Commissioner Steve Radack and the staff of Kleb Woods Nature Preserve would like to wish you a happy Valentine’s Day. While this month can bring snow and cold winter weather, in recent years it usually ushers in the beginning of spring. It is always enjoyable to watch Mother Nature raise the curtain of spring’s opening act. The park can be delightful on nice weather days in February. We hope you come watch spring begin.

If you would like to view this as a PDF document (in traditional newsletter format), use the “download and print” button; it will not automatically print.

Volunteer activities
Our volunteers were busy in January. The severe cold snap in early January froze most of our hummingbird plants for the first time since they were planted in 2006. The volunteers used this opportunity to cut them back and establish a more orderly butterfly and hummingbird garden. We think almost all the plants will sprout from the roots as the temperatures rise in spring. Volunteers were also been busy potting new plants for establishment in the spring, pruned the orchard, built a dozen owl nest boxes, raked up a mountain of pine needles, cleared storm debris from trails and otherwise prepared for spring.

German language classes
German classes are into the spring semester. Classes meet two Thursdays a month. German 1-A meets from 12:30 to 2:00 p.m., German 2-A from 9:30 to 11 a.m. and German 2-B from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. German 1-A and 1-B are the equivalent of high school German 1, while our German 2-A and 2-B are equivalent of high school German 2. If you are interested in starting German we will again have introductory classes this summer and anticipate a new German 1A class in the fall. For more information contact Linda Martin-Rust at klebwoods@pct3.com.

A Closer Look at History class
The January class was about Stephen F. Austin, the Father of Texas. The class reviewed the life of Austin: from boyhood in Missouri, to school in Connecticut, to college in Kentucky, to business manager at age 17 back in Missouri, to militia officer and judge, to empresario in Texas at age 28. The burdens he shouldered at a young age, caring first for a family business and then as empresario for the new American Colony in Mexican-Texas, aged him well beyond his years. He was imprisoned in Mexico for a year with harsh treatment. He lived just long enough to see Texas gain independence, but died in December 1836. On hearing of his death, Sam Houston declared, “The Father of Texas is no more; the first pioneer of the wilderness has departed.” One of Austin’s most important functions was ensuring that land grants were accurately surveyed and recorded so the colonists had valid titles to their property. He employed many land surveyors.

Following the lecture portion of the class, the students spread out around the park, porch or auditorium and selected a “plot” to survey. Then using some simple equipment, they tried their hand at surveying. I think they all left with a sense of the great task that Austin had accomplished, simply getting land surveys and titles for the settlers.

Birding activities
January was sometimes bitterly cold and terribly stormy with at least one record high temperature. The birds were avoiding the feeders until late in the month, and finally they slowly began using them. I have never experienced birds waiting this late in winter to utilize bird feeders. The hummingbirds, on the other hand, are now almost completely dependent on the feeders, as all the nectar producing flowers froze. The Red-breasted Nuthatch that turned up in November is still being seen. Brown Creeper is found regularly, and Golden-crowned Kinglets are still common. A rare Purple Finch was photographed here, but not on a bird walk. We are still hopeful of finding one on a February walk. Certainly the bird walk participants are eager and anticipatory: one of the early January walks had 21 participants!
At left, a Red-breasted Nuthatch delights birders. At right, Brown creepers have a profile like no other North American bird. Photos by Kurt Hillman.

There were no afternoon birding programs in January. The next one will be February 22nd and will be “Birding the Katy Prairie in Spring.”

The Bear Creek Pioneers Park bird walk in January was well attended, as many birders wanted to work on their year list. Unfortunately, the day was slow with a cold and damp north wind. They did find most of the common woodland species the park is known for. Future walks will be February 23 and March 23. The monthly walks are from 8:30 a.m. until 10 a.m. and meet at Koch Lane and Golbow Drive.

The January Senior Birding Bus Trip went to the Granger Lake area in Williamson County. The field trip focused on finding Mountain Plover, Burrowing Owl and McCown’s Longspur. All of these birds are from the northern plains and winter in south-central Texas. They spend most of the winter in fallow, plowed grain fields. It is difficult to find these little brown birds in the big, brown fields under the best of circumstances. The day of the bus trip was a very cold and very windy day and birding was difficult. The group failed to find a flock of Mountain Plover, but did have nice encounters with Burrowing Owls and McCown’s Longspurs. One of the Burrowing Owls was flushed from its roost in a roadway culvert. It posed for its portrait, but we left it quickly as all felt sorry for it, out in the cold wind. The second owl was a “Where’s Waldo” game. We parked the bus at a double row of round hay bales in a field. We then challenged our senior birders to find the owl. Eventually, they spotted it and several participants took photos of the bird.
We also found a small flock of about 20 McCown’s Longspurs. Using the scope, we were able to keep up with the small flock working the furrows out of the cold wind. Showing longspurs to people is always a great challenge, even when the birds are right in front of you. The pictures below, taken by Nina Rach that day, clearly convey the difficulty. Seeing these special birds, which are so difficult to find and observe, is why this trip is an annual one and one of our most popular. Clearly, 30 pairs of eyes looking for these birds make the chance of success much greater. Unfortunately, the birders could not stay out of the wind. After brief views, one by one, they retreated to the warmth of the bus.

Following lunch at a well-loved buffet restaurant in Taylor, we went again to search for Mountain Plover. While we failed to locate that species, the group visited a duck pond and found two uncommon species for the area: Blue-winged Teal and Cinnamon Teal. It had been a cold day. Perhaps the best illustration of that was the Wilson’s Snipe which, contrary to their norm, were highly photogenic. These birds are typically found in wet marsh areas and use their long beaks to probe for worms and insect larvae. However, most of the shallow, wet areas were frozen and did not offer protection from the wind. Hence, the birds were in roadside ditches which were not completely frozen. In the photo below, the ice chunks can be seen floating in the water.
Signing Up for Senior Birding Bus Trips (Must be at least 50 years old to go on these trips)

There is a waitlist for the March 3 trip to see the Attwater’s Prairie-Chickens. You may now sign up for the April 7 trip to look for Golden-cheeked Warblers in the Austin area and the April 21 trip to the coast to look for spring migrants. To sign up for these trips, email klebwoods@pct3.com 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 February and March can be found on the website. There is a link from the park web page or you can look under the Community Center events calendar. The website is www.pct3.com

Dog owners: Pets are no longer allowed in Kleb Woods. For your convenience and enjoyment, Precinct Three maintains five popular dog parks where your dog can run free. They are the Millie Bush Dog Park, 16756 Westheimer Parkway, in George Bush Park; the Danny Jackson Family Dog Park, 4828 ½ Loop Central Dr., near Loop 610 and Westpark; a dog park in Congressman Bill Archer Park, 3201 Highway 6 North; Deputy Darren Goforth Dog Park, 9402 Barker Cypress Road and Beverly Kaufman Dog Park located in Katy at Paul D. Rushing Park, 9114 Katy Hockley Road. The dog parks have their own set of rules. Please visit the Precinct Three website www.pct3.com for more information.