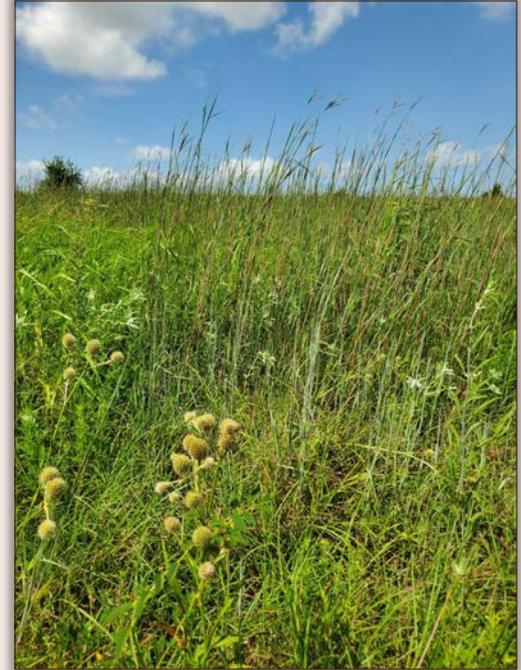


Fayette Prairie Chapter of the Native Prairies Association of Texas

WRITTEN BY GARY KOCUREK

The Native Prairies Association of Texas (NPAT) is a nonprofit membership organization and an accredited land trust dedicated to the conservation, restoration, and appreciation of native prairies, savannas, and other grasslands in Texas. The newest addition to NPAT is the Fayette Prairie Chapter, formed in late 2020 (<https://texasprairie.org/fayette-prairie-chapter/>). The Fayette Chapter includes the Fayette Prairie and the surrounding Post Oak Savanna, all encompassed within an 11-county area centered around Fayette County. From the beginning, the Fayette Chapter has been a little different from the other NPAT chapters. Unlike the other NPAT chapters, which radiate out from the major urban centers of Fort Worth, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio, the Fayette Chapter has no major urban area, but is about equal distance from the sprawling cities of Austin, Houston and San Antonio. Another difference is that most of the chapter members are land owners who actually live on the prairie and are engaged in aspects of land stewardship.

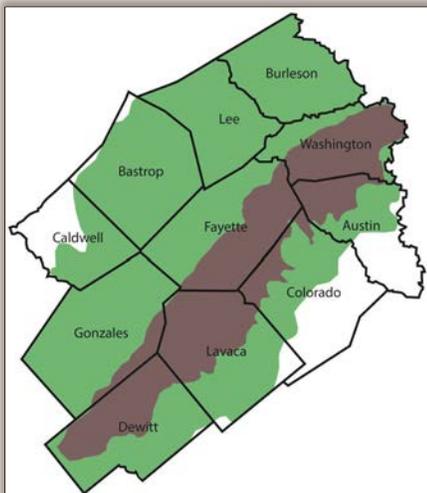
We know from early historical accounts that the area consisted of tall grass prairies with clusters of oaks, with a greater diversity and spatial density of trees along the Brazos, Colorado, Navidad, Lavaca and Guadalupe rivers and their tributaries. These were “disturbance-dependent” prairies, maintained by prairie fires and the buffalo herds that followed, seeking the green regrowth. A resilient prairie requires disturbances from fire and grazing to maintain the plant heterogeneity that makes this ecosystem an ideal habitat for a variety of grazing mammals, birds and pollinating insects.



*Remnant Fayette Prairie, Washington County.
Photo©Tim Siegmund, TPWD*

Fayette Prairie (brown) and Post Oak Savanna (green).

Photo©Tim Siegmund, TPWD



Nearly all of this original ecosystem was lost with European settlement and the intensive agriculture of the latter 19th century. Farmland for cotton, corn and other crops yielded over the decades to rangeland, and after WWII cattle grazing and hayfields dominated. With the introduction of varieties of Bermudagrass, forage production changed dramatically and permanently away from native perennial grasses. Other non-native grasses, especially old world bluestems including King Ranch, Kleberg, Caucasian and Gordo bluestem, which now threaten to engulf the area, were both intentionally and accidentally introduced. Woody encroachment by low-quality trees such as red cedar, and brush such as yaupon increased as the frequency of fire decreased. Over-grazing of rangeland became commonplace, and monospecific grasslands were a goal. Accompanying the loss of habitat was a corresponding reduction in wildlife, including quail and turkey. Most recently, as much as any place in Texas, intense fragmentation of remaining habitat is occurring as large ranches are subdivided into smaller parcels.

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So what can an upstart NPAT Fayette Prairie Chapter do? We cannot go back to a lost ecosystem; too many parameters have changed. Moreover, although there are preserved prairie remnants, their diversity shows that no one prairie type prevailed over the area before settlement. It is also difficult to run against the flow of history and demographic trends. Are the Fayette Prairie and Post Oak Savanna destined to become 10-acre tracts, essentially gentrified big yards? Will favorite sports such as hunting and fishing become impractical because the area has become just too fragmented?

