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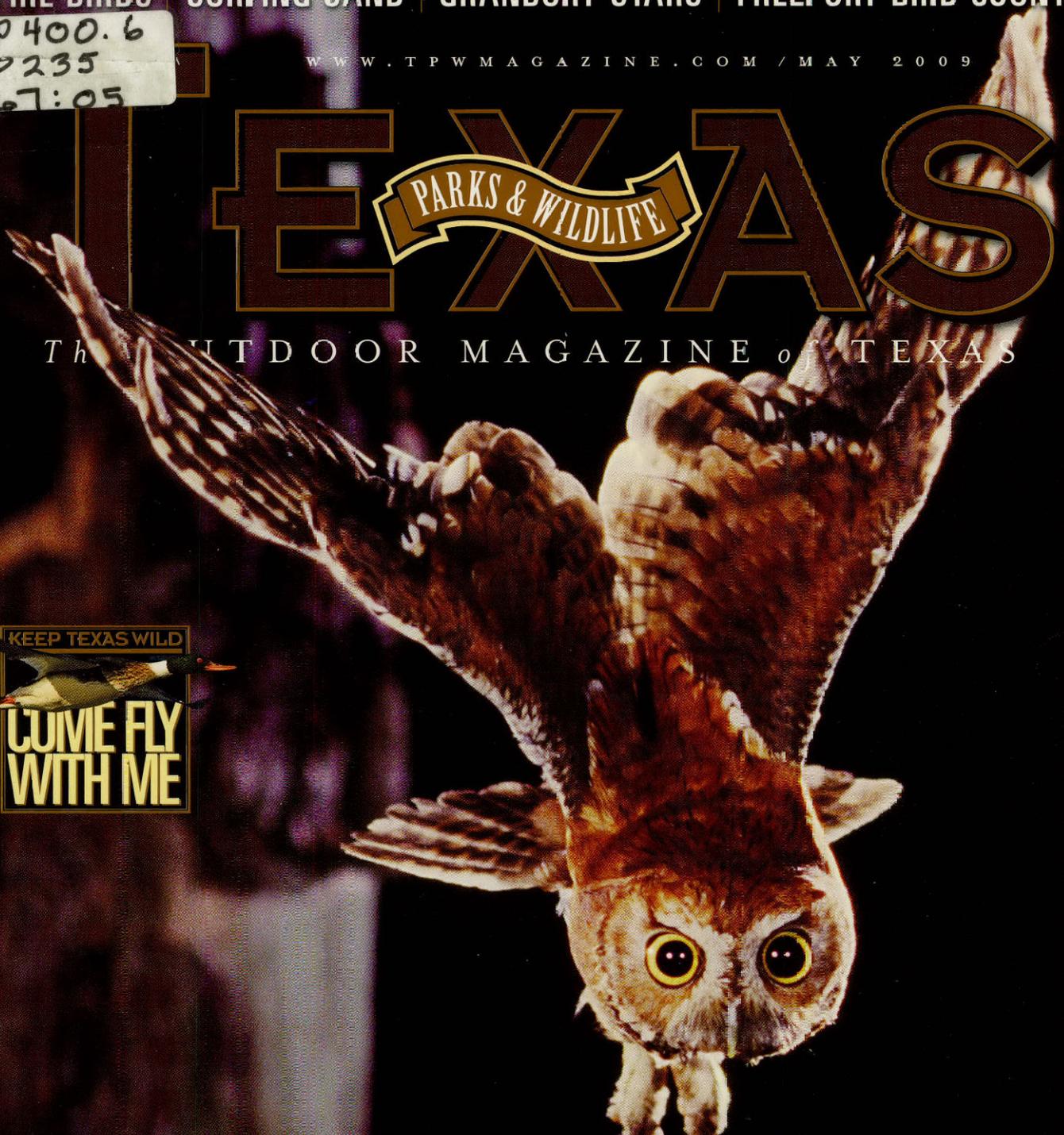
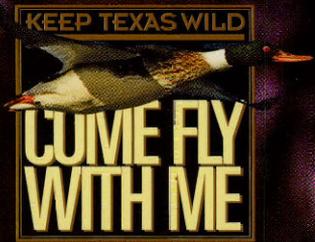
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# TEXAS

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The OUTDOOR MAGAZINE of TEXAS



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PHOTO © ARTHUR MORRIS

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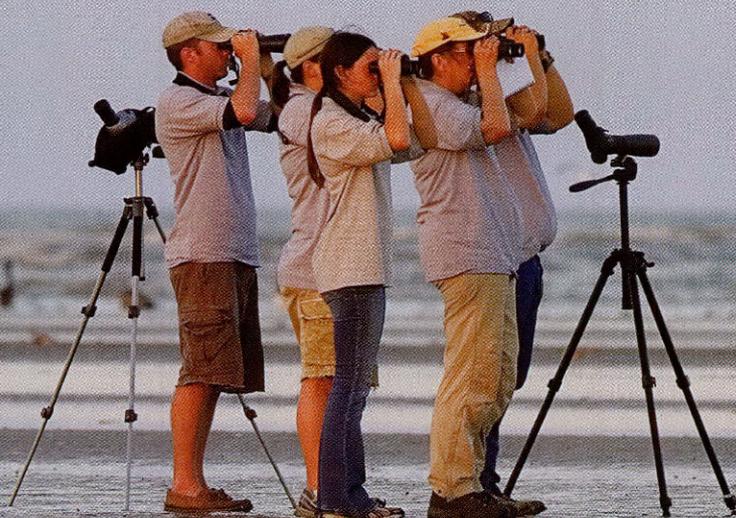
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FRONT: Eastern screech-owl. Photo © Derek Hamrick/Rolfnp.com

BACK: Killdeer. Photo © Larry Ditto

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Brown pelican landing. Photo © Arthur Morris

THIS PAGE: Birdwatchers. Photo by Earl Nottingham/TPWD



# TEXAS

THE OUTDOOR MAGAZINE OF TEXAS

MAY 2009, VOL. 67, NO. 5

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# In the Field

## CAROL FLAKE CHAPMAN,

who now lives in Austin, didn't realize when she was growing up in Lake Jackson that she was living in one of the best birding areas in the country, if not the best. However, it should have been obvious, since she lived alongside a creek, her house was surrounded by woods, and she spent weekend days



alongside the gulls and other shore birds at the beach. Birds were everywhere. Her dad rescued an injured baby screech owl, and Screechie, as she was known, would perch on her finger and swivel her head or land on her shoulder and coo into her ear. Screechie was successfully released into the wild, but often came back to visit, perching on a tree on the patio and peering in the window.

## MARY O. PARKER

recalls an early affinity for fire. "When I was a little girl standing around the campfire, I loved to catch the tip of a stick on fire and write my name in the air with it. It was magical the way the light moved through the darkness, almost like it was dancing," she says.

"This was under the watchful eye of my dad, who instilled in me a strong sense of how quickly fire can get out of hand." Mary writes this month about how more wildfires in the South Texas brush country could affect bird life there. "The research I did for this piece helped me more fully grasp how fire is an important part of nature's scheme and magical in ways that move far beyond the end of that campfire stick."



## E. DAN KLEPPER

shares his love for the Fresno Ranch this month. "Fresno Ranch has served as my creative sanctuary for a number of years," he says. "Some of my favorite work has occurred while hiking the ranch and camping along its canyon. The place has a wild and unusual charge. It inspires a creative urge that springs from the gut

and proves very productive once you let it loose. It's wonderful to think that the entire place will now be conserved by TPWD in perpetuity." Klepper, a regular contributor to Texas Parks & Wildlife magazine, writes from his home in the Big Bend region and exhibits his work at Klepper Gallery in Marathon. His latest book, *100 Classic Hikes in Texas*, is available from bookstores statewide.



# AT ISSUE

FROM THE PEN OF CARTER P. SMITH

**For some, "The State of the Birds," may evoke remembrances of an old Alfred Hitchcock movie** of some former renown. Don't let the title fool you, although some of the contents may elicit similar feelings of fright among those of you who like to pursue birds as a quarry for your optics, lens or game bag.

*The State of the Birds* synthesizes 40 years of biological data on the nation's bird populations and distributions across major habitat types such as wetlands, grasslands and forests. Published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in partnership with a suite of natural resources agencies and conservation organizations, the report summarizes information from long-term data sets such as the North American spring waterfowl surveys, the North American breeding bird survey, and Audubon's Christmas Bird Count. In the aggregate, the report offers the most comprehensive baseline of where we stand with respect to the conservation needs of our avian species and their habitats.

Let's start with the good news. Thanks to considerable work by many partners, some former imperiled species such as the bald eagle and peregrine falcon are doing quite well. So, too, are many species of hunted waterfowl. In fact, 39 species of waterfowl have experienced population increases of over 100 percent in the last 40 years. Through a combination of dedicated funding from waterfowl hunters, strategic management actions applied throughout their breeding and wintering ranges, and longstanding public and private sector investments in wetlands restoration and enhancement, our nation's waterfowl conservation program is a model for what works.

I wish the same were true for many other avian species. Take grasslands for example. Forty-eight percent of our grassland birds, such as the formerly ubiquitous meadowlark, are listed as of "conservation concern." Bobwhite quail, arguably the most majestic and sought after of Texas game birds, have declined by 75 percent across its range in the last 40 years. The lesser prairie chicken, a denizen of the Texas Panhandle, is most likely headed for the endangered species list. Two percent or less of our native tallgrass prairie habitat remains. That which does is fragmented and plagued with heightened land use pressures.

The report's findings for birds that are dependent on arid lands and forestlands, two other prominent habitats in Texas, had similarly dispiriting statistics. So did pelagic birds that reside in our oceans and migrating shorebirds that depend on our coastal wetlands, marshes and barrier islands.

All that being said, hope should not be lost. I find it every day in the work Texas Parks and Wildlife biologists are doing to promote conservation practices on private lands, their efforts to ensure federal farm bill programs maximize conservation benefits to wildlife, the prescribed burns, wetlands restoration, invasive species control, and other habitat management practices they apply to our wildlife management areas and parks, their many partnerships to recover endangered and threatened species, and the research they pursue in concert with a host of university and external partners.

You, too, can be a part of these conservation efforts. Start by familiarizing yourself with the report at [www.stateofthebirds.org](http://www.stateofthebirds.org). As none other than Teddy Roosevelt once said, "There can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country." I hope you will agree that our lands, waters, fish and wildlife are much too precious to suffer from inattention.

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



A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Carter P. Smith".

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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# OUTDOOR NOTES

FROM TEXAS GOVERNOR RICK PERRY

**During these uncertain economic times,** I understand that Texans are working hard to stretch their dollars as far as possible. Thankfully, our state is home to numerous attractions and destinations where families can stay close to home while enjoying time away from the daily grind without straining their budgets.

Keeping vacations local not only limits the costs and stresses associated with long distance travel, but also helps keep the engine of our state's tourism industry running strong.

Texas tourism is a \$56.7 billion industry, directly supporting 534,000 Texas jobs — nature tourism is an important part of that mix. With more than 93 Texas state parks and historic sites to visit and countless other outdoor recreation sites, these destinations are the backbone of this essential segment of our state's tourism industry.

From hunting and fishing to camping and hiking, Texas offers endless options for any outdoor activity. Home to more than 23 species of game for hunting, the second-largest number of birds (behind only California) for birdwatching, and more than 2,200 miles of trails for hiking, Texas is a top destination for those eager to experience the adventures that the outdoors has to offer. In fact, according to a 2006 report by Southwick and Associates, sportfishing, hunting and birding combined contributes roughly \$15.8 billion annually to our state's economy.

Utilizing the infinite outdoor opportunities in Texas, families can not only spend valuable time together without breaking the bank, but also learn valuable lessons about the outdoors and respecting the resources that enhance our quality of life.

Texas state parks are an economic engine in their own right, drawing valuable tourist dollars to localities across the state. Just this fall, the Texas Comptroller's Office conducted a study finding that state parks generate an average of \$3 million in annual retail sales and \$1.5 million in residential income in each county where a state park is located. The study also noted the important role parks play in bolstering the state's quality of life, which is an important factor in attracting new businesses and creating new jobs in Texas.

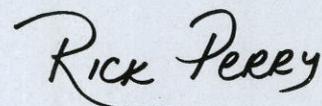
This summer, Texas state parks are in better shape than ever, thanks to increased funding provided by state lawmakers last session.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) has expanded the Free Fishing in State Parks program, waiving certain fishing license requirements and offering a statewide series of events that provide equipment and instruction on how to fish. It provides an extensive trail network known as Great Texas Wildlife Trails that bundles various settings and experiences in easy-to-access packages while promoting sustainable economic development and wildlife conservation. TPWD also sustains the Texas Paddling Trails, mapping out seven coastal and eight inland day trips for kayakers and canoeists at all levels of experience.

This year, May 9–17 marks Texas Tourism Week, which highlights the endless opportunities available to travelers and encourages Texans to take advantage of the activities offered across the state. I hope that all families looking for a cost-efficient getaway will visit one of our state parks. Their visit will not only bolster this essential component to our economy, but also help sustain the incomparable natural beauty of our great state.

Visit [www.lifesbetteroutside.org](http://www.lifesbetteroutside.org) for a comprehensive list of options that TPWD has to offer.

*This summer, Texas state parks are in better shape than ever, thanks to increased funding provided by state lawmakers last session.*



RICK PERRY  
TEXAS GOVERNOR

*Texas Governor Rick Perry writes about outdoor issues four times a year for Texas Parks & Wildlife magazine.*

# MAIL CALL

PICKS, PANS AND PROBES FROM OUR READERS

## LETTERS

### 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's State Park at O.C. 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 other small Texas state parks. The people 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 old West Texas heaven. Hikes, stars at night, and beautiful sunsets are just a few reasons to scoot a little farther west to capture the 31st Cheap Getaway!

MARY SANDERS  
San Angelo

### JUST CRAZY ANTS, NOT RASBERRY

I live in western Williamson County and have been fighting ants ("Crazy Ants," April 2009) for two years. The exterminators are having a hard time just staying even with them. When I moved into my house in June 2005, I spent a lot of time and money trying to get rid of the fire ants. I wasn't doing too well until two summers ago when the "crazies" moved in.

Within one summer, the crazy ants got rid of the fire ants and took over my property and house. They don't build hills in the yard like other ants do, so it is impossible to find out where their nests are. They are under every rock, in all of the trees, in my workshop, in the flowerbeds and in the grass. You can walk out in the yard, look down and see trails of ants running all over every where. They don't walk anywhere, it is always at a dead run in both directions. The only good thing about them is that

they got rid of the fire ants, and I haven't had any of the crazy ants sting me yet. If anyone knows how to get them under control they can get very wealthy.

