November 2025

Naturalist Notes

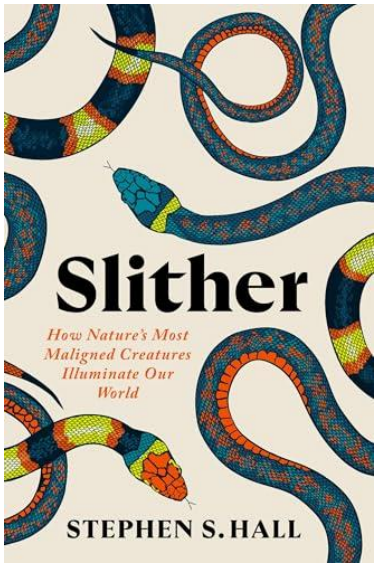
Upcoming

Monthly Chapter Meeting on Thursday Dec 4th starting at 6:30 pm at the Arboretum. Please bring a side to share.

Smith Point Hawk Watch at Candy Abshier WMA, Smith Point Road now through November 30th from 8 am to 4 pm daily

Christmas Bird Counts between now and early January. Check houstonadubon.org for dates, times and locations to get involved.

Book Review



Birdsong drifting through

glass, resident and migrant –

When will it get cool?

October 7th, 2025

Read about using haiku as a diary on page 3.

Book Review

“Slither: How Nature’s Most Maligned Creatures Illuminate Our World”

Stephen S. Hall, 2025

In his newest book, Stephen S. Hall presents a well-rounded volume on snakes. Each chapter includes snake biology as well as cultural and ecological insights.

For example, Chapter 3 on Venom begins with the story of a woman who stepped around her car in an arid corner of Southern California and onto a rattlesnake. Rattlesnakes consider being stepped on an existential threat and inject a large bolus of venom quickly. After spending 3 days in the ICU and a total of 10 days in the hospital, the woman survived. While almost no one dies from snakebite in the US, in many other countries snakebites pose a significant risk of death and disability.

Hall then takes us back to Ancient Egypt, where onions were one of the snakebite remedies used, albeit unsuccessfully. More recent stories examine the quest for an effective, field-stable snakebite treatment. From there we go to the first ACE inhibitor derived from a snake venom. Captopril and more recent drugs are used “in the successful treatment of almost 50% of the patients in cardiovascular medicine”.

Next, I learned the difference between venomous snakes and medically important venomous snakes. The difference is anatomy. Most snakes have to chew on their victims to envenomate them. Medically significant venomous snakes have a combination of fangs and powerful muscles surrounding the venom gland. They can deliver a large bolus of venom quickly.

Back to the quest for a broadly effective snakebite treatment. Although a previously abandoned drug showed promise in improving recovery after a snakebite treated with anti-venom, as of the writing of the book it had not yet achieved approval by the Food and Drug Administration.

Overall, I found this book readable, but a bit dense. If you are interested in a comprehensive volume on (almost) all things snake, do pick it up. However, if you prefer a less dense book, Sy Montgomery’s books may be a better choice.

Haiku Diary – A Work in Progress

Waves breaking, seaweed

swim, swim with the waves, swim, swim –

you know saltwater

May 30th, 2025

Somewhat out of the blue I decided to start writing a haiku a day as a diary. I try to write every morning using Julia Cameron's Morning Pages as a model. But morning pages are not meant to summarize a day, to serve as a diary. So, since haikus are short and I am a poet, I've tried to include a haiku in my morning pages.

A haiku is a short, unrhymed poetic form originating in Japan. Haiku traditionally focuses on nature and has a word that indicates the season. In English, the poem is usually composed of 3 lines with a 5-7-5 syllable count.

Leaves falling middle of

summer – endings are so hard.

I'm just not ready.

July 13th, 2025

While many of my haikus revolve around nature, nature is not the only topic I explore. Work, relationships, and events all appear in the poems. If you want to try your hand at writing a haiku diary, I suggest the following:

- Write the haiku for yesterday today. In other words, wait for the day to end before writing the diary entry.
- Choose two topics to focus on, preferably not closely related topics.
- Give one topic more space, the other topic less.
- Japanese uses a cutting word to transition, in English the – works well.

Give it a try for 30 days, then look back and see what you think. If it's working, keep going! If not, you've spent a little time and discovered something about yourself.

Organism of the Month

White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*)

The American White Pelican overwinters along the coast. It is one of the largest North American birds. The plumage is all white except for the black secondaries visible in flight.

