

T E X A S

Master
Naturalist™



HIGHLAND LAKES CHAPTER



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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

OFFICERS

President

Chris Faught
Crisfaught1
@hotmail.com
(512) 261-6583

Vice-President

Melissa Duckworth
lissaduckworth@
gmail.com
(512) 756-2813

Secretary

Marilyn McClain
mccgrammy
@yahoo.com
(214) 235-5759

Treasurer

Blair Feller
blair.feller@gmail.com
(830) 385-2782

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Cris Faught

This time of year is like a bonus to Master Naturalists. We like the outdoors, and we like to be outside doing things to experience and explore Mother Nature. As we approach the last quarter of the year, milder days and longer nights give us a chance to witness nature's changing character in the flora and fauna all around us. I challenge you to get out there. Visit Inks State Park and see the bird viewing station. Visit Blanco State Park and see the ongoing "life after the flood" efforts being made to bring the park back to its beautiful and open character. Visit the Upper Highland Lakes Nature Center and see learning in action where kids explore the natural world. Go see the Science Mill in Johnson City and take your kids or grandkids to experience the wonders of science.

The excursion to Port Aransas on Sept

20th offers a chance to see a different ecosystem for our members and a behind the scenes visit to many nature venues. If you are not going this time, you might want to go to see the Coastal Plain's natural features this month or next. The weather is fine, and the Reds should be running if you want to experience a unique taste of Texas.

Our Chapter Meeting this month will be more about the Statewide Annual Meeting, so if you are still on the fence, just send your registration in and plan to participate. It will offer many opportunities to learn about our environment, to learn about the Master Naturalist organization, and to give you a chance meet people from all over the State who share a love of nature with us.



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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.

NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS

by Linda O'nan

National Public Lands day will be celebrated at our partner parks on Saturday, September 26.

Join us at Inks Lake State Park to work on the new trail from Devil's Waterhole to the birdblind at 9 am. Contact Linda O'Nan for details.

Activities are also slated at Balcones Canyonlands NWR. Contact Jane Brunclik for more info.

We need your help!!

OCTOBER PROGRAM

by Melissa Duckworth

Dr. Phil Wyde will give us a presentation at the October HLMN meeting. He has given it the title "Light-Hearted, Then Serious and Then Light-Hearted Microbiological Thoughts For The HLMN"

Dr. Wyde holds a Master of Science in Microbiology and Virology from the University of Kentucky and a Ph.d. in Immunology and Virology from the University of Arizona. He has worked as a pre-doctoral fellow with virus-immune system interactions, and as a post doctoral fellow developing a mouse influenza model to study immunopathologic aspects of influenza disease. Phil has served as Assistant, Associate and Full Professor at the Baylor College of Medicine with areas of research being paramyxovirus & orthomyxo virus-animal models for respiratory virus, pathogenesis, vaccine, antiviral and antiviral delivery studies.

With this Curriculum Vitae, I believe we should all expand our knowledge base. This will be a must attend meeting.

GET WELL!

Prayers and loving thoughts for a quick recovery to be back "on the trail"

- Karyn Parker
- Mike Kersey (eye surgery)
- Sondra Fox
- Blair Feller (heart surgery)
- Gretchen Pachthofer
- Ellen Elly (Hibler)
- Anne Holly
- Ann Stevenson

NATURE CENTER

by Billy Hutson

- 2016 calendars should be ready for the October HLMN meeting
- October 31st - UHLNC Open House. More details at the October HLMN meeting.

KIDS DAY OUT

by Pat Campbell, Photos by Sue Kersey

The Kids Day Out event in Burnet was a resounding success. Several volunteers (some that stayed all day or most of it) planted trees, applied tattoos, showed pictures and helped with the nature game. The weather was perfect this year and we had at least 437 visit our booth.

A big thank you to Backbone Nursery for securing 150 red oak and cedar elm trees for us at a great price. The trees were amazing! They donated soil,

pots, and a care guide. The kids picked out which tree they wanted and we potted it right then and there for them. We had quite a lot of people who told us they still had their trees from years past. They were so appreciative of the trees.

