

Fredericksburg Nature Notes



Newsletter of the Friends of the Fredericksburg Nature Center

July, 2022 Volume 3 Number 7

<http://fredericksburgnaturecenter.com>

Editor's Musings: **Lonnie Childs**

Dear Friends of the Fredericksburg Nature Center,

As I write this, we are finally receiving some substantial quenching rainfall at the park. The dry-throated earth will no doubt suck it down without pause, while the parched vegetation and animal life will have a brief drink too. The rain will not be enough to break our drought, as it appears that the hot, dry spell will continue. Nonetheless, July rain always brings a refreshing respite and maybe some hope. Drink up earth! The rest of us need to conserve and prepare for a forecasted period of continued drought.

On page two, you can find information about the phases of our project to construct an Interpretive Center. We have recruited some nature loving community members to serve on a new Advisory Committee. In the Concept Phase, we will be defining the scope of services and features that our center will offer—its function if you will. Agreement upon that will allow us to begin debating the form/design of the center. As part of the Concept exercise, we are conducting brainstorming sessions with community stakeholders and visiting area nature centers for ideas on educational programming and facility features. Look for an invite to participate in one of these brainstorming sessions in the near future.

Come out and hike the trails or stroll the gardens in the mornings. Enjoy the benefits of a little rain while it lasts.



Happy Nature Trails!

Lonnie

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HALLELULLAH!

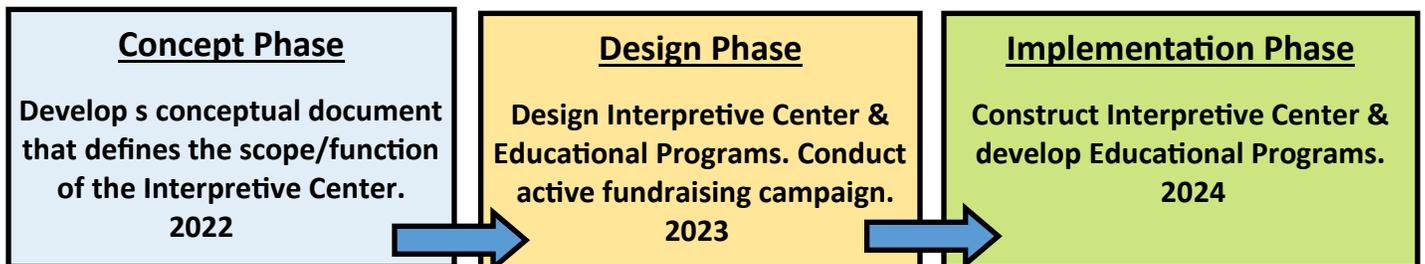


OUR MISSION STATEMENT: “To enhance, protect and interpret the natural ecosystems of the Texas hill country while providing educational and quality of life opportunities for members of the community and visitors”

FFNC Activities—Interpretive Center News

FFNC Forms Interpretive Center Advisory Committee

In 2021, FFNC announced plans to reinvigorate our efforts to build an Interpretive Center (IC) at FNC in order to advance our ability to deliver quality environmental education. We have developed a timeline with three phases of the project:



Our goal is to complete the Concept Phase by the end of this year. The timelines for the next two phases are tentative at this point. At this juncture in the Concept Phase, we remain open about what the scope and form that the IC might take. Of course, the biggest unknown will be the length of time required to raise the necessary capital to build the project.

We have formed an Advisory Committee consisting of the FFNC Board members plus community stakeholders and leaders from the City of Fredericksburg government. The following people have generously agreed to serve and support our project.

Andrea Schmidt, Director of Fbg. Parks & Recreation	Mary Ellen Terrell, FFNC Board
Billy Guin, FFNC Board	Melinda Gregg
Carl Luckenbach, FFNC Board Treasurer	Mike Mangum
Emily Kirchner, Fbg. City Councilperson	Nita Hazle
Gracie Waggener, FFNC Board Secretary	Paul Person, FFNC Board
Jane Crone, FFNC Board	Paula Stone, NPSOT Chapter President
Kevin Pillow	Stacy Johnson
Lonnie Childs, FFNC Board President	Susan Candy
Maggie Livings	Tom Musselman, FFNC Board

Stay tuned for an invitation to participate in input sessions where you can provide your ideas about what services, outcomes, and features that you would like for our Interpretive Center to provide.



