

Nature Lovers Look Forward to Park Opening

San Saba River Nature Park has 1.5 miles of sidewalk trails. The soon to open 40 acre park is bounded by Mill Creek and the San Saba River and connects with existing Risien Park. Several acres of grassy open area and the canopy of an old pecan orchard provide good bird habitat to compliment the two riparian corridors. The majority of the sidewalk trails are in the shade, making for a very pleasant walk any time of year.

Although no two birds have exactly the same requirements, in general all need the basics: habitat, food, and water. Addressing this fundamental formula will be beneficial in any setting whether it be your backyard or a park. It will definitely attract a variety of wildlife.

Birds appreciate plants. The more vegetation, the safer they feel. Trees go a long way here. They also offer nesting and roosting sites; song perches; and food in the form of flowers, fruits/seeds, or the insects they attract. Many large shrubs also fit the bill. Luckily the Nature Park comes filled with many native species including pecan, mesquite, cottonwood, elm, hackberry and bumelia as part of the mix of trees in this bucolic setting. Smaller plant species that attract birds and other critters are pigeon berry, poison ivy (watch out for this one!), green briar, snail vine, rough leaf dogwood and Virginia creeper just to name a few. Native grasses and wildflowers fill the open spaces and provide much needed cover, nesting material and seeds for a variety of birds (quail, doves, finches and sparrows) and small mammals. These in turn become prey for hawks and owls. Besides butterflies, bees, and other pollinators at flowers, there will be many tiny insects feeding on stems and leaves. These insects rarely do permanent damage to plants, and their numbers are kept partly in check by the birds.

Birds and other wildlife aren't concerned with neatness. Branches close to the ground, accumulated leaf litter, deadhead dried flower heads all are appealing. Sparrows and other small passerines will readily use brush piles as safe havens from predators.

That rotting stump along the trail could be a critter condo. Would it surprise you to learn that dead wood sustains as much life as living trees? In fact, what looks like waste to us supports hundreds of Texas species.

Dead trees left standing to decompose naturally are called snags. Snags provide plenty of crevices and hollows where critters can live, hide or store food. They also make great places for birds, such as woodpeckers, to find good eats, or spots for eagle-eyed raptors, like red-tailed hawks (which keep rodent populations in check), to perch in search of supper. In San Saba County, snags attract eastern bluebirds, Carolina chickadees, woodpeckers, nuthatches, barred owls, black-crowned titmice, warblers, wrens and raptors, as well as raccoons, squirrels and bats. Many songbirds, like our state singer, the mockingbird, especially like to show off when they've got snags for stages.

Snags are important to woodpeckers not only foraging, but for nesting and roosting, too. Their abandoned cavities also provide homes for other vertebrates and invertebrates, including over 80 species of birds in North America that are secondary cavity nesters, which need hollows but cannot create them.

Once the snag rots enough to fall to the ground, it creates a new ecosystem where moisture plays a crucial role. For example, holes created by a woodpecker's bill become tiny "tanks" in wooden pastures that give rise to fungi, microorganisms and invertebrates such as earthworms and fireflies. These creatures, in turn, sustain salamanders, toads, frogs, and birds. As logs decompose, they recycle nutrients back into the soil, all while coexisting in symbiotic relationships with the animals they support.

Dead wood makes substantial contributions to forest biodiversity. Of the various organisms that make use of dead wood, insects represent one of the most species-rich and abundant components. Some insects spend the majority of their life cycle living within, and feeding on, dead wood. Others feed only on wood-decaying fungi or prey on other insects within dead wood. Dead wood is critically important to these insects.

Although many birds obtain moisture from fruits or insects they eat, most are attracted to a source of drinking water and this park has an abundance of clear, running water. San Saba Bird and Nature Club will erect a birding blind and water feature to enhance the opportunities for birding and wildlife viewing. It will be a great place to hone your birding skills or just enjoy a peaceful moment in Mother Nature's garden.