



At 25,000 acres, the historic Stasney-Cook Ranch – stop #91 on the Panhandle Plains Great Wildlife Trail – offers plenty of places for buffalo to roam. You'll also find wild turkeys, quail, hawks and migratory song-birds here.



THE GREAT TEXAS WILDLIFE trails

TWA members open ranch gates to nature-tourists

Article by **MARY O. PARKER** Photos by **JEFF PARKER**

In 1996, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) created its first wildlife trail map – *Central Texas Coast: Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail* – for those wanting to know the best places to see many of our 639 documented bird species. That made TPWD the first wildlife agency in the nation to create an official state birding trail.

Less than two decades later, nine maps offer nature-lovers nearly a thousand wildlife-based destinations across hundreds of Lone Star miles – with plenty of Texas-sized hospitality along the way.

Shelly Plante, Manager of Nature Tourism at TPWD, credits private landowners with helping make that happen. “They add a great dimension to the *Great Texas Wildlife Trails*. In a state that’s mostly privately owned, having ranchers and landowners who are willing to open their gates to nature tourists gives the general public a unique opportunity to enjoy the outdoors in a more private setting,” she said.

Wildlife watching now ranks as the number one outdoor activity in the nation. In the Texas Gulf Coast region alone, nature-based tourism generates over 72,000 jobs annually. In Aransas County – which was featured in that very first map – they account for a whopping 28 percent of private-sector employment. That equals more than twice the 12.4 percent national average.

“When we started the coastal birding trails, only a handful of landowners were in the business of nature tourism,” Plante said. “Now, on

the inland trail maps, about one-third of the sites are privately owned. This shows a huge shift in how landowners now use their land, that more and more of them are open for business to nature-tourists and able to earn revenue from this type of business.”

With 123 separate driving loops traversing 11 different eco-regions and making 980 stops along the way, there’s bound to be a TWA member among those landowners, right? Sure enough! Here, we feature five:

Panhandle Plains Wildlife Trail

The *Panhandle Plains Great Wildlife Trail* offers wide open spaces and about 100 places to stop and stretch your curiosity along the way, including Playa Lakes and Rita Blanca Grasslands and starring pronghorns, prairie-chickens and prairie dogs.

Stop #62: Arrington Ranch

Nestled into a slice of Panhandle prairie, the Arrington Ranch – a Texas Commission of Agriculture “Designated Family Land Heritage Property” owned by TWA members Debbie and Mike Arrington – offers up plenty of wildlife-viewing opportunities. Prairie dogs and their “sidekicks” – Burrowing Owls – provide hours of entertainment, while six miles of trails meander along the wetland that serves as headwaters for Washita River. This riparian habitat is rich in mule deer and Rio Grande turkeys. The ranch also provides refuge to two of Texas’ three bluebird species – Eastern and Mountain Bluebirds.

Debbie Arrington said that she appreci-

ates how the map allows her and Mike to “show everyone how ranchers and farmers work together in enhancing and improving the wildlife environment. We all work hard to keep a perfect balance to benefit cattle, crops and wildlife.”

One of the Arringtons’ favorite visitors is Jeff Mundy, a renowned conservationist and Audubon Society activist who has worked hard to preserve key Texas birding sites. “Jeff comes often and brings bird watchers from all over the world who want to see what our area offers,” Debbie said. “That includes the Lesser Prairie-Chicken leks north of us, and our birds here such as the Mountain Bluebird.”

Stop #91: Stasney-Cook Ranch

Lance Thomas, manager of Stasney-Cook Ranch, explained that when the Panhandle Plains map first came out, it attracted nature-tourists to the ranch; however, that doesn’t seem to happen anymore. “But I still think it was worth the energy and effort we spent getting on the map, because it’s better than not having a ticket in the barrel,” he said with a chuckle.

At 25,000 acres, the ranch offers plenty of places for all sorts of Texans to roam. Wild turkeys, quail, hawks and migratory songbirds make their homes here. So, too, do Longhorn and Bison, staples of the ranch’s heritage.

But, many folks just enjoy the experience of hanging out on a traditional Texas ranch. Thomas said: “There’s not another place around here like us. There are ranches where people have leases to go hunting on (which



Stasney-Cook also does), but with us they can come out and stay at a real working ranch and just relax. This is a pretty authentic and historic place, and people think that's a neat thing – a ranch still doing what it's been doing for over 100 years.”

