Asian Giant Hornets

By Wizzie Brown

What headline can draw people away from their thoughts dwelling on the current state of the world and Coronavirus? That would be MURDER HORNETS! I cannot think of a more sensationalized headline, so kudos to whomever came up with that attention grabber. This headline is popping up everywhere from social media outlets, television, newspapers, and others. Quite frankly, it makes me cringe each time I see it. Asian giant hornets (AGH) are Vespa mandarinia NOT "murder" hornets. If you want to use a common name instead of the scientific name, then call them by the CORRECT common name of Asian giant hornet.

Asian giant hornets are large, around two inches in length, with an orangish head, brown antennae (the base of the antennae are yellow-orange), brown to black eyes and ocelli (simple eyes located between the compound eyes). The thorax is dark brown with greyish wings and the abdomen has alternating bands of brownish-black and yellow-orange.

Asian giant hornets are capable of inflicting a painful sting. Please note that while the sting can lead to death in some cases, it is not what typically happens.

People are also capable of receiving painful stings from insects already here in Texas such as honey bees, paper wasps, yellowjackets, or even fire ants and some can die from being stung. Death by insect sting usually depends upon the number of stings and how your body chemistry reacts to the venom injected by the insect. Asian giant hornets are capable of killing other insects, including pollinators, but they are not doing this to be vicious or killing for sport. The hornets use insects they kill as food for their larvae....just like other wasps that we have here in Texas.

We do not currently have Asian giant hornets in Texas. If you think you have these wasps, then please send samples or images to me for identification as we are identifying any items of concern for our clientele.

Some insects that may be confused with AGH to the untrained eye:

Paper wasps are reddish brown in color and sometimes have yellow markings on their bodies and are half to one inch in length. Paper wasps make a paper-like nest out of chewed wood fiber that has open cells and hangs from a single stalk.

Yellowjackets are yellow and black in color and are hakf inch length. Bald-faced hornets are a type of yellowjacket. These wasps also make a paper-like nest, but it is enclosed with a single opening.

Cicada killer wasps have a reddish head and thorax with an abdomen that alternates with yellow and black markings. These wasps reach one and a half inches in length. Cicada killers burrow into the ground, so you may see holes left behind from their digging.

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Asian Giant Hornets

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FACTS about Asian giant hornets in North America:

1. A colony was found late last year (September 2019) in Nanaimo, British Columbia on Vancouver Island. The colony was located and destroyed.

2. A sighting and dead specimen was found in Washington state in December 2019 in Blaine, WA. This was the first reported sighting of the Asian giant hornet in the U.S.

3. It is currently unknown how the hornets entered the U.S. and genetic testing leads to the conclusion that the hornets found in BC and WA are two separate introductions.

4. Agencies are currently monitoring and trapping with lures to discover any queens or workers. They are talking about attaching radio tracking devices to captured wasps to track them back to their nest.

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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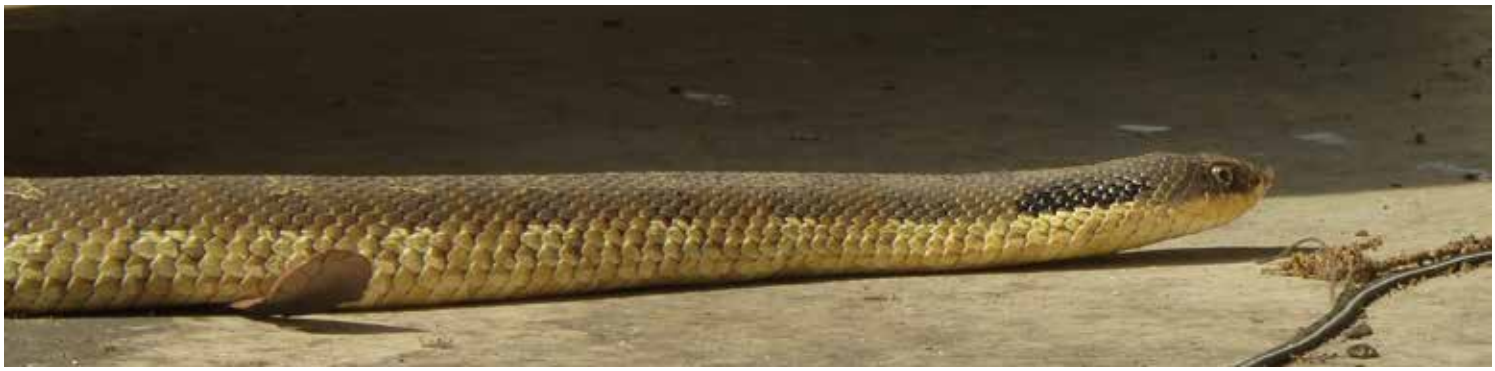
United Way Day of Caring 2020
By Susan Blackledge

