

Part One of The Texas Rivers Series:
On the Canadian River with John Graves & Wyman Meinzer

TEXAS PARKS & WILDLIFE

MARCH 1999

WALTZ of the wild turkey

Huntsville Lunkers ★ Horse Camping Texas-Style
The Legacy of Roy Bedichek

S a d



addle Up!

Whether you choose to trailer in your own mount or find a nearby rental stable, opportunities abound at Texas' equestrian-friendly state parks and natural areas.

It was the ultimate cowboy experience for me. There I was, stretched out beside a blazing campfire, wrapped in a Navaho saddle blanket to ward off the night's chill. Overhead, a dazzling canopy of stars winked against a jet-black sky that seemed to stretch beyond infinity. Nearby, my tent and thick bedroll beckoned my tired bones. For a while yet, I was content just to soak in the sights, smells and sounds of an evening in a virtually untouched part of Texas — made all the sweeter by the comforting presence of my trusty horse, who was happily munching hay in a corral just 10 feet away.

Tomorrow, he would wake me at dawn with an impatient whinny for breakfast, after which I would saddle up and spend another day roaming the scenic hills. Just me, my horse and a few equestrian friends. We would cover more ground than we ever could by hiking, encountering an abundant array of regional wildlife, plant life and miles of trails that might lead us through narrow arroyos, across rushing streams or up to the summit of buttes where splendid vistas would offer reward for the climb. Closing my eyes, I would be lulled by the rhythmic sound of hooves on rock or loam, the quiet squeak of saddle leather and the muffled flurry of wings as we startled a flock of native birds. And I would ask myself: Can life get any better than this?

For me and for others who've camped with horses in Texas, the answer is a resounding "no!" But the experience need not be limited to horse owners, nor to riders desiring to camp out. Of the 12 Texas state parks and natural areas that allow horse camping, several work in cooperation with nearby horse-rental facilities that offer guided or unguided rides by the hour, half-day, full-day

or overnight. (See accompanying table on page 38.)

High Plains Adventure

Recently, I visited three Texas state facilities that feature equestrian camping. Two of the state parks, Palo Duro Canyon and Caprock Canyon, are located on the High Plains, while the third, Hill Country State Natural Area, is located in the state's southern half, near Bandera (San Antonio environs).

Palo Duro Canyon, situated about 30 miles south of Amarillo near the town of Canyon, is where the pan-

cake-flat plains, with their endless cotton fields and sprawling cattle ranches, abruptly give way to plunging red-rocked canyons.

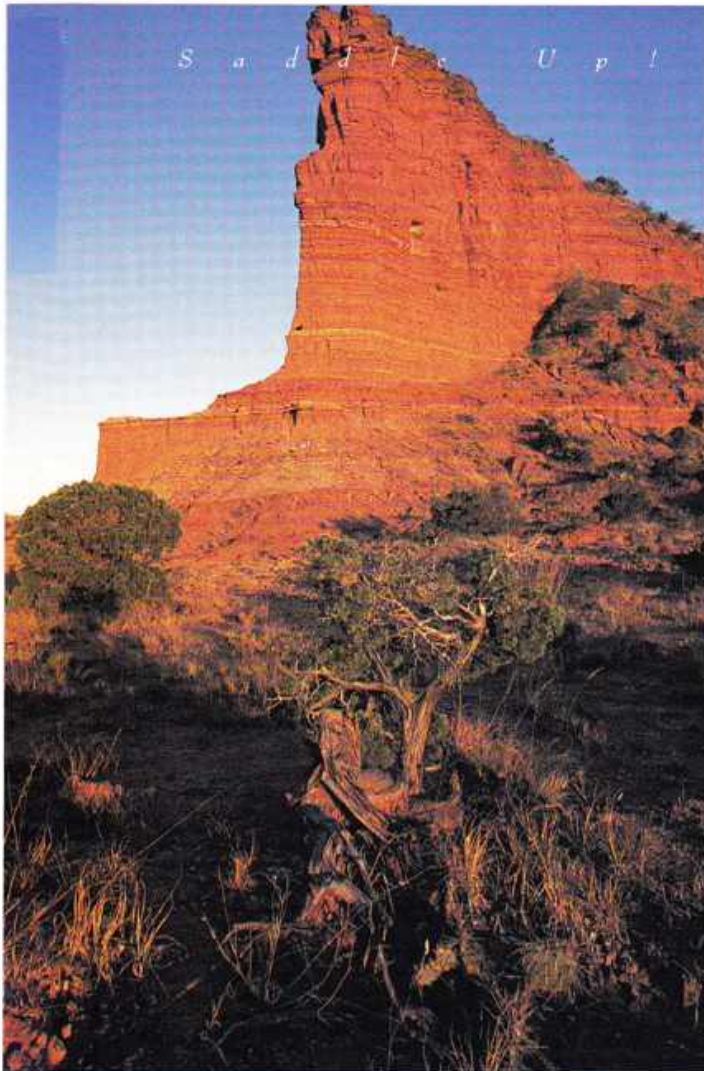
While the park itself is 16,402 acres, only 10.5 miles of trails are earmarked for horses. Two of the trails are limited to equestrians only, while a third is designated for both horses and hikers. Because

