

POWDERHORN | PARK AMBASSADORS | STREAM TEAM

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# TEXAS

PARKS & WILDLIFE

The OUTDOOR MAGAZINE of TEXAS

*Christmas*  
in the parks

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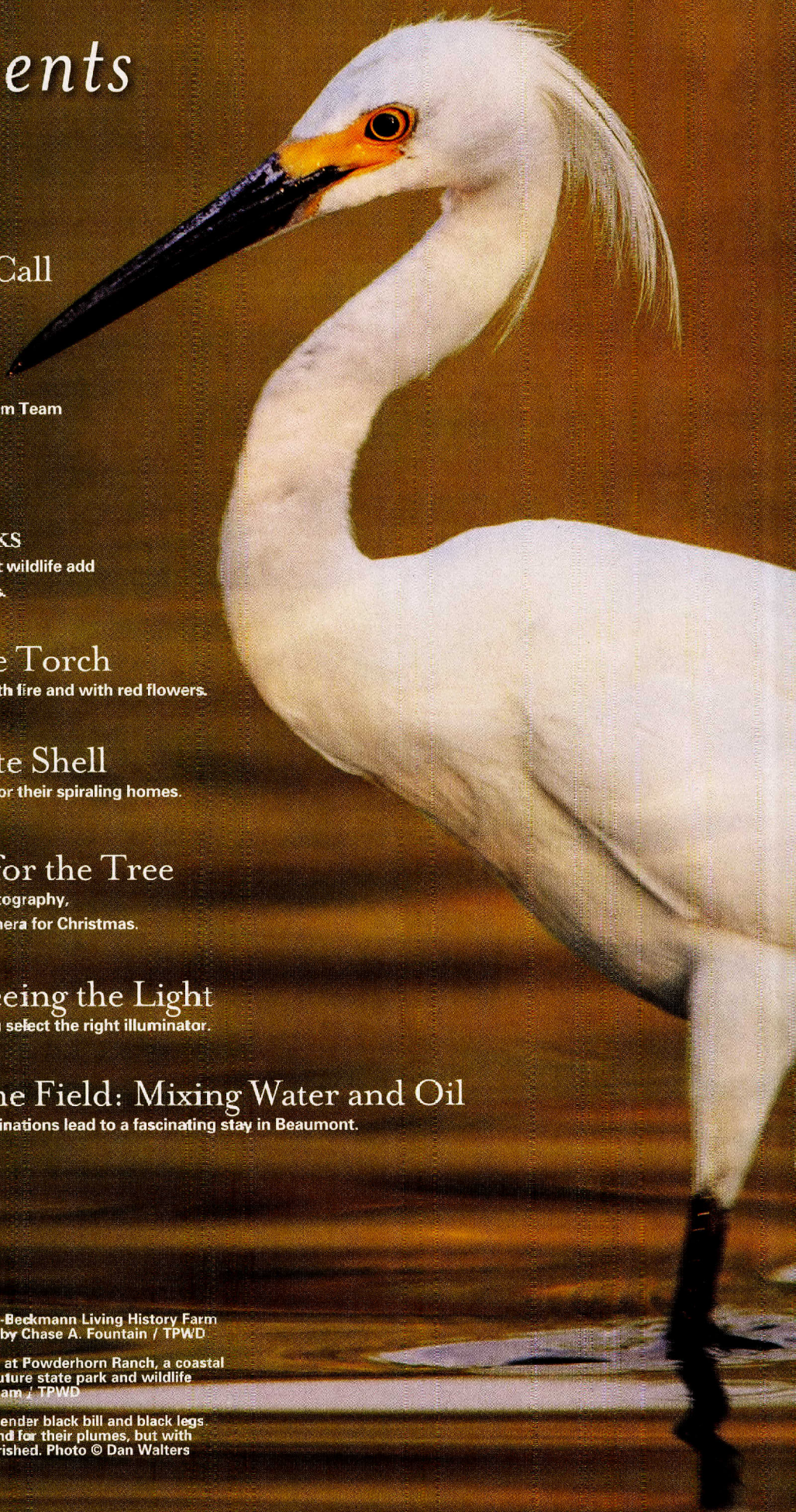
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## Covers

**FRONT:** The holiday spirit is aglow at Sauer-Beckmann Living History Farm at LBJ State Park and Historic Site. Photo by Chase A. Fountain / TPWD

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** The sun sets behind a tree at Powderhorn Ranch, a coastal haven purchased in August to become a future state park and wildlife management area. Photo by Earl Nottingham / TPWD

**THIS PAGE:** Snowy egrets are marked by a slender black bill and black legs. The birds were almost wiped out by demand for their plumes, but with protections in place, populations have flourished. Photo © Dan Walters



# TEXAS

PARKS & WILDLIFE

THE OUTDOOR MAGAZINE OF TEXAS

DECEMBER 2014, VOL. 72, NO. 10

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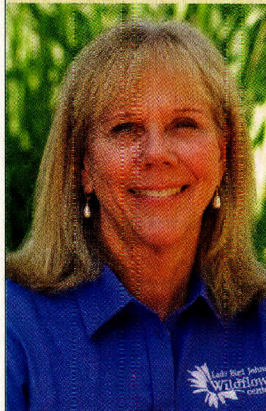
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# In the Field

## KAREN CLARY

manages the Plant Conservation Program at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin. She developed an interest in desert plants early in her career when, as an archeobotanist, she traced the origins of agriculture in the desert Southwest by studying plant remains from well-preserved

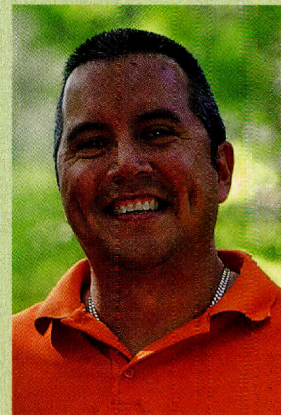


Anasazi-era archeological sites. This research interest blossomed into a full-scale desert plant obsession, culminating in a study of yuccas for her dissertation at the University of Texas. Karen says, "Desert plants astound me with their survival skills and their amazing adaptations to the harsh rigors of sun and drought." Ocotillo is a great example of a plant that can take on the desert, Karen says, and she hopes readers enjoy learning more about it in this month's Flora Fact.

## ROBERT A. RAMIREZ SR.

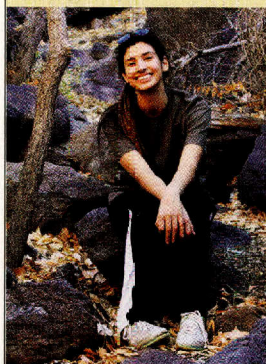
is one of TPWD's outreach and education specialists and provides support for programs such as angle education, Project Wild and Becoming an Outdoors-Woman. When he's not in the office, you can find him running the Life's Better Outside

Experience at events around the state. This outreach program travels to five large events a year to bring a variety of outdoor activities to visitors, who learn basic outdoor skills while having fun. Robert, who writes this month's Skill Builder on flashlights, developed an appreciation for good flashlights at a young age, and whether he's on the water, at an event, in a campsite or just in his vehicle, he always makes sure to have the right light source nearby.



## ALAYNA ALVAREZ

, born and raised in Victoria, says she's always loved two things: wildlife and writing. In 2011 she moved to Austin to study journalism at the University of Texas, where she hopes to learn how to fuse her two passions into a career. New halfway through her senior year, Lani is an editorial intern for *Texas Parks & Wildlife*. "I never dreamed I'd have exposure



to a job this early in life that fulfills so much of what I value. I'm surrounded by amazing leadership and teamwork, deep-rooted love for wildlife and the environment, and passion to inform others and inspire outdoor adventures." When the chance to write about Texas state park ambassadors presented itself, she was thrilled. "These ambassadors, my peers, will lead us into the future. This program, their mission, is critical."

# AT ISSUE

FROM THE PEN OF CARTER P. SMITH

**Christmas came a little early this year for the coast.** It was August, in fact, when a consortium including the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Nature Conservancy, the Conservation Fund and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department teamed up to announce the single largest conservation purchase that Texas has ever seen. And what a deal it was.

The cause for celebration was the acquisition of the fabled Powderhorn Ranch, a stunning 17,351-acre coastal gem adjoining the sportsman's paradise of Port O'Connor. As picturesque and evocative as its name suggests, the Powderhorn is one of those historic coastal Texas ranches, steeped in beauty, diversity, nature and heritage.

From its oak-studded shorelines, one can literally chronicle the passage of Texas history and settlement. From the landing of Cabeza de Vaca to the wreckage of La Belle to the arrival of the German immigrants at Indianola to the pounding of Hurricane Carla at Port O'Connor, the shores of the Powderhorn have seen and weathered many a ship, many a sailor and many a storm.

The ranch sits perched on the protruding Calhoun Peninsula, underlain by deep sands and interspersed with sprawling, wind-sculpted live oaks and expansive native prairies. The uplands are pockmarked with hundreds of shallow freshwater wetlands. Its perimeter is ringed by the oyster- and seagrass-laden waters and bayous of Matagorda Bay and the eponymous Powderhorn Lake. Fish and game abound there. If you are looking for a special place on the coast, the Powderhorn is surely one of them.

It's a special place because of its rich diversity of habitats, unique and endemic plant life, and importance for species from whooping cranes to waterfowl to migratory songbirds to fish of all kinds. For decades, fish and wildlife enthusiasts had hoped to see the historic ranch preserved for future generations of Texans.

Following the Depression, the ranch was stewarded for 70 or so years by a prominent ranching family out of San Antonio. Ultimately, the ranch was sold and passed along to a succession of other owners. With each sale, fears escalated about what would happen to the fabled Powderhorn and its miles of frontage along Matagorda Bay and Powderhorn Lake. Those fears were laid to rest when an innovative public-private partnership was forged to acquire and raise the funds necessary to purchase the property from a conservation-minded seller.

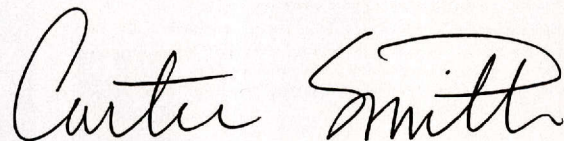
The silver lining came in the form of nearly \$35 million in criminal penalty funds entrusted with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation following the Deepwater Horizon incident. Ultimately, the plans are for the property to end up with the TPW Foundation and then on to TPWD, where it will become a combination state park and wildlife management area. We can hardly wait.

This year at Christmas, we will celebrate many things in our state parks. We'll herald the lighting of the tree at LBJ State Park, enjoy the Trail of Lights and cider at Monument Hill and Kreische Brewery, walk through the pines at Martin Creek Lake and celebrate a Sailor's Christmas on the Battleship Texas.

We'll also be sure and raise a toast to the Powderhorn and those who brought Christmas to the coast and to the state a few months early.

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

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from all your friends at Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.



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 cause for celebration was the acquisition of the fabled Powderhorn Ranch, a stunning 17,351-acre coastal gem adjoining the sportsman's paradise of Port O'Connor.*



# focus on **THE HOLIDAYS**







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# MAIL CALL

PICKS, PANS AND PROBES FROM OUR READERS

## FOREWORD

**What does Christmas in Texas look like?** Does it look like snow-frosted bison standing at attention at Caprock Canyons or cedar waxwings gorging themselves on winter berries at Cedar Hill State Park? Do your memories conjure up a *posada* of children parading between luminarias to find Mary and Joseph a place to rest at Fort Leaton State Historic Site or an echoing choir of voices rising in the ghostly walls of Mission Espiritu Santo? Was your Christmas tree cut in the woods and decorated with hand-strung cranberries and popcorn or a perfect artificial specimen hung with collectible antique ornaments? Eggnog or wassail? Tamales or roasted turkey?

Of course, the answers to these questions run the gamut from primitive to elaborate, with heaping helpings of ethnic influences from across the globe. Texans, with open and inviting arms (not to mention tastebuds), blend this mishmash of cultural flavors and traditions into a holiday that's totally Texan. But because of this beautiful diversity, our staff faced an unforeseen problem this month: How to portray all of this in one photo on our cover?

We designed and printed out test covers of holiday wreaths on beautifully weathered barn wood and woodpeckers on icicle-draped branches, golden lanterns with big bows and ladies in old-time apparel stringing popcorn. We spent way too many hours discussing and comparing, even asking family members and neighboring TPWD staffers to chime in. Considering that we'd started planning this issue an entire year earlier and thought we had a slam-dunk, we found ourselves in a bit of a Christmas pickle.

At the end of the day (or should I say month?), we chose a simple photo with magical light in the skies above a rustic barn with one shining beam of illumination, beckoning us inside to warm our toes. The charm of its sincere, unembellished beauty reminded us of hard-working Texans heading to the barn before daylight and a special baby born long ago in a Bethlehem manger under a brilliant star.

We invite you to visit your state parks this holiday season, whether for a new Thanksgiving family tradition or to see Christmas lights on campers by the lake, or maybe to participate in a First Day Hike for New Year's. Find out about all the Christmas events in Stephanie Salinas' holiday tour on Page 28.

Perhaps you'll be inspired to become an ambassador to your favorite park (Page 46) or the newest jewel in Texas' crown, Powderhorn Ranch (Page 38). Give the gift of the outdoors to your family by taking the gang outside for a walk or a game of horseshoes after the feast. Follow it up with a fishing trip or a rock climbing excursion or a campout. We'll be filling our pages with great ideas throughout 2015; come join us!

Happy holidays from all of your friends at *Texas Parks & Wildlife* magazine.

*Louie Bond*

LOUIE BOND, EDITOR

## LETTERS

### ANTLER RULES AND YOUTH HUNTING

On your article "Growing Bigger Trophies" (October 2014): Personally, I do not like the antler restrictions too much.

I think of my grandsons who are deer hunters. One is 13, one is 10, another is 9 and another 8. They do not understand why they cannot shoot a nice six-

point or eight-point buck if his spread is not at least 13 inches wide.

My oldest grandson quit hunting last year because we saw five or six bucks but none met the requirements. He told me, "Papa, I am not doing this anymore. It's no fun to hunt. We see a nice buck and can't shoot him."

I do not hunt for horns; I hunt for food. Sure, everyone loves to kill a good buck deer, but that doesn't happen every year. That's why they call it hunting. I understand, but my young grandsons don't.

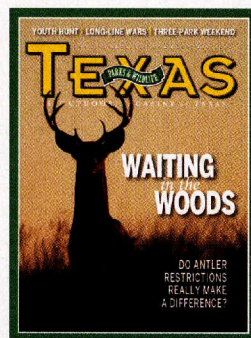
I agree with the man in Fannin County who thinks the restrictions discourage younger hunters.

