

CONNECTION



Personal style

Sycamore Lane creates unique designs

WINTER TEXANS

READY TO CRUISE



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Building the broadband workforce

Partnerships prepare for future growth

As we greet the new year, it's natural to look ahead to the next 12 months, which will again show our members supporting rural America by providing critical broadband internet service. It has been gratifying to see providers like yours working so furiously to build out broadband to communities still waiting for robust service while also serving existing customers. Yet, the work is never truly done.

Whether it is installations, upgrades or maintenance, there is certainly more than enough work to go around. That is why it is fitting that NTCA is stepping up to help broadband workers. Because retention and recruitment in rural markets is more challenging than urban areas, we are especially proud to work with some new partners to support the broadband providers we represent in creating a 21st century workforce.

We recently joined the White House's Talent Pipeline Challenge, a call to action for employers, education and training providers, and others to support equitable workforce development in critical infrastructure sectors like broadband. We have partnered with Northwood Technical College, the National Rural Education Association and the Communications Workers of America to expand training and job opportunities for rural America's broadband workforce.

These efforts seek to prepare for immediate growth in the broadband industry because of significant funding for network deployment in the Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act, as well as future demand for high-tech jobs.

It's an exciting time to work in broadband, and you are fortunate to live somewhere served by a committed community-based provider. As connections grow, so will the number and skills of broadband workers. Stay tuned for more information soon from your provider about these initiatives.

Happy New Year. 🍀

A nourishing change

FCC embraces new broadband labels

Rural broadband providers have a deserved reputation for openness, but not every national company can say the same — shopping for service can be trying.

The Federal Communications Commission, however, intends to require internet providers to prominently display a “nutrition label” clearly detailing the specifics of each plan. The FCC passed a rule late last year clearing the way for this change, although implementation may take time and require additional input.

The intent is to eliminate hidden fees, confusion about data caps and uncertainty about speeds and generally to shine a bright light on what can be a confusing choice.

Each label will show key information — details wise consumers should consider now:

- Monthly price and contract length
- Whether that price will change after a certain period and, if so, what it will change to
- A complete list of monthly and one-time fees, as well as any early termination fee
- Whether the company participates in the Affordable Connectivity Program and a link to check if the consumer qualifies
- Typical download and upload speeds
- Data cap and price for exceeding that cap
- And more

The FCC must complete additional steps before implementing this change, and internet service providers will have time to update websites and other sales material. 🗨️

THE INFORMATION YOU NEED

The FCC is working to limit confusion about broadband services by creating a “nutrition label” providers must display to consumers. While implementation might take time, the example label provided by the FCC offers a guide to information shoppers might consider now when choosing a service.

Broadband Facts

Provider Name
Service Plan Name and/or Speed Tier
Fixed or Mobile Broadband Consumer Disclosure

Monthly Price **[\$]**

This Monthly Price [is/is not] an introductory rate. [If introductory rate is applicable, identify length of introductory period and the rate that will apply after introductory period concludes]

This Monthly Price [does not] require[s] a [x year/x month] contract. [only required if applicable; if so, provide link to terms of contract]

Additional Charges & Terms

Provider Monthly Fees <small>[Itemize each fee]</small>	[\$]
One-time Fees at the Time of Purchase <small>[Itemize each fee]</small>	[\$]
Early Termination Fee	[\$]
Government Taxes	Varies by Location

Discounts & Bundles
Click Here for available billing discounts and pricing options for broadband service bundled with other services like video, phone, and wireless service, and use of your own equipment like modems and routers. [Any links to such discounts and pricing options on the provider's website must be provided in this section.]

Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)
The ACP is a government program to help lower the monthly cost of internet service. To learn more about the ACP, including to find out whether you qualify, visit affordableconnectivity.gov.

Participates in the ACP **[Yes/No]**

Speeds Provided with Plan

Typical Download Speed	[] Mbps
Typical Upload Speed	[] Mbps
Typical Latency	[] Ms

Data Included with Monthly Price **[] GB**

Charges for Additional Data Usage **[\$/GB]**

Network Management [Read our Policy](#)

Privacy [Read our Policy](#)

Customer Support
Contact Us: example.com/support/ / (555) 555-5555

Learn more about the terms used on this label by visiting the Federal Communications Commission's Consumer Resource Center.

fcc.gov/consumer

[Unique Plan Identifier Ex. F0005937974123ABC456EMC789]

GONE PHISHING

Don't get hooked by a ransomware attack



If you lost access to everything on your personal or work computer, how much would you pay to get it back? It's a question more people are asking themselves as ransomware attacks have continued to grow in number and severity.

About 21% of all cyberattacks in 2021 were ransomware attacks, according to IBM Security, costing individuals and businesses an estimated \$20 billion. From 2013 to 2020, the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center saw a 243% increase in ransomware reports. That growth comes thanks to services that offer ransomware-for-hire and the increased popularity of cryptocurrency, which make untraceable payments to these services easier than ever.

The FBI does not recommend victims of these attacks pay the ransom. Victims rarely see their data returned, and payment only encourages future attacks. Instead, the best protection against ransomware is to understand how it works, where it comes from and how to protect your data from the start.

WHAT IS RANSOMWARE?

