

Master Naturalists Graduates its 17th Class.

The Hill Country Chapter of the Texas Master Naturalist celebrated the graduation of 34 members of its 17th class this week. This class brings the total number of Master Naturalists trained by our chapter to 545!

The Master Naturalist 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.

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.

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, plus university professors, or other experts in their fields.

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.

There are over 11,000 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 nearly 100 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 attracts people from all parts of the state and many other states as well, many of whom are looking for a place to retire. And many of those folks are especially attracted to the rural areas of the Hill Country as a place to build their dream home in the quiet and beauty of our rural areas.

Consequently, we see large pieces of land--many formerly ranches that have been in families for generations—broken up into much smaller lots. This results in many more people living on areas that used to be occupied by only one or two families. This increased human density on the land is called fragmentation, and it has serious

consequences in terms of the native habitat and the effects on the native flora and fauna.

Moreover, many of the individuals moving to these smaller rural properties have little or no experience living in the country and also little understanding of the Hill Country ecology and native habitat, so that even people with the best intentions can make poor decisions about how to manage their property. And these are the kind of people that make up a sizeable portion of each year's Master Naturalist class.

After taking the class these new landowners have a better understanding of their land and the plants and animals on it and are certainly likely to do a better job of taking care of their little piece of Texas. Moreover, with understanding comes appreciation and Master Naturalists have a stronger desire than most to best take care of their property.

But Master Naturalist are also educated to "spread the word" about managing native habitat and they have an influence on their friends and neighbors as well. So each of the 545 Master Naturalists in the Hill Country have a wider impact on land management than just their own actions.

And of course among our many volunteer projects we have to include the many different activities that help to educate the public--from 6 to 86—about our natural world and demonstrate the beauty of native gardens.

So when we say that Master Naturalists have made a measurable improvement in the ecology and native habitat in the Hill Country, it is not all exaggeration, we really have.

Applications for the next class starting in August 2019 will be accepted beginning in April.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Ecology," "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners." He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.