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GIFT GUIDE | BLACK MARKET DEER | CRAZY FOR COTJLLA | NUTTY PROFESSOR

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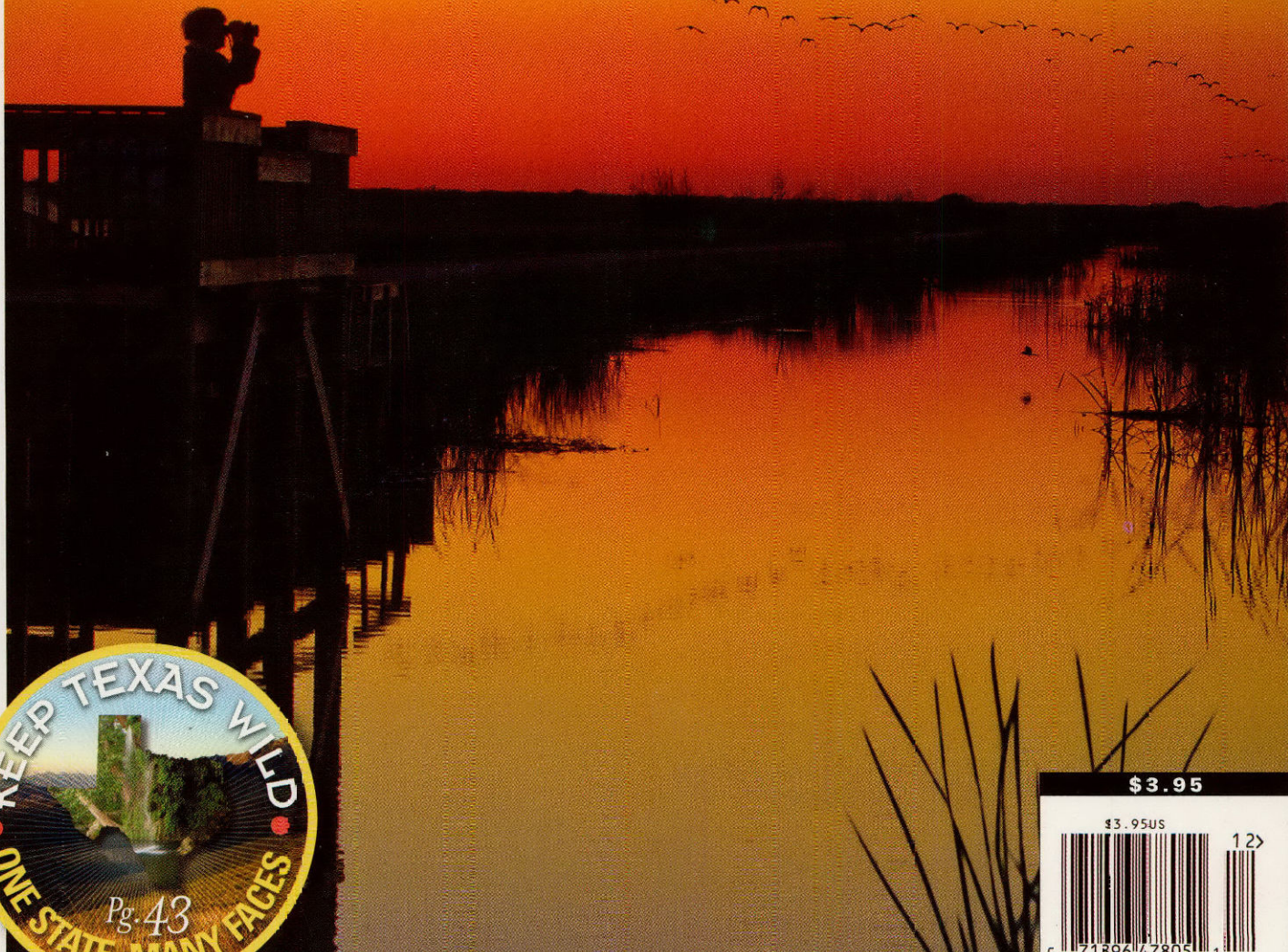
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PARKS & WILDLIFE

The OUTDOOR MAGAZINE of TEXAS

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One State, Many Faces

Forests, deserts, rivers, mountains — Texas has it all!

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A close-up photograph of a cougar's face, showing its eye, nose, and whiskers. The cougar is surrounded by dry grass and green leaves. The text "CONTENTS" is overlaid at the top in a stylized, yellow-green font.

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TEXAS

THE OUTDOOR MAGAZINE OF TEXAS

DECEMBER 2009, VOL. 67, NO. 12

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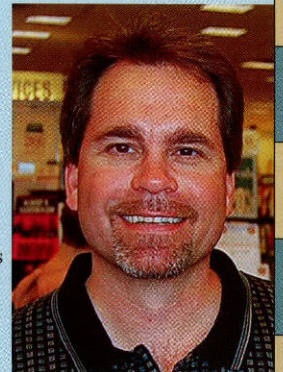
In the Field

JANICE VAN DYKE WALDEN has always been drawn to rivers. She grew up on Houston's Buffalo Bayou and years later co-produced *Life Along the Channel*, a documentary about the Houston Ship Channel. A renewed concern for Buffalo Bayou led her to become a Texas Stream Team volunteer in 2009. She heard about Friends of the River –



San Bernard and their successful effort with re-opening the mouth of the San Bernard River. "I had to find out how they did it," Janice says. "To re-open a river is a Herculean task. So often you hear about the tragedy of American rivers: silting, damming, polluting, over-engineering, closing. But in this situation, everybody won – community, fishermen, wildlife, engineers, water quality. That doesn't happen every day."

BEN REHDER, a hunter and an author of mystery novels featuring a Texas game warden, has an interest in all facets of wildlife law enforcement. He has met dozens of game wardens over the years, including an investigator with the Special Operations Unit. "I was particularly interested in the unit's efforts to curtail the black market in white-tailed deer," Ben says. "Most people don't even know this sort of illegal trade exists. It's not surprising, given the dollar value of a trophy buck nowadays." Ben takes a closer look at the tactics investigators use to catch lawbreakers, and how a single illegal deer can pose a biological threat to our state's resources.



JOHN GOODSPEED, a San Antonio native and president of the Texas Outdoor Writers Association, began fishing coastal waters at age 5. His appreciation of the coast – and its characters – grew each time he visited, especially after becoming a journalist and photographer. He's written about a wide range of



people with a love of the sea, from poachers, musicians and tournament contestants to jetty rats and surf cats. None, however, were like one he never met – the late Dr. Henry Hildebrand, a pioneering marine biologist who helped saved Kemp's ridley sea turtles from extinction. "While he was one of marine science's most brilliant practitioners, he also was one of its most eccentric," John says. "He was marine biology's answer to Indiana Jones, except his treasure was knowledge."

AT ISSUE

FROM THE PEN OF CARTER P. SMITH

The picture said it all, or so it seemed. In the center of the photo was a beaming grandfather standing under a sprawling oak tree, surrounded by his 11 kids and grandkids, all bedecked in their outdoor finery. Judging by the smile on their faces and the clusters of birds in front of them, it looked like a successful family outing in a central Texas dove patch.

There was something else, though, in that picture that caught my eye. Everyone in the picture was holding up something for the camera. As I looked closer, I saw that each child and grandchild was proudly waving a hunting license. Well, at least they were all hunting legally, I thought. But, as I read in a letter accompanying the picture from Mr. Al Dusek, the family patriarch, it wasn't just any hunting license they were holding. You see, Mr. Dusek had purchased lifetime hunting and fishing licenses as a gift for all 11 of his kids and grandkids!

It was clearly a very personal and heartfelt act of generosity on Mr. Dusek's part. As he said so well, "If you hunt and fish with your kids now, you won't have to hunt for them later."

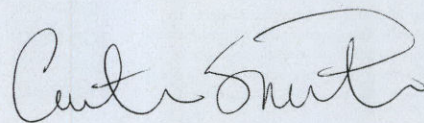
God bless him.

Never before has it been more important to take a child, any child, into the outdoors to expose them to the beauty and bounty of nature. As educators, public health professionals, scientists, conservationists and child advocates have all come to recognize, children who are given ample time to play, explore and recreate outdoors tend to perform better physically, cognitively, emotionally, and mentally than children who don't have those opportunities. Or, as we like to say at Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, those kids become happier, healthier and smarter.

Today's kids have a myriad of distractions competing for what little leisure time they do have. Electronic games and media are one well-known culprit for why kids don't spend as much time outside. But there's another reason for this phenomenon. It is one that each of us can help remedy right now. It is the lack of an experienced outdoor mentor, a family member or close friend, such as Mr. Dusek, who knows how to hunt, fish, camp, canoe, kayak, birdwatch, set up a tent and build a campfire. It is someone who knows one's way around the woods and waters and who cares enough to impart one's knowledge and skills to the younger set.

Let's not forget that December is a time of giving. I hope all of you who read this will give a child you know a meaningful outdoor experience over the holiday season — a trip to a state park, a weekend at the deer lease, a fishing outing at a nearby lake, or maybe an excursion to look at birds in their native habitats. I promise you it will be one of the best holiday gifts you ever give (and likely receive).

Thanks for caring about Texas' wild things and wild places. They need you more than ever.



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department mission statement:

To manage and conserve the natural and cultural resources of Texas and to provide hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation opportunities for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.


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MAIL CALL

PICKS, PANS AND PROBES FROM OUR READERS

FOREWORD

Naturalist John Tveten is a hero you've probably never heard of.

Word of his passing reached me in October. As I'm still wet behind the ears as editor here, the name stood out to me only as one I had come across often while thumbing through the state's finest wildlife guidebooks. No one except editors, writers and photographers pay much attention to bylines and photo credits. But those of us who make a habit of trying to identify wildlife photos and verify descriptions have had "Tveten" drilled deeply into our subconscious.

To say that this fine naturalist, photographer and writer was beloved is no exaggeration. Passionate tributes from his peers, friends and admirers filled pages on Internet birding/wildlife forums. Here's a sampling from Texas' most respected naturalists:

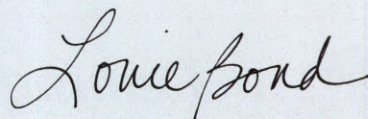
"He was one of the very few [true] naturalists I have ever met. I will never forget when myself and three other young birders invited John on a Big Day run — worst mistake we could make. When we wanted to go to the next birding location, we always had to go find John and take him away from watching a praying mantis or watching a snake eating a frog." David Dauphin, Mission

"Although most people associate John with birds, I don't know what he wasn't interested in when it came to the natural world. John and Gloria also provided material to scholarly publications. The many photographs that appear in the *Mammals of Texas* come immediately to mind. I have always admired, and been a little jealous of, that particular effort. I can just imagine the fun, and frustration, of traveling throughout our state to capture all of those small mammals so that this volume could be illustrated with outstanding photos of many species that most Texans will never see." Mark Lockwood, Austin

"John was a naturalist first and a photographer second. This is the area I find most fascinating about John Tveten. He was the best wildlife photographer of his era in Texas. He knew everything there was to know about each critter he photographed but didn't really care about the camera he used to photograph that critter." Kathy Adams Clark, Houston

Writer, photographer and personal friend Gary Clark will tell us the story behind the man in a Legend, Lore & Legacy article later this winter. Till then, we'll have to be satisfied with our dog-eared copies of *Butterflies of Houston and Southeast Texas*.

This holiday season, honor those who have cherished and protected our natural world by taking a son or granddaughter outdoors and sharing the joy and wonder that resides there. Help them start their own lifelong love affair with the beauty that is the great outdoors of Texas.



LOUIE BOND
EDITOR

LETTERS

HUMMERS TAKE A LAP

I don't believe that hummingbirds "sip out the tasty nectar, just like drinking soda from a straw" ("Bird Lips?!" Keep Texas Wild, November 2009). Only doves can do that. Hummers lap it up with their tongues, which have structures

to help pull up the liquid. Your magazine is great. I'm collecting all of the Keep Texas Wild articles for my granddaughters.

AL HIRSCHLER

Dallas

TP&W EDITOR LOUIE BOND

RESPONDS: Is there any doubt that Texas Parks & Wildlife readers are the smartest magazine readers in the state? Thanks for the keen eye, Mr. Hirschler. You are correct that hummingbirds lap up liquid, and don't sip it through their long beaks. What amazes me each month is how much I learn from Keep Texas Wild, which is designed for fourth graders. "Bird Lips?!" also sent me back to the books looking for the difference between a "beak" and a "bill." Am I smarter than a fourth grader?

I'm afraid to learn the answer to that!

NOT JUST FOR FOURTH GRADERS

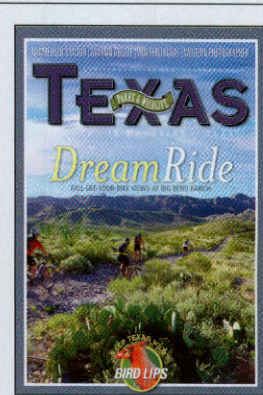
I often bring my magazines into the classroom to share with my fifth-grade science classes. They love the pictures and interesting articles. You really hit the spot for science teachers in Keep Texas Wild with "Bird Lips?!" I do an activity on bird beaks and your article will be a fantastic piece of literature to extend my teaching.

