

a passion for paddling

Be it in a canoe or kayak, the waterways in the Bluebonnet region are a perfect retreat for beginners or seasoned veterans

Story by Pam LeBlanc
Photos by Sarah Beal

MIDWAY THROUGH a 25-mile paddle down the Colorado River, Jimmy Harvey pulls his kayak beneath a canopy of trees along the bank and waves me over. I glide up alongside him, unsure what to expect.

“Put your paddle down,” he says. The quiet settles around us like a blanket. “Listen. No human noises. Just the wind, the river and the birds.”

One in a series of stories on fitness, recreation and outdoor adventure in the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative region.

Get Going

WITH

Pam LeBlanc

twists and turns like a length of rope here, but it all feels miles away from civilization. By the time we ease our boats beneath the highway overpass in Smithville four

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Pam LeBlanc and Jimmy Harvey paddle their boats on the Colorado River at Fisherman's Park in Bastrop, above. Greg Klausmeyer of Houston, left, paddles his kayak in the Rio Vista Park section of the San Marcos River.



A GOOD GUIDEBOOK

Anyone interested in exploring the Lone Star State's many rivers by canoe or kayak should start with longtime Texas paddler Bob Spain's book, "Canoeing Guide and Favorite Texas Paddling Trails."

The 206-page book, printed on waterproof paper, has information on canoeing history, boat design, gear, paddling techniques, safety, water trails and conservation.

His suggestion for those ready to get into the sport?

"Go out in a tandem boat with someone who's a paddler if you can because they can give you subtle tips," Spain says. If that's not an option, contact a canoe livery to find someone who can show you a few strokes and offer basic instruction.



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and a half hours later, my back is tired and my rear end feels half-frozen in place, but I'm happy.

Harvey is a longtime paddler who first canoed as a kid on the Devil's River in West Texas. The Austin resident has completed numerous endurance canoe races, including the Texas Water Safari, a 260-mile nonstop race from San Marcos to Seadrift on the Texas coast.

I'm relatively new to paddling, but in 2019 I joined two other women, both veteran paddlers, to race the Texas Water Safari. We faced logjams, mud, palm-sized spiders, hallucinations and human-sized alligator gar in that adventure.

But this day's Colorado River paddle reveals a completely different and much more relaxed side of the sport.

Before dragging our boats ashore, we've spotted blue herons, soft-shelled turtles, cattle and what almost certainly was a bald eagle, flapping away from the towering skeleton of a dead cottonwood tree. While leaving a small gravel bar where we took a break, I nearly paddled over a short, thick snake that looked like a water moccasin while steering my boat back into the current.

This is why I love to paddle in the first place — to get an up-close look at wildlife on the river while following an unspooling highway of liquid wherever it goes, at a pace that just feels natural.

I'm grateful for the previous day's rain, which delivered a nice flow to help propel us. I'm also thankful for Harvey's expert eye, and I try to glean a little of his skill as we go. Where I see a uniform swath of water, he can read ripples and swirls, and knows exactly where to posi-



ABOVE: Holly Orr, second from left, owner of Paddle With Style and Texas Canoes & Kayaks, paddles on the San Marcos River near Martindale with her sons Matthew Orr, at left, 10, and William Orr, 11. In the red canoe, Tom and Paula Goyens, owners of San Marcos River Retreat, make their way downriver. **RIGHT:** Holly Orr helps her daughter, Katelyn Orr, 7, into her life jacket. **BELOW:** Pam LeBlanc and Jimmy Harvey paddle their way down the Colorado River.

tion his boat to get the best ride.

Paddling traces its American roots to the northern states, where Native Americans and fur traders used canoes for transportation. It remains popular in the northern U.S. and Canada, for both recreation and competition. But Texas enjoys one big advantage — a mild climate.

"You can paddle here in the winter. Up north, the streams are frozen," says Bob Spain, author of "Bob Spain's Canoeing Guide and Favorite Texas Paddling Trails."

