

Eye on Nature

FALL, 2001

A publication of the Wildlife Diversity Branch

Getting Texans Involved

A Growing Appreciation for Biodiversity

by Jesus Franco

The strategic location and unique physiographic characteristics of the Lower Rio Grande Valley makes it the most biologically diverse region in the United States. The Valley serves as a confluence of temperate and tropical habitats along major migratory pathways inhabited or frequented by thousands of plant and wildlife species, many of which are unique to the area. More than 1,200 plant species have been recorded at the Valley, and about 40% of all the butterflies recorded in North America, north of Mexico, call this region home.

The diversity of habitats and its closeness to the Gulf of Mexico puts the Valley at the center of one of the busiest migratory flyways. With almost 500 (489 as of the last official count) bird species recorded in the area, the Lower Rio Grande Valley is indeed a birder's paradise. This official count represents about 54% of all bird species recorded in North America, north of Mexico. Except for California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas as a whole, the four counties (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy) of the Valley have more birds than any state in the nation.

Here, many tropical birds reach their northernmost range of distribution, while others make the Valley their final migratory destination and wintering grounds. In addition to this, the Valley also provides crucial

stopover habitat for hundreds of species of migrating shorebirds, hummingbirds, songbirds, hawks, waterfowl, etc. Through the seasons, it is common to encounter different species and then see them vanish into thin air as quickly as they showed up, leaving birders anxiously waiting for them on their way back to their new migratory destination.

But some species seem to be staying all year. One such species is the Black-bellied Whistling Duck, formerly known as the Tree Duck. Local experts and aficionados alike are in agreement that this year, blackbellies, are just about everywhere: in town, in the brush, around water, away from water, etc. Traditional tree cavity and nest box nesters, blackbellies appear to be adapting to man, and seem to be expanding their niche by nesting on people's yards, gardens, palm trees, etc.

[continued on page 7]

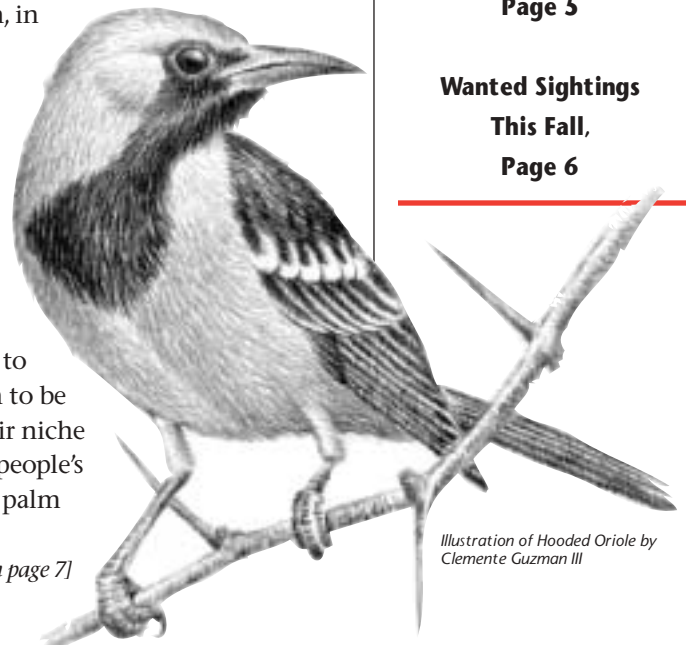


Illustration of Hooded Oriole by
Clemente Guzman III



**Approaching Critical
Butterflying Mass,
Page 2**

**World Birding Center,
Page 3**

**Texas Master Naturalists
Break 1,000,
Page 4**

**Revamped
Birding Classic,
Page 5**

**A New First Shows Up
in the Valley,
Page 5**

**Wanted Sightings
This Fall,
Page 6**



Approaching Critical Butterflying Mass

Eye On Nature
Fall, 2001

Texas Parks and Wildlife

To manage and conserve the natural and cultural resources of Texas for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

