



# The Canyon Echo



*From the President's Desk Tree Stump*

## All things new

Greetings friends, Brush y Canyons members and fellow Texas Master Naturalists!

I'm sitting on the porch just before dawn nursing a cup of hot, black coffee and listening to the day wake up. Right now, a light jacket feels good, but by this afternoon, I'll be in shirt sleeves.

I'm going to state here and now that I believe it's "officially" spring. Even the calendar agrees, crediting the beginning of spring as occurring on March 20.

There's varying opinions as to when spring officially starts. I've always kind of thought it should be on the spring equinox, (typically around March 21 every year). This year's Old Farmer's Almanac states that the 2026 entry into that season will be at exactly 10:46 a.m. on March 20.

"Meteorological spring" (used by the weather service for "statistical consistency") observes it as the period running from March 1 to May 31.

Science aside, I've always put quite a bit of stock in how those closest to the land recognized the arrival of the seasons. In South Texas, some of the "old-timers," along with my Daddy, said to watch the mesquite trees. When



*Photo by Rose Cooper*

**The pollinator garden at Garner State Park is attracting lots of birds this spring, including this chipping sparrow that Rose Cooper photographed in March. Brush y Canyons chapter members installed the pollinator garden as a service project in 2025, with Sid Fly using his skills to build this water feature.**

*they* leafed out, it was spring. "However," they'd add, "Don't watch the young trees. Like young boys, they can often get misled. Watch the old trees. When *they* leaf out, it's 'shore-nuff' spring."

Here in our neck of the woods, there's a measure of country folks who say it's the pecan trees that are the harbingers of spring, so keep an eye on them.

My Grandpa, who was an avid gardener and outdoorsman, watched the weather and swore by

the Old Farmer's Almanac. In his considered opinion, next to the Bible, it was the best thing to plan by. He might start his planting when he was "pretty sure" it was spring, but he'd always hedge his bets and add: "Don't count out a freeze 'till after Easter." That recently proved true, with us shivering through a couple of nights when the mercury dipped into the freezing zone, leaving a layer of

*[Continued page 2](#)*

# All things new

*Continued from page 1*

ice on the bird baths in the morning. We're also watching a couple of those young trees that got "misled" suffering some setbacks in their rush to fully leaf out.

Anyway, I'd like to think that spring is here. It is a wondrous time of year. It seems like all of creation shakes off its winter covers and fairly jumps out of bed. In just a matter of days our prize Cedar elm out back has gone from bare branches to a thick mantle of bright green leaves. The Rio Grande leopard frogs are back in the fountain and singing to beat the band. Speaking of singing, the dawn chorus is again becoming a cacophony of chirps, cheeps, trills, coos, squawks and intricate songs as the birds are expressing their joy at the lengthening days, the warming temperatures and the approaching nesting season. Many of our resident birds are coming home from their winter vacation in more tropical climes and numerous brightly colored migrants are starting to surprise us like those little prizes at the bottom of a box of Cracker Jacks.

We are also experiencing new growth in our chapter. With the turning of the calendar, folks are out getting training and serving in myriad ways to benefit our community and ecoregion. Several folks have already completed their requirements for their 2026 recertification and that much-desired Bobcat pin.

We are also in the middle of our 2026 New Members' Class. We have a great group of 14 folks who are well on their way to becoming trained Texas Master Nat-

uralists. They are an enthusiastic and committed troop of folks who are already getting involved in the life of our chapter in many ways. It's exciting to watch them have revelations and "aha moments" from week to week as they grow in knowledge, understanding and passion for nature and the calling to conservation. We have a cadre of amazing instructors who contagiously share their love for and commitment to the natural world around us. Their expertise and enthusiasm for their chosen field is infectious! We are hoping to start an epidemic!

As our group grows in numbers and experience, our chapter matures, as well. This year we are emphasizing the expansion of our committee structure. We are aiming to give some of our busier folks the chance to take off a hat or two and at the same time introduce some new folks into areas of greater responsibility and leadership. If there's a particular aspect of our TMN work where you have some energy and a hankering to serve, speak up, step up and join up.

So, as we jump into spring, hang up those winter clothes, tighten those boot laces and get ready for an amazing new year as we continue our existing projects and partnerships and dive into some new ones.

I am blessed, honored and excited to be working alongside you as we serve together!

Sincerely and humbly,  
Mickey

## OUR MISSION

The Texas Master Naturalist mission is to develop a corps of well-informed volunteers to provide education, outreach and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities for the State of Texas.

