

The Steward

Spring/Summer 2026 Highland Lakes Master Naturalists Volume 17 Issue 2



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We want it all—event recaps, stunning photos inspiring articles, juicy updates, heartfelt poems, insightful book reviews, captivating stories, and important announcements!

Send to becky_breazeale@yahoo.com

Message from our President

By Al Lillis

What a wonderful spring & summer season we have enjoyed so far. The much-needed rains, cooler days and evenings, and the abundance of colorful wildflowers and blooming plants have made this a particularly memorable time of year. But, as expected, the heat did turn up in July. What is even more remarkable, however, is the dedication of our Chapter members and the countless hours you have volunteered in support of conservation, education, and community outreach programs throughout the spring and summertime.

As I look back through our Chapter calendar and Roy's published volunteer opportunities, I am continually impressed by the number and variety of activities in which our members participated. In many cases, multiple events occurred on the same day, yet our Chapter consistently rose to the occasion, providing knowledgeable volunteers and outstanding service wherever needed.

Many of our long-standing partner organizations continue to rely on HLMN's support for conservation projects and outdoor educational programs. We are proud to assist organizations such as Bamberger Ranch, the GOP, Balcones Canyonlands, and the National Fish Hatchery, all of which benefit greatly from the commitment and expertise of our volunteers.

At the same time, our volunteer efforts have expanded well beyond these traditional partnerships. This year, we increased our involvement at Blanco State Park through river cleanup initiatives, fishing programs, and the addition of archery activities. We also hosted a highly successful educational program for the local third-grade students, introducing them to the natural world through hands-on learning experiences.

In addition, our growing relationships with Peder-nales Falls State Park, the Science Mill, West-cave, and other community partners continue to broaden our educational outreach and strengthen our impact throughout the region. These partner-

ships allow us to share our knowledge, promote stewardship of natural resources, and inspire future generations to appreciate and protect the environment.

I would also like to recognize the graduates of our 2026 Training Class and acknowledge the dedication of class coordinators David Tulsa and Blinda McClelland, who guided these new members through our Chapter's 12-week training program. It has been exciting to see many of the graduates quickly become involved in our programs and activities, embracing our mission and contributing to both conservation and community service. I look forward to watching them grow and discover their individual passions and "sweet spots" as they continue to share their knowledge and talents with others.

Thank you to every member who has contributed time, talent, and enthusiasm so far this year. Your dedication is what makes our Chapter successful and allows us to continue making a meaningful difference in our communities.

With the end of our June business meeting, congratulations again to all that had completed their certifications for this year, reaching milestones, and to welcome all the new training class members to the Chapter. Each of these accomplishments reflects the dedication, and spirit of service that make HLMN such a remarkable Chapter. There are many new opportunities still ahead for the year, so have fun volunteering.

On behalf of all of our Board members, we hope that you had a safe, enjoyable, and relaxing July, maybe a chance to get to the mountains, beaches, or your favorite state park.

Thank you for all that you do for our Chapter, our partners, and our communities. I will look forward to seeing everyone again at our August business meeting.

Best Regards,

Best Regards, Al Lillis HLMN -President

Update on New World Screwworm

By Kim Jungkind

As of early April 2026, there are no confirmed cases of New World Screwworm (NWS) in the U.S. Active surveillance and U.S. border vigilance with sterile fly releases are helpful to prevent spread.

- **Border Vigilance:** The USDA is actively monitoring cases within 400 miles of the border. The infestation has been confirmed within 200 miles of the Texas border, prompting high surveillance, increased state-level disaster declarations, and intensive efforts to secure federal funding for additional sterile fly production facilities.
- **Sterile Fly Release:** To prevent entry of the NWS, the USDA is intensifying the release of sterile flies in Mexico. By doing this, it hopes to break the breeding cycle of the NWS.
- **Treating/Preventing/Controlling:** The FDA has conditionally approved drugs (ex., Dectomax-CAI, Credelio Quattro- CAI, etc.) to treat, prevent, and control NWS in livestock and pets.
- **Symptoms:** Mammals should be monitored for wounds with bloody discharge, maggots, or a foul smell.
- **Reporting:** Anyone finding suspected larvae, particularly near the U.S. southern border, should immediately report it to a local veterinarian or USDA office.

