

T E X A S

Master
Naturalist™
Elm Fork Chapter



Naturalist News

March 2026 Volume 26, Issue 3



Jonathan Reynolds

We're on the Web www.txmn.org/elmfork

On Facebook: www.facebook.com/TexasMasterNaturalistElmFork/

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Master Naturalist™
Elm Fork Chapter



Naturalist News



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On the Cover:

*Tangled tree roots in the moonlight
at Ray Roberts Lake,
by Jonathan Reynolds*

Don't have time to read this month's issue of Naturalist News? Then click the box below to Stream our newsletter in audio format, featuring the voice of Teri Schnaubelt.



This month's "Blood Moon" total lunar eclipse,
by Jonathan Reynolds

Announcements

T E X A S



2026 INITIAL TRAINING CLASS APPLICATIONS OPEN APRIL 6-24

TENTATIVE CLASS DATES ARE TUESDAYS AUGUST 11 - OCTOBER 27, 9:00 AM – 12:30 PM

The 2026 Initial Training Class applications open April 6th – 24th. Interviews will follow. Tentative class dates are Tuesdays August 11 – October 27 from 9:00 AM – 12:30 PM, to be held at Beulah Acres - Global Spheres Center . At this time, four Field Trips will be offered on select Saturdays at the same time, with dates and locations to follow. Once dates, speakers and locations are finalized, there will be postings on the TMN- EFC website, Facebook page, and multiple social media sites with the application link.

For more information, contact Marissa Shaw at training@efctmn.org.



The 2026 Training Committee is asking for your help by actively seeking your gently used TMN Textbooks. We request any TMN-EFC Member that is not using their TMN Textbook to help us reduce, reuse and recycle your textbooks by donating it back to our Chapter. It is easy! Just bring your textbooks to the next few Monthly Chapter Meetings. Contact Marissa Shaw or any member of the 2026 Training Committee to coordinate.

Announcements



About Leave 3

Join Texas Parks and Wildlife, Texas Master Naturalists, the Nature Conservancy, the Audubon Society, and many others in a fun challenge to see which city can document the most species during April 24 - April 27. It is easy to participate by joining an event or making observations on your own using the

Read More > Your Membersh

Edit Project Project Journal



iNaturalist **2026** **CITY NATURE** **CHALLENGE** **APRIL 24-27**



Join EFMN-CNC 2026

It's that time of year again! The 2026 iNaturalist City Nature Challenge is April 24-April 27. We will be competing with many cities across the globe for number of observations, IDs and number of species.

We have landed in the top 5 every year since the inception and plan to keep it that way. We have also finished No. 1 for the State of Texas, beating out Houston, San Antonio and all the other cities in TX.

Yes, we are that good!

THIS YEAR WE HAVE A NEW CHALLENGE!!!

MASTER NATURALIST COMPETITION WITHIN DFW!!!

#1 in OBSERVATIONS, IDS AND # OF SPECIES

EFC Members must join the EFMN-CNC 2026 project, join using the QR code provided

Stay tuned for some mini blitzes we will have during the four days of observations at our project sites. We will have until *May 10th* to ID observations. If you have any questions please email or text Mary Morrow, listed in the directory.

Upcoming Chapter Meetings

March Chapter Meeting and Presentation

Thursday, March 19th, 9:00 am to 12:00 pm

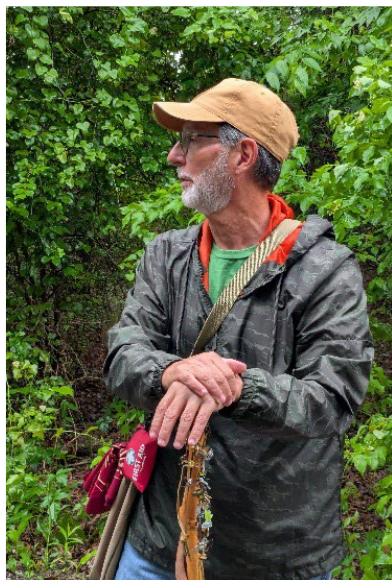
Denton County Administrative Courthouse • 3rd Floor Conference Room
1 Courthouse Dr. • Denton, TX 76208

Municipal Mutualism: Creating Win-Win Relationships with our Communities

By Rick Travis

A personal narrative reviewing the steps taken over the past several years to develop a strong, productive, and trusting relationship between the Blackland Prairie Chapter and the Parks Department in Frisco, TX. This discussion will include examples of the significant positive impact this relationship has had on the inclusion of natural areas in the planning and design of parkland, as well as increasing chapter involvement in other education/restoration/conservation efforts within the city.

Rick owns a Bachelors' Degree in Forest Management and an MBA, both from Stephen F. Austin State University. With retirement from his business career, Rick is fulfilling a long-deferred desire for involvement in the environmental sciences. He is an active member of the Blackland Prairie Master Naturalist Chapter and served as Chapter President from 2022 through 2025. Rick is also a member of Frisco's Natural Resources Advisory Board and works closely with Frisco Parks on multiple projects within the city. He is a volunteer trail guide at the Heard Wildlife Sanctuary, Plano Parks and Trails, and Frisco Parks and Trails and serves as the Forest Ecology instructor for the Blackland Prairie Chapter and neighboring Master Naturalist chapters' training programs in the DFW area.



Upcoming Chapter Meetings

April Chapter Meeting and Presentation

Thursday, April 16th, 9:00 am to 12:00 pm

Denton County Administrative Courthouse • 3rd Floor Conference Room
1 Courthouse Dr. • Denton, TX 76208

Miles and Miles of Texas: My Visit-Every-State-Park Retirement Adventure By Suzanne Tuttle

Suzanne Tuttle is a plant ecologist who retired in 2016 as Manager of the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge after a 23-year career at the park. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Biology from UT Arlington and an Associate of Applied Science degree in Horticulture from Tarrant County Junior College (now TCC).

Suzanne has taught training classes for various North Texas chapters of the Texas Master Naturalist program since 1999 and helped found the Cross Timbers Chapter.

Her first retirement project was to visit every Texas State Park and State Natural Area. The COVID pandemic slowed her progress for a couple of years, but she joyfully completed her quest on October 22, 2022, at Palmetto State Park near San Antonio. This presentation touches on her adventures and the insights she gained on her multi-year quest.



