



The Texas Master Naturalist program activities are coordinated by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and Texas Parks and Wildlife. Texas Master Naturalist and Extension programs serve all people regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, disability or national origin.



# Los Caminos

*Celebrating and sharing our experiences along "the roads" we take through nature.*

Award Winning Newsletter of the El Camino Real Chapter  
Milam County Texas Master Naturalist Spring 2017

## Texas Thistle

by Nancy Webber

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### Did You Know?

What animal sleeps with millions of friends?

See last page for the answer.

### A native plant valuable to pollinators and birds

Thistles are generally maligned as weeds. Do an internet search for "thistle" and you'll find plenty of sites dedicated to their eradication. But consider one of our natives, the Texas Thistle *Cirsium texanum*, before you dismiss all thistles as problem plants.

The nectar of the Texas Thistle is extremely attractive to honey bees, native bees like bumblebees, and butterflies. The larvae of the Painted Lady Butterfly feed on the leaves. Goldfinch eat the seeds, even preferring them to seed available commercially for thistle feeders. Goldfinch also use the silky fluff of the mature thistle seed to line their nests.

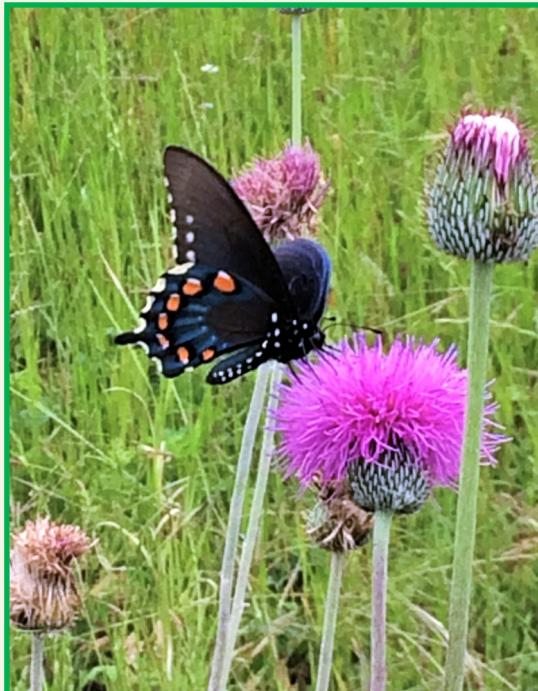
Recognize the Texas Thistle by its round, ball-like receptacle (the expanded container at the top of the flower stalk from which the petals emerge). The colorful lavender pink corolla consists of many small disk flowers, each with

five petals, existing in this compound flower head. Thistles are members of the sunflower family (Asteraceae) but rather than having disc flowers and ray flowers (think of a daisy with its yellow disc flowers and white ray flowers), thistles have only disc flowers. This is true of all thistles but the

Texas Thistle is unique in having that very round receptacle with phyllaries (the bracts covering it) that are soft enough to brush upward with your fingers. These phyllaries are a beautiful silver with black edges. The tips curve out and down. Look closely and you'll see how lovely this interesting flower can be.

Texas Thistle occupies waste places, disturbed ground, pastures, and roadsides. It is the thistle you probably are seeing most frequently April

- August. It should not be mistaken for other invasive, non-native species of thistle which include Musk, Canada, and Scotch Thistles. If you would like to investigate further how to i.d. non-native noxious thistles a good website with illustrations is [pods.dasnr.okstate.edu](http://pods.dasnr.okstate.edu).





## Nature is Unbelievable

by Donna Lewis

### Fermented Fruit.. Nectar of the Gods?

### Or maybe the butterflies!

This past week, (mid April) I obtained some fruit past its prime from a food bank. They were going to throw it in the dumpster. I asked if I could have a box of it. It contained bananas, pears, passion fruit, cantaloupe, and kiwi that were pretty rotten. Lovely smell.

When I got home I spread it out on a wire rack I had in a sunny spot.

Within the hour I looked at it and there were more than 2 dozen Question mark butterflies sipping away.