RAY PAYNE  
Georgetown

*TPWD RESPONDS: We asked for help from Tom Rasberry, the discoverer of Rasberry crazy ants. "Although it is not possible to make a positive identification without seeing a specimen, the ant that Mr. Payne has described is probably paratrechina longicornis. This is not the same species as the Rasberry crazy ant, however, the treatment for these ants is similar in some respects. We have had very good results with baiting the lawn area with a product called Advance Carpenter Ant Bait and spraying the outside perimeter with Termidor. If*

*the problem persists, a treatment with Top Choice or Over and Out may be necessary. Prior to using these products or any other pesticides, you must read and follow label directions. I would recommend contacting a pest control professional."*

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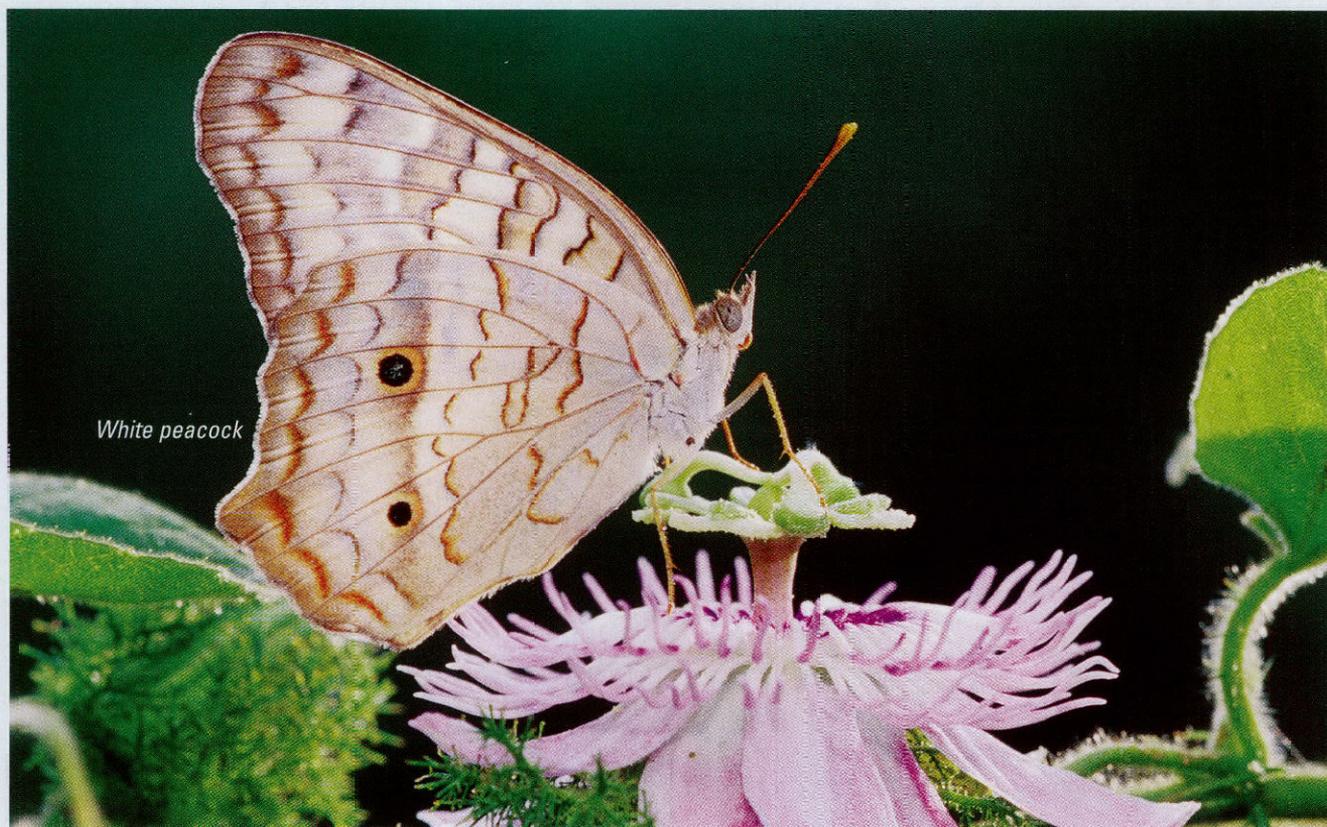
EL PASO

# SCOUT

NEWS AND VIEWS IN THE TEXAS OUTDOORS

## RIO REFORESTATION

*Volunteers use hardy native plants to replenish the Rio Grande Valley.*



White peacock

**"Bring a friend and a shovel"** is the invitation Project Rio Reforestation extends to Rio Grande Valley volunteers. Each year about 1,000 people respond and spend a morning planting native tree and shrub seedlings on selected tracts near the river. Since 1994, the project has restored approximately 552 acres of riparian habitat and native brushland, creating wildlife corridors that provide animals with access to food, water and shelter.

Reforestation volunteers plant 40 species of typically spiny native brush — ebony, huisache, retama, catclaw acacia, anacua — across 20 to 30 acres of former crop land acquired by the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge. The volunteers follow a strategy of planting 600 trees and shrubs per acre in a random assortment. The drought-resistant species receive only rainwater, so some seedlings go dormant while getting established.

"It takes about a year to determine what plants have survived," said Bob Barry, farming and revegetative officer at the refuge. "That tract was a farm field before we planted it, and you didn't get much wildlife use there. Now, it's habitat. If it was still in crops, the red-winged blackbirds and dickcissels wouldn't be there."

In a few years, the restored tract becomes a dense stand of native brush that provides quality habitat for birds and

PHOTO © ROLF NUSSBAUMER



Volunteer-restored terrain provides crucial habitat for wildlife like coyotes (above) and ocelots (right).

butterflies, rare or endangered wildlife like ocelots and jaguarundi, as well as for raccoons, bobcats and coyotes.

When the Rio Grande Valley became a booming agricultural wonderland 100 years ago, approximately 95 percent of the native brush was cleared for farms. Current efforts to expand native brushland coincide with the construction of new houses and malls on the one-time farmland.

Rio Reforestation is a cooperative project of the Texas Forest Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Nature Conservancy, Sabal Palm Audubon Sanctuary and Valley Proud Environmental Council. It mobilizes a volunteer army from school science classes, scout troops, individuals and civic organizations to restore native vegetation. According to Barry, Rio Reforestation is one of the largest, if not the largest, ongoing volunteer project of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Harlingen volunteer and retiree Dave Moulder led a Rio Reforestation crew of 10. "This is about putting native plants in the ground and getting the public aware of the value of reforestation," he explained.

His team, like all the others, divided

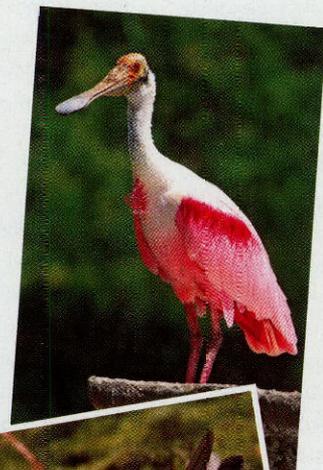
duties to help speed the planting along. The youngest measured 10-foot intervals and marked the spots for planting. Hole diggers shoveled down 8 to 10 inches, and the plant distributors dropped in a 4- to 10-inch tall seedling, encased in a thin cardboard tube, near each hole. The planter centered the tree-to-be at the proper depth and backfilled the hole before leapfrogging to the next waiting plant.

The hands-on experience with hardy native plants prompted interest in trees tough enough to survive in a challenging setting without man's help. The seedlings are grown by local nurseries and the USFWS from seeds gathered in the wild.

Project Rio Reforestation expects to reforest 10,000 Valley acres over a 100-year period. ★

— Eileen McTei

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#### May 10 – 17:

Exploring Purts Creek by canoe; nature photographers discover central Texas; Houston's urban parks make a great escape; Texas coastal marshes; Llano Springs Ranch restoration.

#### May 17 – 24:

The last herd of wild buffalo in Texas; catching catfish at Choke Canyon State Park; restoring tall-grass prairie in Bell County; the joys of jellyfish; sunrise on the water.

#### May 24 – 31:

Honoring angler educator Charlie Pack; Texas ducks; Copper Breaks State Park; West Texas black bear research; devoting a ranch to native wildlife; outdoor learning at Lockhart.



Catching catfish at Choke Canyon State Park. Watch the week of May 17–24.

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# Sand Surfer

Ride the dunes at Monahans Sandhills.

**Some folks jog.** Others play tennis, swim laps or practice yoga. As for Tom Rodman, an Odessa attorney, he rides the dunes at Monahans Sandhills State Park in West Texas.

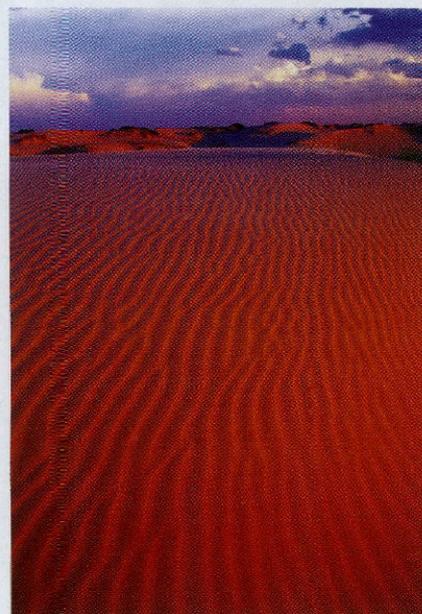
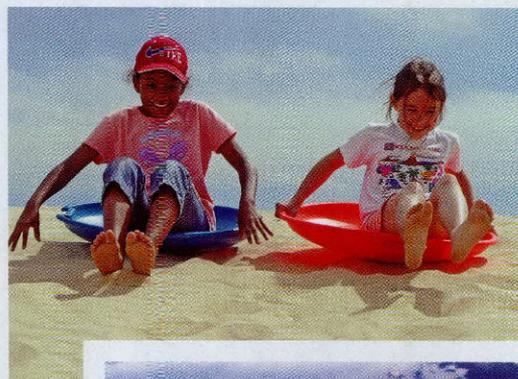
"Sand surfing is wonderful exercise," enthuses Rodman, who at 78 may be the world's oldest sand-rider. "It's very aerobic when you climb up the hills. Low impact, too, because of the sand. I also find the sport challenging. Of course, it's challenging just to stay upright!"

Once a week or so, Rodman hits the slopes with his laminated board, a pro model that includes foot straps for optimal steering and control. His advice to newbies: "Lean forward and stay low. Keep your weight forward. Otherwise, if you go too fast and get scared, you're going to fall back." Rodman also waxes his board and never goes barefoot (shoes and socks are a must, he says).

Want to sand surf, too? Give it a try at Monahans Sandhills, where you can rent sand disks for a mere buck an hour and boards for \$2. Slopes range from gentle grades to steep inclines that reach 60 feet or higher. The park's 3,840 acres of dunes — which peak at 70 feet high — lie within a massive dune field that stretches some 200 miles from south of Monahans and north into New Mexico.

Though most visitors come to check out the dunes, the park offers other activities, too. For instance, horses are welcome in the 600-acre equestrian day-use area (hitching posts and water available). Campers can book a site with water, electricity and a shade shelter.

Numerous bird species, including pyrrhuloxias, western meadowlarks, black-throated sparrows, Swainson's hawks and curve-billed thrashers abound in the park. In early morning and late evening, watch for coyotes, javelina and mule deer. Also, note the park's native stands of Havard shin oak, which reach only 3 to 4 feet high.



**At Monahans Sandhills, a laminated board and riding waves have nothing to do with surfing the ocean. Sand surfing is the craze here, with enthusiasts riding down 60-foot inclines.**

Inside the Dunagan Visitor Center, interactive exhibits tell about the area's oil production, native flora and fauna, and the constantly changing dunes. "They're spectacular when the sun's setting, and the wind's blowing, and you're walking toward the sun," Rodman says. "The sunlight reflecting off the sand looks like a silver river running over the dunes."

To reach Monahans Sandhills State Park, travel I-20 and take Exit 86 to Park Road 41. For more information, call 432-943-2092 or visit [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/monahanssandhills](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/monahanssandhills). ★

—Sheryl Smith-Rodgers

TOP BY TPWD; BOTTOM © LANCE VARNELL

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# Green Anole

*The lizard that's bright green, except when it's brown.*

**Crawling up the side of a house,** a green anole (*Anolis carolinensis*) — long tailed and slender bodied — stands out. Quite the opposite holds true if the anole leaps onto nearby foliage, where — presto! — its skin may turn from bright green to drab brown. Or it may not.

No, it's not a chameleon. The scales of both chameleons (which do not occur in North America) and anoles (native to the southeastern United States) switch color when temperature, light, mood and activity change, not surroundings. Green anoles vary between shades of green and brown. Several times a year, they shed their skin.

Tail included, a mature male measures 5 to 8 inches in length (females are smaller). When defending territory or courting a lady, he may bob his head and flare his throat's dewlap, a pink fold of skin. Tails broken off in a skirmish or lost to a predator typically grow back, though

not as long or perfectly shaped. Adhesive toe pads (lamellae) and claws enable anoles to climb vertical surfaces, such as walls and fences.

Found across the eastern third of Texas, anoles inhabit most yards and other vegetated areas that offer shade, hiding places and moisture. During the day, they prey on insects and spiders, which are swallowed whole. At night, anoles sleep lengthwise along a stem or leaf.

After mating in spring or early summer, a female can store sperm eight months or longer. Then every two weeks or so, she deposits one small egg in leaf litter or soft soil. About six weeks later, a tiny lizard hatches. If not snagged by a cat, rough green snake or some other predator, it may reach the old age of five years. ★

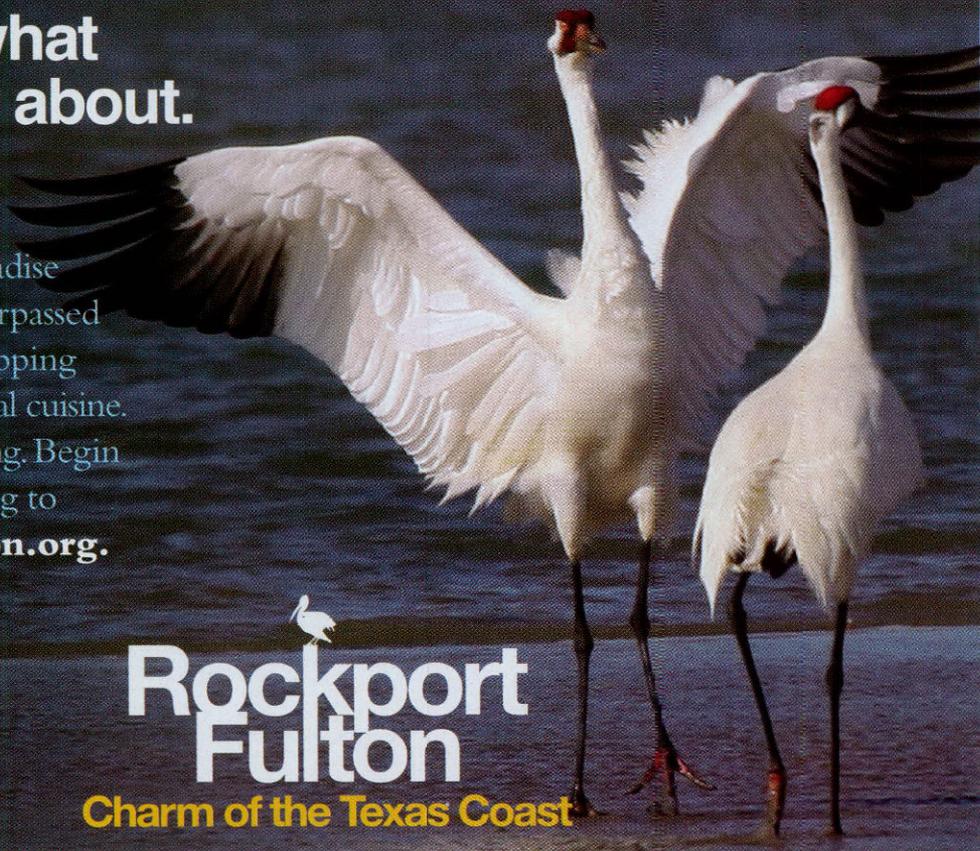
—Sheryl Smith-Rodgers



↑ Anoles change colors like chameleons, but it depends more on mood than surroundings.

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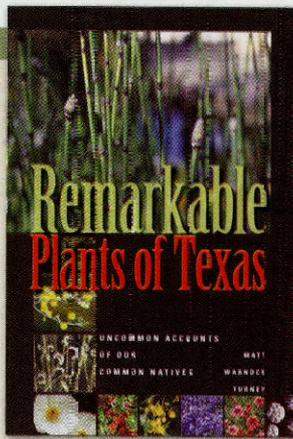
Photography by Diane Loyd

## Amazing Plants

*Little-known facts about common flora.*

Immediately upon reading the first few pages of *Remarkable Plants of Texas*, botanicaphiles like me will give a big shout out to the book's author, Matt Warnock Turner. Turner has done something with *Remarkable Plants of Texas* — *Uncommon Accounts of Our Common Natives* (University of Texas Press) that no other Texas botanical publication has done quite so thoroughly: He has compiled an exhaustive cultural history of the state's most common native plants, providing an informative compendium of facts about favorites like mesquite, sumac, live oak and yucca. Unlike most sources that provide a taste of a particular plant's history only to leave detail-obsessed readers hungry, *Remarkable Plants of Texas* goes whole hog.

