

**NINE
DIVINE
HILL
COUNTRY
HIKES**

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY ERIC W. POHL



IN THE TEXAS HILL COUNTRY, the flat Gulf Coastal plains to the east and the Texas brush country to the south collide with the Balcones Escarpment—a conspicuous topographic demarcation that nearly bisects the state from Del Rio northwest past Waco. West of the escarpment, which roughly parallels Interstate 35 in Central Texas, a land of contrasts presents itself as soaring limestone bluffs, rugged hills, and steep canyons.

At first glance, the Hill Country’s rocky limestone terrain and scrubby cedar hills might suggest that it’s a parched landscape. But underground springs flow across the region from a honeycombed network of caverns, aquifers, and porous underground limestone known as karst. These springs culminate to form cool clear streams and scenic rivers.

Expecting the unexpected goes without saying as you explore this outdoor paradise. You may find yourself crossing a sun-soaked savanna one minute and descending into a cool, sheltered canyon with fern-draped walls the next. Or you might be navigating a shady river bottom surrounded by century-old cypress trees before clambering up a stair-stepped trail to find sweeping hilltop views.

Here, I’ve put together nine of my favorite Hill Country day hikes.

1

COLORADO BEND STATE PARK, 27 MILES WEST OF LAMPASAS

HIKE HIGHLIGHTS:
Scenic views,
river bottom,
canyon,
waterfall

TIP:
Make a
reservation for
a cave tour.

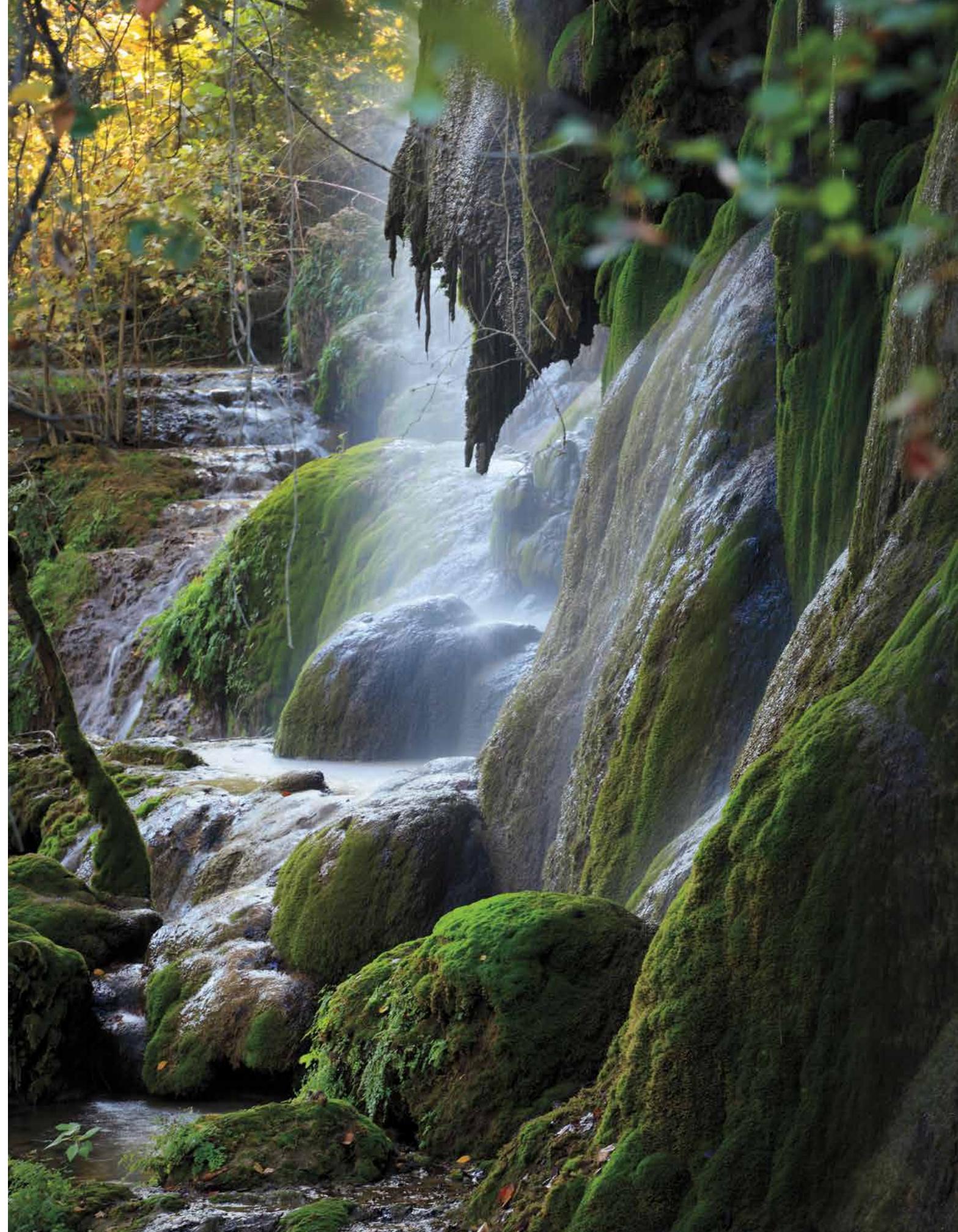
For a 4.4-mile, round-trip hike to see the park’s scenic views and famous falls, start out north on the Tie Slide Trail. This rocky path crosses through intervals of open grasslands, rocky outcroppings, and a medley of hardwoods and junipers with views of the Colorado River valley. Before the trail makes an acute turn, take the short side trip to the Tie Slide overlook for an impressive panorama of the river.

