

Ray Roberts Lake 2023 Visitors Guide

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March 2, 2023

On behalf of the entire State Park team, our lakeside cities, and all of the incredible local businesses in the lake area, I'd like to welcome you to Ray Roberts Lake! We are so very excited to have you and your family here this season!

This year, in addition to all of the usual fun in the sun, we also invite you to join us in celebrating 100 Years of Texas State Parks! In 1923, Governor Pat Neff established the first Texas State Parks Board that set the vision for all of the wonderful State Parks and Natural Areas that we enjoy today, including our parks here at Ray Roberts Lake.

In celebration of our 100 Year Anniversary of Texas State Parks, we have numerous exciting events coming up this spring and summer here at the parks. I encourage you to check out our list of events at: https://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/ray-roberts-lake/park_events and come celebrate with us! There are also new 100 Year souvenirs in the park stores at Isle du Bois and Johnson Branch to help you remember your experience.

Last year we had over 800,000 visitors come and make lasting memories in the numerous parks around the lake. However, we know that there are numerous Texans that have never had the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of outdoor park recreation. Many have just never had experienced family or friends offer to introduce them to the joys of playing outside at the lake or hiking the trails.

So, as we celebrate 100 Years of State parks this year, I encourage everyone to help us extend an open invitation and spread the joy of parks to all Texans! Look for new friends and invite them to come play for the day with you on the lakeside beaches, teach them to fish the pier or shoreline, or take them boating on the lake. Introduce them to the joy of camping in a park overnight or reserve a comfortable room overlooking the lake at Lone Star Lodge and Marina. Take them for a stroll through the beautiful woods along some of our easy paved pathways or challenge them on the many miles of mountain biking trails. You could even bring your favorite horses and introduce new folks to the incredible world of equestrian trail riding.

On behalf of all of us, I wish you all a Happy 100 Years of making lasting memories in YOUR State Parks! Let's all help spread the wonderful health benefits of outdoor recreation and make many more memories in the next 100 years!

Many Thanks,

Robbie Merritt
Park Superintendent
Ray Roberts Lake State Park Complex

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Photo by Chance Kirby

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- ◆ How to book your guided fishing tour for the catch of your life
- ◆ Pro tips on how to have a great time throughout the state park for the entire family

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100 years of state park history



A campsite at Caddo Lake State Park in the '50s.

Photo Courtesy of Ray Roberts State Park

Parks across Texas celebrate park system

By Basil Gist
Staff Writer

For a century, Texas residents and travelers from all over the United States and beyond have been able to escape to nature thanks in part to the parks of the Lone Star State.

According to its website, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has been maintaining the beauty of 89 state parks for the last century, and it all began with Mother Neff near Fort Hood.

“We get to help steward a site that was home to Pat Neff, whose mother had the first six acres that was donated to Texas State Parks,” Mother Neff Superintendent Melissa Chadwick said.

Those six acres, nestled



Two women whip up breakfast over the campfire.

Photo Courtesy of Ray Roberts State Park

TPWD celebrates 100th anniversary



Teens in the '70s camp out at Pedernales Falls State Park.

Photo Courtesy of Ray Roberts State Park

along the Leon River, were set aside by Isabella Neff in her will, but her son Pat, a governor of Texas, donated an additional 250 acres alongside the original six, Chadwick explained.

“Way before that, back in the 1800s, Mother Neff’s Park was being utilized by the community,” Chadwick said. “It was a public-use park before the State Parks Board was even created.”

That said, the 100-year celebration is not the birthday of Mother Neff State Park, but rather the birthday of the State Parks Board.

“Mother Neff had opened her arms to the community long before the State Parks Board was even dreamt of. They would host many com-



A group barbecues under the tree cover in Cleburne State Park.

Photo Courtesy of Ray Roberts State Park

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Programs honor centennial year



Kids gather on the dock around their sizable haul.

Photo Courtesy of Ray Roberts State Park

munity and religious events,” Chadwick said. “She knew it was special and wanted to make sure that it remained available for future generations to enjoy.”

The idea of generations spanning enjoyment of nature is one shared among the rangers and hosts who maintain the parks.

“Generations for another 100 years to come are going to be out here making the same memories, having the same experiences and falling in love with Texas one generation after another,” Isle du Bois Park Interpreter Mindy Shumate said.

One such group memory will begin this year in the form of campfire treats.

“We’re having a S’mores Day event, which will be happening all over the state,” Shumate said. “Hopefully, every single park across the state is going to participate.”

The idea is simple; park guests, staff and volunteers all over the state

are going to gather around campfires with graham crackers, Hershey bars and marshmallows in hand, and share a fireside treat with strangers—whether they be across the embers or the region.

“It’s an awesome concept, connecting people all across Texas, kind of like a shared memory for all the people that participate,” Shumate said.

To be one of the first to join in that shared memory, pay attention to the Ray Roberts Facebook page or the TPWD website for dates and times as they are finalized in the coming months.

“The more people connect to these wild places, connect to their history, the more they care about them,” Shumate said. “Whether it’s the natural, cultural or historical resources of Texas, preserving and conserving them makes them accessible to the public to allow people to make memories here.”

“Everybody’s so happy to see you all the time. It makes me feel like they’re giving me the same service I give my customers!”

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Safety measures

Cook Children's provides life jackets that visitors to the Ray Roberts Lake park system can borrow when they come out to enjoy the lake, including at the Isle du Bois boat ramp.

Abigail Allen/
The Post-Signal

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State park stresses safety in, on water

By Abigail Allen
Managing Editor

As the weather gets warmer and visitors take to the water more regularly, the Ray Roberts Lake State Park staff wants to remind them to take water safety seriously.

Whether people are using watercraft or swimming, Isle du Bois Unit Superintendent Mark Stewart said, they need to put life jackets to good use.

“They need to have a life jacket available,” he said. “If they’re starting to get tired at all, they need to get out of the water and not push it.”

Weather changes can hit the lake quickly, churning up waves with the wind. Storms like the ones that struck the area ahead of the projected time on March 2 can catch park users by surprise.

Even in perfect weather, however, unexpected circumstances can lead to disaster if a life-preserving device is not on hand.

“If something goes wrong with the boat and they lose power, they don’t have any control,” Stewart said. “It’s not too hard to get sideways and have a wave come aboard and potentially flood the boat or flip the boat.”

On a boat, there must be a life jacket available for each person on the craft, and “for kids, they’re required.”

