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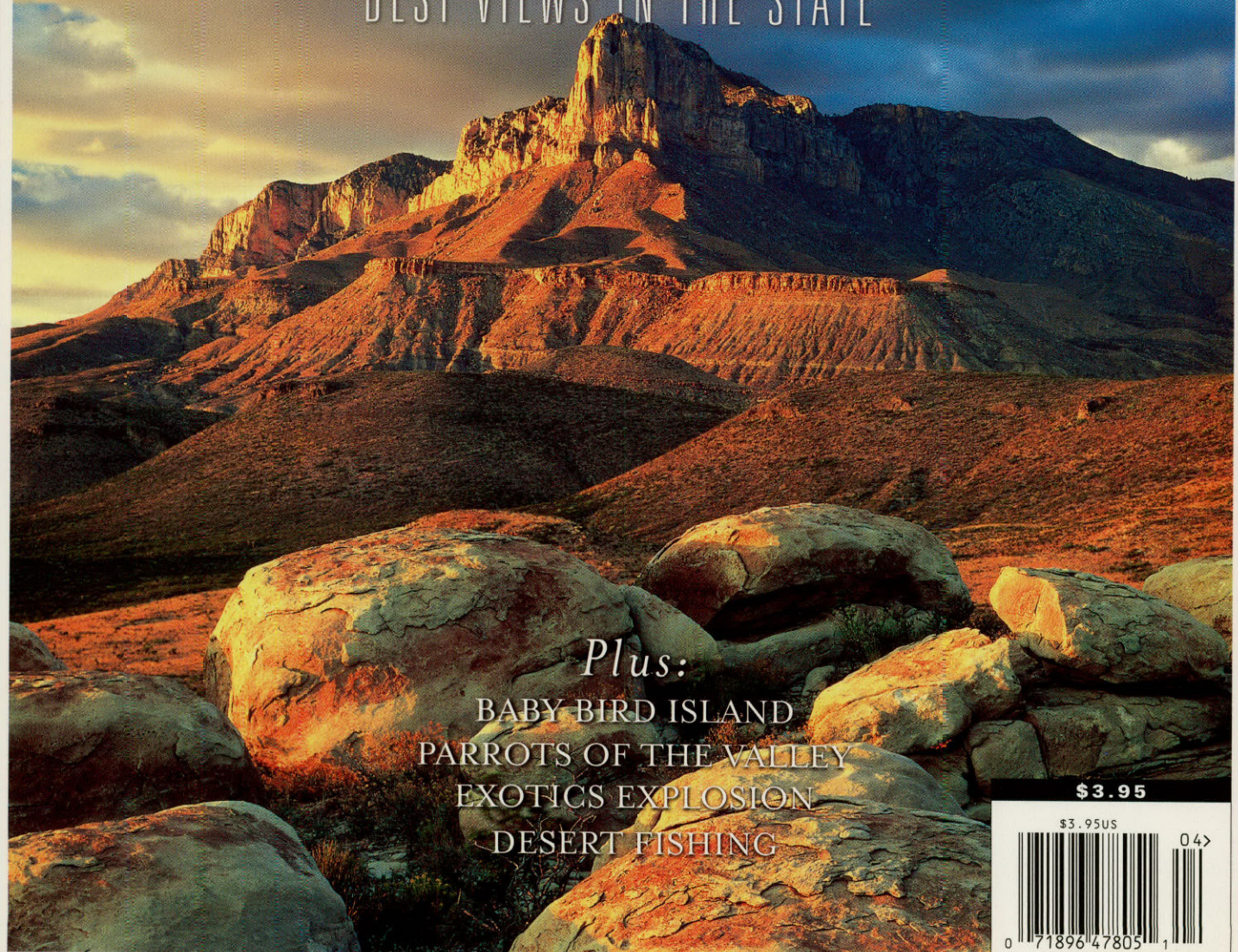
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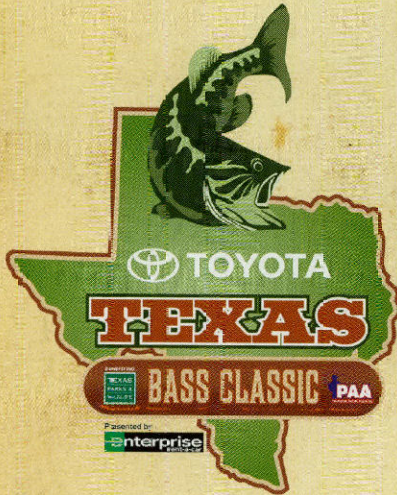
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TUNDRA

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C O N T E N T S

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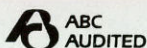


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In the Field

ELAINE ROBBINS, a former executive editor of *Texas Parks & Wildlife*, has written about natural and cultural preservation for *Sierra*, *Utne* and *American Archaeology*. In her "Three Days in the Field" piece in this issue, Elaine investigates Castroville, where she indulges her taste for French food, architecture and



European languages. Castroville, a pretty little town on the Medina River that was settled by immigrants from the French province of Alsace-Lorraine, has one of the first historic districts in Texas listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Its 19th-century Alsatian vernacular homes, with their plastered limestone walls and asymmetrical steep-pitched roofs, provide a glimpse of a place unspoiled by suburban sprawl.

ELSA K. SIMCIK has never lived anywhere but the great state of Texas. Elsa says that while she enjoyed Texas history in fourth grade (and again in seventh), she didn't expect that the lessons would ever come in handy again — until she visited Washington-on-the-Brazos State Park for this issue. This "birthplace of Texas" brought it all back, with its living history farm and museum. Elsa loves traveling around Texas and checking out parks for *TP&W*, whether they're a blast from the past or just a blast. She currently resides in Dallas, where she writes regularly for *The Dallas Morning News* and other publications on health, fitness and the outdoors.



RAE NADLER-OLENICK writes about a wide range of topics, from travel/outdoors to technology to music and the arts. During the 1990s, while employed as a journalist at the University of Texas at Austin, she often covered archaeological subjects, and in 1999, co-produced an award-winning archaeology newsletter. Her freelance work has appeared in *Texas Highways*, the *Austin American-Statesman*, *Austin Chronicle*, *Alcalde*, *Texas Monthly* and *USA Today*. A volunteer at UT's annual Mayan culture meetings, Rae is also an experienced caver who is interested in the intersection of caving and archaeology. She attended her first Texas Archeology Society Field School last summer and will be back for more in 2007. Rae and her husband, Walt, love to travel throughout the Southwest and Mexico in their mini-camper, stopping to explore interesting archaeological sites at every opportunity.



AT ISSUE

FROM THE PEN OF ROBERT L. COOK

The following is just a story about Texas and Texans. It probably never really happened ...

The old cowboy had been waiting a long time to speak at the public hearing on the proposed wind farm along the south Texas coast. It had been a long evening. Many people wanted to be heard. Last to sign up because he had to comb and feed his horses at the end of the day, he was last to speak. When it finally came his turn to be heard, "Flaco," as he was known, rose and walked slowly to the microphone. Clearly, some old injury from the days when he cowboied for The Ranch caused him pain now and it took a while to get started. Flaco had listened closely to the engineers, economists and technical experts who explained in great detail the economic virtues, tax incentives and environmental benefits of producing electricity using some 400 giant wind turbines, which were to tower above the wind-swept prairie and oak mottes. He had heard the environmentalists talk about the potential hazard of those fan-tips rotating at 150 miles per hour to the thousands of songbirds, waterfowl, hawks and shorebirds. The proponents of the massive project had retorted that the wind farm would produce electricity cheaper and cleaner than the current methods including the coal-fired power plants common throughout Texas. The opposition countered that the requested tax abatement would be a great loss to the county's revenue base. The emotions were high.

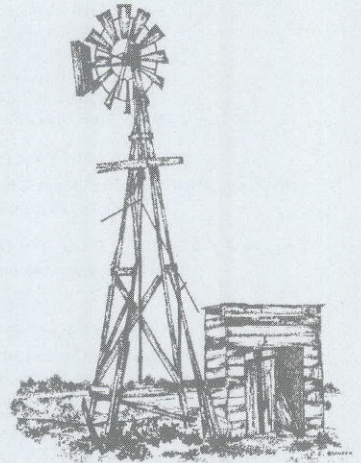
Apparently these "educated" folks didn't agree on almost anything, and Flaco didn't understand much of this talk about incentives and abatements. He did understand the birds and their migration routes through this area of the state. He had seen thousands of colorful little birds "fall out" in the oak mottes nearest the bay many times. On the other hand, he appreciated the value and convenience of electricity; after all, for the first 35 years of his life his modest home was heated with mesquite and lit with coal oil. He remembered that the biologist had said that there was no data, no research from a similar area, and that really nobody knew exactly what the impact on the wildlife would be.

Standing at the microphone, his sweat-stained hat crumpled in both hands and leather gloves stuck in his back pocket, Flaco spoke softly and yet clearly: "I have known the owners of the ranch where these *grande* windmills are to be built, and they are friends of mine. I have worked with them many times through the years. Our families are related, we are friends. I know that they do not wish to hurt the birds or the other wildlife, or their neighbors and friends. I know that it is their property and that they have a right to do what they want to do on their property as long as it doesn't hurt anyone or cause great harm to the wildlife or the land.

"On the other hand, I was born on the ranch next door; Papa and Mama were born there before me, and his Papa before him. I have lived and worked there all my life. The ranch owners are my friends, my family. I know that they have spoken in opposition to these wind towers next door for various reasons, some of which I do not understand. But I know them, they are honest, and I trust them."

The crowded room was silent. They waited, knowing that this man spoke from the heart, knowing that he spoke the truth — an unprejudiced, unbiased truth. They knew he had something to say and they wanted to hear. "They may or may not harm our birds; that is to be seen. I think that they may generate clean electricity. But the truth is, we have no feeling for them. They are not pretty to our eyes and to our hearts like our old windmills, which have pumped water for our cattle and wildlife, and for the people who have worked this land for many years. The truth is ... I just don't want to have to look at them on our prairie."

With that Flaco bowed slightly, nodded to the crowd, and walked slowly out the door. For a moment, the crowd sat in silence. Not another word was spoken. As they walked out of the room, several of the "old hands" were seen nodding their heads and smiling slightly.



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PICKS, PANS AND PROBES FROM OUR READERS

FOREWORD

The Toyota Texas Bass Classic tournament is almost here.

The \$1 million professional bass tournament will be held April 9 – 15 at Lake Fork. TPWD will be involved in many aspects of this event. Normally, TPWD doesn't take an active role in day-to-day operations of tournaments, but this one is an exception.

First, the way the tournament is structured encourages and teaches conservation and proper fish handling techniques. TPWD staff members are helping to devise processes that can be used in the future on other highly managed lakes.

Independent observers on each boat will weigh 14- to 24-inch bass with a hand-held scale, recording the weights of those fish so they can be released almost immediately near the spot 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 fish to ensure proper handling.

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

While one group of anglers is on the water, the others will be holding seminars, signing autographs and mingling with the crowd. Only 40 contestant boats will be on the water at one time. This helps reduce fishing pressure and facilitates videotaping of the event. CBS and the Versus outdoor network plan to broadcast the event.

During the first few days of the tournament, the pros will be learning the lake. Many locals will be on the water in their own boats watching their favorite anglers devise a game plan. However, most of the events readily accessible to land-bound spectators begin on Friday, April 13.

TPWD personnel will be there to host family activities, so anglers and non-anglers will have plenty to do. Some of the kid-friendly, hands-on activities found at the annual Texas Parks and Wildlife Expo will also be available at Lake Fork.

What makes the event so unique among fishing tournaments is the non-fishing entertainment: Country music star Clay Walker is the headline entertainer for the event, performing on Saturday, April 14. Also performing Saturday are Danielle Peck and Zona Jones, playing earlier in the afternoon. Tracy Lawrence is the featured entertainer for Sunday, April 15, with Kacey Musgraves and Todd Fritsch performing on Sunday afternoon.

The angler pairings have also been announced, so check out the TTBC Web site to see the lineup of participating pros. Any new information, as it becomes available, will be posted online at <www.toyotatexasbassclassic.com>.

In the end, everyone benefits: Lake Fork shows off its legendary fishery, anglers learn how to handle big fish properly, local communities benefit from the publicity. I hope you'll come on down and join us for what promises to be a good time for all.

Randy Brudnicki

RANDY BRUDNICKI
PUBLISHER

LETTERS

REDISCOVERING PAPA STAHL

Thanks to you and to Wendee Holtcamp for the delightful story on Carmine and Mary Lou Stahl ("Papa Stahl," February 2007). My grandson and I met the Stahls at a

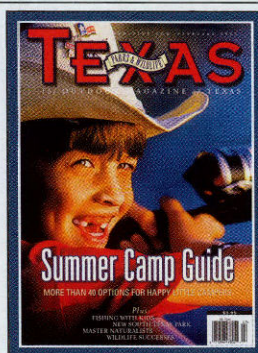
Wildflower Society meeting at Texas Woman's University several years ago. He gave an interesting talk about the use of wild plants for food. We purchased a copy of his little booklet with illustrations of the plants and recipes for preparing them for food. Bob Phillips once featured them in a segment of his "Texas Country Reporter" television show. Papa showed Bob some of the edible plants that grew in his yard. Then they went in for a lunch featuring some of the plants that Mary Lou had prepared

for them. It is good that you choose to feature people like the Stahls in your magazine, so we readers can know about their contribution to making our lives so much more enjoyable.

WILLIAM R. GREEN
Gainesville

GAME WARDEN REMEMBERED

Please allow me to ditto Jim Shelton's letter in the February 2007 issue honoring our game wardens. I agree wholeheartedly with him. Growing up in Cuero many years ago, our local game warden was an inspira-



It is good that you choose to feature people like the Stahls in your magazine, so we readers can know about their contributions to making our lives so much more enjoyable.

William R. Green
Gainesville

MAIL CALL

tion to a whole community of young men. Charlie Edmonson was our Boy Scout Master as well as the local game warden. He dedicated his spare time to a bunch of knuckleheads who would have otherwise been out on the streets doing many things kids don't need to be doing.

Edmonson was instrumental in starting a group called the Junior Game Wardens, with kids from 9-16 years old. We banded doves every weekend, going from city block to city block recording the nesting status of the mourning doves in the pecan and live oak trees throughout the city. We thought we were real "authorities" because we were able to do this — talk about pride.

He saw us off to Boy Scout camp every summer as we continued to learn about nature and wildlife. One time, he took three of us with him on a trip down the Guadalupe. We camped along the river banks at night and built campfires to cook our meals. Imagine the insurance liabilities one would have to incur to undertake such an outing these days.

Charlie Edmonson was a tremendous individual whom I will always hold close to my heart and thank each day when I look out and see the fauna and flora our state still has. The world doesn't have enough Charlie Edmonsons.

BARRY COPENHAVER
Cuero

Sound off for "Mail Call!"

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SCOUT

NEWS AND VIEWS IN THE TEXAS OUTDOORS

BIRDS IN THE HAND

Volunteer bird banders combine science with adventure.



Removing a yellow and gray bird from a cotton bag, bird bander Mark Conway identifies a mourning warbler. He attaches a uniquely numbered band to the bird's leg before taking five measurements: wing and tail length, two beak statistics, and weight. He then establishes the age and sex. Volunteer Jason West takes a cloacal sample from the warbler with a small swab that will be sent to UCLA to test for the avian flu strain H5N1 in the wild bird population.

Far from a genteel pastime, bird banding offers the drama of bites from the jagged-edge beaks of cardinals and pre-dawn treks to set mist nets, plus the opportunity to expand scientific knowledge. Bird banding, long an indispensable tool for the study of wild birds by providing information on birds' life spans, distribution, habitats and populations, now is part of the early warning system

↑ **Wing and tail length, beak statistics and weight are all measured when a bird is banded. Sex and age are also determined.**

for an avian flu pandemic.

Conway, a high school biology teacher in Harlingen and one of a few licensed master banders in Texas, is an avocational ornithologist, like 25 percent of the nation's 2,000 federally licensed master banders. He began banding 10 years ago as a way to keep involved in science and as a change of pace from teaching teens. Instead, he is teaching, guiding a rotating group of 25 adults — science teachers, birders, master naturalists — who work under his supervision capturing and banding birds weekly in Cameron County.

With his first and middle fingers, Conway forms a light



A bander carefully untangles the bird's tiny claws from the fine threads of a nearly invisible net.

nets, and every 15 minutes they check them. "First, you figure out what side of the net the bird flew into and then you free the feet," Mark says, as he demonstrates untangling tiny claws from the net's fine threads and then, grasping its legs near the body, backing the bird out of the net — body, wings and, at last, head. "If you get in trouble and can't get the bird loose, call me. Don't stress the bird."

Seasoned helpers like Dick Roessler, Jason West and Ruben Zamora deftly remove warblers, vireos and thrashers, slipping them into clean bags. Back at the banding table, Conway challenges them to

harness crossing the bird's shoulders to its chest while his little finger supports the bird's feet. "This is the bander's hold," he explains. As a federal permit holder, his foremost responsibility is to maintain the birds' welfare, tracking both the weather and the people who volunteer to work with him. He files reports quarterly on banded birds with the Federal Bird Banding Lab and intends to publish results on site fidelity, about species that return faithfully to a locale. Nets set in the same locations every season yield population dynamics data for the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship program.

Conway's crew strings about a dozen nearly invisible

identify the sex and age of newly banded birds, which is a tough task even with the banders' thick guidebook, *The Identification Guide to North American Birds* by Peter Pyle, opened in front of them along with various field guides. Close examinations of feather edges with a hand lens and other subtle traits often determine the answers. While the goal is scientific discovery, volunteers also enjoy the thrill of holding wild birds and seeing them up-close and personal in a way that few others ever have a chance to see them. For more information, visit <www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl> or <www.aves.net/in.ar.dbba>. ★

— Eileen Mattei



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This series made possible in part by a grant from the Sport Fish and Wildlife Restoration Program.

Digging History

Discover artifacts and learn from experts at the Texas Archeological Society Field School.



Copies of pre-Columbian atlatl points. TAS Field School participants learn about flint knapping and other subjects.

Last June, 300 people of all ages from every part of Texas converged on the Gene Stallings Ranch in Lamar County for a week of fun and discovery digging into the past. Their destination: the Texas Archeological Society's annual field school, a moveable feast that brings the excitement of hands-on archaeological exploration to different locales around the state.

Since TAS held its first field school in 1962, thousands of Texans of all skill levels have had the chance to experience their state's history and pre-history firsthand at dozens of sites statewide, from the eastern forests and the Panhandle plains to Galveston Island and the western desert.

"We have professionals and serious avocational archaeologists, but we also have beginners," says TAS president Carolyn Spock. "No experience is necessary. We teach proper techniques and respect for the cultural resource. We've had 7-year-olds and people approaching 100."

At the field school, seasoned archaeologists lead small-crew excavations in the morning while other work groups process the unearthed materials at an improvised field lab nearby. A full menu of afternoon and evening presentations on such popular topics as flint knapping and artifact identification reinforce knowledge gained earlier. Social events

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Left: A pit crew organizes its excavation at the Gene Stallings Ranch site. Right: Crew member Lou Fullen keeps records while the dirt flies.

cement: bonds of friendship among the multigenerational enthusiasts, both old-timers and newcomers. There are special youth activities for the children and workshops for K-12 teachers.

Until a few years ago, indigenous Americans, whose ancestral grounds are so often the focus of archaeologists' interest, had rarely attended — in part due to historic tensions between the two groups. That changed in 2003, when TAS past-president Margaret Howard, an archaeologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, introduced a privately funded Native American Field School Scholarship Program.

