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Yellow Rain Lilly

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TEXAS PRAIRIE

News

FROM THE NATIVE PRAIRIES ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS

WINTER 2011-12 • VOL. 24 NO. 3

From the Executive Director

2011: The Year in Review

NPAT'S UNIQUE threefold mission promotes conservation of our "natural grassland heritage" through acquisition, research & restoration, and outreach & education. And to that end, 2011 has been a busy year filled with both accomplishments and strategic actions which will support future success.

ACQUISITION

300 acres of rare saline prairie in Wood County were conserved through mitigation and 800-

plus acres of mixed pine-savannah-prairie on Lake Livingston will close by year's end. In progress are 100-plus



acres of pristine Silvanus Dropseed prairie in Bowie County and an easement on The Nature Conservancy of Texas' Clymer Meadow. An offer was submitted to the Austin Independent School District to purchase 12 acres of prairie slated for development in the Travis Country subdivision; AISD has yet to vote on this acquisition.

NPAT conducted a landowner workshop in Elgin this fall. Four more are scheduled in 2012 to be held in strategic geographic locations. In addition, NPAT helped in the passage of Senate Bill 244 which gives statewide legal standing to the use of public funds for conservation easements. NPAT was also a partner in assisting with the passage of a Travis



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIRSTI HARMS

People of all ages took on the mystery grass quiz at Prairie Heritage Day this fall.

County bond package designating \$7.5 million for conservation easements.

RESEARCH & RESTORATION

The survey project identifying prairie remnants in multiple counties is complete and we are working to make this data available to partners to facilitate both conservation and better strategic planning. We also began work on the first (North Texas) of a series of regional restoration guides that will give landowners the tools they need to effectively pursue restoration. Phase I entailed creating an in-depth questionnaire for restoration specialists and analysis of existing research. In 2012 we will facilitate a workshop for professionals aimed at further clarification of efficient protocols, programs, and resources. The final result will be a concise web-

based and printed periodical available to landowners.

OUTREACH & EDUCATION

NPAT works to cooperate with other organizations to maximize conservation efforts in our state, and to that end this year we participated in the following events and projects: Prairie Fest, Prairie Heritage Day, American Grassland's Conference, Holistic Management International's Field Days, the Native Plant Society of Texas' annual symposium, State of the Prairie Conference—co-sponsored with the Coastal Prairie Partnership, Wilbarger Creek Conservation Alliance (provided strategic planning and acquisition support), Elizabeth Ney Museum (curriculum development), Commons Ford (restoration), and the Oaks and Prairies (*continued on page 2*)

2011: The Year in Review

(Continued from Page 1)

Joint Venture (board participation).

We also led four educational field trips linked to a series of restoration articles in our newsletter. Our goal is to actively engage people in urban areas to promote both acquisition and enhanced awareness of the importance of prairies. To that end new chapters are being created which will help us to better understand the needs of individual communities. The Houston chapter is now very active at all levels and future plans include a Dallas-Fort Worth chapter.

NPAT is also adhering to standards of organizational excellence by aiming for national accreditation. Through a Land Trust Alliance grant we have gone through an initial assessment and are on a scheduled plan of implementation. But we cannot do this valuable work without your support. Foundation giving is down by almost 50 percent nationwide, and corporate giving is not only declining but funds

are also being channeled into avenues of immediate concern: economic, health, child welfare. While these areas are important, it is critical that we do not forget our integral connection to the environment.

Not only are prairies Texas' ecological and historic heritage; because of their connection to water quality/quantity, habitat, carbon sequestering, and sustainable land use; they are also vitally important to the well being of both present and future generations. While we operate under sound fiscal management, we need to raise \$50,000 over the next two months to continue all of our programs (A TPWD grant was only partially fulfilled due to legislative cuts in programs). We understand that these are difficult times for everyone, but I urge you to give as generously as you can.

Sincerely yours,
Dalmara Bayne, ED, NPAT

NPAT Updates

THE HOUSTON Chapter of the Native Prairies Association of Texas meets each month at Bayland Community Center, 6400 Bissonnet, Houston. The regular meeting date is the 4th Wednesday of each month at 6:30 p.m.

In August, the speaker was Jaime Gonzalez, president of Coastal Prairie Partnership, and education director for Katy Prairie Conservancy. The topic was "CPP/NPAT Cooperative Efforts for Prairie Conservation in the Houston Area." He talked about the need for more surveying of the area for prairie remnants, monitoring of areas already identified and coordinating preservation activities. This presentation inspired everyone to work harder to save native prairies and educate the public about their value.

