

THE TRACKER

Central Texas Master Naturalist Newsletter December 2020

We did it: 2020 Trainees Graduate!

- **Andrea Liles, 2020**

“Ecosystem dynamics—the ways in which ecological systems change and adapt over time and space” is a key tenet of The Texas Master Naturalist Statewide Curriculum (Texas A&M University Press, 2015). 2020 gave everyone the opportunity to do just that both indoors and outdoors. With lockdowns and gathering restrictions implemented mid-March thru the remainder of 2020, “change and adapt” was crucial. The webinar training (both live and recorded) was the perfect approach to ensure the entire Class of 2020 trainees graduated. As the restrictions loosened and small group in-person volunteering restarted, the trainees joined the rest of the CTMN members in volunteer efforts around Bell County. As trainees, we merged online training with the hands-on volunteer efforts in the area Army Corps of Engineers parks and Mother Neff State Park. The chapter members shared knowledge of their special interests to further expand our education. The experience has been everything I had hoped. Being outside is where I feel happiest and to be able to share that and learn from the rest of the CTMN chapter members is an honor.



Training Co-Directors Lynn Fleming and Mary Ann Everett hand out certificates, name badges and gifts to 2020 graduates.

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From Lynn Fleming, Training Co-Director: *“The 2020 class slapped us awake with a lesson from nature. You must adapt to your surroundings to survive. The training team put brain power together and carried out a plan that kept the ship afloat instead of being scuttled. It may not have been the training we originally planned, but the end result was a great group of enthusiastic Master Naturalists added to the fold of nature nerds. We are glad you stuck with us!!”*

President's Pen

- John Atkins

Howdy Folks! I hope everyone has had a wonderful Thanksgiving and if you don't think you have much to be thankful for this year, remember that if you can read this, that's the number one reason to give thanks. If you are sick of all the noise coming from the media, remember the Zen of a chainsaw at full throttle goes a long way toward drowning most things out!



It has been a pleasant autumn here in Central Texas, in fact, I am writing this article while sitting by my pool wearing shorts. Thank you La Niña! It could be quite different this time of year. On November 11th, 1940, the temperature in the Midwest went from the 50's to single digits in a matter of hours. The winds picked up to 30-50 mph and two feet of snow fell causing drifts up to 20 feet high. The storm claimed a total of 154 lives and killed thousands of cattle in my home state of Iowa. More than a million turkeys were killed by the storm in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and other states. This storm became known as the "Armistice Day Storm".



Daisy Klassy in her PPE volunteering at Miller Springs Nature Center

As usual, I would like to remind everyone to be safe and vigilant while doing our volunteer work. One of the dangers that we are all guilty of is being overconfident in our abilities. Whether it is climbing up a riverbank, picking up logs or felling trees, none of you are ninjas. We take a lot longer to heal than when we were 16 years old! Felling trees is by far the most dangerous work that we do. That is why we are trained, carry "Stop the Bleed" kits and always must be cognizant of where the easiest evacuation routes are and where we can establish helicopter landing zones. Due to the nature of where we are doing our cutting, the biggest risk we face while felling trees is being crushed. We normally are working along very steep slopes and the trees are intertwined with other trees and interwoven with grape, poison ivy, and green briar vines. It is

almost impossible to drop these large trees where you want them, and we often end up with widow-makers that must be dealt with. I would like to encourage everyone who is doing invasive removal (not just the chainsaw operators) to purchase and wear a hard hat. My helmet saved me from a trip to the hospital this month. Instead of a concussion and stitches, I came home with a stiff neck and a story. **Remember, there is no chinaberry or Ligustrum that is worth your life.**

President's Pen cont.

This will be my last submission of the President's Pen; my two-year sentence is up. At the December Chapter Meeting, you will vote for your next President and Treasurer. I hope you give them the same support that you have given me and Don. With your support and ideas, we were able to build upon the strong foundation that was left to me by past presidents. We have trimmed down the number of non-active members while at the same time increasing the number of active members. The credit there goes to our recruitment efforts that provided us with back-to-back classes with high retention and high energy individuals.

We will once again close out this year with well over 4000 hours of volunteer service. We would have beat last year's total, but COVID threw a monkey wrench into our schedule. That is a testament to the fortitude of our members. While others panicked and wrung their hands, you continued to soldier on. You understood that our mission had not changed, only the conditions. Every one of you did a personal risk assessment and continued to volunteer to best of your abilities. Thank you.



President John Atkins hosts his last in-person chapter meeting for 2020. In January, he will serve as the Immediate Past President.

COVID forced us to become innovative and adaptable in how we worked, held meetings, and trained the next class. The Training Committee led the way as we dove into unfamiliar waters. We were forced into using new technologies and imaginative ways to teach. From Webinars and Plant of the Day, to Bio-Blitzes and scavenger hunts, they truly excelled in trying times. Although we had to put some of our team building activities like class project and field trips on hold, I am still pleased with how the COVID Class came together as a team.

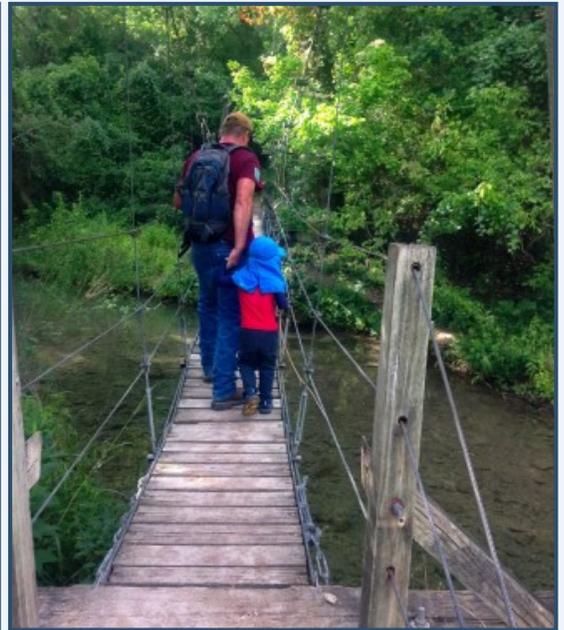
For the incoming Officers and Committee Members, continue to move the Chapter forward and strive to give the members volunteer opportunities that retain them. I will see you down range.

Thank you.

John Atkins—CTMN President 2019-2020



THANK YOU JOHN!



Top Left: John and Master Naturalist wife Tina at our Fleming Ranch Pasture Party; John on chainsaw duty at Chalk Ridge Falls. John escorting Clive Jue, our young naturalist who was a regular at workdays, for Mom Melissa. John handing out certificates and Milestone achievement pins—something he did about 100 times! And John using biofacts (replicas of natural items) from our Discovery Trunks to teach a flock of kids and parents about the natural world in our area at the 5th Annual Mother Neff State Park Christmas event.



Mother Neff State Park

1680 TX Hwy-236, Moody

Jean Solana (2019), MNSP liaison, can be reached at jeansolana@sbcglobal.net

Editor's note: The members of CTMN would like to extend our thanks to Bill Abright for serving as our Liaison to Mother Neff State Park for the last two years. Our partnership with MNSP goes back to the founding of our chapter and we continue to be offered many kinds of opportunities to use our training to benefit the park and its visitors. As Bill begins to focus his attention on a Zebra Mussel Monitoring project at Fort Hood, he "passes the loppers" to Jean Solana, a frequent volunteer at MNSP, who will serve as our Chapter's Liaison. (That's Bill in the hat, mask and sunshades...trust me!)



