

T E X A S

Master Naturalist™



Member News
January 2018

Volunteering for Nature

LEARN ABOUT EXCITING PROJECTS YOU CAN BE INVOLVED IN

This newsletter is provided to you as a benefit of being a member of the Mid-Coast Chapter Texas Master Naturalists, Inc. We will tell you about some of the projects that your fellow members have participated in recently so that you may have some ideas about how you can get involved.

Some of these projects may not be available to you at this time; however, most of them will be repeated next year or later in the year. For more information, see Volunteer Opportunities.

If you hear of a project you would like to participate in, please read the Volunteer Guidelines and submit an approval request.

A few of our partner organizations are:

- The Aransas National Wildlife Refuge
Coletto Creek Park and Reservoir
Goose Island State Park
Clive Runnells Family Mad Island Marsh Preserve
Mission-Aransas National Estuarine Research Reserve
Nueces Delta Preserve
Rob and Bessie Welder Wildlife Foundation
Texas State Aquarium

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Master Naturalists Learn to Monitor Whooping Cranes and Shorebirds

By Pat Garland

On December 13th and 14th, a group of Texas Master Naturalists from the Mid-Coast Chapter participated in classes learning how to monitor endangered Whooping Cranes and other shorebirds. The class was jointly sponsored by Audubon Texas and The International Crane Foundation (ICF). This group of students is part of a pilot project: Crane Activities Monitoring Program (CAMP) to expand the monitoring of these birds in the local area.

The Texas Estuarine Resource Network (TERN) is a community-based citizen science program promoting bird monitoring and conservation, managed by the Audubon Texas Coastal Program, in addition to CAMP. The purpose of the TERN shorebird project is to count and identify shorebirds at specific sites and identify any disturbing activities that may affect them.

Whooping Cranes are among the most threatened families of birds in the world, yet their special characteristics create unique opportunities for observation. With their high visibility, extraordinary beauty, dramatic migrations, and striking behavior, Whooping Cranes inspire caring and action. When people commit to save cranes, they commit to the future of the ecosystems and conservation efforts.

At the two-day class, the Texas Master Naturalist group teamed up to monitor the Whooping Cranes by video, with one person being a timer, one a watcher and one a recorder. Activities of the cranes were monitored at 15-second intervals. All activity was analyzed and recorded for the ICF database.

The second day of the class, all students boarded the *Skimmer*, captained by Tommy Moore. They went to several sites inhabited by families of both Whooping Cranes and shorebirds and the students practiced their new skills.

About 17 territories or families were observed and all the Whooping Cranes seemed to be finding plenty of food to build up their stores to migrate back to Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada in a few months. Most families had a juvenile with them that will learn from the parents how to fend for itself and make the migration to Wood Buffalo in the spring.

PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE



Trip to Barrier Islands

Master Naturalists Linda Shirey and Barbara Jones aboard the *Skimmer*, which took them to see the Whooping Cranes.



Learning to Monitor

Class students learned to monitor the Whooping Cranes and shorebirds.



Juvenile Crane

This juvenile will remain with its parents to learn to forage for food and build up strength before migrating back to Canada in the spring.

Texas Master Naturalists Participate in Cold-Stunned Turtle Rescue

In the fall, Donna Shaver head of the Padre Island National Seashore (PINS) Division of Sea Turtle Science & Recovery holds a half day class on rescuing cold-stunned sea turtles. It turns out that this training was very crucial this year due to several cold snaps that have put green sea turtles in jeopardy along the coast.



Rescuers must be trained and registered to pick up the turtles; but, anyone can report a cold-stunned turtle at (361) 949-8173, Ext. 226. Groups such as the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, the Texas State Aquarium Sea Lab, Texas Master Naturalists, Game Wardens, as well as private citizens, take the training, which includes information about the sea turtles, personal safety when working in the cold, and the gathering of background information on participants who want to be registered.

Barbara Mathis, a Mid-Coast Chapter Texas Master Naturalist, has participated in the rescue efforts for several years and explains the problem. "Turtles typically come from offshore waters to shallow bays and inlets of the Laguna Madre to forage. Turtles move slowly in the process and are sometimes caught in cold snaps that send the water temperature below 50 degrees. If the air temperature is low for a few days, this could leave the turtles cold-stunned with hypothermia and unable to swim. If not rescued, most of them will die. Most of the sea turtles found are green sea turtles. Green sea turtles get their name from the color of their meat and can be identified by two prefrontal scales

(1 pair) on each turtle's forehead. Green sea turtles are considered an endangered species."

