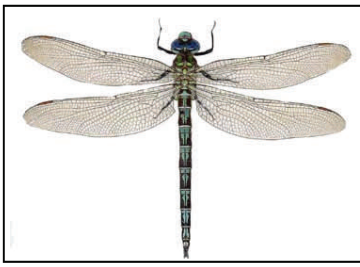
SUMMER 2009 Volume III, Issue 2



Texas Master Naturalist the Cyrano

The Newsletter of the Brazos Valley Chapter

President's Corner *by Betty Vermeire*

Has Texas Master Naturalist training affected my perception of the natural world? Yes! Though having earned two degrees in biology, I never took a botany course. Now I look at plants. And I am more aware of the critters that are attracted to those plants. Whereas I used to think, "What a pretty flower," I can now recognize (some) of those plants by name: Salvia, Esperanza, Cenizo, Liatris.

After moving to College Station, a friend of mine stated that he wanted only native plants in his yard, and was delighted when he found a source of Turk's Caps. He then wanted to make his yard more hummingbird- and butterfly-friendly. With information acquired through the Master Naturalist program– coursework, handouts, speakers, other members–I helped him to do so. Not surprisingly, the plants attract more creatures, and because we spend more time out in the yard planting, weeding, watering, and admiring "our" garden, we are there to see the increased number of birds, butterflies, other insects, toads, skinks, snakes …. The pile of field guides is right inside the back door.

The Master Naturalist program can be what you make it, and we are never too old to learn something new. Embrace the opportunity!

Inside this issue:

While exploring a canyon ledge in Big Bend one morning, I came across this hummingbird and nest. I believe it was a female Black-chinned or Ruby-throated. Discovering this nest was a real treat. It contained two tiny eggs, each about the size of my pinky fingernail. The knife is not for scale—shortly after snapping these pics, I made myself a hearty hummingbird omelet!
—Mark Ojah

The Queen of 'Chokes Comes to Texas *by Kate Kelly*

I have to confess that growing up in northern California and spending summers near Castroville ("The Artichoke Capital of the World," in case you didn't know), I thought everybody respected this vegetable and the strange rituals for eating it. But after moving to Michigan (the Fudge Capital of the World?), I soon learned otherwise. Michiganders were stumped by the edible flower bud and would ask, "You're gonna eat that?" After we moved to Texas, I was talking with a friend who casually stated, "My grandfather brought the artichoke to the Brazos Valley." Instantly, I visualized a smiling sun-tanned man in dusty workboots with a red bandana around his neck triumphantly holding up a perfectly formed globe artichoke, a crowd of children jumping at his feet and reaching arms up to touch it—"Vive Le Carciofe!" ("Hooray for the 'choke!"), they shouted.

I'm still working on the local history of the artichoke, but meanwhile the Aggie Extension website gives us the hard facts about the plant. It belongs to the Composite family, closely related to the thistle, whose edible part is composed of the immature flower bud, "the fleshy base of the flower bracts and the receptacle to which the bracts are attached, known as the 'heart.'" You'll know the heart when you taste it—it's the creamy, rich, and tender center of the bud. The globe artichoke (*Cynara scolymus*) should not be confused with the Jerusalem Artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*), also a member of the Composite or Sunflower family, or the highly invasive "Cardoon" (*Cynara cardunculus*), a naturally occurring variant of the globe artichoke species.

The artichoke likes it cool and humid, so how could it possibly thrive in Texas?

Until recently, the artichoke has not been produced commercially in Texas, but in November of 2007, the Associated Press carried a curious story, "Texas Growers Eye Artichoke Market." Daniel Leskovar, a TAMU Professor with the Agrilife Extension Center in Uvalde, had been growing artichokes for three years in the "Winter Garden" area of Texas, where the temperatures average 65 degrees from September through May. He harvested 600 cartons of artichokes, every one of which found its way to the produce section of HEB Groceries. According to Leskovar, "Artichokes would be an excellent choice as an alternative crop for Texas agriculture because they are high in health properties and also have a high profit margin . . .. They contain strong antioxidants, are a very good source of vitamins C, K, folate, magnesium, manganese, copper and dietary fiber, and they have phytochemicals, which are important in preventing or fighting diseases." And, he adds, "artichoke heads typically sell for $1 to $3 each."

