



The Sabal

November 2009

Volume 26, number 8

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November Meeting of the Native Plant Project:
Tuesday, November 24th at 7:30 P.M.

Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border
(in Gibson Park), Weslaco.

"Native Plants and Birds That Use Them"
by Martin Hagne

Martin Hagne is Executive Director of the Valley Nature Center in Weslaco. He will present November's program for the Native Plant Project. Martin was born and raised on the Swedish west coast, where his grandfather instilled a love for nature at an early age. He moved to the United States and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas in 1979 and turned his focus towards wildlife viewing and conservation concerns.

Come see some great shots of our native plants and birds, and find out about some great bird-attracting plants for your yard or business from one of the LRGV's long-time experts.

The Sabal is the newsletter of the Native Plant Project.

It conveys information on native plants, habitats and environment of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas.

Previous **Sabal** issues are posted on our website [www.NativePlantProject.org].
Electronic versions of our **Handbooks** on recommended natives for landscaping are also posted there.

Change of address, missing issue, or membership: <bwessling@rgv.rr.com>
President - Eleanor Mosimann - (956)-748-2564; <mosimann@sbcglobal.net>

Sabal or Not a Sabal—A photo quiz.

Which of these photos are from a *Sabal mexicana*?
(Turn the page upside down to see the answers.)



Book Review: by Ken King

“Cactus of Texas, Field Guide,” 2009, by Nora and Rick Bowers and Stan Tekiela, published by Adventure Publications, Inc. ISBN-13: 978-1-59193-212-3

This title is one in a series of six Texas field guides on birds, mammals, trees, wildflowers, cactus and freshwater fish.

Selling at \$15.95, soft-cover, “Cactus of Texas” is available locally at Barnes & Noble. Eighty species of cactus are described, **with all LRGV species covered in detail.**

Ample photographs of each species show spines, overall growth habit, blooms and fruit. Photos are opposite concise descriptions of each characteristic: size, shape, stem, spines, spine clusters, flower, blooming period, fruit, habitat and range, as well as a range map by county.

For many species, two pages of additional photos and information describe and illustrate differences between similar-appearing species.

Notes include name origin, range and habitat description outside Texas, and propagation and culture information.

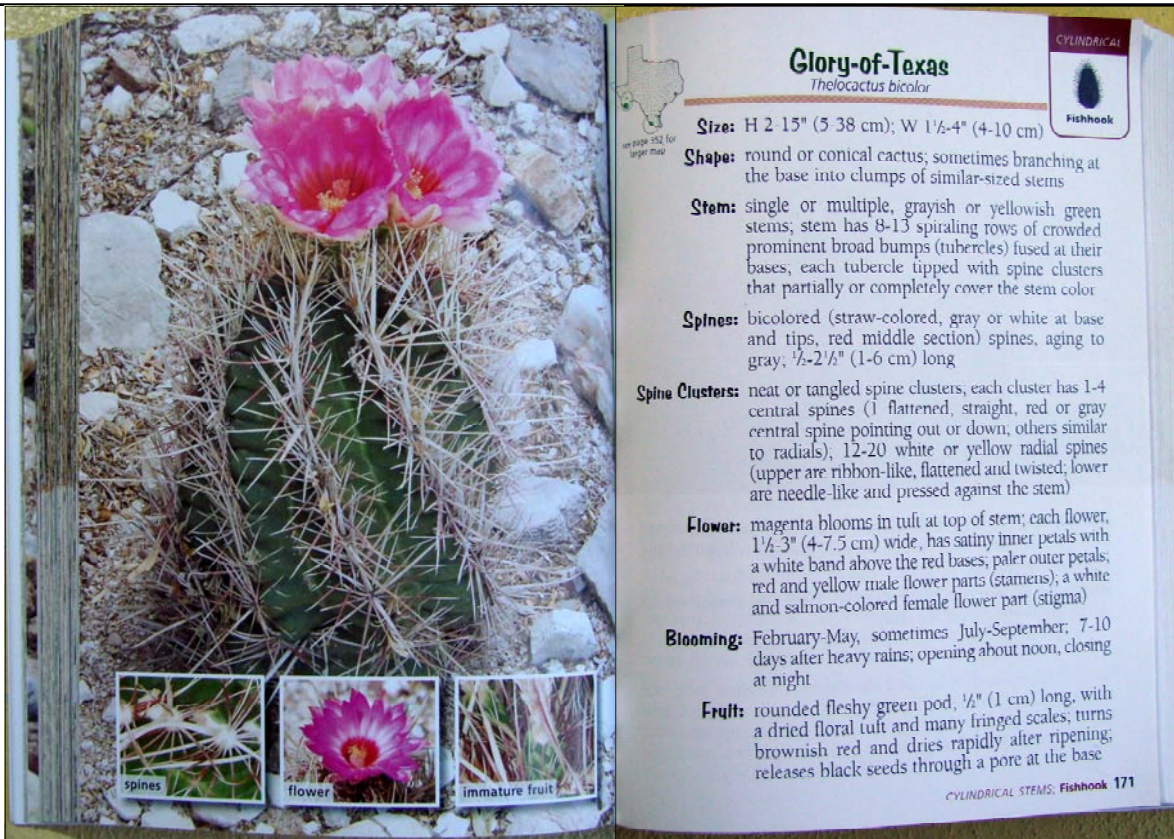
Detailed range maps are found in a back section of the book. One criticism of the book is that detailed range maps and index are limited to common name. (Perhaps that’s because cactus taxonomy has been in constant flux.)

