Commissioner Steve Radack and his staff wish you a happy and bountiful New Year. Our attendance was up over 20% in 2019. We thank you for your strong participation in our programs. You inspire us to strive for improved and increased offerings this year.

Volunteer Activities

The Yaupon’s Worst Nightmare Crew began meeting again this month. They worked on an ongoing project to remove invasive Chinese Tallow trees from one of the park’s wetlands. They also started a new project to improve the Live Oak Trail by removing privet and clearing around larger trees to maintain a healthy forest. Tuesday Volunteers continue to meet each week. They work hard to keep the park in top shape, providing a beautiful backdrop for the many photographers that utilize the park this time of year. Their tasks vary each week and include trail maintenance, picking up litter, working on trail signs, maintaining the historic buildings, and more. The Woodworkers continued preparing racks for storing hundreds of feet of water hose. The Vegetable Gardeners’ historic garden was cleaned-up after a long, productive season. Most of the plants were removed after an early freeze, but a few winter-hardy plants remain. The Butterfly and Hummingbird Gardeners continue to keep the flowerbeds tidy and put out birdseed. They also spent one morning decorating the inside of the Nature Center. Guests can enjoy the festive décor through the New Year. Our volunteers are essential for making Kleb Woods the park you know and love. If you would like to join them, just show up during one of our weekly work parties. The Yaupon’s Worst Nightmare Crew meets Mondays at 8:00 a.m., Tuesday Volunteers meet around 9:00 a.m., and the Heritage Vegetable Garden Volunteers meet every Saturday morning shortly after 8 a.m.

Volunteers and staff gathered for the Annual Volunteer Christmas Potluck Dinner on December 5. Hot-spiced wassail, a traditional German beverage, was plentiful through the evening of food, music, and cheer. Several wonderful dishes were served as dulcimer musicians played for all to enjoy. The evening finished with games and good conversation as we thanked our volunteers for all that they do at Kleb Woods.

A Closer Look at Nature

The “A Closer Look at Nature Program” in December was about Penguins. This unique group of birds seems to fascinate people of all ages. Participants learned about how Penguins are similar to other birds as well as some of their unique biology that helps them survive the cold. They also learned that not all Penguins live in cold climates. In fact, Galapagos Penguins can be found just north of the equator. The program included several Penguin-related activities. Kids tried passing a water balloon “egg” to each other using only their feet. They raced across a finish line, either waddling or hopping like Rockhopper Penguins. They also tried out blubber mittens. These “mittens” are made of vegetable shortening sandwiched between two
Ziploc bags. They are placed in buckets of ice water to demonstrate how a layer of fat called blubber helps penguins stay warm.

At left, participants try to pass the Penguin "egg". Photo by Amber Leung. At right, a girl tries out "blubber mittens." Photo by Megan Ahlgren.

A Closer Look at German Heritage

The “A Closer Look at German Heritage Program” for December explained German Christmas traditions. The kids learned about the festivities of this season around Germany, and the history behind them. Beginning with the first day of the month, the Adventskalender (“Advent calendar”) marks the days until Christmas with a fun treat behind numbered doors. This time also marks the beginning of the Christmas Markets, where handcrafted goods and foods are offered in abundance. The kids made their own paper lamps modeled after those carried in the children’s parade for Sankt Martins Tag (“Saint Martin’s Day”). They learned that Martin was a Roman Soldier who was revered for his kindness and generosity to children and the poor, character traits we can all appreciate in the holiday season.

At left, learning about Christmas markets. At right, decorating lanterns like those for the Sankt Martins Tag parade. Photos by Amber Leung.

History Discussion Group

Our December discussion was frivolous, yet fun and personal for all the participants. We talked about everyone’s favorite Christmas movies. Covering everything from holiday classics to more unconventional Christmas films, we watched clips of many and reminisced about why each one had an impact. Our next discussion group will be on January 9, and staff historian Brigid Burke will be talking about The Great Depression’s Dust Bowl using the book The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl by Timothy Egan.
Plant Walks

Last year we initiated plant walks on a regular schedule and you all seemed to appreciate them. We are working on our schedule for next year, but hope to include plant walks at Paul Rushing and John Paul Landing Parks in addition to Kleb Woods. Please see our calendar or contact us for dates and more information.