I see a lot of four-points and six-points, but they are not legal and can't be taken.

I thank you for your time. I can appreciate what TPWD is trying to do, but not everyone is a horn hunter.

JERALD JACKSON  
Leesburg

TPWD WHITE-TAILED DEER PROGRAM LEADER ALAN GAIN RESPONDS: *The last thing TPWD wants to do with the antler restrictions is to discourage youth from hunting, or anyone for that matter. Data from our Big Game Harvest Surveys indicate no adverse effects on youth hunting participation. Percentages of youth hunters in antler restriction counties remain stable*



"Obviously, I survived, but I still get a chill when I come across a giant redheaded centipede."

KIM LUDEKE  
Austin

# MAIL CALL

and in some cases are greater than before antler restrictions were in place. TPWD continues to monitor youth hunting participation to evaluate the effects of our regulations on young hunters. We do hear numerous comments from hunters such as "My kids are finally seeing bucks when we go hunting! We sat for years without seeing any bucks, but now we see numerous bucks during our hunts." Keep in mind that with antlerless deer harvest options available as well as the two-buck bag limit with antler restrictions, there are lots of deer harvest opportunities for youth. Hopefully, folks can see the benefits in the time spent with their kids in the woods and benefits of good stewardship of the resources for them to pass on to their children.

## REDHEADED DANGER

Reading the article about the red-headed centipede ("Stuff of Nightmares," October 2014) brought back an intense memory from my childhood. At the age of 4, I was watering the grass next to a concrete slab at our ranch on the Red River in Wichita County. I must have flushed out one of

these critters, which in revenge delivered a very painful sting to my foot.

I ran crying into the house screaming that a rattlesnake had bitten me. My mom noticed the two puncture wounds and began to panic. We were five miles from town, and she had no transportation and no telephone. She grasped at what to do and finally had a brainstorm. She had me draw it. I drew a long stick figure with scores of feet. She was relieved that I had drawn what was clearly a centipede. Obviously, I survived, but I still get a chill when I come across a giant redheaded centipede.

KIM LUDEKE  
Austin

## DAD WAS IN PHOTO

I wanted to let you know how much I enjoy your magazine. I don't always get a chance to sit down and read every article. Funny thing, I get a call from a friend stating that a photo in the October 2012 issue looks a lot like my dad. Well, I go and find the issue and, lo

and behold, there is my father and his partner in one of the many bass tournaments they fished back in the '60s and '70s. The black-and-white photo provided by Bob Hood is of my father, Howard Lee Howard, and Dale Rabe, his partner. Looks like the early 1970s. Great photo.

Thanks for the great memory and keep up the great work.

LARRY W. HOWARD  
Kerrville

## Sound off for Mail Call

### Let us hear from you!

Texas Parks & Wildlife magazine welcomes letters from our readers. Please include your name, address and daytime telephone number.

### Write to us at

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Since 1991, TPW Foundation has leveraged public funds with private philanthropy, raising more than \$100 million to help ensure that all Texans, today and in the future, can enjoy the wild things and wild places in Texas.

# SCOUT

NEWS AND VIEWS IN THE TEXAS OUTDOORS

## RIVER WATCHERS



*Citizen science gives Texas Stream Team a good reason to go paddling.*

**In Texas**, outdoor recreation is more than just fun; it's a way of life. With more than 191,000 miles of beautiful Texas streams, creeks and rivers to discover, it's no surprise that paddling is one of Texans' favorite outdoor activities. While in a canoe or kayak, we're fishing, birding, nature watching, waterfowl hunting and taking photos and videos.

Now paddling enthusiasts can help protect the water they love by keeping track of basic water quality parameters, including dissolved oxygen, temperature, pH and other important indicators.

"Boaters and anglers choose to spend their time on the water," says Meredith Miller, senior program

coordinator of the Texas Stream Team. "Anglers are the first to notice changes in the water quality. They know how it flows, how clear it is and what kind of shoreline, vegetation and instream habitats exist."

The Texas Stream Team has been combining outdoor recreation with citizen science since 1991. Managed by the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment and funded by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the Texas Stream Team has certified nearly 8,000 individuals on water quality monitoring techniques. To date, participants have donated approximately 45,000 hours, or \$1 million worth of time, to monitoring Texas waters. This extensive data set

helps support professional monitoring efforts, and the monitors act as an early warning indicator system.

Traditionally, Texas Stream Team members have performed their monitoring duties from the shoreline. However, recognizing the potential scientific value of the growing number of paddlers in the state, the Meadows Center introduced the new Texas Stream Team Paddlers initiative in February, inviting kayakers and canoeists to merge their recreation with conservation. The goal is to encourage paddlers to add to the citizen science effort by collecting data from new or hard-to-reach locales.

Some interested groups have already joined the team. Austin Canoe and



Kayak has set up hubs in Austin and Houston, where trained participants can pick up a monitoring kit and hit the water. Master naturalist chapters from across the state have scheduled trainings, and kayaking/canoeing clubs have begun organizing as well.

To get started, gather up five to 10 people who are willing to go out on the water and monitor once a month. Call or email Travis Tidwell at the Meadows Center (512-245-9148

or [txstreamteam@txstate.edu](mailto:txstreamteam@txstate.edu)). Once trained, Texas Stream Team Paddlers will pick up their monitoring kit, paddle around, make some recordings at the designated location and drop off their kit and data sheet at the end of the trip.

Out on the water, monitoring takes approximately 10 minutes and then you're free to enjoy the rest of your trip, whether just taking a leisurely paddle or searching for that fishing



**Texas Stream Team Paddlers combine recreation and science by keeping track of water quality measures on paddling outings. These University of Texas students conducted water tests on the Colorado River near Bastrop.**

sweet spot.

"No natural resource has greater significance for the future of Texas than water," says Andrew Sansom, Meadows Center executive director.

Joining the Texas Stream Team is a great way to contribute to water stewardship in Texas. Just don't forget your fishing gear.

—Lindsay Sansom



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# Tiny Mighty Oaks

*Unique oak colony and abundant wildlife add to the fun at Monahans Sandhills.*



**Visitors clamber** up vast, pristine sand dunes, some as tall as 70 feet. At the top, they position themselves on plastic disks, skateboards with wheels removed and other homemade “sandboards” to push off for a slip and slide down to the bottom.

While this best-known activity is reason enough to visit Monahans Sandhills State Park, there’s so much more to enjoy. By taking the time to dig a little deeper, you can uncover the story beneath the sand.

The park’s dramatic natural beauty lures artists and photographers.

“So much is said about the interplay between the white sand and the blue sky, and the nearly perfect light,” Superintendent Michael Smith says. “The park is sublimely beautiful.”

The stunning landscape, with its miniature oak colonies, inspired Texas naturalist Roy Bedichek to write in *Adventures with a Texas Naturalist*: “This Lilliputian Jungle is as much a natural curiosity as the Painted Desert or the wonder areas of Yellowstone.”

The comment caught the eye of the State Parks Board, and ultimately Monahans Sandhills State Park was born.

Havard oak (also called shin oak or shinnery) forms large colonies through an extensive system of underground stems called rhizomes. These oak colonies have been called “miniature forests,” but technically the

plants are thicket-forming shrubs. Mature individuals commonly attain a maximum height of about 3 feet; a truly gargantuan specimen might be only 6 feet tall.

Havard oaks are diminutive in stature but robust in other ways. The old proverb “Great oaks from little acorns grow” is reversed here, because these little oaks arise from proportionally huge acorns an inch long and as big around as a quarter. Roots can extend up to 90 feet — the distance between home plate and first base on a baseball diamond. Plant biologists believe Havard oaks are particularly long-lived as well: hundreds to thousands of years. Imagine an ancient “mighty oak” that is shorter than a toddler.

Dunes stabilized by oak colonies and the wet areas that may arise among them are great places to experience the park’s tremendous biological diversity. Sand-loving grasses like big sand reed and sand drop seed abound here, along with bluestems representative of the Great Plains and grammas typical of desert grasslands. After rains, the dunes erupt with a proliferation of wildflowers; the sand holds water like a sponge. Favorites include pink plains penstemon, Engelmann’s evening primrose and spectacle pod.

Water sources are particularly attractive to the park’s diverse bird life.

Songbirds and birds of prey, as

well as roadrunners, owls, doves and quail, are plentiful at the park. There are healthy deer, rodent, reptile and insect populations as well.

“You’ll see tracks of all kinds everywhere in the sand, particularly when it’s wet,” Smith says. “You’d be amazed at the amount of animal activity that takes place behind the scenes.”

Monahans Sandhills State Park is in West Texas between Odessa and Pecos. To reach the park, travel Interstate 20 and exit mile marker 86 to Park Road 41. For information, call (432) 943-2092 or go to [www.tpwd.texas.gov/monahanssandhills](http://www.tpwd.texas.gov/monahanssandhills).

—Linda Hedges



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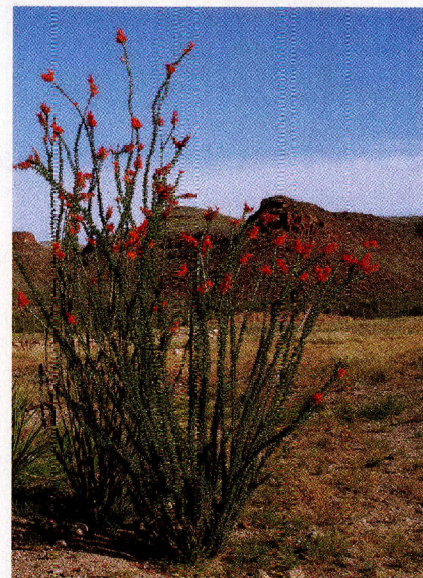


**Whenever I head out** to West Texas, I always marvel when I spot my first ocotillo along the highway. There it is, in all its spindly glory.

If we've been blessed with rain, tiny green leaves will have sprouted along the prickly stems. And if we are really lucky, we'll catch splendid red flowers sprouting from the tips of the branches against the backdrop of the open sky. That a plant as strange looking as ocotillo can exist on this planet is testament to the wonder of desert survival and adaptation and, just maybe, a wink and a nod from Mother Nature.

The ocotillos (*Fouquieria splendens*) we know from our Southwest deserts form the northernmost range of a single species of a uniquely Mexican plant family, the Fouquieriaceae. Eleven ocotillo species, all native to Mexico, make up not only the genus, but the entire family. In Mexico, there's remarkable variation in growth form, from cane-like shrubs to umbrella-like trees to monster bottle trees.

Ocotillo, an indicator plant of the Chihuahuan Desert, grows on slopes at low elevations from California to the Pecos River. Left undisturbed, ocotillos typically live 60–100 years



(even up to 200 years). Great places in Texas to see stands of large ocotillos are Lake Amistad National Recreation Area, Big Bend Ranch State Park, Big Bend National Park, Devils River State Natural Area and Guadalupe Mountains National Park.

In the springtime, ocotillo produces its red, tubular, nectar-filled flowers that attract bees, bats and migrating hummingbirds heading north to their summering places. Matt Turner, in *Remarkable Plants of Texas*, explains that

PHOTOS BY EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD





ocotillo, although dry and dead-looking most of the year, actually has the ability to produce leaves upon demand when it rains. During the summer monsoon rainy season, the tips of the stems will sprout one kind of leaf that will harden into the spine that protects the plant. Then, when it rains outside of the rainy season, the plant can break dormancy, sprouting a second set of leaves along the stem that last but a few weeks. These leaves can appear within 24–48 hours after a rain and are considered reliable indicators of recent rains.

Desert people have used ocotillo for centuries. Even today, the old-time tradition of using ocotillo wood to make a fence is hard to improve upon. Delena Tull, in *Edible and Useful Plants of Texas and the Southwest*, tells us that the sweet flowers are edible and can be made into a drink when soaked in water. Traditional native people ground the seeds into flour.

To protect the plant from the sun, the stems produce resin, wax and gum. The wax has been used for waxing leather, the gum as a thickener and adhesive, and the resin as a water-proofing agent and varnish.

The other name for ocotillo, candlewood, hints at its use as a fire starter. The resin-laden branches ignite easily and produce an intense, bright-yellow flame. "Ocotillo" is thought to derive from the Nahuatl name for pitch pine, *ocotl*, later translated into Spanish as "little torch."

—Karen Clary



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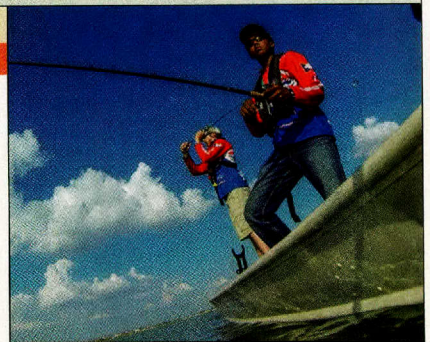
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**Dec. 21–27:**  
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# State Shell

*Lightning whelks are treasured for their spiraling homes.*



PHOTO © LANCE VARNELL

↑ **The lightning whelk was named the state shell in 1987, a "fitting emblem of the exceptional beauty of the Texas Gulf Coast region."**

Collecting any live or dead mollusks and their shells, including lightning whelks, is prohibited from Nov. 1 to April 30 along one part of the island. Permits are not required for collecting empty lightning whelk shells on the beach, though a Texas fishing license with a saltwater fishing stamp is required for harvesting any live marine animals that may be inside.

The shell, named for the brown strips that radiate down its sides, has a long history in the Gulf area. Some Native Americans used the shell for religious rituals, believing the shell was sacred. They also made practical tools like scrapers, gouges, cups and bowls from it.

In 1987, the lightning whelk became the official state shell. The Texas Legislature chose it for its easily recognizable and unconventional shape and prevalence along Texas beaches. According to the resolution, the shell is a "fitting emblem of the exceptional beauty of the Texas Gulf Coast region."

—Katy Schaffer

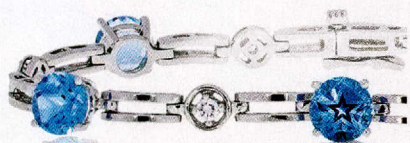
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**Tiny calcified fragments** of colorful shells litter the beach, lining the shore as far as the eye can see. As I look in wonder at the sea of color beneath my feet, one particular shell catches my eye, and I pick it up. Amazingly, it's still whole. It's wide at one end and long and slender at the other. Brown lightning-like lines run the length of its chalky, apricot-tinged body. It spirals around and opens up tantalizingly, leading the way to where an organism once lived.