White Pelicans hunt cooperatively, swimming together to herd small fish toward shallower water and then scooping them up. They hunt in fresh water during the summer. This behavior is very different from our Brown Pelicans, who hunt individually and plunge under the surface to catch their prey.

Breeding adults grow a nuptial tubercle on their upper bill, as seen in the left side picture. This wears off during the non-breeding season. Eggs are laid in large diameter shallow ground nests and chicks hatch after 63-70 days. While females lay two eggs, only one chick survives. Once the chick leaves the nest at 2-3 weeks old, it gathers with others in a creche. Although only about 60 breeding colonies exist, the American White Pelican is listed as a species of low conservation concern.

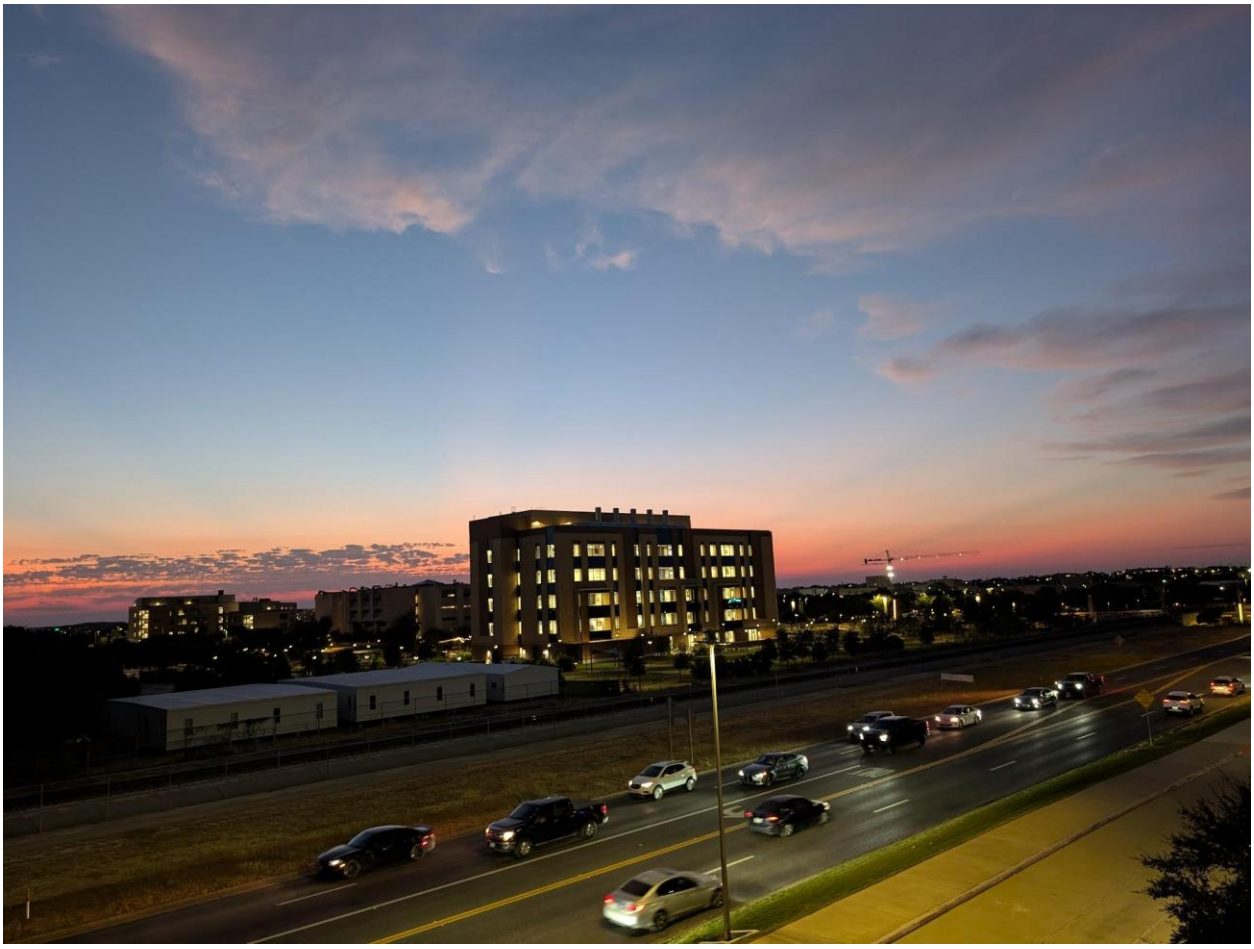
Source: All About Birds

A wonderful bird is the pelican,
His bill can hold more than his belican.
He can hold in his beak
Enough food for a week
But I'm damned if I see how the helican.

