

Celebrating 60 Years

2024 ANNUAL REPORT



From the Director

It's been a remarkable year for The Nature Conservancy in Texas, marked by an abundance of significant achievements. All year long, we've been celebrating our Million-Acre Milestone—the protection of 1 million acres of Lone Star land—to educate new audiences about TNC and the importance of conservation. Our Million-Acre storytelling campaign has been viewed or watched more than 67 million times, thanks to extensive coverage by PBS, Texas Monthly and a variety of other influential outlets. We're hopeful that this compelling work will inspire others to get involved with TNC and join us in making change happen for a brighter future.



In 2024, we also commemorated the Texas Chapter's 60th anniversary, offering the opportunity to reflect on six decades of impactful progress for conservation across the state. Our recent projects and programs have only amplified this landmark year. The success of our climate initiatives has brought much-needed attention to the value of nature-based solutions, while the preservation of rare habitat in North Texas has underscored the power of open dialogue with stakeholders. Moreover, our collaboration with ranchers and farmers has been instrumental in safeguarding our precious water supplies, ensuring that conservation and agriculture can thrive hand in hand.

But as we continue to celebrate, it's important to not only look back at our past successes but also look forward to the future. Already, we have our sights set on new and existing projects that will help TNC reach its 2030 goals and make a lasting difference for people and nature. The actions people take now are vital to set us on a course to meet conservation targets that will support a livable climate, healthy communities and thriving natural areas far into the future.

In the face of the urgent challenges impacting our planet, we are thinking big and expanding our vision beyond Texas. For example, we are connecting our grasslands protection and restoration work in Texas to grassland landscapes within the Great Plains, highlighting that the conservation of this threatened habitat transcends state borders. Our work is scaling up rapidly because the need for action is immediate. TNC's One Future campaign, which is launching now, will energize our work to move at the pace and scale needed to tackle climate change, protect nature and provide food and water for people.

Nature is a powerful solution. Your support has been the cornerstone of our past achievements, and it will be the catalyst for our future successes. Together, we are creating a legacy of conservation that will endure for generations to come.

With gratitude,

Suzanne B. Scott



2024 Bright Spots

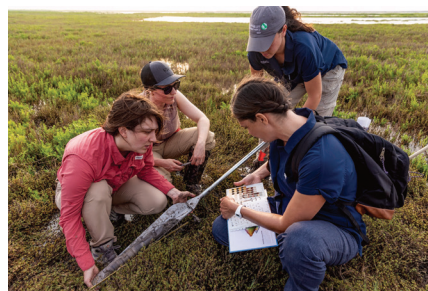


JANUARY:

This year, we're celebrating 60 years of conservation and the protection of 1 million acres of land in Texas! Learn more: nature.org/millionacremilestone

MARCH:

We acquired a conservation easement on the 1,202-acre Port Bay Ranch near Rockport. The property is now being used as a living laboratory, where we're conducting science to better understand how much carbon Texas' wetlands can store.



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© IAN SHIVE

FEBRUARY:

TNC acquired a conservation easement in the Hill Country and preserved 1,125 acres of bigtooth maples and freshwater springs near Love Creek Preserve, expanding our protected acreage in the Bandera Canyonlands.

APRIL:

To foster meaningful dialogue and action on equitable climate resilience, TNC helped organize and host the first South Central Climate Resilience Forum in Dallas. Our chief scientist, Katharine Hayhoe, was the keynote speaker.

Visitors enjoyed an exclusive viewing of the 2024 total solar eclipse from the prairie at TNC's Clymer Meadow Preserve in North Texas.



© KATHY SWEZEY

MAY:

We assisted partners with the placement of 1,080 tons of oyster shells in Galveston Bay at Rett Reef, a sanctuary oyster reef project that TNC has helped support.

TNC and Travis County Parks directed Proposition B funding to purchase RGK Ranch, which will eventually become a new park. Together, with the acquisition of the nearby Castletop tract, we helped preserve nearly 2,000 acres of new public park space in the county this year.



