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A Priceless Resource

Bracken Bat Cave Will Teach the World about Bats

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It is the boldest of dreams: a cutting-edge education and research center that sits lightly in the Texas Hill Country and offers breathtaking views of the largest community of mammals on Earth. It will be an experience so powerful that visitors will come from around the world and leave with a profound new understanding of the gentle, vital, and fascinating nature of bats. The Bracken Bat Cave & Nature Reserve -- crown jewel of BCI's 20-year commitment to bat conservation -- is nearing reality.

The heart of the project is Bracken Cave, summer home to some 20 million Mexican free-tailed bats (*Tadarida brasiliensis*). Here, barely 20 miles (32 kilometers) north of downtown San Antonio, Texas, the largest known bat colony in the world comes to rear its young -- as the city grows steadily closer.

The bats' spectacular evening emergence, visible for miles around, is one of the natural wonders of our planet. Each night, the bats spread out over surrounding towns and farms to consume 200 tons of night-flying insects. Experiencing this awesome encounter with nature can immediately change a lifetime of negative perceptions about bats and create new commitments to conservation.

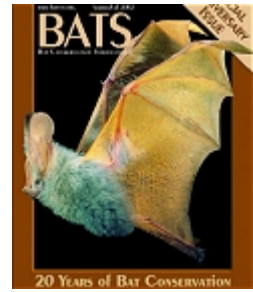
Bat Conservation International has been protecting this magnificent bat colony since 1992, when BCI, with a grant from the Ewing Halsell Foundation, bought the cave and five acres surrounding its entrance. Now the goal is to share it, with great care for the bats and the rugged landscape, with the rest of the world. The potential impact for bat conservation is enormous.


Access to Bracken has been sharply limited. A variety of volunteers, especially the Bexar County Grotto, a group of San Antonio-area cavers, cleared trails, repaired Civil War-vintage buildings and stone walls, built fences and a privy, and installed interpretive signs. The Grotto became BCI's official cave steward.

For more than a decade, BCI has, in cooperation with surrounding landowners, been purchasing land around the cave, enough for a buffer zone to protect this invaluable resource from San Antonio's rapid growth. With generous support from the Lennox Foundation, the Ewing Halsell Foundation, and the Beneficia Foundation, plus a loan from FirStar Trust Co., BCI increased its Bracken holdings to 432 acres in 1997.

Efforts to further expand the protected buffer zone continue as BCI works with The Nature Conservancy of Texas, the City of San Antonio, the Edwards Aquifer Authority, San Antonio Water Systems, and other potential buyers of conservation lands to finalize the long-sought purchase of the entire ranch.

The dream of an international bat education center, built on BCI's current land, has been percolating for years. BCI Trustees approved the concept in 1998 and hired architects Overland Partners Inc. of San Antonio to develop the design. The Kronkosky Charitable



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Foundation provided the lead grant, while the Brown Foundation put up matching funds. The intense planning phase began in 1999.

This center will be one of the most environmentally sensitive facilities in the world, providing a model for sustainable development. The facilities, enclosing an anticipated 30,000 square feet (2,787 square meters), will rest inconspicuously among the Hill Country oaks and junipers. The low, curving walls will be built of native materials, with native plants growing in rooftop gardens. The main building, partially recessed into the ground, will be hidden by surrounding trees. It will give visitors an ideal viewing platform to watch the columns of bats emerging from the cave. Rainwater will be harvested and wastes recycled. The center will be an almost-natural part of the Central Texas hills.

Interpretive areas will evoke the form and mystery of the bat cave, while interactive educational exhibits tell the story of the Bracken bat colony, bats worldwide, and the interdependence of humans, wildlife, and the land. Nature trails will further interpret the plants and animals of Texas.

Special viewing areas are planned for watching the emergence with minimal disturbance. Miniature cameras placed discretely within the cave will allow both scientists and visitors to watch live as the bats court, feed their young, communicate, and leave the roost to feed.

Since bats remain by far the world's least-studied mammals, the center will also provide facilities for BCI-sponsored conservation, research, and education. Income from the center will help support bat conservation and research around the world.

The Bracken Bat Cave & Nature Reserve will ensure permanent protection of this priceless resource -- the world's largest community of these gentle, threatened creatures that play so vital a role in the balance of nature. And it will teach its lessons of conservation with such excitement and drama that Bracken's bats will surely become one of Texas' most beloved natural attractions.

All articles in this issue:

- [Past & Future](#)
- [The Gray Bat's Survival](#)
- [An Epic Gate](#)
- [Bat Scholars](#)
- [Workshops for Bats](#)
- [North American Bat House Research Project](#)
- [A Priceless Resource](#)
- [Bats in the News](#)
- [Bats & Mines](#)
- [The Vampire Video](#)
- [Loyal Friends Keep BCI Strong](#)
- [The Challenges Ahead](#)
- [The Future is Built One Piece at a Time](#)