In September, members worked on a planned travel brochure that would document prairies of the Houston area.

In October a follow-up workshop on "How to Recognize a Prairie Remnant" was presented by Pat and Glenn Merkord. This workshop featured live plants that allowed attendees to work on their prairie plant identification skills. Over 100 plant species were contributed by members for identification. The January speaker, Dalmara Bayne, executive director of NPAT will discuss conservation easements and how they work.

The organization has taken an interest in trying to save at least one remnant prairie within the Houston metropolitan area that they could use as an educational site. A number of potential sites have been identified and the group is now working with other prairie organizations in Houston on ways to proceed. This chapter is an energetic and hard working group working to save prairies, and we are excited about them!

Prairie Heritage Day was held November 5th at Brazos Bend State Park. At the NPAT booth, grasses were featured at the "Name the Prairie Plant Contest," along with arts & crafts that allowed participants to create their own prairie-themed cards and bookmarks. *(continued on page 6)*

I want to make a difference for all Texans

both now and for generations to come by helping to conserve our ecological and historic heritage:

- Enclosed is my contribution of \$50 \$100 \$250 \$1,000 \$5,000 Other _____
- I will go to your website and make a contribution
- I cannot contribute at this time, but I would like to make a pledge of _____ payable by _____ from _____

We cannot do what we do without your support, thank you for your generous tax-deductible contribution.

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Prairie Restoration

What to Plant and Where to Obtain Seeds

WHEN PLANNING your prairie planting, remember to keep your goal in mind.

Whether restoring a native prairie or reconstructing a prairie habitat, you must determine which species to plant and where to obtain seed for your project. The most important aspect is to determine your prairie type. Use the NRCS Web Soil Survey tool (<http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/HomePage.htm>) to determine your soil type. This, in turn, will provide the range of vegetation community types for your area. This should greatly influence many of your decisions.

Your next step: choose the appropriate species for your prairie, and determine the plant ratios. This can be done in a number of ways. The Web Soil Survey will list species that could occur in your soil type; including the pounds per acre that one would expect to find for each of those species, which, in turn, will help you determine the seeding rate and plant ratios. Perhaps the best thing to do is to talk to experts in your area and visit either an intact prairie remnant or a successful prairie restoration. This special place can become a “reference site.” Get to know it, see what is growing there, and what the plant ratios are.

Then, the question becomes, “where am I going to obtain my seed?” or perhaps, “Germplasm, where art thou?” Some seed companies such as Native American Seed (www.seedsources.com) collect seed from many different prairie sites across Texas. There may also be a local seed company near your site that can save time and shipping costs.

Another method of obtaining seed for planting is by purchasing hay. Exercise extreme caution when using the hay method, as this can become a way to introduce non-native species rather than the desired native grasses. If you can convince the owner of your “reference site” to sell you hay from his field, then you will sleep well, knowing that you aren’t in for any unpleasant surprises.

Regardless of where you obtain most



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIRSTI HARNIS

Gulf coast muhly and golden rod created a colorful scene at Brazos Bend State Park.

of your seed, you should plan on hand collecting some of your seed. Some species are not available commercially, and/or are not easily harvested in any other way. This is especially true for many of the small forbs that enrich our prairies. If you are hand collecting, make sure that the seed is fully mature. The one drawback to using hay or hand collected seeds, is that you do not know how much of the seed is viable, while seed bought from a company has usually been tested and its PLS (pure live seed—the percentage of the seed that is expected to germinate) is provided.

Depending on where the seed for your project comes from will determine how it is to be planted. From hand-spreading the seed to using a no-till drill, the seeding of a prairie is still human mimicry of an ancient dance between prairie, buffalo, wind, rain and fire. We do our best to impersonate this perfect system and realize that there is no right way to do it...but there are lots of wrong ways. Talk to your local NRCS representative or a Texas Parks and Wildlife biologist

for more information, and stay tuned for future restoration articles in the *Texas Prairie News*.

—Leslie Dietz
NPAT Board Member

Wanted Board Members

IF YOU LOVE PRAIRIES and want to make a difference, NPAT needs you. All types of skills are needed on the Board of Directors. We are currently in need of officers. Joining a committee is another way to contribute. • It's a great way to learn more about conservation and restoration. Volunteers are vital to this organization. Email NPAT at contact@texasprairie.org or call 512-772-4741.