It was really neat to see them. I could not get too close or they would fly off, so I got my close focus binoculars out and got within about 20 feet of them. Very remarkable to see.

Question Marks (*Polygonia Interrogationis*) prefer to sip juices from rotting fruit, tree sap, and animal droppings. Host plants include Elm trees, False Nettle, Hop Vines, and Buddleia plants.



You will see these butterflies in or near woods as they like to hide under bark and like sap from many types of trees. It gets its name from the small question mark in the center of its wing.

### What is that Lizard!

I was out near our front road checking the mail box when I almost stepped on a really weird looking Lizard, or whatever it was. It was fat and about 8 or 9 inches long, striped and wet looking.

I had never seen anything like it before. I tried to memorize everything I could about it, so I could look it up in my guides when I got back up to my house. I figured it would not still be there if I walked back out to it.

I searched my "Texas Lizards" Field Guide by Troy Hibbitts and Toby Hibbitts, and found it. It's not a Lizard at all, it's a Skink.

It's called a Prairie Skink, *Plestiodon septentrionalis*. It feeds mostly on insects and arachnids.



The Prairie Skink is on TPWD's Black List and may not be caught or sold for commercial purposes. Populations have been on the decline as its grassy habitat has been converted to close canopy woodlands, and field cultivation.

Really very interesting to see it.

Nature is unbelievable...

[Photos from the internet public domain]

## Sweet Shenanigans

By Sheri Sweet

### The Green Tree Frog

[Our Chapter mascot]

A few days ago, I was outside trimming the branches that froze and died from my Oleander bushes. As I leaned over to cut off a long, dead branch I came nose to body with a bright Spring green creature cuddled on the branch. I backed up to see what it was and realized that it was a Green Tree Frog. I held out my gloved finger to it and it obliged by climbing onto it. I gently deposited it on another branch so I could go on with what I was doing. Hmm! Our tank is on the other side of the house and about a football-field-in-length away! So I decided to see what I could find out about the little guy (or gal). Last Fall, I'd opened our door to find a little Green Tree Frog on the glass in the door. And last year, I'd found one up on some trim just below the overhang of the roof on the wall.

The Green Tree Frog (*Hyla cinerea* (Schneider, 1799)) is a very pretty Spring green color – about the color # 5500 of Isacord machine embroidery thread or about the DMC embroidery thread color 703 – if you are a machine embroiderer or cross-stitcher!

The females are larger than the males and they range from about 1.2" to 2.5" in snout vent length. They are of a medium size and have this smooth, pretty green color. Their eyes are prominent, and golden yellow or golden brown. They have long, slender legs with large toe pads on each foot. Their vocal sacs are round.

Their color can vary from what I've described to various shades of green, including greenish gray, olive green or a brownish green. The more active the frog, the brighter its color. When they are not active and hiding, their color blends more closely with their environment. There is a whiteish or cream-colored stripe along each side of the body. The stripe varies with each frog.

The call of the Green Tree frog resembles a honking duck. It is loud and unmistakeable – described as “queenk-aeenqueenk”. They will repeat this call as many as 75 times a minute. The more typical call rate is 30 – 60 notes per minute. This call has a ringing quality or a bell-like quality. They general call from a perch 1 ½ to 6 ½ feet above permanent water sources. The chorus of these frogs can be “deafening”! The males generally start calling around sundown and can continue



to after midnight. Mostly the choruses are related to mating activities, but they can also occur just before rains or if the weather is very still and humid.

Green Tree Frogs are mostly found in the southeastern US. They range from Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia to the southern tip of Florida, then west through the Gulf Coast Plain to eastern and southern Texas, and north along the Mississippi River Valley to extreme Southern Illinois. There is an isolated colony of them in south-central Missouri. The Texas Green Tree Frogs are found throughout the eastern third of the state, from the

Oklahoma and Arkansas borders south along the Gulf of Mexico to the mouth of the Rio Grande. And there is also a colony that has been introduced at the Rio Grande Village in Big Bend National Park.

