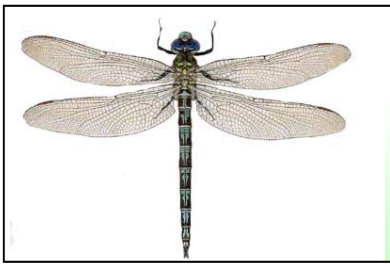
WINTER 2007 Volume 1, Issue 1



Texas Master Naturalist the Cyrano

The Newsletter of the Brazos Valley Chapter

President's Corner *by Jo Anne Bates*

Jo Anne Bates

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." —Margaret Mead

I feel like we are becoming that small group of people who will make a difference in the Brazos Valley. I am looking forward to this year with great enthusiasm. I am open to all your ideas, and I certainly do not have all the answers.

This group started in late 2004 with a small gathering of kindred souls who wanted a Texas Master Naturalist Chapter in the Brazos Valley. That group trained the 2005 class of 19, which in turn helped its 24 classmates in the 2006 class. We have grown and hopefully will continue to expand.

Our calendar looks full with Project WILD classes, Bio Blitz, Planet Earth Celebration, Regional Meetings, gardens to plant and grow, nest boxes to place and a state meeting in the fall. These are a few of the projects that are in the beginning stages. There is also a Naturalist Book Club available with so many titles to read, we may need extra hours in the day.

I hope you will bring your own ideas for other fun and worthwhile things to see and do. Let your passions ignite your fellow naturalists. Together we will have a bigger voice in what happens to this beautiful planet we live on.

Be the change you wish to see in the world!

Inside this issue:

Editor's Note

The Cyrano is named for the dragonfly that is the Texas Master Naturalist "mascot"—the Cyrano darner (see the next article in this issue). As a quarterly newsletter published only once per season, we do not serve as a calendar of activities and announcements in the manner of some newsletters. Our mission is to celebrate the activities and accomplishments of our chapter's members as well as the natural beauty and living creatures of the Brazos Valley, our home region. We also hope to increase our readers' interest in the outdoors and their motivation to learn about environmental issues and lore.

In this our first issue, we offer both news and features. Some of the features may become regular offerings, so let us know which stories you like and what you would like to see increased or decreased.

Since bird activity remains high in the winter, while other creatures lie dormant and many trees and plants are bare, we ended up with an avian emphasis this time around. For those of you more interested in aquatic life, plants, insects, snakes, toads, and other creatures, stay tuned for Spring and Summer!

The Cyrano Darner *by Manuelita Ureta*

This feature of the newsletter will highlight an animal or plant native to our "neck of the woods." Mostly, we want to focus your attention on the unsung beauties, the rare, and the well adapted. It befits issue number one of the newsletter that we tell you about the graceful dragonfly that adorns the Texas Master Naturalist logo, the Cyrano darner (*Nasiaeschna pentacantha).* This insect species is in the order Odonata, suborder Anisoptera (the dragonflies), and family Aeshnidae (the darners).

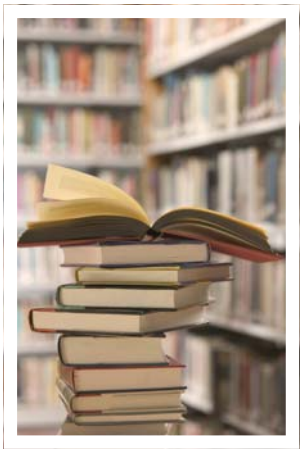
One could not ask for a more accurately descriptive name for a creature. The Cyrano darner is unique among North American dragonflies for its sizable nose (or forehead, depending on who you read). This trait, obvious to the naked eye and thus an excellent field mark, is the reason why it is named after Cyrano de Bergerac. The real life, large-nosed de Bergerac was a dramatist, but owes much of his fame to the play that bears his name by Edmond Rostand and to the operas, novel, and movies the play inspired. The family of darners gets its name from the resemblance to a darning needle.

