

Passport to Texas March 2018

What's for Dinner? Game and Fish!

Thursday, March 1st, 2018

Every other month, Texas Parks and Wildlife teams up with [Central Market Cooking Schools](#) statewide to offer classes on wild game and fish cookery.

The next class is Tuesday, March 13.

Why do we do it? The reason is multi-faceted. We want to introduce folks to the wide variety of healthy, sustainable and delicious native proteins available in Texas.

We also want to let people know that hunting and fishing needn't be scary, difficult or costly. Plus, if you want to know where your food comes from, there's no doubt when you harvest it yourself.

And, of course, we want to let everyone know how Texas Parks and Wildlife works to conserve and manage species and habitat throughout the state for all Texans. That's why in each class we have a Texas Parks and Wildlife representative on hand to talk about the agency and answer your questions.

The March 13th Central Market / Texas Parks and Wildlife fish and game cooking class takes place in Austin, Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, Fort Worth, Plano and Southlake.

This month's menu: Crawfish Etouffee with Bacon; Roasted Prosciutto-wrapped Red Fish with Basil-Parsley Pesto; and Venison & Bacon Sausage with Red Pepper & Rosemary.

Find registration information at passporttotexas.org.

TPW TV — Building Habitat for Fish

Friday, March 2nd, 2018

Most freshwater fishing in Texas happens in reservoirs.

So we want to make sure we conserve the reservoirs and these fishing opportunities by restoring habitat.

Marcos de Jesus is with For Texas Parks and Wildlife Inland Fisheries. On next week's For Texas Parks and Wildlife TV series on PBS, the agency and its partners renew underwater habitat in reservoirs for better angling.

We can always supplement the woody debris, the vegetation, or any type of cover that fish need by cutting something like cedar trees. We can also use artificial habitat that different commercial producers make. These things are put together to mimic trees, that creates cover.

Although TPW has the expertise...

These projects can become expensive and they are labor intensive so we need partnerships to actually get these great projects on the water.

Partnerships with groups like Friends of Reservoirs.

Friends of Reservoirs is a great group. And these groups are usually composed of stakeholders that have the common interest of conservation and fishing. So they team up with Texas Parks and Wildlife; we do some great projects around the state.

See reservoir renovation in action next week on the For Texas Parks and Wildlife TV series on PBS. Check your local listings.

If you want to get involved and help TPWD with conservation initiatives, feel free to call local district biologist. And get involved and help us in conservation. We can't do it alone.

The Sport Fish Restoration program supports our series.

Spring Break Week: Get Outside

Monday, March 5th, 2018

As nature begins to wake from her winter rest, Texans prepare to take time off from school and work to enjoy it. We call this time Spring Break, and for most of us, that's next week.

If your plans involve exploring Texas, but you're not sure where to start, you'll find ideas and resources on the Texas Parks and Wildlife website.

Check out the state park section to discover which parks, historic sites and natural areas are near you. Click on the events tab of any page, and find guided tours, hikes and hands on activities happening while you're there.

For information on the go, download the [**Texas State Park APP**](#) to your smart phone; most of the time, no internet access required to use it.

Using the app, find parks with swimming, fishing, kayaking and other activities; locate cabins, lodges, shelters, RV sites, and tent camping sites; you can view parks with boat ramps, dump stations, showers and more.

The FREE app is available for iPhone and Android devices, and available at the Apple App Store and Google Play.

We have more ideas for enjoying spring break all week long week.

Spring Break: Family Fun at State Parks

Tuesday, March 6th, 2018

Spend time with the family outdoors this spring break.

I believe it's very important for families to spend time outdoors. Especially in the metropolitan areas, (where) people aren't able to fully experience nature in a natural setting.

Doug Huggins works with state parks in the Houston area, but when we spoke, he worked at Bastrop State park. Parks buffer visitors from the hubbub of city life.

It's a good place to see nature; to look at the flora and fauna, and get out of the city and feel like you're away from it all... and you can leave all the hustle, bustle and business behind, and slow down for a little while to think about what's going on right here right now.

Spring break can be sunny and warm or cold and wet; whatever the weather you can enjoy the Texas outdoors. If an overnight stay is in your future, and the weather warrants, consider cabins—like those at Bastrop State Park.

