

# Fredericksburg Nature Notes



## Newsletter of the Friends of the Fredericksburg Nature Center

June, 2021 Volume 2 Number 6

<http://fredericksburgnaturecenter.com/>

### Editor's Musings: **Lonnie Childs**

Dear Friends of the Fredericksburg Nature Center,

This issue brings some discouraging and some encouraging news. On the negative side, we had vandalism on the trail as someone(s) thought that they would demonstrate their herculean strength by pushing one of our benches into the creek. This was not just any bench, but it was one of several benches built with civic-mindedness by the St. Barnabas Boy Scout troop. On another sour note, a visitor, who apparently adhered to the notion that snakes are an expendable part of Nature and should be dispatched, sadly fulfilled their opinion by killing one of our Texas Rat Snakes. We mourn the loss.

In more encouraging news, on May 19th, we hosted about two hundred 4th graders from Fredericksburg Elementary School for an abbreviated nature program. The Pollinator Garden is bursting with color and flying and crawling insects that will surely brighten your day if you will just pay a visit. The makeover of the Butterfly Habitat is near completion and promises to punctuate the Vista Loop trail with a new palette of color and form. The recent rainfall revitalized the vegetation along the trails and setup it up for a head start against the incoming summer heat and desiccation. It's a good time for a visit or a hike.

In the words of Pythagoras, that eminent Greek hiker, *"Leave the road, take the trails."*

Happy Nature Trails!

*Lonnie*

### In this issue:

- Volunteer Work at FNC
- Vandalism and Trash at the Park
- 4th Grade Day at the FNC
- Observations Along the Trail
- What's Blomen at the Pollinator Garten?
- What's Flutterin' & Cawlin' in the Pollinator Garten?
- Feature Story: *The Only Good Snake is a Live Snake*





**OUR MISSION STATEMENT: “To enhance, protect and interpret the natural ecosystems of the Texas hill country while providing educational and quality of life opportunities for members of the community and visitors”**

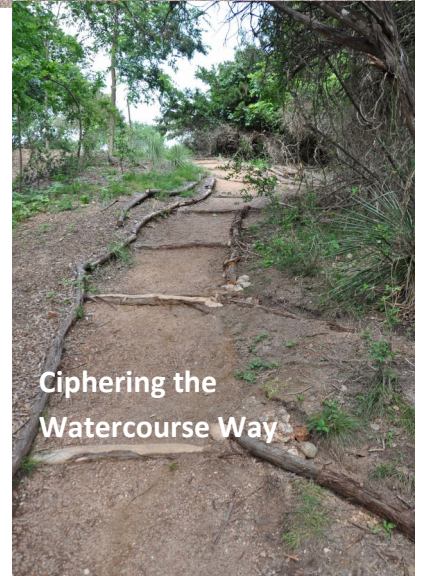
## Volunteer Work at FNC

**Our weekly work sessions continue. Following is an update on some of the current projects.**

**Butterfly Habitat:** With a new irrigation system in place, Jane Crone and team have been updating our plant diversity with new additions of both nectar and host plants. Some of the added plants include Scarlet Sage, Cedar Sage, a yellow varietal of Coral Honeysuckle on the trellis, Big Red Sage, American Beautyberry which will provide dazzling clusters of purple berries in the fall, and Texas Milkweed whose striking orange blossoms attract Monarchs and serve as a host plant for its larvae. Meanwhile, the Lantana are sporting full blooms of orange and yellow flowers contrasted with the lavender spikes of Mealy Blue Sage and the distinctive orange-yellow blooms of Zexmenia. Start your hike on the trail with a stop to admire the refurbished Butterfly Habitat.



**Trails:** Work continues to try and stem future erosion along the upper Vista Loop Trail. The recent 8” rain provided a good test in highlighting areas that needed correction. You cannot stem the “watercourse way” since water will always find its way downhill to the creek, to the river, and on to the ocean without even striving. Unfortunately, when we intrude on water’s path with human constructs like trails, water still finds its way downhill and cut a new path with little respect for our efforts. So we work to influence it but not fight it - maybe a timber to move it off the trail into a diversion channel, to spread it out, and cut its power, etc... We make some changes, and the next rain will inform us as to how well we have ciphared the “watercourse way.” We act and learn with a real lesson in humility provided by our mentor—water.



