

Fredericksburg Nature Notes



Newsletter of the Friends of the Fredericksburg Nature Center

February, 2023 Volume 4 Number 2

<http://fredericksburgnaturecenter.com>

Editor's Musings: **Lonnie Childs**

Dear Friends of the Fredericksburg Nature Center,

I am taking advantage of our 3rd annual February ice storm to camp out in my office and compose this month's newsletter. My personal history pegs these ice events as historically occurring every 3-4 years in central Texas, but the schedule has seemingly escalated with February ice events each of the last three years. According to the state climatologist, the probability each year of a 2021 mega ice storm computes to 2% (every 50 years). Fortunately, this storm has not shown to be too impactful, and I hope that proves true for you. When considering plants for my landscape, I have now added consideration for ice tolerance!

Our Education Committee has been diligently putting together a series of workshops and guided hikes for the coming year. The Monarch and Milkweed workshop is fast approaching with limited seats still open, so register quickly (see p. 2). Beyond that, the current workshop lineup will include speakers on native bees and the upcoming solar eclipses. We will also conduct guided hikes of the trails on April 1 and May 6. Look for all the details in next month's newsletter and on the website. These events will be wonderful opportunities to bolster your Nature IQ and enjoy some nature bathing at the nature center.

Our Feature Story this month will educate and stimulate your appreciation for Sandhill Cranes who pass over our county in spring and fall trumpeting the approach of both seasons. In past years, a flock of Sandhills regularly sought winter refuge in northeastern Gillespie County. A huge thanks to our guest writer, Carol Knutson, for sharing her personal experiences and making us smarter about these avian clippers of the blue yonder. Your submission of articles and photos are always welcome!

Happy Nature Trails!

Lonnie

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"Don't waste your time chasing butterflies. Mend your garden, and the butterflies will come."

Mario Quintana

February Program: Monarch & Milkweed Propagation

**Please join the Friends of Fredericksburg Nature Center
for our first workshop in 2023.**



Monarchs and Milkweed Propagation



Saturday, February 11, 2023

10:00am-12:00pm

Lady Bird Johnson Municipal Park Tatsch House, Fredericksburg



This will be a fun hands-on workshop to learn about the plants that monarch butterflies depend on, monarch way station gardens, and how to propagate and grow milkweeds. Participants will leave with everything needed to get milkweeds growing for spring planting and gardens started.



Presenters:

Cathy Downs— Monarch Watch Conservation Specialist with Monarch Watch, Past chair of Bring Back the Monarchs to Texas (BBMT), Certified March Larval Monitoring Project educator.

Gracie Waggener— Texas Master Naturalist with 11,000+ volunteer hours including Bring Back the Monarchs to Texas committee. Head Gardener of Pollinator Garden at Fredericksburg Nature Center.

HCMN Advanced Training Code = AT23-008

**To register, send an email to gwaggener@flow-apps.com
Attendance is limited.**





OUR MISSION STATEMENT: "To enhance, protect and interpret the natural ecosystems of the Texas hill country while providing educational and quality of life opportunities for members of the community and visitors"

FFNC Volunteer Opportunities

Tuesday Fundays at FNC are weather permitting in the Winter.

Trail Work—We continue to perform trail maintenance and do improvement projects throughout the winter as weather permits. Our weekly email informs you of the schedule. Work sessions are scheduled for **Tuesday at 9:00am.**

Gardening Activities are mostly suspended until March when spring cleaning and trimming starts.

Typical tasks involve gardening skills and trail maintenance, but no experience is necessary. Use it as a learning opportunity. Work in whatever area you choose for as long as you choose. We work some and have a lot of fun outside in the beauty of nature. It's good exercise for the body and great therapy for the soul.

If you would like to join us at the park, we would love to have you!

Contact Gracie Waggener at gwaggener@flow-apps.com to receive a weekly email notification.

