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BEST PLACE TO LOSE YOURSELF

Big Bend National Park & Big Bend Ranch State Park

If your idea of the perfect campsite is a piece of wild space all your own — no amenities, no lights, no neighbors and no noise — then the Big Bend backcountry is the place for you. Drive in to some backcountry sites, or backpack to others. Hike the national park's many desert and Chisos Basin trails, or mountain-bike to the "Other Side of Nowhere" at Big Bend Ranch State Park, which offers more than 60 miles of trails. It's remote and beautiful, and wherever you go in the Big Bend you'll find a healthy slice of solitude.

www.tpwd.state.tx.us

[/BigBendRanch](http://BigBendRanch)

www.nps.gov/bibe

THE BEST OF TEXAS, Naturally!

25 outdoor favorites for 2011

By Kathryn Hunter

Our staff set out on a mission to share our favorite natural delights.

There's a lot to love about Texas, so this selection doesn't even begin to cover it, but we did our best. Enjoy the beautiful, the odd, the traditional, the unforgettable and the just-plain fun of the Texas outdoors. Be sure each of these natural curiosities is already crossed off your list or is marked prominently on your "to do's"!

Turn the page to see 24 more picks >

Web extra: Find additional outdoor favorites with this story online at www.tpwdmagazine.com.



2 SEE, SEE, SEE THE BEST WORK OF THE CCC

29 Texas state parks

There's a certain classic look to structures built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s — rustic and practical, they were designed for use, but not without throwing a little beauty and a careful nod to the natural surroundings into the mix. The CCC's materials were often collected on-site. Seeing these buildings now, aged but still as functional as ever, one has the impression that they sprang up from the landscape like gracefully camouflaged toadstools. Lodges, cabins, picnic shelters, trails and many other New Deal projects stand testament to the skilled and lasting work of the CCC. Visit state parks and historic sites across Texas to admire and pay tribute to their architectural legacy. www.tpwd.state.tx.us/ccc



4 BEST RIDE TO PINE FOR

Bastrop State Park and Buescher State Park, Bastrop and Smithville

The "Lost Pines" of Bastrop State Park are filled with forested trails and a rich assembly of historic CCC cabins and structures. But best of all, the park offers a celebrated cycling route, ideal for families and serious roadies alike. The 12-mile ride from Bastrop State Park to Buescher State Park is well-surfaced, gently rolling and surrounded by quiet woodland scenery. You won't find many cars on this road, but you will see plenty of those "lost" pines and the wildlife that lives among them. www.tpwd.state.tx.us/bastrop
www.tpwd.state.tx.us/buescher

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Best Gander at the Gators

Brazos Bend State Park, Needville

Though located less than 30 miles from Houston, Brazos Bend State Park will help you feel far removed from your daily commute. Camp, picnic, hike, bike or ride horses in and around the park's six swampy lakes while you keep your eyes peeled for orb weavers, alligators and lots of other creepy critters. You're nearly guaranteed to see them, though they might see you first! If interested in astronomy, also visit the George Observatory, located in the park and open to the public on Saturdays. www.tpwd.state.tx.us/brazosbend

THE BEST OF BATS AND BURGERS

Old Tunnel WMA, Fredericksburg

Austin's Congress Avenue Bridge bat colony is something to see, but the show at Old Tunnel Wildlife Management Area provides a larger cast (more than 3 million bats of two varieties) and less of a human crowd. Get dinner next door at the famed Alamo Springs Café, then watch a resident red-tailed hawk get his as the bats emerge from this early 1900s railroad tunnel. Visit at dusk from May through October because these famous flying mammals take a winter vacation to Mexico. Call 866-978-2287 for emergence information. www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/hunt/wma/find_a_wma/list/?id=17



THE WEST'S BOULDERING BEST

Hueco Tanks State Park and Historic Site, El Paso

Huecos — bowl-like hollows in the rock formed millions of years ago — create climbing routes of legend for the boulderers who come from around the world to Hueco Tanks each winter. For ancient peoples, this rocky moonscape was the only place for water and shelter for miles in the surrounding desert, and their drawings ornament its many hidden caves and overhangs. Respect both the challenge and history of this extraordinary terrain — some areas are accessible only with a guide, and reservations for climbing and pictograph tours should be made at least two days in advance. www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huecotanks



