



INDIAN TRAIL MARKER

Nov./Dec. 2014

News, events & calendar of the Indian Trail Chapter, Texas Master Naturalists...Serving Ellis and Navarro Counties

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From the Desk of the **PRESIDENT**

Eileen Berger, President ITMN

Wow! 2014 is almost over. The next newsletter will have a message from the new president, and I will take a back seat for a while. We still have a November meeting and a holiday gathering at Sharon Lane's ranch before the end of the year.

Indian Trail chapter has accomplished many of the goals that we had set for ourselves, including our third place showing in the project fair at the State Meeting.

Thanks to all who contributed to the effort. Our chapter is strong in its leadership and stewardship of the natural resources in Ellis and Navarro counties. We are adding more members every year, and on our way to being one of the best in Texas.

INSIDE *this issue*

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*Merry Christmas
and a
Happy New Year*

Calendar of Events, Projects & Meetings

NOVEMBER

- 1 BRIT First Saturday; Reading Literacy 10-1:00 p.m.; Festive by Nature and Holiday Artisan Market 10-1:00 p.m.
- 15 Kachina Prairie Workday 8:30 a.m., Ennis
- 15 Pollinator Pow-Pow, 8:00-5:00 p.m., Mansfield ISD Center for Performing Arts, 1110 W. Debbie Lane, Mansfield, TX
- 17 ITMN Chapter Meeting 6-9:00 p.m.; Recycling and Methane Gas Capture by Greta Calvery, Waste Management Spokesperson; First United Methodist Church, Waxahachie, TX
- 20 Kachina Prairie Symposium, 6:00 p.m., Ennis Library; Prairie Conservation by Daniel Dietz, Stewardship Director, Texas Land Conservancy
- 22 Kachina Prairie Workday, 8:30 a.m., Ennis
- 22 Dogwood Canyon Workday, 9:00 a.m., Cedar Hill

DECEMBER

- ITMN Christmas Party TBA

JANUARY

- 26 ITMN Chapter Meeting 6-9:00 p.m.; Program TBA



© Jim West

Meeting 4th Monday of each month at 6 p.m. program at 7 p.m. at the First United Methodist Church, Waxahachie

PROJECT VIEWS



Had a beautiful day at Mockingbird. Don Mitchell and I leveled the Charlie step. Caroline and Charlie watered the Butterfly Garden. There is just not a lot to do right now. We also planted Bur oak acorns around the pond but it is anyone's guess if they will grow. Caroline and Charlie also collected a couple of plant cuttings to ID. Carolyn also got some ants to send off for ID.

The Night Hike at Mockingbird was well attended.



PROJECT VIEWS

We had another fun and productive day at Mockingbird on the 30th. We installed the new boot scrapers. We decided to paint them Dayglo orange in hopes that people would see and use them instead of the benches. We weeded and watered the Garden . It is still looking very pretty. Sara did a great job on it this year, I hope she is back soon. We also repaired the info sheets in the old bird blind which had a small amount of vandalism. We also saw several nice stands of Cochineal in our prickly pear.



PROJECT VIEWS



Two Eagle Scout projects were done at Mockingbird this month. One was a new Kiosk near the Mockingbird street entry. The other project was a new bird blind at the dry pond. We had several work days in which we planted wild flower seeds around the pond. The city gave us some new benches, Paul and Charlie made us some more boot scrapers which we plan on installing tomorrow.

Work has begun on the new housing addition across ONWARD from the parking lot. We have been told that the developers are very happy to have the Park as a selling point. There will be major changes as time goes by because of the development. On another note the city may get a branch of the sewer line across the park for future restrooms

Billy King, Manager of Parks, is seriously looking into running a water line to fill and maintain the pond.



PROJECT VIEWS



A Birding Fundamentals class was held at Dogwood Canyon Nature Center.



Picnic *in the* Park

Future project, Bullard Heights Neighborhood Park, was the location of a Friday evening picnic and walkabout to introduce members to the park.



ROYAL FLUSH

Or, how to catch and tag that Monarch of butterflies, the Monarch, with the Rio Brazos MN chapter whereby, 108 Monarchs were caught and tagged, a number of Queens and Fritillaries were traumatized and a good time was had by *(almost)* all.

By Jim West

The Rio Brazos TMN chapter had asked for a little assistance with their third annual Monarch tagging event at the Acton Nature Center October 10th and 11th. Debbie Pierce and I were able to go so, being retired, I thought it best for me to go on Friday as I have no job to take off from. Debbie went Saturday.

