TEXAS parks & wildlife

PEDAL POWER
High school mountain bikers vie for glory

A SPLASH OF TEAL
Adventure writer's first hunt: ducks at dawn.

ROCKPORT ON THE WING
Tourists and 'hummerbirds' return to Rockport.

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AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2019

VOLUME 77 • NUMBER 7

Mountain biker Israel Duran barrels down the course at the Wrangle in Warda, one in a series of Texas high school races held last spring.

ATHAN BERNAL

28

Knock on Wood

No other bird is made to survive in trees quite like a woodpecker.
by Cliff Shackelford

36

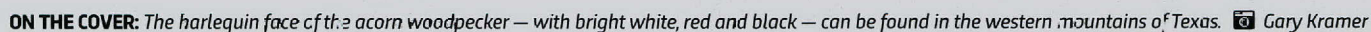
A Splash of Teal

Adventure writer's first hunt: ducks at dawn.
by Pam LeBlanc

44

Rolling Thunder

High school mountain bikers vie for glory in Texas' unpredictable weather.
by Kathryn Hunter



ON THE COVER: *The harlequin face of the acorn woodpecker — with bright white, red and black — can be found in the western mountains of Texas.* *Gary Kramer*

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8

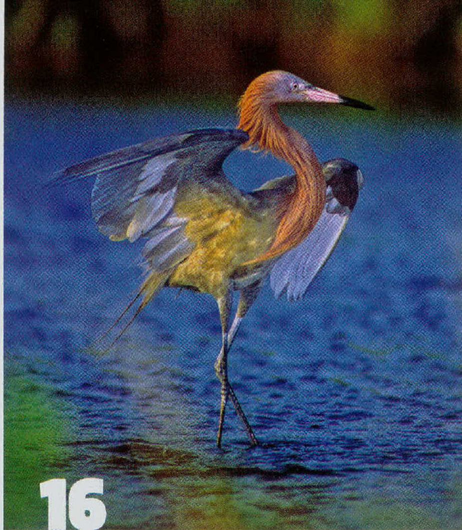
MAIL CALL

TPWD

10

TRAIL MIX

Volunteers needed to help repair **Caddo Mounds** damage. **Giant salvinia** clearing at Texas lakes. Endangered **Aplomado falcon** chicks banded at Mustang Island. Bastrop State Park increases **Houston toad** presence. Here come the **sunflowers**. New national wildlife refuge at **Neches River** in East Texas.



ROB CURTIS/THE EARLY BIRDER

16

WILD THING

Texas' coastal **reddish egret** puts on a show to catch its food.

By Elizabeth Bates

18

NICE CATCH

Late summer brings fishing for **redfish, stripers** and **largemouth bass.**

By Art Morris and Randy Brudnicki

20

PICTURE THIS

Uncompressed **raw format** captures greater range of color and light.

By Earl Nottingham

26

WANDERLIST

Discover the many places where **Texas literature** comes to life.

By Justin Wood

50

LEGACY

First **TPWD Prosecutor of the Year** takes poaching personally.

By Angela Morris

SONJA SOMMERFELD / TPWD

22

TRAVEL

Tourists and "hummerbirds" return to **Rockport** after Harvey's punch.

By Dan Oko

58

WHERE IN TEXAS?

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Greg Abbott

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FROM THE EDITOR

SUNFLOWERS ARE nature's Pez candy dispensers. Wrapped in buttery yellow petals that frame the treasure inside, the skunk-striped seed shell holds a delicious kernel craved by humans and a host of our animal pals.

While animals may not care that sunflower seeds are healthy, all you have to do is observe the critters in action to know the seeds are delicious. A raccoon recently kept me awake for two nights attempting to abscond with my entire feeder. I'm at constant war with the local squirrel tribe as well. Don't they realize that there are acres and acres of these treat-laden flowers in fields just a stone's throw away? Find out more on Page 14.

The intended recipients of my sunflower bounty — chickadees, cardinals and goldfinches — also include woodpeckers. Turns out that these red-tinged tree hammerers are also loved by our state ornithologist, Cliff Shackelford. Cliff has written magazine articles about every imaginable avian topic in the past two decades. It's about time we let him cut loose with his favorites (Page 28).

Writing about our passions is a touchstone for this publication. After all, the best storytelling is accomplished by those who truly care about their subject matter. That's how we knew elite cyclist/contributor Kat Hunter would bring her "A" game to this issue's story about competitive high school mountain biking (Page 44). Even when a thunderstorm changed the course of her journey, Kat still found a way to steer her story straight into our hearts.

I challenge you to find a wilder spirit than that of contributor Pam LeBlanc. Even though she's been on a journey of amazing outdoor experiences for decades, she said "yes" to her first hunt only recently. We're so glad she takes us along for the ride as former TPWD Executive Director Andy Sansom takes her out for a teal hunt. Will Pam shoot? Will she miss? Will she bring home the bacon, er, duck? Find out on Page 36.

Alas, the end of summer also brings the end of our first Great Outdoor Scavenger Hunt. We hope you've been inspired to visit places on our list and submit your selfies, or at least follow the fun on social media. Look for the results and a selection of our favorite selfies next May, as well as a brand-new list to complete for 2020 bragging rights.

Louie Bond

Louie Bond, Editor

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CHASE FOUNTAIN / TPWD

NATURE'S HEALING WAYS

I am writing to let you know how much I appreciated the article "Natural Healing" by Amy Tomlinson which was printed in the June 2019 issue.

It was such a touching piece it brought tears to my eyes. It also allowed me to reflect on the ways my family's time in nature has brought healing to us. Our forays outside the buildings and lights and traffic of Dallas keep telling us the same thing: "We can do hard things."

Melissa Philip
Dallas

KIDS AND THE OUTDOORS

What a great and inspiring article by Amy Tomlinson ("Natural Healing") in your June issue! Amy is doing a fantastic job of helping her kids continue to enjoy the outdoors, and to continue to hone their camping skills. She is doing more than many two-parent families do with their children.

One has to admire her tenacity, and her courage, as she builds lifetime memories with her kids. She should be proud of herself, and the kids should be very proud of their great mom!

Art Farias
Lampasas

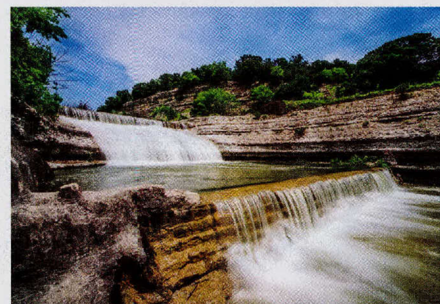
BLAZING TRAILS

I would like to express my appreciation for the fine article "West Texas Trail-blazer," by Melissa Gaskill, on my husband Robert and his mountain bike trails in your June 2019 issue. It is a lovely tribute to his expertise, skill, dedication and dogged determination.

All those who know Robert admire him and the legacy he has established for generations of mountain bikers and hikers yet to come. As a result of your magazine, I have no doubt many others will visit Franklin Mountains State Park and ride or hike those trails and enjoy their magnificent vistas.

Robert has never been one to seek the limelight, and when he read the article he said, "She made me look better than I am," to which I replied, "She captured you EXACTLY as you are."

Juawanna Newman
El Paso



WHERE IN TEXAS?

July's Where in Texas? was one of the tougher ones we've run. The answers weren't flowing nearly as well as the water over the spillway at Cleburne State Park — the spot featured in the photo. Still, some readers recognized the three-level spillway built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps at the park south of Fort Worth. "I always peek to see if I know Where in Texas, but usually don't," says reader Samuel Fox. "This time, however, I see that it is the spillway of Cedar Lake in Cleburne State Park, my hometown park." Chas Fitzgerald noted that "the undulating rock work blends well into the native limestone bluffs" — a hallmark of CCC construction.

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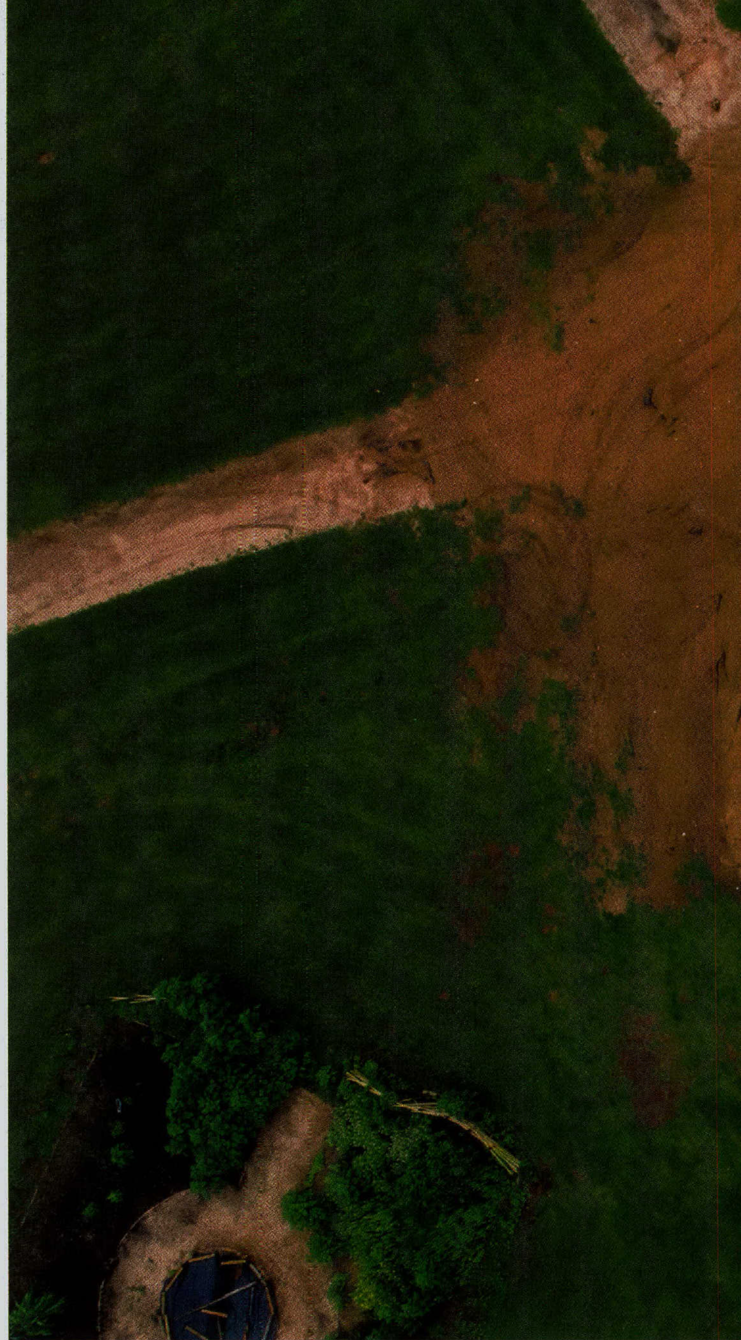
HISTORIC SITES

Friends Help Repair Caddo Mounds Storm Damage

Volunteers needed for upcoming work days; site hopes to reopen this fall.



Following a devastating tornado on April 13, volunteers are lending a hand to repair the damage at Caddo Mounds State Historic Site near Alto. Public volunteer days were held last spring, with 35 volunteers from organizations like the Cushing Independent School District, the East Texas Master Naturalists and Friends of Caddo Mounds participating, as well as individuals from across the state.

The staff welcomes additional volunteers for upcoming work days; the site's needs range from clearing debris to removing fallen trees from interpretive areas.

Last April, the EF-3 tornado that damaged Caddo Mounds had an estimated top wind speed of 160 miles per hour and was on the ground for approximately 44 miles. The storm occurred on the annual Caddo Culture Day, celebrating the heritage of the Hasinai Caddo Indians. Many in attendance were members of the Caddo Nation, with most traveling from Oklahoma.

One fatality and six critical injuries occurred at the site, and 30 to 40 people were injured. The visitor center's roof and exterior walls were torn away, and the remaining portion of the building was later demolished after being deemed unsafe. The grass house, a traditionally built Caddo house that was the recipient of the Vernacular Architecture Forum's Paul E. Buchanan Award in 2018, was also destroyed.

