

## Foreword

I was born and raised in the Brazos River Canyonlands in Fisher County. My maternal great grandparents moved to Fisher County at least as early as 1891 and my grandparents soon followed. The men were teamsters initially, using horses and mules to build roads and to dig dirt, clay bottomed tanks. They built tanks and creeks or ravines to collect and hold water for the horses and longhorn cattle herded up the Brazos.

My Mother and her brothers and sisters were born and raised in Fisher County. One uncle, Hue, became a rancher who's place was located where Little Rough Creek enters the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos River near the county lines of Fisher, Kent and Scurry counties. Uncle Hue and Aunt Sally had no children and, as a boy, I enjoyed and loved them, their attention and their wild ranch.

For a few years before my Uncle Hue died of a heart attack on his ranch, working his cattle, I stayed at the ranch with them whenever I could. I may have worked some but mostly I just tagged along with funny, hardworking young men and women listening to their stories and playing in the wild outdoors with dogs and horses and chasing wildlife. I never was enamored with the cows like a real cowboy, but I did love riding horses, swimming and fishing in the river "holes," hunting raccoons with dogs, dodging rattlesnakes and trapping varmints (too many skunks and never catching a coyote).

For a year or so I dreamed of being a professional trapper, studying the Sears catalogue traps section, running through my hands the cool, steel traps with their hair triggers in the hardware store, saving to buy my own "line" of traps, learning from my uncle and his friends how to lay the traps, spread the scent, use baits, circle a dead calf with a ring of coyote traps, and remove my foot prints with limbs from cedar trees as brooms.

I left West Texas in 1957 to go to college and then on to the city. In 2007, I bought a ranch near my Uncle Hue's old place. About two sections in size, the ranch is identified by two large canyons. Impossible Canyon originates on the ranch and forms the West property line. Goldstens Canyon also originates on the ranch. These two major canyons create a web of ravines and springs through the range lands and the two canyons run a few miles into the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos River. I call the ranch Impossible Canyon Ranch.

This part of West Texas maintains the grandeur and sense of outdoor adventure it held for me over fifty years ago. With fewer people and cattle now than then and with important conservation efforts, the wildlife has returned with startling abundance. The area is one of very few places to support significant populations of large Whitetail and Mule Deer. Turkey, quail and dove thrive. Feral hogs, resembling the baby buffalos which once roamed this country, add to the fun and fare.

I have no cattle on the ranch nor plans for them, nor do I plan finally to become a trapper. I hope to nurture this beautiful piece of land and its wildlife in the spirit of Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic," recognizing Leopold's wisdom that we can never possess land, rather we must respect and love it.

This Web site reflects my ambitious desire to create a West Texas version of Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (1949). Please join me by sending your comments, stories and photographs of the Brazos River Canyonlands.

*Jim Watson, April 2008*

## Acknowledgments

The late Walter Prescott Webb, acclaimed historian at the University of Texas, and author of *The Great Plains* who first understood the unique nature of the American West.

Dan Flores, a worthy successor of Webb and author of *Caprock Canyonlands* which identified the unique nature of the Texas Canyonlands.

Folsom Bell, visionary of the Brazos River Canyonlands and architect of Impossible Canyon Ranch, Royston Ranch, Mountain View Ranch and Gyp Springs Ranch. With each ranch Folsom combines his vision of the land with his great enthusiasm to preserve and enhance a unique place of natural beauty and to nurture and conserve its habitat, water and wildlife in the spirit of Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic."

Scott Bourland, who became my able collaborator and tied all the ideas, art and photography together to create [brazosrivercanyonlands.com](http://brazosrivercanyonlands.com). He saw through his camera lenses both the beauty and wildness of this land. In placing the text, art, maps and photography on the Web site, he blended the colors, shapes and forms to transform the Web site and each of its pages into pieces of art.

Scott's technical abilities in designing the interface for the Web site and his working "under the hood" steered the site to unanticipated destinations. Through delightful coincidences, Scott's family roots are in this area of West Texas, he studied under Dan Flores as a student at Texas Tech University and he shares my enthusiasm and affection for this land.



