



SOUTHWEST REGION Partners FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE

Welcome

Thank you for your interest in our inaugural newsletter! Our goal is demonstrating how the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (Partners) is making a difference in the lives of Americans—perhaps even improving *your* life.

Who We Are

We partner with willing landowners to improve habitat for fish and wildlife. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) launched Partners in 1987. In 2006, Congress made the program permanent and ensured funding. Our goal is voluntary habitat enhancement on private lands, through financial and technical assistance, to benefit migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, certain marine mammals and species of international or inter-jurisdictional concern.

Our Region

Partners works in all eight FWS regions. The Southwest Region includes Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. It is the most geographically diverse of all the regions, spanning from the upper Gulf Coast to cypress wetlands, across the southern Great Plains to the Continental Divide, through the deserts and south to the Rio Grande. Our region is uniquely rich in conservation challenges and opportunities!

Our Successes

Southwest Region Partners Enrollment

Landowners	2,681
Outdoor Classrooms	251
Upland Acres	752,424
Wetland Acres	91,587
Total Acres	844,011

Answering a Call for Help



Gary Kramer/USDA NRCS

Lesser prairie-chicken on a lek in New Mexico.

Lesser prairie-chicken habitat is far from the Beltway, but in 2009 the species established a new lek, of sorts, directly atop Capitol Hill.

This avian icon of the short-grass plains didn't dance or drum, as it does from traditional leks during mating season. This time it displayed an even more pressing need—survival. Habitat fragmentation is threatening its future back home. A call for help in Washington was answered with \$350,000 worth of habitat enhancement projects as part of the economic stimulus package.

Those dollars are now making a difference on the ground via the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

“We specifically asked for help with lesser prairie-chickens because we believe it’s the most important critter on our radar right now. Trying to keep it off the endangered species list may be the most crucial thing we’ve done in the last 20 years,” said Mike McCollum, who coordinates Partners in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Southwest Region. He’s based in Arlington, Texas.

McCollum explained, “When we’re doing everything in our power for lesser prairie-chickens, we’re helping a large suite of species. Keeping wildlife healthy, in turn, is good for the landscape, good for landowners, good for livestock, good for traditional as well as alternative

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Kids, Conservation and the Future of America

With all the serious issues facing America today, why is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fretting about kids playing indoors?

Less than 50 years ago, about a third of the U.S. population lived in rural areas. Now over 80 percent of our citizens live in cities, and that's growing every year. Urban kids today are disconnected from nature. They simply don't experience the time outdoors that many of us enjoyed when we were growing up.

As a result, many young people lack a basic understanding and appreciation of the natural world. When conserving nature is no longer valued, there will be no support or funding for conservation projects. This will have consequences that go well beyond our agency and dedicated employees. Impacts will go

even beyond our country. This would be a global tragedy.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program is leading the effort to reconnect children with nature. The landowners who participate in the program are devoted to conservation on private lands, which makes them perfect liaisons for communicating credibly and urgently about the importance of fish, wildlife and habitat. Our outdoor classroom projects are giving students a hands-on chance to learn about nature. Through Partners-sponsored programs like "National Archery in the Schools," youth can engage in fun activities while coming to understand and appreciate the outdoors.

Conservation in America cannot afford to be relegated to the



Steve Wagner

Dr. Benjamin Tuggle with young archers in Oklahoma City.

backburner, now or ever. That's why you have my personal commitment that all of us with Partners in the Southwest Region will continue fretting — and working to overcome — the very real challenge of reconnecting kids with nature. ❖

Dr. Benjamin Tuggle
Southwest Regional Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

SOUTHWEST REGION

Partners

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Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program Contacts

Arizona

Kris Randall (602) 242-0210, x250
Kris_Randall@fws.gov

New Mexico

Nancy Riley (505) 761-4707
Nancy_Derey@fws.gov

Oklahoma

Jontie Aldrich (918) 382-4511
Jontie_Aldrich@fws.gov

Texas

Don Wilhelm (817) 277-1100
Don_Wilhelm@fws.gov

Regional Coordinator

Mike McCollum (817) 277-1100 ext. 25
Mike_McCollum@fws.gov

Editorial Contact:

Steve Wagner, Blue Heron Communications
steve@blueheroncomm.com, 800-654-3766

Partners and People

Why is the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program important?

Answers to that question can be found throughout this newsletter, but it's worth repeating here why this program is important to our key audience—landowners.

