

Partners in Palo Duro Canyon Foundation

Issue No.56

On the Edge!



Orange-crowned Warbler

Wildlife Viewing Area

**Photo by
Stacy Wilson**



**A Hidden Gem
By
Linda Durante**

Wildlife Viewing Areas (WVA) in the Texas Park System provide visitors with a unique experience to enjoy wildlife within an area that protects the wildlife provides learning opportunities for both young, and old alike, and serves special interest groups, such as photographers and bird watchers.

The WVA at Palo Duro Canyon State Park is no exception and is considered a hidden gem in the Texas Panhandle. The Palo Duro Canyon WVA is tucked behind the Trading Post, and a viewing blind is accessible by a path from the Trading Post parking lot.

The Palo Duro Canyon WVA was established in 2007 in an effort led by Bernice Blasingame who was The Park Interpreter at the time. Construction of the water feature and viewing blind was made possible by a grant from the Statewide Master Naturalist Program. A later addition to the

viewing blind were bird identification photographs.



**American Robin
Photo by
Kenny Munsell**

Over the last 18 years, change to the area was minimal; however the most significant changes came in the last two years as the aging water feature was replaced in 2023. Replacement of the water feature invigorated interest in the viewing area. More visitors returned to the area, and volunteer efforts to provide routine supplement feeding was made to ensure State requirements to discourage the presence of rodents and minimize the spread of disease.

On March 14, 2025, a windstorm with 70 mph winds swept through the area decimating junipers, hackberry trees and brush that provide valuable protective cover for wildlife. The sturdy viewing blind was not damaged by the windstorm; however, destruction of the protective cover required plans to restore vegetation in the area. TPWD and Partners in Palo Duro Canyon Foundation volunteers began working with local Park staff to propagate native plants in the area.

In late August, a proposal for a new water feature was presented to Partners' Board of Directors and funding was approved for the project. Construction of the water feature began in October, and, except for some fine tuning over the winter months, the water feature is complete.

Water flows over a low-profile water fall, and the sounds of a babbling brook attract wildlife and provide soothing sounds of nature for human visitors.. Birds enjoy bathing in the various pools of the feature. Along with songbirds, deer, raccoon, turkey, cotton rats and frogs enjoy the various benefits of the feature. A Coopers Hawk keeps close watch on the “offerings” as well.



Northern Flicker
Photo by
Karen Copeland



Brown Thrasher
Photo by
Linda Durante.



Juvenile White-crowned Sparrow
And
Fox Sparrow
Photo by
Karen Copeland

If you haven't yet experienced the hidden gem of the Texas Panhandle, known as well as the Palo Duro Canyon State Park Wildlife Viewing Area, what are you waiting for? It might just be the respite you seek from a busy world.





David Fischer
Park Superintendent

Running a state park is often compared to running a small city—one with residents that change every single day. And when the park happens to sit at the bottom of the second largest canyon in the United States, the challenges become even more complex. Palo Duro Canyon State Park encompasses just under 30,000 acres, but it lies within a much larger 120-mile-long canyon system carved by the Prairie Dog Town of the Red River. Managing this extreme landscape requires constant care, adaptability, and a deep respect for the forces that shape it.

This work directly supports the mission of Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPWD): to manage and conserve the natural and cultural resources of Texas and provide hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation opportunities for present and future generations. Palo Duro Canyon helps support this mission by stewarding the land and welcoming hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Park.

The Canyon is breathtaking, but it also changes quickly. Our main concern,

always, is public safety. Because the Park floor sits within an active watershed, conditions can shift fast, especially during heavy rain. Flash floods can threaten overnight campers and day-use visitors, and Park staff and Park police officers remain ready to respond at a moment's notice. Even storms outside the Park can send water rushing through the Canyon with little warning.

Flooding doesn't just affect Park visitors, but it impacts the Park itself. High water can cover Park roads, inundate campsites, and leave behind layers of sediment that blocks roads and impedes travel. The constant movement of the river is part of its natural character, but it also means we regularly see changes in the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River that alter how water moves through the Park.

Each significant rain event brings new maintenance challenges. Floods erode trails, wash away signage, and reshape creek crossings. We are very grateful to our dedicated trail team, a group of volunteers. We are able to get trails repaired and reopened faster than otherwise would be impossible. The hard work of the trail team keeps visitors exploring safely and helps protect fragile Canyon ecosystems.

Meanwhile, our infrastructure—roads, bridges, culverts, utilities, and campsites—also take a beating from the elements. Repairing and improving these facilities is a constant, and we're always looking for ways to build smarter and more sustainably.

One of the most exciting developments for Palo Duro Canyon State Park is the recent approval to begin a

comprehensive hydrology study. This long-awaited project will provide data and insights into how water moves through the Canyon and how we can better plan for future storms, flooding events, and infrastructural needs. The study won't just guide future engineering decisions; it will also support our upcoming riparian restoration project, helping us protect riverbanks, improve habitat, and strengthen the resilience of the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River.



