



Highland Lakes Steward

May 2014

Volume 5, Issue 5

MISSION

The Texas Master Naturalist program is a natural resource-based volunteer training and development program sponsored statewide by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

The mission of the program is to develop a corps of well-informed volunteers who provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities for the state of Texas

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CHAPTER PRESIDENT'S LETTER

By Pat Campbell

Hello from my corner. Is it ever going to rain? I hope some of you have had more than the .44inch that we got last week. I am grateful for any amount, although I would love a good soaker. Summer is almost upon us. It has been such a busy spring, but a rewarding one seeing lots of smiling faces of the kids and adults. I did receive a thank you letter from MFISD 18+ transition program teachers thanking us for the outdoors day at Inks Lake on March 20.

Kudos to Kay Herring for her article on Master Naturalists for the Horseshoe Bay Beacon. You might want to let people read it on our website if they are thinking about becoming a master naturalist. It is pretty informative. Thanks Kay.

I also want to thank Sammie Childers and her committee upon taking over the monumental task vacated by Jerry Stone. They are working diligently to get the system up and running and we need to give them our utmost support and cooperation. If they ask questions of you, know it is only to record the hours correctly. If you have questions as to what counts and does not count and AT s VT , I am sure Sammie , her committee, and/or Terry Bartoli will be happy to help. It will be important for new projects in the future to be **pre-approved** for either AT or VT. The pre approval is a must according to the state and should solve a lot of the issues after the fact. Please bear with them as the glitches are worked out. They are working for us and are volunteers same as the rest of us.



came upon the carcass of a gray fox. It was so pretty and it made me sad that he had been lunch for some animal, probably a coyote. I know they don't have a good reputation, but nevertheless it is one of God's creatures. I also came to the realization that I didn't know much about them so I proceeded to read up on this animal.

The common gray fox is of the order Caarnivora, family Canidae, genus Urocyon, species cinereoargenteus. It is found statewide in Texas, and is among the most important of Texas fur-bearing animals.

The gray fox is a medium size fox with grayish upperparts, reddish brown legs, tawny sides, and whitish throat, cheeks and mid-line of the belly. It has a blackish stripe on upperside and black tip on the tail. The length is normally 29-44.3 inches (including tail) and weighs 7.9-15.4 lbs. They are generally inhabitants of wooded areas, particularly mixed hardwood forests.

On a recent walk around the ranch, I

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Please submit pictures, articles, reports, stories, announcements, etc. to

chili865@gmail.com.

Photos should have captions and appropriate credits. The deadline for submissions to each month's newsletter is the 10th of the month and publication will be by the 15th.

Chapter Presidents Message *(Continued from page 1)*

I was amazed to learn that they can climb trees with their hooked claws. It can climb branchless, vertical trunks to heights of 18 meters and jump from branch to branch. It descends primarily by jumping from branch to branch or by descending slowly backwards like a cat.

Gray foxes usually den in crevices in rocks, underground burrows, under rocks, and in hollow trees or logs. Breeding season is December to March, and pups are born in April or May. The gray fox is monogamous.

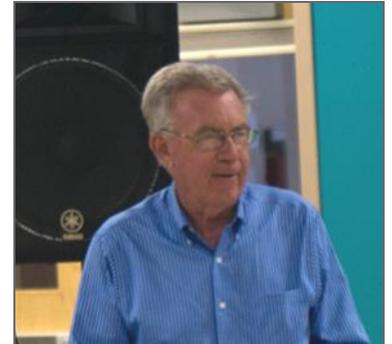
The gray fox is omnivorous and food varies with season and availability. Winter food consists of mainly small mammals, birds, and insects. Summer food is slightly changed but the same diet. In late summer and fall persimmons and acorns lead the way along

LAST MONTH'S PROGRAM

by Chris Faught

Photo by Mike Childers

Mr Bill Lindeman presented "The Nature of the Texas Hill Country" at our 07 May 2014 Chapter meeting.