Searching for a volunteer opportunity that does not involve manual labor? While many of our volunteers labor away in the gardens and on the trail at our weekly Tuesday work sessions, we have opportunities for volunteers that do not involve heavy doses of perspiration. We are focused on bolstering our education and communication capabilities which fosters the need for the following volunteer positions. If you have these skills, please consider utilizing your talents in the furtherance of the FFNC missions as we venture towards a future Interpretive Center.

Webmaster

Social Media Coordinator

Children's Education Program Leader

Adult Education Program Leader

To discuss these opportunities, contact Lonnie Childs at lonniechilds@utexas.edu





"I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver."

Maya Angelou

Funding Needs in 2023

FFNC has three major projects that we would like to fund in 2023 to improve safety, protect our Pollinator Garden, and enhance our educational offering. If you can help with these funding needs, please contact Carl Luckenbach at cluckenbach@sbcglobal.net or Lonnie Childs at lonniechilds@utexas.edu.



#1 Steel Handrail for the steps descending to the Live Oak Creek bridge
\$2,000 funding has been received from an Anonymous donor!!



#2 Historic style fencing to exclude deer from the Pollinator Garden.
Funding need \$6,000



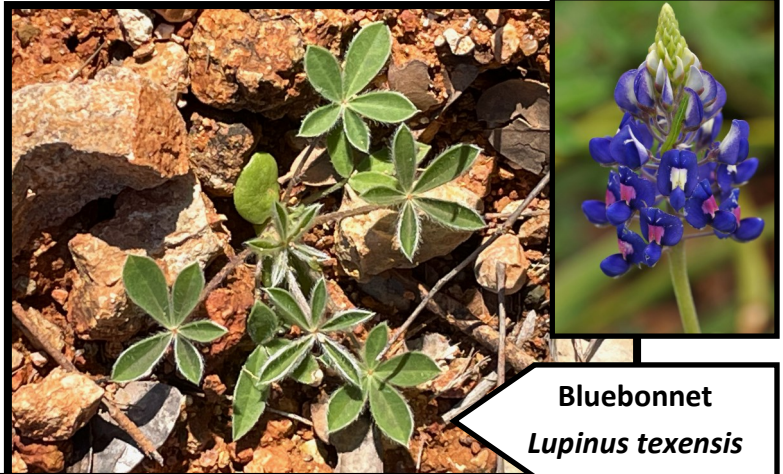
#3 Varrobook educational exhibit for the Pollinator Garden
Funding needed \$7,000

“The rosette does all the work,
but the flower gets all the publicity.”

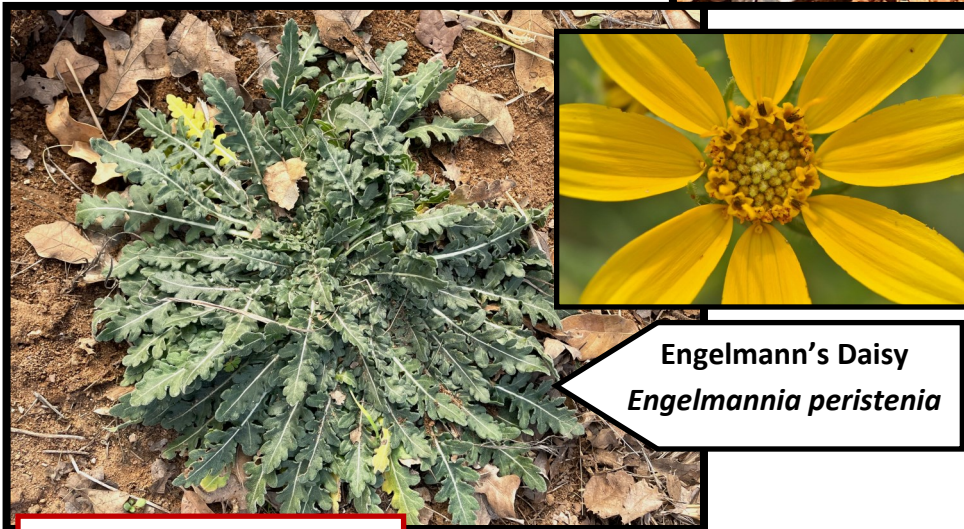
Rose Lefleur

Know Your Winter Rosettes

Many of us only recognize our wildflowers when they burst into bloom, thus earning our appreciation. But for many reasons, including not pulling out a future flower, learning to identify the winter rosettes of our early spring bloomers can prove beneficial. Of course, identifying and yanking out the invasives can be equally useful. Here are a few species to start your learning process.



