



Texas Wetland News

and WETLAND CONSERVATION PLAN UPDATE

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TEXAS
PARKS &
WILDLIFE

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MASTER NATURALIST PROGRAM SEEKS APPLICANTS

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The Texas Master Naturalist program, with 30 chapters located across the state, aims to develop a corps of well-informed citizen volunteers who educate their communities about the management of natural resources.

See page six for more details.



WANT TO GET ON THE MAILING LIST?

If you would like to be added to the mailing list or would like to submit an article for the next issue of the Texas Wetlands News, contact:

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West Galveston Bay Conservation Corridor Partnership

Marsh Restoration Project Parlays into Acquisition

On Oct. 28, 2004, U.S. Department of Interior officials announced that the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department will receive a \$1 million Coastal Wetland Planning, Protection and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) grant for a multi-partner land acquisition and marsh restoration initiative along West Galveston Bay, otherwise known as the West Bay Conservation Corridor. National Coastal Wetlands Conservation grants are awarded to states through a competitive process and are funded by the 1990 Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act. Funding for the program is generated from excise taxes on fishing equipment and motorboat and small engine fuels.

Previous acquisition and restoration activities within the West Bay Conservation Corridor have already resulted in the protection of more than 5,000 acres of coastal habitat. Currently, regional conservation organizations continue efforts to identify

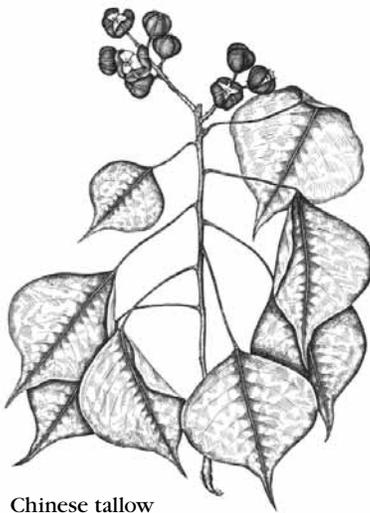
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West Galveston Bay Conservation Corridor Partnership, continued

and acquire land tracts of significant habitat value. Among the areas previously identified as critical habitat, a large undivided tract of Hitchcock Prairie property south of the retired blimp base had received considerable attention from Galveston Bay stakeholder groups and resource agencies.

A 3,000-acre tidal marsh and a coastal tallgrass prairie wetland/upland complex, the Hitchcock Prairie property contains estuarine marsh, prairie depressional wetlands, upland prairie, shallow open water flats, pimple mounds and inter-mound flats that are indicative of coastal tallgrass prairie.



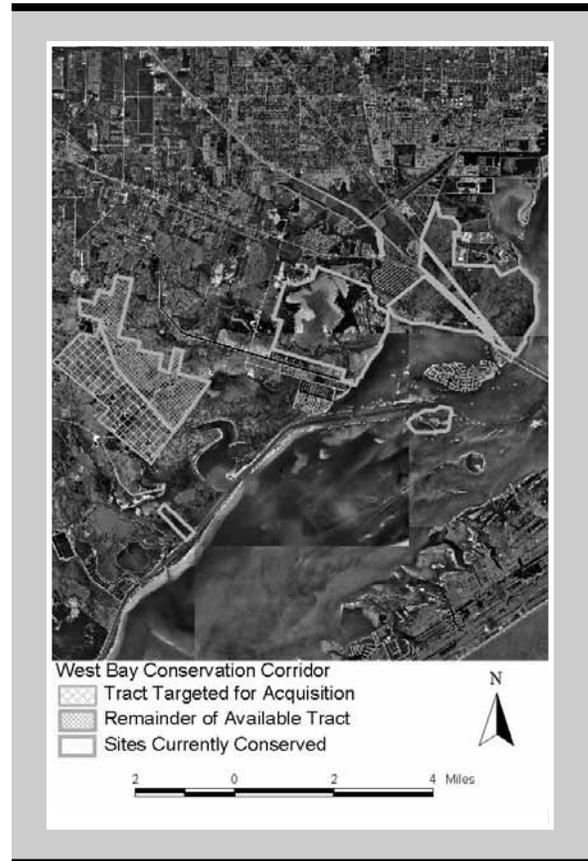
Chinese tallow

Due to burning of the tract by a former owner, the invasive Chinese tallow tree (*Sapium sebiferum*) is only moderately established on the site, which was identified for acquisition due to its availability, diversity and quality of habitat.

