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# In the Field

**GARY CLARK**, who provides a primer on the orioles of Texas this month, leads bird photography tours with his wife, professional photographer Kathy Adams Clark. He has been active in the birding and environmental communities for more than 30 years. He founded the Piney Woods Wildlife Society in



1982 and the Texas Coast Rare Bird Alert in 1983. He is a past president of the Houston Audubon Society, a director for the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and the Houston Audubon Society, and a dean at North Harris College in Houston. Gary's nature writing has been featured in numerous magazines and books, as well as in a weekly nature column for the *Houston Chronicle*.

**DALE WEISMAN**, who penned this month's article on the Texas piñon pine, is an Austin-based freelance writer and a member of the Capital Area Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists. Dale says his writing provides him with an opportunity to explore his affinity for the natural world. Dale first encountered the piñon species in the early 1990s while researching an article on Kickapoo Caverns State Park, with help and insights from the late Dave Stuart, the park's first superintendent. Dale is now hooked on Texas piñon pines and has planted a piñon seedling in the yard of his South Austin home.



**MARY O. PARKER** has been passionate about conservation issues since she was a child. "I remember doing a report in grade school about American alligators and how our human activities were responsible for their then-endangered status," she recalls. As an adult, after moving to Texas, the awe of being able to see a live alligator had a profound effect. Knowing that the species had moved from endangered to threatened in its status, she



realized that our power to destroy a species has a flip side and that "we also have the power to save." Today, Mary is a freelance writer and a teacher, and whenever possible, she explores environmental topics in her articles and class projects. Mary lives in Smithville with her husband, Jeff, who is a nature photographer.

# Saving Gator Babies

Eggs laid in a dry lake bed had to be gently relocated before habitat restoration could begin.

When the rain clouds once again passed up the protected wetlands of Brazos Bend State Park in spring 2006, TPWD naturalist David Heinicke suspected that the American alligators living in the park were going to have a difficult breeding season. He was concerned that an ongoing drought would interfere with the alligators' reproductive cycles.

His concern proved valid: While breeding season arrived in April as usual, it did not arrive with the same gusto. "Because of the drought, we didn't see as much activity as we do in some years," Heinicke says.

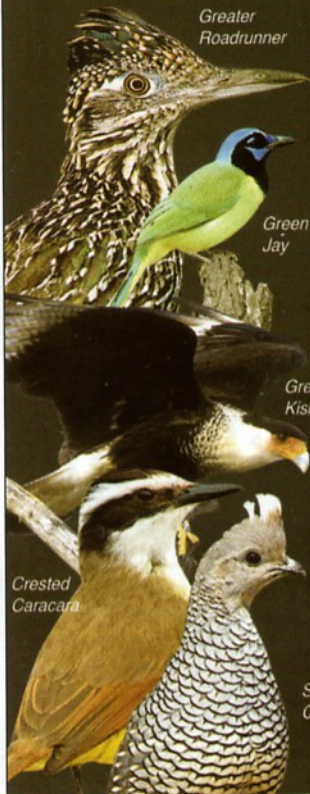
For American alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*), as much yearly breeding activity as possible is always desired. The alligators have rebounded well since they were placed on the endangered species list in 1967, but not without an ongoing struggle. Today American alligators are still included on the U.S. Department of Interior's list of threatened species.

By the time many of the females laid their eggs, two key lakes at the state park, Elm and 40-Acre, had dried up to critical points. In response, park officials decided that water would need to be pumped back into the lakes from a lesser-used source.

There was one problem. The drought had allowed mother alligators to create four nests in areas of the lakes where



Nearly 100 alligator eggs were rescued by volunteers at Brazos Bend State Park, resulting in a hatch of 47 babies.



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**"When they were ready, they just shot out like little rockets," said volunteer James Blankenship (right), who assisted with the hatching.**



there was historically water, and pumping water back in would threaten the eggs in these nests. It was decided that before setting to work restoring the aquatic habitat that nature was destroying, park staff would set to work rescuing as many eggs from the nests as possible.

Early on the morning of July 24, a small group set out on their very special egg hunt. Spotters with long wooden poles kept vigilant lookout for mother alligators while the group collected the eggs. The eggs were put under incubation and the first ones began hatching a mere 18 days later.

"It was an incredible experience," says park volunteer James Blankenship, who assisted with the hatching. "I was helping to open the eggs so that the babies could get out, then when they were ready, they just shot out like little rockets. I don't know how

else to say it, but being a part of this experience was awesome."

Of the 97 American alligator eggs rescued, 47 of them hatched. The babies that survived and thrived were tagged and most were returned to the wild within a couple of weeks. Reintroduction was done by adding them in groups of five or six to already existing nests. Heinicke explained that this is common practice and that foster alligator mothers very rarely raise objections.

"Before releasing the babies," says Heinicke, "we made sure they were eating well and had a belly full of food."

For more information about conservation efforts at Brazos Bend, call (979) 553-5124 or visit <[www.tpwd.state.tx.us/brazosbend](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/brazosbend)>. ★

— Mary O. Parker

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