



# Naturalist Notes



## UPCOMING OUTREACH OPPORTUNITIES

Cub Scout Twilight Camps  
June 20, 22 and 23 evenings.

To volunteer, please contact  
Irm Willcockson via email.

## OUTREACH IN APRIL & EARLY MAY

Irm Willcockson and TJ Butler gave a Skulls, Tracks and Scat presentation to about 100 Cub Scouts and Parents for their Blue and Gold Banquet. At Mont Belvieu, Lynn Travis, Sondra Zacot and Irm Willcockson staffed a Pollinator Booth. We put the display board on the ground. It proved irresistible to small kids, engaging both children and parents.



## TEXAS MASTER NATURALIST IN SPACE

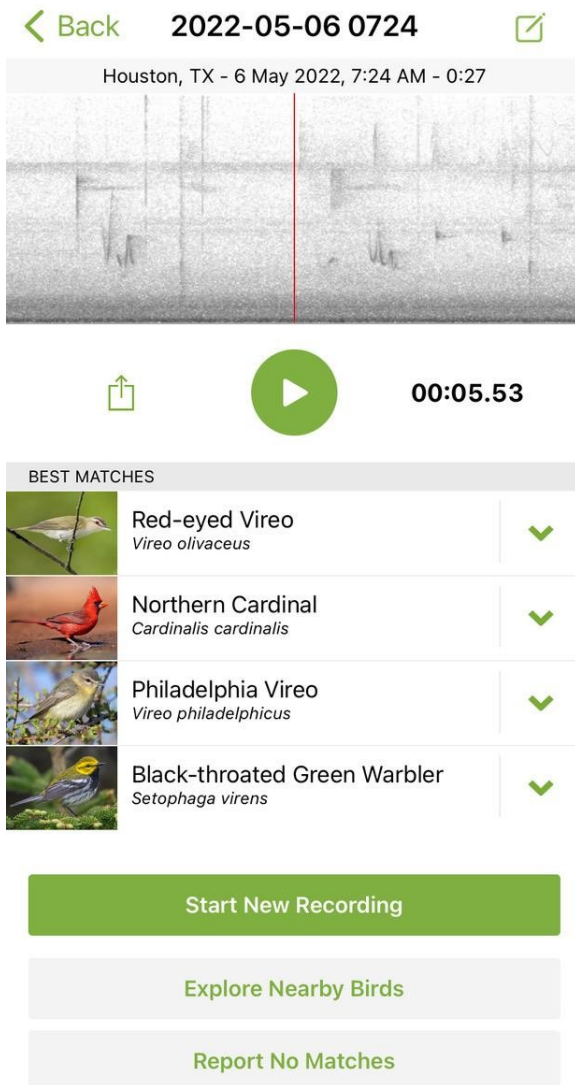
SpaceX Crew-4 arrived at the International Space Station on April 27<sup>th</sup> for their six months stay. Stay tuned for a TMN Tuesday from space with Kjell Lindgren.

## What's that Philadelphian doing in my Backyard? - Merlin Bird ID App

I'm not a birder. In truth, looking for birds can kinda make my neck hurt.

However, on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022, at about 7:30 in the morning, my phone told me there were at least four different species of birds in my backyard:

- Northern Cardinal ( *Cardinalis cardinalis* )
- Red-eyed Vireo ( *Vireo olivaceus* )
- Black-throated Green Warbler ( *Setophaga virens* )
- Philadelphia Vireo ( *Vireo philadelphicus* )



The bird you're hearing might not be in our database yet.  
Your response will help improve Merlin's accuracy.

This Merlin ID screen capture shows an audio recording at the top, followed by a control button. Images of the birds appear as they are identified.

I was familiar with only one, the cardinal. The male and his mate have been flittering in and out of the elderberry shrubs for the past few weeks.

The others were introduced to me courtesy of Merlin Bird ID, a free app from Cornell University. You can find it in your phone's app store.

