

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2022



VTX1 Companies

# COMPASS

VOL. 3, NO. 1

## Feathered friends

Birdwatchers flock to South Texas

WYATT RANCHES

SCIENCE ADVENTURES





By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## An investment for the future

Expanded broadband access will lift rural communities

In order to thrive, all communities — especially those in rural America — require opportunities and the modern communications tools so vital for jobs, education, health and so much more.

Thanks to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the NTCA's nearly 850 rural, community-based broadband providers now have fresh help as they work to complete their essential mission. This historic investment will go a long way to connecting all Americans, even in areas of the country that are the hardest to reach for service providers.

Of course, the work now truly begins to deliver on the promise this law offers. The FCC must prioritize areas of the greatest need. Also, we will work with all key parties to support state leaders as an unprecedented amount of resources flow into their broadband initiatives.

Care is needed to vet those seeking funding, to ensure they can truly supply the infrastructure and services they promise. Throughout the effort, we must remember that we need to do more than simply build networks. Our commitment must also be to sustain these vital communications systems and to ensure the services offered over them are affordable and will meet customer demands well into the future.

We're confident NTCA members will continue to serve their neighbors by solidifying existing networks and expanding service. No matter where they live, all Americans should have the same opportunity to access vital communications services needed not only today, but also for years to come. 📡

# Communication at the speed of light

*Fiber optics make it possible*

At the end of the 1970s, Corning Inc. developed a technology that would reshape communications — fiber optics. Today, it's a critical component in the networks making our hyperconnected world possible. Streaming entertainment, social media, video calls, telehealth, online education, work-from-home jobs and so much more depend on this technology.

## ▶▶ DID YOU KNOW?

- Each fiber strand is made up of a glass core thinner than a human hair.
- Light signals are transmitted through the glass, just as you might send a signal down the tunnel.
- To keep the light from simply passing through the glass when it changes direction, the core is surrounded by a cladding that reflects light back into the glass.
- The process is similar to mirrors in a tunnel, bouncing the signal from side to side until it reaches its endpoint.
- A single fiber cable — each fiber is much thinner than copper wire — can bundle hundreds, or even thousands, of fiber strands.
- While incredibly thin, fiber is not brittle. A single strand is three times stronger than steel and more durable than copper.
- The glass core of a fiber cable is so pure that if the ocean was made of the same glass, you could stand on the surface and clearly see the ocean floor miles below. 📡





# Take a **STAND!**

Avoid back and neck pain while working from home

Over the past couple of years, working from home has gone from a perk — one that only a few employers offered — to the norm for many. The benefits for employees range from having your dog as a co-worker to adding pajama pants to the professional wardrobe. But working from home can also come with hazards.

Whether you're camped out at a kitchen table, sprawled across the couch or luxuriating in bed all day, odds are your home setup isn't as ergonomic as that of an office. This may not be a big deal when you're working from home for short periods. But when those workdays add up to weeks or even months, poor posture and sedentary behavior can create serious back and neck pain.

The good news is that with the right furniture and a little daily activity, it's easy to strike a healthy balance with your work-from-home routine.

## ► GET ON YOUR FEET

Most people tend to hunch forward while sitting, which can put a lot of pressure on your lower back. Standing and

looking at a monitor at eye level, on the other hand, puts little strain on your neck and back, while also burning more calories than sitting.

That said, it isn't comfortable to stand for hours at a time. That's why the UPLIFT Standing Desk V2 is a good option for any remote office. The design enhances durability and comfort, and easy height adjustment encourages users to keep moving without settling into any position for too long.

## ► LOOK FOR SUPPORT

When you do decide to take a seat, getting the proper support can make a big difference. If you don't have an office chair, try putting a small pillow behind your lower back to maintain an arched posture. This practice will help put your upper body weight on the chair instead of your spine.

If you're ready to invest in a new chair, the Steelcase Gesture has been Wirecutter's pick for more than five years. However, if you're looking to spend less, the HON Ignition 2.0 is a more affordable option that makes few sacrifices in comfort.

## ► STAY ACTIVE

It's a good idea to take breaks throughout the day to move around and get the blood circulating. While you're at it, try some simple exercises like backbends, hamstring stretches and planks that can help strengthen your core and provide additional support for your lower back.

If you're looking for a guided workout, the Seven Home Workout app offers a wide variety of seven-minute routines that you can squeeze into a busy day. Or explore the Yoga Studio app to unwind with yoga classes for all levels of experience and guided meditations that take as few as five minutes.

## ► MOVE AROUND

Time can get away from you during a busy workday, so it always helps to have a reminder when it's time to take a break. If you have an Apple Watch, you set the frequency of these reminders in the Activity app. For everyone else, apps like Stand Up! will schedule notifications throughout your workday to get up and move around. The Wakeout app will even suggest quick exercises for every room of the house. 🏠

# Are you ready for the high-tech fast lane?

We're here to help you navigate the upcoming year

**H**appy New Year! From everyone at VTX1 Companies, we hope your 2022 is off to a great start. After a season of celebration, the new year gives us a welcome break from weeks of holiday hustle and bustle. Now is a good time to pause and contemplate what's ahead, whether that's an upcoming vacation, a new job, or a major milestone.



