HABITAT HERALD

Wildlife Austin's monthly Newsletter

AUSTIN PARKS & RECREATION
Cultural Places, Natural Spaces

Wildlife Austin
Keep Austin Wild

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Wildlife Austin
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UPCOMING EVENTS

Dec 1st - Austin Parks Foundation Republic Square work day:
www.austinparks.org/eventinfo.html?eventkey=553

Dec 5th - APF Bartholomew Park - Creek Restoration Project (RSVP Required)
www.austinparks.org/eventinfo.html?eventkey=530

Dec 8th - KAB Lady Bird Lake Clean Up
www.keepaustinbeautiful.org/LBLDec2012

Dec 8th - Hornsby Bend Monthly Bird Survey
www.hornsbybend.org

Dec 12th - The 5th Annual Green Holiday Party and Variety Show!
texasgreennetwork.org/blog/2012/10/31/5th-annual-green-holiday-party-variety-show-on-12-12-12/

Dec 16 - Sustainable Christmas Expo and Rock Opera
www.sustainablechristmasexpo.org

Dec 16th - 23rd - The Trail of Lights at Zilker Park
www.austintrailoflights.org

December 2012

Tis the Season for Winter Wildlife!

Happy Holidays to everyone. As the days get shorter and the temperatures get colder, one can't help but wonder how our local wildlife fare in the winter. Although Texas doesn't get nearly as cold as other parts of the United States, it still can freeze and sometimes we even might get SNOW! (Okay I know that's rare)... No matter what, winter is still a difficult time for our wildlife. Some migrate to Mexico or South American, but many species chose Texas as their wintering grounds. So, how do they survive?

Some birds, like chickadees, will go into a state known as "regulated hypothermia." They can actually lower their regular body temperature up to 15˚ to conserve energy on cold winter nights! Supplemental food really helps winter residents survive. Please fill up your bird feeders (but keep your cats indoors).

Many of our insect friends die off in the winter or overwinter in the egg or pupal stage. There are a few that do bear the cold as adults, and they have adaptations to prevent freezing. Some even have traces of ethylene glycol (yes, the very same anti-freeze that's in your car) in their bodies. There is only so much they can stand, and a longer cold spell can result in a large number of insect fatalities.

Many of our amphibian species survive through the winter as well. Some, like bullfrogs, will bury themselves in the mud at the bottom of a pond. They may look dead but they are breathing very slowly through their skin. Terrestrial frogs overwinter in rock piles, logs, or leaf litter. So if you have these elements in your wildlife habitat, you are helping out wildlife more than you even realized!

To learn more check out the book "Winter World: The Ingenuity of Animal Survival" by Bernd Heinrich:
www.amazon.com/Winter-World-Ingenuity-Animal-Survival/dp/0061129070

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Notes from Erin

I can't believe I've been working as the Wildlife Austin Park Ranger for almost a year now! The time has really flown by, and I have met so many amazing people. I am so proud to call Austin my home. This truly is an amazing city.

The 2012 Neighborhood Habitat Challenge officially ended on November 15th. I am now working with NWF to tally up the totals and I will announce the winners in the January edition of the newsletter. All the participating neighborhoods did a fantastic job, and I think it's going to be very close. I want to personally thank everyone who got their yard certified in 2012! I hope you all have a safe and happy holiday, and I look forward to 2013.

Incredible Edibles: Prickly Pear Cactus

In 1995 the 74th Legislature named the Texas prickly pear cactus the official plant of Texas. The Texas prickly pear cactus 's scientific name is *Opuntia engelmannii* var. *lindheimeri*. The prickly pear was, indeed, a good choice due to its agricultural importance (and thus, its economic value). It's also quite hardy. Its frost tolerance is 10 degrees F and yet it thrives in the heat of a Texas summer with full sun. In a hot, dry climate cactus converts water into biomass very efficiently. (Historical Note: Apache warriors in west Texas could outrun the U.S. Calvary due to their knowledge of prickly pears' store of water).

According to Medicinal Plants, indigenous people poulticed freshly peeled and baked prickly pear pads for wounds, used it for gout and for rheumatoid relief, drank pad tea for lung ailments, and applied the juice from the fruit to warts.

Prickly pear has been a food staple for at least 8,000 years in this area. And, significantly, it is still eaten today.

Opuntia ficus-indica is the most widespread of the long-domesticated cactuses and its wild origin was probably central Mexico. Fig Opuntia is grown as a fruit crop, but also for its vegetable nopale pads, used for food for humans and cattle alike. Even the brilliant yellow or orange flowers, which bloom between April and June, are edible. When blooms fade, fruit forms.

In order to use the bright green pads, the 1-inch spines are removed either by singeing or scraping. The nopale pads, which are high in vitamin A and calcium, can be boiled, steamed or roasted. Sliced nopale pads, commonly called nopalitos, are sautéed with eggs and served in a flour tortilla for breakfast. Nopalitos taste like a cross between celery and green beans. Hot sauce greatly enhances the bland flavor.

Prickly pear fruit, called tunas by both Apache and Comanche, mature in late summer to a red-purple fruit. The fruit is very, very seedy. Tunas contain calcium, phosphorus and vitamin C. Archeological evidence indicates that Texas Indians dried and stored the tunas like figs. Tunas were an important, seasonal staple in their diet.

Today, jellies are commonly made from tunas. Finding a recipe that worked was a bit of a challenge. I pieced together a recipe from several sources. I gathered a bucketful (approx. 75 tunas) from prickly pear plants. I rinsed the tunas in cool water because of the presence of snail and bird debris. Once dry, I seared the fine, hairlike spines, called glochids, on my gas stove. I also cut the glochids off whenever they clustered in one spot on a tuna. I then boiled the tunas in two large cooking pots for about 20 minutes. Once soft, I drained the magenta-colored water. At this stage, the tunas must be either mashed or pulverized, and then strained of a billion seeds, not that the seeds are harmful. Believe-it-or not, the best straining tool is a pair of new, unused stockings. The remaining juice is what you will work with.

