

# Eye on Nature

SPRING, 2002

A publication of the Wildlife Diversity Branch

Getting Texans Involved

## The Great Texas Wildlife Trails Opportunities for Adventure

by Linda Campbell

**H**ow do you provide recreational opportunity, build public understanding and support for conservation, and bring money to rural communities all at the same time? You build the most extensive network of birding and wildlife viewing sites of any state and then you invite people to get off the couch, into the car and excited about exploring the wonders of Texas. That is what the Great Texas Wildlife Trails is all about.

We give people beautiful maps with good directions and descriptions and encourage them to get away from the city and into the countryside to enjoy nature, history and the culture of Texas amidst the compelling rural landscapes of our state. The movie line "build it and they will come" is becoming a reality in Texas. Our trails are making it easy for people to reconnect with nature and their heritage at a time when Americans need the kind of peace and assurance that experiences in the outdoors can provide.

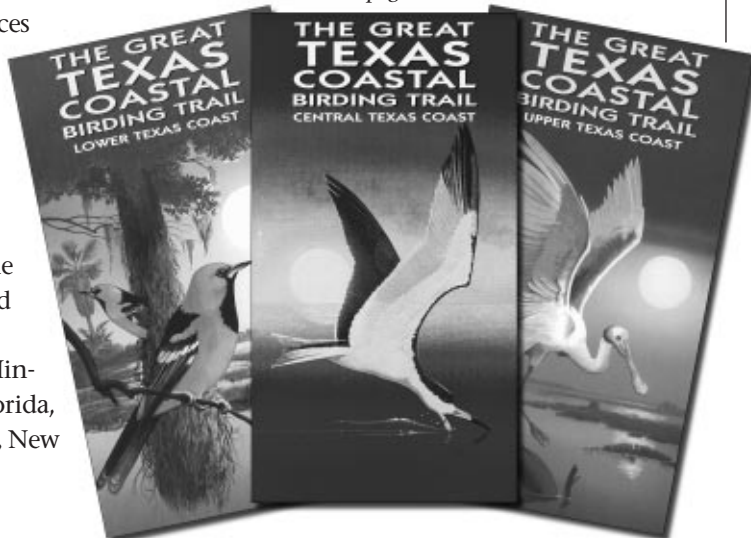
The first of its kind in the country, the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail was completed in 2000. We have distributed over 350,000 maps to people from all over the world. Texas is setting the standard for trails being developed in California, Arizona, Louisiana, Alabama, Kentucky, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, New

York, Vermont, and Ontario, Canada. We started a trend with the Coastal Birding Trail, and it means that people who love to combine travel with wildlife enjoyment will have lots to do for many years.

We hope the Texas Wildlife Trails will encourage people to get outdoors and experience nature for themselves. Whether it is by watching birds, chasing butterflies or admiring wildflowers, experiences that provide an entry into the enjoyment of nature are critical in an urbanizing society if we are to develop an understanding of the importance of conserving wildlife and their habitats.

We know these trails are important for recreation, but what about the key question of how these efforts benefit conservation of wildlife habitat. To understand this we need to look at the people using these trails. Our survey data shows that the typical travelers

*[continued on page 7]*



**Texas Amphibian Watch,  
Page 2**

**Private Land and Habitat  
Enhancement Program,  
Page 3**

**Black Panther  
Myth or Reality?,  
Page 4**

**Guadalupe Delta WMA,  
Page 5**

**World Birding Center,  
Page 6**

**Coastal Prairie—Past  
Present and Future,  
Page 7**

# Frolicking with frogs — opportunities with the ...

# Texas Amphibian Watch

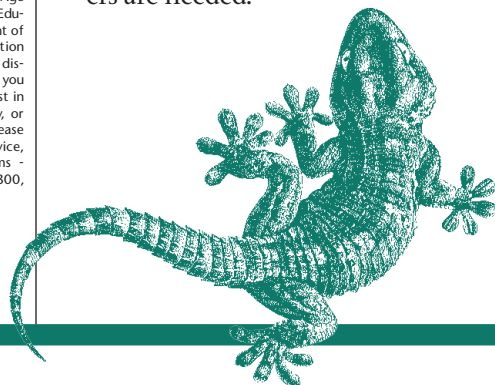


By Lee Ann Linam

**W**hich toad in Texas is as big as a dinner plate? Which frog barks like a dog? What amphibian looks like a sausage, but has a mean bite? Which chorus of frogs just might greet Santa Claus, sounding like sleigh bells in December? Texas Amphibian Watchers know the answers to these and other questions!