of the relatively compact area open to riders, Palo Duro is a good place for novice equestrian campers (and/or novice horses) to try out the experience, perhaps with a day trip or single-night stay.

The semi-rough terrain (a mixture of rock and loam; horseshoes strongly recommended) and mostly hilly trails provide an ample test of stamina for both horse and rider — but all efforts are made worthwhile by the rugged scenery and awesome beauty of the vast, one-million-year-old canyon. Wildlife viewing also is possible: in fact, the city girl in me was both nervous and thrilled to come face-to-face with a coyote on the trail, out in broad daylight. Fortunately, my horse figured it was simply a German shepherd with funny-looking eyes, and he didn't spook.

Palo Duro's equestrian camping facilities are primi-

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Equestrians at Caprock Canyons State Park, these two pages, enjoy spectacular scenery, as well as a close-up look at wildlife such as these mule deer. This 15,000-acre park has 5,000 acres available for horseback riding.

Riding Stables, which is located on park property. Horses can be rented by the hour, the day or for overnight trips (wranglers provided; also meals, if desired).

About 70 miles southeast of Palo Duro is Caprock Canyons State Park, located near the town of Quitaque. Equestrian campers seeking wide-open spaces with seemingly unlimited territory to cover (Caprock encompasses 5,000 acres to ride on, and more than 15,000 acres overall) are drawn to this park, which features 15 miles of riding trails. A bonus is that Canyonland Trailways, a 64-mile (South Plains to Estelline) rail-to-trail conversion that's open to horses, mountain bikers and hikers, is accessible through the south end of the park. The trail offers a relatively level surface, breathtaking vistas, wildlife sightings and one of Texas' last remaining railroad tunnels. Water sources (for horses) and chemical toilets are provided at regular intervals.

Riders seeking more challenging terrain need not venture from the park, however, which features mostly rugged trails of steep climbs and descents — many of which afford spectacular views of the canyon's exposed geological formations. Soil is a mixture of rock, shale and

tive, consisting of six campsites with pipe-fence corrals and a water source (bring your own buckets), but no picnic tables or fire rings. Two large trailer parking areas are nearby, and restrooms with showers are within walking distance of the camping area.

The equestrian routes within the park include Turnaround Trail, a four-mile round-trip; Interconnecting Trail, a two-mile round-trip; and the popular Lighthouse Trail (multi-use), a 4.5-mile round-trip. Time spent out of the saddle might include taking in a performance of "Texas" at the park's famous Pioneer Amphitheater (summers only), a trip to Palo Duro's visitors' center and trading post, or partaking of hiking, fishing, geological study, mountain biking, scenic drives or nature study.

Visitors who don't own horses can lease from Goodnight

Prepare for close-up wildlife viewing at Palo Duro Canyon: the city girl in me thrilled to the sight of a coyote, which fortunately, my horse figured was just a German shepherd with funny-looking eyes.



