

Lyonia Letter



Hawk's Nest

Rio Grande Valley - Part Two

After a rather pedestrian late lunch at a food trough in Brownsville, we set the GPS for the South Padre Island Birding Center. A three story affair nestled between a garishly colored convention center and an expanse of marshland abutting a series of condominiums executed in an austere, contemporary but attractive style, the birding center announces in no uncertain terms that millions of dollars were invested in making the center a real attraction. The remarkable building and acres of somewhat unspoiled landscape are a testament to some naturalist's vision for the future. Staffed by experienced and friendly volunteers brimming with genuine bonhomie and enthusiasm, we were directed to sign the register and invited to enter the auditorium to view a twelve minute film about the flora and fauna of the island, directed and filmed by a famous local naturalist whose budget must have been without limit. On the second floor one finds expertly designed and executed interactive dioramas including but not limited to: coyote, sea turtles, fish, insects, flowers, birds, grasses and dirt. The third floor is an observation deck affording spectacular views of the Laguna Madre, a long, shallow hypersaline bay. I was able to appreciate the view for about twenty seconds, after which the dizzying height placed my heart in my throat and sent me packing for the elevator. Our much braver and spunky photographer effortlessly glided about the sky-high veranda, wielding her camera as a record for posterity. Making our way to the entry to the deck leading to one of the most extensive outdoor boardwalks in the world, one paused at the bird sighting station to the left of the french doors to view a computerized record, touch screen no less, with pictures, of every sighting any bird-watcher wishes to make of our avian cohorts flying, flitting, paddling and wading about the property. It is quite nearly awesome and one is inclined to thank ambitious people of means for lending their earnings to produce such an elegant and useful application for public use. Hence to the

boardwalks. Snowy Egrets, Blue Herons, Piebald grebes, mangroves, redwing blackbirds, alligators, warblers, cat-tails, immature least grebes, ghost crabs, sea purslane, cord grass, gaillardia, mistflower, fish roiling the lagoon, beach sunflower, goldenrod (blooming, no less!), pelicans, ducks, and finally: Roseate spoonbills. Them's what we came for. Even at eighty feet in the distance, those brilliant pink birds with the spatula shaped bills and a deep pink chevron across the wing do not fail to deliver the goods. Our photographer, seeing for the first time the wonderfully colored birds, did everything except wade through the marsh to get photos of the creatures. I felt as though the center had made good, and we exited the park to the main drag followed by a sharp left where a Tiki Bar allowed for some adult refreshment and a wind down of the day. After downing our beverages, we descended to the beach. Narrow, with brown sand and a somewhat hideous pipeline running the length of the island, we walked for perhaps a sixth of a mile as a heavy fog rolled in, providing a cool and mysterious end to the day. A young man, Mexican, showed off his dog, a talented cur that performed a thrilling jump over the pipeline and mid-air catches of some rubber toy that he pitched high

into the air. A handsome couple, pierced and tattooed, sipped cans of beers while seated in chairs nestled in the sand, evidence that Texas is a more civilized state than Florida. The beach is devoid of vegetation, but generally clean. Hotels, condominiums and multimillion dollar houses stretch from one end of the sandbar to the other. Imagine, if you will, what the Spaniards must have seen when they landed on the beach in 1519. Now that's real estate. Estero Llano Grande State Park, a few miles south of Weslaco, Texas, is something to be proud of. The park contains the largest wetlands environment in the World Birding Center sites scattered across The Valley, and includes shallow lakes, thorn forests and seasonal canals. The entrance to the park is populated by butterflies, mist flowers, Altamira Orioles of a bright orange color guaranteed to momentarily stun first timers; orange crowned warblers and of course, the ubiquitous Chachalacas (*Ortalis vetula*), roving through the low vegetation, bouncing along the ground in search of human proffered food, showing
see **Hawk's Nest** p.2

Next Meeting
Tues., April 12

Organizational Meeting
No Speaker
for details,
see Speaking Of . . . p. 4

The Lyonia chapter of FNPS meets at 7 pm the second Tues. of each month, Sept. through June at the Deltona Library, located at 2150 Eustace Ave. Deltona, Florida.

Hawk's Nest from p.1

their appreciation by gurgling hoots and shrill, monkey-like screeches. That is just the entrance. The marvelous pavilion and bustling gift shop, designed with a contemporary artistic flair, looked out upon a small lake loaded with numerous species of ducks and other water fowl that seemed to take pleasure in the exclamations of wonder from the people ringing the waterside. So close to the pavilion were the birds that one suspects that they are in the employ of the Texas state park system, having been instructed to approach the humans with a view to soliciting squeals of delight from platoons of camera-toting birdwatchers and curious children. Job security, of a sort. The center was, on our visit, populated by visitors speaking several languages, with six-thousand dollar cameras encrusted with foot-long lenses seemingly the picture taking machines of choice. A leisurely stroll took us through a marsh bordered by cattails populated with attention-seeking male redwing blackbirds, their familiar trills a homey reminder of our own Florida species.