**DAVE OSBORN**  
Chief Executive Officer

All that potential can be a little daunting. When looking forward, I often find it helpful to look back and appreciate the road that brought us to where we are today. The rapid evolution of the communication industry is a great place to start. Consider the internet. Fifty years ago, only researchers had an idea of the first inkling of what was to come of the worldwide web. A few years down the road in 1971, researcher Ray Tomlinson sent the world's first email to himself using ARPANET, a network of computers linked by phone lines to help Pentagon-funded research stations communicate.

Just a decade later, companies like Apple and Microsoft were already leading the personal computer revolution that put desktops in homes and offices. By 1992, people were

receiving the first of many AOL software CDs. The peculiar squawk of computer modems soon filled homes as people used dial-up internet to connect to email and online message boards.

Nineteen years ago, the internet became a social space with the launch of Friendster, a precursor to Facebook. Social networks would not become fixtures on phones and mobile devices until the arrival of the iPhone in 2007 and the iPad three years later. Even then, the ability to bring medical expertise home with telehealth, take college-level classes from your couch or stream high-quality movies, music, and TV shows — things we can take for granted today — would have seemed far-fetched.

In just five decades, we have seen online technology grow from computers that could only send a few characters of text into being epicenter of a deeply interconnected world. At VTX1 Companies, we're proud to be a part of that story, because we have seen first-hand how the service, we provide benefits lives and connects communities.

As you look ahead to the many possibilities a new year brings, take a moment to consider how far we've come. From staying connected with distant friends on social media to planning your next big adventure. How many of your goals wouldn't even be possible without fast, reliable internet service? How much longer would they have taken you to achieve?

Ponder this, what innovation will be the next to transform our lives? I don't expect the pace of innovation to slow down, which is why we'll be here to make sure your connections are always up to speed. Here's to a wonderful 2022 as we all keep our eyes on the road ahead.

Dave Osborn  
CEO, VTX1 Companies



VTX1 Companies

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**Hours of Operation:**

- Business Offices:  
Mon.-Fri. • 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
- Customer Service:  
Mon.-Fri. • 8 a.m.-7 p.m.
- Technical Support:  
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On the Cover:



John Kaye, a local birder, keeps a record of all the species he identifies for the Bentsen State Park records.  
*See story Page 12.*



## YOUTH TOUR

Valley Telephone Cooperative, Inc. is sponsoring one student's attendance to The Foundation for Rural Service Youth Tour of Washington, D.C., from June 1-5. This tour gives participants a front-row seat to the telecommunications industry, the legislative process, the Federal Communications Commission and more. Historic sites will be visited, including the Washington Monument, the Smithsonian and the U.S. Capitol. Eligibility is restricted to VTCL member families, and other requirements must be met. For more information, contact Carmen Kolenda at 956-642-1133 or by email at [carmen.kolenda@vtx1.net](mailto:carmen.kolenda@vtx1.net). The application deadline is Friday, March 18. All students and chaperones on the tour will be required to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination.

We are pleased to announce that our Valley Telephone Cooperative, Inc. annual and member meetings are returning from a virtual to an in-person format in 2022! It will be so nice to see our members in their communities again and to celebrate together the cooperative's 70 Years of dedicated service to our members. We look forward to sharing a meal and updating you on the latest cooperative news. Be on the lookout for mail correspondence from us to RSVP for the meeting closest to your exchange area. We look forward to seeing you soon!

# SAVE THE DATE

**San Isidro Member Meeting:** March 12

**Hebbroville Member Meeting:** March 19

**Tilden Member Meeting:** March 26

**Raymondville Annual Meeting:** March 29

*Attention  
seniors!*



It's hard to believe that it's time for high school seniors to complete scholarship applications that can help fund their future education! Current Valley Telephone Cooperative members with a high school senior in their family are eligible to apply. Be on the lookout for more details soon to come on how to apply for the \$3,000 yearly scholarship at [vtx1.net](http://vtx1.net).

## LIFELINE SERVICE

LIFELINE IS A FEDERAL PROGRAM TO HELP LOW-INCOME AMERICANS PAY FOR PHONE OR BROADBAND SERVICE.

You are eligible for Lifeline benefits if you qualify for and receive one of the following benefits:

- SNAP
- Medicaid
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Federal Public Housing Assistance
- VA Veterans Pension or Survivors Pension

Additionally, consumers at or below 135% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines will continue to be eligible for a Lifeline program benefit. (State determinations of income will no longer be accepted.)

Check with the VTX1 Companies Customer Service Team for information about benefits that may be available to you. To find out whether you qualify for Lifeline assistance, please visit [lifelinesupport.org](http://lifelinesupport.org).

Note: VTX1 Companies is not responsible for determining who qualifies for these programs or who receives assistance. Consumers must meet specific criteria in order to obtain assistance, and qualifying is dependent upon government-established guidelines.

# Destinations of discovery

Journeys of exploration and education

Story by ANNE BRALY

You're on vacation, and you've planned so many things — where to stay, where to eat, what to pack. You think you've done everything in advance to ensure a great holiday. But then, it happens. You're only into your second day of vacation and your child is saying, "I'm bored." A little extra planning might just prevent this pitfall, and you can treat the kids to a day of adventure while providing them an education in the earth sciences and state history.

