

*Why do we protect natural places? A walk through Westcave Preserve provides the answer.*

Tucked away in what used to be undeveloped southwestern Travis County, 30 miles west of central Austin on 76 acres in the path of suburban sprawl, there's a shady emerald grotto cooled by a fern-lined waterfall, the silence punctuated only by peaceful drips and the buzzy trills of rare songbirds. Westcave Preserve, where the majesty of the Texas Hill Country is on full display, is celebrating its 40th birthday.

"I love to hear the 'oohs' and 'ahhs' of our visitors when they see the grotto for the first time," says volunteer tour guide Beverly Gordon, a Texas Master Naturalist. "Many leave with the comment that it is the most beautiful place, and they didn't even know it was here or that there were places like it. They want to return and bring others."

# Preserving Paradise

*Water falls into a heavenly home for rare birds and flowers in Westcave Preserve's grotto.*

**BY ELAINE DAVENPORT**





PHOTO © TOM HAUSLER

While the destination is sublime, the journey doesn't disappoint either. From the visitors center, follow a flat trail through the live oak/ash juniper savanna, home to the endangered golden-cheeked warbler. A tiny, lichen-covered bump on a branch above you could be a hummingbird nest. Look east across the Pedernales River valley and listen to the rocky river rushing along 80 feet below on its way to Lake Travis. As you descend 125 handcrafted steps, stop to peer into a pocked limestone aquifer at eye level.

At the bottom of the steps, you enter a secret garden, the heart of the preserve, a lush box canyon. The trail now follows a fast-moving stream, shaded by bald cypress trees, with a world of plants and animals different from those above. In the spring, you might see the rare green dragon or chatterbox orchid, which grow only in this moist environment, or hear the descending notes of a canyon wren. As the ravine narrows, a fern-covered amphitheater comes into view with a 40-foot waterfall, emerald pool and the small cave that gives the preserve its name. The cave is nearly hidden under the cliff overhang, walled off by ornate columns and draperies of travertine, a calcite material that builds up from water seeping through the canyon walls.

### SAVING PARADISE

The conservation goals initially established by the nonprofit Westcave Preserve Corporation four decades ago are still top priority today: permanent protection, careful restoration and prudent visitor control.

Those goals were vital at the start, because the preserve was being trampled. Its verdant canyon beckoned like Shangri-la. By the mid-1960s word had spread that a lovely, unattended swimming hole was a cool party place. Indeed, summer temperatures in the canyon can be 10 degrees lower than in the river valley below or on the plateau above.

What's more, it was free. Hamilton Pool, Westcave's larger and better-known twin just one mile east, also was on private land with its own pool and waterfall, but Hamilton Pool charged an entry fee of \$1 per car. Austin's hippie community knew that getting to Westcave was easy: park at Hammetts Crossing (a low-water bridge over the Pedernales River), climb over the barbed wire at the entrance to the slot canyon and hike a quarter-mile to paradise.

Not many thought they were doing harm, but for the next decade, destruction of the pristine habitat was in full swing. The number of trespassers grew from a few people a week



PHOTO BY SONJA SOMMERFELD / TPWD



PHOTO BY EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD

to several hundred. Plants, including ferns and rare columbines, were destroyed and soil was compressed as multiple mud trails were forged on both sides of the clear stream. Trees were felled and campfires set, sterilizing the ground beneath. Stalactites and stalagmites from the old rock shelter were broken off and strewn along the canyon. Bottles, beer cans, paper, charcoal, broken lanterns and plastic (as well as human waste) built up.

Enter "trespasser" John Covert Watson, who would become Westcave's founder and savior. Watson had been visiting Hamilton Pool since he was a boy in the 1930s, never discovering the nearby preserve until the early 1960s.

A student of Frank Lloyd Wright, Watson's architectural juices were inspired by the "most splendid verdant grotto" at the head of the box canyon.

"It all seemed to fit," he remembers. "There was something in the detail that captured your eye."

One day, a "For Sale" sign on the property stopped Watson in his tracks.

In one fell swoop, Watson left trespassing behind and became a visionary conservationist. In 1974, he purchased Westcave's original 25 acres and hired a resident manager, John Ahrns, who arrived with wife Brenda and son Jeff, 5, and daughter Amber, 2.

Ahrns later would tell a visitor that he had "moved us to heaven." The two dreamed and schemed about establishing a nature preserve, and made it happen two years later.

### SHARING THE TREASURE

Experts advised the pair that, left to its own devices, the land would heal itself.

"If you leave things alone, they will recover" became the preserve's guiding philosophy. Ahrns cleared the area of trash and put in a small parking lot and trail. Access was limited to guided tours, setting in place the recovery of this natural gem.

As chief architect of that recovery, Ahrns soon linked conservation with education, welcoming both the public and school groups. Ahrns developed "Worthless Plant Tricks" to lure kids (and adults) into the wonder of botany.

"Who wants a sticker?" he asked, plucking the spiky seed from a ticktrefoil (also called "sticktight") plant and placing it on a child's shirt, then explaining about the tiny hooked hairs that cling so firmly. Ahrns pressed his finger against the spores on the underside of a powdery cloakfern, withdrawing his finger slowly to reveal the perfect image of the frond printed in white spores on his finger.

