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November 2024



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Before you hack that serpent to pieces, call someone who can safely take it far away instead.

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Photos by Russell A. Graves*

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How Mike Harrell reenvisioned hope and happiness through the subtle touch of dominoes.

*By Mark Wangrin
Photos by Eric W. Pohl*

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Photo by Russell A. Graves

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Mike Harrell lost his sight at 28 and then found his way around a dominoes table.
Photo by Eric W. Pohl

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Small Spaces

RECOMMENDED READING

Snakes also slithered across these pages in April 2020. Read *A Snake to Love* to become even more s-s-savvy about rattlesnakes.

Making a Splash

FOR THE FIRST time in nearly 30 years, Texas has a new major lake. Bois d'Arc Lake near Bonham, northeast of Dallas, opened for recreation in April after decades of planning and construction.

The reservoir has a surface area of about 26 square miles and offers boating, hunting, picnicking and fishing. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department stocked it with largemouth bass and catfish.

The lake's main purpose is to supply water to a burgeoning North Texas population. To the same end, Lake Ralph Hall is under construction just to the south and is expected to deliver water in 2026.



FINISH THIS SENTENCE

Snakes are ...

TCP Tell us how you would finish that sentence. Email your short responses to letters@TexasCoopPower.com or comment on our Facebook post. Include your co-op and town.

Here are some of the responses to our September prompt: **My first job was ...**

Learning not to be afraid to gather the eggs by running my hand under the sitting hen. I was 4 years old, and my grandmother was teaching me.

PAM HICKS
SOUTH PLAINS EC
LUBBOCK

Setting pins by hand in a bowling alley in 1945 at age 14.

HAROLD CLARK
NUECES EC
KINGSVILLE

Cashier at my father's drugstore. I used to refer to it as the drudge store.

CATHY BLAY
SAM HOUSTON EC
POINT BLANK

Tearing out the beaver dam every evening so the water wouldn't flood our field.

BENNY CALVIT
BOWIE-CASS EC
DE KALB

Visit our website to see more responses.

Are You a Pepper?

Texas doesn't have an official soft drink. But if it did, we all know what it would be.

Now the rest of the country is catching on. Dr Pepper has edged out Pepsi to become the No. 2 soda in America, behind Coke, which has 19.2% of the market. The pride of Waco now has 8.3%.



SEPTEMBER 2024 Calling an Audible

“I was fascinated with your story about Texas School for the Deaf football and the inspiring coaches who work to support the sport.”

MARY HELEN THOMAS DAVENPORT
CENTRAL TEXAS EC
BUCHANAN DAM



SCOTT VAN OSDOL

Great School Spirit

I worked at TSD in the 1990s, when Andy Bonheyo became the coach. There is a great school spirit there, and I loved reading about the state championship in 2020. I'm not surprised that TSD would respond to a pandemic by being creative and then win state in six-man football.

Dianne Wheeler
Pedernales EC
Wimberley

Long-Serving Tractor

Like John Terry Wende, I purchased 16 acres 37 years ago, in 1987, near the town of Blue Ridge [The Farmer's Regret, September 2024]. A year later I bought a used 1954 Ferguson 30 tractor and rotary cutter for \$1,000.

With lots of TLC and new tires, it still serves me well. I can usually get spare parts at Tractor Supply Co. or from the New Parts for Old Tractors catalog.

Glenn Snyder
Fannin EC
Blue Ridge



DAVID MOORE

Breathtaking Beauty

Wyatt McSpadden's cover photo was truly breathtaking [Open Roads, Open Eyes; August 2024]. He captured the atmospheric phenomenon known as the Belt of Venus.

It's visible opposite the sun at sunrise or sunset. The belt is the pink band above the horizon at the end of the rusty red dirt road. The dark blue band below the belt and touching the horizon is actually Earth's shadow.

Ed LaBelle
Pedernales EC
Johnson City

Elevating a Community

When I finished reading Katie Phillips' retelling of her father's quest to start an electric co-op in 1937, I had tears in my eyes [In the Beginning, August 2024]. This is the story of an unsung hero who greatly advanced his community's standard of living. We are all still thankful for reliable co-op electricity.

Barbara Barnes
Pedernales EC
Junction

TCP WRITE TO US
letters@TexasCoopPower.com

Editor, Texas Co-op Power
1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor
Austin, TX 78701

Please include your electric co-op and town. Letters may be edited for clarity and length.

Texas Co-op Power

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A Good



Snake

Before you hack that serpent to pieces, call someone who can safely take it far away

BY TOM WIDLowski
PHOTOS BY RUSSELL A. GRAVES

Snakes never stood much of a chance.

Even in the early pages of the Bible, the serpent was cursed above all other animals and dealt a troublesome fate: “You will crawl on your belly, and you will eat dust all the days of your life.”

If that lowly lot wasn’t bad enough, from then on they have found themselves on the wrong end of gardening tools and weaponry.

And still they thrive, especially in Texas—home to more than 100 species and subspecies of snakes, including 15 that are venomous.

Their greatest allies, it turns out, are men like Nathan Hawkins and Brett Parker, who themselves crawl on their bellies to remove and safely relocate snakes that encroach on humans’ domain, particularly from crawl spaces under homes.

“There are a lot of rattlesnakes here,” Hawkins says. “A lot more than people realize are here.”

Hawkins and Parker own snake removal businesses, both with an ethos of keeping the snakes, usually rattlers, alive and relocating them to remote habitats. They believe keeping the ecosystem intact and educating people about

Nathan Hawkins, owner of Big Country Snake Removal, with one of the six rattlesnakes he and a co-worker pulled out from under an abandoned house outside San Angelo. He releases most in a remote pasture, but he also has a collection of some 200, including mambas, king cobras, bushmasters and almost every venomous species in North America.

snakes’ role in nature are best for all involved.

The education part can be a challenge.

“A good snake is a dead snake.” Hawkins and Parker hear that almost every day.

“Completely false,” says Hawkins, who owns Big Country Snake Removal outside Abilene. “They’re very important to a healthy ecosystem. And they all deserve life.”

