



Texas Wetland News

and WETLAND CONSERVATION PLAN UPDATE

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JANUARY 2009

MASTER NATURALIST PROGRAM SEEKS APPLICANTS

Twenty-three chapters of the Texas Master Naturalist program are conducting 2009 spring training classes for volunteers wanting to learn about natural resource and conservation management.

The Texas Master Naturalist program, with 39 chapters located across the state, aims to develop a corps of well-informed citizen volunteers who educate their communities about the management of natural resources. The main qualification needed to become a Certified Texas Master Naturalist is an interest in learning and playing an active part in conservation. Volunteers will receive a minimum of 40 hours training from educators and specialists from places such as universities, natural resource agencies, nature centers and museums. Training topics include interpretation and management of natural resources, ecological concepts, ecoregions in Texas and natural systems management. Volunteers are expected to give 40 hours of service a year in community education, demonstration and habitat enhancement projects. They are also expected to pursue a minimum of eight hours of advanced training in areas of personal interest.

Texas Master Naturalist chapters offering volunteer training this spring are listed with contact information. Enrollment is limited in most chapters. Some registration deadlines are fast approaching, so contact a chapter near you to see if seating is still available.

See class schedule on page 6.

Second Phase of Wetlands Completed on Richland Creek Wildlife Management Area

Matthew Symmank, Wildlife Biologist, Richland Creek WMA

Richland Creek Wildlife Management Area is located along the Trinity River in Freestone and Navarro counties, approximately 80 miles downstream of the Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW) Metroplex. The middle section of the Trinity River, south of Dallas, flows between the Blackland Prairie and Post Oak Savannah ecoregions. Both ecosystems have been severely altered due to urbanization and agriculture, leaving only limited and isolated pockets of native habitat within the Middle Trinity River Basin. The goal of the Richland Creek WMA is to conserve and enhance 13,854 acres of remaining Trinity River bottomland for wildlife habitat and public recreation. Bottomland hardwood areas, such as Richland Creek WMA, are critical because of their importance in flood control, water filtration and wildlife habitat. Texas has lost most of its beneficial river bottomlands due to agricultural land conversion and reservoir projects over the past few decades. With water demand rapidly increasing, some of the last remaining bottomland hardwood stands along the Trinity are threatened with development.

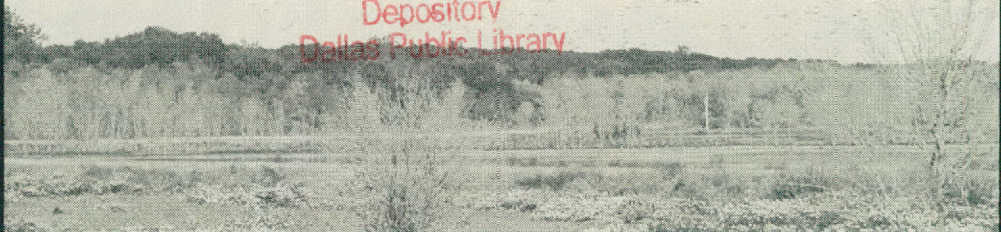
According to the U.S. Census bureau, between July 1, 2006 and July 1, 2007, the DFW Metroplex was the fastest-growing metropolitan area in the United States. This rapid growth significantly increases the regional demand for water. Projections from water planners at the Texas Water Development Board expect water demand in the DFW region to nearly double by 2060. In addition to an increase in demand for clean water, wastewater discharge from the DFW Metroplex is also increasing because of population growth. During low-flow periods, as much as 95 percent of Trinity River water