Bill explored the evolution of the Texas Hill Country region beginning over a billion and one-half years ago to the present. In addition to the geological history, the talk covered the past and present inhabitants, the changes that have occurred since settlement, and what the future might hold. The Edwards Plateau, which includes the Hill Country, is one of the most diverse biological regions on the planet. Although it covers only 17 per cent of the state, more than 40 per cent of the flora and 60 per cent of the birds are found here. Over 100 million bats call the Hill Country home during the summer months. Very colorful insects, including butterflies and dragonflies also call this region home.

FUTURE PROGRAMS

by Chris Faught

Future programs are planned as follows: June we will hear from our member Judy Bloomquist on Humming Birds and their behavior, then in August our member Karen Ponder Parker will inform us about Edible Plants and how to find them in the field.

with insects, small mammals, birds, and crayfish. In one study of 42 stomachs of gray foxes, there was only one incident each of chicken and quail. Interesting! The fox while most active at night also forages during the day.

Gray foxes are thought to live 6-10 years in the wild.

FRIENDS OF THE UPPER HIGHLAND LAKES NATURE CENTER (UHLNC)

by Billy Hutson

Our membership is still growing. Approximately 20 members dropped out that weren't active and have been replaced with 30 more active and interested ones. Quite happily we welcome 7 new members from the new HLMN class.

Take a look at our UHLNC web site. If you like it please let Paula Richards know as she is the force behind it's success. You can get there by going to UHLNC.org and we also now have an information email at info@uhlnc.org

Things are fixin to slow down now for the summer except our building is scheduled to begin construction in June (with Vol's employees and not overheated volunteers) with a hopeful end date of the years end. Then after the shell is complete we will have the projects of cordoning off rooms for the interior, decorating and raising money for nature displays

Also during the summer we will be finishing our

rainwater collection building for watering the Master Gardeners and Native Plant Society garden projects.

No pictures this month for this newsletter but Paula has done a great job of posting lots of them showing our activities for the last 6 weeks on our web site. Thanks to all that sent in those pictures.

Our shirts, hats and badges are in and ready to distribute to members that were not at the meeting on the 8th.

There will be no meetings for June, July or August while the new building is being constructed but I will keep everyone apprised of the progress.

And finally, thanks to Justin Bush from the LBJ Wildflower Center for a great primer on invasive species at our April monthly meeting and to the many volunteers that helped with the several outreach programs this Spring. It was the busiest spring ever.

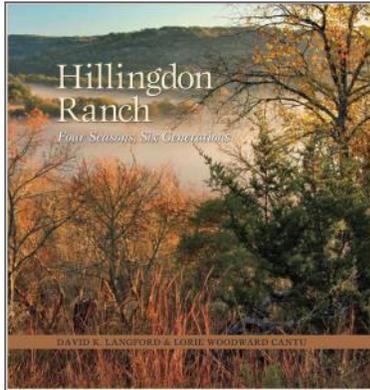
Stewardship

An ethic that embodies cooperative planning and management of environmental resources with organizations, communities and others to actively engage in the prevention of loss of habitat and facilitate its recovery in the interest of long-term sustainability

BOOK REVIEW

by Betsy Bouchard

HILLINGDON RANCH. FOUR SEASONS, SIX GENERATIONS, by David K. Langford and Lorie Woodward Cantu. Texas A&M University Press, 2013



If you love the Texas Hill Country and have a coffee table, you must have this book. You need the coffee table to support its size and heft, a place to spread open its pages and study the moody photographs--100 years of life on a

13,000 acre ranch in Kendall County. Descendent and award-winning photographer David Langford makes a visual portrait of the serious business of the cattle and sheep ranching that supports some of the Giles descendants and brings them all back together. Langford has an eye for striking detail: a row of saddles on their perches, bridles and cinches hanging from the weathered red boards of a barn, border collies alert to their task, or a cloud of dust following a cattle trailer. His photographs of nature found on the ranch is as good as anyone's. These details tell of the resilience underlying the theme for the story of architect Alfred Giles and his descendants: a bond with the land, and a conservation ethic.

