El Despoblado means “the uninhabited place.” It is a name used over centuries to describe the northern Chihuahuan Desert — a name that implies a sense of emptiness. Yet Big Bend Ranch State Park is far from empty. The park offers 500 square miles of unrivaled geology, spectacular vistas and night skies, diverse plant and animal life, and evidence of over 10,000 years of human occupation.

GEOLOGY

The geology of Big Bend Ranch State Park reminds us of profound changes over the past 600 million years of Earth’s history — changes born of water and fire. A deep ocean, the Ouachita Basin, covered the Big Bend and much of the southeastern United States some 570 million years ago, long before the age of dinosaurs. One may see remnants of the Ouachita Mountains in parts of Arkansas, Oklahoma and West Texas, including The Solitario at Big Bend Ranch State Park. Erosion and uplift worked together to form the limestone rock of this ancient sea floor in the Contrabando lowlands and the upended “flatirons” that form the rim of the Solitario.

The Solitario is a feature born of fire. Between 36 and 35 million years ago, magma from deep within the Earth pushed upward in three pulses to create a blister-like bulge nearly 10 miles across near the park’s eastern boundary. Following erosion and a complex series of eruptions, the uplifted sedimentary rock and the underlying lava chamber collapsed to form the almost circular basin-like feature known today as the Solitario. Volcanism remained at work in the region. As you pass the dark peaks and mesas between Redford and Lajitas or along the Sauceda road, imagine glowing cone-like vents and gaping fissures that once spewed red-hot ash and molten rock. Lava from these eruptions eventually hardened into the rhyolite and basalt rock that form the Bofecillos Mountains, whose many cracks and fissures trap groundwater and account for the region’s numerous springs — life-giving oases in the desert.

HUMAN HISTORY

Diverse people have lived among the canyons, mountains and valleys of Big Bend Ranch State Park for centuries, typically near water sources. The materials and structures they left behind tell stories of triumph and hardship in a sometimes hospitable but often relentless land. Hundreds of prehistoric camps, cooking areas and rock art sites dot Big Bend Ranch. Grindstones, bedrock mortars, flint tools and burned rock middens indicate that the hunter-gatherers living here used every natural resource available to survive in the demanding environment. Prehistoric pictographs (rock paintings) and a few petroglyphs (rock carvings or carvings) showcase the amazing diversity of rock art styles preserved in the park.

A handful of traders and freighters such as Ben Leaton and Milton Faver were the first Anglo-Americans to settle the area in the mid-1800s. By the 1870s, small family ranches began to spring up, raising much of their own food and herding sheep and goats. Park visitors today can see remains of the Crawford-Smith, McGurk, Reza and Madrid houses among others. Remnants of a wax factory and several camps remain in Fresno and Contrabando Canyons, where thousands of pounds of wax were extracted from candelilla plants and sold as waterproofing for World War I army tents. Nearby, the Whit-Roy Mine produced flasks of mercury from the Whit-Roy Mine.

FLORA

Vegetation throughout the park exists in a moisture-dependent mosaic, sometimes lush but more often sparse. Native plants range from arid-adapted cacti to water-loving cottonwoods. Common species of succulent include varieties of prickly pear and cholla. Ocotillo is a common desert shrub in the region.

FAUNA

Animals exhibit similar variety, from water-dependent beavers along the river to desert specialists like the black-throated sparrow. The park is home to large mammals, such as black bear, and the Big Bend’s tertiary predator, mountain lions. Mule deer and non-native aoudad are important components of mountain lion diets. The park is also the eastern-most range boundary for the Mojave rattlesnake, occurring alongside black-tail, mottled rock, and western diamond back rattlesnakes.

CLIMATE

Big Bend Ranch State Park is located in the rugged terrain of the northern Chihuahuan Desert. The park receives less than 10 inches of rain per year, mostly occurring as monsoonal summer storms. During monsoon season, dry creek beds (arroyos) are prone to severe flash flooding. Desert temperatures can fluctuate by 40 degrees on the same day. Pack and dress accordingly. Summer temperatures often exceed 110 degrees.

SAFETY

Remember where you are. There is very little shade in the desert. Dress accordingly: long sleeves and wide-brimmed hats are recommended in addition to sun-screen and sunglasses. Cell phone coverage is unreliable or non-existent in the park.

Big Bend Ranch State Park protects habitat for large mammal species, including black bears and mountain lions. Follow these tips to enjoy wildlife while preventing human-wildlife conflicts:

• Observe wildlife from a safe distance.
• Do not feed or attempt to catch wildlife.
• Do not run if you encounter bear or mountain lion in the field. Make noise, take action to make yourself look large, and back slowly away from the animal.
• Rattlesnakes are common and can be active year-round in the desert. Be careful where you step and place your hands. Listen for the rattling warning signal.

PERMIT REQUIREMENTS

Permits are required for use of park facilities, including use of hiking trails, park roads, picnic areas, camping areas, river access, or pull-offs along FM 170 (River Road). Special Use Permits are required for backcountry hiking, backpacking, or bikepacking.

REGULATIONS

• Quiet hours are from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m.
• Dogs are allowed on-leash on two trails in Big Bend Ranch State Park: Hoodoos and Closed Canyon.
• ATVs and UTVs are not allowed within the State Park boundary.
• Big Bend Ranch State Park is an International Dark Sky Park. Please do not use lighting at campsites that will “trespass” into neighboring campsite or temporarily contribute to light pollution.

LEAVE NO TRACE ETHICS

Please help us maintain a pristine wilderness setting in our park by practicing the Leave No Trace Seven Principles:

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare
2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces
3. Dispose of Waste Properly
4. Leave What You Find
5. Minimize Campfire Impacts
6. Respect Wildlife
7. Be Considerate of Other Visitors

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