

the *NATURALIST* newsletter

Louisiana Master Naturalists, Greater New Orleans

LMNGNO Annual Gathering

October 11-13, 2024

The 2024 Annual Gathering of the LMNGNO will take place from October 11-13 at the beautiful Bogue Chitto State Park, just an hour and fifteen minutes from downtown New Orleans. Spanning 1,786 acres along the Bogue Chitto River, the park offers diverse natural environments, including streams, cypress-tupelo swamps, hardwood and upland forests, and even some rare Louisiana hills!

This gathering is a fantastic opportunity for our chapter to connect, learn, and immerse ourselves in nature. If you enjoyed the certification program, you will love the Annual Gathering. The weekend will feature engaging talks, excursions, hands-on activities, and plenty of free time to relax and explore. This year's sessions include phenology, nature photography, forest therapy, animal tracking, bone identification, native plants, a bat walk, an owl prowl, and more.

This event is open to all dues-paying members and friends, and those who are currently undergoing certification. Meals are provided from Friday dinner through Sunday breakfast. You can stay in the bunkhouse for a nominal fee (\$10 for the weekend) or choose from tent camping and cabin rental options nearby. Plus, attending counts toward your continuing education hours!

For more information and to register, visit <https://louisianamasternaturalistsgno.org/winter-gathering-2024>.

- Janna Wisniewski

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Bill Van der Meer photo

Barred Owl (at Bayou Coquille)
Strix varia

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Janna Wisniewski photo

Dr. Bob Thomas leads an in-field tutorial on salamanders at Bogue Chitto State Park
Fall 2023 LMNGNO Annual Gathering

From the editor.....

A Fond Farewell of Sorts

It is very much with mixed feelings that I've decided to move on from my role as editor of the Naturalist newsletter effective with this issue. It's been a labor of love for the past four years. I wasn't quite sure what I was getting into from the start. But because of the generous amount of positive response, this publication literally took on a life of its own. This is due to how much the contributions by authors whose articles, reports and reviews have enriched this publication. I want to thank everyone especially my editorial staff as well as my colleagues on the communications committee who made it all public.

They say that to teach or write is to learn. On a personal note nothing can be more true than the education I've received from the folks with whom I've had the privilege of working with, some of whom also vetted my own submissions. Again, Thanks!

-Bill Van der Meer

2024 Events Calendar:

Board of Directors Meetings (5:30 pm)

Also open to all members in
good standing

LMNGNO Resource Room
STEM Library
3011 N I-10 Service Rd.
Metairie, LA 70002

**October 30th
December 4th (if needed)**

General Membership Meetings

Begin at 5:30pm
Loyola University
Miller Hall, Room 114

November 13

Special Events

**Annual Gathering Oct. 11-13
Location
Bogue Chitto State Park**

***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.***

[Visit us on the web](#)

More Naturalist Hiking Trails Close By **by: Catherine Leftwich and Bill Van der Meer**

As noted in the May 2024 issue of the Naturalist newsletter, all of the hiking trails presented are under a two hour drive from New Orleans (Mid City as reference). The Explorers Guides: 50 Hikes in Louisiana by Janina Baxley was a major guide in creating this list, as well as informing our own and others about local hiking adventures. Although slightly outdated (published in 2004), it is a good reference.

Bonnet Carré Spillway 25 min

Total Distance: 5 miles

Hiking time: 2 hours

Habitats: bottomland hardwood forest, cypress swamp

[Link to the Bonnet Carré Spillway](#)

Built between 1929 and 1931 in response to the major damage from the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, the Bonnet Carré Spillway serves the dual purpose of flood mitigation and recreation. The spillway diverts water from the Mississippi River into Lake Pontchartrain, and has been opened fifteen times since 1931. Located on Rt 61 ("the Airline") at Norco LA, the park features a well maintained mountain biking and hiking path that meanders through thick vegetation. The path runs parallel to a levee that borders the southeastern edge of the spillway, which also provides vehicle access to at least three canoe and kayak ramps. The improved gravel road ends at the newly constructed Wetland Watchers Park on the shore of lake Pontchartrain. Anglers will enjoy a myriad of waterways and ponds replete with bass, bowfin, catfish, and bluegill. Black willows line the trails, hosting the colorful viceroy butterfly. Stands of cypress and tupelo occupy swamp segments. Sugarberries, blackberries, and marshmallows dominate the marsh. *Iris giganticaerulea* enthusiasts will likely observe long swaths of their April blooms that line the ditches along the base of the levee. Local fauna include alligators, snakes, turtles, rabbit, deer, and beaver. The area is popular with birders. Bald eagles have been spotted, as well as red shouldered hawks, double-crested cormorants, and the usual suspects of migratory and wading birds.