- For other information: See [screwworm.gov](https://www.screwworm.gov) for detailed information from the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Reference: <https://www.aphis.usda.gov> for more on the government's response to protect the USA, from the NWS at the southern border and other information.

Kim Jungkind attended the TX and Southwest Cattle Raisers Assoc. conference in Ft. Worth, TX and attended two lectures at the conference about NWS.

Publisher's note: At the time Kim wrote this article, there were no confirmed cases in the United States. That changed on June 3, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) confirmed the first U.S. case in more than 60 years in a calf from Zavala County, Texas (USDA APHIS).

Since that first detection, additional cases have been confirmed in Texas and New Mexico. The USDA continues to maintain an online dashboard tracking confirmed detections while working closely with state animal health officials to monitor and contain the outbreak (USDA APHIS).

The encouraging news is that the outbreak has remained relatively limited. According to USDA officials, aggressive surveillance, quarantines, and the release of hundreds of millions of sterile male screwworm flies have significantly slowed the pest's spread. Because female screwworm flies mate only once, breeding with a sterile male prevents future generations, making this one of the most successful insect eradication programs ever developed (USDA APHIS).

The New World screwworm is not dangerous because of the adult fly itself. The threat comes when a female fly lays eggs in an open wound, recent surgical incision, the navel of a newborn animal, or another moist body opening. The larvae hatch within hours and burrow into living tissue, causing wounds to enlarge instead of heal. The parasite can affect livestock, wildlife, pets, and, in rare cases, people (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Livestock owners, hunters, pet owners, and anyone working with animals should inspect them regularly, particularly during the warm summer months. Warning signs include wounds that fail to heal, unusual drainage, a foul odor, animals repeatedly licking or biting at a wound, or signs of discomfort. Anyone who suspects New World screwworm should contact a veterinarian immediately and report suspected cases to the Texas Animal Health Commission. Early detection remains the best defense against further spread (Texas Animal Health Commission).



While the appearance of New World screwworm in Texas is certainly concerning, it is also a reminder of how quickly federal, state, and local agencies can respond when producers, veterinarians, wildlife managers, and the public work together. Continued awareness, routine animal inspections, and prompt reporting will be essential to protecting Texas livestock, pets, wildlife, and our agricultural economy in the months ahead.

Photos courtesy of USDA Aphis.gov)





Prickle pear cactus can grow anywhere and on anything. This was an actual photo taken by my daughter on Texas coast. Gary Hampton

Ghost Trees

By Randy Froberg

For many years I cut every dead tree I came across. It was partly aesthetic, partly a matter of discipline—following a systematic approach to brush management that left little room for exceptions. A dead tree struck me as a bad investment. Then one year, while completing our annual wildlife management report, I noticed the term “snag development” listed under supplemental shelter. I hadn’t given it much thought.

What I had long read as neglect or failure began to resolve into structure. A tree without leaves, bark slipping, limbs gone brittle against the sky—at first glance, it looks like something lost. That’s a snag, a plain word for a complicated thing. It stands there as if it has missed its time. But the longer you leave it alone, the more it reveals that it has simply changed function.

I had always seen dead standing tree as unfinished business—something to be cut, stacked, made useful in a more immediate sense. Firewood, brush lines, a clearer line of sight. There is a kind of satisfaction in tidying land, especially land that resists you. Cedar cut and piled, mesquite pushed back, the horizon opened again. A snag interrupted that order. It felt like a sentence left incomplete.

Over time, mostly by accident, I began leaving a few. Some stood where machinery couldn’t easily reach. Others leaned just enough to make you think twice. A few I left alone. And in time, they began to answer in ways I hadn’t planned.

The first to claim them were the woodpeckers. Not one species but several, each with its own pattern of work. You hear them before you see them, a hollow, deliberate tapping that carries across the canyon. They do not waste time on sound wood. What they read in that trunk is something I can’t see—softened fibers, galleries of insects, the early work of decay. Research has shown that these primary cavity nesters select trees already compromised by fungal infection or internal rot, because the energy cost of excavation is lower and the structure, paradoxically, more workable. What looks like weakness is, to them, opportunity shaped just right.

