

Preserving Paradise: Comal Conservation Fund Protects John Knox Ranch's Natural Legacy

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Earlier this year, Comal Conservation made its first disbursement from its Comal Land Conservation Fund. This disbursement went to the land trust Hill Country Conservancy in support of a conservation easement being placed on John Knox Ranch. The Comal Land Conservation Fund was created to preserve open spaces in the rapidly growing county, making the 300-acre John Knox Ranch an ideal recipient for support from this fund.

Hill Country Conservancy will steward the property's natural resources in perpetuity through the conservation easement; however, the landowner will retain ownership of the land. John Knox Ranch has been owned by Mission Presbytery for 62 years and has served as a faith camp for 61 of those years. With the conservation easement in place, Mission Presbytery will continue to have use of the land under the agreement that the land be kept in its natural state. While 41 acres are devoted to camp housing and other structures and could be further developed, the 259 acres of the ranch covered by the conservation easement are undeveloped and bursting with wildlife, plants, and pristine water resources. According to the ranch's cover letter to Comal Conservation, the property has 2000 feet of Blanco River footage and a "Grow Zone" area along the river is already in place to allow native plants to thrive undisturbed. The ranch also includes nearly a mile of Carpers Creek. Both waterways offer substantial and critical water resources. The Blue Hole Springs serve as the headwaters of Carpers Creek which is surrounded by a riparian woodland buffer. The Blue Hole provides habitat for many aquatic creatures such as the Blanco River salamander and ostracod.

In addition to preserving the ranch's water resources, it is also vital that the forest of Ashe juniper trees, which covers a large portion of the land, be preserved. The forested area of the ranch is heavily sloped, and the junipers anchor the ground and prevent erosion, especially during periods of heavy rainfall. The trees contribute to the ranch's water conservation by allowing rainwater to collect, be filtered, and infiltrate the soil. The older needles of the Ashe juniper trees are periodically shed and blanket the ground. As the foliage decomposes, it helps develop rich soil that retains water, increases infiltration, and sequesters carbon dioxide. Ashe juniper trees have also been identified as the nesting habitat for the endangered Golden-cheeked

Warbler, a songbird that is endemic to the Hill Country. Keeping this land undeveloped will ensure that the Golden-cheeked Warbler has a permanent nesting area.

John Knox Ranch is a nonprofit Presbyterian youth summer camp in Comal and Hays Counties. The organization has shown a deep commitment to environmental sustainability as part of its mission over the years. As shared in the John Knox Strategic Plan, the ranch incorporates several eco-friendly practices during its camps and year-round activities and intends to further its sustainability mission. It composts all food scraps from the dining hall kitchen using red wiggler worms, which reduces waste and naturally enriches the soil. A rainwater collection system has been implemented to conserve clean water, minimizing the use of drinking water for nonessential tasks such as flushing toilets. Additionally, the ranch plans to reestablish its environmental education program to teach campers and visitors about sustainability and stewardship of the earth. In line with this, the ranch is also working toward establishing a farm-to-table program that emphasizes local and sustainable food sourcing.

Along with Comal Conservation's disbursement to Hill Country Conservancy, many other organizations are assisting in preserving this beautiful piece of land in the Sentinel Peak Conservation Corridor. According to Kathy Miller, CEO of Hill Country Conservancy, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Trull Foundation, and the Texas Land Conservancy LLC have all pledged monetary support as well. Texas Parks and Wildlife has committed a donation through the Texas Farm and Ranchlands Conservation Program, and in an effort to protect the habitat of the endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler, Hays County will be supporting the easement through Proposition A Parks and Open Space Bond funds.

With the conservation easement in place, John Knox Ranch can continue its legacy of environmental stewardship and protect vital resources of the Hill Country. The area also provides infinite possibilities for public enjoyment, such as swimming, kayaking, rock climbing, fishing, and camping. As the owner of John Knox Ranch, Mission Presbytery intends to further its conservation mission and remains committed to best management practices. Through the Comal Land Conservation Fund, Comal Conservation has contributed to keeping this gem of land protected for generations to come.