

Rolling Plains Chapter Texas Master Naturalist

<https://txmn.org/rollingplains>

[\(Rolling Plains Chapter TMN Program | Facebook\)](#)

NEXT CHAPTER MEETING - OCTOBER 1, 7pm AT MSU BOLIN SCIENCE HALL, ROOM 209

From the desk of the Chapter President

While I was walking with my dog, Abby recently, we crossed paths with several mama Wolf Spiders, their abdomens covered in babies, and all were moving to the South. I found myself wondering if spider moms have the same trouble that human moms have when traveling with kids. Do the “kids” constantly clamor for snacks and restroom breaks? Are her babies bored and asking, “Are we there yet?” Can you imagine having hundreds of children to gather up at every single rest area and point of interest? My mom had her hands full with just 2 kids and, according to Google, a Wolf Spider can have up to 100 babies on her back. That sounds like a rough “vacation” to me!

With the arrival of fall, it seems everything has a renewed sense of urgency. Plants are sucking up the recent rain for a last-minute burst of green. Birds, dragonflies and spiders are all moving South, and we are anxiously scanning the skies awaiting the Monarch migration. As I pause to look at the migration map on the Journey North website, I see that they are well on their way and almost here! We will be passing out Monarch tags at the October meeting but if you happen to see a monarch roost in our area, PLEASE LET US KNOW!!! We can get together and go tag some butterflies!

In Chapter news, Thanks to everyone who helped with the Sikes Lake Cleanup at MSU and the TMN Adopt-A-Highway project. There was so much trash and both areas look much better now.

The Texas Pollinator BioBlitz is coming up October 11-27, 2024, so on Saturday, October 19, the Chapter is planning an outing open to the public at Lake Arrowhead State Park from 10:00a - 12:00p. After the Blitz, we would like you and your family to bring your lunch and have a picnic! Ranger L is checking on the venue for us so we will let you know exactly where we'll meet as we get closer to the date.

I hope everyone is enjoying the cooler temperatures and that you all got a little rain. Hope to see you all at the meeting on October 1st!

Laura

Editor's note: I cannot express enough my appreciation to everyone that contributed to this month's newsletter. It's great to have the help. And although this one is rather lengthy, I hope you find the time to sit down, relax, and soak in all the information.

As a small chapter, we need all the help we can get from our members to be successful. And though the newsletter is just a very small part of that success, your input is always welcome and appreciated.

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A Book Review: What An Owl Knows

By Kay Murphy

"A captivating and in places touching science narrative, this book is a hoot from beginning to end." *The Inquisitive Biologist*

This book is a fine balance of an exhaustive report of new scientific research and the personal stories of the people all over the world who study and love owls. Many of these people have given their entire lives to study owls and Jennifer Ackerman takes us all over the globe to meet with them. I was totally captivated by her narrative.