That’s why the Cook Children’s system has paired up with the state park to provide loaner life jackets sized for children.

Although adults can technically just keep the life jackets near them, it’s safer for them to wear the devices the entire time they are in the boat, Stewart said.

“You never know what’s going to happen,” he said. “A lot of people don’t



Signs like this one at the Isle du Bois Unit boat ramp remind visitors of the park’s requirements while boating.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

like them because they’re not comfortable. But it just takes a minute.”

The lake water, which is never fully clear, can get disorienting within moments when someone gets only a few feet below the surface.

Swimming is allowed at visitors’ own risk anywhere outside of the boat ramps throughout the lake.

“We have a designated swimming area, but it’s still—that’s just an

area where it’s the nice sandy beach area,” Stewart said. “You can swim at any [part] of the shore, off the campgrounds or anywhere else.”

Although it’s often disregarded, people with paddleboards, kayaks and other non-motorized watercraft are not allowed to launch from the swim beach.

“We encourage people that are kayaking and paddleboarding to go to the

far cove in the day use area, but in the designated swimming area, no watercraft are allowed,” Stewart said.

That’s for the safety of those swimmers.

“If somebody’s swimming underwater and they come up and they run into the [craft] with their head, it can cause some issues,” Stewart said.


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He knows where to go

Fishing guide provides insight to anglers on Ray Roberts

By Joe Fragano

Staff Writer

When Ray Roberts Lake opened for recreational use 33 years ago, it was a hotbed for Texas anglers eager to test the waters of the Lone Star State's newest fishing grounds.

Three decades later, the rush to fish Ray Roberts' waters has slowed considerably, but there are still plenty of families, competitive anglers and outdoor enthusiasts interested in seeing what they can pull out of the lake. Fishing guides like Jim Walling make a career out of helping those people make the most out of a fishing trip to Ray Roberts Lake.

Walling owns and operates Ucatchem Guide Service and has helped anglers fish Ray Roberts Lake since 1992. Walling's guiding career started in Missouri, but he migrated south to take advantage of a new lake opening in North Texas over 30 years ago.

"[Ray Roberts Lake] opened in January of 1990," Walling said. "January 1st, as a matter of fact. I got here to work on about January the 5th, and I've been guiding out here pretty much exclusively ever since. I [started guiding] a year before that ... in Missouri in 1989, but ... I was waiting on this lake to open. ... Denton is actually home. [Ray Roberts Lake] opened the next year, and I got back home."

Thirty years ago the market for guiding services on the newest lake in the state was extremely strong, Walling said. Nowadays things have slowed down considerably, but there are still enough people interested in fishing the lake that need help doing so to support a small community of Ray Roberts Lake guides.

"Back in the '90s when there was a lot of excitement about the lake and it was new, I fished roughly 250 days a year," Walling said. "It's not to that extent any more. But if a guy works hard at it, has got a reputation [for being] good with clients and [as a] fisherman, too, he can stay pretty busy. It's not a lake like Texoma that supports hundreds of guides. Ray Roberts might support a few dozen guides."

Walling provides full service to



Jim Walling, right, poses with a pair of clients and a cooler full of white bass. Locally known as sand bass, Ray Roberts Lake is known for being one of the best lakes in the state to find the species.

Photos Courtesy of Jim Walling

his clients for a day on the water. All an angler has to do after hiring Walling is show up, and he takes it from there.

"We meet all of our clients, generally speaking, at ... Isle du Bois [in the] state park because they have the nice facilities. ... There's not but a couple of places on the lake that have the fish-cleaning facilities. We meet our clients in the parking lot and leave out ... somewhere around 7 or 8 in the morning. Of course, we furnish all the equipment and then catch fish for hopefully four hours and come in and spend an hour cleaning. Then we bag them up, and they take [the fish] with them."

The process by which Walling helps people find fish and reel them in has changed dramatically over

the years. A rod and reel are still the weapon of choice for pulling in fish, but electronics, radar and other gadgets have helped some anglers get fishing down to a science. Walling said he is more of a traditionalist himself.

"The biggest change [since I started guiding] has been the advancement of electronics," Walling said. "Technology is unbelievable now compared to when I first started. The fishing methods themselves have changed a little. I wouldn't say they've changed a whole lot, but the electronics and what you can see ... has really changed. ... They've got electronics out right now that [are] a lot like sitting in your living room and playing a video game. ... Being the generation I am, I've never

been one to play video games. I'm old school."

Not all of the people who enlist the services of Walling or one of the other guides that frequent Ray Roberts Lake's waters are the same. Some are experienced fisherman preparing for a tournament; others are first timers who have never pulled anything out of the water before at all.

Some anglers go on a guided fishing trip to bring back a haul of filets for a fish fry, while others are looking for a photo op with a once-in-a-lifetime bass. Whatever an angler is looking for, Walling's job as a guide is to help them find it in the water.

"[The lake] attracts people wanting to catch either white bass or crappie to take home and eat," said

Guide shares love of Ray Roberts

Walling. "It attracts bass anglers everywhere from novices to professionals. ... Year before last, they had the biggest bass tournament in the world here, the Bassmaster Classic. It gets a lot of bass fishing pressure, and they have a lot of tournaments out here."

Competitive bass fishing is growing in popularity in the state of Texas. Aubrey, Pilot Point, Tioga and Collinsville ISDs all have bass fishing teams and there are tournaments held on Ray Roberts Lake every year.

Not everyone who fishes in those tournaments is from the area. Some of them need help navigating the lake and some of the unique obstacles it presents. A fishing guide like Walling can help with that too.

"A good percentage of my business is for [competitive bass fishers] coming in here," Walling said. "They want to come and get a guide and learn how to get around the lake because of all the stumps and everything and maybe [learn] some potential good fishing spots for bass. They're doing that preparing for their tournament."

Family trips are the other side of a fishing guide's coin. Moms and dads, often with young children who have never been fishing before, will hire a fishing guide to help get the whole family out on the lake for a fun day of fishing.

These are often the trips where Walling gets to help a young prospective angler pull a fish out of the water for the very first time. It's those moments that Walling said make the job worthwhile.

"It's why I'm in this business," Walling said. "That's what I love about it, and I love putting an experienced angler on a 10-pound bass just as much, but there's something about taking the families and the kids. Seeing those kids have a great time and catch more fish than they've ever caught in their life, that's the ultimate."