I will add that quite a few Master Naturalists helped Sean with the Kayak pool as well. Thanks to all who turned out!



NATIVE PLANT FESTIVAL 2015

by Kay Herring

The Annual Native Plant Festival this year will be on October 10 at the Horseshoe Bay City Hall, #1 Community Drive, Horseshoe Bay.

Two home gardens, one in Marble Falls and one at The Summit in Horseshoe Bay, will be on the tour, with knowledgeable gardeners on hand to answer questions at the gardens. Tickets for the tours of the two homes and directions to them will be available at the event's headquarters starting at 9 a.m. Tickets are \$5 for adults; there is no charge for persons 18 years of age and younger.

In addition to the tour, a speaker is planned and a wide variety of native plants will be on sale at the

headquarters. These are plants that have been nurtured in the gardens of local naturalists. The Plant Sale committee is headed by Joan Mukherjee and Sheryl Yantis. The tour and plant sale will last until 1 p.m.

The day's overall events are organized by the Highland Lakes chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas, with assistance from the Highland Lakes Master Gardeners and the Highland Lakes Master Naturalists.

This is an opportunity for Master Naturalists to get some volunteer hours by assisting on the day of the event.

Additional information about the event will be available as the event nears.

MY SUMMER SCIENCE EXPERIMENT

by Kim Bacon

In mid-July, I chopped down a tall spikey plant in my yard, and was immediately swarmed by wasps. Pretty quickly, I realized I had disturbed a paper wasp nest (*Polistes exclamans*). They aren't usually very aggressive so I went back, found their nest, pulled it over about 5 feet out of the way, and watched as the wasps found the nest and everyone was happy. Except maybe the caterpillars the wasps will eat.

But it did make me realize that the paper wasp nest over my front door might scare the mailman. Which, in turn, might cause the paper wasps to get defensive if the mailman were to swat at them. Unfortunately, I had no place to move this nest that would be close enough for the wasps to find, but be isolated from the mailman. I didn't want to use a pesticide either. So here's my story.

Day 1:

Thought about doing something about that paper wasp nest. Tomorrow.

Night 4:

Put out my tools:

Paper bag, Broom with long handle, and Austin American Statesman for swatting defense, Water hose and nozzle with fine mist adjustment -- although the part of me that channels a 10 year-old tomboy was thinking I'd like to try the "Jet" setting.

Cleared a path from porch, through gate, around house, and in side door to house, just in case the wasps became aggressive!

Day 5:

6 am. Took shower so I didn't smell like perfume. Donned three long-sleeved shirts, thick winter pants, ugly hat with a pull-down neck scarf, leather gloves and shoes, thick socks. All in earth colors. Just being careful. Current outside temp is 75.

Sweating like a cold soda can on a hot day. No chance of smelling like perfume. Wonder if I smelled like wasp deterrent?

Double-tied tennis shoes.

Double checked that side door is unlocked.

First try. Opened nozzle, check mist. Rethought using the jet adjustment.

Slunk up on porch, stayed low so wasps don't see large armed woman. Impossible to look hip while doing this.

Aimed spray nozzle at nest and ran off porch. No mist hit nest. Wasps ignored me as I jetted down stairs.

Time to woman up.

Second try. Took aim. Mist knocked wasps down to porch floor. Floor now covered with about 28



An old *Polistes exclamans* nest on my porch. (Side)

newly soaked wasps with small concussions walking around leaking alarm pheromones. Tried not to step on them as I swung broom to knock off nest into paper bag. No luck. Nest dropped to porch floor into middle of wasp horde which was quickly regaining their senses and seeing multiple images of me. Wielding a broom. And holding a hose.

Picked up nest (hard while wearing leather gloves), dropped it into paper bag, jumped over wasp horde, ran off porch. Ran about three houses down the street. Still holding broom and paper bag.

Waved hello to new neighbor getting their paper. Hoped he didn't call 911.

ALL wasps still alive on porch. Maybe they will just move on?