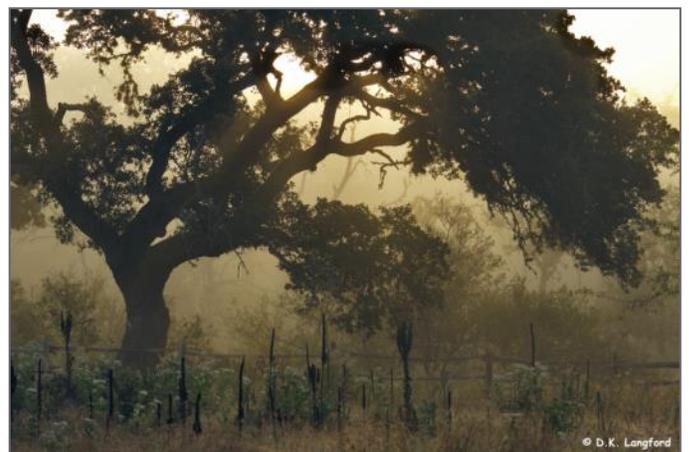
The ranch story begins in 1885 when Alfred Giles, an Englishman and a prominent architect in San Antonio, bought some land from the railroad for \$50 an acre as a vacation place. Alfred continued to expand the ranch and work in San Antonio until a cholera epidemic in San Antonio caused him to retreat to the country with his family. A photograph dated around 1895 shows a sprawling estate of houses, barns, corrals of cattle, a springhouse, poultry coop, and a large walled garden.

This lovely book could be a nostalgic moan about the good old days before ranch lands became suburbs and vacation homes. But hold on: Langford and Cantu's intent is to show how six generations of a family have grown into skilled conservationists of their land. They have lived with agricultural booms

and busts, dispersions of families to far away cities, with the severe droughts and floods that characterize the extremes of our climate. This particularity of the Texas Hill Country climate, drought, is a theme which runs throughout the book. We see creeks that flow gently from their springs, that flood, that frequently dry up, leaving only a rocky skeleton under the hillside. The text explains that learning to maintain a viable family ranch under these conditions requires a close reading of the land and a devotion to protecting it.

The authors themselves are both experienced in conservation efforts. David Langford was formerly the executive vice-president of the Texas Wildlife Association (TWA) and was instrumental in recognizing land stewardship as a component of water management policy for Texas. Writer Lorie Woodward Cantu grew up on a Central Texas ranch and was assistant commissioner for communications for the Texas Department of Agriculture.

Few of us now make a living on ranches, but the ranching past is part of what brings us here and makes the Texas Hill Country special. We all have an interest in conserving the health and beauty of its hills, creeks, rivers and lakes, and for that we must also be stewards of open lands. As well as the hard work celebrated in the pages of this book, the photographs evoke the serenity of the countryside, the passing of seasons that speak of renewal and permanence.



GREAT OUTDOORS PROGRAM—2014

by Terry Bartoli photos by Sue Kersey

Well, another successful GOP is now in the books! Actually a record book. This was the largest event ever with 640 students and 275 parents from Burnet and Llano counties. In addition we had to turn away a school from Lampasas because we were so packed with our current schools. I think our program is catching on!

There were 54 volunteers this year without which the program would not have taken place. The new class was well represented again this year and everyone I spoke to had a good time. Of course by the end of the sixth day everyone was pretty tired, but happy.

