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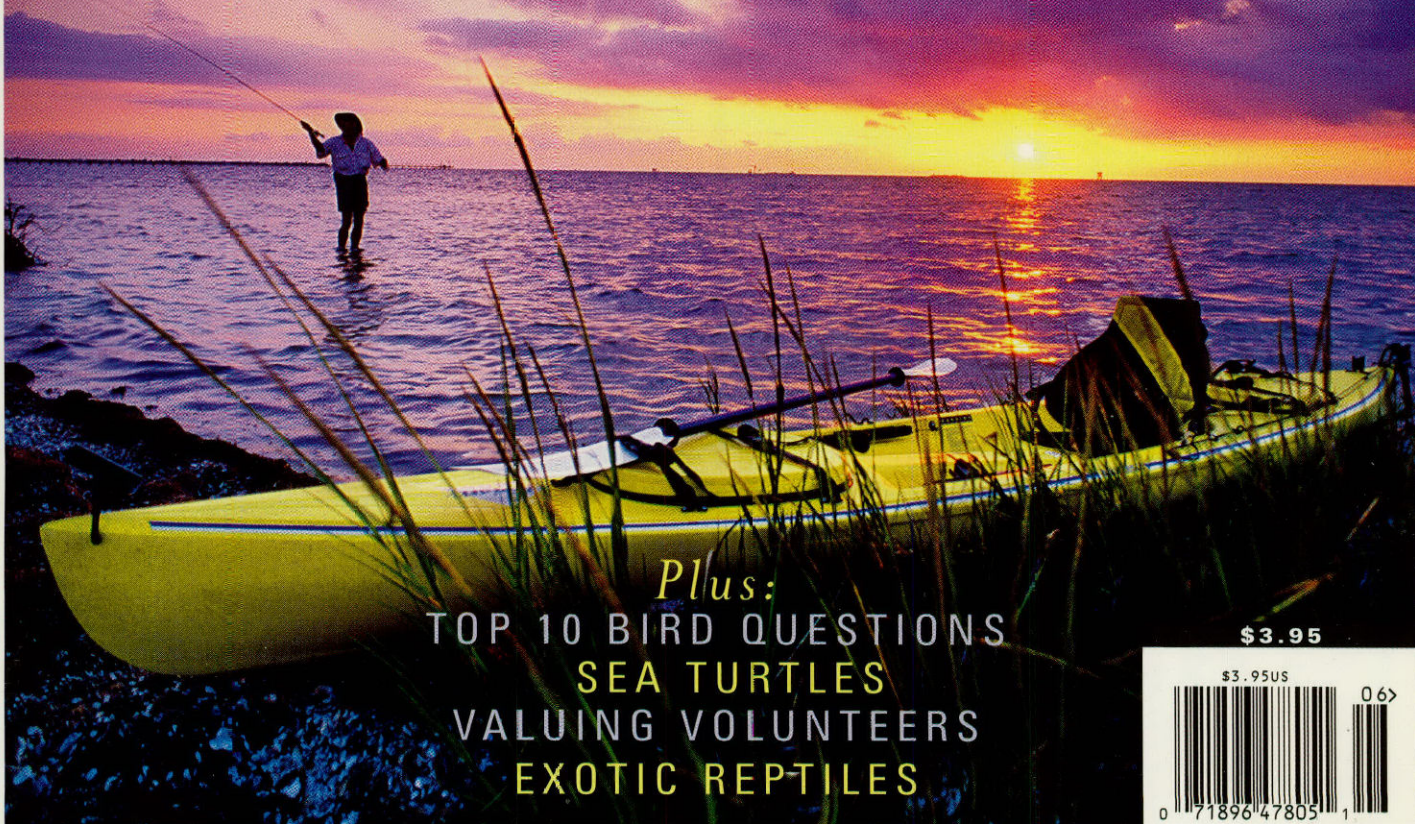
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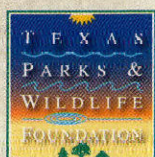
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Features

30 Natural Partners

By Carol Flake Chapman

Hats off to the volunteers who work to preserve the great outdoors in Texas.

33 Rivers of Bliss

By Larry D. Hodge

Whether we realize it or not, we all need a piece of river to call our own.

38 A Turtle's Progress

By Tom Harvey

Bi-national cooperation fuels a Kemp's ridley revival, but the work is far from over.

44 Cold-Blooded Killers

By Arturo Longoria

From the diseases they bring to the ticks that hitch a ride on them, non-native reptiles and amphibians can wreak havoc on an ecosystem.

48 Top 10 Bird Questions

By Bernadette Noll

Answers to the most frequent avian inquiries.

22

COVER STORY

Stealth Fishing

By Larry Bozka

Saltwater kayaks lend a whole new meaning to "getting on top of the fish."

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CONTENTS

J U N E 2 0 0 7



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Departments

6 At Issue *By Robert L. Cook*

8 Mail Call

Our readers share their ideas.

10 Scout

The latest conservation news and events.

10 SHARP AS AN ARROW *By Steve Hall*

Besides being a lot of fun, the TPWD archery program also improves students' attitudes toward school.

12 WINNING THE SHELL GAME *By Larry Bozka*

Recycled shells serve as the breeding ground for future generations of oysters.

14 63 YEARS AGO IN TEXAS GAME AND FISH

By Jon Lucksinger

How wartime technology altered the future of fishing.

16 SKILL BUILDER *By Gibbs Milliken*

Keep a cool cooler: How to protect the number one summer essential — the cold beverage.

18 FIELD TEST *By Gibbs Milliken*

Ice chests and electric coolers: New designs offer greater durability and more convenience — some don't even need ice.

20 Three Days in the Field

By Teresa S. Newton

While Wills Point may be the bluebird capital of Texas, finding the little beauties requires patience and persistence.

52 Legend, Lore & Legacy

By Evelyn L. Metz

The Levi Jordan Plantation represents a period of transition after the Civil War that is largely absent from history books.

56 Sights & Sounds

Check out Texas Parks and Wildlife's television and radio schedule.

58 Park Picks

Recommended stops along the road less traveled.

64 Parting Shot *By Erich Schlegel*

Covers

FRONT: Kayaks offers silent access to coastal wonders.
Photo © Jim Olive

BACK: Fly fishing for smallmouth bass on Devils River.
Photo © Russell Graves

PREVIOUS SPREAD: The Brazos River, a few miles south of Benjamin, Texas. Photo © Wyman Meinzer.

THIS PAGE: Llano River Falls. Photo © Wyman Meinzer.

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THE OUTDOOR MAGAZINE OF TEXAS

JUNE 2007, VOL. 65, NO. 6

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In the Field

BERNADETTE NOLL is a freelance writer who lives in South Austin with her bird-obsessed husband and four children (who only randomly watch birds but absorb the knowledge whether they like it or not). Each year they welcome many migrants through their urban backyard, including 26 different



warbler species, which seem especially fond of the budding pecans. After many years of watching, they finally began chronicling the information in an attempt to make some sense of all of the seemingly crazy springtime bird behavior. Each year, some questions get answered, and each year, more arise. And each year, too, the stack of field guides in their house grows.

TERESA NEWTON'S fascination with birds began when she and her sister held funerals for fallen, departed fledglings in their big yard in Wills Point. The youngsters dug up the birds three days later to see if they had been resurrected, and thanks to the girls' father, they had. After several personal losses this year, Teresa wanted to reconnect with her hometown, the state's bluebird capital. The seventh-generation Texan started writing at age 10 and has written for several daily newspapers and regional magazines. She divides her time between Arlington and Fayetteville, Arkansas, where she lives with her husband, O.C.



EVELYN MERZ lives in Houston and has been active in local conservation and environmental groups for over 20 years. She is currently group chair of the Houston Region Sierra Club and serves on the executive committee of its state Lone Star Chapter. She has also been personally active on water, flood control and park issues. Because of her work with local and state parks, she discovered the Levi Jordan Plantation State Historic Site,



an unknown gem situated in the Columbia bottomlands that had never opened its gates. After several visits to the site, she wanted to share her knowledge of the dual potential the site holds as a magnet for both African-American history and nature tourism. Evelyn hopes that more people will be inspired to support Texas' state parks after reading the article.

AT ISSUE

FROM THE PEN OF ROBERT L. COOK

Justin Hurst, Texas game warden, beloved husband and son, and loving father, became the 16th Texas game warden to lose his life in the line of duty when he was shot and killed on March 17, 2007, while helping other law enforcement officers subdue and capture a person suspected of illegal road hunting. It was his 34th birthday. The shooting occurred following an hour-long high-speed chase in Wharton County. Game Warden Hurst personified what the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department represents. He was passionate about wildlife and natural resource conservation. He was a pillar of his community, he cared deeply for his family, and he was a faithful public servant. His death is a great loss to the people of Texas.

After graduating from Texas A&M University, Justin began his career with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in August 1995 as a waterfowl biologist on the mid-coast of Texas. During his six-year tenure at TPWD's Peach Point Wildlife Management Area, Hurst's passion for waterfowl and the marsh habitat was evident in everything he did, whether it was banding mottled ducks or working up alligators. He had a great reputation for his can-do work ethic and extensive knowledge about waterfowl, developed during his teenage years as a goose guide on the coastal prairies.

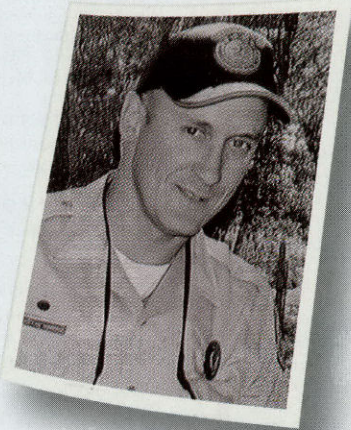
It came as a surprise to everyone who knew him when Justin announced his desire to become a Texas game warden. Hurst saw an opportunity to make a difference in another aspect of wildlife resource conservation and was selected as a cadet in the 48th Texas Game Warden Academy. While at the academy, Hurst not only worked extremely hard to be the best at everything, but he also shared his knowledge about waterfowl and habitat management with fellow cadets and actually taught duck identification techniques. His classmates referred to Hurst as "Super Cadet" because of his diligence and drive. His immediate supervisor referred to Justin as one of the best of the young Texas game wardens, dubbing them "The Whiz Kids."

After graduating from the academy in August of 2002, he was stationed in Brazos County for about a year, and when a game warden slot came open in Wharton County, Hurst's expertise in waterfowl made him an ideal candidate. With his transfer to El Campo, Hurst was able to return to the landscape he cherished and quickly developed relationships with area landowners, hunters and the community. He was as dedicated as he was passionate about his job.

Justin Hurst is survived by his wife, Amanda, and son, Kyle Hunter, age 4 months, his parents, Allen and Pat Hurst of Bryan, a brother, Greg Hurst of Denver, and his in-laws, Larry and Jeanie Wilcox of Denton.

Those who knew Justin Hurst are deeply saddened by the tragic loss of this fine young man. Yet, because we knew him and knew his commitment to the conservation of our state's natural resources and to the people of Texas, and because of what he so willingly gave to all of us, we must re-dedicate ourselves to be better stewards of the world that we live in and to the conservation of our wonderful fish and wildlife resources.

As you enjoy the great outdoors of Texas, remember that every day and every night of every year there are those dedicated individuals out there managing, conserving and protecting our incredible natural resources — individuals who commit their careers and their lives to the fish, wildlife and natural habitats of the great state of Texas. I encourage you to join them, help them in every action you take, whether it is simply by doing a better job of water conservation in your home; or by supporting your local park, wildlife area, natural area or backyard wildlife habitat; or by dedicating your knowledge, hard work and resources to fish and wildlife conservation. Be part of the solution. Get outdoors.




EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Editor's note: Memorial fund donations may be made to Operation Game Thief, c/o Justin Hurst Memorial Fund, 4200 Smith School Road, Austin, TX, 78744. The 100 Club is also accepting donations for the family at 100 Club Survivor's Fund, 1233 West Loop South, Suite 1250, Houston, TX 77027-9107.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department mission statement:

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

A person in a dark wetsuit is shown from the back, pulling a large fishing net full of fish out of the water. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, suggesting sunrise or sunset. The water is choppy with small waves. The net is held high, and the fish are visible inside it.

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MAIL CALL

PICKS, PANS AND PROBES FROM OUR READERS

FOREWORD

One line in Larry Bozka's article on saltwater kayaking ("Stealth Fishing," page 22) really struck a chord with me. He writes: "I was flat-out amazed at how much water we covered in so little time." On calm water, it seems almost magical how far you can go with a modest amount of effort in a kayak.

On a glorious early-spring day, I met up with a group of friends for a kayaking excursion on Lake Buchanan. We launched from Canyon of the Eagles Nature Park, which I dubbed Canyon of the Seagulls because that was about the only bird I saw that day. Despite the lack of eagles, it was one of those stress-free sunny days I replay in my head when I need a momentary escape from the daily grind. We paddled for miles, and though I could definitely feel it in my shoulders, as we glided along atop the water, it seemed strangely effortless.

Maybe kayaking seems effortless just because I'm so easily distracted. Kayaks can take you places where there's always plenty of eye candy. While paddling across a shallow lagoon in Port Aransas, I was endlessly entertained by dozens of tailing redfish, pelicans flying low over the water, and other creatures haplessly splashing near the boat.

On Austin's Town Lake, I have certain spots where I simply have to stop to do a "turtle check." Maybe I'm weird, but I never get tired of watching turtle stacks and listening to the plopping sounds that occur when a turtle stack disassembles itself in a hurry. The bird-watching is always great too. If you paddle slowly and quietly and peer beneath overhanging limbs near the shore, sometimes a stick reveals itself to be a great blue heron or other spindly-legged bird. And the people watching is usually amusing also. There's a guy who frequents Town Lake who propels his kayak with two umbrellas mounted on the front to catch the wind. It really works — I've seen him cruising along at a pretty good clip. Of course, the Mary Poppins approach to locomotion won't give you much of a workout.

Whether you're looking for a workout or just a change of scenery, you should give kayaking a try. As the weather heats up, this is the perfect time to take the plunge because you *will* get wet. Every part of you will get wet. Everything you're carrying will get wet unless it's in a high-quality dry bag. It's good exercise (but not terribly difficult), it's clean (look, no engines!), you don't need a license of any kind, you can sneak up on birds (also turtles and fish), and you get to see the world from a whole new perspective.

See you out on the water. I'll be the one gazing absentmindedly at a pile of turtles.

Robert Macias

ROBERT MACIAS
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

LETTERS

BIT OF HEAVEN ON EARTH

My deepest thanks for the outstanding article ("A Desert Love Story") about the Dieckert Masada Ridge Wilderness Unit of Big Bend Ranch State Park published in your

April issue of *Texas Parks & Wildlife* magazine.

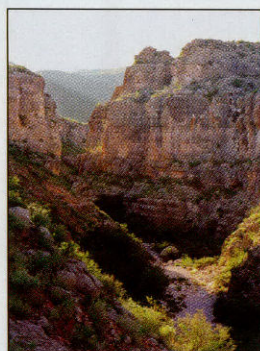
The writer, E. Dan Klepper, captured the true essence of the Masada Ridge Wilderness with his craftsmanlike, artistic choice of words, conveying the wild beauty and majesty of the area. He is a brilliant, talented young man and gifted writer, whose articles are looked forward to in your magazine. Hopefully, you will include his writings in all future issues.

My only difference with Dan's viewpoint is that he views the Masada Ridge Wilderness as such

a harsh, unforgiving environment. I am sure that if he would spend more time there, he would come to view it as Dieck and I always did — as a piece of paradise, our heaven on this earth.

Each time I go to our beloved Masada Ridge, I feel a deep peace, like I am truly "home." Each time I return to the Masada Ridge, I feel as if I had never left it. And, after staying there for many weeks, when it is time to go, I always feel as though I had just arrived, and I am saddened to leave it. Such is the mystical, haunting beauty of the Masada.

MARILYNE CRILL DIECKERT
Alpine



E. Dan Klepper captured the true essence of the Masada Ridge Wilderness with his craftsmanlike, artistic choice of words, conveying the wild beauty and majesty of the area.

*Marilyne Crill Dieckert
Alpine*

MAIL CALL

GREAT VIEW, DIFFERENT CANYON

I don't usually send in items that I find small discrepancies on, but the article on "Top of Texas" (April 2007), Guadalupe Peak is one that I can't "overlook." Wendee Holtcamp comments very well on the trail, surrounding views, fauna and wildlife, with the exhilarating feeling that this enchanting place gives visitors. But the Guadalupe Peak trail does not overlook McKittrick Canyon — McKittrick Canyon is in another part of the park several miles away and can not be seen from the Guadalupe Peak trail. The canyon that she is referring to is most likely Pine Spring Canyon.

Ms. Holtcamp, if you thought that portion of the park was exhilarating, try sitting on the north rim of South McKittrick Canyon by McKittrick Ridge campsite — what a view, what a hike!

JAMES BARNETT
Sugar Land

CASTROVILLE REVISITED

I enjoyed the pleasant article by Elaine Robbins covering the charm of Castroville appearing in your April issue ("The French/ German Connection"). However, it might have borne more historical facts to educate the public as to the origins of Castroville, why it is where it is and how it got there.

Henry Castro was a Jewish Alsat-

ian. It might be remembered that Alsace-Lorraine was a piece of land lying between Germany and France, which intermittently changed its affiliation due to wars and other factors. Castro wanted to lead and plant a colony in the New World. Pursuing this plan, he obtained a commission from the King of France to lead a colony and to colonize an area in what was then developing as Texas and the United States.

I'm not certain that anyone knows why Castro chose the location of Castroville, except that in ways it reminded him and his group of their home country, and was fed by an attractive river and contained fertile lands. Castro was the original grantee of large pieces of land in Frio County. This occurred when a settler could patent state land and receive title.

JESSE H. OPPENHEIMER
San Antonio

GAME WARDEN MOURNED

Texas lost one of its brave game wardens in Wharton County. What a wonderful person he was. Most people think a game warden's job is just to look for poachers or illegal fishing, Justin was so much more than just that. He was a game warden who loved nature, people and his job. His death is a great loss for Wharton and Matagorda counties.

SHEILA HERRINGTON
El Campo

EDITOR'S NOTE: See Bob Cook's tribute to Justin Hurst on page 6 of this issue.

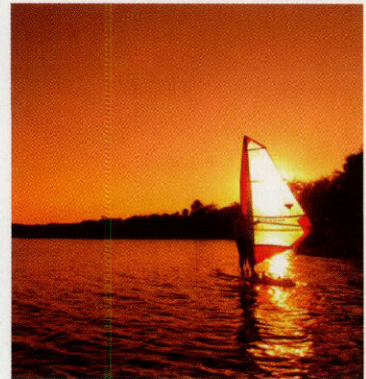
FLACO AND THE WINDMILLS

I just wanted to thank you for your eloquent and touching editorial about Flaco and the big windmills ("At Issue," April 2007). If it didn't happen, it should have. I'm sure it takes a certain amount of courage for a public figure to address the problem of visual pollution the windfarms already cause, and I appreciate your doing so.

RICHARD OGDEN
Flatonja

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SCOUT

NEWS AND VIEWS IN THE TEXAS OUTDOORS

SHARP AS AN ARROW

Besides being a lot of fun, the TPWD archery program also improves students' attitudes toward school.

At the Texas Archery in Schools Program Championship

sponsored by the Texas Field Archery Association in Temple, 358 school children participated in a state shootout — the best of 30 arrows from 10 yards using a standardized compound bow with no sights. “Thhwwaaapp!” was the sound heard throughout the day, but when the clatter stopped, a student from Wimberley’s St. Stephens Episcopal School took top honors with a 280 out of 300 — higher than the scores of middle and high school students in attendance.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department launched its new Archery in Schools program in February 2006. The department has since trained more than 300 teachers and youth group leaders; unfortunately, many do not have the equipment to implement the program. About 50 schools and 10 scout organizations are actively using the two-week curriculum within their physical education (PE) classes or in their after-school ventures. Beginning next fall, that number could double or even triple due to a recent surge in staffing, partnerships and support.

Hired as the department’s new statewide archery coordinator, Burnie Kessner wants to see the shooting sport regain its status as a popular activity in Texas schools. “With the support of the Texas Education Agency and Texas Cooperative Extension, and with the continued support of archery ranges, organizations and industry, this program shows great potential. It looks like my main duties will be to assist schools in getting equipment and to train more teachers.”

Begun officially as Introduction to Archery in Kentucky in 2002, the program will reach 3,000 schools and 567,000 students in 42 states this year and will be in all 50 states by 2009. Credit for such huge success goes to the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources and to Roy Grimes, the head of the National Archery in Schools Program. The resource agency initially felt that target



Since February 2006, TPWD has trained more than 300 teachers and youth group leaders in its Archery in Schools program.

PHOTOS BOTH PAGES BY TPWD

archery would increase the number of future participants in the shooting and hunting sports. What they quickly found, though, is that the program doesn't help only fish and wildlife agencies — there are numerous benefits to the students and to the schools themselves.

According to a 2004 survey conducted by Responsive Management, a Virginia-based research firm, the program not only gets kids excited about archery (92 percent), and interested in target archery (59 percent) and bowhunting (38 percent), it also improves their feeling about PE class (66 percent) and school in general (49 percent). It helps them feel better about themselves (53 percent) and improves their attendance (8 percent), especially on days that archery is taught.

Because of these findings, PE teachers and school administrators are taking notice and considering implementing the program in their districts. "It allows me to learn something new and gives me the chance to do archery and outdoor stuff," says Jocelyn Hoover, a student at Lamar Middle School in Flower Mound. Her teacher, Ferris Bavousett, initiator of a popular outdoor education curriculum in 22 North Texas schools, echoed Hoover's remarks. "The program allows an opportunity for all children, not just the elite athletes, to participate in a rewarding lifetime activity without the pressure of winning," she says.

