

Mid-Coast UPDATE

Newsletter of the Mid-Coast Chapter, Texas Master Naturalists

WINTER 2021-2022

DECEMBER 2021



**Our mission: Education,
Outreach, Service**

UPCOMING

**Mid-Coast Chapter
Board Meeting**

January 8, 2022 at 10:00 a.m.

*All members are welcome to attend.
Details to be announced*

**Class of 2022 Potluck Lunch
January 29, 2022**

Bauer Exhibit Center

Calhoun County Fair Ground

*Check the M-C TMN website for
more information*

Mid-Coast Chapter

**General Membership Meeting
February 12, 2022 at 10:00 a.m.**

Texana Park Campground

344 Park Road 2, Edna Texas

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President**

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Snake Doctors to Devil's Darning Needle: Dragonfly Folklore

By Linda Shirey

When I was growing up in northeast Texas, dragonflies were called "snake doctors." To this day I still have to remember to call them dragonflies instead of snake doctors. I asked a TMN friend if she had ever heard of dragonflies being called snake doctors. She looked at me like I was crazy. So one day I was curious and googled "snake doctors." I was surprised by the number of nicknames for dragonflies and by the origins of the nicknames. The more I read, the more interested I became because of the numerous – and often conflicting – legends and characterizations. I've tried to winnow the information to a concise and representative discussion of the folklore.

In Europe and some parts of the United States, a lot of the folklore depicts dragonflies as evil. On the Isle of Wight, dragonflies historically were believed to sting naughty children if they went near the water. However, the truth is that dragonflies do not have stingers. They belong to the order Odonata (toothy ones) and have serrated teeth. Although they can bite if threatened, the bite probably will not break the skin.

A Swedish name is "devil's steelyard," which probably refers to the dragonfly's body shape, which resembles a balancing scale. According to myth if a dragonfly flew around your head, the devil was weighing your soul, and you could expect a painful sting if found lacking. Despite the ideas that the dragonfly was a tool of the devil, in parts of Scandinavia it was considered to be a holy animal. In Romania and Germany,



Photo by LINDA SWICKHEIMER

there are legends of horses being turned into dragonflies. One from Germany tells of a wild, selfish princess who raced her horse recklessly around the countryside. One day she ran over a man with her horse. As she rode away, the man cursed her that she always be joined to her horse, and they were transformed into a dragonfly.

I found 25 nicknames for dragonflies from around the United States. Variations of "darning needle" are very common. These names probably come from the long narrow shape of the dragonfly and the way it flies back and forth over the same area like a needle does when darning a sock. This flying pattern also led to the belief that dragonflies are looking below the surface and for some deeper meaning. Some other myths relating to the needle are not so benign. Some believed that a dragonfly could sew together fingers and toes if a person slept near a dragonfly or their hands and toes were exposed while they slept. It also was believed that they could sew up the mouths of "scolding women, saucy children, and profane men" (Animal and Plant Lore, 1899) and the ears of truant schoolboys. People would try to frighten children into behaving by telling them that dragonflies would cut off their ears if they lied or sew their eyes shut if

Continued on page 2



they didn't behave.

There are several nicknames related to snakes because dragonflies and snakes are often seen at the same ponds. One belief was that the dragonflies warned the snakes of danger. The name "snake doctor" comes from the belief that a dragonfly could heal a snake's injuries

especially if the snake was in pieces. The two bumps behind the wings were thought to be saddlebags that carried medicine for snakes (Some Peculiarities of Speech in Mississippi, 1893).

Other nicknames are "horse stinger," "mule killer," and "bee butcher." These come from dragonflies flying around horses. Two old myths were that dragonflies killed mules and sucked the blood of horses. The "bee butcher" name is based on fact because dragonflies will eat bees. Probably the best thing dragonflies eat is mosquitoes, hence their nickname "mosquito hawk." In one day a single dragonfly can eat hundreds of mosquitoes, which they catch in mid-air with their feet.

