

Executive Director's Report

Prairie Conservation Partnering with Mitigation Strategies, LLC

THE CURRENT FINANCIAL climate offers us both challenges and creative opportunities, particularly as it relates to lands acquisition. Under the Clean Water Act, Section 404, mitigation is required when impacts from development negatively affect wetlands. Many companies utilize the indirect remedy of purchasing mitigation credits at an off-site mitigation restoration project. These credits are generally created by a mitigation firm with an approved site restoration plan which demonstrates positive wetland recovery. A Conservation Easement created with a land trust is one of the codicils necessary in the federal regulatory approval process for a mitigation site. Therefore, mitigation may offer land trusts a unique conservation strategy.

NPAT is currently partnering with Mitigation Strategies, LLC on a group of projects where we feel we can have a significant effect on environmental restoration, particularly as it relates to pocket prairies. While these projects often focus on tree planting as a means for gaining increased hydrology, many times these ecosystems contain significant amounts of pocket prairie and, in one instance, a rare Saline Prairie habitat type. Historically, pocket prairies were maintained through both fire and grazing practices. But gone are the migrating herds, and the controlled burning employed by Native Americans is also absent. The absence of these occurrences has led to a biological example of entropy where we see scrub replacing grasses and even strangling tree growth. *(continued)*



PHOTO COURTESY OF ED Z. HARR

NPAT Program Director James Alderson conducted plant surveys with other team members at the Commons Ford Prairie Restoration Project. For more on this, see Page 2.

Welcome NPAT's New Staff!



MY NAME IS PHILLIP Quast and I am the new outreach coordinator for NPAT. I live in Wimberley, approximately 35 miles southwest of Austin. My job includes developing outreach and education programs, and educational materials that can be used for teaching the impor-

tance of native prairies to students, NPAT members, and the general public. This curriculum will focus on the role native grasslands and prairies play in our ecosystems—both historically and currently—as well as their place in the heritage and history of Texas. The role of native fauna within and near the prairies will also be a major theme in the lesson plans and activities developed. I will also be conducting data research for both prairie development and restoration.

My professional background includes a BS in Computer Science from Texas State University—San Marcos. I also recently completed a Master of Applied Geography degree at Texas State University with a focus on environmental resource management and Geographic Information Systems.

I am a native Texan and *(continued)*

Prairie Conservation and Mitigation Strategies

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Nor should this be viewed as natural succession. Historically fire and grazing were natural processes endemic to these systems, and much of the current dense understory is comprised of either exotic trees or invasive plants—both of which create significant negative habitat impacts.

While on one hand we might wish there were no need for mitigation, we must realistically make plans that reflect current circumstances; this concept applies to landowners as well. Some landowners are opting to pursue wetland and habitat mitigation as a financial means to both conserve and restore their lands. So the partnership between mitigation companies, landowners, and land trusts can in fact be a multi-faceted vehicle, where negatively impacted habitats lead to conservation elsewhere. When you consider that these easements are to be held in perpetuity, the effect can be substantial.

—Dalmara Bayne, ED, NPAT

PRAIRIE Events

2010 State of the Prairie Conference

November 4–5 in Houston

The 2nd Annual State of the Prairie Conference will be a mix of presentations and field trips designed to encourage those looking to restore, protect, or educate about the Coastal Prairies of Texas and Louisiana. National and local prairie experts will be on hand to lend their knowledge and passion to landowners, educators, and conservation professionals and volunteers. Go to www.coastalprairiepartnership.org for more information.

On **November 6**, following the conference will be **Prairie Heritage Day** at Brazos Bend State Park. For more details, visit www.brazosbend.org.

Make plans now for an exciting week of activities on the prairie!

Identifying Native Prairies

ON AUGUST 28, the Houston Chapter of the Native Prairies Association of Texas held a workshop on the “Identification Process for Native Prairie Remnants” led by Pat Merkord. The workshop was well attended with more than 40 present. Participants were introduced to the protocols, developed by the Native Prairie Association of Texas, to conduct surveys for native prairie remnants.

First presented was a basic four-step process of identification and how to use satellite imaging tools currently available on the internet. The group was then shown how to document the features of a potential site including vegetative cover, exotic and invasive species, native forbs and grasses, and species that are

indicators of high-quality prairie remnants.

At the end of the presentation, participants practiced their skills on photographs of actual sites. Afterwards, some said they realized they needed to know their grasses and other plants much better since vegetation is the main indicator of quality remnants.

If you are interested in scheduling this workshop, or need more information on *Identifying Native Prairie Remnants*, contact pat_merkord@texasprairie.org.

The next meeting of the Houston Chapter of NPAT will be Wednesday, **November 10** at the Bayland Community Center at 6400 Bissonnet in Houston. For details, contact pat_merkord@texasprairie.org

Wanted Board Members

IF YOU LOVE PRAIRIES and have a head for numbers, NPAT needs you as the next Treasurer. All types of skills are needed on the Board of Directors. It's a great way to learn more about prairies, and their conservation and restoration. Contact NPAT at info@texasprairie.org or call 512-772-4741. NPAT needs YOU!