Ransomware is a type of malware, or malicious software, which locks the victim

out of data on their computer until they pay for access to be restored. Most ransomware attacks target individuals, although attacks on large organizations with even bigger payouts have grown in popularity.

In the past, these situations largely involved attackers demanding a ransom to unlock the data. Today, most are "double extortion" assaults in which attackers demand payment for returning the data and to prevent it from being stolen again.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

Ransomware can infect your computer in many of the same ways as any other virus:

- **Phishing emails** — These emails trick users into downloading a malicious attachment disguised as a harmless file or visiting a website that can download the ransomware through their browsers.
- **Software vulnerabilities** — Hackers can find holes in a piece of software's cybersecurity protection or buy information on these flaws to download the malware onto a device or network.
- **Stolen logins** — Whether they're obtained through phishing, purchased on the dark web or hacked by brute force,

stolen credentials give cybercriminals direct access to download malware onto a device.

- **Repurposed malware** — Some ransomware is actually malware developed for other attacks like stealing bank information, and it's reworked to encrypt and lock personal data.

HOW CAN I AVOID IT?

Since paying attackers is not a reliable way to deal with ransomware, the best defense is to protect yourself and your devices before an attack can begin:

- Keep backups of any important data to eliminate most of the leverage an attacker might have.
- Update your computer's software and operating system regularly to protect against the latest threats.
- Update your computer's cybersecurity tools to help response teams detect and react to new ransomware attacks faster.
- Always be aware of phishing, social engineering and other strategies that can lead to a ransomware attack. 

TO LEARN MORE, visit www.stopthinkconnect.org.

Celebrate storytelling

Your magazine is part of the co-op experience

Each issue of HCTC's Connection is special, but this one is a little more remarkable than its predecessors. As always, you'll find stories about your neighbors and local businesses. There are updates about our latest initiatives to bring you unrivaled communications services. And everyone enjoys the food and travel pages. But this issue also marks a milestone.



CRAIG COOK
Chief Executive Officer

I'd like to take a moment to celebrate the roots of the project that makes this magazine possible. It began 10 years ago, at a time when utilities like ours were building the first broadband internet networks so vital to rural America.

You see, this magazine is part of a co-op just as you are part of our co-op. Naturally, that's a distinction I appreciate. By sharing the production costs with like-minded utilities across the country, we can affordably bring you this unique, high-quality magazine. Most importantly, we keep the local perspective that makes it so relevant to our company and to you.

This is a story that began in a little Alabama town called Rainsville, where Stephen and Michele Smith operated a communications company devoted to supporting telecommunications co-ops like ours.

They recognized that many telephone co-ops had similar needs when it came to sharing the story of how building rural broadband networks would shape communities. Working with industry leaders, the Smiths considered how they could create a publication that could benefit as many as possible.

The result was the Regional Telco Magazines, which embrace the spirit of the co-op experience with individuals and businesses collaborating for the betterment of all. "We were producing stand-alone publications for telcos across several states," Stephen says. "Our clients were all facing similar challenges in communicating the changing broadband landscape to their members and community leaders, and we recognized an opportunity to scale those efforts across an entire region."

Today each issue of the Regional Telco Magazines — now under the care of Pioneer Utility Resources, a national communications co-op — reaches 345,000 telco members and customers in Alabama, Kentucky, Minnesota, Tennessee, South Carolina and Texas. While each magazine features the unique stories of its own community, there are similarities.

Across this country places like ours now have opportunities unlike any before. Broadband internet service and work-from-home jobs invigorate our economies. Telemedicine can reduce the number of trips to distant hospitals, and it sometimes even enables faster access to doctors during emergencies. Students, from preschoolers to doctoral candidates, benefit from online learning opportunities. Small businesses have new ways to attract customers. And that's just the beginning.

For parts of rural America, these are shared experiences. The places with this technology enjoy clear advantages but, unfortunately, not every place is equal. Some still struggle to keep pace, and bringing everyone up to speed is a goal for co-ops like ours. We're leading the way, and you are part of this national push to lift up rural America.

As you know, everyone at HCTC is committed to serving you with the fastest, most affordable broadband service possible. This magazine gives us an outlet to report how we're accomplishing our service goals, but it also highlights your successes made possible through access to broadband internet service.

We're excited to use these pages to tell the next chapters of this adventure. 📄

The HCTC Connection is a bimonthly magazine published by Hill Country Telephone Cooperative © 2023. It is distributed without charge to all member/owners of the cooperative.



HCTC is more than a provider of state-of-the-art telecommunications products and services. We are a member-owned cooperative with an elected board of directors who govern our organization using our bylaws, member input and business and industry conditions to guide their decisions. We are proud residents of the communities we serve, and we're dedicated to not only providing the best services possible, but doing so in a way that is ethical, safe and productive for our friends and neighbors. This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Mission Statement: To be the premier provider of modern telecommunications and broadband services throughout our region.

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On the Cover:



Over the past five years, Amanda Goodman has combined creativity and broadband to build her small business. See story Page 9.

Photo by Gabe Herrera



Applications are available

This spring, HCTC will send two students to the Foundation for Rural Service Youth Tour in Washington, D.C. The trip is set for May 31-June 4. This unique opportunity offers students a chance to learn about rural communications and visit historic sites in the nation's capital.

