



ESCAPE THE BUSTLE OF MODERN LIFE AT HILL COUNTRY STATE NATURAL AREA, WHERE YOU HAVE OVER 5,000 ACRES OF HILLS, CANYONS, AND CREEKS TO EXPLORE. BRING YOUR HORSE AND RIDE THE TRAILS LIKE RANCHERS WOULD HAVE DONE 100 YEARS AGO, OR PULL ON A BACKPACK TO TAKE A RUGGED, ROCKY HIKE. WILDLIFE AND PLANT LIFE ABOUND AT THIS WILDERNESS PARADISE.



INTERPRETIVE GUIDE

HILL COUNTRY

STATE NATURAL AREA

THANK YOU FOR VISITING!

While enjoying this natural beauty, please remember everything you see in the natural area is protected. Artifacts, rocks, animals, and plants are all part of the region's rich natural and cultural heritage. Help us keep the natural area a special place for everyone.

- ♦ Hike only on designated trails and check for trail closures before you hike, bike, or ride.
- ♦ Leave no trace. Keep your natural area clean by picking up your trash.
- ♦ Preserve the natural area for future generations and leave plants, artifacts, animals, and fossils where you find them.
- ♦ Get involved by volunteering!
Contact the natural area to learn more.

Hill Country State Natural Area
10600 Bandera Creek Road
Bandera, TX 78003
(830) 796-4413

www.tpwd.texas.gov/hillcountry



Life's better outside.®



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Native people used earth ovens to prepare food.

HILL COUNTRY HERITAGE

The first people here weren't farmers and ranchers that this natural area is best known for—they were hunters and gatherers! Native Americans moved through this area starting about 12,000 years ago. They didn't have crops to plant or animals to wrangle, so these indigenous people moved around with the seasons and resources. From this rugged landscape they harvested plants like sotol, agave, and wild onion. But you can't bite down on a heart of sotol—it needs to be slow cooked for many hours before it's palatable. Native groups built earth ovens to do this, starting around 9,000 years ago. They lined a hole in the ground with hot rocks, added the fibrous plant material, and covered it up for a day or so. The result was tender, edible starches and vegetables.

Archeologists study the material items that people have left behind, and one thing native people left here are the remains of their earth ovens. Now, we call them burned rock middens—they serve as ovens no longer. As rocks in the ovens cracked from heat, the cooks would toss them aside. Today, that means that piles—also known as middens—of scorched rocks mark the site of an ancient kitchen. Archeologists have traced the path of humans with other kinds of discoveries, like camping spots or places where native people quarried rocks for tools. Though we know more about the people here after 1850, indigenous people survived and thrived here for a much, much longer time.

RANCH LIFE

Permanent settlers arrived here in the mid-nineteenth century with the promise of free land—as long as they added some improvements, like a house or pasture. These landowners ushered in a new era, changing the land to suit their needs. Ranchers raised cattle, horses, sheep, and goats. Today, you can still see their cleared fields and terraced lands for crops, as well as historic Kitzelman fencing throughout the natural area.



Of the many ranches that dotted the landscape, the most notable is perhaps the Bar-O Ranch. John and Louise Merrick bought up smaller ranches in the area during the 1940s and 1950s to create the larger Bar-O. It was their wilderness retreat—John owned a drilling company in Houston and would visit periodically. Louise lived on the ranch full-time, so she could “get away from the city and get away from the pressure.” She was active in the community, donating books and dollars to the local library, bidding on livestock at junior stock shows, and serving on the board of the local American Red Cross chapter. After John's death in 1969, Louise donated most of the land to Texas Parks and Wildlife—with the stipulation that it “be kept far removed and untouched by modern civilization... yet put to a useful purpose.” Hill Country State Natural Area opened in 1984.

Kitzelman fence



WILD RESIDENTS



Porcupine

Steep hills and trickling creeks come together to form a rugged home for wildlife. Hidden crevices in the limestone provide shelter to species like salamanders, cliff chirping frogs, and other amphibians. Reptiles like the Texas spiny lizard, western coachwhip, and Texas indigo snake live among the rocks. Similar to other areas of the Hill Country, our most common large mammal is the white-tailed deer, but others like black-tailed jackrabbit, raccoons, porcupines, and fox squirrels live here, too. Almost 200 types of birds have been spotted here—including the endangered golden-cheeked warbler, a small songbird that migrates to the Hill Country each spring to breed. Parks and natural areas provide protected places for native wildlife to flourish.



The Texas madrone tree provides a medley of color along the aptly-named Madrone Trail. Look for its glossy green leaves year-around, and notice how the tree's bark changes throughout the seasons. In the summer, it sheds dark bark to reveal a cream-colored trunk. The trunk eventually darkens, passing through stunning shades of red, orange, and brown.

With all that color in the bark, it's probably no surprise that people have used it to make orange and yellow dye. Even its berries are colorful—you can see these small orangey-red orbs in the fall. See if you can find a madrone tree in the natural area and pick your favorite color from it.