“The idea was to build relationships based on respect, not agenda,” she says. “Both sides wanted better relations. We wanted to spend time side by side rather than facing each other across a conference table.”

Last summer's field school participants came to learn about the Fourche-Maline, a little-known pre-Caddo culture that flourished from about 1000 BC to AD 300. Their week's work produced not only large numbers of dart points and pottery fragments but posthole marks — the first traces of Fourche-Maline houses ever found in Texas — and a giant fire pit with many buffalo bone remnants. They also found large grinding slabs, handstones, charcoal from several kinds of wood, daub and remnants of dietary items including corn-cob and nutshells.

Twelve Native Americans — representing the Caddo, Kiowa, Seminole, Tapilam/Coahuiltecan, Delaware and

Choctaw nations — joined in the excavation and artifact processing. In turn, they shared elements of their own cultures through storytelling, a twined bag-tying workshop and a lecture on indigenous language.

The June 2007 field school will travel to the very different Spanish Colonial period setting of Presidio San Saba in Menard, an outpost occupied during the mid-1700s by over 300 Spanish soldiers and

civilians. The site yields such objects of everyday life as musket balls, gun flints, iron nails, horse gear, buttons, glass beads and women's jewelry.

Field school enrollment is limited to TAS members. It's possible to join TAS and register at the same time. For more information, visit: <www.txarch.org/> or call (210) 458-4393. ★

—Rae Nadler-Cienick

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Win Big, Let it Go

New catch-and-release record honors anglers who release big fish.



In 2003, Scott Graham caught a tarpon on a fly rod in San Antonio Bay. The fish measured 87 inches. It would have been a state fly-fishing record, but Graham could not submit it because he had no way to weigh his catch. At that time, all fishing records were based on weight, and tarpon were catch-and-release-only under Texas regulations (unless the angler had a \$210 tarpon tag). Graham did the right thing. He recorded the length, snapped a quick photo, and let the silver king go.

If Graham were to catch that fish again today, he'd have another option. He could apply for a State Catch-and-Release Record. This new category, launched January 1, 2006, is based on length rather than weight.

"Scott's catch got me started thinking," says Joedy Gray, who manages TPWD's angler recognition program. "We needed a way to recognize people who catch and

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PHOTO © DAVID J. SAMMS

release big fish alive without having them weighed. That's what led to the new Catch-and-Release Record category. It provides an opportunity to recognize conservation-minded anglers who don't have a certified scale available to weigh a fish before returning it to the water."

Catch-and-Release Records are available for selected saltwater and freshwater species: to be considered, a fish must meet or exceed the length requirements for a Big Fish Award. In the case of a tarpon, that length is 80 inches. The fish must be legally caught in Texas public waters, using a conventional rod and reel or a fly rod. A witness to measurement and live release is required.

At press time, Catch-and-Release Records had been awarded for eight species of freshwater fish out of 16 eligible species. Saltwater records were on file for three of 18 possible species. There's plenty of room left in the record book, and the spot for tarpon is open.

State records by weight are also awarded for public and private waters for rod and reel, fly-fishing, bow fishing and other legal methods. Water body records by weight are awarded for fish caught from Texas public waters by any legal method.

Other awards include First Fish Awards for the first fish caught by an angler of any age, the Elite Angler Award for catching five trophy-class fish in the freshwater or saltwater categories, the Big Fish Award for catching a trophy class fish of selected species, and the Outstanding Angler Award for a catch that does not qualify for one of the above categories but still deserves recognition.

All state record applications must be notarized. Photographs must be submitted with the application, which must be received by TPWD within 60 days of the catch. Fish submitted for weight records must be weighed on a certified scale within three days of being caught. If a non-certified scale is used, the applicant has 30 days from the weigh date to have the scale certified.

For more information on the Angler Recognition Program, including rules, entry forms, length requirements for Big Fish Awards and a list of locations of certified scales, go to <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/fishrecords> or call Joedy Gray, (512) 389-8037.★

— Larry D. Hodge and Dyanne Fry Cortez





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Scoring your Turkey

A scale, calculator and tape measure are all you need to see if your gobbler is a winner.

For as long as anyone can remember, Texas deer hunters have judged their trophies against one another by touting a buck's Boone & Crockett score. Did you know that turkey hunters can also get in on the game of keeping harvest records and do a little bragging along the way? That's right. With a few simple measurements, you can objectively evaluate a turkey and assign it a "score" by using a set of systematic measurements. Bragging rights for turkeys? You bet!

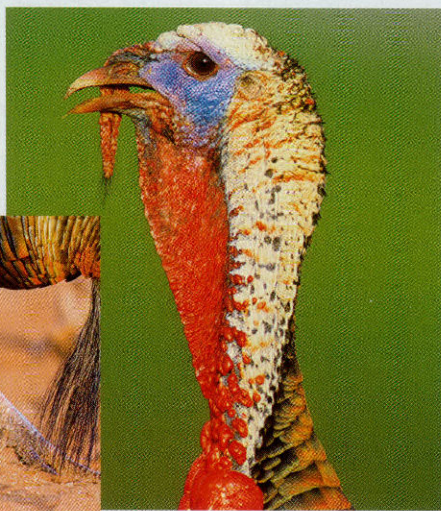
CORRECT GEAR

The tools needed for scoring a turkey are simple: a spring scale capable of weighing a hanging object; a flexible, 1/4-inch-wide tape measure for measuring the spur and beard length, and a calculator for completing all of the calculations. If you have Internet access, you can skip the calculations by logging on to the National Wild Turkey Federation's Web site at <www.nwtf.org> and use their online scoring calculator.

FIRST STEP

To get started, you'll need to weigh your turkey and convert the ounces to decimal form. The conversion formula is pretty simple.

Measurements used for scoring a turkey include the length of spurs (below) and beard.



All you need to do is divide the ounces by 16. For example, if your turkey weighs 22 pounds and 5 ounces, then to convert the five ounces to decimal form, you'll divide 5 by 16, which gives you .3125. Then combine the decimal-ounce equivalent with the number of pounds. In this case, we'll have the weight of 22.3125 pounds.

SPURS

The next step is to measure the spurs and convert the fractional inch measurement to decimal form and measure to the nearest 1/16th-inch without reduction. In decimal form, 1/16-inch is equivalent to .0625. Using these numbers as a base, you can easily figure out the decimal equivalent to fractions. For example, to convert 3/16-inch, just multiply three times .0625.

Measure the spurs from where they exit the leg and over the outside edge of the spur. Once the spurs are measured, add the length of both spurs together and multiply by 10. For example, suppose the right spur measures 2-6/16 inches and the left spur measures 2-1/16 inches. The math will look like this:

2.3759 (right spur) + 2.0625 (left spur) = 4.4384 (total length of both spurs) $4.4384 \times 10 = 44.384$ (spur score)

DON'T FORGET THE BEARD

The last thing to measure on the turkey is the beard. Starting where the beard protrudes from the breast, measure along the center of the beard to the longest tip. Like on the spurs, convert the fractional inch to decimal form. Once you have the beard measurement, multiply the length by two.

6.25 inch beard $\times 2 = 12.50$ on the beard score.

EXCEPTIONS

Occasionally, a turkey will grow multiple beards and spurs. In that case, each extra beard and spur gets measured and added to the total score just like the typical beards and spurs. Birds with multiple beards and spurs are listed by the National Wild Turkey Federation as atypical.

ADDING IT ALL UP

The last step in finalizing your turkey's score is to add up the weight, spur score and beard score. In this case:

22.3125 weight score
+ 44.384 spur score
+ 12.50 beard score
= 79.1965 total score

In Texas, the state records listed with the National Wild Turkey Federation show that the top typical Eastern wild turkey scores a tad over 80 points while the biggest Rio Grande turkey scores just over 88. Of course, like deer, the trophy is in the eye of the beholder. So head afield ... bragging rights await you. ★

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The Scoop on Landing Nets

Whether you're fishing for bass, barracuda or sharks, the right net will help ensure success in that last, crucial moment.

The trend in landing nets is to make them more fish-friendly. Older styles had coarse mesh bags with large, rough knots that not only injured the fish but also allowed hooks to hang in the weave. The most recent designs are intended for catch-and-release anglers. They have softer bags and special coatings that prevent hooks from penetrating the threads. These nets come in a wide range of sizes and shapes, from small one-handed teardrop styles to huge flat-faced hoops with long handles for landing large fish from boats, piers and jetties.

Among the finest traditional nets available are those made by Ed Wachter in St. Paul, Texas. The frames are crafted of five-ply select American hardwoods laminated for strength, then multi-coated with a smooth hand-rubbed waterproof finish. Their best grade, the **Wachter Guide C&R Trout Net**, is extremely lightweight and is easily attached by a magnetic release to hang high on the back while wade fishing. It has a 7- by 16-inch hoop with a handle of sycamore wood. Other styles and sizes can be custom ordered in many beautiful wood patterns. All these nets are one-of-a-kind creations and come with ultrasoft netting for careful fish handling. (\$90, Guide C&R Net, Wachter, 972-429-9301, www.wachternets.com)

When fishing from a kayak, canoe or float tube, it is best to have a long handle for extra reach. The **Frabill Deluxe Wood Trout Net** features a multi-laminated frame with a 23-inch handle, elastic lanyard and clip closure for securing to the boat, fly vest or belt loop. The bag has a 14- by 18-inch opening of fine knotless mesh with a flat bottom to softly cradle the fish until released. (\$49.99, Model #3405, Frabill, 800-558-1005, www.frabill.com)

Larger saltwater species usually require a sturdy aluminum frame net and handle that will telescope for a long reach from a high position. The bag should be tough enough to withstand a thrashing from kingfish, barracuda and shark teeth or the razor-sharp gill plates of snook. The **Frabill Tru-Trax Net** has a heavily coated two-foot tangle-free bag and, with a

positive twist lock, is quickly adjustable to various handle lengths from 4 to 8 feet.

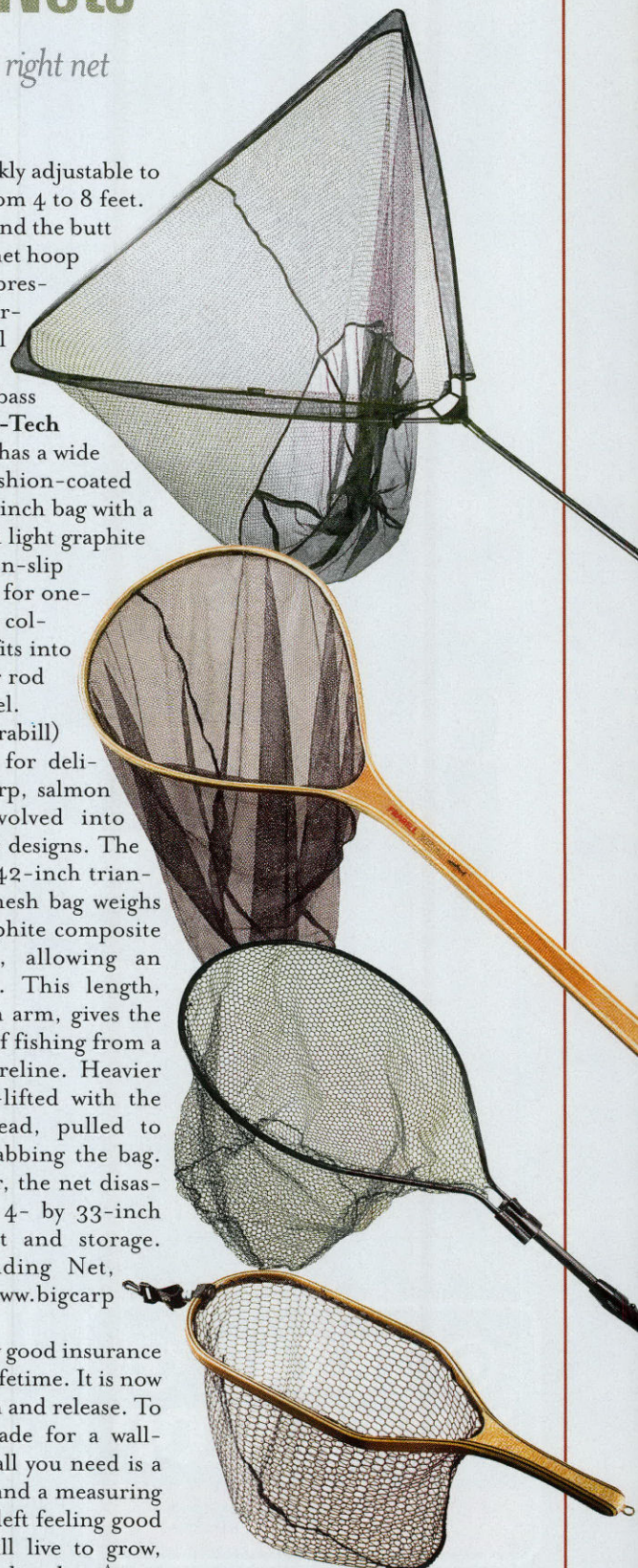
Two soft foam wraps around the butt provide a sure grip. The net hoop can be removed with a pressure pin for compact storage. (\$74.99, Model 3814, Frabill)

A design especially for bass fishing is the **Frabill Pro-Tech Catch & Release Net**. It has a wide straight front rim and cushion-coated knotless mesh 21- by 24-inch bag with a flat bottom. The 36-inch light graphite handle ends in a thick non-slip indented foam grip great for one-handed control. It totally collapses without tools and fits into its own clear vinyl bag for rod locker storage or air travel. (\$69.99, Model 3700, Frabill)

Specialized nets made for delicate handling of huge carp, salmon and steelheads have evolved into lighter, softer and longer designs. The **Fox Tourist Net** with a 42-inch triangular opening double-mesh bag weighs only 2 pounds. The graphite composite handle telescopes out, allowing an amazing 10-foot reach. This length, plus the outstretch of an arm, gives the angler a great advantage if fishing from a riverbank or rough shoreline. Heavier fish must not be dead-lifted with the thin handle, but, instead, pulled to shore and landed by grabbing the bag. Intended for the traveler, the net disassembles and fits into a 4- by 33-inch tube for easy transport and storage. (\$149.95, Tourist Landing Net, Fox, 918-331-9047, www.bigcarp.tackle.com)

The use of a net is really good insurance for landing the fish of a lifetime. It is now common practice to catch and release. To have an exact replica made for a wall-mount of a record fish, all you need is a certified scale, a camera and a measuring tape. Best of all, you are left feeling good that your prize catch will live to grow, breed and fight again another day. ☆

From top: Fox Tourist Net; Frabill Deluxe Wood Trout Net; Frabill Tru-Trax Net; Wachter Guide C&R Trout Net with magnetic catch.



New lure's catch rate may be too high for some tournaments.

Out-fishes other bait 19 to 4 in one contest.

Uses aerospace technology to mimic a real fish.

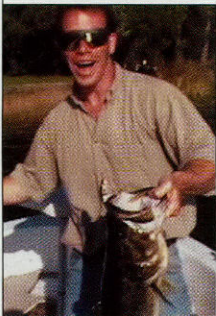
ORLANDO, FL— A small company in Connecticut has developed a new lure that mimics the motion of a real fish so realistically eight professionals couldn't tell the difference between it and a live shad when it "swam" toward them on retrieval. The design eliminates wobbling, angled swimming and other unnatural motions that problem other hard bait lures. It swims upright and appears to propel itself with its tail.



by Charlie Allen

Curiously, the company may have designed it too well. Tournament fishermen who have used it said it's possible officials will not allow it in contests where live bait is prohibited. They claim it swims more realistically than anything they have ever seen. If so, that would hurt the company's promotional efforts. Winning tournaments is an important part of marketing a new lure.

Fish would probably prefer to see it restricted. I watched eight veteran fishermen test the new lure (called the KickTail®) on a lake outside Orlando FL for about four hours. Four used the KickTail and four used a combination of their favorite lures and shiners (live bait). The four using the KickTail caught



Inventor Scott Wilson lands a 10-pounder.

41 fish versus 14 for the other four. In one boat the KickTail won 19 to 4. The KickTail also caught bigger fish, which suggests it triggers larger, less aggressive fish to strike. You can see why the company needs to get it into tournaments.

An almost 3 to 1 advantage can mean thousands of dollars to a fisherman, and hundreds of thousands in sales to the company.

The KickTail's magic comes from a patented technology that breaks the tail into five segments. As water rushes by on retrieval, a little-known principle



New lure swims like a real fish--nearly triples catch in Florida contest.

called aeronautical flutter causes the tail to wag left and right, as if the lure were propelling itself with its tail. Unlike other hard baits, the head remains stationary—only the tail wags. A company spokesman told me this.

"Fish attack live things, and they determine if something is alive by watching its movements. Marine biologists will tell you that the more a lure swims like a real fish, the more fish it will catch. Well, the only live thing the KickTail doesn't do is breathe. It's better than live bait! It lasts longer and it never hangs half-dead from a hook. It's always swimming wild and free. Fish can't stand it. We've seen fish that have just eaten go for the KickTail. It's like having another potato chip.

Increases catch almost 3 to 1.

"To make the KickTail even more life-like, we gave it a natural shad color and shaped it like the most prevalent bait fish of all, the threadfin. Game fish gobble up more threadfin shad than any other baitfish.

"We knew the KickTail would out-fish other lures. It had to. Other lures wobble their heads and swim on an angle. But 41 fish to 14? That's huge! I tell you, in ten seconds anyone who has fished a day in his life knows this little swimmer's a home run. Fishermen reserved thousands of KickTails before we produced it! Here, reel it in and watch it swim toward you. Can you tell the difference between it and a live fish?"

(I said no.) Neither can the fish.

"The flutter technology also allows the KickTail to swim at the water's surface. Other top water lures must be worked to have any live action, or have a bill that makes them dive on retrieval. Our diver version is the only deep crank bait that lets you do tricks like 'walk the dog.' Twitch it at deep levels and it gives an irresistible, lifelike action. Other lures 'dig.' And there's no need for rattles. The five tail segments click together as you pull it through the water, calling fish from a distance."

Whether you fish for fun or profit, if you want a near 3 to 1 advantage, I would order now before the KickTail becomes known. The company even guarantees a refund, if you don't catch more fish and return the lures within 30 days. There are three versions: a floater for top water, a diver and a "dying shad" with a weed guard for fishing jily pads and other feeding spots. The company says it's the only hard bait of its kind in existence. Each lure costs \$9.95 and you must order at least two. There is also a "Super 10-Pack" with additional colors for only \$79.95, a savings of almost \$20.00. S/h is only \$7.00 no matter how many you order.

To order call 1-800-873-4415 (Ask for item # kt) or click www.ngcsports.com anytime or day or send a check or M.O. (or cc number and exp. date) to NGC Sports (Dept. KT-1117), 60 Church Street, Yalesville, CT 06492. CT add sales tax. The KickTail is four inches long and works in salt and fresh water.

KTS-8A © NGC Worldwide, Inc. 2007 Dept. KT-1117

3 Days in the Field / By Elaine Robbins

DESTINATION: CASTROVILLE

TRAVEL TIME FROM :

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The French/German Connection

Revel in the quiet charms of Castroville, an Alsatian village in the heart of Texas.

Castroville may be just 25 miles west of San Antonio, but it feels worlds apart. Drive west from San Antonio on U.S. 90, and soon the hordes of tourists tromping along the River Walk are just a distant memory. Soon the McMansion subdivisions along the freeways fall behind, and then you're there.

