# INDIAN TRAIL MARKER

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

Spring 2024

# From the desk of the President

Trailblazers,

The first notes of spring are being played all around us, with bluebonnets showing themselves along highways and Mexican plum blossoms covering trees almost overnight! Spring is an especially fun time to volunteer in nature, and there are many opportunities coming up. Please take a look at our online Members' Calendar for project work days and events. You can also find lots of information and fun discussions among members on Discord, where everyone is invited to share their experiences, nature photos, and humor!

To highlight just a few things from this month, in April we have our monthly Wildflower Walk as well as Moth Night at Mockingbird Nature Park; Kachina Prairie's events during the Ennis Bluebonnet Festival; and Ellis County Rural Heritage Farm's Wildflower Adventure.

Earlier this month, we witnessed the Solar Eclipse at our events at Kachina Prairie and Midlothian Community Park. At the end of April, we will hear from the one and only Amy Martin, author of "Wild DFW," who is coming to speak at our chapter meeting. And don't forget about our regularly scheduled work days at Kachina Prairie, Ladd, and Mockingbird, plus our Nature Nerds Book Club and Plant Family Study Group.

Woven within these events are many advanced training opportunities to learn even more about nature. Likewise in May, we have many of these recurring events plus a fun night hike at Mockingbird. It's never boring in the Indian Trail chapter!

Thank you for everything you do to make our chapter hum and to further the TMN mission of providing education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within our communities. I am inspired and humbled by the deep well of knowledge this chapter has and its willingness to share it! Please do not hesitate to reach out if there's anything I can do to support your work. See you soon!

Indian Trail Master Naturalist Newsletter
Team indiantrailnews@protonmail.com

*Melanie Gibson, Chair* *Ann Spencer, Editor*
*Robbie Robbins, Production Designer* *Tabby Brobston, Editor*

## INDIAN TRAIL CHAPTER MASTER NATURALIST BOARD

Chapter 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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# With apologies to DoorDash, you weren't the first.

**THIS BEGAN WHEN I CAME UPON A FEMALE DOWNY WOODPECKER** digging a nest hole. A few days later, a pair of Carolina Chickadees had expropriated it and begun to set up housekeeping. In her defense, her mate never came around to back her up even though I often saw him in the area.

After three days where I didn't see any activity, I saw the male Chickadee, working like a borrowed mule trying to keep the female fed. My presence didn't seem to bother them so I stayed around a while to watch the show. No matter which direction he went in to look for food, he always came back to the same willow branch, made his way to the end of it to where he felt safe and, very quickly delivered the package.

I've always been of the opinion that Chickadees were these cute, gentle little birds that you'd see around your feeder but, when it comes to their home, they're pretty tough customers.

# MR. WEST'S NEIGHBORHOOD

**Common, you say?** Well, I'm just the messenger here but, in my experience, a lot of creatures whose names begin with common, aren't.

Case in point is this guy, a Common Yellowthroat. One of my favorite birds, when I can find one. They prefer thick undergrowth, usually near water, which is where I have always seen them, when I do find one. It may be that in their chosen habitat, there are dozens of them hidden in the bush, which would explain the common in their name.

Also, it seems to me that birds that live in areas of thick vegetation don't like to be exposed for long. I found this one in the same spot along the same ditch where I've found them for years, when I see one at all, in the proximity of a couple of Swamp Sparrows down for the season.

So, now that you know where to look for them, hopefully you'll find one. Of course, anyone is welcome to come with me on my rounds or, message me and I'll give you the specific location. *JW*

# More than kisses under the mistletoe

Plant Family Study Group Update

By Tannis Lambert

In December, Sue Frary shared about the Santalaceae, the sandalwood family. This family is a parasitic one. It was interesting and fun to see the sample of mistletoe she brought in! We had a January mounting party and completed 65 mounted plants for Sue to deliver to BRITT. “Way to go!” to our plant collectors!

Robbie Robbins and Tabby Brobston presented carnivorous plants.Texas has four out of the five recognized carnivorous types and Big Thicket National Preserve near Kountze, Texas is the best place to find them.

