

A photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, a paved road curves through a dry, hilly area with sparse, low-lying vegetation. A small car is visible on the road. In the background, there are large, rugged mountains under a clear sky. The overall tone is warm and scenic.

BIG BEND CONSERVANCY

Blooms of the Bend
Exploration for All
Photographer Carl Deal
Desert Discoveries

Spring 2025

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From the Executive Director

Loren Riemer



Greetings, Friends!

Spring is here and I'm excited to see the cactus blooming in our beautiful park. It's been a long season of drought for our region, but just as the hearty desert life persists, so do we. Throughout the many unknowns experienced by our park partners over the past few months, they have continued to show up daily for Big Bend National Park visitors – setting aside their own discomfort and anxiety to care for guests. From provision of interpretive programming, ensuring visitor safety, and keeping facilities clean, park staff truly make Big Bend the special place it is.

Big Bend Conservancy has worked alongside park staff to maintain services for visitors during peak periods, including providing portable toilets in the Chisos Basin during the Spring Break rush. This allowed for the preservation of the limited water supply while still ensuring visitors had access to

facilities. We encourage you to always be thoughtful about water usage while in the park, but, of course, please stay hydrated!

Throughout peak visitation and challenging times, Big Bend Conservancy continues to partner with the Warrior Research Institute, ensuring park staff have access to mental health resources and peer support groups. These tools aid in providing a safe and healthy environment for park personnel and visitors alike. We are proud to be part of this pilot program and see its results daily.

As we look forward to the park's next season, we are excited to partner in identifying funds for sustainability components, including solar power and rainwater catchment, for the new lodge facility in the Chisos Basin. The new construction will also allow the opportunity for a collaborative mural, highlighting features of the

park and recognizing partners who have supported BBC and the park throughout the years.

Additionally, we are continuing our work on the new accessible overlook at Sotol Vista, made possible through an incredibly generous family. This outlook will provide a place of respite – to enjoy sunsets and astronomy programs while taking in all our incredible park has to offer.

If you have the opportunity to visit Big Bend in the coming months, we encourage you to take the time to thank the park staff. They are incredible stewards of our beloved park, and it would not thrive without their persistent guardianship and care.

Just like our beloved prickly pear, thanks to the generosity of supporters like you, BBC continues to bloom where we've been planted. Thank you for your partnership in our mission – to preserve, enrich, and conserve the unique resources of Big Bend National Park. We could not do it without YOU!



With gratitude,

Loren Riemer
Executive Director and CEO

President's Notes

Amanda Billings

Dear friends,

My favorite time to visit Big Bend National Park is in the summer. You might be thinking, “Why would you visit a desert park during the hottest time of the year?” While it’s true that summer requires extra care and preparation, the rewards are worth it: fewer crowds, wide open roads, and the chance to meet interesting people from around the world.

My first trip to Big Bend was at the end of an epic Texas road trip with my husband in August 2014. I was a late bloomer, experiencing Big Bend for the first time in my 40s. After a day of hiking, we gathered on the Lodge patio as a community of explorers to watch the sun set in the Window. We were joined by a group of Dutch students who were backpacking through the United States. They were in awe of the rugged beauty and vast landscapes of Big Bend, one of many national parks they planned to visit. They wanted to make sure we knew how special America’s parks are.

Thinking back on this exchange got me thinking about the history of our national parks and the uniquely American origins of these treasured places. According to the Library of Congress, “The concept of a national park is an American innovation that, in part, grew out of the national conservation movement that began in the 19th century. When Yellowstone was designated a national park in 1872, it became the first such park in the world.”

Fast forward to the Great Depression and FDR’s ingenuity in creating jobs. His creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to put people to work beautifying our country was an extraordinary vision, building our economy while investing in our nation’s natural resources. I think about this on every trail we hike in Big Bend—the hands of the CCC workers who built those paths and the National Park Service staff who maintain them today.

I feel such pride knowing that America’s national parks are cherished not only by the millions of Americans who visit them each year, but also by people from around the world who come to the United States to experience their grandeur. These parks are not just for us, but for future generations. They are living symbols of our natural heritage and a testament to the importance of conserving our wild places. The investment we make in preserving and protecting our national parks ensures that these spaces will continue to inspire, educate, and connect people to the beauty and wonder of the natural world for many years to come. Your support of the Big Bend Conservancy ensures that the legacy of our national parks remains intact—because conserving and investing in these lands is an investment in our shared history, culture, and future.

With gratitude,

Amanda Land Billings
President, Big Bend Conservancy



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Loren Riemer, Executive Director & CEO

In Memory

Joan Hicks

For more than 30 years Joan Hicks poured her time and energy into preserving and enriching Big Bend National Park. During her near-decade on the BBC board, Joan used her extensive architectural and financial expertise to enhance the organization’s financial position, major fundraising campaigns, and increased donor base.

Joan’s most lasting legacy may ultimately be the contribution she made to BBC’s Terlingua Creek Project, alongside her husband Bob. Their generous donation allowed for the completion of the initial property acquisition..

“Joan’s contributions and extraordinary commitment to BBC extended far beyond her duties as Treasurer or Board member, and her love for Big Bend was evident and touching,” recalled Former BBC President Brenda Steuer.



Joan leaves behind her husband of 50 years and countless park friends.

You can honor her spirited and beloved memory by enjoying the view at their honorarium bench positioned on the Mule Ears trailhead.

Become a Supporter of the Big Bend Conservancy

Generous contributions from our members provide annual unrestricted funds allowing BBC to accomplish its mission of preserving, enriching, and conserving the unique resources of Big Bend National Park and the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River. Now, more than ever, your support helps us fund critical park needs. We invite you to be a part of this important mission!



Membership Levels

Road Runner (\$50) – provides engaging programming and resources for visitors

Javelina (\$100) – helps fund important projects, such as restoring historic sites

Peregrine Falcon (\$250) – enables BBC to make progress with park goals including sustainability

Black Bear (\$500) – allows BBC to contribute to important park initiatives like trail maintenance and development throughout the park

Mountain Lion (\$1,000 and above) – facilitates BBC strategic goals, identifying and preserving unique natural ecosystems and meeting important needs identified by park leadership

Make your gift today at bigbendconservancy.org/donate

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B R O N Z E
HONORABLE MENTION

The American Advertising Awards are a three-tiered advertising, communications, and creative competition. It is the longest-running industry contest in the nation and this prestigious recognition - the ADDY Award - is a long-standing tradition in communities around the U.S. With over 40,000 entries, the best work receives recognition that builds awareness and credibility for the organizations they represent.