This summer, an additional \$1 million in federal funding to support this acquisition

was requested by project partner SCENIC GALVESTON, Inc., an all-volunteer local land trust and conservation service organization, for consideration by the North American Wetland Conservation Act Council (USFWS). On Dec. 7, 2004, the NAWCA Council met and selected the West Bay Conservation Corridor - Hitchcock Prairie project for funding, pending final approval by the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission in March 2005. After acquisition is complete, SCENIC GALVESTON (SG) will hold and manage the entire 3,000-acre tract. As with SG's previous 900-acre John O'Quinn I-45 Estuarial Corridor and 1,500-acre Virginia Point Peninsula Preserve properties, Hitchcock Prairie will be permanently deed restricted for habitat conservation and compatible public use. A third-party conservation easement may also be placed on the property to amplify its permanent protection.

Partners in the project now include Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, SCENIC GALVESTON, Inc., Galveston Bay Estuary Program, the Galveston Bay Foundation, Trust for Public Land, Harborwalk-Watkins Properties and The Nature Conservancy of Texas.



In this aerial photo, Scenic Galveston's current holdings of O'Quinn Corridor and Virginia Point Peninsula Preserve Complex are located to the east. Pierce Marsh is center, and will provide the restoration project match for Hitchcock Prairie (located farthest west on the photo), the 3,000 acre target acquisition of current CWPPRA and NAWCA initiatives.

A unique feature of the West Bay Conservation Corridor project has been the inclusion of a private local development interest as a key project partner. Last winter, Harborwalk-Watkins Properties approached the Galveston Bay Foundation (GBF) about a collaborative marsh restoration project. Construction at their Harborwalk canal housing development (the pre-existing site formerly known as Flamingo Isle) was moving forward and they had reached a crossroads with project dredge material: either dispose of it within a spoil cell along the inter-coastal waterway or investigate a beneficial use for the sediment. Through discussion with GBF staff and board members and federal and state agencies (TPWD, USFWS, NOAA-NMFS), a plan emerged designating the Harborwalk-Watkins Properties

West Galveston Bay Conservation Corridor Partnership, continued

intent to voluntarily construct a beneficial uses marsh (not mitigation) in Basford Lake at the Pierce Marsh Preserve conservation property jointly owned by GBF and The Nature Conservancy of Texas. GBF has already created 133 acres of marsh terraces at this site. The new 180-acre restoration project, to commence in late 2004, will build upon these past restoration efforts. After Harborwalk-Watkins completes earthwork, the restored marsh will be planted with smooth cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*) and marsh hay cordgrass (*Spartina patens*) by area volunteers led by GBF.

Beneficial Uses Marsh project partners recognized the value of the donated marsh could serve as required local match for federal habitat conservation dollars by doing double-duty toward local habitat conservation. Quickly, a wider team mustered together to pool resources, research and prepare grant proposals and coordinate the purchase of Hitchcock Prairie and, potentially, other West Bay properties with significant habitat resource values. This collaboration between conservation groups, oversight agencies and a property development company is unique within our region.

BENEFITS

Texas coastal wetlands are an ecological and economical resource vital to the Texas coast. They serve as nursery grounds for over 95% of the recreational and commercial fishery species in the Gulf of Mexico, provide breeding,

nesting and feeding grounds for 75% of North America's bird species, and provide habitat for numerous species of mammals, reptiles and amphibians. Coastal tallgrass prairie has been identified as one of the most endangered community types in North America. It is estimated that only 1% of the pre-settlement acreage of coastal tallgrass prairie currently exists in its native state. This loss can be largely attributed to conversion to urban areas and cropland.

