

ALL-ACCESS PASS

Working together so that everyone can enjoy the outdoors, whatever their abilities.

In 2009, I was 25 years old and in peak fitness as a runner, competing in triathlons and gearing up to race the Boston Marathon that spring. I thought I'd pulled a muscle in my shoulder, but as the pain worsened and breathing became more difficult, I went to the emergency room, where I was told I had a blood clot in my lung and was lucky to be alive.

More than my first glimpse of mortality, it was a reminder that life changes, suddenly and inevitably; that perfect health is often as fleeting as perfect weather. No forecast is guaranteed except that which promises someday the rain will fall on all of us. We will face injury, old age and limitations that weren't there before.



by Kathryn Hunter

The Americans with Disabilities Act, signed in 1990, guarantees legal protections and accommodations for people with disabilities in the workplace, public transportation and other services. The ADA defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits major life activities — not only mobility impairments, for example, but also conditions such as cancer, diabetes or blindness.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is developing a five-year accessibility transition plan that Sandra Heath, hired in 2018 as TPWD's first ADA coordinator, calls "ADA and beyond." Heath says the agency strives to provide access and inclusion for users of all abilities, while also recognizing that public lands are equally tasked with the protection and good stewardship of wildlife and cultural and historical resources.

Neil Thomas, deputy director of TPWD's Infrastructure Division, explains that accessibility solutions are site-specific and are often incorporated in facility renovations.

"You can point to nearly any capital project on the board right now, and there's an accessible component to it," Thomas says.

Park website updates will help visitors decide, based on their individual abilities, which facilities and points of interest might be suited for them.

Whether it's ADA-accessible pit toilets in Enchanted Rock State Natural Area's backcountry or accommodations for disabled hunters in the public hunting program, Heath

says access is important wherever and whenever possible.

"We have very fit, very active, very adventurous visitors of all abilities," Heath says, citing examples of sports like wheelchair rugby and motocross, and Paralympians like Matt Stutzman, "the armless archer" who set a world record in 2015 for the farthest accurate shot in archery.

TPWD lead interpretive planner Eric Ray says research shows that when you make something accessible for one group of people it often improves accessibility for everyone. Many people who could qualify as "disabled" don't necessarily define themselves this way, or even realize that they're benefiting from an accessible design choice.

"If we've done our job right, that's what we hope for — that you don't even notice it's accessible," Ray says. "You can just do it."

THE ABILITY TO DO WHAT YOU LOVE

Before her accident, Laurie Allen trained in any weather, in any conditions — trail running, swimming, cycling.

"When I struggle is when I've been stuck in the house, even just for a



CHASE FOUNTAIN / TPWD

day," Allen says. "I think about before my injury, there was never a day that I didn't leave the house, ever."

In February 2015, the nine-time Ironman finisher slipped on icy ground getting out of a hot tub, falling 10 feet with no railing to catch her.

"My paralysis starts right here," she says, motioning just below her shoulders. Now a quadriplegic, Allen has limited use of muscles in her arms and back and no function in her hands, triceps, trunk or legs.

A month post-injury, Allen knew she wanted to race again.

"I wasn't sure what that was going to look like or how I was going to do it, but I just knew I was going to do it," she says. "We were going to figure it out."

With the support of the community

she calls her "triathlon family," Allen purchased a hand-cycle and racing wheelchair. In 2017, she raced her first multisport event, an abbreviated course of Jack's Generic Triathlon in Austin. Fellow endurance athletes and friends supported and accompanied her through the swim/bike/run, cheering.

"It was right up there with my first Ironman," Allen says. "It was amazing."

Allen continues to race endurance events, balancing her athletic goals with her full-time job as senior vice president of a software company. Training is difficult, but all the little things in daily life she used to take for granted are difficult, too.

Allen says a good way to gain perspective is through something like Archer's Challenge, a nonprofit whose

aim is to improve wheelchair access in public places. It organizes events in which the able-bodied perform tasks by wheelchair like getting around a college campus or shopping. Often people simply aren't aware of accessibility needs, and she doesn't blame them.

"Frankly you don't see a lot of people out in wheelchairs," she says. "And I think a lot of that is because it's hard, it's really hard, to be out."

