



the Cyrano

Texas
Master
Naturalist

The Newsletter of the Brazos Valley Chapter

PRESIDENT'S CORNER: TEXAS WILDFLOWERS

text & photos by Dwight Bohlmeier



This past spring break I drove to Mission, Texas to visit my mother, a winter Texan. As I left College Station, the trees were just beginning to leaf out after a particularly cold winter here in the Brazos Valley. Although there were few wildflowers to be seen, I knew there would

be more the further south I traveled. After passing through Yoakum, I crested a hill and came upon a spectacular patch of Drummond's phlox. I stopped to photograph the bright red flowers and heard a few sandhill cranes calling somewhere beyond a stand of live oaks. I marveled at the site and thought of a friend from my undergraduate days at Texas A&M University at Galveston.

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PRESIDENT’S CORNER (CONT’D.)

Tammy, a native Texan, one day asked me, “Hey, did you hear they’re thinking about changing the logo on the Texas license plates to the wall flower state?”

“What?” I said. She repeated herself.

“You know—they are going to change it from the lone-star state to the wall flower state.”

“Wall flower,” I asked incredulously. Why would Texans of all people want to be known as wall flowers!

“You know—wald flowers,” she said again. I looked at her dumbfounded and asked,

“Wall flowers”?

“Yes, wald flowers,” she stated, as she began to grow impatient with me. Suddenly it dawned on me that Tammy’s Texas twang was more prominent on some words than others.

“Oh, you mean WILD flowers,” as I emphasized the *i* in wild. She hit me!

Nearly 30 years later Tammy is still a good friend, and I can never go past a patch of bluebonnets or Indian paintbrush without thinking of that day. Texas truly is the wildflower state, and each year I welcome their return to the Brazos Valley.



RECENT CHAPTER EVENTS

MONTH	TOPIC	SPEAKERS	MONTH	TOPIC	SPEAKERS
January	Officer Elections		April	Local Native Food Plants	Mark Suter, Program Asst., Map & GIS Collections & Services, TAMU
February	Bryophytes	Dale A. Kruse, Curator, S. M. Tracy Herbarium, TAMU	May	Ocelots	Bernard Cantrell Smalls, TAMU graduate student
March	Coral Reef	Russell Putts, BVTMN Member	June	Dragonflies	Forrest Mitchell & James Lasswell, authors, <i>A Dazzle of Dragonflies</i>

MAGNIFICENT MONARCHS AND ME

By Liz Crompton

It all started very innocently on May 1 at Lick Creek Park. As I was enjoying the monthly Saturday bird walk sponsored by the Rio Brazos Audubon Society, I got to visiting with other birders and listened as they spoke of their past successes in raising monarch butterflies.

One of the women said, "Oh look, here's a milkweed plant and look here—that's the egg of a monarch on this leaf. Do you want it?"

"Well, I don't know," I responded. "Tell me more." Quickly I learned where I might keep it, what its feeding preferences were and how long I would be responsible for this new "pet." If it could be raised in a pre-school classroom, I figured I could do it in my kitchen.

Before I knew it, I was the proud caretaker of four white monarch eggs. Of course I could hardly see them without a magnifying glass. They were as small as pinpricks and oval in shape, I later learned. My greatest concerns were where to find the milkweed to feed these guys when they hatched into caterpillars and how much milkweed they would consume. Once I honed in on the milkweed growing in a neighbor's nearby field, I felt more comfortable with my monarch commitment.



The month of May turned out to be an amazing month. My family and I watched the terrarium night and day. On day four, three of the eggs hatched. (I'm not sure what happened to egg #4.) But those three caterpillars were alive and well—I could easily tell that by all the excrement in the bottom of the terrarium and all the milkweed leaves they began to consume. (Hint from Dwight Bohlmeier: Put the milkweed stems in floral tubes or small test tubes filled with water and stuffed with cotton to keep the plants fresh and succulent and prevent the caterpillars from going into the water and drowning.)



Those yellow, black, and white caterpillars seemed to grow before my eyes. Eating machines they were! They captivated my attention. About ten days later, they stopped eating and began to explore the small branches I had also put in the terrarium. Soon they were suspended by their "tails" from these branches and looking like the letter "J." I remember getting up in the night to check on them, but they were still dangling there.

