

Summer 2025

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INDIAN TRAIL MASTER NATURALIST NEWSLETTER TEAM

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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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For additional information about the Indian Trail Master Naturalist Chapter please visit:

For the Public:

Becoming a Master Naturalist: <https://txmn.org/indiantrail/about/become-a-master-naturalist/>General Inquiries: <https://txmn.org/indiantrail/contact-us-2/>

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Committee Contacts: <https://txmn.org/indiantrail/board-and-committees/>

*Happy Birthday #15, ITMN!
Let's celebrate September 22, 2025*



15th Anniversary Shirt

By Robbie Robbins

Howdy Trailblazers! As many of you know, this year we are celebrating our 15th anniversary as a chapter! We have a lot of cool projects underway, including a video for us to watch at our 15th anniversary party. This party will take the place of our usual speaker at our September meeting. I designed and illustrated the t-shirt design, and included 15 species found throughout the Blackland Prairie.

Species List

- Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)
- Burr Oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*)
- White Rosinweed (*Silphium albiflorum*)
- Western Ribbon Snake (*Thamnophis proximus*)
- Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*)
- Garden Orb-weaver (*Argiope aurantia*)
- Pipevine Swallowtail (*Battus philenor*)
- Yellow Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*)
- Beaver (*Castor canadensis*)
- Alligator Gar (*Atractosteus spatula*)
- Gulf Coast Toad (*Incilius nebulifer*)
- Nine-banded Armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*)
- Greater Roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*)
- Gray Fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*)
- Texas Bluebonnet (*Lupinus texensis*)



Scissor-Tailed Flycatcher by Mark Graham



FROM THE DESK OF THE PRESIDENT

Trailblazers,

I hope you are having a great start to your summer! Looking for something fun to do? There are regular work days every week this summer, plus one more wildflower walk at Mockingbird (June 21). Please be sure to check the Members' calendar on our website for volunteer activities, advanced training opportunities, and other great events like our book club, plant study group, bug study group, and crafting with kids at the Waxahachie Farmer's Market. Go straight to our members' section for all these dates:

<https://txmn.org/indiantrail/members-resources/>

In September, we will be celebrating our 15-year anniversary at our monthly meeting (September 22). Robbie has designed a beautiful t-shirt for us, which we will discuss at our June chapter meeting. There's also a great chapter video in the works thanks to Madeline Bracken, Robbie, and others. Please reach out with any other ideas you have for celebrating this milestone and the trailblazers who made ITMN possible.

Thank you to Rena and her husband Mike for generously hosting members at her lake house for a summer social. It was so nice to relax and spend time getting to know each other better while soaking up the sunshine. On the following page are a few photos from the day. These were also posted on Discord. (hint, hint, join ITMN on Discord.)

Registration for the 2025 Annual Meeting in College Station will open the first week of August, and you can find all the details on the TXMN website: <https://txmn.tamu.edu/2025-annual-meeting/>

See you soon! You won't want to miss our June 23 chapter meeting, where Tabby will be presenting on fireflies!

Erin McKool

Editor's Note: Two ITMN members will present at this year's annual meeting: Charlie Grindstaff on historical women naturalists and Sherry Mossbarger on NaviLens. Let's show up and show them our support. Congratulations, ladies!

FUN IN THE SUN...

SUMMER SOCIAL AT MIKE AND RENA'S LAKE HOUSE

Photos by Erin McKool: top left: Linda Sanford; top right: Tabby Brobston, Maegan Bacon, Erin McKool; bottom left: Robbie Robbins, Rena Sutphin; bottom right: Robbie Robbins, Mike Sutphin.



Left: Uninvited but welcome party guest who wants to join the chapter...already has a following on iNaturalist.

