

OBSERVATIONS

from the Tierra Grande Chapter of the Texas Master Naturalist

SECOND QUARTER 2015

FOCUS ON THE SANDIA SPRINGS WETLAND



CELEBRATION AT THE SANDIA WETLAND PROJECT

On Saturday, May 16, TGMN members gathered to celebrate the success of the Sandia Wetland Project in Balmorhea. The celebration included BBQ and beer (graciously provided by Ellen and Don Weinacht) plus an array of salads, beans, and desserts contributed by TGMN members.



TGMN members (too many to name individually) posed for a photo at the christening of the new bird blind.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE SANDIA SPRINGS WETLAND



Dave Hedges directed and did most of the construction of the wetland ponds. The bird blind was designed by Mike Carter. He, Steve Elfring and Dave Mainz did most of the work. They had help on the first day from Robert Steele and Anne Adkins. They also had help from Abel Rodriguez. The bird blind took three plus weekends to complete. Dave Mainz built the gates that control the level of water in each pond. They are four years old now and are in need of maintenance



Top photo: Dave Hedges and Ellen Weinacht christen the new site of the Sandia Springs Wetland.

Middle photo: The first pond at the Sandia Springs Wetland.



Bottom photo: The first shorebird photographed by Dave Mainz was a curlew.



CONSTRUCTION continued

Steve Elfring, Anne Adkins, Robert Steele, Michael Carter, Abel Rodriguez, Ryan Anthony (a graduate student studying the wetland), and Dave Mainz worked tirelessly on the construction of the bird blind. Work on the project began on January 17 finished on March 14.

THANK YOU to everyone that helped to make the Sandia Springs Wetland a reality!!

All photos of the construction of the Sandia Springs Wetland are by David Mainz.



CONSTRUCTION continued



The bird blind is finished!



Here is the information sign at the entrance to the wetland area. Since this photo was taken this area now has a picnic table under the triangle sunshades. It is a beautiful spot to look out over the ponds.

SANDIA SPRINGS WETLAND AUDIO PRESENTATION

Please check out this 10-minute feature on the Sandia Springs Wetland produced by Megan Wilde She produced this mp3 file for a radio class. This is the full version of her presentation which she later whittled down for Marfa Public Radio.

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/xys900m7b8s0apy/sandia%20wetland.mp3?dl=0>

Here you can find the full calendar of volunteer and advanced training opportunities. When you click on an event, you can see all of the specific details about the event. Thank you Linda!

TGMN MEMBERS AT THE VOLUNTEER BIG BEND APPRECIATION LUNCHEON



Tierra Grande members Dave Hedges (not present), Mike Carter (not present), and Ellen Weinacht were named Volunteers of the Year. They were recognized at the Volunteer Big Bend Appreciation Luncheon May 4, 2015 in Alpine. The luncheon was sponsored by the Pilot Club of Alpine. Front row, from left, Rosemary & Art Dennis; back row, from left, Edy & Steve Elfring, Albert Bork, Mary Malmgren, and Ellen Weinacht attended the event. They are all wearing the new chapter t-shirt bearing Tom Curry's Horned Lizard Cowboy. (Photo by Albert Bork.)

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SANDIA SPRINGS WETLAND

The following article on the Sandia Springs Wetland was published in the January 2015 edition of Texas Co-op Power. TGMN members Ellen Weinacht and Rosemary Dennis were able to obtain permission for us to reprint this article in our newsletter. The article, *Sandia Springs Wetlands*, by Lonnn Taylor, was originally published by Texas Christian University (TCU) Press in *Texas People, Texas Places*.

We would like to thank the author, Lonnn Taylor, and TCU Press for allowing us to reprint this article.

Here is a brief note about the author taken from the TCU Press website:

Lonnn Taylor is a historian and writer who retired to Fort Davis, Texas, with his wife, Dedie, after twenty years as a historian at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, DC. He received a BA in history and government from Texas Christian University in 1961 and did graduate work at New York University before returning to Texas to enter the museum field. He served as curator and director of the University of Texas at Austin's Winedale Historical Center from 1970 to 1977; as curator of history at the Dallas Historical Society from 1977 to 1979; and as curator and deputy director of the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe from 1980 to 1984. He writes a weekly column about Texas called "The Rambling Boy," for the *Marfa Big Bend Sentinel*.