So get ready, Texas, we will soon have our own supply of this elegant bud, best eaten with a dab of mayonnaise or melted butter by dipping each leaf and then holding it upside down between the teeth and scraping off the fleshy end, working your way towards the plant's center, where the heart surrounds the choke. In tender homegrown buds, you needn't remove the choke—just slowly chew the entire heart, enjoying the transformation of the lowly thistle into a queen of Texas vegetables.

Photo Source: "Grilled Artichokes." Cooking for Engineers. n.d. CfE Enterprises, Inc. 24 August 2009 <http://www.cookingforengineers.com/recipe/111/Grilled-Artichokes>.

The Brazos Day-Tripper: Canyon of the Eagles

by Jimmie Killingsworth and Jackie Palmer

A pre-Valentine's weekend hill-country getaway took us to the Canyon of the Eagles Lodge, located in a 940-acre park on Lake Buchanan maintained by the Lower Colorado River Authority. About an hour northwest of Austin near Burnet, the facility offers beautifully designed, well-maintained, and comfortable (if slightly pricey) lodge accommodations with a mediocre restaurant, as well as camping, good walking trails, and great wildlife watching. On our walks we come upon no fewer than ten armadillos out in broad daylight, snuffling the dry ground with little care that we get close enough to examine the pinkish tints of their wrinkled flesh and the comical hairiness of their stumpy legs.

We see little white-tailed bucks with their new

antlers just sprouting between attentive ears that cautiously monitor our approach. White pelicans sit gigantically among a variety of ducks on the lake, soaring red-tailed hawks and ospreys share air space with black and turkey vultures (but alas, no eagles this time), and a good number of woodpeckers, sapsuckers, and songbirds (including phoebes on low roosts near the water, the tufted titmouse with peculiar black-tipped feathers in the top-knot—typical of west Texas birds but new for us—and the white-crowned sparrow, an old favorite with its striped head like finely inlaid pieces of black-and-white woodwork). What most impresses us, though, is the way the park embodies the lessons about ecology and the problems of land management that the hill country faces every day.

Note the extended shoreline resulting from the current drought. The lake level is currently 14 feet below normal.

It is dry—very dry. The boat tour that normally runs up the river a few miles to explore the canyons and falls has been diverted to the main body of the lake because, we are told, the river is too shallow even for a canoe. It is windy, too windy to take a small boat, canoe, or kayak on the lake. People drown all the time, we are told, when they get out on the water and can't get back because of the wind. The wind whistling through the dry wintering oaks around the lodge and the low lake level that exposes hundreds of feet of shoreline usually under water (as well as the bottoms of boat docks normally submerged) brings home the reality of the current Texas drought. We live with the prospect of drought in this land, but this one, we hear, may be the worst since the 1930s and ironically coincides, as it did then, with an already bad economy.

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From Page 3

Lake view (normally visible only from water)

The problem of water and the protection of wildlife come together in the tangle of ash juniper ("cedar") that characterizes much of the park's landscape. A recent book from the Texas A&M University Press, *Water from Stone* by Jeffrey Greene, tells how entrepreneur and conservationist J. David Bamberger has experimented on his hill-country ranch with flora-management techniques that include the eradication of invasive species like the juniper in an effort to restore the flow of natural springs and wells from the Edwards Aquifer. The added advantage is to reduce the likelihood of wild fires that thrive on the nearly explosive inflammability of the sap-rich evergreens. The theory is that, without modern fire protection, regular burns in the low oak forests kept the juniper in check and created a park-like openness in the grassy expanse beneath the oaks, but property protection has led to the overgrowth of juniper in many parts of the hill country

(including the outskirts of west Austin). On some of the trails at Canyon of the Eagles, we see evidence that the LCRA is following the same practice that Bamberger recommends—junipers cut down and uprooted over large expanses of the rolling land near the lake.

