

# TEXAS CO-OP POWER

**BACK**  
= to the =  
**BEACH**

Pack up for  
a coastal  
comeback



**BLUEBONNET NEWS**  
SEE PAGE 18





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A great blue heron at Boca Chica Beach near the U.S.-Mexico border

**FEATURE**

**8** **Back to the Beach** The Texas coast, battered by Hurricane Harvey in some spots, perseveres and lures beach dwellers and visitors alike.

Story and photos by Julia Robinson

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**Texas USA**

*A Mother's Day Haven*  
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**Observations**

*Five Finds on the Beach*  
By Melissa Gaskill

**NEXT MONTH**

**Naturally Protective** *Texan by Nature—a conservation-minded organization founded by Laura Bush—aims to “keep Texas, Texas.”*



**ON THE COVER** *A clean, groomed beach and colorful umbrella await visitors in Port Aransas.* Photo by Julia Robinson

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## Thursday Night Legend

Growing up in Abilene, we were integrated from junior high onward, so this was educational [*Thursday Night Lights*, February 2018], and I look forward to the book.

I was delighted to see mention of Alphonse Dotson, who played for Houston Yates, Grambling State and the Oakland Raiders. We met Alphonse at the tasting room for his amazing Dotson-Cervantes wines. What a talent and a true gentleman. If you find yourself in Pontotoc and the tasting room is open, stop in to meet a Texas legend.

LINDA NESMITH | AUSTIN  
PEDERNALES EC

## Texas Pride is OK, Too

A recent letter to the editor from Luke D. Jessup was hurtful [*OK With Us*, February 2018]. He states that he dislikes all things Texas and never says why. I was born in Texas and have lived in other places, but my heart is in Texas.

JUDY PICKEL | MAGNOLIA  
SAN BERNARD EC

I have to say, Luke from OK, you prefaced your letter most distinctly. I understood your feelings when I saw your location, and I'm assuming the contempt stems from the Texas-Oklahoma football rivalry. I have a coworker who is a devout Longhorn fan, and I've often sat and listened to him tell his tales with spirited vigor.

That aside, your note was refreshing to read. I don't harbor any hate or ill feelings toward any of our 50 states, but I'm certain the good ol'

## Remembering Those Thursday Nights

I remember going to segregated football games as a child but forgot what night they were played on [*Thursday Night Lights*, February 2018]. The players in their uniforms along with the game noises from the band, people yelling and visiting, and announcers calling the plays all made for a fun night.

It is always good to learn about a part of Texas history that we forgot and how far we have come in becoming a truly integrated nation.

CYNTHIA L. MATLOCK | TROUP  
CHEROKEE COUNTY EC



USA is strong enough to weather our love-hate sibling relationships without flinching.  
ANTHONY PIWETZ | VICTORIA  
NUECES EC

## Spreading the Love

Nancy Johnson [*Open Hearts*, February 2017] has done a wonderful job in spreading the need for sending a little love



to these special children with heart defects. It truly touched me that such a small act could impact so many lives. Several years ago, a dear friend of ours lost their baby girl to a heart condition. The Driscoll Children's Hospital in Corpus Christi took such good care of not only the baby but the family as well.

I have begun crocheting hats for Nancy. Each time I work on a red hat, I think about and pray for the baby who will wear it. Thank you for bringing her mission to all of your readers.  
NORMA GAYLE | CONCAN  
BANDERA EC

## Old Theaters Revived

Great article about the Globe Theatre [*Saving the Globe*, January 2018]. I wish you could have mentioned the Lyric Theater in Flatonia. Much like

the Globe, it sat idle—from 1967 until 2007. Finally, on April 7, 2017, it hosted its first film, *Secondhand Lions*, with tickets at the old cost of only 35 cents.  
JAMES LONGMIRE | FLATONIA

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## HAPPENINGS

# Painting the Heavens Blue

The skies over Waco will rumble **APRIL 7-8** when the Blue Angels bring their precision aerobatics to the **HEART OF TEXAS AIRSHOW** at Texas State Technical College.

The team of U.S. Navy pilots and their F/A-18 jets perform around the world, flying at speeds approaching 700 mph and sometimes just 18 inches apart.

The Blue Angels were formed right after World War II when Chester W. Nimitz, chief of naval operations, ordered the creation of a flight demonstration team to showcase and promote naval aviation. Nimitz, born in Fredericksburg, commanded all land and sea forces in the Pacific during the war.

The show will include a C-130 nicknamed “Fat Albert,” the U.S. Army Special Operations Command Parachute Demonstration Team (known as the Black Daggers) and other flying performances. In the 72 years since the Blue Angels formed, more than 500,000 people have seen their shows.

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## NATIONAL LINEMAN APPRECIATION DAY

### IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

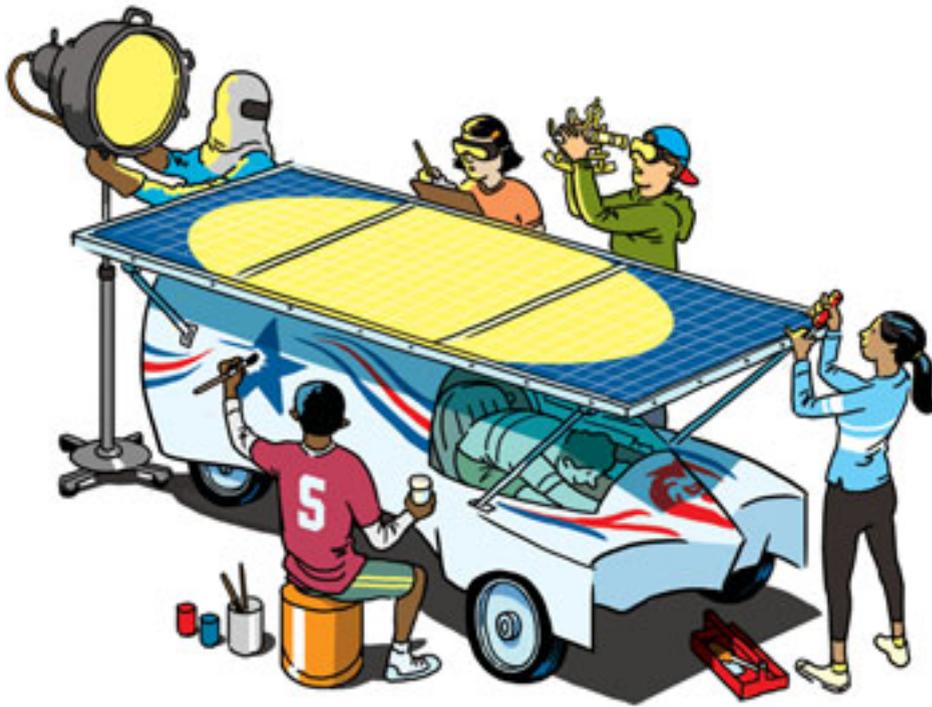
**National Lineman Appreciation Day**, April 9 this year, celebrates the highly trained workers who keep the electricity flowing to our homes in the face of all kinds of nasty conditions.

**Days after Hurricane Harvey** struck last August, mosquitoes took over the Texas Coast. “These mosquitoes were huge. They were like small hummingbirds,” says journeyman lineman Corey Turner, above, a foreman at Victoria Electric Cooperative. “They’re just all over our faces—in your eyes, in your ears. They go in our mouth, up our nose. We ate plenty. I promise you that.”

**What is it about linemen** that makes them willing to deal with challenges like mosquitoes and foul weather as part of their job?

“**I think if you get** in this line of work and you commit to it, I think you finally get it in your head: You know what, I’m a lineworker. I’m going to do this,” Turner says. “We’ve got people with no lights. And as long as there’s people with no lights... you’re not going to go home and feel good about yourself.”

mosquito: MOSQUITO; NECHAEVON | SHUTTERSTOCK.COM; TURNER: VICTORIA EC; SUTHERLAND SPRINGS; SCOTT OLSON | GETTY IMAGES; SAND DOLLAR; MCCURE | SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



CO-OP PEOPLE

## Solar-Powered Speedsters

**DEDICATION, COMMITMENT AND INTEGRITY** have propelled a team of Greenville High School students to multiple championships, says Joel Pitts, a Farmers Electric Cooperative member and advisor of the school's solar car team, which hopes to notch another win at this year's Solar Car Challenge, July 17-23.

Since 2012, the Greenville Iron Lions have designed and built solar-powered cars to compete in the annual race that attracts high school teams from across continental North America and the Caribbean. Greenville's first win came in 2016 in a cross-country race from Fort Worth to Mendota Heights, Minnesota, where it beat the nearest competitor in its division by more than 121 miles. The following year, in closed-track events at the Texas Motor Speedway, it placed first in two divisions.

The Iron Lions are currently re-engineering some aspects of their car, which they hope will lead the pack in this year's 1,400-mile race, from Fort Worth to Palmdale, California. "I think our chances are really good," Pitts says.

But competition goes beyond getting to the winner's podium, he says. It's also about providing students with lifelong skills and fostering their growth through problem-solving. "Because ultimately, this project is not so much about winning than it is about the learning process."

CO-OPS IN THE  
COMMUNITY

## RESPONDING TO TRAGEDY

**Tragedy struck** the small town of Sutherland Springs on November 5, 2017, when a gunman opened fire on the First Baptist Church, killing 26 men, women and children. Within hours of the shooting, thoughts, prayers and material support for the victims and their families poured in from across the country. Of course, the call to action was loudest for those closest to the catastrophe, including Guadalupe Valley Electric Cooperative.

**GVEC employees** sprang to action by contributing equipment to help power care stations for first responders and grieving families. In the weeks that followed, co-op employees donated \$4,270, which GVEC matched dollar-for-dollar, to victims' families. The \$8,540 total went into an account to be distributed evenly among those affected.