CANDY LEONARD

Gunter Middle School

Gunter

TP&W RESPONDS: Be sure to check out the additional teacher resource pages on our website. These pages offer links to activities, videos and articles. Download a printable PDF to share extra copies.



Your magazine is great. I'm collecting all of the Keep Texas Wild articles for my granddaughters.

Al Hirschler
Dallas

MAIL CALL

FISH COOPER LAKE TILL IT HURTS

Thank you for the article about Cooper Lake ("Cooped-Up Fish," November 2009). After I read this and since I am an addicted fisherman, I called some buddies and we spent five days at Cooper Lake. Man, did we catch fish! Our guide knew just what to do. We limited out on whites and hybrids every morning and evening we fished. When we got back home, it took a week for my arm cramps to go away. What a lake! I am planning to take my two sons for spring break in March.

WESLEY HOPKINS
Center Point

MORE KUDOS FOR COOPER LAKE

We had a fantastic trip last Saturday afternoon at Cooper Lake. It was a birthday present for my 10-year old grandson, who loves to fish. We had a wonderful time and caught lots of hybrids and sand bass. We had a great guide who made the whole experience very special for Blake. Thanks for your article. We have been showing it around, and I'm sure some of my friends will be making the trip to Cooper Lake. I know we plan to go back real soon.

JERRY SMITH
Richardson

THE 31ST CHEAP GETAWAY

Texas Parks & Wildlife magazine left out one of the best cheap getaways ("30 Cheap Getaways," March 2009). By skipping San Angelo State Park at OC Fisher Lake, the magazine did not spread the word of the best and most convenient getaway. San Angelo may seem way out west, but it is close to the Hill Country and several Texas state parks. The men and women who work here maintain a beautiful camping area, and it is never crowded. Fishing and hunting are available. The town is close and full of good food, if campers choose to leave the area for a day of West Texas heaven. Hikes, stars at night, and beautiful sunsets are just a few reasons to scoot a little farther west to San Angelo, the 31st "cheap getaway"!

MARY SANDERS
San Angelo

TPWD NEEDS GOLDEN AGE

To promote further interest in our great state parks and as an amenity to our senior citizens, I propose that lifetime entrance passes be available to residents 65 and older. This could be very similar to the federal government's "Golden Age" program. I wouldn't think it would cause a great revenue loss to the TPWD, while letting seniors (and TPWD) avoid the hassle of renewing each year.

DAVID K. GLEASON
Conroe

TP&W RESPONDS: Thanks for the suggestion, Mr. Gleason. Please note that TPWD does offer a Texas Parklands Passport, which offers a 50 percent entry fee reduction to park visitors over the age of 65.

BIG BLUESTEM IN MER ROUGE

The broad floodplain of the Boeuf River can be seen from a high bluff near the town of Bastrop in northeastern Louisiana. Frontier travelers looked out from the bluff at endless waves of grass tall enough to conceal a man on horseback, and wild animals, including black

bears. In the fall, when the big bluestem grass "fades into reddish browns and beiges" ("A Patch of Blue," November 2009) the scene resembled a red sea. And that's how the little town in the floodplain got its name — Mer Rouge, Louisiana. Today it is a commercial center for cotton farmers.

DAVID K. GLEASON
Conroe

Sound off for "Mail Call!"

Let us hear from you!

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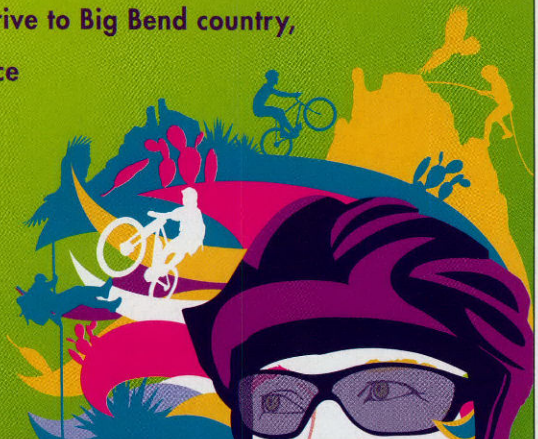
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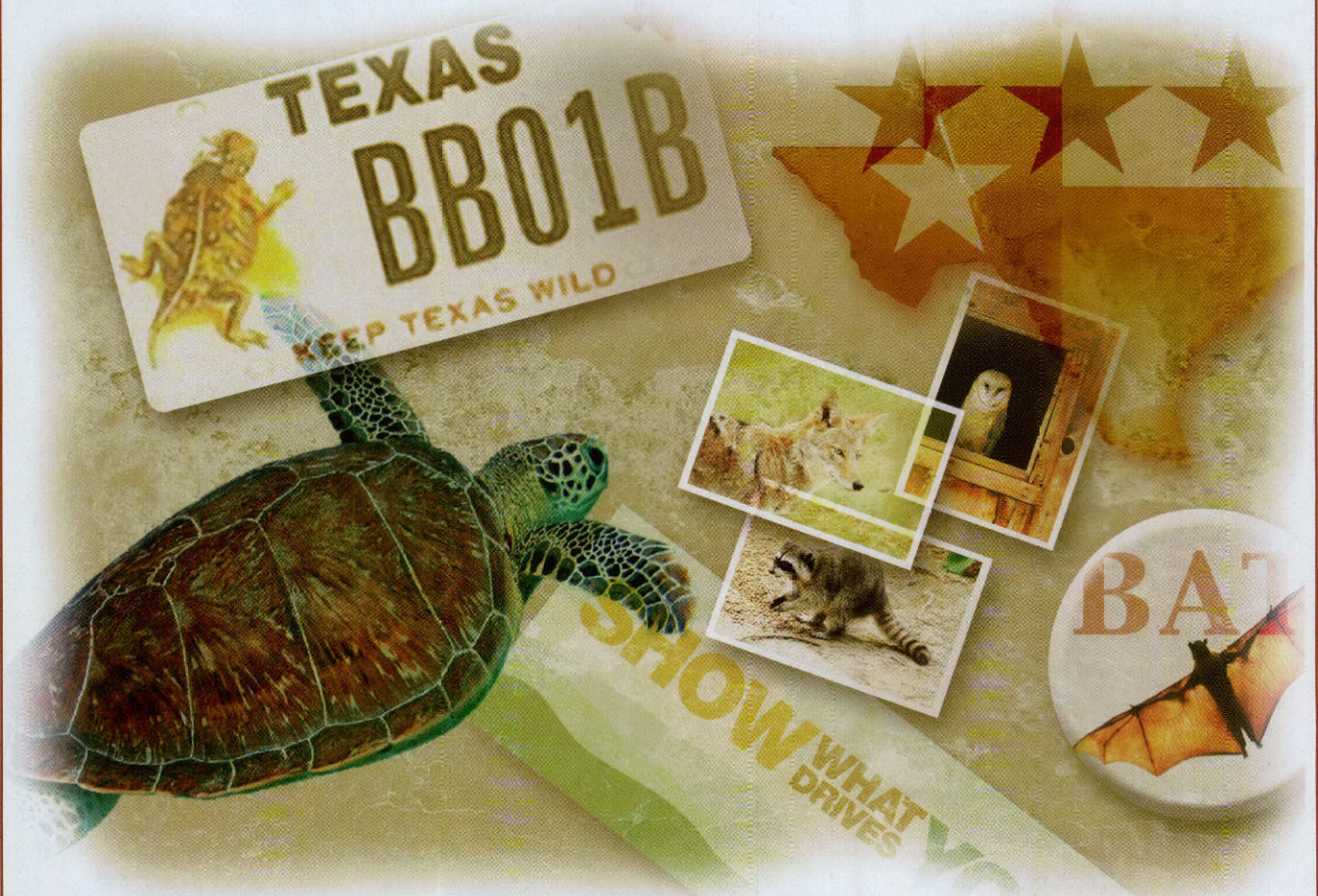
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SCOUT

NEWS AND VIEWS IN THE TEXAS OUTDOORS

SHOPPING WITH HEART

Support conservation when you buy holiday gifts.



Put your shopping dollars to work supporting wildlife and natural habitat around the state. Conservation commerce — the idea of selling appropriate merchandise to raise conservation funds — is catching on, and the products listed here directly support programs in Texas. We've provided just a sampling, so keep your eyes open for more.

Clay Turtles

Residents in the Mexican village of Tepejuahes, a community historically dependent on sea turtle poaching, now create a variety of handmade ceramics, from incense and candleholders to coin banks and wine chillers. The ceramics provide alternative income to villagers and, therefore, help protect the turtles,

which also nest in Texas. Look for the items at Sea Turtle Inc. on South Padre Island and the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, where the wine chillers are particularly popular. Sea Turtle Inc. also sells turtle charms carved from coconut shells that wash up on the nesting beaches. www.seaturtleinc.org, www.gpz.org

Local Honey

The LEED Gold-certified store at Trinity River Audubon Center near downtown Dallas sells Extra Virgin Zipcode Honey, produced locally by the Texas Honeybee Guild. Community gardens and wild areas supply guild owners Brandon and Susan Pollard's bees with the flowers necessary to create honey. The Pollards even installed hives on the center grounds. All sales at the shop help support the center, part of the largest urban hardwood forest in the United States. www.trinityriveraudubon.org

Wildlife Photographs

Color photographs of Texas wildlife and landscapes fill the pages of Images for Conservation Fund *Book One, The Texas Hill Country* and *Book Two, Coastal Bend of Texas*. Sold in select bookstores and on the ICF website, the books support the organization's efforts to promote conservation on private lands through photography contests, says ICF founder John Martin. The growth of nature photography into a \$4 billion industry is changing land management, says Sally Crofutt, manager of

Fennessey Ranch, a first-place winner. The ranch made more money from wildlife photography than from cattle in 2008, she adds, and no longer shoots coyotes or even rattlesnakes. www.imagesforconservation.org

Bracelets and Buttons

The Houston Zoo's conservation bracelets support its Texas programs protecting the Houston toad, Attwater's prairie-chicken, black bears, diamondback terrapins and sea turtles. Last year, the items raised around \$25,000, says Peter Riger, director of conservation. "These make unique gifts, a keepsake that will remind you of wildlife conservation or a specific animal down the road." All of the zoo's gift shop sales help support conservation efforts. www.houstonzoo.org

Special Plates

Texas drivers can purchase horned lizard license plates to help fund projects under the Texas Wildlife Action plan, bluebonnet plates to support state parks, white-tailed deer plates for wildlife management and research, or largemouth bass plates to

fund neighborhood fishing and world record programs. Ducks Unlimited plates benefit wetland habitat and the waterfowl that live in it. www.conserva-tionplate.org

Join, Adopt

Many conservation organizations provide membership gift packets. Those working in Texas include The Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation and Audubon Society. Some groups also offer "adoptions" of an animal. Adopt a turtle through Padre Island National Seashore's sea turtle recovery program to net a certificate, pin and bumper sticker packaged suitably for gift giving. Order by phone, 361-949-8068 or at www.nps.gov/pais. At Sea Turtle Inc., adopt a resident turtle, a hatchling or a nest of turtle eggs, which includes a phone call invitation to the hatchlings' release. Order at www.seaturtleinc.org; click on "adopt a hatchling." Bat Conservation International mails bat adopters a certificate, a color photo, species information and a bumper sticker. Order at www.batcon.org ★

—Melissa Gaskill

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What's Up, Doc?

Jackrabbits are not really rabbits at all.



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Think jackrabbit, and an image springs to mind: a big rabbit with big ears and big feet, right? But herein lies the problem. Jackrabbits aren't rabbits; they're hares. For the misnomer, we can politely thank wildlife artist John James Audubon, who in 1851 dubbed the Texas species as "the jackass rabbit, owing to the length of its ears."

For the record, newborn rabbits arrive blind, furless and helpless. Not so with baby hares. Soon after birth, they get an eyeful of their surroundings and off they go! Given that black-tailed jackrabbits (*Lepus californicus*) rank low on the food chain, it's understandable why they're so quick-footed at such a tender age.

Why the big ears? Coupled with keen eyes and noses, they enable jackrabbits to detect coyotes, foxes and other predators. Nocturnal herbivores, they forage in open fields, prairies and deserts, which offer higher visibility. When threatened, jackrabbits will speed away, flash their tails and hop in a zigzag pattern, reaching speeds of 30 miles or more per hour.

They reproduce and grow just as fast. Females mate year-round and can deliver up to six babies six times a year. Though young jackrabbits morph into adults within eight months, females

breed for the first time early the next year after their birth.