Nestled in a pretty, pecan-shaded bend in the Medina River, Castroville is laid out like a European village. You can stroll down quiet, narrow streets with names like London, Madrid and Vienna and admire the 19th-century French homes, while the church bells of St. Louis Catholic Church ring out over the market square. With charming architecture and a historic inn, Castroville makes a good base for exploring the Hill Country.

Even architect Frederick Law Olmsted, whose chronicle of his 1856 journey through Texas is one long litany of complaints, was captivated by Castroville's charms. "The Medina is the very ideal of purity. ... Upon its banks stands Castroville—a village containing a colony of Alsatians, who are proud to call themselves German, but who speak French, or a mixture of French and German. The cottages are scattered prettily and there are two churches—the whole aspect being as far from Texan as possible. It might sit for the portrait of one of the poorer villages of the upper Rhone valley." About Castroville's Tardé Hotel, Olmsted wrote: "How delighted and astonished many a traveler must have been, on arriving from the plains at this first village, to find not only his dreams of white bread, sweetmeats and potatoes realized, but napkins, silver forks, and radishes, French servants, French neatness, French furniture, delicious French beds ... and more, the lively and entertaining bourgeoisie."

Alas, the silver forks and French servants are gone, but I wanted to find out what vestiges of Alsatian culture remain. Who were the Alsatians, anyway? Everyone I talked to seemed equally mystified. "It's funny hearing of a bunch of French people called

Schmidt," remarked my colleague Céline.

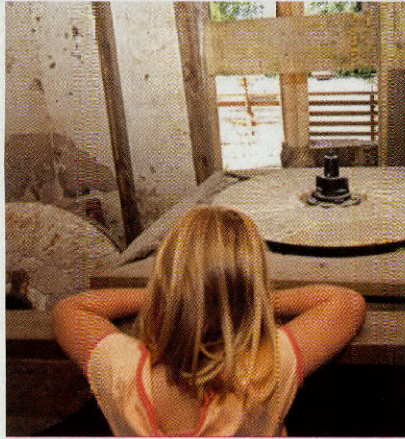
We started our journey at Haby's Alsatian Bakery, where the apple fritters and strudels, cream puffs and long loaves of French bread offered the first clue that the German and French sides of the culture are still alive. We walked across the highway to Sammy's Restaurant, where we met Sammy Tschirhart and his wife, Yvonne. Yvonne explained to us how the town's Alsatian culture has managed to survive for more than 150 years. "The town was isolated, and people intermarried. Everyone's kin to each other."

That insular lifestyle has kept names like Haby, Hans and Schott alive. But the Alsatian language has not fared so well. Sammy is probably one of the last locals who speak Alsatian, a Germanic dialect. He explained that even in the home country, the French province of Alsace-Lorraine, the dialect varies from region to region. Add a Texas twang, and you've got a whole other language. "One time we had a visitor from Alsace," recalled Sammy, grinning. "He listened to me talk for a few days, and finally he said to me, 'I know you're Alsatian, but where the hell are you from?'"

After visiting with the Tschirharts, we met with Carole Romano, founder of the Castroville Conservation Society. How, I asked her, has Castroville managed to avoid the sprawl that has spoiled so

The ruins of a 19th-century mill at Landmark Inn State Historic Site in Castroville.





Above: A beautiful *coucher du soleil* (sunset) over the Alsatian-influenced town of Castroville, whose streets are laid out like an old European village. Left: A young visitor gets an impromptu lesson on the inner workings of water mills at the Landmark Inn State Historic Site.

many places? “The land around Castroville has remained stable,” she said. “These are families that have farmed for generations.” She took us on a tour of the 1847 Alsatian vernacular house that she and her husband have beautifully restored. The house looks like it belongs in a French village, with its 8-inch-thick load-bearing limestone walls and casement windows covered with green-painted shutters. Even the new addition is hidden from the street, and its design meshes well with the Alsatian architectural style.

The best way to enjoy Castroville’s charms is to stroll around the quiet, narrow streets to admire the historic homes and Alsatian-style outbuildings. Castroville’s National Historic District boasts more than 100 historic homes, and the town as a whole has 400 historic properties, half of which date to the 19th century. Pick up a self-guided tour map in the visitor’s guide (available at Sammy’s Restaurant or the chamber of commerce) or call the Garden Club in advance to see if they can schedule a homes tour.

To see a different type of Alsatian architecture, visit the Steinbach House, a two-and-a-half-story half-timber and Fachwerk house. Originally built in Alsace in

the 1600s, it was reassembled in Castroville as a gift from the people of Alsace-Lorraine. Although the interior of the Steinbach House has been redesigned to accommodate visitors, the downstairs of this type of house was traditionally where the kitchen and living areas were located. The grandmother’s room was also downstairs, since she would get up early to light the stove and fix breakfast. The second floor housed the sleeping quarters. The top floor, called the *dachzimmer*, was used for drying and storing clothes.

Two good choices for dinner are The Alsatian Restaurant and the pricier La Normandie, both in the National Historic District. The Alsatian serves steaks, seafood and German food. We dined at La Normandie, a fine French restaurant housed in a lace-curtained cottage. French pop tunes from the 1970s set the mood, and maps and needlework from France line the walls. Although this restaurant mainly serves cuisine from Normandy, we found a few Alsatian dishes on the menu, such as an onion tart and a *charcuterie* of Alsatian sausage and sauerkraut. I ordered the country chicken with apples, which came with tiny potatoes (*heartaefjel* in Alsatian). In a nod to Alsace’s German side, my companion ordered the *wuener scmitzel*.

Worth a visit — or an overnight stay, if you want to sleep in a historic bed-and-breakfast — is the Landmark Inn State Historic Site. In the Republic of Texas era Castroville, situated along the old San

(continued on page 63)

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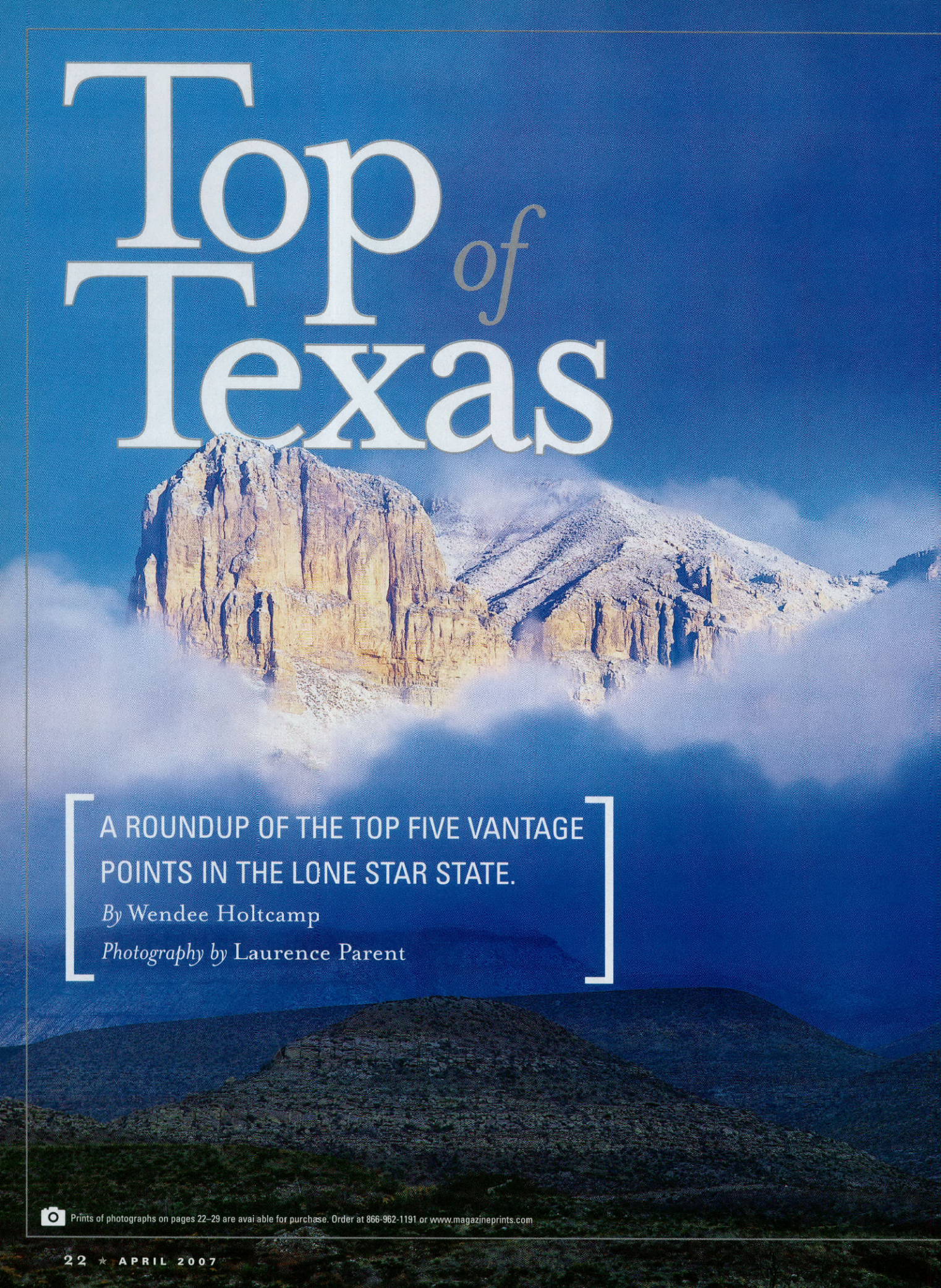
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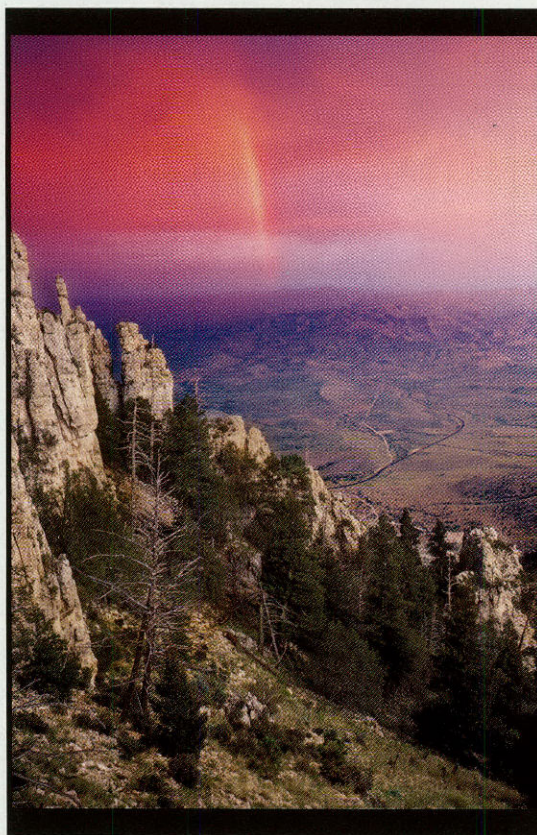


A ROUNDUP OF THE TOP FIVE VANTAGE
POINTS IN THE LONE STAR STATE.

By Wendee Holtcamp

Photography by Laurence Parent

[GUADALUPE PEAK]



Reaching the top of Texas makes every breath, every drop of sweat and every sore muscle worth it a hundred times over. I felt exhilarated to stand literally at the highest point in the Lone Star State, at 8,749 feet, with hundreds of

square miles of Guadalupe Mountains National Park wilderness below. What an absolutely drop-dead gorgeous hike with views of desert mountains, salt flats and the majestic sheer rock face of El Capitan.

I shared the trek with my friend Laurie, and we passed only one other pair of hikers on that cool, fall day — a perfect time for hiking because the intense sweat you'll work up is offset by the chill air. Recent rains had made the canyons and desert flush with life, from the brilliant red Texas madrone berries to the magenta cholla cactus flower to the bright white bull thistle flowers.

The trail begins sharp and steep, and climbs

3,000 feet in elevation over 4.2 miles (8.4 round trip). The beginning segment offers an overlook of McKittrick Canyon, where luminescent orange and rec maples give the cliffs a shout of color, then continues through

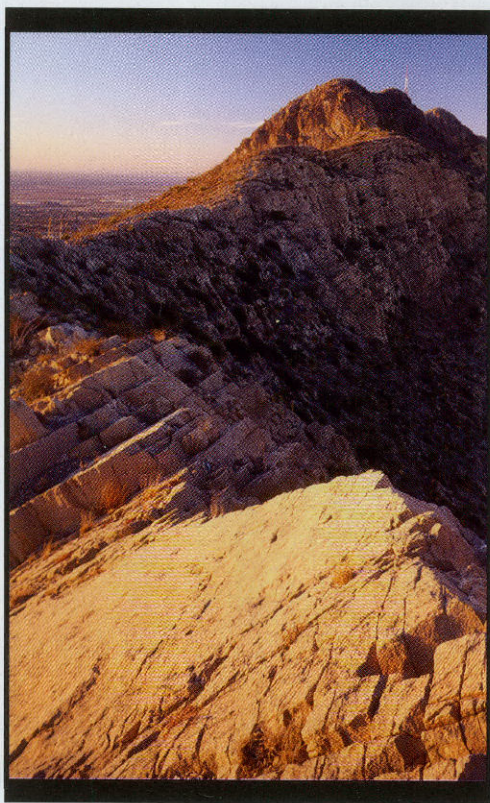
the rock-strewn Chihuahuan high desert, with agave, prickly pear, yucca and sotol — with its deep green, thin serrated-edge leaves that Mescalero Apache Indians used for weaving baskets and mats.

After a while, the trail begins a series of switchbacks, through ponderosa pine, white pine and Douglas fir forests, a relict of times past when a cooler, moister climate prevailed. Wildlife thrives here — elk, mule deer, black bear, mountain lion. Eventually you emerge above the treeline. At the highest elevations, the view is wild land all around for miles in every direction. The only human mark is the road in the far-off distance below.

El Capitan and Guadalupe peaks rise above a breaking snow storm. Opposite: The view from Hunter Peak, featuring a rainbow and storms.

2 [WYLER AERIAL TRAMWAY]

Reopened in March 2001 under TPWD ownership, the Wyler Aerial Tramway takes a short, steep trip inside a cable-guided gondola to the top of the eastern Franklin Mountains. From the starting point in the parking lot, the ride takes only four minutes to reach the top at 5,632 feet. I'm not a



huge fan of rocking gondolas, but I felt no fear inside the closed-in cable car, even as a wickedly fierce wind blew.

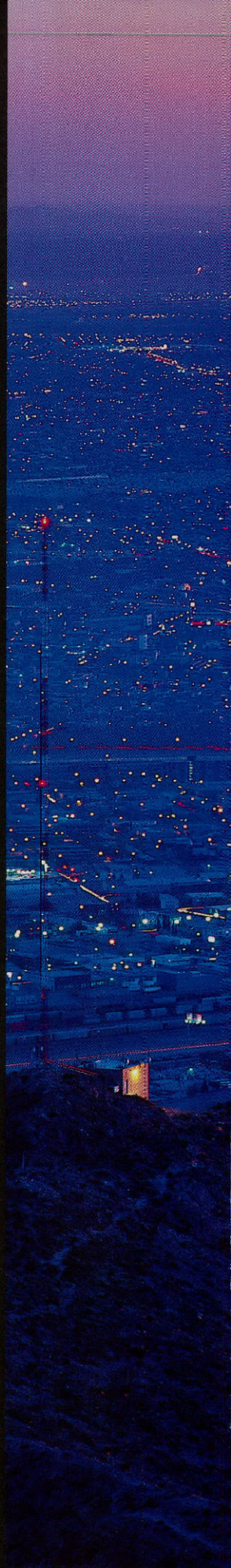
After ascending 2,600 feet up to Ranger Peak, the tram stops at the mountain top, where 20 or so people, mostly locals from El Paso, exit onto a platform to witness the dance of lights. We arrived at dusk, and I marveled at the changing scene as dusk turned to nightfall. The sky turned brilliant azure, with a sunset of blazing red and magenta, and one by one, homes would flicker on their lights, which could be seen for miles and miles into the distance. You can view El Paso just below the mountain, New Mexico to

the west, and, across the Rio Grande River, the dusty Mexican border town of Ciudad Juárez.

The Franklin Mountains emerge from a flatter plateau, the state park forming a nearly 24,000-acre island surrounded by El Paso. The combined population of El Paso and Ciudad

Juárez forms one of the densest population centers on any international border in the world — 2.2 million people, mostly on the Mexico side.

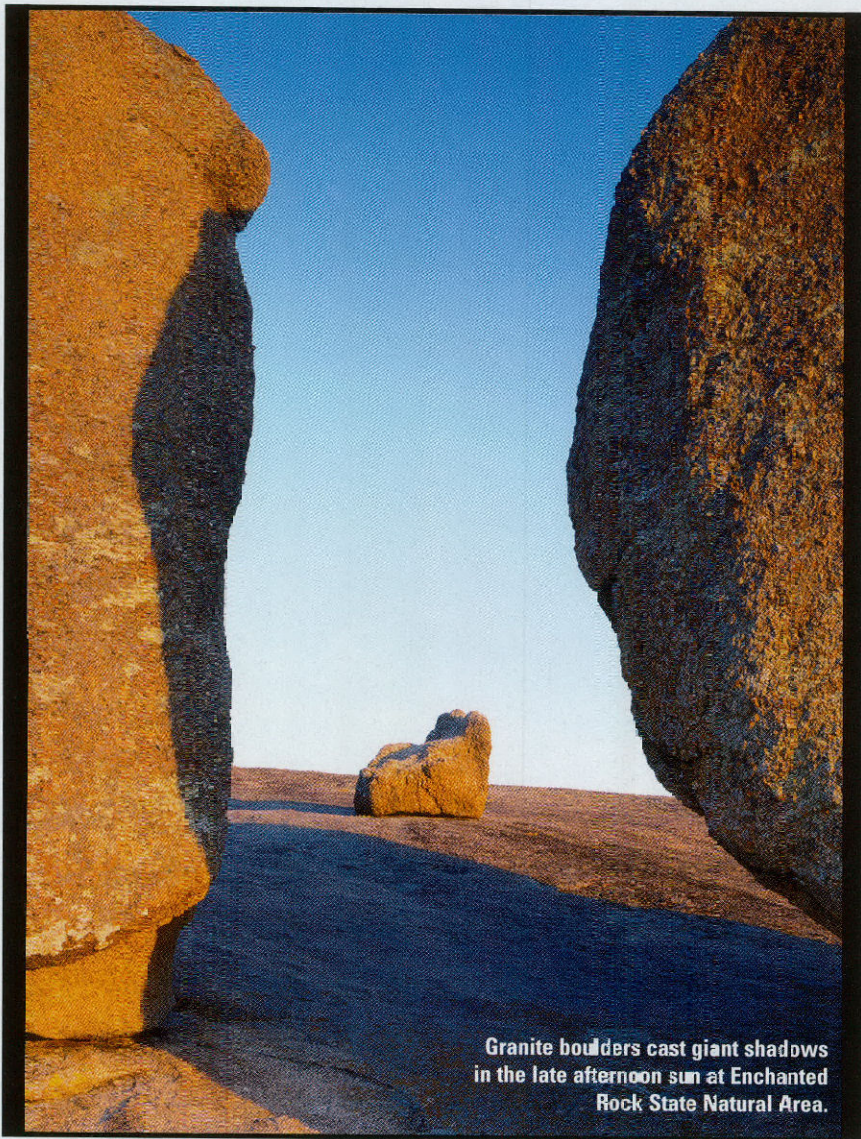
Photographer Laurence Parent and I climbed out on a mountain ledge and could see a lone yucca plant fighting for survival on the harsh desert mountain, as well as desert ocotillo, lechuguilla, and sotol — all characteristic of the northern Chihuahuan desert. The drive up the mountain to the tramway station — separate from the main Franklin Mountains State Park entrance — offers a scenic view in itself.