© TNC

JUNE:

Travis County unanimously passed a TNC-led resolution that supports and prioritizes the implementation of nature-based solutions in all future County-funded projects.

JULY:

We held our annual West Texas Women in Conservation Retreat at the Davis Mountains Preserve. This year's group of college-age women spent five days here, learning from female conservation professionals.



© KENNY BRAUN

OCTOBER:

TNC and partners published a new paper in Ecological Economics that explores trends, drivers and future potential for water markets in Texas. This work is helping us better understand the transaction "signatures," or patterns, in basins across the state and their implications for water policy.

NOVEMBER:

Give thanks and give back! Help us protect the next million acres by donating to TNC: nature.org/donatotexas

DECEMBER:

Grab your binoculars and get ready to participate in the 125th annual Christmas Bird Count. Find a local count near you from December 14, 2024 to January 5, 2025.



© KENNY BRAUN

AUGUST:

The National Park Service officially designated TNC's Independence Creek Preserve in West Texas as the nation's newest National Natural Landmark.

The Post Oak Savannah Prescribed Burn Association—a new collective established by TNC and partners to improve land management in Texas Rangelands—held its inaugural meeting in August.



© KARINE AIGNER

SEPTEMBER:

Millions of bats from our Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve headed south to Mexico for the winter after putting on a display for hundreds of visitors at nearly 50 TNC-hosted emergence viewings this year. Plan your trip: nature.org/texasbatcave



© RICH KOSTECKE



© JENNY ROGERS

Wildflowers bloom at Smiley Meadow
in Northeast Texas.
© SEAN FITZGERALD



Saving Smiley Meadow

SAVING SMILEY MEADOW

Explore this rare prairie at nature.org/smileymeadow



Just west of Paris, Texas lies an expanse of native grassland, where a rare type of prairie found only in the Lone Star State still exists. Behind a carved historical marker, a colorful tapestry of wildflowers bloom, rustling grasses ripple in the wind and birdsongs fill the air. Once slated for development, nearly 1,000 acres of the Smiley Meadow were protected this year. Like all conservation projects, the preservation of Smiley Meadow is a testament to the power of persistence and partnership.

The Power of Prairies

Prairies are some of the hardest-working landscapes in the world. They absorb and filter water, sequester carbon and support pollinators and biodiversity. But prairies are also some of the most endangered habitats in the nation, with less than 5% of native tallgrass prairie remaining across the Central U.S. In Texas, 1% or less of many prairie types exists today, and what little is left is disappearing rapidly. High-quality remnant grasslands are crowded with many species of native birds, insects, grasses and wildflowers, making their preservation vital.

TNC first identified Smiley Meadow as a high conservation priority in the 1980s. We long hoped to see the prairie preserved due to its unique biological value and its proximity to Tridens Prairie Preserve, a smaller remnant owned by TNC. But in 2021, the prairie and surrounding land were leased by renewable energy company Ørsted with plans



“Native prairies are the rarest landscapes in Texas today, so much so that most people have never seen one. Smiley Meadow is one of the best remnants left, and saving a significant portion of it will help us to restore other prairies and to hold on to our heritage and the diversity that we’ve lost.”

David Bezanson
TNC Texas Land Protection Strategy Program Director

to convert the area into a solar farm. When TNC learned that this large-scale development included the Smiley Meadow, we approached Ørsted to open a dialogue about the ecological significance of the land. We made Ørsted aware that the property was the largest remaining example of a rare type of tallgrass prairie endemic to Texas, with an irreplaceable variety of life.

A Win for People and Nature

For several years, we had thoughtful discussions about ways to safeguard the prairie’s conservation value while balancing Ørsted’s development plans and goals. This year, these conversations yielded wins for both people and nature when Ørsted purchased 953 acres of the Smiley Meadow and donated it to TNC. The Texas Chapter now owns and manages this acreage as a preserve. We also plan to use it as a seed source for restoring additional prairie sites in the area, including on solar project lands.

