



The Sabal

November 2014

Volume 31, number 8

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Page numbers for plant species shown in the Sabal refer to: **"Plants of Deep South Texas" (PDST).**

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November 2014 Mtg., Native Plant Project:

Tues., November 25th, 2014: at 7:30pm

The Native Plant Project will present:

“Native and Introduced Flora of Southern France ”
by **Ann Vacek.**

Ann is one of NPP’s native plant experts and a wonderful photographer, as well as a long-time NPP Board Member. A year ago, Ann's work at the USDA took her to France for three months where she recorded the beauty all around her. Come share her experience.

The meeting is held at:

Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border,
(in Gibson Park), Weslaco. 956-969-2475



The Sabal is the newsletter of the Native Plant Project.

It conveys information on native plants, habitats and environment of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas.

Previous **Sabal** issues are posted on our website [www.NativePlantProject.org].

Electronic versions of our **Handbooks** on recommended natives for landscaping are also posted there.

Change of address, missing issue, or membership: <bwessling@rgv.rr.com>

President - Ken King - <wk_king01@yahoo.com>

Birds, Migration, Winter and Native Plants

Last month's Sabal featured lots of blooms and butterflies. October is usually the peak season in Deep South Texas for butterflies.

In November, we usually also enjoy sightings of many birds, stopping over on a longer migration, or appearing here to spend the winter.

It seems that over the centuries, our native plants must have provided food for these migrants. If not, surely the migratory pathways would not have continued. So I wondered, what kinds of fruits are the birds eating here in early winter?



I asked this question on Facebook, and the first answer was surprising. Yes, this is a mouse, presumably eating mistflower bloom buds which failed to mature. Dick Wilson took this photo on Nov. 10th at Estero Llano Grande State Park in a patch of mistflower near the far end of the parking lot. His wife Sherry sent me the photo with these comments:

"My husband took a nice photo this afternoon of a mouse that was busy near the top of a mistflower. I sure thought I heard a little happy chirping as it ate. Most likely you didn't have raptor or owl food in mind when you put out the post, but the seeds feed the mouse that feeds the migrating hawk."

I've always been quick to trim off these uninspiring undeveloped bloom buds, but they could be loaded with nutrition.

Clearly, my scope of what birds might be eating was much too limited. I've also been technologically limited in ignoring Facebook as a resource!

Bert Wessling was my work-mate at the RGV Birding Festival in Harlingen, selling plants for NPP. When I asked Bert if the TexBirds Listserv was still active, he brought me into the current decade by pulling up some great Facebook "groups" on his cell phone. I'm an idiot when it comes to Facebook. However, I've found some amazing "groups" for nature lovers, such as:

Rio Grande Valley Butterflies

Rio Grande Valley Birding

TexNEP -

Texas Nature and Environmental Photographers

The photographs and information posted by members of these groups are amazing. I've been transported to a new dimension of color photos, video and experts willing to share information and experience!

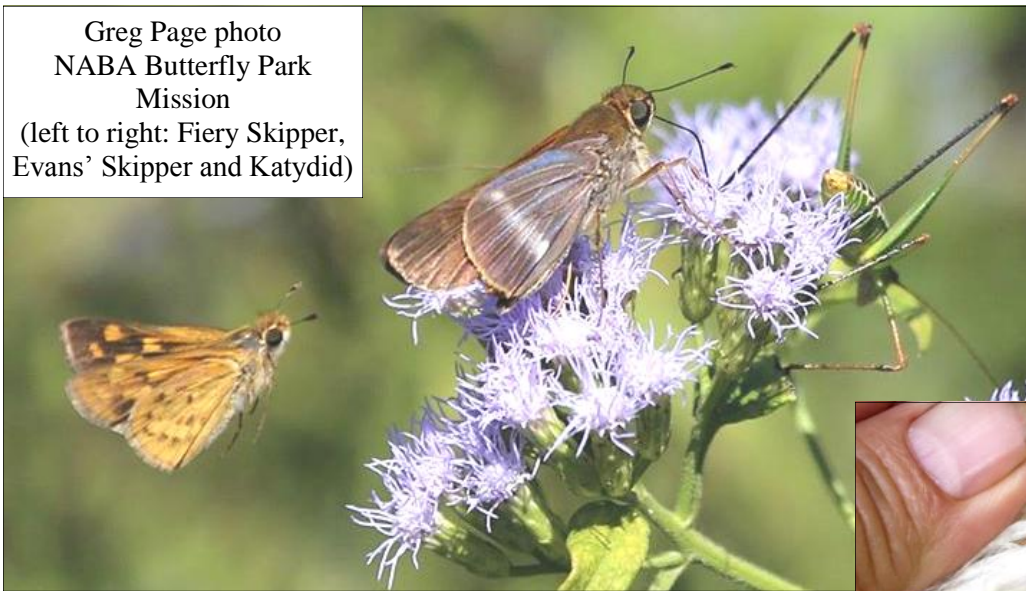
One of Bert's posted photos is this mockingbird eating anacua berries. They aren't ripe enough for me, but the bird's palate is obviously different.



