Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc.

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2022

CONNECTION

Avian paradise

Birdwatchers flock to East Texas

Champagne Cakery

SCRATCH-MADE SWEETS

Henderson Mardi Gras

GUMBO AND ZYDECO

NTCA THE RURAL BROADBAND ASSOCIATION®

RURAL CONNECTIONS

By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association

An investment for the future

Expanded broadband access will lift rural communities

In order to thrive, all communities — especially those in rural America — require opportunities and the modern communications tools so vital for jobs, education, health and so much more.

Thanks to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the NTCA's nearly 850 rural, community-based broadband providers now have fresh help as they work to complete their essential mission. This historic investment will go a long way to connecting all Americans, even in areas of the country that are the hardest to reach for service providers.

Of course, the work now truly begins to deliver on the promise this law offers. The FCC must prioritize areas of the greatest need. Also, we will work with all key parties to support state leaders as an unprecedented amount of resources flow into their broadband initiatives.

Care is needed to vet those seeking funding, to ensure they can truly supply the infrastructure and services they promise. Throughout the effort, we must remember that we need to do more than simply build networks. Our commitment must also be to sustain these vital communications systems and to ensure the services offered over them are affordable and will meet customer demands well into the future.

We're confident NTCA members will continue to serve their neighbors by solidifying existing networks and expanding service. No matter where they live, all Americans should have the same opportunity to access vital communications services needed not only today, but also for years to come.

Communication at the speed of light

Fiber optics make it possible

At the end of the 1970s, Corning Inc. developed a technology that would reshape communications — fiber optics. Today, it's a critical component in the networks making our hyperconnected world possible. Streaming entertainment, social media, video calls, telehealth, online education, work-from-home jobs and so much more depend on this technology.

▸▸DID YOU KNOW?

- Each fiber strand is made up of a glass core thinner than a human hair.
- Light signals are transmitted through the glass, just as you might send a signal down the tunnel.
- To keep the light from simply passing through the glass when it changes direction, the core is surrounded by a cladding that reflects light back into the glass.
- The process is similar to mirrors in a tunnel, bouncing the signal from side to side until it reaches its endpoint.
- A single fiber cable — each fiber is much thinner than copper wire — can bundle hundreds, or even thousands, of fiber strands.
- While incredibly thin, fiber is not brittle. A single strand is three times stronger than steel and more durable than copper.
- The glass core of a fiber cable is so pure that if the ocean was made of the same glass, you could stand on the surface and clearly see the ocean floor miles below.

Take a STAND!

Avoid back and neck pain while working from home

Over the past couple of years, working from home has gone from a perk — one that only a few employers offered — to the norm for many. The benefits for employees range from having your dog as a co-worker to adding pajama pants to the professional wardrobe. But working from home can also come with hazards.

Whether you're camped out at a kitchen table, sprawled across the couch or luxuriating in bed all day, odds are your home setup isn't as ergonomic as that of an office. This may not be a big deal when you're working from home for short periods. But when those workdays add up to weeks or even months, poor posture and sedentary behavior can create serious back and neck pain.

The good news is that with the right furniture and a little daily activity, it's easy to strike a healthy balance with your work-from-home routine.

▶ GET ON YOUR FEET

Most people tend to hunch forward while sitting, which can put a lot of pressure on your lower back. Standing and looking at a monitor at eye level, on the other hand, puts little strain on your neck and back, while also burning more calories than sitting.

That said, it isn't comfortable to stand for hours at a time. That's why the UPLIFT Standing Desk V2 is a good option for any remote office. The design enhances durability and comfort, and easy height adjustment encourages users to keep moving without settling into any position for too long.

▶ LOOK FOR SUPPORT

When you do decide to take a seat, getting the proper support can make a big difference. If you don't have an office chair, try putting a small pillow behind your lower back to maintain an arched posture. This practice will help put your upper body weight on the chair instead of your spine.

If you're ready to invest in a new chair, the Steelcase Gesture has been Wirecutter's pick for more than five years. However, if you're looking to spend less, the HON Ignition 2.0 is a more affordable option that makes few sacrifices in comfort.

▶ STAY ACTIVE

It's a good idea to take breaks throughout the day to move around and get the blood circulating. While you're at it, try some simple exercises like backbends, hamstring stretches and planks that can help strengthen your core and provide additional support for your lower back.

If you're looking for a guided workout, the Seven Home Workout app offers a wide variety of seven-minute routines that you can squeeze into a busy day. Or explore the Yoga Studio app to unwind with yoga classes for all levels of experience and guided meditations that take as few as five minutes.

▶ MOVE AROUND

Time can get away from you during a busy workday, so it always helps to have a reminder when it's time to take a break. If you have an Apple Watch, you set the frequency of these reminders in the Activity app. For everyone else, apps like Stand Up! will schedule notifications throughout your workday to get up and move around. The Wakeout app will even suggest quick exercises for every room of the house.

Are you ready for the high-tech fast lane in 2022?

We're here to help you navigate the upcoming year

Happy new year! From everyone at Eastex, we hope 2022 is off to a great start. After a season of celebration, the new year gives us a welcome break from weeks of holiday hustle and bustle. It also is a good time to pause and contemplate what's ahead, whether that's an upcoming vacation, a new job or major milestones like graduations or weddings.