The mounds, which date to 800 A.D. and include a burial mound, temple mound and ceremonial mound, suffered no damage. The park, currently closed to the general public, hopes to reopen the grounds for access this fall. Check *www.facebook.com/visitcaddomounds* for news and future volunteer dates or call the park at (936) 858-3218.

LARRY HODGE / TPWD

CONSERVATION

Giant Salvinia Clearing at Lakes

Recent vegetation surveys conducted by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Aquatic Habitat Enhancement Team have revealed that giant salvinia — an invasive, free-floating fern that has been wreaking havoc on East Texas lakes for more than 20 years — is believed to have been eradicated from Lake Fork and Lake Athens.

"We have not found giant salvinia in either lake since early last winter," says

The Caddo Mounds visitor center was torn down after suffering tornado damage.

© CHASE FOUNTAIN / TPWD

John Findeisen, team leader. "This is very exciting news. Back in 2017, we weren't sure if eradication was even possible. With early detection and a coordinated, rapid response, we can effectively fight back against this invasive plant."

Giant salvinia was first discovered in Texas on Toledo Bend in 1998 and then spread throughout East Texas. The most recent infestation at Lake Fork was discovered in November 2017; Lake Athens was first infested in February 2018. The team deployed floating booms to contain the giant salvinia in affected areas and to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of herbicide treatments.

Findeisen says that while giant salvinia has been eradicated from these lakes, TPWD will continue monitoring them closely because they are still at high risk of reintroduction. Giant salvinia is currently present on 18 East Texas lakes.

"As the weather warms and people start visiting these lakes more often, they need to remember to properly clean, drain and dry boats and equipment to prevent reintroductions of giant salvinia," Findeisen says. "Nobody wants to be known as the person who brought salvinia to a lake."

For more information on proper cleaning protocols for boats and equipment, and to learn more about giant salvinia and other invasive species, visit *tpwd.texas.gov/giantsalvinia*.

On TV

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AUG. 4-10
Texas walker; saving an island rookery; Bastrop biking.

AUG. 11-17
Eliminating invasive cane; sea camp scientists; Kemp's ridley turtles.

AUG. 18-24
Big-city bobcats; frog pond; Engeling WMA morning.

AUG. 25-31
Dove hunting; spicy dove recipe; hiking dogs; birding hot spots.

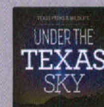
SEPT. 1-7
Texas Water Safari; weekday camping; Caddo Lake rain.

SEPT. 8-14
Mentored hunt; Blanco River restoration; flying game wardens.

SEPT. 15-21
Monahans Sandhills; Devil's River advocates; Lost Maples color.

SEPT. 22-28
Flounder fishing; Fort Parker State Park; moving bees; spring flowers.

On the Podcast



In August, learn about spotted seatrout: how we regulate them, raise them and cook them. In September, we focus on artists whose work is inspired by the natural world. Download at ***underthetexassky.org*** or major podcast platforms.

On the Air

Passport to Texas is your guide to the great Texas outdoors. Any time you tune in, you'll remember why you love Texas. Visit us at ***www.passporttotexas.org*** to find a station near you that airs the series.

TPWD

WILDLIFE

Endangered Aplomado Chicks Banded at Mustang Island

On June 1, researchers put leg bands on fuzzy Aplomado falcon chicks at Mustang Island State Park, where a pair of adult falcons occupy one of 67 artificial nest structures maintained along the Texas coast. A few days later, on June 5, scientists banded the 500th Aplomado falcon in Texas. It's all part of ongoing monitoring to maintain the success of a wildlife restoration effort begun decades ago.

The nonprofit Peregrine Fund, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began the Mustang Island project in 2012. Controlled burning and other work to restore native coastal prairie have been essential to the reintroduction.

The Mustang Island project is part of broader restoration work in Texas, in which 997 birds were released into the wild at 27 Texas sites, including many private ranches, from 1993 to 2013. This year researchers observed approximately 65 Aplomado falcons along the Texas coast, down from the 100 observed the year before because of losses from Hurricane Harvey, but still dozens more than before restoration work began.

Aplomado falcons are some of the world's fastest and most agile fliers. *Aplomado* is a Spanish word for dark gray, the color of the bird's back. The northern Aplomado falcon (*Falco femoralis*) was placed on the federal endangered species list in 1986, primarily because of loss of the grassland prairie habitat where they hunt.

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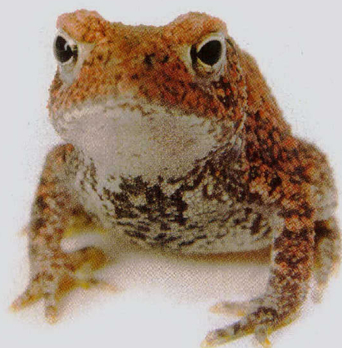
Choose your next Texas adventure and follow other GOSH participants at *tpwmagazine.com/GOSH*

WILDLIFE

Bastrop State Park Increases Houston Toad Presence

Bastrop State Park has taken a major step forward in providing a home for the endangered Houston toad. Partnering with Texas State University and the Houston Zoo last spring, it stocked approximately 500,000 Houston toad eggs in park ponds. The egg stocking should make a huge difference in the survival of this critically endangered species. The released eggs hatched into tiny tadpoles, mature enough to leave the ponds a few weeks after release. In spring 2021, the female toads will have matured enough to return to the ponds for the mating season.


CHASE FOUNTAIN / TPWD

LATIN NAME: *Anaxyrus houstonensis*

STATUS: Listed as an endangered species since 1970.

SIZE: 2 to 2.5 inches long

LIFE EXPECTANCY: Two to three years

ACTIVITY RATE: The toads aestivate most of the year (similar to hibernation); they bury themselves in sand to escape extreme weather.

HABITAT: Loblolly pine forest or post oak savannah with loose, deep sand. The toad occurs only in Texas.

SONJA SOMMERFELD / TPWD

FLORA FACT

Here Comes the Sunflower

You've seen these bright, cheery seed dispensers growing tall and thick in late-summer fields across the state. The sunflower's not only one of the most recognizable blooms in the state, it provides one of our favorite snacks as well.

Technically called the "fruit" of *Helianthus annuus*, the seed kernels are housed in an inedible black-and-white striped shell (seeds with black shells are used to produce sunflower oil). Of course, humans are not the only species that enjoy this natural snack, high in vitamin E and antioxidants. Birds, rodents and other mammals love to feast on sunflower seeds.

The plant was first domesticated by Native Americans in prehistoric North America, then brought to Europe in the 16th century. Native Americans had multiple uses for sunflowers: bread, medical ointments, dyes and body paints.

The wild version of the plant has a branched stem with many heads; the domesticated kind you might plant in the garden usually possesses one large head, up to 5 inches across. Each large bloom resembles the sun hence the name. The heavy blooms teeter on hairy stems that can grow as tall as 8 feet.

Sunflowers love the sun and grow best basking in it. A common misconception is that flowering sunflower heads turn and track the sun across the sky. Although immature flower buds exhibit this behavior, the mature flowering heads point in a fixed (and typically easterly) direction throughout the day.

The outer petals of the sunflower are called ray flowers. The flowers in the center of the head are called disk flowers, and mature into the seeds. Those disk flowers are arranged in a Fibonacci spiral, producing the most efficient packing of seeds in that area, according to the math.

The flamboyant flowers also attract butterflies, especially whites and sulphurs in the fall.

PARKS

New National Wildlife Refuge: Neches River

© TPWD

There's a new place to enjoy the outdoors in East Texas: the Neches River National Wildlife Refuge. Between Jacksonville and Palestine, this newly opened jewel of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will protect wintering, nesting and habitat for migratory birds and ensure protection of the bottomland hardwoods.

With 20 miles of trails ranging from a quarter-mile to 7 miles in length, visitors can enjoy a wide variety of wildlife in the refuge's bottomland and upland forests. The refuge is open from sunrise to sunset, every day.

Historically, the area has played a key role in sustaining the Central Flyway waterfowl population. Eastern Texas and Oklahoma bottomland hardwoods, including those found on Neches River National Wildlife Refuge, represent the only significant breeding habitat of the wood duck and one of the most important wintering areas for the mallard in the Central Flyway.

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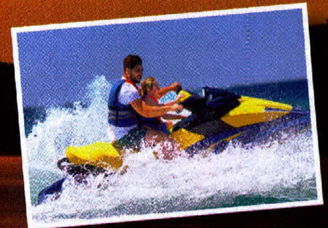

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WILD THING

Wave Dancer

Texas' coastal reddish egret puts on a show to catch its food.

By Elizabeth Bates

If you've visited the Texas coast, you may have noticed a charming, long-legged bird that appears to be dancing in the shallow coastal waters. This dancer, the reddish egret, can easily be characterized as one of the most charismatic heron species.

Reddish egrets rely entirely on coastal wetland habitats, where they nest on barrier and dredge-spoil islands and mangroves. They're known for their unique feeding behaviors.

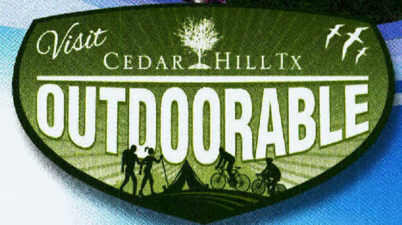
While most heron species stand still or walk slowly when foraging in shallow coastal flats and lagoons, reddish egrets burst into a crazy run, darting left and right, often while extending and retracting their wings. They stop suddenly, lift their wings over their head to create a canopy, and strike the water to catch a small fish with their sharp, spear-like bill. That winged canopy is thought to reduce glare on the water, allowing the bird to better see its prey.

Reddish egrets are considered a medium-sized egret, growing 27 to 32 inches tall. Their name can be misleading since this species actually has two distinct color morphs: dark and white. The term "reddish" comes from the dark morph, with a rust-colored head and neck and blue-gray body. The white morph displays all white plumage. Both color morphs have bluish legs and a bi-colored bill that is black at the tip and pink at the base.

The reddish egret is the rarest of the heron and egret species in North America, with only an estimated 3,500 to 4,250 breeding pairs. Plume hunters decimated their populations (along with those of other wading bird species) in the 1900s to decorate ladies' hats. Although reddish egret numbers increased after passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918, they never reached pre-hunting levels. Texas boasts the largest breeding population in the United States along our Gulf Coast.

Keep an eye out for the dancing reddish egret the next time you're at the coast. If you spot one, take a moment to enjoy the show.

DALLAS/FORT WORTH



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NICE CATCH

Angling the Dog Days

Late summer brings fishing for redfish, stripers and largemouth bass.

By Art Morris and Randy Brudnicki

LEFTY RAY CHAPA

LOOKING TO GET A JUMP on the August red drum pre-spawn schooling behavior? Hit the flats of the Laguna Madre. Dissected by a 20-mile mudflat called the Land Cut, the 130-mile lagoon is broken up into upper and lower sections. With an average depth of about 1 meter, the system provides arguably the finest shallow-water fishing in the world. While wade fishing reigns here, drifting or poling the flats is popular as well. A textbook opportunity to sight-cast to "tailing" red drum draws anglers to the Lower Laguna Madre; the action really heats up in August.

With the lagoon bordered by several large ranches and the Padre Island National Seashore, access is limited to sites near Corpus Christi, Port Mansfield and Port Isabel. The remoteness and isolation contribute to fewer crowds and more fish. Lengthy boat rides to fabulous fishing are customary here, but abundant wildlife and unspoiled scenery make the trip well worth it.

Casting weedless gold spoons is the standard operating procedure; casting soft plastics or live shrimp rigged underneath a clicker cork does its fair share of damage. Casting top-water baits often makes for exciting action as well. Long expanses of shallow, clear, grassy flats offer an idyllic setting for fishing.

Since the Lower Laguna Madre may be better known for trophy spotted seatrout fishing, red drum may be overlooked, but that doesn't mean they're not abundant. In fact, about 27 percent of the statewide recreational landings of red drum come out of the Laguna Madre.