Dixon LanierMerritt, 1910

When the Master Naturalists Come to Town

Breaking Down A Citizen Science Anomaly!

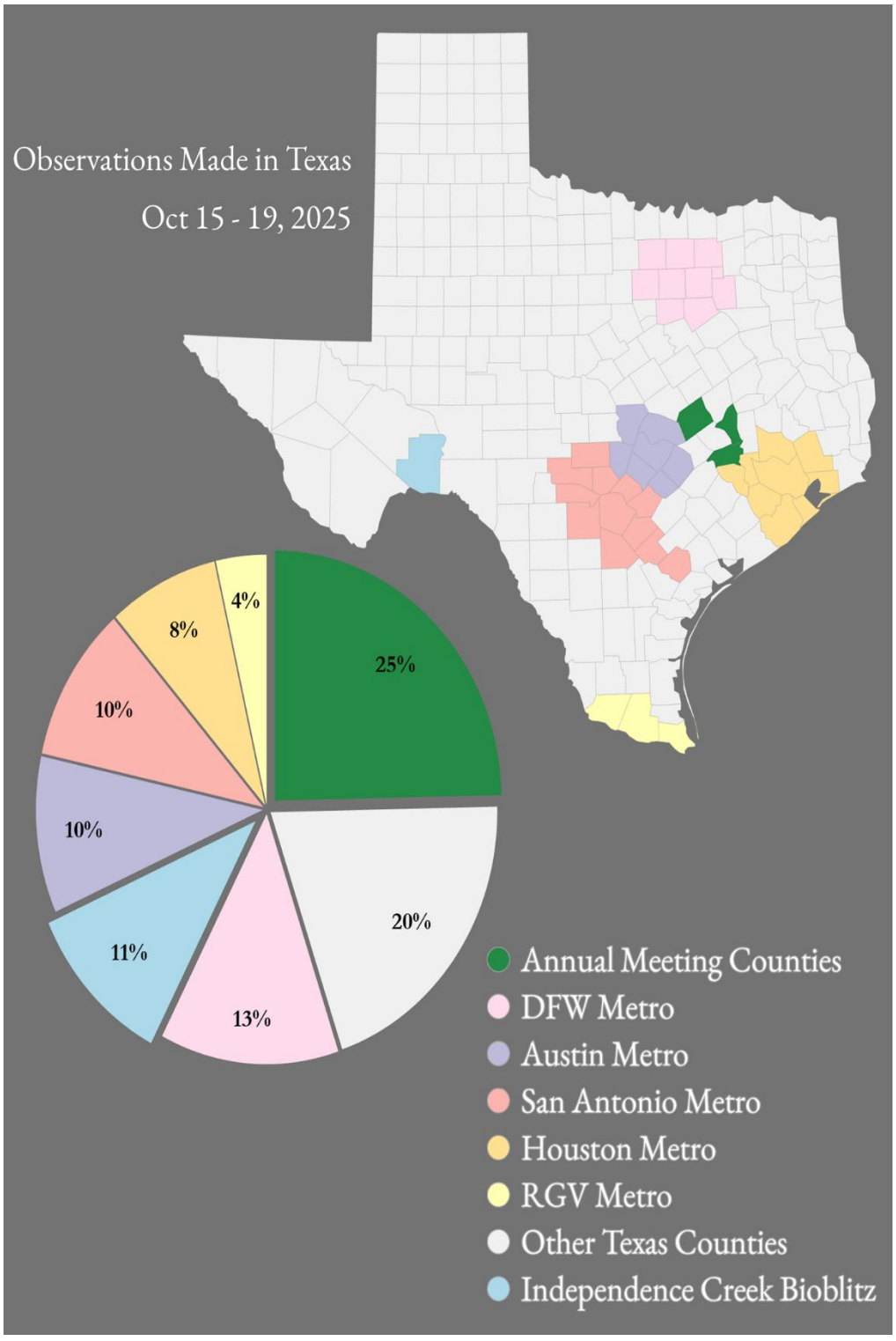


This year's Texas Master Naturalist Annual Meeting in College Station was another wonderful opportunity to explore parks and ecological restoration projects, hear from many remarkable individuals, and make new friends while reconnecting with older ones. This is my ninth year with the TMN program, and my fourth in-person Annual Meeting. After I missed 2024's San Marcos meeting (I was traveling abroad) I was thrilled to return this year to an event I love very dearly.