Spain got into canoeing because he liked the adventure. "I've paddled in 40 or so states, raced in 25, and met people all over the country and abroad," he says. "When you canoe, you see things you wouldn't see otherwise."

Just about anyone can do it, too. Most start with a kayak, because it's

easier to steer. But canoeing offers its own set of advantages: You won't get as wet while doing it, and you can load a canoe with enough gear for a paddle camping trip. Either way, a day on the river is a day well spent.

"It's something you can do your whole life, and you don't have to be a pro or in great shape," Spain says. "If you want to float down river and throw a hook in, you can do that. You get what you put into it."

Here in Central Texas, the Colorado River serves up a smooth ribbon of water that includes several stretches designated by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department as paddling trails. If you go, remember it's OK to stop on gravel bars or islands in the river, but respect private property. Rainfall upstream can create high flows downstream, so check flow levels before you go. Area lakes



make good paddling grounds, too.

In and near Bluebonnet's southwestern service area, San Marcos and nearby Martindale offer opportunities to access the San Marcos River, which flows into the Guadalupe River downstream. The river serves up some of the prettiest paddling in Central Texas, with cypress-

lined stretches of cool, green water and a few rapids capable of bucking inexperienced paddlers.

For information about current river conditions, go to www.lcra.org or <https://on.doi.gov/2VNVxUH>.

There are several spots in the Bluebonnet region where you can put in a kayak or canoe for a long, leisurely (or in some spots more challenging) float. You must make pre-planned take-out arrangements for the end of your trip. Check with state parks or the paddling site owners for restrictions on access, required face coverings and social distancing requirements due to COVID-19. ■

Pam LeBlanc has written about fitness, adventure and recreation in Central Texas for decades. Her work has appeared in Texas Monthly, Texas Highways, Texas Parks & Wildlife and Real Simple magazines, and the Austin American-Statesman.



HELPFUL RESOURCES FOR PADDLING PLANNING

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has a guide to all of the good boating/paddling routes around the state, along with a calendar of paddling events and information on how to paddle, equipment, education and laws. tinyurl.com/ydbjja7h

LCRA Colorado River Guide for Paddlers is an interactive guide for access

points and navigation features along the lower Colorado River. This web page also provides other resource information and contact information for LCRA parks. tinyurl.com/yc65lqo2

Texasoutside.com's list of the state's kayak and canoe paddling trails mentions several in the Bluebonnet region and around the state. tinyurl.com/yctusxv

PADDLING OUTFITTERS

Availability may be impacted by coronavirus restrictions. Call before you make plans.

BASTROP RIVER COMPANY

Fisherman's Park
1400 Willow St., Bastrop
512-321-4661
bastropriverco.com

Canoe, kayak and stand-up paddleboard rentals by the hour or river trip, and shuttle service

RISING PHOENIX ADVENTURES

1409 Chestnut St., Bastrop
512-677-2305
risingphoenixadventures.com

Canoe, kayak and stand-up paddleboard rentals and shuttle service on the Colorado River from Austin to La Grange

COOK'S CANOES

1004 Water St., Webberville
512-276-7767
cookscanoes.com

Canoe and kayak rentals

TG CANOES & KAYAKS

402 Pecan Park Drive, San Marcos
512-353-3946
tgcanoe.com

Big selection of boats, equipment to buy; will make repairs but no rentals or lessons

TEXAS CANOES & KAYAKS and PADDLE WITH STYLE

Reservations at P.O. Box 512, Martindale, 78655
512-749-2350
texascanoeandkayak.com
paddlewithstyle.com

Lessons for all ages, experience levels; boat rentals, guided trips

SAN MARCOS RIVER RETREAT

444 Pecan Park Drive, San Marcos
512-392-6171
sanmarcosriverretreat.com

Shady campground serves mainly youth groups, emphasis on learning to canoe/kayak

POPULAR PADDLING ROUTES IN THE BLUEBONNET AREA



Webberville

Get your feet wet with a leisurely 5.5-mile float on the Colorado River from Little Webberville Park to Big Webberville Park. Access is easy, with concrete boat ramps at each site for easy put in and take out, and huge shady oaks that make a good canopy for picnicking. Rentals and shuttles are available at Cook's Canoes, 1004 Water St. in Webberville, cookscanoes.com, operated by the grizzled but friendly Neal Cook.

