

Master Naturalist™



Wintering on the Texas Coast

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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** Winter 2011-12

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Prairie Tracks by Katherine Bedrich

Honey Mesquite
Prosopis glandulosa Torr.

The Honey Mesquite; a member of the Fabaceae (Legume) Family; grows up to 50 ft. tall and has a crown which provides dapple shade. Roots can be over 100 ft. deep. It is a hardy tree that can survive drought and extreme heat. A heavy, hard wood tree, the mesquite fixes nitrogen in the soil, being a member of the legume Family. Mesquite leaves are deciduous and are one of the last trees to bud in spring; meaning there is no danger of freezing weather.

Creamy white flowers bloom in the spring, but can also continue flowering throughout the summer. The fruit of flat pods with brown seeds produce from late summer to early fall. Native Americans used the mesquite as a major food source. Pods and beans were ground to make a meal used in baking; they are high in carbohydrates and protein and many minerals including calcium and iron. Part of the Native American diet consisted of ripe pods because of their high sugar content. Mesquite jelly and syrup were also made from the pods. Beverages were made from the meal mixed with water. Fermentation would provide an

alcoholic drink used at ceremonial gatherings.

From the bark, a gum could be extracted and eaten like candy. This gum was dissolved in water and used for sore throats and open wounds. To waterproof baskets, the gum would be rubbed on the inside and outside. A glue made with the gum was used to attach arrowheads and feathers to the wood shaft.

The hard Mesquite wood has swirling grains of deep reds and purples. Some uses of the wood by Native Americans, including the root fiber, were for cradles, bowstrings and tools. The wood and fiber burns with an intense heat making it an excellent source for cooking. A black stain was made with the bark and used to paint the face and color hair. Pioneers made fencepost, wagon wheels, and gunstocks from the Mesquite.



Betterhardwoods.com

Coyotes, jackrabbits, turkey and dove are some of the wildlife which uses the mesquite for food and shelter. Deer eat the high protein leaves. Honey is made by bees from the flowers.

The word mesquite comes from the Aztec word for the tree - mizquitl.

The Honey Mesquite provides food, shel-

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Our Motto

- Look
- Learn
- Teach
- Conserve

Our Mascot
Green Tree Frog



Did You Know?

Do Armadillos sink or swim?

See the last page for the answer.

ter, warmth and medicine. It is hardy, surviving in heat and drought. All parts of the tree were used by the Southwest Indians. The National Champion mesquite is near Leakey in Real County. It is 55 feet tall and has a circumference of 168 inches.

Texas Trees: A Friendly Guide ---- By: Paul W. Cox and Patty Leslie

Healing Plants---- By: Ana Nez Heatherley

Remarkable Plants of Texas--- By: Matt W. Turner

Texas Almanac --- Mary G. Ramos

References:

Katherine Bedrich

Sharing Nature Stories

by Our Members

This is continuing something I started with last Fall's Issue. At all of our chapter and board meetings, as well as many other gatherings, we take a few minutes at the beginning to share any nature sightings or unique stories with our fellow nature lovers. And sometimes, folks send out a brief email about some experience, perhaps with a photo. Here are a few recent ones offered for your reading pleasure.

Debbie Harris:

Oh what a sound to wake up to -- it's raining!!! I am so grateful to hear the tap-tap-tap on the roof top of the January rain. One of our tanks is full and the other two are filling up, and its grand to see the color green again! I've attached a picture taken today. Keep it coming Mother Nature, we sure do need it and absolutely LOVE it!



Dorothy Mayer:

There is a term that I studied about in a reading class that I really related to a lot. That term was 'schema' (plural-schemata). Anyway, this term basically describes why a person can read written material at different points in his or her life and take something entirely different away from the reading material each time they read the same print. You see, your prior life experiences and acquired vocabulary determines what you take away from the information you read.



So, I am also realizing that schemata not only applies to our experiences with the written word, but to the world of nature, as well. The more I learn about nature and the world around me, the more things I see that I never used to notice. More & more I am noticing how fascinating our environment around us actually is. Rather than just seeing trees and plants dying from lack of moisture in the current drought, I have

been noticing native grasses and plants popping up all over the place. And, because I see more native plants, I'm finding some positive things about experiencing a true drought.

