

Riparian: transitional area adjacent to a waterway

Uplands: land lying above the 100-year floodplain



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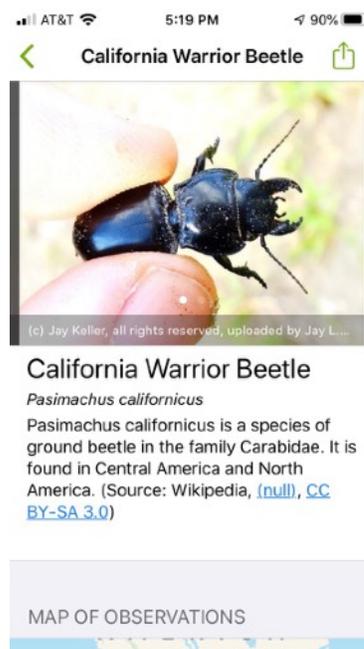
iNaturalist - A Great Tool For Land Management

Spring has sprung - a little earlier than usual given warmer temperatures and lots of rainy days. Are you noticing flowers sprouting up that you can't readily identify? Seeing unusual birds at your feeder? Finding nests with fresh eggs and wondering who the parents are? Finding animal tracks left in the mud and wondering who made them? Trying to figure out what kind of butterfly that caterpillar will turn into? As the saying goes "there's an app for that." Why not use iNaturalist to better understand and manage the ecosystems that share your little piece of the Wimberley Valley?

So what is iNaturalist? Actually, it's lots of different things. iNaturalist describes itself as "an online social network of people sharing biodiversity information to help each other learn about nature." A primary goal of iNaturalist is simply to connect people with nature in ways that give the non-human world more personal significance, thus engendering a stake in protecting it. But, in the process, lots of data is generated that is scientifically valuable for tracking biodiversity. Most Texas land is privately owned so often those studying our native plants and wildlife don't know what's where - a problem particularly when important decisions are being made that potentially affect an area's ecosystem. Citizen/community science is one way to fill this knowledge gap and that's what iNaturalist is all about.

And, the data you collect using iNaturalist benefits you - the landowner. You no longer need to lug around all those field guides because iNaturalist essentially has them built-in. And, as you identify various components of your own personal ecosystem, you are compiling a permanent record of what was there and when. So next year, if you want to know when your Buttonbush will bloom, all you need to do is look back at the picture you took last year when you saw the first round white flowers. If you have a wildlife exemption, you might please the taxman with reports supporting your efforts. And as you get ever more proficient, you are likely to find more ways iNaturalist can work for you.

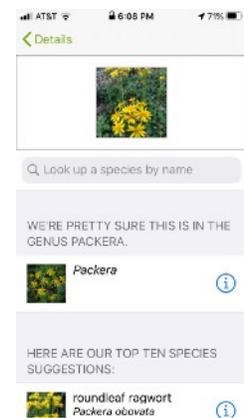
You'll be surprised at the variety of diverse ecosystem components iNaturalist can handle. Did you know you can use it to identify mushrooms and bugs? Or that you can identify some animals without taking their picture or even seeing them? Just take a picture of their scat or their footprints in the mud. For birds, a picture of a nest with eggs, particularly if the eggs are a distinctive color, can work. Or record the sound you're hearing - a good way to identify birds, toads and frogs. And while it might seem sad, even pictures of dead animals are of value.





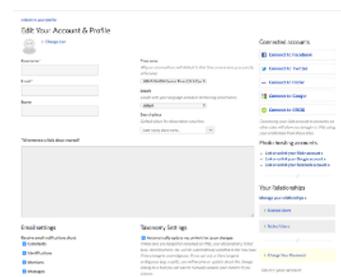
Get started by downloading the iNaturalist app to your iPhone or Android. Then press the Observe button at the bottom of the screen to bring up your phone's camera function. Once you've taken a picture you'll see a screen that on the iPhone looks like the one on the left. (The Android application has similar functions, but the screens look slightly different.) To increase the accuracy of your identification, you can take multiple images by pressing the box with the plus sign next to the picture you just took. You might want to think about what your field guide says is most useful. For example, some grasses have hairs where the leaf meets the stem and other don't. Or flowers may look similar, but the shape of the leaves can be different. Another hint is that, if you are in an area of poor cell service or simply want to save battery, you can go to settings and turn "auto upload" off. Later when you have a better connection or WiFi, you can turn it back and all of your observations will download.