Every year Berry Springs Park and Preserve hosts the United Way of Caring put on by United Way of Williamson County. This year with the Pandemic we could not host our Fall Clean/Pot Luck Luncheon. Therefore, the Day of Caring was dedicated to our flower beds, trees and landscape areas. Keeping social distancing and wearing face masks, we had two dozen folks come out to beautify Berry Springs. It was a great day and the park truly benefited from some loving and caring hands. Thanks to all who participated.



Eastern Hog-nosed Snake

By Mary Ann Melton

This year I have seen at least four different species of snakes where I live. I am lucky enough to have a pond, so I have seen both land based and water based snakes. I live out in the country south of Hutto in an area that is increasingly being built up with new houses. My little road is still "rural." In general, we do not kill the snakes we see, because we consider them to be beneficial. There have been a few exceptions.

I got a good look at an Eastern Hog-nosed Snake, Heterodon platirhinos. It was slithering along my back deck heading toward my house. I was seated far enough away that I could just enjoy and photograph its presence. It is a beneficial snake and not a big threat to humans.

Hog-nosed snakes are sometimes called "puff adders" because when confronted, the snake will take in air and spread the skin around its head and neck giving it the appearance of a cobra. They will hiss and pretend to strike. If that fails, they will roll on their back, open their mouth and play dead.

This species is about 20-30 inches long, with a thick body and broad triangular shaped head. The snout is upturned, giving it the name hog-nosed. The snout is used to dig in soil and leaf litter searching for food. Color varies from yellow, brown, gray, black, olive and orange. There are often rectangular blotches down the back and side, but it can also be a solid color. The belly varies from gray, cream, or yellow.

The range for Eastern Hog-nosed Snake is the eastern half of the United States from southern Florida north to southern Canada, the Great Lakes regions and west along the southern states to Texas.

They are diurnal actively during the day. They eat frogs, salamanders, small mammals, birds, and invertebrates. Toads are their favorite food.

The first thing I did was to try to photograph the eyes and the tail for a preliminary check to get an idea whether or not it was a dangerous snake.