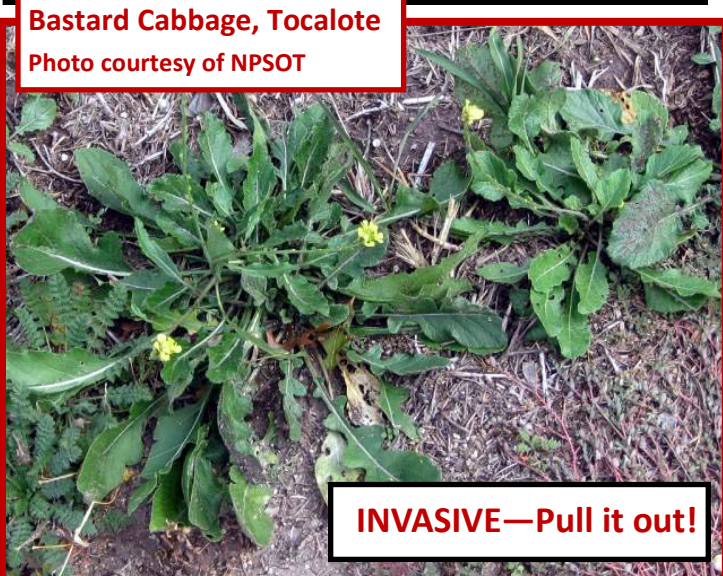
Bluebonnet
Lupinus texensis



Engelmann's Daisy
Engelmannia peristenia



Perennial Winecup
Callirhoe involucrata



Bastard Cabbage, Tocalote
Photo courtesy of NPSOT

INVASIVE—Pull it out!



Photos by Lonnie Childs



"Be like a duck. Calm on the surface, but always paddling like the dickens underneath."

Michael Caine

The Original Snow Birds



Canada Geese **(*Branta canadensis*)**

Our wintering flock will depart in early March for Canada. We have a few that stay the year including this nesting female from a couple of years ago. A year-round gaggle of about 40 individuals reside year round east of Fredericksburg, never having learned to migrate.



Northern Pintails (*Anas acuta*)

For several years, a stray Pintail has passed the winter in the company of our flock of domestic ducks. This year, he brought a friend! Northern Pintails are still common but have suffered a 75% decline in population in the past 50 years.

Swan Geese aka the **Chinese Geese** **(*Anser cygnoides domesticus*)**

This exotic species originates from east Asia but was brought to the US and domesticated. This pair also regularly associates with our domestic ducks & lives here year-round.



Photos by Lonnie Childs

"The robins were singing vespers in the high tree-tops, filling the golden air with their jubilant voices."

L. M. Montgomery

Other Winter Avians

American Robin *Turdus migratorius*

Harbingers of Spring? Some Robins in Texas migrate while others remain all year. In the winter in central Texas, they inhabit areas with Ashe Juniper gorging on their berries. After the berry supply has been depleted in February, they may come into your yard where they can be seen eating earthworms, thus reinforcing the notion that they signal the arrival of spring.

To hear their cheerful sound,
Right Click [HERE](#) and Open Link.