Awards and Recognition

February 2026

Initial Certifications

Rob Arrington

Class of 2025



2026 Recertifications

Gale Bacon

Class of 2018

Pam Bennett

Class of 2019

Becky Bertoni

Class of 2015

Brynne Bryan

Class of 2022

Amy Crook

Class of 2020

Dale Denton

Class of 2019

Hilton Dickerson

Class of 2009

Jerry Hamby

Class of 2014

Sue Hudiburgh

Class of 2018

Tom Hudiburgh

Class of 2025

Scott Kiester

Class of 2003

Tom Mills

Class of 2014

Carl Parsons

Class of 2023

Carl Patrick

Class of 2010

Kevin Shaw

Class of 2025

Marissa Shaw

Class of 2023

John Thomlinson

Class of 2022



Milestones on next page....



Awards and Recognition

February 2026

500 Hour Milestone



Lori Carroll	Class of 2021
Dan Lemons	Class of 2022
Susan Richmond	Class of 2024
Mary Strickland	Class of 2019
Chris Teves	Class of 2019



1000 Hour Milestone

Jim Terry	Class of 2017
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1500 Hour Milestone

Rob Blake	Class of 2024
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4500 Hour Milestone

Marilyn Blanton	Class of 1999
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Congratulations!

Field Notes in Focus



Stonefly nymph from South Hickory Creek, an indicator of good water quality.
(Yes, he was released back into the creek!) Photo by Tammie Walters

Inside Outside News

Advanced Training



Phenology Week

March 16-20, 2026

Join us for a week of celebrating
phenology with daily challenges,
webinars, and more!



Phenology Week - a virtual celebration of the seasonal cycles of plants and animals. The purpose of Phenology Week is to celebrate YOU, our Elm Fork Chapter Texas Master Naturalists, Nature's Notebook observers, Time to Restore Texas program participants, and partners! We'll have webinars, awards, daily challenges, observer stories, and more.

Follow this year's Phenology Week 2026 events on a dedicated web page hosted by the USA National Phenology Network (USA-NPN) at

<https://www.usanpn.org/news/article/phenology-week-march-16-20-2026>.

Phenology Week is held annually in conjunction with the Vernal Equinox. The Vernal Equinox is a moment when nature seems to take a deep, refreshing breath. On March 20, 2026, daylight and darkness will start sharing the hours equally, signaling the official shift from winter's chill to spring's warmth. Across the state, wildflowers like bluebonnets and Indian paintbrushes begin to blanket fields, and the air carries the soft scent of new growth. The equinox often feels like an invitation to step outside—whether it's for a hike at the Ray Roberts Lake State Park, a picnic under budding post oak trees of Green Acres Farm Memorial Park or simply enjoying the longer evenings at the Lake Lewisville Environmental Learning Area (LLELA). It's a season of renewal, balance, and the promise of brighter days ahead.

These training events complement the Elm Fork Chapter Project P250213 - Phenology with Nature's Notebook and the Time to Restore - Texas project's. These projects focus on priority nectar plants for pollinators.

Please note there will be a major software update to Nature's Notebook this year which will make the application easier to use on a mobile device and allow users to progress from Beginner to Intermediate to Advanced Phenology Observer as their knowledge, skills, and experience grow. The Thursday, March 19 session at 1 p.m. CT will provide an overview of the NEW Nature's Notebook Mobile App features and functions.

The Thursday, March 19 at 1 p.m. CT presentation of the NEW Nature's Notebook Mobile App will also complement the upcoming Time to Restore - Texas training session scheduled for April 1, 2026 from 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

For any questions, contact Tom Kirwan through the Membership Directory.

Inside Outside News

Advanced Training

Nature's Notebook/Time to Restore - Texas Phenology Training Wednesday, April 1st, 2026 6:30 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.



Interested in becoming a Nature's Notebook observer? Our next online virtual live training ZOOM session will be April 1, 2026, from 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. CDT. Please register in advance at <https://arizona.zoom.us/meeting/register/Fca4vzmFRsCyC6gMhXmRUA#/registration>. Upon registration, you will receive an email providing you with a link and password for the class.

Elm Fork Chapter Approved Advanced Training (AT) hours are available for first-time attendees. If you have already attended this initial training session, you can still log AT hours and become a certified observer by completing the online Observer Certification Course found on your Observation Deck in your Nature's Notebook application. The Course is our primary training resource and covers the basics on setting up sites, selecting plants and animals to observe, collecting data with the mobile app, an in-depth look at the plant and animal phenophases and intensity measures, and a chance to practice making observations.

Upon successful completion of the course, you will become an official Nature's Notebook Certified Observer. You will receive a completion certificate, a badge for your Observation Deck, and you will be tagged in the Nature's Notebook database as a Certified Observer.

For more information, contact Tom Kirwan through the Membership Directory.



Enjoy learning about improving water quality, water quantity, conservation practices, water law, and aquatic habitats. Join us throughout the year for FREE.

- **Wednesday, April 15th, 6:30-7:30 p.m.**
 - * *21st Century Texas: Climate, water, science, and society*
 - * Jay Banner, Professor & Director at Jackson School of Geosciences - The University of Texas at Austin
 - * [Register](#)

Visit the [Texas Waters](#) webpage for information on becoming a certified [Texas Waters Specialist](#) and view recorded webinars from 2017-2023.

*Note: Texas Water Webinars AT: Texas Waters Certification Training

Inside Outside News

Advanced Training



Drawing Nature Through the Seasons




[Click HERE for more information](#)

Third Saturday each month from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.
Coppell Nature Park
367 Freeport Pkwy., Coppell
For information, call 972-304-3581 or use the QR code.



FM Wild! INaturalist How-to

Sunday, April 26 at 2:00 p.m.

Green Acres Memorial Park

Register using this QR code.



The Texas Master Naturalist program is a partnership between  

This program may require walking on uneven ground. Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service is committed to participant accessibility and will provide reasonable accommodations. Please contact the Denton County AgriLife Office horticulture department at least 10 business days in advance of the program.

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service is an equal opportunity employer and program provider.

Pollinators for Texas 
 a partnership with  



Learn how to use the iNaturalist app to document the plants, birds, insects, and animals that call Green Acres home. If you download the iNaturalist app and create an account ahead of time, you can start observing sooner! Our entries count toward the 2026 iNaturalist City Nature Challenge.

This program is part of the H-E-B Pollinators for Texas 2025 grant Green Acres is the Place to BEE.