But on the steeper trails, we walk through old-growth juniper intentionally protected as nesting grounds for the endangered golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo. These rare birds nest in the low branches of the old junipers. As Rick Bass dramatically teaches in his novella *The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness* (perhaps the finest hill-country story in contemporary literature—which we had chosen for reading material on our trip without knowing how perfectly its images and narrative illuminate this particular landscape), cattle and goat herding, in addition to overgrazing the sensitive land, has all but destroyed the habitat of the warblers and vireos. Goats strip the bark of the trees and even climb up into the lower branches; cows rattle and bump the nesting sites as they forage among the junipers for drought-stricken clumps of shaded grass. But in the protected areas of the Canyon of the Eagles, even human beings are prohibited from using the steeper trails during nesting time—March through August. Sprinkler heads along the trails, not for growing grass so much as stopping fires, we guess, are signs of the management's anxiety over the hazards involved in protecting the juniper forests.

The lessons are somber on the dry land that hosts species on the verge of extinction. But such lessons and such choices (to kill the juniper and bring the water, or save the juniper and bring back the birds; put out the fires, or let them burn) demonstrate the complexities that anyone who presumes to manage the land must face—hard lessons and tough choices. And yet the hill country, despite the threats from overgrazing, overdevelopment, and overpopulation, retains its natural beauty and allure. It is threatened for sure, but not yet defeated.

What's in a Name? Thomas Drummond, Early Texas Naturalist

by Jo Anne Bates

Drummond Phlox

During the spring of 1833, a Scottish naturalist by the name of Thomas Drummond began collecting specimens of both birds and plants in the area of Austin's Colony. He is credited with collecting 750 plants and 150 specimens of birds, a feat that stimulated the later studies of such botanical collectors as Ferdinand Jacob Lindheimer and Charles Wright.

Drummond arrived in Velasco in the spring of 1833 and spent 22 months collecting specimens in the area between Galveston Island and the Edwards Plateau, especially along the Brazos, Colorado, and Guadalupe Rivers. He accomplished this despite torrential rains that caused extensive flooding, a cholera epidemic, lack of food, and general disruption of social and economic conditions. Many people in the town of Velasco died, and Drummond himself was very ill from the disease. Some of his specimens were destroyed by the elements before they could be shipped to England.

His collections were the first made in Texas that were extensively distributed among the museums and scientific institutions of the world. Although Drummond died in 1835 in Cuba while collecting there, many of the plants we see today bear his name. The Drummond Phlox, *Phlox drummondii,* is probably the most recognized. Turk's Cap, *Malvaviscus drummondii,* Drummond's wild petunia, *Ruellia drummondiana,* and *Cooperia drummondii* (a naturalized rain lily) grow over most of the state. It was Drummond's plan to return to Texas with his family after his trip to Cuba. Had he lived, I wonder how many more plants we would have with his name.

Rain Lily

Turk's Cap

Wild Petunia

TMN Member Spotlight

by Kitty Anding

Kitty Anding

I spent the first 17 years of my life in a small town in the northeast corner of Louisiana. There was not much to do inside the house (before television and air conditioning), so much time was spent in the neighborhood playing games, catching lightning bugs, picking dewberries, riding bikes, and generally amusing ourselves. In those years there were fewer things to cause parents concern, and we had much freer rein to come and go as we pleased.

My parents always enjoyed gardening. Although we had a huge vegetable garden, about the only effort I contributed to the endeavor was picking the produce. But we loved gathering tomatoes and lining them up around the inside of my grandparents' screened-in back porch. We always had peas, butterbeans, squash, green beans, corn, and potatoes. My grandmother was a wonderful cook, so I grew up eating just about everything that came from the garden. What we couldn't eat, we canned, so homegrown vegetables were available year round.