Near the bottom of the descending trail, we have installed new planks on the foot-bridge in replacement of their rotting forerunners. This will improve the safety and ease of foot along the trail.

**Thanks to Tom Hynes, Trudy Eberhardt, Frank Garcia, Carl Luckenbach, and Billy Guin for there efforts!**



**Photos by Lonnie Childs**



*"Volunteers do not necessarily have the time; they just have the heart."*

Elizabeth Andrew

## Volunteer Work at FNC (cont'd)

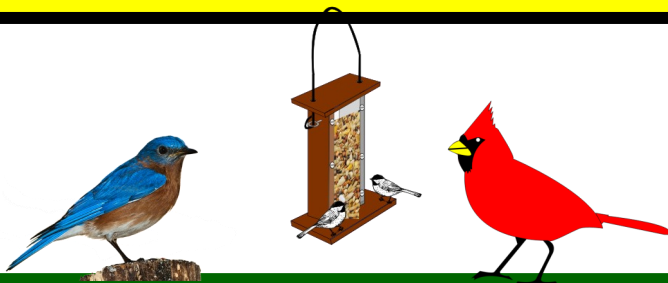
**Pollinator Garden:** Gracie Waggener, Patti Guin, Laura Grant, and others continue with their ongoing weeding efforts. The persistently invasive Bermuda grass stands ready to capture any bare spot, but the team persists. The garden is appreciatively recognizing their efforts, and with the recent rains, exhibits a dazzling display of late spring blooming. Don't miss out. Go gawk before the hot summer pushes the garden into dormancy.



Photo by Lonnie Childs

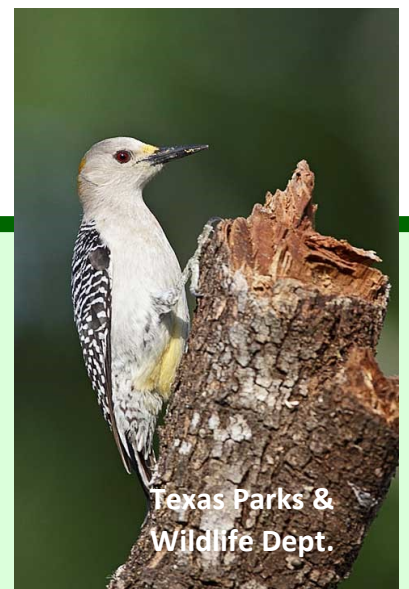
**Tuesday Fundays are always on!** We gather every **Tuesday at 8:30am** in summer near Pavilion #1 to split up into work parties on the trails, gardens, or the Bird Blind. Typical tasks involve gardening skills and trail maintenance, but no experience is necessary. Use it as a learning opportunity. Work in whatever area you choose for as long as you choose. We work some and have a lot of fun outside in the beauty of nature. It's both good exercise for the body and good for the soul.

Contact Gracie Waggener at [gwaggener@flow-apps.com](mailto:gwaggener@flow-apps.com) to receive a weekly email notification.



## Bird Feeder Tip of the Month

**Want to attract Woodpeckers to your feeders?** One tried and true method is to make one of the many suet recipes. But for those of us who might be a little lazy, try buying one of the cakes or cylinder mixes composed of bugs, berries, and nuts. Woodpeckers seem to especially enjoy the mealworms and dried shrimp. Use your suet cage feeder and sit back and watch the acrobatics. Our Golden-fronted Woodpecker is enjoying daily visits to our feeder.



Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept.