Emergent wetland loss within the corridor has occurred at rates among the highest within the Galveston Bay System. The Virginia Point quadrangle was cited as having the largest emergent marsh loss due to conversion to open water (3,600 acres) while the Hitchcock quadrangle had the largest emergent loss due to conversion to agricultural lands. The wetlands within remnant prairie tracts also are faced with the threat of development without Clean Water Act protection. The Supreme Court case of *Solid Waste Agencies of Cook County vs. United States* (2001) removed Clean Water Act protection from isolated wetlands. Local interpretation of this ruling has resulted in most prairie wetlands being considered non-jurisdictional, and therefore not protected under the Clean Water Act.

This important project will not only protect Galveston Bay saltmarsh, but the coastal prairie wetlands that bound them.



Coastal tallgrass prairie, with pimple mound in foreground.

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New Farm Bill Program Benefits Playa Lakes

By Debbie Slobe, Playa Lakes Joint Venture

Signup is underway for a new initiative under the Farm Bill's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) aimed at protecting playa lakes. The initiative is of particular importance to Texas, where a majority of all playas exist.

The Wetlands Restoration Non-Floodplain Initiative (www.fsa.usda.gov/pas/publications/facts/html/nonflood-wet04.htm), or CP23a, provides farmers financial incentives to protect and restore playa wetlands. This is the first Farm Bill program to specifically target playa lakes – of which about 30,000 are located in the Texas Panhandle. The program allocates 250,000 wetland and buffer acres nationally, and of those, 25,000 have been

designated for Texas. If all acres are enrolled, the initiative could bring an estimated \$25 million to landowners in the state.

“We are extremely pleased about this move and what it will mean for playa lakes,” said Mike Carter, Playa Lakes Joint Venture (PLJV) Coordinator.



PHOTO: Playa Lakes Joint Venture



PHOTO: Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory

Playa lakes are the most numerous wetlands in the Southern High Plains, totaling approximately 50,000 in portions of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. They are shallow, seasonal wetlands that collect water from the surrounding area after heavy rainfall or runoff events. Playas are the primary source of recharge for the Ogallala Aquifer and are one of the most important wetland habitats for birds in the Central Flyway, hosting millions of migrating, breeding and wintering birds throughout the year.

CP23a provides cost share, annual rental payments and other financial incentives to landowners to restore and

protect playas and other wetlands located outside the 100-year floodplain. Wetlands must have been farmed four out of the past six years, and buffers of up to four times the wetland acreage are eligible for enrollment. CP23a has no maximum wetland size, which will allow larger playas to be enrolled.

“This new initiative in combination with the Farmable Wetlands Program (www.fsa.usda.gov/pas/publications/facts/html/farmwetland04.htm) means that both large and small playas have a home in the Farm Bill,” Carter said.

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**PHOTO: U.S. Department of Agriculture –
Natural Resources Conservation Service**



PHOTO: Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory

PLJV partners set the wheels in motion for the initiative about a year ago when the organization began putting together a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) proposal focused on the playa lakes region. Then in November of last year, Sen. Pat Roberts (KS) introduced legislation to amend the Farmable Wetlands Program to enhance playas' eligibility. Soon after, Rep. Randy Neugebauer (TX) introduced companion legislation in the House, co-signed by Reps. Mac Thornberry (TX), Dennis Moore (KS) and Jerry Moran (KS).

The legislators' urgings resulted in an administrative action to increase eligibility for playa lakes in the Conservation Reserve Program through this new initiative.

"In addition to the dollars provided for playas, we now have a Farm Bill program that mentions playas specifically by name," Carter said. "We are very happy about that."

Signup for CP23a is on a continuous basis through local Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices through Dec. 31, 2007, or until all acres are enrolled.