The next morning, though, one had metamorphosed into the chrysalis stage. I had missed it! On the following day the other two followed. This time I watched with my magnifying glass but still missed the "silk

spinning" process. I did notice a lot of gyrating in that inverted position for a short time before each chrysalis became quiet. (Then of course, I had to go to work.)



All three hung on their respective twigs for nearly two weeks. First they were a soft jade color with gold beading around the top, and then each chrysalis gradually became translucent. Finally I could see the orange and black lines of the developing monarchs. Visible things were beginning to happen again. Too bad I missed seeing them emerge into beautiful monarchs. Why was I sleeping when I should have been awake? But what an exciting experience it was to see them in the morning, magnificent in their colorful splendor, resting there on their chrysalis—in stark contrast to all the green in the terrarium of the day before.

I let them flex their wings and grow accustomed to their new selves for a few hours. Then I began to worry about them starving in the terrarium, so finally I courageously took them outside. Watching them climb on my fingers as I took them outside to rest on a colorful zinnia flower was breathtaking. After a few moments of hesitation they were off on their own. "My babies." In one way I was sad, but then really delighted that they were free to be on their way north.



If you missed out on this activity as a child, try it this summer. It was an incredible nature experience. I recommend the children's book, *Monarch Magic* by Lynn Rosenblatt, to guide you along on this magical experience. It contains wonderful, close-up photos and diagrams as well as a myriad of butterfly activities and nature discoveries for children of all ages. If I had read the book before the middle of May, I might not have missed the five times that they each shed their skins or threw out their "face masks" with their excrement. I didn't know to look for then—maybe next year!

IMAGES SOURCE: Monarch Butterfly USA. nd. Accessed 2 July 2010
<http://www.monarchbutterflyusa.com/MBUSA.htm>.)

BIOBLITZ 2010, SATURDAY, 10 APRIL

Bioblitz is a 24-hour event during which survey teams count as many species as they can in our local nature park. Families with nature lovers, budding scientists, and experienced naturalists of all age learn about biodiversity and celebrate with KidBlitz activities at booths.

SOURCE:
 Bioblitz website. 2010. Accessed 16 May 2010
<http://blogs.tamu.edu/bioblitz/>.

BIOBLITZ PERSPECTIVE*by Punnee Soonthornpoc*

We BioBlitz and TMN volunteers often say that if we could make a difference by changing or helping one life to understand more about wondrous nature, then our work is justified and we can be happy and proud.

My talk was at one o'clock in the hot afternoon, a time when a tired baby started to fuss and a three-year-old began to fidget, a time when, after spending two hours in the park, mom and dad looked at each other and said, "time to go home."

Fifteen minutes before my talk, I (ethnic group Asian) had a big urge to get up and tell them (ethnic group "Gringo"), "please, don't go! I would like to tell you about several edible plants that we see in Lick Creek Park. I think you will be interested." But I didn't. So I had only about 15 people at the talk, half of whom were TMN members. (We support each other very well. Even though they already knew most of what I was going to talk about, they sat there—my sincere gratitude to each of you!)

After the talk, I was quite happy to see one couple (ethnicity Latino) and one student (mine; ethnicity early American young adult) follow me into the park. I told them that if I had just one person, I would still lead the walk. As it turned out, we had a blast—walking and talking and joking.

I (Asian-American) was giving them

(including a Latino couple) the recipe for nopalitos (egg, chorizos, and cheese). (They didn't, of course know that I was once married to a Mexican-American.) Here were some comments: "So, that's what it is. Remember, we saw the cactus leaves and the orange fruits at grandma's house?" Or, "we really can eat the roots and the leaves of this plant? And, "wow, we will never starve if we get stuck in Lick Creek Park; we have salad from here and water from there and carbohydrates from here." Of course, now my new friends know that the cactus pad is not the leaf but a modified stem that can do photosynthesis and that the thorns are the modified leaves.

After long hours of hard work (and suffering from my arthritic leg and swollen cervical disks), I am happy that I did *not* listen to my pain and that I volunteered for Bioblitz. I had a moment that I can treasure and call "fun" instead of "work." And I am reassured that it is the quality of the talk and not the quantity of people attending that makes the difference.

BIOBLITZ PERSPECTIVE*by Jay Pritchard*

Both the fat mouse and the possum were in traps that I set. They were baited with Special-K diet breakfast bars that were too old for my wife to eat. (Does wildlife have diet concerns? This may be a question someone should explore.)

