

New state parks being developed

I just returned from a two-week stay in the Rio Grande Valley, one of the best birding spots in the nation. As an avid birder, it was a great opportunity to see some "Valley Specialties" and add to my "Life List" of all the different species I've observed.

During my vacation, I visited the four Texas state parks in the area. Texas State Parks, hosted by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), are a true gem of our state.

In the constitutional amendment election earlier this month, Texas voters approved Prop 4, which will invest significant funds to improve the water infrastructure of Texas — a much-needed investment. In a similar election in the fall of 2023, voters approved the \$1 billion "Centennial Parks Conservation Fund," named in honor of the 100th anniversary of Texas State Parks in 2023.

According to an article in the Texas Tribune, "The fund allows the parks department to expand access to natural spaces across the state, while preserving native ecosystems and cultural landmarks." The advocacy group Environment Texas released a report about a year before the election that stated, "With only 636,000 acres of parkland for over 29 million people as of 2019, Texas ranks 37th in the nation for state park acreage per capita."

According to that report, Texas State Parks provide not only outdoor recreation, but a host of other benefits as well, including habitat for wildlife, including endangered and threatened species, that may otherwise face increased destruction of

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**LAURA
BRAY**
DEMOCRATIC
PARTY CHAIR



habitat. Endangered and threatened Texas species, such as sea turtles, horned lizards and Palo Duro mice all rely on state parkland to mate, feed, and roam.

Parks also protect watersheds such as our own Trinity Aquifer. The parks also contribute handsomely to the outdoor recreation industry and tourism, both in the parks and in surrounding areas. The report cites an example.

"Many of the 271,747 visitors to Enchanted Rock State Natural Area in the 2018 fiscal year stopped in nearby Fredericksburg for food, gas, lodging and entertainment."

I'm pleased to report that three of the planned projects are in our neck of the woods. Just over the southwestern border of Kendall County near Pipe Creek, the Albert & Bessie Kronkosky State Natural Area will be developed into a full state park using Centennial Funds. TPWD has completed its Public Use Plan and held public hearings. Park planners (are designing) the look of the buildings, placement of parking and other types of park infrastructure. TPWD has not set an opening date.

The park seeks volunteers to help with plant and animal surveys, maintenance, outreach and more. You can sign up on their volunteer dashboard online after creating a user account.

The ever-popular Enchanted Rock State Natural Area outside of

Fredericksburg will enjoy an expansion of over 5,000 acres to its current 1,685 acres. This park often reaches capacity on weekends (reservations are therefore required on the weekends and school holidays), so an expansion is welcome.

Earlier in the year, due to our prolonged drought, the park had to close its public restrooms and install Porta-Potties. The restrooms have since been reopened, but you should check the "Park Alerts" section on their website before visiting.

The park still encourages visitors to bring their own drinking water. Bottled water is available at the visitor's center.

Two recent land acquisitions in Lampasas and Burnet counties will be combined to form the new Post Oak Ridge State Park, using "Centennial Fund money to develop the new acquisitions," according to the Tribune.

If you haven't visited a Texas state park lately, you're really missing out. The Guadalupe River State Park is only about half an hour east of Boerne and is one of my favorite birding spots — especially in the spring when the strikingly colored Painted Buntings return; the males seriously look like a "kindergarten painting project gone awry."

The park offers camping, birding, hiking, picnicking, water recreation and more.

Thanks for reading. To find out more about how to get involved with local Democratic activities and activism and to fight for more conservation funding, visit www.kcdems.us

Laura Bray is Chair of the Kendall County Democratic Party.