

Wonders
of Nature

EXPLORE THE NATURAL WORLD
IN UVALDE COUNTY'S
HILL COUNTRY RIVER REGION
—AND FIND UTOPIA, TOO!



story by Clayton Maxwell
PHOTOGRAPHS by MATTHEW JOHNSON



We could hear the river before we could see it.

My 11-year-old daughter, Carlisle, and I have arrived past dark at our cabin in Chalk Bluff Park in Uvalde and are seeking a peek of the Nueces River. We step off our front porch under a thick canopy of wind-bent live oaks, their branches so tangled we can't tell where one tree ends and the other begins. But it's just a little too dark to see; we can only hear that sweet sound of water gurgling over rocks. Standing barefoot on a carpet of oak leaves, my daughter and I relish the audible proof that yes indeed the Nueces runs a few dozen yards or so from our door, just as the friendly owner had promised at check-in. Then we turn back to our rustic cabin, the sole source of light against the dark country sky.

I have come with my family to Uvalde County for a long weekend, drawn by the promise of rope swings, horseback rides, and winding roads through hills liberated from billboards and maybe even cell-phone service. Here in the so-called Hill Country River Region, the Nueces and Frio rivers and their many offshoots form a revitalizing web of waterways that is all the more astonishing given the rocky roughness of the terrain. On these unspoiled, wildflower-rimmed roads on the western edge of the Hill Country, it seems we can't drive 10 minutes without crossing another shimmering ribbon of water, calling us to jump in.

And jump in we do. After Carlisle feeds the menagerie of animals that call Chalk Bluff Park home—pot-bellied pigs, braying donkeys, a zebra, and her very favorite, a pair of Clydesdale horses looking jaunty in their shag boots—we return to the river. Now we marvel at what we missed the night before—the seven-story, gray-white bluff that forms the far edge of the river, an impressive uplift of limestone formed by a geologic tug-of-war that happened here millions of years ago.

Members of the Murphy family, owners of the park since 2014, zoom around in little buggies ready to help out; they bring us two kayaks, and we launch right there in the clear rock-bottomed water just in front of our cabin. The current is gentle, but still our unpracticed shoulders wear out fast, so we tie our kayaks to a tree root and crawl up the muddy bank to do that one thing that speaks of childhood and summer like no other—the rope swing. Bracing ourselves, we swoop out and drop into the cool bottle-green water; the first shock of total immersion makes us giddy. We laugh, shiver a bit, and do it again. “Do you know what *nueces* means in Spanish?” I ask Carlisle. “Nuts!” she says.

Our energizing dip in the Nueces is just the beginning; my husband and 7-year-old son join us later in the day ready to explore, too. That's how I find myself on the side of the road in the crossfire of a take-no-prisoners speargrass fight, the kids whizzing pointy little blades at each other with such abandon that they fall into a pile, tiny arrows of grass sticking out of their T-shirts. This is my children's first speargrass fight. It is also their first time to suck nectar from the stem of a primrose flower and to taste an agarita berry plucked from a bush where we'd stopped to see the leafy tip of the largest bald cypress in Texas, poking up far in the distance. We are on a Big Tree Tour of the area organized through the Hill Country Adventures tour company with Lee Haile, a supreme guide to such kiddo-friendly thrills and an encyclopedia of the natural history of this region.

Lee, who twirls the tip of his snowy moustache when talking to us, sees things we don't see. In addition to working as a birding, river, and nature guide, he is also



Opening spread: Frolicking at Chalk Bluff Park and Utopia Park. This spread: Hummingbirds at Sabinal River Lodge, kayaking at Chalk Bluff Park, a view at Utopia Park.



Clockwise from left:
A tremendous oak tree
on the Big Tree Tour,
goats and horseback
riding at Elm Creek
Stables in Concan, and
animal lovers George
and Beverly Streib.



a musician, campfire storyteller, woodworker, and writer. He is the Hill Country's John Muir or a jovial version of Thoreau in a sweat-stained felt hat; he understands the language of this land and translates it for us. While we notice the beauty of green rolling hills, Lee shows us how the direction a slope faces—what he calls “aspect”—affects where different trees grow. What we had seen as a simple cut in the limestone roadside is now a site for seashell-fossil hunting, evidence that the land around us, what we call the Edwards Plateau, used to be ocean floor more than 65 million years ago in the Cretaceous period.

