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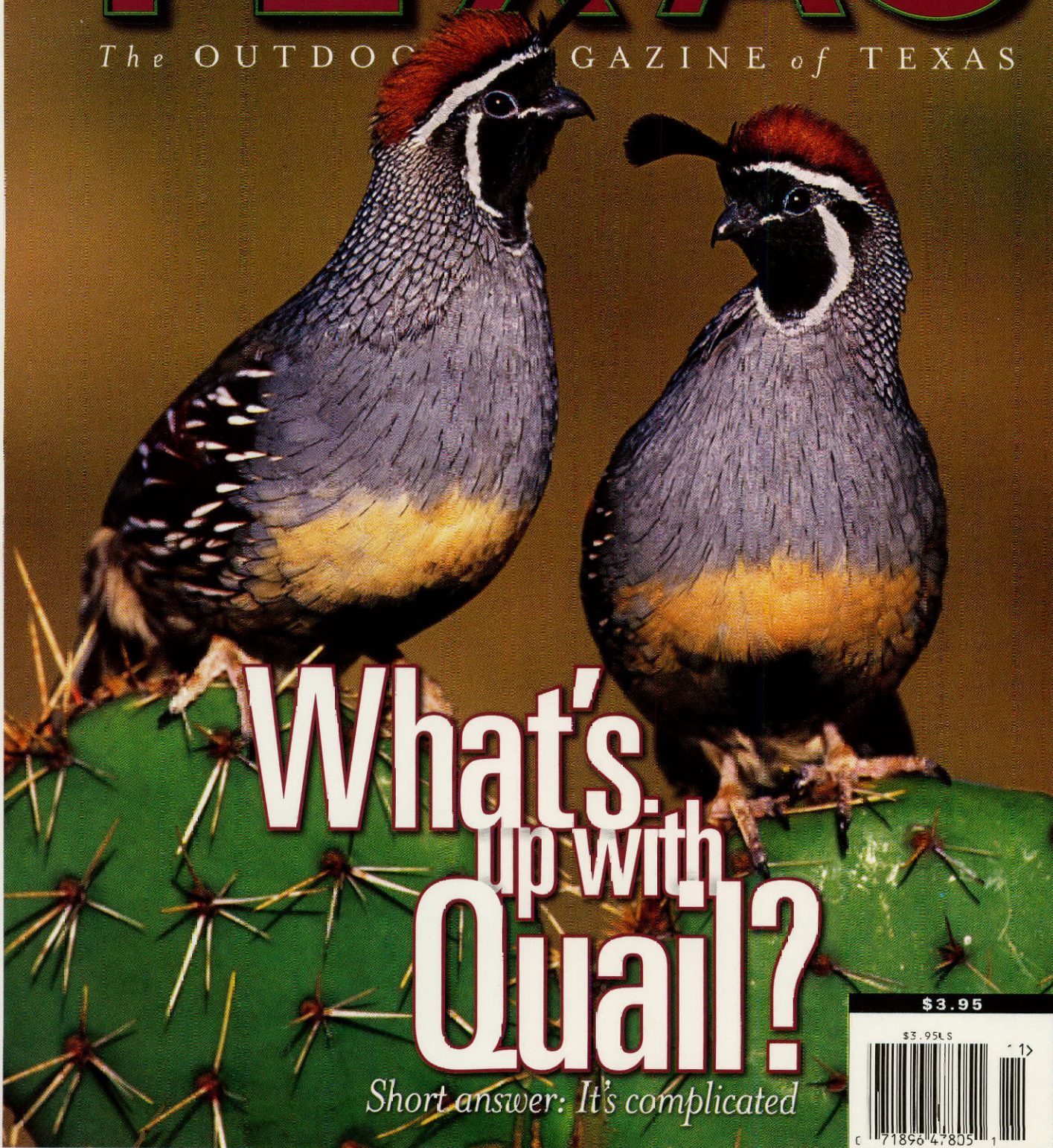
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The OUTDOOR MAGAZINE of TEXAS



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Features

34 2007 Lone Star Land Steward

By Tom Harvz

Native grasses and one old cowboy helped the Price family turn over-grazed land into a conservation showplace.

38 Trout Clout

By Art Morris

Good science and sometimes-controversial rules have helped create a world-class spotted seatrout fishery.

42 Confessions of a Raven Maniac

By Penelope Warren

Surviving on stealth, teamwork and a knack for acting, ravens are the con men of the bird world.

48 Remembering Lady Bird

By Barbara Rodriguez

How one woman's quiet strength changed us all.

24

COVER STORY What's Up with Quail?

By Henry Chappell

Large-scale teamwork may be the only way to meet the quail's highly specific habitat needs.

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CONTENTS

NOVEMBER 2007



Departments

6 Mail Call

Our readers share their ideas.

10 Scout

The latest conservation news and events.

10 BIRDS GONE WILD *By Dan Oke*

While devouring fermented berries, some cedar waxwings don't know when to say when.

12 59 YEARS AGO IN TEXAS GAME AND FISH

By Jon Luksinger

A possibly premature obituary for the ivory-billed woodpecker appeared in the 1948 issue.

13 PARK PICK: FITNESS FUN *By Sheryl Smith-Rodgers*

Huntsville State Park hosts the Texas Jailbreak Adventure Race.

14 WILD THING: PRONG POWER *By Sheryl Smith-Rodgers*

America's fastest mammal, the pronghorn can see you coming from miles away.

15 FLORA FACT: NATIVE NUT *By Sheryl Smith-Rodgers*

The pecan tree, once threatened by the push to plant cotton, has helped feed everyone from Native Americans to astronauts.

16 CARDS FOR TREES *By Sarah Bond*

Give the planet a tree for Christmas.

17 TEXAS READER: KAUFMAN FIELD GUIDE TO INSECTS

By E. Dan Klepper

Check out the flashy green June bug, and you too will be a beetles fan.

18 SKILL BUILDER *By Bernadette Noll*

Camp Crafty: How to make your own plant press, fire starters and the all-time classic: soap-on-a-rope.

19 FIELD TEST *By Gibbs Milliken*

Shooting Sticks: Lightweight, portable bipods and tripods can help both guns and cameras to stay on target.

20 Three Days in the Field *By Robert Macias*

Butterfly Beach: A trip to deep south Texas in autumn promises lots of birds and butterflies — and very few people.

52 Legend, Lore & Legacy *By Karen Hastings*

The Forgotten War: Little-known battles near Brownsville helped establish the Rio Grande — instead of the Nueces — as Texas' southern border.


56 Sights & Sounds


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

64 Parting Shot *By Rolf Nussbaumer*

Covers

FRONT: Gambel's quail. Photo © John R. Ford. 

BACK: Sand dune on South Padre Island. Photo © E. Dan Klepper. 

PREVIOUS SPREAD: South Padre Island. Photo © Lance Varnell. 

THIS PAGE: Field of native grasses. Photo © Wyman Meinzer. 



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In the Field

PENELOPE WARREN, a lifelong naturalist and environmentalist, sits on the board of the Rio Grande International Study Center. She is the environmental enforcement and public awareness liaison for the Webb County Attorney's Office. Penelope contributes to the alternative newspaper *LareDos, A Journal of the Borderlands*, and is also an avid photographer whose images reflect her interest in

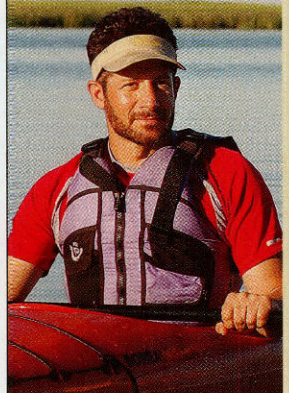


nature and South Texas history. Her work was recently featured at Gallery 201 in Laredo. This month, Penelope explains why she is a "raven maniac." This avid birder says her interest in the bird Edgar Allan Poe immortalized stems in part from her Native American heritage: In Cherokee myth, ravens are creatures of mystery and humor.

KAREN HASTINGS is a freelance journalist and writer whose byline has appeared in most major newspapers in Texas and various state and national magazines, including *The New York Times*. Curiosity about her adopted home in the Rio Grande Valley has led to articles on nature tourism, backyard wildscapes and wind power. A neighbor who enjoys historical reenactments inspired Karen's article this month about the Mexican-American War battlefields in Brownsville ("Legend, Lore & Legacy"). Karen recently moved to the Katy area, near Houston, and hopes to discover this new part of the state through her writing.



DAN OKO, an Austin-based freelance writer, says, "When I first heard about the cedar waxwings dying, I thought of Charles Jackson's novel *The Lost Weekend*." A birder who has covered the Great Texas Birding Classic for *TP&W*, Oko writes in this month's Scout about events



surrounding the Austin-area deaths of cedar waxwings, a common species that passes through Texas early each spring. Oko often watches the bright birds feeding on berry bushes in a neighbor's yard. "It seemed so strange and tragic, these charming little birds getting plastered and then freezing to death," he says, noting that Jackson's tragic tale of alcohol abuse was later turned into a film.

MAIL CALL

PICKS, PANS AND PROBES FROM OUR READERS

FOREWORD

The first time I heard the distinctive *bob white!* call of a bobwhite quail, I was fishing with a cane pole on a pond at my grandparents' farm in New Caney. I'm pretty sure it was Grandpa himself who told me what that call was. I remember trying to whistle the call and being delighted when the quail answered.

The small, 14-acre farm, surrounded by pine forest, was sometimes a noisy place, particularly in the middle of summer. As I walked along the overgrown trails between the fields of corn, watermelon and okra, every step elicited a cacophony of buzzes and clicks, mostly from panicked grasshoppers. Overhead, the persistent *caw-caw* of crows often drowned out the low-key call of the bobwhite and other birds. The pig pen periodically erupted with squeals caused by some long-simmering disagreement among the porcine hierarchy. And, at least in my memory, there was always a dog or two barking in the distance.

In the depths of the dense woods, which my siblings and I explored at every opportunity, the acoustics changed. A distant crow sounded far less menacing, muffled by the tall trees and the soft forest floor of pine needles, but one directly overhead was like someone sneaking up behind you and screaming, "Wake up!" in your ear.

One summer, we heard a rumor that a flock of wild parakeets had taken up residence in the forest around my grandparents' farm. The odds of spotting them as they flitted among the dense canopy were pretty slim, so our search relied mostly on our ears. We knew what to listen for since we had our own parakeet at home. On several occasions, I thought I heard the *ch-ch-ch* of a parakeet. We'd run and try to spot them. I thought I saw a flash of yellow a couple of times. It wouldn't pass muster with the Audubon Society, but by the loose rules of pre-teen birdwatchers, we were pretty sure we'd verified the existence of a flock of wild parakeets in the Pineywoods.

Those early listening skills continue to serve me well. I can walk my dog around the neighborhood at dusk and identify the soft whinny of an eastern screech-owl, the coo of a white-winged dove, the short chirp of a cardinal, and the raspy *churr-churr* of a golden-fronted woodpecker.

It has been years and years, though, since the last time I heard a bobwhite quail. I know they're still out there, but they're not in my neck of the woods. And I don't think there are many left in New Caney, either. Just as anthropologists mourn the loss of thousand-year-old human languages across the globe, I have to believe we lose something of ourselves when the sounds of our childhood fall silent.

Robert Macias

ROBERT MACIAS
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

LETTERS

REDISCOVERING TP&W MAGAZINE

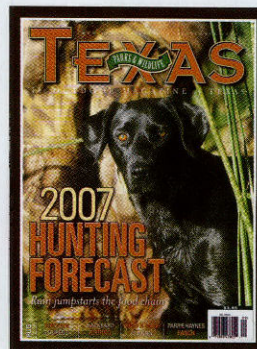
It has been many years since I subscribed to *Texas Parks & Wildlife* magazine, but the other day in the doctor's office, I found a copy and enjoyed reading it so much that I ordered it immediately.

My husband and I began camping in 1956 in a borrowed tent, for a while in a tent on a wagon, and then graduated to a hard-bodied trailer with all conveniences. We usually stayed in the state park campgrounds or national forests. When we retired, we began taking longer trips, about six weeks each time. We had many, many happy trips. We had much appreciation for the state parks, but saw the need for greater funding.

I would still like to "get outdoors, get involved," but I am now 92 and can no longer travel, even on senior trips. I do appreciate the new additional state

funding and will write my elected officials, as suggested.

FRANCES MCMICHAEL
Houston



My husband and I began camping in 1956 in a borrowed tent, for a while in a tent on a wagon, and then graduated to a hard-bodied trailer with all conveniences.

Frances McMichael
Houston

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SCOUT

NEWS AND VIEWS IN THE TEXAS OUTDOORS

BIRDS GONE WILD

While devouring fermented berries, some cedar waxwings don't know when to say when.

This is the tragic tale of a group of travelers who made a bad decision on a boozy winter night and froze to death in the cold pre-dawn hours, before reaching their desired destination. The travelers in question were a flock of about 50 cedar waxwings, a migrant bird species that is common in Texas through the winter into spring. They resemble small, dusky cardinals, typically measuring about 6-7 inches from head to tail, with brown-gray feathers, a small crest and a black mask. According to bird experts, cedar waxwing flocks can number in the thousands as they gather to fly to their breeding grounds in the Rocky Mountains and other northern locales. Like generations before them, this small band of birds had availed themselves of the fermented fruit of the holly-like yaupon bush, which produces a bright red berry, and in so doing essentially signed their own death warrant. Their bodies were discovered in March near the Department of Aging and Disability Services in Austin.

"It was pretty obvious what had happened," says Doug McBride, a spokesman for the state Department of Health Services, who helped investigate the birds' untimely demise. "The cedar waxwings had eaten these fermented berries, become inebriated,

and in their drunken state it appears that they probably did not remember to fluff up their feathers and keep themselves warm." McBride deemed the dead waxwings no threat to human health.

An avid birder, Dr. Peter Barnes, a Tyler physician, keeps track of bird sightings for the Texas Ornithological Society in the northeastern part of the state. Barnes has recorded live

flocks of cedar waxwings numbering up to 2,000 birds, but despite the size of these gatherings, he says he does not believe the species has attained popularity by partying harder. "When it comes to birds that winter in Texas, cedar waxwings are relatively colorful," Barnes says, "and most birders just really do like seeing big flocks of birds."

"It's the berry eaters that we see mostly having these sorts of problems," says TPWD ornithologist Clifford Shackelford, noting that fruit is crucial fuel for many migrants, including robins.

The habit of traveling in large flocks, combined with a tendency to fly at high speeds, adds up to more bad news for waxwings. Many intoxicated birds die from crashing into windows, says Anne Hobbs, a public information specialist with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. To protect drunken fliers, the Audubon

Society recommends hanging netting over windows and planting shrubs close enough to buildings so that the birds can't reach full speed. ★

— Dan Oko



Inebriated cedar waxwings can crash into windows after feasting on fermented yaupon berries.