Everything's big in Texas, and so were the Columbian mammoths that roamed the landscape more than 400,000 years ago. They stood as tall as 14 feet and weighed about 20,000 pounds. All that remains today, though, are the fossil records they left behind, and at Waco Mammoth National Monument, you can see those remnants up close and personal.

Tour guides will lead you from the Welcome Center down a 300-yard paved path to the Dig Shelter and the mammoth fossils. They are only partially uncovered and still in their original position within the bone bed. During your tour, you will learn about the Ice Age, how the fossils were discovered, and the differences between dinosaurs and mammoths. "Mammoths were not dinosaurs," says site director Raegan King. "The tour can teach kids about the difference between dinosaurs and animals from the Ice Age. They get a crash course in paleontology."

But, she adds, kids also learn about the importance of park stewardship — leaving no trace behind. "It's important for kids to learn about cleaning up and leaving things just as they found them," King says.

Research is ongoing at Waco Mammoth National Monument with finds that many paleontologists consider among the most important in North America. Scientists have unearthed a treasure trove of fossils, including the only known nursery herd — mothers and their young — in North America. The bones currently lie in storage at nearby Mayborn Museum, a natural science and cultural history museum at Baylor University.



The Waco Mammoth National Monument offers an exploration of creatures that lived more than 400,000 years ago. Their legacy is told through fossil records and displays that include the bones of mammoths and a saber-tooth tiger. Also, miles of trails add to the adventure.

But visitors to the national monument can see the bones of an adult male mammoth and an adult female, as well as the bones of a saber-tooth tiger, a camel and remnants of four other mammoths in the bone bed at the dig site. It's a unique experience that gives people a different perspective on paleontology. Rather than see a replica of a mammoth in a museum or one reconstructed from partial bones, viewers can walk along a suspended walkway and look into the bone pit where paleontologists have left the bones of the Ice Age animals as they found them — still in the ground and only partially uncovered.

“It gives the public a better idea of how paleontology works,” King says. “Seeing them in the ground lets people learn something about the environment in which the mammoths lived and interacted with the ecosystem.” Mammoths lived across North America during the Ice Age, but there's something about this area in the north-central region of Texas — its air, water and soil, which, combined, made the perfect recipe for preserving the skeletons. Paleontologists working at Waco Mammoth National Monument know there are more fossils underground. In fact, they know where they are, King says. At this time, though, they choose to



Photos courtesy of the Waco Parks and Recreation Department.

leave them in place because as soon as they leave the ground, the fossils begin to disintegrate, and valuable information goes with them.

In addition to the bone pit, there are miles of trails to explore around the park with its plethora of birds, butterflies, bugs and plants. Kids can join the Junior Ranger Program and look for specific things around the site. They'll get a booklet asking questions about what they see and when they return it, they'll get a Junior Ranger badge. There's also a mock dig pit that lets kids search for replica fossils and leave them in place just like paleontologists.

Bring your own food and drink — there are no dining facilities at the site — and have a picnic on the grounds.

Guided tours take place every 30 minutes, so just show up and join the fun — no reservation needed. Tours last from 45 minutes to one hour. For more information, log on to [nps.gov/waco](https://nps.gov/waco). 📱

## Finding the fun-damentals

Entertaining kids while traveling isn't easy. But there are places just a smidge off the beaten track, outside the glitz and glamour of big cities, that will spark your child's interest. Here are some ideas for taking kids around the Lone Star State that bring into focus history and science in fun and interesting ways. They'll be having so much fun, they may not realize they're learning in the process.

### Heard Natural Science Museum McKinney, Texas

The museum features exhibits of natural history: fossils, archaeology, rocks and minerals, plants — close to 150 species of wildflowers alone — and native animals — more than 240 species that live around the 289-acre wildlife sanctuary. Stroll along the boardwalk that snakes its way through 50 acres of wetlands, or see the grounds from a different perspective — a challenging ropes course that traverses the Texas canopy. For more information, log onto [heardmuseum.org](https://heardmuseum.org).

### Texas Through Time Hillsboro, Texas

Discover Texas' interesting and diverse fossil history from the Ediacaran Period more than 600 million years ago all the way up to the Holocene Epoch — our current geological time period. Many museums exhibit replicas. Not so Texas Through Time. The museum works hard to feature as many real specimens as possible for a more authentic experience. The collection includes paleontological finds from around the world, but its main goal is to highlight those from Texas. With several hands-on exhibits as well as a fossil "dig" box for kids that allows them to take home the fossils they find, this makes for a great day for budding archaeologists. Admission is free to all. For more information, visit [texasthroughtime.org](https://texasthroughtime.org).



# ‘Steward of the land’

Wyatt Ranches makes a commitment to its communities

Story by LUIS CARRASCO

One recent Tuesday morning, Bradford A. “Brad” Wyatt was the calm at the center of a storm. Several issues demanded his attention, and the Wyatt Ranches administrator ably fielded multiple phone calls while answering questions emanating from a two-way radio. “When you’re a steward of the land, it’s always something,” he says.