Alligator gar and river catfish gulp or otherwise cruise the cypress swamp



Bill Van der Meer photos

....and an interstate runs through it.

Tickfaw State Park 1h

Total Distance: 2.3 miles

Hiking time: 1 hour

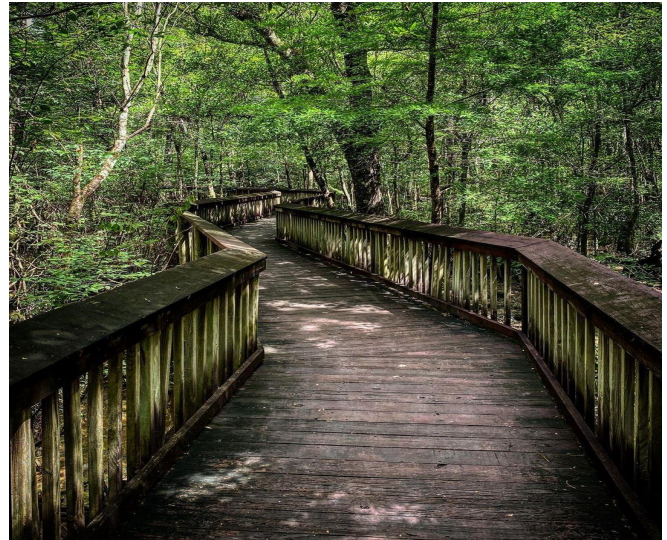
Habitats: mixed pine and hardwood forest, cypress swamp

[Link to the Tickfaw State Park Website](#)

Tickfaw State Park was developed as Louisiana’s first state park for nature education. There are five hiking trails, four of which are wheelchair accessible. Each trail leads hikers through rivers, upland and bottomland hardwoods and swamp habitat. The River Trail ends at a canoe launch, perfect for beginning a trip down the Tickfaw River. There is camping available, with reservations. A splash pad offers fun for younger children during warmer months. The mosquitos are prevalent during much of the year, especially on the boardwalk trails, so be aware and prepare accordingly.

As this is a State Park, there is a 3\$ entrance fee per person. There’s no charge to children under the age of 3 and adults over 62.

Note: The once spectacular boardwalks in the park remain closed due to significant damage caused by hurricane Ida. Keep checking their web site for updates on rebuilding efforts.



Photos courtesy of Tickfaw State Park



Photo courtesy of an anonymous beachgoer

Class of Spring 2024 poses at Elmer’s Island, LA. The good word about the LMNGNO course is out there as evidenced by a two-year waiting list. Thanks to all who make it possible.

Our Disappearing Coast by Jim Grice



Mary Gubala Photo

Our charter flight, operated by [Southern Seaplane Inc.](#)

On a stifling June afternoon in Belle Chase Michele Mire, Mary Ann Breen and I climbed into the claustrophobic cockpit of a small seaplane, the dockhand holding the plane steady as we boarded. The young pilot followed us and the dockhand pushed the plane away from the dock. We taxied down the tiny canal toward a bridge that brought questions to my mind about the fact that we weren't going fast enough to fly over it, but still it loomed ahead.

Momentarily, the pilot cut the engine and swung around. My apprehension was relieved as I stared down a very long canal. He revved the engine and immediately we were speeding down the waterway, reading the graffiti on the walls along the canal, now suddenly airborne and off to our adventure. As we approached high voltage lines, again giving me pause about the youthful pilot, he suddenly banked hard right and ahead I could see the Mississippi and beyond Lake Pontchartrain. Quickly gaining altitude we flew toward the Industrial Canal and turning east as we approached the notorious Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (the MRGO). Below, an enormous field of solar panels lay between NASA's Michoud facility and the MRGO. I wondered whether the energy produced went to Michoud or Entergy. I have not yet answered that question.

We soon turned east toward Lake Borgne, flying over a 1.8 mile long surge protection barrier at the confluence Bayou Bienvenue and the MRGO. Locally known as the "Great Wall of Chalmette" the Army Corps of Engineers ostensibly designed this barrier to protect Orleans and St. Bernard parishes from invasion by the ever increasing tidal surge created by the spawn of global warming and the ever bigger hurricanes.

