

Prairie Partner News

A publication for and about Blackland Prairie Texas Master Naturalists

FALL 2018

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Newsletter Highlight:

By Greg Tonian—Class of 2017
(newsletter editor)

The Summer of 2018 is about to be washed away from our memories and will perhaps be categorized as a drought year. However, I cannot recall having seen so many varieties of fungi popping up in my neighborhood as a result of recent rains. The theme of this newsletter is *"What I did on my summer vacation"*.

Despite the heat and summer travels, I know that our members were active Texas Master Naturalists for these past few months and many volunteer hours were accrued and many observations from the perspective of a naturalist were made, whether here in the Blackland Prairie of North Texas or possibly even in some far away land.

Perhaps you spent some time assisting with children's educational activities during their summer vacation, perhaps you supported one of our partner organizations such as the Blackland Prairie Raptor Center, The Heard or LLELA, etc. Perhaps you took some time to explore on your own, plant a pocket prairie at your home, read a book about Natural History or just watched the Pelicans soar by while sipping a cold beverage under a beach umbrella on the coast.

The kids are back in school and perhaps sometime in October, the last of the 90 degree days will be passed and we can increase our time in the field and all of our volunteering activities will be that much more enjoyable. Let us bid adieu to chiggers and heat stroke and continue to follow the rewarding calling we have as members of the Blackland Prairie Chapter. And yes, I will have fond memories of sharing my bug collection at several of my

volunteer presentations/walks and my love of insects this past summer and earning my Entomologist Certification.

I also will never forget my encounter with a Cow Moose in my camp site on a 4 day backpacking trip in Colorado, 11,000 feet up in the Weminuche Wilderness over



Drought was apparent by July along The Colony lake nature trail.

Labor Day Weekend and watching her stride silently past me to join her nearby calf and head up the frosty mountain valley on a crystal-line morn.

Summer Vacation:

Hiking Garner State Park

by Susan Abernathy—Class 2018

My summer vacation was spent hiking trails, exploring the native plant garden, and birding in Garner State Park, along the Rio Frio and in Lost Maples State Natural Area. I also visited the Frio Bat Cave, where we watched the raptors appear moments after the first wave of bats left the cave. We saw peregrine falcons and other raptors enjoying their nightly feast. And compiled many new species for my bird list at the many bird blinds I visited.

I also went to the coast to the birding sites at Port Aransas and Mustang Island State Park which had lost much of their access due to Hurricane Harvey. The coastal birding sites there are an annual trip for me. I am headed back in October to view more birds and wildlife, hike, and do some volunteer work at Port A and hopefully in the native plant garden at GSP."



LLELA Insect Lodge

by Sue Yost

This was such a fun project. If someone from your chapter would like to build one they are pretty simple to do as long as someone has the tools. We started out googling "insect lodges". Tons of pictures, designs and YouTube videos came up. The LLELA manager and the educational staff didn't want it to look messy. We were originally going to use old pallets and fencing slats but we opted to buy new materials. LLELA also decided to have it moveable so it is anchored into the ground rather than cemented in case they want to relocate it. We had a planning meeting, picked the general design, got it approved by LLELA [they picked the location] then we got to work. Off site, we built the frame first, then shelves and door. It was transported to LLELA on a small

flatbed trailer. It weighs about 300 #! For those that were not handy with tools there were the inside compartments to make. Some built their boxes others purchased already made small crates. We gathered natural materials and then had a building party. Once the boxes were finished we met at LLELA to fill the shelves. Laminated educational signs will be attached to the back-side. One on insects and one on flowers [that can be found in the pollinator garden]. First occupant is a beautiful midnight blue mud dauber busy filling the holes!

Tips:

To keep moisture out the shelves are set back from the door, the top frame overhangs to also add protection. The side and back slats are screwed tight together to again keep out moisture. The "door" was framed and chicken wire was used. This is to prevent critters raiding the occupants and keep the hu-

mans out.