And, while I must admit our current lack of moisture is pretty scary, I am able to come up with a few pros to offset the cons more than I would have been able to do before my master naturalist training. [Photos by Dorothy]

Ann Collins:

On Friday Jan 6th Paula Englehardt and I went to Granger Lake to hunt for the Whooping Cranes that have been sighted wintering there. The weather was just about perfect - crisp and sunny, with lots of wind off the water.

We went to Friendship Park and drove the circle a couple of times then walked down to the lake.....a long way with the drought! We walked about a mile and saw a large flock of White pelicans, a bunch of Pintails, and a few Least sandpipers. No Whoopers!

Back up the hill to the parking lot and three huge white



birds with black wingtips flew away from an area we had scouted out earlier. We saw the Whooping Cranes!

The park rangers said they often flew to the plowed fields and grazed on seeds and sprouts, as many as twelve of them. So, off to see if we could spot them again. No luck. We did see some Red tailed hawks, Loggerhead shrikes, American Kestrels, flocks of American robins and Meadowlarks. We also saw quite a few American pipits.

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A. Shanahan

Of course, we had to check out Friendship Park again and there they were: two adults and an immature. They were a long way across the lake but could be seen with the naked eye, even mine! The park rangers told us that one of the "families" had been seen in Aransas Wildlife Refuge and had apparently not found success there and had come back to Granger Lake. On the coast they eat blue crab and with the large number of cranes (Paula thinks around 300!) and with the drought there is simply not enough food to feed them all. Last year some of them actually starved to death. They appear to be eating massive amounts of mussels. We saw jillions of opened empty shells.

The way the Ranger knew the "family" had been to Aransas and back is that the Juvenile is banded. They keep really good track of the cranes on the coast. Made me wonder who is really watching them at Granger Lake. There is quite a bit of hunting around the lake and there are signs warning the hunters of the consequences of shooting one, even accidentally.

As we were just checking out the area again, Paula said "What is that in that tree"? (about a mile away!) At first we thought it was a Crested Caracara but as we observed it perched and flying it was definitely a Bald Eagle. Way to go, Paula! We watched it fly, hover, eat something, and just sit there. Really cool bird, Paula!



We had a great day at a wonderful place to bird. Paula lives less than twenty minutes away, less as the crow flies. Hope we can schedule a trip later in the spring. Maybe the Whooping Cranes will still be there.

[Ed: All photos from the internet]

Cindy Bolch:

On Saturday January 7, Lucy and I went to Friendship Park and got to see our family of Whooping Cranes. The three were across the lake from where we were standing, but my binoculars were not good enough to see any real detail. As luck would have it there were several birders at the lake and we got to look at the Whoopers through a \$1000 spotters scope. They were beautiful - through the scope you could really see the patches of rusty brown feathers against the white on the juvenile and the red heads on the adults.

Of course, the pelicans were charming and did fly around a bit for us. But the bird that was a first for me was the Harris Hawk. He would fly around some and then go back to his perch in a tree across the lake. A really, really pretty bird!

Ah, all in all it was a lovely day in river city!

[Ed: photo from internet]

Donna Lewis:

As the weather has finally turned from the hot 100 degree days to crisp Fall mornings with blue skies and warm afternoons and then to Winter and it's welcome rain, the changing of the guard with my bird population has begun.

My year round regulars are still here, the Blue-birds, Cardinals, Woodpeckers, Chick-a-Dees, and so many more must learn to share the feeders for awhile again.

The new visitors include Goldfinch, Meadow Larks, Robins, Juncos, Fly-catchers, and numerous others. The beautiful sound of Cranes and Geese can be heard thru the clouds on high, passing over on their way to far off places.

As devastating as the weather has been, the birds always remain a source of beauty, peace, and the hope of renewal.

Nature rewards those who take the time to look and listen to her.

Reminding all of us why we are naturalists.



B.B. C. Sullivan

Nature in New York by Katherine Bedrich

When I was 9 months old, my Mom and I went to New York City to fly overseas. My Dad was in the Army, stationed in Germany. In August 1999, I went to Woodstock, New York to visit the place of the big hippy gathering in 1969, I seem to sometimes be a little behind on my timing.



This past fall, I was back in New York visiting with my niece, Karin, who lives in Ithaca and attends Cornell University. I spent several days on the campus checking out the gardens, libraries, museum and the lake. During

lunch one day, Karin and I walked around Beebe Lake and the first thing we noticed was all the different moss. I did not know my niece had such an interest in mosses and lichens. We were having such a good time with all the greenery, we almost missed the Canadian Geese and several duck species on the lake. A waterfall stopped us for a mist of cold water and a rainbow.

