

Mid-Coast UPDATE

Newsletter of the Mid-Coast Chapter, Texas Master Naturalist

SUMMER 2022



UPCOMING

**Mid-Coast Chapter
Board Meeting**

July 9, 2022 at 10:00 a.m.

*All members are welcome to attend.
Fulton Mansion Education Center*

**Mid-Coast Chapter
General Membership Meeting**

August 13, 2022 at 10:00 a.m.

*Watch for details on the Mid-Coast
Chapter Website Calendar*

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SLEEPING ON A PALLET

By Karen Benson

While walking the west side of our farm, I recently saw a brown lump on the trail ahead. It was about the size and color of a cow patty, but we don't have cows. As I got closer, I could see it was dome-shaped, unlike a flat cow patty. I began to have an idea of what it was. "Hot dog! I think that is a..." I said and hurried toward it.

About this time, the brown lump moved, but very slowly. It had to be a turtle of some kind.

A turtle? On this dry, caliche ridge, sparsely covered with the brush? No way. Turtles need water, don't they?

However, it wasn't precisely a turtle. It was a Texas Tortoise. Tortoises are dryland members of the turtle family. They are related to the giant, 200-pound tortoises found on the Galapagos Islands. Texas Tortoises are much smaller cousins, but they are like the Galapagos Tortoises in body shape and behavior. Both the Texas Tortoise and the Galapagos Tortoise are vegetarians. Neither can pull its entire body back into the protective shell. But they can get pretty close, and the scaly front legs block the entrance from predators.

I got close up and personal with the tortoise on my trail. I got down on my hands and knees to photograph her. She was female because the forked gular scute was relatively short. She pivoted away from me. I scampered to the other side to try to photo her with her head extended. I realized that she must be quite mature at her size, about 7 inches long. She may be my age. She and I had a lot in common. Over 60 years of age, a bit banged up, with dark beady eyes, and a definite similarity in the texture of our throat skin! She pivoted away from me again, and, I swear, I heard her sigh. The books say they hiss, but this sounded like a sigh to me. The same sigh I had uttered often as a teacher. It was the sigh of resigned exasperation. We must have had a lot in common!

As she walked off into the brush, I noticed how different her back legs were from her front ones. They are described as "elephantine." Indeed, the back legs are like stumps that do little more than hold up the back end of the beast.

The front legs are powerful, curved, and tipped with long claws. These legs are designed for digging. A Texas Tortoise digs out a small scrape, called a "pallet", under a prickly pear cactus or bush. The tortoise spends the night, the heat of the day, and most of the winter resting on this pallet. It ventures out to feed on the pads, flowers, and fruit of the prickly pear during the cooler hours of the summer mornings and evenings. The tortoises hibernate on their pallets in the colder parts of the year or in slightly deeper excavations. They might come out on milder, sunny days to get a bite to eat. *(continued on page 2)*



This Texas Tortoise Just departed its cozy scraped-out resting pallet and is headed across a patch of hard caliche to a prickly pear for breakfast. This photo was taken in North Bee County. Photo by Robert Benson.

There are four species of tortoises native to North America. All four belong to the genus *Gopherus* and thus are sometimes called Gopher Tortoises. The Florida species is the one most likely to excavate a burrow in the manner of a gopher, and Florida Tortoises' burrows can be 35 feet long!

The Desert Tortoise occupies the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts of the southwestern part of the United States and northern Mexico. Desert Tortoises usually burrow only deep enough to cover their shells (10 to 14 inches long), but some burrows may be several feet long. Since temperatures in these deserts can reach 140 degrees, it is estimated that Desert Tortoises spend 95% of their lives underground!

The Bolson Tortoise of north-central Mexico is the largest of the four species, and it can reach a length of 18 inches. Scientists did not discover it until 1959 when biologists working in the Bolson de Mapimi region of the Chihuahuan Desert visited a nearby ranch. They noticed chickens eating grain out of a large tortoise shell. The local ranchers told them it was the shell of "la tortuga grande del desierto", the big turtle of the desert. When it was determined to be a new species, and a declining one, the Mexican government set up a preserve, the Mapimi Biosphere Reserve, to protect it and other rare fauna and flora. The loss of habitat still threatens the Bolson Tortoise.

The smallest tortoise of the four is our own South Texas native, the Texas Tortoise. Its range extends from Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Nuevo Leon in Mexico north to San Antonio. It simply must have an arid habitat. If taken out of its range, say to the more humid Houston area, a Texas Tortoise will likely die of respiratory illnesses.

You may remember the pet turtle craze of the 1950s. Every "five-and-dime store" would offer baby turtles (usually Red-eared Sliders) and tortoises for sale. You could get a turtle bowl complete with a tiny plastic palm tree with the animal. Sadly, most of these pets died. And since most of the tortoises were collected from the wild, the pet trade seriously impacted the population.

