

Davis Mountains Preserve

SAVING A ‘SKY ISLAND’ IN THE WILDS OF FAR WEST TEXAS



Davis Mountains Preserve © Ian Shive.

The Davis Mountains rise like a mirage out of the grasslands and scrublands of far West Texas. Formed from volcanoes and sculpted by wind and water more than 35 million years ago, the mountains form a unique “sky island” surrounded by the Chihuahuan Desert. The area Texans call the Trans-Pecos—beyond the Pecos River—is true desert. But the Davis Mountains, climbing skyward to more than 8,300 feet above sea level, are cool and forested, an anomaly in an arid land. Once the domain of the Apache, the range was named for Jefferson Davis, who, as U.S. Secretary of War in 1854, ordered a fort built in the rugged mountains to protect stagecoach routes and emigrants traveling westward. From the ancient pictographs that adorn canyon walls to large, sprawling ranches that dot the landscape, the history and strength of the people of the Davis Mountains are tangible throughout the region.

For more than 25 years, The Nature Conservancy has worked to preserve this spectacular wild landscape and habitat for rare plants and animals. Considered one of the most scenic areas in Texas, the Davis Mountains support a number

of rare species, including some found nowhere else in the world. This region also sits at the overlap of two great North American migratory bird routes, making it a rich haven for birders.

The night skies over this remote part of West Texas are some of the darkest in the continental United States—so dark, in fact, that astronomers consider the nearby University of Texas McDonald Observatory one of the world’s best places for deep space observation.

CONSERVING THE DAVIS MOUNTAINS LANDSCAPE

The Conservancy uses a variety of conservation tools to help protect this majestic region, chief among them: strong community outreach and on-the-ground conservation work. With the purchase of much of the historic U Up U Down Ranch, **the Conservancy established the Davis Mountains Preserve in 1997; the heart of the preserve is the 8,378-foot Mount Livermore**, the highest peak of the Davis Mountains.

A few years later, **we created the nearly 5,000-acre Madera Canyon Preserve** just eight miles northeast of the Davis



Davis Mountains Preserve © Lynn McBride.

Mountains Preserve; its canyons are home to some of the most striking and significant prehistoric rock art in Texas and part of an integral watershed in the Davis Mountains ecosystem. In 2004, the Conservancy purchased the 10,000 acres bridging the two preserves to create one contiguous protected landscape of 33,000 acres, now known collectively as the Davis Mountains Preserve.

This move allowed the Conservancy to preserve Madera Creek and Little Aguja Creek and the health of their canyon watersheds, which contribute to the recharge of the area's Igneous Aquifer. That groundwater provides drinking water for people in the surrounding region and water for area ranches and wildlife, too. Adjoining the two properties also allowed:

- natural processes, such as wildland fire management and prescribed fire applications, perennial surface water flow and permanent pools, to be maintained or restored at a landscape scale
- conservation of crucial habitat corridors for local wildlife movement and bird migration
- additional protection of the dark skies that are vital to the McDonald Observatory
- preservation of scenic natural vistas in the

Davis Mountains

This pivotal land purchase also expanded public access and environmental educational opportunities by making possible the construction of a trail system (adjacent to the Lawrence E. Wood Roadside Park) that allows hikers to enjoy the ecosystem that encompasses Madera Canyon and Mount Livermore.

In subsequent years, the Conservancy has utilized conservation agreements and easements on surrounding properties to advance its goal of whole-system protection; **more than 100,000 acres of this unique region has now been preserved**—including Sawtooth Mountain, an iconic part of Texas lore and legend—thanks in large part to committed and conservation-minded landowners working in concert with the Conservancy.

Fast Facts

Ecoregion: Chihuahuan Desert.

Conservation Elements: Montane evergreen forests, creeks, streams, aspen groves, Montezuma quail, Mexican spotted owl, Rio Grande chub, mountain short-horned lizard, Mexican black bear, Davis Mountains cottontail, Big Bend blackheaded snake, Shinner's tickletoe, Little Aguja Pondweed, buff-breasted flycatcher and dusky-capped flycatcher, common blackhawk.

Stresses: Habitat fragmentation from subdivision, overuse of water resources from a growing population, overgrazing, natural fire suppression.

Strategies: Acquire land, secure conservation agreements, restore ecosystems, encourage conservation management of private land.

Partners: Ranchers and other private landowners, Buffalo Trail Boy Scout Council, Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute, Texas Forest Service.



Screech owl © Rich Kostecke.