**"There is no way of putting a stream in a bucket or the wind in a bag."  
Alan Watts**

## And Now For Some Discouraging News

### Vandalism Along the Trail

We recently experienced some uncommon vandalism along our Vista Loop Trail above Live Oak Creek on the weekend of June 5-6th. One of our quite heavy benches built by Boy Scouts was pushed over the cliff and into the creek near the fern grotto. The sturdy bench is probably not reparable and is now an eyesore sitting in the lovely grotto area. We have reported it to city police, and there is little that might be done to capture the culprits, although it would be nice to provide a learning moment along with some community service and/or reparations from the violators. We realize that our newsletter readership is probably not the audience to request information from, but nonetheless we'll issue the call. Also, in the future, please be on the look-out for any suspicious activity and report it at the park office across the street from the nature center parking lot. Thanks to Finn Alban for reporting this to us and for the sad photo.



### And Then There is the Trash!

We have not experienced a big problem with trash along the trails, although the issue grows proportionately as our visitation does. I have developed a habit of carrying a plastic bag with me to contain the trash that I pick up when I hike the trails. Some of the trash is dropped inadvertently while other small caches were intentionally left by fisher people near the dam. I know that this small group of "trash tossers" includes none of you, but please help when you visit by being a "refuse wrangler."

In a similar vein, I received a recent email from Richard Gray who regularly kayaks Live Oak Lake (a fun activity to regularly pursue). He recently harvested a disgusting collection of trash after the heavy rainfall that we had in early May. He was not able to collect the auto tire or corroding barrel now residing in the creek.



Comparatively, the pile might not be considered huge, but it is a warning that we must protect our precious waterways as visitation and the area population increases.

I am guessing that some of the debris did not originate from park sources but washed downstream as the rising water cleared its banks. This type of pollution is known technically as "*non-point source pollution*" - debris that washes down waterways during storm runoff. Lady Bird Lake in Austin provides a disgusting example of this after heavy rains. Remember that the "watercourse way" carries our trash with it as it traverses to the ocean!

Fortunately, Live Oak Creek still is mostly a rural waterway, but this will be an area to watch as the city continues to grow. One suggestion is that FFNC might organize a periodic trash pickup along the lake shores in the future with shore walkers and kayakers. Stay tuned.

**Turn the page for some Encouraging News!**



*"Teaching children about the natural world should be treated as one of the most important events in their lives."*

**Thomas Berry**

## 4th Grade Day at the FNC on May 19



Since 2004, FFNC has hosted a 3rd Grade Day in the park with two hundred FES students visiting multiple learning stations. Due to the Covid pandemic, the event was cancelled for 2020 and 2021. However, we were able to host a simplified event this year as part of the 4th Grade field day at the park. In addition to hiking the trails, the students were treated to a presentation by wildlife biologists Joyce Moore and Kory Perlachek of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept. Their program on "Predators and Prey" was accompanied by an array of skulls and furs to demonstrate their points. The grand finale fascinated all the students with a hands-on demo of three snakes—petting allowed! Thanks Joyce and Kory and to Gracie Waggener for arranging this.

**Photos by Lonnie Childs**



*"In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks."*

John Muir

## Observations Along the Trail

With the recent rainfall and given the season, this is prime time on the trails and in the gardens. Take a hike to enjoy our nature center at its best, as it appears summer heat is here.



While checking on the Bird Blind, I noticed a bird feeder knocked down, likely by a Raccoon. I then saw **Red Harvester Ants, *Pogonomyrmex spp.***, checking out the mound of bird seed. Texas harbors 11 species of Harvester Ants, but unfortunately they have been in decline for the past 100 years. Their decline mirrors that of their favorite predator—Horned Lizards.

I curiously followed the trail of ants for about 125 feet back to their nest (reportedly their foraging range is up to 300 feet). How did they find the treasure chest of seed? Harvester Ants exhibit two foraging patterns. In the first, ants leave the nest individually and disperse in all directions using visual cues. In the second, ants leave the nest and forage along scent trails to find resources. They prefer seeds, but will also feed on insects. I did not find ants trying to carry the large bird seed back to their nest. Maybe the larger bird seed was too much to handle.

### Buffalo Gourd, aka Stink Gourd

#### *Cucurbita foetidissima*

This ground vine is growing on the trail near the parking lot. Its fruit does stink & is poisonous to humans, although also having medicinal uses. It is in the Cucumber family which explains the 4" squash-like blossom.