Hawkins, a member of Taylor Electric Cooperative, knows that isn’t what folks want to hear. Most people hate snakes and want them as far away as possible. But Hawkins’ method serves snakes well, helps put food on the table for his wife and young son, and has kept him in business for eight years.

He removed 45 rattlesnakes from under a house in 2019. A story about that ran in *The Washington Post* and elsewhere, and his video from that job went viral, making him somewhat famous. His biggest job to date is 127 rattlers, collected under a house in Seymour, southwest of Wichita Falls.

He removed 80-plus copperheads from a property between Cisco and Cross Plains in 2023. That was a nighttime job, when the snakes became, for Hawkins, easy pickings as they feasted on cicadas emerging from the ground.

Hawkins is a self-taught herpetologist whose love of snakes started when he was a kid in the Abilene area. He loved finding and collecting them, and that passion never waned. Today his collection has grown to include about 200 snakes—90% of them venomous.

He spends much of his free time looking for snakes. For vacation, he travels the Southwest in search of varieties of rattlesnakes (there are 23 subspecies in North America). His hobby is not without hazards. He has been bitten by venomous snakes seven times—twice by copperheads, once by a southwestern speckled rattlesnake in Arizona and the rest by western diamondbacks.





For some people, Texas' snake population feels like it's of biblical proportions.

"If you're a carpenter, you're going to hit your thumb with a hammer at some point, and when you mess with snakes as often as I do, it's bound to happen sooner or later," says Hawkins, who is quick to point out he has never been bitten on the job.

He conducts workplace training for folks in the oil and energy industries who spend a lot of time in rugged terrain. He meets annually with Texas Department of Transportation employees to teach them about handling run-ins with snakes. He trains dogs to help them avoid snake encounters.



He'll also visit schools, youth camps and birthday parties.

Winter is the busiest time for Hawkins and Parker, who owns Hill Country Snake Removal outside Austin. That's when snakes become sluggish and enter a state of brumation,

similar to hibernation. They gather into dens, including crawl spaces under homes, where they are protected from the weather and where the stagnant air keeps their body temperature regulated.

Though their businesses are about 240 miles apart, Hawkins and Parker sometimes team up for jobs. That was the case in January, when Hawkins was hired to remove rattlesnakes from under an abandoned house outside San Angelo.

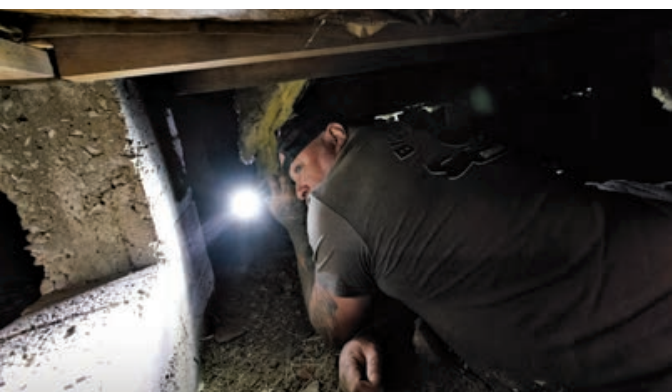
Hawkins, who played a season of football at McMurry University, stayed above ground, and the more slightly built Parker put on his headlamp, grabbed his snake tongs and wiggled into the darkness through a small hole in a closet floor.

First came the offensive odor, likely from the raccoons and skunks also living underground. After a bit of cautiously crawling around, Parker found snakes—six of them—resting under a piece of plywood.

Using tongs, Parker handed them one by one up through the floor to Hawkins. They ended up in a covered 5-gallon bucket in the back of Hawkins' pickup.

After lunch, they headed up to Anson, just north of Abilene, for a job at the home of Kevin and Jolee Karle, members of Big Country Electric Cooperative.

The Karles knew they had snakes. Before hiring Hawkins, Kevin had killed 10 of them with a shotgun. With two horses



and a dog, dispatching snakes around his house was a guilt-free decision. “Oh, no,” Kevin says. “I wanted to protect the family.”

The snakes, one or two at a time, were placed into a sealable piece of 4-inch PVC pipe that Parker handed to Hawkins. “There’s still more in here,” came Parker’s muffled voice from deep in the void.

Eventually, the snakes were coming out three or four at a time. It was near dusk when Parker finally emerged, behind snake No. 29.

“We couldn’t believe there were that many under there,” Jolee says. “The way I look at it, I grew up in the country, so the fact that we’re going to have snakes in the country doesn’t bother me.”

But 29 rattlers? Just a foot or two below your bed? “That’s just a part of country life,” she says.

That part of country life doesn’t sit well with some people. Sarah McLen leads member services at Big Country EC. She lives about 25 miles southwest of Anson.

She and her husband keep a hoe or shovel at each of their exterior doors and by the door to a workshop. The McLens are not, she notes, big-time gardeners.

“We use the tools for their normal purposes,” McLen says. “We’ve killed multiple snakes in a variety of sizes in just about every area of our yard. We kill the rattlesnakes because they multiply, and we have dogs to protect.

“My husband picks on me because I whack them to pieces! But as far as I’m concerned, the more dead they are, the better!”

Because a good snake is a dead snake.

“It’s very, very common here,” Hawkins acknowledges. “Very common.

OPPOSITE Brett Parker, who helps Hawkins on occasion, owns Hill Country Snake Removal. He’s also a captain with Canyon Lake Fire and EMS. ABOVE In winter, when snakes enter a state of brumation, which is similar to hibernation, Hawkins gets called out to many jobs. “You just never know where a snake’s going to be,” he says. “You never do.”

“I have absolutely no right to tell somebody how to protect their house, how to protect their pets. If you feel that’s the right thing to do, then go for it. And I’ll give you a high-five.”


Hawkins just wants people to be aware of the bigger picture, and that’s where his mission to educate kicks in. As part of a stable ecosystem, snakes keep rodent populations in check, and they also are a food source for raptors, large mammals and even other snakes. “At least be a little bit open-minded,” he says.

For some people, though, Texas’ snake population feels like it’s of biblical proportions.

“I feel like I probably walk the yard with my ‘weapon’ held high, like Moses did with his staff when he parted the Red Sea,” McLen says.