Home to 80 percent of the state's submerged seagrass flats, the Mother Lagoon could be Texas' finest locale for superb late-summer red drum action. **AM**

COURTESY OF RANDY BRUDNICKI

ALSO BITING

FALCON INTERNATIONAL RESERVOIR
LARGEMOUTH BASS

The hotter-the-better edition: Falcon Lake is "hot" for fishing now. The lake produces big bass in the late summer, making up for the sweltering heat. Unless a tropical depression comes through to raise the reservoir's water levels, plan to fish away from shore. The state park ramp may be unusable, but you can launch from the main lake point to the right of the ramp (four-wheel drive recommended). The county park may be down to one or two lanes but should remain usable.

Tactics change in summer, so go deep to ledges, rocks and main channels. Some of the old building foundations will be in play, too. With the lowered lake level, fish have less cover to hide from the anglers, so they use depth for security. Top baits include deep-diving crankbaits or 10- to 12-inch plastic worms in 20 to 30 feet of water. When the heat gets oppressive at 2 p.m., be ready by dressing appropriately. Modern cooling fabrics, sun gloves/sleeves and wide-brimmed hats will help you make it through the day. When you catch that 10-pounder, it's worth it. **RB**

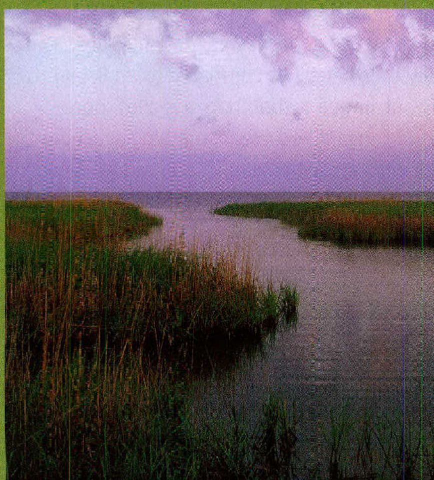
LAKE BUCHANAN
STRIPERS

Lake Buchanan is one of the best summer striper fisheries in Texas. Deep trolling for stripers during the heat of the summer means anglers may have to use downriggers to reach striped bass holding in the deep water. Using your electronics, determine the depth in which the schools of stripers are suspending. Quality electronics will help you see the thermocline; the screen shows a visible line for the gradient where water temperature changes from one layer to another. Lower the downrigger ball to a depth just above this thermocline. Many anglers use simple hair jigs (such as bucktails) because they are durable and inexpensive. Plus, it's much faster to remove a single hook from a fish, so you don't miss out on the hot action. Add a soft plastic twister-tail trailer to increase vibration or color contrast. White, yellow and chartreuse (or a combination) work. **RB**

© ROBERT S. MICHELSON

SABINE LAKE
REDFISH

At Sabine Lake, birds feeding on baitfish are a sign that schools of "Texas gold" — groups of large, voraciously feeding red drum — may be nearby. This 90,000-acre saltwater estuary on the Texas-Louisiana border drains some 50,000 square miles of Texas and Louisiana marsh into the Gulf of Mexico. Chasing schools of redfish feeding on "pogies" (menhaden) is a Sabine Lake tradition. Gear up this summer for some fast and furious action. **AM**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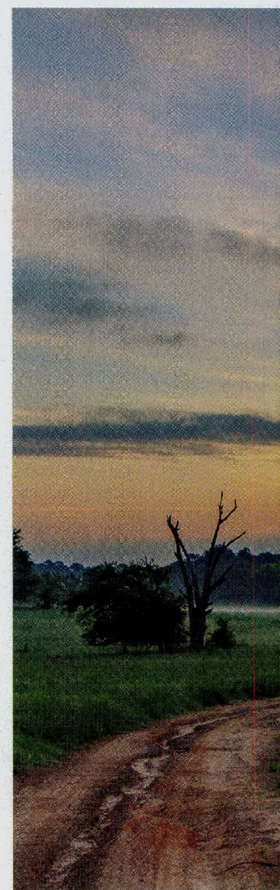

PICTURE THIS

Shooting in the Raw

Uncompressed format captures greater range of color and light.

by Earl Nottingham

How often do we review a photo on a digital camera or smartphone immediately after shooting only to be disappointed that the image didn't come out the way that we envisioned with our eyes? Well, much of that discrepancy is due to the limitations of a camera's sensor relative to the phenomenal ability of the human eye to discriminate between a large number of colors and perceive a wide range of light, from total black to glaring white.

Another large part of the discrepancy is that, by default, most cameras save the images in a very compressed form, usually a JPG file. The compressed forms render smaller file sizes, which take up less storage space and are easier to share. However, JPGs limit the number of colors and the exposure range that can be recorded and don't unlock the full potential of the sensor.

Enter the raw file — an option on most cameras (usually denoted in the menu as "RAW"). It can be selected in the menu instead of, or in addition to, a JPG. A raw file unleashes all the uncompressed data that the sensor has to offer. One caveat, however: Working with a raw file requires post-processing the image in Photoshop, Lightroom or another editing application to make full use of its potential.

Without getting too "techie," raw files are typically 12- or 14-bit as compared to an 8-bit JPG. Simply put, it means that there are a lot more shades or tones of red, green and blue available to work with in raw format. This allows for a wide

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

EARL NOTTINGHAM

range of color adjustments in post-processing.

Raw files also give you more control over a wider range of exposure, referred to as dynamic range. There is more information in a raw file, so you can make more adjustments without a loss of quality. Where there might be a completely white burnt-out sky in a JPG, puffy clouds can be seen in the raw file. Black shadows now reveal the green grass within.

Another advantage offered by shooting raw files is the white balance control. When shooting in raw, there is no need to set white balance in your camera to presets such as daylight, shade, incandescent or auto. You can adjust the color temperature in post-processing.

In applications such as Photoshop, Lightroom or other alternatives, the workflow goes something like this:

Open the file — typically the application will recognize the image as a raw file and open a dialog box along with the image, giving a wide range of creative controls that can be used.

By using the sliders, adjust the exposure, contrast, highlights, shadows and color saturation to your liking. Other useful settings that I frequently use in the raw dialog box are the "Dehaze" feature, which makes skies clearer, and "Camera Profile," which recognizes the camera and lens used and applies corrections for color and image distortion inherent in them. The list goes on and on regarding the corrections and adjustments that can be made to give you that perfect photograph.

Both images above came from the same raw camera file. The first is with no corrections, and the second shows what can be done by making adjustments in post-processing.

Don't be afraid to play with them to see the effects. You can't ruin your file — the process is nondestructive and is "locked in" only when you save the image as a final JPG or TIFF file, which can then be corrected even further in any editing app. You will always retain the original raw file. It is analogous to a traditional film negative for which there is only one but many prints can be made from it.

Shooting in the raw requires a new mindset when photographing a beautiful scene. You are not seeing it just as it is — but what it can become.

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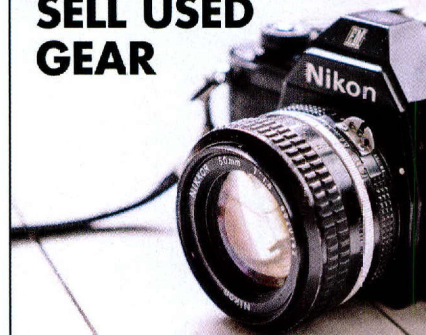

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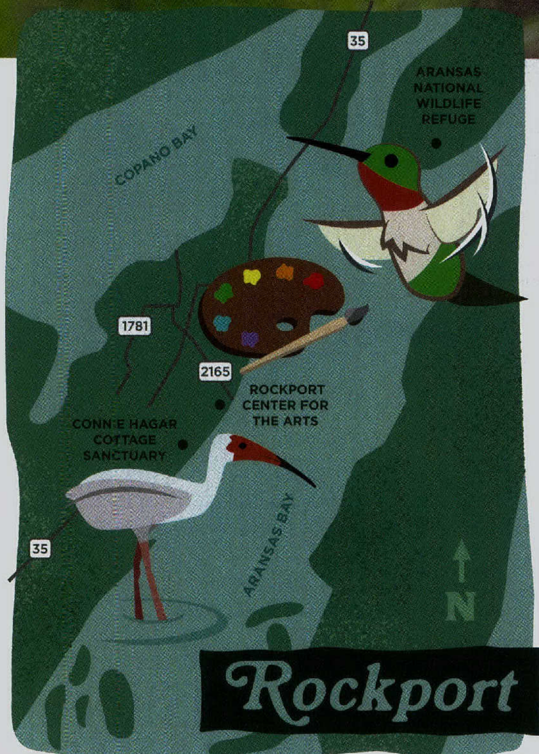

BRYAN SPEAR

TRAVEL

THE HOPEFUL HEART OF THE HUMMINGBIRD

Tourists and 'hummerbirds' return to Rockport after Harvey's punch.

By Dan Oko • Photos by Sonja Sommerfeld

As Hurricane Harvey wound its way across the Gulf of Mexico in August 2017, Rockport schoolteacher Martha McLeod and her neighbors prepped for the storm. Like residents up and down the Texas coast, she and husband Scott, a game warden in Aransas County, went through the familiar routine: battening down their home for the coming gale, stockpiling food and water. Because Scott's a first responder, they ignored the calls for voluntary evacuation.

A few hours after sundown on Friday, Aug. 25, Harvey made landfall at San Jose Island, and winds topping 125 miles per hour shook the McLeod house.

"'Till death do us part' took on new seriousness while we held hands in complete darkness," Martha recalls.

McLeod and her husband survived with no substantial damage to their home, but after a few days, Martha — and the area's other avid birders — had something new to worry about. Every September, thousands of hummingbirds stop over in Rockport-Fulton to prepare for the hardest leg of their migration, across the Gulf. They depend on the area's proffered nectar feeders to increase their body weight by 50 percent in order to survive.

"Everything was stripped clean," recalls HummerBird Celebration chair Glenn Gomez after the storm. "There was no food, no leaves on the trees."

The storm shredded gardens and blew away the oak cups formed by emergent acorns, which hold a high-calorie sap for the birds. With people displaced and many residents without a home, few souls were around to feed the birds, which for generations had relied on human help during migration. Friends of the festival sent cash, feeders and much-needed sugar to provide the nectar-like solution.

"There was a huge effort to bring in hundreds of feeders, and those feeders saw traffic like we've never seen before," Gomez recalls.

Martha McLeod noticed that hundreds of hummingbirds were hanging out in her yard near Goose Island State Park.

"They started showing up like a well-choreographed musical," she says. "I was mowing the brush around the house, and they were landing nearby, looking at me, like, 'Lady, where's my feeder?'"

I heard McLeod retell this story last September at the opening of the 30th annual HummerBird Celebration in Rockport-Fulton. Organizers canceled the 2017 festival, and the 2018 event got everyone back together just after the first anniversary of Hurricane Harvey.

I was eager to join in the celebration. Like many Texans, I have long enjoyed vacationing, fishing and birding around the Rockport-Fulton area. The whooping cranes had not yet arrived to spend the winter among the marshes of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge — also still recovering from Harvey's wrath — but I wanted to explore the Aransas Pathways, a county program that maps recreational opportunities (such as hiking, biking and kayaking) as well as historic sites like the landmark Fulton Mansion.

I stopped by the Rockport Center for the Arts, still operating despite a massive blow from Harvey. There are plenty of galleries in town, but for nearly 50 years, the center has been a focal point for many artists inspired by the salt-tinged scenery of the Coastal Bend. The original, longtime home of the center was destroyed in the storm, but while waiting to rebuild, exhibitors landed in a secondary property. A $5 million economic development grant secured in March will underwrite design and construction of a new sculpture garden and exhibition space, as well as a performing arts venue. The many colorful paintings of coastal scenes and wading birds on display spoke to a bright future.

Before heading out on the home and garden tour, I toured the History Center for Aransas County, a small museum located in a Queen Anne-style home built in 1896. The house

Hummingbirds (left) visit feeders at the McLeod home in Rockport. Volunteers (below) measure and document migrating hummingbirds.

survived not just Hurricane Harvey, but also the hurricane of 1919, which produced a similar wake of destruction. The house has been renovated and now features exhibitions about the area's nature and culture. I spent a long time in a room dedicated to Connie Hagar, the first lady of Texas birding, who — long before there was a HummerBird Celebration — noted the peculiar migration patterns of hummingbirds and their avian allies.