Inside Outside News

Advanced Training

Join Us at
HAGERMAN
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

4th Annual **HNWR BioBlitz**
Hosted by Bluestem Chapter, TMN

FRIDAY, MAY 22 & SATURDAY, MAY 23

Friday Evening at Sunset!
Mothing with Texas' Favorite Enthusiast
SAM KIESCHNICK

Saturday, May 23rd
Full Day of Exploration & Advanced Training!
Nature Hikes, Birding, Bug Hunts & More!

For More Info: trainingclassdir@bluestemtmn.org

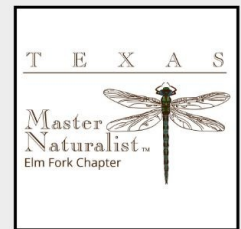
For questions, contact Scott Kiester through the Membership Directory.

Inside Outside News

Volunteer Opportunities

Outreach needs you!

Sign up to be a face of our chapter at an upcoming tabling opportunity!



Help fulfill our mission statement “to provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas.”

Outreach at Carrollton Earth Day Celebration

Saturday, April 18th, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Josey Ranch Lake Library
1700 Keller Springs Rd
Carrollton, TX 75006

TMN - Elm Fork Chapter will staff a "Show and Tell" table at this event. Volunteers SHOW visitors animal pelts, fossils, and other touchables, and TELL them about TMN, and what citizens can do to protect the local Texas environment. No experience necessary, but it helps if you enjoy talking! This is a great opportunity for recently-certified chapter members to log VMS hours. TMN, EFC or nature-related attire is encouraged. WEAR YOUR EFC NAMETAG!

Event website: <https://www.cityofcarrollton.com/about-us/calendar/special-events/earth-day>

Signup link: <https://www.signupgenius.com/go/4090444AEAA2CA7FC1-62453545-efcoutreach>

(Note: The sign-up starts one hour before and extends one hour after the event time, to allow time to set up and take down our materials. There are two slots - you can sign up for one or both!)

If this opportunity interests you but you are not available, watch for information about upcoming Outreach events - there will be several more this spring, and several again in the fall.

Inside Outside News

Volunteer Opportunities



Together, we're supporting native plants, protecting our watershed, and creating hands-on learning opportunities for students.

@Billy Ryan High School
5101 E. McKinney St. Denton, TX
(next to the baseball field)

April 4th, 10-12
Planting Day!

With a grant from **Wild Ones**,
we'll replace and add more plants



Contact

Pamela Golcher through the Membership Directory

Inside Outside News

Volunteer Opportunities

Greenbelt General Maintenance and Natural Resource Volunteers Needed

The Staff of the Greenbelt Unit of Ray Roberts Lake State Park serve as the management team for the Greenbelt and the Natural Resource team for the Ray Roberts Complex. We are looking for general maintenance and natural resource volunteers to assist us in maintaining the Greenbelt and conserve the natural resources of Ray Roberts.

General Maintenance Volunteers have multiple opportunities to volunteer at the park based on their areas of interest and the park's operational needs. Opportunities include but are not limited to a variety of maintenance tasks, special projects, and customer-related opportunities.


Natural Resource Volunteer projects could include bluebird box monitoring, fire break prep, invasive management & habitat restoration.

This opportunity is available year-round and provides a flexible schedule. No minimum hours/week are required. This volunteer opportunity does not include a campsite.

Please contact the Greenbelt Manager at Matthew.moore@tpwd.texas.gov for more information.

Minimum age of volunteers: 16 (if under 18, volunteer will need to print a Parental Release form and bring a completed copy to the park).

Criminal background check is required for non-TMN members.



PO60212: RM Ray Roberts Lake
Bluebird nest box monitoring would be PO60212: FR

Inside Outside News

Volunteer and AT Opportunities

Immediate Changes in Johnson Branch Nature Center Schedule

TPWD is making changes immediately in how the Nature Center at Johnson Branch is staffed. Their vision is to have the Nature Center at JB open daily.

Friday, Saturday and Sunday shifts will be covered by designated Park Hosts or park volunteers. This will ensure these "priority days," when more visitors are there, will be completely covered.

TMN volunteers will be able to volunteer Monday through Thursday for all or part of the day according to the volunteer's availability or desires. I see this as a positive change in our efforts to educate visitors about nature.

Changes have already been made to the calendar and sign up dates are available through March of 2026.

Please take time to sign up now. We can't do it without you.



Be sure to check Plan Your Week and the [Elm Fork Chapter Website](#) and [Calendar](#) for More AT and Volunteer Opportunities!

The screenshot shows the website for the Elm Fork Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists. The header includes the Texas Master Naturalist logo and the Elm Fork Chapter name. The navigation menu includes Home, About, Join Our Chapter, Photo Gallery, Activities, Newsletters, Calendar, Members Area, and Donate. The main content area displays a Google Calendar for March 2026 with the following events:

Date	Day	Event
18	MAR, WED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All day: Phenology Week (Day 3/5) 9am - 12pm: Baulah Acres Agroforest Workday 7801 S I-35E, Corinth, TX 76208, USA 9am - 12pm: LLELA Wednesday Work Crew 10am - 4pm: Ray Roberts Lake State Park Nature Center - Johnson Branch Unit Ray Roberts Lake State Park - Johnson Branch... 1 - 2pm: AT - Project Coyote: Coyote Awareness Week Webinar 2:30 - 3:30pm: AT - Nature Book Club led by Texas Master Naturalists Emily Fowler Central Library, 502 Oakland St, Denton, TX 7...
19	MAR, THU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All day: Phenology Week (Day 4/5) 9am - 12pm: Chapter Meeting Denton County Administrative Courthouse, 1 Courthouse Dr, Denton, TX 76208, USA 10am - 4pm: Ray Roberts Lake State Park Nature Center - Johnson Branch Unit Ray Roberts Lake State Park - Johnson Branch...
20	MAR, FRI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All day: Phenology Week (Day 5/5) 10am - 4pm: Ray Roberts Lake State Park Nature Center - Isle Du Bois Unit Ray Roberts Lake State Park Isle du Bois, 100 P W ...
21	MAR, SAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10am - 4pm: Ray Roberts Lake State Park Nature Center - Isle Du Bois Unit Ray Roberts Lake State Park Isle du Bois, 100 P W ... 10am - 12pm: AT - Drawing Nature Through the Seasons The Biodiversity Education Center, 367 Freeport Pkwy, Coppell, TX 750...

calendar@efctmn.org
Events shown in time zone: (GMT-05:00) Central Time - Chicago

Projects in the Community

The Green Acres iNaturalist Pollinator Photography Exhibit

By Becky Bertoni

The Green Acres iNaturalist Pollinator Exhibit ran from February 1st to March 15th, 2026. We met at the Flower Mound Public Library on Friday January, 30, with icy roads and cold temperatures, to set up the 35 pollinator photographs and the displays from AgriLife and other agencies on the back of the panels. Volunteers arrived at different times depending on how much ice they had to deal with! We're grateful for Marilyn Blanton's gluestick to solve the problem of the photos detaching from their black alligator board backing.

