

Oaks and Prairies Wildlifer

A newsletter for landowners in the Post Oak Savannah
and Coastal Prairies Regions of Texas

TEXAS
PARKS &
WILDLIFE

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Our Wildlife Biologists

District Field Notes

BY DAVID FORRESTER

Since the publication of our fall newsletter, DeWitt and Goliad county biologist Josh Turner and his family have departed for Tennessee. We interviewed for the open position covering DeWitt and Goliad counties in October. Doug Jobes accepted the position and has since assumed the duties in these counties. You may recognize Doug's name because he was formerly the biologist covering Lavaca and Jackson counties. Although I think the landowners in DeWitt and Goliad counties will be pleased with the addition of Mr. Jobes, we still have an opening for wildlife biologist in the district. We are currently advertising the open position vacated by Doug and hope to finish the interview process, make a selection, and have a replacement biologist for Lavaca and Jackson counties by February 1.

The biologists in District 7 have made a concerted effort to collect Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) samples from road killed and hunter harvested deer. The district staff have submitted just over 1,000 samples so far this season. We still have some work to do in the western part of the district to reach our sampling goals in those counties, but the effort by the wildlife biologists has been excellent, as has the cooperation from landowners and hunters in the district. To date, no further CWD positives have been detected. The only positive tests at this point are associated with deer breeding facilities in Medina and Lavaca counties.

During January a new research project to study Rio Grande turkey will begin in District 7. The counties of focus are Caldwell, DeWitt, Fayette, Gonzales and Lavaca. The plan is to trap a number of birds, put transmitters on them, and find out what habitat they are selecting for primarily during the nesting and brooding seasons. Our goal is to develop a Habitat Suitability Index (HIS) model for wild turkeys in the Post Oak habitats. We also hope to develop population data on the birds to help us make some determinations on turkey seasons in some of these special one-gobbler counties versus adjacent counties that may have larger bag limits and differing seasons. You can read more details about this project on page 9.

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It appears that the rain has finally arrived. The winter has been relatively moist. Deer harvest has been down due to abundant acorns and good green pickings. We should be setting up for a great spring which bodes well for a good fawn crop and good survival. Things are looking pretty good, so enjoy the wildlife and habitat on your piece of Texas.



David Forrester is the District 7 Leader in La Grange. He has been with TPWD since 2001 when he started his career as the TPWD wildlife biologist for Fort Bend and Wharton counties. David has a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Economics and a Bachelor of Science in Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences, both from Texas A&M University, and a Master of Science in Range and Wildlife Management from Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

Ranching and Wildlife Expo

Where Ranching and Wildlife Meet the Big City

BY DAVID FORRESTER

The Tenth Annual Ranching and Wildlife Expo is schedule to take place March 1-6, 2016 at NRG Center in Houston, Texas. The event is organized by the Ranching and Wildlife Expo Committee with help from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the All Breeds Committee, and the Texas Wildlife Association in conjunction with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo (HLSR). It is designed to showcase the complementary and beneficial relationships that can exist between a successful ranching operation and a successful wildlife program.

This year's expo will consist of presentations taking place March 1-3. There are also commercial vendor booths and a wildlife auction on March 4. Finally, a youth wildlife poster competition and presentations by the winners will round out the expo on Saturday, March 5 and Sunday, March 6. Past Ranching and Wildlife Expos have generated scholarship dollars for youth ranging from about \$235,000 in the early years to over \$500,000 recently.

Some of the presentations scheduled for this year's Expo include: Cattle Market Report and Outlook for 2016, The Economics of Natural Resource Management, Integrating Prescribed Fire into Grazing and Wildlife Management, Native Grass and Seeds in Cattle Production, Fishing Rod Building Demonstration, Monarch and Pollinator Management, Desert Quail, Threatened and Endangered Species on Private Land, Campfire Meals Cooking Demonstration, Chronic Wasting Disease Information and History, Managing for Turkeys, Wild Game Preparation – Game Birds.

A complete schedule of topics and speakers will be available soon on the HLSR website at: www.rodeohouston.com/Activities/RanchingWildlifeExpo.aspx. For more information contact the TPWD District 7 office at 979-968-6591 or Clint Faas with the Texas Wildlife Association at 979-541-9803.

