Good Water Ripples

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Hey Rocky! Watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat!

By Mike Farley

I suspect there are many Master Naturalists that remember those words from Saturday morning cartoons that ran during my youth. The line is one of my favorite impressions to give.

Flying Squirrel

Who would have believed that we would find ourselves with this richness of Southern Flying Squirrel observations and their habitat under our Nature Tracking microscope? Just imagine the things we are missing if we don't look!

Williamson County is on the western most edge of this species (Glaucomys Volans) range and while they are common in east, and across the south, this was a county first observation for Mark Muccini of the Fall 2019 training class. Mark posted the earliest images to iNaturalist and while we've not seen more than three in one image, hundreds of observations suggest this is a greater population hiding in the trees on the acreage just south of CR152. We have officially documented them at nine different locations hundreds of yards apart. It would not surprise me if they venture across the road into the main park in search of nuts or habitat during the night. They inhabit old woodpecker holes and small crevices high up in the trees.

With observations on Oaks, Pecans, Ash, Cedar Elm, and Hackberries thus far, it is clear that these animals love the trunks of trees as a social platform.

They are omnivores since they do take bird eggs but the small companion trees next to the larger trees offer tender bark for chewing on as well as jumping destinations that access the ground. Small mice and rats can also be seen using the tree trunks in between squirrel presence. Fox squirrels dominate the trees during the daytime.

Up close images of these Flying Squirrels show their bulging eyes that provide superb nighttime vision and specialized ears that utilize echolocation for swiftly gliding flight in total darkness. Their flattened tails provide a wind rudder for sharp turns in any direction. The squirrels are known to land on a tree and quickly run around to the opposite side to evade any aerial predators chasing them. They make a chirping sound with some of their vocalizations not audible to human ears. It is possible that Bat detecting devices could be used to hear these sounds.

Ruffle up my sleeve, Presto!

This Bobcat was also caught on camera. He might like to happen upon a flying squirrel too....

Berry Springs Opportunities

Here are individual volunteer opportunities at Berry Springs Park and Preserve. To participate as an individual per the Master Naturalist requirement and receive volunteer credit, contact Susan Blackledge. Email her at susieblackledge@gmail.com to discuss these opportunities and include your phone number!

From Susan:

1) Removal of invasives. Bastard cabbage and malta star thistle everywhere. So far they are not abundant and we want to keep it that way. You can pull them up and make piles for pick up, or just leave them to dry out and die.

2) Weeding flower beds. Weeds are an ongoing problem needing continual maintenance. I will show you which beds need help and what to weed. This is predominantly grass so you don't have to be an expert in plant identification.

3) Removal of sticks/limbs. Limbs drop constantly throughout the park. Park staff spends extra time and energy moving sticks to mow, keep pathways cleared, and areas/trails mowed and safe. Removing limbs and keeping the understory of the trees clear is the best thing we can do to keep our trees healthy.

Never Say Never

By Amy Flinn

"I will never be responsible for another event," I told my dear husband last year. My "vision"* has always exceeded my organizational talents so I've tried to do what I could to support others while leaving the hosting to those for whom planning, sign-ups, and directions** come easily.

But then the frogs began to call.

The Spotted Chorus Frog*** shows up when fields flood. They are small. Their call can be approximated by running one's finger quickly over the small teeth of a comb.

I was lucky enough to hear them in Bell County and shared the recordings and locations with my fellow amphibian aficionados. And I promised I'd let folks know if the frogs showed up.

So we had an event of sorts. Five amphibian watchers**** met at the Belton McDonald's restaurant a couple of weekends ago and carpooled to where the frogs had been calling. We could not get permission to cross the barbed wire fencing (that's another story) so we could actually see the frogs, but we could stand at the fence, record the calls, photograph birds in the area, and then take a tour of a notorious local birding hot spot.

This is one of my favorite things about Texas Master Naturalists, you find people with similar interests who will meet you to listen for frogs, or identify ducks, or just get out in the wild. I'm not going to be responsible for any events any time soon, but every now and again meet me at the McDonald's and I'll show you where the frogs are calling and where the birds show up most days.