The views from Ranger Peak, at the top of the Wyler Aerial Tramway, are as different as day and night. From one side, you can see the Franklin Mountains (opposite page); from another, downtown El Paso and Juárez (this page).

3 [ENCHANTED ROCK]



Climb 425 feet up Texas' pink granite dome, a rock that was formed in the Precambrian era more than 1 billion years ago — before life emerged on earth. Known in geological circles as a batholith, this dome was formed

from molten magma deep below the earth's crust; the surrounding limestone eroded away over millennia. Twice during history, ancient oceans covered the granite dome, but today Enchanted Rock stands tall above the surrounding landscape at 1,825 feet — and claims the title as the best view in the Hill Country.

"Enchanted Rock is like an endorphin," says Gail McClanahan, president and founder of Friends of Enchanted Rock, a nonprofit group that helped revamp the Summit Trail, install backcountry toilets, as well as other conservation and education efforts around the park. "It puts you in such a positive mood. You can go out there feeling down about life and as soon as you hit that place, it just has a very positive effect on you." She joins many others who flock to the rock.

I forgo rock climbing for the easier way and walk the Summit Trail. It takes less than an hour to reach the top —

Granite boulders cast giant shadows in the late afternoon sun at Enchanted Rock State Natural Area.

although it's the equivalent of a 30- or 40-story building. The early part of the trail goes past mushroom rocks — weathered pedestal rocks that have eroded less around their top than at their base. The climb starts

steep but is relatively short — just over a half-mile. Enchanted Rock itself contains beautiful crystals of granite — which is made of pink feldspar, white oligoclase, grey glassy quartz and black mica. On its surface, beautiful lichens grow in colors of white, lime green, black and grey.

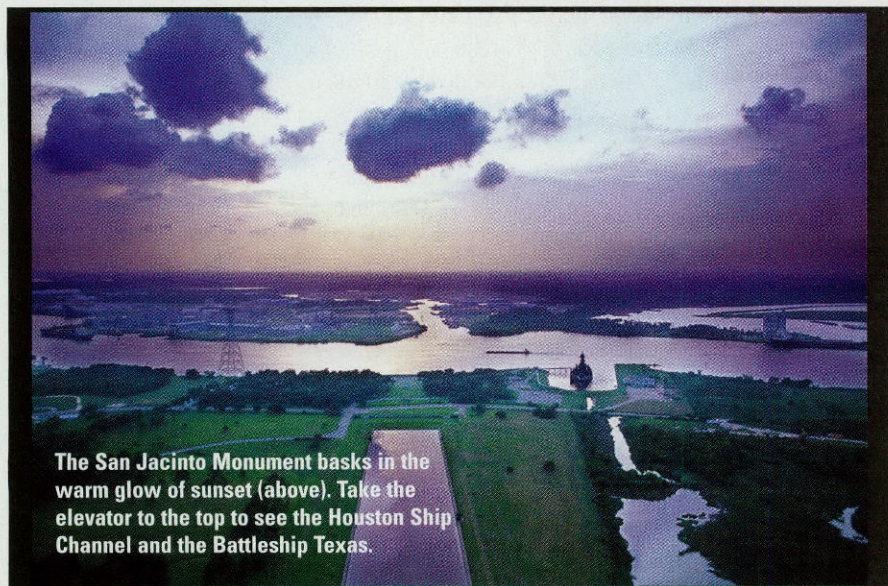
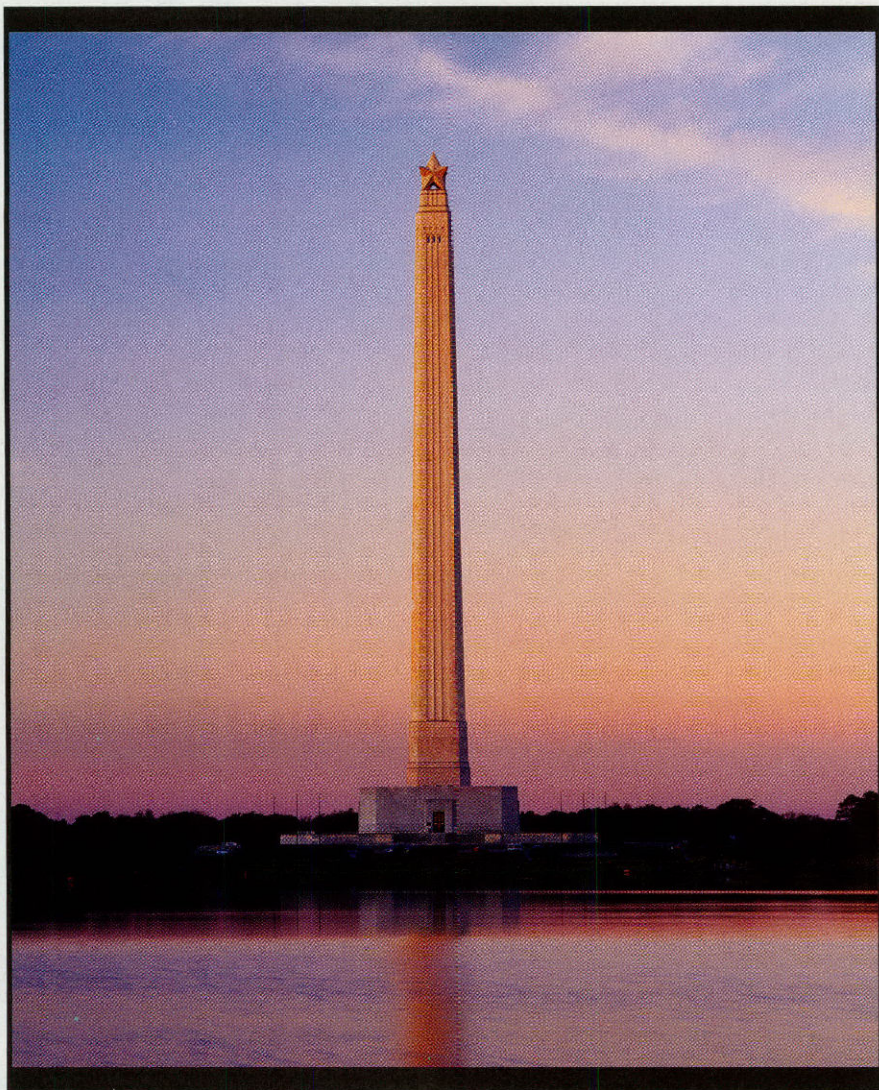
Reaching the top, I explore until I find the metal plaque demarcating the highest point. Recent rainfall still fills several delicate vernal pools at the top, known as weather pits, which create their own little ecosystems with ferns, mosses, algae and even fairy shrimp. The solid granite is completely impermeable, so the rain can only evaporate — as opposed to leaching through tiny pores as it would in other rock types.

I head to a lonely spot on its western edge, with a view of the neighboring "Little Rock." For an hour, I sit alone with my thoughts, watching the sun set, before heading back down.

4 [SAN JACINTO]

Since Texans like to claim they do everything bigger and better, it seems fitting that Texas — not Washington, D.C. — claims the world's tallest monument column. The 570-foot tall monolith marks the spot on the San Jacinto River where General Sam Houston famously cried out "Remember the Alamo!" — a month after the tragic battle in San Antonio. Houston's army launched a surprise attack on Mexican General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna and his army on April 21, 1836, in the boggy marsh and tall-grass prairie near the coast. The defeat of Santa Anna marked the end of the Texas-Mexico war that claimed many lives but turned Texas into an independent nation. (Yes, six flags really did fly over Texas throughout its history, including the Republic of Texas' own flag.)

Today, the battleground spot lays claim to the tallest vantage point on the Texas coast at the San Jacinto Battleground State Historic Site. The recently renovated elevator shoots to the top in sec-



The San Jacinto Monument basks in the warm glow of sunset (above). Take the elevator to the top to see the Houston Ship Channel and the Battleship Texas.

onds flat, emerging on an observation floor, under a gigantic Texas star. Gaze down on the hallowed battleground of years past, but also on the Houston skyline in the distance as well as the Ship Channel, which lies at the lower end of the San Jacinto River before emptying into Galveston Bay.

Below, a self-guided walking tour takes you through all the important sites in the battle for Texas independence — Santa Anna's camp, the Texans' camp, where the fighting began, and the surrender site, to name a few. The Marsh Restoration Boardwalk traverses through coastal prairie, tidal marsh and bottomland hardwood forest along the San Jacinto River.

[5] MCDONALD OBSERVATORY

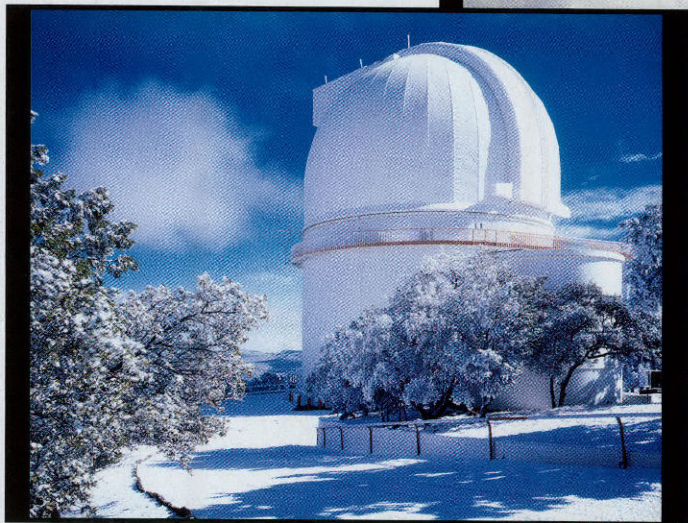
Pronghorn antelope graze in tawny fields of grass, with layers of soft mountains edging toward the horizon behind them. Blazing yellow fall leaves on the soapberry trees line Limpia Creek west of Fort Davis, while a family of collared peccaries scurries off the roadside. The incredibly scenic drive to the McDonald Observatory along the Texas Mountain Trail — part of the Texas Historical Commission's Texas Heritage Trails Program — offers views and wildlife spotting comparable to any national park.

Take Spur 118 — officially the highest paved highway in Texas — to the top of Mount Locke at 6,791 feet, where the observatory provides a starry-night respite for budding and professional astronomers alike. The observatory has nine telescopes, including the Hobby-Eberly, the world's fourth largest, with its space-age silver dome providing a unique silhouette on the Davis Mountains as you drive to the top of Mount Locke.

While astrophysicists study the birth of stars, amateur sky-watchers can take part in thrice-weekly Star Parties hosted at the Frank Bash Visitors Center, opened in 2002. Watch blazing stars at the observatory with some of the darkest skies in the continental United States. Sitting outdoors on sandstone benches, Program Coordinator Frank Cianciolo and his staff show everyone the planisphere, a circular star chart that uses the date and time to locate the sky's most notable constellations, such as Cepheus and Cassiopeia, the king and queen, and the northern cross (part of Cygnus the swan). Peer through telescopes at moon craters and other astronomical wonders, such as the Ring Nebula — affectionately known as the Cosmic Cheerio.

The Astronomers Lodge offers moderate-cost, albeit spartan, accommodations to the public in the same bunks where astronomers from around the world stay. The glass wall in the dining room peers down on the live-oak-dotted Davis Mountains below, a spectacular mountain view. In the morning, watch the sun rise over layers of misty mountains from the deck of the 107-inch telescope tower next door.

"One of the things I enjoy the most is hearing the expressions of awe and wonder from people who see the Milky Way for the first time or who haven't seen it since childhood," says Cianciolo. The observatory works with locals to minimize regional light pollution caused when homes turn outdoor lights on at night. "Many people truly don't know what we've lost by lighting up our night skies."





Miles of empty space paint a perfect black canvas at night for stargazing from the McDonald Observatory. By day, the vast Texas sky swirls with clouds and color. Inset: The 107-inch telescope, dusted with snow.

WestTexasWet

By LARRY D. HODGE



[When lake levels rise, the fish



don't know they're in a desert.]

Kevin Burleson turns to Mandy Scott and me, holds up a fishing rod dangling a length of broken line and says in stunned disbelief, "I can't believe how big that fish was."



The three of us are fishing in O.H. Ivie Lake near San Angelo, and a monster largemouth bass has just taken Burleson's Texas-rigged paddle-tail worm, hook, line and sinker. Completely. They're gone.

Scott is assistant district fisheries biologist for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and her territory includes O.H. Ivie. Burleson is a guide on the lake. Both are tournament anglers, and they know what kind of fish Ivie can produce, so they're not surprised at hooking a big one. But it takes water to grow fish, and that's a commodity often in short supply.

West Texas lakes are either in a desert or on the edge of one. A popular saying goes, "The next drought starts the day it stops raining." Drought is an inevitable fact of life out west, and it is just now beginning to recover from the latest.

Drought is a two-edged sword. It can slash lake levels to the point of killing fish, but rains following a drought rejuvenate a lake and improve fishing. Amistad International Reservoir is perhaps the best example in West Texas. Following a 10-year drought, the lake rose and bass fishing exploded (see "Triple Play" in the October 2006 issue). Anglers report that 50- to 100-fish days are not uncommon, and 2005 saw the lake record rise to a whopping

15.68 pounds.

The O.H. Ivie fish Burleson lost may not have been a new lake record — it would have to top 14.59 pounds — but its growth was sparked by the same conditions that fueled Amistad's resurrection. As a lake falls, brush and weeds grow up in the exposed moist soil. When the water level rises, that increased vegetation provides cover and nutrients for young fish and they grow rapidly. Bigger fish already in the lake suddenly find baitfish feasts swimming everywhere. "It's like instant rice — just add water," says district biologist Craig Bonds.

TPWD typically responds to higher lake levels by stocking fish as soon as possible, but the situation on Ivie called for a more cautious approach, Scott says. Ivie, like a number of West Texas lakes, is still in the early stages of recovery. Rains in 2004 and 2005 were followed by a brutal drought that lasted most of 2006 and dropped water levels again. "We didn't stock any largemouth bass in the lake, because before the rains, we were seeing slow growth of bass, and reports from anglers and our surveys showed there were too many small bass," Scott says. "We were concerned that there were too few baitfish. A lot of people thought we should have stocked largemouth bass after the lake rose, but it would have been a waste. The rising water helped the fish that were already in there to reproduce, and stocking fingerlings, if it affected things at all, might have hurt the growth of those fish.

"We decided to wait and let Mother Nature work," Scott continues. "It's hard to do that, especially when you are getting pressure from different groups

to stock fish. But now we are seeing more abundant bass in larger size classes, and they are growing faster." District Inland Fisheries staff also worked with the Permian Basin Oilman's Invitational Tournament to take small bass out of Ivie and stock them into another area lake that had also suffered from dramatically low water levels, Twin Buttes Reservoir. "That helped both lakes," Scott points out. "Ivie started coming back in the fall of 2005, and this past spring anglers were catching more fish and bigger fish."

"I'm very pleased with the fishing on Ivie," Burleson says. "There are fish everywhere in this lake — it's a bass fisherman's dream. On a typical day with stable weather conditions, you can expect to catch 20 to 50 fish a day. People who have heard the lake was down think it's a mudhole in West Texas, but then they get out here and see this beautifully clear water with unlimited structure, and they realize what they've been missing."

"My favorite way to fish Ivie is to use a Senko around the trees," Scott says. "I love being able to see the bass come from way down deep and strike that soft plastic. It's pretty exciting. I also love topwater fishing up shallow near the flooded brush early in the morning."

We're up in the Colorado River arm, squirming our way through flooded treetops at the base of a low bluff. Burleson and Scott are casting underhanded, pitching paddle-tail worms beside tree trunks, letting them fall, then twitching the lures back to the boat. Burleson compliments Scott on her accurate casting, then offers a tip to make it even more effective. "Have just enough line let out so your hand holding the lure is positioned along the rod just above the reel," he says. "You have a lot more control that way. If you let out so much line that your hand is below the reel, you will lift the rod tip as you pitch the lure, and have less control."

Drought is an inevitable fact of life out west.

Scott immediately starts dropping her bait right at the base of trees, and her pleased smile gets even bigger a couple of casts later as a bass gobbles her lure. That one tip from Burleson made the whole day worthwhile.

The next day finds me on Twin Buttes Reservoir with John Ingle, a fish and wildlife technician with TPWD who has a collection of tournament plaques on his office wall. "I've been fishing Twin Buttes mostly for largemouth bass since we stocked it two years ago," Ingle says. "People have been catching 50 fish a day, most under the 14-inch limit. Also, lately we've had some big white bass come out of here."

When Ingle says big white bass, he's not exaggerating. A new all-ages rod-and-reel record of 3.3 pounds was set in April 2006, just two weeks after a new junior angler record of 2.9 pounds. Both those fish were more than 18 inches long — huge for white bass. "The lake level got so low, it was easy for the white bass to forage on the shad, and they fattened up," Ingle says. "They were so big, some people thought they were catching stripers." And speaking of stripers, just the week before my visit, a new lake record was set — 12.75 pounds.

"Spring is an especially good time for largemouth bass," Ingle reveals. The lake is thick with flooded saltcedar, and Senko-type worms fished around it are the ticket. "You can catch fish all day," Ingle says. "You can also catch them as they mix with acres of schooling white bass on the main lake. Watch for birds working. Use a small roostertail, and you'll wear your arm out." Twin Buttes also has a number of humps and old roadbeds that hold largemouths.

Both O.H. Ivie and Twin Buttes offer good fishing for crappie and catfish. The most impressive thing about both lakes is how fishable they are. Both have lots of shoreline and extensive areas of flooded brush and timber. If you like to fish visible cover, you'll love these lakes.

TPWD biologists are optimistic about the near-term future of West Texas lakes.

"We have been trying to rebuild these fisheries following the drought, and we've come from below average to good," says Bonds. "If the predictions of an El Niño event come true, the fishing could go to outstanding."

Bobby Farquhar, Inland Fisheries regional director for West Texas, shares that opinion. "Fishing will be good at Ivie and Twin Buttes if we just don't lose water," he says. "If we can have a wet year and gain some ground, I think it will get even better."

And maybe — just maybe — West Texas lakes will get some help from an unexpected source. Farquhar calls up a Web site on his computer and shows me a graph of the water level in Twin Buttes Reservoir. The line rises sharply after 2004, as one would expect following heavy, widespread rains. But Farquhar points out something odd. The line remains almost level over the next two years. "It's amazing to me that last year, even though we did not get rain for a

good portion of the year, the lake still continued to rise through the fall and winter," he says. "Creeks ran year-round for the first time in years, and the only thing I can attribute that to is brush control being done on the watershed upstream."

Originally conceived to put more water into reservoirs for municipal use, the Texas Brush Control Program also benefits landowners by improving the health and productivity of rangelands. In an ironic twist, removing brush from a watershed may help fishing by flooding brush in lakes downstream and making reservoir levels more stable. That's good news for anglers. What they sometimes lack in water, West Texas lakes more than make up for in brush. Find the brush, and you'll find the fish.

O.H. Ivie and Twin Buttes have lots of both. ★

Following a 10-year drought, the level of Amistad International Reservoir rose and bass fishing exploded.



