DOZENS OF TRAILS MAKE IT EASIER FOR PADDLERS TO GLIDE THROUGH BAYS OR CRUISE DOWN RIVERS

BY RUSSELL ROE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON JAKOBEIT

PADDLE ON!
It was a steamy June afternoon as I waited for my paddling companions to arrive at the put-in for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department’s paddling trail on the upper Guadalupe River above Canyon Lake.

I was ready for a scenic and exciting trip down one of Texas’ top paddling rivers along one of TPWD’s growing network of paddling trails. I wasn’t ready, however, for the scene I was about to stumble across.

As I waited, I watched food after food after food of canoe and kayaks being delivered. It wasn’t a school group or a Scout troop. It was—cue banjos—a special DeLorean float-and-watch outing sponsored by an Austin movie house.

Forty canoes. Half a dozen kayaks. A couple of rafts. Dozens of impassioned DeLorean fans. They were about to set out down the river—no doubt an alert for any signs of menacing backwatermen.

We needed to get on the water ahead of this crowd.

TPWD’s paddling trails are intended to make it as easy as possible for even novice paddlers to enjoy the state’s waterways, though I’m not sure this is what organizers had in mind.

2010 was a record year for paddling trails, with eight new trails established. They have been embraced by paddlers, communities, and outfitters. And more trails are on the way.

“Every community that has water says, ‘We want to get involved,’” says Shelly Plante, TPWD senior tourism manager.

The trails can be found in a variety of settings. A exhilarating paddle down a scenic Hill Country river. A river float that ends at one of Texas’ most historic sites. A serene cruise through the Pecan Woods of East Texas. An urban water excursion juxtaposing views of wildlife and downtown.

A twisting journey through a mangrove estuary teeming with fish and birds. A coastal trek that attracts water bird watching spreads.

With most of the state’s land in private hands, rivers and bays offer fun, accessible and rewarding ways to enjoy some of Texas’ greatest natural resources, just waiting for Texans to launch their canoes or kayaks.

The paddling trails program started in 1993 with the opening of the coastal Lighthouse Lakes Paddling Trail near Aransas Pass and expanded inland with the opening of the Luling-Zedler Mill Paddling Trail in 2005. The Martin Diers Jr. State Park trails, which opened in December in Southeast Texas, brought the number of trails in the program to 18.

PADDLING THE GUAD
San Antonio resident Joe Salvador, 45, took up paddling fairly late in life. Once he got into it, though, he really got into it. He has managed to acquire 15 canoes and kayaks in his five years of regular paddling. “I got into the sport kind of late, but man, I’ve taken to it with a vengeance,” he says.

I joined Salvador and his family last June to paddle the Upper Guadalupe-Nichols Landing Paddling Trail. Salvador has canceled the Colindale Paddling Trail twice and has also done Luling’s paddling trail in addition to other canoe trips around the state. Salvador, who is active in the Alamo City Riverrunners paddling club, says the trails have been a welcome addition to the state’s paddling scene, introducing people to the sport and improving river access points.

What defines a paddling trail? TPWD’s trails are day-trip paddling excursions across the state with designated access points, signs, maps and community support. Plante says the program aims to make waterways more accessible while encouraging responsible use and promoting economic and recreational benefits.

“By having these manageable stretches of rivers, lakes and bays that can be a paddling trail, we’ve made this a more accessible trip for people who aren’t comfortable on the water yet,” she says.

Salvador met me at the Guadalupe trail put-in with his wife, Diane, his son, 17-year-old Greg, and a daughter, 16-year-old Adrianna.

The 9.9-mile Guadalupe trail is marked by high limestone bluffs and a host of wildlife. Great blue herons fly from giant cypress to giant cypress—modem pterodactyls in this primval landscape. Splashing rapids add excitement.

Salvador likes to bring his kids along on paddling trips to expose them to the outdoors and nurture a love of nature.

“As a parent I think it’s the best way to educate them about taking care of the environment and how it affects people,” he says. “They are my love affair with it.”

Too late, we discovered that the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema planned a Deliverance showing and canoe trip on the same day on the same stretch of river. My T-shirt from a previous canoe trip says, “Paddle Faster, Boys. I Hear Banjos.” That was basically our plan.

While most of the state’s paddling trails are appropriate for new paddlers, the Guadalupe trail offers some challenges, which can be part of the fun. One rapid near the start of the trip pushed our boats toward a tree in the water.

Everything happens fast when water is moving this quickly. I told my bowman to paddle hard. I paddled hard, too. At the last second, I dug my paddle into the water to turn the front of the boat. We just missed the tree, avoiding a dunking (though a twin actually didn’t sound too bad).

We had the river mostly to ourselves later as the afternoon sun started to soften in the sky. At Mueller Falls, one of the most scenic spots on the river, we took a break to eat while Salvador tried several times to run a small waterfall. At Rust Falls, farther downstream, Adrianna followed Greg into the chasing...
A vivid sunset fills the sky as the Lydia Ann Lighthouse stands watch over the Lighthouse Lakes Paddling Trail near Port Aransas.