In March, Madeline Kelley presented on medically significant plants, including poppies and mescaline. At April’s meeting, we learned about the rose family from Eileen Berger. Join us for more plant fun soon!

Plant Family Study Group Upcoming Dates:

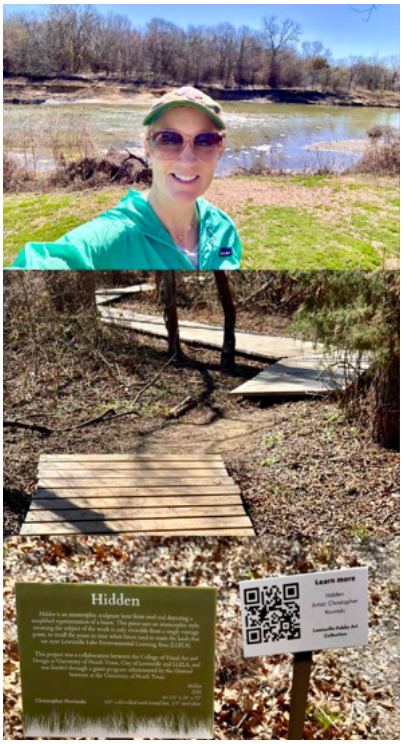
May 16: Sherry Mossbarger - Liliaceae

June 20: TBD

July 18: Sue Frary - Ericaceae

# Hiking the LLELA

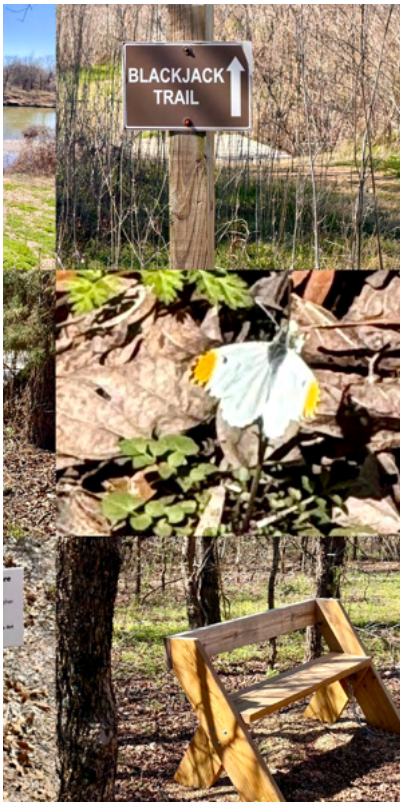
By Erin McKool




After getting my copy of “Wild DFW” signed by author Amy Martin, I was inspired to try to visit some of the places she lists at the back of her book. She refers to these various field trips as “Adventures,” so in the spirit of adventure, I made my way to the Lake Lewisville Environmental Learning Area (or LLELA), a nature area behind the Lake Lewisville dam. The admission was $5 for the day, and I brought my own lunch as there are no places nearby to purchase snacks.

There are several different trails to choose from, and after briefly viewing the Elm Fork of the Trinity, I chose to hike “Blackjack.” It was a beautiful day to be outdoors and I enjoyed the quiet time to myself as there were very few people on the trail. I turned my phone on silent and used it solely as a tool for identifying bird calls (using Merlin) and a few plants and butterflies (via iNaturalist).

It was restorative for me; a nice break from the busyness of Dallas. The trail was beautifully marked and included wooden boardwalks and bridges along with numerous benches for resting along the way. I will definitely plan to return in the spring when I’m sure the woods will be filled with green leaves, plants, and wildflowers. LLELA’s website includes information about each of the trails at https://www.llela.org.



POLLINATORS

Pollinator Week June 17-23

Information can be found at www.pollinator.org/pollinator-week or by contacting Pollinator Partnership at info@pollinator.org.

# PHOTOTIPS

**BIF MADE EASY.**

If you spend any time out in nature with a camera, with any luck, you'll encounter birds in flight. If you haven't had any luck getting sharp photos of them, here are a couple of things to try.