Walling is just one member of a community of local professionals who have dedicated their careers to making Ray Roberts Lake seem just a little bit smaller, a little bit more accessible to the average fisherman, the novice or even the seasoned veteran.

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Marinas make big changes



The slips under construction at the Lone Star Lodge and Marina stretch out into the water near the Jordan Park boat ramp.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

By Basil Gist
Staff Writer

With new event, sales and marketing manager Kylie King working the day to day, Lone Star Lodge and Marina is seeing a revitalization, the once Yoga Twist owner said.

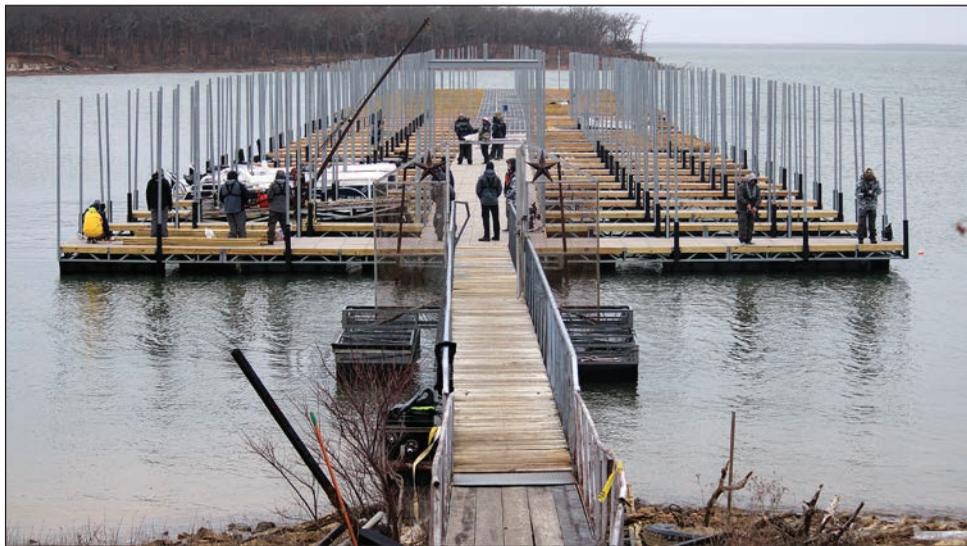
It all starts with the marina, which the lodge has been approved to move forward on.

“Having the marina is going to change everything,” King said. “It’s going to be 500 slips, and we’ll start with the first 94.”

Many of those 500 slips will be occupied by boat owners who have been waiting some time to moor their rigs a little closer to home.

“We’re making phone calls now; we have about 200 people on our waitlist, and they’ve been waiting very patiently, some many years,” King said in February. “We’re hoping to have the first set done by end of February, and then we’ll start right in on the next.”

In addition to the slips, the lodge retains its two primary venue locations: the barn, which fits 100 guests and has a general rustic look and the



Crews work on the construction of the long-awaited slips at Lone Star.

Basil Gist/The Post-Signal

Dining Hall, which accommodates 150.

“We’ve done some renovations on the barn, so it’s less of a horse barn and more of an event barn,” King said before leading into another project under way. “We’re building a new venue space; it’s going to be called the Manor

Hall and will work with a wedding for 200-300 people.”

The new venue has a loose completion date of June, King said.

Those three specific spots, while accommodating different sizes of events with differing aesthetics, are not the only ways in which King is encourag-

ing the community to use the lodge.

“Right now I’ve got UNT who wants to come down and have a giant water fight with like 100 seniors,” King said. “Another lady wants to get married in the woods, just among the trees.”

Unlike many venues, especially wedding venues, King strives to make the lodge not only accessible but also flexible.

“It’s opening it up for all different people to be able to use this property,” King said. “‘Nothing is set in stone,’ is in my template email.”

The owners of the lodge look to add something to this side of Ray Roberts Lake that is heretofore missing.

“Everyone tends to go to Isle du Bois, right; its got big beaches and trails, but what is missing is a marina,” King said.

That additional and new draw, King said, will not only kickstart the lodge itself but breathe life into nearby Pilot Point.

“Imagine if you had three, four, five hundred additional people down here and the extra traffic that’s going

Long-awaited slips take shape at Lone Star

to be coming in for something to eat, grab a coffee, that sort of thing,” King said. “We want to encourage those people that are coming up here to go into Pilot Point.”

Plus, King explained the lodge is working with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to get some trails added to the surrounding property.

“This year they’re going to put some actual marked trails in,” King said. “Right now it’s very popular for horses but not so much the hiking.”

Other additions to the property include cabins to bolster the current hotel limitations, as well as an RV park at the head of the property.

“That will come after, as the marina and new venue space are the priority,” King said. “It may not be until next spring, but it’s going to happen fast because we’ve had such a long wait.”

One use the event manager is particularly keen on is the lodge being used for retreats.

“There’s heaps of wedding venues, so we’re not really trying to be in competition with anyone,” King said. “If you want to get married on the lake,



The sun begins to set over the lake behind the Lone Star Lodge.

Photo Courtesy of Lone Star Lodge and Marina

come here, but the retreats are different.”

King explained, up to now, the lodge had not been particularly open to that sort of business, but after coming on, she said, from corporate to church to couples, retreats are a great option for the lodge.

“Any kind of retreat really; we’re looking for companies to contact us;

that’s what I’m really pushing for,” she said.

The core aspect of the resort, which is still in the air despite all the traction on other fronts, is the restaurant.

“We have to have someone who really knows restaurants to come in and do that,” King said. “We’d like, hopefully, to partner with a local restaurant or catering company to even just do a morn-

ing café or lunch. We don’t know for certain yet, but we will definitely be outsourcing.”

All of the change is exciting, King said.

“There’s heaps of things happening, that’s why it’s hard to put timelines on anything,” King said. “There’s too many things all happening so quickly; it’s just ‘Go now.’”

The Lone Star Lodge and Marina is not, however, the only marina within spitting distance, though the other is a hop across the lake. What has been the Lake Ray Roberts Marina in Sanger is under new management.

The business has been sold to a national marina company by the name of Suntex. In the midst of the turnover, the company was unavailable for comment.

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Interpreters offer wide range of programs



During the First Day Hike, the packs split with the middle pack, which Park Interpreter Mindy Shumate accompanied, being the largest of the three.

Basil Gist/The Post-Signal

By Abigail Allen
Managing Editor

Programming that helps people connect with nature is a crucial component of the state park model every year.

