

NATURALIST NEWSLETTER

Louisiana Master Naturalist Greater New Orleans

Notes from the President

What an eventful few years! In view of the many challenges of 2020 and 2021, LMNGNO members are committed to our mission to engage with the natural environment through education and stewardship.

Here are some highlights from the past months: We have certified 36 new naturalists at virtual meetings from July 2020 to August 2021. Eighty-seven individuals have enrolled in workshops over the past 4 semesters. We recorded and posted to the LMNGNO website 34 Wednesday seminars from a wide variety of speakers. The total number of volunteer and continuing education hours recorded for 2020 was 3,142; and to date the number of combined hours for 2021 is 1,746.

We awarded the first Partner Award to S.O.U.L. founder and executive direction, Susannah Burley, at the last general meeting. Byron's camphor removal project in City Park has expanded range and scope to the Northshore with Carolyn Monteith organizing volunteers at Fontainebleau State Park.

A new book club is off to a great start with the capable leadership of Tres Fisher and participation of his classmates of Spring '21 class. Jr. Master Naturalists has faced some hurdles; but we are forging ahead under a partnership agreement with the LSU Ag center and leaders Meg Adams and Emily Snyder. The Children's Museum volunteer program has an excellent curriculum written by dedicated naturalists led by Hilairie Shackai and Rebecca Stilling.

I know there are many other exciting ways that you have engaged with the community during this unusual time. Let me know on Facebook or Instagram and your project may be featured in the next newsletter.

- Janell Simpson PhD

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Platalea ajaja

(roseate spoonbill)

Photo by Bill Van der Meer

Volunteer Opportunities:

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

From the editor

Looking back on how in a little more than a year and a half ago I attended my first workshop in the Spring 2020 Master Naturalist class, it now seems more like five years have passed. The threat of Covid and way too many zoom meetings later often made the minutes seem like hours.

But it was the processing of copious amounts of information where I learned that completing the course was merely a start in an ongoing journey of discovery, gathering and sharing about the natural world we live in.

And so in the spirit of moving on and sharing, I'm delighted to introduce a few recent graduates who've taken the time to contribute to this issue. Included here is a report on Tres Fisher's efforts to establish a Master Naturalist Book Club.

Nicole Greene, who has distinguished herself as an active volunteer, has submitted the first in what we envision to be a series of Book Reviews as a regular feature. And then we have Dr. Jana Wisniewski's deeply personal reflection of her work related trip and experiences in the Democratic Republic of Congo earlier this summer.

-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.



*Class of Spring 2021 at Grand Isle, LA
Photo by Dr. Bob Rogers*



Book Review:

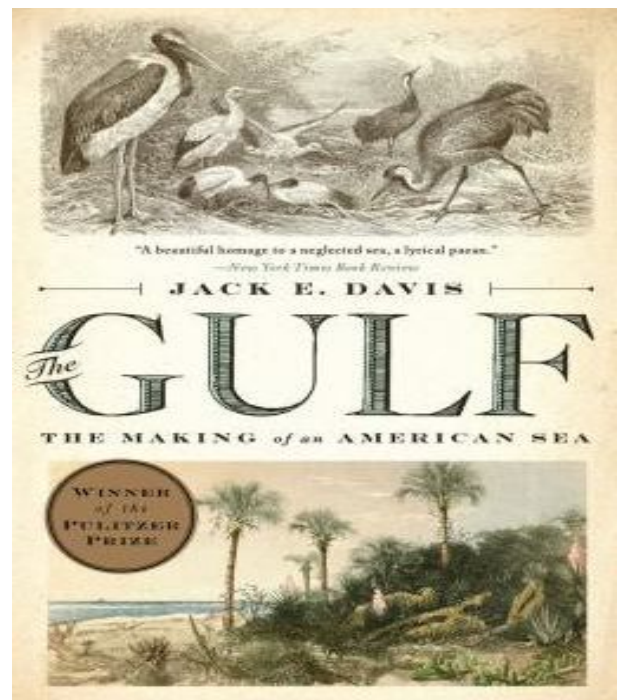
Jack E. Davis's Pulitzer prize-winning *The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea* is a weighty tome of almost six-hundred pages. But this shouldn't deter anyone from reading it.

Although written for a general audience, this study appears to be thoroughly researched with Davis drawing from primary sources in geology, archaeology, anthropology, cartography, history, and, of course, natural history.

The Gulf is a record of the human settlement and exploitation of this sea and its coast, as well as being a description of its fauna and flora. Davis's prose is a pleasure to read with frequent references to writers (and painters) who have been captivated by the Gulf.

