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The Buck Stops Here

YEAR OF EPIC CHALLENGES

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Loving the Land at Laborcitas

2018 Leopold Award winner brings diversity back to this South Texas ranch.

by Justin Wood

Laborcitas Creek Ranch, the 2018 Leopold Award winner for land stewardship, has created waterfowl compounds for ducks and other birds.

ON THE COVER: White-tailed deer are the focus of attention for hunters across the state when fall comes around. Photo © Stephen Goodman / AKM Images
BACK COVER: Autumn brings fall color to Pedernales Falls State Park. Photo © Rob Greebon / Images from Texas

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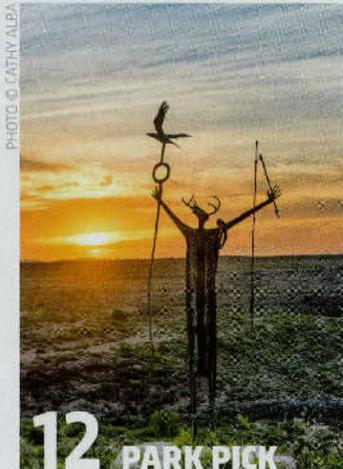


PHOTO © CATHY ALBA

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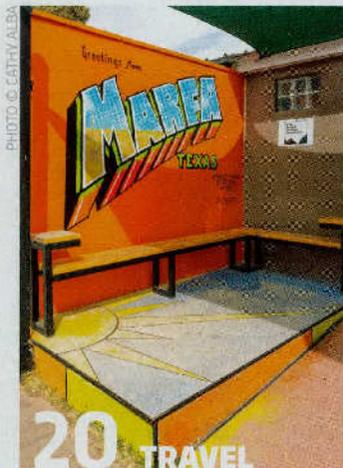


PHOTO © CATHY ALBA

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McNeil family connects city kids to outdoor activities.



ILLUSTRATION © JESS BLANK

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Get prepared for the opening of deer season.

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"HUNTING: THE ART OF PURSUING, STALKING, TRAILING OR SHOOTING ... WHILE FREEZING, SWEATING, SWATTING OR SWEARING." Of course, that's not Webster's definition, just a popular meme making the rounds this season on social media. But there's so much truth to it, as anyone who has pitted themselves against whitetails or gobblers can tell you.

So why do we hunt? Is it for a trophy set of antlers to mount on the wall or to supply fresh, local meat to our family? Perhaps it's something far deeper and more primal, a connection to the past and a quest for time outside spent quietly contemplating life in a place of pastoral beauty.

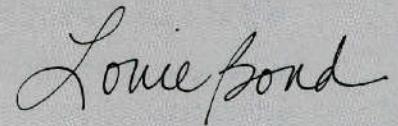
No matter what drives you to the fields and forests this fall, we'll go there with you. Our colleague Whitney Bishop spent a weekend with our PBS show crew in Goldthwaite to highlight a "typical" opening day of deer-hunting season in small-town Texas and brings us a magazine feature to accompany the fine long-form episode that will air Oct 21-27 (and reside on YouTube after that). Meet the local newspaper editor, meat processor, hunters and neighbors in their enjoyment of and participation in the pursuit of Texas' most popular game animal.

So, of course, our November entry in the Year of Epic Texas

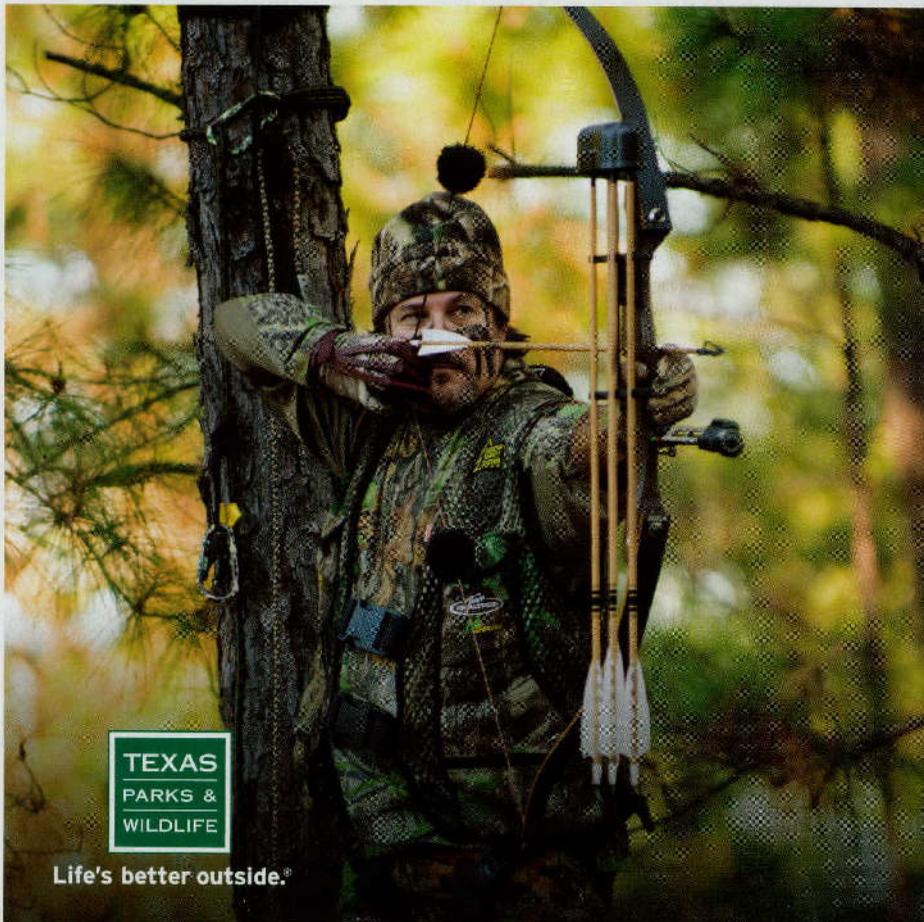
Challenges is fittingly the oldest deer contest in the state (53 years in 2018), the Muy Grande. There are several contests of note in Texas, but Leonel "Muy" Garza's is the granddaddy of them all. Regular magazine contributor John Goodspeed followed the 2017 contest for us to enjoy as the 2018 contest cranks up.

Hunters are some of the best conservationists around, and our 2018 Leopold Conservation Award winners, Berdon and Rolanette Lawrence of Laborcitas Creek Ranch in South Texas, are great examples. Through hard work and wise land management practices, they now "grow" bigger bucks and have thriving populations of dove and quail, as well as other wild birds and wildlife. The Lawrences take it a step further, inviting local students out to enjoy and learn.

So much natural beauty to love this season in Texas. Whether you're out hunting or just enjoying a Thanksgiving country drive to Grandma's house, take a moment to savor your blessings and give thanks.



Louie Bond, Editor



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PHOTO © CARLOS CASTILLA/DREAMSTIME.COM

WIND FARMS ON THE HORIZON

We agree with the Dickinsons (“Devils Advocates,” August/September 2018) and empathize with the residents of Val Verde County. We too have a nearby wind farm flashing its numerous red lights out of our bedroom window.

My wife and I moved out to the country in 2006 for the quiet, wildlife and pretty scenery. A few short years later came cellphone towers, the wind farm and other blights on the once-pristine landscape.

“Devils Advocates” does not mention the multimillions in corporate welfare these wind farms receive. Then there’s the tax breaks, phony job creation, killing birds, etc.

Wind farms are destroying the natural beauty of Texas. A law needs to be passed stating that wind farms are not allowed in pristine areas or along natural rivers (like the Devils River) or within sight of a state or national park.

GREG MAUZ
Christoval

PHOTOGRAPHIC STYLE

Having picked up my first SLR camera in 1972, I have a pretty good grasp on what I think photography is all about. I always enjoy finding short articles that identify a subject — style in this case — and expand upon the subject (“In Search of Style,” October 2018). I must say without equivocation that the piece was one of the best I have read in some time — concise, to the point and devoid of “pro photography speak.” Nicely done!

As an aside, my wife and I moved to Texas five years ago. We have received *Texas Parks & Wildlife* magazine for four of those years. We have truly enjoyed your landscape photography. It has

motivated me to develop a bucket list of places we plan to travel to in Texas. Once we get our travel trailer back from the dealer we will be headed to the Hill Country and South Texas.

DON THODE
Chandler

THE SOUND OF CICADAS

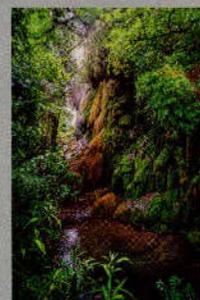
It’s wonderful to have our beloved *chichárras* featured in your August/September issue (“Shrill Symphony” article on giant cicadas). My grandfather, born at Los Rucios Ranch north of Edinburg, called them *las San Juaneñas* because they emerge around St. John’s feast day, which coincides with the summer solstice.

The sound of *chichárras* evokes memories of long, hot summer days, playing outside, climbing trees, digging up antlions and evenings of star-lit skies waiting for shooting stars. The song of *chichárras* is part of my being.

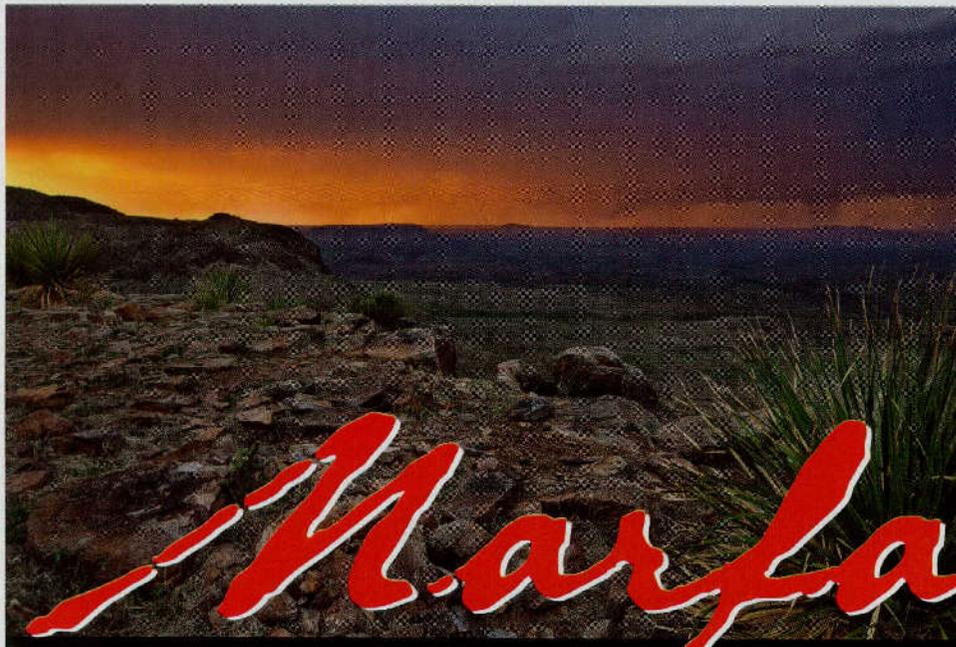
DORA DOVALINA
Mission

WHERE IN TEXAS?

Have you noticed how a waterfall makes you feel better? Science says it’s so. Waterfalls give off negative ions, which are believed to produce



mood-boosting biochemical reactions in our brains. Visitors to October’s *Where in Texas?* location — Colorado Bend’s gorgeous Gorman Falls — probably have experienced just such a feeling. While part of those good feelings may come from being in a wondrous setting, the moving water and air around a waterfall can produce tens of thousands of those negative ions. Reader and Gorman Falls visitor Jamie Blalock describes the falls as “oh sooooo beautiful” and “a definite Texas ‘bucket list’ sight!” See this month’s *Where in Texas?* on Page 58.



BREATHTAKING ADVENTURE



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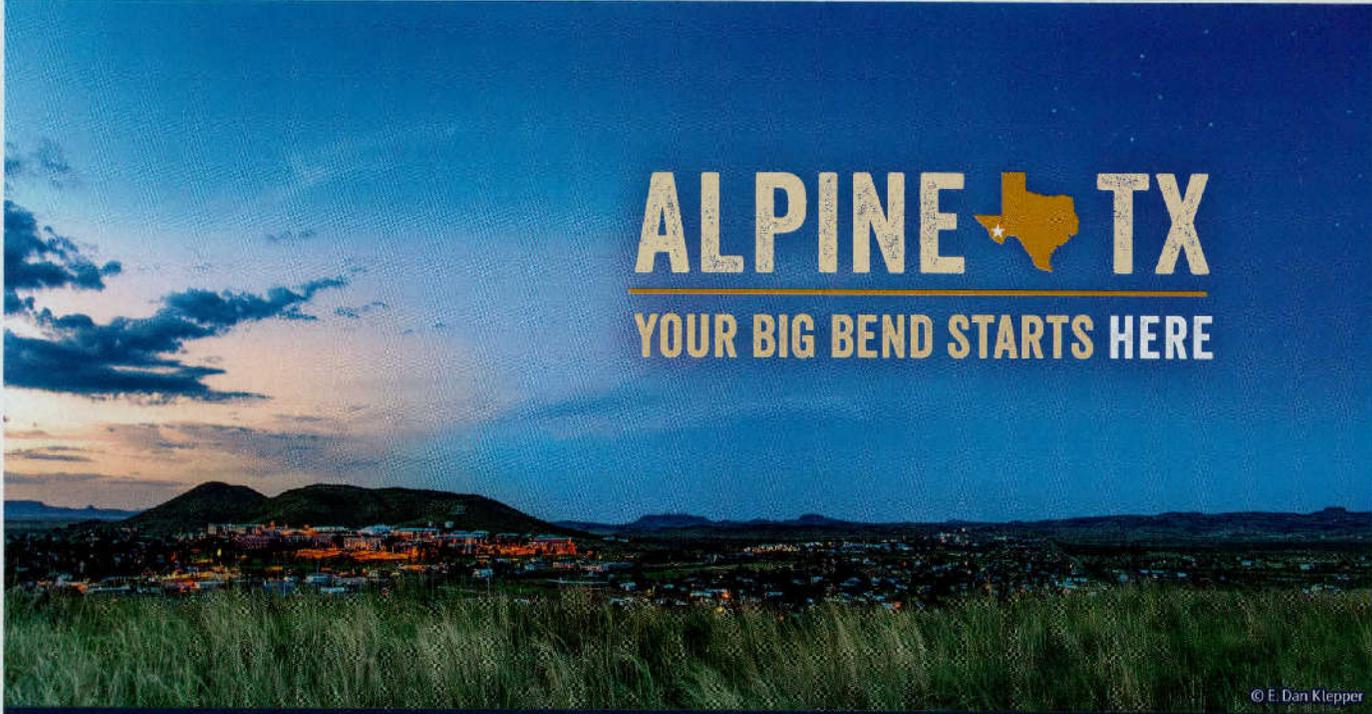


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Wyler Aerial Tramway Closes

AFTER NEARLY SIX DECADES in operation, the Wyler Aerial Tramway in El Paso is closed until further notice.

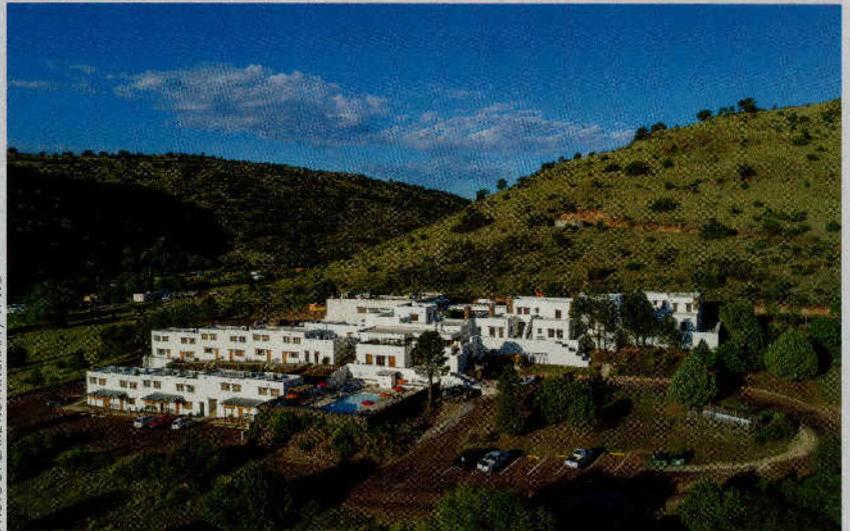
The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, which has operated the tram for the past 18 years at Franklin Mountains State Park, made the decision to suspend operations following an engineering analysis conducted as part of a deferred maintenance project that was planned to begin later this fall. Despite passing annual inspections, the latest analysis concluded the tram, built in 1959, has surpassed its life expectancy and is no longer suited for public use. Out of an abundance of caution, TPWD has closed the tramway while it considers its options.

The tramway was donated to TPWD in 1997; it reopened to the public in 2001 following extensive renovation. Replacement of the tram is estimated to cost millions of dollars.

TPWD does not have the financial resources to execute a capital construction project of this size at this time.

Wyler Aerial Tramway features two aerial cable cars that travel over the jagged mountain and rock formations on the east side of the Franklin Mountains to Ranger Peak. From the summit, about 45,000 visitors per year experience a 360-degree view of two countries and two states. ★

PHOTO BY EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD



Indian Lodge Reopens After Renovations

INDIAN LODGE at Davis Mountains State Park has reopened its doors after months of extensive renovations to more than 35 guest rooms.