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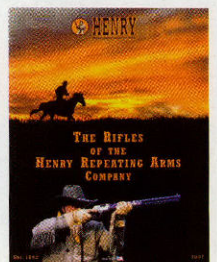


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59 Years Ago in Texas Game and Fish

A possibly premature obituary for the ivory-billed woodpecker appeared in the 1948 issue.

Almost 60 years ago, *Texas Game and Fish* published this somber obituary for a species then thought to be extinct: the ivory-billed woodpecker. More than half a century later, scratchy audio recordings and blurry images indicate that the bird may still inhabit the Big Woods region of eastern Arkansas.

From the December 1948 issue of *Texas Game and Fish*:

Requiem

From the magic pen of Donald Culross Petrie, one of the world's foremost nature writers, came these prophetic words:

"The species man had long had his place in this life, a part of it, keeping the age-old balance. The red man never dammed a stream, never drained a swamp, never exterminated an animal. What ground he cleared for his primitive agriculture was negligible. ... In no way did the Indian break the charmed circle of the wildlife community.

"One can but dimly picture today that great biota, the prodigious abundance with which this continent was originally stocked. It beggared even the expletives of the pioneers. What they say of the pas-

senger pigeon sounds like the tall tales of tall woodsmen, save that the accounts agree....

"On the prairies thundered the wild cattle of that continent, the bison, whose footsteps made the earth tremble....

"In voracious recordings we have glimpses of deer, elk, antelope, and bear, raccoon and fox, water-

fowl and salmon, whose profusion at the time of the white man's coming made this virgin land the richest in wildlife he had known within the memory of his race. But when the white chips flew out of the first tree he assaulted, the ring of steel on living timber was the sound of doom for an immemorial order."

Thus, when "the white chips flew out of the first tree," the "sound of doom" rang out for another of America's magnificent birds, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

Word has been received recently that despite desperate efforts by the National Audubon Society to save the pitiful remnant of this bird in the Louisiana swamps, there are no more. They are gone completely. A specialized feeding habit of eating only certain grubs from a certain tree spelled the end for it as those trees upon which this woodpecker was dependent fell before the woodsmen's axes.

During the war, no feeling could compare with that of listening to the names of comrades as they were read slowly and softly from the casualty list — "Adkins, Allen, Brown, Borowski, Dean, Etheridge, Jones, Luigi, MacGregor, Smith, Wilson, Young."

A kindred feeling might be experienced as we hear the names of species exterminated from this continent intoned from the ever-lengthening roll — "Great Auk, Labrador Duck, Passenger Pigeon, Eskimo Curlew, Carolina Parakeet, Heath Hen, Ivory-billed Woodpecker."

—Jon Luksinger

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



Cover art from the December 1948 issue of *Texas Game and Fish* magazine.

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Fitness Fun

Huntsville State Park hosts the Texas Jailbreak Adventure Race.

Sometimes adventure racers will do whatever it takes to get ahead. Take, for instance, last November, when contestant Chad Holman assumed a rather funny position during the Texas Jailbreak Adventure Race at Huntsville State Park.

"A number of campers were there watching, too, while we made fools of ourselves," he remembers.

No doubt folks must have laughed when they saw Holman kneeling on the beach next to a water-filled PVC pipe, plugging holes with both hands and his tongue. Meanwhile, his teammate (and wife), Megan, raced for more water from Lake Raven to pour in the pipe. Their mission: keep the holes plugged and retrieve a tennis ball inside the pipe.

Later this month, new goofy team-challenge events will test more than 60 teams when the Texas Jailbreak Adventure Race returns to Huntsville State Park. The growing sport of adventure

racing — which can last a few hours or go for days — combines two or more disciplines, including trail running, mountain biking, paddling and orienteering.

Heavily wooded trails and a 210-acre reservoir make the 2,083-acre East Texas park a favorite with adventure racers who come to train throughout the year. Other visitors enjoy hiking, biking, camping, swimming and boating. Canoe, kayak and flat-bottom boat rentals are available, too (weekends March through November).

In Lake Raven, fishing enthusiasts catch bluegill, catfish and redear sunfish by the scores. Some land hefty largemouth bass (catch-and-release only). The fish are part of the Budweiser ShareLunker program, which encourages anglers to donate 13-pound-plus bass to TPWD for spawning purposes.

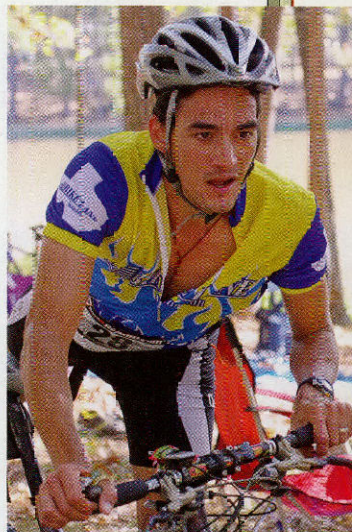
How about a horseback ride through the pines? Guides with Lake Raven Stables lead one-hour treks through the park.

Eat-and-ride trips include horseback riding and either a hot breakfast or steak and all the fixings. All trail rides by reservation only.

Huntsville State Park is located 6 miles southwest of Huntsville off Interstate 45 on Park Road 40. For more information, call (936) 295-5644 or visit <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntsville>. Call Lake Raven Stables at (936) 295-1985.

The third annual Texas Jailbreak Adventure Race starts at 10 a.m. Saturday, November 17. For more information, visit <www.solemracing.com>. To learn more about adventure racing, call the U.S. Adventure Racing Association at (512) 873-1205 or visit <www.usara.com>. ★

—Sheryl Smith-Rodgers



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Long before you glanced out the car window and noticed that pronghorn buck poised off in the distance, it had you spotted, at least three miles away, cruising up the highway.

Add phenomenal eyesight to a pronghorn's unique traits. It's also pegged as North America's fastest mammal, clocking in at speeds

up to 50 mph (cheetahs win the global title). Keen vision and fast feet help the species escape from coyotes and other predators. When necessary, pronghorns can run for miles without tiring, thanks to an extra large heart and lungs.

Though called antelope, technically they're not. Pronghorns (*Antilocapra americana*) belong to a family all their own: Antilocapridae. Indigenous only to North America, Texas pronghorns inhabit rolling, open grasslands in the Panhandle, Trans-Pecos and eastern Permian Basin regions. Named for their branched head gear, pronghorns grow hollow horns — not antlers — over a hard bony core. They're the only mammals in the world that annually shed their horn covers.

In Texas, wildlife biologists closely monitor populations of pronghorn, a prized big-game animal that's harvested by permit only. Over the years, drought and malnutrition have gradually reduced numbers. One reason: Pronghorns seldom jump fences more than 3 feet high, which restricts their movement when forbs become scarce.

There's good news, though. Adequate rainfall in the past year should buoy the state's pronghorn numbers, which were estimated to be 12,341 in summer 2006. ★

— Sheryl Smith-Rodgers

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Native Nut

The pecan tree, once threatened by the push to plant cotton, has helped feed everyone from Native Americans to astronauts.

Countless numbers of pecan trees thrive in the rich soils found along most Texas rivers. Years ago, though, our state tree (and favorite native nut) was nearly decimated.

To make way for cotton, early settlers cleared pecan trees (*Carya illinoensis*) by the groves. Some even cut down huge specimens just to harvest one nut crop. By 1904, worried lawmakers considered making the practice illegal. Two years later, Governor James Hogg — shortly before he died — asked that a pecan tree be planted at his grave. In his honor, the pecan was named the state tree in 1919.

Long before those settlers arrived, Indians subsisted on pecans in harsh winter months. Likewise, many animals — including squirrels, opossums, raccoons and birds — eat the nutrient-rich meat. And did you know that pecans were the first fresh food eaten in space? Astronauts

aboard Apollo 13 in 1970 carried them in vacuum-sealed packages.

On the commercial side, Texas ranks among the nation's top pecan producing states. Annual harvests average about 60 million pounds. Across the state, orchards grow both native species and improved varieties, which number more than 1,000.

As for the state's champion pecan, the title belongs to an awesome tree in Parker County. According to the Texas Big Tree Registry, the tree — located on private property — stands 91 feet tall and measures 258 inches around its trunk. ★



The state champion pecan tree (in Parker County) stands 91 feet tall.

—Sheryl Smith-Rodgers

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↑ **The ultimate "green" holiday card this year offers an opportunity to plant a tree in a national forest.**

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trees while providing card-buyers a chance to give a lasting, environmentally friendly gift. Cards cost \$5.95 and are available for occasions ranging from birthdays to Arbor Day itself, which falls on April 25 in 2008.

Another way Texans can contribute is by planting their own trees. The most popular trees suitable for hardiness zone 8 (the largest hardiness zone in Texas) are the Colorado blue spruce, white pine and Korean boxwood. Mark Derowitsch, public relations manager for the foundation, said Texas plays a big part in the national group.

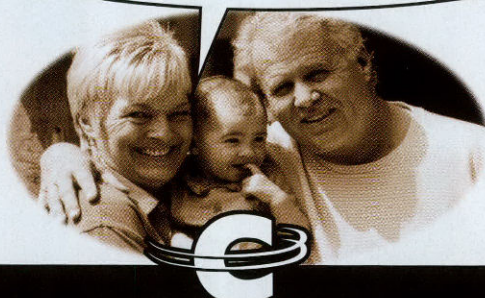
"The number of currently active members from Texas is nearly 36,000," Derowitsch says. Texan members have helped plant over 328,000 trees throughout the state.

Since 1990, the Arbor Day Foundation has helped the U.S. Forest Service plant more than 7 million trees in national forests. For more information on the Arbor Day Foundation or to purchase a card, visit <arborday.org>. ☆

— Sarah Bond



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Kaufman Field Guide to Insects

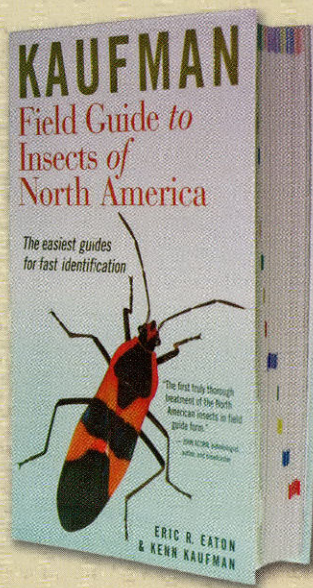
Check out the flashy green June bug, and you too will be a beetles fan.

"The totality of life," entomologist and Pulitzer prize-winning author Edward O. Wilson tells us, "is a membrane of organisms wrapped around Earth so thin it cannot be seen edgewise from a space shuttle, yet so internally complex that most species composing it remain undiscovered." Wilson's observation often comes to mind while hiking over Texas' own bit of membrane, particularly whenever I encounter a member of the state's vast insect population.

A full third of the 90,000 known insect species that inhabit the North American continent make their home here in Texas. Some are readily recognizable, while others are wholly unfamiliar.

But remembering the names of even the most common ones can be a challenge. That's why I've started keeping a copy of the new *Kaufman Field Guide to Insects of North America* in my daypack.

The guide provides quick and easy access to information about members of the insect world Texans may be curious about, including the first bug that caught my childhood interest — the thoroughly creepy *niña de la tierra*. The particular species I witnessed, about the shape, look and size of a cootie, is actually a type of Jerusalem cricket (family Stenopelmatidae), although according to Kaufman (page 84 in the guide), it's not actually a cricket at all. The bizarre insect sparked my enthusiasm for the crawly world, and I moved on to become a beetles fan shortly thereafter. Around the time I was hand-cranking *The White*



Album backwards on the turntable I was also creating a collection of expired but beautifully carapaced green June beetles, or *Cotinis nitida* (page 138). Texans will be happy to know that they need not depend on the ancient pyramids for their scarabs. The *Cotinis* is our very own.

Later, during the punk rock years, I developed an obsession for a giant moth called the black witch. The *Ascalaphaodorata* (page 254) occasionally crosses the Gulf of Mexico in the eye of a hurricane. How rock 'n' roll is that?!

Recently, I came full circle to the crickets again after stumbling upon an enormous Rhabdiphoridae, or camel cricket (back to page 84), a genus that includes at least 89 North American species. I couldn't find the exact species in the book, but the guide is not designed to cover everything. Instead, the authors utilize what they call "naked-eye entomology" in order to provide an overview of insects most likely identified through simple observation at an average distance. Considering the number of disconcertingly creepy insect species Texans can encounter on any given hike, that's just about as close as you may want to get when trying to identify the critters. Feel free to let your Kaufman's do the rest.

Kaufman Field Guide to Insects of North America, Eric R. Eaton and Kenn Kaufman, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007 ★

—E. Dan Klepper



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Camp Crafty

How to make your own plant press, firestarters and the all-time classic: soap-on-a-rope.



No need to abandon your crafty side when heading to the great outdoors. Here are five things for your campsite you can make before you go.

There was a time when **soap-on-a-rope** could be found in any self-respecting department store. Nowadays, if you want it, you'll have to make it yourself. That's way more fun anyway.

You'll need:

- a bar of biodegradable soap
- a drill with a small bit
- a piece of heavy string or a shoelace

Drill a hole through the soap. Thread your string through the hole. Tie the ends together and ta-da, soap on a rope! Hang it on the water spigot in your campsite or on a nearby tree branch for easy access.

A **bug jar** can be any old jar with a few holes punched in the top. You can produce a more stylish bug jar with minimal expense and with a lot less effort.

You'll need:

- a mason jar of your preferred size with metal two-piece screw-on top
- a marker or pen
- a small piece of screen or cheese

-cloth or other gauzy cloth

On the screen, trace the outside rim of the metal top with the marker. Cut on the drawn line. Remove the metal insert part of the two-piece top. Insert the screen into the screw-on top and screw it onto the jar. If using cloth, cut the cloth a couple inches larger than the top. Screw the top on over the stretched-out cloth.

Firestarters are not only fun to make but also very practical on-site. It makes you feel so old school to create these at home for yourself, and there is no better time to feel old school than when camping.

You'll need:

- melted wax (this can be candle stubs melted in a can in a pot half-full of water.)

- a cardboard egg carton
- string or wick
- sawdust or wood chips

Cut the lid off the egg carton. Place a 3-inch piece of string in each cup with the end hanging over the side. Fill the cups with sawdust or wood chips. Pour the melted wax into the cup and let cool. Tear or cut the cups apart, or bring the whole thing and cut the firestarters apart as needed.

Plant presses are simple to make and allow you to savor a little bit of nature.

