May Program:

Insects of the Hill Country

Ed Gage has worked as an entomologist for 30 years. He has served as county extension agent in for three counties in two states. He has been an Integrated Pest Management specialist with Texas A&M, as well as with the Texas Department of Agriculture. Ed has done research in agriculture for over twenty years, as well as applied that research as a regulatory entomologist revising laws related to agricultural pests. He has also been a part of the quarantine actions to eradicate destructive pests from Texas. An ecologist and naturalist, he is working on the insects of Texas.

Other interests include photography, geology, archeology, paleontology, managing the Texas Museum of Entomology, publishing on new insect species and growing orchids. Ed has a B.S. in Biology/Anthropology and a MS in Entomology. Ed is also a Master Naturalist, and a member of our Hill Country Chapter.

President's Message

by Sandy Peña

On May 1st, Mother Nature once again proved that she has the last word. Despite our "best laid plans" and months of preparation, our chapter's "May Day with Mother Nature" event got rained out, and how! I awoke way before dawn to great claps of thunder and lightning so bright it hurt my closed eyes. The storm was still going full blast by the time I got to the Kerrville-Schreiner Park at 7:30, and the temperature was dropping like a rock. A few other hardy MNs showed up, too, but we all knew it was a no-go. And what a great line-up of speakers and demonstrators we had recruited, too. The chapter owes a huge thank-you to: George Tinsley, who chaired the effort, Barbara Lowenthal and Ernest Tremayne, who also served on the planning committee, and many other MNs who volunteered to be speakers, demonstrators, or to help out in other ways: Maggie Tatum, Ed Gage, Lee Haile, John Rogers, Alice Bulechek, Myrna Langford, Julie Campbell, Bob Richie, as well as our board advisors, Kip Kiphart, Rufus Stephens, Scott Loveland, and Charles Kneupper. I'd also like to thank Barbara Rippey and Tim Hufstedler of the Kerrville City Parks Dept. for working so closely with us in planning the event.

Just a reminder again that we're now into our official application period for the 2004 fall class, so please help us find some good candidates for becoming Master Naturalists! Myrna will have some applications available at the May meeting. And please mark your calendar for our special June family picnic/social in Louise Hays Park on Monday, June 28 (our regular meeting date). A special thanks to Emily and Jim Matheson for putting this event together for us. More details in the June newsletter.

CALENDAR

"Approved AT" indicates that an event has been approved as Advanced Training for our Chapter.

For **Cibolo Nature Center events**, contact Cibolo at **(830) 249-4616 or by e-mail at nature@cibolo.org.**

Class sizes are limited, so it is important to pre-register. Fees apply to some events.

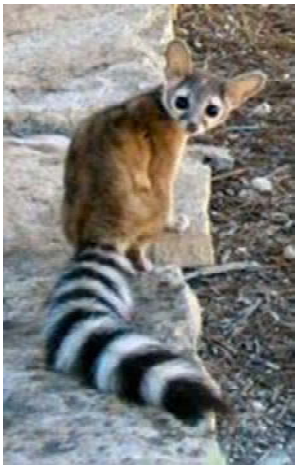
May 19: Master Naturalist - Hill Country Chapter- Board Meeting - Noon at Riverside Nature Center. Chapter members may attend.

May 22 12:30 PM – 4:30 PM: Tree and Shrub Identification by Susan Sander sponsored by Club Ed (Kerrville Adult Education) and Riverside Nature Center. Workshop fee is $45, and part of fee goes to Riverside Nature Center. You must pre-register at 830-895-4386 or www.kerrvilleisd.net/clubed . This workshop will teach the use of the Tree Identification Key, a botanical decision-tree system that will allow you to correctly identify most Hill Country trees and shrubs by observing their

leaf structure and characteristics. You will have practical hands-on practice identifying trees at Riverside. APPROVED AT

May 24 Texas Master Naturalist - Hill Country Chapter, "Insects of the Hill Country" by Chapter member and **entomologist Ed Gage** at **6:30 PM** at Riverside Nature Center, 150 Francisco Lemos St, Kerrville *(see article above)*.

Hill Country Critters



The RINGTAIL

Bassariscus astutus

Photo by Raul Pena

This nocturnal Hill Country mammal is less commonly seen that raccoons and opossums. After Raul Pena took this captivating photo of a ringtail just outside his home, it piqued my interest to learn more about these creatures.

Ringtails have long slender bodies, a tail as long as their head and body, short legs, large ears and eyes, semi-retractile claws, and distinct black and white bands on a bushy tail. They range throughout much of the southwestern United States, including most of Texas and well into Mexico. Fossils demonstrate their existence in the Upper Miocene.

Identification: The head and body of the ringtail is about 15 inches in length; the tail is also 15 inches in length. This long tail with distinct whitish and blackish-brown rings will identify the ringtail. The body has pale yellowish-gray to tawny reddish fur.