NOTES:

*It's like herding ducks - and I'm not good with ducks - others are.

**My kids hate my directions and different people use different tools. It can be hard to get everyone to the right spot.

***If you are curious: https://www.herpsoftexas.org/content/spotted-chorus-frog

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-jVEAEsKqVs

****Amphibian Watch is part of Texas Nature Trackers and is active in Travis and Williamson Counties.

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Chasing Rare Birds

By Mary Ann Melton

Central Texas has a rare bird opportunity along the Colorado River downstream from the dam at Lady Bird Lake in Austin. A White Wagtail, Motacilla alba, has been seen with regularity for a month or more. It hangs around on a gravel bar and it is very difficult to see with just your eyes because of its small size, about the same size as the rocks on the gravel bar. Wagtail is common in Eurasia and there is a small stable population in Alaska. Its appearance in Austin sets many records, because other North American sightings are far from here. This is the only Texas sighting. Most of the U.S. sightings have been along the California Coast. The next closest sighting is in New Mexico near the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. For many birders this is an amazing opportunity to see a bird they might otherwise never get to see.

I went to Roy Guerrero Park on a Sunday afternoon. I could see adults going through an opening in the fence so I followed and joined a group of people with binoculars or scopes. The word was the wagtail was not there. I started my eBird checklist for other birds I was seeing. A short time later, the call came, "It just flew in." The relaxed atmosphere changed as people with scopes strove to get a sighting. And then, one of the nicest things about birders, the words came, "Would you like to see it through my scope." Well, of course. I had now seen the bird! But finding it on my own . . . that was surprisingly tough at first.

Now for the camera. I shoot with a Nikon P900. You really have to have a strong landmark to zoom in on to be able to zoom in on a bird, especially a small bird. So I went back to enjoy watching it through my binoculars. Oh. . . it moved next to the water. I got my first shots. It was far enough away I knew I would not get great shots. But. . . I wanted my shot for iNaturalist, my "proof shot." I started getting some as the wagtail took a bath, shook itself, and posed for all of us.

Shortly after it appeared, a lady rushed up. "Is the wagtail still here? I just drove in from Albuquerque." She had gotten up at 4:00am to come see this bird. Birders immediately shared their binoculars so she could get her first look. There is another very rare European bird in Texas right now, a Mew Gull in Corpus Christi. I saw Mew Gull in London. But the lady from Albuquerque was heading to see the Mew Gull next.

By the time I was ready to leave I could find the bird easily enough that I could help others find it. It took 20 minutes or so before she got on the bird. But she DID finally see it.

Rare birds that I have seen are the Black Tailed Godwit at Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge in 2012, the Fork-tailed Flycatcher near McKinney Falls State Park in December 2012, the Bar Tailed Godwit, Oso Bay, Corpus Christi in 2014, and the Striped Sparrow in 2015. Without the help of other birders I would not have been able to see the Black Tailed Godwit, because it was too far away for easy viewing. Other people's scopes helped a lot. The Striped Sparrow was an anomaly. It is only found in mountains in Mexico. I believe that the American Birding Association ended up not making that a countable bird because of the suspicions that it had arrived as part of the bird trade.

These birds are considered vagrants. Through cold fronts, storm fronts, or other mis-navigation, they end up in places where they "don't belong." That is different from birds that belong in an area that are just low in numbers or not easily seen because of camouflage or nocturnal habits. It is also different from the rareness of bird species that are in an area out of their seasonal migration patterns.

If you are interested in chasing rare bird species in Texas, here are some resources. Google the resources listed below and you can subscribe to these alerts and learn about rare birds near you.

Resources:

eBird Texas Rare bird alerts
Williamson County Rare Bird Alert
Bell County Rare Bird Alert
Milam County Rare Bird Alert
Bastrop County Rare Bird Alert
Burnet County Rare Bird Alert

American Birding Association (ABA) Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/groups/ABArare/

American Birding Association Nationwide Rarities https://ebird.org/alert/summary?sid=SN10489

North American Rare Bird Alert (NARBA) http://narba.org/texas-rba

"The mountains are calling, and I must go..."