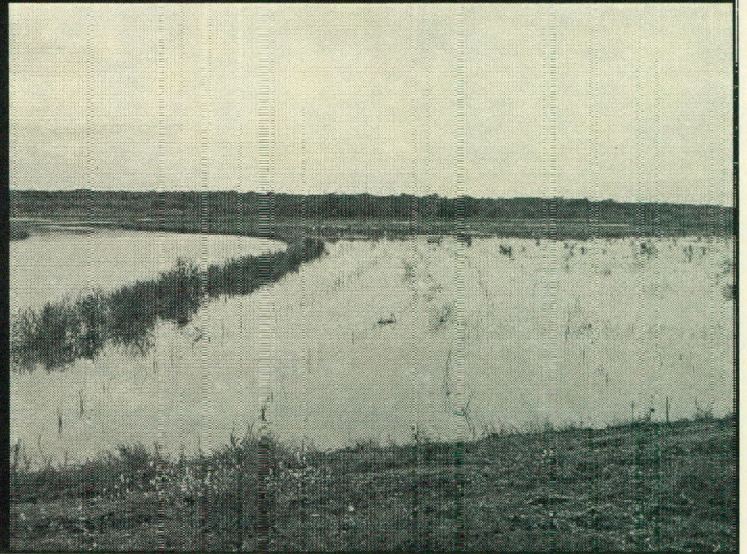
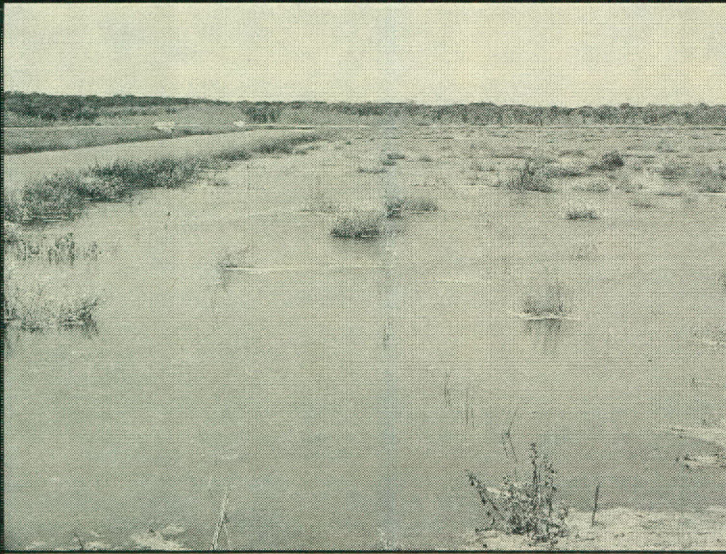
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Richland Creek WMA, continued

south of Dallas is wastewater discharge from the DFW Metroplex. Trinity River water contains high concentrations of nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus due to wastewater treatment facilities and urban runoff, making the river a challenging water supply source.

Texans are faced with the problem of supplying water to a growing population while avoiding adverse impacts to remaining bottomland hardwood habitat throughout the state. As a solution to the problem, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department partnered with Tarrant Regional Water District (TRWD) on a project designed to provide a reliable water supply to the DFW Metroplex without construction of a new reservoir. The George W. Shannon Wetlands Water Recycling Facility will eventually supply 90 million gallons of water every day to the Fort Worth region by cleaning nutrient-rich Trinity River water using the natural filtering process of wetlands. This project harnesses the ecological function of wetlands for the benefit of mankind by helping to meet our needs for clean water. Not only is this project an innovative, environmentally friendly method of water supply, it is also cost-effective. An economic analysis by TRWD shows that the development of wetlands for water filtration costs half as much as new reservoir construction would.

In the summer of 2000, the first phase of construction began on 243 acres of wetlands on the Richland Creek WMA for the purpose of water "recycling." Water is pumped from the Trinity River into shallow wetland cells growing native wetland vegetation beneficial to migratory waterfowl and shorebirds, as well as wading birds and a variety of mammal species. The wetland vegetation utilizes the nutrients in the water, efficiently removing approximately 95 percent of river sediment, 55 percent of nitrogen and 40 percent of phosphorus during much of the year. After filtering, the water is pumped into Richland-Chambers Reservoir adjacent to Richland Creek WMA. The

water from Richland-Chambers is utilized as a water supply source for TRWD customers, including the cities of Fort Worth, Mansfield, Arlington and the Trinity River Authority. The water eventually returns to the Trinity River via wastewater treatment plants, where the recycling process begins again.

