

Native Plant Society of Texas
Big Bend Chapter
October 2008 Newsletter

All Aboard! – Diamond Y Preserve – Sept. 27 –

Nature Conservancy biologist and Program Manager for West Texas John Karges will lead an interpreted hike to Diamond Y Springs Preserve north of Ft. Stockton on Hwy 18. This preserve is one of the largest and last remaining cienega systems in West Texas providing critically important habitat for two species of rare desert fishes - the Leon Springs pupfish, (*Cyprinodon bovinus*) and the Pecos Gambusia, (*Gambusia nobilis*) and the federally threatened, rare, salt-tolerant Pecos (or puzzle) sunflower, four other globally rare plants and a suite of rare aquatic invertebrates.

All of these creatures depend upon the maintenance and perpetuation of the surface springs, their outflow marshes and watercourses or subirrigated moist soils for survival.

Participants will carpool, leaving One Way Plant Nursery in Alpine at 8 a.m. and meeting those coming from other towns at 9:30 a.m. at the Shell Station on the north east corner of Hwy. 18 and IH-10 in Ft. Stockton. The group will caravan from there to the Preserve. The program ends at noon. Participants are asked to bring a sack lunch, water, hats and cameras and to wear shoes suitable for hiking. Sunflowers will be in bloom!

For reservations, call One Way Plant Nursery at 432-837-1117 by noon Friday, Sept. 26.

October meeting – new and different –

Our October meeting had to be changed to October 11 – sadly, not a date the Sibley Ranch could accommodate us, so we are unable to offer that program this year.

However, Patty Manning has stepped to the fore and offered an excellent and interesting alternative: "Botanizing in your own back yard."

About three years ago, Patty and Cyndi Wimberly bought 7 ½ acres on the outskirts of Alpine and have turned the somewhat derelict old ranch into a showplace with a charming home and gardens, both wild and cultivated.

Through the years, Patty has shared her grasses expertise with us, most recently with the grasses for landscaping program in Marathon last year. Now Patty has invited us to visit her home to see what she and Cyndi have done with grasses on their Farm at Twin Sisters.

"Botanizing in your own back yard: Some grasses and forbs of the Alpine Basin" begins at 9:30 Saturday morning, Oct. 11 under the pavilion at the farm - 605 S. Cactus St. in Alpine.

Participants will look at some home herbarium cards that can be made on 4"x6" index cards and then walk the 7.5 acre property looking at and identifying grasses and forbs that are both native and introduced. We will also look at introduced plants and some of the native plants from other parts of the Trans-Pecos that have been incorporated into the landscape.

Please bring snacks for the morning, water, a sack lunch. Wear long pants and shoes or boots that you don't mind getting wet. Birders bring binoculars. The program will end around 11:30.

This is a great chance to identify the grasses on your property - or along the roadside - and to see the on-going transformation of an old ranch into a thing of beauty!

To reach Cactus Street: drive west on Gallego St., turn south on Means St., which becomes Cactus. Please call One Way 432.837.1117 by Oct. 10 to reserve.

Input on the Sul Ross strategic plan solicited –

Dr. Bonnie Warnock at Sul Ross writes: I am working on adding an environmental sustainability section to the SRSU strategic plan and am soliciting input from the University and community. Could you please email any ideas that y'all might have and forward this to anyone who might be interested in contributing ideas.

Contact Bonnie at: rawlesw@yahoo.com or 432.837.8706.

Oct 18 - Big Bend Ranch State Park Fiesta -

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department will host the first annual Big Bend Ranch State Park Fiesta starting at 9AM on Saturday, October 18. This festive open house will feature free entry, attendance prizes, free BBQ lunch, park tours, hikes, guided mountain bike and horseback rides, displays, interpretive activities for all ages, plus a free 2-hour concert by cowboy singer-songwriter Dennis Jay.

Optional field trips will be available on Friday and Sunday by advance registration, including a half-day Rio Grande rafting trip offered by a local outfitter at half price. BBNPSOT will staff a table at the Fiesta with information on native plants and NPSOT membership. If you would like to carpool to the event, contact Pollyanne Melton at bigbend@npsot.org.

For information on the fiesta and to register:
http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/spdest/findadest/parks/big_bend_ranch/.

