



Highland Lakes Steward

March 2015

Volume 6, Issue 3

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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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Chris Faught

IT'S OFFICIAL – SPRING IS HERE!!

With the change of seasons we all need to be reminded of some things to be aware of, now that warmer weather is here.

Here are some safety tips to think about:

1. Drink plenty of water, before and while outdoors.
2. Limber up – stretch before you go so those muscles and joints have a chance to warm up.
3. Check your gear – update and replace things like shoes, gloves and socks if they were “over the hill” the last time you used them.
4. Check the weather forecasts for the area you will be operating in.
5. Pack and be ready for sudden weather changes as they can come up fast. A

windbreaker or a layer of clothes in your pack may save your life.

6. Always let someone know where you are going and when you are expected to return.
7. If you are with others, keep an eye on them to notice behavioral changes such as the symptoms of heat stroke or dehydration.
8. Drink plenty of water – restated here because this is the main thing.
9. Take your Emergency First Aid Naturalist Guide with you.....we still have a few available if you didn't get a chance to own one. (still \$7.00)

We have a load of volunteer opportunities being offered, so please jump in and enjoy the beautiful Hill Country of Texas.

See you on the trail.

APRIL PROGRAM

by Melissa Duckworth

Ricky Linex will be our guest speaker for April. He will be speaking about native plants of The Texas Hill Country. He is a wildlife biologist based in Weatherford Texas with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). He is the editor of the Reverchon Naturalist, a publication of NRCS. Ricky has been Vice-President of the Native Plant Society of Texas and is the author of " Range Plants of North Central Texas". He has spent over 30 years studying and documenting these plants. This book has been praised as an excellent field guide and handbook. Additionally, it yields invaluable information to the reader on the grazing value, wildlife value and manage-

ment tips for each plant with descriptive photography throughout the spiral bound book. Copies of his book will be available at the meeting for sale.

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

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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.

MARCH PROGRAM

Our Speaker for the March meeting was Luke Metzger, Founder and Director of Environment Texas. He spoke to us about bills filed by the 84th Texas Legislature that could have an impact on Texas and our area.

**GET WELL!**

The chapter has sent get well wishes to the following fellow Master Naturalists.

- Morgan Beck – recovery from knee surgery and therapy
- Gretchen Pachlhofer – chemo treatments for breast cancer
- Pat Campbell – recovery from hand surgery
- Sue Kersey – surgery and radiation for breast cancer
- Mike Kersey – maintain eye strength

Keep them in your thoughts and prayers.

HLMN MEETINGS SCHEDULE 2015Chapter Meetings 1:00pm

07 January 2015
 04 February 2015
 04 March 2015
 01 April 2015
 06 May 2015
 03 June 2015
 July No Meeting
 05 August 2015
 02 September 2015
 07 October 2015
 04 November 2015
 02 December 2015 Christmas Party
 11 December 2015

Board Meetings 10:30am

Board Meeting
 Board Meeting
 Board Meeting
 Board Meeting
 Board Meeting
 Joint Board Meeting

VULTURES

by Cathy Hill

Recently while driving through Kingsland I saw a vulture perched on top of the sign for a funeral home. Though macabre, I thought that was really funny. It also occurred to me that vultures would make for an interesting article for The Steward. So with Joanne's delighted permission I am doing this month's bird feature.

Besides the above anecdote I will begin with a joke shared by Kate Boysen, the Blanco S P Nature Interpreter, who gives a presentation called "Vulture Culture." "What kind of luggage does a vulture take on an airline?" "Carrion!"

Now many of us probably grew up calling these birds so commonly seen circling in the sky or feasting on roadkill "buzzards." However this nomenclature like "cedar" and "perch" for example is erroneous and actually is the name of species which do not live here. True buzzards belong to the genus *Buteo*. In the Old World, primarily Europe and Asia, members of this group are called "buzzards" whereas "hawk" is used in North America. There are also Old World vultures, but for the purpose of this article I will only be concerned with New World vultures of the family Cathartidae, a name which comes from the Greek word for purifier. Within this family there are seven species in five genera and of the species, five are vultures and two are condors. Their range extends from southern Canada to South America.