My tryke was a great way to run the trap lines, except that I had to stop and talk to everyone I met on the trails about it.

BIOBLITZ PERSPECTIVE
text & photos by Jackie Palmer



As part of the Invertebrate Team, my primary responsibility was to show-and-tell booth visitors of all ages about the preserved and living specimens on display. Living critters included tiny organisms viewable only through the magnifying scopes, centipedes, pillbugs, scorpions, spiders, termites, and insects (like huge cockroaches, larval and adult forms of butterflies, and gorgeous dung beetles), among others. I love seeing youngsters delight in the display, but also enjoy adults new to the Bryan/College Station area who share personal experiences with similar creatures from other states or countries. And everyone has a story!

Volunteer personnel shifted constantly as folks left to set up the black-light tent or check collection boxes. Yet we always had plenty of help, even between walks and talks when the number of visitors was highest. This apparently was not true for the herpetology area, which several times was left unstaffed. Because what I call my *Jackie-teacher persona* (from my years as a high-school science teacher) kicked in, I found myself occasionally supervising rather than

TAMU
volunteer Monica

educating visitors to the herp area.

In particular, the turtle tank (a child's plastic swimming pool containing half a dozen specimens of different sizes) provided a temptation few younger children even tried to

resist. Not satisfied with simply touching the turtles, they wanted to pick them up, "race" them (vroom, vroom, no doubt incorporating the sounds permeating from the race track south of Lick Creek Park), or make them climb on top of each other. I found myself asking a few how they would like it if a giant treated them the same way. Then again, if it's okay to catch and release bats, and catch, kill, and pin insects into boxes, how is a child supposed to differentiate between different guidelines for respecting wildlife?



Finally, at the end of the day, since the team of girls who had set it up the day before had rotated off-duty, I volunteered to take down the butterfly tent. With a few helpers, it would have been an easy task, but alas, alone, it was a real

chore. I found myself thinking back to my childhood days when my dad had drilled his four children before each summer vacation in setting up and taking down our big canvas tent in a “timely” fashion—that is to say, he used a stopwatch! I certainly wouldn’t have won any time trials this time, but I got ‘er done and was even proud of my accomplishment. (I did, however, turn the tent over to a college student to stuff it back in the bag.)

BIOBLITZ PERSPECTIVE

text by Jane Packard, photos by Jackie Palmer

TAXON	2009	2010
Mammals	12	13
Birds	49	52
Herps	14	20
Fish	19	16
Insects	40	67
Plants	137	219

A BIG HEARTFELT THANKS goes out to all of you who helped make BioBlitz 2010 such a success! BioBlitz attracted over 436 participants and 100 volunteers. Our six survey teams exceeded expectations with a tentative grand tally of 388 species (56% plants, 19% invertebrates, 13% birds, 5% herps, 4% fish, and 3% mammals). Sample participant survey responses:

FAVORITES

- Butterfly tent
- Guided walks
- Live specimens
- Talks
- Volunteers
- Wildflowers
- Fish painting
- Holding snakes
- Learning about and eating edible plants
- Smiling kids



COMMENTS

Great, informed, enthusiastic speakers
Friendly staff

Thank you for making the activities kid-friendly/hands-on; it really enhances the experience. My 2-year-old loved the butterfly tent and the fish; also, the ... volunteers were awesome, helpful, knowledgeable, and friendly.

Keep it growing. Love all the hard work everyone does to keep our locals informed of our [wild]life in the area! Great to see young people getting involved!

I thought it was very educational, and the booths were all interesting. I even touched a snake.

The bird group was amazing. Everyone was friendly and interesting.

Very nice park and very nice people who love what they are doing

I love Bioblitz!

I was particularly impressed by the extensive auxiliary support provided by all of the participants. On a couple of occasions the invertebrate booth benefited from an extra hand offered by other booth volunteers. The event was very well planned and executed. The children came, they learned, and they had fun doing it. That's all that matters!



EDIBLE LICK CREEK

by Punnee Soonthornpoch

This year's topic for the BioBlitz botany section talk was *Edible Lick Creek*. The following plants grow in Lick Creek Park along the Iron Bridge Trail. Due to time limitations for the walk, only ten plants are included in this overview.

1. DANDELION (*TARAXACUM OFFICINALE*)

CHARACTERISTICS: The plant grows close to the ground and is seldom more than 8 inches tall. The leaves have jagged edges; the flowers are bright yellow. There are several species of dandelions.