RUSTY DORMAN
General Manager

All that potential can be a little daunting. When looking forward, I often find it helpful to look back and appreciate the road that brought us where we are today, whether it's my own personal journey or the rapid evolution of the communications industry.

Consider the internet. Fifty years ago, only researchers had the first inkling of what was to come. In 1972, "All in the Family" was the top-rated TV show in the country. Roberta Flack's "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" was at the top of the music charts. And researcher Ray Tomlinson had recently sent the world's first email to himself using ARPANET, a network of computers linked by phone lines to help Pentagon-funded research stations communicate.

Just a decade later, companies like Apple and Microsoft were already leading the personal computer revolution that put desktops in homes and offices. By 1992, people were receiving the first of many AOL software CDs. The squawk of computer modems soon filled homes as people used dial-up internet to connect to email and online message boards.

Nineteen years ago, the internet became even more of a social space with the launch of Friendster, a precursor to Facebook. Social networks wouldn't become fixtures on phones and mobile devices until the arrival of the iPhone in 2007 and the iPad three years later. Even then, the ability to bring medical expertise home with telehealth, take college-level classes from your couch or stream high-quality movies, music and TV shows — things we can take for granted today — would have seemed far-fetched.

In just five decades, we have seen online technology grow from computers that could only send a few characters of text into being the center of a deeply interconnected world. At Eastex, we're proud to be a part of that story, because we have seen firsthand how the service we provide benefits lives and connects communities.

So, as you look ahead to the many possibilities a new year brings, take a moment to consider how far we've come. From staying connected with distant friends on social media to planning your next big adventure, how many of your goals wouldn't even be possible without fast, reliable internet service?

And, just as importantly, what innovation will be the next to transform our lives? I don't expect the pace of innovation to slow down, which is why we'll be here to make sure the services, tools and connections you need are always up to speed.

Here's to a wonderful 2022 as we all keep our eyes on the road ahead.

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Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc.

A member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people in the Henderson, Livingston and Waskom areas.

Eastex is proud to offer broadband through Eastex Net, and security and automation services through ECS Solutions.

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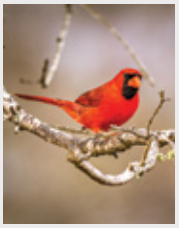


Lee Jones

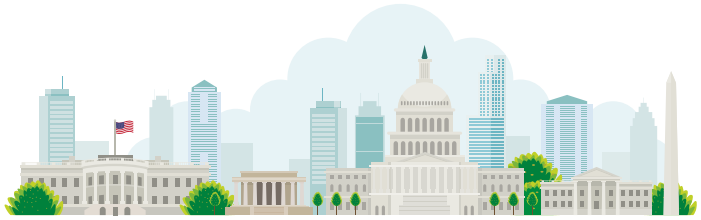
Birdwatchers travel to Texas from far and wide to get a glimpse of hundreds of species like the Northern Cardinal.
See story Page 8.

ATTENTION SENIORS!

Eastex is accepting applications for the 2022 Eastex scholarships available to graduating seniors who will attend a college or a technical school during the 2022-2023 school year. Students may obtain an application from the business offices in Henderson, Livingston or Waskom beginning Monday, Jan. 3.

The applicant must be a high school senior, a member of the immediate family of an active member and reside within an Eastex Telephone Cooperative Inc. exchange as of Jan. 1 of the year of application. An active member is defined as a subscriber receiving local service or dial tone from an Eastex Telephone Cooperative Inc. exchange, excluding employees, directors and their dependents.

Completed applications must be returned to Eastex Telephone no later than March 1.



Apply for a free trip to Washington, D.C.

Eligible students 16 and 17 years old may qualify for the 2021 Foundation for Rural Service Youth Tour of the nation's capital. The tour, which brings students together from across rural America to visit Washington, D.C., offers participants a chance to learn about rural telecommunications and to observe the legislative and governmental processes. This year's tour is scheduled for June 1-5.

Interested students should speak with their guidance counselor to apply. Completed applications must be submitted online by April 1. For more information, and to obtain an application, go to frs.org. All students and chaperones on the tour will be required to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination.

Game on!