Reliant EcoShare

Want to help **Big Bend Conservancy** and offset your carbon footprint at the same time?

Here's how it works: The Reliant EcoShareSM program gives customers two pricing options:

- For a flat monthly cost of \$3.95, a \$1 donation is made each month to EarthShare of Texas, and 500 pounds of carbon offsets are purchased.
- Or for a flat monthly cost of \$5.95, a \$2 donation is made each month to EarthShare of Texas, and 1,000 pounds of carbon offsets are purchased.

As one of EarthShare of Texas' participating organizations, **Big Bend Conservancy** benefits from a portion of the annual Reliant donations.



Events & Announcements

Coffee with a Ranger

Are you curious about the magnificent landscape and efforts to protect Big Bend National park? Every other week, you'll find a park ranger in the Chisos Basin ready to answer any questions you have over a hot cup of Joe. Grab your very own mug provided by the Big Bend Conservancy featuring new artwork by Big Bend Natural History Association artist Caragh Givens.

All ages are welcome. Reservations are not required.

When: Every other Friday, 8:30 a.m. - 9:30 a.m.

Where: *The Window Trailhead, between camp-sites 048 and 049 (across from the restrooms)

Admission: Free

Sunset with the Superintendent

It takes a lot to manage the vast 800,000 acres of Big Bend National Park. Have your questions answered by staff of the Superintendent's office during a bi-weekly informal sunset Q&A.

When: Every other Wednesday, 5:30 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.

Where: *The Chisos Lodge (west patio)

Admission: Free

*Event locations TBD after planned closure of Basin

Lodge Closure Update

Construction on the Chisos Basin improvement projects are now set to begin in July 2025. Funding from the Great American Outdoors Act will allow for the demolition and reconstruction of the Chisos Mountains Lodge, upgrades to aged water infrastructure, and enhancements to visitor safety and accessibility. A full closure of the Chisos Basin is expected during the two year construction effort. You're encouraged to check the park website for the latest access updates.



Get some coffee, chat with a ranger, keep the mug!



Future Chisos Mountains Lodge design renderings showing the beautiful new exterior and interior spaces. Images courtesy of National Park Service.

Upcoming Free Park Dates

All entrance fees are waived on the following dates. Fees for camping, lodging or other rentals will still apply.

Thursday, June 19

Juneteenth National Independence Day

Monday, August 4

Great American Outdoors Act Signing Day

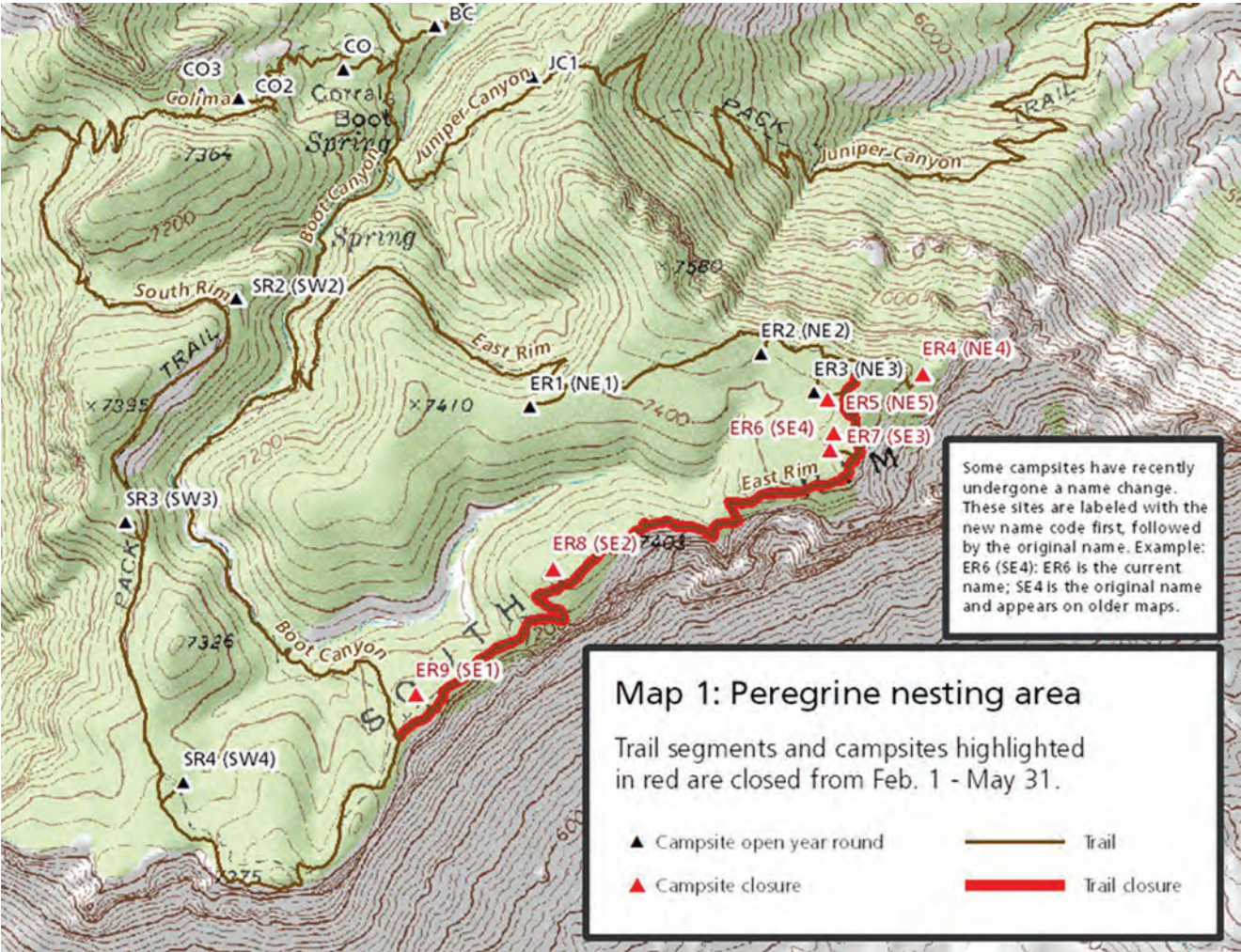
Saturday, September 27

National Public Lands Day

Tuesday, November 11

Veterans Day

For more information on free ranger-led events at Big Bend National Park, be sure to check Big Bend National Park's program calendar.



