

1. Auditorium Shores

Set against the backdrop of downtown's skyscrapers is Town Lake at its best. When the southern shore of the lake, between South First Street and Bouldin Avenue, isn't hosting a free concert, it is one of Austin's most popular dog runs. With long, open stretches of golden grass for dogs who love to fetch and cool, blue water inviting them to take a dip.

2. Bull Creek District Park

Accompanying the rippling sounds of water spilling over limestone falls are the playful splashes of dogs romping along the creek bed of this park near Capital of Texas Highway (Loop 360). Kids can join the action here, too, by jumping from a rope swing into a deep end of the creek. If your dog's not a swimmer, the hiking trails that wind along the side of the steep hills are a good option.

3. Emma Long Metropolitan Park

A true jewel of the Austin park system, this 2½-mile trail runs along the banks of Turkey Creek and atop a bluff near Lake Austin. The trail contains a few steep grades, multiple swimming spots and many long, tree-canopied stretches. Because Turkey Creek is within the Balcones Canyon Land Preserve, home of the endangered golden-cheeked warbler, the dog park is nestled in a balancing act between recreation and preservation. However, according to Sheila Holbrook-White, vice-chairwoman of the Friends of Turkey Creek, the park's warbler population is flourishing, and the dog park is gaining strong community support as land-management plans for the preserve move forward.

4. Far West Park

For dogs that love water, this park is nothing but a tease. Signs posted at the entrance to the park and along the edge of its two large retaining ponds cautiously state: 'This pond is for water quality and flood control. Please do not allow pets to swim in it.' Still, the many enthusiastic dog owners in the surrounding community frequent this small, quiet park often. But they are wary of the water.

5. Northeast District Park

After 10 minutes of romping around this large, grassy, tree-covered park near U.S. 183 and Loyola Lane, my dogs ran toward the car and tried to jump back in. This is a nice park, but it's sparsely used and a bit close to a major road. The only person available to dole out some doggy attention was

1. Auditorium Shores

(920 W. Riverside Drive)

2. Bull Creek District Park

(6701 Lakewood Drive)

3. Emma Long Metropolitan Park

(1600 City Park Road)

4. Far West Park

(Far West Boulevard pedestrian bridge and Great Northern Boulevard)

5. Northeast District Park

(5909 Crystalbrook Drive)

6. Norwood Estate Dog Park

(Interstate 35 at Riverside Drive)

7. Onion Creek District Park

(6900 Onion Creek Drive)

8. Red Bud Isle

(3401 Red Bud Trail Unit Circle)

9. Shoal Creek Greenbelt

(2600-2799 N. Lamar Blvd.)

10. Walnut Creek Metropolitan Park

(12138 N. Lamar Blvd.)

11. West Austin Park

(1317 W. 10th St.)

12. Zilker Park

(2100 Barton Springs Road)

an Austin police officer. 'Hmm, I come to this park all the time, and I've never seen anyone here with dogs,' he said.

6. Norwood Estate Dog Park

The former lake-view residence of Austin developer O.O. Norwood, this property is one of Austin's most popular dog parks. 'We get 100 to 120 people and 150 dogs on an average weekday, and upward of 300 people and 400 dogs on Saturdays and Sundays,' says Paul Paddington, a co-founder of the parks volunteer maintenance crew, the Friends of Norwood Park. The dogs at this park can frolic happily over the estate's old, filled-in swimming pool, through a tall bamboo forest, or in a fenced-off small-dog play area.

7. Onion Creek District Park

This approximately mile-long, out-and-back trail runs along the banks of Onion Creek in Southeast Austin. It has plenty of untrampled green space and a spot for the dogs to take a dip. The park was nearly empty on the afternoon I visited with my mutts Max and Morgan. Enter from Onion Creek Drive to avoid the jealous barking of the neighborhood's many dogs.

8. Red Bud Isle

This park is a water dog's dream come true. About a half-mile of trail runs along the edge of the small island below Tom Miller Dam in West Austin. Multiple openings along the trail allow for the dogs to get into Town Lake. During my visit, a pack of retrievers was

gathered at the tip of the island, eagerly competing for a tennis ball tossed out into the water.

9. Shoal Creek Greenbelt

Before doggy devotees Terry Veit and Russell Soloway owned Roscoe, whom they adopted from Austin German Shepherd Rescue, they occasionally hung out at this dog park without a dog. While Roscoe spent his entire visit to this Pease Park space wading in Shoal Creek, Veit, Soloway and I swapped stories about the joys of dog ownership. Disc golfers, cyclists and runners share this park, so keep an eye out for oncoming traffic.