Cathy Hill's Passport was a big success again this year, and she also had volunteers to help her assemble those. The students really take ownership of the passports and are certain to line up to get their stamps at each station. The Aquatics station had lots of fun, and was very successful at seining minnows for the kids to pick up and put into the aquarium. As usual, the Birding station was a hit with binoculars, a wood duck presentation and a game of identification at the silhouettes behind the park store. Then it was on to the Monarch Migration where students (and parents!) migrated from Mexico to Canada and back again with a stop at the wishing tree. From there it was on to the Mammal station where the students learned the identifying characteristics of birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals. Then they enjoyed the tale of the opossum and it's babies as told by Sharon Drake. Finally came the Native American station which was staffed by Pat and Ricky Garcia (Ricky is a park employee) who volunteer to put on this fascinating glimpse back into the history of Native Americans with artifacts, hides and even a tee-pee.

And of course it would not have been a GOP without one day of bone chilling cold aided by a stiff north wind. Everyone but the students nearly froze. Kids never seem to notice the cold if they're interested in something.

And finally, I want to thank all of the hard working volunteers this year and from previous years. With some reluctance I have decided it is time for someone else to coordinate this event. Enter Cathy Hill who I know will take the program and make it



even more successful than ever. I have offered to help Cathy organize next year's event and will continue to volunteer every year. It has been, and will continue to be, a lot of fun for me as well as satisfying to see happy first grade faces all around me.



THE BLUE GRAY GNATCATCHER

by Joanne Fischer

The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (a member of the family Sylviidae) can be seen year-round in the Hill Country. It is the northernmost-occurring species of gnatcatcher, and the only truly migratory one. Most members of its genus are residents of the Neotropics or the extreme southern parts of the United States. The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher's range includes most of the United States except for the north-west and north-central states. In Texas, it breeds across most of the state. In the winter it can withdraw to the gulf coast and Central America. In fact, the gnatcatchers that live in the Hill Country in the summer probably migrate further south for the winter and the birds we see in the winter have spent their summer on breeding grounds further north.

The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is a very small (only about 4 inches in length) long-tailed bird. It has a bluish gray head and back, white undersides, a prominent white eye ring, a small, thin bill, no wing bars and a distinguishing characteristic of a dark long tail with white outer tail feathers. The male and female are very similar except that the female is overall a paler gray than the male. In breeding season the male has a black line on the sides of its head just above its eyes.

The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is not a visitor to backyard feeders but can be seen flitting in the upper areas of trees searching for small insects and spiders. In fact it is speculated that by flicking its white-edged tail from side to side that the gnatcatcher is flushing insects. It is known to remove the wings of larger insects and beating larger prey against a tree branch before consuming them.

The Gnatcatcher announces its presence almost constantly with calls (described as thin, wheezy notes), short fly-catching flights, and active movements. This species is well named for both its color and its behavior.

The Gnatcatcher breeds in a variety of wooded habitats from shrubby areas to mature forests. They especially like to nest near water. The nest is located



far out from the tree trunk and is an open cup with high sides made of webbing and covered with lichen or bark (it looks much like a large hummingbird nest). It is lined with soft materials such as plant fibers, grasses and feathers. A clutch consists of 3-6 small pale blue eggs with dark spots. Both male and female incubate and feed the young which fledge about 10 – 15 days after hatching.

When seeking to identify the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher which can behave much like a kinglet or a warbler with its flitting, insect seeking behavior, remember to look for the flash of white at the edges of its long tail.

And by the way – white outer tail feathers seen in flight is a great way to narrow your identification of a bird that you have spotted but maybe have not gotten a real good look at. There are a handful of species that have this distinguishing characteristic in the Hill Country. By taking note of the bird's size and general coloration you may be able to identify the species because of the tail. Sparrow size examples include the Lark Sparrow and the Dark-eyed Junco. Mid-size bird examples include the Northern Mockingbird and the Spotted Towhee. This is not an all inclusive list but gives you an idea of how you may be able to identify a bird by watching for the flash of white on the outer edges of its tail!

