

T E X A S

Master
Naturalist™



HIGHLAND LAKES CHAPTER



Highland Lakes Steward

January 2016

Volume 7, Issue 1

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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MESSAGE FROM MELISSA

by Mellissa Duckworth

Happy New Year to all of the Highland Lakes Master Naturalists and thank you once again for allowing me to serve as your President for the upcoming year.

There are many things we will accomplish this year and many past achievements and efforts that are coming to fruition. Our new class of trainees will begin soon under the capable leadership of Ann Cook and Marcy Wescott. Their enthusiasm and example will inspire this group of future Master Naturalists.

The Devil's Backbone Trail has been completed for hiking with many thanks to The Friends of Inks Lake State Park under the leadership of George Brugnoli. ILSP will have an exact scaled replica of the Wildlife Viewing Station in the Park Headquarters. Linda O'Nan and Jerry Stacy donated countless hours to creating this model.

We will soon be logging our Advanced Training and Volunteer Service hours with a new reporting system.

We had another member attain a new milestone and recognition for 4000 hours of service; Sammie Childers. I applaud her dedication.

Karen Lundquist will lead us on a new adventure this year as chairwoman of our trip committee. What we take away from and learn at these yet to be revealed destinations will make us even more knowledgeable; enabling us to teach others.

These are just a few of the efforts from 2015 that will have a positive impact in 2016 and beyond. My point is that the work we do this year translates into exponential benefits for the future...like ripples in a pond.

I will also be re-introducing a past project to the Board that is of significance to me as well as a new project that has been brought to my attention.

I appreciate your confidence in me. More importantly, I am humbled by the thousands of service hours this group has given, striving to keep our Hill Country as naturally native as we collectively can. I look forward to getting to better know many of you and your interests.

"Certain things catch your eye, But pursue only those that capture your heart".....Old Indian saying

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.

FEBRUARY PROGRAM

by Cathy Hil

The speaker for our February 3 HLMN meeting is Josh Helcel with the Agrilife Extension Service. His topic is Feral Hogs.

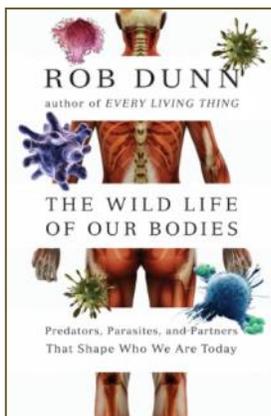
JANUARY PROGRAM

In January our speaker was Kevin Deiters with Central Texas Trail Tamers. He provided some enjoyable trail tales and many useful tips on building trails



BOOK REVIEW: THE WILD LIFE OF OUR BODIES: PREDATORS, PARASITES, AND PARTNERS THAT SHAPE WHO WE ARE TODAY BY ROBB DUNN

Reviewed by Kim Bacon



For those of you who know me, you might not be surprised that I would be interested in a book that discusses my gut and the organisms that used to live there. If you know that I had an emergency appendectomy a few years ago, you might not be surprised that I would be interested in whether or not it really “was” an organ that the surgeon said “wasn’t necessary, anyway.” Or that I might be interested in my fear of snakes was genetic.

Ron Dunn, a biologist at North Carolina State University, discusses who we all used to be (the title of part one) in this fascinating and “a bit icky” book.

We all used to be much more connected to nature. And I am not talking about buying locally grown sustainable carrots. Well, maybe Ron is though. He discusses what happened to our guts when we domesticated grasses and cows, what happened when we killed off the worms in our guts, why most of us are afraid of snakes, why we are naked (naturally), and why we were tasty and easy prey for most of our history.

It’s really cool stuff. Many of us understand how Monarch butterflies have a special relationship with milkweeds, or how some ants may “farm” fungi. But, Dunn takes you into your own body and shows how scientists from different fields are finally beginning to look at how the human body evolved with mutualistic relationships as well. I’m not going to give away the research. You’ll have to read it to understand why lice, ticks, and fleas . . . oops, time to go drink a glass of milk, just because I can.

SAMMYE CHILDERS HONORED

At our January meeting, in honor of her 4,000 hours of volunteer service, Sammye Childers received a letter from President Obama recognizing her for her outstanding service!