10. Walnut Creek Metropolitan Park

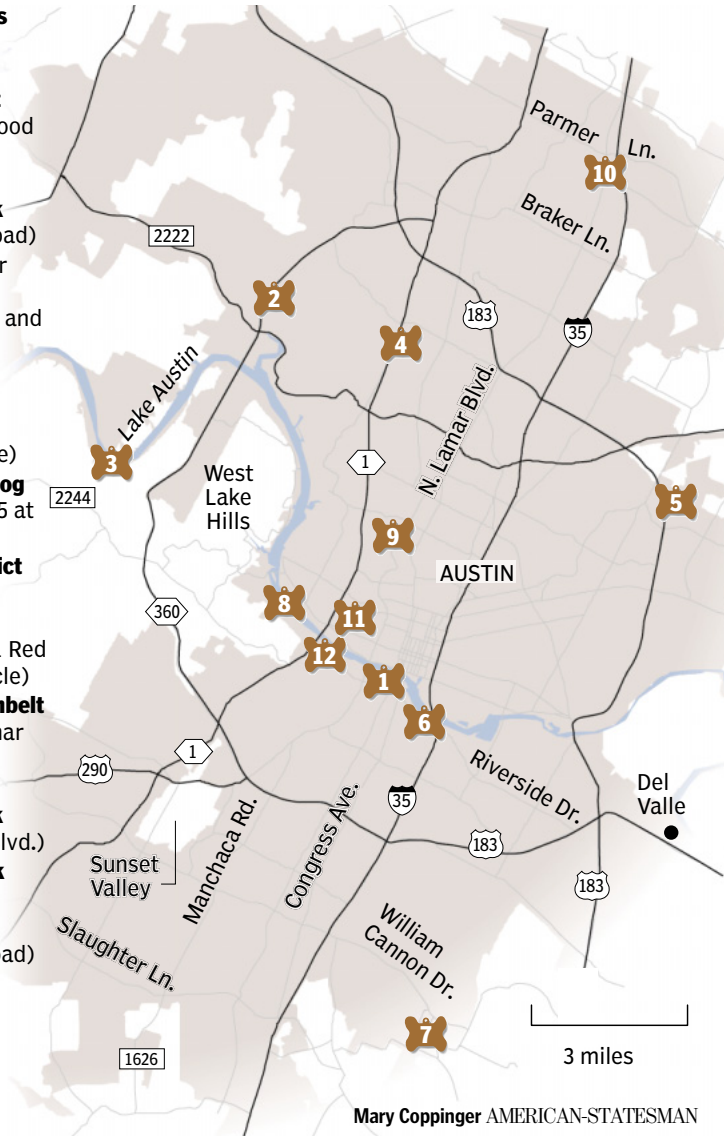
Even after a heavy downpour, as on the afternoon that I visited with my two mutts, the dogs and their owners were still at Walnut Creek Park, ready to enjoy. The rain had turned the maze of tree-covered trails along the bank of the creek into a clay-like mud that coated the bottoms of our shoes and paws, but there was one benefit — no mountain bikers. This is a shared-use park, but the trails are highly popular with off-road cyclists, so use caution. If you wish to avoid any run-ins, a large area of the park just west of the baseball fields, with pine trees and nicely mowed grass, also is posted as off-leash.

11. West Austin Park

In the historic neighborhood of Old West Austin is a small, fenced dog park with an interesting history. For about 20 years, the three-acre open space was an unofficial community dog run. But in 2001, the Austin Parks and Recreation Department decided to use the space for a T-ball league. Suddenly, the owners of off-leash dogs were surprised with tickets from Austin police officers. After a compromise between the neighborhood and the city, a fence was erected to separate the dog run from the sports field. Now, as when I visited, dogs and people playing kickball can use the park in harmony.

12. Zilker Park

I made my way to the Zilker Park kite field, an official dog leash-free area, on a cool Wednesday evening. To my surprise, a free concert — Blues on the Green — just happened to be going on at the same time. Lucky for me, I'd brought along a folding chair and a cooler full of refreshments. On the park's sprawling grass field, which is used for soccer games on most evenings and weekends, other well-behaved dogs and dog owners lounged, soaking in the tunes. Is it safe to say . . . only in Austin?



Kelly West AMERICAN-STATESMAN
Kajsa fetches a tennis ball from Town Lake during her first visit to Auditorium Shores.

Austin might not be the top dog, but it's close

Where does Austin, with its 12 dog parks, rank when compared with the rest of the country?

In an informal survey of dog parks listed on city Web sites, Austin holds its own against some of the biggest cities in the United States.

In fact, Austin far outweighs all of Texas' largest cities when it comes to dog parks. Both San Antonio and Fort Worth offer only one dog park each, while Dallas and Houston each list two official dog parks.

Many city parks become dog play-

grounds without any official designation. A few unofficial dog parks exist in Austin, such as "Dog Beach" just below Barton Springs Pool.

But beware: Austin police can levy a maximum fine of \$500 to the owners of off-leash dogs.

Some cities even require dog owners to purchase a pass to use the city dog parks. The two dog parks in Indianapolis, for example, are accessible only with the purchase of a \$40 annual park pass, for which dog owners must show proof of current vaccinations.

Tops in dog parks

Below is a sampling of U.S. cities and the number of dog parks listed on their Web sites.

1. New York – 45
2. San Francisco – 24
3. Alexandria, Va. – 15
4. San Diego – 12
5. Austin – 12
6. Seattle – 11
7. Norfolk, Va. – 10
8. Los Angeles – 9
9. Portland, Ore. – 9
10. Arlington, Va. – 8