"There is a simple need to know the names of plants, how to recognize them, and how to distinguish them from similar species," Turner writes. "But once we know what we are looking at — whether a pecan, prickly pear, or bluebonnet — is there nothing more to know? Is there anything remarkable or noteworthy about the plant? Did it play a role in history? Is it useful to humankind? Does it contain medicinal, psychotropic, or toxic compounds? Is there unusual ecological or biological information about it? Is it particularly important to wildlife — birds, bees, or butterflies? Does it have cultural significance today, and if so, why? In short, what is its



story?" Turner makes answering all of these questions an entertaining read, discussing over 50 Texas favorites in 300-plus pages.

A good portion of the information included in the volume will be new and enlightening. Read, for example, about the unusual history of the huisache, a plant often considered a nuisance by many landowners: "Unbeknownst to

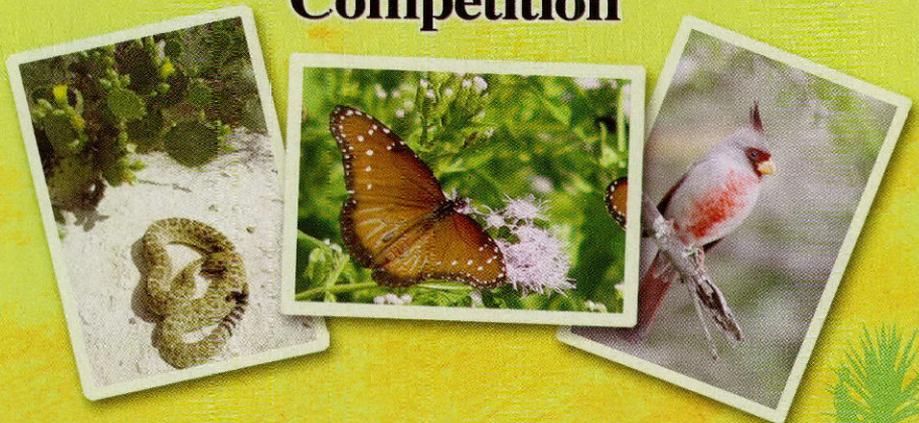
many Texans," writes Turner, "huisache has an amazing history in the European perfume industry. ... First cultivated for perfumery in Rome toward the end of the sixteenth century, *Acacia farnesiana* became industrially important in Provence starting around 1825. Known as *cassie ancienne* in French perfumery, the tree is extensively cultivated on the outskirts of Cannes and near the famous distilleries of Grasse.... *Extrait de cassie*, the end result, is one of the more costly scents in the industry and is rarely used in its pure state; instead it is employed to extend and deepen the notes of other fragrances, especially those involving violet bouquets." *Sacrebleu!* Who knew?

*Remarkable Plants of Texas* is full of such moments, all of them bound in brilliant red cloth binding and lime-green end papers. The visual appeal of the book and its layout, illustrated generously with full-color photography, support an encyclopedia of excellent reference material as well as enhancing a satisfying read, both valuable assets to have in any Texas naturalist's library. ★

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# Barometer Bush

*This hardy native blooms when the humidity shoots up.*

**One day last fall**, weather forecasts predicted rain across the drought-stricken Texas Hill Country. On the horizon, storm clouds loomed. Sadly, not a single drop fell in our neighborhood. Humidity levels, though, must have soared because across the street stood a scraggly cenizo, covered with lavender blooms.

Both rain and moist air can trigger cenizo's showy flowering. For that reason, *Leucophyllum frutescens* has been dubbed the

barometer bush. But hold on — this hardy native with silvery-green leaves answers to other names, too: Texas sage, purple sage, Texas ranger, Texas silverleaf and senisa.

Cenizo — Spanish for “ash colored” — occurs in the rocky, limestone soils of northern Mexico, the Rio Grande Plains, Trans-Pecos region and western Edwards Plateau. Extremely drought and heat tolerant, the medium-sized shrub provides cover for wildlife and nest sites for birds. It's also a caterpillar host plant for *Calleta* silkmths and *Theona* checkerspots. Native Americans and early settlers once brewed a medicinal tea from cenizo leaves.

In 2005, state legislators designated Texas purple sage as the official state native shrub. (Crape myrtle — originally imported from China — was named state shrub in 1997.) A sage it is not, though. *Leucophyllum frutescens* belongs to the figwort family, which includes toadflax, wild snapdragon and Indian paintbrush. ★

— Sheryl Smith-Rodgers



Distinctive silver foliage and a propensity to bloom when the air is full of moisture are characteristics of cenizo.

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# Knot for Reel

*The low-lying arbor knot will help prevent backlashes.*

**When all else fails**, read the directions. It took me only about five years to finally heed that advice.

Inside of five minutes it forever changed the way I go about affixing line onto empty fishing reels. I've been retrieving the benefits ever since.

There is definitely a wrong way to attach line to a reel spool, or "arbor." Unfortunately, it's common to see "hump-backed" evidence aplenty on the reels of countless anglers who have yet to learn to tie the appropriately named arbor knot.

These are fishermen who almost invariably rely upon fishing's most oft-used connection, the improved clinch knot, for the task of filling reels. As effective as it is for securing hooks and swivels to lines and leaders, the improved clinch knot is a lousy choice for effectively spooling line on the empty arbor of a new or freshly cleaned reel.

The consequences are most obvious, and frustrating, when the reel being "spooled" is a backlash-prone baitcaster. Spinning reels have stationary spools. They do not revolve unless forced to do so by the pressure of a fish pulling on the drag. Conversely, baitcasting reel spools make many high-speed revolutions in the course of a cast.

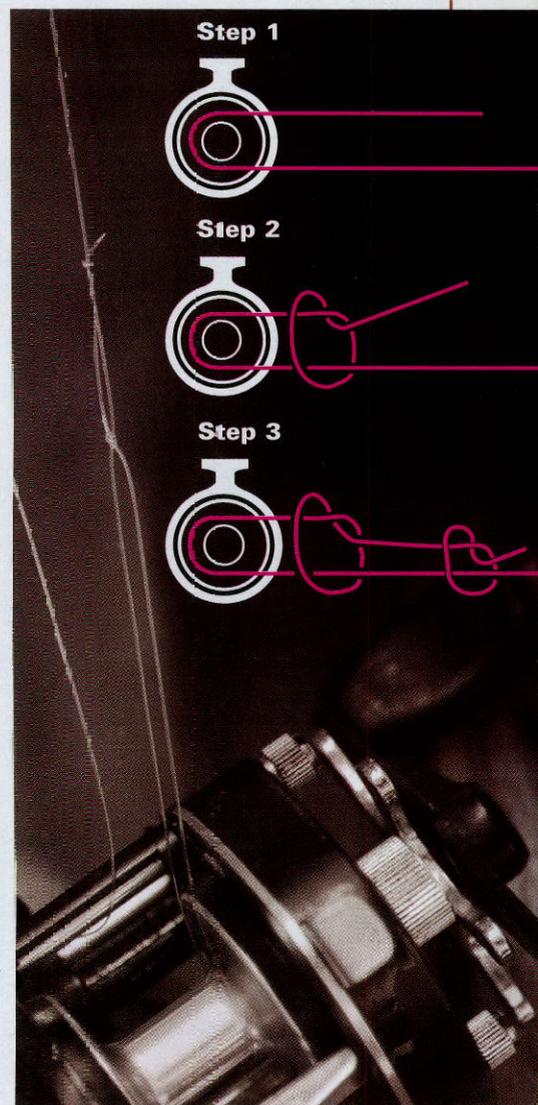
Effective baitcasting hinges heavily upon a half-dozen or so factors: the quality of the reel, particularly the number and grade of ball bearings included in its design to enhance casting distance; the weight of the lure or bait being thrown; the flexibility ("castability," in the angling vernacular) of the line; the taper, or flex, of the rod; proper weight and size balance between the rod and reel; the centrifugal drag setting of the reel; and of course, the coordination and skill of the caster.

Nothing, though, is more critical than starting out with the correct line-to-spool connection. Fortunately, an arbor knot is extremely simple to tie.

First, attach the reel to the rod upon which it will be used. Thread the line through the rod tip and guides, on through the reel's vertical line guide, around the spool, back through the vertical line guide and up to the base of the first rod guide. Then, tie a simple overhand knot (sometimes called a "square knot") around the line immediately above where it exits the vertical line guide. Leave enough slack to tie a second overhand knot an inch or two above the first. Using either a sprinkle of water or a quick spray of Blakemore Real Magic line conditioner or similar product, wet the line and cut the tag end of the uppermost knot as closely as possible.

The angler then need only put enough tension on the line to smoothly pull the two cinched-up knots together.

At that point, with the reel spool in a line spooler (or the pencil-through-the-line-spool-holding hand of a cooperative friend), crank the line onto the arbor. Maintain pressure during application, either through tension on the line spool



or thumb-and-forefinger pressure on the line above the reel.

Being essentially flat, the square knot-on-square knot stack configuration allows the line to lie flat on the spool. Let that not seem important, try using a Hula Hoop with a golf ball glued to one end.

You'll quickly get the concept.

A baitcasting reel's tension-adjusting device is called a "centrifugal brake" for good reason. A revolving baitcasting spool often goes haywire when a tall, multi-wrapped improved clinch knot has its way with the reel's centrifugal balancing act.

Most line manufacturers include directions for the arbor knot inside their packaging. The five minutes it takes to read and practice them will pay for itself many times over as time is spent casting as opposed to desperately picking away at hopeless backlashes triggered by off-balance reel spools. ★



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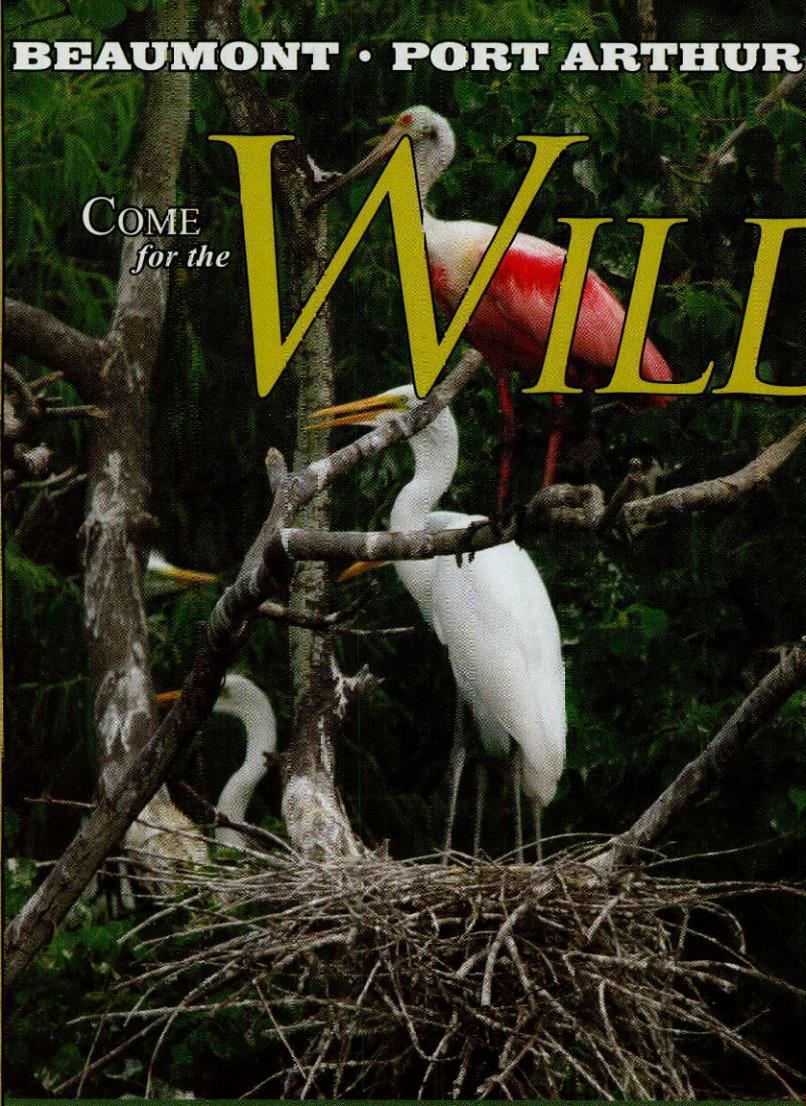


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# 3 Days in the Field / By Wendee Holtcamp

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## Birds over Broadway

*In addition to great birdwatching, Granbury offers a surprising number of entertainment options.*

**I arrive in Granbury on Friday night**, having driven north from Houston to join my friend Laurie for a three-day weekend trip full of entertainment, nature and a fascinating regional history that includes the famous outlaws Jesse James and John Wilkes Booth.

I had never heard of the town before and I didn't quite know what to expect. I've traveled through much of the state and have seen many small Texas towns, but my first glimpses genuinely impressed me. I drove down the Glen Rose Highway right over Lake Granbury — an 8,500-acre reservoir created when the Brazos River was impounded in 1969. The view included a marina, a few waterfront restaurants and a 96-foot double-deck authentic sternwheeler, which used to run regular cruises

on the lake but has since ceased operations.

After driving over the lake, I turned right on Pearl Street which heads straight through the town's nucleus — Granbury Square. I've driven through my share of "old town squares" in Texas, but this one had a charming appeal, and the reconstructive efforts stood miles apart from others.

The white brick Hood County Courthouse, in the center, sets the tone with its tall, gray, three-tiered clock tower, which can be seen all the way from Lake Granbury. Prominent buildings around the square include the old jail, now a museum still bearing the foreboding hanging tower, the native-stone Nutt House Historic Hotel, and a brick red bank building. The square originally was built starting in 1871, and in 1974, it actually became the first Texas town square listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Laurie and I meet at our HQ for the weekend — the Hilton Garden Inn, a posh new 106-room hotel which has two restaurants, the Great American Grill and a separate lounge, all set right on Lake Granbury. Each of the Hilton's rooms has a Garden Sleep adjustable bed with beautiful linen duvets, a refrigerator, mini-bar and microwave, and high-speed Internet.

We take an afternoon jaunt over to the Paluxy River, which is a beautiful shallow clear stream meandering through limestone rocks and known worldwide for its dinosaur fossils. I stop serendipitously at the Stone Hut, a small shack owned by amateur archaeologist Morris Bussey. It's full of all manner of fossils, geodes, rocks and other interesting finds. Outside the shack is a small sand pit that kids can play in to dig up their share of hidden fossils that Bussey plants there every day for the kids to find. He regales me with a bit of the area's history, and tells me this weekend is the annual Fossil Mania event in Glen Rose (last weekend in October), with collectors from all over the nation.

The next morning we awake and head to Granbury square for breakfast, choosing the quaint Nutshell Eatery & Bakery. Over 40 antique and specialty

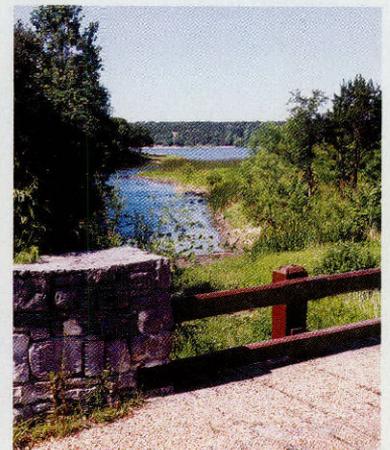


The historic Granbury Opera House, circa 1886, offers family entertainment year-round.

OPERA HOUSE & FUDGE BY EARL NOTTINGHAM/TWMD; CCC & MERIDIAN BY TWMD; ROADRUNNER © LARRY DITTO



Clockwise from far left: Selecting fudge at Pamela & Co. on the Granbury square; the Civilian Conservation Corps, who built Cleburne State Park; Lake Meridian at nearby Meridian State Park; greater roadrunner.



shops line all four sides of the square, along with two places for live family-friendly entertainment, the Granbury Opera House and Granbury Live theatre. We walk all around the square for a little while, spending some time looking at trinkets and books at Pamela & Co. I buy a quarter pound of fudge, before taking a short road trip to spend some time outdoors. The 528-acre Cleburne State Park lies just 30 miles south.