We had the exhibit reception on Sunday, February 1st, and seven of the fourteen photographers attended.



Fran Witte's granddaughter at the first exhibit panel



Fran Witte's granddaughter shows off the photos



Marilyn Blanton and Becky Bertoni with the NPSOT display



The Green Acres iNaturalist Pollinator Photography Exhibit (cont.)



John Thomlinson with his snowberry clearing photo

This exhibit at the Flower Mound Library was funded by our HEB Grant, Green Acres is the Place to BEE. We hope the exhibit helped to persuade the public to plant native plants to attract these local pollinators to their gardens.

Attendees got to vote for their favorite pollinator photo, and the voting continued until Sunday, March 15th.

The day after, we took down the display and tallied all the votes. The winning photograph will be announced in the April issue of *Naturalist News*.



Set up: Beth the librarian, Susan Richmond, and Sue Ridnour



Set up crew: Aly Foreman, Becky Bertoni, Livy Reese, Nick Kowalske, Sue Ridnour, Nancy Wilson, Mary Strickland, Susan Richmond, Liz Moyer, and Mary Morrow

Pollinators for Texas



a partnership with



Projects in the Community

Rain Barrel How-to Class and Rain Collection System (Part of the H-E-B Pollinators for Texas Grant)

By Becky Bertoni

The Elm Fork Chapter's Green acres Project is grateful to Sue Hudiburgh and Kim and Daivid Wootten for their work on this piece of the Green Acres is the Place to BEE grant. They agreed to undertake the installation of the rain barrel system for a shed at the park, along with a how-to class offered through FM Wild! which was advertised to the residents of Flower Mound. They came to look at the site, consider materials, and make their plan at least three times before the actual class and installation on February 7th. During one of the meetings, Edsel Harrell and Cecily Pegues participated with ideas and materials.

Before all this happened, Tom Kirwan donated materials and labor to improve the roof and added rain gutters and downspouts to the shed. Green Acres volunteers Monica Kelly and Bob Vidler cleared the area around the shed and washed it, Lynn and Dart West repaired rust on one wall of the shed and improved the sagging door, and Win, a neighbor photographer and occasional volunteer, and his wife, Sue, painted the shed.



The team for this project: Sue Hudiburgh, Kim Wootten, and David Wootten



The How-to Install a Rain Barrel class



Kim and Sue teaching

Many thanks to these helpful volunteers: Sue, Kim, David, Edsel, Cecily, Tom, Monica, Bob, Lynn, Dart, Win, and Sue!

On February 7th at noon, 14 people gathered at the picnic tables by the parking lot at Green Acres Farm Memorial Park for the how-to class. Kim and Sue shared an excellent handout they had adapted for this project, which included an insert



Rain Barrel How-to Class and Rain Collection System (cont.)



Rain collection system installation

on the water feature. The class lasted about an hour with lots of practical information and questions and answers.

Then almost everyone there walked to the back of the park, up to the white shed for the installation! This went smoothly, with the addition of shortening the downspout on the left side, so that the barrels could be high enough to get water into a bucket easily. We were all done before 2:30.

Next, we wait for rain and attach the drip water feature to the rain barrels!



Kim points out how two barrels connect at the bottom so they fill equally



Brandy Gibson and Rene Henderson (from the class) help Sue to remove the too long downspout

Pollinators for Texas



a partnership with



Crew at the end of the installation

Wild About LLELA

Sue Yost, class of 2017



WE think outside the box, at LLELA. Box turtles that is!

There are two types of box turtles that are found at LLELA, ornate and three-toed, but the three-toed is more prevalent. They can be hard to spot though, because they are very well camouflaged in the leaf litter.

Box turtles are cold-blooded reptiles. They do not hibernate, but do what is called brumate, which is very similar to hibernation. They sleep but don't sleep all winter. Instead, they will periodically wake up. When in this state the heart may beat only once every three to five minutes. They look like they are dead! They bury themselves in leaf litter or under fallen logs to brumate.

The Wikipedia entry on box turtles is especially informative: "Box turtles are omnivores. Their eagle eyes and keen sense of smell help them find snails, insects, berries, fungi, worms, flowers, fish, frogs, salamanders, various rodents, snakes, birds, eggs, among other things. During their first five to six years of life, they are primarily carnivorous. Adults tend to be mostly herbivores, but do not feed on leafy greens. . . Hatchlings and young turtles need more protein and prefer a carnivorous diet." However, the box turtles raised at LLELA, regardless of age, have been fed leafy greens along with other food and supplements, to provide a well-balanced diet—none have refused the leafy greens.



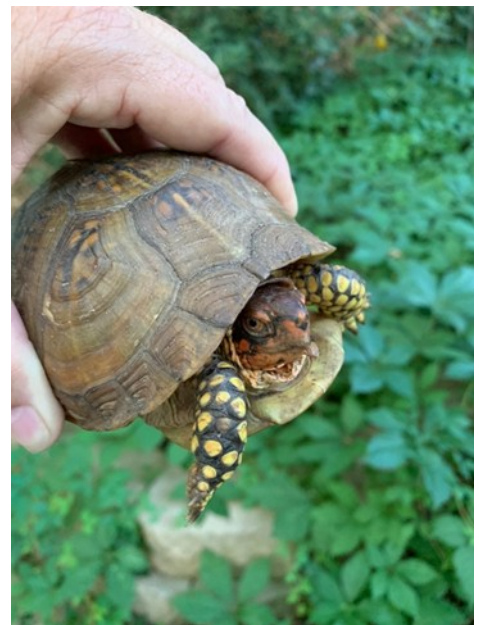
Box turtles have strong homing instincts. This is why they should never be relocated out of their territory, as they will cross highways, meadows, sidewalks etc. to get back "home." Why did the turtle cross the road? To get to the other side! Not to go back in the other direction. Vehicles are turtles' biggest "predator."

