

NATURALIST NEWSLETTER

Louisiana Master Naturalist Greater New Orleans

Message from the President

Greetings and Happy New Year – one that we hope will be a glorious, productive, healthy year and full of opportunities to learn more about nature!

I'm serving this year as President of LMNGNO. I've served several terms in the past and love the chance to engage with such interesting and dedicated folks as the LMNGNO community. I'll share a few words about our initial goals for this year, but first I want to give thanks to the folks who have made this organization so successful for the past few years.

Dr. Janell Simpson has been our president for 2.5 years, filling in quickly when our beloved former president, Joe Baucum, passed away. Joe's shoes were hard to fill, but Janell used his tracks to forge a new path forward for the organization as she led us to being more organized. Janell is a great leader and she set about broadening the inclusion in leadership activities by our ever growing membership. As a result, we have more committees that are active and efficient as they serve the needs of our expanding community.

Additionally, I must thank other current officers including Secretary Joelle Finley, Treasurer Michele Mire, their predecessors, Alanna Frick, Sue Marchal, and a host of board members (past and present). Michael Massimi will serve as the new vice president. Michael is a founding board member and we welcome him back. I also want to thank the board members who have been coordinators and leaders of our workshops, and those who are educators in those workshops. Again, I thank Janell for the enormous amount of time she spent over a long period of time to improve the quality of LMNGNO. We owe her much gratitude and are inspired by her dedication.

Continued on next page

In This Issue

- Message from the President
- Book Club Report
- Gardening for Hummingbirds
- A Naturalist's Circular Journey
- Mud Snakes



Botaurus lentiginosus

American Bittern

(Photo by Bill Van der Meer)

Volunteer Opportunities:

Visit the Events Calendar in "Track It Forward" for upcoming activities in your area

Message from the President (continued)

Here are a few initial goals for the coming year:

- Continue the inclusive process Janell has put in place.
- Have more clarity on who does what for LMNGNO – so many of you are very active
- Workshops
 - Create supplemental workshops focusing on first aid for naturalists and a deeper commitment to journaling (Spring)
 - Natural history bootcamp that will train our participants to better use apps, Canvas, and other tools we find helpful (Fall)
- Find and develop activities that will keep our workshop participants active in the organization – and that will encourage former active members to return to the family
- Increase the use of TrackItForward – have a higher percentage of registration of time spent helping the chapter reach its goals
- Revisiting volunteer requirements
- Board assignments for all board members to improve organizational efficiencies
- Update many of our policies and procedures as we reach our 10th anniversary of operation
- Increase diversity at all levels of the organization – reach communities that are not represented at this time

Please help me by sharing ideas that will improve LMNGNO, joining committees that interest you, and attending our membership meetings. We encourage collegiality – the more you engage, the more you will get out of your membership.

Bob Thomas, Board President 2022



*Class of Fall 2021 on a pleasant afternoon at Elmer's Island, LA
(Photo by Emma Reid)*

Book Club Report - Off to a Great Start

The first meeting of the Master Naturalist book club was held under the shade of the 800 year old McDonough live oak at City Park on the warm sunlit afternoon of December 5th. Organizer Tres Fisher had assigned the first reading as Bayou Diversity 2 by Kelby Ouchley.

The session started with an initial meet and greet followed by what was initially a cursory review of Ouchley's book and taken up again at different times during the meeting. The conversation quickly took several interesting twists and turns into a wide range of relevant topics that built upon one another.



Book club participants at City Park

The eight participants on hand consisted of Master Naturalist alumni and folks enrolled in the fall 2021 class. As facilitator, Mr Fisher's enthusiasm and non linear approach encouraged dialog on a number of Louisiana natural history topics that went well beyond a simple discussion of one book.

In fact he stressed that reading a specifically assigned book, while encouraged, was not necessarily a prerequisite for participating in these sessions. The broad range of discussion and vigorous suggestions for future reads by those in attendance naturally led to the beginnings of what may well become a fairly comprehensive reading list. And that's just one of the things that appeared to work well with this group.

There was unanimous agreement that our next assignment for the near term would be author Mike Tidwell's book titled "Bayou Farewell" about "the rich life and tragic death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast". Long term goals will be to incorporate more scholarly works to be read concurrently with those books less challenging in terms of time..

Stay tuned for regular announcements from Tres Fisher about future reading assignments and meetings. -Bill Van der Meer

Seminars:

Visit the Events Calendar in "Track It Forward" for Upcoming Seminars They will also be announced via email as they become available

The Louisiana Master Naturalists of Greater New Orleans is a community of citizens interested in engaging with the natural environment through education, stewardship and volunteering.