**"When we learned** of the tragedy in the Sutherland Springs community, there was no question we needed to move to action," says Darren Schauer, GVEC general manager and CEO.

ALMANAC

## Texas' Shore Thing



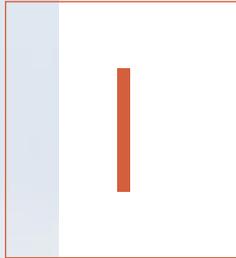
**Padre Island National Seashore turns 50 this month. On April 8, 1968, Lady Bird Johnson dedicated the park, the longest seashore in the national park system.**

THE TEXAS COAST, BATTERED BY HURRICANE HARVEY IN SOME

**BACK**  
= *to the* =  
**BEACH**



## SPOTS, PERSEVERES AND LURES BEACH DWELLERS AND VISITORS ALIKE



I have always wanted to touch the very edges of Texas—to stand on the corners of this great state to see what I could see. After Hurricane Harvey, the mission became a quest to see what’s still standing along the Gulf after the largest storm in state history.

When Harvey made landfall August 25, 2017, in the San Patricio EC service area, the Category 4 storm ravaged the central coast before dumping biblical torrents of rain on Houston, Beaumont and some East Texas co-ops. The Texas Gulf Coast has seen more than 40 hurricanes in the past century, but Harvey tops the list of damage inflicted, with estimates of \$125 billion, far outpacing second-place Hurricane Ike’s \$30 billion in 2008.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JULIA ROBINSON

My Gulf Coast trip begins in early January at the point where the Rio Grande merges into the Gulf of Mexico. I drive through Brownsville, past Magic Valley Electric Cooperative, and I play hide-and-seek with bits of a border wall as I drive south on Boca Chica Boulevard, State Highway 4.

I stop at the historic marker for the Battle of Palmito Ranch. This remote patch of coastal marsh, salt prairie, mesquite and palm is the site of the last land battle of the Civil War. More than a month after Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Union troops advanced to retake Brownsville from the Confederates they thought were retreating. The battle of advances, retreats and skirmishes lasted a few hours, but the Union lost more than 30 soldiers. The Confederates won the day, but the war was already lost.

Just a few miles farther, the Gulf of Mexico opens up, wide and sunny. I take a right onto Boca Chica beach, and in another mile or so, the Rio Grande is shallow and muddy. Black skimmer terns congregate in the middle of the river while herons and egrets stalk the shallows. I wave across the water, a dozen short yards to Mexico, where families and fishermen enjoy their day at the beach. A family visiting from Toronto drives up from the Texas side, curious to see the much-debated border. We sit and watch the birds, the cast of fishing nets, the steady breeze off the Gulf, then slowly drive back down the beach.

It’s three hours north on U.S. 77 to Padre Island National Seashore, where I pitch a tent for the night on South Beach. This 70-mile stretch of coastline is the longest undeveloped barrier island in the world. You need four-wheel drive to make it past the five-mile marker, but even a couple of miles down, the beach feels isolated. I find a flat spot at the base of the dunes and settle in for a gorgeous sunset. A half-mile away, I spot a family who ascends the dunes and marvels at the color and expanse of the Texas sky. The Gulf waters turn a shadowy blue as the heavens take on pastels of pink, purple and orange.

**A family feeds sea-gulls near Historic Pleasure Pier on Galveston Island.**

In the morning, I take my coffee on a bench of driftwood and watch a great blue heron wade through the waves in search of breakfast. At the national seashore’s Malaquite Visitor



**A path leads to the Gulf at Padre Island National Seashore, which protects 70 miles of coastline.**

Center, I find a ranger-led birding tour starting on the expansive deck. Patrick Gamman, chief of interpretation, tells me they dodged a bullet with Harvey. “I expected to come back and see nothing of the visitor center, but Harvey moved just a little bit north and hit Rockport instead.” The park reopened three days after the storm with minor damage to the bayside campgrounds.

2018 marks the 40th year the park has been protecting and releasing sea turtles. Kemp’s ridley hatchlings emerge from late June through mid-July and crawl their way into Gulf waters. This is the only place in Texas where five of the seven species of sea turtles can be found.

**J**ust 20 miles farther north, Mustang Island was not so lucky. Harvey destroyed the bathhouse and damaged roads, jetties and campgrounds. Port Aransas, Corpus Christi and Rockport also suffered major damage. Now, four months after the storm, piles of debris line the roads as families and businesses gut their wind- and water-damaged structures. Everyone is in a hurry to be up and running by spring break.

In Port Aransas, Harvey’s winds peaked at 132 mph, and the damage increases in size and scope. No one is untouched, but everywhere there is renewal. The salty smell of the Gulf is interrupted by roofing tar and sawdust.

**Patrick Gamman, below left, chief of interpretation, says Padre Island National Seashore dodged a bullet with Hurricane Harvey. In Port Aransas, right, a business recovers along Alister Street.**

The sounds of hammers and power tools punctuate the cries of gulls. A new fleet of shiny, candy-colored golf carts awaits beachgoers.

The Port Aransas Museum complex includes a kit house erected in the early 1900s that has survived

**“WE’RE ALL IN THE SAME BOAT. IF THERE’S A NICE PART, IT’S THAT WE ALL PULLED TOGETHER AND THAT WE’RE PRETTY TOUGH.”**

seven hurricanes, including the 1916 storm that wiped out much of the city. Rick Pratt, museum director, says staff prepared the buildings then evacuated and hoped for the best.

“Once we got back into town, we got a lot of volunteers together and we worked 85 or 90 straight hours,” Pratt says. The group removed 3 inches of mud in the boat shop and salvaged what tools they could. “We’re open. We’re not repaired, but we’re open.

“We’re all in the same boat. If there’s a nice part, it’s that we all pulled together and that we’re pretty tough.”

Historic photos lining the walls show resilient islanders recovering from previous storms, the surf culture of the 1960s and 1970s, and the fishing industry that goes back to the 19th century.

Farley Boat Works, an extension of the museum a few blocks away, suffered structural damage and flooding. The active boat-building workshop honors the history of the Farley family, which produced hundreds of wooden skiffs and other craft from 1915–1970. Boat works manager Frank Coletta gives me a short tour of the workshop. A dirty waterline marks the peak of the flood 2 feet above the floor. They already have replaced tools and reopened classes where kids and adults can make model boats, kayaks, stand-up paddleboards and full-sized skiffs.





**A surfer leaves the water  
after a late afternoon  
session in Galveston.**

Drinking coffee on a picnic table outside are volunteers Steve Potter and George McDermid, winter Texans from Michigan. The two have been helping build and repair boats at Farley for several years. “If God had intended boats to be made of fiberglass, he would have planted fiberglass trees,” explains McDermid. “Plastic boats are for nothing,” agrees Potter. “Working with wood gets in your blood. We started coming down here in 2002.”

North of Port Aransas, the coastal oaks are stripped of leaves

ornate architecture and stained-glass windows give the aura of a royal residence.

Nearby Reedy Chapel and Ashton Villa witnessed another great moment of American history. On June 19, 1865, Union Gen. Gordon Granger read aloud, according to some accounts, from the balcony of the villa General Order No. 3, which announced the total emancipation of all slaves, more than two years after it was first issued by President Abraham Lincoln. The order was read

again on the steps of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, later called Reedy Chapel.

Down on the seawall, teenagers rush to the Historic Pleasure Pier for rollercoasters and bumper cars. As the sun sets over the water, the lights from the midway splash across the quickly darkening waters.

Back on the mainland, I head to Beaumont to visit the



**The Port Aransas Museum, left, contains artifacts from the island's settlement and rich surfing and fishing history. A fisherman, below, casts a net from the Mexico side of the border into the Rio Grande delta as it pours into the Gulf of Mexico.**

and limbs. A huge pile of debris lines the median of State Highway 35. The pile is crushed down daily, but the mountain is substantial and still growing as rebuilding continues.

In Rockport, the Fulton Mansion State Historic Site is closed for repairs to the roof while the education center and interactive exhibits remain open. This stately home from the late 1800s has seen many storms over the years and will see many more to come. At nearby Goose Island State Park, the 1,000-year-old live oak called the Big Tree survived the winds and rain even as dozens of younger trees fell.

**G**alveston is famously the site of the deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history, when the hurricane of 1900 came ashore as a Category 4. The residents had little warning of the approaching storm that destroyed most of the town and killed at least 6,000 people. The Galveston Historical Foundation shows a 30-minute documentary called *The Great Storm* at Pier 21 Theater with photos and voices narrating eyewitness accounts.

The Moody Mansion and Gresham's Castle offer visitors a glimpse of Galveston's gilded era in the East End Historic District. The Gresham family welcomed hundreds of survivors into their home, later called Bishop's Palace, after the 1900 hurricane. The





The Moody Mansion, left, in Galveston survived the great hurricane of 1900. The Spindletop Gladys City Boomtown Museum, below, recreates a small, turn-of-the-century town during the oil boom of Beaumont in 1901.

birthplace of the Texas oil boom. The Spindletop Gladys City Boomtown Museum memorializes the day in 1901 when the Lucas geyser erupted over 100 feet in the air from the salt dome flats. The population of Beaumont quintupled in a few short months. Land that didn't sell for hundreds of dollars in 1900 suddenly sold for tens of thousands.

The replica oil town has 15 buildings, blacksmith demos, a barbershop and saloon, gunfights and a geyser blast of water that recreates the Lucas gusher of 1901.