One afternoon Karin took me to "Granny Daycare" - she made that comment when she dropped me off at Sapsucker Woods. Even with the weather being overcast, cold and drizzly I hiked the trail around the small lake finding lichen and moss on dead trees and in the leaf litter. There were not many birds, but I did see ducks, cardinals, dark-eyed juncos and other species. The library has every book you could ever read on birds and birding. It was an interesting place to visit.



Our trip to Buttermilk Falls State Park is where we explored nature and found areas covered with bryophytes. It was one of the coldest days I was there so we bundled up with layers of clothing, packed snacks and water and headed for the Park. On our walk we discovered a beautiful mushroom and inspected lichens in the decaying forest. The hiking trail was along Buttermilk Creek and Lake Treman. As we approached the



lake, with mostly Mallard ducks, we noticed areas with many different mosses. The damp, moist, cold, shade seemed to spawn the growth of these tiny green jewels. Karin and I were trying to continue our hike, but every few steps there seemed to be another emerald deposit calling us to stop and look.



I told Karin our Chapter knows a Bryophyte instructor who is helping us identify them in Milam County. I also told her how some of our members assisted him with a program at the State Meeting so other Master Naturalist chapters could help with identifying Bryophytes throughout the State of Texas.

Several people smiled at us as we were looking at the bryophytes, one person asked us what we were doing and we told her. She said she understood because her mother was a botanist. The park ranger was on the trail and told us the trail was closed up ahead.

As we continued trying to hike the trail, but stopping more than hiking, we were getting cold. My feet were getting cold even with two layers of thick socks. We decided it was time to start back and we disciplined ourselves (to a certain degree) trying not to stop so often.

When we were home, we looked at all the photos we had taken and were amazed at the beauty nature had provided us. I need to send Dale a few photos because I think besides the mosses; I saw some liverworts and hornworts.

My niece wants me to visit again, soon. I am considering another trip back to continue our nature adventures in New York. [Photos by Katherine]



A Walk in the Forest

By Donna Lewis

During this time of year I sometimes get a little depressed because my butterflies are gone and there no flowers to see.

It seems like there is nothing interesting to look at except the birds, which I love also.

But put on some warm clothes and go into the forest.

If you take some time and walk slowly you can see some very beautiful fungi and mushrooms on dead logs, on the limbs of certain tree's and on the forest floor.

I must have seen a dozen or so that I had never seen before. They were beautiful. Some of them looked like coral that grow in the sea.

I tried to look them up, but it was not easy to correctly I.D. them. There are so many that look alike.

So... I contacted Dr. Flo Oxley who knows a great deal about these things. Being a botanist she is well versed in many plants besides the "Wildflowers" that have made her so well known to this chapter.

The names are as exotic as the mushrooms themselves, so I will leave the identification to her. Sometime this year Dr. Flo agreed to give us seminar on fungi and mushrooms. I know many of you have seen mushrooms and wondered, can I eat these, or not? Well, let's not guess, that could be very bad.

Better to learn about them from an expert.

It does go to show us again, that there is ALWAYS something beautiful that nature has prepared for us ANY day of the year.

All we have to do is look. [Photos by Donna]



Birding at Cedar Hill Ranch, Part 2

by Ann Collins

On November 19, 2011, we completed our second bird survey at the Cedar Hill Ranch in Gause, Texas, owned by Mike and Joyce Conner. The weather was much better this time, starting out cool and warming to near 80*. We had quite a few new birders on this trip due to the fact that Brazos Valley Master Naturalists just completed their class. All were eager to get started on those volunteer hours.

From El Camino Real Master Naturalists we had Vivian Dixon, Cindy Bolch, Donna Lewis, Donna's friend Mack McBride, and Ann Collins. We also had representatives from Rio Brazos Audubon Society.

The best treat was Chuck's daughter, Katherine who is a professional nature artist, photographer, and birder. Katherine has spent the last year traveling and birding. She is not doing a Big Year but has had the opportunity to work on the go. She was able to finish her Sparrow list for the year when we/she spotted a Harris sparrow.

We didn't add any new birds to the Milam County list but we did see 41 species. We also saw White tailed deer, coyote, feral hogs, squirrels, and a raccoon curled up sound asleep in a large hole in a dead tree.

