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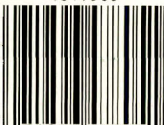
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FRONT: Little blue heron near Corpus Christi. Juvenile little blue herons are white and do not acquire the slate-blue adult color until the second year. Photo © Bill Draker/rolfnp.com

PREVIOUS SPREAD: A family bird-watching at Estero Llano Grande State Park, part of the World Birding Center, in South Texas. Photo © Larry Ditto

THIS PAGE: Cactus wren perched on cane cholla near Laredo. Photo © Rolf Nussbaumer/rolfnp.com

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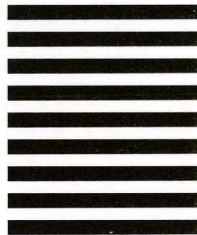


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In the Field

TOLLY MOSELEY

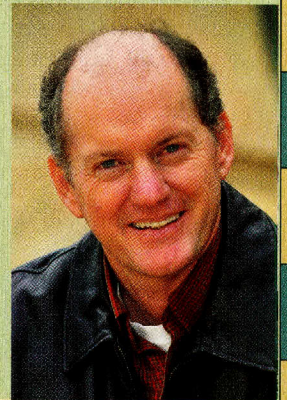
is a writer and blogger who lives in Austin. Before writing, she was a teacher, and that was how she met Lucas Miller, one of the conservation-minded musicians profiled in her article, "Natural Rock Stars."

Miller performed a rap about swamps, and after rapping it herself for days on end, Tolly knew she wanted to write a story about him and musicians like him someday. Tolly's work has appeared on Salon.com, in the national comedy act *Mortified* (where performers read their old adolescent diary entries aloud to a room full of strangers) and in numerous local and regional magazines. Tolly writes about more creative types and quirky characters on her blog, AustinEavesdropper.com.



RUSSELL ROE

managing editor of *Texas Parks & Wildlife* magazine, tends to head west when pursuing his outdoor adventures. The Hill Country and Trans-Pecos regions are his usual haunts. For this month's 3 Days in the Field, he chose instead to go east — to explore the pine forests and timber towns of East Texas. The region's rich history and natural beauty gave him plenty to explore. He says author and Neches River advocate Richard Donovan summed up the region's timeless beauty for him: "When the bluebonnets are in bloom, the Hill Country is a beautiful place. West Texas is a beautiful place when the ocotillo bloom. But East Texas is beautiful all the time."



TARA HUMPHREYS

who wrote this month's Park Pick on Old Tunnel State Park, believes that "watching a colony of Mexican free-tailed bats emerge is an amazing experience — visitors lucky enough to view this phenomenon will never look at bats the same way again." As the regional interpretive specialist for state parks from Bastrop and Buescher

through the Hill Country, Tara helps park interpreters connect their sites to visitors. She loves seeing visitors experience state parks, but she says it's just as exciting to see park interpreters convey their passion for the park to program attendees. "Nyta Brown's programs at Old Tunnel State Park are truly enjoyable and inspirational," she says. In her free time, Tara enjoys hiking, wildlife watching and camping.



AT ISSUE

FROM THE PEN OF CARTER P. SMITH

My wife will be the first to tell you that I am not good with dates, at least the kind of dates that most couples pay some semblance of attention to. In fact, she would argue — correctly, I must confess — that I don't remember any of them. Birthdays, anniversaries, Valentine's Day — you name it.

Unless otherwise prompted by a well-intentioned friend or an exasperated mother, I tend to remember them only after they are well in the rear-view mirror. It is a less than endearing trait. Thankfully, my wife's tolerance for such transgressions is high. She is a saint. Let me shout that for the record.

And yet to be fair, she will not be the least bit surprised to read on this page that I am now calling your attention to a date, albeit one that has nothing to do with her.

March 7, 2012. The setting was rather uninspiring — my front yard. I heard them before I saw them. The telltale raucous cackling high above me in the canopy of the post oaks meant only one thing. One of our now-treasured ornithological rites of spring was on again. The yellow-crowned night-herons had come back again for their annual cycle of courtship, nest building, egg laying and chick rearing. And, we would have a front-row seat for it all.

When my wife and I purchased our home in a quiet little area just northeast of the University of Texas, we were smitten with the big post oaks that blanketed the neighborhood. We had no idea that the nesting herons would come with them, but come they did.

Our first spring in the house, we were treated with three different pairs of night-herons that staked out their claims in the real estate above us. We watched with great amusement as the males chased after the females with characteristic and unrelenting persistence. At the risk of sounding anthropomorphic, they seemed to be as curious about their new neighbors as we of them. They had a penchant for flying down and landing on the rails around our deck. Our border collie didn't know what to make of them — they couldn't exactly be herded or rounded up. Occasionally, one would come down into the yard and march right over to him, a rather hilarious encounter that would puzzle our dog to no end.

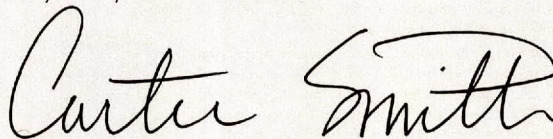
We cheered them on as they built their nests, a seemingly rickety and haphazardly arranged jumble of sticks, arranged precariously on the limbs of the post oaks. My wife fretted over them daily, meeting me each evening at the door with a barrage of questions about whether I thought they would pull off a successful hatch. I tried the usual biologist's explanation that we would have to be patient and to let nature take its due course. She was rarely satisfied with such biological equivocations. She delighted in pointing out their nests to anyone who stopped by the house — friends, family, the mailman and FedEx and UPS guys, the four game wardens who happened to be in the neighborhood, and even the Jehovah's Witnesses who stopped by one Saturday afternoon. She checked on them incessantly until she finally caught sight of what she was waiting for — the little chicks, six in all, sticking their little fuzzy heads out anxiously awaiting the next little frog or fish hauled over from a nearby creek by one of the parents.

We watched as the chicks grew and grew and ultimately fledged from the nest. It was great fun.

And so it goes with birding and bird watching in the Lone Star State, where we are blessed with more birds than any other state. Thanks to a diverse set of habitats across our state, we can see birds of all plumages — rare ones like the whooping crane and the golden-cheeked warbler, common ones like the scissor-tailed flycatcher and red-tailed hawk, resplendently colorful ones like the green jay and great kiskadee, and coastal specialties like the brown pelican and roseate spoonbill.

If you need a place to look for them, go to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's website and learn about the state's five wildlife trails or simply stop by one of your nearby state parks and wildlife management areas. I can assure you there will be something there for you to enjoy.

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



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department mission statement:

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

The yellow-crowned night-herons had come back again for their annual cycle of courtship, nest building, egg laying and chick rearing.

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MAIL CALL

PICKS, PANS AND PROBES FROM OUR READERS

FOREWORD

The other day, I drove through Bastrop on my way to pick up a box of fluffy chicks from a hatchery a bit farther east. As the view out my window changed from the lush green of spring to the blackened bones of charred trees, my mood turned from cheerful and carefree to somber and reflective.

Memories of those days/weeks came rushing back: my first worried thoughts about those CCC cabins at the state park, the flood of stories about employees and friends who didn't even know if they had homes anymore, serving barbecue at a TPWD benefit next to a colleague who showed me photos of how close the fire came to taking his life that fateful day.

If those sights stirred up strong emotions for me, imagine how it must feel for those who fled, those who battled, those who lost.

Here's how Bastrop State Park Superintendent Todd McClanahan describes just one evening of the 35-day struggle to put out the fire: "One night around midnight, we were working on Highway 71, attempting to hold the fire at a power line easement. The entire fire line immediately began to rage and throw embers across the highway. We saw the fire then begin to rage in Tahitian Village again. I was personally distraught because this is where my co-workers and friends lived, and there was nothing we could do. We felt helpless and defeated. We retreated into the park to defend the main campgrounds and cabin areas. This is truly when we looked into the eyes of this monster and fought it head-on. Numerous firefighters stood with hoses in hand surrounding the group barracks and cabins as the massive flames approached. Embers were falling and igniting the ground all around us, and we would stomp them out in attempts to save what little water we had to use on the approaching wall of flames."

Lately, we've experienced much happier days, meeting to discuss the reopening of those same cabins and how to let folks know that it's time to return to Bastrop and its iconic state park. The park is fully open to camping, and a majority of the hiking trails are open. There is still so much to see and do in Bastrop State Park.

"The forest is resilient, and with the winter and spring rains to assist, will recover over time," Todd says. "Visitors are amazed at how much green is sprouting in the park. Wildflowers, grass and even pine trees are emerging from the scorched earth. While it will take decades for this forest to return to its full glory, it is nonetheless amazing to have a front-row seat as the Lost Pines heals itself."

This is the spirit that I find among my colleagues at TPWD every day. This is the spirit that makes Texas great. You just can't keep us down.

As Todd says, "Bastrop State Park is back. But then again, we never left."

Louie Bond

LOUIE BOND
EDITOR

LETTERS

PUBLIC HUNTING SUCCESS

The TPWD public hunt program is a real winner. I have learned how to use the system, and hunt mule deer, white-tailed deer, javelina and quail nearly every year. No, I'm not giving away any secrets for success. The only change needed to make the system better is to raise the fees. Where else can a person hunt for an entire week for only \$130? This season, I got a real wall-hanger of a white-tail. It would have cost big bucks on a ranch. Keep up the great work, TPWD.

JOHN R. ESLEY III
Fischer

KELTON'S INSIGHT

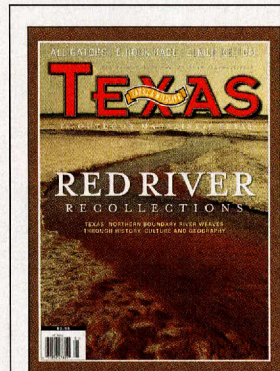
I enjoyed the excellent, well-written article by Mike Cox about Elmer Kelton in your January/February issue ("The Time It Never Rained"). I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Kelton at a writers' conference only months before his death in

2009. Although frail, he was approachable and gracious with his writing advice. It will remain a highlight of my life.

I thought of his book *The Time It Never Rained* often this past summer, when my mouth went as dry as dust and my garden shriveled down to nothing. How true to life his descriptions are, and his opening lines are some of the best I've ever read.

He may not have considered the relevance of his words at the time to the future of Texas and the insight they provide into what could become a regular occurrence for us. He tapped into the emotional side of drought, and it's something we should all pay attention to.

PAULA T. PHILLIPS
San Marcos



"[Kelton] tapped into the emotional side of drought, and it's something we should all pay attention to."

PAULA T. PHILLIPS
San Marcos

MAIL CALL

THRILLED AND CHILLED IN MULESHOE

Enjoyed the article on Muleshoe in your March issue ("Deep in the West"). Sixteen members of the Wimberley Birding Society visited the Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge on Jan. 18 and were thrilled and chilled as we saw some 40,000 sandhill cranes around sunup. They had spent the night in shallow water, then moved out at daybreak to nearby feeding grounds. It was a marvelous sight.

In addition to the cranes, we saw 16 other bird species, including a golden eagle and a ferruginous hawk — plus rabbits, prairie dogs and mule deer. Jude Smith, refuge manager, did a great job showing us around, and I would recommend a visit to anyone who enjoys birds and wildlife. But bring your long handles — it gets cold up there.

JERRY HALL
Wimberley

A FINE FEATHERED FRIEND

Cliff Shackelford's "Knock, Knock!" article on the incredible pileated

woodpecker in the March 2012 edition of *TP&W* magazine was a most enjoyable piece. It was as if I was visiting a life-long friend.

Having grown up in the hilly woodlands and remote bottoms of Benton County, Miss., I generated and cultivated a love and admiration for this large woodpecker. Back home in the '50s and '60s, the term "pileated woodpecker" would have seemed very foreign to the locals. We knew them then as an "Indian hen," "cock-of-the-woods" and "Lord-god," a variation of Mr. Shackelford's "Good-god!" rendition.

Oftentimes while hunting, the shattering, clattering call of a Lord-god traversing over the treetops would be the only advertised breaking of the silence for an extended spell. I always enjoyed seeing or hearing a pileated woodpecker.

My wife and I now live near Decker Prairie, Texas, and we have had a family or two of pileated woodpeckers around our place every year since we moved there in 1992. On Feb. 26, I was out back by the barn and heard a pair of these birds calling back and forth. The

male came flying fairly low across our woodlot and joined the female in a red oak. They both clucked to each other a few times, which I have always considered an indication of contentment rather than annoyance, and a part of close-range casual communication. The "cock-of-the-woods" joined the "Indian hen" on a 4-inch horizontal limb where copulation took place. I was immediately compelled to write to *TP&W* and share the account concerning one of my favorites of all the magnificent creatures.

C. FRANK HUDSPETH
Magnolia

Sound off for Mail Call

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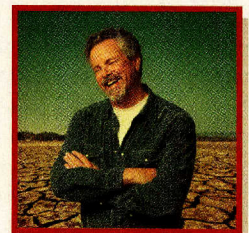
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As the sun was breaking over the eastern horizon, Mary and Dave Elder stood on the observation deck overlooking Ibis Pond at Estero Llano Grande State Park. Birds abounded. Several species of ducks dabbled and dipped over the surface, shorebirds scampered along the muddy shorelines, coots complained, and herons stalked with sedate deliberation in the shallows.

The Elders, Texas state park hosts, were somewhat concerned about their first volunteer assignment: leading a bird walk through the park. Would anyone show up? If so, how many? Would they do a good job? As park visitors started to

arrive, the Elders began their work and their worries disappeared.

After a short introduction, they began a three-hour hike through the park. During the walk, they identified birds, plants and other natural features and explained the history and ecology of Estero Llano Grande and the surrounding area. At the end of the walk the Elders were rewarded with applause and thanks from park visitors. Successfully completing this walk, they saw their initial worries disappear, and their confidence soared.

Now five years later, volunteering at Estero Llano Grande is a significant part of the Elders' lives during their winters

spent in the Rio Grande Valley.

"The Estero Llano Grande State Park staff is very appreciative of the work our volunteers do," Superintendent Marcy Garcia says. "Our volunteers are a respected and valued resource. They are a part of our park family and combine with our staff to ensure an enhanced park visitor experience. Each of them brings a wealth of knowledge and experience that enhances our park."

Garcia says volunteers and hosts like the Elders spend a lot of time learning about the park in order to share information with visitors.

"We have and have had several volun-

teers who have contributed to the development and growth of this park. Many of them are returning volunteers," Garcia says. One such couple, Larry and Linda Luff, celebrated 10 winter seasons of volunteer service last year.

The Elders are passionate volunteers who also volunteer in Atikokan, their small hometown in northwestern Ontario. Both Mary and Dave Elder have a long history of being involved with numerous committees, boards and associations. In a professional capacity as the former superintendent of a million-acre wilderness canoeing park, Dave Elder established and ran an extensive volunteer program himself for many years.

The Elders' volunteering philosophy is simple: "We have to give back something in return for the good life we lead and the good things we have. If you want to effect change, if you want things to happen, if you want to be an active participant — then volunteer."

The rewards are impressive. Mary and Dave Elder have made long-lasting friendships with park staff and other volunteers. They have helped to make the visitor experience more enjoyable and rewarding. Each year they see returning bird walk participants who are not just park visitors but now are old friends. For the Elders, the ultimate

payoff is to see the look of wonder on the face of a park visitor after they have pointed out a clump of brown leaves on the ground that magically transforms into a common pauraque.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department volunteer program is an excellent opportunity for anyone interested in a challenging and rewarding experience. Programs throughout the state offer a broad range of volunteer options that can be tailored to fit individual talents, experience and time frames. In 2010, more than 12,000 volunteers contributed 950,000 hours of service, valued at \$17 million.

Volunteering is a great way to experience the outdoors, promote conservation and outdoor recreation and share your passion. If you would like to learn more about volunteering for TPWD, search for volunteer opportunities or sign up as a potential volunteer, go to www.tpwd.state.tx.us/involved/volunteer. ★

— Dave Elder and Kris Shipman



Dave and Mary Elder volunteer at Estero Llano Grande State Park, helping with bird walks and other duties. They say their volunteer time is rewarding and gives them a chance to share their love of the outdoors.

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Strange Year for Whoopers

Endangered cranes found winter homes outside Aransas refuge and left Texas earlier than usual.



