

From the Executive Director

2010 Annual Report

THIS IS THE SECOND YEAR that NPAT has had staff to implement its goals. But the original grants related to the “Tallgrass Prairie Survey Project,” has consumed a great deal of our resources. While these surveys will provide important data for strategic planning to multiple organizations, as the 95 county project nears completion, we are now able to direct our attention to other important areas.



NPAT is unique among land trusts in that it has a threefold mission; to conserve Texas native grasslands through 1) acquisition 2) research & restoration 3) outreach & education. We feel this approach will ultimately help us to have a greater impact than focusing solely on conservation easements and fee simple transactions. This year, endeavors within these categories include:

Research & Restoration

THE SURVEY project was our primary focus within this category, but we have expanded our efforts to include “Regional Restoration Guides.” Beginning with North Texas, phase one of this project has already begun with an extensive data search. Phillip Quast, our newly hired Outreach Coordinator is conducting the search under the direction of the Research & Restoration Committee and Program



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIRSTI HARMS

The skies over Maddin prairie were particularly photogenic during a recent fall visit.

Director James Alderson. We also have submitted a grant to hire an independent contractor to assist with the data review. This phase will culminate with NPAT hosting a workshop for regional restoration specialists to facilitate concise regional protocols for landowners. The end product will be published in both paper and web based formats and will include an extensive list of resources including: program assistance, supplies, equipment, and professional services.

Outreach & Education

THE RESEARCH & Restoration committee will also be writing a series of related articles in our quarterly newsletters that will be linked to applicable field trips. Our Outreach Coordinator is facilitating these efforts and also working with various agencies including Austin Parks to provide additional field trips and educational opportunities. Through

enhancing our website and providing curriculum for both agencies and schools, we are engaging people where they live and thereby promoting interest in our natural heritage statewide. We ultimately expect to apply this model to other urban areas and are planning our first annual event in Austin this spring.

Future outreach plans include providing access to fee simple properties through both field trips and other programs. Maddin Prairie Preserve, in particular is well situated to be a model regional nature preserve that would not only provide multiple educational opportunities but also enhance community sustainability (located west of Fort Worth, near Colorado City). Maddin is a working example of a restored habitat and is home to many noteworthy species, including the Texas Horned Lizard. We have raised \$35,000 for a minimal building to house these activities, but an additional (continued)

2010 Annual Report

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\$40,000 is needed before ground can be broken.

Acquisition & Management

WE HAVE increased our easement holdings by 400 acres through mitigation partnerships and have another 1500 acres in the planning. In addition, we have restricted funds committed to acquisition and are working on identifying a suitable project that will qualify for agency matching funds to maximize impact. Management has/is also a key issue. We are now monitoring all easements annually, submitting management plans to owners, and developing/implementing sound management plans on fee simple properties.

Other News

NPAT IS ALSO currently undergoing a pre-accreditation organizational assessment funded in part by the Land Trust Alliance. This process is facilitated by independent consultants and will result

in a plan for the organization that ensures both nationally recognized land trust standards of operation and sustainability.

We also continue to embrace the spirit of cooperation/teamwork through partnerships with multiple organizations to further conservation in the state of Texas including: The North Texas Prairie Coalition, Coastal Prairie Partnership, Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture, Teaming with Wildlife, and Native Plant Society of Texas.

Summary

WE'VE ACCOMPLISHED a great deal this year through the efforts of both staff and board activities. Heartfelt thanks are extended to everyone who participated; including our members. But there is more to accomplish, we also need to be mindful of sustainability. We hope you continue to support our conservation efforts, because they will truly serve the needs of all Texans for generations to come.

—*Dalmara Bayne, ED, NPAT*

2010 Financial Report

NPAT OPERATES on a calendar year; the 2010 financial report will be included in the spring newsletter, but it will also be available by request in late January. As you know this is a difficult time for many non profits, especially environmental groups. Too often we forget that our health and welfare are directly related to the state of the environment; i.e. environmental concerns are linked to our own sustainability.

NPAT is a membership organization and therefore cannot exist without your support. We are doing our part by being mindful of expenditures and also working to increase earned income in part through agency programs; Landowner Incentive and CRP, to name a few, have provided \$20,000 in revenue for land management this year. And the PUB (Pastures for Upland Birds) will provide another \$4,000.

But the situation for both operations and endowments is tenuous. The endowments provide stability to the “in perpetuity” aspect of easements and staff is necessary for day to day management as well as accomplishing future goals. Therefore, we ask that you not only renew your membership this year, but also consider a generous contribution to help us to help Texas through conserving our Natural Heritage for both today and generations to come. The following list shows areas of need or you can make a general contribution by going to our web site: www.texasprairies.org or mailing in the form in this newsletter.