FINISHING TOUCHES ON LAST BIRD BLIND CONSTRUCTION DAY AT ILSP

by Linda O’Nan Photos by Judy Parker

Many thanks to all our HLMN volunteers for a project we can all be proud of! Special recognition to chief architect Ed Myatt & construction supervisor/water feature designer Jerry Stacy



Baby Great Blue Herons at ILSP by Jerry Stacy

SOUTH TEXAS TRIP REPORT, APRIL 11-14, 2014

by Sherry Bixler photos by Sue Kersey

Twenty-eight master naturalists had an early start on Friday in order to arrive at Laguna Atascosa NWR for lunch with the Green Jays. We then checked the bird blind near headquarters and the adjacent trails. A quick visit to the lake was not productive and we worried about the drought's accumulative effects on area wildlife but Chachalacas, Altimira Orioles and Long-billed Thrashers along with the Green Jays were fun to



Gray Catbird

watch. We soon left for South Padre Island and its warblers and water-birds.

Arriving at the Convention Center we encountered a biker's convention which meant parking on the highway but the crowds did not seem to affect the migratory species which can be found there every year. We located several warbler species plus vireos, orioles, buntings, olive sparrows and a gray catbird among others. We checked the adjacent bay for shorebirds and



'Shorty', 'Meatball' and the rest of the group.

waders and walked the boardwalk which is home to several rail species.

A seafood dinner at Blackbeard's was our reward for the long drive and afternoon birding. Some friendly bikers wanted to know what we were doing and Sue managed to get pictures of 'Shorty', 'Meatball' and the rest of the group.

Day two started with breakfast at the not so lovely Ramada (I wrote to their headquarters to say they did not live up to their advertising). We returned to the Convention Center, beating the bikers and spent time



Clapper Rail

there before crossing to the adjacent SPI World Bird Center for a guided tour on their boardwalk. We had great looks at a Clapper Rail and the normally very shy Least Bittern.

From the WBC we drove to Sabal Palms, an Audubon Sanctuary, south-east of Brownsville. Part of the group opted for the history tour while the rest enjoyed lunch at the picnic tables next to their bird feeders. White-tipped Dove, Olive Sparrows, Altimira Orioles, Long-billed Thrashers and Green Jays were the south Texas species well-represented here while a single Buff-bellied Hummingbird hung out with us and a female Black-headed Grosbeak made an appearance.



White Tipped Dove and Northern Cardinal



Olive Sparrow



Buff-bellied Hummingbird



Chachalaca



Green Jay



Nesting Great horned owl

A Great Horned Owl nesting near the old plantation house was easy to spot using their scope. The history tour group joined us for a quick lunch and we were off to our next stop, another Audubon sanctuary. Frontera is located in Weslaco and was very quiet this year but early afternoon is usually slow birding everywhere and the group enjoyed seeing this island of wildscape in the middle of town. Their usual resident Green Kingfisher did not show for his appointment with us but we would see one later.

Our last stop on Saturday was the fairly new Estero Llano Grande State Park with its great deck overlooking one of the lakes. Fulvous Whistling Ducks, Black-necked Stilts and Mottled Ducks were just a few of the pond's birds and the Green Kingfish-



Altamira Oriole

er flew to a log right in front of the deck. Some of the group walked toward the Alligator Pond to search for reported Paurques and found two baby Paurques on a log although they were so well-camouflaged they were hard to see.

We continued to McAllen to check into the Pear Tree Inn and were delighted with our accommodations (arranged by Carol Adams and her friends at the Chamber of Commerce). Dinner at Sahadi's was good although the service was not.

On day 3, Sunday, we were up early for a nice breakfast at the Pear Tree and off to Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park. A few of the group wanted to

hike to the hawk tower and the rest opted for the shorter walk to the closest resaca. We were delighted to be joined by Assistant Manager Xavier Deleon who was a great source of information. Not every-



Mottled duck

one saw all the birds but as a group we found Mississippi Kites, a White-tailed Kite, Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks and other raptors even though the hawk migration slows in mid-April.