Meet the New Staff

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have had a life-long interest in ecology, biology, and geology. I look forward to meeting and working with many of NPAT's members to promote awareness and education concerning native grasslands in Texas. You may contact me by email at phillip_quast@texasprairie.org with any questions, concerns, or ideas about the projects previously mentioned or other ways to promote prairie conservation and appreciation in Texas.

—Phillip Quast, OC, NPAT

Commons Ford Prairie Restoration Project

ABOUT A YEAR AGO, birder Ed Fair, became curious about an approximately 40-acre grassland in Austin's Commons Ford Ranch Metropolitan Park. Ed has been birding this park for years because it has a high diversity of bird species. He learned that this old pasture land was primarily K.R. bluestem, coastal bermuda and Johnsongrass with small mesquite trees encroaching.

Ed and park administrator Joan Singh discussed a restoration project to convert this non-native grassland to native prairie. They joined with interested individuals and groups to form the Commons Ford Prairie Restoration Project, a nonprofit organization operating under the umbrella of the Austin Parks Foundation.

Native Prairies Association of Texas, Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, USDA/NRCS, Travis Audubon Society, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Austin Parks Foundation have all committed to collaborate in various aspects of the preparation and implementation of this restoration plan.

To find out more, go to commonsfordpro.blogspot.com or find Commons Ford Prairie Restoration on Facebook.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KIRSTI HARMS

September at Maddin

EVEN IN EARLY September I could feel a subtle break in the summer heat at Maddin Prairie Preserve. So on a sunny Labor Day weekend the Texas Horned Lizard Conservation Society (www.hornedlizards.org) came to conduct a survey on the preserve. Saturday afternoon I joined Marsha May and Lee Ann Linam of TPWD, as well as other members of the THLCS at Maddin. This group had already found a small horned lizard on the lower preserve road. As temperatures rose the following morning, we discovered that the road through the middle of the preserve was a really good place to look. All in all, the group found and studied seven horned lizards along this stretch of road.

Because of ample spring and summer rains, the vegetation at Maddin was fairly thick. The roads serve as an open area for the lizards, and this is also where the harvester ants—the horned lizard's preferred diet—are building their nests. Driving the roads without running over a horned lizard became the challenge of the day. One unlucky victim was run over by a vehicle. It has been recommended that during the warm season visitors to the preserve need to drive slowly and keep their eyes peeled for these slow-moving lizards. The Maddin Committee is looking into safely scheduled mowing and opening up areas of

vegetation to improve conditions for these lizards.

Three weeks later, Pat Merckord and I returned for a weekend of work. The plan was to do a little hand mowing of the roads—to keep from running over more lizards. However, this time the weather did not cooperate and it rained almost all day Saturday. Even though it was a gentle steady rain, the roads turned into slippery mud. I got to experience prairie muck and mud firsthand while trying to dig a trench to drain a deepening puddle/lake in the road. Fortunately the truck made it out okay and there was no need to add “digging vehicles out of the mud” to my resume.

The next day turned into the perfect sunny day as a cool front pushed through. But since we were behind schedule on

Members of the Texas Horned Lizard Conservation Society studied the population at Maddin. One of the measurements involved weighing the lizards (right).

projects, the day was spent mowing roads and clearing brush from around the prairie dog colony. The high vegetation has had an adverse affect on the colony, there are more signs that predators have been after them. We cleared acacia from the vicinity and mowed some taller vegetation in order to improve visibility for them.

If you are interested in visiting Maddin, contact Kirsti Harms at kirsti_harms@texasprairie.org. Surveys and work days are scheduled throughout the year.

—Kirsti Harms

R&R Update

THE RESTORATION and Research Committee has taken the task of updating the current state of knowledge for prairie-related topics. An extensive literature gathering effort is underway and will be compiled for reference in the future. The R & R committee also plans to have seasonal articles on prairie topics in each edition of the newsletter, beginning in December, and we will be scheduling a field trip to coincide with each article. The topics will include all aspects of prairie remnants, restoration and reconstruction. You can expect individual articles on soil types, soil microbes, plant inventory/selection, seed sources, planting techniques, invasive species control, prescribed fire and management techniques. Please stay tuned and look for our first article to appear in December!



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MAKE A DIFFERENCE for current and future generations in the preservation of Texas' natural heritage, while enjoying outings and volunteer activities with fellow prairie enthusiasts. Be a part of the solution for the many challenges facing this great American landscape.

We depend on the support of our members to help us conserve Texas prairies. Programs are supported by gifts, contributions, grants, membership dues, and volunteer efforts.

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For more information, contact NPAT by email at contact@texasprairie.org, call 512-847-7615, or visit www.texasprairie.org.

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