## ABOUT US

The Brush y Canyons Chapter encompasses Medina, Uvalde and Kinney counties. With the Hill Country in the north, the South Texas Plains in the south and six different rivers in the combined three counties, our service area is very diverse in both flora and fauna. We are a relatively new chapter, having just finished our third certification class in May 2025. Our list of partner organizations to date is: Garner State Park, Kickapoo Caverns State Park, El Progreso Memorial Library, Uvalde National Fish Hatchery and Lost Maples State Natural Area.

## CONTACT US

[rmredus@yahoo.com](mailto:rmredus@yahoo.com)



*Photo by Kathy Rice*

**New Member Training Class for 2026 includes (front row, left to right) Biaca Spies and Tara Maxey, with IT Director D.D. Currie. In the back row are Brush y Canyons President Mickey Redus with class members Callie Wilkinson, Bruce Belcher, Lisa Belcher, Claudia Sanderlin, Lauren Commings, Kannon Shimp (standing behind), Susan Welch, Scott Reagan and Kelly Murphy.**

## **New Member Class is the ‘GOAT’**

By D.D. Currie  
New Member Representative

The 2026 new members class is the “GOAT.” GOAT is a term used to describe someone who is the best in their field, exceptionally skilled or admirable. Sounds like a bad term, but it actually means “Greatest of All Time.”

The class is made up of 14 diverse members, all of whom are extremely engaged, enthusiastic and curious. Several class members are already participating in chapter meetings and advanced

training opportunities, working toward their certification hours.

You know it’s a good sign when class members bring you recordings of bird calls from their yard. Some members are even bringing binoculars to the classes. It shows me they are engaged in the TMN program during classes, as well as outside of class.

The members seem to be a tight-knit group. It is heartwarming to see class members exchanging contact info so they can keep in touch outside of class. We are anticipating great things from this class after graduation!

## **Chapter forms IT Committee**

With the growth in chapter membership, the Brush y Canyons Board of Directors recently approved the creation of an Information Technology Committee.

One of its primary tasks will be helping ensure that the online and recording aspects of the monthly meetings and training sessions (including our New Members Class) function properly.

The initial members of this committee are Dell Little as chairman, P.J. Garza, Tammy Wooldridge and Bruce Belcher.

“I appreciate the willingness of these volunteers to step up in an area that is greatly needed,” said Brush y Canyons Chapter President Mickey Redus.

All these duties were previously handled by Vice President Rose Cooper.

## **Outreach events educate, promote**

Kathy Rice and Judy Wood regularly meet the public at community outreach events. They teach people about wildlife and nature and, as a byproduct, the fun we have in Texas Master Naturalists.

*Photos by Judy Wood*

**On the left, Kathy shows off her rat snake and animal skins at the Knippa Career Fair. On the right, she teaches about reptiles at the Concan Spring Market.**



# TMNs hear about plans for new Bear Creek State Park

By Joe Fohn

The Brushy Canyons chapter will soon serve not one, but two state parks in the Frio Canyon with the state's acquisition of the new Bear Creek State Park.

April Butler, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department development coordinator, joined the new park's superintendent, Nathan Reynolds and others at a public report on the park's time line.

Work at the park is already underway. Reynolds lives on the property and the park is expected to be available for guided tours, interpretive hikes and special events this fall. In February 2027, the park should be open by reservation for extended public day use and have restrooms, parking and some hiking trails.

In February 2029, the park will fully open, with overnight facilities, utilities and roads.

Butler said, "There's a definite need for more park land." Each day, Texas loses about 1,000 acres of land to development.

Recognizing that fact, the Texas Legislature created the Texas Centennial Parks Conservation Fund in 2023 with a \$1 billion endowment. Although the base investment will remain untouched, interest earned from that fund is dedicated to creating and developing state parklands.

"The great news is, we'll have that money coming in for our lifetime," she added.

Located west of U.S. Highway 83 within a mile of Garner State Park, Bear Creek State Park will be similar in size to Garner. "But it will complement, not duplicate, the Garner State Park experience," Butler said. For example, the new park will have more



Photo by D.D. Currie

**Here is a map from one of the Bear Creek Park public information sessions in March. Learn more about the planning process to open the park at <https://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/bear-creek>.**

complex terrain, steeper slopes and more streams such as Spring Creek and Bear Creek, plus woodlands, ridge tops with great views, wetlands and, of course, a stretch of the Frio River – although Bear Creek's portion also has spring-fed pools.

No less than 12 different types of habitats exist there, said Butler. Researchers will be mapping existing, historical and potential habitats for a variety of wildlife.

As for human habitation, TPWD historian Jennifer Levin said the first known non-native American settler on the site was Abraham Kelly, who built a ranch house there dating back to the 1870s. Private cemeteries for the family and the nearby Kelly

Settlement also exist on the park property. In addition, outreach has been made to tribal representatives regarding earlier occupation of the site.