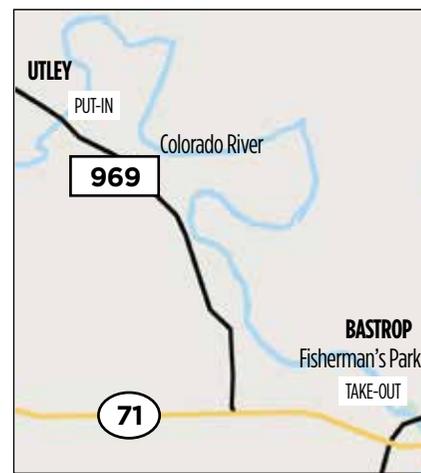


Hidalgo Falls

Paddlers must be certified or registered with the Texas Rivers Protection Association to get permission to access Hidalgo Falls, a private 13-acre park on the Brazos River about 8 miles from Navasota. The rapids and fast-moving water are unusual for East Texas, and are used by emergency crews for swiftwater rescue training. For more information, go to tinyurl.com/y8c3ydsv.

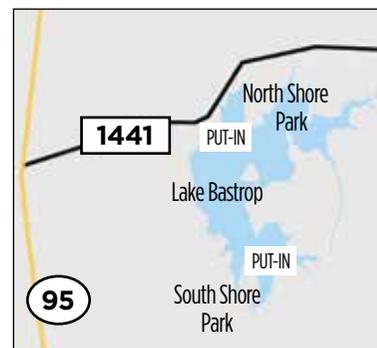
Wilbarger Paddling Trail

This wide, slow-moving section of the Colorado River covers 14.3 miles from Utley, where you can put in at the FM 969 Bridge, to Bastrop, where Fisherman's Park makes an easy place to take a boat out. (Watch out for goose droppings on the concrete take-out.) Along the way, you'll paddle past cottonwoods, pecans and cypress, and you won't find any human-made obstructions. Pay attention, though; a few riffles keep things interesting. tinyurl.com/y8n75erc



El Camino Real Paddling Trail

This generally slow-moving stretch of the Colorado River will take you 6 miles between Fisherman's Park in Bastrop and the Lost Pines Recreational Trails site neighboring the Pines and Prairies Land Trust's Colorado River Refuge. You'll encounter a few minor rapids, float alongside high sandstone bluffs and limestone outcroppings, and pass groves of pecan and cottonwood trees. Plenty of gravel bars make good spots to pull off and rest, and the fishing's good. tinyurl.com/y9kxnh4n



Lake Bastrop

The Lower Colorado River Authority operates two parks on Lake Bastrop — Lake Bastrop North Shore Park, 603 FM 1441, where you can spend the night in an Airstream trailer, and its larger sibling, Lake Bastrop South Shore Park, where you can stay in a rental cabin. You can also rent canoes, kayaks or stand-up paddleboards from either park. The paddling is easy, without any moving current, and the water's warm. It's a good spot to bring kids and families without any paddling experience. The reservoir is located about 3 miles northeast of Bastrop and is stocked with largemouth bass and catfish, so bring a pole. lra.org/parks



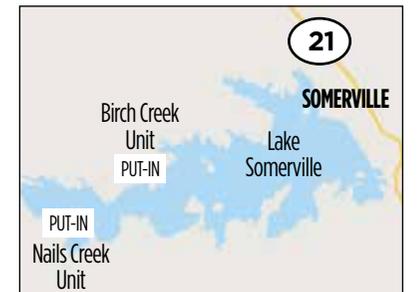
Pam LeBlanc and Jimmy Harvey paddle on the Colorado River near Bastrop. Their slow trek to Smithville took more than four hours and was packed with wildlife sightings.