CULINARY USES: All parts are edible. Eat the leaves raw or cooked. Boil the roots. Roots, roasted and ground, are a good coffee substitute.

OTHER USES: The white juice in the flower stems can be used as glue.



2. YELLOW WOOD SORREL (*OXALIS DILLENII*)

CHARACTERISTICS: This common Texas species has compound leaves with 3 heart-shaped leaflets that meet at a point. Yellow wood sorrel flowers have five delicate yellow petals of equal size and shape. The presence of oxalic acid give plants a sour taste.

CULINARY USES: It poses no problem if eaten in moderation and not as main dish. The tender leaves can be added to a green salad or as a flavoring for soups. The fresh leaves and tender green fruits, when added to vegetable dishes, will add a zingy sour flavor to the dish.



3. COMMON CHICKWEED (*STELLARIA MEDIA*)

CHARACTERISTICS: Flowers are single or appear as a few clusters at the tips of long stalks. Each flower has 5 deep lobes with white petals that are shorter than the sepals. The plant has a matted stem with small oval leaves.

CULINARY USES: Mild flavored chickweed is excellent by itself or with other, stronger greens. Use raw in salads. Boil only 2-5 minutes; add it to other less delicate greens near the end of their cooking period. Serve with butter, seasonings, and a little chopped onion.

OTHER USES: Chickweed served a number of medicinal uses in Europe, including prevention and treatment of scurvy long before vitamins were known.



4. COMMON PLANTQAIN (*PLANTAGO MAJOR*)

CHARACTERISTICS: Perennial or biennial herbs, these plants have basal rosette leaves. The flowers spike with slender flower stalks emerging from the center. The species in Lick Creek Park has leaves similar to (and is often mistaken for) *P. lanceolata*.

CULINARY USES: Use in salads or as a cooked green.



OTHER USES: Plantain is reputed to heal wounds and snake-bites.

5. PRICKLY PEAR CACTUS (*OPUNTIA SPP.*)

CHARACTERISTICS: This cactus has flat, pad-like stems that are green and covered with many round furry dots that contain sharp-pointed hairs.

CULINARY USES: All parts of the plants are edible. Peel the fruits and eat them fresh, or crush them to prepare a refreshing drink. Take care to avoid the tiny pointed hairs. The pads are also a good source of water. Peel them carefully to remove all sharp hairs before putting them in your mouth.

OTHER USES: The pads can also be used to promote healing. Split them, and apply the pulp to a wound.



6. BLACKBERRIES, RASPBERRIES, AND DEWBERRIES (*RUBUS SPP.*)

CHARACTERISTICS: These plants have prickly stems (canes) that grow upward, arching back toward the ground. They have alternate, usually compound leaves. The fruits may be red, black, yellow, or orange in color.

CULINARY USES: The fruits and peeled young shoots are edible. Use the leaves to make tea.



7. RED CEDAR TREE (*JUNIPERUS VIRGINIANA*)

CHARACTERISTICS: Junipers, sometimes called cedars, are trees or shrubs with very small scale-like leaves densely crowded around the branches. Each leaf is less than half an inch long. All species have a distinct aroma resembling the well-known cedar. The berrylike cones are usually blue and covered with whitish wax.

CULINARY USES: Juniper tea can be made by placing a dozen young berryless twigs in a quart of cold water; bring to a boil, then allow to simmer for 10 minutes. Strain and use as regular tea in small quantities.



8. CORN SALAD (*VALERIANELLA LOCUSTA*)

CHARACTERISTICS: This is a hardy annual that grows well in our area. In warm weather it bolts to seed. If the climate is mild, it can be grown as a winter green. It grows wild in parts of Europe, northern Africa and western Asia and is a common weed. Like other foraged greens, corn salad has many nutrients, including beta-carotene, B6, B9, Vitamin E, omega-3 fatty acids, and three times as much Vitamin C as lettuce.

CULINARY USES: This is an old garden green with a mild flavor that contrasts nicely with stronger flavored greens in salads. It can also be cooked like spinach or used in dishes.



9. BULL BRIAR, GREENBRIAR (*SMILAX BONA-NOX*)

CHARACTERISTICS: This plant is a common climbing perennial vine. Its stems are rough and become woody. It has many green tendrils, each

armed with stout, sharp thorns. Leaves that alternate and grow to 4 inches long and nearly as wide are broadest near the base, becoming nearly circular with pointed tips. Flowers are greenish in color. Fruits are bluish-black berries that often contain 2-3 seeds.