According to the panel of speakers, the early goals for developing Bear Creek State Park include providing a range of backcountry experiences, creating trails to guide visitors, prioritizing land stewardship along with native habitats and archaeology, and fostering emotional and intellectual connections between the land and park visitors.

Stay tuned to learn about opportunities for our chapter to become involved in volunteer activities at Bear Creek Park.

## Chapter officers

### President and New Class

**Director:** Mickey Redus

**Vice president:** Rose Cooper

**Secretary:** P.J. Garza

**Treasurer:** Christi White

**Advanced Training Director/Advisor (AgriLife):**

Noel Troxclair

**Communications Director:**

Rosanne Fohn

**Membership Director:**

D'nese Fly

**2026 New Class Representative:** D.D. Currie

**Outreach Director:** Kathy Rice

**Volunteer Service Director:** Chip Fly

**Board member:** Jan Prather

**Advisor (TPWD):** David Rios

**Advisor (AgriLife):** Liz Tidwell

# 4,000 hours and counting!

Brush y Canyon chapter members continue to amaze with their commitment to volunteerism. At the April meeting, President Mickey Redus was honored for completing 4,000 hours of volunteer service, and that includes his 2026 recertification.

But he's not alone. Here is a wrap-up of volunteer service milestones for the first four months of the year.

At the January chapter meeting, Chip and D'Nese Fly were honored for 500 hours of volunteer service, Noel Troxclair for 250 hours, and Susan Duve and Sarah Horvath for their 2025 recertification.

In February, Julie Bartosh and T.C. King each received their 2025 recertification.

No awards were presented in March.

The April meeting honorees included Kathy Rice with 250 volunteer hours, and the following people who have already earned their 2026 recertification: Rose Cooper, D.D. Currie, D'Nese and Chip Fly, and Valerie Redus.



**Noel Troxclair, Chip and D'nese Fly, and Sarah Horvath were honored at the January chapter meeting.**



*Photo by Cathy Rice*

**Julie Bartosh and T.C. King received their 2025 recertification awards at the February chapter meeting.**



*Photos by Rosanne Fohn*

**Shown at the April awards ceremony are (from left) D'nese Fly, Mickey and Valerie Redus, Chip Fly and D.D. Currie.**

# Spotlight on Vice President Rose Cooper

By Rosanne Fohn

Our 4-year-old chapter is blessed to have an amazing array of science experts.

From longtime master naturalists Mickey and Valerie Redus to geologists Chip and D'nese Fly, environmental compliance expert D.D. Currie to Uvalde County Extension Agent Noel Troxclair — to name a few — the Brushy Canyons Chapter is flush with “natural experts.”

But if you're seeking a hardcore nature researcher, look no further than Rose Cooper. Our vice president worked more than 13 years at the Texas A&M AgriLife Center in Uvalde in the Wildlife and Natural Resource Management departments.

“I am a data-driven person,” Cooper admits, which is why she gives the initial training presentation on iNaturalist — the citizen scientist's tool — as well as talks in her professional areas of expertise.

She was introduced to nature at an early age. “My dad loved fishing and my mom was into shooting, so I grew up with dove and deer hunting. I was left to roam around and I loved doing that,” Cooper said. She also learned about plants from her grandparents, who both enjoyed gardening.

After taking ag classes and raising FFA animals as a student at Madison High School in San Antonio, Cooper's love for Southwest Texas and the Hill Country blossomed when she attended Sul Ross State University in Alpine. There she earned an associate's degree in veterinary science, a bachelor's in animal science and a master's in reproductive physiology.



**Rose Cooper**

During that journey she discovered her real love was wildlife ecology. From 1997 to 2010, Cooper worked in research at the Texas A&M AgriLife Center in Uvalde, conducting 15 research projects on a wide variety of topics. One project involved spatial ecology (tracking GPS-collared deer to document their range and what plants they foraged). Another project focused on eco-hydrology (studying how much groundwater juniper trees use). She also conducted research on fire ecology (studying which plants grow back in an area that has had a prescribed burn, and how animals use those plants).

If you've heard her initial training presentation on plants, Cooper's experience working on Texas A&M's virtual herbarium shines through. The online herbarium helped inform folks about the plants found in our area and

their uses by native wildlife.

“That program started in Uvalde (A&M center),” she said, noting that part of her job was informing landowners about the types of plants that were on their property and how to manage them.

When her longtime research supervisor left, Cooper spent two years working in the mass spectrometry lab at the Uvalde center and became a “certified lab rat.”

If that wasn't enough to keep her busy, in 2003 Cooper was recruited into the South Texas Buckskin Brigades, a non-profit organization that provides leadership training in wildlife, fisheries and land stewardship to junior high and high school students. The organization is a collaboration among the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, USDA-National Resources Conservation Service and Texas Wildlife Association.