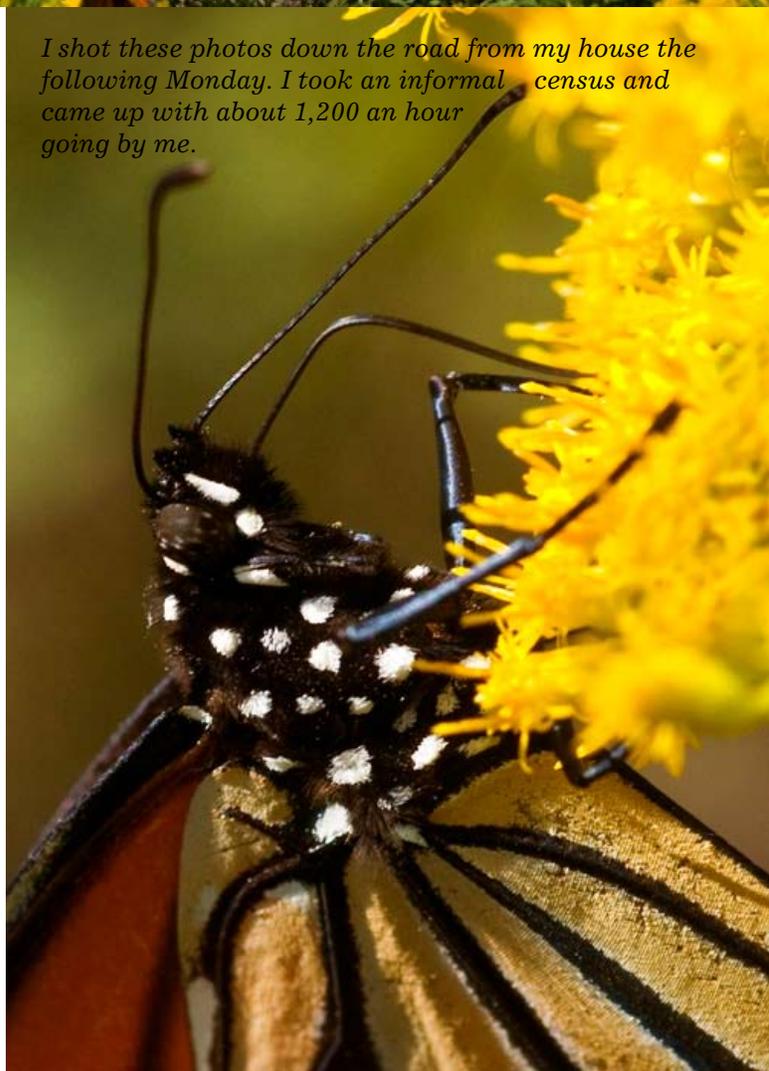
Well, here's how it went for me. They assigned me an enthusiastic teenager whom I could send charging through the briars, cacti, snakes and chiggers with a net to rouse and catch them. After a couple of failed attempts, I explained to him to; A. Wait until they land. B. Make sure that your shadow doesn't reach them before you do and, C. That is a net in your hand, not a sword, their capture rate goes way up.

Once in the net, you grab their wings between your thumb and forefinger, like a pinch of Copenhagen, put this little adhesive sticker on their hind wing and, pinch it lightly. The heat from your fingers will set the adhesive in a few seconds and then just let them go.

The event was deemed a success. It was indeed educational and fun. Maybe our chapter should take a shot at this say, next October 16-17.

PS; got to use the handy-dandy knife from my field kit to get those little-bitty stickers off the backing.

I shot these photos down the road from my house the following Monday. I took an informal census and came up with about 1,200 an hour going by me.



Bluebonnet Musings in September

by Christine Cook

I know what you're thinking: it's the fall season, so what is it with bluebonnets? Yes, it's Texas, yes, they're beautiful, yes, we're proud of them, but now it's goldenrod time, so move on. Well, I did move on. I retired after 24 years of teaching (attempting to?) 11-12 year olds. The second week after school was over, I used to sit on my front porch and shell bluebonnet seeds for my sanity; I still will for a while, and I still will think about "my kids." I live on your all-American small-town suburban street with the prerequisite two oak trees on each side of the straight front walk. All my neighbors have beautifully manicured front lawns and short blobby foundation plantings. I, on the other hand, have no lawn because it was all killed by poisons. So I planned this huge garden (for one person), planted for wildlife and native plants, and never looked back. I threw out some bluebonnet seeds, walked them in good, and have had an expanding glory of them every spring since then.