To learn a little bit more about the three unfamiliar birds, I turned to The National Audubon Society "Field Guide to North American Birds" (1997).

### Flight Path to the North

Turns out, the Philadelphian is likely migrating from the tropics to southern Canada. The red-eyed vireo probably also wintered in the tropics and is not headed to an expansive range in Canada and the US. And the black-throated green warbler may have spent its winter in Texas before its current flight to a northern range that includes Newfoundland. Fly strong, little traveler!

It's amazing to me that my Spring Branch backyard is in an avian flight plan north. It's also amazing I didn't see a one of my airborne visitors. But I definitely heard them. I feel so lucky!

Joy Mullet

## Spring Training Class Field Trip - Katy Prairie Conservancy

The spring training class continues and a field trip to the Katy Prairie Conservancy on April 9<sup>th</sup> was towards the top of the class's list of favorite places to visit. We spent most of the morning and part of the afternoon with our facilitator TJ Butler and guest speakers Gulf Coast Master Naturalist Jane Wood and Iris Poteet.

Jane, assisted by Iris, gave an in-depth and very informative presentation that included the Conservancy's history, mission and goals, education and outreach programs, past and current projects, and volunteer opportunities available to Master Naturalists as well as the public. Jane's animated style of instruction was well-received and she was generous with "awarding points" for answering her quiz-like questions. I haven't decided what to do with my one point that I was awarded for answering questions about the Texas Prairie Dawn, but I'm hoping I can cash it in for one minute off of my end-of-class student presentation...

After a lunch break, we divided into two groups led by Jane and Iris. Iris started with the "seed room" and discussed the process of collecting, storing and sowing seeds of native prairie plants for use in the Coastal Prairie Seed Increase Program, restoration projects, city pocket prairies, and the Great Grow Out. She graciously offered us small sample packets of collected prairie seeds to take home. (No points were required to take a pack of seeds.) We finished in the outdoor nursery so we could witness some of the results of seed collecting. Iris is well-versed in the subject of collecting and growing native prairie plants (as well as birding) and there was no lack of questions presented that tested her knowledge.

After 45 minutes, we swapped instructors and were led by Jane around a portion of the Ann Hamilton Trail. She pointed out and discussed the history, current projects, as well as the trail's namesake of the reconstructed prairie habitat and seasonal wetlands. A 30-minute walk around a portion of the trail produced numerous examples of blooming wildflowers and busy pollinators. There were many bird sightings as well but required young eyes or binoculars to correctly identify them. Though we didn't observe any coyotes, there was numerous scat sign to show that they are plentiful in the prairie. My personal knowledge of scat lacks the excitement of those who are familiar with its identity. I have so much to learn.

- Rob Beaton



## CONSERVATION DELIVERY THROUGH THE RECOVERING AMERICA'S WILDLIFE ACT

### THE OPPORTUNITY

Passage of the [Recovering America's Wildlife Act](#) would mean more than \$50 million in new dollars each year for Texas, transforming efforts to conserve and restore more than 1,300 species of concern here in the Lone Star State, the majority of which are at-risk, non-game fish and wildlife.

It would do this by tapping existing federal revenue – there would be no new or additional taxes. By focusing on species of concern and their habitats, it would keep common species common and avoid the need for endangered species listings by getting ahead of wildlife declines while there's still time to act. That's good for jobs and the economy as well as wildlife, which is why this plan started with buy-in from industry and business. These creatures and their wild homes are the "goose that lays the golden egg" that sustains multi-billion dollar nature tourism industries in our state, clean air and water, and healthy outdoor recreation. This bill would mean millions in new grants to nonprofits, universities, landowners, local communities and others. Besides natural resource benefits, this could also transform nature-based recreation and education opportunities for including children and families. It would be the greatest wildlife conservation breakthrough in decades.