A History of Waterfowl Hunting and Habitat Changes on the Texas Coast

WRITTEN BY DAVID LOBPRIES

Prior to Anglo settlement, the Texas Coastal Prairie was composed of native tall grass prairie and numerous depressional wetlands of various sizes and depths. Coastal Marsh was unaltered and it progressed from freshwater to intermediate to brackish, then to saline along the Gulf of Mexico, with very slow drainage.

Geese migrated almost nonstop from the Canadian and Alaskan Arctic to the Texas Coast. This migration was very stressful and lesser snow goose numbers were kept in check by migration mortality. Ducks migrated to the pristine coastal prairie and marshes to be greeted by thousands of depressional wetlands and excellent marsh conditions. Native Americans used waterfowl for sustenance and feathers for clothing, bedding, and arrow fletching. Lightning strike fires and native people setting fires on the prairies created excellent habitat for waterfowl and bison.

Early Anglo settlers witnessed prime waterfowl habitat on the prairies and in the marshes. Native grasses, belly high to a horse, on the prairie and a slowly drained landscape abounded with thousands of natural ponds and wooded areas along creeks and rivers. Travel through the area was slow and treacherous via horse and wagon.

Cattle ranching became big business and cattle were grazed on the prairie in spring and summer and driven to coastal marshes in fall and winter. Cattle occupied the niche of bison that had earlier in time migrated to the Texas Coast. Most of the waterfowl hunting during this era by Anglo settlers was sustenance hunting.

Limited rice farming began in the late 1800's on the Beaumont and Eagle Lake Prairies with the development of irrigation systems on the Colorado and Neches Rivers. Market hunting began in the late 1800's in Texas. Waterfowl were harvested in large numbers, salted down in wooden barrels, and shipped to the east coast of the United States. The first case of lead poisoning in waterfowl in Texas was discovered in Canvasback ducks killed by market hunters on Lake Surprise in Chambers County in 1896. Declines in waterfowl numbers brought conservation to the national conscience in the late 1800's. Texas Audubon Society, sportsman clubs and local Game Protective Associations promoted conservation laws.

The early 1900's was the era of sport duck hunting by exclusive hunting clubs along the Texas Coast. Examples were the Port Arthur Hunting Club, Eagle Lake Rod and Gun Club, and the St. Charles Bay Hunting Club. Shortly thereafter was the beginning of commercial waterfowl hunting operations. Joe Lagow began the Barrow Ranch in Chambers County as

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a day hunting enterprise where you could line up at the gate prior to the hunt and pay a small fee and hunt the marsh pond of your choice on a first come first serve protocol. Jordan Farms on the Katy Prairie catered to Houston hunters by providing waterfowl hunts alongside trained steers for five dollars. This hunting practice led to the outlawing of hunting with the aid of livestock.

In the late 1930's the Army Corps of Engineers began the construction of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway. The Canal was excavated prior to World War II for national defense and eventually for interstate commerce. Construction of large reservoirs began in the mid-west which started the altering of duck and goose migrations. Mallards and large Canada geese started staying farther north and not migrating as readily to the Texas Coast. Also, because of the expansion of agriculture and large reservoirs, waterfowl could now travel south at a much more leisurely pace. Post World War II began the mechanization of rice farming and started a major boom in rice acreage that peaked at 750,000 acres annually in the 1970's.

Major increases in rice farming and a slow degradation of the coastal marsh due to salt water intrusion by the Intracoastal Waterway caused a major shift of snow geese from the coastal marsh to the new rice prairies. Following this shift in habitat use commercial goose hunting operations like Marvin Tyler's Blue Goose hunting club in Altair, Texas and the J. R. Reel Hunting Club In Eagle Lake Texas started in the 1950's. These two hunting clubs leased and controlled thousands of acres of properties primarily on the Garwood and Eagle Lake prairies.



Jimmy Reel, Eagle Lake, rag spread of diapers over stubble, early 1960s. Photo from the collection of Agnes Strauss, courtesy R.K. Sawyer.