Use screws. They last longer than nails which can weaken over time. Treated wood will last longer. We purchased special bee paper tubes and also used bamboo stalks and corn husks for the tunnels.

And do stop into LLELA and take a close-up look! It's



back by the pollinator garden pavilion.



If anyone needs more information or would like the plans please contact Sue Yost; EFTXMN via email sdyst@asunnytexas



BP volunteers helped LAERF harvest milkweed and other natives from future construction site in Frisco to the new wetlands in Frisco. A type native to the coast was also found on the site. Look at the size of the corm unearthed in top right photo!



Keep in touch about the next milkweed dig in October/ November through Forum.

Our partners were impressively represented at the **Allen Education Fair** by Blackland Prairie Chapter members.

Pictured from right: Connemara, Raptor Center, our Chapter, Heard Museum.



At the Raptor Center

by Debbie Doyle - Class of 2017

I'm a relatively new volunteer at the Blackland Prairie Raptor Center, having only worked there since October 2017. You might think, well, that's almost a year, but there's so much to learn that even after all this time, I still feel like a newbie. The Blackland Prairie Raptor Center rehabilitates injured or orphaned birds of prey; mostly owls, several species of hawks, kestrels and kites.

One of my favorites is the beautiful Cooper's hawk, a North American na-



tive whose range extends from southern Canada to northern Mexico. Their populations are doing pretty well despite habitat loss, since they are acclimatizing to advancing suburban habitats. This hawk likes to prey on other birds, and is often the culprit at your bird feeders, picking off doves and songbirds.

They used to be called chicken hawks and were once heavily hunted to protect poultry, but their populations have recovered to "least concern" conservation status. Compared to red-tailed or red-shouldered hawks, Cooper's hawks are fairly small. The

males can be the size of a large crow, though females are typically 50% bigger than males, which is not unusual among hawks. Pairs are monogamous and raise one brood per season from cobalt blue eggs.

Speaking as a skilled cage cleaner, I find them to be the most artistic of all our raptor center residents, as their flight cages appear to have been decorated by Jackson Pollack. I guess you have to be an acrobatic flyer to successfully prey on birds.

Recently at the Raptor Center, three Coopers Hawks were slated for release into the wild as they had proven themselves capable of hunting live prey and had put on sufficient weight to successfully fend for themselves. These particular Cooper's hawks had come to us as fuzzy white chicks about 7 weeks earlier. Some kind soul had found them helpless on the ground, and delivered them to us to nurture and raise into full fledged flying killers. (Though bird rehabbers all agree that Nest is Best, sometimes the nest is just too high up for a safe return, or the nestling was injured in the fall.)

Anyway, these three Cooper Hawks had spent their whole young lives in kennels and flight cages at the Raptor Center, and were finally cleared to meet the open sky for the first time!

The Cooper's hawk came thrashing out of the kennel in a blur of flapping feathers, and soared into the trees in an arc of grace.

Senior volunteers had transferred them from their flight cages into carry-kennels to await their release. (That's another high-level volunteer skill that I lack, catching a flying raptor and put him in a doggie carry kennel. Easy Peasy.)

Karen, one of our senior volunteers, asked me to assist her in releasing the three hawks on the far side of Lake Lavon. Karen knows a lot about rap-



tor rehab, and has to watch us newbie volunteers "like a hawk" so I was a little intimidated, but excited to help in this very rewarding task. We loaded the kennels into her car, and drove off to the designated locations. Wild birds are naturally fearful of human voices, so we keep their stress levels down by not talking any more than necessary. Again, another hard skill to master!

We drove out in silence. After picking out attractive locations, Karen and I positioned the kennels towards the tree line ahead. I pulled back the kennel cover, pinched open the latch, swung open the door, and stepped back. The Cooper's hawk came thrashing out of the kennel in a blur of flapping feathers, and soared into the trees in an arc of grace. That moment was magic. We stood there for a while, watching the hawks disappear into the cageless air, immediately at home in the sky and treetops.