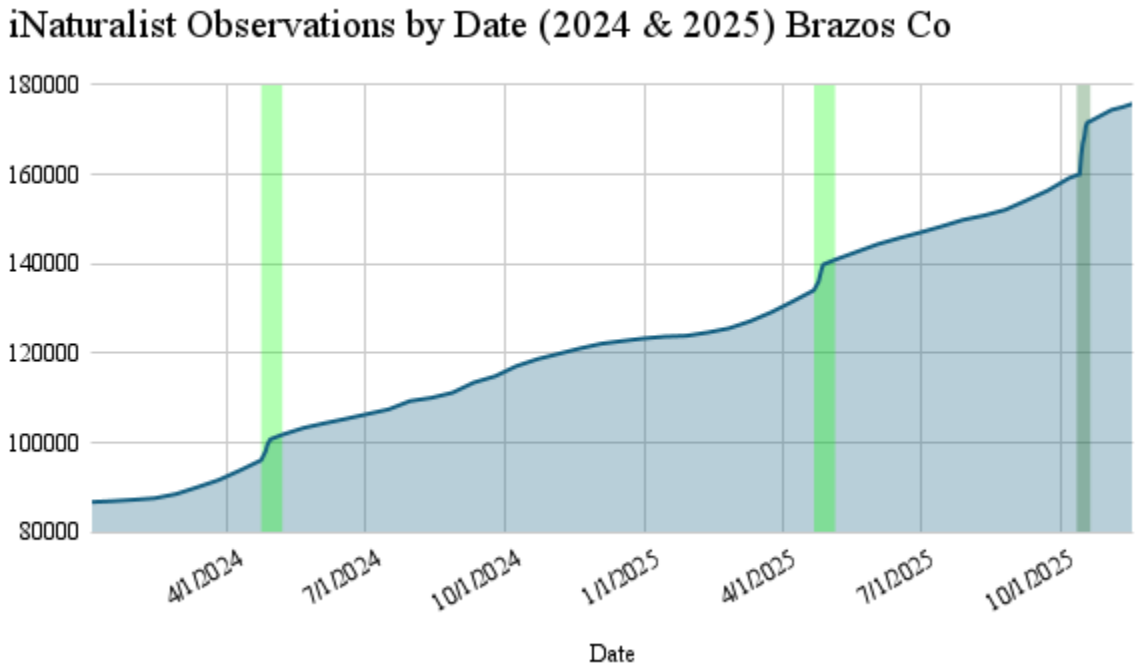
On what was the first day for many of the Texas Master Naturalists arriving in College Station, Wendy Anderson, Texas Nature Trackers Biologist, organized a bioblitz event in partnership with Lick Creek Park. The park's Post Oak Savannah and Bottomland Forest ecosystems provide the opportunity to see a mix of species inhabiting the College Station region. TMNs made their way around the trails of the 500+ acre municipal park, collecting over 4,000 observations in the process. Data analyzed by Texas Master Naturalist Bruce Neville showed that roughly 130 new species were added to the Park's species count on the day of the bioblitz!

Another tradition that has taken root at the Annual Meetings is the after-sunset blacklighting held each evening of the conference. Some of our "Night Naturalist" enthusiasts like Gulf Coast Chapter's own Rich Sommer (rich451) and iNaturalist super-user Sam Kieschnick (sambiology) have made sure to have blacklight stations set up and ready for the dozens of TMNs who arrive after dinner to begin spotting and identifying insects. iNaturalist has become one of the most valuable modern tools for many of us, and we upload our observations both to learn and to contribute to scientific interests. With ever-improving smartphone cameras and the availability of things like macro lens attachments, it's getting easier to upload photos of insects that would have looked grainy and unidentifiable only a few years earlier.