Meanwhile, Hawkins carries on with the staff of his choosing, snake tongs that he wields with a light touch.

“The only good snake is a live snake,” he says. ■

 Watch the video on our website and crawl around with our experts—and the snakes.



How Mike Harrell reenvisioned hope and happiness through the subtle touch of dominoes

TRICKS FOR ENDURING

STORY BY MARK WANGRIN • PHOTOS BY ERIC W. POHL



EDITOR'S NOTE *This story includes discussion of suicide. If you or someone you know needs help, the national suicide and crisis lifeline in the U.S. is available by calling or texting 988. There is also an online chat at 988lifeline.org.*

MIKE HARRELL GREW up like many in rural Texas in the 1960s, with a passion for sports and the outdoors but most of all hunting and the solace it provided. Particularly the solace.

As a boy, he'd ramble through the Central Texas flatlands north of Austin, stalking whatever was in season. Alone time. Just him, the quarry and his thoughts.

After Harrell graduated in 1974 from Florence High School, where he was a standout in track, baseball and football, he needed to find a vocation to match his avocation. His father, Milton, owned an electric shop, so he went to work for him.

Harrell didn't mind the work. "What I didn't like was dealing with people, especially service calls," he recalls five decades later. "It got to the point I told him I wasn't going on any more service calls."

So like any good electrician, Milton completed the circuit by removing the barrier. Harrell would only work on wiring new houses and rewiring uninhabited ones.

The hardest job was yet to come. By 28, Mike Harrell would be completely blind. Now he had to rewire himself.

SOMETIMES PEOPLE MEET the sturdy 68-year-old retiree—whether it's at a Texas 42 dominoes tournament or



LEFT Mike Harrell of Florence has been blind since he was 28. Soon after, he rediscovered his love of the dominoes game Texas 42. He's become an expert at reading the pips—indentations—on his pieces by touch. **RIGHT** Salado Creek Saloon is one of his regular stops for friendly games.

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representing Florence as a volunteer city council member or anyplace outdoors, really—and before long, they’ll drop words like “amazing” and “impressive.” But Harrell isn’t impressed.

“I’ve been told that before,” he says. “But I’m just like everybody else.”

Except Harrell lost the sight in his left eye in a hunting accident when he was 16. Walking in the darkness, a branch whacked his face. “It hurt,” he says, “but it really didn’t bother me a lot.”

Monday came and the pain was worse, and his sight was blurry. It kept worsening, and doctors couldn’t stop it. Pretty soon the eye stopped seeing, the result of inflammation of the optic nerve.

Harrell adapted. He could still excel as a one-eyed tight end and defensive end in football, and he stayed formidable in track, running the hurdles. He did it by studying his motions between steps, memorizing every nuance, until he ran them by rote.

He began working as a roughneck locally and then on an offshore rig reachable only by helicopter. He settled down, got married and started a family.

One day, while welding a broken trailer latch, he thought he’d gotten something in his right eye. He looked at it in the rearview mirror, and it was bloodshot.

An ophthalmologist prescribed corticosteroids to fight the inflammation. “All I could see is if you look at the sun and it looks like a damn light bulb,” Harrell says.

So he had his first operation. “I could tell what color hair people had or what color their clothes were,” he says. “I got excited.”

Neither the excitement nor rudimentary vision lasted. His retina wouldn’t attach correctly, not with a second or third operation. Then came the dreaded words: “There’s nothing else we can do.”

“I WAS DEVASTATED,” Harrell says. “I didn’t depend on nobody for nothing. I did everything myself. Now I can’t even drive. Can’t see my family. I can’t see my kids.

“It was pretty rough.”

Friends wanted him to go to the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center, a state facility in Austin that trains people with limited vision to have productive lives, but the only facility he was interested in served equal parts alcohol and self-pity.

For a year and a half, he drank and couldn’t find work. One night he took out a shotgun and sat on the bed, when he heard the voice of his toddler son.

“I didn’t know my son was in the bed,” Harrell recalls solemnly. “He grabbed me around the neck said, ‘Dad, don’t do it.’”

Harrell pauses in reflection.

“I didn’t know whether I would have pulled the trigger if he hadn’t been there,” says Harrell, who’s estranged from his first family. “I never told anybody about that and don’t know if he’s old enough to remember or not. I don’t know.”



THIS PAGE Harrell, a Florence City Council member, memorizes his pieces as he feels the pips. OPPOSITE Harrell and partner Keith Kyle with their second-place trophy won at the 2023 Texas State Championship Domino Tournament. “I think I’m a dagburn good player,” Harrell says.





A BIT BEFORE Harrell turned 30, he gave himself a present: self-awareness.

“That’s the time where I said, ‘You know, I’m gonna have to do something about this,’” he recalls. “I remembered sitting with my grandma, and she was telling me, ‘I know it’s a terrible thing you lost. But you know, if you just look around, there’s always somebody in worse condition than you are, and most of the time, you don’t have to look very far.’”

He found it at the CCRC. Harrell couldn’t master Braille because his fingertips were too calloused from oil field work, but he learned woodworking and other manual skills, though he could never figure out why he was required to wear safety goggles.

He patched up his relationship with his higher power, discovering hidden blessings in his experience. Ultimately, he also found a career. He decided on transmission building and repair, tactile but challenging, applying the same memory skills he learned while running hurdles in high school.

Gradually he learned to make money from it, started his own shop, got remarried, started a second family, got divorced again and finally retired five years ago. At 4:30 a.m. every weekday he hitches a ride to the local gym to work out.

“Some people with disabilities feel stuck,” says Jessica Kovarna, one of his two daughters from his second marriage. “He’s the opposite. It’s like he doesn’t have one, just a minor inconvenience.”

Former Mayor Mary Condon, who remembers meeting Harrell when she first moved to Florence in 1978, says he has evolved into a man steeped in faith and self-acceptance.

“Because he’s blind, people tend to tiptoe around him,”

she says. “Mike just replies by making fun of himself.”

One day at church, a well-intentioned guy offered to help him find his way. “No, I don’t need help,” Harrell said brusquely.