Breaking the silence, Karen turned to me and said "You never get tired of that." She saw the elation on my face and added "I see you know what I mean." I felt a real connection to her from sharing that experience, that love of wildness, and the thrill you get seeing it restored. With all the many things we do to restore our raptors to health, the most satisfying is releasing them into the wild sky.



Out and About *(clockwise from top left)*

Lu Anne Ray shares happy find with class members, fun time had by all at the aquatic class, hanging out with the dinosaurs at the Heard, learning about our dragonfly friend, Omar Bocanegra, at our August Chapter meeting.



Summer Vacation:

Observations and Odd experiences in Beaver Run Park

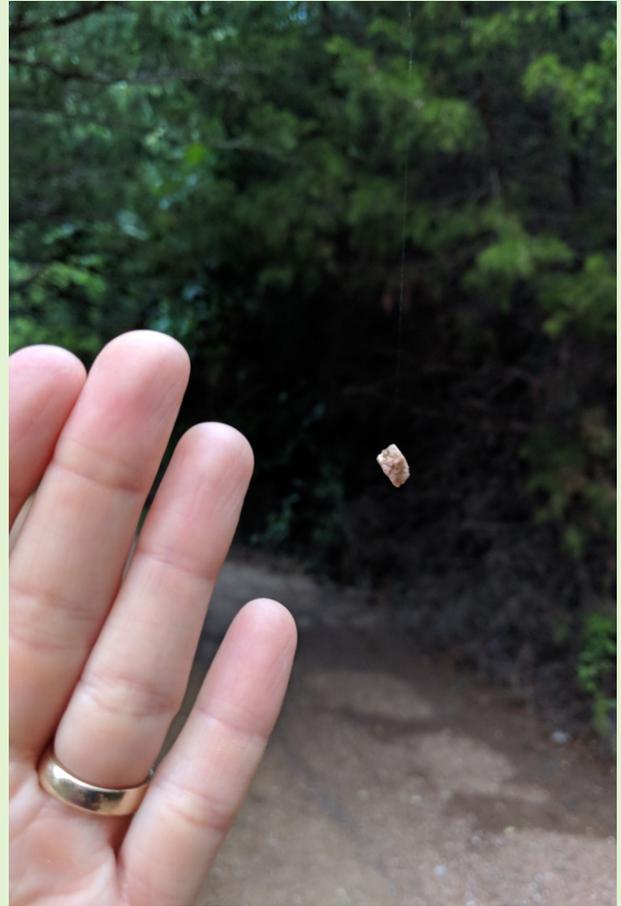
by Janice James — Class of 2018

I was heading out for my walk in Beaver Run Park.

This time of the year there are lots of spider webs across the trail and I generally carry a walking stick to help me get through them.

As I was walking along the shale path, I noticed a small rock hanging, suspended, right in front of my face. Of course, this seemed odd. It turned out that the spider in that particular area, rather than running a silk strand all the way to the ground, had suspended a small rock about 5 feet from the ground to hold the base of the web down. The larger web, which was across the path, was well above my head height. This was new to me, as I have never seen a spider web apparently, intentionally attach a free hanging object as an aid in web construction. I pondered, how did it get up that high. Did the spider carry the rock up? Hoist it? Find it up on a branch? All was very curious!

I also had the good fortune of traveling extensively (drove to Alberta and back) so I have quite a few observations from a large swath of the North American West. Unfortunately, they are by climate changed-induced wildfires, as the smoke was so thick from forest fires sending smoke from California northward to British Columbia and the Yukon to such extents that in some areas streetlights were on all day in some areas"



Ladonia Fossil Trip

October 20, 2018, 8 a.m.

\$27 per person Heard members; \$30 per person non-members (includes bus trip)

Don't miss this chance to collect and keep fossils! Take a comfortable bus trip with the Heard to collect fossils in the Sulphur River near Ladonia! This site is famous for great collecting opportunities. Fabulous finds are not unheard of.