GOVERNOR OF TEXAS

Rick Perry

COMMISSION

Katharine Armstrong Idsal, Chairman
San Antonio

Ernest Angelo, Jr., Vice-Chairman
Midland

John Avila, Jr. **Fort Worth**

Carol E. Dinkins **Houston**

Joseph B.C. Fitzsimons **San Antonio**

Alvin L. Henry **Houston**

Philip O'B. Montgomery, III **Dallas**

Donato D. Ramos **Laredo**

Mark E. Watson, Jr. **San Antonio**

Lee M. Bass, Chairman-Emeritus

Fort Worth

Executive Director Andrew Sansom

Wildlife Division Director

Gary Graham

EYE ON NATURE STAFF

Mark Klym Editor

John Herron Production Manager

Texas Parks and Wildlife receives federal financial assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the U.S. Department of the Interior and its bureaus prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability or sex (in educational programs). If you believe that you have been discriminated against in any Texas Parks and Wildlife program, activity, or facility, or if you desire further information, please call or write: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office for Diversity and Civil Rights Programs - External Programs, 4040 N. Fairfax Drive, Webb 300, Arlington, VA 22203, (703) 358-1724.

by Mike Quinn

For over 100 years, the area along the lower Rio Grande River has been known for its biological diversity. Indeed, more species of butterflies have been recorded here than in **all of North America combined.**

But I believe that only just now is the Rio Grande Valley finally reaching critical mass as a butterflying destination.

In the late 1990s, southmost Texas gained momentum. The NABA-South Texas Butterfly Club was formed; the first butterfly garden was planted at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge; and the North American Butterfly Association (NABA) announced its plans to build a world-class 100 acre butterfly park near Mission, Texas.

The Texas Butterfly Festival has taken off too. Over the last four years, this festival held in Mission has attracted some of the top butterfly experts across the continent including: Jeffrey Glassberg, Robert Michael Pyle, Paul Opler, John and Gloria Tveten, Ann Swengel and John Acorn. Now, most birding brochures, maps and other resources for South Texas include information for **both birds and butterflies!**

In the summer of 2001, Jeffrey Glassberg's "Butterflies Through Binoculars: The West" was published by Oxford University

Press. This field guide covers the region west of Houston including nearly all the breeding butterflies found in South Texas. Finally, we have coast-to-coast butterfly identification field guides that utilize crisp photographs of butterflies shown from above and below; at the same scale; and in the same positions. Standardized English names have been employed and the range maps and text are opposite the color plates.

As great an advancement as the East and West field guides are towards our increased appreciation of butterflying, more fundamentally important has been the awakening of south Texans to the natural resources that surround them. School children, staff and volunteers of all ages have worked together to build and expand upon Santa Ana's and the Valley Nature Center's butterfly gardens in Hidalgo County. Now Cameron County has added to the excitement with two new fantastic butterfly gardens at the Sabal Palm Grove and at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge.

The Rio Grande Valley is finally about to explode into a year-round wonderland of butterflies and butterfliers!

Mike Quinn is an entomologist working out of the Austin offices.



World Birding Center

by Madge Lindsay

Lower Rio Grande Valley communities are coming together for the first time under a new World Birding Center banner to share their best-kept secret and most colorful natural treasure.

For decades, bird watchers have been trekking to South Texas - binoculars in hand - in search of the blue bunting, white-throated robin, hook-billed kite and other rare species found in the nation's premier birding hot spot. What many residents take for granted has been, for knowledgeable birders, an irresistible draw: more species in this four-county area than most entire states.

In recent years, local communities along the Texas Gulf Coast and the Mexican border have awakened to the possibilities. The Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival in Harlingen, the Texas Tropics Nature Festival in McAllen, the Butterfly Festival in Mission and the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, a collaboration of the Texas Department of Transportation and dozens of Texas communities, all serve to attract nature tourism, educate the public about its' priceless feathered resources, and promote the habitat preservation necessary to sustain quality of life.

Now, after years of study and planning, Lower Rio Grande Valley communities are ready to take these efforts to a new level, with a plan that protects and links diverse habitats and wildlife watching opportunities under the World Birding Center emblem. Working with TPW, communities and planners have developed a

20-million master plan for trails, viewing areas, information centers and interpretive exhibits.

"We've been nurturing this for two years and now we are ready to begin," says WBC Project Leader Madge Lindsay. "Thanks to communities and agencies who together have invested thousands of hours, and to a team of experienced planners, the road map is before us. With business and master plans in hand and some of the country's best architects on board, we are headed toward the next big goal - opening the doors in the fall of 2002."

The World Birding Center is a partnership between nine local communities, Texas Parks and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Headquartered in Mission's Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park, the WBC will actually be a regional complex of sites - each with its own distinct appeal - stretching from the pristine beaches of South Padre Island to the historic riverside bluffs of Roma.