SUDOKU

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ANSWERS

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CONNECT WITH A WI-FI CALL

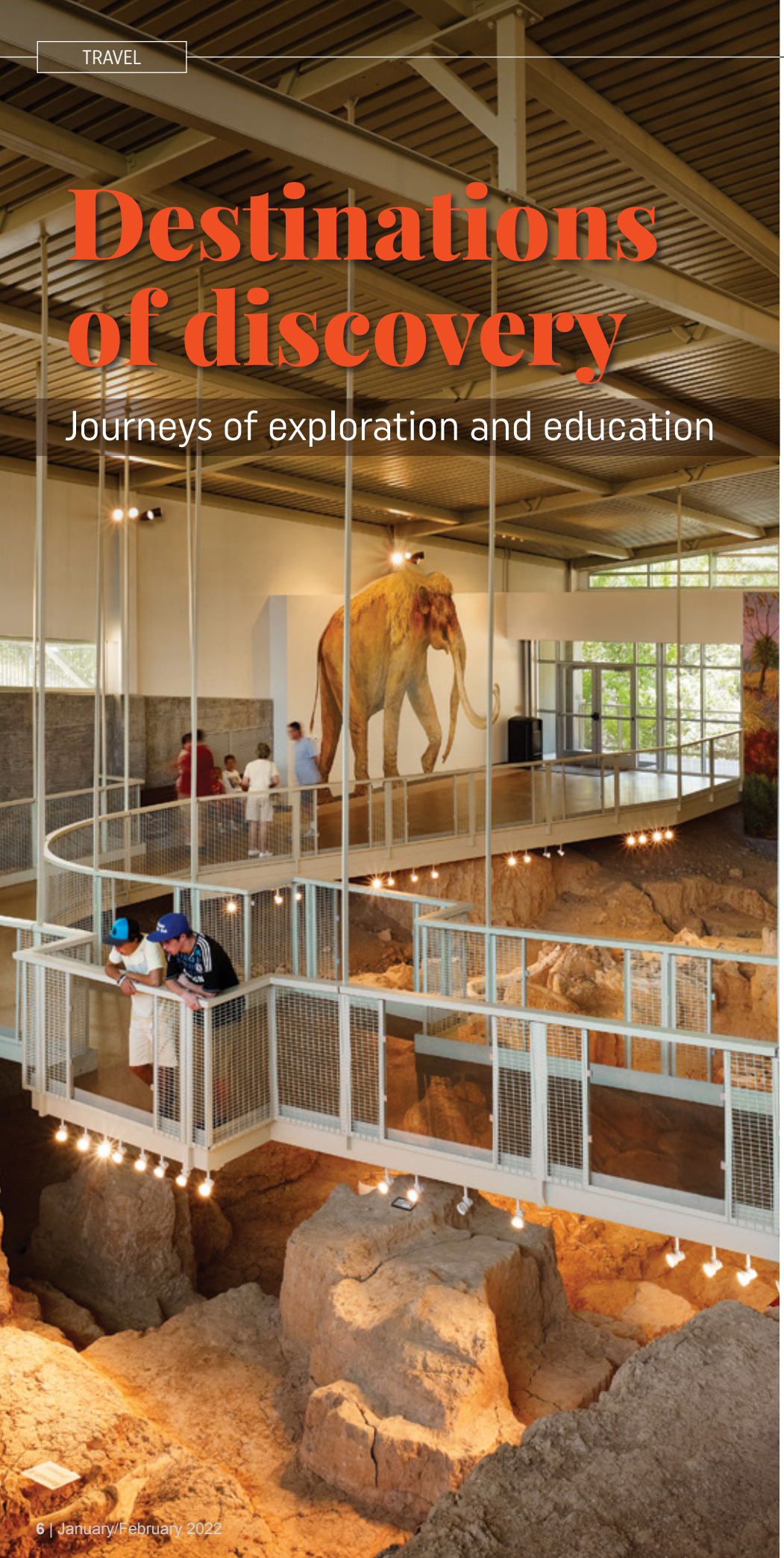
Do you frequent a spot where your mobile phone's signal is so weak that calls often drop? If you have a strong Wi-Fi connection, you may have an easy solution — Wi-Fi calling.

The idea is pretty simple, too. Typically, when making a call, your phone connects to the service of your carrier, such as Verizon or AT&T. With Wi-Fi calling, however, the phone makes a connection through the internet. If you have great, fast internet service at home, dropped or low-quality calls might disappear. And you might even be able to connect when you're in public or while at work if there is access to an open Wi-Fi network. And here's a cool thing — it's meant to be automatic. Once you set up Wi-Fi calling, the phone does the rest, making a choice of when it's best to use either Wi-Fi or your phone's regular network.

The specifics of setting up Wi-Fi calling are dependent on the model of your phone and the policies of your mobile phone service. However, most modern phones offer the feature, so check the online guides for your devices and review the policies of your mobile service provider. Then, give Wi-Fi calling a try.

Destinations of discovery

Journeys of exploration and education



Story by ANNE BRALY

You're on vacation, and you've planned so many things — where to stay, where to eat, what to pack. You think you've done everything in advance to ensure a great holiday. But then, it happens. You're only into your second day of vacation and your child is saying, "I'm bored." A little extra planning might just prevent this pitfall, and you can treat the kids to a day of adventure while providing them an education in the earth sciences and state history.

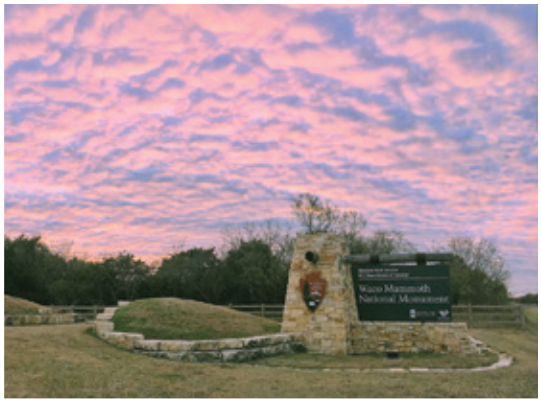
Everything's big in Texas, and so were the Columbian mammoths that roamed the landscape more than 400,000 years ago. They stood as tall as 14 feet and weighed about 20,000 pounds. All that remains today, though, are the fossil records they left behind, and at Waco Mammoth National Monument, you can see those remnants up close and personal.

