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Creating the Bracken Bat Cave & Nature Reserve Andy Moore

A few centuries ago, the great bat colony of Bracken Cave soared over a rolling landscape of waist-high prairie grasses and open savannahs studded with ancient oaks and dappled with red-berried agarita and twisted persimmon. Wildflowers splashed springtime colors, and a dazzling array of wildlife walked, hopped, slithered and flew across the Hill Country of Central Texas.

Then the settlers came. Crops were planted, cattle grazed, roads were built and towns grew. Brush fires, which had kept the plants in balance when sparked by lightning or native peoples, were suppressed. The grasslands shrank, and thirsty Ashe junipers (called “cedars” by the locals) emerged from their rocky enclaves along ravines and hillsides. Dense cedar brakes filled the savannahs and the country changed.

Now Bat Conservation International, slowly and carefully, is putting the Hill Country back as close as possible to the way it was – at least on the 696 acres (281 hectares) BCI finally owns around its famous Bracken Bat Cave.

The restoration of the Bracken Nature Reserve, already off to a strong start, is the first step toward the creation of a unique, world-class public-education center built around the cave and the 20 million Mexican free-tailed bats (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) that spend their summers there.

This colony, the largest community of mammals on Earth, is a priceless resource. Its evening emergences are awe-inspiring. First, a few bold bats fly up from the cave’s dark entrance. The trickle becomes a flood as more high-speed flyers cork-screw up-wards. The vortex of bats looks almost like a single organism as it gains speed on its way upward. Occasionally, an albino joins the stream, providing a marker that tracks individual movement around the spiral. Count-less wings spread a whispered flutter and the hint of a breeze over the landscape.

And the bats of Bracken Cave are on the hunt. Vast, undulating columns of freetail stretch far into the distance. By dawn, they will have consumed some 200 tons of flying insects, many of them pests that wreak millions of dollars in damage on the region’s corn and cotton crops.

Witnessing an evening emergence of the Bracken bat colony is an unforgettable experience. Nothing compares for demonstrating the magic of bats. But protecting so precious a resource must always be our first priority. Until the -visitors’ center and other facilities are in place, Bracken Cave must remain open only on select nights and almost exclusively for BCI members.

But the Bracken Bat Cave and Nature Reserve will one day open this wildlife wonder to people from around the world – without endangering the bats or their Hill Country habitat. And the cause of bat conservation will take a huge leap forward.

But first comes the land. Working with biologists from The Nature Conservancy’s Texas Chapter, the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Texas Parks and



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Wildlife Department, we have developed land-management and prescribed-burning plans. The careful use of fire repeats an ancient pattern of natural fires that cleared away cedars and maintained a mix of brush, shrubs and grasses where oaks could thrive. The first of the controlled burns, planned for last winter, was postponed until this fall because of unusually wet weather.

With the generous support of more than 60 BCI members and foundations, initial brush clearing and cedar chopping is completed on the first 100 acres (40 hectares). The entire tract is now protected by four miles (6.4 kilometers) of eight-foot-high (2.4-meter) game fence. Clearing the perimeter for the fence also helped create a fire break for the prescribed burns.

We repaired one abandoned well and drilled another to supply water to the planned visitor's center. With solar-powered pumps, the wells also provide water for wildlife. The dirt road to the cave had become so rutted by erosion as to be unsafe, and many volunteer hours and heavy-equipment rentals produced only temporary solutions. Browning Construction Co. of San Antonio recently donated material, equipment and staff to build a concrete low-water crossing that should resolve much of the problem. Hundreds more acres of rugged, overgrown countryside still must be restored, and countless smaller chores must be accomplished to return the land to its pre-civilized state. Flora and fauna surveys must be conducted to determine the extent and diversity of the resources and help plan their conservation.

Finally, when the land is ready, we will build the education center: a unique, energy- and water-saving structure that will sit gently and inconspicuously on the land. The center will tell the story of bats at Bracken and around the world, dispelling myths and building support for bat conservation. Our schedule depends largely on developing financial support for this most ambitious and promising of BCI's initiatives.

Support the Restoration

Help BCI restore this special corner of the Texas Hill Country, protect a unique wildlife treasure and contribute to changing attitudes about bats. You can adopt an acre of this exceptional property for \$1,000. With your contribution, you or a loved one will be permanently recognized at the site as a Charter Land Steward of the Bracken Bat Cave & Nature Reserve. We hope you'll want to help us restore several acres.

To become a part of this magnificent adventure at any level, please contact BCI's Department of Development: development@batcon.org or (512) 327-9721.

ANDY MOORE is Bat Conservation International's™ Coordinator for the Bracken Bat Cave and Nature Reserve project.

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