Continue south on the Tie Slide Trail for 0.7 miles until you dead-end into the Gorman Falls Trail, where you’ll head east.

Near the falls viewing area, the sound of cascading water intensifies as you make a modestly steep descent over a stretch of smooth limestone. As you round the last corner, Gorman Falls comes into view—a terraced, 70-foot waterfall tumbling from a limestone cliff over moss-covered travertine formations.

Just below the falls, head down to dip your feet in the Colorado River before taking the Gorman Falls Trail back to the parking area. www.tpwd.texas.gov

WHERE TO EAT: Grab a “Bad Burger” and a cold beer at Bad Bob’s Bend Store, an eclectic convenience store and music venue, less than four miles from the park. Call 325/628-3523; www.badbobsbendstore.com.





2

**MILTON REIMERS RANCH PARK,
30 MILES WEST OF AUSTIN**



HIKE HIGHLIGHTS:
Scenic views,
Pedernales River,
canyons, cliffs

TIP:

Use caution with your footing, as the canyon trail is very slippery.

This 2.2-mile, round-trip hike showcases the ecological contrasts of the Hill Country. Stepping down into Climbers Canyon, you're immersed in a subterranean wonderland where maidenhair and shield ferns thrive as cool spring water seeps from limestone walls.

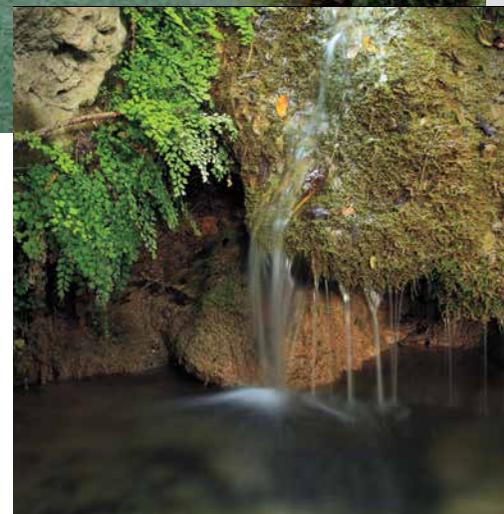
As you head down the trail, the canyon quickly deepens to more than 70 feet. To the left, a spring-fed stream flows into clear pools, over waterfalls, and through stands of bald cypress and sycamore trees. To the right, a small grotto echoes with the sounds of dripping water.

Near the canyon's end, go right to roam a wooded trail in the shadow of a steep limestone bluff overlooking the Pedernales River. Listen for the chirp of canyon wrens as you pass vines of mustang grapes and stands of Turk's caps and beautyberries.

Heading down this scenic stretch of river on the Upper River Trail, you'll follow emerald waters and navigate around boulders. Walk along the river to the vehicle access point on the beach, then follow the road up the hill, where you'll turn right to hike along a granite trail with interpretive displays on the area's geology and ecology. The trail features a couple of scenic overlooks with dramatic panoramas of the river bend and canyon.

<https://parks.traviscountytx.gov>

 **WHERE TO EAT:** Take the short trip to Verde's Mexican Parrilla, a casual grill with a full bar, a large patio, and an outdoor play space. **Call 512/263-0500;** www.verdesmexicanrr.com.



3

**LOST MAPLES STATE NATURAL AREA,
47 MILES SOUTHWEST OF KERRVILLE**



Although famous for its spectacular displays of fall color throughout the park, Lost Maples' scenic trails appeal to hikers year-round. This moderately challenging, 4.6-mile, round-trip hike traverses rugged hills, sinks into deep canyons, and skirts the Sabinal River and gentle streams.

