



TEXAS WILDLIFE

A large, detailed underwater photograph of a flounder fish, showing its flat body, scales, and fins. The fish is positioned centrally and slightly to the left, swimming towards the top left. The background is a murky, yellowish-green water with some sediment or bubbles visible.

The Future For
Flounder



Texas leads the nation in the number of grass species that grow here.





MEETING LANDOWNERS WHERE THEY ARE

Wildlife Habitat Federation

Article by LORIE A. WOODWARD

Photos courtesy of the WILDLIFE HABITAT FEDERATION

Editor's Note: This is the third in a three-part series on complicated conservation inspired by the 2023 Private Lands Summit: Innovative Solutions to Complex Conservation Challenges.

Writer's Note: Grasslands, areas dominated by grasses with less than 25% tree or shrub canopies, are the world's most endangered ecosystems. It is estimated that prairies once covered 167 million acres in the middle of the United States. Now, less than 4% exist in their native state.

In Texas before European settlement, grasslands occupied about two-thirds of the landscape and ranged from desert and semidesert grasslands of the mountains and foothills of the Trans-Pecos to midgrass prairies of the Rolling Plains and Edwards Plateau to tallgrass or true prairies of the Blackland and Upper Coastal prairies. More than 470 native grass species live in Texas. With more than 570 species, subspecies and varieties of grasses, Texas leads the United States in numbers of grasses. It is estimated that less than 1% of the state's coastal prairie remains while only about 0.1% of the Blackland prairie remains.

And with 1,400 people a day moving to Texas, the pressure to convert those remaining acres is fierce.

Grasslands are flat, which makes them prime building sites. The soil supporting most grasslands is rich, prompting conversion to agriculture. Prairies provide vital ecosystem services such as sequestering carbon, capturing rainwater and holding it for sustained release into rivers and streams, and providing rich pockets of biodiversity. But these benefits are "invisible," so keeping grasslands intact has not been a priority, historically.

As policymakers around the globe have focused their attention on issues of changing climate including water availability and flooding, carbon management and plummeting biodiversity, grasslands are being viewed in a new light. They offer natural solutions to human problems, but conserving the remaining native grasslands and restoring converted prairies is a complicated undertaking.

"Prairie is a trendy word that grabs attention, but prairies are grassland habitats—and that's where we work all across Texas," said Garry Stephens, president of the Wildlife Habitat Federation (WHF) based in Cat Spring, Texas. "At WHF, we're committed to creating resilient grasslands and healthy watersheds by meeting landowners where they are within their individual conservation journeys."

WHF, a 501 (c) 3, was founded in 2004 by private landowners Jim Willis, John Webb, and Bob Moore. They hoped to replicate the conservation success they enjoyed on their 225-acre WW Ranch in Colorado County on a larger scale by assisting fellow landowners and establishing corridors of native grassland vegetation. Willis was an early adopter in planting native grasses and was a great advocate in its adoption over large



areas of the Texas upper mid-coast. The organization had the tractors, drills, and other equipment necessary to complete the task.

The trio, drawing on expertise and financial assistance from the NRCS, TPWD, USFWS, Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture, and Texas Audubon, restored the ranch as part of an effort to create more habitat for bobwhite quail and other grassland-dependent wildlife. Within five years, they transformed a worn-out, overgrazed property into a tract of improved coastal prairie habitat worthy of a Lone Star Land Steward Award.

When Stephens joined WHF in 2016 after a 30-year career with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), he found well-used equipment and an operational model that couldn't sustain growth or meet increasing demand. Building on the strong foundation of technical guidance, Stephens reimagined the organization as "a general contractor of conservation."

Today, the team of 10 conservationists rely on a network of vetted subcontractors to carry out the land management activities that they, working with the landowner, have identified, prioritized and compiled in a management plan.

"We meet landowners wherever they are—and walk alongside them wherever they want to go," Stephens said. "From initial outreach and reading the land to post-practice monitoring, we'll do what needs to be done including helping them navigate various financial assistance programs."

Using the model of technical guidance pioneered by NRCS, the WHF team is a partner in conservation progress. The organization's sustained growth is one indication that the model works.

By the end of 2023, the organization had assisted 331 landowners in 59 counties. These efforts included impacting 122,688+ acres by helping landowners implement improved management on 49,300 acres, acquiring financial as-

sistance benefiting 18,396 acres, and implementing 36,104+ acres of grazing plans. Using values determined by a 2021 Texas A&M University Natural Resources Institute study, the mean value of ecosystem services provided during WHF's latest reporting period is \$24.9 million.

A second indicator of success is the number of partnerships that WHF has formed. The list includes the Texas Coastal Prairie Initiative which is part of the Coastal Prairie Conservancy's USDA Regional Conservation Partnership Program; Southeast Aquatics, an effort to improve habitat in the San Bernard, Lower Colorado, and Lower Brazos watersheds that was funded by National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; and the Texas Partners for Conservation, an effort to deliver technical guidance to historically underserved and small acreage landowners in Travis, Burnet, Llano, Blanco, and Hays counties that is funded by NRCS.



The prairie ecosystems where many native grass species grow are threatened. Restoring these prairies, however, is a long-term, complicated process.



In these partnerships, WHF works directly with landowners to achieve the landowners' goals and the partners' objectives.

In addition, a significant collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners Program has resulted in the implementation of many on-the-ground projects. WHF uses TPWD's PUB Program as well.

IT'S NOT STRAIGHTFORWARD

Like so many conservation challenges, grassland conservation and restoration are not as straightforward as they would appear. First, restoring grasslands is not easy or guaranteed. Native seeds require different planting methods than crops or introduced grasses, so while techniques have improved there is still trial and error.

