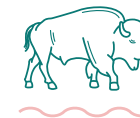


Park Central

WORDS *DFWCHILD* EDITORS

Load up the car and hit the roads leading out of Dallas-Fort Worth for some of our region's **best state parks**, where wild nature awaits

6,659,968. That's the number of people who live in the Tarrant-Dallas-Collin-Denton area. We're one of the nation's biggest and fastest-growing metropolitan zones—and while we have pockets of lakes and trails and green spaces, the Metroplex isn't really the best place to unplug and appreciate the natural world. But you don't have to go far to get to the great (really great) outdoors. We've compiled a guide to five state parks, all within five hours of North Texas, that provide room for your family to explore under wide-open skies.



CAPROCK CANYONS STATE PARK & TRAILWAY

850 Caprock Canyon Road; Quitaque, Texas

tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/caprock-canyons

Drive from Dallas: 4 hours 52 minutes

Drive from Fort Worth: 4 hours 26 minutes

Red-rock cliffs create a rugged backdrop for this state park located in the Texas Panhandle. The activities are plentiful on the park's open range: You can hike, bike or ride a horse through dozens of miles of trails. Stand in wonder (and at a distance) as bison—the largest land animal in North America—roam the plains. Traverse a railway to an old railroad tunnel that happens to be the summer home of a huge colony of Mexican free-tailed bats.

At first glance, Caprock Canyons may look straight out of the dry, dusty Old West, but it's also home to Lake Theo. You just might spot bison grazing on the shores, and the 120-surface-acre lake is open for swimming, fishing and no-wake boating. If you're visiting during the winter, you could see snow along the banks and on the bluffs beyond.

Back in the canyon, you can take in the park's weathered landscape along one of the many trails. Whether you're a novice hiker or an experienced pro, there's a path for you. "Our trails are all longer distance trails, so many people with young children usually go a short distance down the trail and then come back," shares Stephanie Salinas Garcia, spokesperson with Texas Parks & Wildlife.

If you're in for the long haul, you can walk the extensive railway created from an abandoned railroad line, which leads to Clarity Tunnel. That's where the bats (up to half a million of them) spend the warmer months and where mothers give birth and raise their pups. "We recommend watching a bat emergence flight, [which takes place] each evening from late June through September," says Garica.

The bats may be seasonal, but the bison are permanent residents. The large, shaggy animals are descendants of a herd started by famed cattle rancher Charles Goodnight and his wife back in 1878. You can even play a role in protecting and preserving the bison (the official state herd) if you visit the park in September, when the annual Texas State Bison Herd Music Festival is held in downtown Quitaque. Funds raised help maintain the herd. The bison fest was canceled last year because of COVID-19, but the park hopes to be back in the saddle in 2021.

Speaking of animals—if you want to see babies (and who doesn't), spring is the ideal time to make a Caprock Canyons trip. "In the spring, the bison calves are born and prairie dog pups emerge from their burrows," notes Garcia, adding that the landscape is ideal, too. "If we have received some good rainfall, wildflowers are plentiful. Fall is beautiful as well, with changing leaf colors and fall wildflowers. Just remember that these are our busiest times of the year, with higher visitation, so plan ahead to secure a reservation."

Those reservations cover day passes as well as in-park camping options, including drive-up sites with electricity and hike-in, primitive areas. If you have a horse, you'll want to set up at the equestrian camp-sites complete with corrals.

The park will even make your kiddo a Junior Ranger, and a variety of kid-friendly programs at the park will resume as soon as public health concerns ease. So there's a lot of reasons to giddy up on over to Caprock Canyons.