You'll need:

- two pieces of heavy cardboard
- newspaper
- waxed paper
- an old belt

Cut the pieces of cardboard, newspaper and waxed paper into same-sized squares to suit your needs (6 inches by 6 inches is a good traveling size). Lay a piece of cardboard on the bottom and layer it with one sheet of newspaper, two pieces of wax paper and another sheet of newspaper. Continue this pattern until you have used all of the sheets. Put the other piece of cardboard on top. Wrap the belt tightly around the middle. When you find a leaf, plant or flower you want to preserve, put it in the press between two sheets of waxed paper. Buckle snugly after each addition. Keep pressed for approximately one week.

Luminarias can light a campsite trail and are beautiful as well.

You'll need:

- small flat-bottomed brown paper bags
- votive candles
- sand

Open the bags so that they stand on their own. Pour a couple of inches of sand into the bottom of the bag. Place the candle in the sand. Line the luminarias along the trail from the fire to your tent or from the fire to the picnic table or on any other path that people will be walking after dark. Have a ceremonial lighting of the luminarias at dusk and blow them out one by one as you head to your tent at night. ★

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Shooting Sticks

Lightweight, portable bipods and tripods can help both guns and cameras to stay on target.

Most hunters find it is best to travel light, with gear that can be set up fast for that once-in-a-lifetime chance at a trophy animal. Offhand shooting can be very effective at close ranges, but some situations require making a long shot by the hunter or wildlife photographer. The support from a set of shooting sticks can make the difference in getting a clean shot or photo without blur.

The smallest all-metal bipod shooting rest is the **Pole Cat**. Fully extended, it is 39 inches high, but folds down to a convenient 14 inches for transport. The bipod legs deploy quickly using internal bungee cords. The unit is small in diameter, lightweight and simple to carry in one hand or back pocket. The drawback with this short bipod is that it requires taking a kneeling or sitting position and must be held securely to prevent movement. (\$34.95, Pole Cat, Stoney Point Shooting Sticks, McBride's Guns, 512-472-3532, www.mcbridesguns.com)

Another **Bipod Shooting Stick** is made of a lightweight carbon composite and extends to 40 inches, folding down to 14 inches. Like the Pole Cat, it's small enough to carry anywhere and set up quickly with its internal bungee cords. The Bipod brand sticks have a unique rubber loop-lock that cradles around the weapon. This mount is designed to rotate for use against your torso, a wall or a tree. (\$32.95, Composite Bipod Sticks, 800-979-6878, www.bipodshootingsticks.com)

A heavy-duty and extremely stable design is the **Bog Pod**. These all-metal sticks form a very solid tripod with

red non-slip grips. The 360-degree swivel head has a wide padded fork that's ideal for steadying a gun, pistol, binoculars, spotting scope or long camera lens. Ruler-like markings make it easy to adjust the height on all three legs from 22 to 68 inches. The pod-feet have both rubber pads and steel points for a good surface bite in any sitting, kneeling or standing position. (\$99.99, Bog Pod with carry bag, 928-595-0264, www.boggear.com)

It is hard to find real handmade **African Tripod Shooting Sticks**. This 70-inch set can be unscrewed into sections, allowing it to fit into any standard gun case for air travel. Made of durable hickory wood, these are very stable and sport a leather-padded fork to prevent scratching the gun-stock or camera lens. (\$189, Platinum Grade African Take-Down Sticks, 70 inches with Red Oxx case, Sporting Wood Creations, 419-529-5599, www.sportwc.com)

Many trekkers and hunters prefer a simple but strong staff for hiking into rough country. The **Stalking Staff** is a custom exotic wood design with a unique fallow deer fork crown. The owner can add leather thongs with feathers or hair tassels as a wind-direction indicator. (\$279, 60-inch Take-Down Stalking Staff with Red Oxx case, Sporting Wood Creations)

Remember, true sportsmen take only shots they can make — and a set of shooting sticks can help improve the odds in your favor. ★

A. Bipod Shooting Stick
 B. Stalking Staff
 C. Bog Pod
 D. African Tripod Shooting Sticks
 E. Pole Cat



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3 Days in the Field / By Robert Macias

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Butterfly Beach

A trip to deep south Texas in autumn promises lots of birds and butterflies — and very few people.

If you mention **South Padre Island and wildlife** in the same sentence, most people envision something other than dolphins and butterflies. Yet this spit of land at the southern tip of Texas is home — or rest stop — to an astonishing array of land and sea creatures. And the loud mammal known as the party hog generally migrates north toward the end of April.

As I make the long drive from Austin to South Padre Island, the trees get shorter, rougher-looking, as if hunkering down for a fight. And fight they must — against the heat, the salt, the wind and months-long periods without rain. Everything has to be tough-as-nails to survive in this Tamaulipan thorn scrub — from the mesquite trees and prickly pear to the Texas tortoise and ocelot that hide among the brambles.

While I'm generally not a fan of six-hour drives, you really can't get a feel for this part of the state by hopping over it in a plane. You can look at a map and see that, yes, there are huge ranches in South Texas, but you really don't appreciate the scale of it until you drive for a couple of hours straight and realize you're still humming along next to the same ranch. After passing about ten signs indicating that I'm driving along part of the 150,000-acre Yturria Ranch, I slam headlong into a wall of butterflies. Millions of them. They are mostly drab-looking snout butterflies making their annual pilgrimage to search for mates, but there are also bright-yellow sulphur butterflies, monarchs and various other colorful varieties that help to turn my car into a rainbow of bug carnage. I apologize aloud for the first mile or so: "Sorry, excuse me, ouch, that had to hurt..." After about five miles of nonstop

butterflies, I realize the population must still be healthy despite my rampant vehicular slaughter.


As I cross over the Queen Isabella Causeway onto the island, I'm surprised by the lack of cars, the complete absence of human activity. Have the butterflies taken over? It's the last week in October, and I expected the crowds to be light, but this is downright spooky. There is not a cloud in the sky, the temperature is in the mid-80s, and many hotel signs flash off-season rates as low as \$40 per night. I think I could be on to something.

I check into the tidy, no-frills South Padre Island Travelodge, which is about a block away from the beach. On an island that's only a half-mile wide, everything is close to the water.

Couples in search of a few more frills might prefer the centrally located Casa de Siesta Bed & Breakfast. Owners Ron and Lynn Speier have taken a small piece of land and transformed it into a cozy, cool hideaway. It looks like an old adobe building, but it's actually made of concrete to withstand hurricanes. Each room has a collection of Southwestern antiques and a huge stained-glass window that bathes the room in a calming glow. The rooms are arranged around a lushly landscaped central courtyard with a pool in the middle. It's a great spot for the kind of lazy getaway where the routine boils down to: breakfast, beach, pool, naptime.

However, on this trip, I'm eager to explore, but first I need some real food. As I approach the doorway of Dorado's Baja Bar and Grill, my fears of total butterfly domination appear to be confirmed. A black, winged creature with a wingspan of about 7 inches hovers just above my head. Then it flies, bat-like, in a circle and slowly lumbers away. Since it's just a few days before Halloween, I begin to wonder if this is somehow part of the holiday décor. A remote-controlled bat? No, silly tourist. Biologist Mike Quinn tells me that the description matches that of a black witch moth, which is known to haunt these parts.

Once inside the colorful restaurant, with bright-orange walls and surfboards hanging from the ceiling, I discover that I am one of only two diners this evening. The waitress says that the winter Texans don't start arriving until after Christmas, so the period between October and December is deadsville. I order the fish tacos with fried plantains and coconut rice. It's all delicious, but



Off-season, South Padre Island offers the opportunity to watch the sun rise on a nearly deserted stretch of beach.



Clockwise from top left: Bottle-nose dolphins; painted lady; an aerial view of the Laguna Madre Nature Trail.



the aromatic coconut rice is the reason I'll return here as soon as I'm hungry again.

The next morning, I meet up with Scarlet Colley, proprietor (with husband George) of Fins to Feathers, which offers dolphin viewing and birdwatching excursions. They also provide hands-on educational opportunities for kids through their Sea Life Nature Center in Port Isabel. Her enthusiasm for birds and dolphins is immediately apparent — and infectious. Soon after we leave the dock, she pulls the small boat closer to shore to get a better look at a bird's feet. "If it's got yellow feet, it could be a first," she says. Nope, not this time; it has just ordinary tan-colored feet.

As we proceed across the bay, her dog Rozzi is on the lookout for dolphins. The dog sometimes gets so excited after spotting dolphins that it plunges right off the edge of the boat. Colley always has a large net at the ready to scoop up the errant pooch.

Spotting a pair of dolphins about 50 yards away, Colley yells, "Come here, my babies! You're beautiful! Come here, my babies!" She refers to this enthusiastic display as "feeding them joy," and it really seems to work. If you've ever seen a dog react to animated banter, you pretty much get the idea. Colley oozes excitement — and encourages her passengers to do the same — and the dolphins respond in kind.

Soon, the two dolphins are joined by 10 more, and before long the boat is surrounded. A dolphin glides by parallel to the side of the boat, angling its head upward to make eye contact with me. Another jumps out of the water, as the others seem to wrestle playfully just a few feet from the boat.

After a few minutes, they appear to get bored with us and they swim away. Rozzi barks to signal another group of dolphins in the distance. We watch as the two groups briefly merge, do a little more jumping and wrestling, and then head off in separate directions. Colley says this behavior is sort of like two groups of teenagers bumping into each other at the mall. They greet each other, maybe trade a few playful jabs, and move on.

When there are no more dolphins to be seen, Colley directs my gaze skyward. She points out a peregrine falcon — the first I've ever seen. Then she notices an osprey soaring overhead. Thanks to her watchful eye — and countless hours on the water — Colley has been the first to spot many new avian visitors to the island. Her firsts

include the brown booby, black-headed gull, yellow-billed loon, flame-colored tanager and mangrove warbler. In early 2007 she found the first mangrove warbler nest. These red-headed beauties should be back on the island in the fall, Colley says.

Back on dry land, I while away the day at the beach. The water here varies in color from deep blue to shimmering green. While it may not compare to the crystal-clear blue of the Caribbean, this is as good as it gets in Texas. The beaches are wide, clean and, on this late-October day, nearly deserted. I count 12 people as far as the eye can see in either direction.

The next day, I wander around the island without much of a plan, taking in the sights. At the Laguna Madre Nature Trail next to the South Padre Island Convention Centre, I begin to see why butterfly watching is exploding in popularity: it's easy and you don't have to get up early. Hordes of butterflies of every kind flit about from plant to plant in the lush garden. Dozens of monarchs are sipping away at the yellow and red flowers of tropical milkweed plants. I try to snap a few photos, but the wind isn't cooperating.

Just down the road, I happen upon an educational tour already in progress at Sea Turtle, Inc. Several large tanks on-site hold injured leatherbacks, greens, loggerheads, hawksbills and Kemp's ridleys. The guide describes how divers' weights are used to help balance turtles that come into the rehabilitation facility with buoyancy problems. The weights are attached to the turtle's shell with epoxy glue. According to curator Jeff George, "Buoyancy problems are usually associated with pneumonia, bowel obstructions or neurological problems related to boat strikes." Other threats to the turtles include entanglement in discarded fishing lines or nets and loss of food due to degradation of habitat — particularly the loss of sea grasses.

At feeding time, I'm surprised to see the green turtles munching on ordinary romaine lettuce. The other species prefer a slightly heavier diet, including fish, shrimp, squid and crabs.

As my own feeding time approaches, I head for Scampi's Restaurant, which comes highly recommended by locals (yes, South Padre does have locals, almost 2,000 of them). For starters, the chipotle crab cake is a spicy treat, and the pecan redfish entrée induces a happy delirium that has me thinking crazy thoughts like, hey, maybe I could live here. I manage to rationalize this deli-

cious gorging by reminding myself that I'll be going on a hike the next morning.

Arriving just after sunrise at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, I am immediately transfixed by the bird feeder near the visitor's center. I know I should be hiking off the calories from the night before, but there's so much action right here in front of me. Green jays and other colorful birds are chattering and jumping from branch to branch. Clumsy-looking chachalacas are strutting back and forth on low branches near the feeder. And, inexplicably, a javelina is standing silently amid the ruckus, as if posing for a Disney movie promotional photo. A green jay hops onto the back of the javelina, which doesn't budge or seem startled at all. Maybe they play piggyback like this every day.

I finally pull myself away from the feeder, pick up a map in the visitors center and head for the 15-mile bayside drive. I'm amazed at the number of large raptors I see along the way, including hawks, ospreys, peregrine falcons and crested caracaras. Something on the side of the road catches my eye, so I pull over to investigate. It's a dead puffer fish. How did that get here? I'm at least 200 yards from the water, on a hill that's about 30 feet high. Laguna Atascosa wildlife biologist Jody Mays says, "We have seen ospreys regularly carry their meals (fish they have caught) some distance away from the water to feed, perhaps to avoid gulls that try to take their meal from them."

A little farther down the road, I come upon a trail that leads to an elevated observation deck. The view from the deck underscores just how different this landscape is from the rest of Texas. The bay, and its glistening blue water, seems endless, but if you turn around and look only at the plants, you could easily believe you're in the middle of a desert.

After one more short drive, I arrive at the Moranco Blanco trailhead. As I begin the 3-mile hike, a strong wind picks up, so strong that I can lean forward and remain standing on wind power alone.

I consider turning around, but then there are those crab cake calories still waiting to be burned. While trudging forward at the pace of a tortoise, I spot another animal moving at about the same speed: a Texas tortoise. Unfazed by my presence, the tortoise crosses the trail and pauses to take a bite out of a juicy succulent. It's a starkly beautiful animal, much like the landscape it inhabits. Wavy, whorled lines on its shell surround small splotches of yellow. Its feet look like those of a tiny elephant but with longer toenails. Once popular as pets, the Texas tortoise was listed as a threatened species in 1977 and is now protected under state law.

At the end of my long, slow walk, I'm rewarded with another panoramic view of the bay. A blue heron stabs its spear-like beak into the shallows and pulls out a shiny, squirming fish snack. As I enjoy a snack of my own, I begin to wonder what it would be like to spend 24 hours at Laguna Atascosa, to watch the sun rise and set, to see the animals that become more active after dark. A part of the refuge is leased by Cameron County, which offers a limited number of RV and tent campsites at Adolph Thomae Jr. County Park. That's where I'll be staying next time. With nocturnal residents such as owls, armadillos, bats and ocelots, I'll bet the nightlife around here is amazing. ★

Details

South Padre Island Travelodge (956-761-4744, www.southpadretravelodge.com)

Casa de Siesta Bed & Breakfast (956-761-5656, www.casadesiesta.com)

Fins to Feathers (956-299-0629, www.fin2feather.com)

Dorado's Baja Bar and Grill (956-772-1930, www.doradosbaja.com)

Scampi's Restaurant (956-761-1755, www.scampisspi.com)

Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge (956-748-3607, www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/laguna.html)

Adolph Thomae Jr. County Park (956-748-2044, www.co.cameron.tx.us/park/thomae.htm)

PADDLING PADRE

Some of the state's most pristine and remote areas are found along the Lower Coast. And, for paddle sport enthusiasts, silently gliding along these mangrove-fringed shores, especially while fishing or birdwatching, is one of the best outdoor experiences to be found in the Lone Star State.