## Surprising beauty

[brazosrivercanyonlands.com](http://brazosrivercanyonlands.com) tells a story about an area in West Texas of surprising beauty, filled with canyons and tablelands carved out by the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos River. Off the edge of the Texas High Plains, below the caprock, the canyons lie folded and deeply tucked away and the tablelands rise as mountain landmarks, all in the ranch lands of Kent, Scurry, Fisher and Stonewall counties. We call this area the Brazos River Canyonlands.

The Brazos River Canyonlands area continues today to be much as it was when the Apaches and then the Comanches made their camps and raised their teepees on the rims of the canyons and scouted from the tops of the tableland mountains.

Wildlife has returned in abundance. Large Whitetail and Mule deer, Rio Grande Turkey and Bobwhite Quail once again fill this unique habitat.

### Impossible canyons

Maze-like canyons and creeks in the Brazos River Canyonlands drop hundreds of feet from the rolling range lands to the valleys and the river below, unveiling colorful clays, shales, and sands in shades of red and terra cotta, grays and brilliant white gypsum. Deep evergreen Juniper trees rim the canyons and tablelands. Mesquites, Hackberries, and native grasses cover the rangelands. Motes of Shin Oaks compete in areas of sandy soil. Cottonwood and Pecan trees grow in the valleys and canyons.

The creeks and canyons bear descriptive names. Big Rough and Little Rough Creeks, Red Aleck Creek, Impossible Canyon and Near Impossible Canyon. They run from places like Cottonwood Flats and Mesquite Grove down to Longhorn Valley and on to the river, the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos.

These Canyonlands create a landscape of wild beauty, bountiful wildlife and few people, a place of great ranches, a proud mythical history, and end-of-the-road open spaces.

### Mountain landmarks

At the west end of these canyonlands lies Cooper Mountain, a landmark in Scurry and Kent counties. This tableland mesa, carved by the river, rises several hundred feet above the landscape and provided a strategic position for the Comanches in one of their last battles with the frontier soldiers in the 1870s.

As the Double Mountain Fork connects with the creeks and canyons and flows on east, into Fisher and Stonewall Counties, the river passes the largest of the tableland mountains, the Double Mountain.

At an elevation of 2,400 feet, the Double Mountain rises like a giant mesa over 600 feet above the range land and canyons below. "The mountain dominates the surrounding plain, expressing a stalwart grandeur. As a well-known Texas landmark, Double Mountain evokes the state's exploratory history."

### The Brazos River

The fork of the river continues east past the Double Mountain a few miles joining with the Salt Fork of the Brazos and forming the Brazos River. The Clear Fork enters the Brazos River further east near Fort Griffin and Albany in Shackelford County.

The Brazos continues on its way past Fort Belknap to Possum Kingdom Lake, which compounds the river in the Palo Pinto Mountains. Fort Griffin (1867) and Fort Belknap (1851) were built to protect the frontier from the Comanches.

Below Possum Kingdom, the river continues through high hills and tablelands carved by the Brazos and on to Lake Granbury and Lake Whitney.

John Graves in his classic book *Goodbye to a River* calls this portion of the river the "upper-middle Brazos." This small area of the American West became the cauldron for the frontier conflicts of Indians, homesteaders, cattlemen, buffalo hunters, and the U. S. Cavalry, all widely celebrated in books, movies, art, and poetry.

John Ford's and John Wayne's classic movie *The Searchers* and Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* (and the miniseries with Tommy Lee Jones and Robert Duval) tell stories about the Texas frontier along the Brazos. These books and movies have defined the American Southwest in the eyes of millions of readers and viewers all over the world.

## Texas Canyonlands

While this Web site focuses its special attention on the Brazos River and its table and canyonlands, the site also examines a larger area and larger story of which the Brazos is a part. This larger area encompasses the headwaters of the Red River and the Colorado River as well as the Brazos. This larger area of canyonlands and tablelands, about three hundred miles in length and fifty to one hundred miles in width, lies along the edge of the Texas High Plains (the Llano Estacado.) We call these the Texas Canyonlands.