Well, except those wind farms. “We offer tours of those, too. Lots of people are really interested,” Thomas said. “They enjoy learning all about how it works.”

Great Texas Coastal Birding Trails

Three trails comprise the Great Coastal Birding Trail: Upper Texas Coast, Central Texas Coast and Lower Texas Coast. Together their itineraries deliver you to 332 locations at which you'll spot hundreds of migrant and resident avian species. Delight in Roseate Spoonbills, Red-crowned Parrots, colorful Green Jays, quirky Kiskadees and vociferous Chachalacas. But, the trails also include a plethora of other critters including: American alligators, dolphins, butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies, white-tailed deer, javelinas and more.

Stop #46, Central Texas Coast: Rob and Bessie Welder Wildlife Foundation and Refuge

The 7,800-acre Rob and Bessie Welder Wildlife Foundation (WWF) – located on lands deeded along the Aransas River in an original 1834 land grant – provides free tours to the public each Thursday and on selected Saturdays. The refuge welcomes groups and individuals for these tours, which are guided by wildlife experts and include a 10-mile driving excursion. Visitors may borrow guide books and binoculars to bring along at no charge.

“The tour takes visitors through a variety of habitats ranging from upland mesquite-mixed-grass communities to freshwater wetland lakes. Many species of birds and wildlife are generally seen on these tours,” explained WWF's Conservation Education and Volunteer Program Coordinator, Meg Streich.



Black-tailed Prairie Dogs, a keystone species, play a vital role in helping sustain healthy ecosystems at the Arrington Ranch, home to TWA members Debbie and Mike Arrington and stop #62 on TPWD's *Panhandle Plains Great Wildlife Trail*. Debbie appreciates how TPWD's wildlife trail map allows them to show the public how hard ranchers work to enhance the “wildlife environment.”



While Kenedy Ranch wildlife – such as the Bobwhite Quail shown here – offers lots of viewing pleasure, don't overlook its museum, which celebrates 154 years of ranching and regional history. Additionally, because of its location at the northern-most part of the range of many tropical bird species, the Kenedy Ranch—stop #2 on the *Lower Texas Coast: Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail* – is home to many birds seen only in this part of the U.S.

“Native wildlife can be viewed on the refuge year-round. Mammal species include white-tailed deer, bobcats, coyotes, raccoons and javelina. Reptile species include alligators, various turtle species, lizards, and various snake species. Bird species include Green

Jays, Painted Buntings, Crested Caracaras, Barred Owls, Red-shouldered Hawks, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Roadrunners...the list goes on and on!” said Streich.

Stop #2, Lower Texas Coast: Kenedy Ranch

While the Kenedy Ranch, no longer offers the Sanborn birding tours as noted on the trail map, they do still welcome those wanting to learn about the ranch's exciting history. Ranch administrator, Homero Vera, explained that most who come are birders who seem hesitant to step inside the museum. Instead, he said, “They'll either be looking into our yard from the sidewalk or street looking for birds in our oak trees and pond. I tell them they can come in the yard to check out the birds if they want and I also invite them to the museum.”

Those who choose not to venture inside don't know what they're missing! The ranch, founded in 1860, offers up one of the Lone Star's most interesting historical narratives. The museum brings visitors on a journey through over 150 years of Texas ranching traditions. Special displays celebrate *Tejanos*, those Mexican cowboys who played an important role in helping shape the character of our state with their unique contributions to cattle ranching and the great cattle drives of the late 1800s.

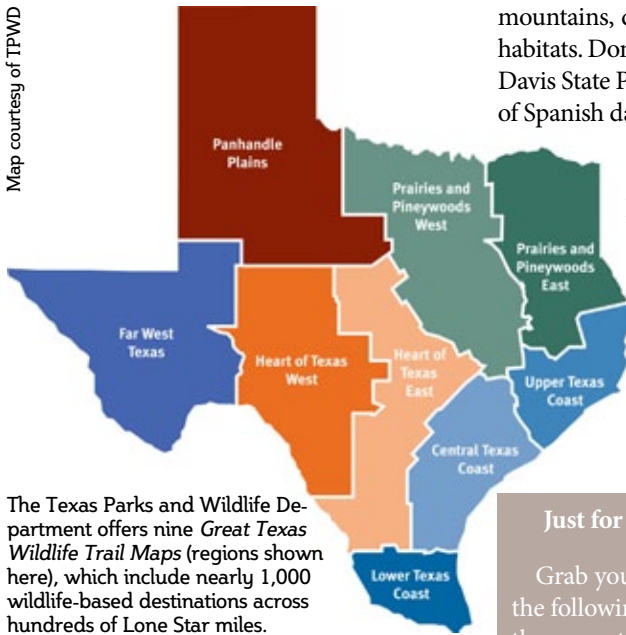
Because it sits at the northern limit of the range of many tropical bird species, those who do step into the yard will be rewarded with some of our South Texas specialties – the very birds that help make this region a premiere birding destination.