After Rain

By Jim Bush

**Walking through the woods,
I saw the green light
through summer leaves
this evening, glistening
after the all-day rain.**

**The sky was washed
a clean new blue,
and the birds came out,
happy to flit limb-to-limb
as the sunlight slowly faded.**

**And the bronze butterflies
on the bright yellow blooms
sipping the last light of day.**



Chasing fireflies

Article and photos by Erin McKool

(Dateline June 11, 2025) A couple weeks ago, I traveled to east Tennessee to spend time backpacking in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park with my best friend since childhood. Our goal was to experience the magical lightshow of fireflies that appears nightly for a brief season between late May and early June. In recent years, word has gotten out, so we made sure to reserve one of the few backcountry camp sites in advance.

The invigorating hike was a nice workout in a spectacularly beautiful forest of endless hues of green. A stream ran beside us for some of our trek, providing plenty of hydration for our water filters. We arrived early enough to set up camp, rest and eat before the sun set. As the sky darkened, we walked with infrared headlamps along the trail, nodding hello to a few other pilgrims who were quietly peering through the trees. All at once, the show began, a 360-degree dance of lights, with several distinct flashing sets at a time, all in perfect synchronization. My friend explained that these fireflies are synchronous fireflies (*Photinus carolinus*). In vain, I tried to record the magic. Finally, I put away my camera and bathed in the experience.

(continued on next page)



Erin on the trail discovers (top right) Devil's Dipstick Fungus (*Mutinus elegans*) and (bottom right) flower longhorn beetle (probably *Typocerus velutinus*).

The GSM forest service explains the Synchronous Fireflies in great detail online, but a few interesting facts they include are:

- “The enchanting flash of a firefly serves a vital purpose: attracting a mate. Each species of firefly possesses a unique flash pattern that plays a crucial role in their mating display. These distinct light patterns help male and female fireflies of the same species identify one another. Typically, males flash while in flight, while females—often perched on the forest floor—respond from below.”
- “The glow is created by bioluminescence, producing light through highly efficient chemical reactions that generate light with minimal heat. In their lanterns, a part of their abdomens, fireflies mix the chemical luciferin with oxygen and the enzyme luciferase, resulting in a ‘cool’ glow that boasts nearly 100% light. In contrast, traditional incandescent bulbs emit only about 10% of their energy as light, with the remaining 90% as heat.”
- “The mating season for synchronous fireflies lasts approximately two to three weeks each year, with the exact timing varying based on environmental conditions such as temperature and soil moisture. The park uses soil temperatures to predict the optimal dates for the viewing opportunity.”
- The Smokies are home to “19 unique species of fireflies out of over 2,000 species identified worldwide.” See <https://www.nps.gov/grsm/learn/nature/fireflies.htm>

Having experienced this incredible phenomenon, I’m eager to learn more about fireflies at our June chapter meeting when Tabby will be giving us a deep dive into this extraordinary insect and letting us know when and where to observe them in our own region!

Love is in the air...

By Andrea Iles



Valentine's day has long since passed of course, but "Love Is in the Air" is the sentiment that came to mind as I watched this male Eastern Bluebird sing his little heart out from the edge of my roof, trying to attract the attention of a lucky lady bluebird. Capturing a shot of him with the heart-shaped bird feeder in the background was too good to pass up.

For the past three years my backyard bluebird nest box has been a hub of activity beginning in March and typically ending by mid-late June. I usually have two successive nest attempts that produce fledglings. If a third nest attempt occurred, it was late in the breeding season, and either wasn't viable or was too hot for the female to sustain consistent incubation.

This year has been exceptionally active. As soon as a nest had been cleaned out or abandoned (unfortunately), a new couple wasted no time moving in to start their new nest (within a day) compared to as much as a week or two between nest attempts in previous years. I even observed two males fighting over the nest box this season. I guess they appreciated my turnover service!