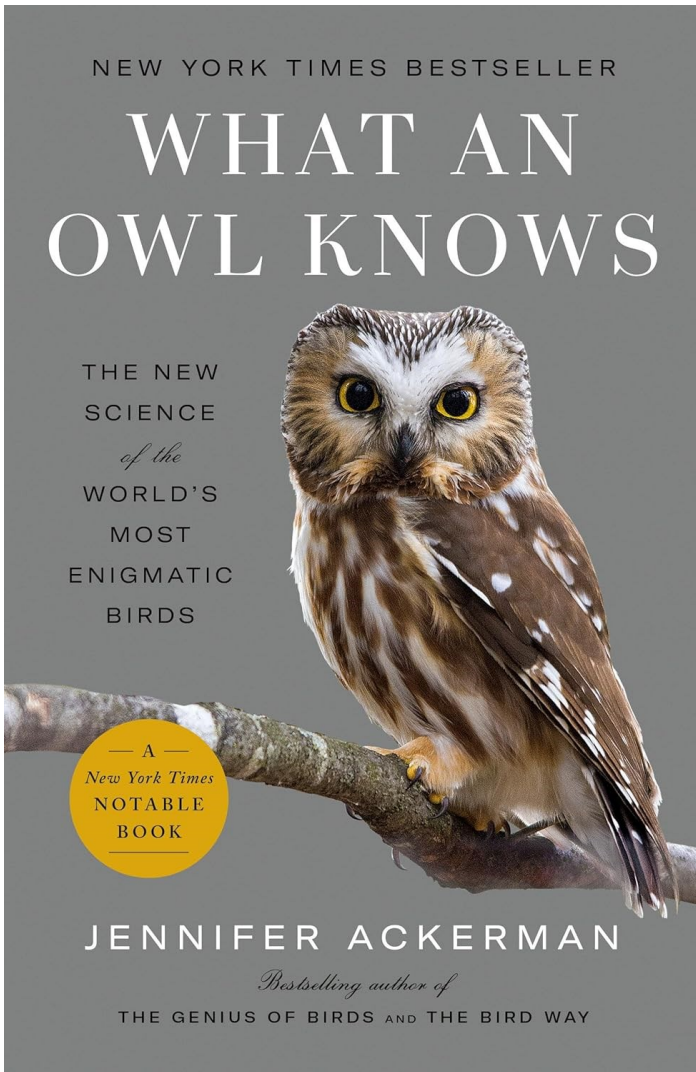
Each chapter dispels many of the myths that surround the mystery of these birds. She explores what new science has revealed about their anatomy, biology and behavior, hunting skills, sensory prowess, and what makes them so different from other birds. The insights come from observing owls in the wild and in captivity. New information about how owls communicate, court and mate, raise their young, and migrate. Some of the most surprising observations come from a scientist who simply sits in a forest for days silent and still just listening.

My favorite chapter is about owl talk. The story about Karla Bloem and Alice the Great Horned Owl is especially fascinating. The relationship took years, but Bloem learned that owls hoot and make a variety of sounds that convey meaning in each sound. Also, owls' calls are hard-wired, not learned. Owls begin hooting before they hatch. Bloem is the executive director of the International Owl Center, a nature center that "seeks to make the world a better place for owls through education and research." Her observations and interactions with Alice are hilarious and touching.

Other engaging chapters reveal how owls have adapted to habitat destruction and climate change, what captive birds have taught us, and how humans have depicted owls in ancient cultures through art and stories. Gail Buhl, who is a leading authority on training rehabilitated captive owls, says that owls may appear calm and stoic around humans, but they are just internalizing their

stress. She says this is a most important point for trainers and rehabbers to know when learning how to behave around owls. She wants us to treat owls "not as mini humans in feathers, but as their own entity." Other scientists remark how unique their personalities and behavior can be, "They are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time." (Henry Beston, *Naturalist*)

I especially love the photographs and delicate black and white drawings, so I am happy I bought the book. People have said that the audible version narrated by the author is great, also. I am so impressed by this author; I want to read her 2016 book *The Genius of Birds*.



What better time than Halloween for a story about my Bracken Cave Experience

Story by Lynn Seman Photos by Lynn and Lee Seman

Recently, my husband and I made the 6-hour drive to an area just outside of San Antonio to visit the famous Bracken Cave. Bracken Cave is the summer home of the largest maternity colony of Mexican free-tailed bats in the world! Every evening before sunset in an over 3-hour display, the flying mammals swirl counterclockwise out of the cave to go on their evening feeding spree. They devour tons of moths each night which benefits agriculture by eliminating devastating crop pests, saving farmers millions of dollars each year. We waited until the latter part of August to experience this wonder of nature because the pups, born earlier in the summer, are then old enough to join their mothers in the nightly adventure, raising the number of bats to between 15 to 20 million! In the past, I have witnessed bats exit the Congress Street bridge in Austin and the bats at the overpass bridge in Georgetown, but those experiences don't even come close to the massive exodus at Bracken Cave!

Our guides and hosts (some who were Texas Master Naturalists from the area) gave us an introduction and explained that this experience involves all your senses, except for taste, of course. They explained how the location of the cave is now surrounded



by land now owned by the Nature Conservancy who purchased the land to keep the colony under protection.