Tour guides will lead you from the Welcome Center down a 300-yard paved path to the Dig Shelter and the mammoth fossils. They are only partially uncovered and still in their original position within the bone bed. During your tour, you will learn about the Ice Age, how the fossils were discovered, and the differences between dinosaurs and mammoths. "Mammoths were not dinosaurs," says site director Raegan King. "The tour can teach kids about the difference between dinosaurs and animals from the Ice Age. They get a crash course in paleontology."

But, she adds, kids also learn about the importance of park stewardship — leaving no trace behind. "It's important for kids to learn about cleaning up and leaving things just as they found them," King says.

Research is ongoing at Waco Mammoth National Monument with finds that many paleontologists consider among the most important in North America. Scientists have unearthed a treasure trove of fossils, including the only known nursery herd — mothers and their young — in North America. The bones currently lie in storage at nearby Mayborn Museum, a natural science and cultural history museum at Baylor University.

The Waco Mammoth National Monument offers an exploration of creatures that lived more than 400,000 years ago. Their legacy is told through fossil records and displays that include the bones of mammoths and a saber-tooth tiger. Also, miles of trails add to the adventure.



Photos courtesy of the Waco Parks and Recreation Department.

But visitors to the national monument can see the bones of an adult male mammoth and an adult female, as well as the bones of a saber-tooth tiger, a camel and remnants of four other mammoths in the bone bed at the dig site. It's a unique experience that gives people a different perspective on paleontology. Rather than see a replica of a mammoth in a museum or one reconstructed from partial bones, viewers can walk along a suspended walkway and look into the bone pit where paleontologists have left the bones of the Ice Age animals as they found them — still in the ground and only partially uncovered.

"It gives the public a better idea of how paleontology works," King says. "Seeing them in the ground lets people learn something about the environment in which the mammoths lived and interacted with the ecosystem." Mammoths lived across North America during the Ice Age, but there's something about this area in the north-central region of Texas — its air, water and soil, which, combined, made the perfect recipe for preserving the skeletons. Paleontologists working at Waco Mammoth National Monument know there are more fossils underground. In fact, they know where they are, King says. At this time, though, they choose to leave them in place because as soon as they leave the ground, the fossils begin to disintegrate, and valuable information goes with them.

In addition to the bone pit, there are miles of trails to explore around the park with its plethora of birds, butterflies, bugs and plants. Kids can join the Junior Ranger Program and look for specific things around the site. They'll get a booklet asking questions about what they see and when they return it, they'll get a Junior Ranger badge. There's also a mock dig pit that lets kids search for replica fossils and leave them in place just like paleontologists.

Bring your own food and drink — there are no dining facilities at the site — and have a picnic on the grounds.

Guided tours take place every 30 minutes, so just show up and join the fun — no reservation needed. Tours last from 45 minutes to one hour. For more information, log on to nps.gov/waco.

Finding the fun-damentals

Entertaining kids while traveling isn't easy. But there are places just a smidge off the beaten track, outside the glitz and glamour of big cities, that will spark your child's interest. Here are some ideas for taking kids around the Lone Star State that bring into focus history and science in fun and interesting ways. They'll be having so much fun, they may not realize they're learning in the process.

Heard Natural Science Museum
McKinney, Texas

The museum features exhibits of natural history: fossils, archaeology, rocks and minerals, plants — close to 150 species of wildflowers alone — and native animals — more than 240 species that live around the 289-acre wildlife sanctuary. Stroll along the boardwalk that snakes its way through 50 acres of wetlands, or see the grounds from a different perspective — a challenging ropes course that traverses the Texas canopy. For more information, log onto heardmuseum.org.

Texas Through Time
Hillsboro, Texas

Discover Texas' interesting and diverse fossil history from the Ediacaran Period more than 600 million years ago all the way up to the Holocene Epoch — our current geological time period. Many museums exhibit replicas. Not so Texas Through Time. The museum works hard to feature as many real specimens as possible for a more authentic experience. The collection includes paleontological finds from around the world, but its main goal is to highlight those from Texas. With several hands-on exhibits as well as a fossil "dig" box for kids that allows them to take home the fossils they find, this makes for a great day for budding archaeologists. Admission is free to all. For more information, visit texasthroughtime.org.

Beauty in the boughs

Texas is a hot spot for birdwatchers

Lee Jones

Roseate spoonbill

Story by ANDREA AGARDY

You don't need to book a safari to experience nature's beauty and diversity — just step outside and look up. There, perched on power lines and tucked away safely in nests are some of the most fascinating animals on the planet. "We've got neighbors that are really interesting to spy on, and they're not human neighbors — they're the birds that we're sharing our backyards with," says Cliff Shackelford, the statewide nongame ornithologist for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. "You can do birdwatching through your back window while sipping coffee in your pajamas. It's so appealing because it's so flexible and easy to do."

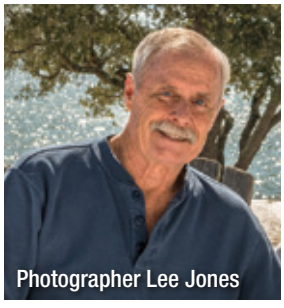
Texas is a birder's bonanza, with more than 650 species spending at least part of the year here. Only California plays host to more birds. "We have a lot of species that don't occur anywhere else in the U.S.," says Cliff, a lifelong birder and member of the Pineywoods Audubon Society. He also hosts "Bird Calls," a popular NPR call-in show.