Exterior renovations included the replastering of the historic and standard lodge rooms, new heating and air conditioning systems in all rooms, new roofing on all lodge buildings and painting of the lodge's exterior walls.

"These updates are beneficial to the preservation of Indian Lodge so that it can be enjoyed and experienced by families for years to come," says Indian Lodge site superintendent Karen Sulewski.

Built in the 1930s, Indian Lodge is a unique inn nestled within the Davis Mountains built to resemble a multilevel pueblo village. With its white adobe walls, Indian Lodge allows visitors to enjoy the rugged beauty of the mountains by day and relax in a comfortable room by night. ★

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OCT. 28-NOV. 3: Huntsville State Park; catching copperheads; Galveston Island beach; Laborcita Creek Ranch.

NOV. 4-10: Spicewood Ranch restoration; Texas horned lizards; ADA hunt help; East Texas woods and wildlife.

NOV. 11-17: Foundation friends; Trans-Pecos grassland pronghorn; urban pocket prairies.

NOV. 18-24: Thanksgiving week turkeys; tracking, calling, hunting, restocking, gobbling.

NOV. 25-DEC. 1: Library rooftop garden; oystering for a living; Couch Mountain water improvements.



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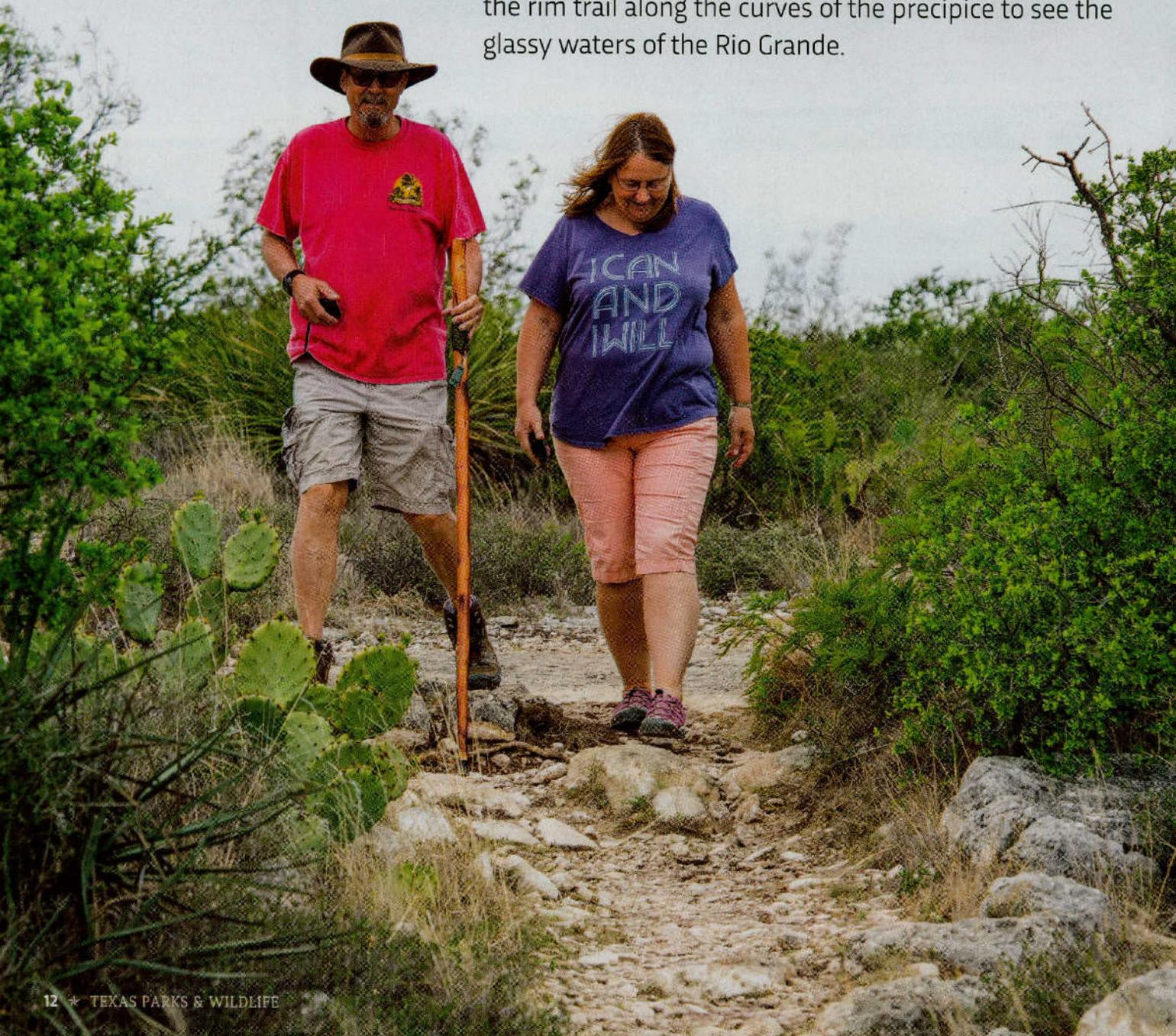


CANYON VIEWS AT SEMINOLE

Hiking the rim trail at historic Seminole Canyon.

BY ELIZABETH O'BRIEN • PHOTOS BY CHASE FOUNTAIN

Hiking at Seminole Canyon State Park and Historic Site offers unforgettable views of tawny limestone cliffs where the rugged West Texas landscape cuts dramatically to Seminole and Presa canyons. Follow the rim trail along the curves of the precipice to see the glassy waters of the Rio Grande.





Along the path, the surrounding medley of vegetation — cenizo and creeping ocotillo — offers a hospitable sanctuary to a bounty of birds. Dive down with a barn swallow that swoops across the vista and you will see some of the oldest rock art in North America in the style of the Lower Pecos region.

Accustomed to traveling by bicycle, I was unprepared for the slower pace of hiking and didn't plan enough time to see everything the park offers. A guided tour led by park staff can help you see the pictographs at Fate Bell Shelter and Panther Cave, though I didn't get to see them myself.

The exhibits at park headquarters contain replicas of the rock art, like the leaping mountain lion, painted by people long passed. The exhibits bring the rich history to the present, with the convergence of misdeeds by Spanish conquistadors, the perseverance of Seminole Indian Scouts and the enterprise of area ranchers. But now, I'm off on a hike.

The Canyon Rim Trail stretches 7.5 miles and takes the stated 3.5 hours to complete. After a while, shadows started to cast on the trail, warning me that the sun might set before I finished. Heeding the sun's warning, I secured the pack

slung across my shoulders — filled with water and emergency apples — and began to run. Thankfully, the mild fall temperatures helped me push on as I dodged pebbles and cactus needles, determined to finish the loop trail.

Near the end of the journey, the sun was illuminating the landscape in magnificent shades of gold. The tall stalks of the desert spoon, or sotol, glowed in the sunbeams. A spiny evergreen plant, sotol served as a multipurpose tool and food source for earlier people. The heart of the plant was baked and made into a veggie patty of sorts. Stems were used as walking sticks, and leaves woven into baskets.

Starting to tire, I noticed that a bird began to follow me; its chirp reminded me of a gym whistle, urging me on as I rose out of the canyon on to flat terrain. Arriving back to the start of the trail just as the sun's red light edged the horizon, I savored these most precious moments. Most of my best times are spent on a bike, but this was pretty nice, too.

The park is located 9 miles west of Comstock on U.S. Highway 90, just east of the Pecos River High Bridge. For more information, call (432) 292-4464 or visit www.tpwd.texas.gov/seminolecanyon. ★





SIGHT UNSEEN

BY EVA FREDERTCK

The Texas blind snake lives a fascinating life under the surface of the earth.

The Texas blind snake is small — between 3 and 13 inches in length — and at first glance is almost indistinguishable from an earthworm. Its mouth is so tiny that it cannot bite humans; its only defense is poking the tip of its tail into its captor. Finally, if you needed further proof of its harmless cuteness, the snake's Latin name, *dulcis*, means “sweet.”

For ants or termites, however, this tiny Texas snake is not sweet or small, but a ferocious predator with a taste for their defenseless larvae. Texas blind snakes are considered fossorial — a word for animals that dig underground — but they do not possess any digging adaptations and get around in the subterranean environment by wriggling through loosely packed earth or following the paths of other animals such as earthworms or ants. To feed, they dive headfirst into ant colonies and wriggle down the tunnels to find the young.

When the ants attack the invading snake, it secretes a mix of feces and a noxious chemical, then rolls around in it to coat its whole body like a suit of smelly armor. Now immune to the attacks of the ants, the snake proceeds into the heart of the colony to snack on pale, tender larvae.

While the snake is a terrifying threat to ants and termites, some animals look

upon it as a well-meaning helper around the house — or nest, to be exact. Screech owls have been known to pick up blind snakes and take them back to their homes to clean up.

Once in the nests, the snakes eat insects and mites that pose a threat to young screech owls. A 1987 paper by Fred Gehlbach and Robert Baldrige found that nests with snake housekeepers had significantly fewer insects and arachnids, and that the baby owls from those nests grew 50 percent faster and were 25 percent more likely to live to adulthood.

Texas blind snakes nest in colonies and communicate with other snakes — both blind snakes and other species — via pheromone signals. Researchers do not know how long Texas blind snakes live, but the snakes have a long list of predators including moles, night snakes, roadrunners and domestic cats. ★



PHOTO © ABBOTT NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY

COMMON NAME:

Texas blind snake

SCIENTIFIC NAME:

Rena (formerly Leptotyphlops) dulcis

HABITAT:

Prairies, deserts and occasionally people's houses in the Southwest U.S. and northern Mexico.

DIET:

Larvae of ants and termites.

DID YOU KNOW?

Not technically "blind," the snake's eyes look like dark spots and can help perceive changes in light intensity.



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PHOTO © SONNIA HILL

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The rare rough-stemmed aster has had an identity crisis.

Rare flowers can be hard to find, especially if they've had more name changes than a guy in the witness protection program. Persistence pays off with the rare rough-stemmed aster.

BY ANNA STRONG

Look along Northeast Texas highway rights-of-way from September to November to find this beauty. To distinguish it from the other half-dozen more common blue- or purple-flowered asters in the area, three characteristics must be present. Rough-stemmed aster is the only blue/purple-flowered aster in Northeast Texas with stiff, long hairs on the midstem, clasping midstem leaves with rounded bases and recurved phyllaries (green, leaf-like structures under the flower head).

The habitat of this rare aster includes relatively open sites of natural wetlands — seeps, bogs and springheads, for example — and degraded wetlands. But, like Goldilocks, the rough-stemmed aster needs habitat that is “just right.” It doesn’t like areas that are too wet or too dry, and so it prefers edges of wetlands. But because of its affinity to saturated soils, the plant is threatened by ditching and draining of wetlands. Conversely, damming ponds to create lakes decreases the available habitat for this rare plant. The rough-stemmed aster also can be negatively affected by mowing to the edge of drainages.

Not only is rough-stemmed aster troublesome to identify and threatened by habitat disturbance, but it is further plagued by frequent name changes. Botanists have changed the scientific name of rough-stemmed aster (now, *Symphotrichum puniceum* var. *scabriacaulis*) no fewer than four times in the 70-odd years since the species was discovered. Such name changes frustrate many a naturalist. It sometimes seems that as soon as one alien-sounding name is memorized, another one is created and deemed correct.

To make matters worse, in many cases, the former scientific name (say, *Aster scabriacaulis*) is both easier to remember and easier to spell. Most people would agree that the name *Aster* is more familiar and easier to pronounce than *Symphotrichum*. The latter name first arose in 1832 but was never widely used.

Then in 1994, when many of the North American asters were found to be different from their European and Asian brethren, most New World asters were transferred to the genus *Symphotrichum*.

Name changes are not arbitrary. The changes reflect new knowledge and techniques. With the rise of the internet, old names, new names and misspelled names now can be found. ★

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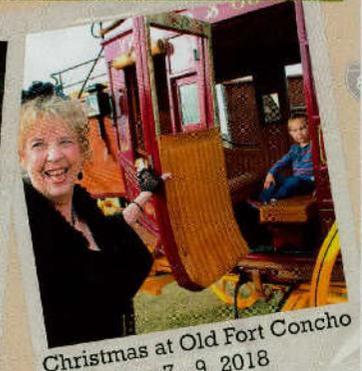
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BIRDS IN FOCUS

Photographer Cissy Beasley offers tips for better bird photos.

BY EARL NOTTINGHAM



PHOTO © CISSY BEASLEY

A familiarity with the behavior and nuances of birds and other wildlife is apparent the moment you see the elegant photography of Beeville-based photographer Cissy Beasley. Through the artful combination of lighting, composition and animal form, she consistently produces extraordinary images of ordinary subjects.

Cissy, who entered her first Wildlife in Focus competition in 2013, is a relative newcomer to the photographic profession, but a lifetime spent in the field at the family ranch near Laredo taught her well about wildlife behavior.

"With my father and brothers as guides and teachers, I learned how to be a respectful guest in nature's house," Cissy says. "This comfort level has served me well as I've traversed the path of nature photography."

She is well on her "path" as she continues to rack up contest wins with her artistic eye and shares her talents with others via workshops and social media. She also uses photography as a tool for conservation to visually tell the stories of threatened bird species like the black skimmer and the perils faced by ground-nesting birds like the royal tern.

"Doing what I believe I am meant to do — fulfilling my purpose — gives me great joy and satisfaction as I use photography as a means of education," she says.

Here are Cissy's top 10 tips for creating better bird photographs.

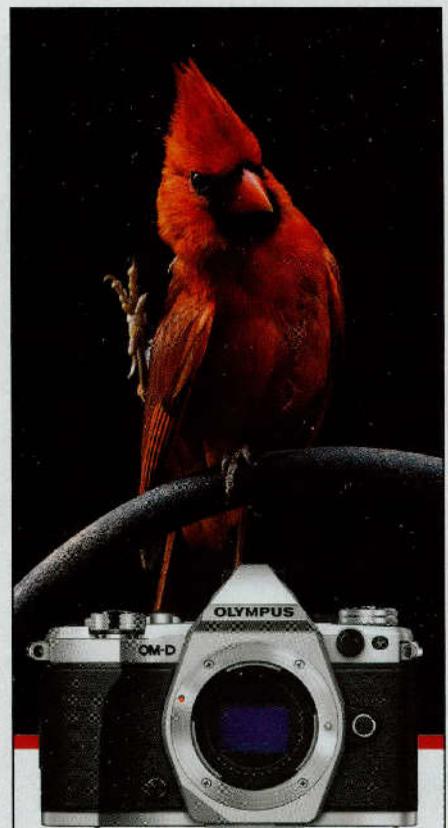
- **SPEND TIME WATCHING AND LEARNING BIRD BEHAVIOR.** This will allow you to anticipate what the bird will do next and keep you ready to shoot at the right moment.
- **FOR BIRDS IN FLIGHT, KEEP MOVING THE LENS WITH THE SUBJECT.** It takes only a second for the subject to get out of frame and then it's gone. Go outside and practice moving your lens with things that move, especially when using longer lenses.
- **HEADS BEATS TAILS EVERY TIME.** For photos of birds in flight, strive to take images of the bird approaching or directly in front of you, but not going away from you.
- **CHECK THE BACKGROUND.** Try to position your subject, whether in flight

or static, against a nondistracting background. This may mean waiting a moment to fire the shutter or moving the camera slightly in a different direction.

- **FOR CLOSE-UP BEAUTY SHOTS OF INDIVIDUAL BIRDS, TRY TO GET THE LIGHT BEHIND YOU.** This will fully illuminate the subject and display its distinct avian features.
- **MAINTAIN FOCUS ON THE EYES OF THE BIRD,** even if it means letting other parts of the body be slightly out of focus. This is true when photographing other species also.
- **SET UP AND USE YOUR CAMERA'S "BACK-BUTTON" AUTOFOCUS FEATURE.** This allows you to control the autofocus separate from the shutter button.
- **USE YOUR CAMERA'S FOCUS TRACKING FEATURE.** Most newer cameras offer the option to acquire and hold focus on a fast-moving subject as it moves across the frame. Consult your owner's manual for specific tracking modes.
- **THINK FAST.** To freeze wing movement, use a fast shutter speed such as 1/2500th of a second or faster for larger birds and at least 1/3200th of a second for smaller birds like hummingbirds.
- **DON'T RULE OUT CAMERA PHONES FOR TAKING GREAT BIRD PHOTOS.** On newer phones, you can touch your screen and the phone will make adjustments for exposure. Take advantage of the zoom feature to bring the bird up closer. Several third-party camera apps offer even more custom camera features.

To see Cissy's work and workshop schedule go to www.coastandcactus.com.

For more tips on outdoor photography, visit the magazine's photography page at www.tpwmagazine.com/photography. Please send questions and comments to Earl Nottingham at earl.nottingham@tpwd.texas.gov.



