

THE TEXAS STAR

APRIL 2008 VOL. 6 No 4



HILL COUNTRY CHAPTER

Chapter Website: <http://www.hillcountrymasternaturalist.org>

APRIL PROGRAM

Bobby Humphrey, Natural Resource Conservation Coordinator with the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA), will present “Erosion Control and the Creekside Project” at this month’s meeting of the Texas Master Naturalist—Hill Country Chapter. As Natural Resource Conservation Coordinator, Humphrey coordinates planning efforts for LCRA’s Creekside Conservation Partnership Program, an 18-year-old effort to reduce soil erosion and agricultural nonpoint-source pollution in the lower Colorado River basin. LCRA began the Creekside project in 1990, and the resulting partnership between LCRA, private landowners, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCAS), and local soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs) provides a cost-share incentive for projects that help retain soil and enhance productivity on privately owned land within the watershed of the statutory district. Eligible counties include Bastrop,

Blanco, Burnet, Colorado, Fayette, Lampasas, Llano, Matagorda, San Saba, Travis, and Wharton. The Creekside Conservation Program encourages an ecosystem approach to conserving soil and water and enhancing wildlife habitat through improved vegetation. To date the Creekside Program has helped 195 landowners develop comprehensive management plans for more than 78,000 acres. Through the program, landowners have treated more than 35,000 acres, including 13,200 acres of selective brush removal. The meeting will be at Riverside Nature Center, 150 Francisco Lemos Street in Kerrville, Monday, April 28, at 7 p.m. There is no charge, and the public is invited. For more information contact Warren Ferguson, 830-896-9500 or cwferg@kctc.com.



THIS MONTH WE HONOR...

Certified Texas Master Naturalist

Barbara Gaddis

Bronze (250-hour) Milestone

Donna Robinson

2008 Recertification

Cynthia Johnson

Martha Miesch

Lars Nielsen

Jim Stanley

Priscilla Stanley

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

PLANT SALE

Just a reminder and note of encouragement that there will be a Native Plant Sale in connection with Earth Day at Riverside Nature Center on Saturday, April 19 (see details below). Unlike the fall plant sale which is a partnership between our Chapter and RNC, the spring plant sales are partnerships between the Kerrville Native Plant Society and Riverside. So, while our Chapter doesn't get any of the money, we do a large part of the work and generate a lot of volunteer hours. Furthermore, this is a place to find a lot more good, native plants than you are likely to find anywhere else. Since we are not partners for this sale, Master Naturalists are not eligible for the Friday Night "Members Only" sale.

In addition to being a good place to find native plants, there will be two talks that will qualify as AT, Donnie Frels from the Kerr Wildlife Management Area will talk on "Changes in Our Ecosystems Since 1850" at 9:30 and Jan Fulkerson from the Texas Forest Service will talk on "Wildfire-Preparedness in the Hill

Country" at 1:00 (See details below). So if you are not already signed up to volunteer for the event, come out, visit with us, buy some plants and hear some good talks. Bring a friend!

NEW CLASS APPLICATIONS

This month marks the beginning of our Application Period for the New Class which will be held from August 25 through November 12. This is especially aimed at those of you who get our newsletter but have not become members. We know we share a lot of interests and we would especially like to have you join us as members by taking the classes this fall. For those of you who are members, how about recruiting your best friend or neighbor? Or for that matter, your spouse...we especially like to have spouses become members because it turns out that people tend to be more active in Chapter events if their spouse is also a member.

Anyone interested, please contact John Huecksteadt by calling 830-997-4843 or e-mail johnh@beecreek.net.

Jim Stanley



CELEBRATE EARTH DAY 2008

Riverside Nature Center and the local chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas will celebrate Earth Day 2008 on Saturday April 19 8 am – 3pm. Since 1970, Earth Day has been celebrated around the world as a time of sharing common values with individuals and organizations who are concerned for the protection of the environment, and honoring the idea that the stewardship of natural resources is a global responsibility.

Featured activities and programs at Riverside Nature Center include

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- ❖ The always-popular **Native Plant Sale** featuring a large variety of plants native to the Texas Hill Country. **Come early, for the best selection.** While supplies last, there will be native trees, shrubs,

perennials, vines, groundcovers, cacti, and succulents selected from nurseries across Central Texas. Experts from the Native Plant Society will be available to help you select just the right ones for your particular landscape.

- ❖ **Activities for the kids will take place from 9 to 11 am, and from 12 to 3 pm and will include a special presentation at 11:00 am by Koy Coffey Education Program Specialist with the Texas Wildlife Association. She will demonstrate **Recognizing Hill Country Mammals – matching animal names with skins, skulls, and tracks. Fun for the whole family****

- ❖ Displays by the Native Plant Society of Texas, Kerrville Chapter; Riverside Nature Center; Upper Guadalupe River Authority; Hill Country Master Gardeners; Kerr County Cactus and Succulent Society; and Texas Master Naturalist, Hill Country Chapter.

