

Prairie Partner News

A publication for and about Blackland Prairie Texas Master Naturalists

2020

Jan-Mar

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Message from the President— Tom Shackelford

Blackland Prairie Chapter members and the 2020 Training Class, Where do we start?

Our members are the most important resource that BP Chapter has. The safety of our members, their loved ones, their friends and the community that we are a part of should be the focus of each individual's decisions on how they will deal with the impact of the COVID-19 virus. It is important that you keep yourself informed on the guidance and the **professional information** available on the spread of the COVID-19 virus in Texas and beyond. The two attached links are very good in providing this. I encourage you to use these excellent resources to engage others with factual information on this disease and the attempts to contain COVID-19.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

<https://dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus/>

We do not want to be fearful, but properly cautious. It is very important that we protect the health of our members and the community we serve.

Previously I sent out information on BPTMN Chapter actions for Volunteer or Advanced training activities that were based on policies set forth by our statewide sponsoring agencies - Texas A&M AgriLife and the Texas Park & Wildlife Department. We are required to adhere to the policies set forth by our sponsoring agencies. We have sought to consistently apply the recommendations with our projects and partners. Our partners have made their decisions and we will comply with their guidance for their locations. The pandemic continues to pose significant challenges and is likely to remain a concern for weeks, perhaps longer. We must remain socially responsible to help minimize the spread and impacts of this virus.

The Texas Master Naturalist Program is Statewide and the impact from COVID-19 varies from region to region within Texas. This allows for TMN Chapters and local leadership to make decisions that they deem appropriate and prudent. Our Sponsors have requested that we follow their response rules and recommendations to minimize the impact and spread of the COVID-19 Virus in Texas. We all have a social responsibility to help 'flatten the curve' and keep vulnerable populations safe. Between 60% and 65% of our TMN membership, by age alone, is considered in the "high risk" category of COVID-19. If we can help minimize exposure, 'hunker down' and socially distance ourselves then just maybe these calls to do this can be lifted sooner rather than later - **THAT may just be our 'Service' over these next few weeks.**

On Monday 3/30/20 there was an online meeting for TMN Chapter Presidents with Michelle Haggerty. The tentative agenda for the meeting:

TMN Annual Certification Requirements

-Regional TMN Zoom Accounts

-Slack as a Communication Tool

-Sharing Online Advanced Training Resources

-Annual Meeting in October

All TMN face to events, programs and meetings are cancelled through at least May 4th. All Volunteer Service must meet local and federal guidelines for limited travel and social distancing.

Look for updates and future events / activities in the Newsletter and on our website as we continue to ride out the COVID-19 storm

Everyone Stay Safe, Stay Healthy!

See you soon,

Tom Shackelford



Heart and photo of heart by Laurie Sheppard (see page 4)



BRIT volunteer trip February 22, 2020

The Botanical Research Institute of Texas, or BRIT, is located in Fort Worth, adjacent to the Fort Worth Botanical Gardens. The sleek, LEEDS-accredited building has been in operation since 2011.

Herbaria are the places that plant specimens are compiled and maintained. Collecting and keeping specimens of plants, which are pressed, dried, labelled, and mounted on sheets of paper, is of scientific value for several reasons. Having a plant specimen provides an example of a species in a particular time and place, which is important for recording the occurrence, range and distribution of plant species. It allows us to document any changes in those same attributes over time. It can also illustrate such important information as flowering period and, as such, any changes in seasonal development. Such information is important in documenting the effects of climate change, for example. More recently, genetic information from specimens has become another important resource for study. By comparing genetic information from past specimens with current, it is possible to investigate changes, such as losses, in genetic variability over time.

To make plant specimens from the herbarium readily available for study to scientists globally, the pressed samples at BRIT are in the process of being digitized (scanned) and uploaded into a searchable database more useful for scientific research. As the plant specimens are individually labelled, the information from the labels has to be transcribed, one at a time, into the database along with the scanned photo, by humans. The handwriting on the labels varies widely, as specimens are from the 1700s onward, and is not readily legible to computer-aided input systems.

