



Region IV Wildlifer

A newsletter for landowners that fall within the 33 counties of Region IV, covering portions of Central and Coastal Texas

TEXAS
PARKS &
WILDLIFE

January 2025

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Our Wildlife Biologists

District 8 Field Notes

BY DERRICK WOLTER



Howdy! The new year is underway, and it looks like we are finally getting some winter weather. I'm appreciative of the cooler temperatures and rainfall, so hopefully the latter will keep up as we get through winter and into spring. I always think of this time of year as a big reset, a time when much of last year's plant growth breaks down, adding organic matter to the soil and making space for a new crop of warm season growth.

Staff have been busy. Biologists have been opportunistically sampling road-killed and hunter-harvested deer as part of our annual disease surveillance. A big **thank you** to all the hunters who helped in this effort by allowing TPWD staff to sample your deer. It's much appreciated. Biologists continue to reach out to landowners in their respective counties to get to know cooperators and their goals. Site visits always take a bit of a breather around the holidays, but according to staff it sounds like things are picking back up again. As always, please reach out to your local biologist if you need assistance with the management of your land.

We also have and continue to offer opportunities for landowners to build wildlife management knowledge and enhance land stewardship. In early December, we hosted 65 landowners in Bastrop County. We have a three-session workshop series taking place in Gonzales County starting next month, but we reached attendee capacity last week! In addition, we have a prescribed fire workshop planned for April 11 at the M.O. Neasloney Wildlife Management Area. Register and join us!

In staff news, the district said farewell to Rachel Hamilton at the end of November. Rachel was the biologist responsible for Karnes and Wilson Counties. It was a big year for Rachel, starting as a biologist with TPWD in February, getting married in October, and then transferring to Coleman County, an area where her family owns land. So, although Rachel was in no hurry to leave the district, she took advantage of the opportunity to get to what quite possibly is her forever place. We miss Rachel, but will still get to see her occasionally, and we wish her the best of luck!

Derrick Wolter began his career with TPWD in 2000 working as a wildlife biologist within the Upper Coast Wetlands Ecosystem Project, where he worked with wetlands, waterfowl, and on several Wildlife Management Areas. In 2004, Derrick moved to Central Texas to serve as a district biologist for Bell, Coryell, Lampasas, and Williamson Counties. In 2020, he became the Senior Wildlife Biologist for the Hill Country District. In November 2023, Derrick became the Wildlife District 8 Leader. He received a Bachelor of Science in Wildlife Science and a Master of Science in Wildlife Ecology from Texas A&M University.

District Field Notes, continued

District 9 Field Notes

BY BOBBY EICHLER



District Staff have stayed busy over the past few months with various tasks and goals. As always, collecting deer age and antler measurements is a large part of this time of year's duties, as well as collecting samples for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD). To date, District 9 staff have collected samples on approximately 835 deer, and within the geographical area of District 9 we have approximately 923 samples. For those of you that harvested a deer and supplied it for testing, or reported roadkills to your local biologist, we Thank You. While CWD has popped up in new areas across the state over the years, District 9 has weathered the disease well with only a few isolated facilities with positives. To date, CWD has not been found in the wild population in our district.

Overall, I would say the deer season was average at best. Locker plants did not seem to take in as many deer as past seasons and biologists did not have quite as many deer come to them. Antler quality seemed spotty as well, with some really nice bucks being harvested but at a lower rate than in the last few seasons. The season seemed to start with well above average temperatures, then a relatively heavy acorn crop, and to top it off rainfall allowed for early growth of winter forbs. The combination likely decreased deer coming to feeders and lowered hunting success. While we do need to continue to take doe out of the population, the positive note will be many

bucks will get one more year of age for next season. So, since I mentioned doe harvest, preliminary data from across our district shows that deer populations have changed very little, if any since doe days were implemented 6 seasons ago. Be looking for an article in the future where some of this data will be presented.