WonderingWhatWorks "Finding the fish is the whole key in bass fishing," says guide Kevin Burleson. "I start out throwing a spinnerbait against the bank to try to establish where the fish are. If they are up against the bank, it's easy to find them. If I don't do well there, I go back into pockets. You have to establish a depth line — that's the biggest hurdle initially."

Burleson uses a spinnerbait to cover a lot of water quickly both to establish the depth where fish are holding and to see if they are aggressive. "I'm looking to see where and how they take the bait," he says. "If the shallow-running, flashy bait does not work, I'll go to a soft plastic worm or lizard on the bottom to work the opposite end of the water column. In between, I'll use a crankbait. Every day you have to figure them out. The whole lure of bass fishing for me is they are such a patternable animal. What works one place will work for the whole lake. If you are on a point and the fish bite a green craw worm, you can go 15 miles up the lake, and the same pattern will work."

A good way to learn a lake is to go with a guide. Burleson not only puts you on fish, he teaches you how to catch them. Contact Burleson Guide Service at (325) 365-5333.

PHOTO © DAVID J. SMITH



Common exotics like axis, sika (shown here) and fallow deer make up the vast majority of the free-ranging exotic animals in Texas.

PHOTO © LARRY DITTA

Texotics

The booming exotics business has led to a population explosion of species such as sika and axis deer.



Across the top of the huge metal front gate of the historic YO Fanch west of Kerrville, ornamental iron depicts a cowboy on one side and a stately giraffe on the other. **My, how things have changed out on the Texas range.** > > >

BY RUSTY MIDDLETON

Founded as a huge cattle and sheep operation in 1880, the ranch that once raised thousands of cows now has only about 500. In their place are 10,000 deer, antelope, sheep and goats from all over the world. Driving around the ranch these days can be a surreal experience. The YO has become a 40,000-acre menagerie of domestic livestock, native wildlife and more than 50 exotic (also known as Texotics) species. There are dama gazelle, scimitar-horned oryx and wildebeest from Africa, blackbuck from Pakistan, sika deer from Japan and axis deer from India to name only a few. With the exception of the giraffe and a few other species, the exotics and native white-tailed deer are hunted for fees that vary considerably from species to species. The ranch also sells animals to breeders and companies that specialize in providing exotic game to restaurants.

Exotics ranchers often find themselves winging it through unfamiliar behavior and range management problems.



Sika deer

"We can't make enough on cattle to survive anymore," says Eric White, hunting manager for the YO. "If not for exotics, this ranch would not be in existence today."

In fact, exotics have become hugely popular with a lot of landowners in Texas. Charlie Seale, executive director of the Exotic Wildlife Association based in Ingram, reports that there are now more than 5,000 ranches/landowners in Texas with exotics, and Texas has more exotics than any other state by far.

"It's a \$300 million a year industry in Texas and growing fast," says Seale.

With that much popularity, exotics are obviously providing a lot of hunting opportunities and additional income to a growing number of people in Texas.

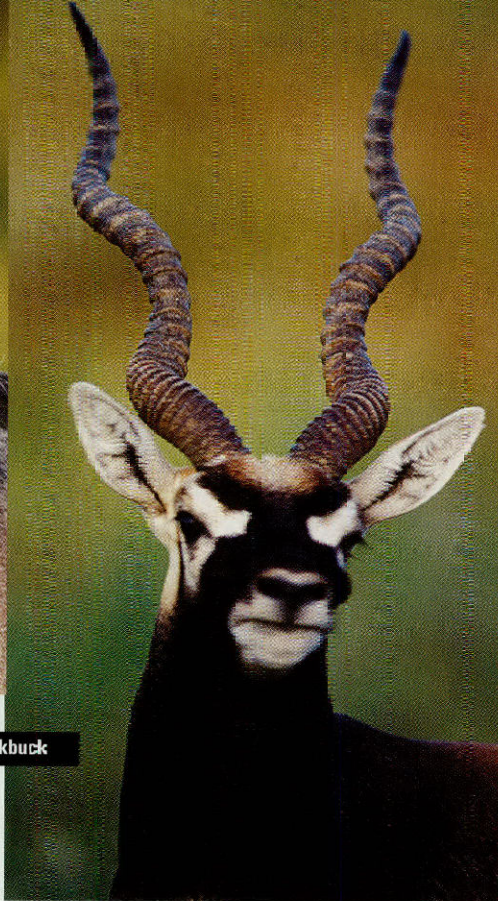
But if you want to own exotics, or even if you

already have some of your own, the consensus among wildlife professionals is clear: You should study up on the animals and be ready for intensive management.

For many rural landowners, ranching in Texas has become something that would have been unimaginable in the 19th century. Whiteface steers have been replaced by the likes of barasingha deer and lechwe antelope, each with a unique set of biological and legal requirements ranging from disease issues and compatibility with other species to restrictions related to endangered-species regulations. It is a strange new world out there, with not much in the way of a rulebook to go by. Exotics ranchers often find themselves winging it through unfamiliar behavior and range management problems.



Nilgai



Blackbuck



Wildebeest

What happens, for example, when two separate species in the same pasture interbreed? And if that happens, what do you do with the offspring? They have little or no market value and could become a liability because they can add pressure to limited habitat.

Exotics owners frequently find themselves learning as they go and sometimes learning the hard way. Just ask Bobby Girling.

Girling, a longtime hunter, got interested in exotics a few years ago and decided to produce exotic stock with high-quality bloodlines. His Eight Points Ranch now has a well-developed breeding program with 20 species, but starting out was bumpy. He learned first-hand just how different the behavior of exotics can be from familiar domesticated stock.

Some exotics don't understand fences and can be extremely unpredictable. Girling brought an axis deer onto a confined area on his property and, even after handling axis many times, the animal surprised him by promptly running straight into a fence and badly wounding its face. After a trip to the vet, Girling released the animal again; it ran into a fence corner and injured itself so badly it had to be put down. He soon learned how to use hoods over the eyes to calm them down at critical times. Even though almost all exotics in Texas today are born in this country, that does not mean they've lost their wild instincts.

"They may seem tame, but don't press your luck. These are still wild animals," says Girling.

And the fact that they move in herds doesn't mean they can be easily herded. They weigh hundreds of pounds each, and their instinct is to scatter the instant they feel threatened. To be transported, exotics often have to be

drugged, then loaded into a trailer.

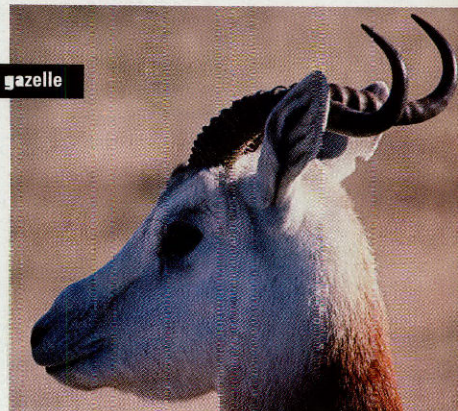
"There's always risk involved in transport

and the use of tranquilizers," says Doug Smith of Bear Creek Ranch in Kerrville. Exotics are often wary of people, so if he can't get close enough to shoot from the window of his pickup, Smith will hide in a blind and wait until the target gets close enough to be darted with a tranquilizer gun. But tranquilizing wild animals is an inexact science, even for the professionals. Some animals will even die because they are more sensitive to drugs than others. Some will die simply from the stress of being moved.

Confinement is another problem. While cows and sheep will placidly graze behind a low, even poorly maintained field fence, most exotics can be confined only with an 8-foot fence, temporarily at least. It is commonly accepted that exotics will eventually get out of any fence. Or get in. One of the biggest problems exotics owners have is feral hogs breaking through a fence to get in, which, of course, allows animals to get out.

For people interested in having exotics on their property, Girling strongly recommends investing in proper fencing with accompanying predator wire to keep out coyotes and feral hogs.

But fencing and confinement also lead to issues more complicated than just keeping animals in or out. Depending on



Dama gazelle



Scimitar-horned oryx

the size of the property high fences can bring an end to a landowner's white-tailed deer population. Studies by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department have shown that some common exotics such as sika and axis deer have a com-

also found white-tailed deer absent from several larger (4,000-plus acre) high-fenced ranches that also contained exotics after about the same length of time.

While TPWD doesn't, for the most part, regulate exotics, it does provide guidance to landowners who want to manage for both exotics and native wildlife, especially white-tailed deer. Department biologists are available to assist landowners in developing a management plan that helps them realize their goals and protect habitat.

"If a landowner is mainly interested in white-tailed [deer], then we recommend getting rid of the exotics entirely," says TPWD biologist Mitch Lockwood. "But if they want both, then they really need to get together with us to develop a management plan that prescribes the right mix of animals that the land can support. There is no canned solution. You need to look at each individual situation. It's all about keeping the habitat healthy and the population in check."

In fact, overpopulation is probably the single greatest "negative" concerning exotics in Texas. They were first brought to South Texas and the Hill Country in the 1930s, but it wasn't until the emergence of the hunting industry in the '50s that the exotics population began to climb rapidly. A TPWD survey in the 1960s counted 13 species and about 13,000 animals. The last survey in 1996 found about 190,000 animals and 76 species. Today, estimates range from about 275,000 to well beyond a million. They are spread across Texas, but the greatest concentration is in the Hill Country. Lockwood and Baccus agree that there could be over a



Fallow deer

petitive advantage over whitetails. That's because both will eat whitetail food — forbs (weeds and herbaceous plants) and browse (leaves of woody plants) — but exotics can also survive on grasses. Thus, when all the usual whitetail food is gone within an enclosure, exotics can keep going on grasses while whitetails starve. A TPWD study in the 1970s found that whitetails were essentially eliminated from enclosed 96-acre tracts after eight or nine years. Texas State University wildlife ecologist John Baccus, who has spent much of his career studying native deer and exotics in Texas, has

There could be over a million free-ranging exotics in the Hill Country alone.

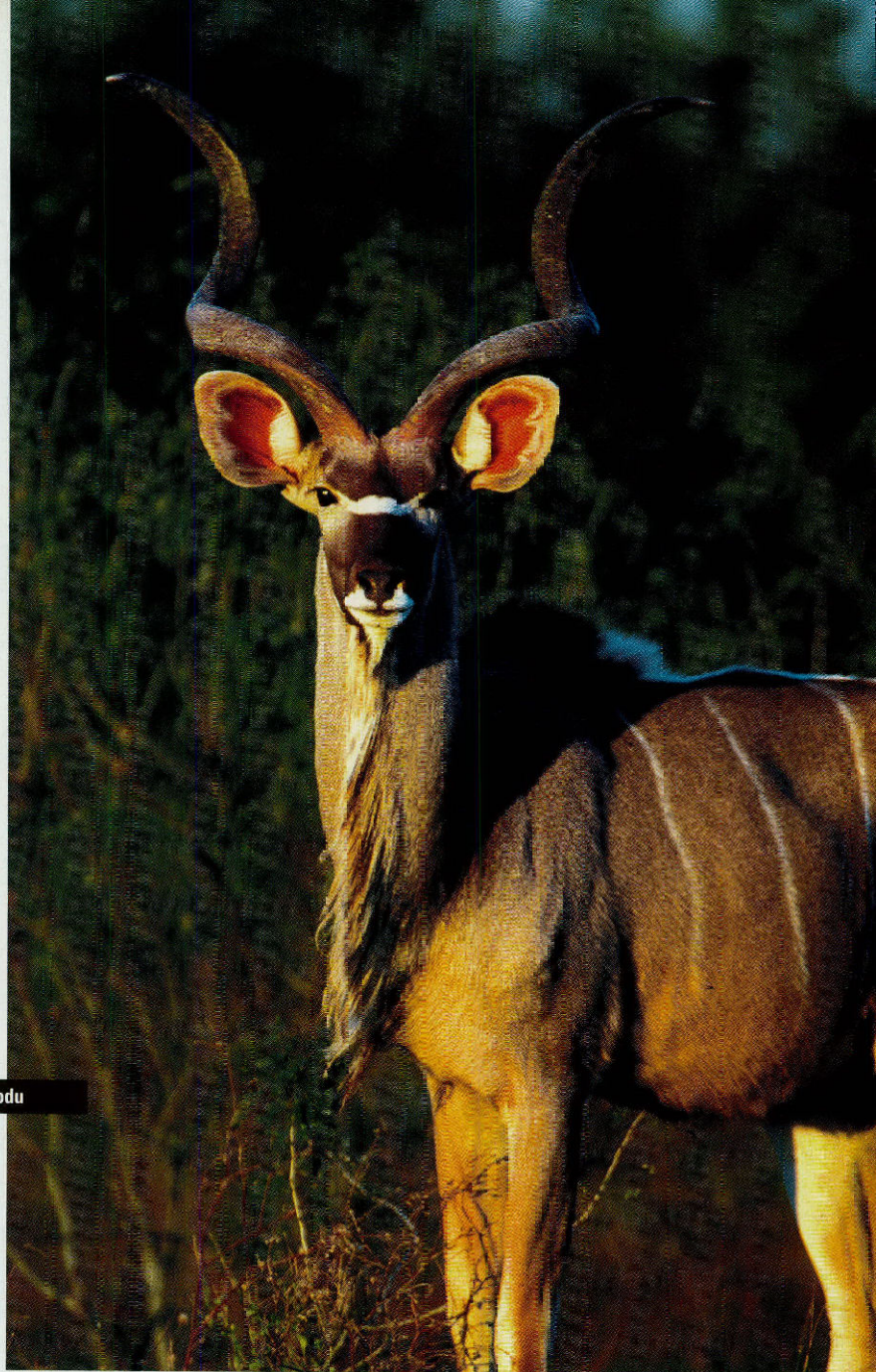
million free-ranging exotics in the Hill Country alone. (Free-ranging in this context means escaped or intentionally released exotics that are roaming the countryside and owned by no one.) In fact, Baccus thinks there might be almost as many exotics in Central Texas as there are white-tailed deer. Most biologists now consider several species of common exotics so numerous and self-sustaining that they are an established, permanent part of the fauna of Texas. Common exotics, mostly deer species from Asia such as axis, sika and fallow deer make up the vast majority of the free-ranging animals. The far more valuable so-called “super exotics” — often antelope species from Africa such as the gemsbok, scimitar-horned oryx and sable — also occasionally escape their enclosures, but they are much less numerous and more likely to be hunted down by the owner. It is the loose herds of common exotics that pose the greatest potential threat to native wildlife and plants.

“At the rate of increase [of exotics] we have, I can certainly foresee a problem with them in the future,” says Baccus.

So the big question is: Are white-tailed deer numbers going down, and, if so, are they declining because of exotics?

“The problem is we just don’t have a good handle on the numbers [of exotics compared to white-tailed deer],” says Max Traweck, a TPWD biologist who conducts periodic censuses of white-tailed deer in central Texas. He has found lower numbers of whitetails in some areas and is concerned about too much pressure on available habitat, but the overall numbers are about the same. TPWD does not routinely count exotics.

Even if it were conclusively shown that the presence of exotics was harming whitetails, the prospect of getting rid of free-ranging exotics or even significantly reducing their numbers is daunting.



Kodu

Mark Mitchell, manager of Mason Mountain Wildlife Management Area, says that eliminating exotics would be extremely difficult.

“The common exotics have a high reproductive rate,” says Mitchell. “It’s very hard to control them. In some counties I could see it taking 50 years to completely get rid of them.”

Mitchell, like many wildlife biologists, has mixed feelings about exotics. He worries about the impact that overwhelming numbers could have on white-tailed deer and other native species but appreciates the economic benefits they bring and the real boost they have provided to the sport of hunting. He is conducting studies to determine which exotic species are the least demanding on habitat.

“I think we all are going to have to accept the fact that the exotics are very likely here to stay,” says Mitchell. ★



Sonia Yeck (in red), Karen Blizzard (in blue) and Clemente Guzman demonstrate how to get the benefits of going to a gym while enjoying the great outdoors.

TAKE YOUR GYM OUTDOORS

Everything you need for a solid workout is just beyond your front door.
(No membership fee required.)

By Elsa K. Simcik

Photography by Chase A. Fountain

If you think Texas doesn't have four seasons, well then, you're mistaken. There's not, really hot, not-so-hot and perfect. The last one, for obvious reasons, is the most ideal. Folks, I have good news: perfect is just around the corner.

So instead of schlepping to the gym for your exercise, why not simply step outside? Don't tell me you enjoy running on the treadmill to nowhere. Or maybe you actually prefer to lift weights in the company of Gym-Rat Roger. I know: You think you can't get an effective workout unless you have all the weights, equipment and confusing circuit machines at the gym, right? Wrong.

"The great thing about training outdoors is that man and Mother Nature have already provided us with everything we need to get an effective workout," says Mike Thornton, a Dallas-based personal trainer and creator of the outdoor program The Transformation Boot Camp.

When it comes to getting his clients in shape, Thornton gets creative: "Whether it be a park bench, a curb, a set of steps, a hill or even the good old-fashioned ground, we have everything we need at our disposal."

Stay Inside for Zs; Head Outside for Cs

Thornton believes that all exercise programs (whether they're indoors or outdoors) need to include what he calls "the Three Cs:" cardio, circuit training and core work. Start with cardio, move on to weights and finish with core. Why is the sequence so important? "This not only breaks up the routine to keep it from feeling monotonous," Thornton says, "but it also keeps the heart rate going and turns the entire workout into a fat-burning bout."

Thornton's tips for getting a Three Cs workout outdoors are illustrated on the following pages.

CARDIO

When the weather's good, there's no limit to the cardio exercise you can do outside — walking, running, biking, playing tennis, shooting hoops — but you can even take those classic exercises to a new level. In Thornton's boot camp, for instance, he has participants do short sessions of cardio for 30 seconds to one minute at a time, several times. This way you're doing interval training (short bursts that work to elevate your heart rate). And the best part? You can do it all outdoors.



A Uphill sprints, downhill sprints. (Live in the flatlands? Try a parking garage.)

B Jumping jacks.

C Mountain-climbers: With your knees bent and feet about two feet apart from front to back, lean down and put your hands on the ground in



front of you; alternate your feet from front to back.

D Star jumps: Start in a standing position. Squat down halfway and explode into a jump as high as you can. As you jump, put your arms and legs as far out to your sides as you can; as you land, bring feet and arms back in.

● Quick-feet: Run in place as fast as you can without pumping the knees.

● Air-bombers: Start with quick-feet. After about 10 seconds, kick your feet out behind you and land in a push-up position; bounce back up to your feet quickly and start with quick-feet again.

● Running steps on a flight of outdoor stairs.

● High-knee pumps.

● Squat thrusts: Start in a standing position. Squat down, place hands on the ground in front of you, kick both legs at the same time out behind you, bounce back to a tucked position and stand back up.

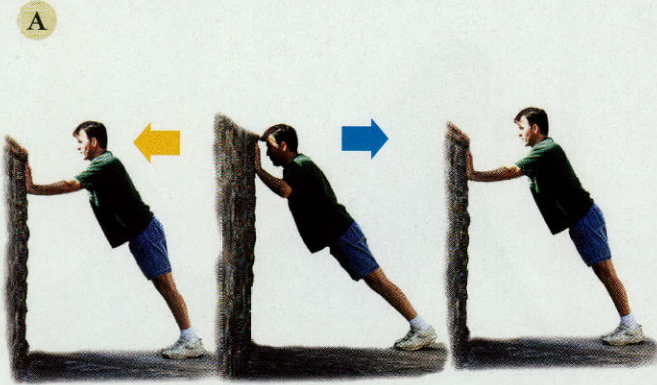


Will and Jacquelyn Fagan of San Antonio say they have everything they need for a cardio workout right around their home: “[We] live near a park,” Jacquelyn says. “We like to run to the park and do lunges once we get there. There are also bleachers for football/rugby/soccer games, and we run up and down the bleachers just like in high school athletics. It’s a great workout.”