Swamps and bayous become more prevalent the closer you get to the Louisiana border. I drive through what was the epicenter

**WEB EXTRAS**

► Read this story on our website to watch a video of this trip to the coast and see more photos.



of Harvey floodwaters—more than 60 inches of rain fell in Nederland near Beaumont—to get to Sea Rim State Park. This 4,000-acre marshland offers 5 miles of beachfront and 10 miles of unique paddling trails.

I take a stroll on the ¾-mile Gambusia Nature Trail, a looping boardwalk suspended a few inches above a marsh lagoon. Seaside sparrows and sedge wrens vie for bugs in the waning afternoon light. An alligator slinks through the shallows, momentarily stopping my heart.

I end my Texas coast journey on the beach again, more than 300 miles from the Rio Grande. I have seen miles of debris and hollowed-out homes but also the resilience and perseverance of thousands of Texans.

Learn more about [Julia Robinson](http://JuliaRobinsonPhoto.com) at [JuliaRobinsonPhoto.com](http://JuliaRobinsonPhoto.com).



The boardwalk of the Gambusia Nature Trail runs for three-fourths of a mile above the salt marsh at Sea Rim State Park near Sabine Pass.



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With decades of experience, Bluebonnet's senior linemen — James Jordan (alternate), Gary Barabas, Kenny Roland and Jeff Hohlt — achieved a competitive feat that earned them the title of best in Texas. Their paths to life on the lines, and the heartbreaking events before and after their championship win, give new meaning to a line worker's creed: One for all and all for one.



*Joe Stafford illustration  
from photos by Sarah Beal and  
Jay Godwin*

# The Brotherhood



**Their profession is dangerous and their bonds are unbreakable. But for this team of Bluebonnet linemen, life's toughest test was only a heartbeat away.**

By Janet Wilson

**F**or a sliver of a second, there was silence. Then the words from the loudspeakers rang out.

Three new champions leapt to their feet. High-fives and hearty cheers gave way to shrieks of joy and raucous shouts that rippled like a wave through the crowd of several hundred. Despite aching muscles, the men bounded up the stage, their own joyous hollering adding to the din.

Gary Barabas, Kenny Roland and Jeff Hohlt had just proved they were the best electric linemen in the big state of Texas. And they did it in the senior age group — 45 and older — at the annual Texas Lineman's Rodeo. It's the Lone Star State's version of the Olympics for electric line workers and they had won gold for Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, a first for the co-op in that prestigious event.

During the day, the trio had put their cumulative 85 years of experience to the test. They scrambled to the top of unelectrified power poles to demonstrate how to rescue hurt colleagues. They tag-teamed to hoist equipment and restore mock outages. They raced against judges' timers to repair or replace heavy equipment, simulating tasks they do daily.

Bluebonnet's senior linemen team had just showed the professional excellence that comes from decades of work on the lines.

Under the tall pecan and oak trees at Nolte Island Park along the Guadalupe River outside Seguin, they held their shiny 2½-foot trophy aloft. There was no end to

their infectious grins.

No one had any idea that day — July 19, 2014 — that this winning brotherhood would never compete together at the Texas rodeo again.

Things were going to change, in dramatically unexpected ways. Life was going to turn triumph into turmoil and loss.

## **Kinship in dangerous work**

There are an estimated 117,670 line workers nationwide. The 80 at Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative help keep power flowing to more than 71,000 Central Texas homes, businesses, schools and churches in a 3,800-square-mile area that stretches from Austin's eastern edge to less than 100 miles from Houston.

Electric line work is routinely listed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor as one of the top 10 most dangerous jobs in America. Bluebonnet linemen typically work around lines carrying 25,000 volts of electricity — often 30 or 40 feet in the air. A single

Continued on next page

After four decades on the job, Jeff Hohlt, right, continues to do what he loves — work in the field with fellow line workers, including Obed Guajardo, left. Here, he helps install underground lines in Brenham in February. (Sarah Beal photo)



### Continued from previous page

misstep or a failed piece of safety equipment could be fatal.

Like firefighters and police officers, line workers are first responders. If the power goes out, they go out. These often unseen wizards of the wires work in harsh and dangerous conditions — downpours, lightning storms, hurricanes, heavy winds, floods, wildfires and icy blasts. They race to restore electricity — and our comfort — as fast as possible.

Some consider them the rock stars of the utility industry, but the lineman brotherhood doesn't seek the limelight. Like firefighters, they don't work alone. They have one another's trust and respect, and that keeps them going. It's a kinship forged in a life-or-death job, day after day, month after month, year after year.

Because they put their lives in one another's hands, the bonds and friendships that form among them can become unbreakable. They live the slogan "one for all and all for one."

Safety is paramount in the Bluebonnet culture and one of the cooperative's six foundation values. Safety training is ongoing, and not just for line workers. At Bluebonnet, regular safety meetings are mandatory and every employee learns how to use CPR to save a life.

Like so many in the electric utility industry, Bluebonnet's Jeff Hohlt has a personal motto: "Everyone goes home at the end of the day."

### 'He wasn't breathing'

Jeff was a teenager in 1977 when he got his first job in the utility industry. He was a lineman's helper with the Lower Colorado River Authority, the primary wholesale power provider in Central Texas. He joined Bluebonnet just months later when the co-op took over LCRA's Brenham-based operations.

Jeff grew up in Brenham, in Washington County, and never left. He learned to climb power poles before there were trucks with hydraulic buckets to lift a line worker into the air. When he was 21, he became a lineman.

He and his wife, Pam, raised two daughters, Kayla and Hannah, and a son, Dylan.

More than four years ago, on Christmas night in 2013, the family was together and had just returned home from a holiday celebration. Pam, Jeff and their daughters went to bed around 10:30 p.m.

Jeff was thirsty. He sat up, swung his feet to the floor, but collapsed back onto the bed.

"He wasn't breathing," Pam said.

She cried out to 21-year-old Hannah, who was trained in CPR. Hannah performed chest compressions for a couple of minutes to keep her dad alive until Washington County EMS arrived.

"They shocked his heart four times," Pam said.

The emergency crew stabilized Jeff and transported him to St. Joseph Hospital in Bryan.

The diagnosis: sudden cardiac arrest — when the heart suddenly stops beating and blood stops flowing to the brain and other vital organs. Death can occur in minutes.

Against all odds, Jeff was alive, thanks to Hannah and the rapid EMS response. Hannah was later awarded a prestigious American Red Cross Certificate of Merit — the organization's highest lifesaving honor — for her actions.

A defibrillator was placed in Jeff's chest by doctors in Bryan. After three days in the hospital, Jeff returned home to a low-sodium diet and daily exercise. He went to the gym and walked on a treadmill. Winter faded, and he and Pam walked the neighborhood together, slowly increasing their time and distance.

A stoic man, Jeff loved being a lineman. He had risen through the ranks to become a supervisor over crews that built electric lines to new homes and businesses, and restored power during outages. He was a respected adviser, mentor and friend at Bluebonnet.

By mid-March, Jeff was back on the job. He had lost 50 pounds, was walking 3 miles a day and doing resistance training with weights. He knew some people doubted he could return to work, but he was up for the challenge.

He kept one secret from his cardiologist. He was determined to compete in the 2014 Texas Lineman's Rodeo in July.

And he planned to win.

### A natural leader

Officially he was Kennedy C. Roland (named for President John F. Kennedy), but everyone knew him as Kenny. He grew up in Lockhart and played football, basketball, and ran track — a natural athlete. But what really drew people to Kenny was his ear-to-ear smile and infectious laugh that bounced off walls and tickled everyone within earshot.

He was a teenager when he got a job at Bluebonnet in 1980 in Lockhart and started from the ground up — literally. Kenny was a novice utility worker, meaning he stayed on the ground and supported co-workers climbing poles. He handed up equipment, ran errands and did whatever he was asked to do until he had the experience and know-how to climb poles himself.

Kenny wanted to be one of those rock star linemen.

In 1982, Kenny could often be found two-stepping and jitterbugging at Footloose, a San Marcos nightclub. That's where he met Cathy Howshan. This dancing, laughing Texas man

impressed the young woman from Massachusetts. He was sporting his favorite colors: red, white and black. He wore red-and-white glasses, a black tie with white polka dots, an argyle sweater vest, pinstriped slacks and red-and-white wingtips. And he drove a 1962 red-and-white Chevy.

Cathy, who was attending Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University), remembers every detail.

“He was an awesome dancer,” she said. “All the girls wanted to dance with Kenny.”

They dated off and on, but got serious in 1996. Kenny proposed to Cathy while they sat on the front porch of the house he had built in Lockhart, the house they made their home. Their daughter, Kennedy Cecelia Roland, was born in 2005. Kenny adored her. “Our little angel baby,” Cathy remembers.

Kenny loved life, his family and his job. When he walked into a room, the atmosphere changed. That smile arrived first, then he enthusiastically — and loudly — greeted everyone with a hug and a pat on the back.

He always tried to make other people’s lives better and to put a positive spin on hard times. “It ain’t nothing but two tears in a bucket,” he would say to friends. “Why you stressing? Them two tears ain’t going to fill it up.”

Kenny worked for Bluebonnet for decades and his career mirrored Jeff’s, though they

**Kenny Roland on his family’s horse, Buster, during a Caldwell County parade in an undated family photo. His daughter, Kennedy, still rides Buster in a pasture behind the home her father built in Lockhart. Below, Kenny, flashing his signature smile, with Kennedy at the 2012 Lineman’s Rodeo competition. Below, right, a third family photo of Kenny and Cathy Roland with their newborn daughter, Kennedy, in 2005.**



Gary Barabas worked in oil fields for years, but he found a home and work family when he joined Bluebonnet. Today he handles service requests — like installing this energy-efficient LED security light in February — for members in the San Marcos, Lockhart and Luling areas. (Sarah Beal photo)

were at opposite geographic sides of the co-op’s service territory. He rose from apprentice to lineman to crew supervisor, a natural leader and patient mentor at the co-op’s Red Rock Service Center near Lockhart.