Applicants must be high school students who are 15, 16 or 17 years old at the time of the trip. They must live in the HCTC service area, and their parent or legal guardian must be an HCTC member.

For more information, visit hctc.net/resources/youthtour.
Applications are due by **March 1**.

ATTENTION

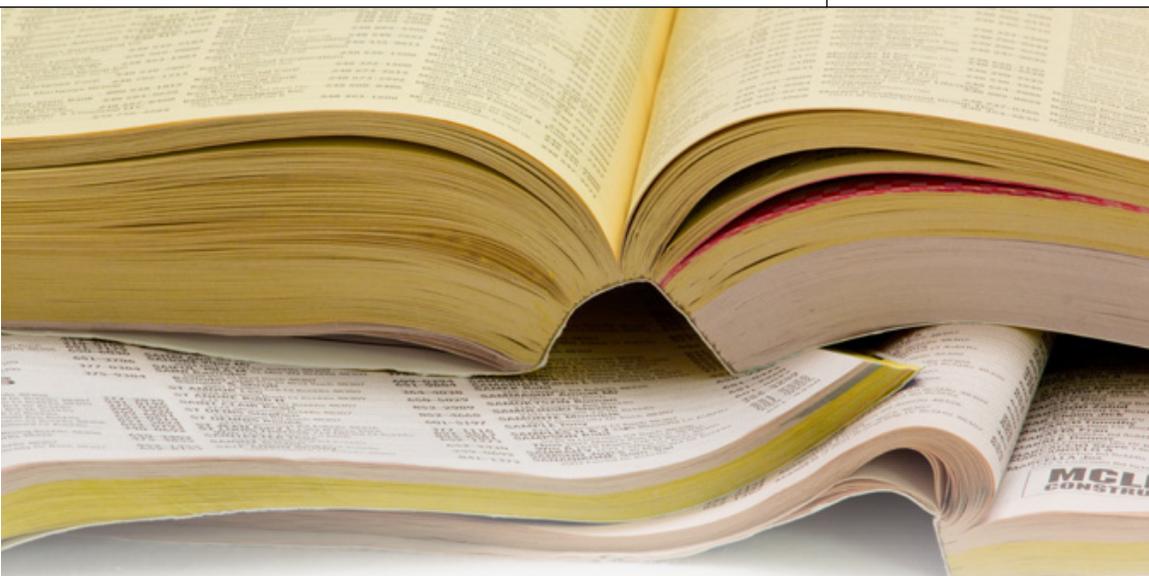
High School Seniors!

Applications are now being accepted for the 2023 HCTC Scholarships. To be eligible to receive the scholarship, applicants must:

- Be a graduating members of the Class of 2023.
- Have at least one parent or guardian who is a member of HCTC.
- Plan to become a full-time student at an accredited college, vocational or technical school.

While above-average grades are an asset, they are not required to compete for this scholarship. Consideration will be given to applicants' leadership qualities, teacher recommendations, extracurricular activities and community involvement.

As many as 15 area seniors may be awarded a \$1,500 scholarship, representing an annual \$22,500 commitment to the future of the Hill Country. Applications are available online at hctc.net/scholarship. **The deadline for submissions is March 1.**



Update your listing for the

2023 DIRECTORY

HCTC members who would like to change or add listings in the 2023 telephone directory must act soon. For White Page listings, please contact the HCTC business office by **Feb. 15**. For listings in the Yellow Pages, please contact the office by **March 3**.



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Facebook:
@HCTCTexas

Twitter:
@HCTC

Brighten the winter

Plan now to cruise this year



Story by ANNE BRALY

When the days are cold, sun-down seems to arrive in the middle of the afternoon and skies are gray, there's no better time to turn daydreams of warm breezes, blue water and sand into reality. You might even save a little money while you're at it.

Cruising the Caribbean is a temptation thousands of people can't resist, and planning now can make a difference. "All of the major cruise lines have returned their fleets to full deployment," says Wes Rowland, president of cruiseexperts.com. "Cruising is back."

As a result, more cruise lovers are going to be on the water, and finding a deal for the best rooms and views is getting harder. There's so much to decide — dates, itineraries, cruise lines, room types and more. One of the first considerations is the port of origin. Fortunately, Southerners have options. In

Florida, you'll find ports in Tampa, Port Canaveral and Miami. Or, you can set sail from Charleston, South Carolina, or New Orleans. Even Galveston, Texas, can be a short, affordable flight away.

"It helps if you can find an experienced and trusted travel professional who can help you navigate the variables of a cruise purchase, understand your needs and expectations, help interpret value and give good guidance so you can make an informed decision in your best interest," Wes says.

The best cruise deals are not only about getting the lowest price. Cruise lines now offer attractive options, including amenities that once cost extra. Check out some of the top cruise sites online and you'll find that cruises now include more in the up-front price, such as beverage packages, tips, free specialty dining and Wi-Fi.