I had discovered a lightning whelk shell, the state shell of Texas. The shell, found along the Gulf Coast, is different from most other spiraling shells in that it coils in a counter-clockwise direction, opening up on the left side of the shell instead of the right. The shell houses a marine mollusk, though sometimes hermit crabs hitchhike rides in empty whelk shells. They are usually found at the bottom of bays near grass beds. Lightning whelk shells typically grow up to 8 inches, though some offshore specimens have grown as large as 16 inches.

The lightning whelk eats bivalves (invertebrates with two shells) like oysters, clams and scallops. When feeding, an adult whelk will use the long edge of its shell as a crowbar to open up the bivalve. If that doesn't work, the whelk will grind a hole in the bivalve's shell to insert its toothed tongue.

The lightning whelk "smells" its food with special sensory organs inside its body and will almost completely bury itself in sand, lying in wait for prey to approach. When it does move, it leaves behind a trail, making it easy for predators, including gulls, crabs and other whelks, to track.

Texas has placed certain restrictions on collecting live lightning whelks at South Padre Island, where there is a daily limit of 15 univalve, or single-shelled, organisms, of which only two may be lightning whelks.

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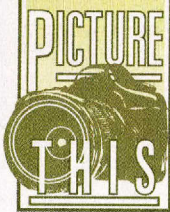
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## 3 for the Tree

*With big advances in digital photography,  
it's a great time to unwrap a camera for Christmas.*

**SANTA AND HIS ELVES** have had a busy year keeping up with the new and exciting innovations in the world of digital photography. There's a perfect new camera out there for every type of photo aficionado.

The past year has brought many new features to the design and functionality of digital cameras. Most notable are the convergence of still camera features with high-definition video and the ability to transfer those images wirelessly to smartphones, tablets or computers. While the market for pocket-sized point-and-shoot cameras has started to dry up because of the great image quality readily available from the typical smartphone, it's a great time to shop for the midsize to larger size camera bodies, lenses and accessories. Competition has forced prices down and quality up.

While that new camera will undoubtedly be a hit when unwrapped, let's hope Santa doesn't forget to bring a few accessories, such as a quality carbon-fiber tripod or protective camera bag. Stocking stuffers can include lens filters, memory cards, a remote cable release or a lens-cleaning kit.

The following three camera examples represent the range of features and prices on currently available cameras. Here's hoping that you've been good!

—Earl Nottingham



### NIKON D810

If lots of pixels are what you're after, then the latest and greatest Nikon D810 DSLR is for you. With a massive 36.3-megapixel full-frame sensor, the D810 is currently the highest-resolution production camera on the market (amid rumors that competitors will up that ante in the next year). Not to rest on the laurels of a high-megapixel rating, the camera also offers normal ISO speeds of 64 to 12,800 (expandable to 51,200) with very little digital noise. Videographers will be happy with full HD recording capability up to 1080/60p as well as other enhancements specifically geared toward professional video production. \$3,299 body onlyw.



### SONY A6000

The Sony a6000 follows the trend of mirrorless interchangeable lens cameras (MILCs), which eliminate the reflex mirror found on typical single-lens reflex (SLR) cameras. Camera images are viewed from either an LCD screen on the back of the camera or an electronic viewfinder. The result is less weight, fewer moving parts and a quieter shutter, which makes it a stealthy and comfortable camera to carry while still shooting high-quality 24-megapixel images with its APS-C sensor. It also offers full HD video with wireless capability. \$798 with 16-50mm lens.



### CANON SX60 HS

While Canon is also known for its professional high-end cameras, some of its best offerings are in its Powershot point-and-shoot line. One standout is the SX60 HS, which features a stabilized 65X optical zoom lens (21-1365mm), making it the perfect camera for sports or wildlife photography. Although the body is lighter than most of its DSLR counterparts, its respectable 16-megapixel sensor also yields full HD video up to 1080/60p. With its wireless connectivity, images can be transferred to your smartphone, tablet or computer. \$549.



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# SEEING THE LIGHT

*A little Flashlight 101 to help you select the right illuminator.*

**WE USED TO JUST CALL THEM FLASHLIGHTS.** Long tubes with a lens at one end, filled with big batteries. One size fit all. Not so today, as we now choose from a confusing array of headlamps, lanterns, LED lights and shake flashlights, just to name a few. The range of costs is wide as well. Still, all these different flashlights are made of the same basic components.

**BODY:** Flashlight bodies are usually made of aluminum or plastic/polymer. Aluminum is common on high-quality lights because of its durability and heat dissipation. Plastic can be easily molded, so there's a great variety of shapes and sizes. Plastic can also resist corrosion and wear.

**BULBS:** Once-common incandescent bulbs are the least expensive, but they have a short life and emit heat. Light-emitting diodes (LED) are more efficient and durable, but are also more expensive.

**REFLECTORS:** A polished surface throws the light into a directed beam. An "orange peel" texture can improve the uniformity of the light beam. Variable-focus reflectors allow a wide floodlight to narrow to a beam effect.

**LENSES:** Lenses can be a flat transparent plastic or glass cover. A "bull's-eye" or convex lens is also used to form a concentrated beam.

**POWER SOURCE:** Battery choices include disposable or rechargeable. Lithium-ion batteries have a longer run time, making them ideal for hikes or long trips, though our Texas heat may lessen their shelf life somewhat.

**CONTROL SWITCH:** Most are top-mounted or end-mounted, but they don't just turn the flashlight on and off. Operating modes include intermittent use, SOS signaling, strobe and variable output levels.

**PRO TIPS:** *When choosing a flashlight, consider the functions you'll need. A floodlight illuminates a wide area easily, but a spotlight has a clearly defined "hot spot" and very little peripheral spill. Large flashlights are powerful, but they're also heavier. A headlamp keeps your hands free while walking and setting up camp in the dark. LED lights have more than 10 times the battery life, so you won't have to carry extras.*

*With all of these options, remember to do some research before you buy. With planning, you can find one that will light your way for years to come — or at least until the next "must have" innovation comes along.*



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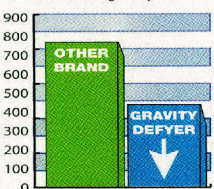


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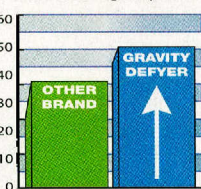
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# 3 Days in the Field / By Sheryl Smith-Rodgers

DESTINATION: BEAUMONT

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## Mixing Water and Oil

*Successful pairings of odd combinations lead to a fascinating stay in Beaumont.*

**“Look!”** George Newsome slows the white Suburban to a stop, then gestures out his open window toward a muddy flat at Cattail Marsh in Beaumont. In the distance, scores of assorted birds swim and wade in pockets of shallow water.

“Now there’s a pile of birds!” Newsome exclaims. “Look, over there! A common grebe! See him? Watch him go under water. There! Did you see that? Wasn’t that just cool?”

From behind the wheel, Newsome continues to scan the water as he always does when patrolling the 600-acre manmade wetlands. Completed in 1993, the system of eight cells and levees cleanses treated effluent from the city’s wastewater treatment plant. During initial construction, Newsome — then an employee with the water utilities department — operated a tractor. Now he’s water reclamation superintendent.

“I didn’t used to be a bird guy,” he confesses, “but I am now.” Out the window, a flash of pink in mid-air catches his eye. “Look, a roseate spoonbill!”

From wetlands to oil derricks, a visit to Beaumont — a high-energy city a little more than an hour’s jaunt east of Houston — will leave you convinced that, occasionally, oil and water can mix. And in the most interesting ways, too.

I start my three-day exploration on board the Ivory Bill, a covered excursion boat operated by the Big Thicket Association. Members with the nonprofit organization strive to preserve more than 100,000 acres of ecologically diverse habitats collectively known as the Big Thicket. They

also educate people about the region’s swamps and bayous through their Neches River Adventures, Saturday morning tours on the Ivory Bill that depart from Riverfront Park near downtown.

A light mist falls as pilot Stuart Liebowitz steers the boat farther upriver.

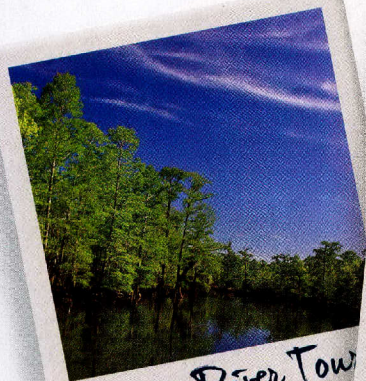
“You never know what we’ll see on these trips,” Liebowitz says as we slowly motor past riverbanks lush with tall grasses, palmettos and thick vines. Snowy egrets perch atop limbs poking up from the water. “The boat doesn’t spook the wildlife much. We’ve even had alligators swim up.”

A red-winged blackbird trills as a ranger with the Big Thicket National Preserve tells us about the Neches River, a murky waterway populated with bass, catfish and alligator gar.

“Cypress and tupelos dominate the forests here,” notes ranger Mary Kay Manning. “We also have maples and sweetgums. The abundance of Spanish moss that you see indicates good air quality.”

A brief description of Big Thicket flora and fauna by Mona Halvorsen, who directs an ongoing species inventory called the Thicket of Diversity, piqued my interest. Next time I plan to try to see the region’s four carnivorous plant species: pitcher plants, sundews, butterworts and bladderworts.

With limited time, I can visit only a few of Beaumont’s many museums and historic sites. After a chocolate shake at the Willy Burger, I head to a must-see: the Spindletop-



Neches River Tower



McFaddin-Ward House



Roseate Spoonbill



Spindletop Museum



Gladys City Boomtown Museum, a collection of Old West-style buildings that represent life after the famous gusher spewed oil on Spindletop Hill in January 1901.

"Gladys City was intended to be a perfect industrial city," says museum director Mark Osborne. "But after the oil came in, they had to build the city as fast as they could to accommodate all the wildcatters and roughnecks." What remained of the rowdy boomtown was bulldozed in the 1950s, then rebuilt in the '70s as a Bicentennial project.

At the tour's end, Osborne leads visitors to a grassy field, where we stand around a 65-foot-tall replica of an oil derrick. Suddenly, a plume of water rises into the air and gushes some 10 stories high. I manage to stay dry during the impressive Spindletop re-enactment.

The next morning, after a quick egg taco at Tacos La Bamba, I tour the McFaddin-Ward House Museum, which preserves the opulent era that followed Spindletop. Built in 1906, the three-story house was purchased by oil and ranching tycoon W.P.H. McFaddin and his wife, Ida. All furnishings, such as Tiffany lamps, quilted bedspreads, Oriental rugs and framed photographs, are original to the family.

"The house has a total of 12,000 square feet and is just a few feet short from being the same width as the Titanic," guide Marcus Powers notes. I find myself wishing I could linger in the sunny, mosaic-tiled conservatory and drink a glass of cold lemonade, just as McFaddin daughter Mamie used to do.

At the Texas Energy Museum, two floors of interactive exhibits focus on the geology, history and production of oil. In one display, robotic figures dressed as oil pioneers Pattillo Higgins and Anthony Lucas stand beneath a drilling rig and recall how they brought in the Spindletop gusher. Another exhibit explains the complex process of oil refining.

Since plants fascinate me, I head for the Beaumont Botanical Gardens at Tyrrell Park, a municipal complex that also includes Cattail Marsh, an 18-hole golf course, horse stables and hiking trails.

"A lot of people pull off I-10 to walk in our gardens," horticulture director Gary Outenreath tells me. "They relax, then they're ready to be road warriors again."

In the 10 acres of themed gardens, I stroll down a sidewalk that winds past daylilies, giant monkeygrass, Japan painted ferns, herbs and oodles of other plants, including Texas natives. A green tree frog on a branch catches my eye, and a great egret hunting a snack in the garden's large pond ignores me.

Inside the humid Warren Loose Conservatory, elephant ears, scheffleras, palms and other tropics reach high to the opaque ceiling. Well-fed koi shimmer in ponds, and a ribbon snake slithers across a stone bench. The kid in me loves the prehistoric pterodactyl that "soars" overhead and a huge dinosaur that lurks among the scheffleras.

South of Beaumont, real-deal reptiles star at Gator Country, where owner Gary Saurage and his crew tend 400 alligators they've rescued from swimming pools, backyards and various public places. The gators laze in swampy ponds where they're grouped

by size. Indoor exhibits house other reptiles, including pythons, iguanas and lizards.

"Once alligators are fed by humans, they can lose their fear," intern Tyler Lacina explains. "If an alligator is determined to be a nuisance, then a permitted nuisance alligator control hunter may harvest the animal. That's what Gary does — only he rescues gators and brings them here."

Big Al, a 1,000-pound alligator that measures 13 feet long, reigns as the preserve's oldest and largest. Only staff get near Al, who gets weighed every July 4, but visitors can hold 6-inch-long baby gators. With both hands, I hold a young alligator longer than my arm (with his mouth safely secured). His scaly skin feels cold and smooth.

"We show the good side of alligators here, and how they need to be conserved," Lacina says.

That evening, a half-hour drive along a back road lands me at the Pine Tree Lodge, a down-home restaurant that overlooks a murky bayou. A basket of fried shrimp with sweet potato fries and hushpuppies fills me right up.

The next morning, I duck into Rao's Bakery, a brick-faced fixture on Calder Avenue that has turned out cakes, cookies and other sugary treats since 1941. I choose a delicious sausage kolache.

I spend my last few hours in Beaumont with George Newsome at Cattail Marsh. The levee roads, which we cruise in his city vehicle, are open to foot traffic only during daylight hours. More than 200 alligators — migrants from an adjoining bayou — also inhabit the marshes, and a pair of bald eagles has nested nearby for four years.

"We have listed 240 bird species here," Newsome says as we slow down to watch a black-crowned night-heron lift up from the water below us. "It's not uncommon to see 60-something species on any given outing. This place is a magnet for birds. Food sources are abundant, and they have a clean water source and plenty of refuge in the grass."

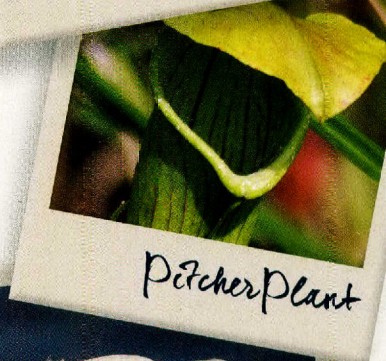
Serious birders hoping to spot a specific species may call Newsome at his city office and ask for pointers.

"One of the highlights of my career was when a lady birder from Vermont saw a thalerope here for the first time," he recalls. "She got tears of joy in her eyes."