Even though Mother Neff has most things shut down due to COVID precautions, the week of November 16th provided lots of opportunities to volunteer at Mother Neff:

Melissa Chadwick, the Park Superintendent, had asked if I wanted to assist Daisy with her monthly Stream Team sampling of the Leon River. I thought, "How hard could that be?" so I said yes. Next thing I know, I'm following Daisy through a ragweed forest and facing a serious fall risk sliding down the only access point to the Leon. After that, being old and crabby, I said "We need to fix this." I had run out of pond burrs to torture Carroll Atkins (2020) (the pond looks really nice after we worked on burr plant removal all Spring and Summer) so I emailed him that I had another "Extreme Mother Neff" Adventure. Since misery loves company, John Ziegler and Bill Abright wanted to come, too. On Monday we showed up to hack a trail through the 8 foot tall ragweed. Luckily the Park Rangers had mercy on us and mowed down a trail most of the way to the Leon River, so we only had to hack the rest of the way. John Ziegler cut dirt steps with a pick into the Leon River slope so it will not be as slippery to get down to the water. Afterwards, Daisy rewarded us with a wonderful hike down the "Hidden Trail" that goes below the forest side of the current park to the Bottoms of the Leon - a beautiful trail. I hope it will someday be open to the public. We also tagged invasives along the trails.

Cont.

Mother Neff State Park *Cont.*

We returned on Thursday for a regular CTMN chapter workday removing flagged invasive chinaberry and ligustrum trees along the trails. Daisy Klassy led the team of Juan Anaya, Jean Solana, Sue Valdez, Susan Schneider, Bill Abright, Sharon and Steve Schmitz, Sue and Ward Critz, John Ziegler and Zoe Rascoe (group photo to right, with Daisy). John Ziegler had been trained on the reciprocating saw and the "Puller-Bear" was manned by Ward, so we surprised some good-sized invasive trees that thought they couldn't be chopped down without a chainsaw.



Sharon Schmitz



Steve Schmitz, Juan Anaya, Ward Critz



John Ziegeler



Zoe Rascoe



Susan Schneider and Sue Valdez

On Saturday, the Heart of Texas (Waco) Chapter Master Naturalist 2020 training class had their Geology class at Mother Neff. I oriented the group to the Park, including a hike to the Tonkawa Cave, CCC Tower and Cabin, and the Bird Blind.

Needless to say, I got lots of volunteer service hours in at Mother Neff that week and will let it be for a while. If you would like to get in on the volunteering fun, just let me know and I bet I can find something you will enjoy doing at our nearest Texas State Park!

Is it Work or is it Play?

MNSP *Cont.*

- Zoe Rascoe, 2004

Editor's Note: This is fourth in a series getting to know the staff at Mother Neff State Park.

We first met Daisy when she began coming to our monthly Chapter meetings well before the next year's training course was to begin. When she joined the 2018 Class, we all knew Daisy and that although she was quiet-natured, she was also a hard worker. She had been previously volunteering at MNSP and joined us on our projects there as well. Daisy is also a Master Gardener, photographer, baker and a violinist—and likely has many more talents unknown to us. Daisy graduated with 120 hours of volunteer service hours, already certified (plus a lot more) when she graduated! It prompted the start of the “Super Volunteer Award” that year for her efforts. That award is now called the Daisy Award!

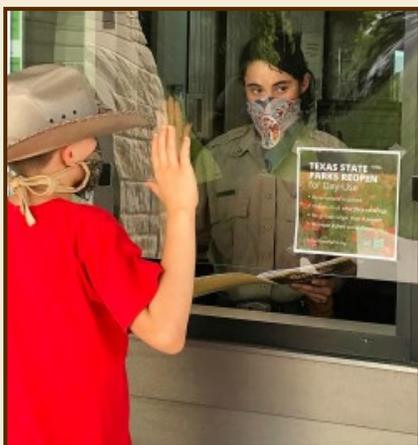
In my visits with Daisy at our meetings, I learned that after volunteering at MNSP for a while, she thought she'd like to work there, not just volunteer. She knew she wouldn't enjoy “being cooped up inside” all the time. I think a fair number of our tribe would enjoy Park Ranger-ing as a profession! After volunteering at MNSP for about a year and a half (and becoming a Master Naturalist during that time) a position opened at the Park and she was hired.



Our readers may know that MNSP is a big operation with not very many employees – that's part of the reason our Chapter gets to help out there so often! Everyone there fills in on all sorts of tasks. Daisy said her days can include indoor projects like greeting customers/campers, taking day use fees, inventorying, cleaning, Christmas decorating (that's always fun!), printing signs, or other projects as needed. Outdoor projects can include trail

maintenance, bird blind upkeep, mowing, weed eating, painting signs and gates, clearing brush, flagging invasives for later removal, weeding the garden area, and anything else that might come up in a day. Some other tasks include photography, helping with crafts, helping with events, or working with volunteers (like Master Naturalists!) This amount of variety is why Daisy enjoys her job so much – every day is a little different.

We are delighted to have an “insider” at MNSP and appreciate Daisy's volunteer efforts with our chapter at other locations (hello chainsaw operator!) If you don't know Daisy, look for her in a cowboy hat at the back of the room.



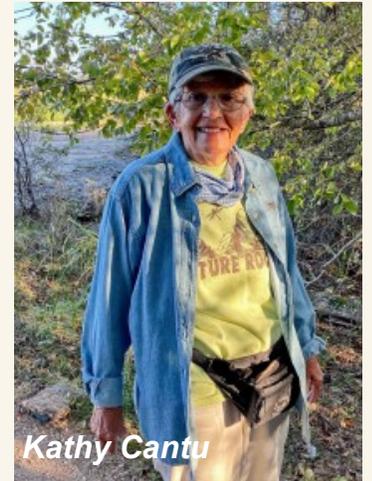
Daisy helps a Junior Ranger



- JOHN BURNS, 2018

jaburns@utexas.edu

In October we had a great workday. Marilyn Whitworth, Kathy Cantu and Bert Peeples offered to pick up litter in the area around the entry to the trail system. The others: John Atkins, Ben Clement, Chris Nixon, Kelly Ann Blanchard, Bill Novakoski, and myself headed to the Green Pond Trail with our tools to continue removing invasive species. If you haven't been keeping up with this project, we are concentrating on Waxleaf Ligustrum, but we also remove



Kathy Cantu



Chris Nixon

other invasive plants we see such as Chinaberry trees, and Nandina (Heavenly Bamboo). On this trip down the trail we removed several large Chinaberry trees along with many Ligustrum plants we either cut or pulled. We were all impressed how much more open the area felt at the end of the day. I know most of the nature center visitors don't realize native plants are being choked out by all these invasive plants, but it would be hard for someone not to notice the difference in this trail over the last few months. With removal of Ligustrum and Chinaberry

trees, the trail is opened up a lot and it doesn't seem as confined. To me it feels like you are walking on a more open Texas trail versus a trail in an overgrown jungle. It was almost to the point where you felt like you needed a machete to cut your way through. It's always nice to be able to see progress! With that said, we have a never-ending job ahead as the invasive plants just keep multiplying. It's called job security, or in our case, never-ending opportunities for volunteer service hours.



Miller Springs Nature Center *cont.*

In November we were back to our recurring job of picking up trash and removing invasive plants! We had 10 great volunteers for the November workday. Marilyn Whitworth led a group of volunteers on litter pickup in the park entrance wooded area and the prairie at the spillway. The High Team also included Bert Peeples, Sue Valdez, and Susan Schneider. The other volunteers, The Low Team, made up of John Atkins, Ben Clement, John Ziegler, Jaime Harmon, Bill Novakoski, and myself head down to the Green Pond Trail to continue the work we had been doing in October. We all had a very productive day making excellent progress on invasive plant removal and the litter team made a visible difference with work as well.