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loam (horseshoes advised). The available riding land is so spread out that during a five-hour morning ride, I encountered only a handful of other equestrians, as well as one small, courteous pack of mountain-bikers. My horse, a loaner Paint named Tony, seemed delighted to be free of his usual urban surroundings, often breaking into a spontaneous jog and whinnying with joy. And I was happy to allow him the opportunity for a flat-out run several times during rides on the park's flatter, more sandy trails.

Caprock's equestrian camping area consists of 12 campsites with picnic tables and fire rings, a cluster of individual pipe-fence corrals and two large community corrals. There's also a sizeable covered pavilion useful for large groups (up to 100 people), reunions and the like. There is no electricity at any of the sites, and available water is adequate only for animal consumption. Campers are strongly advised to bring their own water not only for campsite use, but use on the trail as well.

Riders seeking challenging terrain will certainly find it at Caprock Canyons State Park, with its rugged trails of steep climbs and descents — many with spectacular views of the canyon's exposed geological formations.

Vehicle parking is located at each of the less primitive campsites in the Wild Horse Camping Area. At the more primitive sites nearby (close to the Little Red River), which require a one-mile ride or hike in, vehicle parking is located at the trail head. While there are no restrooms at any of the equestrian campsites, conventional restrooms and shower facilities are located within a mile of the equestrian camping area. (There's a well-maintained outhouse way out on the trail as well, which I was grateful to discover about 2½ hours away from camp.)

As a post-ride treat in hot weather, Caprock Canyons' Lake Theo is available for swimming (also boating and fishing), although horses are not allowed in the section of park where the lake is located.

Other non-riding time might be spent in the park's interpretive pavilion, with its exhibits on geology and the Native American history of the site, or at the park store, which stocks gifts as well as basic essentials.

Mounts can be rented at nearby Quitaque Riding Stables (adjacent to the railway), for both guided and unguided

SADDLE UP FOR THE GREAT TEXAS OUTDOORS: WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

STATE PARKS & STATE NATURAL AREAS	NEAREST TOWN	DAY-USE RIDING ONLY	PRIMITIVE CAMPING ONLY	DRINKING WATER FOR HORSES	DRINKING WATER FOR HUMANS	ELECTRICITY AT RIDING CAMPSITES	AVAILABLE TRAILS	HORSE RENTALS
Caprock Canyons State Park 806-455-1492	Quitaque			★			15 miles	★
Choke Canyon State Park 512-786-3538	Three Rivers		★	★			18 miles	
Cooper Lake State Park 903-945-5256	Sulphur Springs			★	★	★	3 miles	
Copper Breaks State Park 940-839-4331	Quanah			★	★		3-5 miles	
Dinosaur Valley State Park 254-897-4588	Glen Rose		★	★			100 acres	
Hill Country SNA 830-796-4413	Bandera			★			36 miles	★
Huntsville State Park 409-295-5644	Huntsville	★ Rentals only		★	★		15 miles	★
Lake Arrowhead State Park 940-528-2211	Wichita Falls			★	★	★	5 miles	
Lake Houston State Park 281-354-6881	New Caney	★ Bring own		★			8 miles	
Lake Livingston State Park 409-365-2201	Livingston	★ Rentals only		★			2-5 miles	★
Lake Mineral Wells State Park 940-328-1171	Mineral Wells		★	★	★		26 miles	
Lake Somerville State Park 409-535-7763	Somerville			★	★		35 miles	
Monahans Sandhills State Park 915-943-2092	Monahans	★ Bring own		★	★		600 acres	
Palo Duro Canyon State Park 806-488-2227	Canyon		★	★	★		10.5 miles	★
Pedernales Falls State Park 830-868-7304	Johnson City	★ Bring own		★			10 miles	
Ray Roberts Lake State Park 940-686-2148	Pilot Point		★	★	★		16 miles	
San Angelo State Park 915-949-4757	San Angelo			★	★	★	50 miles	★

Many of Texas' wildlife management areas also allow horses and riders to visit, but most do not allow overnight camping with horses. Following is a list of WMAs and other public lands where horseback riding is permitted; call ahead to inquire about potential overnight stays.