From here we turned south toward lower St Bernard Parish. The marsh was still littered with sailboats and shipping containers, compliments of Hurricane Katrina. Some marshland looked relatively healthy with small areas of thriving swamp, much of which was planted by The Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana or other conservation groups. It was satisfying to see the success of these projects since I had worked on several myself.

Soon however, the skeletal remains of the once thriving wetlands of lower St. Bernard appeared. The extreme devastation of coastal erosion caused by multiple forces, some man made, some natural, was clear.



Mary Gubala Photo

Water, water everywhere along the tenuous thread of fishing boats and camps along the Delacroix Highway at Reggio. Looking north, Lake Borgne appears along the upper edge of the photo.



Mary Gubala Photo

Along the upper left of the photo lies the fishing village of Shell Beach and the mouth of Bayou Yscloskey which empties into the MRGO. It continues across and into the open water of Lake Borgne. Fort Proctor is visible on the extreme right.

Straight line oil and gas industry canals introduced saltwater from the Gulf into fresh water marshes and transformed the once thriving marsh into open water. In the distance, we see the tiny fishing villages of Shell Beach and Yscloskey precariously perched on a tiny sliver of land, fighting the Gulf for its existence and daring the next hurricane to wash them away. This is no home for the timid.

Fort Proctor, built in 1850's by General Beauregard, comes into view. Once located on land near the mouth of Bayou Yscloskey, it now stands alone far from shore, Architecturally beautiful, structurally sound, it shows signs of a withering constant battle against the encroachment by the Gulf.

South of Shell Beach we observe where a cypress forest was cut down in a past century, the long radiating lines created by huge trees being dragged across the marsh still evident. What a beautiful swamp it must have been - now, a spotty marsh attempting to restore itself. We now turn west, crossing the Mississippi once again and spotting a few coastal restoration projects, the result of pumping sediment from the Mississippi and allowing nature to generate the vegetation required to anchor the soil. Some projects are green with success, others still gray sand, hopefully each a new beginning.

Swinging north we pass over Lafitte and Lake Salvador on final approach to that tiny landing canal at Belle Chase. All told a day well spent.



Jim Grice Photo

Radiating lines that appear to converge like the spokes of a wheel. A standing tree at the axis of the spokes served as an anchor to where logs were winched for transport out of what was once a magnificent bald cypress swamp.



Mary Gubala Photo

Water filled Mystery Circles in the marsh?

Workshop 6

A Bayou Coquille Reflection

by: **Bill Van der Meer**

Introduction:

It's September 12, 2020 and at first glance or unless someone points it out, a first time observer may not appreciate the significance of the confused terrain along the Bayou Coquille Trail at Jean Lafitte National Park's, Baritaria Preserve. During two visits here and prior to my registering for the Spring 2020 Master Naturalists course, I couldn't really see the forest for the poison ivy. I was primarily looking for herps and migrant warblers. I've since learned and am now attempting to apply the lessons learned at other sites regarding relationships between species and their habitat.

In places the terrain rises up in very subtle increments into what in one instance are *Rangia* shell middens left by the Tchefuncte and Marksville native cultures. They were hunters, gatherers and fishers who occupied the area more or less contemporaneously from 800 BCE through 400 CE. Not far in from the trail head the exposed root system of a handsome live oak appears to shelter such a midden. A well worn path winds in a short distance off trail, affording visitors a closer look.

The spoils dug out from the surrounding swamp and those associated with construction of the Kenta Canal during the lumbering boom, created noticeable elevation changes in the adjacent topography. In 1957 the prospect of oil motivated exploration of the marsh and led to construction of a raised roadway to access and deliver equipment to future drill sites. In fact the modern day trail and foot bridges are built upon the old roadbed.

The question is, how did natural as well as human activity in these wetlands impact the distribution of plant and animal species we observe today? What kinds of habitats occurred? How do they connect with one another?



