

Bluebonnet hunters can use phone line to find wildflowers

By Andrea Warrenburg
REPORTER

Remember as a youngster, your mother dressed you in your Sunday best, threw you in the car and drove for hours to find a bed of bluebonnets she could turn into a makeshift portrait studio with you as the subject?

Well, now such wildflower enthusiasts will be able to find out exactly where the flowers are with a phone call. The Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation is providing a Wildflower Reporting Service which began on the first day of spring, March 20.

This "Wildflower Hotline" provides information on the nearest wildflower patches in the area.

"Blooming wildflowers have always been a prime event in Texas in the spring," Rosemary Neff, public information officer at the transportation headquarters in Austin, said. "People are always calling, wanting to know where they can find the flowers."

Each of the 24 districts in Texas obtains information on wildflower location and keys it into a computer. When one of the 12 Texas Tourist Bureaus or the nearest district office

is called, the caller can talk to a person — not a recording — about the exact location of the nearest wildflower patch. Bryan-College Station is in the 17th district.

"The project has practical as well as poetic reasons," Neff said.

The highway department encourages the growth of native vegetation with landscaping and vegetation management. The beauty of the wildflowers attracts tourists and prevents highway driving monotony or "highway hypnosis," she said. The project also helps to protect the environment from erosion.

Neff said no law exists which specifically forbids picking wildflowers. But if a person is recklessly and flagrantly destroying the flowers, it can be a misdemeanor punishable by a fine.

"We discourage picking the flowers because it's in everyone's best interest to leave them to be enjoyed by all and to seed for the next year," Neff said.

For local reports and information, call 778-2165. A spokesman in the Bryan office said the wildflowers in this area will not be blooming until mid-April. Location reports will be available at that time.

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Houston shelter violates housing, sanitary codes

HOUSTON (AP) — The city's largest shelter for the homeless houses hundreds of men each night without occupancy permits, which violates the city's housing code, and its sanitary conditions are so poor its food dealer's permit could be suspended or revoked, officials said.

After the inspections found the violations, officials from Star of Hope applied to the city for the occupancy permits, which include specifications for the number of people allowed inside. Star of Hope is a non-profit organization that operates the shelter.

One official said the number of beds in the 38,000 square-foot, three-story building at a Preston location might have to be reduced. The building, which began to provide shelter for men about 15 months ago, has more than 400 beds. The La Branch shelter — which fire department records indicate was last inspected in 1979 — has about 100 beds for men.

The average number of men staying in the shelters per night in 1988 was 380. Earlier this year during a cold spell, there were more than 600 men in the shelters.

In addition to looking at space allocation in the buildings, city public works code enforcement officials are inspecting the buildings' plumbing, heating and electrical systems and structural integrity, said Jack Gillum, a department spokesman.

Zoe Laurence, a spokesman for Star of Hope, conceded that a new

men's shelter is needed and said a general oversight was the reason the shelters did not have the permits.

"We're sitting here faced with an enormous need to do something about the men's shelter," Laurence told the *Houston Chronicle*. "It's going to involve millions of dollars. We have to go back to these same corporations, same foundations and individuals, all the heavy hitters in Houston (who have donated money in previous fund-raising drives for the Star of Hope) and say, 'You know what? You have helped us and helped us. But we need you to help us out again.'"

Fire department inspections last week showed the Preston building has a sprinkler system, but, among other problems, it lacks a fire alarm and smoke detectors.

Glenn Duhon, chief of the food inspection bureau for the Houston Department of Health and Human Services, said a recent inspection of the kitchen at the La Branch shelter showed 21 violations of the city's 28 food sanitation regulations.

Violations considered critical included: mice infestation, the leaking and pooling of water in wash and walk-in cooler areas, no soap or paper towels at the kitchen lavatory and toxic materials such as Comet and a can of enamel in food areas.

The Preston shelter does not provide food services.

Car plunges 42 feet; toddler, 2 women survive accident

HOUSTON (AP) — Three people, including a toddler, miraculously escaped death when their car ran through a construction site and plunged to the bottom of a 42-foot deep excavation, authorities said.

Paramedics and firefighters used nylon rappelling rope to hoist the injured people out of the hole, which is about 20 feet wide and protected by a 3-foot high metal barrier.

The car's driver, Norma Vasquez, 50, was flown Saturday night to Hermann Hospital by a LifeFlight helicopter from the construction site in southwest Houston.

Vasquez' 20-month-old grandson, Sergio, was pulled from the hole in the arms of firefighter Pat Kasper, who was suspended from a sling.

"It made me think of Jessica McClure," Kasper said, referring to the dramatic rescue in Midland last year of the young girl from a well. "All he did was cry, but he was the calmest one down there."

Vasquez and her daughter-in-law, Bonnie Vasquez, 20, were lifted out on litters suspended from ropes hoisted by several firefighters as a

crowd of spectators applauded.

Vasquez and her grandson remained at Hermann Hospital, authorities said Sunday. Bonnie Vasquez was treated and released.

Calling the mishap a "very freak accident," Houston accident investigator G.J. "Jerry" Moran said: "It was lucky nobody was killed with the amount of distance the car fell."

A witness to the accident, Brent Griffin, 18, said he was following the Vasquez's car when he saw another car pass them and run them off the road.

Moran said there were no noticeable skid marks in front of the hole that might have helped accident investigators determine how fast Vasquez's car was going, or whether Vasquez made any attempt to stop.

The traffic investigator said if her car was struck by another vehicle, she may not have had a chance to stop. Vasquez's car drove across a muddy construction site, slammed into a 3-foot high steel barrier, and plummeted to the bottom of the hole.



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