

Blanco River Project

CONSERVING AQUATIC TREASURES

Conservation Profile

Ecoregion: Edwards Plateau

Conservation Elements: Blanco River and tributary streams, springs and seeps, riparian forests and floodplains, canyon system, upland grasslands, savannas and shrublands, Blanco natural heritage sites, rural and village ambience, sustainable Hill Country economy, golden-cheeked warbler, black-capped vireo, Texas shiner, Guadalupe bass, Cagle's map turtle, swamp rabbit, Texas horned lizard, canyon mockorange, purple-spike coralroot, granite spiderwort and others.

Stresses: Home development, unsustainable ground and surface water use, excessive wildlife herbivory, unsustainable grazing practices, incompatible fire management.

Strategies: Promote sustainable water use and appropriate land management, restore pure Guadalupe bass population, encourage environmentally sensitive building, conserve natural and cultural heritage

Partners: Texas State University, Wimberley Valley Watershed Association, Guadalupe Blanco River Trust, other non-governmental organizations, private landowners, local communities, and state and federal natural resource conservation agencies.



Blanco River © Lynn McBride.

During its 87-mile course through three counties, the Blanco River is the defining element in some of the Texas Hill Country's most beautiful scenery. There are shady banks lined with cypress, pecan and willow trees; hills and bluffs punctuated with live oaks and limestone outcroppings; and deep pools where fish hang suspended in glassy green water. Its name—'blanco' means white in Spanish—comes from its white limestone riverbanks and streambeds.

This swift, shallow river is part of a network of rivers and aquifers that residents in Austin, San Marcos, San Antonio and surrounding communities depend on for drinking water, food and recreation; its basin spans more than 400 miles. The river's headwaters begin in the springs of Kendall County, then it flows through Blanco and Hays counties. The river terminates at the

San Marcos River, which supports a breathtaking array of aquatic and terrestrial life.

But rapid development threatens the Hill Country and the freshwater resources that sustain its native plants and animals. The 18 counties of the Hill Country added roughly 700,000 people between 2000 and 2010, and growth is projected to jump by more than 60 percent by 2050, to more than five million people.

Project Launched

To conserve the resources and natural treasures of the Hill Country, the Conservancy launched the Blanco River Project in 2003, with the goal of conserving the diversity of life found in the Blanco River Valley, with particular emphasis on aquatic resources; aquatic system function; and rare or unique plants, animals



Blanco River © Lynn McBride.

and communities. Because land ownership within the 400-square-mile project area is overwhelmingly private, the project encourages voluntary collaboration among private landowners, community leaders, government agencies, educational institutions and nongovernmental organizations.

The project supports a variety of initiatives:

- Aquatic research and monitoring programs at Texas State University in San Marcos
- Aquatic and terrestrial management information and cost share support to private landowners
- Riparian workshops for landowners
- Partnering with landowners to protect their ranches through conservation easements
- Sustainable ground and surface water management
- Ecologically compatible home development

Identifying Stresses on the Blanco River

Because of this region's biological importance and the imminent development pressures it faces, the Conservancy joined others working to conserve the

natural heritage within the river's basin. Together, we created a project plan that balances ecological needs with lifestyle priorities identified by local residents. During the process, we identified several issues that have a negative influence on the diversity of life in the Blanco River Valley: incompatible development, unsustainable water use and an overabundance of white-tailed deer. Other concerns include incompatible vegetation clearing, incompatible fire management, unsustainable grazing practices and the spreading of invasive native and non-native species.

Many of these stresses also pose concerns across the broader Edwards Plateau region, but this plan—which serves as a starting point for a robust collaboration with local residents—is a blueprint that will guide conservation work and partnerships. We anticipate that the tools, techniques, partnerships and approaches that result from the Blanco River Project will be readily transferable to similar landscapes throughout the Edwards Plateau, which is nationally recognized as an important area for biodiversity conservation. The Conservancy's interactions with community members will continue to inform and influence our work within the critically important Blanco River watershed.