

Ray Roberts Lake 2024 Visitors Guide

The Post-Signal | Friday, March 15, 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

RAY ROBERTS LAKE STATE PARK

- 3** Letter from RRLSP Superintendent
- 4** Ray Roberts offers top-level service
- 8** Programming draws visitors to park
- 11** Rangers ask visitors to 'Leave No Trace'

ISLE DU BOIS

- 12** Renfro learns ropes from top park staff

THE GREENBELT

- 15** Staff works to improve Greenbelt access

JOHNSON BRANCH

- 18** Flores flourishes at Johnson Branch

RAY ROBERTS LAKE STATE PARK CONT.

- 20** Prescribed burn turns mess into benefit
- 23** Bassmaster to return to Ray Roberts
- 26** Hibbard hits the waves
- 29** Finding flowers at Ray Roberts Lake
- 30** Ray Roberts Lake animal search
- 31** Ongoing effort

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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 and one of the best State Parks in our Gold Medal Award Winning, Texas State Park System! We are so very excited to have you and your family here this season!

Our Rangers have had a very busy winter season, working hard to improve the parks for your visit this year! Several restroom repair and enhancement projects, our new kayak rental facility and Kid Fish Pond improvements at Johnson Branch, and the new accessibility mats on our beaches to name a few. We've also completed several natural resource projects this year, such as hazard tree removals, new tree plantings, and prescribed fires throughout the parks to better conserve and protect these beautiful cross timbers forests and prairie habitats for the enjoyment of our wildlife and YOU!

So, come play for the day at the beach or stay overnight with us at one of the many campsites. You can even rent a beautiful hotel room in the park at the Lone Star Lodge and Marina. Then take a leisurely stroll through the beautiful woods along some of our easy paved pathways or challenge yourself on the many miles of mountain biking and equestrian trails. No matter who you are, there's a trail for you to connect and unwind with here at Ray Roberts Lake SP.

If the lake is calling, grab your rod and a friend and go catch that "Big One" off of the Isle du Bois fishing pier, or maybe a not so big one at the Johnson Branch Kid Fish Pond (*Just as Fun!*). Bring your boat and explore the lake from one of our 7 boat ramps around the lake or rent a boat for the day at the Lone Star Lodge & Marina or the Lake Ray Roberts Marina.

No matter what outdoor adventure you're looking for, Ray Roberts Lake State Park and the many wonderful businesses in our surrounding towns have exactly what you need to make lasting memories this year. We look forward to seeing you soon out at the lake, in the parks, or downtown on the square.

Welcome and Many Thanks,

Robbie Merritt
Park Superintendent
Ray Roberts Lake State Park Complex

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To manage and conserve the natural and cultural resources of Texas and to provide hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation opportunities for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Ray Roberts offers top-level service



Parkgoers at the Isle du Bois Unit swim beach enjoy the warm water on Memorial Day. Whether it's a national holiday, spring break or a summer weekend, the IDB Unit typically fills to capacity early, with the staff recommending visitors reserve their camping sites or day-use passes in advance.

File Photo/The Post-Signal

By Abigail Allen
Editor & Publisher

During the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's centennial year of 2023, the system earned another reason to celebrate—Texas was named the top state park system in the nation.

Ray Roberts Lake State Park Superintendent Robbie Merritt said “being able to win that gold medal while celebrating that is pretty awesome.”

“It was a big year for us, celebrating our centennial—100 years of state parks in Texas,” he said. “Looking back on where we come from, a chance to look forward to where we want to go. It seems like everything just came together in that centennial year.”



A display within the lobby of the Johnson Branch Unit's headquarters provides visitors the chance to buy merchandise that includes magnets, lapel pins and hiking stick rings that bear the unit's name. The state has provided Johnson Branch and the Isle du Bois Unit such merchandise to sell.

Abigail Allen/
The Post-Signal

Thousands visit Ray Roberts annually



A couple of riders make their way through the forest within the Isle du Bois Unit on horseback on July 3. The Ray Roberts Lake State Park system offers a wide range of paths for equestrian visitors, including an equestrian-friendly primitive camp area at the Blue Stem Grove area.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

“We did things in that centennial year that we’ve never done before from a statewide level. We had art exhibitions. We created a music album through the foundation. We had sponsorships that we’ve never had before, like HEB was a big part of that.”

Another big factor for the state park system as a whole, Merritt said, was the voter-approved creation of the \$1 billion Centennial Parks Conservation Fund.

That will allow the state to purchase land for and open new state parks.

“With Prop 5 securing our funding for us so we can actually see what’s coming in the future, which we never could before, and now with the centennial fund, we’re at the cusp of a new golden age,” Merritt said. “We’re planning to open five new state parks within the state within the next 10 years, which hasn’t been done in decades and is desperately needed with

the growing population.”

The Ray Roberts Lake State Park was featured in a full-length TV show and played host to Gov. Greg Abbott in June.

“This year, we’re kind of looking forward to getting back to the basics and inviting a lot more people out, as we always do,” Merritt said. “Making those valuable connections where we can.”

Ray Roberts also earned the top honor within the Texas state park system, and it seems to be on the track to do that again this year.

“I think visitation-wise, we’re ahead of where we were last year,” IDB Superintendent Mark Stewart said in late February. “... It’s been busy.”

The wide range of park units within the Ray Roberts Lake State Park help stack the deck for top-visited park, Stewart said.

“The odds kind of work in our favor because of the way the numbers

are added up,” Stewart said. “Because a lot of the other parks are just one little park, they’re one unit, versus here, they’re adding all the Greenbelt units, all the boat ramp units, IDB and JB all together. We’re so far ahead of where everybody else is, visitation-wise, we’ll probably be the most visited again.”

Merritt sees the system he manages as multiple individual parks amassed together as one.

“Take IDB itself, it would be four or five in the state, as compared to parks like Palo Duro and Garner,” Merritt said.

Merritt is hoping to get a better handle on the way the counts are calculated for the satellite units, which largely rely on weight sensors, before he celebrates that No. 1 status too much.

Ray Roberts now has items that people can purchase to remember their visits to the two main units.