Bill Novakoski on Lopper Patrol



John Ziegler (bottom), Ben Clement and John Burns head down

The next MSNC workday will be Thurs, December 10th at 9:00am. All are welcome—for either High Team or the Low Team! Also, find more information on the City of Belton's annual New Year's Eve morning Volunteer Workday—a great way for the family to come out and hike while picking up litter and trimming up around the trails.

See you on the trails!



John Burns works to keep up with Jaime Harmon

Miller Springs Nature Center *cont.*



The City of Belton hosted a “Seed Scatter” event at MSNC on Halloween Day. It was billed as a way to burn off some calories before filling up on Halloween candy that evening! Halloween costumes were encouraged (as long as they were hike-worthy).

Our Chapter offered to be onsite with nature education stations and a seed ball-making activity to use in scattering the seed as participants hiked. We had lots of Chapter members volunteer to

help: John and Tina Atkins, Mary Ann Everett, Kathy Cantu, Lynn Williams, Jerry Lewis, Kelly Ann Blanchard, Jean Solana, Paula Finley, Sarah Dorn and Buzzard Boy (aka Joe Dorn), Lynn Fleming, Dakota Fleming (and her pup Margaret), Stephen and Sharon Schmitz, and Marilyn Whitworth.

Stations were set up with Discovery Trunks on Mammals with skins and skulls, and our Bird Trunk with feathers and bird feet and skull replicas, our wingspan banner to check your

relative bird size, a big mess of jute to represent the root system of our native Sideoats grama grass. And the seed ball making station. Several helped with hikes and the seed-throwing task—the main reason for gathering.

Thank you to Matt Bates at Belton Parks & Rec for including CTMN in this fun event.

The Seed Scatter was made possible through a donation from the Claypool family in memory of Casey Claypool.



John Atkins, Jean Solana, Kelly Ann Blanchard and Lynn Fleming on Mammals



Marilyn Whitworth, Sharon Schmitz at seed ball table



Paula Finley (pointing) and Kelly Ann Blanchard help with hike

Chalk Ridge Falls Park

- John Atkins, 2016

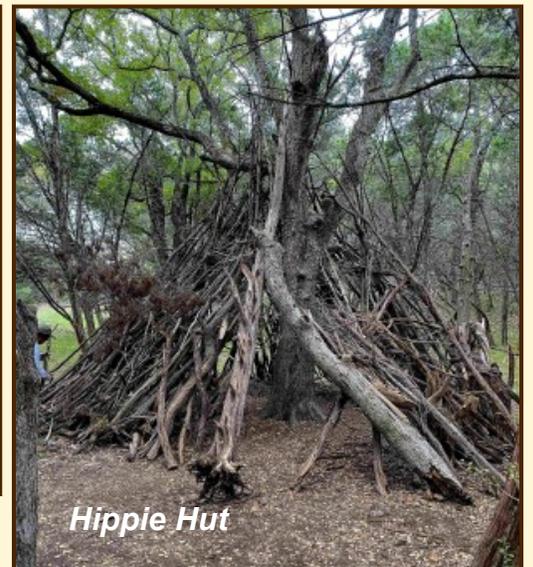
The Central Texas Master Naturalists have been busy this autumn in the parks along Stillhouse Lake. Our volunteers have contributed 93 hours of labor to these projects the past 2 months.

The October Chalk Ridge Falls team consisted of myself, Tina Atkins, Ben Clement, Carroll Adcock, Marilyn Whitworth, Kelly Ann Blanchard, Ward Critz, Susan and Steve Schmitz. It was a mixed workday of trail maintenance, invasive removal, trash pick-up, and removal of illegal structures. Ward and I removed large chinaberries that have been taunting me all summer. Meanwhile, the others were repairing trail erosion devices and fixing a section of boardwalk. Next, we moved to tear down giant lean-tos (complete with fire rings) that we lovingly refer to as "hippie-huts". Even though we cut up many of the larger logs, a week later they had rebuilt it, albeit a smaller version.

In November, the team consisted of myself, John Ziegler, Ben Clement, Daisy Klassy, Marilyn Whitworth, Sue Valdez, Susan Schmitz, Steve Schmitz, and Trace George. The goal was to again remove the re-built huts. This time we cut all the logs up into firewood. In case you are wondering, building unauthorized structures on Corps of Engineers property is a violation of their regulations and it also is a fire hazard. These structures have become an issue through our national forest system recently. After finishing the chainsaw work, we cleaned out the Roots and Shoots bluebird boxes to prepare them for the arrival of bluebirds this winter. Almost every box was chock full of big angry red wasps, but we managed to clean them out without a single sting.



Editor's Note: I suspect this needs an explanation rather than a caption. Please see our Good To Know section for the BEHIND the scene story.



Hippie Hut

Cedar Gap Park

- John Atkins, 2016

At ACOE Cedar Gap Park, we have been helping the Belton Boy Scouts earn environmental volunteer hours as they continue their journey towards Eagle Scout. Our focus has been trash clean-up and invasive removal. The October team consisted of myself, Tina Atkins, Mary Ann Everett, Kathy Cantu, and the entire Nixon family. The Scouts were: Owen Boethel, Colter Boethel, Shrey Gupta, Kyan Pulley, and Jason Francis. The Scouts worked extremely hard removing the chinaberry and Texas lilac (Vitex, also called chaste tree). The Scouts quickly mastered the Pullerbear and Ziegler methods for uprooting invasives. The chinaberry tends to grow where the flood waters of previous years deposited the seeds in drowned ashe juniper. Often, we were required to cut through dead cedar piles to reach these chinaberries.

November was more of the same for the crew, which consisted of myself, Mary Ann Everett, Austin Morgan, Ben Hughes, Jason Vanlongendonck, and Coen Hefley. After two

hours of cutting, the chainsaw ran out of fuel, so we spent the next hour picking up trash. It was hard work and everyone went

home tired (especially me). We really need to get a few more chainsaw operators in the Chapter. Most of the trees we are cutting are too large for other methods, and progress is slow with only one chainsaw operating. Invest in some chaps and a hardhat, and we will put you to work!



John Atkins demonstrates the leverage power of the Puller Bear for pulling woody plants up by the roots.



There is all kinds of surprises to find when you are out in nature!



Chris Nixon brought his family for extra hands

Union Grove WMA

- Kathy Cantu, 2011

Union Grove Wildlife Management Area has always had a problem with illegal trash dumping. I decided that although I couldn't remove six enormous eighteen-wheeler tires and a few other large items, there was plenty of smaller trash I could handle. I removed 6 large garbage bags of cans, bottles and household trash from the parking areas. If you are looking for a stock to invest in, I would suggest Budweiser. I wasn't sure what to do with a dead raccoon in a plastic bag so I left it.

UGMA is the number one birding hotspot in Bell County with 261 species. It is popular with dove and duck hunters which is confirmed by the number of shell casings I picked up. It is a nice dog-walking place. It has wildflowers, butterflies and dragonflies. Deer bound through the grasses. Why would anyone think this is a place to dump trash?

Editor's Note: CTMN's first volunteer project was planting thousands of potted sedges & grasses for ACOE in a new wetland area here in 2010. They had plants but not people to plant!



Kathy is an avid birder and volunteers at many of our ACOE workdays, often picking up other people's trash, as well as projects in Salado and other communities.



