



Vicki Penziner-Matson Spring Break Field Trip, 2012: Report East and Central Texas

Earlham has an endowed fund set up in memory of Vicki Penziner-Matson by Michael and Judy Penziner, Laurence Matson (her husband) and her friends. Vicki passed away suddenly and unexpectedly in the winter of her senior year. Her and Laurence's great interests were in field biology and photography. The fund was set up explicitly to offer field natural history and photography experiences open to the Earlham community.

The fund is distinctive, perhaps unique in higher education. It is restricted to supporting experiences not required by academic courses, programs, etc. Over the past 40 years this fund has supported travel, meals, equipment and lodging (usually tents or state park cabins) for weekend or spring break trips to various sites in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ontario, Kentucky, Florida, Texas and elsewhere. As our broader culture has become increasingly estranged from nature and the natural aspects of landscapes, this travel opportunity has become increasingly important for participants' world-views and environmental insights.

This year's spring break trip participants (23 students and leaders) departed shortly after 04:00 hours on Saturday, 10 March, heading for Texas -- open to letting weather and our discoveries dictate our wanderings. As is the goal of the Penziner-Matson trips we had a diverse group of participants (see list below).

Daylight found us in Illinois, traveling west across the flat, till landscapes left by the Pleistocene glaciers. At Effingham we turned south and soon were approaching the unglaciated, wooded hills of southern Illinois. The rest of Illinois is dominated by agricultural use on the till flatlands. We began to count Red-tailed Hawks and other raptors we saw along the interstate. After crossing the Mississippi River, we passed through the rolling land of southeastern Missouri and then dropped onto the broad Mississippi delta in Arkansas. Red-tailed Hawks were abundant and even the folks who had been napping joined in the counting. New agricultural crops became common: cotton and rice. At Memphis, we turned west, left the delta and traveled through Little Rock. We pulled into Lake Catherine State Park before dark. Heavy rain and flooding was forecast for eastern TX where we had thought we might stay. Stopping in Arkansas allowed us to camp comfortably and avoid the rain. It also gave us the opportunity to appreciate the flowering Red Maples and Serviceberries. [For Neanderthal Bill, traveling with GPS and weather reports on hand held devices was sweet, but a bit unsettling -- he can remember when it took 4+ weeks to get a telegram to the Kenya program.]



We counted up our hawk count and found we had seen 153 Red-tailed Hawks!

On Sunday, we packed up just as a drizzle began and headed west through Texarkana, then south into the Piney Woods of east Texas. Breakfast was under a pavilion at Caddo Lake State Park with rain coming in torrents one moment and lulling at others. The forest trees were just beginning to show leaf buds, Redbud, Red Buckeye and Serviceberry were at peak bloom. We vowed to come back later to do some canoeing in the Bald Cypress swamps.

On Sunday evening we reached Village Creek State Park, TX. Terrific rainstorms with tornado watches were just finishing. Here we met the 24th member of our party -- Laurence Matson (Alumnus, Mask and Mantle member, donor to the fund)!! For years we have tried to coordinate with him so that he could join in a trip. It finally worked out and for the next six days he was an integral part of the group. His deep interest in, and ownership of, beyond state-of-the-art photography equipment was shared with all of us, as were his memories of Earlham.

The campsites at Village Creek were walk-ins and as we first found our way to the sites, the heavy humidity, warmth, and choruses of calling frogs (including widespread individual Rio Grande Chirping Frogs, belonging to a common tropical genus, rare in the US) elicited familiar feelings of being in lowland rainforest for Jose, Wendy and Bill. Matt found Hurter's Spade-foot Toads, a species that only comes to the surface after extraordinarily heavy rains. We discussed the species life history, it lives underground for years waiting for adequately heavy rainfall to allow it to emerge and successfully breed.

On Monday we left our camp at Village Creek in place and took a day trip to the Gulf Coast, passing through oil refineries into coastal grasslands and marsh. At a gas stop some of us sampled the local favorite: Hot Boudin (a spicy Cajun sausage whose main ingredient is rice). New birds and plants were everywhere: White-tailed Kite, Roseate Spoonbill, White Ibis, Boat-tailed Grackles, Loggerhead Shrikes, etc. We spent several hours at Sea Rim State Park (haven for large numbers of voracious mosquitoes, glad we didn't try to camp there!) that allowed us to study coastal birds including: Brown Pelican, Royal, Forster's, Common, Sandwich and Caspian Terns, Laughing. Ring-billed, Herring and Bonaparte's Gulls, American Avocet, Tricolored Heron, Short-billed Dowitcher, Least and Western Sandpipers, Dunlins, Black-bellied Plovers, etc. While much of the coast back from the beachfront was flooded, and plants were inundated, Blanketflowers and several other species, familiar to gardeners were blooming wild and natural.