“That was a big new thing this year, we finally got park store items,” Merritt said. “Both IDB and JB got their own.”

There are also general Texas state park items available, including a state park passport and a map on which each state park can be scratched off once it is visited.

Merritt also recognized the work of the park hosts and other regular volunteers for the way they support the work of the paid staff.

“We have a lot of day-use volunteers that come in periodically, too,” he said. “Master Naturalists that help us keep the nature centers open on the weekends, and that is invaluable to us so that our interpreters can have time to go do programs and plan for that.”

Supporting one another and providing training that matches people’s interests is also a crucial part of what makes the Ray Roberts Lake State Park system as a whole successful.

Park prioritizes visitor satisfaction, resource management

“This, very much, is a community of—and this is all Texas state parks—we’re very much a community of wanting to promote from within,” Johnson Branch Park Interpreter Izzy Mabry said. “And we want to get everybody where they want to be.”

At Johnson Branch, there is a new kayak launch and rental facility.

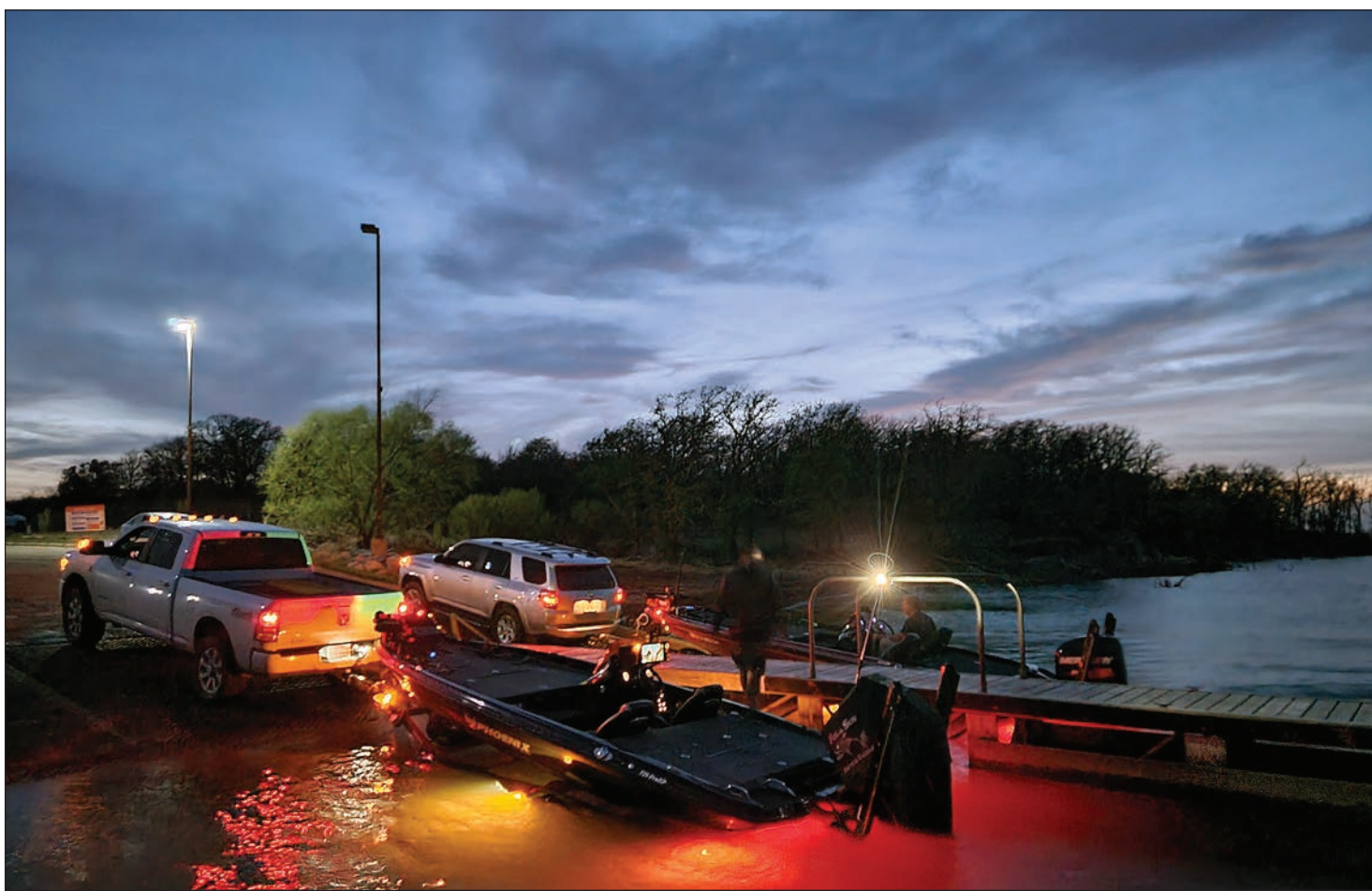
Among the projects planned at Ray Roberts is work being done at IDB to make it more ADA compliant, including a colorblind viewer that will overlook the boat ramp and a primitive camping loop.

It is the centennial project paid for by the state.

“I think it’s a really good project to help folks that haven’t been able to see colors potentially see some of nature in all its color,” Stewart said.

Several anglers load their boats back up on their trailers at the Jordan Park boat ramp on March 22, 2023. Jordan Park is one of the satellite parks within the Ray Roberts Lake State Park system.

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Programming draws visitors to park



Members of the Pilot Point Chamber of Commerce manage the Buddy Bass Tournament on Sept. 8. The program, paired with a vendor event, was done through a partnership between the Chamber and the Ray Roberts Lake State Park staff.

By Basil Gist
Staff Writer

As mother nature sends the area out of winter and into spring, the local state parks present a cavalcade of public events.

From festivals to educational events and conservation efforts, Park Interpreters Mindy Shumate, at Isle du Bois, and Izzy Mabry, at Johnson Branch, have a full plate making it all happen.

“As long as we’re focused on the natural, cultural, and historical resources of the park, we kind of have the freedom to do whatever type of programming we like,” Shumate said. “It’s about bringing people together to not just learn

something, but build a sense of community.”