"We've got so many ecoregions in one state," he says. "That drives the diversity of birds. We've got mountain species out west, we've got coastal species on the beach and everything in between. All those reasons combined create a heck of a bird list."

CAPTURING LIFE THROUGH A LENS

That variety has been a source of joy for Lee Jones, a Livingston resident whose interest in photography led him to a love of birdwatching.

He first pointed his lens toward wildlife about a decade ago while visiting a friend in Florida. "He was



Photographer Lee Jones

really involved with bird photography and had a lot of really nice equipment," Lee recalls. "After seeing the places that he took us, and some of the pictures I was able to take with his better lenses, I just fell in love with it."

Lee loves to travel, bringing his camera along to capture a photographic life list — the term birders give to the record they keep of every species they see. When shooting close to home, his favorite places to go include his backyard, where he's hung several hummingbird feeders. He also enjoys birdwatching at Kickapoo Creek on the northern end of what locals call "the jungle of Lake Livingston."

Whether he's shooting from a hunting blind, on his kayak or while walking through the woods, Lee's found that photography catches the beauty of nature that the naked eye too often overlooks. "When you've got a camera in your hand you're just more attuned with nature. That's the part that really draws me in," he says. "When you get to blow the images up on your computer screen, you see things that you just don't see with your eye, and you realize how much beauty is out there."

WHERE TO GO

With so many species to see and so many square miles to cover, it can be hard to decide where to start. But don't worry. Texas Parks and Wildlife has a solution.

The Great Texas Wildlife Trails include over 900 birding hot spots across the state, and birders can drive from one location to the next at their leisure. All the details can be found online at tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/wildlife/wildlife-trails.

"That's really been the best platform for sending people around because all the homework's been done," Cliff says. "Almost all the states have a birding trail now. Texas was the first in the mid-'90s, and then the other states repeated the concept of figuring out where these birding spots are. It's really been an easy way to tell the public where to go. It's been really helpful."

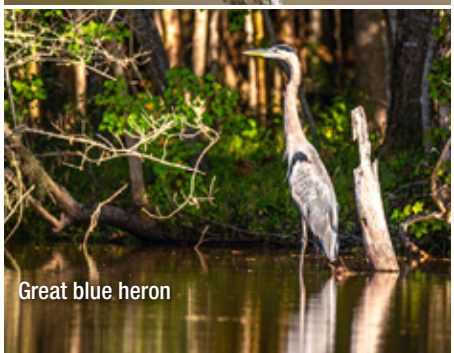
Dickcissel

American white pelican

Blue jay

Great egret

European starling


Great blue heron

© Lee Jones

Pine warbler

Find your *flock* online!

Birders can find a wealth of information about their favorite hobby on YouTube and Facebook, but there are also many birding-specific apps and sites.

"There are just so many resources that I didn't have when I was starting. It's almost overwhelming," says Cliff Shackelford, statewide nongame ornithologist for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Here are a couple of the resources Shackelford recommends:

eBird — Developed by Cornell University, eBird is an international database that encourages birders to become citizen scientists by submitting their findings and sharing details. The mobile app and website, ebird.org, can help users locate the best spot in their area to cross certain species off their life lists.

Cliff says, "eBird is putting stuff in print to shame." It's just super valuable. While someone else is driving, the co-pilot can be looking through their phone and getting information in real time and updates as they come."

Digital bird books — Birders used to carry around paper bird books or field guides in their backpacks, but today, all that information can be logged and tracked digitally.

Cliff recommends mobile apps like the Audubon Bird Guide and Merlin. "I have both of those on my phone, and I use them both equally," he says. "They're great."

Merlin, also developed by Cornell University, recently launched a feature that can identify a species simply by the sound of its call. "You can point your microphone towards a bird, push a button, and it can help you identify it — like Shazam can identify songs," Cliff says.

Locator apps

Connected for safety and security

With the help of a locator app on a mobile phone, parents can be aware of just about anywhere their family members roam — assuming families have reviewed and accepted the app's policies.

While some might find this concept intrusive, these apps can be helpful for busy schedules or a comfort during troubling times, late nights or long trips. Here are a few of the top locator apps on the market and what they can do.

Life360

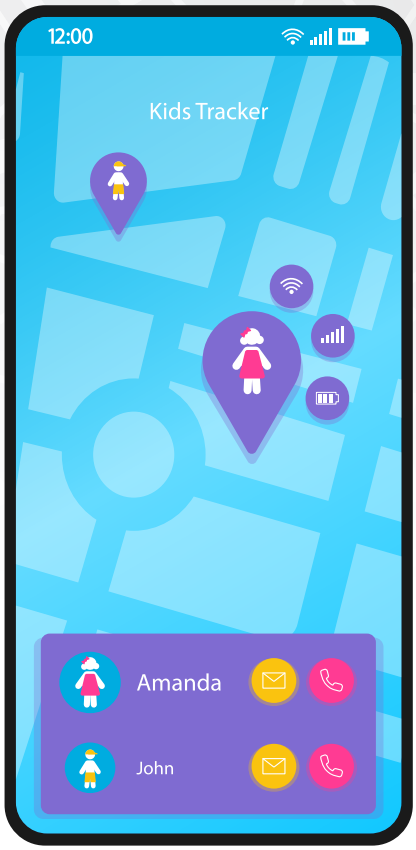
The premium version of Life360 can tell you where your family members' phones are at any given moment. Notifications about events like a child arriving at school are easy to receive.