Tip: Next time you're in Odessa, hop over to Eighth Street and Sam Houston Avenue for a gander at the world's largest jackrabbit. Seated on his haunches, Jack Ben Rabbit — a fiberglass statue with its own Texas historical marker — measures a few hairs more than eight feet high, big ears included. (Genuine jacks sit about two feet high.) ☆

— Sheryl Smith-Rodgers

Female jackrabbits can deliver up to six babies six times a year.



PHOTOS © ROLF NUSSBAUMER; OPPOSITE LEFT © KENDAL LARSON; OTHERS COURTESY OF STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE PARK



Santa's in the Park

Get into the holiday spirit at Stephen F. Austin State Park.

The first time Rebecca Presley and Joni Baxley met, they posed together as babies on Santa's lap at Stephen F. Austin State Park. Thirteen years later, the Sealy eighth graders (and best friends) still get their picture taken with Santa in December at the park.

"Lots of local families as well as people from Houston and Katy come every year for our holiday breakfast," says Anne Presley, assistant park superintendent (and Rebecca's mom). "It's gotten to be a big community event."

Everyone's welcome, so bring the kids and get in line at the dining hall for pancakes, homemade syrup, sausage, juice and coffee. Then comes the best part: visits with Santa. "The little ones have stars in their eyes and are as sweet as they can be," says Hollis Wilkinson, a park host who portrays the jolly gent every year.

More fun's in store that evening when pickup-drawn hayrides — another annual holiday event — meander through the park.

"We sing carols along the way, then afterward everyone enjoys cookies and hot chocolate," Presley explains. "Instead of charging a fee, we ask that people give canned goods, which we give to food pantries in Sealy."

Year-round, Texas history buffs can tour Stephen F. Austin State Park, located on a wooded bend of the Brazos River. The 480-acre getaway marks part of the original town site of San Felipe de Austin, founded by the park's namesake who

brought the first colonists to Texas in 1824. (Tip: At nearby San Felipe de Austin State Historic Site, visitors can tour a replica of Austin's dogtrot log cabin.)

Hikers and bikers rave about the park's well-developed system of 14 marked trails that range from easy 30-minute strolls to half-day excursions. Anglers can cast their line in the river, and there's even an 18-hole public golf course next door.

Camping facilities include RV sites with utilities, tent sites, screened shelters, a group dining hall and recreation hall. Bullinger Creek Lodge, a brand new facility with bunk beds, restrooms, showers and air/heat, comfortably sleeps 26 people.

Breakfast with Santa runs 8 to 10:30 a.m. Saturday, December 19. Fee: \$4 per person. Christmas caroling hayride, 6 to 8 p.m., also December 19. Fee: one canned good per person.

Directions: From Houston, go west on I-10 to FM 1458 (just before Sealy). Turn right (north) on FM 1458, then left on Park Road 38. For more information, call 979-885-3613 or visit www.tpwd.state.tx.us/stephenfaustin. ★

—Sheryl Smith-Rodgers



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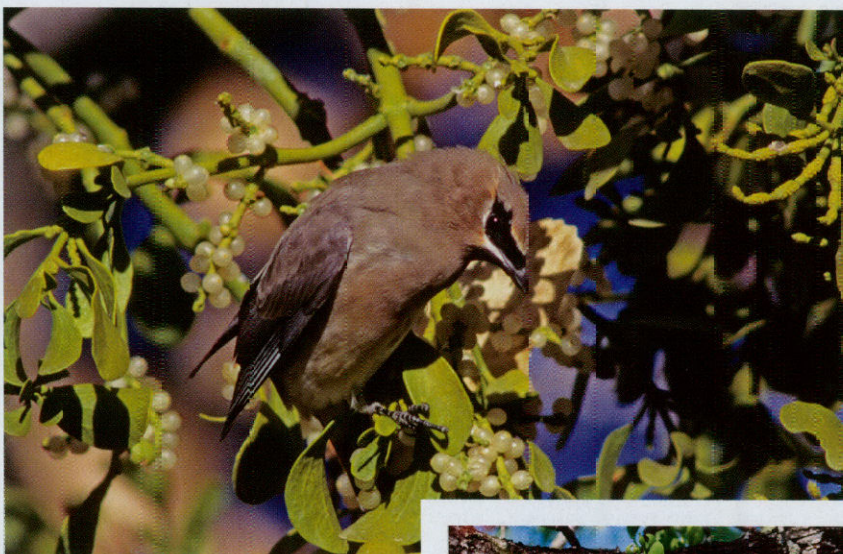
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At the Arboretum
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Mistletoe's effects aren't as benign for trees.



Many animals enjoy mistletoe berries, including this cedar waxwing.

What's to love about Christmas mistletoe? Perhaps not much, unless someone you love happens to be standing under a clump this holiday season. Then you know the drill!

Smooching aside, *Phoradendron tomentosum* — our most common Texas species — lives as a semiparasitic shrub on mesquites, oaks, hackberries and other hardwoods. Green, leathery leaves enable mistletoe to process food via photosynthesis. Through its root-like anchor (called a haustorium), mistletoe steals moisture and minerals from a tree. Generally speaking, mistletoe can weaken and eventually kill a limb but not the entire tree. However, severe infestations can be lethal.

On that note, mistletoe leaves and white berries, if ingested, are toxic to humans but not birds. Their immunity has a twofold purpose. After eating the gooey berries, birds, such as mockingbirds and cedar waxwings, may wipe off extras that stick to their beak. They'll also deposit digested berries on other branches, where the seeds stick and germinate.

Need reasons to love mistletoe? Caterpillars of the great purple hairstreak (*Altides halesus*) feed on the plant. Plus, serious woodworkers hanker after mesquite wood that's swollen with "mistletoe burls." These burls, produced at the point

where mistletoe drills into the wood, contain beautiful grains and patterns.

In Priddy, Texas, Robert and Carolyn Tiemann can't say enough about mistletoe. That's because their business has packaged and shipped the holiday greenery since the devastating drought of the late 1950s forced their ranching family to diversify.

"We buy mistletoe from local folks who gather and pick it within a 50-mile radius," Carolyn says. "A lot of people don't want mistletoe in their trees, and that's good for us!" ★

—Sheryl Smith-Rodgers

TOP © ROLF NUSSBAUMER; BOTTOM © CAROLYN WHITESIDE

All in a Day's Work

More than companions, these dogs really earn their keep.

"Dogs live in a reality far different and more sensually rich than ours," author Henry Chappell writes, explaining the sensitivity of canine hearing and olfaction. For example, a dog's nose contains roughly 220 million scent receptors, while a human has only five million. "Imagine entering the woods on a summer night, in possession of a hunting dog's senses."

Many dogs, kept only as household pets, use these sensory talents for little more than stalking the postman, but the breeds featured in *Working Dogs of Texas* earn their keep as hunters, herders, enforcers, search and rescue animals, and caretakers. Chappell and photographer Wyman Meinzer explore the origins and special talents of working breeds often overlooked and, at times, underappreciated.

Chappell describes, for instance, what it would have been like to approach a backwoods cabin in the frontier South. You would have been

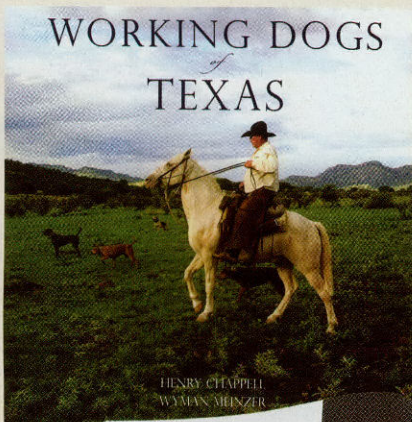
met by two dogs — a feist and a cur — and if you had any sense, you would have held your ground until the dogs' owner appeared.

"Curs are not mongrels, as commonly believed, but a broad class or type of working dog developed in the American South. Without knowing the dogs, you could have inferred that they were good hunters, herders, and watchdogs — just by the fact that they were there to greet you. Backwoodsmen and yeoman farmers could ill afford to feed dogs that didn't earn their keep."

Bluetick hounds, Catahoula curs, blue laceys, bloodhounds, border collies, great Pyrenees, beagles, rat terriers, Chesapeake Bay retrievers — breeds like these are still the nine-to-fivers of the canine world. Some can find a cold trail; others can tackle a fugitive, tree a squirrel, safeguard a goat herd, or locate a few grams of contraband in a traveler's luggage. Considerations like the color of the dog, the shine of its coat and whether it's registered usually don't matter much to the owner of a working dog; what's important is what the dog can do.

Chappell and Meinzer follow Texan working dogs and their owners as they do what they do best — whether in a field, forest, lake, crime scene or airport terminal — and provide a vivid pictorial and textual chronicle of their journey. ★

— Kathryn Hunter



SIGHTS & SOUNDS

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Nov. 29 – Dec. 6:

Living in a state park; Bamberger ranch restoration; Lake Arrowhead State Park; lesser prairie-chicken habitat; Lake Brownwood.

Park; 4-H friends at Dove Creek Ranch; Arkansas whooping cranes; Dolan Creek.

Dec. 20 – 27:

Lessening impacts of new reservoirs; Blanco State Park; Fennessey Ranch nature tourism; state park adventure racing; Caprock Canyons.

Dec. 6 – 13:

Water flows are vital to Texas rivers; Buescher State Park; Boydston Ranch range management; what game wardens do; Balmorhea springs.

Dec. 27 – Jan. 3:

Preserving water for rivers and bays; Wylter Aerial Tramway; spring white bass run; live-stock and toads on the Round Bottom Ranch; coastal birds.

Dec. 13 – 20:

Conflicts between constructing a reservoir or a refuge; Lake Colorado City State



Conflicts are growing over the city of Dallas' plans to build a water supply reservoir in East Texas. Watch the week of December 13-20.

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RADIO

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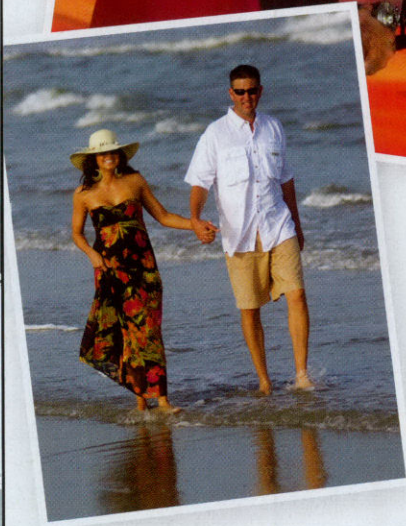
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Think Like a Fish

If you want to catch a fish, learn how to act like food.

If there is indeed a “secret” to consistently catching fish it has to be the ability to think like one.

Successful fishing, especially with artificial lures, boils down to convincing a creature with a pea-sized brain that whatever we are throwing at it looks and acts like the real thing. Fortunately, predator species share many common behaviors.

For the fish it's all about getting a meal. We don't eat everything that's put in front of us every time we see it. Neither do fish.

Also, game fish instinctively conserve energy. The easier the meal, the more attractive it is to an opportunistic predator.

By understanding these tendencies and others, we're far better equipped to con and catch the allegedly feeble-minded creatures we so avidly pursue.

Let 'Wounded' Lures Lie

If a topwater plug is hit but the game fish fails to take the lure, it's a big mistake to immediately reel it in. The fish, having burned substantial calories to “cripple” the lure, is almost invariably still watching it. Let the plug sit. Game fish will frequently return to make “kill strikes” on motionless lures. If it doesn't happen inside of 10 seconds, a faint twitch of the plug to mimic an injured prey will often trigger a vicious response. “Wounded” lures are strikes waiting to happen.

Mimic Forage Fish

When fishing plugs or any other mullet-imitating lures, saltwater anglers often employ nonstop retrieves. Likewise, some bass anglers cast crankbaits or spinnerbaits and never stop reeling after their lures hit the water. Doing so is poor technique at best.

Close observation of active bait fish reveals why. Mullet tend to swim short distances and then momentarily pause before moving on. Freshwater shad gather in pods as well, milling about with erratic stop-and-go surges as they migrate. It only makes sense to work lures accordingly.

Go With the Flow

Inexperienced anglers tend to crank lures in against the prevailing current. Bad idea.

Predators aren't alone in conserving

energy. Forage species are carried about by tides and currents. Accordingly, lures worked in tandem with the flow appear natural. With everything from sinking trout flies to quarter-ounce spoons to large suspending plugs, natural presentation is the key to convincing a fish that a slab of metal or cigar-shaped piece of plastic is actually a living creature.

The ideal retrieve pattern is sometimes no retrieve pattern. With fast-moving currents, the most potent presentation can be to simply let the lure tumble with the flow.

Focus on Color Changes

Where stained or murky water meets clear water there is a visibly defined line that almost always presents a promising strike zone. Game fish lurk immediately inside the cloaking fringe of off-colored water, where they patiently wait for forage species to swim past the edge of the clear-water layer.

Like cats hiding in the shadows, predator fish pounce upon passing bait fish, retreat into the off-colored area and then wait to repeat the process.

