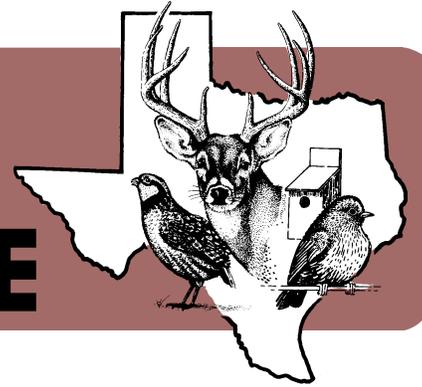


Making Tracts for TEXAS WILDLIFE



Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2000) • Wildlife Division

Trinity River Basin Wildlife Management Cooperative Formed

By Matt Wagner, Technical Guidance Biologist, TPW, College Station

An emerging effort in watershed management is being formed by landowners in a nine-county region along the Trinity River. The initial meeting was held on March 22, 2000 at the request of Dr. Bob MacFarlane of Palestine to inform interested parties in the potential for cooperative deer, waterfowl and nongame management. About 20 landowners attended, as did representatives from Advanced Ecology, TDCJ, TPW, and COE. Three wildlife management areas, plus units of the TDJC prison system form the core area in Anderson and Freestone counties. When coupled with private lands, a public-private partnership of well over 100,000 core-area acres will be incorporated in the association. The association will eventually extend up and down the Trinity River from Kaufman County to Madison County.

Background. The entire Trinity River basin drains approximately 18,000

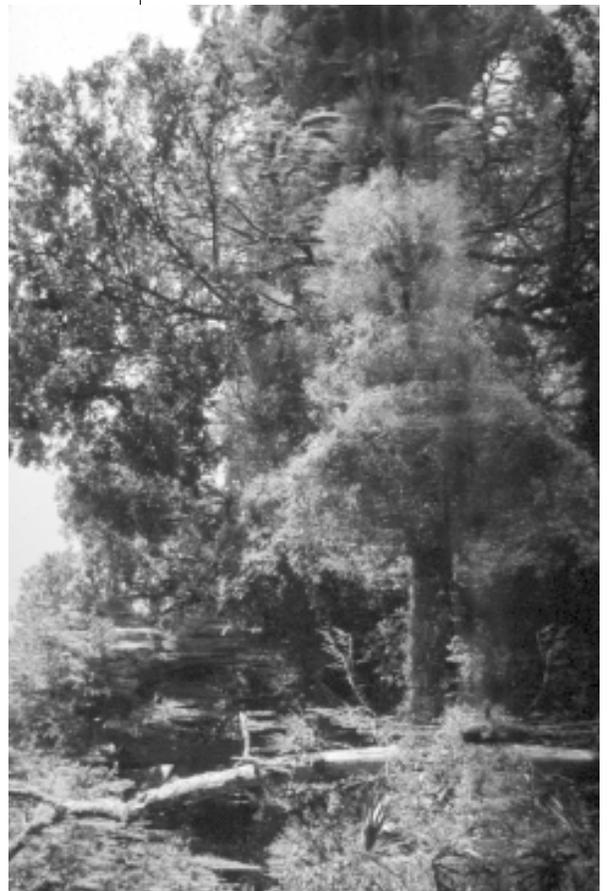
miles from Cooke County on the northern border of Texas to Trinity Bay. The Trinity essentially originates and ends in or near metropolitan areas, but flows through a rural countryside that is one of the most populated in the state. Some of the water quality issues that face the river and its users are: eutrophication of reservoirs, urban storm water runoff and wastewater effluent, nutrient and freshwater flows into Trinity Bay, and toxin and sediment runoff. Yet the corridor serves as one of the most important habitat systems in the Post Oak Savannah Region for waterfowl, upland game and nongame species. In fact, the Trinity River contains about 300,000 acres of bottomland hardwood forest, more than any other river system in the state. Although agricultural products remain the most important economic activity in the Trinity Basin, wildlife-based recreation and watershed management for water quality and supply, will grow in economic value to private landowners. New and innovative sources of economic returns from the land will prevent, or at least

slow, the fragmentation of large land holdings into small tracts for development. Hunting lease revenue is rapidly becoming a larger share of ranch income compared to traditional agriculture. Also, the Tarrant Regional Water District is testing the feasibility of constructing wetlands in the Trinity Basin for water purification purposes.

