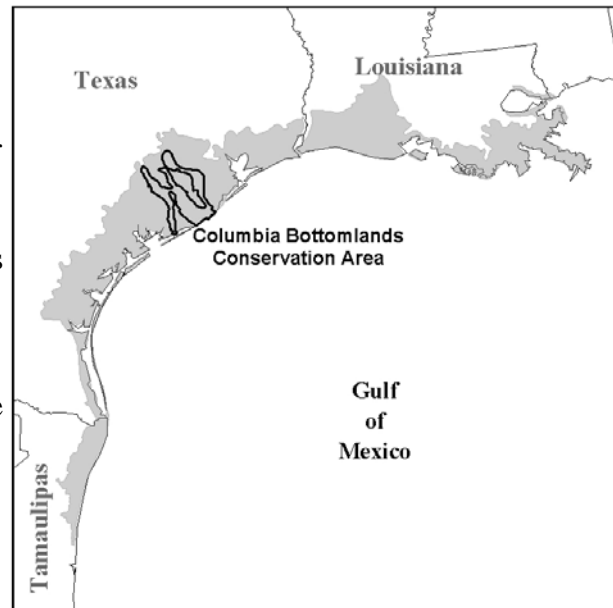


Columbia Bottomlands Conservation Plan: Executive Summary

The Columbia Bottomlands, also known as Austin’s Woods, span over 1 million acres along the Texas Gulf Coast (Figures 1 and 2). This area is part of the Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes ecoregion, an ecosystem that stretches from Mexico to Louisiana. The Columbia Bottomlands are a beautiful and little known network of wetlands, prairies, and bottomland hardwood forests running inland along the floodplains of three major rivers: the Brazos, San Bernard and Colorado. While the total area is large, the estimated remaining acreage of bottomland hardwood forest here is 177,000, down from an original estimated 700,000 acres.

Figure 1. Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes Ecoregion

These bottomland forests harbor huge live oaks and other trees, underneath which grows a rich understory of shrubs, vines, and herbaceous plants. These dense forests provide temporary or permanent residence for over 237 species of birds, including neotropical migratory songbirds. These songbirds spend the warmer months all across the United States and Canada and winter in the southern U.S. and Latin America. This group, or guild, of songbirds is declining in numbers, due in large part to habitat loss. One habitat type that is being lost very quickly is coastal stopover habitat; the Columbia Bottomlands are the largest and best stopover site along the Texas Gulf Coast.

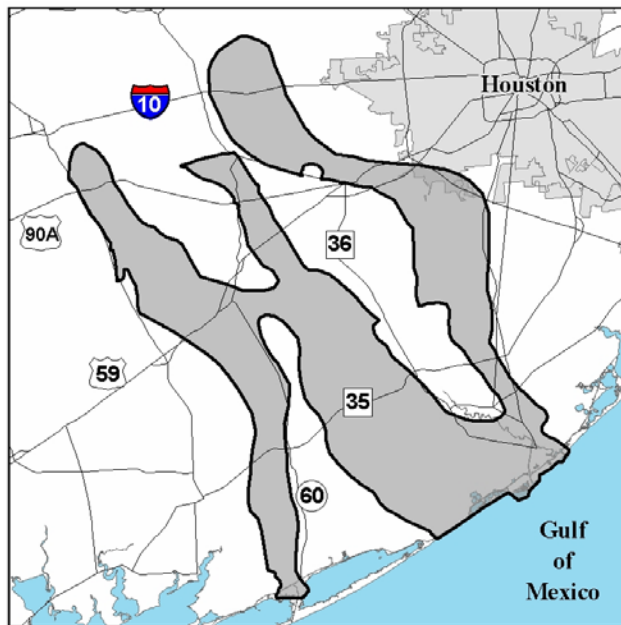


Stopover sites are feeding and resting areas used by birds during migration. They are important to varying degrees and different times, but they can be critical for survival during periods of stress. After flying phenomenal distances across the water, neotropical migrants reach land in immediate need of rest, shelter, and food. This is especially true if these small birds get caught in rough weather while over the Gulf. During these episodes, stopover or fallout sites can make the difference between life and death for migrating songbirds. Tens of thousands of neotropical migrants stop, winter, or breed in the Bottomlands; in fact, the Bottomlands are known as the only “full-service bird hotel” on the Texas coast. This term refers to the great variety and abundance of resources (food, water, and shelter) available at this stopover site. Other small stopover habitats exist on the coast, but none have the quantity and quality of resources found here. Radar evidence shows that about 239 million birds move through the Bottomlands annually.

This area would be worth conserving for the sake of its importance to migratory songbirds alone, but there are many more plants and animals that make this area special. The area supports migrating reddish egrets, waterfowl, and whooping cranes (a federally endangered bird). Bald eagles nest here, taking advantage of the tall hardwoods and the many fish-filled streams and rivers. Texas icons like white-tail deer, bobcats, foxes, armadillos, and possums may be glimpsed in the shady undergrowth.

The Bottomlands encompass or abut several managed areas already under some form of formal protection, including the Brazoria and San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge Complexes, Peach Point Wildlife and Nannie M. Stringfellow Wildlife Management Areas, Brazos Bend State Park, and the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory. These areas, all within an hour's drive of Houston, are popular recreational destinations. The proximity of the Bottomlands to Houston provide not only opportunities for supported conservation, but also serious challenges. As Houston grows, so does demand for housing. Already, Fort Bend and Brazoria counties are experiencing explosive growth, which in turn often means habitat loss. In addition, development and related human activities can create water quality and quantity problems and degrade remaining bottomland hardwood habitats. The situation is still manageable: a significant amount of intact or restorable habitat remains here.

Figure 2. Columbia Bottomlands Conservation Area



The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Trust for Public Land, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and others have a successful conservation history in the Columbia Bottomlands, focusing on land acquisition from willing sellers, habitat restoration and management, and research. The Nature Conservancy has been a partner or financial supporter for many of these efforts. These partners gathered in December 2003 to plan for future collaborative efforts. The product of that meeting and subsequent work by the planning team and others is the *Strategic Conservation Plan for the Columbia Bottomlands*.

One challenge for the planning team was to reconcile conservation needs with available resources. Current organizational limitation on all sides make it difficult for any organization to devote adequate attention to the Bottomlands in the short-term. To address this challenge, the partners selected a short list of high leverage conservation strategies, and included an analysis of additional conservation needs. The plan itself is one strategy: while the current partners may take limited actions based on the issues identified through this plan, it is our hope that others can use the plan to inform their conservation efforts.

The Nature Conservancy will partner with public and private interests to:

- Protect bottomland hardwood forest habitat;
- Ensure that the area continues to support neotropical migratory songbirds; and
- Further conservation of the Bottomlands by raising awareness of and support for this area, and by helping connect landowners with tools for conserving native habitats.