The goals of the World Birding Center are to:

- Show the value of conservation through nature tourism and birding.
- Conserve and restore native habitat through education, demonstration and partnerships.
- Enhance birding tourism, which already brings an estimated \$100 million annually to the region.

From a 65-year-old adobe mansion in McAllen, to more than

1,900 acres of untrampled Tamaulipan woodland at the southernmost tip of Texas, the WBC offers outdoor experiences for all levels of birders, from the most experienced to the very beginner.

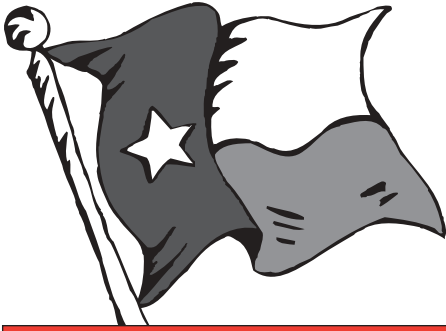
Conservationists should welcome environmentally sustainable economic development, says Father Tom Pincelli, a priest, birding expert and newspaper columnist.

"As a result of the World Birding Center and birding festival efforts, cities are actually setting aside pieces of property and protecting them," says Father Tom. "I don't think the sole purpose of protecting birds should be economic, but that can be a launching pad for some people to understand what is valuable in an area and to want to protect it."

There are signs that the WBC already is acting as a catalyst for the preservation and restoration of natural places.

Bentsen Palm Development, which is planning an upscale RV resort aimed at birders, has donated 175 acres of its extensive land holdings in Hidalgo County for the World Birding Center. A 60-acre onion field next to Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, where the headquarters itself will be located, will be replanted as native habitat. Other undeveloped tracts - including prime avian nesting sites, a resaca and river frontage - will be left as Nature created them.

Madge Lindsay is World Birding Center Project Leader working out of Mission.



Important Information about Proposition 8

If you love the Texas outdoors and are interested in ensuring the upkeep and maintenance of Texas Parks and Wildlife facilities, including state parks and historic sites, wildlife management areas and fish hatcheries, then you should learn more about Proposition 8 on the November 6 ballot. Proposition 8 includes \$850 million in general obligation bonding authority for 13 state agencies. \$100 million of that total is earmarked for Texas Parks and Wildlife. The ballot language may be confusing because it does not mention any of the agencies and there are four other bond proposals on the ballot. The ballot language will read: "The constitutional amendment authorizing the issuance of up to \$850 million in bonds payable from the general revenues of the state for construction and repair projects and for the purchase of needed equipment."

Voters can also vote early from Oct. 22-Nov. 2 at special early voting locations.

For more information on Proposition 8, visit www.proposition8.org

Texas Master Naturalists Break 1,000

By Michelle Haggerty

A thousand volunteers, 13 active chapters and national awards are evidence of the success of the Texas Master Naturalist program. Sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife's Wildlife Diversity branch and the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, the program provides education, outreach and service to natural resources in their communities.

Since its inception in 1998, the program has racked up several significant achievements including the following:

- Thirteen active chapters of Texas Master Naturalists
- A thousand volunteers in three years
- More than 46,300 hours of volunteer service, valued at more than \$695,000
- Eight national and state awards, most recently the Texas Natural Resources Conservation - Commission Environmental Excellence Award and the National Audubon Society's Habitat Hero Award
- Partnerships formed with more than 175 local natural resource agencies and organizations
- More than 4,700 acres of woodlands, rivers, ponds, prairies and lakes enhanced through service projects
- Teaches urban populations to conserve and improve natural resources
- Texas Master Naturalist volunteer Jeff Quayle, discovered *Senecio quaylei* T.M. Barkley, a plant new to science, near Fort Worth, Dec. 19, 2000
- Educated more than 102,000 adults, youths and private landowners through tours, exhibits and demonstrations

"The impact these volunteers are making in their local communities in educating others and in the overall future of Texas' natural resources is tremendous," said Michelle Haggerty, Texas Master Naturalist program coordinator. "The volunteers and their activities are what make this program a success."

Volunteers receive 40 hours of in-depth training by educators and specialists from universities, agencies, nature centers, museums and other organizations, which donate their services. In return, volunteers contribute at least 40 hours of service in community education, demonstration and habitat enhancement projects while pursuing a minimum of eight hours of advanced training in areas of special interest.

