



REFUGIO-GOLIAD PRAIRIE

Texas' coastal prairies support grassland birds

conservation profile

Ecoregion: Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes.

Conservation Elements: Native coastal prairie, little bluestem and brownseed paspalum grasses, floodplain forests along rivers with live oak, pecan and bald cypress communities.

Stresses: Invasive species, altered fire and grazing patterns, habitat loss due to transportation projects and fragmentation.

Strategies: Support partnerships with private landowners, develop techniques to combat invasive brush species and restore ecosystems through fire and grazing management.

Partners: The Coastal Prairie Conservation Initiative, a partnership among private landowners, the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the Natural Resource Conservation Service and the Conservancy.



Wild turkeys at Refugio-Goliad Prairie (© Wade Harrell)

Texas' coastal prairies once spanned more than 6 million acres, extending from southernmost Texas up along the Gulf of Mexico and into Louisiana. One early explorer of the region described the prairies as "an unbroken, level, grassy plain ... on which a few islands of trees and shrubs were scattered in irregular order." Amid this expansive grassland, hundreds of species of plants and animals thrived. Today, less than 1 percent of this grassland remains.

Loss of this precious coastal prairie habitat has devastated many wildlife populations, including the Attwater's prairie chicken. With less than 50 remaining in the wild, it is one of North America's most endangered birds. Other rare species that have experienced decline along the Texas coast include northern aplomado falcon, white-tailed hawk and Texas prairie dawn.



Group tour of Refugio-Goliad Prairie. (© Wade Harrell)

However, places where these remnant prairies endure on a landscape scale offer The Nature Conservancy and its partners an opportunity to restore and revitalize this imperiled habitat type and preserve the species that depend on it. One such place is the Refugio-Goliad Prairie, which spans 500,000 acres along the Gulf Coast between Houston and Corpus Christi in a triangle bounded by the towns of Victoria, Goliad and Refugio. It is one of the largest and highest-quality expanses of coastal tallgrass prairie remaining in Texas. Although some native species have declined and even disappeared from the region, great biological diversity still thrives, making landscape-scale work possible.

Two major rivers – the San Antonio and the Guadalupe – flow through this prairie. These rivers and their tributaries contain floodplain forests, which support a diversity of plant and animal life, making them another important ecological component of this region. Large stands of live oak, pecans and bald cypress provide habitat for native mammals, upland

game birds, waterfowl, and migratory and resident songbirds.

Within the Refugio-Goliad Prairie are some of Texas' largest and oldest cattle ranching operations. Ranchers appreciate the importance of the native grasslands and have helped sustain them for generations. Because of their work, this region remains one of the most productive grassland ecosystems in North America.

Landowners realize that conserving this important coastal prairie requires a concerted effort. Through collaborative private-lands projects, landowners are working with non-profit conservation groups, including the Conservancy, and state and federal natural-resource agencies to maintain and enhance this vibrant prairie landscape. These partnerships provide opportunities to leverage conservation efforts in a broader landscape to produce tangible results.

Conservation Efforts on the Land

While some of the coastal tallgrass prairie is intact, these grasslands need careful management to thrive. Thus,

the Coastal Prairie Conservation Initiative was formed in 1998 to restore habitat in the Refugio-Goliad Prairie and maintain the economic viability of agricultural lands. The partnership includes private landowners, the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Conservancy. The CPCI offers assistance to landowners who want to conduct prescribed burns on their land and combat invasive species. It also assists ranchers in developing grazing and habitat management plans.

This region historically depended on fire to maintain a careful ecological balance. Fire is an essential force that has shaped ecosystems and life forms around the world. In Texas, fire prevents brush and trees from overtaking the prairie, prevents build-up of dead vegetation and retards new growth, and improves habitat for prairie birds, mammals and butterflies. The Conservancy and others are restoring fire to the Refugio-Goliad Prairie. Both fire and compatible grazing practices help maintain plant and animal diversity.

The Conservancy envisions that our partnerships with willing landowners to restore this coastal prairie may some day allow Attwater's prairie chickens to thrive here once again.

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