Start from the East-West trailhead to pass through stands of Uvalde bigtooth maples. Go left at the fork, crossing Can Creek to begin a clockwise loop on the West Trail. (If you take the

East Trail, you'll find some of the park's best autumn color, as red oaks and Uvalde bigtooth maples turn a warm palette of reds, yellows, and oranges.) After Primitive Campsite D, you'll begin a steep ascent of 220 feet to a grassy plateau. Soak in 360-degree views of undulating wooded terrain before trekking down into Mystic Canyon, marked by spring-fed pools and stair-stepped ravines adorned with colorful maples. The trail eventually turns east to follow

Can Creek, which flows into several deep ponds fringed with cattails. From here, turn south on the East-West trail for an easy trek back to the trailhead.

www.tpwd.texas.gov

 **WHERE TO EAT:**

Head 15 miles south to Lost Maples Cafe in Utopia for comfort food like chicken-fried steak. Finish with a slice of fudge-pecan pie.

Call 830/966-2221; www.lostmaplescafe.com.



HIKE HIGHLIGHTS:
Scenic views,
canyons

TIP:

For smaller crowds when there is fall color, visit during the week.

4

**GARNER STATE PARK,
30 MILES NORTH OF UVALDE**



HIKE HIGHLIGHTS:
Scenic views,
historic
dance pavilion,
Frio River

TIP:
Bring a
flashlight to
explore the
park's cave.

This 3.4-mile, round-trip hike begins at the Old Entrance Road trail, which takes you southwest along the park's original paved entry road. Pause at the overlook for views of the Frio Canyon below. At the end of the trail, admire the original 1930s entrance gate with stonework hand-laid by workers in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

Next, take the Foshee Trail east, making a rocky ascent. Just before the one-mile mark, shift to the Bridges Trail. Along this path you'll reach Painted Rock, an overlook with views of the Frio River and Old Baldy, the park's

famous half-domed limestone hill.

From there, backtrack to head northwest on the Crystal Cave Trail. Duck inside this cool, 30-foot-deep cave and marvel at the veins of calcite running along the walls and ceiling.

At the trail's end, head back up the park road to finish where the route began at the Old Entrance Road trail. www.tpwd.texas.gov

 **WHERE TO EAT:** Load up on brisket tacos or tasty burgers at Hippy Chic's River Shack in Concan. Call 830/232-5459.

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**BALCONES CANYONLANDS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
21 MILES EAST OF MARBLE FALLS**



HIKE HIGHLIGHTS:
Scenic views

TIP:
Watch for
migrating
monarch
butterflies
in the fall.

For a four-mile, round-trip hike, begin on the Rimrock Trail. Stay right at the fork to follow a wooded path crossing Doeskin Branch, a clear creek that snakes through the refuge's western edge.

The trail soon opens into a grassy bottomland savanna before ascending a series of rocky switchbacks. Enjoy window views through a shady mix of ashe junipers and hardwoods as you rise 260 feet above the creek bottom.

Next, head south on the Shinoak Trail, which curves east and runs along the rim of an upland plateau. After 0.2 miles, hang right on the Indiangrass

Trail, which descends into a basin encompassed by stair-stepped slopes, then meets the Shinoak Trail again.

Head right, then take another right as you come to the Rimrock Trail, which follows a two-track ranch road. At the creek crossing, admire the waterfall before heading back to the parking area. www.fws.gov/refuge/balcones-canyonlands

 **WHERE TO EAT:** Head to Marble Falls for classic diner fare at the Blue Bonnet Cafe. Call 830/693-2344; www.bluebonnetcafe.net.

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**HILL COUNTRY STATE NATURAL AREA,
12 MILES SOUTHWEST OF BANDERA**



HIKE HIGHLIGHTS:
Scenic views

TIP:

The park provides a list of horseback guide providers.

This route is short on distance (2.3 miles, round-trip) but climbs nearly 400 feet.

Heading out from the park's Bar-O day-use parking area, take Trail 5A west as rolling panoramic valley views begin to open up. Next, the route dips into a shallow bottomland valley before climbing up a steep rocky saddle bisecting the park's two tallest peaks.

Head left at the Trail 5B junction to explore a loop around the summit of West Peak. A breathtaking Hill Country panorama unfolds as you trace the rim of the park's tallest peak: Layers of verdant slopes become mere silhouettes as they melt into the distance.

