

Texas Master Naturalists ROLLING PLAINS CHAPTER

NEWSLETTER

Vol. 8, No. 8

<http://txmn.org/rollingplains>

August 2016

Presidents Report

by Terry McKee

We all know the stars at night are big and bright, but so are the meteors!



The Perseid meteor showers are happening now, but the peak dates to see the most meteors are between 11 p.m. and 4:30 a.m. on August 12 and 13. Unfortunately the full moon is August 10 and that may hamper seeing the faintest of the shower. On average, observers may see 50 to 80 meteors per hour. To get the best view, look half-way up toward the northeastern portion of the sky where you will see the constellation of Perseus.. Looking directly up at the sky into the constellation is not recommended because this is just the point the meteor shower appears to come from. You are more likely to see a trail when looking slightly away. While the meteors are certainly bright, they are typically not much larger than a grain of sand. As these tiny particles travel at great speeds, they put on a great show.

Perseids is extremely consistent in its timing and can be observed for several weeks in the summer sky, conditional on your whereabouts,

the perspective point in the sky from which the meteors appear to come from. In the case of Perseids, it is named after the constellation Perseus, which is positioned in approximately the same point in which the Perseids meteor shower appears to originate from. While this summer spectacular appears to radiate from a constellation, they are actually caused by the Earth passing through the dust particles of the comet Swift-Tuttle. Each summer, Earth passes into a trail of dust left by this comet, and as a result, all the dust and debris burning up in our atmosphere, travelling at a very fast 132,000 miles per second, produces the spectacle known as the Perseids meteor shower, or what are popularly recognized as “shooting stars”.

What better way to avoid the hot August Texas sun, than to enjoy a cool night under the stars and meteors.

Be sure to check them out!

lighting conditions, and weather. Meteor showers are commonly named after their radiant point,

LOCALS

AUGUST 2: Rolling Plains Chapter monthly meeting is at River Bend Nature Center. **Location:** 2200 3rd Street, Wichita Falls, Texas. **Time:** 7:00 PM. **Program:** Our speaker will be Bryan Rupp, KFDX meteorologist who will talk about La Nina effects on Texoma, earthquake and heat safety

JULY 30: Moth Count **Location:** Parking lot at Wild Bird Rescue, 4611 Lake Shore Drive **Time:** 8:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. This is a TMN volunteer activity to celebrate National Moth Week July 24-31.

OCTOBER 21-23: Texas Master Naturalist 17th Annual Meeting **Location:** Montgomery, Texas To stay up to date with the Texas Master Naturalist Annual Meeting, learn about registration details as they are posted, and be the first to see the meeting’s agenda, join the TMN Listserv. The TMN Listserv acts as the main communication tool for the Master Naturalist Program. Event details, local training opportunities and statewide announcements are frequently sent out on this email list.

Congratulations!

The following members of the Rolling Plains Chapter of the Texas Master Naturalist have received their recertification award:
Dian Hoehne, Sharon Hyde, and
Laura Gillis

Mason Mountain-Bringing Back Texas Horned Lizards

by Lynn Seman

On June 25, several members of the HLCS (Horned Lizard Conservation Society) participated in a survey at the Mason Mountain Wildlife Management Area near Mason, TX. This site, a former exotic game ranch consisting of about 5,300 acres, was donated to the state of Texas by C.G. Johnson in 1997, and is now the largest publicly owned land in the Llano Uplift. Presently, this wildlife management area is used in various research projects including a horned lizard reintroduction project. Being my very first HLCS horned lizard survey, I did not know for sure what to expect on the trip. As a recently retired middle school math and science teacher, I jump at any opportunity to get out in the field to survey, observe, and participate in science data collection. I arrived way ahead of time at our meeting location - Topaz Confections on the historic square in Mason, TX. The aroma of freshly baked pastries was too much to resist so consequently, I enjoyed a cinnamon roll with milk from this local hot spot which I highly recommend! Before too long, the other members of the group began to arrive. We were quite a diverse group. Carolyn Todd, a charter member of HLCS, informed everyone of the ground rules, passed out waivers, and described a basic plan for our outing. Carolyn, a veteran member of the organization for 26 years, has participated in numerous surveys. Leslie Nossaman, a geologist and member of the HLCS board of directors, and her daughter, Vivian Thomas, a recent Zoology graduate joined the group with their expertise and photography skills. Two biologists from the Houston Zoo Herpetology Department, Monty Criswell and Chris Valdez, came to help with the survey with hopes of sighting numerous reptiles. Both of these two herpetologists are continuing their education as they work toward master's degrees and to be future PhD candidates. Our Texas Parks and Wildlife Representative, Jim Gallagher has a PhD in Wildlife Biology and is the Research Supervisor for the Mason Mountain Wildlife Management Area. Jim has held many positions over the years which all have contributed to his experience and excellent qualifications for his current position at Mason Mountain. Every participant in the group had something unique to bring to this outing.