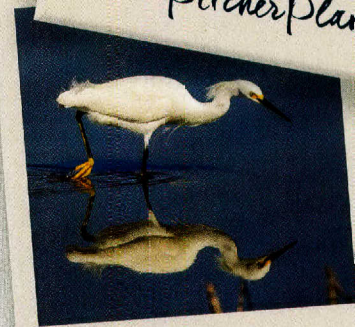
Birds and gators, water and oil — odd combinations that mix together quite well in Beaumont. ★



Botanical Gardens



Pitcher Plant



Snowy Egret



Big Thicket

MOSSY OAK  
EDITION



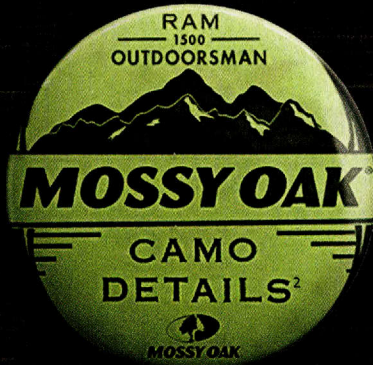
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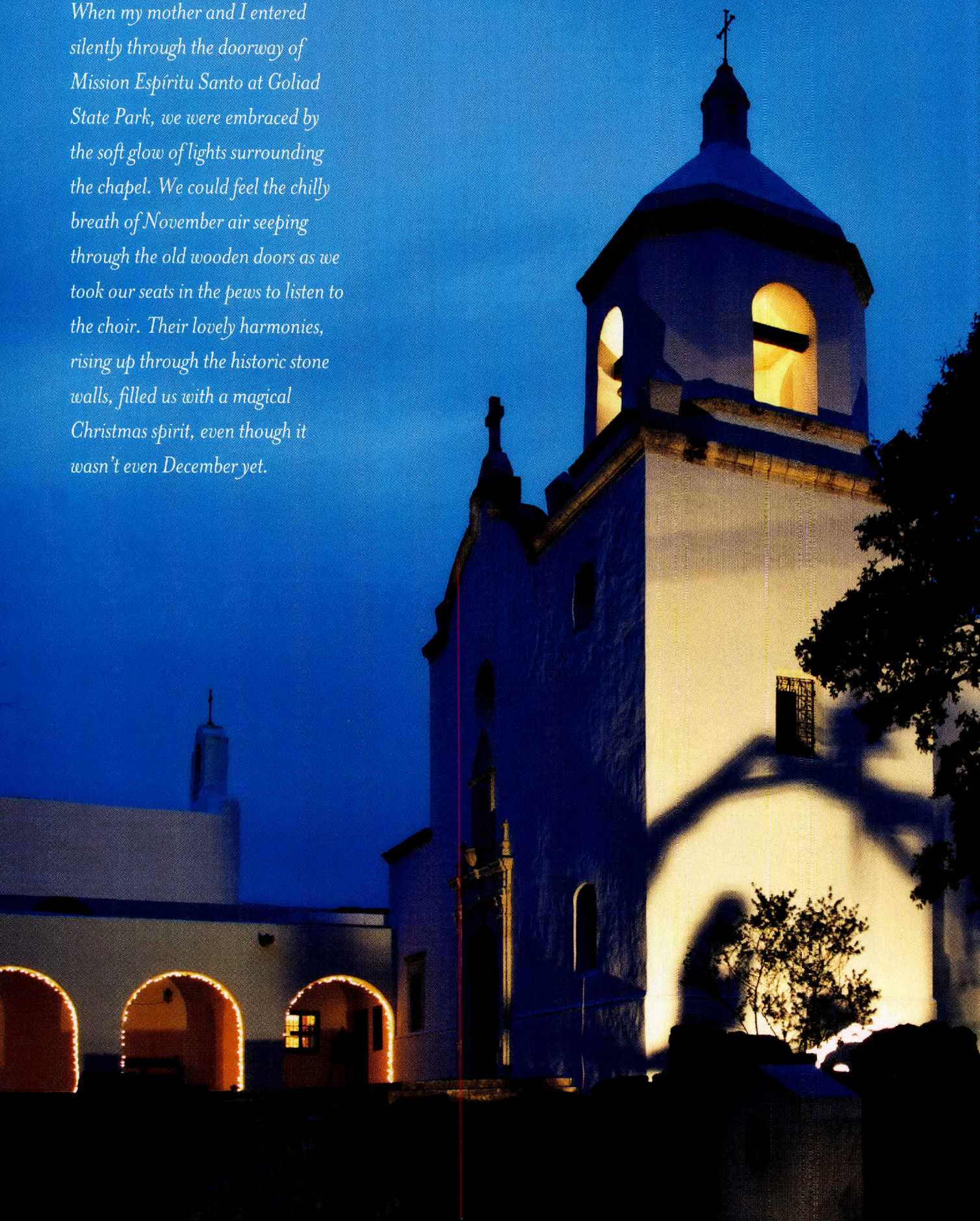
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*When my mother and I entered  
silently through the doorway of  
Mission Espíritu Santo at Goliad  
State Park, we were embraced by  
the soft glow of lights surrounding  
the chapel. We could feel the chilly  
breath of November air seeping  
through the old wooden doors as we  
took our seats in the pews to listen to  
the choir. Their lovely harmonies,  
rising up through the historic stone  
walls, filled us with a magical  
Christmas spirit, even though it  
wasn't even December yet.*





# COWBOY BOOTS & THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT COMES ALIVE IN TEXAS STATE PARKS SLEIGH BELLS

By Stephanie M. Salinas

**T**he many cultures that formed this state now provide the ingredients for a wide array of holiday traditions that can be enjoyed at Texas state parks. From the German holiday traditions at Lyndon B. Johnson State Park and Historic Site to the haunting echo of the choir at Mission Espíritu Santo in Goliad State Park, parks in every corner of the state have unique annual celebrations that ensure a great time for the entire family.

Pull on your boots, grab a jacket and follow this guide through every region of the state as we highlight events guaranteed to put you and your family in the Christmas spirit, state park-style.

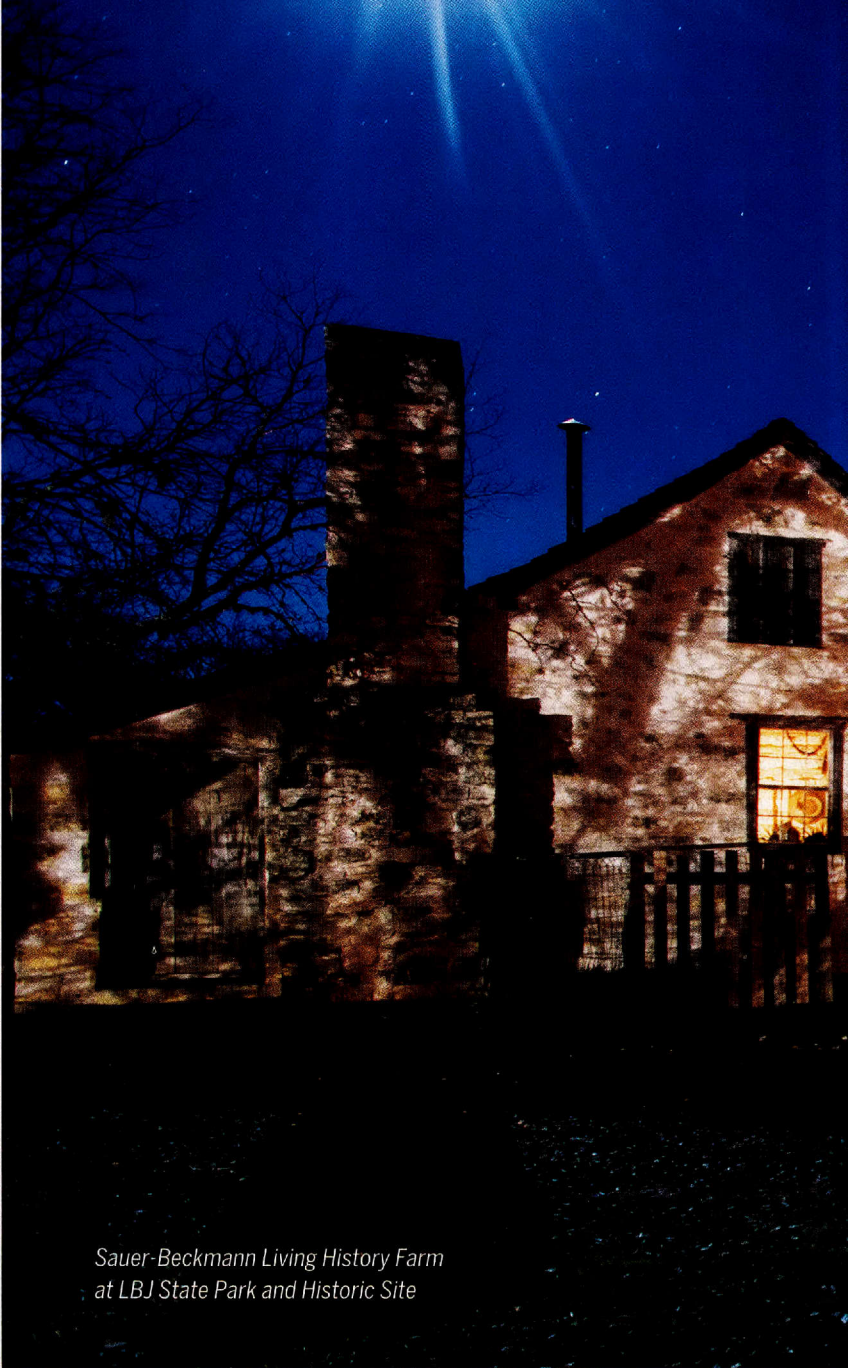
This is just a sampling of what's available at parks this holiday season. For a full listing of holiday events at Texas state parks, visit [www.texasstateparks.org/holidays](http://www.texasstateparks.org/holidays) or pick up a free copy of the "Christmas in the Parks" booklet at any state park or Texas Travel Information Center.

## Enchanted Rock State Natural Area

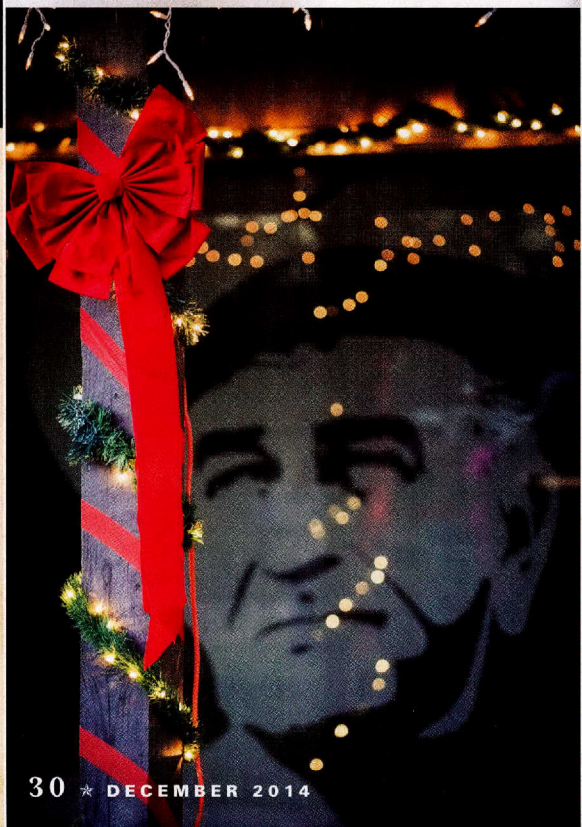
offers amazing vistas during its Christmas in the Park event. Make the climb to the top of the massive pink granite dome north of Fredericksburg and take in the view. Later in the day, join Santa for a hayride through the park and enjoy hot chocolate and cookies.

Beneath Park Road 4 in Burnet lies one of the Hill Country's best-kept Christmas secrets, **Longhorn Cavern State Park**.

Every December the park hosts two separate caroling concerts. After the caroling, the park provides classic holiday food and games in the visitors center. Cavern tours are available. Last December, a woman played the piano and sang traditional Christmas songs inside the biggest room in the cave while the audience sang along. The echoes of *Winter Wonderland* and *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* filled the room and provided us with a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Afterward, we warmed ourselves by the visitors center's huge stone fireplace, enjoying the aroma of the sizzling sausage, hot chocolate and cider, plus holiday sweets. Christmas trivia games were a jolly good time, with T-shirts and other prizes for the winners.



Sauer-Beckmann Living History Farm  
at LBJ State Park and Historic Site



One of the state's oldest holiday traditions, begun 45 years ago by President Johnson and his wife, is the annual tree lighting at **Lyndon B. Johnson State Park and Historic Site**. The festivities kick off just before sunset as a German folk band starts playing popular Christmas tunes, carolers begin to sing and the nativity is brought to life by local children.

Last year, LBJ's daughter Luci Baines Johnson was the guest of honor. She reminisced about traditions her family enjoyed during the holidays and the spirit of the season.

"Each time I come I think about all the things that hundreds of you all could be doing with your loved ones, places you could be and events that you could be sharing in," she noted. "The fact that you have come, in many cases hundreds of miles to join us here, means a tremendous amount to me. Rest



**FEATURED PARKS:**

» **Enchanted Rock State Natural Area**

16710 Ranch Road 965  
Fredericksburg, TX 78624  
Open daily from 8 a.m. - 10 p.m.  
**Christmas in the Park: Dec. 13**

» **Longhorn Cavern State Park**

6211 Park Road 4 South  
Burnet, TX 78611  
Open daily from dawn to dusk. Closed  
Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.  
**Caroling in the Park: Dec. 13 and 20**

» **Lyndon B. Johnson State Park and Historic Site**

U.S. Highway 290 East at Park Road 52  
Stonewall, TX 78671  
Park buildings are open daily from  
8 a.m. - 5 p.m. The nature trail, grounds and  
day-use picnic areas are open until dark.  
**Tree Lighting: Dec. 21**

» **Sauer-Beckmann Living History Farm**

Open daily from 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. except  
Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's.

assured that it would have meant even more to Mother and Daddy.”

