



LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

Conserving wildlife habitat and rare plants in Texas' southernmost counties

conservation profile

Ecoregion: Tamaulipan Thornscrub

Focus: Tamaulipan thornscrub, ocelot, jaguarundi, Texas tortoise, northern aplomado falcon, Brownsville common yellowthroat, Lomita Carolina wren, southern yellow bat, speckled racer, black-spotted newt, Mexican white-lipped frog, Rio Grande lesser siren, star cactus, Texas sabal, Runyon's huaco, Texas ayenia, Walker's manihot.

Stresses: Habitat disturbance, fragmentation and destruction; non-point source pollution, invasive and non-native species distribution, rare cactus poaching.

Strategies: Habitat restoration, landowner outreach, botanical inventories of private lands, rare-plant research, growth and distribution of plant materials for restoration.

Partners: Private landowners, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Pronatura Noreste, South Texas Natives, Environmental Defense, the Arroyo Colorado Watershed Partnership, National Audubon Society, Valley Land Fund, Valley Nature Center, World Birding Center, North American Butterfly Association, 3M, the Lennox Foundation, University of Texas-Pan American University.



Tamaulipan Thornscrub (© TNC)

Comprising the four southernmost counties of Texas—Starr, Hidalgo, Willacy and Cameron—the Lower Rio Grande Valley covers an area of 4,300 square miles in the Tamaulipan Thornscrub and Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes ecoregions. Bordered to the west and south by the Rio Grande River and to the east by the Gulf of Mexico, this region is home to more than 1.1 million Texans and a vast wealth of plants and animal communities.

Although rainfall is sporadic, the cli-

mate of the Lower Rio Grande Valley is subtropical and the combination of western desert, northern, coastal and tropical plants found there make the region among the most unique in Texas. In addition, the area is home to plant and animal species found nowhere else in the United States. The presence of rare communities combined with the area's rich diversity of bird and butterfly species make it one of the state's most popular nature tourism destinations.

Within this area lies some of the most imperiled habitat on Earth.



Lennox Foundation Southmost Preserve resaca (©Lynn McBride)

Land clearing for ranching, agriculture and urbanization has resulted in the loss of more than 95% of the wildlife habitat in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The remaining habitat is crucial to countless species, as well as the economy and quality of life of much of South Texas.

Through a combination of rigorous science and hands-on land management, The Nature Conservancy and partners are working to conserve and restore the habitats found within this important region. One of the most important elements of this work is the botanical survey of private lands, which helps determine conservation priorities and strategies. To date, Conservancy staff have conducted biological surveys on more than 40,000 acres of private land in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

In addition, the Conservancy owns and operates three nature preserves in the area. **Las Estrellas Preserve** is the first formal protected area for the federally endangered star cactus, which is found only in Starr County and a few places in Mexico. At least 15 other species of rare and unique plants and animals, such as the Texas

indigo snake, can be found on the property. The 415-acre preserve serves as a base for the development of a landscape-scale conservation project that provides landowner assistance, community outreach, conservation education and rare species research.

Lennox Foundation Southmost Preserve sits on a slow bend of the Rio Grande in southern Cameron County. The 1,023-acre preserve encompasses one of the last remaining stands of native sabal palm trees in the country and contains several large expanses of intact thornscrub that are part of the network of wildlife corridors extending deep into Mexico. The skies above are part of the famed Central Flyway, a vital migratory bird route in North America. Southmost Preserve is the base of the Conservancy's thornscrub restoration efforts in South Texas and is home to an organic citrus orchard, which demonstrates a sustainable and economically viable alternative use of existing agricultural land.

Chihuahua Woods Preserve covers 350 acres in Hidalgo County. The preserve is home to many species

native to the Valley, and its plant life provides a range of seasonal foods and cover for wildlife. The property was acquired to protect a spectacular cactus community unequalled in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, including a unique assemblage of more than eight species growing densely within a small area. A population of St Joseph's staff—a rare succulent—is also found on the preserve.

While ranching and agriculture have traditionally been the dominant industries in the area, landowners are increasingly turning to alternative uses for their land. Wildlife-related activities such as hunting and bird watching are growing in popularity and landowners in South Texas often derive more income per acre from hunting leases than from production. The rising popularity of bird-watching and other forms of nature tourism has led to the establishment of at least six annual community nature festivals. The key to promoting and sustaining this important alternative income source is the preservation and restoration of wildlife habitat.

Using all the tools of conservation, including science, partnership, acquisition, land management and restoration, The Nature Conservancy is working with partners to conserve the lands and waters of this important region. Investing in conservation today will help preserve the diversity of the Lower Rio Grande Valley for generations to come.

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