

# Fredericksburg Nature Notes



## Newsletter of the Friends of the Fredericksburg Nature Center

July, 2023 Volume 4 Number 7

<http://fredericksburgnaturecenter.com>

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

Dear Friends of the Fredericksburg Nature Center,

June rains offered some relief but did not quench the ongoing drought—yes, most of us are still in Extreme Drought status. We are thankful for the precipitation received, and Mother Nature did respond. In particular, the Pollinator Garden has been an oasis of blooming, fluttering, and buzzing lifeforms to be enjoyed while on display, so come and see for yourself.

All of which leads me to well earned recognition of our prolific volunteer photographers. I hereby declare this the *Photographer's Issue*. While most of us were hurrying around engaged in the business of life, they made the time and slowed their meters down to find the patience to apply their skills and capture those moments in nature that we were missing. So at least take the time now to enjoy their beautiful photos of flora and fauna engaged in the “aah-inspiring” business of nature. It's not quite the same as the original experience, but our shutter sleuths will still make you say aah, or wow, or whatever is your preferred expression of awe. Thanks to Mildred Dworsky, Dot Maginot, and Deb Youngblood for sharing their passion and skills. And even better, pick up your camera or phone, and come out to the park and try it.

In other news, stay tuned for a major announcement in the near future on our Interpretive Center project as we continue to march forward. Our August workshop will prepare you for the two eclipses, annular and total, occurring over our Hill Country sky in the coming year. And as always, the work of maintaining and improving FNC continues through the dedication of our volunteer corps. You too can become one of them!

Happy Nature Trails!

*Lonnie*

### In The Photographer's Issue:

- FFNC Activities at the Park
- Native Bee Workshop
- Photographers Feature
- Botanical Conundrum
- Snakes Along the Creek
- Blumen at the Garten
- Feature Story: Vultures— Nature's Sanitation Engineers





**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**

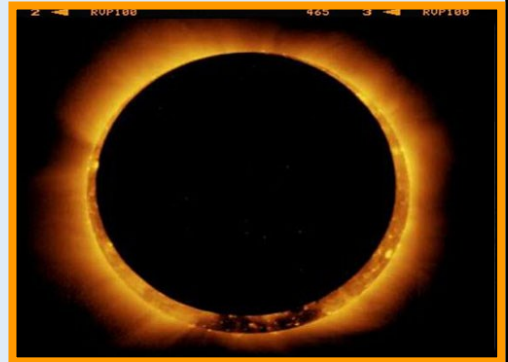
# Save the Date!

## Solar Eclipses & Other Dark Skies

**Presenter:** Jeff Stone, Retired NASA Engineer

**When:** August 11, Friday  
Evening program, exact time TBD

**Where:** Gillespie County Extension Office  
38 Business Ct., Fredericksburg



Do you know that Fredericksburg will be treated to an Annular Eclipse on Oct 14, 2023, & a Total Eclipse on April 8, 2024? Don't know the difference? Come to this program to learn all about the difference & other important eclipse facts. At the end of the presentation, enjoy some stargazing!

Look for more details in the future on our [Facebook](#) page & website page at <https://fredericksburgnaturecenter.com/>



## Tuesday Fundays at FNC are in full swing!

# Volunteer!

We continue to perform **Trail Work** with ongoing maintenance and improvement projects. **Gardening Activities** are in full swing with cleaning, trimming, and weeding.

**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.

If you would like to join us at the park, we would love to have you!

Work sessions are typically scheduled for **Tuesday at 8:30am**.

Contact Gracie Waggener at [gwaggener@flow-apps.com](mailto:gwaggener@flow-apps.com) to receive a weekly email notification about scheduled work tasks for the coming week.



