

## Changes ahead for *Making Tracts* and *Eye on Nature* newsletters

By Linda Campbell

For a number of years, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has been producing two newsletters serving what were once distinct audiences. *Making Tracts*, first published in 1990, was mailed to individual landowners and groups of landowners cooperatively managing their smaller tracts of land for wildlife. *Eye on Nature*, a newsletter focusing on topics of broad interest to nature enthusiasts, was developed 12 years ago. In recent years, we have seen the content of these two newsletters become more similar, with both including information on habitat conservation, plant and animal diversity, and ways that people can enjoy, learn about, and contribute to healthy lands and water. As we respond to a changing constituency, we see an opportunity to address topics of interest to traditional producers, recreational landowners, small acreage landowners, homeowners, and nature enthusiasts of all description.

This has led us to the decision to combine these two newsletters into one new and expanded newsletter to be mailed to landowners and nature enthusiasts who were previously on the mailing lists for the *Making Tracts* and *Eye on Nature* newsletters. This new newsletter (yet to be named) will launch in the spring of 2008 and will replace the previous two newsletters. This strategy will help us reduce costs while still providing relevant information about conservation of the natural world, whether you own and manage a large ranch, or live on a city lot.

Your comments and input regarding this new newsletter are invited and welcomed; we value your input as a way to ensure that the newsletter is a relevant and useful information source. Feel free to comment at any time by e-mailing mark.klym@tpwd.state.tx.us

Linda is the TPWD Private Lands and Public Hunting Program Director, working out of Austin.

### Cooperation and Conservation

Editorial comment by Mark Klym

Cooperation. Where would we be without it?

In the conservation world, cooperation has become a necessary tool in making many of our efforts possible. In our daily work, we find it necessary to work cooperatively with other state agencies, other states, local and county officials, federal offices, nongovernmental agencies, etc., in order to accomplish our mission.

In this newsletter, we will explore just a few of the cooperative efforts we work with each day. From cooperation within and between parks, to cooperating in multi-agency projects, the authors illustrate the importance of this reality to achieving our mutual goals.



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# The Shifting Conservation Paradigm: Integrated Bird Joint Ventures

By Jeff Raasch, Chad Boyd and Mary Gustafson

**J**oint venture is a term usually associated with the workings of big business and found in the pages of the Wall Street Journal, but that changed in the mid-1980s. It was at that time that waterfowl populations were in crisis. A 10-year-long drought and the draining of wetlands for agricultural and other uses were taking their toll on the birds' habitats and subsequently on them. Because waterfowl were then (and are now) North America's most prominent and economically important group of migratory birds, the U.S. and Canadian governments took action. Scientists from inside and outside the governments were asked to identify "waterfowl habitat areas of major concern" across the continent and to develop a conservation plan. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan was signed by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and the Canadian Minister of the Environment in 1986.

The scope of the conservation effort needed left no room for doubt: acting alone, the two federal governments did not have the resources needed to save these vital habitats. It was from this dilemma that the concept of conservation Joint Ventures was born: Private- and public-sector partners would work together to conserve the continent's waterfowl populations and their essential habitats. Texas has three Joint Ventures that came out of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan: Playa Lakes, Lower Mississippi Valley and Gulf Coast Joint Ventures.

Conservationists concerned about other bird groups—landbirds, shorebirds, colonial waterbirds, upland game birds—saw the success of the Plan model and adopted it as they developed conservation strategies for their species of concern. Rather than reinvent the wheel, they looked to the Plan's Joint Ventures to help implement their plans. Within their established geographic areas, the Joint Ventures, when possible, have integrated the conservation of shorebirds, landbirds, and other waterbirds into their planning processes.

