

REFUGIO-GOLIAD PRAIRIE, *Texas*

GREAT PLAINS FLN

664,000 ACRES



Foreground is a winter 2008 Conservancy burn near the Attwater's prairie chicken release site © Wade Harrell/TNC

THE REFUGIO-GOLIAD PRAIRIE, spanning over 664,000 acres along the Texas Gulf Coast, is one of the largest and highest-quality expanses of coastal tallgrass prairie remaining in the state. Among the most endangered bird species habitats in North America with fewer than 70 birds, the project area supports one of the last known wild populations of the Attwater's prairie chicken after it was reintroduced in August 2007.

COLLABORATIVE OBJECTIVES:

- Reintroduce/expand beneficial fire regimes via prescribed burns to restore and maintain the vital contiguous prairie habitat that sustains populations of the Attwater's prairie chicken
- Curtail invasive species encroachment and reduce acreage that has been affected
- Cooperate with landowners to reduce harmful grazing practices and prevent further habitat fragmentation and conversion

Fire was largely removed from this landscape for at least a century. Disruption of the historical regime resulted in woody plant encroachment on the prairie and greatly reduced habitat for many grassland-dependent wildlife species. Increasing the scope and frequency of prescribed fire is needed to support habitat for a viable bird population over the long term.

COLLABORATIVE VISION STATEMENT:

The Refugio-Goliad Prairie will be an ecologically functional coastal tallgrass prairie system that supports historical richness of plant and wildlife as well as agricultural enterprises.

FREQUENT FIRE MAINTAINS PLANT AND ANIMAL DIVERSITY

in this ecosystem and improves cattle forage as well; therefore, the landscape's mobile fire crews conduct burns on private ranchlands. In 2003, the Conservancy staffed and equipped a prescribed fire module to implement prescribed burns and has helped more than 22 landowners apply prescribed fire on 57,741 acres. Currently, the team does not charge ranchers for its services, but relies on state and federal grants to fund the work.

Because the acreage needing prescribed fire exceeds the capacity of the Conservancy's prescribed fire module, innovative means to prioritize and plan burns, and strategies to engage partners, e.g., volunteer fire departments, the Coastal Bend Prescribed Burn Association and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service among others, must be realized.

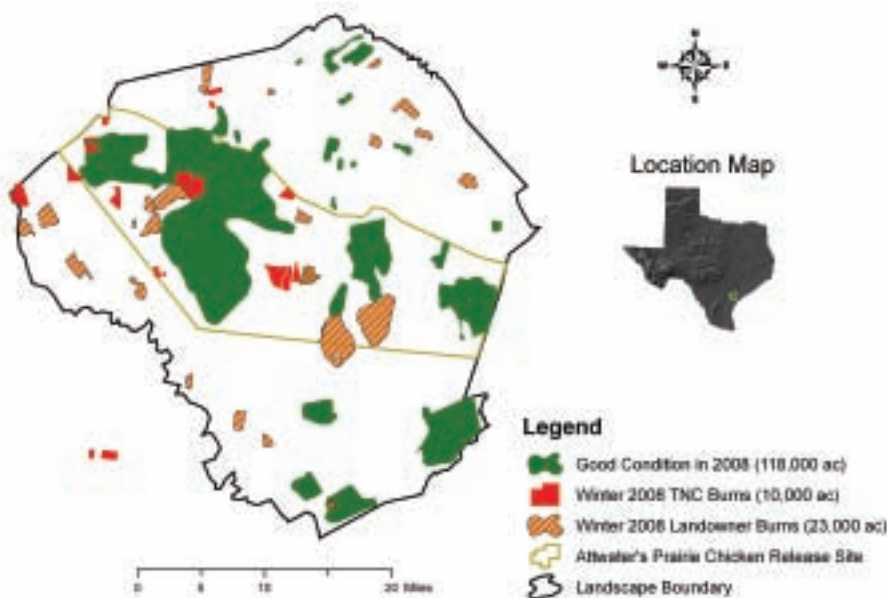
By demonstrating the practicality of prescribed fire to enhance wildlife habitat, manage woody vegetation encroachment and increase livestock forage, the amount of land burned by private landowners has increased dramatically.

PARTNERS:

Bureau of Land Management
Coastal Bend Prescribed Burn Association
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Private landowners
Texas Parks and Wildlife
The Nature Conservancy
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Volunteer fire departments

CRITICAL PARTNERSHIP FUNDING NEEDS:

\$300,000 per year to staff and equip the prescribed fire module
\$20,000 per year for training for the prescribed burn association and volunteer fire departments
\$300,000 per year to support Attwater's prairie chicken reintroductions and academic research, conduct biological monitoring, GIS development and analysis and support research tied to prescribed fire treatments



Map depicting the Refugio-Goliad Prairie Conservation Area, current good condition prairie, winter 2008 burns conducted independently by private landowners and those conducted by The Nature Conservancy © Ray Guse/TNC

KEY SUCCESSES

GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SYSTEM (GIS) products are used to track changes in the prairie over time and document private landowners' increased use of prescribed fire.

AN INCREASE IN PRESCRIBED BURNS ON LARGER ACREAGES was achieved by strengthening our relationship and sharing resources with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service prescribed burn crew on the nearby Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

Our landscape hosted Conservancy and Bureau of Land Management teams seeking **FIRE TRAINING** opportunities.

We set a Conservancy record in Texas for the **MOST ACREAGE BURNED** by one crew in a single day (2,230 acres).

2008–2009 PLANNED ACTIONS

- Increase public understanding of the benefits realized by prescribed fire.
- Continue to engage volunteer fire departments to increase participation on both private and Conservancy burns.
- Support a growing organization of cooperating landowners who conduct prescribed burns on each other's properties.
- Use GIS application to track progress through remote sensing in order to help prioritize prescribed burns.
- Monitor prairie conditions to determine if fire return intervals and burn intensities meet ecological objectives and apply lessons learned.

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