**“Aerodynamically, the bumble bee shouldn't be able to fly, but the bumble bee doesn't know it, so it goes on flying anyway.”**

**Mary Kay Ash**

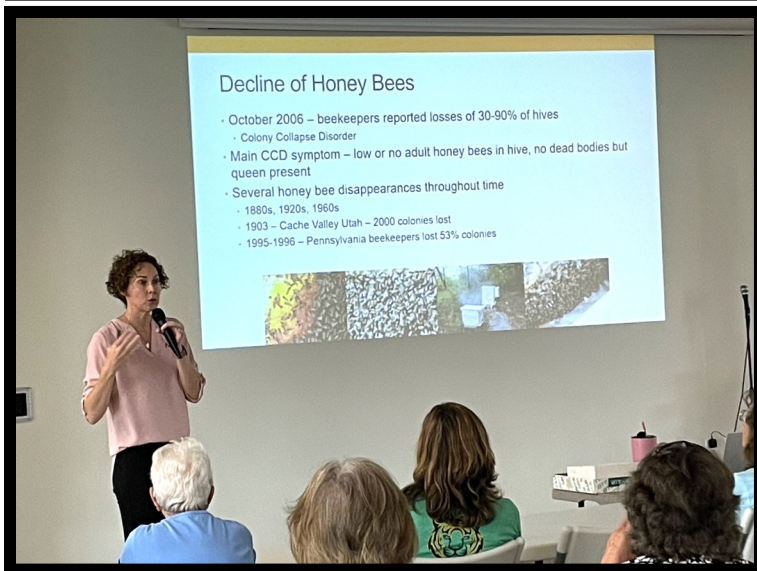
## Native Bee Workshop Creates a Buzz!

On June 16th, almost 60 attendees were treated to a presentation by Molly Keck, entomologist with Texas Agrilife Extension about the importance of native bees & preserving their habitats. Native Bees are vital pollinators for our food crops & native habitats. Attendees were also educated about native bee houses & had the opportunity to build their own to take home. Here are some resources to consult:

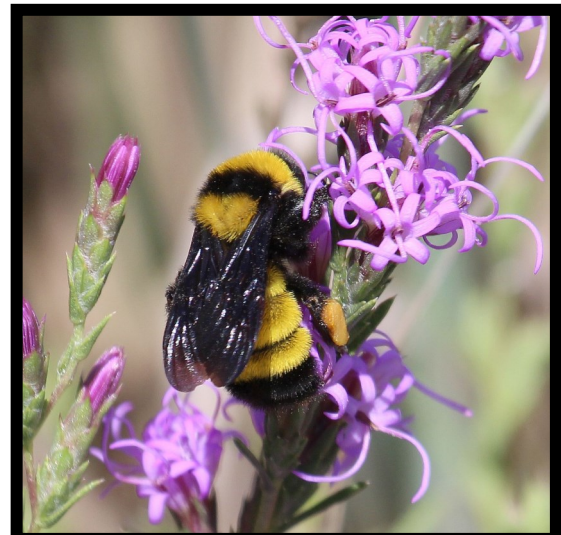
**Bumblewatch.org**—information & citizen science project

***The Bees in Your Backyard—A Guide to North America's Bees*** by J. S. Wilson O. M. Carril

**Twelve Months of Nectar Plants**—David Rodriguez on YouTube



**Molly Keck, Tx Agrilife Extension Entomologist**



**Sonoran Bumblebee @ Pollinator Garden  
by Bill Lindemann**



**Building beehouses**



**Photos by Patti Guin**

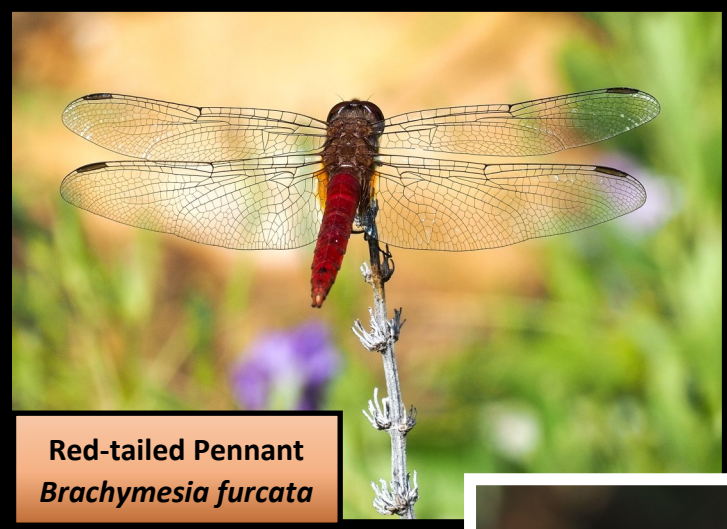


"When a dragonfly flutters by, you may not realize, but it's the greatest flier in nature."