Commercial hunting operations on upper and middle coastal prairies used trained steers until they were outlawed in the 1940's. Shown is Hank Jordan's Katy Prairie hunting steer in the 1920's with Leonard Jordan (left), Chester Jordan (center), and Henry 'Hank' Jordan (right). Photo from the collection of Lyle and Pat Jordan, courtesy of R.K. Sawyer

In the 1960's the Soil Conservation Service began the administering of farm programs that promoted the filling of depressional wetlands with the use of landplanes pulled behind tractors. Land levelling practices started the loss of thousands of natural ponds in the coastal prairie. Goose hunting remained very good with the practice of developing artificial goose roost ponds in the rice prairies. Duck hunting started a slow decline on the rice prairies due to the loss of natural ponds.

Goose numbers continued to climb and commercial goose hunting flourished through the 1970's and early 1980's. Numerous

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commercial goose hunting outfitters formed up and down the entire Texas Coast. Thousands of out-of-state goose hunters flocked to Texas to hunt snow geese. Goose hunting on the rice prairies started with the use of decoy spreads of old newspapers to cloth rags to plastic banquet cloth to full body decoys. Snow geese continued to get more intelligent and weary to decoy spreads.

In 1983 the farm program called Payment in Kind paid farmers not to farm rice and thus started the major decline of rice production in Texas. In the heavy soil portion of the prairies east of Houston farmers and landowners opted to take the payments and thus very little rice was farmed east of Houston after 1983. This major change in land use on the Texas Coast started the downward trend of geese migrating to the Texas Coast.

Goose hunting stayed fairly consistent and population numbers stayed good until the early 2000's. Then a large increase in rice production started in Arkansas. This began a significant shift of geese from wintering in Texas to stopping short in Missouri, Arkansas, and northern Louisiana where large increases of rice production occurred. A peak of 1.5 million acres of rice started being farmed in Arkansas and Texas rice production dropped to less than 200,000 acres. Goose numbers in Texas and goose hunting have steadily declined since. During this same period we have experienced a long series of mild winters. Even though goose populations in North America have exploded, numbers in Texas have plummeted.

In 1991 Texas Parks and Wildlife and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service started the Texas Prairie Wetlands Program. It has grown to include Ducks Unlimited and the Natural Resource Conservation Service as partners. Since 1991 this program has enrolled 615 landowners and developed approximately 68,500 acres of wetland habitat. This program has been very successful in restoring wetlands that have been lost due to drainage and land levelling and filling of depressional wetlands.

Goose hunting on the Texas Coast has suffered drastically while duck hunting has stayed consistent. Near future forecast predict a large increase in rice production in Texas due to release of water to farmers from river authorities next year. Perhaps a cold winter and an increase in rice production will bring back better numbers of geese to the Texas Coast. On the bright side, the duck numbers and duck hunting has stayed favorable on the Texas Coast.

If you would like to learn more about the history of waterfowl hunting in Texas you should check out the recently published book, "A Hundred Years of Texas Waterfowl Hunting" by R. K. Sawyer.



Barrow Ranch, Anahuac, Joe Lagow's gatehouse, Guide Jack Holland top upper right, 1975. Photo from the collection of Jean and Janet Lagow, courtesy of R.K. Sawyer.



David Lobpries is the Wildlife Biologist for Wharton, Fort Bend and Galveston counties, based in Rosenberg. He received his Bachelor of Science in Wildlife and Fisheries Science from Texas A&M University in May 1973 and began his employment with TPWD in December 1973. Most of his career was spent as Area Manager of the J. D. Murphree Wildlife Management Area and as the regional waterfowl biologist for the Texas Coast. Mr. Lobpries retired in 2004 and hired back as a district biologist in Northeast Texas and has been with District 7 since April 2006.

Plant Profile: Eastern Gamagrass

WRITTEN BY STEPHANIE DAMRON



Eastern gamagrass is one of the grasses historically found in the tallgrass prairies of Texas. Photo © Jason Singhurst, TPWD

With the recent heavy rains many local pastures have experienced loss of topsoil due to increased runoff. For pastures with native, healthy stands of grasses such as Eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides* L.) the effects were minimal. As land stewards and biologists it is our goal to propagate the most productive habitat, for wildlife and any potential grazing livestock, as well as be good stewards of the land. The question is “which plants create quality habitat”?