My father loved to travel. Although we never could afford to travel very far, every summer he insisted we go somewhere, usually to spend time outdoors. Once we went to Arkansas and stayed in a cabin in the mountains. Another time we traveled to the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. Several summers of my high-school years were spent on the beaches along the Florida panhandle. In addition to family vacations, I also attended church camps several summers and Girl Scout camp a couple of summers. In spite of all the exposure to nature I had while growing up, it amazes me that probably the only birds that ever entered my consciousness were the boisterous blue-jay, the mockingbird that chased our cats, and the red-headed woodpecker that hammered and called from the pine tree across the street.

The two years after high-school graduation were spent in a dorm at Northeast Louisiana College (now the University of Louisiana–Monroe). This is where I met my husband for the second time. (The first time was during high school when he had a date with a friend of mine and I had a blind date with a friend of his.) We were married after my sophomore year and moved to Lake Charles, where he taught science and math at a small school in Moss Bluff. One summer, Jim attended a National Science Foundation Institute at LSU and took a course in herpetology.

After two years, we moved to Bryan, where Jim taught chemistry at Steven F. Austin High School. I stayed at home and took care of kids until 1968, when I finished up my degree at Texas A&M and began teaching in the Bryan schools.

One day, Jim collected some local Bryan snakes and put them in cages under a big tree in the backyard. The next morning, the trees were full of birds loudly objecting to the presence of the snakes. Our attention was quickly drawn to an adorable little black-and-white bird that neither of us could identify. Hence, began our venture into the wonderful world of birds and other living creatures. We bought one pair of binoculars for $25 and the *Golden Guide to the Birds of North America*. We put Jack on a leash and headed to Hensel Park to look for birds.

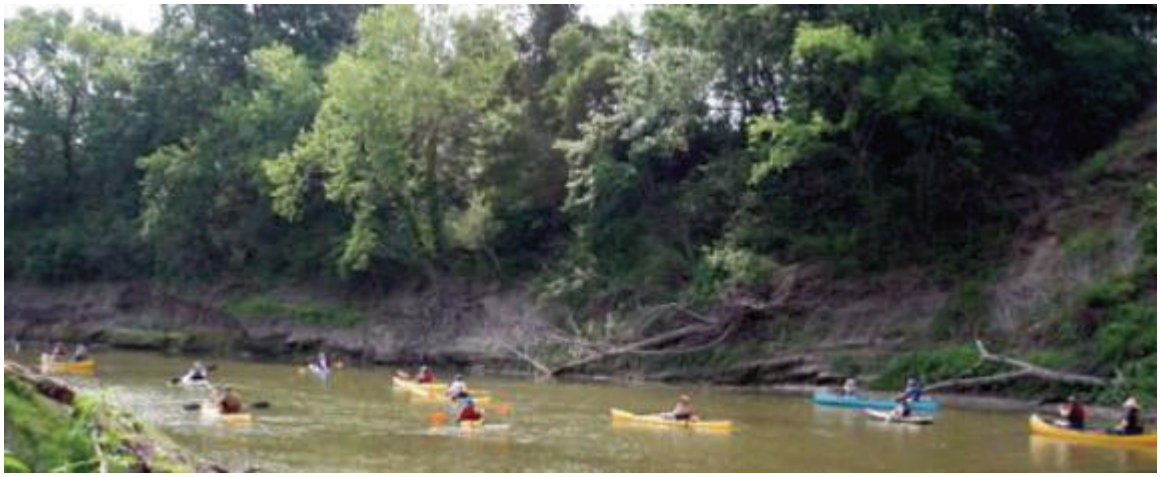
With the arrival of our second son and job-related demands on our time, birding opportunities were limited. We managed to work in an occasional field trip and continued watching and studying birds through the back window. A trip to Southeast Arizona with a group from Rio Brazos Audubon intensified our interest and opened our eyes to the wonderful world of ecotourism.

Upon retirement we vowed to devote more time to birding in our own backyard, in locations around town, and throughout Texas, as well as exotic places we'd only dreamed about. Costa Rica was the first place on our list, then Vancouver, Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands, Peru, Alaska, and most recently, Panama.