NATURE IS GOOD MEDICINE

The health benefits of nature have been well documented; studies have linked time spent outdoors with lower stress and decreased risk for conditions such as depression, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. And yet those who could benefit the most from

Longtime endurance athlete Laurie Allen, who still races triathlons after a devastating 2015 injury, zips through her neighborhood on a hand-cycle during one of her workouts.

nature's good medicine often have little to no access.

Casting for Recovery, a national nonprofit that hosts weekend fly-fishing retreats for women diagnosed with breast cancer, was founded in 1996 on the concept of the healing properties of the outdoors.

Lise Lozelle, marketing director of Casting for Recovery and a volunteer on the fly-fishing staff, says by a retreat's end (along with, invariably, at least one reference to Brad Pitt in *A River Runs Through It*), she'll hear some variation of: "It's not really about the fishing, is it?"

“The fishing is maybe the thing that gets you there,” Lozelle says, “the idea that you want to try something new. It is a lot of what we do, but it’s so much more.”

Held at Camp Capers in Waring or Arrowhead Camp and Retreat Center in Cleburne, three annual Texas-based retreats are open for women of any age and in any stage of breast cancer treatment or recovery. Lozelle says 70 percent of women who attend the program, whether recently diagnosed or many years in remission, have never been in a support group before; most have little to no previous fishing experience. Fly-casting is often a combination of physical therapy and emotional connection to others and to the outdoors.

“We have so many women who spend so much time in a clinical setting, in doctor’s offices and hospitals,” Lozelle says. “They forget — and we all do, we all get busy with our lives and forget — that there’s something really healing about just stepping outside and hearing the birds and feeling the wind on your face.”

Bird Tales, created by Audubon Connecticut and currently being used by facilities in the Houston area, Austin area and the Lower Rio Grande Valley, is a program that seeks to reconnect memory-care patients to nature through multisensory programming and redesigned outdoor spaces.



EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD



COURTESY OF CASTING FOR RECOVERY



COURTESY OF ATHAN BERNAL / CAMACHO ACTIVITY CENTER

Virginia Rose (in foreground on opposite page) started Birdability to help mobility-challenged individuals enjoy birds. Casting for Recovery hosts weekend fly-fishing retreats for women with breast cancer. Left: An Austin program helps middle school kids spend time outdoors.

Mary Anne Weber, Houston Audubon’s education director, says caregivers have reported behaviors of contentment and less signs of agitation, even in advanced dementia patients. In special presentations, patients meet the program’s live birds and hold stuffed Audubon plush birds; during performances of classic songs like *Bye Bye Blackbird* and *Rockin’ Robin*, patients sometimes begin singing along, word for word.

Weber says one of keys to the program’s success is that enclosed courtyards and gardens are replanted with native species that attract birds and butterflies, and outfitted with bird feeders and bird baths.

“When the residents go outside, or even if they’re sitting and watching out a window, they have a direct connection to nature,” Weber says.

EQUITY IN THE OUTDOORS

For one class period every Friday, weather permitting, students in Martin Middle School’s Life Skills class leave the school’s walls behind. The Nature Immersion Program, led by Austin Parks and Recreation staff from the Camacho Activity Center, offers one of the only opportunities the students get during the school week to go outside.

Program coordinator Athan Bernal says that time spent outdoors is meaningful for the students, who have varying physical and cognitive impairments. Through participating in adapted activities, such as nature hikes, scavenger hunts, geocaching and kayaking, they learn to appreciate and enjoy the natural world, opening doors to settings they may have otherwise considered intimidating unknowns. They gain what Bernal calls “environmental literacy.”

“They learn the name of the river that is right behind the school,” he says. “They learn the name of



Top and opposite page: Martin Middle School students learn 'environmental literacy' by participating in outdoor activities. Above: Accessible deer blinds at Inks Lake State Park give hunters with disabilities a chance to shoot a deer.

the trails, the trees, the birds, the different types of animals that live next to them."

This helps the students not only understand what's available to them but also that these natural resources belong to them, he says. They have a right to enjoy the outdoors as much as anyone else.

Michael Wynne, professor at the University of Texas in Austin and an avid mountain biker, says

that though he's never viewed his deafness as a disability or a limit to access to the outdoors, he realized what he might be missing out on during a visit to Rocky Mountain National Park with his 6-year-old son, who is also deaf. Few facilities offer interpretive or guided tours for the hearing-impaired. But at this park, a deaf ranger approached his family and talked with them, opening a window to an entirely new experience.