Texas Amphibian Watch is one of a variety of volunteer monitoring programs offered by Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPW), through which we ask ordinary Texans to pay extraordinary attention to the natural world around them. There's good reason to watch amphibians. In addition to their interesting features noted above, there's also a good deal of concern about global decline of amphibian species. About 12 years ago scientists began to notice declines and even extinctions of amphibians in many localities around the world. Then in 1995 a group of school children in Minnesota discovered a population of frogs that had an extremely high rate of malformations. Given their porous skin and association with aquatic environments, scientists and citizens began to recognize that amphibians might be telling us something about environmental change.

Many culprits have been suggested as causes for amphibian decline, including pesticides, disease, parasites, ozone depletion, climate change and habitat change. All the answers are not in yet, especially in Texas, where very little long-term monitoring of amphibian populations has taken place. That's why more amphibian watchers are needed.



It's easy to get involved in Amphibian Watch and it's a lot of fun. Several types of monitoring activities are possible, but the most common way of monitoring frogs and toads is to conduct a nighttime call count survey. Simply pick a wetland site — it can be as small as your backyard ornamental pond. Visit the wetland after dark and listen for the songs of male frogs and toads calling to the females. With all the different species in Texas (about 45), frogs breed nearly year round in much of the state, but the best nights are warm, humid, moonless nights following a big rain. Write down the species you hear or record the calls so you can compare them to some reference tapes. Also write down the environmental conditions, and you're on your way to your own mini-long term research project.

A free monitoring packet is available from TPW, and a tape of frog and toad calls is available for \$5. TPW also offers optional amphibian monitoring workshops for \$10. More information on materials and workshops is available at our website [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/amphibians](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/amphibians) or by calling 512-912-7011.

And, just in case you can't wait for an amphibian workshop to find out, the answers to the questions above are: the marine toad (found in the Rio Grande Valley), the Eastern barking frog (found in the Texas Hill Country), the amphiuma (found in East Texas streams), and the spring peeper (found in East Texas). But you still need to sign up to find out which frog sounds like an alien invading South Texas, which one sounds like a farm animal in distress, which ones never see the light of day ...

*Lee Ann Linam coordinates the Texas Nature Trackers program out of the Austin offices.*

## Eye On Nature

Spring, 2002

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*To manage and conserve the natural and cultural resources of Texas for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.*

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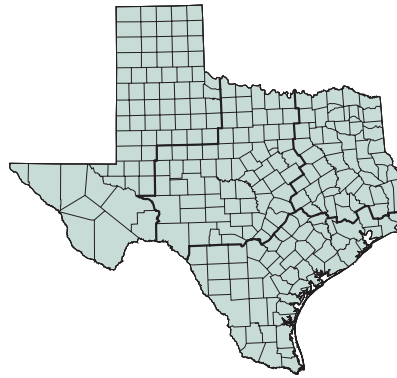
# Private Lands and Habitat Program

By Linda McMurry

**T**exas Parks and Wildlife (TPW) provides technical assistance to persons desiring to include wildlife management considerations in present or future land use practices. This service is strictly advisory and is provided without charge to cooperating land managers.

The goal of the Private Lands and Habitat Program is to provide expertise to land managers in the preservation and development of wildlife habitat and the proper management of the various wildlife populations that utilize that habitat. Through this effort, TPW hopes to slow or reverse the decline in quantity of the State's wildlife habitat and improve the quality of remaining habitat. TPW biologists promote management practices which will maximize wildlife potential, prevent waste or depletion of the resource, provide aesthetic and economic benefits to the landowner, and offer increased opportunity for public use and enjoyment of renewable natural resources.

Upon written request, a biologist will schedule a personal meeting with the land manager and an inspection of the property. The land manager will be asked to define the various needs and uses of the property and to establish an objective for wildlife considerations. Once the property's potential has been determined and constraints thereon identified, the biologist will provide recommendations that may include a written management plan. Recommendations will focus on increased ecological diversity as required to address habitat needs of wildlife. The process will incorporate planning that benefits a wide variety of wildlife, in concert with management of featured



species identified by the land manager. Unique areas will be noted in cooperation with the landowner and management options suggested to enhance or preserve these habitats.