When we heard that a TMN chapter was forming in our area, we thought it would be a perfect opportunity to learn more about the local environment, expand our knowledge beyond birding, and meet people in the community with similar interests. The first year was difficult because no one seemed to know quite what was expected, but the effort to figure it out brought the members of that class closer together. In each successive year, the membership has grown, and the opportunities for personal growth and volunteer service have expanded. The greatest benefit of membership, however, has been the friends we have made and the wonderful experiences we've shared.

Little River Adventure

On Saturday, May 16, thanks to the incredible planning efforts of Connie Flickinger and the muscle-and-truck power contributed by Jim Waldson, Dave Cunningham, and Dave's son, the first-ever joint canoe/kayak trip of Brazos Valley and El Camino Real TMN chapter members took place on the nearby Little River (which later converges with the Brazos River). Here are reflections of that event offered by paddlers:



by Janet Stallone

It was great to get out in a kayak again after 20 years, and it was also great that Jim and Dave and his son and Connie did all the paperwork and legwork to make it happen. I really appreciated the no-schlepping part of the trip! We just picked out a boat and put it in the water, and when we were finished, we toted them out and up the hill to the trailers, and the guys took care of hauling them back to A&M. Great, especially since it was raining at that point.

For the most part the Little River was peaceful and slow moving, but there was evidence that it had not been so in the past. Several times we saw fences—posts and all—suspended in mid-air 5-10 feet from the nearest piece of land! At that point I was sorry that I hadn't brought my camera, but later decided that it was a good idea to have left it in the car.

The river was moving very slowly. We had had been paddling a good bit and gotten stuck on a few sandbars, so we got excited when we saw swiftly moving water. However, there was a fallen tree across the river near the end of the little "rapids." Dave went first and negotiated his nice little kayak over the top of the tree trunk. It looked fairly easy, so Marianne and I decided to go for it. We soon saw the difference between a "real" kayak and a rental kayak: Maneuverability is not the rental kayak's strong suit. Marianne hit the trunk and went sideways. I was behind her paddling furiously backwards, but obviously not achieving my goal of staying out of the melee. She got out, and I missed hitting her but crashed into her kayak, sending hers under the log and mine topsy-turvy against the tree with me straggling behind it. I was just praying that people behind us had seen what was happening and that no one would crash into me. For some obscure reason, I was still clutching my oar for dear life and did a "Stooges" routine on Marianne when I turned toward her—all she needed at that point.

We can say, "We lost our shirts," but it wasn't due to gambling—they were in the kayaks when they got sucked under the tree. I'm just glad I managed to get out of the kayak before the sucking started and don't really remember how I got past the tree, but I did.

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From Page 7

When I was deposited at the far side of the pool, the current was so strong that I couldn't go back to get my life jacket (which had served as a dandy back rest up to that point). It then occurred to me that it probably should be put to its intended use, and after I waded around the pond to get with the current, I caught it up and put it on. Meanwhile, Dave caught my kayak and pulled it ashore. Sadly, my nice collection of mussel shells collected at a pit stop upstream also found a new home further down the river.

It turned cold and windy about then, and we had to paddle in earnest against the wind the rest of the trip, especially the last 250 yards to the sandbar for lunch, but everyone eventually made it. The wind had turned one of the tents into a giant kite. I would have "lost my lunch" too (not due to illness), if Dave's son hadn't offered to bring our food to the sandbar for us, another nice courtesy that I appreciated. We were all milling around wolfing our lunches while trying to stay warm, so the mussel lesson was nonexistent, as far as I know.

Still, it was a fun trip, and I'm sure I'll do better next time. I can't speak for Marianne, however.

by Marianne Dent

Here is what I learned on the kayaking trip: The next time you will find me at the back of the group so that I can let someone else test all of the perils that are ahead of me. I looked like I survived the Titanic when we got done, and those behind me looked as good as when they started. Having my kayak get sucked under the log and dumping me and Jan in the water is a real experience for first-timers. The power of that water deserves respect. Now if anybody sees a dark blue towel floating in the Brazos, it's mine!

by Connie Flickinger

Well, I said I'd be the first in the water, and as usual, I was right! It was actually pretty scary being stuck underwater beneath the kayak and pinned against the logs by the rushing water. But I must say that once I was able to breathe again, the water felt [expletive deleted] good! The weather was perfect, and the water temperature was too. As for the hanging fence, I hope the cows don't think that that's the limit of their kingdom!

