

# Lost Pines Chapter

## Texas Master Naturalist



January/February 2018

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### Member of the Year: Louise Ridlon!



Louise Ridlon has been named Member of the Year for 2017. Louise joined our chapter in 2006, shortly after relocating from California. She has been involved in countless activities, and has served in a number of roles, including Training Chair and President. Louise considers herself a generalist, and consequently has clocked hours in various projects such as bird counts, weather monitoring, biocensus surveys, and interpretive hike leading. However,

Louise truly shines as an educator, and leads an outdoor education program for homeschooled children. Louise is a cornerstone of our chapter, and we are thankful to have her with us. Watch her interview with Julia Aiken at

<https://goo.gl/6rjvTU>.

*Photo courtesy of Bruce Siebert*

### Hiding in Plain Sight by Larry Gfeller

While indulging an indomitable attraction to the Gypsy lifestyle, my wife and I recently landed a 3 month conscription as park hosts at McKinney Roughs Nature Park (a park host is given free utilities and an RV site in exchange for volunteer work on the property). It was not whimsy; we made formal application, underwent the ubiquitous background check and anguished while awaiting word of acceptance. We wanted to experience what it was like to be embedded inside a 1,140-acre nature park—nestled among the wilderness, the wildlife, the weather, the whole nine yards. This is my report.

**Continued on page 3**



# Letter from the Editor by Alysa Joaquin

Welcome to 2018, Master Naturalists! We ended 2017 on a fantastic note, and I trust that we can make this year even better. Our chapter has some great continuing projects, some exciting ideas for new ones, and a *completely full* class of trainees eager for the adventure that awaits them in the Lost Pines.

It's hard to believe it was only a year ago that I, myself, was a trainee. I have learned so much and had so many transformative experiences because of my fellow LPMNs that I truly feel like I've been here for years. I am honored to be serving as the Outreach Director and Newsletter Editor, and will do everything in my power to make sure the world knows how great you all are.

A brief introduction for those of you yet to meet/experience me: I'm the bug lady. I moved to Austin, TX from Seattle, WA in 2013 to attend graduate school, and after meeting bugs as big as my face, I decided to stay (that's a Cecropia moth caterpillar to the right). In my free time (what's that?), I post pictures of bugs on the internet and evangelize iNaturalist.



You may notice this issue looks slightly different from previous ones. I decided to start over from scratch, and I'd love to incorporate more content from more members. This issue is coming out *a little later* than it typically does (sorry!), but I wanted to fill it with tons of examples of how easy it can be to contribute to the newsletter—I'll bet some of you didn't even know you were doing it!

What to send: **Anything!** Gardening tips, vacation photos, poems, art projects by your kid/grandkid/neighbor/dog, and everything in between.

Where to send: **Email LPMPnews@gmail.com** or **post to our facebook page (@lostpinesmasternaturalist)**

When to send: Anytime! **Deadline for next issue: March 20 (ish)**

## SOCIAL MEDIA UPDATES

We have been working hard on our social media presence to increase awareness of our group and activities within our community.

### Facebook:

[@lostpinesmasternaturalist](#)

- 📌 Public LPMN activities are posted as events
- 📌 Interesting/noteworthy posts from similar organizations are shared

### Instagram:

[lostpinesmasternaturalists](#)

- 📌 We have one now!
- 📌 Over 100 followers already!
- 📌 Post photos to the facebook page to submit—you will be credited by name and IG account if provided in your submission

### Website:

[lostpinesmasternaturalist.org](#)

- (redirects to [txmn.org/lostpines](#))
- 📌 Events calendar added to sidebar
- 📌 Newsletter subscriptions now managed by MailChimp
- 📌 New official email addresses for Executives, Directors, and Chairs

## 2018 OFFICERS

President	Marcia Karr	Food & Fun	Kathy Cox
Vice President	Donna Nelson	Junior Naturalist	Kim Iberg
Secretary	Paula Weisskopf	Membership	Nancy Rabensburg
Treasurer	Marsha Elrod	Outreach	Alysa Joaquin
Advanced Training Coordinator	Vicky Gaconnet	Public Relations	James Stolpa
Basic Training	Michal Hubbard	Videographer	Michelle Belden
Chapter History	Cat May	Interpretive Hikes	Benjamin Kanten
Environmental Stewardship	Allen Guisinger	Member-at-Large	Audrey Ambrose