Day 5 afternoon:

They did not move on. Half the wasp horde congregated directly on side of mailbox now. Not an improvement. Rest of horde is building new nest EXACTLY where old nest was. Wasp patrols reportedly looking for large earth-colored stinky woman wielding hose and newspaper.

Day 7

6 am: Placed large Rubbermaid box underneath mailbox, filled it with water and Dawn dishwashing soap. Mist-sprayed wasps on side of mailbox. ALL wasps dropped into box of soapy water and drown. Problem solved.

6:15 am: Six early-rising wasps returned to nest to find all friends floating dead in Rubbermaid box. Remaining wasps spent day chasing large earth-colored woman off porch and trying (AGAIN!) to rebuild nest in the same places.

Night: Internet advised that if nest is knocked down and wasps are killed, life will be good. Not enough emphasis on killing ALL wasps, including those who wake up early to forage.

Day 8

2PM: Armed with huge fan. Placed fan on porch



Wasp eye view of my front door and mailbox area. Prime nest habitat. Photo shows my unsuccessful attempt to blow them away. Blue Rubbermaid box is filled with water and Dawn. Hoping to catch wasps as they fall off mailbox.

aimed at mailbox where wasps are clustering together trying to build another nest on mailbox. Set fan to tornado setting. Jumped off porch as wasps go flying. Smile.

2:15 PM: Wasps returned and crawled down side of mailbox very slowly . . . clinging for dear life.

5:00 PM: Admitted that wasp legs are stronger than this cheesy fan from Home Depot. Removed fan. Wasps leave area immediately. Huh?

(Continued on page 6)

Day 9:

6:15 am Armed with idea from last night and big bowl of Dawn dishwashing soap. Four wasps spent night clinging to porch light high on wall. Two wasps sleeping on location of old nest. Use fingers to smear Dawn soap all over mailbox. Got chair to watch wasps slide off mailbox.

2:00 PM: Wasps completely avoided mailbox, but remained on porch light and original spot above front door. Still only six wasps, but two of them seem to be patrolling porch.

Apparently two other paper wasp nests on porch (out of mailman's way) were not interested in joining war effort.

Day 10:

6:00 am Wasps are out foraging. Armed with new bottle of blue Dawn Dishwashing soap. Wiped down entire mailbox, wooden door frame, and area on ceiling where original wasp nest was located with full strength Dawn. Did not wipe it off. Sit on chair and watch what happens.

8:00 am Six remaining wasps have been flying around the area, but not landing on any area where I have applied Dawn.

Noon: No paper wasps in sight. Success. Mailman can now access mailbox and front door. Approximately 28 paper wasps sacrificed to removal methods. The other two nests on the porch are unaffected and still active (but not in range to bother anyone). Six early foraging wasps alive and presumably looking for a new home.

Conclusions:

1. Remove paper wasp nests located in people-populated areas EARLY in spring during initial nest-building and wipe full-strength Dawn on area you don't want new nest built. They will most likely just move to a different area and build their nest away from your front door.

2. If you forgot to do that, you can just remove a paper wasp nest, relocate it a short distance away from the people-populated area, and the wasps will find it, and both people and wasps are happy.

3. If you don't have a place to set the newly removed paper wasp nest and just throw it out, the paper wasps will come back and try to rebuild in the same place.

4. Even if you kill most of the paper wasps in a nest, the ones that got away will come back to the same place and try to rebuild.

5. Rubbing blue Dawn dishwashing soap full-strength over the area where the paper wasps are trying to rebuild their nest may keep them from rebuilding in that area (and clean up your mailbox and door!)

A note regarding drowning paper wasps:

For unknown reasons, I left the 28 paper wasps in the Rubbermaid box filled with water for over 12 hours before I removed them all and put them in a clear plastic tub so I could look at them under the microscope the next day. About 6 hours later, I opened the clear plastic tub and was greeted by a paper wasp with wings ready to fly and a look of recognition in his eyes. This led me to do a bit of research on how and how long Paper Wasps could hold their breath. More on that another time.