The study begins with a Chronology of Events from 10,000 BP to the present. Davis provides informative chapter headings such as "A Fishy Sea" or "Birds of a Feather, Shot Together" alerting the reader as to what will follow. At the beginning of each chapter, he includes several epigraphs from a variety of sources as diverse as early cartographers, a Jimmy Stewart movie, British Governor of West Florida and a French naturalist, novelist of the sea, Joseph Conrad, and Hushpuppy of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Notes are provided as well as an index so that one can easily dip into this book as a reference to learn about different types of Gulf crabs, or pelicans, or sandpipers, or shrimp. One could also use the index to read only about Louisiana, its culture, its oil and gas industry, its coastal marshes and canals, its restoration, all of which relate to the Gulf.



Also included are numerous illustrations: maps, photographs of Avery Island egrets, sailing schooners, condominiums, and hurricane devastation. Organized in a loosely chronological order, the book describes the beauty of this region's animal and plant life, and its exceptional wealth of natural resources. Predictably, it sadly recounts the ways in which these have been devastated over the last three centuries.

However, Davis writes, "In the midst of gloom, there are hopeful stories to be told about clean water and the protection of wildlife" (page 525). Described by John Berry as "an extraordinary achievement," this environmental history of the Gulf belongs on every Louisiana naturalist's bookshelf.

- Nicole Pepinster Greene, PhD

A Master Naturalist Book Club

LMNGNO is currently exploring an initiative to establish a Book Club. Initially conceived and promoted by recent Master Naturalist graduate, Tres Fisher, its mission will be to assign participant members to read preselected books and create a structured platform to discuss literature related primarily to Louisiana's Natural History.

Tres envisions the purpose of the club as being one of self edification and promoting the heritage of Louisiana's Natural History. Live and/or virtual meetings will give folks an opportunity to discuss preselected reading assignments. A leader will facilitate each group to allow for free discussion among expert as well as aspiring naturalists. Frequency and location of meetings would occur at times, dates and places yet to be determined. An example might be City Park's Botanical Gardens as a BYOC (bring your own chair) evening event.

Tres sums it up by saying, *"The hope is that we establish a manageable core group consisting of people who would like to delve into Louisiana's Natural history."* The project could potentially lead to engagement with local authors. He goes on to say that follow-up field excursions are a possibility and would serve to help folks get a feel for what's been read.

Stay tuned for more details on the LMNGNO web site. If you have any questions or ideas, please free to contact him at tresfisher@gmail.com.

The Gator and the Spoonbill

Imagine my surprise while observing my first Roseate Spoonbill when a cruising alligator appeared close by. I was camera ready and sensed some real life drama was about to unfold.

There was a flash of wings, but instead of attempting to escape the jaws of death, the startled bird leapt onto the gator's back, lowered its bill and proceeded to feed in the wake of its massive head.

So off they sailed into the dappled late afternoon sun, leaving me quite bewildered.

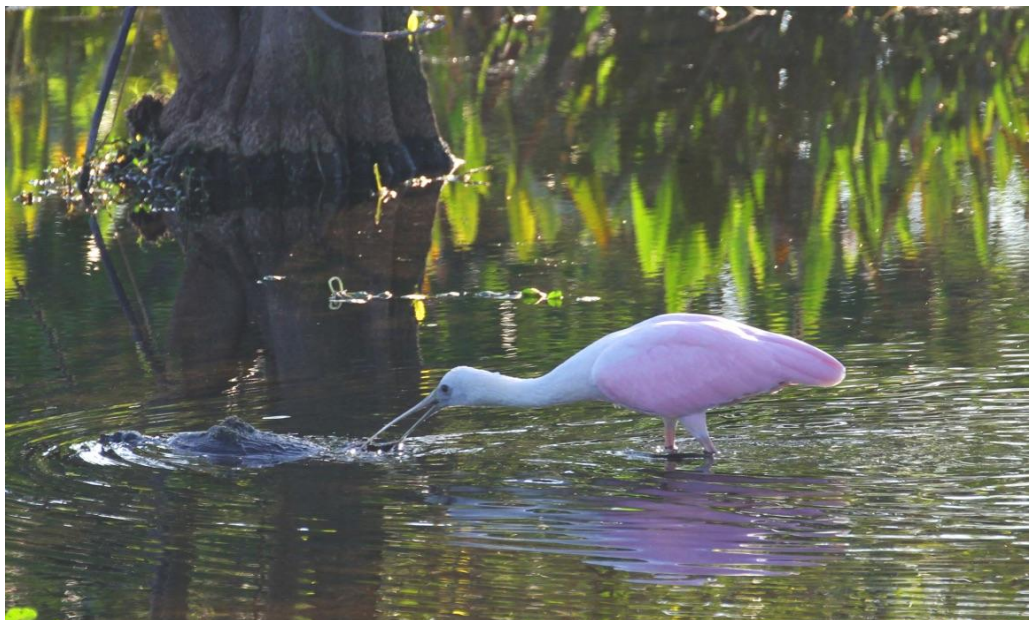


Photo and caption by Bill Van der Meer

A Louisiana Naturalist in the DR Congo

By: Dr. Janna Wisniewski



My first international trip since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic was off to a rocky start. I had just arrived in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, to work with the Kinshasa School of Public Health on an evaluation of a USAID-supported nutrition and food security program. My colleague, Dr. Pierre Akilimali and I were going to train a team of supervisors who would oversee a survey of 4,000 households in three provinces.