First start with the low hanging fruit. In my experience, Red-tailed hawks are the easiest birds to get close to, most of the time. I attended a presentation on hawks at the

Blackland Raptor Center a while ago, wherein the presenter, after getting one out of it's crate, said that they were the laziest of all of the hawks. According to her, they just sit on a limb or power line, waiting for something to crawl underneath their talons. Lazy or not, that's a pretty good strategy judging by the numbers of them in attendance around here.

A rule that's become a habit of mine is that I make sure that I have one camera (*I usually carry two*) set up just for the occasion of seeing a bird close enough to get a decent photo of it, if and when it flies off. I adjust most of the settings manually beforehand to avoid making those decisions should the opportunity arise.

The white balance is set based on the weather. All cameras have an auto WB setting but it's recommended to set it according what you see. I use 1/2500 of a second as my starting point for the shutter speed and f.8 for the aperture if there's enough light. If it's do or die as to whether I get a shot or not, I'll open the aperture rather than use a slower shutter speed. However, none of this is written in stone. I have gotten good sharp photos with shutter speeds as slow as 1/1000 second but, it's rare. It helps if you have serendipity along for the ride.

Autofocus settings are another matter. Again, most cameras have a number of good options here. Each brand of camera has a different name for their settings so, I won't get too technical here. My go to is the auto focus area when I am expecting the unexpected. The camera will choose the most prominent object in the viewfinder and track it. Next is a 3D setting that allows you set the focus point (*if you have the time*) and the camera will follow the subject if it moves. If you're shooting something that's not likely to move, the 3D setting will trip you up if, say, a butterfly flies through the scene. I leave my focus setting on C (*continuous*), regardless of the focus area setting.

And, that's it for now. Have fun. *JW*

# Another run around the sun

Total Eclipse Musings from Tabby Brobston, Maegan Bacon, and Ann Spencer

Tabby Brobston

Sometimes, I think we take the sun for granted. Ever-present above us, day to day, month to month, illuminating our paths and warming our atmosphere to make the world we're born into a livable one, it's as forgettable as the air we thanklessly breathe. It takes something as monumental as celestial alignment to remind us of its importance.

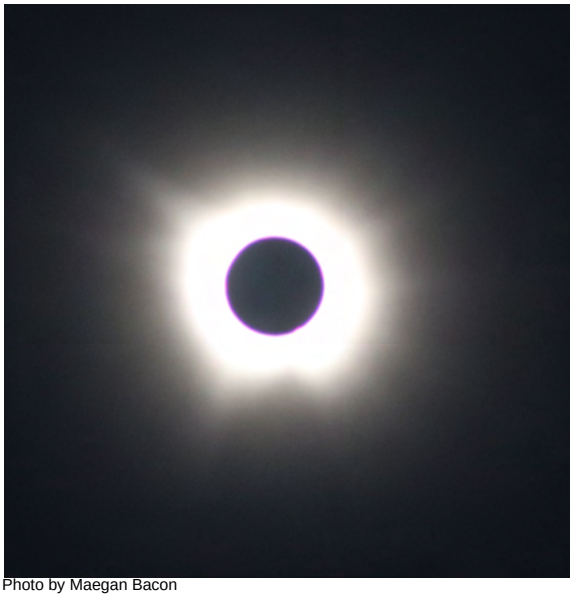


Photo by Maegan Bacon

April 8, 2024 started as any day in Ellis County – a bustling, humid spring day already in the 60s and expected to climb upwards to 85 at its peak. Wispy grey clouds hung in the sky, casting a ripple of worry much darker than the shaded ambience expected of an overcast day. Of all the days spent yearning for clouds, a welcome barrier between people and the blazing Texas summer heat, today the community seemed united in their hopes for clear skies. For the first time in 146 years, a heavenly coordination was due in Texas: a total solar eclipse.

Along with my roommates, I roused myself early to travel south to Ennis, bound for a prairie positioned directly in the path of totality. The Native Prairies Association of Texas event began with a tour of John Wilt's farm led by Taylor Garrison of Texas Parks and Wildlife. The eyes of about two dozen attendees were drawn away from the silvered skies, gazing downwards at an array of the wildflowers, grasses, and insects that call the Blackland Prairie home.

