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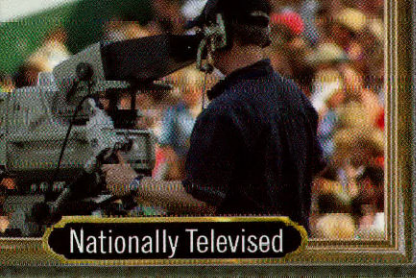
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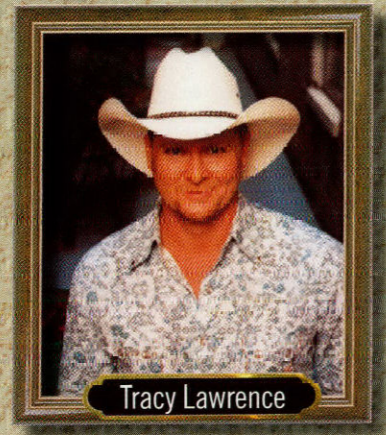


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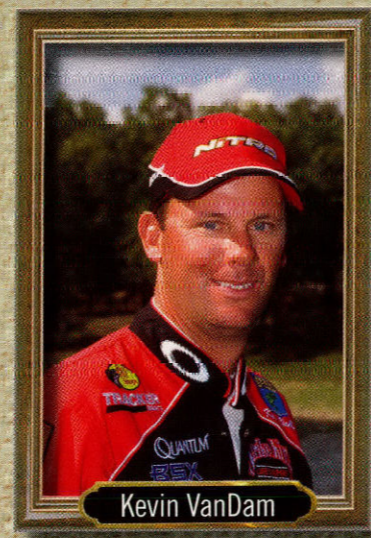
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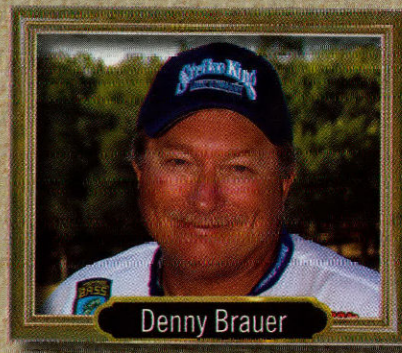
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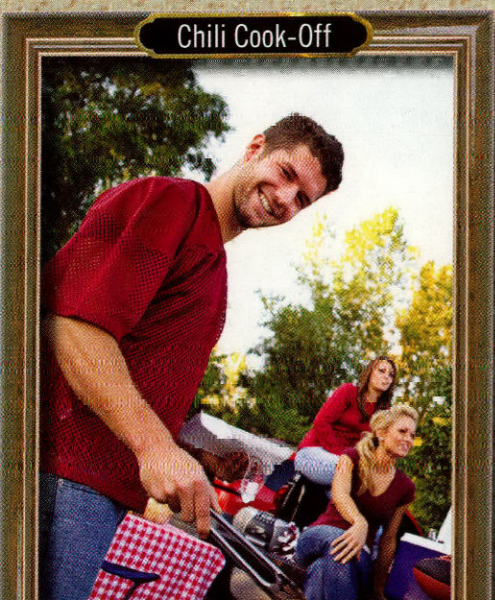
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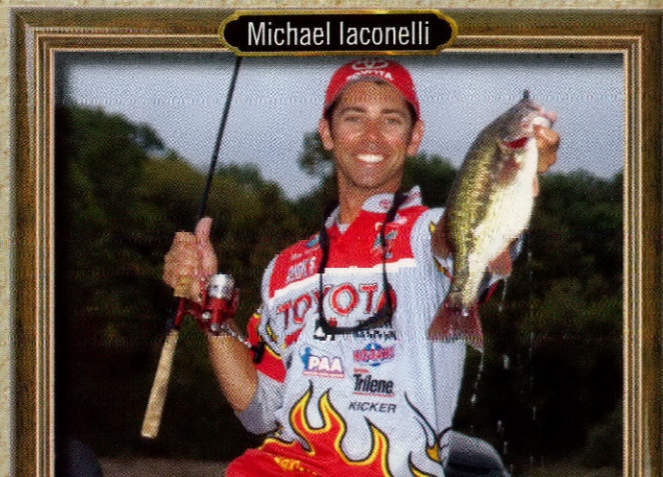
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C O N T E N T S

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PREVIOUS SPREAD: Boats docked at the Rockport harbor on a foggy morning. Photo © Larry Ditto.

THIS PAGE: A great egret methodically stalks its prey. Photo © Bill Carter.

PHOTO © BILL CARTER

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TEXAS
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THE OUTDOOR MAGAZINE OF TEXAS

MARCH 2007, VOL. 65, NO. 3

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CONTRIBUTING WRITERS:

Larry Bozka, Saltwater; Henry Chappell, Hunting; Larry D. Hodge, Freshwater;
Gibbs Milliken, Products

CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Grady Allen, Wyman Meinzer, David J. Sams

EDITORIAL OFFICES:

3000 South IH 35, Suite 120, Austin, Texas 78704
Phone: (512) 912-7000 Fax: (512) 707-1913
E-mail: magazine@tpwd.state.tx.us

ADVERTISING SALES OFFICES:

STONE WALLACE COMMUNICATIONS, INC.:
3000 S. IH 35, Suite 120, Austin, Texas 78704
Fax: (512) 707-1913
Jim Stone, Advertising Director (512) 912-7007
or (512) 799-1045.
E-mail: jim.stone@tpwd.state.tx.us

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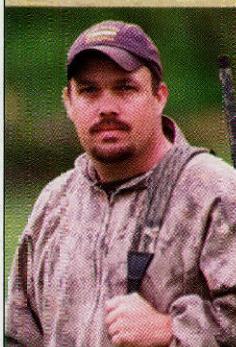
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In the Field

RUSSELL GRAVES came up with the idea of doing an article about snipe hunting after the subject came up in his high school classroom over and over again. Although he never actually participated in any of the excursions that his students conducted, he is complicit in the ongoing cover-up as to the real nature of a "snipe hunt." When not delving into rural conspiracies, Russell is a freelance photographer and writer whose work appears in magazines and ad campaigns nationwide. This three-time Texas Agriscience Teacher of the Year enjoys spending time with his wife, Kristy, and his children, Bailee and Ryan. One day, Russell hopes to convince Kristy that snipe hunting is fun and rewarding.



JIM BLACKBURN shares the beauty of coastal kayaking this month. "I grew up hunting and fishing in Louisiana and Texas and love the outdoors," Jim says. "I have a spiritual connection to the natural environment and try to protect that environment through my work." An environmental lawyer and Rice University professor, Jim has won several awards for writing and community activism, including the Barbara Jordan Award from Texas Southern University, Texas A&M University Press published his work, *The Book of Texas Bays*, in 2004. Jim is a founding member of Houston Wilderness, a group dedicated to realizing the potential of the ecological jewels that surround the city. The group's *Houston Atlas of Biodiversity* was published earlier this year.



ROBYN GAMMILL lives in Caldwell County with her husband and two children, plus assorted housepets and yard-birds. While her most recent snake encounters have mostly involved chasing nonvenomous egg thieves out of the chicken house. "I've become increasingly aware, after years of thinking of dogs on the farm as little more than lovable luxuries, how critical our dogs have been in protecting our family," Robyn says. "They are the front line in venomous-snake encounters.



They have taken many, many bites that could have been especially dangerous to a small child. They always alert us when they come upon a venomous snake, and they usually kill it. Oddly enough, they show very little interest in nonvenomous species." Unfortunately for her, the dogs were penned up the day she crossed paths with the copperhead that bit her.

AT ISSUE

FROM THE PEN OF ROBERT L. COOK

I was 30 years old when I saw my first bald eagle, so I was interested to read recently that the bald eagle was going to be “de-listed,” taken off the endangered species list. This is an amazing accomplishment for all North Americans. Originally protected in 1940 by the U.S. Congress from shooting and harassment and further protected by the Endangered Species Act in 1969, the bald eagle, our national symbol, had become a very rare visitor to the U.S. for much of the 20th century. Growing up in north-central Texas in the '50s and '60s, we heard that there were still a few bald eagles “up north in Canada and Alaska,” but none in Texas.

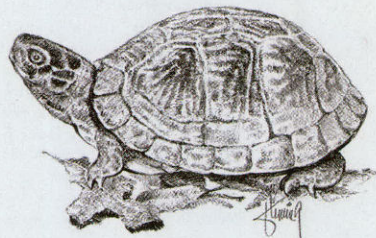
However, in the winter of 1973-74, a group of wildlife biologists (including yours truly) were trapping and banding mallards on Lake Proctor (near Comanche) as part of a study on waterfowl migration patterns and mallard populations. It was a cold, hard winter. Most of the stock tanks were frozen solid, and Proctor was literally covered with mallards. We were catching, banding and releasing ducks by the dozens at night from swim-in traps that we had to break the ice to get to, and at day-break with cannon nets baited with shelled corn on the edge of the icy lake. At midday, we would go back to our tent camp located just off the lake shore, eat a bite of camp stew thanks to Game Warden Billy Works, and rest up for the next green-head go-round.

One cold, clear day I was lying on my sleeping mat out by the fire when I saw what I thought was a black vulture effortlessly soaring high above our camp and the lake. Then rather suddenly the “buzzard” flapped its wings several beats and dove almost straight down and out of sight. I jumped up, called to the other guys in camp, and we all grabbed our binoculars. Almost immediately, the large dark bird reappeared and we all stared in disbelief at the pure white head and tail. We were all experienced wildlife biologists, all born and raised in Texas, and all astonished at the sighting. There just weren't supposed to be bald eagles in central Texas.

In the early '80s, we were pleasantly surprised to have a group of 10 to 12 bald eagles take up winter roost on the headwaters of the Guadalupe River in Kerr County, and return there annually to feed on waterfowl, fish and wild turkeys. In 1981, Texas Parks and Wildlife began annual aerial surveys to monitor bald eagle nesting activity in Texas. The 2005 survey identified 160 active nests, which fledged at least 204 young eagles.

Initially the eagle's decline was blamed on habitat loss, shooting by ranchers and hunters, and human disturbance — all of these factors may have contributed somewhat to the problem. It is always convenient and often fashionable to blame hunters or ranchers for a species' demise, isn't it? However, we now know that environmental contaminants were the main cause of declining eagle populations. Beginning in 1947, eagle nesting and reproductive success declined sharply, coinciding directly with the first extensive use of a new insecticide, DDT. As these insecticides entered watersheds, they were stored in the fatty tissues of fish and waterfowl, the eagle's primary food source. The result was fewer eggs and thin eggshells that broke during incubation. Although the decision was controversial and is still argued by some, DDT was banned in 1972. Today, bald eagles are producing chicks at normal rates, as are our brown pelicans, osprey and peregrine falcons, which suffered similar declines over the same time period. Habitat loss and human disturbance lead the list of concerns today.

Conservation decisions are often difficult and controversial. Be part of the process. Get involved. Get outdoors. By the way, when was the last time you saw a box turtle or a horned lizard?



*Conservation decisions
are often difficult and
controversial.*

*When was the last time
you saw a box turtle or
horned lizard?*

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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PICKS, PANS AND PROBES FROM OUR READERS

FOREWORD

Planning is so overrated. Spontaneity is almost always better (except when combined with combustion). Oh sure, if you're going to do something really big and important, say, build the Great Wall of China or land a man on the moon, then you pretty much have to have a plan. But when it comes to spending time in the great outdoors, it's often best to just get up and go.

Think about it: Half the time when you make plans months in advance, coordinating schedules, catering to every need or whim of family and friends, plans inevitably change. If there's one thing more annoying than planning, it's re-planning. It's often followed by other non-entertaining notions such as compromise, negotiation and re-evaluation of priorities. Priorities? That's a work word. We should never use work words while attempting to engage in leisure travel.

Of course, the occasional downside of impromptu travel is that your spur-of-the-moment destination may turn out to be a big, what-was-I-thinking disappointment. Wouldn't it be great if someone could put together a pre-screened list, no, a guide to quick trips close to home?

Writers Sheryl Smith-Rodgers, Wendee Holtcamp and June Naylor explored, poked and prodded the areas around their home territories (Central Texas, Houston and Dallas, respectively) to come up with this month's cover story, "50 Quick Getaways," on page 38. But don't let our well-organized guide ruin your devil-may-care spontaneity. Feel free to alter, improvise or transmogrify as you see fit.

A few months ago, Robyn Gammill stumbled upon an instance where too much spontaneity could be hazardous to your health — and devastating to your bank account. While encouraging outdoor safety is certainly a part of this magazine's mission, I tend to drift into a light snooze whenever anyone suggests publishing safety tips. But Robyn's firsthand tale of her copperhead encounter will forever cure you of the urge to walk through weeds wearing anything but snake-proof boots. In fact, her article does such a good job of commanding your full attention, you might have a hard time going to sleep tonight. Don't miss "Double Whammy" on page 12.

When Russell Graves suggested writing an article on snipe, I had to do a few Google searches before I was convinced that he wasn't playing a joke on me. Determined not to be left in a field holding the proverbial bag (again), I also checked the *Waterfowl Digest*, and there it is: Common snipe is listed just below woodcock on the list of migratory game bird hunting seasons. Then again, maybe this is all just part of the conspiracy. Russell examines the snipe-hunting prankster tradition and enlightens us about the real-life bird in "The Truth about Snipe" on page 52.

Spring has sprung. If you're not reading this outside (while wearing boots), what are you waiting for?

Robert Macias

ROBERT MACIAS
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

LETTERS

FAMILY TAMALADA

We wanted to thank you for your "Hunting Tamales" article in the December issue. We have always wanted to make tamales, but we were

intimidated by the process. Your article gave us the courage to give it a shot. We made it a family affair, and they turned out great. Davis, 3, and Hayden, 7, helped soak the husks, prepare the meat and sample the *chatos*. Now it is time to restock the freezer with more pork and venison.

ANGIE MATHEWS
New Braunfels



We have always wanted to make tamales, but we were intimidated by the process.

Your article gave us the courage to give it a shot. We made it a family affair, and they turned out great.

Angie Mathews
New Braunfels

INTERESTING WALK IN THE WOODS

I was pleasantly surprised with articles in the January issue of *Texas Parks & Wildlife* magazine.

They were reminiscent of past articles that I thoroughly enjoyed. As a naturalist and watercolor student, I was impressed with "Art from the Heart" by E. Dan Klepper. I was a wildlife biologist with TPWD for over 30 years and had the opportunity to meet many of the great naturalists who are now gone. The lessons taught by these men are many and are easily lost in time. A walk in the woods with one of these interesting gentlemen was as good as a library of books to a young biologist.

Although I have never met Rob McCorkle, I have a feeling he could likewise be an interesting "walk in the

MAIL CALL

woods." I thought his article, "The Peeling Tree," was great. Like Rob, my first encounter with a Texas madrone tree occurred while hiking up a switchback in the Guadalupe Mountains of West Texas. I rested under many a Texas madrone as I labored to the top of El Capitan.

I hope to see more great articles like these about the history, legend, lore and legacy of Texas' natural resources and of the men and women who led the way.

KAY M. FLEMING
Athens

NEW STATE CHAMPION MADRONE

I enjoyed Robert McCorkle's article on the Texas madrone tree ("The Peeling Tree," January 2007). We became acquainted with this unique tree a couple of years ago when my son and I found a huge Texas madrone tree while exploring one of the ravines on our family ranch. Recently, the Texas Forest Service officially named it the Texas State Champion madrone tree. So for at least right now, the title passes from the Chisos Mountains to the Estrella Ranch in the Edwards Plateau in northeast Uvalde County. I really enjoy your magazine and look forward to each month's copy in the mail.

BOB HIXON
Houston

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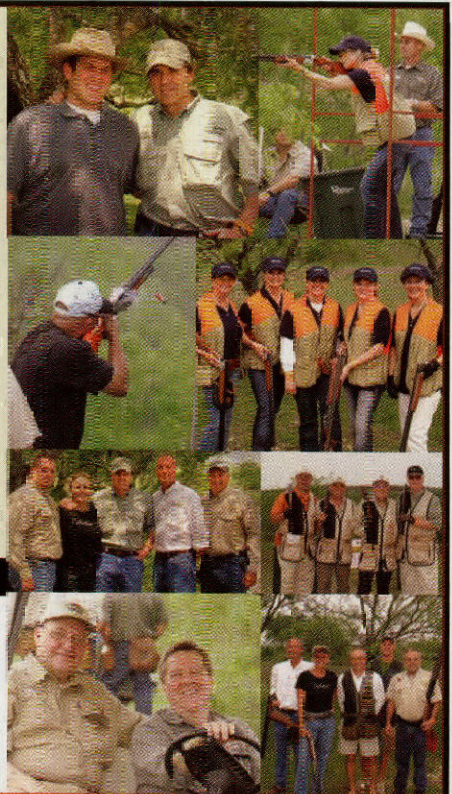
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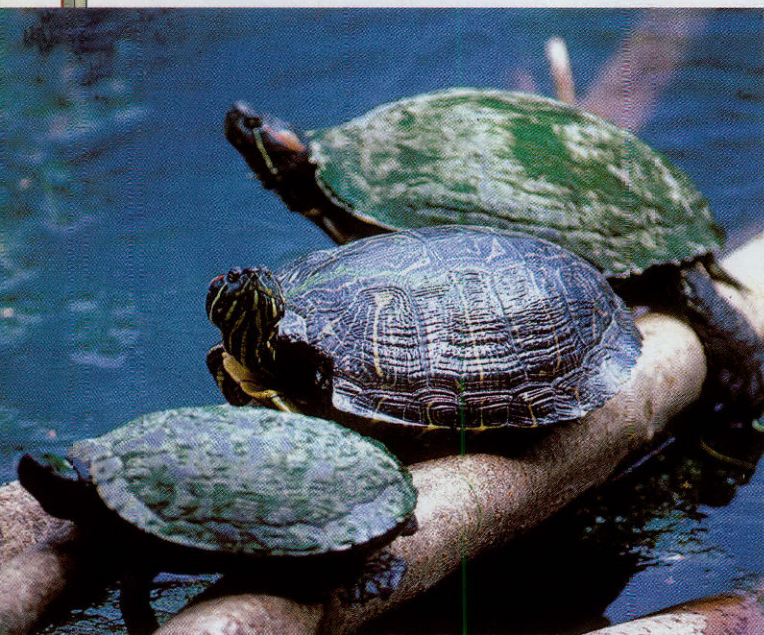
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SCOUT

NEWS AND VIEWS IN THE TEXAS OUTDOORS

ARE TEXAS TURTLES ON THE DECLINE?

No one knows for sure, but researchers hope to find out soon.



There is growing concern that the commercial trade of many species of wild-caught turtles may not be sustainable.

When looking at a familiar Texas turtle like the red-eared slider, it is hard to imagine how this critter could wind up as somebody's lunch on the other side of the world. Actually, a lot of lunches, because tens of thousands of native turtles are shipped overseas every year. Mostly they go to Asia as either pets or food.

"There are more people in China who regularly eat turtle than the population of America," says "Bayou Bob" Poppwell, one of the largest buyers of wild-caught turtles in Texas. With 400 trappers in his network, Bob alone has shipped about 300,000 turtles over the past 15 years. And he is just one among several large dealers in Texas and among many in the United States.

So how are our native turtles holding up under such harvest pressure?

"We just aren't sure at present," says Andy Price, chief herpetologist for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. "There

is not a lot of baseline data on them." However, there are some academic studies and anecdotal evidence indicating that Texas turtles could be in trouble.

River paddlers such as Adrian Van Dellen, who is conducting a survey of the Neches River for the Texas Committee on Natural Resources, has reported seeing fewer turtles on sections of that river. Jim Koukl, a professor at UT-Tyler doing long-term research on box turtles, reports that adults are dwindling in his study area. And scientists at Texas A&M University who studied the turtle trade recognized growing concern among conservationists that "commercial trade in many species of wild-caught turtles may not be sustainable."

Craig Rucolph, a USDA Forest Service biologist in Nacogdoches, is also worried about possible excessive harvest. "There's a lot of collecting going on for the market," he says. "Most turtles rely on living a long time for survival because mortality of eggs and young is high. High rates of harvest mean that strategy won't work anymore." Indeed, a study of turtles in North Carolina by the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory found that "removal of even modest numbers of adults and older juveniles had a very deleterious effect on some populations." The study strongly suggested that long-living chelonians (turtles) cannot tolerate commercial collection.

