

# 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. The Attwater's prairie chicken is also an important native species.

**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, promote conservation easements and safe harbor agreements.

**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.



Attwater's prairie chicken © Lynn McBride.

**Texas' coastal prairies once spanned more than six 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 one 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 200 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.

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 664,000 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, with approximately 120,000 acres of prairie in good condition. Although some native species have declined and even disappeared from the region, great biological diversity still thrives.

Two major rivers—the San Antonio and the Guadalupe—flow through this prairie. These rivers and their tributaries contain floodplain forests,



Cattle roundup at the Refugio-Goliad Preserve © Dan Tharp

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.

The Refugio-Goliad Prairie also encompasses 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.

#### CONSERVATION EFFORTS ON THE LAND

Nevertheless, these **grasslands need careful management to thrive.** 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.

**Fire is an essential force that has shaped ecosystems and life forms around the world,** and this region has historically depended on it to maintain a careful ecological balance. 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,** as both fire and compatible grazing practices help maintain plant and animal diversity.

Thanks to the partnership and the cooperation of private landowners in the region, **30 captive-bred Attwater's prairie chickens have been reintroduced to the area,** which represents a huge milestone—private landowners volunteering their lands to create safe havens for endangered species. Conservancy scientists are continuing to work with U.S. Fish and Wildlife as well as sponsoring landowners to monitor the reproduction and survival of this population. The Conservancy envisions that our partnerships with willing landowners to ultimately restore this coastal prairie and allow Attwater's prairie chickens to once again thrive.

The key to our success at Refugio-Goliad is creating and sustaining strong partnerships. Landowners realize that **conserving the coastal prairie requires a concerted effort and through collaborative private lands projects, landowners are working with the Conservancy,** other nonprofit conservation groups, 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.