Know before you go: Did you know there's such a thing as bison etiquette? (And you thought you only had to teach the kids table manners!) Visit the state park's website for tips on how to safely observe the animals. The closest access point for Clarity Tunnel, where the bats are located, is five miles down the railway, making for a 10-mile round trip. During the summer, staff typically offer "bat tours" using the park van, but they are on hold because of the pandemic. There are no horse or boat rentals, and the boat dock is currently closed due to low water levels. Fishing equipment rentals are not available due to COVID-19. The Lake Theo Lodge cabin is currently closed for repairs. Be sure to ask rangers about the difficulty level of any trail you take; some are not for novices and younger kiddos. Make sure you have water with you, and be safe out there—cell service is limited.



SAN ANGELO STATE PARK

362 S. FM 2288; San Angelo, Texas

tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/san-angelo

Drive from Dallas: 4 hours 15 minutes

Drive from Fort Worth: 3 hours 39 minutes

The stars are certainly big and bright from your vantage point at San Angelo State Park. This West Texas destination's wide-open acres (7,500 of them) make stargazing just one of the many things your family will love here. From longhorns to prehistoric creatures (well, their fossilized tracks), there's abundant wildlife to observe. Trek across mile after mile of trails. Reel in a catch from the O.C. Fisher Reservoir or the Concho River. And learn some history, too. Archaeologists believe Native Americans' presence in the area dates back some 18,000 years.

The landscape at San Angelo State Park is a study in variety. On the trails, you may be in green flats one minute and make your way into a rocky ravine the next. Whether you hike, geocache, bike or ride a horse (it's BYOH, by the way), you'll see diversity in what surrounds you. One trail passes fossilized trackways of Permian Age beasts. There are spots where colorful wildflowers wave in the breezes; in other areas, prickly cacti stand guard over the land.

And that land is roamed by portions of the Official State of Texas Longhorn Herd and bison. The animals' paddocks are designed to give

visitors a glimpse into life on the range in Texas' early days. Then turn your eyes to the sky—birding is outstanding in the park. Located at the convergence of multiple ecological zones, San Angelo State Park provides a home or a migration stop for more than 300 species of birds. You can use the birding-wildlife blind or take a walk under the pecan trees that line the North Concho River.

Don't just look at the water from the shores; you can fish, boat and paddle on the lake and river. San Angelo State Park also offers hunting and camping (primitive as well as sites with water and electricity) areas. There are cabins, too.

There are more outdoor activities in town. Head to the Concho Riverwalk for a family stroll and picnic. You'll also find playgrounds, gardens, golf... San Angelo is called "an oasis in West Texas" for a reason.

Know before you go: Planning to get out on the water? Bring your own fishing gear; rentals are on hold due to COVID-19. No fishing license is necessary if you're fishing from shore (that's true for any state park), but you need one to fish from a boat. Make sure you're appropriately licensed if you plan to hunt. For boating, check lake levels before you come. When lake access is available, your best bet is the Lakeview Boat Ramp. There is no swimming area at the park, and there aren't any sections of the river accessible enough to swim. Bringing a horse? There are sites in the North Concho area with pole tethers and pens. Rustic (read: the restroom is nearby, not on-site) log cabins are available for rent on Friday and Saturday nights. The park does have a bunkhouse that sleeps six, but it's currently closed for repairs.



CRATER OF DIAMONDS STATE PARK

209 State Park Road;
Murfreesboro, Arkansas
craterofdiamondsstatepark.com

Drive from Dallas:

3 hours 55 minutes

Drive from Fort Worth:

4 hours 32 minutes

This state park in southwest Arkansas might just be a girl's best friend. That's because you could find a bona

fide diamond in the park's 37-acre search field, the eroded surface of a volcanic crater. White, brown and yellow diamonds, plus amethyst, garnet, quartz and other rocks and minerals—it's finders keepers here, so you can take home any rock, mineral or diamond you unearth. The park staff will even identify (at no charge) the items that visitors find.

"Some people walk and search the top of the ground for a diamond's metallic shine, similar to looking for a dropped earring or coin," says Waymon Cox, a park interpreter. "Most visitors like to dig and sift the dirt to look for gems." If that's your style, you'll want to bring along buckets, garden shovels and sifting tools. "People use everything from simple kitchen colanders to screens of graduated sizes," adds Cox. There are also nearby businesses that sell mining tools. And you can keep the treasure hunt going when you get home; visitors may not remove dirt from the search area, but the park sells small amounts of diamond-bearing soil in the gift shop.

