

Nature

Eye on

TEXAS
PARKS &
WILDLIFE

FALL 2008 A publication of the Wildlife Division — Getting Texans Involved

Grasslands: Treasures Lost and (re)Found

Much of Texas was once described as grasslands, from our noted prairie regions like the Blackland Prairies and the Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes, to those not so obviously named like the Edwards Plateau, much of which would be prairie interspersed with canyons, or the Trans-Pecos, where grasslands are common at lower elevations. These prairies quickly became the “bread basket of the world” as Europeans settled the land and put it to plow or pasture. The mosaic of grasses and wildflowers soon became a monoculture of crops or became degraded by an invasion of opportunistic vegetation. Prairies are now recognized as among the ecosystems causing the most concern among naturalists in Texas today. The Texas Wildlife Action Plan, completed in 2006, shows prairies as two of the three high-priority ecoregions for the state and three of the four secondary-priority regions.

Much of the concern has developed as we have watched the rapid transition associated with the encroachment of urban landscapes into the colorful palette that was once our native prairies. Grasslands are more than just waving grasses or colorful mosaics—they are home to a very diverse, specialized collection of flora and fauna. Diverse species of birds, mammals, insects and plants are imperiled as habitat becomes cities, crops, etc.

This volume of *Eye on Nature* focuses on grasslands, and what is being done to understand, restore and conserve these unique ecosystems. In this volume you will find an article that describes one of the many state parks on our prairies, an article about some of the help available to landowners wanting to conserve grassland and other habitat, an article about volunteer monitoring opportunities for wildlife of concern in the grasslands, and other interesting features.

A landscape approach to upland bird conservation

The Western Navarro Bobwhite Recovery Initiative – WNBRI

By Jay Whiteside

Until the late 1970s or early 1980s, the sound of “Bob-bob-whiiiiite” was as much of a springtime passage in Navarro County as the annual bloom of wildflowers. During this time, the bobwhite whistles slowly began to fade. By the late 1980s they had become all but silent. Today, except in small isolated habitat patches in the western portion of the county, the springtime silence continues. If you’re lucky and happen to be in the right place at the right time, you just might hear one, but it is almost like finding a needle in a haystack. When you do hear one, you are so surprised that you second-guess yourself.

What happened to the bobwhites? Many farmers and ranchers want to place the blame solely on the invasion of the red imported fire ant, or increased abundance of predators due to reduced hunting and trapping that resulted from the collapse of the fur market. However, Navarro County is not alone. Over the past 30 to 40 years, bobwhite populations have dramatically declined range-wide. This includes portions of their range where red imported fire ants have not invaded and predator abundance is relatively low compared to that of Navarro County. Additionally, there are portions of Texas where bobwhites are thriving despite the presence of red imported fire ants and/or very high predator abundance. If it is not the invasion of the red imported fire ant, or increased predator abundance, what could it be? Most quail experts agree on one thing; the range-wide

[Continued on page 2]



**Native Grassland
Restoration Programs,
Page 3**

**Lake Arrowhead State Park,
Page 4**

**Texas Nature Tracking
on the Prairie,
Page 4**

**Habitips,
Page 5**

**Endangered Birds of
the Coastal Prairies –
Vanishing or Recovering?,
Page 6**

**The Back Porch,
Page 8**

Executive Director

Carter P. Smith

Editor, *Eye on Nature*

Mark Klym

COMMISSION

Peter M. Holt, Chairman San Antonio
T. Dan Friedkin, Vice-Chairman Houston

Mark E. Bivins Amarillo

J. Robert Brown El Paso

Ralph H. Duggins Fort Worth

Antonio Falcon, M.D. Rio Grande City

Karen J. Hixon San Antonio

Margaret Martin Boerne

John D. Parker Lufkin

Lee M. Bass, Chairman-Emeritus Fort Worth

TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT MISSION STATEMENT

"To manage and conserve the natural and cultural resources of Texas and to provide hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation opportunities for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations."