After our long-distance view of the bald cypress that the Texas Forestry Service once registered as the widest cypress in Texas, Lee takes us to visit this granddaddy of trees up close. Its trunk measures 13 feet in diameter. We touch the rough folds of its bark and blink upwards at the bright droopy branches filtering sunlight. We then sit on the Frio riverbank while Lee points out the green kingfisher building its nest in the rocks at the edge of the water. The kids balance on knobby cypress roots protruding from the river and watch the kingfisher fly from bank to bank, hoarding twigs.

So we learn. And we learn in one of the best ways a family can—by digging into nature together. We are grateful to be with someone who not only tells us which plants aren't safe to put in our mouths, but who can also nimbly traipse up the branches of a sprawling oak tree and make some impressive pig and donkey noises while he's at it.

Later, when Lee visits us for some fireside fun, he regales us with storytelling and cowboy songs, and we reciprocate with s'mores. My parents, who have joined us from San Antonio for the night, are also smitten. My mom whispers to me that Lee is a “cowboy genius,” and my dad asks for a repeat performance of his rendition of “Red River Valley.”

As it turns out, Lee is only one of the local characters who make the ecology of the river region come to life for us. Bain Walker, owner of Frio Bat Flight tours, has worked as a guide to the Frio Bat Cave since 1999; his mind is so full of facts about bats and the surrounding area that his wife says he recites them in his sleep.

Bain escorts us and a handful of others to the edge of the cave—located on a private ranch—to watch the 10-12 million Mexican free-tailed bats emerge in search of supper. While we watch, mesmerized, Bain wows us with intriguing information. He explains how each mama bat (this is a ladies-only bat cave) flies about 30 miles and eats its weight in insects every night. My kids marvel that there is so much bat guano in the cave that the ammonium from it could be deadly. Bain points out the Swainson's hawk coming in for a little bat snack, dive-bombing the black ribbon of wings winding across the evening sky. The din of so much bat fluttering is impressive enough, but Bain's insights make the children's jaws drop.

And then there are George and Beverly Streib, the couple who have been running trail rides and rescuing animals at Elm Creek Stables near Garner State Park since the late 1990s. Horse-crazy Carlisle and I steal away to Elm Creek for a mother-daughter trail ride with these two, warmed by their kindness, longtime connection to this land, and “Cowboy” George's salty good humor. Meeting them on their ranch, which stretches up into the hills and provides a gasp-inducing view from the high trail, I know these two are the real deal, as solid and genuine as the live oaks that shade us after our ride.

In the way of all true animal-lovers, the Streibs are attuned to the personality quirks of the many creatures with whom they share their ranch—from the handsome trail horses and the herd of goats Beverly bottle-fed to the blind deer and fat pig who have become best friends.

Hungry and bowlegged after our adventures, Carlisle and I collapse onto a picnic

SO WE LEARN.
AND WE LEARN ONE
OF THE BEST WAYS
A FAMILY CAN—
BY DIGGING INTO
NATURE TOGETHER.

table in front of Saint Jo's Picnic, a bright teal-colored food trailer in Utopia, the nearby town of just more than 200 occupants. While we love the Lost Maples Cafe—famous for its hearty breakfasts, chicken-fried steaks, and deluxe pies—we want at this moment to eat somewhere where we can lie down. We are that tired. While waiting for our gumbo and fried avocado sandwich, we stretch out on the picnic table benches, happy to be horizontal for a moment. “I like it here,” Carlisle says.

Saint Jo's Picnic becomes our food headquarters in Utopia. Parked on a lawn on Main Street next to two other trailers serving barbecue and Mexican food, it's an ideal place to grab a satisfying snack between outings. When we want to eat a salad, we go for Saint Jo's Caesar with cheddar-cheese croutons; the gumbo, sandwiches, and milkshakes deliciously fuel us through another hillside ramble. (The kids also love the bean-and-cheese tacos served at the Mexican food truck next door.)

We rest our weary bones that night at Utopia's four-room Sabinal River Lodge, a comfortable retreat with a back balcony perched over a lawn that rolls down to the Sabinal. (The Sabinal was once called El Arroyo de Soledad—Creek of Solitude—and is actually more of a stream than a river.) This green slope becomes my son Harry's prime spot for football tossing followed by yet another plunge via rope swing into the cool water. And in the morning, savoring our first cup of coffee, my husband and I talk on the balcony and listen to the river—a welcome relief from newspapers and the morning rush.