Lark Sparrows can be easy to find with their unique face pattern. They form flocks in brushy areas in winter. Usually feeds on the ground and flies up into trees when disturbed. (e-bird) Photo by Dr. Randy Pinkston

Zebra Mussel Project

- **Bill Abright, 2016**

For the past several years, our Chapter has been involved in a project with Fort Hood's Environmental Services to monitor for zebra mussels in Fort Hood waterways. As you may know, these mussels cause considerable commercial, industrial and recreational damage wherever they are found. At least 22 Texas lakes are infected with them and in fact Lake Belton has a serious zebra mussel problem. Recently, I found numerous small zebra mussel shells (see image, right) on the shore of Lake Belton where Cow House Creek empties into the lake (Training Area 25). So why is Fort Hood concerned about these mini-terrorists? Well, one reason is that Fort Hood, as well as numerous other area cities, get their water supply from Lake Belton and zebra mussels are notorious about clogging water intake pipes. Another reason is recreational fishing.



The Directorate of Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation prides itself on making quality fishing available not only to Fort Hood soldiers and their families, but also to the general public. There are a number of areas that are open to public fishing and an area access permit is not required. You only need a valid Texas fishing license. There are a total of 18 of these areas, including 15 lakes and ponds (more on these in a future article). TPWD periodically stocks these lakes and if zebra mussels are found in them, the stocking stops and fishing suffers significantly. TPWD requires this monitoring and that is where we come in. We hope to schedule another zebra mussel monitoring class at a later date. Stay tuned!

[More info on Zebra Mussels in our April newsletter](#)



Left: Pipe completely blocked with zebra mussels in an Army Corps of Engineer's lake power plant in South Dakota. Below: Local zebra mussels found after high water receded on Belton Lake (photo by Daisy Klassy)



FIELD NOTES

- Kelly Ann Blanchard, 2020

Looking for a way to contribute to scientific research in a field you love plus earn volunteer hours at the same time? Community science, also known as citizen science, is an increasingly popular field of knowledge scientists rely on to provide data for important research projects around the world. As Texas Master Naturalists, our contributions to local projects are especially vital to conserving and protecting our state's biodiversity. These projects range from common observations to specific interests – there is something for everyone!

In this issue, we will highlight a unique opportunity for birders that only happens once a year – the Audubon Christmas Bird Count.

Christmas Bird Count

It's the most wonderful time of the year! Well, yes, it's also the holiday season... but I was actually referring to Christmas Bird Count season! Every year from December 14th to January 5th, over 2,500 groups of birders come together across the nation to log sightings of over 60 million birds in order to provide scientists and biologists with important tracking data. And these birders are not just professionals – there are plenty of amateur birders and community scientists just like us who can contribute in a big way.

The Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is the longest-running community science bird project in the nation. In the 1800s, teams of hunters would compete in a long-standing tradition called the Christmas Side Hunt to see who could produce the largest pile of feathered game. But around the turn of the century, conservation efforts were beginning to take root across the country, and on Christmas Day in 1900, ornithologist Frank M. Chapman proposed a new holiday tradition – instead of hunting all those birds, why don't we count them instead? Thus, the [Christmas Bird Count](#) was born and is now in its 121st year of providing vital conservation data to scientists.



FIELD NOTES

Cont.

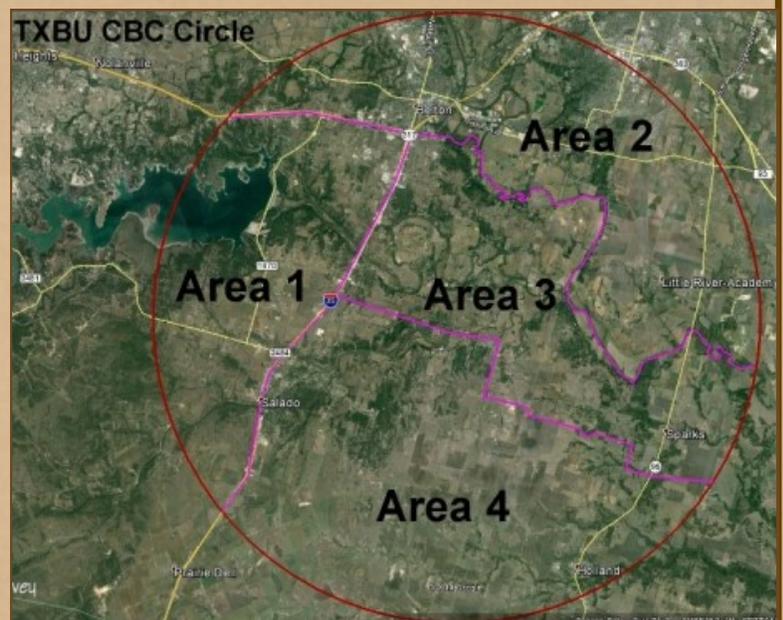
During this early-winter, 22-day birding period, data compiled by community scientists helps biologists study the long-term health and status of bird populations across the nation. This data is used to create environmental strategies and conservation efforts to protect birds and their habitats, leading to valuable climate change research and birds in decline reports.

If you are interested in joining this year's CBC, the process is a bit more official compared to other bird counts, but don't be discouraged! Instead of personally compiling your own information, you will join an organized group of birders who cover a specific area, known as a "circle." Each circle is divided into quadrants, and you will be placed in a quadrant by your group leader or "compiler." Each quadrant has a specific date and time that they will come together for the bird count, then your results will be given to the compiler and combined with all quadrants for submission to Audubon. You will be with a wide range of volunteers from newbies to experienced birders, so if you are new to the CBC, take comfort knowing there will be experts nearby to help with identification if needed. And volunteers are needed to record or be a spotter while others make the identification!



Our very own Mary Ann Everett and Kathy Cantu operate the nearest CBC circle, which happens to be the Belton-Salado area, and will be conducting their bird count on December 19 this year. Ms. Cantu mentioned that they will be following proper COVID protocol during the bird count and that participants can "look for as long as they wish" on the count day. "We usually report around 100 species," said Ms. Cantu. "Although this is a small section of the county, different quadrants find different birds."

If you love birding, or are interested in learning more, and are looking for a new challenge, take a leap and join a CBC team this year to benefit our feathered friends!



FIELD NOTES

Cont.

Featured Community Science Project How-To

The 121st Audubon Christmas Bird Count

Where: Belton/Salado area

When: December 19, 2020

Contact: Gil Eckrich at gil.eckrich@att.net to find out which quadrant within the circle needs help and to officially sign up to participate in the Event

Useful Items: Good binoculars (8x42 is recommended), camera, guide book (Sibley or Peterson recommended), and the e-Bird app

More Info: [Audubon Christmas Bird Count website](#)

* Big thanks to Master Naturalist Kathy Cantu for all the local CBC information!



Local Twin Lakes Audubon previous CBC



THEN...



... and NOW



Shore birds in Central Texas? Of course!!



A Conversation with the Friendly Oaks: *An Invitation*

- Bill Novakoski, 2020

Nine springs ago when the Bluebonnets bloomed, we watched you, your long-haired companion and another human walk through the thick cedar stands all around us. You saw and admired us for the first time, me, the large oak you later called Old Patriarch, and him, the twisted oak you called The Survivor. During the long hot summer, you had just enough Ashe Juniper cut down to clear land for your dwelling but spared as many oak and elm as you could. With the severe drought, you decided not to burn the felled cedar and risk our lives and those of our fellow elm. You built your gravel drive carefully between The Survivor and me so you could admire us every time you entered.