At first, she worked as an instructor in plant identification; however, after becoming vice president of the organization she gave up the instructor role to be more involved in the behind-the-scenes work at the Brigade camps until she took over as president and camp coordinator.

After leaving the AgriLife Center, Cooper spent time as a seventh-grade science teacher and high school biology teacher, as well as an adjunct professor of zoology and botany at Southwest Texas Junior College, now called

*[Continued page 7](#)*

**Your input “makes” our newsletter! Please submit your articles and photos for the next Canyon Echo by June 30 to [rosannefohn@yahoo.com](mailto:rosannefohn@yahoo.com).**

# Spotlight on Rose Cooper

*Continued from page 6*

Southwest Texas College.

In 2014, the family took a five-year hiatus to Virginia for her husband's job, and even still Cooper continued volunteering with the Buckskin Brigade while her kids attended the summer camps in Texas.

Needless to say, these experiences gave her children a thorough education in wildlife conservation, so much so that her daughter Allison is following in her footsteps. "Allison works with the Navarino Nature Center in Shioctin, Wisconsin, where she gives nature tours and educates the public about native wildlife and plants," Cooper said. Meanwhile, son Brodie enjoys hunting and fishing.

When Cooper returned to Texas, she learned that the Brushy Canyons Chapter was to be created in Kinney, Medina and Uvalde counties. She jumped in with the same enthusiasm as ever, becoming a certified TMN in the first class.

With the chapter in its infancy, Cooper took on leadership roles right away, serving as communications director, one of the first volunteer management system (VMS) administrators and treasurer. "As communications director, I created and maintained the chapter website and calendar; created and posted information on the chapter's Facebook and Instagram accounts; and scheduled, recorded and monitored the Webex meetings for the chapter and board meetings, as well as the initial training classes," Cooper said.

With Brushy Canyons' growth in members, Cooper was finally able to hand over some of those hats to other members this spring so that she can now get back to her favorite activities - citizen science projects and teaching.

And she's not wasting any time.

This spring she has concentrated on birding by participating in the Big Sit, her first-ever birding Big Day and leading tours at Birding the Border. She also plans to guide birding trips for the photography track of Birding with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension.

"I've spent a lot of time sitting behind a computer," she said. "What I really want to do is get outside more."

## Want to become a Master Naturalist?

Visitors are welcome to attend chapter meetings to learn about the Texas Master Naturalist program.

Brushy Canyons chapter meetings are held at 6 p.m. on the first Thursday of the month at Garner State Park in the Shady Meadows Group Shelter.

This month's meeting will be on May 7.



*Photos by Rose Cooper*

**This year's "Big Sit" birding event fell on the day of the New Member Training Class's ornithology unit. The class met at Mickey and Valerie Redus' house for "fun" (see the picture above) and to learn. In the picture below, the class is observing a male Lazuli bunting at one of the many bird feeders there.**



Book review

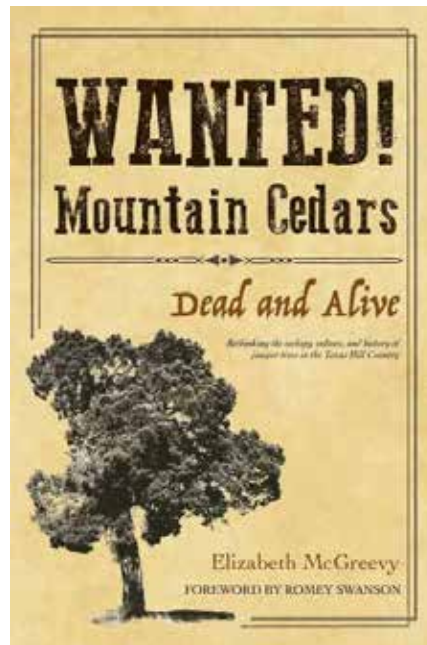
## Wanted! Mountain Cedars: Dead and Alive

By Amanda Griffin

I have heard Elizabeth McGreevy speak at two events in the last three or so years, and each time she was talking about this book. I admired her casual speaking style, and also the way that she charged forth in discussing a prickly subject: the subject of her book, “Wanted! Mountain Cedars: Dead and Alive.” I was there to feel the shift in audience countenance. I picked up on the wafting doubt as she went through her slides and discussed common misperceptions about this divisive plant so ubiquitous in the Texas Hill Country.

Having my first exposure to the topic as an audience member with Elizabeth McGreevy gave me a profound respect for her courage. She knew she would face obstruction and strong opinions about this topic and she tally-ho’d anyway. If I had not had those interactions, I might have put this book back on the shelf in the library. It is heavy and thick and small printed, and even with the spark of personal connection with the author, I questioned whether I would really be able to maintain interest in Mountain cedar to come out on the other side of the 608 pages of this book.

