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# EL SOLITARIO

TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT | SUMMER 2008 | BIG BEND RANCH STATE PARK

## Welcome to Big Bend Ranch SP



My name is Rodrigo Navarrete Trevizo. It is an honor beyond measure to be asked to lead the largest state park in Texas.

Although I have hiked and camped in many of our beautiful state parks and state natural areas, the Big Bend is where my heart and soul belong. This is a country of beauty and isolation, rugged canyons, hidden springs and incredible vistas. Its people are strong and hardworking and its culture unique. Within the park's fascinating history, one that spans almost 400 years, you will find the story of not only the Trans-Pecos but of the entire state of Texas. In fact, the park has been a cross-roads of human activities for over 11,000 years!

I work with a group of dedicated employees charged with implementing our public use plan. This ambitious plan will make the park's remote campsites and extensive trail system available to the people of Texas and visitors from around the world. We are working to expand our partnerships and outreach programs, to bring the park's cultural and natural histories to an ever-expanding audience, and to secure its place of importance in our natural world.

Please take a moment to peruse this issue of *El Solitario* and familiarize yourself with all the park has to offer. I truly believe that you will be as excited as I am about the future of Big Bend Ranch State Park.



Aerial view of Solitario looking north-northeast. The lower outer rim's upside-down V's are the famous "Flatirons."

## A sense of place

### El Solitario: What's In a Name?

by David Riskind

El Solitario is the signature landscape feature of Big Bend Ranch State Park. Almost 10 miles across and nearly symmetrical, this collapsed and eroded structural dome straddles the Brewster-Presidio County line in the eastern portion of the park. Early explorers of the region noted its distinctive shape even

before airplanes or aerial images were available. It is one of Earth's more distinctive features as observed from space. The name is Spanish for hermit or loner.

About 36 million years ago molten rock called magma from deep in the Earth pushed upward and displaced thousands of feet of overlying rock. This activity created a blister or dome-shaped bulge on the Earth's surface. Over millions of years, erosion collapsed the dome's older

rocks. Subsequent volcanic activity further removed overlying rock, collapsed some of the lava chamber and formed a small caldera in the central southeast Solitario. Early geologic studies erroneously suggested that the Solitario was either a large volcano or a meteor impact crater.

The Solitario, as we see it today, emerged about 2 million years ago when the ancient Rio Grande began cutting its now

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## Featured Trails:

# Encino Hiking and Biking Trail



A group of middle and high school students meander through low hills, ocotillo forests and along ancient streambeds on the Encino Loop Trail.

The Encino Loop Trail, located in the interior of Big Bend Ranch State Park, follows an old jeep trail nearly nine miles through a remote portion of the Encino Pasture. This wide, easy-to-follow trail offers opportunities for hiking and mountain biking, birding and photography. An easy hike and a moderately strenuous mountain biking experience, the trail offers great views of ancient lava domes, rugged mesas and colorful desert vegetation.

During the spring and early summer, look for the desert wildflowers that decorate the harsh landscape. Be alert for javelinas rooting through the lechuguilla as you listen to the songs of Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Verdin and Black-throated Sparrow. Pay close attention to the animal tracks that appear in sandy arroyo bottoms and you just might see a coyote ambling away.

The trail loop begins 1.5 miles east of the Saucedo Visitor Center at the junction of Camino a la Saucedo and La Mota Road, just past the cattle guard. The first mile of the trail follows La Mota Road, so watch carefully for vehicles. Views include the shallow hills of Leyva Canyon to the west, La Mota Mountain to the north, Fresno Peak to the east and several volcanic domes to the south. At 1.01 miles the trail leaves the road and veers to the northeast.

At two miles the trail enters hilly terrain where canyons dissect the landscape. Look for severely distorted and twisted rock outcrops — evidence of the geologic forces that have long

shaped the region. At 3.0 to 3.5 miles you will pass acres of ocotillo, a hardy plant also known as desert candle.

Papalote Encino (Encino Windmill), the largest windmill at Big Bend Ranch, comes into view at the four-mile mark. Relics from decades of ranching activities litter the ground, particularly those associated with man's attempt to harness water in the desert.

Between 4.2 and 5.0 miles the trail veers to the right and follows the main ranch road. Watch for vehicles. At 5.1 miles, enjoy an excellent view of La Posta Mountain with Fresno Peak set as a lofty backdrop. At 5.3 miles, the Encino trail leaves the road once again and continues to the right. Ahead lies a commanding view of the Llano, a slightly depressed plain that recharges the underground water supply during the rainy season. Travel along this route is fairly easy — mostly level with a slight downhill dip.

Between 6.1 and 7.5 miles the trail continues through a series of arroyos and gullies. In one of the bigger arroyos, watch for a large cluster of quartz crystals that resembles a mound of ice cubes. At 6.8 miles the country begins to open back up, and at 7.5 miles the trail changes direction to the northeast. Be careful in these areas; many arroyos are covered with loose sand and gravel.

At 8.8 miles the route intersects with La Mota Road. Turn to the left and return to the beginning of the trailhead.

## Closed Canyon Trail



Hikers on the Closed Canyon Trail walk through a slice of geologic history.