In this scenario, and most all others for that matter, keeping the lure inside the strike zone is critical. Cast parallel to the color change and retrieve the lure down the clear-water fringe.

Be Aware

As weather, wind and water conditions change, fish react in unison. Ultra-clear water is best fished with thin, clear line and transparent lures. If game fish are attacking smaller forage species, use smaller lures. Avoid making noise and minimize splash.

These are seemingly small things. And yes, so are fish brains. Still, despite our intelligence, thinking like a fish can frequently be a frustrating challenge. If it weren't, however, fishing wouldn't be nearly so much fun. ☆



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3 Days in the Field / By Mary O. Parker

DESTINATION: COTULLA

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Crazy for Cotulla

A short drive from The Chap's solitude, Cotulla has a distinct Mexican flavor.



The decorative entrance to The Chap indicates that your hosts here are a vast array of wildlife.

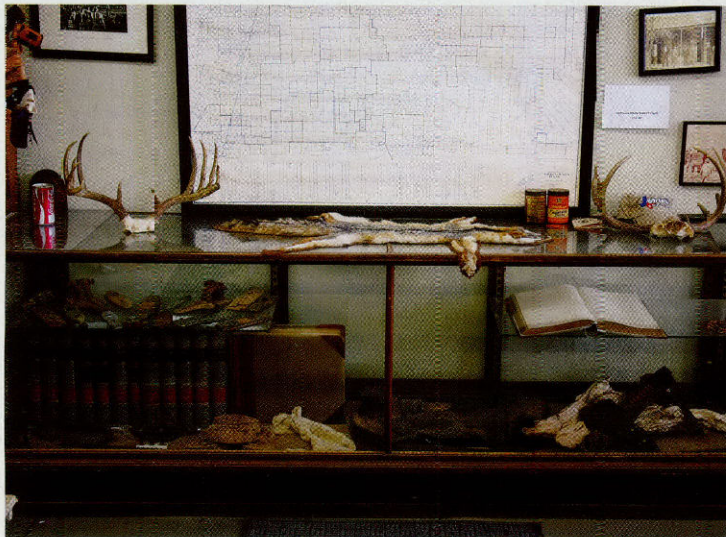
I've fallen in love with the South Texas Brush Country and find myself hungry for deeper exploration of the *brusada's* dusty rawness. Since a brief visit two years ago, I've wanted another nibble at this rustic part of old Texas.

What better way to begin than with a visit to Chaparral Wildlife Management Area? Affectionately known as "The Chap," this 15,200-acre WMA has plenty of room in which to roam. After a few short hikes, most notably one on the Arena Roja Trail, my husband Jeff and I reflect on the abundance of critters we see. Our favorites are the Merriam's pocket mice that play hide-and-

seek with us as we amble.

The Chap provides public hunting opportunities seven months of the year, but from April through August, it's open to the public for non-consumptive recreation. This evening it appears that we're the only ones taking advantage of this, which lends harmony to the glow of the stars and the yips and yaps of the coyotes. As the night settles over our campsite, I realize that the rawness I've come to explore has already lived up to my expectations.

The next day we drive 20 miles to Cotulla, back into civilization. We come first to the historic Front Street, the focus of a ren-



Clockwise from top left: A collection of deer antlers from The Chap; cowboy hats come with stories at the Texas Hat Museum; a display case of historic items at the front counter at T.R. Keck and Sons lumberyard.



aisance that's gaining momentum. Cotulla's rebirth is a work in progress and there's lots of hope here. This hope is embodied in Fatsy Leigh, the Main Street Program coordinator and one of the town's most ardent cheerleaders. She's also destination number one. Since Cotulla is so non-touristy, she's going to help us with our itinerary.

She suggests a visit to the Brush Country Museum, where we're welcomed by literally hundreds of American snout butterflies fluttering about the lantana. From the outside the museum looks like a simple 1920s white frame house, but we soon find out how much meaning there is to do inside. Volunteer Nora Mae Tyler enriches the experience with her vivid stories. When finally we end our tour in a one-room schoolhouse, she tells us that not only was this the impetus for the whole museum, it's also where she went to fourth grade.

Next we're off to Ben's Western Wear, one of Cotulla's most renowned institutions. When we walk in, we're hit with the amiable scent of leather, and I watch as my husband is swept away by boot-shopping-with-Gramps memories.

Ben's is home to the Texas Hat Museum. Owner Jill Martin explains how her husband, Stewart, started it years ago as a way to

pay tribute to the men who wore the hats that hang on the walls. She shows me a poem written by Don Cadden that explains the whole concept. It includes the lines:

"When city slickers come through the door
They can't believe their eyes
These greasy, dirty, beat up hats
Are displayed like a prize."

Well, I don't exactly consider myself a city slicker, but my eyes are amazed by one of the greasiest and dirtiest, the hat of a man called Carroll Adams. It looks as if it's been stomped on and peed on, and since Martin can't remember its story, I make up one of my own.

Meanwhile, I've lost Jeff to the book section. It's not big, but it's impressive, especially if you like Texana or anything at all to do with Texas. Jeff buys *El Lobo and Spanish Gold: A Texas Maverick in Mexico* by C.E. (Rick) Ricketts, but I'm so enamored with the hats that I don't discover his purchase until later that evening when we're back at the lodge.

Martin tells us about the beehive that keeps popping up in the crawlspace between the first and second floors. "When it gets to be 100 degrees, the honeycomb starts melting," she

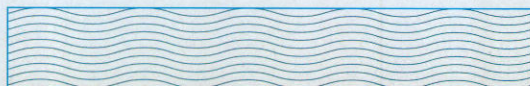
(continued on page 55)

An aerial photograph showing a wide river delta flowing into a sandy beach. The beach is marked with numerous tracks and lines, indicating a large-scale restoration or construction project. The water is a deep blue, and the sand is a light tan color. The text 'A River' is written in a light blue, serif font, and 'RETURN' is written in a larger, bold, light blue, serif font, both overlaid on the top portion of the image.

A River RETURN

Community effort restores

By
JANICE VAN DYKE WALDEN





JOURNALS *to the Sea* ≈

flow of San Bernard River.

photos by
JIM OLIVE

Roy and Jan Edwards knew it was a good place

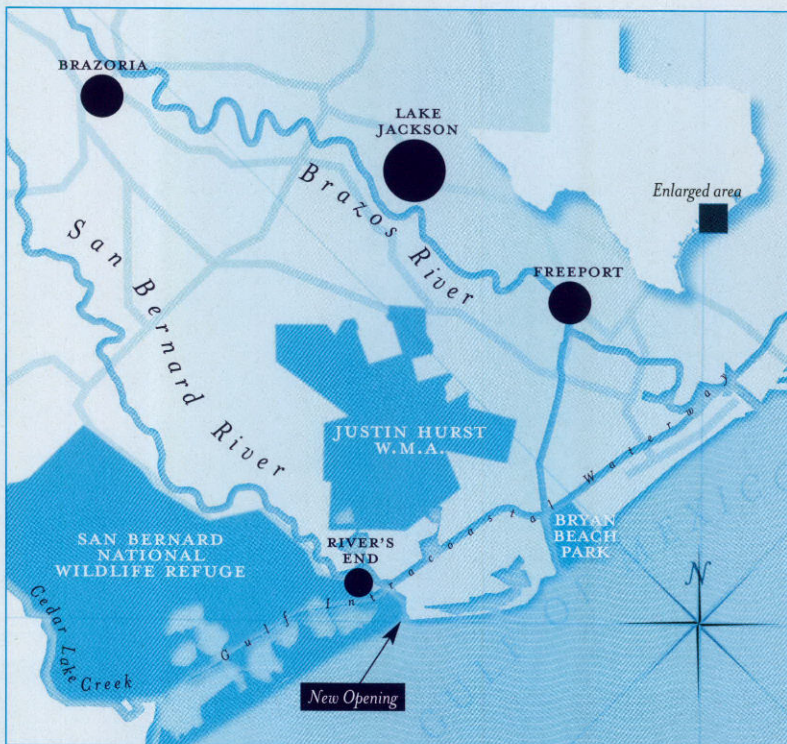
to be when they left the hustle and bustle of Houston five years ago to settle here. One hundred-eighty years ago, Stephen F. Austin, the father of Texas, knew it was a good place, too. He land-granted some of Texas' original 300 here, and was buried here at age 43, in a cemetery near his sister's Peach Point Plantation, not far from Roy and Jan's house.

In the winter, when the wind is just right, the river makes a haunting sound like a ghostly violin. This community, once booming in the 1970s with shrimpers, was dying, and its death knell in the winter wind would have echoed for eons were it not for a few determined souls who saved the river.

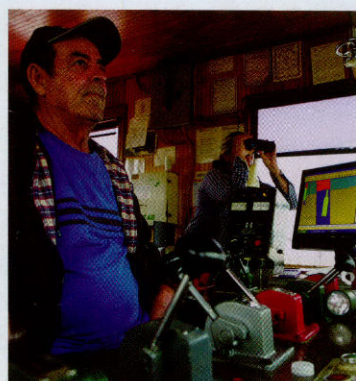
Between the mighty Brazos and Colorado Rivers runs the San Bernard River, a 120-mile riverine system that starts in Texas' Post Oak Savannah with a spring near New Ulm, runs through the heart of the Columbia Bottomland, and ends where Roy and Jan live, appropriately named River's End. This is where the San Bernard would empty into the Gulf of Mexico. But four years ago, the river finally really did end here.

The reasons for the

dying river were engineered by man. A Corps of Engineers' channelization project 80 years ago moved the mouth of the Brazos River 10 miles closer to the San Bernard, and thereby created a



Below, from left: Roy and Jan Edwards, who helped lead efforts to re-open the San Bernard River; Friends of the River – San Bernard meets once a month for breakfast; looking for wildlife from the control room of the dredge boat; a dredge pushes through to the gulf. Opposite: Dredge discharge creates a new beach and attracts avian activity.







Opposite: About to break through on February 22 (top); evening descends on San Bernard NWR's boat ramp and observation deck at Cedar Creek Lake. Below, from left: Marsh grasses in the evening at San Bernard NWR; immature white-faced ibis; baby alligators at the Moccasin Pond auto loop.

series of unintended hydrological consequences: When a delta formed at the Brazos River's new mouth, the sands swept down the coast across the mouth of the San Bernard. Without the power to spew the new sands into the gulf for its own delta, the San Bernard developed an extended mouth, resembling a chicken neck, along the coast.

Over the years, the neck became longer, shallower and narrower. By 2000, the mouth was un-navigable. Shrimpers couldn't reach River's End. The economy of this little community went bust. That's not all that was gone. On the weekends, the boat launch was empty. Recreational fishermen had found better fishing grounds. Bait camps and bars closed. Neighbors reported that flounder and croaker had reduced in size and number since the closing of the river, and residents had not seen a run of flounder to spawn in the gulf since the mouth had closed.

For those who wanted to retire to a sleepy community, they certainly had one. They also had a dying community. By the spring of 2005, the San Bernard River no longer reached the sea.

The closing of the river mouth ultimately meant that the marshes and estuaries associated with the river were threatened. And, if the ecosystem of the region were to be sustained, the pass would have to stay open.

"The open passes to the sea, as much as the freshwater inflows of rivers, create estuaries," says Dr. Larry McKinney, former director of Coastal Fisheries for TPWD, and now director of the Harte Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi. "The mixing of saltwater and freshwater creates the conditions, the salinity gradients, essential to the life cycles of red drum, flounder, croaker and the myriad of other fish and invertebrates found in what has been recognized widely as the most productive of all marine habitats."

Roy and Jan Edwards were familiar with rivers. For 25 years they had paddled many of Texas' rivers, creeks and bayous. During 15 of those years, Roy served as Commodore of the Houston Canoe Club. While Roy is comfortable with any position in or near the water, Jan's feelings about

water are a mixture of fear and love.

"In a past life, I must have drowned," she says. "Because I'm deathly afraid of water, but I'm always drawn to it."

That mutual love for a river led the Edwardses to retire to River's End in 2004, in a former shrimper's house on Music Bend where the wind whistles over the oyster beds during low tide in winter. Their dock is on the San Bernard, overlooking the coastal marshes where white pelicans and snow geese flock in January and February.

In their new life, Roy and Jan found residents who, like themselves, loved the river, were joined as a community because of the river, and had done some things to protect it. A group of residents upriver had successfully led the effort to prevent Conoco/Phillips from shipping fly ash by barge down the San Bernard.

Now downriver, the river's future was in peril. "We realized that the closing of the river was having major effects on this area's marine life, avian life, wetlands ecology, navigation and the local economy," says Roy. "We realized that all things were connected, and if the river went down, so would the surrounding life."

That's when the Edwardses pitched in and started leading efforts to re-open the San Bernard. Their successful petition during an April 2005 trash bash produced 1,700 signatures — enough votes to swing any election in Brazoria County. Not only did the petition drive get the attention of local officials, it led the community to form a grassroots organization, F.O.R. (Friends of the River – San Bernard), which worked in many ways to promote opening the river.