A Conservation/Habitat Joint Venture (JV) is a regional, self-directed partnership of government and non-governmental organizations, corporations and individuals that

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works across administrative boundaries to deliver science-based avian conservation. JVs work in support of national and international bird conservation plans by helping step the larger plans down to regional or landscape scales. They are organized (built) on the biological foundation of Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs) that encompass landscapes having similar bird communities, habitats and resource issues. They focus on a broad spectrum of tools including conservation planning, “on the ground” projects, outreach, monitoring and research, and they raise money for these activities through partner contributions and grants. Joint Ventures are not regulatory and do not directly compete with other conservation entities; in fact, these partnerships should enhance and facilitate the success of existing conservation efforts.

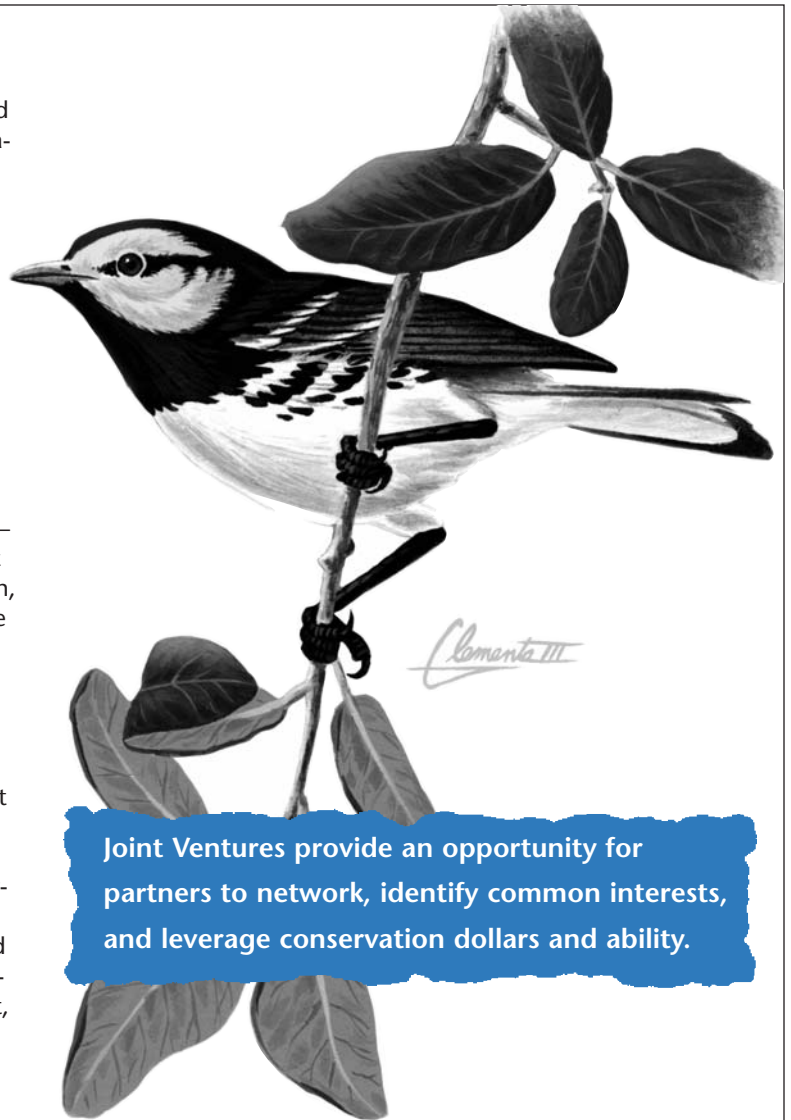
But “white spaces” remain on the map of North America—areas of habitat needing conservation attention where no joint ventures exist. New joint ventures, not associated with the Plan, have formed. From the long-established joint ventures to those in various stages of development, there are nearly two dozen such partnerships at work across the continental landscape. To date, joint ventures have invested \$4.5 billion to conserve 15.7 million acres of waterfowl and other bird habitats.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has taken the lead to fill in those “white spaces” in Texas by leading an effort to start the Rio Grande and Oaks and Prairies Joint Ventures.

