

JULY PROGRAM: COMMENT: PICS LINKED TO ALL PICS FOLDER

THE NATURAL AREA PRESERVATION ASSOCIATION & A LOCAL PROPERTY, "LOS RINCONES"



Los Rincones in the hills south of Kerrville

Our July program will be a presentation on "Los Rincones", by David Bezanson, the Texas State Manager for properties held by the Natural Area Preservation Society (NAPA) in Texas. Many of you are familiar with this property from our Chapter's Class of 2003 project there to build exclosures to protect young trees and trees trying to re-grow after the Sheppard-Rees fire in August 2000 from the browsing deer.

Natural Area Preservation Association (NAPA) is a private, non-governmental **land trust** dedicated to conserving land in Texas to benefit wildlife and to preserve examples of our natural heritage.

NAPA protects more than 60 properties in Texas, with more acquisitions in progress. Several of these properties are in the Hill Country.

NAPA uses three methods of preserving land: donation, purchase, or conservation easement. A conservation easement is an agreement between a landowner and NAPA that allows the grantor to retain title to a piece of land while limiting future development and ensuring that the land will remain in a natural state. NAPA provides the means for preserving land without imposing governmental restrictions and offers alternatives for landowners who want their land to be preserved and managed for generations to come.

Mr. Bezanson will discuss how the Los Rincones property came to NAPA, what they would hope to do with the property in the future. Los Rincones is a 138 acre tract in the hills south of Kerrville that preserves juniper-Lacey oak woodland and threatened plants. The property also has several box canyons and other interesting topography. Our Chapter may be able to assist in some of the projects at Los Rincones.

This program will be held at Riverside Nature Center, 150 Francisco Lemos St, in Kerrville, on **Monday, July 26th** beginning with a social time at **6:30 PM**. The meeting begins at **7:00 PM**. The meeting is free, and the public is invited to attend. We hope that you can join us.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

BY SANDY PEÑA

At our Board meeting on June 23rd, several decisions were made that I'd like to share with everyone.

First, the Board has approved our very first Chapter fund-raiser. We were approached by Riverside Nature Center to co-sponsor their fall fund-raising event, Down By The Riverside (DBTR), which is scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 2nd. This means we will share both the expenses and the profits of this event. Our responsibility will be to provide for all the educational-type activities, while the RNC will conduct the tree/plant sale, the food concession, canoe rides, etc. Since our May Day event was rained out, this is a great opportunity to re-schedule some of the speakers/exhibitors we had lined up. This year's DBTR promises to be great fun for the entire family with lots of special attractions, so mark your calendar now! The plant sale will run from 8 am to 3 pm, and the nature festival will run from 10 am to 3 pm. We'll be needing some volunteers that day, so stay tuned for details later this summer.

Second, the Board approved a Chapter FAQ (frequently asked questions) which is a handy reference sheet about our Chapter activities. A big thanks to Bob Richie for working this up for us. The FAQ is being sent out to all the new fall class members, and we will have copies available at the July meeting for current members and visitors.

Third, the Board approved 13 applications for the fall class and will be considering another 10-12 at our July Board meeting. Once again we will have a full class of eager folks from all over our service area. And thanks to Betty Thomas, who has volunteered to lead our mentoring effort, these new class members will be paired with current members to help them feel welcome. In addition, we're planning a special reception for the class at our August meeting (more about that next month). Hope you're having a great summer so far!

CALENDAR

"APPROVED AT" INDICATES THAT AN EVENT HAS BEEN APPROVED AS ADVANCED TRAINING FOR OUR CHAPTER. There are fewer Advanced Training opportunities in the summer than any other season, since folks tend to be away more, and non-Master Naturalists might not enjoy being outside for hours in the sun at 95 degrees.

For [Cibolo Nature Center events](#), contact Cibolo at (830) 249-4616 or by e-mail at nature@cibolo.org, or online at www.cibolo.org under "Learning". **Class sizes are limited, so it is important to pre-register. Fees apply to some events.**

July 21: Master Naturalist - Hill Country Chapter- Board Meeting - Noon at Riverside Nature Center. **Chapter members may attend.**

July 26: Texas Master Naturalist - Hill Country Chapter, "Natural Area Preservation Association: Los Rincones, Past, Present and Future" by David Bezanson, Texas State Manager for NAPA at **6:30 PM** at Riverside Nature Center, 150 Francisco Lemos St, Kerrville (see article above).

