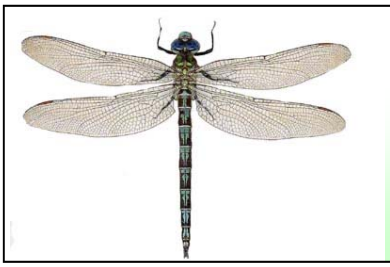
SPRING 2007 Volume 1, Issue 2



Texas Master Naturalist the Cyrano

The Newsletter of the Brazos Valley Chapter

President's Corner *by Jo Anne Bates*

Jo Anne Bates

On Saturday, February 24, seven members of the Brazos Valley Chapter attended the Gulf Coast Regional meeting of the Texas Master Naturalists. The Galveston Bay Area Chapter hosted the meeting at the Wayne Johnson Community Center in LaMarque. Kitty and Jim Anding, Dwight Bohlmeyer, Janet Dudding, David Gwin, Manuelita Ureta, and Jo Anne Bates represented our chapter.

Sonny Arnold, Assistant Coordinator, TMN program conducted the meeting. All nine chapters in this region were represented. The overall purpose of the meeting was to share with other chapters the highs and lows of the past year. He reported that there are currently 38 TMN chapters with three more in process. One of the larger chapters in our region is The Cradle of Texas Chapter, Brazoria County, with about 100 active members. The Galveston Bay Area Chapter has a program that sounds interesting. Their members have agreed to learn the ten most common birds, plants, fish, etc., of their county. This program is called the "Tenners." Members of the chapter decide the ten most common or important based on their own interest. As an example, the Birders in our group would pick the ten for Brazos County. The Heartwood Chapter, based in Conroe, has a project that we may want to join. They are working with the Big Thicket Association on a survey of the Big Thicket National Preserve, which is located north of Beaumont. The Big Thicket Preserve covers 100,000 acres in seven counties. It is listed as one of the ten most threatened parks in the nation. This survey will be similar to one conducted of the Smoky Mt. National Park. The official title of the survey is "All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory of the Big Thicket National Preserve." The project will use citizen scientists working with professionals in various fields. There will be an introduction to the program on June 16, 2007 at the Saratoga Visitors Center. This will be an opportunity to meet the scientists (including our own Jane Packard being one of them). For more information about the project, please read the article on p. 10 of this *Cyrano* issue and check http://www.thicketofdiversity.org/.

Diann Mitchell, Grovesite Web Development Director, answered questions about the web opportunities available to all chapters and the future development of the state TMN web page. E-mail groups were discussed. By utilizing an email group, such as a Google group, individual member's emails are not disclosed in a mass email to the entire group, thus preserving the privacy of individual members' account names and possibly avoiding spam from the unauthorized lifting of addresses. The Brazos members agreed to try this for the convenience of the entire group.

The meeting was adjourned about 2:30 P.M. and all members arrived safely back in Brazos County.

Inside this issue:

The Cyrano encourages stories from the membership that carry within them a sense of the writer's interest in our mission. The editors have voted to exclude their own stories from the pool of eligible contestants. We want to run stories from all of you! We are pleased to announce that Jim Anding's story, "The Prow Project" has won the Cyrano prize for best contribution to Vol. 1 No. 2. This story carries the sound of Jim's voice and his enthusiasm for creating a nest box trail for the prothonotary warbler. The screech owl nesting box built by Mike Cronan will go to Jim. Congratulations!

The Editors

The Prow Project *by Jim Anding*

It really started out of ignorance, I suppose. Mine, of course. I had known the bird could be seen in Brazos County because I had seen it once in the late 1960s down around the Peach Creek Community and had seen it once in our backyard at our birdbath. But until David Gwin came to town, I did not realize the bird nested in cavities. Therefore, birdhouses! I had built, and or helped kids build, eastern bluebird boxes for years. Change the design a bit and *shazam*, a new project.

The prothonotary warbler, *Prothonotary citrea*, sometimes called the golden swamp warbler, is declining in population, a slow downward curve. The Brazos Valley is on the extreme western fringe of its range. Concerned naturalists brought back the bluebirds so could not an effort do the same for the prothonotary?