The Oaks and Prairies JV (OPJV) is one of 20 habitat JVs in North America and focuses on promoting avian habitat conservation across administrative and geographic boundaries. The Edwards Plateau BCR provides habitat to a rich diversity of bird life, including the endangered Black-capped Vireo and Golden-cheeked Warbler. However, pressures from urban development, agronomic uses and plant community changes in the absence of natural disturbance regimes threaten critical habitat resources. Within the Oaks and Prairies BCR, avian habitat in the Cross Timbers Ecoregion has suffered from a lack of fire, which has reduced native shrub habitat availability and allowed for invasion of existing woody plant and grassland communities by eastern red cedar. Red cedar invasion results in habitat used by few bird species. In Texas, most of the Blackland Prairie habitat has been converted to urban or agricultural uses, with the remnants occurring in small, isolated patches. These changes have driven a reduction or elimination of native grassland habitat in much of Texas and declines in, or local extirpation of, associated species (e.g., Northern Bobwhite, Loggerhead Shrike).

The Rio Grande Joint Venture includes the U.S. and Mexican portions Chihuahuan Desert (BCR 35) and Tamaulipan Brushlands (BCR 36) Bird Conservation Regions. The RGJV Region has exceptionally high bird diversity, and many of these species are found nowhere else in the United States, or have only limited ranges elsewhere. Issues of concern in the RGJV include water issues ranging from stream channelization to xerification; invasive plants; changing fire regime; lack of population trends or basic natural history for many resident and breeding bird species; riparian corridors, often impacted by human use or livestock; fragmentation of natural habitats and the loss of natural habitats in the highly developed and agricultural areas of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Joint Ventures are fairly unique in their strategic approach to avian conservation. In this model, biological planning is used to identify and prioritize conservation needs of bird species, set



Joint Ventures provide an opportunity for partners to network, identify common interests, and leverage conservation dollars and ability.

population objectives, and develop working models that link population abundance to habitat condition.

This information serves as the basis for a spatially targeted conservation design or plan. Mechanisms for conservation delivery are then put together based on science and experience/intuition with both the natural and social systems in play. Follow-up monitoring provides a reference for gauging the success of conservation planning and delivery. Research is primarily centered on testing the assumptions underlying biological planning and conservation design. This process results in an increased understanding of the biology and management of bird species, and that increased understanding can be plugged back into the planning and design elements. The importance of this framework is that it links (and strengthens) different conservation tools as a repeating cycle of planning, doing and learning. Ultimately, the specific direction of Habitat Joint Ventures is a function of the goals and priorities identified by the Management Board, working with JV staff and technical committees and the resources available to pursue these goals.

Jeff is State Wetland and Joint Venture Program Leader working out of Austin. Chad is the former Coordinator of the Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture and Mary is Coordinator of the Rio Grande Joint Venture working out of Mission.



# Coastal Prairie Restoration

By Brent Ortego, Tim Anderson and Wade Harrell

The Coastal Prairie Conservation Initiative (CPCI) is a good example of landscape scale habitat restoration requiring partnerships of federal, state and private organizations and private landowners to create conservation on the ground at a scale that is meaningful. The Coastal Prairie in Texas made up about 8 million acres of tall grass prairies prior to the 1830s. It stretched as a broad band of grasslands from the relatively moist Jefferson County to the semi-arid Cameron County. As Anglos settled the Coastal Prairie they changed the landscape by converting the grasslands to row crops and exotic pastures resulting in only 1.8 million acres being left in various stages of quality and patch sizes. Only a few hundred thousand acres of these native grasslands remain in blocks greater than 10,000 acres in 2007. Much of the remaining acres are in a degraded stage occupied by high to moderate densities of brush. Species like the Attwater's Greater Prairie Chicken, Henslow's Sparrow and Northern Bobwhite have greatly declined because of prairie loss.