Yucca photo - L. Bertrand

Continuing along the dry trails, we chanced upon a midwestern family intently staring at something at the base of a tree. Two Common Pauragues (*Nyctidromus albigollis*), belonging to the nightjar family, rested on the leaf litter of the forest floor, several feet apart, oblivious to the hominids snapping photos of them. Not even a small crowd of birders rending the air with exclamations of joy and surprise at finding these birds could make them open their eyes in response to the commotion. On the way to the observation deck further along, we encountered a Texas Mountain Laurel in refugent bloom, its lavender clusters ever so reminiscent of grape bubble gum, both in scent and color. This being our first exposure to this plant, a certain excitement attended the discovery of this large shrub. On a subsequent outing about town, a specimen noted to be loaded with seed pods was spied on the side of the road, and a thorough ransacking occurred with the hope that this magnificent plant will some day grace our verdant corner of Volusia County. At the observation deck, a couple of alligators sunning on the banks of a resaca lent a tropical feel to an otherwise desiccated landscape. A fellow park visitor outfitted with a portable, tripod-mounted spotting scope that screamed expensive invited us to squint into its eyepiece, its lens pointed at a screech owl across the water, its bushy head peering out of a wooden box provided by the state of Texas. A complete catalog of the sites visited would provide for a very lengthy article indeed, and so I shall remark upon a few more of the enchanting and educational experiences afforded by the many habitats encountered. At the Valley Nature Center, we were disappointed to learn that

the grounds were closed, after paying the entrance fee (very poor form on the part of the volunteer) but recouped our donation by attaching ourselves to a university professor engaged in banding various birds in the center. This turned out to be quite outrageously exciting and somewhat complex. Kiskadees, doves, cardinals, hummingbirds (they are truly tiny and exquisitely colored) and green jays, among others, were tagged and held up for close examination by the geeky fanatics that comprised the small crowd in attendance. An earnest and serious lady photographer appeared from nowhere, armed with a battery of camera equipment seen only in the company of important journalists, and began to shoot each of the winged creatures in a variety of poses. A lovely experience. A visit to the Frontera Audubon Thicket in Weslaco provided little in the way of wildlife, but much in the way of old growth Sabal Palms (*Sabal mexicana*), Nopal Prickly Pear (*Opuntia lindheimeri*), Texas ebony and a cypress with a horizontal habit. Many flowers, unknown to the author, were bearing seed or about to bolt into bloom. Noon is not the best time to view birds. The Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park is a 760 acre riparian woodland rich with

plant and animal representatives. The tram pick up point is also an enormous bird feeding station with seed on trays suspended from tree and shrub branches; hummingbird nectar stations, corn cobs and halved citrus fruits impaled on nails erupting from numerous trees. Upon our arrival, chachalacas in an enormous herd provided a stunning sound experience and were audible at more than a mile away. Upon our return, birds arrayed in red, orange, blue, green, black and other exceptional combinations flitted about the feeding stations. Old growth ebony forests were abundant, still loaded with the seed pods used by indigenous early peoples and early American settlers as a food source and substitute for coffee.

January and February are the best months of the year for bird and butterfly watching. Native plant enthusiasts will find March through May to be ideal for plant watching. Explore!

—Jim McCuen

Part 1 of this article appeared in the March issue of the Lyonia Letter.

I don't love studying. I hate studying. I like learning. Learning is beautiful.

~Natalie Portman

Secretary's Minutes . . . and Seconds

Our prez and Ray Jarrett previewed the cool things coming up:

- March 19 - The Volusia County Conservation Lands Outreach—<http://www.volusia.org/growth/learning.htm> — field trip to Hickory Bluff will be led by Randy Sleister, Cindy Bennington and David Griffiths. An amazing concentration of talent in one place!
- March 26 - Wildflower Festival in downtown DeLand – gets better every year.
- April 23 – All-day native plant seminar at the Environmental Learning Center at Stetson University. \$40 registration includes breakfast and lunch. Leaders include Ray, talking about exotic plants and native alternatives and insects, Karen Cole, director of the ELC, and a Stetson graduate student who is also a mom, with a program on native plants for kids.

Our program speaker was Coralie Gilson from the Marine Discovery Center. She told us about their Waterfront Restoration Program, funded by a grant from the state Department of Environmental Protection. Its purpose is to educate shoreline property owners on the benefits of removing invasive exotic vegetation and replacing it with natives. The most difficult barrier to overcome has been property owners' reluctance to plant mangroves, the premier shoreline stabilizer, because trimming of mangroves is regulated (because they're such good stabilizers), which doesn't always allow an unobstructed view.

Our raffle included a gorgeous containerized muhly-grass, two hiking books and a bird atlas

—Steve Tonjes

Miss Whoosie . . .

. . . Takes a Walk

A raccoon fell through the screened porch a few days ago. Master was very angry. My friend almost went through the door to get at it. He knocked over a metal thing with a bowl on it and it broke. I was scared when Master went to the hall and got the belt. We hid by the front window and were very quiet. Even my friend was scared. That raccoon must have been the dumbest one in the lot. She got between the window and the orchid case and kept pawing at the window even when my friend was showing his teeth and barking.

