

APPENDIX N

MANAGING RIPARIAN HABITAT FOR WILDLIFE IN NORTHWEST TEXAS

R*iparian areas* are lands adjacent to streams and intermittent draws where vegetation is strongly influenced by the presence of water. This habitat type is especially important in northwest Texas due to presence of water and lush vegetation typically surrounded by harsher, drier, less productive environments. Even though they comprise only 2-5% of habitat in the Panhandle, these are some of the most productive wildlife areas. Riparian zones in the Rolling Plains can be likened to playas in the High Plains...wetland environments that are "oases" for wildlife. Examples are Wolf Creek, Canadian River, Washita River, Sweetwater Creek, and forks of the Red, Wichita, and Brazos Rivers. Common species are teal, mallards, pintails, wood ducks, mourning doves, wild turkeys, quail, opossums, fox squirrels, rabbits, coyotes, foxes, raccoons, skunks, bobcats, beavers, white-tailed deer, bald eagles (wintering), common snapping turtles, red-eared sliders, and yellow mud turtles. Neotropical (summer migrant) birds include Mississippi kites, kestrels, killdeer, western kingbirds, purple martins, swallows, robins, warblers, sparrows, flycatchers, buntings, and vireos. Overstory timber is typically cottonwood, with a mid-story of hackberry, soapberry, bumelia (chittam), persimmon, native pecan, western dogwood (limited), and understory plants like buttonbush, native plum, sedges, switchgrass, bluestems, native wildflowers, forbs, and legumes.



Key impacts to these riparian systems are dams, grazing, fire, and exotic plant invasion. Each impact deserves discussion; however, ***planned grazing systems*** may be the most important management tool available to the landowner for riparian conservation. Common sense points are:

- Each area has unique characteristics that must be accounted for in developing a grazing strategy. Cattle tend to prefer lush, green vegetation in riparian zones and therefore concentrate in these areas unless special management provisions are not instituted, i.e. fencing.

- No one grazing strategy fits all conditions.
- A grazing plan is only as good as the management that goes into it.
- Riparian pastures reduce management complexity and improve the odds and speed of achieving objectives.
- When grazing riparian areas with upland pastures, one or more of the following management techniques probably will have to be added to improve a *degraded* riparian area:

- Provide water, salt, and supplemental feeding away from riparian zones; herd to limit livestock use of riparian zones; add more pastures to increase management flexibility and increase rest for riparian zones.

Two basic approaches, from least to most complicated are:

- Exclude livestock from the riparian area with stream corridor fencing; or
- Put riparian areas in separate pastures to get tight control over the season, duration, and intensity of livestock use.

You don't have to have all the answers before you get started! A good manager can make almost any grazing strategy work, and a poor manager can make any plan fail. A single guiding principle for healthy riparian zones as part of grazing systems is *short grazing periods and long rest periods*. This generally promotes plant diversity and increased productivity for wildlife and livestock.

Systems Favoring Wildlife Habitat and Healthy Riparian Areas

Winter Grazing - Graze when plants are dormant to provide rest during the growing season. This promotes plant vigor, seed, and root production. However; the manager must watch for damage to streambanks and overuse on previous season's growth on shrubs and trees. This is generally an excellent strategy for recovery of deteriorated uplands and riparian areas.

Three-Pasture Rest Rotation Grazing - This provides for grazing a pasture in spring the first year, summer the second, and rest during the third year. With attention to the degree of plant utilization, this system has produced good results for upland grasses. This is generally beneficial for sedge-rush-grass communities, but can be detrimental to riparian tree seedlings. Attention to woody species utilization is necessary for this grazing strategy to improve shrub and tree regeneration (i.e. fruit production, roosting habitat, loafing areas, nesting cavities, escape cover).

Early Grazing - Graze early during the growing season; early spring in cool season areas, early summer in warm season areas, if pastures can be designed to fit vegetation. This plan usually results in good dispersal of cattle and minimizes use of

riparian woody plants. *Caution:* heavy grazing every year at this time can seriously damage preferred plants. However, with management, this strategy has the potential to influence the development of riparian woody vegetation.

Help to get started is available from: ***Practicing landowners*** in the Panhandle, the USDA ***Natural Resources Conservation Service*** (field offices throughout the area), and ***Texas Parks & Wildlife Department*** (wildlife staff throughout the area).

Note: Some material adapted from *Managing Change: Livestock Grazing on Western Riparian Areas*, by the Northwest Resource Information Center, Inc., P. O. Box 427, Eagle, Idaho 83616.