Eastern gamagrass offers benefits to both the wildlife operation, as well as, the traditional livestock operation. Rooted in history, this relative of corn (*Zea mays*) has been providing quality forage since the bison roamed freely among the Great Plains into our great state of Texas.

Standing 4-8 feet in height, this native, warm season perennial bunch grass offers quite the structure in the moist wet habitats or riparian areas in which it is most commonly found. Gamagrass is ideal for slowing down runoff and allowing water to soak into the soil. Not restricted to riparian areas, this grass does well on most moist, well drained sites found throughout the Southeastern United States. Growth of the grass occurs from mid-April to mid-September. Seed production takes place from May to July.

With a high leaf to stem ratio, the palatability rating of Eastern gamagrass is considered excellent for all classes of livestock. However, if the pasture is not managed properly, the productivity of this grass decreases considerably over time. Because it is highly preferred and selected by livestock, it is important to leave 8-10 inches of stubble height to avoid overgrazing and destruction of the grass. In fact, according to local producers, this grass is so highly preferred that if there are limited stands of it in the pasture cattle will repeatedly graze the plant until it eventually dies. Proper rotational grazing on a monoculture stand can help avoid taking too much. Small stands should be enclosed to avoid overgrazing. When grazing the enclosures it is important to graze only until the stubble height reaches no less than 8 inches.

Gamagrass offers fair grazing for deer as needed. Songbirds and other seed eaters find value in their robust seeds. One of the biggest benefits for wildlife comes from the structure of the plant. This tall, upright, large bunch grass offers excellent screening and fawning cover for deer, small mammals and birds.



Stephanie Damron started her career with TPWD in 2008 as the Natural Resource Specialist for Waller and Washington Counties. She received her Bachelor of Science in Wildlife Management with a Minor in Biology from Tarleton State University in 2005 and her Master of Science in Wildlife Science from Texas Tech in 2007. Prior to working for TPWD, Stephanie worked with The Nature Conservancy at Fort Hood. Stephanie is currently based out of the Brenham field office.

Species Spotlight: The Wood Duck

WRITTEN BY TREY BARRON

There are not many birds in Texas that can rival the beauty of the Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*). As the name suggests, wood ducks tend to prefer habitats with trees and spend much of their time in or around timbered areas. Wood ducks use trees for perching, use cavities as nesting sites, and feed heavily on the mast of many species of hardwood trees in the winter.



The male wood duck is often considered the most attractive and recognizable of waterfowl in North America. Photo © Trey Barron

Wood ducks are a mid-sized duck with males weighing around 1.5 pounds and hens slightly less at 1.25 pounds. As is the case with most birds, the male is the more colorful of the sexes. Males have a red eye, an iridescent green and purple crest, a small red bill, a black back, a chestnut colored breast, and finely barred flanks. The hen is more of a grayish brown overall with tan streaks and hints of purple in the smaller crest.

Wood duck populations have rebounded from once low numbers thanks to harvest regulations, conservation efforts, and wood duck nesting box programs. The estimated wood duck population is around 2.9 million birds and is likely still increasing. From 1999 to 2006, wood duck harvest averaged around 64,000 birds annually in Texas and comprised approximately 5 percent of U.S. harvest. The average life span is around 1.5 years, although the record for a wild bird is 22 years and 6 months.

The diet of wood ducks is omnivorous. During egg laying, hens consume primarily invertebrates such as beetles and their larva, tiny midges, crayfish and snails. During winter in Texas, 97 percent of their diet consists of plant material, with acorns consisting of three-quarters of their diet. Pecan groves can often be filled with birds trying to fatten up for the rest of the winter and the upcoming migration and mating season.

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Wood ducks breed in the Eastern three-quarters of the state, although nesting can occur throughout the state in areas where habitat and nest cavities are available. Nest cavities are not created by the wood duck itself, but they utilize pre-existing cavities (often those excavated by Pileated woodpeckers which is our largest woodpecker species). Cavity entrances are from 2 feet to 55 feet off the ground which is pretty high considering chicks have to jump from the cavities. Wood ducks will also use artificial nest boxes which can be an excellent way to provide nesting sites for these attractive birds. Wood ducks are seasonally monogamous, meaning that they will form a new pair each year versus a long term bond with the hen making the mate selection. Most birds are paired in May and females may use the same nest cavity year after year. Eggs are laid at a rate of 1 per day until 10-12 eggs are in the nest and the hen will incubate those eggs over the next month. After the hen decides it is time to leave the nest, the flightless ducklings are called from the nest by the hen for the big jump into the real world. The hen also does all of the work when it comes to duckling care and will lead the ducklings either over land or water to a safe location to rear her brood. Ducklings fledge at around 60 days, although the hen may decide to leave before that time if in need of additional food resources or is stressed.

