

LOST PINES CHAPTER

Texas Master Naturalist



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A Predator Among Us by Larry Gfeller

Lauren Millican was late and in a hurry. The March sunset was quickly fading to dusk. As the Interpretative Ranger for Lockhart State Park, she had just finished hiding brightly colored eggs for the evening's "snipe hunt," a special delight for children. Wheeling her electric golf cart around the corner of Fence Line Trail onto Hilltop Trail something remarkable happened. There, in front of her at some distance, loomed an unusual animal shape. It was large, tawny, long and lithe with a coat the color of aged driftwood and whipped cream. Lauren first thought it was a deer, but, as the animal silently vanished like an apparition into the brush line, a large chest and long tail could be seen. In January, golfers found a pile of debris in the fairway, which included the cleanly severed leg of a deer. Lauren quickly realized she had happened upon a mountain lion—it was the second sighting by park personnel in 2016.



Puma concolor, aka mountain lion, catamount, puma, panther, painter, cougar

In May 2016 I was approached by a concerned mother at the conclusion of a hike themed, "Predators of Lockhart State Park." She wanted assurance that overnight camping among foxes and bobcats and coyotes was safe. Presuming parents don't allow children to wander alone through the park at night, I gave her that assurance; I was unaware of Lauren's mountain lion encounter—but it wouldn't have changed my response. Since 1980 only four attacks on humans have been reported in Texas, all of them in remote areas of West Texas (data valid through 2005). Man is not prey. As long as ample supply of deer, feral hogs, javalina, coyotes and various small mammals exist, these big cats will go out of their way to avoid humans. Mountain lions are ethereal, elusive animals.

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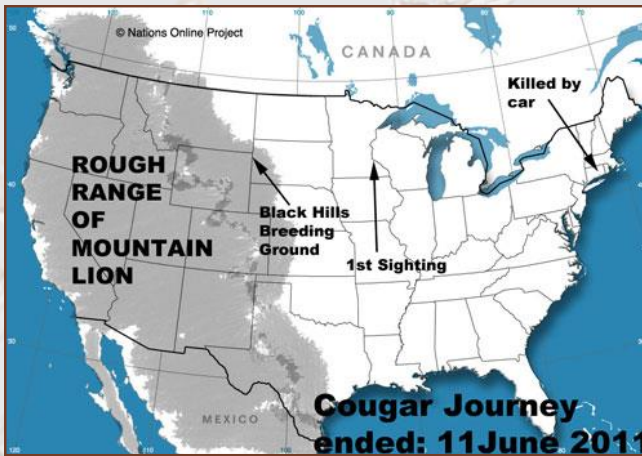
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They are also called cougars, pumas, panthers, painters, and catamounts. Mountain lion sightings have occurred at one time or another in all 254 counties of Texas, although many are unconfirmed. More accurate information comes from mountain lion mortalities (data collected by TPWD since 1983), and these data show mountain lions in 67 counties. Still, sightings are not as rare as they once were. Sighting and kill reports indicate that mountain lions now occur in more counties than they did 10 years ago and appear to be expanding their range into central Texas. Although this is

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Predator, cont.

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good for biodiversity, concerned mothers would likely not care. This is probably true for most people. In a nutshell, that's the problem!

Much of what we know about these cats is colored by stories and tall tales, yet intensive research is ongoing and has dispelled some myths. The scientific name, *Puma concolor*, means “cat of one color.” That color does not include black. In other words, there are no black panthers in North America; no one has ever captured or killed a black mountain lion. Black panthers—where they do exist—are actually the odd melanistic form of jaguars and leopards.

Another myth is that mountain lions bury the uneaten portion of a kill. Not true. They will cover their leftovers with old tree limbs, leaves or other debris, but they do not bury them. Common belief: You can always tell a mountain lion paw print because it is bigger than a dog. Truth: Not reliable; some dog prints are bigger. Not all dog tracks show claw marks and some lion tracks do show claw marks if it was running or lost its footing.