Partners is more than acres and miles. It's more than spending tax dollars wisely. As important as these are, they only touch the surface. It's really about relationships between people. And, the truth is, conservation depends on these relationships. That's why we take time, sometimes over the course of years, to develop relationships with landowners. A common interest—fish and wildlife—brings biologists and landowners together initially.

But we often find that from that common thread, lifelong friendships are woven. These relationships work to conserve resources.

Back to my question. Why is the Partners program important? I guess the most basic answer is... trust. At a time in our nation's history when so few trust our government, we can stand tall and proud knowing that the Partners program is important and successful because of the trust that we continue to earn with landowners. ❖



Mike McCollum
Southwest Regional Coordinator
Partners for Fish and Wildlife

Partners News

Fire is Cost Effective Habitat Remedy



Jeff Vanuga/USDA NRCS

Using a drip torch to light a prescribed fire.

Landscapes fail slowly, quietly, without the public outcry or media attention that often follow environmental disasters. Still, the absence of fire yields impacts that can be just as dramatic. Most of America's upland ecosystems evolved with periodic fire. Burning rejuvenates native grasses, checks woody overgrowth, removes dead vegetation, restarts plant succession and diversifies habitat. Today, prescribed burning is the

Southwest Region's most frequently recommended tactic for returning habitat to optimum condition. Fortunately, it's also one of the cheapest. "You can spend \$150-\$300 per acre for mechanical or chemical treatments, or you can burn for about \$20-\$40 per acre," said Mike McCollum, regional coordinator for Partners. Prescribed burning has become a science unto itself. Learn more by Googling FWS Prescribed Fire. ❖

Conservation Assistance

Conservation often requires cash. Help is available from government agencies that offer cost-share and technical assistance programs for landowners, schools and others interested in wildlife habitat restoration or

improvement. Contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, your state wildlife agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, county conservation district and other conservation agencies. ❖

Anglers and Apache Trout

More anglers now have more chances to catch Apache trout, a beautiful game fish found only in a limited area of eastern Arizona, because of a Partners project in cooperation with the White Mountain Apache Tribe. Fishing tip: On certain creeks at the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, look for strategically placed logs that create pools on the downstream side. The pools restore original flow patterns and water temperatures, helping Apache trout thrive. About 300 logs were required for the project. Trees were taken from an overgrown stand of ponderosa pine



Michael Graybrook

Apache trout

on the reservation, so the stream enhancement effort proved valuable for forest health, too. Funny how little things like conservationists cutting logs and adding them to a stream can make a big difference—the project won a 2009 U.S. Department of Interior Partners in Conservation Award! ❖



FWS

Along a cart path at Emerald Canyon.

Putt and Take Stock of Rare Fish

Carved out of the mountains and canyons along the Colorado River near Parker, Ariz., scenic Emerald Canyon Golf Course is a must-play for any golfer. Players may also learn something about rare fish. The course is the site of a Partners project to restore the endangered bonytail chub, which now are raised in the course's water hazards. Once large enough, chubs are collected and returned to their native river. On the greens, pin flags feature images of the fish. Shoreline signs recognize the teamwork of Partners and Emerald Canyon Golf Course. Sweet strokes for top-of-mind conservation awareness! ❖

Arizona Ranch Raising Cattle, Sparrows, Frogs



Dennis Moroney

Working cattle at the 47 Ranch.

Restoring habitat for rare species *and* enhancing ranch profitability.

For some, those two concepts might seem at odds. But for Dennis Moroney, who operates the 32,000-acre 47 Ranch in southeast Arizona, they fit together like a boot in a stirrup.

Moroney is working with the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to restore native grasslands on property he acquired in 2002. Over 425 acres have been treated with herbicide to eliminate mesquite. Decades of fire suppression allowed the trees to overtake grazing areas across Arizona. Cattle ranchers pay the price. But so do at-risk birds that also rely on open prairie, like the Botteri's sparrow, Cassin's sparrow and Baird's sparrow.

"We think this project is important for two reasons," said Moroney. "First, it's the right thing to do from a wildlife standpoint. Second, anything we can do to enhance grass coverage will benefit the ranch over the long haul. There won't be much profit from it during my lifetime—but it's going to be good for our kids."

Moroney and his wife have two teenage children who already speak of someday raising their own families here. And they're investing alongside their parents in the land's livestock and wildlife values.

"Last summer the kids built hundreds of little rock dams to help trap silt in erosion areas. This year they can see where soil is backing up behind their dams, and grass is beginning to grow. It's working in concert with the mesquite removal, helping to build soil, keep moisture

and restore grass. It's very satisfying for them," he said.