By the end of May, three nesting attempts had occurred. Only one was successful in producing fledglings. Two of those attempts resulted in abandoned nests. This season was somewhat unusual as I had not experienced multiple abandoned nests, especially during peak breeding season. Sadly, the little guy in the photo's nest wasn't successful. Hanging a nest box in your backyard is a wonderful way to enhance habitat for our local songbirds. With increased land development resulting in the loss of natural nesting grounds, birds will be forced to seek new locations for shelter, food, and to raise their young. Despite unsuccessful nesting attempts this year, I have truly enjoyed listening, observing, and learning more about courting and nesting cycle behaviors of Eastern Bluebirds.
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Here is a summary of behaviors I have observed:

The male bluebird attracts a female by singing out to her and then hangs onto the hole of the nest box, rapidly flapping his wings to get her attention, and proudly shows off the nesting site he has found. He typically throws in some nesting material to get her started and may try to further entice her by leaving a snack in the box. If she's interested, she hops into the nest box to make her inspection. If she accepts, she quickly begins assembling a nest.

Once her nest is complete, she begins laying one egg a day until she's finished (five seems to be the magic number). She then begins incubating her eggs. The male visits frequently to check on her, watch for predators, and bring her food. They are impressively attentive. Once all the eggs have hatched (~two weeks later), the male and female take turns foraging for food and feeding the hatchlings. Even after the babies fledge, the parents and sometimes older siblings continue to care for them.

I have monitored nest boxes at weekly or bi-weekly intervals for habitat projects in the past. Having a nest box in your backyard that you're able to monitor daily is a completely different experience. Daily monitoring is the only way I have been able to observe the behaviors described above. There is plenty of information out there documenting the nesting cycle, but it's really cool to observe for yourself. For those of you who have been able to tend and monitor nest boxes, you can probably relate. For those of you who haven't, I encourage you to try it out! For more information about bluebirds and nest boxes visit sialis.org or nabluebirdsociety.org.



VMS Report

- ITMN has 95 Active Members
- 21 Members Recertified in 2025 (YTD May 2025)
- 2024 Training Class:
8 members have earned their initial certification,
10 trainees are working toward certification



Texas Waters Specialist Certification

- 8 AT hours from a combination of topics/webinars/quizzes from the "Texas Waters: Exploring Water and Watersheds" curriculum
- Curriculum is online and can be found here: [Texas Waters: Exploring Water and Watersheds](#)
- New Specialists earn a Certificate of Recognition and a heron pin.

Annual Renewal:

- Participate in at least 10 hours of volunteer service in the area of aquatic conservation, ecology, education, or stewardship

ITMN has:

- 14 Active Members who have earned this certification
- 12 Active Members who are in the process of earning this certification
- More information can be found on the [Texas Parks and Wildlife Page](#)

Rain Harvesting 101 at the Prairielands Groundwater Conservation District



Everett and Ann Spencer, Amanda Weatherly, and Tannis Lambert on May 30 attended a rain harvesting workshop at PGCD in Cleburne and came home with 55-gallon rain barrels and ideas on rain gardens and ways to help reduce stormwater runoff, conserve precious groundwater. PGCD serves Johnson, Ellis, Hill, and Somervell counties. The Texas legislature created the district in 2009 to preserve, protect, and enhance groundwater resources.

NAVILENS MAKES ITS DEBUT AT THE SUMMER SOLSTICE WILDFLOWER WALK JUNE 21, MOCKINGBIRD NATURE PARK

Article by Ann Spencer, photos by Tannis Lambert

Wildflowers at Mockingbird Nature Park Midlothian are now in the virtual world! Project Chair Sherry Mossbarger has led the effort to get Midlothian Community Development Corporation funding to ID plants on the chapter's Wildflower Walks with special QR code signs designed especially to help blind and partly sighted people or non-reader children identify and learn about the plants in the park. The new signs, which heralded the arrival of current plants identified the day prior, made their debut at the last walk of the summer. Congratulations to all who helped make NaviLens possible!

Top left: NaviLens marker in place; top right: Eileen Berger leads the Walk; bottom right: Sherry Mossberger and Tannis Lambert prepare markers in time for fresh flower IDs.