His two books, *Texas, My Texas* (published in 2012), and *Texas People, Texas Places* (published in 2014), are available on <http://www.prs.tcu.edu>.

Sandia Springs Wetlands

'Texas People, Texas Places' book excerpt: A project of pure, uncluttered, non-bureaucratic private enterprise

BY LONN TAYLOR

IN THE FALL OF 2010, ELLEN WEINACHT of Balmorhea went on a birding trip with some friends to the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. As she was watching hundreds of sandhill cranes feeding in the wetlands along the Rio Grande, she thought, "I want a place like this at home." Now she has one. It is called the Sandia Springs Wetlands, and I spent a day last week visiting it with Weinacht and one of the people who helped her create it, David Hedges of Fort Davis.

The Sandia Springs Wetlands is actually a land restoration project. Four hundred years ago Balmorhea was what the Spanish called a *cienega*, a marsh. Antonio de Espejo used that word to describe the area when he camped there in 1583 on his way back home from an expedition to New Mexico. The *cienega* was fed by six springs, now called Phantom Lake, San Solomon, Giffen, Saragosa, and West and East Sandia springs. These springs all rise from a five-hundred-foot-thick layer of Cretaceous limestone that underlies Balmorhea, a layer of rock that is riddled with fissures and caverns that hold water. The largest of the springs, San Solomon, which now empties into the swimming pool at Balmorhea State Park, has historically flowed at about twenty million gallons a day. Phantom Lake spring, several miles west of San Solomon, issues from a cave in a limestone bluff and produces about three million gallons a day. Add in the other four springs, and that's a lot of water. When Espejo arrived he found the Jumano Indians using it to irrigate fields of corn and beans.

In the 1850s, Mexican settlers from Chihuahua arrived and built irrigation ditches leading from San Solomon spring to their fields. They called their settlement, which clustered around the base of the little ridge that runs just east of present-day Balmorhea, Indio. A large cross on top of the end of that ridge, easily visible from the Carrasco store across the highway, marks the spot today. They probably also gave San Solomon spring its name, which is something of a mystery since there is no San Solomon on the Catholic calendar of saints. The name probably comes from an Indian word that sounded like "San Solomon" to those settlers. In 1896 a post office was established at Indio and the name was changed to Brogado, supposedly in honor of Father Brocadus Ecken, the Dutch Carmelite priest at St. Joseph's Church in Fort Davis who held services in Indio. The name Balmorhea did not appear on the map until 1906, when a town site by that name was platted between Indio and San Solomon spring by three land promoters named Balcum, Morrow, and Rhea, thus Bal-mo-rhea.

In 1871, Fort Davis entrepreneur and land speculator Daniel Murphy established a farm near San Solomon spring and dug a canal that diverted the water to his vegetable crops, which he sold to the army at Fort Davis. The adjacent landowners objected, and a series of lawsuits that kept the courts busy through most of the 1870s and '80s resulted in a ruling that Murphy had to share the water with his neighbors. Eventually a network of irrigation canals and ditches grew up around all six springs,



Sandia Springs Wetlands and the nearby farmlands provide a haven for snow geese that winter in the area.

and by the time Lake Balmorhea was built and the Reeves County Water Improvement District Number One was created in 1915, the marshes had been drained and turned into fields and pastures.

Weinacht and Hedges have taken a small step toward reversing that process. They have created three small ponds, fed by the Sandia Canal, and are building a fourth pond the size of the first three combined. When completed, the wetlands will cover about six acres and will provide a habitat for migrating shorebirds. The ponds are easily accessible to the public from County Road 313, which runs south from State Highway 17, just where the state highway turns west after crossing under Interstate 10. There are three inviting picnic tables beside the ponds.