- ❖ RNC Habitat Tours. Walk to the river, the creek, and on the grounds and learn what lives and grows in this area.

Snacks, beverages, and sandwiches from **Paw Paw's restaurant** will be available for purchase. Escorted canoe rides will be available for \$2.00 for adults, \$1.00 for kids under 13. (Children must be accompanied by an adult.)



ADVANCED TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

These Earth Day events qualify for AT:

Saturday, April 19, 9:30 am Donnie Frels - Texas Parks and Wildlife Department--
An Historical Perspective on Ecosystems Management in the Texas Hill Country To fully realize the ecological potential of a site; managers must first understand the conditions and circumstances which led to its current state. Today, the Kerr Wildlife Management Area serves as a prime example of good range stewardship based on sound ecological principles. This presentation will document the decisions, practices and tools responsible for the transformation of this property from native grassland savannah, to cedar brake, to a healthy ecosystem producing a diverse array of desirable products. Please report this presentation under **AT code # 08-042**

1:00 pm Jan Fulkerson - Texas Forest Service--
Wildfire Preparedness Wildfire will happen and you as a property owner can do more to reduce your risk of loss than anyone else can. Learn about Defensible space, structure ignition and Firewise Landscaping. Please report this presentation under **AT code # 08-043**.

Saturday, April 26, 9 am to 12 noon at RNC, John Huecksteadt will teach Forb ID class, AT code# 8-031.

April 22 thru the 27th, at the ninth annual **Nature Quest in Uvalde County**, There will be an abundance of field trips, workshops and seminars which will qualify for HCMN Advanced Training. **AT code # 08-044**. Go to this website for complete details.

<http://www.thcrr.com/static/index.cfm?contentID=10>

Saturday May 10 9 am to 12 noon at RNC, Jim Stanley will teach Tree and Shrub ID class, AT code# 08-032.

Saturday May 17, 10 am to 11 am, at RNC, An Introduction to Bats, AT code# 08-050, presented by Nyta Hensley, Manager of Old Tunnel Wildlife Management Area. Come learn about these fascinating but misunderstood "critters" that help farmers control millions of insect pests. Learn about the life-cycle of bats, how bats use echolocation to navigate, and more. This program is for adults and children. Cost: \$5.00 per adult/\$2.50 members. Kids 12 and under are free.



FIELD NOTES



Photo Source: www.pbase.com/macknight/hummingbirds

Welcome Back, Blackchins!

*(from the notebook
of Tom Collins)*

With migration in full swing, the Hill Country Black-chinned Hummingbirds are arriving on their breeding grounds hungry and anxious to begin house keeping. An important part of a hummingbird's diet is nectar from wildflowers, flowering vines and trees. Hummer food usually must contain at least 15% sugar content or they will move on to another source. Study hummers that come to flowers in your garden. If it dips its bill into the center and stays for a few seconds, then the nectar content meets its need. If it quickly moves on and does not return, then your plant is out of favor. Many cultivar flowering plants have been modified to the extent that they no longer produce any sugar.

The native species of plants such as coral vine, trumpet creeper, and crossvine are some the favored plants for hummingbirds as they are high in sugar content and because they are deep, tube-shaped, the hummingbird bill fits nicely, and they don't have to compete with insects that usually prefer a plant they can perch on to feed. If you see a hummingbird with a yellow crown or forehead, then it probably has been feeding at a one of these plants and is carrying pollen on its crown, providing another way for plants to get pollinated.

Hummingbirds also need protein to maintain a healthy diet. About 15% of their diet comes from catching small insects. This method of feeding is called "hawking" and can be seen as they fly about the tops of trees nabbing small flying insects during the heat of the day.

Humans can also assist hummingbirds by providing feeding stations and small water dishes. Feeding a hummingbird is simple as long as you observe a few important rules.

1. Any feeder will work, but those that are easy to clean (i.e.: can be taken apart) are the best.
2. Keep your feeders clean. Wash before each filling using a hummingbird feeder brush. Make sure the holes where the hummingbird puts its bill are clean. Use a small pipe brush. A mild bleach solution can be used to remove any signs of bacteria. Be sure to rinse well after any chemical application.
3. Use ONLY pure cane granular sugar—no honey or artificial sweeteners. Red dye is not recommended and don't waste money on pre-made solutions.
4. Mix at the rate of 1 part sugar to 4 parts water. You don't need to boil the water. Just add tap water to the sugar and stir until fully dissolved.
5. Add food to feeder and log the date. Clean and refill about every 3-5 days based on air temperature and how fast the food level is dropping.
6. Placement is important. Hummers like to have a perch close by. Set feeder about 5-10 feet from a small shrub or tree in the shade if possible. Hang from a metal pole (shepherd's hook) or under a porch. Monitor for ants, as they can take over a feeder quickly. There are ways to take care of the ant problem, but hanging a feeder from a tree limb guarantees ants!
7. When selecting a site, consider vantage points for people to view and photograph the activity around the feeder.
8. Participate in the Texas Hummingbird ROUNDUP a TP&W Citizen Science Project.