The future of wildlife management in Texas will depend on the success of public-private partnerships such as landowner cooperatives and associations. By focusing on the Trinity River corridor, important habitat will be conserved.

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Great Big and Blue

by Jim Dillard, Wildlife Biologist,
TPW, Mineral Wells

I don't know of anything more impressive in the bird world here in Cross Timbers Country than the sight of a great blue heron in flight. They remind me of a B-something bomber that you just know isn't going to get off the ground and when it does, you can't imagine how it stays in the air. Seeing one of these lumbering giants of the heron family slowly flapping along with what appears to be effortless wing beats is a sight to behold and will get your attention.

Great blue herons (*Ardea herodias*) are big. Standing about 4 feet tall and with a 6 foot wing span, they are the largest of all North American members of the heron and egret family. They can be seen from Alaska to Nova Scotia and south from Mexico to the West Indies. In Texas, they're year around residents and are common around ponds, lakes, streams and just about any where there's shallow water with aquatic things in it to eat. During the dead of winter, they just hunker down and deal with the chill and cold weather by fluffing up their feathers and drawing their head close to their body, making them look like they'd rather be someplace else.

They are expert wade-fishermen and use stealth tactics to catch fish, crayfish, frogs, small birds, rodents, snakes, salamanders, turtles and other water critters. Some have even been seen stalking gophers and voles on dry land. Slowly walking or standing in shallow water waiting for something to swim, wiggle or slither by is their primary modus operandi. I've also seen them belly deep in stock ponds and walking shorelines searching for food.



Anything seen within thrusting distance of their long neck doesn't stand much of a chance to escape and is quickly dispatched by a quick jab and a gulp. Most fish are flipped in the air to be swallowed headfirst and they can swallow surprisingly large prey as any full grown bull frog could attest.

Adults are blue-gray with a black head stripe and have feathery plums on their head, neck and back during the breeding season. Their bill is yellow and like most herons in flight, their neck is drawn up an "S" shape with the feet extending straight behind them. The coarse guttural squawk they make is unlike that of any other bird I know and if you don't know it you may think something big is about to get you. Standing behind or beneath a great blue heron that has just launched into flight is not a good idea as they often "lighten the load" from the rear cargo door. I learned this the hard way while counting heron nests up on Possum Kingdom Lake a few years back and do not recommend it. Although often called cranes or "fish-cranes", they're not. Cranes fly with

their necks stretched out in flight. The only two crane species found in Texas are the migratory Sandhill Crane and the endangered Whooping Crane.

Although solitary most of the year, they often nest in colonies with other great blues. Platform nests of stick, twigs and leaves are usually built in tall trees although here in Cross Timbers Country I've found them in anything from cottonwood to mesquite trees and even on power transmission towers. Nesting sites for these guys is highly variable. Males usually bring nest building materials to the females and she builds it to her satisfaction which is probably his way of preserving domestic tranquility (the old let her do it her way method). She then shares incubation duties with him on the 3-5 pale blue eggs for the next 25-30 days and then it's nonstop fishing and feeding the young for another month or so before they leave the nest.

Great blue herons have a field day during droughty times when water levels are low and their prey items are concentrated in shallow water. If you visit Lake Mineral Wells State Park, there's a colony of nesting great blues there along Rock Creek. They're easy to find. Just listen for all the racket they make.

Like other nongame water birds found in Texas, great blue herons are protected by State and Federal laws. Around the turn of the century, feathers from many heron species were used to decorate women's hats and that demand

(Continued on page 4)

MAKING TRACTS FOR TEXAS WILDLIFE

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Build a Nesting Shelf for Barn Swallows or Robins

Providing supplemental habitat in the form of nesting boxes is not only personally satisfying, but is something that can be done regardless of property size.

Depending upon the part of the state, a nesting shelf can be utilized by either robins, or to coax barn swallows into nesting in places other than over doorways and other inconvenient locations.

If the shelf is to be used for robins, nail it to a tree 10-12 feet from the ground, in a brushy area. Point the open part of the shelf toward another tree or shrub so young birds will have a place to land when they first begin to build.

For swallows, place the shelf in locations such as up under the eaves of barns, porches, or other sheltered areas where their nest will be out of the way.