Congratulations Sammye!



For more information on the Presidential Volunteer Awards go to:

<http://www.presidentserviceawards.gov/>

THE KINGFISHER

By Becky Breazeale

The first time I saw THE Kingfisher was for a brief moment when it touched down on my deck in the early evening. In the



brief second it was on my deck, I could tell it was a Kingfisher, it had a fish in its beak, and it was being chased by a hungry seagull that would do anything to get that fish out of its beak. I should have known from the bird's name (and the fish in its beak) that it was a fine fisherman, but I learned they are expert at plunge diving from a perch or hovering over the water and diving to catch a fish or crayfish. When the birds are young their stomach are acidic and they can digest the fish bones and scales. As they get older, their stomach chemistry changes and the bones and scales are undigested, being coughed up as pellets. Scientists dissect these pellets and learn what they eat without even having to observe the bird.



flew into my neighbor's boat house. I waited patiently for it to come out, but it never did. I assumed that THE Kingfisher has its nest in the boat house. I see other birds coming in and out of that boathouse and the neighbors are never there, so it makes a perfect nesting ground. I **had** to know if THE Kingfisher had a nest in there. OKAY. I trespassed – but I found the nest, an earthen nest on the ceiling of the boat house. I learned that these birds rarely nest in tree cavities and their nests are lined with undigested fish bones

Several weeks later, I had my second encounter with THE Kingfisher. It was on top of a pole and as soon as it saw me, it

and scales which provide insulation.

The next evening I was prepared – I had my binoculars. I spied the bird on a piling at the opposite side of the neighbor's



boat house and could see it well enough to identify it as a female Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*. The Belted Kingfishers are powdery blue-gray with males having one blue band across the white breast and the females having a blue and chestnut band, making the female more colorful. Their sexual roles are not reversed and scientists are not really sure why the female has the extra belt unless to attract the male.



It is winter now and I have not seen THE Kingfisher for a long time so I suppose she has migrated. Belted Kingfishers winter throughout Mexico,

Central America, Venezuela, and Columbia. I look forward to her return in the Spring and maybe she will find a male during breeding season. The Kingfishers find new mates each breeding season, but are monogamous during the season. They work together chasing away intruders from their nest with their loud rattling sound. When they suspect an intruder they may also heave their body up and down with their crest elevated, or fly back and forth along the water, rattling. If truly threatened, they will spread their wings, scream, and raise the patch of white feathers next to each eye. I can't wait to see that.

https://www.allaboutbirds/guide/Belted_Kingfisher

<http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/belted-kingfisher>

THE SANDHILL CRANE

by Joanne Fischer

A bird that winters in Texas, the Sandhill Crane (Order: Gruiformes, Family: Gruidae) is one of the largest bird species of North American and is the most common of all the world's cranes. Standing nearly five feet tall and having a wingspan of up to seven feet, it is a bird that is very hard to miss. It's appearance has been described as "elegant". Sandhill Cranes have bulky bodies with long necks, long black legs and very broad wings. They have short tails which are covered with drooping feathers and are sometimes referred to as a "bustle". As a reference, they are somewhat similar in shape to Great Blue Herons. The Sandhill Crane is slate gray in color with both sexes sporting a crimson cap. Juveniles are gray with rusty brown coloration and do not have the red cap.



The Sandhill Crane is one bird species that "resembles" its name in that its preferred habitat is sand hills! They breed and feed in open wetlands, fields and prairies (preferably with standing water) across the United States and Canada. In summer they are residents in most northern and some southeastern states and in winter they migrate to several southern states (including Texas) and Mexico. Sandhill Cranes are omnivorous. Their diet consists primarily of seeds and cultivated grains but may also include berries and various small vertebrates and invertebrates depending upon the season and availability of seeds and grains.



Sandhill Cranes form quite large flocks – some reported to be in the tens of thousands – during migration and on their wintering grounds. They migrate high in the sky trumpeting as they fly. And a trumpeting flock can be heard from miles away. Many of us listen (then watch) for migrating flocks in the spring and fall over the Hill Country. Their call is very distinctive (a trumpeting or bugling call) and once you become familiar with it you will automatically look to the sky to locate the flocks when you hear the sound.