CIRCUIT

Now this is where it gets trickier. You know you can burn calories and fat outdoors simply by moving your body. But how are you supposed to get tone and build muscle? Should you lift some potted plants?

Again, Thornton says Mother Nature has it all right there. You just have to look around and be resourceful. Here are some of his top picks:

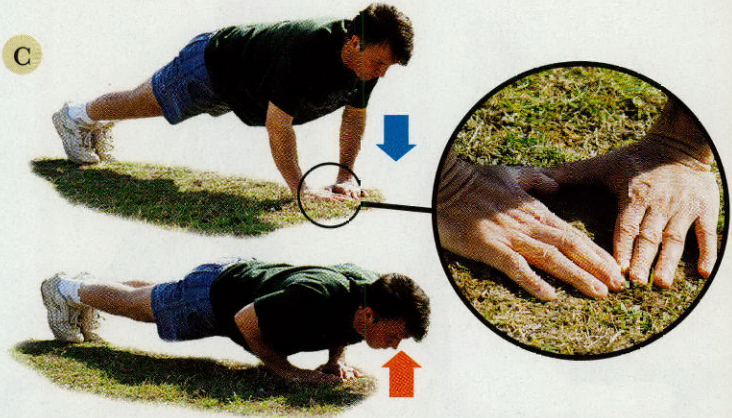


A Push-ups: While outside, try doing push-ups on the ground, against a wall or using two trees.

B Rock side raises: Find two rocks that weigh about 1 to 2 pounds each. Lift cut to the side. This can also be done without resistance and at a faster pace.

C Diamond push-ups: Just like push-ups, but you bring the thumbs and index fingers of each of your hands together in a diamond shape.

D Tree branch curl-ups: Beginners may want to use a low branch so you can pull up with your arms and still get help from your legs.



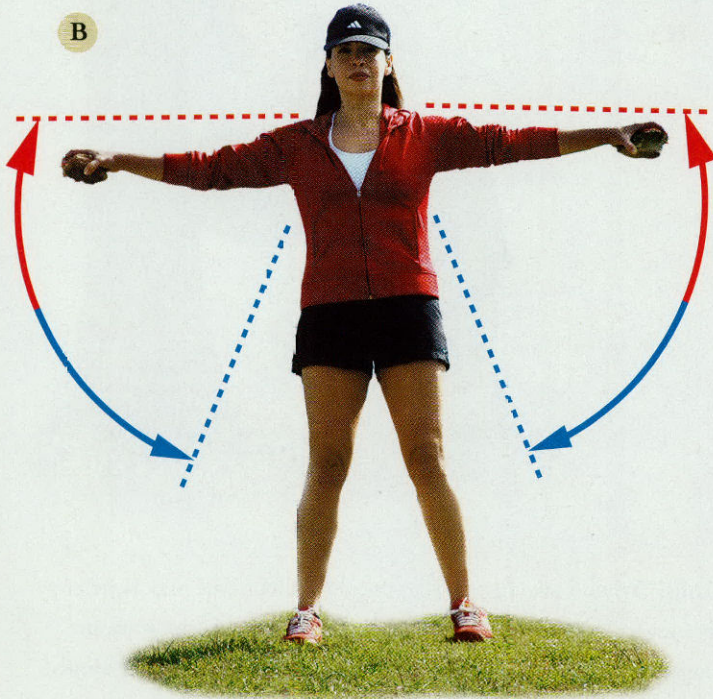
● Tree branch diagonal pull-ups: Find a sturdy branch about shoulder level. Grip it with hands shoulder-width apart; bring your feet slightly in front of the branch and lean back, holding onto it. Pull your chest towards the branch.

● Tree branch pull-ups: Same as tree branch curl-ups,

but with palms facing down.

● Bent-arm 90-degree holds: Find some type of resistance, such as a heavy rock, and hold it with your arms bent at 90 degrees.

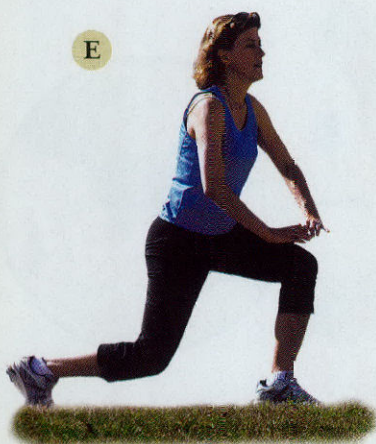
● Shoulder push-ups: Keep hips high for these.



CIRCUIT

Got problem areas? You don't need precision gym equipment to work on specific muscle groups. Tree trunks, benches and rocks will do just fine.

Prone cobra and tree branch pull-ups will help strengthen your back. Puny legs? Try lunges, burpees, butt-kickers and calf raises on a curb. Dips off a bench will give you triceps of steel. Now that you've seen these, try adapting some of your favorite exercises for the outdoors.



E Lunges: Reverse, forward, stationary, side.

F Dips off a bench.

G Prone cobra: Lying on the ground in a prone position, pull your arms up and squeeze your shoulder blades together.

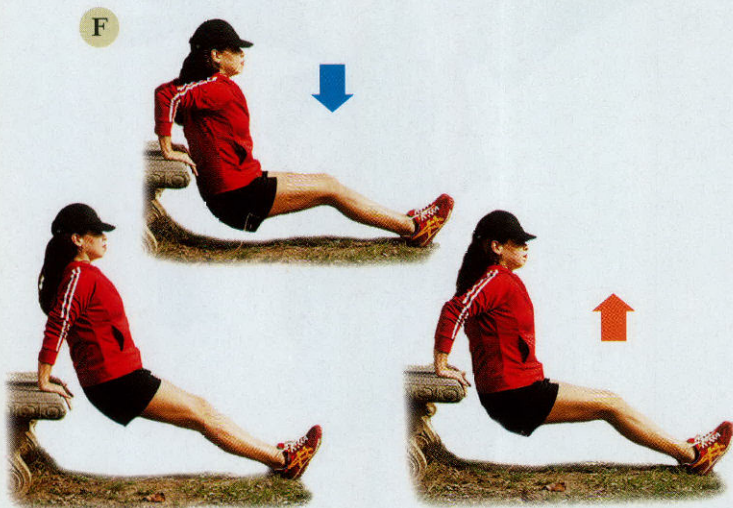
H Tree squats: Find a tree and sit up against it with your knees bent at a 90-degree angle. See how long you can hold it.

● Burpees: Squat down about halfway and then explode into a jump as high as you can. Bend your knees a little as

you land, and end up back in a squatting position.

● Calf raises on a curb.

● Butt-kickers: Either running in place or in a field, snap your heels up behind you as you run and try to kick your butt with your heels.



Amy Janak of Dallas says that she made up her own outdoor arm workout: "When I take [my dog] to the park, I'll use the park bench to do arm presses by keeping my arms on the bench, then I pull my body away from the bench and lunge down for a good arm workout."

Scott Womack of Austin says that he gets in plenty of lifting just working at his deer lease, filling feeders. "Each feeder holds 300 pounds of corn. Each bag weighs 50 pounds, so there are six trips up a ladder carrying 50 pounds over your head, quite a workout by the end of the day," he says.

CORE

A lot of us skip this part of our workout even if we have a gym membership. But really, working your abdominals and lower back is just as important as the two other Cs since it can help prevent lower-back pain and other injuries.

Thornton has plenty of ideas for this one — some you've heard of and some that are a new twist on ab exercises.



A Russian Twists: start by sitting up with your knees bent, feet flat on the ground and your hands behind your head; lean back just a little and rotate your upper torso from side to side.

B Killer Sit-ups: Sit up about three-quarters of the way and squeeze your abdominal muscles for about two to three seconds; then lower yourself back down as slowly as you can.

C The Plank: Lie face down; then raise yourself up on your toes, resting on your elbows. Keep your back flat and hold the position.
 ● Crunches: Do any or all of these: reverse, double, raised knee, oblique.

The Upside of Outdoors

Exercising outdoors is about more than just getting a workout that's equivalent to one in a gym; it's about enjoying your workout, too. "The most important thing is to make it fun," says Thornton.

And for most people, the outdoors does equal fun. Kristen Jones of Dallas says, "In a gym, especially for a woman, it's somewhat intimidating." And when it comes to cardio, she says, "I think, 'Can I really do the stair stepper one more time?'" She opted for Thornton's Transformation Boot Camp instead. She says she loves the fact that it's outdoors and that they're always doing different things, from sprint drills to push-ups on a park bench. And the fact that she's lost 11 pounds in the process means that she has no plans to return to the gym anytime soon.

Scott Womack — proponent of the deer-lease workout — says that this type of exercise is just more satisfying to him. "It sounds hard, which it is, but it is kind of fun because we are outdoors with our family and friends having a good time away from most cell phones, computers and traffic," he says.

Womack also says that when he's not hauling heavy bags of feed at the deer lease, he prefers to exercise at Austin's scenic spots like Town Lake. "There is no doubt I can do more outside than in a gym. I hate treadmills, elliptical machines and stationary bikes

because I do all this work and I go nowhere," he says. "When we go to Town Lake, there is always something new to look at so I don't think about what I am doing; I think about what's going on around me."

Amy Janak adds: "I look at it this way: I'm stuck indoors all day at work. There's something nice about enjoying the weather and nature for at least an hour or so every day."

Even if you're not ready to venture out to your neighborhood park, you can exercise a little closer to home. Patricia Jentsch, a fitness and nutrition coach with WELLFi: Personal Training Group in San Antonio, likes to go right into her clients' backyards. She explains that by utilizing their surroundings to perform the exercises, they're better equipped to do them on their own.

As for making sure they're getting a well-rounded program, Jentsch says she's into "old-school calisthenics" like running, sprinting, jumping jacks, push-ups, crunches, walking lunges and mountain-climbers. "I utilize steps, bars, walls, rocks and hilly areas for running intervals," she says.

Jentsch knows that if people are bored, they're not going to work out. "Mainly, I feel outdoor workouts offer a lot more variety," she says. "It takes away from the humdrum of an indoor gym. Also, it doesn't cost you a dime to work out outside."

So let the treadmill gather dust until winter. Grab your sneakers, get outside and enjoy Texas. After all, it's perfect. ★

By HENRY CHAPPELL

North Deer Island's inhospitableness makes it the perfect place for a rookery. The 144-acre island sits in Galveston Bay, about three miles west of the Galveston landing of the I-45 causeway — too far for coyotes to swim. There's little fresh water, so smaller mammalian predators such as raccoons are scarce. Diamondback rattlesnakes, however, thrive there.

As do birds. Eighteen species of colonial waterbirds and shorebirds nest on the island, including great blue herons, great egrets, roseate spoonbills, royal terns, black-crowned night-herons, white ibis, neotropic cormorants, the



Baby Bird

I S L A N D

One of Galveston Bay's few remaining natural islands, North Deer Island is a 144-acre bird maternity ward.



Great egret chicks

federally endangered brown pelican, and the state-endangered reddish egret and white-faced ibis. As many as 30,000 nesting pairs have been documented there during peak breeding season.

Since the 1950s, erosion and subsidence, due mostly to human activity in the Galveston Bay area, have claimed an average of 5 feet of the island's shoreline per year, and up to 20 feet during tropical storm years.

North Deer is one of the bay's few remaining natural islands.



Great egret newborns



Great blue heron chicks

Several islands that once provided habitat for colonial birds have disappeared or have been rendered uninhabitable by sand dumping from dredging operations. South Deer Island has eroded to the point where it's no longer viable rookery habitat. Dawn Deer Island, sometimes called Middle Deer, disappeared decades ago.

Galveston Bay is a working estuary, the largest on the Texas coast. Through the 1990s, commercial shrimp harvest averaged over 5 million pounds per year. The bay produces more oysters than any single body of water in the country.

About 30 percent of the nation's petroleum industry is located there. In terms of foreign tonnage, the Port of Houston is the largest port in the U.S. These are the realities. Side effects of commerce, abetted by indifference and economic inertia, destroyed most of Galveston Bay's islands. Another human enterprise, engineering, may save the bay's most important island rookery.

I smelled the birds before I saw them.

From behind the steering wheel of our 21-foot Bay Runner, TPWD biologist Jamie Schubert said, "This is it." For a few seconds, I couldn't resolve the mass of bills and feathers in front of me. Then one of the birds spread its wings, and what had looked like a tangle of hackberry and dead limbs became a clump of a dozen juvenile brown pelicans lounging in the late-morning sun.

We had come upon the island suddenly after heading south from Tiki Island Marina through steady rain. One instant I was bent against the

downpour, peering beneath the web bill of my cap; the next instant I was squinting at pelicans and groping suddenly for my sunglasses.

To me, a Kentuckian transplanted in North Texas, the bay felt ominous, foreign. Tides and hazards, boat roads, volatile weather that only baymen seem to understand. The rain, wind and sudden appearance of the island added to the effect.

I can't call North Deer Island picturesque, but it has a familiar, rough, scrubby, wild quality, like a productive piece of West Texas rangeland — diverse, harsh, teeming. For every wild thing you see, thousands more slither, scuttle, squirm and flap back to hide in

the island's ever-present brush.

Pelicans seem to be taking over the island, or at least expanding their territory, but no one's complaining. The brown pelican is the only federally listed endangered species known to nest on the island. In 2003, 31 percent of all breeding brown pelicans in Texas — 1,500 to 2,000 pairs — nested on North Deer Island.

The brown pelican population dropped to a low of about 100 birds in the late '60s and early '70s, mostly because of DDT poisoning. The birds' numbers have steadily risen since the Environmental Protection Agency banned the pesticide in 1972.

"When I moved here in 1988, you

didn't see pelicans," Schubert said. "Now you see them every day."

Like most colonial water birds, pelicans nest primarily in brush and trees on coastal islands. On North Deer, they use the uplands along the northern and northeastern shoreline and forage in the surrounding marshes.

Lime prickly ash, mesquite, paloverde, mulberry, hackberry and woolybucket bumelia dominate the higher ground. Lantana is the predominant shrub. Prickly pear is also commonly found in the uplands.

Dredge material that was dumped over 60 percent of the island actually increased the upland rookery. "One of the reasons this island is so important is that the dredge spoil raised more of it above the tidal range, so that we have greater diversity of trees," Schubert said.

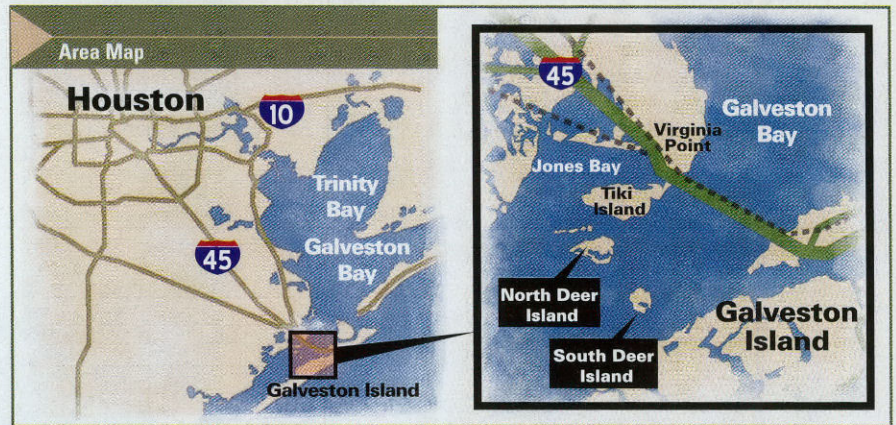
Those trees seemed to be growing pelicans. The young birds lazed, at once dignified, grotesque and comical, occasionally lifting into stately flight.

Although North Deer's importance increased as other bay islands disappeared, Winnie Burkett, Audubon Texas' colonial waterbird steward, says she doesn't believe that the island gets a disproportionate number of birds. "I don't think there's a bigger concentration on North Deer than in the days when islands were abundant," she said. "I suspect we had a lot more birds when there were more islands."

Erosion loss on the steep northeastern shoreline is exacerbated by the longshore currents (currents running parallel to the shore) caused by the proximity of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW), which runs just 30-100 feet to the north. Galveston Bay's natural depth typically ranges between 3 and 10 feet, so it's not surprising that the dredging of the GIWW has drastically altered underwater currents.

We cruised west, along the northern shoreline where the uplands slope more gently to merge with salt marsh. TPWD biologist Shannon Torrance and I passed binoculars back and forth. Torrance had just joined the team at the Dickinson office after completing her doctoral studies at Texas Tech University. This was her first look at North Deer.

Though pelicans were still much in evidence, we began to see ibises (both white and white-faced) and great egrets foraging in the smooth cordgrass, salt wort and grass wort for shrimp and other crustaceans. A juvenile great blue heron, his head just visible above the grass, croaked and flapped toward the island's interior.



Willetts and ruddy turnstones hunted along the edge, where marsh meets uplands. Laughing gulls wheeled overhead. Mullet jumped in patches of open water. We'd caught the tail-end of breeding season in early August. Had we arrived in peak breeding season — May and June — bird numbers would have been even higher.

In addition to providing forage for wading birds, these island marshes are important nurseries for shrimp, crab, menhaden, sea trout, flounder, red drum, Atlantic croaker, and other fin and shellfish.

Longshore currents are eating away at this 4,600-foot stretch of northern shoreline. Schubert eased the boat around to the southwestern shore. Twice he had to lift the prop and pole us into deeper water. Scores of ibis foraged in the marsh. Schubert pointed out a juvenile yellow-crowned night-heron. Through binoculars, I got a good look at the subdued juvenile plumage, the tan streaking on the breast, the thin neck and dark bill.

This shoreline is much less susceptible to wave erosion than it was only a few years ago. About 100 feet from shore, what looks like a long oyster bar is actually an artificial 900-foot breakwater constructed of stiff clay dredged from the bottom and armored with limestone. Like a natural reef, the break-water lessens erosion by tripping up incoming waves. A similar breakwater runs along the southern shoreline.

Schubert pulled up alongside the structure, climbed out and walked along the top to inspect a small washout. Appropriately, an oyster-catcher picked its way through the limestone rip-rap — another addition to my life list and an interesting departure from my usual grassland and woodland birds.

The breakwater was constructed in spring 2003 under Phase I of the North Deer Island Protection and

Restoration Project. Phase II of the project, currently funded by TPWD, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Texas General Land Office, NRG Energy, Houston Audubon Society, Galveston Bay Estuary Program, National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, Environmental Protection Agency/Gulf of Mexico Program, Texas GenCo EcoCenter, Shell Marine Habitat Program and the Harris and Eliza Kempner Fund, will stabilize 5,750 feet of shoreline, benefiting 89 acres of coastal habitat, including 57 acres of marsh.

Schubert, the project leader, plans to put the bid out early this summer. Construction should start around September 1.

The project will address erosion loss and marsh restoration only. Bay island subsidence, caused in part by withdrawal of groundwater during development of the Texas City industrial complex, has declined significantly now that the area relies on water from impoundments.

Erosion along the steep northwestern shoreline will be stanchied by a rock revetment built directly on the bank. Along the northern shoreline, seven rock "groins," jetties protruding perpendicular to the shore, will lessen erosion by disrupting parallel longshore currents.

The southern and southwestern shorelines will be protected by continuation of the breakwaters constructed during Phase I, totaling 4,600 and 3,600 feet of protection, respectively.

