



# the Cyrano

Texas Master Naturalist

The Newsletter of the Brazos Valley Chapter

## President's Corner *by Jim Waldson*



### LIVING IN PARADISE

Well maybe not quite paradise, but as nature enthusiasts, we are fortunate to be living in the Brazos Valley. The variety of plants and wildlife to study and enjoy is some of the best in the state.

Much of the area is officially located in the post oak savannah,

which is in itself wonderfully diverse in flora and fauna. We have rivers, forests, prairies, and swamps. By sitting at the convergence of multiple ecosystems, we benefit from the overlap effect known as ecotones. This creates an area which is host to a large array of species. We have the pineywoods to the east, the coastal plains to the south, and the blackland prairies to the west. Each of these ecosystems in itself differs greatly and on the edges contributes a little of itself to the post oak savannah.

It is always exciting when, in the woods or on the river, to see a native animal or plant that shouldn't be in this area. That happens a lot here due to the overlaps. We also have one of the best assortments of wildflowers and birds in the state because of the ecotones. This is a great place to be a Master Naturalist.



Giant swallowtail. Photo by Manuelita Ureta

### Inside this issue:

President's Corner	1
Herpetologist	2
Lake Bluebird Trail	4
Three Amigos in Panama	4
Big Thicket Adventure	7
TMN Members' Spotlight	9
After the Storm	10
Caracara or Jimmie?	11
Our Final Images	13

## Kate Kelly Interview with Lee Fitzgerald, Herpetologist at Texas A&M University 29 July 2008

### Q: What interested you in herpetology?

A: I always liked being outdoors observing animals and catching them. In college I knew I wanted to be a Field Biologist, which, at the time, I took to mean being good at natural history and at camping. When I left Stephen F. Austin State University, I was into bird watching, although I also liked herpetology.

I joined the Peace Corps after graduating, and began a job in El Salvador. I was assigned to study iguanas and ctenosaurs ("black iguanas") in a national park in El Salvador. People there eat these animals, so I conducted a conservation project for these reptiles.

When I was evacuated from El Salvador during the fighting, I went to Paraguay to coordinate a project called the National Biological Inventory. While I was there, I started working with a herpetologist and tropical biologist named Norman Scott, a scientist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Norm was a great mentor to me, and taught me how to be a naturalist/collector and lots about how science is done. That's when I fell in love with herpetological natural history. So I committed to herpetology late in life, compared to many people in our field who are obsessed with herps from their childhood. I worked with Norm for 2 years in Paraguay, after which I went to the University of New Mexico and became his graduate student. I still think of myself as working with him. I continued working in herpetology in South America and the southwestern United States.

### Q: What was one of the most memorable projects you've worked on?

A: As a herpetologist who does research, I direct several projects simultaneously in the ecology and conservation of herps and amphibians. But some of my most memorable experiences are of being out in the field and collecting—going to a place and trying to identify all the species that occur there. Some of my greatest enjoyment—and best stories—have come from expedition-style natural history and collecting. In the mid-90s up till now, I've made fewer specimens. I did most of that work in South America and those specimens are in museums in Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia, and Venezuela.

### Q: Has your work changed over time?

A: I'm now doing less collecting because most of the places I'm working in have already been surveyed. I'm



Dr. Fitzgerald holding a *Sceloporus arenicolus* (Dunes Sagebrush-lizard) with radio attached to its back. Source: <http://herpetology.tamu.edu/>

currently working in eastern New Mexico on lizard ecology and conservation; I'm also working in the Paraguayan and Bolivian *chaco*. We're starting new research in Peru and in the Caribbean. Beginning with my graduate work in the mid-80s, started doing more focused ecological and conservation research on caimans, tegu lizards, and tortoises. One basic theme of my research is identifying the mechanisms that are causing the persistence or disappearance of a species across the landscape. If we understand what allows a species to persist, then we can determine the anthropogenic causes of the decline of individual species and communities. A second theme of my research is regarding sustainable use as a conservation strategy. My

*Continued on page 3*





From page 2

work on caimans and tegu lizards had to do with their economic importance in developing countries in South America. Preserving the species conserves not only the species itself but also its habitat and the economic benefit to local people who live with and use biodiversity and natural resources.

**Q: What are the biggest challenges to your work?**

A: I think it is a challenge to do basic scientific research that has a meaningful implication for conservation policies. Local communities need incentives to conserve forest and natural habitats. Without realistic incentives for changing the way people use land and control use of wildlife, much ecological research merely documents the disappearance of reptiles and amphibians, for example. So the challenge is doing research that demonstrates the relevance of biodiversity to society generally.