This species likes water. Not just any water, but swampy, gooey, messy, buggy, snakey, insecty water. Brazos River? No. Navasota River? Maybe. I recalled the Longtrussell Road crossing the Navasot (local for the Navasota) from visits years ago and decided to check it out. David and I drove out after a heavy rain and found the road impassable, and we smiled. We waited and went back later, put in a canoe, and alas, found the river down with high banks and most of the water gone. We decided to keep looking.

Now, Darrell Vollert enters the mix. Darrell is a Chappell Hill birding guide and led a field trip to the Navasot bottoms about a year ago. It was a full morning of sloshing through water. Now we're talking! Problem: private land, enter with permission only. I talked to Darrell, and he was enthusiastic and indicated he would approach the land owners about a nest box trail project. The permission to set up the trail and monitor the boxes weekly was given, and the project was on.

Top and bottom: the crew and the action for the project (*Photos by Manuelita Ureta*). Center: a prothonotary warbler (*Photo by Joe, Creative Commons, http://picasaweb.google.com/Kestrel139/Birds/photo?pli=1#5008661622757381602*)

I had a lot to learn! I Googled the species and had tons of hits. Read, read, read. Photos were a special delight. Names of people appeared, so I emailed them or the organization they represented. I looked again at the bird's range map, checked the national Audubon Society's website for chapter locations, and emailed the chapters in the areas showing the greatest density of this species population. I had many replies and corresponded with most of the contacts. One in particular was Dr. Bob Reilly at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. He gave a wealth of information and emailed me a well tested set of plans for a nest box that he and his associates had perfected over the years. He indicated that in 2006 he had banded over 500 birds (which was a slow year) and over 1200 the year before. He checks most of his boxes from a canoe. Another was of family interest, as Skipper Anding, president of the Jackson, Mississippi Audubon Society, had run two trails for several years.

I learned that the species likes to nest in swampy areas, preferably over water, close to the ground, in old woodpecker holes, bridge substructure, and where limbs have broken off and a hole rotted inside the tree. The young are quite good swimmers, but I suspect that bass, bullfrogs, and water snakes take their toll. The eggs are splotched and number from three to eight with about four as an average. Predation by critters was a great area of concern to us, so we decided to place the boxes on straight pieces of EMT pipe stuck in the mud or, using

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Prow Project (from page 2)

David's design, on a pipe bent in the shape of a shepherd's hook and hung from tree limbs. The pipes being slippery, we hoped, would defeat predators' attempts to access the boxes either from below or above.

After assessing the feasibility of the project, two construction dates were set to complete the construction phase of the project. A total of 50 boxes were completed by eleven individuals. Five of that group spent a morning setting the 30 boxes in place. One individual took that opportunity to test the waters fully clothed. My report of this resulted in a comment to the extent that whether this implies that one or more did the same without clothes. A great time was had by all.

We will monitor the boxes weekly starting on April 28. The information we will be recording is species nesting in the box, number of eggs, and over time, the number of young ending with fledging. Monitoring is done to ascertain the effectiveness of the placement of the boxes and to relocate them when necessary. It also provides an opportunity to perform routine maintenance, such as wasp nest removal. The landowners expressed concern that allowing large numbers of participants in the placement and monitoring of the boxes could have a detrimental impact on the environment. Therefore, we decided to limit the number of people participating at any one time but to try to get everyone who expressed an interest in the project involved.

Big thanks to all who participated! And remember: The need for additional suitable habitat for future efforts is greatly needed.

Titmouse Science *by Kate Kelly & Mrs. Vitae Kite*

It's five o'clock on Saturday afternoon in mid-March in the Brazos Valley. This time of year is about as lovely as they come—light breezes, low humidity, temperatures in the 70s, and the surge of spring everywhere you look. In between turning over the soil, I'm keeping an ear open for the birds around, hoping I'll hear some promising sounds from a chickadee nesting box in the ash tree just off our deck. I do hear a series of calls—"peter, peter, peter"—but they are close by and urgent. I locate a tufted titmouse hopping from perch to perch, moving closer to the garden. She's got some fluff in her mouth, and I figure she's building a nest. She drops down inside the tomato cage and then hops back out again. She eyes me—or am I imagining it? "Peter peter peter," she continues, and hops closer to me. I freeze. She next flies onto the top of my head and starts pecking at my hair. After about 5 minutes of this, she flies away. I tell my husband, and he laughs.