The recipe for Terrific Tuna Jelly follows:

- 2 ½ c. tuna juice
- ½ lemon juice (6 juicy lemons or 6 juicy limes)
- 3 c. sugar
- Powdered pectin (approx. 18 teaspoons, which is a tad over the contents of one box of Ball No Sugar Needed Fruit Pectin); therefore, buy two boxes of powdered pectin
- Hard boil tuna juice, pectin and lemon juice for 3 minutes. "Hard boil" is the point at which the juice bubbles even when it is stirred. Stir in the sugar. Bring the tuna juice back to a hard boil for approximately 6 minutes or until the jell point is reached when the juice begins to stick to the end of the spoon.
- Spoon the slightly thickened juice into small canning jars and seal. Before putting the jars into a deep cooking pot, cover the bottom of the pot with a tea towel. Heat process for 10 minutes.
- "Heat process" means putting the jars into a water bath which covers the top of the jars by 1 inch. Put a lid on the pot. Boil the water with filled jars for 10 minutes as mentioned above. Let jars rest on your countertop until cooled. The jelly sets in one hour.
- Store your jars of jelly in your pantry or give Terrific Tuna Jelly to any relative or friend who will surely appreciate your many hours of labor!

Bon Appetit!

By Susan Smith

Susan Smith is an Austin Habitat Steward and Texas Master Naturalist

Garden of the Month

This month I decided to feature my very own container garden. I started it in April of this year and it has been a labor of love ever since. I just wanted to show everyone that you don't need a yard to garden for wildlife. Every day I am visited by squirrels, birds, insects, and one time even a small snake. You can imagine how surprised I was to find a freshly-shed snake skin next to one of my plants (especially since I am on the 3rd floor)! Having a container garden is fun and relatively easy, but much of it is trial and error. I have learned the hard way what plants thrive and what plants don't like being confined. It's also very important to determine how much sun your balcony gets, and to keep any eye out for aphids and spider mites. I love my garden, and I highly recommend anyone without a yard to give container gardening a try.

Most of my sun comes in the morning from the East so I have arranged the plants accordingly

Blooming mistflower

Tables are a nice way to arrange your plants and provide even more sun access!

Hanging plants is also a great way to save space and I have had many visitors to that hummingbird feeder!

This cherry sage has bloomed non-stop since May

Bird feeders are wonderful but be aware that they will also attract squirrels! Make sure you have adjacent doors and windows closed :)

A modest compost operation (I would recommend keeping it covered)

Plants that worked:

- Several different species of salvia (sage)
- Texas Lantana
- Pavonia (rock rose)
- Both species of mistflower
- Texas betony
- Winecup
- Any herb you can imagine
- Mexican feathergrass
- Flame acanthus

Sometimes when it's really hot your new squirrel friends might just deem your garden nap-worthy!

Schoolyard Habitat Update

AISD Model Habitat Has Broken Ground!

Thanks to the many Habitat Steward volunteers that have helped with the construction of the AISD model habitat. The habitat will be used for student field trips, teacher trainings, community events, etc. The work wouldn't be possible without the help of volunteers like you!

Before

Current as of mid-November

Schoolyard Habitat Success Depends on Volunteers Like You!

Contact Anne Muller AISD Outdoor Learning Specialist
amuller@austinisd.org or 841-5070
For an up to date list of work days and volunteer opportunities

Join KAB and Clean up Lady Bird Lake!

Join KAB for their last Lady Bird Lake cleanup of 2012! It's one of the most beautiful spots in Austin, and here's your chance to help keep it that way. Bring your family, friends, service group, coworkers, or just yourself and help us pick up litter from the shorelines. It's a fun and easy way to do your part in keeping our city beautiful. You can clean up on the shore or from your boat! Click the link below to register now!

www.keepaustinbeautiful.org/LBLDec2012

Would YOU like to receive the the Wildlife Austin newsletter electronically?

Simply e-mail us at wildlife@austintexas.gov!

The Sustainable Christmas Expo 2012!

If you are struggling with what to give for Christmas, there is an alternative to socks, bobbles and fruit cake. You can find gifts that keep on giving while supporting local businesses and non-profits that support a green sustainable people and planet....- From local honey, coffee and jewelry to local farmers, rain barrels, electric scooters and hybrids....to gift certificate admissions to cooking, yoga, dance & gardening classes or admissions to a green collar job education.... or how about the gift of a membership or donation to a non-profit committed to bringing forth a safe, sustainable and fulfilling community.... like SafePlace, Sustainable Food Center or adopting a rescue dog, cat or Wombat.

If you believe we should leave our children a better world than how we found it.... If you believe giving is really "the reason for the season".... bring your family to one of the most fun and inspiring community events you will ever attend.

Have a tree planted in love's name.
Adopt a rescue dog, cat or wombat.
Cooking Classes, Yoga Classes, Dance Classes, Gardening Classes
Support Safeplace. End sexual and domestic violence once and for all.
Have produce from local farmers delivered to grandma.
Join a CO-OP.
Have an organic garden installed.
An electric scooter, bicycle or hybrid automobile.
An eco trip to the rain forest or diving at the Palancar Reefs in Cozumel.

www.sustainablechristmasexpo.org

"Like"

Austin Parks and Recreation on Facebook and look for the Wildlife Austin posts!

The City of Austin is proud to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you require assistance for participation in our programs or use of our facilities, please call (512) 974-6700.