Louie Schwartzberg



## Dragonfly Collection by Mildred Dworsky



Red-tailed Pennant  
*Brachymesia furcata*



Common Whitetail  
*Plathemis lydia*

These beautiful photos of Hill Country Dragonflies were taken over the past several years at Kerrville-Schreiner Park & Fredericksburg Nature Center. Next month's newsletter will feature Damselflies.

All photos by  
Mildred Dworsky



Eastern Pondhawk  
*Erythemis simplicicollis*



Checkered Set-wing  
*Dythemis fugax*



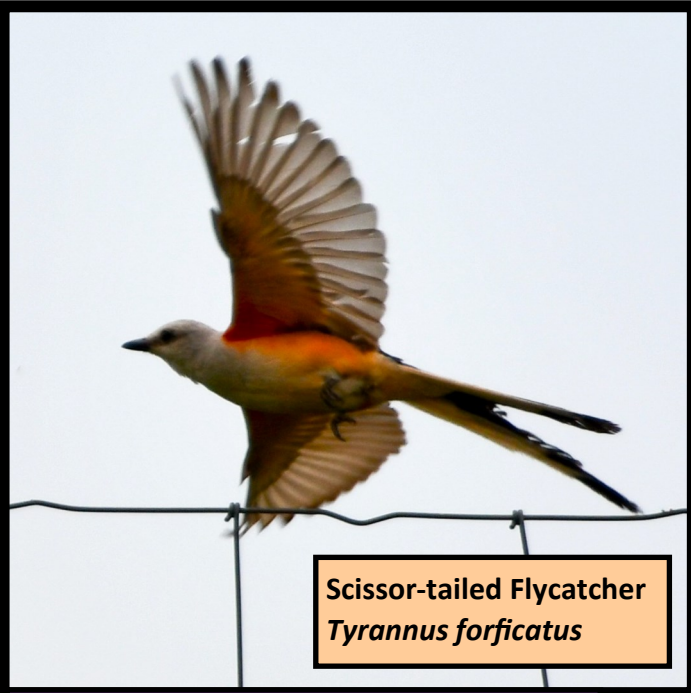
Widow Skimmer  
*Libellula luctuosa*



*"Nature never goes out of style."*  
Unknown



## Nature Through a Lens by Dot Maginot



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher  
*Tyrannus forficatus*



Turk's Cap  
*Malaviscus arboreus*

White-lined Sphinx Moth, *Hyles lineata*, on  
Lemon Beebalm *Monarda citriodora*



Texas Spiny Lizard  
*Sceloporus olivaceus*



Short-horned Grasshopper  
*Acrididae*



**"Photography is a strong tool, a propaganda device, and a weapon for the defense of the environment."**  
Eliot Porter



# Nature the Digital Muse by Deb Youngblood



Question Mark *Polygonia interrogationis*



Western Spotted Orbweaver  
*Neoscona arabesca*

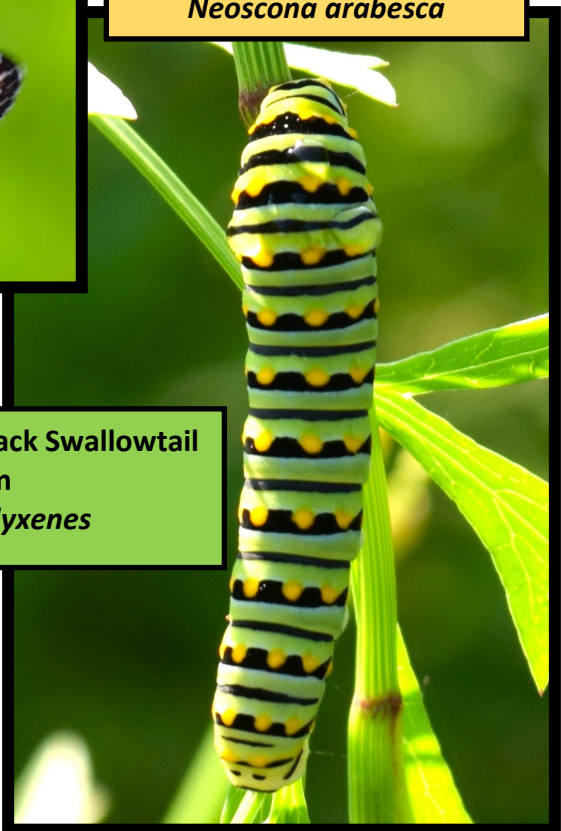


Which is the real Queen?



