

## ***What I Learned as a Van Tour Guide***

By David Clayton, Certified Texas Master Naturalist



Volunteering as a van tour guide at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge this year was more than just fun. For me, it was a very educational experience. Every time we took a trip out in the van with a group of visitors, I learned something. This learning may be the most valuable aspect of volunteering as an interpretive guide.

On one recent tour, I learned that it is important to some visitors that we learn the scientific names for at least the dominant, or prominent, species. One gentleman taking the tour that day was a retired industrial forester from the state of Washington. At our tour stop at a large Blackjack oak near the Visitor's Center, I spoke about the oak and how it relates to the name of the peninsula occupied by the mainland portion of the refuge. As we pulled away, he asked me, "So, that tree is *Quercus* what?" I answered, "*Quercus marilandica*." He smiled, and seemed to loosen up a bit. What I gained in that one moment was credibility with that man. I had his attention, and his participation, for the rest of the tour. If I had fumbled his question, not knowing what he was talking about, I doubt he would have listened to another word I said.

How did I know the scientific name of that tree? I learned it from my free book on the oaks of the Eastern U.S., which I got because Linda Serrill recommended it and told me how to get it. Thanks to Linda, I had it with me in the van that day, so I could have looked up what I needed to know. Even being able to do that would have given me credibility with our visitor. A van tour guide doesn't have to know everything, but he or she has to be willing to try to find out what a visitor wants to know.

On several other days I learned how important it is to have a wide variety of information to impart. One afternoon a very pleasant couple was chatting with me before boarding the van. They told me that they had enjoyed the tour so much the week before, with Master Naturalist guide Robert Angerstein, that they had decided to come take it again. I was able to gather some of what Robert had focused on the day they were out with him. From there, I chose to emphasize points other than what Robert had covered. They told me several times how much they had enjoyed both tours. My thanks go to Robert for giving those folks such a great time that they just had to do it again. My job was easier than his—he had built for them an expectation of an interesting, enjoyable time.

Being able to focus on more than one theme came in handy on other days, as well. Twice Annie and I had tour shifts, and it seemed to us that the refuge personnel had forgotten to let the animals out! Not a deer, armadillo, alligator, turtle, frog, hog, or javelina was to be found for the first three-fourths of the tour. As luck would have it, however, the wildflowers were beginning to appear. We were able to

focus attention on the flowering plants, pollinators, fruits, and so on. The beautiful and fascinating things are always there; the challenge is to integrate whatever you find out there on a given day into your program. Preparing several broad themes to present is a good way to avoid being caught off-guard by circumstances.

The language we use to present our material matters, too. Milt, one of the winter-resident volunteers at the refuge, joined the tour one day. That trip was one of the few times I had younger people in the van. Several times I used terms they didn't understand, so I had to back up and explain a little more. Later Milt and I got to talking about language and vocabularies. Milt, a retired educator, reminded me of a concept I have since tried to keep in my mind. It seems that most people have four vocabularies—hearing, speaking, writing, and reading. They will overlap, but they will be somewhat different. For our tour situation, it is the hearing vocabulary that matters most. Many people will not truly “see” an object pointed out to them if they do not have a word (and image) for that word in their hearing vocabulary.

For example, let us assume I am out in the van with two couples. One is from Minnesota and the other from Pennsylvania. As we pass an oak motte I direct their attention to it and speak of the animal diversity often found in a motte. The couple from Minnesota might see me pointing at a “grove,” while the couple from Pennsylvania sees me pointing out a “copse.” Just remember that even some native Texans will not be familiar with terms that we as Texas Master Naturalists have come to take as part of everyday speech.

I had to concentrate on this very problem one day with a couple from Germany. Each of them had a different level of proficiency in English (and my German is very weak!), so I had to choose my words carefully, and watch them closely, to be certain they understood what I was saying. They noticed my attentiveness, and were very appreciative. Lesson learned—stay attentive to reactions from the group, and tailor what you are saying accordingly.

My last story involves several lessons learned, but the story comes first. On April 9, Annie and I gave our last tours for the year. In the afternoon, Norm Hirsch joined us in the van. On the way back to the van at the Bay Overlook stop, Annie spotted an interesting insect. Now this was a day when the birds and animals were very scarce. Annie pointed the critter out to the group. I knew I had seen pictures of this red and black insect. I just could not recall what in the world it was. Expectant faces around us seemed to demand that I say, or do, something. I got down on my knees and coaxed the insect onto my hand. I was stalling, doing anything to keep the guests interested, while I tried to remember what this thing was. I pointed out its segmented body and counted the six legs, which identified it as an insect. It was now on my forearm. At this point Norm caught up with us from behind.

He said, “Oh, that's a cow ant. When I was a kid they called them that because people said their bite is so painful it can kill a cow.” Imagine please, if you will, what was in my mind as I looked down at this creature crawling up my arm. I turned my arm, and the cow ant fell off. I thanked Norm for telling us about this interesting Aransas resident; he had really saved me twice. First, he had identified the insect, and secondly he had kept me from doing something even more stupid than what I had already done. By the way, the Audubon Field Guide to Insects lists the “cow ant” as “cow killer” and even repeats the old saying about how painful their bite is.

Multiple lessons come from that incident. “Don't pick up strange insects.” “Learn all of the dangerous insects on the refuge.” “If you don't know what it is, don't point it out, or be ready to try to find out.” Those would be valid lessons learned, but I think another good one would be, “Always take Norm with you on the tour!”