You may view this publication through the TPWD Web site. Please notify us by completing a request form at www.tpwd.state.tx.us/enews/. Once verified, we will notify you by e-mail when a new version of your selected newsletter is posted at www.tpwd.state.tx.us/newsletters/. Your name and address will be removed from the printed version mail distribution list.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

All inquiries: Texas Parks and Wildlife Department,
4200 Smith School Rd., Austin, TX 78744,
telephone (800) 792-1112 toll free,
or (512) 389-4800 or visit our Web site for
detailed information about TPWD programs:

www.tpwd.state.tx.us



© 2008 Texas Parks and Wildlife Department PWD BR W7000-255 (9/08)

In accordance with Texas State Depository Law, this publication is available at the Texas State Publications Clearinghouse and/or Texas Depository Libraries.

TPWD receives federal assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other federal agencies. TPWD is therefore subject to Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, in addition to state anti-discrimination laws. TPWD will comply with state and federal laws prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, national origin, age, sex or disability. If you believe that you have been discriminated against in any TPWD program, activity or event, you may contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Federal Assistance, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Mail Stop: MBSP-4020, Arlington, VA 22203, Attention: Civil Rights Coordinator for Public Access.

ADDRESS CHANGES: For address changes, or to be added or removed from our mailing list, please contact mark.klym@tpwd.state.tx.us. We look forward to providing the information you need to understand, appreciate, manage and conserve the natural resources of Texas for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

[A landscape approach to upland bird conservation, continued from page 1]

bobwhite decline over the past 30 to 40 years is a result of habitat loss and fragmentation. This theory is reinforced by similar population declines in other bird species, most notably the loggerhead shrike and Eastern meadowlark, which utilize much of the same habitat components as the bobwhite.

Since habitat decline and fragmentation is the driving force behind the rangewide bobwhite decline, what is being done to reverse this alarming trend? In 2001, a group of notable quail scientists, known as the Southeastern Quail Study Group, developed a comprehensive rangewide conservation plan. This plan, commonly known as the *Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative*, set specific habitat goals and objectives for various ecological regions (Bird Conservation Regions BCRs) throughout the range of the bobwhite aimed at recovering population densities to those in 1980. The development of the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative has set the foundation for bobwhite conservation, and today many states, including Texas (Texas Quail Initiative – TQI), have developed their own step-down versions of this plan to address more specific challenges and needs within their respective boundaries.

The Birth of WNBRI

In 2006, Gary Price, a landowner in the Blooming Grove area of Navarro County, asked, "What can be done to bring the quail populations back to what they used to be?" As a wildlife biologist, my obvious answer was, "We need to restore and/or improve habitat for quail over a very large geographic area and focus these efforts around areas where we know quail persist." Our discussion continued, and after a while Gary indicated that he thought the time was right to deliver the habitat conservation message and begin forming a landowner cooperative around his property, where we knew quail persisted, and possibly beyond. I decided that the time was right to move forward with the landowner cooperative idea. Over the next few months I wrote a strategic plan, now known as the Western Navarro Bobwhite Recovery Initiative (WNBRI), to present to this group of landowners.

The WNBRI is a landscape-level approach to upland bird conservation that sets specific habitat enhancement goals for a particular geographic area and outlines what needs to be done to achieve those goals. Because habitat loss and fragmentation is the primary factor limiting bobwhite populations in western Navarro County, the number one goal of the WNBRI is to create contiguous useable habitat for bobwhite over an area of approximately 30,000 acres. The theory behind this concept is that if suitable habitat conditions can be restored, improved, and maintained over an area this large, source populations within the area will have the ability to grow and expand into uncultivated habitat over time, creating a more viable population.

To be able to reach this lofty 30,000-acre goal, it would be necessary to create a mechanism that could pool landowners together, educate them, keep them informed, and keep them engaged in habitat management. The number two goal of the initiative was to develop the Western Navarro Bobwhite Recovery Cooperative (WNBRC).

Achieving habitat conservation, particularly native grassland restoration and range improvement, over such a large area is not an easy task, and likely impossible without cooperation and partnerships. The third goal of the WNBRI was to develop partnerships with government organizations and non-profit conservation groups. Developing partnerships with these groups provides the necessary knowledge and resources to achieve the scope of work desired.