Vultures are generally large predominantly black or brown birds whose long broad wings and stiff tails make them remarkably suited for soaring and are in fact considered to be the best adapted for it of all the land birds. Despite the oft seen image in old Westerns, it is a myth that vultures will continue to circle over dead or dying prey while waiting to feed. These powerful fliers will soar on thermals looking for food, but once a carcass is located they will approach it



quickly and begin feeding before others find it. In addition, as Sondra Fox tells the tale, a vulture pecking on your back door is not an omen of impending demise!

All species of New World vultures are primarily scavengers, feeding on carrion as the joke implied, although they are capable of killing their prey if it is already weak or dying. Their slightly hooked beaks are relatively weak when compared to those of other birds of prey, but quite adequate for tearing apart their meal of partially rotted flesh. However if the kill is too fresh they might have to wait for some other predator to open it up first. A carcass "tenderized" by a car is probably just fine. Their feet are clawed but with blunt talons and are not adapted for grasping. Thus a vulture can only eat its meal of carrion on site and not take "carry out."

Studies have shown that vultures are able to feed on this diet without any apparent ill effects. Bacteria in their rotting food source and thus also in their digestive tracts would be pathogenic to most vertebrates. They are able to tolerate this because their stomach acids are 10 to 100 times that of humans.

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VULTURES (Continued from page 3)

Vultures can also eat animals that have died from rabies and other diseases without getting sick themselves or passing it along to others. This certainly gives these scavengers an important ecological niche. Vultures are however susceptible to any chemical toxins, especially lead, found in the carcasses they eat. This is believed to be one of the major contributing factors in the decline and near extinction of the California Condor, one of the largest members of the New World vulture family. Other hazards to vultures include car collisions as they feed on roadkill or electrocution from collisions with power lines, plus shooting from some ranchers who erroneously believe they prey on healthy livestock.

Up close vultures are not attractive! Their featherless head, neck, legs, and feet are practical so that when they feed on rotting flesh, bacteria and other parasites cannot burrow into their feathers and cause infections. They also have the interesting habit of urinating on their bare legs and feet. Not only does this cool them off on hot days but has the added benefit of helping to kill any pathogens they may have picked up as they stroll through their carrion buffet.

Unlike many raptors, vultures are relatively social and often feed, fly, or roost in large flocks. Like other animals there are unique names for these groupings including a committee, venue or volt of vultures.

In flight a flock of circling vultures is a kettle. However my favorite (remember the funeral home story) is that when the vultures are gathered together at a carcass they are called a wake! When I took the photo of a wake for this article I observed them for awhile and noticed that only one or two individuals were pecking at the dead fox while the others just watched. I don't know if they were following some sort of pecking order or if the roadkill was still too fresh and they were having trouble getting into it.



New World vultures lack a syrinx and are thus unable to sing or call and are limited to grunts and hisses.

New World vultures are monogamous birds that mate after a courtship of strutting and head bobs. They don't build nests but lay their one to three eggs on bare surfaces including just on the ground, in a cave or hollow stump, or in an abandoned building, or as my brother discovered one year, in his old deer stand. Both parents share in the incubation for 35-40 days and then feed their chicks by regurgitation until they fledge in two to three months.

In Texas we have two species of vultures. Our last two Christmas Bird Counts showed that for Burnet County at least in January that the Black Vultures greatly outnumber the Turkey Vultures.

The Black Vulture, *Coragus astratus* is the slightly smaller, though stockier built, of the two being 24-26 inches long with a wingspan of 55-60 inches. Its head has greyish black wrinkled skin and a gray beak with a white tip. Plumage is an overall black with silvery white primary feathers at its wing tips, a feature best seen in flight. Its gray feet and legs extend to the end of its short tail when flying. The flight of the Black

