

Story and photos by Randy Mallory

## Land of Ahs!

*Touring the 'yellow-brick road'  
wildflower trails of northeast Texas*

OR

## Color Wheeling

*...along wildflower trails of northeast Texas*

Wildflower tours in Central Texas and the Hill Country ramble 'round roadsides of bluebonnet blue. In northeast Texas, the other side of the color wheel--red, orange, and yellow--dominates wildflower tours in Cass and Rusk counties.

Cass County burghs of Avinger, Hughes Springs, and Linden host the 33rd annual Wildflower Trails of Texas, April 25-27. In Rusk County, Henderson serves as hub of the 4th annual East Texas Wildflower Trails, April 15 to May 31. Each has its own style.

Cass County's blooming soir e boasts three days of lively events at each town, plus a 25-mile wildflower drive on a triangle of state highways (49, 155, and 11) between the towns. Fewer events but more trails typify Rusk County's floral fest, featuring 135 miles of road touring. A tour map details historic sites and attractions along the way.

Last spring on the trails, I found crimson clover cascading red onto roadsides, Indian paintbrush bathing shoulders in orange, and yellow-gold coreopsis mimicking the center stripe.

Eye-poppin' wildflower color hugs the highways here. This is, after all, hay and timber territory. Lush grasses and pine forests cover most countryside. But, as one local told me, "Sometimes the wildflower color's so good, it looks like the yellow-brick road." I imagined northeast Texas as the land of Ahs.

## **Wildflower Trails of Texas**

Happenstance planted the seed for Cass County's Wildflower Trails of Texas, one of the state's oldest wildflower festivals.

In 1970 wildflower photographer and author of *Wildflowers of Texas*, Geyata Ajilvsgi, noticed something rare. On roads between Avinger, Hughes Springs, and Linden, she spied many noteworthy wildflower species, including the endangered Texas Trillium. She encouraged locals from the three towns to create a wildflower trail, which they did that year.

Leaving Hughes Springs early on my sojourn, I spotted clumps of red buckeye shrubs on Texas 49. Hummingbirds fed on the bright red flowers. Close by, showy primrose tickled me pink. The pink and yellow petals swayed in the breeze at the edge of a pond.

A tip from Hughes Springs city manager George Fite redirected me to FM 161. On both shoulders, bright yellow coreopsis flowed as if spilled from a paint can. This yellow way was broken at one spot by a field ablaze in crimson clover. I detoured onto a blacktop for a closer look. There stood an old barn and farmhouse with metal roofs rusted as red as clover. A coyote loped through the clover, his head bobbing up and down in the red sea of color.

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That serendipitous moment made me a detour believer. (I kept a county map handy to avoid getting lost.)

At Simpson Lake, yellow honeysuckle draped a high fence, and flowering grapevine climbed an elm tree. On a curving backroad, I spotted deep-purple spiderworts pushing through fallen pine needles. In a bar-ditch, two-foot-tall blue irises grew near four-foot-tall purplish Texas thistle. Painted-lady butterflies flitted back and forth.

Quintessential rural East Texas scenes unfolded before me like a movie. I wound past well-kept brick homes and vintage farmhouses, plus mobile homes and a few hillbilly houses with couches on the porch. I watched cattle and horses graze tall grass and exchanged waves with gardeners hoeing around young corn and tomato plants.

On Texas 155, I passed a wetland thick with green ferns and white spider lilies. At one pull-off, I admired a tangle of purple vetch as a woodpecker swooshed onto a pine and began pecking loudly. I saw scissor-tailed flycatchers balance on telephone lines and mockingbirds zigzag after grasshoppers.

On Texas 11, mixed wildflowers speckled embankments with orange Indian Paintbrush, pink wine-cup, and purplish phlox. I had to avoid a few turtles crossing the road.

Also on Texas 11, I couldn't avoid Holly Hill Homestead & Retreat. Owner Jolene Turner continues the hospitality and gardening tradition of former owner Kathryn Willeford Callaway (*Texas Highways*, April 1996). Jolene toured me through gardens of 400 herb and wildflower varieties. Inside the cozy 1920's farmhouse-cum-bed &

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breakfast, she tempted me with warm oatmeal cookies. I vowed to return for a night's stay and one of her homemade meals.

I was off for a traditional small town parade...actually three parades, one in each town.

Linden's Greek Revival-style courthouse proved a fitting backdrop for a military color guard, a marching band, horseback riders, classic cars, and homemade floats--including the Community Council's entry, a pickup and trailer festooned with red-white-and-blue bunting and an Uncle Sam look-alike.

Hughes Springs and Avinger held similar parades (some entries were even the same), scheduled so onlookers could catch all three.

Besides parades, the three towns offered a bevy of homespun events--Little Miss and Miss Wildflower pageants, street dances with country bands, trail rides and rodeo, carnivals, fun runs, and varied entertainment from gospel singing to clogging. In cooperation with the Texas Department of Agriculture, Hughes Springs hosted the Tex-Scape Trail, a gardening extravaganza with plant vendors, demonstrations, and speakers.

For locals, the festival is an annual homecoming. For visitors, it's a chance to rub elbows with locals.

For example, I chatted with Darlene Stewart at You-Niquely Yours hair salon/gift boutique in Hughes Springs. She introduced me to her lively staff of stylists, dubbed the "*Steel Magnolias* of Hughes Springs." And at TJ's Bakery In Avinger, Terry and Janice Lee showed off their pastries. They also gave me a peek at their new dinner-theater. It

showcases area talent, including Terry's Elvis act (he's impersonated Elvis across the country since 1987).