A bustling anticipation fell upon the group as nature-loving strangers shared our excitement of the world around us: rattling off species identifications, raving as we spotted our favorite organisms, and speculating about the total eclipse to come. We finished our tour where we started shortly before the main event, happy to enjoy snacks as we waited for the midday moon to show itself.

The awaited hour began, and bit by bit the moon began its journey across the sun. Eclipse glasses ready, we watched as at first only a small crescent of black ate into the brightness of the sun. There would still be some time before the eclipse's totality, but there was one nagging concern; clouds still hung in the atmosphere, traipsing across the sky without any sense of urgency. An aspiring astronomer, his telescope pointed dutifully at the shrinking sun, watched nervously as clouds continued to roll. Would our once-in-a-lifetime view be obscured?

The sun was almost gone by the time the skies around us began to dim. It was incredible how even a cat's-claw sliver of sunlight could illuminate everything, as though the sun was smugly defying both moon and cloud cover until the very last moment. It was almost divine the way the clouds continued drifting, in and out, on and off, until only a few minutes remained before totality. Suddenly, skies cleared. The sky above for those few moments was free of vapor, a seemingly hand-picked window for us to watch in awe as the day briefly banished into night.
Almost instantaneously, the light dwindled as though in twilight, and we all held our breath as we were cast in an ethereal grey-purple shade. A hawk, disconcerted, flew overhead as we took in the sudden darkness. All at once, like an orchestra following the directions of their conductor, the crickets and frogs erupted into their nocturnal songs, and a few seconds later the howling of coyotes joined in, a wild sort of harmony.
Through telescope and glasses we watched as the moon moved in perfect alignment to block out the sun, solar flares and a blinding white outline the only remnants of light for the briefest of moments. Almost as soon as it reached its totality, the ring of light fought back against the shadow of the moon; hardly a sliver of sun had thrown aside the dark lunar shadow before the skies began to lighten.

It was as bright as any other partly cloudy afternoon soon after its full darkness; bees and butterflies returned to flowers, business as usual. Humans who had witnessed the sight took a bit longer to recover, the beauty of it still burnt into our minds as we coped with the normality the rest of the day would bring. I suspect by June we'll once again be hoping for a few days without the Texas sun; a cloudy sky will bring relief - and rain, if we're lucky. The winter months will come again, the sun will disappear before work shifts ending and school bus drop-offs, and we will ache for the blaze of a mid-May morning. Watching the light disappear, for even a moment, was a reminder of all it does for us – and a memory that will never be taken for granted.

# Whatabirthday!

Ann Spencer

Back in the fall, when we learned that the total eclipse in Texas would land on Everett's birthday, we knew it would be special. So when one of our Casita camper Facebook groups put out an invitation to celebrate the eclipse occasion in a large pasture in Purmela, Texas (near Gatesville, with one of the longest periods of totality), we signed up!

The event evolved from "some Casita folks gathering" into a five-day festival of food, fun and new friendships with about 200 people who traveled from states as far as California, Colorado, the Carolinas and parts in between – as well as an "umbraphile" from Norway!

Casita (factory near Rice, Texas) sponsored the event, providing a large tent so that local non-profits could serve meals as a fundraiser: more than $14,000 raised benefited two worthy causes in Coryell County. Everett wasn't the only one celebrating a birthday: a woman in the group who happened to be seated next to us was also celebrating and two heifers on the 90-acre farm were born, one on April 7 and another on April 8.

A speaker from NASA outlined the history of eclipses, including the "discovery" of eclipse patterns (Saros) that goes as far back as the Babylonians in second century BCE and goes out as far as another several hundred years with modern day astrophysicists. (That's as far out as current technology can predict with confidence, and they want to leave something for future astrophysicists to do, the speaker noted.)