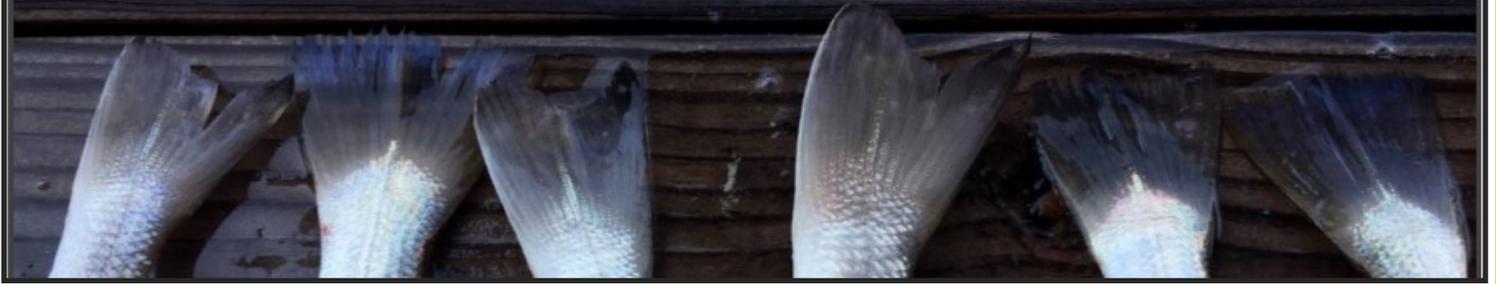
Observing these acts, we quietly noticed your kindness even before your dwelling was complete. Since you and your companion came to live among us, we have watched and listened to you talk in the coolness of the day as you walked your domesticated dogs. We saw your gentleness with the Husky and the Labrador Retriever. We have watched you taking photos of spring, summer and fall wildflowers. We have seen you call to the doe, fawn and bucks eating grasses in the fields. We saw your fright when you spotted your first rattlesnake on this land and your excitement at seeing a rat snake slither up the branches of a cedar tree.

During your walks with your companion, we learned that your name is Bill and your human companion is Nancy. We saw your sorrow when your Husky, Thor, died. Your new dog is an English Lab named Frances, and you now walk Freyja, a German Shepherd. Last fall, we overheard that you were going to take a Master Naturalist course to learn more about the trees, plants, and animals that share their land with you. You spoke excitedly about discovering as much as you possibly could about this rocky hilltop bounded on the west and north by Hi Ridge Drive, east by a barbed wire fence, and south by an intermittent stream.

The Survivor and I decided that if you intend to gain book learning from plant and animal biologists, foresters, geologists, environmentalists and other scientists, we should do our part by offering conversations with us, the native inhabitants. We are pleased, The Survivor and I, to invite you to sit under our shaded branches from time to time. Together, we will talk about our Peaceable Corner. We have much to learn from one another.



FISH TALES



Quiet Time on the Roaring Fork

- Carroll Adcock, 2020

I have always found the mountains of the west to be a magical place. I have had the opportunity over the years to experience a variety of locations and activities. One of my favorite activities is the annual fall fishing trips that are typically shared with one or both of my sons. We have come to block our calendar each year for the final week or two of September just to be assured that we don't miss the annual forays into God's country that we anticipate with such relish. Most years we end up somewhere in Colorado, usually on the western slope somewhere in proximity to Carbondale/Glenwood Springs/Basalt area. This area has become familiar to us, generally provides good to excellent fishing, some incredible scenery and welcome relief from the heat of central Texas that continues to linger at home most years. Another "perk" of course is the opportunity to spend time with my adult sons, which can be a limited opportunity in normal day to day life.

Our trips have run the gamut over the years from backpack camping to staying in motels, and many years can be a combination of the two. The opportunity to be at altitude among the quaking aspens, the smell of spruce needles and to feel the cool air in your face are exhilarating. Wildlife is frequently abundant most places we go and ranges from chipmunks, porcupines and marmots to elk, deer, moose, mountain sheep and goats, and even an occasional bear. We have observed bald eagles and osprey feeding on wild trout, observed wild ducks, geese and more varieties of birds than I can begin to name. While we enjoy catch and release fishing and tangling with some of the large trout that exist in many of these waters, some of the best times can be had fishing for the exotically colorful and often diminutive brook trout in some of the smaller waters.



FISH TALES *cont.*

Professional guide services are available for all levels of experience and most of the available venues from large rivers/lakes to the smallest of streams. The majority of fishing in the mountains consists of fly fishing which is an art form in itself, and while I have dabbled some in fly fishing, I usually fall back on light spin tackle as my method of choice. The many local tackle shops can provide the needed tackle, connect you to a guide or often offer tips for do-it-yourself fishing. If fly fishing, the timing of the various “hatches” can vary from year to year and is critical in your offering the preferred food of the trout. The variety and volume of the various hatches of larval and winged critters that the trout feed on is endless and while they may not always feed upon the current hatch, there are times they seem reluctant to bite anything else. A background in entomology is almost a prerequisite for successful fly fishing! Get out and give it a try, in whatever form you prefer and remember to keep conservation in mind. Find attached some helpful links for more information on fishing and waterways in the beautiful state of Colorado.

Theodore Roosevelt wisely said “To waste, to destroy our natural resources, to skin and exhaust the land instead of using it so as to increase its usefulness, will result in undermining in the days of our children the very prosperity which we ought by right to hand down to them amplified and developed.”

Here are links to more information on [Colorado Fishing](#) and the [Roaring Fork Conservancy](#).





ON MUSTANG GRAPE JELLY

- Joe Dorn, 2014

Our place, located within but not part of west Belton, has many Mustang Grape vines on it. The vines are primarily male that do not produce grapes and about a fourth of them are female that do. The vines become huge and climb high. We have one very old vine next to our house that is *over two feet* in circumference. The vine climbs to the top of what is left of an Oak tree killed by Oak Wilt, and then climbs over to an adjacent Oak tree. The vine now provides us with deciduous shade, making a canopy that fills with grapes in the good years. The birds do most of the harvesting and late in the cycle become subject to FWI (Flying While Intoxicated). Texans have used the grapes for jelly and wine through the years.

Sarah decides to make a batch of Mustang Grape jelly every several years (she makes a lot each time and it takes a while to consume it.) This year, 2020, was one of those years. She and my daughter, Beth, started the process by collecting the Mustang Grapes. The rootstock of a similar variety of wild grapes common in Central Texas is credited with [saving the French wine grapes](#) from dying out in the mid-1800's due to an accidentally imported American insect.

After the grapes are collected, they are skinned, seeded and squashed (by machine, not feet) then the juice is stored for a short time to begin fermentation. Once the juice has acquired the new taste, just shy of becoming wine, the Jelly process begins.

I cannot properly comment on the process except that it took at least three days working in our outdoor kitchen with sugar and other magic chemicals added. The canning process involved boiling the jars, pouring in the jelly and then boiling the jars again to seal the lids. I assisted by staying out of the way.



ON MUSTANG GRAPE JELLY *CONT.*

The fermented juice adds a very special taste to the jelly, slightly tart but very satisfying, definitely not Welch's supermarket special. You will want more...



Collecting the grapes can be time consuming since they grow wild. Our fence lines are covered with them and our retired windmill is a grapevine tree. Sarah just gathers the low hanging fruit on our place.

Many years ago, we were invited to spend several days with some friends on the lower Colorado River near where it dumps into Matagorda Bay. I, being the hyperactive kid, noticed a lot of the Mustang Grapes growing along the edge of the river and decided to do a little collecting. I jumped into a rowboat and collected three five-gallon buckets-full in about an hour pulling myself along via one grape bunch at a time.