Before proceeding to the fossil site, participants will enjoy presentations at Ladonia High school. We will then stop for lunch in Ladonia. Guests should plan to BYO Lunch (food may be available for purchase--TBD). Then we'll drive to the edge of the river. At the Ladonia Fossil Park, we will head out for our adventure! In the Ladonia city park, we will ID the discoveries. During the drive, geologist Diane Brownlee will talk about the geology we are passing through, and discuss the river system we will be hunting in.

The bus will leave from the *AgriLife* Extension Service, 825 North McDonald Street Suite 150, McKinney, TX 75069. Trip leaves at 8 a.m. and returns at 4:30 p.m. General Cancellation Policy: 100% refund up to 2 days prior to class; NO REFUND available after that time.

Check Heard website for suggested gear

20th Anniversary & 2018 Annual Meeting

Gala Celebrates 20 Years

Over the course of our 20-year history, the Texas Master Naturalist Program has trained over 11,000 passionate individuals who have engaged in over 4 million hours of volunteer service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and areas across the state.

Michelle Haggerty, State Program Coordinator, summarizes the importance of our work, stating, "What makes the work of a Master Naturalist so important is that they are not only individuals who love nature and offer their time, but they are also trained naturalists with specialized knowledge of different ecosystems, species, habitats, and environmental demands. This training and skill is priceless when determining how to best manage natural resources."

To commemorate this significant achievement, and to share our impact with friends and those interested in the work of our program, our Texas Master Naturalist 20th Anniversary Gala will be hosted Thursday, October 25th at the Sheraton Georgetown. The festivities will include a live band, a variety of live and silent auction items, and a celebratory presentation by founding Texas Master Naturalists.

Proceeds from the Gala will benefit the Texas Master Naturalist Endowment Fund. The mission of the Endowment is to further enhance the Texas Master Naturalist program, its chapters and volunteers,

now and into the future, creating and improving natural resource education, conservation, and stewardship.

For information about sponsoring the Gala event, donating a silent auction item, donating to the TMN Endowment, or attendance: <https://masternaturalistendowment.org/20th-anniversary-gala/>

20 Years of TMN

This year marks the 20th Anniversary of the Statewide Program, two decades of remarkable impact by thousands of Naturalists across the state.

Stories from Naturalists young and old can be found via our social media and website. We are so grateful to share the stories of Master Naturalists passionate about the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas in Texas. Learn more at: <https://txmn.org/20th-anniversary/>

Annual Meeting Agenda

Our 2018 Annual Meeting schedule has been posted! With a record-breaking 150+ sessions, this year's conference will be the best yet. Make sure you are following us on Facebook and check "Going" on our event page for this year's Annual Meeting. There you will find links to our agenda, sponsor and contest information, and more: <https://www.facebook.com/TexasMasterNaturalistProgram/>

Annual Meeting Get Outside Guide

In addition to various sessions throughout the weekend, over 30 field sessions around Central Tex-

as will occur during this year's Annual Meeting. Some of these opportunities include chances for volunteer service hours or Advanced Training hours. Check out our "How to Get Outside" Guide and find more general information at this webpage: <https://txmn.org/2018-annual-meeting/>

**Not going to
conference?**

Contact

**outreach@bptmn.org
to help with a booth
at the**

Allen Arbor Day

Celebration

October 27th

Thanks

to all who shared photos
and especially to our
Chapter photographer Steve
Lester.