For this reason, in 1977, Texas Tortoises were put on the Threatened List. Without special permits, you cannot take, transport, or possess the tortoise. You shouldn't pick one up if you find one. The frightened creature will likely void its bladder in a last-ditch measure to get you to let it go. While this behavior is only a nuisance to you, it can spell death to the tortoise. Tortoises get nearly all the water they need from the plants they eat. They store water in their urinary bladder and metabolically draw upon this water as needed. Their urine is excreted as a thick white paste. If you frighten it into urinating away its water supply, you may condemn it to death by dehydration.

As you sweat through another South Texas summer, think of the tortoise napping on its pallet under a clump of cactus. This animal is superbly adapted to the South Texas sun, dryness, sandy caliche soils, and native plants. It cannot survive in subdivisions, tennis courts, or even in areas cleared of brush for pastures or fields. Do we need more concrete, lawns, or exotic plants? Let's try to save some of our natural habitat for the Texas Tortoise, our special brush-country resident.



Welcome to new Class of 2022 who graduated on June 4th after completing initial training that started back on January 29th! We look forward to your many contributions in the years ahead. Heartfelt appreciation to our very hard-working Initial Training Directors, Greg Simmons and Sally Scroggs who planned, managed and implemented the 10-session program, and to member "ambassadors" and all who shared in that work. We wish Laura Andersen well as Class Representative for the next year.

Our recent Chapter meeting in Port Lavaca was very well attended; 35 members by my informal count! There is a palpable sense of relief that we can get out and together once again. All members are welcome to attend the Board of Directors meeting on July 9th at Fulton Mansion. VP Bill Burge is arranging for virtual access as well, in consideration of our long distances and spike in gasoline prices. Thanks, Bill! Next year the Board will consider purchasing equipment to allow hybrid meetings, so let us know what you think. Please also plan to attend the next Chapter meeting on August 13th in Palacios, details to follow.

TMN Tuesday on July 12th will be a joint meeting with Chapter presidents and advisors on the topic "Authentic Leadership in Public Service." All members are welcome to attend online and contribute their thoughts in the "chat" function.

Speaking of "leadership" issues, we are in desperate need for someone with an interest / background in public relations / outreach to fill the open Communications Director spot! Other leadership openings under the Communications umbrella are Outreach Coordinator and Publicity (Marketing). Thanks to Rachael Cheyne who volunteered to handle Instagram as part of our Social Media outreach. These positions really affect our ability to recruit new members and engage the public across our wide-ranging region. The P&P Manual describes these roles and responsibilities at pages 34-35: <https://midcoast-tmen.org/pdf/policy-procedure.pdf>. Please contact me if you're interested!

Keep your eyes open the first week of August to register for TMN's Annual Meeting being held Oct 20-23, 2022 at the Omni Houston Hotel – Riverway. Some sessions will be available via online access, but many will not. Don't delay, sessions fill up fast!

In past years, several talented Mid-Coast Chapter members have won awards in the Photo / Art / Media competition at the Annual Meeting. TMN also sponsors a Chapter Project Fair to share our work on behalf of the environment in our local communities, which will be screened for the TMN Tuesday presentation in October. There is also a Video Contest of 1 – 3 minutes marketing / promoting the chapters, to share your personal experience as a trainee or TMN volunteer, or highlighting a Chapter project, event, or partnership effort. Keep track on the TMN website for particulars if you are interested, with deadlines on October 1st or earlier: <https://txmn.tamu.edu/2022-annual-meeting/#contests-and-awards>

Until next time, take it slow and safe during our hot summer season, and keep up the great work!

Bob Cunningham

President, Mid-Coast Chapter

Congratulations Graduating Class of 2022!



Mid-Coast Texas Master Naturalist welcomes 14 new Associate Members from the Class of 2022. This is the second year that Claire Barnhart and Wilfred Korth have hosted The Importance of Native Plants and Graduation at Barnhart Ranch in Goliad County. The activities included a tour via a hayride around the ranch, identifying native plants along the way. We searched for Texas Horned Lizards but they were camera shy.



We did spot a Tarantula Hawk Wasp photographed here with Ray Kirkwood. Photo by associate member Frank Hayes.

Our new Associate Members are Laura Andersen, Class Representative (pictured here with Sally Scroggs and Greg Simmons, Initial Training Directors), Christi Carmichael & Bob Showler, Mary Ann Carr, Sharen Chatterton, Kayla Clark, Maureen Crocker, Frank & Pam Hayes, Bobbie Lee, Steve Marwitz, Janet McCrea, Rhett Parker, and Janie Waghome. Congratulations!!