The guilt of personal association won out, and I checked it out anyway. I feel obliged to mention that I did not begin the book with a strong opinion either way about Mountain cedar. I thankfully don’t suffer from cedar fever, and in general I think trees should be left alone in their habitats, regardless of the species, so I may have entered this conversation with fewer biases than some readers will, but as is my nature, a lot of curiosity.



Less than a chapter in, I understood why McGreevy had her backbone of steel in conversation and presentation about Mountain cedar. This book brings the receipts. It is a culmination of decades of research — biological, ecological and cultural. McGreevy does a masterful job of telling the story of the Mountain cedar through the lens of human experience. This book is part textbook, part folklore and part investigative journalism. She examines the good, the bad, the ugly and everything in between. She calls the strikes and fouls in previous Mountain cedar research and examines specifically where history got it right and wrong.

Not only was this an easy read, thanks to McGreevy’s simple style and her ability to put a human connection into the topics examined in the book, but I learned something on almost every page. I learned a ton about Mountain cedars, but also about soils, karst geology, Hill Country history, ecology, and through all of

it, felt invited to also examine The Human Experience — culture, peer pressure, media, interpretation, hysteria, power, money — all amazingly without judgement.

On many pages, judgement would have been justified, as it is clear through McGreevy’s research that throughout time men have gotten some things really, truly wrong about Mountain cedar. But the book never says “I told you so” or chastises previous study. It just lays it out in honest detail for the reader to draw conclusions for themselves.

Painstaking research, extensive study and scientific knowledge don’t always make for a leisurely read (TMN textbook, anyone?), but McGreevy does a wonderful job of distilling the facts and weaving a tale of truths and consequences, making this book accessible for the reader in a way I did not expect, even as a small fan of McGreevy already.

Texas history buffs, ecology enthusiasts and both lovers and haters of Mountain cedar will get something out of this book. I highly recommend it, and it is in the rare category for me: a book that I would read a second time. What I thought would be a chore of a book ended up being a revealing pleasure of a read. What I thought was a story about Mountain cedar ended up being a story about people, about Texas, about us.

Telling the story of a plant through the lens of a people — the writers of news and history, the students of botany and ecology — McGreevy makes the case for a deep truth: that the Mountain cedar is not the only species with a complicated relationship to the world around it.

# What is NestWatch?

By Dell Little

When Rosanne reminded me that I was going to write an article on birds for the *Canyon Echo*, she suggested an article about NestWatch. When I read this my first thought was “I don’t know anything about NestWatch, so what else can I write about.” But, then I thought, “What is NestWatch?” I’d seen the title come across my emails from all of the promotional items I received from Cornell Labs because of my eBird participation.

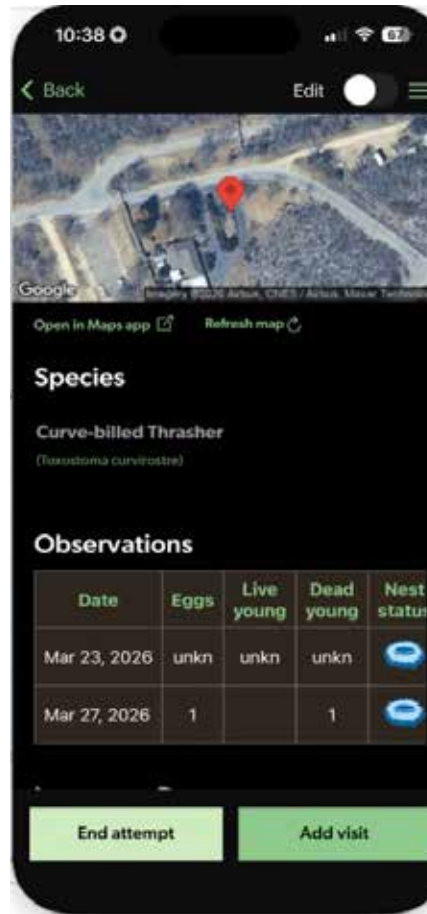
As it turns out, [NestWatch](#) isn’t just a fancy name for watching clumps of brush in trees. It is a massive, like always, citizen science project run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Essentially, I would act as the “eyes on the ground” to help scientists track the reproductive success of birds. They are looking for specific data points: when the nesting starts, how many eggs are laid, and — most importantly — how many of those tiny hatchlings actually make it to the “fledge” stage.

This data helps researchers understand how bird populations are reacting to things like habitat loss and climate change. We aren’t just watching a nest; we’re contributing to a global database that tracks the health of our ecosystem.