BEST OF THE BEAUTY BENEATH

Caverns of Sonora, Sonora

Which way to the Crystal Palace, the Christmas Tree Room and the Baby Grand Canyon? Start by walking 1.75 miles underground on a guided tour. Open to the public since 1960 and designated a National Natural Landmark in 1966, the Caverns of Sonora have long been a showcase of Texas' subterranean splendor. On your visit, witness this beauty in the making, as more than 95 percent of the formations are actively growing. www.cavernsofsonora.com

CCC, HUECO AND CAVERN PHOTOS © LAURENCE PARENT; BIKES BY CHASE A. FOUNTAIN/TPWD; BURGER BY EARL NOTTINGHAM/TPWD

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BEST PLACE TO WHOOP IT UP

Port Aransas

Known to many people as the "Fishing Capital of Texas," Port Aransas is the perfect place to book a guide or charter, launch your own boat or cast a line off a pier or jetty. Catch yourself a flounder, black drum or trout and have a local restaurant cook it up just the way you like it. In February, attend the famous Whooping Crane Festival, or pay a visit any time of year to the world-famous birding sites that also earn Port A the moniker "The Nest of Texas." www.portaransas.org

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BEST PLACE TO GET CATTY

Laguna Atascosa Wildlife Refuge, Rio Hondo

Often told of, but rarely seen, the great cats of Texas might seem like fairy tales, but living legends like the ocelot and jaguarundi call the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge home. The refuge, which hosts a total of 11 federally listed endangered or threatened species, also has more documented bird species than any other wildlife refuge in the U.S. To view Laguna Atascosa's cornucopia of animal residents, take the tram, drive the roads, hike the trails or join a guided tour on foot or by kayak.

www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/STRC/laguna/Index_Laguna.html



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THE BEST MEDICINE

Lake Mineral Wells State Park & Trailway, Mineral Wells

Mineral Wells, once a booming resort town known for its miraculously "curative" mineral baths and drinking water, is still a healthy prescription for the avid outdoorsperson. Lake Mineral Wells State Park provides opportunities for swimming, fishing, boating, rock climbing, mountain biking and hiking. Also, travel the 20-mile trailway from Weatherford to downtown Mineral Wells by foot, horse or bike for a peaceful journey through scenic farms and ranchland.

www.tpwd.state.tx.us/lakemineralwells

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Best Little Shop of Horrors

Big Thicket National Preserve & Village Creek State Park, Kountze

Visit the "rainforest" of Texas, where even the flora has an appetite. On the trails, witness carnivorous pitcher plants, sundews and bladderworts playing their part in insect control. Also, paddle the slow waters of Village Creek, search for rare orchids, hunt for white-tailed deer or feral hogs, experience the beauty of bay galls and longleaf pine forests, or simply enjoy a little quiet time spent in the most biologically diverse habitat in Texas. www.nps.gov/bith and www.tpwd.state.tx.us/villagecreek



PLEASANTEST PHEASANTS

37 counties, Texas Panhandle

Though not a Texas native (nor North American), the ring-necked pheasant is one of the Panhandle's premier game birds, and finding this jaunty flyer is most fun when it's a social affair. Bring your buddies and a bird dog to cover more ground, or take a child on his or her memorable first hunt. Be forewarned, the sudden, cackling flush of the brightly plumaged rooster can scare the wits out of you, sometimes making you so jittery that when you finally shoot, you get only "tail feathers" followed by good-natured ribbing from your hunting party! In the Panhandle, the season runs from early December to early January.

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PORT ARANSAS AND BIG THICKET PHOTOS © LAURENCE PARENT; OCELOT © LARRY DITTO; PHEASANTS © GARY KRAMER; MINERAL WELLS BY TPWD

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Best Place to Cache In

Everywhere on Earth

Satellite coordinates mark the spot in this technological brand of treasure-hunting. Use a GPS unit and clues to locate hidden containers with a stash of secret objects, then replace what you take with an item for the next geocacher to find. Geocaching is a great way to get outside and explore new places, especially for families, and geocaches are everywhere from just down the street to the most remote wilderness areas in the state. Our website shows you how to get started. www.tpwd.state.tx.us/geocaching