Help Needed: For annual holiday party and meeting

Set up, decorations, food, clean up

Contact Deb at

rjdhartman@aol.com

Summer Vacation:

Enjoyed My Pocket Prairie!

by Greg Tonian

Back in April, I decided to implement a pocket prairie at my homestead. Many of us have homes with rear entry driveways, the kind that allow all of us to slip incognito into our suburban refuges and avoid interaction with our neighbors, but I digress. In any case, I wanted to plant native flowers in the yard to attract pollinators and put money where my mouth has been of late, preaching the

Texas Master Naturalist Gospel. I had read about a technique wherein one can suffocate the Ber-

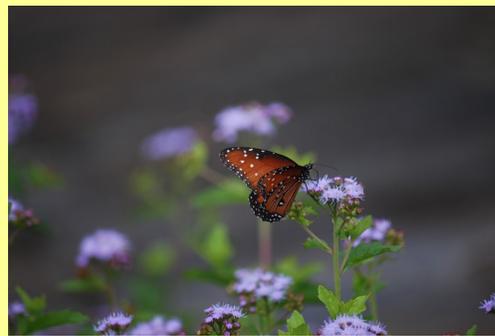


muda grass by scalping it and covering it with wet cardboard. I selected an area along my neighbor's fence and my driveway and placed wet cardboard on a strip of approximately 4 feet wide by 15 feet long, 60 square feet. I had planted a peach tree and I incorporated the tree within this bed. I purchased approximately 16 bags of garden soil and covered the wet cardboard with it. Ap-



proximate retail value, \$ 4.99. I bought 3 native plants at EarthX, including a mealy sage and a mist flow-

er and placed them in the plot. I obtained 2 small Maximilian sun flower specimens and planted them and crossed my fingers as they had been dug up by a chapter member on a field trip and they looked in distress.



They are now 8 feet tall, possibly with as many as 100 flower heads formed and they have not even bloomed. Much to my amazement and joy, I have enjoyed a summer of riotous color and been visited by a variety of pollinators including bumblebees, skippers, Queen butterflies, native bees, wasps, flies, moths, bugs and more. I have had anoles on



the Maximilian sunflower stalks and they are well - camouflaged. This continues even now into the fast approaching

fall months and I anticipate that the plot will return year after year! My intention in doing this was to bring more native insects into my yard and hopefully share this concept with others so that they too will implement a "wildscape" even if it is a small plot like my own. Imagine if each home in the neighborhood devoted a small, medium or large plot similar to this one. What a wonderful world it would be! Now if I can only convince the neighbors to put their sprinklers on manual and make sure they do not run the day after we receive 3 inches of rain!

Did You Know:

Members Area on Website: Who to Contact email list, Board Minutes, Forum Information

Other Website Content: Includes calendar of opportunities, Handbook, link to Facebook page, links to state publications, blog opportunities, information about class schedule and opportunities, Login link for recording hours, photos.

Ode to the Odonata by Greg Tonian

It was perhaps 2 years ago while running on the Shoreline Trail on a sunny morning that I was not alone. Hovering nearby along side my path were dozens of large dragonflies with black-banded wings. They seemed to be swarming and I was curious why there were so many, where they were coming from and where they might be going? I got my answer when I read that some dragonflies, like monarch butterflies, migrate, often using bodies of water as flyways. As part of my awakening as a Texas Master Naturalist, I have developed a fascination for dragonflies. There is something primeval about them. Dragonfly morphology reminds me somehow of a biplane. Instead of canvas, however, the wings are cellophane-like, delicately- veined, transparent paddles, best observed when the dragonfly stops for a rest. Then one can observe 2 pairs of wings jutting out from a slender, sticklike fuselage of a body. Some dragonflies have, wide-jumbo jet bodies, while others have slender, twig-like bodies. The wings themselves have species-specific markings and the body coloration can be quite gaudy and males and females of the same species are quite different, making field identification more challenging, yet exciting. Dragonflies are also endowed with large compound eyes, crushing mandibles and long legs, all adaptations which complement their aerial prowess and enhance their role as the raptors of the insect kingdom.

I do not know if it was just my heightened sense of awareness of dragonflies or not, but I feel this past summer was not just personified by the drought, but quite possibly also could be remembered as the summer of the dragonfly. It seemed like everywhere I went, I witnessed dragonfly swarms. When I visited nature areas such as the Heard, LLELA, the Shoreline Trails in The Colony and Arbor Hills Nature Preserve I encountered a multitude of species even as the summer heat began to dry out the landscape and the very ponds that some of these gliders emerged from.