Of course, don't promise the kid-dos a diamond; it's a real search field, not a game with gems planted for your finding pleasure. But they are out there. Last year, guests unearthed 353 diamonds totaling 81.91 carats.

Once you've finished your search, there's still plenty to do at Crater of Diamonds State Park. Walk a 0.2-mile graveled path to the wildlife observation blind, where your family can sit quietly and watch for wildlife. There are observation windows at various heights, so kids and adults can comfortably look for armadillos, squirrels and birds; you might even spot deer, foxes, turkeys and owls. After the kids have been quiet and still, reward them with a trip to the on-site Diamond Springs Water Park. It's a mining-themed aquatic playground, with a wading pool, geysers, sprayers, water jets, cascades, water slides and waterfall hideaways. "It's a great place to cool off after a hot summer day searching for diamonds," Cox says.

You can also have some water-based fun by casting a line on the Little Missouri River. The nearest fishing hole is at Terrell Access, about two miles south of the state park entrance. Reel in largemouth bass, catfish and bream before you head back to camp at your RV or tent site. You'll enjoy picturesque walking trails and picnic sites during your visit, as well.

If you're not totally worn out from all that, consider driving another hour and a half, or thereabouts,

to Hot Springs National Park. Let the family fun continue!

Know before you go: The park's busiest times are spring break, summer weekends and holidays. Admission to the diamond search area is currently limited to 1,500 people per day; buy advance tickets online to make sure the park isn't sold out during your trip. It can get warm during your search, so the park recommends families bring a beach umbrella, canopy or pop-up tent to provide shade. You can also sit and rest at the park's sun shelters. There are accessible trails in the park. The water park is open Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day.



LAKE WISTER STATE PARK

25679 U.S. Highway 270;
Wister, Oklahoma
travelok.com/state-parks/lake-wister-state-park

Drive from Dallas:

3 hours 59 minutes

Drive from Fort Worth:

4 hours 12 minutes

Considered the gateway to Ouachita National Forest—which covers 1.8 million acres of land stretching from southeastern Oklahoma into central Arkansas—Lake Wister State Park is an outdoor paradise. Relax at your shoreline campsite, surrounded by pine- and oak-covered mountains. Cast a line for northern bluegill, channel catfish, white bass, and smallmouth and largemouth bass. Meander a self-guided nature trail, or hike wilderness routes that offer glimpses of deer, ducks and rabbits. Mountain-bike along the water.

The adventures continue year-round at Lake Wister State Park. Visiting in spring? The birdwatching is ideal; try a birding scavenger hunt or have the kids imitate the calls they hear. (The National Audubon Society has more tips for getting children interested in birding at audubon.org/news/easy-ways-get-kids-birding.) You can also snap a gorgeous family photo among the Indian paintbrush, Indian blanket and other wildflowers. Summer vacationers might try their hand (or legs, as the case may be) at waterskiing on the 7,300-acre Lake Wister, or take a dip at the swimming beach.

If you have a hunter in the family, they'll find abundant opportunities in the fall at the nearby Wister Wildlife Management Area. And don't shy away from a winter visit to Lake Wister State Park. The park's Quarry Island hosts "Lights on the Island," featuring more than 300 light displays, such as a towering Statue of Liberty. And in the colder months, you could spot gold and bald eagles in the skies above.

When you've gotten a good dose of nature, play a round of mini golf or disc golf, hit the playground or cool off in the spray park if it's warm enough. (All those amenities are on-site.) And whether you want to rough it at night or lean more toward "glamping," there's a lodging option for you. Reserve one of the park's cabins, located in groves of dogwood, wild cherry and northern spruce. You'll enjoy majestic lake and park views, stone fireplaces, queen beds, kitchens, air conditioning, flat-screen TVs, showers and convenient access to trails. Pets are welcome in select cabins, too. If your family is RVing it, or you prefer to tent camp, Lake Wister State Park has you covered there as well. Comfort stations around the park will let you shower and, ahem, answer the call of nature.