Maddin Prairie Preserve

New Wildlife and Wildflower Sightings in a Year of Drought

THE DROUGHT started early this year at Maddin and there was little relief throughout the year. The spectacular spring flowers often seen at Maddin Prairie did not make an appearance this year but some new and unusual plants were sighted after the short rains that occasionally came. Of these, the most interesting was the Yellow Rain Lilly or Copper Zyphyr Lily (*Zephyranthes longifolia*). It looks similar to the white rain lily but is rarely seen and it only blooms for one day, usually after a hard drenching rain. It occurs in a few Central and West Texas counties as well as in portions of New Mexico and Arizona. In Arizona it is a protected species listed as a “Salvage Restricted” plant meaning it should not be disturbed or moved. It is a perennial but it may not appear every year. This is the first year we have seen it at Maddin. The Copper Zyphyr lily is drought tolerant because it remains dormant during dry seasons and quickly blooms after a refreshing desert rain.

Tube-tongue (*Justicia pilosella*) is a small lavender-flowered plant that is very significant host for the Vesta Crescent butterfly that lays its eggs on the underside of the leaf and where the caterpillars feed until they become butterflies. This is the first time we have seen this plant at Maddin, but we have observed Vesta Crescent Butterfly here in the past.

Angel Trumpet (*Acleisanthes longiflora*)—a member of the four o’clock family—is another inconspicuous, low growing and sprawling plant that when closely inspected reveals long, delicate, white trumpet-shaped flowers. These fragrant flowers begin to bloom in the evening and attract night flying moths that pollinate them

All three of these new species are found

This Mississippi kite was an exciting new spring bird for Maddin. Maintaining water for wildlife has been an ongoing project during the drought.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAT MERKORD



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIRSTI HARNIS

PHOTO COURTESY OF PAT MERKORD



New species are being discovered at Maddin. The Great Plains skink is one of the latest additions to the list.

only in the southwest region of the U.S. It may be the extremely dry conditions favored by these drought resistant plants that take advantage of infrequent rains.

There were two new vertebrates seen this year at Maddin. The strangest were the desert shrews which were found dead inside our utility shed in a wheel barrow. They had been feeding on the red wasps in the shed and had eaten hundreds of them until there were only piles of wings left behind. They could not climb out of the wheel barrow so they began eating each other.

Only a few were found whole, mostly only pieces of their skeletons were left. These tiny mammals eat about 75% of their body weight each day and live without drinking water. They eat a wide range of insects and even small dead animals and spend most of their time foraging for food. They do not live in burrows but find shelter under brush or debris. These are true desert denizens and the drought has probably had little effect on them. (Note: The wheel barrows are now stored upside down to avoid trapping any more of these small visitors to the shed.)

The other newly discovered vertebrate was a reptile, the Great Plains Skink, the largest skink in the U.S. Two of these lizard-like denizens of grasslands were found under the stock tank when it was moved this summer. In dry areas this species finds cool retreats under objects near water or moisture. Though they often live in very

Drought, Fire, Flooding Natural Cycles or Disaster?

B EING HUMAN, we tend to think of natural occurrences in terms of how they affect us. The impact that both drought, record temperatures, and fire have made upon Texans' lives certainly cannot not be discounted, while elsewhere flooding takes its toll. But, as we provide the necessary support to help our neighbors weather these types of events, it is equally important to remember that natural "disasters" are normal when viewed through a cyclical time line, and are often the product of nature re-balancing itself; both locally and globally. Within this context the cause of global warming is merely an academic argument; the real discussion should be about how we who are a part of the ecosystem either add to or mitigate its affects. While this concept may have always been true, with extreme record temperatures, changing wind patterns, ocean temperatures/levels and water cycles—and all of the appurtenant related affects—the part we play has never been more important.

"Disaster" is defined as an occurrence inflicting widespread destruction and distress; viewed within this context, the drought in Texas and the related fires would certainly meet that definition. However there is also a second definition we cannot ignore; a total failure. Given our collective lack of understanding of ecological processes and the integral role we play, our current situation may not be a total failure, but without a major paradigm shift, total may be on the near horizon. But hope too is on the horizon; the

future being determined by the choices we make today.