Our logo doesn't do the Cyrano darner much justice. This lovely dragonfly has a pale blue nose, brilliant blue eyes, a brown thorax with green stripes, blue abdominal spots, and clear wings with a sliver of mustard yellow along a short portion of the edge of the wings. There are sharp, high-resolution pictures and scans available online. For example, try http://stephenville.tamu.edu/~fmitchel/dragonfly/Aeshnidae/nasia.htm or http://www.njodes.com/Speciesaccts/darners/darn-cyra.asp.

The Cyrano darner is similar to the larger swamp darner and the regal darner. Unlike some of the other darners, it does not "swarm," preferring to cruise slowly, alone, closely over the water. It prefers sheltered, slow-moving streams, swamps, and muddy or stagnant water. It likes the protection that the trees afford. According to the USGS, there are confirmed records of the Cyrano darner in 22 of the 254 counties in Texas, and Brazos County is one of the lucky ones. If you know of ponds, streams, etc. where the Cyrano darner can be admired during the months when it is flying about (mid April through mid October) let us know, and we can tell everyone where to find them in our next newsletter.

The Cyrano darner (*Nasiaeschna pentacantha)*

Brazos Valley Naturalists' Book Club *by Jimmie Killingsworth*



If you're looking for a forum to read and discuss both the classics and new works of nature writing, think about joining the Brazos Valley Naturalists' Book Club. The group meets the third Tuesday of every month and has compiled an impressive list of planned readings. The contact is David Gwin (979-764-3753; dgwin@cstx.gov). The plans for the near future include a discussion of Aldo Leopold's classic *Sand County Almanac*, led by Anna Muñoz (February); Diana and Michael Preston's 2004 book *A Pirate of Exquisite Mind: Explorer, Naturalist, and Buccaneer: The Life of William Dampier*, led by David Gwin (March); Janet Robertson's 2003 *The Magnificent Mountain Women: Adventures in the Colorado Rockies*, led by Jackie Girouard (April); and John Graves' incomparable vision of the Brazos, *Goodbye to a River: A Narrative*, led by Jo Anne Bates (May).

Thanks to David for organizing the group and to the group as a whole for calling our attention to this rich literary tradition.

Lick Creek Park Actual and Virtual *by Kate Kelly*

Many of us have come to know and love Lick Creek Park (LCP), our best (and only) 515-acre nature park located on East Rock Prairie Road off Highway 6 South and Greens Prairie Road. This park is family and dog friendly, as long as the dogs are under voice command. In fact, if you visit often enough, you'll develop your own circle of LCP dog and family friends. Veteran park visitors have watched it change since 1998, when the City of College Station adopted the LCP Master Plan that established a trail system, new entrance drive, and a parking lot. It's now looking official and welcoming. The Master Plan also calls for a visitor's center and outdoor classroom facilities at some time in the future. While the Park has become a little less rugged, it's also more accessible and visitor-friendly than it was in the past, and it will continue to change with the completion of housing subdivisions surrounding the park.

The best way to see LCP is to bike or drive out there and walk the trails yourself. But you can also visit it virtually by taking advantage of the many websites built around the park's features. As a first step, take a virtual class field trip by visiting a web page created by the Herbarium, Department of Biology, Texas A&M University (script written by Monique Reed and photographs by J. R. Manhart and H.D. Wilson):
http://www.csdl.tamu.edu/FLORA/LCP/LCPINTRO.HTML

The field trip is divided into two main sections, "Class Field Trip" and "Bushwacking," which are subdivided into 17 chapters, with titles and accompanying photographs such as "Upland Woods," "Porcupine Eggs", and "Epiphytes and Right-of-Way." Many other websites direct your attention to more specific areas or types of wildlife within the Park.

To learn more about the **spiders** found in the Park, visit http://agnews.tamu.edu/dailynews/stories/ENTO/Dec1906a.htm.

An ongoing **big tree** survey of the Park is described and explained at http://www.csdl.tamu.edu/FLORA/biolherb/lcp_bigtrees_1.htm.