The pastor overhead Harrell and cornered him. “If you won’t let that person help you,” the pastor said, “you are taking a blessing from someone.”

Harrell accepted that help.

WHEN HARRELL WAS a child, he watched his mom and her siblings play Texas 42. He studied the game, joined in when he was in high school and kept playing until he lost his sight.

At CCRC, he discovered a set of dominoes. Excited at something familiar in his hands, he resumed playing and even bought a set with the dots raised instead of indented.

Decades later, his dominoes schedule is full. A typical week has Sunday games at his aunt’s house, Monday at Salado Creek Saloon, Tuesday in Liberty Hill, Wednesday at his church, Friday warmup for a Saturday tournament and tournament play on Saturday at spots around Texas.

“I like competition,” Harrell says. “One reason I chose automatic transmissions to rebuild was because of the challenge doing that and being blind. That’s the same reason I play dominoes. The competition and the challenge.”

Harrell gets a couple of accommodations for 42. He’s allowed to feel the dominoes to identify the numbers they carry. And he can also ask what tiles have been played. “He keeps what’s been played in his head,” frequent partner Keith Kyle marvels. “His memory is amazing.”

In 2023, he and Kyle took second place at the state 42 dominoes tournament in Hallettsville, winning \$115, matching trophies and some admiration. They expect to try again for the state title next spring.

YOU MIGHT NOT think a city of 1,170 people requires a city council meeting lasting almost three hours, but the folks entrusted to shepherd the interests of Florence are nothing if not thorough.

During the July meeting, Harrell sits in the overstuffed chair at the dais and mutters a whole lot of “seconds” and “yesses” and not much else.

“And you thought I talked a lot,” he says to the only public spectator who stayed for the duration.

Condon finishes up a conversation with the current mayor and finds Harrell.

“You ready to go?” she asks.

Harrell puts his hand on her shoulder, and they set out for her pickup truck. “I was ready 2½ hours ago,” he cracks.

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Ways To Save Energy in the Kitchen

AH, THE KITCHEN. It's undeniably one of the most-loved rooms in our homes.

It's where we gather with family and friends for our favorite meals and memories, especially over the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. But like most of us, you probably aren't thinking about saving energy when you're planning that perfect dish.

Here are ways you can save energy in the kitchen with minimal effort.

When possible, cook with smaller appliances. Using smaller kitchen appliances, like electric pressure cookers, toaster ovens and convection ovens, is more energy-efficient than using your large stove or oven, which are probably used to getting a workout in preparation for Thanksgiving. According to the Department of Energy, a toaster or convection oven uses one-third to one-half as much energy as a full-sized oven.

If you're using your full-size oven for baking multiple holiday dishes, remember you can bake several things at once.

Unplug appliances that draw phantom energy load. Halloween may be over, but it's possible you have energy vampires

Using your oven for holiday cooking? Save energy by baking several things at once.

in your kitchen. These are the appliances that draw energy even when they're not in use, such as coffee makers, microwaves and toaster ovens. The DOE estimates that one home's energy vampires can add up to \$200 in wasted energy costs annually. Unplug them when they're not in use, or better yet, use a power strip for convenient control.

Help large appliances work less. There are small ways you can help your larger kitchen appliances run more efficiently. For example, keep range-top burners clean from spills and fallen foods so they'll reflect heat better. When it's time to put leftovers in the refrigerator, make sure the food is covered and cool first. That way, the fridge doesn't have to work harder to cool warm food.

Use your dishwasher efficiently. Only run full loads and

avoid using the "rinse hold" function on your machine for just a few dirty dishes; it uses gallons of hot water each use. You can also save energy by letting your dishes air dry. If your dishwasher doesn't have an automatic air-dry switch, simply turn it off after the final rinse and prop the door open.

If you're cooking all day (or all week) in preparation for a holiday feast, set your thermostat a few degrees cooler. The process of cooking will warm your home without having to run the heater as much.

Bonus tip: The best way to save energy is to not use it. Try a tasty no-bake dessert recipe. Your sweet tooth (and energy bill!) will thank you.

By slightly adjusting a few of your habits in the kitchen—this holiday season and all year long—you'll be well on your way to energy savings. ■

Decorate Early, Decorate Safely

HOMEOWNERS HAVE STARTED decorating their homes for Christmas earlier and earlier—sometimes before Thanksgiving or often right after.

If you're ready to start hanging lights in November, take safety precautions. On average, nearly three people per hour are treated in hospital emergency rooms for decorating-related injuries during every holiday season, according to the National Safety Council.

Here are some ways to keep yourself safe if you're on decorating duty this season:

Inspect last year's lights before using them again this holiday season. Discard any with frayed or exposed wires, loose connections, or broken sockets.

Decorate the tree with kids in mind. Place breakable ornaments and those with metal hooks near the top of the tree, where little ones can't reach them.

Keep children away from decorations that contain batteries, and firmly secure battery hatches to prevent them from being opened. Batteries, especially button or coin varieties, can cause harmful burns if swallowed.

Likewise, some holiday plants, including some varieties of poinsettias, can be harmful to children and pets. Keep them out of your home—or at least out of reach. And keep the number for the Poison Control Center handy: 1-800-222-1222.

Use sturdy ladders when decorating outdoors, and always check overhead for power lines so you can steer clear. Indoors, climb onto stepladders instead of chairs, which aren't designed to support someone in a standing position.

Don't hide extension cords under rugs or furniture. They can overheat and catch fire. When you take the tree down, unplug extension cords. They're not designed for permanent use.

Keep your live Christmas tree well-watered to prevent it from catching fire. Make sure your artificial tree is labeled as being fire resistant.

Opt for LEDs instead of flames in candles and centerpieces to prevent the risk of fire. ■



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DARIA KULKOVA | ISTOCK.COM

Sweater Weather: A Good Time To Save Energy at Home

IT'S BEEN WEEKS since you needed to turn on the air conditioner, but it's not quite time to crank up the heat. In fact, autumn is one of the best times of the year to save energy.

Here are some ideas to get you started.

Layer your clothing. A sweater and a pair of socks can keep you warm enough without turning on the heat, probably for longer than you would expect.