**Q: How do you explain to people the value of what you're doing?**

A: Since my days in the Peace Corps, I've always worked with local people in government, with conservation organizations, and with local communities of *campesinos* and community people that share an interest in preserving biodiversity. To take the example of tegu lizards, thousands of people hunt them for their skins and local people want to sustain that use to raise their income; industry wants to sustain the trade in the species; governments want to sustain it so that the economic benefit continues. But this goal presents a challenge—the land dedicated to the lizards is also valuable for other uses, such as soybean production and cattle ranching. In the end, the challenge is to change from a system of uncontrolled exploitation of these animals to systems that are legal, monitored, and sustainable. I hope my research will contribute to this systemic change.

**Q: Where are things going in your field?**

A: There are hopeful developments. It's getting easier to achieve sustainable strategies in conservation



Horned lizard. Source: <http://herpetology.tamu.edu/>

because of our background work. Some of the projects I've worked on have become an example of wildlife management to benefit local people. Learning the ecological mechanisms that influence how reptiles and amphibians are distributed across the landscape will continue to be a promising area because it can be applied to many other issues—the spread of invasive species, and the conservation of endangered species, for example. If we understand the mechanisms that drive changes in populations and communities, then those results can be applied to other conservation problems. This is a great time to be a herpetologist; society now values herps more than ever. We see this in small ways, such as t-shirts devoted to a certain snake breed, the growing popularity of herps as pets, lizards and frogs on TV commercials, etc. There are more herpetologists now and more thought is being given to the conservation of reptiles and amphibians.

I always return to field work in the end. Good naturalists are people driven to go out into the field to see what they can find. My most enjoyable experiences have always been in the field looking for herps day and night.

## The Leisure Lake Bluebird Trail Produces 40 Babies by Madge Luquette

In the fall of 2007, Bluebird nest boxes were assembled by a group of TMNers under the tutelage of Jim Anding. Before Christmas, 10 of these boxes had been planted on the common land around Leisure Lake neighborhood off Leonard Road by Jim, Kitty, Jo Anne, and Madge.

This brought the total number of boxes to 11, as an old box already existed in the area. The boxes were wired onto metal fence posts with a length of PVC pipe over them to discourage snakes. We sprayed the lids inside with ivory soap solution to prevent wasps and yellow jackets from building nests. All this preparation seemed to work well, as we had no snakes or bees' nests.

On January 27, 2008, the first Bluebird was sighted coming out of box #1. The first nest building started on February 2, in box #9. By March 8, all 11 boxes had nests. Bluebirds occupied 6 boxes, Chickadees were in four boxes, and a Sparrow moved into one box. Another box was donated by Manuelita and planted on March 8, bringing the total to 12 boxes. This box had a Bluebird

nest started by March 21. By April 25, thirty-three Bluebird eggs had been laid and twenty-five babies had hatched.

The second round of nest building started April 25 in box #1. Three or four different birds were seen going in and out. We thought perhaps they might be juveniles from the first clutch "helping out". Bluebirds built new nests in four boxes and re-used old nests in two boxes. By July 7, Bluebird eggs had been laid in the six boxes.

Out of that number, we counted ten that hatched and hopefully, fledged. And, wouldn't you know it, the lusty pair in box #1 went on to raise a third family with four out of four surviving. In all, we totaled 63 eggs and 40 babies out of 12 boxes.

Jo Anne and I really hope they can all curb their appetites for the year because we are quite tired of monitoring boxes and are ready for them to fly. We can handle the empty nest syndrome until we start again next spring.

## Three Amigos in Panama by Kitty Anding and Jo Anne Bates

*This metamorphosis from an abandoned radar tower to a mini-lodge took two years, lots of money and more sleepless nights than I care to remember. I call it the ultimate recycling project, from a military installation to a bird watching center... and what can be more peaceful than bird-watching?*

Raul Arrias de Para

If you have never been on a tropical birding trip, the place to start might be Panama.

Kitty and Jim Anding decided to go to Panama and invited everyone to come along. I agreed to go and I am so glad that I did. What a great place to be initiated into the world of "Nerdy Birders". (Definition of "Nerdy Birders": people who have a grand passion for what they do and are willing to share their knowledge with a newbie.) Kitty and Jim are experienced travelers and gave me the list of essentials: binoculars, hiking boots, and rain gear were tops on the list. Rain gear, I asked? You bird in the rain? Of course you do, and we are going to Panama in the rainy season, so I took rain gear. Which I did use if I remembered to take it out of the Birdmobile. Raul Arias de Para is the owner and operator of Canopy Tower (right), opened in January 1999, and Canopy Lodge,





opened in October of 2005. These eco-lodges are first-class birding centers, each with its own ambiance and character. Birders from around the globe visit each year for the chance to see a Tody Motmot, a Blue Cotinga, or any number of beautiful tropical birds. We spent 7 nights at the Tower and 4 nights in the Lodge. The tower was originally built in the 1960s by the US Air Force during the Cold War. The view from the observation deck included the Panama Canal, the lights of Panama City, and the Pacific Ocean. The Lodge is located in El Valle de Anton. The village of El Valle is inside an inactive volcano crater and about 2 hours from Panama City. The air is cooler here and of course it did rain every day. We went anyway. Raul is from this village and his Eco-tourist Lodge and the Tower provide jobs and education for his employees. They are well trained and friendly.