They're nice and cozy. They also have heaters and they have fire rings outside so you can have fires and roast marshmallows and make s'mores. It's a great place to spend time with the family; and in the winter time we still have some people that come out who take advantage of the bluebird days when it's mild and the sun is out, to look at what winter residents we have at the park.

Find a link to state park information and reservations at texasstateparks.org.

Spring Break: Wilderness Near a Big City

Wednesday, March 7th, 2018

For a lot of families, Spring Break means going camping. If you live in or near San Antonio you don't have far to go: [Government Canyon State Natural Area](#) is minutes from the bustling urban center of the Alamo City.

We have about forty miles of hiking and biking trails right on the edge of the Hill Country. So, we have some beautiful area that people just love to come out and visit and hike and bike and do nature watching and it's just kind of an oasis just right on the outskirts of San Antonio.

Chris Holm is site superintendent. Government Canyon is a special place: it is home to threatened and endangered species like the golden-cheeked warbler, and sits above the recharge zone for the Edwards Aquifer. The site offers visitors a wilderness experience close to home.

It's not too, too rustic, though. I mean, you have access to facilities and there is staff around. And that's one of the neat things about state parks and state natural areas. You have staff available to assist if you need something — and you're five or ten minutes from home.

You can reserve one of 23 walk-in tent campsites. Government Canyon also has two group walk-in tent campsites for up to 16 people.

Campgrounds are open Friday and Saturday nights only, but also open for additional nights around holidays; find more information at texasstateparks.org.

Spring Break: Neighborhood Fishin' Fun

Thursday, March 8th, 2018

If the weather's good, and even if it isn't [this spring break](#), gather up the family and take them to Neighborhood Fishin' ponds for a day of fishing fun.

We think it's a valuable thing for people to be connected with fishing and the outdoors, and we'd like to facilitate that connection.

Former Texas Parks and Wildlife aquatic education training specialist, Caleb Harris, says the neighborhood fishin' program is one of many ways the agency facilitates a connection between people and nature.

Every metropolitan center has a neighborhood fishin' pond. And all those locations are on the [Texas Parks and Wildlife] website.

This time of year, the inland fisheries division begins to stock neighborhood fishin' ponds with catfish. Wouldn't your youngsters love to return to school with a fish story to tell? Harris says although spending time with family and friends catching fish is fun, something deeper takes place among those who connect with the outdoors.

When people are connected to the outdoors in a way that they enjoy it — like fishing — they become stewards of it. They want to protect it. Conserve it. Be good users of it.

[Find a neighborhood fishin' pond near you](#), as well as tackle loaner locations, and information on various fish species, when you log onto the Texas Parks and Wildlife website.

This project and our show is funded in part by a grant from the Sport Fish Restoration Program.

Spring Break: Photographing Nature

Friday, March 9th, 2018

[Introduce youngsters to photography this spring break](#) as a fun and affordable way to get them interested in nature and the outdoors.

I believe that all children have a basic connection with the outdoors and I do feel that photography is a good way to develop that bond. It can really enhance that experience altogether.

Texas Parks and Wildlife photographer Chase Fountain says picture taking is a great way for kids to record and enhance their experiences in nature.

Let's say you're out and about and you're on a family vacation... that's a great way for you to be able to record those memories and take them back with you. With today's technology and digital cameras only starting at \$20, it's affordable for almost any family to buy cameras for the kids and let them experience nature.

The key to getting kids outside is to find something that makes going outdoors sound like even more fun.

As far as utilizing photography... you know every kid is different and maybe some kids won't like photography, but for some that might just be the proper tool to get them outdoors.

Visit the Texas Parks and Wildlife website for more ideas on getting your kids engaged in the outdoors.

If You Could Talk to the Animals

Monday, March 12th, 2018

Kissing the palm of your hand sounds like what a kid might do to practice for their first lip lock. But it's also useful for attracting wildlife...the four legged variety.

I can do that to a bobcat that's sitting out there behind a bush at a hundred yards, and it'll start him towards me almost immediately. It just sounds delicious.