## **East Texas Wildflower Trails**

Rusk County's East Texas Wildflower Trails showcases wildflowers, history, and events spread over six weeks.

The Meet Me on the Square festival held in Henderson features food, country music, kids activities, antique cars, and a butterfly release. The Henderson Civic Theater presents a play (*Clue: The Musical*, April 24-28, May 1-3). And the Expo Center hosts an antique tractor and engine show.

In southern Rusk County, near Mount Enterprise, the Rose Amphitheatre holds events ranging from big-name musical acts to religious productions to motorcycle rallies--all set in a crater-like 15,000-seat amphitheater. (It also sports a steakhouse open on weekends year-round.)

The trails' forte, however, remains its three driving tours. Each features long, occasional patches of color--such as yellow coreopsis and red Indian blankets, splashed with white Queen Anne's lace. Each tour starts from Henderson and traverses the East Texas Oilfield, the largest oil reservoir in the lower 48 states.

On the tours, I frequently spotted pump-jacks, the seesawing machines that pump oil from working well sites.

Tour #1 passes the field's discovery site, where Columbus "Dad" Joiner found oil in 1930. It also passes through New London where, in 1937, natural gas exploded under a school, killing nearly 300 students and teachers. A 32-foot-tall granite cenotaph

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commemorates the tragedy, which is chronicled in new exhibits at the adjacent New London Museum. (The museum also serves lunches Monday-Friday.)

Tour #1 skirts through Overton, home of several gift and antique shops. Just east of town on Texas 135, I noticed a surprised look on Joe Marchbanks' red barn. In the mid-1980s, as a Halloween gag, a buddy of Joe's painted eyebrows and a nose to make the barn door and two hayloft windows comprise a face. Passersby liked it, so Joe kept it that way.

Coreopsis is queen of Tour #1 (and Tours #2 and #3, for that matter), as I discovered on Texas 42 headed toward Jordan's Plant Farm. The Jordan family began with one greenhouse in 1976. They now operate a popular visitor attraction with 500,000 square-feet of growing space, plus a garden center-gift shop that looks like an Old West town.

Tour #2 veered northeast from Henderson on FM 782 past the 26,000-acre Martin Lake TXU surface lignite mining operation. What a sight the 325-foot-long dragline boom and its 82-cubic-yard bucket made!

At the Stewart community, I stopped at C.E. Rogers & Son General Store. The "Son" is Glenn Rogers. At 75, he still runs the old-fashioned store, along with nephew David Walters. I loved hearing his stories about how the store opened in 1889 and how his dad took it over in 1919, building this structure in 1927. Since the 1930s, they've butchered their own beef and pork for the store's meat market. I tried tasty summer sausage, with a slab of red-rind cheddar sliced on an antique cheese cutter. I also tried delicious "peach cobbler in a jar," one of several "new" items David added a few years back. His wife, Paula, also added a line of "countrified" gift items.

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Tour #2 took me to Martin Creek Lake State Park. The 286-acre fishing, camping, and hiking park sits on the 5000-acre cooling lake of a lignite-fired power plant. Near the park's fishing pier, I saw the old roadbed of Trammel's Trace, an Indian trail-cum-roadway traveled by settlers moving to Texas in the 1830s and 1840s.

Three stops on Tour #3 dripped with still more history.

Just off FM 2867, I stopped at Pine Grove Cumberland Presbyterian Church and cemetery, tucked under towering trees. The congregation organized in a log cabin before the Civil War and built this simple white structure about 1870. It disbanded in 1907. But the Pine Grove community has maintained the building for almost a century, holding an annual homecoming and sacred harp singing (April 27, 2003), complete with dinner on the grounds.

At the Brachfield community on FM 840, I paused at the old gin that once processed cotton and now stores hay. Built before 1920, it closed in the 1950s, as did many of more than 50 cotton gins that once dotted Rusk County.

I read the historical marker in front of the Patrick-Bolding House, a neat, unpainted home on FM 1798. In 1855, settler John Patrick built a log cabin that was later expanded using hand-planed virgin timber. His daughter, Mary Bolding, ran a store, post office, and telephone switchboard in the home. John Patrick's 85-year-old granddaughter, Gertie Patrick, lives here now. People are fascinated by her home, she told me: "Not a week goes by that somebody doesn't stop and read that marker."

A sea of color greets me near the intersection of FM 95 and FM 315. Tall bright-orange Texas paintbrush predominate, with ample sprinklings of bluebonnets and pink prairie phlox.

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In 1999, Rusk County started its wildflower trails to attract visitors. The Texas Department of Transportation lends a hand by annually sowing 1,000 pounds of wildflower seeds--including crimson clover, coreopsis, Indian blanket, vetch, and sunflowers. Local tourism officials encourage landowners to let wildflowers naturally reseed, assuring next year's color crop.

As I headed home from Rusk County, I wondered about next year's color crop. The right climatic conditions had made this a good year for wildflowers. But even on an "off" year, I decided, the wildflower trails of Rusk and Cass counties offer a laid-back look at country living in northeast Texas ...with lively events, interesting attractions, and rich history.

If there's a *peak* season, then eyes will be poppin' again along the yellow-brick road to Ahs.