

Broadcasting Wildlife into Texas Classrooms

Partner Spotlight

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Photos courtesy of CONSERVATION LEGACY

Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.

~Helen Keller

Last year, the Texas Wildlife Association (TWA) educated more than 48,000 Texas youths through the Youth Videoconferencing Distance Learning program, which has reached 386,004 students since 2007. This amazing impact is not possible without cooperation with other organizations.

The following individuals have partnered with TWA to share their knowledge and passion through live animal broadcasts into classrooms across Texas.

DIANNE ODEGARD – AUSTIN BAT REFUGE

Bats-A-Billion is one of TWA's longest running and most popular programs, and it is possible because of the partnership with Bat Conservation International's (BCI) former Education and Program Outreach Manager Dianne Odegard. Odegard has been a videoconferencing presenter since 2009, educating students across Texas about the wonders of bats. *Bats-A-Billion* continues to be one of TWA's most popular programs, once reaching over 9,400 students in one day.

While perceptions seem to be changing, there are still some people with an intrinsic fear of bats due to their depiction as scary, rabies infested, blood-sucking, flying rodents. This program serves to further change these opinions and reintroduce bats to students and teachers in a positive light. Students learn about bats' habitat, diet, adaptations which allow them to fly and how to identify an echolocating bat. With the tabletop camera, students are able to see the variety of live native Texas bats up close and observe features such as their hand-like wings, tail membrane and the soft fur which covers their body. Students and teachers come away with a better appreciation for and understanding of bats' important role both to humans and in the ecosystem.

In addition to partnering with TWA, Odegard and her husband Lee Mackenzie cofounded the non-profit organization, Austin Bat Refuge. Austin Bat Refuge's goal is to promote respect for bats and their place in the environment through education, conflict resolution, rehabilitation and release. After 12 ½ years with BCI, Odegard now works full-time at Austin Bat Refuge, rehabilitating bats and educating the public about these amazing creatures. Odegard has been a wildlife rehabilitator since 1990, always working with animals that live in close proximity to urban areas and human structures, with the hope of educating people about ways to live harmoniously with wildlife. She considers bat care



Dianne Odegard with Austin Bat Refuge.



to be service work, benefitting both bats and humans. Odegard's passion and vast knowledge about bats is what makes her a perfect partner in TWA's Distance Learning lineup.

KAMERON BEAN – WILD TIMES EDUTAINMENT

Another valuable partner of the Distance Learning program is Kameron Bean of Wild Times Edutainment. *Edutainment* is a form of entertainment that is also educational—and that is definitely a perfect way to describe Bean's programs. Bean first joined the Distance Learning program in 2011 with *Animal Encounters: Skunks and Armadillos* and has since expanded her program lineup and her animal ambassador crew. Since 2011, her Distance Learning programs alone have educated over 87,000 students and in 2012 she expanded her partnership with TWA to include live animal programs in the classroom for Bexar and surrounding counties.

Bean's *Animal Encounter* programs are a hit with teachers and students because they provide information about animals they may encounter in the wild and sometimes even as close as their backyards. As a wildlife rehabilitator, she receives animals that cannot be returned to the wild either because of a permanent injury, or they bonded with humans during rehabilitation. Because these wild animals need permanent care, they are not able to fulfill their role in the

wild, so their new role is to become animal ambassadors and educate students across Texas. Bean says that her favorite thing to do, in regards to working with wild animals, is sharing them with kids.

She offers many programs such as *Skunks and Armadillos* featuring Flower the striped skunk and Tank the nine-banded armadillo, *Prickly Porcupines* featuring Elmer the North American porcupine, *Fox Facts* featuring Zorro the gray fox, and many more. During these programs, students observe these animals up close and learn about the adaptations that allow these animals to live in the wild as well as the role they play in their environment.

In addition to her educational programs through Wild Times Edutainment, Bean is a Wildlife Rehabilitator for Texas and a member of the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council. Bean has been professionally caring for all kinds of animals from bugs to elephants for almost 20 years. After spending more than a decade as a professional zookeeper and veterinary technician, she founded Wild Times Edutainment combining her love of wildlife and youth education. Her passion for education and her special bond with her animal ambassadors is evident in her programs and is why teachers continue to sign up each new school year.

