PHOTO: MARK LOCKWOOD

The rare 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. Two endangered species call Kickapoo Cavern State Park home – Tobusch fishhook cactus and the 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 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 shows 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 animals, Stuart Bat Cave teems with life. Cave swallows build mud nests just inside the cave mouth. 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 75% of its body weight in insects nightly, including mosquitoes and moths. 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, named for the biologist who worked to protect the bats, historically provided income for people too. The Seargeant family, owners of the original ranchland that donated it to the people of Texas to become a state park, used the cave to corral sheep and goats. Guano, bat droppings, were mined from the cave until 1957. It was sold as high-quality fertilizer and an explosive agent. Now the cave is a protected home for bats and a place for visitors to marvel at their magnificence.

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