Spring officially arrives this month as the sun crosses the equator on March 20. This is called the Vernal Equinox. The increase in the sun’s intensity and increase in day length brings warmer temperatures. In response to these increases, trees leaf out, grass grows, and wildflowers blossom, coloring the landscape. **Commissioner Steve Radack** invites you to come and enjoy spring at Kleb Woods Nature Preserve or any of the other sixty-plus parks he maintains for your benefit and enjoyment.

**Volunteer activities**
The volunteers have worked hard to clean up the dead plants left by the hard January freeze. Virtually all of our hummingbird-friendly plants froze and had to be cut back. The volunteers have also taken full advantage of the dormant season to remove hundreds of invasive plants. Several hundred cubic yards of Chinese Privet and English Ivy have already been removed by the roots, and the clearing crew will work through the end of March to remove more invasives. If you would like to help, come and join them on Monday mornings. In addition, our gardeners are beginning to plan and plant in the vegetable garden while other volunteers are preparing plant identification signs for the spring wildflowers. To honor all of our volunteers, a special Valentine brunch was held for them since they are our favorite “Vountines.”

We were also blessed with a Scout Service Project from Pack 1445. They pulled English Ivy from a forest area helping to eliminate the invasive species.

At left, the scouts work pulling the Ivy. At right, they pose with the big pile of ivy they eliminated. Photos by Leo Revuelta.

**A Closer Look at Nature class**
In honor of Valentine’s Day, the February class discussed “True Love: Monogamy in Nature.” This mating system, while not the most prevalent in nature, is common among birds. It is also seen in some unlikely creatures, from fish to insects and even human parasites! Participants learned that monogamy looks different in different species. Malagasy Giant Rats truly mate for life, not looking for a mate after their partner dies. Shingleback Skinks stay together for several breeding seasons, while many birds are monogamous for only one breeding season. Parental care among monogamous species also varies. Some males only protect their territory; others participate in nest building as well as feeding the young. The male seahorse goes above and beyond carrying fertilized eggs in his pouch until they hatch. Female burying beetles, who kick and push the males if they try to attract additional mates, amused the class.

**History Discussion Group**
To coincide with the February history bus trip from Cypress Top Historic Park, this month the discussion group looked at the area and town of Palacios. According to legend, Palacios was originally named Tres Palacios by shipwrecked Spaniards,
who claimed to see three palaces on the bay. They were sadly mistaken, as there was little there except a prominent point into Tres Palacios Bay, the northeastern extension of Matagorda Bay. The discussion included LaSalle’s role in the development of the area and its eventual settlement. The construction of the Luther Hotel in 1903 contributed to the town’s prominence as a coastal resort. Camp Hulen was established near Palacios during World War II and housed thousands of German prisoners captured in North Africa. Today the area is a modest fishing and resort community that enjoys and benefits from its historic location on one of Texas’ more pristine bays.

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.

Birding activities
February was more typical of winter than January had been. Chipping Sparrows and American Goldfinches frequented the feeders most mornings. We have at least eight, if not ten, Rufous Hummingbirds that have stuck around, despite the lack of winter flowering plants. They rely on our feeders and the insects they catch, which have already emerged after the freeze. The Red-breasted Nuthatch continues, as do Golden-crowned Kinglets. The highlight for February has been sightings of American Woodcock. This peculiar shorebird is solitary and lives in wooded wet areas. While they may be regular at the preserve, they are seldom observed. In February, multiple sightings and at least one photograph suggest they are more numerous than usual. Every February, we do a Winter Big Day, and attempt to best our record one-day total of 70 species. Some past Big Days have been bitterly cold, but this year it was a balmy 78 degrees. Twenty observers found 67 species, including virtually every regular winter resident. We needed many species of flyovers to break the record, and those typically come at dawn. While the group had a good total by noon, it was also obvious that the record would not be broken, and the group called it quits by 4 p.m. Although we have not kept records, the day likely set a record for butterflies.

There was an afternoon birding program in February titled “Birding the Katy Prairie in Spring." The program showed birders what species to look for and where on the Katy Prairie in Precinct 3 and beyond.

The Bear Creek Pioneers Park February bird walk participants were not able to find the infamous Greater Pewee. However, all welcomed the beautiful day and sounds of spring. The highlight was a territorial dispute between two male Downy Woodpeckers. The group watched these birds for several minutes as they fluttered and sputtered, arguing over one tree in particular. Future walks will be March 23 and April 27. The monthly walks are from 8:30 a.m. until 10 a.m. and meet at Koch Lane and Golbow Drive.

The February Senior Birding Bus Trip went to Texas City Dike, Galveston and Surfside. The group started at Texas City Dike in hopes of finding an unusual gull, several of which had been reported recently. Unfortunately none were present that morning, but the group enjoyed a nice variety of other water birds including Brown Pelicans (the photographers’ favorite), Common Goldeneyes, Red-breasted Mergansers and large flocks of Eared Grebes.
At left, a Brown Pelican has a six foot wingspan. At right, a Brown Pelican shows off its wing flexibility. Photos by Hao Vo.

At left, Brown Pelicans feed by diving from a height. Center, the pelican plunges. At right, a perfect 10 dive. Photos by Albert Holba.

The flock of Eared Grebes were feeding on minnows in synchrony. Photo by Albert Holba.
The flock of Eared Grebes dove in synchrony too. Photo by Albert Holba.

The splash of 75+ Eared Grebes as they dove into a school of minnows. Photo by Albert Holba.

From there, the group went to Galveston Island’s Offat’s Bayou, where they found many Common Loons and one elusive Red-throated Loon. While distinctive in their breeding plumage, loons in their winter plumage are difficult to identify. To make it even more challenging, the flock of loons were actively feeding and diving, making it all but impossible to show the critical field marks to most of the participants.
A Common Loon with a large prominent bill unlike the smaller, upturned bill of the Red-throated Loon. Photo by Hao Vo.

The group then took a lunch break at a seawall cafeteria and then went in search of Northern Gannets. These big northern Sulids with six-foot wingspans breed in Newfoundland and winter offshore in the Gulf of Mexico. They feed by diving in the clear water beyond the turbid surf. Unfortunately, on our trip the clear water was out two or three miles, making them extremely difficult to see or identify. A few participants were able to stay on a gannet long enough to identify it and record the species as a lifer. Of course, there were many other species to see and enjoy as well, including a couple of Peregrine Falcons that were roosting on water towers.

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

There is now a waitlist for the March 3 trip to see 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 and May 5 trips 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 March and April 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](http://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](http://www.pct3.com), 16756 Westheimer Parkway, in George Bush Park; the [Danny Jackson Family Dog Park](http://www.pct3.com), 4828 ½ Loop Central Dr., near Loop 610 and Westpark; a dog park in [Congressman Bill Archer Park](http://www.pct3.com), 3201 Highway 6 North; [Deputy Darren Goforth Dog Park](http://www.pct3.com), 9402 Barker Cypress Road and [Beverly Kaufman Dog Park](http://www.pct3.com) 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](http://www.pct3.com) for more information.