Protecting Nesting Falcons

Temporary trail closures are underway in the Chisos Basin in an effort to protect the nesting sites of the Peregrine falcon species in Texas. NPS policy requires protection and preservation of all state-listed threatened species, regardless of federal classification. For this reason, the following trails are closed to the public until May 31st:

- A portion of the East Rim Trail from the southern junction of the Boot Canyon Trail to a point just north of Campsite ER-4
- East Rim Campsites: ER-4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
- Technical rock climbing on rock faces within ¼ mile of known peregrine eyries.

By Michael Eason
VP – Conservation and Collections
San Antonio Botanical Garden

Big Bend National Park is more than just a collection of stories and memories. It's a place that speaks to the soul and invites a deep connection to the land - something I felt during my first visit to the park as a 12-year-old. Little did I know my career path as an adult would lead me back to this area of Texas countless times, performing botanical surveys in the park, camping in remote areas in the back-country and along the River, collecting plant material for botanic gardens, and being part of a team who rediscovered *Quercus tardifolia*, the Late-leaf Oak.

The biodiversity here is staggering, not just in its uniqueness, but in its testament to the delicate balance of life. Plant species that exist nowhere else in Texas, or even the world, survive in this remote and unforgiving environment. It's a profound reminder of nature's ability to thrive in unexpected places.

The land, with its ever-changing seasons, teaches patience and resilience, from the rare late spring super-blooms to the quiet stillness of winter. The sheer vastness of Big Bend brings perspective, making one feel both humble and connected to something far greater than themselves.

In a world increasingly consumed by human-made boundaries and the constant chatter of technology, places like Big Bend remind us of the importance of preserving spaces where the land remains wild and free, allowing both nature and humanity to find a sense of belonging within its embrace.

In honor of Spring, I'm highlighting six spectacular "Blooms of the Bend" and where you may be able to admire them on your next Big Bend adventure.

@Sabotgarden @texas_flora



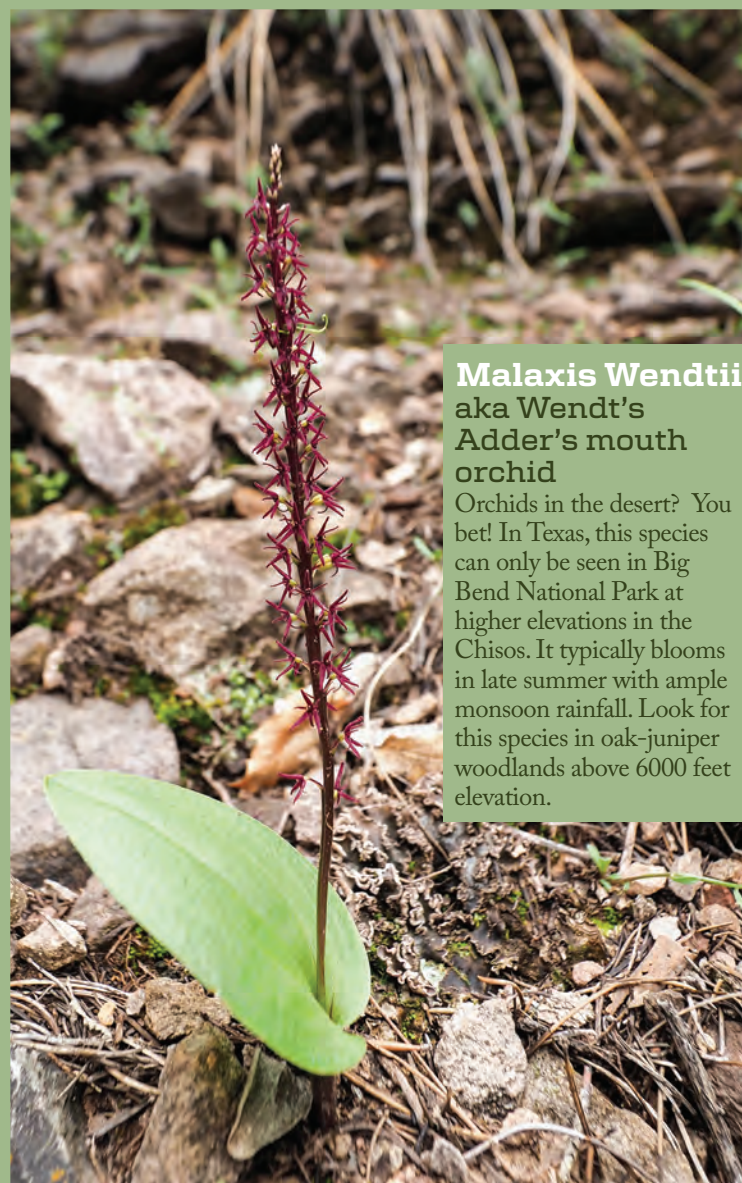
Leucophyllum frutescens
aka Cenizo or Barometer bush
This plant tends to bloom prior to rain. Common throughout the lower desert and into mid elevations. The silver foliage, drought tolerance, and large flowers have enabled this species to become a favorite in native plant landscapes.



Funastrum torreyi
aka Torrey's milkvine
If your hike takes you down the window trail you might catch a glimpse of this plant when it's in flower (typically May in wet years or during summer monsoon). Its large, pendulous flowers may remind you of the tropical Hoya, a common houseplant, of which this is a relative.



