

Parks, Natural Areas, Wildlife Refuges, More Essential Now Than Ever, and More in Need of Our Help

I have been a big fan of State and National Parks all my life, and a large percentage of all of the vacations I have taken have been to parks. Last month was no exception, when my wife and I visited Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Goose Island State Park, and, in an unrelated visit, Devils Sinkhole State Natural Area.

Aransas NWR, on the bay east of Rockport, is the winter home to most of the entire world's population of Whooping Cranes. The drive to get there takes you through miles of flat farm land, all bare for the winter and therefore habitat to almost no wildlife. I think it is not an exaggeration to say that without the Aransas NWR, there would be no more Whooping Cranes. America's tallest bird might well be extinct. Without the protection of the NWR, this area too, would be farmland.

Laguna Atascosa NWR, across the bay from South Padre Island, is home to about a third of the remaining estimated 100 ocelots in the state. Again, most of the surrounding land is farmland, where neither the ocelot, nor most of this little cat's prey, could survive. And without this refuge, and a few similar areas in the lower Rio Grande Valley, the ocelot would no longer be in Texas.

In a state where the human population continues to skyrocket, which leads the nation by far in the number of acres of farm and ranchland lost to "development" every year, and which has only about 1.3 million acres out of 168 million acres of total land area devoted to state parks and natural areas, every protected acre of state and national parkland is precious. As the population continues to grow, and they aren't making any more land, the need will become even more urgent.

Areas in which natural habitats are protected and preserved are important not only for the preservation of the various species of vegetation that make up the habitat, and not only for the preservation of the animal life that depend on that natural habitat, but also as a model of the entire ecosystem to teach us how each ecosystem works. No significant part of Texas is so free of human influence to truly be called a wilderness area, but it is very important that we preserve samples of every ecosystem in the state so we can better understand and manage non-protected areas as well.

Parks also provide an essential function of educating the public about the Natural World, giving kids of all ages an outdoor, Nature experience, and increasing the awareness of the population of the importance of the Natural World to their lives.

This past year has been a very hard time for the State Park system. First, the huge wildfire around Possum Kingdom Lake damaged much of the State Park there. Then

the Bastrop fire destroyed much of that State Park and the vegetation thereon. The drought made it a challenge for State Park personnel to preserve sensitive areas and to minimize the loss of vegetation. The drought and the heat, as well as the fires, have also kept visitation considerably below normal. The lack of revenue from visitors and this past year's state budget cuts have combined to greatly reduce the amount of money available for maintenance, conservation, and damage repair in the parks. For the sake of the State Park system and the continued conservation of important ecosystems and sensitive habitats, we need to do all we can to support our State Park System.

There are three ways to do this. First, visit a park. A large fraction of the money used to support the Parks comes from entry fees. Second, beginning this year, when you register your vehicles, there will be a line where you can donate money to the Park System. And finally, you can go to the State Park System website, www.texasstateparks.org/howtohelp and make a direct donation. I urge you to do so. As Carter Smith, Executive Director of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, says, "Our State Parks won't be the same without you".

Finally, a piece of good news. Last year, the Albert and Bessie Kronkosky Foundation donated 3,800 acres on Rt 46 between Boerne and Pipe Creek for a future State Park. When it opens, hopefully in only a few years, it will be one of the newest, and closest, and a very beautiful State Park.

Until next time...

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