Photos by Lonnie Childs

*"I go to nature every day for inspiration in the day's work."*

**Frank Lloyd Wright**

## Observations Along the Trail



**Alamo Vine**      *Merremia dissecta*

An attractive twining climber of the morning glory family, unless it is growing in your garden where it can be an aggressive weed! This one is growing off the trail near the parking lot.



**Sensitive Briar**      *Mimosa roemeriana*

A low growing Mimosa with recurved prickles and leaves that curl up when touched—a defense mechanism against foragers. It is named after Ferdinand Roemer, a German geologist who visited the area in 1846.

All photos by Lonnie Childs



**Pearl Milkweed Vine**      *Matelea reticulata*

A non-descript vine that grows at the edge of woodlands with a small but attractive flower. It is in the Milkweed family which are host plants for Monarch butterflies. It grows along the trail near the Cactus Garden



**Pipevine Swallowtail Larva**

*Battus philenor*

I found this intrepied larva crossing the trail. The adult butterflies are very common visitors to or gardens.



*"Earth and sky, woods and fields, lakes and rivers, the mountain and the sea, are excellent schoolmasters, and teach of us more than we can ever learn from books."*  
John Lubbock

## What's Blumen at the Pollinator Garten?

## Blooms!



**Frogfruit** *Phyla nodiflora*

A groundcover that serves as a Butterfly host & nectar plant. Tolerates both drought & flooding.



**Texas Star Daisy** *Lindheimera texana*

Named after Ferdinand Lindheimer, Father of Texas Botany, who collected plants in the area in 1840s



**Purple Leatherflower** *Clematis pitcher*

Herbaceous, perennial vine with long lasting flowers. Seed capsule is at right. Growing on the fence near the arbor.



Photos by Lonnie Childs



*"Let Nature be your teacher."*

William Wordsworth

## What's Blumen at the Pollinator Garten?

## Blooms!



Photo by Lonnie Childs

### Purple Bindweed *Ipomoea cordatotriloba*

An attractive Morning Glory with trailing stems that grow to 15 feet long or more. This lovely flower is an aggressive weed in the garden!



Photo by  
Lonnie Childs

### Simpson's Rosinweed *Silphium simpsonii*

This 4-5 ft perennial is a great nectar source for Butterflies. A hardy bloomer that flowers throughout the summer.



*Coprinus ssp.*

Photo by Bill Lindemann

The recent rains spawned these mushroom Fungal forms just outside of our garden. They both appear to be members of the **Coprinus** genus, aka the "Inky Caps". When they mature, the cap disintegrates into a ring of black powdery spores, thus their common name.



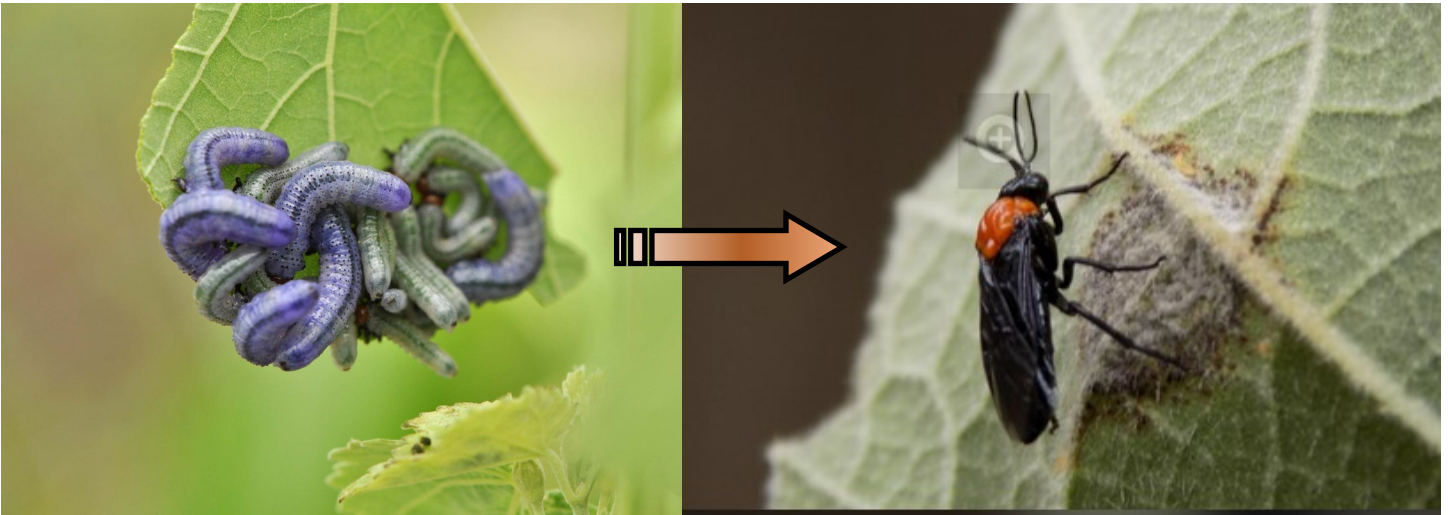
*Coprinus comatus*  
Shaggy Ink Cap, Lawyer's Wig