Without TNC’s intervention and the willingness from stakeholders on all sides to listen and learn, Smiley Meadow would likely have been entirely developed. Instead, the donation will be the largest preservation effort for this type of native prairie to date. Together, TNC and Ørsted have taken up the mantle to conserve an invaluable landscape in one of the fastest-growing areas in the nation, ensuring its preservation for generations to come.



DID YOU KNOW?



Smiley Meadow is an excellent example of Silveus’ dropseed prairie, which is found only in the north and east edges of the Blackland Prairie region in North Texas.



This prairie is named after M.L. Smiley, a native of Lamar County who purchased the meadow beginning in 1899 and used it for cattle grazing and hay production.



Smiley Meadow is the largest protected example of unplowed tallgrass prairie in eastern Texas and supports hundreds of plant and wildlife species.



Bob Sanders, owner of Cypress River Ranch

© JASON WHALEN/FAUNA CREATIVE



The Sanders Family's Story: Shaping Texas' Water Future

THE SANDERS FAMILY’S STORY: SHAPING TEXAS’ WATER FUTURE

Wade into this work at nature.org/cypressriverranch



Nestled between Lake O’ the Pines and Caddo Lake lies Cypress River Ranch, owned and operated by Bob and Kimmie Sanders. Here, with their son’s family, they raise red wagyu beef as a cow-calf producer. The ranch boasts 2.5 miles of river frontage on Big Cypress Bayou and a series of oxbow lakes near historic Jefferson. These unique water features are what initially drew the Sanders family to this land almost 30 years ago.

Exploring New Opportunities

While the ranch has been a great place to raise kids—and recently grandkids—the Sanders family has experienced both the joys and challenges of ranch life. The 2011 drought hit Texas with record-breaking heat, wildfires, power outages, dangerously low water supplies and over \$7 billion in crop and livestock losses for the state’s agricultural community. At one point during the drought, the Sanderses feared that they might run out of grass for their cattle. They began to explore alternative revenue streams to keep the ranch afloat.

Already, the Sanders family had worked with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Caddo Lake Institute and the Army Corps of Engineers to improve the water quality in the river and reintroduce native paddlefish. When these agencies suggested working with TNC to explore the sale of water rights, a new partnership was born.

Ensuring Future Water Security

The Sanderses agreed to sell a portion of their water rights to TNC, and in turn, we are dedicating the water right to the Texas Water Trust—a state program using new approaches to safeguard the health of our rivers and streams. This program creates incentives for participants to preserve and redistribute conserved water, helping ensure there’s enough for all of us.

TNC’s dedication of the water right will be the first-ever donated by a non-profit to the Texas Water Trust, and we hope it will serve as a model for other organizations working to protect our freshwater resources. In times of drought, when our rivers and streams need water most, TNC will ensure water purchased from the Sanderses will remain in Cypress Bayou, improving the amount and quality of flow into Big Cypress Bayou and Caddo Lake. We’ll also conduct regular scientific research on Big Cypress to evaluate the impacts of drought and assess changes in water quantity, quality and flow in the river. This will ultimately help us better understand the downstream impacts on Caddo Lake, which supports some of Texas’ most diverse wetlands and an array of wildlife.

Protecting the Family Legacy

But, perhaps most importantly, this partnership has helped preserve a family legacy. One day, Bob and Kimmie hope that their son and his burgeoning family will take over the ranch. In the meantime, they want to set up an economically efficient and sustainable operation for the next generation. Working with TNC has given them additional tools and resources to better secure a successful future for their ranch. Together, this private/public collaboration is working to strike a balance between the water needs of both people and nature.



“The time will come when this ranch will be passed on to the next generation, so we have to build a roadmap for sustainability and profitability. That plan needs to be simple enough—and the wise counsel around needs to be trustworthy enough—to keep this thing intact for the grandkids.”

