

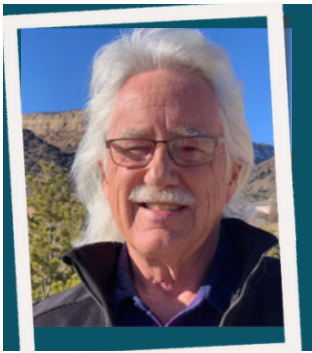


## 2026 HILL COUNTRY LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

# HEART OF THE HILL COUNTRY

### HONORING HILL COUNTRY CONSERVATION CHAMPIONS

The Heart of The Hill Country Award was created by HCA in 2019 to recognize and thank our region's greatest natural resource champions. This year's honorees, Ira Yates and Wayne Gosnell, have both supported and led impactful conservation and environmental education organizations in their communities. Ira and Wayne will be presented with a beautiful award, designed and crafted by Hill Country artist J.J. Priour using Cordova limestone and glass.



#### **Ira Yates: Founder and President - Friends of the Pecos River**

Ira Yates is the founder and president of the Friends of the Pecos River, a founding board member of the Hill Country Alliance, and a decades-long driver of conservation across Texas. Ira is deeply rooted in Iraan, the Pecos County community and the Pecos River where he is a multi-generational landowner. Raised on a cattle and goat ranch southwest of Austin now known as Circle C Ranch, Ira has experienced Austin's urban expansion firsthand. He placed a conservation easement on his family ranch in 1998 and was an active member of dozens of Austin and Travis County organizations since 1978, beginning with the Austin and Travis County Humane Society and as a founding member of the Texas Bicycle Coalition, now Bike Texas. Throughout his life, Ira has held leadership positions with the City of Austin Environmental Board, the Barton Springs Edwards Aquifer Task Force - writing the first watershed ordinances, League of Conservation Voters, Bamberger Ranch, and Commission Shift. His vision, passion, and love for land and water in the Hill Country is infectious, and he is equally comfortable swimming with conservation advocates in a spring-fed creek as he is mending fences or pushing for an environmental and economic survival plan for the Texas Hill Country



#### **Wayne Gosnell: Founder and President - Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky**

Wayne Gosnell is an Aggie with a Ph.D. from UT-Austin. He is a retired Army colonel who fell in love with the Texas Hill Country and its night skies many decades ago when he and his wife, Martha, lived in Austin. They bought land on the river in Blanco in 1997 and have been Hill Country residents ever since. Over the following decades, Wayne worked to educate local officials and businesses, and even HCA's own staff, about night skies preservation. In 2018, he and his neighbors founded the Blanco County Friends of the Night Sky to keep the stars at night big and bright. Since then, Wayne has continued to be one of the region's preeminent leaders in night sky preservation. He was a main author and driving force behind Blanco's International Dark Sky Community application, which led to the city's designation in 2022. Beyond his adopted hometown, he has become a vital mentor and catalyst across the broader Hill Country, generously sharing his expertise and passion to help neighboring groups and communities protect their own nocturnal landscapes. From the riverbanks of the Blanco to the hearts of a community he helped awaken to the cosmos, Wayne's unwavering stewardship reminds us that the brightest futures are built under the darkest skies.



#### **Support the Hill Country Alliance!**

Inspired by the stories, the people, and the information you gathered today? Donate to support our work! Simply **scan the QR code or go to [bit.ly/Summit26Donations](https://bit.ly/Summit26Donations)** to make your donation. Every dollar you give goes directly to conservation efforts for the lands, waters, communities, and night skies of our special part of Texas.