Ladder-backed Woodpecker female (*Dryobates scalaris*)

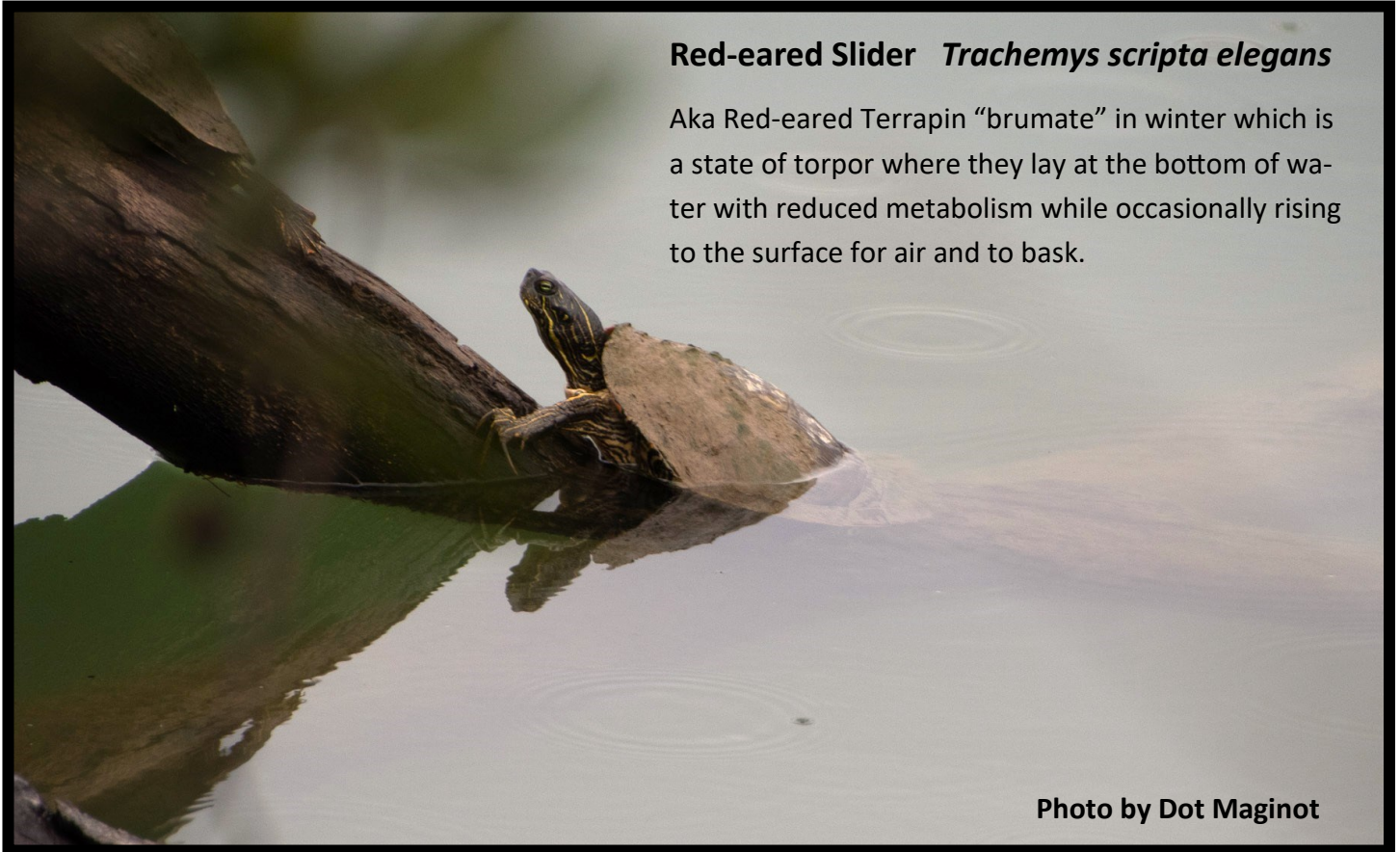
This female is a regular visitor to our suet feeder where it no doubt enjoys the mealworms. Ladder-backs are mostly birds of the southwest and Mexico. They manage quite well in the arid Chihuahuan Desert habitat where they are sometimes referred to as the "Cactus Woodpecker". The rapid-fire drum of their pecking is distinct and distinguishes them from the slower drum of our common Golden-fronted Woodpecker.



"Winter is nature's sleep."