The second phase of the George W. Shannon Wetlands Water Recycling Facility was completed in December 2008, adding 187 acres to the current project for a total of 430 constructed wetland acres. The new wetland cells were opened to waterfowl hunters for the 2008-2009 hunting season. These new wetland cells are highly productive emergent marshes ideal for waterfowl, wading birds and shorebirds. The shallow water depths create an excellent environment for highly preferred waterfowl plant species such as smartweed, barnyardgrass and wild millet. Waterfowl also feed on the abundant invertebrates throughout the marshes. Wading birds consume the abundant fish and frogs, while shorebirds utilize mudflats to forage for invertebrates. The third and final phase of the project is currently being designed with construction scheduled to begin in March 2010. The final phase will add approximately 1,200 acres to the project for a total of 1,630 acres of quality wetland habitat.

The wetland water recycling project on Richland Creek WMA is a model for the future water supply needs of Texans because it provides additional water without the need of a new reservoir. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is proud to be a partner with Tarrant Regional Water District on an innovative use of wetlands as an alternative to reservoir construction. Everyone benefits from increasing our water supply through water recycling, while at the same time creating high-quality wildlife habitat on public lands for the benefit and enjoyment of all Texans.

Back to Nature: Bahia Grande Work Restores Wetlands Lost to Dredging

David Sikes, Corpus Christi Caller-Times

PORT ISABEL — At first glance, differences between the Coastal Bend and the Coastal Rio Grande Valley may appear insignificant. But below the surface, the contrasts become clear. Even though our semi-arid climate is slowly merging with the Valley's subtropical characteristics in the form of newfound fishes here, the greater variety that anglers enjoy there still is impressive. More on this later.

But first I'd like to point out that this isolated gem of a fishery is set to become even better. Be glad Port Isabel is within easy reach. There's a project down there that's gotten very little attention beyond the Valley. The Bahia Grande project is being touted as one of the largest wetland restorations in United States history. It's a long time coming.

About 70 years ago when the Brownsville Ship Channel was dredged, the regulatory rigors we know today were not in place. To be fair, they did not possess the same conservation insights we do today.

So they piled dredge spoils wherever it was convenient, which nearly always is alongside a channel. In this case, the mound of mud and sand cut off the necessary ebb and flow of seawater for nearby bays and estuaries, damming and dooming them to death.

Commercial considerations at the time were sound, but with hindsight we now know this was a shortsighted plan. Without its lifeblood, about 10,000 acres of lush mangrove marshes, seagrass shallows, tidal flats and even a sizable bay began to wither.

This was a tidal or nursery wetland, one of the most vital and productive types of ecosystems that exist. It's where tiny shrimp, crabs and fishes find protection during maturation. These are the food factories for our game fishes and often the nutrient producers for our bay systems.

Eventually, salinity escalated, plants and animals died as water evaporated and mud flats turned barren. For decades the Bahia Grande area had been a dustbowl between the Brownsville Ship Channel and State Highway 100, which leads to Port Isabel.

"... if anyone doubted whether this sleeping bay was poised to fulfill its purpose, nature stepped in during the planning stages to answer the question."

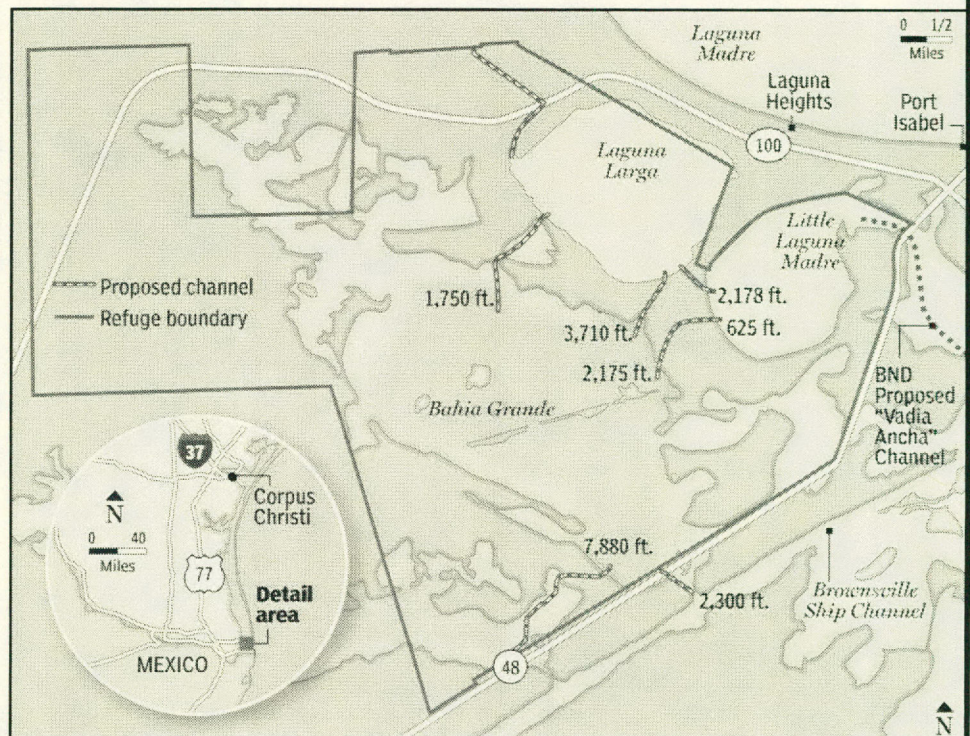
If this had been just an unsightly monument to a mistake, the wasteland might have remained unaltered forever. But the former wetland was producing dust. Prevailing winds were carrying clouds of nature's revenge into the eyes and noses of school children, as well as into the communities of Port Isabel, Laguna Vista, Laguna Heights and as far away as Bayview. When it was dry and windy,