When we arrived at the Tower, we were greeted warmly by Ray and Roz, a couple from Austin, Texas. After lunch, three more “Texans” arrived--Michele and Matt, who are employed by the Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, and their friend, Paul, who is a former employee at Anahuac NWC and is now with US Fish and Wildlife in Madison, Wisconsin. Led by our Panamanian guide, Jose, our Texas contingent spent several days together in search of the most and best birds we could find.

Each day followed a pattern. First thing out of bed, while we waited for the coffee to get ready, we headed to the top of the Tower to see what might be hanging out in the trees. If we were lucky, we might find Keel-billed Toucans, Collared Aracaris (below), Red-legged



Honeycreepers, Tamarind or howler monkeys, or that most-prized bird, the Blue Cotinga. At the call to breakfast, we headed down one floor to the dining room for some of the best coffee in the world and a wonderful breakfast which always consisted of bacon, eggs, yogurt, bread, and fantastic fruit. One could get spoiled to this kind of service. After one more check on the top of the Tower, we boarded the “Rainmobile” for our first trip of the day. From our vehicle we could see birds as we traveled along the road, but most of the real birding was done walking along the trails after we reached our destination. After about three hours of birding, we returned to the Tower for a delicious lunch with more fresh fruit for dessert. We spent a couple of hours after lunch resting and compiling our bird list (and maybe checking the top of the Tower again). Then we were off for our second trip of the day. Returning home hot and weary, but excited about all our wonderful finds, we took a refreshing shower and headed up to the gathering room for a glass (or glasses) of wine, fellowship with our birding companions, and our final meal of the day, which always included, what else but, more of that wonderful fresh fruit.

If you have read anything about Panama birding, some of the locales that may have a familiar ring to your ear are Pipeline Road, Gamboa Rainforest Resort, and Summit Gardens. These, along with the Plantation Trail, Ammo Pond, Chagres River, and Semaphore Hill, were all focus sites for our bird searches. Several people in our party had made lists, either on paper or in their minds, of the particular birds they most wanted to find. One of Jim’s was the Rufous-vented Ground Cuckoo, a most reclusive bird that we found skulking in the dark, jungle understory along Pipeline Road. We felt really fortunate to find this one, since our guide, Jose, had only seen the bird six times in his ten years of leading birding trips. The Blue Cotinga was a prime goal for our Anahuac friends, and was located at the Summit Gardens, but only through a scope from a great distance away. The female was seen quite well from the Tower, but that almost didn’t count because she is really quite plain and can’t hold a candle to her stunning male compadre. The Harpy Eagle (next page), the national bird of Panama, was on everybody’s want list, but alas, was only to be found in the zoo at the Summit Gardens.

JoAnne’s “bird of the trip” was a gorgeous little bird with a bright, red topknot, the Red-capped Manakin. Running a close second was the Blue-crowned Manakin that sported an almost iridescent blue crown. Part of the reason she chose these, she said, was that they sat still and let her get a good look at them. With a total of 223 birds

*Continued on page 6*

From page 5

seen, 110 of them being lifers, it was hard to choose a bird of the trip. With my fascination for hummingbirds, I guess my first choice would be the Green-crowned Brilliant, but another colorful bird, the Red-legged Honeycreeper, gave him strong competition. There were many birds that could easily be moved to the top of the list. The Olivaceous Piculet is a tiny woodpecker, the size of a hummingbird at 3 1/2 inches long, that we watched pecking away at the smaller branches of a tree. The Spectacled Owl, a large dark owl with white spectacles, seen with her white fuzzy-faced, wide-eyed babies in a bamboo forest, was a real treat. Three species of motmots were some of everyone's favorites. We nicknamed the Blue-Crowned Motmot the Aggie Motmot because the noise he made sounded like the Aggie "Whoop." This was another group of birds that very obligingly remained in position long enough for everyone to get good looks.