After meeting at the Mason square, we completed introductions, discussed the ground rules, and then headed out the site four miles north of Mason, TX. When we reached the site, we joined

Alyssa Fink, a graduate student at Texas State University, who is conducting a habitat study on Texas Horned Lizards, and also, Mark Mitchell, the manager for the wildlife management area. Alyssa, wearing a horned lizard belt buckle (which made me smile), gave us a synopsis of her research for the site. Next, our group split into two groups and boarded 4-wheel drive vehicles to trek up the mountain for the survey.

Our first stop was in the extreme



Cellar Spiders (Phlocidae)

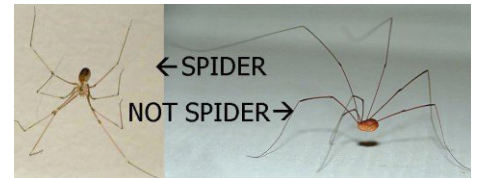
Photo by Debra Halter

We found this spider, and at least two others, in our front store window downtown. Since they prefer dark damp places, they must really be adaptable (per the article), as it is very bright and warm here.



Appearance

The cellar spider is often found in damp locations like basements, crawl spaces and cellars, which is how it got its common name. Cellar spiders have small bodies with long, thin legs and are often confused with harvestmen, the true daddy longlegs that are not actually spiders. There are two groups of



cellar spiders, the long-bodied cellar spiders that have legs up to two inches long and the short-bodied cellar spiders whose legs are about ½ inch long. Cellar spiders are tan or gray in color. Like all spiders, they have eight legs. The most common Phlocidae in the United States is the long-bodied cellar spider. Because of their long legs, cellar spiders are often mistaken for the “daddy longlegs.”

Behavior, Diet and Habits

Cellar spiders hatch from eggs, and when hatched, look like small adults who shed their skin as they grow. The female spiders encase their eggs in silk webs where they are protected against spider predators. Cellar spiders frequently infest



North middle pasture. Within 10 minutes, the first Texas Horned Lizard was spotted. Using radio telemetry equipment, Alyssa located the general vicinity of Horned Lizard L62, a male, who was equipped with a tracking backpack. Alyssa explained to the group that Texas Horned Lizards have been translocated to the Mason Mountain site from an area west of San Angelo. L62

stood very still and posed for several photos while occasionally snatching up a red ant that crawled by his view. His camouflaged backpack glued onto his back and secured with a fishing line type neck collar did not seem to hinder him at all from his daily activities.

Next, we moved on to take a look at the outdoor enclosure. This rectangular cage was set up to allow what Alyssa explained as a “soft release”. The horned lizards that have been brought into this area are kept in this enclosure for 18 days before being released to the wild. Alyssa informed us that this

helps reduce “homing behavior”, but unfortunately, problems can arise with the enclosures. The enclosures must be well designed to prevent the horned lizards



from getting stuck between the wires of the cage and also to prevent raccoons from reaching in to retrieve a lizard snack. These releases, usually held during breeding season, occurred in small groups. Last year, out of the 15 released in two groups of 7 and then 8, only 5 made it to hibernation. Out of those 5, only 3 survived. In the next 15 released, 12 are still believed alive in the site area. Alyssa described finding some of the radio devices in various places, such as in the road, inside a rattlesnake, and some just seem to disappear – possibly picked up and moved out of range by a bird of prey. When asked about the cost of the equipment, Alyssa said that each unit can run about \$200 which makes tracking an expensive endeavor and limits the amount that can be utilized. As we moved along the fence line, we tracked and located horned lizard #78, another male, alive and doing well.