Less traveled and further from the heart of the Ranch Cities, events at Johnson Branch double down on that sense of community, Mabry said.

“For us to have that draw and park guests who regularly come back is huge because it means we’re making an impact and it means these parents are choosing to bring their families out here versus just sitting in front of a TV,” Mabry said. “It lets me know that the community is engaged, does care, and is willing to get outside.”

She explained her focus for the year is on steady, sizable events.

“We’re really trying to focus on bigger annual events, things our community can rely on year after year,” Mabry said. “That’s our big goal for our programs is just being a reliable source for our community to feel like they have a safe place where they can learn, have fun and enjoy nature again.”

Spring Fling, for instance, happening on Saturday, is an annual event the park tries to place in the middle of spring break to encourage as many repeat visitors and new patrons as possible.

At IDB, the community continues to show Shumate they’re interested in new opportunities, so she fills her calen-

dar with a bevy of offerings, some which are sporadic, an eclipse watch party on April 8, monthly Dutch oven cooking the third Saturday of each month, or the annual Greenfest on April 20.

“Now coming into my fourth year, I’ve really got a good idea of what works and doesn’t work, and what the visitors are looking for,” Shumate said. “Our park just gets such good visitation and ‘want to’ from our visitors it’s hard not to put on the big events because we know we’re going to get a good turnout and can make more of an impact.”

Shumate said one of her new favorites is coming up at the end of March.

“March 30th is one of my newer and

Basil Gist/The Post-Signal

Interpreters work to offer quality events

favorite programs,” Shumate said. “It’s going to be Settler Women. We’re going to be talking about some of the brave women who helped settle this area and make Texas what it is. It includes local people and big names like Molly Goodnight, one of my personal heroes.”

She also highlighted a couple of conservation events coming up in April and May, Prairie Restoration and Kayak Clean Up, respectively.

The first will involve preparing the park for further prescribed burns.

“A lot of vegetation that shouldn’t be in a prairie is a little more resistant to fire, so if you cut it down, dead wood is always going to burn faster,” Shumate said. “When we do these preemptive measures, then the prescribed burns clear those areas out really well.”

The cleanup, she said, is as fun as it is helpful.

“If you’ve never kayaked before, this isn’t the program for you because we’ll be on the river, and it could be really flowing at that point,” Shumate said. “For those of us that want a little fun while still giving back, it’s several hours of having a ton of fun while giving back by picking up. It’s all either stuff that’s already made it in the river or is about to.”

On the larger festival side, Shumate called attention to Greenfest on the Greenbelt.

“That’s a true festival, tables set up, vendors, the 1-mile run, the 5K and this is the first year they’re doing a 10K,” Shumate said. “I thought I might go run the 1 mile in uniform.”

With a smile, she also encouraged participation in a new event, happen-



Chandler Sanford, left, and Grayson Gregory, park rangers with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers share giveaways with families to encourage them to use life jackets when they’re on the water at Ray Roberts Lake State Park on Saturday.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

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Large events draw in community, support repeat visitors

ing May 4, which will bring a little more competition than time at the park usually features: The Texas Birding Classic.

“This will be the first year we’re going to have a team,” Shumate said. “This is a statewide birding event. Ours will be a Big Sit. It will be in a set location and anyone from the public, for the duration we’re doing it, can participate and add to the team number.”

There is no limit to team numbers for this event, so the more eyes on, the better, she said.

With such a packed schedule, the best way, both interpreters have said, to keep up is via the branches individual Facebook pages. They feature the most up-to-date information not only on scheduling, but also on cancellations.

“It’s something the community will know they can come have a good family day to enjoy,” Mabry said. “Though sometimes the rain does decide to come.”

Johnson Branch Unit Interpreter Izzy Mabry connects with Ashlyn Saxer about career options in the state park system.

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Rangers ask visitors to ‘Leave No Trace’

By Basil Gist
Staff Writer

With the lake and surrounding parks within spitting distance of the Ranch Cities, residents would be remiss not to take to nature this summer.

Though some time on the trails, in the water and at the campsites may be just what the doctor ordered, enjoying those spaces in a way that lets them persist to be enjoyed again is crucial.

“Some people don’t even understand the impact they are leaving,” Isle du Bois Interpretive Ranger Mindy Shumate said. “It is nature’s home; we are the visitors.”

Shumate, along with many rangers, is a proponent of Leave No Trace, an organization which created a set of principles designed to keep people mindful of the influence they have on natural spaces.

“It’s basically impossible to leave ‘no’ trace, but if we called it ‘leave little trace,’ it wouldn’t be as meaningful,” Shumate said. “It’s all about minimizing your impact. If every park visitor was more mindful of minimizing their impact on the natural areas that we love so much, then everyone’s going to get more out of them.”

The four core principles are know before you go, don’t be a party pooper, trash talk and better together.

“Plan ahead and prepare—you can always reach out to us to help better prepare for your trip,” Shumate said. “Travel and camp on durable surfaces. Our park provides camp pads. They’re designated areas for people to always put their tents.”

The subject of waste applies to both that of the human and animal



Leave No Trace Basics

How to Enjoy the Outdoors Responsibly

Say hello to the great outdoors! Now that you’re here, you are invited to help keep these places healthy and beautiful. As people are getting outside in record numbers, the need to put Leave No Trace skills and ethics into action to minimize our collective impact is more important than ever. **To join in, here’s what you need to know:**



Know Before You Go

Look up the areas you plan to visit online or contact the local visitor center.

Knowing things such as road conditions, weather and available facilities is important.

Be sure to bring all the basics: food, extra water, and a bag to take trash home with you.

Packing extra items such as sunscreen, extra clothing layers, a basic first aid kit, rain gear and a map is always a safe bet.



Don’t Be a Party Pooper

Pet waste is a health hazard for both people and animals. Pet waste can lead to the rise of invasive species and can spread diseases which harms water, plants and wildlife that call this place home. Pack out your pet waste.

