Commissioner Steve Radack and his staff wish you a Happy Valentine's Day. The weather in our area has been wet and mild this winter, but colder than normal to our north and east. So far, many of our hummingbird plants like the shrimp plant, giant Turk's cap, and the red rocket russelia are still blooming and providing natural food for our over-wintering hummingbirds. Let us hope our luck holds through the end of February. I recall a couple of Valentine’s Days in my youth when we made snowmen decorated with valentines in Houston. Let's hope we do not relive my childhood.

Volunteer activities
The Yaupon's Worst Nightmare Crew worked three days in January clearing the right-of-way line along Draper Rd and nurturing the park's only native patch of Farkelberry. This plant in the blueberry family has a tasty fruit. They also cleared around a large Live Oak on the south side of the Nature Center and began clearing a dense stand of Yaupon and Greenbriar for Pine Forest restoration. It is a great way to get exercise and also build hours if you are a Master Naturalist.

Tuesday Volunteers continue to stay busy with weekly chores that range from fixing equipment, trimming and sweeping the trail boardwalks, restoring items for historic display, filling bird feeders, and generally tiding up the grounds. The Vegetable Gardeners are on break and hoping the ground will someday be dry again. The Master Naturalists continue to control invasive and exotic species, as well as pitch in with the Yaupon’s Worst Nightmare Crew. The Woodworkers continue building shelves and working on maintenance items. Their new project, a miniature Kleb House for Purple Martins, is coming along. With the help of one of our talented volunteer artists, they hope to have it completed and installed by mid-February.

A Closer Look at History was about the American Revolution and the Culper Spy Ring. This secret organization was formed by General George Washington, yet not even he knew all six members by name. During the program, the kids learned how invisible ink saved the lives of the spies who used it. The spies could write a note on a piece of paper and place it in a bundle of new blank sheets, and it would pass inspection undetected. Following class the kids tried their hand with invisible ink which is made with baking soda and water. The kids wrote their secret message on paper, and then used grape juice to reveal the message. It was great fun for them.

Our schedule of programs this semester are as follows: The February program is about German Immigrant experiences in early Texas and their trail of bones to New Braunfels. In March, we will discuss Austin’s Colony and the importance of his survey’s and maps. April’s program is on Jamestown and how it relates to Texas. Finally, the missions of Texas and their role in settling Texas will be the topic for May.
Closer Look at Nature
The January 3 class was all about frogs. Students learned about the interesting diversity of frogs and toads and how to tell the difference between the two. Many were impressed by the unique, and sometimes truly bizarre, lifestyles of different frog species around the world. Then the kids had a hoppin’ good time testing their jumping abilities. While some of the younger children were able to jump as far as a Spring Peeper, most were able to jump as far as a Northern Cricket Frog. Nobody could come close to the eight-foot jump of an Australian Rocket Frog. At just two inches long, that is about 50 times its body length!

Future classes for the new year will examine planting trees, eggs in nature, how fast baby birds grow, and spiders.

History Discussion Group
The January History Discussion Group was led by staff member and historian, Karli Pittman. She reviewed the book George Washington's Secret Six, The Spy Ring That Saved the American Revolution by Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger. Spy ring leader, Benjamin Tallmadge, was tasked by Washington to recruit members. Tallmadge, whose pseudonym was John Bolton, gathered two men. One was a blacksmith who used his whale boat to transport letters named Caleb Brewster. The other, Abraham Woodhull, was a nervous man who used his farm as the drop-off and pick-up location for correspondence. Woodhull’s anxiety led him to recruit Robert Townsend (a.k.a. Culper Junior), a coffee shop owner who listened in on the gossip at his store, and Austin Roe, a tavern keeper who counted on the loose tongues at his bar to give him information. One spy episode in the book described several group members who went undercover at a British military party, where female Agent 355 flirted with officers to gain important information.

The Culper Spy Ring was almost lost to history, but in 1929 history enthusiast Morton Pennypacker discovered the letters of Benjamin Tallmadge. From the letters and other documents, Pennypacker was able to piece together a rough history of Washington’s secret spy ring. As the years followed, more information was uncovered about the daring members. The only unidentified member was Agent 355, who had managed to get British officers to be a bit too talkative during parties. Though her identity is suspected, it has never been conclusively determined. Most of the participants of the discussion group, like most Americans, had never heard of this Revolutionary episode. The group discussed the reasons why these brave souls went largely unknown to history for so many years. The story of the Culper Spy Ring fascinated all who attended.