Texas does not currently impose harvest limits on turtles, except for threatened or endangered species. Some conservationists have called for a moratorium on harvest until more is known about turtle populations. Non-game permit holders are required to report their catch, but it is widely accepted that there is considerable unreported harvesting also going on. Thus, truly accurate harvest data is hard to come by.

Ricky Maxey, a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologist in Marshall, recently convened a group of biologists, natural resource managers, researchers and others from various organizations and agencies to investigate turtle numbers. "I want to try and get as good a picture of what's going on as I can," says Maxey. Officials within the Wildlife Diversity Program at TPWD have been seeking public input, and at the end of the process, they will make recommendations for action. ★

—Rusty Middleton

GRAB LIFE BY THE HORNS



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Double Whammy

Getting bitten by a snake is bad enough, but the hospital bill just might kill you.

Let's face it: flip-flops are convenient, but in springtime in Texas, even in the tall weeds of your very own backyard, they are inappropriate footwear. I knew this to be true, and yet I pushed my luck (for the nth time) one Saturday last May when I needed to make a quick trip to the henhouse. Had I known how extremely uncomfortable I was soon to become, I would have worn my boots. Let's just say that I am living proof that wishful thinking serves fairly poorly as a snake repellent.

In fact, I now know I had violated three of the four recommendations of the Texas Department of State Health Services for avoiding snakebite: I had failed to keep the landscape well manicured; to wear long pants and boots in areas known to have snakes; and to watch where I stepped in areas where snakes could be resting. The only suggestion I had managed to follow was to avoid handling or playing with snakes without proper training.

Anyone who's ever been bitten by a playfully overeager kitten knows what I felt as I crossed the yard that morning. As I turned to confront what I expected to be our young pet, I came face to face with a two-foot copperhead that looked as if he'd be happy to serve me another shot. I hobbled to the house and called my savior-than-thou neighbor, Darrell, to ask whether I couldn't just ice my ankle and elevate it. After all, I had nursed the dogs through many a copperhead encounter, and they were fine! Plus, my ankle didn't really hurt much. Yet.

Darrell graciously reminded me that I was not a dog and insisted on driving me and the kids (the husband was at work) to the sheriff's office of our rural county. When the EMTs arrived and unloaded a stretcher, I had my next collision with snakebite reality: There is no effective venom-countering treatment that can be done in the comfort of one's automobile front seat. I would be going to a hospital in one of the cities near my small town.

Along the way I came to discover that many of the age-old suggestions we've all

grown up with regarding how to treat snakebite might do more harm than good. According to the TDSHS, ice, bandages, cuts across the bite and tourniquets are all discouraged as having the potential to cause tissue damage. Washing the wound is suggested, if possible. Even squeezing or (gasp!) sucking the wound to remove some of the venom is recommended, as are limiting movement of the limb (and keeping it below the heart), keeping calm, removing any constricting clothing or jewelry before swelling starts and, of course, seeking medical attention immediately. (A tetanus shot is also recommended.)

Not long into our trip I realized, quite suddenly, that embarrassment at having

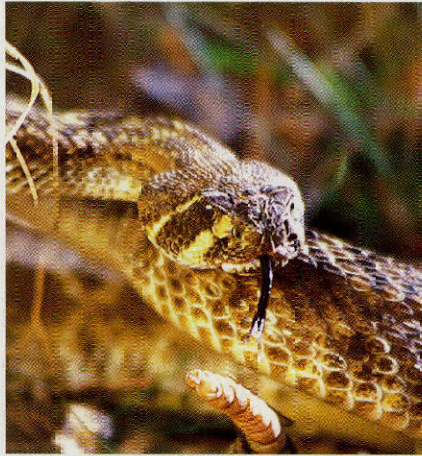
lost the fate-tempting challenge would not be the extent of my suffering. The swelling in my left leg produced a pain the likes of which could make childbirth palatable by comparison. By the time we reached the hospital, the EMT had administered me more than one dose of morphine, for which I will be forever grateful.

At the emergency room, I got yet

Protected by its natural camouflage, the copperhead can usually be found hiding in partial shade — in piles of leaves, alongside logs, under porches or in tall grass. This common pit viper can be easily identified by the prominent copper color of its head.



PHOTO © GRADY ALLEN



Other venomous snakes in Texas include (left to right) the coral snake, the rattlesnake and the cottonmouth. ↑

another surprise: I'd be spending the night. It turns out that reactions to snakebites vary and that the medical professionals like to keep an eye on you in case of anaphylactic shock. Some folks also suffer a severe reaction to the antivenom. In my case, the doctors kept track of the extent of the swelling by marking my leg with indelible marker. Then they admitted me, started an IV and hung the first of three two-hour courses of antivenom treatment I would receive before being discharged late the next day. (For those of you keeping track, there went the weekend.)

I could go on and on about the agony of trying to walk on a snakebite-swollen ankle, about missing a week of work, about sleepless nights with a green and purple foot propped up on six pillows under cold, wet washrags, but if you haven't been persuaded by now to put your boots on, even for that last-minute dash to the henhouse, consider the ultimate ah-ha moment of this tale: the bill.

When my insurance company reported to me what the hospital had charged for my overnight stay, I laughed out loud. Their zero key must be sticking, I thought. But

the itemized statement I requested from the hospital bore the same unbelievable figures: The charges for tempting fate in my flip-flops amounted to a whopping \$40,471. The price of the antivenom treatment alone was — are you sitting down? — \$36,102.

So the moral of the story is — say it with me, folks: Mow your yard, watch where you step and wear your boots! And for pete's sake, don't play with snakes. Why? Because a snakebite hurts. A lot. In more ways than one. ★

—Robyn Cammill

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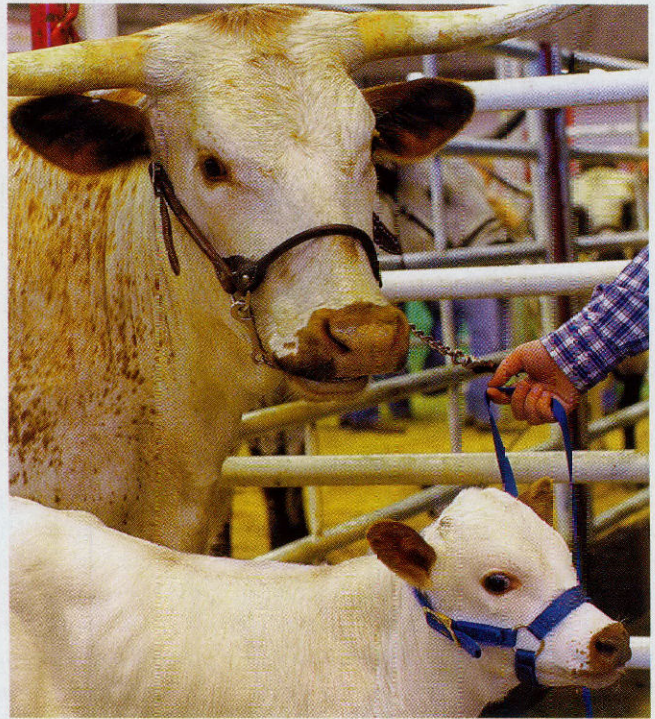
Rodeo Goes Wild

Wildlife seminars to be held at Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

For the first time in its 75-year history, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo (February 27 - March 1 at Reliant Arena) is adding a wildlife component to its lineup of activities. The Ranching and Wildlife Expo will feature wildlife management seminars by experts in the field. Topics will include landowner liability to recreational guests, integrated land management for cattle and wildlife, high fence/low fence wildlife management, feral hog control, habitat management for songbirds, creating successful wildscapes, aging deer on the hoof, successful wildflower plantings and supplemental feeding for white-tailed deer.

At more than 40 wildlife-related information booths, you will be able to get a close-up view of live alligators, test your shooting skills with the Laser Shot and compare your scores at the Texas Big Game Awards area. Sponsored by the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, the expo ends with an exciting wildlife-themed auction (for trips and more) to raise funds for student scholarships. For more information, visit www.rodeohouston.com or www.tpwd.state.tx.us/calendar. ★

—Diana Foss



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Reading the Rings

Tree-rings and timbers from historic buildings shed light on past Central Texas droughts.

A tree-ring study commissioned by the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority indicates that “there may have been periods when drought was more protracted and the impact might have been considerably worse” than the decade-long 1947-57 drought, known as the Drought of Record. The study was conducted by Professor Malcolm Cleaveland of the University of Arkansas Department of Geosciences Tree-Ring Laboratory. Tree-rings and original timbers from historic buildings were examined, expanding our knowledge of past droughts back to 1537 in the Edwards Plateau Region and 1648 in the South Central Texas Region.

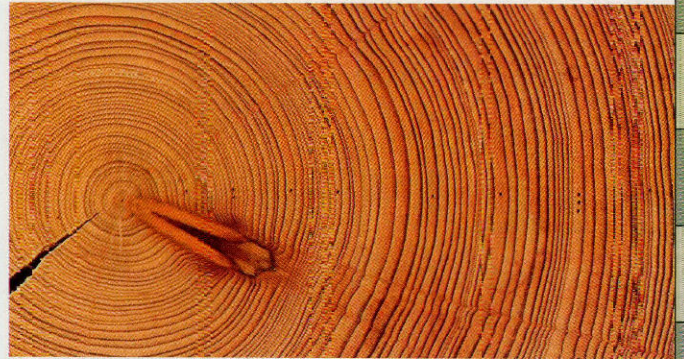
This is significant because the 1947-57 Drought of Record (some experts use 1950-57) is the basis for all Texas water supply planning. This study confirms that the Drought of Record is an appropriate minimum standard for water planning. Similar droughts appear to occur every 80 to 100 years on average. Available supplies of water from reservoirs and other resources used for municipal water supplies are based on providing a reliable supply, should we experience a drought similar to the Drought of Record. Other western states use their respective droughts of record for their planning as well.

Drought is one of the most complex and least understood of all natural hazards and affects more people globally than any other natural hazard. By studying historic droughts we can prepare for future droughts. Unfortunately, the farther back in time we look, the less drought information we have.

One way to make up for the lack of recorded information is to study things strongly influenced by the climate of the time, or “proxies.” Tree-rings are one of the best proxies. Trees generally grow one tree-ring each year, and the ring’s width provides a record of each year’s climate. In a dry year, a narrow tree-ring is produced, while in a wet year the ring is wide.

Some trees can grow to be a few thousand years old, providing a lengthy record of the climate that occurred locally during the tree’s life. Tree-ring chronologies are based on small core samples extracted non-destructively from living trees; cross-sections cut from dead logs. Tree-rings can also be retrieved from original timbers found in historic structures. Each ring can be dated exactly; the climate information is relatively easy to extract.

The study indicates that droughts in 1707-17 and 1885-94 exceeded the Drought of Record in South Central Texas, and a 1571-80 drought exceeded the Drought of Record for



The width of each ring of this bald cypress tree tells the story of that year’s climate. Wide rings denote wet weather.

the Edwards Plateau. “It would appear unwise for civil authorities to assume that the 1950s drought represents the worst case scenario to be used for planning purposes in water resources management in the South Central and Edwards Plateau climate divisions of Texas,” Cleaveland points out. This raises the question of whether future droughts worse than Drought of Record may loom somewhere over the horizon. ★

— Todd Vorteler

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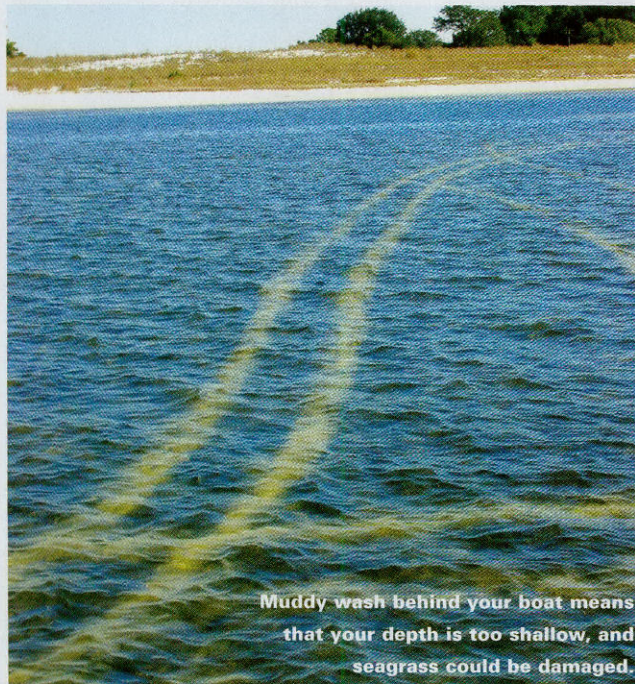
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Keeping the Seagrass Greener

Dos and don'ts for navigating shallow coastal waters.



Muddy wash behind your boat means that your depth is too shallow, and seagrass could be damaged.

When Texas Parks and Wildlife

biologist Dennis Pridgen starts talking about seagrasses, it's immediately obvious that Gulf Coast sport fish need this aquatic vegetation as much as Longhorn cattle need range grass. Despite a minor outcry last year over rules that currently outlaw the destruction of seagrasses in the state's 32,000-acre Redfish Bay Scientific Area, many conservation-minded recreationists are coming to understand that seagrass protection in Texas helps improve fish habitat. That, in short, improves the fishing — and makes learning how to navigate the shallow seagrasses along the length of the Texas Coast a useful way for anglers to help care for the valuable bay ecosystems they depend upon.

"For the lifecycle of many marine organisms, seagrass provides everything," explains Pridgen. "For fish, it's the nursery, the grocery store and the roof over their heads."

There are five species of seagrass found from Galveston Island to the Lower Laguna Madre, and because they present a resource linked to both recreational and commercial fisheries, these aquatic meadows see a lot of boat traffic. In terms of damage, the easiest to

identify, according to Pridgen, are prop scars that boaters sometimes leave behind, which in the worst cases stretch more than a mile. "Anytime you get into a grass flat, you have the potential to get into water that is too shallow for your boat," he warns.

Pridgen provides much of his best advice in pithy sound bites, such as "Run to the grass, not through it." For the past year and a half, the biologist has been part of a TPWD team "breathing,

eating and sleeping seagrasses." He adds that beyond habitat concerns, potential damage to pricey propellers and outboard engines should give pause to boaters who might otherwise flout the following strategies for promoting seagrass protection.

1) Know your depth; know your boat. Most fishing maps of Texas bays show general water depths, and there's really no excuse for not carrying a chart of the area you intend to explore, whether fishing or just out boating. Furthermore, depths can change a foot or more depending on the tide, so in addition to a map, make sure that you not only know what daily tide charts say for where you are headed, but also how they may match up with the sometimes-delayed tides seen along barrier islands. Likewise, it may take additional experience before boat owners fully understand the draft of their craft. It takes practice to be able to discern the differences between when the boat is on plane, going slowly or idling. Pridgen offers this advice: Have someone get out, measure water depth and mark it on the hull, then keep track of where this marker shows at various speeds.


2) Watch your wash; keep your head. "If there is no evidence of mud turbidity or — heaven forbid — vegetation, you're running clear," says Pridgen, who likens prop wash to a car speedometer. Keep an eye on it, in other words, and if you are not trailing sediment, your depth is all right. Muddy wash behind the boat, however, indicates a problem. You could even run aground. If the water is sullied, especially in unfamiliar areas, it's best to cut the engine and check water depth. In addition to sustaining fisheries, this is an effective way to protect your prop and keep unwanted sediment out of the engine's water intake.

3) Lift and drift, pole or troll. When you do find a fishy-looking grass bed, turn off the engine and lift or tilt it. Let the boat drift (a drift anchor slows things down and does negligible damage), use a pole to maneuver the shallows or start up your trolling motor. ★

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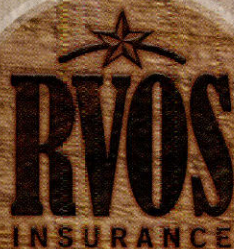


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Stick baits: James Heddon is recognized as the creator of the first commercial fishing lure. His hand-carved floater that sent ripples across a Michigan millpond in 1894 has been used with amazing results since production started in 1902. The original design had two dangling treble hooks and a metal collar for surface action. Now more sophisticated and durable styles with loud rattles like the **Heddon Super Spook** and **Zara Spook** use the same walk-the-dog side-to-side retrieve to bring aggressive strikes from predator fish waiting in ambush. (\$5.74, Super Spook, \$5.74, Zara Spook, Pradco, 479-782-8971, www.lure.net.com)

Jointed baits: Another old U.S. lure company makes the unique **Creek Chub Knuckle-Head**. Sturdily built and weighted for long casts, this large two-section topwater puts on a great wiggle show for big hybrid stripers and largemouth bass. (\$7.99, Knuckle-Head, Bass Pro, 800-227-7776, www.basspro.com)

Propeller baits: Floating lures equipped with spinning blades in the front and rear chop the surface, simulating a baitfish in distress. One of the best of these lures is the **Smithwick Devil's Horse**, a sleek design of wood and metal that has been a consistent fish-catcher for more than 50 years. (\$5.16, Devil's Horse, Pradco)

Poppers and chuggers: Very popular are lures that have blunt or scoop-shaped faces. When jerked, they make audible sounds and spit water for attraction. These noisy lures seldom fail to get the attention of lunker bass. Perhaps the most famous is the **Hula Popper**, designed by Fred Arbogast some 60 years ago. The hula name derives from the replaceable rubber shimmy-skirt that is available in an assortment of colors. Another Arbogast classic

from the 1940s is the **Jitterbug** chugger plug with wide scoops extending out on either side of the head for a side-to-side movement and gurgling water. It is one of the very best night-fishing bass lures to date and comes in a wide assortment of colors and sizes. (\$5.39, Hula Popper, \$5.39, Jitterbug, Pradco)

More modern designs include the **Rebel Pop-R**, which is made in three sizes and considered by many pros to be their go-to topwater of choice. Also good is the **Storm Rattlin' Chug Bug**, a combination stick bait and popper that features a big eye ending in a flashy Mylar fly-style teaser treble hook. (\$5.74, Pop-R, Rebel Lures, Pradco. \$4.29, Chug Bug, Bass Pro Shops)

Weedless soft plugs: The latest development in lure technology is the **Berkley Bat Wing Gulp Frog**, in the form of a snagless floater that has a hidden hook in a soft scent-treated body. This biodegradable bait can be slowly maneuvered through thick weed beds and lily pads to reach bass hidden in thick cover. (\$5.49, Gulp Frog, Berkley, 877-777-3850, www.purefishing.com)

Twitch baits: Last, but certainly not least, is the **Original Floating Rapala Minnow**. No one has yet to equal the seductive look and natural wobbling action of this life-like balsa wood plug with a silver foil coating. In clear small streams and ponds, it is a great choice when twitched slowly across the water like an injured silver minnow. (\$4.79, Rapala Minnow, Normark, 800-874-4451, www.rapala.com)

Other recent innovations in surface lures are the addition of internal rattles, spray-on scents and holographic coatings. In many cases, body materials have changed from hand-assembled painted wood to mass-produced molded plastics with bright reflective finishes. Old or new, these classic designs are certain to tempt bass into explosive surface strikes. ★



Center: Arbogast Hula Popper. **Outside, clockwise from top left:** Heddon Zara Spook; Smithwick's Devil's Horse; Storm Rattlin' Chug Bug; Original Floating Rapala Minnow.