As wild animals go, this one is incredibly beautiful. There is perhaps no more perfect coat of fur than that of a lean, healthy mountain lion. Impeccably groomed layers of charcoal, tan, gray, cream—especially when coupled with the haunting yellow flecked eyes—are an unequivocal confirmation that you are in the presence of something feral, untamed. Something essential and part of the furniture of the earth.

Males weigh in as much as 150 lbs. and stretch to 8½ ft. long. Cougars are the largest feline carnivores in North America (the jaguar is larger but lives in the jungles of Central and South America) and they have the widest distribution of any wild cat, from Canada to South America. Formerly found throughout North America, mountain lions are now relegated to remote areas of the western U.S. In Texas that means mostly the Trans-Pecos region. Sightings are now happening, however, in the brush lands of south Texas and portions of the Hill Country—and Lockhart State Park!

These cats are secretive and solitary, except for breeding season—which can occur at any time throughout the year. Females usually breed every two to three years, so females are a prime consideration in defining a male's home range. Families usually come along in the summer or fall and are most often made up of 2-3 fluffy kittens. They are born with black spots and rings around their tails, which fade away as they mature. The youngsters hang out with mom anywhere from 11-24 months—a luxury made possible only because of mom's long period of abstinence.

Lions need wilderness, canyonlands or hilly areas with good cover. This is one reason why reports of sightings around major metroplexes, like Dallas or Houston, are suspect. Another reason, and perhaps a more compelling one, is the massive amount of range it takes to support mountain lions. They need room, they need cover and concealment and they need an ample supply of medium-sized game animals to survive.



Cached lion-killed mule deer. Photo taken at Lory State Park just outside of Fort Collins, CO, by Roxanne Hernandez

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Preserving the Past

by Larry Gfeller

Do you lead a high stress life, not enough time in your day, too much pressure? H.E.B. was out of your favorite salad dressing, the air conditioner broke and the water company double-billed for last month—you could use a vacation! These were unknown problems for Mary Christian Burleson, Elgin's first Anglo settler in 1840. Widowed twice, Mary built a log cabin, raised seven children by herself, endured Indian raids, war with Mexico, the Runaway Scrape and still managed to be a step-mother to the future commander in chief of the Texas Army and Vice President of the Republic of Texas. This was one tough lady! The remains of her old homestead and family cemetery remain on the northern edge of Elgin, Texas today.

The Mary Christian Burleson Preservation and Development Foundation has received a grant from the Texas Historical Commission to help restore these historical treasures with the stipulation that it be accomplished by December 2018. The cemetery came to light when an out-of-state great-great grandson of Mary Burleson stepped forward to work with the Texas Historical Commission on the project. With respect to the cemetery his request was simple: If someone could be found to clean up the cemetery, a \$1,000 donation would be made to that organization. Mrs. Embree, the supervising archaeologist, contacted the Bridge Maniacs—they had done the initial clearing of the old homestead site after being trained by her.



LPMN receives \$1,000 donation for cleaning up the cemetery

The cemetery was all but forgotten on private land, grown over and nearly buried in vegetation. The maniacs have done their part—removed unwanted vegetation and trimmed the cemetery proper so that serious archaeological examination of the site can begin. The generous donation is appreciated, as are our Bridge Maniacs for making it happen.

Anyone interested in working with Ms. Embree should contact Larry Gfeller at larrydgfeller@yahoo.com.

Erratum

My apologies to Carol Reidy, a former chapter member who has since moved but continues to read our newsletter. Carol actually created the first state approved pilot project Junior Master Naturalist program in the country. My article, "Life After Sesame Street" in the July/August issue of our newsletter stated that the first JMN program for the Lost Pines Chapter was created by current chapter members.

Ms. Reidy points out that the project was actually directed research for her master's degree at South Texas State. She had 15 students who met at the Boys and Girls Club of Bastrop. "I was in touch with Michelle Haggerty throughout the semester and we covered all topics that the adults were covering," Carol says. "Then other chapters contacted me, one on the coast and one in west Texas, and I shared my outline and all written materials with them." The pilot program was done in the spring of 2004.

Sorry for the misstatement, Carol. Hats off to you for forging this initial path for the rest of us. And thank you for reading our newsletter, too!

