Mid-Coast UPDATE

Newsletter of the Mid-Coast Chapter, Texas Master Naturalists

JUNE 2021
SUMMER ISSUE

Our mission: Education, Outreach, Service

UPCOMING

MCTMN Board Meeting
July 10, 10 am
Fulton Mansion Education Center, Rockport
All members welcome

Mid-Coast Chapter Meeting
August 14, 10 am
Details to be announced

IN THIS ISSUE

Mid-Coast Chapter President
Bob Cunningham's Message

As I write on this 1st day of June, we've had several weeks of wet and mild weather and are surrounded by Nature's recovery from the impact of Winter Storm Uri. Our Chapter likewise continues to thrive, and prospects look all the better as Covid recedes and we begin a return to normalcy. This issue should be jam-packed with many activities of our Mid-Coast members.

Special congratulations to our Class of 2021 trainees, and credit to our Initial Training directors Greg Simmons and Sally Scroggs. They prevailed in challenging and changeable circumstances and still graduated on time on June 5th. Amazing work!

New Covid rules issued by TMN on May 21st remove most formal restrictions, although we continue to follow any requirements of our partners and venues. TMN chapters cannot ask about vaccination status or other health issues, and cannot require masks or limitations on gatherings. Mid-Coast will continue to respect and support personal choices, we will remain careful and considerate, and we will encourage virtual events where appropriate.

This wet and mild weather should be your cue to get going propagating native plants for our fundraising sale at HummerBird Fest in mid-September! This event calls on broad support from our members, and there are plenty of ways to help. Ask Donna Bailey or Janet Cunningham if you have questions. We need you!

Don't forget you can earn AT hours from watching the monthly TMN Tuesday videos at your own convenience, as an exception to the usual rule requiring live discussion as part of any online AT session. https://txmn.tamu.edu/tmntuesdays/.

You can also view TMN's monthly "Be the Change" series for the same sort of AT credit, addressing diversity-equity-inclusion opportunities in our natural resource and conservation community. Just as the natural world thrives with biodiversity, our TMN program is dedicated to engaging all audiences in conservation, education and stewardship. Mid-Coast will introduce this topic in our Q3 meetings, to solicit discussion and ideas ahead of addressing more thoroughly later in the year. TMN will hold an online workshop on July 20th aiming to compile a "Playbook" of resources and suggestions towards end of Q1 2022. Try this link for more: https://txmn.tamu.edu/bethechange/

The long awaited TMN license plate with distinctive dragonfly logo should be available by the end of June. Anyone can purchase this plate, and $22 of each $30 annual plate fee goes directly to the TMN state program. Keep an eye out for Facebook or email notifications when they're ready, or try this link: https://txmn.tamu.edu/tmn-license-plate/

Finally, TMN's annual meeting is set for Oct 21-24 at the D/FW Airport Marriott in Irving, Texas. Members can participate as either an "in person" or a "virtual" attendee with certain aspects of the event available for each audience type. Registration should open on or around August 1st. More explanation can be found on TMN's site: https://txmn.tamu.edu/2021-annual-meeting/

Volunteer Here

ANNUAL PLANT SALE

MCTMN organizes a plant sale at the HummerBird Celebration, where we sell Texas-native and a few Texas-adapted plants. This is our ONLY fundraiser! The sale will be on Friday September 17th and Saturday September 18th from 9 am to 6 pm, and Sunday September 19th, from 9 am to 3 pm. You can volunteer for the plant pale by propagating plants, transporting and organizing plants, or assisting at the sale itself in helping customers learn more about beautiful Texas natives. We not only provide great plants, many of which are hard to find in commercial nurseries, but it is one of the Chapter's best outreach and education events.

You can earn volunteer hours when you propagate plants for this sale. The fewer plants we purchase from nurseries, the more dollars we earn, which helps with the cost of training new members.

To report your plant-propagating volunteer hours in VMS, please categorize as CB: Chapter Business and choose Fundraising from the dropdown menu.

Please let us know if you are interested in propagating plants for the sale or if you have any questions.

MCTMN'ers from past classes, trainees, and friends gathered in April at Connie Hagar Cottage Sanctuary for spring cleaning and planting in the pollinator gardens.

'Ask a Ranger" at Mustang Island State Park is a program that is active and accepting volunteers. Pictured Donna Fiarkoski and Carla Haskett.