Need to go but bathrooms are closed? First, walk at least 70 steps away from trails, water and people. If you have to poop, either 1) Dig a “cat hole” 6 inches+ deep, dispose of your waste in the hole, cover it, and pack out your toilet paper, or 2) Use a “wag bag” (a disposable bag to poop in, found in most outdoor stores) so you can pack out your waste.



Trash Talk

Pack it in, pack it out! Pick up all your trash and pack it out or dispose of it in a trashcan.

Natural items such as orange and banana peels, apple cores and nutshells can take years to decompose. Pack those out too.

Food scraps attract and harm wildlife, which in turn can put people at risk.



Better Together

We all share the outdoors. Everyone may have different ideas and expectations about what it means to be outside but we all must be respectful of others we encounter.

Let’s all do our part to make the outdoors inclusive and welcoming to everyone. A friendly smile at people you encounter can go a long way.

Enjoy Your World. Leave No Trace.

© 2020, Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics: www.LNT.org

The state park staff uses graphics like this to help people understand how to help care for their environment.

Graphic Courtesy of TPWD

variety.

“If you know you’re bringing your dog to the park, just bring some bags to pick up after them,”

Shumate said. “Not only can [leaving droppings] disturb other people’s experience on the trail, ... it can also interfere with the wild-

life’s behavior.”

Most state parks make disposing of trash a breeze.

“We have dumpsters at every camp loop, down at the day use, at the dump station and we are also very happy about having a recycling dumpster down at our dump station,” Shumate said. “Our park hosts are very familiar with the leave no trace principles, some of them just always have trash bags on them and like to hand them out to people in the park.”

The final broad Leave No Trace principle applies not to wildlife, but to other visitors.

“This might be one family’s vacation for the entire year, and everyone enjoys these natural spaces differently,” Shumate said. “The way someone enjoys it might interfere with the way you’re enjoying it, but that’s kind of the beauty of it being a public space and a large park.”

More information about Leave No Trace is as close as a quick internet search or dropping by a park’s nature center and asking.

“I would encourage people to visit the LNT.org website and learn more about it,” Shumate said. “Anything and everything that we check out for free to individuals, ... includes little cards about Leave No Trace because again, it is about education and introducing people to the topic.”

Though the principles of Leave No Trace are just that, many of its guidelines intersect with the park’s hard and fast rules.

“Not only the animal itself, but the animal’s home, is worth respecting,” Shumate said. “Keep the wild areas wild.”



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Renfro learns ropes from top park staff



Isle du Bois Unit Trainee Dustin Renfro loves having the chance to improve the accessibility of the park, as well as helping Interpreter Mindy Shumate install additional features that will help the park's youngest visitors enjoy their time outside.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

By Thomas Engelbert
Contributing Writer

The dedication of the team at Isle du Bois State Park to ensure visitors have an exceptional experience in their parks is evident in the commitment of employees like Dustin Renfro.

Renfro's role as a park operations trainee at Isle du Bois highlights his dedication to providing visitors with unforgettable experiences in the great outdoors.

"It's real exciting for me to see somebody come in and get that passion for parks and have that desire to further our mission and be a steward of both our natural and cultural resources and provide that quality experience for [our] visitors," Isle du

Bois Unit Superintendent Mark Stewart said.

As a trainee, Renfro is tasked with learning and mastering various aspects of park management, from administrative duties to hands-on maintenance tasks.

"There is a decent amount of office work that I have in my position, but I love being able to go outside," he said. "Like, today, we're cutting ... dead trees in our day use area. So my role gets to, really encompass a lot of things."

Renfro's role includes a wide range of responsibilities aimed at improving the park experience for visitors.

Renfro never saw himself becoming an operations trainee. Ever since he was a kid, he always had a different

plan for himself.

"My original goal was to be a game warden," Renfro said. "I kind of tailored my whole life around that. I got my degree with that purpose, did extracurricular activities for that purpose. And then, things in life just kind of changed.

"[I] ended up going to a Bible school up in Branson for a year, and I ended up meeting my wife there. My outlook on life changed a little bit and just kind of realized that the game warden path wasn't the right path for me."

Ultimately, Renfro found his calling at IDB, joining the team in March of 2023.

"Dustin's been an outstanding trainee," Stewart said. "... The pur-

pose of that program, of course, is to get him ready to go on to be a manager or assistant manager of a park somewhere. He's shown a great aptitude to learn all those skills and be ready to move on when his time comes."

That's nothing new for Stewart or for his counterpart at the Johnson Branch Unit, Scott Eager.

"Over the years, there's been quite a few across the state," Stewart said of former Ray Roberts staff who have furthered their careers in other parks. "There's been a lot of folks who have come through as trainees ... who have gone on to be managers at other places."

Upon starting at the park, Renfro faced a steep learning curve, never

Renfro sees value in outdoors

having worked in a similar environment before.

“When I first started, I’d never worked in [Parks and Wildlife],” he said. “So, there was a huge learning curve for me.”

Renfro wasted no time, “jumping in, learning the system [and] learning the lingo,” he said.

He spent his first two months focusing on the reservation system, assisting visitors with camping permits and day passes.

From there, he moved into a more field-oriented role, where he started working with the maintenance rangers, learning how they take care of the park, from plumbing, electrical and landscaping to cleaning up campsites.

That process taught him all about their day-to-day operations.

Despite not holding a formal leadership position, Renfro actively contributes to the effective functioning of his park team.

“I can help to outline our rangers to make sure that they have tasks that they’re getting accomplished, because I may have more information

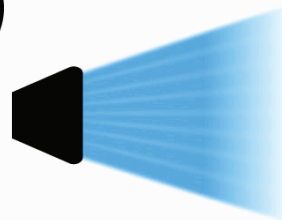
about the kind of projects that we’re trying to get done,” Renfro said.

Beyond his professional pursuits, Renfro’s interests align closely with his love for the outdoors. Whether it’s spending leisure time fishing on the water or exploring scenic trails on his mountain bike, he finds comfort and inspiration in the natural world.

His passion for outdoor recreation serves as a testament to his personal connection to nature and his unwavering advocacy for outdoor conservation and exploration.