The community's seemingly circuitous efforts — visiting Washington, meeting with officials at all levels, writing letters and holding local meetings — culminated in a solution from the very people who had created the problem: the Corps of Engineers.

In September 2006 Assistant Secretary of the Army John Paul Woodley Jr. came to inspect the Brazos/Freeport region with just one hour to see the situation at the San Bernard River. After Roy walked him across the beach and showed him the closed mouth, Woodley went back to Washington



PIPING PLOVER



ONLY AROUND 6,000 PIPING PLOVERS (*Charadrius melodus*) exist in the world, with two of the three populations relying on the Texas coast for their winter habitat.

The Great Lakes piping plover (endangered) and Great Plains piping plover (threatened) have a north-south migration pattern, summering in Canada and the Great Lakes region, and wintering along open beaches in Texas, like those of San Bernard.

Each year the plovers return to the same section of a beach and work the shore side, feeding in intertidal areas on small invertebrates such as worms and insects. Then, depending on the tide, they'll work the island's bay side, generally within a 3-kilometer range of beach and bay.

Texas' open coastal areas are generous to this little shorebird's existence. More than 100 piping plovers have been counted in several locations along the Texas coast, the highest congregations on record. Look for piping plover in San Bernard NWR, Galveston Island State Park, Mustang Island State Park and Matagorda Island Wildlife Management Area.

The piping plover pictured here has been captured for research purposes and fitted with a unique color combination of leg bands.

PHOTO © JOEL SARTORE

resolved to re-open the San Bernard.

For the Corps, at risk were the Gulf Intra-coastal Waterway (GIWW) gates they managed at the Brazos River. Now that the San Bernard's mouth was closed, the river's currents had no place to go but up the GIWW channel, putting pressure on the Brazos River's west gate. To alleviate the pressure from high currents and continuous flow, the gates remained open most of the time. Even so, high currents caused barge decks to submerge at the gates and caused barges to run into the sides of the gate passage, producing the highest allision rate in the nation — 165 a year.

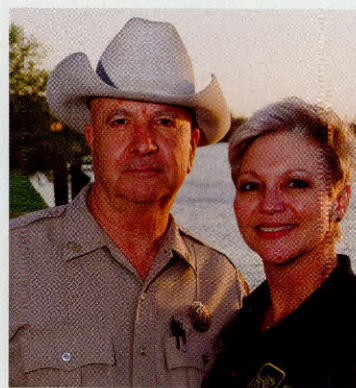
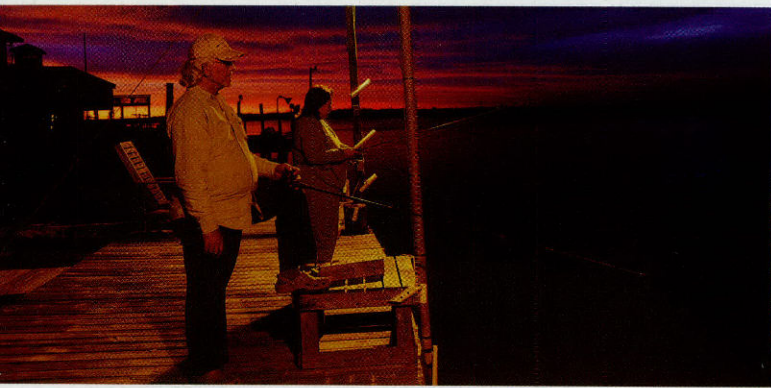
As if the threat of barge damage wasn't enough, the problem was costing coastal commerce money. With barge lines having to be separated into individual units and assisted through the gates with double tugs, passage through the gates was often delayed.

The tonnage value of keeping GIWW open was estimated at \$44 billion a year. For the Corps to fix the problem and open the river would cost a fraction of that, \$2.5 million. The navigational hazard had gone on for seven years. So, it was no surprise when Woodley wrote a letter to the Galveston District recommending the project.

Sixteen months after Woodley's visit, the 1.6-mile dredging effort began, in January 2009. During the seven weeks of dredging, REMSA-MESO Ecologist Kathleen McConnell, contracted by the Corps, walked the beach, dredge line and spoil area daily, counting birds, looking for tracks, and keeping watch for any disturbances. In her daily walks, McConnell was specifically on alert to spot any sign of sea turtles and piping plover habitat. Piping plover, found only in North America, are attracted to open, remote beaches, like those at San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge. But plover had only been sighted in the western quadrant of the refuge, far from the river. That would change.

On February 22, 2009, the dredge broke through to the gulf, and the San Bernard River once more flowed to the gulf. At that moment, the dredge horn blew, and people cried. Area





Opposite: Celebration of the re-opening. Top, from left: Roy and Jan Edwards fish from their pier at River's End; Constable Fred Kanter and wife Nancy were among the first residents to join in the effort; ecologist Kathleen McConnell on the lookout for piping plover. Bottom: Congressman Ron Paul celebrates with the group, who enjoyed hot dogs and champagne.

resident and one of F.O.R.'s founders, Gloria Powell, turned her welcome sign for the Corps at the entrance of the dredge line to read, "Thank you!" Years of symbolic shovel digging at this beach seemed not at all in vain. Gloria's husband, Darrell, witnessed the breakthrough, too, and was able to say, "This is three years of work, and we finally see the river going into the gulf like it should be."

Within days of the breakthrough, the Edwards' next door neighbor, Mark Hazelrigg, started seeing changes in front of his house and at the beach: the narrow channels to Pelican Lake and the first Cedar Lake — about 40 to 60 feet wide — were changing with increased tidal flow. Hazelrigg noticed silt and dead shells shifting, and the tides were now on time and much stronger than they had been for the previous two years.

The Corps of Engineers reported changes, too. Its four monitoring stations positioned at each corner of the San Bernard River/GIWW intersection recorded a large increase in current and tidal flow around March 2 and an increased flow in the river — both the north and south direction and in the section of the GIWW west of the river. But, interestingly, there was no increased flow in the GIWW's eastern section, where the problem at the gates had occurred.

By March 14, the dredging project was complete, and friends of the river celebrated the river's opening with hot dogs and champagne on a bright and beautiful spring morning, March

21. With all the boats lining the mouth of the river, families strolling the beach and Texas and American flags waving, you would have thought it was not the first day of spring, but Independence Day. Actually, it was both. With this first day of spring came the promise of new life. Indeed, new life had come to the river. And, like the Fourth of July, there was cause to celebrate the river's freedom.

In the last days of her assignment, Kathleen McConnell saw new life on the beach, too. Dunes destroyed by Hurricane Ike had started to rebuild. Sea oats were taking root and sprouting. Seagulls became too numerous to count. And, McConnell spotted the first piping plovers. They appeared along the shoreline in a new zone, the refuge's eastern quadrant, not on one day, but each day during her last week. One of the five plovers was banded; another had only one leg.

On the day of celebration, Brazoria County Commissioner "Dude" Payne stood beside Roy and Jan and surprised them with a proclamation: the mouth of the San Bernard River would be called "Edwards Cut." Though they had started the process, it was a community of people that made it happen. Humbled by the moment, Roy knew this only too well. In response to the proclamation, Roy looked out to the crowd, raised his hand toward the mouth, and affirmed, "WE opened this river. Working together, we, Friends of the River, opened this river!"

And so it was that the river returned to the sea. ★

DETAILS

- Brazoria Chamber of Commerce; brazoriachamber.net/history.html
- Friends of the River — San Bernard; www.sanbernardriver.com
- Houston Audubon Society; www.houstonaudubon.org/
- San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge; www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=21541
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; www.fws.gov/northeast/pipingplover/pdf/plover.pdf



THE 2009 TEXAS PARKS & WILDLIFE HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

VISIONS OF HUNTING GEAR

Story & Photos by Russell A. Graves



CANON EOS 5D MARK II DIGITAL SLR CAMERA

IN A WORD, this camera is amazing. Not only is it a top-shelf digital SLR camera that shoots 21-megapixel images at nearly four frames per second, it also shoots high-definition, 1080-pixel video with surprising clarity and vibrancy. With a big 3-inch LCD screen on the back and live-view video recording, this camera works well for capturing all your outdoor memories with a single piece of equipment.

www.usa.canon.com

1-800-OK-CANON

\$2,699

IT'S NO SECRET that the past year has been tough on the wallet. With that in mind, we present the 2009 Texas Parks & Wildlife outdoor gear gift guide. In this year's guide, you'll find lots of affordable items for your favorite outdoor enthusiast. Whether you have a hunter, angler, birdwatcher, hiker, camper or nature photographer on your gift list, you'll find a gift that's a perfect fit.

You'll also find a couple of high-end items for outdoor enthusiasts who have everything — or so they think. Hard times can't stop us from dreaming big, right?

Despite the economy, outdoor equipment manufacturers continue to release innovative products. So consider this gear guide an "outdoors" economic stimulus package. The formula is simple: Buy a gift for someone significant, help boost the economy, then get outside and enjoy.



**REDHEAD ENDURASUEDE
OUTDOOR WEAR**

WHETHER YOUR ACTIVITY is hunting, hiking, photography or fishing, you'll need good clothing that holds up in all weather conditions. The RedHead Endurasuede pants and jacket are made from a lightweight performance fabric that can be worn easily over insulating layers. The pants and shirt have articulated joints for a full range of motion. Velcro closures on the jacket cuffs and pant legs help keep out the elements, and the fabric is windproof, water resistant and antimicrobial.

www.basspro.com
1-800-227-7776

\$160 (includes pants and jacket)

**HANK PARKER SIGNATURE
SERIES TACKLE BAG**

I'M A LIFELONG angler, and fishing equipment has come a long way since my days of carrying lures in an old metal toolbox. The Hank Parker Signature Series Tackle Bag from Plano Tackle Systems is a practical accessory for any angler. It comes in two sizes and has pockets to protect your gear. Plastic utility boxes allow you to mix and match your tackle with adjustable dividers, and it also includes integrated tool holsters, a towel ring and mesh pockets.

www.planomolding.com
1-800-226-9868

Two sizes, \$80 and \$100

**BUSHNELL
BACKTRACK**

THE BACKTRACK is a personal GPS system designed for locating your car at the mall or airport, finding your way home or hiking back to camp. Available in several colors, the ultra-portable BackTrack features three-location storage, a self-calibrating compass, weather resistance and a highly sensitive GPS receiver. It's easy to use: Push a button to mark your original location, then push it again when you're ready for BackTrack to show you how to return.

www.bushnell.com
1-866-255-8406

\$77

WEATHER FXI

FOR AN OUTDOOR enthusiast, weather is always important. With the Weather FXi personal weather station, you've got knowledge at your fingertips. This machine doesn't need external sensors to collect data. Using a transmitter connected to your personal computer, the Weather FXi can access real-time Internet weather updates and seven-day forecasts. The Weather FXi works in a 200-foot radius from your computer, and its backlight changes color with the outdoor temperature.

www.bushnell.com
1-866-255-8406

\$99



HUNTER SAFETY SYSTEM TREE STAND LIFE LINE

HUNTING FROM TREE STANDS is a popular method for bowhunters, but can be dangerous. Few hunters use fall arrest systems while climbing in and out of the trees. The Life Line uses a sliding prussic knot wrapped around a rope that extends from the bottom of the tree to your tree stand. Because the knot cinches when pulled and slides easily when loose, you'll be protected from a fall from the moment your feet leave the ground.

www.huntersafetysystem.com 1-256-773-7732
\$40

BOGS BUGS BOOTS

WATERPROOF AND WARM, these children's boots are perfect for wet, cool hikes in the Texas outdoors. Rated comfortable from 60 degrees down to 30 degrees below zero, these boots will keep little feet comfortable most of the year. An antimicrobial insole helps reduce foot odor, and the wide openings at the boots' tops make them easy to slip on for even the littlest wearer. The whimsical bug-pattern camo makes these boots both fun and practical.

www.bogsfootwear.com
1-800-201-2070
\$67.95

MUD ARMOUR

WATERFOWL HUNTING is muddy business. The mud often gets stuck in your firearms, rendering them useless until cleaned. To keep your next duck hunt on track, try Mud Armour by Texas-based Mud Brothers. Consisting of a chamber vest and barrel boot, this two-part neoprene system keeps out dirt and grime so that your firearm remains fully functional. Available in black and camouflage.

www.mudarmour.com
\$15 (includes both items)

MONEY FROG

LOOKING FOR A GREAT stocking stuffer for your favorite bass angler? Check out this brand new bait from YUM. The 3.75-inch Money Frog has paddle feet that displace water and produce vibration that quickly draws the attention of hungry bass. The Money Frog comes in six colors and is a versatile bait that you can fish like a buzzbait, jig trailer or countless other ways.

www.lurenet.com
1-479-782-8971
\$7 (package of four)