Sunflower sp.

Eastern Black Swallowtail  
Larval form  
*Papilio polyxenes*



## Botanical Conundrum



Some years ago, Bill Lindemann & Gracie Waggener recognized that a sprawling vine growing in a sandy prairie habitat at FNC was different than our normal **Purple Milkweed Vine** (left) which inhabits the Edward Plateau & regions north.

The mystery milkweed proved to be **Prairie Milkvine** (below) which grows mostly in the sandy soils of east Texas with the closest populations to here being ~100 miles east and southeast in sandy soils. It inhabits a similar sandy habitat here. Today, Gracie has it growing in the Pollinator Garden.

How did it come to be here so disjointed from its normal geographic distribution? Is it a relic plant from a more widespread dis-

### Above

**Purple Milkweed Vine  
or Star Milkvine**  
*Matelea biflora*

### Right

**Prairie Milkvine**  
*Matelea cynanchoides*



## Snakes Along the Creek



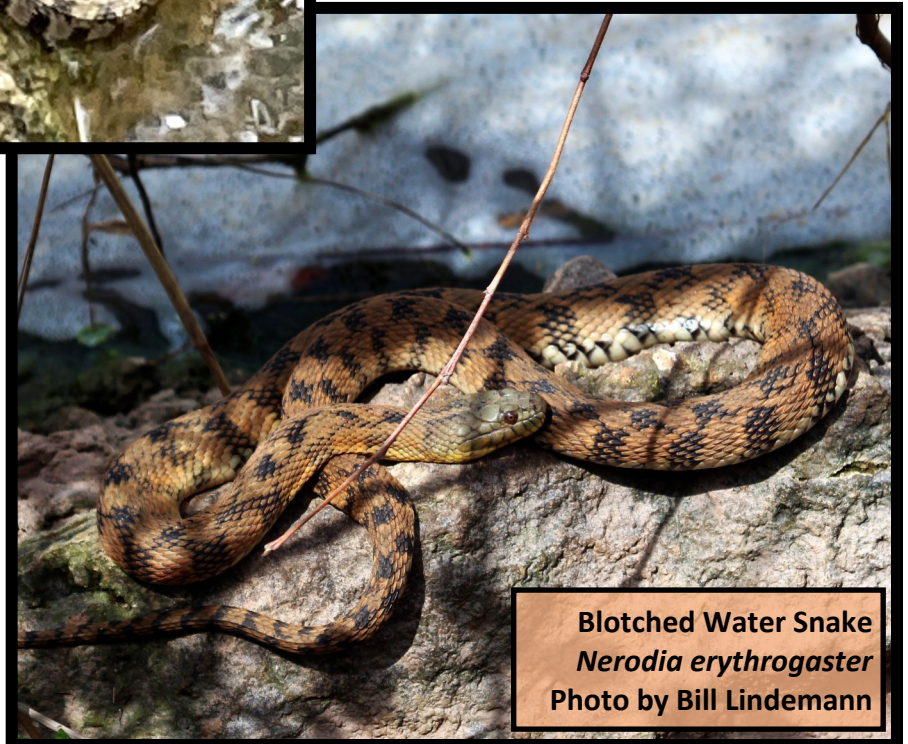
**Diamondback Water Snake**  
*Nerodia rhombifer*  
Photo by Tom Hynes

Tom Hynes caught this Diamondback Water Snake (left) perhaps cooling on this wet rock on Live Oak Creek. Its diamondback pattern might cause it to be mistaken for the venomous Diamondback Rattler. Strike #1. If cornered, it may hiss and flatten the head and body to appear larger, thus making it resemble a Cottonmouth. Strike #2.