The Post-Oak Savannah and Blackland prairies provide suitable nesting habitat for these birds, but we can still expect to find them throughout the winter months and hunting season. Wintering birds typically use bottomland hardwoods and forested wetlands, although beaver ponds, freshwater marshes, reservoirs, flooded agricultural fields, and managed moist-soil wetlands will also be used.

They are beautifully colored, skilled flyers, and very vocal, so keep your eyes and ears open when you are in those flooded bottomlands.



*The most noticeable characteristics of the wood duck hen are found on the head; the head is gray with a white eye-ring.
Photo © Trey Barron*



Trey Barron began his career with TPWD in 2011 as a biologist in the Texas panhandle before moving to Victoria in May of 2014. He is currently the wildlife biologist for Victoria, Refugio, and Calhoun counties and enjoys working with landowners to improve habitat and manage all types of wildlife species. He received his Bachelor of Science in Wildlife Biology and Master of Science in Biology from West Texas A&M University.

Managing Native Vegetation for Deer Forage

WRITTEN BY BOBBY EICHLER

One of the most common questions biologist hear is, “what do I need to plant for deer?” Most hunters are familiar with all the commercial types of forage available for food plots as well as the old standbys such as oats and wheat for winter and cowpeas for the summer. While food plots can be a beneficial management tool for supplementing deer forage, they do have disadvantages. The largest disadvantage being that during droughty years when the deer need the forage the most, the food plots are likely dead. On the flip side, during wet years, the food plots are growing great but there is so much native vegetation, the plots are not utilized much. The solution, manage what is all ready their, the native vegetation. How often have you seen it so dry the greenbriers died?

Before managing your native vegetation for deer forage, a basic understanding of deer diet is required. Deer are very much like goats and sheep. Deer prefer forbs (weeds) and tender browse (twigs and stems) during the growing season and turn more to mast (acorns) and browse during fall and winter. Common browse species that rank high in deer diets include honeysuckle, greenbrier, rattan vine, hackberry, blackberry, poison ivy, Virginia creeper, and American beautyberry. Deer eat very little, if any, grass. If you have seen deer foraging in bermuda grass pastures, they were likely foraging on small weeds.

There are several methods to manage native vegetation for increased production; these include setting aside buffers, discing, and fertilization. Buffers should be established around pasture edges, woodlands, and roadsides by halting mowing and herbicide spraying. Simply designate areas adjacent to woodlands and pasture edges at least thirty feet wide. These areas should be mowed on a three-year schedule by mowing one-third of the buffer annually. Do not mow the entire buffer every third year! By mowing one-third annually, there will be three different stages of vegetative growth for the deer. All three stages will supply ideal forage. These areas are also excellent for fawning cover for deer and nesting cover for many species of wildlife. A thirty-foot buffer would be a good start, but the wider, the better. A buffer 600 feet long and thirty feet wide would cover 0.4 acres.

Discing is another very simple way to create forbs which are utilized as deer forage. Early winter (December and January) discing creates forbs the following spring and summer. Ideal areas would be along fencerows that you do not want to grow up in brush. This method would allow access for upkeep of fence lines as well as deer forage. If discing fence lines, disc one side in the winter, the other in the spring. Other suitable areas would include random strips throughout pastures and woodlands. Ideally, you would not disc the same piece of ground every year.

Lastly, fertilization of native forage can be beneficial and cost effective. The areas that you left as buffers, could be fertilized during spring and summer to increase protein, palatability, and utilization. Target areas with greenbriers, honeysuckle, and small saplings. Different methods can be implemented, the first method would be to apply a time release fertilizer in early spring and then again towards mid summer. The second method would be to apply a balanced fertilizer every 45-60 days from early spring through summer. Finally, do not forget the trees. Target large oaks with large canopies throughout the property and apply fertilizers formulated for trees. This should increase the mast production on these target trees. By following these simple steps, you should have an adequate supply of forage year-round.



