

TMN to look at ‘Putting Ecological Solutions to Work’

Heart of Texas Conservancy director will be guest speaker at Sept. 28 meeting in Kerrville

Staff report
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The public is invited to attend a talk sponsored by the Texas Master Naturalist, Hill Country Chapter in Kerrville, at 7 p.m. Monday, Sept. 28, at the Guadalupe Basin Natural Resource Center, 125 Lehmann Drive, Kerrville. Online participation is available via Zoom.

Doors will open at 6 p.m., with light refreshments served. Starting at 6:30 p.m., the chapter will host its monthly business meeting. Guest speaker Ben Eldredge, executive director of the Heart of Texas Conservancy, will address the audience at 7 p.m.

Eldredge’s topic is “Putting Ecological Solutions to Work.”

“Humanity and the natural world are facing human-induced challenges for which many solutions already exist,” a spokesperson for the TMN said. “Through regenerative practices, smarter urban design and the conservation of natural areas, we can course correct an increasingly troubled world toward a more sustainable, healthy and natural future. Come learn about these sensible solutions so that we can co-create a better tomorrow and a more hopeful future for the generations to come.”

The Heart of Texas Conservancy is a land trust and



ELDREDGE
environmental policy organization based in Boerne that is fast

closing in on 15,000 conserved acres in the Hill Country.

Eldredge previously served as the vice president of conservation at the Cibolo Center for Conservation and influenced the city of Boerne to create the most environmentally protective unified development code in the state.

Eldredge is also on the boards of the Cow Creek Groundwater Conservation District and the Hill Country Alliance.

There is no charge to attend the meeting. To attend via Zoom, pre-register at <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84562345678>.

The Texas Master Naturalist, Hill Country Chapter, is a volunteer organization sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. The Hill Country Chapter is one of 48 chapters in Texas and covers 10 counties: Bandera, Edwards, Gillespie, Kendall, Kerr, Kimble, Mason, Menard, Real and San Saba.

The chapter invites individuals interested in joining to visit <https://txmn.org/hillcountry/> for more information. Members receive comprehensive training in natural resource management specific to the Hill Country and volunteer in a wide variety of community projects.

Friends of the Night Sky installs Sky Quality Meter to track local light pollution

Staff report
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Kerr County Friends of the Night Sky has announced the installation of its first permanent Sky Quality Meter on Sept. 7, marking a milestone in the nonprofit’s efforts to measure and mitigate light pollution across Kerr County.

The meter, designated KC001, was mounted this week near an observatory north of Ingram. This is the second meter available to provide data on Kerr County sky quality. KCFNS member Todd Nunnally has his own SQM that has been operating for several months.

KCFNS plans to use the data gathered from these meters — and future meters — to better understand the effects of artificial light on the night sky and to guide local efforts toward responsible outdoor lighting.

“This is the first Sky Quality Meter owned and operated by our organization,” said Bruce Barton, a member of the KCFNS board of directors who supervised the installation. “It’s a milestone in our efforts to mitigate light pollution around Kerr County, and we hope it’s the first of many.”

Barton is also president of the Hill Country Astronomers and is well-versed in SQMs and light monitoring.



Porcupines are nocturnal and live in rough places like rocky areas and wooded tracts where they can find leaves and tree bark to eat. Consequently, there are no population figures available on them. Mythical claims say they can shoot their sharp quills at anything harassing them, but that’s not so. Predators and domestic pets get “quilled” by brushing against their fur or getting slapped by their quill-laden tails. Those seemingly white hairs pictured on their body and tails are quills, so please don’t try to pet them. (Photo courtesy of U.S. National Park Service)

Forbidden fruit: Porcupine facts and myths

My oldest son owns a few acres and a nice house overlooking the Llano River west of Llano. On Sept. 9, this year, he was up early, sitting on his deck facing the river when he saw something moving in the tall weeds just downhill from his deck. Pre-sunrise dimness prevented identification in thick vegetation several yards away.

He moved a little closer, and it stopped its advance through the underbrush. He thought it might be a raccoon coming to snack below his bird feeder. It cautiously moved a little closer and raised his phone camera. He took video of it in the dim light and realized it was a porcupine (*Earthizon dorsatum*).



John Jefferson
WOODS, WATERS & WILDLIFE

Vicky and I were scouting for a photo workshop site in New Mexico near the Philmont Scout Camp and saw one. No other family members have seen a live one. The porcupine was halfway up a tree, and the guide grabbed a fallen tree limb and ushered it off the tree.

It hit the ground and left as fast its short legs could move — which was slowly.

The guide thought he was doing me a favor, but most porcupine images are taken from the rear end as one waddles away. But a picture of one climbing a tree would have been a winner.