By Holly Zeiner

Before things got really weird and the world changed, my family and I took a short trip to the Davis Mountains State Park, Fort Davis, Alpine, and Marfa, Texas. If you've never been to this part of the state, put it on your bucket list now!

Scenic Overlook

We've made the LONG drive there four separate times, and its been worth the effort every trip! Past trips have been in March, June, and December. Each season has pros and cons, but we prefer summer because you can count on clear skies for stargazing.

The drive there takes you through 11counties and three natural regions of Texas including Edwards Plateau, Llano Uplift, and Trans Pecos.

Old CCC Trail

Our agenda for this trip was hiking and visiting Sul Ross State University in Alpine. My middle son plans to study Wildlife Biology (yeah!) and Sul Ross is high on his list of colleges. I recommend visiting the Museum of the Big Bend housed on campus. It was one of 10 museums built during the 1930s to celebrate the Texas Centennial. The museum recounts the natural and cultural heritage of the Big Bend region and one of its coolest exhibits includes a realistic replica of a 36-foot wingspan Texas Pterosaur. Alpine is a neat college town with a population of about 6,000. They have two grocery stores, which seems like a lot in such a small town, and even both of those were out of toilet paper when we were there.

Alpine, Fort Davis and Marfa form a triangle on the map. From one town to the other is about 30 minutes on all sides of the triangle so staying in one place does not limit access to the area's attractions. Big Bend and Guadalupe Mountains National Parks are roughly three hours from these towns so they make a great "base camp" if you are planning day trips to either national park.

Our hiking time was spent in Davis Mountains State Park (DMSP) and the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute Nature Center. The mountain view pictures shown here are from the Old CCC Trail and the Skyline Drive Trail inside DMSP. At one point on the Old CCC Trail, you have the option to walk from the Overlook, to look down on the Fort Davis National Historic Site.

McDonald Observatory visable in the distance.

Our one disappointment was the closure of the McDonald Observatory due to COVID-19. The observatory hosts tours and Star Parties throughout the year. The Star Parties are a fantastic tour through the night skies by astronomers, complete with multiple viewing stations using many different types of telescopes. This is one of our favorite activities.

A great place for information on the region is the Texas Historical Commission's Texas Mountain Trail Region travel guide. There is a print version or you can visit https://texasmountaintrail.com/ to plan your visit.

Pictures from top down: Views from the Old CCC Trail and Skyline Drive Trail inside the Davis Mountains State Park outside Fort Davis, Texas, on TX-118. A Century Plant at sunset. A very unique cloud formation at sunset.

Local Amphibian Monitoring
by Kathy McCormick

There are five locations in the area where frogs and toads are monitored regularly by Master Naturalists:

- Berry Springs Park & Preserve - North Georgetown
- Devine Lake - Leander
- Lake Creek Dam - North Austin
- Bauerle Ranch Park - South Austin
- Mary Moore Searight Park - South Austin

Amphibian monitoring consists of collecting some environmental data, identifying frog and toad species by sight or their calls, estimating their abundance levels, and obtaining photographs and/or recordings, if possible. Those that are so inclined can then enter their observations into iNaturalist.

Teams typically meet at sunset and monitor for an hour on a specific Saturday each month – but not always – so be sure to touch base with the site coordinator before coming out for the first time.

Coordinator contact information and directions for each site can be found in the story map at http://bit.ly/1nD8ivz. Bring a flashlight and/or headlamp. Wear boots if you want to get wet, but this is not required. On-the-job training will be provided.

Mason Bees

By Wizzie Brown

Mason bees, Osmia spp., are a group of native bees that are excellent pollinators. They are called mason bees because they use clay/mud to make partitions and seal the entrance to their nest. Mason bees are also sometimes known as orchard bees since many of them are very good at pollinating fruit trees (apples, plums, peaches, pears) and emerge in early spring to do so. The blue orchard bee, Osmia lignaria, is so celebrated for its pollinating efficiency that it is used in managed agriculture.

Mason bees carry pollen on their bellies, unlike honey bees which pack pollen into pollen baskets found on their legs. Another big difference between these bees and honey bees is that mason bees are solitary and nest in holes. Mason bees are a bit smaller than honey bees and are usually black with a metallic colored (blue, green, etc.) abdomen.