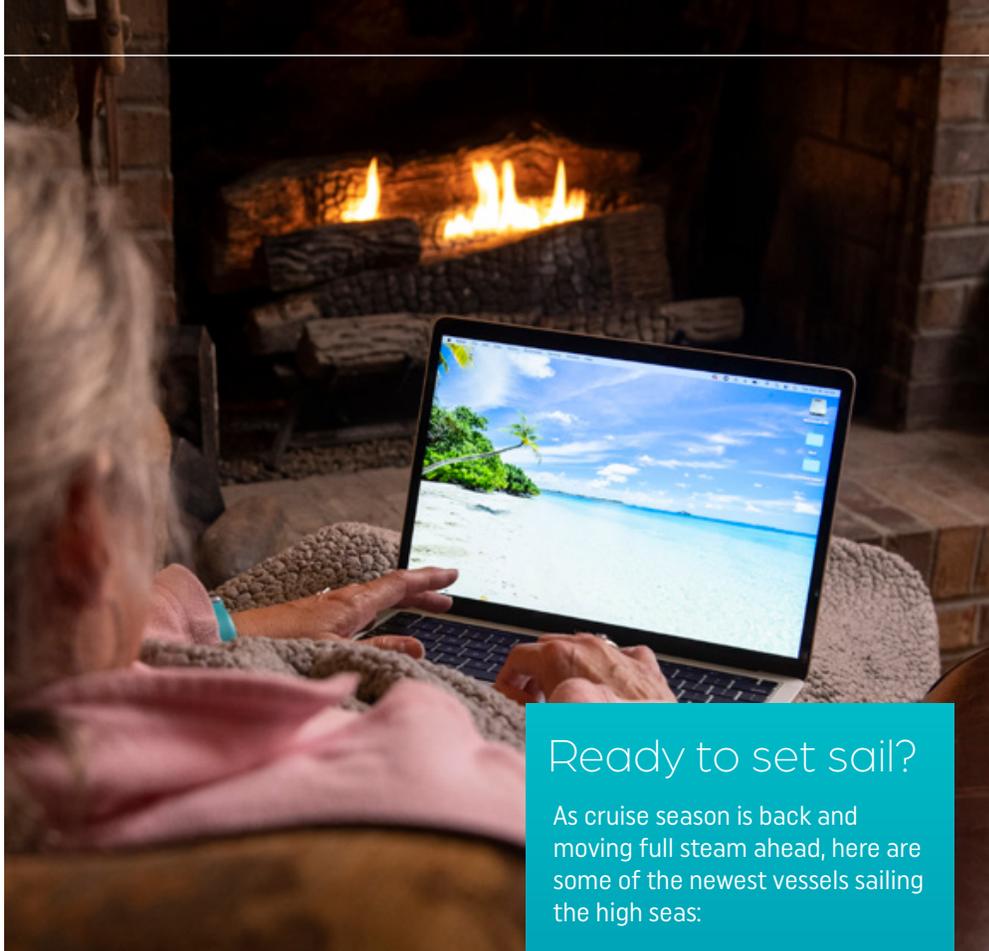
"It's a better value for the guest," Wes says. "Cruise lines took advantage of the unplanned downtime during the pandemic to retire the oldest ships from their fleets. With new ships coming on line, consumers have better choices of fabulous, amenity-packed ships than ever."

For example, Norwegian's 2023 schedule includes a seven-night cruise of the Western Caribbean, April 9-16, 2023, in a suite with a balcony for \$899 per person with double occupancy. The offer includes unlimited bar, a specialty dining experience, excursions and Wi-Fi.

CONSIDER 'SHOULDER SEASON'

Supply and demand determine rates, so if your travel dates are flexible take advantage of what budget cruisers consider the Holy Grail of deals — shoulder season. This window between the peak

blues



With cruises booking up for spring, planning now will help you find the adventure and pricing you want. So brighten the winter gloom with dreams of the sea.

and off-seasons, from late September through mid-November, offers the best deals and smaller crowds. “Sometimes it’s just the perception of when it’s better or worse to travel. You need to know what your priorities are,” Wes says.

TIPS FOR BUYING A CRUISE

If you choose to go it alone, do your homework. There’s no guarantee you’ll find the lowest rate, but these tips from cruiseexpert.com will help you be smarter about buying your vacation:

- Final deposits are due three months before the cruise. Usually, that’s the last date a cruise can be canceled without a penalty. This is when you can snag a good deal as cruise lines slash rates to try to fill empty cabins.
- Book for fall or spring when most families with school-age children cannot travel. There’s typically more

availability, and lower pricing, during these times.

- If you’re willing to risk it, book a Caribbean cruise during hurricane season when prices are much lower. Just be sure to invest in travel insurance and make sure your prepaid deposits and other expenses are covered.
- Aggregate sites — independent websites offering trips on multiple cruise lines — allow you to check out many options at once. Sites include cruisecritic.com, gotosea.com, cruises.com and cheapcruises.com.
- If you’re new to cruising and want to see if it’s right for you, try taking a short, two- to three-night cruise first. Royal Caribbean’s recently refurbished Freedom of the Seas is one option. It makes short cruises between Miami and the Bahamas. [👉](#)

Ready to set sail?