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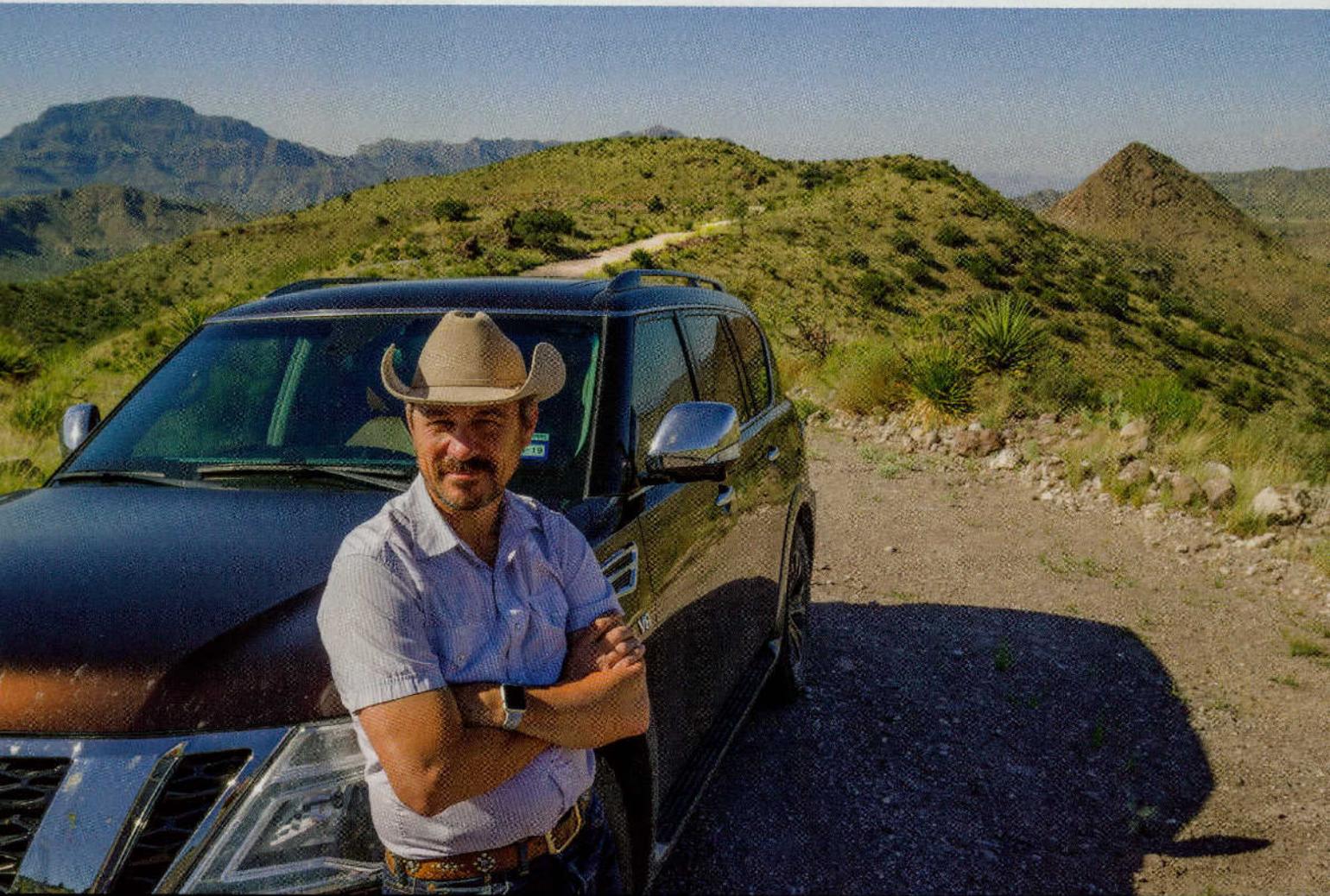
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ART OF THE LANDSCAPE

Marfa's aesthetics extend to the natural beauty of West Texas.

BY MELISSA GASKILL



As Jeffrey Hester maneuvers his dusty SUV down the unpaved road, I notice the navigation panel on the dash is completely blank. We have literally driven off the map. Nice.

AUSTIN

6.5 hours

DALLAS

7.5 hours

EL PASO

3 hours

HOUSTON

9 hours

BROWNSVILLE

9.5 hours

LUBBOCK

4.5 hours

He stops and points toward a deep, rugged canyon.

"From town, you'd never know these canyons and peaks are even here," he tells me. "It looks like the Earth just falls off."

Hester started his guiding company, Rangefinder West Texas Expeditions, so visitors to Marfa wouldn't miss landscapes like this one. We start the day with a cup of Big Bend Coffee Roasters brew at Marfa's Frama, a combination coffee shop/ice cream shop/laundry, the sort of amalgamation that raises no eyebrows here. Then we head south on U.S. Highway 67, a road lined with open, grassy pastures, past Cibolo Creek Ranch and through the mining ghost town of Shafter to the river road, aka FM 170. Going northwest,

it winds and undulates along the backside of the Chinati Mountains, through creosote bushes and past increasingly rugged washes to Ruidosa, a tiny town where the pavement ends. We pass a single vehicle in these 36 miles and spot a sizable bobcat in an arroyo.

Hester pulls into the Hot Springs Airport General Store, which bills itself as the most remote bar in Texas and sells the only groceries available within 50 miles. Jennifer Weaver put up the building to make and sell her handmade leather goods — handbags, wallets, journal covers — and added basic food and hardware items when the grocery in Ruidosa closed, then a bar when the town lost its cantina. The store serves as a local gathering spot as well as office for the airport,

a wide strip in the cactus on higher ground a few miles away. About 10 planes land here each month.

Suitably provisioned with cold drinks, we take Ranch Road 2810, Pinto Canyon Road, rising up to a plateau offering sightings of 7,730-foot Chinati Peak. A small cemetery on a high point proves the perfect spot for a tailgate picnic — breeze and view, no extra charge. The road threads a pass in the mountains, passing the airstrip, Chinati Hot Springs resort and more tiny cemeteries. We cross deep, narrow

here” art, and Hester delivers. Most of his driving tours take a day, some less depending on destination, and his offerings include sunset rides to the canyon and pickup from the Alpine Amtrak station, the El Paso or Midland-Odessa airports and airstrips in Marfa, Presidio and Alpine. While today we stop often to wander, driving tours are ideal for those who want to just sit back and take it all in.

Hester studied fine arts in college and worked in advertising for about 12 years. He drove through Marfa once

stars Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson and James Dean. Today, the sunny lobby features beautiful tile, taxidermy longhorns and historic photos from the movie. A tall fountain splashes in the sunny outdoor courtyard, and an indoor lounge area sports a deep leather sofa and fireplace.

At the Capri restaurant in town, we dig into a plate of Island Creek oysters served with prickly pear mignonette, a seaweed salad and a 50-ounce rib-eye, sliced into enough succulent pieces for Hester, me and everyone we passed on

PALACE THEATER PHOTO © ERIC W. POHL. ALL OTHER PHOTOS BY EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD



FEATURED ATTRACTIONS (LEFT - RIGHT):

- ★ Jeffrey Hester of Rangefinder West Texas Expeditions
- ★ Palace Theater
- ★ Presidio County Courthouse
- ★ Cobra Rock boot store
- ★ Hotel Paisano

canyons, and the landscape grows more rugged. Ocotillo, sotol, yucca and cholla dot the slopes, and we scare up a couple of jackrabbits and a caracara.

“If you come here and don’t see all this, you’ve done yourself a disservice,” Hester says. “I love the diversity of the landscape. There is art in town, but the real art is out here.”

The art in town enjoys quite a reputation, but I came for the “out

on his way to a job in San Diego.

“I spent one night here and couldn’t get it out of my mind all winter: the vibe, the landscape,” he says. “So, I came back in summer.”

He befriended locals and visited every place they told him about before opening Rangefinder in April 2017 as a way to share his experiences discovering the area.

“There is so much out there to see,” he says. “The whole idea of the company is getting people not only to Marfa but to show them how, in any direction, everything is so different — the geology, landscape, wildlife.”

Back in town, I head to my room at Hotel Paisano to wash off the dust before dinner. Designed by famed architect Henry Trost, it opened in 1930, an elegant two-story stucco and tile building of 65 rooms, each with private bath. In the summer of 1955, the hotel served as headquarters for the cast of the iconic Texas film *Giant*, including

the road today. A tall wall of windows overlooks an outdoor area with clusters of seating, firepits and mostly native landscaping.

West Texas native and art aficionado Virginia Lebermann had a hand in the Thunderbird Hotel that opened across the street in 2005 and runs the restaurant with husband and chef Rocky Barnette. The oysters are clearly fresh and full of taste, as is the slightly tangy salad. The rib-eye is Texas-grown Akaushi, a Japanese red Wagyu breed of beef cattle. Thanks to excellent food and drink on top of a busy day, I fall asleep almost before my head hits the oversized pillow on my Paisano bed.

The next morning, I’m ready for a hike. Marfa sits within driving distance of many miles of trails in Big Bend National Park, Big Bend Ranch State Park, Davis Mountains State Park, the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Center and elsewhere. Hester’s favorites are the



South Rim and the Chimneys in the national park, but with only a half-day to spare, I head the other direction, to Madera Canyon Trail in the Nature Conservancy's Davis Mountains Preserve. These 33,075 acres protect part of the Davis Mountains sky island — a cooler, wetter landscape surrounded by arid lowland desert. The area contains plants rare in the state, such as ponderosa pine, pinyon pine, mountain mahogany and madrone trees. The 2.4-mile loop trail begins in the canyon at the Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Area on Texas Highway 118, 24 miles northwest of Fort Davis. It crosses Madera Creek and takes me across grassland and through forests of pinyon, oak and juniper, at one point offering a glimpse of Mount Livermore. At 8,378 feet, the peak ranks as the fifth highest in Texas.

Texas Highways 118 and 166 form a loop out of Fort Davis known as the Scenic Loop. On the advice of Tara Poloskey, the Nature Conservancy's education and outreach coordinator for West Texas, I take a detour on Ranch Road 505, which cuts down to



U.S. Highway 90. Poloskey calls this stretch "hawk alley" for its frequent sightings of golden eagles, red-tailed hawks and other raptors.

Back in Marfa, I meet Hester at Buns N' Roses, which serves breakfast and lunch. Then we swing by the courthouse, climbing a series of

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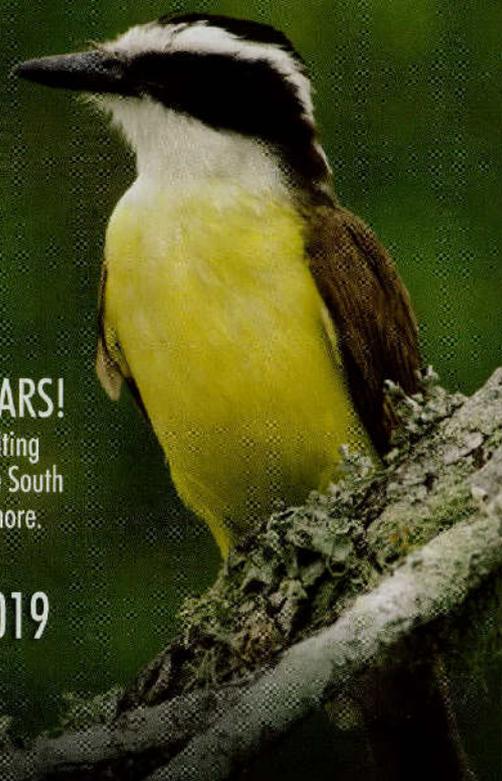
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A rattlesnake guards the roadway; a storm brings lightning and rain to the Davis Mountains.

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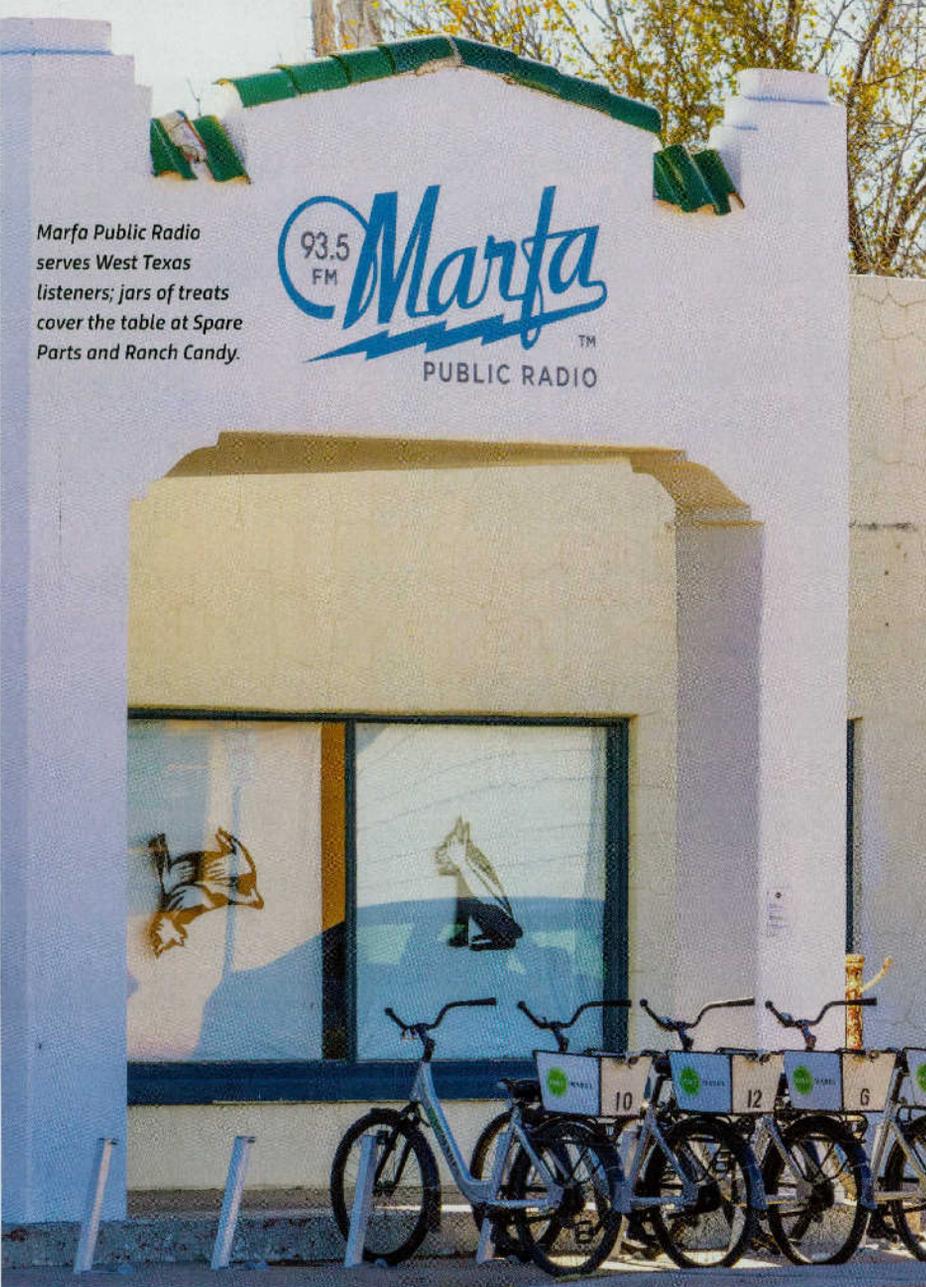
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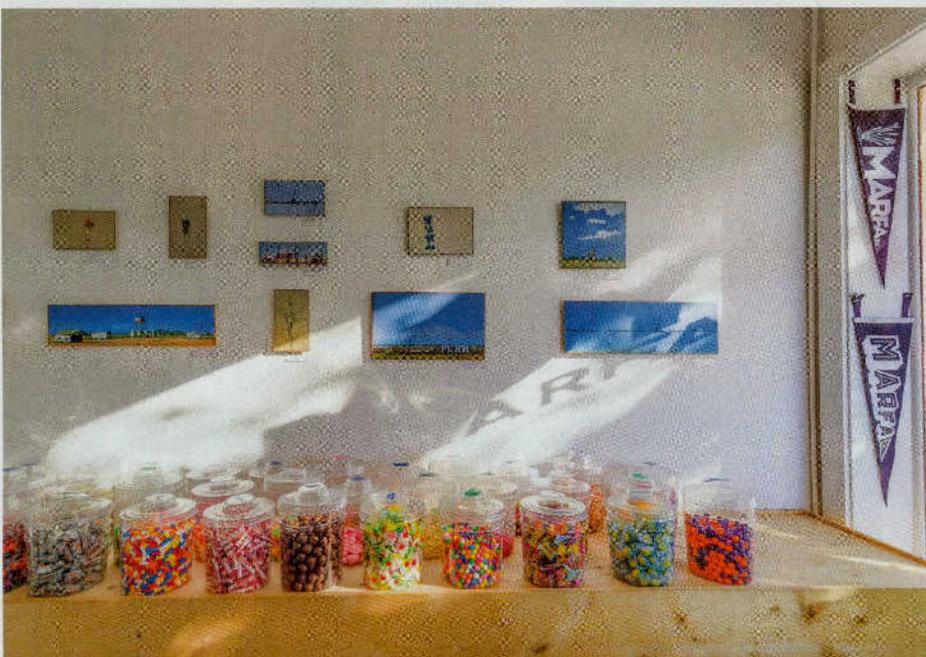


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Marfa Public Radio serves West Texas listeners; jars of treats cover the table at Spare Parts and Ranch Candy.



beautiful wooden stairs to a cupola atop the building to take in an expansive view of town and beyond. Established in 1883 as a water stop for the railroad, Marfa became the Presidio County seat in 1885. This three-story Renaissance-revival courthouse, built in 1886, got a makeover in 2001.

After a cold drink in the bar at Hotel Saint George, we walk around the block to Cobra Rock to admire leather goods designed and made by Colt Miller and Logan Caldbeck in the shop using American leather. Miller grew up south of Lubbock; British Columbia native Caldbeck originally came to Marfa to take a job at the art-focused Chinati Foundation. Both now devote full time to Cobra Rock, which, in addition to Western-inspired, fashionable desert boots, also carries accessories and products from other independent designers and made-in-the-U.S. brands.