~ Larry Gfeller

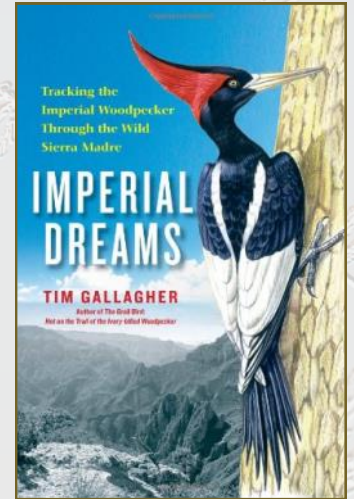
Brooks on Books - The Largest Woodpecker?

by Bill Brooks

Do you have the largest living woodpecker in your backyard?

The Pileated Woodpecker of the eastern pine forests may be the largest living woodpecker in the world. We are lucky to be able to observe this hulking species in our neighborhoods. Ornithologists still argue as to whether we have two subspecies or four. Most agree that the species we have in Texas is *Dryocopus pileatus*. In the 1940s it was the model for the Woody the Woodpecker cartoon. (How many of you can still mimic the sound Woody made?) You can learn more about our woodpeckers in any number of U.S. and Texas bird guides.

A treasure trove of books exists on two larger, probably extinct, New World woodpecker species. The largest of the recently extinct woodpeckers is the Imperial Woodpecker. These proved to be easy targets in northern Mexico and an important source of food. You can read about searches for this animal in "Imperial Dreams: Tracking the Imperial Woodpecker Through the Wild Sierra Madre" by Tim Gallagher (2013). If you want to fill your library with one book that covers both the Imperial and Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, buy the book, "The Travails of Two Woodpeckers" by naturalists Noel Snyder, David Brown, and Kevin Clark. The book can be a bit dry, but it is loaded with historic pictures and paintings. Appendix 2 is a 16- page list of all known Imperial skins in museums and private collections.



The number of titles concerning the Ivory-billed Woodpecker corresponds to the interest Americans have in their recently extinct woodpecker with a 32" wingspan. For basic information you can't beat the original 1942 ecological studies done by James T. Tanner and compiled in "The Ivory-Billed Woodpecker." This is a Dover Book reprint and the National Audubon Society holds the copyright for this manuscript.

In 2010 Stephen Lyn Bailes partnered with Nancy Tanner (James Tanner's wife) to write a more personal story of James's life-long study of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in "Ghost Birds: Jim Tanner and the Quest for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, 1935-1941."

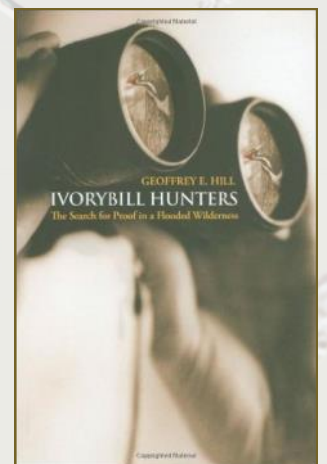
"The Grail Bird," another book by Tim Gallagher, was written after he reported spotting the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in the swamps of Arkansas in 2004. Bobby Harrison was Tim's partner on that fateful day. I heard Bobby Harrison speak at Nature Quest in Uvalde County on April 29, 2006. He told a compelling story, but since their report there has been no undisputable evidence of a population in Arkansas.

One of the last reported sightings of the Ivory-billed in Texas was by ornithologist John Dennis in 1966. Life magazine wrote an article about the report in the April 7, 1972 issue. Dennis, who died in 2002, suffered from the scorn of skeptics who doubted his report.

Jerome Jackson wrote a comprehensive account of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in his 2004 book "In Search of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker" and revised it in 2006 after the Gallagher and Harrison sighting.

In the same vein, "Stalking the Ghost Bird: The Elusive Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Louisiana" by Michael Steinberg (2008) gives an extensive history of the bird along with a compendious catalog of sightings since the 1950s.

"Ivorybill Hunters: The Search for Proof in a Flooded Wilderness" by Geoffrey Hill (2007) tells the events behind the reported sightings in the cypress/tupelo swamps of northern Florida in 2005 and 2006.