At the north end of the Texas Canyonlands near Amarillo the Red River headwaters create the majestic Palo Duro and Tule Canyons. On to the south, the Brazos River headwaters wind out of Yellow House Draw near Lubbock and out of the Double Mountain Fork Canyon in Garza County, joining as the river enters the Brazos River Canyonlands in Kent County.

Further on south and west along the rim of the Texas High Plains the Colorado River headwaters begin at the “caprock” edges of Dawson and Borden counties, carving out Muchaque Valley and Gail Mountain.

This Texas Canyonlands area has recently been designated by the United States Geological Survey as two distinct Level IV ecoregion systems: Caprock Canyons, Badlands, and Breaks; and Flat Tablelands and Valleys.

This Web site relies heavily upon Dan Flores' ideas and information in his books *Caprock Canyonlands* and *Horizontal Yellow*. Through his work *Caprock Canyonlands*, Flores influenced the recognition of this unique land and its formal designation by the USGS as distinct ecoregions. Flores once owned a place in Yellowhouse Canyon on the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos.

## Color and form

Dan Flores also wrote about the Texas Canyonlands area and “its highly hued beauty,” in his August 2007 *Texas Monthly* article titled Land that I Love.

Flores describes the Texas Canyonlands as “a roar of color and form, a profusion of Canyonlands” where “the ground suddenly falls away in a series of trap doors to reveal hidden worlds, plunging as deep as one thousand feet below the flat, dull plain...”

In the foreword to Flores' and artist Amy Winton's enchanting book, *Canyon Visions: Photographs and Pastels of the Texas Plains*, Larry McMurtry wrote that the Texas Canyonlands possess “the power... to arouse in us a sense of the long, long movements of time—a sense, if you will, of the eternal.”

## Frontier artists

Artistic affection for the highly hued beauty of this wild landscape of canyons and big skies began with the Comanches and their haunting rock art, followed by Anglo artists, including Georgia O'Keeffe, Frank Reaugh, L. O. Griffith, and Josephine Oliver, who came early into this Texas frontier territory.

Reaugh followed the cowboys and their Longhorns up the Brazos, first in 1883 and again with Griffith in 1901. O'Keeffe came to the Palo Duro canyon area at the Red River headwaters first in 1913 as a young teacher in Amarillo, beginning her long, prolific artistic romance with the American Southwest

Focusing on shapes, textures, colors and light, O'Keeffe painted the Texas plains and canyons of Palo Duro and wrote about these Texas Canyonlands: “It is absurd how much I love this country.”

### Pastels and easels

After the frontier soldiers in the 1870s chased the Comanches from their strongholds in the Texas Canyonlands, cowboys and cattlemen moved their Longhorn herds west, replacing the Indians and the Buffalo herds, much as depicted by Larry McMurry's Lonesome Dove.

Trailing these cattlemen and their Longhorns, artists made their way to the frontier of West Texas. Frank Reaugh, who studied at the St. Louis Art Institute and the Academic Julian in Paris, came first up the Brazos in 1883. Through French and Dutch-influenced Impressionism, Reaugh's pastels captured the luminance of the light and the subtle grandeur of this epic landscape.

Using annual trips up the Brazos as a workshop, Reaugh took with him other painters including L. O. Griffith in the early 1900s. Reaugh and Griffith traveled up the Brazos for several weeks, likely in 1901, "with pastels and easels, a guitar, a Bible and a gun in a wagon decorated with deer horns and snake skins."

L. O. Griffith enjoyed a long, successful career as an Impressionist painter in New Orleans and Indiana. His works in oils and prints featured on this site, recently "rediscovered," further define the majesty of this landscape and its wide open spaces.

### Double Mountain

Josephine Oliver joined Reaugh's painting campaign in 1925 "to sketch Double Mountain. The impressive peak was among Reaugh's favorite sites. At an elevation of 2,400 feet, the mountain dominates the surrounding plain, expressing a stalwart grandeur. As a well-known Texas landmark, Double Mountain evokes the state's exploratory history." (Lawton and Vogel, 2007)

In 1932, Oliver again painted her impressionistic pastels of the Brazos Canyonlands, including the Double Mountain. This grand, beautiful view continues to be painted and photographed by today's artists.