Once the first cavities are cut, the snag begins to subdivide. Secondary users move in—bluebirds, titmice, wrens, even small owls. None of them can carve their own homes. They depend on the labor of others, and on the standing dead tree that holds those hollows above the reach of many predators. A single snag can house multiple occupants over time, a vertical neighborhood that renews itself without any intention on our part.

Bats will use them too, slipping into cracks beneath lifting bark. In the evenings, you can watch them emerge in ones and twos, taking insects over the pasture. That connection is easy to miss if you aren’t looking for it. The snag feeds the insects, the insects feed the bats, and the bats thin the insects in the same air. It is a quiet form of balance.

Inside the wood, another economy is at work. Beetles lay eggs beneath the bark; larvae tunnel through the softened layers, breaking down cellulose and lignin that the living tree once held together with force. Fungi follow, or arrive first—it is hard to say which comes first; the process is cooperative. Certain wood-decaying fungi are capable of unlocking nutrients bound in the structure of the tree, converting them into forms that can reenter the soil. Studies in forest ecology describe snags as critical reservoirs in nutrient cycling, holding car-

bon and nitrogen in place and releasing them slowly over years or decades. In that sense, a snag is a kind of vertical compost pile—working slowly, but in plain sight. A living tree gathers; a dead one redistributes.

That slow release matters here more than it might in deeper soils. On the thin limestone ground, fertility is never in surplus. When a snag finally gives way and comes down, it does not disappear. It becomes a log, then a low ridge of punky wood, then a darker line in the soil where grasses grow a little thicker. Moisture lingers there a little longer after a rain. Seeds find purchase. The place remembers what stood there, not in form but in function.

There is also the matter of structure above ground. We tend to think in two dimensions when we manage land—acres, cover, percentage of canopy. But a snag adds a third dimension that is otherwise hard to come by. It lifts life into the air. Perches for hawks and flycatchers, lookout points for anything that needs to see before it moves. In open country, a single tall snag can extend the reach of a predator or give advantage to a bird that hunts on the wing. Remove them all, and you flatten the system in ways that are not immediately visible.

It's Baby Season

By Gerrie McCall, Photo by Gerrie McCall



During baby season we experience the usual influx of juvenile great horned owls at Austin Area Wildlife Rehab. They grow so quickly that we have to give each one a red ankle band with an ID number to tell them apart. As they get bigger, they're less cooperative about sitting nicely on the scale for weighing. We place the older juveniles in a bucket to keep them still. Normally they stand upright in the bucket during the weighing, but this one wanted to remind me that his business end is no joke. For more information about Austin Area Wildlife Rehab: <http://www.austinareawildliferehab.org/>

Local Leaders Recognized for Excellence in Supporting Texas State Parks

By Becky Breazeale

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Region 3, recently announced award recipients at the Texans for State Park Conference. Jerry Stacy was nominated for and received the Outstanding Volunteer Award. Karen Stewart, along with the Friends of Inks Lake State Park (FOIL), was nominated and recognized as the Outstanding Friends Group.

Nominations were submitted by state park staff members, members of the public, and park friends groups. A nomination committee then reviewed the submissions and selected the recipients.

For the Outstanding Volunteer Award, nominees were evaluated on several criteria. These included their ability to support the park by fostering positive public involvement and encouraging future stewardship, promoting the Park Friends Program to increase membership and participation, and assisting in the development of events that inspire the public to learn more about the outdoors while enjoying recreational activities.

Similarly, the Outstanding Friends Group Award recognized organizations that demonstrate ongoing commitment to their park. Nominators highlighted groups that work to protect natural and cultural resources for future generations, improve park facilities, trails, and visitor attractions, and actively promote increased membership and participation in the Park Friends Program.

Additional considerations included how well the group supports park needs by developing meaningful programs, increases park usage among diverse audiences, and collaborates effectively with park staff to enhance both the park itself and the overall visitor experience.