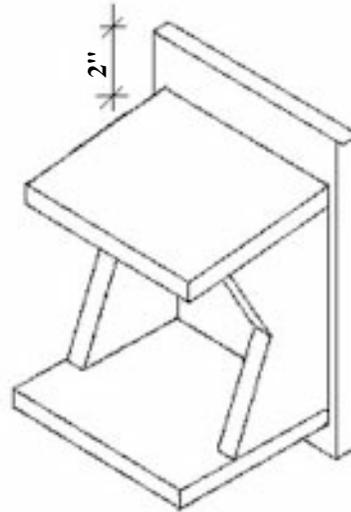
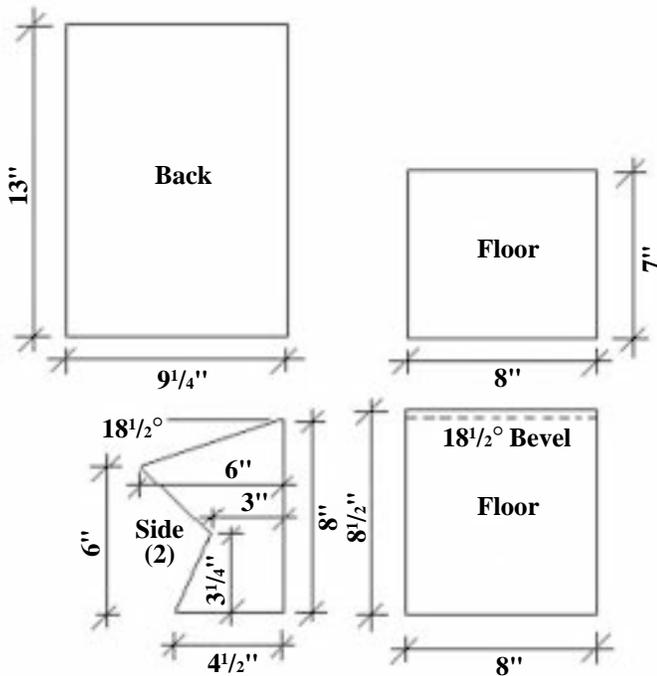


Materials:

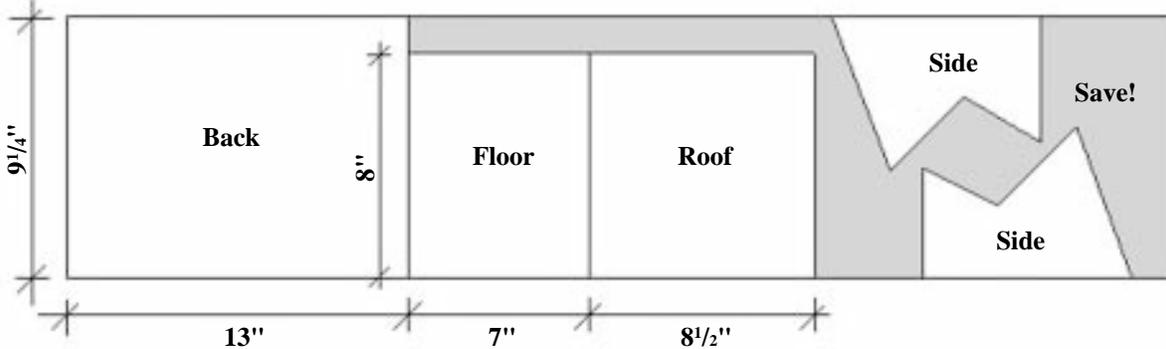
One 1" x 10" x 4' piece of cedar, cypress, or redwood lumber
12 1/2" wood screws

Construction:

- Cut out all pieces – back, floor, roof and two side pieces.
- Attach the sides to the bottom, flush to the back and outside edges, then attach the back.
- Attach the roof to the sides.



Lumber: One 1" x 10" x 4'0"



Working for Wildlife...

Assisting Private Landowners

The wildlife biologists at TPW are well trained, highly educated and motivated people. They work very hard to stay apprised of the latest techniques and findings in wildlife biology and to promote and practice responsible, successful wildlife management techniques on private lands. Currently, 10 Technical Guidance Biologists and the entire wildlife division staff are available to help private landowners assess conditions for wildlife and make recommendations for restoration, conservation and enhancement.

TPW biologists provided wildlife information to more than 100,000 people last year. These specialists in wildlife biology worked with more than 2400 private landowners, controlling over 10 million acres of land to provide pertinent technical information about wildlife habitat restoration and enhancement.



Gene Miller is a Technical Guidance Biologist in the Wildlife Division's Region 1, covering the High Plains and the Rolling Plains ecological regions of the state. He has worked for TPW for 14 years.