This frog is generally found in the vicinity of permanent water. Where it has wetter areas, the frog may range into the surrounding woodlands. In drier areas, they are restricted to the vegetation that is closest to the water. It is a very agile climber and forages through bushes, cattails, and shrubs, seeking food. Once it

spies its prey, it pursues it in a short chase. They are often seen resting on a leaf with their eyes closed during the day. At night is when they start hunting food, which consists of flying insect species, leaf hoppers, grasshoppers, and spiders. Predators of the Green Tree frog include snakes, other frogs, turtles, mammals, fish, birds, and spiders.

Green Tree Frogs breed from March through October, in still water such as ponds, lakes and swamps. Eggs are deposited in small clumps of jelly near the surface of the water and are generally attached to floating vegetation. The female can lay more than 2000 eggs. Metamorphosis will occur between 55 – 63 days – generally in July through October.

The Green Tree Frog is a very common amphibian in its range. It may have benefited from dams impounding water within its range. This is not a protected frog as it is on the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's White List.

My source for this article is Texas Amphibians, A Field Guide, written by Bob L. Tipton, Terry L. Hibbits, Troy D. Hibbits, Toby J. Hibbits, and Travis J. Laduc. (PS - This is a very good guide for identifying various amphibians you might come across!)

## Field Work on Rainwater System Installation by Kathy Hitt & Henry Luna

### Field Work on a Rainwater System Installation

Washington, Texas

Kathy Hitt & Henry Luna

In March, Henry and I installed 2 rainwater tanks for a customer in Washington, Texas. While on location we learned some interesting history about the property in addition to documenting several plant species. The homeowner told us that when he bought the property, there were only 2 pecan trees present. He has since over the years planted over 100 trees on the property. I wish I had before pictures but the trees that surround the tanks are gorgeous. I documented a few of the species while we were there. Southern Live Oak was one species that was ID'd on INaturalist. All the other varieties I took pictures of haven't been identified yet for me to list them. The homeowner had also planted several varieties of olive trees as well.



2 - 1500 gallon tanks installed under and within tree clearings to allow protection for the tanks and the water.

I also identified several native flowers all added to the Plants of Texas project on iNaturalist. They are shown below as well as wildflowers I documented while on the way back from working there one afternoon. These were all identified on iNaturalist as well as the Bluebonnets and Indian Paintbrush were the only ones I knew instantly myself.

I snapped this Southern Dewberry while cleaning up the trench for the PVC to the tank from the gutters connection. I thought it was pretty and wanted to know more about the plant. It was identified in the Plants of Texas project.



I found this Tenpetal Anemone when I walked behind the material we had on the ground for the tank foundations and thought it was too pretty to pass up taking a picture of. It was all by its lonesome. This was also placed into the Plants of Texas project.



I stopped on the way back from the installation one afternoon to take these wildflower pictures. It was too pretty at this corner and I had looked at all these for a couple of days and decided it was time to stop and ID the flowers. This was identified as Golden Wave Tickseed. Also added to the Plants of Texas project.

Prairie Verbena, Hairy Vetch, Sabatia, Longbract Wild Indigo, Texas Bluebonnets and Indian Paintbrush were also identified at several points along the way back. All were also added to the Plants of Texas project.



Prairie Verbena



Hairy Vetch



Sabatia



Longbract Wild Indigo



Texas Bluebonnet



Indian Paintbrush

was able to be still enough to document the bird species that were present there. However, every day the sounds of the birds were all around us. I saw cardinals and many other species as well as heard an owl which the homeowner stated was a white owl.

I feel very lucky to have an occupation that allows me to experience these things first hand and also be able to slow down enough to document them in the process. Assisting people to conserve our most precious asset, water, all while learning about nature around me is truly a privilege.

It was really an amazing experience to document several plant species that surrounded me while I was working. I never

## Transition to a No-Mow Lawn

by Linda Jo Conn

Back in the 1980's, I was the divorced mother of a young son, employed as a chemical technician in the predominantly male workforce at the Sandow Power Plant near Rockdale in Milam County. I worked shift work, overtime, and was often on call. It was a challenge.