Officer contact information is available at [txmn.org/lostpines/2018-officers-committees](http://txmn.org/lostpines/2018-officers-committees)

*The Lost Pines Chapter is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational organization within the Texas Master Naturalist Program. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension serve as sponsors.*

**Hiding in Plain Sight (from pg 1)**

As any visitor can attest, it's a beautiful property. Making your way along the ribbony main road to the Visitor Center, it's not unusual to glimpse a gathering of grazing deer in the rough under a grove of trees. They feel safe here. Cottontail bunnies brazenly feast on the tender grass and a flock of birds pass overhead, buckshot black against the blue sky. An overlook by the Learning Center opens to the western horizon and it delivers the most stunning sunsets imaginable when conditions are right. It's a place of refuge and solace.



Most of you know that McKinney Roughs is owned and run by the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA). What you might not realize is the amazing diversity of environmental elements present there: oyster-shell box canyons, oak and pine forests, native grasslands (savanna), riparian habitat and 18 miles of trails open to hiking, biking and horseback riding. The region is nearly at the convergence of the blackland prairie, lost pines and post oak savanna—and you can find elements of each in the park. Oh yes, and the Colorado River runs through it.



As park hosts, our RV site was close to the campus but nearly invisible—like a hidden fawn, tucked in behind a motte of trees and protected by a dense thicket of yaupon. Each evening brought special effects. At dusk the campus would turn to velvet. At night the full moon poured over everything, illuminating close details. Boney fingers of bare tree branches reached up to lay hands on the moon. There was a delicious sense of being completely alone in the wilderness.

Our volunteer requirements while living there were somewhat loose and negotiable, unlike other park host positions we've come to know. *We don't do*

*bathrooms* was an up-front mantra of ours, which we expected to defend. "That's alright," said one of the regional managers who greeted us shortly after arrival, "we'll work something out." As events unfolded, it became clear that one of our primary responsibilities was to provide a

presence on the property at night—to act as night watchmen, or as a human tripwire, if you will. There is an LCRA police force; we were not there to be enforcers, but rather liaisons. As hosts, we were expected to tend to the needs of overnight guests,

**Continued on pg 11**

**Bill's Snippets****Bold magpies + shy elk = friends 4ever**

A study in Biology Letters demonstrated that shy elk in Alberta, Canada, allow bold magpies to land on them and eat winter ticks, while bold elks scare off magpies and shy magpies avoid elks. The study is among the few to explore how personality shapes interspecies interactions.

Link: [goo.gl/GwV6ys](http://goo.gl/GwV6ys)

**Deer parasites are killing moose**

Minnesota's moose population has plummeted by more than half since 2005, and scientists say parasites carried by white-tailed deer are behind many of the deaths. The brainworm is tolerated by deer, but research pinpoints it as a direct or indirect cause of at least one-fourth to one-third of moose deaths.

Link: [goo.gl/c6wu8t](http://goo.gl/c6wu8t)

# Holiday Party Recap

On December 4, we celebrated the holiday season with a crock-pot cook-off. Members competed in several categories for the most delicious food or beverage prepared entirely in a crock-pot. Thank you to Cat May for suggesting this activity!

*Photos courtesy of Bruce Siebert*



## Holiday Party Committee:

- Kathy Cox
  - Sandi Ward
  - Kim Iberg
  - Nancy Rabensburg
  - Beth Moore
  - Marcia Karr
- ## Decorations:
- Cat May
  - Audrey Ambrose



## Crock-Pot Cook-Off Winners

- |             |                |
|-------------|----------------|
| Sides       | Michal Hubbard |
| Entrees     | Bruce Siebert  |
| Drinks      | Kim Iberg      |
| Desserts    | Ronnie Lanier  |
| Baked Goods | Kathy Cox      |

## Chai Latte – Winning Drink from Kim Iberg

### Ingredients

- 6 cups water
- 3 pkgs Stevia with Inulin
- 2 teaspoon peppercorns, rough crush
- 15 whole cloves
- 25-30 cardamom pods, crush lightly to open pods, collect seeds and grind them
- 3" fresh ginger, sliced
- 4 cinnamon sticks
- 4 whole star anise
- 6 nice black tea bags
- 2 T pure bourbon vanilla
- half and half or whole milk 1:1 ratio

### Instructions

- Fill a tea filter bag or infuser with peppercorns, cloves and cardamom, hang in the crock pot.
- Add cinnamon, ginger piece, star anise, and water.
- Set to low for 4-6 hours, covered.
- Add tea bags to crock, steep covered to desired strength.
- Remove tea/spice bags
- Add stevia and vanilla
- Serve fresh with warmed milk 1:1, a star anise or cinnamon stick in each mug when served.