December through March in coastal wetlands on and near Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, between Rockport and Port Lavaca. In recent years, whoopers have slowly expanded their winter range — usually using coastal marshlands adjacent to already occupied areas.

However, in 2011-12, whoopers made significant expansions southward and westward of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, and one whooping crane apparently spent the winter with sandhill cranes in upland habitats near El Campo. Even more significantly, nine whooping cranes, including six adults and three chicks, spent most of the winter near Granger Lake in Central Texas, and one family group of whooping cranes traveled only as far south as Kansas before heading back north to spend most of the winter in Nebraska.

The unprecedented shifts may be indicators of both bad news and good news for the Texas flock, which is thought to now number about 300 birds, according to Linam.

“We are concerned about the health of our coastal estuaries and long-term declines in blue crabs, one of the traditional primary food sources for this population of whooping cranes,” she said. “At the same time, these cranes seem to be showing adaptability as the increasing population may be causing crowding in traditional habitats and drought may be producing less than ideal habitat conditions. I think it’s a good sign that whooping cranes are exploring and thriving in new wintering areas.”

Whooping cranes are the tallest birds in North America, standing nearly 5 feet tall. They are solid white in color except for black wing-tips that are visible only in flight. They fly with necks and legs outstretched. During migration, they often pause overnight to use wetlands for roosting and agricultural fields for feeding, but seldom remain more than one night. They nearly always migrate in small groups of fewer than four to five birds, but they may be seen roosting and feeding with large flocks of the smaller and darker sandhill cranes. ★

— Steve Lightfoot


It’s been an unusual year for whooping cranes in Texas, and the endangered species’ spring migration is the latest example. Researchers reported that several whooping crane families initiated their spring migration nearly a month earlier than usual, with some birds reaching South Dakota by the end of March.

After a winter distribution that surprised biologists and kept birders enchanted with unprecedented viewing opportunities for one of North America’s most ancient bird species, the unusually early start of the migration to nesting grounds in Canada does not surprise Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologist Lee Ann Linam.

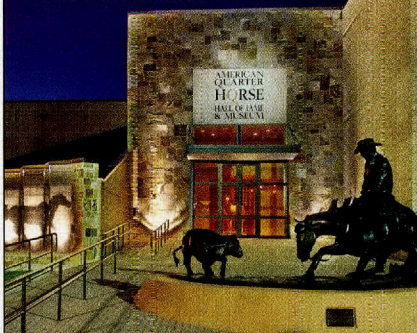
“This winter seemed to produce a ‘perfect storm’ of mild winter weather, reduced food sources on the Texas coast and crowding in an expanding whooping crane population, which led whooping cranes to explore new wintering areas,” Linam said. “Those same conditions have likely provided the impetus for an early start of their 1,500-mile spring migration.”

Texas provides wintering habitat for the only self-sustaining population of whooping cranes in the world. Traditionally, whooping cranes spend

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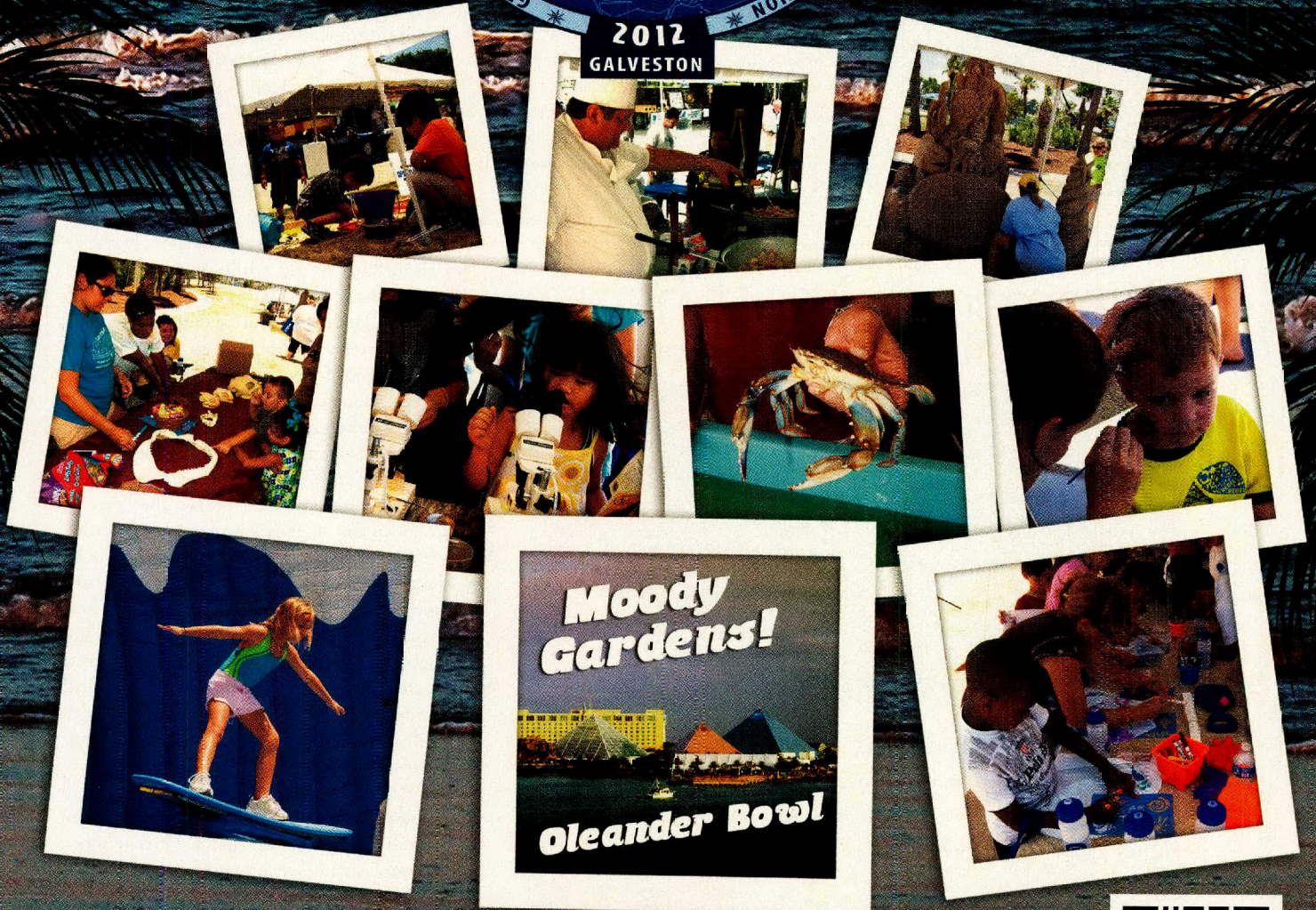
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A 'Tail' of Two Foxes

Red and gray foxes are common cousins with varied histories.



Mistaken identity, different pasts, English heritage — no, this isn't a Charles Dickens novel but rather a closer look at two foxes. While many of us have seen a fox darting through the shadows at one time or another, did you know that we actually have two main species of fox here in Texas? They are often confused with and mistaken for each other, but despite some similarities in appearance, they have very different histories.

The common gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*) is native to Texas and is our most common resident. The red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) is found throughout the southeastern United States; however, it is originally from England. It was brought over for sport hunting purposes sometime between 1650 and 1750. It was introduced to Texas around 1895. Red foxes actually occur on many continents and were even native to North America, but they were historically confined to our northern boreal forests.

The gray fox is named for its gray, salt-and-pepper coat. It has a white throat, cheeks and underbelly, reddish brown legs and a distinctive black-tipped tail. The red fox is primarily rusty red with a white underbelly, black ear tips and legs, and has a bushy tail with an unmistakable white tip. Both foxes weigh 7 to 11 pounds as adults.

Both species are also thought to be monogamous during the winter mating season. Mating primarily takes place in January and February, with litters born about 53 days later. Gray foxes average about four young, while red foxes average about six and occasionally have litters up to 12. Both foxes utilize dens, but red foxes prefer holes dug in the ground, while gray foxes will readily use hollow trees, brush piles and rocky outcrops. The family group, consisting of the parents and young, stays together eight to 10 months until the young reach maturity and are subsequently "shown the door."

Both fox species are primarily nocturnal or at least crepuscular (most active in evening and early morning). Gray foxes prefer drier, brushy, rocky habitat. Red foxes prefer more heavily wooded habitats, as well as riparian zones and even urban areas. It's not uncommon to find them right downtown, although they're seldom seen because of their secretive, late-night habits.

Both foxes are opportunistic feeders but are primarily carnivorous and prefer small mammals as well as birds, eggs, insects, some berries and fruit.

The next time you see a fox darting across the road in your headlights before disappearing into the dark, maybe, like Charles Dickens, you can even say, "It was the best of times." ★

—Nathan Rains

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Keeping It Clean

Lovely Western soapberry can double as detergent.

If you are looking for a drought-tolerant, midsize native shade tree that flowers in early summer, attracts its fair share of bees and butterflies, turns a dazzling color in the fall and produces beautiful translucent amber-colored berries from which you can make soap, then you just might consider the Western soapberry.

Western soapberry (*Sapindus saponaria* var. *drummondii*) takes its name from the Latin *sapo* (soap) and *indicus* (Indian), alluding to the use of soap, in the form of saponins, or plant-derived soaps, by Native Americans and later on by European settlers. The Spanish name for it is *jaboncillo*, meaning "little soap." The varietal name honors Thomas Drummond, Scottish naturalist, one of the earliest scientific collectors of Texas plants in the 1830s.

Soapberries are members of a mostly tropical plant family, the Sapindaceae. Western soapberry is known throughout its range (Arkansas to Arizona) for its use not only as soap but also as a treatment for fever, rheumatism and kidney problems. The inner bark has been used in home medical remedies and as an astringent. Western soapberry wood splits easily into thin strips that can be used to make frames, boxes and baskets. In the past, the wood was used for cotton baskets, crates, packsaddles and fuel. Today, soapberries are marketed as a gentle substitute for lye-based commercial soaps. Beware: Some people are allergic to soapberries.

Although saponins are found throughout the tree, they are most concentrated in the berry. This renders it a fruit to be avoided by most wildlife, except for a few mammals and birds — reportedly, cedar waxwings, bluebirds and robins, which freely devour them.

Western soapberry is a small to medium-size native tree up to 30 feet high, growing naturally along creeks, streams and river terraces throughout the state. Aransas County is home to the Texas champion: 61 feet tall, with a circumference of 108 inches.

Western soapberry is most easily identified by its grayish or tan bark and dusky green, alternate, once-pinnately compound leaves bearing up to 18 leaflets or pinnae. The small white flowers are

formed on dense panicles and later produce translucent one-seeded amber-colored berries. The wood is yellow.

Soapberries flower copiously in June, a time of year when few plants flower in Texas. The perfume of the soapberry flowers attracts a host of bees, butterflies, moths and beetles.

In the fall, the tree is transformed, as Joann Merritt of Midland's Sibley Nature Center muses, "into the glory of autumn when its green leaves turn golden yellow." Once her grandson was so dazzled by their spectacular gold color that he ran through mounds of fallen soapberry leaves with arms outstretched, exclaiming: "I'm rich, I'm rich!"

People sometimes confuse Western soapberry with the non-native, highly invasive Chinaberry tree, which also has yellow berries and pinnately compound leaves. However, the berries of Chinaberry are opaque, never translu-



cent, the flowers are lilac in color, and the compound leaves are twice-compound rather than once-compound.

A serious threat to Western soapberry is the recently introduced and rapidly expanding infestation of the Mexican soapberry borer (*Agrilus prionurus*). The soapberry borer was first reported in Travis County in 2003. Since then, it has been found in 49 additional counties. Infested soapberry trees can be easily recognized by the exposed sapwood that results when birds and squirrels chip off the bark to feed on the larvae, leaving bark chips to accumulate at the base of the tree. ★

—Karen H. Clary

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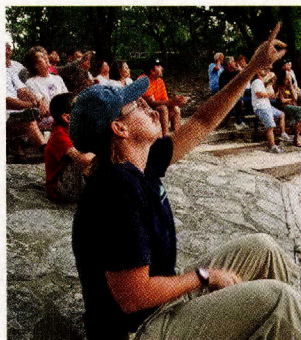
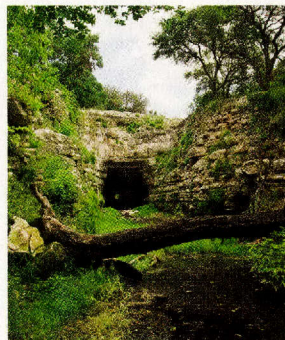


Evening Emergence

Bats by the millions are the top attraction at Old Tunnel State Park.



Imagine inhabiting an area the size of a football field with millions of neighbors and you all leave home at the same time every night for dinner. What a traffic jam! From May to October at Old Tunnel State Park, 3 million Mexican free-tailed bats and nearly 3,000 cave myotis, another species of bat, simultaneously depart their abandoned railroad tunnel shelter in search of food and water. Last year, I witnessed this amazing spectacle with a crowd of other enthralled visitors.



I arrived well before sunset to ensure I didn't miss the emergence. Normally the bats come out within an hour of sunset, but unusual weather (like last year's drought) can cause them to leave at varying times. Park staff and volunteers post the prior day's emergence

time so visitors can get an idea of the departure times. Keeping track of this data and other research also assists in the conservation of the bat population.

As eager visitors arrived, they all echoed the same question: "Have they come out yet?" Before choosing their seats for the evening show, visitors can view exhibits and talk to volunteers and park Superintendent Nyta Brown. We headed down to the lower viewing area, where we were treated to Brown's interpretive program. She knows the park and its famous summer residents well, having spent several years researching them, and her passion is evident.

"I want visitors to experience the awe-inspiring sight," Brown says, "but I also want visitors to leave here with a better understanding of how important bats are to the environment."

After her program ended, we all sat in excited silence, eagerly awaiting the guests of honor. Only a few minutes passed before a handful of bats departed the cave and flew out into the night sky. Numbers built quickly, and soon the swirling spiral grew into the hundreds of thousands. With quick precision, the bats flew over the trees in search of water and insects. Visitors' eyes grew large as they watched in silence.

"I enjoy seeing the smiles on their faces and their whispered words of amazement," Brown says. "It's really great when kids come up to me afterward and say, 'That's the best thing I ever saw!'"

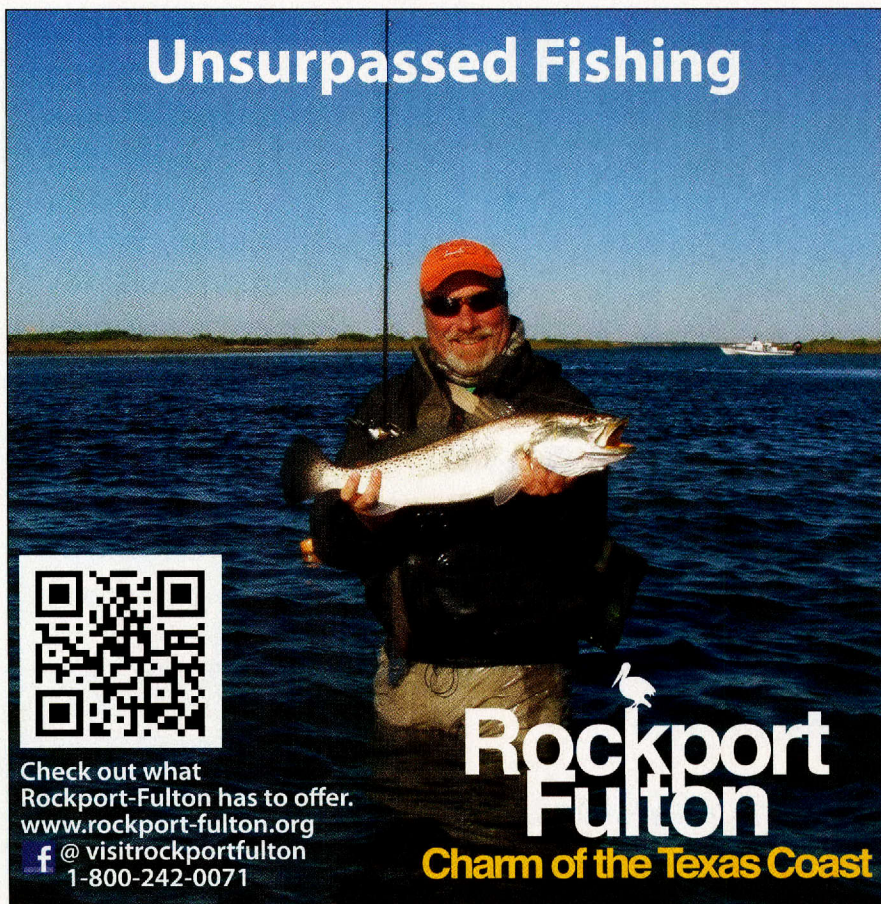
Visitors can view the bats' evening emergence May through October from the upper viewing area, or, for a \$5 fee, from the lower viewing area; interpretive programs are given at the lower viewing area Thursday through Sunday.