#### *L. O. Griffith and Josephine Oliver-Travis*

Rebecca E. Lawton, Curator of Paintings and Sculptures at the Amon Carter Museum and Kevin Vogel, Director of Valley House Gallery have co-written two recent books on Griffith and Oliver: *Louis Oscar Griffith, Rediscovering a Texas Printmaker and Earth & Sky, the Pastels of Josephine Oliver-Travis (1908-1991)*.

These two books focus on recently located works of Griffith and Oliver from this period and greatly enlarge our knowledge of the two artists, of their teacher Frank Reaugh, and of a fascinating period, when artists first ventured into the Texas frontier.

### Cowboy photographers

Photographers also followed the cattlemen and cowboys to West Texas. Some of the cowboys themselves became photographers and recorded cowboy and ranch life with their images.

Ray Rector (1884–1933) grew up in the Brazos River Canyonlands in Fisher County as a cowboy and later worked on the famous XIT Ranch in the Texas High Plains. In 1902 he returned to the Brazos River area becoming a photographer in Stamford recording ranch scenes, including images from the SMS Ranch, portions of which were in Fisher and Stonewall counties. Rector called himself the "Cowboy Photographer." (*The Handbook of Texas*)

Texas A&M University published a collection of his photographs in an 1982 book *Cowboy Life on the Texas Plains*. The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas holds a large collection of his negatives and prints.

The Amon Carter Museum's major collection of photography emphasizes the American West and includes the photographs of Erwin E. Smith. The museum's Online Collection of Smith's images constitutes "some of the most important photographs of cowboy life on record."

### Today's artists

Today, the Canyonlands continue to stir the creativity of artists and photographers. Joining artists O'Keeffe, Reaugh, Griffith and Oliver, we now have Amy Winton and her pastels, and the artists of the Fisher County Art Society, who painted the mural shown above. Reminiscent of an Erwin E. Smith photograph, a lone cowboy resting on his mount overlooks the Brazos River Canyonlands. The mural commemorates the 2007 centennial of Rotan, Texas.

Photographers like Scott Bourland and Wyman Meinzer continue to explore this unique landscape and ecosystem. Bourland photographed many of the images on this Web site. Meinzer, with his wildlife photography, like the Comanche and their rock art, uniquely captures the beauty and spirit of this area's wildlife, which once again fills the Canyonlands.

The January 2008 issue of *Texas Parks and Wildlife* magazine contains Meinzer's wildlife photography of complexity and beauty. His 2001 work *Canyons of the Texas High Plains* brings that same talent to photography of the Canyonlands. This Web site displays three examples of Meinzer's wildlife photography, including a paisano smashing a collared lizard, shown below.

Bill Wittliff in 2007 published a book of his iconic photographs from the *Lonesome Dove* series, with a forward by Larry McMurtry and an introduction by Stephen Harrigan, describing what he calls "a third generation of *Lonesome Dove*." Wittliff's *Lonesome Dove* cowboy photographs recall the frontier photography of Rector and Smith.

Wittliff wrote the script and co-produced the *Lonesome Dove* television mini-series. McMurtry's *Comanche Moon*, was viewed in January 2008 as a mini-series, almost twenty years after the 1989 award-winning *Lonesome Dove*.

### Books and movies

In addition to stirring the creativity of painters and photographers, the Brazos River and its Canyonlands have captured the world's imagination through history, literature, poetry and movies.

Walter Prescott Webb produced his seminal treatise on the American West, *The Great Plains*, nurtured by his boyhood in Stephens County in the upper-middle Brazos River area.

Joining Webb, we have Dan Flores and his insightful, creative and influential books *Caprock Canyonlands* and *Horizontal Yellow*.

John Graves penned his beloved historic memoir *Goodbye to a River*, a paean to the beauty and history of the upper-middle Brazos River area.

Larry McMurtry gave us his Pulitzer Prize novel *Lonesome Dove*, the fictional tale based on Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving, historic cattleman who began their exploits at Fort Belknap on the Brazos and roamed all over the Canyonlands.