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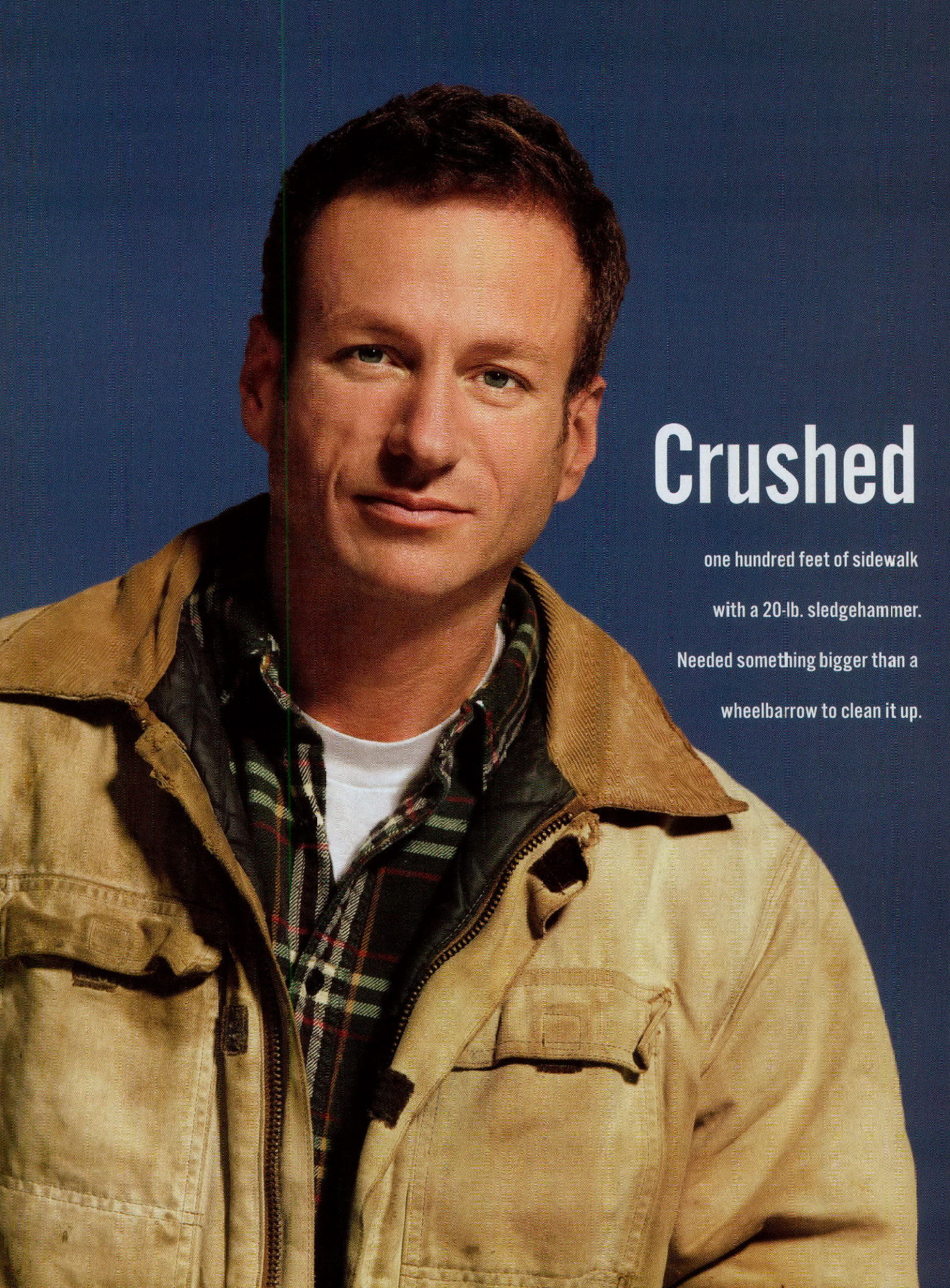
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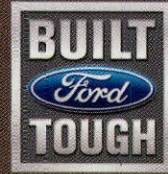
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3 Days in the Field / By Rob McCorkle

DESTINATION: ROCKPORT-FULTON

TRAVEL TIME FROM:

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HOUSTON – 3.5 hours / SAN ANTONIO – 3 hours / LUBBOCK – 9.5 hours

Bird Bay

Along the coastal bend, you'll find birds aplenty, towering trees, funky art, rich history and tons of easygoing charm.

"Osprey at 10 o'clock," Tommy Moore calls out over the public address system to binocular-wielding passengers lining the port side of The Skimmer's upper deck. Heads swivel mechanically, as if on cue, glasses focused on the raptor soaring above the saltwater flats, clutching its writhing, silver-scaled prey in its sharp talons.

It's still a couple of hours until sunset for more than a dozen birdwatchers who have paid \$35 each to go on the Saturday afternoon Whooping Crane Tour led by Moore. The 40-foot, shallow-draft vessel makes two trips a day during the busy whooping crane season that begins around Christmas time and concludes when the last of the endangered feathered giants head north by mid-April. Moore has set anchor in the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway just offshore from the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, home to a large contingent of wintering whoopers. Though only late October, some of the early-arriving migrants already have staked out their territory in the refuge's wetlands.

Known as the Lobstick Family because they hail from the Lobstick River region of upstate New York, the two adults and a juvenile can be seen strutting through the shallows, heads disappearing from time to time to snag blue crabs. The juvenile, we learn, survived a venomous snakebite the previous spring. As viewed

through my binoculars, however, junior and his parents appear to be in good shape. For several of the tour participants, including my companion, this is their first sighting of the amazing cranes that can stand 5 feet tall and have a 7-foot wingspan. Each year, about 200, or roughly half of North America's surviving whoopers, spend the winter at Aransas NWR. The whooping crane is just one of the 30 to 60 different bird species typically seen on The Skimmer birding tours.

Coming and going from the cranes' nesting ground, Moore points out dozens of avian species, as well as notable landmarks along this part of the Texas coast, such as the Copano Bridge that joins Live Oak Peninsula to the Lamar Peninsula. The area's history is a rich one. Copano Bay, according to our pilot, was the site of the first seaport in Texas, El Copano. "There are still shellcrete roads of that settlement that we point out on our history trip that we do in conjunction with the Maritime Museum," says



The Aransas National Wildlife Refuge is home to about 200 wintering whooping cranes.

PHOTO © LARRY DITTO

Top: Shrimping is a major industry here, with tourists enjoying the succulent shellfish at local restaurants, then filling up ice chests to bring more home. Bottom left: Art abounds at the many galleries in the Heritage District. Bottom right: This Rockport barber-shop mural depicts a huge sawfish caught in 1928, though sightings are now rare.



Moore, a personable skipper and credible birder who seems perfectly suited to his vocation.

History, birding and dolphin tours are just a few of the many compelling reasons to visit Rockport-Fulton, the twin bayside communities 35 miles up the coast from Corpus Christi that depend on tourism for economic survival. Fishing for redfish, drum and other saltwater trophies, gallery hopping, museum browsing and kayaking prove major draws as well.

In fact, it was the latter — bay kayaking — that was at the top of our to-do list during our most recent visit to this seaside town, which is blessed by abundant sunshine, sparkling waters and dense forests of wind-sculpted live oaks. Moore, who in 2003 traded his former corporate life in Houston for a boating charter in Fulton, was more than happy to oblige my com-

panion and me with a morning kayak adventure during our first full day in the area.

The day before, we had made it from central Texas to the coast with just enough daylight to marvel at The Big Tree, a massive live oak tree on Lamar Peninsula estimated to be more than 2,000 years old. The charter member of the Live Oak Society of America boasts a 35-foot circumference and crown spread of 89 feet.

That evening, with a plethora of fine restaurants to choose from, we opt for Charlotte Plummer's Seafare Restaurant, overlooking Fulton Harbor. A mainstay in the area since 1970, the seafood restaurant provided our first fix of the fresh seafood for which Rockport-Fulton is known. A shrimp cocktail, crab cakes and cup of shrimp gumbo set the stage for our entrees of shrimp kabobs and pico-de-crab

amberjack, an exotic take on grilled fish featuring a crab meat topping and fresh pico de gallo.

After a restful night at Pelican Bay Resort, we board The Skimmer for the 30-minute ride across the bay to St. Joseph Island. We slip into our Heritage Marquesa kayaks and head for the nearest inlet leading to a watery maze of canals and miniature lakes populated by blue herons, brown pelicans and other waterfowl.

The quiet, shallow-drafting kayaks allow us to get within 20 yards of some assorted avifauna, such as the pink-hued roseate spoonbill that we later learn gets its rosy hue from the seafood they eat. After almost two hours of leisurely paddling (it was my companion's first time in a kayak), we beach the vessels on the island to take a closer look at a noisy heron rookery. But it's the ample population of her-



Left: The Texas Maritime Museum hosts exhibits including excavated items from La Salle's flagship, *La Belle*. **Right:** Early risers can enjoy a beautiful sunrise over the water to begin another day of birding, fishing and feasting.

mit crabs scuttling across the sands that keeps us entertained until The Skimmer arrives at 1 p.m. to take us back to the mainland.

While my companion opts for an afternoon siesta at our cottage, I decide to head just up Highway 35 into Rockport to tour the Texas Maritime Museum. The museum, which is "dedicated to preserving and interpreting the rich maritime heritage of Texas," is located in Rockport Harbor. I recommend starting on the top floor, which affords an excellent view of docked shrimp boats and Aransas Bay, and working your way downstairs.

The third-floor observation deck features a detailed map of the Texas Coastal Bend and the area's 20,000 acres of landlocked bays, as well as exhibits detailing Rockport's history and location on a spit of land between Copano and Aransas bays. I learn from the exhibit that in Rockport's early years, it served as a key shipping point for cattle and cattle products carried by large ships that docked on Water Street to load their cargo. The port's importance declined with the coming of the railroads after the Civil War. The Rockport seawall, breakwater and new harbor developed in 1940 led to a boom in the city's commercial fishing and shrimping industries.

Did you know that shrimping didn't catch on until after the turn of the 20th century because fishermen considered the crustacean an expendable by-product from the catch of the day?

That's just one interesting tidbit I learn perusing the exhibits celebrating all things nautical displayed on two floors. Don't miss the second-floor display of vintage rods, reels, outboard motors and navigational instruments on loan from Fort Worth oil magnate Perry Bass. No doubt anglers will be fascinated with the museum's collection of wooden lures, carved in the 1930s by a local legend — E.W. "Shorty" Townsend.

Dominating the museum's ground floor is the *La Belle Odyssey*. The Maritime Museum is one of a handful of coastal museums exhibiting excavated items from French explorer La Salle's flagship, *La Belle*, which ran aground and sank in Matagorda Bay in 1684. "A Day in the Life" uses recovered artifacts, such as textiles, wood-block rope, a harpoon and nails, and interpretive panels to inform visitors about the deplorable living conditions aboard the four French ships that accidentally ended up in Texas and tried to establish a Gulf Coast colony.

After a long day of being a tourist, hunger pangs are setting in again. The tasty Texas Hill Country-meets-Gulf Coast cuisine of former Austin chef Jay Moore is calling. It's only a five-minute drive from our cottage to Ore Oak Plaza, a nondescript strip shopping center that houses AransaZu Restaurant. Moore, who moved to Fulton five years ago, describes his fare as a "layering of flavors" with New Orleans influences. Local art, white

tablecloths and an intimate setting add to the appeal of AransaZu.

Gorgeous, sunny weather greets us on our last morning on the coast. White wooden rocking chairs on the front porch of each of the 20 pastel-colored cottages beckon guests to savor a cup of coffee and admire the conservation-minded planning that went into developing Pelican Bay Resort's five acres.

The resort features a three-bedroom lodge, garden mini-suites with a view of the pool and rainbow-colored cottages tucked into a tropical landscape amid a picturesque oak forest. Co-owner Laura Denham describes the resort's look — featuring sky blues, pale yellows and pinks — as "coastal New England." One of the resort's biggest bonuses is a guests-only, lighted fishing pier a short stroll away.

Our last day is reserved for checking out the area's celebrated wildlife habitat and birding opportunities, and exploring the shops and art galleries in Rockport's Heritage District.

Breakfast tacos from the Rockport Bakery, which specializes in cakes, cookies and pastries of all kinds, gets us off to a quick start. The first stop just down the highway is the Demonstration Garden & Wetlands Pond Area Nature Trail, a 1991 community project that inspired the state's Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail. It features a wetlands pond, woodland boardwalk and 19 interpretive stops detailing the Coastal Bend's abundant

flora and fauna, and historical tidbits about Aransas County. Please do heed the signs that advise visitors to bring mosquito repellent.

Lunch is our last chance for seafood, so we heed Moore's advice and ensconce ourselves at "the best patio" in town at bayside Moon Dog's Seaside Eatery. Boiled shrimp cocktail, a shrimp po-boy and an above-average coleslaw live up to the eatery's reputation and send us on our way.

Even on a Sunday afternoon, many of the shops and galleries downtown are open. Cities four times Rockport's size would be fortunate to have an exhibit space like The Gallery of Rockport. Owner Derek Hurst has renovated one of the downtown's oldest structures, a 115-year-old seafood restaurant known for 30 years as Corky's, and turned it into an airy showplace for some of the coast's and Texas' outstanding sculpture, paintings and original works. It features the works of 60 artists, who offer their paintings, drawings, posters, photography, metal and glass works in a variety of price ranges. The gallery prides itself on exhibiting the talents of such noted Texas outdoor artists as Herb Booth, Larry Felder, Al Barnes, Michael Gilbert and Wade Butler. Butler, a former fisheries biologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, designed the current saltwater fishing stamp.

"The success of art in Rockport," Hurst explains, "is owing to the fact that people come here to buy art to take home that reminds them of the experience they had on the coast. Most artists live here because of the exceptional wildlife and the area's natural beauty that drew them here. They capture that beauty in their art."

Funky and provocative works greet us at St. Charles Art Gallery across the street. The gallery is a fun place to browse among the eclectic collection of jewelry, sculpture, drawings and paintings by contemporary and traditional local artists.

As I point my car north, I recall gallery owner Hurst's observation that Rockport enjoys its reputation as a thriving artist colony to visitors who want to take a piece of their coastal experience home with them. I hope I

have succeeded in doing just that, visualizing the photo I took from the bow of The Skimmer: a lipstick sunset smeared with the dark streaks of migrating waterfowl soaring above Aransas Bay. And I smile as I remember that ice chest in the backseat, stuffed full of stuffed crabs and fresh shrimp from P.J. Shrimp Co. that will offer one last transitory and gustatory moment of my fond coastal memories when we get home. ★

Details

Rockport-Fulton Chamber of Commerce,
(800) 826-6441, <www.rockport-fulton.org>

Whooping Crane Tours & Coastal Birding
(The Skimmer), (877) TX-BIRDS, <www.rockportadventures.com>

Pelican Bay Resort, (866) 729-7177,
<www.pelicanbyresort.com>

Charlotte Plummer's Seafare Restaurant,
(361) 729-1185

Texas Maritime Museum, (866) 729-AHOY,
<www.texasmaritimemuseum.org>

AransaZu Restaurant, (361) 727-1105

Rockport Bakery, (361) 729-5044

Moon Dog's Seaside Eatery, (361) 729-6868

The Gallery of Rockport, (361) 729-2900,
<www.thegalleryofrockport.com>

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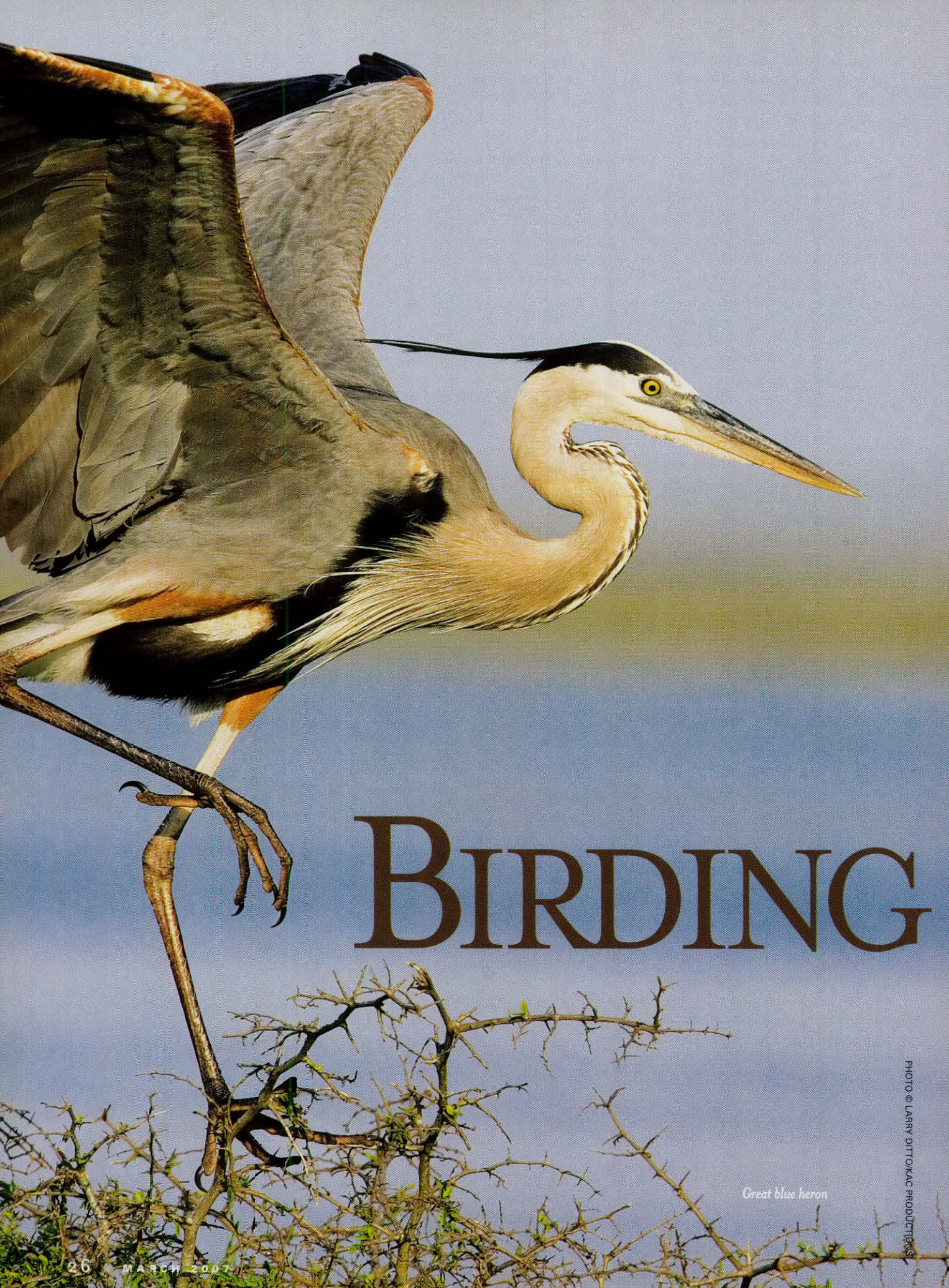


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By JIM BLACKBURN

BY BOAT

T THERE IS A MAGICAL MOMENT

at the start of a kayak trip when you sit down and launch into a new adventure. We use open cockpit, sit-on-top kayaks that are very stable. To get started, you straddle it, sit down and push off. After a stroke or two, the kayak glides forward, needing only a few inches of water in which to float. And I promise you this vessel will transform your view of the Texas coast.



The marshes, grassflats and tidal flats of the Texas coast are among the most wonderful birdwatching and fishing grounds that we have. Unfortunately, creating an intimate relationship with these areas can be difficult at best. Anyone who has spent any time walking or wading our coastal bays will have stories of shoes being sucked off one's feet by the muck that seems to grab hold and pull, not to mention long walks often referred to as death marches. In a kayak, you're above the muck.

When my wife, Garland Kerr, and I got our kayaks, I did not appreciate how vastly different our experience of the Texas coast would be. Up until that time, I was a dedicated wade fisherman and birdwatcher, but those two activities usually occurred at different places. Garland would join me for the birdwatching but not the fishing. And while I would watch birds while fishing, the labor of walking in the marsh and the shallow bays often diverted me from fully appreciating the beauty of the marsh.

From the beginning, kayaking opened up new vistas for us. Christmas Bay lies in Brazoria County between Freeport and San Luis Pass on the backside of Follets Island. It is easily accessible from the road at numerous locations, which is a key piece of information for kayakers. It was here that I fell in love with kayaking.

The kayak is quiet — very quiet — enabling a close-up view of nature. As we glide across the shallow water of the bay, bait fish skitter before us. Approaching the shoreline at eye level, we see the hermits and other crabs backing into the marsh grass that defines the shore. We come around a point and enter a backwater lake, the water only a few inches deep. In the marsh to our right are several white ibis with their beautiful red bills shaped like a scythe — long and efficient. We slow down and watch an ibis thrust its bill deep into the mud, plunging it back and forth like a ram, pulling it out to swallow a morsel, carefully glancing at us out of the corner of its eye, making sure we are as safe as we seem.

In the soft morning light, three roseate spoonbills fly across the blue sky, a swath of pink in a landscape of green marsh grass and blue sky. The spoonbills are heading for an area that seems to be alive with all types of bird life, and we turn around and follow them to what appears to be a bird convention. Here, a symphony of bird sounds welcomes us to the rookery, a bird city within the bay.

