



**Ben Masters at a ranch in Sisterdale, where he is involved in reintroducing bison, on August 22.  
Photograph by Andrea Mendoza**

# Ben Masters Is Very Worried About Texas Rivers

The celebrated documentarian's latest film is a love letter to our endangered waterways.



By Emily McCullar

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Ben Masters says he loves “hanging out with wild animals in cool places,” so he found a way to make that his job. One of Texas’s preeminent nature documentarians, the Amarillo native, who studied wildlife biology at Texas A&M University, made his feature-length directorial debut with 2019’s award-winning ***The River and the Wall***, in which he and some buddies traversed the Rio Grande from El Paso to the Gulf of Mexico. Three years later he released ***Deep in the Heart: A Texas Wildlife Story***, which adapted the *Planet Earth* approach to our state’s unique geography, complete with Matthew McConaughey delivering the words “Guadalupe bass” with a gravitas Sir David Attenborough could only dream of.

A sequel, ***Deep in the Heart 2: A Texas River Story***, narrated by Austin native ***Ethan Hawke***, arrived in theaters across the state September 25 and will be available to stream October 27. It depicts all of Texas’s major river basins, including ***the Rio Grande***. We spoke to Masters, who lives in Austin, in mid-August, as a controversy was raging about the federal government building a border wall in West Texas.

**Texas Monthly:** I'll admit, my favorite sequence in the new movie is the turkey-mating ritual. It's so funny. How do you capture something like that?

**Ben Masters:** We filmed the turkeys on the Canadian River just north of Amarillo. There's this beautiful valley that's carved by the Canadian, and it's flanked by these magnificent cottonwood forests. And there's a whole bunch of turkeys in there. That's my stomping grounds. I guided hunts in high school and college, so I know how to get close to turkeys. We identified a couple of different roosting areas where they go each night. As long as those turkeys aren't disturbed off their roost, they'll become very predictable in their movements. So every day for three weeks, we would go into these blinds next to the turkey roost, and they would fly down and hang out in this big, beautiful meadow right in front of us. And over time we were able to put together this absurdly ridiculous turkey-strut sequence that shows brotherly teamwork in swooning a potential mate.

**TM:** So how did you get into wildlife biology in the first place?

**BM:** Growing up in the Texas Panhandle, I was pretty much my great-grandfather's ranch dog; I just lived in his pickup truck bed. And my dad would always take me out of school to go fishing or hunting and open the ranch gates for him. I just loved to be outside. And then I trained horses through college, and I've always retained that childlike wonder of *How does that animal do this? Why is it doing that?* I just think the natural world is endlessly fascinating. I got into film as a way to understand it a little bit better. I didn't go to film school or anything, but I have really good team members who did, who know all of the technical specs. My true love is wildlife and conservation.

**TM:** This new film is a sequel. How did it come about?

**BM:** *Deep in the Heart: A Texas Wildlife Story* did so much better than we thought it would. It was seen by three times as many people in theaters as we had projected. I was like, "Damn, Texans love Texas." So we decided to make another one, and we're going to keep it going.

**TM:** How is this one different?

**BM:** This one is about Texas rivers. We identified species that are symbolic of rivers and the habitats that they nourish. Whenever we decide which wildlife behaviors to focus on, we want to make sure that there's entertainment value—*oohs* and *aahs* and seeing something that nobody's ever seen before. So we picked mountain lions, which are the coolest critters in Texas—they are endlessly fascinating and an absolute blast to film.