The ranch boasts another conservation project that helps both livestock and rare species, according to Jennifer Kaplan, a Partners biologist who coordinates projects from Phoenix.

She explained, "In the dry Arizona climate, stock tanks are essential for managing cattle as well as supporting wildlife. Due to limited water resources, these stock tanks are also important habitat for the threatened Chiricahua leopard frog. The 47 Ranch has a safe harbor agreement for this imperiled frog. Dennis has used assistance programs to install solar powered pumps to ensure his tanks never run dry. Good for frogs, good for livestock, good for years to come."

"There won't be much profit from it during my lifetime—but it's going to be good for our kids."

—Dennis Moroney

Clearly, thinking long term is a Moroney family trait.

"It's depressing to think short term," he said. "When you think short term, you dwell on cattle markets being down or not getting as much rain you'd like. But when you concentrate on the long term, you start doing things that you feel will have lasting value. And that's what makes a great life." ❖



Tom Ulrich

Baird's sparrow



Jim Korabaugh/ FWS

Chiricahua leopard frog

Restoring Native New Mexico

Nature and wildlife are woven deeply into Native American cultures, so stewardship projects on tribal lands often have extra meaning. Conservation isn't just practical. It's spiritual.

An example is a New Mexico project that teams Ohkay Owingeh with the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

Thirty miles north of Santa Fe, the village formerly known as San Juan Pueblo has been inhabited for over 700 years. Traditional life revolved around agriculture. Modern enterprises include a major casino and resort. Yet the Pueblo also remains home to ancient ceremonies, such as the Deer Dance and Buffalo Dance, which still incorporate elements of the natural world.

"Nature is sacred here, so healthy land and habitat is of tribal significance," said Dave Morgan, a consultant who coordinates conservation efforts on the 12,000-acre Ohkay Owingeh.

A priority is restoring native vegetation along the Rio Grande, which was altered for flood control in the 1950s. Over the years, without high flows to sweep sandbars clean and restart succession, plant communities changed. Riparian areas grew up in exotic salt cedar, Russian olive and Siberian elm, as well as noxious weeds like purple loosestrife. Willows and cottonwoods were



Before and after a restoration project at Ohkay Owingeh.

Denise Smith/FWS



Tom Ulrich

Habitat restoration is benefiting species like the yellow-billed cuckoo.

overwhelmed. In turn, wildlife habitat declined. Species like bald eagles, southwestern willow flycatchers and yellow-billed cuckoos lost nesting and foraging areas.

Partners Biologist Denise Smith, Albuquerque, explained, "This project involved six acres as a unique part of the Pueblo's habitat restoration efforts that now total 745 acres. It required a ton of physical labor in simple hand pulling of undesirable plants. When necessary, tribal work crews also used loppers, chainsaws and even small spot applications of herbicide. Then we followed up by transplanting willows, sedges and rushes from other sites on Ohkay Owingeh."

Smith said funding from Partners supported project planning, design and layout, removal of invasive plants, piling and burning slash and transplanting native vegetation. The Tribe supplied herbicide and treatment, native plants and labor.

Today the area's avian habitat is on the mend, and a variety of other wildlife such as deer and elk are benefiting, too.

One of the most famous residents of Ohkay Owingeh, Esther Martinez was an honored linguist and storyteller. She died in 2006 at age 94, remembered as a national treasure for her eloquence in communicating about her culture. Her tales often weaved elements of nature, wildlife and spiritualism. Perhaps today's conservation efforts will help her young admirers understand the connections, and someday grow up to emulate her. ❖

Navigating Conservation in Oklahoma

Trivia question: What is the most inland seaport in the U.S.?

Answer: Tulsa, Okla.

If you're a tugboat captain in the Gulf of Mexico, you're probably familiar with the 1,045-mile route. And you know that it's anything but trivial. Barge traffic delivers \$1.3 million per day in commerce to Oklahoma!