## Slow Cooker Corn Casserole— Winning Side from Michal Hubbard

### Ingredients

- 8 oz. Cream cheese, softened
- 2 eggs, beaten
- ½ c. sugar
- 1 pkg cornbread mix prepared
- 3 c frozen corn
- 3 c. Mexican or southwestern style corn (canned)
- 1-2 jalapenos, finely diced
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 2 c. Shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 c. Milk
- 2 tbl. Butter, melted
- 1 tsp. Salt
- 1 tsp. Garlic powder
- ½ tsp. Pepper
- *Optional –*
- Medium diced onion
- One can rotel

### Instructions

- Generously coat the slow cooker insert interior with cooking spray or use a liner. (between cornbread & cheese...sticking is a guarantee)!
- Combine cream cheese, sugar, & eggs in a mixing bowl – mix thoroughly.
- Add remaining ingredients & stir until well combined.
- Pour into slow cooker and cover.
- Cook on high for 2-4 hours. (cornbread has to cook, and all the cheeses need to melt.)



# 2017 Year in Review

## Chapter Accomplishments

- Developed Zedler Park South Nature Trail
- Lost Pines Master Naturalist Day in Bastrop County
- Outdoor Adventure Weekend
- First Annual Photo Contest
- Junior Naturalists in its 3rd year
- Bluebird Trail, with photos showing success
- Bridge Maniacs helped our state parks recover from floods and Hurricane Harvey



Bridge at Bastrop State Park. Damage from Hurricane Harvey (left), and after Bridge Maniacs repairs (right)

## Nature Photo Contest

We partnered with Precision Camera to host a photo contest at McKinney Roughs Nature Park in November. There were 34 participants, and three of our members were contest winners. The planning committee included Larry Gfeller, Michal Hubbard, Bruce Siebert, and Carroll Moore. Thank you to all volunteers!



Beth Moore, Winner of Patterns and Textures



Kelly Alecci, Winner of People and Nature



George Alecci, Winner of Young Photographer

*More winning photos on Page 12*

## Lost Pines Christmas Bird Count

The Lost Pines CBC was held on December 30, and the count circle centered on McKinney Roughs. The total species count was 105 birds, including a rare winter White-Eyed Vireo. Nick Cowey and Erin Holley from LCRA coordinated the event. Guides for the count included our favorite birders, Louise Ridlon, Anna Stalcup, and Kathy McAleese. Louise's team spotted a leucistic Red-Bellied Woodpecker, which Alysa Joaquin photographed (at right).



### Our Impact in Numbers

- 10,462 hours volunteered in 2017
- Interpretive Hikes: 526 adults and 509 youth (1035 people total)
- The Invasive Removal Team removed over 1100 invasive plants from Lockhart State Park
- The Biocensations documented 2089 observations and identified 678 species at McKinney Roughs Nature Park

# What's Blooming?

by Liz Pullman, Judy Turner, & Kathy McAleese

Time to talk about those GRASSES.

Regularly, every plant goober vows to “really learn those grasses this year.” Then along come the dicots with their outlandish and colorful petals and we start concentrating on those. I am reporting that we were better this year, as each new biocensus or field trip presented us with new habitat and therefore new grasses. (Having Shaw’s Guide to Texas Grasses didn’t hurt, either.)



Egyptian crowfoot

We think you will be intrigued by some of the species we found this past year. How do you visualize a grass called Little Quaking Grass (*Briza minor*)? It quakes when touched - just shivers all over. Then there’s Egyptian crowfoot (*Dactyloctenium aegyptium*); Judy and I were walking across the grounds at Washington-on-the-Brazos State Park when we were stopped in our tracks by the seed heads on this little grass.



Pan-American balsamscale

Pan-American balsamscale (*Elionurus tripsacoides*) was an unidentified mystery until Kathy McAleese came up with the fact that the species name of *tripsacoides* translates into “resembles *Tripsacum*”. She flips back to the “T”s and there is *Tripsacum dactyloides* and really, the Pan American balsamscale looks like a first cousin.