Box turtles can swim. On land they do not move very fast. But they must be smart as they beat that dang rabbit!

Turtles are most vulnerable in the hatchling stage. Their shells are soft and they cannot yet retract into their

shells. Raccoons, birds, coyotes, and snakes will prey on the hatchlings. They need to be four or five before they have a better chance of survival. If they survive the first four to five years, then they can live on average to 40-50 years.

The shells are made from the same stuff our fingernails are made of. Keratin. And yes, they can feel through the shell!



Wild About LLELA (cont.)



Everyone loves turtles. Our own "Turtle man," Hugh Franks shares his love of turtles with any audience he can find, especially kids. Kids love turtles, from toddlers to our summer campers, they love to observe and handle turtles.



LLELA turtles should start to wake up sometime in March.

On your next visit to LLELA, check out our resident box turtles Andy and Frank. They have their own private enclosures near the classroom.



Take a slow stroll on a LLELA trail. Can you spot our box turtles? (Released) Out of the BOX!



Photo credits: Sue Yost
Text: Hugh Franks, Wikipedia

Features

The Blue Jay's Blues

By Marilyn Blanton

*The color blue in its purest hue
From light to dark expressed in every value*

*With beautiful shades and tints like a changing sky
Carried on the back and wings of a blue jay as it flies*

*Vibrant colors of contrasting gray, black and white
Together in harmony, a lovely sight*

*Like the color of distant mountains varying through the day's hours
To the color of blue in the bluebonnet's flowers*

*To the color of the sky on the fairest spring day
To the darkening color of a winter storm on the way*

*From the palest blue seen through summer's haze
To the intense blue on clear, chilly fall days*

*The blue jay's blues, like deep water, symbolize calm and tranquility
The spirited bird represents intelligence, courage and adaptability*

*When you see a blue jay flying by or perched on a branch
Pause and admire its blues and make the most of the chance*

*To lose yourself and set your mind free
Let your worries fly away with the blue jay, take the opportunity*



Marilyn Blanton



Marilyn Blanton



© Denver Kramer

Features

Finding Solace—

Hiking the Lower Comanche Trail in Palo Duro Canyon

By Jerry Hamby

In her 1986 book *The Solace of Open Spaces*, Gretel Ehrlich reflects on the rugged beauty of Wyoming, a place she discovered as a documentary filmmaker and where she later moved after the death of her partner. Her reflections often focus on the regenerative power of experiencing nature alone. At the end of a recent trip to Amarillo to visit a friend in the hospital, I took a cue from Ehrlich and completed a ten-mile hike in Palo Duro Canyon on my own, relishing the chance to reconnect with a place I have explored for more than fifty years.

A fierce windstorm was forecast on the day of my hike, and to reduce the risk of wildfire, Xcel Energy implemented a Public Safety Power Shutoff for rural customers across the Texas Panhandle, including Palo Duro Canyon State Park. After accessing the self-pay station and assuring the ranger at the gate that I would stay away from cliff edges, I drove to the Soapberry Day Use Area. From there a short spur led to the Lower Comanche Trail, which was new to me; it had the added advantage of being the longest trail in the park.

The junction at the end of the spur splits the Comanche Trail into two sections. The northern route winds through the upper part of the park and crosses the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River, the stream that formed the canyon more than one million years ago, while the southern trail follows Fortress Cliff, a sheer wall of hard sandstone and caliche that dominates the eastern side of the canyon. I took the latter section. The Comanches, called “Lords of the Plains” for their skills as horsemen, are one of several Southern Plains tribes that found sanctuary in Palo Duro Canyon for thousands of years.

Almost immediately the trail went uphill and followed the base of Fortress Cliff. In an open area, the path cut through a field of boulders that had fallen from the canyon rim long ago. Because my visit was in mid-February, signs of new growth were rare, but the promise of spring and summer wildflowers was evident in the dried stems of American basketflowers (*Plectocephalus americanus*) dominating the landscape.



Comanche Trailhead



Boulder field



Brown-spined pricklypear

Finding Solace—Hiking the Lower Comanche Trail in Palo Duro Canyon (cont.)



Black cactus longhorn beetle



Christmas cholla



Nineawn pappusgrass

The most vivid colors were visible in brown-spine pricklypear (*Opuntia phaeacantha*), whose typically green pads had turned purple over winter. On one such cactus I found a Black cactus longhorn beetle (*Moneilema armatum*), a typically nocturnal insect that was feeding on the pads. I also spotted a Christmas cholla (*Cylindropuntia leptocaulis*), a shrubby cactus with small red fruits that line its slender branches. Dozens of native grass species—bluestems, gramas, wild ryes, and dropseeds—covered the landscape. Several grasses, including a clump of nineawn pappusgrass (*Enneapogon desvauxii*), were rooted on top of sandstone boulders.

Without the distractions of fellow hikers or conversation, I focused on the details around me, such as the havard or shinnery oaks (*Quercus havardii*) growing in the upper elevations of the canyon. Due to habitat loss, slow growth, and hybridization, this low-growing shrub is on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. Since *Q. havardii* retains its distinctive elliptical leaves through the winter, I had no difficulty identifying the species.

Honey mesquite (*Neltuma glandulosa*), on the other hand, is certainly not threatened, but I have long admired its sprawling architecture, especially when the branches are bare. I found a mature tree growing between two boulders, giving the impression that the tree had split the sandstone mass in two.

By noon the wind speeds were holding steady at 35 miles per hour and occasionally gusting to 60. Such conditions meant that I had the trail mostly to myself. In fact, the only other hikers I encountered were a couple from Iowa whom I met as they were descending the Rock Garden Trail (on a shared section with the Comanche Trail). Looking to the northwest, we realized that a full-blown dust storm was approaching and that the far rim of the canyon was already obscured.



Havard oak



Honey mesquite and sandstone boulders



Finding Solace—Hiking the Lower Comanche Trail in Palo Duro Canyon (cont.)