Throw extra blankets on the bed.

Open the curtains during the day when the sun is up and close them at dusk to keep cold air outside where it belongs.

Stop drafts by caulking around windows, doors and holes in exterior walls for cable and phone lines.

Set a date for turning on the heat for the first time, like Veterans Day or Thanksgiving, so you don't flip it on at the first cool spell. But if you need to wear gloves and a ski cap to stay warm while you watch TV, it might be time to activate the thermostat no matter the date. ■



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First-Name Basis

A wolf spider misidentified for 120 years gets its due, thanks to an observant amateur naturalist

BY SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS • ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE DALTON COWAN

FOR MORE THAN a century, a rather large wolf spider in Texas attracted little, if any, scientific attention. Then in 2019, Eric Neubauer—an amateur naturalist and recent transplant from Pennsylvania—began to document and photograph the fauna on his rural 12 acres south of Davilla, between Austin and Waco.

With time, he noted enough differences among some of his abundant burrowing wolf spiders that he suspected he'd discovered a new species.

Neubauer, a Bartlett Electric Cooperative member, was right. Five years later, he and a Texas biology professor have nearly finished the lengthy process of naming an undescribed species, *Hogna incognita*.

For an amateur like Neubauer, that's a major accomplishment. On his own dime, he sleuthed to solve a wildlife mystery. "I've always had an interest in nature," says Neubauer, a member of the Texas Master Naturalist Program. "Out here in the middle of nowhere, there's not much to do. So taking pictures is free entertainment. Plus it gets me outside."

Though he holds a biology degree, Neubauer never worked in the field professionally. Instead, he taught figure skating, worked as an engineer for a manufacturing company, and wrote articles and books on railroad car history. After the sudden loss of his wife, he moved to Texas in 2018 to be near family.

At home on his piece of blackland prairie, Neubauer resumed photographing insects. To nail down identifications, he uploaded pictures to iNaturalist, a nature app that enables users to record observations of what they find, keep species lists and compile data. The global network connects online members who share information and help one another with identifications.

However, users often get stumped. In Neubauer's case, some of his wolf spiders kept getting ID'd as *Hogna antelucana*, a commonly seen species (with no common name) in Texas. Upon closer examination, he began to notice that leg bands and other body markings didn't always match among his *Hogna antelucana* observations. Maybe they weren't the same species, he proposed. A few iNaturalist users tentatively agreed.

Determined to find out himself, Neubauer learned all he could about wolf spiders, a harmless group of ground spiders that hunt mainly at night and pounce on their prey. Their dark mottled colors help them

blend into their surroundings. Some dig burrows while others hide under rocks or nowhere at all.

From minuscule spiderlings to more than 2-inch-long adults, Neubauer improved his photography skills so he could take sharp pictures in all their life phases. To broaden his research, he traveled across Texas to photograph wolf spiders.

"By the end of 2021, I was sure I had two separate species," Neubauer says. He concluded that his new species had been confused with *Hogna antelucana* since 1904, when Thomas Montgomery first described the species from specimens collected in Austin. Neubauer hopes to dub his overlooked species *Hogna incognita*.

"I'm not in favor of naming species after people," he explains. "I wanted a species name that sounded good and wasn't used elsewhere. I also thought 'incognita' was appropriate for a wolf spider that had been confused with another spider for 120 years."

Meanwhile, Russell Pfau, a professor in the biological sciences department at Tarleton State University, noticed Neubauer's observations on iNaturalist. He also reviewed Neubauer's research posted online.

"After looking at spider observations from my property, I could see the differences that Eric was pointing out," Pfau says. "So he and I began to correspond. We've also met several times. Eric's knowledgeable about spiders and scientific terminology. He's very sharp-eyed too."

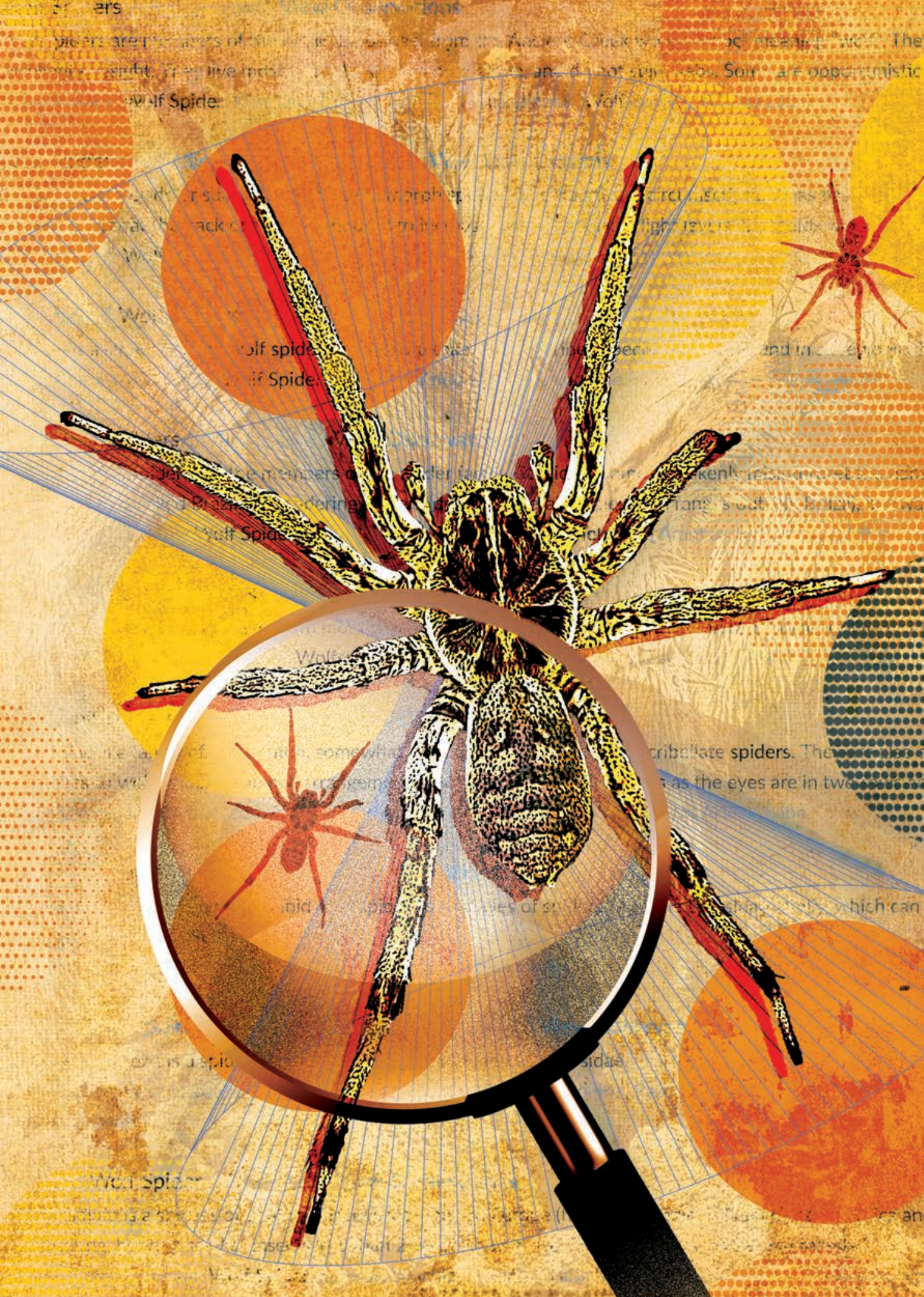
In 2023, Pfau offered to help Neubauer prepare a scientific paper for publication—a major step in the complicated process of naming a new species.