JETBOIL PERSONAL COOKING SYSTEM

TEXAS HAS MORE THAN 2 million public acres to explore, and there's no doubt that you'll get hungry out on the trail. When it's time to refuel your body after a tough day in the field, you want food that's hot and quick to prepare. The Jetboil system is made for portability and speed. Weighing less than a pound, the Jetboil brings a cup of water to boil in one minute. The replaceable 100-gram fuel canister burns for an hour and can heat three gallons of liquid. The canister is also available in a 230-gram size.

www.jetboil.com

1-888-611-9905

\$99



TENPOINT DEFENDER CLS CROSSBOW

WITH TEXAS' NEW CROSSBOW hunting regulations, the Defender crossbow by CLS makes perfect sense for the hunter who has everything. Equipped with a three-power scope, quiver and six arrows, the Defender crossbow is ready for the field. It shoots a blistering 330 feet per second with a 175-pound draw weight. In addition, this package comes with the ACUdraw 50 — a mechanism that helps you safely and swiftly cock the crossbow.

www.tenpointcrossbows.com

1-330-628-9245

\$1,019



**AMERICAN HUNTER
SUNSLINGER FEEDER KIT**

IF YOU FEED DEER or backyard birds, or try to lure animals to your property for photography, you know how frustrating it is to check on your feeder and find that the motor battery is dead. Eliminate that hassle with this all-in-one feeder motor with a built-in solar charger. This unit has a versatile timer that lets you feed up to 16 times a day. The best part is, the battery won't fail you.

www.americanhunterfeeders.com
1-877-269-8490
\$80

**COLEMAN SPORTCAT
PERFECTEMP CATALYTIC HEATER**

WHETHER TAILGATING at a Friday night football game, camping, fishing or waiting on a huge buck in an open blind, we all get cold from time to time, even in Texas. That's why this ultra-portable Coleman heater makes a great gift. Using a catalytic heating process, flameless and consistent heat is emitted, creating an efficient, dependable heat source that lasts 14 hours on a single 16-ounce propane cylinder.

www.coleman.com
1-800-835-3278
\$49

HOYT TRYKON JR. BOW

THE TEXAS ARCHERY in Schools program is a fast-growing activity in our educational system. Get your young archer started off on a good foot with this bow made especially for kids. Thirty inches long, 2.7 pounds and available in draw weights from 10 to 40 pounds, this bow is sure to last until your young archer graduates to adult-sized bows.

www.hoyt.com
801-363-2990
\$500 with accessories (variable)

MOULTRIE GAME CAMERA TRIPOD

GAME CAMERAS are great, but let's face it — they're made for straight trees. Out west where I live, straight mesquite trees are hard to come by and are nonexistent in food plots and wheat fields. That's why I like this tripod. Constructed from durable aluminum and made especially for game cameras, the Moultrie Tripod is very useful when you can't hang a game camera from a tree.

www.moultriefeeders.com
1-800-653-3334
\$70



FOXPRO FURY DIGITAL GAME CALL

GAME CALLS are not only important tools for hunters, they should be a part of every nature photographer's gear bag as well. Used for luring myriad animals in close, including predators and birds, the Fury incorporates 24-bit digital sound quality, four gigabytes of internal storage (to hold scores of wildlife-attracting sounds), wireless upload capability, remote-control operation and dual speakers.

www.gofoxpro.com
1-866-463-6977
\$600

JIMMY HOUSTON ANGLERS A POLARIZED SUNGLASSES

WHEN JIMMY HOUSTON, arguably one of the biggest names in angling, puts his name on a product, you know it must be good. With these polarized lenses, water glare disappears and sight fishing becomes easy. They also provide 100 percent UV protection and are scratch resistant, while still providing an undistorted view. Additionally, these lenses are mounted on stylish wrap-around frames with sport grip tips on the temples for a secure fit.

www.basspro.com
1-800-227-7776
\$20

DEAD DOWN WIND SCENTPREVENT KIT

HUNTING PRODUCTS frequently have crossover potential for nature photographers. Scent management products are no different. Whether you hunt or photograph wild animals, chances are that they'll smell you long before they see you. The ScentPrevent Kit includes body and hair soap, antiperspirant, mouth spray, field spray and body foam designed to minimize your odor signature.

www.deaddownwind.com
1-816-421-4397
\$45

THERMACELL MOSQUITO REPELLANT PATIO LANTERN

I LOVE SITTING OUTSIDE on a glorious Texas evening entertaining friends and watching my kids play. I don't, however, enjoy mosquitoes. With the dual-use Thermacell Patio Lantern, you can repel mosquitoes from a 15-by-15-foot area while providing soft light for perfect evening ambiance. Since the Thermacell is silent, portable and cordless, you can use it in a variety of outdoor settings.

www.thermacell.com
1-866-753-3837
\$32



SHADOW CREEK RANCH

JUST WIN THE LOTTERY and want to give your outdoor enthusiast the gift that says, "I love you a million," or maybe several million? Located in the rough break country of the southeastern Texas Panhandle, this ranch has everything for the hunter, wildlife enthusiast or nature photographer. Scenic vistas provide habitat for white-tailed and mule deer, scaled and bobwhite quail, Rio Grande turkeys, wild pigs and many migratory birds. The property also includes a number of fishing ponds and nine miles of Pease River frontage.

www.nofencesland.com

1-866-800-LAND

\$11.5 million



T R O P H Y

B U C K S

for

S A L E

Black market deer trade poses health
threat for whitetail population.

By Ben Rehder

PHOTO © GRADY ALLEN

IT'S A HUMID SUMMER EVENING IN CENTRAL TEXAS, and a man we'll call Cal is about to make an illegal purchase. As a result, his anxiety level is high. His palms are damp, his heart is racing and his mouth is dry.

The item in this particular transaction isn't a bale of marijuana or a stolen laptop, or even a crate of bootleg CDs. It's an 11-point white-tailed buck with highly desirable drop-tine antlers off each main beam. Eyeballing the deer, which has just been darted with a tranquilizer gun, Cal agrees that this buck will earn a Boone & Crockett score of at least 150, as promised. A trophy by most standards, and a bargain for \$2,000.

Cal pays the price — in cash, of course — and just like that, the deer is his. No permits, no inspections, no hassles from state game wardens or biologists. As he hauls the animal away in the back of a livestock trailer, Cal can't help but smile. The buck is no longer just a deer; now it is evidence, because Cal is a sergeant with the Special Operations Unit (SOU) of the TPWD's law enforcement division. His investigation is just beginning.

Cal remains undercover, working with a confidential informant, communicating with his circle of new acquaintances, and it isn't long before a "deer broker" tells Cal he can get \$5,000 for the 11-pointer. The broker has a customer, a landowner, who figures a hunter will pay at least \$6,500 for the opportunity to bag this deer. In a marketplace where premium trophy bucks sometimes sell for tens of thousands of dollars, the landowner is no doubt correct.

Cal takes the deal. The broker charges \$1,000 for his services, and Cal ends up with a net profit of \$2,000. Not bad for five days' work. And money, as you might expect, is what drives the black-market deer industry.

"People have always been interested in deer," says Cal. "They're a natural resource and they're worth money. So some people are taking things into their own hands and moving them around illegally, putting them in pens or taking them to high-fenced places where they can be used as shooter bucks. There's a demand for big bucks and for people who have the money to pay for them."

A "shooter buck" is exactly what it sounds like — a deer that is purchased solely to be hunted. For instance, a landowner with hunters coming soon might contact a broker and request a trailer full of trophy bucks. In many cases, the hunters might not even know that the deer were brought in just for them. This sort of arrangement is known as "put and take," where a deer could be hauled in one week and shot the next. Shooter bucks constitute a large portion of the black market, but deer — even does and fawns — are also bought and sold illegally for breeding purposes.

Ironically, much of what the black marketers do — pos-

sessing deer, raising them in pens, buying and selling them for hunting and breeding — can be done legally with the proper permits from the state. At present, there are more than a thousand licensed deer breeders in Texas, with approximately 86,000 deer enclosed in their facilities. (It's worth noting that, technically speaking, these deer remain the property of the people of the state of Texas.) Each of these animals is issued a "unique number," which is tattooed into its ear, and wears a tag that identifies the breeding facility.



But there are some things that nobody, not even a licensed breeder, can do legally. Buying, selling or capturing wild deer, for instance, is strictly prohibited. However, in a state with 4 million deer, the temptation can prove too great. The 11-pointer that Cal bought was a wild deer; the man who sold it wanted to cull the native deer off his high-fenced property and replace them with deer he considered genetically superior.

WHILE THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF LICENSED BREEDERS ABIDE BY STATE LAWS AND REGULATIONS, INFRACTIONS DO HAPPEN.



While the overwhelming majority of licensed breeders abide by state laws and regulations, infractions do happen.

“If they have extra unique numbers, they can put those numbers on wild deer and launder them into their system,” says Cal. “For example, if a deer dies and they don’t report it, they can put that unique number on another deer. They’ll also do ghost shipments. They’ll say they’re transferring five deer to another landowner, and they’ll do all the paperwork, but there’s no actual shipment.”

The landowner who receives the fictitious shipment can then put those unique numbers on deer captured from the wild.

Warren Bluntzer, a former Texas game warden and now a respected wildlife consultant, stresses that breeders have good reasons to follow regulations and protect the integrity of their industry. Regarding black marketers, he says: “When one of those guys decides he’s going to break the law, he threatens a system that took years to put in place. He threatens all the work we’ve done and all the safeguards we have in place for the protection of that resource. Those culprits are not appreciated, and we want to see them prosecuted to the full extent of the law.”

What particularly concerns biologists, law-abiding breeders and just about anyone with an interest in Texas whitetails are deer brought in from out of state. Currently, the Texas border is closed to incoming white-tailed deer, whether wild or from a breeding facility, with no exceptions. The threat of disease transmission is just too great. (See page 42.) But, again, that restriction doesn’t stop black marketers.

“Big bucks from out of state are selling for cheaper

and they’re abundant,” Cal explains. “If a landowner has hunters coming and he needs 10 trophy bucks, it’s a whole lot cheaper to smuggle them out of Ohio, Iowa or Oklahoma.” Cal says that the man who sold him the 11-pointer committed multiple infractions over the course of the investigation, including hauling a trailer full of illegal deer into Texas.

One of the biggest challenges the SOU faces is the difficulty in catching violators in the act. That’s why members of the unit use a variety of methods and tactics, including

WHEN ONE OF THOSE GUYS DECIDES HE’S GOING TO BREAK THE LAW, HE THREATENS A SYSTEM THAT TOOK YEARS TO PUT IN PLACE.

covert operations, to conduct their investigations. Cal, for instance, has a fully formed alias, including a driver’s license, Social Security number, bank account and cell phone account, with two vehicles — a truck and a livestock trailer — registered under that name.

The SOU also uses the latest technology to gather evidence and build rock-solid cases. Say a suspect drives to Wisconsin to bring a shipment of deer back to Texas. It’s possible he’ll be carrying a small tracking device — approved by court order — affixed discretely to his vehicle’s undercarriage. As a result, investigators will know the suspect’s every stopping point,

PHOTOS © RUSSELL A. GRAVES



CURRENTLY, THE TEXAS BORDER IS CLOSED TO INCOMING WHITE-TAILED DEER, WHETHER WILD OR FROM A BREEDING FACILITY, WITH NO EXCEPTIONS.

how long he remained at each location and what time he got back on the road. The tracker also helps ensure an investigator's safety.

"When I was hauling, I'd keep it with me, and my captain could watch and see my location," says Cal. "If something happened or went wrong, they'd know right where I was."

Even the deer are occasionally modified with technology. That drop-tine 11-pointer Cal bought? Before he sold it, a microchip was implanted in the deer's neck for positive identification at a later date, if necessary. This is easier than DNA profiling or other forensic testing, which is also available.

Once the evidence mounts and arrests are made, do the violators usually realize the error of their ways and 'fess up?

Cal says no. "The offenders I've dealt with seem to be very arrogant and feel like they can justify their actions. When you go in their house and meet their family and they think you're their friend, then it turns out to be completely false, they're angry about it. You deceived them, tricked them."

But Cal is a firm believer in the mission of the SOU and in the need for undercover operations. "You just have to keep focused that you're doing a job, and the reason you have to do this to them is because of what they're doing — taking a natural resource and exploiting it for themselves, and manipulating it all for money. You have to do your job like this to catch them." ★



THE BIOLOGICAL THREAT

THE TEXAS BORDER IS CLOSED to incoming white-tailed deer, and Kevin Schwausch supports the restriction. Schwausch is the Big Game Program Specialist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and he wants the public to understand the risk that even a single imported deer can pose to the native resources in our state. As it stands now, Texas is free of the two most problematic deer diseases — tuberculosis and chronic wasting disease — and it would benefit us all to keep it that way.

"Once you get these diseases in there, it's extremely difficult, and sometimes impossible, to get them out," Schwausch says. "A lot of money gets spent to try and get rid of them. Wisconsin, for example, has spent millions of dollars trying to eradicate chronic wasting disease and they haven't even come close. Even with diseases that occur in Texas, there are different serotypes, which are basically different strains. When you expose a herd to a new strain, it can cause increased sickness and mortality."