Photo by Linda O’Nan



In remembrance....

Alice Faye Spradley Rheaume – Class of 2014

February 27, 1937 – January 31, 2026



Alice Rheaume left this world on January 31, 2026 at the age of 88. Her daughter was at her side when she died. She was always running businesses or volunteering somewhere. She even flew her own plane and piloted her own yacht. Her devoted husband was always at her side until he died in 1999. They worked together and played together. Fifteen years after he died, she became a master naturalist, where she spent a lot of time teaching children to fish.

HLMN Chapter member Krista Paul commented:

I know many of you knew her and volunteered with her. I understand she did a lot of her service at the Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery, where she was there for the initial use of microscopes for education, fishing support, and water testing. She participated in the annual Christmas Bird Count among many other duties. She also took photos of chapter activities.

HLMN Chapter member Becky Breazeale remembers:

” Alice and I were reminiscing and talking about our old stomping grounds in Houston. Alice told me she was a synchronized swimmer for The Shamrock Hilton Hotel.”

Her friend and former HLMN member Lori Greco recalls of her friend:

“Alice and I were DAR sisters from the Llano Uplift Chapter of the National Daughters of the American Revolution and we both enjoyed fishing. I graduated from the 2013 Class of Highland Lakes Texas Master Naturalists and everything I did for many years revolved around that. Alice lived on Lake LBJ in Sunrise Beach and was living as a TMN even though she had not had any training. She entered the 2014 class and was 76 years old when she graduated. She volunteered a lot!

She was very competitive and regaled her friends with so many different life stories that it seemed like she must have been making them up. I am here to tell you that she really was a yacht captain. She flew her husband's company plane, especially to West Texas to his hunting camp and, when she arrived, she would cook a great meal for all the hunters! She and her husband, Hugh, owned one of the first compressed natural gas companies in Houston. Her own small business selling and renting medical equipment in Houston in the 1970s was a landmark woman-owned business.

She was a wonderful and dedicated genealogist for the DAR and a strong supporter of the Shriners Hospital in Houston. She made hundreds of chocolate covered cherries, Christmas candies, and Neiman Marcus cookies for her friends every Christmas. She needed eye injections to keep seeing clearly and I would take her to Houston to get them. If I wasn't able to take her when she wanted to go, she would take off and try to drive herself. She knew no limits.

She finally settled in with the Fish Hatchery and mostly ended her Master Naturalist volunteering when she could not see well enough to drive anymore or take photos. She would just about talk your ear off and when you tried to walk away, she would follow you while still talking! Unfortunately, over the last year and a half, it was me doing all of the talking to her as she lost her words, but she would hold onto my arm and we walked the halls around her memory care facility in Houston with me jabbering away. She is probably telling St. Peter about the eight miles she walked daily inside that same facility, and, who knows, she may have! I miss her as I was probably her best friend but I am happy she is with her husband again, fishing and enjoying being young at heart. Alice was proof that you are never too old to teach an old dog new tricks. “

Alice will be missed by those who knew and worked with her. Her legacy will live on through her work on the trails, fish ponds, educational programs, and habitat restorations.

CONGRATULATIONS GRADUATION CLASS 2014!



Twenty-one classmates of the 2014 Class of Master Naturalists graduated May 26th in a dinner/ceremony at The Trails Clubhouse. They are shown above with the Certified Master Naturalist coordinators of their 12-week course of study, Ralph Herter, Course Coordinator, back left, and Melanie Huff, assistant, standing in front of Herter. Shown are, front row, from left, are Katherine Romans, Linda Brown, Wayne Holly, Marilyn McClain, Lynn Wolheim. Second row: Melanie Huff, assistant Class Coordinator; Judy Haralson, Alice Rheame, Sandra Landis, Beth Mortenson, Lou Ann Holland, Hanna Drago. Back row: Ralph Herter, Class Coordinator; Jan Belz, Anne Holly, Mary Musselman, Suzanne Adkinson, Donald Cruver, Steve Scheffe, Ann Stevenson, Tracy Salmi, Kay Herring. Not shown is John De La Garza. (Courtesy Photo by Jeffie Herter)



Left: At the Hatchery with Lori Greco, Pat Campbell and Paula D'Orsogna



Bird Count with Lori Greco, Kay Zagst, and Jonny Scalise.