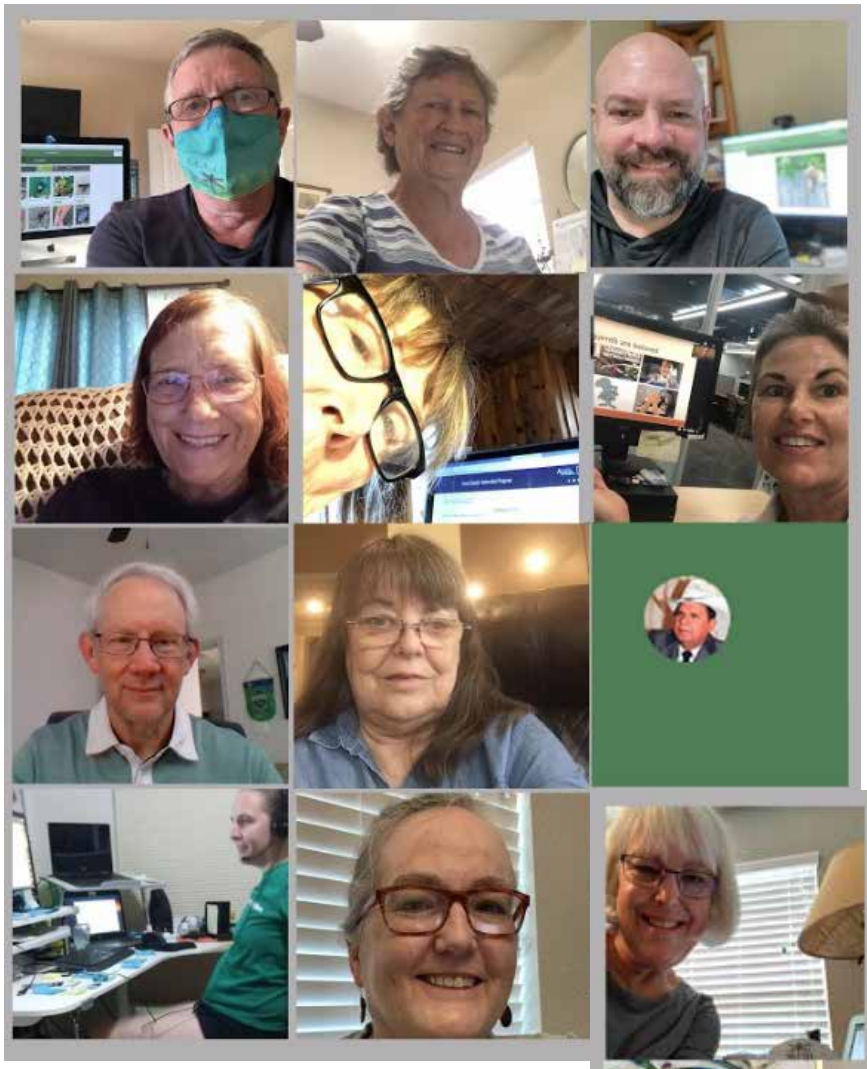
In checking the tail, there were no rattles. So . . . NOT a rattlesnake. Next I zoomed on my camera to see the eyes, round pupils. Round pupils rather than diagonal slit pupils are an indication that it is probably not venomous given the more common snakes in our area. That is NOT an absolute guarantee, but it IS an indicator. After getting as many images of different parts of the snake, I submitted my photos to an observation in iNaturalist. iNaturalist is free and can be accessed from your computer, your tablet, or your phone either on the web or as an app. When you submit an image, it will give you some ideas to choose from as to species. It is important to include date, time, and location for the scientists research purposes. You can obscure the location if it is your home and you want it to remain private except for researchers. Granted sometimes it takes several days for an observation to be "confirmed." (And, if the photo is not good, or your species is in a category not as frequented by experts, it may languish unidentified.) Reptiles do usually get identified fairly rapidly. So my snake was an Eastern Hog-nosed Snake.

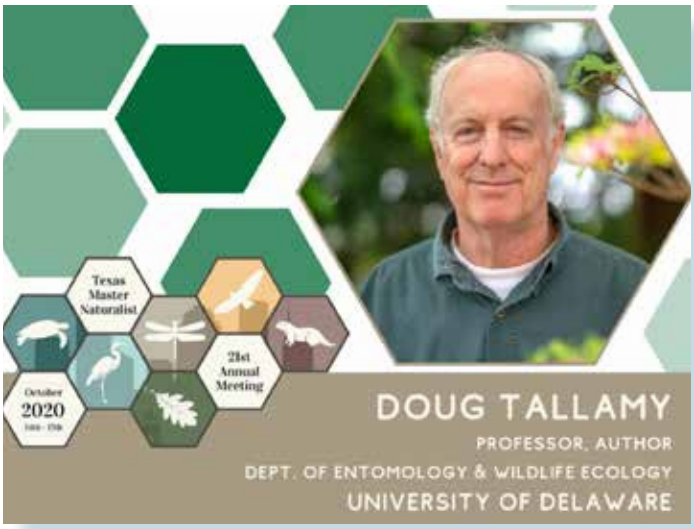
Eastern hog-nosed snakes are rear-fanged. They are venomous but not a big threat to humans. This species is reluctant to bite. According to Herps of Texas, people who have been were often handling toads before handling the hog-nosed snake. That makes sense with toads as their favorite food. If a hog-nosed snake bites a human, there may be a large amount of swelling based upon how long the snake bit. The venom is mild for humans but very effective against frogs, toads, and lizards.

