



WEST AND UPPER WEST GULF COASTAL PLAINS ECOREGIONS

Conserving forests and prairies in East Texas

conservation profile

Caddo Lake

Covering 50 square miles in Texas and Louisiana, this the only natural freshwater lake in Texas. The Conservancy's 1,000-acre **Fred and Loucille Dahmer Caddo Lake Preserve** supports the state's most diverse native fish population and provides habitat for more than 40 rare animals and plants.

In 2007, abundant spring rains allowed for the release of surplus water from Lake O' Pines Reservoir into Caddo Lake and its tributary, Big Cypress Bayou.

The release of water is a major step in a multi-year environmental flows study undertaken by the Conservancy and the Caddo Lake Institute, with assistance from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Northeast Texas Municipal Water District, several universities and federal, state and local government agencies.

This effort is also part of the Conservancy's Sustainable Waters Program, which protects river ecosystems downstream of multiple dams in 13 states. The Conservancy has been working to protect Caddo Lake since the early 1990s and was instrumental in the creation of Caddo Lake State Park and Wildlife Management Area.



Longleaf pine forest at Roy E. Larsen Sandyland Sanctuary (© Lynn McBride)

The West and Upper West Gulf Coastal Plains ecoregions span more than 37 million acres of land in Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana and Oklahoma. These two ecoregions cover nearly 17 million acres of varying terrain in East Texas commonly referred to as the Piney Woods. The West Gulf Coastal Plain is home to the last three percent of a primeval longleaf pine forest that once extended across 92 million acres of the southeastern United States from Texas to Virginia. The remainder of this forest can

contain more than 30 plant species per square meter—a density on par with tropical forests—making it among the most biologically rich natural systems on Earth.

The terrain shifts gradually from the bottomland forests to upland prairies and the remnant marshlands surrounding Caddo Lake. In addition to their hardwood forests, both ecoregions are home to important habitat for terrestrial and aquatic species. That habitat is at risk from conversion for



Caddo Lake (© Leroy Williamson)

agriculture, incompatible timber harvest and residential and commercial development.

The Conservancy is working at several preserves and projects throughout these two ecoregions to protect and conserve these lands and waters. Five of these sites are found in the West Gulf Coastal Plain Ecoregion.

Roy E. Larsen Sandyland Sanctuary in Hardin County is part of the comprehensive effort to restore the longleaf pine ecosystem. The 5,654-acre preserve's rare combination of cypress-tupelo swamp, hardwood bottomland forest, wet savannas and dry pine uplands creates a preserve with remarkable biological diversity, sustaining 727 plant species and 234 animal species. Sandyland Sanctuary is part of the Upper Coast Phase of the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail and is open to the public for hiking, wildlife watching and canoeing. It is also listed in the Top 500 Birding Spots by the American Bird Conservancy.

Situated on 137 acres in Jasper County, the **Little Rocky Nature Preserve** surrounds the spring-fed waters of Little Rocky Creek, which

cuts through the rolling pine-covered sandhills and rocky outcrops of the ancient Catahoula geologic formation. This rugged topography supports several interesting natural communities, including hillside seepage bogs and Catahoula glades. Several of the major forest types of the Pineywoods occur on the property, including longleaf pine, Bluejack Oak-Pine, Blackjack Oak and Post Oak.

In the heart of the Big Thicket lies the 240-acre **Timber Lake Preserve**, which encompasses another of the best remaining examples of the longleaf pine ecosystem. The goal of the Timber Lake Preserve is to protect and restore habitat and important plant and animal species while working with private landowners and the timber industry to develop ecologically compatible forestry practices.

Big Thicket Bogs and Pinelands Preserve is located in Tyler County and contains two distinct forest communities. The dry upland pine community is dominated by longleaf and loblolly pine, several shrub species and a ground cover of grasses rich with wildflowers. The wet pine savanna community is characterized

by shrubs, grasses, sedges, ferns and pitcher plants. The Conservancy's work throughout the Big Thicket is coordinated with many public and private conservation partners dedicated to connecting conservation sites in and near the Big Thicket National Preserve.

The 106-acre **Wier Woods Preserve** in Hardin County contains some of the best examples of beech-magnolia hardwood communities west of the Mississippi. For the past 25 years, the property has been the site of extensive ecological research concerning species diversity and forest dynamics. The Conservancy is working at Wier Woods to combat the spread of invasive plant species, the single greatest threat to the health of the beech-magnolia hardwood communities on the preserve.

In addition to Caddo Lake, the Upper West Gulf Coastal Plain is home to the Conservancy's 75-acre **Sheff's Woods Preserve**. Located in Smith County, Sheff's Woods is a topographically diverse preserve supporting a variety of vegetation types, including upland pine-hardwood forest, rocky forested ravines, bottomland hardwoods and a relict Sphagnum bog that harbors several rare species of ferns, mosses and liverworts.

By working with industry, government and community partners, The Nature Conservancy is helping to conserve and restore Texas' remaining hardwood forests and the vast diversity of life found within them.

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