My research has turned up no website devoted solely to the animal life at LCP, but if you visit http://www.zo.utexas.edu/research/txherps/, you'll find information about some of the **herps** in the park, such as the red-eared sliders, water moccasins, racers and other snakes, lizards, and frogs seen around the creek. (I heard frogs calling on a recent warm Saturday.) **Bird**ers visit the park regularly and can go to http://www.passporttotexas.com/birds/index.html to check out species they can't identify.

You may have wondered why a **meteorological tower** was erected at the Equestrian entrance to LCP? To find out more about the information it's providing, go to http://www.met.tamu.edu/research/LCP/frame.html.

Since 2001, LCP has been the location for our local **Bio Blitz**. During a Bio Blitz, scientists and volunteers conduct a 24-hour survey and report on the number and diversity of organisms found within a park. Bio Blitz events usually involve science, education, and celebration (party time!) to highlight the importance of urban green spaces to biodiversity. To check out the sponsors and activities of a past local Bio Blitz, and to get ready for the 2007 Bio Blitz scheduled for March 30 and 31, go to http://scb.tamu.edu/bioblitz.htm.

We'd like to feature some aspect of LCP in each issue of our Newsletter. If you make a discovery or find something worth sharing, let us know.

Earn Volunteer Hours while Helping the Scientists at Cornell's Lab of Ornithology

The 2007 Great Backyard Bird Count will take place on February 16th-19th. Participating is easy and fun. Spend as little as 15 minutes on any given day or several hours spread over the four days. Count birds anywhere you like: in your backyard, at a park, or while jogging around the neighborhood. Keep track of the largest number of birds of each species that you see together at any one time in a given location. When you are done, go to the Great Backyard Bird Count web site (http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc) and report your counts. Don't forget to count and record the volunteer hours you earned. The form is available on our website http://grovesite.com/globals/addanonrecord.asp?sid=243&iid=0&pid=170818

Protecting Our Local Native Flora and Fauna: Nesting Boxes for Song Birds *by Manuelita Ureta*

In this regular feature, we'll discuss how to conserve native flora and fauna found in the Brazos Valley. The focus in this issue is on setting up bird houses, because some of our avian residents and summer visitors begin looking for nesting sites as early as February.

Texas Parks and Wildlife reports three endangered species in Brazos County: the interior least tern, the peregrine falcon, and the whooping crane. Three species are threatened: the Arctic peregrine falcon, the bald eagle, and the wood stork. Regrettably, we cannot help these species by installing bird houses, as none of these species will use man-made structures for nesting. Besides, the pressures on these birds stem from habitat destruction rather than insufficient nesting sites. But other species can benefit from our efforts.

While not on the endangered or threatened list, populations of several species of song birds have declined since the introduction of two aggressively competitive European birds: the house sparrow and the European starling. The European colonists are resilient, adaptable, and compete successfully in urban and rural settings alike. For decades, eastern bluebird populations in rural areas declined rapidly until people began installing and monitoring bird houses that are inhospitable to European starlings.

In a rural setting, you can install one house for the eastern bluebird per every 3 acres, more or less. The eastern bluebird needs a fair amount of space to claim as its territory. The houses can be mounted just about anywhere, if they are 5 feet off the ground and not too close to your home, as the bird is somewhat shy. Ideally, the entrance hole of the house will face an open field or lawn, and it will face east. Yes, they are choosy. Install the house in a spot that is accessible to you, as you will want to monitor its use (*i.e.*, evict house sparrows!) and clean it once a year.

In urban backyards, the little, acrobatic bundles of song, the Carolina chickadee and wren, the titmouse, and the red-breasted nuthatch, can compete more effectively with the house sparrow if supplied with suitable nesting sites. A small backyard will accommodate one, perhaps two houses. A spot in dappled shade, five feet off the ground or higher, and in the proximity of shrubs and trees is a good site for a house. Apparently birds don't

Continued on page 5

Bluebird nesting box (Photo by Jim Anding)

Prothonotary Warbler box (Photo by Jim Anding)

Nesting Boxes (from page 4)

like wind drafts any more than we do. Point the entrance hole away from the prevailing wind. For general instructions on house placement, visit Cornell University's excellent webpage at http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/instructions/placement. For instructions specific to a particular bird you are interested in attracting, visit http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/bios/nest_require/habitat.