This year, in particular, there's a touch of extra excitement with many of those programs, including those at Isle du Bois and Johnson Branch.

"The idea is that programming will be staggered across the 90 parks in Texas, so there will be something happening at a state park every single weekend in Texas," IDB Park Interpreter Mindy Shumate said.

For her, getting the chance to

share the system's history with the visitors has been a fun component of planning this year.

"We'll look at a little bit of our history, the good, the bad and the ugly will be divulged," Shumate said. "Texas Parks have a good archive and historians that work for the agency, so I'm working with them to really dig into the history."

The Settler Women event, planned for March 18, will include settler games for those who would like to try their hand.

Programming in general is a chance for families to take advantage of the expertise of the park staff

as well as that of Master Naturalists who often volunteer to lead some of the events.

"The parents can kind of take a break and let us rangers take the lead and do some really fun activities with their kids," Johnson Branch Park Interpreter Izzy Mabry said. "[We] get them back outside and get focus off of electronics and things; our programs give them the opportunity to ask about why state parks are so important and why we need to continue doing what we're doing."

For Mabry, the first week of spring would be an exciting opportunity.

"It's just kind of kicking off and celebrating the first week of spring," Mabry said. "There's going to be games, activities, arts and crafts, and the Kid Fish Pond will still be open and stocked with trout."

Fishing will be accessible even to families unfamiliar with the hobby, thanks to ranger support.

"There will be rangers over there, so they can fish with rangers if they like," Mabry said.

The Spring Fling will be March 25 and, though the activities are focused on children, the ranger encouraged parents to participate, too.

"We always love when parents get

Programming provides connection to nature, new activities

involved, so we'll have sack races and the egg race," Mabry said. "We have wooden eggs though because they're expensive at the moment; we love to see families compete."

Mabry explained there will be a mix of activities happening both indoors and out and further reminded that Spring Fling, being one of the park's centennial events, park entry will be free.

"If people have questions about programming at any time, our Facebook page and our website both lists the calendar of events," IDB Unit Superintendent Mark Stewart said. "This year, in particular, a lot of the events are being—statewide, with the 100 years of state parks centennial celebration, there's a lot of different activities going on that are designated as that."

Staff Writer Basil Gist contributed to this report.



First Sgt. Lewis Padilla engages participants during the Buffalo Soldiers event at Johnson Branch in February.

Basil Gist/The Post-Signal



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A young family explores the Isle du Bois trails on Presidents' Day.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

Families flock to IDB

By Abigail Allen
Managing Editor

Every year, the Isle du Bois Unit of the Ray Roberts Lake State Park draws in families from other Dallas-Fort Worth Area cities.

In fact, the park is a perennial Top 10 in the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's list of most-visited parks.

Appealing to families is a point of

pride for the park's staff.

"We try real hard to have a family-oriented environment, whether that be in the camping traffic where we're making sure we're enforcing all our rules and regulations to make it a family-friendly environment, to our day use," IDB Unit Superintendent Mark Stewart said. "A lot of the activities and programs that we have are very good for either small

families or Scout groups and school groups."

That's also why the staff and park host volunteers work together to keep the park clean and in good repair.

"We've always been trying to maintain that family-oriented, safe place to bring your family and we hope to continue that for a long time," Stewart said.

Part of IDB's appeal is its relative

proximity to the DFW Area while still being far enough removed that it feels like an adventure for families from Dallas.

Stewart has started to see a goal he and his fellow state park administrators have had regarding the Pilot Point community start to become a reality. The city that neighbors the park has implemented a campaign to emphasize how close it is to the lake

Facilities at state park unit draw wide range



Families take advantage of the wind and warm weather on Presidents' Day, flying kites and enjoying the Isle du Bois Unit's swim beach area.

Photos by Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

and to help encourage people to take advantage of the body of water in their backyard.

"As we continue the development of Pilot Point [we're] just making sure people are aware that the park is here that move to the area," Stewart said. "Some are very familiar with the park and yet some are not aware that we're here, so we keep trying to increase the profile of the park through community events and activities."

That includes partnering with the Pilot Point Chamber of Commerce to plan a family-friendly tournament in the fall.

There are also two photography competitions—one park-specific and one state-wide—open this year in honor of the TPWD's 100th anniversary.

Visitors can also participate in a photo scavenger hunt, too.

"It's 100 items that are listed all over the complex," Stewart said.

Those who find at least the minimum number of items can enter for a prize drawing that will happen at the end of the year.

Participants can also drop off the entry slip.

For Patrick Malcolm, a Celina resident, visiting Isle du Bois with his son on Presidents' Day when they both had the day off made a lot of sense.

"We drove out here from Light Farms in Celina," he said.

His son, Jayden Malcolm, "likes to go fishing whenever he can," Patrick said.

"He's learning how to drive, so we figured it would be a nice 25 minute drive to come out here," he added.

Fishing together is a great way to spend a nice day, Patrick said.

"I try to hang out with him as much as I can," he said.

It was the father and son's first time at the park unit.

"We wanted to try on the pier, but it was too windy there, so we figured the wind would be blocked," Patrick said. "We know nothing about the fishing spots. He saw this bass boat and he figured that he had radar. ... So, he's like, 'OK, there's probably fish there.'"



Patrick Malcolm, left, and his son, Jayden Malcolm, fish from the bank on Presidents' Day. Patrick was following Jayden's lead on where to fish.

Photos by Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

Killham with kindness as office manager



Isle du Bois Office Manager Randy Killham strives to create an inviting environment for his coworkers and the park's guests.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

By Abigail Allen
Managing Editor

For 17 years, Randy Killham has been a force of nature in the Isle du Bois Unit's main headquarters.

The office manager worked his way from being a seasonal worker who moved to full time, and he loves that he's had the chance to work in one park for the duration of his career with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

"My favorite thing to do is talking to people as they come through," Killham said. "... I love helping people and making sure they're getting what they want."

Originally a Nebraska boy, he came to Texas while working in retail for around 25 years.

He decided to take a break from working in the retail world.

When it came time for him to re-join the working world, opportunities were much harder to come by than he had expected.

By chance, he found the information about seasonal work at IDB.

"They had a posting for a summer seasonal position here," Killham said. "And I applied, and I went, 'This is really cool. I like this. I think I could really do this.'"

As the summer season drew to a

close, Killham found a new opportunity—a full-time position on the office staff.

He worked his way up from there.