Granbury and nearby Cleburne are located in the Cross Timbers and Prairies ecoregion. Early travelers through north Texas coined the name "cross timbers" because it once had swaths of dense forest that slowed or prevented easy travel on the open prairies to the east and west. George Wilkins Kendall wrote in 1841, "The growth of timber is principally small gnarled, post oaks and black jacks, and in many places the traveler will find an almost impenetrable undergrowth of briars and other thorny bushes." At Cleburne State Park, some of these dense timbered forests remain, bordering the 116-acre, spring-fed Cedar Lake.

We park the car and head down the White-Tail Hollow Trail, a 3.2-mile loop that leads alongside the lake before dipping down off the levee and into the woods, zigzagging back and forth through juniper, oak, elm, mesquite, sycamore and ash trees. The weather is warm and the lake has not a ripple, only reflecting the clear blue sky and the handful of scattered puffy white clouds.

The park was created in the 1930s

by the Civilian Conservation Corps, who created the park around the lake. If you're lucky you might spot wild turkeys, and in the spring you might even hear their mating gobbles. More commonly, greater roadrunners regularly dash across the road or the trail. Birders also come to spot the rufous-crowned sparrow, which likes grasslands and shrublands in rocky country. Park Ranger Daryl Lacy says birders occasionally report seeing or hearing endangered golden-cheeked warblers, which are also found at nearby Meridian State Park.

After we finish the trail, we head back to Granbury square and get ready to be entertained at the Granbury Opera House. After checking out menus at several restaurants, including the famous Babe's Chicken House with homestyle cooking and the casual fine dining Stringfellows, we opt for dinner and martinis at Hank's Casual Grill. Laurie has a lemon drop and I have a chocolate martini. The homemade salsa rocks my world, and we have it with tortilla chips,

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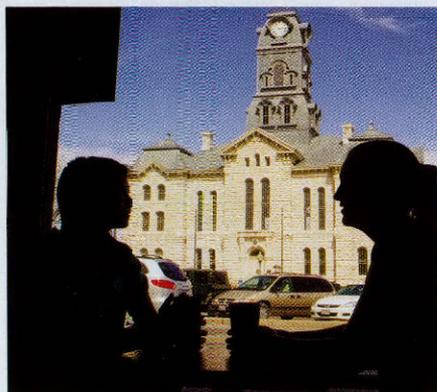
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As we sit down, I learn about the place's interesting history. Apparently, the man who assassinated President Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth, may have escaped rather than being killed — as most history books tell it. Conspiracy theorists believe that Booth was set up to kill Lincoln and then helped to escape. He then may have lived in Granbury under the name John St. Helen, a man who tended bar in the very spot where we ate breakfast. Enough evidence exists that the TV series *20/20* and *Unsolved Mysteries* both ran episodes on the rumors. St. Helen gave what he thought was a deathbed confession on where to find the gun that killed Lincoln. The gun was found just as he said, wrapped in a newspaper detailing Lincoln's assassination. St. Helen recovered from the illness, and promptly left town.

Friendly staff at the Nutshell Eatery & Bakery (left); the distinctive clock tower at the Hood County Courthouse.



followed by a pecan gorgonzola salad with raspberry vinaigrette. Laurie chooses one of their trademark hamburgers, which she says is great.

I'm not sure quite what to expect from the Granbury Opera House show. Tonight's live performance is *Life Could Be a Dream*, a musical play about Denny and his high school friends who form a singing group, and all fall in love with the same girl. We sit down in the middle of the theater with an espresso we picked up from the Coffee Grinder next door. The curtains open and out come the actors singing the fun doo-wop song, "Life Could Be a Dream." The quality of the singing seriously impresses me, and the light-hearted play entertains throughout the hour and a half we watch.

Plays at the Opera House are put on by Texas Family Musicals, a nonprofit organization striving to produce professional-grade, family-friendly theater while helping to launch the careers of young professionals in musical theater. One of the performers has performed on Broadway in New York City and several have theater degrees. Plays change every couple of weeks, so visitors are always in for something different. Recent plays include Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Ethel Waters' *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*.

The play lasts nearly two hours, with a brief intermission, and I enjoy every minute of it. After the play ends, Laurie and I shake hands with all the actors and then head down the road to the Groggy Dawg Grill and Marina, a local dive right on Lake Granbury that has live music. Laurie and I have a couple of Coronas with lime and enjoy some laughter and good conversation, before turning in for the night.

The next morning, we again have breakfast at the Nutshell, one of few places open for breakfast in the square itself. Today, we both opt for the delicious Sunday buffet with French toast, eggs, bacon, biscuits and gravy, and grits.

Turns out, Booth wasn't the only man of notoriety rumored to have lived in Granbury. Many believe that the infamous outlaw Jesse James died in Granbury at age 103, where he had been living under the name J. Frank Dalton. Doctors documented on Dalton a scar on his neck that James would have had from the time he hung from a rope before making a miraculous escape and burn marks on his feet that would corroborate the rumor that he was tortured to reveal the whereabouts of his fugitive brother. The death certificate for Dalton listed Jesse Woodson James.

Anthropologists even exhumed the bones in 2000 for forensic studies.

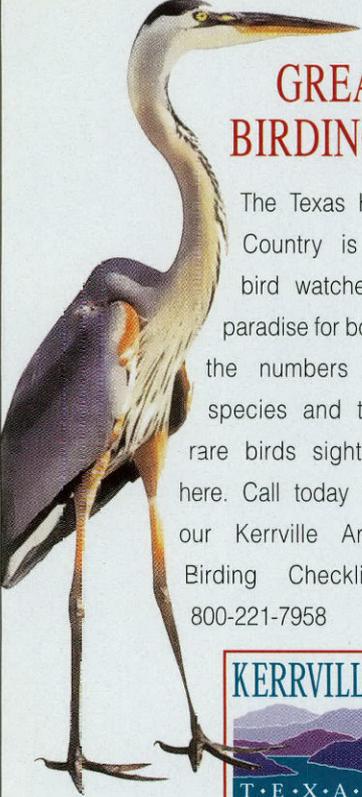
The last famous person to have lived and died in Granbury lived in quite a lot less notoriety: the widow of Texas hero Davy Crockett, Elizabeth. She moved to the Granbury area after his death at the Alamo, and her remains are now buried at Acton State Historic Site, in a 12-by-21-foot burial plot not far from town. Now operated by the Texas Historical Commission, Acton is the smallest historic site in the state (.01 acre).

Most of the stores in the square are not open on Sunday so after breakfast, we take a few photos around the square, grab another mocha at the Coffee Grinder for the drive home, give hugs and say goodbye.

I have definitely found a charming little town to recommend to friends. I'd never heard of Granbury before I chose to head this way, but I was impressed with its restoration, warmth, natural beauty, and outstanding entertainment. You might just see a future Broadway star performing! ★

#### DETAILS

- Granbury Chamber of Commerce (817-573-1622, [www.granburychamber.com](http://www.granburychamber.com))
- Granbury Riverboat (817-279-8687, [www.granburyriverboat.com](http://www.granburyriverboat.com))
- Granbury Square ([www.granburysquare.com](http://www.granburysquare.com))
- Cleburne State Park (817-645-4215, [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/Cleburne](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/Cleburne))
- Granbury Opera House (817-573-9191, [www.granburyoperahouse.net](http://www.granburyoperahouse.net))
- Granbury Live (817-573-0303, [www.granburylive.com](http://www.granburylive.com))
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By Shelly Plante

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Buff-bellied hummingbird



Baltimore oriole

IN ADDITION TO THE EVENTS LISTED ON THE FOLLOWING pages, a regularly updated calendar of all events at Texas Parks and Wildlife Department facilities can be found online at [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/calendar](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/calendar). Search this calendar by "Events and Activities" or by "Regions" of the state to find more outdoor adventures for you and your family year-round! Bird walks, butterfly hikes, hawk watches, breakfast with the birds and owl prowls are only a few of the many activities available at parks and other places throughout the state.

**Year-Round Events  
Second Saturday of  
Each Month**

**BEGINNER'S BIRD WALK —  
JUDSON NATURE TRAILS,  
ALAMO HEIGHTS.**

Binoculars are provided. All are welcome. Helps newcomers and beginners learn the birds of the area. 8 a.m. each month except June, July and August, when groups meet at 7:30 a.m. Free. (210) 342-2073; [www.saaudubon.org](http://www.saaudubon.org).

## All Month

HOUSTON AUDUBON'S BIRDATHON 2009 — HOUSTON AND SURROUNDING AREAS.

Teams gather pledges for the number of different bird species they see within a 24-hour period, competing for prizes such as gift certificates, outdoor equipment and birding tour packages. This is a pledge drive; call for details. (713) 932-1639; [www.houstonaudubon.org](http://www.houstonaudubon.org).

## Every Weekend (except Easter Sunday)

BIRDWALKS — BLUCHER PARK, CORPUS CHRISTI. Birder-led walks through Blucher Park and the expansive lawns of the homes across the street from the park. Blucher Park is the site of large spring migrant fallouts. Free. (361) 443-0744; [www.ccbirding.com](http://www.ccbirding.com).

## Every Wednesday — Saturday

GUIDED BIRD WALKS — GOOSE ISLAND STATE PARK.

Spend the morning with birding experts as they lead a walk through the park identifying the birds of the Gulf Coastal Bend. 8 a.m. Free with park entrance. (361) 729-2858; [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/park](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/park).



Short-eared owl

## April 18

VIDA VERDE FAMILY FESTIVAL — QUINTA MAZATLAN WORLD BIRDING CENTER, MCALLEN.

Celebrates Earth Day with activities including live birds of prey shows, live reptile shows, music, food, art shows, speaker series, green expo and more! 9:30 a.m. — 4:30 p.m. Free. (956) 681-3370; [www.quintamazatlan.com](http://www.quintamazatlan.com).



**APRIL 17 - 19**

**15TH ANNUAL  
MIGRATION  
CELEBRATION -  
LAKE JACKSON.**

This event includes informational booths, exciting speakers and birding field trips of the area's diverse habitats including coastal prairie, hardwood forests and southern bayous along the Central Flyway. Cost varies. (866) 403-5829; migrationcelebration.org.



Snowy egret

OWL © GREG LASLEY/KAC PRODUCTIONS; KESTREL © KENDAL LARSON; OTHERS BY TPWD

American kestrel

**April 21 - 26**

**NATURE QUEST - TEXAS  
HILL COUNTRY RIVER  
REGION, UVALDE COUNTY.**

Learn from world-class experts about native plants, wildflowers, butterflies, insects, birds and mammals through field trips, workshops, seminars and evening programs. Cost varies. (800) 210-0380; www.thcr.com.

**April 24 - 27**

**BALCONES SONGBIRD FESTIVAL - BALCONES CANYON  
LANDS NATIONAL WILDLIFE  
REFUGE, LAGO VISTA.**

A celebration of nature to experience birds, butterflies and wildflowers. Join birding nature walks and enjoy family events, including searches for the endangered golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo. Cost varies. (512) 965-2473; www.balconesornbirdfestival.org

**April 25**

**16TH ANNUAL BLUEBIRD  
FESTIVAL - WELLS POINT.**

Includes educational and entertaining programs, driving tours to hundreds of bluebird nesting boxes throughout town as well as arts and crafts, games and food and educational booths set up throughout the downtown area. (903) 873-3111; www.willspointbluebird.com.

**April 26 - May 3**

**13TH ANNUAL GREAT  
TEXAS BIRDING CLASSIC -  
TEXAS COAST.**

This friendly birding for conservation tournament is held each year to coincide with the spectacular spring migration. To date, \$651,000 has been donated directly to habitat conservation projects through this event. Entry fees vary. (979) 480-0999; www.birdingclassic.org.

# MAY

## May 2

FESTIVAL ON THE BAYOU — HOUSTON AUDUBON'S SIMS BAYOU URBAN NATURE CENTER, HOUSTON.

Come celebrate International Migratory Bird Day with the Houston Audubon Society. Fun for all ages. 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. Ticket prices vary, available in advance or at the door. (713) 640-2407; [www.houstonaudubon.org](http://www.houstonaudubon.org).

## MAY 2 AND 23

DAY ON THE BAY WETLAND KAYAK TRIP — MATAGORDA BAY NATURE PARK.

Escape from the everyday world while paddling through a unique natural wetlands habitat. Discover why Matagorda County is number one in the nation for bird species diversification. Bring water shoes, sunscreen, bug spray, water and snacks for this two and a half mile excursion. 9 a.m. – 1 p.m. \$50 with boat and equipment rental, \$25 with your own boat and equipment. Additional dates: June 20 and August 15. Ages 8 and up. (512) 369-4740; [www.lcra.org/matagorda](http://www.lcra.org/matagorda)

## MAY 9

GUIDED BIRD WALK — LEWISVILLE LAKE ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING AREA, LEWISVILLE.

Accompany a master birder on a guided hike for birders of all skill levels. 7:30 a.m. \$5 per person, reservations required. Ages 10 and up. (972) 219-3930; [www.ias.unt.edu/llela](http://www.ias.unt.edu/llela).



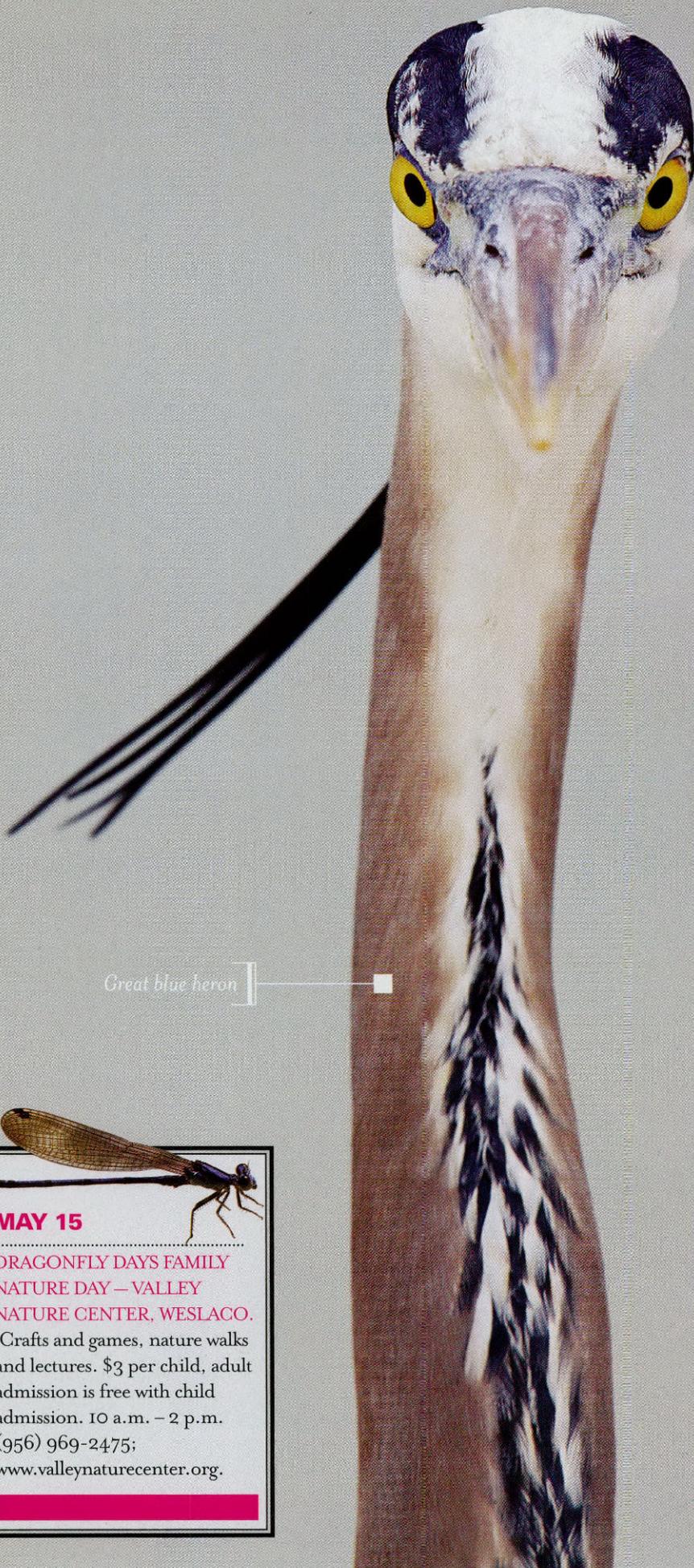
## MAY 9

5TH ANNUAL BIRDATHON — MITCHELL LAKE AUDUBON CENTER, SAN ANTONIO.

