

# Gulf Coast Prairies & Marshes Ecoregion



Brown pelicans on Shamrock Island. © Erika Nortemann.

## Conservation Profile

Before European settlement, nomadic Native Americans thrived on the bounty provided by the Gulf of Mexico—oysters, shrimp, fish, alligators and birds were supported by one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in the world.

Today, people are drawn to the Gulf by thriving industry and business sectors, agriculture, tourism and the beauties of the Gulf Coast. **More than a third of the people living in Texas and Louisiana live in this coastal region**, which supports nearly three-quarters of the states' industrial base, commerce and jobs. In Mexico, where industrial and population pressures are less, overfishing, development pressures, and water quality and quantity are the most imminent threats. Throughout the region, the quality of remaining habitat faces drastic declines, with habitat loss and fragmentation posing some of most serious threats to biological health.

The Conservancy's Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes Ecoregional Assessment identified 228 species of conservation concern, among them the ocelot,

jaguarundi, Louisiana black bear, piping plover, peregrine falcon, reddish egret, brown pelican, Texas pipefish, Texas scarlet snake, blackspotted newt, Kemp's Ridley sea turtle, slender rushpea and Houston meadowrue.

Framing the Gulf of Mexico from the Chandeleur Islands in Louisiana, along the Texas shoreline and down to Rio Soto la Marina in Mexico is a mosaic of coastal habitats unequalled in natural beauty and riches. **The 600-mile-long region abounds in superlatives:** the longest barrier island system on Earth, the most important fish nursery in the Gulf, the largest hypersaline lagoon known to man.

The number and diversity of birds seen across the region's 24 million acres rivals those found anywhere else in North America; the coastline provides critical stopover for millions of migrating birds. Nearly 1,000 species of wildflowers live here, and the area's diversity of butterflies and reptiles is renowned. Boasting 19 major rivers and 22 bays, the Gulf Coast is unparalleled in its diversity of fish and shellfish, which are vital links in the food chain for marine organisms and critical to the economic health and

well-being of human communities.

The Conservancy partnered with Mexican nonprofit Pronatura Noreste to identify three primary habitat types in this ecoregion:

- **Tallgrass coastal prairie in Texas and Louisiana sustains tremendous plant diversity**—more red-tailed hawks, northern harriers, and white and white-faced ibis live here than anywhere else in North America. Waterfowl, wading birds and shorebirds are abundant and the last remaining wild population of Attwater's prairie chickens —considered the most endangered bird in North America— live in an expanse of coastal prairie remnants between Houston and Corpus Christi.
- **Coastal marshes, among the most dynamic and productive ecological systems in existence**, offer food and shelter for wildlife, maintain water quality and help protect land and people from tropical storms, which ultimately creates a more resilient Gulf Coast. They also provide critical nurseries and spawning grounds for commercial and recreational fisheries.
- Marine environments of the northern Gulf are biologically rich, supporting **extensive wetland and seagrass habitats**, marshes, mangroves, tidal flats and even corals. Protected by barrier islands, the Laguna Madre of Texas and Mexico is North America's only hypersaline lagoon and the largest of only five hypersaline lagoons in the world. Ninety-five percent of the Gulf of Mexico's marine species depend in some way on the Laguna Madre.
- **In Galveston Bay** the Conservancy and its network of partners are assessing the benefits of the extensive salt marshes, which have the potential to enhance fisheries, sequester carbon and contribute to a thriving economy.
- **In the Laguna Madre**, the Conservancy bought 24,500 acres of South Padre Island, transferred most of that land to the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and, with the remaining 1,200 acres, created South Padre Island Preserve.
- **In Corpus Christi**, the Conservancy is helping to protect 1,470 acres, restore freshwater inflows in the Nueces River Delta and studying coastal resiliency. And on St. Charles Bay, private lands conservation agreements and a Conservancy land donation to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge have protected habitat for endangered whooping cranes.
- **Near Victoria on the Refugio Goliad Prairie**, the Conservancy is working with private landowners to restore tens of thousands of acres of coastal prairie habitat. On Matagorda Bay, the 7,000-acre Clive Runnells Family Mad Island Marsh Preserve—part of an area that frequently sets records for the number and diversity of wintering bird species in North America—is a model of compatible agriculture.
- **In the Columbia Bottomlands**, the largest and best stopover site for migratory songbirds on the Texas coast, the Conservancy has helped establish the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and an array of state and federal protected lands; we also work with private landowners to conserve this vital habitat.
- **The Conservancy established Nash Prairie Preserve to the southwest of Houston**, with the goal of reestablishing critical prairieland and protecting water quality in the Brazos River. Nash supports more than 300 different plant species that can be found nowhere else, along with 120 different species of birds, including a variety of migrating songbirds and grassland species that are serious continental decline. The 400 acres of untouched prairie also helps filter freshwater, prevent erosion and minimize run off. Without the important watershed functions Nash provides, the diversity of plant and animal life in the Brazos would cease to thrive.

## Conservation Activities

About 1.2 million acres in the United States portion of the ecoregion are managed for conservation by government and nonprofit organizations. **The Conservancy has acquired land for 10 federal refuges and seven state parks and wildlife areas on the Texas coast**, and continues to protect the area's precious natural resources at a number of sites.

- **In Matagorda Bay** the Conservancy is restoring a 90-acre complex of historical oyster reef that will filter impurities from freshwater flowing into the bay, provide critical habitat for fish and sea life, and provide a natural buffer to mitigate erosion and storm surges.

While much has been restored and conserved on this unique and beautiful coastline, much remains to be done to **protect its ecological wealth in tandem with its importance as an economic generator.**