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HOPE FOR HONEY

The final pieces are falling into place to save Honey Creek, a Hill Country treasure.

by John H. Ostdick Photography by Sonja Sommerfeld

About 30 miles from San Antonio, Texas Parks and Wildlife staff, conservation groups and landowners are working their way through an intricate puzzle trying to protect a crucial 8,000-acre watershed, a robustly used state park and a critical natural area during a dizzying time of Hill Country growth.

“Saving” Honey Creek is a puzzle they’ve been working for decades. The process reaches back to 1974 when the state purchased almost 2,000 acres along the boundary of Comal and Kendall counties from private owners, and in 1983 opened Guadalupe River State Park. With adjacent purchases in 1985 and 1988, another nearly 2,300 acres became a state natural area. On Texas Highway 46 from New Braunfels these days, one billboard after another advertises new housing communities rising from previous ranch properties. As the pressure on water resources and wildlife has increased, conservation activity has risen to address some of the resulting challenges.

The latest significant step in addressing this threat involved a large “leap of faith” from sixth-generation neighbors.

HONEY CREEK HEADWATERS

Honey Creek Spring Ranch co-owner Joyce Moore’s voice climbs out of the bottom of a water tank she is working on before she does. “There is always more work on the property than I have time for,” she says, greeting me, “but it’s a labor of love.” Moments later, she is topside, climbing up into ranch game manager Ryan Bass’ truck for a drive to a fence line, where the terrain becomes too rough for the vehicle. Bass picks up a sturdy fallen tree limb and offers it as a walking stick. The journey to the ranch’s pristine underwater spring that forms the headwaters of Honey Creek is a bit of a rocky scramble. Moore shares the history of this property as they clamber along the rocky walk. Its topography and vegetation are typical of other Hill Country ranches, except for its most unique assets — a 20-mile cave system that drains the karst aquifer and a cliffside spring where Honey Creek becomes perennial (running year-round). “My son and nephew make up the sixth generation of our family on this land,” she explains. “Our ancestors emigrated from Germany in 1846 with Mainzer Adelsverein, the German immigration company that settled many towns in Central Texas, including New Braunfels and Fredericksburg.” After settling in the New Braunfels area for about 20 years, they relocated in 1867 to the western part of Comal County, which was wild at that time.

Moore’s family was one of three that applied for land grants under the Homestead Act on the same day in 1871. The current ranch is the combination of two original homesteads. “We’ve been here ever since,” Moore says. “I know no other real home. My sister [and co-owner], Cindy Martinez, and I were both reared here, working this land with our parents and grandparents, and learning to appreciate all that we have been blessed to steward for 150 years.” We hear gurgling water and head toward it. “This is the crown jewel right here, the spring that forms the headwaters of Honey Creek,” she says. Up on a rock rise, vividly clear water flows down into pools framed by cypress-lined banks. Robust lily pads float on the creek’s surface as if painted there. Moore settles down on a rock just to the side of the spring. “This is my absolute favorite spot on Earth,” she says. “This is where I recharge my batteries.” Moore notes the somewhat-diminished spring flow, a byproduct of ongoing drought conditions and increased water use throughout the area.

“This spring has never gone dry, but its ebb and flow are controlled by rainfall and recharge and by the number of wells being drilled in the surrounding area,” she says. “There are just too many ‘straws’ in the ground now. And that’s a big problem.” A few minutes later, she climbs a bit higher to a dark opening — an entrance to Honey Creek Cave, the longest mapped cavern system in Texas. Water that seeps into the limestone cave, a significant karst recharge feature for the Trinity Aquifer, becomes the headwaters of Honey Creek, an important tributary feeding the Guadalupe River. The Trinity Aquifer supplies drinking water to nearly 2 million Texans and the City of San Antonio. The cavern is also home to native and threatened species such as the Comal blind salamander and at least six invertebrates present in only a few Central Texas caves.

LEAP OF FAITH

Moore, who has worked as a wildlife biologist for nearly four decades, started researching conservation easements years ago as a possible way to protect her family legacy. “The decision to move forward was not taken lightly because it is a very final step,” she says, explaining that plans for a large-scale development on a property in the watershed above them sped the sisters’ conservation easement process along. Jeff Francell, director of land protection for the Texas chapter of the Nature Conservancy, started working with the sisters on the easement and funding process in 2019. A conservation easement places permanent restrictions on a piece of property, reflecting the special qualities of the protected acreage along with the landowner’s goals. The property may change hands in the future, but the easement is binding to the new owner. “It is hard to find a better example of why a conservation easement is a better tool to protect natural resources,” Francell explains. “The state doesn’t need to own that stream and that cave [to ensure the water’s purity], but it does need to see they are protected from development so that the remainder of Honey Creek is pristine in the state natural area as well.” The combined efforts of two government agencies — one state and one federal — and the Nature Conservancy to safeguard Honey Creek Spring Ranch came to fruition in February of this year. The project, funded by the Texas Farm and Ranch Lands Council in 2019, is one of the most recent properties benefiting from the protections of TPWD’s Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Program and the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. Funding for conservation easements is limited in Texas, which sometimes can make it a lengthy process. The Great American Outdoors Act, signed into law in August 2020, provides additional funds for states to use on land acquisitions for conservation. TPWD partners with organizations such as the Nature Conservancy and private citizens to make the best use of the money. “Without funding, there is no *there* there,” Francell says.