July 27: "The Amazing Achievements of the Early Texas Naturalists" by Lonnie Childs at **Native Plant Society of Texas, Fredericksburg Chapter** at **7 PM**. New meeting location is **Gillespie County Historical Society**. See <http://www.npsot.org/Fredericksburg/>

KNOW THREE OF THE COMMONEST SNAKES

OF THE HILL COUNTRY

Snakes are more active in our warm summer weather and thus we are more likely to see them now.

Many of us have Volunteer Projects working with the public in parks and nature centers. If a snake appears, as Master Naturalists, we are expected to be able to tell folks something about it. While Texas has many species of snakes, the following three are frequently seen, NONVENOMOUS and have some interesting characteristics to help you identify them.

TEXAS RAT SNAKE

Elaphe obsoleta lindheimeri



Photo by Priscilla Stanley

Abundance:	Very common. Most often appears in suburban areas. Most likely to be found high in trees, hidden in barn rafters or attics, henhouses, or in abandoned automobiles or machinery.
Size:	Long and slender, averaging 42 to 72 inches
Habitat:	Abundant in deciduous woods and pastureland. Also found in riparian areas.
Prey:	Feeds almost entirely on warm-blooded prey; a major predator on birds and their nestlings. Fond of caged birds on suburban patios. Small mammals are also primary prey, with larger ones being overpowered by constriction.
Coloring:	Dark brown, rectangular vertebral blotches separated by yellowish-brown transverse areas. Older adults are much darker in color.
Behavior:	A rapid, agile climber of trees. It also frequently patrols creek banks from the water. The Texas rat snake is frequently observed in suburban backyards when one investigates the source of raucous scolding by scrub jays and finds this snake either high in the tree branches or in a rock wall.

WESTERN COACHWHIP

Masticophis flagellum testaceus



Photo from University of Texas, Herps of Texas

The raised head and forebody to better see an intruder is characteristic behavior for a Coachwhip.

Abundance: Among the **most common large, nonvenomous serpent in terrestrial environments** throughout its range.

Size: Average **4 to 5.5 feet**. The record is 6 feet 8 inches.

Habitat: **Almost every terrestrial, non-urban habitat** in western Texas.

Prey: Almost any smaller vertebrate; Texas spiny and tree lizards probably compose much of its diet. Also eats other snakes, mammals, birds, frogs and baby turtles.

Coachwhips use sight to hunt, and have evolved for high speed pursuit of prey, at the expense of constricting ability. Coachwhips primary feeding response is determined by vomerolfaction. Coachwhips are born with an instinctive reaction to the scent of prey such as the lizards and snakes abundant in their range.

Coloring: On the limestone Edwards Plateau, western coachwhips are predominantly **unmarked silvery tan** in color.

Behavior: **The Western Coachwhip is often seen hunting during the heat of the day, even on rocks fields above 100 degrees.** Only coachwhips and the closely related whipsnakes are sufficiently resistant to heat and desiccation to be able to hunt in the heat of the day which is a major predatory advantage since this is when their lizard prey is most active as well. The downside of daytime hunting is that the coachwhip is itself hunted by red-tailed hawks.

Whipsnakes are exceptionally alert, and perhaps even curious. **An adult whipsnake surprised in the field may, like a slim-necked cobra, raise its head and forebody well off the ground to get a better look at an intruder.** Coachwhips often flee a short distance and then raise up again for a significant period to stare at the intruder. This is possible because of their long-distance vision developed for their day-time hunting.

TEXAS GARTER SNAKE

Thamnophis sirtalis annectens



Abundance: Uncommon, but fairly numerous in scattered locales.

Size: Average **18 to 30 inches**.

Habitat: Riparian meadowland and juniper-wooded canyons along the eastern edge of the Edwards Plateau. Also on tall grass prairie and flooded pastures.

Prey: Any moving prey small enough to swallow, including earthworms, minnows, tadpoles, frogs and small toads.

Coloring: A broad orange stripe runs down the center of its dark back. On the forward third of its trunk, a yellow lateral stripe runs down each side of its body.

Behavior: In the summer months, Texas garter snakes are **active in the morning and evening**. Their lack of wariness makes them interesting to watch.

Editor's Commentary: We have been fortunate to have been visited on our property by all of the above snakes. Even if you really like snakes, a sudden encounter with a large snake can be disconcerting. The more field marks and behaviors that you know, the more rapidly you can identify your snake. It is then more enjoyable to follow it a while and observe its behavior.