The Playa Lakes Joint Venture is a partnership of federal and state wildlife agencies, conservation groups and private industry dedicated to the protection of playa lakes, other wetlands and grasslands for the benefit of birds and other wildlife. For more information, visit www.pljv.org

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PHOTO: Courtesy of Darryl Birkenfeld



PHOTO: Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory

Master Naturalist Program Seeks Applicants

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The Texas Master Naturalist program, with 30 chapters located across the state, aims to develop a corps of well-informed citizen volunteers who educate their communities about the management of natural resources. The main qualification needed to become a Certified Texas Master Naturalist is an interest in learning and playing an active part in conservation. Volunteers will receive a minimum of 40 hours training from educators and specialists from places such as universities, natural resource agencies, nature centers and museums. Training topics include interpretation and management of natural resources, ecological concepts, eco-regions in Texas and natural systems management. Volunteers are expected to give 40 hours of service a year in community education, demonstration and habitat enhancement projects. They are also expected to pursue a minimum of eight hours of advance training in areas of personal interest.

Texas Master Naturalist Chapters offering volunteer training this spring are listed with contact information. Enrollment is limited in most chapters. Some registration deadlines are fast approaching so contact a chapter near you to see if seating is still available.

Abilene–Big Country Chapter. Training begins April 29. (325) 672-6048 or melissa.owen@aisd.org

Amarillo–Panhandle Chapter. Training begins April 11. (806) 352-7463 or suthomps@sbcglobal.net

Bastrop–Lost Pines Chapter. Training begins Jan. 10. (512) 321-5073 or carolreidy@hotmail.com

Beaumont–Upper Coast Chapter. Training begins April 5. (409) 835-8461 or tslooney@tamu.edu

Bryan–Brazos County Chapter. Training planned for April. (979) 458-1099 or sarnold@ag.tamu.edu

Conroe/Huntsville–Heartwood Chapter. Classes begin April 16. texasnaturelover@earthlink.net

Dallas–North Texas Chapter. Classes begin Feb. 15. (214) 904-3050 or xxxsharp@aol.com

Edinburg–Rio Grande Valley Chapter. Training begins Feb. 10 with a registration deadline on Jan. 26. (956) 364-1410 or rgvctmn@aol.com

El Paso–Trans Pecos Chapter. Spring dates pending. (915) 859-7725 or r-bader@tamu.edu

Galveston–Galveston Bay Area Chapter. Training begins Feb. 24. (281) 534-3413, ext.3 or jk-massey@tamu.edu

Junction–Western Edwards Plateau Chapter. Classes begin April 19. (325) 446-2301 or martha.richardson@ttu.edu

Harlingen–Rio Grande Valley Chapter. Classes begin Feb. 16 with a registration deadline on Jan. 26. (956) 354-1410 or rgvctmn@aol.com

Houston–Gulf Coast Chapter. Classes begin Feb. 28. (281) 855-5600 or gcmn@tamu.edu

New Braunfels–Lindheimer Chapter. Classes begin April 5. (830) 620-3440 or elee@gvctc.com

Port Lavaca–Mid Coast Chapter. Training begins in February. (361) 552-5187 or <http://midcoast.tamu.edu>

San Antonio–Alamo Area Chapter. Classes start March 24 with a registration deadline on Feb. 24. (210) 698-2397 or www.alamomasternaturalist.org

San Marcos–Hays County Chapter. Classes begin Feb. 8 with a registration deadline on Jan. 14. (512) 393-2120 or jp10@swt.edu

Tyler–East Texas Chapter. Classes begin Jan. 22. (903) 566-9394 or irene.hamel@tpwd.state.tx.us

Waco–Heart of Texas Chapter. Training begins March 23. Nada Wareham: (254) 799-7170 or nadawaco@yahoo.com

Wichita Falls–Rolling Plains Chapter. Training begins in March. Mark Howell: (940) 766-2383 or mark.howell@tpwd.state.tx.us



Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Texas Cooperative Extension co-sponsor the Texas Master Naturalist program statewide. For more information about existing chapters or forming a new chapter contact Sonny Arnold, Assistant Program Coordinator, 111 Nagle Hall, 2258, TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-2258. Call (979) 458-1099 or E-mail: sarnold@ag.tamu.edu



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