Hog-nosed snakes live in grassy areas or riparian watercourses where loose soil is available to burrow. They may also be seen in areas near streams or lakes associated with open woodlands or pine forests.

Annual Conference 2020 Selfies

By Mary Ann Melton





Texas Master Naturalist State Conference 2020

By Lori Franz

This year's conference was anything but the same, yet it was also pleasantly different. For one, I didn't have to worry about packing or traveling, deciding what to wear, being able to find a seat in the classroom, and if I was just a little late no one would notice.

With this new platform, there was an amazing array of speakers Mary Pearl and staff arranged and the content was excellent. A few I enjoyed hearing from were Professor Doug Tallamy discussing simple steps to reverse declining biodiversity, Merlin Tuttle separating bat facts from fiction, and Travis Longcore providing tools to promote a safe, healthy nighttime environment for all species. Here are a few captured quotes from some of the conference speakers:

- "The great thing about trails is they appeal to everyone from 8 to 80." - Dennis Johnston, Harris County Precinct 4

- "Conservation is a team sport. We all have to work together to protect our natural resources..." - Daniel Shaw from the Operation Game Thief Collaboration to Stop Poaching session

- "What if we woke up one morning only to realize that all of the conservation planning of the last thirty years told only half the story - the daytime story? - Dr. Travis Longcore

- Our diurnal bias has allowed us to ignore the obvious, that the world is different at night and that natural patterns of darkness are as important as the light of day to the functioning ecosystems." - Dr. Travis Longcore

- "You are an important cog in the wheel of conservation." - Dr Tallamy.

- "If you own property then fix it up, if you don't, then volunteer!" - Dr. Tallamy

October Big Day & Global Bird Weekend

By Lori Franz

Cornell University sponsored October Big Day on October 17, 2020. This event is about six years old and happens in October "Because spring is rejuvenating the southern hemisphere and the northern reaches of the world are in the midst of migration." This year there were 7,093 species, 77,981 checklists and 32,243 participants. These observations make possible status and trends for many bird species that can be viewed here: https://ebird.org/science/status-and-trends

Cornell University's Global Bird Weekend happened on October 17 and 18, 2020. There was both team and individual participation. 128 countries registered on the Global Bird Weekend website and Ebird had a further 30 countries, so a remarkable global coverage. 38,463 people sent in 107,596 checklists .

"Wherever you are in the world," Tim Appleton, founder of Global Bird Weekend says, "in your garden, your local park, or nature reserve, by a wetland or the ocean, deep in a forest or high up in the remotest mountains, every bird sighting counts."

Chapter member Mary Ann Melton won 1st prize in the drawing to receive a pair of Swarovski binoculars.

Chapter Member Milestones

By Randy Spurlock

Congratulations to the newest certified GWMN members:
Doug Raymond and Elaine Steinbeck

Kudos to those who Recertified:
Jim Abreu, Dave Armstrong, Helen Elkins, Lydia Fitzmaurice, Judy Grimes, Charlie Grimes Jr, Nancy Martin, Scott Quigley, Julie Roccaforte, Mike Rodgers, Elizabeth Sartain, A.J. Senchack, Renee Warner, and Hunter Yarbrough

Big Congratulations to:
Ross Ebner who received his Certification AND Recertified in 2020. Michelle Butcher for her first 250 Hours! And Dave Armstrong for achieving 1,000 hours!