A management plan addresses multiple facets of habitat management and population management. Components of a management plan include an objective as established by the land manager, the past history of hunting and other land use, and a description and appraisal of the habitat. Specific recommendations are given concerning habitat management practices, wildlife considerations in livestock management, availability of water, food plot development, management of concerned wildlife populations and harvest of game species. The importance of keeping good records to aid in determining the status of wildlife populations and evaluating management program progress is demonstrated.

Recommendations for habitat management stress the quantity, quality, distribution and diversity of vegetation necessary to support viable wildlife populations. The relative importance of grasses, forbs (weeds) and woody plants (trees, shrubs and vines) is explained.

The use of proper harvest as a management tool to maintain game populations in balance with available

food supplies is encouraged and explained in detail. Achieving and maintaining desired population parameters such as age structure, production level and sex ratio is emphasized.

Population management of big game species is often identified as a key tool for habitat management in concert with domestic livestock management and other land use practices. The value of wildlife as a renewable natural resource is explained in economic and aesthetic terms.

Survey techniques are suggested which will adequately monitor population levels and allow the development of game harvest quotas. The merits of various census techniques, their relative accuracy and cost are explained. Participation in survey activities by technical guidance personnel is on a one-time basis for demonstration purposes; cooperators are responsible for the performance of subsequent surveys and implementation of management actions.

Wildlife biologists will continue to assist cooperators through periodic visits to help interpret survey information and formulate harvest recommendations. The overall progress of the management program will be assessed and adjustments recommended as appropriate.

Persons interested in receiving technical assistance for private lands enhancement should write the appropriate Wildlife Division regional office for their respective area, or contact:  
Program Director  
Private Lands and Habitat  
Texas Parks and Wildlife  
4200 Smith School Road  
Austin, Texas 78744  
or call toll free (800) 792-1112.

*Linda McMurry is Private Lands Program administrator in the Austin offices.*

# The rarest plant in Texas?

By Jackie M. Poole

## Species Name:

Texas wild-rice  
(*Zizania texana*)

**Range:** Probably qualifies for the dubious honor of being the rarest plant in Texas. This aquatic grass only grows in the upper two miles of the San Marcos River, primarily within the city limits of San Marcos.

**Status:** The species was the first federally and state listed endangered plant in Texas.

**Description:** This elegant perennial produces long, narrow leaves that undulate with the river current. Only the upper portion of the plant occasionally rises out of the water to produce small, separate male and female flowers. The seeds are a smaller version of its commercial cousin, the cultivated wild-rice. Texas wild-rice establishes in coarse riverbed sands, and prefers to be submerged in water about one to six feet deep.

**Limiting Factors:** One reason why this species may have such a limited range is its reliance on the extremely clear, thermally constant (72-75° F), fast flowing water that occurs in Texas only in the San Marcos and Comal Rivers.

**Threats:** With its habitat requirements, limited range and occurrence in an urban area, there are many threats to the species. The primary threat is cessation of spring flow. The San Marcos Springs are fed by the Edwards aquifer which is the primary source of water for the city of San Antonio as well as many other cities, farms, ranches and individuals from Bexar to Uvalde counties. Several studies have shown that Texas wild-rice requires at least several inches of water flowing over the plants in order to survive. Other threats include non-native animals (for example, nutria and giant rams-horn snails) and plants (such as hydrilla, elephant ears and water hyacinth), water pollution, habitat modification (such as dams, channelization and siltation), and over-zealous recreation.

**Where Can We View It:** The best place to see Texas wild-rice is in Sewell Park at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos. For more information, the San Marcos/Comal (Revised) Recovery Plan (available from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) has an overview of all aspects of the plant's biology, habitat and threats as well as similar information for all the rare species in these unique aquatic systems.

Jackie Poole is a Botanist with the Wildlife Diversity Branch working out of Austin offices.



# Black Panther

## Myth OR Reality?

By John Young

**D**o black panthers really exist? Yes, they are the rare black phase of the spotted leopard (*Panthera pardus*) which is found in Africa, Asia, and Indonesia.