Species that were seen:

Black vulture 51

Turkey vulture 44

Northern harrier 2

Red-shouldered hawk 1

Crested caracara 7 [pictured]

White-winged dove 1

Mourning dove 20

Red-bellied woodpecker 13

Yellow-bellied sapsucker 6

Downy woodpecker 3
[pictured]

Northern flicker 4 (one being red shafted)

Pileated woodpecker 5

Eastern phoebe 5

Blue headed vireo 1

Blue jay 7 [pictured]

American crow 55

Swallow sp. 25 (possible Cave)

Carolina chickadee 4



Tufted titmouse 9

Brown creeper 1

Carolina wren 11

Blue gray gnatcatcher 1

Ruby-crowned kinglet 4
[pictured]

Eastern bluebird 5

Hermit thrush 1

American robin 177

Northern mockingbird 19

Brown thrasher 4

Yellow-rumped warbler 32
[pictured]

Spotted towhee 4 [pictured]

Chipping sparrow 49

Field sparrow 14

Vesper sparrow 13

White-throated sparrow 39

Harris's sparrow 3

White-crowned sparrow 5
[pictured]

Northern cardinal 47

Red-winged blackbird 72

Common grackle 50

American goldfinch 10

Dark-eyed junco 3 [pictured
below]

[all photos from the internet]



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Certifications, Etc. By Cindy Bolch

Achieving Certification: Kathy Lester, Sandy
Braswell, Vickie Braswell, Michelle Fletcher,
Barbara Cromwell, Rich Cromwell, and Tracy
Scarpinato



Our 2011 Re-Certification pin is the Horned Lizard,
our State Reptile. Those achieving 2011 Annual Re-Certifications to date
include: Cindy Bolch, Katherine Bedrich, Lucy Coward, Sue Taylor, Don
Travis, Paula Engelhardt, Dorothy Mayer, Janice Johnson, Sandra Dwor-
zaczyk, Debbi Harris, Cindy Travis, Paul Unger, Donna Lewis, Phyllis
Shuffield, Connie Roddy, Ann Collins, Gary McDaniels, Cindy McDaniels,
Pat Holley, Vivian Dixon, Rusty Thomas and Pam Neeley.

Lifetime to date Milestone Achievement Levels Awarded include:

250 Hours—Paul Unger, Ann Collins, Katherine Bedrich, Cindy Bolch, Paula
Engelhardt, Don Travis, Debbi Harris, Joy Graham, Lucile Estell, Shawn
Walton, Anne Barr, Ed Bureson, Connie Roddy, Dorothy Mayer, Lucy Cow-
ard, Donna Lewis, Sue Taylor, Phyllis Shuffield, Sandra O'Donnell, Jim
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500 Hours—Paul Unger, Ann Collins, Katherine Bedrich, Cindy Bolch, Paula
Engelhardt, Don Travis, Anne Barr, Donna Lewis, Phyllis Shuffield, Lucy
Coward, Debbi Harris, Dorothy Mayer, Sue Taylor and Connie Roddy

1000 Hours—Paul Unger, Ann Collins, Katherine Bedrich, Cindy Bolch, Don
Travis and Paula Engelhardt

2500 Hours—Paul Unger

Congratulations to All!

Did You Know?

Do Armadillos sink or swim?

[excerpted from eNature.com]



From an engineering standpoint, the nine banded armadillo is an exceptional creature. The heavy plates that cover its head, torso, and tail are unique among North American mammals and present foes with a formidable barrier. And since the plates are jointed across the animal's midsection, the armadillo can curl itself into a ball for added protection. But what happens to the armadillo when it hits the water? Do those same heavy plates become a burden? Does this unusual mammal sink or swim?

The correct answer is both, sometimes. Just as it's evolved armor for protection, the armadillo has come up with a unique way to carry that weight while in the water. When small streams and ponds must be crossed, the armadillo compensates for the excess weight of its plates by taking deep gulps of air to inflate its intestines. Thus inflated, the intestines make the armadillo buoyant enough to swim short distances. And if gulping additional air is just too much work, the armadillo can simply walk across the bottom of the stream or pond like a deep-sea diver wearing lead weights. So next time you see an armadillo around water, keep an eye out and see which option it uses. The name Armadillo originated from the Spanish Conquistadors who named it "the little man in armor".