Old Tunnel State Park, formerly Old Tunnel Wildlife Management Area, is located in Kendall County, approximately 13 miles north of Comfort and 11 miles south of Fredericksburg. Visit www.tpwd.state.tx.us/oldtunnel for more information on the park's activities including hiking, wildlife viewing and park programs. For the most up-to-date emergence information, call the toll-free information line at 866-978-BATS (2287). ★

—Tara Humphreys

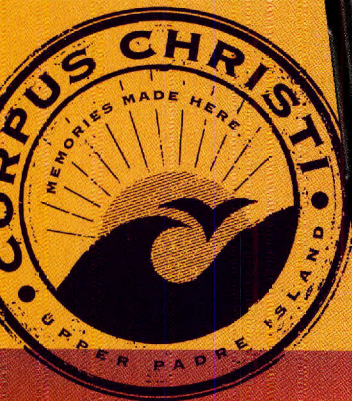
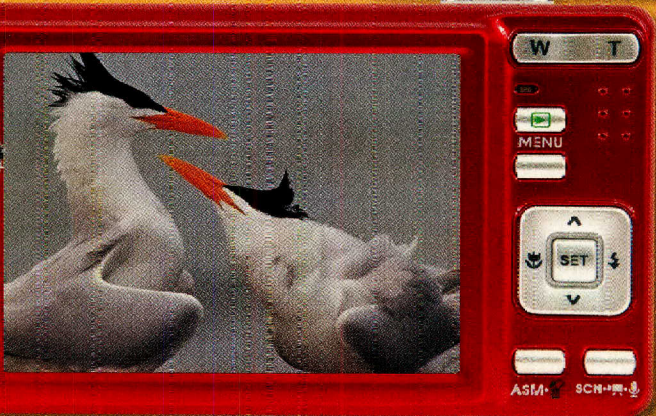
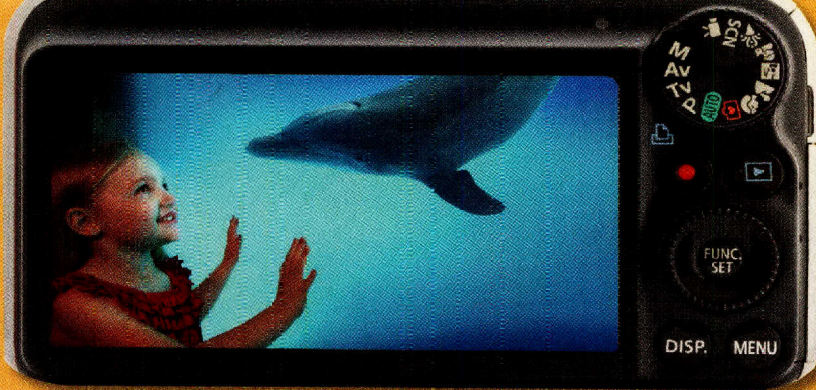
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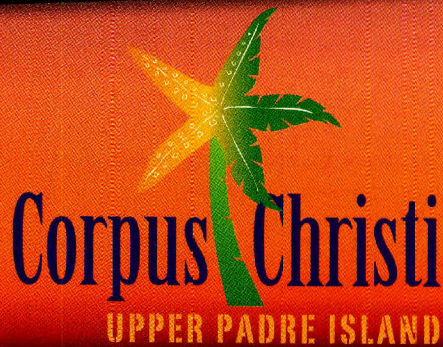
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Al Fresco Kitchen

With the right equipment, you can prepare great meals at your campsite.



Camping is a terrific way to experience Texas' natural wonders. Whether you are putting up a tent or staying in a cabin, food must be provided for the hungry hordes after a busy day outdoors. After many trips, my family has compiled a list of equipment needed to pull off those al fresco meals.

A camp stove and fuel are first on our list. We use an inexpensive two-burner propane stove that's compact and easily set up on a picnic table. These can be purchased at any outdoor store (\$20 and up). Unless you can twirl a stick to get a spark, you will need a lighter for the stove. We take a barbecue lighter, with plastic-bagged matches for backup.

Must you have fresh coffee in the morning? Then purchase a camp coffee pot (\$20 and up).

Most families own an ice chest. Choose the smallest necessary to hold your cold stuff. Freeze water in gallon and half-gallon plastic jugs to cool your chest. These

last longer than bagged ice and keep food from getting soggy.

Almost all other equipment can come out of your kitchen.

Several basic pans can handle most menu needs. You can fry up the bacon or fish in a black cast-iron skillet. We also take two pots — one large and one medium with lids — for heating food and water. For food prep, throw in a small cutting board, a paring knife and a chopping knife. Add a large stirring spoon or two, a spatula and perhaps a pair of tongs. Don't forget a can opener (as we have many times!) and a handful of quart zip-close bags for leftovers.

For dining, you can go two ways. We camp enough that we have invested in a plastic box loaded with plastic plates, bowls, cups and utensils. If you aren't sure about this camping thing yet, use disposable dishes.

After cooking comes dishwashing. We use two fair-sized plastic containers, one

for washing and one for rinsing. These can hold dirty dishes until you're ready to wash. The pots can also work as dishpans, albeit small ones. Of course, you need dish soap, a rag and towels.

Bring an inexpensive plastic tablecloth to cover the picnic table and a large roll of paper towels. Toss in trash bags. I like the small bathroom-size bags or plastic grocery bags, as I prefer to dispose of trash frequently. For packing trash out, you'll need larger bags.

Hands can get really dirty out there. My aunt used to hang a water jug next to some pantyhose holding bar soap. That was creative, but we just bring a hand soap dispenser.

We pack cooking gear in a large plastic container with a lid and put nonperishable food in another. Cardboard boxes would work but are not waterproof. This innovation occurred to us after years of rooting through collapsed grocery sacks in the back of the car.



Be sure to bring some gallon jugs for water. Many campgrounds — but not all — have potable water at each site or at a centrally located place. Another recent addition to our list is a five-gallon water cooler. On a hot day, we really appreciate having a ready supply of cold water (we add ice). Don't travel with it full, as it may slosh. Of course, this is a convenience, not a necessity.

Two final, intangible, very important items are required on camping trips: ingenuity and flexibility. You are camp cooking in the great outdoors, after all. Things can and will go wrong. Prepare as best you can, make do when needed — and have fun! ☆

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TELEVISION

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April 29–May 5:

Hurricanes, past and present; Resaca de la Palma birds; sandhill cranes; pointy plants of Big Bend Ranch; Lodge Creek Ranch.

May 6–12:

Archeology unearthed; sustaining Texas' redfish fishery; Temple Ranch stewardship; Guadalupe River State Park; Palo Duro Canyon.

May 13–19:

Ray Roberts State Park; Blue Mountain Peak Ranch; photographing

hummingbirds; Gulf of Mexico water quality; artificial reef life.

May 20–26:

Fighting for the Big Thicket; high school sharpshooters; scenic Garner State Park; sea level rise; Purts Creek State Park; a Country Life Ranch.

May 27–June 2:

Volunteers on the coast; habitat & conservation education; stop salvinia; Palmetto State Park; Clear Creek Ranch; turkeys in the trees.



It takes a lot of work to sustain the redfish fishery in Texas. Watch the week of May 6-12.

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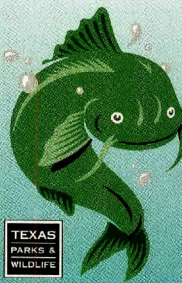
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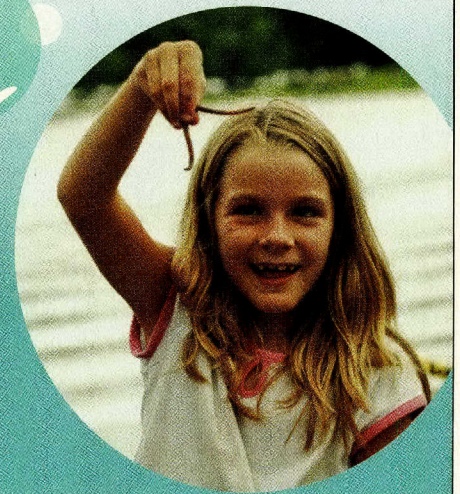


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Sensors and Sensitivity

Technical advances enable cameras to better capture the drama of low-light photography.

From professional digital still and video cameras to the smallest camera phone, the ability to create a quality image continues to improve in quantum leaps with each new product rollout. Most often, these leaps are a result of technical advances to the heart of every digital camera — the sensor — and in the search for the latest and greatest camera, consumers often look for the camera containing a sensor with the highest number of megapixels, believing that more is better.

While this is true to a degree, two other characteristics — sensor size and sensitivity — should be a consideration when choosing a camera, not just the total number of megapixels.

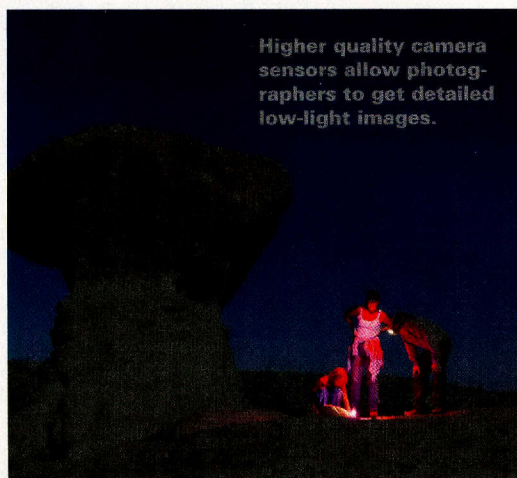
As a rule, bigger is indeed better when it comes to the overall dimensions of a sensor because a bigger sensor not only provides more pixels, but bigger pixels, which more efficiently gather light and sample color. Sensors can range in size from one-quarter to three-quarters of an inch for camera phones and point-and-shoot cameras to almost 1½ inches for full-frame digital SLR cameras (see illustration). The impressive video quality and compact size of the larger sensor cameras have led to the use of these digital SLRs in the movie industry, replacing video cameras in some filming situations.

However, of all the improvements to

come down the pike, perhaps the most notable are not the increases in sensor size but the innovations in increasing a sensor's ability to gather light in low-light situations and to record a wider range of light (dynamic range). Much-improved sensor processors now allow the photographer to get detailed low-light images by allowing shots at high ISO levels that previously generated unflattering digital "noise," or graininess, in an image. The ISO level indicates the camera's sensitivity to light.

Depending on the camera manufacturer, you will see maximum extended sensitivities in the range of ISO 102,000! What a difference from the day when we thought that ISO 400 was fast. Although images can be made up to ISO 102,000, the digital noise level at that range can appear very grainy. Of course, each photographer will have his or her idea of what is aesthetically acceptable. Images that I have seen made with ISOs from 6,000-12,000 look very good and are comparable to ones previously shot in the 1,600-3,200 range.

The payoff for the photographer is that images that were previously unattainable












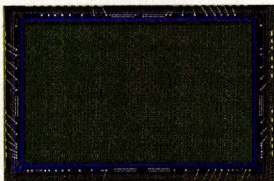
Higher quality camera sensors allow photographers to get detailed low-light images.

because of low light can now be made thanks to the improvements in the sensors and their processors. Landscapes that once could be photographed by moonlight can now be captured by starlight. Portraits can now be made with just a few candles.

Obviously, the more professional DSLRs will perform better than cheaper cameras in low-light situations, but even inexpensive point-and-shoot cameras should produce outstanding results. For photographers of all skill levels, it opens a whole new way of seeing things. ★

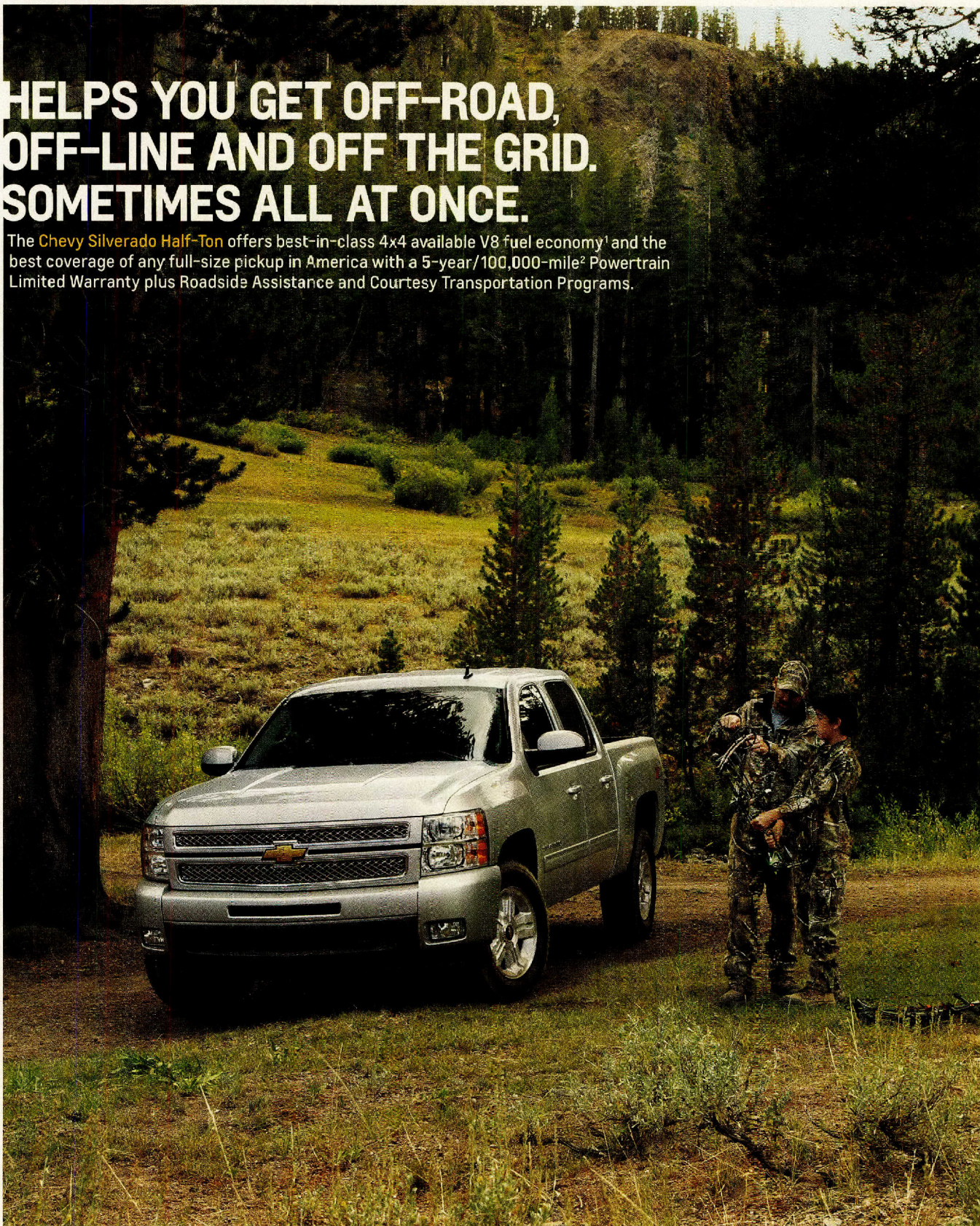
—Earl Nottingham

Camera Sensor Size Comparison

CAMERA TYPE	Low-End Compacts	High-End Compacts	Large Compacts	Entry-Midrange DSLRs	High-End DSLRs
					
	Nikon S640	Canon S90	Nikon 1	Canon 7D	Canon 5D Mark II
SENSOR SIZE					
	1/2.3" 6.1 x 4.6 mm	1/1.7" 7.65 x 5.7 mm	Four Thirds 18 x 13.5 mm	APS-C 23.6 x 15.8 mm	Full Frame 36 x 24 mm

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Heart of the Pineywoods

Lufkin offers woodland treasures, past and present.