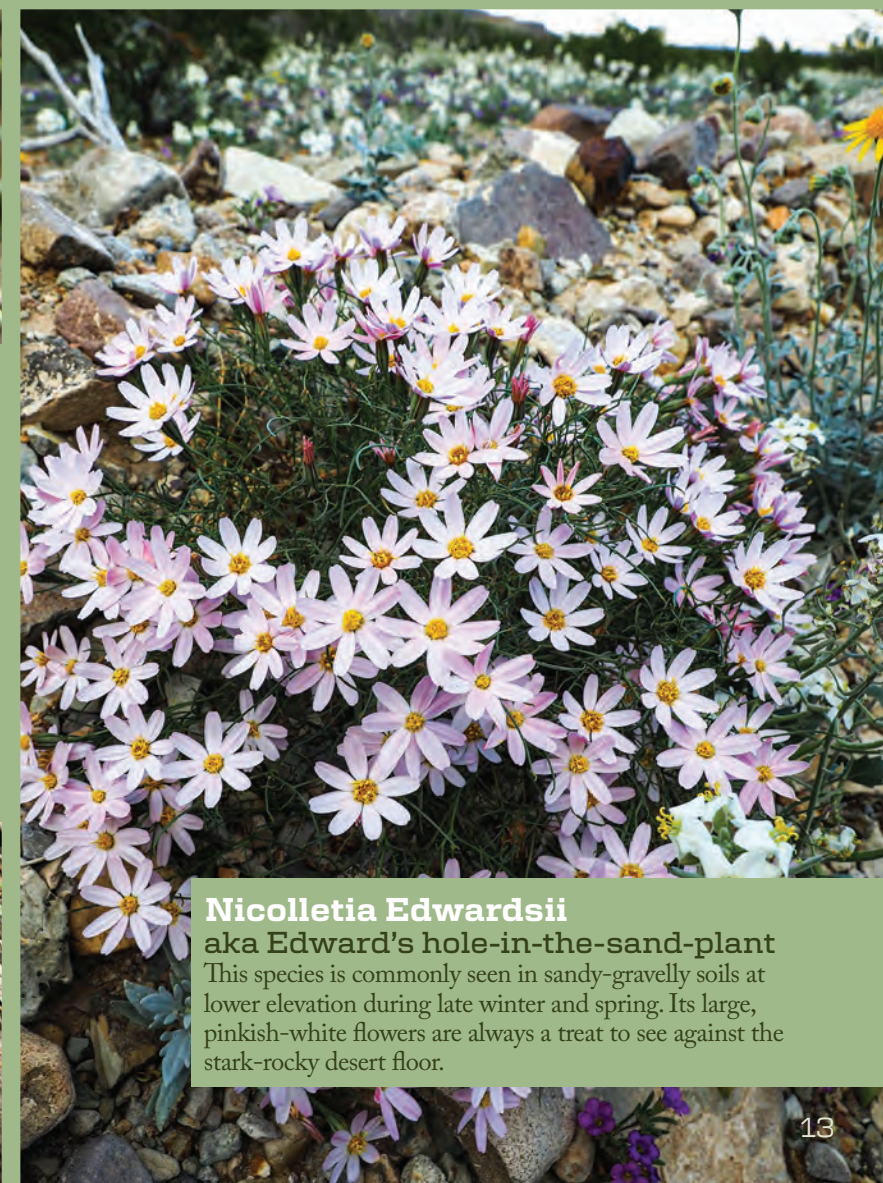
Salazaria mexicana
aka Bladder sage
Only found in a few areas of the park, Bladder Sage can be seen in the washes along the western end of River Road. After flowering, the calyx enlarges and eventually falls to the ground, with the seeds inside. When the winter winds arrive, the enlarged calyx is blown around the desert floor, releasing the seed through a small opening.



Malaxis Wendtii
aka Wendt's Adder's mouth orchid
Orchids in the desert? You bet! In Texas, this species can only be seen in Big Bend National Park at higher elevations in the Chisos. It typically blooms in late summer with ample monsoon rainfall. Look for this species in oak-juniper woodlands above 6000 feet elevation.



Echeveria strictiflora
aka Desert savior
This plant is found in various areas in the park, but most commonly along shady slopes in the Chisos. It's a relative of the common house plant, Hens-and-chicks. This is the only species of Echeveria found in the United States, found only in the Big Bend region.



Nicolletia Edwardsii
aka Edward's hole-in-the-sand-plant
This species is commonly seen in sandy-gravelly soils at lower elevation during late winter and spring. Its large, pinkish-white flowers are always a treat to see against the stark-rocky desert floor.

Conservation and Growth

Part of the unique nature of National Parks is the way you never experience them quite the same way, no matter how many times you visit. Part of this ever-morphing ecosystem can include physical changes, and soon, we hope Big Bend National Park will experience a growth spurt.

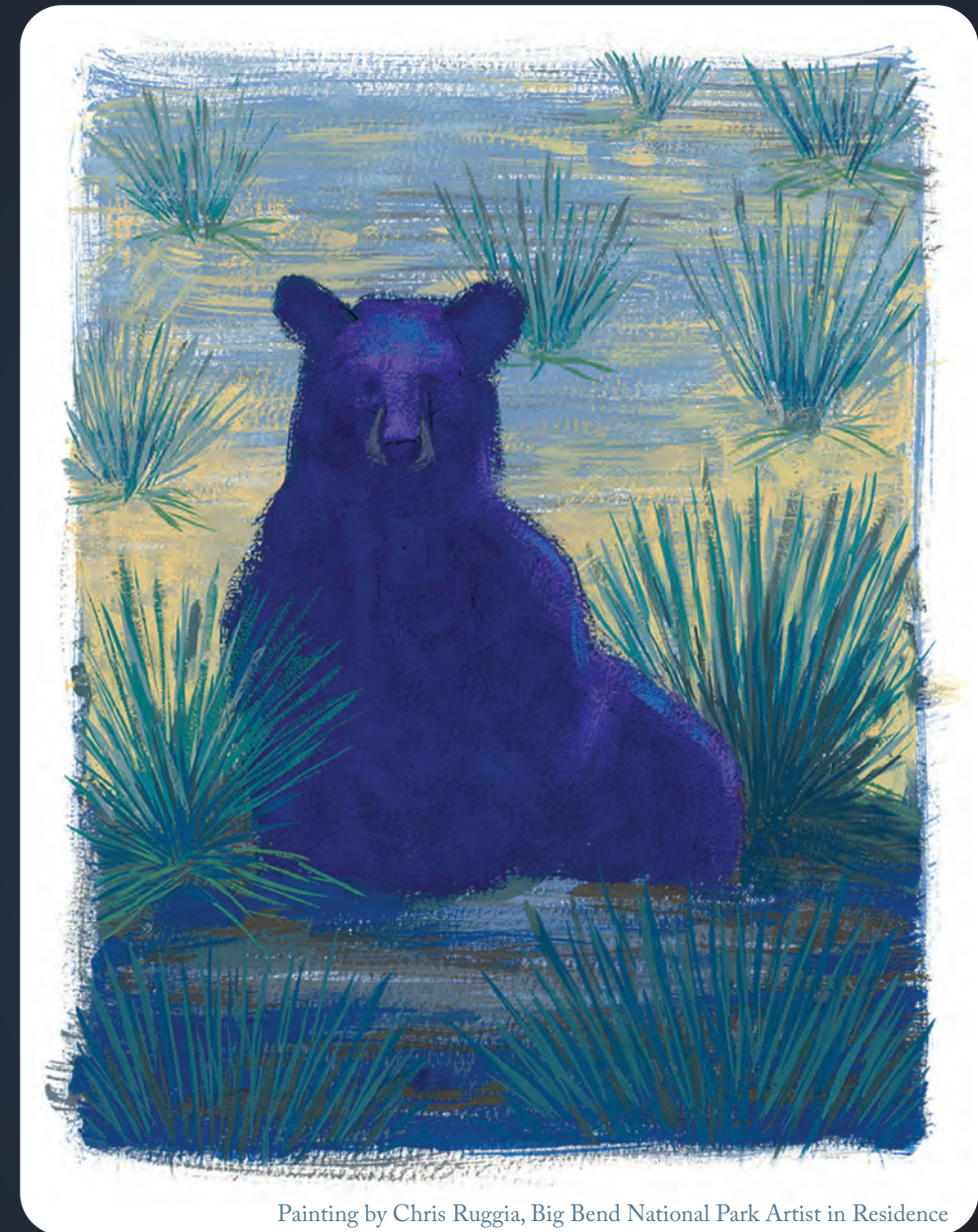
Big Bend Conservancy continues its efforts to preserve 6,100 acres on the western boundary of the park through land acquisition from willing owners excited to be part of history. This unique riparian landscape hosts portions of Terlingua Creek, unique heritage homesteads, fossil beds, and an abundance of nesting birds.