As cruise season is back and moving full steam ahead, here are some of the newest vessels sailing the high seas:

- ▶ Royal Caribbean's Odyssey of the Seas embarked on its first cruise in 2021 and is the first Quantum Ultra-Class Ship in North America offering bumper cars, glow-in-the-dark laser tag and virtual reality games. Passengers can kick back and relax beside the newly designed, resort-style pool. This ship is a game-changer for the cruise industry.
- ▶ Princess Cruises' Enchanted Princess launched in 2019 and offers a touch more sophistication than ships geared toward the teenage set. Dining options are excellent on all the cruise line's Medallion Class vessels, the category to which the Enchanted Princess belongs.
- ▶ MSC Cruises' Virtuosa set sail in 2019. There's a humanoid robot bartender in the Starship Club. The ship has the longest LED dome at sea, and it towers over a promenade of retail shops and restaurants. There are five pools that range from a waterpark for the kids to a quieter place to relax for adults.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Smoothly navigate internet slowdowns



Your internet-connected devices are the last stops in a river of information bringing you entertainment, business services, communications tools and so much more. Sometimes, however, a clog upstream can turn a digital cascade into a trickle. Streaming movies lag. Websites become slow to load. File uploads take time. When slowdowns occur, it's helpful to understand potential chokepoints.



KNOTTED UP: It doesn't happen often, but there are times when the internet itself has difficulties. A storm might disrupt a massive data center — a place storing hundreds of computers. Or a technical glitch might cause the modern equivalent of a wrong phone number. It's doubtful all services will go out — the internet lives by redundancy. So, a quick Google search should give you the details. Then, a little patience is the cure.



THE LOCAL LINK: Cables carrying massive amounts of information connect our local systems to the broader internet. Our professionals work hard to keep everything up and running. If trouble does occur, we'll be on top of it. A check of our social media will give you the lowdown if there's a problem.



THE NETWORK: Fiber optic lines running through our community use beams of light to transmit digital information to homes and businesses. Rarely, an accident or storm might disrupt this network. Again, if there is a problem our social media will let you know. And remember, we'll make repairs as fast as we safely can.



THE BOX: On the outside of your home, you'll find a vital device. We call it the ONT, and it makes it possible to deliver services like TV, voice and data. If you're having trouble, we may remotely reset the ONT to get you up and running again.



THE WI-FI ROUTER: Your router keeps you connected, wirelessly. Turning the router on and off can unclog a surprising number of internet logjams. But keep in mind, multiple devices connected at once, appliances like microwaves, the distance between the router and your devices and more can all impede the performance of your Wi-Fi network. However, we're here to help.

When in doubt, give us a call at 800-292-5457.

Abundant Creativity

Amanda Goodman takes her business global

Story by PATRICK SMITH

Since starting Sycamore Lane Creative Studio in 2017, Amanda Goodman has become well acquainted with her mail carrier, thanks to his regular visits to her home to pick up packages addressed to her customers across the country and around the world.

With its unique products, loyal online followers and return customers, Amanda's business has grown beyond her wildest expectations. "Every time I'd get an order from a different state, I'd color it in on my map and watch my business grow," she says. "In 2021, when I started the map, I shipped to 44 states. I also sold my first order to a customer in Canada."

She doesn't stock her products in brick-and-mortar retail locations, so the success of the business is powered by hard work, word of mouth and broadband. A stay-at-home mom, Amanda appreciates that her fast and reliable internet connection affords her the flexibility to take care of both her family and her customers. "The internet is crucial for my business," she says. "I can get through projects faster, offer more products and stay at home with family, all because of broadband. Without this business, I'd still be working full time."

ABOUT THE BUSINESS

Amanda's creative talents started out as a hobby. Community members soon noticed, and her business quickly grew. Her products include custom T-shirts, magnets, keychains, mugs, ornaments, mousepads, earrings, bags, wall hangings and more. The one-of-a-kind creations are also popular in helping memorialize lost loved ones. "I know I'm not just sitting in an



ABOVE: Amanda looks inside a Roland BN-20 printer to check on the progress of a sticker job.

LEFT: Amanda also creates stylish earrings from wire and wood.



Photos by Gabe Herrera

office making something.

I'm making an item they're going to cherish,"

Amanda says. "When I see someone's smile, or they write me a thank-you letter, that's the icing on the cake."

From local police and firefighter fundraisers to hurricane relief efforts, Amanda is also happy to share her talents with charitable causes. "I love to make things people can't get anywhere else," she says. "But, it's also really important I help with the community I serve."

POWER OF BROADBAND

Equipped with a website and Facebook page, Sycamore Lane Creative Studio finds fans across the globe. "It makes me feel really good," Amanda says. "I didn't start out with this as my goal, but with social media, I can reach people all over the world. I get notifications from my website that a customer is shopping from Ireland or Australia, and that's so cool to see people all over the world looking at my work."

Currently, Amanda has no plans to expand her operation, but that doesn't mean there isn't plenty to keep her busy. "It took me several jobs to find something my soul needed," she says. "They say you never work a day in your life if you're doing something you love, and I truly feel like I've never worked with this job." 🗨️

Check it Out!

To learn more about Amanda Goodman and to explore the full array of Sycamore Lane Creative Studio's products, follow the business on Facebook or visit the website at sycamorelanestudio.com.