H. S. JACOBS

Our Terrapin in Winter



Red-eared Slider *Trachemys scripta elegans*

Aka Red-eared Terrapin "brumate" in winter which is a state of torpor where they lay at the bottom of water with reduced metabolism while occasionally rising to the surface for air and to bask.

Photo by Dot Maginot

Nature's News of the Weird

An Asteroid Just Passed Very Close to Earth!

Right Click [HERE](#) and Open Link to learn about it.



"How do migrating birds know which one to follow? What if the lead bird just wants to be alone?" **Bill Bryson**

Feature Story: Sandhill Cranes by Carol Knutson

Each fall and spring, Sandhill Cranes can be heard and seen flying overhead in Gillespie County in route to and from their historical winter resting grounds. Something I look forward to twice every year! While planting trees in my yard along the banks of the Pedernales River late this past November, I heard their familiar call and looked to the sky. There they were, flying south to points in South Texas for winter. Five days later, I departed for the Bosque del Apache NWR in New Mexico to visit and photograph them there. The Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge in the Texas Panhandle is not only the oldest wildlife refuge in Texas, but also annually hosts one of the largest sandhill crane populations in North America. The number of cranes at this refuge peaks between December and mid-February.

Sandhill Cranes, *Antigone canadensis*, are the most common crane in North America. They are second in height only to the magnificent and endangered Whooping Crane which also winters in Texas! Their range extends from southeastern Alaska to southern Canada, and south through the United States to north-eastern Mexico. A 10-million-year-old crane fossil from Nebraska is said to be of this species, but this may be from a prehistoric relative or ancestor of Sandhill Cranes. The oldest unequivocal Sandhill Crane fossil is 2.5 million years old, almost 50% older than the earliest remains of most living species of birds which are primarily found from after the Pliocene/ Pleistocene age some 1.8 million years ago. There are three subpopulations of migratory Sandhill Cranes in North America: the Lesser, Greater, and Canadian Sandhill Cranes. All of these subspecies spend winters in the south and summers at their breeding grounds in the north.



Sandhill Cranes migrating over author's home in Gillespie Country. Photo by Carol Knutson

The cranes winter in Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Mexico, and in the early spring, they begin the migration to their breeding grounds in the north. Throughout the spring, the cranes can be seen resting and feeding along rivers and wetlands throughout the Great Plains and Pacific Northwest. The common name of this bird refers to habitat like that of the Platte River, on the edge of Nebraska's Sandhills on the American Great Plains.

Sandhill Cranes vary considerably in size and in migratory habits. The sexes look alike, with males being the larger. Cranes frequently give a loud, trumpeting call that suggests a rolled "r" in the throat, and they can be

Feature Story: Sandhill Cranes

heard from a long distance, even if not easily spotted.

In the early spring, as Sandhill Cranes are migrating to their breeding grounds, single cranes will start pairing up. The loudest and most noticeable call made by a Sandhill Crane is during the mating season. Mated pairs will engage in "unison calling" where the cranes stand close together, calling in a synchronized and complex duet to create a bond. The female makes two calls for every one from the male. During mating, Sandhill Cranes perform impressive dancing displays. Although the dancing is most common in the breeding season, the cranes can dance all year long. Often the dance involves wing-flapping, bowing, and jumping.



Sandhill Cranes feeding mid-day on insects at Bosque del Apache. Photo by Carol Knutson

They build their nests from various materials, but typically use cattails and tall grass to construct a large cup shaped nest that is almost 4 feet in diameter. The nest is constructed out of long stems, held together with mud, and is usually positioned in open water. Both mates will gather material for the project and incubate the eggs (usually two) for 29 – 32 days. After hatching, the "colts" develop a downy coat, and their eyes open and become functional. They are fed by the mother for 4 weeks, fly at 9 to 10 weeks, and remain with the parents until they are at least 10 months old.

