

COLUMNISTS

Tilting towards spring at Kirby Park

Rick Hammer Special to the Reporter-News

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It is almost sunset on a summer evening and you have been waiting patiently for about 30 minutes, watching the sun slowly set in the west across Lake Kirby Park. You are standing near the fishing dock on the east side of the lake, keeping your eyes focused on three wooden structures mounted on a tower about 15 feet above the ground.

Welcome to one of Kirby's four new bat roosts installed in early February. Each tower has three separate houses mounted in a triangular fashion. As an award for your patience, you are about to be treated to the twilight emergence of Kirby's Mexican-freetail bats from their lakeside roosts. But first, we need the bats to move in.

According to Dr. Tom Lee, an Abilene Christian University mammologist, "due to the destruction of the downtown Abilene bat roosts, the Kirby project and timing is significant. Hopefully, you will be giving the bats a new place to live, and we can maintain our once healthy populations."

Bats provide numerous benefits, including controlling insect pests that damage crops, and I hope that Kirby can contribute in a big way to local conservation efforts of this flying mammal.

I also am hopeful that this future bat-watching experience will become a reality in summer 2021 at Kirby and provide another opportunity for area citizens to experience the natural world, literally in their backyard. As a frequent visitor at Kirby, I will be monitoring the bat houses starting in late spring.

Migration of Mexican freetails back into Texas is now underway. Females prefer the large maternity roosts of caves and under bridges, so Kirby would be more likely to see males moving into the boxes in early summer.

The potential arrival of bats is only one of the many recreational opportunities to look forward to at Kirby as we enter spring.

Fishing has obviously been a popular form of recreation at Kirby for many years, and a number of long-time Kirby fishermen have been active proponents of the ongoing enhancements to Kirby Park. Anglers at Kirby can fish for largemouth bass, crappie and sunfish, but the lake is maybe most famous for its blue and channel catfish.

Michael Homer, Abilene District supervisor for the Inland Fisheries Division of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, is responsible for monitoring and enhancing the fish populations of the lake. He said that TPWD is beginning a statewide study this spring to study catfish age, growth and mortality, and Lake Kirby is one of the study sites.

When asked about the effect of the recent sub-zero cold temperatures on the Kirby fish population, Homer said, “The cold snap is really hard on warm water species, especially in reservoirs with shallow water. Luckily, Kirby did not have substantial losses.”

Birdwatching, by both casual and serious amateurs, has been popular at Kirby for many years. Serious amateurs have documented more than 250 species at the park.

The casual birder can take a stroll along the Kirby boardwalk to easily see and hear American Cardinals sing year-round. Cedar waxwings, a winter resident, have recently been spotted gleaning insects from tree branches. Many spring migratory species will be passing through soon.

While I am a naturalist at heart and love all things nature, my true passion is the plants of Kirby, especially the wildflowers. The below-average rainfall of the last two years has made for below-average wildflower shows here locally and even in the Texas Hill Country.

However, this spring and summer I am looking forward to some wildflower treats. Early March should bring some colorful blooms from several of the drought-tolerant native species. Many can be observed easily while driving along the main dam road since they often tend to grow in large masses.

The March blooms will include crow poison, wild onion, lemon paintbrush, yellow evening primrose and plains yellow daisies. You can follow the weekly progression of Kirby blooms on the Lake Kirby Facebook to see photos and read descriptions.

See you at Kirby Park!

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