CULINARY USES: Gather new shoots and growing tips, plus uncurling leaves and tendrils, while they are still crisp and tender during spring and summer. Greenbriar is excellent raw as a trail nibble. For salad, use the tenderest part raw, or boil slightly older tips 2-3 minutes, drain, and cool. Steam or boil bundled shoots like asparagus, or boil tendrils, leaves, and shoots together like spinach.

10. OAKS (*QUERCUS* SPP.)

CHARACTERISTICS: Oak trees have alternate leaves and acorn fruits. There are two main groups: red and white. The red oak group has leaves with bristles and smooth bark in the upper part of the tree; red oak acorns take 2 years to mature. The white oak group has leaves without bristles and rough bark in the upper portion of the tree; white oak acorns mature in one year.

CULINARY USES: All parts of the plant are edible, but they often contain large quantities of bitter substances. White oak acorns generally have less bitterness than red oak acorns. Gather and shell the acorns, soak red oak acorns in water for 1 or 2 days to remove the bitter substance. You can speed up this process by putting wood ashes into the water in which you soak the acorns. Boil the acorns, or grind them into flour and use the flour in baking. Acorns baked until very dark can be used as a coffee substitute.

SOURCES

Alston, Angela. *List of Edible Wild Plants in Texas*. 1999-2010. eHow. Accessed 2 July 2010 http://www.ehow.com/list_6108940_list-edible-wild-plants-texas.html.

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BRAZOS VALLEY DAY TRIPPER

text by Jimmie Killingsworth, photos by Jackie Palmer

Our daughter Myrth is visiting, so we enjoy a family tradition—a weekend getaway to Galveston. The island is still making its comeback from Hurricane Ike. The residents who can afford to are rebuilding and re-landscaping. Attractions like Moody Gardens have nearly completed repairs and improvements. The city is restoring the beach in front of the seawall with sand dredged from the ship channel. Engineers are considering a plan to expand the 15 miles of seawall into a gigantic structure called the Ike Dike.

Nature quietly makes its usual adjustments. The tidewater shrubs on the north side of the state park still look burnt after saltwater swells from the back bay flooded this part of the island. But the

wildflowers and grasses thrive, like inland grasses after a controlled burn of the fiery sort. Down here, the generic name for species like smooth cord grass and the various spartinas is “saltgrass”—for reasons now obvious to us.

Early Saturday morning, I take a walk along the seawall. The morning, gray and cloudy at first light, reminds me of that first winter after Ike, a memory with muted colors. The monotone of cloud and sea and splintered, weathered boards recalled the black-and-white photographs of the destruction after the hurricane of 1900.

But today, as a rusty orange tractor with a front-end shovel and a rear-end rake grooms the still-new sand of the rebuilt beach, a similarly colored orange sun appears in a slit of cloud cover and spreads a bright streak across the eastern horizon ahead of me. Nearly the same color graced the throat of the tri-colored heron Jackie and I saw last evening in the ditch by Sportsman Road—and under the chin and



shading onto the breast of the barn swallows swooping out over the marsh from the eaves of rebuilt houses, leaving their fledglings on the fence to watch and see how to feed on the wing rather than wait helpless in the nest.

Sportsman Road (I learned from Dwight Bohlmeyer) gives a colorful view of the wide golden salt marsh on one side, the broad silver bay on the other. Glorious at sunset, it’s a birder’s heaven. We get good views of the black-necked stilt, the willet, and the little blue heron. We roll down the windows and hear the whistle of the redwings, the laugh of the gulls, the croak of a great blue heron, and the clucking of a clapper rail.



As we walk on the beach later in the day, I’m still thinking about the damage of the storm and wondering what the upcoming hurricane season holds in store. But finally, with the cool breeze in my face and sun separating the clouds, I’m willing to let go of my worries and dark memories and enjoy the recovery.

