



CRITTER CONNECTIONS



State Symbols

State Tree - Pecan



The Pecan (*Carya illinoensis*) was officially recognized as the state tree of Texas in 1919. They grow from 70-100 feet tall, but can reach heights of over 150 feet. Their leaves are compound, which means that many smaller leaflets make up a single leaf. One leaf consists of 11-17 long and narrow leaflets which alternate on either side of the rachis or leaf stem.

Pecan trees are pollinated by wind, so they do not need bright and showy flowers to attract animal pollinators. The flowers grow on structures called catkins, which are 3-5 inch-long stems covered with tiny yellow-green flowers. Pecans are related to walnuts, and both have similar fruit where a seed (the nut) grows inside a hard shell or husk.



Pecans are a food source for many types of wildlife including birds, squirrels, and raccoons. Wildlife also find shelter in the tree. Humans also consume pecans and they use the wood to build furniture and to smoke meats. Texas is the second leading producer of pecans in the United States, behind Georgia. Pecan trees can be grown in orchards where the nuts can be harvested for human use, much like a farmer's crop fields. A mature pecan tree can grow almost 100 pounds of pecans in a year.

Source: Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center

Photos: Clemson University, James St. John, SnickeringBear

Texas Symbols Mobile



Craft Instructions:

1. Download Template at: bit.ly/CC_TXSymbols
2. Print and cut out symbols
3. Color symbols
4. Hang symbols to sticks or a coat hanger with string

If you want to take this craft a step further, create your own state symbols mobile using art supplies like felt, colored paper or clay.

Did you know...

... that Texas has over 50 state symbols?

... that the name Texas comes from a Spanish variation of the Caddo Indian word "tejas" which means friendship? This is perfect, because our state motto is friendship.

... that our state reptile, the horned lizard, can shoot blood out of its eyes as a defensive adaptation?

... that Texas has a state small mammal, large mammal and flying mammal?

... that two of our state symbols undergo great migrations: the Mexican free-tailed bat and the Monarch butterfly?

... that there are six species or types of bluebonnets in Texas, and they are all considered the state flower?

... that Texas is home to the largest bat colony in the world, Bracken Cave, which provides habitat for over 15 million Mexican free-tailed bats?

... that our state bird, the Northern Mockingbird, can copy the songs of other birds and frogs, creating around 200 songs throughout their life?