Mason bees "nest" in holes, but "nest" is a misnomer as nursery is a more suitable term. Mason bees collect pollen and nectar and mix it to form bee bread. Bee bread is placed into a suitable hole, an egg is laid on it, then the section is sealed off with clay/mud. The mason bee continues the process until the hole/tube is filled with egg chambers and the tube is sealed off with more clay/mud.

Eggs within nursery tubes hatch within a week and emerged larvae eat the pollen/nectar mixture (bee bread) for 4-6 weeks as they continue to grow and molt into the next instar. After the larval stage, they molt into pupae and remain in that stage for another 4-6 weeks. Once adults emerge from the pupal case, they remain in the tube until the following spring. Female eggs are laid further in the tube structure while males are in the outer sections of the tubes.

While mason bees only live 6-8 weeks in the spring, females can fill up 4-6 tubes and lay up to 36 eggs. Usually a limiting factor of having mason bees in the landscape is providing suitable nesting/nursery sites and a supply of clay/mud. Fortunately, there a variety of ways to provide nesting/nursery areas and clay/mud for these pollinators. Many people go with a wooden nesting block, but this can be difficult to clean each season after bees emerge (if you don't clean the wood block then it can lead to fungal and disease problems).

To make a nesting block, drill 9/32 or 5/16 holes in a dry, untreated piece of wood. Holes can be up to 10 inches in depth (to produce females it typically requires depths of 6 inches or more) but should not go all the way through the wood. Other ideas for nesting/nursery areas would be using any container that you want and filling with cardboard tubes, paper straws, bamboo sections, or hollow reeds. Nurseries made out of such materials allow for easy change out each year to avoid possible disease build up. Nesting/nursery areas should be placed in sheltered locations (from rain & wind) in an area that gets morning sun.

If you choose to attract these pollinators, make sure to have early blooming plants in your landscape, an area where bees can collect clay/mud for their nest/nursery, and use IPM strategies for pest management to reduce pesticide usage.

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Program Specialist at 512.854.9600. Check out my blog at www.urban-ipm.blogspot.com

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Mark Your Calendar

4/24-27 City Nature Challenge Austin Metro Area

4/30 CoCoRaHs Webinar Live "NOAA's Weather Prediction Center -- Part 1: A Quick Overview with a Deeper Dive into QPF/Heavy Rainfall Products" featuring Greg Gallina of NOAA's Weather Prediction Center. https://www.cocorahs.org/Content.aspx?page=wxtalk

6/6 Native Plant Certification Program, Level 1

Winter Weather Summary - Today's Secret Word Is: Phenology

By John Nielsen-Gammon, Texas State Climatologist

CoCoRaHs is not the first volunteer observing network to inspire ordinary people to make high-quality scientific measurements. People have been recording the dates of important climate-related events for millennia. Examples include dates of first leaf or bloom appearance, dates of snowfall or flooding, and dates of first or last ice on rivers and ponds.

In many cases, these records have been compiled and used in climate studies. For example, scientists have found that, over the past 30 years, the timing of breakup of ice on 75 lakes mostly in North America and Europe has become earlier by about 1.5-2 days per decade, with similar trends for the delay of freeze up. Our ponds don't tend to freeze over very often in most of Texas, but we do pay close attention to wildflower season. So do people in other parts of the country. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, some folks decided to take advantage of that fact and organize a set of volunteer observations for the blooming of lilacs and the leaf emergence of honeysuckle.

The original networks operated in full force over several decades and some versions are still operating today. Apart from the benefits of understanding the relationship between weather/climate and plant life, the records have proven to be a valuable way of tracking climate change without thermometers. The name for the study of the timing of natural biological events, by the way, is "phenology," a seemingly ancient Greek word that actually was made up in 1849 because we needed one.