The next night at 5 P.M., I'm out in the garden again. Here she comes, scolding. I freeze again. Up she goes onto my head and resumes pulling and pecking for what seems like a very long time. This time Mike gets a photo. She came looking again last night, always between 4 and 6 P.M. on my back deck, hopping right up onto my head.

I look up this behavior on the World Wide Web and find ornithologists silent on titmouse human-hair-pecking. However, an excerpt from the e-book, *Life Histories of North American Birds,* contains the following report: "Mrs. Vitae Kite (1925) generously allowed an aggressive titmouse to help himself to some of her silvery locks. 'Without the least warning he lit squarely on top of my head . . . At first I thought he was trying to frighten me away but soon changed my mind, when he began working and pulling at my hair with all his might. Now my hair has been very white for many years, but I still have plenty of it . . . , so I steadied myself and 'held fast' while that energetic 'Tom' had the time of his life gathering 'wool' to line his nest, for that was what I now felt sure he was doing.'"

So that's two data points—me and Mrs. Kite—and enough evidence for me to list human hair along with castoff snakeskin as a desired ingredient for titmouse nest building. Cornell Ornithology Lab, are you listening?

The Brazos Day-Tripper: Easter at Brazos Bend *by Jimmie Killingsworth*

Easter Sunday, 2006. Jackie and I are visiting our daughter Myrth and her boyfriend Sean in Houston. It's a nice day in early spring, and everyone wants to take a walk. I've read about a place south of town, a state park called Brazos Bend. It doesn't look like much on the map, but it's the closest place that we might get to in a hurry. After a late breakfast at the bagel shop, we head out under a mostly clear sky with a few wispy high clouds.

As we emerge from the ugly industrial district in south Houston onto the flat coastal plain, the widening space has a hopeful feel. Some new housing developments give way to the truly rural—groups of house trailers and little frame farmhouses on acres that will soon be planted in corn, sorghum, and cotton. Less than an hour later, we turn eastward onto the flood plain of the Brazos River, and after a couple of turns on farm roads, we locate the state park. A roughly painted sign with a picture of an alligator stands in the shade beneath a few low oaks hung with Spanish moss.

The hint of alligators raises my expectations a little from the low level I had cautiously maintained, though I hear a voice inside warning against full excitement. I've been to enough state park ponds in swampy places across the south to know that the usual sighting of gators amounts to a binoculared argument over whether the thing you're looking at is a gator, a turtle, or a log. If you want to see them close, go to an alligator farm.

We park the car in a sunny lot and grab enough water for the short walk on the trail we find on the map given to us at the gate. A mile and a half or two at the most, the trail circles one of several lakes in the park, some maintained by levees, some created by the periodic flooding of the Brazos River and a small tributary called Big Creek. I see a flight of cormorants rise over the lake and feel a lift inside.

A Broad-banded Watersnake (*Nerodia fasciata*) photographed at Brazos Bend by Leo Lombardini

Before catching the trail, we check out a little fishing dock on the lake. Leaning over the rail, I look right into the eye of an eight-foot gator lolling in the water a foot away from the dock. Heart racing, I give the hurry-over-here hand sign to my companions, worried that the big creature will sink out of sight before they see it. But no. The gator yawns and surfaces fully to circle lazily around the edge of the dock as Myrth snaps pictures and Sean stands marveling. He's never seen wildlife up close except in the zoo or on *Animal Planet*, his favorite cable network. Looking up, I catch sight of some color on an island in the distance and find a small flock of roseate spoonbills in the binoculars. I give the glasses to Sean so he can look. "We'll see them better if we walk to the other side," I say, and he's on his way. "You can hang on to the binoculars," I say to his back.

The trail takes us through a small stand of mixed woods. The insects are starting to emerge, and some odd unidentifiable forms, larval or just plain strange, roll in the dust and buzz curiously through the grasses along the trail's edge. We come out of the shade and find ourselves walking on a raised trail with swampy water on either side.

I borrow my binoculars back from Sean and, in one look, see a glossy ibis sitting side by side with a white ibis. One is preening in my left eyepiece and the other fishing in my right. By the time we cover two hundred yards, we've seen three different kinds of herons, two species of egrets in addition to ibises, spoonbills, cormorants, and the black-bellied whistling ducks with their crazy pink feet. Everything with wings is flying and flapping, quacking and calling in a swirl of sound and motion. Every wind that stirs the coolish water seems to raise new life into being. Bass make minnows splash at the lake's edges. Turtles and toads and frogs crawl and leap off logs and muddy banks. Their prints join the ones left by nocturnal creatures—rats, raccoons, night herons—in the malleable mud flats.