Glympse

The free Glympse app lets friends and loved ones know your travel status, so you never have to worry if you're running late. They'll know. Users can send a Glympse alert to anyone with a web-enabled device.

iSharing

Know where your friend or family member is at any moment. The iSharing app provides real-time alerts when someone leaves home, work or school. In-app messaging is just one of the features, some of which are only available in the premium version.



Money wise

Financial education with digital tools

Fewer than half of U.S. states require students to complete personal finance education, although there have been recent efforts in many states to focus on this form of education.

There is, however, a wealth of online resources and apps to help parents teach children to safely navigate the financial seas. Here are a few of the sites and apps available to parents looking to teach their kids real-world money lessons:

CONSUMER FINANCIAL PROTECTION BUREAU

The role of the CFPB, which Congress established in 2010, is to hold financial institutions accountable for following federal financial laws and to protect and educate consumers.

The bureau's website, consumerfinance.gov, has a section dedicated to youth financial literacy and offers more than 200 educational activities designed for kids of all ages. The list of topics is extensive and includes entrepreneurship, budgeting, managing credit and preventing fraud and identity theft.

FAMZOO

FamZoo is a comprehensive finance app for families. It creates a virtual family bank with parents in the banker's seat. Through the app, parents can pay their children's allowances, track their spending and savings and even encourage charitable giving.

FamZoo isn't free — the cost ranges between $2.50 and $5.99 a month depending on which option you choose. One- and two-month free trials are available at famzoo.com.

GOHENRY

GoHenry, aimed at kids as young as 6 years old, provides parents with a prepaid debit card for their children and an app the whole family can use to keep track of spending, savings and progress toward financial goals.

GoHenry offers a one-month free trial, after which, the service charges a monthly fee of $3.99 per child. For more information, visit gohenry.com.

Which **MUSIC STREAMING SERVICE** is right for you?

It's never been easier to discover a new favorite band or find that hidden gem of a song you can't stop playing on repeat. A wealth of music streaming apps boast exhaustive libraries, classic hits and new buried treasures all at your fingertips. Whether you're looking for crystal clear audio, curated playlists or a soundtrack to keep up with your runs, there's something for everyone if you know where to look.

SPOTIFY

Spotify is synonymous with music streaming for a reason. Its interface is easy to navigate and always has new recommendations based on what you're already listening to. If you have friends on the service, you can share your listening activity and see what others are playing from Spotify's library of 70 million tracks. Audio quality, on the other hand, varies based on your account. Free users can stream at decent qualities if they're listening on standard headphones or a Bluetooth speaker. Premium users can stream at higher quality for $10 a month, and Spotify has announced plans to roll out a hi-fi tier with lossless audio quality in the future.

APPLE MUSIC

Apple Music's social options are similar to what you'll find on Spotify, even if there are fewer curated options for discovering new favorites. But the real selling point is audio quality. Audiophiles can enjoy lossless tracks at the base tier of $10 a month with about 20 million tracks currently available at the highest quality. Apple says the rest of its 70 million-plus track library will be available in that format by the end of the year.

TIDAL

TIDAL used to have the crown when it came to lossless audio, but at $20 a month it's now a tough sell against other more affordable options. If you can't wait for Apple Music to update its library, TIDAL's catalog is already fully available in lossless format, with a few even streaming at "Master" quality up to 9,216 Kbps. And while TIDAL may have made its name with major hip-hop artists, the genres available now are about as diverse as other top streaming apps.

AMAZON MUSIC

The biggest benefit of Amazon's music service is that it's already available to anyone with a Prime subscription. But that may not get you as much as you think. Despite having access to more than 75 million tracks, ad-free tier users may notice certain albums and artists are off-limits without a paid subscription. At least that buys you access to lossless audio, but if you're looking for easy access and discoverability, there are probably better options.

WHAT IS LOSSLESS AUDIO?

Most music streaming services compress audio files to save space. That means some data has to be discarded, and audio quality suffers. Lossless audio still compresses these files but retains all the details of the original audio recording. You can hear the difference most often in frequencies like those from the crash of a cymbal in a rock song or the bass of a hip-hop track.

Higher-quality audio tracks are also much larger than lossy audio formats. So make sure you have the necessary data coverage if you're streaming on the go and adequate bandwidth if you're listening over the internet at home.

Owner Gemma Champagne and Manager Cheyenne Palmer greet customers at Champagne Cakery in Livingston.

Cupcakes are always a crowd pleaser.

Gemma opened the bakery in March 2020.

Bubbling with excitement

Livingston's Champagne Cakery is the toast of the town

Story By SHEILA FLYNN

When building a business around tasty treats and accessible fanciness, it helps to have the last name Champagne — and one East Texas baker is just so fortunate. "My maiden last name was Hill, so when people find out, I always say I traded up," laughs Gemma Champagne, who owns Champagne Cakery in Livingston.

A mother of three children all under the age of 13, Gemma says she never had any interest in baking until she had kids and began learning to make their birthday cakes. She started out dabbling and found a passion that turned her into an entrepreneur. "I just started making stuff. I didn't go to school for anything. I haven't even taken a technical class," she says. "I just told myself that I wanted to be a better mom."