For his part, the professor conducted genetic testing on both species. Though they look similar, the DNA results confirmed that the two spiders are different. In vials on his desk, Pfau reared spiderlings from the two species and documented their developmental stages, which also differ.

Sometime next year, the pair hope to have their paper published in a scientific journal. If other biologists agree with their findings, then *Hogna incognita* will be officially recognized as a new wolf spider species.

While he waits, Neubauer continues his research.

"Right now I'm taking photos of other species in Milam and Burleson counties," he says. "That's enough to keep me busy for a while." ■



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TCP Listen as W.F. Strong narrates this story on our website.



shade for travelers and cattle. In fact, range cattle gathered beneath it so much that they created a large depression in the ground there. Thus, it was more properly known then as El Encino del Pozo, the oak in the hole. Encino became a stage-coach stop, but sadly, the namesake tree died long ago.

Palacios, the enchanting town on the Gulf of Mexico, means palaces. There are some lovely homes there but no palaces. The town's original name was Trespalacios, for the first governor of the Mexican state of Texas, José Félix Trespalacios.

Refugio means refuge in Spanish, and the name indeed tells of the town's historical—and even present—significance. Well over 200 years ago, it was a refuge for travelers, a safe haven for those traveling across the frontier to San Antonio or Austin's colonies or south to Corpus or Matamoros.

Today it still functions as a refuge as the halfway point between the Rio Grande Valley and Houston. For its size, it has an unexpectedly large number of restaurants, gas stations and hotels, all teeming with travelers.

The Nueces River, meaning the river of nuts, was so named because of the plentiful pecan trees that grew along its banks.

Agua Dulce of South Texas has a sister city in West Texas—Sweetwater. Both were named for what was a highly prized type of water: Sweet water, as distinguished from brackish or salty water, was, naturally, greatly preferred. It was the sort of attribute chambers of commerce could use to market a town, or name it.

Here's some homework for you. See if you can figure out what Pecos means. It's a hard translation to pin down, with more twists and turns than the river itself has. *Buena suerte, amigos.* ■

Found in Translation

Spanish influence can be traced across Texas as you follow a map

BY W.F. STRONG • ILLUSTRATION BY NICK LU

FOR THOSE WHO have at least a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish, traveling Texas becomes quite interesting because the Spanish names of places reveal, or hint at, their histories.

For instance, Alamo means cottonwood, as in cottonwood trees. The mission was named after the hometown of the Mexican soldiers who served there in the early 1800s—Alamo de Parras.

San Antonio is named for St. Anthony. The Spanish explorers who came upon the river and springs there in 1691 arrived on the Feast of St. Anthony, June 13, and used the occasion to honor him.

Corpus Christi has a similar naming story. Latin for body of Christ, the city was named for the Feast of Corpus Christi, which is 60 days after Easter. Legend has

it that's the day that explorer Alonso Álvarez de Pineda first laid eyes on the sparkling tropical bay.

San Jacinto, in English, would be St. Hyacinth. The battle of that name was fought near the San Jacinto River, which was named either for the hyacinths that grew there so bountifully and bloomed so beautifully, or for St. Hyacinth, the patron saint of those in danger of drowning. Perhaps it was named for both.

Many merely wide places along the trail became small towns and were named for the original attractions that put them on the map.

Encino, 46 miles north of Edinburg, is such a case. *Encino* means oak. In the 1800s it had an ancient, sprawling oak tree that provided much-appreciated

Holiday Bites

Share these flavorful snacks with friends—and be prepared to share the recipes

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ, FOOD EDITOR

I don't think I've ever made a more tried-and-true appetizer than these cranberry meatballs. All the flavors of Thanksgiving in a bite-size appetizer without spending hours in the kitchen. They are always a part of my holiday spread and definitely hold their own alongside other festive bites.

Cranberry Turkey Meatballs

MEATBALLS

- 1 pound ground turkey
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ cup finely diced onion
- 2 tablespoons minced parsley
- 1 teaspoon orange zest
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 egg, slightly beaten
- ½ cup breadcrumbs

CRANBERRY SAUCE

- 3 cups fresh or frozen cranberries
- 1 cup light brown sugar
- ¾ cup orange juice
- 1 tablespoon orange zest
- 1 teaspoon crushed dried rosemary
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper

1. MEATBALLS Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

2. In a large bowl, combine meatball ingredients and mix until well combined. With damp hands, shape into 1-inch meatballs and place on prepared baking sheet. Bake 20 minutes.

3. CRANBERRY SAUCE In a large skillet over medium-high heat, combine sauce ingredients. Cook 8–10 minutes, stirring occasionally until sugar has dissolved, cranberries have burst and sauce has slightly thickened.