The Texas Archery in Schools Program recently received a big boost through donations to the Parks and Wildlife Foundation from Dallas Safari Club and Toyota, and from efforts by the Texas Hunter Education Instructor's Association, which piloted the program in 10 Texas schools in 2005 and



The program not only gets kids excited about archery, it also improves students' attitudes and attendance.

2006. The training is available to teachers and youth group leaders across Texas. The one-day Basic Archery Instructor or three-day Basic Archery Instructor Trainer workshops are held throughout Texas.

For more information about the program, visit www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntered. ★

— Steve Hall

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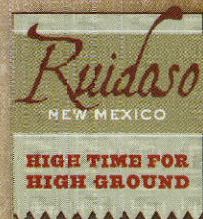


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With so many interests dependent upon the health of the state's oyster fishery, it's only logical that the resource's users should do everything possible to bolster its well-being. TPWD's fledgling Oyster Shell Recovery Program aims to do just that. Lance Robinson, Regional Director for Coastal Fisheries, describes the pilot program as "an effort to put something back."

That "something" is recycled oyster shell.

Though the project will initially be focused on East Galveston Bay, Robinson and coworkers hope to set the stage for a "reseeding" process that can be expanded elsewhere down the coast.



TPWD's Oyster Shell Recovery Program aims to rebuild needed substrate with recycled oyster shells.

"With good water quality, sufficient nutrients, the right temperature and the proper balance of saltwater and freshwater, the only other thing larval oyster 'spat' need to reproduce is a hard substrate on which to attach. Given those factors," Robinson explains, "oysters will definitely grow."

According to the veteran biologist, Galveston Bay possesses all of the above. "That's why 80 to 90 percent of the state's oyster production comes from the Galveston Bay system," Robin-



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The freshly recycled shells will attract the larval organisms that will eventually become oysters.

son says. “Galveston, Matagorda and San Antonio Bays are the coast’s leading oyster producers.

“Substrate is the limiting factor,” he adds. “The nature of the oyster business has been to harvest the oysters, shuck the meat and then pile up the shell. Although some oystermen return it to the water, most end up selling the harvested shell as roadbed material or calcium carbonate for poultry feed.

“We’re in the process of hiring an oyster restoration biologist who will lead the effort,” Robinson continues. “With permits

procured from the General Land Office and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, we’ll start with a reef in East Galveston Bay, one that’s currently beneath about a foot of mud and sediment. The plan,” he says, “is to elevate the reef, initially with limestone and then with oyster shell. The fresh, elevated shell will then attract the spat (free-swimming larval organisms that attach to structure during late spring and summer).”

Industry representatives have verbally committed to providing about 10,000 cubic yards of shell for the location, Robinson says. First, however, TPWD will contract to have limestone brought in so that commercial oystermen can then deposit the shell into marked-off areas.

An oyster grows to a legal size of 3 inches in about 18 months. “We may not see reef growth this year,” Robinson notes. “At this point we are basically spreading the base so that the process can occur. We hope to involve not only the oyster industry, but also, down the road, restaurants with oyster-shucking facilities from which we can reclaim shell for reseeding more reefs.

“If this program is successful, it will expand,” he emphasizes. “Again, it hinges on areas that have the optimal amount of freshwater inflow, nutrients and water quality. It’s a delicate balance.

“It was oystermen who actually came to us with this concept,” Robinson says. “The oyster industry is becoming more conscientious about the state of the resource, and anything we can do to foster that stewardship role is positive.”

Few, neither trout fishermen nor oystermen, would argue that a creature as giving as the humble oyster deserves anything less. ★

—Larry Bozka

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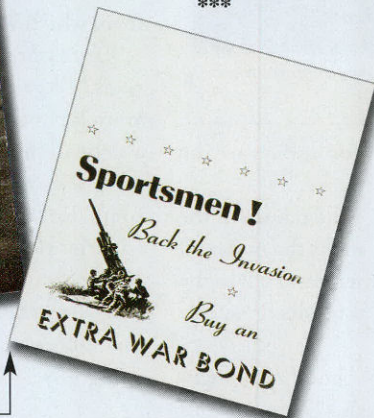
63 Years Ago in Texas Game and Fish

How wartime technology altered the future of fishing.



The front and back covers of the June 1944 issue of *Texas Game and Fish*.

Many great scientific leaps were made during World War II, but back in June of 1944, *Texas Game and Fish* was interested in just one of them: radar. Though the technology had only been made (somewhat) portable around 1941, and was not publicly available, the Fish and Wildlife Service had already tested its effectiveness on fish.



From the June 1944 issue of *Texas Game and Fish*:

Anglers... Get Ready for Radar

A fishing trip after the war is going to be a major expedition if we are to believe the latest dope coming out of the laboratories of the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service.

At present someone mentions a fishing trip. Into the back of the car go the rods, fly and bait box, and perhaps a pan or two. And in a few minutes you are out on a lake trying to entice a nice fat and sassy bass to strike at your lure. Sometimes your patience is rewarded; more often, it isn't.

But after the war — well, it's going to be a different story. Even the rankest amateur fisherman will be coming home with all the fish the law will allow him to catch. No more stops at the fish market on the way home after a fruitless expedition for a

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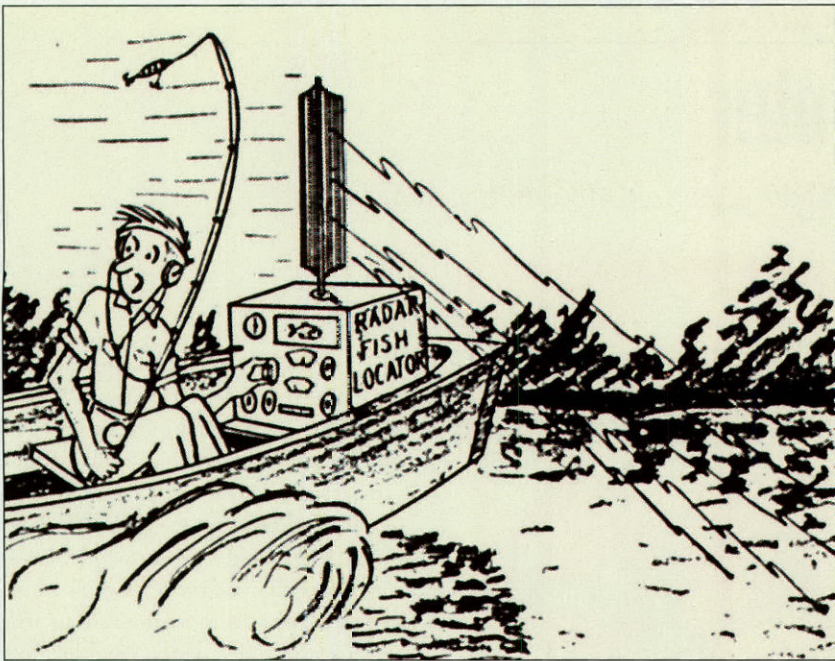
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PHOTOS: ILLUSTRATION BOTH PAGES BY TFWA



Texas Game and Fish accurately predicted the future use of radar, even if it turned out to look slightly different than this cartoon rendering that accompanied the article in 1944.

nice mess of fish. No more alibis to think up to explain just why your lure didn't hold some enchantment for at least one fish. No more blaming the weather, or what have you, for the failure of Mr. Bass to toy with what you have chosen to ease him out of the water and into a frying pan.

Up to now the odds have been with Mr. and Mrs. Bass. But after the war, Mr. Bass isn't going to have a tinker's chance of playing you for a sucker. No, indeed. You are going to cast for Mr. Bass and he is going to get himself all tangled up in your hook and line. Radar is the answer.

The Fish and Wildlife Service says that experiments have proved that fish can be located with radar — that radar can tell you the direction in which the fish are going, their approximate number and the speed at which they are traveling. With radar at your disposal, then what chance has Mr. or Mrs. Bass got to be out when you call at their home?

This mention of locating and catching your fish by radar also brings up some other possibilities. For instance, is there a fisherman so craven that he will go out to his favorite lake with just a radar set on his back and a book of instructions in his pocket?

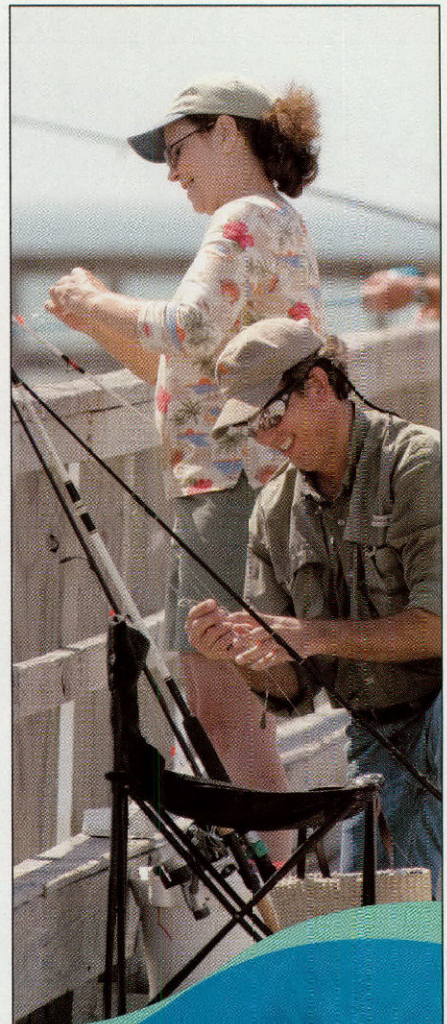
No, the fisherman of the future

will leave his home in a jeep. At the lake he will transfer to an LST — the abbreviation for a landing ship tank — and proceed out on the lake. He will set up his radar set, and read a few last minute instructions. When the radar has located the bass family and has determined just where the family is going and how, but not why, the fisherman will bait his hook or select what he believes is the proper lure, and cast it into the water. Then he will sit back, pick up a copy of Vernon's annotated statutes, giving complete information on Texas' vast and conflicting fishing regulations, take a squint at the barometer and probably take a sip or two from the jug if the barometer reading is right. The jug is optional.

Within an hour or so, he will have his limit of bass and the journey home begins — a smile on his face, a heart that threatens to burst into song, all because fishing was good. Thanks to radar.

Editor's note: This is the first installment in an eight-part series commemorating the 65th anniversary of *Texas Parks & Wildlife* magazine (formerly *Texas Game and Fish*). ★

—Jon Luckinger



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Keep a Cool Cooler

How to protect the number one summer essential: the cold beverage.



As Texas weather heats up, ice-cold drinks and fresh food are more than conveniences — they're survival tools. Here are some simple tips to help you make the most of your ice chest.

1. Start with a well-made hard or soft-sided cooler by checking the insulating R-factor of the unit. The higher the rating number, the colder your drinks will be. (See also "Ice Chests and Electric Coolers," page 18).

2. Pre-chill food and drinks before placing them in the cooler. This will greatly extend the life of your ice supply. It also helps if the container itself is cool before loading.

3. Cold air sinks, so when adding ice, place it on top. Drinks will cool the fastest with crushed ice, but stay cold longer when a small solid block is included.

4. Block ice, dry ice, frozen water bottles or reusable gel icepacks last longer than crushed ice. Place as much ice in the container as possible or line the interior sides with flexible pre-shaped frozen packs; then completely fill with goods to reduce air space.

5. Avoid draining all the chilled melt-water from the cooler as it adds extra insulation and helps maintain a lower temperature. Use heavy-duty zippered plastic bags to keep foodstuffs dry or isolate perishables in a fitted top tray.

6. Shade the container. Direct sunlight or high temperatures that develop inside a closed car can cause a fast meltdown. If possible, cover the

cooler with a light-reflecting cover, blanket or jacket.

7. If you use frozen reusable gel packs, it is best to buy the type that are well sealed and can be easily cleaned and disinfected. Some porous hydration type packs will absorb the odor of fish or foodstuffs and cannot be reused due to contamination.

8. In the larger, sturdier fiberglass or thermoplastic ice chests, items will keep cold for as long as five days. This can be important on long off-road trips and extended camping stays. Avoid metal wall ice chests as they tend to absorb the sun's rays and quickly heat up causing a significant loss of cooling in one day.

9. Keep your cooler clean. After use, wash thoroughly and apply a very diluted solution of Clorox bleach; then rinse with freshwater, wipe clean and air-dry the container before closing. This prevents mold and mildew from developing and ensures the chest is ready for your next trip.

10. Odors retained by some ice chest linings will be reduced or removed if a small open box of fresh baking soda is kept inside once it has been cleaned, dried and placed in storage. ★

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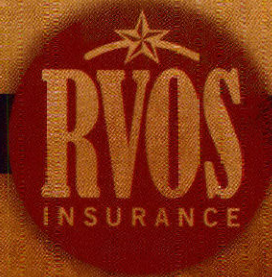
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Ice Chests and Electric Coolers

New designs offer greater durability and more convenience — some don't even need ice.

Portable coolers come in two basic forms, soft-sided or rigid. In many situations the soft, lightweight waterproof case is ideal for carrying food, drinks and gear, but these usually do not have as much insulation as a molded solid chest. The hard-box style can also serve as a seat.

Yeti Coolers manufactures premium quality ice chests made of fiberglass. The units are insulated with high-grade polyurethane foam and a sealing lid gasket for ultimate ice retention. They are made only in white, but hunters can apply camouflage paint or adhesive camo sheets for blending into the environment. These chests come in a variety of sizes. All have heavy-duty hinges and non-marking rubber feet to prevent marring surfaces of fishing boats. The sturdy fiberglass construction is easy to clean and will not impart odors to ice and food products. (\$299.99, 60 qt. Fiberglass Cooler, Yeti, 512-394-9384, www.yeticoolers.com)

Many of the latest designs in ice chests

come with rollers. The new **Igloo Marine Ultra Roller** not only has wheels, but also a retractable extension handle and two detachable fishing rod holders. This 60-quart unit is constructed of poly plastic, well-insulated and small enough to fit conveniently into a car, boat or camper. (\$63, Marine Ultra Roller, Igloo, 800-324-2653, www.igloocoolers.com)

Among the many soft-sided coolers on the market are the excellent **Polar Bear Chests**. They are lightweight and, when empty, can be folded or rolled up to fit in luggage or vehicle compartments. The rugged exterior is of 1,000-denier nylon with top quality attachments, strong seams and a durable rubber-coated zipper for maximum resistance to leakage, ant attacks and the elements. They come in several sizes, colors and also work well as insulated totes for hot foods up to 200 degrees. Personalized monograms can be added at a small additional cost. (\$39.99, 12-pack Soft-Side Cooler, Polar Bear, 888-438-



Igloo Marine Ultra Roller, Polar Bear Soft Ice Chest, Yeti Cooler with Camo Coating
7924, www.polarbearcoolers.com)

Only a few coolers generate their own refrigeration. The **Coleman Powerchill Thermoelectric Cooler** is a fine quality 40-quart unit with an electric line that plugs into a 12V car outlet or a 110 AC household power supply converter. The chest can be used in either a horizontal or vertical position, has an adjustable divider shelf and a quiet fan motor. (\$99.99, Powerchill Cooler with AC converter, Coleman, 800-835-3278, www.coleman.com)

Perhaps the most advanced design in portable electric coolers is the **Coleman Stirling Cooler/Freezer**. It has a capacity of only 26 quarts, but is the most powerful in its class. Features include large handles, a lighted temperature control panel with five settings, and adaptors for either 12V or 110V currents. This unit keeps food frozen solid even in 100-degree temperatures. During operation, it does make an audible humming sound, but is a great choice for hunters, fishers and campers needing a small storage container for freezing foods and making ice in remote locations. The unit requires continuous power supplied from DC or AC generators or direct line connections at a campsite. (\$400, Cooler/Freezer, Coleman)

Portable ice chests and refrigerators are all about new technology. Look to the future for even better designs to evolve that will keep food fresh and drinks ice-cold for longer periods of time. ★

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3 Days in the Field / By Teresa S. Newton

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Bluebird Blues

While Wills Point may be the Bluebird Capital of Texas, finding the little beauties requires patience and persistence.

Going back to my hometown for some birdwatching should be an easy trip. Instead, delays, family matters and lousy weather already have me off schedule. Actually, the past year has been off schedule ... in fact, downright rotten. A trip to Wills Point, Bluebird Capital of Texas, might be a healing excursion.

I hope finding the symbol of happiness isn't as elusive as happiness itself seems to be at the moment.

Wills Point earned the title of Bluebird Capital of Texas in 1995, three years after the local wilderness society started a campaign to bring the small bird home again. The eastern bluebird once proliferated in the area, but its numbers declined with pesticide use, some daunting winters and the removal of old trees with natural nest cavities. The society places nest boxes on fence posts along the main roads into town. In no time, Wills Point had more eastern bluebirds than any other place in the state.

Wills Point was a railroad town, with Texas and Pacific Railway work crews laying tracks in 1873. Folks in nearby Cedar Grove, a few miles northwest, packed up and settled in the new

spot. William Wills, who ran a way station on the Dallas-Shreveport Road, where the woods came to a point, inspired the locale's new name.

Cotton defined the town for decades, eventually giving way to cattle and soybeans. In 1960, the town became the "Gateway to Lake Tawakoni" when the lake opened to anglers. Today, the cotton gins are gone, there are other ways to get to the lake, and bluebirds are the town's main selling point.

Bluebirds grace the name of many businesses, such as the Bluebird Café and Bluebird Lawn and Garden. Nest boxes are everywhere, including one by the depot museum and the caboose visitors' center on U.S. 80 (apparently, bluebirds aren't deterred by noise).

Barbara Robertson meets me at the *Wills Point Chronicle* office, where she works. She hops in my little SUV, and we head out on

While Wills Point has been officially named the Bluebird Capital of Texas, the eastern bluebird can prove to be a rare and elusive delight for visitors.

Farm-to-Market 75I, northwest of town. She points out nest boxes along 75I, then we drive Farm-to-Market 47, which heads northeast of Wills Point toward Lake Tawakoni State Park.

Barbara leads the Wills Point Wilderness Society, along with Gen Ballard. The two kept the society going after membership declined. They started a new drive this year to gain members to check, clean and repair bluebird nest boxes.

She dazzles me with stories of people reporting flocks of bluebirds on their farms, creating pools of blue. But, she warns me, those are not especially common, except during the dead of winter. Most springtime bluebird sightings are single birds or pairs near their nest boxes, on fences or in yards.

"People come to the festival and expect to see bluebirds flying all over downtown," she says, referring to the annual celebration each April. However, she





Whether peacefully waiting for a flash of blue, browsing through shops or eating at a local café, visitors find a bluebird theme throughout Wills Point.

adds, single bluebirds are a very common sight around the area.

I drive slowly, often on the road's shoulder, as we look for and talk about the birds, as well as who's who from our school days. A couple of hours later and I'm on my own again. No bluebird sightings so far.

On to my quirky birding site: the town cemetery. I weave through the brick streets downtown, cross the railroad tracks and head east, turning at the Veterans' Memorial on U.S. 80. This is the old way to the cemetery, beside the railroad tracks. The houses on the street spark memories of old friends as I drive by slowly.

When I turn my head to the railroad tracks, my eyes nearly pop out. A great blue heron stares at me from a couple of feet away. He's about 4 feet tall, so we're almost eye-to-eye. His googly eyes probably are looking for something to eat in the water-filled ditch, courtesy of recent rain. He stares. And being the weaker of the two, I turn and creep down the road. The old entrance to the cemetery is closed, so I creep back, the heron staring all the while.

Back to U.S. 80 and the cemetery's official entrance. Years ago, I'd walk through here to work out my teen angst. I settle on a bench near a town leader's grave. Cardinals, mockingbirds, warblers, wrens and woodpeckers. And robins, lots of robins, picking at brush, fallen leaves, anything that might have a bug under it. (If those dang robins would just shut up.