The ringtail can be easily differentiated from two similar species. The raccoon has a shorter tail relative to its body, a black mask, and larger, heavier-set body. The coati has a less-bushy, indistinctly-ringed tail. The coati's range is reported to be south of Hill Country, along the Mexican border and into Mexico.

Habitat: The ringtail prefers chaparral, rocky ridges and cliffs, arid scrubland, woodlands and riparian areas. The ringtail sounds well suited to the Hill Country topography.

Habits: The ringtail is nocturnal, and may live in pairs. It feeds mainly on small mammals, insects, birds, fruits, lizards and various invertebrates. Ringtails have dens in caves or crevices along cliffs, in hollow trees, under rock piles or in unused buildings. Populations of 5 to 10 per square mile would be considered high. Ringtails have a coughing bark like a fox when agitated; they also whimper. Ringtails are good mousers, and are probably wholly beneficial.

Reproduction: Young ringtails are born in May or June, with 3 to 4 per litter and only one litter per year. They are born covered with white fuzz, and their eyes open in 4 to 5 weeks. The young go abroad at 2 months and leave their mother in August or September.

Commentary: Ringtails have lived for 8 years in captivity. In the wild, however, they are lost to a common large predator, the automobile. We have been fortunate to see live ringtails on our property. They can glide along the ground with a very smooth motion, as though they were on wheels. They seem to move along almost briskly, and we have not seen them tarry under the bird feeder as with the more common nocturnal mammals. Ringtails are well worth watching for whenever you are out at night.

References: Peterson Field Guides: *A Field Guide to the Mammals* (North America north of Mexico) by William H. Burt and Richard P. Grossenheider , 1976. We have found this book to be a readily understandable, user-friendly overview of mammals with excellent color plates of the critters.

Princeton Field Guides: *Mammals of North America* by Roland W. Kays and Don E. Wilson, 2002.

SPIKE BLAMES PARENTS, SOCIETY FOR FAILINGS

by **Bill Armstrong**, Wildlife Biologist, Texas Parks & Wildlife

Photo by Priscilla Stanley

"I never had a chance. My parents and the laws made me what I am." Speaking through Bill Armstrong, his interpreter, the little buck made his case at the Kerr Wildlife Management Area free tour to visitors who reviewed evidence that protecting "spike" bucks did not help the quality of deer populations.

The evidence linked qualities considered desirable in a buck's antlers and the general health of a deer population. More branching (multiple points) and longer, thicker antlers are associated with more efficient utilization of nutrients by the deer and thus, larger, more robust deer.

Deer with a strong metabolism are able to store energy and nutrients required for good antler growth. Deer eat, and deer breed. The degree of efficiency of a deer's metabolism has been shown to be readily inherited by its offspring, so protecting the smaller, less robust "spike" individuals in a deer population reduces the robustness of the population as a whole.

Before the genetic issues were understood, hunters were encouraged to spare spike bucks so they could grow up a little and grow bigger antlers. The Kerr Wildlife Management Area has modified its management procedures and hunting guidelines based on genetic research and has shown success in growing bigger deer with bigger antlers. The larger antler size is not just aesthetically pleasing to the average hunter. It is also an indication of a larger deer with a higher meat production. Therefore, hunters are allowed to cull yearling spike bucks, leaving yearling bucks with branched antlers. The hunters are also allowed to harvest larger bucks if they are able.

What about little Spike? He remains a ward of the state, safe and well-fed behind bars for continued study, but he still won't grow good antlers.

Editor's Commentary: The photo above was taken near our home so I can verify that all the conditions Bill Armstrong describes as necessary to produce Spike bucks (or in this case, Micro-spike bucks) were present.

- This buck was found adjacent to a ranch with hunting leases where hunters often prefer to take the larger, forked antler bucks, thus helping to select for spikes in the next generation. Hunting is not allowed where we live, which precludes the reduction of spike bucks.

- A deer census revealed a white-tail population as high as any measured in Texas.

- A distinct high browse-line on cedars indicates that desirable forbs and browse are unavailable. The deer suffer from what Bill calls "hollow belly", a persistent hunger caused by having more deer than the carrying capacity of the range.

Conclusion: The combination of genetics and poor nutrition yields some small, thin bucks with the smallest spike antlers you are ever likely to see. We might start a trade in fancy toothpicks, but these antlers are just too small to find after they are shed.

Information for our non-Master Naturalist readers: If you would like to learn more about white-tail deer, cedar management and range management in the Hill Country, the Kerr Wildlife Management Area in Hunt offers periodic free guided tours for the public. **For more information, call 830-238-4483.**

REFRESHMENTS

Thanks go to **Angelo Falzarano** and **Karen Johnson** for the delicious refreshments at our April meeting.

Refreshments for our **May** meeting will be provided by **Milby Moore** and **George Tinsley**.

Texas Star

Lindheimera texana

Please send contributions and comments to your Editor, Priscilla Stanley at jpbstan@ktc.com