Winner of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize, Cormac McCarthy based an earlier novel *Blood Meridian* on historical characters and events, ending with the Judge and the kid at Ft. Griffin on the Clear Fork of the Brazos.

Poet Walter McDonald in *Rafting the Brazos* and other award-winning poetry captures the special attachment to the Canyonlands that he and many of us feel.

### *The Western*

Many of the classic western movies were based on the history of this small segment of the enormous American West, John Grave's "upper middle Brazos," where Comanches, frontier soldiers, settlers and cowmen clashed on the Texas frontier.

John Wayne's and John Ford's masterpiece movie, *The Searchers* (filmed in Monument Valley, maybe the ultimate canyonlands) tells of Comanche Indians kidnapping a "white" girl on the Texas Brazos River frontier, not an uncommon event. During the frontier period, Comanches captured Cynthia Ann Parker, who became the mother of the most famous Comanche Chief, Quanah Parker.

## Wildlife management

Today, the state of Texas preserves tens of thousands of acres of the Canyonlands, in three state parks: Palo Duro Canyon, Caprock Canyons and Copper Breaks. Both Palo Duro Canyon and Caprock Canyons parks were once part of the JA Ranch established by early cattleman Charles Goodnight. Many private Texas ranches preserve millions of acres, some huge and historic like the 165,000-acre Pitchfork Ranch and the 300,000-acre 6666 Ranch, some smaller like Impossible Canyon Ranch and Gyp Springs Ranch.

Where ranchers once hunted wolves, mountain lions, eagles, bears—and even the deer and the wild mustangs—to protect and make room for their cattle, ranchers began in the 1950s to reintroduce into the Canyonlands Whitetail and Mule Deer and Rio Grande Turkeys, once so prolific. These reintroductions kindled a wildlife renaissance. Once again, wildlife fills each of nature's niches throughout the parks and ranches of these Canyonlands.

Hunting this wildlife today produces significant income to ranchers, often more than their cattle. Many ranches are devoted to wildlife only.

## Resource conservation

Texas Parks and Wildlife, Texas A&M University, Texas Tech University and private conservation organizations like Quail Unlimited provide ranchers with education and resources to support the enhancement of their land and management of its wildlife. Federal government programs now provide significant economic incentives to ranchers aimed to protect and conserve the land and its water resources and improve wildlife habitat. Many ranchers now nurture the wildlife and its habitat as carefully as their cattle and hay fields.

With the support of the Natural Resource Conservation Service, ranchers have for years been clearing water-hungry Mesquites and Junipers that had filled in the grasslands and canyons after droughts and intense grazing. Ranchers frequently use controlled burns to clear their lands, much as the Comanches did before them. On some ranches, where the Mesquite and Juniper thickets have been cleared, new springs of fresh water are surfacing and water tables are rising.

## Native grasslands

Wildlife-friendly grasses, native bluestem, grama and buffalograss, once again take root throughout the Canyonlands, enriching the soil and conserving the rainfall. These grasses were the primary food source of the American buffalo and then the Longhorns.

Sumacs, algeritas, wild plums and hackberry and cottonwood trees hold their niches in creeks and draws, supporting the ecosystem and nurturing its wildlife.

Thanks to the farsighted leadership of these ranchers, universities and Texas and federal wildlife and conservation agencies, millions of acres of the Texas Canyonlands have returned to native, wild places where wildlife once again thrives in this rich habitat.

### *Llano Estacado*

The Llano Estacado ecoregion, translated as the “Staked Plain,” is an elevated plain surrounded by escarpments on three sides. The Texas Canyonlands lie along its three-hundred-mile eastern rim, forming the headwaters of the Red, Brazos and Colorado rivers.

The Pecos River on the western rim captured the headwater streams of rivers that once ran across the plain from the Rockies, isolating the Llano Estacado and truncating the drainage areas of the Red, Brazos, and Colorado rivers of Texas. As a result, the dry plain, cut off from a mountain surface water source and with little slope to induce runoff, has a very low drainage density. Instead, the smooth surface of the plain holds seasonal rainfall in myriads of small intermittent ponds or playas.