The jaguar (*Panthera onca*), which occurs from northern Mexico through much of South America, also has a rare black phase. In both of these species the normal spotting pattern can be seen through the black. Panther is the often-used name in East Texas for the large cat commonly called mountain lion in other parts of the state. Cougar, catamount, and puma are other names also used for this species (*Felis concolor*). This large cat varies in color from light tan and gray to dark versions of those colors.

Do black mountain lions exist in America? Despite numerous reports of black panthers, a black specimen or skin has never seen the light of day in Texas or anywhere else in North America despite the tens of thousands of animals that have been killed. There are a few, old and unverified reports of black mountain lions from South America, but once again, no specimen exists. J. B. Tinsley, author of "The puma, legendary lion of the Americas," states that although there are frequent reports, no authenticated records of black panthers exist anywhere in North America.

So what are people seeing? Dark brown and dark gray moun-

tain lions may appear black in dim light or when wet. And, considering that the majority of panther sightings last less than five seconds it is easy to misidentify a black cat, dog, bear, hog or otter as a panther.

It is possible that some reports may be sightings of black jaguars or black leopards (panthers) that have escaped or been released from captivity. Breeders of big cats, including leopards, are numerous in the US, particularly Texas; and some animals may have been released when owners were unable to comply with new regulations or the animals were no longer controllable. However, there is no evidence that this has ever happened.

Could a black mountain lion appear in a population where none had occurred before? Yes, because a single mutation would be all it would take and that is how black phases came about in leopards and jaguars. So that's why you can never say "never." But biologists will remain highly skeptical of black mountain lion reports until an actual skin or specimen lands on someone's desk.

John Young is Wildlife Diversity Mammalogist working out of the Austin offices.



# Guadalupe Delta Wildlife Management Area

By Brent Ortego

**A**s defined in Webster's Dictionary, water is a clear, colorless, nearly odorless and tasteless liquid and is essential for most plant and animal life. A flood is an overflowing of water onto normally dry land. Since Aug. 27, 2001 the Guadalupe Delta Wildlife Management Area (GDWMA) in Calhoun County has had its share of both water and flooding. Since August the GDWMA has received 32.36" of rain and 52.95" of rain for the entire year! Along with rain received at the WMA, upstream rain and water released from Canyon Lake the GDWMA has been closed for the most part since the beginning of September!

Public hunting is a main part of the management for the GDWMA and it has suffered greatly this year. The alligator hunts were cancelled due to flooding, along with two of the three weekends of early teal season and to date 12 duck hunts during the regular duck season have also been cancelled!

When the floodwaters recede, active management will resume to include prescribed burning, mowing, cattle grazing and water level management. Included in the management will be the construction of an eight-acre, moist-soil unit created for mitigation by the Texas Department of Transportation for highway construction. Other activities will include the cleaning-out of the Buffalo Lake Ditch to improve water flow between Buffalo Lake and the lower Buffalo Lake Marsh and vegetative windrows being constructed in Alligator Slide Lake to improve water clarity for plant growth. These two projects will be done as Ducks Unlimited MARSH Projects. The CORP of Engineers will also be conducting some maintenance work to repair a low-water crossing on Hog Bayou and replacing water-control structures on the bottom end of Alligator Slide Lake, which were initially done as mitigation projects. A TCP Tour has also been scheduled for April 2002.

Hopefully everything will return to normal soon and we will be able to salvage a few duck hunts before the season ends and we can return to managing this jewel of Guadalupe Delta!

*Brent Ortego is a Wildlife Diversity Biologist working out of the Victoria Office.*

## Did You Know?



Alligator habitat in Texas closely correlates to the 350 isothermal mean (January minimum daily temperature). Department studies done in 1978 documented alligators in 86 counties and an estimated population of 54,921. Today alligators have been documented in 112 counties with an estimated population of 283,263 alligators statewide.