We sat at the entrance which is set up with stone benches for viewers to sit on. We remained quiet while waiting for the bats to make their exit, which is usually right before sunset. The temperature was still around 100 degrees Fahrenheit with no breeze.

The smell of guano was extremely strong causing a few people seated nearby to cough uncomfortably. My thoughts turned to the history lesson explained earlier about how during the civil war, the cave was guarded by soldiers because the guano (bat poop) was used to make valuable gun-

powder. I wondered to myself, did those soldiers also cough back then or did they wear bandanas to protect themselves? Bracken Cave is definitely full of guano! Each day the bats deposit about 50 tons of it which can easily be smelled before reaching the entrance.

We waited in silence until you could hear a few soft wing flaps and then a few more, and then wow! It was like a fan had been turned on as the bats came swirling out of the cave causing a welcomed constant breeze on my cheeks. They continued to pour out of the cave in a counterclockwise stream of wings and bodies synchronized in flight. I cringed to think if any fell or bumped into each other what would happen to them. If they don't make it out, they fall to a cave floor covered with dermestid flesh eating beetles that would immediately clean up the dead bodies.



We witnessed a family of raccoons climbing up the edge of the cave entrance who were hoping to find some unsuccessful exiting bats. Some people have witnessed snakes waiting for the unlucky bats, but I did not see a single snake that evening.

The bat breeze, wings symphony, and earthy smells continued for seconds, then minutes, and then hours! They say it takes over 3 hours for the bats to make their exit, but disappointingly, they didn't allow us to stay for the full exodus.

During the flight, they encouraged people to move over to the overlook area, so I took advantage of that opportunity. At the overlook, the stream of bats flew directly over your head where you could get a much closer view of the bats leaving for dinner. I strained my neck by continuously "looking up" and when I finally returned to my seat, I slightly tripped over my feet from the dizziness and disorientation and then sat down embarrassed by my clumsiness.



There are a handful of events that I have witnessed in nature that bring tears to my eyes. This was one of them! Nature has some amazing spectacles that sometimes cannot be explained unless you witness them in person with a full sensory experience! No matter how good AI can try to imitate what is real, there is nothing that can match an in-person experience of those graceful flying mammals leaving Bracken Cave as they have done for many, many years past. If you ever get the chance to go there, take it! You won't regret it.

Bracken Cave is the summer home to the largest colony of bats in the world. An estimated 20 million [Mexican free-tailed bats](#) roost in the cave from March to October making it the largest known concentration of mammals.^[1] The cave is located in southern [Comal County, Texas](#), outside the city of [San Antonio](#). The 100-foot (30 m)-wide crescent shaped opening to the cave lies at the bottom of a sinkhole, formed when the roof of the cave collapsed.

The cave and undeveloped 1,521 acres (616 ha) around it are owned by [Austin, Texas-based Bat Conservation International](#), which restores the land to support native vegetation and an abundant variety of wildlife. Bat Conservation International bought the initial 697 acres (282 ha) from the Marbach family in 1992, and has been assisted in preservation efforts by [The Nature Conservancy](#).^{[1][2]} Access to the cave is restricted to protect the habitat of the resident bats. Bat Conservation International offers evening guided tours to the cave to watch the bats emerge from the cave.