State park hunt. Photo©TPWD

Staff have also worked several public hunts between some state parks, such as Stephen F. Austin and Brazos Bend, as well as assisting on various Wildlife Management Area (WMA) hunts. Back in late October, staff with the help of volunteers hosted a two-day Youth Firearms Event at Nails Creek State Park. Over the two days, youth from Lee and Washington Counties were introduced to safe firearm handling as well as hunter safety and wildlife topics. Staff also assisted for a full day of quail dissection working with students at the Brenham Middle School. Working with youth with shooting, hunting, and wildlife management in general will hopefully pay dividends in the future. With many youths no longer having a connection with the land, we try to take advantage of any opportunity we can to get them some exposure.

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District Field Notes, continued

Staff from across the region completed the annual National Wildfire Coordinating Group pack testing which enables staff to participate in prescribed fires. At the time of this writing, District 9 staff have already assisted with a handful of WMA burns and a few private land burns as well. For mid-January, that's a good start. Hopefully, some colder weather will stay around and ideally the winter grass will slow down on growth. Depending on what we want to burn, winter grass can become a hindrance.

For those of you in Austin and Fort Bend Counties, your biologist Jon McLeod left the agency at the end of October. Jon was a well-respected biologist and has been missed. We will be holding interviews for this vacancy in early January, and hopes are to have a biologist in place sometime in March. For now, continue calling the district office at (979) 968-6591 if you have a need.

Moving forward, the next few months will have staff busy with Wildlife Management Association meetings which normally occur after the deer season but prior to the spring. Several of these meetings should be listed in the Upcoming Events within this newsletter. Staff will hopefully stay busy with prescribed fires through mid to late March. For landowners who are doing native grass restoration projects, staff will be busy assisting them with seed orders with intentions of planting over the next few months.

Being mid-January, spring is not far away. Overall, this winter has been very mild, I guess we will see what February has to offer. Enjoy the outdoors and if you need anything, let our staff know.



Prescribed burn on private property. Photo©TPWD

Bobby Eichler is the District 9 leader for the Oak Savannah and Prairies District. He has Bachelor and Master of Science degrees in Forestry both with emphasis in Game Management, from Stephen F. Austin State University. A native of Giddings, Bobby started his TPWD career in East Texas before moving to La Grange in 2007.



The Restorative Power of a Native Prairie in Texas

How the Native Prairie Association of Texas (NPAT) Leads Conservation and Supports Landowners

Marvelyn Granger

Texas is home to some of the most diverse and expansive landscapes in the United States. Among these, the native prairies of the Lone Star State stand as living testaments to the resilience and beauty of nature. Once widespread across the state, these grasslands are now dwindling in number, yet their restorative power remains as vital as ever. The Native Prairie Association of Texas (NPAT) is at the forefront of preserving these ecosystems and helping individuals experience the profound benefits of connecting with them.

The Restorative Power of Native Prairies

Native prairies in Texas are more than just scenic vistas; they are ecosystems teeming with life and essential services. These prairies are home to a remarkable array of plants, animals, and insects, many of which are found nowhere else in the world. The deep roots of prairie grasses like big bluestem, little bluestem, and Indian grass anchor the soil, preventing erosion and fostering soil health that supports other native species.

Native prairies are vital habitats for many species that have adapted specifically to this environment over millennia. Biodiversity thrives when prairies are preserved. Birds like the threatened Northern Bobwhite quail, butterflies like the threatened Monarch, and countless pollinators all depend on the health of prairies. Individuals contribute to the broader ecological

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balance by supporting prairie conservation, food security, water conservation, and carbon sequestration.

The Role of the Native Prairie Association of Texas (NPAT)

The Native Prairie Association of Texas (NPAT) is a vital organization dedicated to preserving, restoring, and appreciating Texas' native prairies. As these ecosystems continue to face threats from urbanization, agricultural expansion, and climate change, NPAT provides a critical voice in the fight for their protection. However, NPAT's work goes beyond advocacy; it offers hands-on opportunities for Texans to engage with and protect these vital landscapes.



Elder Prairie Preserve

1. Land Restoration and Conservation Projects

One primary way NPAT supports the health of Texas' native prairies is through its restoration projects. These initiatives aim to restore degraded prairies by removing invasive species, replanting native grasses and

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wildflowers, and promoting sustainable land management practices. NPAT collaborates with landowners, local governments, and other stakeholders to ensure these restoration efforts are effective and sustainable.