Photo by Lonnie Childs

*"Nature breeds curiosity; it helps to grow explorers rather than robots. It reminds us that we are part of something bigger. It grounds us, calms us."*

**Ben Palmer-Fry**

## What's Flutterin' & Crawlين' in the Pollinator Garden? **Insects!**



### **Argid or Mallow Sawfly *Neoptilia tora***

These Sawfly larvae at left were found feeding in mass on an Indian Mallow which is their host plant. The photo at right shows the adult sawfly. The species inhabits the area from Arizona to Texas and south to Mexico. Sawflies exude toxic chemicals as a defense. Thanks to Gracie Waggener and Laura King for discovering and identifying these creepy larvae. I think that I hear Mother Nature chuckling at us.



**Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*) on  
Butterflyweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)**



**Pipevine Swallowtail (*Battus philenor*)  
on  
Butterflyweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)**



***“Always carry a flagon of whiskey in case of snakebite and furthermore always carry a small snake.”***

**W. C. Fields**

## **Feature Story: *The Only Good Snake is a Live Snake***

**By Lonnie Childs**

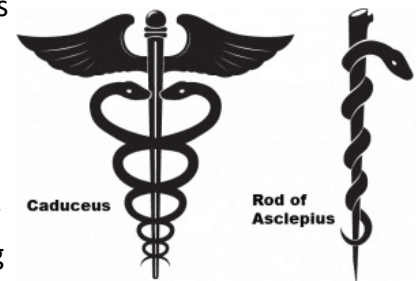
**Newsflash: One on our prized Texas Rat Snakes was found dead along the trail recently. It appears that one of our park visitors dealt the fatal blow.**

***“People get very passionate about saving the whale, but when something like a Florida indigo snake is endangered there are not a lot of people out there holding up placards.”*** Gary Larson

***“The only good snake is a dead snake.”*** Anonymous & Misinformed

For those of you who read the newsletter regularly, you know that I have an affinity for sagacious quotes that make their point in pithy brevity. As is my wont, I performed a search for positive quotes about snakes. I found none, zero, zip, unless you endeavor to cast W.C. Fields’ quote above as an affirmation of the value of a snakebite.

Snakes have received uneven treatment from human cultures throughout the ages. The Bible treats them as a master of deception in the Garden of Eden, later as an agent of punishment, and finally as a protector and healer. The ancient Egyptians and Hindu cultures worshipped cobras, the Hindus even giving them godly status. The true medical symbol depicts a snake wound around the rod of Asclepius who was the Greek god of healing—the snake representing either the myth that the snake had taught Asclepius about healing herbs or the idea that snakes embody rejuvenation because they shed and grow new skin. In the 19th century in the US, the two-snaked Caduceus was mistakenly substituted as the medical symbol and is now in common use—two kissing snakes being more powerful than one?