Like Jeff, Kenny was a key member of the lineman’s rodeo team, competing every year since 2007. Cathy and Kennedy joined the audience of well-wishers as Kenny climbed poles and encouraged his fellow linemen. Kenny and Jeff and Gary Barabas had competed together on the senior team since 2011, when the team placed second and qualified for the International Lineman’s Rodeo in Kansas.

But the 2014 Texas Lineman’s Rodeo was

special. Kenny knew what Jeff had overcome to be on the roster and Kenny was determined to do his best to honor his teammates, who by then included alternate James Jordan.

## High hopes for winning

Gary grew up in Luling, working in oil fields on drilling rigs for 20 years before coming to Bluebonnet at age 39.

The father of a boy and girl — Blain and Bliss — Gary is an outdoors enthusiast who hunts, fishes, floats the San Marcos River and barbecues with friends and family on his days off. He began his Bluebonnet career in 2000 as a line worker and moved up through the ranks as an apprentice, then a journeyman lineman.

Gary joined Jeff and Kenny on the senior rodeo team in 2011, the year they won second place. The three joined ranks again in 2012 and 2013.

“It was fun,” Gary said. “We three were a good team and worked great together.”

In 2014, with Jeff competing again and Gary’s longtime life partner Jaime Garner cheering him on, Gary had high hopes of returning to the winners’ stage.

Continued on next page





From left: During the 2014 Texas Lineman's Rodeo, Gary and Kenny race against the clock in competition to be named the best senior team in Texas. They haul equipment and tools between events, and Jeff inspects a piece of equipment. The Bluebonnet team trained especially hard in 2014, hoping to bring home the elusive first-place trophy. Below, the crowd erupts into high-fives and

Continued from previous page

## 'It's an adrenaline rush'

James was the fourth member of the crew of Bluebonnet senior linemen. He grew up in Houston, then moved to Giddings — his wife Pshaun's hometown — when the young couple were expecting Dominique, the first of their two sons. They wanted to raise him and, later, brother DeVonte, in the country.

Soon after arriving in Giddings in 1991, James got a job as a meter reader at Bluebonnet.

James was an eager participant in his first lineman's rodeo in 2005, winning first place in an apprentice division event. He won second and third place on a journeyman lineman team in 2009. "I just fell in love with it," he said of the rodeo competition. "It's an adrenaline rush."

In 2013, when he turned 45, James joined the senior rodeo team as the alternate member. Training and competing with career linemen Jeff, Kenny and Gary was a thrill.

After the sudden cardiac arrest sidelined Jeff in December 2013, James was prepared to take Jeff's place on the team if he needed to. But Jeff was relentless in his rehab and his doctor cleared him to compete.

"Everyone was excited about Jeff's return," James said. "We were all hoping for a big win."

Most people didn't know that James had been in pain for months by the time the rodeo rolled around. His left leg tingled and he couldn't stand for long. He knew what it was; he'd had surgery for a herniated disc before. But James told his doctor to postpone a second surgery until after the competition.

He was a member of the senior team, and he wasn't going to let his teammates down.

## A day at Nolte Island Park

The sky was pitch black when Bluebonnet employees arrived at Nolte Island Park on the morning of July 19, 2014. Flashlights provided just enough light to collect and inspect equipment needed to compete in the 18th annual Texas Lineman's Rodeo. It was Bluebonnet's 10th consecutive trip to the competition.

The event, held every July, was created by the Texas Lineman's Rodeo Association. It's a chance for families and friends to watch linemen from utilities across the state display their skills. The weather is usually sweltering as line workers race against the judges' stopwatches to prove they are the best of the best.

Well over 100 competitors showcase their skills in three divisions: apprentice, those studying to become line workers; journeyman, those who have completed classroom and apprenticeship programs; and seniors, who are journeymen 45 or older. It's not glamorous. Across a field of 40-foot poles, sweaty men weighted with leather equipment belts pull wagons heavy with tools

from one event to another.

Jeff, Kenny and Gary competed in five categories that showcased how they would rescue an injured lineman, how fast they could ascend and descend a pole and how well they changed and repaired equipment. They felt good about their performance, but they had a tough close competitor — Farmers Electric Cooperative from Northeast Texas.

"Every year we'd be on edge because it's hot out there and we didn't know how things were going," James remembered.

As always, Kenny kept everyone's spirits high during competition, chiming in with his motto: "Stick with me, I'll make you famous."

It's a phrase he and Cathy shared — she to inspire students at her dance studio ("If you listen to me, I will make you famous"), he as a constant mantra with colleagues during and after work.

"We'd say 'Are you serious?'" James said. "Then we would sit back and laugh. He always made everyone at ease."

Family, friends and colleagues gathered that evening at picnic tables under a pavil-





cheers when the announcer says Bluebonnet's team won the title. Kenny (in red shirt), Gary (in blue shirt) and team captain Randall Bownds (in gray shirt and cap) savor the moment. Their win qualified them to compete in the International Lineman's Rodeo in Kansas three months later against the best in the nation. It was the last time the four friends would be together. (Jay Godwin photos)



ion as the winners were announced. When the Farmers Electric team was called to the stage for a second-place win, Bluebonnet fans knew their team would take home the flashy first-place trophy.

"Finally," James told himself, "we did it!"

"We were so tickled," remembers Randall Bownds, a lineman and coach of Bluebonnet rodeo teams. "Everybody wants to win, but everybody really wanted that senior team to win."

Randall searched for the proper words to congratulate the team that night.

"We had so many obstacles this year. But there was one man who overcame a big obstacle and he's here today. He trained and practiced with us in the hot sun. He didn't miss a step. The dedication Jeff showed, he was gonna rodeo no matter what.

"He was a real inspiration. The whole senior team has been an inspiration. Watching them compete — not due to age but their dedication, their fun, their loyalty to each other and the rodeo."

Jeff was 55, Gary was 53, Kenny was 51 and James was 46 when they celebrated with

their friends that night.

That was the last Texas Lineman's Rodeo for the champion senior team.

## Six months later

Kenny was busy in January 2015 putting the final touches on Lockhart's Martin Luther King Jr. March — arranging food donations and lining up speakers. The march was a huge success and one of many community events Kenny had started, or been involved with. Bluebonnet was even one of the sponsors.

The Monday march was followed by a Bluebonnet workday on Tuesday, and then Kenny, a Lockhart city councilman, attended a public meeting that night. He was tired but said he felt good. It was Jan. 20, 2015.

## A chair saved for Kenny

Joyce Buckner was 15 miles from her home in Lockhart, driving to Bluebonnet's Service Center in Red Rock early that Wednesday morning, Jan. 21. She saw an ambulance in a neighborhood along the way, but didn't pay much attention. It was 6:20; she had a 7 a.m. meeting, and she was never late.

Joyce, one of Bluebonnet's community representatives, picked her usual chair at the back of the meeting room, set her purse on the floor and saved a chair for her longtime, dear friend Kenny Roland.

The weekly meeting is mandatory for linemen and others to learn about safety issues and topics of interest. Joyce waited for a text from Kenny so she could open the back door, a small workplace tradition for the two.

The phone in Joyce's purse vibrated. She stepped away to answer. Suddenly, the others in the room heard her scream "No!"

The ambulance she had seen that morning was at Kenny's house, and she had just learned

that she would never see him again. A friend of Cathy Roland told Joyce that Kenny had died peacefully in his sleep. He was just 52.

The devastating news spread quickly. Linemen and employees working in Bluebonnet's Brenham and Giddings offices were in similar safety meetings when the calls and texts started.

Overwhelming grief turned the morning's mood dark and tears flowed. It was like a missing man formation. Everyone was in his or her place except Kenny. His chair was empty.



Joyce Buckner

Randall Bownds, the lineman rodeo coach, was leading another safety meeting 50 miles away in Giddings. "It got real silent

and I had to get up and walk out and leave the room. I couldn't hold it back," he said.

"Linemen form a bond. You laugh with them, cry with them and work with them. It's devastating when you lose one.

"I have to say losing Kenny was the hardest," Randall said.

## Celebration turns somber

The day after Kenny's death was supposed to be a celebration for Bluebonnet. Once a year, the cooperative has a company-wide meeting to honor employees for their achievements and community service during the previous year as well as their years of service, including those who retired in the past 12 months. It's the one day when almost all employees are gathered together.

But Jan. 22, 2015, was somber. Tears fell on round tables that filled the big room at

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the Bastrop Convention & Exhibit Center. Numb disbelief hung in the air.

Just a year earlier, Kenny had walked across the stage at Recognition Day to receive the co-op's Foundation Value Award for Love. That, along with safety, courage, respect, reliability and community, are the six guiding principles for Bluebonnet employees. It was a fitting tribute to a man who loved, and was loved, by so many.

He was scheduled to walk the stage again, to present the coveted award to another employee. The co-op's rodeo team members — linemen, apprentices, judges and others who helped produce the rodeo event — sat together at a table watching as another employee took over Kenny's duties. Almost all were wearing the 2014 Lineman's Rodeo logo shirts in Kenny's honor, and when the meeting ended, the rodeo team collected donations to buy a memorial for their fallen friend.

## Farewell to a friend

Over the next two days, thousands attended Kenny's visitation and funeral in Lockhart. The funeral was at the First Baptist Church because it has the largest sanctuary in town, but it couldn't hold all the tearful mourners who crowded into adjacent rooms and spilled onto sidewalks.

A seemingly endless line of family members, elected officials, Bluebonnet colleagues, church friends and community activists hugged and comforted Cathy and Kennedy Roland, who was 9. They didn't know who all of these people were, but they saw that Kenny had touched more lives than they ever imagined.