The Closed Canyon Trail constitutes perhaps the most popular hike along the River Road corridor at Big Bend Ranch. The trailhead is located approximately 29 miles east of Presidio and 36 miles west of Study Butte on FM-170 (The River Road) between La Cuesta (The Big Hill) and the Colorado Canyon River Access. This relatively easy three-mile round-trip trail enters a slot canyon that portrays the incredible sculpting power of water and erosion. Deep inside the canyon, hikers can stretch out their arms and touch both canyon walls simultaneously while looking up at the canyon rim 150 feet above. Imagine the force required to slice through solid rock in this way!

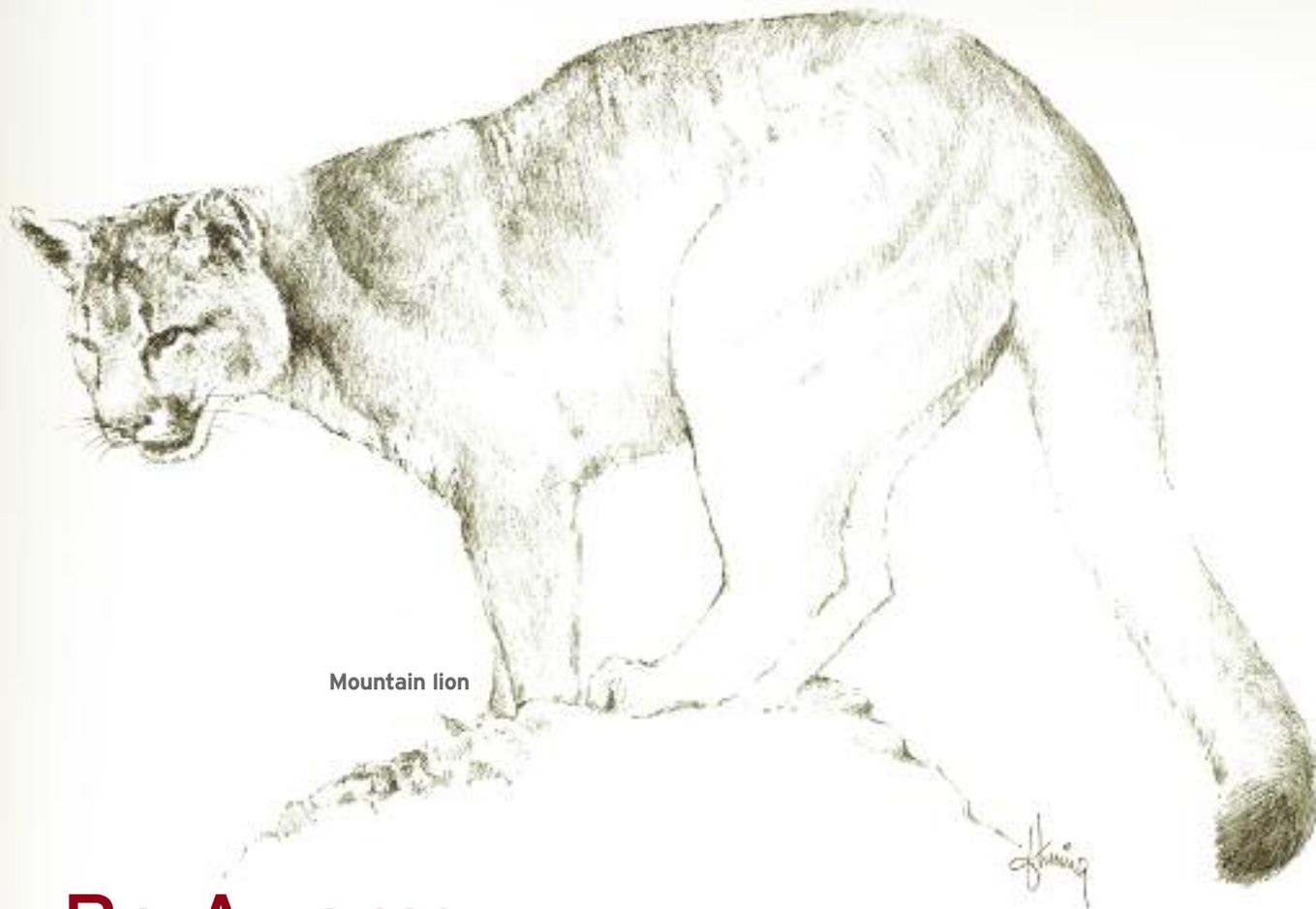
Closed Canyon Arroyo cuts through the reddish volcanic rock of Colorado Mesa. This mesa is composed of ash flow tuffs that erupted from volcanoes in the Sierra Rica of neighboring Chihuahua, Mexico, about 30 – 28 million years ago. Around 2 million years ago, both Colorado Mesa and the Santana Bolson (the valley that the River Road follows) had become completely covered with sedimentary basin-filling rocks. As the Closed Canyon Arroyo began to cut through these softer, looser rocks and establish its course, intense erosion occurred quickly enough to completely breach the harder, underlying volcanic rock of Colorado Mesa. Thus, Closed

Canyon Arroyo became a direct tributary of the Rio Grande.

Today, the Closed Canyon Trail presents a meandering hike into a narrow, deep, high-walled canyon worn smooth by the ongoing effects of moving water and sediment. As you walk through the canyon and contemplate its geologic past, also look for one of the Big Bend's most colorful lizards. The greater southwestern earless lizard can be seen along the canyon walls performing "push-ups" to expose its blue-purple belly to potential mates. During the mating season, males sport a vivid orange throat patch and a lime green wash along the flanks. Closed Canyon is also a favorite habitat for the canyon wren. Listen for its melodic song, a descending cascade of notes, echoing throughout the canyon.

