The Crosstimbers & Southern Tallgrass PrairieEcoregion

The Nature Conservancy
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PRESERVING THE LAST REMNANTS OF FERTILE BLACKLAND PRAIRIE

Clymer Meadow Preserve wildflower tour © David Rogers.

Conservation Profile

America's great tallgrass prairie once extended from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, spanning 14 states and 140 million acres. This undulating ocean of grass was known as the "breadbasket of America" for the ceaseless bounty the rich farmland could produce—travelers riding horseback could actually lose sight of one other in the tall, abundant grass that blanketed the terrain.

Between San Antonio and the Flint Hills of Kansas lies a segment of this ecosystem known as the Crosstimbers and Southern Tallgrass Prairie ecoregion. This is a land of variable soils—sandy loam supporting the crosstimbers and dark calcareous soil that bears prairie grasses—interspersed with woodlands of oaks and other hardwood trees. It was, very literally, the land where buffalo roamed and the deer and antelope played.

The vast majority of this 76,750-square-mile ecoregion is located in central Oklahoma and North and Central Texas. As such, the two state Conservancy programs work cooperatively to protect this important landscape and the plants and animals found within it.

Within the Lone Star State, the ecoregion is primarily defined by Post Oak Savanna, Eastern and Western Crosstimbers woodlands, and the Blackland and Grand prairies. But the diverse and dramatic Blackland Prairie—which once covered more than 12 million acres between Texas and Oklahoma—has been reduced to a mere 5,000 highly fragmented acres today, making it one of the most imperiled ecosystems in North America. When the prairie was home to Comanche, Caddo, Wichita and other indigenous Plains tribes, it was kept intact by a delicate balance of periodic fire and the grazing of bison

Above and below: Wildflowers at Clymer Meadow Preserve © Lynn Mcbride.

and antelope. But the remainder of this fire-dependent ecosystem is threatened by large-scale development diverging from Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio and Austin, as well as the suppression of natural fire and the spread of highly invasive eastern red cedars.

Such challenges affect numerous species, including the northern harrier, eastern bluebird, red-tailed hawk, cedar waxwing, dicksissel and meadowlark, as well as species of conservation concern such as the Henslow's sparrow, shorteared owl, Smith's longspur, interior least tern, painted bunting, migrant loggerhead shrike and bobwhite quail.

Time and development have transformed this beautiful landscape from an uninterrupted mosaic of grasslands, woodlands and wetlands into patches of disconnected habitat. But The Nature Conservancy has focused its conservation efforts in the 17,586-acre Clymer Meadow Conservation Area, which contains some of the largest and most functional Texas prairie remnants.

- The 1,400-acre Clymer Meadow Preserve in Hunt County protects one of the largest and most diverse examples of remaining Blackland Prairie and prescribed burns have helped restore the prairie's health. Clymer Meadow Preserve is home to the Conservancy's plant material center, which houses seeds harvested from native plants within the preserve for prairie restoration.
- Nearby Cowleech Prairie Preserve protects 86 acres of rare, bottomland meadow wetlands that have never been plowed, while Tridens Prairie Preserve protects nearly 100 more acres of productive grasslands. Both parcels are considered part of the larger Clymer Meadow.

Historically, wooded areas—or crosstimbers—ranged from dense forest to savanna. Since these old-growth woodlands didn't produce the kind of timber prized by the logging industry and the steep, harsh terrain made the land beneath ill-suited for agriculture, many of these centuries-old post oak tracts still stand—remnants of an ancient deciduous forest. These crosstimbers are key in the chain of oak forests that extends from Canada to Central America, providing habitat for numerous species of migratory birds like the cerulean warbler, veery and gray-cheeked thrush.

Barnett Shale

One of the most important geological features of this ecoregion is the Barnett Shale, an underground natural gas field that spans an estimated 5,000 square miles. The Barnett Shale is comprised of extremely dense, lowporous rock that until very recently was impervious to extraction.

However, thanks to advances in technology, what may be the largest onshore gas field in the United States is now accessible to drilling. Seventeen Texas counties have the potential for natural gas exploration or production in the Barnett Shale, making it crucial to the economy of much of East and Northeast Texas.

Exploration of the Barnett Shale is growing rapidly; as such, it is imperative that conservation organizations, landowners and energy companies work cooperatively to protect surface lands and waters while facilitating the continued economic growth and development of an area that supports millions of Texans.