So why are Americans so fearful of snakes? The obvious answer might be that they bite you idiot! But so do bears and mountain lions and then they eat you. Perhaps, the answer lies in the prevalence of snakes hiding in dark lairs waiting to strike or at least the vision thereof. My own speculation is that when Europeans endeavored to venture into the wilderness of North America, they were confronted with the reality of being bitten by venomous snakes they did not recognize in places that were far from medical assistance. While Europe still harbors snakes and even venomous Adder species, they are less common. So perhaps our American snake phobia germinated out of some pragmatic origin.

To be sure, Americans are truly afraid of snakes. A 2001 Gallup poll asked respondents what they were most fearful of. The #1 answer was snakes (51% of respondents). One scientific study demonstrated that humans appeared to have evolved an unconscious phobia of snakes which I guess means that those with the greatest snake fears survived in higher numbers over the eons. Per a National Geographic article, *“The odds of being bitten by a venomous snake in the U.S. are estimated at 1 in 37,500. The odds of being killed in a car accident are far more frightening at 1 in 112.”* According to Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept. data from 1978-2001, you



**“For most of history, man has had to fight nature to survive; in this century he is beginning to realize that, in order to survive, he must protect it.” Jacques-Yves Cousteau**

## **Feature Story: *The Only Good Snake is a Live Snake* (cont’d)**

are more likely to die from a car accident, drowning, firearm accident, boating accident, venomous arthropod, and even lightning than you are a venomous snakebite. Studies also show that the preponderance of snakebites occur when the victim is either trying to kill the snake or at least messing with it. So much for human reason.

**My Personal History with Snakes.** My own experience with snakes has progressed for the better over the years. In my early youth, I suppose that I would have been categorized into the “dead snake” crowd, but only because I did not know better. The south Texas mentality was that if you saw a snake, you killed it. Fortunately, I personally do not remember ever having killed a snake in my youth, since I’ve never had the instinct for harming animals. Later, during the more adventurous period of my life, I gained great respect for venomous snakes after having



**Texas Rat Snake**  
*(Pantherophis obsoleta lindheimeri)*

jumped over or walked near rattlesnakes on three separate occasions, because I was committing the classic error of traversing over rocks and crevices where I could not see what lay beneath. After three chances, I did learn my lesson! It was not the snake’s fault. They were maybe as terrified as I was in the aftermath.

Today, I would not call myself a snake lover but certainly a snake admirer. The form and the dazzling kaleidoscope of colors and patterns of snakes provides a wondrous display of Mother Nature’s beauty. In our 20 years of living rurally in Gillespie County, we have had the pleasure of hosting several species of snakes around our house. They seemed to like the habitat, moved in for periods of time, and then moved on when I suppose that the diet of mice and rats had declined (thanks for your services!).

Our first guest was a large Bull Snake who seemed to enjoy sunning on our garbage can. In more recent years, a Texas Rat Snake (*Pantherophis obsoleta lindheimeri*) has enjoyed lounging on our rock wall and mostly just languorously ignores us. We have also appreciated the stand-offish company of a Coachwhip the last couple of years whose progeny is now living with us also. Our other gorgeous “herp-pets” are Checkered Garter snakes



**Coachwhip**  
*Masticophis flagellum*



“  
“*Land really is the best art.*”

Andy Warhol

## Feature: *The Only Good Snake is a Live Snake* (cont'd)

(*Thamnophis marcianus*) which are frequent visitors in our garden beds in search of prey. In addition to enjoying their beauty and presence, again, they provide valuable ecological services in our habitat by controlling the rodent population. They can make good neighbors if we Humans will allow them to be.

Over the years, we have also been visited by two venomous species which can be problematic. One was a gorgeous Texas Coral Snake (*Micrurus tener*) who wanted inside my garage on a cold winter's day. He proved easy to remove as I simply swept him into a garbage can and carried him off to better habitat. On another occasion, a Diamond-backed Rattlesnake took residence in our horse barn. Without the skills to handle a rattlesnake, we were faced with the choice to shoot him as the safety of my family and animals was at risk. For me, that is probably one of the few situations that would justify killing a snake.

My point in relaying my personal relationship and history with snakes is to demonstrate that with education and experience, our perspective can grow. We can evolve from a “dead snake” mentality to a “let and let live” position and maybe even begin to enjoy the addition of some local herps to your landscape while receiving free rodent removal services. We really have grown to admire and enjoy our snake friends, even if they do occasionally startle us with their presence.