Dust storm on the horizon



Juniper grove

Finding shelter from the wind proved challenging, but soon after leaving my fellow hikers, I stopped for lunch in a grove of redberry junipers (*Juniperus pinchotii*), one of three evergreen conifers native to the region. “Palo Duro” is Spanish for “hard wood” and refers to the junipers that fill the canyon. This section of the trail also crossed a spring-fed creek, which provided a calming contrast to the wind blowing through the tree canopy.

As the trail emerged from the woods, I witnessed the only sustained bird activity of the day, a blush of American robins (*Turdus migratorius*)—a flocking term that alludes to their reddish-orange breasts—as they made their way down the canyon slope. At the same time, I heard dozens of cedar waxwings (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) flying overhead. Appropriately enough, a gathering of these loud, chattering birds is called an ear-full. The only other bird I observed was a greater roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*) sprinting across the trail late in the day. This striking bird was the Texas Master Naturalist program’s recertification pin in 2025.

Throughout the hike I was struck by how well the trail was maintained, which was even more impressive given the complexities of the alignment. From the canyon floor to a mesa halfway up the canyon wall, the trail gains 300 feet in elevation and then descends and ascends several times before terminating on the canyon floor. Long sections feature bench cuts on a slope or cuts through rock. One precarious section on the side of a crumbling hillside was reinforced with rock armoring—dozens of large rocks placed below the tread and down a steep embankment. The upkeep is even more remarkable given that there are more than thirty miles of improved trails in the park.



Rock armoring



Trail blaze



Finding Solace—Hiking the Lower Comanche Trail in Palo Duro Canyon (cont.)

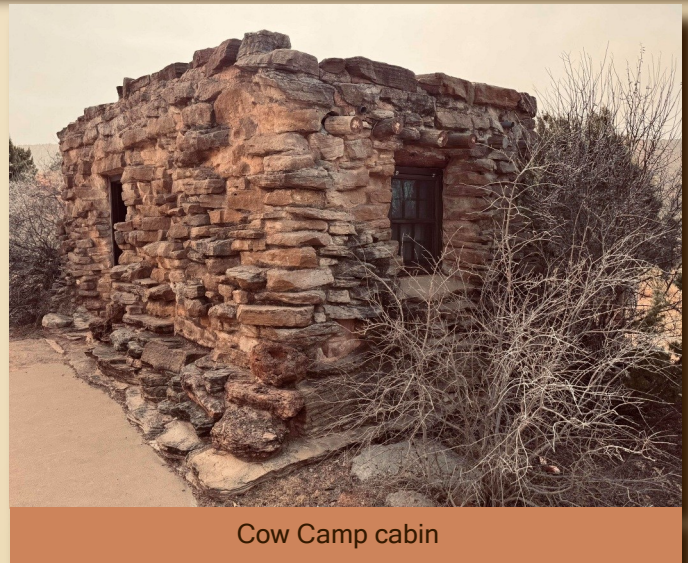
The trails in Palo Duro Canyon are marked with color-coded fiberglass blazes, placed every tenth of a mile, keeping hikers from getting lost and reminding them of the distance traveled. The final blaze on the Lower Comanche Trail is at the 4.4-mile mark, and beyond it an interpretive sign marks the end of the trail. After I paused briefly to read about the ancient history of the canyon and its Native American inhabitants, I retraced my route.

Before recrossing Park Road 5, I made a quick detour to the Cow Camp, a cluster of four one-room cabins built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the mid-1930s. After topping off my bottles with cold well water, I rejoined the trail for the return hike. With a clearer sky and soft late afternoon light, the red, orange, and yellow bands of clay on the canyon wall were more vivid than they had been earlier in the day, and close to the trail, a series of hoodoos—eroded rock pillars with harder capstones—cast dramatic shadows.

One thing I did not see was evidence of my outbound hike; any bootprints I left on the trail had been erased by the wind. Close to the ground, however, I saw fine circular marks in the sand, zen-like patterns raked by the tips of grass blades blowing back and forth. Farther down the trail, standing close to a large sandstone boulder, I scrutinized the ridges and lines, evidence of cross-bedding, the geological layering of sediment. On the exposed edges, cracks and gaps revealed the effects of weathering over time.

Late in the afternoon, I picked up the pace and concentrated on completing the hike before sunset. By the time I returned to my car, I had traveled ten miles in seven hours. On my way out of the park, I passed the old Goodnight Trading Post (now the Palo Duro Trading Post). Decades earlier I would have stopped at the Sad Monkey railroad for a frozen custard, but that tourist attraction closed thirty years ago.

As long as I can remember, Palo Duro Canyon has been an anchor point in my life. One of the earliest experiences I can recall was an all-day outing with my oldest friend, Tim Sougstad, whom I had recently visited in the hospital. In our early twenties, I led him on an off-trail excursion up the western slope of the canyon, a rough scramble that he took in stride. Two days before my hike on the Comanche Trail, Tim passed away, the latest friend to die prematurely. That is what happens