Miller acquired his love of the outdoors from his father, who taught him a strong stewardship ethic through dove hunting, fishing, camping, and a deep respect for The Creator, who he finds right here in the rivers, lakes, fields, and coasts of Texas. Full involvement in Scouting, from Cub Scout through the rank of Eagle Scout with two palms also had a lasting influence on him and his choice of career.

During the summer of 1967, Miller spent two weeks at the Philmont Scout Ranch near Cimmaron, New Mexico. While there he met a high school biology teacher who was "moonlighting" for the

"The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."

—Aldo Leopold

summer... he had a degree in Wildlife Management from Texas A&M. "I knew from that time forward what my career was to be, even though a stint in the United States Marine Corps was sandwiched in between graduation from A&M and full-time employment in wildlife conservation."

After leaving the Marine Corps, Gene spent 9 years with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. While there, he was involved with white-tailed deer and Eastern wild turkey restoration, black bear and raccoon research, an extensive public hunting program, and of course, what Gene does so very well—providing technical guidance assistance to private landowners.

Joining Texas Parks and Wildlife in 1986, the Pineywoods and Post Oak Savannah ecological regions were the beneficiaries of Gene's expertise as he continued working with Eastern wild turkey restoration programs, acted as a liaison with the National Forests, and provided harvest recommendations to landowners and hunting clubs.

In 1989, Miller became one of TPW's Technical Guidance Biologists. Gene works directly with landowners and sportsmen concerning wildlife management practices in the High Plains and Rolling Plains regions of Texas. Gene also effects extensive liaison with other state, federal, and private conservation organizations.

Miller sees the sustainability of modern agriculture in today's economy and the resulting effect on farm families, farming and ranching as a way of life,

and the resulting impact on rural communities as one of the challenges facing landowners in the High Plains and Rolling Plains of Texas.

Other challenges that Miller enjoys tackling include helping landowners to understand that *all* open space landscape is habitat, irrespective of current land use, and that the corresponding impacts associated with that land use dramatically affect the ability of land to sustain native wildlife populations and human populations.

Miller helps landowners to understand that a steady reliance on replication of natural processes such as the use of prescription fire and grazing to manage plant succession for vegetative diversity to benefit wildlife habitat is far more beneficial in the long run than tempting "quick-fix" solutions.

The belief that "it's the responsibility of every household and family who cares about wildlife and nature in our state to foster a land and wildlife stewardship ethic among younger Texans" is what Miller practices as he goes about his duties and works with individual landowners.

Miller gains tremendous personal satisfaction from the "privilege of assisting landowners who have a respect for the land and native wildlife that it supports, and who realize that we are only temporary steward of all of these things. I've been fortunate to work in 5 ecological regions spanning 2 states, from the Southeast to the Southwest during the last 22 years... and Panhandle farmers, ranchers, and sportsmen are some of the nicest folks I've ever met."

Great Big and Blue (Continued from page 2)

almost resulted in their decimation. Consequently, early conservation groups such as the Audubon Society were formed that promoted the passage of laws to protect them and today most species have recovered and are thriving.

Here in Cross Timbers Country, great blue herons have a pretty good deal – they fish whenever and wherever they want to, no season, bag limit or fishing license required. Until next time – I'll see you down the road.

Spring Habitips

Practical and useful information for improving wildlife habitat.



Begin monitoring nest boxes for breeding activity of wood ducks, whistling ducks, blue birds and other songbirds. In April, mottled ducks, wood ducks and whistling ducks will begin hatching and require shallow, vegetated ponds for rearing their young.



Monitor turkey breeding activity. Begin Spring turkey hunts in counties with a Spring season. Continue to protect roost sites, hunting away from the margins. Turkeys require areas with good herbaceous cover that contain insects for rapidly growing poults. In areas where platform feeders are being used to supplementally feed turkeys utilize 16-18% crude protein pelleted feed during February through April to increase egg production.

June, July, and August are important times of year for turkeys. This is the time of year when turkey hens will be raising their broods. Their success will determine the establishment and growth of future turkey populations.