The pond is all dry but the sundews are blooming. Master is not going to mow the yard this year he says.

I like rolling around in the oak leaves and making my back all scratchy. Yesterday afternoon the raccoon came back with two babies. She crawled down the screened porch and had a baby in her mouth. My friend jumped up and down and scratched at the window. Master yelled at us and hit my friend with a towel. He ran around the kitchen counter but went back to the porch and started barking some more. Master made faces and yelled at us.

We have pawpaw flowers and Master took a picture of them. I'm not sure what is so good about them. I think Master needs company.

My friend got sick and went to the doctor. Master is rubbing his head and telling him he is a good boy. In front of people and stuff.

—Jim McCuen

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- ☼ Full Moon Natives & Herbs
1737 Fern Park Drive, Port Orange, FL
(386) 212-9923 <http://www.fullmoonnatives.com/>
- ☼ Double B Ranch
850 Bay Drive, New Smyrna Beach, FL
(386) 547-1664 doublebranch@aol.com
- ☼ Green Winters
147 Tomoka Ave., Ormand Beach, FL
(386) 235-8730 <http://www.greenwinters.com/>

Many Natives

- ☼ DeBary Nursery and Garden Supply, 61 US 17/92
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(386) 668-4466 <http://debarynursery.com/default.aspx>
- ☼ Lindley's Nursery, 2359 SR 44, New Smyrna Beach, FL
(386) 428-7298 <http://lindleysgardencenter.com>
- ☼ Designing Women, 6275 W. SR 46
Sanford, FL 32771 (407) 324-2377

Pine Straw

- ☼ GAIT Pinestraw, Inc. 425 South Volusia Avenue
Orange City, FL 32763 (386) 337-8729
<http://www.gaitpinestraw.com/index.html>

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Lyonia ☼ Letter to friends.

Native 'n' Nice

Blue Flag Iris

Few of the previous columns on going native have featured wetland plants. Unlike many plants, *Iris virginica*, or Blue Flag Iris, not only tolerates wet feet; it thrives in marshes or any wet spot, including the edges of shallow ponds such as retention ponds.

Although the blossoms are not as large as non-native irises, blue flags are very showy for natives. Their pale blue to purple flowers sit atop 2-foot stems surrounded by graceful dark green, sword-shaped leaves. Bold yellow streaks appear at the centers of the large petals.

Blue flags grow in sun to part shade. They are perennials that spread by forming colonies of underground rhizomes that send up new shoots in early spring. Young plants may germinate from seeds that form inside large pods. However, seedling rarely bloom before the third year.

Blue flags are prevalent throughout the eastern half of the U.S. and Canada.

—Donnadine Miller



Donnadine Miller was an active member of the Pawpaw chapter, FNPS and wrote this column for years for *The Skimmer*, the newsletter of the Southeast Volusia Audubon Society (SEVAS).

She passed away April 7, 2008.

This archived article is from *The Skimmer*, April 2006

Speaking Of...

No Speaker this month . . .

This will be a chapter organizational meeting for the upcoming *Native Plant Seminar that is being organized by Jim McCuen as a fundraiser and we will discuss a few native plants of the month.

Please bring in any plant samples for ID and discussion.

—Ray Jarrett



*See ad last page

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Outside of the Patch

Events of interest to members

Conservation Lands Outreach

Outdoor Learning Adventures

Bring the family outdoors for Saturday adventures led by experts on diverse subjects.

Here's the schedule:

<http://www.volusia.org/growth/learning.htm>

Bonnie Cary

Register early, space is limited.

For more information or to register:

386-736-5276

bcary@co.volusia.fl.us

Just Caws



Recommended Reading

The Creation - E.O. Wilson

The Lives of a Cell - Lewis Thomas

—Gil Miller

A wonderful thing about a book, in contrast to a computer screen, is that you can take it to bed with you.

~Daniel J. Boorstin

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Thanks to Jim McCuen for proofreading this issue.

Creating a Garden, The Natural Way

A Seminar

Sat., April 23, 2011

8:30 until 4:30

Stetson University

Rinker Environmental Education Center

234 East Michigan Street Deland, Florida 32724

Free Parking next to Rinker Center

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- ⊗ Waterwise Landscaping
- ⊗ Don't Plant This ... Plant That!
- ⊗ Landscaping Principles for Native Plants
- ⊗ Bee Friendly
- ⊗ Attracting Wildlife To Your Garden
and much more!

Presented by the Lyonia Chapter of The Florida Native Plant Society

Register online at: www.123signup.com/register?id=vnqgr ⊗ Call 407-733-1892 for Information

Other Sites

⊗ Florida Native Plant Society

News, Programs, Events, Chapters, Links

<http://www.fnps.org/>

⊗ Southeast Audubon Society (SEVAS)

News, Programs, Events, Field Tips, Blog

<http://www.sevolusiaaudubon.org/>

⊗ Florida Bluebird Society

News, Events, House Plans, Links

<http://www.floridabluebirdsociety.com/blitz.htm>

⊗ Florida Wildflower Foundation

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<http://www.floridawildflowerfoundation.org/>

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