Hitting a Milestone

by Rob Denkhaus, Nature Center Manager

Since its earliest beginnings in 1964 when the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge—then known as the Greer Island Nature Center—consisted of only a few hundred acres and the trail system was a meager few miles, the staff has relied on the local community of naturalists to help document the flora and fauna that call the area home. Back in the day, that meant Fort Worth Audubon Society members tallying birds and a few amateur herpetologists flipping rocks to locate snakes, lizards, and other ectotherms. Of course, there have always been some native plant enthusiasts around to track which plants are blooming and maybe a maverick...
lepidopterist or two—sweep net in hand—flitting about in search of butterflies. Naturally, Nature Center staff and volunteers made note of the creatures they found.

Historically, the problem with this form of natural history data collection is that it is almost impossible to compile all of the available information. The information has been scattered throughout the region in who knows how many people’s file cabinets, field notebooks, journals, and, worst of all, in their fuzzy recollections. If only there were a central repository for such information!

On May 17, 2013, the Nature Center took advantage of an emerging online technology, iNaturalist, and created the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge Project to document every extent species on the Refuge. Using iNaturalist either as a phone app or on a PC, anyone can save any plant or animal observation, complete with photo(s), date, time, and location data, along with any other notes they would like to add, making the information accessible to the naturalist community. The way the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge Project is configured, any iNaturalist observation that is made within the geographic boundaries of the Refuge is automatically collected.

The project started slowly. It took 10 months to tally 100 observations. Twenty-one months later, we hit 1,000 observations in December 2015. But the initial 1,000 observations documented 500 different plant and animal species. Patience has paid off, however. On August 19, 2018, at 6:22 pm, the project reached the 10,000 observation milestone.

The milestone observation was made by iNaturalist user “chrisalis,” who, according to his profile, appears to hail from California. Chrisalis documented 40 flora and fauna observations during his early-afternoon visit to the Refuge. His observations ranged from the mundane (white-tailed deer) to the obscure (wrinkled grasshopper).

Prior to iNaturalist, the likelihood that we would ever have been privy to what chrisalis observed on his visit is virtually nil. Instead, chrisalis is one of 243 nature lovers who have helped create this extremely valuable database of natural history knowledge. An additional group of 911 naturalists has assisted in identifying observed species and vetting the quality of the data compiled.

So what species did chrisalis document with the 10,000th observation? Something common like the eastern pondhawk dragonfly, the most commonly documented species with 122 total observations? How about a
commonly seen and easily identified species such as the nine-banded armadillo with 47 observations? No, chrisalis found and identified hairy hexagonia (*Hexagonia hydnoides*), which, prior to chrisalis’ visit, had only been documented seven times on the Refuge.

Hairy hexagonia is a species of fungus in the shelf fungi order. It is largely saprophytic, meaning that it lives on dead or decaying organic matter, specifically decaying wood in this case. The species has a fairly wide distribution, with iNaturalist observations throughout the Gulf states and Mexico and scattered observations extending to the Great Lakes. Tarrant County is well represented with approximately 30 known observations, in part due to our project, but most likely influenced by the local wanderings of Botanical Research Institute of Texas botanists.

Ultimately, is it all that important that we know we have hairy hexagonia on the Refuge? Maybe not. But the fact is that iNaturalist and the efforts of our nature-appreciating visitors have provided us with detailed knowledge of more than 1,800 species of plants and animals on the Refuge, and this knowledge forms the foundation of the Nature Center’s educational and natural resource management programs. And as our knowledge grows and diversifies, so will our programs. So here’s to the next 10,000 observations and to those who help document them.

*(NOTE: Thanks to the wildlife monitoring game camera program, we are sitting on more than 250,000 photos that could be uploaded to iNaturalist, but we are afraid of breaking the internet.)*