Birding at the Lodge followed the same pattern—two birding trips a day with three fantastic meals and good fellowship sandwiched in between. Accommodations were a bit more luxurious. The elevation was higher and, therefore, the weather was cooler and rain fell more often. Instead of the top of the Tower from which to view birds, we had an open-air lounge/dining room/library with fruit feeders placed around the perimeter to attract such birds as the Blue-gray Tanager, Red-legged Honeycreeper, and Thick-billed Euphonia. A greater variety of hummingbirds called this area home. We managed to check off fourteen species, but one of the most prized continued to evade us—the Rufous-crested Coquette, a 2 1/2 inch hummer with a bushy, rufous crest that was known to frequent only one particular shrub in the area. We visited this shrub frequently, even up until our last morning, but success was



not to be. More species in the colorful tanager family also occurred in the El Valle Valley. One of our favorites was the Bay-Headed Tanager whose color pattern resembled our Painted Bunting, but the colors were more subdued—pastel shades as opposed to the vivid primary colors of the Bunting. Panama is a beautiful country that has much to offer anyone interested in learning about any aspect of tropical America—plants, insects, birds, mam-

imals, aquatic life. The list could go on and on. The Canopy Tower/Canopy Lodge package is a good introductory experience because it provides a sufficient amount of time in the field with some time for rest and recuperation built into the schedule. All the guides are personable, extremely knowledgeable about birds, and skilled at bringing them in close enough for everyone to see. They are also well versed on plants, insects, and other animals of the region, and can answer most questions posed to them. Their knowledge is only exceeded by their patience. We found all the people of Panama to be extremely gracious and helpful from our taxi-driver who spoke very little English (but attempted to learn some from Jim while Jim tried to learn Spanish from him) to Raul, the owner of the Tower and Lodge. It was a great experience that we would all love to repeat. Maybe next time the Coquette will be more cooperative.

For more photos from Jim, Kitty, and Jo Anne's trip go to <http://picasaweb.google.com/Kitty.Anding/2008620PanamaForCyrano?authkey=S45EiZZ7Frk>





## The Brazos Day-Tripper: A Big Thicket Adventure

by Jimmie Killingsworth, photographs by Jackie Palmer and Myrth Killingsworth

In the last issue of the *Cyrano*, we heard about the canoe trip chapter members made on Village Creek in the Texas Big Thicket last Spring. It was so successful that another is planned for October. As a cautionary tale, I thought I'd devote a column to a trip I made with Jackie back in the Fall of 2002—our first venture into the Thicket, a forest once so dense and dark that the Native peoples were wary of entering unless they knew their way out. A place where water moccasins, alligators, and slime molds find their native element. Where the rays of the sun are blocked by the high crowns of long-leaf pines, the rivers crowded by huge cypress trees, the little light remaining filtered by Spanish moss. Panthers still roam the forest. A sign on one of the nature trails warns you to keep small children close. The pitcher plants and sun dews, both carnivorous, may be far too small to swallow a stray toddler, but a big cat might be tempted to try.

In short, compared to the sunny savannas of the Brazos, the place evokes the Southern Gothic. I confess I found it spooky on my first trip. We rented a cabin down a couple of miles of dirt road, past a clear-cut logging site, and seated on private land where the forest was intact. Remnants of the summer magnolia bloom lingered. I'd never seen magnolias in their wild state, taller and not as bushy as the domestic variety cultivated in front yards across the south. The thick leaves were covered with pitchy brown needles from the pines. I'd never seen so many long-leaf pines either, the remnants of a forest that once ran from Virginia to Texas but now survives mostly in the rotting boards of old houses and the molding copies of pulp novels in your attic.

The cabin, not nearly as well kept as the web site suggested, was so overrun with spindly arachnids that we christened it "Chez Daddy Longlegs." But we were ok with the spiders; they were better than some possible alternatives—rats, fleas, copperheads, or bed bugs. Compared to most hunters' cabins, the place was well appointed—but spooky for sure. We ate a quick supper and went to bed, eager to be well rested for the next day's adventure, trusting our dreams to be disturbed by nothing worse than the tentative touch of the daddy longlegs' tiny feet.

We awoke to a gray cloudy morning and went early to meet the canoe outfitter, Perry, who followed us to a parking spot by a bridge over Village Creek, then taxied

us with our canoe to a jump-off point nine miles upstream. Perry, a heavy redhead with a friendly manner, told us the creek was low so to expect some portages around deadfalls.

"How many portages?" I asked.

"No more than six or seven," he said, "with good sandy ground on both sides so you can drag the canoe if it's too heavy for you." He said he and some friends had cut passages through a number of the deadfalls after a big



storm a few years before, but they quit after breaking the blade off the second chain saw. "You can see that blade still stuck in the log down there, about three miles in." He gave us a map, and we shoved off into the foot-deep water, clear but tea-colored from the tannin that leaches out of the giant cypresses shading the wide stream nearly its entire course.