I would like to help conserve Texas' natural heritage by contributing/pledging funds noted to the following program (s):

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Operations | <input type="checkbox"/> Research & Restoration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Acquisition | <input type="checkbox"/> Outreach & Education |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maddin Building Fund | <input type="checkbox"/> General Fund |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Property Management Endowment | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Easement Legal Defense Fund | |

Check enclosed

I am donating on your website (www.texasprairie.org) to be utilized as noted above.

Pledge (Amount) to be paid by check credit card on or before the following date:

By

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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!

Property Monitoring Completed

OUR ANNUAL monitoring of properties for which Native Prairies Association of Texas (NPAT) holds conservation easements is complete for 2010. Philip Quast, Outreach Coordinator, and James Alderson, Program Director, conducted the reviews in November. Landowners were contacted ahead of the visit to each one's respective prairie parcel so they could participate.

During a typical visit to monitor current conditions and indicators of trends to the future, we record any changes from previous years. Increases or decreases in amounts of individual species and species appearing for the first time are recorded.

Categories of plants for which we keep a particularly close watch are noxious, invasive, or exotic (not a native species indigenous to the soils of the site) species. Johnsongrass, dallisgrass, bahia-grass, King Ranch bluestem, bermudagrass, and vaseygrass are just a few of the many species included in our target list for attention. Why just "attention" and not removal? Removal is a multi-year process, often involving multiple methods.

At the end of the day, we discuss each prairie owner's management plans and assist them with plan revisions or other needs they might express. Performing these evaluations each year has exposed a need for some equipment, particularly tools to aid the owners in their fight against undesirable vegetation. NPAT will purchase some of these items to be available prairie owners' use.

Annual monitoring reviews of easement properties is an early warning defense to reveal threats to the current health and long-term needs of NPAT's conservation easement properties.

—James Alderson, PD, NPAT

A Letter from a Member



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NELL HEGEFELD

HELLO, I'M NELL HEGEFELD, daughter of Nelson and Emeline Wieting. They have received your notice of the annual members meeting along with a request for an e-mail address. Nelson and Emeline do not have e-mail. We have tried to interest them, but to no avail. They say it is just as easy to come to our house and let us use our computer for them...you see, we built our house ten years ago on the home place which has been in our family for 112 years. I have attached a few pictures of the meadow that were taken [in late September].

Daddy is really proud of his hay meadow this year. He says he does not remember the meadow ever being this thick and this tall. We went down to the meadow around sunset tonight because he wanted his picture made. He's never asked me for that before, so it didn't take long for me to grab cameras and hop in the mule.

I wish all of you could have been there, the wind was just barely moving the blades of grass, the longhorns were in the meadow behind us mooing softly and watching what was going on, bull frogs were croaking in the tank, and Clair, the border collie, was posing for her picture. Daddy looked so relaxed to just be in his field. Momma didn't want her picture made, but with one crook of a finger, a lopsided smile and a "Come on, Honey" from Daddy, she was by his side.

For those of you that don't know: this is native prairie grass, meaning it has never been plowed. There are very few of these fields of prairie left. Momma and Daddy have ensured its safety to remain as it has always been by registering the meadow with the Native Prairies Association of Texas. They have groups of people that come out several times a year to look at and study the changes that are naturally taking place. Daddy will be 92 on November 2 and except for the time he served in WWII, has never lived anywhere else. This land has been in our family about 112 years.

Sincerely,
Nell Hegefeld



Disturbance on the Prairie

By Aron Flanders, TPWD Wildlife Diversity Biologist

STATIC IS NOT A TERM used to describe functioning prairies. Indeed, prairies are disturbance-maintained systems and must be managed accordingly.

First, fire—photosynthesis’ opposite—has sculpted and maintained Texas prairies. In historical accounts, European settlers describe watching vast fire lines glowing white to deep red hues on the night horizon, appearing to muffle out and then waving intense flames. No parking lots, four-lane highways, reservoirs, or fire departments existed to stop the fires beneficial effects on the prairie. So the crackling and roaring flames, ignited by lightning or Native Americans, had their way with the cured grasses and were only stopped by a major drainage or the lack of fuel.

Second, pioneers in Texas wrote about encountering the largest terrestrial animal in North America, bison. Bison herds were reported to stretch for miles. Unlike fire, not even major waterways could stop herds of these buoyant swimmers from migrating in search of green forage. In their wake, intensely grazed rangelands, trodden ground, and the smell of dung were found.

Along with fire, high intensity, low frequency, short-duration grazing by bison and to a lesser extent pronghorn suppressed woody species and increased herbaceous species diversity. These two disturbance types, grazing and fire, are paramount to sustaining a healthy prairie ecosystem and realizing wildlife benefits.

