

THE TEXAS STAR

HILL COUNTRY CHAPTER NEWSLETTER

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T E X A S

Master
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Hill Country Chapter

Chapter Website: <http://www.hillcountrymasternaturalist.org>

JANUARY PROGRAM: LIVING IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

On Monday, January 26th, Peter Bonenberger of Bear Springs Blossom Nature Conservation Group Inc. in Pipe Creek, will give a program entitled "Living in Harmony with Nature". Peter and Marianne Bonenberger own and operate a nature preserve that they have developed in Bandera County which offers conservation education and nature tourism projects.

The Bonenbergers purchased 100 acres of abused land in Bandera and carefully restored the land to a natural condition. They formed a nature conservancy that is open to the public to demonstrate the processes they used to restore the land. The Bonenbergers formed the Bear Springs Blossom Nature Conservation Group, a Texas non-profit organization, as a means to advance their educational efforts. This organization assists people in Bandera County in diversifying income from the land by providing examples of nature tourism on private property. Educational programs are also offered on land management and restoration, water and wildlife management, erosion control, and wind and solar power.

If you are interested, you can find more information on the Bear Springs Blossom Conservation Group at <http://www.keepbanderabeautiful.org/bearspringsblossom>. There is also an interesting website on Bandera at <http://www.keepbanderabeautiful.org>.

This "Living in Harmony with Nature" program will be held at Riverside Nature Center, 150 Francisco Lemos St, in Kerrville, beginning with a social time at 6:30 PM. The meeting and program begin at 7:00 PM. The meeting is free, and the public is invited to attend. We hope that you can join us.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

BY SANDY PEÑA

Happy New Year, everybody! (Bet I'm the umpteenth person to say that). We're barely into January, and already we're off to a running start. The first project activity of the year was the Christmas Bird Count in Kendall County on Jan. 3rd, which Milby Moore and Bobbie Livingston participated in. Bobbie told me recently that they saw almost no sparrows, and that the county has cleared all the roads right up to the fence lines (she calls it the "General Sherman landscape") so that habitat is no longer available to the birds. Bobbie intends to talk with her county commissioner and others about why such practices are a big mistake--you go, girl!

In other Christmas Count news, our own Jane Crone scored a rare bird sighting on the West Kerr County count: a pair of American woodcocks! Her group also found a Louisiana waterthrush (another rare sighting), and saw 54 species in all--the highest number recorded in the four years of this count, according to Bill Lindemann.

Nearly a dozen of our MNs turned out for our first AT of the year on Jan. 10th. Amy Sugeno, the manager at the Old Tunnel Wildlife Management Area, led a Tree Bark ID Workshop. We scrutinized over 15 trees as well as some bushes and other flora. One unusual tidbit we learned was that the Escarpment Black Cherry was used by native peoples as a cough suppressant and for labor pains (not sure if it was to relieve the pains, or induce them!).



Photo by Raul Pena

Master Naturalists learn to identify native trees and shrubs in winter by bark and growth habit

One other project I want to mention is the year-long Texas Hummingbird Roundup Backyard Survey (our project ID is CC-02-A). I put my feeder out on Jan. 1st, even though I've never seen them around before mid-March. No sightings yet, but Priscilla Stanley tells me they have hummers at their place (probably over-wintering). I hope many of you will participate in this fun and easy project that provides excellent tracking data to TPWD. If you didn't get one of the survey sheets, just call or email John Quinby, our project chairman, for help.

Whatever your choice of volunteer activities this year, I hope you have a great time while doing something truly worthwhile. And please consider sharing some of your experiences with the rest of us by writing them up and sending them to Priscilla for the newsletter. With 50 of us out there doing good deeds, there's got to be some great stories to tell!

CALENDAR

"APPROVED AT" INDICATES THAT AN EVENT HAS BEEN APPROVED AS ADVANCED TRAINING FOR OUR CHAPTER.

January 26: Texas Master Naturalist - Hill Country Chapter, "Living in Harmony with Nature" at **6:30 PM** at Riverside Nature Center, 150 Francisco Lemos St, Kerrville (see article above).

February 27 - 28: "Managing to Make a Living: The Texas Hill Country" at The Fifth Annual Spring South Texas Farm & Range Forum at Honey Creek State Natural Area & Bulverde, Topics will include: Watershed Management, Brush Management, Deer Management, High-fencing, Exotics, Habitat Fragmentation, Predators and Non-game Species, Wildlife Appreciation, Nature Tourism, Endangered Species & Birding in the Hill Country, Wildlife Valuation & Landowner Liability Update. For more information, contact Susan Hughes at 210-822-4503 or susan@wordwright.com
Cost: \$85

APPROVED AT

For **Cibolo Nature Center** events, contact Cibolo at **(830) 249-4616** or by e-mail at nature@cibolo.org.
Class sizes are limited, so it is important to pre-register. Fees apply to some events.

January 22 – 23: Trail Building Theory Classes by the Trail Doctors: Ryan Spates & Susan Stormer, Ph.D.
7:00 – 9:00 PM at Cibolo Nature Center, Boerne Cost: Free **APPROVED AT**

January 24: Trail Building at Cibolo Nature Center from **9:00 AM – 2:00 PM** (Jan 23 class is required).
Volunteer project.

February 14: Deer Management [*This excellent class has been re-scheduled to **March 6**. See below*]

February 21: How to Attract Nesting & Migrant Birds by Dick Park at Cibolo Nature Center from **8:30 AM to 11 AM** (carpool to Old Daley Ranch at 8:30 AM). This class is **NOT** considered AT.