It is frequently found basking on branches over water where it will dip its head into the water to catch prey. When approached, it will quickly drop into the water and swim away. If you don't know your snakes, just back away, and let the snake happily escape. But also take some to observe and appreciate it from a safe distance.

### **The Blotched Water Snake** *Nerodia erythrogaster transversa*

This is our other common water snake. When this species feels threatened, it may also flatten its head into a "diamond-shaped" defensive posture, causing many to be mistaken for the Cottonmouth. It is not aggressive or venomous, so please leave it alone, & it will oblige you.



**Blotched Water Snake**  
*Nerodia erythrogaster*  
Photo by Bill Lindemann





***"Flowers always make people better, happier and more helpful; they are sunshine, food and medicine for the soul."***

**Luther Burbank**

## **Blumen at the Pollinator Garten**



**Purple Leatherflower**  
*Clematis pitcheri*  
Photo by Dot Maginot



**Texas Greeneyes**  
*Berlandiera betonicifolia*  
Photo by Deb Youngblood



**"Let us praise the noble turkey vulture: No one envies him; he harms nobody; and he contemplates our little world from a most serene and noble height." Edward Abbey**

## **Feature Story: Vultures—Nature’s Sanitation Engineers**

**by Lonnie Childs**

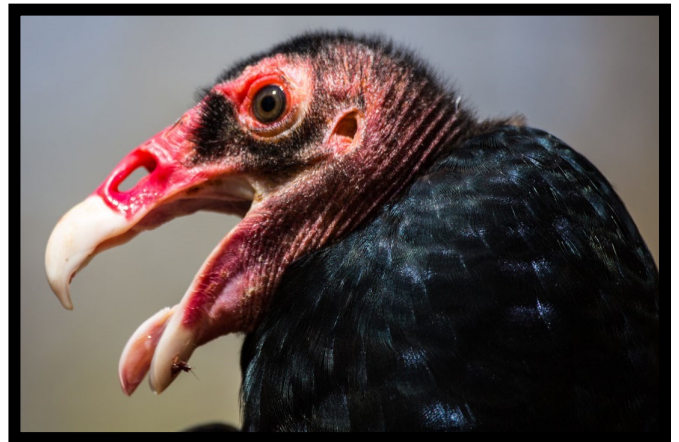
One of my favorite Gary Larsen *Far Side* cartoons features a wake of vultures circling a dead carcass on top of which are perched two individual vultures. One looks at the other and says, “What more could you ask for? A stinking carcass, a fine day, and friends over for brunch.”

For the majority of we rural Texans, our primary encounters with vultures involve a game of chicken (maybe it should be called a game of vulture?) on a highway where they sit tearing scraps of carrion off a carcass either ignoring your fast approaching auto or perhaps consciously attempting to secure one more bite before fleeing, in order to deprive their competition of the opportunity. In either case, vultures are large, slow moving targets. My advice to drivers is to slow down, and let the vulture win.

Our other encounters with vultures generally involve us espying them as they soar or flap overhead, depending on the species, whereby they are mistaken for hawks or other raptors. For those of us old enough to have appreciated the western movie genre, the image of soaring “buzzards” reminds us that death is near for the forsaken cowboy trying to cross the desert, and we hope that we are not appearing in that movie.

I would speculate that most humans view vultures as lowly scavengers who must be the ugliest avians on earth. Why would Mother Nature create such a foul creature with nasty habits? In support of their assertion, it is true that vultures vomit on their attackers as a self-defense mechanism, and defecate on themselves to keep their legs cool. Yuck!

