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Don Kirchoff ‘goes native,’ returning family farm to prairie near Floresville

Companion of the prairie

Story and photos by Jeff Valcher
Wilson County News



The seeds from these milkweed plants will eventually be planted to feed migrating monarch butterflies. The mesh bags are ready to collect seeds — each seed has a parachute, and will be blown away when it matures, unless captured by the mesh.

Most people driving by the Kirchoff family farm near Floresville won't notice anything particularly special about it, but among the various grasses and shrubs that ripple in the breeze across the property lie years' worth of blood and sweat spent in the pursuit of conservation.

The sign on the front fence is the only indication that something interesting is going on — to the untrained eye. These 200 acres are teeming with native plants and wildlife, and have been officially registered as native prairie by the Native Prairies Association of Texas.

As I pulled up to the homestead, Don Kirchoff was busy at work in what appeared to be a vegetable garden — but there were no vegetables. Several of the plants had small white tulle mesh bags covering their tops.

It was actually a plot of milkweed, he explained.

“That is the only plant that the monarch caterpillar subsists on,” Don said, adding an explanation for the mesh covers. “Every seed has a parachute. On the day it opens, you have to be there or it will blow away.”

He asked me if I'd heard the quail when I pulled in. My windows had been up, I confessed. Fortunately, we would hear several quail calls as we toured his family's land, with eastern bluebirds, martins, and many others adding their voices to the chorus. Between 50 and 60 bird boxes dot the 200-acre property, he said, attracting a variety of local and migrating fowl.

Hopping into his utility vehicle, we first passed through a 50-foot wide swath of shrubs and trees. Blackbrush acacia, cat claw, guayacan, lotebush, and granjeno form what's known as a green-tree firebreak. A group of 91 volunteers came out in 2012 to help put in the approximately 2,400 seedlings.

“Putting in” is a bit of an understatement for many of these species. Some seeds require a two-hour soak in sulfuric acid, Don explained, before being boiled in water for three days. Even after all that, it can take 10 to 15 years for them to sprout.



A screech owl has taken up residence in one of dozens of bird boxes scattered around the Kirchoff family farm.



The Kirchoff family farm near Floresville has been registered as native prairie in perpetuity with the Native Prairies Association of Texas, for future generations to use for educational and research purposes.

We continued driving into the prairie, all the while watching out for turkey nests on the ground. The former business broker and consultant pointed out the different varieties of grass swaying in the wind around us — little blue stem, windmill, bristle, buffalo, and Indian, to name a few.

He and his sister, Brenda, have spent untold hours scouring back roads looking for native grasses to collect seeds from, he said. It's estimated that this area used to contain some 25 million acres of prairie land, Don shared.

We pulled over next to a stand of switch grass almost as tall as us. In a wet year, this grass grows as tall as 9 feet.

"What we're trying to do is return [the land] to the condition it was in 200 years ago, when the Europeans arrived," Don explained.

Another goal is to make the farm financially stable. Thanks to closely managed grazing by neighboring cattle and hay production, 2017 was the first year that the farm broke even financially.

"The reward for the first years is the return of the natural habitat," Don smiled.

The nutrition of his grass is also significantly higher than what's found in most hay in the area, he pointed out. What's more, his hay — made mostly of switch grass — is rolled up with the seeds, so farmers who use it are planting native grasses on their properties, too.

We drove along a fence line, where a slow war is being waged between Don's native grasses and his neighbor's mesquite trees and Bermuda grass. Mesquite is not native to the area; it was brought up from Mexico during cattle drives, Don said.

We next passed a fenced-off "diversity plot," full of bluebonnets, Indian blankets, and purple lemon mint — one of 10 such plots scattered around his property.

We checked out a burrowing owl roost site, essentially a large mound of dirt with tunnels dug into it. This was built as an Eagle Scout project by Jesse Fehr of Pleasanton.

Next to it is one of several "guzzlers," which collect rainwater from roof runoff for local wildlife. Construction of these wildlife watering holes was led by another Eagle Scout, David Pruit of La Vernia.