Some may find the small chunky size (about four by six inches) awkward, but the small size is convenient to take into the field. County names are not printed on range maps, which can be inconvenient.

Otherwise this is an excellent guide, with most photos showing the plant’s typical habitat. The extensive photos of fruits and flowers are the result of a tremendous commitment on the part of the authors.

This is an affordable reference guide which fills a need for an updated guide to Texas cacti.

The illustration below is from pages 170-171, “Cactus of Texas, Field Guide,” on the Glory of Texas cactus, *Thelocactus bicolor*. Additional information on the Glory of Texas is found on two successive pages. This striking cactus occurs in Starr County in South Texas.



Alkali Sacaton

by Mike Heep

Sacaton, or Alkali Sacaton, (*Sporobolus wrightii*) is a large bunchgrass native to the LRGV. The name “sacaton” translates from the local Spanish as “big grass”. It is usually found in clay or clay loam soils that may be a little saline.

It is reported to grow up to 7-8 feet high, although I usually see it 3-5 feet. The inflorescence is a very open, pyramid-shaped panicle to 2 feet long and 6-12 inches wide.

Sacaton is in the genus *Sporobolus*. The members of this genus are known as “dropseeds”. Each spikelet in a panicle consists of 2 glumes and a single floret enclosed by a lemma and palea. The palea often splits at maturity, allowing the seed to readily fall out. The seed coat becomes gelatinous when it absorbs moisture.

Dr. Robert I. Lonard’s grass book **Guide to Grasses of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas** (1993) lists 10 species of *Sporobolus* native to the LRGV. All are bunchgrasses except coastal dropseed (*S. virginicus*), which spreads by rhizomes. The one most similar to sacaton is Padre Island Dropseed (*Sporobolus tharpii*). P. I. dropseed grows in sandy soils of the secondary dunes. The panicle is a little more contracted (less open) and is more ellipsoidal than pyramidal. Whorled Dropseed (*Sporobolus pyramidatus*) is very similar to sacaton in growth form, but it only reaches a height of 12-18 inches with a panicle about 6 inches long.

There is another species, *Sporobolus airoides*, that shares the common name “Alkali Sacaton.” This Alkali Sacaton occurs in western Texas north to Nebraska.

Sacaton is most common near the coast in the area that many of us refer to as the lomas. The lomas, known by geologists as “clay dunes”, are surrounded by low saline flats that are occasionally inundated by high water lev-

els from storms. This area along the coast was previously known locally as the “Jackass Flats” or “Jackass Prairie”. It’s said that wild or feral donkeys once roamed these flats. They were supposedly rounded up once and for all in the 1940’s and sold for dog food.

Sacaton is most commonly found at and near the bases of the lomas at slightly higher elevations than the flats. The adjoining vegetation at lower elevations is usually mostly sea ox-eye daisy (*Borrchia frutescens*), shoregrass (*Monanthochloe littoralis*), and/or gulf cordgrass (*Spartina spartinae*).

Sacaton is a worthy candidate for use in landscaping. We first used it as a slightly smaller version of Pampas Grass. One caveat is that it can get a little weedy.

Those seeds will indeed drop.



Above: Alkali Sacaton inflorescence.



Alkali Sacaton photographed by C. Mild at the entrance to Valley Nature Center in Weslaco.

Editor's Notes: Martin Hagne, Executive Director of Valley Nature Center provided this information about recent landscaping use of Alkali Sacaton. "TPWD, at Estero Llano Grande State Park in Weslaco, planted many dozens of the plants along some of their trails along several ponds. They are starting to grow a bit and will eventually act like buffers between visitors and the ponds, as well as probably help stop run off materials into the ponds. I was not personally part of that project but have watched it in progress. It looks nice and seems very functional. TPWD donated about 50 plants to the VNC that we planted in our nature park or sold in our nursery."

Master Naturalists have planted ~30 Sacaton along the sloping banks of the Arroyo Colorado at Ramsey Nature Park in Harlingen. So far, the plants have done well. They will be watered by soaker hose until established. It is hoped that this very large grass will be able to compete successfully with the exotic guinea grass which currently populates most of the Arroyo Colorado's banks. Plants were donated by: South Texas Natives, Caesar Kleberg W. R. I. USDA Kika de la Garza Plant Materials Center.

**Shrubs (short trees) of Wetter Places—by C. Mild
Caesalpinia & Coralbean**

Some of our most beautiful blooming trees require a bit more moisture than the average thorny brush. They are good choices for landscapes where water can be provided. Planted directly into the wild from seed, they will germinate following a prolonged wet season. Mexican Caesalpinia and Coralbean are found in places where moisture is sometimes abundant. Neither is present in great numbers, but may be encountered in wild areas of the LRGV.