Herbarium collections are therefore valuable scientific resources. The BRIT in Fort Worth is one of the top ten largest Herbaria in the United States. It is an amalgamation of the original collections from SMU (Southern Methodist University), Vanderbilt University, Louisiana State University, along with BRIT specimens. Recently, Dr. Nelson Rich from Collin College has donated his personal collections to BRIT as well. These most recent specimens have to be sorted and prioritized before they can be incorporated into the main collections.

Which is where the BPTMN comes in! We arranged to aid in the incorporation of the Collin College Collection into the BRIT collection, and to work towards the transcription of the labels as Volunteer Hours. On February 22, 2020 a group of 12 from the BPTMN made the trek to Fort Worth to help out with sorting of the Collin College sheets. Tiana Rehman is the Collections Manager at the BRIT and she directed our sorting project, helping us to compile and cross-check the information from the sample sheets with a database file. We spent the better part of a day working in pairs, filtering through specimens, primarily from

around Collin County, and helping Tiana to integrate the specimens into a functional database. She oversaw our efforts, and by mid-afternoon, we had completed more than half of the specimens. We are aiming to make a second trip, likely in June or July, to continue and perhaps complete the task.

By Janice James



2/14/2020. Owl boxes.

Debbie Doyle, Class of 2017

My sister, Karen, & I are both into organic gardening, preserving wildlife, and caring for the natural world. We enjoy being Texas Master Naturalists and volunteering at the Blackland Prairie Raptor Center. Karen got the idea at the raptor center to put up an owl box in her suburban Richardson yard to attract the adorable native Eastern Screech owl. Eastern screech owls are exceedingly cute, with huge golden eyes and a tiny fluffy body the size of a softball. She & her husband built the owl box and hung it in their backyard in December and within a few weeks a fluffy little owl claimed it as her own.

I was so jealous, my observant husband made an owl box for me for my birthday the next month. We hung it facing south in our Plano backyard, 15 feet up from the ground in an uncongested part of the tree for easy flying, but with branches below the opening for fledglings to grasp. We were shocked that we also had a resident within a week! It turns out that eastern screech owls like the suburbs, and readily take to nest boxes built for their needs. These are the plans we used. <https://feltmagnet.com/crafts/screech-owl-house> Suburbs with good tree cover have the perfect density for these little owls since their habitat is forest edge, not open meadow (where hawks often hunt) or dense forest (where great horned owls hunt.) Female Eastern screech owls are house hunting now for nesting sites to raise their young in early spring. There aren't too many hollow trees around, so a well placed nest box is apparently a hot commodity. There are lots of plans online, or you can buy a pre-cut owl box kit from the Blackland Prairie Raptor Center. If you build it they will come.

We We also installed a tiny camera in the owl house to keep up with our little resident. (Amusingly, it's Google's Nest Cam, which wasn't actually designed for nest surveillance.) The camera sends us texts when there's movement in the nest box, and records sound and video in infrared as well as daylight. It keeps



a recording of all activity "in-box" that we can save upon review. She doesn't seem to notice it, and we've gotten over feeling creepy about snooping on her.

At sundown every night she sits at the door of her owl box and performs a concert of sweet trilling love songs to entice a mate, then flies off for a night of mouse hunting. We hope she's been luckier finding mice than she has finding a mate, but it's early yet. She's back by 7 the next morning, often awakening us with her trilling coos. We've nicknamed her "Daughter Judy" since she sounds so much like the Jetsons flying car.