We had a relaxing and discovery rich episode on the beach, swimming, sunning, chasing birds and crabs, etc. We returned to camp and were lulled to sleep by the chirps of frogs all about us. As with every morning on the trip we wakened to the dawn chorus of birds -- staking out territories (beautiful sounds to most of us, disturbing to the slug-a-beds who had been up late chasing frogs or playing cards around the lanterns).

Tuesday we broke camp and traveled south through High Island, TX (a world famous bird migration observation area, but we were 3-weeks ahead of the migration peak) and onto the Bolivar Peninsula heading towards Galveston. 30 years ago this peninsula was covered with hurricane debris and was a mecca for herpetologists. John Iverson "haunted" this area back then. Every billboard, large piece of trash harbored

snakes and other herps. We had high hopes, but development and changing ownership has produced a trash-free environment on the peninsula and we came up empty-handed (Matt, our herp nerd, was a mess -- so let down!).



While we waited in stopped traffic, waiting for the ferry to Galveston Island, Wendy and Jose gave impromptu dance lessons to the group with a van's radio blaring Latin music (to the delight and a mazzement of other folks waiting for the ferry)! Hey, it was Spring Break! Why not be a bit crazy and joyful! Oda

discovered some other Norwegians among the throng of waiting vehicles! Also, by the way, Spanish was nearly a second language of the trip -- and it wasn't just Wendy and Jose trying to communicate behind our backs!!!

That evening we camped (in overflow camping -- TX public schools were on spring break) at Brazos Bend State Park. While tents were set up and our meal prepared, Matt and students drove the park's roads looking for good places to return after dark.

After dark, two full vans went "road cruising". We were looking for frogs, toads, snakes and lizards crossing the road. If you have never done this, its sort of like Christmas! Every so once in a while and unpredictably a "gift" appears in the headlights. Matt drove the lead van and soon had a variety of frogs in hand (to later be shared with the whole group, before being released in the locations they were found): Gray Treefrogs, Green Treefrogs, cricket frogs, chorus frogs, Leopard Frogs. As we drove along, the loud sounds of the frog chorus filled our ears and played on other senses that are difficult to describe.



As different folks from the front van captured frogs, the back van evaluated their style and agility. Matt was definitely the Master of one-handed captures and agility. Imagine him opening his driver's door and reaching out 8 feet to the side (still with one foot on the floor board, his body no more than 2 feet off the road) and snatching a Green Tree Frog off the pavement -- less than a 3-second maneuver. Those of us in the back van rated it a Gollum-like maneuver (-- "yes, my precious!"). We passed a squished Broad-banded Water Snake (Matt had caught a young one earlier). Then we arrived at a pond near the roadside that on quick assessment had lots of amphibians and some obvious alligator eyes shining back at our head lamps and flash lights (Brazos Bend SP is known for its alligators and the next day we saw some huge ones).

We all agreed before starting out that no one would handle poisonous snakes, not even the leaders. But, alligators are sort of a gray area -- not poisonous, but can produce damage proportional to their size. Matt really wanted to catch one to share with the others (have you ever felt a living alligator's skin?). He chose a healthy sized individual and asked permission to try for it. The rest of the leaders were of mixed minds (each conflicted with "yes" and "no" responses). Somehow in the darkness, 4 foot gator in the lights, the leaders reached the conclusion that, "If Bill says OK, you can do it." Bill did and Matt made an Olympian lunge, got two secure hands to the beast and we all had the opportunity to see a gator up close, to touch and handle it, to demystify but build an understanding of "alligator", etc. "Alligator" has a new meaning to a set of people.

Also on this night drive, an armadillo was spotted on the roadside. Instantly Kat jumped from the car and chased it into the thick brush, trying to catch it! Bill, the driver, was overwhelmed with admiration and respect for her effort and enthusiasm. Those left in the van could hear her chasing through the dense brush, muttering to herself, trying, but failing, to capture the critter! What followed in the van was a conversation about armadillos and their role in the study of leprosy -- just one of those academic add-ons that expand from experience. Did you know that armadillos give birth to four, genetically identical offspring with each pregnancy?!

The next morning, Wednesday, we got to explore several areas of the state park and saw a great variety of birds and other animals. The live oaks were festooned with *Tillandsia* (both Spanish Moss and the more usual air plant form). Resurrection Fern was abundant on the tree limbs. During a brief last stop in the park, a small Copperhead (poisonous snake) was found and many folks got to see this beautiful reptile.

We moved on to the Edwards Plateau west of Austin, TX, in the afternoon. Here we ran into the pressures of the Texas public schools spring break.