The positive feedback about her increasingly skillful efforts matched her burgeoning love of baking. "Friends were like, 'Hey, you should sell this stuff,'" she says.

She considered a food truck, but the cost and red tape associated with permits and licenses dissuaded her. Instead, she and her husband began looking for a brick-and-mortar location. "We wanted something cute and small," she says. "Our shop we have right now was actually a one-bedroom apartment that we renovated into a bakery. It was all in God's time, for sure. I had to go slow to find the right place."

She signed the lease at the end of 2019 and went to work to customize the space according to her vision, with friends hand-painting an accent wall and lending their artistic talents. Champagne Cakery opened on March 14, 2020.

SWEET TIMING

And then the world shut down as COVID-19 took hold. In hindsight, Gemma is thankful to have had that first opening week so locals could familiarize themselves with her venture. "I think, had we opened maybe a week later, then people would have already been staying home and not coming out," she says. "But, they had that week to see what we had. I think it was definitely an amazing timing thing, given the pandemic."

The Cakery became a thriving takeout business, its treats taken out to customers' cars as people cherished small pleasures in lockdown life. "We had so many people coming in and saying that it was just nice to have something like this at this time," she says.

Gemma believes her commitment to from-scratch ingredients has cemented the popularity of her bakery, which has won several local awards. The Cakery's most popular items are red velvet cupcakes and cake jars, as well as old-school oatmeal cookie sandwiches.

"People are so accustomed to processed things now that when they try something made from scratch, it's so different," she says. "People will say, 'Wow, this is something my grandma used to make. This is what it tasted like.' Or, 'My mother made something like this as a kid.' I never want to get big enough to where we have nothing made from scratch anymore to save time. Our customers know that."

The emphasis on family looms large at the Cakery, where Gemma's kids hang out after school. The business seems to be inspiring their career dreams. "My oldest wants to own his own restaurant," she says. "And my youngest currently wants to be a baker, so I'm not failing!"

IF YOU GO ...

Champagne Cakery
340 Pan American Drive, Suite B6
Livingston
936-327-2171
@ChampagneCakery on Facebook

Gumbo with gusto

Henderson hosts tasty Mardi Gras celebration

Story By ANDREA AGARDY

The Henderson Main Street Advisory Board invites everyone to come and paint the town green, purple and gold at the city's annual Mardi Gras festivities.

Slated for Feb. 26, the celebration will mark its eighth anniversary with crowd pleasers like live music, a beer garden and the popular gumbo cook-off. "The gumbos are all so good," says Suzanne Cross, the city's tourism director. "The whole day is a fun event — just something great to break up the winter."

What started as a way to draw people to explore Henderson's historic downtown evolved into a beloved local tradition. "We are not very far from Louisiana. We're very, very East Texas," says Main Street Coordinator Kaitlin Smith. "It's kind of a way to merge the two states together at the same event. A lot of people attend Mardi Gras, so we wanted to bring something similar to Henderson."

MAD ABOUT ROUX

It wouldn't be a true, Louisiana-style party without gumbo, the heavily seasoned stew that became the official cuisine of the Pelican State in 2004. The gumbo cook-off pits teams against one another to decide whose gumbo reigns supreme.

"We have a lot of returning businesses that participate in the gumbo cook-off each year," Kaitlin says. "Anyone is encouraged to participate."

First-, second- and third-place trophies are awarded by a slate of secret judges — out-of-towners who blend in with the rest of the crowd. The public will also get the chance to honor their favorite by voting for the winner of the Peoples' Choice Trophy.

Recipes are cook-off contestants' closely guarded secrets, and competitors often engage in a little good-natured trash talking. No two gumbos are the same, and some folks get really innovative with their ingredients. "There's no two that taste alike," Suzanne says. "I'm just kind of amazed! They're all so different."

Swampland Revival.

Photos courtesy of Henderson Main Street Advisory Board.

Guests 21 years and older can stop by the beer garden and grab an adult beverage to wash down the gumbo.

FUN AND GAMES

Returning to provide the soundtrack for the afternoon will be Swampland Revival, a band from New Iberia, Louisiana, that specializes in zydeco. "They're a great band and a great bunch of guys," Suzanne says. "They have all the beads on and everything. It really, really beefs up our event because they really make it shine."

Trophies will be awarded in several contests throughout the day, including best mask, best costume and best decorated gumbo booth. The cake walk winner will get to take a dessert home.

Henderson's Mardi Gras is a family friendly way to fight cabin fever and laissez les bons temps rouler. "It's giving back to our community with a fun event for people to enjoy with their families," Kaitlin says. "It helps us give back to our local businesses in downtown Henderson, and it's a good community-building event."

If you go

Henderson Mardi Gras
Saturday, Feb. 26, 3-7 p.m.

The event will be held on Main Street in the historic downtown area.

In the event of inclement weather, the festivities will be moved to the Henderson Civic Center.

Admission is $10 per person, and tickets are available at the gate.

For details and weather updates, follow @mainstreethendersontx on Facebook.

ROUX the day

It's a given that pretty much everything is improved by the addition of a sauce. That's why we put mustard on hot dogs and ketchup on fries. Good sauces cling to food, which means they need body.