Cow Camp cabin



Hoodoo



Weathered sandstone boulder

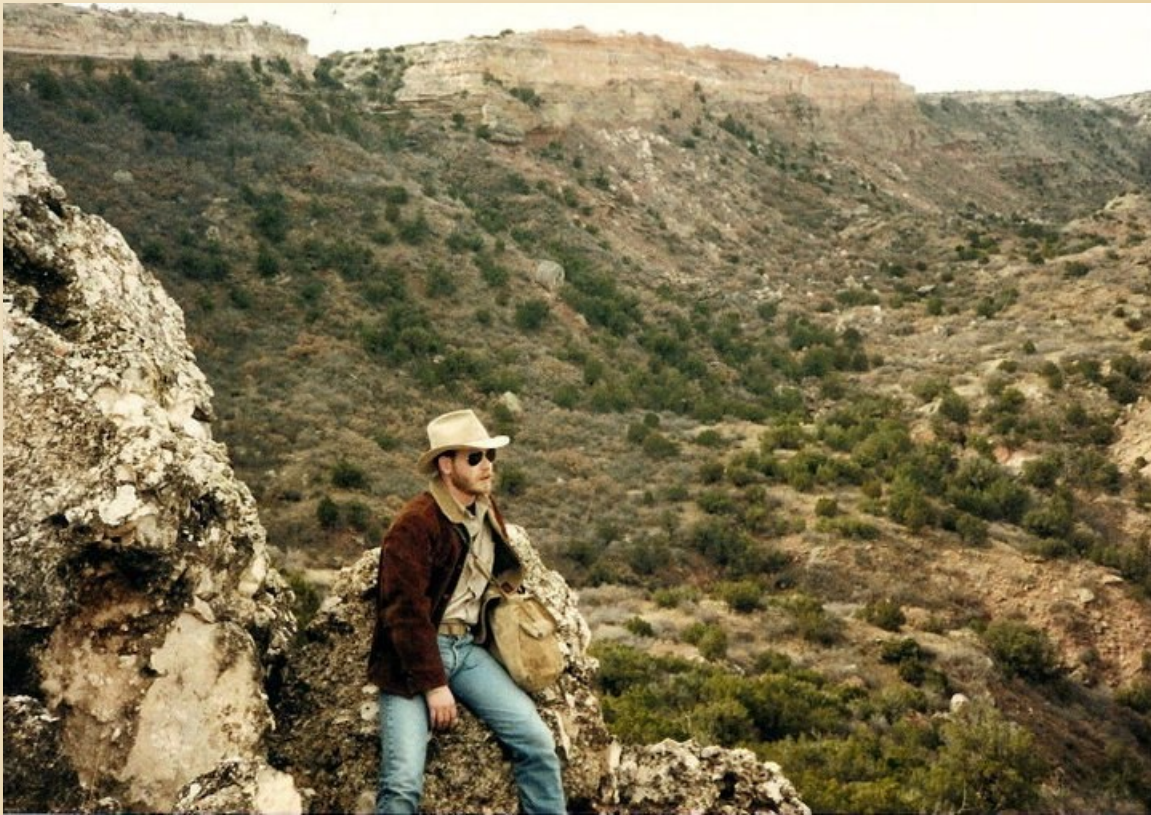


Finding Solace—Hiking the Lower Comanche Trail in Palo Duro Canyon (cont.)

when you reach “a certain age,” another old friend recently reminded me. It was a blunt but realistic assessment. Throughout my hike, I thought about Tim and, in particular, the adventures we shared from the age of six.

I also recalled a [2024 article in Texas Parks and Wildlife](#) magazine entitled “Hiking Rim-to-Rim at Palo Duro Canyon,” a narrative about a Texas variation of Grand Canyon’s popular adventure. The most expeditious route covers eleven miles (8.5 miles from rim to rim plus 2.5 miles back to the canyon floor) and has an elevation change of 2,100 feet. (In contrast, the Grand Canyon rim-to-rim covers 24 miles and 10,000 feet of elevation change.) After completing my latest hike, this slightly longer trek was appealing to me more and more, especially as a shared accomplishment.

I began to wonder how many of my friends, new and old, would be willing to join me on a rim-to-rim hike in Palo Duro Canyon. A greater challenge might be getting my compatriots to move at a steady pace; many of my hiking buddies find it hard to resist examining every plant and insect. At whatever pace we might choose, however, I cannot think of a better way to share our love of nature and to remember the people who once explored the trails with us.



Tim hiking off trail, 1984

*Photographs by Jerry Hamby
unless noted otherwise*

Tweet of the Month

From Sue Yost, class of 2017

Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*)



The Red-shouldered Hawk is a common woodland raptor in our area. Mainly permanent residents, birds in the northern part of the range do migrate, mostly to central Mexico.

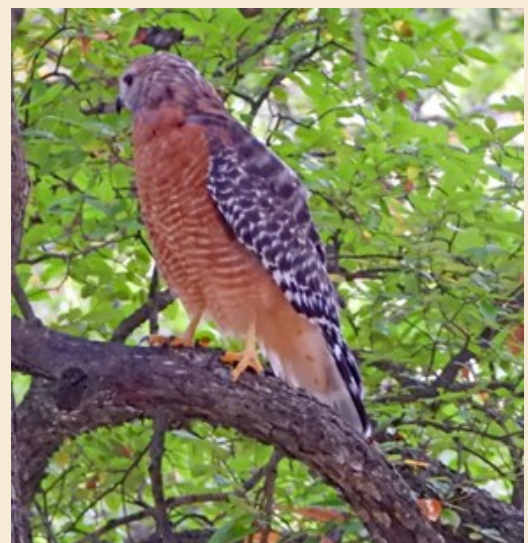
Males are 15 to 23 inches long and weigh a little over a pound. Females, as in most raptors, are slightly larger at 19 to 24 inches long, with a wingspan of 35 to 50 inches, and weigh 1.5 pounds.

Wikipedia's description is very thorough: "Adults have brownish heads, reddish chests, and pale bellies with reddish bars. Their tails, which are quite long by Buteo standards, are marked with

narrow white bars. Red 'shoulders' are visible when the birds are perched. These hawks' upper parts are dark with pale spots, and they have long yellow legs." "This bird is sometimes also confused with the widespread Red-tailed Hawk. That species is larger and bulkier, with more even-sized, broad wings, and is paler underneath." A distinct bellyband with a reddish tail are also often apparent. "The Red-tail is also more likely to soar steadily, with wings in a slight dihedral."

Wikipedia continues: "Red-shouldered Hawks are forest raptors. In the east, they live in bottomland hardwood stands, flooded deciduous swamps, and upland mixed deciduous-conifer forests. They tend to live in stands with an open subcanopy, which makes hunting easier. They are not exclusively birds of deep forest, though; one can find Red-shouldered Hawks in some suburban areas where houses or other buildings are mixed into woodlands." There are nesting pairs at LLELA.

"Red-shouldered Hawks search for prey while perched on a treetop or soaring over woodlands. When they sight prey, they kill it by dropping directly onto it from the air. They may cache food near their nest for later consumption. When in clearings, they sometimes fly high and then drop to surprise prey. Red-shouldered Hawks, like most raptors, have very good vision and reasonably good sense of hearing, with talons capable of killing animals as big as their own size. Small mammals are typically the most common prey, especially rodents. Voles, gophers, mice, moles, and chipmunks may be locally favored based on abundance. Slightly larger mammals, such as rabbits and squirrels, are also occasionally preyed on. Other prey can include amphibians, reptiles (especially small snakes), birds, fish, and large insects. They will attack birds up to the size of



Red-shouldered Hawk (cont.)



a Ruffed Grouse or Ring-necked Pheasant. Steller's Jays and Blue Jays, both of which being potential prey species, sometimes habitually imitate the call of the Red-shouldered Hawk." They sound just like the real thing! During winters, Red-shouldered Hawks sometimes prey on birds found at bird feeders.