Next stop, Spare Parts and Ranch Candy, where jars full of colorful treats cover a table beneath some of Hester's art: images of barbed wire, antelope and cacti painted on squares of rough wood. I admire the funky Western-themed art, clothing, hats and jewelry, displayed in a very Marfa-esque style, hanging on Topo Chico bottles (no shortage of those around here).

The trip ends with a final Marfa meal at Convenience West BBQ, which serves Friday through Sunday from 5 to 7 p.m. or "until we run out." Tantalizing aromas waft from a large pit in front of the former gas station; large picnic tables fill the inside. I order a brisket plate with sweet potato salad and box up several generous slices of tender brisket for snacking on the drive home.

Hester, who hails from a small Georgia town, has lived in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Atlanta and worked briefly in a half-dozen other cities.

"But," he professes, "I've never felt more at home than here in Marfa."

Now he wants to make others feel at home here, too. ★

FALL COLOR

BY EMILY MOSKAL

From late October through November, the deciduous cycle of death and renewal erupts with a bang of cellular color. Cold fronts from the northwest pass across the state, creating a rolling gradient of color. Signaled by the first cold snap of fall, the sun-powered, sugar-making chlorophyll of green leaves breaks down and unmasks the purple, red, orange and yellow pigments that steal the show. The best color often peaks shortly after the first frost. In anticipation of Thanksgiving, get out and enjoy some of the best weather of the year and one of the best times to visit a Texas state park.

LAKE BOB SANDLIN STATE PARK ↓

Meander through the Lakeview Loop to obtain that dreamy lake mirror-reflection photo or catch a fish at the tree-lined lake. There's even a pier with hazy morning mist for sunrise photos. This East Texas park's sumacs, dogwoods and sassafras blush pink, scarlet and maroon, while hickories, red maples and sweetgums transform into towers of yellow, amber and gold beside the famed East Texas evergreen pines.

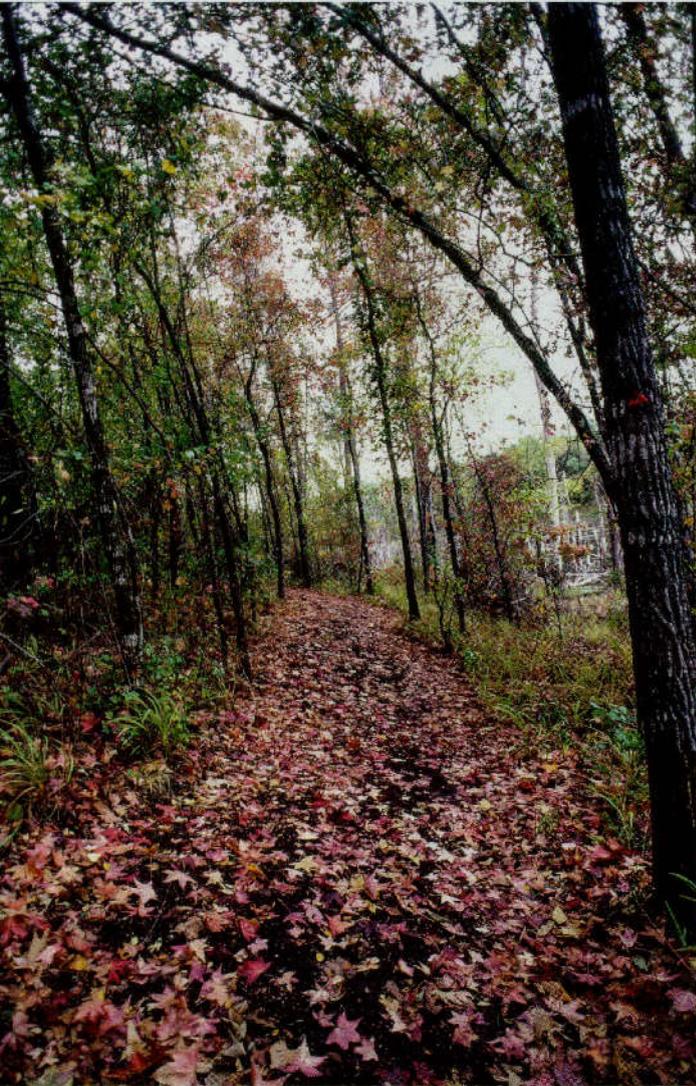


PHOTO BY CHASE FOUNTAIN / TPWD

CADDO LAKE →

Dark mystery meets a splash of romance. At Caddo Lake, you can explore the colors from another perspective. In a canoe, glide over the Earth's watercolor palette, watching the swirling colors meet in the wake behind you while admiring the rust-colored leaves of the bald cypress. (Caddo Lake State Park is closed through Dec. 28 due to construction.)

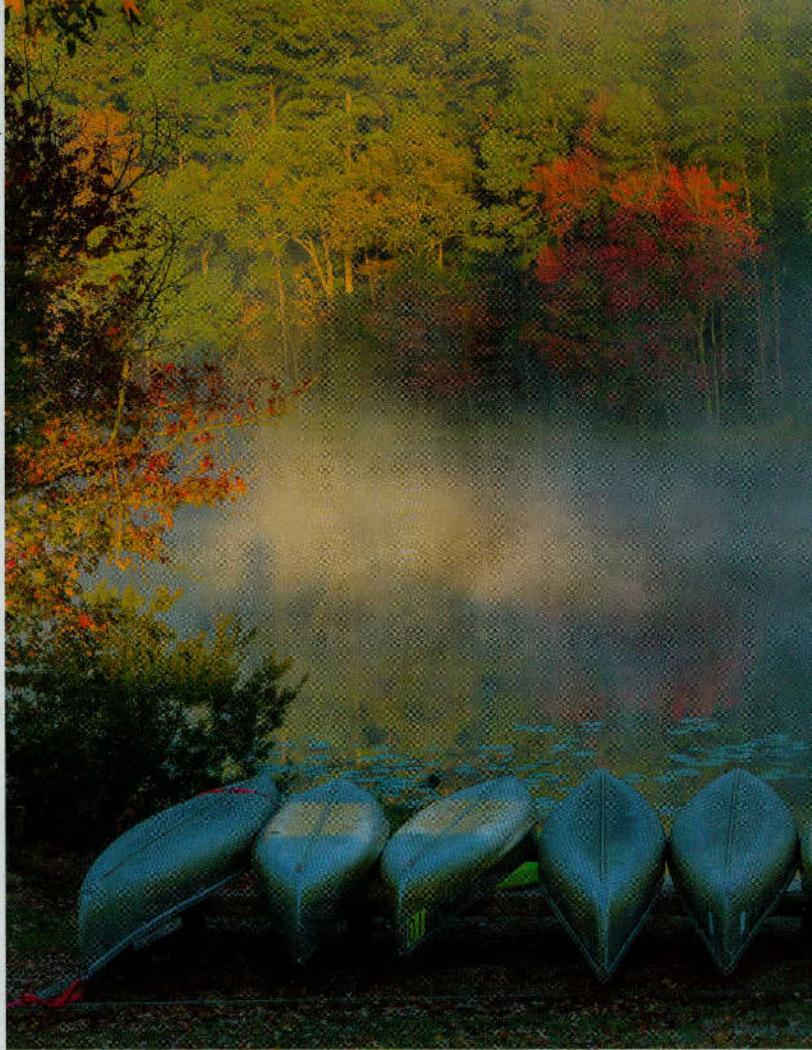
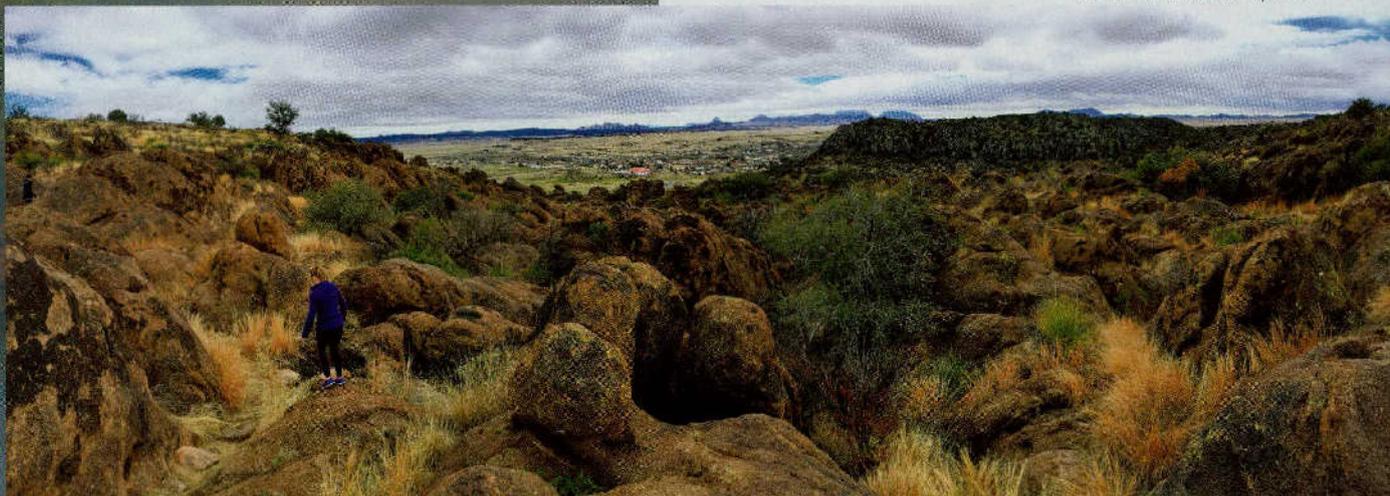


PHOTO BY EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD



PHOTO BY EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD



DAVIS MOUNTAINS STATE PARK ↑

Every autumn along Limpia Creek in the high-elevation Davis Mountains, the lofty West Texas cottonwoods offer bright yellows to complement the big blue skies. Drive up to the scenic overlook on Skyline Drive before sunset and witness the sun touch a golden torch to the canyon walls and mountains.

PHOTO BY CHASE FOUNTAIN / TPWD

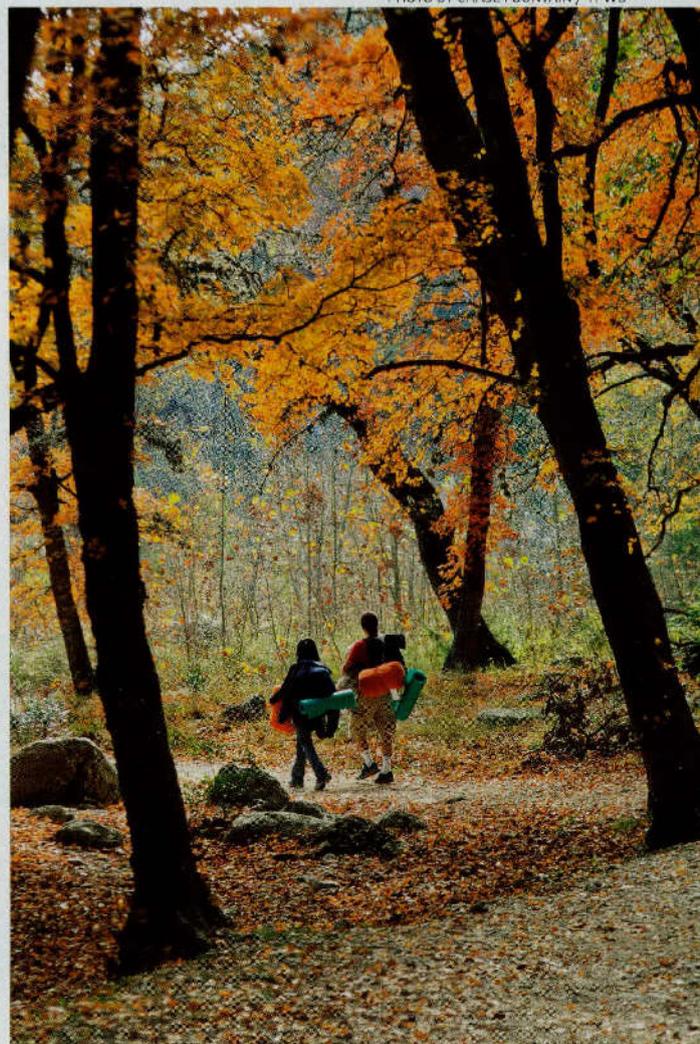


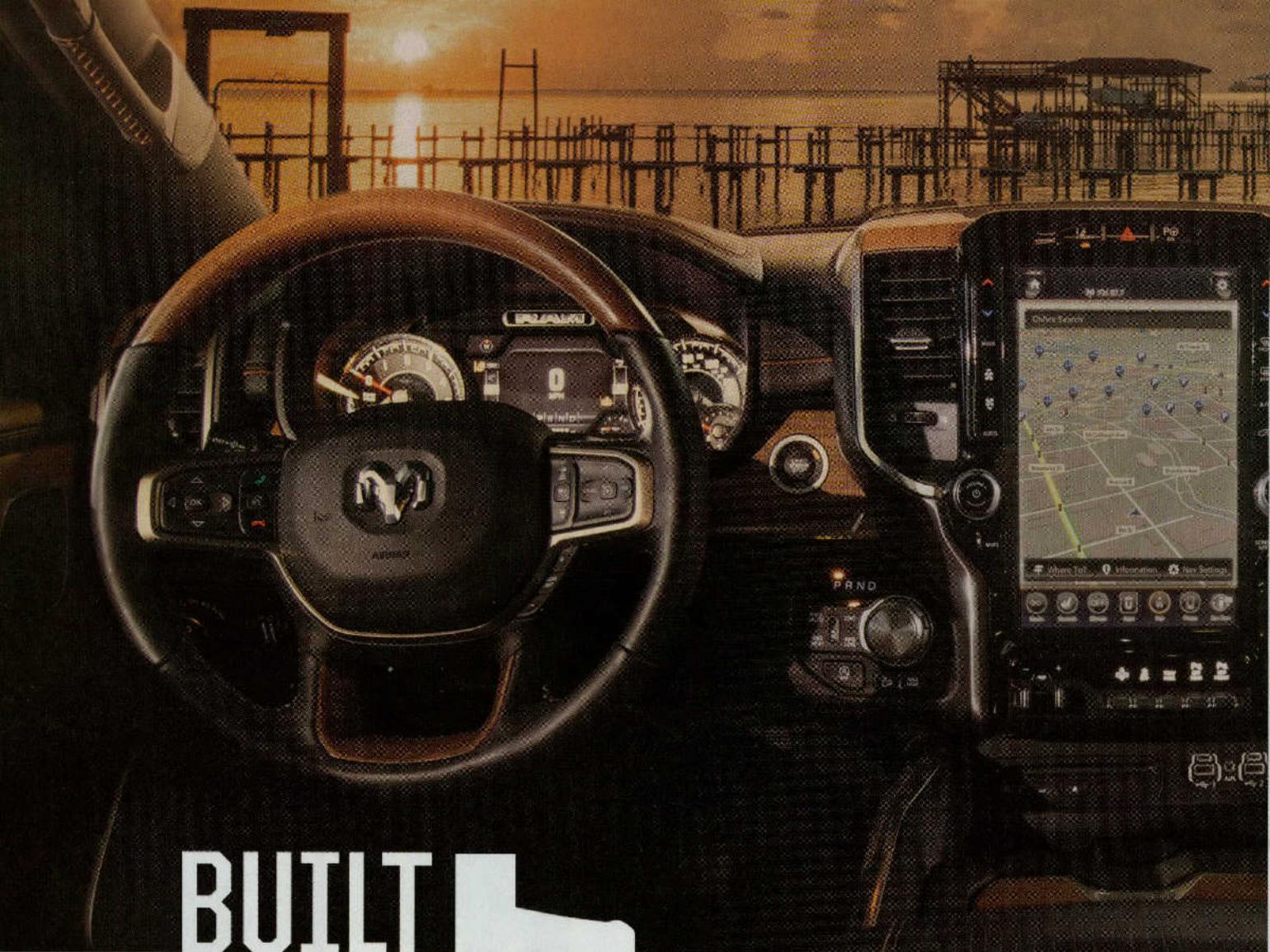
DAINGERFIELD STATE PARK ↑

Bundle up in your coziest sweater and boots and travel to Northeast Texas to take a relaxing 2.5-mile stroll on the Rustling Leaves Nature Trail. As you travel through the “Cathedral of the Trees” along the 80-acre lake, lay out your picnic blanket, dare to take a cool dip or make leaf angels along the lakeshore, where wildlife regularly stops for a drink. For a panoramic overlook of the park, hike the challenging, yet rewarding, Mountain View Trail.