Let me share with you a few things I have noticed about bluebonnet seeds. They live inside "beanpods", which turn brown (in May) when the seeds are ripe. They twist to open, possibly "springing" the seeds a foot or more from the plant (which is why my patch gets bigger every year). They can be picked when brown, but before opening, they should be put in a brown bag, and they will do their sproinging there. I like to shell them and let my mind wander. Whichever method you use, dead-looking bluebonnet plants waiting to dehisce (*scientific word for "splitting open"*)

are not your acceptable garden beauty. My waiting until June to pull them up is a bit touchy, but nobody has turned me in to the homeowner police yet.

The pods themselves are

interesting. They can be baby-bottom smooth or roughly hairy, and pale tan to almost black. Like my students, they can be short, average in length, or long/tall; some feel flat, others feel fat. I find myself trying to guess how many seeds are inside, or if they

feel "done" enough to germinate. Sometimes, when I break off the tip and de-string one side, the pod twists open in my hand, sending seeds around me on the porch floor. I have to pick them up; as a teacher, how could I leave out some of my children? It's not compulsive, it's just right.

Let's talk bluebonnet seeds. Have you ever fixed a pot of dried beans? Or shoved your hand into a barrel of dried pintos in a store and let them be sieved through your fingers? The coolness and smoothness of that sensation is so pleasurable: bluebonnet seeds are like that in miniature, and it is tempting to handle them. I like to let them flow from hand to hand while I know that my mind is still wondering about my school year, about my students' progress, about what each is doing now without me.

Just like "my kids", bluebonnet seeds come in different sizes, colors, and shapes. There is a big white one that feels like a wet gritty stone. A middle-sized one that is University of Texas orange (sorry, no maroon A&M). Several different shades of gray, some mixed with black. They come in solids, heathery tones, and spotted



or brindled like a Texas dawg. Sometimes I sort them into little piles by color on the arm of my Adirondack chair. And then I wonder why grouping seems to be so important, when each one of my kids is such an individual and needs to be honored as such. Most of the bluebonnet seeds are somewhat square-ish, with rounded-off corners and fat middles. I like them, but I am always surprised by and have an affinity for the little round pebbly ones that come rolling out of a pod that seems too small to be viable, like that little sixth-grader who looks like a fourth-grader but has what it takes to be successful. Best of all, sometimes when I open a seed pod and see the seeds all lined up inside still attached to the pod, they make me smile, because I see them as beautiful babies in an Anne Geddes photograph.

It takes me about two weeks of shelling seeds into a bowl and sweating (hey, it's June in Texas) to be done with it all, to pull up the rest of the plants and throw them in a box. I guess by then—no, I know by then—school is over and I have mentally moved on to

continued

Bluebonnets continued

the demands of summer. I usually have a flour sack-sized pile of seeds. Time to share some of them, like my kids, and to broadcast the rest in old and new spots in the yard. I'll know by late November where they have taken root because I check on them. So here I am back to thinking about bluebonnet seeds (and school) in September. My kids are planted in new classes, in new

ground. If you want bluebonnets in your yard next spring, throw out your seeds now so they have time to take root and thrive with coming rains. Nick them, sandpaper them, or soak them if you like, and press them close to the soil. Visit them often, encourage them verbally, tell those baby rosettes how beautiful they are, and look forward to their Texas glory in the spring.

Walking Kachina Prairie

by Christine Cook

Last night when I made out a sketchy to-do list for today, my plan was an early morning walk around Kachina Prairie after a week of being out of town. Like spring, autumn is a dynamic, culminating time in nature, and while I didn't really expect to see new things blooming, I was eager to look for changes in color or seed formation, especially because we had had rain since my

last visit. Good intentions did not win, however, but I finally parked at the prairie entry around 4 PM and did my silly mental coin flip to decide to take the upper path to the right or the lower path to the left. Left won.