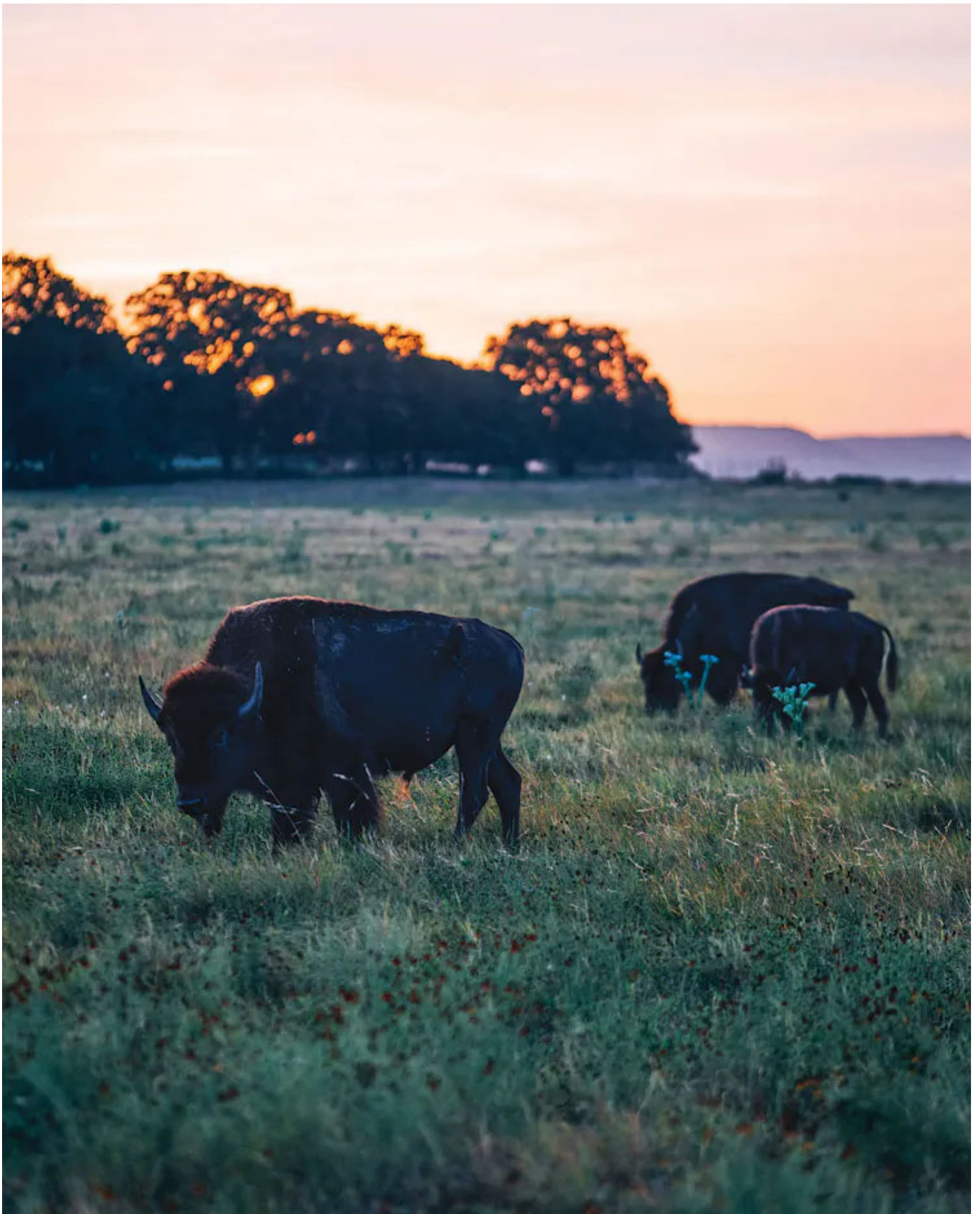
I wanted to open the film with the mountain lion depicted in **Pecos rock art** because I think it's important to recognize that humanity's history in this state stretches back at least fifteen thousand years. Complex civilizations have existed along Texas rivers for at least eight thousand years. Cultures have depended on rivers for hundreds of human generations. And taking care of our rivers is something that we need to get better at doing, because a lot of our rivers are really hurting.

**TM:** What are the most pressing issues regarding Texas rivers?

**BM:** We've got to start managing groundwater and surface water as the same water, because it [often] is the same water, but legally it's two separate water entities. Our rivers depend on groundwater flows. But our groundwater isn't being managed sustainably. If the groundwater is depleted to such an extent that the water table falls below the historic spring line, those springs die, and then they don't go into our creeks, they don't go into our rivers. We're seeing that happen across the state. The good news is, if we do manage our springs and our water tables to stay connected to the rivers, we have rivers. That's a choice that we should totally make. Do you want to have rivers or do you not want to have rivers? I choose rivers.