SEPTEMBER PROGRAM

by Karen Bruett

The September speaker was Karen Clary, Sr. Conservation Manager at Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center. Her topic was monarch population and milkweed collection efforts being undertaken by the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center. They are attempting to collect milkweed seeds from all across the state and categorize them by the specific region they are harvested. Then they will work with schools to plant them. She also spoke about the monarch migration path and said that there are many threats to the monarchs - the greatest potentially being in the corn belt region of the United States where most of the milkweed plants are being eradicated by farmers.



Karen Clary, discusses a recent milkweed seed collection effort at Balcones Canyonlands with Jane Brunclik.

ECKERT JAMES RIVER BAT CAVE PRESERVE

by Melissa Duckworth



On July 14, fourteen intrepid Highland Lakes Master Naturalists met at the Willow Creek Cafe in Mason, Texas in anticipation of an evening visit to the Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve, operated under the management of the Nature Conservancy and Bat Conservation International.

This spectacular home and nursery to approximately four million bats from May to September is located in an isolated unspoiled area far from human activity. Appreciating the plight and decline of the Mexican free-tailed bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*), the Cave itself was partially donated by the Eckert family in 1990.

Our theatre was rustic seating amongst rocky crags and crevices and native trees and plants. The lighting was a fading sunset. The acoustics could not be replicated on any stage. The play we attended involved no acting - simply nature on it's best behavior. The bats began to emerge, slowly sending scouts from the mouth of the Cave before sunset as our

guide, Vicki Ritter, gave us an educational yet anecdotal lecture on bat behavior, bat pregnancy and delivery, bat anatomy, as well as bat predators that we were to be on the look out for. There apparently are generations of raccoons, snakes, owls and hawks that depend on the demise or live capture of bats to earn their keep. We were also made aware of the all consuming, flesh eating beetles that await at the floor of the cave--- not a far distance from our seats.

Near dark, the tornadic emergence of the bats took place creating a surprisingly cool 15 mph breeze caused by their swirling activity. These tiny mammals were so near, one could almost see them observing us as humans. It felt mystical. It felt like a privilege. Humans have contributed to their decline with the usage of organochlorine pesticides that remain toxic for decades. These pesticides are fat soluble and accumulate in stored body fat. Mother bats pass residuals to babies through their milk. That said, places such as the Eckert James River Bat Preserve give us a moment of hope and brief redemption.

COYPU (*MYOCASTOR COYPUS*)

by Phil Wyde

It is absolutely amazing to me how much I do not know although I have been striving all of my life to learn all that I could. Yesterday I was at the back of our property and saw the two creatures shown in the image above. My first thought was that they were large cotton rats. Then I thought that they might be muskrats, a animal that is common where I grew up. I quickly changed my mind again since they were much too big to be a rat of any kind. Then I imagined them to be beavers. However, that idea quickly vanished since I know that Billy has trapped or scared off the few that live in this area. Then it struck me. They were nutria. (I purposefully did not put this name in the title so that I could determine how many of you could correctly guess what animals were in the picture. Please tell me if you did or not.) Then after I calmed down I tried to think what I knew about these animals. After I did some research, it turns out that I did not know much.

Nutria (*Myocastor Coypus*), or coypu as they are called in Spanish, are semi-aquatic rodents. They are native to subtropical and temperate areas of South America where they live in burrows in and around freshwater and brackish wetlands. They feed on wetland plants.

Nutria were introduced throughout the world, including North America as a source of fur (which is now in little demand). Now in most places outside of South America they are most unwelcome and are considered to be very undesirable and invasive. (I have to say that as I was watching the two nutria that you see pictured above busily munching on grass, I thought of them as cute and not pests. However, after reading about them I changed my mind (see below).



The main reason that they are not called “nutria” in Spanish speaking countries is because there “nutria” is used to refer to otters. In the United States they are often called “river rats” while in Holland they are commonly called “beverrat” (beaver rat). In Germany nutria are frequently called “wasserratte” (water rat)” while in Sweden they are also known as “sumpbaver” or swamp beaver.

Now for a number of things that I did not know about nutria.

Adult nutria typically grow to be between 8 to 20 pounds, but can get to be 40 pounds.

Not counting their tails, they typically get to be 1 to 2 feet long. If you count the tail they usually measure 2 to 3.5 feet.