"I jokingly tell people at our regional meetings that I killed my way to the top," Killham said.

He has loved working with his coworkers, many of whom have become close like family.

In fact, he came on staff before IDB Superintendent Mark Stewart's daughter Kaylen was born and watched Will Stewart, Lindsey True and Garrett True grow up at the park.

"He's been almost like an uncle to our kids," Stewart said.

Killham has been key in the way the IDB office operates, Stewart said.

"It's been great working with Randy," he said. "He's been a real good employee, a valued team member."

He puts creative touches on the office and the work wherever possible, Stewart added.

Some of those touches can be seen in the decorations surrounding him at his desk.

On the windows that face the line of visitors streaming into the park, Killham has stained glass birds hanging with one more set to join the flock.

He also keeps photos of his loved ones and mementos from long-time

Killham loves working in state park system

visitors on a shelf above his head.

For a couple of years, Cecily Rebarchek has worked with Killham in the office, and the two have developed a deep friendship.

"We've been able to build a relationship that carries outside of work," she said. "... We are able to communicate with each other not just as coworkers, but as genuine friends."

She's since gone to Johnson Branch to become a park operations trainee.

Having the opportunity to find more work-life balance has been a welcomed change for Killham.

Stewart said he, too, has enjoyed Killham getting to connect with the community through his love of theater.

"It's been exciting over the last year or so, watching him get involved in the community stuff with the Garage Door Theater," Stewart said.

Rebarchek and many of

the other IDB staff members have shown their support for Killham as audience members at his performances.

Killham's ability to win over a crowd and to smile on stage helps him weather some of the storms that come through the office on the customer service side, too.

He tries to have a happy demeanor, he added, because he has been told his disposition has a way of affecting his peers in the office.

"Those are the people who do the best, honestly," Killham said. "Is if they're happy here and they like what we're doing."

When he wants a moment to himself in the park, Killham enjoys going to the Lost Pines Trail or the Elm Fork Park to find isolated parts of the park.

The chances to see Killham's smiling face are running low, too, as he plans to



Randy Killham keeps photos and items that remind him of people he cares about, topped with a Chaparral in honor of Aubrey.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

retire this year.

"I hope that the people in

this area and other people

in Texas realize what a gift

they have with their state

parks," Killham said.

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Making improvements



A crew works on repairing the decking for the roof on a bathroom facility at the Isle du Bois Unit. The buildings, which are around 30 years old, are needing repairs.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal



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Feet in the sand

Stephen Peterson from Aubrey sits on the Isle du Bois swim beach on Presidents' Day, enjoying the chance to reconnect with nature.

Abigail Allen/
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Out on the water

Jimerson Adkins waves at the shoreline during a Pilot Point Paddleboard Club outing.

Justine Wollaston/
Contributing Photographer



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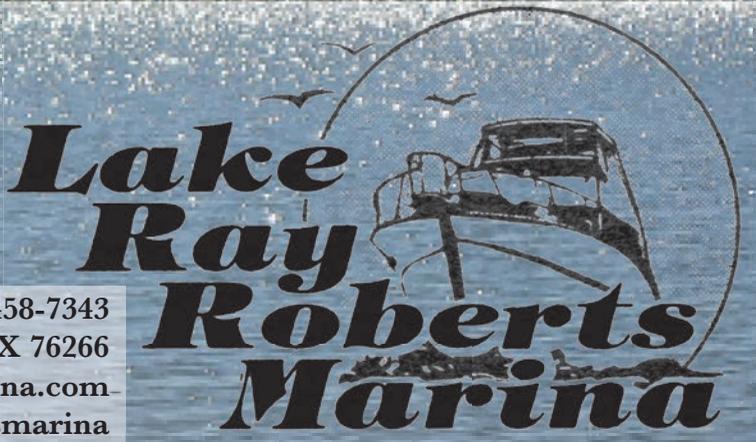
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Paddleboard club hits IDB

By Justine Wollaston
Contributing Writer

As the days inch toward consistent 70 degree plus temperatures, the local paddleboarders are readying their gear for launch.

Several locals have formed a paddleboard club so they can enjoy the lake together.

The club plans one long paddle each month, but most paddles are one to four people who can meet same time same place.

Anyone can become a member by simply showing up and requesting to join the Pilot Point Paddleboard Club Facebook page.

Members can post a date, time and launch location if they want company on an outing.

Founding member Jimerson Adkins enjoys the camaraderie and the exercise.

“It’s fun, and it’s great fitness,” he said. “You get to be out in nature. You don’t have to be stuck in a gym or running around dodging cars.”

Paddleboarding is easy to get into. A board and life jacket cost around \$250. Most newcomers find their balance on the board after a couple outings. It is also feasible to sit or kneel on the board if balancing is difficult.

The sport offers a full body workout.

It is also a great way to enjoy the lake.

“You’ve got a solid eight months or more [on the lake] if you’ve got a wet suit, or if you’re just



Shayla Storms lays out on her paddleboard during a club adventure.

Photo Courtesy of Amy Lanier

crazy,” Adkins said.

Evon Lusk enjoys the sport because she “can get out on the lake and not have to fish and not have to think about [anything else].”

The experience of being out on the water on a board is different to a boat because you are quietly gliding across the water. You get a real sense of the water around you and can get close to wildlife.

Boarders routinely see herons, geese, ducks and deer.

In shallower water and depending on the angle of the sun, boarders can see fish hanging out in rock gardens or lazily swimming.

Some of the most exciting things are to hear

splashing and witness fish jumping for insects.

It’s a fun sport for all ages and a way to make new friends.

People who have never been into a sport find it fun and easy. But it is weather-dependent.

The boards are light, so winds above 12 mph make paddling difficult, and one is likely to fall in at some point so it’s no fun if the water is too cold.

There are apps available that tell the direction and speed of the wind on the lake.

“Many locals never go to the lake if they don’t have a boat, or they use the trails near the shore but don’t get out on the water. On a board, you’re getting out on the water and seeing the shore from a whole different perspective,” Adkins said.

The boarders are able to get to secluded spots, including Split Rock Bay on Wolf Island, Dragon Spire Point, DuckPoo Key and Sweet Beach.

If you’re interested in trying it out, contact Adkins through the Facebook page.

The group also welcomes people in kayaks, rowboats, canoes and small sailboats—anything without a motor.

The only requirement otherwise is that every person have access to a life jacket on board.

Kayaks can be rented from Isle du Bois and Lone Star Lodge and Marina.