The Sam Houston Resource Conservation and Development Area, Inc., affiliated with the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Association, started working with grants, regulatory enhancement activities, and technical assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1995 in conjunction with cooperating private landowners to restore Coastal Prairie. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department was recruited to participate in this initiative in the late 1990s and brought to the team additional state and federal grants, and technical assistance. The Nature Conservancy joined

the initiative in the early 2000s and provided a prescribed fire burning team, additional technical assistance, access to new grants, and research capabilities. Ultimately, the biggest contributors have been the private landowners who provided their land and resources to improve the Coastal Prairie to make their ranches more profitable, and restore the prairie for historic and natural resource values without fear of regulatory consequences of enhancing rare species on their land.

The Coastal Prairie is largely gone as an ecosystem and will not likely be restored/maintained in meaningful (100,000+ acres) landscape sized units except in two locations: Kenedy County, and near Goliad. The CPCI is working with one of the Units that has the potential to be about 300,000 acres in size. Today this Unit in Goliad and Refugio counties is fragmented into three large pieces of about 100,000 acres. Work to date has focused on stopping further loss from brush encroachment and increasing native grasslands on 80,000 acres that are in key locations for reintroduction of Attwater's Greater Prairie Chicken.

Key Conservation Management Actions in the CPCI has been to remove and stop further encroachment on existing native grasslands by native brush by herbicide application, mechanical chopping of the brush and controlled burns. Grazing practices were implemented to maintain the vigor of native grasslands. This involved several major steps and lots of money that needed to be obtained from multiple sources because no one provider had sufficient funds.

Key steps were:

1. Recognizing the problem that animal species would disappear if the Coastal Prairie was not restored.
2. Organize a team of conservation groups that had sufficient funding and technical expertise to conduct the work.
3. Obtain regulatory relief in the form of federal Safe Harbor programs which assured land owners they would not incur any additional regulatory restriction if they improved their land for endangered species.
4. Convince and educate landowners that recommended practices would improve the profitability of their ranch, improve the natural resources and historic values, and would not adversely impact their use of their land.
5. Obtain funding from as many sources as possible to pay for the conservation practices.

The Attwater's Greater Prairie Chicken was released within the CPCI managed lands during the fall of 2007.

**Brent is a Diversity Biologist working out of Victoria. Tim is Partners Program Coordinator with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service out of Corpus Christi, and Wade is Coastal Prairie Project Director with The Nature Conservancy out of Victoria.**



## Texas Backyard Habitats Program

# Continues to Grow

By Alice Nance

The partnership between the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) and the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) to develop the *Best of Texas Backyard Habitats* certification program has proven to be a model of success. The program, launched in 2002 to offer wildlife gardeners the option of being recognized by both organizations under one joint certification, emphasizes excellence in environmental stewardship. Each year we have seen the program grow with more people electing to jointly certify their wildlife habitats with both TPWD and NWF.

The steady increase in *Best of Texas Backyard Habitats* certification is attributed to the strong partnership forged by TPWD and NWF that maximizes organizational resources to create awareness for wildlife habitat gardening. Texas is a big state with lots of ground to cover. With two entities dedicated to providing education about the benefits and techniques of gardening for wildlife, the ability to engage more participants has increased. In addition, both TPWD and NWF sponsor volunteer training programs that inform trainees about the *Best of Texas Backyard Habitats* program, thereby spreading the message through a network of informed and enthusiastic volunteers.

Getting the message out about creating habitat for wildlife continues to be necessary as habitat loss and fragmentation are still threats to wildlife today. That threat has been amplified by global warming, which leading scientists have identified as a significant danger to wildlife in the future. Participating in the *Best of Texas Backyard Habitats* program by creating a conservation-minded wildlife habitat is a great way to be part of the solution to help wildlife survive in a changing climate. To learn more about how global warming may affect your own backyard, visit [www.nwf.org/gardenersguide](http://www.nwf.org/gardenersguide) to download NWF's new report, *Gardener's Guide to Global Warming*. Both TPWD and NWF promote the use of native plants as part of their habitat certification programs. The selection of native plants over invasive exotic species will be paramount in a world impacted by global warming. Warmer temperatures create an environment in which many invasive species like English Ivy and Chinese Tallow thrive. Abundant growth of invasive species makes it more difficult for native flora to compete for space and sunlight. TPWD has created an informative brochure to raise awareness about invasive plants called *The Dangers of Invasive Species*. Go to [http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd\\_br\\_w7000\\_0942.pdf](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd_br_w7000_0942.pdf) for more information.