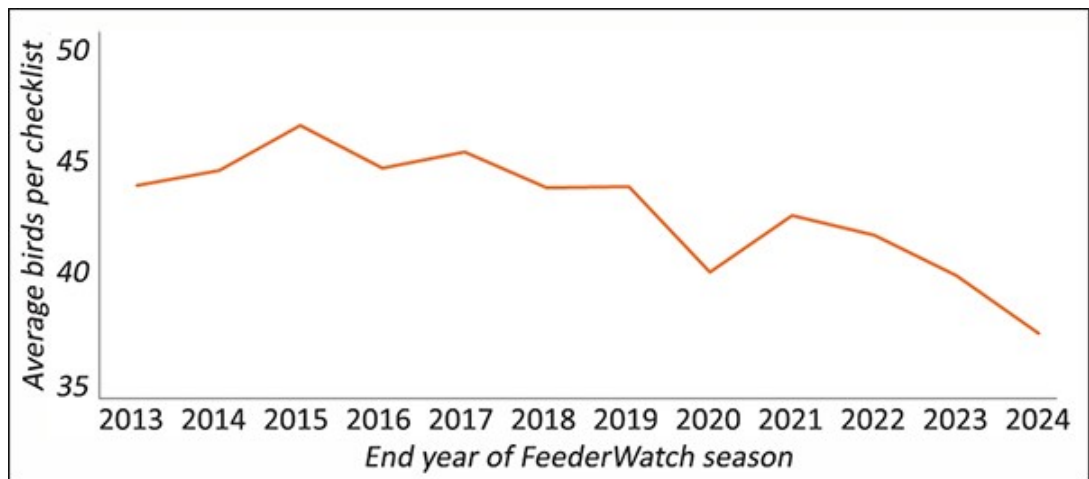
Project Feederwatch Starting Soon by Penny Miller

One of my favorite thing to do in the winter is participating in Project Feederwatch. This is a study of bird populations sponsored by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Birds Canada. According to the Project Feederwatch website, this will be my 27th season.



My primary reason for taking part is that I like to watch the birds. I feed them regardless, so why not provide information that can help up learn more about them? The picture at the left is one from my backyard a couple of years ago during a particularly harsh bit of weather. The interesting thing, although you can't see it without enlarging the picture, is that there are some yellow-headed blackbirds in this photo. I had never seen yellow-headed blackbirds in the winter here--I thought they were a migrant that passed through in spring and fall. Apparently, a few do hang around (or at least, did that winter).

Last winter was particularly disappointing. I didn't have many birds at all--neither in numbers of species or in numbers of individuals. Some of the other local people who participate mentioned they were having a disappointing season as well. I chalked it up to a relatively mild winter. However, recently I received the newsletter for the project summarizing some of the data from last year, and we were not alone. Last year was a bad year for every one--in fact the numbers of individual birds seen was down significantly everywhere.



You might find the possible reasons for these low numbers interesting. Check out the blog post. However, bird populations are declining everywhere. The link takes you to the Cornell Lab's page highlighting a study showing that nearly 3B birds have disappeared since 1970. This is not good news for us. Another reason to do what you can to provide habitat for all species, not just birds.

The Project Feederwatch starts November 1 and runs through April 30. If you want to take part, there is a small charge. If you are a member of the Lab, the cost is \$18. It is a few dollars more for those who are not. If you are new to the project or don't know your birds very well, Cornell will send you a poster of common birds. It's also a good idea to have access to a field guide. Here's the link to sign up.

I hope you'll take part. This is a good project to do with kids as well. They learn more about birds and about the scientific method.

Good Birding!

To find out more about Project Feederwatch go to [FeederWatch - Count Feeder Birds for Science](#)