Garry Guthrie



Vice President - Carol Guthrie's husband passed away on April 1st. Garry participated in several of our volunteer activities and enjoyed traveling along with Carol on a number of our day and Fall trips. Our condolences to Carol and her family with the passing of her husband Garry.

J. David Bamberger

PROCLAMATION – J. DAVID BAMBERGER DAY IN BLANCO COUNTY, TEXAS



WHEREAS, J. David Bamberger was a visionary Texas entrepreneur, conservationist, and philanthropist whose lifelong commitment to land stewardship, water conservation, and sustainable agriculture positively impacted communities across the Texas Hill Country and beyond; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Bamberger was the founder of the renowned Selah, Bamberger Ranch Preserve in Blanco County, a living laboratory dedicated to restoring degraded land, protecting aquifers, and demonstrating responsible environmental practices for future generations; and

WHEREAS, through innovation, education, and generous public access, the Preserve has served as a model for ecological restoration, agricultural resilience, and conservation leadership throughout Texas; and

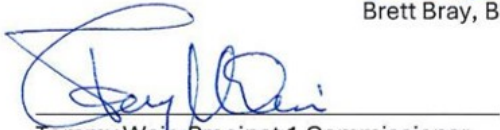
WHEREAS, Mr. Bamberger's dedication to protecting natural resources strengthened the economic vitality, environmental health, and quality of life for the citizens of Blanco County; and

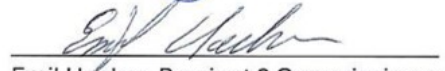
WHEREAS, his enduring legacy continues to inspire landowners, students, scientists, and civic leaders to responsibly steward Texas land and water;

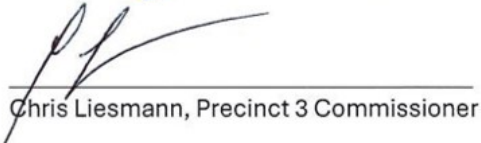
NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT PROCLAIMED that the Commissioners' Court of Blanco County, Texas, does hereby proclaim June 11, 2026 as J. DAVID BAMBERGER DAY in Blanco County, Texas, in honor of his life, service, and lasting legacy.

PASSED AND APPROVED this 27th day of January, 2026.


Brett Bray, Blanco County Judge


Tommy Weir, Precinct 1 Commissioner


Emil Uecker, Precinct 2 Commissioner


Chris Liesmann, Precinct 3 Commissioner


Charles Riley, Precinct 4 Commissioner

ATTEST:


Laura Walla, Blanco County Clerk



Kayak Cleanup at Inks Lake State Park

By Martelle Luedecke, Photo by Cindy Dietz

The Friends of Inks Lake (FOIL) host a popular monthly Kayak Trash Pickup from March through early fall, typically continuing into September or October. The effort is open to FOIL members, Highland Lakes Master Naturalists, and anyone in the community willing to lend a hand. Organizers say participation has steadily grown, reflecting a shared commitment to keeping the lake and its shoreline clean.

Volunteers gather around 8:30 a.m. to organize equipment and prepare for the morning. FOIL provides kayaks, paddles, and life jackets, though participants are welcome to bring their own gear if preferred. Grabbers and trash bags are also supplied. Following a brief safety overview, the group launches by about 9:00 a.m. and spends the next two to two-and-a-half hours collecting debris from the water and shoreline, typically wrapping up between 11:00 and 11:30 a.m.

Participants are encouraged to come prepared for time on the water. Sunscreen, hats, sunglasses, drinking water, and a light snack are recommended, along with gloves and quick-dry clothing. Organizers note that volunteers should expect to get at least ankle-deep in the water when launching kayaks. Anyone bringing a cell phone is advised to use a waterproof case.

"No certification is required to participate. It is helpful if they know how to kayak," said organizer Steph Beardsley.