WNBRI Moving Forward

The first step in getting the WNBRI wheels in motion was to pitch the idea to a select group of landowners within the initiative area. In June 2006, 15 landowners attended a meeting at the USACOE Navarro Mills Lake Project Office, where the idea of the WNBRI was presented. A majority of the group decided that the plan was worth pursuing, and the Western Navarro Bobwhite Recovery Cooperative was formed. Since that meeting, the WNBRC has grown to 32 active members, managing properties totalling nearly 30,000 acres.

Once the WNBRC was formed and officers elected, the first item of business was to hold a landowner workshop to introduce the WNBRI plan to a larger group of landowners, educate them on bobwhite ecology and management, and enroll new members into the WNBRC. On Sept. 23, 2007 the landowner workshop, titled

[Continued on page 3]



[A landscape approach to upland bird conservation, continued from page 2]

Native grassland restoration programs

By Chuck Kowaleski (TPWD) and Susan Baggett (NRCS)

One hundred and fifty years ago much of Texas west of I-45 was a sea of native grass that fed foraging herds of bison, antelope, elk and deer and provided habitat for hundreds of other grassland dependent species of wildlife. Grass health was maintained by the nomadic nature of the large herds of herbivores whose constant movement prevented local overgrazing and periodic lightning or Native American induced fires. Much has changed since that time. The advent of property ownership and fencing has resulted in the confinement of herbivores to limited areas and increased pressure on desirable native plant species. Human settlement also brought with it the elimination of fire. As native species were eliminated, hardier non-native species were introduced that were better suited to the higher grazing pressures. Herbicides, fertilizers and cultivation techniques came along with the introduced forages and helped to maximize production of the monoculture plantings. In the process, populations of many wildlife species that needed native prairie habitats declined drastically as their habitat was degraded or eliminated.

Many Texans are now starting to realize the value of native grasslands both for plant and wildlife diversity and for low input, high quality forage production. But reverting to native plants can be a time consuming and expensive task. It requires a high degree of specialized knowledge to be successful. Fortunately, there are a number of sources of technical expertise and funding available to landowners through current USDA and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) programs.

Landowners that are lucky enough to still have native rangeland, even though it may be in poor health due to past management mistakes or brush encroachment, may wish to take advantage of two USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs, CTA and EQIP. CTA stands for Conservation Technical Assistance and, as the name implies, provides free technical assistance by trained NRCS conservationists to interested landowners. The Grazing Land Conservation Initiative (GLCI) is part of this program and provides over \$2 million annually in technical assistance funding targeted at conservation on range and pasture land. EQIP stands for the Environmental Quality Incentive Program and provides cost share for a wide variety of practices, including

[Continued on page 5]

Bringing Back the Bobwhite, was held at the Blooming Grove Elementary School Cafeteria. The workshop featured presenters from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), Natural Resources Conservation Service, Audubon Texas, and a private Range and Wildlife Management Consultant. A total of 30 landowners attended the workshop, and 12 new members enrolled in the WNBRC.

The next order of business was to build partnerships within the wildlife conservation community. Two key partnerships were formed prior to the landowner workshop; one with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the other with Audubon Texas. Other key partnerships that developed following the workshop were with the Trinity Basin Conservation Foundation, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Navarro Mills Lake Project.

Once the two major elements of the WNBRI were in place, the formation of the WNBRC and partnerships with government and non government organizations, the next step was putting habitat on the ground. One of the key elements for habitat improvement would be native grassland restoration and range improvement. Audubon Texas made a significant contribution by donating \$40,000 worth of native grass and forb seed — enough to plant roughly 1,000 acres — to the WNBRC to provide to their members free of charge. The donated native seed mixture has been used to plant 425 acres, with about 500 acres scheduled for planting during spring 2009.