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BEST PARTY WITH THE STARS

McDonald Observatory, Fort Davis

Texas' wide open spaces don't stop at the horizon — the skies over the Davis Mountains are some of the starriest in the state. On Tuesday, Friday and Saturday evenings, visit the McDonald Observatory for one of its legendary Star Parties. Simply looking up with the unaided eye or looking through one of the observatory's massive telescopes, learn about the constellations, planets and other bright lights overhead. On any given night, the guest list might include celebs like the rings of Saturn, the moons of Jupiter or the dusty tail of a comet. These parties are never dull and are always well-attended. <http://mcdonaldobservatory.org>



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BEST SURFING ON THE SAND

Monahans Sandhills State Park, Monahans

Looking for white sand, sun and surfing? Go west! Believe it or not, it's sage advice. You won't catch any big waves, but you're sure to find adventure at Monahans Sandhills State Park. Rent a toboggan or disk from park headquarters and test your skills on the dunes, some as much as 70 feet high. This wind-swept, dynamic landscape is one-of-a-kind in Texas. www.tpwd.state.tx.us/monahanssandhills

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GUADALUPE PHOTO © LAURENCE PARENT; GPS AND TURTLES BY CHASE A. FOUNTAIN/TPWD; OBSERVATORY BY EARL NOTTINGHAM/TPWD; MONAHANS BY TPWD

16 PRETTIEST PADDLE

Guadalupe River, near Canyon Lake

The Guadalupe is one of Texas' top recreational rivers, popular in the summertime for swimming and tubing, but the best way to travel its length and escape the downriver crowds is a trip by kayak or canoe on the upper Guad above Canyon Lake. Ride some of Texas' best rapids on the 9.9-mile Nichol's Landing paddling trail, a route that's exciting and sublimely beautiful as it twists below high limestone bluffs and giant bald cypresses. In this extraordinary landscape, it's easy to imagine yourself no more than an ant clinging to a floating leaf, the mighty river carrying you where it may.

www.tpwd.state.tx.us/fishboat/boat/paddlingtrails/inland/upper_guadalupe



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BEST SEE OF THE SEA

Kemp's ridley hatchling release, Padre Island National Seashore and South Padre Island

Every summer, Kemp's ridley turtle hatchlings are released at Padre Island National Seashore and South Padre Island. As the sun rises, watch these pocket-sized creatures, no bigger than the lid on the coffee that got you here, crawl into the surf. This brief stumble across the sand is imprinted in their memories, and many females will travel hundreds of miles on the open sea before coming back, remarkably, to the very same stretch of beach. No doubt, after watching their departure, you'll feel a similar yen to return.

For release dates and times, call the Hatchling Hotline at 361-949-7163. www.nps.gov/pais



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BEST HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Lake Amistad, Del Rio

At Lake Amistad, make a houseboat your home base for a few days' quiet sojourn, enjoying Amistad's clear waters, sheer cliffs and long and scenic shoreline. Friends and family can do all the things they enjoy the most — swimming, talking, grilling, fishing and more — with no long back-and-forth trips to the marina, and you're always the early bird because the best parts of the lake are, literally, at your door. Boaters in smaller craft can visit 4,000-year-old pictograph sites like Panther and Parida Caves on the upper reaches of the lake.

www.tpwd.state.tx.us/fishboat/fish/recreational/lakes/amistad



HOUSEBOAT, BALMORHEA AND ARROWHEAD PHOTOS © LAURENCE PARENT; EXOTIC © GARY KRAMER; FISHING BY CHASE A. FOUNTAIN/TPWD; GOLIAID BY BRANDON JAKOBETT/TPWD; SAWMILL BY EARL NOTTINGHAM/TPWD; CADDO BY TPWD

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BEST EXOTIC SMORGASBORD

Y.O. Ranch, Mountain Home

Hunters sometimes dream of exotic safaris in Africa, but can't quite make the trip. Fortunately, there's a ranch in Texas with most every item on their wish list. More than 60 species of exotics, as well as trophy native game, roam the Y.O. Ranch's 40,000 acres of rugged Texas Hill Country. The price of the hunt includes meals, lodging in the ranch's 1880-style log cabins and guide fees, as well as an up-close-and-personal look at the Y.O.'s resident longhorn herd, one of the oldest and most cherished traditions of this working ranch. www.yoranch.com