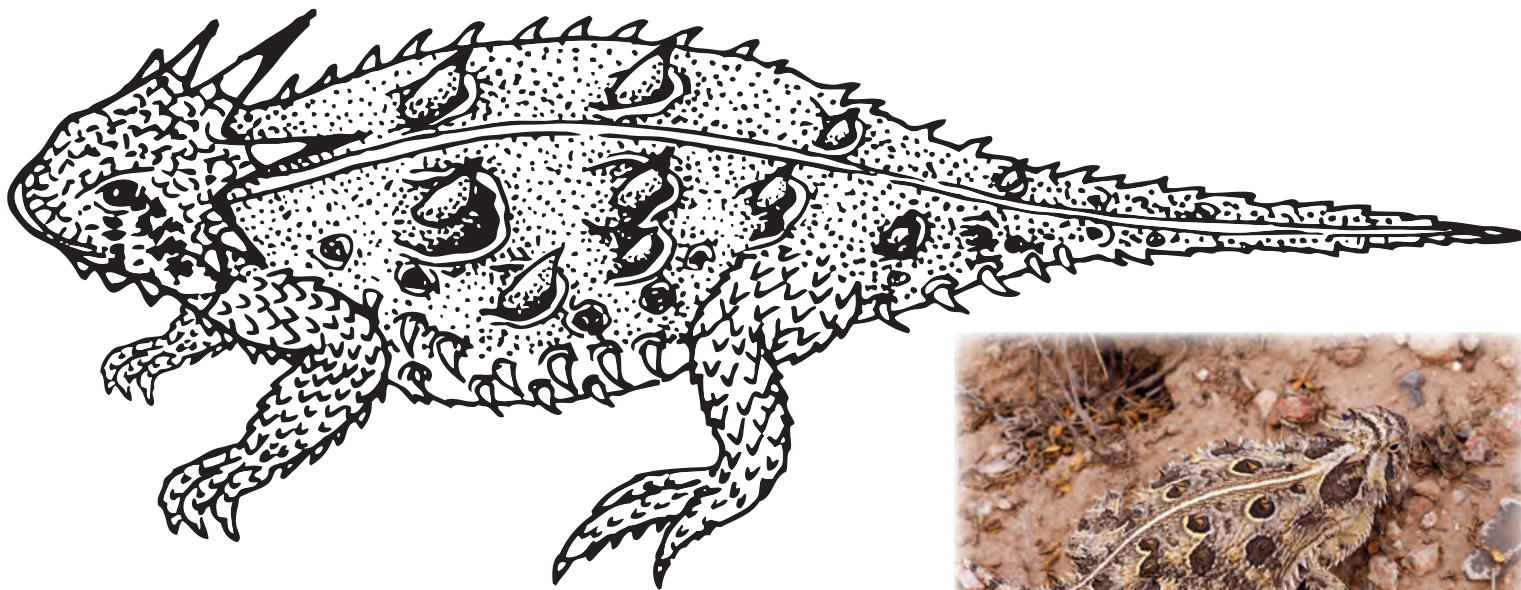
Mexican free-tailed bats

Photo source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Headquarters

Color Me

Texas Horned Lizard

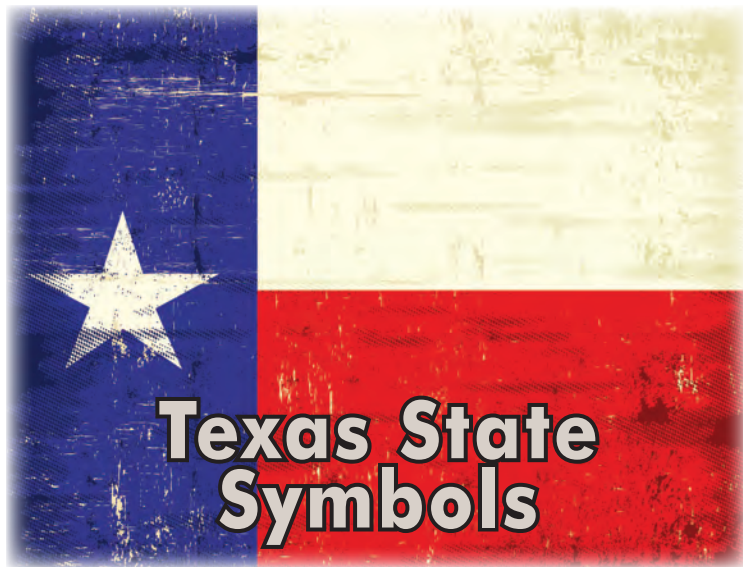
(*Phrynosoma cornutum*)



Texas Horned Lizard

Image © Sheri Amsel, www.exploringnature.org

Photo source: Patrick Alexander



by Elanor Dean

Texas, the Lone Star State, is an amazing state with over 50 state symbols. This article will not cover all of them, but here are a few honorable mentions: state shoe is the cowboy boot, the state motto is Friendship, the state large mammal is the Texas Longhorn and the state shell is the Lightning Whelk. There are many more, but this issue will focus on some of the more well-known plant and animal symbols.

Flower – Bluebonnet (Recognized in 1901)

By far the most well-known plant symbol is our state flower, the Bluebonnet. There are six species or types of bluebonnet in Texas, and they are all considered the state flower. Bluebonnets are in the same family of plants as peas and beans. Their seeds grow in pods just like peas, but their peas are toxic or poisonous to humans. The plant is made up of many blue flowers that grow all around the stem with a whitish cluster at the tip. Bluebonnets are important food sources for pollinators like butterflies and especially bees.



Bluebonnets

Grass – Sideoats Grama (Recognized in 1971)

Sideoats grama is the state grass of Texas. It is found across most of Texas, except the far eastern parts of the state. The name comes from the oat-like spikes which hang on the side of the stem. Sideoats grama is beneficial to wildlife in many ways. It provides cover and nesting material for smaller species of wildlife. It provides a food source for wildlife like birds, caterpillars and deer and livestock like cattle. Sideoats grama is also an attractive grass in grassland ecosystems and gardens, and it provides erosion control.

Plant – Prickly Pear Cactus (Recognized in 1995)

One of the most common and easily recognizable cacti in Texas is the prickly pear. There are over 40 species in the prickly pear genus, *Opuntia*, and they are all recognized as the state plant. A typical prickly pear has several round, flattened pads called nopales that are covered with clusters of defensive spines. They produce beautiful flowers in various shades from white and yellow to red. After flowering, the purple prickly pear fruits (also known as tunas) emerge. Small mammals and birds feed on the fruit and find shelter below the pads. The pads can also be a food source for wildlife and livestock and are important as a water source in dry habitats. Humans can also consume the fruit and pads.



Prickly Pear

Fish – Guadalupe Bass (Recognized in 1980)

The state fish is a freshwater fish called the Guadalupe Bass. They are only found in Texas, which makes them an excellent state symbol. They live in habitats with flowing water like streams and rivers, including the Guadalupe River. They are overall greenish in color with a yellow-white underside and characteristic diamond-shaped markings on the side. They do not grow very large, typically up to 15 inches and weigh around one pound, but the state record weighed over 3.5 pounds. Texas anglers or fishermen note that they are a popular gamefish because they are fun and challenging to catch.