Disturbance is important because prairies are constantly transitioning even while they appear to lay idle. During a small window of time, prairies are often invaded by woody shrubs, leading to further changes in water infiltration, herbaceous cover, and erosion. Additionally, annual wildflower and grass species’ production is often lost without disturbance due to dense, matted perennial herbaceous cover and ground litter. Furthermore, habitat suitability for many prairie-dependent wildlife species will significantly decline because they rely on disturbance to create their habitat requirements. Fire, grazing, and mechanical



PHOTO COURTESY OF ARON FLANDERS

treatments (i.e. light disking, shredding, etc.) can increase plant diversity, create weedy areas for upland birds and ungulates, maintain wildlife cover requirements (i.e. nest, escape, brood, fawn, and thermal), produce nutritious regrowth for ungulates, enhance structural diversity, maintain or set back successional stages, increase forbs, alter insect type and abundance, prevent woody invasion, alter the distribution of ungulates, reduce the risk of wildfire, increase nutrient cycling and microbial activity, trample seed and organic material into the ground, inoculate plants, maintain water and soil resources, and improve forage characteristics for grazers, browsers and foragers. Performed incorrectly, the aforementioned benefits can be lost or even reversed.

The response of a prairie community to various disturbance treatments will depend on timing, intensity, duration, soil types, precipitation, aspect, historical land use, and complex biological processes. However, scientific study and field experience has led us to some general land management guidelines for managing ecological dynamics.

Disturbances often promote early successional plants. Early successional plants are the annual grasses, broadleaf plants and woody plants that emerge first following a disturbance. Examples of early successional species include partridge pea, ragweed, sunflowers, and basket flower.

Annual plants are important seed producers for migratory songbirds, turkey, quail, and prairie chickens. Many annuals serve as nutritious forage for deer, pronghorn, jack rabbits, or even box turtles. Also, some insects are host specific, such as butterflies only utilizing specific plants as caterpillars. Thus, if you notice your prairie being dominated by perennials or perceive the absence of a favorite annual wildflower, it

may be time to cycle a disturbance through your prairie. The timing of this disturbance along with weather patterns plays a major role in the response.

For example, burning in late summer through fall promotes cool season forbs and grasses, while performing this activity in the winter through early summer produces warm season forbs and grasses. Try a late winter or early spring burn to have every cow in the county drooling over your green grass. In fact, research has shown increased weight gain of livestock grazing burned pastures relative to unburned pasture due to higher amounts of dietary protein content on burned areas. Most prescribed burn managers consider “hot” summer burns better for reclamation of herbaceous openings from shrub encroachment, while “cool” burns are better for maintenance. Natural resource professionals recommend creating mosaics and not applying disturbances uniformly across a landscape. Burns could be conducted on 1/5 to 1/3 of the prairie annually, depending on management objectives.

Disking, similar to fire, is also a technique used to promote beneficial early successional plant species. Shallow strip disking is usually recommended for no more than 5% of the total acreage, depending on your objectives, and should be distributed throughout a property. Disking, burning, and grazing can help maintain a percentage of bare ground. If bare

November Was a Busy Month for NPAT Members in the Houston Area

THIS NOVEMBER was an eventful month for prairie enthusiasts of the Houston area.

The Second Annual State of the Prairie Conference was held at the Houston Zoo on November 4th and 5th. This conference included lectures by national and regional prairie experts on prairie restoration and conservation easements. There were presentations by private landowners on prairie establishment, maintenance and wildlife benefits. Also included were workshops for educators on how to establish and maintain a schoolyard prairie, and how to teach about prairies.

The second day of the conference was devoted to field trips to parks and preserves with ongoing restoration projects such as Sheldon Lake State Park, Armand Bayou Nature Center, Attwater's Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge; private landowner restoration; and original prairie remnant sites. The Native Prairies Association of Texas was a major sponsor of the event. The keynote speaker was Jason Singhurst, TPWD plant ecologist and NPAT board member. Jason discussed the current status of prairies in Texas and results of NPAT prairie remnant surveys. NPAT president-elect, Pat Merkord presented a program on "Conservation Easements for Texas Landowners". The response to the conference was very positive, turnout was good and attendees said they learned much and had a great time.

On November 6th, the annual Prairie Heritage Day was held at Brazos Bend State Park. Organizations involved with regional prairies included Native Prairies Association of Texas Houston Chapter, four chapters of Texas Master Naturalists, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Coastal Prairie Partnership, Katy Prairie Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, Houston Audubon Society, Houston Zoo, Native Plant Society of Texas, Texas A&M Agri-life Extension, USDA-NRCS, Texas Wildlife Society, *Houston Chronicle*, and many others.