In addition to erosion mitigation, these rock structures also provide substrate for oyster spats and other encrusting organisms, leading to further reef development.

Along the southwestern shoreline, sediments leftover from dredging of the breakwater channel will be deposited between the breakwater and the island shoreline and graded to an elevation suitable for marsh development.

Phase II improvements should protect 49 acres of marsh and 25 acres of upland habitat. About 8 acres of marsh will be restored through distribution and grading of sediment dredged from barge access channels, along with the planting of cordgrass and other native marsh plants donated by the Texas GenCo EcoCenter.

Even after Phase II completion, Galveston Bay's colonial birds will remain vulnerable. "When we have all of our birds on one island, and there's a problem, we can lose an entire nesting season," Winnie Burkett said. "We need to spread things out; we don't want all our eggs in one basket. The more healthy islands we have in the bay, the better."

Artificial islands constructed of dredge material from the widening of Houston Ship Channel should eventually provide bird habitat. "Those islands are still pretty raw, but they're beginning to grow vegetation," Burkett said. They should start being more attractive to a variety of birds."

Heading for the marina, we rode back into rain. Torrance and I sat up front, heads down, tugging our cap bills — an appropriate spot for the new kid and the pesky writer.

To the northwest, a barge lumbered along the Intracoastal Waterway. Massive, ugly, threatening and much like the vessel that will house the engineering crews who'll build the breakwaters, groins and revetments at North Deer Island.

Irony and hope abound throughout Galveston Bay. ★



Great blue heron pair at their rookery

Pelicans



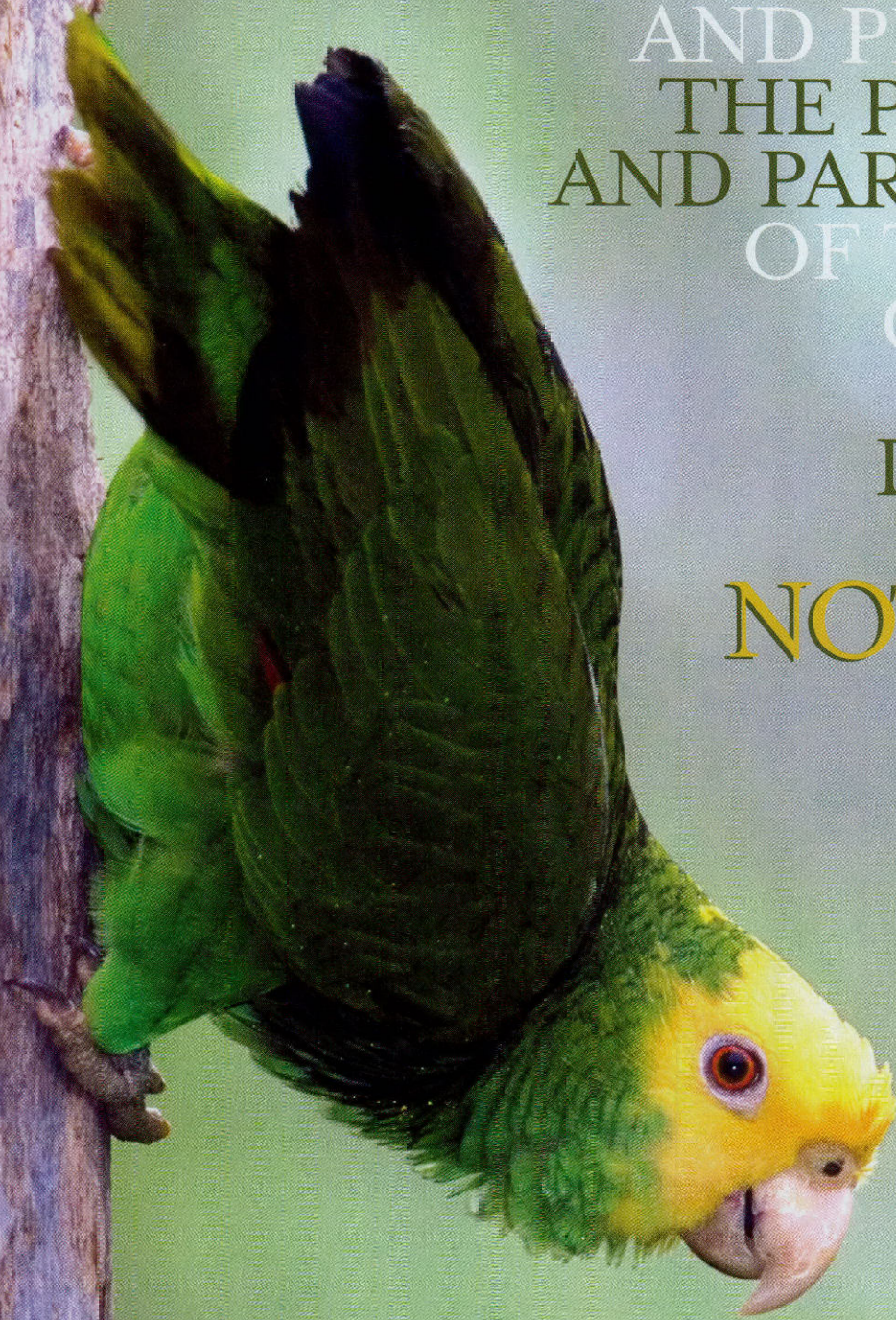
Details North Deer Island is an Audubon sanctuary owned by Houston Audubon Society, Audubon Texas and four other undivided interest owners, and is off-limits to the public. For information on bird-watching trips near the island, contact Galveston Harbor Tours, (409) 765-1700, <www.galveston.com/harbourtours>.

Coastal Organizations and Initiatives:

- Texas Gulf Ecological Management Sites <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/landwater/water/conservation/txgems/>
- Galveston Bay Foundation <www.galvbay.org>
- Texas Coastal Management Program <www.glo.state.tx.us/coastal>
- Texas Coastal Program <www.fws.gov/texascoastalprogram>
- USGS Galveston Bay Project <gulfsci.usgs.gov/Galveston>
- Galveston Bay Estuary Program <www.gbep.state.tx.us/>

TOP PHOTO © GARY KRAMER NETS; LEFT © JOHN JETTISON

LOUD, COLORFUL
AND PLAYFUL,
THE PARROTS
AND PARAKEETS
OF THE RIO
GRANDE
VALLEY
DEMAND
TO BE
NOTICED



By
EILEEN
MATTEI

PHOTOS
BY
LARRY
DITTO

MOUTH OF
THE SOUTH

A LOUD WHISTLE BROKE THE SUNDAY MORNING QUIET A FEW MONTHS AFTER I MOVED TO HARLINGEN. A MESQUITE TREE 30 FEET AWAY

OFFERED A PERCH FOR THREE LIME GREEN PARROTS, 12 TO 13 INCHES LONG, WITH SCARLET CROWNS, PATCHES OF LEMON YELLOW AND RED ON THEIR WINGS, AND A TOUCH OF VIOLET BLUE ON THE NECK. THEY SQUAWKED WHILE I GAWKED. WHEN THEY FLEW OFF, I RAN FOR MY BIRDING GUIDE.

T

Yellow-headed parrot >>

he red-crowned parrot, a tropical fruit of a bird, is seen in noisy flocks in towns across the Rio Grande Valley. The presence of parrots and green parakeets sparks a lot of enjoyment and some controversy about the big, colorful birds. Where did they come from and why are we seeing more of them in Brownsville, Harlingen, McAllen, Pharr and Weslaco?

Although settlers in the mid-1800s wrote of seeing wild parrots (no species identified), most current birding books refer to the *Amazona viridigenalis* and *Aratinga holochlora* as Mexican visitors. People assume they are seeing escaped caged birds because red-crowned parrots and parakeets frequent urban and suburban trees. While a few of the estimated 300 to 500 red-crowned parrots in the Valley might be escapees, the Texas Ornithological Society (TOS) considers red-crowned parrots and green parakeets as established avifauna, meaning they are self-sufficient, breeding and expanding. The birds hang out in the urban forest because “those trees are where the food is,” explains ornithologist Tim Brush of the University of Texas-Pan American.

Starting around 1910, as the Valley’s brushland was cleared for fields of cabbage, carrots and citrus, almost 95 percent of the region’s existing trees disappeared. Parrots seemed to disappear, too, for the next 70 years. By the time Valley towns had developed urban forests of mature live oaks, hackberries and fruiting trees, parrot habitats 100 miles south in northern Mexico were being cleared for



agriculture. Big Valley freezes in 1983 and 1989 killed thousands of Washingtonian palm trees. Parrots nest in dead palms. Abundant, available food, shelter and water attracted many displaced red-crowned parrots, Brush believes.

“Every good size town in the Valley has at least one parrot flock,” says Pat Wade, who with his wife, Kitty, leads the parrot and parakeet tours for the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival every November. “Outside of breeding season, parrots are very social,” he says, estimating that more than 100 birds roost together in Harlingen. Before the festival, volunteers spend late afternoons tracking where the birds are eating and socializing. Knowledge of the birds’ habits convinced



<< Red-crowned parrot

some ecotourists that the birds were trained, Kitty says. "The parrot tour pulled into the Pendleton Park parking lot and the parrots, close to 80, arrived a minute later and landed on high wires only 50 feet away. The single red-lored parrot with the flock hung upside-down for about five minutes so we could point it out." Red-crowned parrots come into their roost near dark, when it is difficult to photograph them.

Red-crowned parrots are seen and heard almost exclusively during the two hours after sunrise and the hour around sunset. "I know that in the wild they eat early," Pat says. "They can get enough acorns in less than an hour in the morning to keep them going all day." The parrots move noisily between trees, socializing, feeding on flowerbuds, young leaves, fruits and seeds. They shift their feeding areas frequently, breaking into smaller groups, responding to weather changes and to what is in season or blooming — ripe mulberries, chinaberries, pecans and the orchid-like blooms of the *pata de vaca*. They can wander 50 to 60 miles a day, but the flocks from different towns don't appear to mix, according to Brad McKinney of Brownsville, who serves on the TOS Bird Records committee.

Most mornings between February and July, a flock of 10 to 20 parrots works my neighborhood's trees, which are about eight miles from the Harlingen roost at Pendleton Park. I hear and then see a few overhead in other months. On very misty, overcast mornings, I've watched a raucous group of 30 parrots socializing on the power line until 11 or so, a few hanging upside-down by one foot, crowding together, screeching, trilling, shifting and playing what looks like King of the Mountain.

Usually parrots disappear during the day. Wade speculates that they hang out quietly all day digesting, then re-emerge to eat before dark. Only once have I spotted a parrot during the day, and it was darn near invisible in the oak where I'd watched it eating earlier.

Parrots, which mate for life, have raised families of one or two chicks in the dead palms on my suburban road, a source of neighborhood pride. So, after lightning killed three tall Washingtonian palms near my front door, I waited for the natural progression. First, golden-fronted woodpeckers hollowed out multiple cavities for nesting. Two years later in February, two parrots spent about an hour each morning perching on the top of the dead palms and hanging from the dead fronds between stints of pulling themselves with beak and claws from hole to hole, sticking their heads and upper bodies in, occasionally ripping off a piece of bark with their beak. But after a week, the pair left to look for another cavity. I still spot the pair, recognizable because one is missing a patch of secondary feathers.

Birding guide Roy Rodriguez ranks parrots and parakeets among the most intelligent and longest-lived birds. In 2005 he counted 67 in one McAllen parrot flock, then counted 89 the next year. But at one McAllen intersection, "you used to expect them like clockwork, but for some reason, they're not showing up," he says. Rodriguez guesses that the removal of dead palms as the city grows has made nesting holes harder to come by, so some parrots have shifted to Pharr, where he is seeing more.

Even without a parrot census, parrot-watchers keep tabs on the population. "My gut feeling is that parrots are not going to be as numerous as parakeets," says Brad McKinney, who had expected to be seeing more parrots this year. The reason may be that parrots nest exclusively in dead palm cavities, while green parakeets have adapted to nesting in man-made structures, such as an indentation in a metal building.

Valley towns use parrots and parakeets in their tourism promotions. The red-crowned parrot is the official bird of Brownsville while Weslaco invites visitors to "Rendezvous with a redhead ... parrot, of course" and provides detailed instructions on how to spot the parrot flock. Both





PARROTS AND PARAKEETS ARE AMONG THE MOST INTELLIGENT AND LONGEST-LIVED BIRDS

Brownsville and Weslaco have city ordinances protecting parrots and their nests. That's a necessary step, Tim Brush says, because parrots and parakeets fall in a gray area, neither indigenous nor protected by federal migratory bird laws. "Every community lucky enough to have these birds needs to protect them." He recounts stories about people spraying parrots with water to knock them off a perch and capturing them to sell at flea markets notorious for trafficking in illegal birds, although adult birds never become good pets.

Green parakeets inhabit the same urban forest as the red-crowned parrots.

Last summer we downsized to a home one-and-a-half miles away with an acre of dense, second-growth, south Texas brush. Midday on our first day there, three parrot-size birds perched on the backyard bird bath — green parakeets, all green. Twice the size of the caged budgies sold as parakeets, the birds have a longer, pointed tail and a more slender profile than the red-crowns. Like parrots, they are commonly heard before being seen, with an equally raucous call that is distinctly different from the parrot's. (Visit www.worldbirdingcenter.org/bird_info to listen to both vocalizations.) Green parakeets prefer the same palm roosts and food favored by red-crowns. Their numbers started increasing about 20 years ago, although they weren't observed breeding in Brownsville's palms until 1995. Their established Mexican range is about 150 miles south of the Valley.

Parakeets stay in small groups of about five to 15 that are active during the day, eating anacua berries, hackberries, acorns and young flower buds. Marian Turk's McAllen neighborhood was an orange grove 35 years ago.

"We never saw parakeets then, but for the last 15 years, when they are not in my yard, they are only six or seven blocks away," she says. Now Marian sees 150 to 200 parakeets at a time in her neighborhood around North Tenth Street, but she has counted up to 300. She's observed them mating on power lines and knows they stay out of sight when a strong north wind blows.

Across town at Quinta Mazatlan, a city park and World Birding Center satellite, three pairs of parakeets nested in palm cavities with a pair of red-crowned in a nearby cavity,

possibly nesting. No one has reported seeing the species interacting.

In Weslaco, Martin Hagne at Valley Nature Center tries to stay on top of the shifting populations so he can send visitors to the right viewing spots. "Two or three years ago, we could set our clocks on the parrots coming in at 4:30. That's changed," he says. "Once they leave the roost to go feed in huisache or hackberries, it's hard to spot them." But the flocks of parakeets are getting larger.

During Brownsville's Latin Jazz Festival, I stepped outside the Jacob Brown Auditorium about 30 minutes before sunset and heard the unmistakable screeches of green parakeets. Coming to roost in a batch of short palm trees, the birds landed on the outer curve of the palm fronds, which bent under their weight as they squeezed together. I counted 38 parakeets landing in one tree, just like clowns piling into a tiny car. An occasional bird hung upside down. The traffic was similar at nearby trees. I saw the silhouettes of individual parakeets walking, with that distinctive side-to-side gait, down a frond to the palm's trunk. The nearest trees got quiet at twilight when the parking lot lights came on, while an occasional parakeet flew out and back from the palms not shaded by a building.

Brush organized the region's first official parakeet roost count in November 2006. Observers tallied 380 green parakeets in McAllen, 33 in San Benito, 13 in Weslaco, 140 in Brownsville and 16 in Laredo. "I don't think we found all the birds, but I am happy with the number we got and what we learned," Brush said. He and Brad McKinney expect the numbers to rise during the winter as cold fronts bring dispersed flocks together for warmth and safety. McKinney counted 140 parakeets in the old Fort Brown area.

Yellow-crowned parrots, that red-lored parrot in Harlingen and lilac-crowned parrots are considered escaped birds that mingle with the red-crowned flocks. Wade estimated the continental population of red-crowned parrots at only 5,000. For more information on spotting the rare and wonderful red-crowned parrots and green parakeets stop by area visitors centers, or visit worldbirdingcenter.org or texbirds.org for updated reports. ★

A Desert Love Story

Affection for the land — and each other — led Julius and Marilynne Dieckert to give their special place to all Texans

By E. Dan Klepper

It isn't often that Texans are lucky enough to secure a place where nature's temperament faithfully reflects the mind in repose. Such a place, auspicious when discovered but often difficult to reach, must fit a rarefied set of criteria. First, it should inspire an immediate silencing of the mind's voices upon arrival. It must provide the body with a stark but simple contrast to soft comforts by sacrificing ease for character. It should offer only the rawest of life; what can be cobbled from the fortitude acquired in crossing serrated, shank-filled terra and the sparse sort of grace encountered while resting on the smooth, warm flat of firma. Next, it should fill the lungs with a rhythmic sedation of clear air. Finally, it must allow the eyes to rest firmly upon a minimalist's landscape and then draw — both sight and the mind's eye — toward a free and unfettered vision of the earth's breathtaking horizon.

The Masada Ridge Wilderness Unit of Big Bend Ranch State Park is just such a place. The unit, a gift to the people of Texas from fellow Texans Julius and Marilyne Dieckert, typifies the wild landscape spilling out of the Solitario caldera, Big Bend's famous volcanic remnant, and tumbling south across an ancient seabed towards the Rio Grande. The 4,480-acre rise of recovering desert grassland lies above the dry rifts and ravines of the Chihuahuan scabble like the prow of a desert brig. The up-thrusting sailfins of the Solitario walls tower behind the Masada to the north, making the ridge a geographic forecastle deck, or balcony, to the caldera's grand brigantine. It is an apt analogy, as the Masada provides all of the best that a balcony offers — seclusion above the fray and an ideal vantage point for a stunning, world-class view.

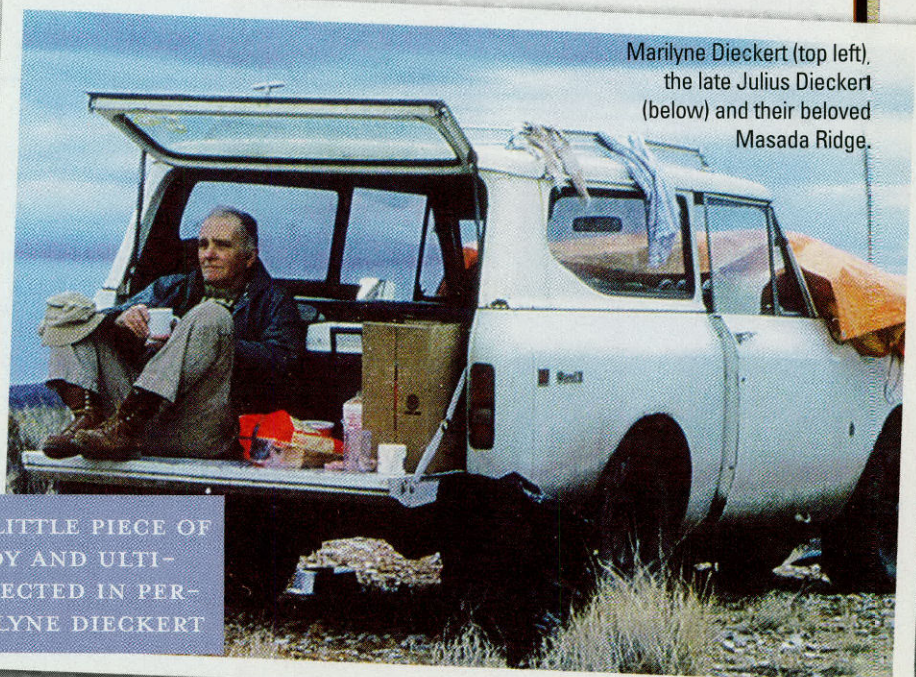
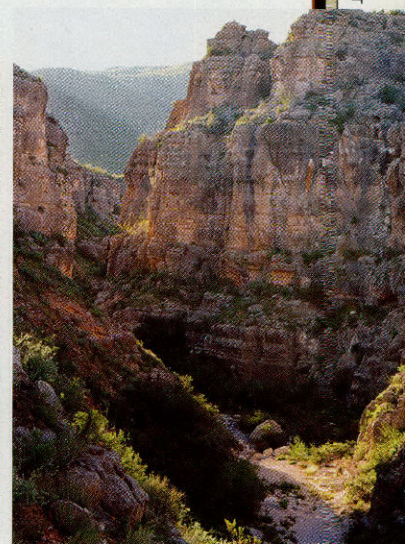
Mule deer often trail the Masada rimrock in the afternoon light and catch a whiff of some far-blown scent carried across eroded canyons. In the distance, Mexico's Sierra Rica range shadows against the onset of short winter days while the Chisos, to the southeast, brighten in their profile, blue and orange and exposed in their entirety. Humbler mountains and canyons stump the surrounding ground below — Bee, Clay, Amarilla, Contrabando, Tres Cuevas, Leon, Wildhorse, Willow, Indian Head, Cigar, Hen Egg, Maverick, Dark Canyon, Saltgrass Draw, the Blue Range, Pinks Peak and Black Mesa — along with a cast of no-name humps, lumps, drains, creeks and arroyos that scatter across a 360-degree arc of the Chihuahuan empire.