The rookery is on an area that is slightly higher than the marsh and bay around it, a spit of land with a number of small trees and shrubs at the center, tailing off to oyster shell at either end. As we approach the tip of the land, two regal-looking wading birds stand at attention, the chocolate-brown heads and neon-orange beaks signifying oystercatchers. Mating pairs of laughing gulls line the grass that emerges from the sandy landmass, their bills blood red with lust.

Suddenly several heads pop up from the short shrubs and taller grass. The head and neck are purplish, with a long white stripe with a chestnut/cinnamon fringe extending down the underside of the neck. These are tri-colored herons, coming together for the mating season. The air is pierced by ugly grunt-like sounds that seem strange coming from such beautiful birds. But then again, these are predatory fish eaters.

As the kayak glides along the edge of the rookery island, the birds nesting in the small trees come more clearly into focus. The great egrets — magnificent white birds that have green eye patches during breeding season — nest alongside the roseate spoonbills with their elegant coloration and inel-



Brown pelicans

PHOTOS: BOTH PAGES © MIKE SIZEM

A symphony of bird sounds welcomes



PHOTO © ANDY LONG/AMMIMAGES

Reddish egret

us to the rookery, a bird city within the bay.

gant spoon-shaped bills that are backlit by the morning sun. Quietly we witness the black cormorants and grey night herons maneuvering for space on the backside, staying away from the gigantic great blue heron that rises like a tower from the tallest tree.

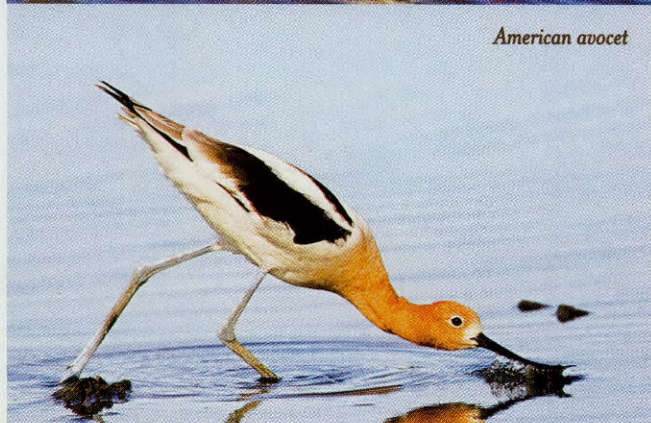
During the spring migration, some unique opportunities open up for the dedicated kayaking birdwatcher. At various times between mid-March and mid-May, migrating neotropical songbirds fly across the Gulf of Mexico from the Yucatan Peninsula as well as up the coast from northern Mexico. On occasion, these birds get caught by bad weather, causing them to expend great amounts of energy to simply reach the mainland. Often during these times, a "fall-out" occurs when these small birds literally fall out of the sky onto the beaches and the coastal marsh.

Once, when fishing from my kayak in a meandering marsh channel, I experienced a minor fall-out. The wind was howling and a light mist was flying by as I stalked redfish in the shallows. Suddenly my attention was caught by a small brown and yellow bird that was struggling in the wind. As I watched, it simply fell out of the sky onto the *Spartina patens* marsh hay.

I slowly paddled over to where the bird was lying on the grass, its spread wings holding it atop the bunched grass. As I approached, the warbler's eyes were riveted on me as its beak lay open. To me, it seemed to be gasping for air, and I



American oystercatcher



American avocet



Roseate spoonbill

left it alone. I fished on down the channel and then returned to where the warbler had fallen, but it was gone, having gathered the strength to continue the journey. I felt richer for having witnessed this event, for having the chance to gain insight into the reality of the migration. Without a kayak, I would simply have missed that experience.

But to truly encounter the migration, Garland and I and our friends, Jack and Sue, simply paddle to it. The Bolivar Flats are merely a ferry ride across from the City of Galveston, on the Bolivar Peninsula. This fabulous shore-bird area was formed by the east-to-west longshore current of the Gulf of Mexico intersecting the north jetty that protects the Houston Ship Channel. Where this natural force meets the man-made obstacle the long-shore current slows and the sediment that is being carried along the shore drops out. Over the years, a large shallow area known as the Bolivar Flats has formed.

The Bolivar Flats is a world-class spot for birdwatching that has been preserved by the efforts of the Houston Audubon Society. The easiest entry point for kayaks is from the base of the north jetty. The flats extend north along the shoreline and east toward the Gulf, interrupted by peninsulas of salt marsh and mud flats extending in from the northeast. A spring kayak trip requires attention to both northerners and tides because the flats are shallow and strong north winds can blow the water off the flats, an excellent result for feeding birds but a major problem for the kayaker.

Our group launches across a shallow wetland fringe and enters the flats. The wind is blowing strong from the southeast and we paddle directly into it. The water is so shallow

OYSTERCATCHER, AVOCET © LARRY DITTO; SPOONBILLS © MIKE SLOAT

that our paddling strokes are more horizontal than vertical, catching relatively little water. The tide is coming in and the birds are following the water toward the shoreline. The four of us stay quietly back from the birds, trying not to disturb the thousands that are alternately feeding and loafing on the shore. But we experience no problems with seeing birds. They are everywhere.

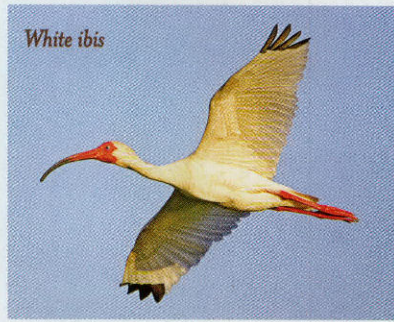
A reddish egret is easy to distinguish, doing its feeding dance in the shallow water. This darkish bird with its reddish brown neck and pink bill is fascinating to watch as it fishes the shallows — wings extended, jumping from side to side. Behind it, a dozen white pelicans loaf on the muddy shoreline.

Today, the showstoppers on the flats are the avocets. Avocets are mid-sized wading birds that stand about 14 inches tall, larger than the smallish plovers and sandpipers running along the shore yet definitely smaller than the egrets and herons. Avocets are easily identified by their black and white body coloration and their light brown heads with a long, upturned bill. They are delicate birds that are delightful to watch.

A group of about 200 avocets are loafing behind a small marsh island that blocks the wind. As we watch, a black and white wing comes up and then goes back down, like a student in class, asking to be recognized. A flight of 20 comes in over our heads making a soft twittering sound as they swing into the wind and land before us, quickly tucking their upturned bills under their wings and settling in.

Suddenly we see a large cloud of birds rise from the shoreline where thousands of avocets are lined up against the water's edge. As we paddle in that direction, the birds come into focus, thousands standing together wing to wing, a black and white and brown border between the dark mud, the green grass and the blue sky. Behind them are thousands more small waders and a few larger birds. The sight is breathtaking — so many migrants gathered together, waiting for the right time to depart for the far north to breed and return next season. I am truly grateful to see this sight that bears testament to the spirit and power of nature.

As we paddle back, a flight of brown pelicans weaves across the sky before us. When I moved to Houston in the 1970s,



there were no brown pelicans on the Texas coast. Whenever I see these magnificent fishing birds, I give thanks that we humans have undone some of the harm that we have done and are doing to the natural system. And as I spend more time in my kayak, I realize how much more we need to do to protect this wonderful heritage that we have here on the Texas coast so that this experience will be available for the generations who follow us.

For me, kayaking the coast is a spiritual act, an act of communion with other living things. I am convinced that we will not protect the coast unless the people of the coast know and understand our resources and the wonder and greatness that we have before us. If we don't use these resources, we will not value them.

Kayaks are the easiest and most entertaining way to enter our great coastal outdoors. They are safe, easy and fun. When birdwatching from a kayak, respect the birds. Stay far enough away to keep from flushing them. Nesting birds need to protect their eggs. Loafing birds need a peaceful rest. If you simply take the time to observe, you will be rewarded in more than one way.

There are numerous places from the Louisiana border to the Rio Grande where road access exists to excellent places for kayaking. TPWD has created a wonderful kayak trail at Lighthouse Lakes near Port Aransas as well as on Christmas Bay and Armand Bayou in the Houston area <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/paddlingtrail>. Other great places for kayaking include Matagorda, the Port Aransas-Rockport area, Corpus Christi and Nueces Bays and the Lower Laguna. The access is generally better on the backside of barrier islands and peninsulas than from the mainland side.

It is possible to rent kayaks in most coastal towns. If you are heading to a new area, study maps to find good access points. Contact the local chamber of commerce to get the names of area outfitters who can fix you up with kayaks, paddles and safety gear, not to mention tips on good places to launch. Always wear a life jacket. Take water and dry bags for cameras, binoculars and bird books. Get a rod holder for your fishing rod. And bring the family for a bona-fide Texas coastal experience that just might change your view of outdoor recreation. ☆

Kayaks are the easiest and most entertaining way to enter our great coastal outdoors.

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TOYOTA TEXAS BASS CLASSIC
APRIL 13-15, 2007

Recently, a national fishing tournament organization listed the top five bass lakes in the country. To no one's surprise, three of the top five are in Texas. Conspicuously absent from the list, however, was Lake Fork.

Texans know the big bass potential of Fork, but national tournaments don't stop at Fork for pro tournaments (in part because of the protected 16- to 24-inch bass slot limit). Therefore, Fork doesn't receive tournament notoriety.

That is about to change.

The \$1 million Toyota Texas Bass Classic tournament (April 13-15) will be the world's richest no-entry-fee bass tournament; and it will be held at Lake Fork.

In the past, tournament organizations have requested variances of the slot limit rules on Lake Fork to hold tournaments. Those variances have not been granted.

For the first time in a professional tournament, the Professional Anglers Association, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Toyota, have devised tournament rules that not only subscribe to the slot limit, but also enhance the conservation message of the lake's regulations.

Gene Ellison, executive director of the PAA, which comprises touring pro anglers, says, "Tournament pros are looking for ways to give back to the resource and get kids involved." The Toyota Texas Bass Classic does both. The PAA members are supportive of Texas' (and other states') conservation efforts, so they see this as a vehicle to promote highly managed lakes while sustaining the resource.

The idea for the tournament resulted from a trip to Lake Fork by TPWD Commissioner Donato D. Ramos who was escorted by Kelly Jordan, a touring bass pro and member of the PAA. Commissioner Ramos enlisted the help of Commissioner T. Dan Friedkin and the Toyota Texas Bass Classic became a reality.

Anglers in the first Toyota Texas Bass Classic will be fishing in what is arguably the best largemouth bass lake in the world: Lake Fork.

Consider:

- The current Lake Fork and Texas state record largemouth bass, 18.18 pounds, is the third-largest certified state record, behind Georgia and California. And the Georgia fish also holds the world record.
- Lake Fork has produced the six biggest largemouth bass ever caught in Texas.
- Of the 50 biggest largemouth bass caught in Texas, 35 came from Lake Fork. The smallest of those fish weighed 15.2 pounds and was larger than the state records of 37 other states.
- A survey of trophy largemouth bass catches from Lake Fork (in

progress since March 2003) shows anglers have reported catching more than 6,500 bass weighing 7 pounds or more.

• TPWD biologists estimate that as many as 15,000 bass weighing 7 pounds or more are caught from Lake Fork annually.

While both California and Georgia have produced fish larger than any from Lake Fork, no data exists to challenge Fork's claim to have produced more big bass than any other lake in the world. Bigger bass are caught elsewhere on occasion, but if you want to have a chance to catch a 10-pound or larger fish, Lake Fork is your best bet.

Fishing of that quality doesn't happen by accident — not in Texas, which has only one natural lake. A 1948 map of Texas shows one natural lake — Caddo Lake in East Texas — and a handful of constructed reservoirs scattered about the state.

Then came the drought of the 1950s, which rudely awakened Texans to the fact that vastly greater water supplies were needed for the state's growing population. The rush of dam building that followed increased the number of reservoirs from 66 in 1950 to 149 in 1970. Today Texas has almost 6,700 reservoirs, large and small.

When it comes to bass fishing, Lake Fork tops the list.

Lake Fork was built near the end of the reservoir-building era and about a decade after the beginning of serious fisheries management in Texas. The timing could hardly have been better. Lessons learned about how to build a lake that would support the best possible fishery were applied to Lake Fork as they had been nowhere else in Texas. Innovative management techniques and regulations designed to create and maintain a trophy bass fishery were first instituted at Lake Fork.

The lake was stocked with Florida largemouth bass, which research in Texas in the 1970s showed grow faster and larger than native northern largemouths.

A quarter-century later, anglers are still reaping the rewards.

Steve Smith was the TPWD fisheries biologist in charge of Lake Fork at the time the Sabine River Authority began construction in 1975. Allen Forshage was his regional director, and David Parsons was SRA's technical division manager. The three men could have just let the lake happen. Fortunately for bass anglers, they chose instead to do everything they could

to make it a prime bass fishing lake.

Parsons and other managers at SRA had backgrounds in aquatic biology and were eager to try out the experimental programs Smith and Forshage proposed for the lake. "We believed TPWD knew what they were doing," Parsons recalls. "Even though the project was primarily for public water supply, SRA realized there was considerable interest in developing fishing and other recreation to



Steve Pice photo



From the West - Dallas Area: I-30 East for approximately 75 miles to Exit 124 (TX-154 South) toward Quitman. Stay on TX-154 South for approximately 22 miles; take a Right onto FM-288 South for approximately 1 mile. Follow signs for Event Parking. Estimated Travel Time: 1 hour 45 minutes

From the North - Sulphur Springs Area: TX-154 South toward Quitman for approximately 22 miles. Turn Right onto FM-288 South for approximately 1 mile. Follow signs for Event Parking. Estimated Travel Time: 30 minutes

From the East - Shreveport Area: I-20 W for approximately 95 miles to Exit 516 (US-69 North) toward Tyler / Lindale. Turn Right onto US-69 North for approximately 16 miles. US-69 North becomes TX-27 for 8 miles. Turn Left onto TX-154 North for approximately 5 miles. Turn Left onto FM-288 South for approximately 1 mile and follow signs to Event Parking. Estimated Travel Time: 2 hours

From the South - Tyler Area: US-69 North for approximately 20 miles. US-69 North turns into TX-37 North for approximately 8 miles. Turn Left onto TX-154 North for approximately 5 miles. Left onto FM-288 South for approximately 1 mile. Follow signs for Event Parking. Estimated Travel Time: 50 minutes

benefit the lake area economy. I don't recall any formal agreements. We were just able to do it."

Normal practice in lake-building called for clearing all timber from the lake bottom. At TPWD's request, only 20 percent was removed from Lake Fork, and in the cleared area near the dam, TPWD and SRA cooperated in placing piles of huge earthmover tires to provide structure. The timber and other vegetation that flooded when the lake filled provided habitat for fish and also released nutrients into the water, feeding the microorganisms that fed the small fish that fed the bigger fish.

Location is as important for bass lakes as it is for real estate. "We spent a lot of time driving around looking at the watershed," Smith recalls. "It had a lot of basic fertility—dairy farms and fertilized pastures in Hopkins County."

"Our pre-impoundment studies showed the lake's watershed had twice the nutrients of any other lake in the basin," Parsons says. The lake was filled in stages over a five-year period, allowing fish to make the maximum use of those nutrients. Average annual rainfall of some 40 inches and generally stable water levels have promoted good spawns and survival.

"Instead of cutting the dams of ponds to be flooded, we left them

intact at TPWD's request," Parsons continues. TPWD crews replaced fish in those ponds with Florida largemouth bass fingerlings and adults two to three years prior to impoundment. Before the lake was finished, it was stocked with 732,215 fingerlings. When the lake filled, it had a healthy population of bass and abundant food for those fish.

"Lake Fork had habitat, nutrients and forage—it was set to explode," Smith says. "And it had the right mix of fish. We stocked Florida broodfish in every little pond so that when they closed the gate and got that explosive spawn, there was as much Florida influence as possible."

Lake Fork also ranks high in what biologists call shoreline development index—the ratio of shoreline length to the circumference of a circle with the same surface area as the lake. A circle has an SDI of one. "Lake Fork's SDI is unbelievable—something like 12, as I recall," Smith says. "That's very positive for largemouth bass, since that represents a lot of habitat for fish."

"Another key was that the TPWD hatchery system had the capacity to raise the fingerlings we needed to put into a 28,000-acre reservoir," says Forshage. As of 2006, TPWD had stocked 8,105,910 Florida largemouth bass fingerlings

and 49 adults into the lake.

TPWD puts fish into lakes, but anglers have tremendous impact on what happens to those fish. Two factors influence the process: harvest regulations and the attitude of anglers. Lake Fork benefited from both.

During the boom in reservoir construction, fisheries biologists came to believe it was impossible to overfish the new lakes because they were extremely productive. Anglers proved them wrong. Harvest regulations in effect at the time allowed anglers to keep 10 fish a day over 10 inches long — and they usually did. So many bass were harvested that in the 1970s biologists saw a decline in the size and numbers of bass being caught from lakes across Texas. Young bass were caught and introduced to hot grease before they had a chance to mature and spawn — much less attain trophy size.

Lake Fork opened to fishing with what was considered to be a restrictive regulation at the time — a 14-inch minimum length and a five-fish daily bag limit. As biologists learned more about the benefits of protecting fish until they had a chance to grow, regulations evolved to the present 16- to 24-inch slot limit with a daily bag limit of five fish, only one of which can be 24 inches or longer. The regulation allows the removal of small fish (which leaves more food for

the larger bass) and protects big fish from harvest.

Many anglers were not in favor of restrictive regulations at first, but as the quality of fishing improved, they came on board. Competitive bass fishing began to emphasize catch-and-release, and recreational anglers started to emulate their angling heroes. The result has been a virtual halt to harvesting of bass from Lake Fork. The fish have good genetics, plenty of food and the time to grow large. It's said that you cannot find a fishing guide on Lake Fork who will allow you to keep bass of any size.

"The combination of physical attributes of the lake, public acceptance of TPWD harvest regulations, and the catch-and-release ethic of anglers made Lake Fork what it is today," Parsons says. "Public perception of what is a good fishing trip has changed and has had a lot of impact. The change in attitude of anglers has been the key to the whole deal."

Proof of the success of the pre-impoundment planning and work came on November 26, 1986, when Mark Stevenson caught a new state record 17.67-pound largemouth bass from the lake, eclipsing the former record by more than 4 pounds. That mark stood until 1992, when Barry St. Clair caught the current lake and state record fish from Fork, an 18.18-pounder.

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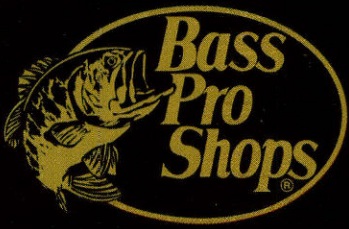


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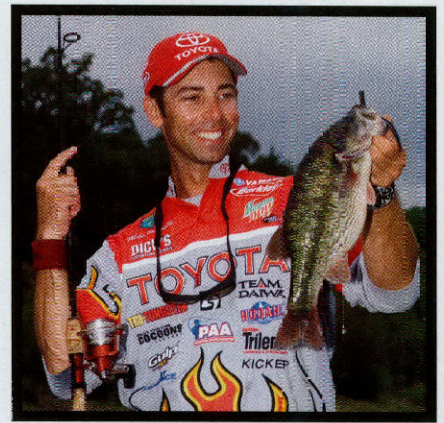
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All the stars aligned to make Lake Fork what it is today. When the Toyota Texas Bass Classic stars take to the water in April, they can be assured they are fishing on one of the best bass lakes in the nation and perhaps the world.

The Tournament Format

Maintaining the management practices established by TPWD on Lake Fork is one reason the PAA is so excited about the tournament. The Toyota Texas Bass Classic showcases the conservation mindset of all involved. The PAA sees this as a new opportunity for professional anglers to take the concept to other highly managed lakes all over the country.

To be sure, "paper tournaments" have been held on Fork to compensate for the slot limits. Paper tournaments are tournaments where the anglers measure and record the length of the fish on a paper score sheet so the fish can be measured and released quickly. Paper tournaments are popular with many bass clubs around the state when fishing slot-limit lakes or during the hotter months — to reduce stress on the bass.

The PAA pros in the Toyota Texas Bass Classic are using a unique system. An independent observer in each boat will weigh the bass caught between 14- to 24-inches with a hand-held scale (Bogagrip scales); he'll record the weights of those fish so they can be released where they were caught. Each angler, however, will be allowed to bring in one over-24-inch bass each day to the stage. TPWD will supervise the care of the bass brought to the stage to assure proper fish handling.