2. Education

Educational programs, which include workshops, field trips, and collaboration and partnership with like-minded organizations, are designed to increase public awareness of the ecological, cultural, and economic value of prairies. The Fayette Prairie Chapter provides these educational opportunities locally and supports landowners interested in restoring their own land to a native prairie. In fact, the Fayette Prairie Chapter also manages the Smaller Acreage Restoration Program (SARP) to provide consultation, plan development, and cost-sharing opportunities for restorations under 25 acres.



KR ID & IPT Workshop led by TPWD Biologists

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3. Opportunities for Involvement and Membership

Becoming a member of the Native Prairie Association of Texas Fayette Prairie Chapter provides individuals with a direct way to support the preservation of prairies and get involved in hands-on restoration work.

The Fayette Prairie Chapter supports its members in the 11-county region covering Caldwell, Bastrop, Lee, Burleson, Gonzales, Fayette, Washington, DeWitt, Lavaca, Colorado, and Austin counties. Upcoming events include:

- Native Prairie Soil Hands-On Workshop
- “The Future of Restoration in a Changing World” Zoom presentation with Russell Feagin, Dept. of Ecology and Conservation, Biology, Texas A&M University
- Volunteer opportunities at Elder Prairie Preserve in Chappell Hill
- “Art on the Prairie - Hummingbirds” a time to be creative and socialize with other members
- Native Seed Propagation Hands-On Workshop
- Post Oak Savanna Restoration Tour, featuring goat grazing as a tool

For more information on how to become a member of the Native Prairie Association of Texas, join the Fayette Prairie Chapter, and support prairie conservation, visit:

NPAT: <https://texasprairie.org/>

Fayette Prairie Chapter: <https://texasprairie.org/fayette-prairie-chapter/>

Become a Member: <https://texasprairie.org/join/>

Subscribe to our Fayette Prairie Chapter **NEWSLETTER**

Email: fayette@texasprairie.org

2024 Doe Day Harvest Update

WRITTEN BY MARK LANGE



The counties listed in the table are counties which implemented a 4-day doe season starting in 2019. When these doe days were added during the general season it included the ability for hunters to also take doe during youth and muzzleloader seasons with a combined bag limit of 2 doe all seasons combined. Before this regulation change, the take of 2 doe during archery only season was already allowed. With the implementation of the additional doe harvest dates, mandatory harvest reporting was also implemented for all antlerless deer taken during any of the seasons (archery, youth, general, and muzzleloader) which is done on the My Texas Hunt and Fish App. Mandatory reporting is a great tool for staff biologists allowing them to get a better grasp of just how many antlerless deer are being harvested in our area. This reporting, coupled with Managed Lands Deer Permit (MLDP) cooperators reporting antlerless harvest, gives a nearly total count for harvested doe; the exception would be harvested doe which were illegally not reported. Staff and law enforcement believe non-reporting is a small portion knowing most hunters try to follow game laws. Data included in this summary only covers the archery, early youth-only, and general 4-day season on properties not receiving MLDP permits. Data excludes late-season youth-only and muzzleloader season due to the timing of this newsletter. Properties participating in the MLD program and receiving antlerless tags do NOT get to harvest additional doe during these seasons as harvested deer on MLDP properties can only be tagged with MLDP permits.

County	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
	Archery					Archery and Early Youth					4 Doe Days				
Austin	15	10	12	13	8	3	10	8	1	5	58	68	58	62	55
Bastrop	65	32	40	45	38	12	9	11	5	9	207	147	83	113	125
Caldwell	61	27	32	25	23	7	8	5	4	3	134	117	68	115	105
Colorado	46	34	40	19	41	9	4	11	10	12	150	171	152	118	158
Dewitt	81	39	48	30	61	17	13	5	9	16	371	276	235	290	334
Fayette	71	28	44	27	21	25	11	12	4	9	285	201	161	201	237
Goliad*	34	11	19	4	16	10	3	1	1	14	162	112	108	129	141
Gonzales	30	13	20	21	13	5	4	9	6	4	199	142	127	146	189
Guadalupe	44	21	33	34	24	13	2	12	6	7	157	100	91	134	150
Jackson*	23	17	19	6	9	5	1	11		1	33	42	61	39	43
Lavaca	85	41	54	31	50	20	17	11	5	11	194	205	195	148	234
Lee	55	45	27	32	25	21	13	5	6	5	215	139	91	141	128
Victoria*	23	11	12	10	20	5		4	2	8	91	59	46	68	91
Waller	15	5	12	5	8	2		1			20	31	17	23	16
Washington	22	19	25	17	15	15	2	5	4	10	110	105	87	89	77
Wharton*	8	5	5	5	2	1	3	3	3		21	33	19	21	11
Total	678	358	442	324	374	170	100	114	66	114	2,407	1,948	1,599	1,837	2,094