This is a chapter approved volunteer project under *FR: Project Feederwatch*

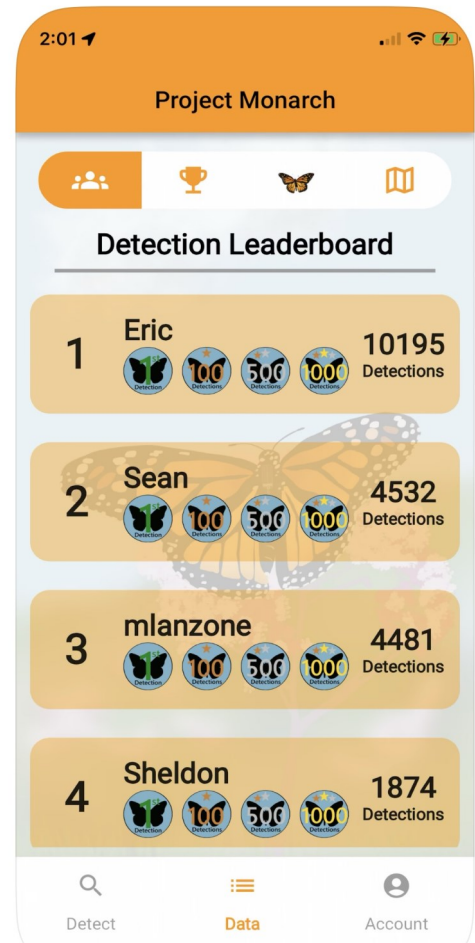
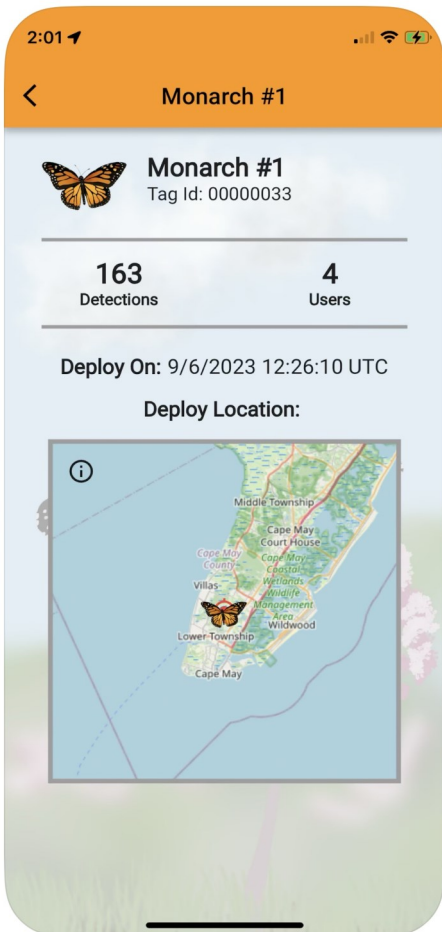
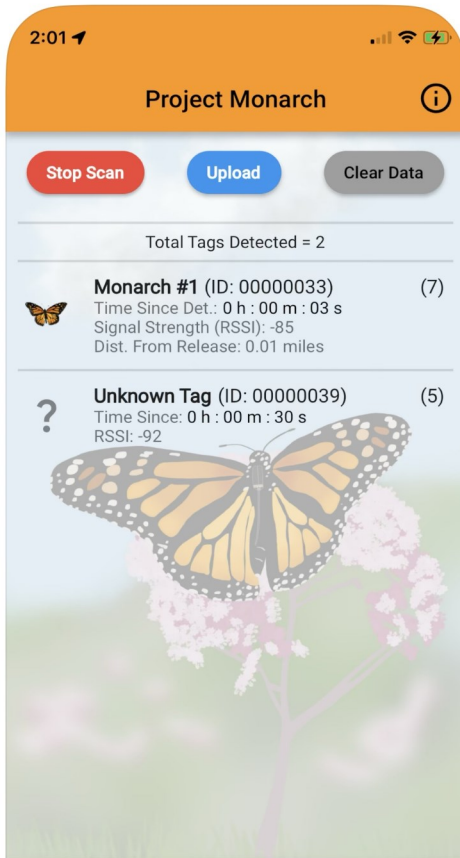
Project Monarch—An App to check out

(A tip of the editor's hat to Tiffany Herring for the head's up about the availability of this app.)

Project Monarch is an effort to leverage recent advances in tracking technology, that have enabled the development of the world's smallest tracking devices, to track Monarch migration.

The tracking devices on the monarch butterflies transmit at the same frequency as Bluetooth which means that everyone with a smartphone is carrying around a receiver in their pocket. This revolutionary approach can potentially create the largest wildlife tracking receiver network in the world, but only if members of the public download and use the free Project Monarch app.