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What's Blooming?

by Liz Pullman & Judy Turner

"A plant that lives where it should not is simply a pest but a plant that thrives where it should not is a weed" (Lab Girl, Hope Jahren. 2016). As humans disturb the earth by plowing, chopping, digging, burning and swapping soil for asphalt and concrete, the aggressor—WEEDS—wins. That is our subject this time—WEEDS.



Late-flowering boneset

We came up with about 10 native plants to our region that meet our weed criteria, the first being *Erigeron Canadensis*, also known as horseweed, mares tail and Canada fleabane. This is a very popular "mystery plant" and several images needing identification have shown up this year during growing season as it emerges and yes(!) mostly in disturbed areas. Poor soil does not keep it away but it can be noticeably smaller in poor conditions such as parking lot edges. In fertile soil, it goes crazy wild and forms large colonies several feet tall, and as it blows gracefully in a breeze you can see why mares tail became a common name. These same characteristics are found in another plant—Late-blooming eupatorium or Late-flowering boneset (*Eupatorium serotinum*) grows in poor soil but is quite rampant in better soil.

A native woody plant we have observed take off in a disturbed area is yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*). This is a common shrub/small tree in the piney woods of Bastrop County but it noticeably became quite a pest after the fire since it grew too thick and too fast on the soil that was left bare after the fire. Calling such a nice plant a weed seems wrong, but no one wants a monoculture in the loblolly pine understory.

Our two ragweeds are definitely on the weed list. We have western ragweed (*Ambrosia psilostachya*) and giant ragweed aka bloodweed (*Ambrosia trifida*), both of which spread rapidly, the giant variety preferring damper areas. Ditches and roadsides become a jungle of ragweeds. Interestingly, people with allergies despise ragweed because of the abundant powder-like pollen they produce, but many of this same group will point out goldenrod (*Solidago*) as the pollen source, calling it ragweed. The real culprits are the two Ambrosias.

We have poison ivy on this list as a weed. In many cases it is just a pest, but when it gets in the right place and starts spreading and climbing and becomes a hazard along trails then *Rhus toxicodendron* = WEED.

Pokeweed, *Phytolacca Americana*, fits the weed category. We all know that the first shoots of spring are edible but otherwise, in most settings, it is unwelcome. Someone in my neighborhood loves and carefully cultivates two very large pokeweed plants in his suburban yard. I do notice that he keeps his car in a garage to shield it from the birds that flock in for the delicious berries, which are produced all summer long.

Dandelions!! Everyone knows these and also knows how futile it is to dig them all out of your yard only to find them returning. Those seeds



Giant ragweed

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Blooming, cont.

were made to travel, floating in on their little parachutes and finding a place to take root—possibly in the soil you just disturbed while digging out their cohorts.

These few plants—WEEDS—as well as horsemint (*Monarda sp.*), cockleburs (*Xanthium sp.*), sticktights (*Torilis spp.*), and you can probably mention a few more, seem to be here to stay since there is apparently no way to actually eradicate them. We are the cause, with our activities that disturb the soil and create bare areas where weed seeds can thrive.

But, remember this bit of information—all of the above mentioned WEEDS are actually native to our eco-region and have a use in nature—to insects, butterflies, birds, other critters, and even humans.

Latin Notes:

Erigeron = woolly-knee; *canadensis* = of Canada

Eupatorium = King Eupator of ancient Pontus; *serotinum* = late-flowering or fruiting

Ilex = holly; *vomitaria* = emetic

Ambrosia = food of the gods; *psilostachya* = containing a biologically active phytochemical called *Psilostachyin*

Ambrosia trifida = three parted

Rhus = a classical name; *toxicodendron* = poisonous

Phytolacca = hybrid name, for plant and lake or purplish-red plant; *americana* = of America

Notes from my weed book – “Just Weeds” by Edwin Rollin Spencer, published 1957

“Ragweeds are just as acceptable to soil bacteria that make these two soil essentials (nitrogen and humus) as are any of the crops we may grow for green manure.”