For information on how to become a Texas Master Naturalist volunteer, call Haggerty at (979) 458-2034, visit the TPW Web site <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/> or write Texas Master Naturalist Program, 111 Nagle Hall, Texas A&M University, 2258 TAMUS, College Station, Texas 77843-2258.

Michelle Haggerty is coordinator of the Texas Master Naturalist program working out of Texas A&M University in College Station.

Revamped Birding Classic strives to increase funding!

By Matt Dozier

The 6th edition of the annual Great Texas Birding Classic will look a little different from past tournaments. Some of the exciting changes for the April 20-28 event include...



The addition of sectional Conservation Cash Grand

Prizes - Teams participating in sectional events (as opposed to the coast wide event) will now have the opportunity to compete for a \$3,000 award to be used for a conservation project within their section. Round up your birding buddies and see if you can win \$3,000 for your favorite hometown conservation project!

Format change for main Conservation Cash Grand

Prizes - Instead of three defined competition days, limited by section of the coast, Sponsored teams competing for the chance to designate \$9,000, \$12,000 or \$20,000 will now have a five-day block from Tuesday April 23rd until Saturday April 27th in which to cover the entire 41 county area however they see fit!

Roughwings (8-13 year olds) will now compete

sectionally - The Roughwing Competition has been such a big success that we now have enough teams to merit distinct Upper, Central and Lower coast competitions.

These are just a few of the exciting changes you will see at next year's Great Texas Birding Classic! To find out more contact the Great Texas Birding Classic at 1-888-TXBIRDS visit us on the Web at www.tpwd.state.tx.us/gtbc or contact Classic Staff members Matt Dozier (512) 389-4427, matt.dozier@tpwd.state.tx.us or Shelly Scroggs (512) 389-4500, shelly.scroggs@tpwd.state.tx.us

Matt Dozier is Outreach Coordinator for the Birding Classic working out of the Austin office.



Texas Parks and Wildlife and the National Wildlife Federation moved one step closer to a joint habitat certification program in June, with the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement committing both organizations to this goal. Andy Sansom, executive director of Texas Parks and Wildlife and Susan Kaderka, director of the Gulf States Natural Resources Center signed the Agreement. We expect to launch the new program in Spring 2002.



A New First Shows Up in the Valley

By Mark Klym

The Green-breasted Mango, a bird typically found in Central and South America, has been documented in Texas only seven times. All the records involve juveniles that apparently dispersed into Texas, instead of moving further south in the autumn. Texas was graced on February 6, 2001 when the first adult Green-breasted Mango was seen and photographed in McAllen, TX. This is probably a case of overshooting the breeding range, which is typically about 300 miles south of the Texas border in Mexico.

Until recently all records of this rather large hummingbird were of immature plumaged individuals - a purple metallic green back with white on the chin and upper throat. There may be some chestnut spotting on the chin, and sometimes on the sides and chest. There is quite a bit of rufous coloring on the borders of the feathers of these birds, especially on the underparts. There is usually a dark black median line on the breast of these birds.

This bird is metallic bronze-green above with deep purple tail edged in black. The black chin bordered by a blue-green chest are typical of the adult male. The black decurved bill is typical of the species.

This bird is generally associated with relatively dry open lowlands, pasturelands, streamside borders and roadsides. It generally is not found above 1,500 feet.

This rare and beautiful visitor is just one of many hummingbird species that can occasionally be found in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and possibly beyond. All records of the Green-breasted Mango from Texas have been found south of Corpus Christi. The only U.S. record outside Texas is a year 2000 record from North Carolina. Any sightings of this bird in Texas should be documented by a photograph to confirm that its identity.

Mark Klym is coordinator of the Texas Hummingbird Roundup working out of Austin.



WANTED

Sightings this Fall

by Lee Ann Linam

Texas Nature Trackers

Texas Monarch Watch is only one of a variety of monitoring programs offered by Texas Nature Trackers. Visit our Web site or call (512) 912-7011 to find out about ways to get involved with Texas Mussel Watch, Texas Horned Lizard Watch, Texas Amphibian Watch, Hummingbird Round-up, and a variety of other volunteer opportunities.

These are the signs of autumn - crisp cool mornings, crimson and golden leaves, the calls of wild geese and sand-hill cranes, and a fluttering of orange and black in the trees. The passage of monarch butterflies through Texas in fall is truly one of the wonders of the natural world.

Monarchs have an amazing migration story. In fact, it's the longest known migration in the insect world. They begin their journey south from their breeding grounds in the northern U.S. late in the summer. They arrive in Texas in two principal flyways, one along the coast and one through the center of the state along a 300 mile-wide path centered roughly on a line between Wichita Falls and Eagle Pass.

