

If You Love Nature, Maybe You Should Become a Texas Master Naturalist

I assume that most of my readers have at least some interest in and/or affection for Nature, native flora and fauna and native habitat. If this describes you then I have some suggestions that will let you become more involved with and learn more about Nature.

The local chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas meets at Riverside Nature Center at 3:00 pm on the second Tuesday of the month from September through May. Their website is www.npsot.org/wp/kerrville. While you are there you can talk to the Riverside folks about becoming a member of the Nature Center as well. Both organizations will give you opportunities to learn more about Nature and to volunteer on projects with other like-minded folks.

But if you want to be a bit more involved and to learn even more about Nature, you might be interested in the Texas Master Naturalist program.

The program is a volunteer organization sponsored jointly by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. It is modeled somewhat on the Master Gardener program. The mission statement describes very well what the program is all about: "To develop a corps of well-informed volunteers to provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities".

To become a Master Naturalist, one must first attend a class training program consisting of 12 half-day sessions, usually, with three speakers on different nature-related topics, plus, typically, three field trips. The classes for this year begin on Wednesday, August 20 at the Texas Lions Camp on route 27 in Kerrville, and ends with a commencement meeting on November 12.

Class topics include most all of the "ologies" related to nature, including biology, zoology, mammology, ornithology, entomology, herpetology, geology and hydrology. Other topics include grassland and woodland management, land stewardship, range management, cedar, oak wilt, and rainwater harvesting. But don't worry, you won't have to take a test!

Field trips include visits to the Bamberger Ranch Preserve, Kerr Wildlife Management Area, Canyon Lake Gorge, and Love Creek Preserve.

Most of the topics are presented by government agents with the Texas AgriLife Extension, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Texas Forest Service or USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service, university professors, or other experts in their fields.

I believe most people taking these classes will rediscover how much fun it is to learn more about a topic you are interested in and maybe a topic you have never thought of before. And I can almost guarantee that you will make new friends who have similar interests to yours and with whom you will enjoy doing volunteer projects.

The Hill Country Chapter includes members from our original counties of Bandera, Gillespie, Kendall and Kerr, plus newly acquired counties to the west and north of here. This chapter was first organized in 2002 and to date has trained over 400 Hill Country residents. There are over 8000 Master Naturalists state-wide in over 44 chapters.

The organization is a volunteer organization, and to become certified as a Texas Master Naturalist one must perform 40 hours of volunteer service and attend 8 hours of advanced training every year. Our chapter has over 70 volunteer projects which include many activities at most of the state parks and nature centers in our area plus various adult and children's education activities.

The Hill Country Chapter's monthly meetings, which are open and free to the public, are held most every 4th Monday at the UGRA building on N. Lehmann beginning at 6:30 pm. You can find out much more about our chapter, its activities and its members by visiting the chapter website at www.txmn.org/hillcountry.

Applications for this year's class are being accepted from now through mid-July. You can fill out an application on the website or print the form and mail it in. For more information, you can contact our Membership Director, Becky Etzler at hillcountrymasternaturalist@gmail.com or 830-285-1258.

Hope to see you in class this fall.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spiling It". He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.