Mexican Caesalpinia, Tabachin del Monte. →
Caesalpinia mexicana. Propagated and “escaped” in the LRGV, more common in Northern Mexico. Similar species from tropical areas around the globe are cultivated. Caesalpinia occurs in many yards, where it has been cultivated for many years. Blooming occurs after rain.



Both Caesalpinia and Coralbean are propagated easily by seed, although Coralbean has a very hard seedcoat. Each is a Legume. Coralbean seed is poisonous. Caesalpinia may be also. Both are well-suited to LRGV landscapes, growing quickly when moisture is available. Each withstands drought.



Coralbean, Colorin. *Erythrina herbacea*. →
Damaged by frost. It occurs in sandy woods of the TX Coastal Plain and in several coastal states. Coralbean is encountered along the Rio Grande. It is dry-deciduous. Blooms often occur on barren, thorny, overhanging limbs. Similar exotic species are also cultivated. Attractive red seed hangs in open black pods. ←
Coralbean seed is poisonous.



Nature Happenings in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas

The following have guided walks and programs about Valley nature and wildlife:

Edinburg Scenic Wetlands and World Birding Center (956) 381-9922

Quinta Mazatlan - McAllen Wing of the World Birding Center (956) 688-3370

Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park WBC (956) 584-9156

Santa Ana NWR has Nature Tram rides (late Nov. thru April) at 9:30, 12 noon, 2:00 (956) 784-7500

Valley Nature Center 301 S. Border Ave., Weslaco, TX. (956) 969-2475

Estero Llano Grande State Park WBC FM 1015, Weslaco, TX. (956) 565-3919

Local planting guides are available from **Valley Proud Environmental Council** (956) 412-8004

3 new planting guides are available. Email: <vpec@sbcglobal.net> or visit [www.valleyproud.org]

For a comprehensive calendar go to RGV Nature Coalition at: [www.rgvnaturecoalition.org]

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Billy Snider, Jr.
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email <sue_griffin@sbcglobal.net >

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and revegetation in south Texas.

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Native Plant Rescue:

Valley Nature Center will rescue native plants slated for
destruction by construction or development, or natives no
longer wanted by home owners. Call 956-969-2475.

Come visit the
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NPP Board & General Meetings, 2009:

Sept 22 Oct 27 Nov 24

(Tuesdays) Board Meetings at 6:30pm. Speaker at 7:30pm
Most meetings held at Valley Nature Ctr.

Correction from the October 2009 SABAL:

The bat mentioned on pg. 4 and illustrated on
pg. 5 is correctly named:

*Choeronycteris
mexicana.*



Summary of the Minutes of the Board Meeting - October 27, 2009

The Native Plant Project will have a booth at the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival at the municipal auditorium in Harlingen to be held Thursday, November 12th through Sunday, November 15th. We will be selling plants and handbooks as well as offering a free plant with each new membership.

The Lower Rio Grande Valley chapter of the Texas Master Naturalists
will be hosting a native plants field trip
at the Pérez Ranch 11 miles north of La Joya
on **Sunday December 6th**. Tours will start at **10 a.m.**

A mesquite grill will be going and a **potluck lunch will be served at 12:30.**

Everyone is invited. Call Betty or Susan at (956) 580-8915 for directions and to sign up.

The **Native Plant Project (NPP)** has no paid staff or facilities. NPP is supported entirely by memberships and contributions. Anyone interested in native plants is invited to join. Members receive 8 issues of **The Sabal** newsletter per year in which they are informed of all project activities and meetings.

Meetings are held at:

Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border, Weslaco, TX.

Native Plant Project Membership Application

Regular \$15/yr. Contributing \$35/yr
Life \$250 one time fee/person
Other donation: _____

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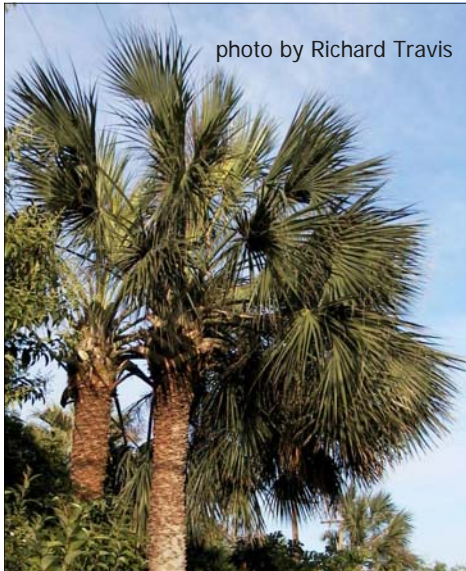


photo by Richard Travis

Nov. 24th at 7:30 p.m.

"Native Plants and Birds That Use Them"
presented by Martin Hagne

Valley Nature Center, 301 S Border, Weslaco, TX



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