Gardening for Hummingbirds



Black Chinned Hummingbird



Rufous Hummingbird
(Photos by Seth Nehrbass)



Buff Bellied Hummingbird

Seth Nehrbass is a Spring 2020 Master Naturalist graduate who happens to have a special affinity for hummingbirds and has made it one of his vocations to study and nurture them. For decades Seth has had sugar-water feeders in his yard year-round, but until recently he did not observe any hummingbirds during the winter months. He only saw migrating *Archilochus colubris*, ruby-throated hummingbirds, for about six weeks per year. After adding numerous hummingbird-attracting plants to his yard, his observations of ruby-throats went up to nearly twelve weeks per year. Seth found that man-made feeding stations alone without sufficient flowering plants, were not enough to attract the birds, that is until the flowering plants had become sufficiently well established.

In November 2019 he observed his first non ruby-throated hummingbird. It was a *Archilochus alexandri*, black-chinned hummingbird. This species is more commonly observed throughout the western portions of the US. Later that same winter of 2019-20 he observed two *Selasphorus rufus*, rufous hummingbirds, who stayed for several months. During the following winter of 2020-2021 there were others including an *Amazilia yucatanensis*, buff-bellied hummingbird, and a tiny *Selasphorus calliope*, calliope hummingbird. The calliope bears

the distinction of being the smallest of all North American birds. There were several other species he was unable to identify, but suspected another in the genus *Selasphorus*.

The aforementioned species are some of the more common residents throughout various regions of the western mountains and Pacific coast who often make an appearance along the gulf coast states. Often referred to as Louisiana's second season these birds fill a niche vacated by the vast majority of ruby-throated hummingbirds, whose spring and summer breeding populations have departed to tropical wintering grounds by late August or early September. But unlike the ruby throats, which is the only hummingbird species to breed in Louisiana, our western visitors do not breed here.

Much to the delight of those who've provided a food source through a combination of selective plantings and feeders, these west coast vagrants may return to these same locations year after year. An excellent hummingbird resource is Nancy Newfield's book titled "Louisiana Hummingbirds" where she details thirteen different species as having occurred in this state. This highly informative and illustrated work is available as a free download at https://btnep.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Louisiana_Hummingbirds.pdf

Gardening for Hummingbirds (continued)

Ms. Newfield reports that she is now in her “forty-third year of a five year project” having documented and banded literally thousands of hummingbirds in Louisiana.

Because New Orleans is uniquely situated in a subtropical pocket (Hardiness Zone 9b) along the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain, flowering subtropical and tropical plants can be prolific throughout the winter months. During the summer of 2019 a hummingbird feeder project was started at the NOBG and is currently being managed by Seth Nehrbass in a partnership between LMNGNO and City Park. One of its goals is to determine whether adding feeders to the existing hummingbird-attracting plants will increase the number of hummingbirds seen there.

As the number of species, and number of individuals, tend to vary substantially from year to year, Seth believes it will take many years of structured research before there’s enough data to support the notion that adding feeders will increase hummingbird populations at any given locale. Suffice it to say that the sheer variety of hummingbirds observed by volunteers, who maintain and replenish the feeders at the NOBG, have been well documented.

Seth is always happy to recruit new volunteers. The work is relaxing and the rewards are great. In April of 2021 while volunteering to replenish the feeders, I encountered an adult male broad-tailed hummingbird feeding in a bottle brush tree. The thrill of that sighting was my take home pay.
-Bill Van der Meer



Archilochus colubris

female ruby-throated hummingbird
on Crocosmia
(Photo by Bill Van der Meer)

For details about opportunities to gain volunteer hours related to hummingbird-attracting projects and other projects at City Park’s Botanical Garden please feel free to drop Seth a line at SNehrbass@gmail.com

Many thanks go out to Nancy Newfield and Seth Nehrbass for their contributions by providing content and review for this piece.



I want to take this opportunity to thank all of those who contributed to this and past issues of *The Naturalist*. Your submissions have truly enriched this publication. If you’d like to consider submitting an article, a photograph, a reflection, or an announcement, please drop me a line at bvanderme1@gmail.com.

-Bill Van der Meer



A Naturalist's Circular Journey

By: Ian Gray

Photo by Bill Van der Meer

By way of introduction, the author of this personal account and I have a connection dating back to 2016. We had been part of a team creating an interpretive exhibit on the history of logging at the West Virginia Railroad Museum in Elkins, WV. Our paths later diverged but as fate would have it, we both landed in New Orleans at about the same time in 2019. After a dinner and as guests of the Crescent City Model Railroad Club one evening, I casually mentioned a Master Naturalist course I had signed up for and that he ought to look into it. Soon after, Ian Gray attended a LMNGNO members meeting and the rest as they say is history. - Bill V.