Another key contribution came from the Trinity Basin Conservation Foundation (TBCF). In spring 2008, TBCF was awarded a Wildlife Diversity Grant from TPWD to purchase essential equipment for the WNBRC to use in native grassland restoration and range enhancement projects. The equipment that will be donated to the WNBRC includes a no-till seed drill, prescribed burning equipment and trailer for transporting, and herbicide for site preparation.

Summary

The WNBRI is still in its infancy. A lot of work still lies ahead for it to achieve its ambitious goals. However, in a little over two years it has made some enormous strides, and the future looks promising. No one can predict what the future holds for bobwhites and other grassland wildlife in Navarro County. However, we can say for certain that the recovery of the bobwhite and the host of other species that share their habitat will become a distant memory if aggressive habitat conservation efforts, such as the WNBRI, are not undertaken.

Jay Whiteside is a Technical Guidance Biologist providing assistance to landowners in Navarro and other North Central Texas counties.

Lake Arrowhead State Park

Built by the city of Wichita Falls as a primary water source, Lake Arrowhead lies approximately 15 miles southeast of the city in the North Central Plains of Texas. The lake covers roughly 16,400 surface acres and is bordered by 106 miles of shoreline. Lake Arrowhead State Park, on the northwest portion of the lake, boasts 524 acres. Surrounding the lake, the land is mostly semi-arid, gently rolling prairie. Cutting through the northern portion of the park is Sloop Creek, a tributary of the Little Wichita River.

Located on the eastern edge of the Rolling Plains, the park is characterized by undulating grasslands which include little bluestem, Indian grass and sideoats grama. These grasslands have been invaded by mesquite and other species such as cottonwood, hackberry and wild plum. An abundance of native wildflowers with a variety of colors may be seen. Indian paintbrushes, bluebonnets, primroses, sunflowers and daisies are among the plant life found within the park boundaries.

In this Prairie biome, diversity abounds with five ecological expanses encompassing the park. This biome supports numerous species, including an assortment of mammals, birds, reptiles, insects and fish. White-tailed deer, armadillo, coyote, skunk, rabbit, black-

tailed prairie dog and fox are some of the mammalian population. The area is a major fly-way for the monarch butterfly and a cross-over for migrating birds such as the pelicans, geese, ducks, hummingbirds, bald eagle, hawks and the sandhill crane. The banded water snake, grass snake, turtles, horned lizards, legless lizards, as well as water moccasin and rattlesnakes, are often found.

Lake Arrowhead hosts a black-tailed prairie dog town. The prairie dog entertains watchers and plays an important role in the park's biome. Also featured at the park are approximately five miles of hiking trails, a 300-acre equestrian area, 71 campsites, 44 shaded picnic tables and an 18-hole disc (Frisbee) golf course. Nesting boxes are provided for eastern bluebird along the Bluebird Trail.

The lake teems with game fish, including bass, bluegill, carp, catfish and crappie. Almost every weekend, a fishing tournament takes place. The park offers the "Loan a Tackle Program" in which the park lends fishing tackle to its visitors. The park provides an unsupervised swimming beach, a concrete launching ramp, lighted fishing piers, two fish cleaning stations and a floating boat dock.

Educational and interpretive programs are available for groups including teachers and students. Requirements include a minimum of 10 persons and

pre-scheduling through the park headquarters. Aquatic Wild, Project Learning Tree, Texas Rare and Wild, Adopt a Wet Land, Buffalo Soldiers and other educational programs are available. Continuing education credit for attending many of these programs is available for teachers.

Park programs with which the Master Naturalists are involved include Texas Horned Lizard Watch, Monarch and Mussel Watch and Hummingbird Roundup. These involve general skills of observation and note-taking. The amount of time a person spends on the project corresponds to the level of involvement. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologists use the data collected to better understand population trends and management needs of various species in the state.



Texas nature tracking on the prairie

By Marsha May

The North American prairie historically ranged from Canada to the Mexican border and from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains to western Indiana and Wisconsin. This prairie is referred to as the Great Plains. Approximately 400,000,000 acres of prairie covered the Great Plains before European settlement. The Great Plains Prairie is divided into three different types of prairies defined by the types of grasses found in each: (1) tallgrass prairie to the east, (2) mixed grass prairie in the middle, and (3) shortgrass prairie in the west. The Great Plains Prairie extends

into Texas and includes parts of Central Texas, parts of West Texas and the Texas Panhandle.