8 apps for every pet owner



Story by DREW WOOLLEY

New pets are always popular gifts around the holidays. But the new year is when the responsibility for all that feeding, walking and those never-ending bathroom breaks can really set in. Fortunately, technology is here to help you stay on top of all of your new best friend's needs, from training and wellness to games and socialization. Check out these apps to see how they can make pet care simpler, whether you're a new pet owner or an amateur zookeeper.



Puppr — Every new dog owner could use some help with training. With Puppr, you have access to training videos, over 100 lessons,

live chats with trainers, progress tracking and more. Celebrity dog trainer Sara Carson leads the programs, and your pup will be able to keep up with her “super collies” in no time.



Cat Training Tips — If you're looking to establish ground rules with a new feline friend, the more streamlined Cat Training

Tips app is a good reference for practical tips on common issues like litter box training and scratching.



Pet First Aid — Every pet owner worries about what to do in an emergency situation. The Pet First Aid app from the American Red

Cross has you covered. It offers step-by-step instructions for situations like your pet being attacked by another animal or eating something toxic. You can even learn how to give your pet CPR, check for warning signs and look up the closest veterinary hospital.



11pets — Keeping up with your pet's medical needs on top of your own can be a challenge, which is why it helps to have an app like

11pets to keep everything covered. Store your furry friend's medical history, medication and vet schedules, or track their weight and nutrition to make sure they're on the healthy path.



Cat Fishing 2 — Humans aren't the only ones who enjoy a good mobile game. Cat Fishing 2 from Friskies is designed specifically for

cats, and you can download it to your phone or tablet. Start it up, place your device on the floor and let your cat kill time swiping at colorful fish on the screen.



BarkHappy — If you're looking for dog-friendly people and places in your area, BarkHappy is the app for you. Use the interactive

map to find hotels, restaurants, bars and more where your dog will be welcome. You can also send out the call if your pup goes missing or find nearby dogs with whom to set up a play date.



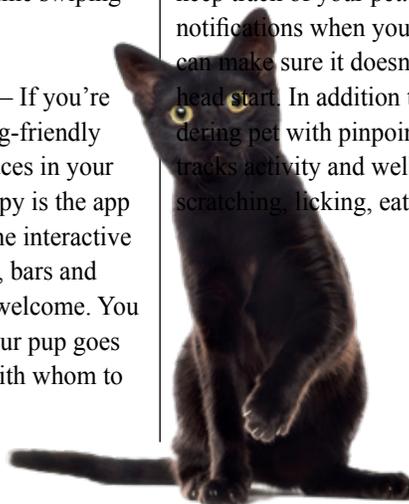
Rover — Rover is the top pet sitting app with over 200,000 caretakers in the U.S. and Canada. Rover's team handles the vetting,

and over 95% of reviewed services on the app have earned a five-star rating. Despite the name, Rover offers services for all kinds of pets, not just dogs. The app is also great for pet lovers looking for new job opportunities.



Whistle — You probably know an adventurous dog who likes to explore every chance it gets. With the

Whistle app and accompanying GPS tracker, it's never been easier to keep track of your pet. The app sends you notifications when your pet gets out so you can make sure it doesn't get too much of a head start. In addition to finding your wandering pet with pinpoint accuracy, the app tracks activity and wellness indicators like scratching, licking, eating and drinking. 🗨️



SIT, STAY, BINGE



Your furry friends might fetch the remote for these programs

With more TV shows streaming every day, there is more entertainment than anyone can keep up with. But did you know your pet might enjoy a good binge as much as you?

Programming for pets is on the rise but it's not a new idea. In 2012, the dog food brand Bakers began running a 60-second commercial targeted right at their canine consumers, complete with barking dogs to get their attention and high-pitched sounds human viewers couldn't hear.

If you're worried that your pets might get bored while you're away at work, or you just can't give them your full attention 24/7, consider some of this programming that can help stimulate, relax and even train your pet throughout the day.

DOGTV

When it comes to man's best friend, there's a dedicated streaming service to keep your dog happy and occupied. Available on major streaming devices like Roku, Chromecast and Apple TV, DOGTV offers a variety of programming.

Some programs offer playful sequences to prevent boredom and provide mental stimulation, while others offer calming scenes to keep pooches relaxed. Training programs help dogs get used to common

noises like doorbells and car sounds. There are even a few shows available for their humans.

SQUIRREL!

Think your furry friends might be getting bored while you're away from home? Many cats and dogs respond to videos of birds, squirrels and fish. Cats, in particular, are visual animals, making them more likely to be entertained and mentally enriched by watching the quick movements of prey across a screen.

Because dogs rely more on their sense of smell, breeds with better eyesight are more likely to show interest in the TV. They tend to respond to images of other dogs running or socializing and might try to interact as they would in real life by barking or sniffing. Fortunately, no matter what grabs your pets' attention, there are plenty of videos available on sites like YouTube designed to keep them occupied for hours while you're out.

FOR THE BIRDS

Birds can be extremely smart and emotionally sensitive animals, making it especially challenging to keep them occupied. Many birds have a natural interest in new sounds and colors, making the TV a

good way to keep them engaged throughout the day.