San Marcos City Park to Shady Grove Campground

This 10.4-mile shady, narrow stretch of the San Marcos River serves up some of the prettiest scenery in the area. Unless coronavirus restrictions are in place, put in before 10 a.m. at City Park, 170 Charles Austin Drive in San Marcos, and perhaps you'll avoid hordes of tubers farther downstream. Plan to carry your canoe or kayak (that's called portage by paddlers) around the rapids at Rio Vista Dam. At Cummings Dam, you'll have to drag your boat down a steep set of wooden stairs and, later, navigate a low-water bridge. The biggest obstacle comes at Cottonseed Rapid, where swift water can flip



a boat. Keep an eye out for bald eagles, owls and turtles. Don't even think about running Martindale Dam; portage right. Take out at Spencer's Canoes and Shady Grove Campground, 9515 FM 1979. You'll pay a small day use fee.



Somerville Lake

Somerville Lake is an 11,000-acre reservoir north of Burton and Carmine, where you can rent a canoe at the Birch Creek Unit of Lake Somerville State Park on the north side of the lake or the Nails Creek Unit on the park's southwest side. Both units rent canoes and kayaks and have ramps.



Luling Zedler Mill Paddling Trail

If you want to experience part of the course of the famed Texas Water Safari, put in at the Texas 90 river crossing 5 miles west of Luling, and paddle 6 miles to Zedler Mill, which is within the city limits. You'll glide through some small rapids and plenty of clear, quiet pools, and might encounter a logjam or two. Just scramble over or around them if you do, dragging your boat behind. And watch for spiders. tinyurl.com/ycozk4w



Erin Kieschnick photo

The Lincoln Volunteer Fire Department in Lee County includes, from left, Spencer Schneider, Kyle Kieschnick, Shane Urban and Jared Boriack.

Grants help fire department, SPJST lodge with improvements

THE LOWER COLORADO River Authority and Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative provided several grants in Bluebonnet's service area recently. The grants are part of LCRA's Community Development Partnership Program to give back to the communities it serves. Bluebonnet is one of LCRA's wholesale electric customers and a partner in the grant program. More information is available at lcra.org/cdpp.

The Lincoln Volunteer Fire Department will be able to refill firefighter air tanks and air bottles at the department rather than sending them out of town to be replenished, thanks to a \$19,893 grant.

This grant, combined with \$4,973 in matching funds from the department, will enable the department to purchase and install the new self-contained breathing apparatus refill station to help ensure volunteer firefighters have access to clean, safe air while responding to emergencies.

A \$24,000 grant will help restore a historic fraternal lodge and dance hall that has welcomed residents of Fayette County for more than a century. The grant, paired with matching funds of \$46,000, will pay for restorations to the wooden flooring and shutters at SPJST Lodge No. 1 in Fayetteville. The lodge was built in 1910.

In addition to lodge meetings, the building is frequently the site of

Photo courtesy of SPJST Lodge No. 1



"We had wanted to carry out this restoration for several years," said Ronald Pflughaupt, treasurer of SPJST Lodge No. 1. "With the help of LCRA and Bluebonnet, it's going to happen."

community gatherings such as weddings and reunions.

SPJST comes from the Czech phrase Slovanska Podporujici Jednota Statu Texas, which in English means the Slavonic Benevolent Order of the State of Texas. SPJST was founded in 1897, when members in a nationwide fraternal organization decided to create a Texas-only fraternal benefit society. ■

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DR. LIZ MONTERO

has been a pediatric dentist for seven years, the last three in Manor. A Bluebonnet member, she pays her bills online and keeps her business eco-friendly by tracking her monthly energy use on the MyBluebonnet mobile app. "We love Bluebonnet," she said. "The new app has a great feature for keeping track of your usage. I like it!"

Learn more at bluebonnet.coop/mybluebonnet