The morning that Hedges and Weinacht and I were there was sunny and pleasantly cool. There had been a severe hailstorm the previous evening, and shredded leaves from cottonwood trees covered the ground around us. Shorebirds were already arriv-

ing. As we sat at one of the picnic tables and talked, a flight of half a dozen or so western sandpipers skimmed over the water and settled on the pond nearest us, immediately standing up in the shallow water and plucking organisms out of it with their long bills. "They are on their way to Alaska, where they nest in the spring," Hedges said. "I'm surprised that they have any feathers left after last night," Weinacht said, adding that eight inches of hail had fallen at Saragosa, just up the road. We also saw several families of northern shoveler ducks on the other side of the pond, and as we walked between the ponds, scared up a green-winged teal that was resting in a clump of grass on the bank. She flew off to join a cinnamon teal and a blue-winged teal paddling on the water. These birds, Hedges pointed out, were just the beginning of the spring migration.

The remarkable thing about the Sandia Springs Wetlands is that Ellen Weinacht and her husband, Don, created it themselves, on their own land, with absolutely

no aid from the federal, state, or local government, and they have made it available to the public. When they first got the idea they consulted Hedges and Madge Lindsay of Fort Davis, who are fellow birders and naturalists. Hedges helped them pick the site, using a soil map of Reeves County to locate a patch of clayey soil that would hold water. They have enlisted the Tierra Grande chapter of the Texas Master Naturalists to assist with the planning and development, and the master naturalists have created committees of volunteers to help with water management, interpretation, and plant species. But the project is pure, uncluttered, non-bureaucratic private enterprise, done in the straightforward Texas way. The Weinachts had a good idea and went ahead with it. As the Gary P. Nunn songs says, "When a Texan fancies he'll take his chances, chances will be taken."

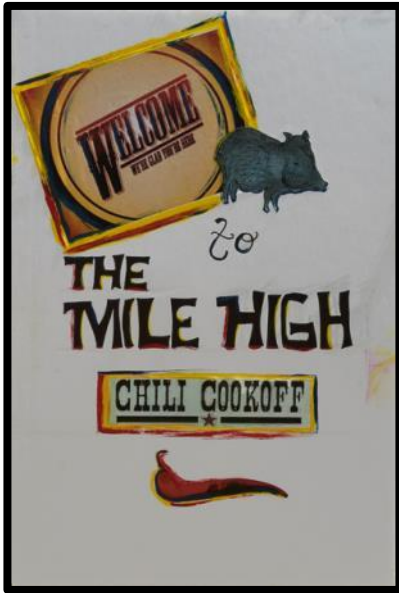
Excerpted from 'Texas People, Texas Places: More Musings of the Rambling Boy,' TCU Press; prs.tcu.edu. (Original column: April 26, 2012)

TGMN RECOGNIZED BY TxDOT

TGMN was recently recognized by the Texas Department of Transportation for its contribution to the Adopt-a-Highway program. Thank you to all of those that have helped to pick up trash along the TGMN section of highway!!



DAVIS MOUNTAINS CHILI COOKOFF



DAVIS MOUNTAINS STATE PARK CHILI COOKOFF

On Saturday and Sunday, April 25 and 26 the Davis Mountains State Park hosted their first annual Chili Appreciation Society International (CASI) Chili Cook-off.

It was an officially sanctioned event, meaning that entrants could earn points in order to qualify for the Terlingua International Championship Chili Cook-off in November.

Contestants must pre-qualify for the Terlingua Chili Cook-off by qualifying and receiving an invitation. This requires cooks to earn points by placing in CASI sanctioned Chili Cook-offs. A cook earns 4 points for first place, 3 points for second, 2 points for third, and a point for fourth through tenth place. The total number of points required for qualification ranges from 6 points to 12 points and depends on the cook's state of residence.



TGMN member Gary Freeman takes a lunch break while volunteering at the Chili Cook-off.



TGMN members Steve Elfring, Becky Haynie, Vicki Lowe, Maurine Pendleton, and Kate Mahoney (not pictured) volunteered at the Chili Cook-off.

DAVIS MOUNTAINS CHILI COOKOFF



STORY OF THE SANDIA SPRINGS WETLAND

This is taken from the information/bulletin board at the entrance to the wetland area.

Local ranchers Ellen and Don Weinacht have long been interested in the birds they see on their property. That interest led them to improve habitat and provide suitable nesting sites for their avian visitors and



residents during the past decade. Included in those efforts was the installation of a Burrowing Owl nesting structure on their land, and removal of invasive Russian olive.