Therefore, while juggling and coping with more important things, some stuff did not bother me. One of these was mowing and manicuring my front yard. It was pushed down to the bottom of my "To-Do List" because ankle high grass did not bother me. Besides, I enjoyed the display of volunteer wildflowers.

However, the unkempt condition of my lawn bothered my neighbor Raymond who lived two houses north of me. "Linda", Raymond would stop to inquire when he drove past my ragged landscape, "is your lawnmower broke?"

Sure enough, a day or so later, I would arrive home after work to find that neighbor Raymond had graciously mowed my lawn, including the Indian paintbrushes and other blooming wildflowers. A couple of times, he mowed across small trees I had recently transplanted. (Oh, well, I should have known to protect them in some way.)

Anyway... Fast forward several years... I remarried and my husband actually believed that a mowed/trimmed yard was the epitome of joy, happiness, and success in life. So the lawn became acceptable to the neighborhood.

Another fast forward... My husband and son and I moved from "My Place" to "Our Place" in Lee County. The lawn was fairly religiously mowed, including the ROW in front of the property and usually by my spouse. Still, the height of the "weeds"

did not bother me. After all, we did not live in town... we were living out on a county road.

Fast forward again... As a member of the 2012 training class of the El Camino Real TMN chapter, I was introduced to and educated about the beauty of wildflowers and native plants. (Actually, I was reminded of their importance. During my childhood, my mother hauled me and my younger sisters on countless excursions down Milam County roads where we stopped to observe, identify, and enjoy wildflowers.)



As a result of the Texas Master Naturalist training, I began to question the current landowner's idea of beauty in mown green pastures and bar ditches. Brown fence lines from the application of herbicides began to look less attractive and viable.

Another fast forward... My husband had been in failing health for several years and passed away. The lawn care business he hired to keep the lawn under control and to his standards had mowed the yard a few days before his death.

Fast forward another month... The grass and the "weeds" are almost knee high now... However, I have enjoyed blossoms of winecup mallow (*Callirhoe involucrata*),

crowpoison (*Nothoscordum bivalve*), sticky mouse-ear chickweed (*Cerastium glomeratum*), prairie phlox (*Phlox pilosa*), clasping Venus's looking glass (*Triodanis perfoliata*), hastate-leaved dock (*Rumex hastatalus*), Indian paintbrushes (*Castilleja indivisa*), Carolina crane's-bill (*Geranium carolinianum*) and other species.

I hope to now practice what I preach. There will be minimal mowing and weed eating in my home landscape. I trust that the

folks driving past the place will appreciate the color and diversity and not worry about the lack of short green grass. The wildflower display will hopefully only get better over the years ahead!

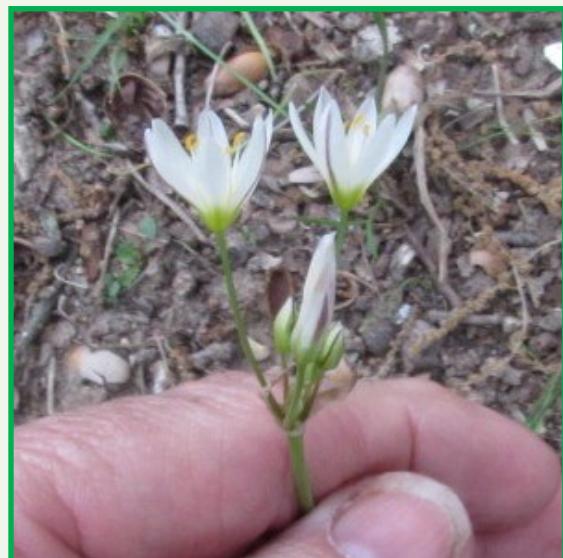
Attention: Insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals (except feral hogs and stray cats) ... You are welcome at my place!



Clasping Venus's Looking Glass



Modiola



Crowpoison

## Earth Day 2017

by Don Travis

From [earthday.org](http://earthday.org).