Through BBC's efforts, a Congressional bill will enable this beautiful land to be part of a Big Bend

National Park boundary adjustment, conserving it forever. BBC has already purchased 3,377 acres and is in the process of acquiring additional parcels within the proposed boundary adjustment area, all of which will be donated directly to the park.

BBC is excited to see our park continue to serve as the guardian of vital landscapes and epic plateaus and is grateful to Senator Cornyn, Senator Lujan, and Congressman Gonzales for recently introducing parallel Senate and House bills in Congress.

If you're interested in joining this effort to ensure these essential lands are protected forever, please learn more at bigbendconservancy.org/donate



Painting by Chris Ruggia, Big Bend National Park Artist in Residence

Preserving Beauty Through Art

Limited edition-signed and numbered 11x14" prints are available with

50% of proceeds benefitting Big Bend Conservancy. This painting of a bear surrounded by sotol plants was created during Chris Ruggia's 2024 art residency at Big Bend National Park and was featured in the inaugural issue of the BBC magazine.

Get your own at ChrisRuggia.com/bear

And for that special collector who wants to make an even bigger difference for the conservancy and park, you can own the one-and-only original painting for \$800.

The painting is on display at 5th Street Gallery in downtown Alpine.

Contact Chris Ruggia at chris@vastgraphics.com for more details.

EXPLORATION FOR ALL

A Donor's Passion for Making Big Bend Accessible for All

By Amanda Billings



John Killian's deep appreciation for national parks first blossomed after a visit to Yellowstone National Park seven years ago. Before that trip, he had never fully realized the stunning beauty of these natural wonders and regretted not having explored them sooner with his family.

After retiring two years ago, John – together with his children – embarked on an ambitious journey

to visit 13 national parks in a single year, covering diverse locations from the Channel Islands to Pinnacles National Park. One of those parks, however, stood out for reasons that would impact not just John but the lives of many individuals living with disabilities: Big Bend National Park.

Big Bend had always been on John's radar, but he never had the time to make the trip while he

was working. He was excited to finally be able to plan a spring trip to Carlsbad, Guadalupe, and Big Bend with his son Sam. Although they were captivated by the natural beauty of these locations, it was their experience at Big Bend that would change the course of their journey. Sam, 23 years old and living with muscular dystrophy, uses a wheelchair for mobility, and like many individuals living with a disability, Sam often faces challenges when it comes to exploring the great outdoors.

During their visit to Big Bend, John and Sam discovered a partially accessible trail, one that allowed Sam to explore some of the park's vast desert landscapes. Unfortunately, the trail did not extend all the way to the overlook, so Sam was unable to fully enjoy the panoramic views that the park is known for. This experience sparked a realization for John: the immense natural beauty of Big Bend, with its striking variety of ecosystems ranging from the desert valley to the lush Chisos Basin, could and should be made more accessible for individuals like Sam and others living with disabilities. John's passion for the park and his desire to make it accessible to all individuals, particularly those using wheelchairs, led to a bold idea: to create more accessible spaces within Big Bend so that others could enjoy the same awe-inspiring beauty.

"I was amazed by the vastness of Big Bend," John remarked. "The wildness of it all was something I'd never experienced in any other park. I wanted to make sure that Sam and others like him, who are living with disabilities, could experience that same beauty."

Determined to make a change, John reached out to Loren Riemer, Executive Director of Big Bend Conservancy, and presented her with an opportunity: to make the park more accessible to individuals with disabilities, including those who rely on wheelchairs for mobility. Loren worked closely with park staff to identify areas that could benefit from accessibility improvements, and Sotol Vista emerged as an ideal location for accessibility enhancements.

Sotol Vista is known for its breathtaking views and was already slated to become a dark-skies viewing site. The addition of a paved platform and

a wheelchair-accessible path would allow individuals of all mobility to not only enjoy the stunning landscapes but also take part in stargazing in one of the darkest and clearest skies in the United States. This thoughtful addition would not only enhance accessibility but also offer new opportunities for exploration and connection with nature.

To bring this vision to life, John made a generous \$100,000 donation to Big Bend Conservancy, a contribution that will fund the construction of the paved platform and path. This gift is a testament to John's commitment to ensuring that all individuals have the same opportunity to experience the beauty and serenity of Big Bend National Park.

For many individuals living with disabilities, parks like Big Bend represent not just physical landscapes, but symbols of freedom, adventure, and connection to the natural world. Unfortunately, due to limitations in infrastructure, parks are often out of reach for those who would benefit most from their beauty. By making these spaces more accessible, national parks can ensure that people of all abilities can enjoy the wonder of our nation's natural treasures.

John's efforts at Big Bend demonstrate how one person's passion can lead to meaningful change that has a lasting impact on the lives of others. His work in partnership with Big Bend Conservancy highlights the importance of accessibility in fostering inclusivity and ensuring that everyone can experience the breathtaking landscapes of Big Bend.





Solitude in Focus

Feature Photographer Carl Deal

We humans think in pictures – and I’m quite sure it’s why we’re all so inclined to capture moments in time. I inherited a love for photography from my incredible surroundings. I grew up in a science family. My dad photographed everything and we led adventurous, lucky lives. I had my own dark room in the fourth grade, processed my own film, and printed my own pictures using my mom’s very old 120 film camera. The eye doctor down the street from me gave me enlarger and an army night vision scope. A very cool toy for an eighth grade boy! Ansel Adams was also in my Tuesday night Sierra Club Group, which I would not realize the significance of until several years later.