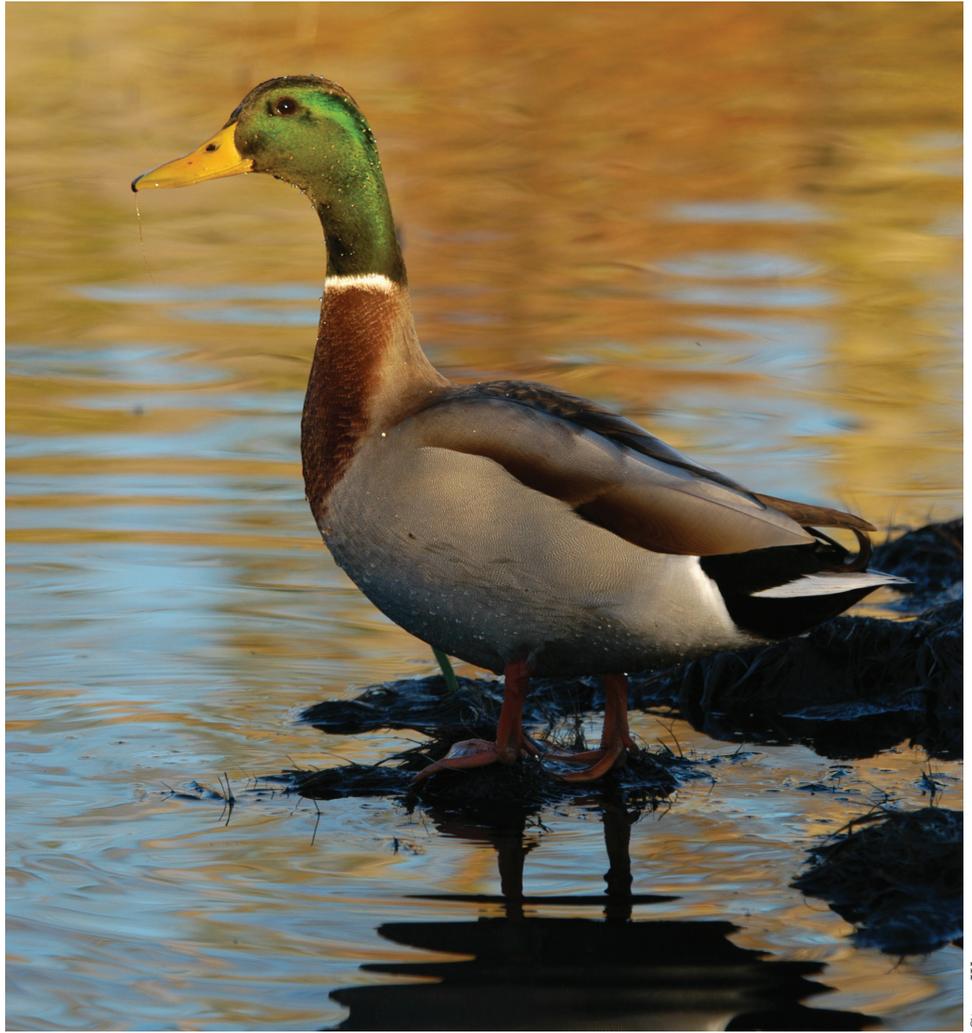
But the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers wonder that makes it all possible—the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System—also delivers a cost to wildlife. The rich bottomland hardwoods habitat that once lined the 145-mile river system in Oklahoma is nearly gone. Periodic floods, which once carried nutrients to water-loving oaks and other mast producers, are preempted by river channelization. Now the land is mostly cleared and converted to crops.

But John Williams' place is different.

Just below Tulsa's port, Williams, with help from the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, manages one of the largest remaining tracts of bottomland hardwoods. At 2,200 acres, it's an oasis for wildlife, especially birds. Bald eagles nest here. Other raptors, songbirds, woodpeckers and wading birds can be seen year-round. Williams and his family, all avid waterfowl hunters, are particularly fond of seasonal visitors such as mallards and teal.

"We bought this place nine years ago and immediately identified several habitat issues that needed improvement. I started checking into wetlands assistance programs and found Partners," said Williams, a realtor from Claremore, Okla.

Jontie Aldrich, who coordinates Oklahoma's Partners program



Steve Wagner

Mallard foraging in a flooded bottomland pool.

from Tulsa, remembers that phone call. An avid duck hunter himself, he identified with the landowner's motivations. As a biologist, Aldrich also understood how habitat enhancement in the name of waterfowling would translate to benefits for all of the area's wildlife.

Aldrich said, "John and I worked together on a water management system to simulate natural flooding processes. Each fall, water is pumped from the barge channel into the hardwood forests. A series of water control structures—dikes, screw gates and flashboard risers—allow

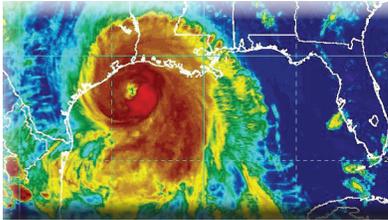
water to be held where and when needed."