## How it Works (The “Can I actually do this?” part):

The best part for a beginner like me is that they don’t expect you to be an expert on Day 1. There is a simple [Certification and Protocol](#) process that teaches you how to observe a nest without causing stress to the birds. The “job description” is straightforward:

**Find a nest:** (They even give



you [tips on how to look](#)).

**Visit every 3-4 days:** Just a quick peek to see what’s changed.

**Report what you see:** You can use their [Mobile App](#) to log data right there in the field.

**My attempt:** I began thinking that the nests I’ve seen around the house are mostly above my head. So I assume a ladder might be required. We have a healthy fear of ladders around here so I thought that might not work. But I saw a photo on Cornell’s Code of Conduct page of what appears to be a mirror on an extension. So I looked into finding one on the Internet. Avinet seems to have one specifically for this purpose, so I paid \$20 and it was here in a couple of days. And having the Mobile App will be my method of

documenting, as I hate keeping up with paperwork.

One key protocol: Avoid early morning checks. That’s my usual “birding” time, but I learned that flushing an adult off the nest in the morning chill can quickly cool the eggs or nestlings. It’s best to wait until the female leaves on her own. I also have to stay alert for egg thieves like Green Jays and Roadrunners — and of course, neighborhood cats. They are the worst.

**Next up: the quiz:** Do you hate quizzes? Me too. But I suppose they exist to ensure we actually read the [Protocols](#) and know what we think we know. After all, the goal is to help, not cause more harm than good, right?

**March 23: From theory to the driveway:** After passing the [quiz](#), it was time to move from the screen to the brush. I always thought our driveway Cholla cacti were full of Cactus wren nests, but as I started my first search, I realized I was looking at two completely different styles. While the wrens build those familiar large grass clumps, a **Curve-billed thrasher** darted into a much tidier nest made of short tree limbs.

This was my first lesson in the [NestWatch App](#) logic: there are three levels to every entry — the **Nest** (the location), the **Attempt** (the specific nesting cycle), and the **Visit** (my individual check-ins). It seemed complex at first, but once I realized the app tracks multiple **occupants or broods** using the same spot over time, the “why” clicked. I pinned the map, logged the habitat and officially started my first attempt.

**March 27: The Mirror Test**  
I’ll admit, I “cheated” during the

[Continued on page 10](#)

## Nestwatch

*Continued from page 9*

waiting period by glancing at the nest while passing by at a distance. The adult was almost always on duty. Once my telescoping mirror arrived, I made my official afternoon approach. The adult took off, giving me a short window to snap a few photos. The mirror revealed one blue egg and one nestling. However, after blowing up the photos on my computer, the young bird appeared motionless with its eyes closed. While I suspected it hadn't survived, the vibrant blue of the remaining egg was a striking contrast. D.D. also noted seeing blue eggshell fragments nearby, confirming the timing of the recent hatch.

### **March 30: Young Alive!**

I'm so glad I was mistaken. What I previously thought was a lost nestling was very much alive. The nest was clear this afternoon, and when I carefully positioned my mirror and nudged a nearby cactus limb, the baby opened its mouth wide for a feeding. I didn't make a sound, but the movement was enough. The other egg was still present. I immediately went back and updated my previous [Nest-Watch](#) entry from "dead young" to "live young: 1." I hope to catch a feeding soon and watch this bird grow up.

Well, that is my first official nest in the books. I thought I'd easily find more, but observing birds is one thing; decoding nesting behavior and actually locating the site is a whole different level. It's a skill I clearly need to practice. With the newsletter deadline here, my "official" report ends for now, but the monitoring continues. Maybe I'll have more success to share later — or better yet, maybe you'll get back to me with your own [NestWatch](#) experience.

## VMS: From hours to impact

By Joe Fohn

At the Brush y Canyons February chapter meeting, members heard that since its charter in 2023, the chapter is credited with 45 paid members who have amassed 15,458 total hours, of which 11,307 were volunteer hours.

Where, exactly, do those numbers come from? Thanks to D'nese Fly's presentation, we now know. She recently served on a four-member panel along with Rose Cooper, Mickey Redus and Tina Bourgeois, examining the VMS (Volunteer Member Service) reporting system and is one of the chapter's VMS approvers of hours.

D'nese's topic, "From Hours to Impact: Our Chapter's Volunteer Projects," explained how the hours that members report through the VMS webpage are recorded, organized, translated into individual and chapter totals, and then credited to the chapter by Texas Master Naturalists and the Texas Agrilife Extension Service.

That total, in turn, becomes a significant measure of our chapter's success within the TMN system.