Xavier pointed out an Altamira Oriole just starting to weave his suspended nest from a telephone line



Fulvous whistling duck

and a nearby Kiskadee nest - the Kiskadee is more aggressive fighting off cowbirds and one theory is that the oriole nests nearby to take advantage of his 'security guard.'

While with Xavier, Betty Cruikshank spotted a



Birding Group

large nest and as we watched, a Gray Hawk appeared. Nesting Gray Hawks are very rare there and Xavier had not known of this site. A highlight of our trip for sure! Other birds spotted at Bentsen-Rio Grande included a Curve-billed Thrasher, Black Phoebe, a pair of Indigo Buntings and a Bronzed Cowbird. Northern Beardless Tyrannulets were heard much but never seen.

We left for the National Butterfly Center to have lunch and had the unexpected help of naturalist Luis Rivera who showed us their great bird blind on the edge of a small ravine. We found Ruby-throated and Black-chinned Hummingbirds taking advantage of the beautiful garden. Green Jays, Chachalacas, beautiful Red-winged Blackbirds and lots of butterflies came to the blind along with a female Summer Tanager. Several species took baths in the unusual ball-shaped fountain nearby.

After lunch we drove east to Santa Ana NWR. Santa Ana is perhaps the best known birding spot in the valley but has suffered from the drought and their lack of water was compounded by the fact that their marshes had to be drained for cleaning. There must have been a reason for draining them during the busiest birding time! Nevertheless we found several raptors including a pair of Harris's Hawks spotted by Fred Zagst. Pintail Lake appeared to be the only site with water and those of us who walked there found several waterfowl species and our only Yellowlegs of the trip. Clay-colored Thrushes were seen near headquarters and a few Savannah Sparrows lingered.

Heading back to the Pear Tree for our complimentary cocktails, we split into several groups for dinner and P F Chang's lived up to its reputation with

great meals and great service.

After breakfast on Monday morning we checked out and headed for our first stop, Quinta Mazatlan. Carol Adams had arranged for us to visit even though they are closed on Mondays and we had a great naturalist guide in John Brush – we learned a lot from him, especially about the insect studies they did to determine which plants would most benefit the birds. John also talked about gallinaceous birds that eat leaf litter and about the many birds that need cavities for nesting.

He also spotted or heard both Green Parakeets and Red-crowned Parrots but they zipped by so fast that few people saw them. Missing these two Psittacidae species is a great reason to return to the Valley. At the beautiful new Ruby Pond we had brief glimpses of both Common Yellow-throat and Yellow-breasted Chat – the Yellow-throat sneakily returned after most people had left. Pairs of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks made frequent flights over the pond.

Our last stop before heading home was the Edinburgh Wetlands, another World Bird Site. We finally saw Cormorants and after checking with the staff, found that they were Neo-tropic Cormorants although we did see a couple of our familiar Double-crested Cormorants on the South Pond later. Those of us who ate lunch there and walked to the South Pond also found Green-winged Teal, a Spotted Sandpiper, more dowitchers including a few Long-billed, Killdeer and several more sandpiper species. Another highlight was the Zone-tailed Hawk spotted by Cathy Hill during lunch.

Then it was off to the hill country with all of us hoping to return for a more leisurely birding trip – at every stop we were really pressed for time but needed to check the major sites – there are many more! We missed only four south Texas species I had hoped to find: Groove-billed Ani, Aplomado Falcon, Ringed Kingfisher and Tropical Kingbird. Another four south Texas birds are very rare and would have been unexpected: Blue Bunting, Tropical Parula, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and Crimson-collared Grosbeak. (Other species found only further west toward Falcon Dam are the Brown Jay, Audubon's Oriole and White-collared Seedeater. And only if there is a break in the drought will some of the rarer birds continue to show up.

Thanks to all of you for coping with small problems and making this a great trip. I wish you all more good birding.