Song birds will more likely nest in your house if you maintain a regular supply of fresh water, plant native flora, and hang a squirrel-proof bird feeder with quality bird seed. Don't encourage squirrels; they feast on bird eggs.

Several retailers in town stock bird houses and you can order them online. For the do-it-yourself types, building a bird house is a great weekend project requiring just a few woodworking tools, wood**,** and instructions. Plans for a nesting box suitable for songbirds can be found at http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/pdf/boxeabl.pdf . Pay special attention to the size of the entrance hole**,** for it is crucial to keeping out the colonists.

Do You Know an Eastern Bluebird-Loving Landowner?

A chapter member is proposing that the Brazos Valley Master Naturalists set up an **eastern bluebird trail**. A trail consists of several bird houses set about 100 yards apart on private land, to deter potential vandals. We would earn volunteer hours on the several days we meet to build the houses and when we go merrily about installing them. Better still, the emphasis would be on monitoring (out with the house sparrows!) and keeping records of nesting attempts, eggs laid, young produced, and numbers fledged, which affords us ongoing opportunities for volunteering. If many of us get involved in a project of this nature, we will develop a wonderful sense of ownership and pride of accomplishment. So here is the challenge: do you own or know someone who owns acreage suitable for this project? A few or a lot of acres, and some open fields are ideal. We could start building the trail in the fall when the nice weather arrives.

Environmental Concerns: Should Old Technology Coal-Fired Power Plants Be Fast-Tracked in Texas?* *by Kate Kelly*

The Question: Should TXU and other companies be permitted to build—on an accelerated schedule—17 coal-fired power plants and 1 petroleum/coke-fired plant in North and East Texas that pollute more heavily but are less expensive to build and operate than the least polluting plants? Or should regulators push utilities toward cleaner-burning coal plants, even if it means they will cost more and are based on IGCC technology (integrated gasification combined cycle), which TXU says is unproven (only two such plants have been built and they have both experienced problems) and doesn't perform well with the western coal used in Texas?

For an **overview** of the controversy, see the January 2007 issue of *Texas Monthly* (www.texasmonthly.com).

For a position **advocating** the building of the plants, go to http://www.reliabletexaspower.com/ and click on "Proposed Plants".

For arguments **opposing** building the plants as proposed by TXU, go to http://www.environmentaldefense.org/home.cfm Click on "Stop TXU's Coal Rush"

* TMN operates according to the IRS rules for a 501C3 organization. We do not advocate a political position on issues of importance to naturalists. But we are committed to informing our members about environmentally important events and future plans. The question of the proposed coal-fired plants deserves our closest attention.

The Brazos Day-Tripper:
Winter at the Falls on the Brazos *by Jimmie Killingsworth*

Driving north out of Bryan, Jackie and I are heading to the Falls on the Brazos, the northern opening of the valley. We follow Highway 6, which carries the main north-south traffic through our region, all the way from Waco to Hempstead, a stream of humanity, steel, and horsepower that stays parallel to the big river but never gets close enough for car travelers like us to see, that space reserved to this day for grazing and planting. We take the Marlin exit, and after a few miles through old cotton country, including a wet field with a wintering flock of sandhill cranes and a prison farm named for a former governor, we find the modest county park at the site of the falls.

At the end of the short road through the picnic ground and campsites, the falls come into view. It's high water when we arrive, a strong current. The low concrete dam is completely covered by the abruptly falling river that drops a few feet, then swirls and foams onto a ledge of limestone, creating a brisk run of white water. The turbulence fairly quickly subsides as the river digs into the muddy soils that form its bed all the way to the sandier land of the coastal plains. After no more than a hundred yards, the water recovers its stately flow.

It's not Niagara, but its width and power still manage to impress. We know the river's determination, how it maintains a more or less constant breadth and volume all the way down the valley. We know that the relatively clear green color it displays up here—more like the Navasota down below—will yield to the muddy chocolate we've seen in places like Washington-on-the-Brazos as it scoops up soil and patiently molds the land.