The really huge, gross grass we found on the sand bars of the Colorado River in early December which was as tall as the tallest cattails (but are NOT cattails) has

Here is a list of grasses with very intriguing common names for you to mull over or laugh over. An asterisk (\*) indicates that seed heads may be present well into the winter.

Winter Bentgrass	<i>Agrostis hyemalis</i>
Turkeyfoot	<i>Andropogon gerardii</i> *
Purple Silkyscale	<i>Anthaenantia rufa</i>
Whiskeygrass	<i>Andropogon virginicus</i> *
Churchmouse Threewawn	<i>Aristida dichotoma</i>
Arrowfeather Threewawn	<i>Aristida purpurascens</i>
Buffalograss	<i>Bouteloua dactyloides</i> *
Carolina Jointgrass	<i>Coelorachis cylindrica</i>
Feather Fingergrass	<i>Chloris virgata</i> *
Gummy Lovegrass	<i>Eragrostis curtipedicellata</i> *
Red Lovegrass	<i>Eragrostis secundiflora</i>
Curly Mesquitegrass	<i>Hilaria belangeri</i> *
Catchfly Grass	<i>Leersia lenticularis</i> *
Mudbank Crowngrass	<i>Paspalum dissectum</i>
Witch Grass	<i>Panicum capillare</i>
Switchgrass	<i>Panicum virgatum</i> *
Carolina Canarygrass	<i>Phalaris caroliniana</i>
Timothy	<i>Phleum pratense</i>
Sugarcane Plumegrass	<i>Saccharum giganteum</i> *
Indiangrass	<i>Sorghastrum nutans</i>
Slender Wedgescale	<i>Sphenopholis intermedia</i>
Smut Grass	<i>Sporobolus indicus</i>
Gaping Panicgrass	<i>Steinchisma hians</i>
Pink Fluffgrass	<i>Tridens congestus</i> *
Texas Signalgrass	<i>Urochloa texana</i>



Canary grass and habitat

been located at the very back of Shaw’s Guide. (*Zizaniopsis miliacea*). Giant cutgrass, water millet or southern wild rice - all highly descriptive of the plant.

Judy undertook research on (and lost sleep over) some of these strange and wonderful common names. She has produced some interesting results as well pinpointed an unfortunate absence of data on the origin of many common names.

Here are the ones she found: **Continued next page**

**What's Blooming? (from previous page)**

*Origins of grass common names, compiled by Judy:*

- Turkeyfoot** Seed heads resemble turkey feet
- Whiskey grass** This grass was used for packaging for bottles of whiskey
- Purple silkyscale** Leaves are lined with purplish silky hairs along the edges
- Churchmouse threawn** Also called poverty grass. May be a reference to the saying "poor as a church mouse" when churches did not have kitchens or food present
- Mudbank crowngrass** Prefers muddy streambanks and the roots grow from the crown node. Most Paspalums are referred to as crown grasses.
- Timothy** Named after Timothy Hanson who introduced it to agriculture in the southern states.
- Smut grass** Frequently a black fungus called "smut" infects the flower clusters and upper leaves
- Gaping panicgrass** The floret is inflated, obovate, distinctive and larger than the lemma, giving an open-mouthed or gaping appearance.