All along the way, it was good to see the people of Rockport and Fulton coming back from such a brutal disaster. Sandy Jumper at the local chamber of commerce told me that the towns have recovered more than 75 percent of their lodging options, and more than 90 percent of the local businesses have reopened.

At Cyndi Kuhn's place, full flowerbeds bloomed beneath mature live oaks, and she had just finished off her second 50-pound bag of sugar of the season, keeping all 29 feeders topped off. A certified Master Gardener, Kuhn was even giving away seedpods from her showy Pride of Barbados plants.

With an art festival in July, a film festival in November and a whooping crane festival in February, tourists are flocking back all year long, helping to bolster recovery.

A tropical depression brewed in the Gulf throughout the weekend of my visit, and it rained on and off. Some spots remained off-limits because of minor flooding. I opted to wander the lush 6.5-acre Connie Hagar Cottage Sanctuary, with a birding platform and a few looping trails through an upland marsh with a small oak motte and a span of coastal prairie, as well as a butterfly garden. Like Hagar herself, who stood under 5 feet tall, the plot is diminutive — she and husband Jack constructed a few guest cottages on the original 11 acres — but during peak migration, it's a hot spot. As a sweet bay breeze blew, a light drizzle kept the birds tucked into the trees.

That night tantalizing aromas and noisy chatter were drifting through Glow, a popular bistro that reopened after Harvey. The restaurant remains a beacon for diners interested in local eats, so I sampled wild boar-and-seafood gumbo and a moist black drum fillet.

Before heading home the next day, I checked out the festival banding station and found a crowd gathered around Sue Heath of the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory. While assistants trapped hummingbirds in cages across a private yard and carried them to her for banding, Heath shared information about the ruby-throats and other species.

There is no permanent pairing at nesting time for these birds. Ornithologists have found that hummingbirds have a split tongue, which uses grooves to split flowers and slurp nectar. Heath held a male ruby-throated hummingbird, weighing less than a nickel, in her hands and allowed us to feel the strange muttering vibration of its heartbeat with a single finger. A hummingbird heart can beat 1,200 times per minute. After everybody had a chance, she released the bird, and it vanished.

When squalls blew fishing guide Eric Knipling and me off the water the following morning, my thoughts circled back to Martha McLeod. That essay

Clockwise from far left: *The Rockport-Fulton sign welcomes visitors; the Rockport Center for the Arts kept operations going in a new building after its original building suffered hurricane damage; the Henderson Nature Site is part of the Aransas Pathways network; a mural and a board from Hurricane Harvey adorn a wall at Rowdy Maui; the Connie Hagar Cottage Sanctuary attracts birds with a variety of habitats.*

she read during the festival's opening presentation earned her 2017 Birder of the Year honors from Swarovski Optik and *Bird Watcher's Digest*. She closed the essay with this memorable line: "I realize, most of all, that hope can be found in something as small as a hummingbird, hope that there is still beauty in a town torn apart."

Having experienced the tiny emerald dancers in Rockport-Fulton, I found it easy to embrace McLeod's message. I had seen my adopted hometown of Houston likewise traumatized by the weather. But after putting my finger on the beating heart of the hummingbird, I was reminded of something more.

Following Harvey, many Texans perceived the natural world with new eyes. I took in the startling sight of the Milky Way, now revealed above the catastrophe-darkened city once the clouds cleared, and the determined call of frogs mating in the pooled floodwater outside my door.

We are fortunate to live in a state with such sublime phenomena, and to have festivals that celebrate them. After all, keeping mindful of nature helps us endure.

MORE INFO:

ROCKPORT-FULTON
rockport-fulton.org

HUMMERBIRD CELEBRATION
rockport-fulton.org/HB

ARANSAS PATHWAYS
aransaspathways.com

HISTORY CENTER FOR ARANSAS COUNTY
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The 31st HummerBird Celebration on Sept. 19-22, 2019, offers art installations, discussions about travel/ornithology and van tours to dozens of participating private homes and gardens. Dominated by ruby-throated hummingbirds — "hummerbirds" in the local parlance — the bright fliers don't form true flocks but do converge before flying across the Gulf. Rockport-Fulton is a staging zone for several species that winter in Mexico and Central America, such as rufous, black-chinned and the rare Allen's hummingbird.

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Literary Texas

BY JUSTIN WOOD

Texas boasts a long list of great native writers, and many draw on the Lone Star State for inspiration. Whether you're exploring the southwestern Texas deserts of Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men* or passing through the small town of Bronte, named after legendary English novelist Charlotte Brontë, there are many places where Texas literature comes to life. Here are seven spots across Texas where those legacies live on.

SONJA SOMMERFELD / TPWD

NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ILLUSTRATED LITERATURE ABILENE

Abilene isn't shy about its love for children's literature. Between the National Center for Children's Illustrated Literature, a museum honoring those delightful illustrations, and the Adamson-Spalding Storybook Garden sculptures (including the Grinch, Stuart Little, the Three Little Pigs and more) on the lawn of the convention center, there is plenty to enjoy. The center offers a multitude of free activities, including children's art workshops and artist book signings.

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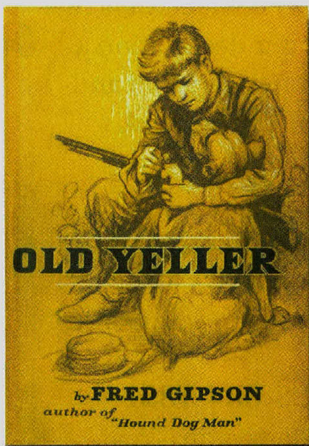
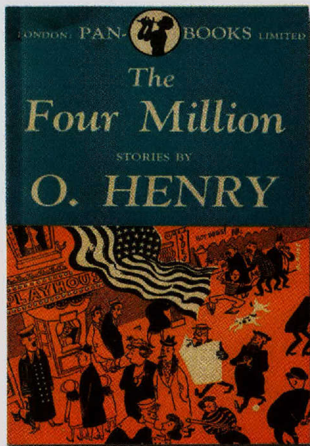


OLD YELLER DAYS MASON

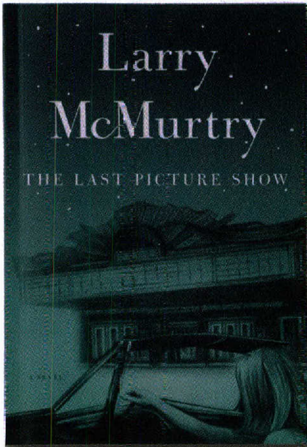
The beloved 1956 novel *Old Yeller* made author Fred Gipson a household name in the literary world, especially when the book was turned into a Disney movie. Writing vivid descriptions of the Texas Hill Country and the characters who lived there, Gipson was inspired by his grandfather's true tales. Every year, residents host and participate in Old Yeller Days to celebrate and honor Gipson's legacy with games, dog parades and Old Yeller look-alike contests.



O. HENRY BUILDINGS AUSTIN

William Sydney Porter wasn't born in Texas, but his desire to alleviate a cough drew him to the warm air of Austin, where he began to make a name for himself as a short story writer. Known more commonly by his pen name, O. Henry, Porter became famous for his witty wordplay and unexpected endings. Porter's downtown Austin home now serves as the O. Henry Museum; his former place of work in the Sixth Street Historic District is now O. Henry Hall.

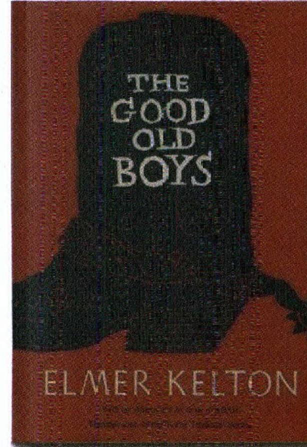
EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD



THE LAST PICTURE SHOW THALIA / ARCHER CITY

Author Larry McMurtry drew on his Texas roots for inspiration in many of his novels. Thalia, the fictionalized version of McMurtry's hometown of Archer City, was the setting for *The Last Picture Show*, later adapted for Peter Bogdanovich's 1971 film. Remnants of the film set can still be seen today in Archer City; buildings like the Royal Theatre transport visitors back to Thalia.

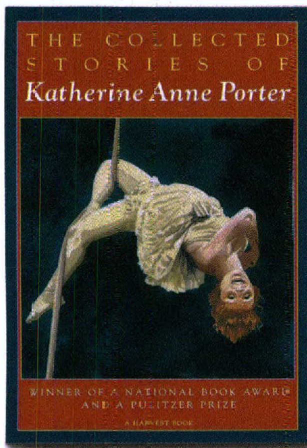
STEPHEN M BONTEMPO



ELMER KELTON'S STAR FORT WORTH

One of the great Western writers, Elmer Kelton also spent much of his career serving as editor for various publications. Kelton's novel *The Good Old Boys* was turned into a TV movie starring Tommy Lee Jones; many of his other novels have won numerous awards. The Texas Legislature proclaimed an Elmer Kelton Day in April 1997. Visitors to Fort Worth can see Kelton's star on the sidewalk at the historic Fort Worth Stockyards.

CHASE FOUNTAIN / TPWD



KATHERINE ANNE PORTER HOUSE KYLE

A distant relative of O. Henry, Katherine Anne Porter is one of America's best short story writers. She first made her name with the 1930 *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, and her 1962 novel *Ship of Fools* was a bestseller. Porter later received both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*. Porter's childhood home in Kyle is a literary center on the National Register of Historic Places, open by appointment.

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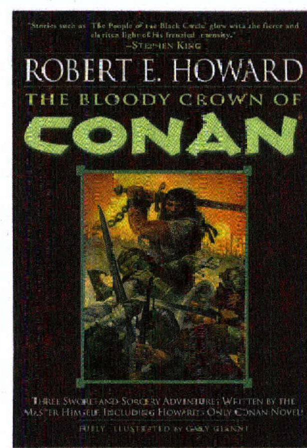

ROBERT E. HOWARD DAYS AND MUSEUM CROSS PLAINS

The Robert E. Howard Museum in Cross Plains looks much the same as it did when the legendary fiction writer lived there with his family. The creator of Conan the Barbarian, Howard had massive influence across multiple genres of pulp fiction that continued to grow even after his death in 1936. He's honored each June during Robert E. Howard Days, including museum tours and displays of Howard's original manuscripts.

NO OTHER BIRD IS MADE TO SURVIVE IN TREES QUITE LIKE A WOODPECKER.

KNOCK ON WOOD

One warm spring day, decades ago, a movement caught my eye, and I quickly ducked behind a tree on our family property deep in the East Texas woods. Not 25 yards away landed a giant woodpecker — a pileated woodpecker — at a round hollow carved into the side of a massive black willow trunk.

The bird and its mate were excavating a cavity. The male immediately lowered its head, dropped its entire body into the cavity and, except for the tip of its tail, disappeared momentarily, only to emerge with a bill full of wood chips. Then, like a wet dog shaking off water, the woodpecker shook its head and sent those pieces of wood raining to the ground.

Heck, I'd need several different tools to be able to achieve what that amazing bird was doing to that tree. Watching the mated pair switch duties at that construction site also reminded me of my own parents working together to get a job done at our homeplace. I was mesmerized by the nest building that whole weekend. I spent hours watching those birds make finishing touches to what I later discovered was their nursery.

This wasn't my first encounter with a pileated woodpecker. In fact, a few years earlier, as a preteen, it was the gateway species that opened my eyes to the wonderful world of birds and nature. Ever since, I've been in awe of woodpeckers and, now in my early 50s, my fascination with woodpeckers has not waned.

What makes a woodpecker so amazing? Is it the stiff tail feathers that act like a third leg to help the bird prop against the trunk of a tree? Is it the sharp nails on their feet that serve as lumberjack spikes? Is it the extra-long tongue used for extracting food items crawling deep

inside cracks and crevices? Or is it the thick skull and special shock-absorbing neck muscles that keep woodpeckers safe as they beat their heads against wood? An emphatic "yes" to all the above. No other bird is made to survive in trees quite like a woodpecker; this is what makes them so special.