KACHINA PRAIRIE MARCH-MAY 2025



By Jim Patak
KP Project Chair

What a wet year we've had so far! All this rain has been great for the Prairie, but has really hampered habitat maintenance. We've only been able to have three of the six scheduled workdays. We were fortunate to be able to have the scheduled wildflower walks associated with the annual Ennis Bluebonnet Festival. The pre-walk, conducted the week before the scheduled walks, identified and flagged 42 species of plants in bloom. During the two days of scheduled walks, we had 415 visitors walk the Prairie.

Thank you to the 18 chapter members who volunteered their time and knowledge to complete the pre-walk and lead and shepherd the walks this year. Your help made all this happen.

Until next time!



Bluebonnet Festival volunteers (top) from left: Christine Cook, Maegan Bacon, Denise King and nephew, Linda Sanford, Eileen Berger, June McDarby, Jim Patak and Erin McKool.

(bottom) from left: Denise King, Eileen Berger

GROUP PROJECTS UPDATES



Article and photos by
Tannis Lambert

At the May 3
Waxahachie Farmers
Market, we made
newspaper pots and
planted a seed for take
home.

Plant Family Study
Group gathered May 15
at Kachina Prairie for a
scavenger hunt and
puzzle to refresh our
wildflower knowledge.

Jasper Bird presented
on paper wasps at our
June 19 Bug Study
Group meeting.

Top: Jerry McClung, Lea Sandoz, Tannis Lambert, Cheryl Michael at the Waxahachie farmers booth;
bottom left: Sherry Mossbarger and Christine Cook find leaves at Kachina.
Right top, Tannis helps with seed pots;
Right bottom Jasper presents on paper wasps.

LADDFEST

Article by Tabby Brobston Photos by Robbie Robbins



This April, we joined the Duncanville Nature Conservancy yet again to raise funds for the Charles F. Ladd Nature Preserve at our second annual Laddfest!

Last year, we banded together to celebrate the recently-established Preserve and set our sights on the future ahead; this year, we were able to reflect on the work we've done so far. We were able to share even more incredible trail cam footage from the past year, and talk about the Indian Trail Chapter's involvement both on the ground and as advocates on the Master Plan Committee.

Native critters including beetles, spiders, and a very tolerant hognose snake were proudly displayed on the ITMN table as we listened to speakers such as Amy Martin and John Ascher from Blackland Collaborative.



CRAZY About Monarchs!

Article and Photos by Amanda Weatherly

Trailblazers, I don't know about you, but it's that time of year when I begin itching to catch some monarch butterflies. Have you ever caught a monarch butterfly? Have you ever tagged a monarch butterfly? Would you like to learn how to catch and tag a monarch butterfly? Have I got your attention yet?

My name is Amanda Weatherly, and I am the Indian Trail Master Naturalist Chapter project chair for the monarch tagging program. This is an annual community science program for the ITMN chapter that occurs during the fall migration (usually September-November), when the monarchs begin their southward flight to the Transvolcanic Mountains of central Mexico.

The process is simple: you catch, tag, collect data, and release the monarch butterfly. Well, it is not always that simple. The small insect is very smart and can be tricky. It may take a little practice, but some of our more "seasoned" taggers have tricks of their own that they may be willing to share with you. Just remember that "practice makes perfect," and you will always lose a few in the process. (continued on next page)



(left) I was out on a bike ride in the late afternoon when I was stopped by the sound of an owl hooting. I began frantically searching high in the trees for the calling creature. After further observation, there were two owls, in different locations, calling to one another. I was mesmerized and stayed for a while to watch and listen to the show.



(above) A pair of bluebirds nesting on my property were seeking shelter under my patio from one of the spring rainstorms. They were perched upon a tomato cage as if they owned the patio and dared another bird to approach. It was very comical to watch and occurred more than once throughout the spring season.



Amanda Weatherly's first tagged monarch butterfly for the 2024 Tagging season. Tagged at the butterfly garden next to the Waxahachie dog park.

Happy Tagging!

While it may still be early to begin tagging the small but mighty insect, I will have the annual information booth and the 2025 tagging season sign-up sheet at the July chapter meeting. I will be available to review the process of tagging, have examples of the supplies needed to tag, and answer any questions that you may have. A SignUp Genius also will be created and sent to the membership before the July meeting.

