

Interpretive Guide to:

KICKAPOO CAVERN

STATE PARK



PHOTO: ALLAN COBB AND TRAVIS SCOTT

AS RECORDED IN HIS 1889 DIARY, METHODIST CIRCUIT RIDER HAL CUNNINGHAM AND A PARTY OF EIGHT RELIED UPON LANTERN AND TORCHLIGHT TO ENTER "THE EGYPTIAN DARKNESS OF THE SUBTERRANEAN WONDER" KNOWN TODAY AS KICKAPOO CAVERN.

FROM THE TIME OF THIS FIRST WRITTEN ACCOUNT TO THE PRESENT, THE CAVES OF KICKAPOO CAVERN STATE PARK HAVE STIRRED GREAT CURIOSITY AND INTEREST. THE INTRIGUE OF THE PARK, HOWEVER, LIES AS MUCH ABOVE GROUND AS BELOW, FOR IT BOASTS EXCEPTIONAL NATURAL DIVERSITY AND A RICH HUMAN HISTORY AT EVERY LEVEL.



PHOTO: TRAVIS SCOTT

TOURS

Guided flashlight tours of undeveloped Kickapoo Cavern are available on scheduled dates, through advance reservation only. Participants can see the largest "speleothem" in Texas – a natural column formation rising as tall as an eight-story building. Although the cave is now mostly dry, dripping water once played an important role in shaping this and other formations, such as icicle-like stalactites and stalagmites, rippled sheets of flowstone, and moonmilk that resembles white cream cheese.

For additional information about Kickapoo Cavern tours, birding tours and bat flight observation, contact the park at:

P.O. Box 705, Brackettville, TX 78832 • (830) 563-2342
www.tpwd.texas.gov/kickapoocavern

FURTHER READING

William Elliott and George Veni, editors, *The Caves and Karst of Texas*, National Speleological Society and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, 1994.

Marshall Enquist, *Wildflowers of the Texas Hill Country*, Lone Star Botanical, 1989.

Mark Lockwood, *Birds of the Texas Hill Country*, University of Texas Press, 2001.

Merlin Tuttle, *Texas Bats*, Bat Conservation International, 2003.



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PHOTO: MARK LOCKWOOD

The endangered Black-capped Vireo, a specialty of the Edwards Plateau, breeds at Kickapoo Cavern State Park.

SURFACE LIFE

The park lies at a crossroads of nature, where three vastly different natural zones meet and intermingle to create a remarkable blend – a patchwork of plant and animal life. At Kickapoo, sprawling live oaks from the Edwards Plateau interplay with Chihuahuan Desert cacti and thorny shrubs of the subtropical South Texas plains. This type of mixed vegetation creates habitat for abundant and varied animal life. Birds provide one example: 240 migrant and resident species have been recorded within its boundaries, half the number that regularly occur in the entire state.

Several vulnerable species rely upon habitat that Kickapoo provides. The papershell pinyon, widespread in West Texas during the cooler and wetter Pleistocene ice age (about 10,000 years ago), clings to survival in isolated patches, dependent on moisture caught in the park's low-elevation limestone. Three endangered species persist in specialized environmental niches at Kickapoo – Tobusch fishhook cactus, Black-capped Vireo and Golden-cheeked Warbler.

KICKAPOO CAVERN

The park's namesake cavern chronicles roughly 4 million years of nature's handiwork. Formation began when slow-moving, acidic groundwater carved passageways through 105-million-year-old Devils River limestone. As the water table eventually dropped, the passageways drained and thereby lost their buoyant support, causing massive collapse within the cavern. The floor of Kickapoo Cavern was once its ceiling – a breakdown of jumbled limestone blocks from the collapse that measures 130 feet thick – the equivalent of a 16-level underground parking garage!

A large mound of burned rock and chipped stone near the cave records visitation by prehistoric Native American groups. In dry periods, a small pool deep within the cavern likely provided these early visitors with life-sustaining water. Although the cavern was presumably named for the Kickapoo Indians, archeologists are unsure whether this historic tribe actually visited the cave. Historic graffiti and layers of torch soot in the depths of the cave document explorations that began around 120 years ago during the time of European settlement.



PHOTO: MARK LOCKWOOD

Papershell pinyon rely on Kickapoo Cavern State Park's unique ecological conditions to survive.

STUART BAT CAVE



While Kickapoo Cavern supports relatively few animal species, Stuart Bat Cave teems with life. Cave swallows build mud nests on rocky protrusions just inside the cave mouth where they raise their young. Up to a million

Mexican free-tailed bats roost deep within the cave from spring through fall. At dusk, the air comes alive with a flutter of bat wings as these flying mammals stream into the night in search of insects.

Each Mexican free-tailed bat can eat up to three-quarters of its body weight in insects nightly, including mosquitoes and moths that include some agricultural pests. That's the equivalent of a 150-pound person gobbling up 450 quarter-pound hamburgers in a single day! The population of bats inhabiting Stuart Bat Cave could consume up to 10 tons of insects nightly – the weight of two elephants.

Stuart Bat Cave historically provided sustenance for people as well as bats. The Seargeant family, owners of the original ranchland, added fencing to supplement the cave's natural enclosure and created a corral for sheep and goats. Accumulated bat droppings called guano, mined from the cave until 1957, provided important income when sold as a high-quality fertilizer and explosive agent. A shaft dug into the back of the cave by guano miners has since been sealed to ensure the warm, moist conditions that bats prefer. Potentially, higher temperatures in the recesses of the cave will be suitable for a maternity colony, where female bats will give birth and raise their pups.

Mexican free-tailed bat
Photo: Merlin B. Tuttle, Bat Conservation International