Bob Sanders
Owner of Cypress River Ranch



DID YOU KNOW?



A recent study found that Texas’ working lands provide significant freshwater benefits by capturing rain, reducing runoff and increasing recharge at a value of \$51 billion annually.



Caddo Lake is home to an internationally protected Ramsar wetland site, including one of the largest flooded cypress forests in the nation.



Lake O’ the Pines is a popular destination for anglers and supports numerous fish species, like largemouth bass, spotted bass, catfish, white bass, crappie and sunfish.



A Greener Gulfton

The vibrant and diverse neighborhood of Gulfton in southwest Houston is often referred to as the city’s Ellis Island. This community, rich in culture and history, is home to over 55,000 residents from all over the world. Brightly colored murals adorn the streets, depicting people, flags, animals and plants to bring life to this urban enclave. Yet, despite its cultural wealth, Gulfton faces a significant challenge: a lack of green infrastructure.

A GREENER GULFTON

Watch this community in action at nature.org/greenergulfton



At the neighborhood’s center is Burnett Bayland Park, bustling with families on the playground and soccer players on the field. However, beyond this park, the area is dominated by busy roads and long stretches of pavement that trap heat, making Gulfton one of the hottest parts of Harris County. In fact, a recent heat mapping project revealed that Gulfton is 17 degrees warmer than the coolest parts of the county—a stark reminder of the urgent need for more greenery.

A Vision for a Healthier Future

Determined to combat these blazing temperatures and improve the overall health of their community, Gulfton residents, TNC, community leaders and others came together to create a vision for a greener, healthier neighborhood. This initiative, known as Greener Gulfton, outlines how incorporating nature can advance the community members’ vision for a more livable neighborhood. The first step in this ambitious plan was to design a suite of projects that would transform Gulfton into a climate-prepared and nature-connected community.

Chief among the plan are several major neighborhood interventions, including the master planning and redevelopment of Burnett Bayland Park, the creation of “cool corridors” using tree plantings and trellises for more narrow transit ways and environmentally friendly stormwater solutions in the southeastern portion of the neighborhood, which experiences regular street-level flooding.

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- The Tuckerman Foundation •



“I don’t want to drive across the city for my kids to experience nature. When you see our children playing outside, they’re playing in the parking lot. Having a greener neighborhood, a greener Gulfton, creates a healthier environment for communities to thrive.”

Sandra Rodríguez
Gulfton Super Neighborhood Council President

Community-Driven Change

The vision for Greener Gulfton extends beyond local, physical improvements. The community also aims to enhance the mental and cultural health of its members by bringing back the wonder of nature, creating outdoor community gathering spaces and supporting a more equitable and biodiverse environment for everyone.

This year, Gulfton was awarded a portion of a \$43 million federal grant to fund many of the much-needed interventions that are spelled out in the plan, including new tree-lined sidewalks, bike lanes and more parks and green space.



Beyond Gulfton

Our work on nature-based solutions does not start and stop in Gulfton. What we have learned through this community-led effort is expanding to other parts of Harris County to educate leaders on the value and function that nature plays in infrastructure planning. Recently, TNC supported a successful resolution in Travis County that states nature-based solutions must be considered in the implementation of all County-funded projects. Likewise, we’re working in Dallas and San Antonio to ensure nature is integrated into City projects. We hope that the nature-based solutions implemented in Gulfton will be noted and replicated in other communities across the nation and beyond to clean and cool air, provide additional greenspace and support species, because everyone can benefit from what nature provides.



DID YOU KNOW?



58% of Gulfton residents were born outside of the U.S., with 75% born in Latin America.



Gulfton was the hottest neighborhood identified in the 2020 Harris County heat mapping campaign.



The shade provided by vegetation can reduce surface temperatures by 20-45° F as compared to unshaded material surfaces.