dust was killing nearby upland vegetation and covering cars.

A group of locals convened to address this community nuisance that threatened the health of children and harmed aesthetics in the area. They considered pumping water from the ship channel into the dustbowl. But then somebody suggested a channel. From there, ambitions grew. Cameron County took the lead, securing a Coastal Impact Assistance Program grant to create an artery 60-foot wide and 2,300 feet long, finally quenching the thirst of a dormant wetland.

But first, if anyone doubted whether this sleeping bay was poised to fulfill its purpose, nature stepped in during the planning stages to answer the question. Following a particularly wet season in 2004, about 400,000 mullet, 15,000 redfish and other organisms crowded the once-empty bay that had partially filled mostly with rainwater. Apparently these fish had gained access through small

(Continued on page 7)



Got Cache?

Nora Schell, Lake Waco Wetlands Coordinator, City of Waco

GEAR Up Waco "Marsh Madness" is a U.S. Department of Education grant that is facilitated through a collaboration between Baylor University Center for Reservoir and Aquatic Systems Research and the City of Waco Lake Waco Wetland.

Middle and high school students engage in a half-day outdoor program in which they navigate through the wetlands with only a GPS unit and their skills.

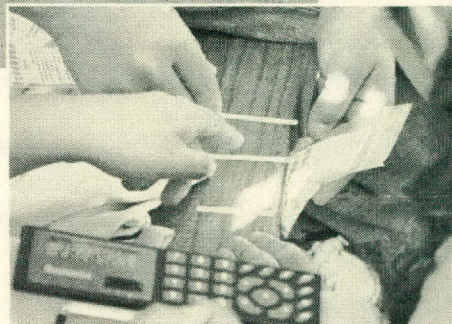
Students GPS their way through the wetlands in search of 15 caches hidden throughout the Lake Waco Wetlands, on the water, in the water and even in trees. This adventure race challenges the students as they navigate their way in search of the waypoints, and when they finally arrive at the designated spot, they find the cache, open the box and answer the questions. Each cache has a different problem, question or calculation that their team has to solve. The team with the most correct caches WINS!

The focus of GEAR Up Waco "Marsh Madness" is to provide field and laboratory experiences in the biological and environmental sciences in a wetland environment. The primary goal of this grant is to significantly increase the number of low-income students who are prepared for meaningful interaction with colleges and universities, and to increase their interaction with environmental professionals and science academics.

For more information on the "Marsh Madness" program or the Lake Waco Wetlands, contact: Melissa Mullins, Marsh Madness Coordinator, Baylor University (CRASR) at (254) 710-2348 or Melissa_mullins@baylor.edu or www.baylor.edu/crasr
 Nora Schell, Lake Waco Wetlands Coordinator, City of Waco at (254) 848-9654 or noras@ci.waco.tx.us or www.lakewacowetlands.com
 U.S. Dept. of Education GEAR UP Web site: www.ed.gov/programs/gearup

The GPS/geocaching curriculum not only is a fun, hands-on field trip, but also encourages students to work together to accomplish different goals and tasks, all the while reinforcing the core biology concepts that are aligned to TAKS. And not to mention that they get to get wet and muddy!