Job Opening in Fredericksburg -

After three years as Coordinator's for the NPSOT state organization, Mike and Jennifer Mc Bride will "retire" at the end of this year. They have created a streamlined organization and laid a solid foundation for the next Coordinator to build upon.

The NPSOT Board is looking for a new State Coordinator. The job is located in Fredericksburg. Skills required are: Quick Books, word processing, spreadsheet software and other computer and clerical skills.

If this job has your name on it, please submit your resume to NPSOT State President Carol Feldman at carol@feldmandesign.com by October 1st.

Reflecting on the Rio Grande -

I can't resist sharing this piece by my friend and wonderful writer, Sandra Harper of Marfa. This was written on Sept. 11, and much has happened since then, but the picture of life in La Junta is not changed. This is excerpted from Sandra's "Farm Stand Marfa News."

MONSOON LIVING

In far West Texas a good year means we have attained our average rainfall of 12-14 inches. It is not uncommon for six months to pass with no more than an inch of rain. During these dry stretches - when the desert soil begins to lift and blow across the landscape and the pronghorns, looking for water and food, walk weakly into the town and their clattering hooves can be heard on the paved roads - we take heart knowing the monsoon months of August and September will more than likely bring rain.

This hurricane season - while the islands in the Caribbean and the Gulf and Atlantic coastal areas experience storm after storm, and tropical depressions creep up the Baja peninsula in the west - it is raining in Marfa. Indeed, it has been raining since July. The early summer rains created lush gardens of foliage, but poor conditions for the heat-loving okra plants, black-eyed peas, tomatoes and chilies.

In late August the rains began to be more frequent and now in September it is raining every day. I am frequently emptying buckets and pouring water from containers onto shrubs and trees. As I make my way through the dripping, humid garden, I push aside the plants, double their normal size, and feel like I have entered the 1993 Vietnamese film, *Scents of Green Papaya*, directed by Tran Anh Hung. In the film, a young woman spends her days and nights walking gracefully around a courtyard filled with tropical plants. It seems to never stop raining. For most of the film the actress wrings out beautifully dyed cloths, pours water from one exquisite bowl to another, and steps barefoot through puddles.

The Rio Conchos, a river whose headwaters are high in the Sierra Madre of Chihuahua, Mexico, flows about 380 miles down the mountains, into the desert navigating cities, industries and

agricultural fields, passing through five dams before reaching its confluence at La Junta with the Rio Bravo/Grande a few miles above the sister border cities of Ojinaga, Mexico and Presidio, Texas.

Choked and dammed, north of the junction, the Rio Grande needs the Conchos so that it can travel on from its border confluence at Ojinaga/Presidio through the Canyon lands of the Big Bend, the reservoir at Lake Amistad, and the massive agricultural delta of South Texas, called the Valley, into the Gulf of Mexico.

When the dams on the Conchos in Mexico fill up, the government's water agency releases the water into the river. The river flows downstream to meet the Rio Bravo/Grande. This week the release of water from the flooded dams in Mexico, coupled with the monsoon rains and the irrigation canals on the Texas side clogged with tumbleweed, has caused the Rio Grande to breach its banks. The border town of Redford, just 75 miles south of Marfa, knows about drought and flooding.

Near century old structures are scattered about the town of one hundred residents and its original settlement called El Polvo. The First Five settlers - Acosta, Lujan, Carrasco, Borillo and Sanchez - arrived in 1872 with land grants given to them by Richard Coke, the governor of Texas. These colonists built houses, dug a 7-mile irrigation canal to water their fields and chased away the Apaches. Their descendants still live in Redford and their family names are prevalent throughout the Trans-Pecos region and the state of Chihuahua.

Since 1000 AD the indigenous peoples living in pueblos at the El Polvo site had farmed using floodwater irrigation, planting after the bi-annual floods had subsided. The Rio Grande flowed through the Chihuahua Desert habitat, feeding it continuously with water and creating a rich riparian environment of plants and animals.

Twice a year the floodplain of the river filled with water and receded. Each May the snowmelt in the Rockies and the Sierra Madres in Mexico brought the first over-bank flooding. The waters left rich, wet silt along the banks of the river. Here in the cracks of the drying soil the indigenous peoples planted beans and corn and squashes. Flooding occurred again in August and September during the Mexican Monsoon. As the floodplain dried enough for planting, they seeded pumpkins.