From the NASA website:

*Eclipses occur in patterns. The Saros Series is a period of 223 lunar months that has been used to predict eclipses for thousands of years. In a Saros Series, exactly 9 years, 5.5 days after any lunar eclipse, a solar eclipse will occur, and vice versa. Approximately 6585.3211 days, or 18 years, 11 days, and 8 hours after one eclipse, the Sun, Earth, and Moon return to about the same relative geometry, and a nearly identical eclipse occurs. These similar eclipses are part of the same Saros Cycle, and the time between the two eclipses is called a saros.*

(Drone photo courtesy of Chip Allen)

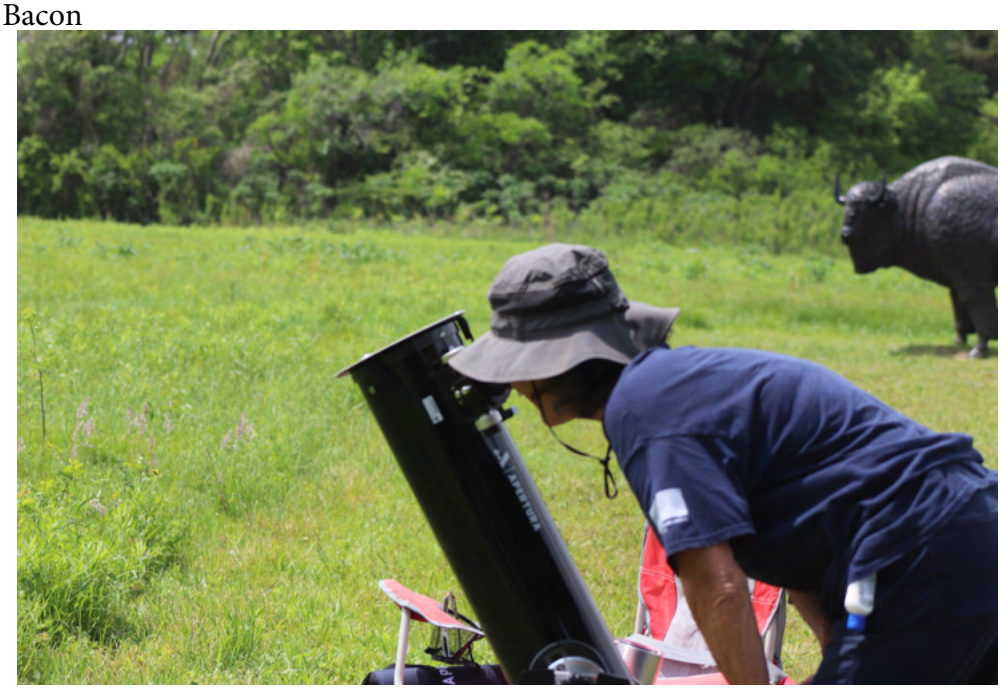
*For eclipses that belong to the same Saros Cycle, the Moon will be at the same node and the same distance from Earth. Because one eclipse of a Saros Cycle occurs just 11 days later in the year than the last one, Earth will be at nearly the same distance from the Sun and tilted relative to it in nearly the same orientation (in the same season) as it was during the previous eclipse in that cycle. Each total solar eclipse path of totality looks similar to the previous one, but is shifted by 120 degrees westward.*

*Astronomers first have to work out the geometry and mechanics of how Earth and the Moon orbit the Sun under the influences of the gravitational fields of these three bodies. From Newton's laws of motion, they mathematically work out the motions of these bodies in three-dimensional space, taking into account the fact that these bodies have finite size and are not perfect spheres. Scientists then feed the current positions and speeds of Earth and the Moon into these complex equations, and then program a computer to "integrate" these equations forward or backward in time to calculate the relative positions of the Moon and Sun as seen from the vantage point of Earth.*
*Eclipses are specific configurations of these bodies that can be identified by the computer. Current eclipse forecasts are accurate to less than a minute in time over a span of hundreds of years.*

A total eclipse birthday won't come to our part of Texas again in our lifetime. Celebrating with 200+ of our closest new friends singing "Happy Birthday" and watching the moon dance across the sun…whatabirthday!