**Mother Nature’s Cleaning and Recycling Crew.** The simple answer is that animals die, and the world would be a rotting mess without our carrion cleaners. Carcasses would remain exposed to the environment for long periods, and the resultant build-up of harmful diseases and bacteria, such as anthrax, botulism and rabies, would harmfully impact wildlife and humans alike. Vultures effectively remove pathogens and toxins in the environment by rapidly consuming carrion before it decays. Their stomachs contain an incredibly potent acid that destroys many of the harmful substances found in dead animals. Without this important ecological service, the earth would literally be a dirtier world requiring much stronger immune systems. Additionally, the rapid removal of carcasses prevents water pollution and helps to control population growth in other scavenging species such as feral dogs and rats. As a sad confirmation of their sanitation value, the reduction of



**A face only a Turkey Vulture mother could love!**

Photo via Shutterstock



**"Don't play dead with a vulture. That's exactly what they want."**

**Kevin Nealon**

## **Feature Story: Vultures—Nature's Sanitation Engineers**

vulture populations in India between 1993 and 2006 led to an increase in feral dog numbers resulting in increased rabies deaths amongst humans.

Beyond their cleaning services, vultures are recyclers of vital nutrients and even help with climate mitigation. By quickly consuming carrion, they prevent the release of tens of millions of metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> each year. One study posits that 96% of that emissions mitigation occurs in the Americas, with our Black and Turkey Vultures being two of the three key species contributing to that. The next time that you curse at a vulture for blocking the road, just remember that the more you allow him to scavenge, the more CO<sub>2</sub> he is capturing, so slow down.

**Vulture Populations.** All scavengers are considered to be [keystone species](#) and particularly vultures, so their population decline is concerning. Worldwide due to a number of factors such as persecution, poisoning, electrocution, collision, habitat loss and changes in farming practices, 16 of the 23 species of vulture species are considered vulnerable, threatened, or endangered with the population of several species declining by 90% in some areas of the world. The lesson of India's declining vulture population serves as a reminder of the negative impact on human health. In Europe, they have been successfully restoring their vulture populations. Our two major American species have managed to maintain their numbers and even spread their geographical distribution as temperatures warm.

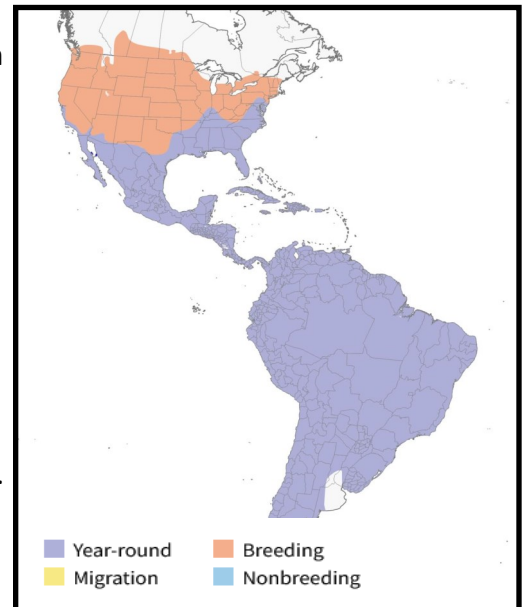
I would be remiss not to note that as is typical, human interactions with vultures are not all positive. Our two species of vultures do congregate which can be an annoyance, and they may cause damage to buildings or electrical structures. Black Vultures, in particular, are reported to attack newly born livestock causing death, thus putting them in the crosshairs of ranchers. It is important to note that our vultures are federally protected species.

Texas hosts two vulture species—Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures.

**Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes Aura*** = Latin for "golden purifier" or "purifying breeze.") earned their common name because of their featherless red face resembling a turkey's and which makes them easily identifiable when roosting. They appear black from a distance but up close are dark brown. Turkey Vultures are the larger of the two resident species standing 2.5 ft tall with a wingspan up to 6.5 ft.