Sixty Years of Success

Put your Nature Conservancy knowledge to the test with this quiz that covers six decades of conservation achievements across Texas.

ALL ANSWERS LISTED AT
BOTTOM RIGHT OF NEXT PAGE.

1. What protected area did The Nature Conservancy's first land acquisition project establish in Texas?
A. Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge
B. Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge
C. San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge
D. Yoakum Dunes Wildlife Management Area
2. Who founded the Texas Chapter of The Nature Conservancy in 1964?
A. Edward "Ned" Fritz
B. Aldo Leopold
C. Rachel Carson
D. Lyndon B. Johnson
3. Which of these protected places did TNC help expand in Texas?
A. Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge
B. Big Thicket National Preserve
C. Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge
D. All of the above
4. Which of these freshwater preserves was established in 1991 to preserve land along the Devils River?
A. Dolan Falls Preserve
B. Barton Creek Habitat Preserve
C. Fred & Loucille Dahmer Caddo Lake Preserve
D. Love Creek Preserve
5. At which TNC preserve did the Texas Chapter's first official prescribed burn take place?
A. Lennox Woods Preserve
B. Clive Runnells Family Mad Island Marsh Preserve
C. Roy E. Larsen Sandyland Sanctuary
D. Clymer Meadow Preserve
6. How many estimated plant and animal species does TNC's work support in Texas?
A. 500
B. 1,000
C. 3,000
D. Over 4,000

7. Which park did the Texas Chapter expand by adding 57,000 acres of protected ranch land in 1989?
A. Big Bend National Park
B. Guadalupe Mountains National Park
C. Padre Island National Seashore
D. Sabine National Forest
8. Which TNC preserve recently became part of the largest International Dark Sky Reserve?
A. Las Estrellas Preserve
B. Texas City Prairie Preserve
C. Lennox Foundation Southmost Preserve
D. Davis Mountains Preserve
9. In 1978, Lady Bird Johnson urged TNC to purchase a property with a unique geological feature made of pink granite. Can you name this beloved state natural area?
A. Honey Creek State Natural Area
B. Enchanted Rock State Natural Area
C. Lost Maples State Natural Area
D. Government Canyon State Natural Area
10. TNC and partners safeguarded over 17,000 acres of pristine coastal prairie, now set to become a state park, in what was likely the largest conservation land purchase in Texas history. Which property did this protect in 2016?
A. Honey Creek Ranch
B. El Rancho Cima
C. Powderhorn Ranch
D. RGK Ranch



Thanks a Million

Thank you to our friends and supporters who helped make this incredible work possible in FY24 (July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024)

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2023-2024
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In Appreciation of
John Norris, Jr.

The late John Norris, Jr. was a dedicated advocate for The Nature Conservancy’s mission over the years. He held numerous roles, including two terms as Texas Board Chair, and served on the finance and nominating committees, the Dallas Advisory Board and as an Emeritus Trustee. John was a mentor to everyone at TNC, both staff and trustees. One of his most cherished contributions was sponsoring TNC’s Staff Enrichment Program alongside his wife, Terry. This annual event, held in Nebraska, trains and empowers TNC staff from around the world. John and Terry attended many of these gatherings, where John loved connecting with staff and exploring TNC preserves.

As the long-time CEO of Lennox International, John understood the importance of nurturing talent. He also recognized the critical value of TNC’s on-the-ground work, with a special fondness for grasslands. John and Terry exemplified conservation and philanthropic leadership for their family. They established endowment funding to support Staff Enrichment, became Legacy Club members and generously contributed to conservation efforts in Texas, Maine and beyond. In 2015, John received TNC’s highest honor, the Oak Leaf Award, for his dedicated support and outstanding leadership. We’re deeply grateful for John’s generosity and commitment to conservation—and his legacy lives on in the many lives he touched at TNC.

Davis Mountain Preserve.

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Port Bay Ranch.

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