Managing road sides or open areas is an easy way to provide valuable wildlife openings on ranch lands. Mowing, disking, and fertilizing native vegetation along alternate lengths of roadside will often provide a wide diversity of nutritious native forage at low cost. Mowing should be done on both sides of the road in late July, after nesting and then again on only one side in March to protect nesting habitat. Lightly disking and fertilizing different strips here and there in May and September will add to

plant species diversity and vegetative cover. Road sides managed in this fashion provide excellent nesting and brood-rearing habitat for quail and turkeys, good year-round forage for deer, nesting and feeding areas for a variety of songbirds.



Continue feeding for songbirds in backyard feeders during this critical time of year. Utilize native plants to attract butterflies and hummingbirds. Keep water available for songbirds at a variety of levels, in varying degrees of cover to meet the needs of the widest possible number of species. A shallow dish at the edge of the garden provides cover as well as water.

Wildlife Regulations Bullets

TPW Proposals Target Increased Opportunity, Simplification

If it flies at the federal level, a recently announced set of proposed alterations to Texas migratory game bird regulations could mean better hunting this fall, according to state wildlife officials.

As with all state migratory game bird proposals, TPW's recommendations must conform to federal frameworks for the upcoming fall season. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will finalize the standards for the Central Flyway this summer. Proposals under consideration include:

- Petitioning for a week later closure to the North Zone duck season.
- Creation of a third goose zone in the north-central part of the state.
- Possibly extending sandhill crane hunting in two areas along the mid and lower coast.

Proposed dates for the various migratory game bird hunting seasons in Texas for 2000-2001 are:

- **Dove** — Sept. 1-Oct. 30 in the North Zone; Sept. 1-Oct. 17 and Dec. 26-Jan. 7 in the Central Zone; and Sept. 22-Nov. 5 and Dec. 26-Jan. 9 in the South Zone. The proposed white-winged dove season is Sept. 2, 3, 9, and 10 in the Special White-winged Dove Area of South Texas.
- **Teal** — Sept. 15-30.
- **Sandhill Crane** — Nov. 11-Feb. 11 in Zone A; Dec. 2-Feb. 11 in Zone B; and Jan. 6-Feb. 11 in Zone C.
- **Rail, Gallinule** — Sept. 15-30 and Oct. 28-Dec. 20.
- **Ducks, Mergansers, Coots** — Oct. 21-24 and Oct. 28-Jan. 21 in the High Plains Mallard Management Unit; Oct. 28-29 and Nov. 11-Jan. 28 in the North Zone; and Oct. 28-Nov. 26 and Dec. 9-Jan. 28 in the South Zone.
- **Goose** — Oct. 28-Jan. 21 in the Eastern Zone; Oct. 28-Feb. 11 in the Central Zone; and Oct. 21-Feb. 4 in

the Western Zone. Special snow goose season opening Jan. 22 in the Eastern Zone; Feb. 5 in the Western Zone; and Feb. 12 in the Central Zone, depending on adoption of season dates for ducks. Closure statewide on April 1.

Anyone wishing to comment on these proposed changes can write to Hunting Information at Texas Parks and Wildlife, 4200 Smith School Road, Austin, TX 78744, or call (800) 792-1112. Comments may also be made at the public hearing held at the Commissioners Hearing Room, Texas Parks and Wildlife headquarters, Austin, on June 1, 2000. These rules, if approved by the commission June 1, will be tentative until the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sets the federal regulations in late June. If approved by the commission and USFWS, the proposed changes would go into effect Sept. 1, 2000.

Helping Songbirds Through Cowbird Control

Throughout North America songbird numbers are declining. While there is no one single reason for this decline, one major contributing factor is the spread of the brown-headed cowbird. The brown-headed cowbird, *Molothrus ater*, is a member of the blackbird family. They are distinguished from other species of blackbirds in the world by their parasitic nature. The brown head and metallic green-black of the adult males easily identifies the brown-headed cowbird. Female cowbirds are a pale brown with a gray-brown head. Both males and females have a length of about 7½ inches.

These birds were once limited to the short-grass prairies, where they followed the herds of buffalo, feeding on the insects stirred up by the movement of herds as they moved from place to place. Today however, this highly adaptive bird is found throughout North America. This is a problem because of the reproductive strategies the species employs. The cowbird is what is referred to as a brood parasite. This means the female lays her eggs in the nests of other birds, abandoning them to the care of foster parents. The foster birds raise the cowbird chick to the detriment of their own young. Because the female cowbird can lay an average of 40 eggs per season, susceptible species of songbirds, such as the black-capped vireo and the golden-cheeked warbler, that are already endangered, are particularly at risk.