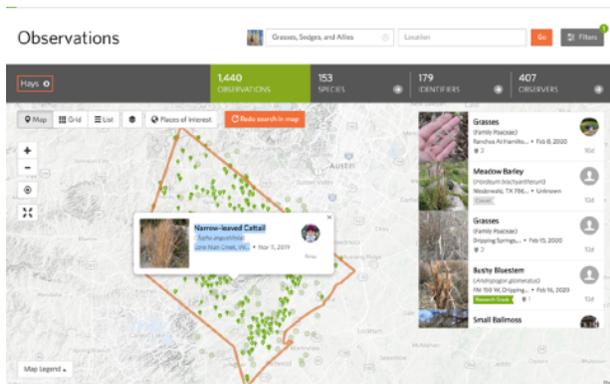
To determine what you are seeing, tap on "What do you see?" and a list of suggestions will appear. In the picture on the right, iNaturalist was pretty sure of the genus and provided its top ten picks for the species. The system will also tell you when it is not confident enough to make a recommendation. But you will still be presented with a list of the top ten suggestions. Sometimes the system's choices are spot-on. But other times they're clearly way off - even laughable. If you are smarter than the system, you can simply look up the species by name. But note sometimes the common name found in iNaturalist is different than the one commonly used in our area. For example, the *Packera obovata* identified at the right as "roundleaf ragwort" is known to many of us in the Wimberley Valley as golden groundsel. So scientific names may be better. If you are stumped, you can just choose the genus or simply enter an observation without making any choice.



Before entering your observation, you might want to scroll down to where there are additional settings. One of the choices is the level of privacy you want for your observation. There are three choices. "Open" enables anyone to see the location of your observation on a map. With "Obscured" your coordinates become a random point within a 22 X 22 km area. That means only you, trusted users and trusted project coordinators can see the exact location. "Private" means your observation does not appear on the public map in any form. Again only you, trusted users and trusted project coordinators have access to them. Once you've tapped share and entered your observation, the entry is automatically placed in the "Needs ID" category. That enables others within the iNaturalist community to weigh in. Once two separate reviewers have agreed with your identification, it becomes "Research Grade." Reviewers might also disagree with your choice and help you understand why in ways that can help you hone your identification skills.

But the phone app is only iNaturalist's tool for data collection. Using your computer to signing into your iNaturalist account enables you to do much more. When you sign up for iNaturalist, be sure to update the time zone to CST. That can be done only from the computer interface by going to account settings. There are other settings you might also consider changing. For example if you are one of those people who is more comfortable with scientific names, you can set those to show first when making an identification. Remember to scroll down to the bottom of the page to save your changes.

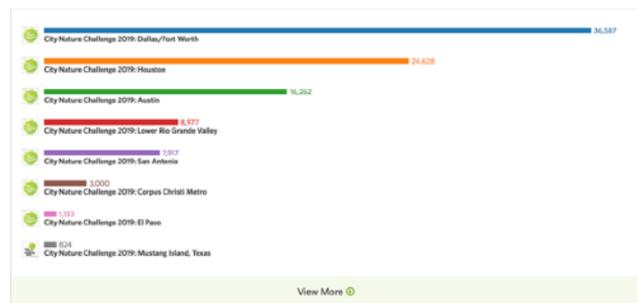




The iNaturalist website also enables you to download pictures from your camera or ones that already exist on your computer - even if they are several years old. Especially useful is the fact that you can crop images before downloading - great for animals that won't let you get too close. Remember you are not going for museum quality, just the ability to make an accurate identification. And there are lots more ways you might use the iNaturalist computer interface like zeroing in on all of the grasses observed in Hays County as shown on the left.

You might also explore the many projects that have already been set up within iNaturalist. There are three types of projects - Collection, Traditional, and Umbrella. A Collection project means that every time you load the page, iNaturalist makes a quick search and all of the observations that match the project's requirements are displayed. For example, if you search for the project named Cypress Creek Nature Preserve, you will bring up all of the observations made along that stretch of Cypress Creek. You can even set up a project for your own property to capture all of your family's observations. Traditional projects are for things that don't readily lend themselves to searches (e.g., a study of bee and wasp hotels). These projects require the observer to join the project and observations must be added to the project manually.

Umbrella projects offer a way to collate, compare, or promote a set of existing projects. One example is the City Nature Challenge, a "bioblitz" that tracks all wild plant and animal observations made within select metropolitan areas worldwide during a specified time period. This year's event is scheduled for April 24th thru April 27th. The Wimberley Valley is included within the Austin area. Last year, Austin finished third among Texas cities participating with 16,262 observations and 2,259 species observed within last April's designated four day period.



Want to know more about iNaturalist? The help section of the iNaturalist website is excellent. In particular, there are a number of videos which will quickly get you up and running (or should we say snapping pictures and entering identifications). Want to learn even more about how to use iNaturalist as a tool for becoming a better steward of your Wimberley Valley property? Then mark your calendar for October 10th (9AM-2PM). That's when Craig Hensley from Texas Parks and Wildlife will be at the Wimberley Community Center to teach a class called "iNaturalist as a Land Survey Tool." More details to come. Hope to see you there! Now head outdoors and record the nature you see around you.

The Riparian Recovery Network News is a periodic Hays County Master Naturalist publication covering topics of interest to the Wimberley Valley community. Back issues are available at <http://beautifulhayscounty.org/conservation-restoration/>. Share with neighbors and friends. Send questions or ideas for new topics to riparian@haysmn.org. Also use this same address to get on our mailing list.