Pine trees are reflected in the waters of Bouton Lake in Angelina National Forest.

Find Lufkin on a map, and you'll see that it is nestled between two national forests — Davy Crockett National Forest to the west and Angelina National Forest to the east.

The great pine forests have shaped life in East Texas for generations, first for the Native Americans and settlers who lived off the woods and later for the lumbermen who saw profit in the pines.

Timber doesn't have the same cachet as oil and cattle in the roll call of Texas enterprise, but 100 years ago, it was the state's biggest industry. And it continues to play a major role in the region.

Lufkin is in the heart of the Pineywoods, a town that sprang up when the railroad came through, expanded with the timber boom and now serves as a regional hub for East Texas.

I had visited the town a year earlier when I accompanied the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department paddling trail team on its survey of the Neches-Davy Crockett Paddling Trail on the Neches River. On my second trip, I am ready to delve deeper into what Lufkin has to offer.

I start with the past, at the History Center in Diboll, south of Lufkin.

Not quite a museum, not quite a library, it's a remarkable archive and public history center documenting East Texas' social and economic history. A permanent exhibit explores Diboll's history as a sawmill town. It's an interesting and impressive place, especially for a small town.

History wields a heavier hand up the road in Nacogdoches, which sits along the historic Camino Real roadway into Texas and claims to be the state's oldest town.

But Diboll's history may be more representative of life in East Texas. It's always been a timber company town, and the continued presence of the industry is evident in the timber and lumber trucks rumbling through town. Only by recording this history will future generations know the real East Texas story.

My East Texas story continues in Lufkin, where I meet Richard Donovan, author of *Paddling the Wild Neches*, for dinner. Worried that a dam might drown the

land he loves, Donovan set off on a solo 200-mile canoe trip down the Neches in 1999 to highlight its scenic beauty and historical bounty.

Donovan, whose pickup bears a "Neches" license plate, is still on a mission to show Texans that the Neches "isn't just a ditch full of muddy water." He was leading an overnight canoe trip that weekend for a handful of local residents.

"When you drive over a bridge at 70 mph, that's all you see," he says. "When

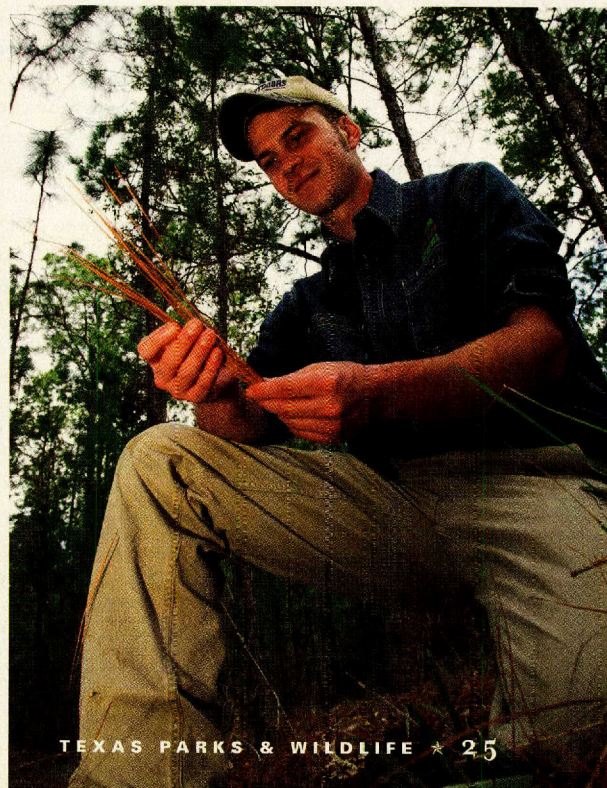
you go around the first bend, it changes dramatically. There are few places you can go and have the solitude you have on the Neches River."

TPWD's Neches paddling trail bears that

out. The 9-mile trip takes paddlers through the highly scenic riverway near Davy Crockett National Forest, where tall pines and hardwoods line the riverbank. Birds serenade paddlers along the journey, and few signs of human presence exist. It's just a few miles from Lufkin but feels like a world away.

My first night's stay is at Lufkin's Southern Stables Bed and Breakfast, in a house built by a state senator in 1966 on several acres at the northern

Left, a locomotive offers history and fun at the History Center in Diboll; below, TPWD's Cliff Shackelford looks for birds at Alazan Bayou Wildlife Management Area; the old Aldridge sawmill, right, stands crumbling in the forest; the Southern Stables Bed and Breakfast, bottom left, provides accommodations in a pastoral setting; Aaron Friar, bottom right, gets a closer look at long-leaf pine needles at Upland Island Wilderness Area.



edge of town. Proprietor Dave Overdorf greets me as I arrive. He and his daughter are feeding the longhorns they keep on the property.

Overdorf started with a couple of longhorns to enhance the ranch ambience of the bed and breakfast, but then his kids got into raising them and showing them at competitions, and their longhorn enterprise grew. To let me get a closer look, he shouts across the pasture, and Swoop, so named for his distinctive and improbable set of horns, comes running to us, along with a couple of other longhorns.

After a good night's sleep, I'm off to explore one of East Texas' wildest places. The Upland Island Wilderness Area is the largest and most diverse wilderness area in the region. Its 14,000 acres lie within the Angelina National Forest. In this rich diversity, longleaf pine stands cover the uplands, and multiple varieties of hardwoods populate the bottomlands. Along the ancient Catahoula rock formation, groundwater seeps out to sustain several rare species of orchids, club mosses, ferns and all four Texas species of carnivorous plants.

Aaron Friar of the Lufkin visitors' bureau agrees to show me around this special place. We start with a hike to High Point, a ridge where longleaf pines dominate. Longleaves were the tree of choice for loggers, and many of the longleaf forests were cut down, replaced by the faster-growing loblolly pines. But here, you can see East Texas as it once was: towering longleaves above a carpet of foot-long pine needles, with an understory of dogwoods, yaupons and blackjack and bluejack oaks. We linger for a while on the ridge, catching glimpses of sun shining through the morning mist.

Upland Island is a land of giants. Some of the tallest trees in the state have grown here, including some former state and national champions. Friar takes me to the Neches River bottomlands where some of the big trees reigned. He says his favorite thing to do at Upland Island is to bushwhack through the bottomlands, and to me that sounds like a perfect way to spend a few hours.

We set off through the woods, and pretty soon we run up against a thick palmetto grove where the palmettos are chest-high. This almost-impenetrable thicket might have been enough to make me turn around if I was on my own, but Friar continues on undeterred. Stepping over fronds, ducking under others and pushing branches out of the way, we fight our way through and eventually make it to more open woods. Friar shows me willow oak, water oak, swamp chestnut and a variety of hickories. He points out how the leaves of the cherrybark oak look like Chinese pagodas (hence the tree's name, *Quercus pagoda*).

After wandering through the woods, we realize we're off-course. We want to make it to the Neches River, so Friar breaks out the map and compass, and we decide to pick up the pace so we can get to the river in time. We dodge trees and jump over downed branches, and we make it to the river just as we hit the turnaround time we'd set.

The wild Neches stretches before us — the natural and historical heart of East Texas. Donovan says Texas "was born in the Neches River valley," and he's got a point. Cabeza de Vaca and La Salle explored the area, and the first Spanish mission in East Texas was established near the river. The earliest Texans coming from America settled here.

After our explorations, we set our bearings north and hike out. My next stop is nearby Boykin Springs, a U.S. Forest Service campground featuring a small lake and spring-fed creek set amid the pines. The campground and lake were built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps, the same group that built many of our state parks. The picturesque park offers

camping, fishing and picnicking, but I've come mainly to hike the Sawmill Hiking Trail. This charming 5-mile round-trip hike comes with a dramatic payoff at the end point, a feature that stirs the imagination with a combination of mystery and history. The trail mostly follows Boykin Creek as it gurgles over small waterfalls on its way to the Neches.

At the end of the trail, the decaying concrete buildings of the old Aldridge sawmill emerge from the forest, looking like a long-lost temple in the jungle. The buildings are covered in graffiti, and the forest is slowly reclaiming the ruins, with vines crawling the walls and trees growing inside. The Aldridge township, abandoned in 1927, once had 76 buildings. Four of them remain, in various states of decay.

I stroll among the crumbling buildings, fascinated by the interplay of concrete and nature and the contrast of bustling sawmill and forest solitude.

My accommodations for the night are in another abandoned sawmill town, Manning. The Mansion on Sawmill Lake, a bed-and-breakfast that opened in June 2011, is one of the few buildings remaining from what was a thriving sawmill community and the county's second-biggest town. After the sawmill burned in 1936, the population dropped sharply, and most of the buildings were torn down. The town site is now a grassy hillside, giving no hint of the community life that existed there. The B&B is the former sawmill boss's house, overlooking the sawmill ponds.

When I tell proprietors Rodney and Judy Toups that I plan to visit the Texas Forestry Museum in Lufkin, they tell me not to miss the scale model of Manning showing the town in its heyday. At the museum, which features exhibits relating to the timber industry, the model fills in the blanks that my imagination didn't, and it provides a vivid picture of the Manning of the past.

The next morning, I get up early to meet Cliff Shackelford, TPWD ornithologist, for some bird watching. Shackelford suggests we visit the Alazan Bayou Wildlife Management Area and the Stephen F. Austin Experimental Forest, both stops on TPWD's Prairies and Pineywoods Wildlife Trails.

When I pull up at Alazan Bayou, Shackelford already has a bird spotted in his binoculars. "It's my first yellow-rumped warbler of the year!" he says.

For Shackelford, bird watching starts with bird listening. He listens for bird calls and then looks for the birds, a technique he says works well in forested areas such as East Texas. He hears a Carolina chickadee and looks for it in a tree. Then there's a downy woodpecker. He knows the calls well enough that he says it's like hearing Johnny Cash on the radio. When Cash starts singing, you know it's the Man in Black because you've heard his distinctive voice enough times to recognize it. It's the same with Shackelford and birds.

He trains his scope on a meadow, and we see more birds: eastern bluebirds perched on a fence and a handful of eastern meadowlarks scattered in some brush. East Texas has a few specialty birds that birders make the trek to see: pine warbler, Bachman's sparrow, brown-headed nuthatch and endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

East Texas is known for having lots of woodpeckers, and our big payoff for the morning is seeing six woodpecker species, including Texas' smallest (downy) and largest (pileated).

"That is what's great about birding," Shackelford says. "No two days are alike."

The same can be said for visiting East Texas. With its abundant history and natural beauty, the region holds enough attractions to keep any visitor entertained and enlightened. ★

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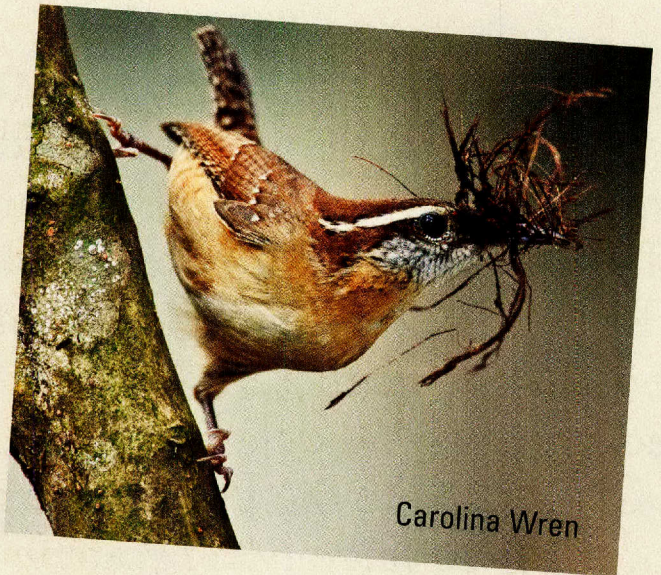


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Sedge Wren



Carolina Wren

Not-So-Plain
JANES

DON'T BE FOOLED
BY THEIR DRAB LOOKS —
WRENS BOAST
BUSYBODY ENERGY AND
BEAUTIFUL SONGS.

BY NOREEN DAMUDE

AT ONCE CONFIDING, RECLUSIVE, MELLIFLUOUS, RAUCOUS, resourceful and oft-times baffling, wrens make up for in substance what they lack in glamour. Members of the family Troglodytidae, from the Greek word *troglydites*, meaning “cave dwellers,” they have clearly transcended their “cave bird” beginnings and emerged into the light, adding much to our edification and delight.

Compared to the Hollywood glamour of the painted bunting or vermilion flycatcher, wrens may seem like drab, ho-hum little birds. But looks can be deceiving — and wrens are anything but boring. With dummy nests, egg-puncturing forays and a decided taste for polygony (mating with more than one female), wrens — imps of the perverse — afford biologists a wealth of intriguing behavioral questions to ponder. Meistersingers, master builders, not always monogamous but never monotonous, wrens combine a kaleidoscopic mix of “wren world” attributes peculiar to themselves.

THE ESSENTIAL WREN:

Characteristics of the Clan

So what is a wren? And why is there but one species in most of Europe and Asia when there is such a diverse profusion in the New World, notably Central and South America? Experts believe the wren clan arose in North America and then spread and diversified south. In a second push, wrens ventured north across the prehistoric land bridge to reach the Old World.

With 85 to 90 species worldwide, depending on your taxonomy, wrens are a complex, diverse, incredibly distinctive variation on an avian theme. Wren classification is currently in flux, so be warned: Splits and lumps loom on the horizon for wren species.

Wrens are typically minuscule, and only kinglets, gnatcatchers and some hummingbirds weigh less than the small-

est wrens. The cactus wren is our largest, a near-giant compared to the rest, though no bigger than a mockingbird. Wrens are highly active, inordinately curious and ever spritely in their manner. Many species are difficult to see.

Forgoing gaudy colors, wrens dress variously in tones of brown, rufous, gray and buff, often set off in accents of white and black. Males and females look alike. Brown above and pale below, a few sport bars or spots on underpants or barring on the tail. Snappy eyebrow stripes often complete the ensemble. Quintessential little brown jobbies, wrens may present a challenge for the novice. Differentiating one from another — well, the devil's in the details.

Occupying habitats as varied as piney woods, woodland thickets, reed beds, sedge meadows, cliff faces, canyons or arid scrub, wrens sort themselves out

best by habitat. Look for cactus wren in desert thorn-scrub, rock wren along rimrock and talus slopes, canyon wren in steep canyons and shallow caves, marsh wren low in cattail marshes over water and sedge wren in moist meadows. Carolina and Bewick's wrens may occur in almost any backyard.

More often heard than seen, wrens boast stunningly beautiful songs at a volume well out of proportion to their size. Vocal “wrenditions” from the ethereal to the guttural, both varied and complex, contribute to their exalted status in the world of birdsong. Canyon, Bewick's, winter, Carolina and house wrens number among some of our finest vocalists, entralling us with their ebullient nuptial songs.

Wrens have definitely changed with the times, an excellent recipe for success. As human and bird populations



Winter Wren

With 85 to 90 species worldwide, wrens are a complex, diverse, incredibly distinctive variation on an avian theme.

increasingly interact, many have expanded their search for the ideal spot to nest. The house, Bewick's and Carolina wrens, in particular, take full advantage of nest boxes we provide for them. Old boots, baseball caps, vest pockets and even mounted steer skulls prove irresistible to these modern-day opportunists.

WINTER WREN:

A Puff of Feathers Conquers the World

The Old World has but one species of wren — aptly, if not dryly, called “the wren.” Weighing a mere half-ounce,

the winter wren pulled off one of the most amazing land grabs in avian history. It successfully founded a new dynasty now limited to the Old World, occupying vast areas of Europe, Asia and northern Africa.

We used to claim *Troglodytes troglodytes*, the erstwhile winter wren, traditional standard bearer of Old World wren-dom. But, based on differences in songs, calls and plumage and lack of hybridization, the species has recently been split into three: Pacific wren, winter wren and Eurasian wren.

Our winter wren is now *Troglodytes hiemalis* — well named for us in Texas,

since it's very much a bird of winter here. The elusive, silent troglodyte — always a great bird to tick off on a Texas Christmas Bird Count — amazes and confounds us with its stealth, ability to avoid detection and infuriating silence, except for the occasional *kimp*, *kimp* call.