From <https://tpwd.texas.gov/about/recovering-americas-wildlife-act#:~:text=Passage%20of%20the%20Recovering%20America's,non%2Dgame%20fish%20and%20wildlife.>



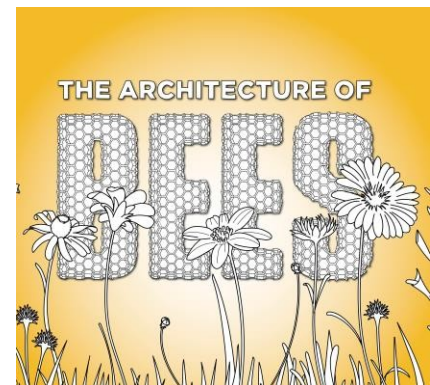
## Reduce or Eliminate Your Plastic Use During Plastic-Free July

Commit to going plastic free in July by refusing single-use plastic items from July 1-July 31. For some, Plastic Free July is a great way to try out plastic free alternatives for a month that can then turn into permanent changes. [Learn more](#) about the campaign and take the pledge to join the movement!



## The Architecture of Bees exhibit

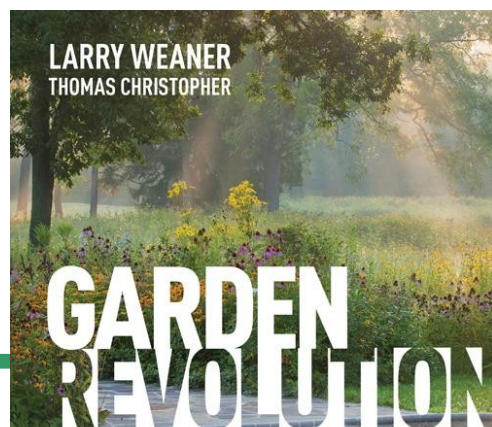
This week, Architecture Center Houston opened the exhibition The Architecture of Bees in the gallery of its headquarters at [902 Commerce St.](#) in downtown Houston. Curated by architect and beekeeper Wendy Heger, AIA and on view through August 26, The Architecture of Bees is an immersive educational visual arts exhibition that brings together designers, architects, naturalists, and beekeepers to illustrate the importance and influence of bees on human design and construction. The Architecture of Bees is accompanied by several public programs including bee-keeping courses and [pollinator walks](#) in collaboration with Buffalo Bayou Partnership; a [Biophilia and Bees lecture](#); and a beehive-inspired architectural workshop for kids. For more information, visit [aiahouston.org](#).



## Pathogen May Eliminate Raspberry Crazy Ant Populations

While crazy ants don't bite people, they are responsible for steep declines in insect and bird populations. They also attack man-made infrastructure. Control of this invasive social ant has been difficult. A naturally occurring fungus may be the answer. This fungus can only survive inside the ants' cells. An experiment conducted at the Estero Llano Grande State Park and World Birding Center demonstrated that introducing the fungus into ant populations eliminated them completely within 2 years.

For more information, visit Texas Monthly for their April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022 article "Apocalyptic, Acid-Spewing Crazy Ants Invaded Texas. Now Scientists Have a 'Silver Bullet' To Obliterate Them".



How our landscapes can be a source of environmental change

## Book Review

### [Garden Revolution: How Our Landscapes Can Be a Source of Environmental Change](#)

by Larry Weaner, Thomas Christopher, Timber Press, 2016, 328 pp.

“This beautiful book shows us that guiding natural processes rather than fighting them is the key to creating healthier landscapes and happier gardeners.”

–Doug Tallamy, author of [Bringing Nature Home](#)

This is one of those books that can change the way you see something that you are very familiar with. A good number of us see the value of “bringing nature home” and are actively doing so in our yards and in the pocket prairies and other conservation projects that we are involved in. This book has us reframe what we’re doing by getting us to pay closer attention to how nature works on the piece of land we’re gardening on or managing and to integrate the aspect of time into how we come up with plans for and manage that land. This aspect of time is a truly innovative way of looking at landscaping and goes beyond selecting and arranging the most desirable native plants, which is where many of us more or less stop. It offers us a procedure for coming up with a plan, not for a static, but for a living, evolving landscape.