Other nicknames refer to their flight. Dragonflies can fly straight up and down, hover, and fly up to 35 mph (45 mph in one source), making them the fastest flying insect. Because of their aerial skills, they are called "helicopter," "airplane bug," and "airplane fly." They mate in mid-air but I found no nicknames for that feat. They form a heart-shape when mating and were the emblem of Freya, goddess of love in Norse mythology.

Other beliefs not associated with a particular nickname are that dragonflies indicate where the fishing is good; if a dragonfly lands on a fishing pole, the fisherman will have success. The color of the dragonfly indicates which fish will bite. However, I also found that some believe that fish won't bite if dragonflies are around. I guess whether you catch fish or not, you can thank/blame the dragonflies. Some believe dragonflies predict rainfall. If they fly high, rain will be heavy. If they fly low, the rain will be light.

Dragonflies represent good luck and prosperity. If you catch a dragonfly, you will marry within a year. If you make a wish on a dragonfly, the wish will come true. Dragonflies represent supernatural beings and should be left alone at all costs. Even if they are not supernatural, they should be left alone because they provide a great service to the environment by eating many nuisance insects.

Among Native Americans dragonflies are a sign of happiness, activity, speed, and purity. They signify water in Navajo sand paintings. In Zuni culture dragonflies have supernatural powers and are represented in their pottery as a double-barred cross. One Native American myth says that dragonflies were originally dragons. A coyote tricked a dragon into shapeshifting into a dragonfly and it couldn't change back. So a dragonfly represents change and speed. The Tlingit carve dragonflies into their totem poles, and the Yaqui have a dragonfly dance.

The dragonfly is revered in most Asian cultures. In China it represents change, happiness, and new beginnings. Dragonflies are used in feng shui to bring new insight and positive change.

In Japan dragonflies are symbolic of happiness, strength, courage, and success. They are sometimes mentioned in haiku poetry. The Buddhist celebration Obon, which honors one's ancestors, occurs about the same time as thousands of dragonflies appear. Some believe that the ancestral spirits ride the dragonflies or that the dragonflies are the spirits themselves. One legend from Japan is that Emperor Jinmu, the mythical founder of Japan, was bitten by a deadly mosquito but was saved because a dragonfly ate the mosquito. The samurai respected the dragonfly for its hunting technique of flying directly toward its prey and never wavering from its target. Dragonfly emblems were often seen on the clothing and helmets of samurai.

A dragonfly spends up to two years of its life in the water in a larval stage. In this stage they eat tadpoles, mosquitoes, fish other insect larvae, and even other dragonflies. At the end of the larval stage it crawls out of the water. Its exoskeleton breaks open and the dragonfly emerges abdomen first, then wings. Its life as a dragonfly lasts usually one to two weeks. It spends most of that time eating and mating. Because of its short life span, the dragonfly has come to represent the virtue of living life to the fullest.

As you know, the emblem of Texas Master Naturalists is a dragonfly – not just any dragonfly but the Cyrano Darner (*Nasiaeschna pentacantha*). Why a dragonfly and this one in particular? Dragonflies are beautiful, interesting creatures that are widely distributed. Almost everyone is familiar with dragonflies. The Cyrano Darner has the classic shape and beautiful coloration. The venation in the wings makes it easy to imagine a 19th century naturalist's field notebook, a look that TMN founders wanted to achieve. They wanted a logo that wouldn't be confused with other nature organizations. (Thanks to Ron Smudy for this information.)

One last thought, dragonflies may or may not be supernatural, but the next time you see one, make a wish. Who knows what might happen?





MC-TMN Newsletter - President's Column

Bob Cunningham, Dec 6, 2021

It's the season for looking back and looking forward. Over the last couple years, we've dealt with continued challenges of a Covid-imbued world. We've learned how to meet remotely using Zoom, and hope to incorporate a virtual component in future meetings and training. But it was so delightful to join together in person after a long hiatus, for our well-attended Chapter meeting and potluck in November! For those who missed it, minutes are on the Chapter website here: <https://midcoast-tmn.org/members-landing/minutes/>.

