The Edwards Plateau Ecoregion

The Nature Conservancy
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Conservation Profile

Winding through Kendall, Blanco and Hays counties, the Blanco River lies within the Edwards Plateau ecoregion and is a vital link in the network of rivers and aquifers on which residents of Austin, San Marcos, Wimberley, San Antonio and the surrounding countryside depend. Its waters eventually flow into the San Marcos River, which is fed by the ever-important Edwards Aquifer, San Antonio's sole source of drinking water that supports more than two million people across the Hill Country.

Since the 1990s, the Conservancy, in partnership with others, has purchased land from and established conservation agreements with willing private landowners to protect the sensitive lands in and around the Edwards Aquifer—we have succeeded in protecting 21 percent of the recharge zone, which is of particular ecological importance.

The Conservancy also works with partners in the area to advance the Blanco River Project, which encourages collaboration among landowners, communities and other stakeholders to conserve the diversity of life in the Blanco River Valley. Similar projects have also been established in the Upper Nueces, Guadalupe and Pedernales River watersheds.

Love Creek Preserve © Ian Shive.

The much-loved Texas Hill Country is both rugged and pastoral in terrain. Renowned for its beautiful watercarved canyons and steep hillsides forested with oak and juniper, the Hill Country—as the Edwards Plateau region is known by conservation scientists and most Texans—encompasses 36,680 square miles in Central Texas. Perhaps most important in the area is a profusion of irregular limestone—or karst—features that capture water underground with which to replenish this semi-arid landscape. Supreme among the region's groundwater resources is the Edwards Aquifer, the primary water source for the city of San Antonio and millions of Hill Country residents. The Edwards Aquifer also provides habitat for a variety of rare cave and crevice-dwelling species.

In addition to the Hill Country's sweeping, bountiful landscapes, 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 settled towns like Fredericksburg, Comfort and New Braunfels, among others. The region's grasslands, shrublands and savannas also attracted cattle, sheep and goat ranchers. In fact, an ecoregional assessment undertaken by The Nature Conservancy and partners identified 628 rivers, creeks, springs and watersheds, along with 102 landscapes, that are important to conservation within the area; those features support a rich diversity of animals and plants, many of which are not found outside the Edwards Plateau.

Although large predators are generally rare throughout the Edwards Plateau, bear and mountain lions have occasionally been spotted in western portions of the plateau. Other mammals, such as javelinas, ringtails, bobcats, armadillos,

Above: Painted bunting © Rich Kostecke. Below (top to bottom): Cactus © Fran Trachta, Texas horned lizard © Rich Kostecke.

raccoons, opossums and badgers are more common. Rare and interesting birds include the federally endangered golden-cheeked warbler—which nests only in the Hill Country—as well as the black-capped vireo, Acadian flycatcher, summer tanager, indigo bunting, bluegray gnatcatcher, zone-tailed hawk and bald eagle. This region—located within the North American Central Flyway—provides essential corridors for a great variety of migratory birds.

Rare aquatic and cave-dwelling species include Guadalupe bass, Texas fatmucket mussel, fountain darter, San Marcos salamander, Texas blind salamander, Balcones ghostsnail, Tooth Cave ground beetle and Bee Creek Cave Harvestman spider. Rare plants include Texas mockorange, sycamore-leaved snowbells, darkstem noseburn, spreading leastdaisy, scarlet virgin's bower, big red sage, buckley tridens and Tobusch fishhook cactus. Reptiles include the fabled Texas horned lizard.

What attracted those groups of German settlers so many years ago continues to lure residents today—the Hill Country is projected to add two million people over the next four decades with some counties, including Bandera, Comal, Hays, and Kendall, expecting to double their residents by 2050. The very appeal of the Edwards Plateau spurs the greatest challenge of conserving the ecoregion: We are in danger of loving the Hill Country to death. Poorly planned growth, habitat fragmentation, suppression of natural fire, poor range management and the introduction of harmful, non-native species are putting severe pressure on the environment, particularly water resources.

But the Conservancy is working diligently to protect the diversity of plant and animal species, as well as the region's critical freshwater resources, for the benefit of people and nature. Our regional preserves include:

· The 4,000-acre Barton Creek Habitat Preserve in southwest Austin, which provides habitat for rare songbirds, serves as a conservation outreach center and important research site.

· Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve in Mason County, which is home to about six million Mexican free-tailed bats; between May and October the bats migrate from Mexico to give birth. This eight-acre preserve on the James River was gifted to the Conservancy in 1990 by the Eckert family.

· The Love Creek Preserve in Bandera County boasts crystal-clear water that flows from springs and seeps to feed Love Creek, for which the 1,400-acre preserve is named. These life-sustaining waters etch through deep, cool canyons and support a variety of rare wildlife including one of the rarest fish in Texas.

· Cibolo Bluffs Preserve, just northwest of San Antonio, offers 1,244 acres of pristine habitat for the golden-cheeked warbler and safeguards land over the Edwards Aquifer. Created in partnership with Bexar County and the United States Army, it also buffers Bracken Bat Cave, which is home to more than 20 million Mexican-free tailed bats, making it the largest bat colony in the world.