PURSUING A NEW DEAL

When nearby Honey Creek Ranch owners Ronnie and Terry Urbanczyk planned a 1,600-home development farther up the watershed from the origin point of the spring, neighboring landowners and environmental groups vehemently opposed it because of the runoff impact on Honey Creek water quality. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation and the Nature Conservancy approached the Urbanczyks to explore a deal to preserve the 515-acre property as state park land. Francell notes that unwinding a complicated development deal is a difficult process. “We’ve been working on the specifics of it for a year now,” he says. “I’m hopeful we can complete it this summer, but if it takes longer, we are willing to keep at it to protect Honey Creek.” A contract to supply water to the proposed development (signed in 2018) is the last significant complication in the negotiations, but parties are working to resolve it. Once they do, the future looks brighter for this natural wonder. “It eliminates the biggest threat to Honey Creek,” Francell says. “The dense development’s need for a wastewater facility would have brought some kind of discharge that would go into the karst and threaten water quality in the spring.” The dissolution of soluble rocks, principally limestone and dolomite, creates karst terrain. Karst areas are characterized by distinctive landforms (like springs, caves, sinkholes and other recharge features) and a unique hydrogeology that results in aquifers that are highly productive but extremely vulnerable to contamination. “The Honey Creek watershed is somewhere around 8,000 acres. If we include the Urbanczyk property to the Honey Creek Spring Ranch easement with the state natural area, maybe three-fifths of the watershed is protected,” Francell says. “And that certainly includes the most important three-fifths.” Moore says it is critical to preserve a legacy of conservation going forward. Her 21-year-old son, a college wildlife and range management major, and her 34-year-old nephew support the easement decision; their heirs will be tasked with keeping up the legacy. “There are some places that should just not be developed, and this is one of those places,” she says. “We don’t want to see Honey Creek become just another impaired water body, as so many waterways already have across Texas. We hope that other families have meaningful discussions about taking the necessary conservation steps with their properties before it’s too late.” While the land holdings surrounding pristine Honey Creek are unique, the pressures they face are surfacing across the state. More than 846,000 acres of rural Texas changed hands last year, an increase of 53 percent from 2020, according to the Texas Real Estate Research Center at Texas A&M University. Rising prices bring bigger financial hurdles for organizations trying to make conservations deals. “My sister and I thought long and hard and prayed about this,” Moore says. “We just could not live with the thought that our property could potentially be covered in houses. We could have sold it anytime for millions more than we received through the conservation easement agreement. However, that option was never discussed because the land was not and is not for sale. At the end of the day, it was a leap of faith.”

STATE PARK AND NATURAL AREA

On a clear, brisk Sunday morning on the other side of Moore’s property line, Mackenzie Brown and Charleen Moore, a Texas Master Naturalist husband-and-wife team, greet a group of visitors who have signed up for one of the limited-number state natural area walks. The couple banters back and forth, wielding com­plementary senses — his sharp hearing easily identifies birds by their songs, and her keen eyesight adeptly spots their location. They serve as co-historians and board members of the Friends of Guadalupe River/Honey Creek Inc., a group supporting the area’s operations and educational programs. Brown, a retired college professor, offers a mix of human and nature history during the leisurely 2-mile walk, pausing to note plant and organism highlights along the path. He explains why it is crucial to the natural area’s educational and research purposes to limit the number of its visitors. Moore brings up the rear, interjecting insights and answering individual questions about specific plants or birds. The walk passes through five different ecosystems. The live oak/post oak savannah region prompts a conjecture from Brown that the open grasses and scattered oak expanse are likely how land in this region looked before European inhabitation. Guadalupe River State Park is one of the most visited parks in the Texas system. The park’s star attraction is the river, which passes over four natural rapids and past immense bald cypress trees framing its banks along its three miles of park frontage. It provides ample opportunities for swimming, fishing, tubing and canoeing. At the main gate, passengers in six vehicles queue up to check into the park. Like Joyce Moore and all the Honey Creek neighbors, these nature tourists are an important part of the ongoing puzzle process, though they may not realize it. The conservation areas around them, which they may never set foot on, allow the robust use of the Guadalupe’s assets while assuring a hearty water source for the state. A win for water is a win for Texas.