Monarchs tend to migrate in pulses dictated by cold fronts arriving from the north, with monarchs arriving in the central flyway by late September and along the coast by late October. During peak fall migration periods and conditions, groups of hundreds or thousands of monarchs can be seen passing overhead or roosting in sheltered wood-

lands or low-lying areas. They may linger and feed if unfavorable southerly winds blow, but then continue toward their winter home in central Mexico when northerly winds prevail again.

You can help us learn more about this phenomenal migration by reporting your sightings this fall and winter (some monarchs in the coastal flyway may remain in Texas in the winter) to the Texas Monarch Hotline. Simply call in to report the number of monarchs, the location, county, date and weather conditions.

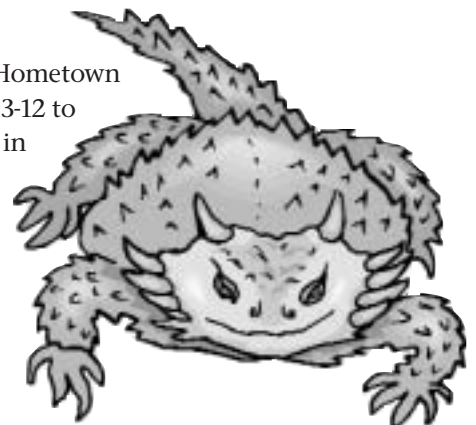
The Monarch Hotline is just one way to get involved. You can find out about butterfly identification and more intensive volunteer monitoring efforts, including butterfly tagging, by requesting a Texas Monarch Watch Monitoring Packet from (512) 912-7011 or from our Web site at www.state.tx.us/nature/education/tracker

Texas Monarch Hotline (800) 468-9719

Special Opportunity for Students!

This fall TPW will launch an essay contest called Hometown Horned Toads. The contest asks students in grades 3-12 to collect local accounts about Texas Horned Lizards in their community. Essays are due March 1, 2002. Great prizes will be awarded in three age categories. Get details on our Web site!

Texas Nature Trackers :
www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/education/tracker



[A Growing Appreciation for Biodiversity continued]

A debatable increase in water availability provided by reservoirs and stock ponds, increased food provided by homeowners and global warming, are just a few of the proposed explanations behind the blackbellies population increase.

Also, according to local ornithologists, and to the delight of birdwatchers, other tropical species such as the Audubon's and Altamira orioles, Muscovy ducks and Clay-colored robin seem to be steadily increasing along stretches of the lower Rio Grande.

This biodiversity richness combined with its rich cultural diversity makes the Valley one of, if not the, best birdwatching and nature destination in the United States. Communities of the Valley have taken note, and are already capitalizing on the natural and cultural resources under foot as a way to further develop the foundation of their sustainable economic base. The Valley now supports five nature festivals: the Rio Grande Birding Festival in Harlingen, the Nature Festival in McAllen, the Wild in Willacy Festival in Raymondville, the Butterfly Festival in Mission, and the new kid in the block, the International Birding Festival in Brownsville.

Unfortunately the Valley is also one of the most threatened regions in the United States. Years of agricultural clearing and urban expansion have eliminated 95% of the original native brush in the region. The remaining five percent is now home to several federal and state listed endangered and threatened species. Today, several communities of the Lower Rio Grande area are included in the top 10 fastest growing communities in the country. Although many restoration and conservation efforts are currently being conducted on public and private lands in the area, an ever-increasing need for greater public environmental awareness and education is prevalent.

Determined to assist in fulfilling this need, Texas Parks and Wildlife, through the urban wildlife office in Weslaco, offers information and programs intended to actively involve the communities of the Valley in activities that increase public awareness of urban wildlife and urban wildlife issues, and promote biodiversity and integrated resource management as part of urban wildlife conservation. For information please call (956) 447-2664.

Jesus Franco is an urban biologist working out of Weslaco.

Hummingbird Festival Allows Opportunity for Observation – Comparison

The 2001 edition of the Davis Mountains Hummingbird Festival, held August 17-19 at the Prude Ranch in Fort Davis, offered the opportunity to observe good numbers of diverse hummingbirds, and even the opportunity for direct comparison of similar, often confusing species. The participants had opportunity to observe:

- Black-chinned Hummingbirds
- Ruby-throated Hummingbirds
- Rufous Hummingbirds
- Broad-tailed Hummingbirds
- Calliope Hummingbirds
- Lucifer Hummingbirds
- Blue-throated Hummingbirds
- Magnificent Hummingbirds
- Costa's Hummingbird

The festival will be held again April 15-17, 2002. Maybe next year we can see the Berylline or White-eared Hummingbird!

