



200 EPC SSO

rapped in a thick green blanket and the opaqueness of a cool April morning, we wait for the flirtations to begin. Behind us, the sun rises on the Anderson Ranch, while the moon sets over the courtship stage in front of us.

The rare light creates a fitting stage for the occasional predawn jump of a male bird practicing his mating ritual moves.

Beside us sits Dick

Wilberforce, the lesser prairie-chicken guide extraordinaire who's been leading folks to these courtship areas, known as leks, near the Panhandle town of Canadian for 20 years.

"Hear that?" he asks, with a tilt of his head. We nod at the soft, insistent murmur. Even Wilberforce, who brings visitors here every other day during mating season, sits mesmerized.

The hens arrive and the show begins in earnest. The colorful males become fancy dancers, pounding the earth loudly with their feet to get a female's attention (called "drumming"), gular sacs pouched out like red balloons, pinnae standing gloriously tall.

We're enjoying nature at its finest. And this is just one way to engage travelers hungry for these kinds of experiences.

In 1994, Gov. Ann Richards' State Task Force on Texas Nature Tourism produced a report to help individuals and communities wanting to "expand income through nature tourism by utilizing and preserving their natural resources for benefit and enjoyment." Their recommendations became the guidepost for developing what's now a multibillion-dollar-a-year industry in Texas.

In 1996, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department began a project still under way today — the creation of statewide interpretive birding and wildlife trails — and became the first state in the nation to offer visitors official state birding trails. The agency then created a nature tourism manager position in 1998. Today, Shelly Plante, who defines the industry as "conservation that can be accomplished in meaningful ways through tourism," fills those shoes.

Subscribing to Plante's definition, nature tourism includes

birding, hiking, horseback riding, fishing, mountain biking, nature photography, stargazing and much more. Actually, the key to the definition lies in understanding that it conserves the environment while improving the welfare of the locals. It certainly doesn't mean shutting down a ranch or a farm.

Part of what's going on here is also about stewardship. With about 95 percent of Texas' land privately owned, individuals deserve plenty of credit for the positive strides made in habitat restoration and species conservation. But, even with hearts of gold, landowners still must pay yearly tax bills and other expenses. Nature tourism helps do that while also preserving natural resources.

Now, nearly two decades after Richards initiated her task force, the future of nature tourism still holds plenty of Texas-sized possibilities.

The six success stories featured here found positive results during uncertain times through uncharted terrain. They recognized a breed of folks hungry for authentic and nourishing experiences and then found ways to feed them. Sometimes these folks want to learn. Sometimes they want a challenge. Sometimes they just want to enjoy beauty, simply.



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**Above:** The dance of the male lesser prairie-chicken proves alluring to female birds and wildlife watchers in Canadian. **Right:** Water sports are a draw in the Corpus Christi area; birding is one of the natural attractions at X-Bar Ranch; this toad picture was part of the winning portfolio in a 2010 nature photo contest held on private ranches.

## Canadian

"What these birds do during the springtime is so interesting that people come from all over the world to watch them. People come from other countries as well as other states, and that brings a lot of money into the commu-

nity," says rancher Jim Bill Anderson. "We're lucky to have the lesser prairie-chickens."

Since 1997, the concerted efforts of a strong economic development committee aided locals and the birds alike. While lesser prairie-chickens play a leading role here, the threatened species certainly isn't the only star. Prairie dog towns, river kayaking and wintertime viewing of rough-legged hawks attract

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their share of admirers, too. Canadian also boasts the oldest celebration of nature in the state, the two-day Fall Foliage Festival, held for the first time in 1954, which draws a crowd of 10,000 each October.

"We've adopted nature tourism as an industry because it makes sense to add it to our economic development toolkit," says Anderson. And, in the mid-'90s, Canadian needed to throw all it could into that toolkit since it had lost about half its population between 1985 and 1997.

Today, even though Canadian still relies heavily on gas and oil revenue, thanks to nature tourism, the peaks and valleys of its booms and busts now tend to run more in line with the Panhandle geography.

### Corpus Christi/Rockport/Port Aransas Region

Head to Corpus, Rockport or "Port A" nowadays and you'll soon discover just how much the sands have shifted at these Gulf Coast tourist destinations, where the emphasis no longer rests solely on sunny beaches.

To make that point, the Corpus Christi Convention and Visitors Bureau (CCCVB) welcomes travelers with a new tagline: "Waves, wings, wildlife. It's our nature."

The catchy phrase also puts the crowning touch on efforts that began five years ago when CEO Keith Arnold rolled out his nature tourism initiative. His push to make the region a top nature tourism destination seems to be paying off. A 2010 economic impact study shows that 40 percent of leisure travel to the Corpus Christi area is nature-based.

Corpus recently unveiled a "nature portal." Linked to both Rockport and Corpus' visitor bureau websites, the portal not only lists regional outdoor activities, but also in-depth information about the area's flora and fauna. Also listed are the CCCVB's certified wildlife guides, officially accredited through a one-of-a-kind program.