Adventures With Sneaky Snake (from the notebook of Jim and Priscilla Stanley)

We first met three years ago. We were sitting on the back porch when I noticed a scrub jay screeching and shrieking, hopping around and showing an intense interest in a pile of rocks just outside the fence. I said to Priscilla, "I'll bet he has a snake out there", and we went to investigate. At first we saw nothing, but we also didn't scare away the Jay, which was still squawking nearby. Upon removing a rock or two from the pile we could see the mottled markings of a snake. I was pretty sure, but not positive, that it wasn't a rattler, so I removed another rock or two. At this point the Jay came swooping in to a branch just above the rock pile and less than 3 feet from me, still making a racket. I could also now tell that our visitor had a pointed tail. Eventually, the snake apparently grew tired of all of this noise and attention and he emerged from his rock pile and made a bee-line for the nearest tree. I could see he was quite long, between 5 and 6 feet, but not as big in diameter as a rattler that long would be, and he was also quite fast. He was up the Blackjack in a second to a height of 6' when he immediately crawled out on a big limb and into a hole in the hollow limb. He seemed to know that hole was there.

Upon consulting our "snake book" it was obvious, from size, coloration (dark brown blotches on a yellow-brown background) and habit, that our friend was a Texas Rat Snake (*Elaphe obsoleta lindheimerii*), but with apologies to Tom T. Hall, we named him Sneaky Snake. The Jay kept searching for him for another 30 minutes. I'm not sure what he thought he was going to do with a snake that size.

The next year we were alerted to something going on in the front yard by the unmistakable cries of an injured rabbit. We quickly discovered the source of the cries as coming from the large prickly pear in front and almost immediately also discovered the back half of Sneaky Snake sticking out of the cactus. We couldn't see either the head or the rabbit. Now, you might think that we would have had some philosophical discussion here about letting nature take its course, etc., but if you knew Priscilla and the huge soft spot she has for rabbits,

you would know that no such discussion took place. Instead, I grabbed hold of what I could see of ole Sneaky Snake and pulled him out of the cactus, fully expecting to see part of a baby rabbit in his mouth. But, in fact, he emerged sans rabbit and I carried him off a hundred yards into the pasture in hopes that he wouldn't be able to find his way back to the rabbits. Mother rabbit soon returned to the nest and presumably moved them.

The next May, we discovered a first for us here, a Turkey hen had made a nest in the tall silver bluestem under the post oak off the corner of the house, usually flying over the fence to do so. When we discovered the nest, it had 6 eggs in it. Since Turkeys usually brood a lot more eggs than that, we assumed she would be coming back each day to lay more eggs before beginning to set. (You know where this is going now don't you?)

Well, the next day Priscilla came rushing in saying, "get the camera, the snake ate the eggs". Out I went, camera in hand, to find not 6, but 4 eggs in the nest, and ole SS lying next to it. Now, it is important to think sizes here. A turkey egg is between 2 and 2.5 inches in diameter in the smallest orientation. SS is about 1 1/4 "across the head in a normal relaxed posture. We could see that SS was bulging considerably in the middle, but the form of the eggs could not be seen. He had apparently crushed them by the time we found him. When he tired of us gawking at him, he took off to a hole at the base of a live oak tree which, again, he seemed to know the exact location.

Can you see the bulge in this photo?

In the next couple of days we noticed first 3 more eggs missing and then the final one disappeared. We haven't seen the hen since the first eggs were taken. How do we know that SS is responsible for the last 4 eggs? Because if a raccoon or skunk or possum had found them, they would have either broken the eggs in the nest or a short distance away, and we would have found the shells. Which got me to thinking, why do snakes swallow the eggs whole, as uncomfortable as that may be (a little anthropomorphism here I guess)? The answer is, I think, they don't have a choice. Their tongues are only good for smelling the air. They couldn't lap up the gooey mess of a broken egg, so they have to swallow it whole.



Walk Softly ... Reducing the Carbon Footprint



Don't Just Recycle – FREECYCLE!

Have you discovered the Freecycle network yet? It's a great way to clear out the clutter, or you might find that gadget you have been looking for is just taking up space at another networker's home -- and it's free! According to the main website (www.freecycle.org) there are 4331 groups comprising 4,852,000 members worldwide. There is a group in Kerrville, one in Boerne, and one in Bandera.

Freecycle is "... a grassroots and entirely nonprofit movement of people who are giving (& getting) stuff for free in their own towns. It's all about reuse and keeping good stuff out of landfills. Each local group is moderated by a local volunteer... Membership is free." The rules are simple: e.g., Keep it free, legal, and appropriate for all ages; no trading – offers must have no strings attached, etc. Check it out: it's free, it's fun, and it's *GREEN!*



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