Grasslands are considered among the most endangered ecosystems in North America. The Texas Wildlife Action Plan (TWAP), created by Texas professionals to conserve wildlife and natural places, prioritized the various ecoregions and species of concern in Texas. The Blackland Prairie ecoregion, a tallgrass prairie that historically ran along Interstate Highway 35 in Central Texas, was identified in the TWAP as a high-priority ecoregion. This ecoregion was identified

as the most severely altered in the entire state. Most of the Blackland Prairie has been converted to cropland or urban development, and less than 1 percent remains in an uncultivated state. The shortgrass prairie is another important grassland in Texas. Originating in the Trans-Pecos region of West Texas, it extends northward into the High and Rolling Plains ecoregions of the Panhandle. These ecoregions are experiencing a high rate of conversion to crops and fragmentation. Many species of concern call these ecoregions home.

[Continued on page 7]

Habitips

Habitips will become a regular insert in the *Eye on Nature* newsletter. It features simple things you can do on your land to enhance wildlife value.

<p>November throughout May</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Control feral hogs. Preserve brushy fence rows, shelterbelts and herbaceous zones around playas and other critical cover for wildlife. Black-oil sunflower seeds attract the greatest number of birds to a feeder. The best cover for white-tailed deer is a pattern or mosaic of woody brush and trees interspersed within open areas at an approximate 1-1 ratio of open area to woody cover. Clumps or strips of brush should be wide enough that an observer cannot see through them from one side to the other during the winter months, when deciduous species are bare of leaves. Cover strips should be as continuous as possible to provide travel lanes. Continue predator control activities. 	<p>November</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor grazing pressure on rangelands, and adjust or move livestock accordingly. Monitor use and condition of key vegetation, especially browse, going into the winter period. Move livestock off fall food plots for wildlife. Disc fire lanes as needed. Construct brush piles for winter cover as needed. Evaluate areas needing prescribed fire treatment. Begin development of prescribed burn plan. Doe harvest should be initiated at opening of appropriate season. Plant trees and shrubs as needed for wildlife cover. Plant native grass and forb plants. <p>December</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare fireguards for prescribed burn program. Disc in proximity to woody cover to provide good 	<p>habitat interspersed for game birds.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get prescribed burn equipment ready for use. Manipulate inadequate woody cover to enhance new growth. Strip disk to encourage native food resources. Focus on providing travel lanes, secure cover and over-winter cover for birds. <p>January</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop fireguards for prescribed burn program. Monitor turkey flocks. Clean out and repair martin houses, bluebird boxes and wood duck nesting boxes. Gather and compile deer harvest records; record sex, age, weight, body condition and antler size—this helps to monitor the health of the deer herd. Conduct post-season deer census if appropriate. 	<p>February</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct prescribed burns as needed. Monitor turkey flocks. Conduct mechanical brush control if appropriate. Disk wetland areas to encourage moist soil plants as needed. <p>March</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Landowners who have received TPWD training should begin trapping brown-headed cowbirds. Plant warm-season native grass, forb and legume seeds. Conduct prescribed burns as needed. Watch for wildflower bloom season to begin in late March. Conduct mechanical brush control if appropriate. De-water flooded areas to promote growth of wetland vegetation. Disk wetland areas to encourage moist soil plants as needed.
--	--	---	---

[Native grassland restoration programs, continued from page 3]

those that improve grassland. Since 2007, EQIP has funded brush management on almost 400,000 acres, planted native grass on almost 50,000 acres and performed prescribed burning on over 7,000 acres in Texas. During this period NRCS staff has written EQIP conservation plans for prescribed grazing on almost 320,000 acres and helped pay for almost 1,000 miles of cross fencing to facilitate prescribed grazing. Every year, each county establishes its own priorities for EQIP funding based on the local resource concerns. For information on local priorities and office locations please visit: <http://www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/EQIP/index.html>