State Of The Garden June 2021

Spring Hopes Are Eternal When Seasons Change And Gardeners Start Again

Spring sprang and, as is her wont, wiped away all the unpleasantness with the gift of a tiny glint of green leaf and the promise of flower and fruit to come. For five days in late winter, a polar vortex spun on down and froze our nether-regions off and did much worse to our outdoor charges. When I kicked off this column in March (unfortunately too late for the prior deadline) I was sad and convinced all was—and would continue to be—lost, brown and withered.

Within a few short, dreary, dark and weary days, a minuscule but billowy frond began to emerge from where the pride of Barbados had been, and then quickly appeared a single narrow blade of grass out of a circular clump of shorn deadness.

Out of the base of a dead piece of wood that only last summer was an entire fence full of passionflower vine in all its blooming glory there peeked curls of deep greenery that could only be its pups. I felt like in Charlotte's Web when the baby spiders fly off to their futures! The very first tendril to attach was set by hand so that it did so on the dead wood of its parent, forever hereafter incorporating a symbol of what we lost with growing, renewal and rebirth. In that singular act of human husbandry, so intertwined in me a refreshed desire to build and support the new garden while incorporating what remained of the old; think of it as a kickoff to a new chapter rather than a sad ending to a Greek tragedy.

For the longest time , I couldn't bear to dig up and doom to the compost heap plants that I had nurtured from seed for years, and in some cases I made the right choice. A Christmas fern in a container, somehow managed to show its face in late April - through the drain hole of the pot and had to be cut out to get buried. Surprises like that continue to pop up here and there, miraculously, in a landscape that originally looked as though a plant-hating death bomb had detonated.

One of our biggest challenges in going native is what to do with things that are going and growing already, and I used to waffle a lot between whether such-and-such a thing (think St. Augustine grass runners) really "deserved" to be in my exclusive native and adapted garden. What is its pedigree? Is it a member (and we check ID at the door)?

Polar vortex Uri made this decision a lot easier: every single thing that survived the storm got a promotion. They may not be on the official list native and adapted plants or listed at the wildflower center, but by God they will have a more prominent place in the remade Mid-Coastal Garden for Native and Adapted Plants. Maybe they are more adapted than we think to whatever future climate that may be coming around the pike, when it comes.

This includes priority placement of the Spider Lily, aka Peruvian daffodil, which we now have in gobs. Two tiny little American beautyberries were unfazed by five days in the frozen tundra, and one now has become the cornerstone of the new layout. Somehow, and don't ask me because I do not know the answer, two mandevillas that were in a sheltered location came back from the roots, and these tropical superfreaks will continue to be a part of the home team lineup.

Owing to the abundance of resprouts from the passiflora in unauthorized locations, we added topiaries galore in wire cages and pieces of furniture around and above several of them to create a new entrance into one of the garden rooms and a show-stopping future seating area to be covered with purple blooms under a glass table.

The creeping wedelia will cover the ground and play off the sallow tones in the pride of Barbados inflorescences. Wooly stemodia, I'm looking in your direction. This furry grayish ground cover with tiny lavender blooms never skipped a beat, laughing at the fury of the polar vortex and will now be used as an edging around one of the beds.

Two hanging baskets of red cyclamen made it and grace both sides of the porch in a crimson display, owning their place of prominence, owing to their stick-to-itiveness and gumption. One tiny, pale blue agave pup has only recently poked through and will become the centerpiece of the sparsely populated live oak grove it is now re-emerging into. Prickly pear cactus: Yes. Aloe vera: Barely. Elephant ear: Can it be killed?

In trying to make lemonade out of this mess, we took the opportunity to lay down new garden paths as the foundation rather than having to walk-around something that might have already been in situ by default. Also, focusing on big plans for the next steps - so to speak. As a confirmed control freak, I'm happy to have the opportunity to start every plant from scratch by myself. I will know every time those little esperanzas got gently watered with collected rainwater from the exact day they were planted. Ditto for the little bluestem grass plugs, coralbean, as well as tropical and zizotes milkweeds.

In short, as planters we can choose to focus not on what was lost but what we learned, and that gardening is one of the riskiest avocations you will ever love. We nurture, plan, build - and then lose. A gardener's heart may be broken and he will experience loss, but within such gravity lies the very seed for rebirth, rededication, realignment of our priorities and a bold new restart in earnest on activities that, as toilers in the soil, we must obey when our collective heart commands it.