Adkins also has an extra board for “a newbie who wants to see if they are into it.”

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McKenzie makes impact at Johnson Branch



Johnson Branch's Brett McKenzie stands in the park unit that he loves to serve as assistant superintendent.

Basil Gist/The Post-Signal

By Basil Gist
Staff Writer

The assistant superintendent at Ray Roberts Lake State Park Johnson Branch Unit saw increasing time at the desk in his future and chose instead to retire to the parks.

Brett McKenzie, coming up on two years of service at Johnson Branch, retired as a major in the Army after 20 years of service only to begin a new career as park ranger.

"The higher you go up in the Army, the more time you're in a desk," McKenzie said. "I decided I didn't want to

be at a desk in the same room all day every day doing the same job; I want to be outside, so this job is perfect."

A deployment at Fort Hood put the officer within spitting distance from Colorado Bend State Park, where he first got the idea.

"I went out to the park out past Lampasas on the Colorado River and just said, 'it would be great to work here,'" McKenzie said. "I was looking around thinking, this is what I want to do; I want to be helping other people enjoy nature."

Between his time in the Army

and an upbringing on Eagle Mountain Lake in Fort Worth, McKenzie brought a bevy of applicable skills from his first career into his second, he explained.

"An Army Officer in the Infantry generally has some of the largest units with the most people to manage in them," McKenzie said. "It involves being a leader and dovetailed nicely into management at a park."

He extrapolated, explaining that as an executive officer he got on the job experience with budgeting, maintenance of equipment and so on.

"As a park manager it's kind of like being in charge of a very small city," McKenzie said. "You have things which have to be fixed, improved, projects for improvement, maintenance, customer service, [etc.]"

He further related his time overseas and on joint operations to accommodating park hosts and guests.

"Being an Army Officer gave me a wide range of experience working with people all over the world," McKenzie said. "I worked with the Russians, Finns, Swedes, Danes, the Polish and the Bosnians. I worked with

Assistant superintendent finds peace in nature

Iraqis and spent two years in Korea on the DMZ [demilitarized zone] where I worked hand in glove with a combined Korean-U.S. multinational unit, so I got a lot of experience from peace-keeping to Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

McKenzie spoke more at length about his extended deployment on the DMZ where he met his wife.

“I actually got married late in life while on the DMZ in Korea in 2012,” McKenzie said. “They take tours up there, and she was manager of the gift shop for nearly 20 years and had never dated an American until I came along.”

In his time at Johnson Branch, McKenzie has built himself a reputation complete with a nickname; park staff and volunteers call him “The Beaver,” chiefly for his knowledge of trees but also for his affinity with a chainsaw.

“It started when I was stationed at Fort Hood for the second time, a friend of mine’s dad retired and bought 600 acres out in Palestine; that’s old root hardwood trees ... but with those big trees and sandy soil, you get some rain and wind and they

like to fall over and block the trails,” McKenzie said.

It was in the pursuit of clearing those trails that The Beaver got his teeth. The friend works as an environmental scientist, so McKenzie got an education in trees while dismantling them.

“He got me interested in tree growth cycles and different species which dovetailed to natural resources and invasive species, management and prairie restoration,” McKenzie said. “[But], it started as a utilitarian thing.”

Prairie restoration in particular is a focus for McKenzie, despite the implication that more prairie means less trees.

“There’s always the maintenance aspect,” McKenzie said. “Birds carry cedar seeds around everything, and those things will pop up anywhere. You could get the job completely finished, and if you don’t do anything for a few years, you’ll have overgrowth all over again.”

Before choosing the Army and eventually the parks, McKenzie had aspirations to be a physician, at least,

until he weighed all the additional school against getting life started.

“I went to TCU in pre-med and got a biology degree, but about halfway through college I decided, ‘I hate school, so why would I sign up for four more years.’”

McKenzie explained he has no human children but raised a puppy instead.

“I love dogs; I have a seven-year-old Border Collie who is probably as smart as a five-year-old child and as demanding as one for sure,” McKenzie said.

The ranger, like many others in his line of work, does a lot of what he does for a living on his days off.

“I like to go out to parks on my days off and walk,” McKenzie said. “I live in Sanger, so I go to the parks there. My wife is a city girl, but I like having the woods nearby.”

Between an extending stay on the DMZ, a career in the military and working with tourists for a living, McKenzie could be forgiven for carrying more stress than the average person, but he’s found a way to keep that tension under control.

“I’m a yogi; not with mats and

stretchy pants but sitting still for long periods,” McKenzie said. “It’s called Self-Realization Fellowship. I was initiated in August 2019 in downtown L.A., which was the last time they did it in public before COVID hit.”

McKenzie explained yoga for him is less sun salutations and more contemplation.

“It started with a lot of reading; I started with Aldous Huxley’s ‘Perennial Philosophy’ back in 2010,” McKenzie said. “I’ve got a whole bookshelf at home. There’s some ‘woo-woo’ spiritual books, but it’s just about going along that path that led me to meditation.”

The ranger, who was in Iraq in 2006, explained creating conscious peace has since been a valuable tool.

“It eliminates a lot of fear in your life; you start carrying that calm with you everywhere you go,” McKenzie said. “I was probably the only yogi who was an Infantry Officer in the Army.”



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LRRETA reins in support for park

By Tatiana Ambrosio

Contributing Writer

The Lake Ray Roberts Equestrian Trails Association otherwise known as LRRETA (pronounced like the name Lorreta) has been a best friend to the Ray Roberts Lake State Park for quite some time.

As part of that friendship, the association has not only benefitted the park and itself but also all visitors to the state park complex.

Their website best explains their mission.

It reads, “We are a bunch of enthusiastic and fun horse people that strive to improve the quality of your horseback riding experience by preserving, maintaining and improving the equestrian trails at Lake Ray Robert’s State Park in North Texas.”

A bridge, or rather an elevated walkway, brought the association into being.

In 2010, after severe flooding, a large crevasse formed on the trail just below the dam.

The park held a public meeting about the issue in 2011.

“They said, ‘We’re going to close this trail because we don’t have the funds to fix it,’” LRRTA President Linda Moore said.

Moore and other equestrians at the meeting said they enjoyed the trail and were unhappy about it being closed.

“So, we got organized,” she said.

Members from the Greenbelt Alliance were also in attendance at the meeting and provided help, Moore said.

“They were already a 501c3 organization,” she said.