All the state parks in the area were full and we had no reservations. At a stop in a gas station in Llano, TX, (sorry you folks in Spanish, this is pronounced “Lano”, not “Yano” in those parts), we were overheard by some locals who suggested we try the “Oxford Ranch and Campground” south of town. After a quick call, we discovered that it had space (Debbie, the owner offered the perspective that the place had never been full, that it was 160 acres in size and the most folks they had ever housed at one time was 3500 bikers and it still wasn’t full then!). The ranch was fantastic -- no restrictions on where we camped, how much firewood we collected/used, how many logs we turned over looking for snakes and reptiles, etc. And it had an adequate bathroom block with hot water and showers.



On Thursday we visited Enchanted Rock State Park, famous for its huge granitic monolith that has been exposed by erosion and stands above the local landscape as a bald feature with spheroidal weathering sloughing off large layers of rocks. We heard the park is

popular during the spring break and arrived there shortly after 0800 hours. We got in! But as we left several hours later, cars were backed up for miles trying to enter before the end of the day. We hiked, climbed, searched for birds and lizards and had a great time talking about the geologic nature of the site.

The Oxford Ranch is in the center of the Edwards Plateau of Texas and we hit the peak of the spring wildflower extravaganza for the area. Around our campsite the grassy fields were full of blooming Texas Bluebonnets, Wine-cups, Stemless Evening Primroses, Cut-leafed Germander, Devil’s Claw (seed pods), White Prickly Poppy, Texas Groundsel, Prairie Brazoria, Pointed Phlox, Texas Paintbrush, and many more wildflowers. Many photographs were taken.

After another night (Thursday) at the Oxford Ranch we started back east, aimed at returning to Caddo Lake State Park. Its campgrounds were full, but we got spaces at a nearby state park (Friday night) and arrived at Caddo early. That allowed us to canoe the Bald Cypress swamps in and near the park. We logged many discoveries including some new turtles, a young Cottonmouth, Northern Parula and Prothonotary Warblers, etc. Noticeable was that six days after our first visit here, the trees were well along in leafing



out, Redbud were no longer in flower and Flowering Dogwoods were in full bloom. Spring was passing rapidly and it was apparent.

Laurence left us after canoeing, to catch planes back to Vermont. We were sad to see him go, but glad to have been able to share his interests and humor. In parting, he observed how wonderful it was that the spirit and the mission of the fund lived on, unaltered after so many years and transitions of leadership.

After canoeing we headed on east and camped (Saturday night) west of Memphis at Village Creek State Park, AR. We arrived late at night, set up camp, cooked a big stir-fry and turned in on soft grass and with warm temperatures. In the morning, Redbuds were in full bloom and migrant birds were singing. Our campground neighbors made a point of noting how thoughtful, quiet and organized such a large group was as it arrived late -- their initial trepidation turned to admiration.

More than 30 years ago, on about the same date, Bill had stayed at this campground with Margaret Lechner and the Southwest Field Studies Program returning to Earlham. Then too we arrived late at night, but then the camp was vacant. We threw out our sleeping bags on flat ground only to realize that it was frozen puddles into which we would melt ourselves overnight! Climate change....

On Sunday we returned to Earlham before dusk.

Over the past week a diverse segment of the Earlham community had gotten to know each other as friends and fellow travelers/ learners. For those of us who were leaders, there is something elemental about Earlham in this venture. These trips are rewarding and sustaining; they engage core principles about what an Earlham education is capable of realizing. Our thanks to the Penziner and Matson families for making these trips possible and to the integrity of the College in observing the donors' wishes.



Trip “Leaders” aka “The Team”:

Wendy Tori (Assistant Professor of Biology)

Jose Ignacio Pareja (Science Technology Learning Specialist)

Matt Lachiusa (EC '10)

Bill Buskirk (EC '66, emeritus professor of Biology)

Trip Leader in absentia: Many thanks to John Iverson’s important roles in planning and out-fitting the trip with food and equipment. He wasn’t able to join us physically, but was with us throughout the adventure in spirit!!!



Trip participant and benefactor:

Laurence Matson (EC '72)

Trip participants:

Robert Lugg (Sr, English Lit)

Kat Hardy (Jr., Neurobiology)

Kumar Jensen (Sr., Env. Stud.)

Kevin Schmidt (Sr., Bio./ Chem.)

Natsumi Hamada Fearnside (Jr., Bio.)

Meagan Grandfield (Sr., Env. Stud.)

Collin Schulze (Sr., HDSR)

Martin Ventura (Jr., Music)

Finn Olcott (Sr., Bio.)

Laura Coyne (Sr., HDSR)

Luke Tierney (Sr. History)

Sarah Johnson (Jr., HDSR)

Oda Davanger (Jr., Philo.)

Yoni Glogower (Jr., Env. Sci.)

Mary Jones (Sr., Env. Stud.)

Siobhan Beal (Soph., Geo./SOAN)

Clara Stuligross (Soph., Env. Stud.)

Rudy Chlissma Putra (Fr., undecided)

Joanne Huang (Fr., undecided)