Started by Brad’s father, Oscar Wyatt Jr., in 1965, Wyatt Ranches has always focused first on being a successful commercial and specialty cattle operation. But spread across six divisions in South and West Texas, the company also hosts a cross section of Lone Star industries, including gas and petroleum leases, recreational leases for hunting, mining operations and green energy tenants.

“When you take large, vast amounts of acreage and you combine that with wildlife, human interactions, oil and gas, our animal units grazing, recreational hunters ... you always have to be prepared,” Brad says.

## THE RIGHT STUFF

Part of that preparation includes having the right people. It’s not just Brad who must remain alert and in control. Wyatt Ranches’ operations are like a machine with a lot of moving parts. If any of them falter, it can set off a domino effect and gum up the works. But Brad says the operation is fortunate to have dedicated team members.

“We’re blessed to have people who have worked for the Ranches for 30 years,” he

says. “We’re blessed to have some really loyal associates, but it does take a lot of discipline to work here.”

Take cattle roundups, for example. While they have changed since the ’60s — nowadays it’s fewer vaqueros and more helicopters — they still require commitment, flexibility and attention to safety. “We have a spring roundup, which always turns into a summer roundup. Nothing ever happens on time,” Brad laughs. “And then, we have a fall roundup, and it always turns into a winter roundup.”

In years past, 20 riders would start on one end of a pasture and move cattle toward the corrals. Once they gathered the animals, they processed the cattle using basic recordkeeping in ledger books. Today, roundups require fewer



Left: A charming gatehouse awaits visitors at the main entrance to Wyatt Ranches' Los Robles Division in Nueces County.

Below left: Although technology is now a part of cattle roundups, vaqueros play a vital role.

Below: Established in South Texas in the 1960s, Wyatt Ranches also owns and operates ranches in Colorado and West Texas.

riders. Modern feeding and air support techniques make the gathering process easier, and workers use computers and chips — powered by VTX1's fast and reliable broadband service — to track the livestock.

But even with all that technology, there are still some stubborn stragglers. "When we have errant animal units we can't gather, we call for the Ranches' helicopters from Weslaco," Brad says.

The benefits VTX1's service provides for the ranches extend far beyond seasonal roundups. "VTX1 plays a critical support role at Wyatt Ranches, providing us with multiple telephone lines, wired and wireless internet services, CCTV surveillance support and so much more. Also, their service is beyond reproach," Brad says. "We are proud of our long-term relationship with this IT and telecommunications provider."

Wyatt Ranches makes sure to take care of its employees, whom the company refers to as associates, mostly promoting from within and helping them grow along with the business. This emphasis is even reflected in the slogan emblazoned on the ranch truck fleet: "Nuestro orgullo es nuestra gente," which translates to "Our pride is our people."

Brad says Wyatt Ranches goes above and beyond for its associates — in the good times of their lives and also when an associate is faced with a dire personal challenge. That caretaker philosophy has served the Ranches well, and it extends to the greater community.

## GIVING BACK

The Wyatt Ranches Foundation



strives to engage with and give back to the communities that have helped the company succeed. Within the past five years, the foundation's board has renewed its focus to ensure any grants or donations enhance the lives of people living in rural South and West Texas.

"We still make contributions to, say, Memorial Hermann Health System in Houston for a training ambulance, but as part of the grant, that ambulance must come to South Texas and train medics," Brad says.

Awarding foundation funds is a very hands-on process for Brad and the other board members. Applicants send letters outlining their requests to the foundation's president, Billy Wells, and the entire board reviews the requests during quarterly meetings. The board then asks applicants of selected requests to send a representative to give a presentation. "The board will then vote and make the award right then while the recipient waits," Brad says.

Over the years, grants and donations have gone to educational agencies, fire departments, emergency medical service providers, law enforcement, animal welfare organizations and parks and recreation departments. The foundation's latest disclosure filings for fiscal year 2019



Photos courtesy of Wyatt Ranches

show charitable disbursements of more than \$2 million.

Donations the foundation gave in 2021 include \$200,000 to the city of Agua Dulce to support the City Marshal's Office and another \$100,000 for an improved gateway at the San Diego Independent School District's athletic complex. The foundation also awarded \$87,000 to the Catholic Church in San Isidro, \$50,000 each to a homeless shelter in Rio Grande City and the Hidalgo County Sheriff's Foundation, \$190,000 for a new fire truck to fight brush fires in Blunzter, and \$137,000 to the Alice Police Department for new patrol cars. "The Ranches Foundation is something that all of us are very proud of," Brad says.

## MOVING FORWARD

Wyatt Ranches is one of the few remaining large cattle ranching operations in Texas. About 70% of cattle comes from smaller producers now, leaving commercial cattle ranches a dying breed. "It's very difficult to find vaqueros. It's difficult to find people who are interested in being in a rural setting and working in intense heat," Brad says.

Still, he expects the group of ranches to continue operating for a long time, not only providing the Wagyu crossbred and Brangus cattle they are known for but also supporting the foundation's efforts and being responsible guardians of the land. "In the end, everything must coexist," he says. 🗨️

# Locator apps

Connected for safety and security

With the help of a locator app on a mobile phone, parents can be aware of just about anywhere their family members roam — assuming families have reviewed and accepted the app's policies.