Unlike my last trek with a consistent breeze and rustling, swishing grasses, today in the late afternoon all was still and quiet-- until I was quiet enough to listen and knew that I was not alone. I saw few birds but

could hear birdsong in many directions. Grasshoppers snapped away sharply as I neared; at this late season they are two to three inches long, hefty, and green and

brown. Honeybees hummed all over the white asters, which are now in full bloom. Bumblebees added their buzz in the goldenrod apatches and picked up pollen in the Maximillian daisies, many of which towered over my head. Tall trees on the edges of the prairie—hackberries, oaks, cedar elms, a pecan or two—are still summer green, but the sumac “forests” are now a mixed green and scarlet. Hanging from a mesquite was a spider egg sac, an amazingly strong fabric-like brownish pouch. I found a yaupon with red berries and several vines of red-berried snailseed. The roughleaf dogwood has its unusual white berries on red stems.

Little bluestem grass is everywhere, coppery in the sunshine, with Indian grass and big bluestem (turkeyfoot) vying with my short height. Looking across the prairie from its high point, I recalled what Rich Jaynes, environmental scientist and prairie biologist, said at our last Master Naturalist meeting, that he had a great reverence for grasses. Today that emotion resonated within me as I felt the “agelessness” of even our small bit of remaining virgin prairie.

Unexpectedly I sensed a movement near me, but it was silent, so not a grasshopper.

Looking around carefully, I finally

spied a big green mantis hanging head down on one of the boneset flowers next to the path. We looked at each other unblinkingly. I guess she, too, has a reverence for grasses; after all, she is a “praying” mantis!





Photos © Jim West

Assassins Among Us!

by Travis N. Edwards

A couple of years ago I had my normal yard work routine interrupted by an encounter with the natural world. I was trimming the hedges in my front yard when I noticed what I thought was a stink bug. As a kid, I would kill stink bugs all the time, and of course they would stink. This bug was a different kind of bug. On its back it had what I initially thought was body armor. It looked like a gear had been impaled on its back. I observed this particular bug near some flowers that were blooming on the hedges. I assumed this particular bug was feasting on the nectar that the flowers provided. I continued trimming the hedges, only to put down my tools and go inside to find my field guide to insects. I had spotted another one of the gray, armor-bearing bugs, and this one was not dining on flower nectar.

The second bug I found was feasting on a honeybee it had pierced on the side. I had never known stink bugs to eat other bugs so I immediately had to find out what type of insect I had discovered. Besides that, it was time for a break from the ever present Texas heat. This particular insect predator is known as a wheel bug (*Arilus christatus*), and it is a member of the Assassin

Bug Family. Wheel bugs, like stink bugs, are classified in the order Hemiptera. This particular assassin bug variety is the largest in North America and can grow to a length of one to 1 ½ inches. They are normally a dark gray or dark brown and blend in well with their surroundings. There are several varieties of assassin bugs in North America, but wheel bugs are easy to identify since they are the only known bug with a crest on their back. As their name implies, assassin bugs are in the business of killing and eating other bugs. And on this particular day, with honeybees in abundance, business was good.

But business is almost always good for wheel bugs. The list of garden pests they consume is long and includes such varieties as Mexican bean beetles, cucumber beetles, fall webworms, grasshoppers, cabbage worms, Japanese beetles, tomato hornworms, ladybugs, honeybees, etc. When insect prey becomes scarce they have been known to kill and eat their own kind. A meal is a meal in the wheel bug world.

Wheel bugs have five developmental stages, known as instars. The nymphs are aggressive at killing and eating other insects, such as aphids and caterpillars. The adults emerge in about mid-summer and die in the