As I looked out across the high (and dry) plains of western North Dakota towards the meandering Missouri River from my perch atop the walkway of the old fort, my thoughts drifted to the last place one would imagine. My mind was following the river clear down to its confluence with the Mighty Mississippi at St. Louis and down-stream to New Orleans. The chapter of my life that included the words “*permanent federal employee*” would soon begin amidst the boardwalks of the Barataria Preserve and the artillery emplacements of Chalmette Battlefield. Looking back on the circular path that had led up to my “triumphant return” to Louisiana, I had to appreciate just how my whim of taking the master naturalist course was about to pay off.

The tale got off to its unexpected start in the summer of 2019 when I accepted a two year position with the National Park Service at Chalmette Battlefield. After spending several years in West Virginia for graduate school and working at several different historic sites under the AmeriCorps program, I was leaving the Appalachian Mountains for the low lying Louisiana wetlands.

When I was not dissecting the War of 1812 during work hours or beginning to form the social connections I hold dear during my off hours, I was exploring area nature sites. I hiked along the trails of the Barataria Preserve, Fontainebleau State Park, Northlake Nature Center, City Park, Bayou Sauvage, and many more locations. Rounding things out with an evening paddle down the Pearl River,

I had managed to cover a whole lot of ground in a very short time. Problem was, I had not seen much from a truly naturalist's perspective. By the time my (original) time was up in Louisiana that had changed thanks to the master naturalist course.

I hadn't learned nearly everything there was to know, but I had gained a whole new appreciation for the incredible natural world around me. It led to an understanding about how this delta and coastal ecosystem had formed, how to notice the subtle changes in its components of marsh, swamp, prairie, and forest, and many of the flora and fauna dependent upon it.

No sooner had I completed my fall of 2020 Master Naturalist certification when change was on the horizon. The life of a park ranger is often one of mobility. My two years in Louisiana had come to an end and it was off to another park for the summer, specifically Fort Union Trading Post National Preserve located in the high plains of North Dakota. I now became the teller of tales of a time when buffalo herds roamed the west. Settlers had not yet crossed the Mississippi river in force. What are now largely contiguous parcels of farms, ranches, and oil wells were once vast open prairie inhabited by Native American nations and a few fur trading posts. Beginning in 1828 these trading posts were to engage in one of America's first truly modern business empires. The history was fascinating, but with my newly acquired naturalist certification I became just as interested in exploring yet another completely new environment.

Circular Journey (continued)

Most striking was just how dry everything was in the northern plains. I arrived in the middle of a record drought, which was still present when I left. It quickly reinforced how varied and complex our current climate crisis is. The very same forces threatening to flood us here in Louisiana coincide with extreme drought conditions in North Dakota. Shifting winds occasionally brought in a thick haze of smoke from raging wildfires across the Canadian border.

From the highlights of my trips to Glacier National Park, the Black Hills and the areas around the trading post, each place was breathtakingly different and new to me. All the while my Master Naturalist training kicked in as I sought to understand all the various creatures and plants within the context of their unique habitats. I marveled at how much “wild” there is out west while at the same time contemplating how profoundly the area had changed. You could scarcely take a step without hearing the chirp of songbirds while gazing out at the seemingly endless sea of sagebrush and prairie grasses.

At the same time there were vestiges of what was once there to remind me of what had been lost. The dense cottonwood forests that lined the Missouri River are a shadow of their former selves thanks to man’s never ending appetite for building materials and fuel. As summer drew to a close and as I wondered what lay in store for me, I soon learned that I was about to follow a feathered migration back south along the Mississippi river. I was headed back to Louisiana!

After the shortest job interview in my professional life, consisting of a text message and a brief phone call, I got the news that Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve was filling several permanent positions. I was offered an opportunity to fill one of those at the Barataria Preserve and gladly accepted. But a nasty surprise by the name of Hurricane Ida disrupted the start of my return to the area but am now happy to say I’m back in the parks!

Although a sense of normalcy is still a ways off, I have already led multiple nature walks along the familiar route of the Bayou Coquille trail and been able to pass along much of what I’ve learned to park visitors.

It’s been superbly satisfying to turn what had been a side interest into what now occupies the majority of my day job, which also involves occasional duties at the Chalmette battlefield. After a truly remarkable journey over the past two years I couldn’t be happier that it ended right back where it started!