On a short walk, we soon exhaust the limits of the park. The wind whips as we cross the bridge over the river just north of the falls. The strong current has left a huge pile of jetsam against each of the concrete abutments. Uprooted trees, logs, even an entire johnboat are in various stages of being dismantled by the rush of the water. We pitch sticks into the river to watch them run.

The water and the wind seem to be the main animating forces on this winter day. I see wisps of dirty gray fiber fluttering in the breeze around the desiccated corpse of a skunk and stuck in stiff blades of winter grass—signs of the lingering cotton trade in these parts left by trucks carrying product to market. On the little road down to the river, we find the almost perfectly preserved skeleton of a small dog, dumped here dead no doubt, but flattened by subsequent traffic and picked clean by crows and other carrion-eaters. In an earlier stage of decay is a goat beneath the bridge. I've found animal remains on river access roads all over Texas. I guess the idea is to dump the dead things and hope the river will carry them someplace else—the afterlife maybe.

There's mistletoe all over the trees, and since it's close to Christmas, we decide to gather a little. I find an old board and, by throwing it javelin-like into the overhead branches, try to knock loose a good-sized bunch. I'm able to get a nice sample with the translucent berries. I start to call out to Jackie in victory but notice that she's collecting good samples at shoulder level.

We walk back and eat our lunch at the picnic ground overlooking the falls, admiring the big black willows bending out over the river. In one, a pair of fox squirrels chase each other round and round the partially submerged trunk. Three anglers are working a small pool by the bank just below the falls, their genders indeterminate, they're so bundled up against the early December wind. They have at least six lines out in the water but catch nothing while we're watching. A man and a little boy carry their tackle down to the boat launch above the falls and sit in the sun with their backs against a low concrete wall. The boy in his car coat and red stocking cap cannot be more than five years old. Recalling the times I've carried unruly kids on fishing expeditions, I marvel at the patience of this child.

Except for the bright red of the cardinal flashing across our line of sight and an occasional quick view of the woodpecker's red nape, the birds here maintain a winter decorum in gray and blue. Even the warblers and goldfinches keep only a hint of yellow in the trim of their gray-flannel suits, as if to politely allow the bluebirds a chance to provide the main show of color.

An older fellow comes out of a camper and walks over to us. From the small talk, we gather that he's retired and has some time on his hands. Noticing the binoculars, he asks if we're birdwatchers and tells us that he's just learning. He points out the "Eastern Bluebird." We tell him about a "Belted Kingfisher" whose bright blue Jackie had sighted near a backwater pond of the creek that runs into the Brazos just below the falls. I had verified its laughing call coming across the water.

As we drive away after lunch, we see the man heading for the creek, shiny new binoculars in hand.

TMN Members' Spotlight

Mary Ann Cusimano

Imagine the world green all around. Imagine thousands of different colors of green splashed with fuchsia, indigo, azure. I grew up in New Orleans, surrounded by this lushness. And as luck would have it, I inherited a bit of the magic that dwelled in my father's green thumbs. Like him, I love encouraging plants to grow. I once had a wonderful dieffenbachia that wanted to be as tall as the banana trees outside my study window. At university, I fell deeply in love with the study of the earth, with geology. To hike in mountains, to walk among trees, to bend down and see every petal on a small flower has always brought me happiness. With luck holding my hand, I found a job that for a while allowed me to travel to many places in the world and to see fantastic sights. I watched pink porpoises playing in the waters mixing at the start of the Amazon River. On a sunny morning, I watched a wallaby joey trying to return to the safety of his mom's pouch as I approached. At the top of a Mayan temple, I listened to the song of a toucan perched at eye level in the top of the canopy. I don't travel so much any more but channel my energies into raising my son to appreciate our natural world, the world that my husband and I appreciate so. I'm currently finishing my master's degree and hope to teach geology in the future. I've always hoped to inspire people to love the world as much as I do. I am glad to be a part of a group that is working to make our natural world more appreciated.