As a side-note, on another trip to the same location, this time with a group of boating friends, we woke up to a beautiful "Windberg" morning. *It was photography time!!!* I assembled my cameras and then stepped from one boat to another on dew-covered decks. I slipped and dumped two Nikon F's and their lens into twelve feet of brackish water. It was Sunday morning and my exclamation could not be repeated inside a church even though it was loud and fervent. The event had a relatively happy conclusion as I had the cameras fully insured and our insurance agent was a couple of boats over. He came awake with my plaintive cry/scream. He did not add an amen.

I would like to invite members of the CTMN to collect grapes if you are inclined to follow this old Texas activity. I will also encourage Sarah to bring several jars to the Christmas party for consumption and bidding.

Ain't being a Texan fun?



Beth Gardner and her mom, Sarah Dorn show some fruits of their labor.

The Ranching Naturalist

- Ward Critz, 2018

You've seen this weed in just about every field and vacant lot you pass as you travel about this time of year. For most people it is insignificant but to farmers and ranchers it is one of the most persistent pests we face. It is an annual croton with silvery-yellow leaves and tiny white flowers called "dove weed" or sometimes "turkey mullein". It is at home on most soils and will quickly form a wild ground cover that is detrimental to existing grasses and beneficial grazing plants unless removed through use of a herbicide or mechanical equipment such as a shredder or mower.



This seems like an easy problem to solve except that dove weed, as its name suggests, is a primary and favorite food source for dove, quail wild turkey and other species of birds. Additionally, dove weed shares the same soil, moisture, and temperature preferences as our local milkweed variants so vital to sustain butterfly populations. They grow comfortably together so ranchers face the puzzle of how best to manage dove weed on the land for the benefit of both pastures for livestock and sustenance for wildlife.



I want to remind you of one of the early subjects in our Master Naturalist curriculum called "Land Stewardship". We learned that 95% of the land in Texas is privately owned and there are a quarter of a million farms covering more than 130 million acres.

The Ranching Naturalist cont.

What that means to me and Sue as two of those farmers and ranchers, is that since the state has nearly 30 million people, being a couple of those 250,000 people working the land means that how we care for our pastures, woods, creeks and ponds is a lot more important than just us. So we're careful how we approach weed management in our pastures and dove weed is a case in point. I'll share how we approached it and understand there are other techniques others may prefer.



Generally, we view the edges of our fence lines, dry creek beds and rough

areas as patches and strips where the dove weed (and its friends) will be allowed to grow and further establish a "riparian-like" boundary several feet further away from the fence or feature where we do not shred or apply herbicide. In the rest of the pasture we do both. This allows for plenty of good weed-free grazing for our cattle while leaving strips and pockets for the birds, butterflies and other wildlife. It is working. Five years ago we had our first wild turkeys and now count flocks of 30 or more. Monarchs and other types of butterflies are more numerous than we can ever remember and the general bird population seems more varied and vibrant than before.



Ward Critz





- **Zoe Rascoe, 2004**

Out on a Limb

Below are excerpts from an article by David Hillis, PhD that ran in the Mason County News November 18, 2020. Dr. Hillis is a Professor in the Dept of Integrative Biology at UT Austin, studying biodiversity, evolution and genetics. He is also owner of the Double Helix Ranch (of course!) in Mason County. The article is titled “The Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of Trees”

It is the best of trees; it is the worst of trees. Texans have long had a love–hate relationship with Honey Mesquite. In the right form, in the right place, mesquites can be among the most beautiful and useful of trees. They can also be some of the most annoying woody vegetation on Texas ranches.

Honey Mesquite has a very deep taproot that may extend 100 feet or more below the surface, down to the water table. It also has an extensive lateral root system that gathers water from a wide area near the surface. In an extreme drought, they may drop their leaves to conserve water, but mesquites can survive droughts that kill almost any of our other trees.

Mesquites can live at least a couple of centuries. An old, single-trunked mesquite is a beautiful, majestic tree. The trunk and branches twist and turn to give it its characteristic shape. Its leaves sprout relatively late in the spring, so the soft green foliage is rarely caught by a late frost. The fragrant flowers of mesquite attract numerous pollinators, and its abundant nectar is a source of outstanding honey produced by bees, which gives Honey Mesquite its name.

Among the most important services that mesquites provide to the landscape is nitrogen fixation. Mesquite is a legume, and like other legumes, its roots produce nodules that host and support nitrogen-fixing rhizobia bacteria. All living organisms need nitrogen to make proteins, but most of the Earth’s nitrogen is tied up in atmospheric nitrogen gas, which cannot be used directly by most of life. But rhizobia bacteria can convert nitrogen gas into ammonia, which can be used by plants to make proteins. Animals then eat these plant proteins and thereby get the compounds that they need to make their own proteins. Thus, all of life depends on the action of these soil bacteria.

Legumes like mesquites (together with their bacterial symbionts) can add considerable amounts of fixed nitrogen to the ecosystem every year. This is a natural fertilization system that keeps the soil fertile and productive. If all the legumes are removed, then soil fertility may





plummet, and then farmers or ranchers need to add expensive nitrogen fertilizer to make up the difference.

The wood from mature mesquites is exquisite, with a deep, rich red core and yellowish outer layer. The wood is very dense and the grain is tight, so the wood takes on a beautiful fine polish. Mesquite wood is prized for making everything from fine tabletops, to flooring, furniture, beautiful wooden bowls, and sculptures. The dense wood also makes some of the finest, longest-lasting fire wood, and many people consider it among the very best woods for smoking barbeque.

Mesquite produces beans that can be ground to make a sweet, nourishing flour. In the frontier days, mesquite beans often provided the only available food in times of drought. They can also be used to make a substitute for coffee. Today, some diabetics seek out mesquite flour, because its sweetness comes from fructose rather than sucrose, and fructose causes a much lower and slower rise in blood sugar levels (which are regulated by insulin). It also contains soluble fibers that help slow digestion and flatten the blood sugar curve after eating.

There are few browsing animals alive in Texas today that eat leaves of a mesquite tree, except as a last resort. But when humans cut down mesquite trees mechanically, they stimulate a response from mesquite trees as if they have been browsed. The mesquites respond by re-sprouting with many thorny branches growing from the cut stumps, which would deter further browsing. This re-growth mesquite can become an impenetrable, thorny mess for a rancher.

Although the leaves of mesquite largely go uneaten today, the sweetness in mesquite bean pods attracts many mammals. Uncrushed seeds pass through mammalian digestive systems intact, and the mammals then deposit the seeds in their feces. The stomach acids help the seeds to germinate; indeed, mesquite seeds need to pass through a digestive system in this way to sprout. Unfortunately, this means that mesquites can become highly invasive in certain situations—especially in overgrazed cattle pastures.

Because mesquites easily sprout from stumps, dense patches of invasive mesquite can be hard to control or remove. The mesquites either need to be grubbed out (cut well below the surface), or else an herbicide like Remedy needs to be applied immediately to the cut stump. When thinning mesquite, it is good to remember that mesquite serves a very useful function in nitrogen fixation, so it is best to leave some of the larger, single-trunk trees intact. This will remove the dense, thorny vegetation, but leave some beautiful mature mesquites in a more natural configuration.