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA	NEAREST TOWN	WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA	NEAREST TOWN	WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA	NEAREST TOWN
Alabama Creek 409-639-1879	Lufkin	Alazan Bayou 409-639-1879	Lufkin	Bannister 409-384-6894	Jasper
Big Lake Bottom 903-677-9588	Athens	Black Gap 915-837-3251	Alpine	Caddo Nat'l Grasslands 903-785-0482	Paris
Caddo Lake 903-757-9572	Longview	Gus Engeling 903-928-2251	Tennessee Colony	Sam Houston Nat'l Forest 409-327-8487	Livingston
Gene Howe 806-323-8642	Canadian	Matador 806-492-3405	Paducah	Moore Plantation 409-384-6894	Jasper
North Toledo Bend 409-639-1879	Lufkin	Old Sabine Bottom 903-566-1626	Tyler	Richland Creek 903-389-7080	Streetman

TIPS, POLICIES AND PROCEDURES:

- ★ In compliance with the Texas Animal Health Commission, all horses entering state parks must have written proof that they have tested negative for Coggins Disease. Form VS 10-11, less than 12 months old, is acceptable proof.
- ★ Call well ahead to make reservations; equestrian campsites often are limited and sometimes are booked months in advance.
- ★ Inquire about vehicle parking, as extremely large rigs might be difficult to accommodate.
- ★ Call to determine whether dogs or other non-equine pets are acceptable. Dogs are required to be on a leash no longer than six feet, and are not permitted to be led from horseback.
- ★ Check with parks in advance as to availability of corrals; some parks do not provide any horse enclosures on site.
- ★ A full set of shoes on all horses is recommended, as terrain may vary. Call ahead to inquire about the range of trail terrain.
- ★ Trail users are responsible for knowing and understanding the location of designated horse trails.
- ★ Horses may not be tethered to trees, shrubs or other park structures.
- ★ ASTM/SEI-approved protective headgear is strongly recommended for all riders.
- ★ Riders are advised to venture out in groups of two or more and always to ride single-file for safety.
- ★ Bring your own tether lines, feed, feed buckets and water buckets, even to parks designated as having potable water for horses.
- ★ For more information check the TPW Web site at www.tpwd.state.tx.us/park/admin/equest.htm.

Multicolored canyon walls provide a backdrop for riders at Palo Duro Canyon State Park, right. Hill Country State Natural Area, below, has 36 miles of trails.

ed rides. Day riders might consider lodging at Hotel Turkey, located about 10 miles east of the park in the town of Turkey. The hotel was built in the 1920s, and each of its 15 or so guest rooms is painstakingly furnished and decorated with period items — from claw-footed tubs to charmingly faded wallpaper.

Hill Country Rides

Equestrian campers who want it all — access to rugged as well as smooth trails, and camping that ranges from primitive to downright homelike — often choose Hill Country State Natural Area as their destination. Located 50 miles northwest of San Antonio in Bandera, the former Merrick Bar-O Ranch is 5,400 acres, with 36 miles of 23 designated, multi-use trails for horses, hikers and mountain bikers (four miles of those trails are solely designated for the former two). Terrain runs the gamut, from sandy creek bottoms to steep, rocky ascents of up to 1,900 feet (horseshoes recommended).



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During my Hill Country ride, a large group of endurance riders and their horses were conducting a competitive event within the natural area, their overnight-equipped rigs in abundance. All equestrian campsites were full, so I frequently encountered other horses and riders on the trails. I also spotted guided groups of rental-horse riders, walking through the more forgiving terrain of the natural area's lower meadows. My horse seemed to enjoy greeting new equine friends on the trail, and I know he liked the variety of surfaces and grades under his feet.

Discover the quintessential Hill Country experience at Hill Country State Natural Area, with terrain running the gamut from sandy creek bottoms to steep, rocky ascents and luxurious accommodations at the Ranch House.

Campers at the Hill Country area may choose from a wide range of overnight options. Across from park headquarters is the Bar-O Camp Area — a six-acre, generously shaded camping site that includes 14 10-foot by 10-foot portable stalls (open pens, actually), a water trough, wash area, fire rings, composting toilet and security light.