As part of her habitat study, Alyssa guided us to a nesting site that she had protected with a small rectangular cage. She had found the female digging in this area on around June 11. The female weighed 60 grams before the nest was completed and then 30 grams after about 8 hours of nesting. Alyssa plans to check the

nest site daily for hatchlings. We discussed how termites are important as a food source for the young because the Pogos (which is a short name for the red harvester ants - *Pogonomyrmex barbatus*) are usually a bit too large for the babies to munch. Fortunately, several termite mud tubes were noted in the area. Of course, Pogos make up about 80% of a Texas

homes and warehouses and make their webs in protective corners of basements, closets, attics, outbuildings and rock piles. They prefer to eat small moths, flies, mosquitoes and other insects or spiders that are found near their webs. Male and female cellar spiders may be found in climate-controlled structures year round. The spider reaches maturity in about a year. Once mature, the spider can live another two years. The web of the cellar spider is irregular, with no discernable pattern. Although their bites are harmless to humans, their webs are unsightly and profuse: unlike other spider species, cellar spiders prefer to live within close proximity to one another, creating troublesome communities within human dwellings.

Like most other spiders, cellar spiders are highly adaptive and successful predators. Their diet consists primarily of insects, which they lure and trap within their webs before encasing them in cocoons. When food supplies in their environment are insufficient, these spiders travel to other webs and pretend to be trapped insects. As the other spider attempts to catch and consume it, the cellar spider attacks the unsuspecting arachnid. Also known as vibrating spiders, cellar spiders utilize wobbly, vibrating movements to confuse predators and attackers.

Bites

Not a medically important spider, cellar spiders aren't known to bite people. However, this has not detoured the existence of an urban myth indicating that cellar spider venom is among the most deadly in the world, but the length of the spider's fangs are too short to deliver the venom during a bite. There is no scientific based information to support the deadliness of their venom, so there is no reason to assume this is true. But, are the fangs too short to penetrate human skin? Cellar spiders do have short fangs, termed uncate by spider experts. But, so do brown recluse spiders that undeniably bite humans. Cellar spiders can be a nuisance around homes and businesses, despite their harmless nature.”

Horned Lizard diet. The wildlife biologist, Jim Gallagher, showed us the GPS maps of the ant dens in the area noted with red dots for den locations. He pointed out that although the presence of ant dens is important, this does not mean that you will find horned lizards near them – other factors of the habitat are important such as ground cover, etc.

After leaving the first pastures, we headed on to a different part of Mason Mountain to conduct a survey of any presence of horned lizards. Our party split into two groups and followed a trail that wandered into a huge field of sunflowers with an occasional area of granite boulders. An interesting fact about this wildlife management area is that there are two soil types found in the region – limestone and granite based. This provides an opportunity for species diversity. Although our two groups did not spot a single horned lizard in this canvassing, we did find reptiles from the Genus *Cnemidophorus* and *Sceloporus*. We spotted whiptails, as well as racerunners, and a crevice spiny lizard sitting atop a granite boulder. I was especially delighted to hear a Black-capped Vireo (*Vireo atricapilla*) that was pointed out by wildlife biologist, Jim. These birds have been listed as endangered since 1987. We also spotted a common poorwill (*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*) resting on a rock as we descended the mountain.

Although horned lizards had not been spotted in the Mason Mountain Wildlife Management area since the 1990's, they are now being reintroduced in an attempt to build a healthy population of these critters in this habitat. Thanks to the efforts of Mark Mitchell, area manager, Jim Gallagher, wildlife biologist and research supervisor, and dedicated interns such as Alyssa Fink, the Texas Horned Lizard may have a chance to once again, scamper across Mason Mountain.

The trip was fun, educational, but bittersweet for member, Carolyn Todd. This was her last official survey before relocating to Boston, Massachusetts. She will be extremely missed! I am so glad that I got to attend this outing and actually got to meet her before she leaves Texas. Thank you, Carolyn, for all that you have done for this organization and horned lizard conservation. After completing my first HLCS survey trip, I can say that I definitely want to attend more in the years to come, and I highly recommend these outings to other members



TPW Television Series
Airing Soon on PBS Stations



**El Paso's Owls,
Three Kingfishers & Richland
Creek Water**
July 31-August 6, 2016

Take a peek at the burrowing owls of El Paso. Marvel at the rare chance to see three species of Kingfishers in one place at one time. See how a manmade wetland is cleaning the water for the Dallas-Fort Worth area.



**Night Photography,
Fishing at Mueller & Some
Survival Tips**
August 7-13, 2016

Attend a night photography class near Big Bend Ranch State Park. An event at an Austin park teaches families how to catch fish, and how to cook them. We remember the late Dave Alloway, an expert in the art of survival.



**Purple Palaces, Big Black
Bears & Cleaning It Up**
August 14-20, 2016

Meet some folks whose mission is to help build homes for purple martins. Follow a husband and wife team as they trap, tag and follow Black Bears in West Texas. See how Texas Parks and Wildlife employees mobilized to help wildlife after an oil spill.