Come March, the dusky sylph forsakes the Lone Star State and heads north to breed. There it fills the thickets of the boreal forest with its long, loud, rolling, rhapsodic song. Alas, in Texas we don't hear its hauntingly beautiful refrains that so gladden the northern forests in spring.

PHOTO © GREG LASLEVYKAC PRODUCTIONS

CAROLINA WREN:

Singing "Dixie," "Sweet Caroline"

A rufous and ochre charmer with strong affinities for the South, the Carolina wren is a denizen of the forest and dense understory. Residing year-round in the eastern two-thirds of Texas, the state bird of South Carolina inhabits woodlands, swamps and tree-lined suburbs here.

Climbing like a creeper or hanging upside down like a nuthatch, the birds eagerly investigate nooks, crannies, holes and other tight confines in search of insect prey. Basically monogamous, both male and female stalwartly defend the same territory year-round. They will gladly patronize bird feeders or bags of suet laced with nuts and seeds set out for them.

Its signature song is a loud, rich, rolling *cheeseburger, cheeseburger, cheeseburger* or *cher-ae, cher-ae, cher-ae*, usually sung in triplets with many variations. An equally diverse number of trills, buzzes and rattles enable pairs to remain in contact. Courting pairs often sing duets, but it is the male that wows us with his extensive repertoire — as many as 40 different versions of its song. Sometimes called the mocking wren, he vaguely mimics songs of other birds,

particularly the whistling notes of the tufted titmouse, northern cardinal or Kentucky warbler.

The Carolina wren seeks out tree hollows or other natural cavities to build its nest, but readily adapts to man-made structures — a birdhouse or a hanging flower basket is a favorite spot.

BEWICK'S WREN:

Say "Buicks"

Named for John James Audubon's friend Thomas Bewick, English artist and wood engraver, the Bewick's wren is spry, svelte and sonorous. It often flicks its tail from side to side as it moves about in dense, brushy terrain foraging for insects and other small arthropods.

Its sweet, musical song, sounding somewhat like that of a song sparrow, is considered one of the finest of all bird songs. According to experts, the non-singing female is the silent architect of the male's song, having played a major role over evolutionary time in perpetuating the genes of the best singers.

The Bewick's song in Big Bend differs markedly from that of other areas, as song types — and plumage — vary geographically. Comfortably at home near human dwellings, Bewick's is a

familiar backyard bird throughout its range. Like many of their kin, Bewick's wrens are most adaptable nesters with decidedly eclectic tastes. A can of nails, a baseball cap, almost anything that can be called a cavity will do.

CACTUS WREN:

Desert Thorn-Bird

Texas' largest and most attractive wren, the boldly marked cactus wren is a denizen of the shrub deserts of the Southwest. Boisterous extroverts, these birds typically fly about in noisy groups making them, for a wren, uncharacteristically easy to see. Forswearing the family's reputation for stealth, the male sings tirelessly from an exposed perch, breaking the sweltering silence of a sun-baked desert afternoon.

Cactus wrens' favorite foods include insects, seeds and berries, from which they get most of their dietary moisture, while dispersing seeds of the plants they use the most. They rarely drink or bathe in water, preferring to wriggle about in patches of sand to rid themselves of parasites.

Of all our native wrens, the cactus wren is perhaps the least likely to win a Grammy. Its droning song, a dry rhythmical series of harsh *jar-jar-jar*

More often heard than seen, wrens boast stunningly beautiful songs at a volume well out of proportion to their size.



Carolina Wren



Bewick's Wren

notes, seems oddly displeasing to some ears. Yet, in concert with the Cassin's sparrow, Bell's vireo and curve-billed thrasher, there's no mistaking the cactus wren's contribution to the signature chorale of the desert Southwest.

Master builders, cactus wrens construct a bulky nest in well-armed cholla, prickly pear or cat-claw, aiming for complete impregnability. The well-concealed side entrance follows a long passageway to the football-shaped inner chamber. Prickly on the outside, the nest is amazingly soft inside — amply lined with feathers and fur. The female will select a nearby nest from one of the 10 to 12 additional edifices the male has fashioned for her to raise a second brood. Remaining dummy nests are used year-round for night roosting, by both adults and young of the year.

CANYON WREN:

Unchained Rockland Melody

One of few terrestrial birds restricted to canyons and rocky outcrops, the well-named canyon wren occupies the western two-thirds of the state. From the lofty Santa Elena Canyon along the Rio Grande to the less imposing limestone outcrops of the Edwards Plateau, canyon wrens hold court year-round. Shy and elusive, they move nimbly and furtively along the shadowy rocks and through dense underbrush.

Short legs and a flattish head and body enable them to squeeze through narrow openings in the rocks, as they probe deep into slit-sized crevices in search of hidden insects. Sharp claws allow them to clamber up and down steep rock faces.

Sometimes difficult to spot, even in open terrain, this rufous wren, white throat and breast gleam, may continue to elude us as it creeps about the jumbled rocks. Now and then a bird will sally forth to seize a flying insect. Or, better yet, a territorial male will alight atop a tall boulder to defend his domain with song.

Throwing back his head, he pours out a clear, rippling vocal cascade that descends through a series of liquid notes *te-you te-you te-you tew tew tew* — a silvery glissando — once heard, never forgotten. Reverberating canyon walls instantly play back his wild and lovely song.

Crevice-nesting canyon wrens construct an open cup nest of wool, hair and feathers on a base of twigs and moss. In some places birds have adopted unoccupied stone buildings, nesting regally within.

ROCK WREN:

Mysterious Spirit of the Craggs

Nimble and hyperactive, the rock wren is a year-round resident of rim-

rock regions across western Texas. Our palest wren, it seeks out canyons, gullies, stony outcrops, talus slopes and dry gravelly desert washes to make its home. Steep highway cuts and rocky beams are likewise favorite haunts.

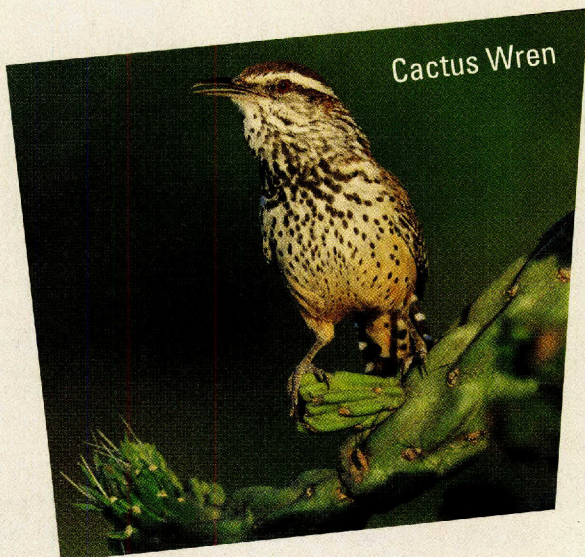
Although rock and canyon wrens' habitat choices somewhat overlap, the rock wren is partial to boulders and bare ground, while the canyon wren seeks out shadowy canyons and shallow caves, surrounded by brushy vegetation.

When disturbed, rock wrens may bob up and down mechanically, or crouch down stock-still, disappearing in full view. Their gray-brown upperparts (finely spotted with whitish dots) and subdued eyeliner offer perfect camouflage against the flinty rocks.

Clambering up, down and sideways across the rugged cliffs, rock wrens move jerkily in a series of hops and fluttering flights, leaping up from time to time to nab an airborne insect, in

**The Wren Family:
Family Troglodytidae**

Cactus Wren	<i>Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus</i>
Rock Wren	<i>Salpinctes obsoletus</i>
Canyon Wren	<i>Catherpes mexicanus</i>
Carolina Wren	<i>Thryothorus ludovicianus</i>
Bewick's Wren	<i>Thryomanes bewickii</i>
House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>
Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes hiemalis</i>
Sedge Wren	<i>Cistothorus platensis</i>
Marsh Wren	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>





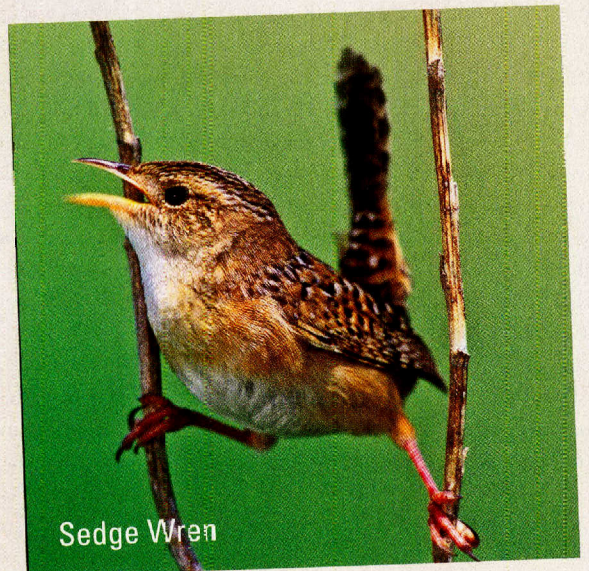
Rock Wren



Marsh Wren



House Wren



Sedge Wren

Texas currently boasts nine of the 10 North American species of wrens, more than any other state.

their constant quest for food. Opening their wings, they may parachute down to lower ledges to scour in and out of cracks for deeply hidden fare. Built much like a canyon wren, they deftly extract prey from the narrowest crevices, nimbly negotiating the sheerest rock faces.

The courting male sings an exuberant, metallic song that echoes well across the rimrock walls, *tew tew tew tew, cher-wee cher-wee cher-wee*. With its

mechanical, tinkling mixture of unbirdlike buzzes and trills, the rock wren declares hegemony over his realm. Remarkable singers, males vaunt rich song repertoires of 100 or more song types, many learned from neighboring males.

True to the clan, the rock wren is no exception in its nest-building eccentricities. Seeking out crevices among boulders, old gopher holes or clefts under rock ledges, it constructs its well-

concealed cup-like nest within. The rock wren then lays down a path of curious artifacts — pebbles, stones and bone fragments that lead directly to the nest — which rattle each time the bird goes in or out.

MARSH WREN:

Songs My Father Taught Me

Well-named, marsh wrens favor a wet, marshy habitat replete with dense stands of cattails, bulrushes or sparti-

na, bordering freshwater or saltwater marsh. Shadowy, skulking and hard to see in winter, the phantom lurks out there in the cattails year-round along the coast, staying out of sight till spring. Rustling unobtrusively in the reeds, a small dusky bird flies to the top of a dry cattail seed-head. As he tilts up his jaunty tail, he throws back his head and belts out an exuberant nuptial song. The rattling sound of music is that of the marsh wren.

As song is an essential part of territorial behavior, neighboring males launch highly structured counter-singing tournaments to prove their vocal virtuosity to silent female listeners. Each alternates his signature song with a precise match of his adversaries' renditions. A young male first learns his vocal repertoire by listening to the songs his father sang. Only later do neighboring males influence the ultimate fabric of his song.

Come spring, if a marsh wren isn't singing, he's furiously building a bevy of starter nests. Indefatigable home builders, they fly to and fro, hauling long strips of wet, dead cattail leaves to form the globular nest. Birds punctuate the task with a perpetual stream of charring and buzzing calls.

A master builder, he creates a virtual avian housing development designed for one. A male marsh wren may construct as many as 20 skeleton nests in a season. Known as "cock nests" or "bachelor pads," they may serve as decoys to confuse predators or as a fall-back in the event of nest destruction. Females may choose mates based on their nest-building prowess, preferring the most prolific architects. It's the female that makes the final choice, as she adds the finishing touches — a soft lining of cattail down — to the nest she deems the best.

The male, not resting on his laurels, continues to work simultaneously on several additional nests, each at a different stage of construction. He clumps them within a few yards of one another. Should any new female pass through the neighborhood, he will naturally be able to offer her one of these surplus models.

Marsh wrens can be voracious nest robbers, destroying other species' nests,

even other marsh wren nests, by piercing or removing eggs or ejecting small nestlings from unattended nests. This makes them exceedingly unpopular with the marshland community. With extremechutzpah, a marsh wren may even puncture eggs of birds the size of a least bittern. Such havoc in the 'hood is greeted by a flurry of hostile countermeasures by enraged neighbors. Red-winged blackbirds, upon hearing the marsh wren's song, react directly by sounding raucous vocal alarms and launching relentless aerial attacks against them.

HOUSE WREN: **Domestic Bliss Was Never Like This**

Early settlers, reminded of the wren they knew in England, dubbed the house wren "Jenny" after the bird they left behind. But there's nothing girlish about this jaunty, belligerent little mite. Slightly smaller than a sparrow, with a plain brown back, gray throat and chest, it differs from most other Texas wrens by its lack of distinguishing marks. Often cocking its short tail up over its back in full view, it's still a very plain, brown bird.

House wrens rarely breed in Texas, mostly wintering or passing through during migration. A few nest in the upper Panhandle, and those lucky enough to have watched the soap opera have witnessed the darker face of this unobtrusive bird. Breeding house wrens marry a titillating mix of romance, infidelity, plural wives and broken homes.

Aggressively territorial, the male defends his domain by singing loud and often. He may repeat his complex, bubbly song several times a minute to attract a mate. Courtship likewise entails escorting females to potential starter nests he has built there. He is a habitual, almost obsessive home builder. A male will stuff any likely nesting cavity with twigs, grass and other materials, first to mark his territory and second to provide ample inducements to attract a mate. As he points out the best features of his prospective pads, he punctuates the tour with fervent bouts of song.

As is customary, it is the female that has the final say, and she will line her

nest to suit herself. The male may stand guard while she works or he may fly off to start another nest, which may be used for a second brood. Or, should the opportunity arise, he may try to lure a second female and start a new family, or two, or more. In a veritable avian *Peyton Place*, males may even sneak onto another male's territory to gain favors from his neighbor's consort. She oft-times proves amenable as house wren nests invariably contain eggs fertilized by more than one father.

SEDGE WREN: **Wraith of Moist Meadows**

Elusive and mysterious, the elfin sedge wren is best seen in Texas during winter and migration. With shifting populations and a highly secretive nature, this wraith of moist meadows is often difficult to spot. As it creeps about in rank sedge meadows, the golden brown mite remains infuriatingly low and out of sight. Occasionally, though, it will pop up into view.

Perched on a swaying sedge stem, the male pipes his dry staccato chatter, *chap chap chap chapper-rrr*. By nature nervous, stiff-tailed and alert, a sedge wren rarely allows a lengthy look. When approached, it flutters away feebly, wings flapping like a fledgling. Once out of sight, it drops deftly back into the grass, disappearing like a mouse.

Sedge wrens prefer the higher parts of marshes beyond the cattails and away from water where marsh wrens stake their claim. The best way to distinguish the two is by habitat and song.

Texas: The High Wren District

Texas currently boasts nine of the 10 North American species of wrens, more than any other state. From smallest to largest, they are the winter wren, sedge wren, house wren, marsh wren, Carolina wren, Bewick's wren, rock wren, canyon wren and cactus wren. All but one, the sedge wren, nest in Texas. The house wren is by far the least common breeder, while the sedge wren vies with the winter wren for being the hardest to spot. Devils River State Natural Area and Neal's Lodge in Concan in early spring are great places to find up to eight species in a single day. ★

EYES ON THE SKIES

The 2012 Spring/Summer Birding Calendar



Though the Great Texas Birding Classic is postponed till 2013, many other events offer wondrous bird-watching opportunities.