A history of brutal colonization, war, political instability, inflation, under-investment, climate change and now COVID-19 have led parts of the country to be incredibly susceptible to hunger, with women and children being the most impacted. The program we were evaluating works to strengthen farming practices, resilience to shocks, and community cohesion with the goal of stable access to nutritious food.

As a public health person, I had taken all the precautions: vaccinated with two doses, pre-departure negative test, wore a mask through the entire journey. My final hurdle was to get a second COVID test at the airport. The passengers were herded off the plane and crammed into a small, windowless, temporary building on the tarmac. It was complete chaos. I was being pressed from all sides, people yelling in languages I didn't understand. I am usually pretty unflappable, but I really thought I might cry. And then as I looked up and, down from the bare fluorescent light bulb, flew a moth. I was the only one who noticed it, and suddenly the room around me seemed still. When I finally made it out of the building there were bats hunting in the streetlights, and I was so happy to see them that I greeted them out loud.



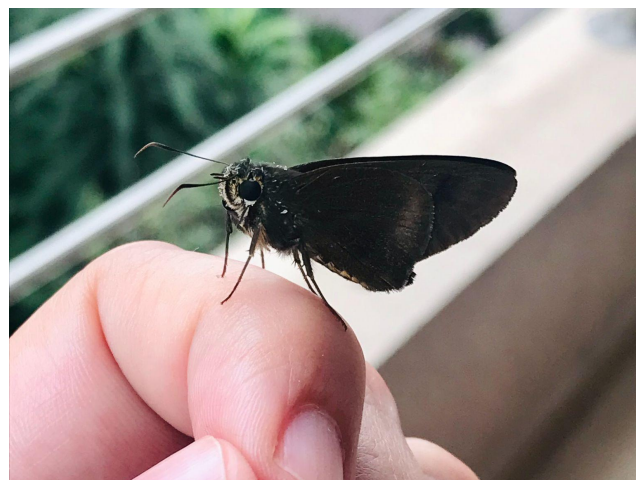
Typical farm in Kinshasa during our survey pilot testing

All photos by Dr. Wisniewski

My favorite thing about being a Master Naturalist is becoming aware of everyone else, the non-humans, who are all around. Once you start to see the world through that lens, you can't turn it off. A rainbow agama lizard liked to hang out on my hotel room balcony. If I went outside she'd leap over the side but peek at me from behind the wall. I gave her apples, which also attracted doves, bulbuls, and cordon bleus. Moths and butterflies were everywhere.

Congo, continued

I spent an evening with a skipper perched on my hand, her warming up and enjoying the salt from my skin and me watching the African grey parrots coming in to roost and listening to the kingfishers. Driving around the city, I noticed that the ubiquitous white birds looked a lot like cattle egrets. It turns out, they were cattle egrets! They're native to Africa and have only found their way to the US in the last century. Pied crows are also omnipresent, but unlike our crows, these perform aerial acrobatics, climbing high above the traffic then spiral diving until they almost hit the ground. In Congolese folklore they are the tricksters, but mostly people don't pay them any attention.



A skipper, a species unknown but very fond of me

During my last weekend, I went with a friend and his family to *Le Parc de La Vallée de la N'Sele*, a new safari park on the outskirts of the city. I am thrilled that there's a place where people from the city can experience nature, but it was strange because the animals (lions, zebras, crocodiles, etc.) were all imported. I have no idea which of them are native. Kinshasa has been a metropolis for so long there's not much large wildlife left. In fact, large wildlife have suffered throughout the country, victims of the same forces that cause food insecurity for humans.



Black Rhino and Cattle Egrets at Parc N'Sele

Back at the hotel, I spent an evening drinking and having an interesting conversation with a team of Kenyan wildlife biologists who were in the country to investigate reports of lions returning to one of the provinces after being absent for decades. The training and survey went smoothly, and I made it, COVID-free, back to New Orleans and my flowers and my caterpillars and the anole that sleeps in my lime tree, but with a renewed sense that as a naturalist, I'm actually home wherever I go.