Two years ago, Ellen visited New Mexico's Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, where she was inspired by the sheer numbers of overwintering birds. She was particularly impressed by the tens of thousands of Snow Geese and Sandhill Cranes. She was also struck by the similarity between the lands surrounding the Refuge and that of Balmorhea, and thought it might be possible to create a smaller series of wetland ponds on her own land.





When she returned from Bosque, Ellen took her idea to Don, who signed on immediately. Don selected the site for the project in a place on their land that had available water and was easily accessed by the public. Work on the first two ponds began in the spring on 2011. Thus was born the Sandia Springs Wetland Restoration.

Several months later, Ellen invited the Tierra Grande Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists to become a partner in the project. Current partners in the project include Saving Birds Thru Habitat, Omena, MI, The Nature Conservancy, U.S Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 2 Migratory Bird Office, Albuquerque, NM, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 2 Inventory and Monitoring and National Wildlife Refuge System, Albuquerque, NM, Borderlands Research Institute, Sul Ross State University, Alpine, TX.

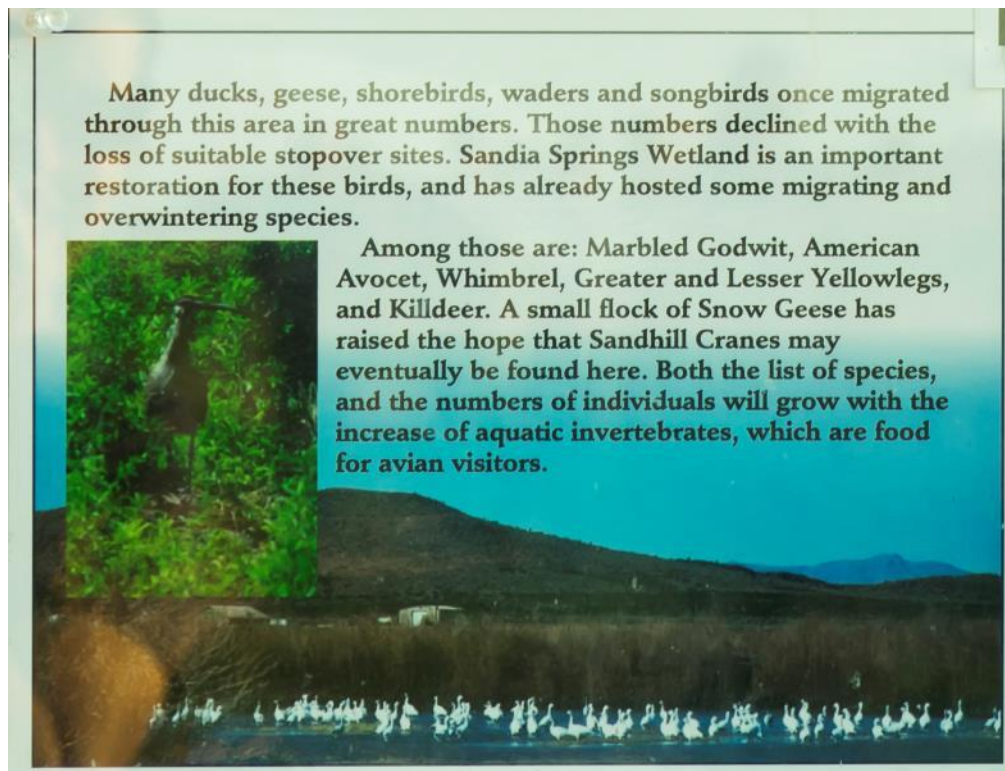


The Nature Conservancy

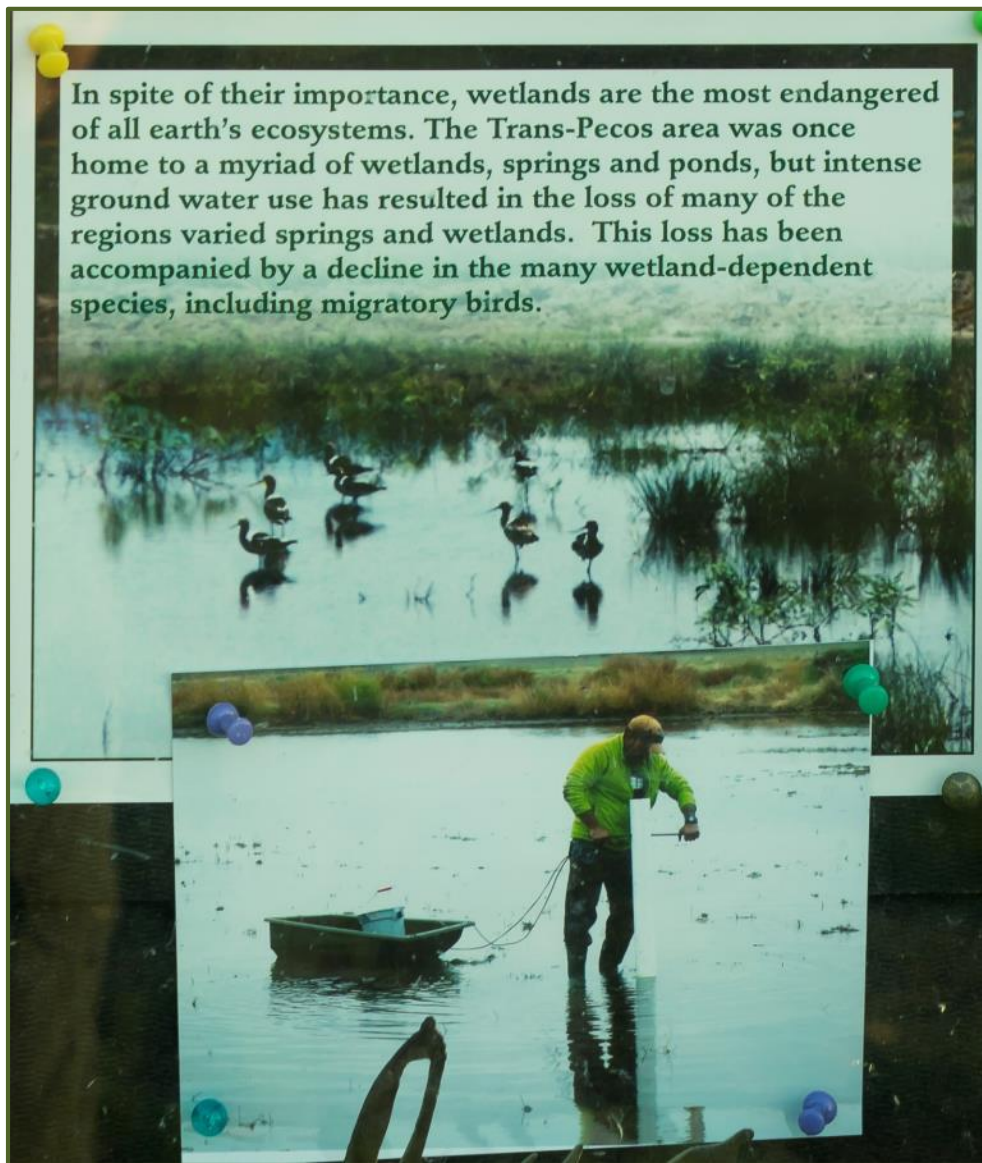


Tierra Grande Chapter
Texas Master Naturalist





In spite of their importance, wetlands are the most endangered of all earth's ecosystems. The Trans-Pecos area was once home to a myriad of wetlands, springs and ponds, but intense ground water use has resulted in the loss of many of the regions varied springs and wetlands. This loss has been accompanied by a decline in the many wetland-dependent species, including migratory birds.



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Today there are five ponds. Water levels are controlled by gates between the ponds in order to provide appropriate depths for avian visitors and to allow for management of wetland vegetation.