Masters in Sisterdale.  
Photograph by Andrea Mendoza



Bison at sunrise.

Photograph by Andrea Mendoza

**TM:** If you're doing a film about Texas rivers, you would have to include something about how dangerous they are. Can you tell me more about the sequence on the 2025 Guadalupe flood?

**BM:** When the flood happened, we were trying to film storms for the movie, and we realized really fast that we needed to put our cameras down and start helping people. That turned a two- or three-day shoot into a multimonth endeavor where all of our team was out there trying to help people get their lives back together and picking up trash and helping with the search and rescue efforts and just volunteering wherever we could.

The experience left a profound mark on all of us. And we decided that if we were making a Texas rivers movie, it would be dishonest to make it seem like Texas rivers are all butterflies and rainbows—they have a long history of rising beyond their banks and taking the lives of people. We've had floods for [decades] that have taken out towns and killed people here. We felt like it was necessary to incorporate that into the movie and to try to do so in a way that was respectful to the survivors and to the families. We spent a lot of time on that sequence trying to get it right.

**TM:** It's still unfathomable.

**BM:** The Medina flood in 1978 wrecked that community. But over time, people forget. It was important to us that the film acknowledge that healthy rivers have flood mitigation. You have a river bottom that has a healthy riparian forest on either side within the floodplain. If a big flood comes through, it's going to slow down because it's hitting all of those trees, it's going to capture sediment. It's going to be good for that river.

But if you have a river where all of the vegetation has been removed and that water is gushing as fast as gravity will take it, it increases the velocity and the intensity of the floods. That's a message that I really wanted to have in the film—that managing our river bottoms to have healthy river habitats benefits wildlife, but we are also the beneficiaries because those are more resilient rivers.

My greatest hope is that *Deep in the Heart 2* can be used as a tool to inform policymakers and water managers and the general public about the opportunity that we have to better manage our rivers. Nobody wants rivers and springs and creeks to go dry.

**TM:** Maybe it's just how I was raised, but I feel like to be Texan is to worry about water. I always keep an eye on the Doppler and check the Lower Colorado River Authority Hydromet data so I can look at the rainfall gauges and watch the river levels after a storm. It just seems like we should all be invested.

**BM:** An analogy that I like to use, and I think that this speaks to the business-minded economists in the state, is that our aquifers are the predictable investments that will generate revenue as springs. If we treat them like an investment account, and we don't spend the principal, we can live off of the interest and be wealthy forever. The most rookie thing that you could do if you were a money manager is burn through your principal. And the most rookie thing that you could do as a water manager is burn through your aquifers. Once that water table drops below the spring line, it [might be] gone. And that's what we're seeing across the state. And nobody wins.

**TM:** Do you have a favorite river in Texas?

**BM:** My favorite stretch of river in the whole world is the Rio Grande through West Texas. It's so rugged. There's [almost] no roads. It's like stepping back in time. And I'm so glad that I got to spend dozens of glorious river trips in Big Bend and in the lower canyons before it turned into this place that is now defined by controversy. The idea of that stuff **getting bulldozed**—for me, it's like somebody bulldozing my church.

**TM:** There's a Big Bend sequence in the film. You told me earlier that you were debating whether or not to mention **the border wall**, and that you wished you had gone with your gut and kept that in. Do you have any comment on what's happening there?

**BM:** I think that a border wall in Big Bend is the pinnacle of federal government waste and is unbelievably offensive to millions of Texans and is one of the stupidest political moves that the Republican Party can do, because it's turning millions of moderate people against them. I would love to see strong opposition from the governor and all of our representatives in keeping the federal government from destroying our public lands and blocking access to our river.

Is that direct enough?

**TM:** That's perfect.

*This interview was edited for clarity and length.*

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