OCTOBER CHAPTER MEETING

- KELLY ANN BLANCHARD, 2020

Hooray! People! For the first time in seven months, our October meeting was in-person and we had a blast (socially distanced and with masks, of course). After a quick ceremony honoring this year's class of graduates, our very own Jenna Chappell (class of 2019) led us with her presentation, "Insect Collection and Curation," followed by a hands-on experience of pinning and identifying insects. The presentation covered many topics related to cultivation, including using the correct equipment, methods of catching insects, and how and where to pin them appropriately in order to best preserve them. Some helpful snippets of advice from Jenna: the best kill method for insects is freezing them by putting them in your freezer! And when buying a butterfly net, look for netting that is green instead of white because green netting is harder for insects to detect.



Did you see those beetles on Jenna?



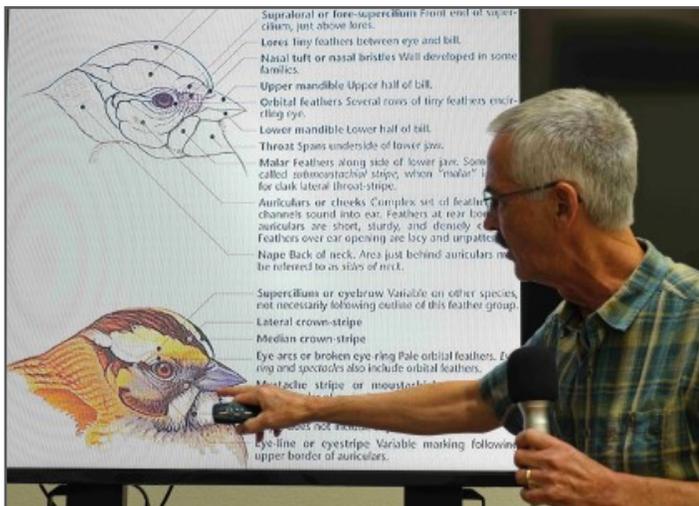
After the presentation, we broke into small groups to pin our own insects that we either brought from home or borrowed from Jenna's collection. We were generously provided with all the curation materials, and Jenna flitted from table to table to help us properly label and pin the insects. I don't know if any of us managed to do it perfectly, but we all thoroughly enjoyed the hands-on activity and the opportunity to spend time together as a chapter again.



NOVEMBER CHAPTER MEETING

- KELLY ANN BLANCHARD, 2020

We were lucky to be able to meet in person again this month! Following a trial run last month, we have started airing our in-person meetings on Facebook Live so that people can have the option to safely attend chapter meetings from home if they are not comfortable with the idea of mingling. This came in handy for me this month as I had dental surgery the morning of the meeting, so I opted to watch the Facebook Live from the comfort of my couch rather than attend in person. If you haven't already "liked" our page on Facebook, this is a great reason to go do that [right now!](#)



Our guest speaker for the evening, Dr. Randy Pinkston, crafted a brand-new presentation just for us about our favorite LBBs (little brown birds): Bell County Native Sparrows. Texas is home to 37 species of sparrow and 20 of those are Bell County natives. "Winter is where it's at," according to Dr. Pinkston, because 15 sparrow species reside either mostly or entirely in winter here. He covered some of the most common species here in Bell County, complete with descriptions and behaviors to help us better identify our LBB

friends. Did you know the mustache-like stripe on some sparrows' heads is called the "moustachial line"?

While we may initially look out the window and see just a bunch of little brown birds at the feeder, Dr. Pinkston's thorough presentation demonstrated that sparrows all have very distinct markings and are worth taking a closer look with the bins. Native sparrows are fun!

Our 20 Native Sparrows by Season

- 15 species occur mostly or entirely in WINTER—Chipping, Field, Fox, Dark-eyed Junco, White-crowned, Harris's, White-throated, Vesper, LeConte's, Savannah, Song, Lincoln's, and Swamp Sparrows, Spotted & Eastern Towhees
- 4 species are local breeders—Cassin's (irruptive), Grasshopper, Lark, and Rufous-crowned Sparrows
- 1 species is strictly migratory—Clay-colored Sparrow in spring & autumn

MEMBER ACCOMPLISHMENTS



Mary Ann Everett—5000 Hours!!



LouAnn Hight—1000 Hours

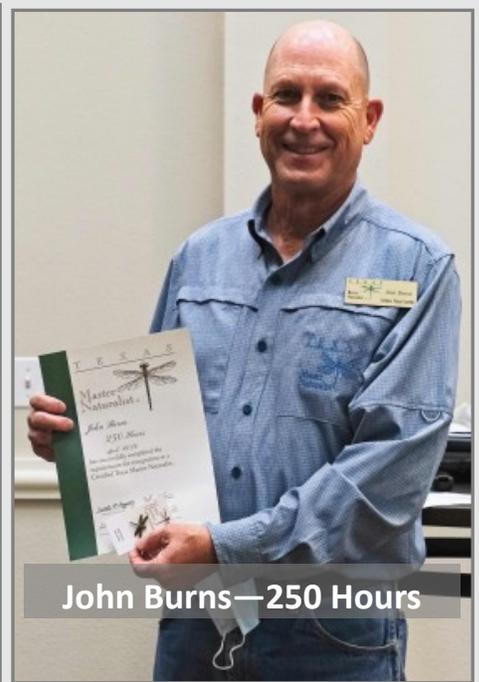
Congratulations!!



Jean Solana—250 Hours



Jessica Dieter—250 Hours

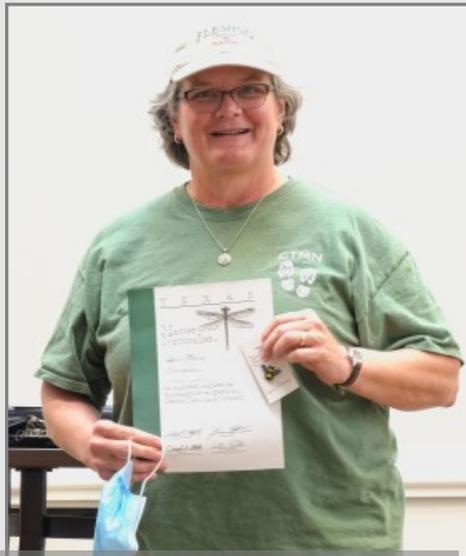


John Burns—250 Hours

MEMBER ACCOMPLISHMENTS



John Atkins recertifies for 2020



Lynn Fleming recertifies for 2020



Paula Finley—initial certification



Bruce Polikoff recertifies for 2020



Zoe Rascoe recertifies for 2020



Don Wyatt recertifies for 2020



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Linda Fairlie recertifies for 2020



MEMBER ACCOMPLISHMENTS



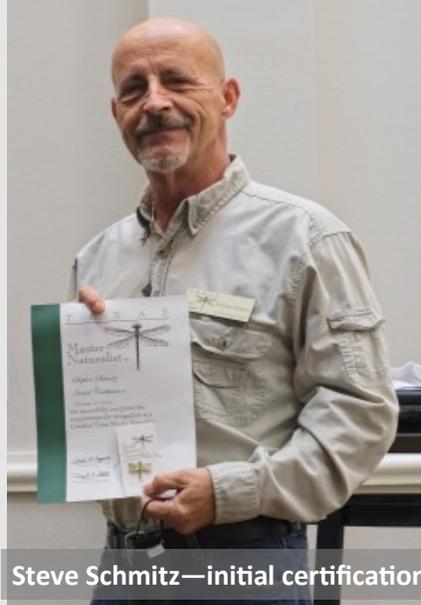
Marilyn Whitworth recertifies for 2020



Tina Atkins recertifies for 2020



Andreas Wooten recertifies for 2020



Steve Schmitz—initial certification



Jenna Chappell recertifies for 2020



GRADUATION

Central Texas Master Naturalists

Congratulations to the 2020 Master Naturalist Graduates

Carroll Adcock	Chris Nixon
Kelly Ann Blanchard	Bill Novakoski
Brent Blumenthal	Stephanie Preciado
Bill Bowsher	Matt Ridley
Jennifer Chalmers	Sharon Schmitz
Bill Cornelius	Stephen Schmitz
Samantha Erzen	Susan Schneider
Jaime Harmon	Julie Sieh
Andrea Liles	



October 13, 2020

*Masks will be required in
the building at all times.
Your cooperation is
appreciated.*



Top Left: Kelly Ann Blanchard receives the Daisy Award for outstanding volunteer service and continuing education efforts during the training course. She both graduated AND certified more than reaching an additional 8 hours of training and 40 hours of volunteering. Andrea Liles (above right) and Carroll Adcock (left) also graduated AND certified. Trainees have 15 months after graduation to certify—these folks are way ahead! Above center: graduation gifts await while we video a CTMN “Howdy” for the state conference.