My fascination with woodpeckers has become somewhat of a life's journey. In graduate school, I wrote a thesis on woodpeckers, and my field sites and university were both located in, you guessed it, the deep woods of East Texas (go Lumberjacks!). After all, where is the diversity of woodpeckers greater than in the most wooded part of our state? I've published numerous papers on woodpeckers, many of which appear in scientific journals. I've traveled to other countries specifically to observe woodpeckers, including the Atlantic Forest of northeast Argentina in 2013 to "shadow" a friend working on a very rare woodpecker known as the helmeted woodpecker. Thus, I've long considered myself a qualified fan of woodpeckers. Maybe I, too, am hard-headed?

In Texas, there are 16 species of woodpeckers and allies; they go by a variety of other names (including sapsuckers and flickers), but they're all in the woodpecker family. Fourteen on this list are regularly occurring species; one is a former inhabitant, the ivory-billed woodpecker. (I've excluded the red-breasted sapsucker since it has only three documented records in the Lone Star State.)

Let's peck around and learn a little about these great birds.

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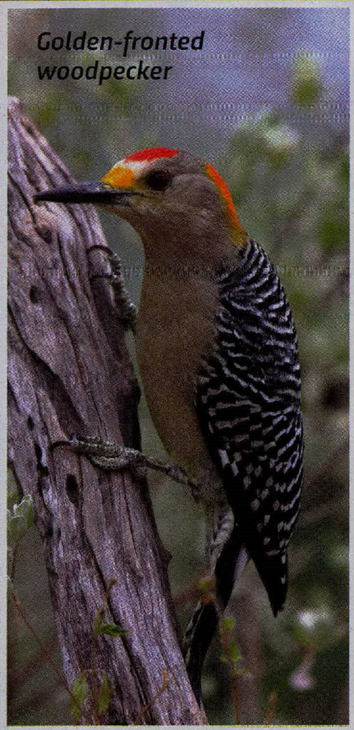
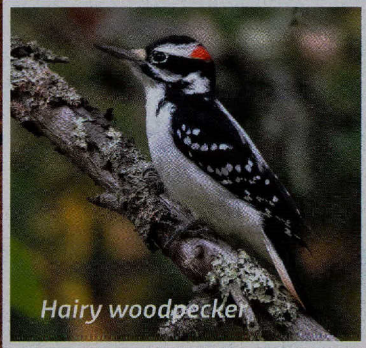
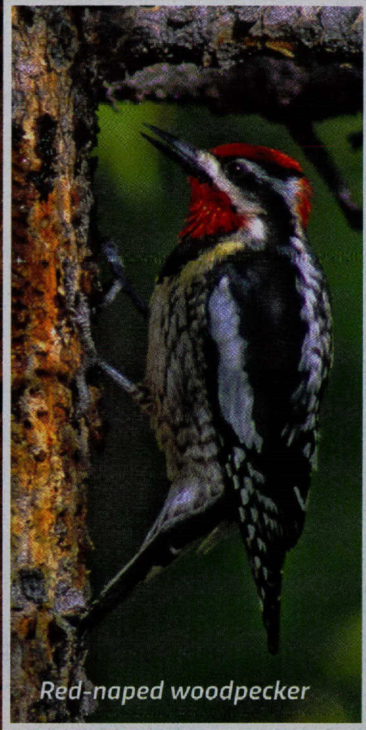
by Cliff Shackelford


Golden-fronted woodpecker

Acorn woodpecker

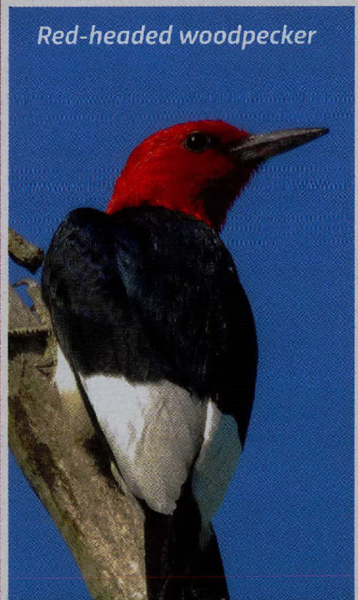
Red-bellied woodpecker


Hairy woodpecker


Red-naped woodpecker

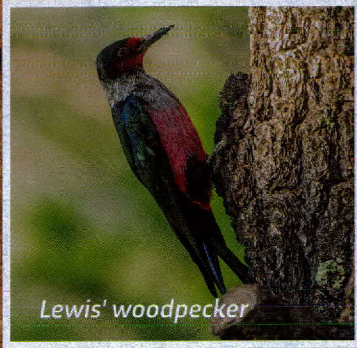
WOODPECKERS OF TEXAS

Red-cockaded woodpecker


Red-headed woodpecker

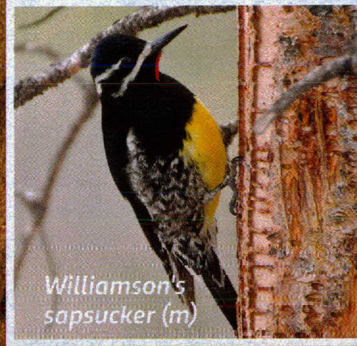
Ladder-backed woodpecker

Northern flicker


Lewis' woodpecker

Yellow-bellied sapsucker

Pileated woodpecker


Williamson's sapsucker (m)

Williamson's sapsucker (f)

Downy woodpecker

ROW ONE 📷 GREG LASLEY; GARY KRAMER; VINEETH RADHAKRISHNAN; ROB CURTIS/THE EARLY BIRDER. ROW TWO 📷 R.M. BUQUOI PHOTOGRAPHICS, LLC. ROW THREE 📷 ABBOTT NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY; ROB CURTIS/THE EARLY BIRDER; LARRY DITTO. ROW FOUR 📷 ROB CURTIS/THE EARLY BIRDER; MICHAEL L. GRAY. ROW FIVE 📷 LARRY DITTO; ROB CURTIS/THE EARLY BIRDER; R.M. BUQUOI PHOTOGRAPHICS, LLC; R.M. BUQUOI PHOTOGRAPHICS, LLC. ROW SIX 📷 MAC WOMACK

GOLDEN-FRONTED WOODPECKER In the U.S., this bird is almost exclusively found in Texas. A few spill over into Oklahoma, but the majority occur in Mexico south to Nicaragua. In Texas woodlots that include mesquite, this woodpecker is likely around. Though not a mesquite specialist, they're found in the drier parts of the state west of the Trinity River where mesquites flourish. The golden "front" that the bird's name refers to is actually the bird's forehead — the area between the bill and the crown. Males have a small coin-sized red dot on the crown. This species can be found from the Panhandle to the Rio Grande Valley. I've never seen it thicker in numbers than in Estero Llano Grande State Park in Weslaco.

ACORN WOODPECKER Found in several mountain ranges in the Trans-Pecos, this oak-loving species stores acorns for later use. Woodpeckers guard these storage areas, called granaries, against squirrels, jays and other acorn-eating burglars. For the most part, a granary occurs up and down a selected tree or telephone pole but can also include the side of a wooden cabin or shed — to the chagrin of its owner. This social and vocal species is easily distinguishable by its pale eyes. There's a peculiar, disjunct population of these birds in the Hill Country, on private land west of Kerrville.

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER Poorly named for a small coin-sized spot of red on the belly, this is the most common woodpecker behind the great Pine Curtain in our state. When compared to other specimens, however, the red belly patch was such a unique feature that the name was fitting. Don't expect to see that red belly — it's usually laid flush against the tree trunk — but a feeder might produce a glimpse of it as this bird enjoys sunflower seeds and suet. Males have a red mohawk from bill to nape, while females have that red only on the nape. Both sexes are very vocal, making them one of the noisiest birds around.

HAIRY WOODPECKER The hairy woodpecker looks like a larger twin to the downy woodpecker. The hairy woodpecker's voice is a higher-pitched *pete* as opposed to the duller *doot* of the downy. Their call-notes can help with identification long before you see the bird.

RED-NAPED SAPSUCKER This species can show up just about anywhere in the western half of the state. Superficially it looks like its yellow-bellied cousin. The ranges of the two overlap, so be sure to watch for a tiny patch of red on the nape and a few subtle differences that, for those with a telephoto lens, often require snapping a photograph that can be enlarged and examined later.

RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER If you've identified this bird in your backyard or coming to your feeder, you've likely made an error in its identification. This endangered species is not expected in a Texas backyard. Instead, it's found in open, mature stands of pine far from urban settings. The 2017 estimate for this species in our state was around 576 pairs (or family groups); 90 percent of those occurred on national forest lands owned and managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Interestingly, prescribed fire is used to manage this woodpecker's forest stands, which are also the last strongholds for our state's Bachman's sparrows, northern bobwhites (in the entire Pineywoods) and any nearby nesting eastern wild turkeys (they bring their poults to feed during late spring and summer months). If there are any surviving Louisiana pine snakes in Texas, they might be hiding out in a forest managed for red-cockaded woodpeckers.

RED-HEADED WOODPECKER A black-and-white tuxedo fresh from the dry cleaners is never as crisp and clean as the black and white on this bird. They keep their white backpack starched clean all year long. What about the red head? All of our state's male woodpeckers have some hint of red somewhere on their heads, allowing for many misidentified woodpeckers. The red-headed woodpecker truly has an entirely red head, like an ice cream cone dipped in a red candy shell. Young are born in spring or early summer and, once fledged, have all-gray heads that change into red during their first February or March. By April, the entire family is red-headed and are such look-alikes that, to our eyes, males cannot be differentiated from females.

LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER The ladder-backed woodpecker is restricted to the drier woods found in the western two-thirds of Texas and in the desert Southwest of the U.S. Sometimes, wide-enough trees for cavity placement are lacking so this species resorts to using telephone poles and fence posts more than other woodpeckers. Several of our woodpeckers have alternating bands of black and white on their backs, giving each a "laddered" appearance, so that's not the best field mark. The male has a red ball cap atop its head, while his mate's is black.

NORTHERN FLICKER This woodpecker is mostly brownish and feeds on the ground, including mowed urban lawns. When fleeing, it shows a large white rump patch. Western birds show a salmon-pink flavor under wing and tail, explaining the northern flicker's former name — the red-shafted flicker — while eastern birds (yellow-shafted flickers) show yellow. The two used to be considered different species, but in areas of overlap, hybridization is rampant, resulting in the two becoming lumped into one species in the 1980s. The northern flicker is a highly migratory species — cold weather pushes birds that breed in the north to Texas to overwinter. Very few stick around in the summer, but some pairs find the Texas heat pleasant and breed spottily across our state.

LEWIS' WOODPECKER This Rocky Mountain species makes infrequent appearances in the western two-thirds of our state. It's a show-stopper when it does, typically in winter. Thanks to social media, birders hear about its rare appearance and flock to get a glimpse of its crazy colors, so unlike any of our state's other woodpeckers. The bird's predominance of black feathers and level flight, unlike the typical undulating flight of most woodpeckers, make it look more like a small crow until you spot the splashes of gray and dark red.

YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER Tiny sap wells excavated by the yellow-bellied sapsucker usually occur in horizontal rows on a variety of trees in such a fashion that they look like bullet holes from a machine gun. This doesn't kill the tree — instead, it only injures it enough to ooze tasty sap to cover the wound. People who harvest maple syrup can relate to sapsuckers because they're kindred spirits. That sap, before it hardens, is not only consumed by this bird but also attracts insects that get trapped in the sticky stuff, creating an easy meal. This migratory species pours into our state in fall, peaking in the first half of October, and overwinters with us. Come springtime, they head back north before things really start to heat up. Maybe this is just another hard-headed bird that bangs its head against a tree, but I'd say escaping the heat makes it pretty smart.

PILEATED WOODPECKER This large black-and-white woodpecker with a huge red crest provided the inspiration for the cartoon character Woody Woodpecker. This species is often misidentified as an ivory-billed woodpecker, but the pileated is common and expected in the eastern third of the state where big, tall trees occur. It is colloquially known as "Indian hen" — the first name refers to its loud drumming and the second to its one vocalization reminiscent of a clucking chicken. Because of my family's abiding love for pileateds, we have not removed the stumps of four mature trees that died in our urban yard in over a decade. Leaving this heaviest part of the tree saved us lots of money, and the pileateds, to this day, thank us for it with repeated visits to search for tasty insects deep inside the rotten wood.