Spring 2020 Graduates:
Anderson, Amy
Bannister, Nancy
Brown, Walter (Gene)
Chaney, Michael
Chrisler, Cindy
Cochran, Jack
Dyer, Rhonda
Fowler, Amanda
Friou, Elizabeth (Ann)
Hobbs, Lori
Koschoreck, Sonia
Martin, Catrina
Meyer, Harold Rick
Scott, Mary
Sowers, Tricia
Ulrich, Flo
Whitehead, Maria
Winsmann, Anthon

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At Large Director 2 - Open
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New Class Rep. Spring - Erin Buhl

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Gault Site Wildlife Survey- Bob Waring
Good Water Book Club - A. J. Sencheck
Good Water Library - Judy Grimes
Good Water Stream Team Monitoring - Randy Spurlock
Habitat Dev. SGU Church - Billye Adams
McNeil Bridge Bats - Christie Gardner
Odonata Research - Mike Farley
Pollinator Garden - Elizabeth Sartain
River Ranch County Park - David Armstrong
Nature Trackers - Mike Farley

The Butterfly and the Bee

Story and Photos By Jack Cochran

Some of you have probably seen me slowly (and obsessively) walking around the cemetery garden, binoculars on neck and camera at hip, at my favorite outdoor site, Berry Springs Park and Preserve.

Great Purple Hairstreak using an Eastern Carpenter Bee-made slit to get nectar from the base of a trumpet-like flower.

Did you know that garden, lovingly maintained by park staff and Good Water Chapter Master Naturalist and Gardeners volunteers, is a wildlife preserve? It is, especially when flowers are blooming and pollinators galore visit to sip their nectar while enabling fertilization for production of the next generation of plants.

Eastern Carpenter Bee "nectar robbing" by using its mouth-parts to cut a slit in the corolla of this trumpet-like flower. Otherwise, the bee cannot get into the flower to get the nectar. No pollen transfer to the bee occurs.

Bees are probably the most well-known pollinators, but wasps, flies, butterflies, moths, beetles, and hummingbirds also participate. More exotic pollinating fauna are some bats, possums, lizards, and lemurs. (No, I have not photographed a lemur at Berry Springs Park yet!)

A bee getting nectar while collecting pollen to fertilize a plant is a symbiotic relationship that benefits the bee and the plant. Technically, when both species benefit, that symbiotic relationship is mutualism. At the other end of symbiosis is parasitism, where one species benefits and another harmed. Birders would quickly point to the Brown-headed Cowbird's habit of laying its eggs in another bird's nest, to the detriment of that host bird's young, as a parasitic example. A third symbiotic relationship in nature is commensalism where one species benefits while the other species is not affected. One of the most fascinating examples of commensalism is Monarch caterpillars sequestering toxic cardiac glycosides from the milkweed they eat so they are unpalatable to many predators, including most birds. Interestingly, these chemicals later become part of the Monarch's wings, thus extending protection to the adult.

I often observe Eastern Carpenter Bees, which resemble American Bumble Bees, on flowers at the park. For shallow flowers the bees can do the nectar/pollen swap (mutualism), but for deeper tubular flowers (e.g., Tecoma stans; Esperanza) they perform corolla slitting to get nectar. Using their mouth-parts they cut a hole at the base of the flower petals to get at the sweet juice, something called nectar robbing. In many cases this doesn't hurt the plant, but there is no pollination benefit (commensalism?).

This summer at Berry Springs Park I was photographing an Eastern Carpenter Bee nectar robbing on Tecoma fulva when I saw a Great Purple Hairstreak fly in to sip nectar at one of the bee slits!