Although the Lower Laguna Madre offers miles of shoreline, there are a handful of stretches that are notable for the scenic solitude available to paddlers.

At the southernmost end of the Lower Laguna Madre, just below the Brownsville Ship Channel, lies a shallow, oyster-encrusted estuary known as South Bay, a virtual paddling paradise. A few miles west of the main bay, just above the Ship Channel and State Highway 48, is San Martin Lake, which just may be the state's best-kept paddling secret. And just a short paddle north of the South Padre Island Convention Centre is a stretch of isolated, protected and scenic sand that is an easy paddle even for beginners.

"Both South Bay and San Martin Lake are great for paddling and fishing," says fly shop owner and artist Larry Haines of Port Isabel. "South Bay is probably the better of the two, because it is more consistent, fishing-wise, and is also a little easier paddle.

"San Martin is a little more difficult because it is even shallower than South Bay," Haines says. "It can be really good when there is a high tide, and it can be good when the tide's coming out and the fish are moving out. Because it is so shallow and the water isn't quite as clear, it is easy to get stuck on oysters. The bottom is so mucky you can't get out and it's sometimes hard to get yourself off. But it is a gorgeous paddle, with lots of mangroves, a variety of birds and all kinds of other stuff to see.

"The best way to access South Bay is either from the children's beach at Isla Blanca Park or coming in the back side off Highway 4," Haines continues. "Or, you can go in by boat, anchor and get out and paddle. For San Martin, the Highway 48 boat ramp offers great access."

"South Bay is a wonderful area to paddle, whether you are sightseeing, fishing or birding," agrees Bruce Gillan of Canoesport in Houston.

Besides being the co-owner of one of Texas' premier paddle sport shops, Gillan is an accomplished paddler who has been exploring the Lower Laguna Madre for well over two decades.

"Wind is always a concern when paddling on the Lower Laguna Madre," Gillan says. "When we paddle to South Bay, we leave from the county park (Isla Blanca). It is not an extremely long paddle, but the wind can make it seem that way if you're not prepared for it. To help avoid the strongest winds, we like to leave early and return early.

"One area that is a nice paddle when the wind is up is the stretch of shoreline that runs north from the Convention Centre," says Gillan. "This area isn't heavily developed, and it provides for a really scenic paddle. And the island gives you a nice windbreak." — *Danno Wise*



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Bobwhite quail

What's Up with Quail?

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SPECIFIC HABITAT NEEDS.



By Henry Chappell



Although holding steady in the Rolling Plains and South Texas Plains, only small populations of bobwhites can be found in East Texas, where they once flourished. Loss of habitat to modern agriculture (opposite) is the primary culprit.

One or two years per decade, when rain comes at the right times, in the right amounts, it's easy to be a Texas quail hunter. Stop to open a gate and a covey flushes from the brush by the cattle guard. Spend an afternoon driving around a well-managed Rolling Plains ranch and you'll see more quail along the roads than hunters in the South and Midwest see in a year. The bird dog and shotgun business booms. The better guides are booked up a year or more in advance.

About as often, everything conspires against quail and quail hunters. Drought hits in the fall and continues through spring and summer. The weed crop fails. Simple survival requires all of the birds' energy, leaving none for mating and nesting. Nothing seems to thrive but grass burs and prickly pear. Fair-weather hunters turn to other game. Seasoned quail hunters get out a few times in the interest of tradition. They'll take it easy on their dogs, enjoy the outings, shrug and wait for a better year.

But the 2006-07 season had even the most experienced hunters shaking their heads. I kept hearing, "worst year since '84," and "worst year ever." Several top guides shut down in December.

It was a strange year, too, because habitat in many areas looked great. Of course there's a good explanation. Late summer rains greened up the plains, but, for the most part, it came too late to stimulate breeding.

Still, we all wondered: Was this just another rough year to be endured, or had something changed?

There are several parts to the answer. I'll begin on a bleak note.

Bobwhite quail are doing poorly across most of their range. According to the National Audubon Society's

2007 report, *State of the Birds*, the northern bobwhite quail ranks first on the list of common birds in decline, down 82 percent since 1967 — from a population of about 31 million to 5.5 million today.

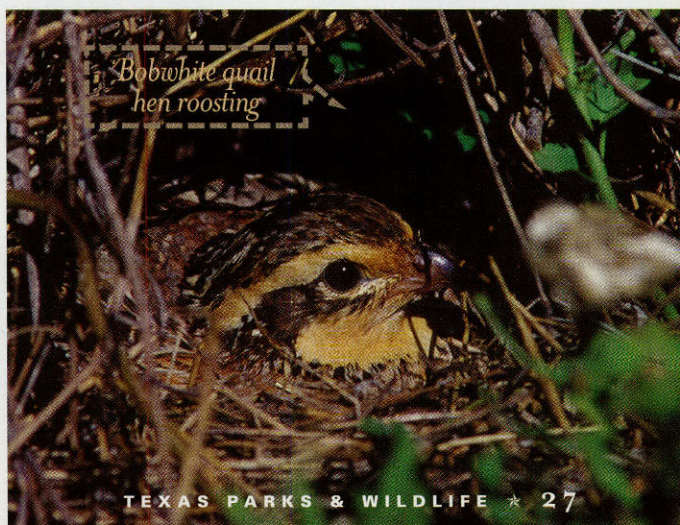
More specifically, bobwhites declined in Texas at a rate of 5.6 percent per year between 1980 and 2003 — a total loss of about 75 percent. Blue quail have declined at a rate of 2.9 percent per year over the same period for a total loss of 66 percent.

What's going on?

"Basically, it amounts to changing

land use over the past 100 years," says Robert Perez, TPWD's Upland Game Bird Program leader. "We've seen millions of acres converted to habitat types that may be fine for white-tailed deer, but not for grassland birds."

Unlike grackles, house sparrows and starlings, which thrive in habitats ranging from farmland to fast-food parking lots, quail have very specific needs. Low, woody cover such as shinnery oak, blackberry and sumac serve as "screening" or "loafing" cover. Perennial warm-season bunch grasses provide nesting cover. Annual forbs such as rag-



Scaled or blue quail



Scaled or blue quail



weed, crotcn, sunflower and pigweed produce high-calorie seeds the birds need to make it through winter. During spring and summer, various types of insect-rich, herbaceous growth serves as brood-rearing cover. Ideally, these habitat types should be interspersed so that all the cover types are available on every acre of land. Remove just one component and the birds disappear.

According to Jason Hardie, former Audubon Texas' Quail and Grassland

Gambel's quail



Gambel's quail



Bird Initiative coordinator and now TPWD Upland Game Bird Program specialist, areas east of Interstate 35 have suffered the most serious declines. "Quail have gone extinct locally in a few spots or survive on a few isolated islands of remaining habitat. The Post Oak Savannah and Pineywoods currently support very small populations," he says.

Ironically, East Texas once boasted some of the country's best quail hunting. Through the 1950s, tenant farming created a patchwork of ideal bobwhite habitat. Brushy fence rows provided ideal screening cover, while weedy field edges and forest clearings kept the birds well-fed.

Over the past several decades, fire suppression has allowed brush to overrun savannas and modern agriculture, which favors large pastures, clean fence rows and "improved grasses," has drastically changed the landscape. In deep East Texas, mature pines now stand where yeoman farmers once worked their mules.

So what's the good news?

Quail are holding fairly steady in their vast strongholds on the Rolling Plains and South Texas Plains. But while quail lovers can take comfort in that fact, it only serves to highlight the seriousness of the declines in the eastern half of the state.

More troubling yet, the bobwhite is an indicator species — a "canary in the coal mine" — whose status reflects the overall health of its ecosystem. It should come as no surprise that many other grassland bird species are in trouble as well. According to the Audubon Society eastern meadowlark and loggerhead shrike populations are down more than 70 percent. Field sparrow and grasshopper sparrow populations have suffered declines of more than 60 percent.

Any recovery strategy that benefits bobwhites will also benefit other grassland species.

In 2002, the Southeast Quail Study Group, under the auspices of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, completed the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, a large-scale recovery plan that currently encompasses 22 states.

In order to provide specific local solutions, the strategy contains several

state or "step-down" plans, including the Texas Quail Conservation Initiative, which coordinates management efforts based on best available science, policy and practices.

Organizationally, Texas' effort consists of the Texas Quail Council, a steering committee composed of representatives from universities, non-governmental organizations, and other leaders in the scientific and conservation community. The council, which meets quarterly, makes policy recommendations to TPWD and other agencies with the ability to impact quail habitat in Texas.

The plan also includes provisions for the study and management of Texas' other quail species: blue or scaled quail, the rare Montezuma quail and the Gambel's quail of far southwestern Texas.

Objectives include stabilization of quail populations within the next 10 years, creation and restoration of suitable habitat for quail and other grassland birds, and

It should come as no surprise that many other grassland bird species are in trouble as well. ... Any recovery strategy that benefits bobwhites will also benefit other grassland species.

Moritzuma quail



PHOTO © JOHN R. FORD TEXASPARKPRINTS.COM

By forming wildlife cooperatives, property owners in a given area can work together to manage wildlife habitat on a much larger and more effective scale than is possible on a property-by-property basis.

education and support of landowners and public land managers.

Biologists estimate that to meet these goals, Texans must improve habitat on 40 million to 100 million acres.

Drive along back roads in the eastern half of Texas, and you'll see pockets of quail habitat: native grasses, a mixture of herbaceous and low, woody cover, nice stands of ragweed, croton, or sunflower, and patches of open ground. You might think there'd be a covey or two around, but chances are, the bobwhite's dawn hail call hasn't been heard in the area for years.

That's because you're looking at a small island of habitat — a fragment. Quail and other grassland birds isolated on fragments are highly susceptible to predation and disease. On large, healthy tracts of good habitat, especially those connected to other tracts by viable wildlife corridors, predation has little effect on long-term populations.

"You can't manage quail on 50 acres at a time," says Perez. "Habitat fragmentation is one of our biggest challenges."

Wildlife cooperatives offer part of the solution.

Although co-ops aren't new — in Texas, the practice dates back to 1955 — they're increasingly important as more and more large ranches and farms are broken up into smaller properties.

By forming wildlife cooperatives, property owners in a given area can work together to manage wildlife habitat on a much larger and more effective scale than is possible on a property-by-property basis.

Along with TPWD's technical guidance biologists, Audubon Texas provides assistance to co-op members.

In 2004, a group of landowners in Colorado and Austin counties, near the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge, founded the Wildlife Habitat Federation, a co-op that now

includes some 34,000 acres. According to Hardin, bobwhite densities on some co-op properties approach a bird per acre in good years — excellent by any standard.

Landowners in Navarro County, in the Blackland Prairie Region, have formed the Western Navarro Bobwhite Restoration Initiative. Currently, the co-op has about 29,000 acres under management. With support from Audubon Texas and TPWD, the group holds landowner workshops and combines resources for habitat improvements.

Assistance isn't limited to private lands. Hardin is especially proud of Audubon Texas' work at Gus Engeling Wildlife Management Area, where technicians cleared encroaching brush and trees to restore savannahs.

In 2006, The Conservation Fund, of Arlington, Virginia, acquired a 4,700-acre ranch in Fisher County, near Roby. The property, now called the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch, will be managed by a nonprofit foundation. The ranch will serve as a research and demonstration facility where biologists will deepen their understanding of bobwhite and blue quail ecology and management.

"We have several students up there already," says Dale Rollins, the ranch director. "We're collecting baseline data this year on small mammal and quail populations."

Rollins, a professor and extension wildlife specialist with the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, is working with researchers at Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute to refine quail census methods. Currently, biologists estimate relative quail densities by walking transects and driving back roads. Rollins and his colleagues hope to use helicopter surveys and other methods to measure actual populations.

According to a worn-out aphorism,

when it rains in Texas, it rains quail. Notwithstanding the fact that drought-prone regions of Texas hold most of the quail, it just isn't that simple.

Drought is a natural part of plains ecology and plays a role in the boom seasons that make West and South Texas popular among quail hunters.

Much like fire, searing drought can serve as a cleansing or disturbing agent, burning away thick perennial ground vegetation that chokes out annual forbs and inhibits quail movement and foraging.

Conversely, on unmanaged land, several consecutive wet years can result in thick stands of grass and other rank growth. Quail numbers decline, then drought returns and wipes the slate clean — almost. Seeds of ragweed, croton, snakeweed and dozens of others lay hidden, waiting for rain. Likewise, beneath brittle clumps of little bluestem, grama, curly mesquite, buffalo grass, and other natives, roots lie healthy and protected.

And a few quail survive. Anyone who hunts running, wild-flushing, drought-honed survivors knows that only the fittest birds start the comeback. When an old-timer counsels a young hunter to practice restraint and "leave some seed," he's employing an apt metaphor.

The drought broke in 2007, and the surviving "seed" responded. Although quail populations are unlikely to go from bust to boom in a single year, there's reason to be optimistic about the upcoming season. Research indicates a relationship called "density dependent reproduction," which means that nesting success and brood survival are highest under conditions of excellent habitat and low population density — a perfect description of this past spring.

The birds will always do their part. It's our job to make sure that they have the chance. ★

Details

Audubon Texas (www.tx.audubon.org/Quail.html)

Team Quail (teamquail.tamu.edu)

Quail Unlimited (www.qu.org)

Quail Forever (www.quailforever.org)

Wildlife Habitat Federation (whf-texas.org)

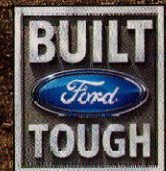
West Navarro Bobwhite Recover Initiative (www.navarroquail.org/index.htm)

BECAUSE "HOLD MY HAND WHILE
I HOP UP THERE" ISN'T AN OPTION.

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LONE STAR LAND STEWARD



2007

By Tom Harvey

Native grasses and one old cowboy helped the Price family turn overgrazed land into a conservation showplace.



It was June 1959. The morning sun was just starting to send moist heat rising off the pastures at the 77 Ranch south of Dallas.

Ranch owner Lee Low stood in the corral, smiling up at a 10-year-old kid on a horse. The young rider was Gary Price, who never dreamed in those days that someday he'd own the ranch. "You think you can handle that horse?" Low asked. The fine cutting horse had just arrived from Oklahoma City, where Lee's son Bill was a successful cattle buyer.