© Bill Van der Meer photo

Gator in Salvinia

Ecological Connections:

Experienced naturalists will be looking to answer these questions from an entirely different perspective than the casual observer. They instead will be documenting indicator species, which will eventually enable them to assign classifications of divergent ecosystem types. Trees are a good start. In the case of Bayou Coquille understanding the dynamics of a habitat in southern Louisiana is often a function of minute differences in elevation and subsequent degree of exposure to periodic flooding. The presence of live oaks, hackberry, and rough-leaved dogwood, for instance, are good indicators of an "Upland Hardwood Forest" that exists upon natural levees, and a raised roadway. Squirrels find this to be an ideal habitat due to cyclical acorn and seed drops. In turn rat snakes and blue racers complete only one component of the interconnectedness of this habitat by preying upon the squirrels.

The upland forested areas prevail behind and upslope from what is termed an occasionally flooded "Bottomland Hardwood Forest". Indicator species here include but are not limited to dwarf palmettos, Nuttall's oak, and sweet gum.



Banded water snake
Nerodia fasciata

Somewhat lower still we find Giant Louisiana iris, copper iris and localized stands of water loving tupelo gum and cypress trees. These areas are defined as a “Forested Wetland”, also locally known as a “Tupelo Gum/Bald Cypress Swamp”. Eventually, the unique habitats associated with each forest classification transition to a vast and virtually treeless freshwater “Marsh” and do so in the space of less than one mile from the trailhead.

The predominant indicator species there include pickerel weed, water spangles, bull tongue, spider lilies, wading birds and alligators, who are the apex predators of the marsh.

It should be noted that the transitions from one habitat to another are far from being edge to edge. Known as “ecotones” the handoff from the predominant flora in one type of habitat to another takes place gradually. They become apparent as a mixture of species from one to the next. As such ecotones tend to contain a wider variety of species than the specialized habitats themselves.

Animal species such as snakes, frogs, birds, spiders etc. routinely cross over these habitats and are integral members of these various biological communities. And like a myriad of other organisms existing therein, they are inextricably connected to one another throughout the preserve. They do so through individual adaptive strategies and divide up available resources through a process

known as resource partitioning where for example, insect eating nocturnal bats and diurnal flycatchers pursue the same bug infested resource. They simply work different shifts.

Cultural Impacts:

An impressive old growth Bald Cypress stands alone in the marsh. Aptly named the Monarch, she is by some estimates over 600 years old. There are a number of myths or theories as to why she escaped the crosscut saw, but regardless, she now serves as a reminder of what was once a vast network of Climax Tupelo/Cypress swamps. The unregulated clear cutting and processing of these giants throughout the delta region in the late 1800s through the early 1950’s, resulted in a substantial benefit to an economy consisting of the lumber industry, which accounted for a continuous supply chain of cypress to the ship building, residential construction, commercial wood product and transportation industries until the resource was eventually depleted.

But I believe there’s a bit of irony here. The loss of the magnificent cypress forests resulted in a decades long succession to a new ecosystem now containing an incredibly rich and much more diverse habitat for thousands of plant and animal species. If left alone and as conditions allow these environs may in time morph into the mature growth wetland forest it once was.



Copper iris
Iris fulva

Conclusion:

For those of us who experienced the ambiance of the swamp during Workshop 6, the oppressive heat, humidity, swarms of mosquitoes and fogged up glasses were not much more than a moderate nuisance to be quickly ignored as we bore witness to a barred owl who dropped into a pine tree above our heads. Looking directly at us, it was a very auspicious moment like so many others that evening. The Barataria preserve continues to motivate scientists, photographers, archeologists, artists, and naturalists to return time and again to teach, to learn, or otherwise wax poetic to a cacophony of frog sounds and a thousand peering spider eyes in the beam of a headlamp on a warm summer night.

Postscript:

The date of August 29th, 2024 will mark the third year anniversary of the life altering mayhem that Hurricane Ida visited upon Greater New Orleans and beyond. Along the present day Bayou Coquille trail, the oak that once sheltered the midden is gone, toppled by Ida's winds. I'm told that the famed Monarch bald cypress still stands but is damaged. The trail remains closed by nearly one third of its original length preventing access to the Marsh Overlook and its excellent views of the Kenta Canal and marshland. Remaining portions of the boardwalk are all in varying stages of decay including the bump-out observation platforms now closed off by the park. Additional trails within the preserve have also been closed indefinitely. The question of if and when reconstruction will ever take place notwithstanding, one can only marvel at how quickly nature will take care of itself and cause our human infrastructure to simply vanish when left unattended.



Bill Van der Meer photo

Red Bellied Woodpecker (at Bayou Coquille)
Melanerpes carolinus