TMN Brazos Valley Chapter

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Punnee Soonthornpoct

My parents were Cambodian. I was born and raised in Bangkok, Thailand. I received a USAID scholarship to study Plant Pathology at Louisiana State University, after which I went back to work for the government as a Plant Pathologist until 1970 when the war started. I requested to be assimilated into the Army as an intelligence officer working for the G-2, as an interpreter in four languages. I came to the US for a second time in 1972, this time to complete a Master's degree in Plant Pathology at Mississippi State University. I worked for TAMU as a research associate in the Biology Department's insect endocrinology lab until 1995, when I went back to MSU to earn my doctorate degree. I then returned to the Brazos Valley to teach at Blinn College. I joined the Master Naturalist program because I want to learn more about the animals and plants of Texas, which is my second home. The Texas Master Naturalist program also gives me a chance to use my knowledge to help the community.

Jessica Taylor

From camping when I was younger all the way to studying in college, I have always loved being out in nature. I joined the Texas Master Naturalists because I have an interest in nature and wanted to be in a group of others who share some of the same interests. I am 24 years old, and I have a strong interest in wildlife and the environment. I have a B.S. in Biology from Sam Houston State (class of '05), and I am currently studying Wildlife and Fisheries at Texas A&M. I plan to work as a field biologist someday. I plan to be finished with my school this fall, and in the meantime, I am trying to get field experience. I hope to join a wildlife expedition with the Dallas Zoo this spring. The expedition consists of a biological assessment of an area near Tepehuajes, Tamaulipas, Mexico, with an emphasis on the behavioral ecology of endangered cats in northeastern Mexico. Additional components of the project include capturing and banding raptors and surveying rodent populations. I also plan to intern with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

The Texas Master Naturalist Program

The Texas Master Naturalist program is a venture directed toward developing local corps of "master volunteers" to provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities. Many communities and organizations rely on such citizen volunteers for implementing youth education programs; for operating parks, nature centers, and natural areas; and for providing leadership in local natural resource conservation efforts. In fact, a short supply of dedicated and well-informed volunteers is often cited as a limiting factor for community-based conservation efforts.

In Texas, this partnership among the Texas Cooperative Extension, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and more than 260 local partners has resulted in a unique master volunteer organization. At the state level, the organization is directed by an advisory committee providing training guidelines, program marketing and promotion, curriculum resources, and advanced training opportunities; and a volunteer representatives committee responsible for representing the varied interests of the chapters and providing a communication link to state committees and program leaders.

For an individual to gain the designation of a Master Naturalist™ they must participate in an approved chapter training program with a minimum of 40 hours of combined field and classroom instruction, obtain 8 contact hours of approved advanced training, and complete 40 hours of volunteer service. Upon their start of the initial training program, trainees have a maximum of one year in which to complete their 40 hours of volunteer service and 8 hours of advanced training. To retain the Texas Master Naturalist title during each subsequent year, volunteers must complete 8 additional hours of advanced training and provide an additional 40 hours of volunteer service coordinated through their local chapter.

The program currently supports greater than 2750 Texas Master Naturalist volunteers in 27 local recognized chapters across the state. The program continually expands each year, so if there isn't a chapter near you, contact the Texas Master Naturalist Coordinator or your local TPWD biologist or TCE county agent.

Since its establishment in 1998, Texas Master Naturalist volunteer efforts have provided over 334,000 hours of service valued at more than $3.38 Million. This service has resulted in enhancing 75,000 acres of wildlife and native plant habitats, reaching more than 530,800 youth, adults and private landowners. It has also lead to the discovery of a new plant species by a program volunteer. The program has gained international state and local recognition with the Wildlife Management Institute's Presidents' 2000 Award, the National Audubon Society's 2001 Habitat Hero's Award, the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission's 2001 Environmental Excellence Award, and Texas A&M University's 2001 Vice Chancellor's Award of Excellence in Partnership.
Funding is provided by Texas Parks & Wildlife and Texas Cooperative Extension.

Our Final Thought

A Mimosa Yellow (*Eurema nise*) butterfly enjoys the nectar from a hibiscus flower.
Photo by Leo Lombardini

If you would like to have one of your photos featured in one of the next issues of the Cyrano, you can do so, by submitting it electronically to Leo Lombardini at l-lombardini@tamu.edu