(continued on page 62)

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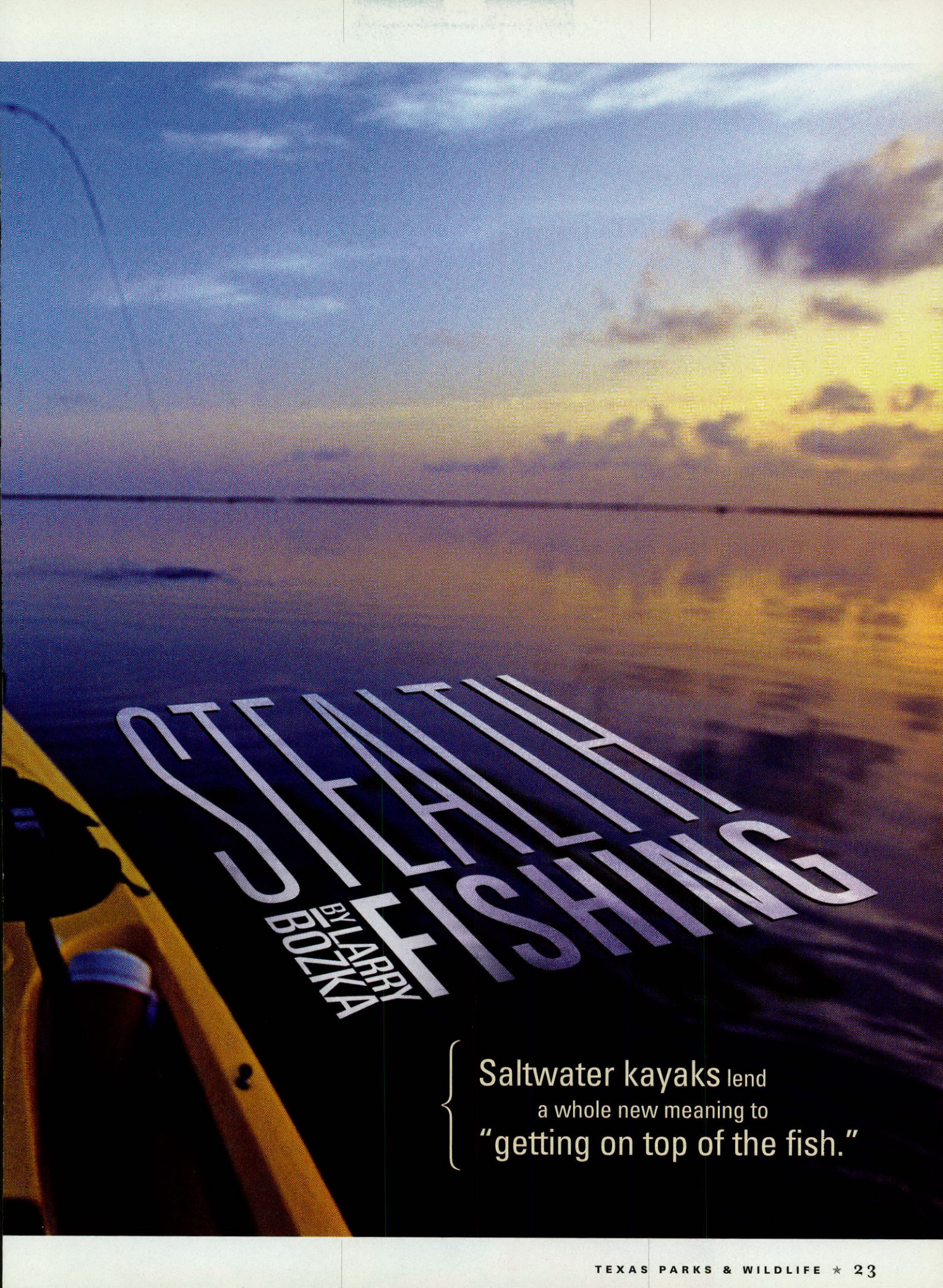
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TEXAS' LARGEST RURAL LENDER





PHOTO © TOSH BROWN



SALTWATER FISHING

BY LARRY BOZKA

{ Saltwater kayaks lend
a whole new meaning to
"getting on top of the fish."

It's exhilarating, realizing that a wild creature only a few yards away is oblivious to your presence.

Native Americans had to have felt it when, with tanned buffalo hides draped over their shoulders, they slipped undetected into roaming herds of bison. Deer hunters, especially archers, live for the thrill of stalking the forest floor instead of sitting for hours on end inside the easy concealment of a four-by-four box blind.

From 10 feet, a 10-point buck with a 20-inch antler spread is something to behold.

So is a 28-inch-long redfish.

I've made three casts at this one, now only 12 feet away with the gap closing fast. The south breeze exhales, pushing the hull like a drifting leaf. Seconds later, the motionless red's shadow is intercepted by the bow.

The reaction is as sudden as a trigger pull.

Where the fish's dusky profile loomed only seconds ago there's now a malevolent mud boil in the foot-deep water, a mushrooming

cloud of silt that billows and blossoms in the creature's turbulent wake. An arrow-straight smoke stream punctuates its escape route.

I've been punked by a fish.

Sure, I expected it to spook, but not like this. My shirt is soaked. The amber lenses of my polarized sunglasses are dappled and flecked with a sparkly smattering of saltwater droplets. Like a bully kicking sand on the beach, the startled redfish drenched me with a single thrust of its paddle-broad tail.

When the most enticing retrieve goes unnoticed time and again, when the opportunity to strike finally arrives after two straight hours of scanning the horizon, sizing up bottom contours and translating color changes, and then, in an abrupt, watery splash it all literally blows up in your face, you don't cuss.

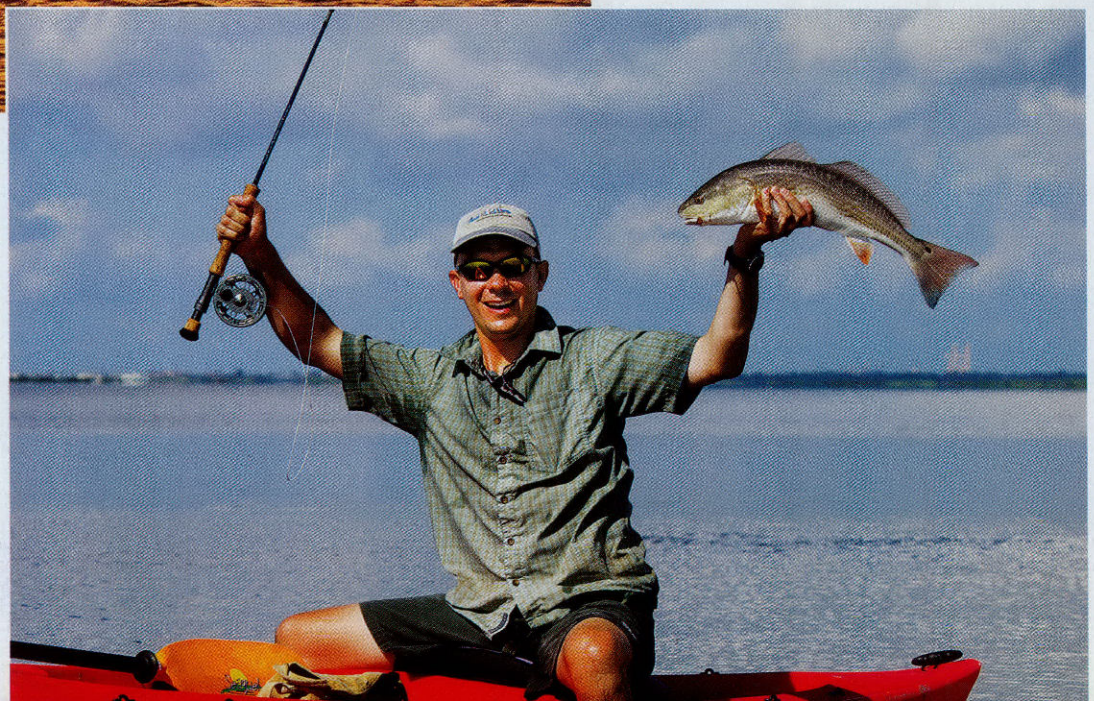
You salute.

The redfish won, fair and square. But it sure as heck wasn't because I didn't get close enough, or didn't have enough chances.

It's not the first time that paddling a kayak across a saltwater flat has put me on top of a predator's shadow.

I can only hope it won't be the last.

It was a real epiphany when about a year ago, having just turned 50, I realized that my evolution as a boater and fisherman had quite possibly come full-circle. Like most other





TOP FAR LEFT © DAVID J. SAMS; BOTTOM FAR LEFT © CARRIE ROBERTSON; LEFT © DAVID J. SAMS; OPPOSITE PAGE © TOSH BRQVIA



The silent stroke of a kayak paddle allows the flats angler an incomparable measure of stealth. When approaching and casting to noise-sensitive redfish in shallow water, that's an invaluable advantage. A light-action 7-foot rod and baitcasting reel filled with a 10- to 12-pound test line is all that's necessary to finesse a keeper-class red into a waiting landing net.

anglers, my fishing career began on the bank and soon graduated to a small aluminum john boat. From then on, I craved, and ultimately ran, bigger and bigger hulls with progressively larger engines and more sophisticated accessories with bigger and bigger price tags.

Now, at the phase of life when so many things that once obsessed me suddenly seem senseless, even silly, simplification has become my prime directive. Way beyond needing to impress myself or anyone else with high-dollar toys, I now spend as much time as possible fishing from a boat that's smaller and lighter than anything I have owned.

It's also a lot less expensive. Fifteen hundred bucks doesn't go far on an outboard rig, but it'll buy a top-notch, well-appointed fishing kayak.

Everything that so radically defines modern-day flats fishing is conspicuously absent from the driver's seat of a kayak. It's a world away from a 22-foot fiberglass hull with more horsepower than you'll find beneath the hood of the average sports car.

I've grown accustomed to the silence.

For a long time, without as much as a half-hearted test, I dismissed the kayak as an unviable fishing boat. Anything that narrow, I figured, had to be unstable. Chalk it up to too many canoeing mishaps.

I was wrong, and I've never been so happy

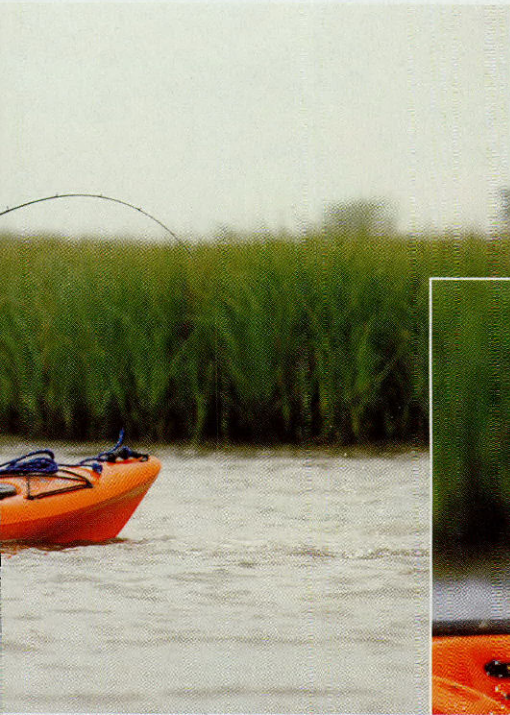
to be so misguided. For stability and simplicity, canoes don't even remotely compare to modern-day fishing kayaks.

Sally Moffett, a pioneer of the sport on the Texas Coastal Bend, introduced me to kayaking in the mid-1990s. On a whim, participating in the Mercury Redzone Tournament to benefit cystic fibrosis research, I accepted Moffett's offer to spend a day paddling across the grass-carpeted flats south of Rockport.

Though we caught quality fish and had a blast doing it, we didn't win the tournament. Something far more significant occurred that day. Today, one decade and three kayaks later, I've come to appreciate the advantages — yes, advantages — kayaking affords versus launching, operating and maintaining a flats boat. Many of those incentives were strikingly apparent that first day on the shallows near Redfish Bay.

Foremost was stability. The boat Moffett loaned me was a "sit-on" model that allowed me to sit sidesaddle, and even stand up and cast. It took a bit of adjusting to, but in an hour or two it seemed like I'd been doing it for years.

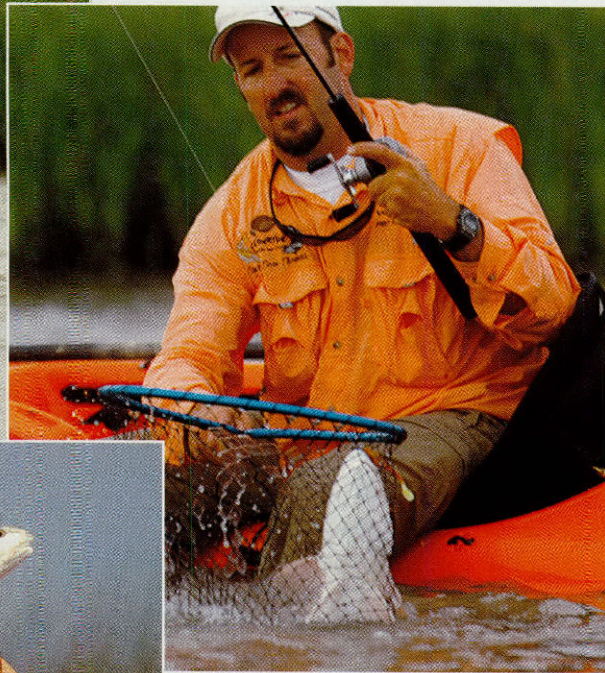
Next was discovering that paddling a kayak is not exhausting. It is, if anything, remarkably relaxing. The streamlined little boats glide more than float. Longer hulls in the 14-foot



a kayak is just like choosing any other boat.

Foot pedal versions are among the newest innovations. In the same way a bicycle is pedaled, the operator uses his legs to engage flexible flippers immediately below the hull. The “hands-free” aspect is incentive enough for many shoppers to spend the extra money — and

Again, would-be kayakers need only understand that there is no substitute for firsthand experience. The initial outing is an eye-opener. Almost invariably, a single exploratory trip dramatically changes the way an experienced saltwater angler views the sport’s most daunting challenges.



I was, for example, an enthusiastic and avowed wade fisherman for over 25 years before I first set foot in a kayak. Situations still exist where wading gets the nod. There are times when a kayak cannot safely substitute for an outboard-powered flats rig. It’s risky business to cross an open, deep-water bay via kayak alone. Most anglers who own outboard-powered bay boats, yours truly included, now use their “big boats” to transport their kayaks, often to previously unexplored locales.

The Texas coast hosts countless areas where wade fishing is virtually impossible, places where, although the water is kneecap-shallow, the bottom is as soft and unstable as quicksand. Marsh inlets and sloughs, traditional high-odds fishing locales during falling tide phases, are both prime examples. Hardcore waders sometimes



these boats do cost a bit more than most conventional paddling hulls.

There are single-passenger and double-passenger models, though the latter are mostly for touring (treble-hooked lures zinging from 7-foot trout rods are frightening to dodge from the rear seat of a ‘yak). There are even super-stable

traverse these marginally supportive zones, but seldom without muddying up the terrain in less than a dozen steps.

Noise is another drawback. Shell reefs are proven, firm-bottomed fish attractors. Unfortunately, though, sound travels almost five times faster underwater. The sound of oyster shells crunching beneath a wade fisherman’s boots is about as comforting to skittish reds and trout as the crackle of dried oak leaves is to wary white-tailed deer.

range are, surprisingly, a bit faster and more paddle-efficient on the flats than smaller hulls. But regardless of size, it doesn’t require Herculean strength to capably propel a saltwater kayak a considerable distance. I was flat-out amazed at how much water we covered in so little time.

The rapid growth of coastal kayaking’s popularity has spawned an increasingly diverse array of hull designs and configurations. Be it a “sit-in” hull, a “sit-on” hull or one of either style with a rudder or pedal-driven flippers, no one model is everything to every situation. In that context, selecting

kayaks with tandem hulls that resemble Polynesian outriggers. However, for reasons of portability and weight, they’re rarely used by fish-hunting paddlers.

Extensive books have been written on the subject (Moffett, in fact, just completed one). Kayaking Web sites abound. But there is arguably no better way to make a wise purchase than to start out by renting several different models. Kayak rentals are inexpensive, and there is a budding legion of facilities up and down the coast that provide such services, often within easy paddling range of superb fishing waters (see sidebar).

Even when executed on a firm sand bottom, wade fishing is physically punishing. Maintaining balance exacts a painful toll on leg muscles, lower backs, shoulders and arms. Always present, too, is the nagging realization that every step taken away from the boat is a step that must be repeated in order to return. If it’s a lengthy shuffle to a wade-fishing spot, it always seems at least twice as far on the way back. A kayak transforms what was once a grueling trek into a pleasant round-trip breeze.

Distance is essential to surf fishing as well, particularly getting baits or lures to the blue-water break that so often beckons just beyond the third or fourth sand bar. Either as a fishing platform or a vehicle to carry big natural baits far out in the surf for presentation to bull redfish, sharks and other large species, a kayak is the ultimate hull.

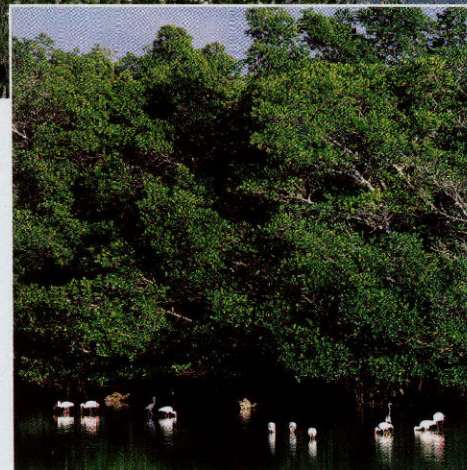
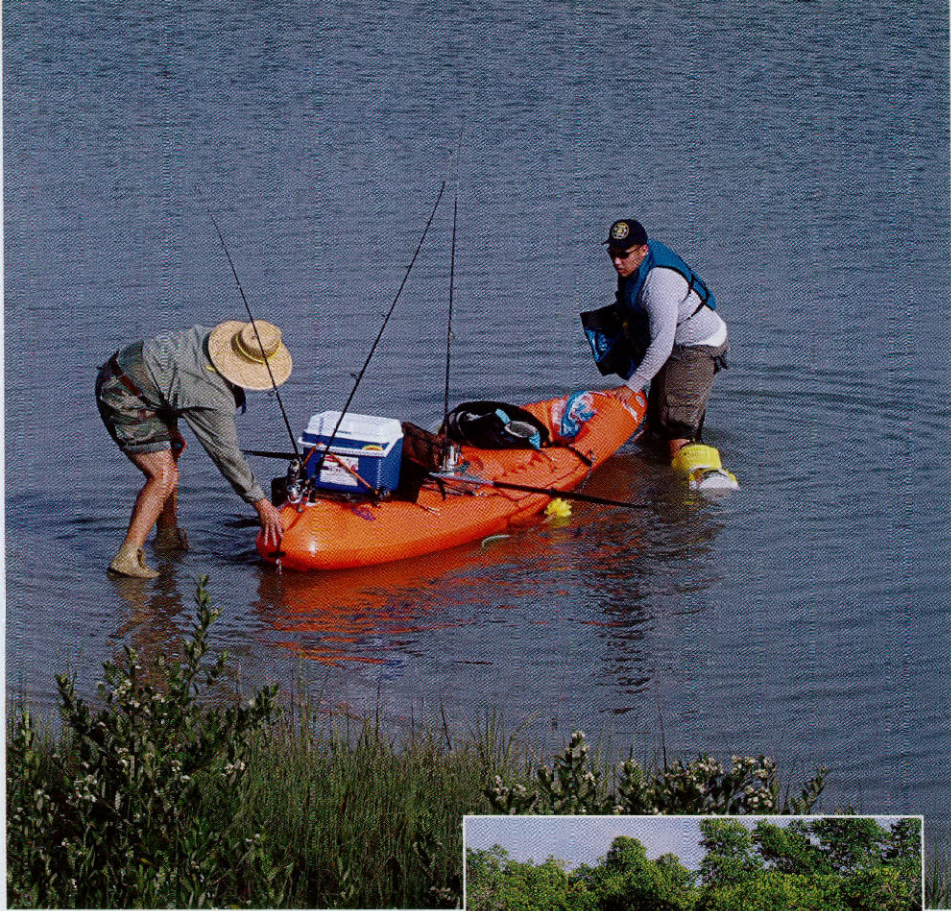
Although long hulls shine on shallow flats, shorter versions excel in the surf, especially when water conditions get choppy. In anything but optimal conditions, beachfront wade fishing can be brutal. Rolling breakers, surging tides and powerful undertows were once sobering obstacles to my surf fishing. Now, with a 12-foot kayak and a firmly fastened life jacket, the beachfront, like so many other previously restrictive fishing spots, is my personal playground.

The wafer-thin paddle slices through 18-inch-deep water. Tiny green whirlpools spin past the hull with each stroke of the blade. An enthusiastic flock of laughing gulls is wheeling and diving over a frenzied school of speckled trout that's at least a half a mile away.

In the past, fishing afoot, there's no way I'd make the journey.

Not this time. Thanks to this amazing little boat, those fish won't have the slightest clue I'm there.

Even if I'm right on top of them. ★



From the white ibis to the blue heron, saltwater shorelines teem with a colorful array of shorebird species. No one is more likely to get close to them than the coastal kayaker. Despite their amazingly light weight, kayaks can hold a substantial amount of gear. Many manufacturers now produce kayak-specific accessories such as specialized rod holders, back-support seats and space-efficient tackle storage systems.

COASTAL KAYAK RENTAL FACILITIES

If there is an invaluable tip for the aspiring kayak owner, it's "Rent before you buy." In tandem with an ever-expanding array of manufacturers and models, a burgeoning community of rental facilities up and down the Texas coastline now allows motivated kayak shoppers to do just that.

Following is a list of some of the coast's more noteworthy kayak rental facilities.

Aransas Pass

Port A. Kayak, (888-396-2382, www.portakayak.com)
Slowride Guide Services & Kayak Rentals, (361-758-0463, www.slowrideguide.com, www.texasakayfishingsschool.com)

Corpus Christi

Trula B, Norm Baker, (361-949-1673, www.trulab.com/kayaking.htm)

Galveston

Caribbean Breeze Boat Rental, (409-740-0400, www.caribbeanbreezeboatrentalandfishingcharters.com)

Matagorda

Matagorda Bay Nature Park, (979-863-7120, www.lcra.org/parks/developed_parks/matagorda.html)

Port Aransas

South Bay Bait & Charters, (361-758-2632, www.fishportaransas.com)

Rockport-Fulton

Cove Marine, (361-727-1100, www.covemarineinc.com)
Jubilee Guide Service, (361-727-9835, www.jubileeguideservice.com)
Rockport Kayak Rentals, (361-790-6205, e-mail: jvalero@awesomenet.net)
Rockport Birding and Kayak Adventures, (877-892-4737, www.rockportadventures.com)

South Padre

The Boatyard, (956-761-5061, e-mail: Jibber@WindsurfTheBoatyard.com)

Kayak rentals are also available at select Texas state parks. For information on specific locales, call TPWD at 800-792-1112.

HATS OFF TO THE VOLUNTEERS WHO WORK TO PRESERVE THE GREAT OUTDOORS IN TEXAS.

By CAROL FLAKE CHAPMAN

natural partners

WHEN CLARENCE FORSE, 75, RETIRED FROM HIS JOB AS A SHIFT SUPERVISOR AT DOW CHEMICAL COMPANY, HE DIDN'T REALIZE THAT HE WOULD BE MAKING ANOTHER COMMITMENT IN 1995 THAT WOULD PUT HIM ON TRACK FOR MORE THAN 5,400 HOURS OF WORK OVER THE NEXT 12 YEARS.