Annual fundraising event where birders raise pledges based on species seen. Expert guides make this event fun for birders of all experience levels. Call to sign up or for details. 7:30 a.m. (210) 628-1639; [www.mitchelllakeaudubon.org](http://www.mitchelllakeaudubon.org).



Great egret



Great blue heron



**MAY 15**

**DRAGONFLY DAYS FAMILY NATURE DAY – VALLEY NATURE CENTER, WESLACO.**

Crafts and games, nature walks and lectures. \$3 per child, adult admission is free with child admission. 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. (956) 969-2475; [www.valleynaturecenter.org](http://www.valleynaturecenter.org).

**May 21 – 24**

**DRAGONFLY DAYS – VALLEY NATURE CENTER, WESLACO.**

This festival includes speakers on dragonflies, field trips to different nature destinations, seminars and lots of opportunities to see birds, butterflies and, of course, dragonflies. Cost varies depending on activity. (956) 969-2475; [www.valleynaturecenter.org](http://www.valleynaturecenter.org).

**May 23 – 24**

**RANCH OPEN HOUSE – HILL COUNTRY.**

The Texas Hill Country Nature Photography Alliance will open the ranch gates to visitors wishing to see what nature photography is all about. Visitors must contact each ranch individually in advance to reserve space. Free. (512) 264-1741; [www.hillcountryphoto.org](http://www.hillcountryphoto.org).

**MAY 30**

**WINGS OVER THE WETLANDS – MATAGORDA BAY NATURE PARK.**

Join us for a beginners' program on birding. Learn about birding equipment and migration routes, how to identify common Texas bird species and why birds are considered environmental indicators. Binoculars provided upon request. 8 a.m. – 10 a.m. \$10 per person. All ages welcome. (512) 369-4740; [www.lcra.org/matagorda](http://www.lcra.org/matagorda).

# JUNE

## JUNE 1 - 5

KIDS SUMMER NATURE  
CAMP - VALLEY NATURE  
CENTER, WESLACO.

Contact center for more infor-  
mation. Ages 6 - 8.

(955) 969-2475;

[www.valleynaturecenter.org](http://www.valleynaturecenter.org).

## JUNE 6

KIDS BIRDING 101 -  
MITCHELL LAKE AUDUBON  
CENTER, SAN ANTONIO.

Children will learn more about  
birding, including how to use  
binoculars and identify birds  
they see. Participants will also  
have a chance to explore the  
habitats at Mitchell Lake. 9 a.m.  
- 11 a.m. Free, reservations  
required. (210) 628-1639;  
[www.mitchelllakeaudubon.org](http://www.mitchelllakeaudubon.org).

## JUNE 8 - 9

KIDS SUMMER NATURE CAMP  
- VALLEY NATURE CENTER,  
WESLACO.

Contact center for more  
information. Ages 9 - 12.

(956) 969-2475;

[www.valleynaturecenter.org](http://www.valleynaturecenter.org).

## JUNE 13

GUIDED BIRD WALK -  
LEWISVILLE LAKE ENVIRON-  
MENTAL LEARNING AREA,  
LEWISVILLE.

Accompany a master birder on a  
guided hike for birders of all  
skill levels. Second Saturday of  
every month, weather permit-  
ting. 7:30 a.m. \$7 per person.  
reservations required. Ages 10  
and up. (972) 215-3930;  
[www.ias.unt.edu/lela](http://www.ias.unt.edu/lela).

### EVERY TUESDAY - FRIDAY THROUGH AUGUST

KIDS NATURE DISCOVERY  
CAMP - QUINTA MAZATLAN  
WORLD BIRDING CENTER,  
MCALLEN.

Children will discover the  
wonders of nature during each  
weeklong summer camp.

There is a new camp each week  
for children ages 6 - 12. 9 a.m.  
- 12 noon. \$60 per child/per  
week. (956) 681-3370;

[www.qa.ntamazatlan.com](http://www.qa.ntamazatlan.com)

Belted Kingfisher

## June 22 – 26

BIRDS, BAYOUS, AND BEYOND — HOUSTON AUDUBON'S SIMS BAYOU URBAN NATURE CENTER, HOUSTON.

Get ready for some birding fun and adventure. Our most popular camp is back with new activities and new birds to discover. 9:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m. \$125 for non-members, \$100 for members. Ages 8 – 12. (713) 640-2407; [www.houstonaudubon.org](http://www.houstonaudubon.org).

## JUNE 25

INTRODUCTION TO ORNITHOLOGY — EDITH L. MOORE NATURE SANCTUARY, HOUSTON.

The first in a series of classes to study the remarkable physiology of birds that makes them such amazing creatures of flight, migration and beauty. Instructor: Glenn Olsen. Call for cost and time. (713) 932-1639; [www.houstonaudubon.org](http://www.houstonaudubon.org).

# JULY

## JULY 2, 9, 16 AND 23

INTRODUCTION TO ORNITHOLOGY — EDITH L. MOORE NATURE SANCTUARY, HOUSTON.

The first in a series of classes to study the remarkable physiology of birds that makes them such amazing creatures of

flight, migration and beauty. Instructor: Glenn Olsen. Call for cost and time. (713) 932-1639; [www.houstonaudubon.org](http://www.houstonaudubon.org).

## JULY 14 – 17

KIDS NATURE PHOTO CAMP — VALLEY NATURE CENTER, WESLACO.

Contact center for more information. Ages 8 – 13. (956) 969-2475; [www.valleynaturecenter.org](http://www.valleynaturecenter.org).



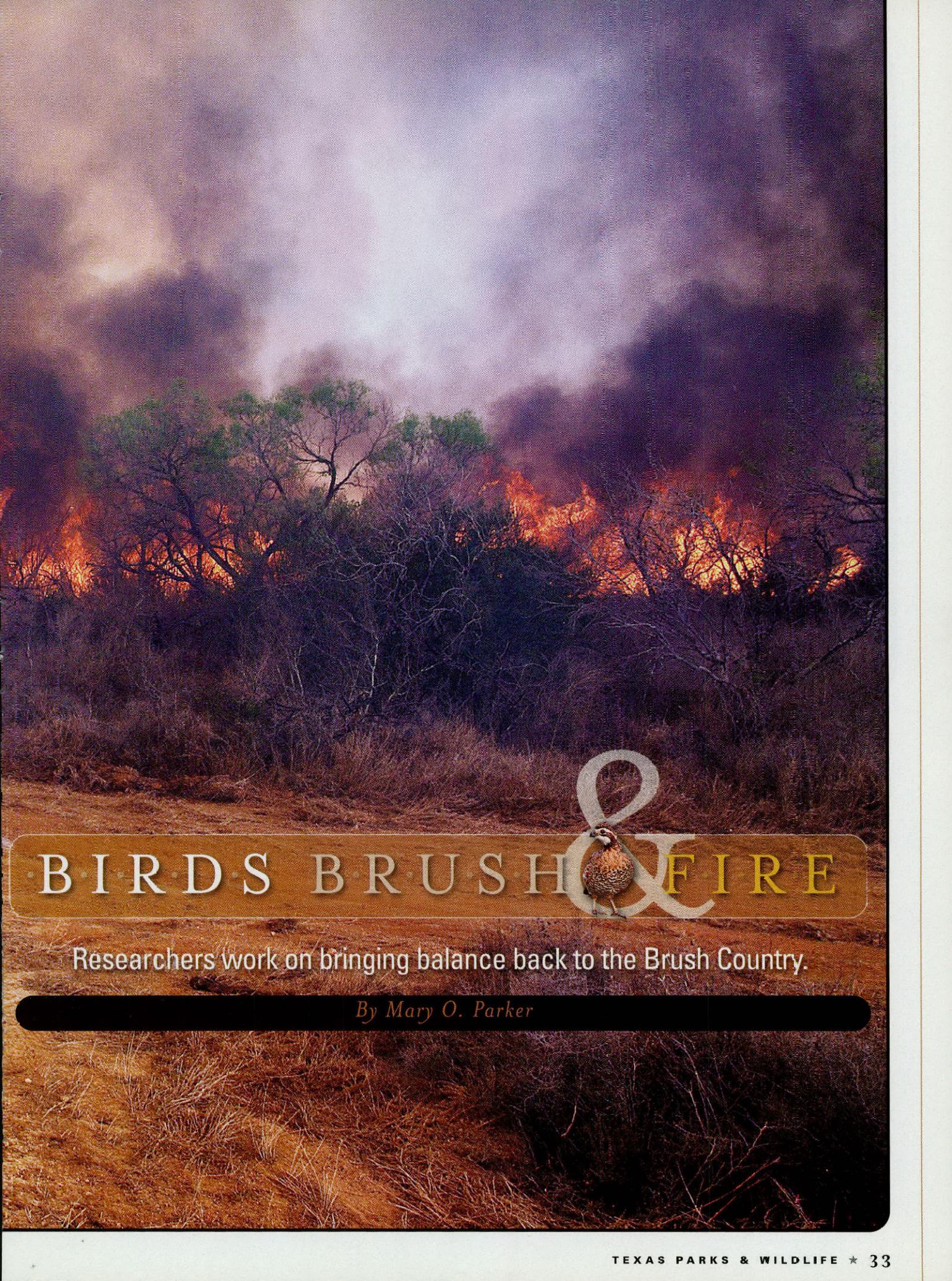
Acorn woodpecker

Green jay





PHOTO BY CHASE COINTANT/PWD



# BIRDS BRUSH & FIRE

Researchers work on bringing balance back to the Brush Country.

*By Mary O. Parker*



**MARCH 2008. ANIMALS FLEE AS AN INTENSE FIRE RAGES, BURNING THROUGH 95 PERCENT OF THE 15,000-ACRE CHAPARRAL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA (THE CHAP). THE HEAVY FUEL-LOAD OF GRASS AND THICK BRUSH AT THE CHAP INTENSIFIES THE FIRE'S HUNGER AND SPAWNS A STAND-ALTERING BLAZE.**

In a press release, TPWD Executive Director Carter Smith responds by telling us: "Obviously, we are concerned about the short term impacts at The Chap from this wildfire, and we should be. But, the bigger story I think is whether these sorts of intense wildfires will be a growing pattern through South Texas."

Now, over a year later, the embers have cooled but Smith's words still linger, leaving us to ponder this "bigger story." In particular, we wonder how South Texas' birds, some of the littlest wildlife, would fare in the face of more big fires like this one.

In order to understand the possible effects on the region's winged creatures, we must first understand how they've already been affected by habitat changes. You see, both this bigger story and its bird tale begin with sheep.

It is said that Sierra Club founder John Muir likened sheep to "hooved locusts who kill more than they eat." This is especially true if there are too many in a place that cannot

sustain them all. Such was the case in South Texas in the late 1800s, when more than 2 million sheep grazed the region. Ecologists believe heavy grazing by the sheep during this period

reduced grass competition and facilitated a relatively rapid expansion of brush in South Texas. Much of the more open grassland habitat present at the time of Anglo settlement changed to a denser brush community favoring species who preferred the brush and reducing densities of grassland dependent wildlife.

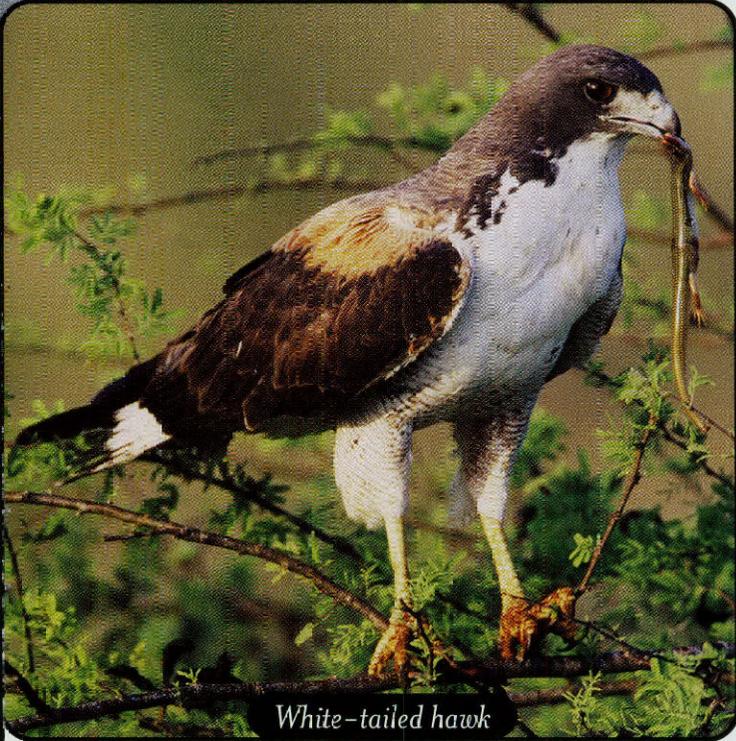
Next on our list of leading characters in our bird tale are cattle. Once sheep grazing on a large scale failed and the grasses became less abundant, ranchers increasingly turned to cattle, animals that are both grazers and browsers.

As cattle browsed, they consumed large quantities of mesquite bean and helped spread it across the range, further increasing brush density. However, what was good for cattle business was unfortunate for grassland birds; when it came to the bear, part of what went in the steer also came out. The habitat alteration that began in earnest with large numbers of sheep continued with the prolific mesquite

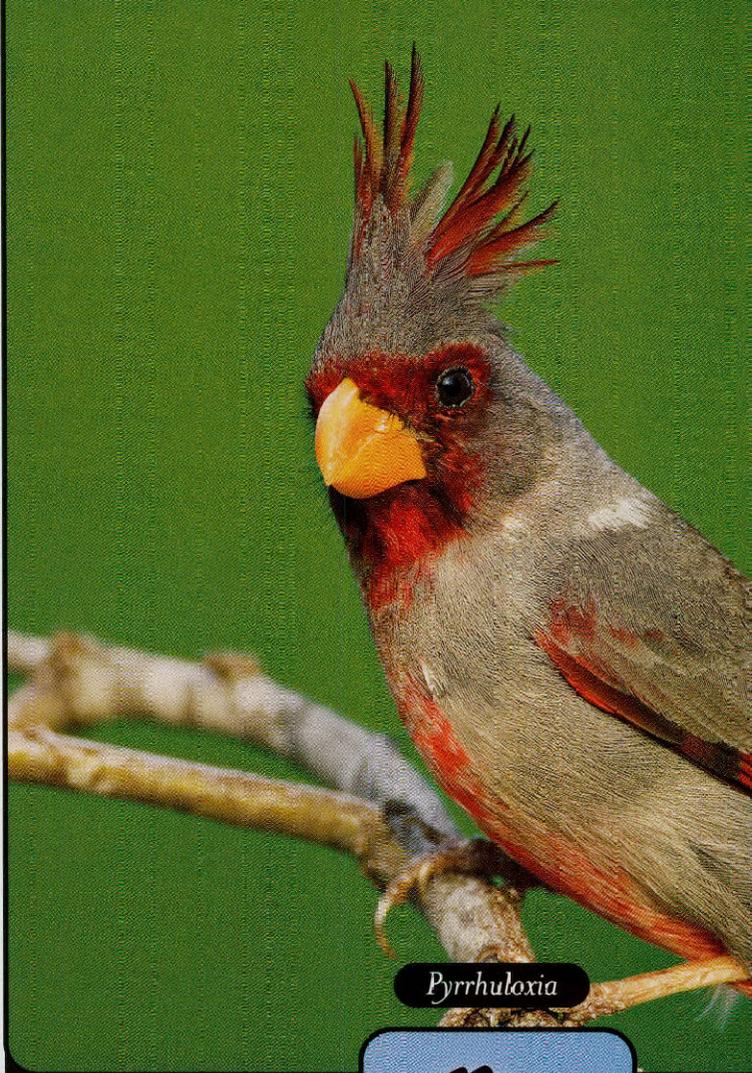
PHOTO BY CHASE FOUNTAIN/TPWD; TOP LEFT: OPPOSITE BY TPWD



Cattle grazing spread mesquite seed, replacing native grassland with brush.



