

question at the entrance to Pedernales Falls prompted Blasingame to inquire about the number of state parks.

The ranger’s reply—95 at the time—inspired Blasingame to respond immediately with “I’m going to buy the annual pass, and I’m going to do them all in one year.”

This spontaneous decision would transform his life and spill over into his career.

With his annual pass in hand, Blasingame, an associate professor of digital media and journalism at Texas State University in San Marcos, started ticking state park properties off his list, beginning with those in Central Texas and followed by ones near Dallas and Houston.

While he had never considered himself outdoorsy, a bad breakup in 2013 led him to spend more time in nature, starting with a trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico, with his sister and brother-in-law. That inspired a solo road trip to Montana through Yellowstone National Park and the Rocky Mountains.

Halfway through his state park quest, he met a man hiking with his dog at Buescher State Park in Bastrop County.

“I asked him if he liked hiking with the dog, and he was like, ‘Oh man, you’ll never regret it,’” Blasingame says. “The whole way home, I was just thinking about [how] it would be really great to have a dog to hike with.”

Coincidentally, the PetSmart near Blasingame’s home was having an adoption event that same day. He brought home a medium-sized black rescue pup he renamed Lucy, who resembles a mix between a black golden retriever and a border collie. Since then, the pair have been inseparable.

Blasingame decided Lucy needed to be the first dog to visit every Texas state park. Since hiking and photography were the main draws for him at the parks, the pair focused on long day hikes, mostly ranging from 11 to 14 miles.

In July 2015, as his annual pass expired, Blasingame visited his 95th state park—becoming the first known person to hit all of them in one year.

“I do have to be totally honest,” he says. “It actually took me 367 days. I was two days late.” The final park, Cedar Hill State Park, near Dallas, had been closed due to flooding, so he had to wait for it to reopen.

Lucy completed her goal in December 2018 after finishing a West Texas route that included a private visit to Balmorhea State Park, where dogs are normally not allowed. When they reached the last park, Blasingame let Lucy off her leash, and she went nuts. “It was like she knew that was a celebration of something,” he says.

His newfound love of the outdoors led Blasingame to create a park-focused storytelling class at Texas State



University in 2017 that has evolved to include visits to state and national parks across the U.S. “It’s one thing to get to know students over the course of the semester and a regular class,” Blasingame says, “but when you’re traveling on the road with students, you really do make lifelong friends.”

Now Blasingame has a new goal: “I decided to do every national park property, which is different from saying ‘I’m going to do every national park,’” he explains, pointing out that this includes park designations like national historic sites and battlefields.

So far, he’s set foot on 251 of the 429 national park properties.

While Blasingame’s Texas adventures have been filled with awe-inspiring moments, like observing the Milky Way from West Texas, and downright scary ones, like being chased by wild boars at Lake Somerville State Park and Trailway, it’s impossible for him to have only one favorite state park.

Here are some of Blasingame’s picks by region.

The Panhandle

Palo Duro Canyon State Park is special to Blasingame because of its landscape and a family connection. Located near Amarillo, it’s home to steep, multicolored mesas and the second-largest canyon in the country, known as the Grand Canyon of Texas. Since his parents lived nearby, he often took them to the park.

“My dad loved to go there and just sit in the car and wait for me and Lucy to finish hiking and being able to share those moments,” he says. When Blasingame’s parents died in late 2020 and early 2021, friends had a memorial bench built for them overlooking the Lighthouse, the park’s iconic rock formation.

Despite roughly 30 visits to nearby Caprock Canyons State Park and Trailway, Blasingame hasn’t witnessed large crowds and never tires of the scenic views and hikes through the red rocks.

“It’s got the state bison herd, which are always just incredible to watch,” he says. The animals have free range over 10,000 of the park’s 15,313-acre prairie.

East Texas



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“Caddo Lake is one of my favorite parks out in East Texas,” Blasingame says, reminiscing about the swampy environment where he captured some of his favorite nature photographs of Spanish moss-covered trees on a sunrise boat ride. ““The great thing about the environment in Texas is we have every element. We’ve got beaches. We’ve got mountains. We’ve got canyons. We’ve got lakes.”

Dense fog on his first trip to Martin Dies, Jr. State Park, located at the confluence of the Neches and Angelina rivers, was also memorable. “It literally [felt] like I was just sitting on a cloud and looking out over all these trees coming up out of the fog.”

Central Texas

Closer to home, Blasingame’s favorite park is Colorado Bend State Park, along the Colorado River. A 70-foot spring-fed waterfall is a highlight of every visit.

“Gorman Falls is one of the most unique spots in all of Texas—a slice of the rainforest about an hour outside of Austin,” he says.

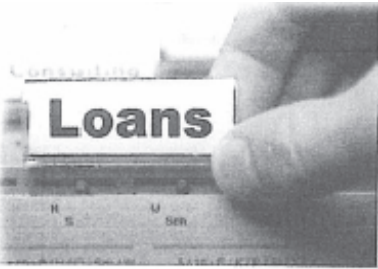
West Texas

Blasingame’s first glimpse of the Milky Way from West Texas in 2013 was one of the moments that molded him into an outdoorsman.

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