Heart of Texas Wildlife Trail

From Central Texas to the South Texas Plains two “Heart of Texas” trails deliver dozens of delights. Mexican free-tailed bats bedazzle as you adventure through the Hill Country, following the *Heart of Texas West* trail map. Follow the *Heart of Texas East* routes, and you'll head as far south as Laredo, where Green Parakeets



Map courtesy of TPWD



The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department offers nine Great Texas Wildlife Trail Maps (regions shown here), which include nearly 1,000 wildlife-based destinations across hundreds of Lone Star miles.

soar in the historic town square.

Stop #65 - West: Stowers Ranch

The Stowers Ranch, founded in 1904 by George Arthur Stowers (pronounce the “ow” like “ou” in “ouch”), is located at the headwaters of the north fork of the Guadalupe River in some of the Texas Hill Country’s most magnificent terrain.

Its mix of grasslands, woods and riparian areas makes Stowers Ranch a wildlife magnet. Since taking sheep and goats off the property in the 1960s, said Stowers’ grandson, Richard Smith, “We’ve remained committed to habitat restoration.” For Smith, being on one of the TPWD maps “lets us show people places like ours where the habitat is in good shape.”

Smith said the maps haven’t brought many visitors, but that those who do come enjoy spotting Bald Eagles, Golden Eagles, endangered Golden-cheeked Warblers, and Black-capped Vireos. “A number of years ago, with the help of the Environmental Defense Fund, we created a Black-capped Vireo sanctuary. We have four to five families of Black-capped Vireos on the sanctuary part, but we’ve also got them and Golden-cheeked Warblers throughout the ranch,” he shared.

Far West Texas Wildlife Trails

Updated maps will soon be released, Plan-te said. That means more stops and likely more stops hosted by TWA members. But for now, the Far West region consists mostly of driving loops that deliver folks to publicly owned destinations.

Go exploring here, and you’ll journey through Texas’ most remote lands, carousing

mountains, deserts and Rio Grande riparian habitats. Don’t miss Montezuma Quail at Fort Davis State Park bird blind or the sweet smell of Spanish dagger in bloom at Big Bend State Park. And, no matter where you head, don’t forget to look *up*; here, the stars certainly shine bright over Texas! In fact, last year the International Dark-Sky Association (<http://www.darksky.org/>) designated Big Bend National Park as one of only 13 International Dark Sky Parks on Earth.

Prairies and Pineywoods Wildlife Trails

Compare and contrast ecosystems such as the Big Thicket and Blackland Prairie when you explore two distinct sets of Prairies and Pineywoods driving loops. The “East” trail map brings you through dense pine forests comprised of loblolly and long-leaf, while routes on the “West” map feature mixed-grass prairies. Spy a myriad of species along the way, from Pileated Woodpeckers to Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, carnivorous plants to cactus, and beavers to bison. 🌿

Just for Fun ~ Map Scavenger Hunt:

Grab your stack of TPWD Great Wildlife Trail maps and enjoy a scavenger hunt! Use the following questions to get you started: (*Don’t own the maps?* View them online, pick them up at any TxDot Welcome Center, or buy them from TPWD at: <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wildlife/wildlife-trails/purchase.>)

- If you visited the trail with a Roadrunner for its sign marker, what trail would that be?
- Find the Red-crowned Parrot. Where was it located?
- Follow the Chisholm Trail. What Great Texas Wildlife Trail map did you use?
- You’ll find a 355-acre lake and bluebirds at which site on one of the Prairies and Pineywoods Wildlife Trails?
- You can view Montezuma Quail at which *Far West Texas Wildlife Trail* site?

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