If Daughter Judy is successful attracting a boyfriend, we will hap-



pily document their courtship and hopefully see a successful clutch of eggs hatch and owlets fledge. But I'm getting way

ahead of myself, since she's not even brought any suitors home to introduce to us. I've read that Eastern screech owls mate for life and can return annually to a successful nesting site. Once the eggs are laid, the male does all of the hunting while the female incubates the eggs, and when the owlets hatch, both parents hunt, returning to the nest with mice, lizards, bugs, or sleepy birds to feed the young. And then the babies fledge and fly away to populate owl boxes in YOUR neighborhood! I hope to share this on a future newsletter.

RV Naturalist South Texas Travel Report by Laurie Sheppard

I always tell people you can see butterflies every month of the year in North Texas. All it takes is a warm day to bring the sheltering lepidoptera out of their hiding places. January let me down, though, and February brought snowflakes. Facebook photos of unique bugs in the Rio Grande Valley enticed me to travel south.

My first stop was Choke Canyon State Park in Three Rivers, TX. This is one of my favorite state parks because the wildlife and horticulture is a blend of several regions. The lake attracts many varieties of wintering ducks and you can find a Vermilion Flycatcher or a Pyrrhuloxia every time you visit. Green Jays and Long-billed Thrashers call to you as you drive through the camping areas. White-eyed Vireos and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers are just waiting there for winter to end in North Texas. But still, there weren't many butterflies, so I continued south.

On my way to McAllen, I made a slight detour to John J. Sablatura Park in Banquete, TX, where I'd heard a rare local butterfly had recently been seen in large numbers. At first, I didn't see anything, but as I drove through a grove of trees, there they were! A little further on and everywhere I looked tiny Definite Patch butterflies were feeding on even tinier flowers in the grass. The little side trip was worth the extra time it took, and I still got to McAllen before dark.

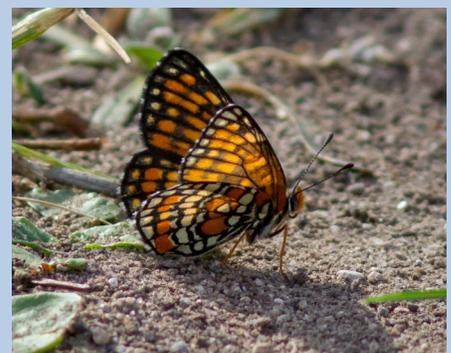
The next two days were cold, cloudy, and damp but I found places to bird where I could stay tucked in my car. Anzalduas Park in Mission, TX is a small, drivable county park that attracts many birders because of the variety of birds that can be found there. It is right on the Rio Grande River and you can look across into a similar park in Mexico. In winter, it's sometimes a good place to find a Zone-tailed Hawk or a Sprague's Pipit. I found the former but not the latter. I also visited the Rio Grande Valley State Veterans Cemetery where I was surprised to find a pair of wild Muscovy Ducks visiting from south of the border. Later, I took a tram tour at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park where my driver was a Texas Master Naturalist from the South Texas Border chapter.

On day three, the sun finally came out. I spent half a day on South Padre Island where the Laguna Madre is home to many typically ocean birds. A lovely white morph Reddish Egret put on a show for me, and I found huge flocks of Black Skimmers, Laughing Gulls, and Royal Terns. It was a little too soon for migratory birds, so I moved on to Resaca de la Palma for the afternoon. Birders there were chasing a Rose-throated Becard but it didn't make an appearance while I was there. I did, however, find a pair of Blue Metalmark butterflies shining in the sun.

My last two days were spent primarily chasing butterflies. Oleander Acres RV Resort in Mission has a small but well maintained and very active butterfly garden where I saw many skippers and brush-footed butterflies concentrated in a small footprint. This garden is the work of another Texas Master Naturalist and he is constantly working to enhance the location. It's a very welcoming place and I enjoyed chatting with him. The somewhat overwhelming National Butterfly Center was my next stop and it was a chaos of butterflies and other pollinators. I found many familiar species like Little Yellow, Fiery Skipper, and Checkered White, but also some I rarely see, like Texan Crescent and Southern Dogface. Upon my arrival, the staff gave me a rusty Valentine heart that they engraved for me and encouraged me to hang on any tree on the site. Look for it if you go there. (see page 1)

By the middle of February, it's easy to feel like you need some spring. You buy plants or you go on trips. I chose the latter, and 1500 or so miles later I was back at home digging through photos and looking forward to the change of seasons.