Birding Activities

The weekly bird walks in December saw an influx of wintering birds. Flocks of American Robins pass overhead, dozens of Chipping Sparrows visit the feeders, and Hermit Thrushes are often heard in the understory, making their characteristic "chuck" call. Other species that are regularly being seen include American Kestrel, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Eastern Phoebe, Winter Wren, Brown Thrasher, Blue-headed Vireo, Cedar Waxwing, Orange-crowned Warbler, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Participants are still eagerly awaiting the arrival of a few winter residents like Brown Creeper and Brewer's Blackbird.

The afternoon birding program in December was about Sparrow identification. The class covered all 38 Sparrow species that have been observed in Texas. Specimens representing 32 of those Sparrows were brought from the Texas A&M Biodiversity Research & Teaching Collections. This gave participants a unique opportunity to compare features among similar birds. In addition to talking about the appearance of each species, the class included information about other clues that can aid in identification such as behavior and habitat.

Birding Bus Trip

The December Senior Birding Bus Trip visited several lakes north of Houston. Our first stop was the Cagle Recreation Area on Lake Conroe. We were hoping to find Ducks, Sparrows, Pine Siskin, and other wintering species. However, the cold and wind kept the woodland birds under cover and the Ducks had not yet arrived from the north. Two Bald Eagles soaring over the lake and the parking area were nice consolation prizes.

Our next stop was Lake Livingston. A Lesser Black-backed Gull, uncommon in this area, was found on the lake. It is difficult to find birds on the large lake, but hundreds of Gulls, Terns, Herons, and Pelicans gather below the dam. There, we saw four species of Gulls. These included 60 Laughing Gulls, a surprisingly large number so far inland. From the dam, we followed a trail along the Trinity River to look for a Great Kiskadee that had been seen recently. This species is common in the Valley of South Texas, but it has steadily been expanding its range northward. While we were not successful in our Kiskadee search, a mixed flock of small birds put on a show. The flock included Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Carolina Chickadee, Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and American Goldfinch.

The group counts hundreds of Gulls, Cormorants, and more at the Lake Livingston Dam. Photo by Sarah Kuzio.
After a delicious BBQ lunch topped off with banana pudding, we headed to Lake Bryan, our final stop of the day. Up to this point, we had only seen one Duck all day. As we pulled up to the lake, a fisherman docking his boat said there had been Ducks, but they had just flown away. The group persevered, patiently birding around the lake and eventually found seven species of Ducks. Ruddy Ducks, with their stiff tails, were found near the shore. Several Buffleheads were seen across the lake. The males of this small species are so distinct with their black and white plumage that they can easily be identified from very long distances. Other species included Red-breasted and Hooded Mergansers, Mallard, Gadwall, and Lesser Scaup. At least one bus trip participant briefly saw a Loon as well. The highlight of the day was a very cooperative Merlin that afforded everyone great scope views and posed for photos. As the photographers snapped away, a second Merlin was spotted. What a way to end the day!

**Signing Up for Senior Birding Bus Trips (Must be at least 50 years old to go on these trips)**

You may now sign up for the January 3 trip to Williamson County to search for Mountain Plover, Burrowing Owl and McCown’s Longspurs, the February 14 trip to the coast to look for Gulls and Gannets, and the March 27 trip to search for Golden-cheeked Warblers. To sign up for these trips, email klebwoods@pct3.hctx.net or call 281-357-5324.

You may only sign up yourself plus one friend/spouse. No multiple reservations. **You will get a confirmation e-mail a week before the trip if you have a seat.**

The calendars for January and February can be found on the [www.pct3.com](http://www.pct3.com) website at Community Calendars or a link may be found on the park page.

**Dog owners:** Pets are **not allowed** in Kleb Woods Nature Preserve. The scent they leave negatively affects wildlife. For your convenience and enjoyment, Precinct Three maintains five popular Dog Parks where your dog can run free. The Dog Parks have their own set of rules. Please visit the Precinct Three website [www.pct3.com](http://www.pct3.com) for more information.

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