From an early age, Renfro carried a profound appreciation for nature, fostered by cherished memories of outdoor adventures with his father.

“I can look back on my childhood—me and my dad used to go camping all the time, going to Enchanted Rock, hiking to the top of Enchanted Rock, riding our mountain bikes at Palo Duro Canyon and going out on the lake at Lake Somerville,” Renfro said. “We hit a lot of different state parks, so I got to a lot of different places. We’d go at least once a month, and I think that was really rooted in a passion and a love for the outdoors.”



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Trainee tries to harness youth outside in professional life

From an early age, Renfro knew he wanted to do work outdoors to preserve and “help facilitate those memories for new generations coming up,” he said.

These formative experiences instilled in Renfro a desire to work outdoors and preserve the natural beauty of his surroundings for others.

At the heart of his passions and career lies a profound motivation that comes from witnessing the excitement and joy that people experience when they visit the park.

He recounted a recent experience, helping a family at the entrance of the park, and “these little kids were just super excited to be at the park.”

He said he loves, “just seeing them have so much fun.”

Those memories that they are creating with one another, “that’s what keeps me going day in and day out,” Renfro added.

Renfro views his role as more than just a job; it’s an opportunity for personal growth, self-discovery and professional development. Each day

presents new challenges and learning experiences, allowing him to refine his skills, expand his knowledge and evolve as both a professional and an individual.

Looking ahead, Renfro remains committed to his mission of preserving the natural beauty of Isle du Bois and facilitating memorable experiences for generations to come.

That includes helping with ADA-compliant projects throughout the park, such as the walking path by the Nature Center and with the colorblind viewers.

Renfro himself will benefit from the viewers, and he’s excited to see how visitors to the park who are colorblind will respond to that amenity.

“I want to help families and individuals just make memories,” Renfro said. “And so, having a place for people who might have a disability of being colorblind or [with their mobility] is adding to that experience and allows for those memories to be made. I get pretty jazzed about it.”



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Staff works to improve Greenbelt access



Three deer look up across the Elm Fork River at the Elm Fork portion of the Greenbelt. The park, which is included in the Ray Roberts Lake State Park system, starts on the southern side of the dam and continues through to Lake Lewisville.

Photos by
Abigail Allen/
The Post-Signal

By Abigail Allen
Editor & Publisher

The Greenbelt Unit of the Lake Ray Roberts State Park provides an entirely different environment for parkgoers to enjoy.

The river bottom, which is surrounded by bottomland hardwood forest, has patches of swampy areas.

“Historically, what we try to do is aim for what the pre-white settlement habitat was,” said Robbie Merritt, the Lake Ray Roberts State Park superintendent. “... We’re taking some steps this year to set the stage for the future on that. We’re working on a project to build a greenhouse at IDB where we can actually harvest acorns and seed from the Greenbelt to grow up saplings there and then plant them here as part of a larger project in the years to come.”

The natural habitat isn’t



all the park staff is trying to restore.

“Last summer, we went in and reclaimed two sections of the old equestrian trail that had been washed away that we still think are viable,” Merritt said.

Where the paths nearly merged before, now has been turned into a way for the staff to open more pathways.

“There’s points where they come so close to the hard-surface trail that we

were able to loop them together,” Merritt said. “Whereas in the past, every time it floods, we’d close from the overlook all the way down to 380, which is a little over four miles of trail, now we have the abil-

In an attempt to make more of the Greenbelt usable for park visitors, the rangers continually work on keeping the multi-use path clear and passable.

ity to close it and open it in sections.”

Although it would be ideal to have both paths open—one for horseback riders and the other for hikers and bikers—having one path at parts is better than having to close everything, Merritt said.

“When we went about this project and posed the idea, it was a matter of either we do this and it’s multi-use or we don’t and the equestrians just don’t have a path south,” he said.

The Lake Ray Roberts Equestrian Trails Association signed off on the plan, he added.

“We’ve established that this Pecan Grove Loop around here and back is maintaining well during floods,” Merritt said. “This next loop, the loop we’re calling the Clear Creek Loop, it gets to just a little over a mile north of 380.

Flooding causes closures

I just don't know if it's going to be sustainable or not. Since the last flood, it got severely impacted."

He's thrilled that the Pecan Grove Loop is so far able to stay open.

"We may have had a half victory on this one," he added.

The portion closest to U.S. 380 has been closed since December because of flooding issues and the resulting deadfall.

"We had that closed for six years straight," Merritt said. "The strategic plan was we'd have a fix to the log jams and it wouldn't flood any more. We had a shift in that a few years ago. Now, we recognize that



Ray Roberts Lake State Park Superintendent Robbie Merritt looks out at the problematic part of the Greenbelt path. Forest fall and standing water keep the portion closest to the access point along U.S. 380 closed following heavy rainfall and flooding. Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

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Rangers find ways to increase access to park

it's going to flood. Open it when we can. Close it when we have to."

The head of the Greenbelt Unit, Matt Moore, has that and some additional big challenges with the portion of the park that he leads.

"He acts as a small park manager and our resource specialist for the complex, which is a big ask," Merritt said. "So, finding the right person for that is really important. I think we hit the nail on the head with Matt."

Another project that Moore's trying to tackle in both of his roles is cutting back the invasive species that are within the park, including privet and Johnson grass.

"We don't have a fire prescription for the Greenbelt," Merritt said. "It's just such a narrow strip. It would be really hard to do and not affect our landowners on either side, so we have to find other solutions."

He talked about using a forestry mulcher to clear out a lot of the privet near the walking path south of FM 428 and a hay baler that clears the Johnson grass.

Another invasive species—the emerald ash borer—likes to contribute to the number of felled trees in the forest, which is something the park staff watches carefully, especially along the open paths.

Moore has two full-time team members, seasonal help and park hosts who assist him in maintaining the Greenbelt Unit.

There are some sizable cottonwood trees that grow along the riverbank, their roots exposed in tangled masses.

"There's a lot of beaver and otter activity in these little places," Merritt said. "They're hard to find just looking, but we get game camera photos from time to time."