Invasive Spotlight

Soapberry Borer (*Agrilus prionurus*)

A native of Mexico, the soapberry borer is a beetle that attacks western soapberry. Infested trees can be easily recognized by the exposed sapwood that results when birds and squirrels chip off the bark to feed on the larvae, leaving an accumulation of bark chips at the base of the tree. Infested trees die back from the top, and in response often produce many sprouts along the base of the trunk. Adults leave D-shaped exit holes



when they emerge from the tree. Trees die within three years. The soapberry borer is now found in several counties in Texas.

The adult soapberry borer is about 1/2 to 1 inch long, shiny black, and distinctively marked with four small white spots on the wing covers. Larvae are flat-headed wood borers that may attain an inch in length as they mature. After feeding beneath the bark, the larvae bore into the wood to complete development and pupate.

Because of its negative impacts, the soapberry borer is a Report It! species as part of the Sentinel Pest Network, a component of Texas-invasives.org. Please report any infestations of soapberry borer you observe.

Plant Identification with Dr. Cadenhead

by Lynn Seman

On July 7, several members of the group met up with Dr. J.F. Cadenhead, Retired Extension Range Management Specialist at Texas AgriLife Extension Service, to learn about some of the plants found on the quail study site. Kay Murphy, Larry and Judy Snyder, Joy Parsons, Pete Peterson, Laura Gillis, Amanda Gobeli, and I met up with Dr. Cadenhead at the site at around 7:00am and travelled to several of the mile markers for most of the morning. Finding the abundance of forbs, grasses, and other plants is very important to quail survival and habitat; therefore, understanding what is available on the site is crucial.



One of the first plants that we encountered is the Marestalk (*Conyza canadensis*). This one is found in abundance this year with plants growing from 1 to 2 meters tall. Next we came across Stickleleaf (*Mentzelia oligosperma*) with yellow flowers. Dr. Cadenhead demonstrated how the leaf of this plant would “stick” to your clothing if you come anywhere near it. There was plenty of Croton which produces seeds that help support the quail population, as well as Western Ragweed, a quail favorite food source. We came across Cat-claw Sensitive Briar, Dotted Gayfeather, which has a taproot that can go as deep as 15 feet, Verbena with its distinct purple flowers, Gaillardia, the state wildflower of Oklahoma, and Golden Prairie Clover (*Dalea aurea*). Also, we discovered some Yellow Wood Sorrel, a Buffalo Gourd, some Noseburn, Texas Filaree, a cluster of Rock Daisy, a Texas Geranium, Mule’s Ear, and some Texas Bindweed. As you can tell, we saw many species of range plants.



Some of the grasses that we observed included Threeawn, with seed tops that have 3 parts like a helicopter, Tridens, which have two types- white and rough, and Sideoats Grama, the state grass of Texas. Sideoats Grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*) can be identified by how the blade and stem come together at the “collar” with bulbous

type hairs if the easily identifiable seed heads are not present yet. We were fortunate to come across a ditch which contained two of the “big four” tall grasses in

Texas, Switch Grass and Big Bluestem. Both of these were extremely tall this year! The Big Bluestem can be identified with the “turkey-foot” tops. Switch Grass is in the *Panicum* genus and has an open panicle seed head from 5 to 20 inches in size. These tall grasses are very important to provide cover for quail and foraging for grazing livestock. We found both Arizona Cottontop

grass and Silver Bluestem which can sometimes be confused with each other. Dr. Cadenhead explained how to look for the “football shape” seeds in the Cottontop which the Silver Bluestem lacks. Some other grasses included the distinguishable Hairy Grama with the spike coming off the end of the “eyebrow” shaped seed head. In addition, we found some Texas Grama also known as “Bell” Grama for the bell shaped seed head. Another native grass in the area found was Buffalograss. Buffalograss spreads through runners called stolons and have both male and female plants. The male part of Buffalograss (*Bouteloua dactyloides*)

looks like a small toothbrush on an elevated flag terminal while the female part is a hard bur usually deeper in the grass



clusters. We found Yellow Indian Grass, another one of the “big four” tall grasses. It can be identified by finding little “rabbit ears” at the base of the leaf which is called the ligule. There were many other grass species discovered on the trip- almost too numerous to name them all!