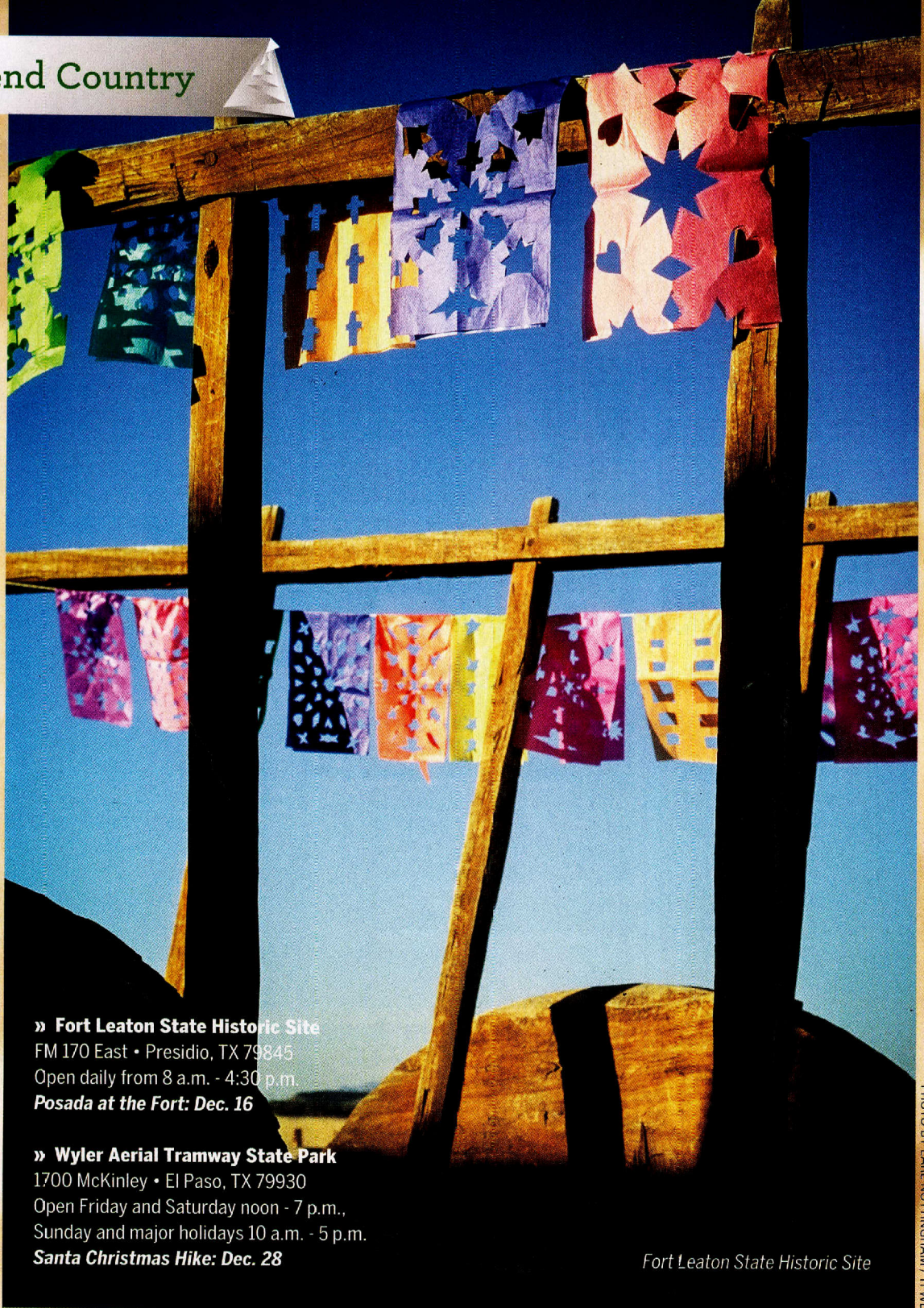
Luci, with help from her late father, provided insight to living out the true meaning of the holiday.

“Let’s do as my father asked us 50 years ago and think not so much about what we hope to get, but what we yearn to give to those in need, because that is indeed the real joy of the season.”

After she spoke, a military veteran whom Luci spotted in the crowd flipped the switch to bring the illuminated tree to life while the crowd cheered. Serenaded by the music of the carolers, people snaked through the park’s trail to the **Sauer-Beckmann Living History Farm**. Along the way, we saw children and animals re-creating

the classic live nativity scene. Buffalo Soldiers also set up camp along the trail, cooking over an open flame, singing songs and playing games that the original soldiers would have known during the Civil War.

At the Sauer-Beckmann farm, people lined up to see the house in full Christmas splendor. Following the German tradition, a cedar tree was placed in the middle of the parlor with real lighted candles adorning the tree branches. The cedar smell filled the house and followed us to the next room, where traditional toys were put on display for the visiting children to enjoy. The final stop at the farm was the kitchen, where period-dressed employees and volunteers offered a variety of homemade cookies to all.



» **Fort Leaton State Historic Site**

FM 170 East • Presidio, TX 79845

Open daily from 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

**Posada at the Fort: Dec. 16**

» **Wyler Aerial Tramway State Park**

1700 McKinley • El Paso, TX 79930

Open Friday and Saturday noon - 7 p.m.,

Sunday and major holidays 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

**Santa Christmas Hike: Dec. 28**

Fort Leaton State Historic Site

PHOTO BY EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD

The annual Christmas event at **Fort Leaton State Historic Site** features a traditional Mexican *posada* where visitors can witness Mary and Joseph's search for shelter on the fateful night that Jesus was born. A Christmas carol concert performed by a local choir and more than 600 candlelit luminarias help bring this historic structure to life.

In El Paso, **Wyler Aerial Tramway State Park** hosts a yearly Santa Christmas Hike to the top of Ranger Peak. From the top of the peak, 5,632 feet above sea level, visitors can enjoy panoramic views of New Mexico, Texas and Mexico. Once you are ready to leave, a Swiss-made gondola will take you to the base of the mountain while you enjoy the ever-changing views of the canyon below.



» **Abilene State Park**

150 Park Road 32 • Tuscola, TX 79562

Open daily.

*Fa-la-la in the Forest: Dec. 13*



**Panhandle Plains**

One weekend in December, **Abilene State Park** sparkles with Christmas lights adorning tents, screened shelters, yurts and trailers throughout the park. All park visitors are treated to cookies and hot chocolate, and Santa tops off the evening with a surprise visit.

Kick the holidays into high gear by cruising through a winter wonderland in the Pineywoods at **Martin Creek Lake State Park**. Campsites will be decorated with sparkling holiday lights, and kids will have a chance to visit with Santa. Entrance fees will be waived if an unwrapped toy is brought for donation to a local charity group.

The Grinch, Santa, Mrs. Claus and Smokey Bear help celebrate Christmas at **Atlanta State Park**. Visitors will be able to drive through the park to view the Christmas light display for free, and campers who decorate their campsites will have their entrance fees waived.

» **Martin Creek Lake State Park**

9515 County Road 2181D • Tatum, TX 75691

Open daily.

*Christmas in the Pineywoods: Dec. 5-6*

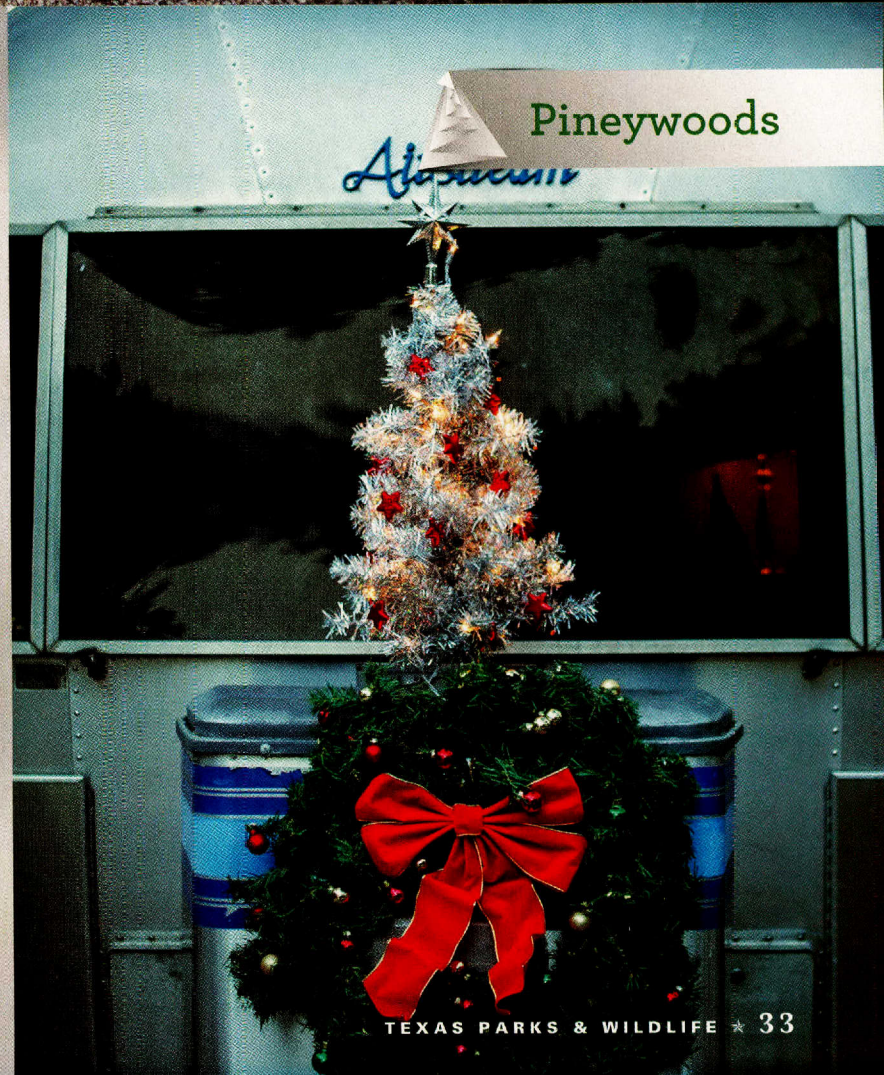
» **Atlanta State Park**

927 Park Road 42 • Atlanta, TX 75551

Open daily.

*Christmas in the Park: Dec. 12-13*

**Pineywoods**



### » Goliad State Park

108 Park Road 6 • Goliad, TX 77963  
Open daily from 8 a.m. - 5 p.m. except  
Christmas Day. Due to site improvements,  
the mission compound will have limited  
access through December.

**Christmas Concert: Dec. 6**

### » Estero Llano Grande State Park

3301 S. International Blvd. (FM 1015)  
Weslaco, TX 78596  
Open daily from 8 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
from November through June.