*Fort Union Trading Post National
Historic Site, Williston, ND
Photo by Ian Gray*



*NPS park ranger, Ian Gray, leads a small
group at Bayou Coquille*

MUD SNAKES (*FARANCIA ABACURA*)

By: Dr. Bob Thomas

One of nature's treats is to encounter a species that is rarely seen. We had such an experience at a recent Louisiana Master Naturalists of Greater New Orleans educational workshop held at Joyce Wildlife Management Area between Ponchatoula and Manchac. In daylight we stumbled upon an animal that is typically nocturnal – a two-foot long female mud snake!

The mud snake, *Farancia abacura*, is a large (up to six feet) spectacularly colored snake. They are abundant in swamps and associated wetland habitats, but rarely seen due to their secretive mannerisms and their glossy, iridescent black backs blending into the dark water. Our specimen was mostly under the mud with only about four inches of its neck and head extending to the surface for a bit of fresh air.

Their bright red bellies are obvious when the animals are held, or when you speed by one on the highway that has been crushed by traffic. Among our snake fauna, they are unique in this coloration. I call them “70 mph” snakes, since their coloration allows them to be easily identified to species at 70 mph. Fortunately for them, they spend most of their time in swamps, and rarely cross highways.

This contrast of pattern – dark on the back and light on the belly – is common in the aquatic world. Scientists call it countershading, and it helps them avoid predation. If a predator is above them, the dark back tends to blend into the darkness of the water depths; if below, and the snake is at the surface, the light belly blends into the brightness of the sky light.

One of the mud snakes' behaviors (see photos) further explains the contrast. When approached by a predator, they often place their heads beneath a coil of the body and curl the tail while holding it upside down and elevated. The bright color may either frighten the predator or draw its attention from the snake's head. A snake with a chewed tail has a better chance of survival than one with a chewed head. This behavior is common among brightly patterned snakes, especially the coral snakes.

The mud snake is truly an important example of animal misunderstandings and resulting myth.



Farancia abacura, Mud Snake
dorsal view
(all photos by Brad Moon)



Farancia abacura
Defensive display

Mud Snakes (continued)

For instance it is said they have a habit of lying in the water in a perfect circle. Large specimens look like a wheel, so the story has been passed down that they take their tails in their mouths and roll down a hill – the so-called hoop snake.

Since the mud snakes live in swamp habitats and stealthily move in search of prey, they use a technique that mirrors a man using a pole to push his pirogue forward. The tips of their rather short tails have a pointed scale on the terminus, and they push the “spike” into the mud, and push away to move forward. When picked up, mud snakes often push this spiny tip into the holder’s arm to gain purchase. Someone who doesn’t know snakes might think the snake is trying to “sting” him – thus the common name “stinging snake.” I’ve handled many mud snakes, most have exhibited this behavior, and I never felt pain.



*Farancia consuming a three-toed
amphiuma
(photo by Brad Moon)*

This leads to another myth. When I was young and living in central Louisiana, I was often told that stinging snakes “take their tails in their mouths, roll down a hill, and sting a tree at the bottom. My grandfather actually saw this happen, and the dead tree is still there.” It took personal fortitude not to roll my eyes.

Interestingly, mud snakes show no aggression against humans. I have encountered over 100 in the field, and each time I simply picked the animal up in the middle of the body and have never seen one even open its mouth, much less snap at me. Their bodies are soft to the touch, without strong muscle tone.

When it comes to their prey, however, they are vicious in their attacks. Mud snakes predominately eat amphiumas, although they are bound to occasionally feed on sirens (another eel-like salamander) and other salamanders. Fish and frogs have also been reported in their diets. David Muth, former Chief of Planning and Resource Stewardship at Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, renowned naturalist and first Paul Percy Viosca Outstanding Naturalist awardee, tells of having a conversation with a visitor on the ring-levee trail at the park’s Barataria Unit. There was a sound nearby and they saw a foot-long three-toed amphiuma (*Amphiuma tridactylum*) about as thick as a human thumb shooting into the air out of a crawfish chimney pushing a little fountain of water ahead of itself. It was immediately followed by a two-foot long mud snake. The amphiuma slithered through the shallow swamp water, then disappeared down another hole with the snake in hot pursuit. This game of “nature tag” is constantly in play throughout these species’ range.

Mud snakes lay up to 100 eggs and the female stays with them until they hatch in the late summer or early fall. These are glorious snakes, and I hope all naturalists have a chance to enjoy their beauty, especially in their natural habitat. They are truly beautiful, but do not make good pets due to their food preferences being limited to live amphiuma salamanders. Please don’t be tempted to capture one and remove it from its chosen habitat!