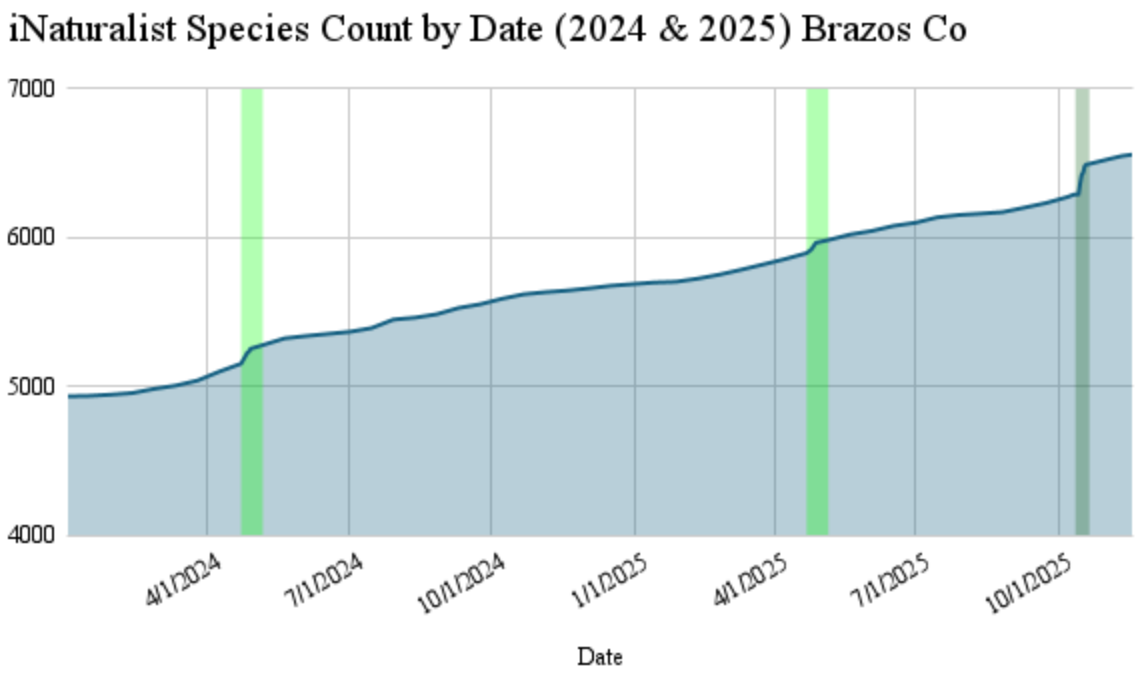
Events like these, combined with field trips to restoration sites including Cedar Hill Nature Preserve in Milam County and the Elder Prairie in Washington County, produce a noteworthy surge in iNaturalist data. What makes it noteworthy? Well, let's look at all the observations made in Brazos, Milam, and Washington Counties during the TMN Annual Meeting dates and compare it to the rest of Texas and its metros during the same stretch of time. Keep in mind, this is not just Master Naturalists, but any iNaturalist user making observations in Texas. I've added the graphic below to visualize the results.


Observations Made in Texas
Oct 15 - 19, 2025
25%
20%
13%
11%
10%
10%
8%
4%
Annual Meeting Counties
DFW Metro
Austin Metro
San Antonio Metro
Houston Metro
RGV Metro
Other Texas Counties
Independence Creek Bioblitz

With an increased presence of Texas Master Naturalists, we see an entire quarter of observations made in Texas coming from the three counties where our Annual Meeting took place. That is a staggering percentage of observations! There also just so happened to be a multi-day bioblitz taking place during the same dates in isolated Terrell County at The Nature Conservancy's Independence Creek Preserve. After noticing this anomaly I reached out to their top observer (jellyfishmambo) who told me that he and many others participating out there were also Texas Master Naturalists. Congratulations to them too!



You may be wondering what that surge in observations looks like compared to the normal rate of observations made throughout the year....that was my first thought anyway. In the graph above I've plotted all species uploads from January 2024 to present in Brazos County specifically. In the darker shade of green, you can see what I am currently calling the "TMN leap effect" (feel free to suggest other naming ideas) which is the October 15th - 19th observations. The other lighter greens highlight the leaps made during the Annual City Nature Challenge held at the end of April each year. I suppose one could say that hosting the TMN Annual Meeting in Brazos County provided the data supply equivalent of two or more City Nature Challenges in the County!



The diversity of what we observed during our Annual Meeting mattered a lot too. In the graph above you can see what it looks like when observers add almost 200 new species to Brazos County's iNaturalist records. Similarly to the observation totals, the species totals leap in a way that compares to the City Nature Challenges.

There are caveats to consider when looking at iNaturalist data this way, for instance: the identification of uploads can take anywhere from seconds to years when it comes to settling the taxonomy. This can cause the unique species count to fluctuate over time. However, the data typically stabilizes to a place where the species count only has minor changes as the majority get identified. It's also worth pointing out that rural counties will see a larger impact to their observation and species numbers than say the Houston region, but that doesn't make the effect of our Texas Master Naturalists there any less impressive.

Suffice to say I'm very proud of our dedicated TMN members who value citizen science and observation. I'm already excited thinking about our impact on the Waco region next year!

Brian welcomes comments or questions to brian.schrock@txgcmn.org