And then the alligators. A little boy with a Spanish accent comes running up to his grandparents and parents on the trail behind us. "A big one walked right across the path," he yells, "an alligator!" Grandpa leans his head back and laughs while mama grabs a handful of shirtsleeve. "Stay close," she warns. Two more children ahead of us

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Brazos Bend (from page 4)

point to the creek running left of the pathway. "There, there," they shout. We look over the edge between the tamarisk shrubs in time to see a pair of gators swimming by, going upstream, jaws parting occasionally to scoop up an easy meal of fish or tadpoles. A little farther, we stand with other walkers watching a big gator trapping good-sized fish in a tiny cove. He uses his body to block their exit, and when he feels them swim beside his head, he opens his mouth and turns it sideways to snap them up. "That gator is fishing," says an old man to one of the kids. Sean looks at me. "Awesome."

Up ahead, Jackie has spotted something else. She shows us a big discarded snakeskin hanging from a tree. Spring molting is underway. While we admire its length and breadth, movement in the water seizes our attention. The creature itself, or else its nemesis, a nice-sized king snake, gleaming black and yellow, slides onto the bank and then back into the glassy water.

Further around the trail a snaky protrusion from the lake proves to be the neck and long-beaked head of an anhinga, a kind of customized cormorant native to the southern swamps, known locally as the water turkey. It swims half-submerged, using its wings to propel through the water. Later, as we linger at the end of the trail, we see it sitting heraldically on a water-rooted cypress, spreading its wings in the sun to dry.

We separate for a while as we come to the end of the trail, and I find myself alone, sitting on the stump of a big cottonwood, pondering the wetland. People picnic in the distance, flights of birds rise from the water and settle down again, the wind stirs the surface. Sun shining on my face, I close my eyes and feel the river roaring in my blood. The tomb of winter has opened its door.

BioBlitz *by Jean Paul*

In spite of threatening weather, BioBlitz was another triumph this year. Heather told me that Friday night's owl walk hosted 120 people! And the nocturnal herp/amphibian walk afterward involved 60. Saturday, although overcast and chilly earlier in the morning, turned out to be gorgeous after noon. Thanks to Leo, Manuelita, Punnee, Ginger, Madge, Dwight, Eddie, Jane, and anybody else who helped out, we must have handed out close to 100 pine-cone feeders. We went through a whole gallon of crunchy peanut butter and a couple dozen wooden applicators. We had a gallon of peanut butter left over for the Planet Earth Celebration, along with a couple of bushels of pine cones, and two sacks of wild birdseed.

BioBlitz 2007 (Photos by Manuelita Ureta)

Chinese Tallow Tree *by Leo Lombardini*

The chinese tallow tree [*Sapium sebiferum* (L.) Roxb. or *Triadica sebifera* (L.) Small], also known as "florida aspen" and "popcorn-tree," is an invasive species which was purposely introduced from eastern Asia as early as the 1700s. In China the tree has been cultivated for hundreds of years as a seed-oil crop. In America, the tree was not introduced for its crop, but mainly as an ornamental. The attraction did not come from its flowers, which have no petals and are therefore relatively unattractive. The tree became popular because in autumn its leaves turn yellow, orange, or red, a very rare treat in the Texas flora.

The species belongs to the Euphorbiaceae family, which is one of the largest families of plants with about 300 genera and 7,500 species. Species of this family can be herbs, shrubs (such as the popular poinsettia), and trees. Plants in the Euphorbiaceae are sometimes succulent and cactus-like, and they are all characterized by the frequent occurrence of milky sap. Like the chinaberry tree (*Melia azedarach* L.), another non-native invasive species, the chinese tallow tree is fast-growing, medium-sized, and characterized by an elegant canopy, which can blend very well with other trees frequently found in our gardens. Like most fast-growing trees, however, it has a relatively soft wood and limbs can break easily. Chinese tallow tree often spreads by root sprouts, but propagation by seed is also common. Birds disperse the seeds, which causes the tree to rapidly establish itself along fence lines.