Photos by Laurie Sheppard Blue Metalmark Butterfly, white morph Reddish Egret, Definite Patch Butterfly



Refuge

By Greg Tonian

Sipping warm coffee,
Steering one-handed,
Faceless, familiar radio voices,
Informing me,
Connecting dots,
In my dark cocoon,
I pull into a parking spot,
Hop on another steel human transport,
Driven by another human's hands,
Now I'm nestled in a soft, cloth nest,
Others huddled nearby in the dark, peering down
At tiny blue screens.
Neon logos drift by as we head south, into City Center,
Bumper cars on a concrete track,
Traveling 75 mph, pass in a silent blur on the other side of a glass pane.



30 minutes later I disembark into the mist and glow of a concrete and glass canyon.

I trek in the chilly, misty air a few blocks,
Wary of metal buffaloes that threaten to stomp me with rubber hooves,
And duck quickly into a warm cavernous atrium.

I walk by the coffee shop with its tempting selection of the day written in colored chalk, the donut shop, the hotel breakfast bar, a myriad of foraging opportunities,

But I am not distracted and within minutes I am in my work refuge.

At my cubby, I hook my body and mind into my office ecosystem.

I am a drone, focusing on my assigned tasks,

Clicking my mouse like a cricket in the dark,

Receiving and sending signals via multiple media.

Pictures of raptors, loved ones, maps of Big Bend, on my cabinet,

Distract me and I think about Saturday, though its Monday.

I am going to the Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge.

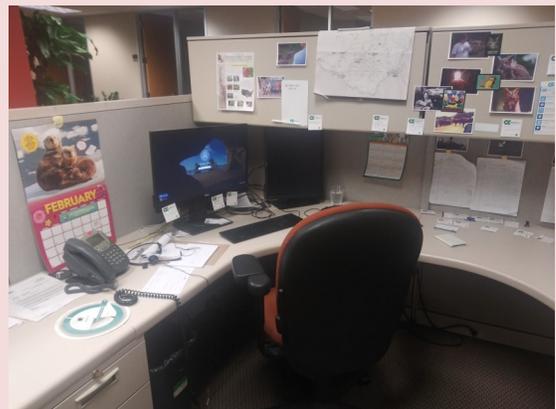
I awake before dawn, it's Saturday.

Time to fly north.

All I need to get a good start is here in my cozy lair,

Coffee machine, fridge; warm, adaptive clothing; binoculars,

Mountain bike.



Refuge

By Greg Tonian

I board my tin transport,
Soon I am driving away, through deserted streets.
A few miles away, on a wide, walled suburban corridor,
lined with 3500 square foot homes,
I quickly pass two, small,
Black, furry pelts in the roadway.
My chest tightens, my throat and eyes burn,
Could it have been a pair of skunks,
their courtship cut short in the wee hours of a crisp February morn on the cold concrete?
Not the glimpse of nature I was expecting, yet is it not true,
That at any moment, life can come to an end?
But surely man has the impact of a "drive by" on the countless innocent creatures that have no choice,
But to be his neighbors?
Dawn unfurls, the sky blushes pink,
Retaining walls and parking lots, tollways and overpasses,
Hospital buildings and gas stations are
Bathed in a golden glow,
I am running late,
The animals at the refuge are heading back to their hideaways in the woods, surely I will miss them.
I turn north on 289 and pass through the bustling and expanding communities of
Prosper, Celina, Gunter.
Where once a waist high sea of prairie grass covered the
black, sticky earth,
Where buffaloes kicked up the turf,
Pronghorns were chased by mountain lions and wolves,
Fires raged through the thatch,
Ignited by flashes of lightning,
Wind bent the few trees and the grasses danced and swayed
Under the billowing clouds.
Soon the flames were doused, followed shortly by
a kaleidoscope of prairie flowers, bursting like roman candles,
hosting a myriad of bees, butterflies and insects.
Now I was only able to see a patchwork of striped fields,
alternating with
Weedy tangles, Mesquite covered ranch tracts, dramatically frosted white on this crisp day.
A small cluster of black angus and a weathervane create a dramatic, anachronistic silhouette as I hurtle north.



