

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--URBAN TRAILS--MALLORY

*[NOTE: INFO COMES FROM SITE-SUPPLIED LITERATURE OR SITE INTERVIEWS; ANY OTHER RESOURCE IS NOTED IN PARENTHESIS ]*

Story by Randy Mallory

Within earshot of freeways and flight paths, within a stone's throw of shopping centers and neighborhoods, urban trails put you in touch with nature in some of the fastest growing areas of metropolitan Texas.

## *WILD IN THE CITY*

OR

## *WALK ON THE WILD SIDE*

OR

## *LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE*

**A**s you walk from the parking lot to the trail, city sounds take a backseat to nature sounds. Caws from crows and shrieks from hawks overtake honking horns. Wind rustles the leaves, outdoing the drone of traffic. You begin to relax and pick up the pace as your path turns deeper into the woods.

On the trail a platoon of hikers in boots and khakis stride past a slow-strolling couple in cowboy duds. A covey of binocularized birdwatchers focus on

a particular treetop. A cluster of students discuss an ecology question. And several sneaker-clad commuters break into a jog. At a fork in the trail, two kids and their parents watch something slither under golden brown leaves.

Welcome to life in the slow lane.

Here, cooperative efforts of environmental groups and governmental agencies have set aside trail-laden parks, preserves, and refuges as protected pockets of nature which remain relatively wild in the city. A rising tide of public interest seems to support their goals--nature conservation, education, recreation, and research.

"People who live in urban settings still want to enjoy nature," says John Herron, director of the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department's Non-Game and Urban Wildlife Program. As evidence, he points to a recent U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service survey shows that 3.8 million adult Texans "actively" observe wildlife, twice the number of hunters statewide. "With today's busy lifestyles, people who used to take far-off wilderness trips are now looking for nature experiences closer to home."

The following big-city trails offer such a walk on the wild side. Most also provide educational guided hikes led by trained naturalists and volunteers. By spotlighting nature's intricate web of life, these ecological oases hope to prove that wildlife and city life can exist side by side.

**[NOTE: ORDER THESE HOWEVER BEST FITS THE PHOTOS, THOUGH I WOULD LIKE TO END WITH FRIEDRICH WILDERNESS PARK]**

### **River Legacy, Arlington**

October's perfect for "cigar-hunting" in city-owned River Legacy Parks, a 600-acre forest floodplain on the West Fork of the Trinity River. A brown fungus

called the Devil's Cigar emerges in autumn near cedar elm stumps and matures in the shape of a fat cigar up to four inches long. Amazingly, the rare plant (found only in Texas and Japan) then releases a smoke-like cloud of spores with a hiss audible several feet away, says Dr. Harold W. Keller, research administrator at Fort Worth's Botanical Research Institute of Texas. Dr. Keller guides visitors to see the famous fungus as part of his volunteer work at River Legacy Living Science Center, a foundation-operated educational facility located adjacent to the parks.

On crisp fall days, nature-lovers of all ages swarm around a beehive of activities at the 12,000-square-foot center--including a simulated river raft ride (you feel like you're floating, thanks to hydraulics and high-tech audiovisuals), a children's area with videotaped larger-than-life critters, an interactive exhibit on river flooding, plus close-up views of local reptiles and fish.

Visitors also meander along 26 miles of trails on the steep southern banks of the Trinity. On interpretive hikes, the center's guides point out the fecundity of nature: Like how wasps lay their eggs on red oak trees which grow a covering called a gall around the eggs, protecting and nourishing them until the larvae hatch and eat their way out. Or like how the swallow-tail butterfly lays its eggs only on prickly ash trees...not to mention how its caterpillar looks exactly like bird droppings, a graphic example of mimicry in nature.

### **Dallas Nature Center**

Interstate 20 crosses what's left of an ancient limestone cliff, now known as the Mountain Creek Escarpment. A critical 633 acres of the escarpment lies undisturbed at the Dallas Nature Center.

The pristine property--jointly owned by the center, the city, and Dallas County--scrambles across three ridges tapering down the escarpment's rocky western slope. Topping out at 755 feet (one of the highest points locally), the

place offers spectacular sunset vistas as the lights of the Metroplex come up below.

When stars begin to twinkle, so do the eyes of education director Kevin Duvel who loves night hikes on the center's seven miles of trails. With his flashlight covered by red cellophane (to not disturb wildlife), Kevin asks trailmates to engage their senses. "Some people are afraid of nature at night, but that's based on ignorance," he says. "When they learn about night sounds, they want to see what they're hearing. That's when they begin appreciating the complexity and beauty of nature."