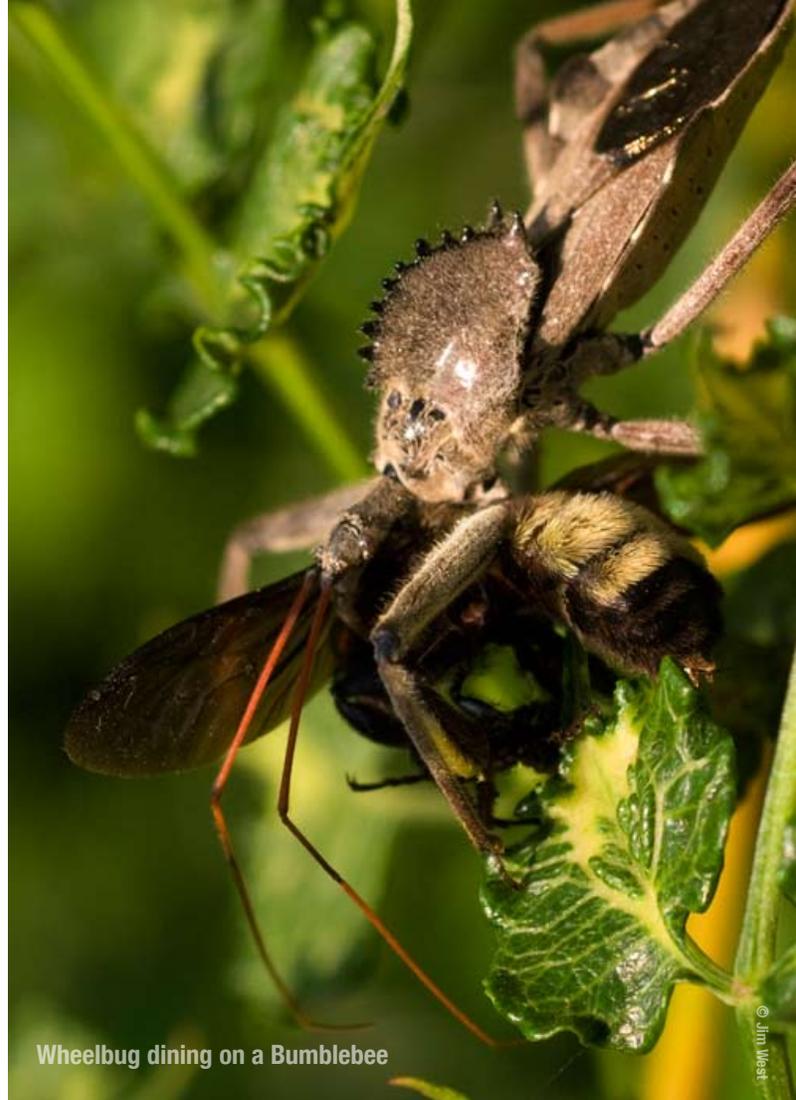
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Assassins continued

winter. The female will lay a collection of eggs, which look like brown bottles, with white stoppers. There can be between 40-200 eggs placed in a hexagonal arrangement. They may also be covered with a gummy paste that protects during the winter. These eggs will hatch in the spring and become the next generation of voracious insect hunters.

I was glad to have my workday interrupted by the wheel bugs. I was also glad that I did not touch them. It is reported that their “bite,” or being pierced by their beak, is 10 times worse than being stung by a bee. Both adults and nymphs use their beaks to pierce insects and they have been described as being similar to a “single-fanged spider.” The wheel bug attacks its victim by holding it down with its long, front legs. It then uses its beak to inject the victim with a toxin that kills it in 15-30 seconds. After that, it dines on the victim by sucking out the liquefied remains.

Wheel bugs look menacing, but they’re not, unless you try to pick one up. Truth be told, I was somewhat delighted to have discovered them in my yard. However, it seems that the future of the next generation of wheel bugs is precariously dependent on the annual hatching of its eggs in the spring. It concerns me that the overuse of pesticides in our yards and gardens may short circuit their life cycle. Destructive insects may eventually become resistant pesticides, but can they become resistant to the seemingly insatiable appetite of the wheel bug? Well, there’s only one way to find out,



Wheelbug dining on a Bumblebee

and I plan on looking for them as they hunt for their next meal in my yard.



Here’s our entry in the Mockingbird Nature Park Scarecrow contest, Charlie’s Frankenshovel.

Congratulations! We won third place at the State Meeting for our Mockingbird Nature Park Exemplary Project Display. The third place award came with a check for \$400 to use for Mockingbird Nature Park or for any other project the Chapter chooses.

Thank you to everyone who helped with the Exemplary Project.



NATURAL reads

Book Review by Charlie Grindstaff

Range Plants of North Central Texas, A Land User's Guide to Their Identification, Value and Management

By Ricky J. Linex

ISBN: 978-1-4951-2165-4

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There is a lot to love about Ricky Linex's new book *Range Plants of North Central Texas, A Land User's Guide to Their Identification, Value and Management*. A whole page (8 1/2" x 11") is devoted to each of 324 plants that are found in North Central Texas which includes the Rolling Plains, Cross Timbers, Blackland Prairie and Post Oak Savannah regions.