During summer it is best to avoid hiking Closed Canyon during mid-day when the sun is directly overhead. Morning or afternoon is better because the canyon floor is shaded by its high walls. Be sure to carry plenty of water, and wear a large brimmed hat. Beware of afternoon thunderstorms; flash flooding can be a serious problem in the canyon.

To learn more about the geology of the region, pick up a copy of *Geology of Big Bend Ranch State Park* by Christopher Henry, at any of our visitor centers.



# Be Aware: You're in wildlife country

Many wonderful animals live here and play a vital role in the balance of nature. You are a guest in their home. By learning about the park's animals and observing the following tips, you can show them the respect they deserve while keeping yourself and your family safe.

**Never feed wild animals** or allow them to get human or pet food.

**Observe wild animals and longhorn cattle from a safe distance;** never approach or try to photograph them at close range.

**Keep children and pets** under your control at all times.

**Clean up and store food and garbage** immediately after meals; never keep food in your tent.

**Enjoy the outdoors** with others, not alone.

**In the unlikely event that you encounter a black bear or mountain lion, do not run.**

Instead, face the animal, make noise and try to look as large as possible. Pick up small children. Back away slowly. If attacked, fight back. Report sightings to park staff immediately.

**Rattlesnakes are especially common at Big Bend Ranch.**

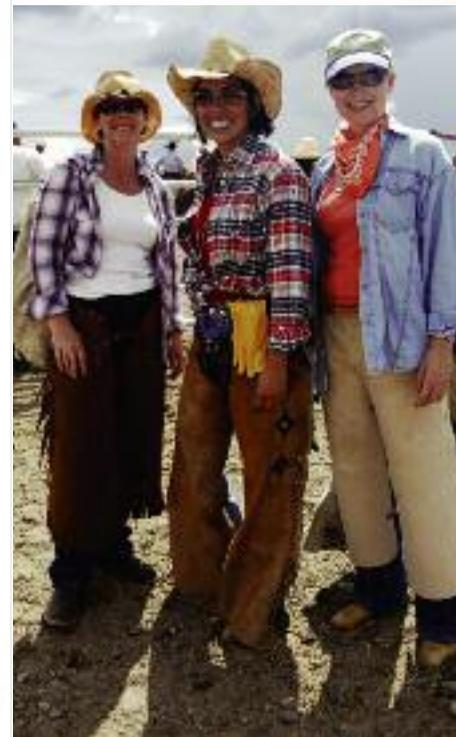
Watch where you put your hands and feet. Never harass or attempt to handle a rattlesnake—this is when most bites occur. Rattlesnakes are protected in the park; do them no harm.



Western Diamondback rattlesnake

**In the unlikely event that a bite occurs:**

- Remove jewelry and loosen tight-fitting clothing.
- Wash the bite area with disinfectant.
- Keep the person calm and quiet.
- Limit movement if at all possible.
- Watch for symptoms of shock.
- Seek medical attention immediately.



## Head 'em up, move 'em out!

Weekend wranglers have a chance each spring and fall to see cattle in the ranch's rugged and remote pastures, learn how the herd is moved with horses, and drive the park's historic Texas Longhorn Herd to stock pens at Sauceda Headquarters. Participants can take part in branding and vaccinating calves, recording lineages and experiencing the traditions of the Spanish, Mexican and Anglo-American cowboy culture.

The cattle drive is Big Bend Ranch State Park's most popular program, allowing up to 25 visitors to experience a part of the state's Western heritage. The three-day event allows participants to learn about the park's ranching tradition, experience life as a cowboy and gain a lifetime of memories.

**For information call the Big Bend Ranch State Park, Sauceda Ranger Station at (432) 358-4444.**

# Featured Campsites:

## Fresno Vista Campsite

Volcanic boulders stand sentinel as they guard the approach to Fresno Vista campsite. Here, at the edge of ancient lava flows from the Bofecillos volcanoes, one can glimpse millions of years of geologic history and contemplate thousands of years of human occupation in upper Fresno Canyon.



After driving through gently rolling grass-covered hills to arrive at the campsite, visitors will find a picnic table and fire ring situated in a small valley. A few yards to the north lies a level ridgeline that has been designated for tent camping. Numerous tumbled boulders invite exploration and play. The site can also accommodate those with mobility issues.



### What's special about this site?

- Uninterrupted views of the surrounding mountains
- So peaceful that you can hear the breeze pass through
- Lots of room to spread out

Fresno Vista campsite is protected from south winds but is exposed to the north. Desert grasses, lechuguilla, cholla, hedgehog cacti and an occasional juniper are common plants. On clear nights, stargazing is spectacular.

### Getting There

At the Saucedo Ranger Station turn right and travel east on Camino a la Saucedo, the 2WD all-access road. Turn right onto Fresno Vista Road. Pass the warning sign and travel along the ridgeline. Upon reaching a water trough, turn right and follow the road to the parking area.