While some might find this concept intrusive, these apps can be helpful for busy schedules or a comfort during troubling times, late nights or long trips. Here are a few of the top locator apps on the market and what they can do.

## >> Life360

The premium version of Life360 can tell you where your family members' phones are at any given moment. Notifications

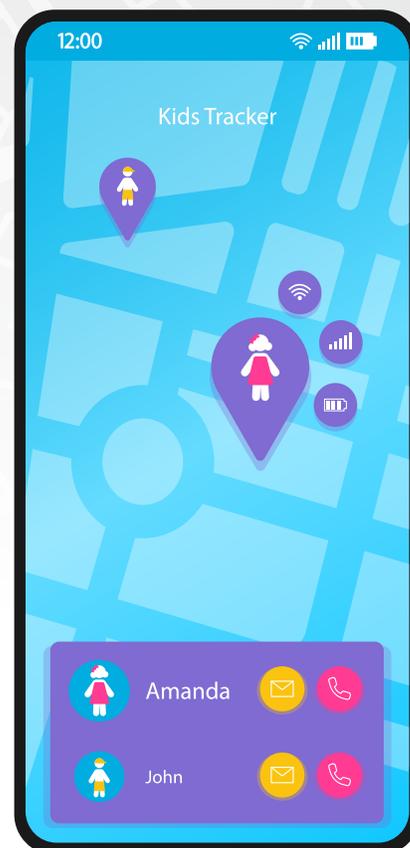
about events like a child arriving at school are easy to receive.

## >> Glympse

The free Glympse app lets friends and loved ones know your travel status, so you never have to worry if you're running late. They'll know. Users can send a Glympse alert to anyone with a web-enabled device.

## >> iSharing

Know where your friend or family member is at any moment. The iSharing app provides real-time alerts when someone leaves home, work or school. In-app messaging is just one of the features, some of which are only available in the premium version. 



## Money wise

Financial education with digital tools

Fewer than half of U.S. states require students to complete personal finance education, although there have been recent efforts in many states to focus on this form of education.

There is, however, a wealth of online resources and apps to help parents teach children to safely navigate the financial seas. Here are a few of the sites and apps available to parents looking to teach their kids real-world money lessons:

### CONSUMER FINANCIAL PROTECTION BUREAU

The role of the CFPB, which Congress established in 2010, is to hold financial institutions accountable for following federal financial laws and to protect and educate consumers.

The bureau's website, [consumerfinance.gov](http://consumerfinance.gov), has a section dedicated to youth financial literacy and offers more than 200 educational activities designed for kids of all ages. The list of topics is extensive and includes entrepreneurship, budgeting, managing credit and preventing fraud and identity theft.

### FAMZOO

FamZoo is a comprehensive finance app for families. It creates a virtual family bank with parents in the banker's seat. Through the app, parents can pay their children's allowances, track their spending and savings and even encourage charitable giving.

FamZoo isn't free — the cost ranges between \$2.50 and \$5.99 a month depending on which option you choose. One- and two-month free trials are available at [famzoo.com](http://famzoo.com).

### GOHENRY

GoHenry, aimed at kids as young as 6 years old, provides parents with a prepaid debit card for their children and an app the whole family can use to keep track of spending, savings and progress toward financial goals.

GoHenry offers a one-month free trial, after which, the service charges a monthly fee of \$3.99 per child. For more information, visit [gohenry.com](http://gohenry.com). 

# Which MUSIC STREAMING SERVICE is right for you?



It's never been easier to discover a new favorite band or find that hidden gem of a song you can't stop playing on repeat. A wealth of music streaming apps boast exhaustive libraries, classic hits and new buried treasures all at your fingertips. Whether you're looking for crystal clear audio, curated playlists or a soundtrack to keep up with your runs, there's something for everyone if you know where to look.

## SPOTIFY

Spotify is synonymous with music streaming for a reason. Its interface is easy to navigate and always has new recommendations based on what you're already listening to. If you have friends on the service, you can share your listening activity and see what others are playing from Spotify's library of 70 million tracks. Audio quality, on the other hand, varies based on your account. Free users can stream at decent qualities if they're listening on standard headphones or a Bluetooth speaker. Premium users can stream at higher quality for \$10 a month, and Spotify has announced plans to roll out a hi-fi tier with lossless audio quality in the future.

## APPLE MUSIC

Apple Music's social options are similar to what you'll find on Spotify, even if there are fewer curated options for discovering new favorites. But the real selling point is audio quality.

Audiophiles can enjoy lossless tracks at the base tier of \$10 a month with about 20 million tracks currently available at the highest quality. Apple says the rest of its 70 million-plus track library will be available in that format by the end of the year.

## TIDAL

TIDAL used to have the crown when it came to lossless audio, but at \$20 a month it's now a tough sell against other more affordable options. If you can't wait for Apple Music to update its library, TIDAL's catalog is already fully available in lossless format, with a few even streaming at "Master" quality up to 9,216 Kbps. And while TIDAL may have made its name with major hip-hop artists, the genres available now are about as diverse as other top streaming apps.