He had been the first African-American elected to the Lockhart City Council and he was the key organizer of that city's first MLK Jr. March in 2004. Two months after Kenny's death, the Texas House of Representatives passed a memorial resolution that recognized his contributions to community, church and the thousands of lives he touched.

## Words to set in stone

Six months later, line worker teams from all over Texas stood with hard hats in hands at the opening ceremonies of the 2015 Texas Lineman's Rodeo outside Seguin. For a silent moment they honored Kenny. Jeff, standing in the bucket of a work truck, raised the American flag during the emotional tribute.

Cathy told Bluebonnet's team: "Win or lose, you are all champions in his heart and mind. So just do it Kenny Roland style — living it and loving it. I know he will be watching over all of you with that great big smile."

A year after Kenny's death, the senior rodeo



**The Hohlts — Hannah, left, Jeff, Kayla, Pam and Dylan at their home in Brenham in February. They have always been close, but after Jeff's brush with death from sudden cardiac arrest on Christmas Day 2013, they savor time together. Hannah performed CPR on her dad and kept him alive until emergency crews arrived. (Sarah Beal photo)**

team and coaches piled into a Chevrolet Suburban and drove to Lockhart. They unloaded a dark gray granite footstone and carried it to Kenny's grave under shade trees in the Lockhart Municipal Burial Park. Cathy and Kennedy Roland and Joyce Buckner joined them. The marker is engraved with a Bluebonnet logo and the words "In Honor of Our 'Brother' Kenny Roland, 2014 Bluebonnet Electric Rodeo Team."

The first year after Kenny died, Cathy said she and Kennedy were on autopilot, and just "got by." The second year they "got through." Last year, the enormity of his death sunk in.

"We've cried more," Cathy said. "It's been harder on us both." Kennedy misses her dad.

He was teaching her how to ride her horse, play golf, throw a football, rollerblade and hop on a pogo stick. The two often wrestled in the living room and Kennedy loved sneaking upstairs on Saturday mornings and waking her dad by jumping on the bed.

Rituals have turned to memories. "He was

so much fun," Kennedy said.

Cathy still owns The Dancing Center Unlimited, the business Kenny encouraged her to start in 1999. Kennedy is 12, in sixth grade at Lockhart Montessori School.

Cathy continues to design a headstone for Kenny's grave. "It took me a year to be able to walk into the monument business in Lockhart," she said. "That stone is final. I'm not ready."

The headstone will be shaped like Texas in black marble with flecks of blue. Flower urns will adorn each side.

"It will have the Bluebonnet (logo) and foundation values because Kenny represented those well," Cathy said. "If you took those values, it would describe Kenny to a T."

More importantly, there's a lot of space on the back for an epitaph and Cathy is still thinking about what it should say.

"It has to depict Kenny — his life and what he represents," she said. "If someone walks by, I want them to say, 'Wow, that's a great guy.'"



Cathy and Kennedy Roland visit Kenny's grave at Lockhart Municipal Burial Park in February. The third year after his death hit them hardest with grief, but they continue to feel his presence, they said. Cathy is still working on his headstone, trying to write a fitting epitaph that will let visitors know the amazing man her husband was and how much she, Kennedy and the world have lost. (Sarah Beal photo)

## The rodeo team today

Bluebonnet's three senior rodeo team members — Jeff, Gary and James — gathered recently for lunch. It was the first time the three had been together alone since Kenny's death. They thought back to the rodeo championship several years ago. Just seven months before that victorious day, one of the team members had almost died, and six months later one would. Their tight-knit fellowship, part of the bond between Bluebonnet linemen, helps keep them going in the wake of tragedy.

Their memories are filled with laughter tempered by sadness. Losing Kenny was devastating personally, but was a huge loss professionally, too.

"He was a good teacher and a good influence (with new employees)," said Gary, a journeyman at the Red Rock Service Center who today works service orders in the San Marcos, Lockhart and Luling areas. "He was a peace-maker and if there was a problem, he knew how to de-escalate it.

"Kenny was knowledgeable about everything

and knew how to talk to people the way they wanted to be talked to," he said. "He was great with (Bluebonnet) members and had a work ethic he passed along to younger employees."

Then, thinking about that work ethic, all three burst into laughter. They recalled how at the end of a shift, Kenny's clothes were often cleaner than theirs.

"Learn how to work smarter, not harder," Kenny would advise them.

There was a lot of soul-searching after the 13 months between Jeff's sudden cardiac arrest and Kenny's unexpected death. (The official cause of his death was "undetermined," but the coroner's report noted blockage of the arteries.)

"It changes your priorities," Jeff said. "I used to think about having money — now I think 'It's only money.' I'm thinking more about how good it is to wake up each morning."

Jeff is still a crew supervisor and walks 3 to 4 miles a day (6 or more on the weekend.) He's following a fairly strict diet and wears a Fitbit exercise band to make sure he takes 12,000 steps a day.

Gary made some lifestyle changes, too.

"Since then I've quit smoking and (am) doing better with exercise," he said. "Still haven't gotten the eating down right yet," he added, laughing.

James has fully recovered from herniated disc surgery in 2015. Today, he supervises Bluebonnet's metering department.

"This has brought us all closer together," James said, "because we know at any given time, any one of us could pass. So we know we should cherish the time we have together. Let's make the best of it and talk. Let's not lose touch."

Jeff's daughter Hannah married last year, and Kayla is getting married this month. He and Pam keep in touch with Cathy and Kennedy Roland, sending cards for holidays and special events.

Gary and James were each expecting their first grandchild in March.

Jeff joined one of Bluebonnet's journeyman teams for the 2017 Lineman's Rodeo. James and Gary haven't competed since 2014.

There hasn't been another senior Bluebonnet rodeo team since Kenny's death. Bluebonnet will compete at the 2018 Texas Lineman's Rodeo on July 21, but there won't be a senior team this year, either.

The Texas Lineman's Rodeo, the three friends agree, isn't the same without Kenny Roland's boisterous personality and magnetic smile.

"We lost a friend," James said.

"We lost a family member," Jeff adds.

"Anyone who met Kenny knows what we lost," Gary said. ■



James Jordan, left, Jeff Hohlt and Gary Barabas meet for lunch in February to share how their priorities changed after Jeff's sudden cardiac arrest and Kenny Roland's death. Healthier diets and more exercise are their goals, but cherishing time with family and friends is most important. 'Let's not lose touch,' James said. (Sarah Beal photo)

Bluebonnet's  
new internship  
program is training the next generation of line workers

# Learning

Bluebonnet



The first participants in Bluebonnet's 30-week line worker internship program are, from left, Dylan Dussetschleger of Lexington, Zackary Handrick of Somerville, Brooks Kasper of Giddings, Tra Muston of Rockdale, Isaac Mills of Lockhart, James Flores of Elgin and Ty Duesterheft of Maxwell. (Sarah Beal photo)

## By Will Holford

It takes years to train an electric line worker, and Bluebonnet just gave a head start to seven interns — residents of our area — along that rewarding career path.

Electric utilities across the country are facing the challenge of replacing longtime, experienced line workers who are retiring. Texas utilities are particularly impacted because the state's low unemployment rate and robust economic growth are increasing the demand for skilled labor.

Bluebonnet's new internship program targets future line workers from communities in or near Bluebonnet's service area to encourage motivated, talented residents to

enter the trade.

"One of the greatest things about Bluebonnet is the personal relationships that exist between our employees and members," said Matt Bentke, Bluebonnet's general manager. "A key reason for those relationships is that nearly all of our employees were raised in the communities we serve. Our employees and their families go to school or church, or play sports with many of our members. It's natural to hire people who want to work close to their friends and families."

It is not uncommon for siblings or multiple generations of a family to work for Bluebonnet, Bentke noted. "That is one of the greatest compliments and surest signs that we have the right culture in place," he added.

Bluebonnet is counting on those local and family ties to create and retain a stable workforce for years, perhaps generations, to come.

"The intent is to hire and develop home-

grown line workers who have roots in the communities we serve," said David Tobola, Bluebonnet's manager of operations and a homegrown lineman himself. Tobola, who grew up in Giddings and has lived in Bastrop for many years, has risen through the ranks at Bluebonnet. "We want people who want to make a career here and retire from Bluebonnet," he said.

The interns participate in a 30-week program during which they alternate weeks between the classroom and the field. They learn together in the classroom, but during those weeks in the field, each intern is paired with a mentor who is an experienced line worker or crew supervisor. While in the field, the interns apply the knowledge they learn in the classroom, and, with the help of their mentors and other crew members, hone the skills necessary to be successful journeyman linemen. They work full-time hours and receive pay

# the ropes

**“By bringing the training in-house, we can provide constant feedback to the interns every step during their path to becoming journeymen.”**

**— David Tobola**

BLUEBONNET'S MANAGER OF OPERATIONS

and benefits from Bluebonnet.

Each month, mentors, instructors and assistant superintendents formally review the interns to give them feedback on how they are doing in the program and on the job.

“We provide constant communication and feedback throughout the process,” Tobola said.