### From Saucedo Ranger Station

Saucedo Ranger Station to Fresno Vista Road	7.8 miles
Fresno Vista Road to water trough	0.9 miles
Water trough to campsite	0.3 miles

**9** miles | **40** minutes

Access: 2WD High Clearance

### GPS Coordinates (NAD83)

UTM13 Easting	611335.2756
UTM Northing	3263866.2950
Longitude DD	103.85140183
Latitude DD	29.49939832
Longitude DMS	103 51 5.0466
Latitude DMS	29 29 57.8339

## Tascate 1 Campsite

For decades, vaqueros and cowboys maintained the water tank and windmills of Tascate. Today the Tascate 1 campsite offers visitors a taste of the past. Sit at the picnic table and survey the rugged hillsides covered with yucca and sotol as you ponder the site's ranching heritage and the natural beauty that lies all around.



The picnic table and fire ring at this campsite are located approximately 50 yards from the parking area. Nearby the rock walls struggle to keep back the mariola and creoste bush that is attempting to take back the land. A large tent pad is located northwest of the fire ring, and a smaller tent pad is located northeast of the windmill directly behind the parking area.

### What's special about this site?

- Solitude
- Elegant rock formations and views
- A sense of protection for your family and friends

### Getting There

Turn left at the Saucedo Ranger Station and travel to the Madrid Falls Road. Turn left onto Madrid Falls Road and follow the road south. Pass through the closed gate and travel through the Llano Flats among scores of yucca, purple and green prickly pear cactus and stands of ocotillo.

Pass the intersections of Llano Loop and Papalote Llano. Take in breathtaking views of Fresno Peak and the Chisos Mountains. Turn right at the intersection of Madrid Falls and Tascate Road.

Engage four-wheel drive and negotiate through water-eroded channels traveling south-westerly. Enter the open gate and follow the road through a small oval depression into the canyons below Tascate Peak. Cross the arroyo and enter the heavily vegetated canyon bottom. Pass the remains of the historic wooden windmill and pull into the parking area near the water trough.

### GPS Coordinates (NAD83)

UTM13 Easting	599591.0871
UTM Northing	3256303.3155
Longitude DD	103.97323223
Latitude DD	29.43214196
Longitude DMS	103 58 23.6360
Latitude DMS	29 25 55.7111

**4.6** miles | **40** minutes

### From Saucedo Ranger Station

Saucedo Ranger Station to Tascate Road	3.1 miles
Tascate Road to Campsite	1.5 miles

Access: 4WD High Clearance

## Backcountry Zone Camping



There are no designated campsites in the backcountry zone. Backcountry camping allows overnight visitors to select their own primitive campsite, based upon certain conditions:

- At least 1/4 mile from any other existing campsite
- At least 300 feet from water sources and prehistoric or historic cultural sites
- At least 3/4 mile from trailheads or roads

Backcountry campers may use the "cathole" method to dispose of human waste and must pack out all trash. No open fires are allowed due to resource impact; use of containerized fuel stoves is permitted. The maximum stay is 14 nights (total) and seven consecutive days in any one backcountry zone.

# Big Bend Ranch State Park Fees and visitor services

Daily entry fee:  
\$3 per person per  
day for all 13 years  
and older

Standard Vehicle  
Campsite:  
\$8 per site/day

Backcountry  
Zone Camping:  
\$5 per night/site

Horses:  
\$2 per day/horse

## Lodging

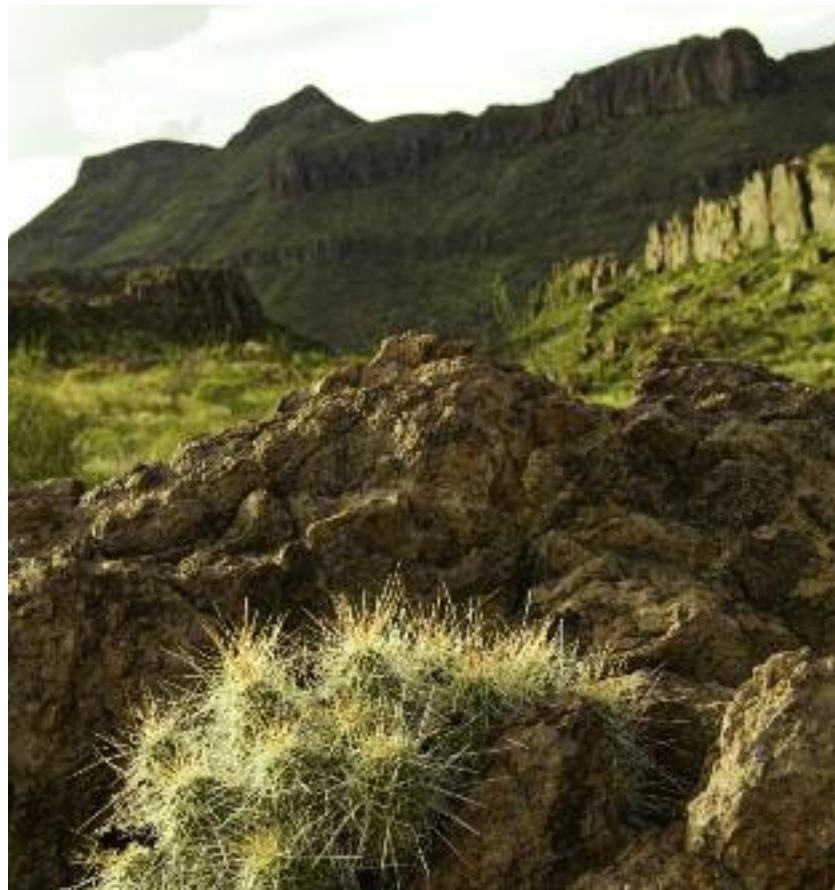
Lodging is available bunkhouse style or in the "Big House" at Saucedo. Meals are available with advance reservations. Call (432) 358-4444 between 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. for information and reservations.

