



devils river volunteers & friends

A newsletter of The Nature Conservancy of Texas

Volume 4, Number 3

August 2003

Conservancy buys 87,000 acres on river

Largest private conservation deal in Texas to safeguard the headwaters of the Devils River

The Nature Conservancy of Texas has purchased 87,760 acres to protect the Devils River.

Comprising eight historic ranches in Val Verde County, the land surrounds the Devils' headwaters and includes eight miles of the 60-mile-long river. The Conservancy plans to protect the property with conservation easements permanently restricting development and subdivision, and sell it to a buyer or buyers committed to conservation.

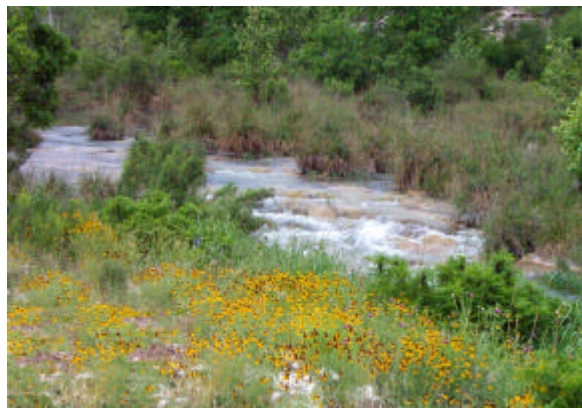
A notable feature of the property is a massive sinkhole leading to a cave system known as Fern Cave. The site provides a seasonal cave for Mexican free-tailed bats. (See related story on Page 2).

The property is also a nesting area for black-capped vireos, an endangered songbird, and several other birds of conservation concern, such as the zone-

tailed hawk, hooded oriole and Bell's vireo. This area of the Devils River is also known to have populations of rare fish, such as the Devils River minnow.

For more on this story please visit nature.org/texas.

In conjunction with this purchase, The Nature Conservancy has opened an office in Del Rio. Located on U.S. Hwy. 90, this office will be staffed by Bea Harrison, Devils River Program Coordinator, and Jim Harrison, Devils River Project Director. The new phone number is (830) 775-9292.



Springs near the headwaters of the Devils River, part of the new Conservancy purchase, produce some of the cleanest water in Texas.



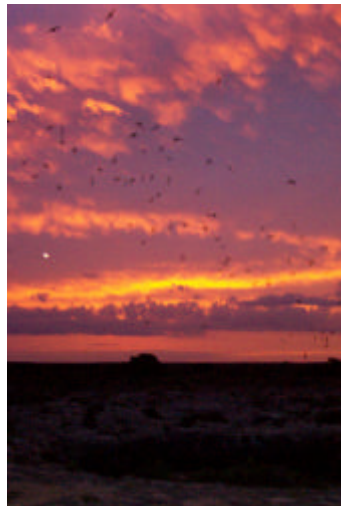
Merlin Tuttle and Bea Harrison at Fern Cave.

Bat expert Merlin Tuttle visits Fern Cave

Merlin Tuttle, renowned bat expert and photographer with Bat Conservation International (BCI), visited Fern Cave recently to do a bat survey. Fern Cave, the largest cave in Texas, is on property recently purchased by The Nature Conservancy. He determined that Fern Cave is home to one of the world's largest remaining bat populations, about 250,000 Mexican free-tail bats.

Historically, Fern Cave may have held up to 12 million bats. A guano-mining operation, some time after 1962, significantly reduced these numbers. Cutting a shaft in the ceiling of the free-tailed bats' primary maternity roost made the site largely unsuitable as a maternity cave. The majority of bats now appear to abandon the cave just prior to giving birth.

Following Mr. Tuttle's recommendations, the Conservancy plans to close the old mining shaft.



Sunset illuminates the bat emergence at Fern Cave.

TURTLES, FISH AND BIRDS



Scientists study wildlife at Centex Homes Dolan Falls Preserve

Dolan Falls Preserve has seen its share of scientific researchers lately. Dr. Michael Forstner of Southwest Texas State University and a crew of zoologists came in June to collect DNA from the turtles in the Devils River. These turtles, called the Rio Grande cooter (*Pseudemys gorzugi*), have recently been listed as a species of special concern.

Other animals being studied at Dolan Falls include neotropical songbirds. Dr. Brent Ortego of Texas Parks and Wildlife, Dr. Ross Dawkins of San Angelo State University and Bob and Martha Sargent of the Hummer/Bird Study Group were at the preserve in June, doing some DNA work of their own. Through this research they hope to prove that tropical and northern parulas, as well as summer and western tanagers, are hybridizing along the Devils River. Their study also deals with site fidelity of green kingfishers.

Other scientists who have been working at the preserve this summer include Dr. Mark Nicoletto of Lamar University, who is recording the sounds made by Conchos pupfish, and Dr. Gary Garrett and his crew from Texas Parks and Wildlife, who are continuing their inventory of rare fish in the Devils River.