The Sandhills' cheeks are white, and their foreheads have a bright red patch of heart-shaped skin, which is one of their most noticeable features. Sandhill Cranes have mostly grayish feathers, but the shade of gray can vary widely, sometimes having a reddish-brown appearance. This is because Sandhill Cranes preen themselves by rubbing mud on their feathers, and mud from iron-rich environments is often red. While they do not have webbed feet like ducks and geese, they can and will swim. The largest Sandhill Crane ever recorded weighed about 11 pounds. In Native American cultures, they were once thought to be good luck, so people often named their children after them.

A most beautiful natural phenomenon in the United States is the annual congregation of the Sandhill Cranes. For about a month each March, more than 500,000 Sandhills converge on the Platte River Basin in Nebraska to rest and eat before they finish their migration to their northern breeding grounds. The birds eat corn from the grain fields and then sleep, or "roost," on the sandbars. Time on the Platte River also gives single Sandhill



"Birds chirping around you is a beautiful realization that life is incredibly good. Let this sound be a gentle break in your routine."

Hiral Nagda

Feature Story: Sandhill Cranes



Cranes the chance to find mates. On a migration route that traverses the western Gulf Coast to the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, Sandhill Cranes travel through the flyway called North America's Central Flyway. This migration path takes roughly six weeks. During the late spring, summer, and early fall, Sandhill Cranes can be seen at their breeding grounds, some of which are in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Others breed in Oregon, Idaho, and Alaska.

Three subpopulations of Sandhill Cranes are non-migratory. The Mississippi Sandhill Crane is found on the southeastern coast of Mississippi. Florida Sandhill Cranes occur in many inland wetlands of Florida where they are year-round residents. The Cuban Sandhill Crane lives exclusively in savannas, wetlands, and grasslands in Cuba. Mississippi and Cuban Sandhill Cranes are critically endangered. Sandhill Cranes are considered an indicator species, meaning that if their numbers are declining, then other bird populations are likely to be declining as well.

The future of Sandhill Cranes is completely dependent on the condition and state of their habitat, which is why it is critically important to conserve wetlands of all kinds (marshes, bogs, etc.) in the ranges of nonmigratory populations, and in staging and wintering areas where large migratory flocks congregate. Sandhill Crane populations recover slowly, partly because each breeding pair usually has only one chick per year that sur-



"I never for a day gave up listening to the songs of our birds, or watching their peculiar habits, or delineating them in the best way I could."
John James Audubon

Feature Story: *Sandhill Cranes*

vives to fledging. The Greater Sandhill Crane has historically suffered most. By 1940, probably fewer than 1,000 birds remained. Populations have since greatly increased again. At nearly 100,000, they are still fewer than the Lesser Sandhill Crane, which, at about 400,000 individuals continent-wide, is the most plentiful crane. About 300 Cuban Sandhill Cranes, the least known of the populations, still exist. The largest nesting population of Sandhill Cranes is on Washington's San Juan Islands. In 1992, the Pacific coast population was estimated at 2,200 birds. By the late 1990s, there were reports of about 200 breeding pairs remaining in the San Juans.

Sandhill Cranes are very social birds. They mate for life, and mostly travel in pairs or family groups during migrations, which include their juvenile offspring. Using thermals to obtain lift, they can stay aloft for many hours, requiring only occasional flapping of their wings, thus expending little energy. Migratory flocks contain hundreds of birds and can create clear outlines of the normally invisible rising columns of air (thermals) they ride. They roost in shallow lakes at night

for protection from a variety of predators, including coyotes, bobcats, foxes, wolves, golden and bald eagles, and owls. Cranes attack aerial predators by leaping into the air and kicking their feet forward. They threaten terrestrial predators by spreading their wings and hissing, eventually resorting to kicking.

Omnivorous, they fly out at daylight to feed on agricultural fields and prairies, where their diet includes cultivated crops such as corn and wheat, as well as berries, water plants, insects, small mammals, vertebrates, and invertebrates. They often live to be 20 years old in the wild. One banded Sandhill Crane is known to have lived over 37 years. It was banded in Florida in 1982 and found in Wisconsin in 2019.