Gerald Stewart is a consultant for Johnny Stewart wildlife calls. Gerald's dad, Johnny, created the business, which featured recorded animal sounds.

Dad realized early on in the development of the business, that these sounds could be used by quite a wide variety of people. Photographers, nature lovers, bird watchers, hunters, researchers, or people that just want to simply show their grandkids the eyes of a raccoon coming through the grass at night...just for the joy of being able to see something wild, literally a few feet away from them.

Screech owls are common in residential neighborhoods, and are a good animal to call when you're with children.

It's easier to call screech owls with children around. Screech owls are a gregarious little bird, very social. And will put up with human presence. After a minute or two of being there, humans can just start talking and milling around and the little screech owl just sits in the tree.

[Learn about native wildlife](#) by logging onto the Texas Parks and Wildlife web site.

[City Nature Challenge Seeks Experts](#)

Tuesday, March 13th, 2018

In about a month, competitors from around the globe will head outside with their smart phones to photograph the flora and fauna of their regions, and then upload those images to iNaturalist as part of...

The City Nature Challenge.

Marsha May is a biologist and challenge coordinator for the Austin region—one of seven TX regions involved.

And there are over 60 cities worldwide that are involved in this challenge.

April 27th—30th, participants worldwide will try to “out-document” their competitors, for bragging rights.

All that data is collected in iNaturalist, and it will be evaluated a week after the challenge is over.

Regions can win for most observations, verified species or members. May said last year’s event drew nearly more competitors than they had experts to verify the data.

We really needed more people to help with verifying the observations. That’s the call [to action] I would like to make. So, if you’re a herpetologist, a birder, a botanist and such—please, help us verify. Go to iNaturalis[.org] and look for the projects. You can go to any one of the cities and help verify these observations. Because, the more we get verified—that’s research grade observations—so those count more toward this contest.

The Wildlife Restoration program supports our series.

[Evolution of the Great Texas Birding Classic](#)

Wednesday, March 14th, 2018

Twenty eight marks the 22nd anniversary of the [Great Texas Birding Classic](#). Shelly Plante, Nature Tourism Manager for Parks and Wildlife, has been involved for 21 of those years.

In the beginning, Plante says most participants were “hard core” birders. Since becoming a statewide event, she says it’s evolved into a tournament for everyone.

We have a lot of different categories. There are categories for beginners; categories for kids who are just getting started; categories families can take part in—or bird clubs can take part in. And

so, I've seen this really huge growth in the generalist, which I think is fantastic. That's who we would love to connect with nature. They may not have a connection. So, we're hopefully making that connection for them with an event.

The Great Texas Birding Classic is April 15 through May 15; registration deadline is April 1st. Money raised through fees and sponsorships goes toward conservation grants.

The more money we raise through registration fees and sponsorships, the more money we are able to award to conservation grant projects throughout the state. So last year, we gave out 36-thousand dollars' worth of grants. And, some of the winning teams got to pick which projects received that funding. So, it's really a fun way to take part in conservation, and maybe even get to choose who gets those conservation dollars.

Put together a team and register before April 1, at birdingclassic.org.

That's our show... Funding provided in part by Ram Trucks. Guts. Glory. Ram

[Sitting in Circles for the Birds](#)

Thursday, March 15th, 2018

[The Great Texas Birding Classic](#) continues to attract seasoned and beginning birders to its flock.

It's really crazy. We keep seeing amazing growth. I keep wondering when we might plateau, and it hasn't happened yet.

Shelly Plante is Nature Tourism Manager for Texas Parks and Wildlife. The tournament had a growth spurt beginning in 2013 after it became statewide.

We had the largest participation in over ten years in that first year that we were statewide. And that was 58 teams. Since then, we've grown every single year; last year in 2016, for our 20th anniversary, we had 113 teams.

The money raised funds conservation grants. Birders have fun doing it, when they participate in various tournaments. One of the most popular is the Big Sit.

And it is what it sounds like. You are sitting in a 17-foot diameter circle for 24 hours (or parts of 24-hours), to see how many birds come through that area. In 2016 of the 113 teams that were registered for the Birding Classic, 40 of those teams were Big Sit teams. And they took place in every region of the state.