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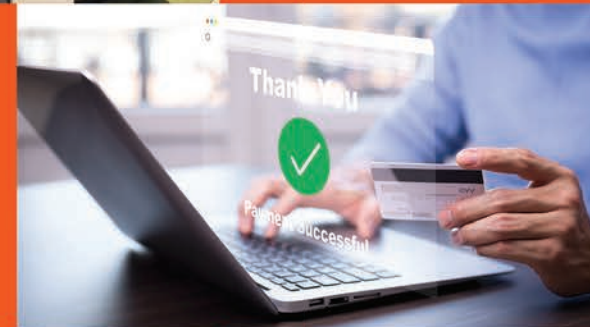


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Johnson Branch Assistant Office Manager Celia Flores loves being inside the Nature Center because that's where many of the park programs happen. Flores has the goal of becoming a park interpreter.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

Flores flourishes at Johnson Branch

By Thomas Engelbert
Contributing Writer

The north side of Lake Ray Roberts State Park is the home of the Johnson Branch Unit.

There, amid the rustling leaves is the woman who holds the heart of Johnson Branch—Celia Flores.

“One of her biggest attributes is her customer service skills,” Office Manager Jae Luna said. “I’ve never seen anything like it. She makes everybody feel extremely welcomed and part of our group.”

A dedicated assistant office man-

ager, Flores embodies a commitment to excellence, with a singular focus on visitor satisfaction as her foremost priority.

In this perfect setting, her passion for service and attention to detail converge, enriching the park's atmosphere and enhancing visitors' experiences with every interaction.

With over a year and a half of experience in her role, she brings a wealth of passion and dedication to every aspect of her work.

“She’s always going out and doing above and beyond things,” Luna

said. “She’s part of our recruitment team throughout the state. She just got Sawyer certified. She’s trying to get into interpreters. So, we do all we can to let her get out there.”

Flores loves her job and wants to connect with every person she meets. Her short-term goal is making sure everyone is satisfied with their stay at the park, and someday she wants to become a park interpreter.

“[It feels great to] see how happy they are at the end of their reservation or just how excited they are when you ... see them first enter the

park,” Flores said. “They [have] all kinds of smiles.”

Her excitement extends to those who are dealing with something as they pull up to headquarters.

“Some of them may come stressed,” she said.

When that is the case, she said, Flores is happy to put “them at ease and answering all the questions that they have.”

She never had quite as strong of a fixation on the outdoors as some others, but she still had a love for it.

“I kind of grew up a little differ-

Flores embraces opportunities in park system

ently,” Flores said. “I didn’t grow up outside, so being in the park system now is still an eye-opener.”

Flores’ journey to her current position has been shaped by her upbringing in various communities within the Dallas-Fort Worth Area.

Moving from Farmers Branch to Addison then Carrollton to Little Elm in the early 2000s, Flores is now residing in Cross Roads. She has always been close to the urban hustle and bustle.

Despite not having extensive exposure to the outdoors during her formative years, Flores developed a fascination with nature through visits to local zoos.

“Because I’ve lived so close to either Dallas or Fort Worth, I always had the opportunity to go to the zoo,” she said.

Visiting the tiger exhibit at 5 made a deep impression on her, and her love of cats continues today.

“I like the small ones, too, like the bobcats I get to see out here,” she said. “They’re so fascinating.”

She enjoys watching families enjoy the park together from one of her

favorite spots in the park—a secluded picnic table near the boat ramp.

Her journey into the park system was an unanticipated one, driven by a desire to explore new career avenues while using her administrative skills.

Before joining the Johnson Branch team, Flores gained valuable experience working as an administrative assistant for the Boy Scouts of America.

That role not only honed her organizational and managerial abilities but also sparked her passion for environmental education and community engagement.

Flores expressed a strong passion for environmental education and engagement with the community, spearheading programs aimed at fostering environmental awareness, education and appreciation among visitors.

She discusses her involvement in educational programs like the junior ranger program, paper airplane competition and her critter talk. All of the activities she hosts have some kind of educational component to

them.

“I want kids to be more comfortable with being outside, especially with people on their tablets and their phones,” Flores said.

A popular event organized by Flores is the paper airplane competition, inspired by Elizabeth Bessie Coleman, the first African American female to obtain a pilot’s license.

The critter talks she leads aim to educate park attendants about critters in their area that may seem a little spooky but are a real help to the environment.

“There was a point in my career path I was just trying to get in anywhere until Scott actually called me,” Flores said. “I was kind of taken aback by it because I took a chance on it. [I] really wasn’t expecting the interview that soon. I’m still so thankful for it. Again, they have thrown so many opportunities at me.”

Those opportunities may turn into a change of “becoming an interpreter hopefully soon,” she said, and Park Interpreter Izzy Mabry has been a great mentor to her.

“I don’t think I would be where I

am right now without her and really the whole team that has encouraged me,” Flores said.

Mabry is incredibly proud, she said, of the work Flores does to put on quality programs for their visitors.

“It’s a breath of fresh air,” Mabry said. “She really, really is.”

Knowing she can entrust the park’s programs to Flores when she needs to be away for other state park-related work is huge for her.

“I’m gone doing outreach every Saturday in April,” Mabry said. “And knowing that I have her here means I know my park is being taken care of, so I can go do those outreach events.”

It’s important to Mabry to make sure Flores feels supported, “because that is basically taking on two jobs at once,” she said. “But she has stepped up, and she has been amazing.”

That goes for more than just the help she provides with programming.

“She’s somebody we can rely on parkwide,” Mabry said.

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Prescribed burn turns mess into benefit



Wildlife Fire Management Specialist Joe Lewis watches for trouble areas that might cause a spot fire on the eastern side of the park road on Feb. 26. The prescribed burn ran from the western edge of the park road to the dam.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

By Abigail Allen
Editor & Publisher

Fires can have a devastating impact, as was clear in the Smokehouse

Creek fire that raged in the Texas Panhandle in February into March, becoming the largest fire in state history, as well as the Windy Duece fire and the

Grape Vine Creek fire.