That commitment would lead to a brand new facility that was to become nearly as identified as Dow with his hometown of Lake Jackson: Sea Center Texas. Forse, a longtime saltwater angler, was a member of the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA), an organization of recreational anglers who first came together in the 1970s in response to the declining population of redfish in the Gulf of Mexico. The CCA and Dow joined with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to create a new state-of-the-art fish hatchery that would produce juvenile red drum and spotted seatrout to stock in Texas bays.

Dow donated the land, the CCA raised funds and TPWD provided the staffing. As Forse recalls, he helped with recruiting, and a substantial Sea Center volunteer group was ready to get to work even before the first building was completed. As the center grew into an aquarium and nature center, the volunteers, many of them Dow retirees like Forse (and like my dad, Raymond Flake), embraced the center as their own, helping with everything from construction work to organizing fishing programs for kids. The volunteers, who now include a number of young people as well, have been indispensable, says Sea Center Director David Abrego, who keeps promising Forse his own desk at the center.

Forse and the CCA are among the strong and diverse network of volunteers and non-profit partners that help with nearly every aspect of the work of TPWD, from fundraising, education and outreach to hands-on maintenance work. TPWD's partners have helped create, maintain and improve state parks, wildlife management areas, historic sites, and fish hatcheries; they have supported game wardens in multiple ways and have worked to protect and restore the state's fish and wildlife habitat and its natural resources. They staff park gift shops, bake cookies for benefit events, clear brush from park



LEFT © GREG LASLEY/KAC PRODUCTIONS; RIGHT BY TPWD

trails, build campsites and cabins, dress in period garb and lead tours at historic sites, teach city kids how to bait a hook and cast a line, help control fire ants and invasive aquatic plants, donate lunkers to the Sharelunker bass program, count birds, remove abandoned crab traps from coastal waters, and convince friends and associates to donate time or money to restore wetlands.

More than 60 friends' groups partner with state parks, historic sites and fisheries, and an equal number of other nonprofit groups partner with the department in other ways.

"We just couldn't operate without them," says Parks Division Director Walt Dabney. He points to such groups as the Washington-on-the-Brazos State Park Association, the oldest of the park support groups, which was founded in 1936. When asked about the contributions of the association, Park Superintendent Tom Scaggs says, "They are absolutely essential for us to be able to accomplish the mission at Washington-on-the-Brazos." The group even raised funds to provide a year's salary for a farm manager while the Barrington Living History Farm was being built.

Jim Ellison, former president of the group, says that once you join the group, you get committed to it. "You just get hooked on the history of the place," he says. "It's the birthplace of Texas. It gets in your blood."

Just as committed to their park is the Brazos Bend State Park Volunteer Organization, whose members rack up about 20,000 volunteer hours a year. The reason for the group's success, says park staffer David Heinicke, is the strong team effort at Brazos Bend. The volunteers work alongside the

park's staff in a wide variety of tasks and projects, doing meaningful work to improve the park. At the end of the day, the volunteers go home with a true sense of accomplishment.

"We've got people from car salesmen to rocket scientists who come out to volunteer," Heinicke says. Another reason for the steady flow of volunteers, he points out, is the allure of the park itself, with its swampy habitat and resident wildlife, including river otters and alligators. "It's just such a neat place," says Heinicke.

Volunteer Rick Dashnau, whose day job is in seismic exploration, agrees. "What could be cooler than helping the park and working outside? And there are alligators." Dashnau, who leads nature walks at the park, maintains a Web site with photos of the gators and other inhabitants of the park. He even enjoys pointing out the park's banana spiders, the huge but benign arachnids whose complex, shimmering webs often line park trails. "I also happen to be a spider guy," he says.

In addition to spider fans and history buffs, many of TPWD's partners come from the ranks of hunters and anglers. "We're natural partners," says TPWD Small Game Program Director Vernon Bevell of such groups as Ducks Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation and Quail Unlimited, which have helped substantially over the years with habitat and species restoration projects. "Each has an expertise and a shared mission with us in these projects. We've been blessed with conservation partners who

Far left: Ducks Unlimited helps to preserve and restore wetlands for mallard ducks (pictured) and other waterfowl.

Left: Volunteers at Sea Center Texas demonstrate fishing tackle basics.

Right: Texas Game Warden Association volunteers focus on enlisting young people in outdoor activities like fishing and hunting.

Below: Members of the Wild Turkey Federation release Eastern wild turkeys, which had disappeared in some areas.



? What is the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation?

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, based in Dallas, serves as the official, designated nonprofit funding partner for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The Foundation, which was organized in 1992, has brought together companies, corporations, organizations, communities and individuals to raise more than \$43 million to support the work of the department. The foundation operates the Lone Star Legacy Endowment Fund, which establishes endowment funds for every state park, wildlife area, historic site and fish hatchery in the state. It assisted in the creation of the Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center as well as the World Birding Center, Government Canyon State Natural Area and Sheldon Lake Environmental Learning Center. Now, however, the foundation is focusing on only one or two projects a year, according to director Dick Davis. Currently, the main projects include a buy-back program for commercial shrimping licenses in order "to reduce pressure on that resource and restore that resource," says Davis. The other main goal this year, he says, is assisting the Texas Game Warden Association in building a new facility for training game wardens. Meanwhile, the foundation is always trying to recruit more supporters, he says, including the recently founded Corporate Conservation Coalition, which aims to bring in corporations involved in producing natural resources or in outdoor activities.

roll up their sleeves and work with us. They all come to the table with a conservation ethic, forged by years of experience. They understand that if you don't take care of a resource, you lose it."

Bevill cites the late Johnny Walker, who served as president not only of the state branch of Ducks Unlimited, but of the national organization. "He was one of those guys who understood ducks and the connection between ducks and wetlands," says Bevill. "He was an over-the-horizon thinker. He made an organizational difference to Ducks Unlimited and an individual difference in our lives. His footprint in Texas lives beyond his years."

Walker's son-in-law, Bill Ansell, who serves on the Game Bird Advisory Board as well as on the board of Ducks Unlimited Texas, has carried on the tradition. "We want our children to hunt, to have waterfowl, to have clean drinking water," he says. Of hunters

ices and to lay off park employees. "We wanted to bring together as broad a group as possible to save the parks," says coalition director George Bristol. "We felt that the parks needed a champion." The group includes dozens of nonprofit, sporting, conservation and community organizations, particularly from areas that were being affected by park cutbacks. They were joined by the Texas Recreation and Park Society (known as TRAPS), which supports local parks.

"We studied the issues for a year and decided that the missing link on park funding was the economic benefits of state parks," says Bristol. The coalition has sponsored studies and gatherings to bring those economic issues to the attention of the public.

As for the rewards for their work, TPWD partners can cite both tangible and intangible benefits. For members of the CCA,

it was the return of redfish to the waters they love to fish. For those who work with Ducks Unlimited, it was the growing number of ducks returning to the marshes where their numbers had begun to dwindle. Members of the Wild Turkey Federation can enjoy watching Eastern wild turkeys strut and gobble in areas of East Texas where they had disap-

peared. Some partners talk about a satisfaction that they are helping to create a new generation to appreciate the outdoors.

"Sometimes it's just getting young people out to feel the earth under their feet," says Paul Farrell of the Wild Turkey Federation.

Pat Canan of the Texas Game Warden Association remembers the look of stunned triumph on the faces of a group of city kids at summer camp who were able to find their way in the wild after taking an orientation class and learning to use topographical maps and compasses.

"At first you see the panic, then you see them start to get their bearings. It's really something, seeing that look of wonderment that they can really do it, the look of knowledge they get on their faces." For Clarence Forse, nothing beats the look on the face of someone catching their first fish, whatever their age. "You should have seen the look on the face of a 92-year-old woman who caught her first fish here at Sea Center, an eight-pound redfish." What could be better than that? ☆



The Value of Volunteers

During fiscal year 2006, 3,400 trained volunteers provided more than 46,000 teaching hours, at a value of more than \$740,000 to TPWD, in training students in mandatory hunter education programs and in the mandatory Texas Boater Education Program. Angler education volunteers performed more than 8,000 hours of service at a value of nearly \$139,000 to the department.

Sea Center Texas volunteers, Lake Jackson

and the outdoors, he says: "We appreciate it in a different manner than non-outdoor people. We like to sit out there on a cold dreary morning and see the sunrise with wildlife around."

That irresistible passion for the outdoors is shared, too, by the anglers and anglers' groups who have worked with TPWD to restore fish populations and habitat. "It's just pure pleasure," says Dick Hart of his work for the Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center, which has been supported by a number of organizations. Hart first joined a fundraising group called the Friends of the Freshwater Fisheries Center and founded another group called the Schooling for Bass Club, which helped raise money for a new conservation center with classroom facilities. Hart's love for fishing is so great, he admits, that he had to miss the ceremony for his induction into the Freshwater Fisheries Hall of Fame because of a long-planned fishing trip to Maine.

It's that strong feeling for the outdoors that Texas game wardens, too, can count on, with groups like the Texas Game Warden Association, which was formed in 1971 by game wardens concerned with conserving natural resources around the state. As the group was joined by ranchers, farmers and other landowners, it became more focused on outreach and educational programs to enlist young people in outdoor activities like hunting and fishing. The association has recently become involved with TPWD in building a new training center for game wardens. And in acknowledgment of the more perilous side of wardens' work, the 100 Club, a law enforcement support group, has provided line-of-duty death benefits to families of wardens killed in the line of duty.

In fact, many TPWD support groups have been formed or strengthened in the face of challenges to the resources, parks or wild places they've come to treasure. In 2001, the Texas Coalition for Conservation was formed in response to budget constraints that were going to force TPWD to cut back park hours and serv-

DETAILS

Coastal Conservation Association (CCA),
www.joincca.org, (800) 201-FISH (3474)

Washington-on-the-Brazos State Park Association, www.birthplaceoftexas.com, 979-830-1824

Brazos Bend State Park Volunteer Organization,
www.brazosbend.org, 979-553-5123

Ducks Unlimited, www.ducks.org, (800) 45DUCKS (38257)

National Wild Turkey Federation,
www.nwtf.org, (800) THE-NWTF (843-6983)

Quail Unlimited, www.qu.org

Friends of the Freshwater Fisheries Center,
www.tpwd.state.tx.us/spdest/visitorcenters/tffc/becomepartner/

Schooling for Bass Club, www.tpwd.state.tx.us/spdest/visitorcenters/tffc/becomepartner/

Texas Game Warden Association,
www.texasgamewarden.com, (800) 322-8492

The 100 Club, www.the100club.org, (877) 955-0100

Texas Coalition for Conservation,
www.texascoa.org

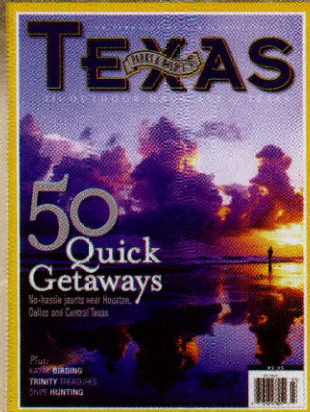
Texas Recreational and Park Society (TRAPS),
www.traps.org, 512-267-5550

Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation,
www.tpwf.org, 214-720-1478

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Why is Saltwater Fishing in Texas so cool?



FROM THE ESTUARIES NESTLED DEEP IN BAY BACKWATERS TO THE TEEMING TURQUOISE WATERS 100 MILES OFFSHORE, TEXAS SALTWATER FISHING OFFERS ANGLING EXCITEMENT.

Just outside the mouth of the Trinity River east of Houston, not far from a fishing spot called "Jack's Pocket," fresh water borne from as far away as Dallas spills into Trinity Bay. Nearby, standing waist-deep on the edge of a submerged roadbed, three wade fishermen relish the bounty in an outgoing tide.

The speckled trout arrived an hour before dawn. As the rising sun washes the bay with blazing hues of blue and gold, the trout are in full-feeding mode.

Two of the rods are deeply bowed. The other is tucked beneath the angler's arm, with a bright spoon dancing from the rod tip while the wader slides a 23-inch speckled trout onto a metal-tipped stringer.

Nearby, frightened mullet erupt from the surface and skitter across the crest of an oyster reef. The mullet spread in unison, counting on sheer numbers for protection. Reel spools grudgingly release 12-pound-test line. The anglers' flickering silver lures soar with low-angle trajectories and smack the water 100 feet away.

The strikes are immediate. Again, the jubilant waders are fast into fish.

The Beauty of the Texas Coast

It's a priceless moment when so many pieces of the piscatorial puzzle fall into place. No one takes a day like this for granted. And it's days like this that make Texas a world-class haven for saltwater anglers of every ilk.

Here on Trinity Bay, when wind, tide and water allow, the magic is evident

One person who understands the magic is Artie Presley, owner of Oak Island Lodge on Trinity Bay, who explains: "The business world is more hectic than ever, and everyone is tight on time. I built in this spot because folks who can't leave town for long can still enjoy the kind of fishing you'd expect to find in distant, remote locales, and I found it right here on Double Bayou.

"We're barely an hour east of Houston. You could drive a long, long way and not find a more diversified and productive bay system than we have right here.

"Most people have no idea how wild the world becomes once you pass the Trinity River."

morning like this, any one of the adjacent reefs and dropoffs can hold substantial numbers of red drum, speckled trout, flounder and other inshore species.

Drifting on the Bay

A 22-foot, center-console flats boat drifts a half-mile beyond Smith Point. Standing in the bow, surveying the water through polarized sunglasses, a tall and tanned fisherman stoops to adjust the steering arm of a bow-mounted trolling motor.

Trolling motors were once rare on Texas coastal waters. Now, it's a rare bayfishing rig that doesn't sport one. Most are designed for saltwater, their components as corrosion-resistant as technology can make them.

Fishermen rely on trolling motors to quietly approach reefs and shorelines at which, upon arrival, they get out and wade undetected. Others use their trolling motor to follow the meanderings of fish schools. Whether you're looking for the visible spectacle of working birds plucking shrimp from the sur-

Although the commotion is obvious when it occurs close by, even lifelong saltwater fishermen use marine binoculars to spot indistinct fish signs. Gray or white birds wheeling and diving against hazy summer horizons can be frustratingly vague signals.

When working birds appear, steady strikes are almost a sure bet. Casting soft plastic shad-tails on quarter-ounce jigheads from seven-foot trout rods with baitcasting reels, this pair of bay drifters is partaking in one of Texas bay fishing's most productive and easy-to-master scenarios: "fishing the birds."

World-Class Catches

Up and down the Texas Coast, a virtual armada of gull-chasing boaters is playing the same game. More than half the speckled trout they catch are undersized. Fortunately, single-hooked shadtail jigheads make catch-and-release a simple proposition.

As added insurance, the casters use barbless hooks. They're easier to get out of fish, and if there's a casting mishap, barbless hooks are easier to extract from fingers as well. Mostly, though, it's about conservation. Texas anglers are fiercely dedicated to conservation, endorsing tighter bag and size restrictions over the past 25 years. That dedication is what makes Texas saltwater fishing what it is today.

From Smith Point, the water courses east and sluices inside the narrow borders of Rollover Pass at Gilchrist. Then it melds with the gentle swells of the High Island surf.

Here at Rollover Pass just after Memorial Day, some of the year's largest speckled trout will be caught by savvy anglers who know that fishing history repeats itself every season.

Head 'em Off at Rollover Pass

Anglers line the banks of the pass. Some stand near the edge, some recline in lawn chairs and others even cast from wheelchairs. Seven-year-olds and 70-year-olds alike stand — or sit — side by side. They know that the bay's resident gamefish enter or exit the Gulf through Rollover Pass.

Inside the pass, flounder and Atlantic croaker are setting the morning's pace. In between, gafftop sail catfish, black drum, sheepshead, whiting and sand trout join other fish inside coolers.

Running of the Bull Reds

The stuttering squalls of a protesting reel drag occasionally announce the strike of an errant redfish. On both ends of the pass, the beach-



Saltwater's Season Opener

Saltwater fishing has no season opener. But if it did, it would be the first weekend of June.

The wind, an inaudible whisper of saturated salt air, flows out of the southeast at less than 5 mph. The swelling current shifts the sand beneath their feet. On top of the reef, fleeing mullet shatter the surface. The anglers agree — everything's right.

They're not alone in that blissful assessment. The water surges southwest, tracing a baitfish-laden path around Smith Point, a narrow peninsula that divides Trinity Bay and East Galveston Bay. On an almost-summer

face or tracking the oily sheen of slicks created by speckled trout, the motor keeps a boat within easy casting range of the action.

Follow the Birds

The drift-fishing duo is upwind of a squawking flock of laughing gulls. Always opportunistic feeders, the black-capped gulls know an easy meal when they see it. Red drum and speckled trout herd shrimp to the surface, so the hapless crustaceans are corralled by gamefish below and pounced upon by birds from above. Wounded shrimp sink into the jaws of larger game fish that lurk farther down.

front is dotted with the tall, vertical markers of 10- and 11-foot-long fiberglass rods stowed inside PVC pipes pounded solidly into the sand. The surf rods are all baited with fresh-cut or live baitfish, held firmly in place by wire-pronged “spider” weights rigged on heavy monofilament or fluorocarbon shock leaders. Such natural offerings are nigh-irresistible to hulking “bull reds.” The bronze-scaled brutes forage the nearshore cuts between sand bars when the tide generates a steady current, and they are known for stripping small baitcasting reels free of line and occasionally snapping the tips of lightweight speckled trout rods. “Bull” redfish is actually a misnomer. The 36- to 46-inch-class fish, many of them 20 years old, are actually females.

From a fighting standpoint, given their powerful nature, “bull” is an appropriate description. A 30-pound red drum is a magnificent fish that no angler is likely to forget. Even though almost all are released to maintain breeding stock, anglers can legally keep two of the brawny bronze heavyweights per license year by using a special “trophy tag” affixed to the TPWD fishing license.

But few fishermen will keep a bull red. Aside from having coarse flesh that makes for poor table fare, bull redfish are the backbone of the Gulf’s red drum fishery. TPWD saltwater hatcheries provide an amazingly effective assist through massive stockings — some 30-million-plus fingerlings annually. If red drum measure inside the 20- to 28-inch “slot,” they’re fair game for the table.

The popularity of red drum continues to grow. “There’s always one constant,” says Travis “Bowie” Tucker, who talks with anglers daily from Tucker & Sons Bait, a Galveston Island institution for 40 years. “For year-round reliability and access, there is no more popular fish than the red drum.

Almost anyone can catch them with a modest investment in tackle — starting with a 10- or 11-foot surf rod, a squidding reel loaded with 25- to 30-pound-test line and a stout shock leader. “Almost everyone fishes with circle hooks. These hooks basically set themselves when the fish strikes, and they almost never injure the catch. Bull redfish are tough,” Tucker explains, “and they put up an awesome fight. Thanks to good fishery management and conscientious fishermen, we have more bull reds now than ever.”

As for smaller ‘slot’ redfish,” Tucker adds: “They run in schools through all of the major

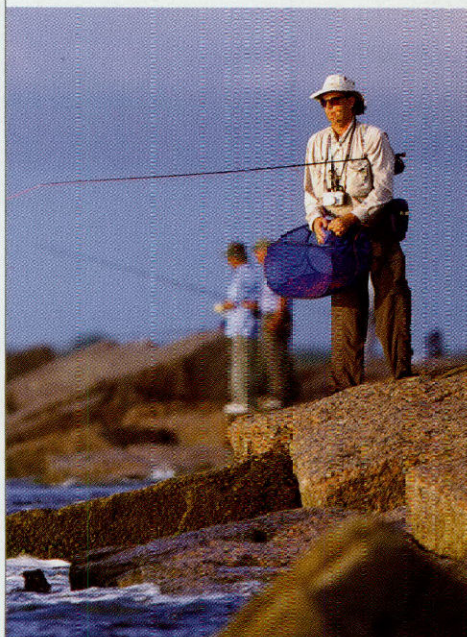


bay systems. And those red drum are versatile. People stop by the shop rigged up with fly rods and shrimp patterns, spinning gear and quarter-ounce spoons baitcasting tackle with topwaters and just about all kinds of live bait. When the tide is moving and redfish are on a bite, there isn’t much that they won’t attack.”

Fishing On the (Jetty) Rocks

Many Rollover Pass red drum follow the current south until they dead-end at the base of the North Galveston Jetty. One wall of the jetty complex extends more than three miles offshore. The rocks support a magnificent array of species, from half-inch shad to 500-pound tiger sharks.

Veteran jetty boaters know the rocks and the treacherous crevasses between them. Regular jetty anglers use GPS units either handheld or console-mounted in tandem with



WADE-FISHING CHECKLIST

Successful wade fishing is all about stealth and efficiency. Generally, it’s easier to cast using a shorter-handled rod than the one boating anglers use. To get knee-deep in the action waders need the following gear.

POLARIZED SUNGLASSES

Glare relief is a major consideration, and polarized sunglasses are essential, and are particularly valuable to waders (and kayakers).

Polarized lenses make fish-finding signals extremely distinctive. These glasses make it easier to analyze the contour of the bay floor, to identify working birds, to recognize fresh slicks regurgitated by feeding speckled trout or even notice subtle changes in the water’s color.

“Wrap-around” shades are among the most popular, because they minimize interference from bright ambient light. And always attach sunglasses to a lanyard so you won’t have to worry about the expensive and annoying mistake of losing a hundred-dollar-plus pair of polarized shades in the water.

WADE-FISHING BELT

A well-designed wade-fishing belt will support a fishing rod in a PVC holder and hold a pair of pliers or hemostats close at hand for extracting hooks, along with a small plastic utility lure box and a stringer.