White-tailed hawk



Pyrrhuloxia

Birds like the pyrrhuloxia, white-tailed hawk and Harris's hawk appear to thrive after brush fires.



Harris's hawk

seed-dissemination of the cattle.

Enter our third character: fire. As settlers continued establishing a vested interest in the region, it became important to protect those interests from burning. Natural fires were a major part of the ecosystem and helped mold the species densities and distributions across the region. The natural fires and dry climate generally created a region with extensive grassland/brushland landscapes. Following Anglo settlement, flames were no longer allowed to quicken, and the centuries-old procreation cycles of native grasses were short-circuited. At the same time, nature's method of brush control was thwarted.

Today, while the sheep are mostly gone and, according to Leonard Brennan of the Center for Quail Research in Kingsville, many ranchers have reduced cattle grazing pressure, man is still suppressing fire.

So far our bird tale has taken us from too many sheep destroying too much grass, to too many cattle planting too much mesquite, to too little burning going on. It's led us smack dab to where we are today, which, according to Smith, is: "The tremendous amount of brush that we now see in South Texas was not historically present here, but has built up over time as a result of overgrazing, changing land use patterns, and suppression of fire."

What was historically present there? While early accounts often conflict, most likely yesterday's Brush Country was a healthy mix of brush mottes with patches of native grasses. One account describes its pre-European settlement state as a prairie with grass as high as a man on horseback. However, this part of our tale is probably taller than the grass and has grown with the telling. The truth is that many historians agree that what early European settlers, who often had no other basis of comparison, were calling prairies were really interspersed grassy areas of 50-100 acres (with man-on-horseback-high grass in very wet, very rare years).

Cliff Shackelford, TPWD nongame ornithologist, says that while the mix between brush and grass wasn't necessarily even, "there was certainly a lot more native grass than we have now. It's also a safe bet that the brush didn't blanket the large areas that it does today. Fire kept the woody species



*Long-billed thrasher*



*Black-crested titmouse*



*Olive sparrow*

Species like the long-billed thrasher, northern cardinal, olive sparrow and black-crested titmouse need dense woody brush cover to thrive. As the woody plant species (mesquite, huisache, retama) have moved north due to fire suppression, so have these birds.

from spreading. Since modern humans have suppressed fire, and some have almost eliminated fire, the woody species have spread north.

While no one is comfortable saying for sure exactly who the area's frequent fliers were before sheep, cattle and man's vested interests changed the habitat, they will say there was more diversity.

As the woody plant species have moved north, Shackelford says, so have the birds that need woody brush cover, like the long-billed thrasher, olive sparrow and green jay. "Species that like mesquite, huisache, retama and dozens of other scrub species are inching northward thanks to fire suppression," he says. "What's in short supply after fire suppression are larger grasslands or savannahs where so many grassland birds abound, including more than a dozen overwintering grassland species."

**"THE TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF BRUSH THAT WE NOW SEE IN SOUTH TEXAS WAS NOT HISTORICALLY PRESENT THERE, BUT HAS BUILT UP OVER TIME AS A RESULT OF OVERGRAZING, CHANGING LAND USE PATTERNS, AND SUPPRESSION OF FIRE."**

— Carter Smith, TPWD executive director

Tom Langschie, coordinator of the South Texas Wintering Birds Program in Kingsville, has also noticed these trends.

"We've seen a big expansion of brushland birds such as Harris's hawk, white-tipped dove, great kiskadee, green jay, long-billed thrasher and the Audubon oriole," Langschie says. "This is because the brush has become like a bridge that allows the birds to travel further

north than they used to be able to. There's always been a brush component to South Texas, but as brush has become more abundant, the cover is giving brushland birds more mobility."

These days, the historical proportion between grassland and brushland species is long gone. But, with more fires like the one at The Chap, the proportion we're seeing today could become more balanced.

"It's hard to say what things would be like with more fire,"

Langschied says. “I do think, though, that with a more even mix between brush and grasses there would be more diversity, and overall, it’s best to have a healthy mix of both.”

Shackelford points out the benefits. “I’m a big fan of fire and what it does for birds,” he says. “More frequent cool-burning fires would maintain a healthy grass cover that would keep woody species from encroaching and dominating after shading out the grasses.”

Already, says Langschied, birds such as loggerhead shrikes, and American kestrels are doing better because of it. David Synatzske, manager of The Chap, says fire is also beneficial for quail. “In the long run the quail will do better because the fire thinned things out,” he says. “They don’t like it much when the brush gets too thick and do better when it’s a good mix of nesting cover and brush.”

Brennan agrees, and says that when conditions get too thick, “some form of disturbance is needed to reset [them] back to a point where they are favorable for quail.”

While mourning doves currently flourish in South Texas, they would be expected to do even better with more fire.

“I think that the fire itself created a habitat that we haven’t had in a long time,” Synatzske says. “Now the dove will be able to find the seeds that had been covered up by other vegetation. Immediately after the fire there were easy pickings.”

However, there’s another side to the story. More fires in South Texas would likely have a negative effect on the brush-loving species that have been reaping benefits from fire suppression. Langschied considers the Audubon oriole, which “has been on a consistent northward roll,” to be “one of our best indicator species of how fire in the area would affect brush birds.”

Langschied is one of the researchers taking part in a joint study between Texas A&M University–Kingsville and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The study has just begun to take a closer look at how the March 2008 fire affected the birds at The Chap.

“I’m particularly going to be watching what’s going on with the Audubon oriole,” Langschied says. “This bird has had some of the highest counts at The Chap of anywhere in South Texas in previous Christmas bird counts. Because this bird needs some brush for cover and nesting, the Audubon oriole could almost be the poster child in terms of how fire affects brush birds.”

Brent Ortego, TPWD wildlife diversity biologist, notes the effects of the reduced density of woody vegetation due to the Chap fire. “You would speculate that species which prefer dense woody vegetation like black-crested titmouse, Bewick’s wren, long-billed thrasher, olive sparrow and northern

cardinal would be hurt by the fire in the short term, and species like mourning dove, Cassin’s sparrow, black-throated sparrow, and pyrrhuloxia would benefit.

Ortego is careful to use the word *speculate* because, in our bird-tale portion of the “bigger story,” nothing’s simple. There’s yet another set of variables to consider: The ghost of past grazing practices has left the footprint of non-native grasses on the region.

“Unfortunately, a lot of times after fire, what comes back are non-native, or exotic, grasses instead of natives,” explains Langschied. “If fire goes through and all of a sudden these invasive grasses become more dominant — you know these grasses that were planted to ‘improve the rangeland’ — if these take hold instead of the natives, then that could affect diversity.”

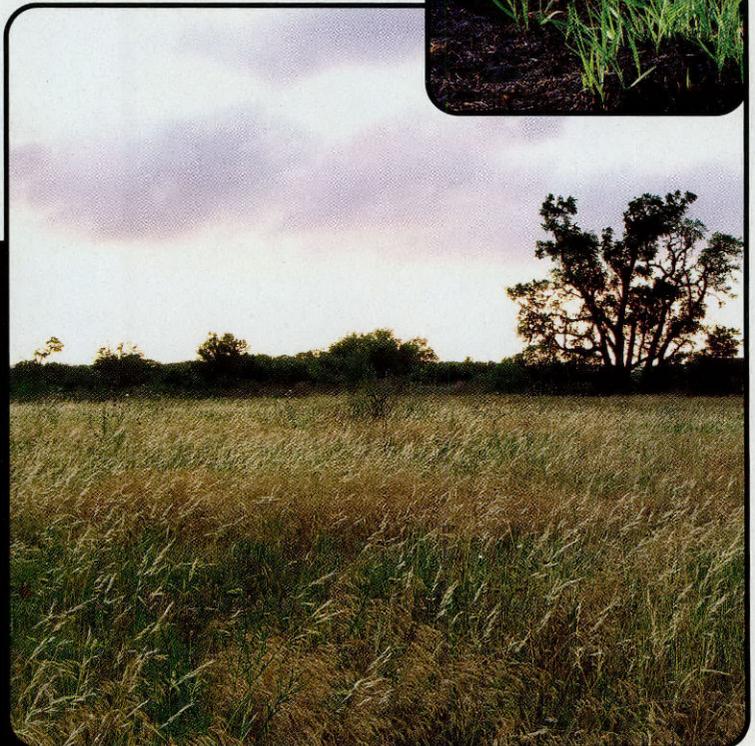
“Exotics tend to dominate and take over,” he adds, “resulting in the sort of homogeneity that doesn’t provide the variety needed to sustain a good variety of grassland birds.”

So, as our tale comes to an end, just how does it end? How would more fires in South Texas affect birds? What we do know is that more fires would probably increase diversity by creating a better balance between grassy and brushy areas. We also know that more prescribed fires would be the best way to achieve this, rather than more intense, stand-altering fires like the one at The Chap last year.

Beyond that, we know little for sure when it comes to South Texas birds and fire. That’s why, says Ortego, researchers are looking to the upcoming study to provide more information and help them “develop a defensible hypothesis.” Thus, as we bring this portion of the bigger story to a close, it appears that much of it still remains to be told. ★



**Right: The historical proportion between grassland and brushland has changed, leaving less native grassland. After a fire, new grasses pop back up — sometimes the desired natives, but also invasive non-natives, unfortunately. Exotics create homogeneity that doesn’t provide the variety needed to sustain a good mix of grassland birds.**





B I R D



B I R D

FOR MORE THAN 50 YEARS, THE FREEPORT BIRD COUNT HAS ATTRACTED SHARP-EYED SPOTTERS FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE.

BY CAROL FLAKE CHAPMAN

PHOTO © ARTHUR MORRIS



GREAT BLUE HERON

**A**s I head out in the pre-dawn darkness of a cool December morning on the Gulf Coast, I'm grateful that the wind has died down and the temperature has held above 60 degrees. I'm on my way to join a team of birders participating in the annual Freeport Christmas Bird Count, and I've been warned that it will be a long, demanding day, particularly if the weather doesn't cooperate.

The Freeport count is something of a legend among birders, and though I grew up in this part of the world, and my dad often participates, this will be my first count. I'll be joining the oldest and largest ongoing citizen-science project of its kind in the world.

Like the other counts, now more than 1,500, that take place around the country between mid-December and early January, the Freeport count will take place over a period of 24 hours, though almost all counting is done from dawn to dusk. The objective is to count every bird spotted within a radius of 15 miles, and there is an undeniable element of competition involved among different counts.

As Mike Austin, one of the Freeport organizers told me: "There's always the excitement of seeing a bird that hasn't been on the count before. But the competition is really to get as many different ones as you can." The top count is decided by the total number of species recorded rather than the total number of birds.

While the Christmas Bird Count itself has been going for more than a hundred years, the Freeport count was started 52 years ago by birding luminary Victor Emanuel when he was just 16 years old. As it happens, birds, like humans, prefer to winter

in warm coastal areas, and California and Florida topped the count lists before Freeport entered the fray. But Freeport includes a remarkable diversity of habitat within its range, from beach and marsh to coastal prairie and bottomland forest. In 1972, the Freeport count hit a record total of 226 species, and the count began to top the national list on a regular basis, until a new count, centered on the sparsely populated Mad Island area, just down the coast, took the crown. Emanuel still participates in the Freeport count, and I'll be joining his team during the latter part of the day.

I arrive at a parking lot on the edge of downtown Freeport, and the rest of the team I'm joining for the first part of the day is already there, plotting strategy. The area to be covered in the count is divided up into 10 sections, with a team assigned to cover each section. I'll be starting out in the mostly coastal Section 7, headed by birding veteran Elric McHenry, who has been part of the count since 1961.

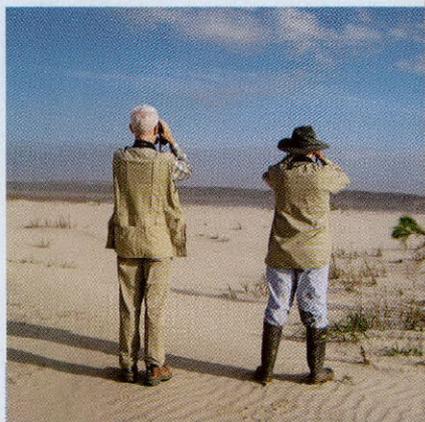
"This is as good as it gets, weather wise," says McHenry.

"We've been here in pouring rain and when it's been cold and icy." McHenry is wearing knee-high rubber boots, in preparation for a tromp through the marshes. Last year, he said, one of his team left a boot behind in the mud.

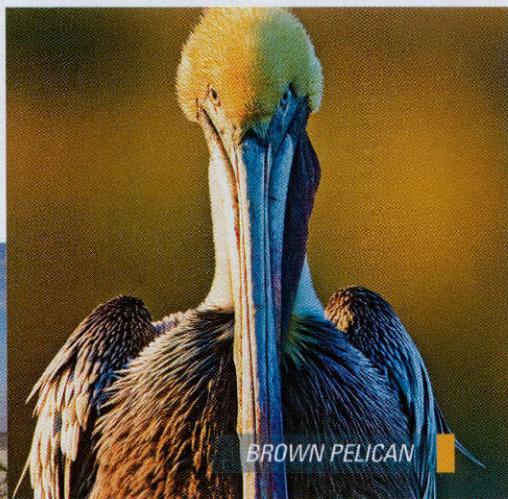
McHenry dispatches a couple from Houston to cover the tiny town of Quintana Beach, where there is a small bird sanctuary and some nearby wet meadows. I'll join McHenry and Leonard Frost, a five-year veteran of the count, as they scour a marshy area under the main bridge to Quintana and then a stretch of Bryan Beach.

"After doing the count for so long," says McHenry, "I look for the same birds in the same places."

McHenry begins to add to the count with the rails he spots deep in the marsh. We pile in McHenry's four-wheel-drive vehicle and slowly prowl down the beach, and I get carried away by the sight of dozens of sanderlings, the little windup birds that enliven the beach. It's heartening to see so many, just



Counters are dispatched to specified locations across the area. There is an atmosphere of competition among the participants, who are trying to spot unusual species as well as achieve the top count.



BROWN PELICAN





WILLET

months after the far edges of Hurricane Ike roared through. We count all manner of gulls as we go along, and I'm amazed at how fast McHenry can identify and number the birds skittering along the ground or swooping by in the air. Birds are identified by markings, behavior and habitat. But this is an art, learned over time, as color and markings can vary, depending on season as well as age and sex.

We come to a new cut along the beach formed by Hurricane Ike and determine that we won't be able to cross. This is a spot, however, where McHenry usually spots a number of snowy plovers, so we set out on foot for a closer look. I lag behind and spot a bird that looks something like a tern, but I suspect is not a tern. I mention it to McHenry and Frost, and they agree to take a look. And as they backtrack, McHenry spies one, then two, then 12 snowy plovers! My bird is a killdeer, which should be more appropriately called a "kill-



**The object is to count every bird spotted within a radius of 15 miles.**

dee," says McHenry, imitating the bird's distinctive call.

And now it's time for me to brave the Freeport Jetty, which has gained a reputation as the toughest assignment in the count, ever since famous birding author Kenn Kaufman, then a novice, was swept off the jetty back in 1973, along with an expensive telescope. This year, only one volunteer is stationed on the jetty, and he's clearly a hardy sort. When I reach the end of the jetty, trying to avoid the waves that crash over the boulders, David Sarkozi of Houston is sweeping the distance with his binoculars. I try not to distract him as he explains that his day



# This is an art, learned over time, as color and markings can vary.

job is managing public safety systems for the Houston police department and that he took over the jetty assignment 10 years ago.

Sarkozi points out the buoys that mark the outer edge of the boundary for the count. "It's been a challenging morning," he says, ducking the spray from a wave. "This jetty is legendary. This is extreme birding." I can't disagree, as I try to find a spot to avoid getting soaked or swept off my feet.

"There's a sandwich tern," he says. He's scanning even as he speaks, and he stops, puts down the binoculars and peers into the scope. "Is that a black-legged kittiwake?" he asks, his voice changing pitch. "Look at the M-shaped pattern. Yes!"