BY SHELLY PLANTE

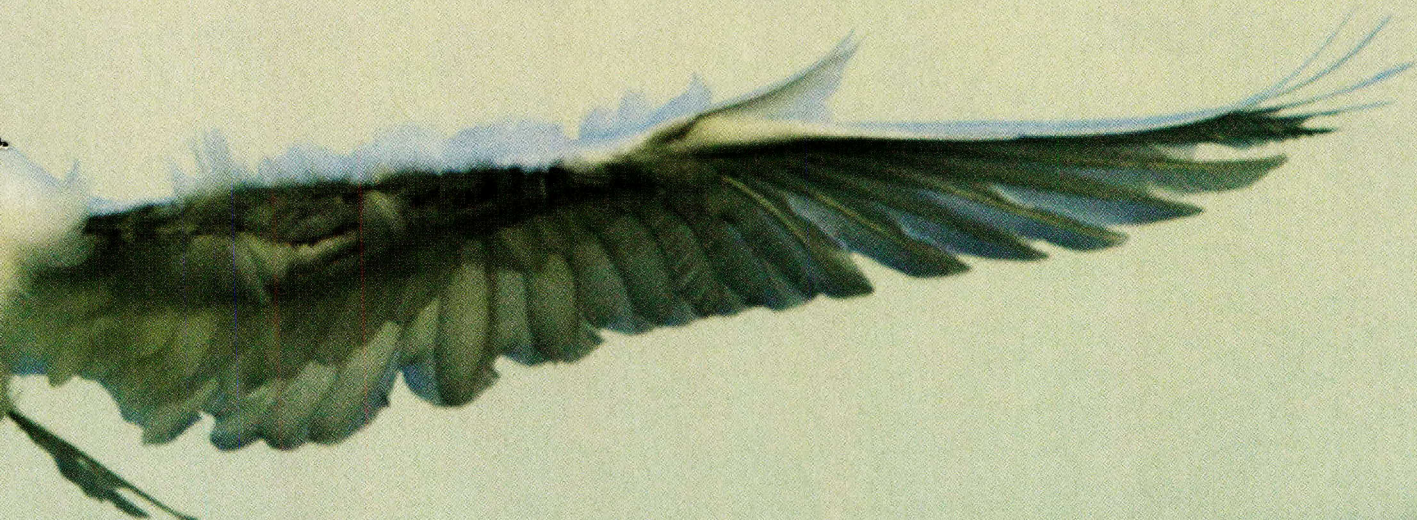


Great egret

In

THE SPRING, NEOTROPICAL MIGRANTS SPREAD

their dazzling wings and leave their warm winter homes in Latin America. Some stop on the Texas coast; others fly inland. Birders flock to the hot spots, hoping for a sighting of a feathered rarity to add to their lifetime list. In addition to the events below, state parks host frequent birding activities. Check the “Birds, Bats and More” section of www.tpwd.state.tx.us/calendar for a listing of all the wonderful bird walks, owl prowls, bird identification classes and more offered at state parks around the state, including the World Birding Centers. Additional events at the Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center and Sea Center Texas can be found at “Site Calendars” on the main calendar page.



RECURRING EVENTS

Every Tuesday and Thursday

WETLANDS EDUCATION CENTER

TOURS — The University of Texas Marine Science Institute, Port Aransas. Stroll the boardwalk at this 3.5-acre center, which contains a marsh/seagrass pond landscaped and planted with various seagrasses and coastal vegetation, to observe migratory waterfowl and resident marsh birds. 10 a.m. Free. (361) 749-6764; www.utmsi.utexas.edu/outreach/wetlands-education-center.html.

Every Wednesday

BIRDING ON THE BOARDWALK —

Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center,

Port Aransas. Enjoy a weekly guided birding tour of the boardwalk, where a variety of wetland species can be seen. 9 a.m. Free. (361) 749-4158; www.portaransas.org.

Second Saturday of each month

BEGINNERS' BIRD WALK — San

Antonio Audubon Society, San Antonio. For beginners and newcomers to the area. Some binoculars available to borrow. 8 a.m. (7:30 a.m. in June and July). Free. (210) 308-6788; www.saaudubon.org.

Third Saturday of each month

MONTHLY BIRD WALK — San Antonio Botanical Garden, San Antonio. Enjoy

birds in native habitats during a morning bird walk led by an experienced guide. Please bring binoculars if you have them. Ages 10-plus. 9 a.m. Walk is included with admission fee; free for Botanical Society members. (210) 207-3255; www.sabot.org.

Any day by appointment

CUSTOM BIRDWATCHING TOUR —

Fennessey Ranch, Refugio. Pack a picnic and go where the birds go with a personal, experienced guide. Call to schedule trip and time. \$105 per person, two-person minimum. (361) 529-6600; www.fennesseyranch.com.

PHOTO © ARTHUR MORRIS/BIRDS AS ART



Elf owl

PHOTO © BRUCE D. TAUBERT

APRIL — JULY

Month of April

QUINTANA SANCTUARY SPRING FLING — Quintana Sanctuary, Quintana. Gulf Coast Bird Observatory staff and volunteers assist with bird identification, provide local information and bird checklists, sell snacks and field guides and post a daily bird list. The station will be operated daily during the month of April. 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Free. (979) 480-0999; www.gcbo.org.

Months of April-May

PHOTOGRAPHY TOURS AND WORKSHOPS — Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Los Fresnos. Learn how to take great bird and wildlife photos in a workshop or tour the refuge with a skilled photographer. April 14 and May 11. Registration and fees apply. (956) 748-3607; www.friendsofsouthtexasrefuges.org.

April 19

DISCOVER HUMMINGBIRDS WITH CLIFF SHACKELFORD — Trinity River Audubon Center, Dallas. 7-8 p.m. Free. (214) 309-5801; www.trinityriveraudubon.org.

April 21

SPRING MIGRATION WILDLIFE PHOTO TOUR — Fennessey Ranch, Refugio. Work with a professional photographer and degreed biologist to capture images of migratory songbirds and other wildlife. Dawn and dusk. Half-day for \$200, one day for \$300, two days for \$400, three days for \$500; group discounts available. (361) 529-6600 or (281) 398-7100; www.fennesseyranch.com.

VIDA VERDE (EARTH DAY FESTIVAL) — Quinta Mazatlan, McAllen Wing of the World Birding Center. Event includes live animal presentations, an organic farmers market and cooking demonstrations, green living expo, trail walks, children's arts and crafts, live entertainment and more. 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. \$2 per adult; \$1 per child. (956) 681-3370; www.quintamazatlan.com.

April 21-22 and 28-29

BLUCHER PARK BIRD WALKS — Blucher Park, Corpus Christi. Bird Blucher Park and the expansive lawns behind the two Blucher homes. If needed, participants will be guided through the park and assisted in bird identification by the Audubon Outdoor Club of Corpus Christi. 7:30-10:30 a.m. Free. (361) 443-0744; www.ccbirding.com.

April 24

BIRD BANDING IN THE PARK — San Saba River Nature Park, San Saba. Nature lovers are invited to watch bird banders set up mist nets to capture and document birds caught. Birds will be removed from the nets and then released after data is collected. 8 a.m. to noon. Free. (325) 372-7615.

April 27-29

WINGS OVER THE HILLS NATURE FESTIVAL — Fredericksburg. Participate in a naturally wonderful weekend dedicated to the varied winged wildlife of the Hill Country: birds, butterflies, dragonflies, bats and bees. Lectures, field trips and events suitable for all ages. (830) 998-1927; www.wingstx.org.

April 28

ADOPT-A-BEACH/ESTUARY CLEANUP — Galveston. After trash pickup, preserve birders discuss and report observation highlights with volunteers over lunch. Species count typically exceeds 100 for the morning. Free; reservations requested. www.scenicgalveston.org.

WOODLAND WALKABOUT

— Quinta Mazatlan, McAllen Wing of the World Birding Center. Enjoy a guided tour along the trails surrounding the historic adobe mansion, taking in the sights and sounds of our Valley specialty birds and many other resident and migratory birds. 10-11 a.m. \$2 per adult; \$1 per child. (956) 681-3370; www.quintamazatlan.com.

April 27-30

BALCONES SONGBIRD FESTIVAL — Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge, Lago Vista. Festival includes

opportunities to view two Texas endemic endangered birds as well as butterflies and wildflowers on specialty birding tours and nature walks. Includes educational presentations on a variety of topics. <http://friendsofbalcones.org/festival>.

May 4-5

TEXAS ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY SPRING MEETING — Port Aransas. Join the spring meeting of the Texas Ornithological Society, including field trips to local migration hot spots. \$35 for TOS members, \$60 for nonmembers. www.texasbirds.org.

May 5

WARBLER IDENTIFICATION — Dogwood Canyon Audubon Center, Cedar Hill. Warblers are colorful and extremely active birds that flock in large groups during spring and fall migrations. Learn to identify these amazing birds with ease and confidence. 8-11:30 a.m. Free. (469) 526-1980; www.dogwoodcanyonaudubon.org.

May 12

BIRDS AND BOTTOMLANDS BLITZ: INSECTS OF THE BOTTOMLAND FOREST WITH ED BARRIOS — Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, Lake Jackson. 9-11 a.m. Free. (979) 480-0999; www.gcbo.org.

GUIDED BIRD WALK — Lewisville Lake Environmental Learning Area, Lewisville. This guided tour takes birders to some of the best locations to view many of the 270 species of birds documented at this 2,000-acre forest, prairie, river and wetland habitat, including areas not regularly open to the public. Birders of all skill levels are welcome; ages 10-plus. \$7 per person. Reservations requested but not required. (972) 219-3930; www.ias.unt.edu/llela.

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATORY BIRD DAY — Roma Bluffs World Birding Center, Roma. Learn about the bird diversity in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. 8:30 and 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. (956) 849-4930; www.theworldbirdingcenter.com/Roma.html

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATORY BIRD DAY — Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, Alamo. \$3 per vehicle. (956) 784-7500; www.friendsofsouthtexasrefuges.org.

May 17

OWL PROWL WITH BEN JONES — Trinity River Audubon Center, Dallas. 8-9 p.m. Free. (214) 309-5801; www.trinityriveraudubon.org.

May 18

ENDANGERED SPECIES DAY — Roma Bluffs World Birding Center, Roma. Learn about the importance of protecting endangered species and everyday actions you can take to help protect our disappearing wildlife and open spaces. 10-11 a.m. and 2-3 p.m. (956) 849-4930; www.theworldbirdingcenter.com/Roma.html.

ENDANGERED SPECIES DAY —

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, Alamo. \$3 per vehicle. (956) 784-7500; www.friendsofsouthtexasrefuges.org.

May 19

BIRD BANDING — Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, Lake Jackson. Volunteers collect baseline data on bird populations at the sanctuary. The banding station is an excellent opportunity to see birds up close and to learn about birds in our community. 8 a.m. to noon. Free. (979) 480-0999; www.gcbo.org.

May 20

ENDANGERED SPECIES DAY — Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Los Fresnos. Discover the important work being done at the wildlife refuge to save several of South Texas' endangered creatures. \$3 entrance fee per vehicle. www.friendsofsouthtexasrefuges.org.

May 26

OPEN GATE AT WARBLER WOODS BIRD SANCTUARY — Warbler Woods Sanctuary, Cibolo/Schertz. This private ranch offers varied habitat for birders to explore, with the opportunity to see many of the 280 documented species of birds (including 40 species of warblers). 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Free. www.warblerwoods.org.

June 7

FLYING WILD EDUCATOR WORKSHOP — San Antonio Botanical Garden, San Antonio. Flying WILD materials provide interactive, interdisciplinary, standards-based activities to help students understand the importance of migratory birds and their conservation. 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. \$15 per person; registration required. (210) 207-3255; www.sabot.org.

June 9

GUIDED BIRD WALK — Lewisville Lake Environmental Learning Area, Lewisville. This guided tour takes birders to some of the best locations to view many of the 270 species of birds documented at this 2,000-acre forest, prairie, river and wetland habitat, including areas not regularly open to the public. Birders of all skill levels are welcome; ages 10-plus. \$7 per person. Reservations requested but not required. (972) 219-3930; www.ias.unt.edu/llela.

June 11-15

BIRDING DAY CAMP — Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, Lake Jackson. Camp will feature a variety of learning experiences including identifying birds, learning how and why birds communicate, sketching birds with a local artist, catching and examining wetland critters eaten by wading birds, conducting mini-research projects and graduating as a certified "bird scene investigator." Registration required. \$150 per participant in five-day camp. (979) 480-0999; www.gcbo.org.

June 16

BIRD BANDING — Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, Lake Jackson. Volunteers collect baseline data on bird populations at the sanctuary. The banding station is an excellent opportunity to see birds up close and to learn about birds in our community. 8 a.m. to noon. Free. (979) 480-0999; www.gcbo.org.


June 28

HUMMINGBIRDS NATURE NIGHT — Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, Austin. Families can discover the world of hummingbirds through hikes in the gardens with bird experts, learn how to attract hummingbirds to your yard, go on a scavenger hunt to discover interesting hummingbird facts and spend time coloring the most common hummingbird



Bullock's oriole





**GREAT TEXAS
BIRDING CLASSIC
SUSPENDED FOR
ONE YEAR**

After 15 years of raising awareness of birding and raising money for avian habitat projects in Texas, the Great Texas Birding Classic will be suspended for 2012 because of economic conditions, including budget cutbacks at TPWD and a reduction in federal

dollars. This was a very difficult decision for TPWD and for the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, the organization that has co-hosted this popular event for seven years with TPWD.

The silver lining is that TPWD has agreed to resume the Great Texas Birding Classic in 2013 with plans to expand it to a re-envisioned statewide event.

For those unfamiliar with the Birding Classic, this event has raised \$789,000 for on-the-ground avian habitat conser-

vation projects and has attracted hundreds of birders to Texas from all corners of the United States and overseas. The Birding Classic also provided an opportunity for birders of all ages to compete in the longest bird watching event in the country, with one-day and weeklong categories for experts, beginners and even blind birders.

Stay tuned to the Birding Classic website (www.tpwd.state.tx.us/gtbc) or send an e-mail to gtbc@tpwd.state.tx.us

Sandhill crane

to be added to email updates as plans unfold for the 2013 Great Texas Birding Classic.

As they say, "when one door closes, another one opens," so we look forward to the continued support of the many individuals, past participants and organizations as well as many new groups as we work to develop a new model for this important birding event.

species. Hands-on educational activities and displays for kids and adults of all ages. 6-9 p.m. Free. (512) 232-0100; www.wildflower.org/nature.

July 5-6

FLYING WILD EDUCATOR WORKSHOP AND FACILITATOR TRAINING — Cibolo Nature Center, Boerne. First day is an educator workshop and second day is a facilitator training. July 5, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.; July 6, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. \$15 per person; registration required. (830) 249-4616; www.cibolo.org.

July 12

BIRDS OF PREY NATURE NIGHT — Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, Austin. Come see live birds of prey including owls and hawks. Take walks in the gardens with bird experts to learn

about prime bird of prey habitat and how to spot birds flying above. Scavenger hunt, crafts and educational displays for the entire family. 6-9 p.m. Free. (512) 232-0100; www.wildflower.org/nature.

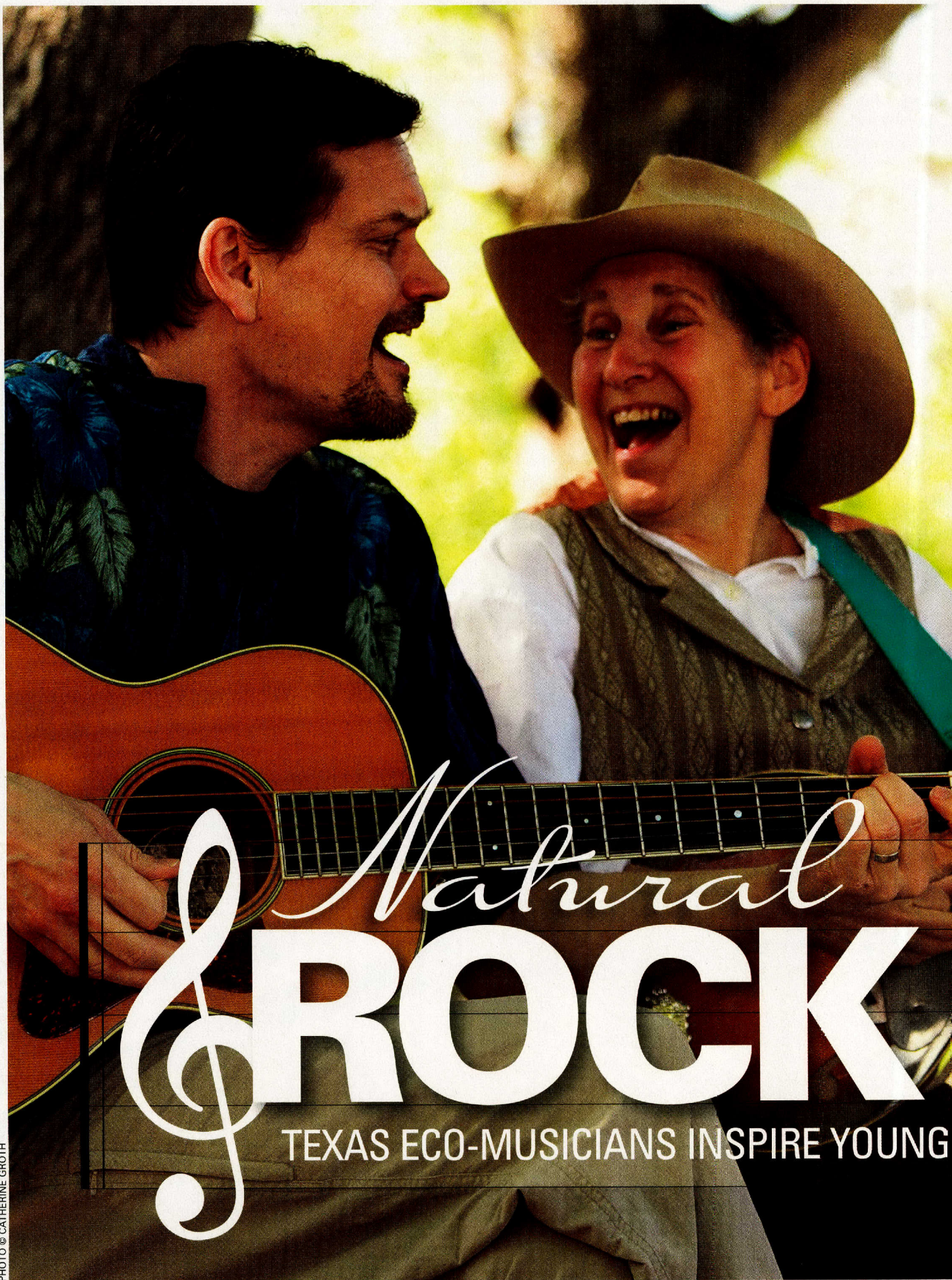
July 21

BIRD BANDING — Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, Lake Jackson. Volunteers collect baseline data on bird populations at the sanctuary. The banding station is an excellent opportunity to see birds up close and to learn about birds in our community. 8 a.m. to noon. (979) 480-0999; www.gcho.org.