"The breeding habitats of the Red-shouldered Hawk are deciduous and mixed wooded areas, often near water. They have been known to nest near residential areas." "Like almost all raptors, the Red-shouldered Hawk is monogamous and territorial. While courting or defending territories, the distinctive, screaming *kee-aaah* call (usually repeated three to four times) of this bird is heard." Loudly! "Courtship displays occur on the breeding grounds, and involve soaring together in broad circles while calling, or soaring and diving toward one another. Males may also perform the 'sky-dance' by soaring high in the air, and then making a series of steep dives, each followed by a wide spiral and rapid ascent. These courtship flights usually occur in late morning and early afternoon.

"Red-shouldered Hawks' mating season is between April and July. The breeding pair builds a stick nest (sometimes including shredded bark, leaves and green sprigs) in a major fork of a large tree. They often use the same nest year after year, refurbishing it annually with sticks in the spring. The clutch size is typically three to four eggs. . . The incubation period can range from 28 to 33 days. Hatching is asynchronous, with the first chick hatching up to a week before the last. The hatchlings, which weigh just over an ounce, at first, are brooded almost constantly by the female for up to 40 days." Research cited in the Wikipedia page on this species shows that pairs that nest earlier in the breeding season tend to lay greater numbers of eggs and have higher productivity from those eggs. "The male more often captures food but will also incubate and brood occasionally. The young leave the nest at about six weeks of age but remain dependent on the parents until they are 17 to 19 weeks old. They may continue to roost near the nest site until the following breeding season. Breeding maturity is usually attained at one or two years of age."

Although they have lived almost as old as 20 years, few live even half that long and only around half survive their first year. "Early mortality can be due to natural causes, relating to harsh weather conditions, or more often starvation." A common cause of mortality is natural predation. Raccoons, martens, fishers and large arboreal snakes can prey on eggs, hatchlings, fledglings and occasionally incubating and brooding adults. Non-nesting adults, being fairly large and powerful predators, have fewer natural predators, but they may be preyed on by other Red-shouldered Hawks, Great Horned Owls, Red-tailed Hawks, Barred Owls, American Goshawks, Peregrine Falcons, Prairie Falcons, and Bald and Golden Eagles.

"Humans, intentionally or unintentionally, are also a threat to Red-shouldered Hawks, including by hunting, collision with electric wires, road accidents and logging." "Poisoning from insecticides and



Red-shouldered Hawk (cont.)

industrial pollutants continues to loom as threats to the species.” Before the use of DDT was outlawed in the United States, Red-shouldered Hawks and other raptors suffered from exposure to the pesticide.

“DDT would cause their eggs to have thin, breakable shells, reducing their ability to reproduce. Despite all these dangers, habitat loss remains the biggest threat to Red-shouldered Hawks.” “Local forest regrowth and the ban of hunting has allowed Red-shouldered Hawk populations to become more stable again and the species is not currently considered conservation dependent.”

Red shouldered Hawks can often be heard at LLELA. A pair is usually seen on the power lines at the entrance and around the Blackjack Trail heads. See if you can hear or see this beautiful raptor that calls Texas its home. Kee-kee-kee!



Text courtesy of Wikipedia. See note 23 in the entry on Red-shouldered Hawk::

Morrison, J. L.; McMillian, M.; Cohen, J. B. & Catlin, D. H. (2008). ["Environmental correlates of nesting success in red-shouldered hawks"](#). *The Condor*. **109** (3): 648-657.

Photos courtesy of Alan Gann

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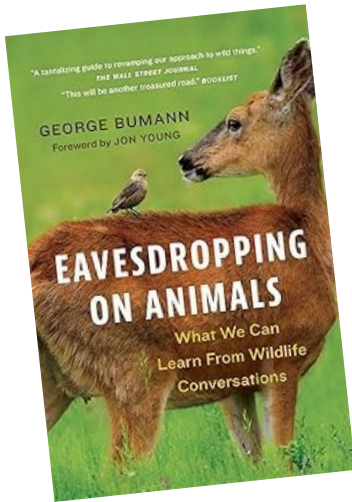


Mary Morrow

And a big thanks to Karen DeVinney and Mary Morrow for proofing!

Almost the Last Word

Here's a great book suggestion and audio summary from Tom Kirwan!



Eavesdropping on Animals: What We Can Learn from Wildlife Conversations

Humans once relied on the calls of wild animals to understand the natural world and their place within it. Now, this remarkable guide reveals what our ancestors knew long ago—that tuning in to the owl in the tree, the deer in the gully, can tell us important information and help us feel connected to our wild community.

In *Eavesdropping on Animals*, George Bumann shares the fascinating stories and insights he has gained from studying wildlife around the world for more than forty years, the last twenty of which have been spent leading popular programs on animal language and intelligence in Yellowstone National Park. Bumann shares tips, tricks, and advice for listeners living in urban, suburban, and rural areas and clearly shows us that you don't need an exotic vacation or a biology degree to have transformation wildlife encounters. Listening to and observing creatures in your own backyard, on nearby trails, and in local parks, seashores, fields, and forests can lead to extraordinary experiences and a profound sense of belonging.

Are you ready to eavesdrop on your wild neighbors? Are you ready to learn how to tell a warning call from a mating call, a purr of satisfaction from idle chatter? Then this book is for you!

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Video Presentation with the Tree Lady Talks: [George Bumann - Author, 'Eavesdropping On Animals' - YouTube](#)



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INSTAGRAM!**

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from our chapter.*

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Tammie Walters,
Editor

Thank you all for your amazing
articles and photos for the
Naturalist News!

We couldn't do it without you!

Please send submissions to:
newsletter@efctmn.org

April 2026 submissions are due
by:

Monday, April 6th



Who We Are



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<https://txmn.org/elmfork/>

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- AgriLife – Erin Smith
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Our Mission

“To develop a corps of well-informed volunteers to provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities for the State of Texas.”

Our Vision

“In our community, Elm Fork Chapter of the Texas Master Naturalist will be recognized as a primary source of information, education, and service to support natural resources and natural areas today and in the future.”

Regular Monthly Chapter Meetings

Meetings are on the third Thursday of each month at 9:30 a.m. preceded by a social time at 9:00 a.m.

Chapter meetings are open to the public.

Board Meetings

The board meets each second Thursday of the month at 9:30 a.m.

Monthly board meetings are open to members.

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