The 160 pros will fish in four-person teams; two team members will fish the morning flight and the other two, the afternoon. The observer in the boat assures adherence to the tournament rules, records the fish caught, and transmits the data to the tournament officials, who keep a running tally on giant scoreboards for the spectators.

While one group of anglers is on the water, the others will be holding seminars, signing autographs and interacting with spectators.

After the morning weigh-in, the team members will strategize for the afternoon's fishing. The anglers trade positions and the other half of the pros will remain on shore.

Only 40 contestant boats will be on the water at one time, which maximizes the conservation ethic. Having a limited number of boats on the water also facilitates videotaping the event. TV crews will record the action and the event will be broadcast on CBS and Versus.

The Main Event

Over the years, tournaments have evolved into spectator events. Many organizations now include open-to-the-public activities at tournament venues. The Toyota Texas Bass Classic aims to do this bigger and better than any other tournament. Weekend activities will run Friday morning through Sunday evening with exhibits from related vendors, kid and family activities hosted by TPWD and others. Free live concerts will be offered throughout the day Saturday and Sunday, highlighted by country music stars Clay Walker (after Saturday's weigh-in) and Tracy Lawrence (after Sunday's weigh-in).

In the end, everyone benefits: Lake Fork shows off its legendary fishery, anglers learn how to handle big fish to provide sport for the next generation, local communities benefit from the publicity, TPWD receives a \$250,000 donation to further conservation and youth initiatives, the pros earn a hefty paycheck, and maybe Toyota sells a Tundra or two.

For current information:

<http://www.toyotatexasbassclassic.com/>

<http://proanglersaassociation.com/>



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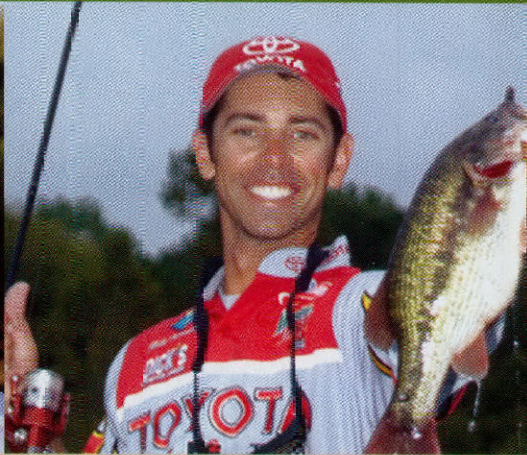
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Lake Fork, Texas • April 13-15, 2007



Denny Brauer



Michael Iaconelli

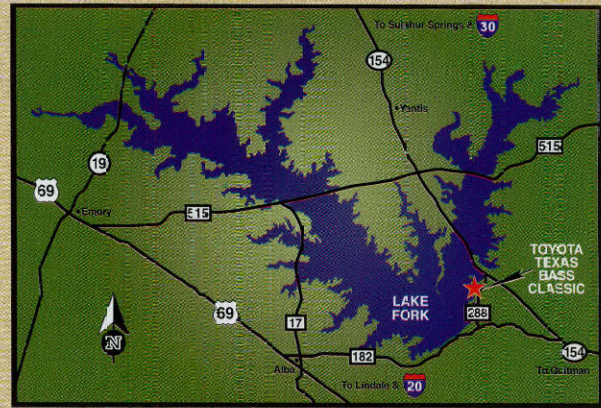


Kevin VanDam

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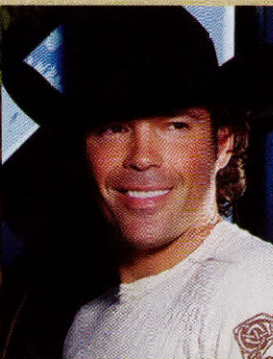
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The most beautiful stretch of this hard-working waterway is where you'd **least expect it.**

Story and photos by
LARRY D. HODGE



As

the kayakers paddle lazily by the lush green island in the middle of the Trinity River, four wild turkeys in succession blast off and fly right over their heads, flapping mightily, heading for the dense forest on the other side. The kayakers stop paddling, stunned, and drift a bit before one looks at the other and says, in awe-struck tones, **“Did you see that?”**

Even more amazing that this happened at all is where it happened — on the edge of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, not far north of DFW Airport and the urban sprawl gobbling up a large amount of North Texas, along a stretch of river little known even to most DFW residents, just below Lewisville Lake Dam.

Zoe Ann Stinchcomb and I are here to float and fish this almost-secret stretch of the Trinity with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department fisheries biologists Tom Hungerford and Rafe Brock. Flowing as it does through the two most populated areas of Texas — Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston — the Trinity is perhaps the most used and abused river in the state. For much of its length, urban runoff and sewage effluent form the bulk of its flow. Yet where it issues from Lewisville Lake, the

Elm Fork of the Trinity is clear, clean and inviting.

Much of the credit for this goes to the Lewisville Lake Environmental Learning and Wildlife Management Area, nearly 2,000 acres of land owned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that lies on either side of the Elm Fork immediately below the dam. The area includes bottomland forests as well as upland areas and is home to reintroduced Rio Grande turkeys, white-tailed deer and a host of other species — 27 mammal, 275 bird, 36 reptile, 13 amphibian, 17 arthropod and 28 fish, in fact.

It's fish that we're here for, partly to help Hungerford and Brock sample the stream and partly for the sheer fun of fishing a small, fast-flowing stream with light tackle.

We scrub a planned trip when wel-

come rains arrive with a cool front, but an intrepid group of volunteers bent on cleaning up the river cast off anyway. It's citizen involvement that helps preserve the charm of this little bit of natural North Texas (see sidebar, “De-Trashing the Trinity”).

The next morning dawns clear and cool, a perfect day to be out on the river. We pack our canoes with fishing gear and picnic supplies and put in just as the sun climbs high enough to reach the west bank. We're off on a six-mile float to the take-out at the West Hebron Parkway bridge. Along the way, we'll pass under a railroad trestle and Texas 121 and alongside two huge landfills whose towers of trash — covered with earth — peek through a narrow strip of forest that contains some of the biggest cottonwood trees I've ever seen, giants it would take three people to reach

around, wonders of nature whose tops seem to tickle the sky's belly. We'll see mallards and blue-winged teal, American white pelicans, great blue herons, wood storks, vultures, red-tailed hawks, belted kingfishers, northern cardinals, red-eared turtles, American rubyspot damselflies, green darner dragonflies, monarch and tiger swallowtail butterflies.

And fish. The best fishing places come in the first mile or so of river, from the put-in to the railroad trestle. Actually, Brock and Hungerford explain, this isn't the river channel at all, but a constructed conduit for water released from the dam. But you'd never know by looking. Winding and rock-bottomed, its banks covered in sycamore and willow and partridge pea and poison ivy, the channel looks like a wild river.

And fishes like one. We haul out just a hundred yards or so below the put-in, where a bend in the river spins an eddy against the east bank. Tom uses a soft plastic crayfish-imitating bait while Rafe threads a nightcrawler on below a quarter-ounce bullet weight, and they edge cast to the bank and to the edge where the current meets the eddy. Rafe loses a few worms, probably to sunfish; Tom hooks several rocks.

"There should be white bass, spotted bass, largemouth bass and lots of bluegills," Tom says. "And there may be some hybrid striped bass mixed in with the white bass, since we stock those in Lewisville Lake every year. Fish for the bluegills with red wigglers. For bass,

use small spinnerbaits, small jigs, small crawfish-imitating baits."

"Ultralight or fly-fishing tackle will work, but do use 14- to 17-pound line when fishing for bass, because farther down the river you'll be fishing around logs and laydowns," Rafe adds.

Back in the canoes, we paddle by the island where the wild turkeys were the day before, but they're elsewhere. Past an S-curve in the river, we pull out on a gravel bank, and Rafe and Tom start working a sheer clay bank on the outside of a bend while Zoe Ann wades to a small island. Release from the dam is 126 cubic feet per second today, and while the current is moving at a pretty good clip, keeping our footing is not a problem. Because water coming from Lewisville Lake is part of the water supply for Dallas, releases can be 300 CFS or more, and under those conditions, you should take precautions against falling and wear your life preserver even when you're out of the boat.

Rafe picks up a rod baited with a Texas-rigged crayfish-imitating lure and tosses it within inches of the far bank. Bam! A fish takes it before the swirling current moves it more than a couple of feet. The fish puts a hefty bend in the ultralight rod and tail-walks several times before coming to hand. It's a spotted bass, and Rafe shows us the

The Trinity is perhaps the most used and abused river in the state.

tell-tale lines of spots on its side and the sandpaper-like tooth patch before releasing it.

A few casts later, using a tiny diving crankbait, Rafe pulls another spotted bass from the river. This one is all of three inches long, but it tried to eat a bait suitable for a much larger fish. We laugh at its ambition while admiring another of its trademark body features, a tri-colored tail — then send it home to grow up and fight again another day.



Both Tom and Rafe catch spotted gar on artificial lures, and the changing angle of the sun tells us it's time to move on down the river. At a leisurely pace we're still two hours from takeout. Below the railroad trestle to the 121 bridge, it's easy to imagine you are deep in the wilds of East Texas, if you can ignore the low-flying jets taking off from DFW. The twisting channel is a slalom course of downed trees, stick-ups and gravel bars. At this low flow, it's not a challenge even though the paddler in the front of the boat — me — is inexperienced. At 300 CFS, only experienced paddlers should attempt this stretch of river.

Below the 121 bridge the number of snags and laydowns lessens, and the river flows leisurely, giving time for your attention to wander to the huge



Dallas area canoers and kayakers love the Elm Fork of the Trinity with a passion, so much so that they go to great lengths to improve and maintain it. The Saturday cleanup we witnessed was co-sponsored by LLELA, the City of Lewisville, Kayakpower.com, REI-Dallas and REI-Plano. Mike Swope of Kayakpower.com showed up with a pickup truck and trailer loaded with kayaks and PFDs.

Mike Williams, outreach specialist with REI-Dallas, explained why the Elm Fork arouses such loyalty. "LLELA is a wonderful place to camp and paddle. It's wild enough to give you the feeling you are a hundred miles away from the big city." So far

REI has given LLELA \$13,000 in grants for improvements and organized several volunteer work days to build a kayak launch, expand the primitive camping area, and construct nature trails. Anyone interested in volunteering can contact LLELA director Ken Steigman (steigman@unt.edu, 972-822-0320) or REI at 972-985-2241 in Plano or 972-490-5989 in Dallas.

Volunteers on the projects get dirt under their fingernails, the satisfaction of knowing they've done something to improve their little part of the world and T-shirts that say "Get Dirty."

Ironically, getting dirty may be the best way to help the Elm Fork come clean.

cottonwoods and flowers and fluttering butterflies. The westering sun slants through the trees — over the tops of those huge landfills, alas — and showers sparkles on the river; reflections dance off leaves drooping low over the water. It's altogether a relaxing, quiet way to spend an afternoon just a mile or so from the constant clang and clatter of the city.

And while the Trinity is a working river for much of its length, carrying water to cities and disposing of their wastes, here it more resembles a mountain stream in its carefree youth, out to have a good time carving its banks and frolicking with its fish.

It's a good place to be, and all you need to enjoy it is a canoe

or kayak and a few hours during which you can slip the bonds of city, freeways and responsibilities — so near, and yet so far.

Before You Go

Check out the Lewisville Lake Environmental Learning Area (LLELA) Web site at <www.ias.unt.edu/llela> for hours, regulations and fees. The dam area has primitive camping as well as a canoe and kayak put-in and is open for public use only on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

Information on running the river, canoe and kayak rentals, shuttle service and guided trips can be found on several Web sites: <www.southwestpaddler.com>; <www.kayakpower.com>, <www.down-river.com> and <www.canoe-dallas.com>. Streamflow data and other Trinity River information can be found at <www.trinityra.org>. For information on City of Dallas plans to improve recreational opportunities along the river within that city, go to <www.trinityrivercorridor.org>.

While put-in facilities at LLELA are excellent, taking out on the upper stretch of the Elm Fork is, frankly, a pain. You can take out at the Texas 121 bridge, but your float will be only about two miles, and the bank there is very steep and parking is very limited. The take-out at West Hebron Parkway is a little better, but you have to jump a curb and negotiate a 70-percent grade to get down to the parking and takeout, and if the ground is wet, forget it. You'll never

make it back up the hill, even with four-wheel drive. A better plan would be to take a guided trip with one of the companies above or arrange for them to shuttle you and your gear back to your put-in.

Another alternative is to put in at McInnish Park, west of I-35 on Sandy Lake Road. Turn into the park, then take the first right to go under the McInnish Drive bridge to the parking area and boat ramp. You can paddle upstream and then back down. (You can, of course, do the whole 12 miles from LLELA, an all-day trip.) Do not go downstream; just under the bridge is an uncontrolled spillway that drops 20 or so feet into a boiling cauldron below. People have drowned here; make sure you don't. ☆

Left: TPWD fisheries biologist Rafe Brock quickly caught this spotted bass.

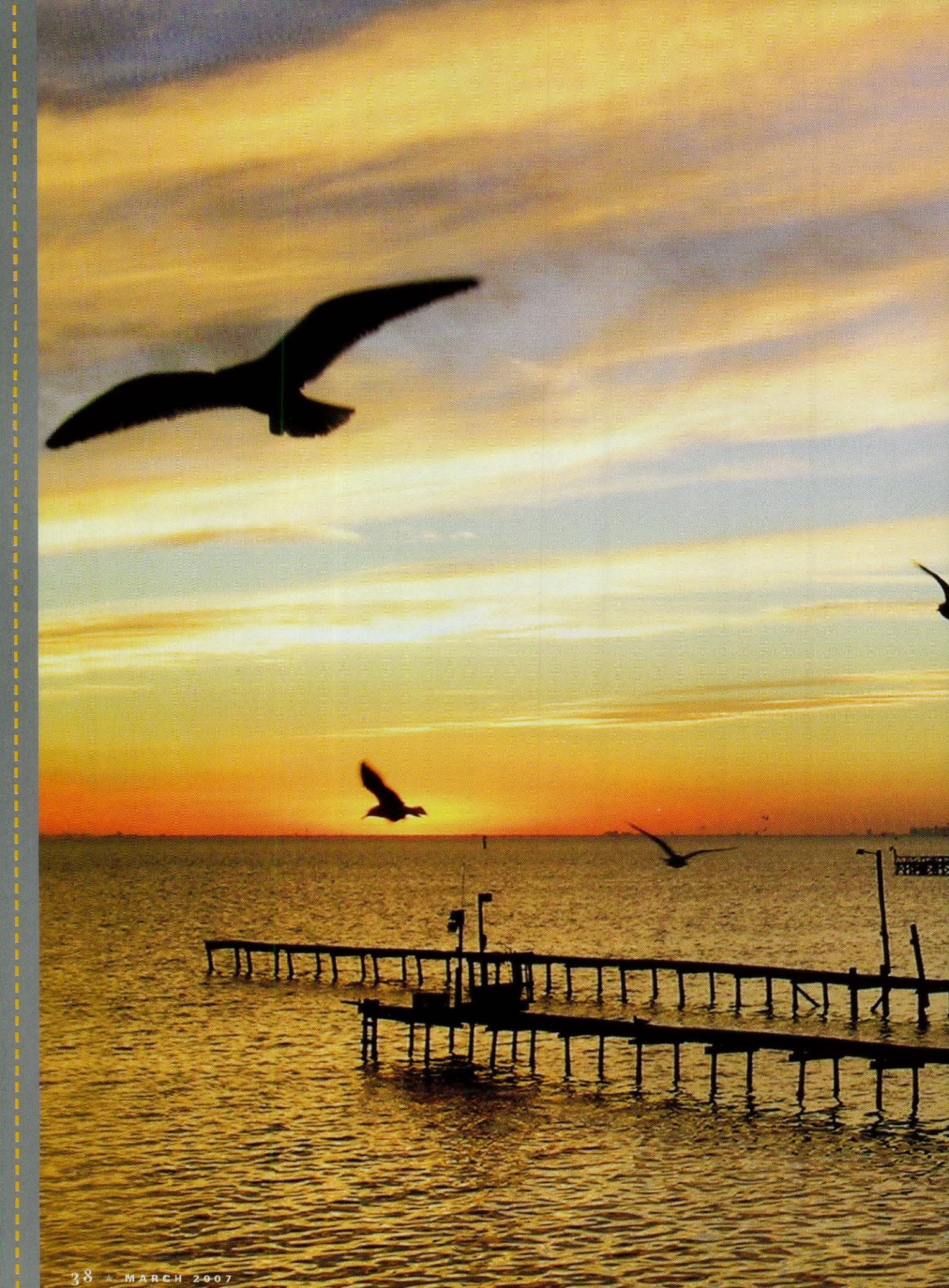
Opposite page: Brock and fellow TPWD fisheries biologist Tom Hungerford try their luck in the Elm Fork of the Trinity.

Opposite bottom: (Left) spotted gar; (center and right) large and small diving crank-baits. Both sizes will work in rivers, but the smaller ones more closely match the natural food available.



It's altogether a relaxing, quiet way to spend an afternoon, just a mile or so from the constant clang and clatter of the city.





50 QUICK GETAWAYS

Places to go when you absolutely, positively need a break — *right now!*

The problem with planning a trip — even a quick one — is that it can seem a lot like work. Schedules, budgets, to-do lists, packing lists, other people with opinions. It's time to tear up those lists and jump in the car. For those family members who lack spontaneity, wanderlust and/or spunk, try out this powerfully persuasive line: **Road Trip!** Our writers have done the work for you. All you need is this handy guide (oh, and maybe a cell phone to call for reservations). These getaways near Houston, Dallas, San Antonio and Austin were selected with convenience in mind. Whether you're looking to hike, fish, birdwatch, or just gaze at something other than your computer, your next adventure is just a short drive down the road.

By WENDEE HOLTCAMP,
SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS,
JUNE NAYLOR



PHOTO © CARRIE ROBERTSON

1 **Kemah with Kids**

Spend a weekend exploring the **Kemah Boardwalk on Galveston Bay**, just east of Clear Lake, with its waterfront restaurants, shopping, stingray reef and kids' carnival activities. Dine at the Aquarium Restaurant surrounded by hundreds of colorful coral reef fish in a 50,000-gallon aquarium, or participate in the Marine Biologist for a Day program. Two great lodging options include the Palm Lodge Bed & Breakfast in nearby Seabrook on five forested acres, which provides complimentary bikes and binoculars to guests, or Kemah's A White Texas Pelican B&B, where you can fish right off the private pier.

Best time to go: Enjoy the festive tropical Christmas event with an annual Christmas Day sailboat parade, carolers and bell choirs. — WH

2 **Coral Reefs in Texas?**

Explore an underwater world off the Texas coast, including both natural and artificial reefs. Coral reefs in Texas? You bet! **The Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary** is the United States' northernmost coral reef and offers a world-class scuba diving experience just 110 miles offshore. Perched on twin salt domes, the coral gardens are home to hammerhead sharks, sea turtles, eagle rays, sea stars, crabs and hundreds of colorful fish species. Ocean critters also flock to "artificial reefs" created by offshore oil rigs and shipwrecks, such as the V.A. Fogg, 35 miles from Freeport.

Best time to go: August is very popular, with visibility best June through September. — WH

3 **Rent a Beach House in Galveston!**

Rent a beach house on **Galveston Island** for a lazy summer weekend. Build sandcastles and play in the surf by day, and then catch a sunset dolphin-watching cruise. Gregarious bottlenose dolphins feed, play and raise young all along the Texas coast. Galveston Elderhostel offers educational marine mammal programs for seniors 55 and older (409-740-4921). If you want to beat the heat, spend a day exploring Moody Gardens, with its larger-than-life IMAX films, rainforest pyramid and state-of-the-art aquarium with several penguin species and touch tanks.

Best time to go: Summer. — WH



3

4 **Ski Conroe**

Spend a weekend at the wooded shores of **Lake Conroe**, popular with watersports enthusiasts who love motor boating, jet-skis, or pontoon boat rides. Lake Conroe offers fantastic fishing for largemouth bass, channel cats, bluegill and crappie. Rent a hotel suite or a lake-side villa or cottage at the Del Lago Waterfront Resort, set on 300 acres with a golf course, health spa, sand volleyball, tennis and racquetball courts, and boat rental or fishing expeditions. Take the Southern Empress, an 1800s-style sternwheeler riverboat, on the lake for lunch or supper dining and dancing.