About ten portages after we had seen Perry's broken blade, I stepped in an underwater hole and threw my back out. I went down on all fours, the foot-deep, brown-tinted water running between my hands. If I moved in any direction, even to lift my head and look around, the muscles in

*Continued on page 8*



From page 7

my low back spasmed and pain erupted. Low back trouble had followed me since early adulthood. But this pain was particularly insistent. X-rays would later show no structural damage, but I was sure at the time a disc had ruptured or an alien had entered my spine. As I made an unwilling study of the sandy creek bottom, I imagined an airlift, a strap descending from a helicopter and reaching under my belly. I'd seen bears lifted this way on TV. Now I figured it was my turn. So long as they shot me with a dart to sedate me, I'd be fine with the plan. I sure couldn't move on my own.

Fortunately Jackie had a different vision. She leaned over and stuck a couple of ibuprofen capsules in my mouth, dribbled some water in, made sure I didn't choke, dragged the canoe up onto a sandy strip of beach, and sat down to wait. About ten minutes later I managed to roll over onto my back and let the cool water flow around the epicenter of the pain. Ten minutes more and I crawled up onto the beach. In five minutes I could stand up. Then Jackie pointed the canoe downstream, dragged its bow into the running water, and helped me lower my-



**Sundews**



**Pitcher Plants**

self into the stern seat with minimal screaming. She waded in nearly to her waist and somehow hoisted herself into the front seat as we started down the creek.

Between that point and the next portage, we were fine. I could sit straight and even paddle without much pain. When time for portage did come, I rolled out, struggled to my feet, and watched Jackie drag the canoe around the deadfall. I eased back in and commenced to paddle again. We repeated the process at least ten more times, cursing Perry at each deadfall as his estimate of portages was overwhelmed by reality. About half of the portages Jackie had to negotiate on her own—a middle-aged woman in good, if not great shape, but certainly a long way from the time she used to canoe the Arkansas River with her brothers and sister.

Finally we emerged, exhausted, into deeper water. The creek widened, the current slowed, a fish jumped swimming up stream. A great blue heron came off the bank and lazily beat wide wings, leading us down the shady tunnel of dark green cypress and brownish transparent water. Soon the bridge appeared, and we wrestled the boat back onto the top of the car, Jackie doing most of the work again. I remembered the phrase the women in her Kansas family used to describe themselves. "Pioneer stock," I said, and she smiled wearily, then drove us back to Chez Daddy Long-Legs.

*Continued on page 9*





From page 8

Our return trip to the Big Thicket in Spring 2003 was much easier. This time we stayed in Silsbee in an old motor lodge. The room had an odd smell only partially covered by the cleaning chemicals. The caretaker told me he pulled a cottonmouth out of the swimming pool a couple of times a week. We brought our daughter Myrth with us, rented Perry's largest canoe, and paddled a shorter and much more dependably deep six-mile run of Village Creek. My back was still questionable but mostly well, and Myrth was in great condition from varsity swim team and water polo. We saw a couple of big snakes in the

water, but they were much easier to get around than the two dozen downfallen trees of the previous trip. We made no portages and enjoyed a good current. We even forgave Perry and now remember him as a jolly fine fellow. We walked the trails of the Big Thicket, photographed sundews and pitcher plants in bright sun, and the pom-pom tufts of new long-leaf pine, like Hope itself, growing along the creek.

When you go to the Thicket, I wish you high water and a healthy back.

## TMN Members' Spotlight



### Lucy Deckard

I came to love nature through my German grandmother. Those of you who have visited Germany know that hiking is in the German blood, and that was definitely the case for my grandmother. Every year from the time I was 10 years old until I was about 16, my grandparents rented cabins in Colorado, and my

entire extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins) made the Texas Summer Pilgrimage to Colorado. I think the Colorado Rockies reminded my grandmother of her youth in the Bavarian Alps, and she took us all on hikes in the National Park, leading the way in her slightly militaristic, German way, pointing out the new growth on the tips of the pine trees and mandating that her twitchy brood of grandkids stop and enjoy each new view that met us along the trail.