If you would like to join me in casting our eyes toward summer and fall, feel free to dip into our chapter seed library by contacting Janet Cunningham, who will be happy to share not only seeds but wisdom, as we demonstrate how we can bounce back and start anew. Also, collect and prepare for storage seeds from plants in your yard that are on the HummerBird Celebration inventory list and add them to our growing cache as the season winds on.
The inaugural State of the Garden column from March 10, 2021, can be viewed at https://bit.ly/359CwR6.

Carla M. Haskett is a fifth-generation farmer, Texas classroom teacher, reformed journalist and 2020 Mid-Coast Master Naturalist living in Rockport with her dog.

Milkweeds & Monarchs Project

The Monarch butterfly, the most famous butterfly in North America, and the State insect of Texas, is an iconic symbol of nature's beauty, and its multi-generational migration is one of the wonders of the natural world. However, it is a species in decline whose long-term survival is in serious doubt. Texas is a key state for the Monarch's survival, as it is both a major migratory corridor and an important breeding ground. In the Coastal Bend, large numbers of Monarchs can be seen flying north in the spring and south in the fall, some which stop to lay eggs on milkweeds, their only host plants. Locally, threats to the Monarch are readily apparent, as habitat is being lost to development, milkweeds and wildflowers growing along roadways and on private property are often subject to frequent mowing, and spraying for mosquito control, which can be lethal to larval and adult Monarchs, is widespread. Life can be tough for a Monarch here!

In response to the Monarch's plight, the Mid-Coast Chapter of Texas Master Naturalist (MCTMN) has initiated a "Milkweeds & Monarchs" project with the goal of increasing the quality and quantity of Monarch habitat in the chapter's 8-county region. The highest priorities of the project are to create butterfly habitats, to include host and nectar plants, and to register the habitats under the Monarch Watch *Monarch Waystation* program. Registering the sites can provide information for the larger Monarch research and conservation community, and provide public outreach and education opportunities for MCTMN members. It is proposed that each of the 8 counties in the MCTMN region have at least one publicly accessible and/or school-sponsored Monarch Waystation. According to the Monarch Watch website, there are currently 21 registered waystations in 6 of the 8 MCTMN counties, including 5 waystations that are publicly accessible (4 in Aransas County, 1 in Victoria County). So, there is room for improvement! Please consider identifying and/or sponsoring a waystation near you!

The project's current focus is twofold. One is to identify potential Monarch Waystations, preferably sites that can support a native milkweed population of at least 10 plants, have a good population of nectar plants, and are protected from disturbances such as mowing, weeding, human and pet traffic, insecticide applications, and nearby vehicular traffic. Sites of at least 1000 square feet in size are preferred, as larger sites with higher concentrations of milkweeds tend to be more attractive to Monarchs. Secondly, chapter members are being asked to collect native milkweed seeds and/or propagate plants, which will then be planted at the Monarch Waystations. Collection is necessary because native milkweeds are generally unavailable from nurseries, especially those adapted to the Coastal Bend ecoregion.
In the Rockport-Fulton area, 8 sites have currently been identified which would either be new Monarch Waystations, or expansions of existing waystations, with a projected need of >400 native milkweed plants or >1500 seeds.

Monarch Waystation Name	Registration Status	Notes
Goose Island SP Big Tree Unit	NEW	Site is located in an area NOT currently accessible to the general public
Connie Hagar Sanctuary	EXISTING to be expanded	Aransas Pathways site
Linda S. Castro Sanctuary	EXISTING to be expanded	Aransas Pathways site
Rockport Post Office	NEW	
Welcome to R-F (North)	NEW	Site is at "Welcome to Rockport-Fulton" sign near Copano Bay bridge
Welcome to R-F (South)	NEW	Site is at "Welcome to Rockport-Fulton" sign near intersection of highways 70 and 35
Texas A&M AgriLife	NEW	Located just inside entrance gate at Airport Road office; to be managed by Master Gardeners
Ivy Lane	NEW	Aransas Pathways site

The current effort is the first step in what is hoped will become a much larger network of Monarch Waystations in the future. In addition to habitat creation, there are opportunities for monitoring milkweeds, and Monarch larva and adults, in order to provide scientific data that may be used for developing conservation and protection programs. Currently there is only limited monitoring occurring in the Coastal Bend region, representing a significant "data gap" for this important area.

