks to Katy Emde for organizing this field trip. Photos by TJ Butler.

Part of the field trip group

Patterns in Nature

Human evolution gave rise to brains hardwired to find patterns. From clouds and coastlines to curled fern fronds to stripes and spots, patterns abound in nature. Some believe that the presence of patterns implies a pattern maker.

Scientists have made great progress in explaining the origin of patterns. Many patterns arise from growth of minerals, trees, and fungi, among others. Activators and inhibitors, small molecules present in many organisms, produce patterns such as stripes and spots.

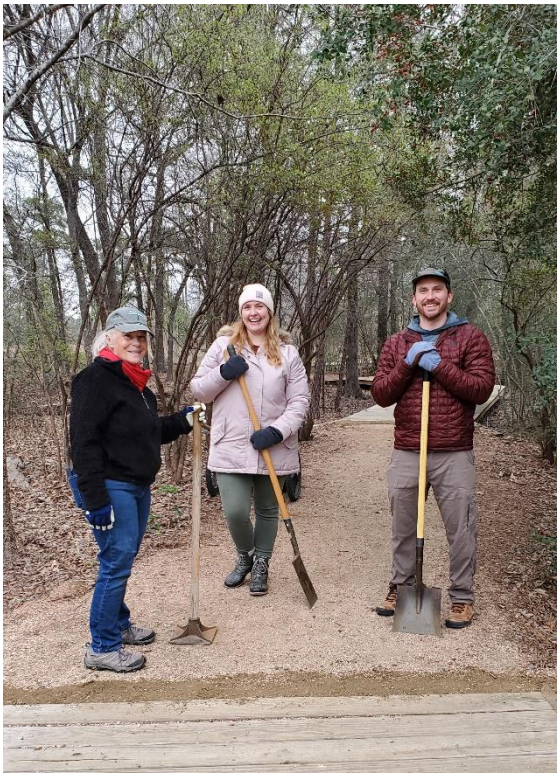
This series of articles is primarily based on Philip Ball's book "Patterns in Nature: Why the Natural World Looks the Way it Does", published in 2016. Additional sources will be listed for each article, as appropriate. Explore the science and beauty of patterns with me in 2024!

Bird calls echo in

still air. Blue Jay, White-winged Dove

Robins have returned!

Irmi Willcockson, Jan 29th, 2024



HANC Accessible Trail Maintenance

Richard Solberg leads a monthly workday maintaining the accessible trail at the Arboretum.

This month's crew consisted of:

Richard Solberg
Jill Johse
Roger McChargue
Lan Shen
Judy Thomas
Susan Coffman
Elizabeth Travis
Andrea Mathews

The next workday will be March 16th. Richard will send out an email with details before then.