# Ennis Eclipse Event

Photos courtesy of Maegan Bacon



# FEED THE BIRDS: Springtime Pinecones

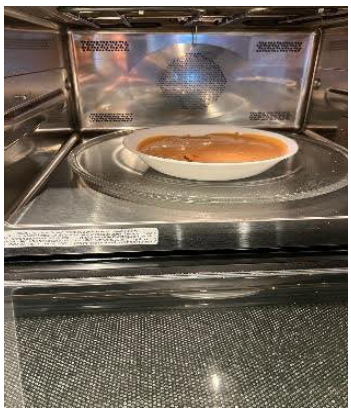
By Laura Beattie

## Each year we do this – it's messy but fun and easy to do at home!


Step 1: Gather your supplies, including pinecones (without scent), garden twine, peanut butter, oatmeal, cranberries, and songbird seed.

Step 2: Cut the twine for the hanger.

Step 3: Wrap twine around the pinecone for a hanger.



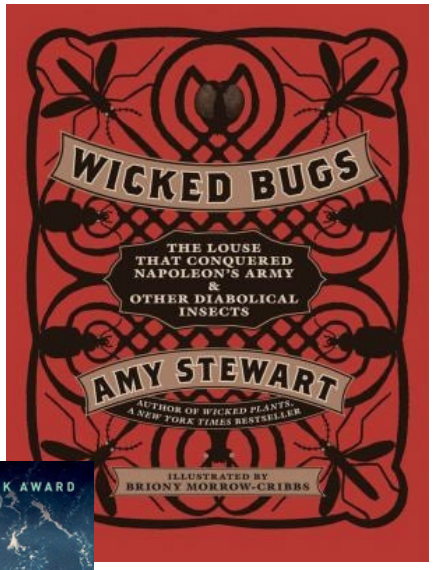
Step 4: Heat peanut butter gently in the microwave for 1 minute or until creamy.

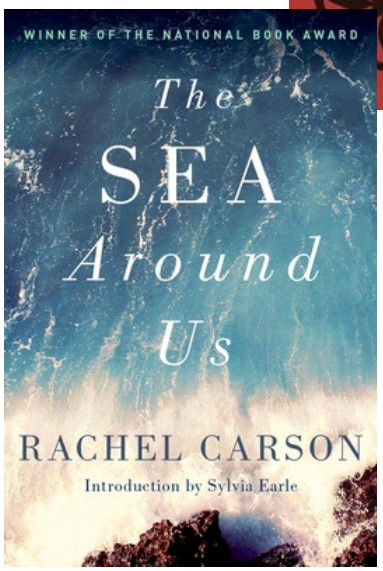
Step 5: Place pinecone first in peanut butter, cover it well with peanut butter, then into oatmeal and bird seeds.

Step 6: Place cranberries in the gaps for the real treat!

Once done they look great and are ready to hang in your backyard! After the birds have cleaned them off, save the pine cone for next year.

# WHAT'S BOOK CLUB READ ING?




Book club meets on May 7th, from 6:30-7:30PM at Waxahachie Parks, 401 S Elm St, Waxahachie, TX 75165. Hope to see you there!

# In the Grand Scheme

After our move from Cedar Hill, TX to Taos, NM, Lynne and I set up seed and hummingbird feeders in the patio of our rented condo. Days went by, then a couple weeks, and… nothing.

The hacienda we moved into, built in 1915, has six units partitioned by beams and pole ceilings. It was surprisingly quiet. Days went by after our move, then a week… nothing; no neighbors did greet us. What are the people like? What about those feathered friends? Change is a curious part of life. Life changes evoke uncertainties and emotions. There's a longing for the familiar and delight for the new.

In Nature and life, change is a governing principle that intertwines with harsh reality and suffering as well as with beauty and delight. We are part of this grand scheme of change and so are the birds, the trees, and all wild things. Our relocation to New Mexico reminds me to appreciate where I've been and to gracefully accept what lies ahead. What is Nature teaching me about my change in environment stimulated by a mission for rejuvenation and learning?

It was summer in Taos when we moved and put the feeders out. Maybe 85 degrees, low humidity, and the 7000-foot elevation of high-desert plateau isn't suitable for songbirds. They're up the mountain in the Ponderosa Pine, Aspen, and Douglas Fir. Then, one day, I spy Juncos, Fox Sparrow, Pine Siskin, and Cassin's Finch! The birds that wintered in Texas reside here in the summer. My change is bridged by familiar companions in an alternate habitat.