[Register a team before April 1, at](#) birdingclassic.org.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation supports our series and helps keep Texas wild with support of proud members across the state. Find out more at tpwf.org

[Join in the Great Texas Birding Classic](#)

Friday, March 16th, 2018

During [The Great Texas Birding Classic](#), birding teams raise money for conservation while they compete for bragging rights against other teams...if there are other teams.

If you wanted to know where I really feel like people need a challenge, I think the Panhandle. They want some competition up there.

Shelly Plante is Nature Tourism Manager for Texas Parks and Wildlife. While the coast hosts a multitude of birding teams during the classic, regions like the Panhandle barely have any, and they aren't alone.

Far west Texas—they want some competition. The DFW area only has a couple of teams participating. They could use some great competition. It would be wonderful to see those areas grow by leaps and bounds this year, and to see a real shift in people seeing birdwatching as an activity that they can do with their friends and family in spring as the Birding Classic.

There are tournaments suitable for nearly every experience level. So, c'mon Panhandle, Far West Texas and DFW Metroplex, step up to the challenge and put together a team. You other regions, too. I'm not trying to bird-shame anyone, but you can all do so much better.

When you register, the fee you pay supports conservation, and you'll have fun outdoors with friends and family. Doesn't that sound better than watching The Real Housewives of wherever?

The Birding Classic is April 15 through May 15, and the registration deadline is April 1. Do it for the birds.

[So Much Sargassum](#)

Monday, March 19th, 2018

Every spring and summer, visitors to the coast encounter piles of brown, wet, slimy vegetation on Texas beaches.

It's a brown algae called sargassum.

Paul Hammerschmidt, formerly with Coastal Fisheries, says sargassum may accumulate on tide lines for miles.

It belongs to a whole group of plants that belong to the sargassum group. Most of those plants are attached to hard substrate – rocks, shells – that kind of thing. These particular species don't attach to anything; they're floating. They have little tiny gas bladders that help the plant float. So, periodically that breaks away and ends up on the Texas beach.

Sargassum originates in the Sargasso Sea, in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean.

...in a big floating gyre; a gyre is a big eddy. And this particular sea has no shoreline at all – no land shoreline. It's surrounded by four different ocean currents that keep that seaweed trapped in this one particular area.

Yet, tons of sargassum escape and end up on Texas shores.

Changes in the currents; winds and storms can occur in the area, and sections of it actually break off and get into the main currents. Those main currents will bring them into the gulf and eventually onto the beaches.

Tomorrow: the value of sargassum

Sargassum: Not Pretty, but Useful

Tuesday, March 20th, 2018

The arrival of brown colored algae, called sargassum, to Texas beaches is nearly as predictable as the return of the swallows to Capistrano, but not as welcome.

It shows up on the beach, late spring through early summer, and it can be a nuisance to your average partygoer.

Paul Hammerschmidt, formerly with Coastal Fisheries, says tons of sargassum wash up on the Texas coast from the North Atlantic, hindering beachgoer access to the water. Yet, sargassum is far from being a mere nuisance. It provides habitat for other living things.

There are many animals that only live in the sargassum weed in the Sargasso Sea. It also is a nursery area for a whole lot of game fish like Mahi Mahi, Marlin, Sailfish, that type of thing.

On shore, Hammerschmidt says beachcombers discover shells and sea beans in the slimy tangle, as well as live animals. Cities and counties that obtain permits may move the seaweed to help rebuild sand dunes. If you get a hankering to bring home some Sargassum, it does make a good garden fertilizer – with one caveat.

One thing you really do have to do is rinse the saltwater off of it. You don't want that saltwater in your garden; that's just not healthy for your garden.

The Sport Fish Restoration program supports our series.

Spring White Bass Run

Wednesday, March 21st, 2018

Beginning in late December and early January, white bass begin to congregate where rivers and reservoirs meet.

And those fish are getting ready for those environmental cues to happen so they can actually all start migrating and running up river.

Environmental cues like changes in temperature and water flows. Marcos De Jesus is a fisheries biologist. When conditions are right, [white bass move up river to spawn](#)—something anglers eagerly anticipate each year.

