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Habitat for Free-tailed Bats Protected

A partnership between the Texas nature Conservancy and BCI ensures protection of one of Central Texas' most important bat caves. . .
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by Patricia A. Morton

Observing the spectacular emergence of more than 4 million Mexican free-tailed bats from the Eckert James River Bat Cave near Mason, Texas, has been likened by some to a "religious experience." Poetic, unbelievable, awesome and phenomenal are words frequently used by people experiencing their first bat flight.

The Texas Hill Country is home to many of the world's largest free-tailed bat colonies. In fact, Bracken Cave near San Antonio, contains not only the largest bat colony, but the largest aggregation of *any* warm-blooded animal on earth. The Eckert James River Cave is one of the top 10 free-tailed bat sites known. Research done at the cave by Dr. Thomas Kunz, a member of BCI's Scientific Advisory Board, has shown that these bats may consume up to their weight in insects (more than 185,000 pounds of them!) each night, providing an invaluable service to people and agriculture.

Tens of millions of female Mexican free-tailed bats (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) migrate from Central Mexico to Texas each March to inhabit this site and the few other maternity caves that provide special temperature and humidity conditions needed to raise young. Although these colonies contain millions, the bats are actually quite vulnerable and already have declined dramatically in some areas. Because they roost in such large numbers, colonies can easily be destroyed by a single vandalous act. When bats suffer a catastrophe, natural or otherwise, recovery takes a long time due to their slow rate of reproduction (about one pup per season).

The Eckert James River Bat Cave has been safeguarded thanks to the fine stewardship of Mason's mayor, Clinton Schulze. A plan to manage the cave, however, was needed to ensure the colony's long-term future. Recognizing the great benefits of bats and the importance of maternity colonies, the Texas Nature Conservancy (TNC), with the help of Mayor Schulze, recently acquired the site. Bat Conservation International is working with the TNC to develop a management plan for the cave that will include opportunities for visitors to view nightly bat flights. Partnerships between The Nature Conservancy and BCI already have been successful in protecting other important bat habitat, including Hubbards Cave in Tennessee, one of the world's three largest hibernation sites.

Plans for this newest cooperative effort in Texas began to take shape at a recent meeting. Staff from TNC and BCI, other bat and cave experts, as well as local land owners and Mason residents, gathered at the cave to share their ideas about the future of this important site. Biologists discussed management needs of the bats.

Many good suggestions were voiced for visitor educational activities. These include an interpretive nature trail up to the cave and an educational kiosk to introduce the public to the natural history of the cave's bats. The planning group hopes that Mason school children and scouting groups will want to become involved in helping to care for the site. A management plan for the cave is enthusiastically supported by many Mason residents who have enjoyed the bats for years. They are looking forward to sharing their natural treasure with visitors.

The TNC is to be congratulated for their role in securing a future for Mexican free-tailed bats in Texas.

Well-managed protective efforts like these will also provide opportunities for many people to enjoy a warm summer evening in the Texas Hill Country and perhaps encounter an awe-inspiring experience at the Eckert James River Bat Cave.

For more information about visiting the cave, contact Sharon Reynolds at the Texas Nature Conservancy in San Antonio at 512/224-8774.

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The Texas Nature Conservancy, Bat Conservation International, and others gathered recently at the James River Bat Cave to discuss a management plan for the cave and its 4 million Mexican free-tailed bats.

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