* Only includes harvest north of US HWY 59

Doe Day Harvest Update-2024, continued

While some counties stay remarkably consistent on the number of doe harvested during these seasons, others vary a bit, which is reflected in the annual totals. As every experienced hunter knows, environmental factors contribute greatly to hunter success annually. This past spring and early summer many areas received average or above-average rainfall, but then later summer turned dry. Fall and the early part of winter were unseasonably warm with scattered rainfall. The mild season start offered plenty of browse and forbs on the landscape for deer to utilize which decreased the incentive for them to go to supplemental feed and lowering hunter success. As you can see on the table, hunter success specifically during the 4 days of the general season increased this season over the previous three seasons. If you hunt a property that doesn't receive MLDP permits, we encourage you to take advantage of these seasons to not only increase your hunting opportunity but also contribute to managing the deer herd in your county.



Local youth doe harvest. Photo©TPWD

Mark Lange was the wildlife biologist for Colorado/Austin Counties where he started in June 2012 and is now the District 9 Senior Biologist. He grew up in the Texas panhandle in the small town of Nazareth. He attended West Texas A&M University where he completed his Bachelor of Science Degree in Biology/Wildlife Science in 2006 and his Masters of Science Degree in Biology in 2011. Mark offices out of the Columbus field office. Mark has diverse interests and enjoys working with landowners towards their management goals.

Plant Profile: Smartweed (*Polygonum sp.*)

WRITTEN BY RACHEL PATTERSON

Smartweeds are a group of native warm-season annuals commonly found growing along watercourses and ponds in wet or disturbed soils. They exhibit long and narrow leaves in an alternating pattern and clusters of small pink or white flowers. Of the fifteen species that reside in North America, nine are found here in Texas. Smartweeds are quick growers and often colonize ponds if other aquatic plants are not present in large numbers.

Smartweeds are an invaluable source of food for waterfowl, small birds, and mammals that frequent wetlands and the low-lying areas along drainages, creeks and rivers. Submerged portions of smartweed provide habitat for aquatic invertebrates that waterfowl rely on as a source of protein and calcium during the breeding season. Dense stands of smartweed also provide cover for young birds to hide from predators.

Wild animals weren't the only ones that relied on smartweed either. Several Native American cultures, including the Meskwaki, Ojibwa, Chippewa, and Menominee tribes, utilized different parts of the plants as medicinal ingredients. Common symptoms treated with smartweed include mouth sores and hemorrhaging, stomach pain, acid reflux, and diarrhea.

If you're looking to attract more waterfowl to your property, smartweed may be a worthy addition to your ponds. After the last spring frost has passed, drop the water level until the soil is exposed, but still moist. Broadcast the seeds at 10-15 lbs/acre and wait until the seedlings grow at least 6 inches in height. Once the migratory season comes around, reflood the wetland 12-18 inches deep. Then watch as your property becomes a hotspot for your favorite waterfowl species!



Above: Longroot Smartweed
Below: Pennsylvania Smartweed



Rachel Patterson is the wildlife biologist for Bastrop and Caldwell counties. She grew up in Conroe and graduated from Texas A&M University in 2022 with a B.S. in Wildlife & Fisheries Sciences. Following graduation, she interned with TPWD at the J. D. Murphree Wildlife Management Area, then worked two other seasonal positions with the East Foundation and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources before accepting her current position in August 2023. Rachel offices in Bastrop and enjoys helping landowners and wildlife management association members manage their habitat to benefit wildlife.