Fleabane “produces an oil which reacts very much like the oil of turpentine.”

Late-flowering boneset “become valuable soil builders when so used.” That means, plowed under!

An “extract or tincture of phytolacca is said to be one of the best remedies known for reducing caking and swelling of the udders of cows.”

“More than a hundred thousand pounds of dandelion roots are imported by the United States each year. They are used by pharmacists in tonics and in liver medicines.” Also, flowers are used for making dandelion wine.

Books, cont.

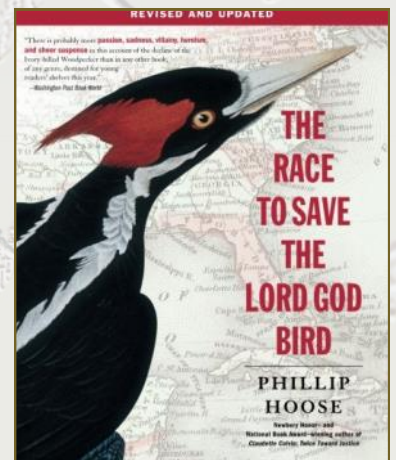
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One of the most recent strongholds for Ivory-bills may have been in Cuba. Here the last certified photograph was taken in 1948. “Looking for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Western Cuba” by Alberto Estrada (2014) is a translated report on the expeditions of 1985 and 1993 that searched for the missing bird.

“The Race to Save the Lord God Bird” by Phillip Hoose (2010) contains a through report on all widely known Ivory-billed sightings.

It would be wonderful if a colony of either of these huge woodpeckers would be found but at the moment it looks like they have passed into the realm of the Dodo, the Passenger Pigeon, and the Carolina Parakeet.

Read on and learn the lessons of history!



Predator, cont.

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They hunt in mornings, evenings and at night.

The size of a lion's range is determined not only by these factors but also the presence of other lions. Male home ranges usually include several female home ranges and cover from 80-200 square miles. That's a lot of real estate! Males will not tolerate other males in their home range, but lionesses typically share territory with other females. Marking one's range is an important ritual. It's done by leaving scratch marks in the earth by kicking backwards with the hind legs. Each scrape is then extravagantly decorated with a urine-soaked mound of debris towards the back. This is pee-mail for "Posted—Keep Out!"

So, what do you do if you encounter a mountain lion in the wild? Nothing. Most likely, the response from the cat will be to disappear quickly—it knows you are lethal to its survival. Don't run, don't lay down and play dead. Keep eye contact, stand tall, and raise your arms to make yourself appear larger. Slowly wave your arms and speak with authority. Give the cat room and time to move on. In the rare event of an attack, fight back. Most people succeed in driving the mountain lion away—this advice from the Mountain Lion Foundation.



This apex predator is considered endangered in Florida, protected in California and hunted with restrictions in Arizona and New Mexico. And so what about Texas?

In Texas you can kill mountain lions on sight, regardless of age or sex, provided you have a hunting license. They are considered non-game animals with no set hunting season and no bag limits. While it is true that mountain lions occasionally kill livestock, they rarely kill animals larger than 500 lbs. Still, ranchers often see mountain lions as a threat to their livelihood, even when they experience very few losses from them.



Lions are shot for sport, recreation, trophies and as threats to livestock herds. Mountain lions only live a decade or so in the wild—if they make it to old age at all. John Muir once said, "All life is created for its own good, and while life feeds on life, and all flesh-eating animals kill animals lower on the food chain, only human beings have the arrogance to assume that animals were created for them." Lauren Millican was one of the lucky few to ever have seen one of these magnificent creatures. If we lose our big cats in Texas—like we have two species of wolves before them—our state will be without yet another keystone predator to help maintain healthy animal populations and ecosystems. And this will be the greatest loss: that we knew enough to save them but didn't.

Newsletter Deadline

Submission deadline for the next issue is October 21, 2016. We welcome relevant contributions, photos, announcements, or other material relating to the mission of the Texas Master Naturalist program, particularly those pertaining to our local area. Submissions may be edited for clarity, grammar, spelling, and space requirements. Please send information to the editor at Roxanne.M.Hernandez@gmail.com.