In autumn that beauty flutters on gossamer wings as Monarchs migrating to Mexico stop at the center's butterfly garden where they feed on milkweed and sleep in hackberry trees.

The facility began in 1975 as the Greenhills Environmental Center to preserve an untouched portion of what's called Dallas Hill Country. Today, the Dallas Nature Center offers extensive educational programs, many developed for children. It also promotes sustainable landscaping through a native plant nursery selling hardy indigenous flora from Mexican buckeye to prairie grasses.

### **Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge**

The 3,500-acre Fort Worth Nature Center and Refuge claims the title "largest single city-owned park in Texas." Set aside in 1964 on Lake Worth (a reservoir on the West Fork of the Trinity) to protect the city's water supply, the refuge also protects wildlife habitat--1,700 acres of post-oak savannah, 1,000 acres of wetland, and 800 acres of prairie.

In 1980 the National Park Service recognized the place as a National Natural Heritage Landmark, particularly for its post-oak savannah, a remnant of the ancestral Western Crosstimbers. This dense belt of oak groves interspersed with tallgrass prairies once stretched from Texas to Kansas. Indians and settlers

knew it as the forested fringe of the Great Plains and as home to black bear, wild hogs, and turkeys. The woods provided cover thick enough for buffalo to escape hunters. (Texas Wild, 132)

That legacy survives in the center's small buffalo herd which co-habitates with a prairie dog colony on a 55-acre range. The Wild Plum Trail leads to the range through high-quality crosstimbers (also found on the Riverbottom Trail and Todd Island), boasting post-oaks up to 400 years old.

Trailhounds (and scouts working on merit badges) frequent the Canyon Ridge Trail for its shady canyons and views 100 feet above the lake. Wildflower fans follow the Oak Motte trail. And birders scour the Prairie Trail for the Harris's sparrow and the Marsh Boardwalk for the Prothonotary warbler, two of 170 bird species seen regularly each year.

### **McKelligon Canyon Park, El Paso**

Rising 3,000 feet above the city, the Franklin Mountains form the northern ramparts of the pass from which El Paso got its name. Access to this urban sierra lies just ten minutes from downtown via McKelligon Canyon Park.

Actually a cluster of five small canyons (Rainbow, Red Rock, Granite, Ancon, and Falls Canyons), McKelligon encompasses 90 acres of canyon floor surrounded by Franklin Mountains State Park. Donated in the Twenties by namesake Maurice J. McKelligon as a city park, McKelligon sports a high-tech amphitheater for musical spectacles like "Viva El Paso!"

For a "low-tech" spectacular, venture onto foot trails that veer past plants cleverly adapted to the dry Chihuahan Desert. After a rain, for example, the spindly ocotillo dons a fresh coat of green leaves; when dry, it jettisons them to reduce its moisture requirements. Also after a rain, the prolific creosote bush gives off a pungent, spicy smell. Searching for water, its roots grow as deep as

nine feet and even excrete a toxin into the soil to deter competing plants. (Big Bend, 29; Texas Wild, 18)

A spectacular trail leads from the end McKelligon Canyon Road, up a steep slope, past 6,764-foot South Mount Franklin, to Smuggler's Pass, a grueling 3.5 miles away. Moxie rock climbers follow unmarked trails into the park's scenic Rainbow Canyon. "There are 15 established climbing routes, some dating from the Forties," says Dave Hunt, member of The Circle, a local climbing group, and owner of a climb shop. "We've got 30 to 40-foot climbs in McKelligon from easy to expert--very unusual for the middle of a city."

### **Forest Ridge Preserve, Austin**

"Earth Healing" reminds a sign blocking an eroded gully in Austin's Forest Ridge Preserve. That means don't walk here--let the soil build up, so trees can grow. In this 1,000-acre portion of the much larger Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, rules put nature first, not people. In particular, the endangered golden-cheeked warbler--a mid-March to mid-August resident before wintering in Mexico and Central America--gets top billing in this the nation's first urban endangered species preserve.

These tiny songbirds raise their young only in central Texas and only in nests made of bark strips from mature ashe junipers (also called mountain cedars). They require a closed forest canopy of junipers and oaks. As neighborhoods, offices, and roadways cleared gaps in their traditional habitat, warbler numbers shrank.

Eco-friendly Austin purchased Forest Ridge in 1993 and, with help from other governmental and private groups, hopes to turn back the hands of time. "We want to restore the closed canopy, but that's a slow and complicated process," says city biologist Carlo Abbruzzese. "We haven't had enough time to tell if warbler populations are stabilizing."