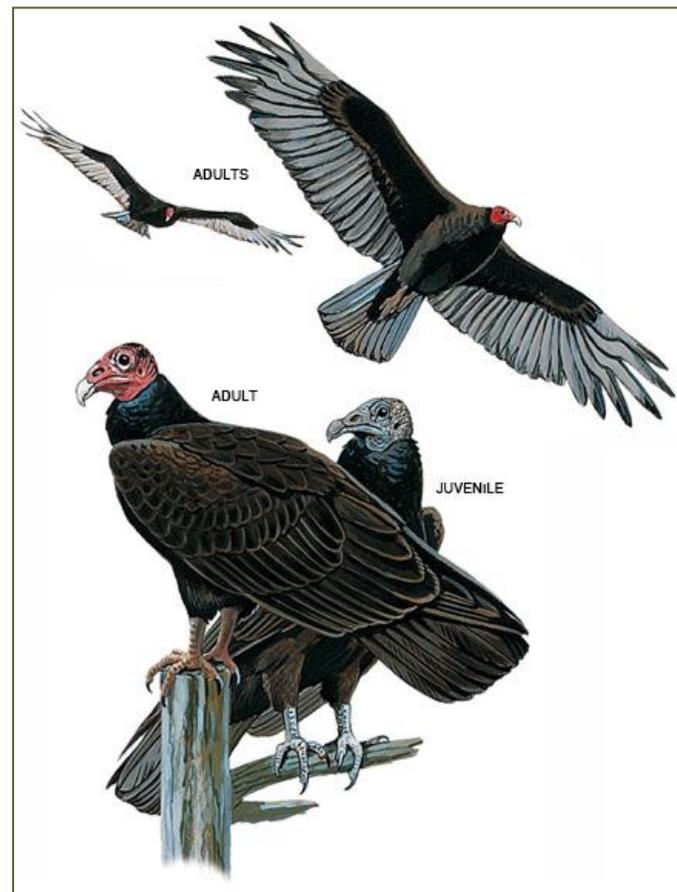
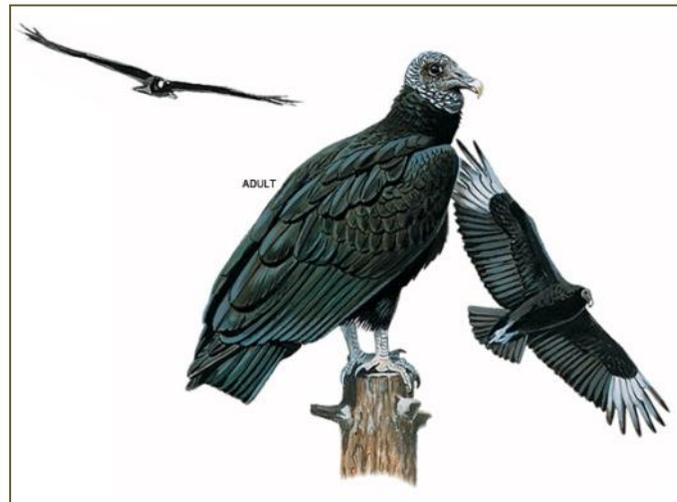
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VULTURES (Continued from page 4)

Vulture includes rapid flapping and short glides with its broad wings held flat. The range of the Black Vulture includes most of the southeastern United States and Texas and extends through Central America and into South America. It is the most abundant vulture in the Western Hemisphere and is mostly nonmigratory.

The larger Turkey Vulture, *Cathartes aura*, is 28 - 32 inches long with a 70 inch wingspan and has a longer neck and tail. Like the Black Vulture it weighs about 4-5 pounds. With its small wrinkled red head it gets its name of course from its resemblance to a wild turkey. Its bill is slightly hooked with warts and is creamy white in color. Its legs are pinkish red. Also of black plumage it can be most easily distinguished when in flight from the Black Vulture by the bi-colored pattern of its longer wings that show a dark leading edge, the coverts, and a lighter trailing edge, the flight feathers. In addition the Turkey Vulture holds its wings in a dihedral, or slight V shape and tends to fly with an overall rocking pattern. Turkey vultures are majestic fliers and can ride the thermals for hours searching for food. They have extraordinary sight and unlike the Black Vulture also have a highly developed sense of smell. It is believed that they can smell a dead mouse from 200 feet above. (I bet that was an interesting experiment!) In winter the range of the Turkey Vulture is similar to that of the Black Vulture but in spring and summer they will migrate north to breed and can then be found throughout the United States and parts of southern Canada. This migration gives rise to a rather unique celebration. Every year on March 15, since 1957, the citizens of Hinkley, Ohio eagerly await the "Return of the Buzzards" and compete for the first sighting of the migrating turkey vultures. Okay so its not as romantic sounding as he "Swallows of Capistrano" but sounds like a fun way to celebrate the coming of spring.