"A gate to nature is a gate to heaven!"

Mehmet Murat Ildan

FFNC Activities—New Gates at the Pollinator Garden

Despite the heat, a dedicated group of volunteers have continued to work at the park on Tuesdays. The Garden crew have been weeding and tending to the struggling vegetation. Between the drought and the ravaging deer, the gardens have not blossomed well this year as they normally do. Deer have always been an issue, but this year they have been extremely destructive to the gardens. We have installed new gates at the Pollinator Garden and are considering options for improved high fencing around the perimeter. We are also installing a partial perimeter fence at the Butterfly Garden with more to come.



Photo by Gracie Waggener

Frank Garza, Tom Musselman, & Lonnie Childs admire the newly constructed front cedar picket gate.

The rear cedar picket gate is in place. An arbor will be constructed over the four posts to mirror the other Crossvine covered arbor entrances.



Photo by Lonnie Childs

Tuesday Fundays at FNC are always on! We gather every Tuesday at 8:30am at 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 good exercise for the body and great therapy for the soul.

Contact Gracie Waggener at gwaggener@flow-apps.com to receive a weekly email notification.

"The sun, with all those planets revolving around it and dependent on it, can still ripen a bunch of grapes as if it had nothing else in the universe to do."
Galileo Galilei

Observations Along the Trail—Wildflowers



Common or Black Elderberry

Sambucus nigra L. ssp. *Canadensis*

Elderberry resides mostly in East Texas but also occurs along the eastern edge of the Edwards Plateau along moist stream banks. Significant stands of the perennial shrub grow along Live Oak Creek towering up to 12 feet tall. It produces clusters of black berries that are relished by many bird species & mammals. Elderberries, inedible when fresh and raw, are used for making jelly, preserves, pies, & wine. It has been used for medicinal purposes, although parts of it are poisonous.



Western Ironwood *Vernonia baldwinii*

This 3-6 ft perennial herb is growing along Live Oak Creek & in the Hwy 16 ditch near the park entrance. Preferring moist soil, it rampantly colonizes via rhizomes (underground stems).



Photos by Lonnie Childs

Observations Along the Trail—Wildflowers



Clammyweed *Polanisia dodecandra*

A 1-3 ft annual that grows in sandy washes and roadsides. We have it growing in the Bird Blind at FNC, and I have found it in Sandy Creek at Enchanted Rock SP. Its name references the sticky liquid exuded on glandular hairs, a feature which generates its extended common name of Red Whiskered Clammyweed. If sticky liquid on red whiskers does not distinguish it enough, Clammyweed is also strong-smelling. I suppose that you could describe it as a sticky, smelly beauty?

Gray Golden-aster

Heterotheca canescens

This low growing plant with silvery foliage is one of my favorite xeric plants growing along the trails. Here is proof of its hardiness as I found it growing in the pavement along the park road.





"Neither the hummingbird nor the flower wonders how beautiful it is."

Unknown

Hummin' at the Pollinator Garden



Black-chinned Hummingbird Females

Archilochus alexandri

The Black-chinned Hummingbird is our common summer resident. Fun fact: Its tongue has two grooves; nectar moves through these via capillary action, and then the bird retracts the tongue and squeezes the nectar into the mouth.

Sipping some Coral Honeysuckle nectar.



Sparring over a territorial perch.

"That's my nectar! No, that's my nectar!"

Photos by Dot Maginot



**"We are like butterflies who flutter for a day
and think it is forever."**

Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*

Flutterin' at the Pollinator Garten



Giant Swallowtail

Papilio cresphontes

The Giant Swallowtail is considered the largest butterfly in North America. It is a fairly common visitor at FNC found at the Pollinator Garden, Butterfly Habitat, & along the Live Oak Wilderness Trail. It is quite a sight!