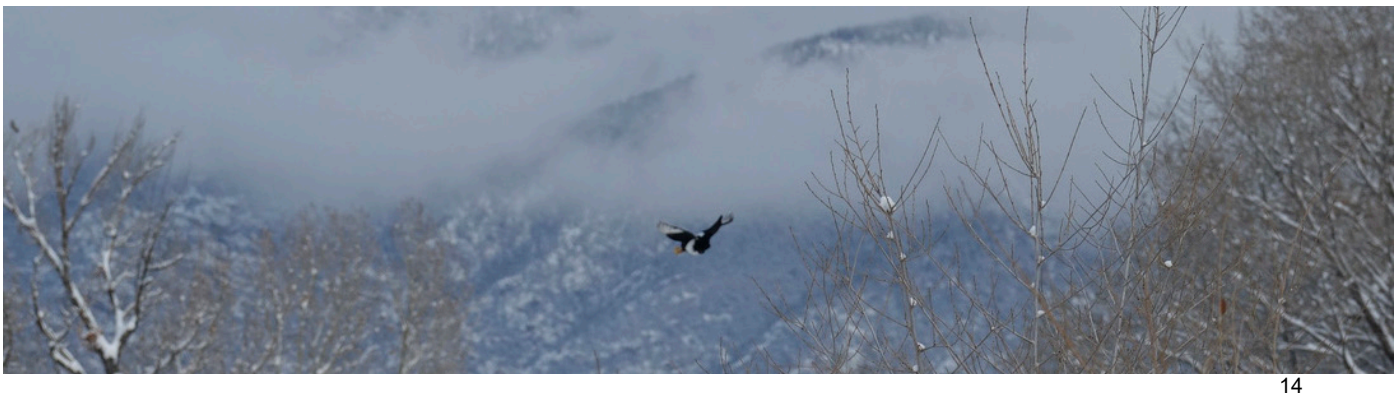
A week later, other residents pop in – Rufus, Ruby, and Black Chin Hummers, Evening Grosbeak, Magpie, Juniper Titmouse, Eurasian Collared Dove, and Mountain Chickadee! We meet a neighbor, a wildfire fighter. He is in the field 21 days a month through fire season. Other neighbors, more birds, greeted us. Nature determined when we all met, birds and people. Patience. It was all out of my hands.

The grand scheme of change in life and Nature is something to flow with, not to control. Yes, we do our part to plan, use wisdom, to care for our health. Yet, aging, ailments, death, seasons, storms, and erosion are integral to life and Nature. How well do I flow with this reality?

The mountains call. I respond with a wilderness hike. I find my first cougar sign, scat! I see mule deer, chipmunk, skunk, and coyote tracks. On another trek I spot Elk and have close encounters with Bighorn Sheep, American Red Squirrel, and Piñon Jay. Engaging with Nature comforts me. I rediscover my spirit. Amidst change, Nature consistently is. Her patterns follow the same principles of cyclical regeneration, fire and water, sun and cloud, regardless of habitat. It snows regularly in Taos winters and much more so up in the mountains. I snow walk one morning to follow tracks and photograph birds that otherwise elude me. Brown Crawler, White Breasted Nuthatch, and the blue-grey Bushtit are new discoveries for me.

In the grand scheme, I miss my familiar trails, my people, my Texas ranges. In the grand scheme, I love my adventure, my search for new found niches. In the grand scheme, Nature reminds me to appreciate the journey, to honor the past, to look forward to the future, and to live fully in each moment.

***"Amidst change, Nature consistently is. Her patterns follow the same principles of cyclical regeneration, fire and water, sun and cloud, regardless of habitat."***



# Time to get to talking: TMN Annual Meeting

By Mary Pearl Meuth
TMN Program Assistant

Under 200 days to our TMN Annual Meeting, and just one month left to submit your presentation proposals!

The Texas Master Naturalist Program welcomes your presentation proposals as contributions to be considered for our Annual Meeting and agenda! Individuals wishing to present are invited to submit their proposals via the “Submit Abstract” button below.