CATHY DOWNS

Monarch butterflies are declining due to habitat loss and Texas is an important state for their migration. Education is a key step in their survival, so in 2012, longtime TWA volunteer Cathy Downs became a presenter for *The Magic of Monarchs* educating over 6,000 students in one day. Prior to this, Downs also served TWA as a volunteer with youth Field Investigation Days and designed lessons in the *Butterflies Flutter By* Discovery Trunk. Downs provides invaluable help to Conservation Legacy and was deservedly named TWA's Volunteer of the Year in 2011.

The Magic of Monarchs is a teacher favorite because it incorporates adaptations, migration and includes real live examples of each stage of the butterfly's life cycle. The tabletop camera allows students to get an up close view of an individual egg on the back of a milkweed leaf and observe each instar of the caterpillar stage. Students "ooh and ahh" during the video of a caterpillar pupating into a chrysalis, a student favorite. Programs are purposely scheduled during Monarch migration in Texas both to ensure there are live specimens for the program and so participants know to be on the lookout for migrating butterflies. Hopefully after viewing this program, students and teachers are inspired to plant butterfly friendly gardens at their schools with nectar plants for the adult Monarchs and milkweed for the larvae.

In addition to being a volunteer for TWA, Downs volunteers for several other organizations including the Texas Master Naturalists and Monarch Watch as a Conservation Specialist. Monarch Watch is committed to tracking and aiding the survival of Monarchs during migration by providing free milkweeds, setting up Monarch Waystations and through education. Downs is also a certified Monarch Larval Monitoring Project trainer,



Kameron Bean with Wild Times Edutainment.





Cathy Downs presents "The Magic of Monarchs."



Robert Trejo and Diablo with Zoomagination.

educating volunteers to identify native milkweed and Monarchs in each stage of their life cycle. She also hosts live butterfly events at parks and outdoor educational venues in central Texas educating children and adults about native Texas butterflies with a focus on Monarch biology, migration and their food and habitat requirements. At home, Downs propagates native milkweeds and raises Monarch caterpillars for education, tagging them to track their migration once they are adult butterflies. She is truly a champion for the Monarch butterfly in Texas and a great partner for TWA.

ROBERT TREJO – ZOOMAGINATION

In 2014, TWA's Distance Learning program was looking for some new native Texas animal ambassadors, so Robert Trejo from Zoomagination joined the team with *Hawk Talk*. Up until this point, TWA's only bird program was *Let's Talk Turkey*, featuring a mounted Tom turkey, so bringing Diablo a live Red-tailed Hawk to the studio was an immediate hit. In spring 2017 Trejo debuted a new program, *Owl Adaptations* featuring Athena the one-eyed Eastern Screech-Owl.

Diablo has been an animal ambassador for almost 20 years after suffering a permanent injury from flying into powerlines. Likewise, Athena is unable to be released into the wild due to

her missing eye. As such, they are great representatives in the Distance Learning program. Most of the animal ambassadors in other TWA programs are mammals, reptiles and insects, so it is a treat for students and teachers to have an opportunity to observe native wild birds. Both programs highlight the bird's life cycle, hunting adaptations and flight, and students also enjoy hearing audio clips of bird calls during the program. Following the *Hawk Talk* program, one group of students was even inspired to build their own Red-tailed Hawk nests to scale using facts they learned in the program.

Trejo also provides live animal programs in San Antonio and surrounding areas through his company, Zoomagination. Zoomagination was started to inspire and influence people of all ages to protect the natural environment through close animal encounters. In addition to wild birds, Trejo has quite a collection of animals including warthogs, sloths and even a small herd of reindeer. Growing up with animals, it didn't take Trejo long to realize that he had a natural ability to relate to them and care for them. After rescuing and nursing several animals back to health, he knew that his passion for animals would soon become his focus in life. Trejo's positive attitude and passion for animals makes him a dynamic presenter for TWA's Distance Learning programs. 🐾