The Llano Estacado was once covered with shortgrass prairie, composed of buffalograss, blue and sideoats grama, and little bluestem. An estimated 7 million bison once populated the southern High Plains. They were the most prominent elements of a prairie ecosystem that no longer functions as an interdependent web of bison, black-tailed prairie dog, black-footed ferret, snake, ferruginous hawk, coyote, swift fox, deer, pronghorn, mountain lion, and gray wolf. (USGS Ecoregions of Texas, 2004)

## Whitetails and Muleys

Large, elegant Whitetail Deer have returned in abundance. Mule Deer enjoying the security of the steep canyons now range in significant numbers into the Brazos River Canyonlands as far east as the Double Mountain area. Rio Grande Turkeys once again strut and trot up and down all over the canyons.

At least a few Mountain Lions roam, challenging the Coyotes, Foxes, and Bobcats for the top of the food chain. Big-eared Jack Rabbits and meek Cottontails mingle with their predators. Badgers and Porcupines have returned. Horned Toads still thrive here along with the not-so-charming Diamond-Backed Rattlesnake.

## Exotic wildlife

Shaggy-haired black and brown feral hogs, many bearing menacing tusks and weighing hundreds of pounds, resembling small buffalo, root, roam and proliferate throughout the Canyonlands.

Hundreds of years ago, upon early European exploration of the Texas lands, the Spaniards and French first released hogs into the wild. Americans in the 1930s brought Russian boars into the country and released them for hunting. Escaped domestic hogs have readily adapted to become feral. All these hogs interbreed and birth in apparent wild abandon, creating an astonishing number of large and prolific exotic animals.

Despite no hunting restrictions on these wild hogs, the adaptable omnivores continue their wild population explosion providing hunters the whole year with great prey and great fare.

The exotic, elusive Barbary sheep, the Aoudad, also hide in the Canyonlands as far east and south as Impossible Canyon.

### *Kuby's*

Kuby's, a storied meat market in the heart of Dallas' upscale Park Cities, processes wild hogs into tender pork tenderloins and sausage, for hunters' tables across the Metroplex.

## Game birds

The Bobwhite Quail's strongest habitat in the United States today lies in the Brazos River Canyonlands. A new quail research center, the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch, funded by The Mellon Trust with the support of The Conservation Fund, opened this year on a 5,000 acre ranch in Fisher County, between the Clear Fork of the Brazos and the Double Mountain Fork. Dale Rollins, wildlife specialist extraordinaire, directs the ranch. Quail Unlimited awarded its 2007 prize for Quail habitat conservation to the 5,900-acre T-Diamond Ranch located in the Brazos River Canyonlands, near the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos River.

The *Texas Sportsman* magazine, February 2008 issue, contains an article by Tom Stephenson about "Quail Alley," a 150-mile wide corridor that coincides with the Texas Canyonlands ecosystems. Quail Alley is "one of the last strongholds of wild quail," and "an invite to hunt wild quail in Quail Alley is not to be missed... To decline such a summons... would be considered a mortal sin amongst the quail hierarchy."

Dove remain abundant. Hawks soar across the landscape, searching for quail, their favorite prey. The Roadrunner, the Paisano, chases the lizards and insects. With urbanization having changed Texas' natural wildlife habitats, the Canyonlands have become a fly-way for waterfowl, including Sandhill Cranes which migrate across the area, using the rivers and canyons as their sanctuaries.

## Sense of the eternal

Along with the artists, photographers and writers, many of us ordinary observers today continue to "love this country." This Web site celebrates the Texas Canyonlands and especially the Brazos River Canyonlands, an area unique in its proud mythic history, its end-of-the-road open spaces of big ranches and few people, once again filled with its historically rich wildlife.

Welcome to Scurry, Kent, Fisher and Stonewall counties, home of Impossible Canyon, Goldstens Canyon, Cooper Mountain, Longhorn Valley, Big Rough and Little Rough creeks, the Double Mountain, and the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos, where you, too, may fall in love with the Texas Canyonlands with their rough hewn "highly hued beauty," and "...sense, if you will, of the eternal."

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