TPWD and NWF are committed to partnership building to ensure wildlife habitat diversity and healthy wildlife populations in Texas for years to come. If you still have not certified your landscape as a wildlife habitat or have not taken the next step to certify it as a *Best of Texas Backyard Habitat*, what are you waiting for? We have made it easy for you to make a difference for wildlife starting right at home. Habitats created at schools, businesses and places of worship also can be certified. Visit TPWD's *Texas Wildscapes* Web page to learn more about the program and to download a *Best of Texas Backyard Habitats* application: <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/wildscapes>. NWF also offers *Community Wildlife Habitat* certification for entire communities and cities. The City of Austin is the first community in Texas to register for NWF's community wildlife habitat program. Visit <http://www.nwf.org/community> for more information.

Alice is Education Program Manager for the National Wildlife Federation working out of Austin.



Do you enjoy watching hummingbirds in your back yard?

Would you like to learn more about these wonderful birds while helping our biologists learn more about their activities in Texas?

Why not join the Hummingbird Roundup?

To join the Hummingbird Roundup, please send a \$6 donation with your name, address, city, county, zip, and e-mail address to:  
Hummingbird Roundup  
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department  
4200 Smith School Road  
Austin, TX 78744

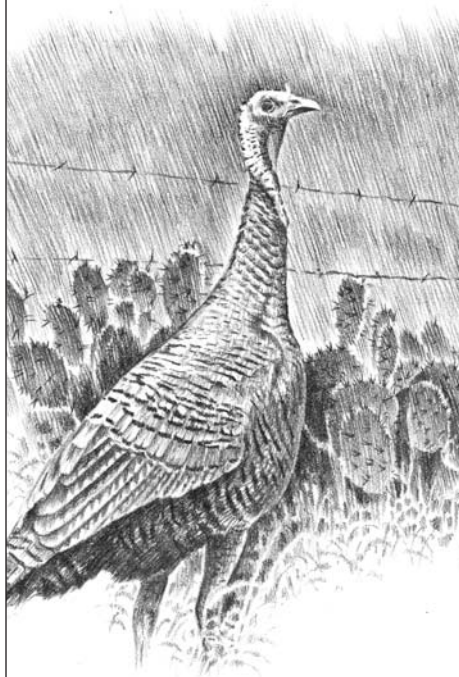


[The Back Porch, continued from back page]

stakeholders in conservation issues and ideas is critically important so that they not only enrich their lives, but make informed decisions at the voting booth. Programs such as Master Naturalists, Urban Wildlife, Wildscapes and Nature Trackers provide core venues for education and outreach that leads to conservation action.

Together, all Texans, rural and urban, will need to form partnerships in securing the future of land, wildlife, and other natural resources in this great state. So it is fitting that as we continue working together, the Wildlife Division at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department presents a unified message of wildlife conservation. In the near future, *Eye on Nature* and *Making Tracts*, the Division's newsletter for landowners, will merge. The result will be a single newsletter combining different perspectives and topics from program areas, but with the common theme of wildlife and habitat conservation. We hope you like this approach, because only by forming partnerships can we hope to leave a lasting legacy for future generations.

**Matt is Program Director for the Wildlife Diversity Program working in Austin.**



# The World Birding Centers

## A Model of Cooperation

By Jennifer Owen

In an area rich in history, culture and biodiversity, the World Birding Center of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas is bringing ecotourism to a whole new level. A collaborative effort between 11 governmental agencies, the World Birding Center brings together the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the cities of Roma, Mission, Edinburg, McAllen, Hidalgo, Weslaco, Harlingen, Brownsville and South Padre Island. With nine sites stretched across the southern tip of Texas working in collaboration to promote conservation and education about birds and the habitats they utilize, the World Birding Center offers a multitude of nature viewing opportunities. Each site highlights a different habitat type from wetlands to thorn scrub, coastal marshes to freshwater resacas (ox bow lakes), a historic mansion to a restored river museum, a 40-acre urban park to a 1700-acre state park, and much more in between.

