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Take a look at Palo Pinto Mountains State Park — North Texas' newest escape to nature

By Eleanor Dearman

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Prickly pear cacti and ash juniper trees sink their roots in red-tinged soil. Purple and white flowers speckle the greenery. The 5,000 acres of rolling hills bring to mind central Texas, but the developing Palo Pinto Mountains State Park is instead about an hour west of Fort Worth.

If the park were a town, James Adams would be the city manager tasked with getting the land ready for its owners: the people of Texas, who in 2023 are expected to have access to North Texas' first state park in more than two decades.

"There is so much that goes into making a park," Adams, the park superintendent, said. "So much more than I could have ever imagined getting into this position."

Texas' growing population is straining its state parks, with 10 million annual visitors, campsites reserved months in advance and long lines at the most popular attractions.

So it's no surprise outdoors enthusiasts are eager for the opening of Palo Pinto Mountains State Park near Strawn — described as the Metroplex's playground.

Denise and Cecil Aparicio of Mineral Wells visit Mineral Wells State Park often during the week and camp there a few times each year.

As they sat outside their trailer on a breezy October Friday afternoon, Denise Aparicio looked forward to the day she could do the same several miles west. "It's going to be gorgeous," she said.

'A much wilder place'

Driving around the 4,871-acre park in his Suburban, a Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife crest on its side, Adams is clearly proud of the park's progress.

With an encyclopedia-like knowledge of the land's greenery and history, he periodically points out some of his favorite features — the side of a cliff where stalagmites the size of rice grains have formed and a particularly picturesque scene of cascading hills he's dubbed the "Y'all come back view."

Adams explains how there's a rock oven dating to 1880 or 1890 still on the land. It was built by railroad workers to make bread. There are prehistoric campsites and a paleolithic point that could be anywhere from 8,000 to 16,000 years old, he said.

The park is also a golden-cheeked warbler habitat. Construction is paused during the nesting season for the endangered bird.

Adams points out spots that will one day be home to trails, a playground or shower buildings.

But some areas even he hasn't yet explored.

Campers will have their choice from about 60 campsites, from primitive to RV.

Workers are orchestrating about 20 miles of trails for hikers, bikers and horseback riders. Tucker Lake will offer swimming and boating — though motor boats won't be permitted.

The park is designed to provide recreational opportunities while being "light on the land" to keep the area in its natural form, Adams said.

Texas has more than 80 state parks. Palo Pinto Mountains State Park will join those in close proximity to North Texas. Lake Mineral Wells State Park is west of Fort Worth, and Ray Roberts State Park is north near Aubrey. Travel south and you'll hit Cleburne State Park and Dinosaur Valley State Park.

But North Texas visitors to Palo Pinto Mountains State Park will notice a stark contrast to the topography they're used to in the Metroplex, Adams said.

"Once you get out past Weatherford, you really start seeing these big, beautiful rolling hills," he said. "You start feeling like you're in a much wilder place when you get out here, something that is reminiscent of the Hill Country but in North Texas."

A park years in the making

There's a lot that goes into making a state park: the acquisition of land, an archaeological survey, public comment, the crafting of trails and campsites.

It all takes time and money. The latter has been a roadblock.

The more than \$9 million sale of 400 acres of state land next to Eagle Mountain Lake in 2008 served as the park's initial funds. In the years since, the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife asked the state Legislature for millions more for its development.

Lawmakers earmarked \$12.5 million during the 2019 session, and the remaining \$9 million is being raised by the nonprofit Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation. So far, \$7 million has been raised, said Anne Brown, the Palo Pinto Mountains State Park project lead for the foundation.

“A lot of the operating dollars for state parks goes into things that need to be fixed at current state parks that have 10 year backlogs, plus,” Brown said. “So when you go to build a new park, obviously, those take longer.”

‘Inundated with people’

Kirk Parrish and Stacey Lawson of Richardson booked their Mineral Wells camping spot about three months in advance. As they sat by a fire, fully set picnic tables and a blue and white tent nearby, they recalled how they recently tried to get a spot for spring break, but the park was already booked.

Lawson has figured out that it’s a good idea to try and get a site about five months out, when reservations open.

“There’s some people that literally, they’re waiting for the clock to tick and then they’re immediately on booking,” Parrish said.

“Texans love their state parks,” Lawson chimed in.

State parks are inundated with people.

“That’s a great problem to have,” Adams said. “The issue is though, anybody who’s tried to reserve a campsite on a weekend and especially on a nearby weekend, it’s very difficult to do. We’re so popular. There’s so many people that want to come out and experience the outdoors. And as exciting as that is, it makes it difficult to get everybody out. We need more campsites, more day use areas and more parks for people to be able to experience that.”

Palo Pinto Mountains State Park could eventually see 75,000 visitors each year.

April Klendworth of Fort Worth enjoys the escapism of camping — getting herself and her family out of the big city and into nature. It’s peaceful, she said.

“Any time that they can take land and use it to be a continued open space, rather than building more homes — because I think that’s something that Texas is experiencing right now is the urban sprawl,” she said.

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