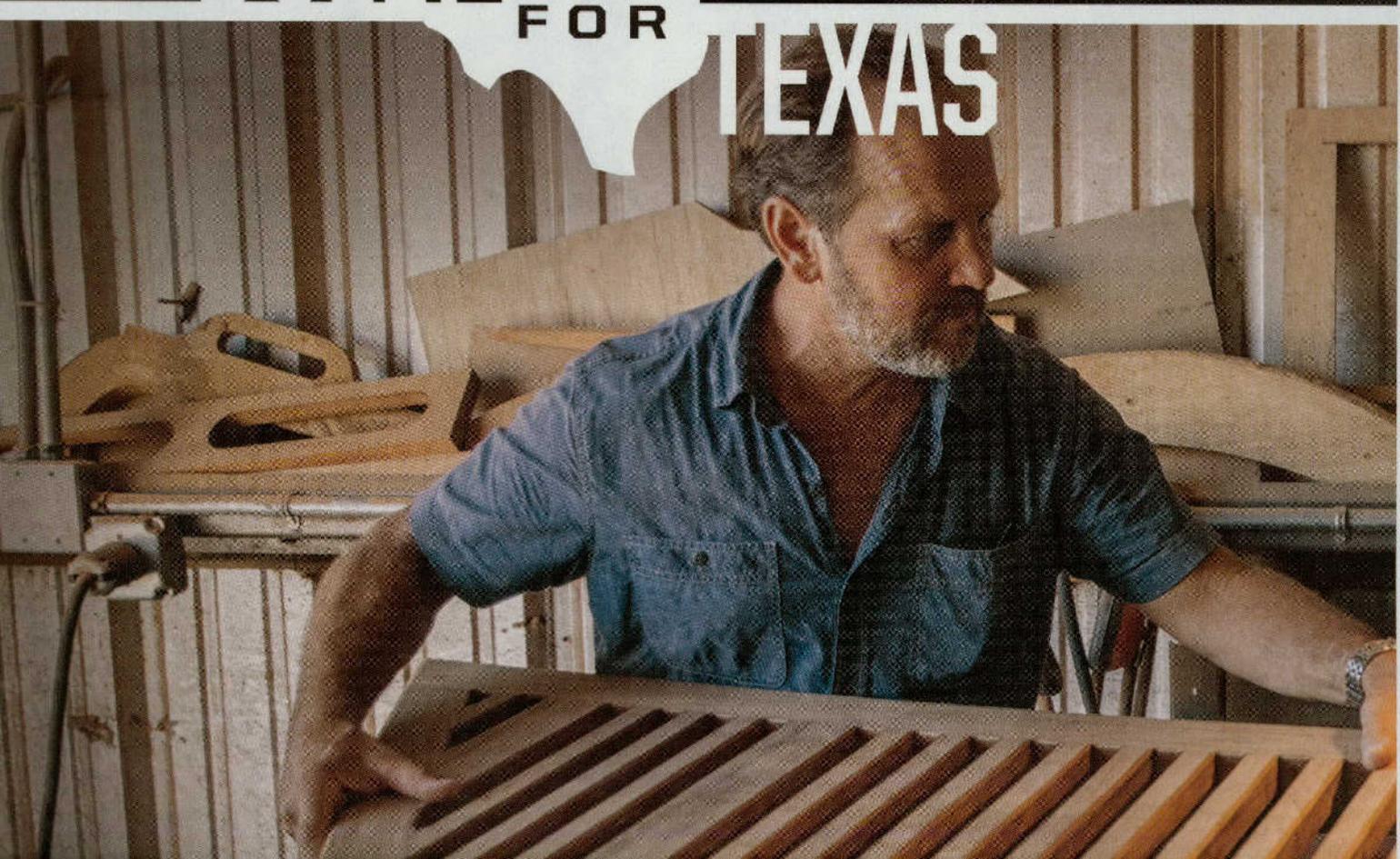
LOST MAPLES STATE NATURAL AREA →

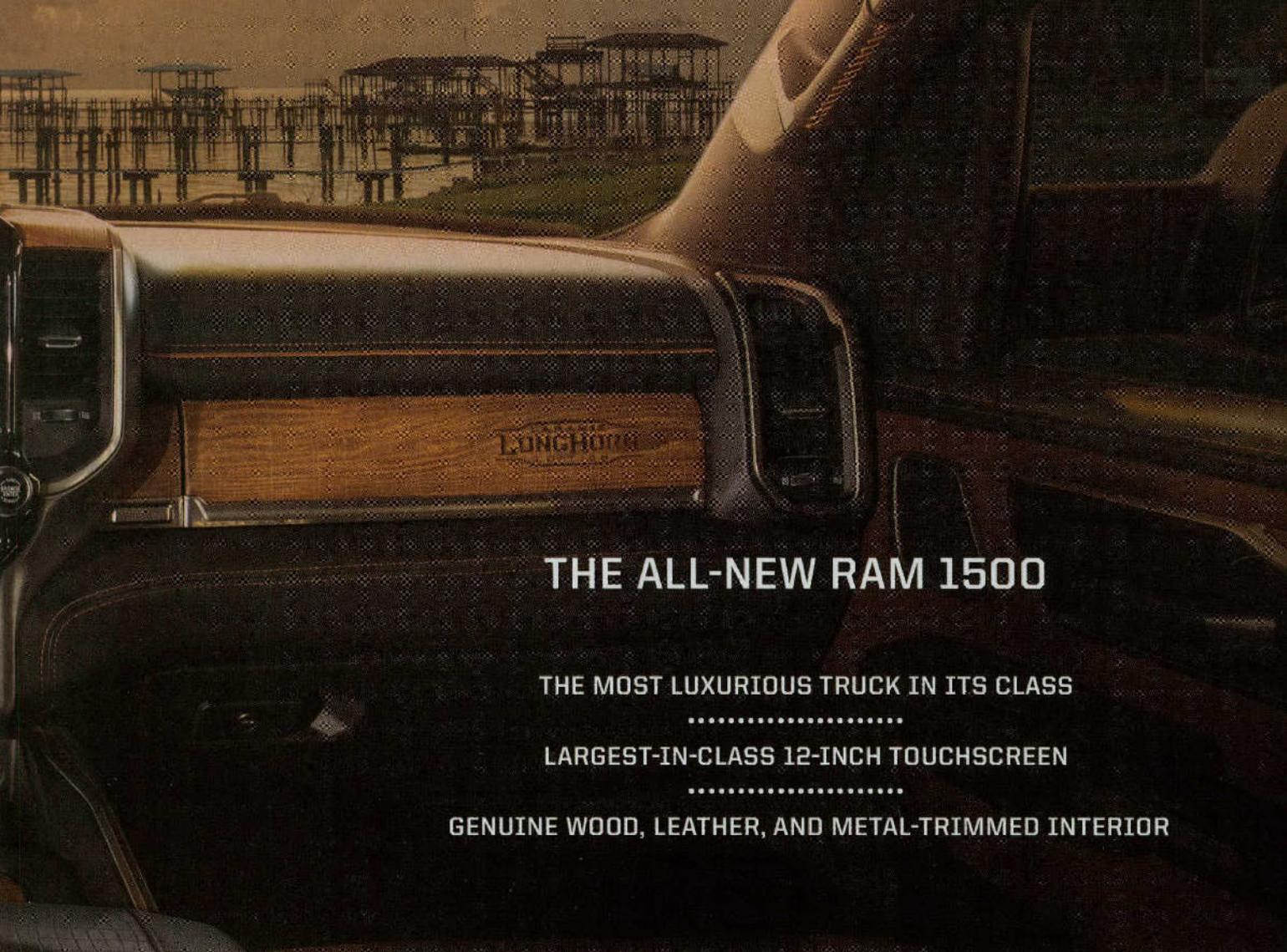
Grab a leaf identification guide and teach the youngsters (and yourself, too) about our state’s trees. Get started with a tree with one of the most deeply lobed (where’s that glossary?) leaves of any tree in the state — the Uvalde bigtooth maple — and the state park most known for its fall color. The park’s namesake maple trees have survived in this “lost,” isolated pocket since the last ice age to give us a deep vermillion red when the temperatures begin to drop. View online fall foliage reports for Lost Maples at tpwd.texas.gov/lostmaples.





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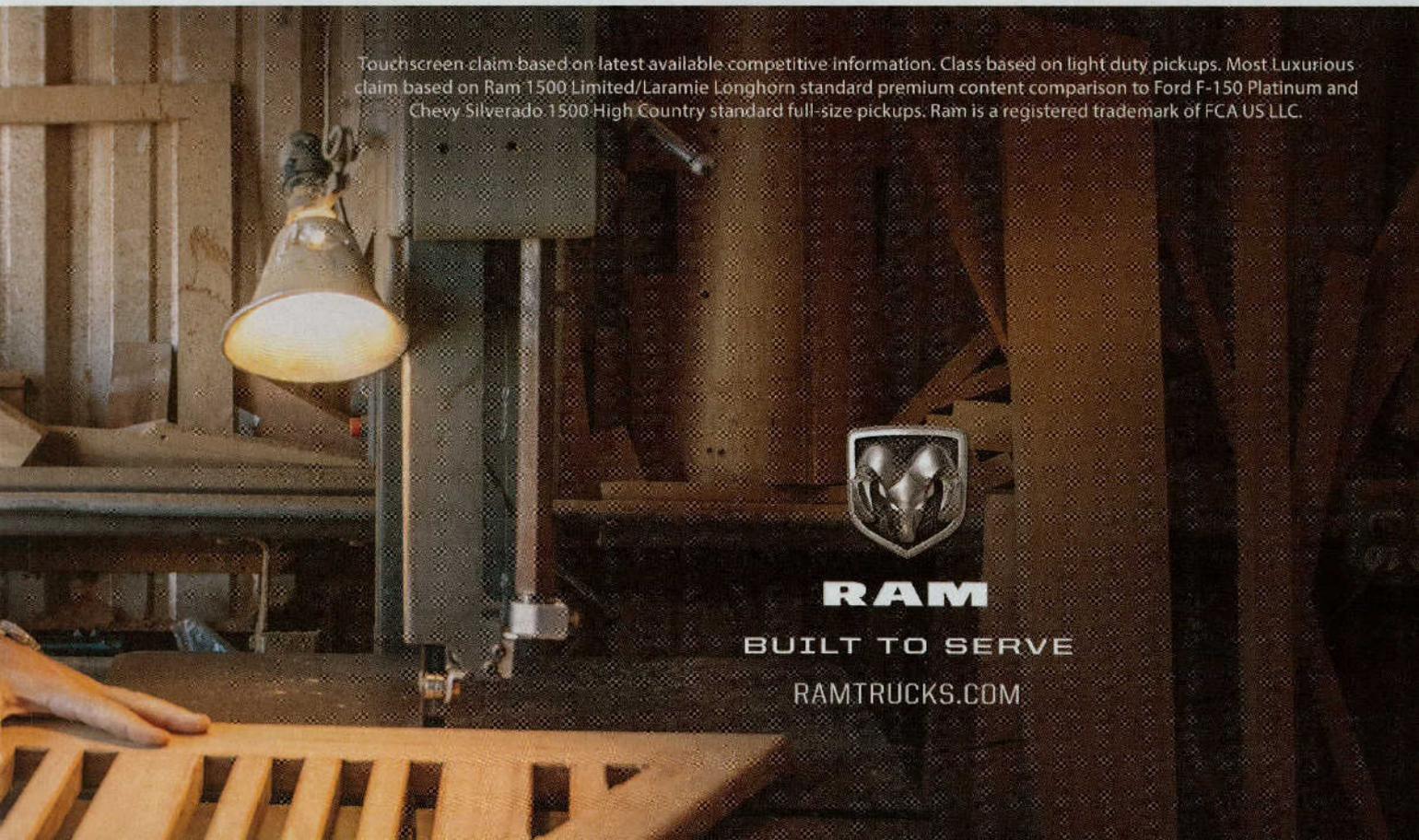
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Leonel Garza, founder of the Muy Grande Deer Contest, has scored more than 20,000 deer since 1965.



The Buck Stops **HERE**

Suspense reigns at Muy Grande, the world's longest-running deer contest.

Bob Jackson points to a photograph. In it, he's kneeling behind an eight-point buck with antlers that look as though they'd been twisted by a tornado with a sick sense of humor.

"That's the ugliest deer you ever saw," the Katy resident proclaims.

But the whitetail presents a pretty picture below the leaderboard heading of "Widest Spread" with a score of $26\frac{2}{8}$ inches, based on the contest's antler-ranking formula. It's early on a chilly January afternoon, the final Sunday of the 2017-2018 Muy Grande Deer Contest, billed as the world's oldest such deer hunting competition (and copied by others as its fame grew).



by John Goodspeed
Photos by Chase Fountain

With nine hours left in the South Texas competition, Jackson beams like a confident winner, but his hunting buddy, Brad Hildebrand of Victoria, tasted defeat only a day earlier. Neophytes to the contest, the pair each shot their leading entries a month earlier at the Sweden Ranch, named for a ghost town near Benavides where a post office opened in 1884 and shuttered in 1932. Hildebrand led the "Best Seven Pointer" category with a 116 $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch buck until William Barfield of Hebronville topped it by 5 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches.

"That's the way the contest goes," Hildebrand says. "You never know what's going to happen."

That same day, though, on his last hunt of the season, Hildebrand nails a nine-point contender.

While Jackson views the leaderboard inside, Hildebrand watches anxiously as the buck is scored on a waist-high metal table under an awning angling off the red-brick Muy Grande building, which serves as a grocery store,

restaurant, gas station, sporting goods store and contest headquarters.

"We pre-scored him before we brought him in and knew it was going to be tight," he says.

As pickups and cars rumble around the fuel pumps, Muy Grande founder Leonel Garza measures lengths of antler tines and circumferences along beams and tallies the score.

"That deer is 150 $\frac{2}{8}$, which is real close to the one that is leading," he says.

With the help of his cane, Garza, 78, hobbles inside to check the leaderboard, then returns and announces, "There's 6 $\frac{5}{8}$ of an inch separating that first place and this one. We're going to do it again."

Tight-lipped, Hildebrand nods. This time, Garza fills the scoresheet as son-in-law Kenneth Sharber measures with care and precision — a championship depends on it. On the leaderboard below "Best Nine Pointer" is a photo of Adam Lozano Jr. of Garden Ridge with his 151-

inch trophy. Whether it stays there depends on the numbers.

Sharber reports between pauses for measuring: "We've got 10 $\frac{7}{8}$... 5 $\frac{2}{8}$... 4 $\frac{2}{8}$..."

THE DREAM STARTS YOUNG

Freer, the home of the Muy Grande, sits in the big-buck Brush Country of Duval County at the crossroads leading to Laredo, San Antonio, Corpus Christi and Houston. Bob Jackson, 61, and his father, Donald Jackson of New Braunfels, would stop at the Muy Grande store before the contest was conceived just to gawk at the hunters' harvest.

"We couldn't wait to see how big the deer were in that cooler," Jackson recalls.

Bob Jackson was 7 when the contest began in 1965. While he and his father never entered the actual competition, they visited regularly. Inside the store, a large board is dotted with bold, black-lettered signs proclaiming the many categories — "Husband and Wife Team," "Top Story of the Year," "Freak of the Year," "Heaviest Javelina" and many more — with corresponding photos and notecards offering glimpses at the current leaders. Hunters register for the contest and then spend the next days and weeks of the season trying to harvest that trophy animal. When that lucky moment occurs, they bring the field-dressed deer to Muy Grande for scoring. If they can't make it in, assessment by a certified Texas Big Game Awards scorer will be accepted.

The scoring, devised by Garza himself, uses the Boone & Crockett score common to hunters as a basis, but adds in factors like the circumference of the main beam, the antler width and number of points, and the animal's field-dressed weight. Those numbers decide who makes it to the leaderboard, perhaps knocking off the current hopeful leader at the end of the contest. It's high drama that intrigues young and old patrons throughout hunting season.

"I have a lot of fond memories of going in and talking to Leonel Garza when I was a kid," Jackson says. "Muy Grande's a tradition."



Bob Jackson proudly points out his entry atop the leaderboard for the widest antler spread.

PHOTO © JOHN GOODSPEED



A young admirer sizes up a set of antlers at the Muy Grande store.

Also a lifelong fan of the contest, Jackson's friend Hildebrand decided to participate after management practices at the ranch, family owned for six years, began paying off with quality bucks.

"I stop all the time at Muy Grande," he says. "Like everyone else, I want to see what's going on and if I know anybody on the leaderboard. To me, Muy Grande is the grandfather of all the deer contests, and Leonel Garza is a legend."

WIDE AS THE RIO GRANDE

Garza managed the Center Circle gas station in town and had started a simple deer contest as an attraction. One day a stranded motorist hitchhiked in, seeking help with a pickup stuck in a pasture. Garza pulled him out, refused compensation and asked him to tell friends about the contest and his hunter-friendly gas station.

Two weeks later, a convoy of pickups appeared, and a driver showed Garza a recent newspaper

story about his station. The stranded hitchhiker happened to be Fred Strong, an outdoor writer for the *Victoria Advocate*, and he had repaid Garza's kindness with free press. Newspapers across the state began spreading the word about the contest, and hunting trucks and jeeps lined up at the Center Circle.

But the contest had no name. Irritated that one writer called it "the little filling station deer contest," Garza came up with Muy Grande (Spanish for "very big"), because, he says, "The deer in South Texas are as big as Texas and as wide as the Rio Grande."

The Muy Grande contest grew from a simple, one-category competition to 11 divisions and 136 categories for everyone — men, women, boys, girls and military members. More than 2,000 hunters compete annually; there are now more than 1,200 lifetime members.

The charismatic Garza, himself now nicknamed "Muy," has scored more than 20,000 deer and visited

with such celebrities as Nolan Ryan, Earl Campbell, Ty Detmer, George Strait, Gary P. Nunn and Ramon Ayala. The House and Senate recognized Muy Grande for contributions to conservation, deer management and the economy of Texas for spurring the hunting industry.

"A legend? I don't put no mind to it," Garza says. "I accept it, but being called a legend doesn't make me feel like a big shot. What makes this contest stand out from the others — and I don't like to brag on myself — is that it's respected by every type of person who walks in with a deer. Those people will never forget how you treat them."