"Yes, sir" said Price, though he eyed the big horse with some trepidation.

"All right," said Low, saddling up to accompany his young charge. Low was seeing Gary's widowed aunt and had become like an uncle to the boy. The Prices lived in south Dallas, but Gary would come down on weekends and in the summer, tagging along and helping the old cowboy from San Saba. Somehow, the relationship between boy and man that began here grew into a lifelong friendship.

"Let's go to the bumper gate," Low said, and the two spurred their horses out of the corral. Low was riding Piss

Ant, a horse that lived to be 35 and became a minor legend in Navarro County.

At the bumper gate pasture, Low told Price to move some dogies (motherless calves) into a corner, so he could try out the horse and "see how cowie he is." The boy complied with gusto, but on the first calf he headed, the horse stopped so abruptly Price sailed off and got a mouthful of Navarro County. He quickly rolled to his feet, rubbing his noggin.

Low sat on his horse, laughing, but not unkindly.

"He stops hard, don't he?" said Low.

"Yes, sir," said Price, still rubbing.

After a few more tries, Price was able to sit a little deeper in the saddle and ride the cutting horse to Low's satisfaction.

More than two decades later, Price and Low were again riding together, helping a neighbor catch some yearling cattle.

Over the years, the small boy at Low's boot heels had grown into a young man. And Low had passed along some important



Gary and Sue Price used a holistic approach to revitalize the 77 Ranch in Navarro County. Their efforts earned them the 2007 Lone Star Land Steward Award.

insights, ranching principles that eventually led to model stewardship. Low had come from dry San Saba County, where ranchers emphasized drought-tolerant native grasses and rotational grazing to move cattle often from pasture to pasture so they won't eat the grass down. These ideas were less common in the greener country east of I-35, but they took root in Gary Price.

Low was now more than 80 years old, but still active. Price still clearly recalls what happened that day.

"Lee came in behind this yearling, and he couldn't quite get up there on old Piss Ant. I was worried it might get into the brush, and I was riding a young roan horse named Eveready, so I just flew right by Lee and roped it. I have some regrets about doing that, because it wasn't quite cowboy etiquette. But that was probably the passing of the torch, right there."

Several decades later still, Price was standing in the north pasture of the 77 Ranch, explaining his ranching approach to an Associated Press correspondent, a TV news crew from Dallas and other reporters.

Price was talking about grass. The reporters asked questions and took notes, trying to understand what's so important about grass.

Much had happened since those early years with Low, and a series of events had brought Price full circle back to the 77. In the 1970s, Low's son died suddenly, leaving him without an heir. Gary had married Sue and was in Lubbock, working for a veterinary pharmaceutical company. Lee surprised them one day by offering to sell them part of the ranch. The Prices moved back in 1977 and repaid Low over 20 years, continuing payments to his granddaughters after the old cowboy finally died in 1987.

The reporters don't know any of this. But as Price speaks about grass in his slow, patient drawl, the pieces start to connect, and they begin to realize what he's really talking about is a holistic approach to the land. It's about working with natural processes as much as possible, about simulating the effects of migrating bison by rotating cattle, about using controlled burns to mimic

long-suppressed natural wildfire, about restoring native grasses and plants, the ones that evolved to be here over millennia, about how these plants are better for cattle, and wildlife, and water resources, and ultimately for people too, for people in cities as well as folks in the country.

"The key for me was when I realized about water cycles," Price said. "You can never control how much water you get, but you can control how much you keep."

When you see that and understand it, it's going to completely overhaul your land management. What we used to call weeds can be very beneficial plants."

When raindrops fall on the 77 Ranch, tall native grasses with deep fibrous roots catch and hold the water, slowly filtering and releasing it, recharging the underground water table and sending cleaner water with less silty erosion downstream to Richland-Chambers Reservoir. For this reason, Tarrant Regional Water District and USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service have for years provided cost-share financial assistance to ranchers like the Prices.

"The water district is convinced that what happens in the watershed very often drives not just the quantity of water in our reservoirs, but also water quality," said Darrell Andrews, TRWD assistant environmental director. "That in turn affects the water we sell to our customers in the western half of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. It translates to reduced costs, because the water is cheaper to treat, because the water going into the reservoir is cleaner."

The Prices have some land they bought from adjacent owners, pastures covered with non-native coastal bermuda grass, low-growing turf introduced as cattle forage. But they've gravitated toward tall native bunch grasses, planting or protecting classic prairie species like eastern gamagrass, indiagrass, and big and little bluestem.



Controlled burns (above) mimic long-suppressed natural wildfires; the Price family replanted native grasses (center) to hold water longer; Governor Rick Perry presents the 2007 Lone Star Land Steward Award to Gary and Sue Price.



"You can never control how much water you get, but you can control how much you keep."

—Gary Price
2007 Lone Star Land Steward

This benefits not only water resources but wildlife as well.

One beneficiary is the bobwhite quail. Like many places in Texas, the 77 Ranch used to have a lot of quail, and years ago it hosted hunters from the Metroplex, but in recent years, few wild quail have been seen. The Prices have helped enlist their neighbors to reverse that trend by forming the Western Navarro Bobwhite Quail

Initiative, comprising about 20,000 acres in western Navarro County.

For all these reasons, the 77 Ranch received the 2007 Leopold Conservation Award for Texas from Sand County Foundation and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, part of the agency's Lone Star Land Steward Awards program.

On May 23 at the Austin awards banquet, when Gary and Sue Price stepped on stage to receive their award, a surprise guest was there to shake their hands, Governor Rick Perry.

The small boy who used to ride out with Lee Low had become the toast of the hour, a model for others.

It has not been an easy road. The past two years brought extreme drought to the area, and the Prices came close to selling all of their cattle last fall. Fortunately, rain finally returned this spring.

"When you lose production, you lose income, and trying to balance financial needs with protecting natural resources can be

quite a challenge," Price said. "But we know that by protecting the resource, when we finally do get water, the country is going to respond better and we're better off in the long run. We're not looking for short-term gains; we're in it for the long-term. My son runs a ranch in West Texas, and I'd like him to have the option to come back here and run this place. It's the old standard of leaving it better than I found it. That's what Lee Low taught me." ☆



NEIGHBORHOOD GOES WILD

Texas leads the nation in the loss of green open space, with buildings and roads replacing what used to be wildlife habitat, a trend that threatens people and water and air quality as well as wildlife.

The Woodson Place "conservation development" east of Dallas represents part of the solution, and for this reason it is the first residential developer/builder to earn a Lone Star Land Steward Award from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Woodson Place also earned statewide recognition in 2005 when its model "Idea Home" achieved a top, 5-star rating under the Austin Green Building Program, the world's oldest and largest such program, with more than 5,000 homes rated.

Woodson Place is located about 80 miles east of the Metroplex, in Rains County. The small-scale residential development is led by the seventh-generation owners of a 108-year-old family farm. More than half of the community's 66 acres are preserved as shared woodlands, meadows, ponds and trails, professionally managed for recreation and wildlife habitat.

Frank Woodson bought the original home-site in 1896 to raise his family and farm the

land. Frank's grandson R.O. Woodson was born there in 1914. After completing high school in nearby Emory, R.O. borrowed five dollars to travel to South Texas to work for his uncle in the lumber business. He eventually became a successful residential builder, completing close to 10,000 homes across South Texas during his career. However, R.O.'s heart remained in the East Texas farmland of his boyhood, where he and his wife, Bernice, retired in 1973.

R.O.'s grandson Chris Allen has worked on renewable energy projects and large-scale land management plans. In 1997, he started looking at the conservation subdivision model as part of a bigger project for the U.S. Department of Energy.

"I saw the chance to pick up on my grandfather's legacy as a builder and developer, but with a 21st century spin on it," Allen said. "This land was a pretty sizable amount of my mother's inheritance in 1998, and she didn't want to be a farmer or rancher, so we started looking at it. We didn't want to see it turned into something that would go against the character and tradition of the place. The idea that eventually emerged was to plan for limited

development on part of the property, allowing us to keep the rest of it for the family."

To reduce its ecological footprint, the neighborhood clusters groups of half-acre home sites to preserve contiguous open space, enhancing sustainability through water conservation and energy efficiency.

Habitat enhancement includes water development, fire ant control, erosion control, bird nesting structures, tree snag preservation and wildflower planting. Native prairie is being restored through native grass and wildflower seed plantings and controlled burns.

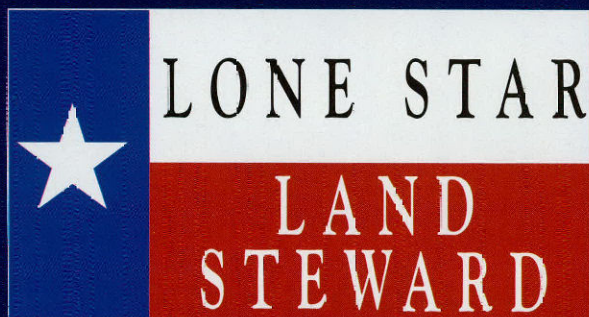
Lot buyers get six hours of free consulting with a landscape architect specializing in native plant wildscaping.

For more information, visit <www.woodsonplace.com>.

Details

Ecoregion and special category nominations for Lone Star Land Steward Awards are accepted June 1-November 30. Leopold Conservation Award nominations are accepted June 1-January 15. Nomination forms and instructions may be obtained online at <www.tpwd.state.tx.us/lsls> or by calling (512) 389-3119.

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To find out more about becoming a sponsor of the Lone Star Land Steward Awards, or to learn how to nominate a deserving landowner for recognition, please visit <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/lsls> or contact Linda Campbell at (512) 389-4395 or linda.campbell@tpwd.state.tx.us



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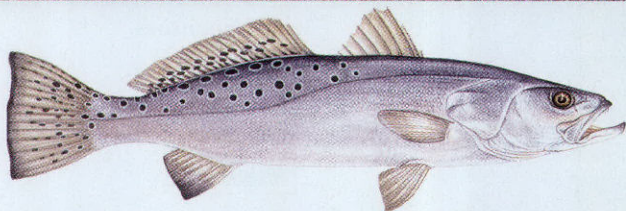
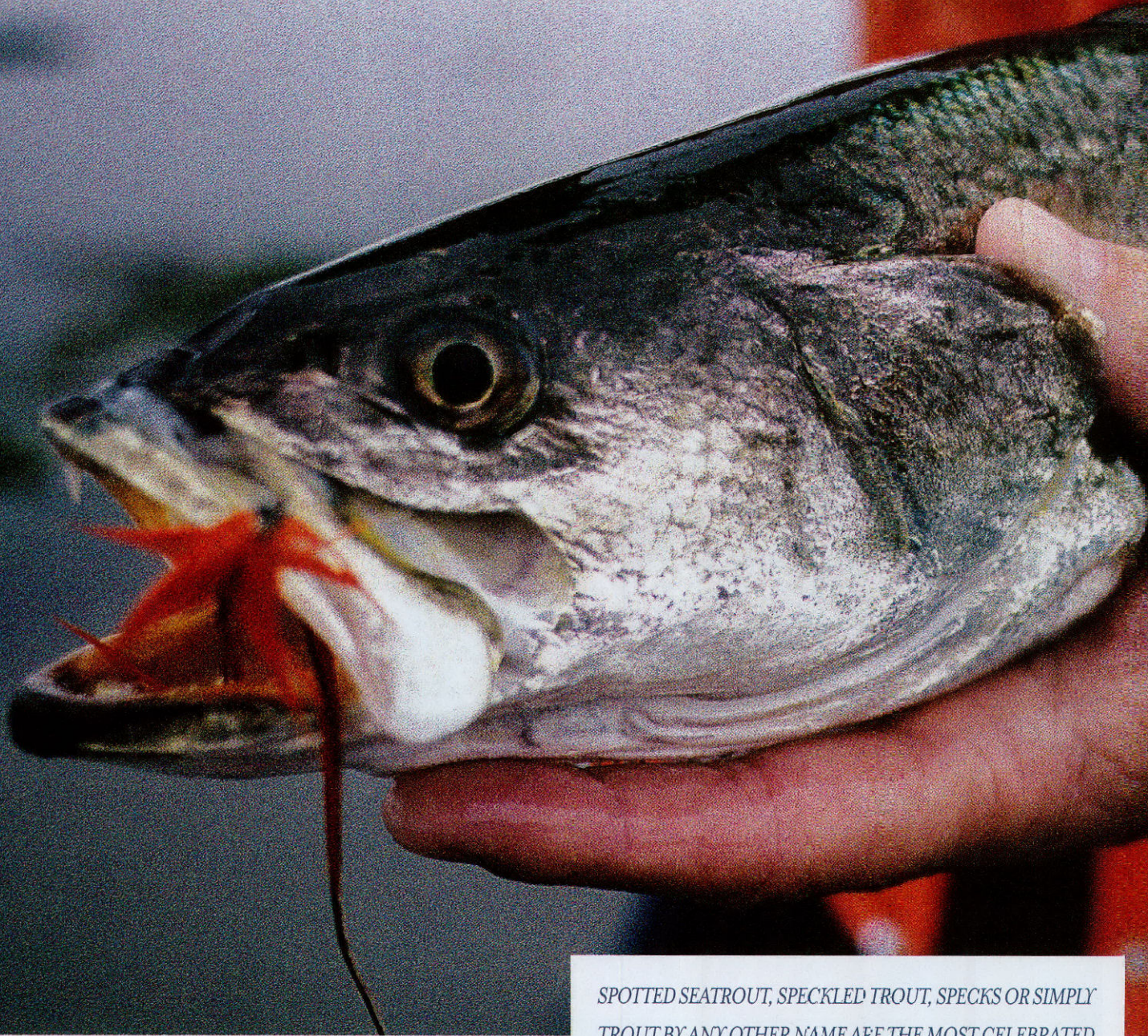
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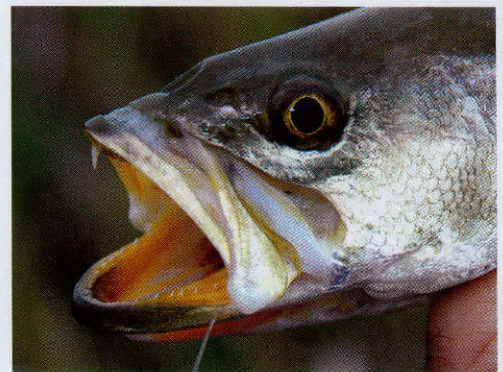
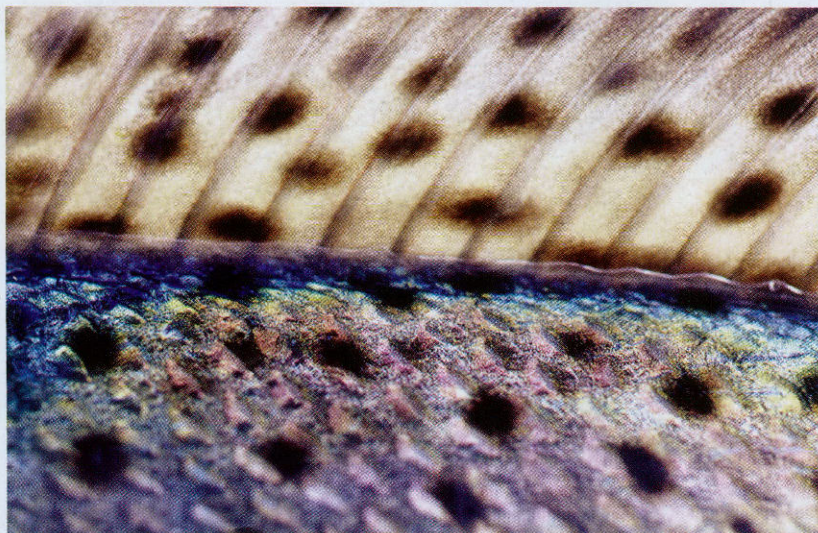
In the 1970s, spotted seatrout populations were being overfished. A growing sport fishing industry, along with a significant commercial trotline and net fishery, was taking its toll on spotted seatrout. There were laws governing spotted seatrout, but county commissioner courts often used their veto power over Texas Parks and Wildlife Department regulations whenever they saw fit. In some southern counties, there were no bag limits. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission implemented a coastwide 12-inch minimum size limit and a 20-fish bag limit in December 1978. However, the rule did not apply to three counties bordering Galveston Bay and one along the San Antonio Bay system because TPWD did not have the authority to regulate fisheries in those counties. Nevertheless, the next year the legislature imposed the limits on those four counties. Two years later, an unprecedented battle at the state capitol ensued.