February 28: Cedar Management Workshop by Mark Peterson, Rufus Stephens, Lee Knox & Darwin Ressel at Cibolo Nature Center from **8:30 AM to 1 PM** (carpool to Dietz-Ressel Ranch at 8:30 AM). See 3 demonstration areas managed for the benefit of range improvement, forest ecology and wildlife conservation. Bring your lunch, drink, folding chair and sturdy walking shoes. **APPROVED AT**

March 6: Deer Management by Rufus Stephens, TPWD Wildlife Biologist at Cibolo Nature Center from **9 AM to noon** Includes choosing management goals, conducting a deer census, harvest strategies & more **APPROVED AT**

OUR CHAPTER CERTIFICATION STATUS

Since our November newsletter, five more members have achieved certification as Master Naturalists. Congratulations go to **Kathryn Harrison, Holly Houston, Gwynn Jackson, John Rogers, and Kim Whitaker.**

At the end of our first year of Chapter meetings, 24 of the 28 members of the Class of 2002 have achieved certification. Thus, **86% of our first Class are now certified Master Naturalists.** As of January 1, 2004, the Class of 2002 begins working toward 40 hours of volunteer service to either maintain or attain certification in 2004. For the Class of 2002, volunteer hours from 2003 do *not* carry over toward certification for 2004, however these hours do count toward cumulative awards.

The Class of 2003 can carry over their 2003 hours and continue to accumulate hours until December 31, 2004 toward their 40 volunteer hours requirement for certification. New Master Naturalists are allowed fifteen months to achieve their initial certification.

For the information of our prospective members, a Master Naturalist achieves certification by completing the 40 hours of required training, a minimum of 40 hours of approved volunteer service, and the minimum of 8 hours of approved Advanced Training within one year.

VOLUNTEER PROJECT OF THE MONTH:

Our Chapter has many ongoing, approved Volunteer Projects in each of the four counties that we serve (Bandera, Gillespie, Kendall and Kerr). We are eager to showcase the contributions made by Master Naturalists to the local communities through each of these projects. Thus, your editor is encouraging each of you to share the highlights of your volunteer work. This is your opportunity to potentially recruit additional members to your favorite project! Please send your contributions to Priscilla Stanley at jpbstan@ktc.com.

THE YELLOW GARDEN ARGIOPE (*Argiope aurantia*)

This large, colorful spider is one of the most noticed spiders in Texas, especially since it is commonly found around homes. While many spiders rest in a retreat area during the day, the Yellow Garden Argiope tends to be quite prominent, hanging upside down in the center of its web waiting for prey on a reinforced area commonly referred to as the "zipper".

This spider is an "orbweaver" constructing a snare for its prey that is commonly known as a spider web. As befits a large spider, this orbweaver spins a VERY large web (2 to 4 feet in diameter). The spider first strings the upper foundation line between two objects and then adds foundation lines that form the outer framework of the web. Radii connect the center of the web (known as the "hub") with the foundation lines. Sticky (viscid) silk is then spun across the radii in spirals. The Yellow Garden Argiope typically makes a stabilimentum, which is the thickened region near the hub that has a vertical zigzag pattern (*see the photos below*). There have been several theories about this rather unique structure. A recent study proposes that the stabilimentum may reflect the ultraviolet frequency of flowers thus acting to attract insect prey.

A female Yellow Garden Argiope has a body size of 0.7 to 1.3 inches in length. Including legs, the female may be about three inches in diameter. The male is significantly smaller (about one-third the female's size), and shorter lived. This Argiope can kill prey at least twice it's body length, and feeds on grasshoppers, honeybees, lepidopterans (butterflies) and other insects.



Photo by Priscilla Stanley
Dorsal view (the spider's back)



Photo by Priscilla Stanley
Ventral view (the spider's underside)

In August or later, one or more males stay on the edge of a female's web, waiting to mate. The eggsacs, containing 400 to 1,000 or more eggs are made of multi-layers of silk that darken to a brownish color. Initially the eggsac is on the edge of the web, but the female continues to wrap it in silk and secure the eggsac to a solid surface with a strong, short, thick single stem of many strands of silk.



Photo by Jim Stanley

Yellow Garden Argiope with her eggsac freshly secured to the breezeway ceiling on October 8, 2003.

This particular female secured three different eggsacs in our breezeway over a several week period. The two eggsacs secured to stonewalls about two feet above the ground disappeared, however, the eggsac shown above continues to hang as she left it, despite periodic examination by other spiders. It is with mixed emotions that I anticipate the hatching of 1,000 garden spiders above our back door.

I have written this much about the Yellow Garden Argiope because I think it represents a unique Master Naturalist teaching opportunity. This common, highly-visible spider has several very interesting behaviors that the public might enjoy watching, if they understood enough about this spider not to be intimidated by it. In the course of our volunteering, Master Naturalists are likely to be asked about this spider, or asked to identify "the giant spider on that plant". I am especially proud that last summer Riverside Nature Center was able to keep a large female Yellow Garden Argiope in the butterfly garden for a over a month to show the school children, to the best of my knowledge, without either well-meaning volunteers or visitors causing its premature demise.

Acknowledgement: The technical data in this article were taken from *A Field Guide to Spiders & Scorpions of Texas* by J. J. Jackman in the Texas Monthly Fieldguide Series, pp. 70-71, 75-76. I highly recommend this book as an interesting and understandable reference. Can you imagine being a Master Naturalist in a state that did not have a 200 page book devoted to its spiders and scorpions? The nature observations and color commentary in this article were made possible by the half-dozen Yellow Garden Argiope who share our gardens with us.



Texas Star
Lindheimeria texana