From the beginning of NPAT, the vision has been clear, and the Fayette Prairie Chapter follows from this vision. As many as possible of the remaining remnant prairies need to be preserved. Restoration of prairies and savanna is also a major objective. These will probably not recreate what had been here, but will provide good habitats that work for our times. Most challenging, can a patchwork of preserved remnants and restored areas be connected by corridors of grazing and crop lands to provide an interconnected habitat for deer, turkey, quail and other species? If so, how do we get there?

Education is key at multiple levels, as is imagining the potential. A core of conservationists has long existed in the area, including those who have remnant prairies on their land. Most of the growing chapter membership, however, comes from recent transplants. These are usually people attracted to the natural beauty of the area, the rich history, the small towns, the “country” lifestyle, but few begin with any notion of prairie restoration. A big part of chapter outreach is sharing our vision with these people, and this vision resonates with many. A few are surprised to learn that they have bought a remnant prairie and have something rare that needs to be conserved. Others gravitate to the idea of restoring an over-grazed ranch back to a reasonable prairie. Yet others envision a restored savanna with majestic oaks and a grass/forb understory, turkey and deer included, just as soon as the pesky yaupon thicket is eliminated. Cattle grazing and haying are definitely part of prairie management, and these traditional practices can be carried out so that they are actually beneficial to the prairie ecology. Sustainable grazing and wildlife habitats go hand-in-hand in rangeland management.

Another aspect of education is educating ourselves. The prairie/savanna ecosystem is complex and multi-faceted. The Fayette Chapter regularly hosts presentations by experts in the many aspects of this ecosystem. Thanks to Zoom, we can bring in experts from all over the country. Talks over the last year have included topics such as the characteristic plants of the area, the role of prescribed burns, programs that can assist with restoration, the role of grazing, what defines ecological resilience in prairies, and the prairie carbon cycle. Upcoming talks and recorded past presentations can be found at the Fayette Prairie Chapter web site.

Third-year restoration, Burleson County. Photo©Tim Siegmund, TPWD



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An important part of the chapter mission is encouraging and supporting restoration efforts.

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Education is key again because most of us interested in restoration do not know where to start, how to proceed, or what to expect. Fortunately, there is an able body of expertise in the TPWD, NRCS and TAMU AgriLife. These local experts are more than happy to become engaged on an individual basis or work with a group. Interest is clearly out there. The Fayette Prairie Chapter recently hosted a “Restoration Clinic” staffed by five experts, who covered the spectrum of restoration. We limited attendance to 35 participants to keep the field portion manageable, and after that we had to turn away people.

It is also important to see not just preserved remnant prairies, but also beginning and advancing stages of prairie restoration. The Fayette Prairie Chapter has been fortunate to have highly qualified TPWD personnel guide us through exactly this on field trips in the area. There is no one cookie-cutter recipe; each restoration develops differently depending upon a host of local parameters.

Another aspect of education is learning about programs that financially support restoration efforts. Multiple resources exist, but chapter members, working with TWPD, have been especially aided by the Pastures for Upland Birds program (PUB) and the Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (GRIP).

For most of us, actually launching into a restoration project means learning a whole new skill set. This involves serious education as you learn about herbicides, sprayers, brush mulchers, seed drills, seed selection, seed ecotypes, plant identification, prescribed burns, cattle grazing, fencing, tractors, chainsaws, cultipackers, hay mowers and rakes, and a host of now essential other things. The Fayette Prairie Chapter has a regular program where we tour each other’s restoration efforts, sharing and learning from each other’s successes and failures. Equipment gets shared because no one has everything. A program of cooperative work days has begun, and a lot can get done if 25 people show up on your place. The participation of the Texas Master Naturalist – Gideon Lincecum Chapter makes these work days hugely successful. Because of the importance of prescribed burns, our membership largely overlaps with that of the South Central Texas Prescribed Burn Association. The incentive here is to reintroduce prescribed burns as a vital part of prairie management. Cattle grazing as a prairie management tool is also being rediscovered, recognizing that fire and grazing are both essential to prairie resilience. A rewarding natural outgrowth of these interactions is the establishment of a social network centered around restoration.

*Seed drill demonstration, Fayette County.
Photo©Tim Siegmund, TPWD*

But how can our efforts be made permanent? Few of us who want to invest our time and money in a restoration just to see it lost after us. A major thrust of NPAT, often working with The Nature Conservancy, is the continued preservation of restorations and remnants. The most effective tool is a conservation easement. Essentially, you can design provisions such that a remnant prairie or a restoration is locked in conservation for perpetuity and monitored by NPAT or The Nature Conservancy. In some cases, NPAT will also take land donations, with its stewardship ensured. Other sister conservation organizations in the region have a similar function.



What is at stake here is the heritage of the Fayette Prairie and Post Oak Savanna. We can leave it a better place than we found it. NPAT and the Fayette Prairie Chapter welcome your participation. Please contact us at <https://texasprairie.org/fayette-chapter-contact/>.