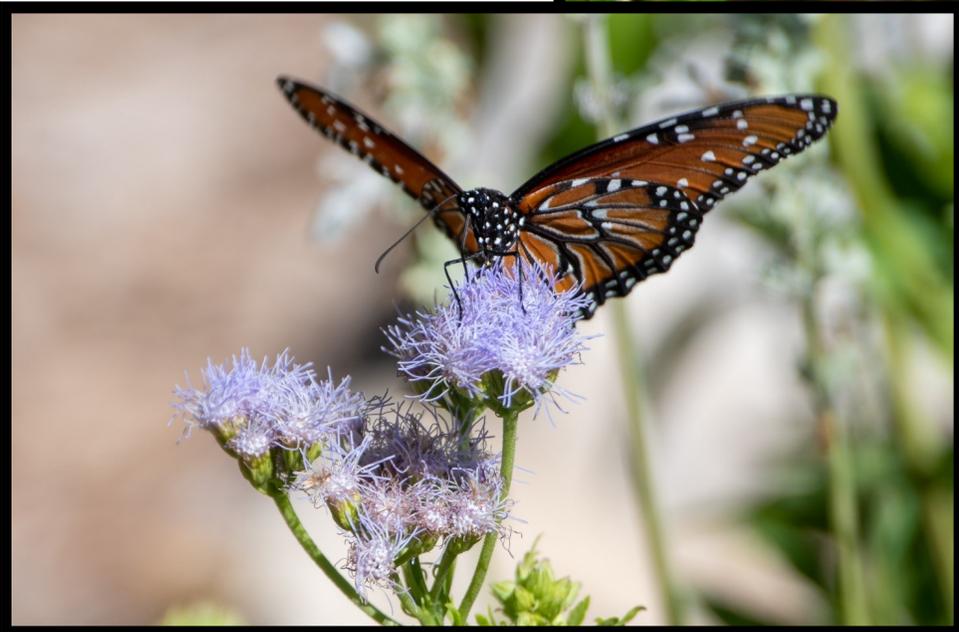
Gulf Fritillary *Agraulis vanilla*

This butterfly of the southern US is a common inhabitant of the PG. Here it enjoys the nectar of Texas Greeneyes (*Berlandiera betonicifolia*).



Queen *Danaus gilippus* on Gregg's Mistflower (*Conoclinium greggii*)

Clouds of Queen butterflies can often be found on the Mistflower at the PG. It's true majesty to see them lift in unison when startled by your movement.



Photos by Dot Maginot



“O Cuckoo! shall I call thee bird, Or but a wandering voice? “
William Wordsworth

Feature Story: The Yellow-billed Cuckoo

By Lonnie Childs

Experiencing the outdoors is an important part of my life, and observing the changing seasons and cycles is naturally part of that. Those experiences keep you connected to the natural world and provide spiritual and health benefits.

I must confess that I enjoy Spring the best when rejuvenation and renewal reign as the operative forces. We all anticipate our own personal signs of impending Spring—the first Bluebonnets, the explosive pink blossoms of a Redbud, and the arrival of Purple Martins and that first Hummingbird, to name a few. At this seasonal juncture, I am normally outside walking or working on a trail or in my own home landscape, and I relish each of these vernal signs.

But one sign that you may have missed or not understood is the call of “kuk-kuk-kuk...kowlp, kowlp...” of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo emanating from somewhere high in the canopy of our Oaks. Their call is not melodious or even pretty, but still I find it reassuring when they return each Spring for breeding and then keep me company throughout the summer, each day calling repeatedly through the course of the day. They reportedly make this call in response to loud noises and at the sound of thunder, thus earning them the nickname of “rain crow.” This is a bird that you will hear more often than see.



Photo by Phil Swanson

Classification and Culture. Yellow-billed Cuckoos (*Coccyzus americanus*, YBCs for short) are classified in a genus of cuckoos, *Coccyzus*, which occur in the Americas. The genus name is from the Ancient Greek word *kokkuzo*, defined as to call like a Common Cuckoo. Cuckoos are part of the Cuculidae family which is mostly an Old World family represented mostly famously by the European or Common Cuckoo and of course Cuckoo clocks. Cuckoos have a long association with human culture where they appear in Greek, Indian, Japanese mythology and even Shakespeare while also being associated with Spring and the etymology of the work cuckoldry. North America only harbors 8 species of the 142 Cuckoos and are represented here by the five different so-named Cuckoos, the Roadrunner, and two species of Anis.