July 21 and 28

JUNIOR RANGER PROGRAM — Roma Bluffs World Birding Center, Roma. Kids 6-10 years old are welcome to take part in fun activities including projects with owl pellets, microscopes, water testing, animal tracks, animal skulls, pelts, nature games and more. Space is limited to six participants per date; registration required. 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. (956) 849-4930; www.theworldbirdingcenter.com/Roma.html. ★

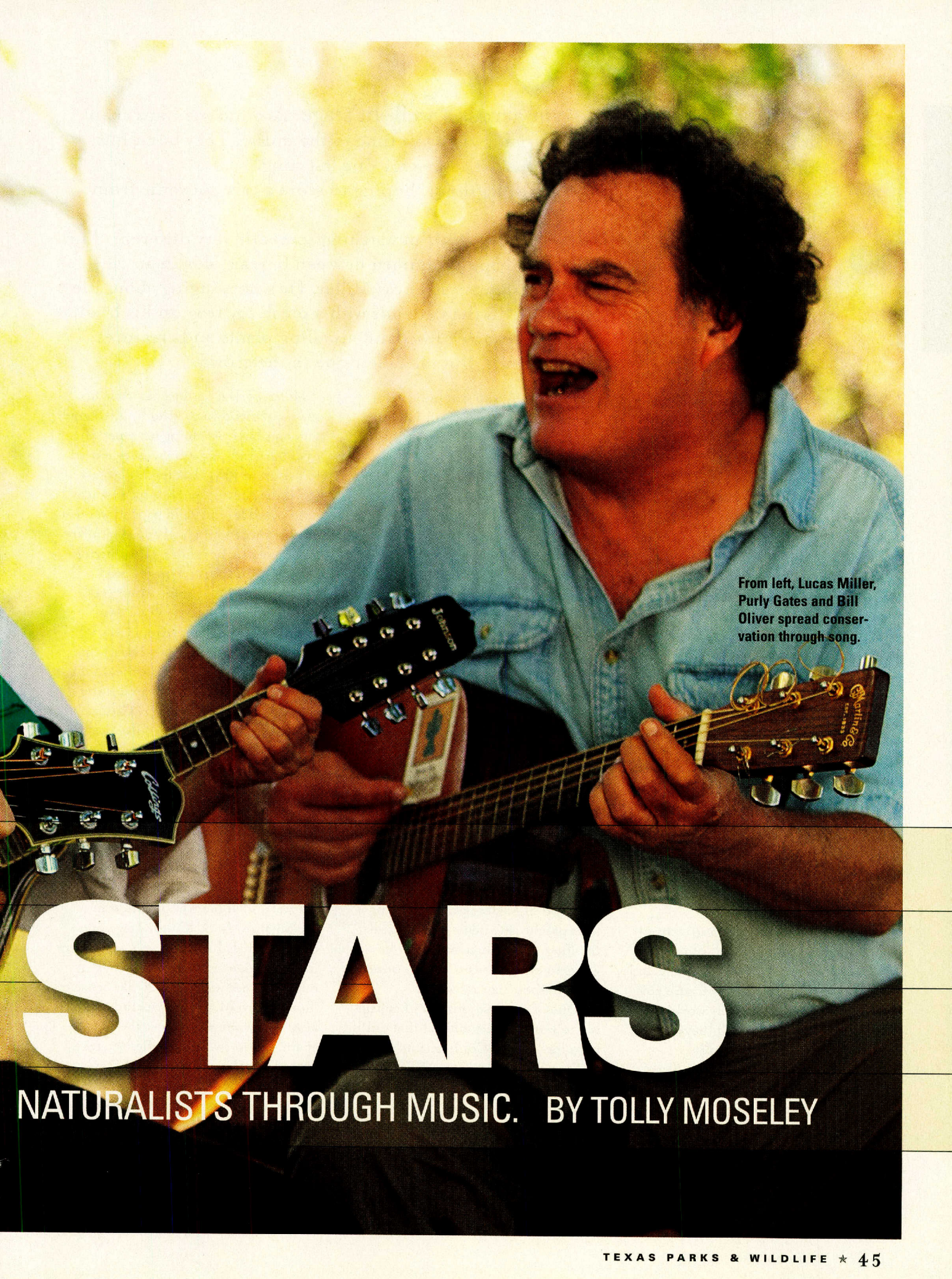




Natural
ROCK

TEXAS ECO-MUSICIANS INSPIRE YOUNG

PHOTO © CATHERINE GROTH



From left, Lucas Miller, Purlly Gates and Bill Oliver spread conservation through song.

STARS

NATURALISTS THROUGH MUSIC. BY TOLLY MOSELEY

I'm watching a rapper strut across a well-lit stage. Around me, fans chant along to his call-and-response lyrics, swaying in time to the music. They burst into applause after the number is finished, and beg for one last song.

"Throw me your hat!" I hear one girl shout, hoping to score a rare souvenir from this larger-than-life personality.

It may sound as if I'm at a Jay-Z show, but I'm watching someone very different. I'm not in a smoke-filled stadium; I'm happily jammed between 6-year-olds in an elementary school auditorium. The "rapper" is Lucas Miller. He's not singing about life in the 'hood; he's singing about life in the wetlands with a plush toy frog on his head. In the background plays a lively slideshow of wetland-dwelling plants and creatures: reeds, birds and an alligator. For once, I'm the tallest one in the crowd.

Miller dubs himself "The Singing Zoologist," and he's one of a handful of Texan musicians using their lyrical abilities to teach children about the environment. Count Texan singer-songwriters Purly Gates and Bill Oliver in the fold, too.

In addition to performing, Gates teaches children (and families) how to make musical instruments using recycled materials, while Oliver produces two eco-festivals for kids and families: Lady Bird Lake Fest and Mother Earth Day at the Springs (both in Austin). And while all three originally hail from different parts of the country, Texas is where they landed, inspired both by the state's ecological diversity and the abundance of young audiences.

"Children have an innate curiosity in nature," says Oliver. "And we just can't lose them to technology. Playing shows is a blast for me, but I suppose I view each individual one as part of a much larger mission, to encourage them in their natural sense of adventure and hungry discovery."

As a member of the manic texting/tweeting/Facebooking set, I found Oliver's words refreshing. I often find myself worrying about my future children, and the techy, tinny world that will surround them. Will they go outside? Will they climb trees?

I wasn't exactly raised by the Swiss Family Robinson myself, but I was among the last generation to grow up without the Internet, and I cherish my outdoorsy, sun-streaked youth. Not surprisingly, Miller, Oliver and Gates feel the same way: All three have a deep connection to the children they once

were, the ones who still hunger for discovery. I wanted to find out how 21st century kids were responding to their message.

2 LUCAS MILLER

"I think music is in us for more reasons than by accident," says Miller. "Rhythm helps us remember things."

Miller and I are chatting on the phone about music. Our conversation has taken a physiological turn.

"There's research from anthropologists that says that music happens to tickle this part of the brain where language is located," he tells me. "It helps us create patterns. Repeat things. Remember things."

He should know. Recently, a mom wrote Miller to say: "My son and I just came home from South Padre Island, and he sang me your entire 5-minute song about sea turtles in the car."

Having played for over 1.5 million children during his career, Miller says this kind of feedback from a young fan's parent isn't new — but it's still thrilling. More than anything, he wants to enable kids to make connections in their natural world.

"One of my first jobs out of college was to work on this sailboat that did trips for kids, in Connecticut," says Miller, a Kentucky native. "They gave me the song list from the last guy, but they were all too simple. They didn't have a lot to say about science, and some of them weren't even accurate! So I started writing my own stuff instead, songs that would put a tune to all the things kids were seeing in the water."

Miller worked on the boat while his then-girlfriend (now wife) finished grad school, slowly expanding his repertoire of kid-friendly eco-tunes. They moved to Austin in 1994, leading Miller to a job at the Austin Zoo, hosting birthday parties and leading field trips. It was that gig that earned him his famous moniker, and it wasn't long before "The Singing Zoologist" took his act on the road.

"I'm in the Hill Country one week, the East Texas forest the next," says Miller. "At each of my school visits I always try to communicate the fact that it's good for us to appreciate the wildlife in our own areas, rather than just the stuff we see on the Discovery Channel — the African plains and stuff like that. We have this big ecological variety in Texas, which makes our state pretty special."

Audiences seem to find him special, too. The National Endowment for the Arts named Miller an American Masterpiece Artist for three years in a row (2008-10), and he has performed twice at the Austin City Limits Music Festival and at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. Miller's stage presence channels Bill Nye the Science Guy in a Hawaiian shirt, and his songs marry science with a Shrek-like sense of humor. Crowd favorites include *The Mako Shark* (which discusses the food chain), *Slimy!* (which clarifies the texture of a snake's skin) and *The Chimichanga Song* (which is about delicious Mexican food, as well as the difference between carnivores and herbivores).

As if being a children's rock star didn't keep him busy enough, Miller is also a children's book author. His most recent book, *Bluebonnet Time: An Evan Wilder Science*

TEXAS

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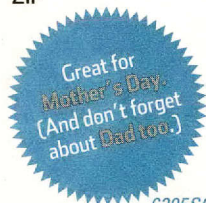
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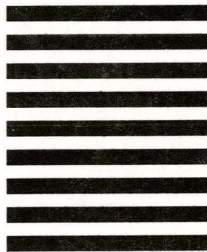
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LUCAS MILLER, ABOVE, AND BILL OLIVER, BELOW.



PHOTOS BY CHASE A. FOUNTAIN/TMWD



PURLY GATES



PHOTO BY CHASE A. FOUNTAIN/TPWD



When it comes to the environment, Gates uses her musical know-how somewhat differently. She starts with recycled materials, a do-it-yourself spirit and a burly set of power tools.

Journal, uses Texans' obsession with roadside family portraits to illustrate botanical truths about our state flower.

"And trust me, I indulge that obsession," Miller laughs. "But maybe with this book, kids and families will know all the little intricate processes that go into making that flower so unique. That's what I'm after: Writing songs about a world they interact with every day and helping them to see it with fresh and curious eyes."

(www.lucasmiller.net)

2 **BILL OLIVER**

One of Miller's personal idols is Oliver himself, a man who also credits his career to a boat.

"A major turning point of my life was rafting the Mississippi River," says Oliver. "I was a huge fan of Mark Twain novels — maybe too big a fan — and my buddy and I decided we were going to sail the whole thing. This would have been the summer of '68, when I was kind of attending college, but mostly playing music and having adventures. That trip changed a lot of things for me."

It's not a surprise that this would be the man who would help lead the Texas River School, produce nature festivals on the shores of Barton Springs and release an album titled *Friend of the River*. The last time I watched him perform, it was at a benefit for the Edwards Aquifer organization Save Our Springs.

"Water is very sacred to me, but it's also an easy sell for kids, too," says Oliver. "Being out on a boat is a novelty. Exciting, you know? So that's why I really like to involve water in our festivals, because believe it or not, some of the kids who come have never even been out to Barton Springs before. So this is nature education what we're doing here, but it's

exciting and out of the ordinary, too."

Oliver's nickname — "Mr. Habitat" — grew out of the song that put him on the musical map. An Internet search for *Have to Have a Habitat* pulls up scores of YouTube covers 30 years after its release. Oliver wrote the song while taking classes at Austin Community College's Biology Department, where he was moved to do more with his music — to "take a stand," as he describes it.

It's a good thing, too: Since he began singing for children in the '70s, the radius around the home where most children are allowed to roam on their own has shrunk to one-ninth of what it was then. It's a fact Richard Louv reports in his book *Last Child in the Woods*.

"I grew up in treehouses," Oliver tells me. "It's a different world for kids now, but I think that's why they are so jazzed when they come out for a show or for the River School. They might not get too many experiences like that, and whether they're on a boat, or dancing to a song — hopefully both simultaneously — it's like, *this is it, kids*. This, right here, is a rich moment."

(www.mrhabitat.net)

2 **PURLY GATES**

When it comes to the environment, Gates uses her musical know-how somewhat differently. She starts with recycled materials, a do-it-yourself spirit and a burly set of power tools.

"Well, you need something to drill through all that plastic!" laughs Gates. "Seriously though, I like showing girls how to work a drill. Boys, too, of course, but girls sometimes have this idea that they're not supposed to ... and I change that thinking."

I went to one of Gates' instrument-making workshops at the Wimberley Community Center, where a couple of parents, a table full of youngsters and I

crafted Brazilian *cuicas*: instruments that sound either like stepping on a creaky wooden stoop or the mating call of an amorous bullfrog.

"Does anyone know where plastic comes from?" she asks the table. "Petroleum. The same stuff they make oil out of," she explains. A few pairs of wide eyes stare at her.

"It's true! Weird but true," she assures us, right before busting out an impromptu percussive beat on her *cuica*. "And I figure, why not use that oil stuff again? Make some music with it?"

Gates' easy banter is a quality she picked up performing everywhere from the Texas Book Festival to Disney World. She narrates her craft lessons with stories, telling us how she got the water for our *cuicas* by traveling to the Amazon River. When it's passed around for our use, we are so careful we might as well be handling liquid gold.

"You can use everyday things for music, you know, like jug bands," she says. I grin immediately, thinking about Gates with a washtub bass, plucking away in suspenders and a newsboy cap.

"Is this a jug?" one girl asks, pointing to her new *cuica*.

"Nope, that was a bucket of almond butter from Wheatsville," says Gates, referring to an Austin grocery store. "But we're giving it a new existence."

The girl shares a mischievous eyebrow raise with the boy next to her, and I hear her whisper to him: "*We have buckets at home. Like a hundred.*"

They giggle conspiratorially, thinking about all the old buckets they are about to surprise into a new musical existence.

(www.purlygates.com) ★

See All Three!

Lucas Miller, Bill Oliver and Purly Gates will perform for the first time together at the Lady Bird Lake Fest in Austin on May 22.

The Lawman Who Busted LBJ

Game warden was a family friend with a quick smile, a foul mouth and a lifetime of stories.



By Mike Cox

It doesn't happen as often as it used to, but sometimes the smell of lingering tobacco smoke takes me back to all the times Game Warden Grover Simpson came by our place when I was a kid growing up in Austin.

Driving a green and white 1954 Chevy (this was before wardens gained full peace officer status in 1963 and got their first state-issued vehicles), Simpson would roar up our driveway and screech to a halt, his car's long radio antenna still whipping back and forth as he opened the door and ducked his head to get out.