However, if you are too excited to wait until the meeting for more information, you may read about tagging, watch videos, or get some fun facts about monarchs by visiting

<https://www.monarchwatch.org/>.

If you are interested in being a co-chair with me this year, please let me know. It's always an advantage to have more than one person who knows how to run a project. This project is always showcased during this time of year because it is active. However, feel free to ask me any flutterby questions throughout the year. "Happy 2025 Tagging," and I look forward to working with everyone this year.

Seen and Noted on Facebook: Monarch Blitz

"Save the date for the 9th annual **Monarch Blitz, July 25 - August 3!**...The Monarch Blitz invites people across North America to go outdoors and share their sightings of monarch butterflies, eggs, caterpillars, chrysalids and milkweed plants. These observations help researchers identify and prioritize actions to better conserve our emblematic monarch butterfly!"

Learn how you can be a part of this vital trinational community science initiative at the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) website:

<https://www.cec.org/newsletter/2025-international-monarch-monitoring-blitz/>



Photo by Ann Spencer, home at Spencer Farm near Ovilla in Ellis County after a rainy spring

GREEN, GREEN GRASS OF HOME OR...

Where am I?

By Maureen Nitkowski

If I were to tell you that I was enjoying the very green expanse at latitude 53.35 N and longitude (-) 6.26W you should not be surprised – this is the location of Dublin, Ireland. In contrast, my location in Ellis County is latitude 32.35N and longitude (-) 96.79W; why ever would I expect a green expanse all year here?

As you can tell from the difference in latitude, Ellis County is much closer to the equator than Dublin, Ireland. This means that the average July high temperature here is 96F while Dublin comes in at 59F. The January low temperature is 34F and 39F respectively which seems not so different until you factor in the temperature range in each place: 62F in Ellis County and 20F in Dublin.

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There must be very different plants and animals which are adapted to these temperature ranges. Add to this the summer high temperatures and duration of same here in Ellis County, the difference is even more apparent. Surprisingly, Dublin and Ellis County each average about 39 inches of rain annually. Dublin receives its rain in 2 to 4 inch increments per month while Ellis County can go months without any precipitation particularly from July through September. If we have these facts available to us, why do we continue to expect to have green lawns and meadows here throughout our summers as happens in Ireland?

I will confess that I am not an anthropologist, but I do recall a theory about humankind in the very distant past wanting to remove trees and bushes near their habitation in order to eliminate hiding places for predators and enemies. This seems like a reasonable idea to me. Moving forward in time, actual land ownership began and was in the hands of a few powerful people, while the majority of folks labored for them without owning any land. If owning the largest parcel of land indicated status and power, having a labor force at your disposal to manicure it would be even more prestigious. In our enthusiasm as landowners in the U.S.A. where almost everyone has a piece of real estate if only 0.1 acre, are we mimicking the prestige model by trying to maintain green turf/meadows all year long and in opposition to the climate and available resources? Would it not be more enjoyable and cost –effective to use the plants that are native ?

Unfortunately, all of us are under pressure from advertisements as to how our property should look and how we remember summers elsewhere before coming to Ellis County. My suggestion is to make the most of the beauty that has always been here instead of trying to change it to something foreign and difficult to maintain. Interestingly enough, our native plants and animals are often regarded with envy in other places.

www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/us-climate
<https://weatherspark.com>



Texas Master Naturalist Training

Applications are being accepted for the annual Master Naturalist Training Class of the Indian Trail Chapter serving Ellis and Navarro Counties. We'll have awesome speakers, excellent field trips, and fun, educational experiences as we learn to improve public understanding of natural resource ecology and management; enhance existing natural resources education and outreach activities; and develop a volunteer network. The classes will run from **August 12 through October 28** with three field trips included. Further information and application are available on our website:

<https://txmn.org/indiantrail/about/become-a-master-naturalist/>.