Stringers should be up to 20 feet long and fitted with a float at the end so the catch will remain suspended and away from the angler — just in case a shark decides to take a bite from a freshly-caught trout. Attach the stringer to the wading belt with a metal pin that can be easily inserted and extracted.

Wide-diameter stringer ropes are less likely to cut an angler’s hands when hoisting a stringer of fish. Thick cotton stringer rope is easier on wet hands, but choose stringers made of tougher nylon.

PROTECTIVE BOOTS OR LEGGINGS

Stingrays pose a threat to wading anglers, and the most effective protection against the stingray is a pair of wade fishing boots or leggings. In addition to preventing painful ray incidents, a good pair of wading boots will protect against bay-floor hazards such as abandoned crabtraps, chunks of concrete, coral, or broken wooden pilings. Wade-fishing leggings (much like dry-land snake leggings) attach around the angler’s calves and cover the tops of wading booties. Leggings cost less than boots, but are not quite as “bulletproof.”

WADING CAP

All caps are not created equal. Although white is a cool color to wear on the outside, it is a problem color for the underside of a cap bill because white reflects light. For a clearer, cooler view, always choose a fishing cap with a green or blue under-bill.

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OFFSHORE-FISHING CHECKLIST

When you're fishing 60 miles from shore, you either have what you need or you do without., and often, doing without is not an option.

RUGGED BOAT RODS

Most of the time you'll use rods and reels that are up to the task of fighting big game fish.

Medium-heavy to heavy boat rods are the norm, rigged with 4/0-class trolling/squidding reels carrying 40- to 50-pound-test monofilament. A long-handled rod makes for much more efficient fighting. Between handling eight-ounce sinkers and hoisting heavyweight amberjack, tuna and cobia or down-deep snapper and grouper, medium to heavy rods are tough enough to counter the protests of even the feistiest Gulf fighter.

FLUOROCARBON LEADER

Fluorocarbon ranks as the ultimate leader material. Unlike monofilament, fluorocarbon is not water-absorbent. Its stiffness can take some getting used to, but its abrasion resistance, tensile strength and shock resistance are impressively apparent. Fluorocarbon becomes virtually invisible when submerged, so it can fool sensitive predator fish that often shy away from visible steel leader or even coated steel.

FISHING PLIERS

For rigging and cutting wire, fishing pliers are imperative. Even with heavy-test monofilament or thick fluorocarbon leader, a pair of corrosion-resistant fishing pliers can reduce the number of cuts an offshore angler's hands endure in a typical day of fishing.

Good all-around fishing pliers do equal duty cutting and twisting leader material and holding a fish's jaw or removing a hook barb from deep inside it.

Pliers with rubber-coated handles are easier to hold, especially with wet or slimy hands. They should always be tied to a box or a belt with a coiled tether.

LONG, FIXED-HANDLE GAFF

Flying gaffs with detachable hooks attached to ropes are mandatory for safely and efficiently handling large sharks and billfish. A long-handled, fixed-hook gaff is all that's needed to snag and subdue common Gulf species such as king mackerel, ling (cobia), dorado, bonita, amberjack or yellowfin and blackfin tuna.

Long gaff handles also provide much more leverage than shorter versions, and they afford the user a much more secure double-handed grip. When made of aluminum, such handles are both lightweight and corrosion-resistant.

GLOVES

Quality nylon fishing gloves are not expensive. But like most offshore gear, once they get a 5- or 6-hour drive from dock they become virtually priceless.

depthfinders, to pinpoint the 40-foot-deep sweet spots on either side of the jetty.

On both sides, the rocks are home to a swimming smorgasbord. Spanish mackerel, their thin, bony jaws brimming with sharp teeth, patrol the ledges of the granite in wolf-like packs. The metallic, torpedo-bodied fish abruptly sever the lines of fishermen who fail to use steel leaders. Large speckled trout, some topping eight pounds, attack pods of mullet only a few feet from where the water bathes the rocks. Buck-toothed sheepshead snatch crabs from the barnacle-encrusted structure just below the waterline.

Black drum, including the occasional leviathan of 40 to 50 pounds, pluck scurrying crabs from the jetty's base. Huge bull reds swim nearby, closely flanked by several species of sharks, including blacktips. The powerful predators have it all, excellent eating qualities and the propensity to jump like sailfish.

Some anglers fish the jetties by boat; others carefully walk the rocks. Today, only the June heat stands as an obstacle.

The Wild World of Blue Water

About five miles beyond the jetty's mouth, the first of the Galveston area's off-shore oil rigs looms. The farther the current flows, the more rigs appear. Some 35 miles southeast of the jetties, the platforms of the Buccaneer Oil Field punctuate the horizon.

Rigs offer a setting for fantastic summer fishing. Swarms of grunts, small jacks and other baitfish circle the structure's algae-laden legs, while whopping cobia, king mackerel, dorado and other species feed on the easy forage nearby. The food chain of the blue water is the stuff of fishing legend.

A 25-foot, center-console boat, held securely by a shock-absorbing aluminum "rig hook," tugs a rope on the downcurrent side of a bright yellow rig in 75 feet of water. Its occupants hold medium-action casting rods rigged with live baits and ribbonfish. King mackerel respond with sizzling runs that strip 40 yards of line in seconds. And the anglers are tested more thoroughly than the tackle.

It's still 65 miles to the Continental Shelf and the 1,000-foot-deep water past the Tequila and Cerveza rigs. The deep-water platforms are responsible for the catch, and usually, the release, of countless billfish. Today, those fish and a great many others are more accessible than ever.

Houston-based Fishing Tackle Unlimited has been in business for 27 years and now

has a store in Southwest Houston off of I-10 East and an outlet in South Houston near Hobby Airport. Owned by brothers Joe and Danny Meyer, the stores have long served as headquarters for Upper Coast offshore anglers. The Meyer brothers know the blue water.

"We've always had a strong base of billfish specialists," says Danny Meyer. "However," he adds, "thanks to the development of fast, water-worthy, center-console boats in the 25-foot and larger class, that segment of the sport-fishing community is now bigger and more avid than ever."

With tighter regulations on red snapper, fishermen now target keeper-size limits of snapper in the morning and then pursue king mackerel, dorado and cobia. In the offshore blue water, anglers seek yellowfin tuna and wahoo along with marlin and sailfish.

Fishermen who run with a single outboard engine are advised to add a light-horsepower kicker motor to the transom. Even a five-horse kicker is insurance for making the return trip to shore. No matter the boat size, safety is the foremost concern, and a VHF radio is a must.

Meyer also stresses the need for both a GPS unit and a depth finder with which to locate fish attractors like wrecks, rocks and bottom breaks. "Serious blue-water fishermen work very hard to get quality bottom coordinates. When you're viewing structure that's 180 feet below, it's imperative that you have a high-quality depthfinder.

"Texas offshore fishing is as good as any to be had on the Gulf of Mexico," Meyer says. "If there's a problem, it's the distance





BAY BOAT FISHING CHECKLIST

Fishing from a boat is a unique game—every inch of deck space is essential. No matter the make or design, it's imperative that the bay boater be prepared to maximize his hull's deck and storage space.

WHITE-SOLED TENNIS OR DECK SHOES

Quality deck shoes are indispensable accessories for boat anglers. White-soled (to prevent deck scuffs) tennis shoes suffice for many. But, unfortunately, once tennis shoes get wet they stay that way.

BAYFISHING'S ESSENTIAL ROD TRIO

It's not uncommon for a bay boater to carry three bait-casting rods—a 7-foot, medium-action blank for popping corks or free-lining live baitfish, a 6-1/2-foot medium-light-action rod for heavy plugs such as topwaters, and a sensitive, 7-foot light-action rod for quarter-ounce-class spoons and shadtail jigs or free-lining live shrimp and smaller live baits.

Bass-caliber baitcasting reels are the best choice for bay boat rods. Preferences vary between reels with round housings and pear-shaped versions that are designed for comfortable palming. So long as it

has a quality star drag system, centrifugal brake and high-grade stainless steel ball bearings, a baitcaster that will accommodate 150 to 175 yards of 12-pound-test monofilament is perfect.

ROD HOLDERS

High-quality rod holders are inexpensive, but valuable angling conveniences.

BINOCULARS

A pair of marine-grade, 8X, wide-angle binoculars unveils a host of fish-revealing vistas for an on-the-move bay boater. It's helpful to be able to read buoy markers from 100 yards away, too.

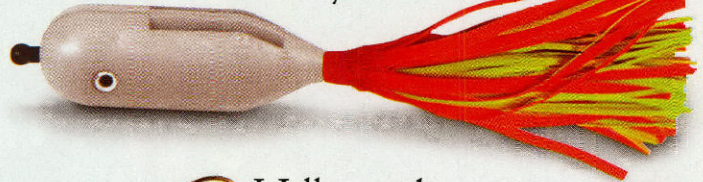
required to reach it. Only so many people are willing to travel 70 miles offshore. But the ones who are willing to make the trip get to fish areas that receive less pressure."

Out on the fringe of the Continental Shelf, where iridescent flying fish frantically flee from massive marlin weighing 500 pounds, the water morphs to a surreal brilliant hue of aquamarine.

This aquamarine water is less than 100 miles from the ports along the Texas South Coast. And no matter what stretch of the Texas coast you fish, all it takes is a single summer day to discover why Texas saltwater fishing is the coolest in the country. ★



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RIVERS OF BLISS



WHETHER WE REALIZE
IT OR NOT, WE ALL
NEED A PIECE OF RIVER
TO CALL OUR OWN.

By Larry D. Hodge

PHOTO © TIM FITZ HARRIS

Pedernales Falls

"THE BRAZOS BELONGED TO ME THAT AFTERNOON, ALL OF IT. IT REALLY DID. THE AUTUMN-BLUE SKY ... THE YELLOW-WHITE AIR, THE CEDARS AND OAKS GREEN AND GOLD AND RED. THE ROCKS THE SIZE OF BUILDINGS, THE SUN ON MY BACK, THE STEADY, COMFORTABLE STROKE OF THE PADDLING ... IT WAS MINE." —FROM *GOODBYE TO A RIVER*, BY JOHN GRAVES.

John Graves was in his eighties before I had the good fortune to meet him and edit the Texas Parks & Wildlife Press edition of his book *Texas Rivers*. Ironically, I'd used a quote from *Goodbye to a River* in the very first book I'd edited years before in another life, a high school Texas history textbook.

At that time I don't think I'd ever been in a boat, much less a canoe, and certainly I'd not floated the Brazos Graves loved and wrote about so well. But the things he had to say not just about the river but about life and people and history and all manner of disparate yet interconnected subjects shone a light into some previously dark corners of my mind.

And so when I was preparing to write this article, the first thing I did was read through *Goodbye to a River* again. And the second thing was to get on the river. Not just any part of the river, but the very part where Graves began his journey, at the picturesque, sandstone, multi-arched bridge across the Brazos where Texas 16 crosses it just below Possum Kingdom Dam, where signs now proclaim it to be the John Graves Scenic Riverway.

I wanted to make a piece of the river mine. That's one of the magical things about rivers. They can belong to John Graves, and to you, and to me and to hosts past, present and future and not be diminished — as long as we all care for them.

There was a time when people who roamed rivers were called river rats. Today the term river angels is more appropriate, for river paddlers and anglers are among the fiercest protectors of Texas' flowing waters.

HELLO TO A RIVER

"Usually, fall is the good time to go to the Brazos, and when you can choose, October is the best month. . . . Most autumns, the water is low from the long dry summer. . . ."

Early October found me standing beside the Texas 16 bridge with TPWD fisheries biologists Mark Howell, Gerald Kurten and Dale Lyons, looking at a river so low that even a canoe would have to be dragged much of the time. Graves was right. The weather was perfect, but the river was low.

However, Howell had a plan, and so we put in below the mouth of Ioni (*EYE-on-EYE*) Creek, near the spot where Graves made his first night's camp and scribbled in his notebook, "The hard thing is to get slowed down." The thick, tough, oily green weeds and willow trees Graves described were still there. And so were fish, as my three companions soon demonstrated and I learned first-hand. Largemouth bass, white bass, channel catfish (yes, they will bite artificial lures) freshwater drum and sunfish all took our offerings, but most fun of all were the hard-fighting spotted bass. I dragged a plastic cicada-imitating lure through the swift water just below the last rapid, and one little bass after another smashed it as it reached the edge of the riffle. They were as beautiful and athletic as any Colorado mountain-stream trout, and best of all, they were in my piece of the river.

Much of the time I spent with camera in hand watching the others fish. Twice I was rewarded when a flight of no fewer than 50 blue-winged teal buzzed Howell as he fished the rapids. Being here was definitely better than reading about it. And unlike Graves, I had no trouble slowing down and savoring the solitude.

"The aloneness of it was good," John Graves wrote of the appeal of rivers in his book *Goodbye to a River*. And it's that very aspect that draws modern river rats, whether sharing a quiet father-daughter moment (right) or a solitary afternoon of fly-fishing (below right). (Below) The sun sets in a private showing for a canoeist on Armand Bayou.



IMPATIENCE IS A CITY KIND OF EMOTION, HARMONIOUS WITH "DRIVE" AND ACID-CHEWED JUMPING STOMACHS, AND I PRESUME WE NEED IT IF WE ARE TO HOLD OUR OWN ON THE JOUSTING GROUND THIS CONTEMPORARY WORLD MOST OFTEN IS. BUT IT GOES POORLY ON A RIVER ...

FINDING YOUR OWN PIECE OF RIVER

There's no substitute for being on a river yourself. Fortunately, no Texan lives more than a few hours' drive from a stream that will float a kayak or canoe, and the state has no shortage of river angels willing to share information about the waters they love. Here are some recommendations to get you started, but finding your own piece of river — well, that's up to you, and that's a good thing.

EXPERIENCED ONLY NEED APPLY A trio of West Texas Rivers — the Rio Grande, the Pecos and the Devils — offer the most solitude and some of the finest fishing. However, they are remote and can be dangerous. "There are parts of the Rio Grande a complete novice could do, others you should not attempt unless you are experienced and well-equipped," says Marc McCord, whose Web site <www.canoeoman.com> offers reams of information.

"For me, the Pecos is the best fishing river in West Texas," says river guidebook author Louis Albrecht. "It has spectacular scenery, but when you are in the canyon, there are places you can't get to by land. Once you begin, you are committed."

The Devils River provides some of the best smallmouth bass fishing in Texas, but access is limited, and there are few places to camp unless you have landowner permission. "The river doubles in flow where Dolan Creek comes in," points out river guide Joey Lin. "There are Class III rapids on the Devils, and it's very remote, so inexperienced paddlers need to be careful."

RIVERS FOR THE REST OF US. Fortunately, there are many paddler-friendly Texas rivers. Near the top of everyone's list is the San Marcos. "For a great river experience, I tell people to

try the San Marcos," says McCord. "It's not that challenging for people who know what they're doing. It's the most reliable river in Texas in terms of flow, and it's drop-dead gorgeous." Lin points out that the San Marcos can be dangerous for novices — there are numerous small dams that must be portaged — but it has plenty of sunfish, smallmouth bass, largemouth bass and Guadalupe bass. Summer angling can be awesome, with channel catfish biting topwater flies and bass chasing vibrating lures or grasshoppers.

The South Llano also has a reliable flow and runs through country without a lot of development. "This river has a lot of smallmouths," advises David Thomason, who guides fishing trips on Hill Country rivers. "Fishing is best in the stretch above South Llano River State Park. There are a lot of riffles and rapids and tailwater below rapids. Throw a pheasant-tail fly for Guadalupe bass, smallmouths and sunfish. With ultralight equipment, use a crawdad pattern. Small lures work best."

The Colorado River between Austin and Webberville has some stretches that can be run as day trips, and you can catch channel catfish, Guadalupe bass and carp — all on flies, if you like. Using heavy conventional gear, you can catch freshwater drum up to 30 pounds on live crayfish.

The Houston area has more paddling opportunities than most people realize, says Wiest, who is writing a book on Southeast Texas canoeing for novices. "Buffalo Bayou, Clear Creek, Oyster Bayou, Chocolate Bayou, Armand Bayou, Lake Charlotte, Sheldon Lake State Park — we have this incredibly benign resource for paddling 12 months of the year so close to Houston, and people don't know about it. People ask me where I go to canoe, and I say, 'Right in your backyard.'" Wiest doesn't fish, but she says the birding is phenomenal.

"In East Texas, the Sabine below Toledo Bend Reservoir is great," McCord says. "It's very remote and forested on both sides, flows pretty consistently, and you can take it all the way to the Gulf of Mexico."

Texas has 15 major rivers, and we've touched on fewer than half of them. See "Life is short — paddle hard" on page 37 for places to find more information.



CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: Swimmers cool off in the Pedernales River; canoeing down Buffalo Bayou in the shadow of downtown Houston; an isolated stretch of the Pedernales River beckons those who crave solitude; the Rio Grande cuts through the towering cliffs of Santa Elena Canyon in Big Bend National Park; a kayaker tries out the newly rebuilt chutes at the Rio Vista Dam on the San Marcos River in San Marcos.



THE MAGIC OF RIVERS

"The aloneness of it was good. . . . Few people are willing to believe that a piece of country, hunted and fished and roamed over, felt and remembered, can be company enough . . ."

Every single person I interviewed for this story said they love rivers for the same reasons. "What I like about [the Brazos] is the thing that may be in jeopardy after you write about it — there aren't many people out there," Kenny Whittenburg tells me.

"Relaxation," Natalie Wiest says when describing why she likes canoeing on the Trinity and the Colorado. "Being out-

side, alone on the river, with the sounds of nature all around."

"The sense of being in the wilderness is quite an appeal," says Louis Aulbach about the Pecos.

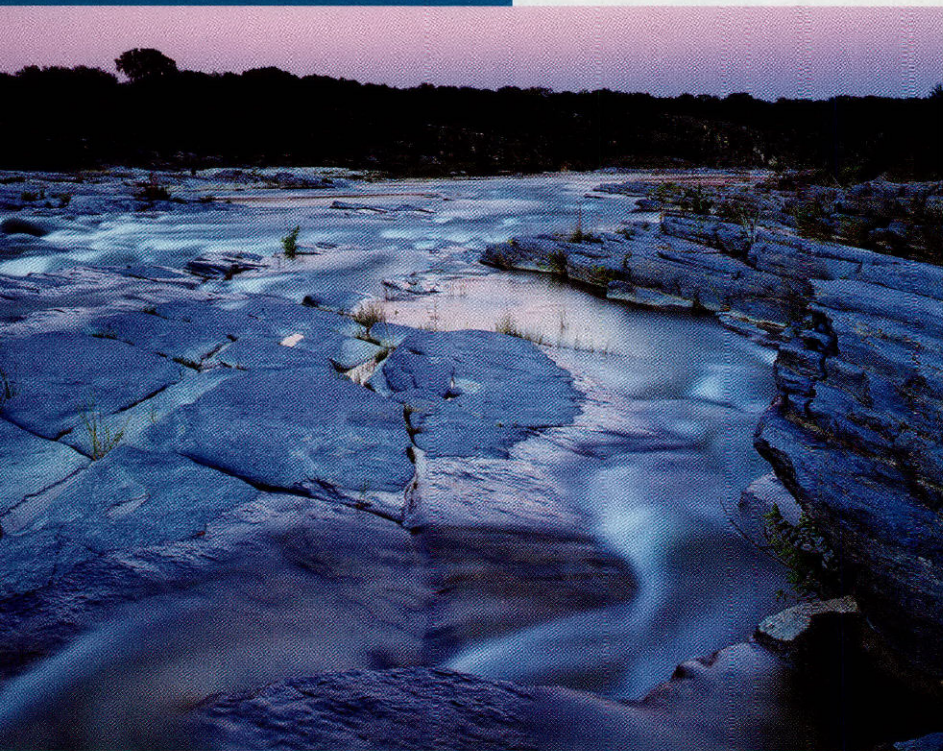
Ed Lowe has paddled many Texas rivers, and he particularly loves the Rio Grande, the Pecos and the Devils. "I love the fact they've been there thousands of years, and the surroundings are in many cases unchanged since the Comanches roamed up and down," he says. "It seems to me that people these days are so connected to cell phones and video games and computers, and we all have a need to

connect back to the earth, and rivers let us get away from all that stuff and see what's out there."

It's difficult to put a price tag on the intrinsic value of rivers, but Lloyd McCoy came close. McCoy owns a few acres on the Brazos below Possum Kingdon Dam, and his children and grandchildren have begged him not to sell. He turned down an offer of 10 times what the land was worth. "I'm worth \$22 billion," the would-be buyer huffed. "Well, that's not near enough to buy this place," McCoy responded.

For some people, rivers are priceless. ★

CANOES, TOO, ARE UNOBTRUSIVE; THEY DON'T STORM THE NATURAL WORLD OR RIDE OVER IT, BUT DRIFT IN UPON IT AS A PART OF ITS OWN SILENCE ... CHANCES OF BEING QUIET NOWADAYS ARE LIMITED.



LIFE IS SHORT — PADDLE HARD

Serious canoe- and kayak-heads navigate the Web as expertly as they do the rapids on their favorite rivers, so there's a wealth of information for paddlers out there just waiting to be clicked on. Paddlers are a friendly bunch who like to share, so visiting one site will uncover links to others, which will lead to others, until you feel you need to wear a PFD while surfing the Web to keep from drowning in information. The sites below will get you started; how you find a way to stop is your problem.