Leaves of the Chinese tallow tree (Photo by Leo Lombardini)

Unfortunately, since its introduction, chinese tallow has escaped cultivation and disrupted native ecosystems, and it is thus referred to as "invasive" exotic species. Invasive exotic plants all share many common characteristics: they propagate easily, grow quickly, are resistant to native pests and diseases, can grow in a wide range of soils, can invade undisturbed habitats, and have features considered attractive enough to encourage the further distribution by people.

Chinese tallow has escaped into the wild in many parts of southeastern Texas, where it can be a significant invading woody species. Once established, this species can be costly and time consuming to control. In the wild, it can compete with other valuable wildlife plants and can adapt to different ecological conditions, as it can thrive in well-drained uplands as well as in bottomlands. It is also very resistant to conditions of flooding or elevated soil water content, which explains why it can be frequently seen along the shores of water bodies, and even on floating islands. Thanks to these traits, the chinese tallow has become naturalized in the southern coastal plain from South Carolina south to Florida and west to Texas.

If you have recently driven in autumn through the Atchafalaya Basin in Louisiana (that breathtaking stretch of I-10 which is above the big swampy area) you may have noticed the nice fall colors of the roadside trees. Unfortunately, most of the nicely colored trees are chinese tallows that have spread thanks to birds or water seed dispersal. It can colonize new patches of soil so fast that it can easily outgrow and overshadow the slower-growing bald cypress seedlings. In Florida, thousands of dollars are spent every year to remove or control the spread of this species. In addition, Florida landowners are encouraged NOT to purchase or distribute chinese tallow trees or seeds, but to remove them and pull up seedlings as they germinate.

Despite all this, the tallow continues to be sold in plant nurseries of the southeastern United States, and unaware gardeners still plant them for their attractive but dangerous beauty. To know more about this species and the ways to control, visit the USDA National Invasive Species Information Center at http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/ plants/chintallow.shtml.

Editor's Note

Thanks to Morgan Reisenbichler and Jonathan Armour, students in Jackie Palmer's editing class at Texas A&M, for their help in editing this issue and their development of a style guide for The Cyrano.

A Flowerbed with Native Plants *by Manuelita Ureta*

On a Saturday morning in late March, sixteen volunteers armed with native plants, garden tools, and gloves went to work planting a flowerbed by the southeast entrance doors to Texas Cooperative Wildlife Collection (TCWC) in College Station. It was overcast and the perfect temperature. We spent a good hour pulling weeds from the target flowerbed and from one started last year that is a showcase for clump grasses. Mary Waldson (the team leader) and Jean Paul (quite an expert in native flora) took inventory of the plants available and designed an optimal layout, considering the eventual size and growth requirements of the various plants. By noon it was sunny, and we were a little tired and pretty muddy. It was great fun and, as of late April, the plants were doing well. See the before and after pictures.

Ocelots *by Jessica Taylor*

I recently went to Los Ebanos Ranch in Tamaulipas, Mexico (100 miles north of Tampico) and worked with a researcher (Arturo Caso) who was studying ocelots (*Leopardalis pardalis*). This was an educational "workation" called a Wildlife Research Expedition (WRE) run through the Dallas Zoo. In addition to ocelots, we also studied the rodents and small mammals, which the ocelots were eating, on the ranch.

The ocelot is a small spotted cat roughly the size of a bobcat. Every ocelot has a different distinct set of lines and spots on its fur. These cats have a beautiful pelt, which unfortunately has created a hunting demand.

Ocelots once ranged from as far north as Arkansas and Arizona to as far south as Northern Argentina. Fossil records suggest possibly an even larger range. Ocelots currently live in extreme South Texas, coastal lowlands in Mexico, Central America, down to Northern Argentina. The existing populations of ocelots are isolated from one another. Ocelots require dense cover, and humans have and are clearing out the dense cover for agricultural use. Dense forests once dominated the flood plains through Texas up to Arizona and throughout the Rio Grande Valley. The Amazon rainforest is now the ocelot's main stronghold for habitat. Humans have been clearing ocelot habitat to grow their crops. Hunting was once the number one threat to the ocelot. Habitat loss is now a major problem.