In late February, when crane families from all over convene on the Platte River in Nebraska to socialize and refuel before returning to breeding/nesting grounds in Idaho and Canada, they can be observed at locations such as the National Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary, located in the Platte River Valley near Gibbon, Nebraska. It is a great place for people from all over the world to learn about the river and wildlife, including the special experience observing the Sandhill Crane spring migration from blinds along the riverbank.



Photo by
Marvin De Jong

**To hear the trumpet call
of Sandhill Cranes,
Right Click [HERE](#)
and Open Hyperlink.**



"My perfect weekend is going for a walk with my family in the park. I don't think there's anything better."

Anne Wojcicki

One More Appeal for Parks

The City of Fredericksburg is updating their Comprehensive Plan and Parks Master Plan. Your input is critical to define the future of our area parks and to provide support for Fredericksburg Nature Center and the construction of our Interpretive Center.

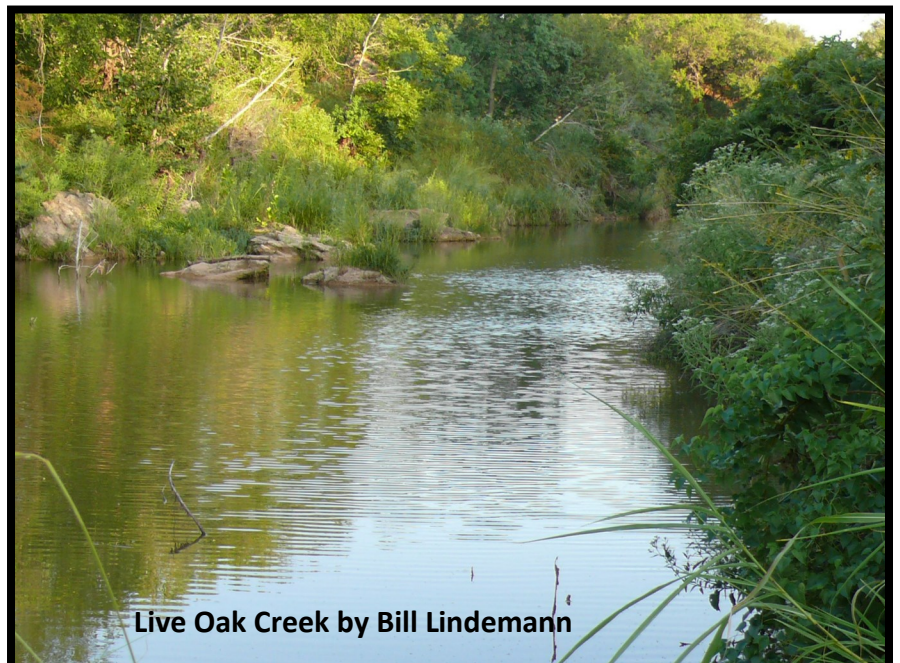
Following are some recommendations for improving the future of Fredericksburg city parks.

1. Increase neighborhood park space
2. Increase access to undeveloped green space and wilderness areas in our parks
3. Improve connectivity to parks via hike/bike pathways
4. Advocate for construction of an Interpretive Center at the Fredericksburg Nature Center to support more environmental education programming
5. What are your ideas to improve our park system?

You can provide input to the Master Plan and Parks Plan by submitting a comment **via the Online Form or Email** by going to:

<https://www.fbgtx.org/1128/Comprehensive-Plan-Update-and-Parks-Mast>

If you love parks and support FNC, please take time to do your civic duty!!



Live Oak Creek by Bill Lindemann



*"In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man,
in spite of real sorrows."* **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

It's time to renew your membership!
**Please consider joining or renewing
your FFNC membership or donating to
the Bill Lindemann Capital Fund.**

To join or donate, go to

<https://fredericksburgnaturecenter.com/membership/>



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**Comments, questions, or future newsletter submissions can be sent to
Lonnie Childs, Newsletter Editor, at lonniechilds@utexas.edu**