'Twas the Training of 2020
(inspired by the seasonal poem by Clement Clarke Moore)

**'Twas the months before COVID, when all through the
county,
Zoe called the trainees of 2020;
Not a TMN was stirring, lockdowns were looming;
With Zoe in her khakis and JohnA in his too,
Settled in with a plan to train us online
Webinars proceeded with topics galore,
Insects and forbs, grasses and water
Reptiles and mammals, Stewardship, conservation
The trainees were huddled all safe on their phones
While visions of chainsaws danced in their heads
In hopes that field trips soon would be there;
When out in the parks the gates flung wide open
Away to the paths we sprang into action
With loppers and saws, dreams of cleared Ligustrum and
bagged up trash
Months flew by when what to our wondering eyes should
appear,
But volunteer hours and advanced training too,
Graduation, certificates and congratulations all around!**

By Andrea Liles, 2020

Good to Know...

New Year's Eve Morning GET OUTSIDE DAY at Miller Springs Nature Center!

City of Belton is hosting what is becoming an annual Volunteer Work Day at Miller Springs. Geared for the whole family, instructions, tools and trash bags will be available as participants walk the trails to pick up litter and trim wayward limbs and bushes encroaching on the paths. It's a good time to see some of the critters and plants that make their home in the prairies, canyons and wooded areas. A great way to wrap up 2020 helping nature!!



BEST ADVERTISING EVER!! (for us)

Do you wear your CTMN shirt at times besides our work projects? Daisy Klassy (right) wore hers to our Chapter Meeting (we love that!). And John Ziegeler showed off our new logo in the embroidered version that evening. But some of you have been wearing your shirts around town.



A visitor to our Chapter meeting, who hopes to join the 2021 training class, saw our logo on the back of someone in HEB. He made a note and googled it up when he got home. He found our website, filled out the form for more info, and got a call from Zoe. Thank you to all who share your passion for nature with friends, family and people you don't even know!



More Good to Know...



Editor's Note: The hardworking crew who volunteer regularly at the Army Corps of Engineer Parks are good to take photos while they work so I can use them in this newsletter. I have been complaining that most photos are of workers' backsides rather than faces. All the time. So these fun folks made a "backside only" shot just for me. Because I've had to ID workers from the back for so long, I know boots, belts, hats, gloves, shirt preferences: I was able to ID all of those in the backside shot! =)

Joe Dorn, also know as Buzzard Boy, roams the Seed Scatter event at Miller Springs sharing his baby vulture puppet with little ones who dare to pet the furry varmint (the puppet, not Joe).

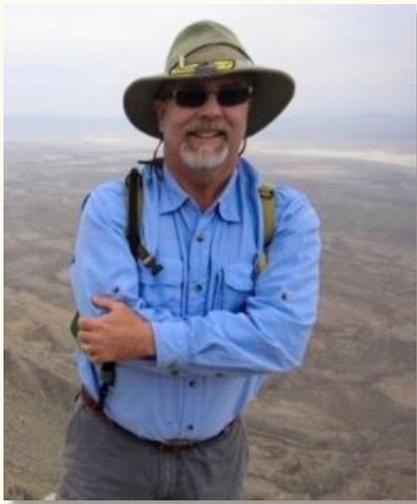


If you think you'll be looking for a workout plan after the first of the year, Carroll Adcock can recommend the work crew at Chalk Ridge Falls. Nothing like carrying big rocks uphill to Get Fit!

Remember Patrick Blanchard helping his mom Kelly Ann take notes for the Sparrow Class? Take a look at what wrote! "Sparrows 11/10/20" and some color descriptions of birds. This little naturalist just turned 6, y'all!



Contributing Authors to this Newsletter



Clockwise from top left:
Joe Dorn, John Atkins, John Burns,
Bill Novakoski, Andrea Liles,
Zoe Rascoe, Bill Abright, Kelly Ann
Blanchard, Jean Solana, Carroll
Adcock. Below: Daisy Klassy and
Ward Critz





Board of Directors

President: John Atkins

Past President: Lynn Fleming

Vice President: Jean Solana

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Technology: Dale Hughling

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Hospitality: Mary Odom

Training: Lynn Fleming/Mary Ann Everett

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Contributed Images: John Atkins, Tina Atkins, John Burns, Kathy Cantu, Jean Solana, Carroll Adcock, Kelly Ann Blanchard, Bill Abright, Joe Dorn, Ward Critz, Bill Novakoski, Zoe Rascoe.

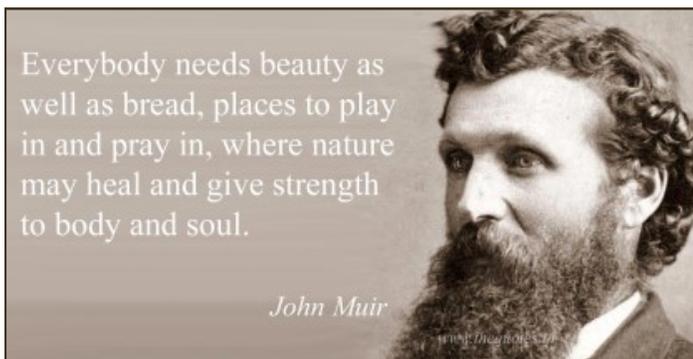
Have you noticed the recurring feature articles on member visits to National Parks and Texas State Parks, “Fish Tales” (of any kind!), backyard nature, travel to places unlike Texas and more? If you have a story to share, just send me your idea. Volunteer Service hours apply for members!

Zoe Rascoe trascoe@hot.rr.com

Chapter Advisors

Whitney Grantham,
Bell County Extension Agent,
Natural Resources
Texas A&M AgriLife Extension

Derrick Wolter,
Wildlife Biologist, Texas Parks and Wildlife



Meetings May be in Person or by Webinar—Apologies for the uncertainty!

Chapter meetings are held on the 2nd Tuesday of each month at 6 p.m. They may be in person at the Belton Church of Christ or online. Or both. Meetings include a nature-related program and the public is welcome to participate. If meeting in person, a Facebook Live event is currently being offered on our FB page. If programs are by webinar, you may submit a request to join the webinar using the “Contact Us” button on our website Home Page to reach the WebEx Request link. Program details can be found on our website and Facebook page. The Board of Directors generally meets the 1st Monday of each month from 11:30am-12:30pm but these meetings are currently on an as-needed basis and location or online webinar options vary. Meeting notices will be sent to chapter members and all members are welcome to participate.