## U. S. Forest Service research on timber rattlesnakes in Texas

*Dr. Craig Rudolph, Richard R. Schaefer, Richard N. Conner, Shirley J. Burgdorf, and Toni Trees. U.S. Forest Service, Southern Research Station, 506 Hayter Street, Nacogdoches, TX 75965-3556*

**T**imber rattlesnakes (*Crotalus horridus*), southern populations also known as canebrake rattlesnakes, occur throughout the eastern United States. They are large and impressive inhabitants of forested habitats throughout much of eastern Texas. Concerns about the status of Texas populations resulted in their inclusion on the state list of threatened species. Our lab has been investigating the biology of timber rattlesnakes for several years. Using surgically implanted radio transmitters we have been able to follow individual snakes for several years. Results have demonstrated that adult timber rattlesnakes depend on relatively large prey, primarily tree squirrels. Reproductive output is surprisingly low. They require several years to reach sexual maturity (6-8 in the case of females), and females in our study have only produced litters of 10-12 young every 2-5 years. This type of life history strategy depends on high adult survival to maintain viable populations. Human impacts on populations in Texas are substantial. Habitat loss and killing have impacted many populations. Our research has demonstrated that mortality on highways and roads is also having a substantial impact on populations. This mortality is greatest on adult males during the August-October breeding season when they are actively searching for females. Forestry practices that reduce populations of tree squirrels also have potential impacts on populations.



It is clear that if populations of this remarkable predator are to survive in Texas, human-related mortality must be low. This will require an enlightened and tolerant attitude toward timber rattlesnakes, or we will lose another important component of wilderness in Texas.

*Dr. Craig Rudolph is a research scientist with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in Nacogdoches.*

# TPW's World Birding Center takes off, fledges, stretches, but never lays an egg

by Lee Sean Smith

Imagine a south Texas paradise where all the compass points of birding and birds meet.

Already a major destination for birders and nature enthusiasts from all over the globe, the Rio Grande Valley will soon provide people and birds another reason to flock to the most biologically diverse region in the United States. Texas Parks and Wildlife's World Birding Center will be a focus for intense, but ethical, birding activity, the restoration of threatened brushland and riparian environments, and for educating residents and visitors on the importance of the area's borderland habitats. If the World Birding Center sounds like a stretch to you, think of it this way. Like baseball's World Series, the world may not yet participate, but everybody knows the best ball, and birding, is played right here.

The World Birding Center is continuing its mission to create a world-class birding experience in the Valley, a nature tourism adventure for both ardent wildlife watchers and the uninitiated. TPW's vision of a complex of interpretive and habitat centers combines the growing avitourism economy of the region with the restoration and preservation of severely impacted habitat. Birders will be able to see a direct link between the money they spend pursuing their hobby, the protection of



natural areas and a new accessibility to this "increased" habitat. Communities will see the direct benefits of an economy based on sound wildland retention and restoration. More than 3,000 acres have already been committed to conservation for this project. As Wildlife Division Director Gary Graham has stated, "Tangible economic benefits are available to communities through enhanced wildlife watching, but only if habitat is protected."

Hiring of staff, fundraising and the beginning of the "development" of sites is now progressing wholeheartedly. Wildlife and Parks divisions are combining to hire more than 24 new positions. Our capital campaign has some of the best movers and shakers in the state behind it. With backing from local Valley communities, USFWS, the State of Texas and many conservation organizations the entire capital budget is anticipated to exceed \$30 million.

Work has begun at the Weslaco site with Ducks Unlimited completing pond and impoundment construction and at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park where TPW's infrastructure department has begun trail development, soil sampling and revegetation. Interpretive planning workshops have been held for the last six months and a final interpretive master plan nears completion. Although the World Birding Center visitor will mostly enjoy a

natural and hence outdoor experience, TPW has contracted world-class firms grounded in the principles of sound and sustainable built environments that will blend into, rather than clash with, mostly natural landscapes. Architects Lake Flato and Overland Partners, Spawglass Construction and BIOS Interpretive Design have won many awards for their innovative design and construction.

Development and planning on affiliate sites, administered by the local participating municipalities, has also begun. Each site offers different flavors of the habitat and history of the region. As staff is hired educational and interpretive programming for ardent and novice birders will begin in earnest. It's anticipated that around the same time as the Valley adds its 500th confirmed bird to the area checklist, likely in early 2004, the WBC will have its grand opening.

At the crossroads of migration for both birds and birders, the Lower Rio Grande Valley offers the best overall birding experience in the world. TPW's commitment to excellence in birding tourism and habitat conservation will continue to positively influence local economies. With the advent of the World Birding Center visitors and residents will discover an enhanced and fully integrated complex of participating communities and sites offering "world-class" birding.