In Texas it is estimated that 80 to 120 ocelots remain. Researchers are trying to create a pathway of brush land along the cost of Mexico and Texas to connect the populations. Researchers have been successful in relocating individuals from Mexico to Laguna Acosta Wildlife Preserve (located in South Texas). Currently researchers are working to relocate more ocelots to Texas. The research done on this WRE will help to better understand ocelots and support a successful relocation project in Texas. Will the ocelot return to the Brazos Valley? No, the days of ocelots in central Texas have come and gone. However, through conservation work and cooperation with people, the existing ocelots can survive.

Planet Earth Celebration 2007 *by Kate Kelly*

On Saturday April 21 in downtown Bryan, a whole group of earth-friendly folks set up tents and displays showing how easy and affordable living green is becoming here in the Brazos Valley. The best part of the Planet Earth Celebration was watching the involvement of kids in the event. The Kids' Zone activities included t-shirt drawing contests, face painting, rockwall climbing and more, but kids seemed to find interest in just about all of the earth-related displays that covered several city blocks. The Master Naturalists of the BV had a display visited by several kids while I was there early in the morning. Smushing peanut butter onto a pine cone and rolling it around in bird seed was of course one of the favorites. Dwight's identification board was another hit, as the kids tested their knowledge of bird names and photographs by linking the two. Many of the kids beat their parents at this game—so something good is happening with youngsters around here! We had several inquiries about the TMN program from families looking for ways to get involved locally. Other favorites were the snakes displayed next door to our tent and the bluebird nesting boxes sold one street over, next to the displays from the cities of Bryan and College Station on recycling, water conservation, waste reduction, and composting. By the time I left, the air was warming up, the cotton candy was smelling really good, and the visitors were checking out just how easy it is becoming to live green.

Having fun at Planet Earth Celebration 2007 (Photos by Manuelita Ureta)

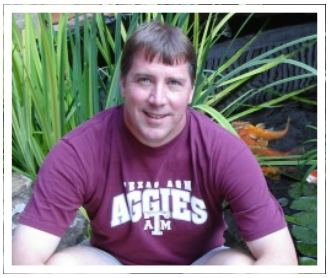
BRAC Nature Trail *by Mary Strauss*

This summer, the Texas Master Naturalists of the Brazos Valley will have an opportunity to volunteer for a new project that will be sure educate for generations to come. The Bryan Regional Athletic Complex (BRAC), located off Texas Avenue in north Bryan, has a nearly forgotten natural area with an extensive network of well established trails. The trails run through a variety of habitats including a hardwood canopy and open prairie, and even boast a 300-year-old oak. In the coming months, BV Master Naturalists will be marking the numerous trails with guideposts and also drafting informative trail maps for public use. Our first task, posed to take place in May, will include using a combination of GPS techniques with GIS software to locate every available trail. The creation of trail posts and guides will continue throughout the summer, and all available naturalists are encouraged to participate. We hope that the BRAC trail will be the first of many guided trails our group helps create in the Brazos Valley.

TMN Members' Spotlight

Mark Ojah

I grew up in Canada and was fortunate to have wild places close at hand during my formative years. As a child, I was always curious about nature and preferred outdoor explorations and adventure to other forms of entertainment. Family vacations and summer camping, hiking and canoeing trips reinforced these interests. Following undergraduate studies in geography and Spanish and brief stints traveling, studying, and doing charity work in Europe and the Caribbean, I decided to strike out on a grand adventure. I broke loose from the high tundra and headed to Caracas, Venezuela where I landed a job teaching English to oil-industry executives. It was never my intention to stay long, but I ended up spending three wonderful years trekking, climbing, and snorkeling my way around the South American continent. Later, after returning to Canada and completing studies in transportation and logistics, I scored a six-month paid internship with a transportation firm in Mexico City. This led to an opportunity to work on a U.S.-Mexico transportation project at the Texas Transportation Institute, where I have been employed as a researcher for the past six years. I joined TMN to broaden my knowledge of the natural world and meet friends with similar interests.