Bill's Snippets

BEE TRIVIA

- Q. How many flowers must honey bees tap to make one pound of honey?
A. Two million.
- Q. How far does a hive of bees fly to bring you one pound of honey?
A. Over 55,000 miles.
- Q. How much honey does the average worker honey bee make in her lifetime?
A. 1/12 teaspoon.
- Q. How fast does a honey bee fly?
A. About 15 miles per hour.
- Q. What state is known as the beehive state?
A. Utah
- Q. How many flowers does a honey bee visit during one collection trip?
A. 50-100.
- Q. How long have bees been producing honey from flowering plants?
A. 10-20 million years.

(Honey Trivia)



EYELESS CATFISH SPECIES DISCOVERED IN TEXAS

Blind fish were first documented in Mexico in 1954. They have now been discovered deep inside a cave in Texas at the Amistad National Recreation Area. It's an entirely new area for this extremely rare fish. (University of Texas)



THE FIRST DOCUMENTATION OF TOOL USE IN REPTILES

The American Alligator and the Asian Mugger Crocodile have been seen putting sticks on their snouts during bird nest-making season. When the birds come to collect the sticks the alligators attempt to catch and eat them ("Ethology, Ecology, and Evolution" magazine 2014).

COOL BIRDS

Birds do not sweat. Bare skin on their faces and legs radiates body heat. (Bathing or urinating on their legs also allows the liquid to evaporate and take away body heat.) A higher respiration rate supports panting. Many species even control blood flow rates in their bills, which facilitates heat loss on hot days ("Helping Backyard Birds Beat the Heat" by Melissa Mayntz in "National Wildlife" magazine, Aug/Sept 2014, pg. 12).



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Snippets, cont.

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A NEST BIGGER THAN OUR BIGGEST BEDS

The largest bird's aerie (also called a nest) was built by a pair of bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), and possibly their successors, near St. Petersburg, FL and measured 9 feet 6 inches wide and 20 feet deep.

RARE ORCHADS FOUND IN AUSTIN

Two rare orchards were found at the Brackenridge Field Labs in Austin, TX in June 2016. The identity of the vivid purple species was confirmed as *Hexalectris grandiflora*. The creamy red species is *Hexalectris arizonica*. Both are considered to be extremely scarce.



MILK ANYONE?

Cockroach milk crystals pack nutrient punch, study suggests. Milk crystals inside Pacific beetle cockroach embryos are the most nutrient-dense substance, per weight, ever discovered, according to a study published in the [International Union of Crystallography's Journal](#), IUCRJ. Researchers say cockroach milk is three times more nutritious than the previous record holder, buffalo milk.



THIS WOULD SAVE ON MEDICAL BILLS

The first time seen by science: [spider fixes its own broken leg](#). If you haven't watched this video it's worth a look—nature at her best.

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Snippets, cont.

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FISH PARENTING

Researchers from James Cook University revealed last fall in that the Coral Rabbitfish pair off and take turns standing guard to watch for predators while the other one eats. While other scientists have recorded examples of reciprocal cooperation in a number of highly social birds and mammals, this study is the first to document such behavior in a type of fish” (National Wildlife magazine, April-May 2016, p. 10).

GRASSHOPPER KABOB, FOR STARTERS

“Some 1,900 insect species are consumed by 2 billion or so people in more than 80 countries” (“Aphid Reflux” in “Texas Co-op Power” magazine, July 2016, p. 6).



Lost Pines Master Naturalist Monthly Business Meetings

The monthly business meeting, which occurs on the third Monday of each month, is an opportunity to hear first hand about volunteer and advanced training opportunities. The chapter’s project leaders update members on their work and recruit volunteers if needed. In addition, chapter administration issues are discussed: brief committee reports, financial decisions, and news from our state organizers. Stay tuned to Meetup.com to learn more about upcoming meetings.

One hour volunteer time is awarded for attendance at qualifying business meetings.

STATE PROGRAM CONTACTS

Website: <http://txmn.org>

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The Texas Master Naturalist program is sponsored by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

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