Nearby stables provide rental mounts for visitors to Caprock Canyons State Park, while horse owners can spend the night at the park's equestrian camping area.

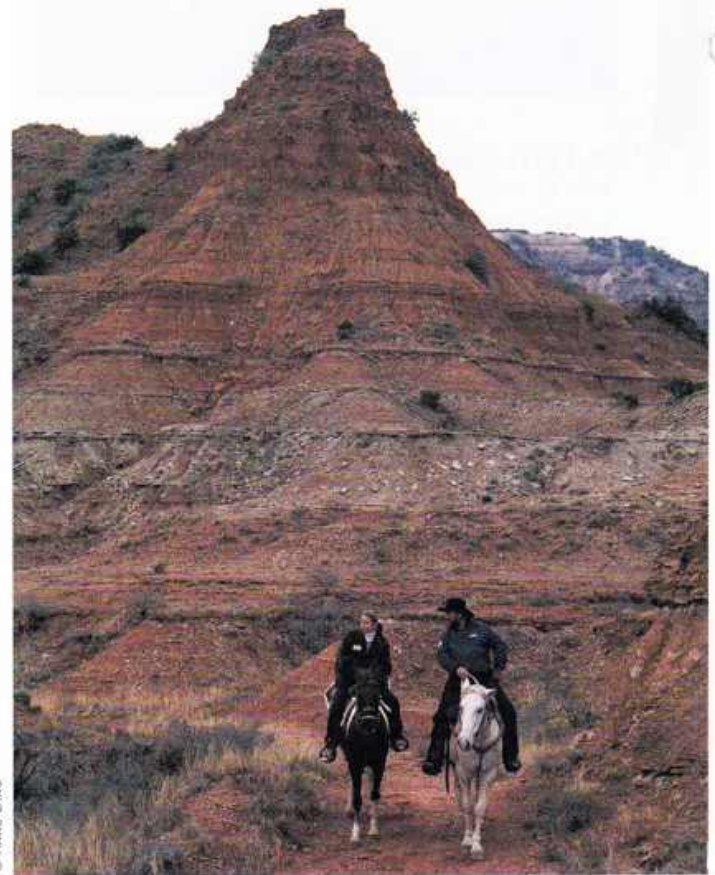
Also used as the day-parking area (there are scattered hitching posts for day-use riders), this section of the park can accommodate up to 25 rigs.

Just south of headquarters is Chapa's Group Camp Area, located on two shady acres and featuring a large barn with concrete floor and electricity. Up to 20 rigs can park in this area, which also includes water for horses, fire rings, picnic tables, three picket lines, 12 horse stalls and a bathroom in a nearby ranch house.

At the core of Hill Country's natural section, the Trailhead Equestrian Camp Area features five developed equestrian camping sites, with a capacity (at each) for six horses and people. There are picnic tables, fire rings, corrals, picket lines, water for horses, a chemical toilet and pull-through parking for rigs.

Arguably the most luxurious campsite at Hill Country is the Ranch House, which features a three-bedroom house that can sleep up to 12 people. The heated and air-conditioned house offers a bathroom, full kitchen, separate screened cooking shack with covered barbeque pit. Stalls and corrals for horses are nearby. Reservations are recommended, here as well as for Chapa's Camp.

At Hill Country, spring water is available for horses,



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but human campers must bring their own drinking water. There are several swimming holes in West Verde Creek with limited fishing available. Campers are advised to bring their own firewood because the cutting of standing timber is prohibited, and dead wood on the ground is scarce. Trash must be packed out for disposal, including all hay and animal byproducts. There are several horse rental companies in the area. For referrals, call the Bandera Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-800-364-3833.

For basic at-a-glance information on these and other Texas state parks and natural areas that allow equestrian camping, please see the table on page 38. Granted, preparations are more intensive when you plan to experience state parks from the saddle, but the pleasures — and the memories — are well worth it. ★

Horse owner ANNE LANG of Austin has written for numerous national equine publications.