Bobby Eichler is the Technical Guidance Biologist for the Oak Prairie District. He has Bachelor and Master of Science degrees in Forestry both with emphasis in Game Management, from Stephen F. Austin State University. A native of Giddings, Bobby started his TPWD career in East Texas before moving to La Grange in 2007.

Coming to District 7: Rio Grande Wild Turkey Project

WRITTEN BY BOBBY EICHLER

Over the next several years Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPWD) will be funding research concerning Rio Grande wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo intermedia*) along the western counties in District 7. Counties involved in this research will include Caldwell, DeWitt, Fayette, Gonzales and Lavaca. Research will utilize existing populations on private properties throughout the involved counties. While TPWD wildlife biologist will be assisting on this research, Louisiana State University (LSU) will be the lead researcher on this project and will supply the graduate student(s).

There are several goals for the wild turkey research.

One goal will be to intensively look at what types of habitats turkeys are using in these counties.

Approximately 40 turkeys will have radio transmitters attached to them on an annual basis. With today's technology, transmitters can be programmed to record

locations as often as the researcher would like (ex. one location per hour, one location per day, etc.). So if nesting habitat for hens is a focus, maybe only 2-3 locations a day are needed. Alternatively, if poult brooding habitat is a focus maybe one location every 30 minutes is needed. Once these locations are 'stored' in the transmitter, the transmitter can be downloaded from a remote receiver without having to actually 'see' the turkey. These same data will be able to tell us how much of an area turkeys use daily, seasonally, and annually. A common assumption is that turkeys will have smaller ranges in areas of better habitat and larger ranges in areas of poorer habitat.

A second goal for this research is to get a better grasp on the annual hunter harvest of turkeys across the area. Currently Dewitt and Gonzales counties have an annual bag limit of four gobblers while Caldwell, Fayette, and Lavaca have an annual bag limit of one gobbler. A better grasp on hunter harvest as well as habitat requirements will help guide TPWD decision making in the future.

Starting this January, trapping wild turkeys will be the focus across the research area with trapping taking place on cooperating private landowner properties. Trapping methods will depend on flock size and may include rocket nets, drop nets, and walk-in traps. Hopes are to put transmitters and leg bands on approximately 40 turkeys throughout the counties and to put leg bands on any additional birds that are trapped. January and February are the preferred months to trap since turkeys normally come to bait the best during the coldest winter months; due to the mild winter so far this may be an issue.

Hopefully as this research unfolds, we will be able to give some preliminary findings through various outlets such as this newsletter and possible workshops. Stay tuned!



As part of the research project, gobblers will be leg banded. Hunters are encouraged to report band numbers from harvested toms.

Photo © USFW

Non-game Notes: Nest Boxes for Natives

WRITTEN BY TREY BARRON

What better way to start the New Year than by creating some nest boxes for native birds? Nest boxes can provide hours of education and entertainment for all ages.



A male Eastern Bluebird attracts the female to his nest site by carrying nest material in and out of the cavity. Afterwards the hen does most of the nest building. Photo © Trey Barron

Nest boxes can be as simple or complex as you want. Simple is normally best if you want increased chances of a bird using it soon after erecting the nest box. Many species of birds use cavities in trees to build a nest and raise their young. Most of these species will use a nest box as a substitute for an actual cavity. One of the most popular is the Eastern Bluebird, but birds such as Carolina wrens, titmice, chickadees, screech-owls, wood peckers, wood ducks, and black-bellied whistling ducks all use nest boxes. Odds are, no matter where you live, one or more of these species is present and might utilize a nest box if provided. An added benefit is that you can use them to meet supplemental shelter requirements for a wildlife tax valuation. In the following text, you will be provided with how to be a good nest box landlord and increase the chances of birds being successful at nesting and brooding using a nest box. Keep in mind that just because you put up a box does not mean that birds will use it. Location of the nest box is a key component to utilization and you may have to move the box if after a few seasons there is little use.