## AMAZON MUSIC

The biggest benefit of Amazon's music service is that it's already available to anyone with a Prime subscription. But that may not get you as much as you think. Despite having access to more than 75 million tracks, ad-free tier users may notice certain albums and artists are off-limits without a paid subscription. At least that buys you access to lossless audio, but if you're looking for easy access and discoverability, there are probably better options. 📱

## WHAT IS LOSSLESS AUDIO?

Most music streaming services compress audio files to save space. That means some data has to be discarded, and audio quality suffers. Lossless audio still compresses these files but retains all the details of the original audio recording. You can hear the difference most often in frequencies like those from the crash of a cymbal in a rock song or the bass of a hip-hop track.

Higher-quality audio tracks are also much larger than lossy audio formats. So make sure you have the necessary data coverage if you're streaming on the go and adequate bandwidth if you're listening over the internet at home.

# Flocking to South Texas

## World Birding Center sites draw visitors by the thousands

Story by ANDREA AGARDY



Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park is a must-see destination for birders like River Rivera.



The only place in the U.S. to see some bird species — like this Ani — is the southern tip of Texas.

With the Rio Grande and the Gulf of Mexico as bookends, and lying smack-dab in the path of two migratory flyways, South Texas is a bird-watcher's bonanza.

"We're at 531 species just in Hidalgo, Cameron, Starr and Willacy counties," says Roy Rodriguez, lead park interpreter at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park in Mission. "We have about 20 or so species that are found nowhere else in the country. South Texas is the only place in the U.S. you'll find the Plain Chachalaca. It's a big, loud and raucous bird. They'll put on a nice show if you get to see them."

Communities throughout the Rio Grande Valley now promote themselves

as birding destinations, offering visitors unique bird-watching experiences that also feather the nest of the local economy.

### WORLD BIRDING CENTER

Scattered throughout The Valley are nine World Birding Center sites, the result of partnerships between Texas Parks & Wildlife, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and individual municipalities. The original site at Bentsen is the center's headquarters. Each location has an on-site manager who understands habitat, ecology and environmental education.

Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park includes 8 miles of hiking and biking

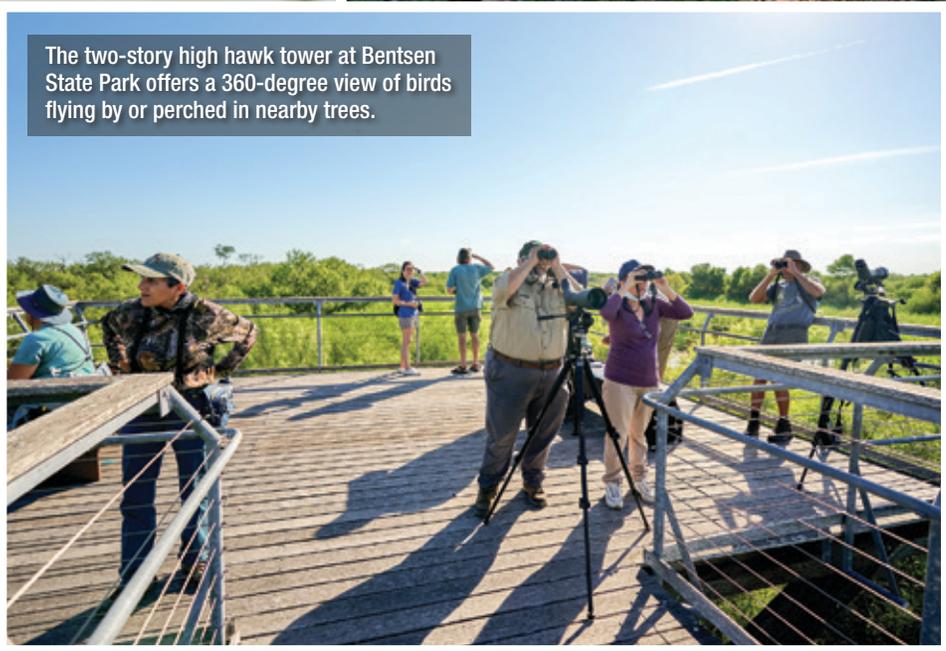
trails perfect for bird-watching. There's also a two-story-high hawk tower and bird feeders scattered throughout the 800 acres, along with two photo blinds where shutterbugs can get close-up snapshots of their feathered friends.

Whether he's teaching elementary schoolers about migratory patterns or leading a group of winter Texans on a bird walk, Roy enjoys working with people at the Bentsen site. "The people are what birding is all about, really," he says. "It's about people taking on the role of stewards. It's about people working with other people to share and mentor. We're really lucky to be able to do this kind of work."

For Roy, the real value of the World Birding Center isn't in its buildings or exhibits. "The real value has been the environmental educational aspect," he



A plain chachalaca runs from the cover of the brush.



The two-story high hawk tower at Bentsen State Park offers a 360-degree view of birds flying by or perched in nearby trees.

DAVID PIKE



says. “We see now that the families are camping, doing photography, the kids create their own birding and science clubs at school, and all the schools have their own recycling centers. There’s a payoff to some of this stuff when we’re talking about connecting the public to resources.”

### BIG BUSINESS

That payoff doesn’t come just in the form of environmental awareness and conservation efforts. There are economic benefits, as well. Texas A&M University-Kingsville has been surveying visitors for years, compiling a wealth of demographic information about them. “What they’re finding out is people are spending \$450 million a year and dumping that money into the economy down here,” Roy says. “These are not anglers or hunters. This is just from birders.”