But chief conservation officer Mike Von Wupperfeld remains hopeful the city can protect warbler habitat while letting visitors enjoy it. Hikers, mountain bikers, and birders who frequent the preserve's eight miles of designated trail hope he's right. They enjoy its broad upland vistas and deep canyons, replete with a picturesque waterfall on Bull Creek.

"Law requires protection of the warbler," Von Wupperfeld notes. "Visitors can help by staying on designated trails. If we minimize human disturbance here, we can increase quality of life for birds and people, too."

### **Armand Bayou Nature Center, Houston/Pasadena**

Orbits and egrets, astronauts and alligators. Space and earth co-habitate on the southeastern edge of Texas' largest metropolis. While Space Center Houston and NASA's Johnson Space Center shoot for the stars, neighboring Armand Bayou Nature Center digs its heels into a 2,500-acre animal haven and remnant of ancient bottomland forest, tallgrass prairie, and bayou.

Once known as Middle Bayou, it was renamed for Armand Yramategui, a Gulf Coast conservationist who inspired the establishment of the center in 1975. This wetland--never logged nor heavily farmed--has served historically as a tidal tributary supplying fresh water and young finfish and shellfish to Galveston Bay. In 1991 the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department recognized it as one of four Texas State Coastal Preserves. The productive preserve supports 220 species of birds and 150 species of mammals, reptiles, and amphibians--from prehistoric-looking armadillos and brilliant painted buntings to elusive bobcats, owls, and alligators.

Look for them yourself or join a guided hike along almost five miles of trails that wander through 300 acres of dense forest and skirt alongside a tallgrass prairie. Canoeists can explore miles of bayou on their own or hop aboard center-sponsored boat tours.

"We have such concentrations of wildlife here that it's easy to bridge the gap between people and nature," says center director George Regmund. "I've seen 17 different species of warblers within one hour. One hiking group even got to witness a deer giving birth to twins.

"But we have to realize that this is not like television where everything is condensed," he adds. "Nature is more subtle, so we try to teach the intricacies of natural cycles."

### **Friedrich Wilderness Park, San Antonio**

Hikes led by Friedrich Wilderness Park director Eric Lautzenheiser seem like rousing rounds of some nature trivia game. Poison ivy's white berries feed 100 animal species, he observes, more than any other plant in the park. The sapsucker pecks small holes in trees, he continues, and returns later for a food buffet of insects stuck in the oozing sap. Texas supports more native grape varieties than anywhere else, he adds, which reminds him how people once boiled greenbrier tubers with sassafras roots to make the first root beer.

Tucked in the Hill Country of northwest San Antonio, 232-acre Friedrich Park (named for the Friedrich family of air-conditioning fame, who donated most of the land) provides a nice stroll in the woods. But look closer and you'll discover diverse wonders of the Edward's Plateau.

"We're a fabulous place to observe plants and animals," says Lautzenheiser, "because we're the transition zone where eastern and western species mix." Five miles of trails lead to diverse flora and fauna--from Eastern Meadowlark to Western Kingfish, from cottontail rabbit to armadillo, from Virginia Creeper to Texas Persimmon. On terraced limestone hillsides, varying shades of green divulge the underlying geology: Dark green junipers grow in steep thinly-topsoiled slopes, while light green deciduous trees thrive on flat ledges where topsoil accumulates.



The Main Loop Trail climbs 150 feet to the city park's pinnacle. There you see San Antonio's skyline in the distance, as well as a habitat restoration project managed by park researchers. Through controlled burns and selective clearing, they hope to bring back the endangered black-capped vireo, now all but vanished from the park.

"Humans are part of nature just like animals, and we'll inevitably change things," reminds director Lautzenheiser. "But we've got to try to make changes that are healthy for people and wildlife."

**H**eading back to the parking lot, you notice two red-winged blackbirds dive-bomb a threatening red-tailed hawk. Higher up, a jumbo jet makes its landing approach. Out of the corner of your eye, you spy something in the trail a dozen yards ahead--a white-tailed doe frozen in place, statue-still. Motionlessly you and the grazing creature eye each other for what seems like an eternity--perhaps a full minute. One final nibble and the animal bolts into the bushes, concealed by the golden glare of the setting sun.

Back at the car, traffic sounds swell in the distance. Unlocking the door, you hope that maybe, just maybe, cities and wild things can co-exist after all.