

# DALLAS Naturally



BY MARY BLYE HOWE • PHOTOGRAPHS BY NATALIE CAUDILL

## Cedar Ridge NATURE PRESERVE

**MOST VISITORS TO DALLAS**—indeed, a good many residents—express surprise that the city boasts a gorgeous, 633-acre wilderness area called Cedar Ridge Preserve. Located in southwest Dallas, not far from Cedar Hill State Park, Joe Pool Lake, Cedar Mountain Preserve, and Dogwood Canyon, Cedar Ridge is a nature-lover's paradise.

[CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE LEFT] Insects like this one, perched on a Mexican hat (also known as long-headed coneflower), serve important roles in the ecosystem. The scenery at Cattail Pond resembles that of the Texas Hill Country. If you're lucky, you'll spy creatures like the white-eyed vireo and cottontail rabbit.







Standing cypress, also known as red Texas star, grows two to five feet tall.





**"It feels** MORE LIKE I'M WALKING THROUGH THE TEXAS **HILL COUNTRY.** I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I WALKED THE BLUEBONNET **TRAIL** AND IT OPENED UP TO **A VIEW OF** JOE POOL LAKE. I THOUGHT, '**WOW!** HOW DID I GET *HERE?*'"

**CEDAR** Ridge Preserve's seven unpaved trails, which vary in length from a quarter-mile to two miles, have been well marked by members of Audubon Dallas, which manages the site. A few trails are designated "difficult," and the shortest route is accessible to wheelchairs, but most provide a moderate challenge. All the trails are beautiful, winding through a landscape studded with junipers, 200-year-old bur oaks, and Mexican buckeyes. Depending on the time of year, bluebonnets, Texas paintbrush, foxglove, and

yucca splash color alongside the paths.

Wooden benches along the way allow hikers to rest and, in some places, to gaze out on breathtaking scenery. The preserve lies in an outcropping of limestone known as the Balcones White Rock Escarpment, part of the rocky uplift that created the dramatic topography of the Hill Country. At Cedar Ridge, from elevations as high as 755 feet, you can see as far as Joe Pool Lake, which shimmers to the west, a mile or so away. Hikers here

enjoy some of the quietest, most serene spots in Dallas.

Rabbits and squirrels scamper through the thick brush, and warblers, indigo buntings, cardinals, and Carolina wrens seem to sing from every tree. In the summer, a hike to the small Cattail Pond may offer a glimpse of a spectacular painted bunting. Occasionally, an armadillo, intent on locating insects and other morsels of food, wanders close to a trail, its snout buried in the high grass. The preserve also

Carl Fletcher and his daughters Saidah and Nailah hike Cedar Ridge Preserve's Bluebonnet Trail. In summer, plants like snake herb (inset), whose stems are covered with stiff hairs, are abundant throughout the preserve.





[CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE] Dr. Marcy Brown Marsden (right) leads regular nature tours of Cedar Ridge, teaching students about the region's fascinating topography and ecology. Theresa Fish enjoys the trails with her happy beagle. Members of Audubon Dallas manage and maintain the preserve, keeping records of bird sightings like this painted bunting, probably a young male.



boasts a sizable population of bobcats, although it's unlikely you'll see one.

If you want an easy-to-moderate hike that isn't too long, Possumhaw Trail offers a gently sloping walk, aided by log "steps." Possumhaw descends to one of the lowest points in the preserve, crosses the creek, climbs again, winds back down to a second bridge, then twists slowly upward to complete a three-quarter-mile loop. Young junipers bolt upwards, stretching towards the sunlight, surrounded by old-growth specimens so large you can barely wrap your arms around them. At the creek, a gigantic bur oak seems to hang on despite all odds, some of its enormous roots clinging to the sturdier tree beside it.



It's hard to believe such wilderness exists in Dallas. Sunflowers enliven the fields here in summer.

Another of its roots stretches across the entire creek, bracing it from the other side.

Vicki Bryant, an assistant teacher at Acton Elementary in the Dallas suburb of Duncanville, often hikes at the preserve during her lunch breaks. "I get a sense that I'm not even in the city," Vicki says. "It feels more like I'm walking through the Texas Hill Country. I remember the first time I walked the Bluebonnet Trail and it opened up to a view of Joe Pool Lake. I thought, 'Wow! How did I get *here*?'"

Another frequent visitor, Joe Posani, who lives near Austin, hikes in the preserve every time he's in Dallas. "There's an amazing tree on the Mulberry Trail," he says. "Its trunk shoots up, then suddenly turns in a 45-degree angle. I've never seen anything like it." Joe also takes in the view from atop an observation tower on the Bluebonnet Trail. "How many places can you look out at this huge expanse of nature?" he asks.



**ALONG** with other dedicated volunteers, Dr. Marcy Brown Marsden, an associate professor of biology at the University of Dallas, began in 2004 to reconstruct the habitat of the endangered black-capped vireo in hopes of luring it back to the preserve. Although it hasn't yet been spotted there by birdwatchers, several have recently heard its call.

The preserve offers a wealth of guided

## essentials

### CEDAR RIDGE PRESERVE



**CEDAR RIDGE PRESERVE** is in southwest Dallas, at 7171 Mountain Creek Pkwy. (75249). Hours: Tue-Sun, sunrise-sunset. Admission: Free. Call 972/293-5150 or 709-7784; [www.audubondallas.org/cedarridge.html](http://www.audubondallas.org/cedarridge.html).

Naturalists lead hikes and/or presentations on birds and other topics two Saturdays a month; call or check the Web site for a schedule.



tours, hikes, and programs, most of them free (although the preserve accepts donations to maintain trails and continue educational offerings). Jim Varnum, who has led hikes in Cedar Ridge Preserve for more than 25 years, sometimes asks groups on his night hikes to try to identify the different sounds they hear, to describe the various fragrances, and to feel the changes in humidity and temperature. He might bring along tape recordings of screech and great-horned owls, and guests may have the pleasure of hearing a live owl's responsive call. You may stop to distinguish the long churrrr of the tree grasshopper from the staccato sounds of the ground grasshopper. Bring a flashlight along, covered with red cellophane, and Jim will help you identify insects and flora.

Other hikes throughout the year focus on topics like trout lilies, native orchids, sparrows, and painted buntings. During the winter, Jim and other guides point out winter flora, berries, and birds, and help hikers learn to identify trees after they've shed their leaves. In addition, wildlife reha-

bilitation centers regularly bring in hawks, owls, possums, and other animals for a "show-and-tell" at the Visitor's Center.

At the end of your walk, near the entrance to the preserve, sit in the rugged swing perched in a quiet corner of the Butterfly and Five Senses Gardens. In August, the gardens' abundant blue mist-flower, Turk's cap, and salvia attract hummingbirds and more than 20 species of butterflies. A feast of fragrance and color fills this area, while the tickle of a butterfly landing on your arm and the tinkling of chimes all but complete the sensory experience. Finally, to satisfy your fifth sense, enjoy a picnic lunch on a blanket or at a picnic table near the Visitor's Center. Even there, serenity continues to suffuse the preserve—the perfect respite from the commotion of the city. **H**

Award-winning writer MARY BLYE HOWE of Duncanville is the author of two books, *A Baptist Among the Jews* and *Sitting with Sufis*. This is her first piece for *Texas Highways*.

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# TEXAS HIGHWAYS

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