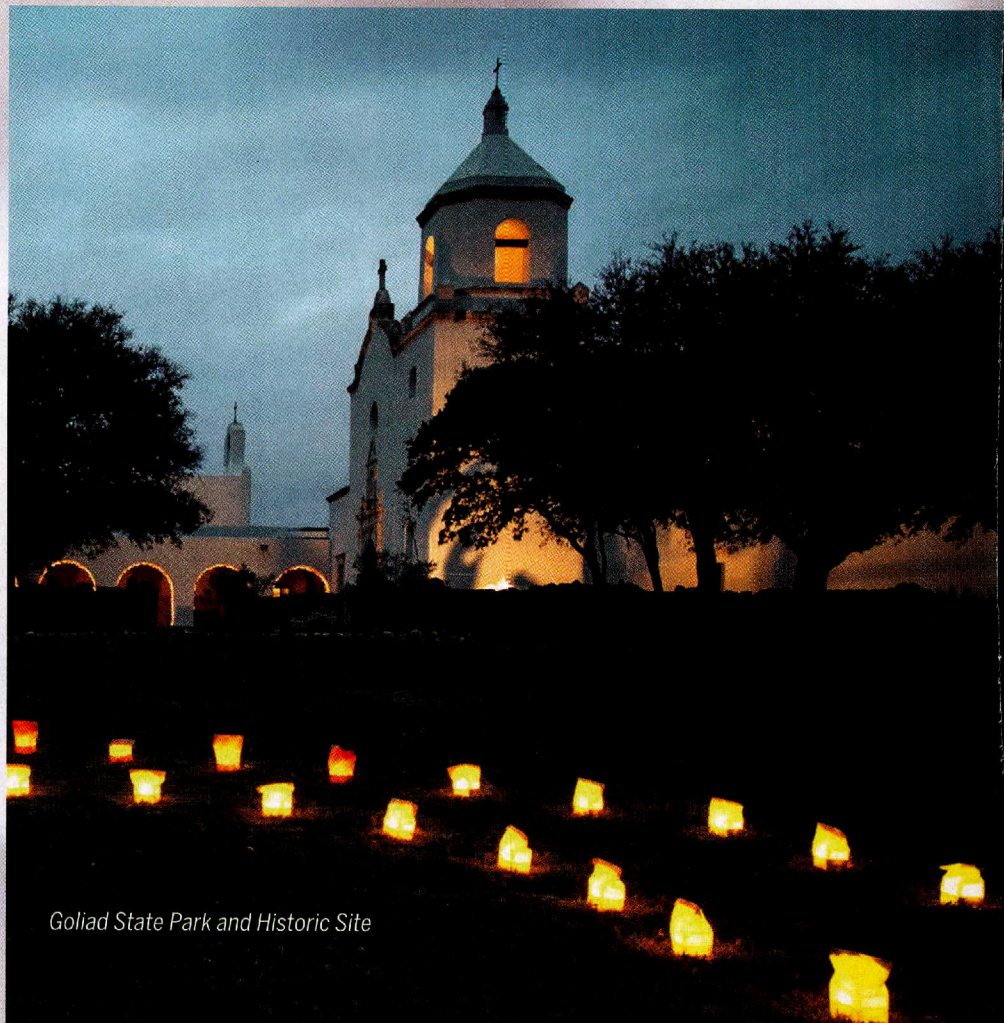
**Night Hike with Santa: Dec. 22**



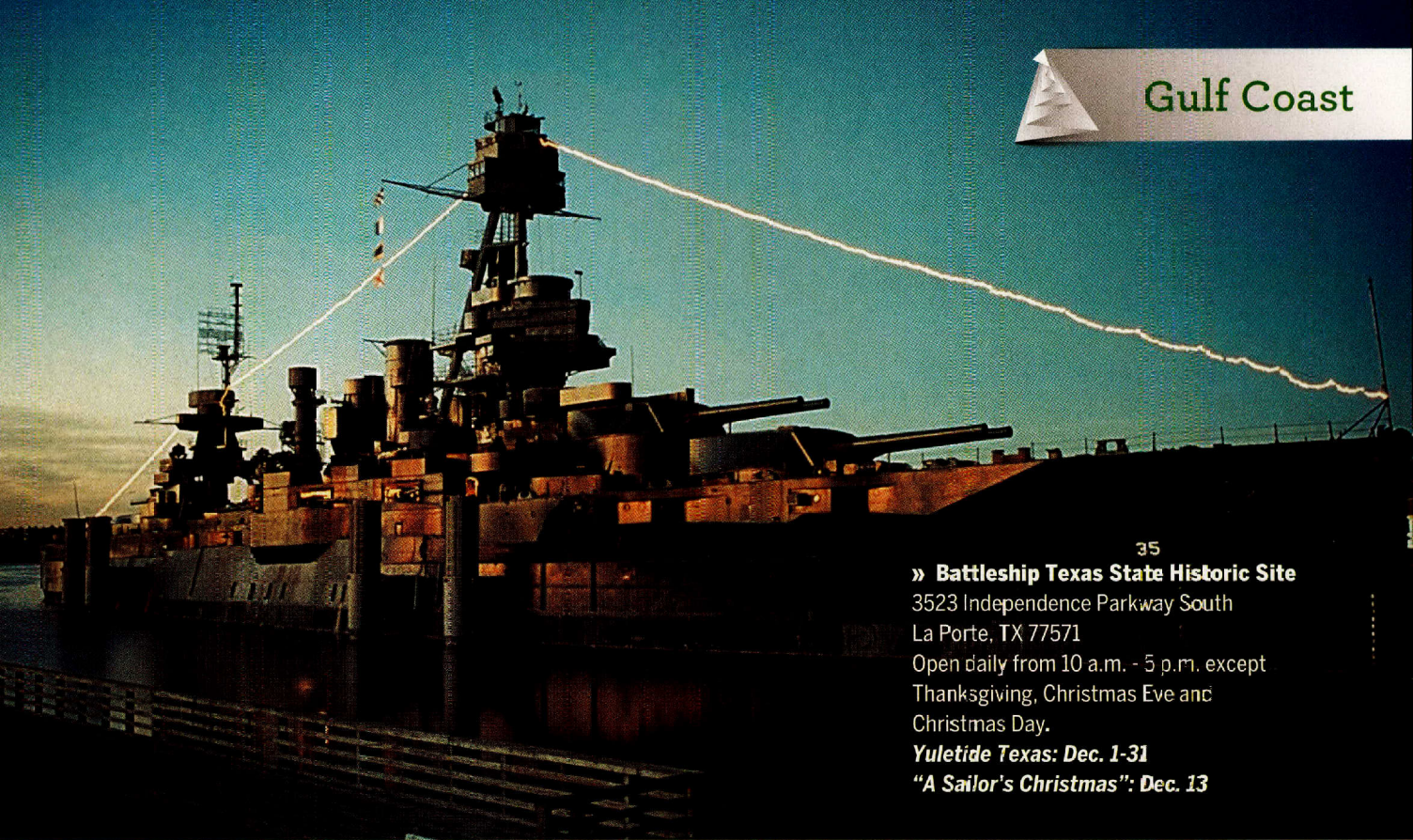
*Goliad State Park and Historic Site*

The voices of the Beeville Community Chorus resonate through Mission Espíritu Santo during **Goliad State Park and Historic Site's** annual Christmas at the Mission celebration. A trail of luminarias greets you at the park's visitors center and leads you to the doors of the old mission chapel. The choir sings a selection of sacred and secular Christmas music to create a visual and auditory Christmas experience like no other.

At **Estero Llano Grande State Park** you can take a holiday version of the park's guided nighttime hike through the park with Santa. The walk follows the boardwalks and trails of the park under the nighttime sky of the Rio Grande Valley.



*Goliad State Park and Historic Site*



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» **Battleship Texas State Historic Site**

3523 Independence Parkway South  
La Porte, TX 77571

Open daily from 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. except  
Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and  
Christmas Day.

*Yuletide Texas: Dec. 1-31*

*"A Sailor's Christmas": Dec. 13*



While away from their family and friends during the holidays, crew members on the Battleship Texas tried their best to make the ship feel like home. Now during the month of December, anyone can visit the **Battleship Texas State Historic Site** and see the ship draped in traditional lights, ornaments and decorations similar to the ones used by the sailors.

On a special night, you can visit the battleship and experience some holiday moments re-created by the crew. Visitors will be able to send a secret message to the North Pole through Morse code, make some Battleship ornaments and listen to live performances by local bands and choirs.

## Prairies and Lakes

### » **Cooper Lake State Park**

1664 FR 1529 South • Cooper, TX 75432

Open daily.

**8th Annual Christmas in the Park: Dec. 12–13**

### » **Fairfield Lake State Park**

123 State Park Road 64 • Fairfield, TX 75840

Open daily.

**4th Annual Christmas in the Park: Dec. 13**

### » **Fanthorp Inn State Historic Site**

579 S. Main St. • Anderson, TX 77830

Open Saturday - Sunday from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

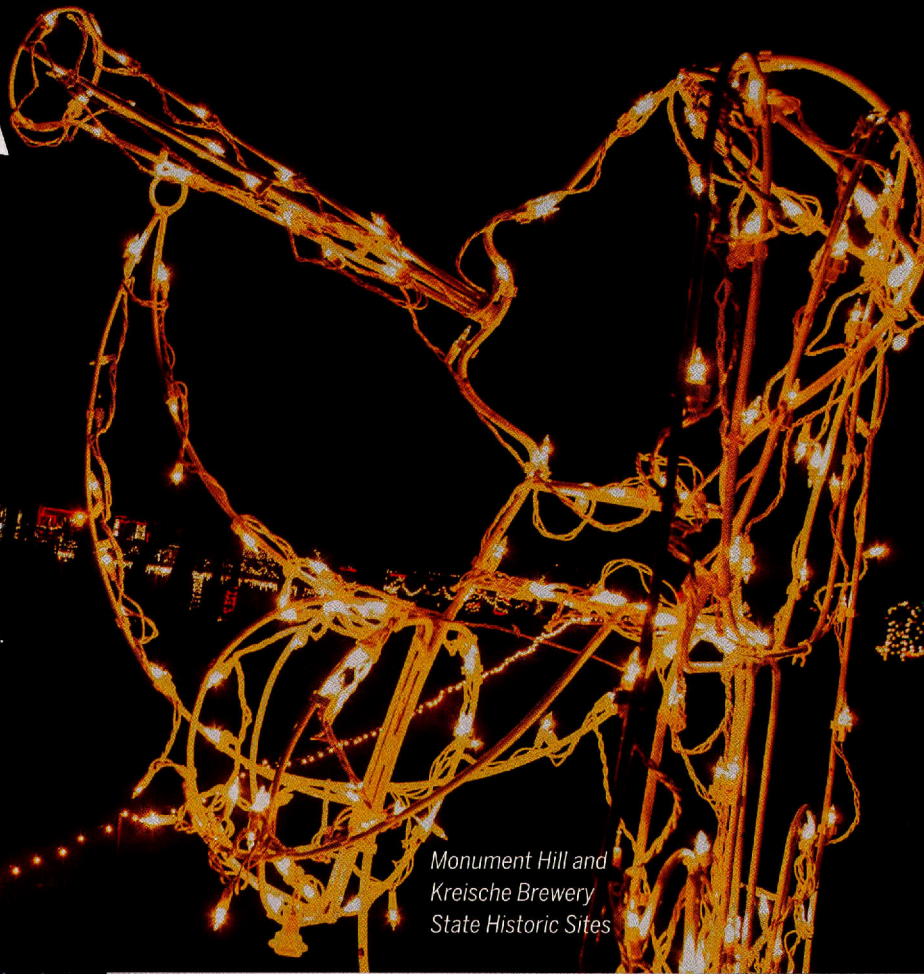
**Twilight Firelight: Nov. 29**

### » **Monument Hill and Kreisiche Brewery State Historic Sites**

414 State Loop 92 • La Grange, TX 78945

Open daily 8 a.m. - 5 p.m. except Christmas.

**Trail of Lights: Dec. 6, 12, 13, 19 and 20**



*Monument Hill and  
Kreisiche Brewery  
State Historic Sites*



*Monument Hill and  
Kreisiche Brewery  
State Historic Sites*

Every year, the Doctors Creek Unit at **Cooper Lake State Park** welcomes visitors to a park that's decorated with Christmas lights. Families can drive through the grounds and enjoy the sights.

The fourth annual Christmas in the Park at **Fairfield Lake State Park** offers a variety of activities for the whole family to enjoy. A trail of lights and hayride will run through the camping area, where visitors can view the campsites covered in Christmas decorations. Classic holiday movies are shown in the dining hall with hot cocoa, wassail and cookies. Santa will also stop by to visit and have pictures taken.

**Fanthorp Inn State Historic Site** takes visitors on a journey back to the 1850s, when the inn was illuminated only with lanterns and candles. The candlelit inn will host period music, poetry readings, stagecoach rides, chuckwagon cooking, carol singing and employees dressed in period clothing.

In La Grange, the **Monument Hill and Kreisiche Brewery State Historic Sites** dedicate weekends in December to celebrating Christmas in early Texas-German fashion. Thousands of lights will lead visitors through an illuminated quarter-mile trail to the glowing Monument Hill and Kreisiche house. While on the trail's hillside overlook, you can see the lights of La Grange sparkle in the distance. The house, originally the home of German immigrant H.L. Kreisiche, is decorated in traditional Texas-German 1850s-era Christmas decorations. Mr. and Mrs. Claus will be there, too.



*Barrington Living History Farm  
at Washington-on-the-Brazos  
State Historic Site*

» **Washington-on-the-Brazos  
State Historic Site**

23400 Park Road 12  
Washington, TX 77880

Open daily from 8 a.m. - sunset

**Christmas on the Brazos featuring  
Barrington's Candlelight Christmas:  
Dec. 13**

» **Barrington Living History Farm**  
Open daily from 10 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

» **Purtis Creek State Park**

14225 FM 316 • Eustace, TX 75124

Open daily from 7 a.m. - 10 p.m.

**Christmas in Goshen: Dec. 5-6**

**Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site**

combines both historic and modern activities to create a unique holiday experience. In Independence Hall, there will be readings of 19th century Christmas literature, and visitors can create period crafts at the Star of the Republic Museum. There's music in the visitors center, with displays by Texan artisans and samples of local Texas foods. Santa will be available for photos. The **Barrington Living History Farm**, located on the park property, hosts a Candlelight Christmas event offering a glimpse into how the holidays might have been spent in the 1850s. A candlelit tour of the Barrington farm will be offered, as well as a tour of the historic home of the last president of the Republic of Texas, Anson Jones. The farm's quarters will also be open, with volunteers re-enacting how the people enslaved at the

farm would have celebrated the season. After the tours, put on your dancing boots for live 19th century music and dancing. Bonfires, Christmas readings, an 1850s Santa Claus, musket firing, cookies and hot cider will also be included in the celebration.

**Purtis Creek State Park**

dedicates the first weekend of December to a Christmas light display and old-fashioned holiday fun. All campers are encouraged to decorate their campsites with Christmas lights. Smokey Bear and Santa Claus will be at the picnic pavilion for pictures, hot chocolate and a cake walk. A fee of \$5 per car will be charged (instead of entrance fees) for the evening to support the construction of a new playground by the Friends of Purtis Creek group.



Texas state park ornaments are designed with images of the natural, cultural and historical resources of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The images are laser-etched into wood in incredible detail with a short interpretive message burned into the back of each ornament. The 2014 collection includes Big Bend Ranch State Park, the state bison herd at Caprock Canyons State Park and Independence Hall at Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site.

To find out more about ordering ornaments and to see ornaments from past years, visit [www.texasstateparks.org/ornament](http://www.texasstateparks.org/ornament).



PHOTO BY JOSH HAVENS / TPWD



# POWDERHORN

*Partners purchase vast coastal property  
to preserve for public enjoyment.*

BY TOM HARVEY



**“These gravestones have been here as long as I’ve been coming here, and they all appear to be children, based on the size of the headstones and the size of the graves as demarcated by the footstones.”**

Wendel Denman Thuss is standing in a little graveyard near his family’s former ranch house at Powderhorn Ranch on Matagorda Bay. One headstone is dated 1882. The graves are not far from the historic town of Indianola, on the bay just a few miles north. It was here in 1844 that German Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels (for whom New Braunfels is named) landed with 100 German families. Their Indianola community would be ravaged by disease and ultimately destroyed by a hurricane.

“It appears they were the children of immigrants who died in Indianola and were brought over here to be buried in this sort of ad hoc little graveyard,” Wendel says. “The thing that’s always amazed all of us [family members]

is that none of the rock is native to here. Which means that somebody had to haul the rock back to this place to bury their children. I think that shows a certain level of discipline and fortitude that it probably took to be a new immigrant in this part of the world and scratch out a living.”

Indeed, the first settlers paid a dear price to claim their piece of Texas, and it certainly took determination and courage for them to succeed. When they arrived, the Texas coast was an unbroken sweep of native prairie,





**ARANSAS**

National Wildlife Refuge  
(Whitmire Unit)

Powderhorn Lake

Indianola

**POWDERHORN RANCH**

17,351 acres

• Port O'Connor

**MATAGORDA  
ISLAND**

Espiritu Santo Bay

verdant woods and sparkling wetlands, empty and vast. Today, in places like Houston, most of the coastal prairie is gone, covered by buildings and roads.

In a changing world, Wendel's former family ranch is one of the last wild havens on the Texas coast. And now, it will be protected in perpetuity, because a new group of determined

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**Powderhorn Ranch is one of the last wild havens on the Texas coast. The 17,351-acre property was purchased for \$37.7 million, the largest dollar amount ever raised for a conservation land purchase in the state.**

pioneers had the fortitude to work together and pay the price needed to protect it forever.

On Aug. 21, a multipartner coalition announced the purchase of the 17,351-acre Powderhorn Ranch in Calhoun County. At \$37.7 million, it is the largest dollar amount ever raised for a conservation land purchase in the state. In years to come, Powderhorn Ranch is expected to become a state park and wildlife management area.