It's the threat of such wildfires that leads the park service to hold prescribed burns at state parks like the

Ray Roberts Lake State Park.

"First and foremost, [reasons why prescribed burns are important] is safety for the park and our neighbors

Fire service pulls participants from across state



The fire team babysits the blaze during the controlled fire on Feb. 26 to ensure the flames don't spread beyond the intended focus area.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

so that we don't have huge fuel loads build up and wildfires that blow through and get out of control and jump over the line to our neighbors' property," Ray Roberts Lake Superintendent Robbie Merritt said. "A really close second to that is the resource management part of our mission. All of these forests and prairies in the area were traditionally ... fire-climax communities.

"It wasn't until humans came in and built roads and fence lines and started stopping fire that that stopped."

Thinning the forest in such a way allows tree seedlings a chance to reach some sunlight because they are no longer choked out by the ground cover immediately following a fire.

"This helps promote native

species over invasive species," Merritt said.

Conditions have to be just right for such a controlled burn, and it must be babysat carefully.

"We were pretty lucky," Merritt said on Feb. 26. "I thought we were done for the season because it's greening up so much everywhere, but we managed to get this last one [in]."

Merritt's eyes turned to the cedar tree, wrapped in flames that spiked a few feet above the tip of the tree.

Merritt, along with the park firefighters, remained vigilant about the blaze while interacting with the people coming into the park, which was still open for use in certain areas.

"The way the winds are

blowing today, if it gets over here, it can go pretty fast," Merritt said. "We still have Merrill Road over there to help stop it, but we really don't want to get into this patch."

When spots kept popping up east of the park road, the firefighters fanned out into the forest to ensure there were no sleeper spots burning that could spell out trouble.

"It's a tough balance, because you can't burn when there's no wind, because then the smoke just sits and you don't get a good burn," Merritt said. "But you can't burn with the wind in the wrong direction or too strong."

The staff prepped the burned portions of the parks for six months to make sure the only things that burned were intended to, he added.

"Some days, you get the whole team here, gather them up from all over the state and all the equipment and everything, and then you wake up that morning, and you're like, 'Nope.'"

That's why the teams deploy to a region that has options to shift to, as needed.

Although the controlled burn can result in the loss of some trees, the blaze tends to affect other parts of the forest to a much greater degree, turning leaf litter and other things along the ground into fertile soil.

"Controlled burns are very important to the environment because it replenishes a lot of natural resources back into the soil, which is really great for animals because the floras can flourish back and they can

get nutrients from those," Isle du Bois Office Manager Kailyn Taylor said.

It's also an important preventative measure in a forest with a lot of debris and underbrush that would have been naturally removed through wildfires.

"It clears the ground floor of the forest, so if a wildfire was to come through, there wouldn't be as much vegetation to burn," she said.

Before coming to Isle du Bois, Taylor worked for the Texas State Parks Fire Program.

"We did control burns across all the state parks in Texas," she said.

While she came to IDB for an opportunity to grow her career within the park system, it felt good to help with the pre-

'Controlled burns are very important to the environment because it replenishes a lot of natural resources back into the soil.' *Kailyn Taylor*

Burnt materials replenish forest, prevent wildfires

scribed burn to keep her new unit safe.

She was one of two members of the Isle du Bois Unit who worked those prescribed fires, alongside Greenbelt Manager Matt Moore.

"It's a very valuable resource management tool, and it's good to keep it where it's supposed to be so it doesn't get out," he said.

The pair were in one of the utility vehicles, watching for spot fires.

"That's where the fire goes out of the controlled burn area, and that's when we really rely on our other firefighters to go and put those out," Taylor said.

That's precisely what the team did when the wind carried embers across the park road, with Wildland Fire Management Specialist Joe Lewis and Wildlife Fire Management Specialist Kevin Ferguson zipping to the spot fire and springing into action to contain the small blaze before it left the prescribed zone.

"They do fire full-time, all over the state," Merritt said. "But, most of the guys out here on the crew line are actually just regular park rangers, they're maintenance staff, office staff, people from also all over the state."

Celia Flores, the Johnson Branch assistant office manager, said she was inspired to pursue that training opportunity after seeing the prescribed burns at Isle du Bois and Johnson Branch this year.

"That's my goal this year, to start training to become a wildland firefighter," Flores said.

For more information regarding prescribed burns, visit tpwd.texas.gov/landwater/land/wildland_fire_management.



Ray Roberts Lake State Park Superintendent Robbie Merritt chats with Greenbelt Manager Matt Moore and Isle du Bois Office Manager Kailyn Taylor, who both participated in the fire service on Feb. 26.

Abigail Allen/The Post-Signal

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Bassmaster to return to Ray Roberts

By Abigail Allen
Editor & Publisher

The “Super Bowl of Bass Fishing” will return to Lake Ray Roberts in 2025.

The Bass Pro Shops Bassmaster Classic presented by Jockey Outdoors will be March 21-23, 2025, and the state park staff is thrilled to invite the anglers and their supporters back.

“We’ve been in behind-the-scenes talks with the Fort Worth Sports Commission really ever since the last one,” said Robbie Merritt, the Ray Roberts Lake State Park superintendent. “They were super excited about the results of it and really wanted to court B.A.S.S. to come back to Texas and specifically here, and they’ve done a great job of doing that.”

He’s hoping that being the host lake in 2021 and 2025 helps set Ray Roberts up to be in the rotation of lakes the competition regularly uses.

“We’re hoping we’re getting on cycle now to be every several years, they’ll come back to Texas,” Merritt said.

In 2021, the competition drew 147,197 attendees, which the release from B.A.S.S. said “was the second-largest crowd ever for a Bassmaster Classic and still a record for a Classic held in Texas.”

That crowd turned out from June 11-13, during which time the lake was in flood stage.

Hank Cherry, a pro angler from North Carolina, took his fourth title in a row that year, with a total weight of 50 pounds 15 ounces.

This will be the fourth Bassmaster Classic held in Texas.

“It will get a Texas-sized boost in attendance and participation with an expected economic impact of more than \$25 million for local businesses,” the release said. “Weigh-ins and all of the usual festivities will be held in Fort Worth.”