Best time to go: A great destination for summer watersports! — WH

5 **Paddle Spring Creek**

Neighboring Harris and Montgomery counties are actively acquiring forestland along both sides of **Spring Creek** to create a linear nature preserve of up to 12,000 acres — just minutes north of the Intercontinental Airport. In comparison, New York's Central Park is only 843 acres. Several parks are now open along the creek, including Jesse Jones Park & Nature Center and Montgomery County Preserve. Launch a canoe at Jones Park in Humble and take out at Riley Fuzzel Road in Spring. Hike or birdwatch along the trails — the area provides habitat for Swainson's warblers and the easternmost pair of green kingfisher yet documented. No camping yet, but lodging exists in nearby Humble, The Woodlands or Shenandoah.

Best time to go: Catch Pioneer Day at Jones Park every November or Heritage Day in February — great family events — then go for a moonlight paddle with Southwest Paddlesports (www.paddle.sports.com). — WH



I

6 High on Birds

Spend a weekend at the world-renowned birdwatching destination **High Island**. Four Houston Audubon Society sanctuaries preserve the coastal oak scrub and marsh. HAS offers guided hikes starting from the Boy Scout Woods headquarters. Don't miss Clay Bottom Pond in the Smith Oaks Sanctuary in spring, home to a large rookery for roseate spoonbills, great white egrets, snowy egrets and white ibis. "This is one of the most accessible rookeries in the nation," marvels Winnie Burkett, HAS sanctuaries manager. Seeing adorable pink fuzzy spoonbill chicks is worth a trip in itself. The Birder's Haven Resort B&B in High Island caters to birdwatchers.

Best time to go: Peak spring migration is mid-March through mid-May. Fall migration peaks in late September or October. — WH

7 Like a Forest, but Thicker

Escape to an earlier era when East Texas settlers lived in log cabins surrounded by lush **Big Thicket** forests. More than 180 bird species, 80 fish species, 50 reptiles and 30 amphibians dwell within these forests, but the Big Thicket's true eminence comes from the stunning diversity of plant and tree species that grow here. Stay in one of the rustic log cabin B&Bs offered at Ethridge Farm or Pelt Farm — both located close to Kountze. Spend the weekend hiking the Big Thicket, including an unforgettable walk along Sundew Trail to see carnivorous pitcher plants and sundews in the nearby Hickory Creek Savannah Unit.

Best time to go: April brings an array of flowering dogwood and orchids and is a good time to see pitcher plants. — WH

8 Chain-O-Fun

Built on a reclaimed 20th-century gravel mine, majestic Big Thicket forests have grown up around the 500-acre **Chain-O-Lakes** resort near Cleveland, with 43 cabins, most overlooking 250 acres of interconnected lakes. Owners Jimmy and Helena Smith share a genuine passion for the environment and manage an outdoor Shangri-la where families reconnect with nature — and each other. The resort has biking and hiking trails, fishing, canoeing, horseback riding and a spring-fed swimming lake. The world-class Hilltop Herb Farm Restaurant is worth a trip in itself. I spent Thanksgiving here with my kids and parents; we gazed at constellations, rode horses and saw a humongous snapping turtle; my 10-year-old son said it was one of the coolest things he's ever done (and we'd just been to Australia).

Best time to go: Catch some lovely fall colors and crisp weather October to November. — WH

9 Wooded Bliss

A wooded resort north of Houston, this upscale resort offers a great quick retreat from the busyness of life at a moment's notice. It offers the standard resort amenities — golf, massage therapy, swimming pools and tennis courts — as well as access to more than 140 miles of hiking and biking trails throughout **The Woodlands**. "It's very unique in that you feel like you're not in the city," says Marketing Associate Tenley Wood. "You're surrounded by beautiful nature and you're secluded, but at the same time if you want to go shopping or to a concert, everything is nearby." The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion offers year-round open-air concerts, and Market Street with shops and restaurants is minutes away.

Best time to go: The holiday season has several great events, including a Wonderland in the Woods culinary event that recreates a North Pole out of candy every November. — WH

10 Birdy Bottomlands

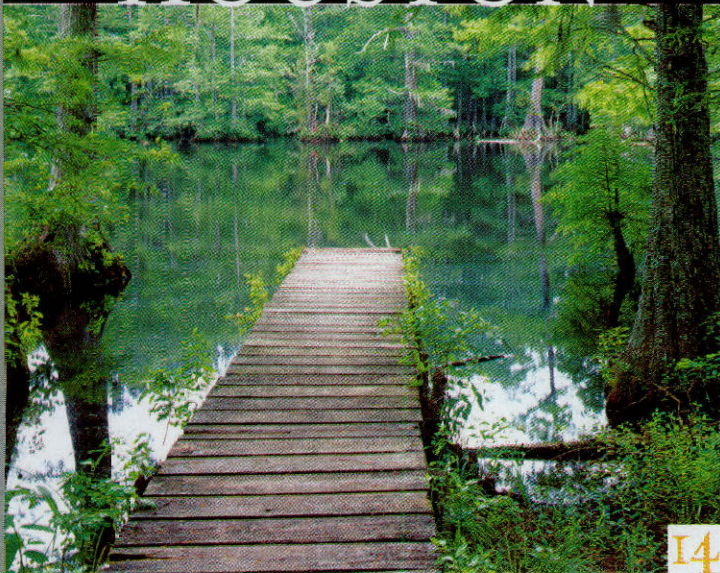
Thousands of acres of luxurious old-growth coastal forest — and a critical habitat for neotropical migratory birds — lie within an hour's drive southeast from the heart of Houston. The **Columbia Bottomlands** line the southern portion of the Brazos, Colorado and San Bernard rivers and the rich coastal floodplains that lie in between. Birders worldwide refer to the Texas Gulf Coast as the "birdiest" place in the world, and the bottomlands play a large part: an estimated 27 – 29 million individual birds of 237 species migrate through the bottomlands each year. Go for a weekend without the kids at Roses and The River B&B on the banks of the San Bernard.

Best time to go: Spring brings the opportunity to see multitudes of migrating birds. — WH

11 Meditate, then Get Crabby

Partner a trip to the **Trinity National Wildlife Refuge** with a stay at the nearby Langetree DUCK FARM Ecoresort — a nonprofit B&B in Liberty, with its meditation gardens, stone labyrinth and sustainably designed wood building. No, they don't raise ducks; the name is an acronym for "Discovering, Understanding Creativity and Knowledge





I4

I4 Peachy Paddling

Nearly 5,000 acres of wet, wild and wildlife-friendly bottomland hardwood forest just northeast of Houston, the underappreciated **Lake Houston Park** offers a restful respite from the noisy city on the banks of Peach Creek. Awaken to the sounds of pine warblers and pileated woodpeckers. Recently transferred from TPWD to the City of Houston, the park has primitive and group campsites, cabins, 12 miles of hiking trails and an interactive nature center. Explore sandy beaches along Peach Creek, or paddle all the way out to Lake Houston and the San Jacinto River.

Best time to go: Participate in the 12-mile East Fork/West Fork Canoe Challenge — a mini adventure race from the park out to the San Jacinto River held every spring. — WH

I5 Horse Around in Huntsville

Adjoining Sam Houston National Forest, heavily forested 2,000-acre **Huntsville State Park** offers a great and inexpensive family camping getaway, north of Houston off I-45. The park offers Eat N Rides, an old western tradition, consisting of a guided horseback trail ride ending with either a full breakfast or a hearty steak dinner. Spot lurking alligators as you canoe the 210-acre Lake Raven. This popular family camping spot offers canoe rentals, 19 miles of hiking trails and a swimming spot. Up for adventure? Try the Texas Jailbreak Adventure Race with running, orienteering, mountain biking and kayaking, or the Huntsville Classic for a true mountain biking challenge — both held in November.

Best time to go: November for the Texas Jailbreak and the Huntsville Classic. Fall has the best weather for camping. — WH

I6 Pining for Stress Relief

Angelina National Forest preserves one of the south's only remaining old-growth longleaf pine forests at Boykin Springs campground. Less than 3 percent of the original 90 million acres of longleaf pine remain in the southeastern states. Look for endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers, swim in the 9-acre Boykin Lake, or hike the 5.5-

for a Fern Alternative Restoration Model." The 21,000-acre Trinity NWR preserves incredible habitat for paddling and wildlife watching — bottomland hardwood forest, sloughs, tributaries and oxbow lakes (abandoned meanders of old river channels). Spanish moss drapes from ancient cypress trees and you can spot bald eagle, wood stork, osprey, swallow-tailed kite, vermilion flycatcher and prothonotary warbler. Or catch blue crabs in 1,000-acre Champion Lake.

Best time to go: Trinity NWR has good crabbing in summer and best fishing during spring or fall; boats with engines less than 1 HP only. — WH

I2 Batty on the Bayou

Take a weekend nature getaway in the middle of Houston, exploring **Buffalo Bayou**, where in 1836 the Allen brothers founded the city. Buffalo Bayou Partnership has begun a major effort to renovate, revitalize and clean up Buffalo Bayou, and efforts include several new parks, art projects and recreation opportunities along the bayou. Spend a day kayaking the forested corridor through the city, lessons included, followed by an evening watching thousands of Mexican free-tailed bats emerge from the Waugh Bridge — either by foot or on the Bayou Breeze pontoon boat. Stroll the new \$15 million Sabine-to-Bagby Promenade and stay in the art-deco Modern B&B 10 minutes away with its fun architecture, art and organic food.

Best time to go: Bats stay year-round, but pups fledge in fall. — WH

I7



BUDGET GETAWAYS

I3 Hike 'til you Drop

Spend a weekend backpacking through the Lone Star Hiking Trail or **Sam Houston National Forest**. At 128 miles, this is the longest continuous hiking trail in all of Texas. For a long hike, start west of the pristine 3,855-acre Little Lake Creek Wilderness Area and hike 17 miles east to Stubblefield Lake Recreation Area, or primitive camp in the forest. The luxuriant forest remains untrammelled by human habitation and roads. Dozens of moss-covered logs crisscross the landscape near a spring-fed creek, creating a lush, beautiful topography.

Best time to go: Spring brings flowering dogwoods and redbuds tejasweled in purple. Fall brings some beautifully crisp nights. — WH



I6

mile Sawmill trail from the lush, cascading Boykin Springs to the open longleaf pines around Boutin Lake. Listen to the sound of rushing water along the first mile, which follows a creek, with a genuine Texas waterfall, as well as carnivorous pitcher plants along the way. This relatively isolated campground has hot showers and toilets.

Best time to go: Fall or spring. — WH

Whoop it up at Matagorda

Sand dunes growing with morning glory, evening primrose and sea oats lend an air of soft beauty lost at more developed Texas beaches. Matagorda Island is arguably the state's best place to find unusual, unbroken shells because no vehicles are allowed. Gather friends around a bonfire, or get away for a romantic weekend. **Matagorda Island Wildlife Management Area** includes over 58,000 acres of public lands and is a reserve for 19 threatened and endangered species — including Aplomado falcons, horned lizards, sea turtles and whooping cranes. Outside of the group barracks, you must be prepared for primitive camping. Bring in all the food, water and supplies you need and tote out all garbage.

Best time to go: December to February; you may spot whoopers at the southern end of the island, closest to Aransas NWR. — WH

RESOURCE GUIDE — HOUSTON

1) Kemah (www.kemahboardwalk.com, 877-AT-KEMAH). **Aquarium Restaurant** (281-334-9010, www.aquariumrestaurants.com). **Palm Lodge B&B** (www.visitpalmldodge.com, 281-291-7513). **A White Texas Pelican E&B** (www.awhitetexaspelican.com, 231-538-3900).

2) Two operators take trips to Flower Garden Banks NMS (flowergardensnms.gov, 409-621-5151) and rigs/showrecks: **Fish-n-Divers** (www.fishndivers.com, 713-304-2070) leaves from Galveston; **Gulf Diving** (www.gulfdiving.com, 979-233-4445) leaves from Freeport. Two-day packages include sleep-aboard option.

3) Beach rental companies: (www.beyraef.com, 300-527-7333), www.sandnsea.com, 800-880-2554). **Harbor Tours** dolphin-watching

(409-765-7700). **Moody Gardens** (www.moodygardens.com, 800-532-4673).

4) Del Lago (www.dellago.com, 800-Del Lago). **Southern Empress** (www.southernempress.com, 800-324-2229). For more condo rentals and a lot of information: **Lake Conroe Visitor's Bureau** (www.lakeconroevb.org, 936-538-7112).

5) Spring Creek Greenway (www.springcreekgreenway.org, info@springcreekgreenway.org, 936-539-7817), **Jones Park** (www.hcp4.net/jones).

6) Birjer's Haven Resort (409-286-5362), **Bolivar Chamber of Commerce**: (www.bolivarchamber.org). **Houston Audubon Society** (www.houstonaudubon.org). Get a **Texas Coastal Birding Trail map** (388-900-2597).

7) Big Thicket National Preserve (www.nps.gov/bth, 409-951-6725), **Pelt Farm** (www.peltfarm.com, 409-287-2279), **Ethridge Farm** (www.ethridgefarm.com, 409-898-2710).

8) Chain O' Lakes Resort (832-397-4008, info@coresort.com, www.colresort.com).

9) Woodlands Resort (www.woodlandsresort.com, resortinfo@the-woodlands.net, 800-433-2624).

10) Houston Wilderness has a map showing a dozen preserves throughout the Columbia bottomlands (www.houstonwilderness.org). **Roses and the River B&B** (rosesandtheriver.com, 800-E10-070, stay@rosesandtheriver.com). **Brazosport Chamber of Commerce** for other lodging options (www.brazosport.org, 979-285-2501).

11) Langetree Duck Farm (www.duckfarm.org, 936-567-4325), **Trinity NWR** (www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/trinity/vtr/index.html, 936-336-9733).

12) Buffalo Bayou Partnership, (www.buffalobayou.org, 713-732-2314); **Modern B&B** (www.modernbb.com, 800-452-4014).

13) Request a \$7 trail map from the **Sam Houston National Forest office** (888-361-6908), **Lone Star Hiking Trail Club** (www.lshclub.com).

14) Lake Houston Park (281-354-6881, houstonparks.org). **15) Huntsville State Park** (936-295-5644, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntsville/), **Texas Jailbreak** (www.solemracing.com), **Huntsville Classic** (www.bikelanehouston.com, 281-440-6100).

16) Angelina National Forest (936-639-8620, www.fs.fed.us/r8/texas/).

17) Matagorda Island WMA (www.tpwd.state.tx.us/matagordaisland and 979-244-6804), **passenger ferry** (512-983-2215).

18

Enjoy the View on a Glass Bottom Boat

Aquarena Springs in San Marcos once entertained visitors with glass bottom boat rides, a sky-ride tram, arcades and underwater shows. Today, the former theme park houses the Aquarena Texas River Center, an educational arm of Texas State University. Glass bottom boats still give guests an up-close look at underwater life within crystal-clear Spring Lake, fed by more than 1,000 springs that bubble up from the Edwards Aquifer. The Endangered Species Exhibit and Natural Aquarium contain four endangered species and other animals native to the springs and adjoining San Marcos River. From the floating Wetlands Boardwalk, keen eyes may spot cormorants, pied-bill grebes and other waterfowl. Another great outing in town: hike the scenic San Marcos River Walk, a 2.5-mile trail system that starts at the Greenhouse Interpretive Center.

Best time to go: Avoid the crowds on weekdays. — SSR

19

Hightail it to the Hills

Remote and secluded, **Red Corral Ranch** — located between Wimberley and Blanco — offers 1,100 acres of rolling hills and wilderness. Kick back in a roomy cottage, an isolated cabin or a comfortable lodge room; explore foot trails that wind through live oak groves, past seasonal creeks and across grassy hillsides. White-tailed deer, gray foxes, coyotes, wild turkeys, armadillos, raccoons and many species of birds inhabit the ranch, including the golden-cheeked warbler. The cottages and cabin have stocked kitchens and outdoor grills (hot tubs, too), so bring some steaks and disappear for a weekend.

Best time to go: Ranch open year-round; trails closed November and December. — SSR

23



24



20

Camp with Eagles

From, should you pack the tent or just a suitcase? It's your choice at **Canyon of the Eagles**, an eco-friendly getaway located on Lake Buchanan. Camp out for the weekend or book a comfortable cottage. Bonus: enjoy dinner and a spectacular view of the lake from the Canyon Room Restaurant. This 940-acre park also has a swimming pool, fishing docks and piers, 14 miles of nature trails and a lights-cut observatory. Walk down to the lake and join a Vanishing Texas River Cruise, an ecological boat tour that runs along the rugged Colorado River canyon.

Best time to go: Park open year-round. Take a river cruise November–March to see American bald eagles that nest in canyon cliffs above the lake. — SSR

21

Get Wet in Wimberley

Now, for a small town, Wimberley has a lot to do: Climb up the stone steps to the summit of **Old Baldy**, one of two peaks located off Ranch Road 2325 in Woodcreek. Tour Bella Vista Ranch, the state's first commercial olive oil company. Look for bargains at Market Day, with more than 450 vendors spread across 17 acres. Cool off in **Blue Hole**, rated among the state's top swimming holes. Being a blanke: to watch a first-run movie at the Corral Theatre, an open-air big screen, or students performing Shakespeare Under the Stars at the outdoor EmilyAnn Theatre. Stay overnight at Dancing Waters inn and see **Jacob's Well**, believed to be the longest underwater cave in Texas.

Best time to go: Summer weekends. Market Days at Lions Field and First Saturday, April–December. Corral Theatre open summer Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings. Shakespeare runs the first two weeks of August. Blue Hole open summer weekends only. — SSR

22 Take a Lake Break

Rent a cottage or an RV site, relax on **Lake LBJ**, a popular place to swim, boat and ski. On the northern shore, Sunset Point caters to RVers with lakeview sites that have full hookups, wireless Internet, picnic tables and concrete pads. On the southern shore, the LBJ Yacht Club at Granite Beach appeals to families with a water park, lakeside cottages, restaurant, boat rentals and guided fishing trips. Bonus outing: visit the Nightengale Archaeological Center on the northwest end of Lake LBJ. More than 171,000 artifacts have been unearthed at this state archeological landmark, which also features exhibits, a display of field excavations and an interpretive trail.

Best time to go: Summer. Nightengale Archaeological Center tours given second and fourth Saturdays (2 – 5 p.m.), February through November (no admission fee). — SSR

23 Lose Yourself at Lost Maples

No matter the season, the scenery's always spectacular at **Lost Maples State Natural Area**. Eleven miles of trails wind past rugged cliffs, flowing springs, wooded slopes and the Sabinal River. Backpack your gear, and camp at one of several secluded sites. Most visitors come in the fall to see the park's famous bigtooth maples' colorful foliage display. If you're not into primitive camping, stay overnight at a nearby cabin, such as Foxfire Log Cabins and the Lodges at Lost Maples.

Best time to go: Fall weekdays to see brilliant foliage. — SSR

24 Fine Time among the Pines

Luxury and wilderness intertwine at the 656-acre Hyatt Regency **Lost Pines Resort and Spa** near Bastrop. Here, you can hike in the

afternoon and dine by candlelight at night. A hotel shuttle will bus you to adjoining **McKinney Roughs Nature Park**, where 15 miles of hiking/equestrian trails wind through the pines. Book a horseback ride at Hyatt's stable or raft the Colorado River with an experienced guide. The resort's water park features a 1,200-foot flowing river pool, a sandy beach, water slide, children's pool and more. Other activities: golf, spa, fly-fishing, GPS scavenger hunts, live animal presentations, evening campfires and storytelling.

Best time to go: Spring through fall. Some activities are offered weekends only. — SSR

25 Sandy Beach, Hungry Bass

Load up the fishing gear and head for Oak Thicket Park on warm-water **Lake Fayette**, one of the best bass fishing lakes in Central Texas. This LCRA-owned getaway has RV and tent sites, screened shelters with electricity and water, and furnished cabins — complete with satellite TVs, small refrigerators, microwaves, coffee makers and linens (some have kitchenettes, too). Kids love the park's sandy beach and playscape. Bring some binoculars and hike the Rice-Osborne Bird and Nature Trail, which winds for a mile through the woods. Load up the bikes, too — a hike-and-bike trail connects Oak Thicket to nearby Park Prairie Park, another LCRA facility on Lake Fayette.