References:

- [Smartweed - AquaPlant: Management of Pond Plants & Algae](#)
- [PENNSYLVANIA SMARTWEED](#)
- [BRIT - Native American Ethnobotany Database](#)
- [Plants of Texas Rangelands » Smartweed](#)

Blackland Prairies: Ecoregion Snapshot

WRITTEN BY BLAKE HENDON

Blackland Prairie

A Blackland Prairie is a highly diverse and productive prairie system named for its deep, black, fertile soils and tall grasses. Historically, herds of bison, and to a lesser extent pronghorn, grazed, trampled, and fertilized the soil, stimulating the growth of the prairie. Before the arrival of European settlers, fires ignited by indigenous people and lightning regularly consumed the prairie. These fires cleared or reduced the presence of trees and woody shrubs, stimulating the native herbaceous prairie species of forbs and grasses that were adapted to these disturbances. The periodic grazing and fire promoted the rapid regrowth of a highly productive and diverse prairie system, which set the stage for additional bouts of grazing and fire. This positive feedback loop supported an open prairie landscape and held the forest and woodlands to the east at bay. In this sense, the Blackland Prairie is



Blackland Prairie with diversity of grasses and flowering plants. Variation in plant stature and seasonality of growth provides for high wildlife habitat quality. Woody plants, including trees and shrubs often occur along drainages. Photo©Cullom Simpson, TPWD

recognized as a disturbance-dependent system; disturbance being responsible for creating, shaping and maintaining the prairie. Despite the prairie's persistence over many thousands of years, native Blackland Prairies currently exist in scattered remnants accounting for less than 1% of the original extent.

An Ecoregion versus A Prairie

Ecoregions are identified by the patterns and composition of biotic (living) and abiotic (physical) features that reflect the differences in landscapes. These features include geology, landforms, soils, vegetation, climate, land use, wildlife, and hydrology.

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Blackland Prairies: Ecoregion Snapshot, continued

The ecoregion concept acts as a planning and communication tool by providing a defined area with distinct ecological characteristics, allowing landowners, managers and biologists to identify and prioritize actions based on the existing or potential plant and animal life within that region. The unique combination of geology, landforms, soils, historic vegetation, climate, and hydrology help to define the Blackland Prairie Ecoregion.

The Blackland Prairie Ecoregion of Texas is part of the southern extension of the North American Tallgrass Prairie system. That Tallgrass Prairie system historically stretched from the southern edge of central Canada through the eastern portions of the central “prairie states” to the coastal prairies of Texas. The Blackland Prairie ecoregion covers an area of approximately 10.5 million acres; however, some delineations exceed 13 million acres.

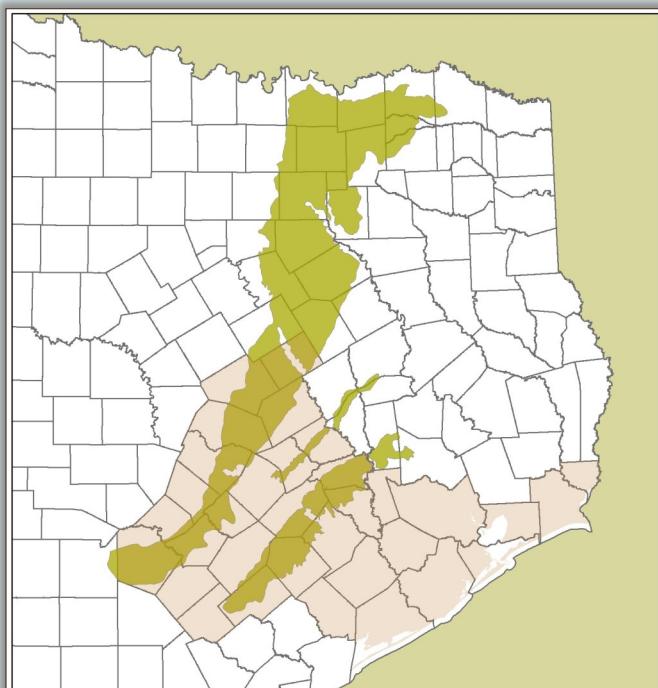
The Blackland Prairie Ecoregion consists of a main section and two outlier areas, or islands, of tallgrass prairie southeast of the main Blackland Prairie. The main section runs from just south of the Red River on the Texas-Oklahoma border through the Dallas–Fort Worth metropolitan area and southward to include portions of San Antonio. A stretch of about 300 miles southward in a gradually narrowing band. This ecoregion is bounded on the west by the Cross Timbers and Prairies and Edwards Plateau and on the east by the Post Oak Savannah. The larger of the two outliers is the Fayette Prairie and the smaller is the San Antonio Prairie. The two outliers are separated from the main section of Blackland Prairie by the Post Oak Savannah, which surrounds these prairies on all sides but the northeast, where the Fayette Prairie meets the East Texas Piney Woods.