Volunteer Matt Jary said the group's efforts often turn up more than expected. "We had a great couple of hours...and we did indeed find some treasures. The most common item I believe were the bobbers! But we also found items like clothing, boards, plastic bottles, plastic bags and even a propane tank (and not the Coleman Stove size)!"

Those interested in participating or learning more can contact Beardsley at slbeardsley@prodigy.net. Organizers emphasize that all help is appreciated, whether from seasoned paddlers or first-time volunteers looking to make a difference.



Train the Trainers Hosted by Friends of Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery

By Becky Breazeale, Photos by Cris Northup

Participants from the Friends of Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery and the Texas Master Naturalist Program, Highland Lakes Chapter, gathered for a "Train the Trainer" session at Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery. The workshop brought together dedicated volunteers and educators committed to sharing knowledge about conservation and natural resources with the public.

Attendees received both initial instruction and refresher training in several key areas essential to hatchery outreach programs. Topics included fish production, freshwater mussels, birding with binoculars, pollinator gardens, and master casting techniques. Each session was designed to equip participants with the skills and confidence to effectively engage and educate visitors of all ages.

The hands-on format allowed trainees to deepen their understanding while practicing how to present complex information in an accessible and engaging way. By strengthening these teaching skills, participants are better prepared to support the hatchery's mission of conservation, education, and community involvement.

The “Train the Trainer” session not only enhanced the knowledge and presentation abilities of its participants but also reinforced the vital role volunteers play in environmental education. Through their efforts, the Friends group and Master Naturalists continue to inspire stewardship and appreciation for Texas’s natural resources, ensuring that future visitors leave the hatchery informed, engaged, and connected to the world around them.



Left: Binoculars and birding with Sherry Bixler



Right: Fish Production with Dannialle Clayton



Left: Learning about Mus-
sels with Jacquelyn
Halmbacher



Left: Master Casting with Mary Ann Holt and Kaye Barr

Right: Pollinator Garden with Mary Lynne Norman



Left: Train the Trainer Fish Harvesting



Birding the Texas State Parks: Balmorhea and Davis Mountains

By Julie Jary, photos by Julie Jary

Texas State Parks have so much to offer: camping, fishing, hiking, boating, wilderness exploring, quiet self-reflection, and, my favorite: birding (a.k.a. wildlife viewing). Last year, Matt and I set a goal to visit every Texas state park - even going so far as to purchase the Texas State Parks Official Passport book, which we ritualistically stamp at each park. Some parks we had to revisit just to receive the coveted stamp, but we always love an excuse to return to our favorite parks for more hiking and birding. In our younger days, hiking was the primary focus of our state-park visits. Now that we are in our 50s and adolescent birders, hiking is more of a means to an end: to find the birds. To date we have explored nearly half of the Texas State Parks and Natural Areas. Most of our “vacations” are planned strategically to fill in the blank pages of our “passport.” A great deal of planning is required for these expeditions, and Matt does virtually all of it. This is mostly because I am a chronic over-thinker and my frugality results in sub-standard accommodations, according to Matt. We don’t camp anymore because we no longer own an RV, and Matt had “all the ground-sleeping he cares to endure” in the Army. Scouring maps and pouring over vacation rental reviews for hours on end, he plots the most efficient routes to optimize our parks-visited per miles-travelled ratio and books rentals that maximize our birding opportunities. Once we are in the park, however, the birding part is up to me. As Matt likes to say (ever since Kay and Fred Zagst introduced him to the term), “I am quite the S.O.B.” (Spouse of a Birder).

Our latest Texas State Parks tour took us over rolling plains and prairies to the majestic mountains of West Texas. Over a period of one week, we would visit four State Parks and cover a total distance of 1,250 miles. The four new park-stamps we would acquire would be Balmorhea, Davis Mountains, Fort Leaton, and Big Bend Ranch State Parks. Our first stop was Balmorhea, and we decided to check out Balmorhea Lake on the way as it was listed as a birding “hotspot” on *eBird*. Upon arrival, we battled 50 mph wind gusts and lake-spray while scanning for birds along the shore. Our *eBird* checklist was rather limited due to the high winds, but we did spot a Greater Roadrunner, American Pipit (who fought the wind in an unsuccessful attempt to escape the paparazzi), one Killdeer, and a few gulls and cormorants.