4. Serve meatballs warm with cranberry sauce.

SERVES 14

TCP Follow Vianney Rodriguez as she cooks in *Cocina Gris* at sweetlifebake.com, where she features a recipe for Pickled Jalapeño Shrimp Ceviche.





Olive Cheese Balls

BETSY STRIEGLER
BLUEBONNET EC

Cheese-wrapped olives, baked to perfection, are a wonderful pick-up appetizer. Striegler learned this recipe in a college food and nutrition class where the students prepared thousands for the dean's reception. It's a family favorite to this day.

2 cups grated sharp cheddar cheese
½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened
1¼ cups sifted flour
½ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon ground cayenne pepper
48 pimiento-stuffed green olives, drained

COOK'S TIP Once the prepared olives have been frozen one hour, they can be placed in a zip-close bag and stored. When you're ready, simply place olives on a baking sheet and bake according to directions.

1. In a food processor, blend cheese with butter until smooth. Add flour, salt and cayenne and process into cheese mixture until well blended.
2. Pat dry the olives with a paper towel.
3. Wrap 1 teaspoon dough around each olive. Place each olive approximately 1 inch apart on a baking sheet. Freeze at least 1 hour.
4. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Remove olives from freezer and bake 15 minutes.

MAKES 48

MORE RECIPES >



\$500 WINNER

Feta and Dill Stuffed Shrimp

ANN CYCHOSZ
WISE EC



Meet your new favorite appetizer! Go beyond the typical shrimp cocktail with this creamy, delicious snack. The feta dill filling comes together in minutes, and you can assemble these succulent bites the night before. I love the contrasting tastes and textures of these delightful shrimp, which add a festive touch to your holiday parties.

4 ounces cream cheese, softened
4 ounces crumbled feta cheese
2 tablespoons lemon juice

2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh dill or 2 teaspoons dried dill
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
½ teaspoon ground black pepper
1½ pounds large raw shrimp
Fresh dill sprigs, for garnish (optional)
Cocktail sauce (optional)

1. In a bowl, mix cream cheese and feta cheese until well blended. Stir in the lemon juice, dill, salt, cayenne and black pepper. Chill mixture 1 hour.
2. Remove shrimp shells, leaving the tails on. Cut a slit down the length of the outside curve of each shrimp and devein.
3. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add shrimp and cook 90 seconds or until they turn pink and are fully cooked inside. Drain shrimp, rinse under cold water and pat dry.
4. Transfer the cheese mixture to a pastry bag or a plastic sandwich bag with a corner of the bag snipped off. Pipe the cream cheese and feta cheese mixture into the slit of each shrimp.
5. Arrange on a platter and chill 1 hour. Garnish with fresh dill and serve with cocktail sauce, if desired.

SERVES 6

TCP \$500 Recipe Contest

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Pork and Cream Cheese Stuffed Mushrooms

SUSAN RODGERS
PEDERNALES EC

The savory richness of ground pork, tanginess of cream cheese and earthy depth of mushrooms come together in this bite-sized delight.

- 1 pound cremini mushrooms**
- 12 slices bacon**
- 1 pound pork breakfast sausage**
- ½ cup chopped onion**
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic**
- 2 teaspoons steak seasoning**
- 1 package cream cheese (8 ounces), softened**

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Coat a baking sheet with cooking spray. Remove stems from mushrooms and discard. With a paper towel, gently wipe off the caps and place on baking sheet with the cavity side up.



3. In a skillet over medium heat, cook bacon a few slices at a time until crispy and drain on a paper towel.
4. Reserve 2 tablespoons of bacon grease in skillet and add pork sausage and onion. Cook, breaking up sausage with a spoon until well done. Stir in garlic and steak seasoning. Reduce heat to low and cook 2 minutes, then remove skillet from heat.
5. Dice bacon, reserving 2 slices, and add to a bowl along with cream cheese and sausage mixture. Mix until well combined.
6. Fill each mushroom cap with filling and

App-ropos Tips

BY VIANNEY RODRIGUEZ

Here are a few ideas to make serving appetizers more fun:

Lettuce leaves have a natural cup shape and can be used instead of a plate.

Dips, meatballs, ceviche and soups can be served in **martini glasses** instead of bowls.

Crackers add crunch and are sturdy enough to hold salads and dips.

Easily create a beautiful display using **skewers**, which can hold meats, cheeses and veggies.

return to baking sheet. Bake 20 minutes, then allow to cool 10 minutes.

7. Crumble reserved bacon slices. Garnish mushrooms with bacon before serving.

SERVES 8



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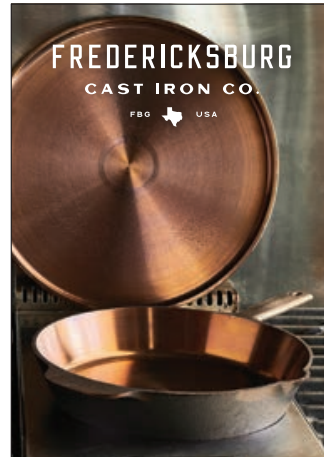
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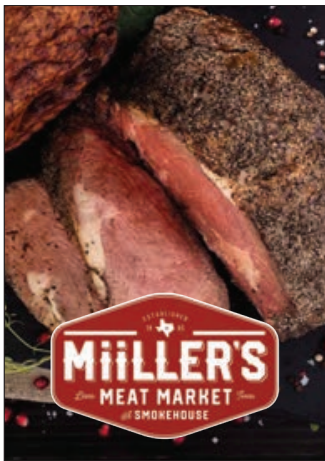
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COURTESY CHET GARNER

A Den, and Then Some

Animal World & Snake Farm Zoo boasts more than 500 tame and terrifying species

BY CHET GARNER

THERE'S ALMOST NO better way to break up a road trip than popping into a strange, offbeat roadside attraction. But this famous destination on Interstate 35 north of San Antonio is the king cobra of them all. I don't suffer from ophidiophobia (the fear of snakes), but even I was nervous stepping into a building full of the world's most venomous vipers.