The day included walks and talks on prairies and wildlife, booths with exhib-



PHOTO COURTESY OF FLO HANNING

Tom Solomon, right, was awarded a Dick Benoit Volunteer Service Award at this year's 2010 State of the Prairie Conference. Tom is a member of the Texas Master Naturalist Galveston Bay Chapter and is a Master Gardener.

Here Tom explains the correct planting technique to a volunteer at Houston Audubon's Horseshoe Marsh Bird Sanctuary restoration project on the Bolivar Peninsula. They are trying to restore coastal prairie after Hurricane Ike.

For more information, go to www.coastalprairiepartnership.org.

its like the live bees presented by the Fort Bend Beekeepers Association. The NPAT Houston chapter held a seed challenge contest where participants tried to guess what seeds they were looking at. The prize for participation was a free packet of native seeds. Also at the NPAT booth children made pictures with wooden carved stamps depicting prairie wildlife and plants. This booth was very popular and had many visitors throughout the day.

The newly formed Houston Chapter of the Native Prairies Association of Texas was busy with other events in November as well. On November 10th, a workshop on grass identification was presented by NPAT member Carolyn Fannon who is a highly acclaimed nature photographer of the Houston area. Carolyn's presentation was very informative and her prairie grass photography was truly stunning

and exceptional. She also had developed a set of handouts to help in grass identification to go with her program. This workshop presentation was followed by a field trip on Saturday Nov. 13th to Williams Prairie, a Katy Prairie Conservancy property in Harris County. Members met at the site and explored all the fall forbs and grasses growing there and practiced on their plant identification skills. These two events were a follow up to a previous presentation to the group on "How to Identify Native Prairie Remnants".

For the coming year 2011, the NPAT Houston group will be meeting each month on the fourth Wednesday at Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet; Houston, Texas. If you live in the Houston area and are interested in prairies come and visit us at our meetings. For more information, contact Pat Merkord at pat_merkord@texasprairie.org.

Disturbance on the Prairie

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ground is not present on prairies, then the land is largely unusable for many bird species that require bare ground for foraging, traveling, or brood rearing.

All the benefits we have covered so far can be accomplished by a proper grazing regime. The most important factor for rangeland grazing management is stocking rate. Stresses of high stocking rates and non rotational grazing will cause the most palatable grasses and forbs to decrease and be replaced by less palatable forbs and grasses, termed increasers. Other considerations include duration, frequency, and season of grazing. Rotational grazing is recommended for sustainable rangeland productivity, livestock weight gain, and wildlife. Rotational grazing mimics historical grazing patterns and allows plants to maintain necessary stored carbohydrates for persistence. Some would argue that the benefits of grazing carry longer into the year compared to a one time burn. Indeed, wildlife habitat structure and plant composition can be managed for a longer period of time via grazing on highly productive soils. The impacts are more pronounced on tall and mixed grass prairies relative to short grass prairies.

Patch burn grazing is a technique that has been shown to effectively manage grazing distribution and has been reported to increase forb cover beneficial to wildlife by 60% compared to non-burned, grazed sites. This technique burns small, manageable areas in winter or early spring, which strongly attracts large herbivores that utilize the highly palatable grass regrowth. In tallgrass prairie, grasses were reported to regain dominance 2 to 3 years following burning and grazing by bison. Patch burn grazing may be a powerful tool for focusing grazing and increasing habitat diversity.

Executed correctly, fire, grazing, and mechanical techniques will prevent shrubs from taking over prairie openings. Keep in mind though, that many of our beloved wildlife, such as deer, turkey, northern bobwhite, scissor-tailed flycatchers, and painted buntings require or benefit from varying densities of shrub mottes.

Cutting and shredding are commonly

used mechanical techniques used to prevent shrub encroachment, create beneficial bugging areas for birds, and alter the plant community. However, it is recommended that these activities take place after July 1st in order to allow ground-nesting birds produce and fawns to be mobile. Repeated cutting at the same time every year can alter the plant community and lower diversity. It's good to leave some standing strips and allow time for regrowth and seeding of perennial grasses. Leaving 50 yard strips along woody corridors can create a feathered edge beneficial to wildlife. Cutting below 6 to 8 inch height can harm some tallgrass species.

Covering all the necessary specifications and considerations for these techniques is beyond the scope of this article. The starting point for all land managers is to look at their historical land use and the current state of their range condition. A professional evaluation can help formulate the proper prescription that will adapt to changing conditions over time. One thing for sure, there'll always be a place for disturbance on the prairie. We must not only protect prairies, but also conserve their beneficial, natural processes.

Citations and more information

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- <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/landwater/>
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- Web Soil Surveys <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/>

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