If you're trying to expand your feathered friend's vocabulary, some programming might even help to train them while you're out. Repetition is key for helping any bird pick up a new word or phrase, and there are numerous videos available that will repeat common phrases for hours on end. Hit play and run, keeping your bird mentally engaged while you're away.

FUN AND GAMES

If your cat likes to curl up next to you during a gaming session, consider adding "Stray" to your list. When BlueTwelve Studio released its cat-themed adventure game last year, it was an instant hit with cat owners. But it turns out the game was just as interesting to their feline friends.

Videos and photos of players' cats being entranced by the digital kitty on screen became so popular that PlayStation even put out the call for submissions for a charity event with the hashtag #StrayReactions. The best ones went into a digital photo book presented to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals along with a \$25,000 donation. That's a win for everyone. 🐾

Winter

The annual migration of snowbirds to Kerrville

Story by LAZ DENES

The Hill Country joins South Florida and Arizona's Valley of the Sun as popular landing spots for travelers affectionately known as snowbirds, a group mostly consisting of retirees who migrate south each winter.

Hailing from the Upper Midwest and even parts of central Canada, they are considered by many to be Winter Texans. They are welcomed with open arms, not just for how they benefit the local economy but also for their enthusiastic immersion into the community, albeit temporarily.

"I would consider them as valid of a Texan as I am," says Leslie Jones, a Uvalde native and longtime Hill Country resident who serves as the public relations and communications manager for the Kerrville Convention & Visitors Bureau. "They're only here for a time, but so many of them keep coming back.

They're paying sales tax and helping the local economy and getting involved in the local community. They might as well be Texans."

FREQUENT FLIERS

After attending college in Steven's Point, Wisconsin, Todd Viola moved to Kerrville in 1989. His parents, Bill and Carrie Viola, have visited each year since, despite living 1,300 miles away in Mukwonago, Wisconsin.

"The Hill Country is very different than the rest of Texas," Carrie says. "There is so much to see and do." The Violas enjoy spending time with family, walking the Kerrville River Trail, taking local tours and watching plays at the Cailloux Theater. Bill often fishes the Guadalupe

River. Carrie enjoys trips to The Hunt Store, while Bill is fascinated by the last Gibson's Discount Center in Texas.

Now retired, the Violas increased the length of their time in Texas and plan to stay six weeks beginning in March. Over the years, they've made temporary homes at hotels, local guesthouses and at the Carlton Inn, illustrating the wealth of lodging options available to visitors.

STAY A WHILE

"Snowbirds visiting 7 Bluff Cabins and RV Park enjoy our peaceful 50 acres, located beneath our bluff along the crystal-clear Frio River," says Bree Carrico. Since age 7, she has lived on the property and is now the co-owner, with her brother Ben Ferguson, of the RV park.

"Our cabins and RV sites are nestled in a pecan orchard that is home to an abundance of wildlife including deer, turkey, songbirds and more," Bree says. "Days can be filled with hikes, picking pecans, and visiting local parks while nights can be enjoyed around the campfire under an expansive starry sky."



The 7 Bluff Cabins and RV Park features 20 cabins, including a few riverfront options.

Photo courtesy of Casey Chapman Ross

Texans

Jennifer Christiansen and her family have become close friends over the years with countless winter Texans. She and her parents, Dee and Kathy Christiansen, converted a former goat ranch on the outskirts of Kerrville into Buckhorn Lake Resort, one of the top-rated RV parks in the country.

In addition to its proximity to nearby Kerrville, as well as to the many popular tourist destinations throughout the Hill Country like Fredericksburg and Bandera, Buckhorn Lake Resort features top-shelf amenities and activities.

LOCAL LEGACY

The Hunt Store — or simply ‘Store’ as it is affectionately called — is a scenic, 20-minute drive from Kerrville along the Guadalupe River. It’s one of the more popular and historic gathering spots in the Hill Country. Established as the town of Hunt’s general store in 1946, patrons today can still find everything from groceries and gasoline to postal, banking and real estate services. The Hunt Rock Café serves lunch, hosts special events

and offers customers high-speed Wi-Fi from HCTC.

John and Vikki Dunn, native Texans, became the 11th owners of The Hunt Store in 2013, having fallen in love with its charm and historical significance when they were exploring real estate investment opportunities in the area. They consider it a privilege to help carry on a rich legacy. “The Hunt Store is something very special. It’s embedded in the fabric and DNA of the community,” Vikki says.

Vikki and John’s take on what makes Hill Country a popular choice among Winter Texans goes well beyond the area’s natural beauty and mild climate. “What’s interesting is that people think the Hill Country is

simply a bunch of small towns and communities, but it’s much more than that,” John says.

“We have museums, performing arts, wineries and all sorts of activities that give the area a lot more depth than many people realize. Visitors come here knowing what they’re going to get. We’re very reasonably priced, with many options for food and where they can stay,” Vikki says. “In addition, the world-class medical facilities in Kerrville are a huge selling point that helps make this area one of the highest-rated among retirees.” 🏠

A WIDE ARRAY OF OPTIONS

Locals and out-of-staters alike can agree the sky is the limit when it comes to all the Hill Country offers Winter Texans. Just a few of the highlights:

Other places to stay

Kerrville Schreiner Park — RV slots, tent camping, cabins, even a ranch house along the Guadalupe River: kerrvilletx.gov.

