



DEVILS RIVER

*Freshwater springs feed the Devils River,
one of the most pristine in Texas*

conservation profile

Ecoregion: Edwards Plateau (also in the Chihuahuan Desert Ecoregion buffer).

Conservation Elements: Black-capped vireo, Texas snowbells, Devils River minnow, Rio Grande darter, Rio Grande river cooter, headwaters catfish, riparian woodlands, cave biota and river, stream and spring health and integrity.

Stresses: Excessive groundwater withdrawal, degraded rangeland health, surface water quality, small tract housing subdivision and harmful, non-native species introductions.

Strategies: Landscape-scale conservation agreements with conservation buyers, formation of underground water management districts and promoting sustainable economic activities that are ecologically sound.

Partners: Private landowners, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, National Park Service, Texas Council on Environmental Quality, International Boundary Water Commission, Texas Water Development Board, U.S. Geological Survey.



Devils River bluff © Laurence Parent

There are vast tracts of land where the wildness of Texas' frontier remains unbroken – where clear spring-fed waters weave a river of turquoise and jade through pale limestone canyons. Here, framing the luminously blue Devils River, lies a rich biological crossroads where the Hill Country, Chihuahuan Desert and South Texas Brush Country landscapes converge.

Rugged in character and steeped in centuries of human history, the Devils River Basin is the kind of rough-hewn landscape from which

legends are born. This remote, free-flowing river—considered an ecological jewel—winds southward through steep, wooded canyons, mesa-like hills dotted with mesquite and juniper, and a desert of prickly pear and purple sage for nearly 60 miles before joining the waters of the Rio Grande at Lake Amistad on the U.S./Mexico border. Its clear waters are crucial for human communities and wildlife.

Fed by powerful freshwater springs flowing from the bases of towering limestone cliffs, the Devils River and



Devils River landscape © Laurence Parent

its tributary, Dolan Creek, comprise what many consider the most pristine, pure river in Texas. In addition, this river contributes more than 22,000 gallons of water a minute for wildlife as well as human needs. Its unique springwater flows and habitats are what initially sparked The Nature Conservancy's interest in the Devils River Basin more than a decade ago.

These clean waters harbor a rare salamander and several rare, declining fish species, many of which are unique to the Chihuahuan Desert region. In addition, the wooded tributary canyons of the Devils River corridor serve as important migration paths for birds and monarch butterflies traversing this dry region. The area sustains other rare species as well, including the Texas snowbell, the Devils River minnow and the black-capped vireo, an endangered songbird that nests here each spring.

Another striking feature of the Devils River area is Fern Cave, a maternity roost for up to 10 million Mexican free-tailed bats from May through October, as well as the

northernmost known wintering site for this species. During their evening emergence to feed on insects, an awe-inspiring cloud of bats swirls from the cavern's massive, 80-foot-deep sinkhole.

In addition to its diverse array of plant and animal life, the Devils River area bears witness to its ancient Native American inhabitants. Fine examples of pictographs, Native American artwork painted on rock dating from historic times to 5,000 years ago, draw anthropologists and archeologists to this unique part of Texas.

Working Across the Landscape

In this arid land, the Devils River Basin is an oasis supporting exceptional biodiversity. Working together with other conservation partners, The Conservancy is helping ensure that its waters and watershed remain intact and pristine for future generations of people and wildlife.

To this end, the Conservancy has protected eight historic ranches—87,760 acres—in

Val Verde County, properties which surround the Devils River's headwaters and include eight miles of the nearly 60-mile-long river. These lands contribute to a mosaic of previously protected lands along the river, including:

- 18,500 acres farther south along the river, including the largest-volume continuously flowing waterfall in Texas: Dolan Falls. Nearly 5,000 acres of this land now forms the Conservancy's Dolan Falls Preserve, while the remainder is protected by a conservation easement – a legal agreement that permanently conserves land.
- the nearly 20,000-acre Devils River State Natural Area, on which the Conservancy holds a conservation easement
- the nearly 22,000-acre Devils River Ranch, a section on the southernmost portion of the river bordering more than 13 miles of river frontage.

Altogether, the Conservancy has permanently protected about 25 miles along the Devils River, or nearly 150,000 acres in the Devils river's basin.

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