*"Each year, Earth Day—April 22—marks the anniversary of the birth of the modern environmental movement in 1970.*

*On April 22, 1970, 20 million Americans took to the streets, parks, and auditoriums to demonstrate for a healthy, sustainable environment in massive coast-to-coast rallies. Thousands of colleges and universities organized protests against the*

*deterioration of the environment. Groups that had been fighting against oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, raw sewage, toxic dumps, pesticides, freeways, the loss of wilderness, and the extinction of wildlife suddenly realized they shared common values.*



*Earth Day 1970 gave voice to that emerging consciousness, channeling the energy of the anti-war protest movement and putting environmental concerns on the front page.*

## Milam County

## Los Caminos

## Spring 2017

Earth Day 1970 achieved a rare political alignment, enlisting support from Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, city slickers and farmers, tycoons and labor leaders. By the end of that year, the first Earth Day had led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species Acts. "It was a gamble," Gaylord recalled, "but it worked."

As 1990 approached, a group of environmental leaders asked Denis Hayes to organize another big campaign. This time, Earth Day went global, mobilizing 200 million people in 141 countries and lifting environmental issues onto the world stage. Earth Day 1990 gave a huge boost to recycling efforts worldwide and helped pave the way for the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. It also prompted President Bill Clinton to award Senator Nelson the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1995)—the highest honor given to civilians in the United States—for

his role as Earth Day founder. Earth Day had reached into its current status as the largest secular observance in the world, celebrated by more than a billion people every year, and a day of action that changes human behavior and provokes policy changes.

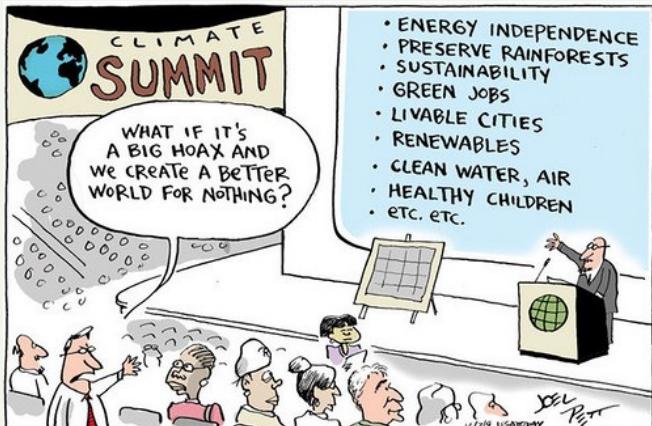
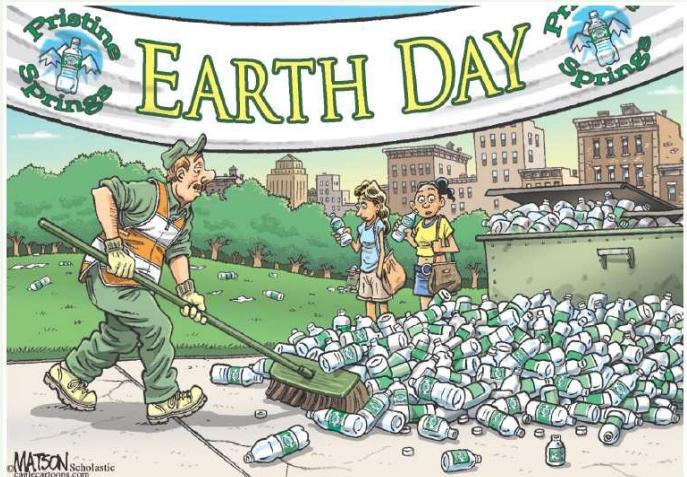
Today, the fight for a clean environment continues with increasing urgency, as the ravages of climate change become more manifest every day."

Earth Day projects in Rockdale included youth projects at elementary and intermediate schools and the Rockdale Library, numerous clean up projects around town, planting of trees and rose bushes, and presentations on water conservation and composting.