The Fort Worth Sports Commission has plans to make the celebration a memorable one.

“We are extremely excited to welcome back the Bassmaster Classic and all the amazing anglers and fans to Fort Worth for an experience that they won’t soon forget,” said Jason Sands, executive director of the Fort Worth Sports Commission in the release.



Pro angler Pat Schlapper trolls the water on Ray Roberts Lake for a fish that could net him the Academy Sports and Outdoors Bassmaster Classic’s \$300,000 grand prize.



Pilot Point High School anglers Kason Magouirk, left, and Grayson Brown hoist their catch, which included the biggest fish and biggest total weight of the day. The team took top team at the Lake Ray Roberts tournament on March 2.

Abigail Allen/
The Post-Signal



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Bassmaster Classic to bring anglers, crowds

During the Texas High School Bass Association North Texas Division tournament on Lake Ray Roberts on March 2, the Pilot Point team of Grayson Brown and Kason Magouirk pulled five fish from the water in the course of one day for a bag total of 27.58 pounds, which shows the potential for a pro competition held on the lake in March.

“Finding that perfect balance to have a good lake and a Super Bowl-class facility at a big city nearby to do all the rest ... is tough to find,”

Merritt said. “I think we’ve got a pretty good mix right here. We have the lake and then everything Fort Worth has to offer makes a pretty good package that we hope will keep luring them back.”

Merritt is proud that the lake he manages brings out the pros.

“We’re excited to have them back and all the profile that brings to not just Ray Roberts but Texas and our fisheries management efforts here and across the state,” he said.



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Julie Hibbard rides the wave on Lake Ray Roberts. She hopes to find a way to connect more people with wake surfing, a sport she has come to love and in which she chooses to compete.

Courtesy Photo

Hibbard hits the waves

By Basil Gist
Staff Writer

Julie Hibbard is bringing surfing to Lake Ray Roberts.

Hibbard, ranked fourth in the world in Masters Ladies skim wake surfing and the owner of Anytime Fitness in Pilot Point, said she wants to see more wake surfing on the lake.

“I’m shocked that there aren’t many surfers on this

lake,” Hibbard said. “There are so many people on Lewisville, and I’ve scoped out Ray Roberts recently. There is a dam that’s like half a mile long and that’s where the best water is.”

She said it could start with a fundraiser.

“I want to do a lake day fundraiser,” Hibbard said. “I think I can get a lot of my boat friends or some boat

companies to sponsor so we can teach everyone how to surf. The sport itself is just beautiful, no matter if it’s at a lake, in the ocean or at a park.”

Hibbard was aware of the main barrier to entry for her hobby—boating access—and spoke on ways to address it.

“DFW Surf is where I learned to surf,” she said, saying she learned the im-

portance of good organization for an organization like that. “... It’s all surfers, but I was wanting to partner with someone here and offer something like that, like a fleet of boats in a boat club so that lots of people could surf who don’t have the liquid or credit to get a boat.”

Otherwise, a small group of owners could pair up with a larger selection of surfers,

and Hibbard thought a Facebook group could make that happen.

“A bunch of people can buy wake boats, and you can start a Facebook group and get surfers,” Hibbard said. “A lot of the people that come out with me don’t own boats, but boat owners need friends who will be able to help them with their boat.”

Surfing, Hibbard ex-

Wake surfing provides fun escape, exercise

plained, is good for all ages, with her own experience riding next to both surfers in their 70s and young kids like her own daughter, who is 11.

“Little kids pick it up immediately,” Hibbard said.

She said the easiest way to learn is at a surf park and recommended Fireside Surf at the Grandscape in Frisco.

“It’s like \$75 a session, and the food is amazing,” Hibbard said.

She explained surfing at a park lets new surfers nail down the basic balance and sets them right into the wave, while on the lake you’ve got to learn how to get into the wake and get towed up to speed.

“It’s just like ocean surfing, except the wave never ends,” Hibbard said. “Time stops, and it’s so amazing.”

For her, surfing started a therapeutic escape during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Our gyms had been shut down throughout COVID, so they cut off

all our money, and as a business owner and single mom I was super depressed,” Hibbard said. “During that time, my dad was also diagnosed with a terminal illness. We couldn’t see him because of COVID.”

Reaching her current peak after just four years on the board was, Hibbard said, a result of her competitive nature.

“Being as competitive as I am, I was like, ‘I’m going to get good at this,’ and started watching professionals and things like that,” Hibbard said. “I’ve been trying their tricks ever since.”

Even on the other side of the pandemic, Hibbard cited the value of the hobby both as exercise and therapy.

“What I’ve found about surfing is it’s extremely therapeutic, just like yoga,” Hibbard said. “It’s all about balance and what balance does is it soothes your nervous system. I realized I could go out and do that, and it was like all the problems went away.”



Julie Hibbard and her daughter, Brooklyn, surf side-by-side. Hibbard recommends the sport for participants of all ages.

Courtesy Photo



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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," Stewart said.

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.



Bass



Cardinal



Beetle



Blue Heron



Deer



Goose



Bald Eagle



Rabbit



Pelican



Racerunner



Turkey



Wild Pig

Ongoing effort

Work continues on the construction of the Lone Star Lodge and Marina slips and boating store next to the Jordan Park boat ramp.

Abigail Allen/
The Post-Signal



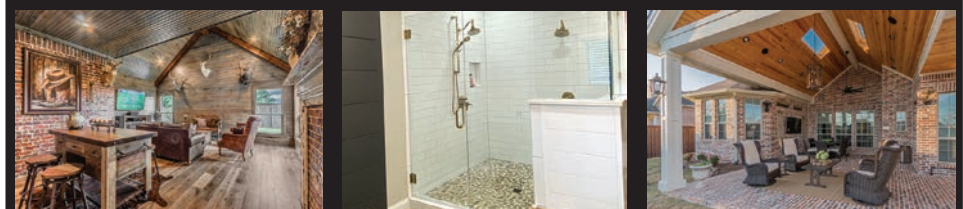
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