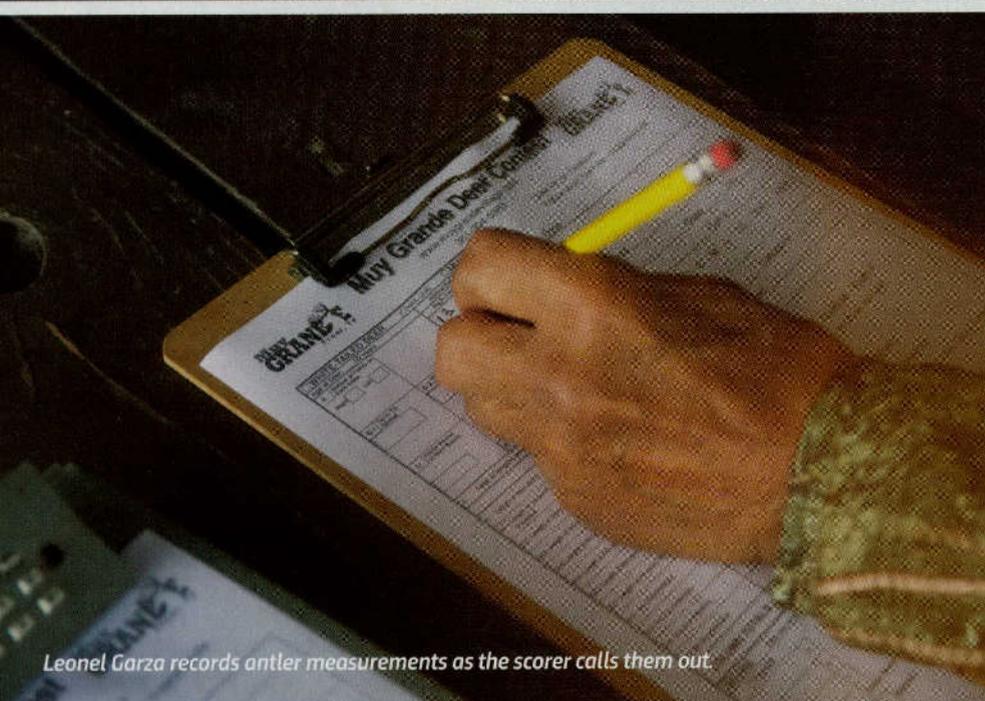
A FAMILY AFFAIR

Like her four older sisters, Imelda Sharber, 45, grew up helping with the contest. In 2005, her father asked her to lead the 40th anniversary. She introduced a website and social media.

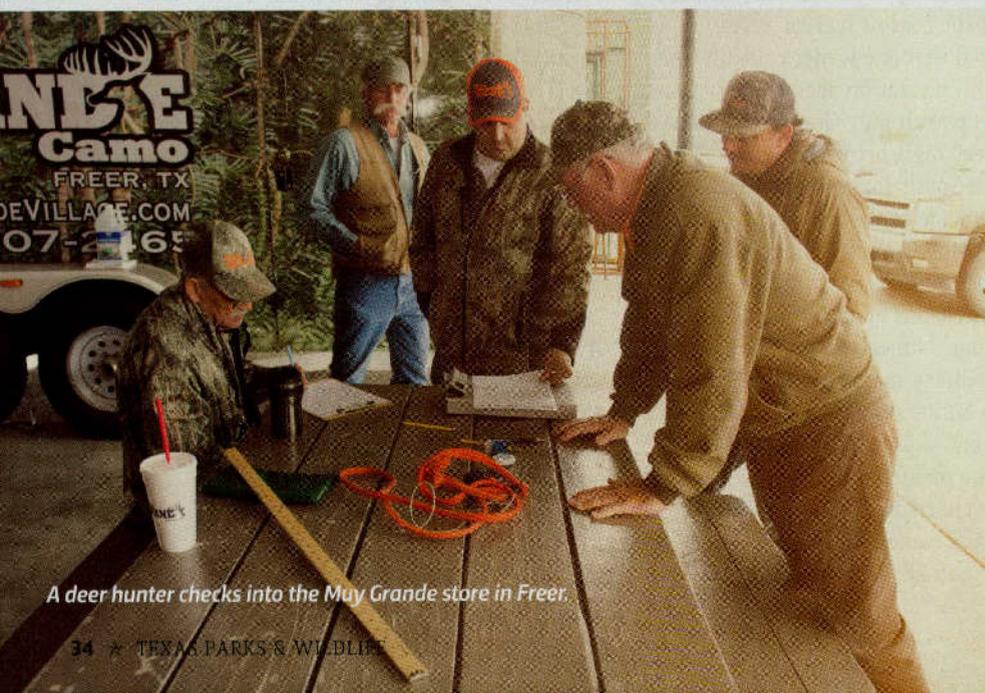
"Dad still has big ideas and needs help with them," she says. "It was a crazy



Official scorer Kenneth Sharber measures an antler beam circumference.



Leonel Garza records antler measurements as the scorer calls them out.



A deer hunter checks into the Muy Grande store in Freer.

thing to do, but the next year Kenneth left his job with British Petroleum to work at the store full time.

The couple bought property across the street and opened a new place in 2008, Muy Grande Village, with more pumps and a bigger store with a restaurant, souvenirs, sporting goods, hunting supplies and, of course, the contest. Diesel pumps for 18-wheelers opened this year; taxidermy and deer processing shops are in the works.

"It's not just an honor to continue the tradition, it's a responsibility we take very seriously," Kenneth Sharber says. "Leonel is still here every day whether he needs to be or not — shaking hands, talking to people and selling a few ranches here and there."

Family members helped Leonel Garza found the Hall of Fame in 2007 to honor hunters, landowners, conservationists and wildlife biologists and continued to expand the awards banquet, with attendance now at 400-plus. Youth participants get trophies and plaques, while more than 200 winners receive a jacket embroidered with their name, category and score.

"It's a big thing to win a jacket with Muy Grande on it," Kenneth Sharber says.

This year's jackets sport Muy Grande camo from the store's new line of outerwear (featuring a mesquite bean pattern from a photo Garza shot).

Family members help run it all, including Elda Garza, Leonel's wife of 57 years, their daughters, sons-in-law and grandchildren. The Sharbers' oldest child, Meghan, a freshman at Texas A&M University, was crowned Miss Freer 2015, but she still mops the store.

"Deer hunters are the nicest, greatest people," Imelda Sharber says. "They bring their families, and they're like family members we see annually, just like our blood relatives. We love it because that's how it should be, and we want to see those traditions continue."

The final day is still exciting to Garza and Kenneth Sharber, even after all the hours they've spent working on the event since October.

"We sit out here scoring deer when it's 30 degrees and drizzling, so we have to love it," Sharber says. "When kids come in with their first deer, it's special.

It makes memories that last forever.”

“It’s especially thrilling if a kid comes in at the last minute to win a category,” Garza agrees. “They are so proud. But it’s sad to see the one leading lose.”

THE HUNT

Bob Jackson, one of the Katy hunters, says that for many seasons he killed only does and deer he wanted to cull from the herd.

“I’m actually going to hunt this year,” he told his friends. “The ranch foreman discovered that wide deer last year. He showed me a video of him and pointed me in the right direction.”

Jackson drove, walked and stalked that wide deer for four days with no luck. Then he glimpsed a deer in high grass and crept up to discover his quarry.

“I got within 100 or 110 yards, threw up and shot,” Jackson says. “I had no idea how wide he was until then. Next thing I know, I’m leading the contest.”

Jackson’s buddy, Hildebrand, had admired one particular nine-pointer over several years, but waited for the perfect moment to shoot it.

“We like to shoot deer between 5½ or 6½ years old,” he explains to me.

On the Saturday morning of the final weekend of the contest, he drove around with a ranch hand and spotted that nine-pointer. They studied it for 15 minutes before concluding it was finally old enough.

“Some deer seem to shrink after they hit the ground,” Hildebrand says. “He actually looked bigger. I began to realize that this deer just might win the big nine contest.”

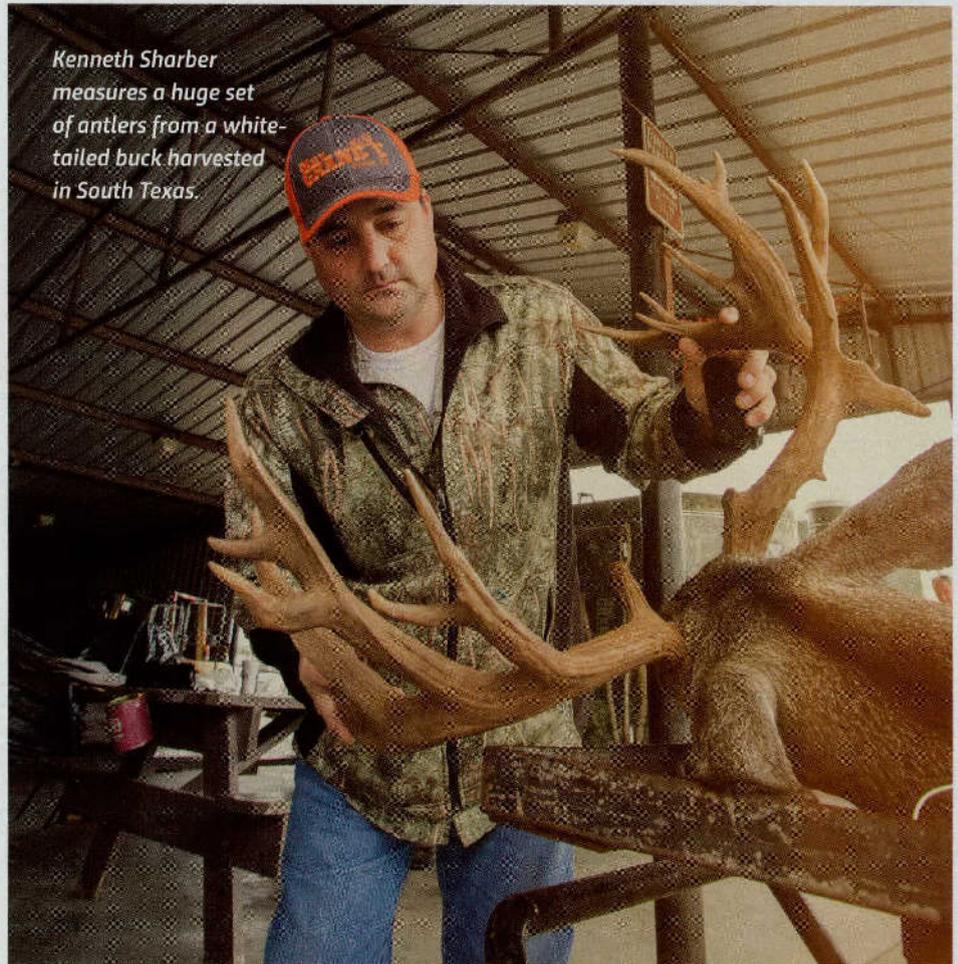
CLOCK STILL TICKS

At *Muy Grande*, Sharber continues announcing measurements on Hildebrand’s deer as Garza glances at the first scoresheet.

“Doing good,” Garza says.

“Looking better?” Hildebrand asks nervously. To intensify his anxiety and amuse the half-dozen onlookers, Garza replies, “No,” which evokes laughter from all but Hildebrand.

“Gained ⅛ of an inch,” Garza finally assures the anxious hunter. “Picked



Kenneth Sharber measures a huge set of antlers from a white-tailed buck harvested in South Texas.

up another one. This deer’s going to come out ahead of the first score, that’s for sure.”

Garza tallies the numbers, and Sharber double-checks them.

“OK, here it is. 152⅞. Earlier it was 150²/₈, so this here beat that other buck by 1⅞ inches,” he announces, then points to the grinning Hildebrand. “Look how happy he is. How come you’re so slick to enter the contest at the last moment?”

“I didn’t see him till the last moment,” he answers, as Garza pounds his back and congratulates him.

The contest, though, will still tick for eight more hours. Anything can happen.

NO AGONY IN DEFEAT

Hildebrand checks the leaderboard online the next morning and finds his lead position has held. He wins.

“I’d never entered a deer contest before, and winning that category is very exciting,” he says. “Gratifying, too, because all our wildlife management came into play and

afforded us a nice deer like that.”

Jackson’s saga ends differently. In first place is a 27-inch entry — ⅙ inches wider than his — that Kathryn Lake of Dallas shot on the Dougherty Ranch in Live Oak County.

“She came in at the last second,” Jackson tells us, seemingly with little disappointment at his silver finish in “Widest Spread.”

“Widest Spread,” a special legacy category because it was the contest’s first, is now one of many categories that award a coveted *Muy Grande* jacket to second-place finishers.

“I’ll put it up on the wall or under glass or something,” he says, beaming with satisfaction and pride.

After following the legendary contest for 53 years, Jackson finally entered. He held the lead for nearly a month, lost at the closing bell — yet still managed to be crowned a winner and return home with his coveted jacket.

Now that is *muy grande*.

John Goodspeed is a freelance outdoor writer and country music columnist.

WELCOME



PHOTO BY LASH MORTIMER/STAFF

HUNTERS



**Small-town Goldthwaite
comes alive with the
opening of deer season.**

by Whitney Bishop



PHOTO BY EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD

It's rush hour in Goldthwaite. A steady stream of pickups pulls into this small Central Texas town, piling up at its two main stoplights.

"Come deer season, it's like Easter Sunday in the Baptist Church here," says visitor Stan Laukhuf, who drove in from Dallas.

Tomorrow is opening day, a hallowed day for hunters that marks the beginning of general deer hunting season. From November through January, Goldthwaite will be a hub of activity as hunters come to chase the bucks that are chasing the does.

"We are getting ready for the craziness to start happening," says Rodney Spies, owner of the popular-with-the-hunting-crowd Mills County General Store. "People are wanting to buy a hunting license. 'Oh, I forgot my

camo shirt and I need a box of ammo.' It's gonna be a lot of fun."

Funny thing is, 50 years ago there were hardly any deer here at all.

BUCK BOOM

"The first deer sightings were sometime in the '60s in this area," says Mike Miller, TPWD wildlife biologist.

This part of Texas was better known for its angora goats, which produce the silky wool known as mohair. But in the mid-20th century, another animal came calling.

"The increasing amount of brush has made deer habitat where deer habitat didn't used to exist, so we've

seen an increase in deer density over time," Miller says.

The eradication of the screw worm helped the deer population increase. But while deer numbers were rising, the town population held steady. Today, Mills County has just 600 more residents than it did in 1900. About 1,800 people live in Goldthwaite, located about halfway between Lampasas and Brownwood.

"We're happy to see the green of the camo because it brings the green dollars into this little county," says Steven Bridges, publisher of the local newspaper, the *Goldthwaite Eagle*. "The feed store will be lined up two- or three-deep with folks getting deer corn. The motels and hotels have been booked up since last year. It's also the lease money that helps a lot of these ranches that would otherwise be scraping by to try to make a living. They can make as much or more from just the deer leasing as they can from the ranching."

The middle-aged newsman is the fifth generation of his family to own a Texas newspaper. He also serves as writer and photographer, overseeing a small staff. Tall, lanky and sporting a goatee, Bridges knows just about everyone in Goldthwaite. And just about everyone in Goldthwaite has been featured in the *Eagle* at one time or another.

"The kids and the old people and the deer hunting and the Friday night football — it's still contained in the pages of the small-town newspapers," Bridges says.

With hunters from across the state descending upon Goldthwaite, opening weekend is one of the biggest stories of the year.

HEAD TO THE FIELD

Opening day dawns through a thick fog. As the full moon fades away, the weather promises to be unseasonably warm. Across Mills County, hunters sit silently in their blinds, waiting for deer to appear.

One of those hunters is Lindsey Head, a 30-year-old with freshly painted nails who harvested her first buck, a nine-point whitetail, when she was 9 years old.