## Airstrip

Big Bend Ranch  
paved airstrip 3TE3

103-56-11.7030 W  
28-28-10.6840 N

Elevation: 4240 feet  
Length: 5500 feet



## Park Information and Permits

Park information and permits for day use and camping may be obtained in person from 8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. daily at three locations:

**Saucedo Ranger Station**  
Park interior  
(432) 358-4444

**Barton Warnock Environmental  
Education Center**  
Lajitas  
(432) 424-3327

**Fort Leaton State  
Historic Site**  
Presidio  
(432) 229-3613

Special-use permits are required for use of Primitive Road and all camping. Day Use visitors are required to obtain a free, special-use permit for motorized use of primitive roads.

Campsite and backcountry reservations may be made in advance by calling (432) 358-4444 between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Permits must be picked up in person.

## Use Zones

**Front Country Zone** is defined as those lands within approximately one-quarter mile either side of the designated 2WD roads. All street-legal and licensed vehicles are permitted in this zone. Overnight use may occur only at designated campsites, with the required, special-use permit.

**Primitive Road Zone** is defined as lands within one-quarter mile either side of designated 4WD or 2WD high-clearance roads. Motorized vehicle access to this zone is restricted to street-legal and licensed vehicles that must have at least four functional wheels. Overnight use may occur only at designated campsites, with the required, special-use permit.

**Backcountry Zones** are defined as lands that are more than one-quarter mile from publicly accessible roads. Twenty separate zones have been defined. Only non-motorized travel is permitted. Visitors are encouraged, though not required, to use designated trails and routes until they are knowledgeable and confident enough in their familiarity with the park to travel cross-country.

## Important: Orientation

### Front Country Zone Day Use Only

Appropriate orientation materials will be provided, depending on the visitor's intended activities and areas of interest at the park.

### Primitive Road or Backcountry Zone Day or Overnight Use

The viewing or reviewing of comprehensive orientation materials and information is required. This material will introduce the park, the Chihuahuan Desert, safety, water use, vehicle requirements, land ethics, etc. Orientation is required annually.

**No gas, diesel  
or groceries  
available in park.**

**Cell phone service in  
the park is very  
limited and unreliable.  
Don't count on it!**

**EMERGENCY DIAL 911**

### Towing

Alpine (432) 837-1150  
Presidio (432) 229-3312



# BIG BEND RANCH STATE PARK





# Big Bend Ranch State Park

## Access and visitor services

### Vehicle-Accessible Camping

Fifty-five locations have been designated for vehicle-accessible camping. Permits are required. Each site includes a tent area, picnic table and fire ring. Some campsites are still under development and may temporarily lack some amenities.

Campers are required to place tents in designated areas only. Desert resources are fragile.

**Important: All visitors are required to haul out their human waste and pack out all trash.**

Portable privies are available for purchase at all permit-issuing stations.

Downed wood is critical to desert ecology. Gathering firewood is prohibited. Visitors may bring their own firewood or purchase it at Saucedo. Charcoal cooking fires and containerized fuel stoves are allowed. Ashes must be packed out or deposited in the fire ring. The maximum stay per permit is 14 nights.

#### Individual Campsites

- Up to 8-person occupancy
- 3-vehicle limit

#### Group Campsites

- Up to 12-person occupancy
- 5-vehicle limit

#### Equestrian Staging Campsites

- Up to 24-person occupancy
- 12-vehicle limit

#### Campsites at Campgrounds

- 3-vehicle limit

### Pets

Pets are allowed anywhere vehicles are allowed, and within 1/4 mile of publicly accessible roads. Always keep pets on a leash and pick up after them. Never leave pets unattended or allow them to approach wild animals or longhorn cattle.



**Road conditions are affected by rain and runoff and will vary widely. Check with a ranger for conditions on arrival.**

### Know Your Vehicle

Some roads are suitable only for high-clearance or four-wheel-drive vehicles. If you have any questions about the roads or the suitability of your vehicle, consult a park ranger.

- Two-wheel-drive (2WD): main road and some spurs that any highway-worthy vehicle, driven responsibly, can access.
- Two-wheel-drive, high-clearance (2WDHC): roads where extra clearance is required due to road conditions (rocks, steep dips, etc.).
- Four-wheel-drive (4WD): recommended where extra traction is required on steep, loose or soft ground. Includes all-wheel drive (AWD).
- Four-wheel-drive, high-clearance (4WDHC): primitive roads or routes harsher than 4WD, where passage requires vehicles with extra traction, rigid suspension and high clearance.

High clearance is considered a minimum of 8 inches.

### Rules for the Road Less Traveled

Park roads are dirt and may be narrow. Speed limit is 25 mph on primary park roads. Drive slowly to keep yourself, your passengers, your vehicle and the park's animals safe.

When should 4WD be engaged? Generally speaking, once you leave the maintained road, shift from 2WD into 4WD and leave it there until returning to the maintained road. Use 4WD low before you need to negotiate any really difficult obstacles.