After a pretty 10-mile drive up FM 1050 from Utopia, we stop in at the Hill Country Nature Center, which is also home base for Hill Country Adventures tours and Rio Frio Lodging, a service that can connect you to vacation homes in the area. Spread over 250 acres, this nature center engages visitors with hiking trails, native-plant gardens, and exhibits about the area's natural history. My kids love standing by the hummingbird feeders while ruby-throated and black-chinned hummers zoom past. And owner LeAnn Sharp takes me to see the five aquamarine bluebird eggs in one of the 30 nesting boxes she has built—a sight so precious I catch my breath.

And this is why we do this, I think, as LeAnn carefully closes the lid of the nesting box. I think of a quote from Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: “There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises.” I want my kids to witness these magical gifts firsthand because no screen or hand-held gadget can connect us better than the real thing.

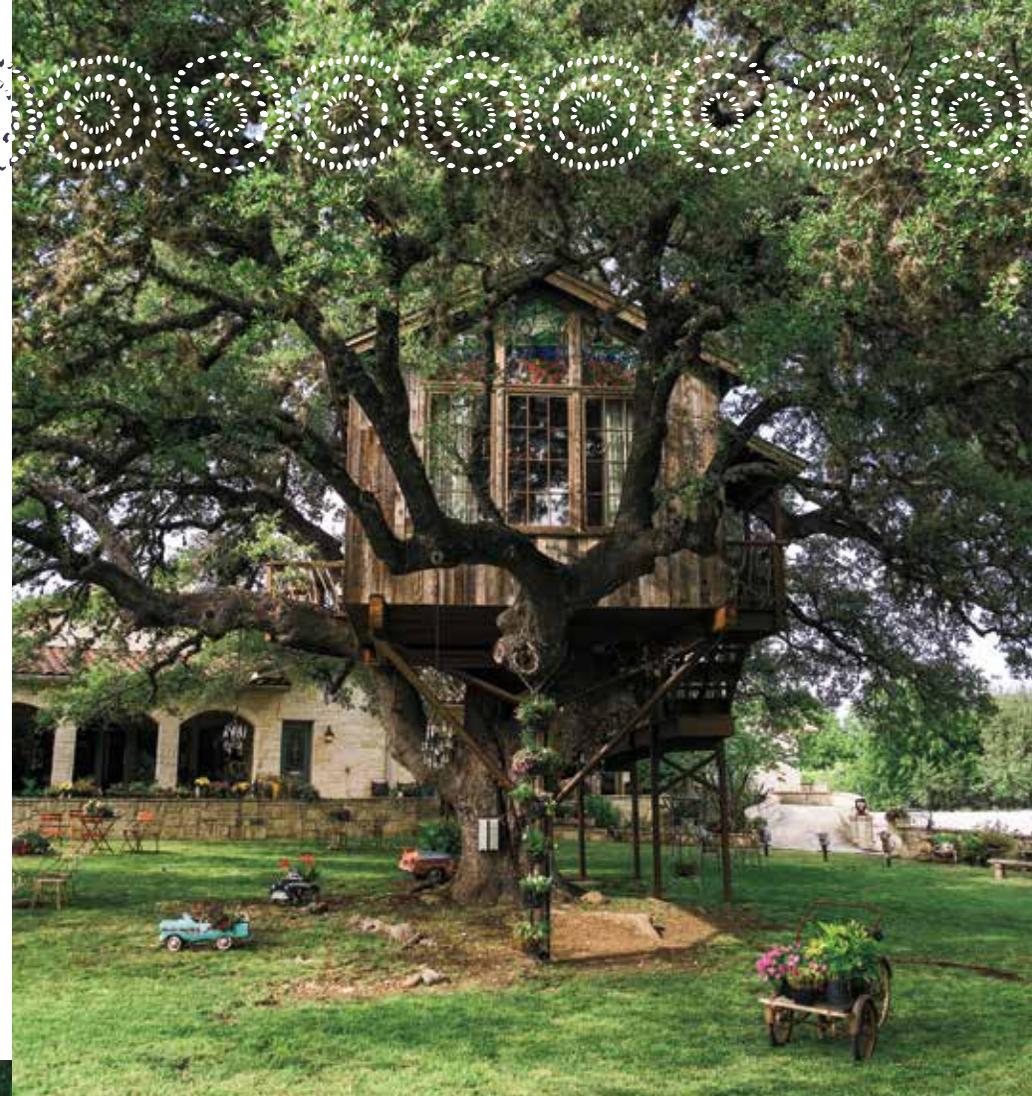
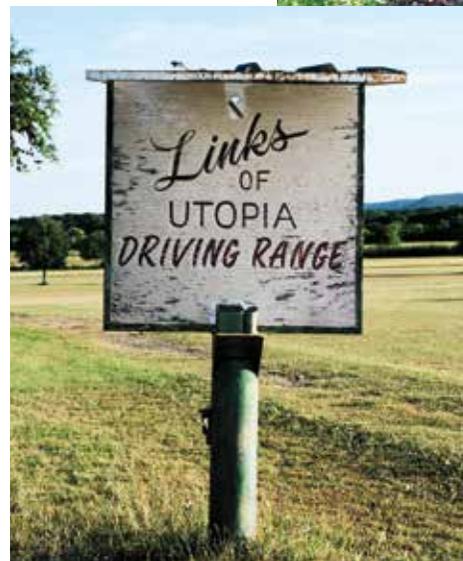
On our last day, we stop to see the nine-hole Utopia Golf Course on our way to lunch with my parents at the Laurel Tree, the area's popular French-inspired restaurant. Not only does the Laurel Tree have a tree house that once appeared on the Animal Planet's series *Treehouse Masters*, but it's also known for dishes so tasty it has made the pages of *Food & Wine* magazine. The golf course was part of the inspiration for the movie *Seven Days in Utopia* with Robert Duvall, based on the book *Golf's Sacred Journey, Seven Days at the Links of Utopia* by local author David L. Cook. Plaques with quotes from this golfing manifesto pop up throughout the course. These words from Chapter 8, close to the clubhouse, ring particularly true for us this day: “Who is teaching wisdom? I had never had a course in it, but this week my life had been altered because of it. I thought of the multitude of unsung heroes that seek to teach wisdom in the small forgotten communities, the true Utopia of the land.”