Bert also caught this tanager devouring an insect. As my husband laments, "where you have a lot of birds, you're bound to have a lot of insects".



Greg Page photo
 NABA Butterfly Park
 Mission
 (left to right: Fiery Skipper,
 Evans' Skipper and Katydid)



Susie Lovegren shot the photo below of Prairie Milkweed ripe seeds emerging from the seedpod. Birds tend to carry off any seeds with fluff, presumably to line and insulate their nests.



Insects can be glorious, and tasty food for birds and other critters. The photo above illustrates some of the insect diversity attracted to Crucita, our fall-blooming mistflower. This looks like a feast awaiting a hungry bird or lizard.

Dan Jones photographed a male painted bunting (photo right) in his backyard pigeonberry patch. He elaborates: "Our pigeon berries are also eaten by chachalacas, Yellow-breasted Chat, mockingbird and thrushes."



Bob Becker photographed a pair of painted buntings feasting on brown seedpods of scarlet sage (plant photo below). And Bert Wessling took a video of the Lesser Goldfinch feasting on the same seedpods in his backyard.

Seeds which we consider so small as to be insignificant are apparently important in the diet of birds. I've been trimming off the dried seedpods as unsightly!! What a mistake!



Photo right: Male Black Crested Titmouse eating seed from our common sunflower. Juveniles and females lack the black back and are much harder to spot.

These plants look pitiful when lovely flowers become brown seeds. But it's probably worth saving them if you might spot these marvelous small birds.

Photo from:
[\[http://birds.audubon.org/birds/black-crested-titmouse\]](http://birds.audubon.org/birds/black-crested-titmouse)



Jan and David Dauphin of Mission are a wealth of information about the animals and plants we live with. I asked what birds are eating in their yard this fall, and this is David's answer:

"Our tiny yard (50' x 100') has 69 species native to the LRGV, planted mostly for butterflies, but birds are our first love and still are.

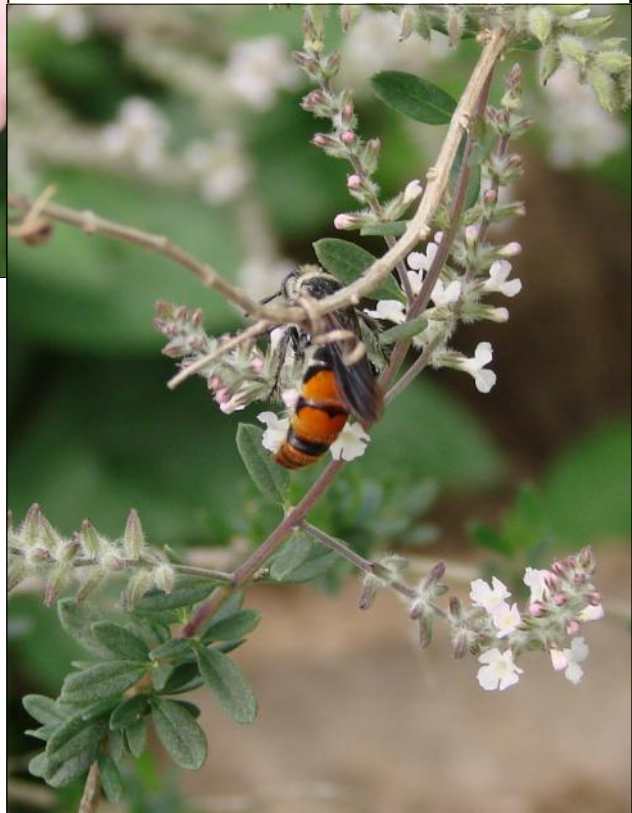
Our local Northern Mockingbird and migrating Orioles love to feed on the berries of both of our Sierra Madre or Mountain Torchwood, *Amyris madrensis* (photo upper right, found on www.saws.org). ...and Texas Torchwood, Chapotillo, *Amyris texensis* (photo below; note the trifoliate leaf).