I wasn't cold until the trip back in the bed of the truck in the rain with the overhanging tree branches slapping me in the face! That was not the highlight of the trip! For anyone who didn't see it, Dave's cabin is AMAZING! We definitely need to get a social event together out there—maybe a fish fry?

by Manuelita Ureta

Were it not for Connie, who deftly stopped my kayak in midstream, the tree would have claimed yet another victim. I am very happy with my inflatable kayak.

by Jean Webster

This is Jean "third-in-a-canoe" Webster, just checking in with observations on our recent water adventure. Even though I had visions of wildly kayaking down a glistening stream of water, I was luckily sentenced to Jackie's canoe (no tipping, no washing under logs, and someone to help me paddle). And I enjoyed it totally. The water was wonderful, if a little slow; the company was superior; and my only regret is that the weather changed and shortened our trip. I really want to do this again, and now that my paddling is remediated, I think a kayak is in order. Thanks to all who worked so hard to make our trip happen—Connie, Jim, Dave (and kids)!

From Page 8

by Jackie Palmer

Okay, now even though it may look from the photos like I just floated effortlessly down the river, I want it on record that we three actually traded off positions until Lourdes abandoned ship to help Jackie Giraurd (whose young daughter tired midway through the trip). A few more highlights:

- Dave's history lesson on Old Nashville and the former roadside park on his property (a future trip's takeout point) that marks the site of the now absent 1927 bridge linking Austin and College Station football fans
- A brown water snake, about two feet long, swimming upriver close to shore
- Several herons, of different types, flying downriver, but viewable only if you were in one of the first few canoes/kayaks to disturb the area
- The sound of grumbling thunder moving up and across the river, first behind, then in front of us, combined with the look, sound, and smell of swaying treetop vegetation as the storm moved in and the wind kicked up
- Mussel shells of several varieties and pearlescence, all of which were described and categorized effectively by the Mussel Watch representative (to those not too cold or hungry to appreciate it)
- The dozen or so cows with nursing calves, milk dribbling from their lips, momentarily blocking the road back to Old Nashville and the waiting llamas

Stephen F. Austin Middle-schoolers Visit Blinn Aquatic *by Jay Pritchard*

On May 8, 80 sixth-grade students from Steven F. Austin Middle School participated in a science experience hosted by Blinn Aquatic Center. Four stations were supervised by chapter volunteers. One focused on viewing items with dissecting scopes, namely flower parts, insects, and green slime. The second introduced all those creatures in the Center's back room; students got to pet a "LIVE" snake. The third took students out the back door to make plaster casts of tracks. And the fourth was a Project WILD simulation that involved a blackboard; the students lined up as if they were going to line dance.

The National Museum? Whale Watch? Nah—How About the Victoria Bug Zoo? by Jackie Palmer and Jimmie Killingsworth

Combining business with pleasure during a recent trip to Victoria, British Columbia, on the west coast of Canada, we arrived after a long flight at our conference hotel—selected specifically for its environmental awards. The view of the harbor from the eleventh-story room was stunning, but the air was warm and stuffy. The thermostat, which registered Celsius degrees, appeared broken. So we called the front desk and were told there was no air conditioning. "Just open the windows," the clerk said. "But there aren't any screens. What about mosquitoes?" we asked. "No problem this time of year." So we opened the windows, enjoyed a nice sea breeze along with our view, and marveled at a place where bugs don't fly into open windows. We definitely weren't in Texas anymore!

It turns out that the best place to see bugs indoors in Victoria is at the Bug Zoo. That's right: Bug Zoo.

Actually, the zoo is misnamed, as it contains all sorts of arthropods from around the world—*live* arthropods, not dried specimens. (For a nice little video of the zoo, go online to <http://www.bugzoo.bc.ca/zoo_video.htm>.)

