

Local State Parks Are Great Places to Go, Even In Winter

A few weeks ago, I wrote a column urging everyone, especially those with kids, to spend more time outdoors enjoying and learning about Nature. Someone said to me, "But there is nothing to do in the winter". I beg to differ. There are 18 State Parks and 4 Wildlife Management Areas in the Hill Country, all within about 2 hours drive or less from Kerrville.

Some may think things are not as "pretty" when everything is not green, and the rivers that run through many of these places are too cold for swimming or tubing, but Mother Nature is still there. The trails are open, the rivers are flowing, the birds are singing. There are things to do and things to see in all of them. And best yet, they are not nearly as crowded as in the summer.

Most all of these places have hiking trails, some moderately strenuous, most fairly easy. The sights and sounds and smells are different in the winter, but no less interesting. You can sometimes see more in the winter without the leaves. For bird watchers, both serious and casual, there are opportunities to see species that are not here year round. For photographers, there are always interesting things to photograph.

Best of all, you get to experience and learn from Mother Nature. Here are some of my favorite places:

South Llano River State Park just south of Junction is a great place to watch birds from any of the several blinds the park has built. There is a large "pecan bottoms" area filled with huge pecan trees and a long expanse of the South Llano River. Adjacent to the park is the Walter Buck State Wildlife Management Area with 18 miles of hiking trails, but call (325-446-3994) ahead to make sure the trails are open as research activities close them at times.

Garner State Park, 10 miles south of Leakey on the Frio River has about 7 miles of hiking trails and a long stretch of the river, and they have both cabins and campgrounds.

Lost Maples State Natural Area on the Sabinal River 4 miles north of Vanderpool is justifiably famous for the fall color of its Bigtooth maples, but it is a great place to visit anytime. There are over 10 miles of hiking trails, some short and easy, some more strenuous, but with beautiful views. There is a campground and some primitive camping sites.

Hill Country State Natural Area about 10 miles outside of Bandera is well known to folks that like to go horseback camping, but most trails are also open to hikers. It is a really

beautiful, undeveloped expanse of hills and woodlands. It is closed on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Enchanted Rock State Natural Area 14 miles north of Fredericksburg on RR 965 is one of my favorite Hill Country places. While famous for the granite dome which rises 450 feet above the valley floor and affords a striking view of the surrounding countryside, there is also a great 4 mile trail around the domes and shorter trails along beautiful Sandy Creek.

Pedernales Falls State Park 9 miles east of Johnson City contains numerous hiking trails, a great stretch of the river flowing over interesting rock formations, and is an excellent birding location.

Other Hill Country State Parks and Natural Areas are Fort McKavett, Devil's Sinkhole, Kickapoo Cavern, Colorado Bend, Inks Lake, Longhorn Caverns, Blanco, Guadalupe River/Honey Creek, and Government Canyon, all very much worth a trip.

Two of the local Wildlife Management Areas are also recommended. Kerr Wildlife Management Area is open to the public and is a favorite with seasoned birdwatchers. It is about 13 miles west of Hunt on Rt 1340. Then in the spring when the bats return, everyone should experience seeing the bats exit the tunnel for their nightly feeding at Old Tunnel Wildlife Management Area between Comfort and Fredericksburg.

Texas has a smaller percentage of public land than any of the other states in the west, so each of these parks and all of the 115 State Parks and Historic Sites are playing a critical role in maintaining and protecting Texas' native habitat. So take advantage of these places, enjoy your visits and become better acquainted with our native ecosystems.

For more information, phone numbers and directions, visit the Texas Parks and Wildlife website at www.tpwd.state.tx.us. Until next time...

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