**Snakes in the Park.** An important part of the mission statement of FFNC is “*To enhance, protect and interpret the natural ecosystems of the Texas hill country ...*” That mission includes protecting and promoting the presence of snakes as important contributors to our ecosystem. We have identified seven species of snakes in the nature center area with only one (Texas Coral Snake) being venomous. You have to assiduously work to be bit by a Coral Snakes, since they have small mouths that must latch on to a thin section of flesh and engage in a chewing motion that allows for the injection of venom.



Checkered Garter Snake  
*Thamnophis marcianus*



Texas Coral Snake  
*Micrurus tener*



*"The goal of life is to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe, to match your nature with Nature. "*

**Joseph Campbell**

## **Feature: *The Only Good Snake is a Live Snake* (cont'd)**

Unfortunately, the uneducated often identify any snake with a diamond like pattern on their back as a rattlesnake, even though they have no rattles! Texas Rat Snakes fall in to this category of mistaken rattlers and make their situation worse by mimicking the behavior of a rattlesnake, such as vibrating its tail against dry leaves to sound like the rattler's warning sound. And of course, all water snakes must be Water Moccasins, aka Cottonmouths. The dark coloration and patterning of our Blotched Water Snake makes him a good candidate for this mistaken identity. According to one report, there have only been 1 or 2 reported sightings of a Water Moccasin in the Pedernales Watershed, and they were downstream in a dammed area with consistent water. Make no mistake, our nature center has the potential to harbor any of our four venomous snake families, but twenty years of history suggests that the potential is low.

**How to avoid encounters with snakes?** The first lesson to internalize about snakes is that they are shy and would really rather not have to deal with a threatening and bothersome human. When they see you, they would prefer to slither away into hiding. If you're feelings are commensurate, then back away and allow them to do so. Snakes, even venomous species, only become aggressive when cornered and have no other defense mechanism. Better yet, if you would prefer to see no snakes at all, then stay on the trail or in open areas where you can see the terrain, and do not venture into high grass or rocky areas where snakes might be lurking and your line of sight is restricted. Do not put your feet or hands into places where you cannot see, especially in rocky terrain. Recall that I mentioned earlier that most snakebites occur when people are attempting to kill or harass a snake! Finally, if your life activities put you into potential contact with snakes, then educate yourself a bit and learn basic snake identification. But when in doubt about what kind of snake you have encountered, back away and leave it alone.

My closing appeal and profound hope is that I have at least moved some of you to resign from the "dead snake clan" and agree to give them their due in our ecosystem. You can still not like them, just leave them be. And if you see a friend or family wielding a murderous club, then warn them that their actions will increase the odds of a snake bite. Dare I hope that some of you will even become snake admirers some day? We admire all kinds of other dangerous animals, why not snakes too? But please, at a minimum, advocate for the right of our snakes to slither away silently in peace when we come across them. Help us save our snakes.



### **Texas Snake Facts**



1. Texas has 76 species + 30 sub-species for a total of 115—highest in the US for any state. There are 2,375 species in the world.
2. Texas has 4 of 5 snake families in the US.
3. We have 4 sub-families of venomous snakes that contain 15 species—Rattlesnakes, Water Moccasins, Coral Snakes, & Copperheads.
4. Snakes are predators, especially important to the control of rodents. They are also prey, even to other snakes.



*"Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts."*

Rachel Carson

## Snakes of Fredericksburg Nature Center



**Eastern Hognose**  
*(Heterodon platirhinos)*



**Redstripe Ribbon Snake**  
*(Thamnophis proximus rubrilineatus)*



**Rough Green Snake**  
*(Opheodrys aestivus)*



**Blotched Water Snake**  
*(Nerodia erythrogaster transversa)*

Photos by  
Bill Lindemann



*"If you can't be in awe of Mother Nature, there's something wrong with you."*  
Alex Trebek

Go to our website for online renewal or print & mail our membership form.



Mexican Hat  
*Ratibida columnaris*

**Please consider continuing to support FFNC.**

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