



DAVIS MOUNTAINS PROJECT

*Saving a 'sky island' amid a desert sea
in the wilds of far West Texas*

conservation profile

Ecoregion: Chihuahuan Desert.

Conservation Elements: Creeks, springs, evergreen forests, aspen groves, Montezuma quail, Mexican spotted owl, Rio Grande chub, mountain short-horned lizard, Mexican black bear, Livermore paintbrush, Big Bend black-headed snake.

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

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, Davis Mountains Education Center, University of Texas McDonald Observatory, Texas Forest Service.



Davis Mountains (© Lynn McBride)

The Davis Mountains rise like a mirage out of the grasslands and scrublands of Far West Texas. The area Texans call the Trans-Pecos – beyond the Pecos River – is close to 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.

Formed from volcanoes and further sculpted by wind and water more than 35 million years ago, the mountains form a unique “sky island” surrounded by the Chihuahuan Desert

Throughout the Southwest, these insular mountain ranges receive more precipitation than do the plains below, creating a true island of life for many plants, animals and plant communities uniquely adapted to the cooler climate and higher terrain. The Davis Mountains – considered one of the most scenic areas in Texas – support rare species, including some found nowhere else. This region also sits on the edge of two great North American migratory bird routes, making it a rich haven for birders.



Davis Mountains (© John Karges)

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 paint canyon walls to ranches with colorful names like the “U Up U Down,” the history and character of the people of the Davis Mountains are indelibly marked by this landscape.

The night skies over this remote part of West Texas are some of the darkest in the continental United States – so dark that astronomers consider the University of Texas McDonald Observatory here one of the world’s best places for deep-space observation. But those night skies risk being illuminated by an influx of new residences, many of which are vacation homes in the mountains. Development also taxes water resources and fragments habitat.

For more than 20 years, The Nature Conservancy has worked to preserve this spectacular wild landscape and habitat for rare plants and animals. One way this is achieved is by encouraging private landowners to

donate conservation agreements to permanently protect their land and prevent future subdivision. In many cases, conservation-minded individuals have bought properties subject to these conservation agreements.

Conserving the Davis Mountains landscape

Madera Canyon – home to some of the most striking and significant prehistoric rock art in Texas – is an integral watershed in the Davis Mountains ecosystem. Using conservation agreements and land purchases, the Conservancy has protected more than 100,000 acres in the Davis Mountains and is committed to working with private landowners to provide lasting conservation results for the preservation of this unique and irreplaceable region.

The Davis Mountains’ highest peak, Mount Livermore, rises to 8,378 feet at the heart of the Davis Mountains Preserve, initially created in 1997 with the purchase of part of a historic ranch. A few years later, eight miles northeast, the Conservancy established the nearly 5,000-acre Madera Canyon Preserve. More

recently, the Conservancy purchased the 10,000 acres that connects these two preserves. The result is the conservation of one contiguous protected landscape of 32,000 acres, now known collectively as the Davis Mountains Preserve.

This purchase also allows the Conservancy to conserve Madera Creek and the health of its canyon watershed, which contributes to the recharge of the area’s Igneous Aquifer. This aquifer provides water for area ranches as well as drinking water for people in the surrounding region. Other benefits of the recent purchase include:

- natural processes, such as wildland fire, perennial surface flow and permanent pools, can be maintained or restored at a landscape scale;
- conservation of a crucial habitat corridor for local wildlife migration;
- additional protection of the dark skies that are vital to the McDonald Observatory; and
- preservation of scenic vistas in the Davis Mountains, unmarred by incompatible development

This pivotal land purchase also expands public access and environmental educational opportunities by making possible the construction of a trail system, which allows hikers to enjoy the ecosystem that encompasses Madera Canyon and Mount Livermore.

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