*Sean Smith is Director of the World Birding Center working out of Mission offices.*



[Great Texas Wildlife Trails continued]

are both men and women, middle-aged, well educated, with high household incomes and living in a city or suburb. They have varied interests and they typically belong to several conservation organizations.

One goal of the wildlife trails is to connect people with nature and history by making it easier for them to enjoy the natural and cultural resources of Texas and thus to care about conserving them. For example, birdwatchers have always come to Texas. Our geographic location and diversity of habitats contributes to the highest avian diversity of any state, with 620 documented species of birds. We have 4 of the top 12 birdwatching destinations in North America. The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail was developed to make it easy for birders and wildlife watchers to find the best places to see wildlife on the coast. The Trail serves as a marketing platform for coastal communities to attract nature-based tourists. Thus, nature tourism has become an integral part of the local economies in many of the communities along the Trail.

There is no question that nature tourism is an important way to bring needed dollars to rural communities suffering from downturns in oil and gas prices and fluctuations in agricultural commodity prices. Nature-based tourism provides incentives for local communities and landowners to conserve wildlife habitats upon which the industry depends. It promotes conservation by placing an increased value on wildlife habitat. As nature tourism becomes important to the local economy, communities have additional incentive to conserve their remaining natural areas for wildlife and wildlife enthusiasts.

Nature tourism development in rural communities can diversify local economies, while also providing benefits to the people who live there. Some benefits are economic. For example, on average every \$78,085 spent in 2000 by travelers supported one job. Local tax revenues were \$623 million and state tax revenues were \$2 billion. Travel spending increased at an average annual rate of 6.1 percent since 1990. Other benefits have to do with instilling pride in the community and providing jobs for residents.

Rural communities and private landowners eagerly support the Texas Wildlife Trails as they come to understand that nature and cultural tourism is an important way to diversify agricultural economies, conserve remaining habitats and maintain rural lifestyles.

Next year, Texas will unveil its newest trails — the Heart of Texas and High Plains Wildlife Trails. The trails will feature 338 sites in the 115-county area from Laredo to Canadian. Three new maps will direct travelers to beautiful places throughout south Texas, the Hill Country, and the High Plains. Private landowners in these regions are inviting wildlife enthusiasts to be their guest at some of the most beautiful places in Texas. Add to that the state and local parks, TPW wildlife management areas and national wildlife refuges, and you have a network of places important for wildlife and for the growing number of people seeking enjoyment and peace from nature.

*Linda Campbell is Nature Tourism Coordinator working out of the Austin offices.*

# Coastal Prairie – past, present and future

By Brent Ortego

The Coastal Prairie made up about 8 million acres of tall grass prairies in Texas prior to the 1830s. It stretched as a broad band of grasslands (following the coast and dissected by the occasional river bottom) from the relatively moist Jefferson County in southeast Texas (56" mean annual precipitation) to the semi-arid Cameron County (24") in extreme south Texas. Principal climax grasses were gulf cordgrass, big bluestem, little bluestem, indiagrass, eastern gamagrass, gulf muhly, tanglehead and many species of Panicum and Paspalum. The Coastal Prairie is part of a complex of several prairies nationwide that primarily support 300 species of birds and 80 species of mammals.

As white man settled the prairie it changed drastically to where it is today, estimated at only 1.8 million acres left in various stages of quality. Only a few hundred thousand acres (if that much) remain in blocks greater than 10,000 acres. Much of the remaining acres are in a degraded stage occupied by dense to moderate densities of brush (mesquite, huisache, live oak and baccharis). The best representative blocks of remaining coastal prairie are in Calhoun, Goliad, Refugio and Kennedy counties.

And as the habitats changed, so did the wildlife. The grasslands ecosystems in the United States has been shown to have the greatest percentage of significantly declining breeding species of birds.

**What happened?** Most of the grasslands were plowed for agriculture — primarily sorghum, corn, rice and cotton. Natural processes like fire and roving herds of buffalo were eliminated from much of the remaining acres and replaced by domestic livestock under a continuous grazing system. Sizeable portions were converted to introduced grass species, and the remainder was developed into highways, housing and businesses.