Upcoming Festivals in the Valley!

The Lower Rio Grande Valley comes alive in the fall months, with festivals and activities celebrating the rich natural heritage of the region. Some of the coming events are:

Texas Butterfly Festival – Oct. 19-21
Mission

Wild in Willacy – Nov. 8-11
Raymondville, Port Mansfield

Rio Grande Valley Birding – Nov. 14-18
Harlingen

Other festivals are also available throughout the state during the fall months. For more information please contact the Wildlife Diversity Branch at (800) 792-1112 for a copy of Birding and Nature Festivals of Texas.





The Back Porch

by John Herron

Change - it's a constant in nature. Light and dark. Wet then dry. Cool then hot.

As I write this, we're moving from the sun-scorched days of summer into our wonderful fall and winter seasons. And with the cooler weather comes our chance to get outdoors again. Not that I stop during the summer, but my family tells me that fall and winter are the *more reasonable* times to go birdwatching, camping or hunting. Or for planting a fall landscape garden - maybe even put in a pond.

Fall and winter are great times to get out and see Texas. With the arrival of fall, we have migratory birds literally flocking to Texas; to South Texas and the coast in particular. Shorebirds, waterfowl and cranes pack into our coastal wetlands, bays and estuaries. It is one of my favorite times to visit the Gulf Coast or the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

At the same time, songbirds and raptors are moving through Texas on their way to wintering grounds in Latin America. Deer are out and about with the onset of their breeding season. And other wildlife species become more active after a busy summer of raising young, followed by the challenge of finding food during our droughty summer months. Wildlife really responds to the coming bounty of fall - cooler weather, rain, abundant seeds and prey. One can see wildlife nearly everywhere, if you make the time.

But to see wildlife, one has to know where to go. We continue to work on improving the outdoor experiences avail-

able to Texans. The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail is one of our most popular projects. We can barely keep maps in stock and continue to ask a \$3 per map donation to help the project develop. Over 300,000 maps have gone out in the four years since the trail opened.

And we're starting to extend the viewing trail concept, beginning work on new wildlife viewing trails and sites in Central Texas and the Panhandle, with East Texas next on the list.

Similarly, we are working with nearly a dozen communities in the Lower Rio Grande Valley to create the World Birding Center. Once completed, the World Birding Center complex will include three large visitor sites in Mission, Brownsville and Weslaco, with a number of additional birding sites located throughout the Valley. The World Birding Center will be much more than network of visitor sites and education centers, it will also be a showpiece demonstrating the importance of habitat. Good habitat is good for wildlife and it's good business for communities. It's also a good escape for those of who enjoy the outdoors.

In addition to our trail projects, Texas Parks and Wildlife other projects that promote habitat conservation - such as Texas Wildscapes and the Lone Star Land Steward Awards. The common thread is showing folks that the habitat that surrounds us is important for wildlife - whether it's a backyard, a ranch or small parcel of habitat in your local town or neighborhood.

At the same time, we need to remind ourselves that we lose habitat everyday in

Texas. Texas has already lost the vast majority of its wetlands, bottomland forest, brushlands and prairie. Each year, we lose a little bit more. We need to work together to preserve what is left and to show those people around us that these habitats have value, not only to wildlife, but to communities, landowners and others. That is a big part of the message behind our wildlife trails and the World Birding Center.

There are some changes on the horizon that may help us save more habitat. The Conservation and Reinvestment Act (HR 701) has been reintroduced in Congress. CARA would provide a tremendous amount of conservation funding to Texas, over \$130 million a year for wildlife, coastal conservation and our state parks. You can learn more about CARA by visiting the Web site www.teaming.com

Also, as someone who is an active outdoors person, you should be aware of Proposition 8 on the November 6th statewide bond election ballot. If approved, Texas Parks and Wildlife would be authorized to issue up to \$100 million in general obligation bonds to complete critical repairs and improvements to state parks, wildlife management areas and hatcheries across the state.

Enjoy the upcoming season. Oh, and don't forget to do something for wildlife.

John Herron is Wildlife Diversity Branch Chief working out of the Austin offices.