A couple of fun facts: The Poteau River, which flows into Lake Wister, is the only north-flowing river in Oklahoma. And if you head over to the nearby Heavener Runestone Park, you can explore some of the state's ancient history: It's the home of a large sandstone that contains markings believed to have been created by Vikings.

Know before you go: Find fishing and hunting license information, and book your cabin, RV site or campsite, on travelok.com. Lodging includes 15 one- or two-bedroom cabins, 118 modern and semi-modern RV campsites, and close to 50 tent sites. There's also a group camp area. Want to enjoy the water but don't own a boat or other water sports equipment? This year, a new concessionaire is offering kayak and canoe rentals. And if you Google "Lake Wister boat rentals," you'll find nearby businesses. The splash park is open from Memorial Day Weekend until Labor Day. Lake Wister State Park boasts two cabins with accessible main and bathroom entrances, and the park's Wards Campground has an ADA-compliant trail.



CADDO LAKE STATE PARK

245 Park Road 2; Karnack, Texas
tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/caddo-lake

Drive from Dallas:

2 hours 49 minutes

Drive from Fort Worth:

3 hours 20 minutes

If you're looking for a true change of scenery from the hustle and bustle of the city, then Caddo Lake State Park is the perfect spot. Located on the eastern edge of Texas, this park is home to a lush landscape of wetlands and slow-moving bayous—an ideal habitat for a diverse range of animals, including fish, frogs, minks, waterfowl, beavers, white-tailed deer, snakes and even alligators. Yep, you read that right: There are alligators in the park, so definitely check out the park's website for alligator safety tips as a precaution.

The animals are, of course, not the only ones to enjoy this natural



Enormous bald cypress trees make for impressive surroundings as your family cruises through the waters at Caddo Lake State Park in a canoe or kayak.

haven. Bring a kayak or canoe (or rent one in the park) and explore the huge, 26,810-acre Caddo Lake; navigate the twists and turns under a canopy of giant bald cypress trees, draped with Spanish moss. You can even journey into the 50+ miles of paddling trails in the Caddo region.

Interested in some serene fishing? You can cast a line for 71 species of fish found in Caddo Lake. Hiking more your family's thing? The forest awaits; look for the Pine Ridge Loop or the Caddo Forest Trail. Stop in at park headquarters so your little one can become a Junior Ranger and earn a badge by completing tasks throughout the park.

When it comes to lodging, choose from campsites (accommodating tents to RVs, with water to full hookups); screened shelters, with electricity, outdoor grills and picnic tables; and, if sleeping in a bed is more your speed, the limited-use cabin (sleeping space only) or historic cabins with other amenities.

And speaking of history, Caddo Lake State Park has a rich one: People

have lived in the area for some 12,000 years, hunting and gathering throughout the Caddo wetlands, forests and floodplains. Ask your kiddos what they would do to survive here without all the comforts of modern home. You can look up information about the Caddo Indians, who were here long before there was a park. Caddo Lake State Park's first structures were constructed by members of the Civilian Conservation Corps between 1933–37. Can your children spot the remnants of original picnic spots along the trails?

Know before you go: This is a popular park, so booking your day passes early is recommended; you can book up to 30 days in advance. Want to stay in one of the coveted cabins? You might need to plan five months ahead. Pets are not allowed in cabin areas, but they are allowed in the park for camping or day use. Several of the cabins are ADA accessible. Busy season is from March to November; we suggest visiting in late March or early April when dogwood trees are blooming. Beautiful! 🌳



SUNSET: COURTESY OF SAN ANGELO STATE PARK; KAYAKING: COURTESY OF CADDO LAKE STATE PARK