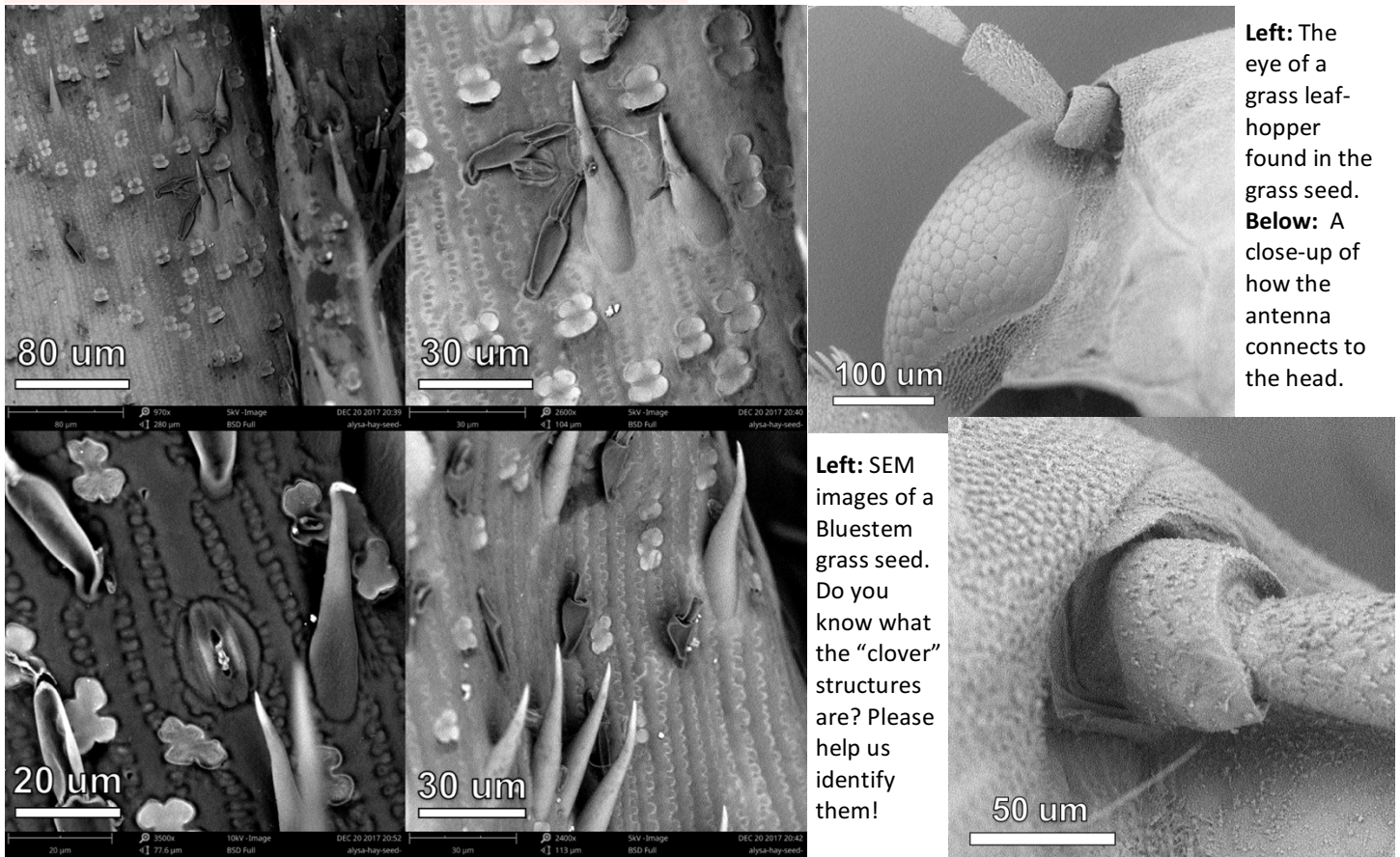
**A Closer Look** by Alysa Joaquin

I have always been fascinated by the miniscule world hidden beyond the capabilities of our eyes. My favorite toy as a child was my microscope, which I used daily. Imagine my joy when my company bought a Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM), and I was assigned to be the primary operator.

I've received the blessing to use the SEM for LPMN activities, and decided getting a closer look at a grass seed would tie in nicely with this issue's "What's Blooming?" article. My company's building sits next to a field of King Ranch Bluestem (*Bothriochloa ischaemum*), so I collected a seed head, and imaged a single seed. I found some surprises! The seeds are covered in clover-shaped structures, and the brightness in the image indicates it has a mineral component. **Does anybody know what these structures are?** The scale bar gives size in microns (um). A typical human hair is 100 um thick.

**What do you want to see in next issue's article? Email me at [LPMNnews@gmail.com](mailto:LPMNnews@gmail.com) with suggestions!**

*Thank you to Blueshift International Materials (San Marcos, TX) for allowing us to use the SEM*



**Left:** The eye of a grass leaf-hopper found in the grass seed.  
**Below:** A close-up of how the antenna connects to the head.

**Left:** SEM images of a Bluestem grass seed. Do you know what the "clover" structures are? Please help us identify them!