In the nearby tree line, we were treated to the sight of a screech owl, which has taken up residence in one of the bird boxes.

After snapping a few photos from a non-threatening distance, I attempted to get closer, but the bird quickly flew away.

"Since the bird flew instead of hiding, that means there's probably little ones," Don deduced.

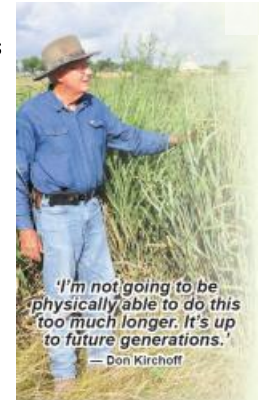
As we continued our tour, I commented to Don on the beauty of a section of Canadian wild rye in the distance undulating in the wind.

"When early pioneers came here, they described oceans of tall grass waving in the wind," he said — a metaphor echoed in "America the Beautiful" as "amber waves of grain."

We eventually arrived at the "front line" of Don's war, where non-natives are slowly being replaced. The landscape is littered with the wilting bodies of mesquite, baccharis, and silky bluestem grass.

The native varieties taking their place are serving as ground cover and food for a variety of wildlife, including deer, quail, rabbits, and birds, Don said.

"It's a chorus of singing in spring," he smiled.



Don Kirchoff admires a stand of switch grass on his family property near Floresville. This variety of grass can grow as high as 9 feet tall in a wet year!

This Wilson County native obviously takes pride in his work, but it is more than that. The farm has been in his family since Thanksgiving weekend of 1954. Don was 10 years old when his parents, Leroy and Brunhilde Kirchoff, purchased it and moved him and his four younger siblings there.

“My parents had a strong conservation ethic,” Don said.

His dad was a dry-land farmer, but neither Don nor any of his siblings wanted to continue in that tradition.

Instead, they provided the land as an easement in perpetuity to the Native Prairies Association of Texas, preserving it for future generations to use for educational and research purposes.

The farm has become a tourist destination of sorts for a variety of groups, including San Antonio River Authority personnel, college students, and pollinator groups.

The third Saturday of every month has been designated as a prairie workday, and anyone can drop by and help with the restoration process. After all, there are still 90 acres of scrub to be converted out of the 200 acres total, so there’s plenty of work to be done.

Now that he’s “relatively retired,” Don tries to come down to the farm from San Antonio two or three times per week to work, but his attention often drifts to what will become of this vital plot of land.

“I’m not going to be physically able to do this too much longer.” Don said. “It’s up to future generations.”

For more information about the farm, contact Don at 713-562-7681.

Native Prairies Association of Texas

The Native Prairies Association of Texas (NPAT) was founded in 1986 by a group of Texans concerned greatly about our disappearing prairie heritage, especially Texas’ endangered tallgrass prairies.

The association is a nonprofit membership organization and land trust dedicated to the conservation, restoration, and appreciation of native prairies, savannas, and other grasslands in Texas.

NPAT protects more than 4,031 acres of native Texas prairie, including more than 1,340 acres of endangered/ threatened tallgrass prairie.

For more information, visit www.texasprairie.org or call 512-772-4741.

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Don Kirchoff

Don’s parents, Leroy and Brunhilde Kirchoff, moved to the Three Oaks area of Wilson County in 1954, when Don was 10 years old.

A 1963 graduate of Poth High School, where his mother taught, Don continued his education at Texas Lutheran College, earning a degree in mathematics in 1967, followed by a master’s in physics from the University of North Texas in 1970. He began working on a physics doctorate at the University of Illinois, but eventually left to go to work.

Don worked for Schlumberger and International Technology Corp. before starting a business brokerage and consultancy company, Kirchoff Peterson Co., in 1998.

He considers himself to be “relatively retired” from his company these days, and tries to come down from San Antonio to the old family homestead two or three times per week to get his hands dirty.

Currently a sentinel with Heritage Action, Don also is a member of the San Antonio TEA Party, on the board of directors for the Native Prairies Association of Texas (NPAT), and leader of the San Antonio Chapter of NPAT.