Identification. YBCs are fairly large handsome birds, long and slender in appearance with gray brown backs, “tidy white” underparts, rusty patches on their wings, and with a black tail sporting white spots visible from underneath, which is how you will normally view them. And of course, they have a long, pointed, and slightly crooked yellow bill which evolved for jabbing insects. As I mentioned earlier, they are not easily seen as



“One flew east, one flew west, one flew over the Cuckoo’s nest.”
Ken Kesey

Feature Story: The Yellow-billed Cuckoo

they reside in the canopy, but you may glimpse them from underneath hunched on a limb with their white underbelly and white spotted tail.

Fortunately, I am allowed frequent sightings of YBCs as they visit my home water feature. This hot, dry weather draws them to the fountain every afternoon for some splashing behavior to cool themselves off. It is quite comical to watch. See the photo at right.

Flight. You might also spot them flying between trees as they swoop down out of the canopy and arc up to the next perch using staccato wingbeats with a slight pause between them. They do not appear to be strong fliers, and yet they migrate to Central and South America for the winter. Their low sweeping flight pattern from tree to tree unfortunately makes them prime candidates for smashing into your large see through windows. I have lost a couple of YBCs to large windows over the years. One supporter recently reported having one crash into her window, where she found it unconscious. My advice to her was to place it where predators could not get it and hope for the best. Miraculously, after over 24 hours in an unconscious state, the bird arose and flew off. That is not the normal result of these crashes, particularly after such a long period of unconsciousness. Perhaps that bird might be seeing double or at least be a little “cuckoo.”

Nesting. YBCs exhibit some unique nesting and birthing habits. Both parents build the nest, incubate the eggs, and brood the nestlings. The female lays eggs successively over the course of many days, such that the oldest may be fledging while the youngest are just hatching. This allows the parents to either cull younger offspring if the food supply will not support them or allow for a larger brood to develop in good years.

YBCs have very short nesting cycles with the period from incubation to fledging taking as little as 17 days. Within a week of hatching, the chicks are fully feathered and ready to leave the nest. When they have an abundant food supply, YBC females may also lay eggs in nests of other cuckoos as well as in those of American Robins, Gray Catbirds, and Wood Thrushes. Their European Cuckoo cousin made this behavior famous and became the source for the word “cuckold.”

Diet. Their omnivorous dietary habits provide another motivation for my favoritism for this bird. Remember





"Nature is pleased with simplicity. And nature is no dummy. "
Isaac Newton

Feature Story: The Yellow-billed Cuckoo

that hooked bill designed for stabbing insects? It turns out that YBCs love fuzzy caterpillars which most birds cannot consume because the hairs can damage their craws. YBCs can consume as many as 100 tentworms in a single meal, and they also have a craving for fall webworms. Let's wish them bon appetit! They also take advantage of the annual outbreaks of cicadas, katydids, and crickets, and will dine on frogs and lizards. They top off their diverse diet by eating various wild fruits, berries, and seeds when in season.

Yellow-billed Cuckoos are common in the eastern US and Texas, but they have become threatened in the western US due mainly to the loss of habitat. Maintaining canopy is essential to habitat protection. The use of pesticides to combat webworms and other insects might also prove to be quite harmful to the birds.

So next time you are out under a good canopy of Oaks, listen for their familiar "kuk, kuk, kuk, kowlp, kowlp... call. Once you hear it, it is one of easier bird calls to identify. Look up in the canopy for a hunkering bird with a long white spotted tail. Hopefully, you will come to know the Yellow-billed Cuckoo and appreciate them for their handsome beauty, companion call, and beneficial dietary habits. How can you not like a bird with a name like Yellow-billed Cuckoo? Tell your children and grandchildren about this bird with the cartoon name.



Typical view of YBC in canopy
by Lonnie Childs

To hear their call:

Right click [Here](#)
Open Hyperlink
Choose Maryland sample



Nature's News of the Weird

Importing Cochineal Beetles to Kill Cactus in Africa

Right Click [here](#) & Open Link



"Keep close to Nature's heart... and break clear away, once in a while, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean."

John Muir

Photo by Dot Maginot



THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

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