While stressing that it's important to ensure that volunteer hours are reported and credited properly, she noted that some of the rules are very specific: For example, Hospitality hours can be logged for serving and/or delivering food for a meeting, but the time spent shopping for the ingredients or preparing the dish can't.

Using handouts, D'nese led members through the VMS process as well as other topics such as Service Opportunity Categories including Nature Public Access, Resource Management and Field Research, with examples of each.

Other handouts included lists of activities and their associated categories, definitions, and how to account for meetings, training, hospitality and mileage.

"Reporting reaches beyond hours and pins," D'nese said. "It affects funding for the chapter and for TMN."

She concluded, "Keep up the good work! Your volunteer hours are appreciated by many."

## Purple martins get new condominium

By Rosanne Fohn

Brush y Canyons members and Friends of the Castroville Regional Park worked together to install a new 18-gourd Purple martin house at the park on March 12.

Chapter member Sarah Horvath applied for and received a \$1,000 grant from the Bexar County Audubon Society to purchase the large birdhouse and additional supplies. A concrete base for the pole was poured in February, then the volunteers assembled the plastic gourds, put in a handful of nesting material to help the birds get started and raised the house 16 feet to greet the migrating birds arriving from their trip south for the winter.

Chapter members helping with the project were Mickey and Valerie Redus, Joe and Rosanne Fohn, and Horvath from the Brush y Canyons Chapter. Robin Green, Pricilla Garret and Helen Delavan represented the Friends group, and Jeremy Tometczak, a volunteer from the Alamo Area Chapter of TMNs, assisted.

*(See photo on the next page.)*

# Volunteers install native plants along Medina River

By Rosanne Fohn

More than 40 volunteers, including some from the Brush y Canyons Chapter, worked to plant native vegetation along a bend of the Medina River in Castroville Regional Park.

The purpose of the project is to restore the banks of the Medina River to improve water quality.

After forming in Bandera County, the Medina River flows into Medina Lake and through the Medina Lake Diversion Dam in north Medina County before going south to Castroville. The river joins the San Antonio River in Bexar County and eventually flows into San Antonio Bay along the Texas coast.

Locally, the river and its tributaries are used for irrigation and recreation, but the water also seeps into several aquifers that are used for drinking water.

A stakeholder group was formed in 2025 to address water quality when testing by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality detected harmful levels of bacteria in the Medina River and in Medio Creek that feeds into the Medina River in Bexar County. The pollution presents dangers to drinking water drawn from the Trinity, Carrizo-Wilcox and Edwards aquifers, and to those who swim, wade, fish and kayak in the river.

In late 2025, the Environmental Protection Agency approved the stakeholder group's Watershed Protection Plan — the "Medina River below Diversion Lake Watershed Protection Plan" — that was submitted after getting input from stakeholders in Medina and Bexar County.

"With more development going into eastern Medina County,

we want to get everyone involved and provide education on how we can work together to keep the river clean," said Mary Michael Zahed, a program specialist with Texas A&M's Texas Water Resources Institute.

She leads the stakeholder group, along with collaborators from Texas A&M AgriLife and the Texas State Soil & Water Conservation Board. Other major stakeholders are farmers and ranchers in Medina County, the Friends of the Castroville Regional Park, the San Antonio River Authority, U.S. Forest Service and volunteers from many organizations in Medina and Bexar County.

On Feb. 7, volunteers broke ground on the restoration project by creating pedestrian walkways for recreational use, laying the foundation for a native plant demonstration garden and install-

ing coconut coir logs for erosion control in Castroville Regional Park.

On Feb. 28, volunteers planted native grasses, trees and forbs along the riverbank and a native plant demonstration garden in the park for educational use.

"We are so thankful for the many volunteers who worked out here both days. Their efforts not only will beautify the area but will make a big difference in helping improve water quality," Zahed said.

To learn more about the water protection plan, water-related educational opportunities and how to volunteer for future events, visit the group's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/MedinaRiverWPP/>. Or visit the project website, <https://medina.twri.tamu.edu/twri.tamu.edu/>.



## Success!

**Right after this new, 18-gourd birdhouse was hoisted up in Castroville Regional Park, nearby Purple martins came over to check out the new condos. Brush y Canyons members who assembled the house were Mickey and Valerie Redus, Joe and Rosanne Fohn and Sarah Horvath, who successfully wrote the grant to purchase the birdhouse.**

# Advanced training: What the brush is telling us

By Joe Fohn

In the land of Brush y Canyons, sometimes you see the wildlife, sometimes you don't. But if you look closely at the brush where they live, you can tell which species of animals have been eating there.

“What the Brush is Telling Us: Breaking Down Whitetail Deer Browsing and Browse Survey Methodology,” presented by TPWD Wildlife Biologist Mary Beth Foerster, was the program for the Brush y Canyons March chapter meeting.