In the US, it lives on in the National Phenology Network (https://www.usanpn.org), where if you want to you can enter your own phenological observations as part of an official data-base available for future research. They welcome formal observations that continue the lilac record as well as the timing of anything you've found important enough to observe and record. One thing they've done with the lilac and honeysuckle data is to create a statistical model relating the blooming and leaf emergence ("leaf-out") to each year's weather conditions. They can do this to estimate the beginning of spring (first leaf and first flower are as good a measure of spring as any) throughout the United States in real time. In Texas we've had a fairly mild winter. According to the National Phenology Network models, spring started earlier, as you might expect. But the timing, compared to normal, varied quite a bit across Texas. As of March 11, spring has arrived everywhere, it was early in most of the state and a bit late in the Panhandle.

The winner here seems to be central Texas, where spring sprung about 2-3 weeks early. Meanwhile, for about half of the country, spring is still just a gleam in a farmer's eye. Next up on the phenological calendar: the start of summer, which I like to define as the first five consecutive days in which the forecasted chance of rainfall is exactly 20%.

(used by permission from Texas CoCoRaHs Newsletter)

Friend Groups Now Underway

The Williamson County Commissioners Court approved an agreement that helped establish The Friends of Berry Springs Park and Preserve (FOBS), and River Ranch County Park (FRRCP)! These volunteer groups are devoted to making our parks a better place. Their mission is to dedicate their time and effort to advocate for the parks, offer valuable information and interpretation, and assist with daily operations pertaining to maintenance and conservation.

Both FOBS and FRRCP are accepting members. They hope like-minded, committed individuals will take this opportunity to support the parks. If you are interested in joining FOBS, email friendsofberrysprings@gmail.com. If you are interested in joining FRRCP, email friendsofriverranch@gmail.com.

Photo of Board: Laurie Connally, Lori Franz, Dave Armstrong, Karen Schnell, Sue Wiseman, Russell Fishbecx, Susan Blackledge, Charles Grimes, Mike Rodgers. *Some board members not pictured.*

A Message From Our President

By Nancy Phillips

March has been a challenging month for all of us.

Thank you for your patience and understanding as we have had to cancel so many of our volunteer opportunities. AgriLife has said no face-to-face of any sort.

The good news is that there are still some volunteer and advanced training opportunities that you can do by yourself. Some of these are CoCoRahs, many Citizen Science activities, iNaturalist - as long as this is not on your property.

Berry Springs also has some individual activities that you can do. In addition there are webinars available for advanced training hours or just to learn something new, plus other online learning courses associated with eBird and Cornell Ornithology. A couple are free like Intro to eBird. Some cost to participate.

I expect we will be limited on this until May. I will keep you updated as we get the information. Please take care of yourself and hang in there. That is more important than anything else.

Upcoming Speakers When Meetings Resume

By Mary-Gail Hamilton, GWMN Vice President

Invasives - Dr. Hans Landel

Dr. Hans Landel is the Invasives Species Program Coordinator at The University of Texas Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. He manages the Texasinvasives.org program, including its associated Invaders of Texas citizen scientist program, website and invasives database, and provides outreach on invasive species across the state. He has performed field research in the U.S. and abroad, including on endangered species in China and the Philippines.

Prior to coming to the Wildflower Center, Dr. Landel spent over 15 years teaching biology, marine biology, environmental science, field studies, wildlife management, and natural history. Dr. Landel holds a B.S. in Zoology and a Ph.D. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology.

Texas Birds - Jim Haley

Jim has been an avid birder for the past 30 years. During those years he has served as a trip leader for the Texas Ornithological Society to Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Texas and Minnesota.

Jim is a native Texan, born in Corpus Christi. He moved to Georgetown in 2009. Prior to that, he spent 10 years living on his ranch in Duval County. While in Duval County Jim organized the Monte Mucho Audubon Society and served as President for seven years. While working with the Monte Mucho Audubon Society, he also organized the first Laredo Birding Festival in 2006, and has participated as guide or speaker in all its festivals since.

Upon moving to Georgetown, Jim organized the Williamson Audubon Group and served on its board for several years. He also served on the original steering committee for the Good Water Chapter. Jim is a Past President of the Texas Ornithological Society. Over these past 30 years, Jim has had the good fortune to bird six continents.

Feral hogs are a big problem across Texas mostly in rural areas but increasingly in cities and suburbs too, according to the USDA.

For more information about the Good Water Chapter contact us at:
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