The contrast was jarring when I returned to Houston—a seemingly unending sea of concrete and strip malls. As I reached adolescence, an irritable time anyway, I sometimes felt that if I didn't get away from all the concrete I might scream. But it wasn't until I was in college that I discovered that the Big Thicket was just an easy car ride away. This has been my experience with Texas—you have to look for beautiful natural areas here, but they are here if you know where to look. When I graduated from college, I finally had the freedom and funds to pursue what was until then mainly an intellectual passion for the

outdoors. I decided that I wanted to start backpacking, but I had no idea how to do it and no friends who backpacked. I ended up following the same approach that had gotten me through college—I bought a book on backpacking (a really good book, it turned out) and took a course on how to backpack (a continuing education course offered at the University of Texas at Arlington). In the years after that, I went on backpacking trips in Big Bend, New Mexico, Arkansas, the Grand Canyon and the Appalachian Trail. Despite all of those trips, I've managed to remain a mind-boggling inelegant backpacker owing to my innate drive to overpack. I was the one clanking down the trail with all kinds of gear dangling from the frame of my pack. I've had more than one hiking partner repack my backpack for me out of sheer pity.

After the arrival of kids, I segued into car camping out of necessity. Luckily for us, we spent the earliest years of our kids' lives in California, which is a virtual Disneyland of camping—perfect weather, no bugs, breathtaking nature only a few hours' drive away. Whenever we return to California to visit family, I always try to fit in a camping trip.

Camping in Texas is more of a test of commitment than a trip to Disneyland, but it has yielded wonderful memories and allowed me to discover those beautiful natural areas that you have to search out here in Texas. Texas has a wonderful system of state parks, and it seems I have visited most of them with our Girl Scout troop, or family. Participating in Texas Master Naturalists has helped me to see things I had always missed and to better understand the ecology of those places. I've also learned about new places to go hiking and camping—I'm compiling a list of places to go that should keep me busy for the next 20 years!

## After The Storm *text and photo by Dwight Bohlmeier*

As Hurricane Ike churned towards the Texas coast, I made preparations like millions of other Texans, all the while worrying about Galveston. Having graduated from Texas A&M University at Galveston, the campus and the City of Galveston will always hold special memories for me. I'm not a BOI (Born On the Island) but I am a BOI (pronounced boy) at heart.

Friday morning as I cleared the decks around the house of potential flying debris, I made a few phone calls to check on the status of friends living on the island. Most of them had safely evacuated to inland cities all over Texas and a few

even traveled out of state. I watched the news intently as the storm surge lapped at the seawall and began to crash over Seawall Boulevard. I wondered how many of my friends would be able to return home to an intact house. Friday evening I went to a poker party in College Station where friends played cards on the patio with the moon periodically shining through the clouds.

It seemed unbelievable that we could be comfortably sitting outside while, 150 miles away, Galveston was getting thrashed.

Saturday morning I awoke to the sounds of banging as tree branches hit the house during 30-40 mph wind gusts. I grabbed a raincoat to take my dog for a walk and I checked the rain gage and saw that we had only received a quarter of an inch of rain. Are you kidding me! A category two hurricane and that's all we've had! I figured my outing would be brief, since my little dog hates thunder storms. But since there was no lightning, he wanted to go for a long walk. We saw a utility truck and a catering van, but no one else was out. He had a blast chasing leaves and downed debris as potential vermin. We returned

from our walk and spent the rest of the day flipping channels between college football games and news teams scouting hurricane damage as the wind and rain continued.

As the weather began to clear, I checked the rain gage one more time before taking my dog for his evening walk. We had over three inches of rain and I left the house content, knowing that I wouldn't have to water any time soon. The sky was beautiful as we walked next to the willows and cottonwoods growing in Wolf Pen Creek near the A&M golf course. Grackles perched on light

poles and bare tree branches of a large hickory tree, preening their ruffled feathers. A swarm of dragonflies had emerged from hiding to dance in the evening air as though happy to be alive.

That's when it struck me in the golden glow after the storm—that animals (like people) seem to be happy to be alive after a major storm. Hurricanes, though destructive to human property, do serve a purpose. They can bring much needed rain to drought-

stricken regions. They help to flush out our bays and estuaries, reducing pollutants and lowering salinities, making them more hospitable to the juvenile fish and shellfish that use them as nursery areas. They can even bring people together as friends and family ride out storms together. As we continued our walk, the sunset grew more and more beautiful. I took a few photos of the sunset and tried in vain to get a good photo of a pair of skunks who were out earlier than usual to look for an evening meal. I know that the weeks ahead may bring bad news to friends as they return home; but for now, I'm happy to be walking with my dog, knowing that in Bryan/College Station, we dodged the worst of the storm.