Take care of your tires. **On primitive roads, the number one trouble is tire failure, often sidewall punctures.** Drive slowly and watch for sharp rocks, sticks and cactus. Carry fix-a-flat, a lug wrench, hydraulic jack and tow strap. A good spare is essential; **two spares are recommended.**

Always carry an extra 5 gallons of water.

**Beware of brush. The woody bushes of the desert are extremely hard and can produce nasty scratches in your vehicle's paint.**

### Food and Lodging

The lodge at Saucedo is a bunkhouse with a commercial kitchen. Meals are prepared and served in a common dining area. Meal service can be arranged with advance notice. Lodging is available bunkhouse style with men on one side and women on the other. The three-bedroom "Big House" sleeps eight. The Big House has a full kitchen, or meals may be taken at the Bunk House. Pets are not allowed in either. For information, rates and reservations, call (432) 358-4444 between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.

### Enjoy the Park (and Live to Tell About It)

The beauty of Big Bend Ranch lies in its rugged remoteness. You are responsible for your own personal safety while at the park. Stay alert, read posted materials and consult a ranger for advice.

**Stay cool.** Desert heat can kill, and sunburn is no fun. While enjoying the park, be sure to use sunscreen. Wear a long-sleeved shirt, long pants, a broad-brimmed hat and sunglasses. Avoid strenuous outdoor activities during the hottest part of the day. Always drink plenty of water.

**Water is life.** If you wait until you're thirsty to drink, you've waited too long. Carry and consume at least 1 gallon of water per person per day to avoid dehydration. Drinking water is available at the visitor center.

**Weather the weather.** In a lightning storm, seek shelter inside a building or a vehicle with a roof. Do not stand under trees or in shallow caves, and avoid high ground. Stay away from water, wire fences and metal railings, which can carry lightning from a distance.

**Stay high and dry.** Dry creek beds can quickly become raging torrents due to rainfall far upstream. Be cautious when hiking in streambeds. Never cross rain-swollen creeks or washes. Be aware that temperatures can fluctuate by 50 degrees per day at the park, and dress accordingly. Stay dry to prevent hypothermia.

**Don't go it alone.** Tell someone your plans and estimated return time. Avoid exploring alone. Cell phone service is spotty at best; do not rely upon it. Always have plenty of water and food with you.

**EMERGENCY DIAL 911**



### Medical Services

Note: Cell phone service in the park is unreliable and limited. No medical facilities are available within the park. The nearest hospital is located in Alpine, approximately a three hours' drive from Saucedo. Local Emergency Medical Services are:

Terlingua Medics: (432) 371-2222 | Presidio EMS: (432) 729-4308



# What to do while you're here

## Hiking and Biking

Trails provide the only means of accessing many areas within Big Bend Ranch State Park, and allow visitors an intimate rapport with the outdoors. Ultimately the park will boast 65 routes comprising 236 miles of interconnected trails. The system strives to capture the spirit of the land by offering trails that are scenic and educational, and offers varying levels of accessibility and challenge to people of all ages and abilities.

Due to rough terrain, some of the park's trails are suitable for hiking only. Other trails available to for mountain bikers and equestrians as well. Refer to the park map or speak with a ranger for details. If you do not have a bike, rentals are available at the Sauceda Ranger Station or through local outfitters. When biking, always wear a helmet. Carry plenty of water and wear appropriate, protective clothing. Most importantly, have fun!



## Horseback Riding



Horseback represents another way to view and appreciate Big Bend Ranch. So, saddle up and explore almost 300,000 acres in the Chihuahuan Desert. Equestrian activities are allowed in all areas of the park unless specifically excluded. All pack and saddle stock users must obtain a backcountry use permit, whether for day use or overnight. Equestrians must bring their own weed-free horse feed. All horses must have documentation of a current Coggins test.

## Rock Watching

The primary attraction of the Big Bend country is its scenery, and here, scenery is geology. The mountains, canyons, plateaus, rivers and waterfalls are all the direct results of geologic processes of mountain building, volcanism, rock formation, subsequent faulting, folding, weathering and

erosion. Geology and resultant landforms ultimately determine where and how the region's plants, animals and humans live. So as you soak up the scenery, remember that you are looking far back into geologic time—a long chronicle of earth history.

## River Access

The Rio Grande/Rio Bravo corridor is an easily accessible area of the park for day use, including rafting, kayaking, canoeing and free bank fishing. Several river access points are found within the park along FM-170. Colorado Canyon includes Class II and Class III rapids. This section of the river is not considered dangerous under normal flow conditions. The walls of Colorado Canyon,



unlike the limestone canyons of Big Bend National Park and the Lower Canyons, are entirely of igneous rock. Raft trips may be arranged through local outfitters in Terlingua and Study Butte.

## Commercially Guided Tours and Outfitters

Bend Ranch State Park can promote public access for those individuals apprehensive of such a primitive site or who may be looking for a recreational experience that they are unable to facilitate themselves. Potential services may include: equestrian trips, river rafting, mountain bike tours, campouts, nature/birding hikes and art and photography classes.