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BEST OASIS IN THE DESERT

Balmorhea State Park, Toyahvale

Millions of gallons of crystal-clear, cold water bubble up from the San Solomon Springs, feeding a 1.75-acre pool popular for both its swimming and scuba diving. Surrounded by desert, this deep blue oasis is chock-full of a variety of fish, invertebrates and amphibians. Visitors to Balmorhea (Bahl-mor-AY, the locals will correct you) can stay at the historic San Solomon Courts lodge, which, like the pool, was constructed by the CCC in the early 1930s.

www.tpwd.state.tx.us/balmorhea

BEST MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR

Caddo Lake State Park, Uncertain

With its sprawling maze of ancient cypress trees draped in Spanish moss, Caddo Lake may be Texas' most magical and mysterious place. Rent a canoe or take a pontoon boat tour from Caddo Lake State Park to see the most beautiful parts of the lake in what's known as Hell's Half-Acre, or book a guided fishing, hunting or bird watching trip. Visit at sunset for some truly spectacular sights of the surroundings.

www.tpwd.state.tx.us/caddolake



BEST PLACE TO HUNT GHOSTS

Aldridge Sawmill Historic Site, Angelina National Forest, Jasper

Once producing 125,000 board-feet of lumber per day and supporting a community of hundreds of workers, the turn-of-the-century Old Aldridge Sawmill, now crumbling ruins, rises out of the East Texas forest like a mirage. The outer walls of four mill buildings, portions of the railroad tramway and a green-carpeted mill pond persist as haunting evidence of the past. Listen closely and you might just hear the whine of those long-ago saws. To access the site, take the scenic, five-mile round-trip Sawmill Hiking Trail from Boykin Springs Recreation Area, or follow the driving directions provided on the Angelina National Forest's website.

www.fs.fed.us/r8/texas/recreation/angelina/aldridge.shtml



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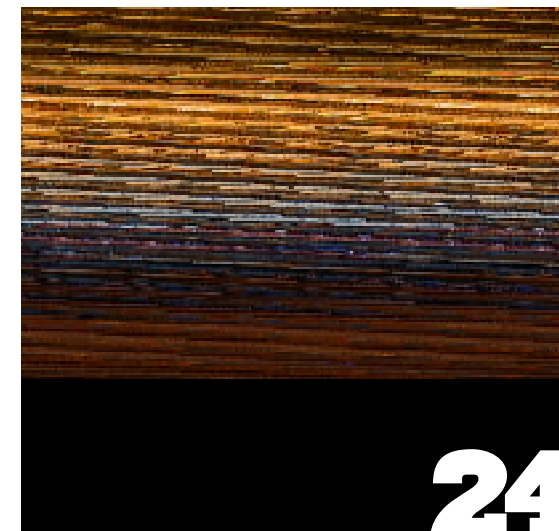


BEST TINE OF YOUR LIFE

Lake Fork, Quitman

Consistently one of the top trophy bass lakes in the country, Lake Fork is where the big lunkers wait. Many of Texas' largest bass, including the current state record, were caught here. While largemouth bass are the most popular sport fish on Lake Fork, depending on the season, anglers will also find an abundance of crappie, catfish and sunfish. Enjoy the catch, but remember to release all bass between 16 and 24 inches.

www.tpwd.state.tx.us/fishboat/fish/recreational/lakes/fork



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SLEEP WITH HISTORY

The Quarters at Presidio La Bahia, Goliad

Just across the river from Goliad State Park and Historic Site's Mission Espiritu Santo lies the circa-1749 Presidio La Bahia, the most fought-over fort in Texas, and the only Spanish fort in the U.S. in which you can stay overnight. At "The Quarters" — rooms formerly used by Spanish officers and later by priests — historic stone walls surround today's sound sleepers, or perhaps not so sound, given the fort's tradition of ghostly occurrences. The Quarters can house up to four guests, and includes a kitchen.

www.presidiolabahia.org



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More Precious Than Gold

Alibates Flint Quarries National Monument, Amarillo

In early North America it was a valuable mineral, prized for centuries, traded across thousands of miles and often at the heart of conflict and war, but it wasn't a precious metal or jewel. Flint was the gold of its day, essential for making weapons and tools, and the red hills of the Alibates Flint Quarries National Monument were the source of some of the most coveted, a type of agatized dolomite streaked with bright blues and reds and golds. More than 700 quarries exist where the flint was dug out by hand. See this historic area and surrounding village ruins on a ranger-guided tour. Call the park at 806-857-3151 to make reservations. www.nps.gov/alff/index.htm

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