The resulting hunting quality has deepened the Williams family's sentimental attachment and stewardship.

"We'll never sell this place. It means a lot to all of us. We enjoy it and have fun being here," he said.

Come spring, Williams' water is released back into the barge channel where it resumes floating tugboats and freight between the Gulf of Mexico and America's most inland seaport. ❖

Rebuilding a Texas Treasure



Renee Brawner will never forget that day.

It was Sept. 26, 2008—exactly 13 days after Hurricane Ike made landfall near the science teacher’s home at Crystal Beach, Texas. It was the first day that authorities allowed residents back into the area. It was Brawner’s turn to see the devastation.

“The most heart-wrenching thing, aside from losing my own house, was seeing the destruction of our school’s outdoor classroom, which had been the greatest teaching tool of my life. It had changed the way our students learned science by allowing them to actually see what we covered in the classroom. It gave them an opportunity to apply what they’d heard. It was real learning,” said Brawner.

Now it was gone. Two years earlier, the outdoor classroom had been a rallying point for a close-knit community and 134 students in grades K-8 at newly finished Crenshaw Elementary and Middle School.



Ron Jones/FWS

Wetlands learning.

Brawner conceptualized and led planning for the project, then reached out to Ron Jones of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

The Houston-based Partners biologist explained, “The site was 23 donated acres

adjoining the school. The land was sensitive back dune prairie and wetland habitat once typical along the upper Texas coast. Most has been lost to development. We felt this remnant would provide an outstanding opportunity for conservation learning.”

A corporate contributor, BHP Billiton, added funding. Local businesses offered free or discounted materials. Parents and teachers volunteered labor. The result was more than 800 linear feet of raised boardwalk, four-tenths of a mile of gravel trails and two sitting areas for up to 30 students.

Partners funds also helped reduce invasive plants such as Chinese tallowtree, salt cedar and McCartney rose. Native grasses like little bluestem began to flourish. Reptiles, amphibians and birds returned, highlighted by a nesting pair of mottled ducks.

Then came Ike. Boardwalks and sitting areas were destroyed. Habitat sat submerged in storm-surge brine long enough to kill most vegetation.

For months the area was brown, inaccessible and uninviting. But in recent weeks a green awakening has given hope to the determined teacher and her school. The Partners



Ron Jones/FWS

Volunteers building a boardwalk at Crenshaw School.

program is providing additional funding and all of the original contributors have vowed to restore and rebuild this young educational treasure. Soon.

When so much in Port Bolivar needs repair, why such broad enthusiasm for this particular project? Brawner believes it’s a community spirit of conservation, perhaps nurtured by the outdoor classroom itself, already giving back. ❖



Ron Jones/FWS

Before Ike’s destruction, the outdoor classroom was used for teaching several subjects.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
<http://www.fws.gov/partners>

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Answering a Call for Help

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energy development. It's good for everyone."

Lesser prairie-chickens, native to parts of Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Kansas and Colorado, are affected by a complex mix of habitat issues. Encroaching cedar, or juniper, fragments the open country they require. Crop fields and introduced pasture grasses are squeezing out native habitat. Overgrazing can be a problem. Fence wires higher than 24 inches are common lethal obstacles for flying birds.

Partners field staff are using the new stimulus dollars to offer landowners a menu of treatments.

"Probably our most commonly recommended strategy is restoring native prairie ecosystems by removing cedars and rejuvenating native grasses, usually through prescribed burning," said McCollum.



Alva Gregory/ODWC

Clearing invasive cedar to restore prairie habitat.

Another common strategy is working with landowners to improve grazing management and stocking rates.

"We work with landowners and agriculture experts to develop strategies to help landowners' bankbooks stay in the black—and improve land for lesser prairie-chickens. Remember, suitable habitat for chickens is also very productive, very economical grazing land," he said.

Marking fence wires with small, colored vinyl tags, which helps birds see and avoid these obstacles,

and removing unneeded fencing altogether, are also frequently recommended.

McCollum said, "We recognize that landowners are the best conservationists. But we also understand that, because landowners are at the mercy of livestock prices, hay prices and more, their interest in wildlife is tied to the economy. If they can't make a profit from their land, then they can't help lesser prairie-chickens."

"Our job is to help them do both," he added. ❖

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