

# 5 Questions About

## THE WILDLIFE HABITAT FEDERATION

A Q&A with  
GARRY STEPHENS

STORY BY LORIE A. WOODWARD

Grasslands, areas dominated by grasses with less than 25 percent tree or shrub canopies, are the world's most endangered ecosystems. Prior to European settlement in Texas, grasslands occupied about two-thirds of the landscape, ranging from the desert and semidesert grasslands of the mountains and foothills of the Trans-Pecos to the midgrass prairies of the Rolling Plains and Edwards Plateau to the tallgrass prairies of the Blackland and Upper Coastal Plains.

Grasslands are flat, which makes them prime building sites. The soil supporting most grasslands is rich, prompting conversion to agriculture.

It is estimated that less than 1 percent of the state's coastal prairies remain while only about 0.1 percent of the Blackland prairie is left intact. And with 1,400 people moving to Texas a day the pressure to convert those remaining acres is intense.

From an ecological standpoint, prairies are valuable. They 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. As policymakers around the globe have focused their attention on issues such as water availability, carbon management and plummeting biodiversity, they have begun to view prairies as natural solutions to human problems.

But conserving and restoring prairies is a complicated undertaking. The Wildlife Habitat Federation (WHF) based in Cat Spring was founded to help minimize the complications and help landowners to optimize their grassland habitats. Over the past 20 years, the organization has expanded its efforts beyond grasslands but continues to focus on "meeting landowners where they are in their conservation journey."

I sat down with Garry Stephens, President and CEO of WHF on the Land.com Podcast to discuss the organization and its mission to put "conservation on the ground" in partnership with landowners across Texas. To catch the entire conversation, listen to "Putting Conservation on the Ground" Episode 34 of the Land.com Podcast.

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Wildlife Habitat Federation (WHF)

### 1 What is the Wildlife Habitat Federation and its mission?

**GS:** Wildlife Habitat Federation, also known as WHF, is a non-profit organization that was created to provide on-the-ground restoration management and generational sustainability. In application, we put conservation on the ground in partnership with private landowners and government agencies. Our team helps landowners create conservation plans for their property, apply for and acquire matching funds to leverage their financial resources and eventually monitor the progress of those projects. Our team also amplifies the technical guidance and outreach efforts of state and federal conservation agencies such as the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

### 2 How has it grown and changed since its founding in 2004?

**GS:** WHF was originally founded in 2004 by Jim Willis and several others. It was founded to help create wildlife corridors contiguous to the Attwater's Prairie Chicken Refuge in Austin and Colorado counties by restoring native prairies. The goal was to expand and connect potential habitat for the highly endangered bird.

Since I joined WHF and stepped into the leadership role, we've grown to provide services in over 110 counties using the complementary talents of a staff of 18 professionals that includes wildlife biologists, agronomists and range specialists.

We're working with people on properties from a quarter of an acre to 50,000 acres.

### 3 What tools does WHF offer landowners and municipalities?

**GS:** We provide several things. First, we talk to landowners and try to derive their goals and objectives. People often know what they want to do but have never articulated it. We talk until they—and we—are clear about what they are trying to achieve, whether it's creating habitat for grassland birds and butterflies or improving range condition for livestock or whatever else they can imagine.

We also level-set expectations by being honest. Before we start, I make sure our landowner partners understand that habitat





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That land now provides improved habitat for wildlife. The native grasses that are cornerstone species of native prairies have deep roots that stretch 10 to 15 deep in the soil sequestering carbon, up to a ton and half annually. Those roots also create channels that allow water to seep into the soil replenishing aquifers and helping mitigate floods. Healthy land provides natural solutions to human problems, so it just makes sense to help landowners optimize the land in their care.

restoration and conservation practices can take a while, so patience is essential. I remind them that nature is fickle, especially rainfall, and we're at its mercy as far as how quickly the land progresses. Generally, it takes three to five years for people to begin to see the impact of the management changes that they have implemented.

The work is expensive. For instance, prairie restoration in the Gulf Coast prairie can run anywhere from \$300 to \$1,200 an acre. And it's specialized. Planting native grass seed is different than planting row crops. It requires different equipment and different expertise, so we provide technical assistance and have access to some of the necessary equipment such as no-till grass drills.

On the subject of cost, we help landowners navigate the maze of potential funding sources that range from federal and state agencies to NGOs. It is an alphabet soup of acronyms. EQIP. LIP. CRP and more. Each agency and each program have their own very specific requirements. For people who aren't familiar

with the programs and the process, it can be overwhelming.

As a recent collaborator said after we visited the local NRCS office, "How in the heck does somebody like me even know what questions to ask them? I was there and I'm still confused." Our team speaks the language and knows how the programs work because we work in concert with all these agencies.

To further complicate the situation, demand for these cost-share conservation programs is at an all-time high, so the environment is competitive. We help landowners develop applications that make their projects and properties stand out by meeting the requirements of the specific program.

Finally, once the project is underway, we can help the landowners monitor, measure and document their progress. This not only helps them meet the requirements of the programs but gives them scientifically documented proof of their progress. You can't improve what you don't measure.

**4** Give me two or three examples of projects that the WHF team has worked on?

**GS:** One of the projects that stands out to me is a 12,000-acre ranch that is contiguous to the Attwater's Prairie Chicken Refuge near Eagle Lake. This heritage ranch was founded in the 1890s. They raise rice, run about 1,500 momma cows on Bermuda grass, and they have about 5,500 acres of brushy rangeland that we're working with them to restore by removing the McCartney rose, willow baccharis and other species that are prone to take over the on the coastal prairie. Once we get the woody component managed and can implement prescribed burning and rotational grazing, we will have doubled the potential habitat for Attwater's Prairie Chicken on the globe.

Another outstanding project involved a 16,000-acre mitigation site along the Red River. Within the Corps of Engineers' permit for building the lake that prompted the mitigation, they had to restore habitat types on a degraded farm and ranch that was founded in 1836. I



Photo courtesy of Wildlife Habitat Federation and Texan by Nature

helped restore 3,200 acres of grassland habitat. In addition to my work, they replanted trees, restored wetlands and performed stream mitigation.

One of the benefits of the work is that the local Bobwhite quail population, which was almost non-existent in Fannin County, has increased along with other grassland species that we've monitored. Plus, the water table under the restored mitigation site is expected to rise by 10 feet—10 feet of water under 16,000 acres is a considerable amount of water that is being stored and held underground instead of just running off.

**5** How have all those individual projects that you've undertaken with landowners added up to big results?

**GS:** In 2024, our team of 18 conservationists worked with 297 landowners to provide technical

assistance on 300,000 acres. Now, not all those contacts resulted in conservation plans and further work, but 72 percent of those people accepted and implemented our recommendations. We amplify and multiply efforts on the landscape.

And those numbers translate into ecological progress that benefits all Texans. That land now provides improved habitat for wildlife. The native grasses that are cornerstone species of native prairies have deep roots that stretch 10 to 15 deep in the soil sequestering carbon, up to a ton and half annually. Those roots also create channels that allow water to seep into the soil replenishing aquifers and helping mitigate floods. Healthy land provides natural solutions to human problems, so it just makes sense to help landowners optimize the land in their care. ♻️

  
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