While I wouldn't say anyone has forgotten these little river communities—far from it—the naturalists and cowboys we meet out here are “teaching wisdom” whether they intend to or not. And my kids now have their eyes a bit more open, ready to find their next bluebird nest or green kingfisher or fossil, not to mention take each other down in another killer speargrass fight. 🐉

Writer Clayton Maxwell, a native Texan, loved hitting the backroads of Uvalde County with her husband and two kids, where they found new thrills at every green turn. Photographer Matthew Johnson enjoys working with both portraiture and landscapes.



Contemplating the rushing water at Utopia Park, treehouse dining at the Laurel Tree, Laurel Waters tends her native gardens, the nine-hole golf course and driving range in Utopia.



Essentials HILL COUNTRY WEEKEND

For general information about Uvalde County, see visitualdecountry.com.

Rio Frio Lodging rents vacation homes and cabins in the area; see friolodging.com.

Chalk Bluff Park is at 1108 Chalk Bluff Road in Uvalde. Call 830-278-5515; chalkbluffriverresort.com.

Sabinal River Lodge is at 21749 North RR 187 in Utopia. Call 830-966-3393; sabinalriverlodge.com

Elm Creek Stables and Frio Canyon Horse Refuge are at 31611 State Highway 83 North in Concan. Call 830-232-5365 or 830-279-4051.

Hill Country Nature Center, headquarters of **Hill Country Adventures**, is at 5181 FM 1050, 10 miles

west of Utopia and 5 miles east of Garner State Park. Call 830-966-2320; hillcountryadventures.com.

To arrange to see the **Frio Bat Flight**, call 888-502-9387; friobatflight.com.

Utopia Golf Course is at 20567 RR 187 in Utopia. Call 830-966-5577; utopiagolf.com.

Lost Maples Cafe is at 384 Main St. in Utopia. Call 830-966-2221; lostmaplescafe.com.

Saint Jo's Picnic is at 658 Main St. in Utopia. Call 830-275-3989; saintjospicnic.com.

The Laurel Tree is at 18956 North RR 187 in Utopia (open Sat. by reservation). Call 830-966-5444; utopiagourmet.com.