In 1981, the proposed House Bill 1000 would make it

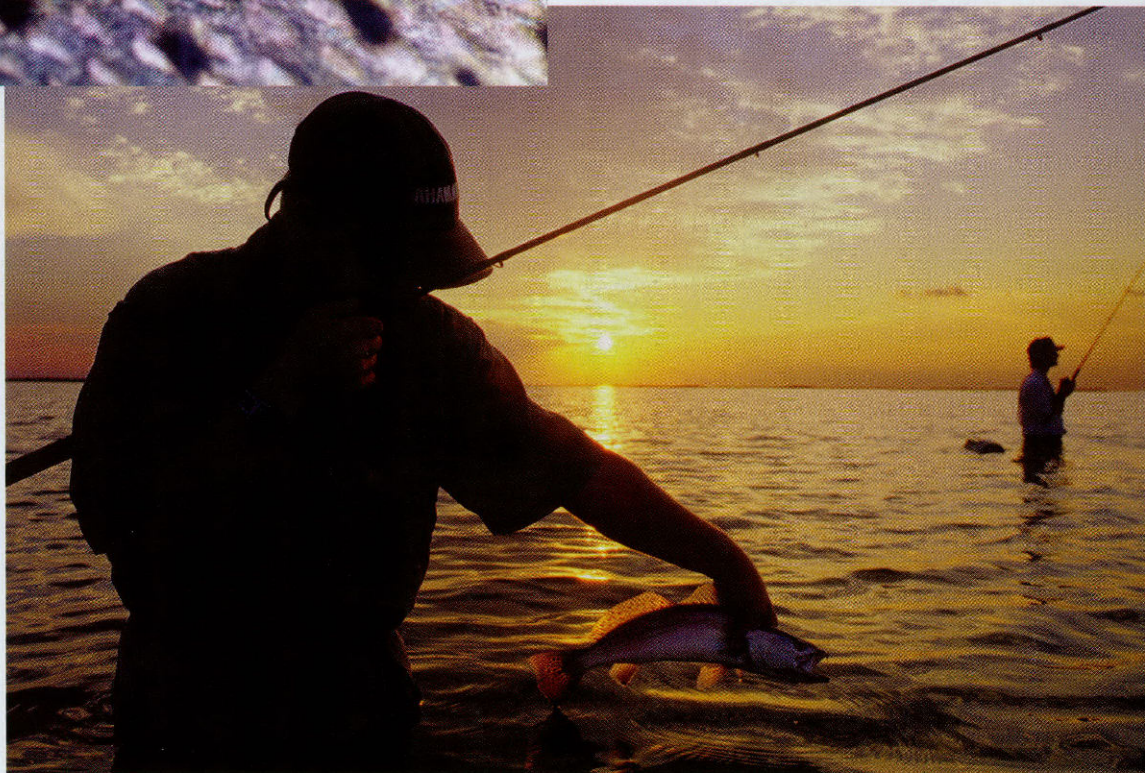
illegal to sell red drum and spotted seatrout. Some considered this a landmark law, while others thought of it as a sign of the apocalypse. Data collected by TPWD indicated that spotted seatrout and red drum populations were in a serious state of decline. A Federal Court decision would come into play. In the end, it would boil down to simple economics — both species were worth orders of magnitude more to the state as a sport fish than on the lunch menu. The law would eventually pass, marking a victory for sport fishing interests and helping to create a premier recreational fishery.

Despite careful management of size and bag limits, a troubling trend began to emerge in 2006. TPWD biologists started to see a long and slow downward trend in spotted seatrout spawning stock in the Lower Laguna Madre. Spotted seatrout longer than 20 inches were showing up less frequently in the sample nets, while large trout in other bay systems were increasing.

While the fishery was still healthy overall and in no dan-



Distinguishing characteristics of the spotted seatrout include distinct round spots on the back (above), fins and tail, as well as one or two prominent canine teeth at the tip of the upper jaw (above right). Right: Spotted seatrout swim near seagrass beds of shallow bays and estuaries during spring and summer, then head for deeper bay waters and the Gulf of Mexico when the temperatures fall. Opposite: a 30-inch trophy-sized trout.



ger of collapse, concerns about over-exploitation of seatrout indicated that some action should be taken to improve the situation. After eliminating water quality issues, escapement and recruitment problems, too much fishing pressure was considered the underlying cause. The answer was to take a hard look at the historic coastwide bag and size limit tactic. In this case, perhaps the “one size fits all” approach was not working.

Regional management is not new to Texas fisheries. Inland lakes are managed on their unique characteristics and commercial fisheries have been managed under this strategy for decades. The idea is simple. Formulate fisheries regulations to match the idiosyncrasies of a particular bay system. Texas bays range from almost fresh to hypersaline, and the species that inhabit those systems have evolved a lifestyle to fit the conditions distinctive to each.

In the Lower Laguna Madre, everything pointed to a simple solution: reduce the bag limit to five. Over time the fishery should respond favorably in greater abundance, higher spawning stock biomass and more trophy-sized trout. The rule will have no effect on 90 percent of Lower Laguna Madre anglers, but for the remaining 10 percent who routinely land more than five fish, the sacrifice is about one fish per trip. This regulation went into effect on September 1, 2007.

As a result of intensive and ongoing management measures, anglers from across the country are attracted to Texas’ world-class seatrout fishery. Water body records for each of the eight major bays are all over 10 pounds, with six of those records set since 1999. The Lower Laguna Madre currently boasts the IGFA world record for a fly-caught spotted seatrout, 15.6 pounds. ★

A GROWING SPORT FISHING INDUSTRY, ALONG WITH A SIGNIFICANT COMMERCIAL TROTLINE AND NET FISHERY, WAS TAKING ITS TOLL ON SPOTTED SEATROUT.



HOW TO CATCH SPOTTED SEATROUT

The old adage that to catch big fish, you have to use big bait holds true for spotted seatrout. A spotted seatrout can swallow something half its length. When they reach about 20 inches, trout switch from a shrimp/fish diet to strictly fish — large fish — like mullet. Casting a foot-long mullet may be a little awkward, but that is a preferred food for trophy-sized trout. To make matters worse, large spotted seatrout probably feed only once or twice a week, so you have to be at the right spot at the right time with the right bait to catch a “career trout.”

Top trophy anglers generally fish with large artificials or use live bait fish. Big topwaters,

shallow divers, large fish-like lures, live mullet, pinfish or croaker all can claim a stake in the trophy race.

Another method that works well is to use a popping cork rig. Place a float — popping cork — about 20 inches above a hook. Add a small split shot between the float and bait to keep the bait down in the water column. Most anglers like to use a 20-pound test leader so that the trout do not bite through the line with their sharp teeth. A sharp jerk to the cork imparts a chugging or popping sound that simulates the sound of a spotted seatrout hitting the surface, thus drawing attention to the bait. In the early years, the popping cork was made from real cork, and

then Styrofoam was used. Today, while both of the older types can still be found, molded plastic floats with built-in rattles are commonplace.

In the early 1980s, Bob Fuston, a fishing guide from Port Mansfield, invented a variation on the float style called the Mansfield Mauler. These floats are narrower, with a stiff wire running through the middle of the float with plastic or metal beads on each end. The same retrieve method is employed, but it makes a softer “clicking” sound and is often used in more delicate presentations in shallow water where too much noise might scare the fish. These “clicker corks” have become a mainstay in most spotted seatrout anglers’ tackle boxes.

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CONFESSIONS OF A RAVEN MANIAC

Surviving on stealth, teamwork and a knack for acting, ravens are the con men of the bird world.

BY PENELOPE WARREN



THE RAVEN "NEVERMORE!" QUOTH THE RAVEN "NEVERMORE!" QUOTH THE RAVEN

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PHOTO © LARRY DITTO TEXASPARKPRINTS.COM

“What’s your favorite bird?”

It’s one of those questions birders hear with predictable regularity. I’ve gone through an equally predictable sequence of stock answers, beginning with the obvious, “Oh, well, it’s impossible to choose just one,” progressing through “The newest bird on my life list,” to an admission of the bald truth: “I’m a raven maniac.” Non-birders will respond with a frown and “Oh, those big black things?” puzzled that the answer isn’t “painted buntings” or “mockingbirds” or something else stunningly beautiful or musical. Most other birders will pause, nod, acknowledging the choice even if they don’t share it. Every now and then, though, one gets a gleam in his eye, grins, and admits, “Oh, yeah. Me, too.”

The fact is ravens are special. The common raven is one of the most widely distributed of all birds and one of the most successful. It originated in the Old World, ranging across the breadth of Europe, a narrow strip of North Africa and most of Asia. From there it crossed into North America via the Bering land bridge, possibly scavenging the remains of mammoth and bison hunted by the humans who made the trek. Ravens spread south to Central America and east to the Atlantic, adapting to tundra and desert and everything in between, splitting into new species and subspecies as they went.

Today, Texas is home to both the original common raven (*Corvus corax*) and a later, strictly American branch of the family, the Chihuahuan raven (*Corvus cryptoleucus*) that developed in the New World after the initial migration. The common can be found in Big Bend and on the Edwards Plateau, while the Chihuahuan’s range overlaps and extends north into the Panhandle and south along the Rio Grande. The common is a bird of wild places, favoring mountains and forests. The Chihuahuan is altogether more gregarious. A bird of grasslands and desert scrub, it happily winters in and around cities, taking advantage of landfills and exploiting even the litter tossed onto parking lots,



poking into burger wrappers and corn chip bags for the last tasty crumbs

Legend has always ascribed extraordinary powers to ravens. In Celtic myth, the war goddess Morrigan takes the form of a raven. A matched pair named Hugin (thought) and Munin (memory) were said to sit on the Norse god Odin’s shoulders and whisper news of the world into his ears. Western Native American nations saw Raven as both a creator spirit and a trickster, while others associated him with dark magic; in Cherokee, a *ka’icna yelisi*, or raven-caller, is a two-heart, a shape shifter, a stealer of souls. Perhaps the most famous raven of all is Edgar Allan Poe’s incurably pessimistic bird, who “once upon a midnight dreary” stalks into the parlor of a grieving lover and croaks “Nevermore” in answer to each of his despairing questions.

Part of the raven’s mystique is sheer physical presence. Both Texas species are glossy black, with shaggy hackle feathers at the throat and wedge-shaped tails. Both have large, heavy bills adorned with bristles and an aristocratic Roman arch. At 22 to 27 inches long and up to 3.6 pounds, with a wingspread of about 4 feet, the common



raven is larger than any other American songbird — yes, you read that right; songbird, even if it's more Philip Glass than Mozart — and consistently larger than any but the high-end raptors such as eagles and great grey owls. The smaller Chihuahuan checks in at 19.5 inches, not as overbearing, but still a match, millimeter for millimeter, for a red-tailed or Swainson's hawk. Perhaps most distinctive, both boast high-domed skulls that house brains as large, in relationship to their bodies, as those of chimpanzees. And recent research has begun to show that ravens use those brains in sometimes remarkable ways.

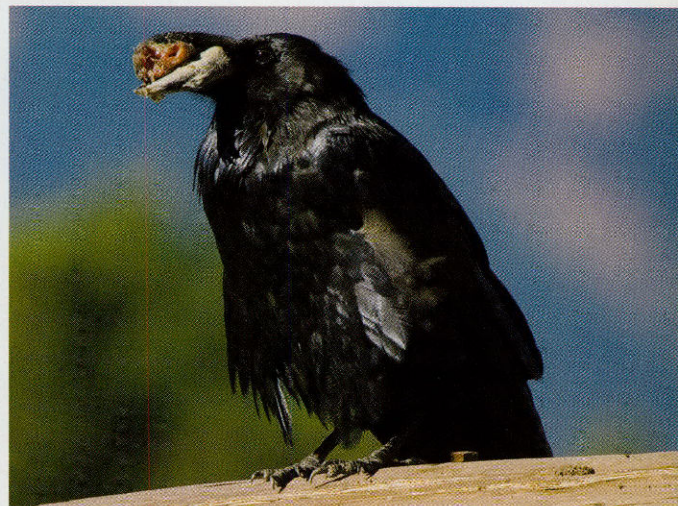
Scientists have long associated intelligence with two major factors. One is the ratio between brain size and total body mass. The bigger the brain in proportion to the body, the more intelligent the brain's owner tends to be. This measure holds true with humans and non-human primates such as chimpanzees and gorillas; with the cetaceans (dolphins and whales); with elephants; and, among birds, with the parrot and corvid families. Besides several species of crows, the latter includes jays, magpies, nutcrackers and, of course, ravens.