Greater Roadrunner



American Pipit



Killdeer



Cormorant

Balmorhea State Park was our next stop, and it did not disappoint. Despite the fact that it was mid-February, it was a balmy 90 degrees outside, and the San Solomon Springs swimming pool was a welcome relief for numerous visitors - human, avian and reptilian. I found myself wishing I had brought a suit to swim with the Lesser Scaups and turtles. The pool actually stays between 72 and 76 degrees year-round due to the underground springs that feed it. While walking around the pool, the presence of a well-camouflaged Great-Horned owl was revealed by large pellets deposited underneath a tree (that and a tip from a kindly Park Ranger who told us where to look).



Balmorhea State Park Swimming Pool fed by the San Solomon Springs



Lesser Scaups



Great-Horned Owl

The construction of the swimming pool by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the 1930s destroyed the natural cienega (desert wetland), but there are two human-made cienegas in the park that support fish, birds and other wildlife. A quick hike across the parking lot to these wetlands, yielded two new “life-birds:” a Hooded Merganser and a Common Goldeneye. A life-bird is a bird species that has not previously been seen or recorded by a birder who cares about such things as keeping a list of birds they have seen in their lifetime (aka, Life-List). Speaking of life-birds, I wish you could bottle the feeling that comes from acquiring a new one. I can only compare it to waking on Christmas morning to find the gift I pestered my parents about for months wrapped in a bow beneath the tree.



Hooded Merganser



Common Goldeneye

Still giddy from the life-list expansion, we headed south to Fort Davis, settled into our vacation rental, and began the time-intensive process of sorting, editing and uploading photos to *iNaturalist* and *eBird*. Prior to visiting a new park or birding hotspot, I usually explore *eBird* to find out what “target birds” have been reported there recently. Target birds are those which are not yet on our life-list. While I don’t consider myself a “lister,” there is a sense of fulfillment in the fireworks display after confirming a new life-bird on *Merlin*. I find myself daydreaming about all the potential firework birds that might be within eye- or ear-shot. For those who are not *Merlin*-ites (*Merlin*-ians?), the app generates digital fireworks each time a new life-bird is confirmed. On this particular trip, I desperately wanted to find a Phainopepla. Quail were also on the target list, specifically Montezuma and Scaled. We had searched for these species (in vain) on a previous expedition through West Texas and Arizona on our way to California. Luckily, Gambel’s Quail had been added to our life-list at Franklin Mountains State Park on that trip. I didn’t know it at the time, but both the Phainopepla and Montezuma Quail would elude us once again.

The next morning, we arose before the sun, gathered our gear (binoculars, camera, spare camera-battery, hiking poles, water bottles, etc), and headed to **Davis Mountains State Park** just after sunrise. After printing our pass from the self-serve station, our first stop was at the beautifully-designed and generously-supplied Francell Bird Blind. If you ever visit Davis Mountains State Park, this is one bird blind you do not want to skip. Acorn Woodpeckers and a swarm of Bushtits devoured fresh bark-butter spread over hanging cedar-logs. Woodhouse Scrubjays sipped water from the flowing, stone water-feature. Dark-eyed Juncos hopped and scratched on the leaf-covered ground in search of insects for breakfast. It was easy to see why this bird blind is dubbed “the best little bird blind in Texas.”



Acorn Woodpecker



Bushtits



Dark-eyed Junco



Woodhouse's Scrubjay

Sapsucker
(Yellow-Bellied or Red-Naped...discuss)