Anyone who does not have White Brush, (photo right) *Aloysia gratissima*, in their yard, should be ashamed of themselves, because Lesser Goldfinch feed on them constantly.

Another must have is Turk's Cap, *Malvaviscus arboreus*. Buff-bellied Hummingbirds love to nectar on this easily-grown shrub, as do other migrating hummingbirds. In fact, the hummingbirds that come to our yard prefer the Turk's Cap over the hummingbird feeders we keep filled." (See photo on p 7.)

(For more Valley wildlife watching info, go to: [<http://www.thedauphins.net>].)



David's comments reminded me of the Kidneywood which once grew adjacent to the front window of the old Valley Nature Center. For visitors, I could usually point out a Black-Crested Titmouse eating the seedpods. As a legume, these seeds are probably high in nitrogen.

The titmouse is an inquisitive bird which I especially enjoy watching. The photo inset below right is from [<http://birds.audubon.org/birds/black-crested-titmouse>] where you can see additional photos and hear recordings of the bird's calls. Familiarity with bird calls helps a lot in trying to spot just where they're lurking about.

I can recommend Kidneywood as an airy, thornless shrub for planting near a window. Its origin is well-drained, sunny western habitats. Butterflies love the nectar of these blooms. I enjoy rubbing the leaves; the aroma is wonderful.

Most of the plants David Dauphin mentions are tall, providing a bit of protection from predators. Whitebrush and Kidneywood are also "airy," with thin limbs too delicate to support a cat, squirrel, or typical bird predator.



Bert Wessling just sent me the photo above of a house finch eating leaf buds. Many birds will do so, including chachalaca and parrots. Following our recent rains, many shrubs and trees will undergo renewed vegetative growth (if the temperatures return to our usual winter 80 plus degrees).

Kidneywood,
Esenhardtia texana



Black-crested Titmouse
Baeolophus atricristatus



This brings to mind an article in “Butterfly Gardener,” Vol 19, Issue 3, Fall 2014.

Author Gary Noel Ross points out the value of tall trees and shrubs in fence rows, as shelter for butterflies, as well as host plants. He estimates that 32% of butterfly species in Louisiana depend upon trees or tall shrubs as their host.

Such shade-producing plants may be ignored in the design of butterfly gardens, opting for maximum sunlight needed by many nectar plants.

What Ross fails to point out is the value of vines which climb and even cover these same trees and tall shrubs.

Robert A Behrstock of Hereford, AZ, a frequent visitor and tour guide in the LRGV, sent me a vine photo for identification. It was *Urvillea ulmacea*, PDST 381, which has grown and spread to cover much of the “bosque” behind my home. In the upper right photo, a curvewing butterfly nectars while multiple caterpillars devour the foliage. In the middle right photo, immature green football-shaped seedpods are clustered and trifoliate leaves are visible. A bee hangs from clustered blooms.

“What a great nectar source,” Behrstock commented, “Seething with bees, wasps, flies, butterflies, etc.” “Oh, and the same caterpillar you had was on it. *Didugua argentilinea*: [<http://bugguide.net/node/view/155152/bgimage>].”