This year’s Annual Meeting will be hosted Thursday, October 24th through Sunday, October 27th in San Marcos, Texas. Nestled in the heart of the Lone Star State, San Marcos, Texas, unveils a natural symphony where the enchanting melody of the San Marcos River dances alongside vibrant greenery. As the sunlight filters through the towering cypress trees, it casts a golden glow on the river’s crystal-clear waters, revealing a mesmerizing underwater ballet of aquatic life. The San Marcos Springs, the lifeblood of this ecological marvel, showcase a unique blend of aquatic flora and fauna. Rare and endemic species find refuge in these pristine waters, forming a delicate ecosystem that stands as a testament to the town’s commitment to conservation. San Marcos, where the balance between urban development and environmental preservation is an art form, invites residents and visitors alike to immerse themselves in a natural sanctuary. The city’s commitment to sustainable living ensures future generations will continue to marvel at the harmonious coexistence of humanity and the untamed beauty of its environment.

We are planning for an in-person Annual Meeting for 2024! We are asking that all presenters be prepared to host their sessions in person with us this fall, however special considerations may be given where needed. The final full event schedule will be released mid-summer. We are seeking proposals for both classroom presentations and field sessions out and around San Marcos:

As a classroom presenter, you would have the opportunity to inform and train TMN members from across the state on various natural resource topics and provide more in-depth information than their initial core training and curriculum. You are also encouraged to make this an opportunity to enlist and train our program volunteers to assist you, your program, and your work as part of their annual volunteer service commitment. Classroom sessions are currently scheduled to begin each day of the conference at 8am and end at 5pm. Classroom sessions will be offered concurrently with one, two, three and four hour blocks, built-in breaks and potentially themed days (dependent on final submissions received).

As a field session presenter, you would have the opportunity to showcase the region’s diversity of natural spaces, highlight local TMN chapter projects and inform and train TMN members from across the state on various natural resource topics. You are also encouraged to make this an opportunity to host a service project for our volunteers to assist you, your program, and your work as part of their annual volunteer service commitment - even while at the conference. Our Annual Meeting is a time to host numerous field session site visits before, during, and after the event. Three goals with Annual Meeting field sessions is to provide advanced training applicable to any registered Master Naturalist traveling to the meeting from anywhere in the state, while also showcasing the local diversity of the area and the work of local host chapters for project sharing, learning and replication. We want field session attending TMN’s to walk away from the event knowing a bit more about the natural landscape of our host location - and to have new ideas for chapter projects or project management ideas.

Annual Meeting registration and costs will be released in July. Classroom session presenters will need to register to attend the Annual Meeting if they intend to stay and participate beyond their presentation time or for event activities outside of technical sessions.

Learn more about our meeting and submit your presentations for the classroom or field sessions here:
https://txmn.tamu.edu/2024-annual-meeting/#call-for-proposals
Deadline May 15th 2024
See you this fall in San Marcos!
Mary Pearl Meuth
Texas Master Naturalist Program Assistant State Coordinator
Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service
E-mail: mpmeuth@tamu.edu<mailto:mpmeuth@tamu.edu>

# Whoo Whoo's Out There?

by Andrea Iles

For the past couple of months, my husband and I have periodically heard a pair of great horned owls calling to each other in the night. The calls were surprisingly loud – mostly because one of the two enjoyed perching atop my neighbor's chimney.

Since these owls are mostly nocturnal, I had tried in vain to spot the creatures, let alone capture a decent photo in the dark. Moonlight and cloud coverage had not been on my side.

One night recently after everyone else in the house had gone to bed and all was quiet, I heard the owls again. Determined to find the owl and maybe get a photo, I crept outside to see if I could spot the owls. To my delight, the illumination from the waning gibbous moon that night provided a beautiful view of the elusive owls. I got my photo, albeit grainy. But you know the adage – no pic, no proof.

This just goes to show that any time is a good time to enjoy nature, whether it's during the day watching the birds visit your feeders, nature walks and talks, workdays with chapter members, or sitting on your back porch in the middle of the night listening to the love songs of great horned owls.

"The earth has music for those who listen." – George Santayana