The 2022 Initial Training program included 10 field training venues and 9 virtual lectures for approximately 80 hours of available training. The program was made possible by numerous chapter members who served as training ambassadors for respective venues, including Phil & Rebecca Stapleton at ANWR, Ray & Kris Kirkwood at Welder, Bill Burge at Fennessey, Allan & Brigid Berger for both Bay Ecology and Mad Island, and Claire Barnhart & Wilfred Korth for native plants at Barnhart ranch. Additional members who contributed education included Bob Cunningham, Ron Smudy, Debbie Griffith, Janet Price, Liz Smith, and Randy & Dawn Bissell (South Texas Chapter).



Thanks to all the chapter members who came out to Barnhart ranch to celebrate graduation. A fun time was had by all.

Contributed by Sally Scroggs & Greg Simmons, Initial Training Directors



Steve Marwitz and Janet McCrea (pictured with Bob Cunningham, President) completed 40 hours of volunteer service and 8 hours of advanced training by graduation to become Certified Texas Master Naturalists.

Raising Naturalists

By Rachel Cheyne

One of the most remarkable things about spending time outdoors with children is how the depth of their curiosity enriches my own.

“Why do Leaf Cutter Ants have more than one home?”

“What sound does a grasshopper make?”

“What kind of fruit comes from a willow tree?”

“Why does that fish have a face like an alligator?”



These questions and countless others spring from my children as we linger in wild spaces. Their curious, observant minds are always churning, making sense of the world around them. There is no need for me to choreograph their nature experiences, I simply need to give them the time to explore.

We recently spent over an hour tracking down the food source of a nest of Leaf Cutter Ants. We noticed their highway, worn smooth in the dirt, and followed it through the park. Eventually, we found the tree that had produced the seeds the ants were carrying. This yielded such questions as, “Why do they like these seeds better than the ones from the other plants?” and “Why don’t they move their home to be close to the tree?”. We discussed the questions at length, ending no nearer to a conclusive answer than when the conversation first began.

Another day, our walk to view a Bald Eagle nest was transformed by the discovery of dozens of unfamiliar beetles on the underside of fallen palm fronds. Little feet stopped to observe the iridescent creatures, so near and so tiny. Twenty minutes passed, then thirty, and still the watchful wonder persisted. In the end, I don’t actually remember if we saw the eagles that day. It didn’t matter so much after all.



This summer, take the little ones in your life on an outdoor adventure, and consider letting them set the pace. Wait for the wonderful questions to come, and don’t immediately ask Siri for the answers. Savor the whys, whats, and hows as together you marvel at the amazing things around you. I’d venture to guess that none of you will either forget or regret it.



DOC AND MARTHA REMEMBERED AT TREE DEDICATION



Several long-time MCTMN members came to the Tree-Naming Ceremony for Doc and Martha McAlister in Cuero April 29, 2022—left to right: Ron Smudy, Barb Threatt, Ray Kirkwood, Doc and Martha's daughters Jenny McAlister and Cynthia McAlister, Kris Kirkwood, Helen Boatman, and Diane Pletcher. Not in the photo, Carla Rinche.



The Cuero Tree Board unveiled their seventh named tree of what continues to be a unique campaign to name all the historic trees in the streets of Cuero. The Cuero Tree Board chose this seventh tree to be named in honor of the late Martha McAlister and her husband Dr. Wayne H. (Doc) McAlister. Martha was a dedicated Cuero Tree Board member; she and Wayne lived and “botanized” in DeWitt county and around Texas for almost sixty years. For years, Doc and Martha were dedicated to instilling a love of the natural world into members of the Mid-Coast Chapter of Texas Master Naturalist through their U.S. Fish and Wildlife service on Matagorda Island. The tree is located in the 300 block of East Live Oak next to the First Presbyterian Church. This tree is unique in that it is in the middle of the street and has two trunks coming from the same root system. The Tree Board dedicated this tree during a special ceremony scheduled for Friday, April 29th at 10:00 a.m., which happens to coincide with the 150th anniversary of Arbor Day. Special signs have been placed on poles on both sides of the tree.

AWARDS



2021 Service Against All Odds Through Grit and Distance

front row: Patrick Hartigan, Rachel Cheyne, Debbie Griffith, Lauren DeLeon, Susie Starnes, Linda Swickheimer, Janie Von Dohlen

Back row: Janet Price, Ken Goodner, Judy Goodner, Marilyn Stewart, Dianne Pletcher, Cathy Koenig, Bill Burge, Debbi Roskey, Bobby Garner, Melissa Guthrie



Barbara (Mathis) Carr and Debbie Griffith – “Service against All Odds through Grit and Distance” 2020 pin



Rachel Cheyne, Class of 2021, Initial Certification (Bob Cunningham presenting)



2021 sideoats grama recertification pin: Barb Threatt, Dianne Pletcher, Barbara (Mathis) Carr, Debbie Griffith, Melissa Guthrie, Ken Goodner, Lauren DeLeon