It turns out that not only is this an unusual bird to spot on the jetty, it's the first one he's ever seen. It's not often, he says, that veteran birders coming to the same spot will add a bird to their lifetime list.

"I deserve a kittiwake," he says, "after all these years out here!"

Meanwhile, the last two anglers that have been braving the waves at the end of the jetty finally give up, shaking their heads and gathering their gear.

I leave Sarkozi to his extreme birding and head to the Peach Point Wildlife Management Area to meet Victor Emanuel and his team, who have been combing the refuge all morning, with some heartening results. Over a picnic lunch, Emanuel, who leads birders on tours all over the world, talks about why he keeps coming back for the Freeport count.

"One of the great things of the Christmas Count, it's been done over 100 years," he says. "It's something that you do over and over, and all these memories come back. It becomes a thread through your life. You see the birds that are like old friends."

Over time, the data recorded by the counters, and entered in a central database maintained by the National



Audubon Society, reveal long-term trends in the numbers and ranges of birds, showing declines in many species. The data can also reveal a recovery, as with the brown pelican, which had virtually disappeared from the area.

"I'll never forget when I saw my first brown pelican," says team member Fred Collins, whose first count was in 1969, when he was age 20.

After lunch, the team covers the grounds of a schoolyard and then forms a small convoy to survey areas along the streets. Vehicles screech to a halt as Victor sees something in a large grove of oak trees on a vacant lot. Emanuel is a pied piper of birds, I think, as I look around at what seems at first to be some bleak winter branches and brush, and suddenly it is full of rustling and chirping bird life. One bird in particular draws Emanuel's attention, and he patiently directs me toward an impenetrable pile of brush.

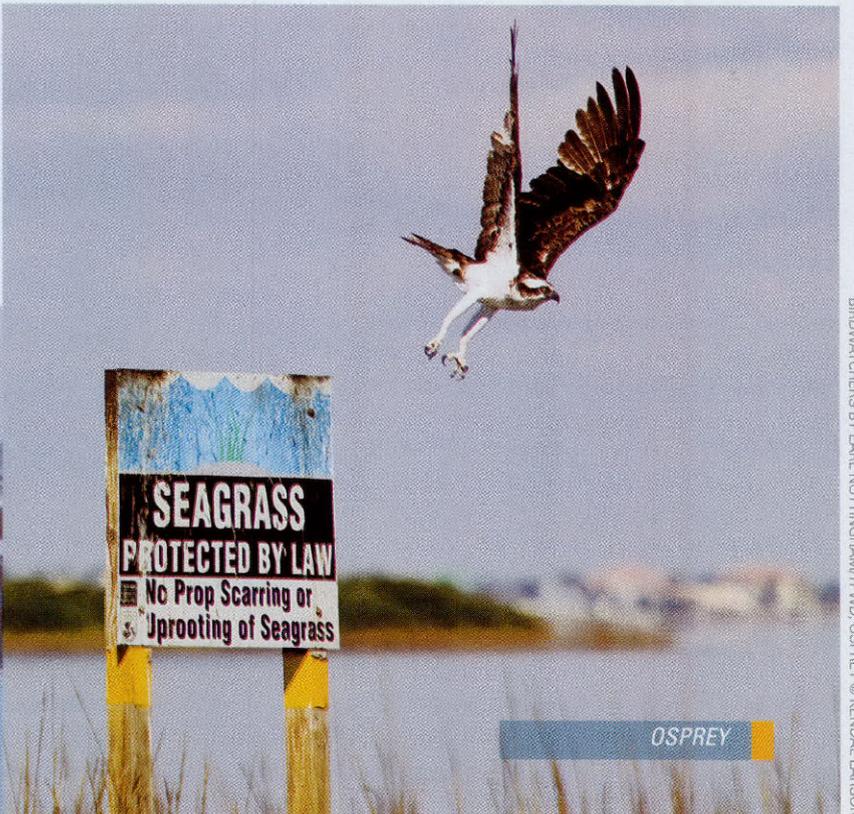
"Watch for how the wings seem to shudder," he says. I peer through the branches and finally see a small brown bird with a rust-colored tail and white ring around its eye. It's a hermit thrush, according to Emanuel. There is something very appealing about this plain brown bird, and I'm transfixed.

Later, as the sun begins to set, we travel past a gate along some large fields in search of a short-eared owl that has been spotted there before. Though we don't see one, we do see a vast flying squadron of geese in the distance, numbering in the hundreds, a reassuring sight that seems to stir some ancestral memory of abundance.

It's finally time to stop as darkness falls. A couple from Houston participating in their first count are still exclaiming over the thrilling sight of a scarlet tanager earlier that day. They'll be back for the count next year, they say.



Freeport has a remarkable diversity of habitat within its range, from beach and marsh to coastal prairie and bottomland forest.



OSPREY

BIRDWATCHERS BY EARL NOTTINGHAM/TM/D. OSPREY © KENDAL LARSON



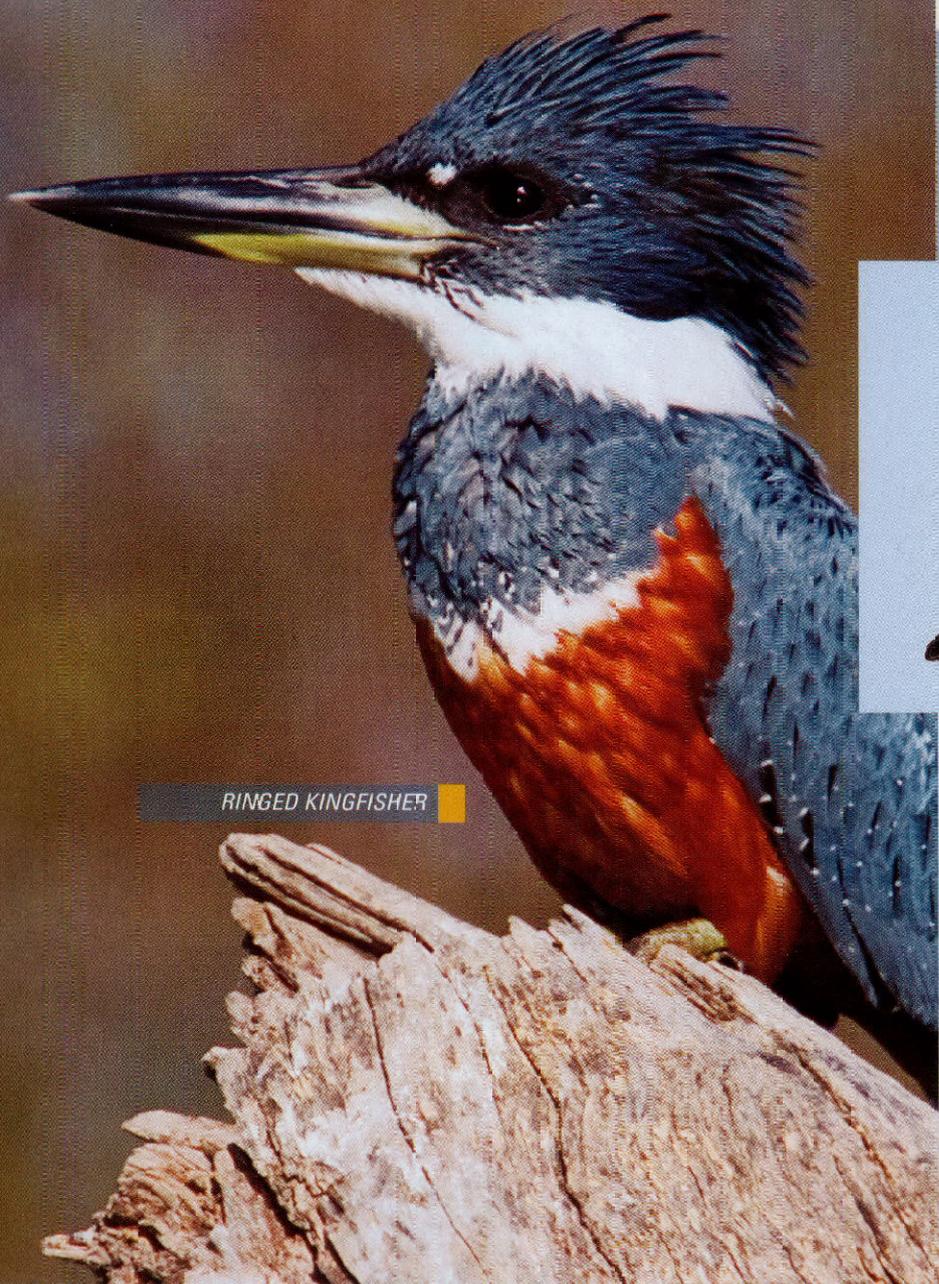


SANDHILL CRANES



CRANES © ARTHUR MORRIS; SANDERLINGS © ROLF NUSSBAUMER

SANDERLINGS

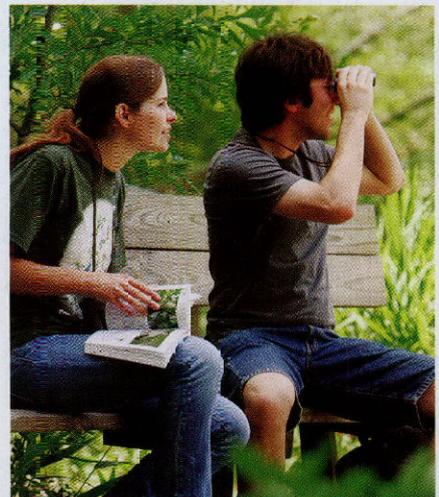


RINGED KINGFISHER

While the Christmas Bird Count itself has been going for more than a hundred years, the Freeport count was started 52 years ago by a local luminary Victor Emanuel when he was just 16 years old.



VERMILION FLYCATCHER



KINGFISHER © LARRY DITTO; FLYCATCHER © GREG LASLEY; OTHER BY TPWD

That evening, all the teams assemble at a local hall for the Countdown, or toting up of all the birds of the day, by species and number. The ritual includes what Mike Austin calls the Court of Inquisition, which is designed to question the rare birds that have been spotted during the day. The official compilers, Mike Austin and Victor Emanuel, are joined by expert local birder Ron Weeks.

First come the most common birds, seen every year, then the species at least three out of five years. And finally the rare birds, of which one will be declared the "bird of the count." Emanuel looks at his checklist, and species are called out, until a total of 200 are mentioned, a respectable and reassuring number following a major hurricane.

Those who have seen unusual birds describe them with the intensity of a witness testifying in court. I'm a little disappointed that Sarkozy's kittiwake does not prevail as top bird over a ringed kingfisher.

With the Mad Island team counting more than 230 species again for 2008, it's clear that Freeport may never regain its

**Those who have seen unusual birds describe them with the intensity of a witness testifying in court.**

crowd, as more and more people and more industrial plants crowd into the coastal prairie. But I'm still thinking about the moment when those little snowy plovers appeared, almost like magic, out of nowhere, and about that elusive hermit thrush, so plain and yet so remarkable. I later learn that the song of hermit thrush is considered by many birders the most beautiful of all. I listen to a recording of its pure, plaintive song, and I realize why the bird count has worsened for so long. This is the way it happens for birders, succumbing to this passion and this work, bird by bird. And this is why every bird counts. ✧

# Keep Texas Wild

## COME FLY WITH ME

Birds travel across continents to find food and warmth.



*Red-breasted mergansers*

### » ON THE WING

ON A CHILLY WINTER DAY, have you ever wished you could just fly away to a place that's warm and sunny? Every year, millions of birds travel distances from a few miles to thousands of miles in search of more food, a better place to nest, milder weather or longer days. Many birds from the northern United States and Canada fly south to spend the winter in Texas. Some species travel further down to Mexico, Central America and even South America. Birds have natural instincts that tell them when to migrate. Just like you remember the way home from school, birds follow the same routes every year.



## WHERE DID EVERYBODY GO?

About half of the 634 bird species found in Texas migrate. Some birds from Canada and the northern states spend the winter in Texas. Some birds spend warm months here, then travel farther south during winter. For example, the yellow-billed cuckoo spends April through October in Texas, but migrates to the tropical forests of South America for the winter.



## WHY DO THEY FLY SO FAR AWAY?

There are several reasons why birds migrate: to find more food, to find nesting space, to find milder weather and to enjoy longer daylight hours.



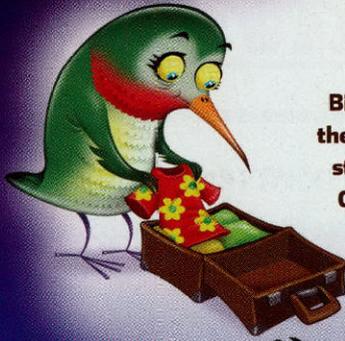
## IS THERE A BIRD MAP?

Birds use landmarks such as mountains, rivers, coastlines ("topography") to find their way, but they use other means as well. They seem to have an inner compass that helps them stay on course. Birds may also use the position of the sun during the day or the stars at night to guide them. They notice changes in climate and ecology as well.



## READY, SET, GO!

Birds inherit traits to help them migrate. Birds can sense changes in the length of the day and sunlight. Before birds begin migration, they start to eat more. Some build up enough fat to fly across the entire Gulf of Mexico in one day! Many migratory birds also have longer, more pointed wings and weigh less than non-migratory birds.



## HEY, WAIT FOR ME!

Most birds migrate in groups. Even solitary birds will fly together while migrating. This keeps birds safe from predators. Have you ever looked up to see a "V" formation of migrating birds? These were probably geese, ducks, pelicans or cranes.



## ARE WE THERE YET? ARE WE THERE YET? ARE WE THERE YET?

Most of the migrating birds we see in Texas travel along the Central Flyway and the Mississippi Flyway. (You can go online to see maps of these routes.)

Mississippi Flyway



## NOT FOR SISSIES

Migration is dangerous. Nearly half of the birds that leave in the fall don't return the following spring. Some accidentally fly into buildings and high wires. Some are killed by predators (including pet cats). For some, habitat that was there the year before is gone, leaving them without food, water or shelter for a much-needed rest.



# Spike's Activity Page



## >> BIRD BRAINS

MEET AN ORNITHOLOGIST (BIRD BIOLOGIST) AND A FUTURE BIRDING GUIDE. THEY FELL IN LOVE WITH BIRDS WHEN THEY WERE YOUR AGE!

### CLIFF SHACKELFORD

A lifelong Texan, Cliff Shackelford's interest in birds started when he was 9 years old. While walking through the woods, he spotted an incredible black-and-white woodpecker. He visited the local library and found a guidebook and found the bird – the pileated woodpecker. He checked out that guidebook so many times that his parents finally bought it for him. His parents thought Cliff would outgrow this interest, but he never did. Cliff became an expert who works for TPWD. Cliff says he'd love to spend every day observing birds in the wild, but he spends a lot of his time speaking on behalf of birds. Cliff says beginning birders need a bird book and binoculars, but should look not only with their eyes, but also with their ears. You can see if your family wants to build a wildscape to attract birds, with a birdbath and a feeder. Then you can watch birds while you eat your breakfast, just like Cliff!



### JESSE HUTH

Jesse Huth, a 17-year-old homeschooler, has already made an impression on Texas birders. For a recent Eagle Scout project, Jesse built a large bird blind on a nature refuge in his hometown of Wimberley. A neighbor took Jesse under her wing when he was six, teaching him to identify birds by silhouette, calls or songs, and field marks. Jesse sat on that porch every morning, and says it quickly became the best part of his day. At age nine, Jesse competed in his first birding contest, the Great Texas Birding Classic. With a team of friends, they find as many bird species as they can along the Texas Coast. "Birding is something that can sound dull until you've tried it," Jesse says. "You just can't believe how many different species of birds there are and how much fun it can be trying to find them all. It's like a treasure hunt. Find some binoculars and just watch for awhile – you'll be amazed at what you can see in your own backyard!" Jesse will attend Texas A&M University and hopes to become a professional bird guide.