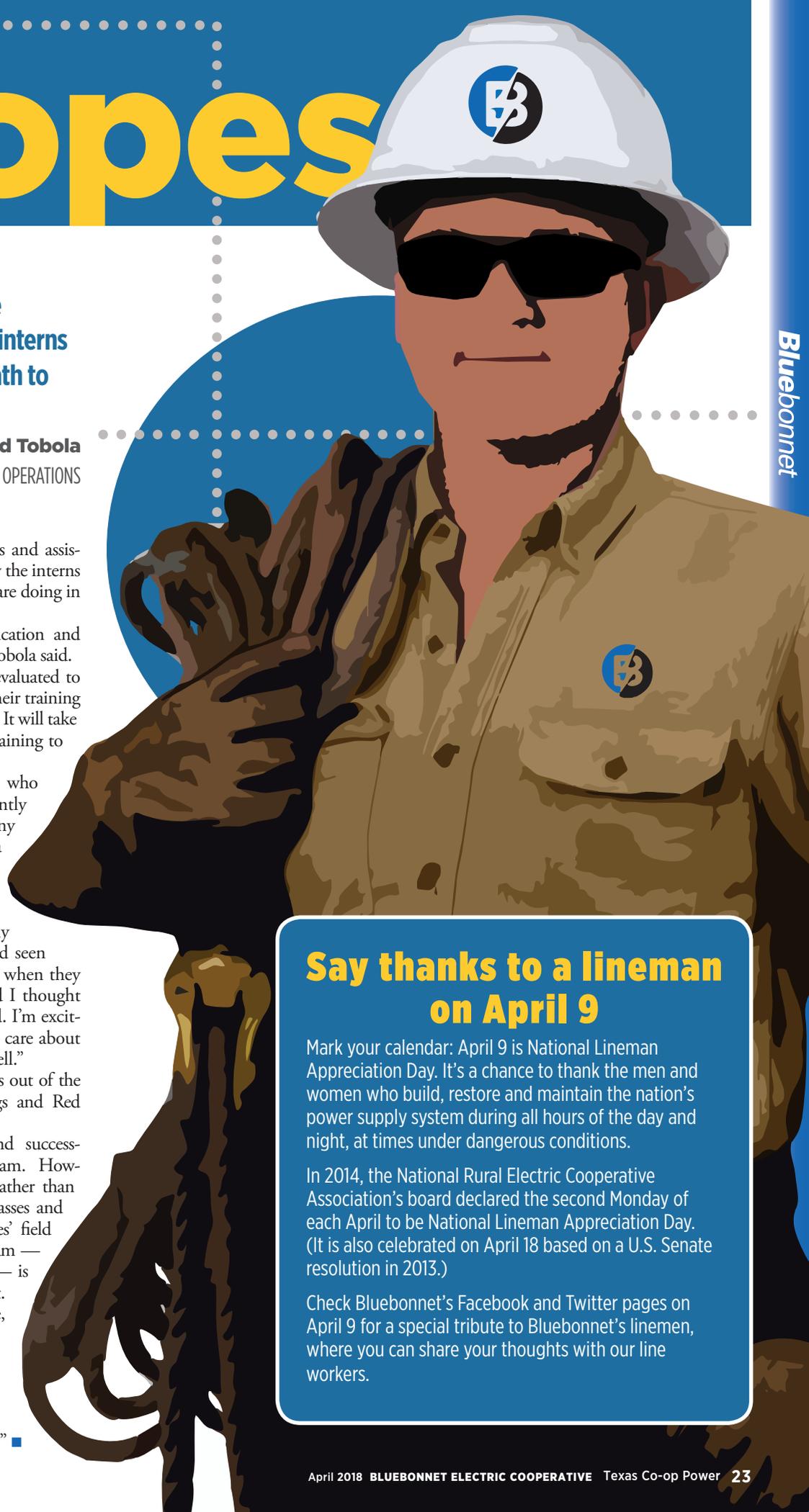
After 30 weeks, participants are evaluated to determine if they should continue their training to become journeyman line workers. It will take them an additional three years of training to become journeymen.

James Flores, one of the interns who lives near Bastrop and until recently worked for a remodeling company in Austin, said he was looking for a more stable career closer to home when he saw that Bluebonnet was hiring. “I wanted to branch out and start a career that I hopefully can retire from,” Flores said. “I had seen and talked to the Bluebonnet guys when they were working on our property and I thought that looked interesting, so I applied. I’m excited to get to work with people who care about what they do and treat people so well.”

The seven interns work with crews out of the co-op’s Bastrop, Brenham, Giddings and Red Rock service centers.

Bluebonnet has an ongoing and successful journeyman apprentice program. However, trade and technical schools, rather than Bluebonnet personnel, teach the classes and conduct portions of the apprentices’ field training. The new internship program — a precursor to apprentice training — is administered entirely by Bluebonnet.

“By bringing the training in-house, we can provide constant feedback to the interns every step during their path to becoming journeymen,” Tobola said. “That’s a definite advantage for the interns, the co-op and, ultimately, our members.” ■



## Say thanks to a lineman on April 9

Mark your calendar: April 9 is National Lineman Appreciation Day. It’s a chance to thank the men and women who build, restore and maintain the nation’s power supply system during all hours of the day and night, at times under dangerous conditions.

In 2014, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association’s board declared the second Monday of each April to be National Lineman Appreciation Day. (It is also celebrated on April 18 based on a U.S. Senate resolution in 2013.)

Check Bluebonnet’s Facebook and Twitter pages on April 9 for a special tribute to Bluebonnet’s linemen, where you can share your thoughts with our line workers.

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While we're thinking of saving energy, on April 22, Earth Day, check out Bluebonnet's Twitter feed and Facebook page for a chance to win a basketful of green-energy goodies, including LED bulbs, a solar-powered emergency radio, a solar-powered flashlight and more.



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**By text**

Register first, by texting BBOUTAGE to 85700 and following the prompts. Then you can report an outage on your mobile device by texting OUT to 85700. Get outage updates by texting STATUS to the same number

Bluebonnet

# Tomorrow's leaders to take a tour

## High school seniors selected for Bluebonnet-sponsored D.C. trip

By Lisa Ogle

**A** blood drive organizer who wants to become a nurse practitioner and a cheerleader who plans to pursue a career in family law will represent Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative during the 2018 Government-in-Action Youth Tour in Washington, D.C.

Madison Iselt, a senior at Lexington High School, and Gillian Nietsche, a senior at Giddings High School, were chosen in February. Roy Kruemcke Jr., also a senior at Giddings High, is the alternate who would join the tour if Iselt or Nietsche were unable to attend.

The two participants will tour the Texas Capitol and the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, and visit historical sites in our nation's capital from June 6-15. They also each receive a \$1,000 scholarship after graduating from high school.

The two recipients and alternate were among nine finalists interviewed at Bluebonnet's headquarters in February. Recipients were selected by community leaders based on the interviews and essays in their applications about their congressional representatives, the three branches of government, what they would like to see in D.C. and their favorite nonprofit organizations.

Iselt, 18, of Lexington, has participated in Lexington FFA and coordinated American Red Cross blood drives the past two summers. She has already taken several college courses and plans to complete her prerequisites at Blinn College in College Station before applying to nursing schools. She wants to become a nurse practitioner, which was reinforced by her experience volunteering at St. David's Medical Center in Austin last summer.

"I want to be able to help people out and make a difference in their lives," Iselt said of her career choice. "I want to have some authority and be able to prescribe medications to people, and that is exactly what a nurse practitioner can do."

She is pursuing Basic Emergency Medical Technician certification and is involved in the Student Health Advisory Committee and Health Occupations Students of America.

Iselt looks forward to seeing the Lincoln



From left, Madison Iselt, a senior at Lexington High School, and Gillian Nietsche, a senior at Giddings High School, will travel to the nation's capital in June for the youth tour. (Sarah Beal photo) Roy Kruemcke Jr., also a senior at Giddings High, is the alternate. (Family photo)

posters, stage a mock car crash involving an intoxicated driver and make a short film about it that is shown to the student body, she said.

Like Iselt, Nietsche is most looking forward to seeing the Lincoln Memorial. "This memorial is a reminder that we must work hard for the things we want in life and to never give up on our dreams," she said in her essay.

Kruemcke, 17, of Giddings, plays trumpet in his school band and also is a member of the band at Martin Luther Lutheran Church in Giddings. He

has placed in Computer Science UIL at the district and regional levels and serves as president of Christ First. He will study engineering and computer science at Texas A&M University and plans to enroll in the Air Force after college.

Iselt and Nietsche will join 147 other young people representing other Texas electric co-ops and more than 1,500 teens from around the country in the nation's capital, where they will see lawmakers in action, tour historical sites, and attend events hosted by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, an organization that represents more than 900 electric cooperatives.

For more information, visit [bluebonnet.coop](http://bluebonnet.coop). Click on Community, then Scholarships. Look for 2019 applications in the fall. ■



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# Rousting the Rustlers

Cattle raisers' organization employs special rangers to fight centuries-old crime

BY LADAWN FLETCHER

THE THIEVES ARE BRAZEN. COWS, HORSES, sheep—any livestock—can be swiped and sold relatively quickly at full market value. Depending on what is stolen, it can be days and sometimes weeks before the rightful owner even notices. But when the theft comes to light, one of the first calls to be made is to the special rangers.

The special rangers, not to be confused with Texas Rangers, are a select group of law-enforcement agents licensed by the states of Texas and Oklahoma and dedicated solely to agriculture crimes.

Hal Dumas, a special ranger since 1993, has seen a lot in the decades since he joined the force. It is a far cry from his days as a Houston police officer or as the sheriff of Wharton County. His uniform on any given day is crisp jeans, a white shirt and the hat he places beside him on the sofa as he talks. The only tells that confirm his special status: his badge and the gleaming black gun holstered to his side.

“Almost all of what we do as a special ranger is cold cases,” says Dumas. Theft and fraud to be exact.

Catching cattle thieves is why the force was created in 1877 by the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association. Cattle raisers, tired of losing their profits to rustlers, banded together to create this specialized and dedicated force.

To this day, the 30 agents who roam the rural roads of Texas and Oklahoma are funded by the TSCRA, not by either state's government. The rangers investigate crimes not just for members but for any rancher or farmer who experiences theft.