The students troll through mud in search of a waypoint.



Students learn about the habitat of aquatic organisms in the Lake Waco Wetland by measuring pH.

The students use a dipnet to collect and measure crayfish.



New Incentives Sweeten Deal for Playas in CRP

Debbie Slobe, Playa Lakes Joint Venture

Agricultural producers with expiring Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts are being enticed to conserve playas and other wetlands in Continuous CRP with new, lucrative incentives¹ offered by the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA).

Starting November 3, the FSA is offering expiring CRP contract holders a 20-percent boost over current soil rental rates on playas and other wetlands enrolled into Continuous CRP practices CP23 and CP23a (Flood-Plain and Non Flood-Plain Wetlands Restoration², respectively).

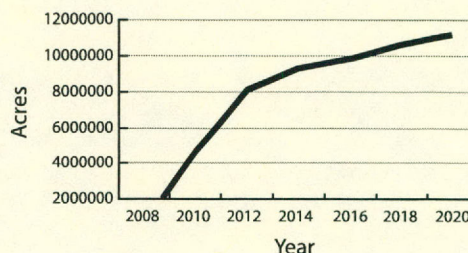
New farmland enrolled into CP23a and CP23 would also receive a \$100-per-acre sign-up incentive payment and a 40-percent practice incentive payment. The new incentives could more than double the overall contract payment on wetland and buffer acres over previous practice incentives.

“We were pleased to announce this package of incentives for wetland practices as a way of encouraging landowners to restore wetlands on their farm properties,” said John Johnson, deputy administrator for Farm Programs for the FSA. “Our goal is to simply get as many wetlands restored and functioning at their highest value as possible to achieve groundwater recharge, nutrient absorption and wildlife habitat values that wetlands provide.”

The Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV) is urging producers with expiring CRP acres with playas on them to consider enrolling in CP23a, the practice that specifically applies to the wetlands. This winter, the PLJV will pilot a direct mailing campaign in partnership with the FSA to individual expiring CRP and playa landowners and operators in western Kansas, with the hopes of launching similar mailings in other states with playas including Texas.

“Kansas will experience a significant expiration of general CRP acreage over the next couple of years. The vast majority of these acres lie in the western high plains of the state,” said Rod Winkler, Kansas CRP Program Specialist. “Playas are common throughout this region. Right now, CRP participants are considering their options on these expiring acres. By partnering with PLJV,

FSA can increase landowner and operator awareness of available opportunities outside of a general signup with significantly increased financial incentives for conserving this natural wetland resource along with preserving habitat for wildlife on a number of wildlife habitat practices, including enrollment of new lands.”



CP23a was launched in 2004 with 250,000 acres available nationwide. Today, about 215,000 acres remain. Unlike in 2004, states are not allocated specific acreage amounts, so there is more flexibility for FSA to enroll acres where there is more demand for the practice—and for PLJV and partners to drive demand from the playa lakes region.

Other Continuous CRP practices available to producers whose contracts are expiring also include CP33 – Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds³, and CP38 – State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement⁴. These also provide a 20-percent boost on rental rates for enrollment of expiring acres, and an additional \$100-an-acre signup incentive and 40-percent practice incentive payment for new acres.

With millions of CRP acres expiring and no new general signups over the next several years, these continuous practices are critical means to keep valuable natural resources like playas and wildlife habitat conserved via the Farm Bill.

A recent Conservation Effects Assessment Project⁵ by the PLJV and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) found that CRP supports more than 15 percent of several priority bird species – such as Grasshopper Sparrows, Dickcissels and Eastern Meadowlarks – in the mixed grass prairie regions in several states.