Refuge

By Greg Tonian

I turn off 289.

From a forlorn tree on a closely-cropped, sloping lawn, fronting a modest, single story ranch house,

A puffed-up raptor sentinel,

Watches me pass.

Soon I arrive at the visitor center,

Deserted at this hour.

Yet as I step out into the biting air,

I see flitting birds,

Their trills, whistles and chirps,

pierce the morning silence and the stiff breeze rustles the twigs and branches,

Penetrating the wind shell I am wearing.

The butterfly garden up close,

Is a tangle of ghostly gray and brown hues and etched with ice crystals,

Like intricate lace curtains.

I assemble my mountain bike, put on my gloves,

Throw the binoculars over my neck and

Urgently plunge down the hill toward the levee road, hoping my body's engine will quickly send hot blood to my chilled extremities.

The morning glow is almost blinding, Meadowlarks skitter like fat grasshoppers, across the stubble.

Vapors rise off the many lagoons,

Dotted with waterfowl rafts.

Dozens of Shovelers, Pintails, in pairs, a few remaining Ross's Geese, a huge White Pelican.

There is a heightened sense of being alive today.

For the next several hours, I galloped on my aluminum steed:

Up and down dusty, gravel roads;

Passing rusted oil-bearing arteries emanating from storage tanks and bobbing, whirring, iron, earth suckers;

Splashing through puddles and squishy mud.

I explored a number of the perpendicular levee roads to get a closer look at the numerous ponds and lagoons,

observing the hunters on stilts, Great Blue Herons, American egrets, Yellowlegs and Killdeer stalking puddles and mudflats,

Roadside trees teemed with songbirds.

A variety of sparrows scattered into the thick undergrowth as I rapidly approached.

2 pairs of Eastern bluebirds sharing some morning camaraderie on a levee road.

High in the trees, I saw jumpy ruby crowned and golden-crowned kinglets, American Goldfinches in their winter plumage, flocks of female redwing blackbirds.

Lower to the ground, groups of dark-eyed juncos jumped and scratched through the leaf litter.

Downy and Red-Bellied woodpeckers shouted out their distinctive calls and tap-tapped away,

Agitated Carolina Wrens sang out "Liberty, Liberty, Liberty" and buzzed in annoyance as they fussed through the tangles.



Refuge

By Greg Tonian

Alas, Lucy the Bald Eagle did not make an appearance during my visit.

I did hear a pair of shrieking red shouldered hawks and observed them at a distance.

While standing on a levee that passed through the bottom land forest, I noticed a sudden wave of panicked birds heading my way,
High and low,

There must have been hundreds,

Of all different species.

Then, a medium-sized gray-backed hawk torpedoed by,

Overhead,

Perhaps a sharp-shinned,

It was time for breakfast and songbird was on his menu!

I went to the refuge to see the dance of life, perhaps even death.

Nature is flitting,

revealing itself in brief,

often confusing bursts.

I have so many questions about life and living things.

When I see nature in action, I get only partial answers and still more questions.

In nature,

I feel alive,

I am a voyeur in a wildlife refuge,

Where life and death dramas are playing out everywhere,

Mostly unseen.

Now I return to a place where my own drama plays out,

But the memory of this crystalline morning at the Hagerman will remain imprinted and stored like a daguerreotype in the archives of my mind.

-Greg Tonian



“Cheers to the Volunteers!”

