

Our Mentors—Doc and Martha

By Joan Muchmore, Certified Texas Master Naturalist
Photos by Penny Hong, Class of 2003

Dr. Wayne H. (Doc) McAlister and his wife, Martha K. McAlister, have guided us, taught us, and inspired us from the inception of the Chapter. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to their untiring dedication to promoting love of the natural world and to their efforts to instill that love into the members of the Mid-Coast Chapter of Texas Master Naturalist. Doc and Martha are retiring from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service, but they are not retiring from our hearts.

Observations on a Day with Doc and Martha—Final Training Session of the Class of 2003



As we of the Class of 2003 greeted each other at the Goose Island State Park boat dock, we knew that this was a special occasion. We were well aware that this would be the last time any of us would 'sit at the feet' of Doc and Martha out on Matagorda Island, listening and learning. And this would be our last class meeting and we would not be together again. Today's group would be small—Ted Hong was already up north, Carroll and Charla Marsh and Martha Riccio were missing because of family vacations, and we hoped that Shara Branstetter wasn't left behind as Petra Villegas and Beth Hester almost were. Petra and Beth; Annie and David Clayton; Penny, Rolf, and Anne Marie Hong; Cathy and Rick Johnson; Joan Muchmore; and our two Master Naturalist Ambassadors, Kris Kirkwood and Ray Little, made up the group that boarded the boats for the trip across the bay to our rendezvous with Doc and Martha.

We knew from our kayaking day that Anne Marie has a problem with open bodies of water, so David took it upon himself to keep her thinking on other things as we traveled across the bay.

The dolphins helped, but the four Magnificent Frigate Birds coolly—and, yes, magnificently—resting on four pilings as we approached the island portended a great day.



Doc and Martha were at the dock to greet us. Martha said they almost cancelled us again because of stormy weather the day before! We were soon rocking along on Doc's Island Conestoga with our learning adventure already begun as we inspected the spongy twigs on the tables before us. Our first stop was the black mangrove bush in the wetland area that had produced the twiggy, air-breathing 'knees' that allow it to live in boggy ground.



On to the headquarters building to stow our lunches and for orientation to the island, to its position as a barrier island in the Gulf, and to its four ecological regions—beaches, dunes, grasslands, wetlands. It all came rushing back—how lucky we are to have Doc with his calm, clear way of sharing his knowledge in a manner totally lacking in pedantry.

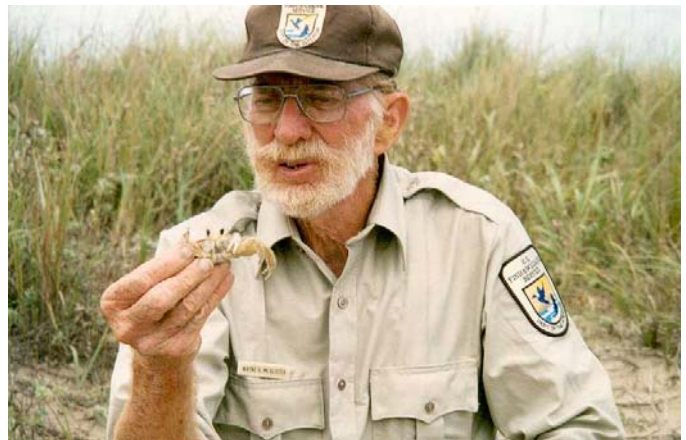


We held and learned about a slender glass lizard, a Texas horned lizard, and an ornate box turtle, and admired an ornery speckled king snake from afar.



Doc had said earlier that he hoped that we would see Aplomado falcons, but even he wasn't expecting the display a pair of them put on for us. A falcon captured a swallow and perched on the radio tower eating it as other swallows swooped around and we watched. Through our binoculars we could see feathers flying as the falcon pulled at them. Soon, a second falcon joined the first to share the meal. They played one-up-man-ship as the second perched above the first, which soon flew up and above the second, which then flew up and above it. And then they tossed away the less-than-prime remains of the prey and were gone. What a show!

Back to the Conestoga and heading for the beach. Doc is right—contrary to its initial appearance, the beach is not lifeless. We brought pastel-hued coquina clams to light, dug deep for ghost crabs, sieved for the little swash creatures—including the mole crabs and other creatures those little sandpipers are constantly finding as they dash back and forth in the surf—caught fly-like critters in the piles of gulfweed, found dune grasshoppers, and followed tracks of rabbits and coyotes and sand crabs into the dunes.



After lunch, Doc and Martha had seashells spread out on tables. We were able to identify all of them with a wonderful key that they are developing. Personally, I can't wait for it to be available to us all. We distinguished lightning whelks and pear whelks by their left- and right-handedness

(the former is the state seashell of Texas) and recognized moon shells—which drill the small holes seen in so many shells on the beach. We identified a tub of creatures from the wetlands—many kinds of crabs and periwinkles.

Time on the island passes so quickly, as it tends to when you are doing what you love. Our time was almost up, as we headed out again on the Conestoga for adventures on the bay side.

Black-necked stilts fussed at us and at Doc as he netted creatures off the surface of a body of water that appeared with the rains of the day before. We saw black-crowned night herons, a reddish egret dancing around, and some white ibis, but the best was yet to come. We walked out to the boardwalk near the boat dock. Ray Little had been telling us the difference in wing markings between white ibis and wood storks, but said that the wood storks had not yet returned to the island. However, there we were as three wood storks flew over. Doc and Ray were ecstatic. Then four more flew above us. All together we counted 27 wood storks arriving on the island for the summer! What a special ending to a special day!



After goodbyes made poignant by the knowledge that Doc and Martha were retiring and would no longer greet us on the island, we set out for the mainland. Surely all of us were thinking of our copies of Doc and Martha's book, *Matagorda Island*, which will always remind us of this day.

At the dock, Kris presented us with our official Master Naturalist nametags. Would the highs from this day never end! It wasn't easy saying goodbye to our classmates. We decided to try to have learning get-togethers, maybe once a month, in order to keep in touch. The end to a perfect day.