With that kind of money on the table from typically low-maintenance and conscientious tourists, local businesses responded. For example, many restaurants and hotels cater specifically to birders who are, fittingly, early risers. They often offer breakfast a few hours earlier than they might otherwise. “The tourists are spending an average of \$400-\$500 a day, and they’re going to give themselves a few days,” Roy says. “They fly in, they rent a car and get a hotel. They’re eating at the restaurants and going to the Walmart.”

Every fall, the area welcomes hundreds of visitors to the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival, a five-day event featuring speakers, a trade show, more than 100 guided field trips and more. “This is a big one,” Roy says. “It’s the No. 2 festival in the country. They have to fly in 40 guides from around the country to keep up with the tours.”

### GETTING STARTED

Luckily for fledgling birders, there’s not a lot of equipment or special skills

necessary to get started. Most of what you’ll need — a hat, bug spray, a water bottle and comfortable shoes — you probably already have in the house. Grab a pair of binoculars and a bird book or birding app, and you’re ready to go.

“Birds are easy,” Roy says. “They’re always there, and you don’t really need to go anywhere. You can look at them outside your window at work. You can go birding with Grandma, you can do it from a wheelchair, you can do it with the kids. This is one of the few pastimes that offers itself up to everyone at all ages and all abilities. That’s the beauty of the whole thing. As long as you can get yourself to where the birds are, you’ll see the birds.”

Birding has also gone digital, with many apps and websites available to help birders keep a record of every species they see and to share information with others. These include eBird, an international database developed by Cornell University that encourages birders to become citizen scientists by submitting their findings and sharing details.

“Today, the tools for birders — from binoculars to apps that help you ID them — they’re phenomenal,” Roy says. “When I started out, you carried a cassette player with you to record the bird, but now, your phone does everything for you.” 📱

- » To learn more about Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, go to [tpwd.texas.gov](http://tpwd.texas.gov) and click the “Find a Park” button. You can also follow the park on Facebook: @BentsenRioGrandeValleyStatePark.
- » For more on World Birding Center, visit [theworldbirdingcenter.com](http://theworldbirdingcenter.com).

# ROUX the day

It's a given that pretty much everything is improved by the addition of a sauce. That's why we put mustard on hot dogs and ketchup on fries. Good sauces cling to food, which means they need body.

There are many ways to achieve this, including making a roux, the foundation for wonderful sauces for meats, fish, poultry and vegetables. But it's also the beginning of many pots of gumbo, and roux is the underpinning for unbelievably creamy Creole dishes.

Roux is nothing more than equal parts of butter or oil and flour. The addition of warm liquid, whether water, stock or milk, works to swell the small granules of flour, which trap the liquid to thicken the roux. Careful though — one of the most important things to remember when making a roux is to avoid adding the flour to a hot liquid. The result is something every cook dreads: a lumpy sauce.

In French cuisine, roux is cooked to one of three stages: white, blond or brown. In New Orleans, where roux is the beginning

of so many dishes, roux becomes a chameleon. It can change from brown to red and to black. The longer the roux cooks, the darker and more intensely flavored it gets.

Cooking the roux has two main benefits. First, it gets rid of the raw, starchy flavor of the flour. Second — and this is with darker roux — it adds color to a dish. White and blond roux are used for light-colored sauces, such as cheese sauce and bechamel. Brown roux is used for darker sauces, such as stews and gravies.

Here is a recipe for basic roux. Add milk and shredded cheese for a lovely cheese sauce for vegetables. Or, use roux as the foundation for gumbo or mac and cheese. It's a versatile concoction that's an important step in making so many good foods.



FOOD EDITOR  
**ANNE P. BRALY**  
IS A NATIVE OF  
CHATTANOOGA,  
TENNESSEE.



## BASIC ROUX

- 1 stick (8 tablespoons)  
unsalted butter or 1/2 cup  
peanut oil
- 1/2 cup flour

In a large pot or skillet, warm the butter or peanut oil to medium heat and then stir in the flour. Cook for 10 minutes, constantly stirring, to make a lightly browned roux, or continue stirring and cooking for up to 30 minutes for a dark roux. The roux will darken as you stir, from very light brown to copper or peanut butter brown, then to light chocolate brown, then dark chocolate brown and then very, very dark brown.



## SEAFOOD GUMBO

- 1 recipe basic roux (dark brown)

### Vegetables:

- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 cup chopped celery
- 1 cup chopped green onions
- 1 green bell pepper, chopped

### Tomato sauce:

- 6 cups water
- 1 (8-ounce) can tomato sauce
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 teaspoons salt, or to taste
- 1 teaspoon hot pepper sauce, or to taste

- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme

### Seafood and okra:

- 1 pound fresh or frozen chopped okra
- 1 pound white fish such as catfish, cut into 2-inch pieces
- 1 1/2 pounds peeled and deveined shrimp

### Final seasonings:

- 1 tablespoon gumbo file powder, or to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon salt, or to taste

In a large pot, make a basic roux, allowing it to cook to a dark brown stage.

In a separate skillet, melt the tablespoon of butter over medium heat. Add and stir the celery, green onions and bell pepper, cooking until tender, about 10 minutes. Add the cooked vegetables to the pot with the roux.