The above quote on the book jacket from Douglas Tallamy captures the thrust of what this book is about. The authors, who are trained horticulturists, advocate in this book for a design process that goes completely counter to traditional horticultural practice and can serve as a guide for conservation at any level. A couple of the chapter titles illustrate this: “The Plant That Wants to Be Here” and “Site Analysis: Where are you Ecologically Speaking?” You want to find out what nature wants in the individual habitats that are present on the parcel of land in question. Listen to nature first. Observe. Check out neighboring undisturbed areas.

So far, this is not very different from what many of us notionally aim for in our back or front yards and advocate for with others, except that the scale of the main author, Larry Weaver’s projects are larger than what many of us are involved in, unless we’re assisting in a larger restoration or conservation projects like at Sheldon Lake State Park or Exploration Green. What is truly different is the authors’ approach based on the observation: “Plants occupy niches in time as well as in space.” As you can see from the title of the PLANTING A RELAY section on p. 20, “gardening in a more ecologically informed style” (p. 21) requires paying attention to the process of plant succession and deciding where in the process of succession one wants individual habitats (wet depressions, open grassy areas, etc.) on the land in question to be.

While the approach of the authors is based on the big ideas of doing things on nature’s terms and of plant succession, the book is full of practical information based on extensive experience and experimentation. Points are illustrated throughout with beautiful photos.

The key contribution of this well organized and clearly written book is in focusing our attention explicitly on managing a landscape based on careful observation of all the factors involved in enabling a living, always changing ecosystem and on taking a longer view and noticing how plants change in time and planning for that. Gardening in this horticulturally revolutionary way can be rewarding beyond the reduced need for maintenance and “...the benefits to the local ecosystem and wildlife such a garden can provide. There’s another reward as well, and that is: no matter how long you live with it, an ecologically designed landscape never becomes routine.” (p. 21)

Bob Romero

## ORGANISM OF THE MONTH

### MEXICAN FREE-TAILED BAT ( TADARIDA BRASILIENSIS)

One of the most abundant mammals in North America lives right here in the center of Houston. Mexican free-tailed bats are medium sized bats, about 3.5 in long and weighing between 0.25 and 0.41 oz. These insectivores range from the southern half of the US through most of Mexico to much of South America outside the Amazon rainforest. Most people in Houston have seen them flying near dusk. However, these bats still hold some surprises.

Mexican free-tailed bats fly fast and high and far. Bats emerging from Bracken Cave gather between 600 and 3,200 feet high, some even as high as 9,000 feet! Migrating insects fly at various altitudes, and the bats intercept them. Furthermore, these bats appear to have the highest overland flying speed, clocked at over 99 mph. They will fly about 30 miles straight from their roost to reach feeding grounds. But wait, there’s more.

Insect-eating bats use echolocation to detect their prey. In large colonies, many bats may hunt in the same area. Normally, animals will modulate their signal to avoid interfering with other members of their own species. Mexican free-tailed bats, however, can use special ultrasonic signals to ‘jam’ another bat’s signals. This causes the competitor to miss their prey, leaving more food for the ‘jammer’. Living and hunting in large colonies has both advantages and disadvantages.



While Mexican free-tailed bats are abundant, up to 20 million bats roost in one location. Having relatively few, large roosting sites makes them vulnerable to habitat loss and disturbance. For example, Bat Conservation International purchased Bracken Cave to protect the bats and other animals that live in the cave.

Even though these bats are common, they still hold surprises.

Sources: Wikipedia.org; Corcoran & Conner (2014) DOI: [10.1126/science.1259512](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1259512)