Heading back down, join up with Trail 5A again to pivot east on Trail 6, which traces along a ridge with broad views of the West Verde Creek valley. When you've soaked in the view, cross the equestrian parking area to meet Trail 7, which will intersect 5A, near the trailhead. www.tpwd.texas.gov

WHERE TO EAT: Check out the OST restaurant in Bandera for a mix of home-style favorites like chicken-fried steak, classic Tex-Mex, and all-day breakfast. Call 830/796-3836.



7

**ENCHANTED ROCK
STATE NATURAL AREA,
18 MILES NORTH OF
FREDERICKSBURG**

Watching the sunset from the summit of Enchanted Rock, a massive dome of sparkling pink granite that rises 425 feet above the surrounding countryside, should be a goal for every Texan.

Begin your four-mile, round-trip trek to the top of the dome and back by taking the Loop Trail northeast. This stretch of trail runs through a mix of cedar elm, mesquite, and live oak trees with views of Enchanted Rock and an adjacent crumbling granite hill called Turkey Peak.

As the trail curves north, it crosses the creek and heads into the saddle between two smaller boulder-strewn granite domes called Freshman

Mountain and Buzzards Roost. In about a third of a mile, head west on the Base Trail, then head south through Echo Canyon. Rest in the shade of oaks and massive boulders before hanging a left at the Summit Trail to clamber up the smooth granite path to the top of Enchanted Rock.

While exploring the expansive summit, take in the 360-degree views of distant hills and rolling terrain. www.tpwd.texas.gov

WHERE TO EAT: Enjoy German cuisine with local craft beers and wines at Otto's in Fredericksburg. Call 830/307-3336; www.ottosfbg.com.



HIKE HIGHLIGHTS:
Scenic views,
geologic
formations

TIP:

Camp overnight and marvel at the stars.

This family-friendly trek takes you on a 3.9-mile, round-trip hike starting with bird's-eye views of the park's rolling terrain and ending with a relaxing stroll along the Guadalupe River.

Start from the trailhead on the western end of the Cedar Sage Camping Area. Go left at the fork to head south on the Live Oak Trail, winding through areas of open savanna and woodlands.

Next, veer right on the Painted Bunting Trail to connect with the River Overlook Trail, a high route through a shady mix of oaks and ashe junipers. Pass through the camping area to reach the Cedar Sage River Trail.



HIKE HIGHLIGHTS:
Scenic views,
river relaxation

TIP:
Learn about
the park's natural
features at the
Discovery Center.

Along this forested footpath, take a short detour west on the Barred Owl Trail and stop at the scenic overlook to marvel at a panoramic river-bend view.

After reaching the river and heading south on the Bald Cypress Trail, a towering limestone cliff looms on the opposite bank. Dangle your feet in the cool, spring-fed waters of the Guadalupe River before retracing your steps to head back. www.tpwd.texas.gov

WHERE TO EAT: In nearby Bulverde, check out 46th St. Pizzeria for thin-crust pies, manicotti, and sandwiches. Call 830/980-4678; www.46stpizza.com.

9

PEDERNALES FALLS STATE PARK, 44 MILES WEST OF AUSTIN



HIKE HIGHLIGHTS:
Scenic views,
ponds, water-
falls, geologic
formations

TIP:
Watch for deer
and other wildlife
at the duck pond.

The Pedernales River cascades through a steep-walled canyon over 300-million-year-old limestone to create Pedernales Falls.

To see the falls close-up on a 7.8-mile, round-trip hike, head north on the South Loop Equestrian Trail from the Wolf Mountain Trail parking area. This route traces a high ridge through stands of twist-leaf yucca and sotol.

Next, cross the equestrian parking area and hit the North Loop Equestrian Trailhead. Then hang a left at the fork to skirt the duck pond through a mix of mesquite, oak, and Texas persimmon trees.

Go right at the next fork and again at the dead end. In about 650 feet, take a left at the junction that dips down to the Pedernales Falls Trail, then a right to follow the river down to the falls.

To return, retrace your steps or take the shorter 2.2-mile

trek back on Park Road 6026. www.tpwd.texas.gov

WHERE TO EAT: Pop over to Pecan Street Brewing in Johnson City for brick-oven pizza, burgers, and a selection of craft beers brewed on site. Call 830/868-2500; www.pecanstreetbrewing.com.

“Even as a child on family trips to state parks,” says contributor Eric W. Pohl, “I was always eager to learn what lay beyond the next bend.”

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GUADALUPE RIVER STATE PARK, 13 MILES WEST OF SPRING BRANCH