Until very recently, the common wisdom among ornithologists was that all birds came equipped at hatching with a set of

stereotypical responses to stimuli, with very little room for learning or originality. Mammalian brains — ours, chimpanzees', whales' and elephants' — are composed of two kinds of cells. The more "primitive" parts of our brain, which keep us breathing and digesting without having to think about it, are composed of bundles of neurons. The neocortex, which deals with abstract thought, creativity and problem solving, forms an overlay of flat cells in convoluted layers — the "gray matter." Avian brains, in contrast, are smooth and appear to be made up of the same type of fiber bundles as the lower sections of the mammalian brain. Scattered through the bird forebrain, though, are clumps of gray matter.

Despite their very different architecture, we now know, the internal connections within bird and mammal brains are quite similar, including the pathways for processing visual information and vocal learning. This brings us back to the importance of relative size. Not all birds are potential Phi Beta Kappas — just the ones with big brains for their body mass and the lofty craniums to house them.

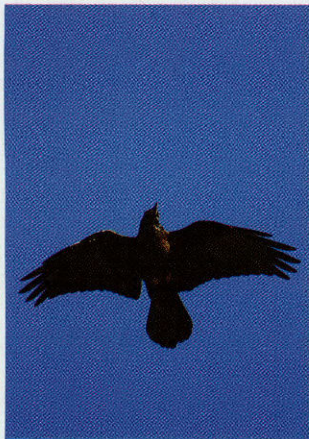
Several researchers have undertaken to test the extent of raven intelligence. One of the most prominent, Bernd Heinrich of the University of Vermont, devised an elegant experiment to test for insight, the ability to predict the results of an action. He suspended pieces of meat by long strings from a perch. One raven in the flock Heinrich was studying solved the problem by pulling the string up a few inches with



From far left: Ravens have heavy bills with bristles; a Chihuahuan raven lands on a branch; a raven roost in Big Bend National Park; ravens work together to hunt squirrels and even young seals.



Opposite: Males and females fluff their neck feathers to assert dominance. Below: The mating ritual of ravens involves a graceful aerial ballet. Lifelong mates play and hunt together as a team.



his bill, grasping the loop with the talons of one foot, then hauling up another few inches of cord and holding that down until he arrived at the bait. Another bird took a more direct approach, pulling the string along parallel to the perch until the snack was within reach. Other birds either imitated the first two or devised strategies of their own. This set of experiments has recently been repeated at the Konrad Lorenz Institute in Grünau, Austria, where European ravens have proven just as inventive as their American cousins.

A big brain, though, is only part of the equation. The other factor that favors the development of intelligence is a complex, usually hierarchical, social context. Among both common and Chihuahuan ravens, immature birds form flocks that feed and roost together. Intricate status relationships develop among them, established by gender-specific displays. The would-be dominant male struts casually along the ground with his head and bill held high, his head and neck feathers puffed out. Long belly feathers droop over his skinny legs like an incongruous pair of tattered pants. The female fluffs out her neck feathers, flares her wings and makes a series of *tok-tok-tok* calls known as “knocking.” Ravens are unusual in that the dominant male and dominant female do not necessarily become a “Bill and Hill” power couple. Each may well choose a mate further down the social scale.

At sexual maturity, around the age of three, pairs split off from the group to claim territories that they will vigorously defend against interlopers. At the end of nesting season, Chihuahuans gather again into large flocks, to winter with other pairs and their offspring. Common ravens, though, maintain their solitary territories year round, defending carcasses and other food sources from flocks of youngsters and other strangers.

The lifelong pair bond is established well before young ravens are ready to mate and set up housekeeping on their own. A courting male tempts his prospective bride's palate with choice morsels of grubs and bugs, the raven equivalent of a box of chocolates or maybe a three-martini lunch. She preens him, and he returns the favor. Both species of ravens perform spectacular courtship flights comprised of swoops, corkscrews, barrel rolls and plummeting dives with wings held close to the body, falcon fashion. Courting and mated pairs also fly serenely together, wingtip to wingtip. I have seen a

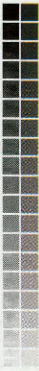
pair of Chihuahuan ravens execute a graceful *pas de deux*, flying within inches of each other, separating only to skim the flowing air of a high thermal as it carried them upward, then glide down again, calling to each other. Common ravens may also lock talons while tumbling through the sky, one bird flying upside down beneath the other, fierce and tender at once, like eagles.

The precision that brings paired ravens together, talon matched for talon and wing for wing, can also be deadly in the high air. Ravens may fold their wings and drop like falcons in the sheer exuberance of play or to impress a partner, but they may also kill like falcons, striking their prey from above and bearing it to earth. On the ground, bonded pairs make formidable hunting teams. Ravens have been observed chasing squirrels and even young seals toward a waiting partner, who blocked escape and made the kill. Raven partners are also accomplished bandits and stick-up artists. One of a pair will distract a feeding hawk or fox, while the other darts in from behind and steals its dinner. On Wreda Island in the Baltic Sea, a raven was observed dragging a wing to feign injury, luring a swan off her nest while its partner snatched an egg. Butch and Sundance, move over.

Raven cooperation also extends to other species. Biologists assume, but 10,000 years later have no way to prove, that ravens followed Ice Age hunters across the Beringia land bridge, feeding on the offal discarded by the humans. Ravens' relationship with wolves, on the other hand, is well attested. Ravens follow hunting packs and share their kills. In turn, ravens, whose formidable bills cannot tear through moose or deer hide, will call wolves to open a carcass and allow both species to feast together. The Lakota call them “wolf birds,” recognizing the kinship.

Ravens have fascinated humans for millennia because we see ourselves in them. Ravens are devoted partners and parents. Less admirably, they are also accomplished liars and thieves. They are opportunists, living by their wits. Yet ravens will share resources not just with their own, but with other species. (We humans are still working on that one.) They make us uncomfortable, inhabiting the uneasy intersection between life and death. Yet they are survivors, making their homes in deserts and on pack ice, where a black predator on white snow breaks all the rules and still succeeds.

Clever survivors that we are ourselves, we admire that. Maybe, if we're honest, we even envy it a little. ☆



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HOW ONE
WOMAN'S
QUIET
STRENGTH
CHANGED
US ALL.

REMEMBERING

Lady Bird

BY BARBARA RODRIGUEZ



I saw her in person only once. She was gliding through the airport in Austin at the rate of a Rose Bowl parade float, slowed by a flank of Secret Service and a small retinue of other folks. Her dress was classic and timeless; her shoes were sensible, but handsome; her hair was done up, neither cotton candy nor helmet, just attractively-no-nonsense. But it was her accessibility that impressed me. She spoke when spoken to, made eye contact with those she passed and smiled warmly in answer to greetings.

Her name was Claudia Alta Taylor Johnson. But from the time I was a little girl I knew her as Lady Bird. When, as a 6-year-old, I first learned her nickname it was no small thing to me. All the people in my family had nicknames. That people spoke of her simply as Lady Bird or even Bird, as Lyndon called her, planted the seed that she was “one of us.” It didn’t hurt that she looked enough like my mother to

be her sister. Even had she not, she had a familiarity about her, not the least of which was the dogwood blossom East Texas accent. She spoke our language. As she said when rolling across the state in 1964, campaigning for the Civil Rights Act — the first solo whistle-stop tour of a first lady in history: “You may not agree with all I say, but at least you can understand the way I say it.”

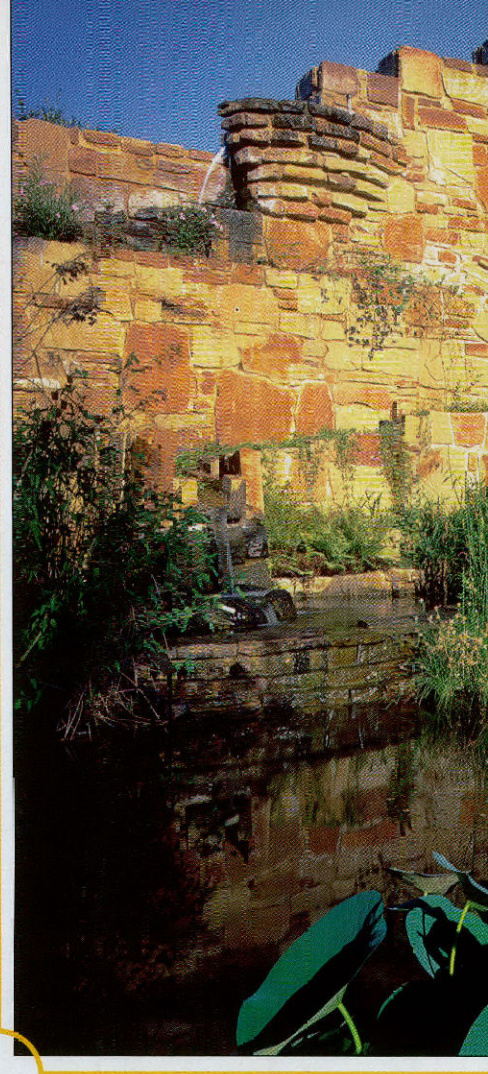


OPPOSITE BY TPWD, THIS PAGE COURTESY LADY BIRD JOHNSON WILDFLOWER CENTER

She was one of the first public figures on my radar, but throughout her long life she was for me unlike any other. Most important in those early years of recognition was that my mother adored her. What I learned from my mother's admiration for Lady Bird, first as the vice president's wife and in those somber later years as a reluctant first lady, was a lesson in the powerful pull a "steel magnolia" can have on other women. My mother was not a liberated woman. She generally disliked public women who weren't movie stars. She found the early voices of the women's movement too loud, too stringent. The powerhouse women of the '80s and '90s appalled her. But Lady Bird she admired absolutely — enough to turn up the radio at the mention of her name and lay aside the ironing. Lady Bird's strengths were recognizably her own: the quiet support of her husband, the steely resolve to protect and support him, the backstage mothering that nudged him in the right direction and showcased his strengths. That Lady Bird was a woman of wealth and business brains was admirable, but she won my mother's highest accolades for being a lady whose compass point was good sense.

When in 1962 we named our first puppy Lady Bird, it was nothing but the purest sort of honor. All these years later it is one of the few family puppy names I remember. I remember, too, the day we were called from our classrooms at the Sacred Heart Academy, corralled in the sacristy of the church and told that the president was dead. I was too young to understand what this meant for me or for Lady Bird, but when I arrived home to the tears of my mother I knew something in my world had shifted dramatically. We watched the news, over and over, and I think that even then I could sense my mother identified more with Lady Bird's burden than Jackie's grief. Forever after, the photo of Johnson being sworn in aboard Air Force One was for me about the suffering in Lady Bird's face, the face of a woman on a high ledge without a ladder.

Below left: At 17, the future first lady sits in a cypress tree on Caddo Lake. She described it later as her first memorable experience in nature. Below right: Lady Bird shares a moment with daughter Luci (top) and flashes her trademark smile in a Christmas photo from the ranch. Right: The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin. Far right: Mourners lined the streets of Johnson City with flags for Lady Bird's funeral procession.



TOP CENTER © LAURENCE PARENT; OTHERS BY TPWD; OPPOSITE RIGHT BY CHASE FOUNTAIN/TPWD



WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY MOTHER'S ADMIRATION FOR LADY BIRD ... WAS A LESSON IN THE POWERFUL PULL A "STEEL MAGNOLIA" CAN HAVE ON OTHER WOMEN.

During those tough first lady years, Lady Bird's name was a dinner table feature in our military household, often spoken with more reverence than the president's. It was a personal comfort to me when she attached her might to the civil rights campaign. At Sheppard Air Force Base the children I built forts and herded kittens with were black and brown and white. When my mother told me that Bobby, an African-American officer, would most likely not be my dad's best friend had they each pursued other careers, I was confused and angry. So in 1964 when Lady Bird mortised the cause with the soft-nud comfort of her voice, my mother listened and nodded and told me how right and brave she was and why.

When Lady Bird pushed through the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 (how she disliked the word beautification, which she called "prissy"), Mother rolled us kids out of the station wagon and onto the shoulder of the highway to make lessons out of hideous junkyards and ugly billboards. It was her salute to the first lady's belief that "ugliness has been allowed too long — it is time to say 'enough' and to act."

In this way I learned that Lady Bird was the first to say, in her own way, Don't Mess With Texas — or natural beauty anywhere. For us, every patch of wildflowers was a blooming tribute to her vision and taste. But as much as she took the nation to her bosom as first lady, she did not want a sea-to-shining-sea, homogenized, manicured-lawn sort of beauty; she said she thought Vermont should look like Vermont and the Lone Star State must remain uniquely true to itself. She understood the link between landscapes and character, that far more than being simply a backdrop, a home-escape was the context that defined its inhabitants in ways often unspoken.

Many accolades have been accorded Lady Bird since her death at age 94 last July, but for me her crowning glory is the bluebonnet portrait, the wildflower photographs that are the signature of the classic Texan rite of spring. These photographs of children bundled out of the car by mothers who thumb-lick bangs and straighten collars before settling them into pools of flowers are perhaps the truest legacy of Claudia Alta Taylor Johnson. These same children, surprised by their parents' willingness to set them free alongside a highway or pasture — in their Easter finery! — will grow up to seize the spring with their own snapping shutters. Beauty and ritual are her legacy as sure as seeds travel on wind and spring follows winter.

That she had a flower named for her should surprise no one. More surprising, perhaps, is that it was not a magnolia, nor a dogwood, but a rose. But the Lady Bird Rose is not a typically delicate tea rose favored by the fainting couch or bridge club set. The Lady Bird hybrid tea rose is a deep coral-red, like the lipsticks she favored, with a scent more spicy than sweet. And like Lady Bird, it's a working rose. It was developed by Lady Bird herself with Jackson and Perkins, the oldest garden nursery in the nation, as one of its line of "cause" roses; a percentage of all sales is donated to the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

I didn't know her. And yet I grieved when she died, along with the thousands of people waving flags and wildflowers in a final grateful salute as her funeral procession moved from Austin to the ranch in Stonewall in the slow glide of a Rose Bowl Parade float. It didn't surprise me when her seasoned Secret Service detail said they felt they'd lost a family member; we all did. She was one of us. ★

The FORGOTTEN WAR



Little-known battles near Brownsville helped establish the Rio Grande — instead of the Nueces — as Texas' southern border.

By Karen Hastings - Photos by Larry DiTo

Visitors to Palo Alto Battlefield, a 1,500-acre swath of prairie and chaparral just 11 miles north of the Rio Grande, usually arrive with one question: What does this have to do with the Texas Revolution?

Their confusion is common. Most Americans — even most Texans — have trouble placing this opening clash of the Mexican-American War (1846-48) on the colorful timeline of U.S. history. They hear “Texas” and think “Alamo”; they sing “from the halls of Montezuma” and never picture a triumphant American army marching all the way into Mexico City. In a rush to get to the Civil War, many American history classes gallop through the 1840s and barely pause over an 18-month conflict in which American forces won most of the battles.