All my life photography has perhaps been my favorite creative outlet, both professionally and as an educator. Big Bend is one of my favorite places to capture and share. As I’ve experienced for myself, along with the first-timers who’ve come with me to the park, the solitude and beauty of Big Bend can be life-changing.



There is a lot to do to keep such a special place safe for future generations to enjoy, to grow from, to change from. Big Bend is a photographer’s paradise and a visitor’s paradise. Fighting for the things we love is what we now must do.

Life at home is often laden with chores and responsibilities. Certainly, our current times make planning and dreaming for the future less assured. In the park there are no trains, no streetlights, no noise, except for the sounds of the birds and the wind. Every new day offers a different view, a different light, and a different sky. It’s a long drive from everywhere, but the peace and tranquility of this place is a reminder of a simpler time – a worthy escape and a dream for a better world.

Carl H. Deal
www.CarlDealPhotography.com







Photo credit: Casey Dunn

Desert Discoveries

By Don Corrick
Big Bend National Park, NPS Geologist

Fossil Discovery Exhibit

Mounted replicas of Quetzalcoatlus skeletons can be found in almost every large museum displaying dinosaurs today. However, it was never displayed in the park where it was found. That is, until the opening of Big Bend's Fossil Discovery Exhibit in 2017.

It may come as a surprise that Big Bend National Park's most famous fossil was discovered by a graduate student in 1971. Douglas A. Lawson was attending the University of Texas at the time. Lawson made his big find while exploring the badlands near the western edge of the park and conducting field work for his master's degree

project on the ancient ecology of the Javelina Formation. Coincidentally, this is the same area near the Fulcher property, along Terlingua Creek, which the Big Bend Conservancy has purchased for donation to the park.

Lawson had proven his fossil-finding abilities the previous year during his first visit to the park with Dr. Wann Langston, his thesis advisor, in March 1970. During their work in the Tornillo Flat area, Lawson discovered a section of jaw with the distinctive knife-shaped teeth of a meat-eater. This fossil would prove to be from a "southern cousin" of *Tyrannosaurus rex* and was the first *Tyrannosaurus* fossil ever found in Texas.

Lawson's luck would continue during his return visit to the park in 1971. As he explored an arroyo in the maroon-striped hills of the park's western badlands, he found a 3-foot-long bone. He collected a portion of it and returned to Austin, where he and Langston then identified it as a pterosaur fossil based on its hollow internal structure with thin walls. Since pterosaurs are the family of flying reptiles, it makes sense that their bones would be hollow and light weight.

Lawson and Langston wasted little time in returning to the site later that year. As they excavated bones from the wing of the creature, they were struck by the unprecedented size of the fossils,

compared to known pterosaurs. The site was dubbed the Big Wing Site, and excavations continued for several more years, producing much of the left wing of an enormous pterosaur. The estimated total wingspan of over 33 feet makes this the world's largest known flying creature of all time.

As the fossil's discoverer, Lawson had the privilege of naming it. He eventually named the giant pterosaur *Quetzalcoatlus northropi*, after the Aztec feathered serpent god *Quetzalcoatl* and the aircraft designer John Knudsen Northrop. The announcement of the find in 1975 generated great interest in both the scientific community and the public. *Quetzalcoatlus* was reported on throughout the world, was featured in *Time* magazine, and appeared on the cover of *Scientific American*. The species has been cited by over 500 scientific publications, making it the single most cited pterosaur species.

A Need Unmet

Soon after I arrived for my first season working in Big Bend in 1990, I started learning about the fascinating and scientifically-important fossils that have been found here. At that time, we displayed a few dinosaur bones in the Panther Junction Visitor Center and some replicas of mammal fossils at the old Fossil Bone Exhibit near Upper Tornillo Creek. To put it kindly, these exhibits were underwhelming, especially given the world-class fossils that Big Bend has produced.

The Fossil Discovery exists because of donors to the Big Bend Conservancy and the people who sought to see this history preserved and honored. We thank those who have provided for the exhibit's ongoing needs through continued gifts.

If you'd like to make a donation to help maintain this state-of-the-art facility and provide funding for educational projects, please visit bigbendconservancy.org.





Photo credit: Carl Deal

It was especially galling that we were not displaying *Quetzalcoatlus* and I soon began pushing for better fossil exhibits. I watched a succession of park superintendents come and go, and I made my plea to each one. But the answer was always the same - we love the idea, but there's no money.

Meanwhile, Big Bend Conservancy (formerly Friends of Big Bend National Park) had been established and was actively fundraising for the park. Around 2013, the conservancy accomplished its

most ambitious fund-raising project thus far, the park's movie "Big Bend—Life on the Edge." The success of that endeavor led them to look for their next big project. So, I attended a board meeting, ranger flat hat in hand, and made my pitch.

Decisions, Decisions...

The BBC Board enthusiastically agreed to fund-raise for a new fossil exhibit. Almost immediately, we needed plans. We were fortunate to have

Javelina Formation

The beds of the Javelina Formation were laid down in an ancient floodplain around the very end of the Cretaceous Period, shortly before the big extinction event that wiped out the dinosaurs. The colorful clays and sandstones of the Javelina erode into badlands and low rounded hills, like those seen between the park's west entrance sign and the Maverick ranger booth.



Photo credit: Don Corrick, NPS

Steve Wick, the park's Paleontology Technician, whose wealth of knowledge about Big Bend fossils helped make the project a success.

I sent a letter to our paleontology researchers, soliciting their opinions about what should be displayed. One of the best suggestions was from Dr. Thomas Lehman, of Texas Tech University. Dr. Lehman noted that what made Big Bend special was the long span of time preserved in the park's rocks and the story of changing ecosystems recorded in the rocks and fossils. Most fossil parks just preserve a single snapshot in geologic time, but Big Bend had a story to tell.

The story was built around the Western Interior Seaway, the broad, relatively shallow sea that stretched north-south across North America in the Cretaceous Period. The ancient environments at Big Bend's location had changed over time as the seaway gradually shrank and the coastline moved toward its current location on the Gulf Coast.

We agreed to tell Big Bend's story in four "chapters," covering about 135 million years. Our story would start in a marine environment, then change to a coastal floodplain, followed by an inland floodplain (that's where *Quetzalcoatlus* lived), and finally volcanic highlands after the extinction of the dinosaurs. Each chapter would have its own exhibit space with fossils found in the park's fossil record illustrating each ecosystem.

We also had to decide where to place the exhibit. One option was to add it to the visitor center complex at Panther Junction for the convenience of staff and to concentrate development to a single area.