The February discussion will again feature little-known facets of George Washington. We will review the book by Peter Stark, Young Washington: How Wilderness and War Forged America's Founding Father. In March we will discuss WWII in the Pacific focusing on the Marines.
German language classes
Formal German classes continue into the spring semester including German 1-A, German 1-B and German 2-A. German 1-A and 1-B are the equivalent of High School German 1, while our German 2-A and 2-B are the equivalent of High School German 2. If you have any other questions, please contact Linda Martin-Rust at klebwoods@pct3.com.

Birding activities
The weekly bird walks in January continued to be highlighted by unusual wintering Purple Finches, Pine Siskins and Red-breasted Nuthatches. Other regular but fun birds like Winter Wren, Brown Creeper and Golden-crowned Kinglet were also highlights for many of the participants. The Scaly-breasted Munias, an exotic species, have remained through January and are sought by many visiting birdwatchers.

The January Senior Birding Bus Trip visited Williamson County and was highly successful, with the group quickly locating their primary target: Mountain Plover. These pale, plain plover are slightly smaller than a Killdeer and are restricted to North America. They primarily nest in the rolling prairies of Colorado but reach into Canada. They winter in the Sacramento Valley of California, Texas and northern Mexico. The population is declining, and they may soon be listed as threatened or endangered. They and the Sparrow-like Longspurs prefer nearly bare, fallow sorghum fields in winter where they can be very cryptic. See if you can spot the four Mountain Plover flying in the picture below.

Mountain Plover can be difficult to spot, even while flying. Photo by Albert Holba.

At left, a Mountain Plover’s white breast can be conspicuous with good position and light. At right, another group in a different field were difficult to see if they turned their backs to you. Photos by Albert Holba.

The group also spotted some McCown’s Longspurs. Longspurs are usually in flocks. When in flight, the flocks crisscross the fields in a distinctive way so that there is little doubt that they are Longspurs. Each species has distinctive tail patterns, often accented by a black and white pattern. McCown’s Longspur has a T-shaped pattern of black on a white tail. Seeing this mark just before they land is a good way to identify them. Unfortunately, once they land in this stubble, seeing the sparrow-sized bird is difficult. Fortunately, we were able to get the scope on them as they walked about the fields, and all 30 of our participants got to see these elusive birds. After a successful morning, we went to the Sirloin Stockade in Tyler for lunch. This is an annual pilgrimage for the Seniors, and several say they go on the trip just to eat at this popular buffet.
After lunch, we assembled the group at Sore Finger Wildlife Management Area to walk off the over indulgence from lunch. Our target was Short-eared Owl. Fred Collins, our trusty leader, said “They are only about 100 yards away, come on and follow me through this tall grass.” The group formed a line and proceeded to move across the field, hoping to flush an owl or two. When we were about 1,000 yards into the field (as measured on Google Earth), an Owl finally got up, flew a short distance and settled back into the grass. The group reassembled closer to the spot, and before they could proceed more than a step or two, Owls erupted from all over in front of them. Eventually there were seven Owls in the air at one time. It was a great spectacle. The Owls were joined by a couple of Norther Harriers to complete the show.

At left, three of the seven Short-eared Owls flying with moth-like wing beats. At right, their distinctive wing pattern is easily seen. Photos by Albert Holba.

After the successful Owl walk, the group went in search of Sparrows at Willis Creek Park on Granger Lake. They found a large number of Harris’s Sparrows, both on the way and in the park. These big Sparrows are most handsome. The Fox Sparrows normally found at the park were elusive. This boldly marked, Big Sparrow was seen by some, though not everyone in the group had the same luck. The day was quickly gone, and it was time for the drive home. It was a great day with great weather.

At left, a Harris’s Sparrow. At right, an immature White-crowned Sparrow. Photos by Albert Holba.
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 **March 29** trip to look for Golden Cheeked Warblers and the **April 12** trip to Boykin Springs to look for Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Bachman’s Sparrow, and any nesting 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 February and March can be found on the [www.pct3.com](http://www.pct3.com) website at Community Calendars. There is also a link from the park’s web 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.