

Adventures of a New Naturalist

By Diana Rushing, Certified Texas Master Naturalist



Diana Rushing prepares to release a rehabbed green turtle.
Note TMN badge—a ticket to adventure!

When I graduated from the Texas Master Naturalist Class of 2010 last June, I wondered if or how my life would change. Would I find my niche, would I find rewarding activities, would I be able to make a difference in protecting and preserving our environment, and educating others about it? Let me tell you how the Texas Master Naturalist certification can open doors, provide an opportunity to serve the natural community, and have fun at the same time.

About 3 weeks ago, Padre Island National Seashore announced that they would have their first release of cold-stunned Green Sea Turtles who had been rehabilitated and were ready to be returned to now warmer Gulf of Mexico waters. Husband Lew and I drove over to watch. We lined up with about 2,000 other folks as they began bringing the greens down a ramp, across the beach, and putting them into the surf one by one.

After watching for a little while and taking photos, I remarked that it was going to take them a very long time to release almost 300 turtles. I noticed that some people helping seemed to be volunteers. “What the heck,” I thought. “Maybe I can help out.” I ran back to my car where I keep my TMN name tag, put it on, and walked over to the truck where the turtles were being removed from crates and handed to PINS employees and volunteers.



Green Sea turtle

I recognized a PINS employee and said, “I’m a Texas Master Naturalist and have been a Turtle Patroller on Matagorda Island. Can I help out?” “Here, take this turtle,” she said. And I was off, carrying my first turtle (juvenile, about 20 pounds) down the ramp and across the beach where I handed him off to a helper in waders who carried him out into the surf. What a thrill! I worked diligently carrying turtles for the next hour, until the truck was empty. We were asked to let the public see them and take pictures. Everyone was happy: the public, the turtles, and me! One turtle that I carried started “swimming” in the air with his front flippers as soon as he saw the water. Another kept his front flippers in “dive mode.”

Lesson learned? Doors open when you are a Master Naturalist. Second lesson learned? Turtle releases are fun and provide an opportunity for the community to observe and support our work in protecting and preserving this important species.