The colors bring the place alive, leaving behind the sepia shades of a broken past. The beach is strewn with the purple-blue, transparent heads (also called “sails” or “floats”) of the Portuguese man of war. Many of them are still alive, reaching upward, seeking the means of buoyancy on an unyielding stretch of gray-brown sand. Tentacles of bright teal lie threatening but inert alongside. Remembering a sting on a trip to

Surfside Beach as a young girl, Myrth side-steps a long blue strand with a little leap, then notices with a laugh that this one is a lost length of nylon cord. She points out another man of war that's clear instead of blue, and another with a coral-colored seam in its plastic-balloon-like head. The color matches the stem of a clot of seaweed to which it is attached and with which it made landfall. We wonder if the floating predator can change its colors like a chameleon (but find no evidence

later, only reports of the colors ranging from clear to pink to purple-blue).

Like a person recovering from a long illness, Galveston is getting its color back. It's good to see you out again, old friend.



**MEMBER PROFILE:
RUSSELL PUTT**

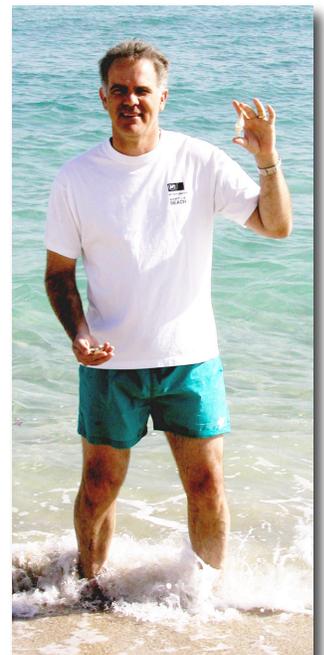
My father was the finest fisherman I've ever met. I viewed him as the best when I was a child and continued to

recognize his incredible talents when he was in his 70s. There isn't enough room here to begin to tell the stories of his remarkable exploits. I guess the time I spent with him fishing was the origin for my own love of the outdoors. No matter where we lived across Texas, he was able to locate some body of water in which to fish. We also seemed to



have a vegetable garden in each location. At the end of his life the "family garden" had expanded to approximately 3 acres! I think exploring the clear granite lined pools along the Llano River while Dad fished may have been the source of my fascination with "underwater things."

My interest in the outdoors and "underwater things," along with my love of all things "sport" led me to investigate outdoor careers. I did everything in high school and attended Texas Christian University on a full athletic scholarship (football). There I began my studies to be a "Marine Biologist." When asked at the beginning of my sophomore year if I had ever met anyone working in that field or knew of any marine biology job opportunities, I was forced to admit I did not. That realization led me to a summer internship at the newly established Flower Garden Ocean Research Center in Galveston. The Center had been established to study one of the most unique marine habitats in the Gulf of Mexico, the Flower Garden Banks and their coral reefs. Surviving on a small stipend, the room and board associated with



oceanographic cruises (and a little extra food provided by the ship's cook while in Galveston), I was able to spend that summer applying my newly learned SCUBA-diving skills (evening course at TCU) and working with a long list of the region's finest marine scientists. The summer left me without funds for the next school year but with memories a young man couldn't buy for a million dollars.

When my TCU scholarship was extended through a fifth year, I was able to take graduate classes, complete a minor in Chemistry, and earn a Teacher's Certificate along with my biology degree. I then accepted an offer from the Flower Garden Center as a research technician supporting ongoing studies of the northern-most coral reefs in the western hemisphere. The principal investigators conducting the research on the Banks were from the Department of Oceanography at Texas A&M. The relationship established with the professors and graduate students led to an offer of a research assistantship should I choose to attend graduate school. After qualifying as a SCUBA instructor and taking 6 weeks to run diving operations for a nautical archaeology program on sixteenth-century Spanish wrecks off South Padre Island, I made my move to College Station.

As the only student in the oceanography program at the time with SCUBA credentials, I was able to participate in all types of diving-related research projects, ranging from coral disease studies in the Cayman Islands, to numerous submerged fishing banks offshore from Texas, to effects of oil-industry drilling fluids on corals in the Florida Keys and fish populations associated with offshore gas platforms (M.Sc. Thesis). I also worked with my TAMU team on consulting programs monitoring the effects of oil-drilling activities near the Flower Garden coral reefs. (Before leaving the university, I also completed certification as an EMT.)

After graduation, I joined a fellow TAMU oceanography graduate in establishing a new environmental consulting company in South Florida. I spent the next 6 years working as a field oceanographer, specializing in the environmental impacts of offshore oil and gas development. A small specialty commercial diving group developed within the firm. I occasionally assisted in their projects, including working as one of the divers successfully undertaking a 1,500-foot penetration into a cooling water pipe at the Indian River Nuclear Power Plant—but that's another story.