Landowners wishing to convert exotic grass pastures back to native grassland might be interested in the Pastures for Upland Bird program offered by TPWD. For more information please visit: http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/landwater/land/habitats/post_oak/upland_game/pub/

Landowners who would like to convert highly erodible or environmentally sensitive cropland into grassland may wish to look into the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) administered by the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA). While whole field enrollment is only available during announced signups or in certain areas (such as the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) projects located on the middle and upper Texas

coast, Rio Grande Valley and northeastern and southwestern panhandle), partial field enrollments that reduce wind and water erosion such as grass buffers, filter strips, riparian buffers, wildlife corridors, grassed waterways and crosswind trap strips are available year round. To locate your nearest FSA or NRCS office visit: <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app>

Landowners who currently have a grazing operation but are worried that it might be lost due to urban or cropland development can protect it through a Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) permanent conservation easement or shorter term rental of development rights. For more information see: <http://www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/GRP/index.html>

Landowners wishing to restore native prairies for at-risk species and reduce the impact of invasive species may want to look into the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP). For more information see: <http://www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/whip/index.html>

Grassland restoration may seem a daunting task but it is the mark of the true land steward. Fortunately there are a number of sources of technical and financial assistance to help interested landowners get the task accomplished.

Chuck Kowaleski is TPWD's Farm Bill Coordinator. **Susan Baggett** is NRCS's State Resource Conservationist.

[The Back Porch, continued from back page]

best manage property for wildlife. So as wildlife managers in Texas, we must be able to connect not only with our traditional landowners, but also with the new landowners who often bring different value systems, goals and objectives to the table with them.

These are just two examples that our human, largely urban, population is having direct or indirect impacts on wildlife resources well beyond the limits of the local city. With the previously mentioned population projections, these issues aren't going to get any easier. In fact, they are likely to become even more complicated for wildlife managers.

Unfortunately, most wildlife managers aren't trained to operate in this new people-centered environment. Most of us were taught about population dynamics, habitat manipulation, and carrying capacity of the land, but today's wildlife biologist has to deal with development, public speaking, changing social values, regional planning, etc. So, like any species in a new environment, we must adapt, migrate or die. Fortunately for us, we are adapting. As of 2005, we are blessed with a guiding document called the Texas Wildlife Action Plan, which was painstakingly developed over a year's time by the talent of many educated and passionate people. In this document, we have a vision of where to place priorities to ensure the continued existence of the wonderful wildlife in our state. The plan also emphasizes the importance of working with people. Therefore, it actively supports the Urban Wildlife Program, the Wildlife Interpretive Program, Texas Nature Trackers, Texas Master Naturalist, and Texas Wildscapes, which are a few of the programs specifically designed to meet people where they are and lead them to a better relationship with wildlife. As the Conservation Outreach Coordinator for the Wildlife Division, I am proud to be associated with all of these programs and am excited about the role each will play as we all strive to conserve our beloved species and habitats for the enjoyment of future generations.

Hopefully, I'll soon get to meet you as part of one of these programs and hear about the particular plant or animal that just lights you up (mine's the Texas Horned Lizard). Until then, take care and remember... as wildlife enthusiasts, we're in the people business.

John Davis is Conservation Outreach Coordinator with the Wildlife Diversity Program, working out of Austin.



Endangered birds of the coastal prairies –

vanishing or recovering?

By Mark Klym

The eerie sounds of a coastal prairie dawn were all but silenced. The mournful “boom” of the Attwater subspecies of Greater Prairie Chicken had all but disappeared from what was once a 9,500,000-acre crescent of grassland interspersed with herbs and forbs. The pageantry that inspired some Native American dances was nearly gone. And offshore, the majestic whooping crane that wintered each season on the Gulf Intercoastal Waterway was quickly disappearing.

A gloomy picture, isn't it? But this was the reality of where our coastal prairies were headed. An annual census of Attwater's prairie chickens recently estimated fewer than 40 birds on the two preserves dedicated to their recovery. When serious efforts to restore the whooping crane began, fewer than 25 birds were thought to populate the flock migrating each year from Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge.