- Information on Texas navigation law, legal access points and river flow gauges. Especially valuable is the "Analysis of Texas Waterways," which includes maps and descriptions of significant features (including hazards) by stream segment. <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/riverguide>
- Includes link to "Canoeing and Kayaking 101," which lists paddling clubs and river conservation associations. <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/paddlingtrail>
- Reviews of Houston-area paddling locations. <www.tamug.edu/paddler> and <www.bayoupreservation.org>
- A monumental labor of love by river guide Marc McCord. Trip reports, photos, water quality, access points, camping, outfitters and shuttles — this site has it all. <www.canoeman.com/crgs>
- Covers paddling in eight states. <www.southwestpaddler.com>
- Site covering multiple states with coverage of a number of East Texas streams. Allows you to post your own trip reports. <www.kayakguide.com>
- River-related links including a list of retailers of Louis Aulbach's guidebooks. <www.hal-pc.org/~lfa>
- Dallas Down-River Club site. <www.down-river.com>
- Central Texas Fly Fishers site. <www.ctff.org>
- Joey Lin's guide service. <www.faroutfishingtrips.com>
- Ed Lowe's guide service. <www.texaswatertrails.com>
- Instructional guided trips statewide. <www.cutteraquatics.com>

And the list goes on: <www.texas kayakfishermen.com>, <www.alamacityrivermen.org>, <www.houstoncanooclub.org>, <www.canoetexas.com>, <www.txrivers.org>, <www.gopaddle.com>, <www.austinflyfishers.com>, <www.austinpaddling.org>

TOP PHOTO © ROLF NUSSBAUMER; BOTTOM © ERICH SCHLEGEL

A TURTLE'S PROGRESS

AS THE SUN SET ON A MEXICAN BEACH—SOUTH OF BROWNSVILLE, JAIME PEÑA KNELT IN THE SAND JUST A FEW FEET FROM THE FOAMING OCEAN. BEFORE HIM, ILLUMINATED BY THE DAY'S LAST LIGHT, LAY A PLASTIC TRAY FILLED WITH KEMP'S RIDLEY SEA TURTLE HATCHLINGS, NEWBORN TURTLES JUST FOUR INCHES LONG. ONE BY ONE, PEÑA PLUCKED THE HATCHLINGS OUT OF THE TRAY, PLACED THEM GENTLY ON THE SAND AND WATCHED THEM CRAWL THE LAST FEW FEET INTO THE SEA.

By Tom Harvey

All around, up and down the beach, Mexican and U.S. scientists and volunteers were doing the same, turning the tide line black with wriggling turtle hatchlings.

"This is the best part of the project — my favorite part — just helping out the babies a little bit more," Peña explained. "I deal a lot with governments, politics and permits and this and that, but this makes everything worthwhile and more."

Peña is conservation programs curator at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville. He's been with the sea turtle recovery project since 1994 and is now field crew director for U.S. support of Kemp's ridley programs in Mexico. He's been around long

enough to know that, on that night, something remarkable was happening.

The date was June 28, 2006, when 240,000 ridley turtle hatchlings were released at once—the largest single-day turtle release since the binational recovery project began three decades ago. It's an impressive number, although ultimately only a tiny percentage will survive and return to nest as adult females.

But even though sea turtle nestings on Texas and Mexico beaches have soared to record highs in recent years, biologists are tempering jubilation with caution, emphasizing that current levels of funding and work must continue for the world's most endangered sea turtle to fully recover.

The Kemp's ridley is one of five sea turtle species found in the Gulf of Mexico, all of them threatened or endangered. The other four are the hawksbill, leatherback, loggerhead and green sea turtles. The ridley is the world's smallest and rarest.

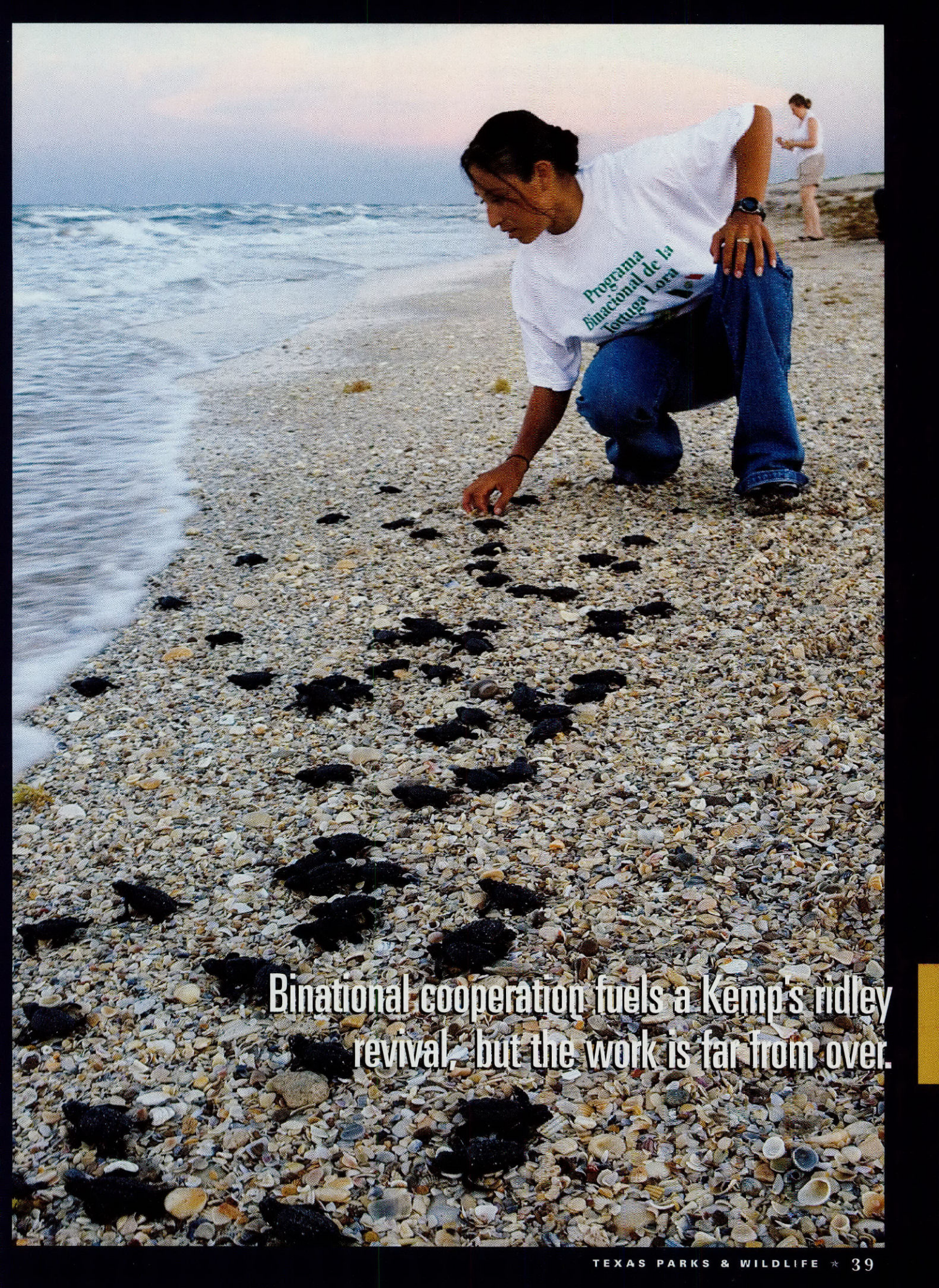
"Ground zero" for the Kemp's ridley

Last year's big ridley release took place at Tepehuajes, about 200 miles south of Brownsville. It's one of the northernmost "turtle camps" within the 125-kilometer



A newly hatched Kemp's ridley turtle safely reaches the water's edge, in the first stretch of its race for survival.

Right: A volunteer watches over hatchlings during a release of the turtles in Mexico.



Binational cooperation fuels a Kemp's ridley revival, but the work is far from over.

stretch of Mexican beach, where 99 percent of the world's ridley population nests.

Rancho Nuevo, a little farther south, is "ground zero" for ridley nesting. It was here in 1947 that Andres Herrera shot film that rocked the wildlife science world, showing an *arribada*, or arrival, of tens of thousands of female turtles on a single day.

In the years that followed, however, human poachers and natural predators took an alarming toll on the ridley. Nesting numbers steadily dropped to a record low of only 702 nests in 1985, the dark days when many scientists feared nothing could stop the turtle's headlong plunge toward extinction.

Lately, things have improved a lot, but it's been no accident.

Mexico began protecting sea turtles in 1966. In 1977, the Mexican government declared Rancho Nuevo the country's first sea turtle reserve. The next year, the collaborative binational program involving the U.S. began to try to restore the Kemp's rid-

ley to a self-sustaining level.

"Most of these turtles reach sexual maturity around 12 years of age, so basically I'm seeing my [hatchlings] come back and nest," Peña said. "But I can only imagine how people like Jaime Ortiz, the camp coordinator here at Tepehuajes, feels. He has been doing this since 1978. And back in those days, if you had a thousand turtles a year, that was a lot. And we're talking about 2,000 turtles in one day back on May 11. So

Right: A hatchling leaves characteristic tracks in the sand.

Below: By hatching en masse, the turtles overwhelm predators and improve their survival chances.



it's an incredible feeling to be part of this."

Each spring and summer for three decades, scientists, graduate students and volunteers have come to live in the Mexican turtle camps. They patrol the beaches, looking for telltale tracks in the sand, signs of a nesting female. They carefully dig up the eggs and rebury them inside protected corrals, where they're safe from poachers and predators. The work is hot, the condi-

Turtle-viewing opportunities

There are at least two places in Texas where people can see live Kemp's ridley sea turtles up close and personal, and a couple of spots where visitors can watch the release of ridley hatchlings crawling into the surf.

Padre Island National Seashore, south of Corpus Christi on the barrier island, (361) 949-8068, <www.nps.gov/pais>. For three decades, Donna Shaver has been leading efforts to re-establish a Texas nesting population of Kemp's ridleys here. Turtle eggs collected along the Texas coast are brought to the national seashore, which has an established program of summer hatchling releases for the public. Call the Hatchling Hotline at (361) 949-7163 for up-to-date information on turtle releases from April to August.

Texas State Aquarium, 2710 N. Shoreline Boulevard, Corpus Christi, (800) 477-4853, <www.texasstateaquarium.org>. Visitors can watch through underwater windows as live ridleys swim around in the big Turtle Cove aquarium. These once-injured, nonreleasable turtles now live a comfortable life supporting public education. The aquarium also has green, hawksbill and loggerhead sea turtles.

Sea Turtle, Inc., 6617 Padre Boulevard, South Padre Island, (956) 761-4511, <www.seaturtleinc.com>. STI was founded in 1977 by Ila Loetscher, popularly known as "The Turtle Lady." It rehabilitates injured sea turtles and provides educational programs for schools and public visitors, including Turtle Shows, where people can see live ridleys and other turtle species that are nonreleasable or in rehab. Under oversight by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the organization also incubates eggs and releases hatchlings from turtles that nest in the South Padre Island area. From April to August, STI conducts ridley hatchling releases, roping off a protected area on the beach right in front of condominium row, where the public is welcome to observe for free. Check the Web site for release dates in the nesting season.





Biologists and volunteers of all ages help the hatchlings make the trek from nest to sea.

tions remote and primitive.

But it's paid off. Last year, more than 100 ridley turtle nests were found on Texas beaches, twice the previous year's number, vindicating decades of work by U.S. scientists and dedicated volunteers to re-establish a second nesting location in Texas. (See "Solving the Ridley Riddle," March 2004.)

Still, Mexico remains the primary home for the species — a record 12,143 ridley nests were found there in 2006. Although the United States has provided money and manpower, Mexican elected officials, scientists, students and volunteers have played key roles in the ridley recovery. Without 41 years of work by Mexican biologists, the turtle would not be recovering, a fact that sometimes gets scant attention north of the border.

Help from an unexpected source

The turtle camps needed more all-terrain vehicles to patrol beaches and better accommodations for workers, things the governments couldn't always provide. Help came from an unexpected source in 1995, when a new partner emerged on the scene.

"It really started when Pat Burchfield with the Gladys Porter Zoo made a presentation to our seafood industry at one of our association meetings," said Les Hodgson, co-owner of Marco Sales, a Brownsville shrimp wholesaler. "He explained to us how important it was to keep a balance in nature, and that if you lose a species, it has an effect on another species. And if we want to maintain a good shrimp stock out in the Gulf, we've got to maintain a healthy environment for all the animals out there."

Shrimping practices had been identi-



Left: Data is recorded about each nesting female.



Left: A volunteer carefully helps the mother off the nest so her eggs can be collected.



Left: Each clutch contains around 100 eggs.

tion. I was very pleased at the warm reception I got."

Burchfield's words took hold with Les and his brother Larry, who began a crusade to get U.S. shrimpers into the ridley recovery project. The Hodgsons approached the Texas Shrimp Association and Wild American Shrimp, the marketing group that represents shrimpers in eight U.S. states along the Gulf and Atlantic. A fluent Spanish-speaker, Les also got Mexican shrimpers involved.

"Together, the Mexican industry bought the property here, the U.S. industry bought the material for this camp at Tepehuajes, and between the fishermen from both countries we spent two months down here building the 12-bed facility for the biologists that run this camp," Hodgson said.

Ocean Trust, a Virginia-based nonprofit that promotes science, conservation and seafood partnerships, also helped fund and build the Tepehuajes camp and continues to support ridley restoration with contributions from the seafood industry.

Building local sustainability: jobs from turtles

Around the globe, wildlife conservation efforts often fail without the support of local communities. With that in mind, turtle supporters took a new tack in 1996.

"When we first started, we thought shrimpers were probably the most adversely affected by government regulations," Hodgson said. "But it wasn't until we spent some time in the little *ejidos* [communal farms] behind the turtle camps that we found they had lost revenue from not being able to collect turtle eggs and were probably hurt worse than anyone."

Shrimpers and scientists went to work with the Mexican federal agency Desarrollo Integral Familiar, whose role is to create jobs and industry at the family level in local communities. The Darden Foundation (affiliated with a company that owns Red Lobster restaurants) helped fund construction of a commercial kiln in Tepehuajes. Patricia Luevano, a Tamaulipan state turtle restoration leader, got the governor's wife personally involved, and they brought in skilled artisans from other areas of Mexico to train the locals on how to make pottery and even paid them a salary while they were learning. University of Texas at Brownsville Art Professor Nancy Slight also volunteered to help teach the villagers ceramic arts.

fied as one reason for the Kemp's ridley's decline, and in the 1990s shrimpers were required to start using turtle-excluder devices, holes in shrimp trawls that allow sea turtles to escape and avoid drowning.

At a time when some people were placing blame, zoo director Burchfield went to Orlando to speak to the National Fisheries Institute, holding an olive branch.

"I told them they need the turtle as much as we do, because it's part of the food web where they earn their living," Burchfield said. "I asked them to be part of the solu-

What to do if you spot a sea turtle on the beach

Turtle scientists rely on public reports as well as on volunteers. If you see a large sea turtle crawling on the beach or laying eggs, or if you find a sick or injured turtle, call (866) 887-8535. You'll hear a recording that will give you the correct phone number to call based on where the sighting occurred. For more information, visit the PAIS Web site: <www.nps.gov/pais/nature-science/reporting.htm>.

Right: Turtle eggs are painstakingly reburied inside protected corrals, where they're safe from poachers and predators.

"We had no idea what the response would be, but the day we opened the pottery school, all 40 families showed up," said Hodgson. "For most of the women, it was the first time they'd ever had a job they got paid to do."

Ceramic candle holders, flowerpots, wall sconces, wine chillers and many other items — all bearing ridley turtle motifs — now sell at places like Gladys Porter Zoo and Sea Turtle, Inc., a turtle rehabilitation facility on South Padre Island. Most of the money goes back to the families in Tepehuajes. The rest is used for sea turtle public education and conservation.

The government is also planning to expand a small museum at La Pesca, the northernmost Mexican turtle camp, to better interpret the ridley story for Mexican and U.S. visitors and support turtle-related tourism.

Heading in the right direction, but not home yet

The current Kemp's ridley bi-national recovery plan calls for a total of 10,000 females nesting in a single year, among other provisions, for biologists to consider "downlisting" the species from endangered to threatened. If current trends continue, Peña says some scientists believe the project could hit that mark by 2012. (Recovery targets could change, since the plan is now undergoing revision. The draft revised recovery plan will be out for public comment later this year.)



"We cannot look at a 2,000-turtle *arrá-da* on May 11 as 'Okay, that's it, we got it, the turtle's recovered, let's pack it up and go home' — not at all," Peña said. "This is the one-yard line — we cannot stop now."

"But I think this is the example to follow in conservation, not only for sea turtles, but for any endangered species. If you can have federal, state and local governments, fisheries industries, universities and NGOs from both countries working together, that is the key for conservation success. That is the word: cooperation." ★

Below: Students of the pottery school in Tepehuajes, with samples of their ceramics bearing ridley turtle motifs.





The *Amblyomma rotundatum*, or rotund toad tick, capable of carrying unwanted, tenacious tropical pathogens, may be quietly arriving attached to non-native animals.

FROM THE DISEASES THEY BRING TO THE TICKS THAT HITCH A RIDE ON THEM, NON-NATIVE REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS CAN WREAK HAVOC ON AN ECOSYSTEM.



(COLD-BLOODED KILLERS)

By Arturo Longoria

THE HUMAN AVERSION TO SNAKES, LIZARDS AND OTHER scaly things has its roots in myths and legends, which often depict reptiles as tempters and connivers, and even great dragons born of evil and mischief. The fact that some reptiles are venomous has contributed over time to this innate dread. Still, with the exception of a handful of venomous snakes, most Texas reptiles are benign and serve as useful predators, balancing out rodent and insect populations and serving as allies in the overall harmony of nature.

However, sometimes things can go awry, especially when foreign species are introduced into areas where they interfere with endemic animal and plant life or when they carry pathogens that can decimate native or domestic animal populations. Obviously, reptiles are not the only introduced exotics that can disrupt ecosystems. Texas landowners are familiar with fire ants, Africanized bees and a slew of invasive grasses. Then there are the mammals, feral hogs and aoudad sheep, not to mention the sika and other exotic deer that have displaced many Hill Country and South Texas whitetails. Along with the unstoppable kudzu in the American Southeast and aquatic hyacinth clogging waterways like the Rio Grande, the casual or innocent translocation of one species into the range of another often wreaks havoc on the biological status quo.



“IN FLORIDA, THE GREEN ANOLE SEEMS TO BE ON THE DECLINE,” MITCH STERNBERG SAYS. “STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT WHEN THE BROWN ANOLE GETS ESTABLISHED IT WILL DRIVE THE GREEN ANOLES OFF THE GROUND AND LOWER TRUNK AREAS AND INTO THE HIGHER BRANCHES THAT OCCUPY THE TREE’S CROWN.”

When it comes to introduced reptiles, and amphibians as well, Texans face the likelihood of two major problems. First, transplant species can overwhelm native populations and push them out of their preferred habitats. Perhaps even more disturbing is the possibility that tenacious tropical pathogens might hitch a ride within the parasites that live on reptiles and amphibians, and thus spread diseases that have the potential to wipe out animals like white-tailed deer and domestic livestock.

Wildlife biologists and other researchers are always on the lookout for exotic reptiles and amphibians that have either been abandoned by their owners in refuges and sanctuaries, or were transported into backyards and city parks amid plants purchased at nurseries.

“We caught a tortoise not long ago that had some very interesting ticks attached to it,” says Mitch Sternberg, a wildlife biologist for U.S. Fish & Wildlife who works at the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge in South Texas. “Not long after we found the tortoise, we found a marine toad with more ticks that looked pretty rare.”

Sternberg said that several suspicious ticks were sent to scientists at the National Veterinary Services Lab in Ames, Iowa, which identified one as *Amblyomma rotundatum*. Also known as the rotund toad tick, this species was introduced from Africa and has been identified on the North American mainland only in South Florida and on Mexico’s Pacific Coast in the state of Guerrero. How the tick arrived in South Texas remains a mystery, but the event gives a whole new meaning to keeping our borders safe from unregulated entry.

“On the refuge we’ve found two iguanas, one about four feet long that shimmed up a tree, and an African spurred tortoise, and even one tortoise that had its shell painted purple, obviously by the owner who abandoned it,” says Sternberg.

Sternberg adds that while one parasitological expert has suggested that the previously unseen tick was perhaps misidentified, biologists are still concerned that a non-native animal could introduce a potentially devastating disease like heartwater into the country. Also

known as cowdriosis, heartwater is a non-contagious disease endemic to Africa (but now known throughout the Caribbean) that is carried by ticks of the genus *Amblyomma* and is caused by a rickettsial organism known as *Cowdria ruminantium*. The effects of the disease can range from moderate to lethal. It could pose an acute threat to ruminants like cows, sheep, goats and deer.

“That’s precisely why the area along the Rio Grande from Brownsville to Laredo here is patrolled by tick riders [known officially as Mounted Patrol Inspectors for the Fever Tick Eradication Program]. We have a general quarantine for ticks so no one can transport a cow north across Highway 83 without first being tested for tick-caused infections,” says Roel Treviño of the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

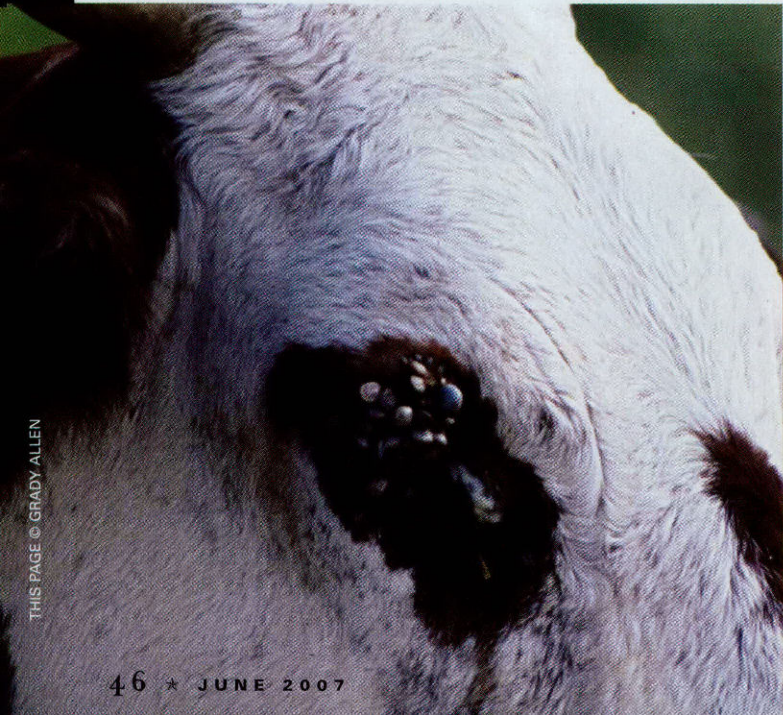
Even so, biologists worry that cows wandering into the United States, or those that are purposely smuggled across the border, may not be the only ways that infected ticks travel to our mainland.