Some species of birds are able to resist parasitism by cowbirds, but many are not. Those that are tend to be the birds that evolved with cowbirds in the open, short-grass parts of the country. These birds employ a number of strategies for dealing with cowbird parasitism. Some aggressive species, such as the mockingbird, actively chase cowbirds away from their nests. Others species will push the cowbird egg out of the nest, or build over the egg and re-nest. Still other species will simply abandon the nest. Depending upon the time of year, these birds may or may not re-nest. Cowbirds have been known to successfully parasitize more than 225 species of birds in the United States.

Those birds that have not evolved with cowbirds tend to be birds that are found in tree-covered, forested areas. The most common to be parasitized are the warblers, vireos, flycatchers, and finches. What is important to understand is that these parasitized nests are not *unsuccessful* nests just because no baby songbirds have been raised. They *are* successful nests. The problem is they are producing the wrong “product”: they are producing baby *cowbirds*, not baby *songbirds*.

One of the most effective short-term methods of controlling cowbirds is through trapping programs. Traps are operated from March 1 through May 31 only. During this time they are checked frequently, preferably every day, and data is collected. Any birds that are not cowbirds that have accidentally been trapped must be released as soon as possible. Female cowbirds are humanely euthanized through cervical dislocation. Males are released, often after being banded for study purposes. Cowbird parasitism on vulnerable species cannot be systematically brought under control without the help of trapping.

Since cowbirds are attracted to cattle, many people think that by merely removing cattle from an area, the parasitism rate on vulnerable species will automatically be reduced. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. If cattle are not present, cowbirds may simply switch to following sheep, goats, horses, or any other grazing animal. Cowbirds routinely travel large distances between roosting areas, and feeding areas. It is not feasible to eliminate grain fields and suburban yards, or remove all grazing animals from the landscape to control parasitism by cowbirds. Therefore, trapping of cowbirds to reduce their numbers becomes an important option to consider if we are to prevent declines in songbird populations.

Rather than removing cattle in order to reduce parasitism, the members of the



Central Texas Cattlemen's Association and Texas Parks and Wildlife have found that parasitism rates can be reduced in Black-capped vireos by using the cattle to attract cowbirds into traps located near the cattle. This way the traps are away from the vireo's preferred brushy habitat, and do not interfere with nesting. Locating the traps to an area where there is a concentration of cattle grazing dramatically increases the number of cowbirds caught in the traps. The traps are checked daily to make sure any non-target species of bird (any bird that is not a cowbird) can be quickly released. Female cowbirds are removed and humanely killed by cervical dislocation. Some of the males are banded and released to help learn more about cowbird movements.

Many other landowners in the Hill Country counties are now actively trapping cowbirds to help reduce songbird parasitism rates. Because cowbirds are a native species in North America, they are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. However, there are exceptions to this law for acts of depredation by a few select species. Under the Texas Parks and Wildlife Code, Section 64.002(b) brown-headed cowbirds are included among this small group of eight non-protected bird species that “may be killed at any time and their nests or eggs may be destroyed.” State regulations may not supersede federal regulations, so it is important that all landowners interested participating in cowbird trapping become certified through Texas Parks and Wildlife's free training program. For further information, contact:

Texas Parks and Wildlife
4200 Smith School Road
Austin, TX 78744
(800) 792-1112

Effects of Quail Management on Nongame Species

by Gene Miller, Wildlife Biologist, TPW, Canyon

Paraphrased from “Beef, Brush, & Bobwhites” by Guthery, pages 163-64:

“We studied response of nongame birds to bobwhite management on mesquite rangeland in the Rolling Plains. Management included disced strips, tepee and permanent brush shelters, half-cut mesquite and food plantings. For 1 year, we counted nongame birds on the managed site and on a similar site with no management. Nongame birds benefited... there were more species and higher densities on the managed than on the unmanaged site in 10 of 12 months. With management, we increased the availability of seeds for any bird that eats seeds, not just bobwhites. Any time habitat diversity is increased, there is likely to be an increase in the number of species using the habitat... because the changes are made on a relatively small scale, you should lose no bird species. On the other hand, recommendations on grazing and brush management favor some species of nongame, but do not favor others. Birds or mammals that require dense brush are not adapted to the more open areas preferred for bobwhites. Birds or mammals that require high condition rangeland may not inhabit pastures in the lower condition required for bobwhites.”