When very cold snaps occur, the PINS volunteer coordinator will notify volunteers and post notices on social media and in the news for the public to be on the lookout for the cold-stunned turtles and call the hotline. Volunteers will rescue the turtles by boat and walking patrols. Many of the turtles are young and dinner-plate sized, but some are very large. All must be carefully handled, but the larger ones must be carried in a certain way to prevent further injury.



All the cold-stunned turtles transported to the PINS Turtle Lab are separated into three groups: healthy turtles, those with growths or tumors caused by the *Fibropapillomatosis* (FP) virus, and dead turtles. Turtles with FP have external tumors that grow so large as to hamper swimming, vision, feeding, and potential escape from predators. Volunteers must change gloves after handling the infected turtles to keep from infecting healthy turtles. Biologists tag, measure and document all turtles. All live turtles receive a PIT (Passive Integrated Transponder) tag, injected internally under skin that will have a number which is placed on the back of the turtle and on a corresponding information form. Both the turtle and the form are photographed for identification. Once the turtles have been processed, they

are sent to locations such as the Corpus Christi Aquarium, Sea Life, or ARK (Animal Rehabilitation Keep).

At these facilities they are slowly warmed up, as they are fed and cared for by staff and volunteers. After a few days, they are released by PINS staff and volunteers at Malaquite Beach or other locations at PINS. The National Coast Guard assisted by releasing some of the turtles offshore. This year, we have already had the largest cold-stunning event since the 1980's and more cold weather is on the way. Over 14,000 turtles were processed through PINS during the first five days of this year and over 2,000 turtles were processed statewide.

If You Find a Cold-Stunned Sea Turtle

- Report immediately to (361) 949-8173, Ext. 226
- Follow instructions and wait for assistance. You will need to report location, number of turtles, and condition.
- To protect the turtle, you may need to move it out of the water and away from cold wind & direct sun.
- DO NOT warm a cold stunned sea turtle, as raising its temperature too quickly may harm it
- Do not put the turtle in water because it can drown.
- If you find a dead turtle, report the location. It will be recovered, although the priority will go to live ones.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To Volunteer, contact the Volunteer Coordinator at (361) 949-8173, Ext 268.

New Training Class Slated to Begin in February

Bill Burge and Bob Cunningham are the new Co-Directors of the Training Committee and have put together an exciting initial training class for the new Mid-Coast members of 2018. The class begins February 3 and ends by June. The classes will be held about every other Saturday.

In addition to classroom instruction, trips are planned to the Welder Wildlife Foundation, the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Museum of the Coastal Bend, the Mad Island

Marsh Preserve, the Aransas County AgriLife Extension Office, Fennessey Ranch, and Coletto Creek.

Boats will also transport the students to Matagorda Island for a full day study of marine life. Co-Director, Bill Burge stated, "I am most excited about the session on Early Texans, Pioneering Texas Naturalists, and Archeology, because we have never had an extensive training class on those subjects.

Bob and I hope to include this new class as part of the Advanced Training curriculum to all members later this year."



Collecting and Growing Zizotes Milkweed for Monarchs

Neli (Nelida) Spurrell, a Mid-Coast Chapter Master Naturalist launched a new project last spring to develop a pollinator garden at Ivy Lane Wildlife Sanctuary, a project of Aransas County Pathways, whose goals are to use plants native to the area to attract birds, pollinators, and wildlife.

Of chief concern is the plight of the monarch butterfly. Increasing use of herbicides, habitat loss due to real estate and agricultural development, and climate change are all factors in a declining Monarch population. Female monarchs lay eggs on milkweed host plants because their caterpillars only eat milkweed plants. Naturally, Neli decided to include milkweeds in her pollinator garden.

Neli had difficulty finding the only native milkweed seed for this area, Zizotes Milkweed (*AsclepiasOenotheroides*). She described how she solved this dilemma, "I started asking other naturalists to keep their eyes on any path around Aransas County that might include Zizotes milkweed. Soon, we got responses and a few seeds were sent to me. One day I was jogging on the beach and looked over at some large

patches of grass between the shore and the waterline. Much to my surprise, Zizotes Milkweed were growing there!"

After requesting permission from the landowner, Neli recruited the help of her fellow Mid-Coast Texas Master Naturalists to collect the seeds and propagate them.

"I have asked members to keep records and return half of the seeds they have germinated to me for replanting back to the sites where they were collected.

The seeds will also be donated to other organizations for planting in pollinator gardens throughout the local area."

Congratulations, Neli, on taking this initiative to save the monarchs.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Neli Spurrell,
Texas Master Naturalist
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