Though small—the zoo takes up only two rooms—there is a wealth of information offered to both children and adults in an engaging, hands-on, and humorous manner.

Among others, the collection includes a large ant colony, arachnids (like tarantulas and wolf spiders), assassin bugs, beetles of all types and sizes (including a rhinoceros beetle different from the one in Jackie's mounted collection that some of you have seen), a foot-long centipede, several species of giant leaf insects (nearly indistinguishable from the blackberry branches in spite of their 4-7-inch adult length!), crayfish, praying mantids, huge millipedes, several varieties of roaches and scorpions, giant walking sticks, and waterbugs.

Leaf Insect, Perfectly Camouflaged (About 4 Inches Long) On A Blackberry Twig

Rhinoceros Beetle Atop an Elephant Beetle Atop an Orange Slice

A leaf-cutter ant farm, consisting of clear PVC pipe and rectangular chambers, spreads across three walls of one room. Viewable are the cultivation areas where leaf parts are taken to feed a fungus that the ants then eat (kind of like a mushroom farm tended by ants). Wikipedia calls this relationship mutualism. In a corner of the farthest container is a "graveyard"—a pile of dead ants about six inches high deposited there by worker ants. Not once had we ever considered where dead ants might end up.

The praying mantis is the only insect with a head that can rotate nearly 300 degrees. Combined with large compound eyes, the insect is an accomplished predator that eats other insects, including her mate! This one is *not* an albino!

Female Orchid Mantis (Hymenopus coronatus) on Egg Cases

While we turned down the offer to hold the fist-sized tarantula or scorpion, Jackie did handle a foot-long millipede—which, by the way, she never would have done in the wild! Feeling a lot like toothbrush bristles, its legs never stopped moving as it crawled across her hand and wrapped tightly around a finger. Even more interesting was the barely visible superhighway of red mites that streamed steadily just above the millipede's legs on both sides. (We were assured that they would—and apparently did—remain on the critter rather than on the hands!)

Jackie Holding Millipede With Mites

The mites literally run along the horizontal length of the millipede just above where the legs are attached to the body.

The Tree That Keeps on Giving *by Jay Pritchard*

When I was a boy, I delivered papers on what is now the west side of Bryan. At the intersection of Beck and Palasoda, there stood a majestic old oak whose shade I sought on warm summer days. Years later when I returned to Bryan as a family man, I purchased a house four blocks from the tree.

That old oak was still an informal community meeting place. In fact, bigwigs from the City of Bryan were invited to sweat under it as they explained that the old tree had to be cut down because it was too close to the street. The then "Area Grandmother" (a nice way to say little old lady in tennis shoes) mounted her broom and threatened to chain herself to the tree; in fact, she was accused of driving bridge spikes into the trunk and of cutting the heads off of those spikes (perhaps to thwart a chain saw). As a result, the city decided that one tree was not worth the effort.

Yet recently, the tree seemed to sense its impending doom. For each of the last five years, I wondered if it would put out leaves the following spring, but it always did. Then last year, although one branch had leaves, the tree had to go so that the streets could be improved. I explained to everyone who would stand still the history behind the tree and got the contractor, after felling it, to move it to a pocket park. We maintained that tree even after he pushed it over. There it lies today, the favorite play structure of kids in the area. When I tell kids about that old oak, I also tell them that it was a honey tree—you know, like Pooh Bear's.

The Tree That Keeps on Giving

Final Image *by Mark Ojah*

Taken from atop the ruins of Tulum; I have Buddhist leanings, and think this iguana was the reincarnation of an ancient Mayan ruler surveying his former domain.

The Cyrano is prepared by *Kate Kelly*, katherinekel@gmail.com, *Leo Lombardini,* l-lombardini@tamu.edu, *Jackie Palmer*, palmer@tamu.edu, and *Manuelita Ureta*, Manuelita.Ureta@tamu.edu. Thanks to Jimmie Killingsworth for reviewing the final document.