## Certified Commercial Guides for Big Bend Ranch State Park are:

**Big Bend River Tours**  
432-371-3033 or  
800-545-4240

**Desert Sports**  
432-371-2727 or  
888-989-6900

**Far Flung Outdoor Center**  
432-371-2489  
800-839-7238



Vermilion flycatcher

Featured Activity:

# Watch the birdie

## Over 300 species of birds reside in Big Bend Ranch State Park

by Mark Lockwood

Big Bend Ranch State Park offers the opportunity to explore Chihuahuan Desert habitats including grasslands, desert scrub, canyons, and riparian woodlands and thickets. The greatest diversity and abundance of birds is normally found near the numerous springs and along streams scattered around the park. Large springs normally are found in association with riparian woodlands (cottonwood-willow-hackberry and shrub thickets).

One of the premier birding locations within the park is found at Ojito Adentro (wayside stop #4). The trail from the parking area traverses through desert scrub into riparian woodland. The song of the Bell's Vireo is a common sound of the thickets along arroyos and in the understory of riparian habitats and can hardly be missed between early March and September. In spring and summer, watch for the Zone-tailed Hawk, Vermilion Flycatcher, Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak and Varied Bunting. Canyon, Bewick's and

Rock Wrens are present year-round and a wide variety of sparrows can be found here in winter. This area can be very productive during migration (late March through mid-May and late August through mid-October) when flycatchers, warblers and tanagers can be common. Migration in West Texas is not as spectacular as farther east, but surprises can be found. Some of the more interesting finds at Ojito Adentro include Painted Redstart and a variety of eastern warblers.

A walk along a dry arroyo in well-developed desert scrub will reveal a different group of birds. Say's Phoebe, Verdin, Curve-billed and Crissal Thrashers, and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher join more Bell's Vireos in this habitat. An easily accessible place to find these birds is along the arroyo that passes along the west side of the Saucedo headquarters complex. Two of the more abundant birds on Big Bend Ranch can be encountered almost anywhere. They are the Scaled Quail and Black-throated Sparrow. Keep an eye out for them as you travel along the park's many roads. Be sure to pick up a copy of the park's bird checklist, Birds of Big Bend Ranch State Park, to record your sightings.



Black-throated sparrow



Zone-tailed hawk



Scaled quail

## A sense of place

<continued from page 1>

famous canyons. Volcanism, weathering, erosive rains, runoff and groundwater moving through the Shutups, Fresno Creek, Terlingua Creek and Contrabando Creek combined to expose and shape the landforms that park visitors see today. Eons of erosion exposed some of the Earth's most ancient rocks including shales, sandstones and cherts in Solitario's core.

On first impression, the Solitario's interior seems to be an unremarkable terrain of low rolling hills covered by desert grasslands and scrub. But the exposed geologic history reveals one of the most remarkable accounts of our planet's past that can be seen in one place. These rocks are deformed, uplifted and eroded remains of the Ouachita Mountains, which predate the Rockies. Massive limestones that were seafloor deposits were uplifted during the Rocky Mounting building period of Earth's history. These deposits now form the Solitario's outer rings. The entire southwest quadrant of the Solitario has steeply inclined inverted V-shaped rocks called "flat irons." Viewing them from the south or west at sunset is a breathtaking experience. Hiking through this world-class geologic landmark is truly a walk through time.

There are several places in the park to experience the full visual impact of the Solitario. Solitario Overlook is a few miles past Saucedo and is accessible by 2WD vehicles. Fresno Overlook on FM 170 between Lajitas and the Teepee Picnic area offers a great view in late afternoon. For a closer look you'll need a 4WD high-clearance vehicle, to reach the Mexicano Trailhead. A short hike will give you spectacular Solitario vistas. The interior of the Solitario can be accessed via a 4WD high-clearance road to the Tres Papalotes Trailhead. Hikes, some substantial, can then be made to all points of the interior.

# Archeology, History and Culture: The Rock Art of Big Bend Ranch State Park – A Reflection on Culture History



Ancient Native American pictographs in Big Bend Ranch State Park. Please treat these sites with the sensitivity that they deserve. Please do not touch the pictographs or spray liquids on them, which may accelerate fading.

Though early Spanish explorers to the Big Bend referred to the region as *el despoblado*, meaning uninhabited or deserted, the region has in fact been continuously inhabited or visited by various cultural groups for over 10,000 years. Native Americans lived in the region for most of that time. Beginning with the arrival of shipwrecked Spaniard Alvaro Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, his companion Estebanico and a band of pack traders in 1535, Spanish, Mexican, and Euro-American populations also settled and traveled across the Big Bend.

While evidence of the more recent occupants of the Big Bend is readily visible in the structural remains, art, and everyday items these people left behind, evidence of the earlier Native American inhabitants is somewhat more difficult for visitors to recognize. Perhaps some of the more obvious cultural features that reflect the diversity of Native American groups that inhabited or traveled through the region — and their ways of life — are the rock art panels that dot the landscape. Twenty-nine such sites, most of which are pictograph (rock painting) sites, are presently known on Big Bend Ranch State Park.

Other sites contain petroglyphs, images that are etched or abraded into the rock.

Several rock-art styles and a variety of figures are represented within the state park, including curvilinear (wavy) and rectilinear (zig-zag) abstract images that could date at least as far back as 5,000 years ago, during what is known as the Early Archaic period. These images are painted in a variety of colors, including red, yellow, black and white, or are occasionally abraded into the rock surface. Subsequent pictographs begin to include anthropomorphic (animal and human-like) figures, and are frequently painted only in red or only in black. Some of these rock paintings could date to the Late Archaic period, beginning about 3,000 years ago, while others date to the Late Prehistoric, beginning about 1,100 years ago and ending with the arrival of the Spanish. More recent pictographs date to the early Historic period, beginning in 1535. Among the Historic period pictographs at Big Bend Ranch State Park are numerous figures of riders on horses, one of which depicts an early Spanish saddle.