We decided that the better option would be to replace the old Fossil Bone Exhibit. This location was an actual fossil site, was already developed with an access road and parking lot, and would serve as a point of interest for visitors travelling along the north entrance road. As a bonus, the rocks representing each of the four "chapters" of our story can also be seen from the site as part of the magnificent panoramic view to the east.



Photo credit: NPS

Old Fossil Bone Exhibit

The Fossil Bone Exhibit had a sad history. The original exhibit, built in the 1960s, consisted of a shelter constructed over a partially-excavated bone bed containing numerous mammal fossils. Here was a place where visitors could see real fossils embedded in the rock the way that paleontologists found them. It was the only in situ fossil display from this geologic time period in the entire NPS. However, due to a mix up during renovation of the shelter in the 1980s, the original shelter was removed, the fossils were excavated, and replicas were displayed on a bed of sand in a new shelter. The result was a contrived and inauthentic display of unimpressive replicas.

The Exhibit Takes Shape

BBC assembled a planning team of exhibit designers, architects, and park staff, and we met in the park, visited the site, and brainstormed ideas. The initial concept was to create a short half-mile loop trail through the low hills, with 4 exhibits spaced along the trail. Each exhibit would display fossils from one of the four "chapters" and point out the location of the corresponding rock type in the distance. This approach would link the interpretive displays to the nearby fossil resources.

Unfortunately, we quickly learned that the soft sandstone hills were not strong enough to support a trail like this and that it would be impossible to make the trail accessible. The team considered a

Big Bend Fossil Story

The story begins at a time when a broad, shallow sea covered Big Bend and much of Texas, leaving behind a fossil record that includes mosasaurs (swimming reptiles), predatory fish, sharks, and numerous “sea-shell” fossils, such as clams, oysters, snails, and sea urchins.

Later, the coastline moved farther to the east, and Big Bend was crossed by rivers and forests, where dinosaurs roamed and giant pterosaurs soared overhead.

After the extinction of the dinosaurs, mammals flourished, including those whose bones were found just a stone’s throw from the Fossil Discovery Exhibit.

variety of options and eventually agreed on creating an open-air pavilion style structure with all of the displays under one roof. The exhibit would be unstaffed and would be open from dawn to dusk.

To provide a space big enough to hang our Quetzalcoatlus skeleton, the design included a large, central area called the Gallery of Giants. This shady, breezy open space has become a favorite feature of the exhibit. The entire east side is open to the panoramic view of the Deadhorse Mountains, and low rock walls and benches provide abundant informal seating. Touchable bronze skulls of Tyrannosaurus and the giant crocodilian Deinosuchus are popular spots for selfies of kids (and playful adults) with their heads in the jaws of the bronze monsters. And soaring just out of reach overhead, Big Bend finally has its own

Quetzalcoatlus skeleton!

Architects from the renowned Lake-Flato firm designed an interesting roofline that is evocative of the wings of a flying pterosaur. They also suggested using the perforated steel walls that let in light and air and that visitors can “see through” while inside the exhibit, thus maintaining a visual connection between the exhibits inside and the fossil-bearing rocks just outside of the structure. In keeping with NPS values, the structure is entirely off the utility grid, uses solar power, and collects rainwater from the roof. Constructed of Corten steel, the structure never needs painting, and the rust-colored patina blends in well with the natural desert color palette. Great pains were taken to keep the roofline low and to site the structure so that it is mostly hidden from view.

The Fossil Discovery Exhibit is fully accessible for people with physical limitations. Graphics, fonts, and colors were selected that were appropriate for people with impaired vision. Custom paleo-art murals tell the overarching story of changing environments over geologic time, so that people who may not read English can still understand the exhibit’s message. For folks who want more details than could fit on the captions, QR codes on the exhibit cases lead them to the website fossildiscoveryexhibit.com where longer articles or helpful links can be found. A picnic area with a fossil-themed children’s area and a short trail to an elevated viewpoint round out the amenities.

Open to the Public

Finally, after long years of fund-raising, planning, and construction, Big Bend’s Fossil Discovery Exhibit had its grand opening on January 14, 2017. For someone who had been watching visitors use

this area for decades, the difference was dramatic. Before, the parking lot was usually empty, and the rare visitors would take a quick look at the old display, shrug their shoulders, and never come back. Now, the new exhibit almost constantly has visitors, and it’s common to hear expressions of wonder and excited cries of children.

The exhibit is now the premier interpretive exhibit in Big Bend National Park and has been lauded as one of the finest fossil displays in the National Park System. In 2018 the prestigious American Alliance of Museums awarded it with a special achievement award for “encompassing sustainable design and demonstrating innovative approach.”

There are still dinosaur bones out in the Big Bend desert, waiting patiently for an intrepid hiker to come across them and marvel at the remains of long-gone creatures. Like the dinosaur bones, the



Fossil Discovery Exhibit also patiently waits in the desert to welcome you on your next visit. My advice is to take a lunch or snack, find a comfortable spot to sit in the Gallery of Giants, enjoy the view, and just hang out for a while. It can be fun to watch newcomers admire the bronze skulls without realizing that the mighty Quetzalcoatlus is just overhead, then see their reaction when they finally spot it!



You can explore the Fossil Discovery Exhibit from the palm of your hand through our interactive website. Get a behind-the-scenes look at current research, see the gallery of giants and find ways to plan your visit!

fossildiscoveryexhibit.com





Big Bend map mural by Kerry Awn in Alpine's "Art Alley" Credit: Matthew Walter

BEYOND THE PARK Historic Alpine is open for visitors on their Big Bend journeys

By Sarah M. Vasquez

With summer on the horizon, a new swell of visitors are expected to travel to Big Bend National Park. With the impending closure of the Chisos Basin facilities, finding lodging or a place to eat near the park can sometimes be a challenge. Driving about 76.4 miles along scenic State Highway 118, Big Bend National Park becomes a day trip from neighboring Alpine that not only provides additional lodging options, but also amenities and attractions with West Texas charm.

"Big Bend National Park and all of the neighboring towns are great partners in providing an amazing experience for our visitors," said Chris Ruggia, Alpine's Director of Tourism, "and the economic benefit that the Park brings to Alpine and the entire region cannot be overstated."

With a population of 6,000 residents, Alpine is one of the bigger neighboring towns in Far West Texas with all the necessities. There are multiple grocery stores, including Lowe's and Blue Water Natural Foods, in addition to restaurants and food trucks that provide local cuisine. The area's only hospital, Big Bend Regional Medical Center, is located north of town.



