There are vast tracts of land where the wildness of Texas’ frontier remains unbroken—where clear springfed waters weave a river of turquoise and jade through pale limestone canyons. Here, framing the luminous 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 45 miles before joining the waters of the Rio Grande at Amistad Basin on the U.S./Mexico border.

Fed by powerful freshwater springs flowing from the bases of towering limestone cliffs, the Devils River and its tributary, Dolan Creek, comprise what many consider the most pristine, pure river in Texas. The creek contributes more than 22,000 gallons of water each minute to the Devils River—its unique springwater flows and habitats are what initially sparked The Nature Conservancy’s interest in the Devils River Basin more than two decades ago.

The pristine waters of the Devils River harbor a rare salamander and several rare fish, reptiles and freshwater mussel 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 blackcapped vireo, an endangered songbird that nests here each spring.

Another striking feature of the Devils River area is Fern Cave, a seasonal maternity roost for millions of Mexican free-tailed bats and the northernmost wintering site that has been identified for this species. Between May and October, 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 paintings dating from historic times to 5,000 years ago, can be found on some of the rocks here.

**Working Across the Landscape**

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

To this end, the Conservancy has protected more than a dozen historic ranches in Val Verde County along the Devils River (or in its watershed). These lands contribute to a mosaic of previously protected lands along the river, including:

- 18,500 acres around one of the largest continuously flowing waterfalls in Texas: Dolan Falls. Nearly 5,000 acres of this land forms the Conservancy’s Dolan Falls Preserve, while the remainder is permanently protected by a conservation easement.
- Nearly 20,000 acres that comprise the Devils River State Natural Area, on which the Conservancy holds a conservation easement.
- Devils River Ranch, a nearly 22,000-acre section on the southernmost portion of the river that borders more than 13 miles of riverfront.

Altogether, the Conservancy has permanently protected about 25 miles along the Devils River and nearly 135,000 acres in the watershed. The Conservancy has also facilitated important research to increase our understanding of the entire Devils River system, including the springs that sustain it and the ecosystems and species it supports. We’ve aided universities and state agencies in establishing monitoring programs to ensure the detection and management of anything that impacts the flow and water quality of the Devils River and the aquifer that is the river’s lifeblood. This information is already being used to improve surface water and groundwater management in the river basin, which will benefit the entire region and the animals and people that depend on the Devils River.