Our first **Texas rat snake** was found by an extremely upset, scolding scrub jay in a low rock wall. After the snake had enough of us looking at it, it smoothly glided up a nearby blackjack, and all 5 feet of the snake disappeared into a hole in a hollow branch. Our second was found trying to eat baby cottontails in a nest in a large prickly pear cactus. Our third was basking in the garden, and then circumnavigated the house, methodically examining each window as a potential hiding place. It was able to easily reach up two feet looking for a hole to crawl into. Eventually it settled for a nap on a stone window ledge on the front porch.

We have had several **Coachwhips**. One I nearly stepped on three times in the grass in a single day on various parts of the property. The startled snake accelerates with rapid high-amplitude serpentine sine-waves, resulting in a momentarily startled human observer. Last week's 5 foot long coachwhip, seen on a hot afternoon, exhibited the "slim-necked cobra" behavior, raising up about 1 foot and starring for about 30 seconds, several times, before smoothly gliding under the door into our RV barn.

The **Texas garter snake**, with its three brightly colored longitudinal stripes, is the most readily identifiable of these three snakes. Last week, a 3 foot long specimen was resting against our back door as I opened it at 6:30 AM. It smoothly moved into a flowerbed and totally disappeared. Amazingly, I could find no further sign of it.

Enjoy your snakes!

Information from: Tennant, Alan, *A Field Guide to Texas Snakes*, Second Edition, 1998, Gulf Publishing Co.

We find this to be a very useful and informative field guide for identifying the snakes we see.

Also www.zo.utexas.edu/research/txherps/ from the University of Texas, Zoology Department, "Herps of Texas"

MASTER NATURALIST CERTIFICATIONS FOR 2004

At our July meeting, **Sharon Corley** will achieve certification as Texas Master Naturalist, and **Edna Platte** will achieve re-certification as a Master Naturalist. This will make **21%** of our 47 members that are certified so far in 2004. Congratulations to Sharon and Edna!

For the information of our prospective members, a Master Naturalist achieves certification by completing the 40 hours of required training, a minimum of 40 hours of approved volunteer service, and the minimum of 8 hours of approved Advanced Training within approximately one year. The Master Naturalist program encourages members to continue serving their communities, and continue their education by requiring a minimum of 40 hours of approved volunteer service, and a minimum of 8 hours of approved Advanced Training in each successive year to achieve recertification for that year.

BLACK WITCH MOTH SIGHTING

Ascalapha odorata

by Maggie Tatum



Photo by Jim Stanley

Every day there are such wonderful revelations! About 2 weeks ago, I think it was probably June 29th, I was sitting in my living room with a friend when I caught sight of a huge black moth resting at the top of the rock fireplace against the white ceiling. It was absolutely beautiful.

Because it was still there when I was ready for bed, I left the doors open so it could proceed on its way to wherever big black moths go. I tried to find the same moth on the internet, but "black moth" yielded me many, many sites but none where I could find "my" moth. My next step was to look in books at RNC and Hastings, but to no avail. Feeling completely frustrated, I mentioned my experience to Amy Sugeno, the TPWD person at the Old Tunnel, the following Friday night. Of course she knew immediately what it was and told me Mike Quinn was keeping a list of sightings.

The next day I e-mailed Mike with the information I had, not knowing if it was male or female.

Leaving the computer I walked into my bedroom to tidy up, and there on the floor near the front window was a dead "Black Witch." I'm assuming it is the same one that I had seen earlier, but now I could identify it as a male. Instead of leaving, he must have been lurking in some corner of my house.

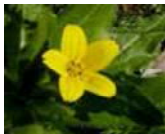
I now have him on a piece of paper on a table where I can admire him. However, I really wish that on the first sighting I had done with him as I do with birds that fly into my house. That is catch them, take them outside and speed them on their journey.

Editor's Note: We also enjoyed a Black Witch Moth sighting in Gillespie County on June 9th and 10th. The photo above was taken at 11 AM high on a west-facing wall. This moth (or a similar male) had spent the previous night high on a north facing wall in our breezeway. Like Maggie's moth, it seemed to have a preference for resting on rock. The male moth we observed was approximately six inches across. The Black Witch Moth is the largest moth north of Mexico, according to Mike Quinn, TPWD Invertebrate Wildlife Biologist.

REFRESHMENTS

Refreshments for our July meeting will be provided by **Tracy Garofano** and **Emily Matheson**.

Please send newsletter contributions and comments to your Editor, Priscilla Stanley at jpbstan@ktc.com



Texas Star

Lindheimeria texana