



THE GULF COAST PRAIRIES AND MARSHES ECOREGION

Conserving rare and precious natural resources in balance with crucial economic development

conservation profile

Threats

Before European settlement, nomadic Native Americans thrived on the bountiful oysters, shrimp, fish, alligators and birds available along the Gulf of Mexico, one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in the world.

Today, people are drawn here by petrochemical industries, businesses, agriculture, tourism and the beauties of the gulf coast. More than a third of the people living in Texas and Louisiana live near the coast, with nearly three-quarters of the states' industrial base, commerce and jobs. In Mexico, where industrial and population pressures are less, overfishing, development pressures, and water quality and quantity are the most imminent threats. Throughout the ecoregion, the quality of remaining habitat faces drastic declines, with habitat loss and fragmentation posing some of most serious threats to biological health.

The Conservancy's Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes Ecoregional Assessment identified 228 species of conservation concern, among them the ocelot, jaguarundi, margai, Louisiana black bear, piping plover, peregrine falcon, reddish egret, brown pelican, Texas pipefish, Texas scarlet snake, black-spotted newt, Kemp's Ridley sea turtle, slender rushpea and Houston meadow-rue.



Coastal dunes (© Harold E. Malde)

Framing the Gulf of Mexico from the Chandeleur Islands in Louisiana, along the Texas shoreline and down to Rio Soto la Marina in Mexico is a mosaic of coastal habitats unequalled in beauty and riches. It encompasses such natural wonders as the mighty Mississippi River Delta and the Laguna Madre, or Mother Lagoon. The 600-mile-long region abounds in superlatives: the longest barrier island system on Earth, the most important fish nursery in the gulf, the largest hypersaline lagoon known to man.

Ecologists call this 24-million-acre environment the Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes Ecoregion. The numbers and types of birds seen here rival those found anywhere else in North America; the coastline provides critical stopover sites for millions of migrating birds. Nearly 1,000 species of wildflowers live here, and the area's diversity of butterflies and reptiles is renowned. Boasting 19 major rivers and 22 bays, this area is a virtual factory for producing fish and shellfish, vital links in the food chain for marine organisms and vital to the economic health of human communities.



Attwater's prairie chicken (© Lynn McBride)

An ecoregional assessment completed by The Nature Conservancy and its Mexican partner Pronatura Noreste identified three primary habitat types in this ecoregion:

- Tallgrass coastal prairie in Texas and Louisiana sustains tremendous plant diversity. More red-tailed hawks, northern harriers, and white and white-faced ibis live here than anywhere else in North America. Waterfowl, wading birds and shorebirds are abundant. The last two remaining wild populations of Attwater's prairie chickens – considered the most endangered bird in North America – live in coastal prairie remnants south and west of Houston.
- Coastal marshes, among the most dynamic and productive ecological systems in existence, offer food and shelter for wildlife, maintain water quality and help protect land and people from Gulf of Mexico storms. They also provide critical nurseries and spawning grounds for commercial and recreational fisheries.
- Marine environments of the northern gulf are biologically rich, supporting extensive wetland and

seagrass habitats, marshes, mangroves and tidal flats. Protected by barrier islands, the Laguna Madre of Texas and Mexico is North America's only hypersaline lagoon and the largest of only five hypersaline lagoons in the world. Ninety-five percent of the Gulf of Mexico's marine species depend in some way on the Laguna Madre.

Conservation Activities

About 1.4 million acres in the United States portion of the ecoregion are managed for conservation by government and non-profit organizations. The Conservancy has acquired land for 13 federal refuges and five state wildlife areas, and continues to protect the area's precious natural resources at a number of sites.

- In the Laguna Madre, the Conservancy bought 24,500 acres on South Padre Island, transferred most of that land to the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and with the remaining 1,200 acres created South Padre Island Preserve.

- In Corpus Christi, the Conservancy is helping to protect 1,470 acres and restore freshwater inflows in the Nueces River Delta. On St Charles Bay, private-lands conservation agreements and a Conservancy land donation to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge protect endangered whooping cranes.

- Near Victoria on the Refugio-Goliad Prairie, the Conservancy is working with private landowners to restore tens of thousands of acres of coastal prairie habitat. On Matagorda Bay, the 7,000-acre Clive Runnells Family Mad Island Marsh Preserve – part of an area that frequently sets records for the greatest number of wintering bird species in North America – is a model of compatible agriculture.

- In the Columbia Bottomlands, the largest and best stopover site for migratory songbirds on the Texas coast, the Conservancy helped establish the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and an array of state and federal protected lands, and is working with private landowners to conserve this vital habitat

While much has been conserved on this unique and beautiful coastline, much remains to be done to protect its ecological wealth in tandem with its importance as an economic generator.

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