These data will allow scientists to track the movements of monarch butterflies in detail never previously imagined. We will see how monarchs utilize key stopping points along migratory routes and learn more about the speed and direction of migration, helping identify the most important sites for habitat conservation and restoration. help guide conservation planning and lead to increases in monarch populations.



Rolling PlainSpotlight

Chapter Happenings



Left: Jim and Barb Price doing their part in litter patrol for our adopt a highway program.



Right: Penny Miller proudly displays her litter "booty."



Left: Cindy Huckabee stands guard at the collection point for litter pickup.

(Sandy Underwood also participated in this worthwhile effort along with Lynn Seman who was behind the camera.)

Rolling PlainSpotlight

Chapter Happenings



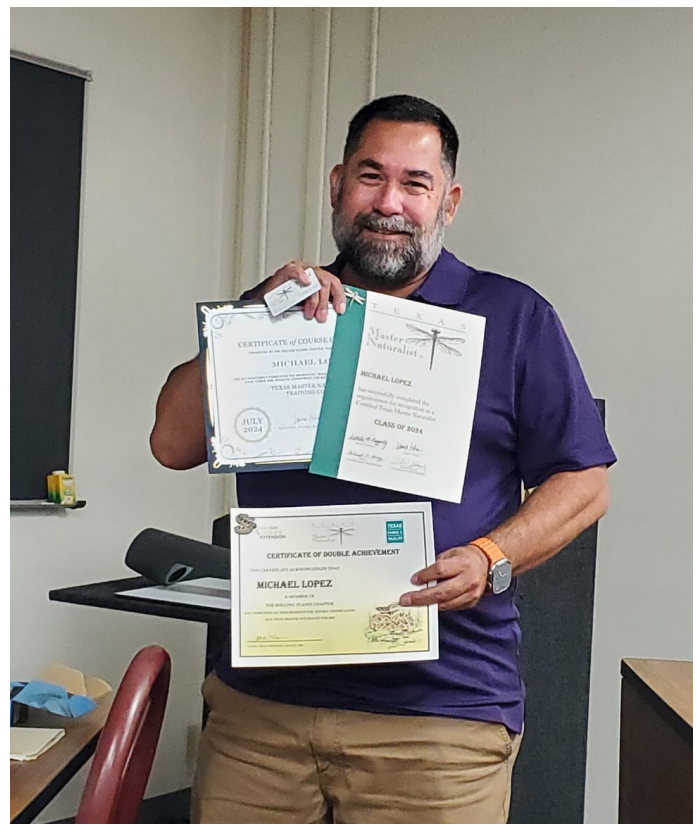
What can we say about our 2024 trainees that hasn't already been said? What a fantastic group of Master Naturalists we have joining us!

Left: Jacob Stripling with his Graduation Certificate, his Initial Certification Certificate and pin as well as his TMN name tag

Lower Left: Elliott King with her Graduation Certificate

Lower Right: Double certifier, Michal Lopez with his Graduation Certificate, his Initial Certification Certificate and pin as well as his 2024 Certificate and pin for a double certification and name tag.

(Photo Credit: Debra Halter)



Rolling PlainSpotlight

Chapter Happenings



Left: Ahtziry Herrera (AZ) with her Graduation Certificate

Bottom Left: Damian Flores with his Graduation Certificate

Bottom Right: Mariana Ramirez-Flores with her Graduation Certificate and her Initial Certification Certificate and Pin and name tag. (Mariana should have also received credit for her double certification but the VMS Admin made an error. However, she'll receive it this next meeting and, hopefully, we'll have that photo next month.)

Photo Credit: Debra Halter



Rolling PlainSpotlight

Chapter Happenings



Left: Christine Dison with her Graduation Certificate

Bottom Left: Cynthia Blanchard with her Graduation Certificate

Lower Right: Hmm! Larry Snyder? This fellow claims to have recorded 3,000 hours of volunteer time. His claim is currently under audit by the chapter VMS Admin.

Photo Credit: Debra Halter

Not pictured but also graduating:

Joyce Reed

Charles Peterson, Graduation, Initial Certification and 2024 Certification for a double certification!.