While this project is technically a new initiative, it is building on the efforts of MCTMN chapter members who have collected and propagated milkweeds, created or facilitated creation of butterfly and pollinator gardens, and educated the public and chapter members. Special credit is due to Neli Spurrell, Bill Burge, Brigid Berger, Donna Bailey, Vickie Wilson, Jane Moore, Claire Barnhart, Bob and Janet Cunningham, Kris and Ray Kirkwood, and Janet Price (I probably missed someone; my apologies). For more information on the project, **contact Patrick Hartigan (pdhartigan4321@gmail.com).**

Zizotes, *Asclepias oenotheroides*

By Carla M. Haskett, certified Texas Master Naturalist

Asclepias oenotheroides, besides possibly being the hardest of the milkweeds to spell or pronounce, is probably the most valuable thing in the native landscape that has been mowed over, over and over, without it being realized. *A. oenotheroides*, called *hierba de zizotes* - or just zizotes by the real local locals, is the local local milkweed for the local local region of the Texas Mid-Coast.

Zizotes also bears the moniker of longhorn milkweed because, when set in opposing pairs, its conspicuous seedpods (resembling a smooth okra) could be said to give the effect similar to the cranial appendages atop the eponymous Texas cattle breed.

Unlike its milkweed brethren but similarly to a lot of its regional native colleagues, this perennial is not showy and its flowers are almost missable. They are ever so light with an almost greenish-yellowish tint, small and insignificant—unless one is a tiny pollinator. The pale green leaves with wavy margins are arranged around a central stem that never grows taller than about a foot or so.

Yes, it can tolerate the abuse such as being sling-bladed time and time again, but as soon as it's allowed to grow on its own, beaucoup blooms readily start being fabricated. *A. oenotheroides* is unusual in that it may have all phases of the life cycle displayed at once, from barely opening buds to flowers in bloom and swelling or ripening seedpods simultaneously, which doesn't make it easy for the collector either.

Unfortunately, those found in the wild do not take kindly to being uprooted nor the extra watering (and God forbid city water out of a hose), that it takes to raise something in a container. Therefore, your best bet is to start from seed, which doesn’t offer much more promise but is worth every second of the hard work it takes to successfully germinate this elegant native, as this bit of greenery is candy to Monarch caterpillars.

The pods stick upright and swell from the flowers progressively before they harden and dry, splitting open along the seams and releasing the potential progeny instantaneously on the first stiff gust to come along. On a brisk coastal breeze, a seed about the size of an engorged deer tick is borne aloft on a shock of white Albert Einstein-esque hairs and gone out of reach as fast as the wind itself. Even handling the seeds indoors practically requires an airless cleanroom because, as you attempt to excise the hairs for safe storage, the seeds will take flight with every little movement of your hand or a breath that's slightly too forceful.

Because of all this upward mobility, the seeds are practically impossible to collect in the wild without a little husbandry intervention in the form of a mesh bag applied individually over nearly developed seed pods or, if they can't be checked fairly often, covering the whole plant after it has received its fair share of pollination (including work by the Southern Carpenter Bee). Probably for this same reason the seeds are a rarity among purveyors and can be quite expensive.

Luckily, this loneliest little milkweed is in the seed library of the Mid-Coast Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists, in abundance, and available to all interested propagators to try their hands at. Zizotes prefer a poor, sandy soil to start and can be laid on the surface of a four-pack starter, covered with a thin layer of sand and sprayed to keep moist until they sprout. As long as they are put into the ground before their roots will be disturbed during the process, this plant is a perennial workhorse (which did come back from the roots after winter storm Uri decimated the area flora) and is a hardy selection for those mid-level gaps in landscaping and garden layouts.

It does best in that format—interspersed in a full, thriving community. A monoculture of zizotes in a particular area has been shown in studies to be less successful in drawing the adult insect as opposed to where they coexist with plenty of blooming plants and among others of its own kind.

If you happen to be blessed to live where these plants are in the natural landscape, consider collecting seeds to become a part of the chapter’s seed bank available for all propagators to use in order to produce their own native plants for home use or to grow on behalf of the HummerBird Celebration fundraiser in September. Contact Janet Cunningham to get seeds and draft this Texas coastal charmer onto your native-scaping home team.

Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship

By Bill Burge

Over the past several years, MCTMN members have been supporting a research initiative sponsored by The Institute for Bird Populations at the Rob and Bessie Welder Wildlife Foundation. Under the direction of Selma N. Glasscock, Ph.D., C.W.B, Assistant Director, and working with the Welder staff our team has participated in the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) bird banding program. The MAPS program is a continent-wide collaborative effort among public agencies, non-governmental groups, and individuals to assist the conservation of birds and their habitats through bird banding. MAPS bird banders collect data that can be used to estimate key demographic parameters—also known as vital rates—like productivity, recruitment, and survival of individual bird species. This information helps scientists understand which life-stages may be most important in limiting population growth or causing declines.

MAPS banding stations use a system of fine mesh nets to capture birds for banding during the summer nesting season. We follow a standardized, constant-effort protocol so that data from different stations or years can be compared. MAPS operators collect information on the age, sex, body condition, and reproductive status of hundreds of species. Captured birds are given a lightweight, numbered aluminum leg band and released unharmed. Subsequent recapture data provide information on survival, reproductive rates, and movement patterns.

This year's MCTMN team includes Ray Kirkwood, Kris Kirkwood, Linda Swickheimer, Ele Chew, and me. MAPS sessions start before dawn at Welder in order to avoid stressing the birds during the heat of the day. We deploy to the banding station and start work by 6:00 am and finish by 12:00 pm, or whenever the temperature reaches 90 degrees. Given the amount of rain we've had the past few weeks mosquitos can be a bit of a challenge. I have become a connoisseur of mosquito repellents.

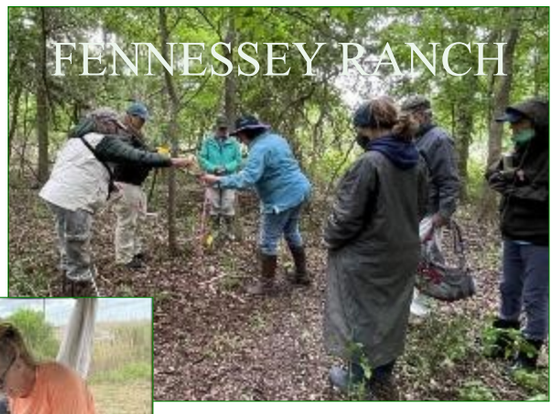
As a total newbie to bird banding there has been a lot to learn. We spent a full day on training before going into the field. Everything from deploying the nets, monitoring weather conditions, collecting the birds and processing them is very precise. The goal is to retrieve the bird, apply the band, and collect vital data as fast as possible so the bird can be released. Checking the nets is the most exciting part of the project as you never know what you are going to find. Getting the birds out of the mist net is an art that I'm learning, but haven't nearly mastered.

Bird identification is more challenging than I thought. We spent quite a bit of time deciding between Brown and Long Billed Thrashers (they even cross breed). I have also learned that the only way to tell an Acadian Flycatcher from a Traill's Flycatcher is by checking the color of the inside of their mouth and measuring the length of their primary feathers. We also spend time documenting bird ID's by their calls for those we don't catch in the nets. Molt patterns on body, wings, and tails are important to determining whether the bird is from last year's hatch or fully grown. The textbook used to reference all this data and get a positive ID on a bird is about the size of a phonebook!

This year's MAPS program will continue through early August. If you'd like to get involved this year or next contact Ray Kirkwood, our Chapter Projects Director.

GRADUATING CLASS OF 2021

From left to right, Cindy Hanifen (Class Rep), Paul Clore, Monica Clark, Rachel Cheyne, Susie Starnes, Donna Fiarkoski (rolled over from 2020 Class and now certified member), Tracey Bennett, Marisa Rinche, Kim Gaddy, Mark Gaddy, and Anne Thomas. Greg Simmons and Sally Scroggs (IT Directors in the background).



Even with the challenges of COVID, we had 11 graduates in the Class of 2021. Orientation, Archaeology, and Barrier Island Ecology sessions were completely virtual. Weather was a challenge. ANWR needed to be rescheduled due to winter storm URI. Fennessey occurred as scheduled, but you can see from the photos that it was uncomfortably cold and wet. The Barrier Island field session was the only session cancelled due to rain, flooding and high tides.

The graduates from the Class of 2021 showed amazing resilience and stamina. We look forward to their contributions to our chapter.