Best time to go: Spring. — SSR

26 Climb a Rock, Crash in a Cabin

Warmer temperatures mean it's time to climb the huge granite dome at **Enchanted Rock State Natural Area**. Or hike the 4-mile trail that winds around the formations. Along the way, you'll likely spot squirrels, lizards, rabbits, white-tailed deer and other wildlife, not to mention a rich variety of vegetation. Afterward, spend some quiet nights in a cabin overlooking a creek at A Getaway Ranch. Call ahead



to book a horseback ride. Dutch Mountain Ranch — which adjoins the state natural area — offers a secluded, Western-style lodge.

Best time to go: Spring for wildflower viewing. State natural area closes after parking capacity fills, so arrive early on weekends. — SSR

27 Pack your Peepers

Pack the binoculars and explore trails at **Kerrville-Schreiner Park**, where you'll see lots of white-tailed deer. Stay overnight in a mini cabin (heat/air, bunk beds, and a table — bring linens or a sleeping bag) or a secluded cabin with satellite television and kitchen (bring linens and towels). You can canoe or kayak on Flat Rock Lake, which straddles the park. Watch for birds, turtles and snakes as you paddle. If you've a hankering for some solitude, stay in a cabin at Stowers Ranch, an 11,000-acre spread located approximately 25 miles west of Kerrville. Spot birds, deer, exotic game and other wildlife along the ranch's hiking trails.

Best time to go: Spring. — SSR

28 Weekday Getaway at Garner

Bring a tube and float the crystal-clear Frio River at **Garner State Park**. During the summer, paddle boat and kayak rentals are available. Miles of hiking trails crisscross the park's 1,484 rugged acres. On summer nights, jukebox dances at the concession building attract crowds. A miniature golf course is also lit for nighttime playing. Heads up: cabins, shelters and campsites here typically book up months in advance so you'll likely have to find lodging elsewhere. Try Neal's Lodges, Frio River Cabins and Utopia on the River, among others.

Best time to go: Summer weekdays to avoid crowds. — SSR

28



31

29 Scoot your Boots to Bandera

Looking for a really different getaway? Head for Bandera, the "Cowboy Capital of the World," and pick from a slew of dude and guest ranches. Most include cowboy chic, evening campfires and horseback rides. At Running-R Ranch, wranglers lead rides into **Hill Country State Natural Area**, which stretches across some 5,400 scenic acres. Approximately 40 miles of multi-use trails there appeal to equestrians, hikers and mountain bikers. Find other area dude ranches at www.tpwd.state.tx.us/hillcountry.

Best time to go: Spring and early summer when temperatures are cooler. — SSR

30 Go Tubular in Gruene

Take a day off and indulge yourself in a float trip on the **Guadalupe River** below Canyon Dam. Slather on the sun-screen, and jack a cooler (no glass!), then rent a tube or a raft in Gruene. Trips can run from one and a half hours up to six hours. Side trip: check out beautiful **Landa Park** on the Comal River in New Braunfels. The 196-acre city park has swimming pools, a miniature train, miniature golf course, paddle boats, nature trail and arboretum.

Best time to go: Late spring and all summer. — SSP

BUDGET GETAWAYS

31 Succumb to Pine Power

There's something so soothing and addictive about being among pine trees. One visit to **Bastrop State Park**, and you'll be hooked, too. Campsites and rustic cabins are an affordable way to stay the night. Cabins have air conditioning, linens, towels and kitchens with



microwaves (but no utensils or dishes). Take a leisurely drive or bike ride along Park Road 1C, which winds 12 miles through the pines to **Buescher State Park**. Cast a line in the park's lake or play a round at the Lost Pines Golf Club. A swimming pool and more than 10 miles of hiking trails will give the kids plenty to do during summer vacation.

Best time to go: Spring and summer. — SSR

32 Peace and Quiet in Castroville

If you're craving quiet, then stay at quaint **Landmark Inn State Historic Site** on the Medina River. Antiques, quilts and area rugs decorate the inn's 10 comfortable rooms, which have no phones or TVs (hence the quiet!). Some share baths. Tour the grounds, which include a mill complex built in 1853 and a museum. Then hop on a park bike and pedal around the Alsatian (French-German) town of Castroville. You can rent the inn's canoe for a modest fee or play some yard games, like croquet, badminton and horseshoes. For breakfast, savor Alsatian pastries and coffee in the parlor.

Best time to go: March – May for wildflower viewing; October for mild temps. Summer weeknights are typically available. — SSR

33 Round up the River Rats

Families especially love **Blanco State Park**, where they can swim, tube, fish and canoe in the Blanco River. Anglers catch sunfish, catfish and bass (rainbow trout are stocked in winter months). Kids enjoy biking along park roads, hiking a short nature trail through the woods and burning energy at playgrounds. Towering pecan and cypress trees shade picnic tables that overlook the river. Campsites accommodate tent campers and RVers (screened shelters available, too). Downtown Blanco, located four blocks from the park, hosts a monthly market on the square. Lavender farms in the area welcome visitors.

Best time to go: Spring and summer for wildflowers and swimming. Market Day is held third Saturday each month, April through November (second Saturday December). — SSR

34 Birds and Barbecue

Campsites along Clear Fork Creek and a nine-hole golf course draw folks to **Lockhart State Park**, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The view from the park's hilltop refectory is worth a look. Tip: Lockhart's best known for its barbecue joints, so pick up some for supper while you're here. Check out nearby **Palmetto State Park**, where lush stands of dwarf palmettos thrive in the swampy woods. You'll think you're in the tropics! Birders, bring binoculars; more than 240 species have been spotted at Palmetto.

Best time to go: Spring and summer. — SSR

RESOURCE GUIDE — CENTRAL TEXAS

- 18) Aquarena Texas Rivers Center** (512-245-7570, www.aquarena.txstate.edu).
- San Marcos Parks and Recreation** (512-393-8400).
- San Marcos Tourist Information** (512-393-5900 or 888-200-5620, www.toursanmarcos.com).
- 19) Red Corral Ranch** (866-833-4801, www.redcorralranch.com).
- 20) Canyon of the Eagles** (512-334-2070 or 800-977-0081, www.canyonoftheeagles.com).
- Vanishing Texas River Cruise** (512-756-6986 or 800-474-8374, www.vtrc.com).
- 21) Wimberley Visitors Center** (512-847-2201, www.wimberley.org).
- Additional town information** (www.visitwimberley.com).
- Bella Vista Ranch** (512-847-6514, bvbranch.com).
- EmilyAnn Theatre** (www.emilyann.org).
- Blue Hole** (512-847-0025, www.friendsofbluehole.org).
- Dancing Waters Inn** (512-847-9391, www.dancingwatersinn.com).
- 22) Sunset Point on Lake LBJ** (830-798-8199, www.sunsetpointlbj.com).
- Lake LBJ Yacht Club at Granite Beach** (830-693-9172, www.lakelbjmarina.com).
- Nightengale Archaeological Center** (830-598-

5261 or 800-776-5272 ext. 6714, www.lcra.org/parks/natural_resource/nightengale.html).

23) Lost Maples State Natural Area (830-966-3413, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/lostmaples).

Foxfire Log Cabins (830-966-2200 or 877-966-8200, www.foxfirecabins.com).

Lodges at Lost Maples (877-216-5627, www.lostmaplescabin.com).

24) Hyatt Regency Lost Pines Resort and Spa (512-308-1234, lostpines.hyatt.com).

McKinney Roughs Nature Park (512-303-5073 or 800-776-5272 ext. 8021, www.lcra.org/community/mckinney_roughs.html).

25) Oak Thicket Park (979-249-3504, www.lcra.org/parks/developed_parks/oak_thicket.html).

26) Enchanted Rock State Natural Area (325-247-3903, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/enchantedrock).

Dutch Mountain Ranch (325-247-4074, www.centuryranchlodging.com).

A Getaway Ranch (830-997-3169, www.agetawayranchtexas.com).

27) Kerrville-Schreiner Park (830-257-5392, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/kerrvilleschreiner).

Kerrville Convention and Visitors Bureau (800-221-7958 or 830-792-3535, www.kerrvilletexascvb.com).

Stowers Ranch (830-238-4346, www.stowersranch.com).

28) Garner State Park (830-232-6132, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/garner).

Neal's Lodges (830-232-6118, www.nealslodges.com).

Frio River Cabins (830-232-5996, www.friorivercabins.com).

Utopia on the River (830-966-2444, www.utopiaontheriver.com).

More lodging: Texas Hill Country River Region (800-210-0380, www.thcrr.com) or **Rio Frio Lodging** (830-966-2320, www.friolodging.com).

29) Bandera Convention and Visitors Bureau (800-364-3833, www.banderacowboycapital.com).

Hill Country State Natural Area (830-796-4413, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/hillcountry).

30) New Braunfels Chamber of Commerce (800-572-2626).

31) Bastrop State Park (512-321-2101, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/bastrop).

32) Landmark Inn State Historic Site (830-931-2133, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/landmarkinn).

Castroville Chamber of Commerce (830-538-3142 or 800-778-6775, www.castroville.com).

33) Blanco State Park (830-833-4333, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/blanco).

Chamber of Commerce (830-833-5101, www.blancochamber.com).

34) Lockhart State Park (512-398-3479, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/lockhart).

Lockhart Chamber of Commerce, (512-398-2818 or 877-519-7057, www.lockhartchamber.com).

Palmetto State Park (830-672-3266, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/palmetto).





35

35 Heaven at Hell's Gate

Escape to the shores of **Possum Kingdom Lake**, about an hour west of Fort Worth, where the Cliffs Resort clings to the lake shores nearest the jaw-dropping rock formation called **Hell's Gate**. You can reach the twin stone towers by rented boats from the resort's marina, or you can stay on dry land and play the magnificent waterside golf course, followed by a Dead Sea salt glow or seaweed body wrap treatment at the spa. If you still have the energy, make the half-hour drive to the west side of the lake for a hike or to paddle a canoe around **Possum Kingdom Lake State Park**. Just be sure you're back at your room's patio in time for a magnificent sunset over the water. At dinner, tuck into jerk pork tenderloin, stuffed with pine nuts and manchego cheese, one of chef Chris Tomboni's specialties at the resort's Chaparral Grill.

Best time to go: Spring, early summer and fall. — JN

36 Watch Birds by Day, Stars at Night

Head south of Glen Rose for a deluxe hideout known as **Quail Ridge Ranch**, thought to have the state's largest black-capped vireo population on private land. Bring a small group of family and friends to the small lodge, perched on a scrubby hill and surrounded by native grasses, live oak and juniper. Sit around a fire pit after a customized dinner for your gang, or just watch the brilliant canopy of stars from your private porch. Pack your mountain bike, too. Make time, if you like, for a side trip to examine the dinosaur tracks in the riverbed at nearby **Dinosaur Valley State Park**.

Best time to go: Spring and fall. — JN

37 Denton's Forest Hideaway

You'll forget you're just seconds away from an interstate highway once you're ensconced at the **Wildwood Inn**. Situated on the near-south side of Denton, this lovely bed-and-breakfast inn sits on four densely wooded acres that make you feel as though you're deep in the countryside. You can curl up with a book in the shade, next to the serene swimming pool, or head to the courthouse square for a horse-drawn carriage ride and a poke around the antique shops. If you're feeling particularly energetic, drive just a short way south of town to take a hike on the six-mile **Elm Fork Trail**, a fairly new Corps of Engineers development with rolling terrain and plenty of country air. That's assuming you can pull yourself away from the fireplace and whirlpool tub in your suite at the inn. On weekends, you'll be pampered in the inn's restaurant, where dinners include pan-seared duck with blackberry demiglace.

Best time to go: Holidays, spring and fall. — JN

38 Rest Up at the Ridge

Just north of Denton at the town of Pilot Point, **Lantana Ridge Lodge** provides a retreat right on 30,000-acre **Ray Roberts Lake**. Done up in an Old West theme, the lodge offers a special for sweethearts — a four-course dinner in the gazebo when the weather's nice or a candlelight table for two in the library on cooler nights, along with a stay in the honeymoon suite. Any night, you can find chef Heron Barbosa cooking up a mean steak at the lodge's Bronze Buffalo Grill. Bring your horse, if you like, for boarding at the lodge's Lone Star Hall.

36





and riding on 26 miles of equestrian trails. Consider also a hike on the 10-mile Ray Roberts Greenbelt that begins at the Ray Roberts Dam. It's perfect for birding and mountain biking, too, and anglers fishing nearby can access the path at one of three trailheads.

Best time to go: Fall. — JN

39 Vintage-rich Village

Yep, it's in the shadows of jumbo jets taking off and landing at DFW Airport, but **Grapevine**'s historic Main Street seems as though it should be somewhere in a storybook. Each side of the charming thoroughfare boasts shops, theaters and cafes. Nearby, you can catch the Grapevine Vintage Railroad for a trip to Fort Worth. Along the shoreline of Grapevine Lake, you'll find hiking, biking and equestrian trails of three to ten miles in length. If you're looking for pampering, you can be spoiled rotten at the lavish Gaylord Texan Resort on Grapevine Lake, with plentiful shopping, a fancy nightclub, a fabulous steakhouse and a spa.

Best time to go: Spring and early summer. — JN

40 Up in Red River Country

On the woody southern shores of **Lake Texoma**, roughly an hour and some change north of Dallas, the rejuvenated **Tanglewood Resort** packs a load of fun into a weekend. There are 18 holes of golf

and plenty of tennis, croquet, volleyball, basketball and horseshoes. You can also rent bikes, ride Belgian horses, work out in the fitness center or get a massage in the spa. Want to hang out on the water? Book a guide for landing some of the stripers for which Texoma is famous, or reserve the Stardust, a luxury houseboat that rivals even the resort's condos and villas for posh points.

Best time to go: Summer. — JN

41 Hood County Hangout

One of the first Main Street projects in Texas, **Granbury**'s courthouse square has served as a model for the rest of the state since its renewal more than 20 years ago. Just a few blocks from **Lake Granbury**, a scenic reservoir on the Brazos River, the old downtown continues its joyful boom with a bevy of delightful little shops around the square, an opera house with a full calendar of plays and Broadway shows, a theater with an ongoing '80s musical revue, a pretty country inn, a bookstore, ice cream parlor and a handful of yummy cafes. Don't miss the gourmet cooking store called the Pen Handle, or a stay at the lakefront Captain's House, an 1890s-era B&E inn, with its breakfast of Belgian bacon waffles with pecan-praline cream. If you can slip away for a couple of quiet hours, bring your fishing gear and try to hook some of the largemouth bass, catfish and striped bass for which Lake Granbury is famous.

Best time to go: Spring, summer, winter holidays. — JN

42 Longhorns and Butterflies

Due west of Fort Worth on scenic U.S. 180, Albany may well offer you the best surprises in near West Texas. Part of the state's official longhorn herd greets you at **Fort Griffin State Park and Historic Site**, where you can hike around the picturesque ruins of a hand-dug well, cavalry barracks, officers' quarters, bakery, hospital and other fort buildings. In town, be sure to eat an unforgettable steak at the Fort Griffin Mercantile, buy vintage Texas maps and books at the Lynch Line shop, and visit the Old Jail Art Center, one of the nation's richest small museums, right on the pretty Shackelford County Courthouse square. Stay at Stasney's Cook Ranch, where you can take tours to look for bison, deer, wild boar and coyote, as well as migrating monarch butterflies in the fall and dozens upon dozens of birds heading to and from the Rio Grande Valley in fall and spring. Bring your mountain bike, too, to ride the ranch.

Best time to go: Spring and fall for migrations. — JN

43 Play Around at Whitney

If you're not playing on one of the two Bruce Lietzke-designed courses at **White Bluff Resort** on Lake Whitney, surely you've hooked up with a guide from the resort's marina to make a day of catching striped bass and blue catfish. The marina can set you up for a day of sailing or water-skiing, if you choose, and the spa's deep tissue massage will work out whatever kinks you brought along. But then, so will an afternoon or two of relaxing by the swimming pool — or simply gazing at the lake from the balcony of your rented condo. Pack a picnic for a day of picturesque hiking at nearby **Lake Whitney State Park**, too.

Best time to go: Spring through fall. — JN

44 Go Birding on a Horse

Set aside an afternoon of horseback riding with Chad, head wrangler at the **Wildcatter Ranch**, found between Possum Kingdom Lake and the town of Graham. He'll show you breathtaking views of the Brazos River from atop scenic, cedar-shrouded bluffs, and he'll point out a number of resident and migratory birds — even a bald eagle, if you're lucky. While you're canoeing you're likely to see a blue heron, and if you take a quiet break on hiking trails, be sure to watch for rabbits and turkey. On weekends in summer, the Wildcatter likes to host cowboy poetry nights, hayrides, campfires and chuckwagon cookouts. You can book a massage any time of year, and you'll always be welcome to a sensational rib-eye at the ranch's steakhouse. Check out the comfortable, luxurious rooms, each done in a Wild West theme pertinent to local history.

Best time to go: Spring, summer and fall. — JN

45 Embrace the Brazos

By all means, bring your camera along to photograph the magnificent **Suspension Bridge**, spanning the mighty Brazos River in the middle of Waco. When you walk across the expanse, think of all it's seen since its erection as the longest single-span suspension bridge west of the Mississippi in 1870; cattle drovers traveling the Chisholm Trail even used it to bring their herds across the river. Be sure to bring your mountain bike for riding on the 8-mile course winding through woods and vegetation, over limestone cliffs, alongside the Brazos and Bosque rivers and over natural springs in Waco's 416-acre Cameron Park. Or, you can walk the River Walk below to **Fort Fisher Park**, where you'll visit the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum. Don't miss the gorgeous Armstrong-Browning Library on the Baylor University Campus, or a comfy night's stay at the Cotton Palace, a B&B inn with six rooms and suites and a carriage house.

Best time to go: Spring and fall. — JN

49





46 Mind the Manor

Just outside of Muenster, roughly an hour north of Fort Worth, you'll find the most unlikely little countryside refuge that's guaranteed to dispel your city stress — at least for the weekend. At the center of 14 pecan-studded acres, **Elm Creek Manor** — a century-old, three-story farmhouse — gives you a choice of rooms, suites and cottages in which to really unwind. Imported antiques fill every nook and cranny, while modern delights include wireless connectivity and DVD players. You can take breakfast in your room, book a candlelight dinner and treat yourself to a facial hot rock massage, or reflexology session at the onsite spa. Take a short hike on the peaceful grounds, or enjoy a side trip to see the beautiful painted church in nearby Lindsay. Bring your fishing tackle for an early-morning jaunt to **Moss Lake**, about 15 miles northeast of Muenster, where the white, spotted and largemouth bass are almost always biting.

Best time to go: Fall, winter and spring. — JN

BUDGET GETAWAYS

47 The Norse of Course

Roughly midway between Waco and Glen Rose, you'll find an unexpected treasure trove of European heritage at the town of **Clifton**. Head right to the Bosque Memorial Museum for a look at the Norwegian Collection, an exhibit that details settlement of the hearty Norse Community just down the road. You'll also want to wander over to the Norwegian Historic District to take a tour of the pretty little Our Savior's Lutheran Church, where Oleng Pearson, known as the Father of Norse Immigration to America, is buried in the churchyard. In the fall, there's a Norse community dinner, and a heritage tour in early December. Nearby, watch for the golden-cheeked warbler at **Meridian State Park**, a good place to camp and to hike on limestone-rimmed trails circling the tree-lined lake.

Best time to go: Late fall. — JN

48 Fishing for Treasures

Not that you ever needed to, but when was the last time you could have bought a baby goat, century-old wheelbarrow, wooden toilet seat with brass hinges, a new stoneware table setting and a funnel cake — all at one place? For most everyone, it's the last time they went to First Monday Trade Days at **Canton**. Since the 1350s, it's been one of the major marketplaces in the South to find people selling just about anything that can be hauled to and fro; you owe it to yourself to see why as many as 300,000 people show up to cram the acres of booths open on the weekend prior to the first Monday of the

month. If you need a break in the action, take time out to catch (and release) some largemouth bass at nearby **Purtis Creek State Park**.

Best time to go: Spring. — JN

49 Doggone Fine Dogwoods

Everyone thinks of visits to the city's lovely rose gardens when **Tyler** is mentioned, but sometimes that's at the expense of the excellent little Caldwell Zoo. Among residents well worth checking out are the black-footed penguins and the family of giraffes. New is a fabulous entryway populated by lemurs, monkeys and roseate spoonbills. From town, it's just a short drive to **Tyler State Park**, a sweet spot for riding on a 13-mile mountain bike/hiking trail, canoeing, and ogling the graceful dogwood blooms in spring.