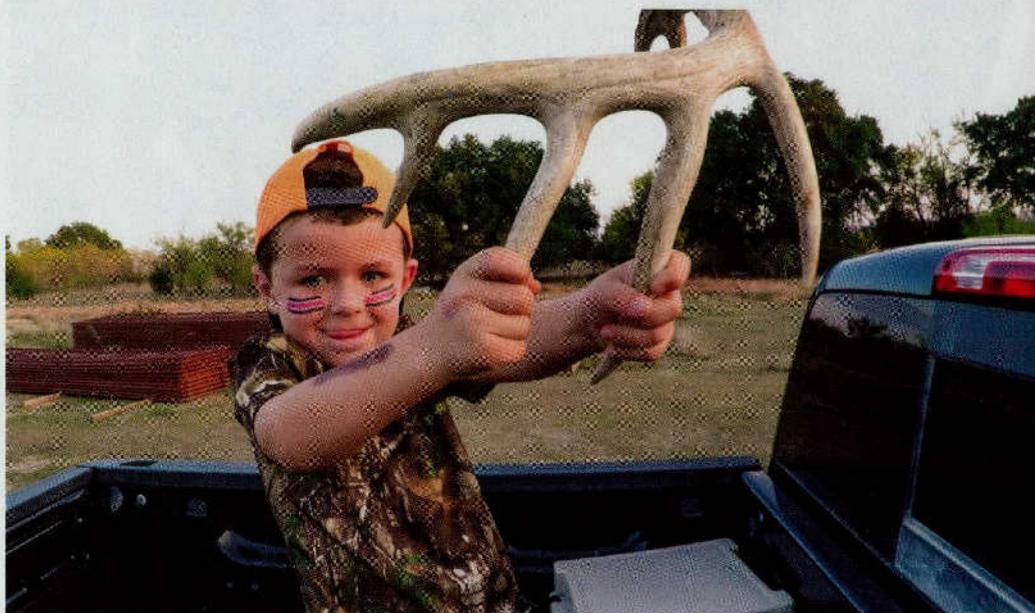
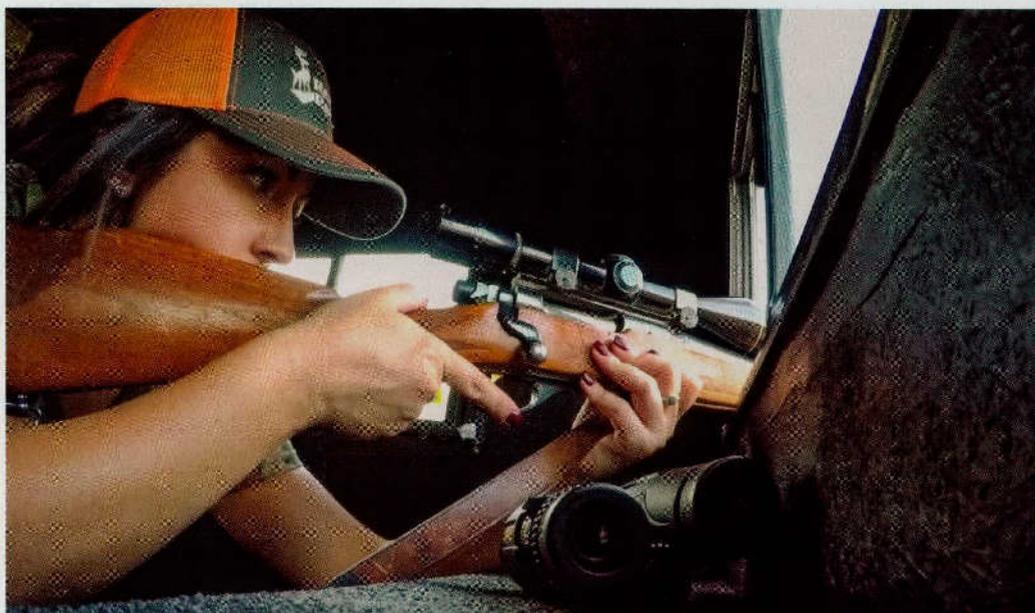
"Even if you can't see through the fog you know there's stuff wandering around out there," she whispers. "Then you've got to really listen for things. You know eventually the fog will lift, the sun will come up. Sometimes it surprises you how many deer are out there after the fog lifts."

Head takes pride in harvesting fresh, healthy food for her 6-year-old son.

"It feels awesome to be able to go out and shoot a deer and provide your family with meat," she says. "Plus, you know where the meat comes from. It's all natural; there are no antibiotics. Most people think that girls need a man to do all their dirty work, but women are completely capable of doing stuff on their own, especially going hunting."

REPLENISHING IN TOWN

Just up the road, the staff at El Tapatío Restaurant is gearing up for the after-hunting rush. Hunters will



PHOTOS BY ABE MOORE / TPWD

start filing in around 10 a.m. after their morning hunt.

"Everybody's like: 'I'm ready for deer season. Deer season's coming!'" owner Nancy Rodriguez says of the yearlong focus on this day. "You know, once it starts to roll around, like October, they're just like, 'OK, we're getting prepared!' Then the first of November hits, and here we are."

On a typical morning during hunting season, the restaurant will go through 15 dozen eggs and at least 3 gallons of sweet tea.

Over in the heart of town, the Mills County General Store is ready for one of its busiest days of the year. The store evokes an earlier era when local businesses thrived in most small

Business starts to pick up at the Mills County General Store (opposite page). Lindsey Head (above) takes aim at a deer, while her son plays with some antlers.

towns. Long and narrow, it's packed with housewares and hardware, guns and gadgets, camo and candles.

"There are a million things in the general store," Bridges tells us, adding a local tip. "You just have to ask sometimes because it's in some cubbyhole."

Owners Rodney and Ginger Spies say that opening day of deer season is their Black Friday.

"Every hunter has a ritual," Ginger explains. "They're going to eat a big breakfast, then they'll come in and



PHOTOS BY EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD

Mills County General Store owner Ginger Spies (above) measures a buck brought in by Roy Pitrucha for the store's Big Buck Contest. Hunters gather at the community pavilion (opposite page) for the chili lunch sponsored by the local chamber of commerce.

they'll mill around. Now, if they shot something, just like the guy that was in here a while ago — he was shaking, he was so excited. That's not unusual. I feel it, too."

Over the years, the Spies have noticed several changes in their customer demographics.

"Typically, on opening weekend 18 years ago you wouldn't see a lot of kids, probably no wives," Ginger says. "Now hunters have involved their families and it's become a growing thing. Believe it or not, we sell a good many toys when hunting season starts. Something to do in-between the times when you're out in the deer stand."

THE BIG BUCKS ROLL IN

In the spirit of the season, the store sponsors a Big Buck Contest. The hunter who brings in the buck with the biggest antlers — as measured by the store's certified Boone & Crockett scorers — wins bragging rights and a Henry repeating rifle.

Bridges is on hand from the *Eagle* with camera and notepad to document the action.

"My job is covering the deer hunting, which is the news: who shot what, where they're from, how long they've been hunting here, what kind of rifle they shoot," he says. "Was it chasing females? Was it eating at the corn feeder? To some of our readers, it's just as important as anything else in the paper."

In the opening weekend edition of the *Eagle*, 20 of its 40 pages will be devoted to deer hunting. The paper's special "Hunting Guide" has a readership of more than 15,000 in a county with 5,000 people.

Right around 10:30 a.m., the big bucks start to roll into the parking lot.

One of the first comes from Gary Barbar, a portly grandfather wearing denim overalls. He pulls up with a deer hanging from a hoist on the back of his truck. He shot it with his favorite rifle, nicknamed Ole Bad Breath.

Bridges chats with Barbar and snaps a few pictures. Later, he'll caption the shot of the deer hanging from the truck "Only in Goldthwaite."

Soon more hunters bring in their bucks. The biggest buck of the day

comes from Walt Thompson, a young hunter pumped with excitement. Thompson's buck scores 129, with an inside spread of 16 inches.

"When you first see the deer you get excited, sometimes you get scared," Thompson says. "And when you're about to shoot, most people get buck fever. That's what they call it when you're shooting and you're shaking because it's so big and you're about to miss it. I was so scared I had to use my hand to close my eye."

GROWING TROPHIES

The bucks are getting bigger in Mills County thanks to a cooperative effort among landowners. Many have joined together to manage their lands for wildlife.

"Without an association you have a lot of individual properties," TPWD biologist Miller says. "Some properties are large, some small — all following their own harvest rates, their own objectives. There can be a lack of trust in that situation. Hunters can feel like if they pass on a decent deer rather than letting them grow up, the deer may be harvested that same season on a neighboring property. But in these associations, there is that trust. They trust that when they pass on a deer that's middle-aged, it's going to grow up to be something better later."

Miller has worked opening day for 20 years and consults with the landowner associations throughout the year. He gives harvest recommendations based on annual deer counts.

"We've seen over time that these deer, they're larger now as far as antler growth," he says. "We can tell by looking at the harvest data that they're better deer than they used to be 10 years ago."

One local landowner group, the Simms Creek Wildlife Management Association, represents close to 80 properties totaling nearly 55,000 acres.

"That's pretty powerful when you have that kind of acreage," Miller says. "You can start making a difference by making the right decisions both in terms of numbers of deer harvested and the types of deer that you harvest."

Warren Blesh, president of the Simms Creek WMA, agrees.



"People want big bucks," he says. "They're willing to let the little bucks walk; that's a change in culture in the last 20 years."

Land that was once valued for its agricultural potential is now valued for its recreational opportunities. As deer quality improves, land prices go up and the demand for hunting leases increases.

"What's been happening probably started around 2000 when prices soared from \$600 an acre to more than \$3,000 today," Blesh says. "The people buying this land are mostly conservation-minded. They're taking what could have been overgrazed land and turning it into restored pastures, new lakes and new ponds. To me, they're making the land better than when they found it."

CELEBRATING THE HARVEST

Meanwhile, back in Goldthwaite, the chili lunch is about to begin. A big tent is set up downtown with free nonalcoholic drinks, several kinds of chili and a gun raffle to raise money for a local scholarship. It's Goldthwaite's way of welcoming hunters.

"It's amazing what hunting has to do with the community," says Linda Crum from the Mills County Chamber of Commerce. "The hunters are from all parts of Texas: Longview, El Paso, Midland, Amarillo."

On the outskirts of town, Wesley Head is too busy to celebrate. His wild-game processing business turns a hunter's bounty into steaks, jerky and seven types of sausage (the favorite: jalapeño and cheese). During deer season he works every day for four months straight.

"I'll usually get here somewhere around 8 a.m.," he says. "A lot of times I'll stay here until 9 or 10 at night, seven days a week, until the season's over."

By the afternoon of opening day, the temperature has reached 90 degrees. Hunters have been up since before dawn. Their adrenaline is spent; it's time to recharge before the evening hunt.

Over opening weekend, Bridges will shoot several thousand photos and interview at least 100 people for the readers of the *Eagle*.

The Mills County General Store will sell 40 percent of its volume between the beginning of hunting season and Christmas.

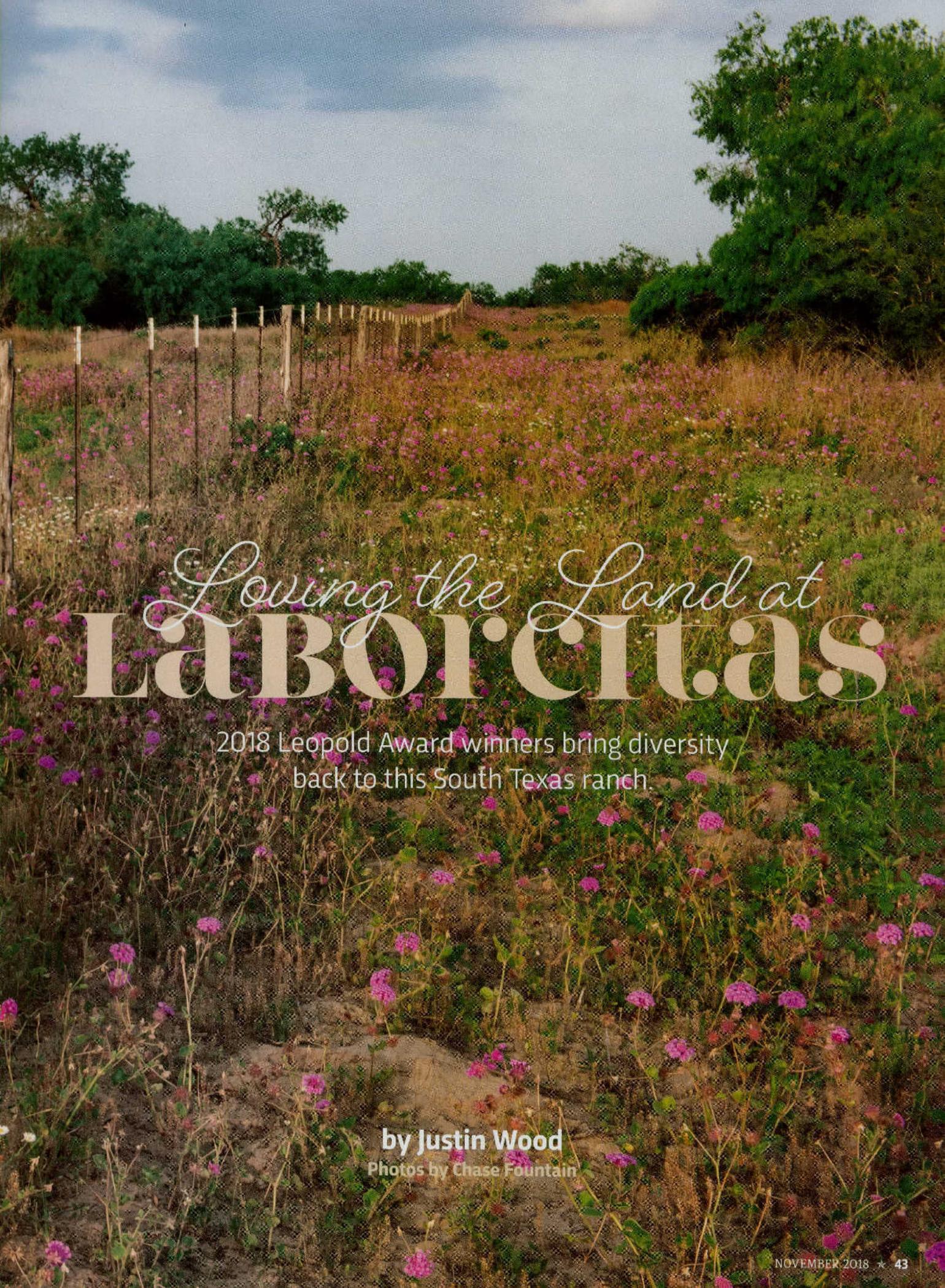
Lindsey Head will harvest a doe, dreaming about the day her son will go on his first hunt.

And small-town Goldthwaite will prosper.

Whitney Bishop is the social media coordinator for TPWD. Look for the TV version of this story on PBS stations Oct. 21-27 or on YouTube.



*Laborcitas Creek Ranch owners
Rolanette and Berdon Lawrence
and their black Labs.*



Loving the Land at
LABORCITAS

2018 Leopold Award winners bring diversity
back to this South Texas ranch.

by Justin Wood
Photos by Chase Fountain

Heart's delight, or Amelia's sand-verbena, grows only on the sandy prairies of South Texas and can be found at Laborcitas Creek Ranch.



or Laborcitas Creek Ranch owners Berdon and Rolanette Lawrence, the payoff of almost 30 years of land restoration has come in the form of beauty and birdsong.

"I love hearing the quail — when they sing to each other it's like a love song," Rolanette says. "Every day the beauty changes. There's something new — a new flower, a newborn fawn or just something moving through. Every day is different."

The Lawrences began their love affair with this 16,000-acre plot of South Texas grassland in 1990, when they started leasing the land from the owners at the time. They purchased the land in 2001, officially setting in motion the restoration process that would in time turn the overgrazed piece of property into a thriving



wildlife habitat and a leading example of private land conservation.

The Lawrences have worked alongside ranch manager David Kelly to return Laborcitas to its former glory while also adding new twists and features. It was the success of these efforts that led Laborcitas to receive the 2018 Aldo Leopold Award for Conservation at the 23rd annual Lone Star Land Steward Awards last May. The award, with a \$10,000 prize, was presented by the Sand County Foundation in partnership with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

"It's very gratifying to see the

evolution of this property over the years," says Kelly, who first arrived at Laborcitas Creek Ranch as a guest hunter in 1990 and accepted the position of ranch manager in 2009.

Much of the land that greeted the Lawrences in 1990 had been severely overgrazed after decades of dairy farming. It took several years and the removal of much of the ranch's cattle just to bring the area back to a state that the wildlife could utilize.

"I can remember the first time I came down here," Rolanette says of the ranch west of Falfurrias. "Because the property had been overgrazed, the deer

were very small and their antlers were small. Now, over the years, we've made this a better place. The deer are bigger, healthy and thriving, along with all the birds and other wildlife."

Kelly says that when he began his stint as ranch manager, he was forced to confront another growing problem — parts of the ranch were too densely populated with brush or were overrun with non-native plant life, much of which made it difficult for dove and other wildlife to establish a nest or find any type of shelter.

To counter this, Kelly, the Lawrences, field operations manager

Benny Cantu and the Laborcitas field staff implemented a series of innovative brush control practices that have worked wonders for both plant and animal diversity.

Kelly's targeted method for brush control is chemical spray, which he says is used primarily on small mesquite and silver leaf sunflower, two species that he says exist on the ranch for the sole purpose of "tormenting" the more beneficial plant life.

"The mesquite will kill the grass because it blocks out the sun, so it can't grow," says Mack Jones, wildlife specialist at Laborcitas. "Once you open it up, stuff that's good for the quail and deer to forage will come out."

Among the most labor-intensive methods, as well as among the most visible (due to the perfectly square plot of disturbed soil often left in its wake), is the practice of disking, which takes place mainly in the winter months, December through February. The process involves breaking the ground, turning the soil over and allowing the desired plant, usually croton or goat weed, to grow back in place of the

former brush. Kelly explained that the ground's composition allows the grass to grow back surprisingly quickly.

"When we do that," he says, "each plant has thousands of little seeds in it, and the birds, primarily the quail and the dove, just love it."

The most famous brush control method at Laborcitas, a method that was invented on the ranch's grounds, involves a vehicle named "the Quailerator." Designed to imitate the grazing and hoof action of cattle, the Quailerator is a modified pasture aerator that employs longer-than-usual spikes with stops to keep the rolling drum from completely flattening the grass. Instead, it disturbs the soil only to the point that the new grass is allowed more space to grow, produce and thrive.