**Turkey Vulture**  
Photo by James Hurt



**Turkey Vulture distribution**  
[allaboutbirds.org](http://allaboutbirds.org)



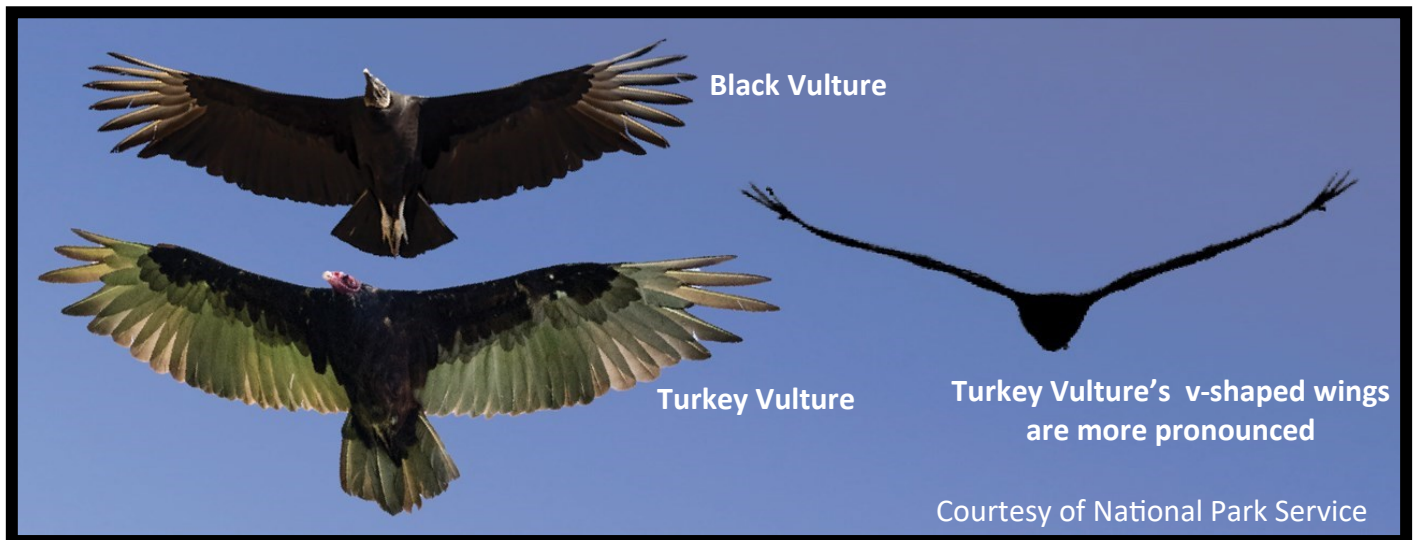
**"Vultures are homely, but they clean up all the garbage and that's good. And they're elegant in the sky."**

**Roger Tory Peterson**

## **Feature Story: Vultures—Nature's Sanitation Engineers**

Turkey Vultures have the larger population numbers and are most often seen soaring with their wings raised in a V shape turning wobbly circles. When seen from below, the undersides of the flight feathers (along the trailing edge and wingtips) are paler, giving a two-toned appearance. The ends of their wings seem to have "fingers". They ride thermals in the sky and use their hyper-keen sense of smell to find fresh carcasses, or they may swoop low over the terrain sniffing out some carrion

In winter, Turkey Vultures in the southern US may only migrate a short distance south. In central Texas, they migrate slightly south from here with year round populations living from northeast Texas to southern Texas.



**Black Vultures (*Coragyps atratus*)** is a merger of Greek words of "corax" = crow + "gyps" = vulture; The name of the species *atratus*, conversely, comes from the latin "ater" = dark). Thus, their Latin name translates to the "dark Crow Vulture." The smaller vulture of our two species, they sport black plumage, a bare black head, and neat white stars under the wingtips. Black Vultures are compact birds with broad wings, short tails, and powerful wingbeats.

Similar to the Turkey Vulture, the bare head is designed for digging inside animal carcasses, and the absence of head-feathers helps the birds stay clean and remain free of animal fluids for hygienic purposes. Most vultures are known to bathe religiously after eating, provided there is a water source. Give them some credit for pursuing cleanliness.

With its shorter wingspan of 5.5 ft, its flight mode involves flaps in short bursts which are followed by short periods of gliding with the wings held horizontally. Because of its short tail, it always appears to me that it flies lopsidedly about to tip forward and working hard to attain lift.