As far as I can tell, the behavior of butterflies using bee slits to drink from has not been previously reported. I know this was just a case of being in the right place at the right time, but slowing down and observing nature is a great way to increase the odds of witnessing something unusual (and wonderful!).

Resources for This Article

https://www.fws.gov/pollinators/pollinatorpages/aboutpollinators.html
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbiosis
https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/science/monarch-butterflies-milkweed.html
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_carpenter_bee

Chapter Meeting

December 8, 6:30 pm

The online chapter meeting will include Voting for Officers for 2021, followed by a River Ranch Update by Park Manager, Robert Moss. We are getting closer and closer to the Grand Opening, which he will discuss and you'll be able to see photos of the amazing progress that has been made in 2020.

And finally, Jesse Huth will continue his identification of Birds by Sight and Sound. His website: http://www.huthavian.com/ also includes tours and information on raising chickens!

NOTE: January 2021 speaker will be Dr. Bethany Bolling from the Texas Dept. of State Health Services speaking on one of the world's most deadly animals in the World: The Mosquito.

Meet Jack Cochran

Jack Cochran was a student in the Covid Class of 2020. Starting out in the classroom last March, the students switched over and completed their coursework online September 29. His favorite volunteer activities with the Chapter have been somewhat limited outdoors due to the Covid-19 crisis, but fortunately there is the "Field Research – iNaturalist" option, which allows him to document his bird and butterfly and dragonfly and plant and other nature sightings so we can extend our knowledge of flora and fauna at local parks. Jack enjoy sharing some of those sightings through writing Good Water Ripple newsletter articles.

Right before the shutdown, Jack participated in a Texas Nature Trackers (TNT) project, setting camera traps in a Williamson County Park. While he hasn't been able to get out in the field to do that lately, he just recently started helping log TNT sightings through iNaturalist.

As a Naturalist, Jack has never been accused of having single focus! He's been a birder for over 35 years, but more recently expanded his interests to butterflies and moths (there are over 5000 moth species in Texas!), dragonflies and damselflies, and pollinators like bees, wasps, and flies. He loves documenting his nature sightings in iNaturalist, which is a great citizen science resource. iNaturalist is an excellent way to keep in contact with a bigger naturalist community during the pandemic, especially since you get to learn from experts around the world.

Jack started adding his observations on February 5, 2020, and recently I read he had over 12,000 iNaturalist observations and 1,200 species. He had the most observations in the 2020 Texas Pollinator BioBlitz, and the most in number of species. Wow!

Jack retired last November after doing analytical chemistry for 40 years. While free to do field naturalist activities, he also likes to read, listen to blues music, and keep in touch with former lab colleagues. He enjoys traveling in Texas and hopes to do that again soon.

Bird Notes

By Jim Hailey

Some of you may have seen this bird. This sparrow only recently showed up in our region – Clay-colored Sparrow, Spizella pallida.

These are early fall migrants, moving through our area on their way to wintering grounds in South Texas and Mexico. They breed on the Northern Great Plains of the United States and Canada and pass through our regions in mid-Spring on their way north. This species is often confused with its relative and winter resident in our area, the Chipping Sparrow, Spizella passerina, in that they have very similar field markings. Both have clear, un-streaked breast, brownish cheeks, and striped crown. And they share a gray collar but can easily be separated by two factors - Clay-colored Sparrows have a brown versus gray rump that is found on the Chipping Sparrow and two other features of identification. Whereas the Chipping Sparrow shows a black line passing through the eye to the beak (clearly not seen in this picture) the Clay-colored Sparrow does not, and the Clay-colored has two distinct black malar stripes not present on the Chipping Sparrow.

If you have a chance to observe these sparrows, which I consider it to be one of the more beautiful of this Spizella group, you need to do so soon as they will not linger here long.

For more information about the Good Water Chapter contact us at:
http://txmn.org/goodwater
or
goodwatermn2@gmail.com