Growing up in Southeast Texas, I’d heard of the critters but knew they didn’t live around there. According to “The Mammals of Texas,” written by two former

professors in the Texas A&M Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences, porcupines range from the western half of Texas to Bosque County and south to near Alice. Popular and scientific literature confirm that.

I’ve seen several road-killed porcupines in the Hill Country and even carefully collected a few quills — but no live ones. A recent sighting by my friend, Mike Tewes, a wildlife professor at Texas A&M-Kingsville, reported one in Hidalgo County.

It won’t surprise me if readers contact me about other sightings. Porcupines seem to be expanding their range. Their mating season is late summer to early autumn. Most animals, including two-legged ones, often travel farther during mating seasons. It’s said that only another porcupine could get past a porcupine’s pungent aroma to, uh, socialize. It’s also said that love is blind.

Maybe their sense of smell is affected, too.

Porcupines protect themselves with 30,000 sharp-pointed quills. Any creature that even brushes them can pick up a few. Those quills protect them from coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, bears, great horned owls and dogs, unless the predator attacks their face and turns them over to bare their soft underbelly.

Attacking them from behind their heads can inflict numerous quills and can ruin the predator’s day — and life, in some cases. Predators can carry quills throughout their lives, which may be shortened because of quills that interfere with eating.

Quill removal from pets by veterinarians isn’t cheap.

You’re lucky if you ever see a live one. Look, but don’t touch.

John Jefferson is an award-winning columnist who writes about the great outdoors.

Survey finds most Americans miss out on nature’s health benefits

Rae Lynn Mitchell
Texas A&M University

Most Americans are not getting outside enough to experience the benefits nature provides to their physical and mental health, according to a new national survey.

Jay Maddock, a Regents Professor at Texas A&M University’s School of Public Health, said even brief exposure to nature — 10 minutes a day — can make a big difference.

“Nature really is all around us,” Maddock said. “It can reset our attention, improve our mood and even affect our immune functioning.”

Maddock, who serves as director of the Center for Health and Nature at Texas A&M, was part of the team behind the American Nature and Health Survey, which received responses from more than 3,000 Americans.

“Compared to 2016, our time in nature has really declined steadily,” Maddock said. “One of the reasons might be that we have so many conveniences that we didn’t have before. Things like delivery services, where you can get your groceries, your Amazon packages, your food delivered right to your door, keep us inside more and more often. Screen time, in its variety of forms, has increased dramatically in the last decade, and that’s been offset by less time outside.”

The survey, launched by REI Co-op and the Nature and Health Alliance and supported through the REI Cooperative Action Fund, also highlighted a significant



New survey shows most Americans are not spending enough time in the great outdoors. (Courtesy photo)

opportunity for healthcare providers: While only 20% of people had ever been told by a doctor to spend more time in nature, 83% said they would spend more time outside if their doctor recommended it.

The survey will track how people experience nature over time, creating a credible, data-driven foundation for understanding trends, barriers and opportunities to expand Americans’ access to and connection with the outdoors. The benchmark is expected to be updated every two years, creating a long-term measure of how Americans’ relationship with nature evolves over time.

Maddock equates spending time in nature with practices that are universally accepted as essential: eating right, exercising and getting enough sleep. He believes more doctors need to prescribe

nature to encourage their patients to get outside.

Key findings from the survey include:

- 84% of Americans say protecting nature is essential and important.
- 79% agree that wild, open and natural spaces are part of being American.
- Nearly 45% spent less than two hours in nature during the previous week.
- 83% would increase time outdoors if recommended by a healthcare provider.

Maddock said the long-term survey will create “a shared foundation for researchers, healthcare leaders, community organizations and policymakers to better understand trends, barriers and opportunities over time.”

The survey follows last month’s release of “The Nature Dose,” an 11-minute

documentary sponsored by outdoor gear giant REI that focuses on the health benefits of being outside.

It’s one of three short films created through a collaboration between The Redford Center, a nonprofit founded in 2005 by the late actor Robert Redford and his son to create environment-related films, and REI’s nonprofit Cooperative Action Fund, which supports projects related to making the outdoors more accessible.

“Over the past 20 years, we have become an indoor species, but spending time in nature is an easy way to improve our health,” Maddock said. “Sitting in a greenspace outside for just 10 minutes — the nature dose in the film’s name — has been found to reduce stress, lower blood pressure and strengthen our immune systems, and we can even bring health benefits indoors by adding houseplants.”

“The Nature Dose” was directed by Andrew Nadkarni and also highlights the work of Nalini Nadkarni, an expert on trees and their importance, and Jennifer Roberts, an expert on how environmental inequities affect physical health.

The other documentaries in the series are the 11-minute “Boys N the Wood: Resilience in the Redwoods,” about men who bond with each other and with nature in the California redwood forest, and the nine-minute “Marcus & Me: Connecting with Nature in Steel City,” about youth climbing opportunities in Pittsburgh’s industrial area.