Non-hunters may think this threat doesn't concern them, but they'd be wrong. As Schwausch is quick to point out, hunting in Texas is a \$2.2 billion industry, and any negative impact on hunting can spread across the statewide economy. For example, states that discover chronic wasting disease in the deer population typically see an initial drop in the sales of hunting licenses. This can create a ripple effect. Motels, restaurants and sporting goods stores experience a slowdown. Landowners have a more difficult time attracting hunters.

Another concern is that some of these diseases can transmit to other species. Tuberculosis, for instance, can make its way from deer into cattle.

"Animal health agencies are constantly battling to keep that out," Schwausch says. "In the cattle industry, they worry about diseases that cause production loss. Any disease that would cause those cattle not necessarily to die, but to cause production to go down to a point where it's hard for them to actually produce more cattle, that affects them pretty severely as well."

In 2008, a Grimes County deer breeder was convicted of smuggling 14 white-tailed bucks into the state from Minnesota, where tuberculosis has been a problem in the deer and cattle populations. He received a sentence of 18 months in a federal prison, 36 months probation and a fine of \$50,000. Some people might think the penalty was harsh, but considering the repercussions that might have resulted from the man's actions, others might argue that he got off easy. ★

Keep Texas Wild

ONE STATE, MANY PLACES

Forests, deserts, rivers, mountains - Texas has it all!



» OH, GIVE ME A HOME...

WHEN YOU'RE STARING OUT THE CAR window and the scenery starts to change, you're probably entering a new region of Texas. Perhaps you can see the flat land buckle into rolling hills and the tall trees become grassland. Texas has deserts, forests, prairies, plains, mountains, swamps and sandy beaches. Each type of environment supports different kinds of plants and animals. Have you ever wondered where a prairie dog or a black bear calls home? Turn the page and find out!

PHOTOS © CHASE FOUNTAIN/TPWD



PANHANDLE-PLAINS REGION

NOTICE HOW this area of Texas looks like the handle of a pan? That's why it's called the Panhandle! The Panhandle Plains region is covered with ranches and prairie grasses. It is mostly flat with two deep canyons that are like upside-down mountains. Prairie dogs live here in groups of tunnels called "prairie dog towns." They aren't really dogs, but they do make a barking noise when they talk to one another.

HILL COUNTRY REGION

HILLS, STREAMS, SPRINGS and caves are common in this region. There is a lot of wildlife, including white-tailed deer, ring-tailed cats and salamanders. Bracken Cave has the largest bat colony in the world. At certain times of the year, more than 20 million Mexican free-tailed bats live here and eat about 250 tons of insects every night. The Hill Country sits on top of the Edwards Plateau. Underneath it lies the Edward Aquifer, which contains underground lakes that supply most of this region's water.

BIG BEND REGION

THE BIG BEND REGION, the only region of Texas where real mountains are found, gets the least rain of any other place in the state. It's part of the Chihuahuan Desert. Since water is so scarce here, most plants are able to go a long time without it, storing it in their leaves, stems or roots. Many

plants have thorns or spines that keep them safe from thirsty animals. Mule deer, mountain lions and black bears live here. Did you know that black bears are mostly vegetarian? They like to eat fresh leaves, roots and berries, and only occasionally eat insects or small mammals.

PINEYWOODS REGION

IT RAINS in the Pineywoods region more than any other place in Texas. Here you'll find lots of pine trees and swamps. In the Big Thicket there are four kinds of carnivorous (meat-eating) plants that trap and eat bugs: the pitcher plant, bladderwort, but-

terwort and sundew. Though rarely seen, one of Texas' most playful animals lives here — the North American river otter. River otters often make their own water parks, sliding down steep clay banks face-first into the water. Splash!

PRAIRIES & LAKES REGION

THE PRAIRIES AND LAKES region is dotted with lakes, farms and cities, but long ago it was prairies. Giant dinosaurs roamed here. Now nine-banded armadillos, porcupines and wood ducks are common species. Wood ducks, almost extinct 100 years ago, build their nests in a hole high in a tree. Babies are born with their eyes open and can find food on their own right away — they've been known to jump nearly 300 feet from their nests to the ground and land safely!

SOUTH TEXAS REGION

ALTHOUGH MOST of the South Texas region is very dry, the lower Rio Grande Valley is a subtropical environment. You can see migrating tropical birds from South America and even palm trees. This region has more animals per acre than anywhere else in the United States. The ocelot, a very rare and endangered animal, lives in the South Texas region. This nocturnal, spotted cat is only a little larger than a housecat. In 2005, there were about 50 to 100 ocelots left in Texas. The chacalaca bird, named for the noisy sound a flock makes, also calls this region home.

GULF COAST REGION

THE GULF COAST region is the place to find sandy beaches, coastal plains and grasslands. It rains often here, and sources of water — the Gulf of Mexico, bays, marshes, estuaries and bayous — make this a perfect home for many birds and fish, as well as turtles, alligators and snakes. Did you know that alligators don't require as much food as we do? A large alligator may only eat once or twice a week in the summer months!



Spike's Activity Page



>> WILD MATH

PART OF WHAT MAKES THE SEVEN REGIONS different from each other is the amount of precipitation they receive. Precipitation is moisture that comes from the sky, like rain, hail, sleet and snow.

- 1) Which region gets the most precipitation?
- 2) Which region gets the least precipitation?
- 3) About how much more precipitation does the Pineywoods region get than the Panhandle-Plains region?
- 4) About how much less precipitation does the Big Bend region get than the Gulf Coast region?

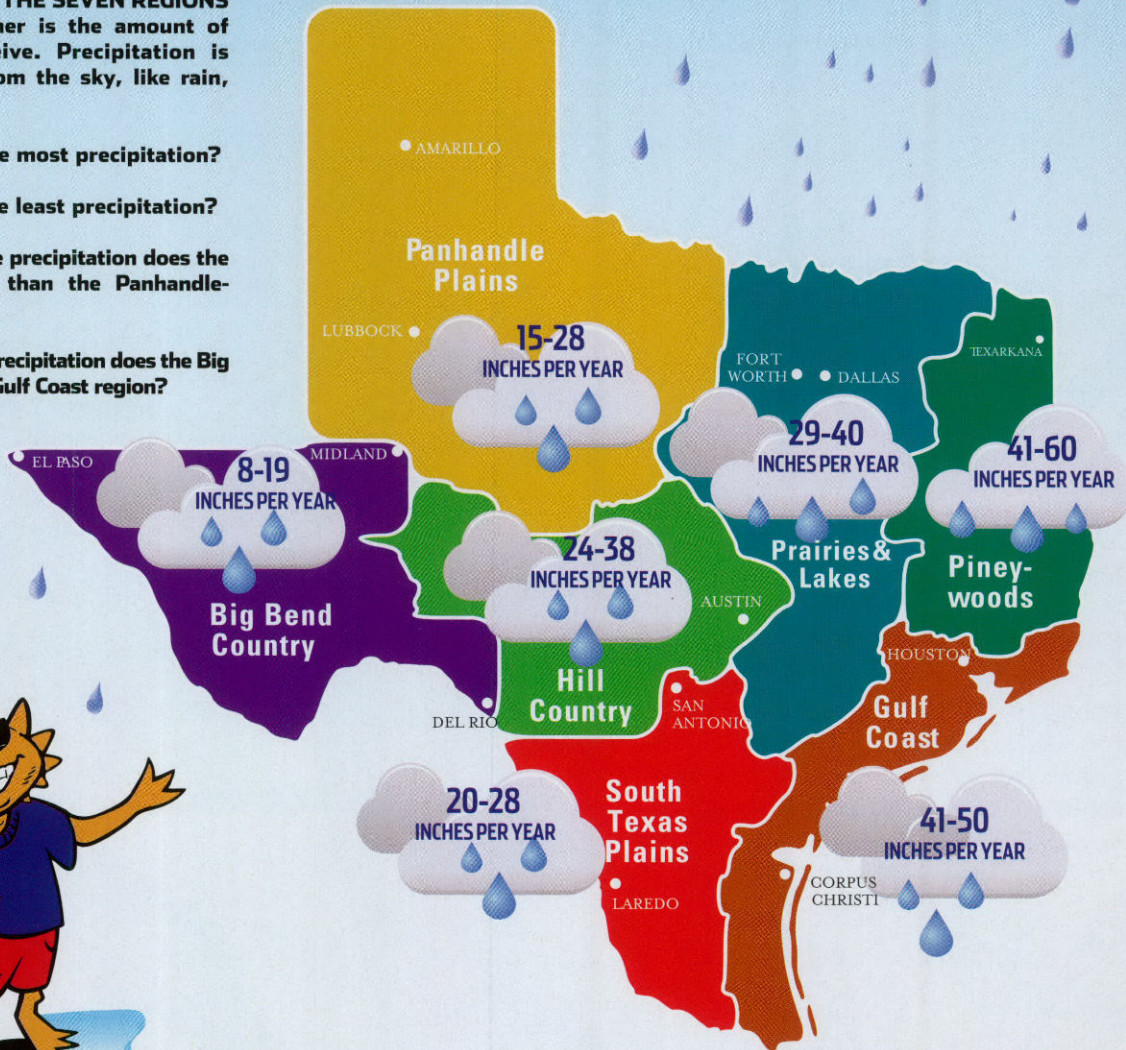
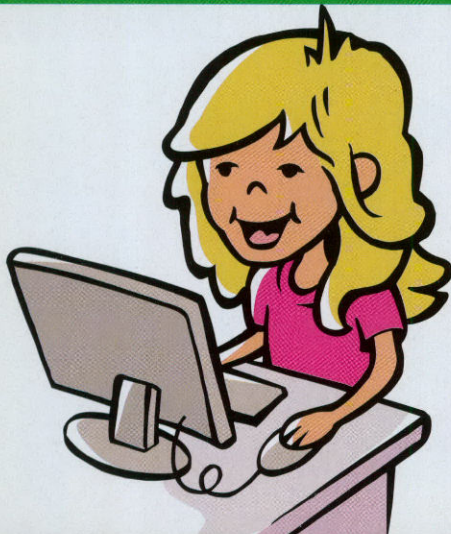


ILLUSTRATION BY AUGIE HAUND/TPW

>> KEEPING IT WILD



DETERMINE what region you live in and what is special about it. How much precipitation do you get? What sorts of plants and animals live there? Are there any rare or endangered species in your region? Are there any state parks, landforms or special natural areas near where you live?

NEXT MONTH: Alien Invaders!



TEACHER RESOURCE

Visit www.tpwmagazine.com to download a printable PDF, access lesson plans, find additional resources or order copies.



2009 EMPLOYEE Recognition and Awards

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is fortunate to have dedicated employees who give 100 percent of themselves every day. Please join us in recognizing our outstanding employees of 2009, who exceeded our expectations in providing outstanding service to the state of Texas. We are very proud of them, and you should be, too.



Community Outreach
Vicki Sybert



Conservation
Jackie Poole



Customer Service
Brad Hood



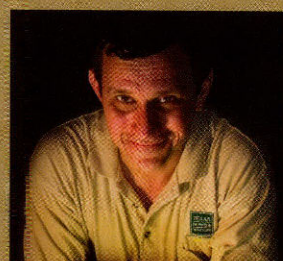
Innovation
Chris Cummings



Leadership
Ed Hegen



Natural Quality Service
Jeremy Leitz



Partnership
Robert Vega



Special Achievements
Ervin Hartl

Outstanding Teams



Urban Wildlife Program



CCC Web Site: Designing Texas State Parks



Nutty Professor

The eccentric Henry Hildebrand inspired many budding scientists.

BY JOHN GOODSPEED

Never one to bother with fashion, Dr. Henry Hildebrand would wander the halls of the University of Corpus Christi (now Texas A&M University—Corpus Christi) in the same checkered shirt and striped pants, partially unzipped, that he'd worn three decades before. His belt often was twisted and not fully buckled. His socks didn't match. His hair was mussed. His glasses were dirty. Sometimes he wasn't sure what day it was.

Based on appearance alone, it would have been hard to believe that Hildebrand was the pioneering biologist who founded the university's marine science program in 1957 and discovered the nesting grounds of Kemp's ridley sea turtles, helping to save them from extinction. More frequently found in the company of beer-drinking, hell-raising commercial fisherman and shrimpers — gaining insight into the fisheries, of course — than in an intellectual tête-à-tête with his fellow academics, Hildebrand was a long step outside of the mold.

In the 1960s, Hildebrand was among the first to teach students that while books are important, the best learning experience is to work hands-on in nature. His students pulled nets and learned

to identify fish, sample water, and process the collected data. He also taught students that to learn about a species, one must study its entire ecosystem, including human impact. To protect the species, one must influence public policy, he believed.