**What is being done?** There are two major initiatives to enhance coastal prairie on private land where greater than 90% of the remaining prairie exists. The most significant is the Coastal Prairie Conservation Initiative (CPCI) which is funded by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and works in cooperation with the U.S.D.A. Natural Resource Conservation Service, Soil & Water Conservation Dis-

tricts, and the Sam Houston R.C.& D. (a private foundation affiliated with the NRCS). The CPCI provides 50% cost sharing, range management technical assistance and a Safe Harbor prairie chicken agreement to each cooperating landowner that places their coastal prairie into a rotational grazing program and implements brush control through controlled summer and winter burns, and herbicide treatments. The second major program is Texas Parks and Wildlife's Landowner Incentive Program (LIP) which is funded by state legislated money and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act funds to manage for rare resources. Grants and technical assistance are provided to cooperating landowners to enhance native grasslands as one of the major focuses of the program. In several instances, LIP has partnered with CPCI to assist landowners and in other instances has funded prairie enhancement projects individually. The net result is that at least 70,000 acres of private land is receiving technical assistance and funding to enhance existing coastal prairie through establishing rotational grazing, controlled burning and herbicide treatments of brush.

**What is the future?** As with most conservation initiatives in Texas, the future of wildlife resources is in the hands of the private landowners. As long as quality Coastal Prairie with little or no brush meets the land use goals of the landowners for their economic, recreational, aesthetic, family and historic needs, and they have the financial resources (income from the land or grants from public/private groups), technical assistance (knowledge to properly manage the habitat) and favorable regulations (endangered species, fire/smoke liabilities, inheritance taxes, property taxes) there is a reasonable outlook that sizeable blocks of Coastal Prairie will exist indefinitely. However, it is going to take much more aggressive and extensive assistance and funding to make inroads into the more than 1 million acres of degraded Coastal Prairie that has been invaded by excessive densities of brush in this decade to stabilize declines in many species of grassland dependent wildlife in Texas.

*Brent Ortego is a Wildlife Diversity Biologist working out of Victoria, TX.*



# The Back Porch

by John Herron

As I write this, the first signs of spring are already upon us. Songbird are declaring their territories in songs of spring — my backyard cardinals have gone from quiet neighbors to bold. The Mexican Plum tree in front of our office is just beginning to flower, already filling the air with its magical scent.

I adore spring. Maybe it's because my natural rhythms match those of our wilder friends. Maybe it's because so many of my hobbies and interests are spring oriented.

I'm already working on my vegetable and wildflower gardens — my Wildscapes. Spring is a good time to plant a few more native shrubs in those few remaining bare spots that have been bothering me. Maybe this is the year I put in the small pond I've been wishing for. And soon my gardening efforts will be rewarded with a spectacular display of spring wildflowers — bluebonnets, Indian paintbrush, primroses, blanket flowers and Black-eyed Susans.

I'm planning a short trip to West Texas to photograph the spectacular scenery as the desert landscape also responds to spring. I'm forever fasci-

nated with the contrast of life in such a harsh landscape. It's always a challenge trying to capture that contrast and stark beauty on film.

Then there's the bird watching. Spring isn't complete without at least one birding trip to the Gulf Coast in April. Maybe I'll help with this year's Birding Classic or maybe I'll just head to the Coast on my own. Even a bad day birding on the Coast is better than many good days elsewhere in the state. Of course, I'll take any spring-time opportunity I can to visit other parts of the state as well — just to be sure.

And I'll look for an Earth Day activity to participate in. My wife and I have been Earth Day supporters since the first Earth Day, 32 years ago. Earth Day is our unofficial anniversary, since we met as part of a committee planning Earth Day 1970. Somehow, April 22, 2002 seems an important Earth Day to me — all those "2's" seem to match the symmetry and pattern that is part of spring.

Now, if only I could find a way to make spring a few months longer — then I could be certain to have the



time to fit all these activities in. But with spring there are always plenty of choices.

This issue of "Eye on Nature" also reflects the many interests and activities that Spring brings us. After 7 years in circulation, we've updated the newsletter's look and changed the format some to include more news items, as well as feature articles. I hope this issue of "Eye on Nature" makes your spring even more enjoyable and helps you do something for wildlife.

*John Herron is Wildlife Diversity Branch Chief working out of the Austin offices.*