“Tick inspectors are watching out for cows and such,” Sternberg says, “but we also need to keep a lookout for reptiles and other animal species that probably go unnoticed and yet need to be monitored. Besides, it’s not just diseases we’re worried about. There is also the question of species competition. An introduced reptile can sometimes depose native reptiles.”

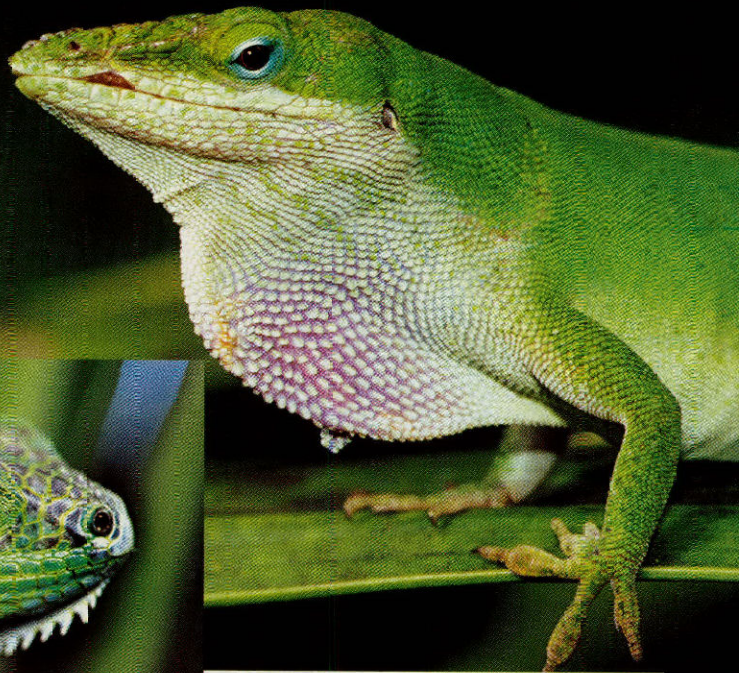
One of the best examples of reptilian niche displacement occurs in the American South, and possibly soon throughout Texas, where the Caribbean brown anole has successfully shoved our native green anole out of part of its preferred hunting territory. The brown anole (*Anolis sagrei*) first arrived in the Florida Keys in the late 1800s. But it wasn’t until the early 1960s that biologists observed that this member of the anole family, which includes some 300 species worldwide, had begun to oust the green anole (*Anolis carolinensis*), which is our only native anole and was first observed by Europeans in the mid-1600s. The displacement, however, was not of the kind where one animal moves into another’s territory and pushes it clean out.

At my McAllen home, I recently spotted a brown anole (the first I’d ever seen) perched on our cedar fence. That’s when I first called Mitch Sternberg, who gave me the lowdown on how this lizard native to the Bahamas and Cuba had arrived in South Texas. I also noticed that the brown anole never foraged into the higher branches of my front yard’s mesquites and ebonies, and likewise stayed clear of the higher limbs of my brasil trees where we usually spot all our local green anoles. Green anoles prefer to hunt from “ground to

Cows may be threatened by various diseases carried by ticks on non-natives. Some areas have been overrun by feral hogs (below).



THIS PAGE © GRADY ALLEN



The non-native Caribbean brown anole (above) has successfully shoved our native green anole (upper right) out of part of its preferred hunting territory. Green iguanas (right), sometimes escape or are released by pet owners. Invasive plants such as water hyacinth (below) clog waterways like the Rio Grande.

Worth Zoo, maintains that despite the potential for problems, there are active measures in place to protect the unwanted introduction of exotic reptiles and

amphibians and the diseases they may harbor.

“Under USDA regulations, most incoming animals to the U.S. have to undergo extensive diagnostic testing and possible quarantine in both their country of origin and at designated USDA import sites to detect diseases such as *Ocrodria ruminantium*,” Ferrell says. Places like the Fort Worth Zoo quarantine incoming animals for 30 to 90 days more in order to watch for infectious diseases and remove parasites.

“If a concerning parasite or disease enters Texas, the state or federal authorities alert the veterinary medical community and render instructions for possible containment measures,” Ferrell says. He cautions, though, that “this type of drastic occurrence would be rare in our area [Dallas/Fort Worth], but could be more foreseeable in the border regions with Mexico.”

Officials are also on the lookout for *Coxiella burnetii*, known as Q-fever, another organism transmitted by ticks, says Ferrell. Again, Ferrell emphasized that the probability of foreign reptiles introducing diseases into the state that might affect mammalian livestock is remote. However, the possibility of diseases from exotic reptiles infecting native reptiles is another matter.

“The imported herpetofauna usually have no clinical disease and often carry their infectious organisms in low numbers. But releasing foreign reptiles into our ecosystems would create the opportunity for these infectious agents to find new and [susceptible] reptilian hosts that most likely would result in severe and widespread fatal infections within a suitable reptile order,” Ferrell says.

Ferrell has firm opinions about the ownership and abandonment of reptiles into the wilds. “My recommendation is preventative,” Ferrell says. “Do not own exotic reptiles. The trade in exotic reptiles is partially responsible for reptile depopulations in their countries of origin, the introduction of foreign parasites and diseases to the United States, competition and displacement of native North American herpetofauna, and potential damage to other native fauna populations through predation.”

Or to put it another way — if you want to see something exotic, take a trip — and don’t bring anything home. ★



crown,” meaning that they look for insects from along the ground all the way up to the crown of trees. The brown anole, on the other hand, prefers to hunt from “ground to trunk,” meaning that it stalks insects only from ground level to no more than about five or six feet off the ground.

“In Florida the green anole seems to be on the decline,” Sternberg says. “Studies have shown that when the brown anole gets established it will drive the green anoles off the ground and lower trunk areas and into the higher branches that occupy the tree’s crown.”

Might this make the green anoles more likely to be spotted by predatory birds or remove it from some of its preferred food sources? Well, scientists don’t seem ready to render any sort of definitive conclusions in that regard. But the fact that brown anoles can muster the muscle and tenacity to push green anoles into the upper tree crown has many biologists concerned.

“The bottom line is that in areas where the brown anole becomes prevalent we see a decline in green anoles,” says Sternberg.

In places like Guam, the introduced brown tree snake has greatly diminished native bird and lizard populations. An accidental or intentional release of a reptile species not known to Texas might create the same sort of ecological disaster here.

Still, all the news isn’t quite so apocalyptic. Shannon Ferrell, a clinical veterinarian who works as a researcher and practitioner at the Fort

TOP PHOTOS © ROLF NUSBAUMER; CENTER © TIM FITZHARRIS; BELOW BY CHASE FOUNIANI / IPWU



TOP 10 BIRD

Northern cardinal



Western scrub jay

Altamira oriole



QUESTIONS

By BERNADETTE NOLL

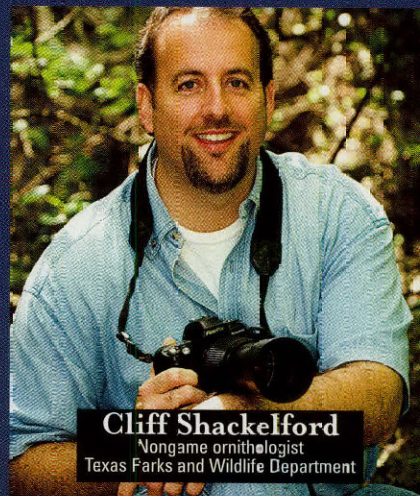


Golden-cheeked warbler

SCRUB JAY, ALTAMIRA AND WARBLER © ROLF NUSSBAUMER; NORTHERN CARDINAL © GREG LASLEY/KAC PRODUCTIONS

ANSWERS TO THE MOST FREQUENT AVIAN INQUIRIES

Since we live in the birdiest state in the union, with 629 species reported, there is no question that there will always be questions. Oftentimes we take the birds and their activities for granted.



Cliff Shackelford
Nongame ornithologist
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

But the birds come into our consciousness and give us cause for a pause when there is seemingly strange behavior, or when they are in an odd location, or when we see a bird that to the average onlooker seems like an odd duck — or warbler or finch or sparrow. What is it doing? Where is it going? Where did it come

from? Or perhaps the most perplexing — what is it?

Each year Cliff Shackelford, the nongame ornithologist for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, receives hundreds of calls and e-mails regarding birds and their avian behavior. Over the years, Shackelford has documented these

inquiries — creating a fascinating compilation he has distilled into a crowd-pleasing Power Point demonstration.

Culled from his years of arduous record keeping, I bring to you, in no particular order, the top 10 birding questions posed each year in the state of Texas.

ONE I spotted a bald eagle! Is this unusual? Aren't they endangered?

While bald eagles are still officially listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act, the number of bald eagles nationally has increased from approximately 500 breeding pairs in 1967 to an estimated 7,000 breeding pairs today. A TPWD aerial nest check in the spring of 2005 found 160 active nests out



Bald eagle

of 188 nesting territories surveyed. Says Shackelford: "If you are near a lake in Texas, you will most likely see a bald eagle. They are not uncommon; the numbers are continually on the rise. They're here and they're here in great numbers." Though bald eagles are no longer unusual, they are still spectacular, and you should get out to see one if you can.

TWO I've got a bird in my yard that has become a nuisance. Can you come and take it away?

Many people call regarding birds that have become pests: a mockingbird that sings loudly all night long, an owl that is threatening pets,

a Carolina wren nesting in the eaves, etc. TPWD is not in the business of removing birds, nor do we recommend methods of ridding an area of a bird. "We do not move birds," says Shackelford. "If there is an owl threatening your cat, keep it in the house. If there is a loud mockingbird outside your bedroom, shut the window. Just like with any other perceived bad neighbor, we've got to figure out ways to make peace and even learn to appreciate their contributions. The raptors work hard to eliminate the rodent population. The mockingbirds eat the bugs. I hope people can appreciate that." Shackelford also points out that the law protects all native birds, so meddling with them or their nests is illegal.

Northern Mockingbird



THREE How can I attract birds to my yard?

Birds, like other wild creatures, need three things: food, water and shelter. While feeders are nice and will probably bring in a few birds, the best way to attract birds is to create a backyard habitat or wildscape your yard. "If you've got a yard that looks like a manicured golf course in Central Texas, for example, you're only going to attract grackles and white-winged doves," says Shackelford.

A yard needs a diversity of plants, feeders and cover in order to attract a variety of wildlife. A yard planted with multiple layers of native plants will act as a veritable buffet for an amazing array of birds by providing essential butterflies, berries, bugs and lizards for the birds to feast upon. Nesting boxes, such as a screech owl box or bluebird box, will provide a necessary dwelling place for a wide variety of birds and will give you an opportunity for daily viewing of your yard birds. Adding a water feature such as a pond for the birds to bathe in and drink from will also go a long way to attracting birds to your yard. Even apartment balconies and patios can be effectively wildscaped with potted plants and water features. Before you know it, painted buntings, hummingbirds and songbirds galore will be flocking to your own backyard.

In our own yard, in a treed but very urban setting, the water drip — a small plastic tube hooked up to a spigot and set to drip — has attracted a medley of birds, including dozens of different migrating species. Each spring we can practically count on the many warblers and tanagers and grosbeaks that stop in for a drink or a bath before continuing on their lengthy journey. Bathing birds provide us with great views that we surely would not get otherwise.

FOUR Can I shoot a bird that is eating my pets?

This could be a hungry heron at a koi goldfish pond or a hawk at a chicken coop. Either way the answer is no; it is illegal to kill a



Painted bunting

native species. "If you've got free-roaming chickens, or goldfish in a pond, it's like leaving the pantry door open when a hungry crowd is around," says Shackelford. Putting the chickens in a coop or putting a screen over the pond is about the only way to stop the birds from feasting on your animals.

FIVE I saw an unusual bird at my feeder. Can you identify it?

In this case a picture really is worth a thousand words. Shackelford says he won't even attempt identification without a photograph. "Imagine trying to identify an actor someone describes as tall, dark and handsome. That could be so many different people. The same applies to birds. I just can't do it." Shackelford recommends doing a little birding homework. "Learning to identify field marks, searching the Internet or accessing a good field guide will go a long way in learning to identify birds on your own."



Great blue heron

SIX Birds have been dive-bombing me at my front door. What can I do? Am I in danger? Are my kids in danger?

Most likely what you've encountered is a barn swallow or a mockingbird that has built a nest nearby. Shackelford recommends using an alternate door for a few weeks if at all possible. "These birds are simply trying to protect their nest. If we can, we should give them a little room and let them be good parents." Usually it is only between two to three weeks before the young fledge the nest, so Shackelford recommends just waiting it out if you can. In return for our patience, the birds will help us by eliminating pesky insects around our homes.

SEVEN What can I do to protect a nest in a tree that's about to be cut down?

This call comes in quite frequently in developing areas. Most city codes require permits on trees of a certain size. With the exception of European starlings, English sparrows and feral rock doves, all native bird nests are protected by state law, but realisti-



Nestling birds

cally, few real estate development projects are ever halted due to the presence of a cardinal nest. Migratory bird nests are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act; red-cockaded woodpecker and bald eagle nests are protected by the Endangered Species Act. If you can see that a nest is active, try recommending that cutting be postponed. Otherwise count on the power of nature to help the birds relocate.

EIGHT I saw an albino bird. Do you want to come and get it for research's sake?

Albinism in birds is not at all uncommon. Watch it as a curiosity, but there is no need to alert the authorities. Again, it should be noted that TPWD is not in the business of coming to get birds.



Mallard hen with ducklings

NINE There are dozens of domestic fowl on my pond. What can I do?

There are many ducks and geese in Texas that are not native species but rather offspring of somebody's long-ago domestic pet. If you have domestic fowl on your property, the only solution is to call a private pest control company to help you deal with the problem.

TEN I found a baby bird that seems to have been abandoned by its parents. What should I do?

Though a baby bird or a nest appears abandoned, that very well may not be the case. Often the babies are not abandoned but instead being watched from afar. For example, adult blue jays watch their recently fledged young from a nearby branch. Shackelford advises leaving the birds alone. "Rehabbers are over-taxed as it is, and what is intended as well-meaning is actually detrimental to the bird." Human interaction ends up being more of a kidnapping than a rescue, which is disruptive to the wildlife and costly to wildlife rehabilitation personnel.

Empty nests that appear abandoned should also be left alone. Many birds reuse their nest year after year, while other nests, once vacated by the builder, are then used by a different species. If you find an empty nest, it is best to leave it be.

Watching birds can be an amazing and perplexing endeavor. Their activity can be one minute so predictable and another time seemingly so random. The birds waste few efforts, however, and if we watch long enough we will soon learn that each action is usually for good purpose. It is perhaps for this reason birds are so compelling: they are at once, a wonder, a beauty and a mystery to behold. By examining the birds in our yards and in our communities, we can better appreciate their contributions and understand the role they play in our own great habitats. ★

DETAILS: For more information on wildscaping your yard visit www.tpwd.state.tx.us/wildscapes

To learn about birding basics and backyard bird feeding, visit www.audubon.org

Your local Audubon Society offers birding information pertinent to your area. Many offer tips, field trips and classes for all levels of birders. Local chapters can be found through the national chapter's Web site listed above.



*The tears rose indignantly
evening raged and blushing. I
the trouble and pain upon
Diary of Sallie Ann Neill, October 12, 1867*

From Slaves to Sharecroppers

The Levi Jordan Plantation represents a period of transition after the Civil War that is largely absent from history books.

By Evelyn L. Merz

The sign on the gate reads “No Trespassing.” The historic marker on the side of the road informs passersby that this is the Levi Jordan Plantation — “Home built 1848–1851 by slave labor; Materials came by sea, Florida to Velasco, and up the San Bernard River.” Beyond the padlocked gate is a hulk of a house that could inspire a Dickens novel — its windows and doors boarded and locked — shutting out everything but decay. The green Columbia bottomland stretches beyond.

But while you listen to your footsteps past the house and the well and explore its fields and woods, you are walking with history. Not the major event kind of history that can be bounded by a single day, but of history changing for an entire people.

This is the Levi Jordan Plantation State Historic Site, a place on the cusp of the Deep South Plantation culture. Beyond was the western frontier. This hundred-acre patch of Brazoria County holds the promise of putting flesh on the buried history of African-Americans in Texas. Some of that history has literally been unearthed during archaeological excavations at the site.

If we try to imagine Levi Jordan, the builder of his namesake plantation, from observing his home, he must have been single-minded in making a success of his operation. Forget the imposing multicolumned showplaces of the Old South. Levi Jordan’s home is spare, simple and strictly utilitarian — a workplace, not a showplace.

Some time after the Civil War, after the former slave cabins became sharecropper cabins, the inhabitants disappeared. They abandoned their few possessions and their food on the table. Why did they leave? What can the Levi Jordan

Plantation tell us about the people who lived there, their neighbors and how enslaved people became free?

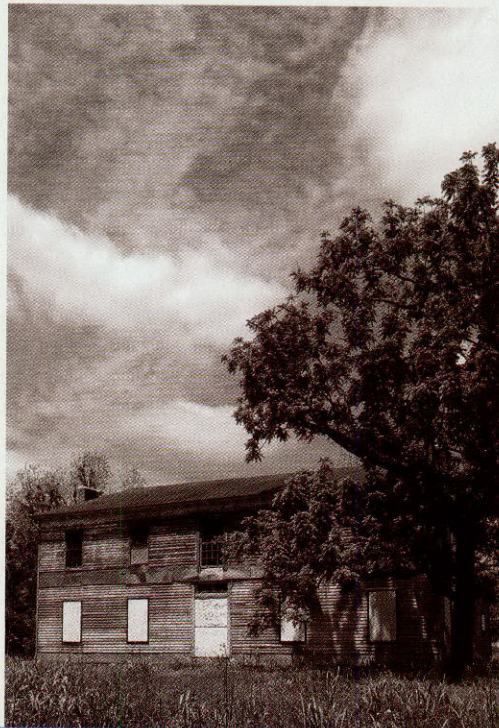
“Though I cannot altogether abide by his decisions, I am no longer a child to be governed by his rigid and old-fashioned notions and he cannot expect me to be as compliant as Ma is,” confided Sallie McNeill to her diary in 1860. Sallie lived at the plantation with her grandfather, Levi Jordan. Through her writings, we see Levi Jordan as the absolute patriarch of his family who ruled it with an autocratic hand. She chafed under his authoritarian ways and resented the subservience of her mother.

Her diary recounted her frustration with her life on the plantation, how she recoiled from the brutalities of slavery, but also her ultimate acceptance of the system. Sallie’s emotional conflicts are evident as she described her feelings upon seeing an escaped slave returned: “The tears rose indignantly to my eyes, when ‘Mose’ was led up that evening ragged and bleeding. I could say or do nothing, for he brought the trouble and pain upon himself.”

Indeed, cotton, sugar and slavery were the keys to wealth for Levi Jordan, his family and his fellow planters. Success in Brazoria County was rooted in the plantation system. To reject slavery was to reject wealth.

After the Civil War ended, the former slaveholders still relied upon the newly enfranchised black population to work the land. In fact, each needed the other. The landowners couldn’t farm without labor and the former slaves needed work. The post-Civil War labor system had some of the same restrictions that were hallmarks of slavery. The former slave cabins became sharecropper cabins. The workers were still bound to live on the land where they labored.

So what had changed at the Levi Jordan Plantation? What did freedom mean to the freed African-Americans?



FORGET THE IMPOSING MULTI-COLUMNED SHOWPLACES OF THE OLD SOUTH. LEVI JORDAN’S HOME IS SPARE, SIMPLE AND STRICTLY UTILITARIAN — A WORKPLACE, NOT A SHOWPLACE.



CORA FAYE WILLIAMS, WHO RECENTLY TURNED 100, STILL LIVES DOWN THE ROAD FROM THE PLANTATION WHERE HER GRANDMOTHER BECAME FREE. "THERE'S BEEN SUCH A CHANGE FROM THE TIME I WAS A GIRL ... IT'S SO DIFFERENT," SHE SAYS.

What was the difference between slavery and sharecropping?

If the Civil War was the cleaver that freed the slaves, the Freedmen's Bureau was the buffer between the newly enfranchised black population and the white landowners. The labor contract was the key. From the early days of Reconstruction through the withdrawal of its agents in 1868 the Brazoria County Office established itself as watchdog, mediator and enforcer of the rights of the freedmen in its district.

Freedmen could bind themselves to a certain plantation for wages — working under supervisors that were the former overseers. Payment could be for a specified sum of money, but usually for a share of the crops produced. Levi Jordan himself contracted to pay "one-fourth of all crop" to the sharecroppers listed on his 1867 contract roster. Part of the contract could include housing, food and medical care. Labor contracts were filed with the County

Freedman's Bureau, such as the one for Sterling McNeill, who agreed in 1867 to "Contracts with five freedpersons and families to work during the year 1867: To furnish them with provisions, teams, etc. and give them one third of the cotton." Although still bound to the land, freedmen could now earn income from their labor.