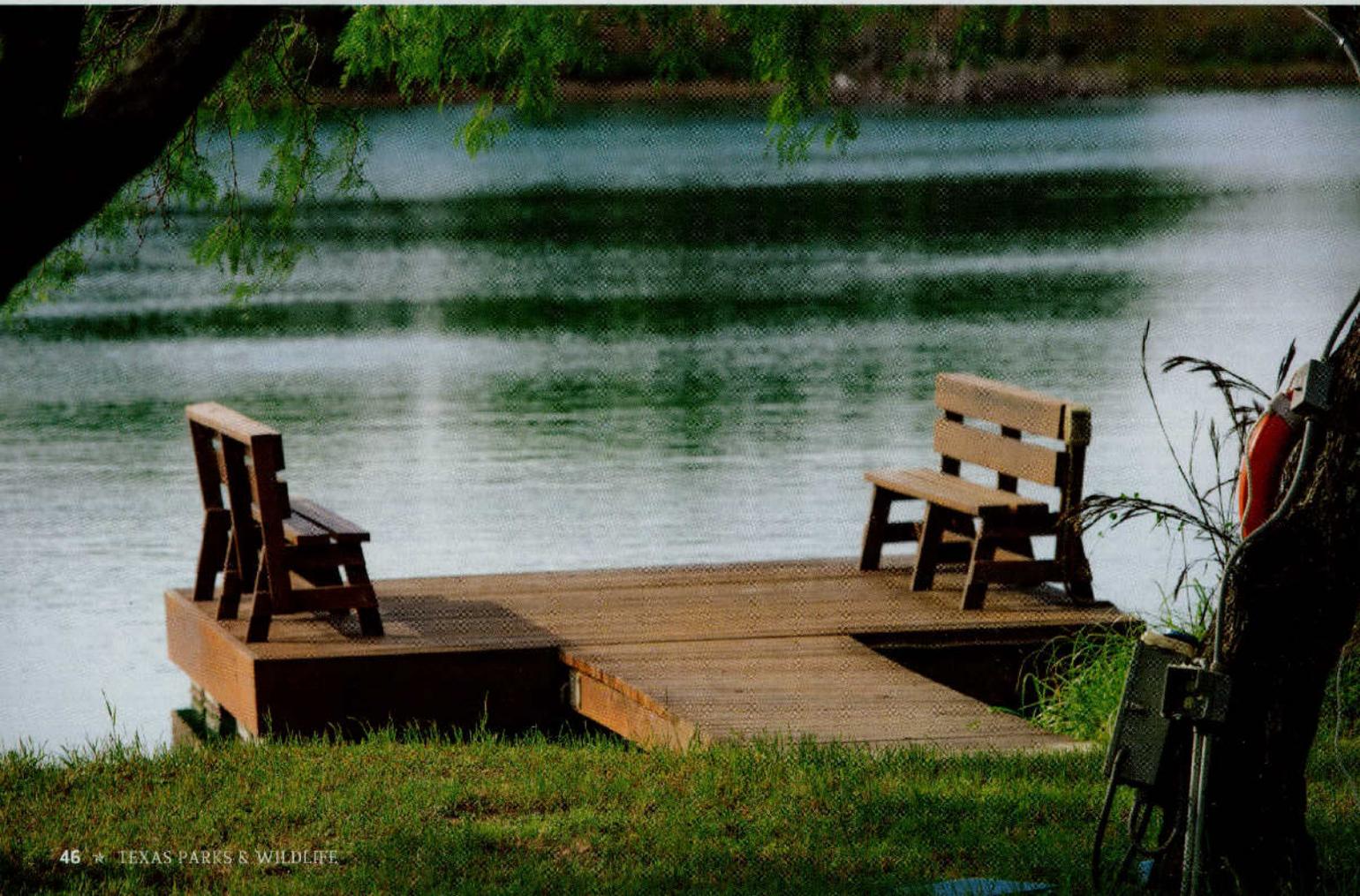
Substantial increases in quail, deer and dove populations have become the strongest indicators of the success of Laborcitas' brush control efforts. The quail will be there regardless, Kelly tells me. The dove and deer are the ones that let you know you're doing something right.

"For instance," he says, "in 2000, the maximum trophy we would shoot might be a 125-inch deer; now we're shooting them all the way up to 200. We're getting some much better quality deer now, so the management program is really evident."

Laborcitas deer management includes more than just brush control for better habitat. Another crucial part of Laborcitas' wildlife habitat restoration process is a food and water production effort that, based on the numbers, has been a huge hit with the wildlife.

These efforts include the ranch's 18 food plots, where crops (including millet and milo) are grown to feed the diverse and ever-growing population of birds; the gravity feeders, where the deer can enjoy protein pellets; and the various water structures around the ranch, including everything from small water holes for dove to massive waterfowl compounds, most of which are disked and shredded on the perimeter to promote food and cover for the animals.

The food plots, equipped with



irrigation pivots, take up about 1,000 acres of the ranch, according to Kelly. During dry periods — and there are a lot of them — the quail rely even more heavily on the plots, surviving on the food supply that Laborcitas has labored to maintain.

The waterfowl compounds, with water reflecting rays from the blazing South Texas sun back into a perfectly clear blue sky, are buzzing with activity. Jones, who has played a major role in developing and disking most of the compounds, says the ranch has seen everything from seabirds to puddle ducks flock in from across the state in the years since the habitats have been constructed.

The genesis of the waterfowl compounds and their eventual insertion into the ranch's plans should come as no surprise, as Jones, like Kelly, first became close with Berdon Lawrence while duck hunting in East Texas and southwestern Louisiana. Later, while working together on the ranch, the three men agreed that with all the ducks that pass through South Texas, they might be able to attract some of the birds with a nice duck and waterfowl habitat. More than 10 compounds later, Laborcitas Creek is now home to thousands of ducks and other waterfowl every year.

Lack of consistent rainfall remains a challenge. Like the food plots and other water-dependent areas of the ranch, the waterfowl compounds are forced to rely on the extensive well water distribution system that the Laborcitas staff has installed. Central to this system are eight water reservoirs spread out across the ranch used essentially as holding tanks, though most of them also host small populations of fish. Collecting the water, however, is only half the job.

"We have probably about 100 miles of underground water pipe all over the ranch," says Kelly, explaining that the pipes get the water from the reservoirs to wherever it's needed.

Kelly says he is extremely proud of the staff at Laborcitas.

"The staff here is like family," he says. "Everybody has been here a long time and has a specialty that they do. It really just works wonderfully."



Local students are invited to the ranch for conservation education.

Rolanette Lawrence echoes this sentiment.

"One of the main reasons why the ranch has thrived," she says, "is because we have this wonderful staff."

The ranch's enhancements have been gaining notice. The quality of work, long-term commitment and resulting habitat improvement at Laborcitas have been recognized by multiple awards over the last several years and by the growing influence of the ranch's practices, adopted by other properties across the state.

Berdon Lawrence has had a direct hand in this development. By helping introduce a wildlife exemption that gives tax credits to ranch owners who cultivate their property for wildlife (similar to a livestock exemption), he has helped make it more economically practical for other ranches to undertake their own conservation efforts.

Looking ahead, the Laborcitas staff is also doing their part to train the next generation of conservationists. Each year Laborcitas Creek hosts local 4H kids and puts on various activities to give them a glimpse of the work taking place across the ranch's 16,000 acres. Jones notes that the kids especially enjoy the waterfowl habitats.

"We usually get in the water, because that's what they like to do — they like to get wet," he says.

Students at Texas A&M University-Kingsville are also taking advantage of the opportunities for research at Laborcitas.

"Students come out every year in the fall semester to study wildlife management, and that particular class has a lot to do with waterfowl," Kelly says. "They go through most of the duck ponds to see what's happening and what plant life is growing."

While many of the transformations at Laborcitas have been brought about by humans, Kelly says that the staff gets the most satisfaction when that work enables nature to take the reins and evolve on its own. In fact, it's the resurgence of Laborcitas Creek Ranch's natural beauty that still gives Kelly the most pride, especially since he and the rest of the staff have had such a direct hand in guiding it along.

"It's still wild and it's still natural," he says, "And that's the way we like to keep it."

Justin Wood, a student at Emerson College in Boston, worked as an editorial intern at Texas Parks & Wildlife magazine.



ADVENTURE TIME

The McNeils pay it forward by connecting city kids to outdoor activities. By Lydia Saldaña • Photos by Jonathan Vail

On a beautiful spring morning in early May, the banks of the Guadalupe River at Bergheim Campground near Boerne are busy with folks preparing for a paddling trip. A group of 18 kids from San Antonio are finishing up breakfast and getting ready to go. Kayaks are lifted off a trailer, life vests are distributed, and the kids gather for a safety briefing.

The focus of their attention is Leon McNeil, a middle school teacher/coach from San Antonio who also leads City Kids Adventures, a nonprofit that mentors city kids through outdoor adventures.

While Leon may be the face of the organization, his wife, Leticia, works quietly behind the scenes. Leon briefs the kids, and Leticia prepares to break camp. Their 18-year-old son, Lee Charles, helps out as well, shepherding kids, gathering gear and making sure everything's ready for the downstream adventure.

Before the kids pair off in kayaks, Leon goes through some safety tips and lets the kids know what to expect. While most have been in a

Leon McNeil (left) navigates his kayak down some falls on the Guadalupe River as he leads a group of children on a City Kids Adventures outing. McNeil's son Lee Charles (right) follows a dog out of the brush on a hog hunt organized by the nonprofit group.

kayak before, none of them have ever experienced a free-flowing river.

Exposing kids to new experiences in the outdoors is the modus operandi of City Kids Adventures. The program got its start in 1995 at Cooper Middle School in San Antonio. The school is in the central part of the city; students often struggled to succeed. Two young teachers, Leon McNeil and Leticia Martinez, brainstormed an idea to involve students in outdoor activities to enhance their lives and help them achieve academic success.

"Leticia was passionate about the outdoors," Leon says, "and we got this crazy idea to show these kids another way of life."

Their shared passion for the outdoors and ultimately each other led to marriage and the birth of their son.

Fueled by private donations, the program continues to evolve and is now deeply ingrained in the family's life.

"I've been in the program since I was born," Lee Charles attests, laughing.

Today's outing is one of dozens the McNeils will lead over the course of the year. From March through October, they spend virtually every weekend and the entire summer taking kids on outdoor adventures.

"City Kids Adventures is supported 100 percent by individuals, businesses and private landowners who graciously allow us to access their ranches," Leon says. "The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is also a big supporter — TPWD's Community Outdoor Outreach Program really put us on the map. Those funds allowed us to purchase critically needed equipment."

A lot of that TPWD-funded equipment was put to use that day on the river. From the camping tents



and trailer to some of the kayaks, the grant program has provided many of the tools that City Kids Adventures needs to offer quality experiences.

Partnerships are also key to the program's success. Volunteers from the San Antonio chapter of Stewards of the Wild helped organize the trip and joined the flotilla of newbie river runners to provide assistance. Stewards of the Wild is the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation's young professionals organization, with chapters across the state. (TPWF is the nonprofit funding partner of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.)

"Encouraging the next generation of conservationists is what Stewards of the Wild is all about," says Chris

Collis, co-chair of the San Antonio chapter. "The City Kids Adventures program takes it a step further. These kids are going to help keep it wild."

San Antonio chapter co-chair John Saunders proposed the idea of the river trip after inviting City Kids Adventures to hunt on his ranch.

"Leon is really amazing — he coaches at San Antonio Academy, positively impacting student athletes, including my son," Saunders says. "He also runs a team of quail dogs all through quail season. On top of that, he pretty much donates his life to City Kids Adventures. He inspires me. He inspires a lot of people. He certainly inspires these kids."

Under the watchful eye of the

McNeils and the volunteer Stewards, the kids launch their kayaks into the cool waters of the Guadalupe and make their way downstream. There are several rapids along the way, challenging enough that several boats overturn, spilling their gleeful occupants into the river.

"It's Comedy Central sometimes," says Lee Charles, who has been kayaking for 10 years and who helped the younger kids navigate the rough spots. "We do all we can to keep them in the boat, but sometimes the river wins. It's fun helping them out, or watching them fall. It's all part of the experience."

Teaching the kids to be confident and calm when things go wrong is one of the life lessons to be learned here. Gaining the confidence to try new things is another.

"A lot of these kids have a lot of negativity in their lives," says Leticia. "In their world, it's hard for them to accomplish things in their own neighborhoods. So, when they do something like this, it's very empowering."

The City Kids Adventures motto is "Hard work has many rewards."

All of the kids who participate in the program have to earn their way by keeping their grades up and doing service work. Those participating today make sure to leave the campsite better than they found it and pick up litter as they paddle down the river.

Leon learned his lesson about hard work in high school. He grew up in an inner-city neighborhood in San Antonio, and his home life was troubled. When his fractured family disintegrated, one of his high school coaches took him in, feeding him, clothing him and helping him understand that hard work would help him reach his goals. A talented athlete, he was awarded a football scholarship to Abilene Christian University. A camping trip with his teammates was his first outdoor experience, and it turned out to be life-changing.

"City Kids Adventures is our way, as a family, of giving back," Leon says. "It has become a calling for us."

For Lee Charles, the giving goes both ways.

"We welcome all of these kids into our family," he says. "It's that family

Leon McNeil, kneeling next to wife Leticia, is an ambassador for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation's "We Will Not Be Tamed" initiative, which encourages Texans to get involved in conserving the wild things and wild places of our state. Find out more at wewillnotbetamed.org.

bond that many of these kids don't have. It brings it all home. And our family is closer because of it."

Janai Adams has been part of the program since eighth grade.

"I think of Leon and Leticia as my second parents," the 16-year-old confides. "I can go to them for pretty much anything. There is a reason I am here, and there is a reason they are here. They are a big part of my life."

For Leon, it all comes back to family.

"I wouldn't be who I am today without my family," he says. "For them to share our love and blessings with other kids is why it works. It's a purpose-driven life for me, and I wouldn't want it any other way."

Lydia Saldaña is communications director for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation.



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But let me get to the point: his loss is your gain. Many of you may be wondering about your next gift for someone special. This year, we've really come to the rescue.



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— James T. Fent,
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Gemologist

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Your satisfaction is 100% guaranteed. Wear the *Urban Blue* for 30 days. If you're not convinced that you achieved excellence for less, send it back for a refund of the item price. The *Urban Blue* is one of our fastest sellers. It takes six months to engineer this watch so don't wait. Take a stand against overpriced watches in impeccable style.

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Stauer Urban Blue Watch ~~-\$199†~~

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Deer Hunting

ILLUSTRATION © JESSICA BLANK

NOTHING STIRS A HUNTER'S EMOTIONS more than the opening of deer season. Hunters all simultaneously catch a case of "buck fever," a vision of the hunt to come that creeps into dreams during the nights before the season. That anticipation grows until the moment the trigger is squeezed or the bowstring pulled.

You don't have to harvest a big-antlered buck to get your blood flowing, either — shooting a doe can be just as stimulating. Hunter education courses help you learn about safety; be sure to buy a hunting license before you go.

Deer hunting is a rite of passage for hunters in North America: Take a hearty whitetail or "muley" (mule deer) and provide rich, lean venison for the table.

By Steve Hall

GEAR UP



BIG-BORE RIFLE OR OTHER SPORTING ARM: A .24- or .30-caliber (6mm to 7mm) centerfire rifle is perfect for taking Texas white-tailed and mule deer. No matter what you choose, find a good teacher and familiarize yourself with the action, safety and functions.



ELEVATED/ GROUND STANDS:

Elevated box stands/tripods and ground blinds are the favorites of most Texas deer hunters. Pop-up, portable camo blinds and folding chairs also are popular to use around active deer trails, open pastures and/or downwind situations.



AMMUNITION/ ARROWS:

Rifle and handgun calibers (bullet width), grains (weights) and bullet materials/shapes all affect performance. Arrows must match the bow weight and draw length of the hunter.



CLOTHING:

Clothes should be durable and weatherproof. Public land deer hunters are required to wear hunter orange. On private lands, many deer hunters select camo clothing, but orange is still recommended. Boots should be lightweight, durable, comfortable and waterproof.



SCOPES/SIGHTS:

"You can't hit what you can't see!" A quality telescopic or bow sight is the best choice for most deer hunters. Make sure it's been "sighted in" (sights properly adjusted) and properly transported.



OTHER ACCESSORIES:

Bring a good knife for field dressing, skinning and quartering the animal. Also consider bringing game packs, field dressing (meat handling) gloves, game scents/calls, coolers, range finders, shooting sticks, survival kits, insect sprays and wind direction indicators.



BINOCULARS:

A good set of binoculars helps determine species, sex, antler dimensions and other deer characteristics.



QUICK TIPS

MAINTAIN SAFE MUZZLE CONTROL, especially in and around vehicles, making sure sporting arms are unloaded, properly cased and separate from the ammo until you're ready to take a legal shot.

IMMEDIATELY TAG THE DEER UPON KILL and make sure to complete the "white-tailed deer log" on the back of the hunting license.





Be the one they remember.

They may not remember everything you ever did for them, but they will *always* remember who took them hunting.



Find helpful resources like youth/adult hunts, hunter education and mentored hunting workshops at

tpwd.texas.gov/youth-hunting

Do you like a good mystery? Texans travel to this West Texas spot in hopes of encountering something that defies explanation. The Texas Department of Transportation built this roadside center to support those who seek illumination.

If you recognize this viewing station, send us a note at *Texas Parks & Wildlife* magazine, 4200 Smith School Road, Austin, TX 78744 (write "Where in Texas?" on the envelope); email us at magazine@tpwd.texas.gov; let us know on Facebook; or post a comment to tpwmagazine.com. We'll reveal the answer in a future issue.

Photo by Tony Drewry

TOOLS: Canon EOS Rebel T6i camera, Rokinon 16mm f/2.0 lens, f/18 at 15 seconds, ISO 100.

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