Paraphrased from “Interaction of Range Management or Nonmanagement with Wildlife Habitat and Wildlife” by Koziy and Fulbright, pages 221-222:

Livestock Grazing: Researchers found that eastern meadowlarks were more numerous under moderate than under heavy grazing. Long-billed curlew numbers are significantly correlated with spring and fall grazing intensity. Arizona researchers stated that a grazed area supported significantly higher numbers of birds in summer, while densities did not differ in winter. Grazing appeared to favor birds as a class over rodents. In a study of four grazing treatments, bird species richness was highest under heavy

short duration grazing (HSDG) and HSDG was the only system to show an increase in bird species diversity between years.

Brush Management: Researchers observed no difference in bird density, species diversity, or species richness... between untreated sites and sites later sprayed with herbicides to control mesquites. The density of mockingbirds was lower on treated than untreated areas, but no other species was affected. Habitat management to favor mourning doves and bobwhite quail was associated with a 54% increase in combined density of nongame birds. A researcher found that, as habitats changed from brush to clearings, tree-foraging birds were replaced by ground-foraging species. Clearing brush at any intensity decreased total bird density but improved species richness and diversity relative to untreated areas.

Prescribed Burning: Researchers stated that the absence of the deliberate use of fire to control vegetation succession has done untold damage to prairie wildlife. Research found that ground-nesting lark sparrow nests were more numerous in the most recent burns and declined with increasing litter build-up.

Food for thought and discussion:

1) Should managers be concerned with improving conditions for single species or entire “systems”?

Thinking “comprehensively” to manage habitat systems will lead to greater wildlife diversity.

2) Can Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) land be managed for game and nongame wildlife?

Yes, if tracts are established using a diverse, native (to the region and particular site) cover mixture.

3) Can you manage forest lands for quail and red-cockaded woodpeckers at the same time?

Yes, use of prescribed fire and a timber harvesting system that provides for different seral stages within the forest can lead to greater abundance and diversity of wildlife.

4) Can you manage quail and Texas horned lizards at the same time?

Yes, with the common denominator being appropriate amounts of bare ground, woody cover, and native forbs, legumes, and grasses.

5) The axe, fire, plow, cow, and gun are tools for the wildlife manager. Is “no manipulation” of habitat for a specified time a *management* option?

Yes, it is the part of prescribed grazing systems that wildlife and range managers call “rest” and is a necessary management tool for healthy rangelands.



Parting thought: The strength of the traditional wildlife habitat management approach is that it explicitly uses and enhances *natural processes* to perpetuate populations and habitats upon which they depend.

**HELP STOP POACHING
REPORT VIOLATIONS TO
OPERATION GAME THIEF
1-800-792-GAME**

Landowner Incentive Program

Working together for the conservation of rare plants, animals and habitats on private lands in Texas

The Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) is a Wildlife Division program designed to provide financial and technical assistance to landowners interested in conserving rare species and habitats on their property. **The first government program of its kind in the nation** in which federal funds were used to directly help landowners improve rare species habitat and populations, LIP was conceived in 1997 with strong support from concerned Texas landowners. In 1999 the Governor's Office and the Texas State Legislature likewise demonstrated their whole-hearted backing of this program by appropriating state funds to help meet this challenge. Today both federal and state funds are

available to interested landowners through this TPW program.

A wide array of projects has been funded by LIP since its origin. Projects have been undertaken dealing with rare species such as Prairie-chickens (Attwater's and Lesser) and ocelots to restoring dwindling prairie and thornscrub habitats. An effort is made to facilitate rare species/habitat conservation in all portions of the state and to impact as many species and habitats as possible.

Confidentiality remains an utmost consideration in each LIP project. The landowner's name and address will be required for accounting purposes, however in accordance with the respect for the landowner's right to privacy, the kind and

amount of information recorded by TPW both before and during the project can be negotiated by the landowner.

Since February 1 of this year, three new LIP contracts have been signed between Texas landowners and TPW for the conservation of rare species and habitats. Several proposals are currently before the LIP Advisory Committee which recommends the funding of proposals on their individual merit. Additionally, a number of other project applications from across the state are in various stages of development and review at this time.

If you are interested in participating in improving rare species habitat and populations on your property, contact your Regional Wildlife Office, or contact the:

Landowner Incentive Program
Texas Parks and Wildlife
4200 Smith School Road
Austin, Texas 78744-3292
(512) 389-4799

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Texas Parks and Wildlife
4200 Smith School Road
Austin, Texas 78744