Dressed in a dark-green wool uniform that wardens wore no matter the season, he'd be pounding on our front door in a few seconds, alternately whistling or yelling good-naturedly. Sometimes he'd wait for Mother or me to let him in, but not always, if the house was unlocked. Either way, he'd have to stoop to get through the door. Pulling his hat off as soon as he stepped inside, he'd have a smile on his face as wide as a catfish's mouth.

If Mother didn't already have coffee ready, she'd be building a pot by the time our lanky friend blew into the kitchen. The red datebook clutched in one of his big hands really didn't become fully visible until he'd settled his 6-foot, 4-inch frame in a chair at the kitchen table. Then, with a click of his Zippo, he'd light up another Lucky Strike.

Simpson often dropped by unan-

nounced, but we could count on at least one visit a month no matter what. That's because Mother, an English teacher, helped him write his monthly report to headquarters. Though reasonably well-educated for the times, Simpson knew that his "country boy" way of speaking, punctuated by an innocent level of profanity that was just his normal way of talking, did not lend itself to formal law enforcement documents.

The starting point for each month's activity report would be that red datebook he always had in his car. Even though Simpson would have written down the basic who, what and when of each day he was on duty, Mother would have to interview him to glean more detail on the cases he had worked. She'd also have to translate phrases like "those little chicken----s" or "the tall ----- with the flashlight" into acceptable cop talk. When Simpson turned those reports in, neatly typed by my mother, his puzzled supervisors found they always read just like something an English teacher had written.

While a Southern gentleman around people deserving respect, Simpson used terms relating to a person's parental heritage naturally and often with no offense intended. For those he deemed not entitled to as much courtesy, Simpson kept a leather blackjack in one boot and a short-barreled .38 in the other, even though he wasn't

supposed to carry a pistol.

I soaked all this in. At school I'd brag to my friends that Grover Simpson, the game warden we'd occasionally see talking about wildlife on Channel 7's *The Uncle Jay Show*, had been at our house and happened to be a family friend.

That had been the case since the early 1950s, when my mother worked for a time as a secretary for the Game and Fish Commission, when it was located at IIth Street and Congress Avenue in the long-since-razed Walton Building. She had met Simpson there, but as it happened, we lived across the street from him, his wife, Melba, and their two kids, Sharon and David, in a new subdivision on what then passed for the far north side of Austin.

Simpson had been a game warden since June 1, 1948. Born in McKenzie, Tenn., on May 21, 1918, Simpson lost his father in 1930 and ended up in the state children's home in Waco. He attended college in Denton, served in the Texas National Guard and spent a few months studying chemistry at Baylor University before he was accepted into the four-month game warden training program at Texas A&M University. His first assignment was Travis County, and that, despite the trouble that would come, is where he stayed for the rest of his career.

Simpson was a wonderful raconteur, and I hung on his every word. I had

Grover Simpson, at left along the Colorado River and below in a 1981 *TP&W* magazine article, served as a game warden in Travis County.

"Educate the kids and catch their daddies."

Still good advice after three decades

Article by Jim Cox
Photos by Bill Reavas

Grover Simpson has been a game warden for 33 years.

Ron Kramer has been one for only a year.

Simpson once chased outlaw hunters through the Travis County cedar brakes where Kramer's residence lies in what is now a West Austin suburb.

Simpson was issued only a badge, a stop flag and a law book when he started in 1948. He used his own radioless 1939 Chevrolet as a patrol vehicle while enforcing game, fish and water pollution laws in Travis and nine surrounding counties.

Kramer's first-year transportation is a state game warden car equipped with modern electronic communication gear. His territory is Travis County, rather than the vast territory assigned to Simpson in the early days.

Simpson, fiery and assertive, has acquired a reputation as an even-

handed enforcer of the law. This dedication has earned him both high praise and threats of violence.

Kramer, understandably, is light-years away from Simpson's world. He moves with the measured restraint of one on unfamiliar ground. The two game wardens represent different generations, separated by a wide gulf of history.

With all their differences, however, the rookie and the veteran still share certain philosophical views about their jobs. Both believe they received the best training possible to prepare them for the complicated and sometimes frightening events that confront game wardens from day to day.

"It's hard to believe they (instructors) cram so much into a 4½-month school," said Kramer. "I had been told it would be tough, but I really didn't realize just how tough it was going to be."

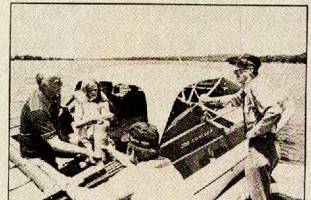
Kramer's schooling was centered around the new academy facility in Austin, a complex designed to house and train game warden cadets and veteran wardens returning for in-service training. Simpson and his fellow cadets also attended a rigorous training school back in 1948, but it was conducted at Texas A&M University rather than Austin. In-

structors were A&M professors, while today's cadets are taught by Parks and Wildlife personnel.

Simpson chuckled as he recalled the advice given him by the late Capt. Frank Covert shortly after Simpson graduated from the training school. "Educate the kids and catch their daddies," was the phrase, and Simpson says it still applies today. "You have to speak the people's language to be a good game warden," Simpson declared, "because after all, it's all Texans you're trying to serve—even more than your boss in Austin."

Simpson obviously has practiced what he preaches, having made hundreds of talks before groups ranging from garden clubs to major resource users. He mobilized sportsmen and landowners in the early 1950s, forming game protection associations during an era when poaching was rampant and the now-famous Hill

Grover Simpson and Ron Kramer (pictured) represent different generations of game wardens, but they share many philosophical views about their job. Communication with the public is important, and Kramer points out that game wardens often can have a positive impact, giving helpful advice instead of just issuing citations. Simpson adds to this: "You have to speak the people's language to be a good game warden."



heard him tell it before, but in October 1971 — then a reporter for the *Austin American-Statesman* — I prevailed on him to let me tape-record his signature story, the time he busted future President Lyndon B. Johnson for refusing to submit to a bag check while dove hunting.

The 1956 incident would threaten Simpson's career, change the history of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and even figure in the 1964 presidential campaign.

Here's the back story: Capt. E.L. Sprott, then director of law enforcement, had been invited by Blanco County Game Warden Travis Gilbreath to shoot dove on a ranch where he had permission to hunt. Sprott, who had a bad leg from a crash with a logging truck, asked Simpson to drive him to join Gilbreath for the dove hunt. The three men would get in a little hunting and then close out the day checking for violators.

"It didn't take us an hour to get our 10 apiece," Simpson told me. "We sat at our car and picked our birds and put 'em in separate sacks. On that ranch east of us, they just kept banging. Right on up until it was way past sundown, they were still shooting. Cap said, 'We'd better go over there and stop those boys from shooting.'"

Entering the ranch, they saw a late-model luxury vehicle parked near a stock tank, about 150 yards away. The wardens could make out four men — three of them plainly dove hunters. The fourth man wore a white waiter's coat and appeared to have been mixing the others drinks and picking their birds.

Sprott told Simpson to walk over and check their game bags. As he approached the vehicle, two of the hunters and the waiter got inside. Before the waiter joined one of the other men in the back seat, Simpson saw him throwing something into the car's trunk (or as he called it, "the turtle") and slamming down the lid.

"I noticed you fellas shooting pretty late, and I'd like to check your birds," Simpson told the man who had remained outside.

"We're shooting here on my own ranch. We can shoot as long as we want to," the man said. "You don't have a right in here searching my car on my ranch."

"Well, whose ranch is this?" Simpson said he asked.

"I'm A.W. Moursund, the county judge of Blanco County, and I own this ranch," the man replied.

"I said I couldn't find anything in the law book where it said anything about the Blanco County judge being exempt," Simpson recalled.

"Well, you're not gonna check this car," Moursund said.

Realizing he had a touchy situation on his hands, Simpson summoned his captain and the local warden to try to persuade Moursund to cooperate. While Sprott and Moursund talked, Simpson took a closer look at the vehicle.

In addition to the hired help, Simpson recognized A.W. Stubbs, a Johnson City banker. The warden couldn't get a good view of the other man, who kept his hands over his face as if in deep reflection.

"He had his hands up over his face peeking out between his damn fingers at me," Simpson continued. "And I went on around to the front of the car and he'd just follow me like a little kid. I came right on around to his door and tried that door again, and he's just sitting there staring at me. I was pretty sure who he was, but about that time, I said, 'Judge, who's this damn big-eared [expletive] sitting here in the front seat?'"

The game warden was referring to Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson.

With no further discussion, Moursund suddenly got behind the wheel of the car and drove off quickly in the direction of a gate leading to his ranch house.

Simpson's first instinct was to shoot out a couple of Moursund's tires and hold him and the other two hunters for a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agent, but Sprott nixed any use of the World War II-surplus .30-caliber carbine the Travis County warden kept in his trunk. But the captain did authorize Simpson to go ahead and file state charges against the men.

The three wardens then drove to Johnson City, where Simpson filed complaints against all three men with the local justice of the peace, who said he'd set a hearing on the matter in the morning.

"Next morning at 7 o'clock my phone rang," Simpson continued. "It was this old judge over there. He said, 'Are you Game Warden Grover Simpson? Well, this is the JP in Johnson City where you filed these dove cases last night. I wanted to inform you there's not any use coming here. I had to dismiss those cases. These gentlemen had to fly back to Washington.'"

Simpson concluded: "I've had hell over that ever since."

Indeed, though the charge against him was dismissed, Johnson did everything he could to get Simpson fired from his job and, failing that, to get him transferred out of Travis County. When longtime Game and Fish Commission Director Howard Dodgen lost his job with the creation of the new Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in 1963, he later said he believed his removal stemmed from his refusal to intercede in the Simpson-LBJ case. Former Game and Fish Commission member J.W. Elliott of Mexia told the *Texas Observer* that Johnson had also threatened to cut any federal aid the department received, but that didn't happen, so far as is known.

Even though Gov. John B. Connally appointed Moursund to the new Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission, Simpson held on to his job and survived an effort to transfer him to Cleburne.

Meanwhile, following the assassination of John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, in Dallas, Johnson became president. When Johnson ran for a full term in office in 1964, West Texas historian and ultra-conservative J. Evetts Haley came out with a book called *A Texan Looks at Lyndon*. In it, for the first time, he exposed a national audience to the story of Simpson's effort to get LBJ fined over a game law violation.

As Johnson followed the election returns in his suite at Austin's Driskill Hotel, downtown filled with tens of thousands of people celebrating his landslide victory. Given what had happened in Dallas, security was tight. The Austin Police Department, Travis County Sheriff's Department, Texas Department of Public Safety and the new Texas Parks and Wildlife Department all had officers armed with high-powered, scoped rifles hidden away atop various downtown buildings just in case. One of those officers was Simpson.

The president likely never knew that the game warden he had been trying to get fired was among those providing his security that night. From Simpson's standpoint, he was just doing his job, same as he had been back in 1956.

And with the growing war in Vietnam, Johnson soon had plenty of other things to worry about besides a Texas game warden. By the time Simpson retired on Aug. 31, 1982, with 34 years of service, the dove hunting incident had been largely forgotten.

Despite chronic health issues tracing back to a lung injury he had suffered years before as a national guardsman, Simpson laughingly used to tell me he planned on outliving Johnson (in typical Simpson fashion he referred to the former president a bit less graciously than that), and he did. LBJ died of a heart attack in January 1973, but Simpson made it another 12-plus years, dying of lung cancer in the spring of 1985 at 66. ★

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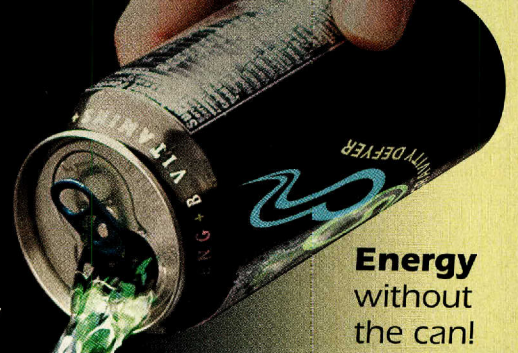
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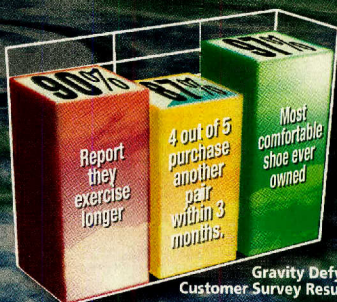


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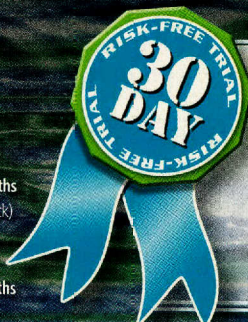
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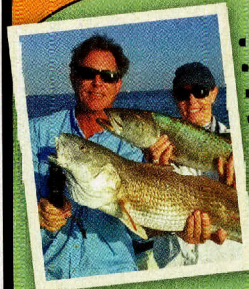
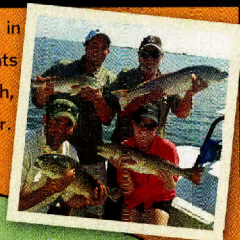
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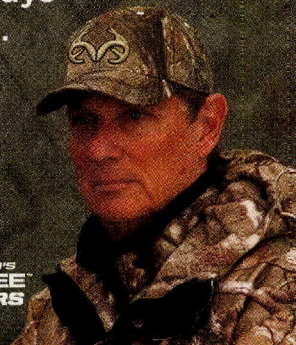
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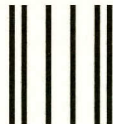
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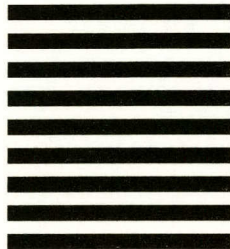
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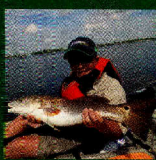
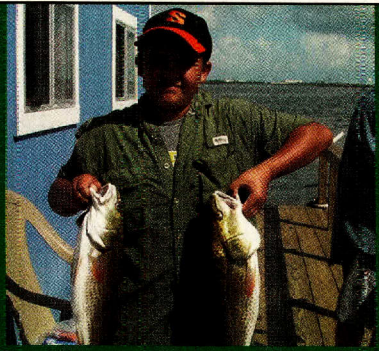
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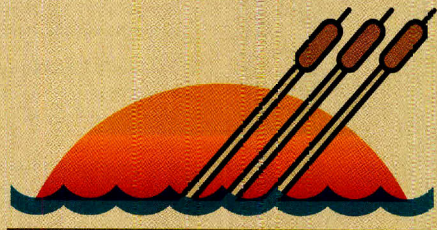
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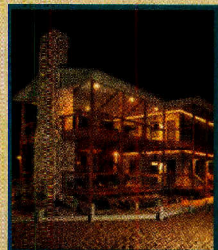
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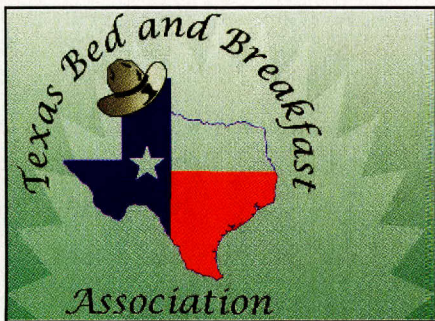
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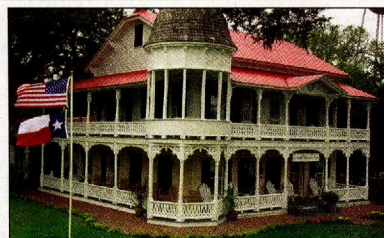
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PARTING SHOT

A white-crowned sparrow is perched on a branch of a Huisache tree, surrounded by vibrant yellow flowers. The bird is facing right, and its distinctive white crown with a black stripe is clearly visible. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting a natural outdoor setting.

IMAGE SPECS:

Canon EOS 5D Mark II camera with 600 mm f4 lens, f/4 at 1/3200 second, ISO 400

Offering a vast assortment of colors, springtime flowers provide a nice backdrop for photography. Huisache tree flowers exhibit a beautiful golden hue. Not only did their vibrant blooms get the attention of photographer Sharon Draker, but they also caught the eye of this little white-crowned sparrow. The sparrow found a comfortable perch and cooperated while Draker snapped a few shots. This image was taken at the Welder Wildlife Refuge near Sinton in South Texas.

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