"He had a reputation of showing up anywhere that had something to do with the marine environment, and it was like, 'Uh, oh — here's Dr. Hildebrand,'" says Dr. Wes Tunnell, founder of the university's Center for Coastal Studies and associate director of the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies. Tunnell replaced Hildebrand when he left the university in 1973.

"He knew how to ask the pointed questions, whether it was at a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department hearing or a Corpus Christi City Council meeting," Tunnell says. "He usually took students with him. He told them that an important part of being a scientist was being engaged. He really made an impact in that way."

Tunnell recalls that Hildebrand, who died in 2003 five days shy of his 81st birthday, always appeared calm, almost meek, and his ramshackle appearance lulled people into believing he was a pushover — that is, until a discussion turned to one of his pas-

sions or he disagreed with something being said.

"Then you could see his eyes spark and he was ready to get into it," Tunnell says. "Sometimes his lip would quiver as he would start into his diatribe about how wrong they were and how they didn't have the data to support the statements they were making."

While never Hildebrand's student, Tunnell attended his seminars in the late 1960s and accompanied him on field trips, including one when a norther blew in on a rising tide and they almost had to abandon Hildebrand's truck when it got stuck in a pass.

"I'd already put him on a pedestal as the kind of marine scientist I'd like to be like some day because I'd heard so many good things about his field trips and his publications," Tunnell says.

Hildebrand was born in 1922 in Fowler, Kansas. Both his parents were teachers, but his interest in marine biology was sparked by his uncle, Samuel Hildebrand, a distinguished ichthyologist. Henry Hildebrand began teaching at the University of Corpus Christi in 1957. In 1973, he left to teach at Texas A&I (now A&M) University in Kingsville, and in 1979, he entered the private sector as a commercial fishing consultant. Hildebrand officially retired in 1985, though he remained very active in marine science.



Throughout his career, Hildebrand conducted groundbreaking research on many marine subjects, but is perhaps best known for discovering the nesting grounds of the Kemp's ridley sea turtle, which had been a mystery until 1960. His careful investigation showed that the turtles nested on the beaches of Tamaulipas, Mexico — residents told



HILDEBRAND WAS AMONG THE FIRST TO TEACH STUDENTS THAT WHILE BOOKS ARE IMPORTANT, THE BEST LEARNING EXPERIENCE IS TO WORK HANDS-ON IN NATURE.

him of large numbers along the shore. With the help of an amateur film taken in 1947 showing thousands of turtles, Hildebrand pinpointed the nesting site near Rancho Nuevo, a small ranching community. In 1966, conservation efforts began, and in 1978, the United States joined Mexico in an effort to save the turtle from extinction, establishing nesting beaches along the Texas coast on Padre Island.

In his field work and his teaching, Hildebrand left behind an important and continuing legacy.

"Many of Henry's students, like many of ours now, are in all the state and federal natural resource agencies around Texas, the United States and Mexico," says Tunnell. "Many are professors, carrying on the legacy of getting out in the field with hands-on study, research and teaching."

After Hildebrand died, Tunnell inherited his home library, which filled four bedrooms and five closets. The books were brought to the university, where it took several years to fully review the collection. Included was an unfinished manuscript called *Fishes of the Texas Coast*. Tunnell shared it with his colleague, Dr.

David McKee, professor of biology and coordinator of the mariculture degree program at Texas A&M University — Corpus Christi. McKee expanded on Hildebrand's work, while also narrowing its focus, to write *Fishes of the Texas Laguna Madre*, published in 2008. While Hildebrand's approach was scientific, McKee's intent was to reach a broader range of readers, including fishermen. In his book, McKee included the rich illustrations by Hildebrand's friend, the late Henry Compton, from the original manuscript.

"[Hildebrand] was a real hero of mine, and I just loved the old guy," says McKee, who took a fisheries biology class with him in the 1970s. "He was a remarkable, brilliant scientist. But he wasn't Mr. Personality. If you wanted to talk to him and it didn't pertain to science, he'd just turn around and walk off. He wasn't necessarily being rude, but if he wasn't interested in something he'd just walk away. But he was a real sweetheart of a guy."

Some students called Hildebrand the "old walrus" because in his later years his teeth had worn down to the gum line. He spoke in short, choppy sentences that forced people to listen closely — and everyone did, from scientists to shrimpers. As with his students, Hildebrand had become a hero to commercial fisherman, a frequent presence on the docks who championed the fishermen's way of life against restrictive regulations he believed were not based in science.

Even after he retired, Hildebrand always had a cause. He would visit the university and go from office to office — "Running his traps, as we called it," McKee says — to discuss the scientific topic at hand. Often he would walk in on a professor's closed-door meeting without knocking, sit down and wait until it was over to talk about what was bothering him that day.

McKee says Hildebrand was so influential on his life that, without him, he would not be doing what he is today. But he never told

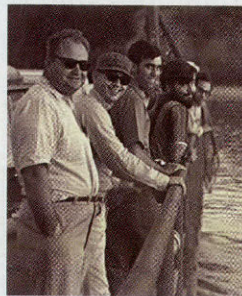
Hildebrand that. "He would have turned away, pretended not to hear it or say it was nonsense," McKee says.

On the water or in the classroom, McKee often thinks of Hildebrand, whether reminiscing about studying freeze kills, counting fish on Baffin Bay or lecturing.

"In terms of how I do things and the way I think, I'm a whole lot like that old guy," McKee says. "A lot of us tried to model ourselves after him, changing some traits but holding on to the best stuff. I'll say this is the way the book says it is, but I've had personal experience and this is my side of the story. Then I realize, golly, this is probably the way Dr. Hildebrand would have addressed the topic. A lot of his philosophy was to work hard and have fun at what you really want to do.

"But I do try to zip my pants up and keep my hair combed," McKee laughs. ☆

From top left: A photograph of Henry Hildebrand in the military; Hildebrand with a sperm whale; the professor accompanies students on a ferry.



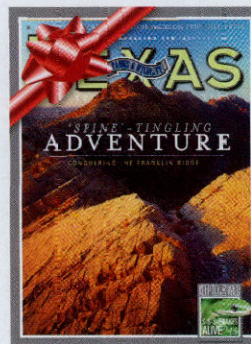
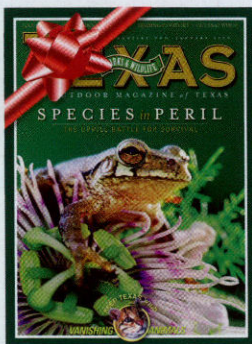
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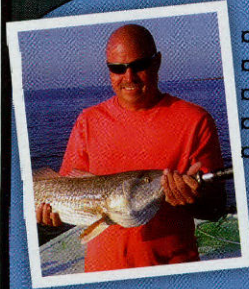
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(continued from page 21)

tells us, “and honey starts dripping from the ceiling.” She points to a spot on the floor and says, “We could put a bowl right there and it would fill up with honey.” There’s none today because she recently had the hive removed, but she shrugs as she tells us she figures it’ll be back. It always is.

We continue our exploration, finding the famous Welhausen School where Lyndon B. Johnson taught Mexican-American students for a year in 1928. It’s a pretty brick building but, honestly, I’m more intrigued by the *tienda* located across the plaza.

This market, called Botanica Vasquez #2 & Grocery, is one of the most happening places we’ve seen in this town of 4,000. Folks come and go at a steady pace, while others sit visiting on the benches in front. Since this place is so reminiscent of the small Mexican towns I love, I ask if they sell tacos. I’m told no, but that if I want really good tacos I need to go to the stand just outside of Mike’s Drive-Thru.

It turns out the taco stand actually has a name of its own, Guy & Wayas. Tonight it’s manned by a friendly guy named Manzi, who’s completely unconcerned by the heat as he stands over a smoker making brisket for the tacos. We’re starved so we each order two. Manzi’s sweaty work has paid off and they turn out to be as satisfying as our under-the-stars meal at The Chap was the night before.

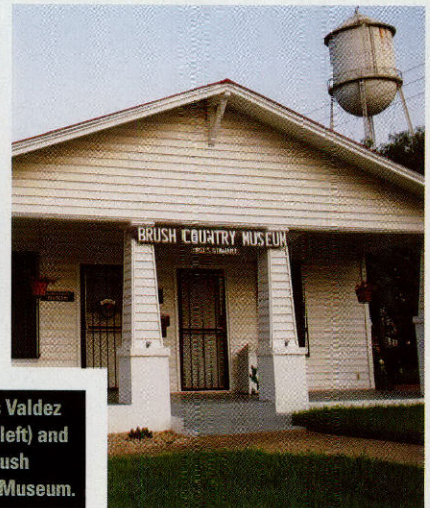
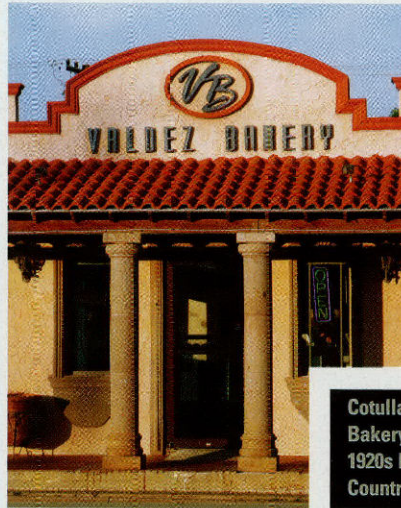
Tonight it’s a real bed at the Talbert L Bar Lodge. Brenda Talbert designed the handsomely decorated two-story lodge for groups of hunters, since this is pretty much the deer-hunting capital of Texas, but couples can also stay in the off-season. When her son Murrey opens the door to the vast space we’ll be calling home, I quip, “I don’t think this will be big enough for the two of us.” It’s a unique luxury to have that much room to ourselves, and we have fun trying out all the different places to sit and read.

In the morning we’re off to Valdez Bakery, which is a bit like the *panaderías* you find throughout Mexico, though certainly not as large. It’s got conchas, one of my favorite types of Mexican sweet bread (*pan dulce*), but no place to sit, so we drive around listening to Tejano music (at Jeff’s insistence) and search for a spot to munch on our goodies.

We decide to eat our *pan dulce* at, of all places, the Cotulla Cemetery. At the museum the day before, Tyler told us the story of Sheriff Charles B. McKinney, who was assassinated in 1886 “in the protection of outraged female innocence,” and I want to find his gravesite. The story goes that two bad guys set him up with news that a young lady had been assaulted. So, off rode the sheriff (who, according to his gravestone was “without guile, truthful and true, kind and considerate and gentle” and the “bravest of the brave”) to administer justice.

The cemetery isn’t officially divided into two sections, but you can tell by looking at it that it is. And, just as the Hispanic part of town beckoned me the night before, so too does the Hispanic part of the cemetery because of its, well, aliveness. Borrowing from the traditions of old Mexico, sodas, water bottles and keepsakes have been left for loved ones in case they become thirsty or lonely in their travels.

Later, over a tasty lunch at Uncle Moe’s Country Kitchen,



Cotulla's Valdez Bakery (left) and 1920s Brush Country Museum.

where they serve both Tex-Mex and barbecue (in other words, it’s an authentic South Texas restaurant), we are met by Leigh again and she introduces us to John Keck. He’s the owner of T.R. Keck and Sons, a lumberyard that’s been in the family since it was established in 1893.

To say that Keck’s store is simply a lumberyard is like saying it’s hot here in July. In the spirit of Cotulla, there’s a plethora of details hidden throughout, and the more we wander, the more we notice. From the ubiquitous Brush Country mounted deer heads to the old metal hardware bins to the many-g geared old rope cutter, it’s an adventure. It begins with the huge set of elk antlers that have hung by the door since the 1920s, when a customer left them as collateral until he could return from “go north” and pay his bill. Keck is still waiting.

While we’re there, the manager shows us the old Cotulla Post Office sign from 1928 that he’d just found deep in the lumber bins. Keck says that these sorts of discoveries happen all the time, so they’ve created a kind of a mini-museum near the front counter. Among the items that catch my eye are old coffin nails that were found in the room where the coffin inventory used to be housed.

The time has come to say goodbye to Cotulla and the special beauty of the Brush Country. I silently send some extra hope out to Leigh for good measure. To The Chap I send gratitude for its satiation of my appetite for a quiet night in the brush. This tough little town and its vicinity are an acquired taste, and as I take one last glimpse in the rearview mirror, I realize it’s one I’ve fully embraced. ★

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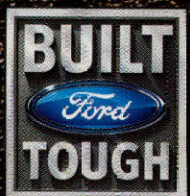
With this photograph, Larry Ditto demonstrates that good things come to those who wait. "All the ingredients for a great shot were coming together: beautiful white pelicans reflected in glassy water as morning light penetrated the fog," he says. "I had waited behind the tripod for an hour hoping the fog would lift enough to reveal birds cloaked in moist, white feathers. I've visited this spot many times over the years, but the fog was there only once."

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Canon EOS 1D Mark II digital camera, Canon 500 mm IS lens, Gitzo tripod, Wimberley head, ISO 400, 1/640 second @ f/14



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