Foerster brought with her a tabletop full of branches from native woody plants. Some were pristine; others had their tips missing, and still others bore a diagonal cut. Each sample said something about the animal that bit off a piece of it.

For example, an oak with the tender leaf tips missing was probably grazed by a whitetail deer. Meanwhile, that thorny branch with the diagonal scar was lopped off by the angled incisors of a rodent.

Checking the intensity of consumption across several brushy species can provide a good indicator of deer and overall wildlife species population as well as the health and diversity of their nutrition source, which is itself an indicator of the wildlife community's health.

For example, a sizeable population of Texas oak, cedar elm, granjeno and kidneywood indicates a good supply of the preferred browse species for whitetail deer.

Second-choice species include blackbrush, Roemer acacia, huisache and sumac species.

On the other hand, evidence of grazing of agarita, Texas persimmon, Mountain laurel, Ashe juniper (often locally called Mountain cedar) or elbowbush indicates that deer are down to their least-preferred nutrition source.



*Photos by Rosanne Fohn*

**(Below) Chapter members gather around the demonstration table with presenter Mary Beth Foerster at the March meeting. (Above left) Here is an example of untouched vegetation compared to (right) a branch wildlife has used for food.**



# Mission Possible: San Lorenzo de Santa Cruz

By Joe Fohn

The Brush Y Canyons Chapter frequently hears requests for help on projects ranging from a pollinator garden to a bioblitz, to maintaining a park's Purple Martin colony. But at its April meeting, the chapter heard from a couple of neighbors who need some help with a buried treasure.

Well, mostly buried. Only a few hints of Mission San Lorenzo de Santa Cruz, founded in 1762, remain above-ground at its location just outside Camp Wood.

Portions of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish mission and military stronghold remain intact under several feet of topsoil. But according to chapter members Julie Bartosh and Jan Prather, both of Camp Wood, the community's immediate objective isn't to unearth the archaeological site. At least, not yet.

"Our mission," said Bartosh, "is to bring people to our county." To do that, they're working to make the historic site more visible to tourists, starting with refurbishing the seven flagpoles that fly the famous 'Six Flags over Texas,' as well as a tribal flag representing the Lipan Apache tribe.

Nearby is an existing "mission home" building that could serve as an interpretive center where the two hope to replace a painting of the mission, now no longer in place, that was created by local students. Also, there are placards with historical data that mark the corners of the walled mission's former entrance, and a paved walking path tying the sites together.

She added, "We're not here (tonight) for the history of this mission. We are here for what we're going to do for the future of it."

In fact, the history of the mission has been well-researched since the 1970s by various historians specializing in the Spanish Texas era, and also by Texas Tech University archaeol-



ogists, who exposed portions of the tiled floors and rock walls, mapped them and then carefully re-buried them to protect them from weathering and vandalism. More recently, a Lipan tribal official has been actively aiding the preservation effort.

Besides helping to publicize what is now known as the Nueces Canyon Visitors and Heritage Center, the

group seeks help to restore and maintain the walking path and possibly to plant native plants in a cleared area that leads down to the Nueces River.

"This mission is possible. We need help with it," said Prather, who is a Garner State park staff member "It's so cool to be able to get into something like this and know you're bringing back history."

## Adopt-A-Loop visit yields 17 species

Despite the temperature being a chilly 46 degrees, seven chapter members layered up for a March 16 visit to Garner State Park.

Led by Brush y Canyons Adopt-A-Loop project coordinator Nancy Thornton, the group identified 17 species including hummingbirds, a Vermillion flycatcher, Ash-throated flycatcher, Hutton's vireo and Canyon wren. They also recorded a Cottontail rabbit and several plants, such as Wild persimmon, Mountain laurel and Bluestem grass.

Adopt-a-Loop is a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department citizen science project to provide regular visits to the TPWD Great Texas Wildlife Trails. TMN chapters partner by adopting a loop or several loops to provide information about flora and fauna at the sites as well as acces-

sibility to the properties. The data entered through the iNaturalist and eBird apps help the TPWD keep tabs on species of greatest conservation need and wildlife in general.

The Brush y Canyons Chapter has adopted the Rio Frio Loop that includes eight stops in the Frio River watershed. They include the Frio Bat Flight, Neal's Lodge, River Oaks Nature Trail, Frio Country, Frio River Cabins, Garner State Park, Clearwater Ranch and Hill County Nature Center.

To order printed maps or to view interactive maps for trails throughout all the different regions of Texas, visit <https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/wildlife/wildlife-trails/>.

In the meantime, contact Nancy by text at (830) 279-5040 to participate in the next Adopt-A-Loop visit.