The outer fur of nutria is coarse and dark brown. However their underlying fur is dense, soft and grey. Interestingly this underlying coat is called “nutria.”

Nutria have several distinguishing features:

- A white patch on their muzzles;
- Webbed hind feet;
- Bright orange-yellow incisors;

Long rat-like tails; and

The nipples of female nutria are high on their sides. This unusual location allows the young nutria to feed while mother and babies are in the water.

As I said earlier, when I first saw “my” nutria, I fleetingly thought that they might have been cotton rats, muskrats or beavers. It turns out that I am not the first person to confuse nutria with these species. Now I am going to save you from having this difficulty since there is a “easy” way to differentiate nutria, muskrats and beavers – something that every Texas Master Naturalist should know. Muskrat tails are flat towards the latter part of their tails (helps them swim), beavers have flat, paddle-like tails and nutria have totally round tails. As noted above you can differentiate nutria from cotton or common rats by size. (Even though Texas rats are big, they are no where as large as nutria.) Just think how smart you will look when a child or adult on an interpretive hike that you are leading, or your grandchild, asks you how you know that you are looking at a nutria and you snap back with what I just told you. (I look forward to hearing how you got close enough to see the tails distinctly.)

Here are a number of more things that I did not know about nutria.

Wild nutria do not normally live much more than a year.

As you might expect for such a short lived animal, female nutria become sexually mature in 3 to 4 months and males 4 to 5 months.

Litters range from 1 to 13.

Interestingly, unlike many rodents, the babies are born furred and with open eyes; moreover, they can eat vegetation within hours of birth.

Amazingly, the female can become pregnant within a day of giving birth.

It seems that nutria were first brought into the United States, via California, in 1899. They were brought to Louisiana in the early 1930s to raise for their fur.

In the early 1940s a hurricane struck the Louisiana coast destroying many of the enclosures that the nutria were kept in – and allowing many of the caged animals to escape. At first fur hunters and trappers kept this new wild population of nutria in check. However, as the demand for nutria fur diminished, the animals soon multiplied out of control and they spread to Texas and elsewhere.

Now why do you suppose nutria are considered to be so undesirable and much more than mere pests? It is not just because they are not native. It turns out that it is because of their voracious and unusual manner of eating. Nutria eat 25% of their weight daily. Moreover they dig up and eat the base, roots and rhizomes of the plants that they uproot. This leads to significant areas devoid of plants and disruption of much of the habitat that other marsh and wetland animals depend on. Indeed, in areas where nutria populations are dense, they can severely reduce the biomass of the wetland and actually change that wetland to open water. Moreover, several coastal replanting restoration projects performed to stabilize disrupted areas have failed when nutria were not controlled prior to starting the restoration efforts.

The state of Louisiana issues licenses to hunt or trap nutria, and there is no limit to the number of nutria a licensed person is entitled to kill. For each nutria tail that is turned in the hunter/trapper gets \$5. In the year 2009-2010 445,963 tails were turned in. (I can picture Billy reading this article and then either moving to Louisiana or taking numerous, long extended trips there.)

References

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coypu>
2. http://www.texasinvasives.org/animal_database/detail.php?symbol=7
3. <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/nutria/>
4. <http://www.nsrl.ttu.edu/tmot1/myoccoyp.htm>

ECHIAM VULGARE (BLUEWEED) CONTROL UPDATE

by Sammye Childers Photos by Mike Childers

In early June 1997, Chuck Sexton, then field biologist at Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge, was traveling towards Burnet on Hwy 29 when an unusual color caught his eye. He and a companion pulled over to investigate and found a small clump of unusual vegetation that they had never seen before. They gathered specimens for the purpose of identification. After it was discovered to be *Echium vulgare*, a noxious invasive. They returned to the site and removed all specimens they could find. It was surmised that the seed had been deposited from imported hay due to the drought conditions. For a few years afterwards, every time he traveled that highway, Chuck continued to scout for more plants but none were ever observed. He did report the find to various herbariums and to Ben O'Kennon one of the authors of the *Flora of North Central Texas/1999* and it is noted on p. 448. Chuck came to believe that it was an isolated occurrence.