In 1535 when Cabeza De Vaca and his three companions, the first Europeans to travel here, arrived in the La Junta area near Presidio, the Indians talked of a two- year drought preventing them from planting corn. De Vaca's account of his 7- year odyssey across Texas ending at Culiacan, Mexico was written after he returned to Spain and published in 1542. His book, *La Relacion*, is the first written account of the indigenous peoples of South and West Texas.

The next written document to describe the area came from Antonio Espejo in 1582 when his expedition took him to the La Junta confluence in present day Ojinaga. He reports not being able to cross the flooding rivers of late August.

Today, with overfull dams in Mexico flooding the Conchos and causing the river settlements in Ojinaga to be evacuated, the residents of Redford wait. Already the river has breached its 25- foot high bank and the 15- foot levee and the 10- foot deep *acequia*, the canal protecting the homes on the river side of the road. The highway along the river and the detour through the desert are closed. The town watches the water, hoping that the rains will not start up and the release of water from the Mexican dams will stop and that the earthen dams in Chihuahua will not burst.

From Bill Lindemann, former NPSOT State President -

Birds and Natural Disasters

Kerrville Standard-Times

9-21-08

All of us were focused on the destruction taking place on the upper Texas Gulf Coast this past weekend because all of us either have relatives or friends who were likely slammed by Hurricane Ike. Most birders are very familiar with places like High Island, Bolivar Flats, Galveston Bay and many other great birding venues along the upper coast, and we all are afraid to imagine the destruction to the wonderful habitats found there. As for the birds themselves, natural disasters are part of their existence and although it will take time for these habitats to recover, life will go on in the bird world.

From a global perspective, storms, earthquakes, fires, volcanic eruptions and floods are happening somewhere on planet Earth almost continually. The destruction and death toll to the birds can be very large depending on the type of disaster. Many of you might remember the eruptions of Mt. St. Helens in the Pacific Northwest a couple of decades ago - an event that in a few seconds and minutes wiped out thousands to hundreds of thousands of birds and mammals that were living around the volcano.

The wrath of Ike will be with us for a number of years, but birders returning to the area over the next few years will find the normal residents and migrants as before the storm. Birds have a great advantage over most members of the animal kingdom in that they can fly, or be blown, to areas where the storm is not as devastating.

I read an article written by Mark Lisher in the *Austin American-Statesman* about the impact of a Hurricane Ike on the wildlife caught up in the storm. He reports that despite some mammals, reptiles and insects hit hard by the storm, most will recover and life will go on. There is no doubt that many sea birds got caught up in Ike and, like it or not, got a ride to North Texas, Arkansas and points northward. They will follow their instincts and head for the Gulf of Mexico, or one of the oceans.

These wind-blown birds could be seen almost anywhere in Texas either traveling alone or in small groups. Just a few years ago a Magnificent Frigate bird was seen in a kettle of vultures over Kerrville about this time of the year. Some of these lost souls might be seen over area lakes and rivers trying to find something to eat. One of the big problems for birds getting caught up in storms is that they expend a lot of energy to stay alive and do not have any time to find food. For example, a hummingbird's high metabolism will quickly drain the bird's energy reserves unless it can fly out of the path of the storm.

As the winds in a hurricane travel in a clockwise direction around the center of the storm, the conditions on the western side are much more favorable to the birds. I was supposed to be in Rockport last weekend for the Hummingbird Festival, but, as expected, the event was cancelled. All of the hummingbirds that were staging in the central Gulf coast got an unexpected boost from Ike's north winds on his western perimeter. These birds now had a strong tail wind to help them cross the Gulf of Mexico. Birds have instincts that help them to sense changing weather conditions and avoid danger; another reason that birds tend to survive weather related obstacles.

Based on the photos and television clips of the destruction of Galveston Island and the Upper Gulf coast, we can only offer sympathy and support to our relatives and friends who were devastated by Ike. For our bird friends we can be somewhat assured that they will pull through this as they have for eons of time, and life will return to normal in a much shorter time than for the human population. For all alert birders, some interesting opportunities will exist to see some of these birds passing through the Hill Country. Maybe a frigate bird soaring on his magnificent wings will again grace the skies of the Hill Country.

NPSOT
#15 Los Ranchos
Alpine, TX 79830