It is the partnership between the nine sites that makes the World Birding Center so remarkable, as they join together to expand the nature viewing and educational opportunities to visitors and residents of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. In August 2006, just three months after its grand opening, Estero Llano Grande State Park, the Weslaco wing of the World Birding Center, had a rare visitor—a Northern Jacana. The Jacana is a bird typically found in Mexico and Central America and is a rare visitor to South Texas. As soon as word of the rare bird got out, visitors from all over the United States, Canada and even Europe came calling. The World Birding Center network came together to facilitate viewing of this bird as all the other sites provided up-to-date sighting information and directions to the Weslaco site. In addition to this, the World Birding Center-sponsored rare bird alert (956-584-2731) kept callers abreast of recent sightings and movement of the bird. Through this shared effort, over 1,000 visitors paid a visit to the newly opened park in search of the rare bird. The effort to promote exciting happenings at other World Birding Center sites is not limited to rare birds. Hard-to-find, specialty and even common birds, as well as butterflies, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, plants and much more seen at each site are promoted through all other sites, providing visitors to one site with a birding and nature viewing road map for the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

This team effort continues though the educational opportunities offered at each site. The education and interpretive staffs at each site have established a support network where those employees with exceptional knowledge in specific areas, such as local flora and fauna, interpretive techniques, local culture and history, etc., help to train other World Birding Center employees. Furthermore, employees for each of the sites frequently offer their services as guest speakers or teachers in support of another site's educational programs. In addition to the sharing of knowledge, the World Birding Center sites share educational materials such as live animals, preserved specimens, and equipment, as well as technological resources such as telescopes and microscopes. Working in conjunction with the other eight sites allows each site to access the resources and support typically found only in large institutions. This permits each site, no matter its size, to provide quality educational opportunities to its visitors.

Alone, each of the World Birding Center sites is a remarkable place to visit, but together they provide an unforgettable nature adventure for visitors to the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Nine sites, nine cities, nine different habitats, nine knowledgeable staffs, one amazing experience—the World Birding Center.

Jennifer is Park Naturalist at Estero Llano Grande State Park in Weslaco.



## Support Habitat Conservation in Texas with Friends, Family and Birds!

By Shelly Plante and Carol Jones

The Great Texas Birding Classic is an excellent opportunity to go out with family and friends and enjoy Texas' amazing spring migration. Made possible through a partnership between the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, this event raises over \$50,000 a year for on-the-ground habitat conservation projects. Registration fees and corporate and community sponsorship make project funding possible, so come out and join the fun next spring! The event is perfect for beginning birders needing a great outdoor classroom, advanced birders hoping to see a fall-out on the coast each spring, kids with an interest in nature and the outdoors, mentors who would like to share their passion for birds with friends and family, and anyone else with an interest in birds and conservation of their habitat along the Texas coast.

From April 22–29, 2007, the 11th Annual Great Texas Birding Classic created life-long memories for 49 teams from throughout the United States and Canada. Teams covered all age groups and skill levels, including 16 youth teams, three teams of visually impaired birders (they bird by ear!), and 11 teams for a tournament called the Big Sit! which allows for up to 10 team members who stay in one 17-foot diameter circle for a day of birding. Adult teams who ranged in age from their 20s to their 70s rounded out this year's team roster.