They do fly quite high in search of carrion. Their poor sense of smell forces them to use their sight, and they have evolved to watch for Turkey Vultures locating carrion, at which point the Black Vultures will swoop in to



***“Why do vultures never check their luggage on an airline?  
— They prefer carrion.”***  
**Unknown**

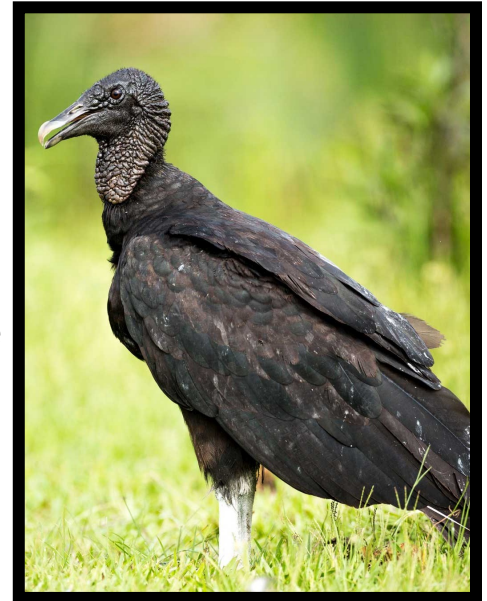
## **Feature Story: Vultures—Nature’s Sanitation Engineers**

try and overwhelm the competition with numbers. They roost in exclusively family units at night and will communicate the location of carrion to their family members.

Black Vultures live year-round in central Texas in forested and open areas. They usually nest in dark cavities such as caves, hollow trees, abandoned buildings, brush piles, thickets, and stumps.

The next time that you encounter a foul-mouthed vulture perched on the pavement, savagely ripping off pieces of road kill, remember that this avian scavenger is consuming pathogens and capturing CO2 to the benefit of the human population, without the benefit of their respect. They may be blocking the road, but they are also blocking those pathogens from you.

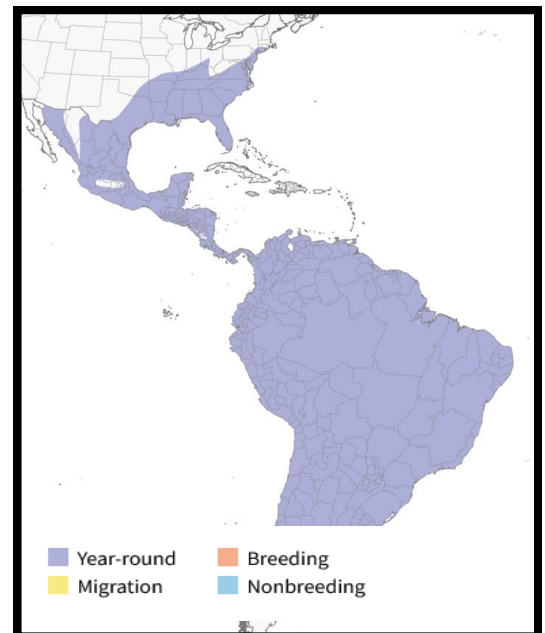
Sources:  
[allaboutbirds.org](http://allaboutbirds.org)



**Black Vulture**  
Photo by Shutterstock



**A Black Vulture perched along the Live Oak Wilderness Trail one fine day, dressed in his best undertaker suit, observing the passing hikers.... Photo by Lonnie Childs**



**Black Vulture distribution**  
[allaboutbirds.org](http://allaboutbirds.org)



**"We still do not know one thousandth of one percent of what nature has revealed to us."**

**Albert Einstein**

FFNC logo species



**Thanks  
for your  
Support!**

*Widow Skimmer (Libellula luctuosa) by Deb Youngblood*

**Friends of Fredericksburg Nature Center Board of Directors**

**Lonnie Childs—President**

**Paul Person—Vice-president**

**Carl Luckenbach - Treasurer**

**Gracie Waggener—Secretary**

**Jane Crone**

**Billy Guin**

**Tom Musselman**

**Mary Ellen Terell**

**Andrea Schmidt, Dir. Fbg. Parks & Recreation, ex officio**

**Thanks to our supporters and the City of Fredericksburg  
for your continued support of the  
Friends of the Fredericksburg Nature Center!**

**A 501(c)(3) corporation**

**Go to <http://fredericksburgNaturecenter.com/membership> for more information**

**Comments, questions, or future newsletter submissions can be sent to  
Lonnie Childs, Newsletter Editor, at [lonniechilds@utexas.edu](mailto:lonniechilds@utexas.edu)**