While some of the rock-art sites may be visited by park visitors without a guide, other sites are especially sensitive and are accessible by way of staff-led tours. When visiting these sites, please treat them with the sensitivity that they deserve so that others may enjoy them in the future. Please do not touch the images or spray liquids on them to make them easier to see; pigments in the rock paintings are affected by the oils on your skin, and moistening the images can cause accelerated fading. And, of course, do not deface the rock art or remove artifacts from these sites. With every occurrence of such vandalism, a piece of irreplaceable history is lost to all of us.

## Lights, Camera, Action!

What, a movie set in the middle of the desert? It's true! The scenic grandeur and cultural flavor of the Rio Grande corridor at Big Bend Ranch has long inspired artistic expression, including filmmaking. About 5 miles west of Barton Warnock Environmental Education Center along FM 170, you will see what looks like a quaint 1800s village perched on the banks of Rio Grande. This "village" is actually a movie set dating to 1985. Have you seen any of the five films or the award-winning music video that were shot here?

- Uphill All the Way (1985)
- Rio Diablo (1993)
- Gambler V: Playing for Keeps (1994)
- Streets of Laredo (1995)
- Dead Man's Walk (1996)
- My Maria, music video (1995)

## Want to Know More?

The park stores at Saucedo Headquarters and Barton Warnock Environmental Education Center have a well-rounded selection of books that delve into the region's geology, plants, animals, culture and history. Included are children's books, memoirs, cookbooks and field guides. Check out the offerings and find a book that's right for you. Perhaps one of the following?



- *The Three Little Javelinas* by Susan Lowell
- *Geology of Big Bend Ranch State Park* by Christopher D. Henry
- *Chronicles of the Big Bend* by W. D. Smithers
- *The Texas Outback: Ranching on the Last Frontier* by Bill Wright
- *The Wind that Swept Mexico* by Anita Brenner
- *The Buffalo Soldiers* by William Leckie
- *Quicksilver* by Kenneth Ragsdale

# The River Road Runs Through It



Rio Grande vista from pullout just west of La Cuesta (Big Hill).

El Camino del Rio, also known as The River Road or FM-170, skirts the southern boundary of Big Bend Ranch State Park. It has been touted by *National Geographic* as one of the most scenic highways in all of North America. And for good reason—traversing this road is like traveling through time. While hugging the banks of the picturesque Rio Grande, travelers are treated to windshield views of geologic formations that resulted from the region's tumultuous past, when volcanism shaped the landscape. The forces of faulting and erosion have sculpted the land over the millennia into the stunning vistas seen today. A kaleidoscope of natural wonders awaits you on this world-class drive.

One of the more spectacular sights along the route is La Cuesta, or The Big Hill. Ascending over 500 feet above the river below, this stretch of road is perhaps the longest and steepest paved grade in Texas.

Motorists are treated to pullouts at the summit, where they can stop and take in the grandeur of the Rio Grande as it cuts its way through the surrounding Chihuahuan Desert. This is a favorite stop for those who want to watch a glorious sunrise or sunset.

For those wishing to leave the pavement, the River Road has several trailheads leading to more than 60 miles of backcountry trails that traverse some of the most remote areas in the Big Bend. The Rancherías Loop Trail is a favorite among backpackers. For day hikers, the Rancherías Canyon Trail leads to a waterfall that cascades over several rock ledges into a refreshing pool of water. The multi-use Contrabando Trail offers access to hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking. Interpreted sites along the way include a candelilla wax camp, ruins of an historic homestead dating to the late 1800s, and relics from the



Contrabando movie set, located six miles west of Barton Warnock Environmental Education Center on the River Road.

region's cinnabar mining days. One of the park's most popular hikes is the Closed Canyon Trail, which is covered on page 2 of this newspaper.

From several access points along the River Road, visitors can easily access the Rio Grande for fishing, floating, birding or simply to soak up the serenity and splendor or the river corridor. Three campgrounds provide picnic tables and shaded shelters for day use or overnight camping. Two designated group camping areas can support large groups.



Pick up a map and enjoy the shaded picnic facilities at Fort Leaton SHS.

The river road is not a journey for the hurried traveler. Only 50 miles in length between Presidio and Lajitas, it takes about 1.5 hours to complete. The road is a roller coaster of 20-mile-per-hour turns with numerous ups and downs. So take your time and savor the experience. Drive safely along this "Trail of Treasures" because you never know what is around the next bend.

Before embarking on the River Road, stop in at either the Barton Warnock Environmental Education Center near Lajitas or at Fort Leaton State Historic Site near Presidio. There, you can pick up maps and receive information on what not to miss on the drive. Be sure to tour both facilities while you are there. Fort Leaton served as a home and trading post along the Chihuahua Trail beginning in 1848, and as a private fortification for the Leaton family against Indian raids and attacks by bandits and other outlaws. Barton Warnock Environmental Education Center profiles the archeology, natural history and cultural heritage of the Big Bend Region, and features a botanical garden that allows visitors to walk among characteristic plants of the Chihuahuan Desert.

Happy Driving!

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