Allison Barrett
Resource Manager

**Grazing for Restoration: How Cattle Help
Manage the Prairie at Palo Duro Canyon State
Park**

Today, Palo Duro Canyon State Park is known for its majestic canyon views, scenic trails, and opportunities for hiking, biking, and camping. Before it became a park the Canyon was part of the historic JA Ranch, one of the first ranching operations in the Texas Panhandle, founded by Charles Goodnight and John Adair in the mid-1800s.

But even before the first cattle arrived, these rugged canyons and open grasslands were shaped for millennia by fire and by the grazing of nomadic bison herds in a landscape unbroken by fences and roads.

Palo Duro Canyon lies along the eastern edge of the Southern High Plains where the Caprock Escarpment drops sharply into the Rolling Plains. Historically, this region was a vast mixed-grass prairie mottled with ephemeral playa wetlands. With the rise of new irrigation technologies in the early 1900s, much of this native prairie was converted into cropland and cultivated pastureland. Most of the irrigation drew from the Ogallala Aquifer, one of the largest freshwater aquifers in the world, which underlies almost the entirety of the Great Plains. For more than a century, it has supported agriculture across the region but has also been heavily depleted in many areas as groundwater withdrawal has outpaced natural recharge. Today, less than 20 percent of Texas's historic native grasslands remain. Where these remnants endure, decades of fire suppression and altered grazing patterns have shifted their plant communities toward woody species.

As Aldo Leopold famously wrote in *Game Management*, there are five tools of land stewardship: "the axe, cow, plow, fire, and gun." These tools remain essential, not only for wildlife management but also for maintaining healthy rangelands. The prairie landscape of the Southern High Plains evolved under regular cycles of fire and grazing disturbances that shaped a diverse and resilient ecosystem.

To restore and sustain these ecosystems today, modern land management

must mimic those natural processes. On the Southern High Plains, honey mesquite and redberry juniper have become dominant woody species, often targeted in rangeland management efforts due to their rapid expansion in the absence of fire and grazing. Both species are native to the region, but without these natural disturbances, they can become invasive and alter the grassland ecosystem.

Palo Duro Canyon has experienced this pattern of change. Decades of fire suppression and the loss of large grazers have allowed woody brush and invasive grasses to proliferate throughout the Park. While “Palo Duro” translates to “hardwood,” the abundance of woody plants today far exceeds historic levels. This encroachment has degraded rangeland health by reducing native plant diversity, decreasing forage availability for wildlife and livestock, and disrupting soil, carbon, and water cycles.

In the 1980s, Palo Duro Canyon State Park began using one of Aldo Leopold’s classic tools of land stewardship—the cow. By reintroducing carefully managed cattle grazing to the Park’s uplands, the Park took an important step toward restoring ecological balance. Grazing leases continue today as part of the Park’s habitat management program, helping to control brush, stimulate grass growth, and maintain mixed-grass prairie landscape that once defined the region.

To ensure that grazing supports rather than harms the landscape, Park staff conducted regular forage analysis and range assessments prior to cattle entering the lease in October and grazing through April. Forage samples are collected from

representative sites within grazing pastures to estimate available biomass, species composition, and nutritional quality. This data helps determine the proper stocking rate (the number of cattle the land can support without overgrazing) for each cattle lease. This management approach allows the Park to adjust timing, duration, and intensity of grazing based on current conditions.

The result of this work extends beyond the pasture fence. Managed grazing promotes a more diverse and resilient grassland structure and, in turn, also supports soil and water conservation. Deep-rooted native grasses slow runoff, hold soil in place, and allow more rainfall to soak into the ground, reducing erosion and improving infiltration.

The Ogallala Formation was deposited by ancient rivers as sediments eroded from the Rocky Mountains to the west. What took millions of years to create has been severely depleted by humans in little over a century. The Ogallala Aquifer will most likely not recover within our lifetimes, but conserving and restoring native grasslands helps slow further decline and protects the soils and water resources that remain.

At Palo Duro Canyon State Park, cattle grazing has become more than a historical footnote. It is a modern management practice rooted in science but guided by the past, working to restore the Canyon’s historic prairie landscape. Through partnership with local ranchers, regular monitoring, and a commitment to adaptive management, Park staff are helping to keep the land healthy and productive. In doing so, they continue a legacy that began with

Goodnight's herds more than century ago,
using cattle not just to work the land but to
help heal it.



Cows



Ann Coberley
A Poem

Nightfall

I watch
the canopy of night
lift from the eastern horizon
and spread west
where a golden sunset
still gilds grazing cattle
as they grunt and low
at the coming darkness,
then fold their legs
in acquiescence.

Birdsong fades with the light
and all creatures retreat
to guard their nests
from those who hunt
in the cover of darkness,
silent and still
as they watch from
the shadows
for predators who threaten
even in sunlight.





**Partners in
Palo Duro Canyon
Foundation
11450 Park Road 5
Canyon, TX 79015
806.488.2227**

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