"My son loved that ranger so much that we left the park with him saying he wanted to be a ranger one day," Wynne says.

Ted Pick, interpretive ranger at Huntsville State Park, believes blind

and visually impaired visitors have an unrealized stake in the outdoors. The park is creating an audio-described tour of the quarter-mile Loblolly Trail. If funding can be obtained, Pick hopes to also make the trail fully ADA accessible again following damage from Hurricane Harvey, and add Braille signs and guide ropes.

The audio tour plays the sounds of common wildlife species in the park, from the green tree frog to the pileated woodpecker. As the recording educates about the area's ecology and history, it invites listeners to crush the leaves of a sassafras tree and smell its fragrance, to touch a shortleaf pine whose flaky bark feels "almost like a freshly baked croissant." The senses of sound, smell and touch can be as vivid as the brightest colors.

HEARING "YOU CAN!"

At 7 years old, Bre Loveless was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis and was invited to attend Camp John Marc, a year-round facility in Bosque County that has served children with chronic illnesses and physical challenges since 1991.

"Getting to go to camp and for the first time hearing 'yes' instead of 'no, don't do this,' really impacted me from the time I was little," she says.

Years later, Loveless came back, first as a summer counselor and then in 2014 as the camp's assistant director.

In partnership with hospitals in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, the camp organizes sessions around different diagnoses, such as kidney disease, spina bifida, hemophilia, asthma or severe burns.

"Many of our campers' diagnoses can be acute or lifelong," Loveless says, "so independence is something that's often taken away from them when they're diagnosed or as their disease progresses."

With the medical support and facilities available at Camp John Marc, campers can ride horses, sleep out under the stars and cook over a campfire. Activities like fishing, swimming, boating and archery are open to them, often for the first time.

Inks Lake State Park began holding mentored white-tailed deer hunting

workshops for the mobility-impaired in 2014.

"We've had participants tell us that they'd never thought they'd be able to go hunting again, or they never thought they'd be able to take a deer or even get out and engage in the sport," says park Superintendent Cory Evans.

Currently Inks Lake has six 8-by-8-foot accessible blinds with ramps, dropped windows and carpeted floors for noise dampening. With no prototype for an accessible deer blind, staff consulted with disabled hunters to develop the original design, which they've continued to improve on over the years.

Evans says the experience is about more than just harvesting a deer.

"Sitting around in the evenings and participating in the conversation around the campfire and listening to everybody laugh and cut up and just have a good time — to me, that's what it's about."

FINDING JOY

Despite their conditions, or perhaps even because of them, people with

disabilities have a need for challenge and adventure.

In November, Voyager Outward Bound School hosted its first veterans' program in Texas: a seven-day whitewater-canoeing expedition in the wilderness of Big Bend. Other long-established programs for veterans and wounded warriors specialize in activities like hunting, fishing or endurance sports. A physically challenging outdoor experience can help those with wounds, seen or unseen, navigate life at home after their time of service.

Adventures can happen at a slower pace, too. Virginia Rose, founder of Birdability, will be the first to tell you birding is not exercising. She pauses frequently on our walk along the 1.5-mile, paved Lake Creek Trail in Williamson County north of Austin. Rose doesn't want to miss the warblers, high in the canopy. She stops midsentence to point out a red-shouldered hawk overhead and to name the source of a chirp deep in the underbrush, where a pair of cardinals bursts out.

Rose, now 59, has used a wheelchair since a childhood accident. Through Birdability, she helps mobility-challenged individuals get out into parks and enjoy nature through birds. Many of the people who've joined the walk this rainy day in October aren't birders, or as Rose puts it, "don't know they're birders yet."

There are a handful of people wheeling, a handful of people walking. A sense of camaraderie and community becomes as much a part of the experience as sightings of scissor-tailed flycatchers and red-bellied woodpeckers.

Kathy Ferland has been birding for years from a wheelchair, but this is her first trip to the Lake Creek Trail. "It's like an amusement park," she says. Just to get a chance to be there, in all that beautifully varied bird habitat. Just to get a chance to wheel somewhere on her own, to be one of those people out in nature in the gently falling rain.

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