

COLUMNISTS

Abilene State Park: A place for discovery and wonder

Ian Shelburne Special to the Reporter-News

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“The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away,” said Job in the Biblical account of his one-day reversal of fortune. Sometimes technology is the same: what it gives us in communication, information and immediate access is amazing, but what we sacrifice is just as valuable.

I spent my childhood in Malawi without a TV, but now I can use my phone to access a National Geographic documentary within seconds. I love that my middle-schooler can access stunning Discovery Channel videos on his devices, but I’m disappointed he’d rather view nature on a screen than go outside to experience raw, real nature with more than two of his senses.

Richard Louv’s 2005 book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder," called attention to the cost of our urban and technology-saturated society and its toll on our interaction with the natural world. In both this book and its follow-up, "The Nature Principle: Reconnecting with Life in a Virtual Age," Louv also explores the benefits of reconnecting with nature for both children and adults.

There are several excellent places for all ages to experience nature adventures in and around Abilene. One of the best is the Abilene State Park.

There’s a daily \$5 entrance fee for those 13 or older; children 12 and under are free. A Texas State Parks Pass provides access for you and your guests to more than 90 state parks for \$70 a year.

Explore the state park’s miles of walking, running or biking trails, through wooded and streamside areas, as well as more open areas on the shores of Lake Abilene.

During the summer heat, the park swimming pool is a refreshing option after hitting the trails. Rent a boat or kayak to tour the lake or try your luck fishing.

There are various camping options: bring your own tent, park your RV, stay in a screened shelter or try out a yurt. You can even combine technology and nature exploration on a geocache quest.

Want to get better acquainted with native species of plants and animals, bone up on local geology or boost your knowledge of the night sky? You'll be astounded at the diversity of the park's natural resources and may want to check out some of the interactive learning activities offered by park rangers and local Master Naturalists.

Once or twice a month there are star parties, complete with telescopes and folks to tell you about the West Texas night sky.

Usually on the first Saturday of each month, a group does a morning hike around Lake Abilene for exercising and learning. Another Saturday typically features a daytime bird walk or nocturnal creature hike after sundown, with guides to identify animals and provide commentary.

The easiest way for most people to keep up with these and other upcoming events at the Abilene State Park is on Facebook (facebook.com/BCTXMN) or the park website (tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/abilene).

I cannot remember a time in my life when I did not hear the call of the wild. The woodlands around our home in Malawi beckoned to me as a child. I spent many enchanted hours learning their closely guarded secrets.

Visiting Abilene State Park reminds me of that season of discovery and wonder, and it is a fabulous place for young and old alike to connect with nature while making memories to treasure for a lifetime.

The next scheduled Master Naturalist activity is Saturday, Dec. 21. There will be a Birding Basics program and hike at Abilene State Park from 9-11 a.m. Be sure to check out our local chapter on Facebook for event details and updates. Check it out.

This article is courtesy of the Big Country Master Naturalists, a sister organization of the Master Gardeners. It is also sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife and the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. The Big Country chapter is a group of volunteers interested in all things outdoors in Texas. Their goal is to reach out to other Texans to provide education and service benefiting our natural resources and natural areas.