



## INTERPRETIVE GUIDE

# BIG BEND RANCH STATE PARK

PHOTO: E. DAN KLEPPER



Barton Warnock Visitor Center

## MORE INFORMATION

Barton Warnock Visitor Center, named for a prominent area botanist and educator, serves as the eastern entrance for Big Bend Ranch State Park. The center interprets 570 million years of geological history and the five biological landscapes of the Chihuahuan Desert and includes the exhibit, “*Una Tierra – One Land.*” A self-guided two-acre botanical garden allows visitors to walk among the characteristic plants of the Big Bend region.

**Big Bend Ranch State Park**  
**Presidio, TX**  
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[www.tpwd.texas.gov/bigbendbranch](http://www.tpwd.texas.gov/bigbendbranch)

**Barton Warnock Visitor Center**  
**Lajitas, TX**  
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[www.tpwd.texas.gov/bartonwarnock](http://www.tpwd.texas.gov/bartonwarnock)



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**EL DESPOBLADO MEANS “THE UNPOPULATED PLACE.” IT’S A NAME LONG USED TO DESCRIBE THE NORTHERN CHIHUAHUAN DESERT, INCLUDING THE BIG BEND REGION, WHICH MAY IMPLY A SENSE OF EMPTINESS. YET BIG BEND RANCH STATE PARK IS FAR FROM EMPTY. THE PARK OFFERS 500 SQUARE MILES OF UNRIVALED GEOLOGY, SPECTACULAR VISTAS AND NIGHT SKIES, DIVERSE PLANT AND ANIMAL LIFE, AND EVIDENCE OF OVER 10,000 YEARS OF HUMAN OCCUPATION.**



## WATER: THE DESERT’S WEALTH

Water, the desert’s life-giving wealth, softens and tames *el despoblado* to make it habitable, even welcoming. An important water source, the Rio Grande carves a verdant ribbon through the harsh grandeur of the Chihuahuan Desert along the park’s southern boundary. Other perennial watercourses and abundant springs provide unexpected oases in an otherwise dry environment.



Vegetation throughout the park exists in a moisture-dependent mosaic – sometimes lush, more often sparse. Native plants range from arid-adapted cacti to water-loving cottonwoods. Animals exhibit similar variety, from water-dependent beavers along the river to desert specialists like the black-throated sparrow.





## GEOLOGY: WINDOW INTO THE PAST

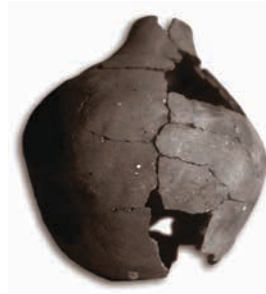
The geology of Big Bend Ranch State Park reminds us of profound changes over the past 600 million years of Earth's history – changes born of water and fire.

A deep ocean, the Ouachita Basin, covered the Big Bend and much of the southeastern United States some 570 million years ago, long before the age of dinosaurs. One may see remnants of the Ouachita Mountains in parts of Arkansas, Oklahoma and West Texas, including The Solitario at Big Bend Ranch State Park. The ancient Ouachitas formed through the tremendous forces of plate tectonics, which folded-up layered sedimentary rock from the ocean floor like a rug being pushed against a wall. Water continued to shape the region as a shallow inland sea spread from the Gulf of Mexico to Alaska. Erosion and uplift worked together to expose the limestone rock of this ancient sea floor in the Contrabando lowlands and the upended “flatirons” that form the rim of The Solitario.

The Solitario is a feature born of fire. Between 36 and 35 million years ago, magma from deep within the Earth pushed upward in three pulses to create a blister-like bulge nearly 10 miles across near the park's eastern boundary. Following erosion and a complex series of eruptions, the uplifted sedimentary rock and the underlying lava chamber collapsed to form the almost circular basin-like feature known today as the Solitario. Volcanism remained at work in the region. As you pass the dark peaks and mesas between Redford and Lajitas or along the Saucedo road, imagine glowing cone-like vents and gaping fissures that once spewed red-hot ash and molten rock. Lava from these eruptions eventually hardened into the rhyolite and basalt rock that form the Bofecillos Mountains, whose many cracks and fissures trap groundwater and account for the region's numerous springs – life-giving oases in the desert.



## HUMAN HISTORY



Diverse people have lived among the canyons, mountains and valleys of Big Bend Ranch State Park for centuries, typically near water sources. The

materials and structures they left behind tell stories of triumph and hardship in this sometimes hospitable but often relentless land.

Hundreds of prehistoric camps, cooking areas and rock art sites dot Big Bend Ranch. Grinding stones, bedrock mortars, flint tools and burned rock middens indicate that the hunter-gatherers living here used every natural resource available to survive in the demanding environment. The wide variety of prehistoric pictographs (rock paintings) and a few petroglyphs (rock etchings or carvings) document the amazing diversity of these peoples.



A variety of rock art styles are represented at the park.

A handful of traders and freighters such as Ben Leaton and Milton Faver were the first Anglo-Americans to settle the area in the mid-1800s. By the 1870s, small family ranches began to spring up, raising much of their own food and herding sheep and goats. Those who survived the drought of 1892 were soon thriving. Park visitors today can see remains of the Crawford-Smith, McGuirk, Reza and Madrid houses among others. Early ranchers supplemented their incomes in innovative ways. A wax factory and

◀ The “flatirons” form the Solitario rim.

several camps remain in Fresno and Contrabando Canyons, where thousands of pounds of wax were extracted from candelilla plants and sold as waterproofing for World War I army tents. Nearby, the Whit-Roy Mine produced flasks of mercury from cinnabar ore into the 1960s.

The Bogel brothers – Gus, Gallie, Graves and Edward – began consolidating small ranches in the 1910s until they amassed over 38,000 acres. The buildings and corrals of their headquarters, Saucita, endure today at the heart of Big Bend Ranch State Park where the area is now known as Saucedo. But subsistence was one thing, and profit another. The ranching boom ended when only two inches of rain fell in 1933. Precious water sources evaporated and desert grasslands withered. Hit hard by drought, the Bogels sold the ranch in 1934. Mannie and Edwin Fowlkes risked limited funds to purchase the Bogel property and additional land. Conditions were so dry once again during the 1950s that the Fowlkes fed their cattle ground sotol, an abundant desert succulent, to keep them alive.



Gus Bogel

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARFA PUBLIC LIBRARY



A load of native chino grass is delivered to Crawford Ranch in 1920 for livestock feed.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF THE BIG BEND

When Len G. “Tuffy” McCormick purchased the ranch in 1958, it was described as half the size of Rhode Island, and listed as one of the 15 largest in the United States. Subsequent owner Robert O. Anderson and his Diamond A Cattle Company partnered with Walter Mischer to increase the size of the ranch before selling the property to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in 1988.



Mountain bikers explore Fresno Canyon.

## ENJOY YOUR VISIT

Today, people visit Big Bend Ranch State Park for many reasons. Some come to glimpse the region's vibrant past. Others come to commune with nature. Over 300 species of birds alone have been recorded here, and other forms of wildlife abound – from lizards to javelina to mule deer. Many more come to test themselves. Camping, hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, river rafting and backcountry driving in this wild and remote land can push the limits of human endurance and fortitude. Still others come for the peace, quiet and solitude that Big Bend Ranch State Park can offer like no other place. Whatever your motivation, the park awaits you.