It was hard to drag me away from that blind, but there was more of the park to see, and we needed to get in a hike before the afternoon heat made it unbearable. We drove up Skyline Drive to get a quick picture from the Lookout Tower when I spotted a black bird in a mesquite tree. I shouted, "Phainopepla," which Matt knew was Julie-code for "PULL OVER!" I lept from the car with camera in hand and started shooting in rapid-fire succession. Matt, a former Army Officer, is the ultimate time- and schedule-keeper, but when I lock in on a bird, he knows his best-laid plans are off the clock. About ten shots in, the clouds parted and the previously black bird with a crest transformed into a plain brown bird with rusty underbelly - it was a Canyon Towhee. A reasonable person would have accepted defeat, taken a couple pictures and moved on, but this bird remained in its tree, unperturbed by my presence. You would have thought this was a life-bird or some incredible rarity given the enthusiasm with which I photographed this poor bird. When a bird lingers I feel the need to keep taking shots from different angles, like I'm conducting a photoshoot for a high school senior, until the bird inevitably gets annoyed and flies away. With the patience of a supportive SOB, Matt waited until I'd had my fill. After dozens of shots, you'd think I would have come away with a masterpiece, but clearly I'm still a freshman photographer. Satisfied that I must have at least one publishable photo, we proceeded to the overlook for a few obligatory selfies.



Canyon Towhee



Canyon Towhee

Matt in the CCC-built Rock Overlook Building
At Davis Mountains State Park

Matt and Julie-Davis Mountains Overlook

The rising sun and temperatures informed us that we better get a move-on, and we proceeded to Indian Lodge for a hike. Matt parked and began the process of gearing up while I headed to the lodge for a "quick" bathroom break, promising not to dawdle. Thirty minutes later, I returned with a guilty grin and photos of Black-throated Sparrows, a Rock Wren, and a Say's Phoebe. At least this time I took a more reasonable number of photos of each bird (20 or so as opposed to 50).



By the time we embarked on the Indian Lodge Trail it was nearly 10 a.m. and already starting to get West-Texas-desert-hot. The hike is only one and a half miles, but with an elevation gain of 574 feet on steep, rocky terrain with sharp twists and narrow turns, we needed at least a couple of hours and steel-nerve to get through it - not to mention some Ibuprofen for our aching knees that evening.

It was well-worth the effort for the gorgeous views of the park, Macdonald Observatory, and the town of Fort Davis from the summit. Unfortunately I am no landscape photographer, and my pictures do not even come close to capturing the view (I did get a nice photo of a cactus, though).



MacDonald Observatory from Indian Lodge Trail



From the top of Indian Lodge Trail

The east side of Indian Lodge Trail is a death-defying (for us) decline with switchbacks and sliding rocks that eventually (if you survive) connects to Montezuma Quail Trail. Carefully and very slowly, we assisted each other down the cliff-side, joking along the way that maybe we are getting too old for this. By the time we reached the adjoining trail it was past noon - not exactly an ideal time for tracking quail - but I was still holding out hope. All we found on Montezuma Quail Trail was relief that we had not tumbled off the side of Indian Lodge Trail.

In spite of the minor disappointment, we felt pretty accomplished at the end of the hike. After all, the only other visitors daring to attempt that particular trail at that time were invasive Aoudads (Barbary Sheep, which I had never heard of prior to this adventure). I'm sure that the lack of other hikers had nothing to do with the fact that it was a Tuesday in the middle of February. Although we did not add any new birds to our life-list at the park, I was grateful to come away with some really stellar photos, like this one of a Spotted Towhee.



Spotted Towhee...probably



Aoudad Lamb Indian Lodge Trail



Aoudad Indian Lodge Trail

In all seriousness, Davis Mountains State Park now ranks among my favorites of the state parks we have visited. No, we did not find the elusive *Phainopepla* (now jokingly referred to as "Bane-o-pepla") or Montezuma Quail (maybe one day I'll get my Montezuma's revenge... wait), but you can dismiss those as "Bird-world problems." Overall, we had a great adventure and saw some pretty beautiful wildlife and scenery. Birding is a lot like life - best-laid plans don't always come to fruition, expectations don't always match reality, goals are not always achieved, but if you stay focused on the journey and just enjoy the ride, you will find fulfillment in the little successes (like amazing towhee photos) and learn some lessons along the way (like all the birds are at the bird blind, so just skip the hike). We left feeling satisfied with our visit and headed West to see more State Parks.



Matt and Julie Jary - Top of Indian Lodge Trail



Rock Wren



Say's Phoebe



Black-throated Sparrow



Black-throated Sparrow



Black-throated Sparrows