I pondered how the drought might impact the populations of dragonfly nymphs that would be the next generation? It would seem that for every adult dragonfly, there must be an exponential number of nymphs “waiting in the wings”, existing as voracious predators in their aquatic realm, until, someday, they too emerge and take flight. As nymphs, they certainly are part of the food chain and likely are consumed by fish and wading birds, but they are equipped with a specialized hinged jaw that allows them to snare worms, other insect nymphs and small minnows. They gorge themselves and when the primeval urge arrives, undergo their amazing transformation into a winged adult. They are then ready to launch themselves into the soft, summer air, in search of a mate. The male dragonfly uses the tip his ambidextrous, elongated abdomen to deposit a sperm packet in an auxiliary genital receptacle at the underside base of his abdomen. He then uses the tip of his abdomen to grab the head of a potential mate and must convince her that he is the right mate for her. Then, after the linked pair finds a resting place, she is obliged to curl her abdomen under and forward to grasp the sperm from the underside of the male holding her. If this acrobatic mating ritual succeeds, the sperm is successfully brought in contact with the eggs, which are deposited through the tip of the female abdomen into the water or onto an aquatic plant.

The circle of life that is the lifespan of the dragonfly seems to be repeating itself over and over and all around us. Nothing seems to be stopping it. Yet, as successful as this fascinating creature, the dragonfly, has been this past summer, one still must be concerned that it, like us, is reliant on other insects to survive. It too must have clean water, teeming with life. Let us hope that we will continue to be swarmed by dragonflies for many summers to come. It is important to share our passion for them and the other amazing insects that live around us to insure that they will be appreciated and protected.

(There are approximately 160 species of dragonflies hovering over Texas and they and their cousins the damselflies, are members of the Insect Order Odonata)

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email newsletter@bptmn.org.

Past issues can be found on our website at:
http://bptmn.org/_BOARD_FTP/newsletter/

Other BPTMN communications are at:

Smugmug - <http://bptmn.smugmug.com/>
Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/bptmnforum.bptmn.org>

The Mission of the Texas Master Naturalist program is to develop a corps of well-informed volunteers to provide education, outreach and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities for the State of Texas.

The Texas Master Naturalist program is a partnership between the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, Texas Parks & Wildlife and other local partners.



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Upcoming BPTMN Meetings

2018 Monthly Meeting Topics

October 9: "Driving Sustainability Through Campus Transformation" – Thea Junt/Craig Lewis

Craig Lewis is the greenhouse and; landscape coordinator at The University of Texas at Dallas; he has worked at UT Dallas for 28 years. Besides growing and planning, Craig has led the way for a prairie restoration, an 8-acre Monarch Waystation, increased the knowledge base for the UT Dallas Community Garden members, and been an active mentor for sustainability minded students.

Thea Junt is the Sustainability Manager for Children's Health System of Texas, which includes the Children's Medical Center Plano. She previously worked as the Sustainability Manager for UT Dallas.

November 13: "Rainwater Harvesting"

December 11: "Working with Park Rangers"-Roger Scott

Websites of Interest...

All About Birds:

<https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/features/birdanatomy/>

Blackland Prairie Texas Master Naturalist Calendar <http://bptmn.org/calendar/>

Cornell Lab of Ornithology –

<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/Page.aspx?pid=1478>

Earthkind Landscaping

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/>

Green Source DFW

<http://www.greensourcedfw.org/>

Ladybird Johnson Wildlife Center

<https://www.wildflower.org/>

Texas Aggi Horticulture

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/>

Texas Parks & Wildlife Updates

<https://tpwd.texas.gov/>

Texas Smartscape <http://www.txsmartscape.com/>

Texas Superstar Plants <http://www.texasuperstar.com/plants/>