1 www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/newsReleases?area=newsroom&subject=landing&topic=ner&newstype=newsrel&type=detail&item=nr_20081007_rel_1508.html

2 www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/newsReleases?area=newsroom&subject=landing&topic=pfs&newstype=prfactsheet&type=detail&item=pf_20081007_cons_v_en_wetlands.html

3 www.qu.org/content/habitat/habitat_buffers.cfm

4 www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/newsReleases?area=newsroom&subject=landing&topic=pfs&newstype=prfactsheet&type=detail&item=pf_20080221_cons_v_en_safepr208.html

5 www.pljv.org/cms/farm-bill

Editor's note: The Playa Lakes Joint Venture describes their effort as “a nonprofit partnership of federal and state wildlife agencies, conservation groups, private industry and landowners dedicated to conserving bird habitat in the Southern Great Plains. We provide science-based guidance and decision-support tools for all-bird conservation throughout the region, as well as outreach, coordination and financial support to our partners and local groups to conduct on-the-ground habitat work.”

For more information please visit the PLJV at www.pljv.org

Master Naturalist Training Classes

ABILENE—Big Country Chapter. Training plans are pending. For details, contact: president@bigcountrymasternaturalist.org

AUSTIN—Capital Area Chapter. The 2009 class is full. For information about the 2010 class, please contact Theresa Pella at tpella@austin.rr.com or Kris Thorne at thornebio@aol.com. For chapter information, visit: <http://camn.org>

BASTROP—Lost Pines Chapter. Training begins January 26 and registration is due by January 10. Additional information is available by calling (512) 281-5516 or email: markmcc@prodigy.net

BRENHAM—Gideon Lincecum Chapter. Classes begin February 7 at the Winedale Historical Center. Registration deadline is also February 7 with a class limit of 25 students. For details, call (936) 878-9900 or email: judith_deaton@yahoo.com

BURNET—Highland Lakes Chapter. Training starts March 5 and the registration is February 19. For information, email: drrayb@tstar.net or call (325) 379-1455.

CONROE—Heartwood Chapter. Classes begin March 14 and the registration deadline is March 1. For information, call (832) 381-6921 or email training@heartwoodtmn.org

DALLAS—North Texas Chapter. The chapter will host an Open House on January 13, 2009 and the registration deadline is January 23. Classes begin February 17. Call (972) 248-7980 or email: glferris@mac.com for more information.

GALVESTON—Galveston Bay Area Chapter. Training begins February 26 at the Armand Bayou Nature Center in Pasadena. Registration ends February 13. Class is limited to 20 students. For details, call (281) 534-3413, ext.2 or email: jmassey@ag.tamu.edu

GRANBURY—Rio Brazos Chapter. Training will begin in early March with a registration deadline of February 15. Specific information is available at (817) 579-1194, or email: dmzlfly@lakegranbury.com

HOUSTON—Gulf Coast Chapter. Classes begin February 16 at the Houston Arboretum and Nature Center. The registration deadline is February 1. Call (713) 816-5318 or email: milliemorgan@hotmail.com for specific information.

JEFFERSON—Cypress Basin Chapter. Training begins January 29, 2009 and applications are due December 29, 2008. Details are available by calling (903) 767-1676 or email: bwbailey1@peoplepc.com

JUNCTION—Western Edwards Plateau Chapter. Class begins March 12 and registration is needed by February 1. Program details available at (325) 446-9133 or email: cavuforeman@ctesc.net

MCKINNEY—Blackland Prairie Chapter. The first class is set for February 11 and applications due by January 23. Call (972) 248-6283 or email: svevans@sbcglobal.net for information.

MIDLAND—Llano Estacado Chapter. Class begins January 19 and your registration is needed by January 15 for the training at the Sibley Nature Center. Details available at (432) 684-6827 or email: bwilliams@sibleynaturecenter.org

NAVASOTA—Cinco Tierra Chapter. Training starts February 21. The chapter will host an information social on January 10 and the registration deadline is January 30. More information is available by calling (979) 220-6977 or emailing: cinco_tierra@yahoo.com

ROCKDALE—El Camino Real Chapter. Classes begin January 13 and registration is due December 1. Enrollment information available at (512) 922-4150 or email: danpaulae@yahoo.com

ROCKPORT—Mid Coast Chapter. Training begins February 7, 2009 and registration is due December 15, 2008. For information, call (361) 570-3679 or email: jhmuchmore@aol.com