Debbie Griffith—500-hour silver dragonfly milestone pin



2022 lightning whelk recertification pin—Bobby Garner, Patrick Hartigan, Sally Scroggs, Greg Simmons, Bill Burge, Janie von Dohlen



Chapter Members Expand Work In Rockport Area Pollinator Gardens

By Vickie Wilson



Jane Moore and I have added Linda Castro Sanctuary to our volunteer pollinator gardens project which currently consists of the north and south Rockport Welcome monuments and Rockport Post Office. We have already started weeding and watering to keep the plants going throughout the summer. We are both very excited to take this on and hope we can encourage others to join us in enhancing and creating pollinator gardens in Aransas County. If you need a few volunteer hours, we have opportunities available through the end of June. Come early and work for an hour or more. We will take a break in July and August and then get back to work in the fall with planting. We are experimenting with different strengths of vinegar for environmentally conscious weed killing. Stay tuned for D'Ann Williams' Guineagrass Project. We invite our birders to provide feedback for future plant selections that will be

beneficial and attractive for our feathered friends.



Caterpillars have been spotted on the Zizotes Milkweed that we successfully planted at the Rockport Post Office Garden.

VOLUNTEER HERE!



YOUTH CAMP - The City by The Sea Museum is in search of volunteers who enjoy engaging children in nature study to assist with their 2022 summer ecology camps. Descriptions of the camps can be found on the [museum website](#). Camps will be held from 9 a.m. to noon at the Palacios Education Pavilion, 693 S Bay Blvd, Palacios, TX 77465 on June 20-24, July 11-15, and July 18-22. Activities include birding, plant identification, seining, and beach cleanups. Volunteer hours range from an hour plus prep time for guest presenters to 15 hours per camp week for camp assistants or co-teachers. Having a Master Naturalist as a co-teacher for each camp would allow us to split into two groups of 10, allowing more contact time per participating student and higher quality field experiences due to small group sizes. Master naturalist guest presenters would also have an impact by connecting children with their local coastal environment. If interested, contact camp leader, Kayla Clark, at museumpalacios3@gmail.com.

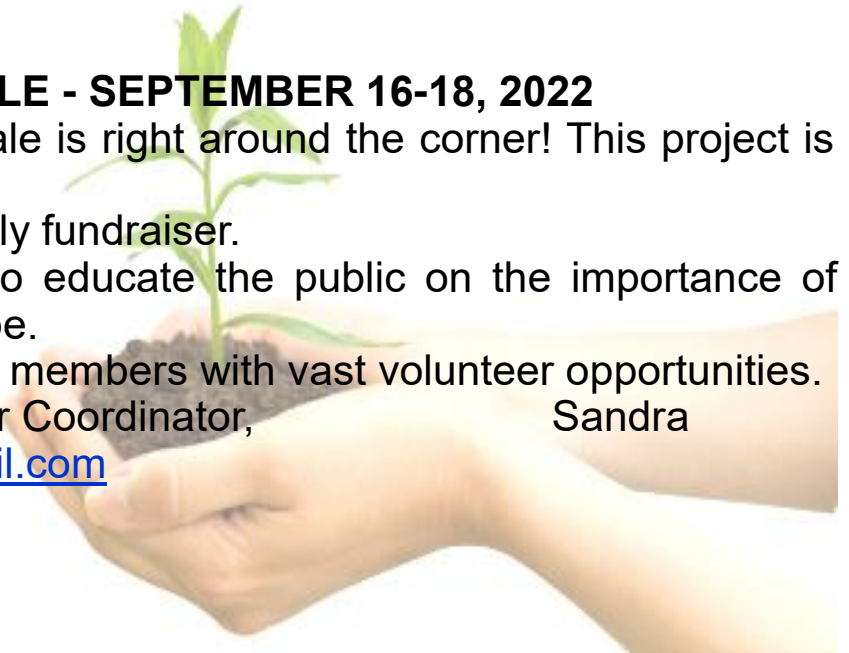
MID-COAST TMN PLANT SALE - SEPTEMBER 16-18, 2022

Our Chapter's Annual Plant Sale is right around the corner! This project is important in many ways.

- It serves as our chapter's only fundraiser.
- It gives us an opportunity to educate the public on the importance of native plants in the landscape.
- It provides our members our members with vast volunteer opportunities.

Contact Plant Sale Volunteer Coordinator,
Garcia: sagarcia0712@gmail.com

Sandra



WRITE FOR THE NEWSLETTER:

Submit photos, articles, volunteer opportunities and anything you think fellow chapter members would have interest in seeing or reading. Get VS credit for your time. Report as Chapter Business (CB), Communications, and describe as newsletter submission work. **Email Fall Newsletter**

Submissions to:

Bobbie Lee anakiri@gmail.com

Thank you, Bobbie, for taking on the position of Newsletter Editor!