Railroad Blues in Alpine, Texas during Viva Big Bend Credit: Michael Howard / visitalpinetx.com

In the heart of downtown, there are galleries and places to shop, such as Javelinas 5th & Holland, Front Street Books and the new 5th Street Gallery that features regional artisans. Some of the surrounding murals provide glimpses of the area's history and folklore, and there are over 25 murals in Mural Alley, tucked between Holland Avenue and Avenue E.

The award-winning Museum of the Big Bend shares a more in-depth look into the region's natural and cul-



Mural at Kokernot Municipal Park in Alpine, Texas Credit: Bell Peña-Lancaster / visitalpinetx.com

tural history and heritage through its seasonal exhibitions and permanent collections, and the panoramic view of the Davis Mountains from the patio is a must-see.

Alpine is designated as a Music Friendly Texas Certified Community due to its music venues that have attracted prolific musicians such as Little Joe y La Familia and Ryan Bingham. The annual Viva Big Bend music festival brings over 65 shows at venues across the region, including Alpine's Railroad Blues, The Granada Theater and The Ritchey, the newest to the local music scene. The Ritchey went through years of renovations from its former life as a hotel and saloon for railroad workers in the early 1900s. Now the historical bar on the corner of 5th and Murphy streets is a community spot to gather over drinks and listen to live music.

When planning a trip to Big Bend, the neighboring town of Alpine provides good options for a more enjoyable vacation.

For more information, go to visitalpinetx.com



View of Alpine, Texas from Hancock Hill Credit: Aaron Bares / visitalpinetx.com

ADVENTURE AFTER “I do!”

Erika Holland

Tommy and Judy look up
in awe at the gold and purple-hued Milky Way just past
the west entrance of the park.
07/31/2019]

Big Bend National Park was not the honeymoon destination Tommy and Judy Britt had in mind following their wedding in June 1978. It’s something Judy, an avid Big Bend visitor and supporter, can laugh about today as she looks back on her initial naivety.

“Our original plans to go to Colorado fell through and Tommy had always wanted to go to the park and I thought ‘what on earth was Big Bend!?’”

Traveling from suburban Houston with nothing more than their post-wedding high, a camera, and the prospect of a new adventure, Judy explained how awe-struck they were by the sheer magnitude of the park.

“We did a lot of windshield hiking, taking everything in, because I didn’t even have on tennis shoes!”

Yet, Judy’s small wedge sandals managed to safely get her down to Santa Elena Canyon for a view she’ll never forget. Nearby in Boquillas, Mexico, she and Tommy expanded their tour, followed by cold cervezas and authentic tacos.

“We rode donkeys in Mexico and still to this

day laugh about how Tommy’s long legs dragged on the ground the whole way!”

It was in this place Judy recalled the feeling of “standing at the edge of the United States.”

“I stood in Texas and looked into Mexico. It’s a powerful thing when you stand at the Boquillas overlook and realize you are on the bend of Texas.”

During this trip, Judy and Tommy made a promise to each other that they would take their future kids back to Big Bend one day. Nearly 20 years later, in 1997, that promise came to fruition.

Since then, Tommy and Judy have become actively involved in the protection and conservation of the park. Tommy is an active board member of the Big Bend Conservancy and Judy is a staunch supporter of the mission to preserve and enrich the park in any way she can.

Tommy and Judy look forward to celebrating 50 years of marriage in 2028.



Judy dips her toes in the Rio Grande near Boquillas, Mexico.



Tommy enjoys a cold beer at a restaurant in Boquillas, Mexico.



Judy looks out on the Window View Trail.

Cancellations and postponements were the way of the world in the summer of 2020. Lane and Cassandra Luckie were among those who put long-anticipated wedding celebrations and honeymoons on pause in the spirit of safety.

“After our wedding we debated where we could safely vacation close to home, while observing the pandemic regulations,” Lane explained. “Immediately our minds went to one of our bucket list destinations. It made perfect sense - Big Bend is one of the most remote locations in the country!”

As luck would have it, the newly wed Luckies arrived at the park to learn many facilities would soon be closing due to an outbreak of the virus within the Big Bend community.

Determined to make the most of what was left of their first day, Lane and Cassandra experienced several defining areas of the park including the Fossil Discovery Exhibit, Chisos Basin, the Boquillas Canyon Trail and Santa Elena Canyon.

“Sotol Vista Overlook was the absolute perfect location for us to set up our cameras on tripods and capture a sunset time-lapse as our day came to a close,” Lane shared. “That night, we were amazed

by how many stars we could see, as far off storms provided a dazzling lightning show.”

Following their flash tour of Big Bend, the Luckies say they were most surprised by how much there was to do, see and eat in the surrounding Brewster and Presidio counties.

“Our change of plans at Big Bend became the most serendipitous ‘wedding gift’ we could imagine. As we were setting out on this new season in life, that series of events proved to be so valuable for setting the foundation of our relationship. Our honeymoon was a crash course in learning to live in the moment, being resilient, and making the most of any situation.”

Lane and Cassandra enjoyed a beautiful week in Costa Rica in June of 2021 in celebration of their one-year anniversary.

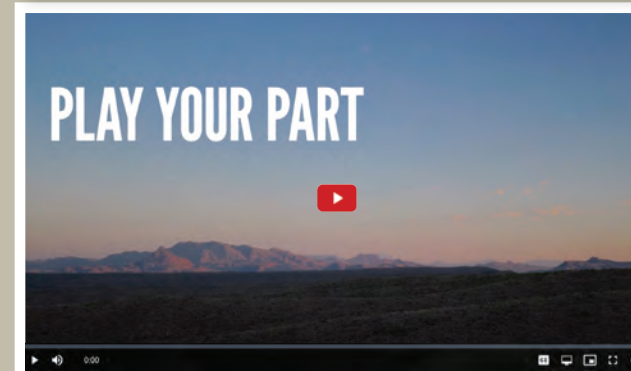


Santa Elena Canyon, 2020



Lane and Cassandra on a short desert hike with the Chisos Mountains in perfect view.

PREPARED FOR YOUR VISIT?



Whether you're a seasoned Big Bend visitor or coming to the park for your first time, it's critical to know what to expect in this remote area of far West Texas.

The Big Bend Conservancy coordinated with park officials to create a visitor preparedness video series to help you make the most of your experience, while keeping wildlife, staff and yourself safe.

Watch our full series at nps.gov/bibe



or on the Big Bend Conservancy Youtube channel

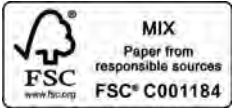


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FOR HELPING US
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SPECIAL PLACE!**



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