Insect – Monarch Butterfly (Recognized in 1995)

Texas is a very important migration stop for our state insect, the Monarch butterfly. Monarchs migrate up to 2,500 miles from northern parts of the United States and Canada, through Texas, and all the way south to Mexico. They have a wingspan of 3-4 inches and have orange wings with black veins and white spots on the edges. Like all butterflies, Monarchs undergo complete metamorphosis through a four-stage life cycle; egg, caterpillar, pupa and adult butterfly. If you want to see Monarchs in your home and school gardens, be sure to plant nectar plants for the adult butterfly and milkweed for the caterpillars.



Monarch Butterfly



Texas horned lizard

Reptile – Horned Lizard (Recognized in 1993)

The state reptile is the rare and mysterious horned lizard. They are found in dry habitats in west Texas where their reddish-brown coloration provides excellent camouflage against the soil. Their flat and wide bodies are covered with spiky scales, and they have horns on their head. If a predator spots them, they are able to squirt blood out of their eye at a distance of up to 5 feet. If this defense does not work, they can also puff up their body, making them difficult to swallow. They are insectivores, primarily feeding on harvester ants. In Texas, they are a state threatened species, which means they are studied and protected.

Flying Mammal – Mexican Free-tailed Bat (Recognized in 1995)

Mexican free-tailed bats are the most common bat in Texas, so it's no surprise that they are the state flying mammal. In normal flight, they can reach speeds of 99 miles per hour, making them the fastest mammal on earth. Their tail, which is free from the tail membrane, allows them to quickly change directions in flight to hunt their insect prey. They are very important to farmers by eating tons of insect crop pests. Millions of bats migrate to Texas during the summer, and there are places you can visit to view them. Bracken Cave near San Antonio is the largest known colony of bats with up to 20 million female bats and their babies. Austin is home to the largest colony of urban bats, with over a million living under Congress Avenue Bridge.



Mexican free-tailed bat

Small Mammal – Nine-banded Armadillo (Recognized in 1995)

The nine-banded armadillo is the state small mammal, and they are common all over Texas. They are covered with tough leathery armor which protects them from predators. They have an excellent sense of smell with a long nose, scoop shaped face and long front claws which they use to dig for worms and insects. They also dig burrows for shelter. They are quite athletic and can jump three feet up in the air to avoid predators, and they are good swimmers. They can inflate their intestines to float across a body of water, or they can sink and hold their breath for up to six minutes to run along the bottom. Another interesting fact is that they always give birth to four identical babies, which are either all males or all females.



Nine-banded armadillo

Bird – Northern Mockingbird (Recognized in 1927)

Our State bird, the Northern Mockingbird is found across Texas in many habitats. It is a very common bird, so you have probably seen one before. They are a medium-sized gray bird with white and black markings on their wings. They are omnivores and will consume different foods including berries, insects, seeds and sometimes even small lizards. Mockingbirds are named because they mock or copy the songs of other birds and even other things like frogs and car alarms. A male mockingbird will make 50-200 songs in its life, which they use to attract females and to establish their territory.



Northern Mockingbird

All of these state symbols are amazing and definitely worthy of representing Texas. Check out a book from your library to learn more about Texas' state symbols. How many of these state symbols have you seen? What can you do to be a good steward and help our state symbols?

Sources: Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center, Texas Parks and Wildlife
Photos from Wikimedia Commons: Sandy Horvath-Dori, Stan Shebs, Judy Gallagher, Patrick Alexander, USFWS, VladLazarenko, Rhododendrites

Guess that Texas Symbol

I have protective armor: _____

I am related to peas: _____

I can fly very fast: _____

I can grow 100 feet tall: _____

I can copy the sounds of other animals: _____

I can squirt blood from my eye: _____

I am covered with spines and have purple fruit: _____

I have diamond-shaped markings along the side of my body: _____

I go through complete metamorphosis: _____

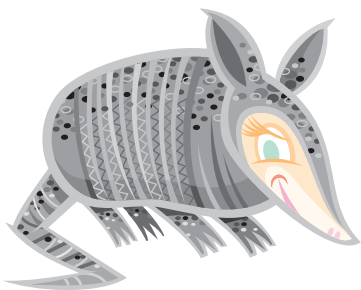
I have long roots which help prevent erosion: _____



Photo Source: Captain-tucker



Nancy's Corner



"What's your favorite state symbol of Texas?"

Choose your favorite state symbol, draw it below and write one fact about why it is important.

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TWA is a membership-based, non-profit organization whose goal is to educate all people, especially the youth of Texas about conservation, management and stewardship of wildlife and habitat on private land.

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