Looking forward, our 2022 Initial Training program will provide both virtual classroom and outdoor field sessions. Kudos to directors Greg Simmons & Sally Scroggs for securing the training schedule already, posted here: <https://midcoast-tmn.org/members-landing/basic/>.

At this writing the Class of 2022 is almost full with only a couple slots left. Please encourage anyone you know who is interested to submit their application and send payment asap. And mark your calendar for January 29th to show support for the new class with potluck lunch at the Orientation session at Bauer Exhibit Building in Port Lavaca.

Members are always welcome at the Board meetings. The meeting on January 8th (venue TBD) will feature budgeting for the upcoming year, including discussion of whether our Chapter has the funds and/or skills to conduct hybrid virtual access for our live meetings.

As we return to in-person meetings, our virtual experience highlighted the need to ensure exposure to all areas of this widespread Chapter. So our next Chapter meeting on February 12th, will be held at the newly renovated education center at Texana Lake & Campground in Edna. More convenient for many of our inland members, and time for us south coastal folks to tackle a longer drive!

Meanwhile, our Diversity-Equity-Inclusion committee is addressing this issue of expanded service as a first priority. Please respond if contacted by them to offer input on how we might improve outreach to underserved areas and populations in our Chapter region.

More imminently, birding activities are in high gear. Looking at the Christmas bird count events on Audubon's website, special credit is due to MC-TMN members Brent Ortego, Bob Friedrichs, and Claudia Dorn for their leadership roles. Dates, summary and contact info here:

<https://houstonaudubon.org/birding/christmas-bird-counts/>

Finally, there's just a few days left to fulfill requirements for annual certification: 40 hrs volunteer service, 8 hrs. of advanced training. Check out the virtual training available from TMN Tuesday / Be the Change presentations if short of AT credits. And stay alert for e-mail blasts with last gasp VS events, or create your own approved project. No time left to procrastinate!

Best wishes for the holidays as we say goodbye to 2021 and welcome to the New Year!

Membership Meeting Potluck, In Person, Finally!



TMN 2021 Photo, Art, & Media Contest

Mid-Coast Chapter Winners



Photography: Naturalists at Work and Play
First Place

**“Uri’s Unprecedented Cold-Stunned
Sea Turtle Rescue Operations”**

Photo by D’Ann Williams



Photography: Plants
Second Place

“Prickly Pear at Dawn”

Photo by Ele Chew



The President’s Call To Service Award:

Congratulations to Allan Berger for receiving this award for 4000 hours of volunteer service. A certificate, a letter from the President of the United States, and the Call To Service pin with the Presidential Seal was presented to Allan at our fall chapter meeting.

Welcome to some of our initially
certified members.



KIM GADDY 2021



**MARK
GADDY
2021**



**DEE
MAHAFFEY
2020**



**SANDRA
GARCIA
2020**



Rookery Work in Little Bay, Rockport



New Service Opportunity: The Matagorda County Birding Nature Center (MCBNC) is planning a new Monarch Waystation, and volunteers are requested to help with installation and maintenance. If interested, please contact Sara Huebner with the MCBNC at saraleehuebner@gmail.com.

Report as **RM: Other Locations** and include Monarchs & Milkweeds project, MCBNC Monarch Waystation in the description.

heaven’s stair
by gpr crane

expecting nothing we set out to fish
on Christmas Eve the shallows by the pier
some whisky, chest waders, headlamps, and spears
large flounder, then, would grant us both our wish
ice-cold and clear the night presented grand
sea-bottom lightly rippled, absent prey
we searched, un-finding, ‘neath bright Milky
Way
saw starfish underwater on the sand
as starfish crept, our flounder slept elsewhere
and we, we waded out on heaven’s stair