# Chapter Project Highlights

## Interpretive Hikes

We enjoyed a great season for Interpretive Hikes in Fall 2017. Pictured below is the crowd of 34 people who came to enjoy James Stolpa’s “Tiny Predator, Tiny Prey” hike at Buescher State Park on October 14.



## Junior Naturalists

Now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> year, our Junior Naturalist program continues to get kids outside and interacting with the natural world. In December, they had a field trip at Fisherman’s Park, where they learned about fish and aquatic invertebrates (group photo below).



## Project Spotlight: Invasive Fauna Removal at Lockhart State Park

In 2017, Bruce Siebert and Allen Guisinger launched an ambitious project to remove invasive plant species from Lockhart State Park. This beautiful

park has been invaded by non-native plants and trees, which have begun to alter the habitat. Plants such as China Berry, Ligustrum, and Johnson Grass displace the diversity of native plants and wildflowers that wildlife rely upon, and quickly grow over trails and campsites, which affects people’s appreciation for our parks.



After receiving special training on the use of herbicides in May, the team set to work. By the end of the year, the team has made a noticeable impact on the park, removing over 1,000 invasive trees in the course of several months!

If you would like to join the Invasive Removal Team, contact Bruce at:

[invasivesremoval@lostpinesmasternaturalist.org](mailto:invasivesremoval@lostpinesmasternaturalist.org)

December 14, 2017

Team,

It was a large day at Lockhart SP...we exceed our 2017 target of 1,000, logging 1,150 treated trees in total for the year. Each one of you who invested in the training and “made your mark” during at least one of four functions this year should stand proud. Today, Penny, Pat, Peter, Allen and I, blew past the 250 target for the day, and 1,000 total for year. But, without the previous efforts from most of you, that would not have been impossible.

I think it is safe to say, we are hungry for more. Although Lockhart SP needs a lot more attention, I would like to open up consideration for at least one more of the other State Parks in our territory in the 2018. Any thoughts on that subject are welcome. Ground work must be laid, before we “jump and gun”.

Thanks again for contributing to the preservation and reclamation of native flora specie. Without our help they could be overrun by the bad guys.

Best During the Celebration Season!

Bruce

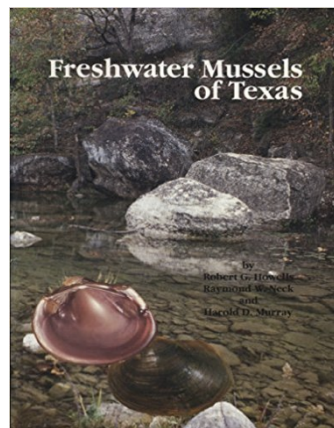


## Brooks on Books: Aquatic Life by Bill Brooks

On Saturday Dec. 9<sup>th</sup>, I helped with a field trip for the Junior Naturalists. We met at Fisherman’s Park and had 3 stations using the Back Yard Bass casting game, the plastic river habitat mat with plastic animals, and we netted and observed aquatic insects. More of our members should be involved with these fun classes. In honor of this class I thought I’d review a few books on freshwater animal life.

The masters of the water are fish. You may come across the 10” x 7” TPWD paperback “Freshwater Fishes of Texas” (1997) by Earl W. Chilton II. Although this book doesn’t cover everything, it is marvelously illustrated by a who’s who of Texas nature artists: Nancy McGowan, Clemente Guzman, Jared Faulk, Diana Peebles, and Rob Fleming. The drawings of the 46 species covered are outstanding.

The newer “Freshwater Fishes of Texas” (2007) by Chad Thomas, Timothy Bonner, and Bobby Whiteside includes more species. The illustrations are photos of preserved fish and range maps are included.



At several of our Texas Master Naturalist gatherings I have met the father/son authors of “Texas Crawdads,” Sterling & Nathan Johnson. This is a great guide to these freshwater crustaceans. This 2008 privately published guide is the best Texas has on crayfish.

“Freshwater Mussels of Texas” is the best Texas guide on the subject of mussels, one of the most endangered fauna families in Texas. This 1996 book published by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is often used in the field. Please photograph and send your finds to iNaturalist. This app is building our knowledge of the ranges of so many plants and animals in Texas.

