

Refugio-Goliad Prairie Conservation Plan Executive Summary

Project Vision

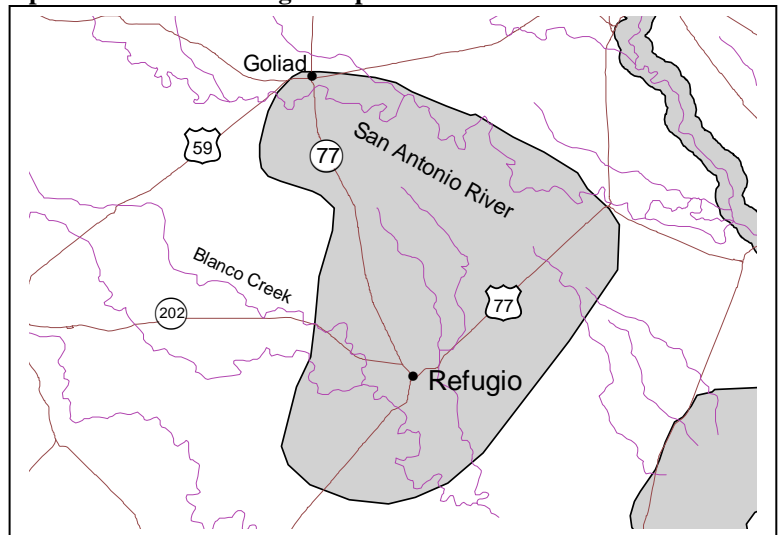
The Refugio-Goliad Prairie contains one of the largest and highest-quality expanses of coastal tallgrass prairie remaining in Texas. Texas has lost roughly 99% of its coastal tallgrass prairie, areas which supported hundreds of native and migratory species. These grasslands were also home to the Attwater's prairie chicken, endangered since 1967; the Refugio-Goliad Prairie supported one of the last known wild populations until 1998.

Through collaborative private lands projects, state and federal natural resource agencies, non-profit conservation groups and private landowners will help maintain and enhance this vibrant prairie landscape so they may once again be home to wild populations of Attwater's prairie chickens, as well as the multitude of other native plants and wildlife. All of this work will be done to support not only natural systems but also the agricultural communities that have helped keep this ecosystem intact.

Introduction

The Refugio-Goliad Prairie is a name used to reference the general location and extent of a large prairie landscape in the Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes ecoregion (Figure 1). The Nature Conservancy's emphasis here is on helping private landowners maintain the network of large landholdings that have protected this area in the past, and on helping sustain and enhance the biological diversity that makes the Refugio-Goliad Prairie so remarkable.

Figure 1. Refugio-Goliad Prairie conservation area as represented in the ecoregional plan



Coastal tallgrass prairie is a globally imperiled community, one experiencing huge habitat loss. Rare species such as Attwater's prairie chicken, northern aplomado falcon, white-tailed hawk, and Texas prairie dawn have suffered concomitant declines as a result of the cumulative effects of habitat loss and modification to these native prairies. Local landowners have long appreciated the importance of these grasslands: ranching families have lived off this land for 150 years or more. More recently, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and The Nature Conservancy, among others, have identified these grasslands as high priority areas for conservation and have initiated partnerships designed to help landowners maintain and enhance them.

Project Overview

One such partnership is the Coastal Prairie Conservation Initiative, or CPCI. The CPCI project is a multi-agency, public/private initiative being carried out by the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Nature Conservancy, and private landowners. Landowner cooperators enter into management agreements with one or more of the CPCI partner agencies and agree to implement specific practices on their property to restore and enhance coastal grasslands. Landowners and the CPCI share the cost of these restoration and enhancement projects. These projects also enhance range and pasture condition for livestock and wildlife, adding to the profitability of ranching enterprises. As of early 2003, over 32,376 hectares (80,000 acres) of private land had already been enrolled in the program, and demand continues to rise.

As an outgrowth of the CPCI, these same partners have expanded the array of available strategies and conservation tools available to landowners and other stakeholders. Building upon the initial successes of the CPCI, the partners hope to accomplish three primary goals in the Refugio-Goliad Prairie:

Maintain large tracts: Part of the aim of the CPCI and an underlying theme for all projects in the Refugio-Goliad Prairie is to help current landowners retain their holdings so as to avoid the ecologically damaging effects of habitat fragmentation and loss. Technical and/or financial assistance programs in addition to CPCI are available to ease economic burdens of land ownership and thus help prevent ranch subdivision or loss.

Maintain or enhance tallgrass prairies: Brush encroachment is the major habitat threat on much of the prairie. Invading brush also reduces livestock grazing capacity for ranchers. There are three management strategies that will address brush control. First is prescribed burning, which is an effective tool for managing woody vegetation, but which requires considerable expertise, funding, and staff. Thus, the first habitat management strategy is to build local prescribed fire capacity and increase the amount of annual prescribed burning implemented. The second strategy is to work with willing landowners on additional habitat improvement projects (under the CPCI and other programs), dismantling roadblocks to optimal resource management. The third, but not least, habitat management strategy is ecologically compatible grazing management, also the cornerstone of habitat restoration for the coastal prairie. This too, is part of CPCI and many related programs.

Reintroduce Attwater's prairie chickens: After adequate habitat has been identified, improved or restored, the return of Attwater's prairie chickens will be possible. Thus, the third goal is to secure formal permission from private landowners to release captive-reared Attwater's prairie chickens on their property. Several landowners have already expressed interest in releasing the endangered birds on their properties. Achieving this goal is a critically important first step in formalizing the effort to expand prairie chicken populations, which now exist rather tenuously in only two locations on the Texas coast.