Stir the water, tomato sauce, Worcestershire sauce, garlic, salt, hot pepper sauce and thyme into the vegetable mixture. Bring the mixture to a gentle boil, reduce heat to medium low and simmer for 1 hour.

Stir okra into the vegetable mixture and cook it until tender, about 15 minutes. Add the fish, stir gently, and cook it until the flesh is easily flaked with a fork, about 5 minutes. Gently stir shrimp into the mixture and cook until the shrimp are bright pink, about 3 minutes. Season with the file powder and more salt; stir. Makes about 8 servings.



©Mark Gilliland



## THREE-CHEESE MAC AND CHEESE With Bechamel Sauce

- 1/3 cup butter
- 1 shallot, finely chopped
- 3 cloves garlic minced
- 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 1/2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 2+ cups whole milk
- 1 cup heavy whipping cream
- 1/4 teaspoon white pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1/8 teaspoon dry mustard, preferably Colman's
- 8 ounces Gruyere cheese, shredded
- 6 ounces sharp white cheddar cheese, shredded
- 2 ounces Monterey Jack cheese, shredded
- 1/2 tablespoon salt
- 2 pounds macaroni, cooked

Melt the butter and saute the shallot, then whisk in the flour and cornstarch to a thick paste. This is your roux. Cook the roux on medium-low heat until it is light brown. Add the milk and cream and cook it, stirring, until the sauce comes to a simmer. Remove from heat and keep stirring about 4 minutes. The sauce will thicken as it cools. This is your bechamel sauce.

To the sauce, add and stir in the white pepper, cayenne pepper and dry mustard. Test the temperature with your finger. If it's too hot to touch, let it cool longer. If it's just uncomfortably warm, it's the perfect time to add the cheeses in stages, stirring constantly. Add extra milk if it's too thick. Taste the sauce, and add salt if it's needed. Pour the sauce over the cooked and drained pasta and stir. Serve immediately. Makes 12-14 servings. 🍴





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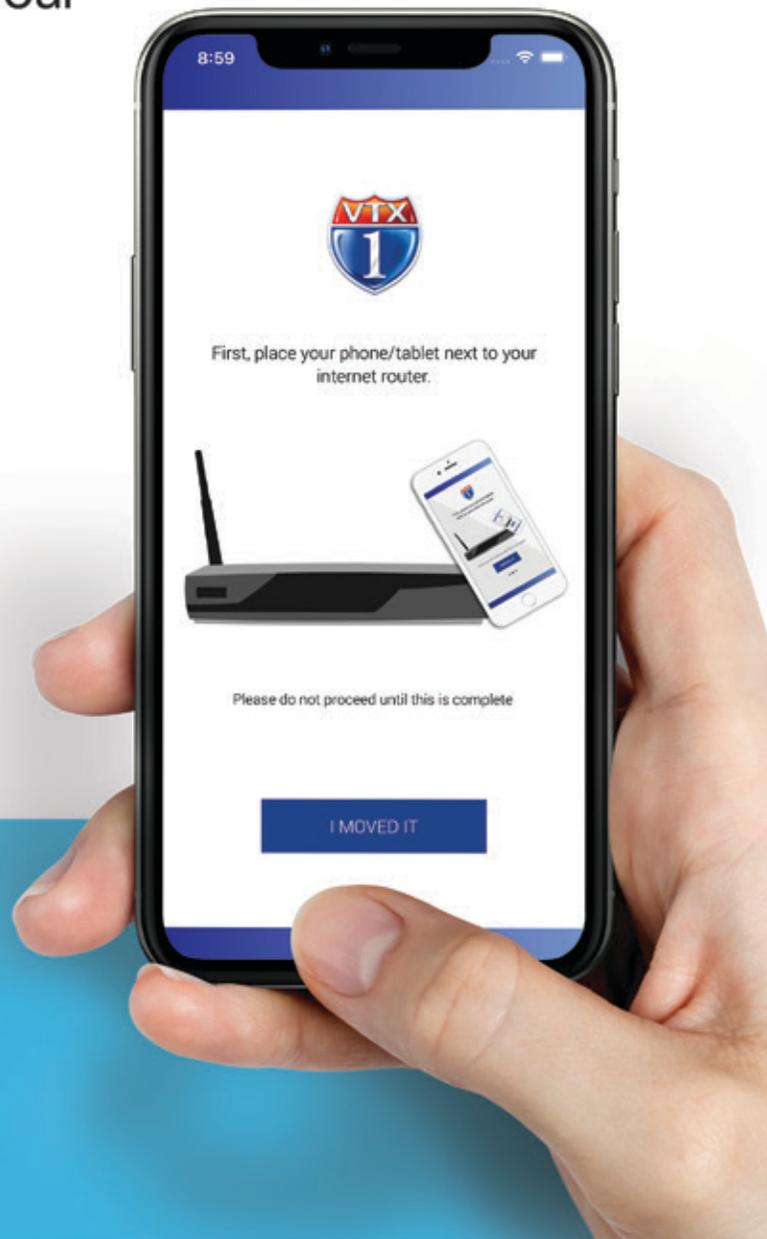
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