Some of them go up pretty far – as far as they can swim to complete their spawning run. So, they become congregated and create excitement for the anglers, because once they're congregated they're really fun to catch.

East and Central Texas offer many white bass fishing opportunities. De Jesus says while they're active year round, springtime runs, which continue through April, practically set up anglers for success.

As we get into the springtime, they congregate towards the mouth of the river waiting for those cues. Right when they're at the mouth of the river, they're easy to catch. But, the easiest time to catch them is when they're running up river spawning in those shallow waters, because you can actually catch them from the bank. Do these fish give you a good fight? Definitely. They're very great fighters. They become aggressive, and they take on many types of lures and live bait. Once they hook on – they'll fight pretty hard.

The Sport Fish Restoration program supports our series.

[How Drought Conditions Affect White Bass Run](#)

Thursday, March 22nd, 2018

In springtime, the white bass run is among the most anticipated freshwater angling events in the state.

Generations after generations seek these fish during this time, and it's a good way to get kids involved in fishing. So there are a lot of traditional values to this fishery. And, there's also a big economic impact by this fishery. It's very important to our economy.

Marcos De Jesus is a fisheries biologist. When water levels in reservoirs are low, and river flows are down due to severe drought—that can spell trouble for the run.

Because the connectivity between the lakes and the rivers are being lost. So, without the flows that the fish need, they're not running up river [to spawn]. So, our concern is the fishery is not there for our anglers, and number two, these fish are not reproducing properly. And that starts to concern us because these fish are short lived, and we need them to reproduce within the second or third year.

Although the more than 40 percent of Texas is now in a moderate to severe drought, according to the latest data from the U.S. Drought Monitor, white bass are running.

Anglers need to understand that these drought cycles occur, and that the fish still can be caught in the main reservoirs. It's just that they may not be able to catch them in those typical areas upriver where people traditionally catch them [during droughts].

[Find the fishing forecast on the Texas Parks and Wildlife website.](#)

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TPW TV: The Illumination

Friday, March 23rd, 2018

Mission Espiritu Santo de Zuniga, part of **[Goliad State Park & Historic Site](#)**, was established in 1749 by Franciscan priests. Next week the TPW TV Series on PBS takes you there to experience an annual event called “The Illumination”. Assistant Superintendent Jason Ramirez.

In a lot of the Franciscan missions there is a documented event that will usually coincide with a solar event; a lot of the times it's one of the holy days of the Catholics. In our mission we have something that happens every year on April 16th; we don't really have an official explanation for it, but basically what happens is the sun will set in the 'window of the sun' as we call it, and cast a direct beam of light onto the Crucifix here. It happens every year on April 16th at around 7:00pm. One of the things we do know is that April 16th is an important holy day for Franciscans. It's the anniversary of the founding of the Franciscan Order, and so it's a very important day for the Franciscans. It's a day that they renew their vows and rededicate themselves to the faith. And so we think that this may have been something that the missionaries here planned to convert the native people here, also to celebrate their faith.

Witness “The Illumination” next week on the **[Texas Parks and Wildlife TV series](#)** on PBS.

Protectors of Woods, Water and Wildlife

Monday, March 26th, 2018

Texas Parks and Wildlife is accepting nominations for its brand new Prosecutor of the Year Award. The award reflects the critical role legal professionals play in the protection of Texas woods, waters and wildlife.

Texas Game Wardens may spend months investigating and building cases against lawbreakers who kill endangered species, poach wildlife, or dump polluting chemicals in waterways. Partnership with local prosecutors ensures violators are brought to justice.

The Prosecutor of the Year Award aims to formally recognize a courtroom champion each year for exemplary efforts in prosecuting fish, wildlife, water safety, natural and cultural resource or other environmental crimes in Texas.

Nominees may include any prosecutor at the county, district, state or federal level whose action occurred during the previous two calendar years.

Nominations are due May 15 each year, and award recipients will be announced at the August meeting of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission.

[Nomination forms and instructions are on the Texas Parks and Wildlife website.](#) [*Find links to nomination forms and instructions on the homepage.*]

Feral Cats Wreak Havoc on Songbirds

Tuesday, March 27th, 2018

It's estimated there are more than 100-million cats in America—both housecats and feral cats.