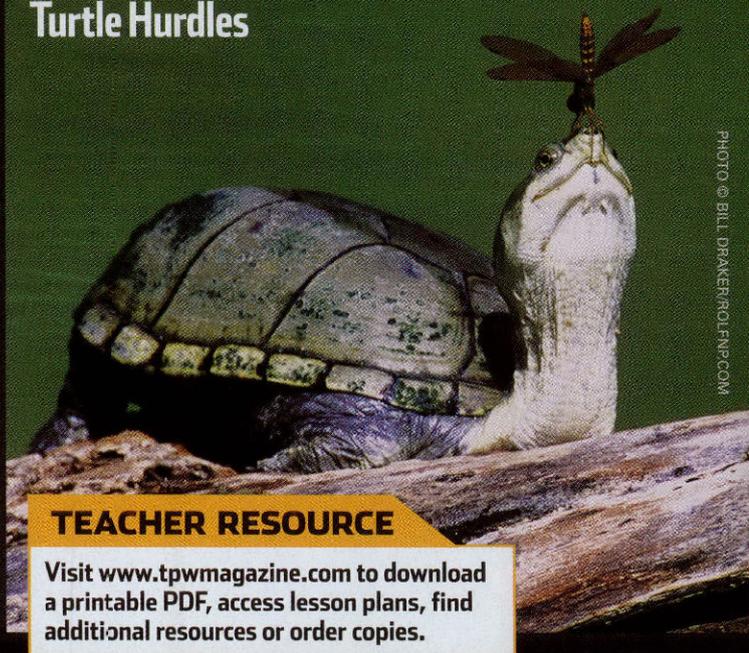


## >> WILD MATH



Purple martins can migrate from Madison, Wisconsin, all the way to Bogotá, Colombia. If the distance from Madison to Houston is 1,226 miles, from Houston to San Salvador, El Salvador, is 1,176 miles, and from San Salvador to Bogotá is 528 miles, how far does the purple martin have to fly during its migration? Can you create another "migration math" problem to challenge your friends?

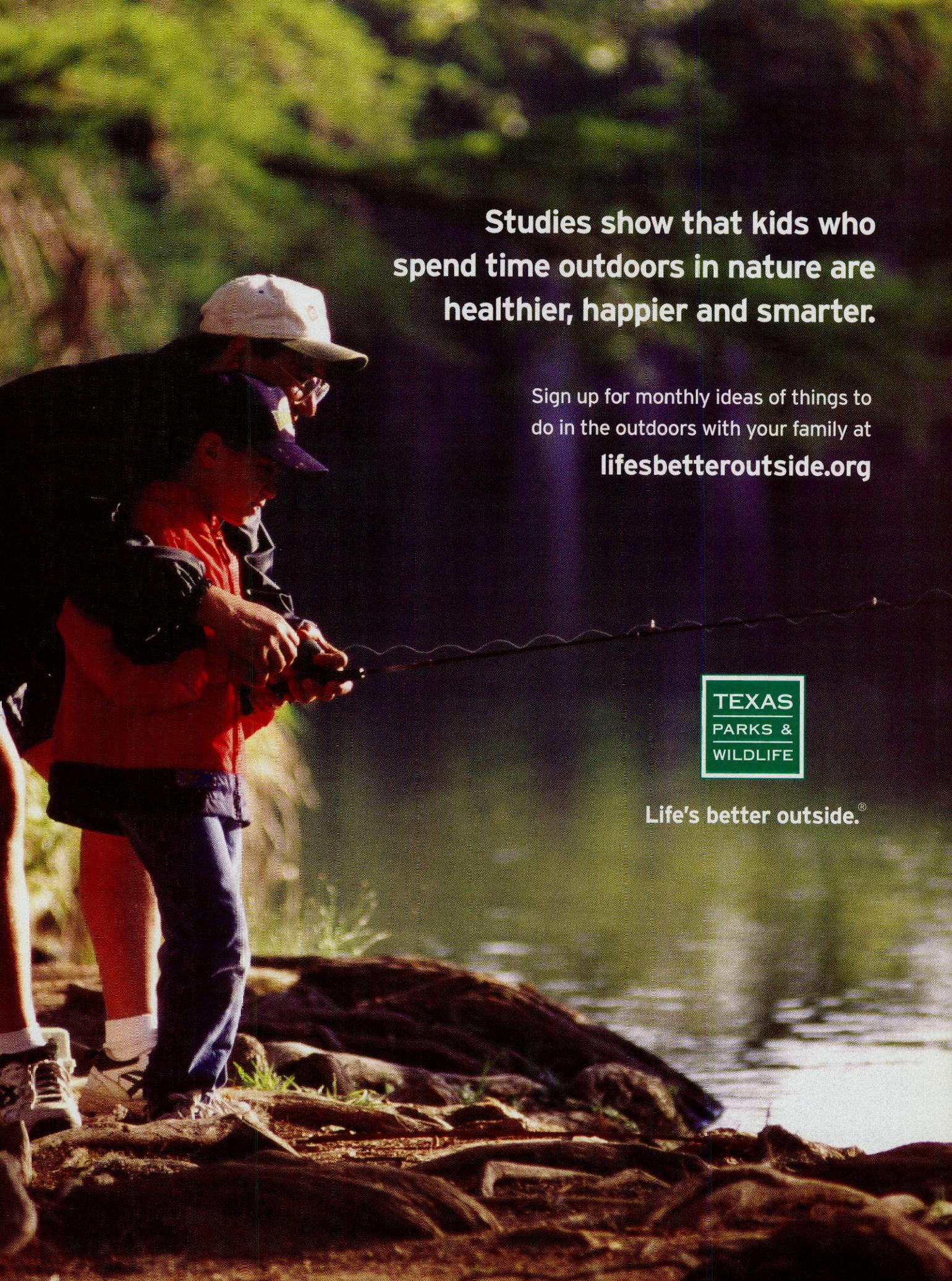
## NEXT MONTH: Turtle Hurdles



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PHOTO © BILL DRAKER/ROLF.COM

A man and a child are fishing together by a river. The man, wearing a white cap and glasses, is standing behind the child, who is wearing a red jacket and a blue cap. They are both holding fishing rods. The background shows a lush green forest and a body of water.

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# Light and Shadow

*Jeanne Norsworthy and Fresno Ranch*

BY E. DAN KLEPPER

The vistas of the Big Bend in southwest Texas have inspired many works of art over the last century. Alongside Yosemite, Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, the region's austere beauty and unusual topography are equal to any found throughout the continent.

But this vast swath of the northern Chihuahuan Desert also generates a unique draw all its own. The angst embodied in the region's volcanic upheaval conjures an allure beyond the canvas, compelling artists from across the country to abandon creature comforts and move to the Big Bend. Here, many artists live in stone ruins, campers, tents and caves, contending with the intense heat, the winter chill and the venomous

wildlife, all in an attempt to understand the enigma that lies in the mountain and canyon landscapes scattered across hundreds of uninhabited West Texas miles. The geography, lit by an ever-changing light, is as cryptic as the human psyche. But with time and contemplation, an artist can thrive on conclusions that are as much about the land as about their own internal landscapes.

Some artists who choose to live here are dependent on their own entrepreneurial wits to survive. Others bring their fortunes with them. The late Jeanne Norsworthy, painter and great-granddaughter of *Dallas Morning News* publisher George B. Dealey, embodied the artist's trifecta — talent, money and an unrelenting call to capture

the beauty of the Big Bend. At the age of 47, undeterred by her privileged past, Norsworthy compromised her lifestyle in order to paint the West Texas landscape. For almost a decade she occupied a run-down adobe within the heart of Fresno Ranch, a keystone of this remote northern Chihuahuan Desert wilderness.

Fresno Ranch sits within earshot of the mountains of both Texas and Mexico, and its relatively static topography, a brief pause in the ridges and arroyos of the region's igneous tumble, provides a staging ground for a library of natural phenomena. It is an attribute that Norsworthy recognized and embraced, not only choosing to live within it in an attempt to uncover its substance beyond the rigid aesthetics of its

landscape but also to possess it completely.

Norsworthy accumulated a checkerboard of 11 sections of the surrounding countryside, starting with the heart of the ranch along the Rio Grande just west of Lajitas and adding parcels northward as they became available, eventually compiling a 7,000-acre laboratory of elements and atmospheres. Now, thanks to a collaboration between her estate, the Nature Conservancy of Texas, federal Land and Water Conservation matching funds and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the ranch resides in the hands of all Texans, artists and otherwise.

It is perhaps the most important land acquisition in the evolution of the park system's grandest achievement — Big Bend Ranch State Park. The purchase closes the gap between strategic sections within the park and Fresno's private in-holdings, thereby resolving both protection and access issues. It also adds 8.5 miles of unbroken river frontage to the 25-five mile stretch of Rio Grande River

corridor between Lajitas and Presidio currently residing under the protective custody of the state.

"Jeanne was a very distinguished artist," former TPWD Executive Director Andrew Sansom says of Norsworthy. (Sansom helped lead the effort to establish Big Bend Ranch State Park.) "She created a beautiful body of art, much of it done there at the Fresno Ranch. We first began to speak with her in the late 1980s. I last discussed the acquisition of this property a few months before her death, and she told me she wanted it to become part of the park, so in a very large measure, this is fulfilling her vision."

Norsworthy never lacked for vision, particularly throughout her years at Fresno Ranch. But an artist is never at a loss for a muse while under the Fresno spell. The property begins in the shadow of the Solitario, one of the planet's most impressive collapsed volcanic domes, then follows the water- and wildlife-rich corridor known as Fresno Canyon south

before terminating, with the nation itself, at the Rio Grande border. Along the way are springs and seeps, migratory birds, willow woodlands, mule deer, peregrine falcon, bats, horned lizards, rare reticulated geckos, and a catalogue of historic and prehistoric sites.

However, as Norsworthy discovered, this litany of environmental treasures does not necessarily complete the list of Fresno's distinguishing features. The artist, recognizing the infinite reflection in the shallows, set out to capture Fresno in its entirety, painting not only what she saw but also what she sensed. Almost at odds with the surrounding Chihuahuan Desert realities, Fresno hovers like a dream, cradled among the jagged bluffs of the Sierra Ricas, the Bofecillos and the rigors of the Contrabando. Light here bends, it seems, to the will of sorcery, scattering across dawn in crepuscular rays, pin-sharp as lasers or awash in a haze. Virga filters the ambient dusk; night skies explode in terrific fulguration. The summer heat strangles the air and winter rolls in great gusts across the lechugilla flats. Morning breaks so quietly that nothing but the muted rumble of the Rio Grande's Fresno rapids can be heard echoing off the river cliffs almost a mile away.

A hike along Fresno Canyon, a temperamental waterway that alternates between a wide, flat wash and walls squeezed tight, provides a chance for the hiker to wander in aimlessness or with intent, never sure what will arise and

(continued on page 55)

THE ARTIST, RECOGNIZING THE INFINITE REFLECTION IN THE SHALLOWS, SET OUT TO CAPTURE FRESNO IN ITS ENTIRETY, PAINTING NOT ONLY WHAT SHE SAW BUT ALSO WHAT SHE SENSED.



*Moon Dance of the Yucca Moth*, a painting of Fresno Canyon by Jeanne Norsworthy (left). A photographic portrait of the artist. (below)



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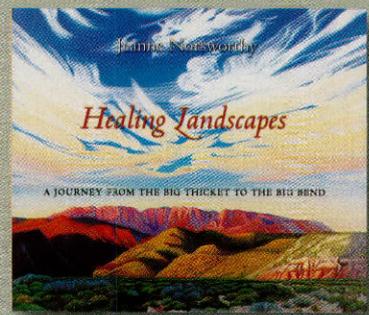
(continued from page 51)

scatter from the thickets of cottonwood and willow stands. In late afternoon the ravens strafe the canyon floor, wing beats slow and droopy in the heat. Their shadows slash the trail as they call the canyon in a rasping refrain: "Not you. Not now. Not yet."

Art has a way of speaking truth to beauty. Good landscape painters, in particular, understand that nature's façade — with its glowing sunsets, thundering waterfalls and purple peaks — is only the prologue to a more compelling picture. A landscape will yield its entire story, not just its glamour but also its despair, its calamity, apathy and grace, once pinned beneath the discerning artist's brushstroke. And it is often a story that mirrors the artist's own. Towards the end of Norsworthy's decade at Fresno, she struggled in the shadow of cancer and the collapse of a marriage. But rather than allowing these traumas to compromise her love of the desert, she embraced the landscape with a greater intensity, painting the geography of Fresno in a light that illuminated the intrinsic link between humans and the natural world. In doing so, she exposed a bond that is at once both divine and vulnerable, illustrating

the fundamental belief that a mountain profile is no less perfect or more compromised by time and turmoil than the contours of the human lifespan. The desert reciprocated, granting her solace in her darkest hours and hope in those rare moments of brightness.

Fresno is the Spanish name for the ash tree (*Fraxinus velutina*) that grows within the ranch's namesake canyon. The Fresno tree is a surprising encounter in this low desert where any shade, however meager, is welcomed. Among the quaking cottonwoods and willows, the Fresno is a lush standout, its leaves an equatorial green and its bark cool to the touch. Fresno trees growing along an arroyo's dry floor signal the underground presence of a permanent source for the desert's life blood — water. The tree also embodies the largesse of Fresno Ranch, a countryside where sustenance and renewal are available to anyone who seeks the restorative in the outdoors. Like Norsworthy's paintings, created by a gifted artisan who accepted everything that the landscape had to offer, Fresno Ranch stands as a legacy for all Texans who embrace the transformative power of the natural world. ★



A book of Jeanne Norsworthy's paintings titled *Healing Landscapes* — *A Journey from the Big Thicket to the Big Bend*, featuring many of the works she created at Fresno Ranch, was published posthumously in 2001 and is available from Texas A&M Press.

#### DETAILS

Visitors may access Fresno Canyon via horse or mountain bike or on foot from several locations within Big Bend Ranch State Park. All visitors are required to receive an orientation and appropriate permits at park headquarters before heading out to front country or backcountry Fresno locations. Orientation and permits are available at the Barton Warnock Environmental Education Center (BWEEC) in Lajitas, Fort Leaton State Historic Site in Presidio and Saucedo Ranger Station within the interior of the park. For additional information, call (432) 358-4444 or visit [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/bigbendbranch](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/bigbendbranch).

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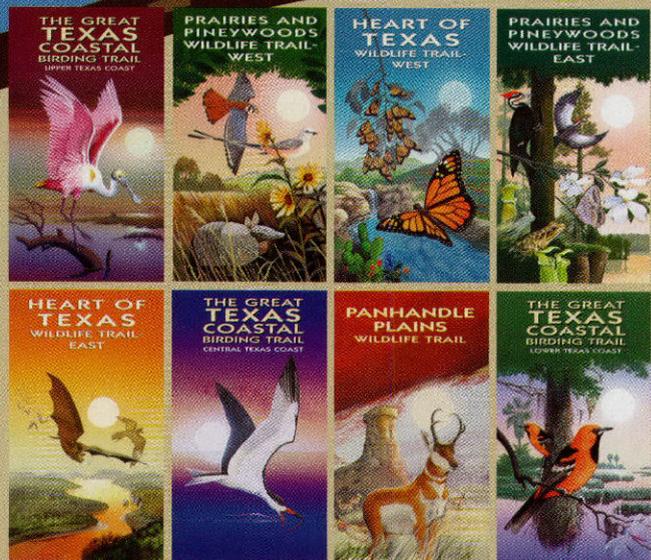


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# PARTINGSHOT



This photo of a female cardinal preparing to land won first place in The Nature Conservancy's photo contest. Photographer Howard Cheek says he manually focused on the back side of the birdbath and, after taking several shots of a bird's foot as it left the frame, he finally got the timing just right.

**IMAGE SPECS:**  
Canon 20D with 100-400 mm lens, 1/2500 second exposure, f/8, ISO 400. Shot with tripod and remote wire, single shot made.



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ExxonMobil is sponsoring a new "Keep Texas Wild" section in this magazine to introduce children to the magical world of nature. See this month's "Come Fly With Me" beginning on page 45. ExxonMobil's sponsorship brings these editions of *Texas Parks & Wildlife* magazine to fourth grade classrooms and learning centers throughout Texas.



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