The newly formed group would have a focus on equestrian trails and amenities but was formed under the Greenbelt Alliance.

“That was our over-arching umbrella organization,” she said.

LRRETA knew it would take a significant amount of time for them to receive their own 501c3 designation.

They banded together to immediately raise money for the elevated walkway.

It took much coordination between all of the controlling entities from the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, which owns the land; to the Texas State Parks and Wildlife Department, which manages the land; to the cities of Denton, Aubrey and Pilot Point.

“It was hard to get a meeting,” she said about having all the organizations



Trail riders enjoy the elevated walkway that inspired the creation of the Lake Ray Roberts Equestrian Trail Association. The organization has made many improvements to the over 29 miles of trails along the Greenbelt.

Photo Courtesy of LRRETA

in attendance.

The group eventually succeeded after two years.

They were awarded a grant for \$132,000 for the elevated walkway from a Texas Parks and Wildlife Recreational Trails grant. With the money, they were able to build the walkway and do some other improvements needed on the trails.

Moore praised LRRETA’s members for being good grant writers.

“We’re quite successful at the grant thing,” she said.

In 2012 LRRETA brought in \$460,000 worth of grant money to the park. That figure includes the money for the walkway and trail markers every half mile of all the trails.

“It took us about five years to finish that grant,” she said.

Grant money was used to improve amenities at the Bluestem Grove Equestrian Camp area at Isle du Bois.

Amenities at Bluestem Grove now include: nine double overnight horse stalls, day-use stalls, several recycled benches, a round pen, and water and electricity connections for the campsites.

A round pen, Moore explained, is a place for riders to warm up their horses that may have jitters from riding in trailers or are just needing to get out extra energy before riders take them on the trails.

“It’s a safety issue,” she said. “So, you can get them a little settled down.”

Overnight horse stalls, Moore said, offer another safety issue solution.

If campers only had places to tie horses, they run the risk of the horse getting free.

“You sure don’t want your horse getting untied in the middle of the night,” she said.

The benches are made out of recycled plastic.

“We collect stretchable plastics,” Moore said. “We have recycled more than 10,000 pounds of plastic.”

The group collects from the local Brookshire Brothers grocery store along with D&L Farm and Home, Denwards, and Pilot Point Feed Store for their used packing plastics.

Members of the community can also donate their used plastic grocery bags by contacting LRRETA.

The group’s trail improvements include preventative measures to keep muddy areas from becoming bogs that can injure the horse and rider.

They also have work days that included trail trimming. Work days usually happen twice a year—usually once in the spring and once in the fall.

Moore encourages anyone that would like to help with a work day to join them.

Ray Roberts Lake State Park Superintendent Robbie Merritt praised LRRETA’s most recent “big win” this year

Nonprofit provides needed volunteers, resources for paths

of adding the 50-amp electric and water connections to the camping spots at the Bluestem Grove.

“They’ve been working on it for years,” he said.

He relayed how the organization had been waiting patiently through many approval processes from the park.

Equestrians are only allowed to use Bluestem camping sites that have previously been primitive sites. With the electricity, those equestrian campers can have access to power for their recreational vehicles.

Moore said a lot of equestrians travel and stay at the park. Many of them have horse trailers that include added living spaces for humans.

The primitive sites posed a problem for those equestrians, “because the state park has a rule that after 10 o’clock you cannot run a generator, even though a lot of us have our own generators,” she said.

Although LRRETA had grant money for a lot of their projects, Merritt noted, they could not use any of that money for the electric and water con-



nections project.

“They raised almost \$60,000,” he said. “And they raised it all through grassroots efforts. ... They’re a really important partner.”

He explained that being a government entity can sometimes limit spending on certain projects.

“But having them being a nonprofit partner that’s just passionate ... really helps bring projects forward and get things done faster,” he said.

Merritt explained further that the

parcs are here for the people. To have people take ownership of the park in the manner and help steward resources is very important to the park itself.

“We have equestrian trails from U.S. 380 all the way up through the Greenbelt, through Isle du Bois through Jordan Park up the area we call Lost Lake, just north of Jordan,” he said. “It’s all continuous.”

He also pointed out that LRRETA had been nominated and were awarded by the 2022 Outstanding Friends

Group Award for Region VI by Texans for State Parks.

“They’ve got a lot to crow about this year, for sure,” Merritt said. “We’re super proud and excited for them.”

Members of LRRETA attended the conference in early March to receive the award.

Plans for the future include plans to fix the area along one of the trails the LRRETA members refer to as “horse bog creek” so named because a horse actually got bogged down in the area and had to eventually be pulled out with a rope.

Anyone can become a member of the group. Members do not have to own a horse.

Not all the improvements LRRETA makes are for equestrians alone. They are also planning rest stops that include hitching rails and a covered area with a picnic table at the halfway point on each of the five trails for all users of the trails.

“People can stop there, have a nice picnic lunch and then go on,” Moore said.

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Greenbelt provides trails, connectivity

By **Tatiana Ambrosio**
Staff Writer

Many of the Ranch Cities' newer residents may be waiting for their neighborhoods to be fully built to include amenities like trails and water features.

However, the Ray Roberts Lake State Park is only minutes from the driveway, offering protected green areas that long-established residents of the area have not only worked to protect but also gifted for all to use.

The state park includes the expected lake access and campgrounds found at the Isle du Bois and the Johnson Branch units. It also includes boat launches in Sanger and at Jordan, Buck Creek and Pecan Creek parks.

The complex includes an extensive network of trails for hiking, biking and horseback riding. This network of trails is known as The Greenbelt.

The Greenbelt contains over 29 miles of connected trails, including over 6 miles of "concrete/improved" trails and over 11 miles of equestrian or multi-use trails.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department leases the land from the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, which built the lake in the 1980s. The campgrounds opened in the mid to late 1990s, while the Greenbelt opened later into the early 2000s.

"That was in large part due to the good works of the people with the Greenbelt Alliance," Ray Roberts Lake State Park Superintendent Robbie Merritt said.

He said the Greenbelt Alliance began with mostly landowners along the Greenbelt corridor who donated a lot of the land to make sure it would be protected from future development.

"As a result of that, too, we were able to establish that trail system," he said.

The Greenbelt received over 70,000 visitors last year.

Visitors can access the trail system from Jordan Park, Isle du Bois, FM 455 (below the dam), FM 428 and U.S. 380.

