

Where to Go to Enjoy and Learn More About Our Native Hill Country

Recently, my wife and I spent seven days camping, hiking, bird watching and just enjoying nature in three of our closest State Parks. South Llano River State Park, Garner State Park and Lost Maples State Natural Area are all within about an hour's drive from Kerrville and are well worth the drive.

It is my deep-seated belief that everyone will benefit from spending time away from the city, away from the TV and the computer and the cell phone and reconnecting with a piece of the natural world. And it is my experience that the more one spends time in and learns about natural areas, the more enjoyable it is. Even those of us who live in the "country" can become "rejuvenated" and refreshed by time spent with nature. And I would suggest it is especially important for kids to be given as many opportunities as possible to spend time in natural areas.

The above three parks are only a sampling of about a dozen other State Parks in the Hill Country. The Hill Country State Natural Area, Enchanted Rock State Natural Area, Old Tunnel State Park and Lyndon B. Johnson State and National Parks are all within an hour's drive of Kerrville. Go to www.texasstateparks.org for lots more information.

Parks, of course, are not the only places where people can go to learn more about nature and the Hill Country in general. There are a number of organizations that sponsor talks and presentations on nature topics, usually on a monthly basis, and usually free to the public.

The Hill Country Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists meets the fourth Monday of most months at UGRA at 6:30 pm. You can get on their newsletter list or find out about the next meeting on their website, <http://txmn.org/hillcountry>. More about Master Naturalist later.

There are chapters of the Native Plant Society of Texas in Boerne, Fredericksburg and Kerrville. You can learn more about NPSOT and contact a chapter and find out about the next meeting by going to <http://npsot.org/Kerrville>, or /Boerne or /Fredericksburg.

Nature Centers generally have hiking trails or nature trails plus they sponsor many talks and presentations on nature and conservation topics throughout the year.

Cibolo Nature Center off route 46 in Boerne has 100 acres of hiking trails and wilderness areas on the banks of the Cibolo Creek, some native gardens and excellent meeting facilities. Go to www.cibolo.org.

Riverside Nature Center by the bridge on Francisco Lemos St. has an arboretum with mostly native trees, shrubs and forbs and sponsors numerous nature-related talks throughout the year. Go to www.riversidenaturecenter.org.

The Friends of the Fredericksburg Nature Center has about a mile of trails through several different natural habitats plus a handicapped-accessible trail and a butterfly garden. These trails are in Lady Bird Johnson Park on route 16 southwest of Fredericksburg. Go to www.fredericksburgnaturecenter.org for more info.

I highly recommend all of the above organizations and facilities and encourage you to visit them and attend their meetings, and I expect you will make new friends when you do.

My favorite organization, and the one I have learned the most from and spend the most time working with, is the Texas Master Naturalist. This is an organization that is sponsored by two state agencies, Texas AgriLife Extension and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. It has as its goal, or mission statement, "To develop a corps of well-informed volunteers to provide education, outreach and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas in their communities".

I like this organization because it is a science-based, volunteer organization focusing on the conservation, protection and restoration of natural resources in the Hill Country. To become a Texas Master Naturalist requires taking a training course consisting of 12 days of 4 hours of classes, and then volunteering for 40 hours of activities consistent with the above mission statement, as well as attending 8 hours of advanced training every year. Over 350 Hill Country residents have become Master Naturalists in the past 12 years.

The chapter is now accepting applications for this fall's class which will meet Wednesday mornings from August 21 to November 13. Classes include such topics as botany, ornithology, entomology, herpetology, geology, mammology, hydrology, soils, range science, ecology, and grassland, rangeland and wildlife management.

Anyone interested should contact Membership Director Valeska Danielak at 830-370-2464 or go to the website <http://txmn.org/hillcountry>.

Until next time...

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