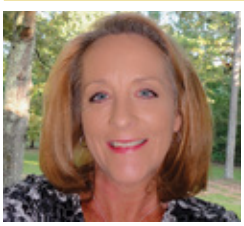
There are many ways to achieve this, including making a roux, the foundation for wonderful sauces for meats, fish, poultry and vegetables. But it's also the beginning of many pots of gumbo, and roux is the underpinning for unbelievably creamy Creole dishes.

Roux is nothing more than equal parts of butter or oil and flour. The addition of warm liquid, whether water, stock or milk, works to swell the small granules of flour, which trap the liquid to thicken the roux. Careful though — one of the most important things to remember when making a roux is to avoid adding the flour to a hot liquid. The result is something every cook dreads: a lumpy sauce.

In French cuisine, roux is cooked to one of three stages: white, blond or brown. In New Orleans, where roux is the beginning of so many dishes, roux becomes a chameleon. It can change from brown to red and to black. The longer the roux cooks, the darker and more intensely flavored it gets.

Cooking the roux has two main benefits. First, it gets rid of the raw, starchy flavor of the flour. Second — and this is with darker roux — it adds color to a dish. White and blond roux are used for light-colored sauces, such as cheese sauce and bechamel. Brown roux is used for darker sauces, such as stews and gravies.

Here is a recipe for basic roux. Add milk and shredded cheese for a lovely cheese sauce for vegetables. Or, use roux as the foundation for gumbo or mac and cheese. It's a versatile concoction that's an important step in making so many good foods.

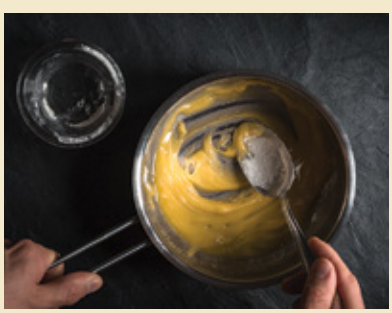


FOOD EDITOR **ANNE P. BRALY** IS A NATIVE OF CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE.

BASIC ROUX

1 stick (8 tablespoons) unsalted butter or 1/2 cup peanut oil
1/2 cup flour

In a large pot or skillet, warm the butter or peanut oil to medium heat and then stir in the flour. Cook for 10 minutes, constantly stirring, to make a lightly browned roux, or continue stirring and cooking for up to 30 minutes for a dark roux. The roux will darken as you stir, from very light brown to copper or peanut butter brown, then to light chocolate brown, then dark chocolate brown and then very, very dark brown.



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SEAFOOD GUMBO

1 recipe basic roux (dark brown)

Vegetables:

1 tablespoon butter
1 cup chopped celery
1 cup chopped green onions
1 green bell pepper, chopped

Tomato sauce:

6 cups water
1 (8-ounce) can tomato sauce
2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
2 cloves garlic, minced
2 teaspoons salt, or to taste
1 teaspoon hot pepper sauce, or to taste
1/2 teaspoon dried thyme

Seafood and okra:

1 pound fresh or frozen chopped okra
1 pound white fish such as catfish, cut into 2-inch pieces
11/2 pounds peeled and deveined shrimp

Final seasonings:

1 tablespoon gumbo file powder, or to taste
1/2 teaspoon salt, or to taste

In a large pot, make a basic roux, allowing it to cook to a dark brown stage.

In a separate skillet, melt the tablespoon of butter over medium heat. Add and stir the celery, green onions and bell pepper, cooking until tender, about 10 minutes. Add the cooked vegetables to the pot with the roux.

Stir the water, tomato sauce, Worcestershire sauce, garlic, salt, hot pepper sauce and thyme into the vegetable mixture. Bring the mixture to a gentle boil, reduce heat to medium low and simmer for 1 hour.

Stir okra into the vegetable mixture and cook it until tender, about 15 minutes. Add the fish, stir gently, and cook it until the flesh is easily flaked with a fork, about 5 minutes. Gently stir shrimp into the mixture and cook until the shrimp are bright pink, about 3 minutes. Season with the file powder and more salt; stir. Makes about 8 servings.

©Mark Gilliand

THREE-CHEESE MAC AND CHEESE With Bechamel Sauce

1/3 cup butter
1 shallot, finely chopped
3 cloves garlic minced
1/4 cup all-purpose flour
1 1/2 tablespoon cornstarch
2+ cups whole milk
1 cup heavy whipping cream
1/4 teaspoon white pepper
1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1/8 teaspoon dry mustard, preferably Colman's
8 ounces Gruyere cheese, shredded
6 ounces sharp white cheddar cheese, shredded
2 ounces Monterey Jack cheese, shredded
1/2 tablespoon salt
2 pounds macaroni, cooked

Melt the butter and saute the shallot, then whisk in the flour and cornstarch to a thick paste. This is your roux. Cook the roux on medium-low heat until it is light brown. Add the milk and cream and cook it, stirring, until the sauce comes to a simmer. Remove from heat and keep stirring about 4 minutes. The sauce will thicken as it cools. This is your bechamel sauce.

To the sauce, add and stir in the white pepper, cayenne pepper and dry mustard. Test the temperature with your finger. If it's too hot to touch, let it cool longer. If it's just uncomfortably warm, it's the perfect time to add the cheeses in stages, stirring constantly. Add extra milk if it's too thick. Taste the sauce, and add salt if it's needed. Pour the sauce over the cooked and drained pasta and stir. Serve immediately. Makes 12-14 servings.

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