In 2015, the access point and parking lot on U.S. 380 had been closed due to flooding and a log jam. It was a major log jam that, Merritt said, diverted the whole river through the area.

Merritt said frequent log jams



Trail markers line the more than 29 miles the Greenbelt has to offer visitors. Portions of the trail system are equestrian friendly.

**Tatiana Ambrosio/
Contributing
Photographer**

were the issue causing so much flooding in that area.

In 2018, a large log jam was removed by TxDOT.

"We thought that was going to fix our problem," he said, but it was to no avail. Another log jam was created with the next flood.

During the years since, the U.S. 380 access point had been closed, and a lot of options for reopening were discussed and worked through logistically.

After much deliberation and many attempts in 2021, there was a collective decision made that the park would accept that the area floods.

"We understand that this place is going to flood. It's in a floodplain but that doesn't mean we can't have a trail access here," Merritt said. "We've been open there since the fall of 2021."

Now the access point will be closed when it floods then cleaned out "as best [they] can" and reopened.

Merritt said that new loops will be added which mean visitors can still access areas from the FM 428 access point to the U.S. 380 access point, even during the floods.

Texas Parks and Wildlife is currently celebrating its 100 years of Texas State Parks.

"It's a pretty amazing time to be

working for [Texas] State Parks," Merritt said explaining the feeling of accomplishment of building the parks over the 100 years. "It feels like being on a bridge to the future," he said.

Merritt feels like the bridge connects the efforts of those in the past that worked to preserve the land to those in the future that will enjoy it. He pointed out that only approximately 3% of Texas' land is public land.

"So, these parks that we have are just that [much] more special ... especially as we see urbanization growing and growing," he said.

Ray Roberts Lake State Park will be participating in the celebration by hosting Greenfest on the Greenbelt on April 15. The event will be co-hosted by the Greenbelt Alliance.

The event will include a 5K trail run and a one-mile fun run. Runners are able to sign up until April 7. People will also be able to enjoy bounce houses and other activities.

"We're going to be out there in force with all kinds of different park ranger games," Merritt said.

He noted that the Blackland Prairie Raptor Center will also be on hand.

"It's going to be a fun time," he said.

The event will be at the Greenbelt access point on FM 428.

The Greenbelt Alliance is a volunteer organization that "fosters awareness of the Greenbelt; generates public support; promotes recreational and educational opportunities; and encourages preservation of the Greenbelt in its present, scenic, natural state for the benefit of all," according to its website.

Periodically, the state park will host interpreter programs along the Greenbelt. Merritt said information about any upcoming interpreter programs can be found on their Facebook pages.

"The Greenbelt's [events] are usually posted on Isle du Bois' [Facebook page]," he said.

Some of the park's most interesting animals can be seen from the Greenbelt.

Merritt said that people are often amazed by the beavers and otters that live in the park. He said they can be hard to spot, but their evidence can be found along the Greenbelt.

"They like to hang out especially in those sloughs and things off of the main trail," he said.

Pets are allowed on the Greenbelt while on their leash, and Dallas Off-Road Bicycle Association also uses the trail system.

Currently, the park is hiring a new supervisor for the Greenbelt as the previous supervisor, Daniel Rios, was promoted to another park. Merritt explained that there is a comradery among parks, especially with those close in the region.

"It's a pretty tight working community," he said.

He explained that even recently members of his staff went to Eisenhower State Park at Lake Texoma to help clear campgrounds, and that the Ray Roberts staff has often borrowed equipment from them.

"We've got a really close working relationship with all of our other state parks in the area," he said.

The trails will soon be more user friendly with new names and new trail markers showing the names. A new trail map is available on the website. Merritt expects the new maps to be displayed at access points and along the trails by fall of 2023.

Finding flowers at Ray Roberts Lake

Story & Pictures by
Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

The wildflowers that dot the Ray Roberts Lake State Park system aren't there purely by accident or nature.

Members of the park system staff actively work to help the wildflower population flourish throughout the different park units to help visitors have a look at the flowers native to the area.

"Our dream is to be ... a wildflower destination," Johnson Branch Unit Assistant Superintendent Scott Eager said.

Flowers bloom year-round at the park, helping pollinators find sources of food outside of the plentiful months.

Many of the same varieties can be found

across the park, including in pocket prairies, "where we're doing a lot of invasive species removal," Isle du Bois Unit Superintendent Mark Stewart said.

"[That's] so that people can kind of see what some of this area looked like 100 years ago, 200 years ago, when settlers were coming through the area."

Eager also gave a warning to people searching through tall grass for the blossoms to check for insect and arachnid bites.

See which of the flowers on this page you can find at the park.



Elderberry



Evening Primrose



Texas Thistle



Echinacea



Lemon Beebalm



Black-eyed Susan



Finger Poppy-mallow



Longhead Coneflower



Texas Star



Coneflower



Mimosa



Rosinweed



Green Milkweed



Indian Paintbrush



Triodanis



Indian Blanket



Noble Yarrow

Ray Roberts Lake animal search

There's a wide variety of creatures to find within the Ray Roberts Lake State Park complex, ranging from insects that live in the water and on land, to migratory and birds who stay year-round as well as reptiles that include the six-lined racerunner and various snakes to mammals as small as squirrels to as large as white-tailed deer.

The fish, which include bottom-dwellers like catfish and bass, draw out anglers all year.

The following are a collection of animals seen at Ray Roberts Lake State Park.

See which of the animals on this page you can find at the park.



Beetle



Cardinal



Catfish



Cormorant



Deer



Goose



Orb Weaver



Pelican



Rabbit



Racerunner



Turkey



Wild Pig



On the move

After launching from the Jordan Park boat ramp, a boater opens up his engine past the wave breaks.

Abigail Allen/
The Post-Signal

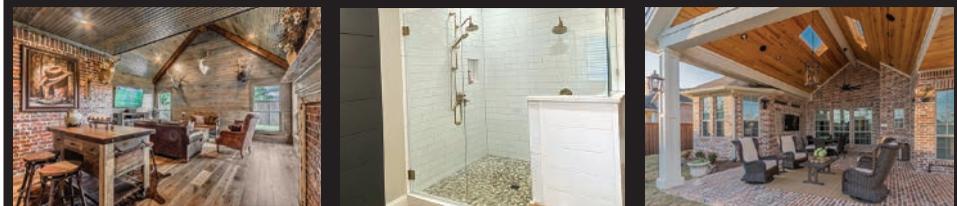
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