According to a U.S. Forest Service study, kayaking has been one of the fastest-growing outdoor activities in the U.S., with the number of kayakers increasing 104 percent in the past decade.

I made my way from lake to lake through the winding channels lined with mangroves. I stuck to the map to make sure I stayed on course and followed the paddling trail markers. Pretty soon, though, I felt comfortable enough to venture off the main trail and explore some side channels through narrow mangrove alleys. Some were dead ends, some took me right where I wanted to go, making me feel as though I had discovered a secret passageway. Fish were everywhere — redfish, mullet, trout. And birds, too — great blue herons, great egrets, white egrets, roseate spoonbills, brown pelicans, ducks and more ducks. At one point, I saw redfish stirring in the water and a roseate spoonbill flying by, with the Lydia Ann Lighthouse in the background. That's when I realized what a treat the Lighthouse Lakes area is for anglers, bird watchers and explorers of all types.

MAKING OF A TRAIL

How does a paddling trail get established? With the early coastal trails, Harvey and others decided where they'd go. Now, communities must apply for a trail. TPWD wants trails to be day-trip length — generally four to 10 miles long — with natural or historical amenities, adequate water quality and flow and a local partner to maintain the put-in and take-out. TPWD performs a river survey, provides signs for the put-in and take-out and maintains a paddling trail website with information on the trails.

With motivated communities leading the way, trails have popped up in some destinations not traditionally on the paddling map, while some better-known padd-
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A paddler gets ready at the put-in for the Naches River paddling trail; one of several trails that opened in 2016. Luling’s water tower celebrates the city’s paddling trail; a man helps paddlers find their way through the mangroves at Lighthouse Lakes; a paddling trail marker guides kayakers and attracts visibility at Lighthouse Lakes; dinging spots don’t have them yet.

Paddle Carro? Yes! For TPWD, paddling trails are an opportunity to get people engaged in water recreation, which can lead to appreciation and conservation. For paddlers, they are no-hassle destinations where they know they’ll have access to the water and parking. For towns, they are a path to nature tourism. For landowners? TPWD’s Plante says some landowners have been worried about trespassing, but TPWD makes respect for private property a part of the program.

Places like Luling, Port Aransas and Bastrop have found that paddling trails are a viable tool for nature tourism. When TPWD decided to expand paddling trails to rivers, Luling was the first in line, with the goal of encouraging water recreation on the San Marcos River.

Now, the town loves its trail so much, it put a paddler on the water tower.

“The paddling trail has been great for us,” says Randy Engelle, Luling parks director. “It’s brought people to Luling who didn’t know Luling existed. Just about every day, if you look in Luling, you’ll see kayaks on top of trucks.”

The Lighthouse Lakes and Mustang Island paddling trails have meant more kayaks on top of cars and trucks in Port Aransas, too.

“We have certainly seen an increase in the number of kayakers coming our way to kayak for sightseeing and kayak fishing as well,” says Ann Vaughn of the chamber of commerce there. “It’s very definitely in our mix of what we’re promoting.”

In Bastrop, the paddling trails have put the locals more in touch with the river. John Cline of outfitter Rising Phoenix Adventures says that when he first arrived in town, there weren’t many locals who used the Colorado River. They thought it was dangerous or dirty, or they worried about snakes. Or river access. The city’s first paddling trail changed that.

“When TPWD established it as a paddling trail, that’s like the authority figure,” he says. “That’s like putting the A-OK stampprint, a thumbs-up that you can go down this river. We approve of it. The State of Texas approves of this paddling trail, of going down this river. That was what put it over the edge.”

To celebrate the paddling trail launch, Bastrop created a nature festival, which became an annual event.

In Luling, in Bastrop and in other parts of the state, the paddling trails have also brought about welcome improvements in river access points.

“That’s been a great part about this program,” Plante says. “Communities have either developed new access sites that did not exist before — which is great and increases public access to waterways in Texas — or they’ve improved existing sites to make them even easier for paddlers. Those two things together have been a real success story for the paddling trail program.”

Bastrop, in looking for a paddling trail take-out spot, took an underserved piece of riverfront land and turned it into a regional park with hiking and biking trails and wildlife viewing platforms on the river. In Luling, organizers cleaned up a run-down, 25-acre roadside rest area that the state wanted to shut down and turned it into a park and the paddling trail put-in. Now, paddlers, campers, swimmers and anglers flock to the park on weekends. Enhanced put-in and take-out points have proved to be a nice side benefit to what TPWD wanted to achieve with the paddling trails — establishing low-cost, accessible water recreation opportunities for today’s paddlers and tomorrow’s.

Bill Harvey of Lighthouse Lakes fame says the state’s paddling trails are a great way for families and kids to connect to nature, especially with the state getting more urbanized.

As more and more trails open, paddlers will be able to enjoy more and more stretches of water. And those trails and access points will be there for the next generation of paddlers, like teenagers Greg and Adrianna Salvador.

Canoe trip?

That’s right, a canoe trip. ★

PADDLING TRAILS ON TV
Be sure to check out the paddling trails segment on the Texas Parks & Wildlife Television show, airing the week of March 27-April 3.