WILLIAMSON'S SAPSUCKER It took a long time for early ornithologists to realize that the males and females of this species — which look vastly different in an extreme example of "sexual dimorphism" — actually were not different species. The male is mostly black; the female is duller with a brownish head and a black-and-white barred body. A naturalist collected a male during an 1855 Oregon railroad expedition, so this unknown woodpecker was named in honor of the commanding officer, Robert Stockton Williamson. Several years earlier, ornithologist John Cassin described this species but based his description on the two females he collected. It took years to realize the two discoveries represented the same species.

DOWNY WOODPECKER This is the smallest member of the family in Texas and the one most likely to occur at backyard feeders, especially those serving suet cakes. Males have a tiny red patch on the back of their heads, while females have no red. This woodpecker looks like a mini-me version of the hairy woodpecker. To tell the downy from the hairy, look for a downy's shorter bill (shorter than the width of the bird's head) and a few tiny black dots on the outer white tail feathers. The hairy woodpecker has a longer bill and snow-white outer tail feathers. Remember: "Downies have dots; hairies have not."

Cliff Shackelford has been with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for more than two decades as state ornithologist.

IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER

No woodpecker species in the U.S. is more sought-after by seasoned birders than this one, even though this species is presumed to be extinct. Some believe it's still hanging on somewhere in its haunts in the southeastern U.S., yet slam-dunk proof is lacking. The ivory-billed was believed to be rediscovered in 2004 in the Cache River bottoms of Arkansas, but, despite a tremendous search effort, the scant evidence obtained wasn't enough to convince everyone. To see one, I visited the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., in the early '90s as a researcher. There, as shown in the photo above, I found the last specimens recorded for Texas, two male ivory-billeds collected just minutes apart in 1904 near Gaylor Lake, an old oxbow of the Trinity River at the Texas Highway 105 crossing east of Cleveland. Our nation's largest woodpecker, the ivory-billed required large contiguous tracts of tall trees that included many dead and dying individuals (mainly caused by beaver dams, storm damage, wildfire, insect outbreaks, etc.). Most of their habitat has disappeared. To see one, visit one of a handful of museums that have a specimen on public display.

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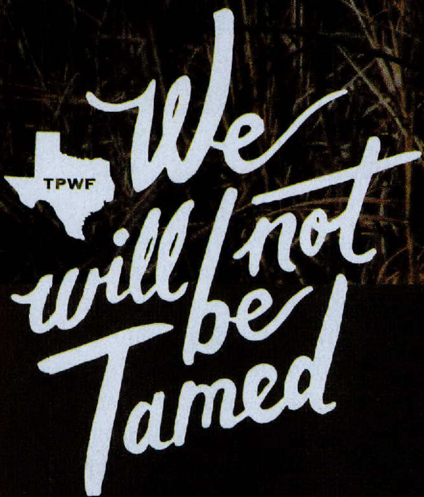
"CONSERVING TEXAS WILDLIFE IS IMPORTANT TO ME BECAUSE IT WAS PASSED ON TO ME AND IS SUCH AN IMPORTANT PART OF MY LIFE. I WANT IT TO BE AROUND FOR MY KIDS ONE DAY AND MY GRANDKIDS AFTER THAT."



TEXAS IS BLESSED WITH A DIVERSITY OF WILDLIFE, WATERS AND ICONIC LANDSCAPES THAT ARE THE HEART AND SOUL OF OUR NATURAL HERITAGE. WILD THINGS AND WILD PLACES DEFINE WHO WE ARE AS TEXANS.

What **STEPHEN McGEE** has learned in the field permeates everything he does.

From teamwork learned on a football field in high school, college and then the NFL, to the life lessons he's learned in the field hunting, Stephen applies those lessons to every aspect of his life. A self-described financial quarterback for the clients he advises, Stephen finds work/life balance by spending time outdoors with family and friends.

"I think it helps me to focus on what's really important," he said. "I know I will remember and treasure these experiences for a lifetime.

"My wife and I love wildlife and spending time outdoors. It's just fun to get away and unplug from all the business of life. For me that's getting outdoors, hanging out next to the campfire and telling a bunch of stories, many of which are probably not true.

"My family has a ranch in South Texas and we love to spend time there. We're trying to take care of what we have and do everything

right to make this a perfect world for deer and all the other wildlife out there.

"You don't have to love hunting. You don't have to love harvesting a deer, but people should at least know that part of conserving wildlife is managing and harvesting animals. And then everything that happens after a deer is harvested.

"We love venison and we almost always have a freezer full of meat. One of my brothers-in-law is a chef, and he teaches me new ways to make it delicious. So that part is really fun, too.

"Texas is so diverse, from people and the culture to the topography and wildlife. There is so much to experience and appreciate.

"Conserving Texas wildlife is important to me because it was passed on to me and is such an important part of my life. I want it to be around for my kids one day and my grandkids after that. I want them to be able to enjoy the experiences and the life lessons that I have been fortunate to have."

Texans are some of the wildest, most rugged, independent, and freedom-loving people on Earth. So is our land and the life on it. Find out how you can join Stephen and others who are standing together for the land that has given us so much.

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A SPLASH OF teal

Me, pressing a shotgun into my shoulder and taking aim at a flock of ducks flapping past?

You'd just as likely find me base-jumping off a skyscraper.

Or so I thought.

BY PAM LEBLANC • PHOTOS BY JONATHAN VAIL

You see, I'm afraid of heights. And I don't hunt. Never have and thought I never would.

Then Andy Sansom, director of environmental strategy at the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment (and former executive director of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department), invited me to join him for what many might describe as a one-of-a-kind Texas experience — a teal hunting trip near Eagle Lake, between San Antonio and Houston.

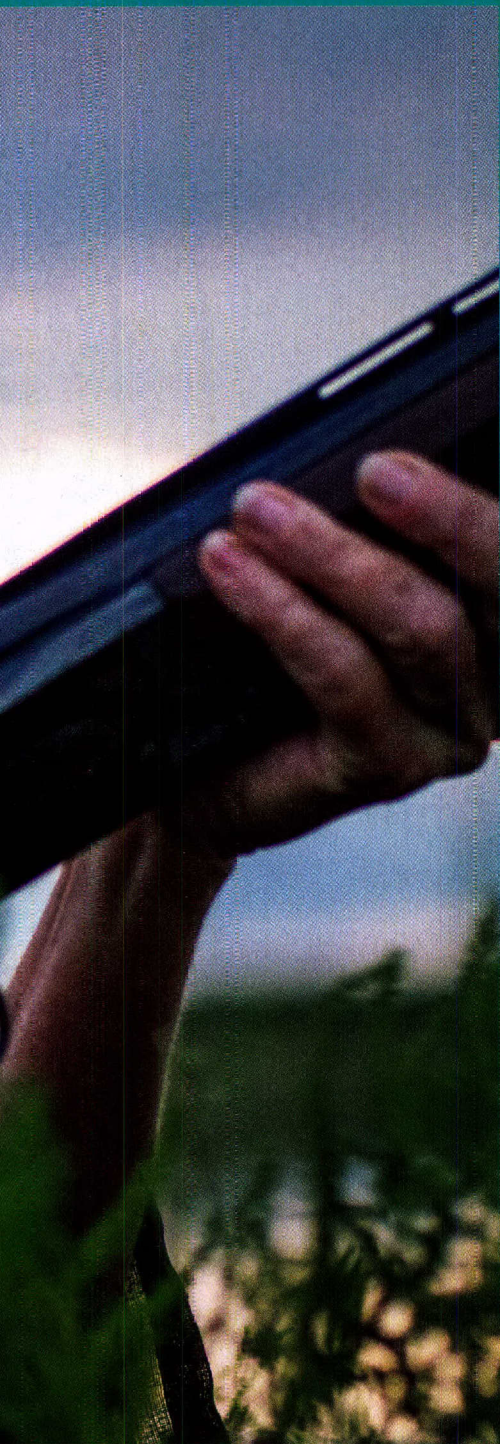
Author Pam LeBlanc stares down some teal as they swoop down to the decoys. Bill Montgomery and Margie Crisp clean their guns at Bucksnag after the morning hunt.

I love to try new things. Plus, I eat poultry, normally and necessarily purchased in grocery stores. If I, as a hunter, consumed what I shot, wouldn't it give me a new appreciation for what appears on my plate? And heck, it might even be fun to wade around in knee-deep water in rice-growing territory as the sun rose.

I decided I'd go.

Sansom booked rooms at the Bucksnag Hunting Club in Garwood, of which he is a member. He rounded up the gear I'd need — a shotgun, waders, ear protection, camouflage pants and shirt — and instructed me to purchase a hunting license and duck stamp, which I did.

On the appointed day, my husband and I drove down to the lodge, a picturesque white clapboard building that dates back to 1910, when it operated as a boarding house. (Women stayed on the second floor; men on the third. Everyone convened downstairs for



meals.) The building later served as a tea house before opening in 1968 as Bucksnag.

Today, a row of rocking chairs draws visitors to the front porch, and a flock of taxidermied ducks and geese pause, midflight, on interior walls. Our group of five nibbled snacks and made plans for the following day.

Duck hunters rise early. I'd get a wakeup knock at 5 a.m. We'd roll out at 5:45 a.m., in order to settle ourselves on the edge of a pond by 6:30 a.m.

Sansom handed me a pair of gargantuan rubber waders, which I stashed on the front porch for easy retrieval. He unpacked a 28-gauge Browning shotgun in a padded case embroidered with his name and handed it to me. He told me the gun had less kick than other models.

WADERS AT DAWN

Before the sun, I yank on the waders and climb into the truck, discovering during the 20-minute ride that a sticky-footed frog has spent the night inside them. It shoots out of my pants and onto the windshield, then ricochets across the interior of the truck like a tiny, spring-loaded pogo stick, jolting me awake.

We park, free the frog and get our things in order. The sky still looks like black velvet as we load gear onto an ATV; the two hunting dogs in our crew dance a quick jig. Brian Center, Bucksnag manager, leads the way through a muddy field toward a private pond that has been planted around its perimeter with grass tall enough to provide cover for hunters.

Blue-winged teal migrate through Texas on their way south from breeding

IMPACT
MOSSY OAK

grounds in the northern United States and Canada each September. Depending on the population that year, teal season lasts up to 16 days. The birds feed in shallow water that's rich in aquatic invertebrates and seeds, and they like the swampy fields around Garwood.

"They stop here because of the rice farming to fatten up and then continue on their migratory pathway," says Center, who has been guiding duck hunters since he was 15.

He grabs three bundles of duck decoys — including one of a bird bottoms-up — and flings them out in the pond to lure in the teal. A few streaks of orange and blue rip through a sky that looks like dryer lint. Overcast conditions generally make for better hunting, Center says.

"They fly like rockets and they're very good to eat," Sansom adds.

Once we're all tucked in the grass on the levee, Center gives a safety briefing, warns us to keep an eye on the dogs (Sansom's dog Scout can hardly contain her enthusiasm) and shoot only when he makes the call.

"We start in 4 minutes," he announces.

MOMENT OF DECISION

We pull on our ear protection, and at exactly 6:45 a.m., 30 minutes before sunrise, our guns point toward a group of teal zipping across the sky.

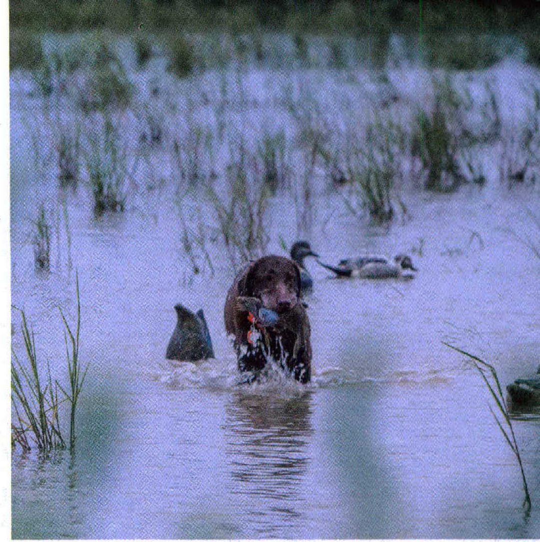
Four shots pop off, but I can't pull the trigger. Not yet. It's just not programmed into my DNA to hunt.