The picture is changing for these two birds, however. Efforts to identify and restore habitat for Attwater's prairie chicken are revealing new sites—some on private lands—where captive-bred birds are being released. Safe harbor agreements between the Fish and Wildlife Service and landowners with suitable acreage are leading to habitat conservation with potential for population introduction. In 2007 this was realized in Goliad County when prairie chickens were released on private land. In the spring of 2008, the boom of adult Attwater's prairie chickens was restored to the prairies of Goliad County. There are plans for continued releases on this site in 2008. The spring census in 2008 revealed 70 Attwater's prairie chickens between the three populations currently on the Texas coast, nearly doubling the number of the previous spring.

Habitat conservation and harvest restrictions have also contributed to a strong recovery for whooping cranes. The most recent flock estimate was 266 birds at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. A spring survey in Canada saw 62 percent of the estimated flock. These surveys count only birds that have completed their first molt and have spent at least one winter on the wintering grounds.

You can help both of these birds. Captive breeding and release of Attwater's prairie chickens is a costly endeavor, and zoos or researchers working with the birds appreciate our support. Donations for prairie chicken recovery can be made through Adopt-a-Prairie Chicken, 4200 Smith School Road, Austin, TX 78744.

[Continued on page 7]

[Texas nature tracking on the prairie, continued from back page]

This is where Texas Nature Trackers can play a role. Texas Nature Trackers is a citizen science monitoring effort designed to involve volunteers of all ages and interest levels in gathering scientific data on species of concern in Texas. The goal of this program is to enable long-term conservation of these species and to foster wildlife appreciation among Texas citizens through experiential learning. The Texas Horned Lizard Watch, Texas Amphibian Watch and Texas Black-tailed Prairie Dog Watch are three programs currently available to citizens that directly involve prairie species of concern. Other watch programs under the Texas Nature Tracker umbrella include Texas Hummingbird Roundup, Texas Monarch Watch, Texas Mussel Watch and the Texas Box Turtle Survey.

The Texas Horned Lizard, our official state lizard, is loved by just about every Texan. The historic range of the Texas Horned Lizard covered all but the eastern Pineywoods of Texas. In the last 30 years Texas' favorite lizard has disappeared from the eastern third of Texas and is increasingly rare in Central Texas. Only in West Texas and South Texas do populations seem to be somewhat stable. This animal is a species of concern and is listed by state as threatened. Texas Horned Lizard Watch is a great way for citizens to get involved in "on the ground" data collection and observations of this charismatic critter.

Amphibians are a barometer of the health of environments we all share. Recent reports suggest that up to 40 percent of amphibian species in the Americas are declining. Texas Amphibian Watch focuses mostly on frogs and toads, collectively called anurans, and due to the tallgrass prairie to the east getting more annual rainfall than the shortgrass prairie in the west, it would seem to make sense that there would be more anuran species in a wetter ecoregion. There are around 15 anurans in Central Texas and only around 10 in Northwest Texas. The only anuran species of concern in these three ecoregions is the secretive Hurter's spadefoot toad. It can only be found in the Blackland Prairie and regions south and east. These toads are seldom seen. It takes a major rain to coax them out of their burrows. Males have a mating call that sounds like a moaning "Waaaah." Texas Amphibian Watch is another way for citizens to get involved and all it takes is a good ear—most of the data collected are the mating calls of frogs and toads.

Black-tailed prairie dogs are an icon of the grasslands. These animals were once common but now occupy less than one percent of their historic range. Prairie dogs are an important part of the prairie ecosystem, their digging aerates and promotes soil formation, they clip brush maintaining the shortgrass prairie and they are a keystone species providing food and shelter for as many as 170 different animals. Data collected through the Texas Black-tailed Prairie Dog Watch is an opportunity for citizens to help widen our understanding of these prairie sentinels.

To find out more about these and other watch programs, go to www.tpwd.state.tx.us/trackers

Marsha May is the Nature Trackers Coordinator and works out of the Austin headquarters.