Each page includes at least three pictures, a description for identification of the plant, the value of the plant for livestock and wildlife, and management notes for the plant. I especially love the multiple pictures of each plant. Typical field guides show a picture of the mature plant in bloom, but I am not always looking at mature plants in their full glory when I am in the field. *Range Plants of North Central Texas* has many pictures of details, such as flowers, seeds, fruit, leaves and the whole plant. I find this very helpful when identifying a plant.

I also love that *Range Plants of North Central Texas* includes forbs (herbaceous flowering plants that are not grasses), grasses and woody plants all in one book. This book contains pictures and information on 160 forbs, 59 grasses and 105 woody plants. I must admit I lost count a few times before arriving at those numbers simply because I became caught up in the pictures and moments of recognition, "oh, I have seen that plant", and found myself reading instead of counting.

The plants in this book are organized alphabetically by family, genus, and species which makes it easy to compare similar plants. Each plant is identified as native or introduced; annual, biennial or perennial; and by its growth season, warm or cool. The regions of Texas where it grows are listed. The book contains an index by common name and another by scientific name, as well as an illustrated glossary. This book is not full of botanical jargon but was written with the layman in mind.

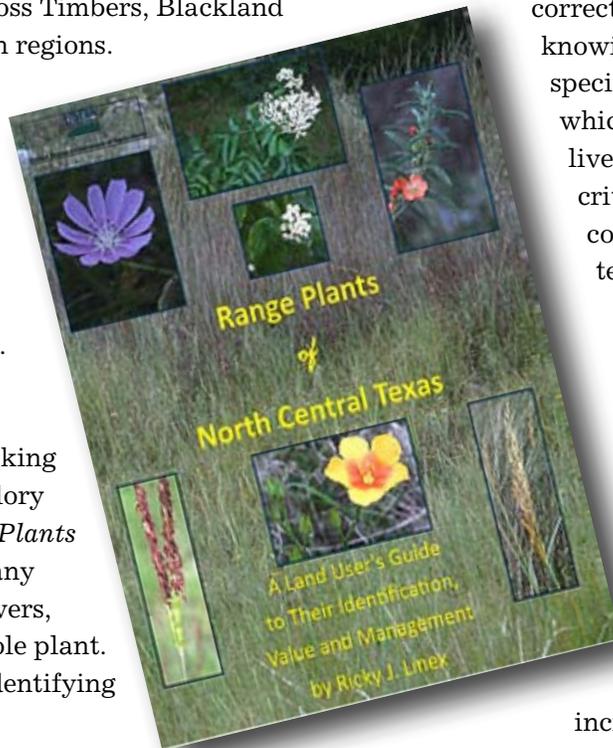
Range Plants of North Central Texas was written for ranchers, wildlife managers, naturalists and anyone interested in land stewardship. As Mr. Linex says in the introduction to the book, "The common denominators for any land user are the plants that grow there. Your success as a land user depends upon correctly identifying the plant and knowing the value of the plant to the species you manage." He tells not only which plants provide forage for livestock, but also, if and how other critters use those plants, be it for food, cover or nesting materials. He also tells what soil type the plant prefers.

While this book may be too large to carry into the field, I feel it will become the "go-to" book for land stewards who want to know more than just the names of plants. I am sure they will appreciate the information on the value of these plants to livestock and wildlife since it is not readily available in most field guides.

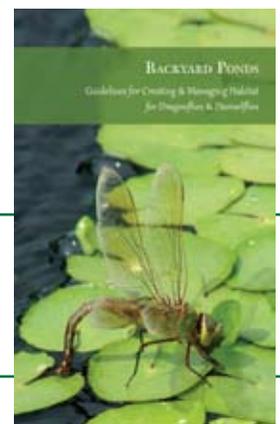
I find this book to be incredibly useful and user-friendly.

Range Plants of North Central Texas by Ricky Linex is published by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and may be purchased at their Waxahachie office. Cost is \$20.

Ricky Linex is a wildlife biologist with the NRCS in Weatherford who has spent 30 years studying plants. He is the editor of the Reverchon Naturalist newsletter.



For anyone interested in creating and/or maintaining a dragonfly habitat, I have a copy of this brochure (*It's a large file*) for anybody who would like one. Just email me jrwest901@gmail.com – JW



MASTER NATURALIST PROGRAM MISSION:

To develop a corps of well-informed volunteers to provide education, outreach and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities.

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The mission of this newsletter is to inform, educate and entertain Indian Trail Master Naturalists and their circle of friends.