A feral cat is not under the direct care of humans...they are the ones out roaming around.

Kelly Simon is an Urban Wildlife Biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife. Feral cats regularly compete with wildlife predators for the same food sources...

They outnumber them and they out-compete them. So they are using the same kinds of prey animals that our native predators, like hawks, are using; and they're exerting pressure on them.

Small mammals, like mice, account for about 70 percent of a feral cats' prey, while birds account for at least 20 percent. A single cat can kill up to 1,000 animals a year.

They can even cause the endangerment of some species, especially those species that are already under pressure from habitat loss or habitat derogation.

Feral cats aren't the only feline predators decimating small wildlife. Even well-fed housecats—whose owners allow them outside—hunt and kill prey with precision and skill.

From a wildlife management standpoint, we really should be keeping our cats indoors.

We'll talk about that tomorrow. Find **[information on cats and wildlife](#)** on the Texas Parks and Wildlife website.

That's our show for today... Funding provided in part by Ram Trucks. Guts. Glory. Ram.

Keep Kitty Indoors to Protect Wildlife

Wednesday, March 28th, 2018

As cute and as cuddly as they are, cats are born killers.

Some people estimate that cats will take a total of 39-million prey animals per year.

Prey animals include invertebrates, small mammals, reptiles and birds. Kelly Simon is an Urban Wildlife Biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife.

From a wildlife management standpoint, we really should be keeping our cats indoors... Indoor cats are safer, healthier and live longer than outdoor cats.

If your cats roam free, place bird feeders and baths in open areas away from places where they can hide and ambush birds.

...and realize that by not spaying or neutering our cats, we are producing an awful lot of predators each and every year.

Finally, do not release your unwanted cats in rural areas. It is NOT more humane than taking them to a shelter where they will be housed, fed and with luck—rehomed.

Released in an unfamiliar setting, former housecats are confused, terrified and vulnerable. If they survive, that's when they become a threat to wildlife...and it's not their fault.

Bird Words with Cliff Shackelford: Cere

Thursday, March 29th, 2018

There's a name for everything—including those things about which we don't give much thought. Like that little waxy lump between the beak and eyes of certain birds.

And it's usually found in raptors and parrots.

Ornithologist, Cliff Shackelford calls this feature a cere (seer).

Cere—c-e-r-e. And for people that like crossword puzzles, this might be a good one you might often see.

If you have a pet parakeet, parrot, or cockatoo, you will see that waxy, hard covering around the nostrils.

And that featherless hard area is the cere. People will see them in caged parrots, but in raptors, too. So, falconers will notice these unique features on these birds. And it's just a waxy, hard covering to expose the nostrils.

So is this structure functional or just decorative?

It's not very decorative, although it can be brightly colored in some raptors. But there's no real understanding why these groups of birds—raptors and parrots—have it and no one else does. There's another similar structure on a dove and a pigeon called an operculum; why don't all birds have that? So, there are certain things that not all birds have.

Such as the cere (seer).

And that's our word of the day here: cere.

The more you know....

Creating Habitat for Freshwater Fish

Friday, March 30th, 2018

As we age, it's natural to experience physical decline. That's what's happening to Texas' reservoirs.

Many Texas reservoirs were formed years ago by constructing dams across rivers. As water filled the low lying areas it submerged trees and shrubs, which became fish habitat.

That organic matter's been breaking down ever since—and has reached a breaking point in some reservoirs.

This past fall, with the help of local volunteers—and financial support from the Brazos River Authority (or BRA)—Inland Fisheries staff from TPWD **completed several projects to improve fish habitat** at Aquilla Lake, Lake Georgetown and Granger Lake.

Each water body received a different treatment, from replanting water willows and establishing new plant colonies, to creating artificial reefs, to sinking brush piles—all of which help to improve fishing.

These projects were completed with funding from the Brazos River Authority as part of a multi-year effort to improve all 11 BRA System reservoirs in the basin through 2020.

Learn about these habitat projects as well as others that have taken place in reservoirs across the state on the TPW website.

The Sport Fish Restoration program supports our series.

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