Since it opened in 1967, the legend of the Snake Farm has grown far and wide, helped along by the well-known Ray Wylie Hubbard song that it inspired in 2006. Based on the lyrics, I was expecting a "nasty" and dimly lit den of danger.

What I discovered was a full-blown zoo with more than 500 species of animals ranging from mambas to mammals. It turns out that the owners who took over in 2007 had a new vision and a new name: Animal World & Snake Farm Zoo.

I started inside the front building, staring down the likes of death adders, rattlers and one of the world's deadliest snakes: the inland taipan. If you come for slithering serpents, you won't be disappointed as this zoo boasts hundreds.

The real surprises came when I wandered outside and past habitats with some of the world's most curious creatures. I said "howdy" to a pair of white lions and even got to feed the resident bison. There were otters and jaguars right next to monkeys and hyenas.

But nothing entertained the crowds more than when a staff member jumped into the gator pit with more than a dozen hungry alligators chomping for the raw chicken in his hand. I'm not sure if that was bravery, negligence or just good old-fashioned showmanship.

The best roadside stops provide visitors with a dose of the unexpected, and this one certainly delivered. ■

ABOVE Chet with Jarrod Forthman and an enormous albino Burmese python at the Snake Farm.

TCP Watch the video on our website to explore the place that inspired a song. And find all Chet's Explorations on *The Daytripper* on PBS.



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NOVEMBER

7

Lake Jackson [7-8] Mums & Mistletoe Market, (979) 297-3041, smlj.org

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Bastrop [8-9] Heroes & Hot Rods, bastropareacruisers.com

Buda [8-9] Buda Bee Club Quilt Show, (512) 295-3413, ocscbuda.org

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Blanco Gem of the Hills 40th Birthday Bash, (830) 833-2713, gemofthehills.org

Corsicana Texas Veterans Parade, (214) 537-9311, texasveteransparade.com

Mason Wild Game Dinner, (325) 347-5758, masontx.org

Smithville Tour of Homes, facebook.com/smithvillegardenclub

Surfside Beach Kites and Castles, (979) 233-1531, visitsurfsidebeachtx.org

16

Brenham Winter Dance Party, (979) 337-7240, thebarnhillcenter.com

Smithville Reel Film Expo, (512) 237-2313, smithvilletx.org

23

Luling Winter Wonderland Arts & Crafts Show, (830) 875-0123, lulingcc.org

24

Giddings Sip & Shop Christmas Market, (979) 542-3455, giddingstx.com

25

Grapevine Carol of Lights, (817) 410-3450, gograpevine.com

26

Jasper Pioneer Day, (409) 384-5231, tpwd.texas.gov

29

Granbury Night of Lights Christmas Parade, (682) 936-4550, granburysquare.com

30

Liberty Hill Holiday Around the Hill, facebook.com/holidayaroundthehill

DECEMBER

6

Fredericksburg Light the Night Christmas Parade, (830) 997-5000, fredericksburg-texas.com

Castroville [6-7] Old Fashion Christmas, (830) 538-3142, castroville.com

McKinney [6-7] Holidays at the Heard, (972) 562-5566, heardmuseum.org

7

Palestine Christmas on Main, (903) 723-3014, facebook.com/palestine-mainstreet

Woodville Christmas Twilight Tour, (409) 283-2272, heritage-village.org

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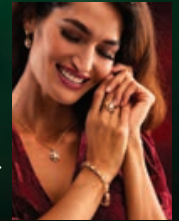
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3 LAURA DAVIS
BANDERA EC

A moment at a Medina football game.

4 PATSY MCCLUNG
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TCP See Focus on Texas on our website for many more Mascots photos from readers.



The Lease of Our Concerns

Time together is time well spent—with prized lessons, if not always deer

BY MARK TROTH
ILLUSTRATION BY
HOKYOUNG KIM

WE CALLED IT simply “the lease.”

At 10, I may not have understood the concept of my father’s financial agreement with a property owner that allowed us to enjoy the benefits of his ranch. But it was apparent to me that we could do a lot of cool things on this 1,000-acre piece of Brazos County heaven, including hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, stargazing and exploring.

Our accommodation was an old, one-bedroom wooden shack with a kitchen and fireplace.

I was not the appropriate age to shoot a deer, according to my dad. But I would accompany him on hunts and learn valuable lessons of wildlife conservation and gun safety.

I was with him, and that was all that mattered.

Late one afternoon we decided to hunt a more wooded site. We drove for about 30 minutes along a fence line and then parked our International Scout. We walked through a gate, crossed a pasture and followed a game trail into the woods.

We found the deer blind and settled in. It was cold, and we saw no deer. Then came the rain. At dusk we headed out of the trees with flashlights in hand.

We were working our way through the dense, wet grass and shrubbery when we lost the trail. Although Dad didn’t admit it, he was completely turned around and didn’t know which direction it was to the pasture, the gate, the fence line—or the car.

More surprisingly though, especially knowing my father, he didn’t have a compass with him. We continued our way through the woods, trying to maintain a consistent direction. Time was a mystery to me.

Finally, we came to the pasture. We quickened our steps and reached the fence line. But now—which direction? Without hesitation, Dad made a right turn.

I asked him, “How far, Dad?”

“Not too far, Mark. Are you still good?” he said.

“I’m fine. Just a little tired.”

“And hungry too, I bet.” It was the levity we both needed.

A huge lightning bolt struck, sending countless fingers to the horizon. “There!” Dad exclaimed and pointed. “I just saw the Scout.”

There was no conversation on the ride back. At the shack we changed clothes and ate biscuits with butter and honey. In my eyes, it was a feast to rival no other.

“Were we in trouble?” I inquired.

“No,” he reassured me. “But we may have had to spend the night out there. We would have made out OK. Probably built a fire.”

I contemplated the possibilities. “Thanks, Dad.”

He smiled and put his arm around my shoulder. It was a rare show of physical affection from the man. “Remember though. Always bring your compass.”

Another lesson learned. ■

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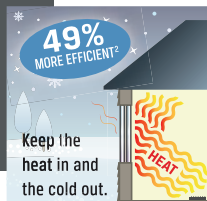


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