SAN ANTONIO—Alamo Area Chapter. Classes start February 19 with applications accepted until February 2. For information phone (210) 842-7967 or email: pball12@satx.rr.com

SAN BENITO—Rio Grande Valley Chapter. Training begins January 21 with a registration deadline on January 14. Call (956) 364-1410 or email: rgvctmn1@rgv.rr.com or visit the chapter Web site: www.rgvctmn.org

SAN MARCOS—Hays County Chapter. Classes begin February 17 and registration is due no later than January 15. For details call (830) 833-4235 or email: trainingcom@haysmn.org

TYLER—East Texas Chapter. Classes begin January 24 and registration is needed by January 16. Class details available by calling (903) 882-5532 or emailing: tappa@hughes.net

WACO—Heart of Texas Chapter. Training begins January 17 with registration due by January 12. For details, call at (254) 379-3642 or email: e_haskell67@yahoo.com

WICHITA FALLS—Rolling Plains Chapter. Training begins March 24 with the registration deadline on March 17. For details, contact Mark Howell at (940) 766-2383 or email: mark.howell@tpwd.state.tx.us

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Texas AgriLife Extension co-sponsor the Texas Master Naturalist program. For more information about existing chapters or forming a new chapter, contact Sonny Arnold, Assistant Program Coordinator, 111 Nagle Hall, 2258, TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-2258. Call (979) 458-1099 or email: sarnold@ag.tamu.edu. Complete information about the Texas Master Naturalist program is available at: <http://masternaturalist.tamu.edu>

Bahia Grande, continued

ditches and creeks from the bay. But when the water receded the fish became trapped. And, unfortunately, most of them died before the channel could be opened.

Financial aid for this ongoing project has come from many sources, including the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) and AEP Texas. Area navigation districts have played a role. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service controls most of the 10,000 acres as part of the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and they are involved in the science.

Several other channels have been dug and are planned to help rehydrate the area and to improve tidal circulation.

Plans are under way to widen the main channel to 225 feet and deepen it to 9 feet, which should go far to completely restore Bahia Grande, said Joe Vega, mayor of Port Isabel and deputy director of the Cameron County Parks & Recreation Department.

Along Highway 48, which parallels the ship channel, TxDOT has provided a bridge across the main channel, which

replaces culverts and improves tidal flow. A paddle launch, nature trail, fishing pier, overlooks and boardwalks for birders also are in the works along Highway 48. A parking lot already provides access there.

Biologists and students at the University of Texas at Brownsville and UT-Pan American are cultivating black mangroves for Bahia Grande and will oversee the return of seagrasses there.

By the way, this might represent Texas' first no-motor zone, at least for a while, until the aquatic vegetation takes hold. John Wallace, with the USFWS, said that once Bahia Grande is fully restored they may consider allowing duck hunting, plus nilgai and quail hunting on upland portions of the project area.

Don't worry, there's plenty of water near Port Isabel where outboards are allowed. And I explored a good portion of these waters recently, starting with Carlos Garcia on a clear autumn morning.

A bull tide, calm winds and high barometric pressure are not the elements of a

good fishing day. Drifting was futile and eventually we had to admit this was not a morning for artificial lures.

Garcia saved the day in South Bay, where we targeted the edges of submerged channels during a moving tide. Free-lined live shrimp produced the widest variety of species I have experienced in Texas.

Of course we caught trout and redfish. And I wasn't too surprised that we also caught mangrove snapper, black drum, ladyfish, flounder, Spanish mackerel and jack crevalle. But we also caught lane snapper and some decent croaker. And then Garcia caught a juvenile ling cobia. Now that's unusual.

The next day with Gencho Buitureira we caught four impressive flounder and several snook along with other species in the Brownsville Ship Channel. Thirteen species in all for the two days. I expect within a couple years we'll enjoy some of the same in Bahia Grande, the most impressive and successful dust-control project in Texas.

This article was originally published Sunday, November 16, 2008, in the Corpus Christi Caller-Times. It has been reprinted with permission. David Sikes' Outdoors column runs Thursday and Sunday. Contact David at (361) 886-3616 or sikesd@caller.com

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**Please note that the newsletter cannot include announcements of for-fee seminars or workshops for which Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is not a sponsor.*

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