



INVASIVE SPECIES IN TEXAS

Threatening the state's biological diversity

conservation profile

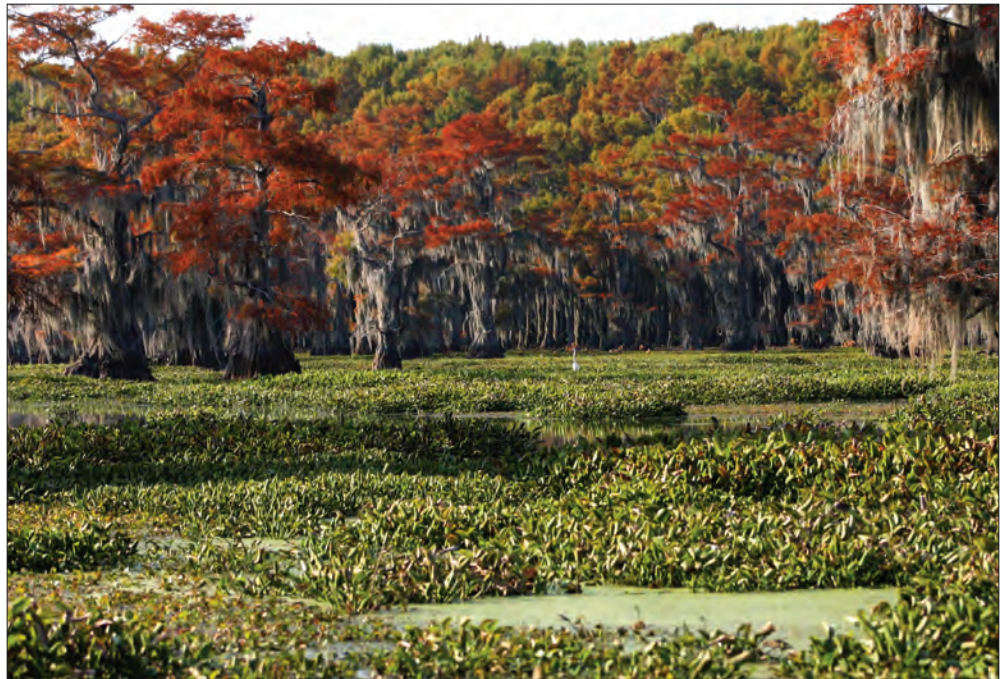
A Growing Concern

The cactus moth (*Cactoblastis cactorum*), introduced in countries such as Australia and South Africa to destroy unwanted prickly pear and cholla cactuses (*Opuntia spp.*), has spread far beyond those original boundaries and is becoming a threat to *Opuntia* cactus species in North America. Now, the cactus moth has been spotted at Isla Mujeres off the west coast of Mexico.

Prickly pear cactus are an integral part of the economy and culture of Mexico. The plant has long been used in food and medicine and even appears on the Mexican flag and coat of arms. In addition, the plants and their fruits are a diet staple of many desert inhabitants, including birds, mammals, reptiles and insects.

If the cactus moth were to make its way to Mexico's mainland, it could decimate the prickly pear cactus populations of that country and eventually spread to Texas and the American Southwest.

Landowners with *Opuntia* on their property are encouraged to watch for this dangerous pest and report any sightings to a local county extension agent.



Water Hyacinth forms in dense colonies that block light and crowd out important native plants. (© Lynn McBride)

Managing the introduction and spread of invasive and non-native plant and animal species is one of the pillars of responsible land stewardship.

Invasive species are defined as those whose introduction is likely to cause ecological or economic harm to humans. They consume food, water, light and other essential resources, often to the detriment of native biological life.

In the past 200 years, more than 50,000 non-native species have

been introduced in America – deliberately and accidentally – often with drastic results.

Of the nearly 1,000 species of plants and animals listed by the federal government as endangered, nearly 400 are directly threatened by non-native species.

As one of the most biologically diverse states in the country, Texas is particularly susceptible to the threat of non-native species. Four of the twelve invasive species considered the most dangerous in the United



Cactus moth larvae. (© Joint FAO/IAE Programme; Nuclear Techniques in Food and Agriculture)

States are found in Texas. They are: tamarisk (known as salt cedar), hydrilla, Chinese tallow and purple loosestrife. Sightings of brown tree snakes in the state indicate that another of the “dirty dozen” could become a threat

In addition, invasive species like red imported fire ants and feral hogs have become widespread menaces to landowners across Texas. While red imported fire ants are also a nuisance for neighboring states, feral hogs are particularly problematic in Texas. Two million feral hogs – half of the entire U.S. population – live in the state. In addition to being carriers of disease and parasites, feral hogs also pose a direct threat to the health of rangeland, and wildlife.

A considerable portion of the Texas economy is derived from tourism and outdoor activities such as fishing, hunting, and bird watching. The wildlife at the heart of these activities depend on healthy, balanced ecosystems for their habitat needs. If left unchecked, invasive species can degrade ecosystems, making them unsuitable for wildlife.

The Nature Conservancy and part-

ners are working to control these and other aggressive invaders through a combination of prevention, early detection, restoration, research and outreach. Landowners are the first and best line of defense against these threats to Texas’ biological diversity.

There are several ways landowners can help combat the introduction and spread of invasive species. The first is to become educated about the species that pose the greatest threat to Texas. Landowners should frequently inventory their land to determine if any invasive or non-native species are present and need to be removed. Local extension agents, biologists from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department or the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Conservancy staff can help identify invasive species, or more information can be obtained online.

While invasive plant species can be spread by wind, insects and wildlife, humans also unwittingly contribute to their distribution.

Gardeners and landscapers sometimes introduce invasive species by selecting non-native plants. These are often chosen simply for their colorful

foliage. There are several attractive native plant alternatives for each invasive plant species that poses a danger to Texas.

Boats used in different bodies of water in Texas must be thoroughly cleaned after each use, as plant fragments and organisms can survive for extended periods of time on watercraft hulls.

Hikers should clean their shoes after trips since nearly invisible plant seeds and pathogens can travel from area to area in the treads of footwear. Care should be taken when traveling with fruits and vegetables, plants, insects and animals, as those items can carry pests or become invasive themselves.

Another way to prevent the spread of invasive species or pathogens is to avoid bringing firewood from one part of the state to another. In addition, aquarium fish and plants, pets, live bait or other exotic animals should never be released into the wild.

To help combat this problem and learn more, volunteer to remove invasive species at your local park, refuge or other wildlife areas. In addition, more information can be found at the following sites:

- nature.org/initiatives/invasive-species
- invasivespeciesinfo.gov
- tncweeds.ucdavis.edu
- texasinvasives.org

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