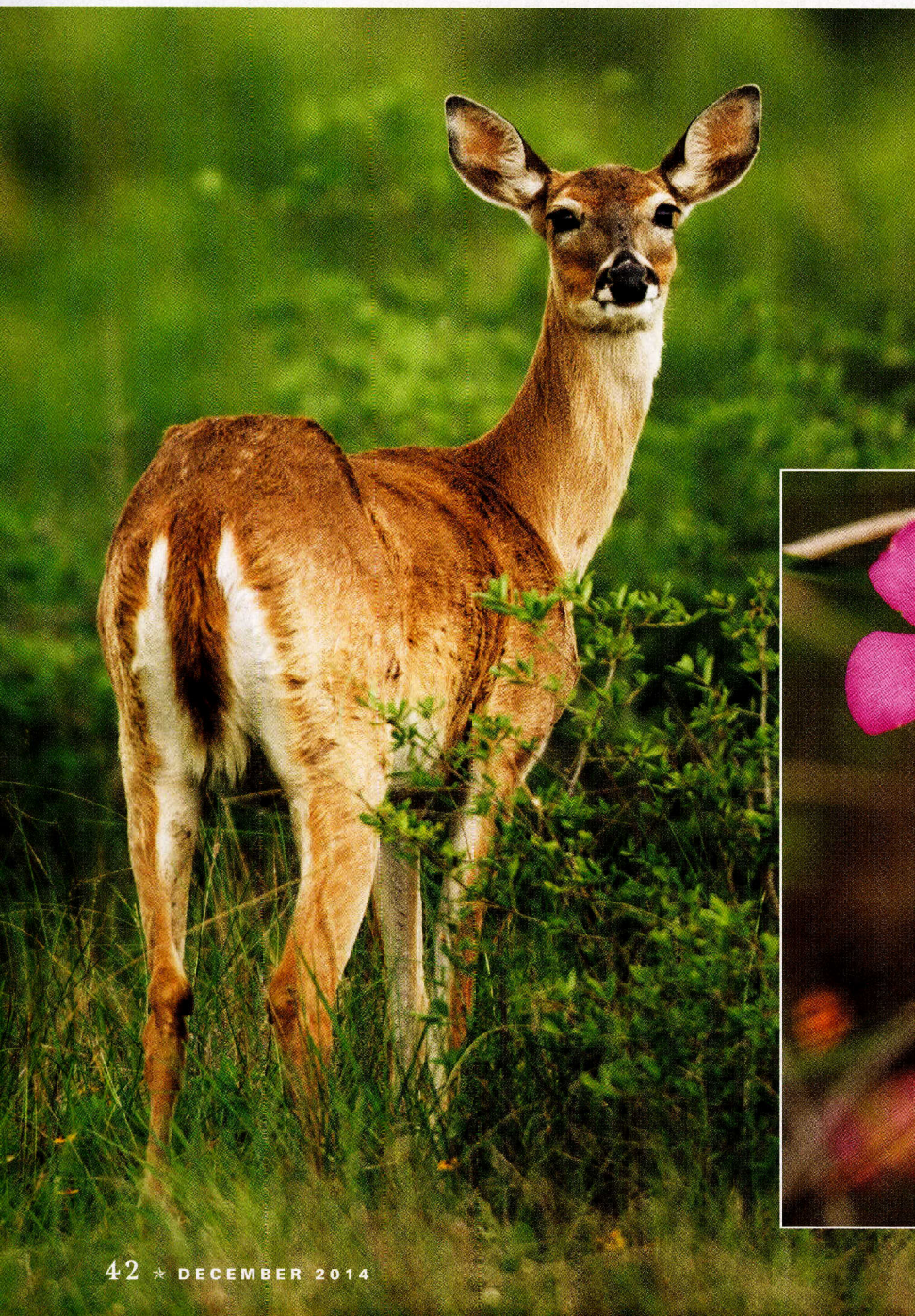
### **SPORTSMAN'S PARADISE**

"If ever there was a sportsman's paradise, it's the Powderhorn Ranch," says Carter Smith, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department executive

director. "The place is literally teeming with fish and wildlife. And if you like to wade-fish, or canoe or kayak to catch a tailing redfish, or catch a trout or flounder, the bays and back bayous and marshes are going to be the place for you. If you like to hunt, the game there is just simply extraordinary — from deer to ducks and doves and bobwhite quail. And if you like to bird-watch, there's no place finer."

The acquisition will protect the sprawling prairie, wind-sculpted coastal live oaks and Powderhorn Lake, a tidally influenced, secondary bay off Matagorda Bay. The range of habitats is perfect for hunting, fishing, hiking, paddling and birding. The property also includes thousands of acres of freshwater wetlands and salt marshes, which provide natural filtering to improve water quality and also shield people and property from storm surges and sea level rise.

From the 1950s to the early 1990s Texas lost more than 200,000 acres of coastal wetlands, but the Powderhorn acquisition helps combat this trend. The ranch includes more than 11 miles of tidal bayfront on Matagorda Bay and provides habitat for hundreds of species of birds and animals, including the endangered whooping crane.



PHOTOS © JEROD FOSTER / NATURE CONSERVANCY



## PARTNERS IN THE PURCHASE

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation is spearheading fundraising for the \$50 million project, which includes purchase of the property and a long-term endowment for habitat restoration and management.

A significant portion of the funding comes from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund, created with dollars paid by British Petroleum and Transocean in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. NFWF has committed \$34.5 million over the next three years, making this the largest land acquisition in the nation to date using BP spill restoration dollars.

To facilitate the purchase, the Conservation Fund and the Nature Conservancy of Texas are each providing \$10 million in interim funding to buy the property in 2014. The two organizations will be reimbursed by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, which will hold title on the property by the end of

2016, and will ultimately turn it over to the department.

## ACHIEVING THE DREAM

Acquiring Powderhorn Ranch has been a dream of the conservation community for close to 30 years, but its history goes back much further.

Wendel's great-great-grandfather, Leroy Gilbert Denman, was a Texas Supreme Court justice who acquired the San Antonio Loan and Trust Company in the 1900s. Shortly after, the bank repossessed the St. Charles Ranch (now the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge), making Denman the ranch's new owner. His son was Leroy G. Denman Sr., known by the family as "Senior," who in turn had a son named Leroy G. Denman Jr., now 91, known as "Junior."

In the 1930s, as part of the New Deal, Senior sold the St. Charles Ranch surface rights to the federal government, which bought the land with funds raised from the sale of migratory bird stamps. The Aransas refuge was established in 1937, with



ABOVE PHOTO BY JOSH HAVENS / TPWD  
INSET PHOTO © JEROD FOSTER / NATURE CONSERVANCY

47,261 acres.

After the St. Charles sale, the Denmans realized that they had 3,000 cows to sell and a very poor cattle market in which to do it. In 1936, the family bought Powderhorn Ranch and moved the cattle down the road. In its heyday, Powderhorn Ranch included some 42,000 acres.

In the 1920s, Senior became general counsel to the King Ranch and Bob Kleberg. Junior later continued his father's legacy, serving as King Ranch attorney from 1939-88 and as the first nonfamily chairman of the board



PHOTO BY JOSH HAVENS / TRPVD

from 1990-95.

Collaborating with Kleberg, Denmans Senior and Junior conducted various ranching and wildlife management experiments. They purchased exotic species, including nilgai antelope, sambar deer, axis deer and Russian boar, and brought them to both the King Ranch and Powderhorn. The idea was to find an animal that would eat and control brush, such as running live oak and mesquite. Both ranches ran all Santa Gertrudis cattle from the King Ranch; all Powderhorn bulls and quarter horses were King Ranch stock.

## OUTDOOR LESSONS

In this ranching and wildlife paradise, Wendel spent formative boyhood years.

“As a child, I spent countless days running around the Powderhorn shooting dove, fishing — lots of fishing — a little bit of sailing, lots of exploring,” Wendel says. “I consider myself incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity here, at this place. And this particular piece of land has tremendous meaning to me. Because it was where I was a kid and it’s where I had the opportunity to learn all the lessons that come outdoors. And what better teacher than this place?”

Someday, new generations of Texas kids will have a chance to learn similar life lessons at Powderhorn, though few may get into the scrapes that Wendel did.

“I’ll never forget my brother and I one time going out to one of the piers on Powderhorn Lake to go fishing,” he recalls. “We got out there and we decided that we were going to turn the car around in the tidepool on sand, so we wouldn’t have to back out all the way down the rock jetty. Sure enough, we got the car about halfway turned around, and it sank. The tide was coming in. I was about 12 and he was about 9 or 10, and we thought, wow, we’re going to have to go explain to Mom and Poppy why there’s a Suburban rotting out in the bay. Lo and behold, we got real creative, real fast. And, through a lot of hard digging and carrying rocks, we managed to pile it under the car and get it back up on the jetty.”

All through those years, Wendel



PHOTO © JEROD FOSTER / NATURE CONSERVANCY

**The ranch is expected to become a state park and wildlife management area, preserving habitat for birds (such as this great egret) and animals and offering recreation for the public.**

says his grandfather always stated his intent to sell Powderhorn Ranch. But whether for love of the land or other reasons, he continued to ranch the place almost his entire life. Finally, in the late 1990s, he sold nearly 15,000 acres on the west side. In 2000, he sold the remaining 27,000 acres.

After the Denmans, Powderhorn Ranch went through a series of quick ownerships. One of the owners had plans to subdivide and develop the entire property. Fortunately, a conservation-minded owner eventually bought the ranch. Having worked hard to keep the property in a more natural state, he was willing to collaborate with the partners to make the current acquisition possible.

## PARK FOR THE FUTURE

It will be years before the property opens to the public as a park, something that will depend on balancing other needs facing the state

park system. But the partners were able to seize a historic opportunity to use BP spill restoration funds and act now to protect a long-sought treasure.

“We have to think of places like the Powderhorn in generational terms,” Smith says. “These are the proverbial trees that we’re planting so that somebody else can enjoy their shade. And if we wouldn’t take ambitious steps, we wouldn’t have any more state parks for our growing public to enjoy.”

The TPWF Foundation is still seeking donations to fund the Powderhorn acquisition, which is part of its statewide fundraising campaign called “Keeping it Wild: The Campaign for Texas.” More information is online at [www.tpwf.org](http://www.tpwf.org).

“Powderhorn is going to be one of those places that we look back on for generations to come,” Smith says. “We’re going to thank goodness that we had the courage and the foresight to acquire this place.” ★

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# STATE PARK AMBASSADORS

BY ALAYNA ALVAREZ



ILLUSTRATION BY CHYNNA CLUGSTON FLORES

**Devonte Hill turns on his camera and takes a deep breath,** getting ready to begin his first mission as a Texas state park ambassador. "I just want to shoot anything that moves," he says.

Unsure of what story he might capture and eventually tell with his camera, Hill decides to keep an open mind and let the story unravel organically. After all, being open to possibilities led him to this moment as the leader of a group camping trip in Tyler State Park.

Hill, a student at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, was interested in producing outdoor films and saw the Texas State Park Ambassador Program as a prime opportunity to get started. He hooked up with Dream Builders, a student organization at the university that partners largely with Habitat for Humanity and plays an active role in serving the local community. The organization was looking to carry out a service project, and Hill, exercising his new role as an ambassador, suggested they take a trip to a Texas state park.

"They were really psyched about it," Hill says.

In a busy world increasingly beeping and buzzing with technology, some people may think that today's youth prefer wiring in to adventuring out. Texas state park ambassadors aim to reverse this trend.

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*Turn to page 48*



into a larger volunteer team.

"The vision of the program is essentially empowering young adults to advocate for outdoor recreation within their communities," Harkey says.

That's where Zimmermann comes in. Now working as coordinator for the program, she says a main component of her job is identifying outreach opportunities for the 16 current ambassadors.

"There aren't really assignments," Zimmermann says. "It's mostly about choosing your own adventure and doing what fulfills you."

The program's emphasis on personalizing the experience allows ambassadors like Hill to embrace individual interests such as video production while carrying out a leadership role.

The group camping trip he coordinated at Tyler State Park unfolded into a nearly hourlong video that told a story about friendship and new explorations complete with one-on-one interviews and custom-made music. He said that despite its limited advertising, the documentary has seen decent success.

"It took months to complete. I had to plan the trip, be the leader of the group, be the cameraman and help organize everything. Then after the shooting was completed, I edited everything myself and composed the music," says Hill, now 22 and working for KHOU-TV in Houston. "It was a true one-man-band show, but it was a great experience."

There are several ways the ambassadors connect to their peers: delivering presentations, promoting state parks at events, organizing activities at state parks and carrying out individual interactions, like introducing peers to camping or hiking at a state park. Ambassadors take on projects based on their own skills and interests.

"Our mission is to get more people out to state parks, talk about why it's important to play outside and talk about why state parks are some of the most fun places to do so," says ambassador coordinator (and former ambassador) Karen Zimmermann. "Our hope is that more people will be interested in the program just by listening to us and eventually say, 'Hey! I want to be a part of that!'"

Zimmermann joined the program when it first began in the fall of 2012, while studying psychology and pre-med as a senior at St. Edward's University in Austin. Perceiving the decline of outdoor recreation as a "public health epidemic" among today's young people, she wanted to apply her medical interests to the ambassador program, hoping to help her peers unplug and unwind in the great outdoors of Texas.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's outdoor education and outreach teams focus on creating the next generation of state park visitors and advocates. While programs like Texas Outdoor Family and the Buffalo Soldiers bring more families and minority visitors to state parks, there was no program to attract teens and young adults. With the average age of park visitors being in the 40s, TPWD outdoor education and outreach coordinator Ky Harkey saw a need and founded the Texas State Park Ambassador Program.

"This demographic is the next generation to get involved in conservation issues and have children who they will introduce to the outdoors," Harkey says.

Initially, he formed the TPWD program within the framework of America's State Park Ambassador Program, but he began to see opportunities to expand beyond its model and get the ambassadors more involved in community outreach, event planning, videos and social media.

One of Harkey's ideas for expansion was a team-building retreat at Colorado Bend State Park to kick off the 2013 program. At the retreat, the newly formed team explored the park, rappelled off cliffs and discussed strategies to connect young people to the outdoors. Attending the inaugural year were seven ambassadors, including Zimmermann, ranging from high school students to graduate students. After the retreat, the team kept in contact through monthly video conference calls and has since evolved



Zimmermann says much of the value of the program lies in the freedom of individuality — it's all about each ambassador's unique, personal touch.

The backgrounds of the current batch of ambassadors vary across the board, ranging from passionate film producers to aspiring park rangers to professional amphibian bloggers. Despite their colorful contrasts, they all share a common love: promoting and supporting Texas state parks and a healthy outdoor lifestyle.