While native seed stock is more available today, there can still be issues with seed availability. Imported grasses and less desirable native species can outcompete seedlings, so it requires vigilance to get native stands re-established. Even hardy, resilient native seeds don't sprout without rain. And even when everything works exactly right, prairie restoration takes time and patience.

"Restoring a diverse grassland plant community is a long-term, multi-faceted undertaking," Stephens said. "It's always much easier to conserve an existing ecosystem than re-create one."

Today, introduced grasses such as KR bluestem, buffelgrass, bahiagrass, Johnsongrass and Bermuda grass are anathemas to range scientists and wildlife managers, but that wasn't always the case. For the last 100 years exotic grasses have been introduced, often at the urging of agency personnel, to help landowners achieve the then-common goal of producing the most pounds of protein per acre.

This conversion had unintended consequences, particularly for grassland birds like quail. No one foresaw the skyrocketing cost of inputs such as fertilizer necessary to sustain Bermuda or the impact of pesticides and herbicides on insects and soil organisms.

"Humans' priorities change," Stephens said. "We learn more and then we try to do better."



As the grasses on the barn wall show, prairies have been described as upside-down forests. That's because grass roots can grow deeply, serving as carbon sinks.

GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT

From the earliest times, federal government policies have set the stage to convert native grasslands. As a fledgling nation, the priorities were settlement and food.

To that end, The Homestead Act of 1862 provided 160 acres to anyone who lived and farmed on prairie land. Prairies have a deep, rich soil, making exceptional farmland. Unfortunately, once it is plowed up it's no longer prairie. Ten years later, the Timber Culture Act of 1873 gave landowners an additional 160 acres of prairie if the landholder planted more than 40 of those acres in trees.

The drumbeat of conversion continued unabated until the disaster of the Dust Bowl. In addition to spurring the loss of valuable topsoil across the Plains states to wind erosion, the ongoing drought drove teams of families from their land in a transcontinental search for work.

Soil and water conservation became a national priority with the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt. In fact, the efforts

were cornerstones of the New Deal administration. On April 27, 1935, the Soil Conservation Act was passed, leading to the creation of the Soil Conservation Service, now NRCS.

Government agencies, even those housed under the same department such as the Farm Services Agency (FSA) and NRCS often operate in silos. As a result, they often have competing and conflicting priorities. For instance, Stephens recalled a time when the FSA was offering a CRP State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement Initiative (SFAE) to benefit mottled ducks by creating grassland and wetland habitats.

To participate, producers just had to keep "odd areas" that were less productive or hard to irrigate out of production for a period of time, ensuring water on the landscape which is critical to the species' brood rearing. There were no applications because the subsidy for rice during that period was \$950 per ton. It didn't make economic sense to rice farmers to retire any acreage.



More recently, as part of the national agenda to address changing climate, the federal government pushed for biofuels and ethanol production. The effects will be seen for many years to come.

With that emphasis, corn became a much more lucrative proposition than conservation. According to University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers, crops, including corn and soy commonly used for biofuels, expanded onto 7 million acres of new land in the U.S. between 2008 and 2012, replacing millions of acres of grasslands.

Perhaps the starkest example of conflicting agendas is the sprawl of green energy infrastructure. Underwritten by federal incentive programs, green energy infrastructure is changing the landscape of rural America and adding an industrial element to what once was grassland, rangeland, and wildlife habitat. Grasslands are more suitable for construction of solar and wind farms than forests or mountainous terrain.

“Ironically, green energy is a method of addressing atmospheric carbon, but in many cases solar farms are being built on the very land that when well-managed is nature’s biggest carbon sink,” said Stephens, noting that grasslands are often characterized as upside down forests because prairie grasses’ deep roots make up the bulk of their mass and facilitate underground carbon sequestration.

Case in point, Texas is home to about 5,000 acres of native tall grass Blackland prairie remnants, which is less than 0.01% of the original grassland ecosystem. The largest remaining contiguous tract is about 2,200 acres and is owned by a single landowner. Recently, the landowner chose to construct a massive solar farm on his land.

“And just like that we were set to lose almost half of the remaining native tall grass prairie in Texas,” Stephens said.

In addition to having conflicting priorities, government agencies often operate within a bureaucratic maze.

While they exist to support landowners, their programs and funding are often inaccessible to anyone who is not an agency insider.

“With GRIP, LIP, EQIP, CRP, CSP, RCCP and a lot more, you have to have a Ph.D. in acronyms,” Stephens said. “When faced with the paperwork and the process, most people just throw up their hands.”

For instance, to apply for EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentive Program), NRCS’ flagship program that helps landowners integrate conservation into working lands, there are two hurdles to surpass. First, FSA reviews all the landowner’s records and qualifies him or her as an eligible producer. Then, NRCS determines land eligibility.

“As a point of reference, the guidance provided to the NRCS field offices explaining what it takes to qualify for EQIP was five pages long,” Stephens said.

Knowing that bureaucracy can be an obstacle to getting conservation on the ground, WHF team members act as translators and guides. Once WHF and a landowner formulate a conservation plan, the WHF professional will accompany the landowner to any meetings to ensure that both the steward and the agency have exactly what they need to succeed.

“It’s honestly navigating a maze of acronyms and it’s easy for landowners to get lost,” Stephens said. “We not only guide them through the entire process, but we also prepare the necessary paperwork in such way that agency personnel can just enter it into their computers.”

Acting as a guide helps get landowners to their destination and minimizes the chance of miscommunication. Miscommunication can derail a conservation project before it even gets to the planning stages. In fact, Stephens identified clear communication as the biggest challenge in any conservation arena.

“Effective communication—both listening and talking—is the foundation of effective conservation,” Stephens said. “In our role, we help landowners see what is possible and assess their wants and needs, so they can take their land to exactly where they want it to be.”

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