"You're a lover, not a fighter," my husband always tells me. He fires off a few shots.

As a teal drops out of the sky I wrestle with my thoughts. The dogs happily splash through the water, picking up birds the other hunters have shot.

I'm blown away watching Center, the guide, at work. He uses a duck call to draw in the teal, which turn on their wing to make a pass. Besides teal, we see pintail ducks, white-faced ibis, great egrets, black-necked stilts and swallows. Center hollers when it's safe to shoot, and

***Clockwise from left:** Andy Sansom encourages his dog Scout after a tiring morning of retrieving birds. Scout retrieves a downed bird. Four teal zip down after being called in.*



IF YOU GO

Duck hunters must purchase a Texas hunting license and stamps (endorsements), available online at *tpwd.texas.gov/buy* or by calling (800) 895-4248. A federal duck stamp costs $25; find information at *fws.gov/birds/get-involved/duck-stamp.php*

the other hunters connect. Birds drop into the pond and the dogs dash out, gleefully collecting the bounty.

In time, I do fire the gun. I don't hit anything, but I try. But that's not why I'm here — not really. I understand pretty quickly that the experience hinges more on the social aspects of the event than on bringing in a haul. We're sharing an experience that has been shared for generations in this part of the state.

It goes on like this for an hour and a half before clouds start lining up into bubbly gray waves. Then the skies open up, driving cold pellets of rain onto us. We dive for our rain jackets and call it a morning.

Pam and Chris LeBlanc bring in the decoys as the rain begins to fall. Below, left to right: Margie Crisp, Andy Sansom, Bill Montgomery and Pam LeBlanc.

POST-HUNT RAPTURE

When the morning hunt ends, our group of five has bagged 21 birds. The limit is six per person. We string them up, pose for a few photos and slosh our way back to the trucks.

On the drive back to the lodge, a double rainbow forms overhead and we pass two bald eagles perched in a tree.

Afterward, we gather at the Bucksnag for breakfast. As I butter a biscuit, adding it to the generous heaps of potatoes, eggs and bacon on my plate, we talk about the morning.

"Hunting is about the ritual," Sansom says. "It's about friends. It's about places. It's about tradition. It's about dogs. I don't think there's any other form of hunting that has quite the tradition and character."

Margie Crisp, an Elgin-based writer, artist and conservationist who started duck hunting three seasons ago, says she's surprised by how much she enjoys the sport. Today marked her first teal hunt, too.

Part of the appeal for her, she says, is that duck hunting helps support conservation. Hunters purchase a federal duck stamp (required to hunt teal, along with a hunting license). Ninety-eight percent of proceeds from stamp sales are used to buy and protect wetland habitat and purchase conservation easements for the national wildlife refuge system.

The talk turns to cooking. We've dropped the birds off at a shed across from Bucksnag, where the birds are cleaned and packed up for the hunters. I'm going home with a bag of duck breasts.

Everyone shares a recipe. Sansom likes to marinate teal breast in Italian dressing, then sauté it in olive oil with brown mushrooms and onions. I can practically smell it cooking as he describes the process.

Crisp and Bill Montgomery say they prefer to brine a whole bird, stuff it with dried apricots and apples or figs, then drop it in a slow cooker with onion, celery and a splash of wine.

Me? I'm handing over cooking duties to my husband, a Cajun from Louisiana who grew up hunting ducks. He's a wizard in the kitchen. I'm happy knowing we worked hard for what we're putting on the plate.

Pam LeBlanc is an Austin-based outdoor travel and adventure writer.

Smoked Teal with Miso, Mushrooms, Garlic and Truffle

by Jesse Morris

COURTESY OF JESSE MORRIS / KILLER CHEFS

SMOKED TEAL

2 pieces of duck breast
Black pepper
1 king oyster mushroom, diced
Truffle salt
1 slice good bread (like brioche)

Season two cleaned and dried teal breasts heavily with black pepper. Smoke at 220 degrees until the duck reaches an internal temperature of 125 degrees.

On medium-high heat, sauté diced mushrooms until they have a nice color. Strain out of the pan; add duck breast and cook for two minutes, adding a tablespoon of the miso garlic paste to coat at the end. Set aside to rest.

Toast a slice of bread with butter until golden brown. Use a round cookie cutter to make a circle, then top it with the diced teal-and-mushroom mixture and season with truffle salt. I garnish it with onion flowers and nasturtium flower petals.

MISO GARLIC BUTTER

10 cloves peeled garlic
Vegetable oil
1 cup blonde miso
2 tablespoons soy sauce
1 stick unsalted butter

In a heavy-bottomed pan, add 10 cloves of peeled garlic and cover with vegetable oil. Cook on low heat until garlic is soft and caramelized. Set aside to cool. Save oil for vinaigrettes or other projects.

In a mixing bowl, add miso, soy sauce and all 10 cloves of garlic. Mix well. Add one stick of room-temperature butter and fold together. Also good as a vinaigrette base. Add a few pinches of chili flake for spice (optional).

Jesse Morris is a hunter/chef/guide who lives in Richardson with his wife and two daughters. "Every now and then I come up with a dish on the fly that, in its simplicity, also seems so complex. I tend to cook what I have on hand at the moment, adding this, adding that. I feel like my best dishes come from that style of cooking, a feral art." Find more recipes online at *www.killerchefs.com* and @killerchefs on Instagram.

Ryan Eaker eyes the dark line of clouds as an icy wind announces the approaching cold front.

"We'd better step on it," he warns the line of a half-dozen boys behind him on mountain bikes, and they push off with urgency.

Rolling Thunder

High school mountain bikers vie for glory in Texas' unpredictable weather.

by Kathryn Hunter

CODAJET PHOTOGRAPHY

Then the storm hits. Rain, sleet, hail and high winds slam the group sideways. Still two miles out, they're soaked through and freezing, and the weather makes it hard to see even a short distance ahead. They press on to their campsite, only to find the tents crumpled and tossed across the field where they'd been staked, everything inside them damp or dripping wet.

READY TO RIDE

It's Saturday, April 21, 2018, the day before the annual Dinosaur Dance race at Dinosaur Valley State Park in Glen Rose; it's the state championship event of the Texas Interscholastic Mountain Bike League. Eaker, site supervisor of the Camacho Activity Center in East Austin, had been leading a group of the center's competitive mountain bike team through a pre-ride of the race course.

A pre-ride is meant to be an opportunity for teams to practice difficult features, to visualize the race, to get comfortable. But if the elements have something else in mind, like today, you roll with the punches.

The bad weather lifts almost as quickly as it blew through, but the pre-race campout that night on site is the coldest and wettest of the season for all the teams at the event. Camacho's canopies, permanently destroyed, look like flattened soda cans.

As race day dawns, cloudless and warming fast, the bikes and their riders emerge again. It's hard to imagine that these limestone hills, a dusky scrubland scattered with Ashe juniper, once sat at the edge of a sparkling sea, and that herds of long-necked sauropods and their fierce two-legged predator, *Acrocanthosaurus*, walked this ground. Evidence of their presence is preserved in the riverbed, however — footprints buried and then revealed by the slow workings of time.

Now, in this place where ancient giants trod, 375 kids on bikes traverse the 5-mile race loop like mechanical mountain goats, making their own mark on the future.

A NEW AGE

The Texas league is part of a larger National Interscholastic Cycling Association, incubated in Northern California in 2001, then spreading to 25 other states. Texas joined the list in 2010, with membership growing about 25 percent each year. There are now 37 teams across the state, from as far north as Amarillo to as far west as Midland to as far east as Houston and Tyler.

Teams include students from grades six through 12 and vary widely in size. Some have only a handful of athletes. The Lake Travis team, one of the oldest in the league, is currently the largest, with 54 boys and 11 girls, as well as 18 volunteer coaches.

On a misty, cold Saturday in March, I attend a practice at Pace Bend Park at

***Lower left photo:** Former high school racer Tara Hauwert (at center) helps coach the Camacho team in 2019.*

***Photos this spread and next spread:** Middle school and high school mountain bikers take part in 2019's series of races at Troy, Warda and Rocky Hill.*

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the invitation of Rick Margiotta, team director. In addition to attending the league's five races, the team holds two weekday practices and one Saturday practice each week throughout the spring semester.

Lake Travis' students are divided by skill level — gold, silver, blue and red groups — with almost military efficiency. I tag along with part of the gold group, and I try (as a former elite-level road cyclist but comparatively novice mountain biker) not to flub anything. I'm a little in awe of what the teenagers I'm chasing down the trail can do at an age when my bike probably still had streamers on it.

What I see is kids learning the bike and the trails as if they're a language, absorbing it. Today many children start with balance bikes almost as soon as they can walk and skip training wheels entirely (my two children started riding pedal bikes before the age of 3). College scholarship opportunities are available in cycling, and development teams introduce promising young riders to the national pro scene.

The league seems a part of this new world, a world where doors are open much sooner and much wider.

A BEAUTIFUL MOMENTUM

The race loop at Dinosaur Valley is challenging, with steep switchbacks, large ledges and loose, tennis-ball-sized rocks. To the uninitiated, the terrain looks impossible, but thanks to the magic of modern suspension and large, supple tires, today's mountain bikes are a different species from the gentle, pavement-loving bikes most people know.

Near the end of the race loop, whether athletes are completing one or multiple laps in their division, there's an intimidating, very technical downhill. Here, a line of spectators forms an expectant gantlet of sorts, which doesn't help calm riders' nerves as they try not to tumble over their own handlebars.

Tara Hauwert crashed in this section her first year of competition. But at the 2018 race, as a graduating senior at Westlake High School in Austin, she has it down — she focuses on the trail ahead, balancing on her bike and enjoying the feeling of zooming out of the final part of the hill and out into the grassy field before the finish. When she crosses the line in second place (and second overall in varsity for the season), it's her last mountain bike race as a high school student.

"The first thing I learned about mountain biking and have used since is 'you've got to be brave,'" Hauwert says. "You can't be scared. You have to tell yourself you can do it."

She talks about the balance of knowing your skill level and riding what you're comfortable with, but also

ATHAN BERNAL

learning to trust yourself and having the confidence to fully commit to trying difficult features. She describes goal-setting, as well as success, as being individual and incremental.

Hauwert started mountain biking with the Camacho program when she was in middle school. In the 2019 season, she's one of several former student athletes who have graduated and come back to Camacho to help the next generation of riders.

When I meet her for a ride, I learn she's interning for a rainforest conservation nonprofit in Austin and coaching at Camacho's weekend practices. She's just returned from three months in Guatemala and Costa Rica and will soon be on her way to Germany to visit family before starting at Texas State University in

CODAJET PHOTOGRAPHY

CODAJET PHOTOGRAPHY

the fall, where she wants to major in geography and minor in biology.

I watch as Hauwert navigates the trail's tough features with grace and nonchalance. I'm often struck by female cyclists' air of confidence — maybe they find this sport because they're strong personalities or maybe it brings out that strength, but almost all of them have it, a kind of inner mettle.

Hauwert seems a lot older than she is. She doesn't have all the questions answered yet, but what strikes me is the way she knows where she's headed, the beautiful momentum she's built. On that ledgy descent at Dinosaur Valley, where everyone was waiting for her to fall and fail, she didn't seem to be afraid of what was ahead, wasn't questioning herself or doubting in the way I think I did at that age, tearing myself down before I could even get started.

BREAKING THE MOLD

According to the Kaiser Foundation, kids 8-18 spend an average of 7.5 hours in front of a screen every day. Centers for Disease Control data shows that nearly one in five school-age children in the U.S. is obese, a percentage that has tripled since the 1970s. Sports, which encourage physical activity and outdoor time, are arguably more relevant than ever.

Some students in the Texas mountain biking league also compete in traditional school sports; for others, cycling is the first and only sport they've participated in.