For sheer consequences, however, it's hard to ignore the

Mexican-American War: It established the Rio Grande as our nation's southern boundary and added more than a half million square miles of what is now California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming to United States territory. Not to mention the Lone Star State.

War of Manifest Destiny indeed.

Today, Palo Alto is the only national battlefield dedicated to the Mexican-American War, but it is one of several sites in Brownsville connected to this often-neglected but pivotal conflict. A second battlefield, Resaca de la Palma, also has been partially preserved in the midst of fast-encroaching urban development. And on a University of Texas at Brownsville golf course hugging the Rio Grande, there are remains of the original Fort Brown, named for the officer who died protecting what was then an isolated earthen barricade called Fort Texas.

The city of Brownsville, which recently converted nine miles of old railroad tracks to a "Historic Battlefield Trail," is also working to make its battlefields a draw for history buffs.

With bilingual exhibits and living history programs, Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site aims to restore the Mexican-American War to its rightful place of importance in the grand and sometimes grim march of America's continental conquest. "Restore" is certainly the correct term, says Palo Alto director Douglas Murphy.

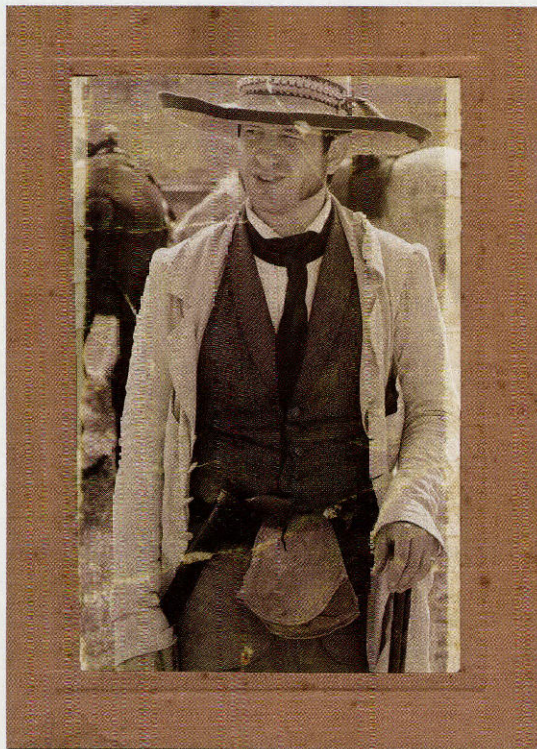
"In the newspapers at the time, the opening battles were presented as one of the biggest events of American history. It was the equivalent of Bunker Hill and it would never be forgotten," Murphy says.

Mexican-American War heroes like Gen. Zachary "Old Rough and Ready" Taylor and artillery genius Samuel Ringgold were household names. Dotting the United States map are numerous cities and counties named for then-celebrated battles and heroes of this "Event of the Century."

"I personally have been to half a dozen Ringolds around the country," says Murphy. "These names were very popular for awhile, and now there's probably nobody there that can tell you why it's named that. People from Palo Alto County, Iowa, and Resaca, Georgia, come down here and they have no idea."

That's why the Palo Alto site was created, Murphy adds. "We don't just present the battle here at the park. We made a commitment to preserve the whole war, because people just don't know about it."

On a bright, windswept day in May, a few busloads of high school students, Cub Scouts and other assorted history buffs unload onto an open field beside the Palo Alto visitors center.



IN A RUSH TO GET TO THE CIVIL WAR, MANY AMERICAN HISTORY CLASSES GALLOP THROUGH THE 1840S AND BARELY PAUSE OVER AN 18-MONTH CONFLICT IN WHICH AMERICAN FORGES WON MOST OF THE BATTLES.

Their attention is drawn to a small band of what appear to be infantry and artillery soldiers from the 1840s, gathered beside canvas tents, a "six-pounder" cannon, reproduction flint-lock muskets and wooden cartridge boxes.

It's the 161st anniversary of the Battle of Palo Alto — the start of the Mexican-American War. These local historical re-enactors — a Homeland Security agent, a middle school history teacher and a federal archaeologist among them — are setting the stage for this crucial battle. Later, these members of the Wild Horse Desert Historical Brigade, sweating in their Kersey wool fatigues of sky blue, will

The National Park Service sponsors an annual re-enactment of the Battle of Palo Alto. Actors portray the historical figures in the actual setting of yucca-covered prairie each spring.

march to an overlook and fire a 21-gun salute beside an open field, where the forces of U.S. Gen. Zachary Taylor and Mexican General Mariano Arista met on May 8, 1846.

Texas had won its independence from Mexico a decade before and was now boldly claiming the Rio Grande as its southern border, although the Nueces River — 125 miles to the north — had been its boundary as a Mexican territory. Texas already had joined the United States in 1845, and tensions between the U.S. and Mexico over this still-disputed territory were quickly reaching a fresh boil. At little Fort Texas, across the river from Matamoros, the fluttering Stars and Stripes only added to the heat.

News of a bloody skirmish April 25 at Rancho de Carricitos, about 25 miles west of present-day Brownsville, was the invitation President James K. Polk needed to ask for, and Congress to grant, a declaration of war on May 13, 1846.

"Mexico ... has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil," Polk told Congress. "She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war."

By this time, the war's opening battles had already been won.

Mexican bombardment of Fort Texas began on May 3. These hostilities would take the life of Maj. Jacob Brown, commander of the U.S. 7th Infantry, who eventually would lend a hero's name to both the rechristened Fort Brown and the city of Brownsville.

On May 8, 1846, after leading his freshly supplied forces from Port Isabel, Gen. Taylor met Arista's men at Palo Alto. It looked then very much as it looks today, open fields of tall sacahuiste cordgrass, ringed by

patches of dense chaparral and trees that hint at the Spanish name for "tall timber." Ulysses S. Grant, then a young 2nd Lieutenant facing his first battle, described the shoulder-high tufts of cordgrass as "hard and almost as sharp as a darning-needle."

U.S. forces were outnumbered, but artillery — including two 18-pounder cannons drawn by oxen — won the day. As mostly ineffective musket balls whizzed overhead and bounced through the cord grass, Arista's men were pounded by the "flying artillery" of Maj. Samuel Ringgold, a Palo Alto hero who would be mortally wounded that day.

American casualties were a handful dead out of about 2,300 soldiers. More than 100 Mexicans were killed with many more wounded out of around 4,000 men. Many were buried in mass graves on the field of battle. Arista began retreating that night to Resaca de la Palma — a dry oxbow of the Rio Grande only a few miles to the south — hoping for strategic advantage the next day.

He would not find it.

On May 9, Taylor again engaged the Mexican Army and sent them fleeing across the Rio Grande, where — according to letters from soldiers who were there — many drowned in treacherous currents.

Thus opened the 18-month Mexican-American War, a war of conquest that sent the United States marching all the way to the fabled “Halls of Montezuma.” It’s an unfamiliar and troubling image for many Americans — then and now — and a lingering sore point in Mexican-American relations. As one Palo Alto soldier quoted in James M. McCaffrey’s *Army of Manifest Destiny* put it: “It was a beautiful morning; the winds were singing; the sun was shining bright; and the sweet fragrance of the prairie flowers was wafted along by gentle winds; and yet, surrounded by all this loveliness, were two Christian armies about to meet and kill each other.”

When the fighting ended in 1847, the American flag was flying over the National Palace in Mexico City, and battles had been won all the way to San Francisco. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo established today’s Rio Grande border and — for a price tag of \$15 million — added territory four times the size of France to a nation that now stretched from sea to shining sea.

“That one image of our army in Mexico City really makes people stop and think,” says Murphy. “That’s the one image that tells

them this was much larger than a bunch of border skirmishes along the Rio Grande. It was the first two campaigns in what essentially was a war of conquest into Mexico.”

But as events like Goliad and San Jacinto led to the Mexican-American War, so the dominoes of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma continued falling toward the Civil War. In that bloody state-against-state conflict only 15 years later, the memory of Palo Alto was blotted out by Vicksburg and Antietam, Gettysburg and Appomattox.

UT-Brownsville history professor emeritus Anthony Knopp says Civil War issues of slave-versus-free states also distorted the memory of the Mexican-American War. And our national Wild West mythology didn’t help either.

“When you tell people the outcome of the war with Mexico, they say ‘Oh really?!’ Part of our national mythology is the conquest of the West, but we don’t think of it as a military conquest so much as cattlemen and miners and settlers coming out in wagon trains. How we acquired that West has sort of slipped past us in our historical mythology.”

Today, Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site seeks to present a balanced account of the entire war. Rather than glorifying American victories, interpretive panels tell both sides, in Spanish and English, and note the valor and sacrifice of all soldiers who did their duty.

“We try to bring the actual battle and events down to certain individuals on both sides: The soldiers who were here,” says Murphy. “And we get a variety of responses. We’ve had Mexicans who have complained it’s clearly biased against Mexico, and we’ve had Texans who’ve said we’re following Mexican marching orders.

LEARN MORE ABOUT PROP 4

TEXAS
NOV 6
2007

The 80th Texas Legislature recently authorized additional funding for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department including Proposition 4 bond money that would help state parks in 2008 and 2009 by providing:

- \$25 million for a dry berth to save Battleship TEXAS from deterioration and
- \$27 million for major repairs at Texas State Parks.

On November 6, 2007, Prop 4 will go before Texas voters in a statewide election. Visit www.proposition4.org to learn more about Prop 4 before you vote!

If approved, Proposition 4 would also provide critical funding for eight other state agencies.



PROPOSITION 4

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"We just try to preserve the two views and how the war was seen at the time. It happened, and there was right and wrong on both sides. I honestly think if you do it that way, people are smart enough to make up their own mind."

Meanwhile, while decades of farming and souvenir-taking have altered the site, there are still clues buried at Palo Alto that could help tell its story. With no official U.S. battle map — the Army map maker accidentally shot himself after Palo Alto — questions remain. Careful archaeological grid surveys are validating historical accounts

and yielding evidence of how the battle actually unfolded.

A reported mass grave of Mexican battle casualties has never been found, but six-pound cannon balls, metal buttons and other items are still being pulled intact from the ground with the help of volunteers and metal detectors.

"Our long-term goal down here in Brownsville is we want to tell the integrated story of the beginning of a very significant war. It's all three elements: Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma and Fort Brown," says Knopp. "It all started here." ★

VISITING BROWNSVILLE'S BATTLEFIELDS

The Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site includes a visitors center and a half-mile trail to the site of this opening clash of the Mexican-American War of 1846. In this tranquil place, visitors can easily imagine the battlefield as it was that day. Flags mark the approximate placement of Mexican and American forces, and work is underway to preserve and restore the landscape to its original open prairie bounded by dense thorny thicket. The park entrance is just north of the intersection of FM 511 and Paredes Line Road (FM 1847).

To the south, north of the intersection of Price and Paredes Line roads in Brownsville, visitors can also see what remains of the Resaca de la Palma Battlefield. Now preserved by the Brownsville Community Foundation, a partner with the National Park Service, it includes a new walking trail as well. Annual memorial events around the May 9 anniversary of the battle have featured hundreds of luminarias lit in honor of the American and Mexican soldiers who fought and died there.

Intrepid history detectives can also hike to the UT-Brownsville Fort Brown Memorial Golf Course driving range, where an old Army cannon marks remnants of the original star-shaped Fort Brown earthworks. Historic markers near the driving range parking lot give some background information. The university took over the grounds of Fort Brown after World War II and has preserved several post-Civil War buildings.

This fall, the city of Brownsville dedicates a new nine-mile, rails-to-trails hike-and-bike project that runs from the downtown Federal Courthouse through neighborhoods and across several resacas, to Palo Alto. Plans are to line the Historic Battlefields Trail with palm trees rescued during the expansion of Brownsville's U.S. Highway 83.

On both the trail and at Palo Alto itself, birders will encounter many of the "Valley specialties" that make the Lower Rio Grande Valley a birdwatcher's paradise. Checklists available at the park note several species — such as the black-bellied whistling duck, vermilion flycatcher and olive sparrow — first documented by Palo Alto soldiers such as U.S. Capt. John Porter McCown and Mexican Capt. Jean Louis Berlandier.

The Palo Alto visitors center includes picnic tables and bilingual exhibits, plus a selection of books in English and Spanish to fill in gaps about this often neglected part of American military history. Check with park rangers for special living history events and other programs.

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Nov. 11–18:

Panhandle wildfire recovery; Lake Whitney State Park; Litteken Ranch outdoor outreach; comeback of the tenacious tarpon; Big Bend in bloom.

Nov. 18–25:

The job of a Texas Game Warden; Martin Dies Jr. State Park; restoring springs on a Llano River ranch; birding for beginners; radical rocks at Copper Break State Park.

Nov. 25 – Dec. 2:

Watching out for frogs and toads; Hill Country State Natural Area; animal coloration; overcoming obstacles and pedaling the country; morning mist on the Leon River.

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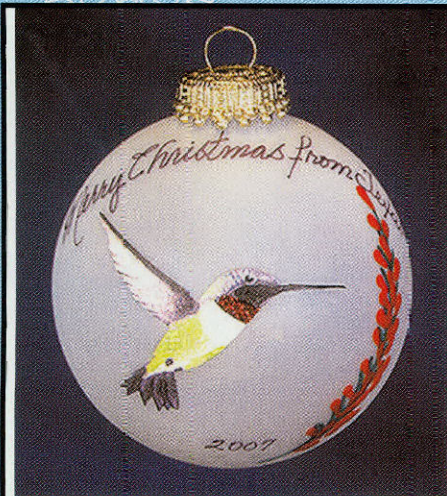
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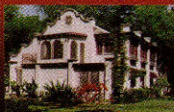
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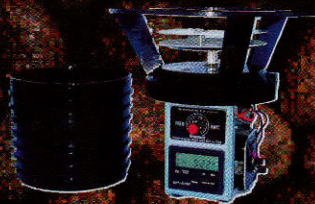
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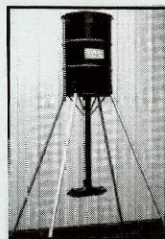
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PARTINGSHOT



Photographer Rolf Nussbaumer shot this close-up of a Texas bluebonnet in the early morning near Lake Corpus Christi. "One would think that flowers are easy to capture. However, the light should not be harsh. Early morning, late afternoon or a cloudy day [is best] and the air needs to be very still for a perfect setting," he says.

IMAGE SPECS:
Nikon F5 camera with 200mm macro lens, f4 aperture, 1/15 second shutter speed at f/16 on Fuji Velvia 50 film.

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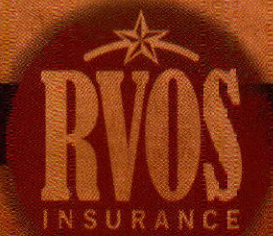
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