



MARFA GRASSLANDS

Expansive grasslands between mountain islands – magical in their beauty

conservation profile

Ecoregion: Chihuahuan Desert.

Conservation Elements: Mixed semi-arid grasslands, tobosa grasslands, black grama grasslands, American pronghorn, black-tailed prairie dog, kit fox and declining grassland bird species.

Stresses: Incompatible grazing practices, habitat fragmentation, loss and degradation from subdivision and development; altered surface hydrology.

Strategies: Maintain current expanses of intact grasslands and restore degraded grasslands by establishing effective and incentivized collaborative partnerships; increase viability of indigenous pronghorn herds through rangeland improvement.

Partners: Private ranchers/landowners, community of Marfa, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Peregrine Fund, Sul Ross State University and Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute.



Blue gamma grass (© James King)

Along the Mexico border in the southwestern corner of Texas lie the Marfa Grasslands, one of the most expansive natural landscapes of the southwestern United States. Located within the Chihuahuan Desert Ecoregion, these precious grasslands are bordered by the Davis Mountains to the north and east and Chinati Mountains and Sierra Vieja to the southwest and west

This part of West Texas has a long-standing history of cattle ranching and managing wildlife resources.

The open plains grasslands are the key component of that heritage.

From countless generations of nomadic Jumano Indian tribes to the Spanish missionaries who arrived in the mid-16th century to the cattlemen and other landowners who live there now, human communities have long been attracted to the Marfa Grasslands. The rich grasses that blanket the sloping plains create rangeland with unusually high drought tolerance and a longer, greener grazing season.



Marfa Grasslands (© James King)

The Nature Conservancy, too, was drawn by the beauty and resilience of the area, as well as the diversity of life and the potential to conserve these precious resources on a landscape scale.

An expansive grassland

Thanks to large, historic ranches in the area, the Marfa Grasslands are a particular rarity because they are expansive and relatively intact. Where they remain, they are a high priority for conservation and potential restoration.

In stretches of the grasslands, which can be as large as tens of thousands of acres, one can find declining species and healthy native wildlife populations.

A suite of grassland birds find refuge on the plains surrounding the town of Marfa. They use the landscape as nesting habitat and stop over during migration. Grassland birds show steeper, more consistent and more geographically widespread declines than any other group of North American species.

A recent Audubon Society study, *The State of the Birds*, found that 70 percent of all grassland bird species are experiencing significant declines. This decline directly ties to loss of habitat. Protecting this vital habitat in West Texas can slow that decline, averting drastic changes to the natural ecosystem.

Several species of wintering sparrows and longspurs and raptors such as prairie falcons, golden eagles and ferruginous hawks use the grasslands, as do loggerhead shrikes, burrowing owls and short-eared owls. Other species of concern include the now locally extirpated aplomado falcon, which historically nested on the grasslands, and the increasingly rare mountain plover and long-billed curlew. Conservationists, in partnership with several area ranchers, are reintroducing the aplomado to the plain.

Two unique mammals occur in the grasslands, the Arizona black-tailed prairie dog and kit fox. Also, the American pronghorn – North America's fastest land mammal – is a dwindling species of concern that occurs in the region.

A Rare Opportunity

During the last century, the Marfa Grasslands fared better than many of Texas' rangelands. Still, soil loss and range degradation took their toll, as did droughts and the absence of fire in the landscape – an important ingredient in maintaining healthy grasslands.

By using prescribed fire and watershed management, many of the basin's grasslands can be preserved or restored. An important part of the Conservancy's work includes creating contiguous, high-quality habitats for larger mammals that need room to roam, also giving a boost to migratory, breeding and wintering birds. Research shows large landscapes are needed for the long-term health and vitality of species.

The Marfa Grasslands also serve as an ecological bridge between the Davis and Chinati mountains, adjacent Conservancy landscape-scale projects. If conservation succeeds here, these bountiful and awe-inspiring grasslands will continue to thrive as they have for thousands of years.

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