It's not just the sport that's changing the kids, however, but the kids who are changing the sport. The traditional demographic for competitive cycling — a pursuit that can be lifelong, with race categories commonly extending from junior riders to masters ages 70-plus — is wealthy, white and male. While the league still reflects some of those trends, it's also a foot in the door for kids from all walks of life.

Like the Camacho team, which pulls from traditionally underserved communities in East Austin, the San Marcos high school mountain biking team has many students whose families wouldn't have the resources to participate without financial assistance.

"The kids that we get, a lot of them are just trying to experience something new," says head coach Adam Wagner. "Most are students who are first-generation riders that probably wouldn't have ever touched a bicycle or ridden it had they not been a part of the team."

The team "checks out" a bike to each student athlete for the year like a library book, bypassing what can be a significant barrier to entry in the league; a race-quality "hardtail" mountain bike often starts around $800, a full-suspension bike might start at $2,000.

The team cobbles together grants and donations, but funding fluctuates. This season the team's four volunteer coaches paid for students' food during race weekends out of their own pockets.

They say they do it because they know it matters. Many past students have continued riding, or they've pursued jobs in the outdoors or working with kids. One man whose son was on the team credits it for saving his son's life, and though his son has now graduated, the father comes back to volunteer for races, driving a trailer and cooking.

"Some of the students have experienced some pretty heart-breaking things, heartbreaking situations, and the team helps them," Wagner says. "The baggage they bring with them, they let that down a little bit. They get competitive with each other, and that feeling of home for them — of having a family at school — really benefits them."

Winning isn't the emphasis of the team. One assistant coach says riders don't have to be the best but are encouraged to do better than the last time.

I think of a seventh-grader I'd met at a Camacho practice one Saturday. She wasn't learning how to race a mountain bike, but rather how to ride a bike for the first time. Every turn, every incline, was difficult. She fell, and she got up again. It reminded me that there are many types of courage, and many ways to witness it.

MAKING HISTORY

Race season for the Texas league is the spring semester, which is always a seasonal grab bag in the Lone Star State. Sometimes searing hot and sometimes freezing cold, the weather can change on a dime. The nature of an outdoor sport like mountain biking is to be at its mercy.

In a disappointing anticlimax, the 2019 Dinosaur Dance is canceled, and conditions on what should have been race day are still too soggy from heavy rains the day before. Most of the 20-mile trail system is closed, and only the interior of the park is open, a finger of land bounded by the U-shaped arc of the river.

I'm left with my own contemplations on that almost-too-quiet day, staring

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down into the Paluxy River at a set of theropod tracks imprinted into a rock shelf a few inches below the water line. In my mind's eye, as if playing connect-the-dots against the blue sky above, I can sketch the rest of the creature as it must have stood. In the open air, I feel a sense of wonder and possibility that I've never experienced seeing bones in a museum.

I find myself asking if someone in a future age will come across such tangible evidence of our presence here, all the ways we wander this land — a footprint, a bicycle's tire tread — or if it'll just be the stories that carry on the memories of what was, what is and what still remains to be.

Kathryn Hunter is an Austin freelance writer and bike racer.

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LEGACY

East Texas Law

First TPWD Prosecutor of the Year takes poaching personally.

By Angela Morris

When Bobby Neal was a kid, deer hunting with his dad and grandpa was different from the way it is today when he hunts with his sons in the East Texas Pineywoods.

"When I was a kid, we didn't have any deer in East Texas, at least our part," says Neal, who was born and raised in Sabine County. "If you saw a deer track, you talked about it for a week."

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department spent decades restoring deer to East Texas, which now boasts a healthy whitetail population.

Just as the generation that grew up in the Great Depression knew the true value of a dollar, Neal, about to celebrate his 50th birthday, says that early experience gave him great respect for wildlife resources.

So, when he became county attorney in Sabine County in 1999, he wasn't about to let poachers get off easy. Instead, Neal takes game violations just as seriously as any other crime — one reason why the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department honored him with its inaugural Prosecutor of the Year award in 2018.

Robert G. Neal Jr., second from left, accepts TPWD's inaugural Prosecutor of the Year award. He is joined by TPW Commission Chairman Ralph H. Duggins, Col. Grahame Jones and Executive Director Carter Smith.

"A lot of people don't think it [poaching] is as important, but they probably would if they really thought about it — those turkey and deer were restocked with taxpayer funds," says Neal, noting that some common game violations — hunting at night or hunting from a public road — also threaten public safety.

Col. Grahame Jones, who directs the Law Enforcement Division of TPWD, says that Neal is a tremendous support to his local game wardens.

"Successful prosecution sends a strong message to the violators and acts as a future deterrent for others who are considering violating the law," Jones says.

That deterrent effect doesn't work as well if judges and prosecutors don't take game violations seriously. Wildlife protection officials across the country, including Texas, told researchers for a 2017 report that the court system can be the largest obstacle to successful poaching prosecutions.

Why? The system doesn't make wildlife crimes a priority; courts don't consistently impose fines; and sometimes judges dismiss cases. Judges may lack understanding of game laws or hold cultural, traditional or personal beliefs that lead to weak prosecution.

Neal stands out compared to other prosecutors, says Tom Jenkins, who was a game warden captain in Sabine County for 26 years before retiring in August 2018. For years, Neal and his father have hunted at and maintained a large Sabine County deer lease that boasts an impressive population of Eastern turkey, a species that's had a hard time in other areas.

Because Neal knows the importance of proper wildlife management, poaching feels personal to him, says Jenkins, who nominated Neal for the TPWD prosecutor award.

"In Bobby's mind, you're stealing from me and the public. It's just like someone is breaking in a house and stealing stuff," he says.

Neal earned his high school diploma from West Sabine High School in Pineland. After graduating from Stephen F. Austin State University, he worked as an accountant, which put him in touch with lawyers, planting his interest in the law. He earned his law degree from South Texas College of Law in Houston in 1995 and started his legal career in private practice. Sabine County officials appointed him to become the county attorney in 1999, representing the county in civil matters and prosecuting Class A and B misdemeanors.

Although Neal was humbled by and appreciative of TPWD's prosecutor award, he says he didn't like being singled out for the honor because he acts as part of a team. A typical game violation case starts with a citizen who calls a game warden about a crime. The game warden investigates and puts together a case — it takes hard work in tough conditions, often at night, and incorporates modern techniques such as DNA or ballistics testing. When the case arrives in Neal's office, his staff helps usher it through the court process. Local judges have taken these cases seriously.

"Everybody working together is the only time you have exceptional results," he says.

A game warden might go easy on a hunter who makes an honest mistake — for example, taking a buck with a 12-inch spread when the legal minimum is 13 inches. Neal doesn't see those cases. Rather, he says, his defendants are accused of egregious things like killing four deer and cutting off their antlers, harvesting just one backstrap and leaving the rest to waste.

Poaching is a seasonal crime, with most cases occurring between September and January, coinciding with deer season. Half of his cases involve Sabine County defendants; half are visitors drawn to hunt in the region's vast national forests. Although Neal has prosecuted cases against women, he says the majority of defendants are men between the ages of 18 and 30.

"I think a lot of it is [due to their] youth," he says, "and lack of appreciation for what they are doing."

Most game violations are misdemeanors. Justices of the peace handle the lowest level, Class C, while Neal's office tackles the higher Class A and B misdemeanors. Depending on the classification, a defendant could face a $2,000 to $4,000 fine and between 180 days and one year in jail. Class A or B violations can also bring two years of probation, pricey court costs and probation fees, the suspension of hunting and fishing licenses, seizure of the firearm used in the crime and payment of civil restitution.

Jenkins, the longtime game warden, says that before Neal's tenure as county attorney, Sabine County poachers viewed getting hit with a game violation as a joke because they might get only a $25 fine.

"Bobby's getting $3,000 to $4,000 fines. He's collecting restitution on the animals," Jenkins says. "On people who are habitual outlaws, he's following through on the letter of the law."

In one case, a defendant was convicted for shooting a turkey hen from a public road out of season. The defendant's sentence included 155 days in jail, one year of probation, 40 hours of community service, a $1,500 fine, more than $1,800 in court costs and fees, a two-year license suspension, weapon forfeiture and $1,000 in restitution.

Viron Barbay, the president of the Sabine County Landowners and Leaseholders Association, a local group that pushes for conservation education and opposes poaching, says game violators in the region used to be "blatant outlaws."

"There was a culture of poaching," says Barbay, a longtime Milam resident.

But Neal's commitment to prosecuting poachers has sent a message: Poach in Sabine County and face serious consequences. Barbay says it's deeply significant that the first TPWD Prosecutor of the Year award honored someone in East Texas.

"We see it as deep East Texas winning the award," Barbay says. "The people here are very proud of what he's done."

Angela Morris is a multimedia journalist who covers the legal profession. A new TPWD Prosecutor of the Year will be named in August.

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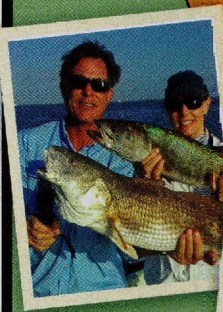

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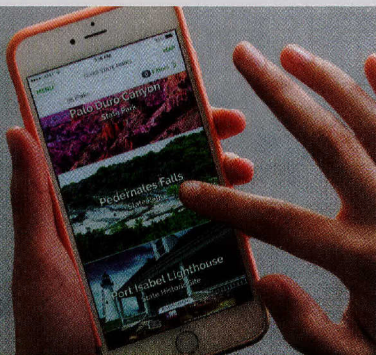

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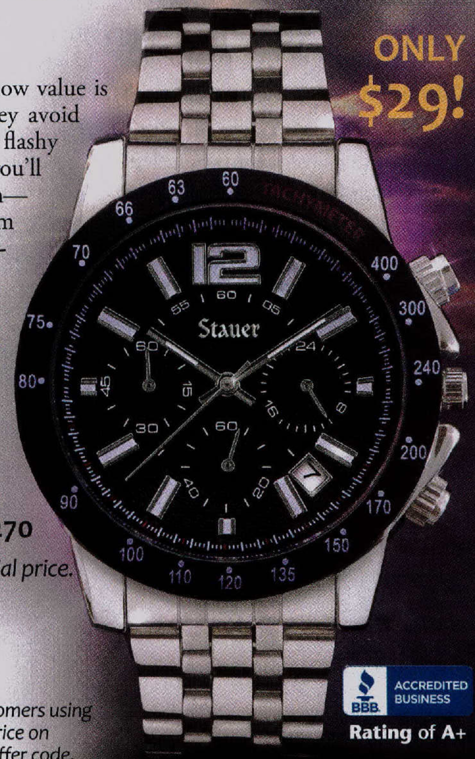

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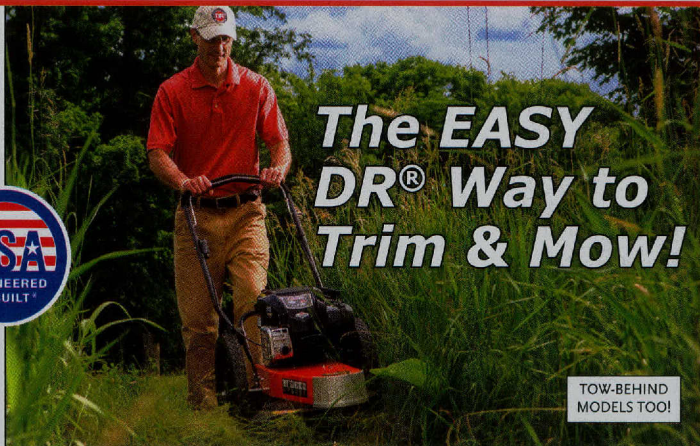

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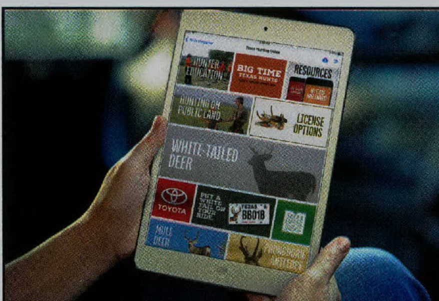

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