We tend to forget that far more than one image may be needed for an accurate plant identification. Extremes of drought and luxuriant growth are sometimes unfathomable. Fresh, mature and spent blooms are variable in appearance. Newly-formed and mature seedpods may vary widely in shape and color. Enormous books would be required to include such a range of photos. Attempts to photograph the “entire plant” are usually undecipherable, beyond general color and perhaps showing a typical shape.

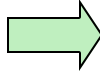
Photos on Facebook “groups” may help to fill this wide void in our understanding

of the world around us. Other good sources for detailed photos of our native plants are websites of several universities located in Texas and Florida. (Don’t trust every identification posted on the web!)



LRGV Native Plant Sources

See also our
Sponsors
on right



Perez Ranch Nursery

(Betty Perez & Susan Thompson)
12 miles north of La Joya, TX
(956) 580-8915
<PerezRanchNatives@gmail.com>

NABA Butterfly Park

Old Military Hwy/3333 Butterfly Pk Dr
Mission, TX 78572
office (956) 583-5400
Marianna Trevino Wright, Exec.Dir.
cell 956-648-7117
<marianna@nationalbutterflycenter.org>
[http://www.nationalbutterflycenter.org]

Rancho Lomitas Nursery

(Benito Trevino)
P.O. Box 442
Rio Grande City, TX 78582
(956) 486-2576 *By appt. only

Valley Garden Center

701 E. Bus. Hwy. 83
McAllen, TX 78501
(956) 682-9411

Landscapers using Natives:

Williams Wildscapes, Inc.
(Allen Williams)
750 W Sam Houston
Pharr, TX 78577
(956) 460-9864
[www.williamswildscapes.com]

Landscaping, Etc. Inc.
Noel Villarreal
125 N. Tower Rd, Edinburg
956-874-4267
956-316-2599

Sponsors (Native Plant Nurseries)

Heep's LRGV Native Plant Nursery

Owned and operated by Mike and Claire Heep
We grow plants suited to landscaping
and revegetation in south Texas.
1714 S. Palm Court Drive, Harlingen, TX 78552
(956) 457-6834 <heepsnursery@gmail.com>
[www.heepsnursery.com]



Come visit the VNC:
301 S. Border Ave.
Weslaco, TX 78596

(956) 969-2475
info@valleynaturecenter.org
www.valleynaturecenter.org



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[www.billdraker.com]
Buff-bellied Hummingbird,
Turk's Cap Flower,
Malvaviscus arboreus



NPP Board & General Meetings
held at Valley Nature Center

(see ABOVE)

(Fourth Tuesday each month)

Board Meetings 6:30pm.
— Speaker 7:30pm.

(There is no NPP meeting or SABAL in December.)

Meeting Dates for 2015:

Jan.27, Feb.24, Mar.24, April 28, May 26, Sept.22, Oct.27, Nov. 24.

FROM: NPP; POB 2742; San Juan, TX 78589

The **Native Plant Project (NPP)** has no paid staff or facilities. NPP is supported entirely by memberships and contributions.

Anyone interested in native plants is invited to join. Members receive 8 issues of **The Sabal** newsletter per year in which they are informed of all project activities and meetings.

Meetings are held at:

Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border, Weslaco, TX.

Native Plant Project Membership Application

Regular \$20/yr. Contributing \$45/yr

Life \$250 one time fee/person

Other donation: _____

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Native Plant Project, POB 2742, San Juan, TX 78589-7742*



NPP November meeting/speaker on:

Tues., November 25th, 2014:
at 7:30pm

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Weslaco. 956-969-2475



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EEK!!
Better Wait To Prune!

Esteemed former NPP volunteer Eugene Rouse would remind us every winter that we should wait until about March to do any large pruning jobs. Apparently the greater the plant's biomass, the better protected it is from harsh winter conditions.

Mike Heep recommends leaf mulch mounded around sensitive species. You may need the AC on Christmas and your winter coat in late February.

This month's SABAL topic: **“Birds, Migration, Winter & Native Plants”**