The Masada offers an astounding vision but yields little else above this hard country, an elevated plateau of rugged isolation where pioneers scoured out a history of overgrazing and prospect mining, scraping away the meager resources that an arid desert wilderness might harbor. What remains of human use and abuse lies scattered in wind-blown remnants across the Masada landscape, no more revealing than the hand-hewn chert fragments and shelter scrawls left by ancient men. At night, their campfires spit sparks out against their hopes and the wind drug the firebrands across the fuel-less plain until they were snuffed out.

“WE BEGAN WISHING FOR OUR OWN LITTLE PIECE OF WILDERNESS, WHICH WE COULD ENJOY AND ULTIMATELY LEAVE AS A GIFT TO BE PROTECTED IN PERPETUITY AFTER OUR DEMISE.” —MARILYNE DIECKERT

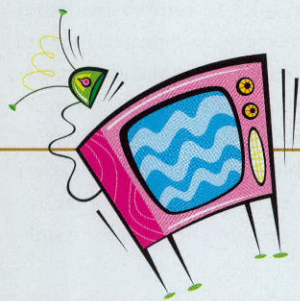
Firelight against the Masada's black plateau is just as bright and revealing today as in the past. On a recent night along the ridge, the light of a campfire drew down a migrating sandhill crane, lost and forlorn, that cried out for a familiar voice to campers gathered around the firelight. Hearing none, the crane disappeared into the void. The moment seemed to define the soul of the Masada — beautiful but alone, closer to heaven but not quite paradise itself, exquisite in its rendering of all the natural world offers yet subject to nature's capricious tides. It is remarkable then that the preservation of such a place, where humans must bend no less than any other living thing to the will of the wilderness, grew out of the most fragile emotion of human design — love.

Julius and Marilyne Dieckert first came face to face, quite literally, on the peak of Enchanted Rock. At the time, Julius (known as “Dieck”) was a graduate student in biochemistry at Texas A&M University. He had accepted a job in the summer of 1949 as an instructor for an Audubon Camp held on the campus of the Schreiner Institute in Kerrville. Marilyne, a sophomore at Texas Christian University on a music scholarship, had been offered a chance to attend a summer session of the (continued on page 63)



Marilyne Dieckert (top left), the late Julius Dieckert (below) and their beloved Masada Ridge.

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS



THE FRONT LINE OF NEWS AND VIEWS



T E L E V I S I O N

LOOK FOR THESE STORIES IN THE COMING WEEKS:

April 1 - 8:

El Paso history at Magoffin Home; importance of state park volunteers; sunset at Pedernales Falls; the science of animals; re-spooling reels.

April 8 - 15:

Saving the Guadalupe bass; living with deer; building the Barton Warnock Center; Alabama Creek WMA; fall camping at Daingerfield State Park.

April 15 - 22:

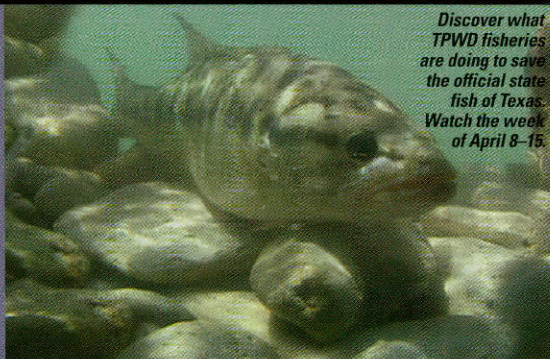
Texas game wardens hurricane help; Panhandle windstorm; Franklin Mountains State Park; using conservation tools on the Edwards Plateau; economic impact of state parks.

April 22 - 29:

Stewards of the grassland; student studies in state parks; creating an island with recycled materials; Panhandle windstorm; Inks Lake State Park.

April 29 - May 6:

150 years of history at the Starr Family Home; preserving land near San Antonio; Ft. Hood's Bear Spring; fishing hall of famer; reclaiming and restoring a coastal family ranch.



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LUBBOCK: KTXT, Ch. 5 / Sat. 10 a.m.

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PECOS: KIUN-AM 1400 / 10:30 a.m.

PLAINVIEW: KVOP-AM 1090 / 9:50 a.m.

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Lake Arrowhead State Park

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But, consider a pop-up of a different kind: stepping out of your tent at Lake Arrowhead State park to get the morning coffee going, you stretch to unkink muscles that are still familiarizing themselves with an air mattress and sleeping bag ... and suddenly, there's the black-tailed prairie dog pop-up. Your furry neighbors with the inquisitive eyes inhabit an underground world of tunnels and chambers, popping up to survey their surroundings and forage for food, keeping one eye out for predators. Spend the morning watching their antics at the park's Prairie Dog Town before heading to the eight-lane boat ramp to launch and enjoy water skiing or personal watercraft on 16,000-acre Lake Arrowhead.

Located just southeast of Wichita Falls, the 524-acre Lake Arrowhead State Park is a favorite for anglers in the North Central Plains area. The park is popular with many locals who fish for crappie, bass, perch and catfish on a daily basis, either from the pier, or on the lake near the oil well derricks that offer an environment that is friendly to fish. Many Wichita Falls residents purchase the State Parks Pass, allowing them entry into the park every day. That, and bait, are their only expenses; there's no license required when fishing from the shore in a state park. A convenient fish cleaning station is near the lighted fishing pier; a beginner can even borrow tackle from the park headquarters.

Lake Arrowhead is a popular spot for equestrian outings also. The equestrian area at the park offers four campsites with 50 amp service, water, restrooms and a group pavilion along with four covered stalls, a fire ring, picnic table, tie rail and corral. (You have to supply the horse.) The day-use horseback riding area encompasses 300 acres and is rider-

friendly with restrooms and potable water. The park also welcomes disk-golfers with an 18-hole course and an additional five miles of trails for casual hiking.

Whether on horseback, bicycle or foot, an excursion through the rolling prairie and mesquite trees, hackberries and cottonwoods is an opportunity to spot eagles, herons, egrets, white-tailed deer and wild turkeys. The park is also along the monarch butterfly fly-way. Bobcats and the occasional mountain lion have been spotted by park staff, and coyotes keep the prairie dog population under control. Cool off with a swim in the lake on the unsupervised beach or enjoy a shady picnic.

Lake Arrowhead State Park hosts riders overnight as they stop along the route of the Hotter N' Hell One Hundred bicycle ride in August. In the fall, the staff welcomes day-hunters who camp here while they pursue dove and quail in the area. No hunting is allowed in the park.

Enjoy your neighborhood pop-ups when you camp at Lake Arrowhead. Where else can you enjoy drinking your morning coffee with prairie dogs? ★

— Marian Edwards

Fort Richardson State Park

Special celebration scheduled for fort's 140th anniversary.

WHEN THE MORNING MISTS HANG CLOSE TO THE PARADE GROUND

at Fort Richardson State Park and Historic Site, visitors need only close their eyes and imagine the sounds of creaking leather and the restless, muffled stamp of a hundred hooves waiting in cavalry formation. Perhaps the imagination can conjure up the smell of the stables mingled with the aroma of the bakery. As the sun burns through the mist, it reveals a vast green parade ground, surrounded with historic buildings, but alas, no soldiers or mounts. Still, a stroll across the level and well manicured parade ground is a great walk at any time of day; pick up the interpretive guide and walking tour brochures at the park headquarters; they bring the old fort to life.

Established in the fall of 1867 near Jacksboro, Fort Richardson was at the north end of a long line of forts that ran from the Rio Grande River to the Red River. Established to subdue the native Comanche, Kiowa, Kickapoo, Tonkawa and Apache Indians along the frontier, the soldiers of Fort Richardson guarded the area and patrolled for Indian raiding parties. A glimpse into their lives on the wild Texas frontier of the 1870s is available for modern-day visitors when visiting the seven original historic buildings and the two replica fort buildings on the grounds. Guided tours are available and the park offers living history presentations and military re-enactments throughout the year.

Fort Richardson will celebrate its 140th anniversary this month. Activities include cavalry, artillery and infantry drills, soap-making, bread-baking, 1860s baseball, a frontier classroom, laundress presenta-



tion, chuck wagon cooking and children's games of the period.

Hikers will make good use of the adjoining Lost Creek Reservoir State Trailway, a 10-foot wide multi-use trail with loops that vary in length from one mile to an 18-mile round trip and can be enjoyed on horseback, bicycle or on foot. The trail meanders from Fort Richardson around the Lost Creek Reservoir (home to crappie, bass and catfish, for you anglers) and back. Plenty of pecan and oak trees offer shade along the trail, but pack in your water bottle; there is no potable water along the trailway. You can refill your bottle at the trailhead, where you will also find restrooms, picnic facilities and a fishing pier. The trailway is popular with equestrian groups, who enjoy the convenience of parking their horse trailers in a field close to the trailhead.

Visitors can choose tent or RV camping. The campsites are spacious with lots of buffers and wide open spaces, providing more seclusion when camping. The Quarry Lake near the entrance to the park provides bank fishing and is stocked periodically throughout the year with catfish, bass and trout. The park is popular for day use activities such as picnicking and has a volleyball court, horseshoe pits and a lighted group picnic pavilion. When a hot afternoon calls for some cooling splash-time, drive or walk to the swimming beach on nearby Lost Creek Reservoir, but keep in mind there is no lifeguard on duty.

Exploring historic Fort Richardson is a great way to absorb the history of the Western frontier. The hardships and dangers that challenged the soldiers and their families are keenly imagined when you walk where they once lived and worked, protecting settlers and townsfolk. ★

—Marian Edwards

Washington-on-the-Brazos

Go back to where Texas began.

IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE EVENTS THAT TOOK PLACE IN WASHINGTON, Texas in 1836, you might be writing "Mexico" on your return address labels. It was here — 18 miles east of what we now know as Brenham — on a cold March day that delegates signed the Constitution for the Republic of Texas and organized a government. And while the republic only lasted 10 years, our state's colorful past lives on.

But if your seventh-grade Texas history knowledge is getting a little stale, a visit to Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site will certainly revive it. What makes this place so unique (besides being "the birthplace of Texas") is that it features both a living history exhibit and a museum.

For the living history portion, you can visit Barrington Farm, a replica

of the one belonging to Anson Jones (the last president of the Republic of Texas), featuring some of the relocated original farm buildings. It provides a real window into what life was like for Texans 160 years ago. You can take a self-guided tour and check out the original main house (which was pretty posh by mid-19th-century standards), the barn, the fields and the slave quarters.

But if your imagination isn't your strong suit, the site actually has costumed staff members available to help bring history to life. Thanks to Jones' diary entries, the interpreters have a strong understanding of what went on at Barrington Farm. While they're not always "in character," the staff works hard to give visitors vivid demonstrations of farm labor by actually doing the work. You'll see them plowing the fields with oxen and cooking in the outdoor kitchen. And if you ask nicely, they may even let you join in: visitors sometimes help plant crops, make soap or if they're really lucky, drive the oxen.

After you've seen how the Jones family lived, you can head over to the Star of the Republic Museum which showcases memorabilia from the Texas Republic period (1836-1846). The first floor gives visitors a chronology of the lives of some of the first Texans plus insight into its military and political history. A must-see? The painting of all the delegates signing the Constitution.

Upstairs you'll get a glimpse into the social and cultural history of



Texas. The museum has set up three houses — each to reflect the major cultural influences in the Texas Republic (Hispanic, African-American and Anglo).

No need to worry about the kids dragging behind; just pick up an activity sheet at the front and have them answer the questions along the way. Museum staffers say it works like a charm. Another kid-friendly outlet is the Discovery Room. Here kids can play with the same types of toys used by the children of the Republic era, dress up in period clothes or even make a log cabin.

Walk down the path to Independence Hall, the historical focal point of the park. Daily guided interpretive tours and unique living history programs are available.

It's impossible to leave Washington-on-the-Brazos without gaining more knowledge about our state's past and a newfound respect for those first Texans who experienced it. Plus, where else can you learn about Texas history and how to plow fields with oxen? For more information, call (936) 878-2214 or visit <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/washingtononthebrazos>.★

—Elsa K. Simcik

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

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Audubon Camp. She had always enjoyed the outdoors and was “delighted with this chance to again study ‘things biological.’”

“I was a student in Dieck’s classes,” Marilyne recalls. “But we were each on a solo hike away from the other members of the field trip group when we actually became acquainted, meeting face to face when we each came around the opposite side of one of the huge room-sized boulders which sit on top of Enchanted Rock. We connected right away, and I postponed my return trip home because of our sudden discovery of each other. Our courtship and our marriage consisted of one long glorious experience of birding, hiking and backpacking in the wilderness.”

It was an experience that would, in fact, last for a total of 58 years. Over time the Dieckerts married, raised a family of five and pursued careers, Dieck as a professor and biochemical researcher for Texas A&M and Marilyne as his research associate. They also became regular visitors to the Big Bend area, spending family vacations backpacking across the national park. The Dieckerts’ love of the region ultimately evolved into a desire to preserve it.

“We began wishing for our own little

piece of wilderness,” Marilyne explains, “which we could enjoy and ultimately leave as a gift to be protected in perpetuity after our demise.”

Beginning in the late 1980s, the Dieckerts began to acquire land that was contiguous to Big Bend Ranch State Park. They purchased what would become the Masada Ridge Wilderness in sections, eventually accumulating a total of seven square-mile sections of Chihuahuan Desert. “The acquisition of this land was not easy for us on a professor’s salary. The project took over a decade of scrimping, saving, selling other properties, cashing in insurance policies and obtaining bank loans in order to accomplish our goal.”

Once the Dieckerts retired in 1993, they began to spend each December and May camping and hiking the ridge, named “Masada” by the Dieckerts for its similarities to Israel’s Masada in geography and the metaphor in its sanctuary. “Fortress of old, by the Dead Sea: The Masada,” Marilyne wrote in her poem about the Dieckerts’ wilderness dream. “Invincible outpost held for most of a century by Jewish zealots, after all others had succumbed to Roman conquerors. Thus, we christen our private,

wild fortress Masada — and we pledge to preserve this wondrous land as a refuge for all wildlife — plant and animal.”

The name imparts a certain pride and perseverance to the ridge’s identity, but underlying Marilyne’s dedication is also a much greater distinction of place — one born from intimacy. The Dieckerts truly loved the desert in a way that only those who sacrifice comfort and security to dwell within it come to understand. The Dieckerts spent months at a time living on the ridge with an ascetic’s discipline — conserving water, sleeping unsheltered, grappling with the elements day and night. It is an existence that strips the superfluous from the living and magnifies what remains — sustenance and warmth, in all their physical, emotional and spiritual manifestations. To dwell in the experience alone builds character. But to share a lifetime of experiences creates a bond that neither time nor mortality can break.

The Dieckerts’ desert sojourns ended with Dieck’s passing in June of 2006. But their legacy lives on atop the Masada Ridge, where an unflinching tenacity and a remarkable generosity preserved this ancient desert wildscape for all Texans. ★

(continued from page 21)

Antonio-El Paso road, was a thriving shipping stop for wagon trains traveling to Mexico. John Vance operated a general store along the road on the banks of the Medina River. “He learned that by the time people reached here, they were exhausted,” says Ken Conway, superintendent of the Landmark Inn State Historic Site. “He added a second floor in the 1870s. It has been an accommodation ever since.”

Even if you’re not staying at the inn, you can visit the gift shop and walk around the grounds. We strolled down to the Medina River to see the gristmill with its huge, rough rounded stones designed to grind corn. Before the gristmill was built in 1854, farmers didn’t grow much on their farm plots outside of town because grinding the corn required a three-day round-trip journey to San Antonio. After it was built, though, many farmers grew surplus corn and sold it to forts and for stock feed. The gristmill bolstered the local economy in other ways: It harnessed water to provide power for a sawmill and a cotton gin.

The next day we headed to Hill Country State Natural Area in Bandera. This huge,

5,370-acre swath of rough and rugged ranchland gives the public access to wide-open spaces just 45 miles northwest of San Antonio. Several dude ranches near the site cater to riders from beginners to experts. You can saddle up your horse and ride for miles across the rocky canyons, sweeping grasslands and broad, dry creek beds. These folks thoughtfully provide drinking water for horses, but people are on their own. “If you need it, you better bring it,” says lead ranger Randy Evans. “We don’t have anything but nature.”

For our last stop, we head down the road to Bear Springs Blossom Nature Preserve to see what Hill Country ranchland looks like in its restored state. The 125-acre preserve is one of the stops on the Bandera Loop of the Heart of Texas Wildlife Trail. Nature preserve caretakers Peter and Marianne Bonenberger, an energetic couple from Germany, offer guided walks around their property. This parcel of overgrazed ranchland was abandoned in the 1940s. When they arrived in the 1990s, wide swaths of the hillside had eroded. They cleared out the thick scrub of young juniper by hand

and made cedar mulch to spread on the bare patches of land. Over time, soil formed and grasses began to grow. “In the beginning, we had three grasses,” says Peter. “Now we have 31.”

Butterflies and birds now are attracted to the wildflowers, oaks and cherries, and the golden-cheeked warbler uses mature juniper bark for its nest. We left inspired by how two people, through the labor of their hands, could make such a big difference in just a few years. Like the Alsatians who created Castroville, they started with almost nothing, and transformed their little piece of Texas into something beautiful and timeless. ★

Details

Castroville Area Chamber of Commerce, 802 London St, 800-778-6775.

Landmark Inn State Historic Site, 830-931-2133, <www.landmarkinn.tpwd.state.tx.us>.

La Normandie, 1302 Fiorella, 800-261-1731

Homes tours: Castro Garden Club, 830-931-2298.

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

Bear Springs Blossom Nature Preserve, <www.keepbanderabeautiful.org/bearspringsblossom>.

PARTINGSHOT

It's not easy to get a good shot of a wriggling, hard-fighting largemouth bass as it leaps out of the water, but for photographer David J. Sams, it's all in a day's work.

IMAGE SPECS:
Nikon D2HS (digital) with
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