Dwight Bohlmeyer

I grew up on a farm in central Missouri, the youngest of five children. I developed a love of animals and nature at an early age. As a small child I spent summers outdoors playing with the dogs and farm cats, helping in the garden, and exploring the fence rows and orchard for animals. In high school I often spent my free time fishing or watching migrating waterfowl on our 30-acre irrigation lake. I attended the University of Missouri in Columbia before transferring to Texas A&M University at Galveston, majoring in marine biology. Upon graduation in 1984, I taught at a marine science camp in the Florida Keys, and then spent time in the Bering Sea as an observer for National Marine Fisheries Service on Japanese fishing vessels. I returned to Texas and studied the redfish (*Scieanops ocellatus*) for my master's degree in genetics. For the last ten years I have been teaching freshmen biology at Blinn College in Bryan. I enjoy all things related to the natural world and working with the Texas Master Naturalists to educate others about our local fauna. I am particularly drawn to water and started the Aquatic Education Center at Blinn in 2005 as an outreach center to interest others in our local streams and ponds.

Leo Lombardini

I was born in downtown Florence, Italy, a town which is known mainly for its Renaissance masterpieces. Despite being a city boy, I consider myself lucky because I had the chance to spend my childhood summers in a beautiful little farm my family owned that was located on a picture-perfect Tuscan hill. The farm was small, but there was enough land for us to raise chickens, grow our own vegetables, and make our own wine and olive oil. I still remember myself killing time in those hot and dusty summers by doing a lot of activities that had to do with nature, such as observing insects, checking on the newborn chicks, and planting pretty much any type of seed I could put my hands on, just to observe a new plant grow. When it came the time to choose my College major, I debated a bit between Agriculture, Veterinary Science, and Architecture. (I do not know where the inspiration for the latter one came from, but I assume that breathing Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci's air had something to do with it!) I ended up getting my *Laurea (B.S. + M.S.)* degree in Forestry, and I am glad I did it, because I very much enjoyed my college experience and everything I learned. My desire to know more and explore other fields brought me to continue my education in the U.S., where in 1999 I obtained a Ph.D. in Horticulture from Michigan State. Since then, I lived and worked in the gorgeous Washington state and have been at Texas A&M since 2002. Many years have passed since those hot Tuscan summers, but my curiosity for nature has not diminished, which is why I joined TMN. I am deeply convinced that learning how to observe and respect the environment around us can make us better persons.

Our website has moved! We are now at:
http://grovesite.com/tmn/bv

Mark your calendar: Thicket of Diversity Kickoff Event *by Jane Packard*

The Big Thicket National Preserve will kick-off its ongoing All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory (ATBI) with a public event scheduled for June 16, 2007 at the Visitor Center near Kountze. Several faculty, staff and students from WFSC, RPTS, and RELM have been participating in planning for this cooperative initiative for over a year, under the leadership of Dr. Gillian Bowser at the Gulf Coast Cooperative Ecosystems Studies Unit. Other participating universities include Lamar, S.F. Austin, Sam Houston, Arkansas-Fayetteville, Prairie View and Eastfield College.

"This is a great opportunity for our students to network with scientists and citizen scientists, while sharing the skills they have learned," stated Dr. Packard. "Several members of our local chapter of the Texas Master Naturalists are excited about assisting with collecting survey data, as part of their volunteer efforts coordinated through the Texas Cooperative Wildlife Collections. Heather Prestridge, Toby Hibbitts, and Denise Harmel Garza have been wonderful in coordinating these opportunities for a field course to be held during the week before the event. Pedro Chavarria will be one of the graduate students assisting with the course and the surveys to be reported at the event."

Dale Kruse, of the Tracy Herbarium, explained "researchers are organized in over ten Taxonomic Working Groups (TWiGS) to focus on a particular set of organisms they know best." He is calling for more scientists to step forward as TWiG co-leaders. For example, Dr. Packard will be co-leading the slime-mold TWiG with Dr. Steve Stephenson, who is conducting a global inventory funded by NSF.

All volunteers are welcome, including retirees and "wannabes." At the recent Big Thicket Science Conference, over 30 people signed up to learn more about volunteering. "I'll be interning at the Preserve this summer, so volunteered to help collect slime mold samples and mentor an undergraduate student from Eastfield College," said graduate student Andres Esparza. He is interested in how field experiences may encourage Hispanic students to continue in science and outdoor adventure travel. His outreach activity is part of a grant from NSF to study the interfaces between science and society, associated with conservation lands.

For more information about volunteering with the Big Thicket ATBI, visit http://thicketofdiversity.org, or contact Dr. Packard at j-packard@tamu.edu.

Our Final Thought

This might not be as famous as *The* Rose Garden, but our President's yard is definitely worth a special mention (Photo by Jo Anne Bates).

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

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