And lastly speaking of celebrations, vultures also have another unique holiday. International Vulture Awareness Day is celebrated worldwide on the first Saturday of each September to raise awareness of these interesting birds. So this September I will remind you to raise a glass (as good an excuse as any for this group) to these truly ugly but important feathered garbage recyclers which look so beautiful in flight!!



COLLABORATION AT IT'S BEST!

by Billy Hutson

On the bright and sunny day of Friday March 6th between a series of erratic freezes, an eclectic group of volunteers took time from their schedules to spread mulch at the UHLNC gardens that are under development.

Mulch was delivered by Phil Wyde and M J Hansen, picked up at the Kingsland MUD, and Billy Hutson and the Whaleys with two truckloads donated by Premium Landscape Supply Co. in Burnet.

Members of the local Master Gardeners, Native Plant Society of Texas, Master Naturalists, Upper Highland Lakes Nature Center, a new class student from HLMN, two local citizens and two friendly dogs all participated in a group effort to layer some mulch over the already planted and certified Pollinator Waystation and over some existing topsoil to hold down the weeds and conserve water.

The Lilley's donated and delivered the material

to construct a keyhole garden which we constructed to the first stage of completion. There are three sections to the garden: section one - (Pollinator Waystation) already completed, certified, and growing (some additional plantings will happen as time goes on and plants are donated); station two - the MG demo gardens (keyhole, raised bed and maybe more ideas in the future); and section three - for the Antelope Horn milkweed being donated by Balcones NWR.

Thanks to all for the collective efforts of so many hill country organizations to make ours a better nature center- namely Ray Buchanan, Terri and Bob Whaley, Paula Richards, Alice Rheame, Billy Hutson, Ed Lilley, MJ Hansen and husband, David Heatley, Mike and Sammie Childers, Lori Greco, Phil Wyde, David Peyton and Bonnie Mikels.

Pictures below show the eager volunteers at work.



'CLEAN SWEEP' AT INKS LAKE STATE PARK

Article and photos by Kay Herring

About 30 volunteers from the Highland Lakes Master Naturalist Chapter (HLMN) gathered at Inks Lake State Park Feb. 18-19 for the annual "Clean Sweep" activities, helping the park ready for the season's visitors.



Some volunteers -- (above) Elaine Barnhill of Burnet; Morgan Beck, standing, and Tom Ashcroft of Meadowlakes; and Minnie Eaton and MJ Hansen of Whitewater Springs – painted and stained benches at the park's amphitheater, located beside the lake's shore. Also volunteering at the amphitheater were (at right) Lampasas residents Ed and Sue Lilley, kneeling and right, and Gretchen Pachlhofer of Burnet.



Another group of volunteers bushwhacked through dense brush to establish a trail that ends at the new Bird Blind, built by members of this Master Naturalist chapter. These volunteers (at left) included, from left, Judy Bloomquist of Burnet, George Brugnoli of Marble Falls, Melissa Duckworth, Burnet, and vice-chair of the chapter; Barbara Booth, Bluffton; Sean Jones, Interpretive Ranger at ILSP, and Charles Beierle, Kingsland. Also part of this team was Marvin Bloomquist, not shown.

The HLMN involvement was organized this year by Melissa Duckworth, the chapter's vice-president. On both days, Friends of Inks Lake (FOIL) provided lunch for all volunteers, an activity coordinated by Master Naturalist George Brugnoli of Marble Falls, FOIL president. HLMN members (at right) Lori Greco and Marilyn McClain grilled hot dogs and hamburgers to serve the hungry volunteers.

A second round of Clean Sweep activities is scheduled in March.



GALLERY

Here is a photo of a porcupine that has recently taken up residence on our ranch. My neighbor has cleared a hundred acres or so and may have displaced our friend. Porcupines are, in our experience, not extremely rare, but neither are they commonly seen.

Allan Wolfe