[Endangered birds of the coastal prairies – vanishing or recovering, continued from page 6]

Nonprofit organizations are currently raising funds to purchase wintering habitat for whooping cranes near Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to protect it from development. Reporting any sightings of whooping cranes or suspected Attwater's prairie chickens off the refuges is also appreciated. These can be made by emailing: mark.klym@tpwd.state.tx.us or leeann.linam@tpwd.state.tx.us

Other prairie birds are also a major concern as this habitat disappears. The recent Texas Wildlife Action Plan identifies prairie ecosystems, including the coastal prairies, as one of the high-priority ecosystems. Bachman's sparrow, Henslow's sparrow, Sprague's pipit, mottled duck and others are identified as species of high priority within the plan. Much of the concern is specifically directed at habitat loss. Efforts to conserve, identify and restore habitat should be supported if these birds are to continue to be some of the treasures of our vanishing prairies.

Mark Klym is the Information Specialist with the Wildlife Diversity Program, working out of the Austin Headquarters.



Do you enjoy watching hummingbirds in your back yard?

Would you like to learn more about these wonderful birds while helping our biologists learn more about their activities in Texas? Why not join the Hummingbird Roundup?

To join the Hummingbird Roundup, please send a \$6 donation with your name, address, city, county, zip, and e-mail address to:
Hummingbird Roundup
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
4200 Smith School Road
Austin, TX 78744



Hummingbird Wheel

This 10" full-color identification wheel is a helpful reference to keep nearby when you watch the hummingbirds. Sixteen hummingbird species are featured, all of which have been documented in Texas! For each bird, the wheel tells you its range in North America, habitat type, and distinguishing features of both males and females.

\$11.95 (shipping and handling included)

Visit www.tpwd.state.tx.us/business/shop/featured/ for order form.



The Back Porch

A passion for people



Please visit <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/newsletters/eye-on-nature/2008spring/page2.phtml#e> for continuation of the spring edition of The Back Porch that explores changes to private land technical guidance and how they are leading into the future.

By John M. Davis

I'm a wildlife biologist. Therefore, I'm in the "people business." If you think those two statements contradict one another, you're not alone. However, it's true. Wildlife management is people management. Think about it. People own the habitat. People make land use decisions. People enact environmental policy. People vote. It's people who decide the fate of wildlife. So as one who loves wildlife, I'm in the people business.

Unfortunately, I believe that there are many who get into the wildlife management field without understanding that fact. It's a common misconception that one can become a wildlife biologist and be a "Grizzly Adams" type, living in the wilderness and not having to deal with people. Those days (if they ever really existed for wildlife managers) are long gone.

Today's Texas is a fragmented and urban one. In 2000, 20.8 million people lived in Texas. Of those, 17.9 million (86 percent) were urbanites (city dwellers). The areas of Dallas/Ft. Worth and Houston housed a whopping 47 percent of our entire population! By 2040, it's projected that nearly 90 percent of our population will live in the city with over half of the state living around Dallas/Ft. Worth or Houston. We are a state of urbanites, and there is no indication that this trend will cease any time soon.

How does that relate to the seemingly endless open terrain in the rural parts of Texas, you ask? Many, if not all, of the conservation issues statewide are tied to people. First, water quantity and quality issues are directly tied to our human population and the impacts of urbanization. Many folks worry about how we will provide water for all the

people in Texas while still leaving some for fish and wildlife. Folks also debate the construction of new reservoirs to meet the demand for humans at the expense of bottomland hardwood habitats. Non-point source pollution is a term that describes chemical and physical contamination that's picked up as rain water that washes over parking lots, rooftops, etc. This category of water pollution is often the most damaging to water quality in our streams and rivers and is usually directly tied to urban land uses.

Second, the large landholdings of Texas' past are being carved into numerous, smaller landholdings. A significant percentage of the landowners in Texas today are absentee landowners. They own property "out in the country" yet live in the city. Many of these new landowners are anxious to learn how to

[Continued on page 6]