Sandhill Cranes can live to be 20 to 30 years of age and do not begin mating until they are about six or seven years old. They most often mate for life and

because they are such a long-lived birds, mating bonds may last 20 or more years. Sandhill Cranes are known for their "dancing skills" and display to each other with lively dances during mating season. Courting cranes stretch their wings, pump their heads, bow and then leap into the air in an amazingly graceful mating dance. During mating, pairs also vocalize in a behavior known as "unison calling." They throw their heads back and produce something akin to a "duet"—an extended litany of coordinated song.

They nest in small, isolated wetlands – bogs or

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SANDHILL CRANE

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marshes. Nests may be built either in shallow water (sometimes up to 3' deep) or dry ground close to water. They are constructed of dried plant materials – typically whatever is available at the nest sight. Both sexes participate in the building of the nest and the final product is about three feet across and six inches deep. They have one brood per year and although each female usually lays two eggs, only one nestling typically survives to fledge. The incubation period is about a month and at hatching the chicks are well-developed, covered with downy feathers and very active. Chicks are able to leave the nest within hours of hatching and are even capable of swimming within the first day. Mated pairs remain together throughout the year and their juvenile offspring stay with them throughout the summer, through migration and all through their first winter, until the 9- to 10-month-old juveniles finally separate from their parents the following spring.

Although adult cranes have very few predators because of their size, eggs and nestlings have many including foxes, raccoon, coyotes, wolves, and bobcats as well as other bird species like crows, ravens, eagles and owls. Adult Cranes attack aerial predators by leaping into the air and kicking their feet forward. They threaten terrestrial predators by spreading their wings and hissing, eventually resorting to kicking.

Sandhill Cranes are considered Of Least Concern from a conservation standpoint. In general, Sandhill Cranes are numerous and their populations have been increasing by about 5 percent per year since 1966, according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. But the crane is still vulnerable to loss of habitat, and wetland conservation is critical to the future of this species not only at their breeding grounds but also at their major migration stopover points (various sites on the Great Plains) and their wintering grounds.

Okay, now here's something I learned while doing research on this species (but many of you "native Texans" and outdoorspeople may know all about this). What I learned is that the Sandhill Crane is a

"game bird" - yes that's right – they can be and are hunted. Several states throughout the country allow hunting of these birds. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as well as various State Park Departments have websites regarding the hunting regulations for Sandhill Cranes. One reference site regarding crane hunting in Texas stated that "Sandhill Crane hunting has grown in popularity over the last ten years. Once seen as a shorebird throughout the country, the Sandhill Crane offers some exciting hunting opportunities". The same site reported that the Sandhill Cranes can reach weights up to 18 pounds and that despite their size and crane exterior, they offer wonderful table fare!

A South Dakota website stated that while Sandhill Cranes are famous for massing in great numbers along the Platte River in Nebraska and at wildlife refuges in the far South, they do migrate through South Dakota in the spring and fall and that the fall migration offers a "unique hunting opportunity for those in the right place at the right time". And in Minnesota, Sandhill Cranes are a protected species, but it is legal to hunt them in parts of northern Minnesota during the Sandhill Crane hunting season each year. Go figure!

The hunting season for Sandhill Cranes in the various states is short in duration but the daily bag limit can be as many as three birds per person per day. The final surprise for me was in one of the hunting sites that cautioned that the Sandhill Crane may be accompanied by the endangered Whooping Crane on occasion. The site warned that hunters must be aware of this and "certain of their target". Yikes!

Now I have nothing against hunting. Having grown up in the upper Midwest, hunting was (and is) very popular. But even at that I still have a hard time thinking about the Sandhill Crane as a target for hunters. So now, any time I am fortunate enough to see (or hear) a flock migrating through the Hill Country or spot these elegant creatures grazing in a cut field of grain, I will have a hard time not thinking "steak in the sky" (a phrase used in one of the crane hunting websites) or "crane under glass"!

GALLERY

By Sue Kersey



Sir Owlton



Orange-crowned warbler



Rare to this area Yellow-throated warbler



Lesser goldfinch



Mute Swan named Charles over 20 yrs. old



Sharp-shinned hawk looking for breakfast