Dumas has his work cut out for him. He supervises Region 5, which includes Milam and all counties east of it, up to Leon County. His region and Region 6 to the north contain 70 percent of the cattle in the state and 70 percent of the sale barns.



Cattle raisers not familiar with the special rangers often call the local sheriff when their equipment or livestock is stolen. The special rangers work closely with other law enforcement agencies.

“We work with sheriff's departments all the time,” Dumas says. “Usually that is what we are doing, assisting another agency. We have the information on all the cattle sold in the state. They are a great help to us, and we're a great help to them.”

There are more than 120 sale barns in Texas, and on any given day, some of them are open for business. Buyers and sellers from surrounding counties converge in metal buildings on dusty lots and, with little more than a handshake and exchange of checks, make deals to transfer ownership of livestock.

In some cases, Dumas says, if a bad check or similar issue has delayed payment, the rangers give buyers a chance to pay before stepping in. Some of these cases involve millions of dollars.

“We filed a case several years ago that ranged from Crockett to Caldwell, and we recovered close to 30 pieces of equipment

worth close to a half-million dollars,” Dumas says breezily.

Livestock can be worth even more.

There have been multimillion-dollar deals where the buyer will purchase cattle from an organization that sells to individuals or puts cattle in a feedlot, Dumas explains. They buy as many as 10 or 15 truckloads and pay for them on time. If they get slow on paying or they go bankrupt, then the special rangers might have to get involved.

As old-fashioned as cattle rustling sounds, modern technology helps to catch the bad guys. Branding, the most effective way to identify cattle, was at one time identified via microfiche. Now each special ranger is equipped with a tablet and has instant access to databases across the state. Surveillance cameras on property also sometimes help.

Dumas believes cattle thieves will always be among us. Technology helps stop them or catch them, but he has old-fashioned advice for the modern rancher. “Brand your cattle.”

LaDawn Fletcher is a Houston-area writer.

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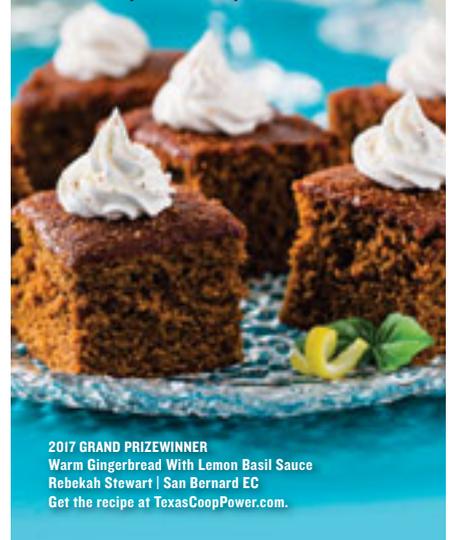
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# Breakfast Pastries

WHAT BETTER WAY TO WAKE UP THAN to the aroma of freshly baked pastries? Whether it's fragrant banana muffins, buttery scones or the sheer delight of a high-rising, oven-baked pancake, breakfast pastries are a delicious way to make any day feel special. This month's winners are ideal for celebratory brunches ('tis the season for bridal showers and graduation parties), but they're also easy enough to prepare on a weekday. A family favorite is this cinnamon-scented quick bread that combines a moist, tender texture with a crackly, almond crust. Consider baking two and freezing one to brighten up a future morning.

**PAULA DISBROWE**, FOOD EDITOR

## Snickerdoodle Loaf

### BATTER

- 2½ cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1½ teaspoons cinnamon
- 1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened
- 1¼ cups sugar
- 3 eggs, room temperature
- ½ cup sour cream
- ½ cup whole milk yogurt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon almond extract

### CINNAMON SUGAR

- 3 tablespoons light brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- ¼ cup sliced almonds

- 1. BATTER:** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease a 9-by-5-inch loaf pan.
- 2.** In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder and cinnamon.
- 3.** In a large bowl, cream the butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add the sour cream, yogurt and extracts and beat until well-combined. Add the dry ingredients and mix until the batter just

CONTINUED ON PAGE 32

MELISSA BRISKO

# Recipes

## Breakfast Pastries



### THIS MONTH'S RECIPE CONTEST WINNER

HELEN COUNTS | GRAYSON-COLLIN EC

Counts' Puff Oven Pancake is also known as a Dutch baby, a large, fluffy pancake that's whisked together in minutes and bakes into a billowy show-stealer. Vary the toppings to suit your mood or occasion.

Sprinkle with Parmesan or Gruyère for a savory bite, or top with fresh fruit and powdered sugar.

### Puff Oven Pancake

- 4 eggs
- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup flour
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup (½ stick) butter
- Powdered sugar
- Fresh fruit or berries

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees.
2. In a large mixing bowl, briefly beat the eggs. Whisk in milk, flour, sugar and salt until fairly smooth (do not over mix). Cover the batter and let stand for 30 minutes.
3. Place the butter in a 12-inch cast-iron skillet, or similarly sized

baking dish, and heat in oven until melted. Swirl skillet to coat the bottom and sides with melted butter.

4. Pour batter into skillet and bake 15–20 minutes, or until it rises very high and is billowy on the edges and golden brown.

5. Remove from heat and cool for 5 minutes. Place fruit in the center crevice of pancake and dust with powdered sugar. ▶ Serves 4–6.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

comes together (do not over mix).

4. Pour half the batter into the pan and smooth the top with a rubber spatula.
5. CINNAMON SUGAR: In a small bowl, whisk together the brown sugar and cinnamon. Sprinkle half the cinnamon-sugar mixture evenly over the batter in the pan.
6. Pour the rest of the batter over the cinnamon sugar and smooth the top. Sprinkle the remaining cinnamon sugar over the batter and top with the almonds.
7. Bake 50–60 minutes or until a tester inserted in the middle of the loaf comes out mostly clean. Remove from oven and cool for 10 minutes before running a knife around the sides of the pan and turning out the loaf onto a wire rack to cool completely. ▶ Serves 6–8.

**COOK'S TIP** Wrapped in plastic wrap or foil, this bread will keep 3–4 days.

### Spiced Banana Muffins

JILEEN PLATT | BOWIE-CASS EC

An unexpected blend of spices and a moist texture set these banana muffins apart. Adding a bit of whole-wheat flour lends a satisfying texture and balances the sweetness. For a crunchy topping, sprinkle cinnamon and coarse sugar over the tops of the muffins before baking.

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup whole-wheat flour
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon nutmeg
- ½ teaspoon cardamom
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup (1 stick) butter, softened
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 1½ cups sugar
- 4 eggs
- 5–6 ripe bananas, mashed
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Apply cooking spray to 2 muffin tins or line with paper baking cups.
2. Whisk together flours, baking soda, spices and salt in a medium bowl.
3. In a separate mixing bowl, cream butter and sugars. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each. Add bananas,



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oil and vanilla; mix well. Add the dry ingredients and mix until moistened, being careful not to over mix.

**4.** Spoon batter into muffin tins. Bake 15–17 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean.

**5.** Remove from heat and cool muffins in tins for 5 minutes. Invert and finish cooling, right-side up, on a wire rack.

► Makes 24 muffins.

## Cranberry Scones

CHRISTINE HENDERSON | GUADALUPE VALLEY EC

These tender crumb scones are easy to assemble. For optimal texture, use very cold butter. “These are great fresh from the oven or split open and spread with butter, honey, or my favorite—whipped cream,” Henderson says.

- 3 cups flour**
- ½ cup plus 3 tablespoons sugar, divided use**
- 1 tablespoon baking powder**
- ½ teaspoon baking soda**
- ¼ teaspoon salt**

- ¾ cup (1½ sticks) butter**
- 1 egg, beaten**
- 1 cup buttermilk**
- ½ teaspoon almond extract**
- 1 cup dried cranberries**
- ½ cup chopped walnuts (optional)**
- 1 tablespoon finely grated orange zest**

- 1.** Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Coat a baking sheet with cooking spray or line with parchment.
  - 2.** Whisk together the flour, ½ cup sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt in a large bowl. Using a fork (or your fingers) cut in butter until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Mix in egg, buttermilk and almond extract until it forms a slightly moist batter. Stir in cranberries, nuts and orange zest.
  - 3.** Using a spoon, scoop 3-inch rounds of batter onto baking sheet (keeping them about 2 inches apart). Sprinkle remaining sugar over each scone. Place baking sheet on center oven rack and bake 15 minutes or until lightly browned.
- Makes 12 scones.



## Top of the Morning

What’s the only way to improve an enticing pastry? Serve it with a delicious drizzle or creamy condiment. These are simple ways to add flavor intuitively, to taste:

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**INFUSE SYRUP** Gently heat pure maple syrup with blackberries, raspberries or blueberries (fresh or frozen), and include a cinnamon stick and/or vanilla bean. —PD



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WEB EXTRAS ► See Focus on Texas on our website for more photos from readers.



▲ CAROL POPE, Bowie-Cass EC: Tad Hobbs of Hooks shares a gentle touch with his horse, Gingersnap.



▲ KANDICE LAMMERT, Heart of Texas EC: "Lucas Lammert, age 4, mutton bustin' at the HOT Fair in Waco"



▲ JULIE KLAMMER, Pedernales EC: Mylie Pearl, 3, wears chaps and a cowgirl hat for a Texas birthday party.



▲ DAVID PENA, Pedernales EC: "My son loved the sound the spur made as he walked."



### UPCOMING CONTESTS

AUGUST SCHOOL'S OUT	DUE APRIL 10
SEPTEMBER WEDDING FUNNIES	DUE MAY 10
OCTOBER CLOCKS	DUE JUNE 10

All entries must include name, address, daytime phone and co-op affiliation, plus the contest topic and a brief description of your photo.