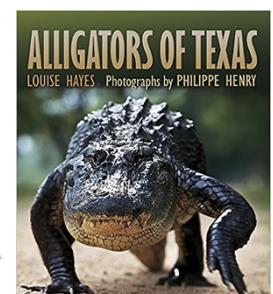
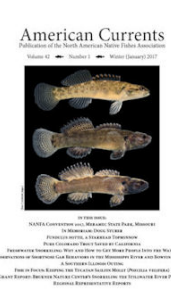
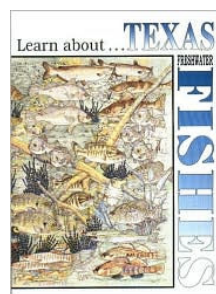
Let’s get wet. See what we can find, and keep on reading.

For educators, “Learn About Texas Freshwater Fishes” (2001) by George Zappler is an amazing resource. This is one in a series of excellent publications by Mr. Zappler and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and covers fish anatomy, taxonomy, and includes activity pages.

If you want to increase your fish knowledge to all the species in North America, the newest research on ecology, reproduction, distribution, taxonomy, and fossil records is being compiled in a 3-volume encyclopedia. Volume 1, edited by Melvin L. Warren, Jr. and Brooks M. Burr, was released in 2014, and covers fish families from Petromyzontidae to Catostomidae.

If you want to keep up on the very latest fish research, subscribe to the magazine “American Currents,” the publication of the North American Native Fish Association.

In 2016 Louise Hayes compiled her research on alligators and wrote “Alligators of Texas”. In this delightful book you can find a mention of our friend Lee Ann Linam, the retired TPWD employee who worked with non-game animals, especially frogs, toads, and horned lizards. You can read about a young Lee Ann (then Johnson) driving an airboat and wrestling alligators on page 52.



Lastly, there are several large and well-written aquatic insect books. The one I use is the 1995 edition of “An Introduction to the Aquatic Insects of North America.” It is spiral bound, 862 pages, and edited by R. W. Merritt and K. W. Cummins, and contains all the information most people will ever need.

# Scrapbook

Photos, art, news, writings, and memories of members, their families, and our community. We welcome all content of interest to our members.

Send submissions to [LPMNnews@gmail.com](mailto:LPMNnews@gmail.com) or **post them to our facebook page!**

## Snow Day December 7-8, 2017

## Winter Birds Dec. 2017



Judy Turner



Michal Hubbard



Female Cardinal at Webberville Park, Alysa Joaquin



Sue Arcy



Red-Shouldered Hawk in Bastrop, Morgan Hay

## Arts & Crafts



**Left:** Roxanne Hernandez, Intarsia in wood.

*Left to right:* American Kestrel, Barn Owl, and Red-Tailed Hawk

**Right:** Sue Arcy's booth at the Bastrop Street Market, where she and her sister sold items hand-made by themselves and their mother. Sue writes, "Sales were good and the weather was perfect."



**Hiding in Plain Sight (from pg 3)**

ensure the buildings and gates were secured nightly and to report occasional middle-of-the-night errant security alarms.

Our secondary occupational specialty defaulted to groundskeeper. We watered plants, pulled weeds, trimmed, raked leaves and kept the various water features operating. All-in-all, these were not demanding duties.

The structured hierarchy of the park is on display in day-to-day affairs. All area LCRA park hosts (that was McKinney Roughs and Lake Bastrop South Shore) were gathered early on for an orientation consisting of a mandatory safety briefing, introduction to the LCRA police force, emergency procedures and protocols and a general discussion of park hosting duties. The orientation was run by a regional manager. During our tour of duty, hosts were given specific training (duly documented) on all power equipment and vehicles before being allowed to use them. Hosts were presented each week with a schedule of planned activities at the park and personally briefed about unusual or special requirements. It was common to have many visitors on the premises at peak times of the day and everyone from the front desk to maintenance personnel knew who was there and what they were doing.

