

THE EDWARDS PLATEAU ECOREGION

*Extraordinary diversity of life amid hills
and canyons in Central Texas*

conservation profile

Partnerships

Protecting San Antonio's sole source of drinking water is an important priority for the Conservancy. Since the 1990s, in partnership with others, the Conservancy has bought land from or established conservation agreements with willing private landowners to protect the recharge and contributing zones of the Edwards Aquifer.

Winding through Kendall, Blanco and Hays counties, the Blanco River is a vital link in a network of rivers and aquifers in the Edwards Plateau Ecoregion on which residents in Austin, San Marcos, Wimberley, San Antonio and the surrounding countryside depend for water. With partners, the Conservancy launched the Blanco River Project in 2003 to encourage collaboration among landowners, communities and other stakeholders to conserve the diversity of life in the Blanco River Valley.

Beginning in 1994, the Conservancy joined forces with the U.S. Army to protect the federally endangered black-capped vireos and golden-cheeked warblers on and around Fort Hood.

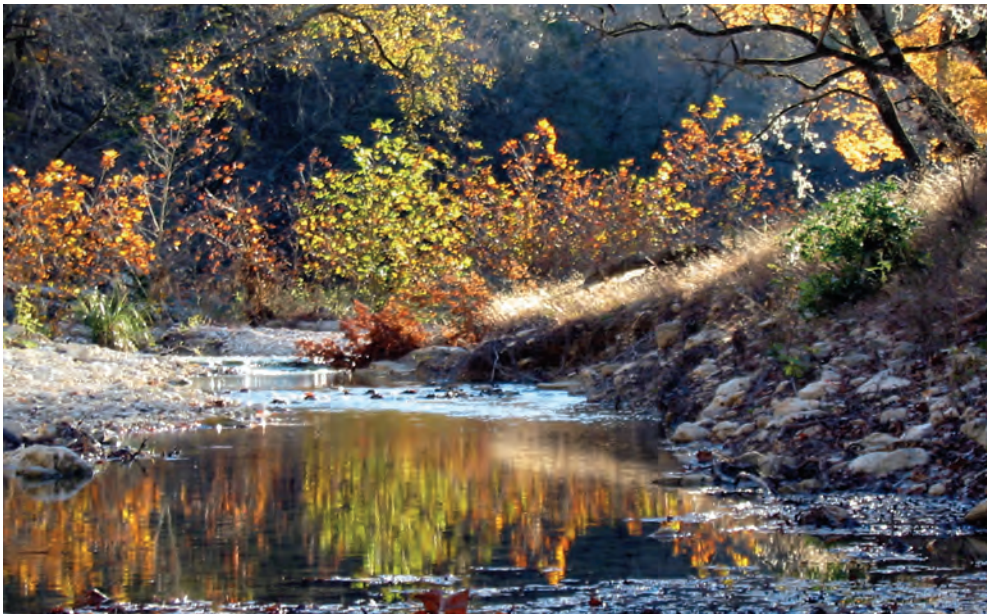


Black-capped vireo (© Mike Gray)

The much-loved Texas Hill Country is both rugged and pastoral in terrain. Renowned for its beautiful water-carved canyons and steep hillsides forested with oak and juniper, the Hill Country, described as the Edwards Plateau Ecoregion by conservation scientists, encompasses 36,680 square miles in Central Texas. A recent ecoregional assessment undertaken by The Nature Conservancy and partners identified 62 rivers, creeks, springs and watersheds, along with 102 landscapes, that are important to conservation. They support a rich

diversity of animals and plants, many of which are not found outside the region.

Perhaps most important to the Edwards Plateau Ecoregion is a profusion of irregular limestone (or karst) features that capture water underground and supply this semi-arid landscape with abundant water, the lifeblood of the land. Supreme among underground water resources is the Edwards Aquifer, the primary water source for the city of San Antonio and other consumers. The Edwards Aquifer



Love Creek (© Edward Porter)

also provides habitat for a variety of rare cave- and crevice-dwelling species.

While best known for the beautiful and historic Hill Country, the Edwards Plateau Ecoregion includes a wide range of plant and animal communities, making it one of the most biologically diverse regions in the nation.

With its picturesque landscapes, mild climate and copious water, the region beckoned to early settlers in the 1800s, particularly Germans, who built the gracious and orderly Hill Country towns of Fredericksburg, Comfort, New Braunfels and others. Grasslands, shrub lands and savannas also attracted cattle, sheep and goat ranchers.

Although large predators now are uncommon on the Edwards Plateau, bear and mountain lions occasionally are spotted in western portions of the plateau. Other intriguing mammals are more common, such as javelinas, ringtails, bobcats, armadillos, raccoons, opossums and badgers. Rare and interesting birds include the golden-cheeked warbler, which nests only in the Hill Country, black-capped vireo, Acadian flycatcher, summer

tanager, indigo bunting, blue-gray gnatcatcher, zone-tailed hawks and bald eagles. This region – located on the North American Central Flyway – provides essential corridors for a great variety of migratory birds.

Rare aquatic and cave-dwelling species include Balcones ghostsnail, fountain darter, San Marcos salamander, Texas blind salamander, Tooth Cave ground beetle and Bee Creek Cave Harvestman spider. Rare plants include Texas mock-orange, sycamore-leaved snowbells, darkstem noseburn, spreading least-daisy, scarlet virgin's-bower, big red sage, buckley tridens and Tobusch fish-hook cactus. Reptiles include the fabled Texas horned lizard.

Hill Country towns today are magnets for Texas urbanites seeking a small-town lifestyle within commuting distance of Austin and San Antonio. As a result, the populations of seven counties within the ecoregion are among the fastest growing in the nation. San Antonio, the eighth-largest American city, continues to grow, with much of that growth occurring in the recharge zone for the Edwards Aquifer.

The very appeal of the Edwards Plateau spurs the greatest challenge to conserving the ecoregion: We are in danger of loving the Hill Country to death. Poorly planned growth; habitat fragmentation as older, large landholdings are developed; introduction of harmful, non-native species; poor range-management practices; and suppression of natural fire are putting severe pressure on the environment, particularly water resources.

Appreciation for the region's natural treasures also helped create many state parks and natural areas – some, such as Enchanted Rock and Honey Creek, with help from the Conservancy. The Conservancy's preserves in the Edwards Plateau include:

- The 4,000-acre Barton Creek Habitat Preserve in southwest Austin provides habitat for rare songbirds, serves as a conservation-outreach center and is a research site.
- Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve in Mason County is home to about 6 million Mexican free-tailed bats between May and October, when the bats migrate from Mexico to give birth in this important maternity colony. This eight-acre preserve on the James River was given to the Conservancy in 1990 by the Eckert family.
- At Love Creek Preserve, in Bandera County, crystal-clear water flows from springs and seeps to feed the creek for which the 1,400-acre preserve is named. These life-giving waters etch through deep, cool canyons and support a variety of rare wildlife.

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