"Awesome!" was the usual reaction.

Some of those visiting schoolchildren now bring their children and even grandchildren to Westcave Preserve. Today, more than 15,000 visitors come each year — about 5,000 on school field trips — to learn about the preserve's unique geology and hydrology and its diverse flora and fauna. On weekends, nighttime star parties and four daily guided canyon tours regularly fill with families and adult visitors. Self-guided

**Above:** Near the grotto, visitors learn about Westcave's unique geology and hydrology and its diverse flora and fauna.

**Opposite:** Stairs lead down to the preserve's lush box canyon. The trespasser era has given way to guided tours, in line with Westcave's emphasis on conservation and education.





PHOTO © LARRY DITTO



PHOTO BY EARL NOTTINGHAM / TPWD

hiking is available all week (except Mondays) on the oak-juniper, mixed-grass savanna area known as the uplands.

Student reviews come in at five stars.

- “I learned that there are 25 kinds of dragonflies and damselflies,” wrote a first-grade girl from Lago Vista Elementary after her visit. “When damselflies land, they fold up their wings, but when dragonflies land, their wings are still out.”
- An older student was struck by how nature was an antidote to anxiety: “Not being in the city and not having to pay attention to all the cars just calmed me down a lot.”
- A third-grader, on seeing the grotto for the first time, threw open her arms and exclaimed: “This is 100 percent nature! I love it!”

Using outdoor classrooms to reconnect kids with nature is at the core of Westcave’s modern mission. In 2009, Molly Stevens, Westcave’s executive director, and board member Hayden Brooks led the development of the Children in Nature Collaborative of Austin, with 40 member nonprofits, health care professionals and community leaders. One of the most visible examples of a Children in Nature program is the Roadrunner Outdoor Adventure Bus, a repurposed school bus painted green and covered with wildlife images, available to transport children and families to nature-based activities.

“Research shows that kids who spend even a little bit of their day outside are healthier and happier and perform better academically,” Stevens says.

#### DISCOVERY CENTER

With its wider range of programs, Westcave adopted a new name: Westcave Outdoor Discovery Center. The \$1.7 million visitors center is rich with opportunities for visitors to experience the natural forces of water, sky and land around them. Dedicated in 2003, the 3,000-square-foot green-built structure serves as a living science laboratory, classroom and natural history museum, all in one. The building was funded in part by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and masterminded by Lee Walker, Westcave’s board chair for 28 years.

The center’s most remarkable feature is a solar observatory, a 28-foot calendar plate set into the floor’s precise north-south line, with tick marks for each day of the year.

On a sunny January day, Christina and Bill Nabors of Marble Falls waited until exactly 12:32.34 (mean local noon) for a spot of sunlight to enter the building through a small

opening in the ceiling and line up with the date they were there. This event repeats each sunny day at the same time (1:32.34 during daylight saving time) at a point further north or south along the calendar.

“It’s a simple way of seeing the seasons, kind of like a modern-day Stonehenge,” Nabors says. When the sun spot triggers the calendar’s photovoltaic strip, a few bars of the Beatles’ *Here Comes the Sun* plays, to their delight.

Many visitors search for their birthday along the calendar; it’s not uncommon to hear: “I want one just like it for my house.” Architect Robert Jackson’s inspiration was a solar calendar at a Rome basilica used by Pope Clement XI in the early 1700s to help predict the date for Easter.

A Fibonacci spiral is embedded in the floor of the center’s south room. This spiral occurs in plants and animals, like the curved horns of bighorn sheep, showing the beauty and purpose of math to help us understand the natural world.

The principal focus of Westcave has always been the outdoors, and more scientific research projects than ever before are underway. Current studies involve the golden-cheeked warbler, the Texas barberry plant, dragonflies, monarch butterflies, water quality, prairie restoration and the history of drought.

#### FULL CIRCLE

A familiar name leads these and other projects at the preserve. Remember the 2-year-old who came to Westcave with John and Brenda Ahrns in 1974? With two children of her own, Amber Ahrns Gosselin is back where she and brother Jeff grew up, now as Westcave’s conservation director. Her fond memories include the area’s superb swimming holes, sibling warfare with persimmon berries as ammunition, evenings with neighbors enjoying music around the Ahrns family firepit and going to sleep on summer nights to the sound of a box fan humming in the window.

Gosselin takes her inspiration, curiosity and work ethic from her father, who became one of the region’s most highly respected educators, naturalists and community organizers. He served Westcave for 37 years, retired in 2010 and died in 2014, having touched tens of thousands of lives.

“I want to carry on his legacy the best I can,” Gosselin says. “I believe the future of Westcave is steeped in its past and will look much like the last 40 years — protecting the land and educating the public. Luckily, we aren’t starting from scratch. Thanks, Dad!” ★

*Elaine Davenport is co-author of the 2016 book “Discovering Westcave.”*

PHOTO © TOM HAUSLER



**Opposite:** Scientific research projects underway at Westcave involve the endangered golden-cheeked warbler, prairie restoration and more.

**Below:** Westcave’s signature grotto is framed by a waterfall, ferns and travertine formations.