As winter comes to an end, birds are starting to explore habitat and possible nesting sites. January and early February is a good time to clean out old nesting material, wasp nests, or any other unwanted pests. It is also a good time to make sure the box is in good condition and install or repair any predator deterrents and barriers. Depending on the species that you are targeting, you may or may not leave any material in the box. For most songbirds, such as bluebirds, chickadees, wrens and titmice, you can clean the box out completely. For screech-owl boxes, it is recommended that you put in some dry leaves at the bottom as they do not carry in their own nesting material. Once the box has been cleaned out, it is time to monitor the boxes. Monitoring the boxes is an important part of being a bird box landlord. Many non-native species, such as starlings and house sparrows, will try to use the nest boxes and may out-compete our native birds. If you see these species attempting to nest in your box, you can remove their nesting material to discourage them from using the box. Just keep in mind that you cannot remove nests of native birds such as bluebirds, chickadees, wrens, and titmice. However, starlings and house sparrows are not protected and the nests should be removed to give our native species a better chance.

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Once nesting has begun in the spring, you can check the box weekly for evidence of nest building and when egg laying begins. To check a box, tap the box gently so that any birds present can leave. If you are the record keeping type, it can be enjoyable to record when nesting begins, eggs are laid, when eggs hatch, and when they fledge. Once egg laying has begun or if expected to begin soon, it is best to leave the box alone for a while so the female can lay eggs without disturbance. Also, do not disturb boxes right before the young fledge. Observations should be done at a safe distance. Disturbing too soon may cause the birds to fledge early and increase their chances of predation and starvation.

Nest boxes can be predated upon just like any other nest. Common nest predators include cats, raccoons, snakes, and even squirrels. Just prior to fledging is the most critical time and the frequency of predation increases. This is because birds are getting large and the adults cannot keep up with housekeeping. Up until this time, the adults remove fecal sacs away from the nest to reduce predation and keep the nest tidy. Once birds get larger and the adults are spending more time acquiring food than housekeeping, the chore gets put on the backburner and the nest gets a bit messy. This allows predators to track it down by scent. That and the young birds are always yelling for food. Because of this, adequate predator guards are needed on all nest boxes.

After fledging, you can leave the nest material in the box until next year. Some species will build a nest on top of another. Another benefit to leaving the material is insulation for the upcoming winter. Nest boxes are not only used for nesting, but can be used by birds to overwinter. Overwintering birds may be the same as the nesting birds or another species altogether. During cold weather, many birds may pile up into one box in order to keep warm.

If you have questions on the appropriate nest box for your area, including box plans and placement, contact your local biologist.



The black-bellied whistling duck is one of seven cavity-nesting species of waterfowl in North America. Photo © Trey Barron

Upcoming Events

JANUARY

- 23 Egypt Wildlife Management Association Meeting**
Tim Krenek's barn in Egypt, 9:30 a.m.
Contact Brian Gordon at 281-797-4647
- 30-31 Lexington Varmint Tournament**
Lexington Memorial Park. Registration begins at 10:00 a.m. on January 30.
Contact Bill Woodward at 512-217-0984 or Tommy Ramsey at 512-636-9488

FEBRUARY

- 5 Lee County Wildlife Association Annual Meeting**
Sons of Herman Hall in Giddings. Doors open at 5:00 p.m., dinner at 6:30 p.m. Contact Susan Schatte at Agrilife Extension, 979-542-2753
- 13 Dime Box Sportsman's Club Annual Banquet**
SPJST Hall in Dime Box, 6:30 p.m.
Contact Jeff Shows at 979-224-5483