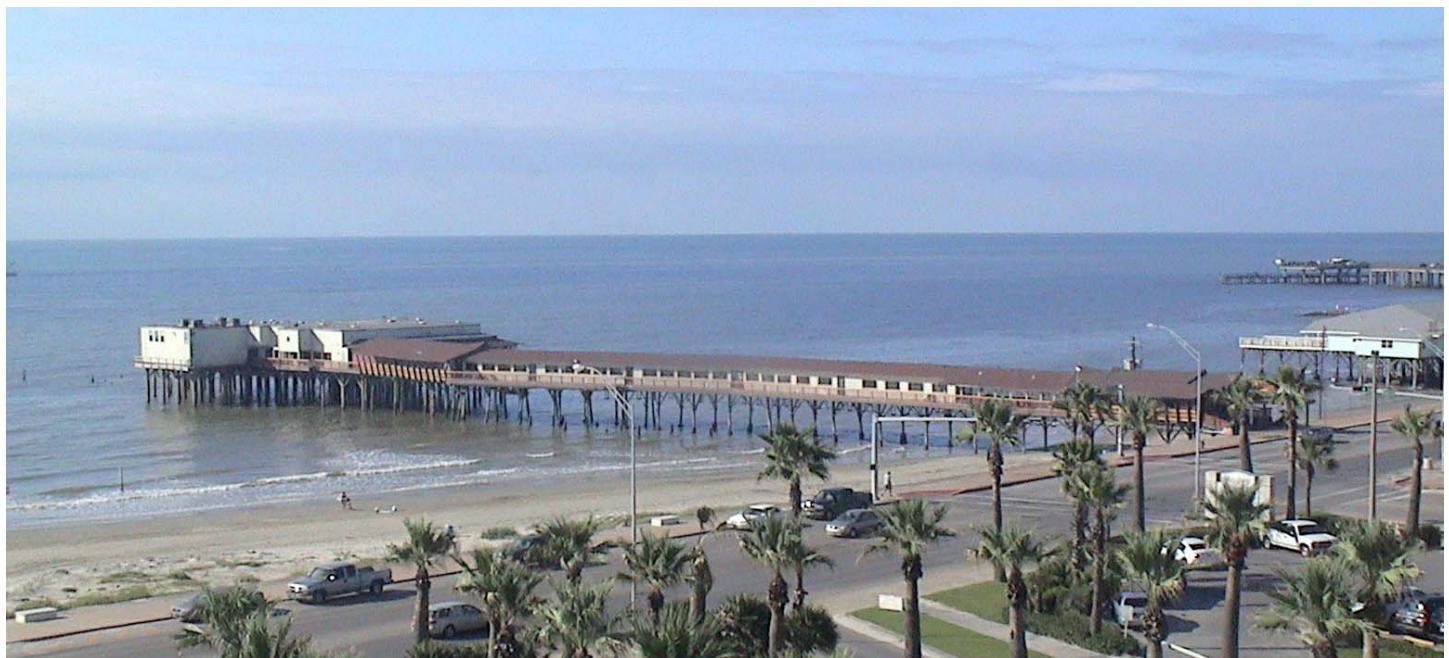
## Caracara or Jimmie? *text and photos by Jackie Palmer*

The weekend before Hurricane Ike battered Galveston and washed the marshes clean, Jimmie and I took a “research” trip to the island. Using the Hotel Galvez, situated across Seawall Blvd. from the infamous Balinese Room (which alas, was apparently “flattened” by the storm) as our base camp, we cycled to the bayside seaport where we saw cabbage-head jellyfish, a black drum, schools of mullet hanging around a ship’s waterline, and a favorite haven of dozens of pelicans and cormorants—the shrimper’s boat dock. Of course we also stopped at the book and spice stores, as well as the Mosquito Café, three of our own favorite haunts that we fervently hope survived the flood.

Saturday afternoon we bicycled up the coast, following the sea wall while sharing space with people-powered fringed surreys, walkers, runners, and other cyclists until the levee and marshes began. From then on, we had the sidewalk to ourselves. On our left, the levee, built to protect the downtown area from surges, rose 15-20 feet above street level. The seawall on our right dropped another 5-7 feet to end in a marsh teeming with wild-life—nature’s fish nursery. Taking the lead, Jimmie kept a sharp eye out for birds, while I followed with the camera, capturing on film such ubiquitous avians as the white ibis

(next page), great egret, and the crested caracara (next page), which soared gracefully to a regal perch some human had built on a tall pole in the middle of the marsh. Perhaps the presence of the caracara accounted for the phenomenon we observed.

