The Nature Conservancy
SAVING THE LAST GREAT PLACES ON EARTH

texas program

Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve

Millions of Mexican free-tailed bats raise their young in a Hill Country cave

Mexican free-tailed bats emergence at dusk at the preserve, a seasonal home to a maternal colony. Photo © Lynn McBride/TNC

The Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve is one of the largest bat nurseries in the country. Located in Mason County, about 1 million female Mexican free-tailed bats inhabit the site from May through October. About an hour before sunset, hundreds of bats flutter and chirp around the mouth of the cave. Slowly, a stream of bats emerges and flies in a large circle, low to the ground, just outside the cave entrance. These bats gradually spiral upwards and form a dark funnel of flying mammals, reaching several hundred feet into the evening sky. The bats at the top of the spiral break off, forming columns that stream out over the countryside.

Richard Phillip Eckert and Virginia Eckert Garrett donated the cave to The Nature Conservancy in honor of their father, Lee Eckert, and grandfather, W. Phillip Eckert. The Eckert family acquired the property in 1907 when W. Phillip purchased the ranch on which the cave was located. In the early 1900s, W. Phillip mined the bat guano in the cave and sold it to local farmers for crop fertilizer. W. Phillip's son, Lee Eckert, continued his father's legacy of bat conservation and guano mining, and left the site to his wife and children when he died in 1967.

This generation of Eckerts wanted to ensure permanent protection of the bats, so in 1990 they donated the cave to the Conservancy on condition that the land around the cave remain open to the public for enjoyment and education, as it had been for more than 100 years.

Millions of Mexican (also called Brazilian) free-tailed bats live in Central Texas. Like all bat species, the free-tailed population at this cave is an integral part of the Edwards Plateau. For many years,

however, bats were considered menacing creatures to be avoided or destroyed. Thanks to the work of biologists and groups like Bat Conservation International and The Nature Conservancy, this groundless reputation is slowly being corrected.

Bats are finally gaining recognition for their important ecological roles. They are agents of seed dispersal and cross-pollination for many plant species. Bats also control insect populations. They scour thousands of acres of countryside each night searching for food. During these nightly excursions, each bat consumes close to its body weight in insects. Included in their diet are mosquitoes and numerous crop pests such as cutworm and corn borer moths.

In a maternal cave, such as the Eckert James River Cave, females give birth to a single pup in June or July. The young bats grow rapidly and are able to fly at about five weeks of age. They remain with their mothers until they return to Mexico in October.

Because these and other bat species roost in such large numbers, colonies could be destroyed by a single act of vandalism. The free-tailed bat population has declined dramatically in some areas of the country. This decrease is largely attributed to the disturbance and destruction of roost sites by humans, usually leading either to total evacuation of the roost or complete decimation of the site's entire population. Because free-tailed bats give birth to a single pup each year, a population's recovery rate is slow.

The management plan developed by Bat Conservation International and The Nature Conservancy at the preserve prevents human entrance to the cave during maternal activity, controls visitation, monitors the bat population and protects the cave opening. Scientific research continues at the site and the cave remains open to scientists throughout most of the year.

Experience the bat emergence

Continuing the tradition of public access to the cave, the 8-acre preserve is open mid-May to early October for interpretive tours. Normal hours are Thursday-Sunday, 6 to 9 p.m., although emergence times vary slightly. Call (325) 347-5970 prior to coming to see what time the bats are emerging. Some sunrise tours of the bats returning from their nocturnal hunts also are offered. A $5 donation is requested from visitors over the age of 5.

Driving directions from Mason

From the southeast side of the Mason town square, follow Highway 87 South about 1 mile to FM 1723 and turn right. After 4.8 miles, turn right on FM 2389. Cross two bridges over the Llano River and turn right on James River Road. Watch for deer and cattle on the road. The pavement ends, but continue on the James River Road past the paved turnoff to the right. Cross the James River at the ford and drive about a half-mile to a sharp left turn. The gated entrance to the Bat Cave Preserve is on the right at this curve. Follow the road to the parking lot.

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