Best time to go: Spring and fall. — JN

50 Taking the Waters, Scaling the Rocks

Another fine destination on U.S. 180 west is **Mineral Wells**, a town that seduced movie stars and other glitterati in its heyday, when the spectacular Baker Hotel offered curative waters at its spa. The hotel's closed today, but you can drink the restorative elixir at the Famous Mineral Water Co., a few blocks north of the abandoned hotel. Bring along your climbing gear to scale the rust-colored rocks along the beautiful, shady shores at **Mineral Wells State Park**, or haul your bicycle or horse along to ride the Lake Mineral Wells State Trailway, a 20-mile path that follows an old rail bed to Weatherford. There's good camping at the park, along with nice birding.

Best time to go: Spring, summer and fall. — JN ★

RESOURCE GUIDE — DALLAS/FORT WORTH

- 35) **Cliffs Resort on Possum Kingdom Lake** (888-335-8882 or 940-779-4500, www.thecliffsresort.com).
- 36) **Quail Ridge Ranch** (254-897-3618, www.quailridgeranch.com).
- Dinosaur Valley State Park** (254-897-4588, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/dinosaurvalley).
- 37) **Wildwood Inn** (866-840-0713 or 940-243-4919, www.denton-wildwoodinn.com).
- 38) **Lantana Ridge Lodge** (940-686-0261, www.lantanalodge.net).
- Ray Roberts Lake State Park** (940-686-2148, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/rayrobertslake).
- 39) **Grapevine Tourism** (817-410-3185). **Gaylord Texan Resort** (817-778-1000).
- 40) **Tanglewood Resort** (800-833-6569 or 903-786-2968, www.tanglewoodresort.com).
- 41) **Granbury Convention & Visitors Bureau** (817-573-5548 or 800-950-2212, www.granbury.org). **Captain's House B&B** (817-579-5253).
- 42) **Fort Griffin State Park and Historic Site** (325-762-3592, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/fortgriffin). **Stasney's Cook Ranch** (888-762-2999, www.stasneyscookranch.com).
- 43) **White Bluff Resort** (888-335-8881 or 254-694-0304, www.whitebluffresort.com). **Lake Whitney State Park** (254-694-3793, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/lakewhitney).
- 44) **Wildcatter Ranch** (940-549-3500, www.wildcatterranch.com).
- 45) **Waco Tourist Information Center** (800-922-6386 or 254-750-8696, www.wacocvb.com). **Cotton Palace** (254-753-7294, www.thecottonpalace.com).
- 46) **Elm Creek Manor** (877-356-2733 or 940-759-2100, www.elmcreekmanor.com).
- 47) **Clifton Chamber of Commerce** (254-675-3720, www.cliftontexas.org). **Meridian State Park** (254-435-2536, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/meridian).
- 48) **First Monday Trade Days at Canton** (903-567-6556, www.firstmondaycanton.com). **Purtis Creek State Park** (903-425-2332, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/purtiscreek).
- 49) **Caldwell Zoo** (903-593-0121, www.caldwellzoo.org). **Tyler State Park** (903-597-5338, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/tyler).
- 50) **Famous Mineral Water Co.** (940-325-8870). **Lake Mineral Wells State Park** (940-328-1171, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/lakeminerawells).

LEGEND, LORE & LEGACY



ILLUSTRATION BY CHET PHILLIPS

The Truth about Snipe

Though mostly known as a mythical animal featured in teenage pranks, snipes do exist — really.

By Russell A. Graves

I'm not too sure of the universal protocol, but the Northeast Texas version I learned goes something like this:

First, get a few friends together. The hunt seems to go better if you and the friends are in your teens. The hunt, of course, works swell if one of the friends has no idea of the nature of the impending "hunt."

Sacks are important. Most purists prefer burlap sacks while weekend snipe hunters will settle for paper or plastic. The key is finding a sack that will hold an unruly snipe when the action heats up.

Scouting is also important. You can actually go scout during the day to find a snipe hotspot or you can say you scouted. Either way it really doesn't matter in the end.

Location, location, location. I would always ask myself, "Can a snipe live here?" If the area is remote and dark, the answer is a resounding yes.

Pick a good night. Early summer evenings work well. Personally, I like a moonless night. Snipes seem to thrive in the darkness so the darker the better.

The set-up is crucial. I like picking a trail far from the truck. Remember the guy who had never heard of snipe hunting? He's the one who gets placed on the best trail which just happens to be farthest from the truck.

Once the inexperienced guy is in place, it is very important that you tell him that you are going to go up trail and scare some snipes back his way. Therefore, he must keep his senses alert and his sack open and held to the ground.

agree as to the length of time the inexperienced hunter should be left alone. Me? I say it depends on the inexperience of the new hunter. The length of time could be just a few minutes up to hours. The key is to make the new hunter feel as uncomfortable and abandoned as possible.

When you think the new hunter is sufficiently uncomfortable, retrieve him immediately and then spend the rest of the night teasing the new hunter with your other friends.

When I was taken on my first snipe hunt, I had no idea what we were doing. I learned the game early on when I was still young enough that my kin were gentle on me. When I was about seven, I was left out in the pasture within sight of my parent's house. I stayed out for a while but figured that something was wrong when I could see the silhouettes of my older cousins playing in the yard back at the house.

Country boys learn quickly. So luckily, once I reached my teens, I was never again abandoned by friends in a foreboding place. Over time I led a few snipe-hunting parties of my own, and even played along while some of my high school students schemed to take one of their friends out into the field in search of unruly snipe.

Snipe hunting is a rite of passage over

passed down each time it is played and continues to entertain as new members of the snipe fraternity are brought into the fold.

Try as I may, I cannot find the origins of the mythical snipe hunt although I do know that it is played all over the nation and even parts of Europe. The ritual has even found its way into popular culture as at least one network program, *King of the Hill*, featured a snipe hunt with Hank Hill and his son. Instead of snipes, the two ended up catching a whooping crane.

Believe it or not, real snipes do exist, and are found in plentiful enough numbers to warrant a hunting season. In fact, real snipe hunters can pursue the bird (which is classified as a migratory game bird) from November through mid-February each year. A hunting license with state and federal migratory bird stamps are all that's required to hunt. The limit in 2006 was eight snipes per day and 16 in possession.



THE BIRD'S RECLUSIVE NATURE ADDS TO ITS MYSTERY AND UNDOUBTEDLY HELPS FUEL THE LEGEND THAT SURROUNDS THE MYTHICAL SNIPE HUNT.

As a distraction, some suggest having the hunter make a call that the snipe supposedly makes. The call can be any sound as long as it is silly and repeated often.

Once the new guy is in place, disappear back to the truck for a while with the others in the party. Many snipe hunters dis-

most all of Texas for particularly teenage boys. Although variations of the activity abound, the end game is essentially the same: abandon a "hunter" alone with his snipe sack while the rest of the hunting party laughs at his expense from another location. This good-natured prank is

Although most of the legitimate snipe hunting is along the freshwater marshes of the coast and lower East Texas, snipes also exist over much of the state as they spend their winters in Texas. The Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count reveals that the highest number of wintering snipes are found along the coast as well as the northern blackland

(continued on page 63)

PHOTO © RUSTY RAY

PARK PICKS

RECOMMENDED STOPS ALONG THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED



Possum Kingdom State Park

Swim, ski or just dive right in at this northeast Texas favorite.

"Possum Kingdom Lake is the prettiest lake in Texas," says Jeff Nichols. Considering he's been running the state park's store and marina for the last 10 years, he might be a little biased. But one glance at the 19,000 acres of crystal clear waters and the towering cliffs makes it hard to argue with him.

It's not just the scenery that's been bringing folks here for generations; it's also the opportunity to experience all types of water sports, including boating, skiing, wakeboarding, kneeboarding, tubing, kayaking and fishing. During the spring and summer months, the lake is filled with boats, many of them congregating in the cove separated by two photogenic cliffs known as "Hell's Gate." Why such a daunting name for a place that's known for endless celebrating?

Nichols fills us in on the legend: Back in the mid-1800s, long before the existence of Possum Kingdom Lake, two fur trappers stole mules and fur from a couple of local Indians

When the Indians found out, they chased after the men, catching one and scalping him immediately. The other man ran until he reached the edge of the cliff and announced, "I'd rather die in hell than be scalped by Indians," before making the 180-foot jump to his death.

While things didn't end well for the fur trapper at Hell's Gate, lake and leisure lovers flock to the area, especially on the 4th of July for a fireworks show that's so spectacular, Nichols gets starry-eyed just describing it.

Many of those visitors come from Dallas-Fort Worth — it's an easy and picturesque drive — but Nichols says he also gets people from Houston, Austin, Lubbock and even from places where they don't say "y'all," like Switzerland. He says he often asks them, "What made you want to come to Possum Kingdom?" and they say, "It just sounded cool."

In fact, it's so cool that it's one of the most popular places for scuba diving in Texas. Deep-water devotees come to the Scuba Point Dive Shop, a family-owned business that's been a Possum Kingdom Lake staple for almost 50 years. In March, visibility is about 20 feet, and if the lake is at full capacity, divers can go down as far as 110 feet.

If you prefer to keep your head above water, Nichols has plenty of water-sport equipment for rent. You could camp at the state park along the shores of the lake (reservation information available on the TPWD Web site), walk to the park store and rent a ski boat with a wakeboard, skis, kneeboard and tube. Or you could take a more leisurely tour of the lake with one of his pontoon boats. If fishing is your water sport of choice, Nichols says you can expect to catch largemouth bass, sand bass and catfish.

Whatever you do on Possum Kingdom Lake, be sure to bring along a camera. The photo opps are infinite, especially at the site of our fur trapping friend's demise.

For more information on water sports, call Possum Kingdom State Park's store and marina at (940) 349-5612 or visit <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/possumkingdom>. ★

—Elsa K. Simcik

Starr Family Home

East Texas historic site and B&B earns 5 'Starrs.'

The Starr Family Home State Historic Site in Marshall offers visitors a rare glimpse at a rich 150-year history as well as a relaxing reprieve from the hustle and bustle of modern times.

My husband, Eric, and I arrive a little after 10 on Saturday morning, just in time to slide in on the coattails of a tour group of eight ladies from a church in nearby Carthage. A short video in the formal living room commences our introduction, with a historical overview of the Starr family and the three-acre estate, but it's our tour guide, park ranger Jo Ann Toole, who really brings the 19th-century Maplecroft mansion to life.

Though not the first home on the property, Maplecroft, built in the 1870s by the eldest son, James Franklin Starr, a shipwright, is the primary focus of the park. The home originally consisted of eight rooms, with a separate kitchen and servant's room connected to the main house by a covered passageway. Through the years the home has been modernized, modified and enlarged to accommodate the changing lifestyles of four generations of successive family members who have occupied it.

Despite the changes, Maplecroft looks much like it did 130 years ago and continues to shelter treasured family heirlooms, collections of china, art, figurines, decorations and furnishings that range in age from the latter part of the 19th century through the 1960s.

"Someone once told me that as a rule of thumb, [clothes] that are antique are almost always small. Apparently that's true of most of the people that lived a hundred years ago, too," Toole explains as all the ladies gawk admiringly at the tiny Victorian-style dresses, once worn by Starr's wife, Clara, displayed on mannequins throughout various rooms. From the child-size dainty dresses to the petite formal dining table and chairs, everything looks miniature juxtaposed against the home's towering 14-foot ceilings.

The authenticity of the home's furnishings and décor help capture even more of the prominent family's rich history. "At one time, the house had 26 bookcases in it, each one with a different letter on it for each letter of the alphabet," says Toole as she points out a bookcase with a gold letter "G" on the front. "This crack in the glass is actually a bullet hole from when someone got



upset with Mr. Starr and took a shot at him."

As we venture through the courtyard to the back of the property we pass a building that Starr converted into a private schoolhouse for the instructor of his six daughters.

"Right now we just use the schoolhouse for storage," explains park superintendent Cathy Marshall. "We're considering the idea of transforming it into another bed and breakfast cottage one day."

Currently the site offers one bed and breakfast room, Rosemont Cottage, which is the last stop on the tour and final destination for my husband and I later that evening. Built in the late 1830s, it is the only surviving wing of the original family home that was purchased by Frank Starr's father, Dr. James Harper Starr, in 1870. Dr. Starr was a prominent official during the Republic and first statehood periods; his son Frank was a leading land developer. According to Toole, it's said that at one time the Starr family owned one-

third of Texas and had land in every county.

"Whether you're talking about the precision and amazingly solid construction of the home itself, the antiques inside it, or the families who lived here," says Toole, "there's so much to be learned about Texas history right here in this house."

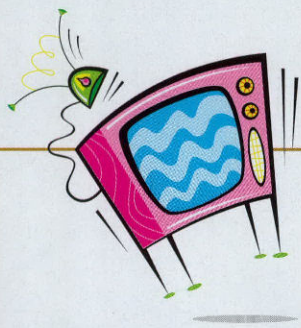
The grounds are deserted on Sunday morning when we wake. We brew a fresh pot of coffee, slip into some rocking chairs on the front porch of our cottage and imagine Dr. and Mrs. Starr doing the same more than a century ago. For an hour on this brisk October morning, life is so quiet, so unburied, so simple.

For information about the park or bed and breakfast accommodations, call (903) 935-3044 or visit <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/starrfamily/>. ★

—Erica Brasseur

For information about upcoming events in all your state parks, visit <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/calendar/>.

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS



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TELEVISION

LOOK FOR THESE STORIES IN THE COMING WEEKS:

Feb. 25 – March 4: Coastal pier fishing; Edwards Plateau ranch makes a comeback; Bentsen–Rio Grande Valley State Park; Caddo Lake water issues; Hill Country thunderstorm.

March 4 – 11: Protecting the fragile seagrass beds; Martin Dies Jr. State Park; JA Ranch grasslands; sharing Rio Grande water; starting a campfire the old-fashioned way.

March 11 – 18: Economic benefits of bats; Goose Island State Park; how to clean aquatic plants off your boat; battle for water rights in the Panhandle; Katie Floyd photographs.

March 18 – 25: Texas' natural connection with the Caribbean; family fun at Lake Texana State Park; Lavaca County landowners protecting habitat; water worries on the Colorado and Trinity rivers; Big Bend Ranch State Park.

March 25 – April 1: Houston's butterfly palace; Lake Whitney State Park; one couple's 60-year relationship with the land; end of the line for the Rio Grande; hummingbirds at the feeder.



Katie Floyd of Austin is a budding outdoor photographer. Watch the week of March 11–18.

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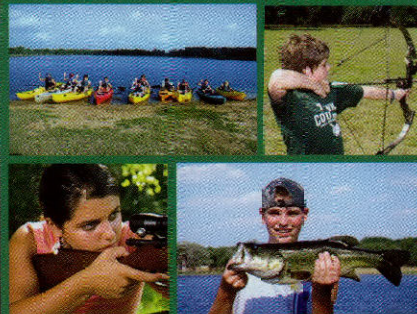
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(continued from page 53)

prairie region, which stretches roughly from Waco north to the Red River in a swath about 100 miles wide.

The snipe's breeding range is mainly in the northern United States and southern Canada. Courtship and nesting takes place in the spring. Nests are built of dry grasses on the ground at the edge of swampy areas and measure about six inches across. Typically, the female lays four blotched eggs. Then, after an incubation of 18–20 days (shared by both parents), the eggs hatch. Like other ground-nesting birds, the young leave the nest almost immediately after hatching and are able to follow the mother in search of food. Within a couple of months, the young can fly well enough to fend for themselves.

The common snipe measures about 10 1/2 inches long and weighs about 4 1/2 ounces. It is most comfortable in shallow, freshwater marshy areas. The snipe's brown, black and white feathering makes for superb camouflage in brambles and low-growing grasses.

The snipe is a wading bird and eats a variety of insects, earthworms, small mollusks and some vegetable matter. Its bill is long and flexible and is capable of finding food by feel alone. Although I never knew what they were, when I was a kid, I saw

snipe on a regular basis while slogging around flooded bottomlands. When startled, the birds would fly away in a zigzag pattern while emitting a high-pitched call. The thick brush they inhabit and their erratic flight makes snipe a challenging wingshooting target.

Because of the rank vegetation they inhabit, hunting them with dogs is recommended but, at the same time, hunting snipe can be hard on dogs. Because of the physical demands of slogging through thick and wet cover, the snipe could be the most demanding of all game birds to hunt. As such, not many choose to pursue them.

The bird's reclusive nature adds to its mystery and undoubtedly helps fuel the legend that surrounds the mythical snipe hunt. Because they are so secretive and so well camouflaged, snipes are rarely seen. So much so, many people doubt they exist and may not appreciate their relative abundance in Texas today.

During the 19th century, the snipe was particularly abundant over the southern United States. Hunter James Pringle in *Life Histories of Familiar North American Birds* (published in 1927) describes the abundance and challenge of the game bird.

"The birds being such great migrants,

and only in the country for a short time, I had no mercy on them and killed all I could, for a snipe once missed might be never seen again.

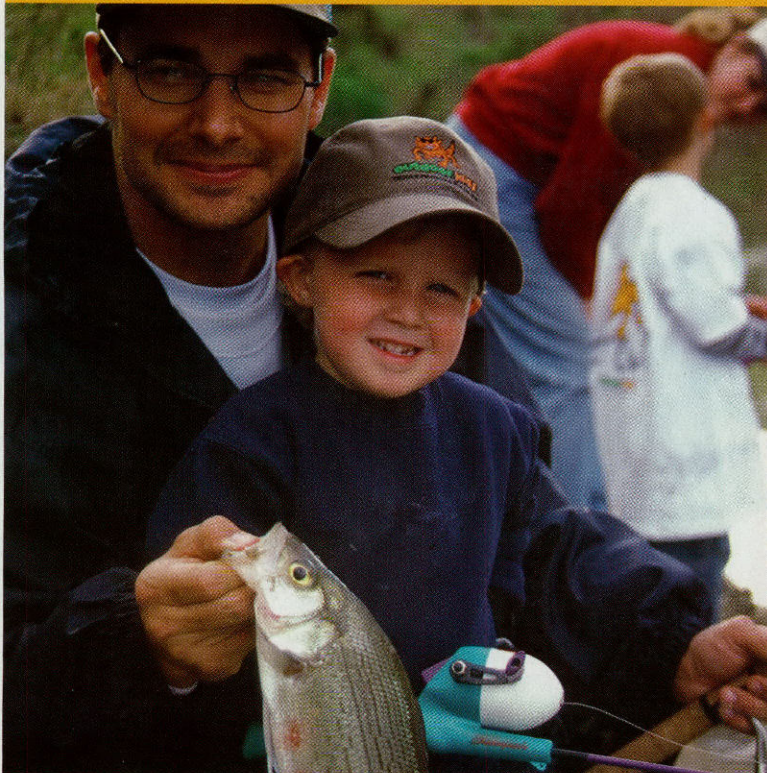
I shot with only one gun at a time; had no loader, but loaded my gun myself; had I shot with two guns and had a loader I would, of course, have killed a great many more birds, but in those days and in those parts it was impossible to get a man that could be trusted to load."

Even without a loader, Pringle was an efficient hunter, taking nearly 70,000 birds over a span of 20 years from 1867 to 1887 — most of them in Louisiana. That's an average of 9 1/2 birds a day.

Nine-and-a-half birds a day — that's quite a record. Undoubtedly there are high school boys across Texas who still swear that the fields hold enough snipe to yield that many birds and perhaps more in a night's outing. Most importantly, there are those who, in the spirit of adventure, are willing to trust their friends and wait in the grass with a sack.

Fortunately, for ornery teenagers everywhere, there are those who are gullible enough to give snipe hunting a try. As long as the mystery of the snipe pervades rural Texas, the legend will live on in perpetuity. ★

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Photographer Gary Kramer captured this image of great blue herons having a romantic moment at High Island in late February 2006. The raised feathers and frontal facing behavior of this pair are part of courtship activities that occur in late winter and early spring. The best places to catch this type of behavior are in their nesting colonies, also known as rookeries.

IMAGE SPECS:
Canon EOS-1V with
Canon 600mm f4 lens
with 1.4 tele-extender,
exposure of 1/500 second
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