

to determine the overall winner.

This year's state winner will receive the title to a 3/4 ton diesel pickup, sponsored by Texas Farm Bureau Insurance Companies; a \$5,000 cash award, sponsored by Farm Credit Bank of Texas; and expense-paid trips to both the TFB Annual Meeting and American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) Annual Convention.

Two runners-up will receive a \$500 cash award, sponsored by Southern Farm Bureau Life Insurance Company, and expense-paid trips to the TFB Annual Meeting.

All district winners will receive a \$1,000 cash award from Farm Bureau Bank.

**Excellence in Agriculture Contest**

The EIA Contest rewards TFB members who are involved in agriculture but don't make

the majority of their income through production agriculture.

Eligible applicants include farm store managers, crop consultants, agricultural educators and those who are employed by an agricultural business or agency.

"Agriculture needs farms and ranches, but it also needs the businesses and industries that support farmers and ranchers," Hall said. "The EIA Contest recognizes members who are involved in ag-related careers but still make time to be involved in production agriculture."

The state winner will receive a UTV, sponsored by Southern Farm Bureau Life Insurance Company; a \$5,000 cash prize, sponsored by Farm Credit Bank of Texas, and expense-paid trips to both the TFB Annual Meeting and AFBF Annual Convention.



**Retirement!** Douglas Roberts retired last week from the Texas Department of Transportation after 31 years of service to the San Angelo district. He started as a summer hire in 1989 while attending Texas Tech University and moved to a full-time position in 1990. He has worked his way up, holding various positions in the Robert Lee Maintenance section, including supervisor and ultimately district maintenance supervisor.



**Zoo Magic**

By James M. Decker

When's the last time you took a trip to a zoo? More to the point, when did you last take a trip to the zoo with a child? My daughter Miriam turned three earlier this month. For her birthday, we took a Sunday afternoon outing to the Abilene Zoo with her grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. I will admit, until Miriam was born, I had not been to the Abilene Zoo (or any zoo) in many years. We have made several trips since then. This was Miriam's third trip to the zoo (and my second) in 2021 alone!

I have a hard time relaxing. I have a hard time focusing my brain on one thing. I have a hard time cutting out distractions on my phone and otherwise (my wife will nod furiously if/when she reads this). As such, it can be hard to fully enjoy "slow" pleasures in life like a zoo or other quiet recreation. But I am trying. First, if you are anywhere within driving distance of the Abilene Zoo, you need to make a visit, especially if you have children or if you have not visited recently. When I was a kid, I always thought it was cool that a "smaller" city like Abilene had a zoo. That is not the case for similar cities in Texas, even larger ones.

Every time I walk around the Abilene Zoo, I am thankful that the City of Abilene and its nonprofit partners do such a tremendous job spotlighting wildlife from near and far and providing unique educational experiences to their visitors. It is particularly enjoyable to

watch it through the prism of an excited toddler - jabbering about feeding the giraffes, pointing out the flamingos, trying to attract the attention of the giant anteater (more on him later), and commenting on the bobcat sleeping in a hammock or the otters jumping in and out of the water.

The history of zoos is something of a mixed bag. Humans have not always done right by wild animals in captivity. But humans have not always done right by wild animals in the wild, either! It is more of a human problem than it is a zoo problem. Well-run zoos are critical to the stewardship of our environment and the flora and fauna that inhabit it (and that are affected by our decisions as a society). We cannot all travel to Africa or Alaska or Argentina, but zoos show the majesty in those places and give us a better appreciation for the world around us.

For each animal, the Abilene Zoo does a wonderful job of outlining its conservation status, the threats facing it, and the good work being done to preserve that animal and its habitat. It is sobering to see how humanity has driven some amazing creatures to the point of extinction. It is inspiring to see how zoos and their partner organizations have succeeded in preventing numerous species from outright extinction. I was thinking about this as I admired

Abilene's whooping crane. Texas Monthly recently reported that the whooping crane is nesting in Texas for the first time since the 1800s! That is pretty incredible considering that, as Texas Monthly shared, in 1941, there were only sixteen(!) of the birds still in the wild.

On that point, the Abilene Zoo recently received a female giant anteater named Demo from the Roger Williams Zoo in Rhode Island, to be matched with Abilene's fantastic male anteater Beni. Through the Species Survival Plan, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums is working to establish a breeding program for endangered species like the giant anteater. According to the Abilene Zoo, only 5,000 giant anteaters remain in the wild. What beautiful work it is to help grow that population!

I could write a whole essay about anteaters, y'all. I think they are one of the most interesting creatures on Earth. Miriam agrees with me. If you get the chance, take yourself to

the zoo, preferably with a child in tow, and try to truly relax and soak it all in. By the time you are done, you'll both be giddy about the majesty of God's Kingdom.

James Decker is the Mayor of

Stamford, Texas and the creator of the West of 98 website and podcast. Contact James and subscribe to these essays at [westof98.substack.com](http://westof98.substack.com) and subscribe to West of 98 wherever podcasts are found.

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