Fast forward to 2006. The site was selected to erect a new Victory Church. Half the site of approximately three acres was cleared and the soil completely disturbed. The church was erected and the grounds around the building were now regularly mown although no formal landscape was established. Flash forward again to mid May 2010, a photographer friend noticed the grounds of the church were dotted with a beautiful flower that she had never seen before. She sent a photo to us, knowing that we are Texas Master Naturalists, to see if we could identify it. With the help of Wade Hibler, then Texas A&M AgriLife Agent for Burnet County, Dr Baron Rector of TAMU and Bill Carr, noted Texas biologist, our identification was verified. As Master Naturalists, we knew we could not let this noxious invader take hold in Burnet County. In late May 2010, we organized a team of Texas Master Naturalists and friends from the NPSOT to help eradicate this plant from the site. This is our 5th year monitoring the site and destroying any plant that appears. We have made great progress.

Echium vulgare is a stunningly beautiful plant, native to Southern Europe. Common names include Common Viper's bugloss, blueweed, blue devil. It prefers limestone and dolomite parent soils of poor fertility. It typically takes hold in wastelands and disturbed areas. It does not grow well under dense veg-



etation.

Blueweed was imported to America as an oil seed crop. It is now designated a noxious invasive species in Washington state and Montana.

The leaves are a beautiful dark green and the flowers of the plants we have observed are a true blue rarely found in nature with coral to fuchsia showy stamens. The plant has a vigorous, carrot-like root. *Echium vulgare* is generally considered a biennial. The first year it forms ground hugging rosettes up to about 12 to 15 inches in diameter and can occur in

large dense mats. The elongated leaves are fleshy and velvety with stiff hairs. We have seen rosettes overwinter but in years with extreme cold it dies back to a few leaves at the crown. The second year it sends up a strong central stem to support the flowers. We have seen stems up to three feet tall. However, if that stem or the plant in general is damaged, it will sprout multiple stems that produce flowers. We have even seen flowers set below blade level in mown areas. The plant dies after flowering. Each plant produces 500 to 2000 seeds with average viability of 90%. Seeds remain viable for 3 or more years. No evidence has been found that the plants are capable of vegetative reproduction. Research suggests that plants bloom June thru Sept. We have seen blooms in May and October as well. *Echium vulgare* is known to be pollinated by the ruby throated hummingbird and at least 50 different insects. The plant contains a high concentration of toxic alkaloids and can be dangerous (even deadly in extreme cases) to wildlife and livestock. Horses are especially susceptible to the toxins. Handling plants can cause rashes and discomfort to humans. The plants are known to host wheat rust, alfalfa mosaic virus, tobacco mosaic virus and cabbage black ring spot.

When we first started the project in May 2010 the approximately 3 acre property had fairly extensive contamination of the plants. We had teams of about 12-15 participants on any given workday. We called 5 workdays, about 2 weeks apart in that first late spring and early summer. We attacked the plants with axes, mattocks and carefully controlled applications of Round Up. By the end of July 2010, every plant that could be identified was eradicated. The plants that had flowered were burned; non flowering plants were left in place to wither and die. Every year thereafter fewer and fewer plants have emerged but we are still finding new plants to this day, although very few in numbers. We continue to monitor the site and the two of us are able to control the whole three acres in an hour or less with long handled mattocks as the tool of choice. We found a casual spray of Round Up had no effect other than making wart like growths on the leaves. We had to add a surfactant to the mix and literally soak the crown to kill a plant. When chopping up a plant, one had to remove a good portion of the taproot too or the plant would resprout.

I shudder to think how many seeds were gathered to be planted in home gardens. And, by the way, seed is readily available for sale on the internet.

As an aside, at the request of Dr. Barron Rector, we made a presentation to the Texas Invasive Species Coordinating Committee (a subcommittee for the Texas Department of Agriculture) early in September on the success of our project and showed them how Texas Master Naturalists can help them in their efforts.



GALLERY



Who says vultures are ugly?

Turkey Vulture
By Phil Wyde