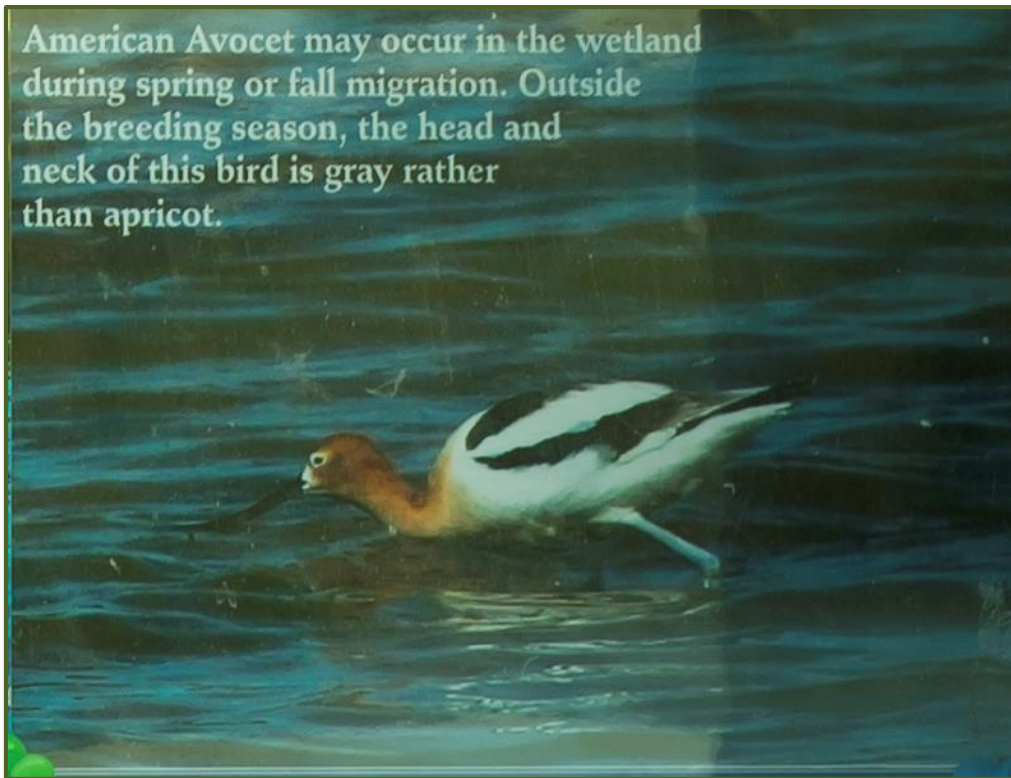
Plans are in place to improve the value of the wetlands by adding proper vegetation and increasing aquatic invertebrates. Appropriate native shrubs and wildflowers will be added around the ponds to add to the complexity of the wetlands. These plantings will attract wetland dependent migrating songbirds and insects such as

those shown here: Yellow Warbler, Great Spangled Fritillary butterfly and 12 Spotted Skimmer dragonfly.



Wetlands are more than just marshes, swamps, ponds or bogs. They are complex ecosystems that work for all of life. They play significant roles in our environment; they act as water purification systems - filtering out pollutants like fertilizers and herbicides, they help in flood control, and they aid in shoreline stability for lakes, rivers and other waterways. Wetlands are among the most biologically diverse of all ecosystems, providing habitats for a wide variety of plants, insects, amphibians and birds.

American Avocet may occur in the wetland during spring or fall migration. Outside the breeding season, the head and neck of this bird is gray rather than apricot.



Common Yellowthroat. This small, wetland loving warbler may be found in surrounding vegetation at any time outside the breeding season.



2015 Tierra Grande Chapter Officers, Advisors, and Committee Chairs

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Vice-President: Toni Arnold
Secretary: Sandy Lynch
Treasurer: Chris Pipes
Past-President: Pam Pipes

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Committee Chairs:

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Newsletter: Kate Mahoney
Outreach: Jill Goodwin
Programs: Mary Malmgren
TGTMN-DMSP Friends: Dave Mainz
Volunteer Service Projects & Advanced Training: Linda Hedges

Stories, photos, and ideas for the newsletter are welcome.
Please email them to Kate Mahoney, ka_mahoney@yahoo.com

TIERRA GRANDE MASTER NATURALIST CALENDAR

<http://txmn.org/tierra/calendar>

Here you can find the full calendar of volunteer and advanced training opportunities.
When you click on an event, you can see all of the specific details about the event.
Thank you Linda!