

Interpretive Guide to:

DEVIL'S SINKHOLE

STATE NATURAL AREA



A restored windmill speaks to the area's ranching heritage. Enterprising pioneer ranchers laid windmill pipe to underground pools deep within the Sinkhole to water thirsty livestock.

Former owner Clarence Whitworth once said of the Sinkhole, "The only thing crazy enough to get around that thing is people. Horses and cows won't go near it." Nonetheless, Devil's Sinkhole State Natural Area functioned as a successful working ranch prior to its purchase by the State of Texas in 1985.

Access to Devil's Sinkhole State Natural Area is limited to guided tours; reservations are required. For information, contact the Devil's Sinkhole Society at (830) 683-2287.

FURTHER READING

The Caves and Karst of Texas

by William Elliott and George Veni

Bat Bomb: World War II's Other Secret Weapon

by Jack Couffer

Texas Bats by Merlin Tuttle

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WIDELY ACCEPTED LORE SUGGESTS THAT DEVIL'S SINKHOLE ACQUIRED ITS NAME FROM PIONEER AMMON BILLINGS, WHO HAPPENED UPON "THE OUTLET TO HELL, THE DEVIL'S OWN SINKHOLE" ONE HOT JUNE AFTERNOON IN 1867—A "HELLUVA HOLE" SOME 65 FEET WIDE AND UNFATHOMABLY DEEP—A PORTAL TO A SUBTERRANEAN WORLD. TODAY, DEVIL'S SINKHOLE STATE NATURAL AREA CHRONICLES EONS OF GEOLOGIC TIME AND DECADES OF COLORFUL HUMAN HISTORY WHILE DOUBLING AS A HOME FOR UP TO 3 MILLION BATS.



A SUBTERRANEAN WORLD

Water played a vital role in the formation of Devil's Sinkhole. Starting about 1 million years ago, slightly acidic, slow-moving groundwater carved a huge cavity in 150 million-year-old Edwards Limestone. As nearby valleys cut downward and groundwater levels dropped, the cavity drained. No longer upheld by the water's buoyant support, the cavern's ceiling began to collapse and finally broke through to the surface within the past few thousand years—merely a moment ago in geologic time. Today, visitors peer downward from the Sinkhole rim onto a “breakdown mountain” of rubble 140–150 feet below that resulted from the collapse.

The largest single-chambered and third-deepest cave in Texas, Devil's Sinkhole resembles a huge, inverted funnel, with emphasis on the word *huge!* If the breakdown mountain were a substitute for her pedestal, the 151-foot Statue of Liberty could stand inside the Sinkhole with her torch extending only slightly beyond the surface opening. At its widest point some 350 feet below the surface, the sinkhole measures 1,081 feet across—that's over three football fields placed end to end.



HUMAN HISTORY



Based on archeological clues, Native Peoples certainly knew of the Sinkhole, although we are unsure of how they may have used it. Some native groups considered such earthly openings sacred as the emergence points of life and used subterranean features like sinkholes as final resting places for the dead.

The first documented foray into the depths of the Sinkhole dates to 1889, when H.S. Barber carved his name and the date into a rock at the bottom. Barber's method of entry remains a mystery. During World War II, a team of army scientists risked life and limb to enter “the absolute Stygian darkness of the netherworld” on a swaying 150-foot ladder of rotted wood, rusty nails, barbed wire and frayed rope to collect bats for Project X-Ray. This top-secret military plan, eventually abandoned, called for bats to deliver firebombs to roosts in enemy cities. Workers installed the rickety ladder in the 1920s when mining bat guano, valuable as fertilizer and used as a chemical component of gunpowder.



Fred Foster and Calvin Furr produced an adventure film inside Devil's Sinkhole in 1947. Thereafter, other entrepreneurs offered rides to the bottom and back in an elevator cage for \$1.00 per person.

The mystical lure of Devil's Sinkhole has long captured the human imagination and entrepreneurial spirit.



Millions of Mexican free-tailed bats like this one rise from Devil's Sinkhole at dusk in a counterclockwise rotation.

BATS

An important colony of up to 3 million Mexican free-tailed bats inhabits Devil's Sinkhole from late February through October. Biologists recently determined this number by measuring guano deposits on the cavern floor to extrapolate the number of roosting bats on the ceiling above. At a conservative estimate of 200 bats per square foot, 150 could roost in an area the size of this opened brochure! Although Devil's Sinkhole provides excellent habitat for non-breeding bats, it is not warm enough for a maternity colony—females give birth to their pups in other Central Texas caves.

During winter, bats from Devil's Sinkhole journey to North-Central Mexico and beyond, where warm temperatures ensure a plentiful supply of insect prey. During the warm months in Central Texas when insects are abundant, the Sinkhole colony could consume up to 30 tons of beetles and moths per night, many of which are agricultural pests. That's the weight of about 20 mid-sized passenger cars! Thus, Devil's Sinkhole bats contribute greatly to the quality and quantity of the human food supply.