Johnson Creek — an RV resort surround by 50 acres of mature pecan trees and grass: johnsoncreekrvresort.com.

Things to do

Arcadia Live Theatre — This historic theater in downtown Kerrville showcases live music and entertainment: thearcadialive.org.

Museum of Western Art — This attraction is dedicated to excellence in the collection, preservation, and promotion of Western heritage and the education and cultural enrichment of its diverse audiences: museumofwesternart.com.

Kerrville River Trail — Hike this 6-mile trail along the Guadalupe River with seven trailheads: kerrvilletx.gov.

AIR FRYERS

can solve dinnertime dilemmas

The savior of simple dishes and leftover pizza

Air fryers have crisped their way into America's heart. Ranging from models with one knob and a basket to others with lots of bells and whistles, they've become as common in the American kitchen as toasters and coffeepots.

So how do you know which air fryer is the best fit for you?

You'll become a champion of the air fryer with the Ninja. Priced around \$150, it has a large basket and multiple settings that allow for dehydrating, reheating, baking and, oh yes, air frying. If you plan to do a good bit of cooking in your air fryer, this may be the model for you.

But if you're cooking for one, or just want to see if an air fryer is right for you, then a less-expensive option like Dash's air fryer — \$49.95 at online retailers — might be better. With just one setting and a compact size, it's perfect for one baked potato, a handful of French fries or a chicken thigh or two. It comes in multiple colors to add a little pizzazz to your kitchen counter.

It goes without saying that air frying is a healthier alternative to deep frying. Think of an air fryer as multiple appliances in one. It cooks quickly like a microwave, toasts like a toaster oven and fries like a deep fryer.

These kitchen wonders work magic on vegetables, proteins and baked goods because they're basically small convection ovens. They have a fan-and-exhaust system that blows hot air across your food for even cooking and browning. It works just as well whether you're making breaded onion rings from the freezer, roasting fresh broccoli or frying up some wings. Baking powder in the rub helps make air fryer wings crispy.



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Photography by MARK GILLILAND | Food Styling by RHONDA GILLILAND



AIR FRYER CHICKEN WINGS

- 12 chicken wings, whole
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional)
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 cup Buffalo hot sauce

Cut the wings into pieces so you have 24 wings. Preheat the air fryer to 380 F. Spray the fryer basket after preheating. Place the wings in a large bowl and add olive oil, garlic powder, baking powder, salt, cayenne pepper and

black pepper. Toss wings until fully covered. Place the wings in a single layer — as many as will fit without overlapping — on the air fryer basket.

Air fry the wings at 380 F for 20 minutes, flipping them every 5 minutes. Increase the temperature to 400 F and cook an additional 2 minutes for extra crispy skin. Use a digital meat thermometer to ensure the internal temperature is 165 F.

Carefully remove the wings from the air fryer, cover with Buffalo sauce and serve with your favorite sides.



CRISPY AIR FRYER POTATOES

- 1 pound small Yukon Gold potatoes, halved
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 1 teaspoon Cajun seasoning (optional)
- Kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Lemon wedge, for serving
- Freshly chopped parsley, for garnish

In a large bowl, toss potatoes with oil, garlic powder, Italian seasoning and Cajun seasoning, if using. Season with salt and pepper.

Place potatoes in basket of air fryer and cook at 400 F for 10 minutes. Shake basket and stir potatoes, and then cook until potatoes are golden and tender, 8 to 10 minutes more. Squeeze lemon juice over cooked potatoes and garnish with parsley before serving.

AIR FRYER EGG ROLLS

- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 1/2 pound ground pork or ground chicken
- 4 cups coleslaw mix
- 1/2 cup matchstick-cut carrots
- 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 green onions, sliced
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons rice or white vinegar
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/8 teaspoon Chinese 5-spice seasoning
- 12 egg roll wrappers
- Nonstick cooking spray
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Sweet chili sauce, duck sauce or hot mustard sauce, for dipping

Heat sesame oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the pork and cook until crumbled and cooked through, about 4 minutes. Add the coleslaw mix, carrots, ginger and garlic. Cook 2-3 minutes or until the cabbage has wilted.

Remove from the heat; stir in the green onions, soy sauce, vinegar, pepper, salt and 5-spice seasoning. Transfer to a plate and let cool slightly.

Place 1 egg roll wrapper flat on a work surface with the points of the wrapper facing up and down (like a diamond). Place about 1/3 cup of the pork/chicken mixture in the middle of the wrapper. Dip your fingers in water and dampen the edges of the wrapper. Fold the left and then right points of the wrapper in toward the center. Fold the bottom point over the center just like you would a burrito, rolling the wrapper toward the remaining point to form a tight cylinder. Press edges to seal. Place on a plate and cover with a dry towel. Repeat the process with remaining wrappers and pork/chicken mixture.

Preheat the air fryer to 375 F and spray the air fryer basket with cooking spray. Brush the tops of the egg rolls with olive oil. Working in batches, place the egg rolls in the basket and cook 7 minutes. Flip the egg rolls over and brush with more oil. Cook for an additional 2 minutes. Serve with your favorite dipping sauce. 📺





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