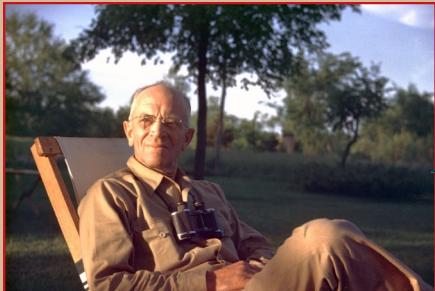
On Friday April 21 from 2-5pm, our chapter, under the leadership of Donna Lewis, put together a nature and conservation display at the Library. Donna was assisted by other chapter members and helpers including Joyce Conner, Sherry Colley, Pam Neeley, Dorothy Mayer, Sandra Dworaczyk, Billy Moore, Linda Jo Conn and her granddaughter Jasmine, Phyllis Shuffield and Joshua Huckabee (a local youth and insect collector). Our exhibits and presentations focused on a variety of subjects including: creating sustainable environments, horned frogs, harvester ants and how these things are connected in our ecosystem, wildscaping, and creating environments for birds and butterflies to thrive in.



## Happy Earth Day 2017



Aldo Leopold Says:



"What more delightful avocation than to take a piece of land and by cautious experimentation to prove how it works. What more substantial service to conservation than to practice it on one's own land?"

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### **Did You Know?**



**You do.** Your friends are dust mites. Just thinking of these dust mites living in your pillow by the millions, eating your dead skin and hair is enough to make you sick (literally and figuratively). House dust mites are too small to be visible to the naked eye; they are only 250 to 300 microns in length and have translucent bodies. It takes at least a 10X magnification to be able to correctly identify them. They are a major cause of asthma and allergies; especially in vulnerable individuals, such as children and the elderly. According to the American College of Asthma, Allergy & Immunology, approximately 10 percent of Americans exhibit allergic sensitivity to dust mites. The American Lung Association tells us "Dust mites are not parasites; they don't bite, sting or burrow into our bodies. The harmful allergen they create comes from their fecal pellets and body fragments. Dust mites are nearly everywhere; roughly four out of five homes in the United States have detectable levels of dust mite allergen in at least one bed." Don't you feel better now, knowing they don't bite or sting; and your allergic reaction is only due to burying your face in a pillow full of their feces? And you may feel better knowing, according to WebMD, that "Dust mites like to eat dead skin from pets and humans. You probably shed enough skin a day to feed a million dust mites." In the spring, pollen aggravates allergies, and dust mite infestations make it worse. The Fall and Winter months are a particular problem, as we close up our houses and the concentrations of dust mites and their feces increases inside. And with dust mites at their multiplying peak during warm, wet weather, read on to find out what you can do about dust mites and visit <http://www.ehso.com/ehshome/dustmites.php>

### **Certifications, Etc.**

By Debbi Harris

New since the Winter 2017 newsletter **are in this color**.

2017 Re-Certifications (Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle pin).

**Debbi Harris and Don Travis.**



Highest Level of Lifetime-to-date Milestone Achievement Levels earned by current members as of March 31, 2017 include:

**5000 Hours**—Katherine Bedrich (deceased Nov 2016)

**4000 Hour Presidential Award**—Donna Lewis

**2500 Hours**—Don Travis, Ann Collins, and Debbi Harris.

**1000 Hours**—Joyce Conner, Sue Taylor, Dorothy Mayer, Phyllis Shuffield, Sandra Dwarczyk, Linda Jo Conn.

**500 Hours**—Barbara Cromwell, John Pruitt, Michael Conner, Sheri Sweet, Wesley Sweet and **Cindy Travis**.

**250 Hours**—Janice Johnson, Kim Summers, Sherry Colley, Kathy Lester, Pat Holley, Pam Neeley and Darlene Anglen.

Our March 31, 2017 Year-to-Date Volunteer Service and Advanced Training hours were **723** and **99** respectively (40 current active and eligible members) and Total Accumulated hours for Volunteer Service and Advanced Training hours are **57,145** and **7,656** respectively (96 total volunteers past and current since 2008 including transfer outs).

**Congratulations to All**

### **What animal sleeps with millions of friends?**

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