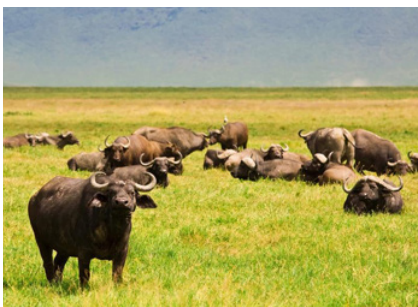
This is the third year that Dr. Cadenhead has volunteered to teach us some of the range plants to help with our quail study. Each year, we learn more and more about the grasses, forbs, and plants on the site. As all of the members would agree, Dr. Cadenhead has been a huge help to our group by donating his time for this hands-on identification trip. As one member quoted, “my head is about to burst with all the new knowledge that he taught us”. We are extremely grateful for him sharing his expertise! In conclusion, as described above, diversity of the plants at the quail study site is amazing! This can directly affect the rise of the quail population at the quail study site.

FACTS FUN

Depending on where you are on the globe, you could be spinning through space at just over 1,000 miles per hour. People on the equator move the fastest, while someone standing on the North or South pole would be perfectly still.



Fourteen new species of dancing frogs were discovered in 2014, raising the global number of known dancing-frog species to 24.



African buffalo herds display voting behavior, in which individuals register their travel preference by standing up, looking in one direction and then lying back down. Only adult females can vote.



Park Wildlife: Our national parks are some of the best places to watch wildlife. This field guide will

help you identify birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians commonly encountered in 100 national parks across the country. Not only that, but it points out native endangered species as well as native poisonous or dangerous species to keep an eye out for in each of the parks included. As an extra bonus, it also gives information on park directions, hours, fees, phone numbers and other important info for getting out and identifying critters.

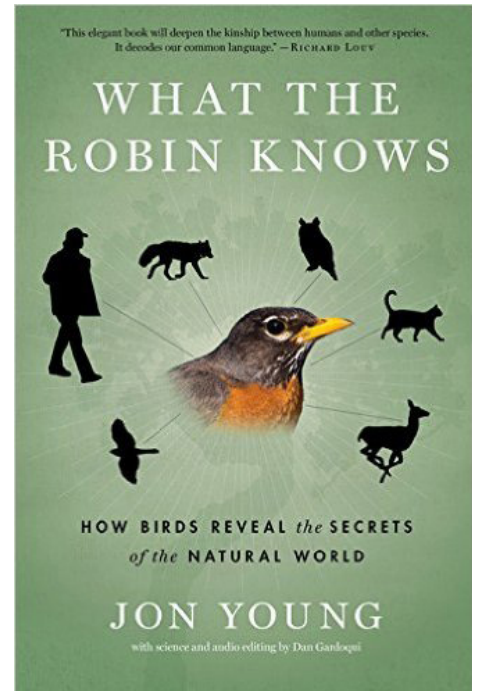


Oh, Ranger! ParkFinder: Can't find where to take a hike? This app will help! Use it to find the nearest parks with the activities you want to do, whether that's hiking, bird watching, canoeing or whatever. This huge database features not only every national park, state park, and federal public land in the country, it also includes 50,000 local parks. With this app, there's no excuse for staying inside!



RESOURCE CORNER

What the Robin Knows: How Birds Reveal the Secrets of the Natural World
by Jon Young
Paperback: 272 pages
ISBN-10: 054400230X
Price: \$10.41 on Amazon



A lifelong birder, tracker, and naturalist, Jon Young is guided by three basic premises: the robin, junco, and other songbirds know everything important about their environment, be it backyard or forest; by tuning in to their vocalizations and behavior, we can acquire much of this wisdom for our own pleasure and benefit; and the birds' companion calls and warning alarms are just as important as their songs. Deep bird language is an ancient discipline, perfected by Native peoples the world over, and science is finally catching up. This groundbreaking book unites the indigenous knowledge, the latest research, and the author's own experience of four decades in the field to lead us toward a deeper connection to the animals and, in the end, a deeper connection to ourselves.

Chapter Contacts:

Terry McKee, President 766-4097, dgm59@aol.com; Kay Murphy, Vice President 704-0406, kay_vince@sbcglobal.net; Judy Snyder, Secretary 569-4534, judithksnyder@gmail.com; Larry Snyder, Treasurer 569-4534, lastime64@gmail.com

Committees Chairperson:

Paula Savage, Newsletter Editor and Designer 691-0231, pasavage@sbcglobal.net; Tami Davis, Website Manager 224-013, tamieducator@gmail.com; Dian Hoehne, Communication Chair 692-7234

Advisor: Robert Mauk, TPWD Advisor 766-2383, Robert.Mauk@tpwd.Texas.gov