Wetland areas are being reclaimed as we recognize their importance in mitigating storm surges and cities like El Paso are replanting public lands with drought resistant native vegetation. Programs are also being offered on the benefits of planned burning, and organizations like NPAT are assisting land owners in restoring native habitat through both education and workshops. As we all know, native grasses are not only drought resistant, they also enhance both water quality and quantity, so these efforts significantly mitigate the effects of drought, when it does (and it will) happen. This mitigation extends to fire and floods because native grasses' deep roots help to retain precious top soil and the nutrients they provide pave the way for successional vegetation; including forests. But these efforts are not mainstream, and neither our current laws nor actions reflect the seriousness of the situation.

However, collectively we can effect significant change and given the current circumstances, our voices have a good chance of being heard. So plant your lawn in native grasses (or even your roof), help your local government or school to restore their lands, and have a friendly talk with your representative. We thank you for all of the good work you do every day, including supporting NPAT's educational/restoration/conservation efforts; together we can make a difference.

—Dalmara Bayne

dry areas their secretive nature helps them to survive the drought conditions. They eat a variety of insects and spiders.

Butterflies were very scarce all across Texas this year and at Maddin we only recorded one new species, the Giant Swallowtail. It was seen feeding on nectar from a Texas thistle in May during the worst of the Texas drought. It was one of fewer than a dozen butterflies seen at the preserve in this year of extreme heat. Overall, it has been a bleak year for butterflies.

Seven new bird species for Maddin were recorded this year, with the most notable being the Mississippi kite and the Great Kiskadee flycatcher that were seen during the May breeding bird survey along Champion Creek. This riparian area has proved to be a lifesaver for bird species and has acted as an oasis in a desert grassland for many migrating and breeding birds.

—Pat Merkord
President, NPAT



Father Peter Conaty of St. Mary's describes Nash Prairie in simple, succinct terms: "In theology, we talk about a thin place where heaven and earth meet, where we will find God. And this is where I find God." Check out the video on Nash Prairie at www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJbEITkqVS8.

Pat Merkord led a walk on the restored prairie of Brazos Bend. Other groups participating this year included the Brazos Bend State Park Volunteers, Coastal Prairie Partnership, Ducks Unlimited, Houston Audubon Society, Katy Prairie Conservancy, Native Plant Society of Texas, and Texas Master Naturalist chapters

Other news:

At the Native Plant Society of Texas' Fall Symposium in Houston, NPAT was awarded the **Nancy Benedict Memorial Award** for an act of conservation/public service in the field of Texas native plants for our continued conservation and preservation of Blackland Prairie through stewardship. Congratulations!

The 2011 State of the Prairie Conference was held at the Houston Zoo on November 18th with about 150 in attendance. The day opened with speakers Doug Ladd, Director of Conservation Science, Nature Conservancy of Missouri; and Bill Wilson, Co-owner, Sabine Ranch, South Jefferson County. A question and answer session was fol-

lowed with workshops in the afternoon. Saturday included field trips and an educational workshop.

Rev. Peter and Susan Conaty were awarded the Prairie Builder's Award for Career Achievement in Prairie Conservation. **Marc Pastorek**, Cajun Prairie Habitat Preservation Society was given the Dr. Charles Allen Cajun Prairie Award; **Jim Willis**, Wildlife Habitat Federation, received the Dick Benoit Upper Texas Coast Prairie Award; and **Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative-Coastal Prairies** received the Clifford Carter Central Texas Coast Prairie Award

Presentations have been posted at <http://www.coastalprairiepartnership.org/page/2011-conference-homepage>

On November 19, in conjunction with the State of the Prairie Conference, the Houston Chapter of NPAT hosted the **annual NPAT membership meeting** at a local barbecue restaurant. A small group gathered for an informal discussion and updates on NPAT activities. It was the first time for some the HNPAT group to meet NPAT staff and board members.

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Thank you to our **renewing members** as well!

Donate to NPAT to help protect Texas prairies. Many employers will match donations, so check with your employer to make your donation go farther!

Travis Country Pledge Campaign

A special thank you to the many people who worked so hard to raise \$254,000 in pledges to purchase a conservation easement on the South Austin 12 acres owned by AISD, it is a shining testament to what a small group of people committed people can accomplish. Although AISD has elected to accept another bid, based upon the past bid they accepted, the matter is not closed until the developer is out of the option period. It is unfortunate that AISD has ignored public sentiment on this issue and elected to allow development of yet one more open space, but we are still hopeful that needs of the public will prevail; not just for this generation, but for future generations as well.