By this time a growing family and career aspirations led me on more of an administrative track in environmental protection. I began working as an environmental enforcement officer for the State of Texas and as a scientist developing coastal and marine programs for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Having served at the local, state and federal levels, I jumped at the chance when called by a friend at Amoco to help with its international environmental projects. For the next 19 years, I



would advise the oil and gas industry (Amoco and BP) on environmental and safety protection programs across the globe. Project areas included, among others, the rainforests of Ecuador and Bolivia, the deserts of Kuwait, Russian Siberia, the Baltic off the shore of Latvia, the Caspian Sea off the shore of Azerbaijan, and the deep seas north of Scotland as well as the Gulf of Mexico. During the last 9 years, my role expanded to include the mentoring and training of young environmental professionals from other countries.

After 9 years living overseas, my wife and I moved back to Bryan/College Station in 2009. As we began the construction of a new home, we were told about the TMN chapter. I immediately was drawn to the program because of its volunteer focus and the opportunity it provides to learn about all the aspects of the natural world that I either had never learned much about (botany and birds) or had long since forgotten as I had traded my field boots for the business suit. I now look forward to having some time to try my hand at a bit of fishing and even gardening. I also still know how to dive should a program studying a shipwreck site or coral reef need an extra hand!

New folks move to the Brazos County each and every year. Thousands of students fill the local universities from all over the world. I'm concerned that few will have the opportunity I have had to see and learn about the natural world in Texas. How many international students are offered an open hand to see the wildlife of our county or state? My hope is that the TMN chapter might serve as an active influence in introducing our unique environment to those who will now have the responsibility of its protection.

Some may ask, "Why does it matter? Wouldn't it be the same if we take care of it or not?" Well I've lived where that was put to the test, and I still have the photos!

WILD KINGDOM IN OUR OWN BACKYARD!

by Jackie Palmer

Several years ago (after reading a newsletter article by the Andings on backyard birding), Jimmie and I set up a feeder viewable from our screened back porch where we often eat meals when the weather isn't scorching. Typically we see sparrows (several varieties), house finches, cardinals, and chickadees, although more recently grackles have appeared—unwelcome hogs that quickly consume our purchased seeds. Several species of doves frequent the ground at the base of the feeder, scarfing up dropped tidbits. Seasonal hummingbirds visit a separate feeder. Blue jays and mockingbirds alight on fig tree branches, waiting more-or-less patiently for the fruit to ripen.



In the meantime, a pair of cardinals is raising two chicks in those trees. Soaring overhead we also often see swallows, buzzards, and other birds that have no interest in our vegetarian fare.

One recent

afternoon, as I sat on the porch reading, I heard a loud thunk(!) and looked up just in time to see a sparrow flit off the feeder and a flash of large wings on the ground. Within a split second, a huge hawk, which had apparently misjudged the position of its fat prey and hit the feeder instead, leapt back into the air in pursuit of the sparrow. It happened so fast that all I could say was, "Wow!"



And even though Jimmie rushed out to see what I'd seen, the only sign of the predatory suburban event was a few feathers on the ground that the doves had apparently dropped as they'd quickly scattered to get out of the way.

The Gulf-coast toads have left strings of eggs in our pond just under the window where they often sing with Jimmie at dusk as he plays his mandolin or guitar. Today two neon blue dragonflies are mating in the umbrella grass. And when we went out to the porch this morning, we found a reptilian



gift on the thatched-grass mat—skin a snake had shed—and still haven't figured out how it got there.

And just a few minutes ago, a new visitor came to the feeder. Perhaps you can help us identify it.



I found these cool fossil teeth while canoeing the Brazos. Each tooth is about an inch in diameter. At first I fantasized that these monster molars must have belonged to some ferocious ice-aged beast like the giant cave bear. But alas, experts say it's the upper jaw from a Pleistocene Tapir. Still, a neat find after being lost to the sand and water gods for so long.

--Mark Ojah

The Brazos Valley Chapter of the Texas Master Naturalists was founded in the fall of 2005 as “a corps of well-informed volunteers who provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within our community.”

This issue of the *Cyrano* was prepared by the following 2010 Brazos Valley TMN Newsletter Committee members: Jimmie Killingsworth, and Jackie Palmer
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