The 2007 Great Texas Birding Classic resulted in seven conservation projects being awarded grants. Exciting good news is that a grand total of \$73,000 will be granted to conservation projects this year. A new partner, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Texas Coastal Program, joined TPWD and GCBO and committed funding which resulted in the increase to this new record amount. The conservation grants are used to fund approved habitat acquisition, restoration and enhancement projects along the 41-county area of the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail ([www.tpwd.state.tx.us/wildlifetrails](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/wildlifetrails)). Over the past 11 years, the Great Texas Birding Classic's winning teams have donated \$578,000 to avian habitat conservation. This is a significant accomplishment and one that truly helps the birds of Texas and all birds that migrate through our great state.

Mark your calendars now for the 12th Annual Great Texas Birding Classic from April 2 – May 4, 2008. We look forward to seeing you on the Texas coast!

Shelly is Nature Tourism Coordinator working out of our Austin office. Carol is the Birding Tournament Coordinator with the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory in Lake Jackson.

# Wild Stuff!



## Wildlife Posters

- You Can Help Texas Turtles (pictured)
- Bats of the Western United States
- Venomous Snakes of Texas
- Migratory Landbirds of the Southeast
- Common Feeder Birds of Eastern North America
- Common Feeder Birds of Western North America

\$2 each plus \$3 shipping and handling for up to 4 posters. Add \$1 for each additional poster.

Visit [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/business/shop/posters/](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/business/shop/posters/) for order form.

## Hummingbird Wheel

This 10" full-color identification wheel is a helpful reference to keep nearby when you watch the hummingbirds. Sixteen hummingbird species are featured, all of which have been documented in Texas! For each bird, the wheel tells you its range in North America, habitat type, and distinguishing features of both males and females.



\$11.95 (shipping and handling included)

Visit [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/business/shop/featured/](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/business/shop/featured/) for order form.

## Fall is the best time to clean and prepare bird nesting boxes.

For information on two popular nesting birds, check out *Purple Martins and their management in Texas* (\$2) or *Bluebirds in Texas* (\$1) (shipping and handling included)

Visit [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/business/shop/books/booklets/](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/business/shop/books/booklets/) for additional items and order form.



# The Back Porch

## Partnerships

By Matt Wagner

In late April, I met my good friend and colleague Gene Miller for a turkey hunt in the Texas Panhandle. As a TPWD Technical Guidance Biologist, Gene works with over 70 landowners on about 600,000 acres in that region of the state. He knows the land, wildlife and people of the High Plains or Llano Estacado. Gene had permission to hunt on some private ranches near the Salt Fork of the Red River. Remote and wild, the unique riparian areas that dissect the treeless plain provided a rich backdrop for an experience I will never forget. Abundant rainfall had transformed the landscape from previously drought-stricken to vibrant hues. Flowering spectacle pod and honey locust framed the cottonwood gallery woodlands where Rio Grande turkeys and other wildlife thrive. At 5:30 a.m. we eased into the forest, the chuck-wills widows

calling so loudly we had to raise our voices to communicate in the darkness. Screech owls and barred owls joined the pre-dawn chorus as we settled into place to call in a big gobbler. Boots and pants wet with dew, my eyes also moistened as I began to think about the blessings and experiences in my life, and this was one of them. To be at that place at that moment was a gift that could easily be taken for granted if I didn't keep things in perspective.

Conservation of land in Texas will only occur through the private landowner. The folks on the land make decisions every day that have positive or negative impacts on the habitat and wildlife that occur there. Leaving an indelible mark upon the land for better or worse, the landowner will make decisions that make sense economically and in concert with the potential for the

land to fulfill. Fortunately today, wildlife has a dominant role in the economic theater. Wildlife, along with corn and milo, cows and minerals, will determine the complexion of the land surface. The unique relationship between wildlife held in public trust, and the private property on which they reside, forms the foundation for a true public/private partnership which justifies the need for biologists like Gene Miller. Land purchased and operated for wildlife recreation is preserving habitat on millions of acres in Texas. This trend will only become stronger as new landowners escape to the countryside seeking outdoor pursuits and solitude.

But just as important as the land-owning citizenry are the urban dwellers who make up more than 80 percent of our state's population. Engaging these

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