In Brazoria County, the relationship between the Freedmen's Bureau and the landowners was more cooperative than in the rest of Texas. In other regions, local resentment could spark violence, which was sometimes fatal. James Hutchison, Brazoria County's second bureau agent, had confidence in his position. He staked his claim as the arbiter of labor contract disputes. It must have been unsettling to the former slaveholder to receive a demand letter requiring him to respond to the complaint of a freedman about the breach of a labor contract.

By June 1867, there was a new bureau agent in Brazoria County—P.F. Duggan—and he continued Hutchison's forceful defense of freedmen's rights. One sharecropper on Levi Jordan's plantation, with the surprising name of Jeff Davis, brought his grievance to the bureau. Agent Duggan called Levi Jordan to account, writing him that "Jeff Davis f.m.c. complains that you have dismissed him from your employ without just cause and in direct violation of the agreement made by you last spring and have even refused to pay him for the services rendered to you." Both Jordan and Bob Stanger, his overseer, replied immediately to defend their actions, countering that Jeff Davis "has been absent from here three different times to my knowledge

from 4 to 10 days at a time." But significantly, Levi Jordan accepted the jurisdiction of the bureau to resolve the dispute.

But the freedom to contract could be treacherous. The advance of clothing and supplies could be used as a credit against future wages or share of crop production. The danger was that the debt could exceed the value of the future income. In response, the bureau issued General Order No. 11 in 1867. It prohibited the landowner from deducting a debt from the sharecropper's share of the crop before paying him, essentially separating debt payment and income into two independent transactions. The landowner was required to pay the sharecropper his full share of crop and then collect the debt. In response, a number of landowners simply refused to extend credit for supplies.

We can trace the freedom to offer liens and own property in

Brazoria county records. In 1867, when Levi Jordan's sharecroppers received their one-fourth share of crop, they immediately sold their shares at market for income. The bureau agent was often the trusted broker of their crop shares. By 1873, Walter Brown, one of Levi Jordan's sharecroppers in 1867, agreed to settle a debt for \$75.90 for purchase of supplies from Joseph Mims the prior year. Brown's payment was "one bale of cotton now in Jordan's Gin House, unginning, said cotton to be ginned and baled at my expense and to weigh 500 lb." Freedmen had begun to handle their own business transactions.

By 1881, Robert Smith, who also appeared on Levi Jordan's 1867 sharecropper roster, purchased 50 acres on the west bank of the San Bernard River for \$500. Land purchases by freedmen continued. In 1884, Holland Sherman paid \$100 to acquire 40 acres near Cedar Lake, a parcel formerly owned by R.S. Stanger, overseer at the Levi Jordan Plantation. The freedmen had crossed a great divide from being treated as property to becoming owners of property.

The freedom of the right to vote moved in tandem with economic freedom. Agent Duggan sent the most sanguine of reports to his supervisor in Galveston: "I have the honor to report that 301 voters — 46 white and 255 blacks were registered during the week ending Saturday August 3, 1867." He asserted that no influence was exerted on the freedmen to prevent them from registering. His description of the courthouse scene sounds more like a festival than a voter registration: "There is a freedom from all restraint and the best humor prevails between the races. ... Both whites and blacks are eager to register and it is amusing to see the happy effect the possession of a certificate has upon them..."

In 1865, at a neighboring Brazoria plantation owned by Kit Patton, Henrietta Maxey learned that she was free. Just 15 years old when she was emancipated, she was old enough to have vivid memories of slavery and young enough to be able to pass on her memories to her granddaughter, who still lives down the road from the plantation where her grandmother became free. Now at 100 years of age, Cora Faye Williams still calls it the Patton Place, but now the sign reads Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historic Site.

When Henrietta Maxey was freed, signing with a mark was common practice for the black population. Education was a scarce commodity in Brazoria County for all its residents, but was more acutely felt by the freedmen. White planters resisted having schools established on their plantations. Agent P.F. Duggan was emphatic that there was "an earnest desire on the part of the colored people of this county to do all in their power to educate the children but they are unable to build school houses through want of means."

Arthur B. Homer, who took Agent Duggan's place in 1868, had definite ideas about the reasons. Homer believed that the planters' response was rooted in apprehension "that a teacher might be the cause of trouble in one way or another among the freed people." The freedom to learn was missing.

Agent Homer persisted in trying to establish schools while trying to rouse a nonresponsive bureau. He repeatedly requested teachers and construction funds. The freed men — and women — did try to establish their own schools. But without the assistance of the bureau to provide teachers and supplies, the results tended to be ephemeral. Thanks to Homer's determination, the bureau eventually sent some supplies and financial support for teachers' pay in the fall of 1868. In November, Homer could report that there were "5 freedmen's schools in my district — two in charge of

the Bureau and three supported by the freedmen." The future must have seemed promising to Homer when he contemplated those five schools.

The future was short-lived. In Brazoria County, landowners could see the Freedmen's Bureau fading, as could other landowners across Texas. Arthur Homer's last surviving report, from November 30, 1868, crystallized hope derived from rationalization. He concluded that "the demand for labor compels the white people to treat them justly."

All of the Freedmen's Bureau offices in Texas closed by the end of 1868. It was just a short era in Texas, but the meaning of freedom changed mightily for African-Americans in Brazoria County during those three years following the close of the Civil War: the right to earn wages, to make a contract, to register to vote, to go to school, and with perseverance to be identified as a property owner instead of property. It wasn't equality. It was a beginning.

But with the demise of the Freedmen's Bureau, there was no reliable champion to vigorously assert the rights of the freedmen. Freedom ebbed away as the promise of education eroded. The Jim Crow era was born as white power organizations rose. Some time about 1890, the sharecroppers disappeared from their cabins at the Levi Jordan site. There is no precise record of why or how it occurred, but we do know that the inhabitants appear to have been compelled to leave without their few belongings. Over time the cabins and their contents crumbled in place, preserved in strata. This is the history in the earth of the Levi Jordan Plantation.

Cora Faye Williams shares her memories of the changes she has seen and her grandmother's stories with her visitors. Age has restricted her mobility, but not her interest in the change she sees around her. As a girl, she remembers wanting for nothing except education. "There wasn't but one thing we didn't have with the black people here. And that was the education, the schooling." Miss Cora Faye's local school held classes for only four and a half months a year. Then the teacher rotated to another local school. The black students who wanted to continue their education would make the trek to the neighboring school and walk back home by evening.

Henrietta Maxey, Miss Cora Faye's grandmother, told her that she would live to see better times. After adding the celebration of her centennial birthday to her storehouse of memories, Miss Cora Faye still makes quilts and greets each day with anticipation. Her grandmother's prediction finally came true, she says. "There's been such a change from the time I was a girl and now to look like I'm living in another world. It's so different. It is so different."

The Levi Jordan Plantation State Historic Site holds the promise of revealing the journey of how Henrietta Maxey's prediction came true. ★

DETAILS

The Levi Jordan Plantation State Historic Site is open only for prearranged tours scheduled through the Varner-Hogg State Historic Site (979-345-4656; www.tpwd.state.tx.us/varnerhoggplantation).

Visit www.webarchaeology.com to read additional excerpts from Sallie McNeill's diary and to learn more about the Levi Jordan Plantation.

Research assistance provided by Cora Faye Williams, Park Superintendent Kandy Taylor-Hille, Regional Interpretive Specialist Walter Bailey, Interpretation and Exhibits Lead Planner Angela Davis, Brazoria County Historical Museum, Staff and Friends of Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historic Site, Beverly Stimson and Ginny Raska.

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Digging history at the San Jacinto Battleground; living with alligators; Mother Neff, the first “official” state park; West Texas moon rise; fishing rod art.

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June 10 – 17:

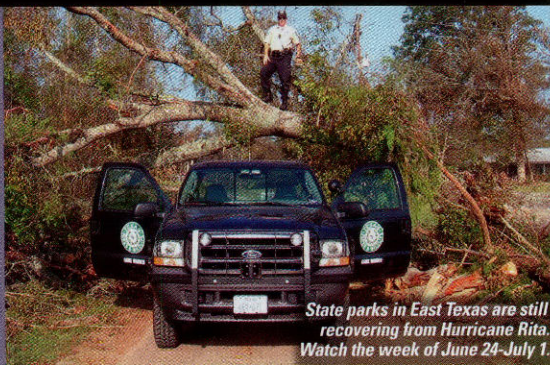
The bird man of Sundown Island; promoting Texas’ outdoor opportunities; prehistoric footprints at Dinosaur Valley State Park; sighting your rifle; cruise Lake Amistad.

June 17 – 24:

Dutch oven cooking; tour the bat caves of Texas; Texas coastal fishing; discover Big Bend Ranch State Park; Trans-Pecos sunset.

June 24 – July 1:

Staying safe on the water; state parks recover from Hurricane Rita; sandhill cranes; heroes and hops at Monument Hill and Kreische Brewery; Dutch oven one pot meals.



State parks in East Texas are still recovering from Hurricane Rita. Watch the week of June 24-July 1.

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Devils River

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“This may be the only place on the planet where nothing has changed in my lifetime,” says Jim Finnegan, indicating a mile of river frontage in Devils River State Natural Area. He should know; Finnegan grew up on these 20,000-odd acres, where his great-grandfather established a sheep ranch in 1883.

Running south more than 40 miles to empty into Lake Amistad, Devils River gets 80 percent of its water from springs, several gushing from park property. The spring water and the site’s remote location, in the vestness of southwest Texas between Sonora and Del Rio, help make it one of the state’s cleanest rivers. It’s only impounded at its lower end, and that, along with deep pools, wide shallows, impressive

rapids and sheer good looks, attracts canoe and kayak aficionados. The Devils River is not for the casual paddler, though. A typical trip is 45 miles long over several Class II rapids, and the wind along part of the journey is sometimes strong enough to blow boats upstream.

“This is not a float trip,” as Devils River Outfitter’s Gerald Bailey says. “You have to work to get down river.” A rough limestone bed, limited take-out areas, shuttle drives of up to five hours, and no medical care within 70 miles — without a doubt, running this river takes guts. The rewards, though, include miles of pale blue water shot through with sunlight, rugged cliffs punctuated by caves, shady pecan and oak groves, and more unspoiled scenery and solitude than most of us have experienced in a lifetime — not to mention some of the finest catch-and-release fishing for smallmouth bass around.

For \$10, park staff will shuttle groups to put in for a down-river paddle between 8 and 9 a.m.

There’s also a riverside camping area for those who start some 15 miles upstream at Baker’s Crossing Campground. The next public take-out after the park is Rough Canyon Marina and Recreation Area on Lake Amistad, 32 miles downriver, although Bailey can arrange take-out on private lands along the river to make for a 3-day river trip. Those without arrangements are duly warned: Trespassing is not taken lightly in these parts.

For those not up to that much adventure, Bailey offers two days of catch-and-release fishing based in a cabin at the park’s far edge, providing transportation, meals, gear and everything but the bedroll. In addition, the park has a 12-mile hike-and-bike trail, primitive camping, a group barracks that sleeps 10, and a group dining hall with a reasonably well-equipped commercial kitchen (check with staff for particulars). Finnegan, now a park staff member, and park superintendent Rick Thompson give tours of the river, park

archaeological sites and Dolan Falls. Arranged in advance, these last about two hours and are \$10 per person.

By land, the only access is via 22-mile-long, unpaved Dolan Creek Road. The turn-off is on Highway 277 near Loma Alta, between Del Rio and Sonora. High clearance and sturdy tires are recommended. No open fires and no pets allowed. Bring everything you'll need, including drinking water, and plan to take out all your trash.

For more information on Devils River State Natural Area, call (830) 395-2133 or visit <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/devilsriver>; Rough Canyon Recreation Area: (512) 775-8779; Devils River Outfitters: (830) 395-2266. ★

—Melissa Gaskill

Pedernales Falls State Park

They come in droves for hiking, camping and, of course, the falls.

As the summer heat starts to send Texans into a swelter, outdoor enthusiasts vow not to stay indoors. At Pedernales Falls State Park, about 40 miles west of Austin, they don't have to. With approximately five miles of the beautiful Pedernales River flowing through it, visitors can take a dip or just wade in its cool waters. And while the river's floor is too rocky for tubing, there are still plenty of other ways to enjoy the park.

Hiking, for instance, is popular year-round. Bill McDaniel, the park superintendent, says the high temperatures don't scare away hikers. In total, there are about 25 miles of trails in the 5,200-acre park, but most people stick to the main 7-mile trek. There's also a 4-mile loop that takes you through the river, some routes that go down into the canyon and flat roads for walkers. Nature lovers like the well-marked wooded trails where it's not uncommon to spot armadillos, deer or rabbits.

No matter where they hike, nobody comes to the park without catching a glimpse of the falls. "They are the main attraction," says McDaniel. The limestone that forms the picturesque, cascading falls is part of the 300-million-year-old Marble Falls formation. And even though visitors aren't permitted to swim or wade near them, they still love to hang out at the scenic overlook at the north end of the park to catch one of the best views in the Hill Country.

Many prefer to savor the view as long as possible by camping overnight or for a few nights.



"Camping has really picked up," says McDaniel. He says their sites fill up even in not-so-popular months like January. That means those eager to camp at Pedernales should probably call at least two months in advance.

One of their most popular camping attractions is the youth group camping area. The site can hold 150 to 200 campers. Organizations love the fact that they have a private area with their own river access for swimming, a locked gate and a large area for their pre-planned activities. Plus, shade provided by tall live oaks and cedars doesn't hurt. But don't bother trying to book it for a corporation or a family reunion; this area is open only to sponsored youth groups.

Most of the crowds who flock to the falls come from nearby Austin, San Antonio and Houston to camp, hike,

swim or just check out the great view. They range from families to college kids to Boy Scouts to church groups. McDaniel warns prospective visitors, though, that you have to be ready to walk a bit if you come to Pedernales Falls. There's not a lot to see from your car and just getting to the falls involves a 350-yard hike down a gravel trail as well as a rock staircase — and then you have to come back up. But for those who don't mind the walk, this park is the perfect place to come beat the heat, because you definitely can't beat the views.

For more information on Pedernales Falls State Park call (830) 868-7304 or visit <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/pedernalesfalls>. ★

—Elsa K. Simcik

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

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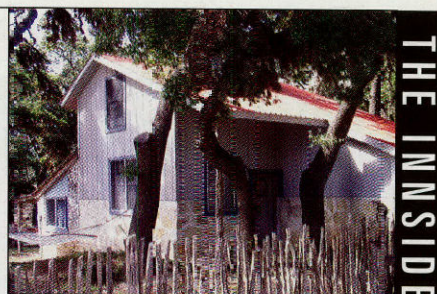
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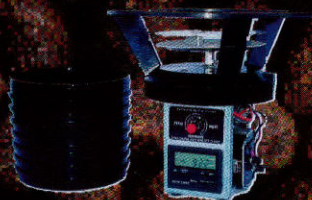
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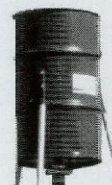


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(continued from page 21)

maybe I can hear the bluebird's cheer, cheerio, cheerup song.)

But no bluebirds.

For dinner, the Lone Star Grill beckons me with a "homemade pies" invitation on its sign. After my sandwich, I look lustfully at the "mini pies" on the menu but restrain myself.

Base camp is Shoestring Farms Bed and Breakfast, north on FM 47, near the Lake Tawakoni dam. Patty Lovvorn runs the B&B part while her husband, Pete, handles the farm. My room is in the "breakfast house" where Patty serves a hearty morning meal.

The rooster wakes me early, so I grab my earplugs and catch another couple hours' sleep. After breakfast, I head back to town for FM 751 and its bluebird nest boxes.

The road's generously paved shoulder is a big help. Traffic is well spaced but continuous, and I feel safe parking at various spots for long periods. Patience, I remind myself, as I raise my binoculars again and again, looking at nest boxes, fences and nearby trees. After an hour, I've inched along a couple of miles to the Union Grove cemetery, where I pull in to watch for another 30 minutes. Mockingbirds and robins dominate the landscape. A roadrunner dashes by.

But no bluebirds.

A little farther down 751 and I turn toward the old farm. This is where three generations of my family lived, and where I chased butterflies and tromped through the woods. Surely I could find bluebirds there, as I had in days past.

But nothing looks familiar. Daddy sold the land years ago since the kids weren't interested in farming or ranching. Trees have taken over fence lines and fields. Woods have been cleared for houses. My great-grandparents' house is gone.

And no bluebirds.

Now I'm in a funk, so I head for other bluebird trails.

Several nest boxes perch on the fence by the football stadium on Farm-to-Market 2965, across from the new Jack Lester Park. Instead of bluebirds, I find house sparrows. My funk deepens.

House sparrows are the local trash of the bluebird world. They move in, take over your home and kick you out into the cold. For years, house sparrows — introduced to North America in 1850 — were satisfied with taking the bluebirds' homes in old trees. Bird

lovers responded by building nest boxes for bluebirds, and house sparrows followed like bad relatives. They will break eggs and toss fledglings out to claim a nest box.

I make a note to tell Barbara to begin eviction proceedings.

I drive down FM 2965 a few miles, noting nest boxes along the way, waiting and watching to no avail. Time to head back and try another route. By now, I've decided the bluebirds must be at a convention somewhere else. That or my scowl isn't helping my eyes to focus.

Whoa!

A bluebird darts in front of the car. My heart jumps. I hit the brakes to give him plenty of room. In a split second, he's gone. I pull off the road, wait and watch. Maybe he'll be back. Maybe his family will follow. But I've got nothing.

I decide on a quick, but cynical, loop east on U.S. 80, turning back before hitting Edgewood's city limits. There is little paved shoulder on this road, but I pull off onto a lightly graveled area beside a tree farm. From this spot, I see three nest boxes. In about 10 minutes, I'm bored and hungry, and I start the engine and pull onto U.S. 80.

A blue streak leaps from the grass to a nest box. I jerk my head aside fast enough to see him linger at the box's entrance for a second, then slip inside. Again, I pull off the road and wait, but the show's over.

Back to town and Cowboy's BBQ.

"Aren't you Teresa Smith?" the waitress asks as she greets me at the door. I know those eyes and high cheekbones. Cathy Barton Kallies was one of my best buddies back in third grade. The recognition and warm greeting put me in a better mood.

After lunch, I need to walk off the chopped brisket sandwich and home fries, especially after spending half the day in the car. The Wilderness Society's trail is about a mile out on FM 751. A sign marks the two entries, which are blocked. However, the trail is open, as Barbara had said the day before. I park in the drive and step over the cinder block barrier. The trail winds through the woods, with a few bluebird and bat houses along the path. A couple of short wooden bridges cross over small creeks, while a longer boardwalk covers some low-lying areas. That's good news, since recent rains have these spots soaked. The trail

ends back at the entrance, and since it was a short walk, I turn back and take the loop in the opposite direction.

Again, robins, the bluebird's larger cousin, are everywhere.

Again, no bluebirds.

The next morning I head to Lake Tawakoni State Park for a hike and more birdwatching. The lake, the catfish capital of Texas, has a great reputation among birding fans. I spot herons, egrets, woodpeckers, killdeer, mallards, doves, various hawks and the ever-present robin.

No bluebirds.

A couple of hours later, I drive to the parking area by the Iron Bridge Dam, where the water trickles down to become the Sabine River. A trail leads along the riverbed, and I head out. About a half mile down stands a massive dead oak, riddled with holes for nests. This is the bluebirds' natural home, a simple cavity in an old tree. I wait and watch, but no birds. Instead, I marvel at the number of nests in this timber and look for the woodpecker I hear nearby, possibly carving out another home.

As I pull out of the parking lot onto FM 47, I think these morning hikes were fun, even without bluebirds. Just then, I spot three bluebirds in a row on a fence. Three!

I leave town satisfied at seeing the few bluebirds I did. Local folks told me they see them all the time. Maybe I need my karma in order before I can spot more.

If nothing else, I learned this: Happiness is sort of like the bluebird. Sometimes, he has to jump up for you to notice he's there. Occasionally, you have to step on the brakes to keep from running him down. Now and then, you need to clean up your house, or your act, before he can come back. More times than not, he's where you least expect him. And even the common and everyday, rather than the blazingly colorful, can be quite satisfying. ★

Details

Wills Point Wilderness Society, (469) 474-6123

Wills Point Chamber of Commerce, (903) 873-3111, <www.willspoint.org>

Shoestring Farms Bed & Breakfast, (903) 560-1925, (800) 825-5006, <www.shoestringfarmbnb.com>

Lake Tawakoni State Park, (903) 560-7123, <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/laketawakoni>

Texas Bluebird Society, <www.texasbluebird.society.org>

PARTING SHOT

A volunteer holds a Kemp's ridley sea turtle hatchling just before it is released into the surf at Tepehuajes Turtle Camp near Tepehuajes, Tamaulipas, Mexico, south of Brownsville. Every year, the eggs are collected from nesting turtles, incubated at the camp, and the young turtles are released into the Gulf of Mexico. Many of the turtles become "imprinted" on the location and return to the same beach to lay their eggs.

IMAGE SPECS:

Canon EOS 1D digital SLR with
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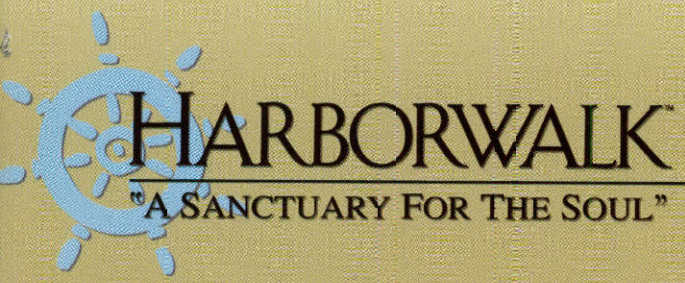
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