"Creating the portal was important," CCCVB's Michelle Horine says. "People need a place to go and learn about what we have here." It had to include the surrounding areas, she explains, because "nature tourism does not stop at the city limits sign."

### X-Bar Ranch and Nature Retreat

It might be considered a disadvantage to own a destination almost 200 miles from the nearest city, but if your dark skies are the perfect backdrop for stargazing, you're really

blessed with a competitive advantage.

Stan Meador, co-owner of X-Bar Ranch and Nature Retreat in Eldorado, says: "I didn't really know what was needed to be a destination for astronomy, so I reached out to the people involved in the Texas Star Party. They really helped me get things going."

These days, a steady stream of visitors comes regularly to enjoy two designated viewing areas and special treatment of light that make for a unique night-sky experience. Fall 2010 marked the eighth annual Eldorado Star Party.

Long before astronomy drew sightseers, the retreat gained fame when it was added to mountain bike racing circuits. And when Meador hired pros to design 16 miles of mountain bike trails, he asked them to keep horseback riders and hikers in mind, too. Today, about 25 percent of the 7,100 acres of family land, owned by five generations of Meadors, is dedicated to the nature retreat concept.

"In about 1996, we came up with a working-guest ranch product as our initial idea," he says. Recounting those early days, he chuckles. "Selling 'the authentic Texas ranch experience,' well, that was not a real natural fit for my dad or me. We really wanted something where people could embark on their own nature activities."

### Fennessey Ranch

A single paragraph in a 1991 management report spurred Fennessey Ranch owner Brien O'Connor Dunn to turn his 4,000 acres of coastal prairies and river woodlands into a nature tourism destination.

The words "There might be tourism opportunities to go along with the hunting" inspired a life's work, he says. Since then, the passionate land steward nurtured the nature that's been in his family since 1834 into what he calls an "environmental Disneyland." Here, visitors tag butterflies during Monarch Madness, watch for more than

400 species of birds, go on school field trips, partake in nature photography, bump around on hayrides, gaze at stars, hunt hogs or just relax.

Partnerships helped make it all possible, says Sally Crofutt, general manager for two decades. "Resources are scarce: money, equipment, habitat. If you share it, you can all thrive. You need to help each other or no one survives. And, thanks to a partnership with UT's NERR [National Estuarine Research Reserve], we've been able to do a lot more than we could've afforded otherwise."

In 2010, Fennessey Ranch's fastest-growing revenue stream was photography. Crofutt credits more good part-



With the Congress Avenue bats, Austin turned a perceived negative situation into a positive one; Fennessey Ranch has pursued nature tourism with Monarch Madness and other activities.

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nering, this time with photographer Todd Steele, who came up with an idea for photo clubs.

"Our photo club is really unique," he explains. "Nobody else is doing anything like this, giving members the keys to the door like this."

### **Congress Avenue Bats, Austin**

When a 1980 retrofitting transformed the Congress Avenue Bridge from a casual bat hangout into a big-time lair, reactions ranged widely, with some even calling for eradication of the colony.

"We were afraid of bats because we didn't understand them," admits Austin resident Geraldine Baker-Voss. "But then Bat-Con [Bat Conservation International] started educating people about all the good stuff bats do, and now I love them!"

The city decision to nurture the colony proved profitable: More than 100,000 visitors flock to the world's largest urban bat colony annually to watch as up to 1.5 million Mexican free-tailed bats (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) skim nightly across Lady Bird Lake in search of supper, bringing along an estimated \$10 million to \$12 million a year in nature tourism dollars.

### **Private Ranch Nature Photography**

As evening light falls lushly over Tacubaya Ranch, you tuck yourself into the specially designed photo blind and extend your tripod. With snags placed artistically next to the water, the picturesque setting needs only a bobcat or swimming rattler to fill the frame. Wildlife coordinator Jeffrey Chavez also collects you

early in the morning so you won't miss the sweet dawn light.

Tacubaya owner Sylvia Chavez says inspiration to make these 3,200 acres into a nature photographer's paradise struck unexpectedly.

"John Martin was on television talking about preserving family ranchland through nature photography. I thought that sounded perfect!" she says.

Martin founded the Texas-based nonprofit Images for Conservation Fund (ICF) in 2003 with an eye on conserving private lands through the economically sustainable business of nature photography. Its Pro-Tour of Nature Photography attracts world-class wildlife photographers from throughout North America and Europe. In 2010, prize money totaled nearly \$200,000, split equally between landowners and photographers.

Long before ICF, Martin, his wife, Audrey, Steve Bentsen, Carol Rausch, Tom Koeneke and Jack Hart created the Valley Land Fund (VLF) in 1987 based on the concept of generating sustainable income from the land via nature photography. VLF had its first photo contest in 1994. The Coastal Bend Photo Contest was then created in 2000 based on the same principle.

Today, Martin estimates that 15 Texas ranches like Tacubaya cater specifically to nature photographers. But he insists that comes nowhere near meeting demand, nor reaching the income potential available. "When a full marketing program is developed and implemented, an annual income of \$100,000 to \$200,000 is possible from a 500-acre ranch properly developed and marketed for nature photography." ★