

# Nearby Prairies Alive With Color



We're unbelievably lucky here in south-central Texas to live at the center of a startling variety of completely different habitats that are no more than an hour or so away. We too often take the pine forest and post oak savannah that we live in for granted but nearby are spectacular prairies, the Texas hill country, the northern borders of the south Texas plains and the western edges of the east Texas piney woods.

Try this: Take a map and draw a circle corresponding to 60 miles around the city of Smithville. Within or near the edges of the circle you'll find Canyon Lake, Wimberly, Dripping Springs, Lago Vista in the hill country, Cameron to the north, almost to College Station on the northeast, well past Brenham to the east, south almost to El Campo and Cuero, and southwest past Seguin almost to San Antonio. There's an incredible variety of habitats, wildflowers and wildlife to see within that circle!

Short loop, day trip tours that begin and end in the Smithville area can be incredibly productive for local naturalists. For example, last

week I visited the Nails Creek unit of Lake Somerville State Park northeast of Giddings but tried to stay off the highways as much as possible and stuck to paved FM or CR routes. The variety of wildflowers that can be seen along the byways passing through the prairies of south-central Texas is almost overwhelming.

For a short day trip into the Fayette Plains to see some spring prairie wildflowers, try FM 153 through Winchester, watching for prairie larkspur, fields of herbertia irises, and swamp lilies between the town and the intersection of US 77. Jog south (right) on 77 to FM 2145 (left). Along 2145 between the intersection of 77 and FM 1291 you can find large stands of antelope horns, with goat's rue, Texas bluebonnets and skullcaps as color accents. Beyond that is a magnificent stand of foxglove penstemon that includes everything from white to deep pink/purple spikes of showy large flowers.

Once you get to US 290 at Ledbetter, jog west (left) to FM 180 (right) and follow it north to where it ends at Nails Creek State



*The magnificent flowers of Foxglove Penstemon, Penstemon cobaea, can be found in the nearby Fayette Plains.*

Park. The Texas bluestar (*Amsonia tabernaemontana*), sandwort, large-flowered buttercups (*Ranunculus macranthus*), baby blue eyes, pointed phlox, maiden fern, and some spectacular bicolored prairie larkspur, are well worth the entrance fee. I also found a sundew but they're not too common here.

Returning from the park, try right on FM 1697 to FM 141 south

(left) to Giddings, then FM 448 south through Northrup back to Winchester on FM 153, or explore a bit and find your own way home. I guarantee that if you stop (be safe!) to sniff the flowers (please don't pick 'em—return later for seed), you'll have a good time. But don't forget our own State Parks—both Buescher and Bastrop SPs have a lot to offer.

Take a hike, eh?