The early evening sunlight cast Jimmie’s shadow down onto the marsh’s meandering water trails. The shadow moved quickly as he rode his bike up the coast, but as it passed, the glassy water became agitated. (Now *that* was puzzling.) The same reaction subsequently occurred when my shadow passed across the marsh. In fact, the churning water kept pace with the bicyclist, erupting milliseconds *before* the shadow touched the water and ceasing as soon as it moved on. Aha! It had to be those tiny fish. Like the reflexive action of an eyelid that closes just before it gets hit, the fish must have an instinctive reaction to fast-moving predator shadows. Can they, in that split second, differentiate between the shadow of the predatory caracara and those of (perhaps) harmless humans on bikes? If the reaction is instinctive, the answer must be no. But if it isn’t instinctive, how can those tiny brains recognize the shadow of a potentially dangerous Jimmie attacking from his trusty rusty steed?



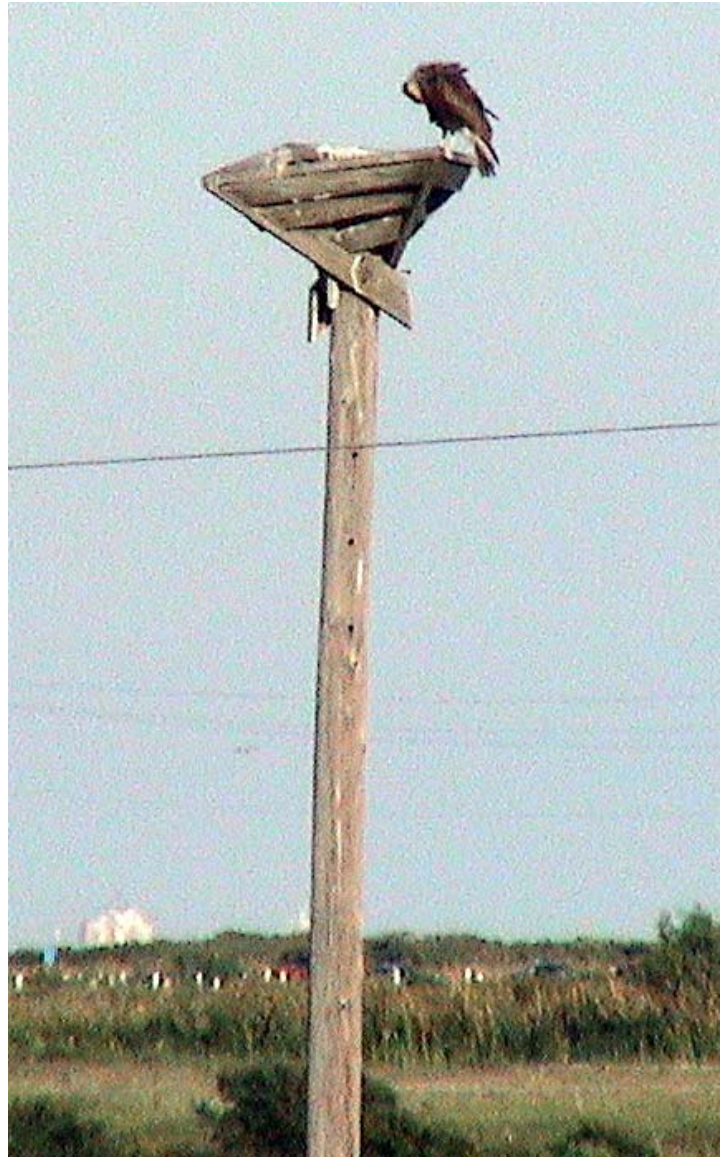
Perhaps the last photo of the Balinese

*Continued on page 12*





White Ibis



Caracara

### GREEN FACTS

#### Low flush toilet

If homebuilders installed one dual-flush toilet instead of a standard low-flow toilet in every new house built in one year, they would save 1.65 billion gallons of water per year. But don't be fooled, this toilet doesn't flush two times, it actually has two different buttons, one for... er, how do we say this... #1 and #2 and it uses 0.8 and 1.6 gallons of water, depending on the flush. This single innovation can reduce water usage by up to 67% compared with the traditional toilet that uses 2.9 gallons in a single flush.

#### In the Can

One soft drink can recycled by each elementary school student in America would save 24.8 million cans. That would be enough aluminum to create 21 Boeing 737 airplanes.

Source: National Energy Foundation





## Our Final Image



**Sunset on the Texas A&M campus a few hours after Hurricane Ike swept through the Brazos Valley.** *Photo by Dwight Bohlmeier*

### **Help Encourage Fun Contributions to *The Cyrano* by Voting!**

Texas Master Naturalists are invited to vote for the best article in this issue of *The Cyrano*. The author getting the most votes will receive a pecan cracker offered by Leo. Also, we will feature a flattering picture of the winner on our next issue. Please send your vote by October 31 to Jimmie at [killingsworth@tamu.edu](mailto:killingsworth@tamu.edu). *The Editors*

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