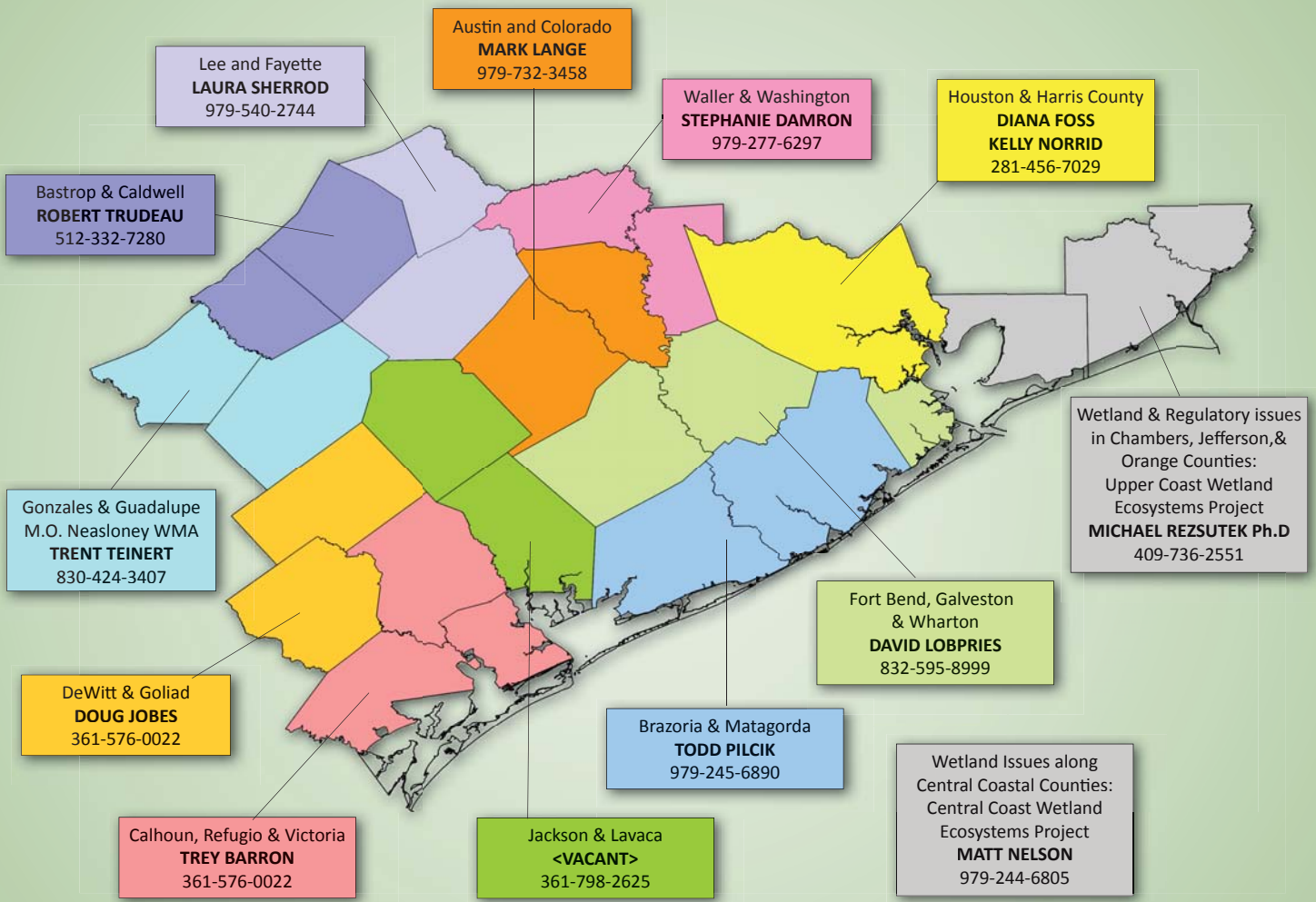
MARCH

- 1-6 Ranching and Wildlife Expo**
Houston Livestock Show, NRG Center
www.rodeohouston.com/Activities/RanchingWildlifeExpo.aspx
- 19 Colorado County Wildlife Management Association Spring Banquet**
Columbus KC Hall. Doors open at 4:00 p.m., dinner at 6:00 p.m. Contact Mark Lange at 979-732-3458 or mark.lange@tpwd.texas.gov

APRIL

- 8 20th Annual Wildlife Activities and Practices Workshop**
S.P.J.S.T Education and Nature Center at Cooper Farm (Fayette County), 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.
The workshop fee is \$12 with refreshments and a catered lunch provided. Reservations are required before April 6. Contact the Fayette County Appraisal District at 979-968-8383.

Our Wildlife Biologists



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- S. Reed Morian** Houston
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- Kelcy L. Warren** Dallas
- Lee M. Bass, Chairman-Emeritus** Fort Worth

TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT MISSION STATEMENT

"To manage and conserve the natural and cultural resources of Texas and to provide hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation opportunities for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations."

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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