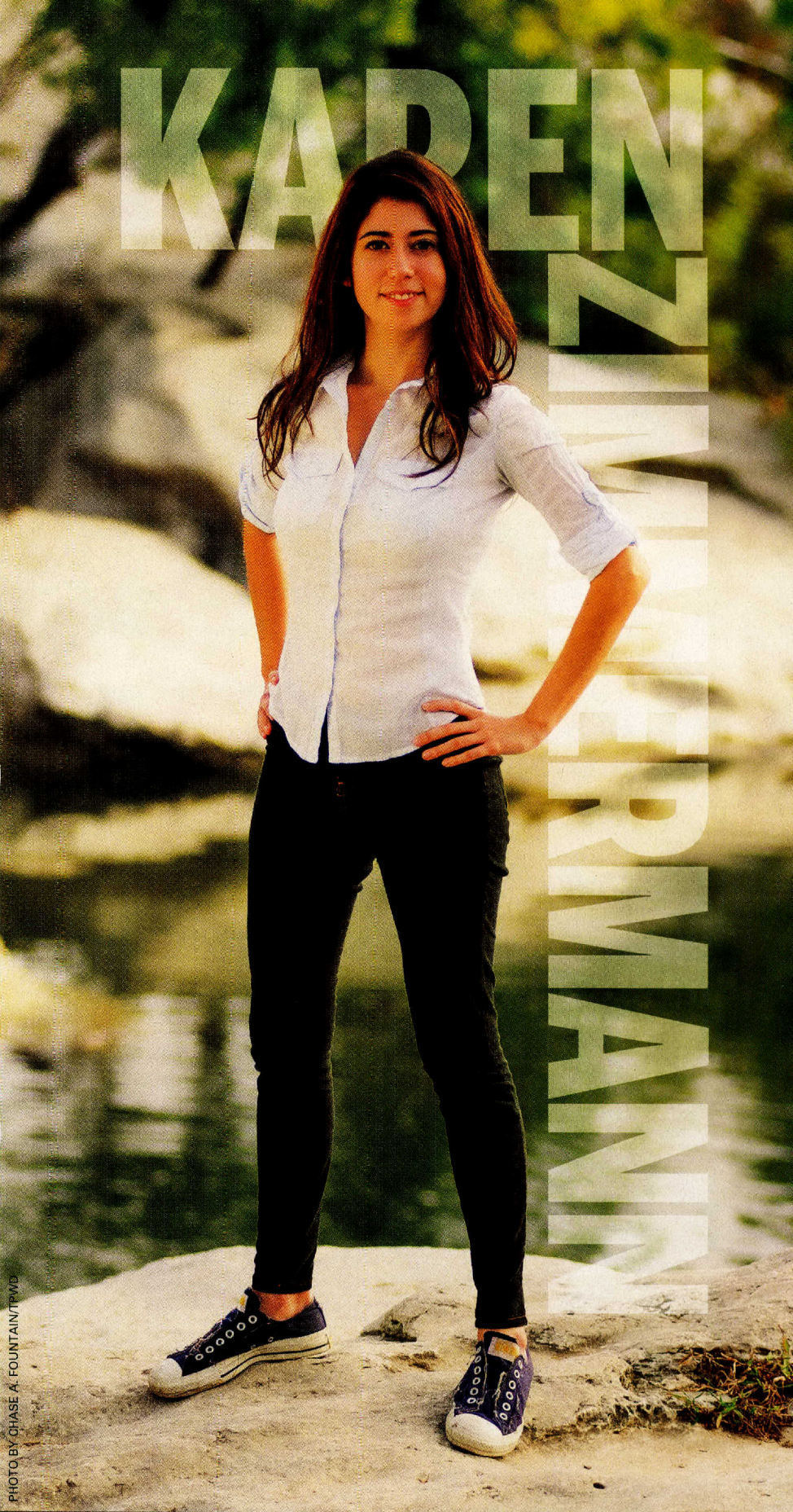
Hannah Halydier, a 25-year-old who majored in natural resource management at Angelo State University, challenged herself when she and another ambassador gave a presentation to a crowd of 150 in Round Rock. She said experiences like these have improved her ability to engage others.

"I just get really excited about what I'm sharing with the people who ask questions, and I've found that if you're passionate about something, people want to see what all the hype is about," Halydier says. "I hope that in the future I can talk to more people, either in large or more personal-sized groups, because so many people don't know what Texas Parks and Wildlife has to offer, and we just need the info to get out there."

Josh Tiller, a 21-year-old who attributes his love of wildlife and nature to long road trips around the country, is a lover of hiking and biking and aspires to become a park ranger one day.

"Personal fitness and public service have been two large driving forces in my life," Tiller says. "This program gives me further motivation to stay fit and healthy while allowing me the opportunity to share my experiences with my peers and show them just how wonderful it is to truly experience life and nature."

PHOTO BY CHASE A. FOUNTAIN/TPWD



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# DEV- ONTE



PHOTO BY EARL NOTTINGHAM/FWD

Tiller has his own YouTube channel, where he's documented visits to Dinosaur Valley State Park and Cleburne State Park. He said the program has improved his marketing and people skills while also allowing him a "foot into the door of this amazing organization" by enabling him to meet a variety of park personnel.

Of course, there are others, like ambassadors Natalie Davis and Marisela Montelongo, who got involved to engage their peers and promote Texas state parks. Montelongo organized a free concert, called Sunrise Music Festival, in El Paso's Franklin Mountains State Park. Davis prefers to connect to people through film, and she runs a vibrant YouTube channel.

In one of Davis' videos, she poses the question "Why?" Why would park ambassadors spend the time and make the effort to try to change something that some people would say isn't their problem?

Her answer?

"We love being outside. And we love helping people experience all there is to offer in the great outdoors," Davis explains.

The ambassadors have kept busy, maintaining a presence at events such as Float Fest in San Marcos and UtopiaFest in the Hill Country, giving presentations at events such as Rockport's HummerBird Celebration and carrying on their own volunteer projects.

"It's becoming increasingly more difficult to get young adults interested in getting outdoors.

I think [this program] is important for the kids that are going to college or are starting to think about what career field they want to go into, because they can learn why it's so

important to conserve Texas lands and wildlife,” Halydier says.

That is why 2015 will be jam-packed for the ambassadors. According to Harkey, next year’s goals are to develop partnerships with universities and young adult community groups, reach 3,000 young adults through ambassador outreach and host two training weekends.

The first training weekend of the new year will be in January at Colorado Bend State Park. There, the ambassador team will develop bonds through team-building exercises such as rappelling and do some brainstorming for the upcoming year.

Zimmermann and Harkey agree that the long-term goal of the program is to create a process for supporting outreach volunteers that can be replicated with other demographics and can be supervised by park friends groups, park staff and even community organizations.

“We would like to grow, to increase our numbers. I think fundamentally that’s what outreach is all about. You know, the parks are there for you. And a lot of people just don’t get that message,” Zimmermann says.

One “like” or hike at a time, the ambassadors aim to reach their plugged-in peers and ultimately rewire their perception of outdoor recreation and Texas state parks.

As for Hill, he says his video shows that “you don’t have to be some kind of crazy Bear Grylls-type person to have fun camping,” referring to the star of TV’s *Man vs. Wild*.

While not everything went as planned on the Tyler outing, the end result was a lot of fun for everyone.

“Me being a participant of the trip allowed people to be really comfortable with me — no moments were ever awkward,” Hill says. “I was a part of the trip, so I was with them on this journey of failing to put tents together.”

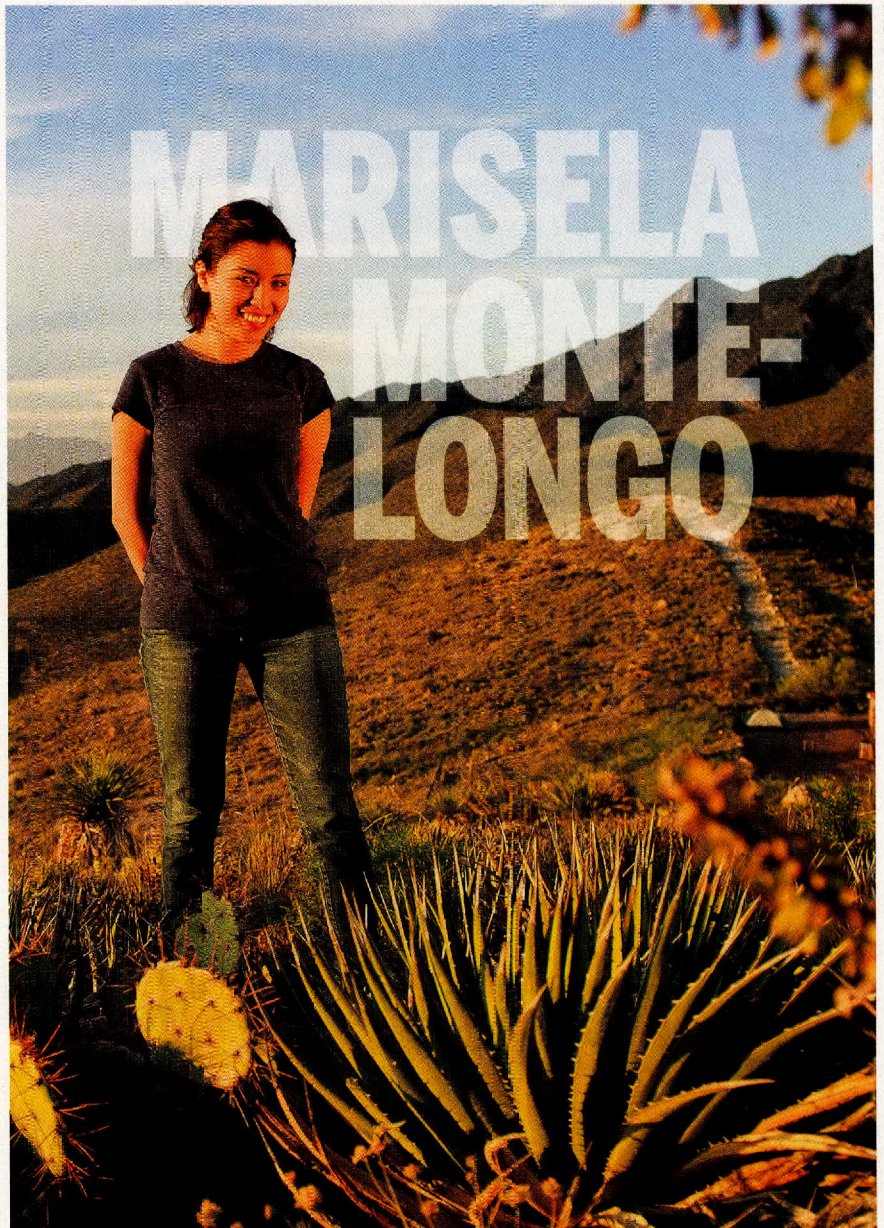


PHOTO BY CHASE A. FOUNTAIN/TPWD

Hill said the Stephen F. Austin group now has plans for more trips to Texas state parks.

“Even if it’s a small impact like that, it’s an impact,” he says with a smile.

No matter the medium our ambassadors choose to reach and positively affect today’s youth, one notion remains constant: “We’re making investments in our future,” Harkey says. ✪

## BECOME AN AMBASSADOR

To find out more about becoming an ambassador and promoting Texas state parks with your community, go to [www.texasstateparks.org/ambassadors](http://www.texasstateparks.org/ambassadors). The first training session of 2015 will be in January.

THE END



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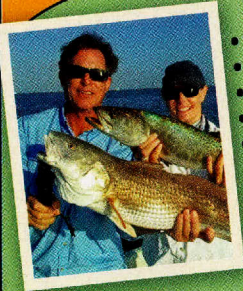
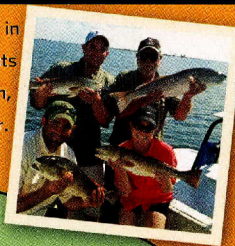
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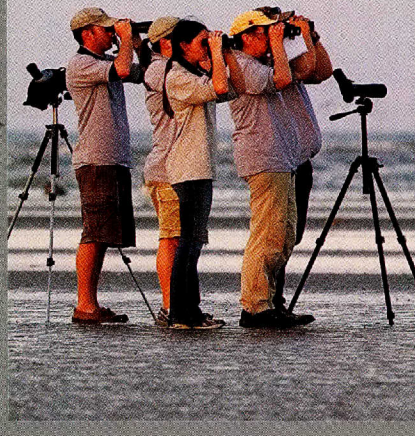
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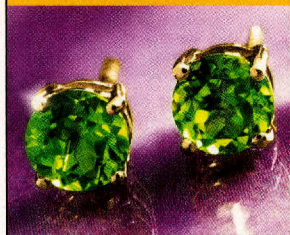
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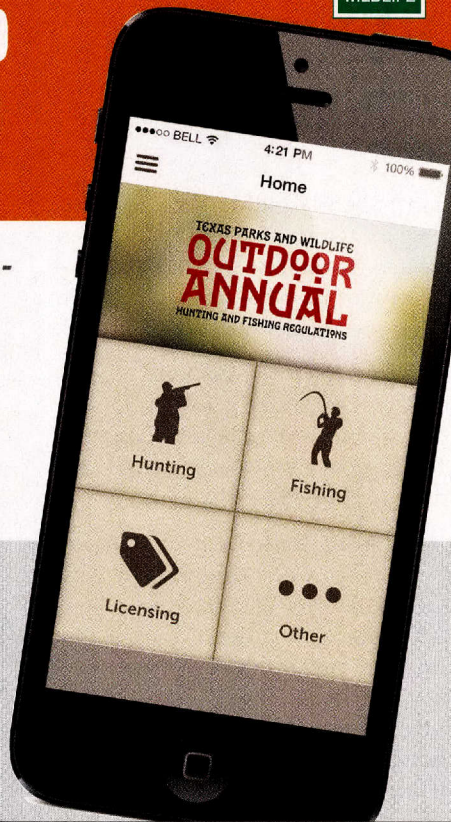
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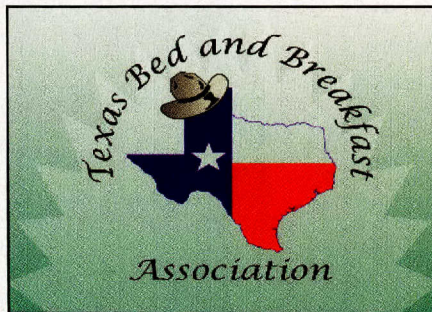
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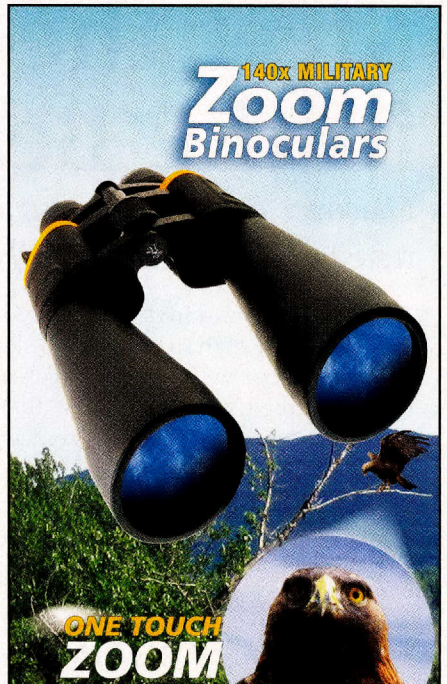
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