I always thought that park patrons were day-trippers who came out on a whim to spend the day outdoors. Some do that to be sure, but I was not prepared for the number of private individuals, organizations, youth groups and commercial companies who book

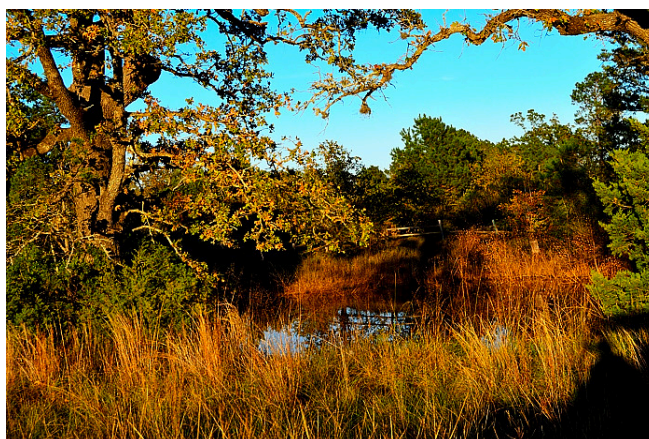
the park months in advance as a venue for meetings, parties, weddings and other uses. They even offer three dormitories for overnight guests. Indeed our own Photo Contest and Christmas celebration were only two such events sandwiched in among a very tight

schedule through-out most of our stay.

In addition to providing a retreat, the staff at McKinney Roughs is uniquely outreach oriented. Talented and enthusiastic, event planners, program guides, educators and others provide field trips, kayaking, river rafting, team building experiences, animal demonstrations, a challenge course, star-gazing and summer camps. There's even zip-lining in the park. These programs, services and rentals are generally not free—I was surprised to learn the park recovers over ninety-percent of its operating costs.

This culture of community service was an awakening for me... who knew? What I did know—as do most naturalists who've ever visited—was the beauty and diversity of the ridgelines and valleys beyond the main campus. In the first few days after our arrival, I saw 3 of the 4 poisonous snakes that call this part of Texas home. Exploring the trails was a special treat. Red-tails cruised the thermals overhead and startled deer vaulted away from me through the meadows. Everything seemed fresh. It was as if humans are rarely seen here. Those of you who have marveled at the eagles' nest along the Colorado will be heartened to know the nesting pair is back! They have rebuilt their nest and have reclaimed their old homestead.

**Continued next page**



**Hiding in Plain Sight (from previous page)**

At night, when everything takes on a magical presence, we were regularly serenaded by a poignant chorus of coyotes. The chilling call of the great horned owl punctuated the blackness almost every night. These noisy neighbors are much preferred to the usual screaming sirens and unending drone of highway noise associated with urban life. Although stealthy by night, tracks in the mud betrayed the bobcat, the raccoon, the skunk and armadillo—especially down by the river. Hunters and hunted. The heartbeat of survival pulses through the veins of this vast wilderness at night. This is what being alive feels like.

Beginning on November 24, 2017, McKinney Roughs

opened up the trail system to mountain biking. It was a big deal. Opening day saw an onslaught of bikers in addition to the normal weekday hikers. Each trail received a fresh set of signs identifying the trail and indicating what was permitted on the trail (hiking, biking, eque-



strian). So excited were the staff to offer this additional draw to the public that one of the regional managers could be seen on his gator handing out bottled water to trail-weary travelers.

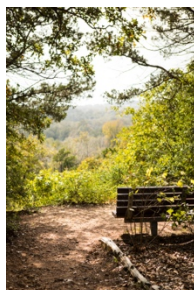
The trail system is generally well-maintained, all but a few segments accessible by ATV. These trails are used extensively by the public. One of my responsibilities

was to close a gate that provided access to the back of the property at dusk. I became well acquainted with a gentleman who walked a specific combination of trails nearly each evening. He knew the routine. Just as I was about to lock the gate, he would round the bend in a pickup that looked like it had been rolled down a mountainside. Stop. Chat for a while, then we parted ways to pursue the rest of our evenings—his probably in front of a TV somewhere in town, mine in a forest under the light of a peaceful silver moon.

We have lived in Texas for over 30 years and only experienced snow here three times. One of those times was during a night at McKinney Roughs. The next day was a peerless winter morning, the pines stood

silent in their wrap of white, everything quilted in a fresh blanket of snow. It was dry cold, winter still; the landscape lay white and paralyzed. It was beautiful—and we were excited to be the first to trace footprints in the snow.

It's over now. We are back home after our adventure. There is so much to learn and know about McKinney Roughs. But the next time I return will be with a completely different understanding. The park speaks to people on many different levels so the most important thing when you are there is to listen. Look around, be still and listen. If you do this long enough, you're sure to recognize yourself.



Nature Photo Contest Winners: Overall (Julie Perkins), Landscape (Julie Perkins), Wildlife (RJ Cichocki)