ONLINE: Submit highest-resolution digital images at [TexasCoopPower.com/contests](http://TexasCoopPower.com/contests). MAIL: Focus on Texas, 1122 Colorado St., 24th Floor, Austin, TX 78701. A stamped, self-addressed envelope must be included if you want your entry returned (approximately six weeks). Please do not submit irreplaceable photographs—send a copy or duplicate. We do not accept entries via email. We regret that *Texas Co-op Power* cannot be responsible for photos that are lost in the mail or not received by the deadline.

◀ BECCA BRIDGE, South Plains EC: These 1952 cowgirls—Jane Powell Bridge, left, and sister Pat Powell Hightower—are ready for the rodeo.

## Pick of the Month Cajun Heritage Festival

**Port Arthur** April 7  
(409) 835-2787, cajunheritagefest.com

Food, drink and music mark this annual festival, which takes place as the coastal community of Port Arthur continues to recover from Hurricane Harvey. The Category 4 hurricane, which struck Texas on August 25, 2017, caused \$125 billion in damage and dropped 4 feet of rain on Port Arthur and 5 feet on neighboring communities.



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## April 7

**Kilgore Gregg County Walk Like MADD**, (903) 534-6000, walklikemadd.org

**Terrell Big Band Hangar Dance & Dinner**, (972) 551-1122, bftsmuseum.org

## 8

**Crockett Ernie Haase & Signature Sound**, (936) 544-4276, pwfaa.org

## 11

**San Angelo [11-14] Just Between Friends**, (325) 716-7356, sanangelo.jbfsale.com

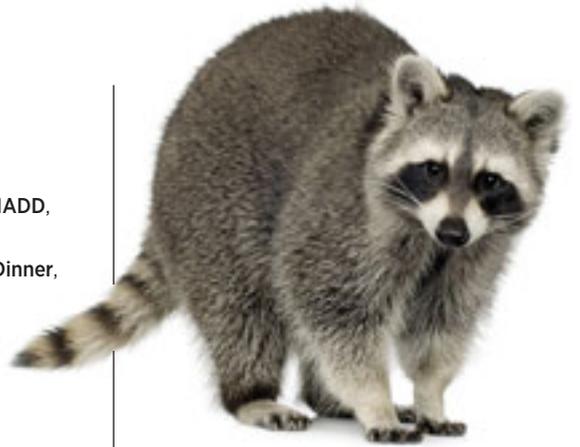
## 13

**Georgetown [13-14] Quilt and Stitchery Show**, (512) 658-6973, handcraftsunlimited.com

**Neches [13-22] 1836 Chuckwagon Race**, (903) 721-9111, 1836chuckwagonrace.com

## 14

**Cedar Park Austin Walk for PKD**, (508) 981-3011, walkforpkd.org/austin



April 14  
Sherman  
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Than a Raccoon?**

**Hearne Crossroads Hometown Festival**, (979) 279-5372, crossroadshometownfestival.com

**San Saba Music Series Presents Jason Boland**, (325) 372-5144, visitsansabatexas.com

**Schulenburg Sausagefest**, (979) 743-4514, schulenburgsausagesfest.com

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**Sherman** Are You Smarter Than a Raccoon?, (940) 391-5135, friendsofhagerman.com

**Waco** Rootstock: A Texas Wine Festival, (254) 848-4343, rootstockwinefest.com

**Chappell Hill** [14-15] Official Bluebonnet Festival of Texas, (979) 836-3696, visitbrenhamtexas.com

## 19

**San Angelo** [19-21] Regional Cavalry Competition, (325) 657-4444, fortconcho.com

**Waxahachie** [19-22] Crossroads of Texas Film Festival, (469) 309-4045, crossroadssoftx.com

## 20

**Edinburg** Got Faith Concert Series, (956) 358-2755, gotfaithmusic.com

**Carthage** [20-21] Piney Woods Quilt Festival, (903) 646-1791, carthagetexas.us/main-street

**Henderson** [20-21] Antique Tractor Show, (903) 889-2671, visithendersontx.com

**Grandview** [20-22] Antique Alley Texas, (817) 666-5024, antiquealleytexas.com

## 21

**Calvert** Calvert 150: A Texas Celebration Fit for a Queen, (979) 364-2323, calverttx.us

**Hillsboro** Hill County Master Gardeners Plant Sale, (254) 582-4022, hill.agrilife.org

**Brazoria** [21-22] Migration Celebration, 1-844-842-4737, migrationcelebration.com

**Dripping Springs** [21-22] Redbud Artisan Market, (512) 858-7892

**Whitney** [21-22, 27-29] *Doublewide, Texas*, (254) 694-5105, lakewhitneyarts.org

April 20-21  
Henderson  
Antique Tractor Show



## 22

**Wilson** VFD Fundraiser Dinner and Auction, (806) 778-7326

## 26

**Freeport** [26-28] RiverFest, (979) 233-6061, freeportriverfest.com

**Fredericksburg** [26-29] Hill Country Film Festival, 1-866-224-7714, hillcountryff.com

## 27

**Clute** [27-29, May 4-6] Little Theater's Production of *Hamlet*, (979) 265-7661, brazosportcenter.org

## May 6

**Wylie** Wylie 500 Pedal Car Race, (972) 516-6016, wylietetexas.gov

### Submit Your Event!

We pick events for the magazine directly from TexasCoopPower.com. Submit your event for June by April 10, and it just might be featured in this calendar.

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# Where Birders Perch

World Birding Center spans nine sites along Rio Grande Valley

BY EILEEN MATTEI

FROM SOUTH PADRE ISLAND ALONG THE Rio Grande to Roma, 134 miles to the west, nine World Birding Center sites entice serious birders and amateur naturalists with extraordinary, year-round watchable wildlife. Easily accessible, the WBC includes three state parks and six urban nature preserves where it is possible to enjoy one-on-one encounters with birds, butterflies, Texas tortoises and semi-tropical, thorny, flowering Mother Nature.

Beginning birders count red-crowned parrots, great kiskadees and green jays among the Rio Grande Valley's large, loud and colorful species that make it easy to enjoy wildlife watching. Veteran birders come from around the world to spot birds not seen anywhere else. World Birding Center habitats range from tidal wetlands to thorn-scrub forests. Brimming with native plants, the sites attract an abundance of semitropical and migratory birds. This inspires locals to grow native plants to nourish and shelter wildlife.

The WBC's easternmost location is on South Padre Island, and the other eight sites lie within a few miles of Interstate 2 and Highway 83, which traverse the lower RGV.

At **South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center**, you can observe birds up close because the birds here don't spook easily, says Javier Gonzalez, park naturalist. In contrast, he adds, the alligators living in the freshwater wetland tend to shy away from noisy groups. "The adjacent salt marsh lets you compare the differences in habitats and wildlife," Gonzalez says. "With only one trail and one boardwalk, you share experiences with people you meet and learn from each other."

Thirty-six miles inland, **Resaca de la Palma State Park's** diverse habitats include



The Edinburg Scenic Wetlands and World Birding Center

a wetland that weaves through the park's 1,200 acres. As guests roam the park's grassland, thorn scrub and old-growth ebony forests, they are likely to spot Altamira orioles, groove-billed anis, green jays and kingbirds.

The **Harlingen Arroyo Colorado** site of the WBC encompasses the 54-acre Hugh Ramsey Nature Park and the 40-acre Harlingen Thicket. Volunteer Texas master naturalists have collaborated to transform parts of the park into an indigenous habitat densely packed with native plants.

Scattered through **Estero Llano Grande State Park's** 230 acres of grassland and woods are ponds that host alligators, black-bellied whistling ducks, roseate spoonbills and wood storks. A wildlife-watching pavilion overlooks Ibis Pond and serves as the ideal starting point for the popular owl prowls and night hikes.

In addition to the birds and butterflies crowding the gardens, the **Old Hidalgo Pumphouse Museum** boasts an up-close perspective on the massive steam-driven pumps that drew water from the Rio Grande to irrigate farm fields starting in 1909.

**Quinta Mazatlan**, a historic 1930s adobe mansion, takes center stage at McAllen's

urban wildlife habitat. Resident semitropical birds perched along the trails blend in with 38 bronze sculptures of leafcutter ants, bats, owls, horned lizards and javelinas.

At **Edinburg Scenic Wetlands**, two large ponds and several small ones act like magnets for kids, wading birds, songbirds, foxes and dragonflies. "We're an educational nature center, an urban oasis for watchable wildlife rather than a native forest," says Marisa Oliva-Rodriguez, who manages the 40-acre site. "The idea is to get kids outside and enjoying it." Park admission includes use of binoculars and playsets with dip nets.

**Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park** is renowned for hawk watches during seasonal migrations, while **Roma Bluffs'** observation deck high above the Rio Grande looks out over the river and islands and into Mexico. Every step on the World Birding Center trail delivers wildlife encounters in this lively, semitropical environment.

Eileen Mattei, a member of Nueces and Magic Valley ECs, lives in Harlingen.

 **WEB EXTRAS** ▶ Read this story on our website to see more photos from the World Birding Center.



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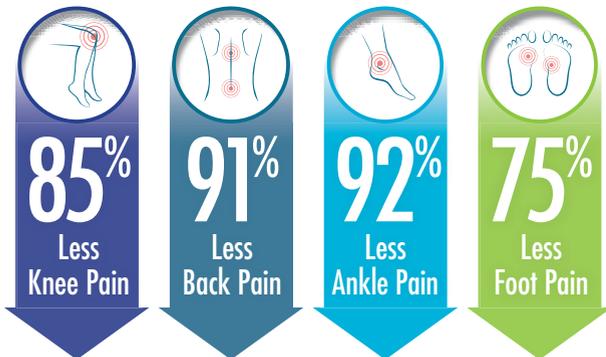
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