

Bandera Canyonlands Executive Summary

Vision

The Bandera Canyonlands are among the most scenic and ecologically significant parts of the Texas Hill Country. People travel from around the world to enjoy the beautiful waters, forests, canyons and wildlife that typify this region. In addition, the Bandera Canyonlands are ecologically linked to watersheds critical to the continued health of central Texas. The Nature Conservancy of Texas will partner with landowners and others who live in and love this region to conserve the native plants, animals, and natural communities here. The Conservancy will work to minimize habitat fragmentation, conserve water quality and flow in springs and streams, restore the balance between animal populations and their environment, and maintain or return land to ecologically sustainable, productive use.

Introduction

The western Hill Country is home to a 21,601-hectare (53,378-acre) area that The Nature Conservancy calls the Bandera Canyonlands (Figure 1). Here, crystal-clear water flows from springs and seeps created by fissures in the porous limestone. These perennial, life-giving waters etch through deep, cool canyons, enabling a wide variety of Texas native plants and wildlife to flourish on the Edwards Plateau. From late October to mid-November, these rocky cliffs are adorned with some of the most dramatic displays of autumn color found in Texas. These scattered remnant stands of bigtooth maples – often called the “lost maples” for their rarity throughout most of Texas – display brilliant, contrasting shades of yellow, orange and red as temperatures drop and days shorten.

The exposed upper Glen Rose limestone formation is a large reason this region attracts so much biological interest. The surface water that emanates from this location provides habitat for a wide variety of native plants and wildlife. Rare plants such as Texas mock-orange, sycamore leaf snowbells, darkstem noseburn, spreading least-daisy, scarlet clematis, buckley tridens, big red sage and tobusch fish-hook cactus are some of the floral natives. Rare golden-cheeked warblers and black-capped vireos are found in the conservation area, as well as Acadian flycatcher, Louisiana waterthrush, summer tanager, indigo bunting, blue-gray gnatcatcher, yellow-billed cuckoo, zone-tailed hawks and many other bird species. Native mammals include white-tailed deer, armadillo, rock squirrel, bobcat, beaver, and javelina. Aquatic species found include rare salamanders of the *Eurycea* genus, and a species of tiny, freshwater jellyfish.

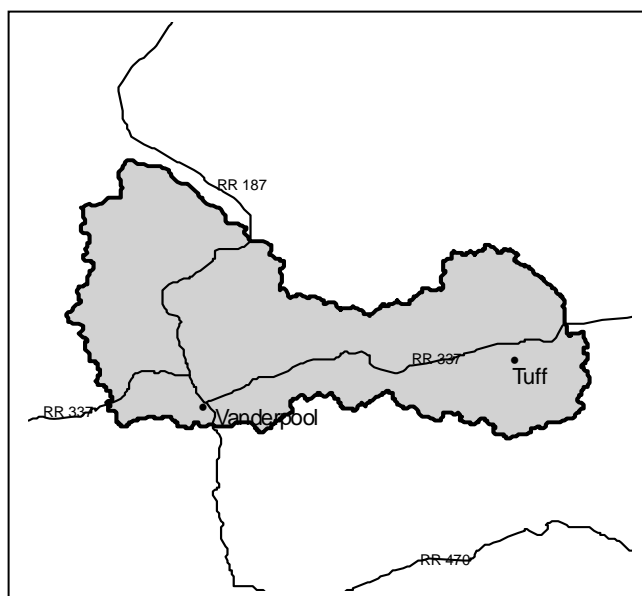


Figure 1. Bandera Canyonlands Conservation Area

Challenges and Opportunities

From scattered artifacts found in Love Creek and along lower stream terraces, there is evidence that prehistoric people inhabited this region. These steep canyons provided shelter in caves, food from the abundant diversity of plants and animals, and an essential ingredient – water. Several tribes of Native Americans roamed the Bandera Canyonlands, including Lipan Apache, Apache and Comanche. The

first European visitors to the area were the Spanish explorers of the late 1700s. Primary immigrants to the region were Germans in search of land to settle. These settlers started a farming and ranching legacy in the Hill Country that continues to this day. Crop production became a mainstay in fertile valley floodplains, and hay production, along with lesser amounts of other grain crops, are common today. Cattle, goats, and sheep, all popular with early ranchers, are still raised in the area. Livestock ranches have been joined by commercial wildlife ranches marketing hunts for both native and exotic species. Cropping and grazing have produced changes on the landscape, not all positive. Introduced plant and animal species, brush clearing, and water extraction have changed the make-up of some wildlife habitat and contributed to a decrease in the abundance of some endemic plants and animals.

Today, the fertile Bandera Canyonlands are also witness to a new kind of settlement, as people from Austin, San Antonio and other cities buy their own piece of the Hill Country here. This new “settlement” can be a serious problem or part of the solution for conservation of this special area. While many new landowners hold tracts that alone may be too small to provide sustainable habitat, landowners working together can develop mutually beneficial management strategies that enhance the ecological, aesthetic, and economic value of every participant’s property. Such cooperative work applies equally well to farms and ranches that have been in families for years, even for generations. In 2000, The Nature Conservancy joined the ranks of new landowners in Bandera Canyonlands, with the acquisition of the Love Creek Preserve. This acquisition gave the Conservancy a vested interest in the future of the Canyonlands. The Conservancy will work with neighbors to help create management synergies, with the ultimate goal of conserving the ecological integrity of the Canyonlands. Toward that end, the Conservancy will engage in the following projects:

- Maintain the ecological function of watersheds for the many area streams, including those that make up the headwaters of the Medina and Sabinal Rivers.
- Collaborate with landowners to implement cooperative, multi-property exotic and native wildlife management efforts, as well as sustainable land management strategies.
- Cooperate with landowners and communities to minimize habitat fragmentation.
- Enhance golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo populations, as part of the effort to remove both birds from the federal endangered species list.