The average annual rainfall is 28 to 40 inches, increasing from west to east. These rainfall amounts are enough to support trees and shrubs. In the absence of regularly occurring fires, woody plant communities develop, transitioning the prairie into woodlands and forests. The widespread adoption and use of mechanical and chemical methods to slow the encroachment of woody plant cover is our attempt at replicating the necessity of fire in a tallgrass prairie landscape.

Except for river breaks, the Blacklands are gently rolling, ranging in elevation from 800 feet in the north and west to 300 feet in the south and east. Watersheds of several major river systems and their tributaries bisect the region. These include the Trinity, Brazos, Colorado, Guadalupe and San Antonio rivers. Woodlands typically occur along these drainages where additional soil moisture gives woody plants an advantage. Trees including pecan, American elm, bur oak, sugar hackberry and walnut provide valuable food resources, cover and edge habitat in the otherwise open prairie landscape.

The Blackland Prairie Ecoregion is primarily underlain by Cretaceous marine chalks, marls, limestones, and shales which gave rise to the development of the characteristic black, calcareous, heavy clay soils. Early settlers were drawn to this region by these productive soils, gentle topography, extensive, and seemingly endless native grasslands.

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Map of Blackland Prairie Ecoregion including the outlier San Antonio and Fayette Prairies. Shown in relation to TPWD Region 4. Photo©Produced in ArcMap, TPWD

Blackland Prairies: Ecoregion Snapshot, continued

Although historically a region of tall-grass prairies, today most of the region is devoted to cropland and other agricultural enterprises. Cotton, corn, and milo are grown throughout the region. Livestock grazing is an important land use, especially on domesticated pastures. Industrial and urban expansion into this ecological region continues.

Opportunities for Action

Maintain existing remnants of native Blackland Prairie using periodic grazing and fire to replicate the historic cycle of disturbance. Use mechanical and chemical methods of woody and non-native, invasive plant control as needed to complement the impacts of grazing and fire.

Reestablish prairie plant communities where applicable. Areas of marginal cropland and degraded, non-native pastures can be perfect sites to experiment on. Plan for the eventual application of grazing and fire (and other complementary methods) to maintain your investment.

Join your local Prescribed Burn Association and learn about the importance of fire on the landscape, including its safe application.

If you have an interest in restoring native prairie there are programs to help you with technical and financial assistance to achieve that goal. Information on those programs can be found at the links below or by contacting your local TPWD biologist.

- Native Prairies Association of Texas (<https://texasprairie.org/>)
- The Fayette Prairie Chapter's - Smaller Acreage Restoration Program (SARP) (<https://texasprairie.org/sarp/>)
- Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture - Grassland Restoration Incentive Program (GRIP) (<https://www.opjv.org/grip>)
- Texas Parks and Wildlife – Pastures for Upland Birds Program (PUB) (https://tpwd.texas.gov/landwater/land/habitats/post_oak/pub/)
- Prescribed Burn Alliance of Texas (<https://www.pbatexas.org/member-associations>)

References:

G. Diggs, Jr., B.L. Lipscomb, and R.J. O'Kennon, "Shiners and Mahler's Illustrated Flora of North Central Texas." Botanical Research Institute of Texas. 1999. Available online. See pages 20-42 for an excellent overview of the Texas Blackland Prairie.



Blake Hendon is the Senior Wildlife Biologist for District 8. Previously, he was the Natural Resource Specialist for Hays and Travis Counties. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Wildlife Ecology and a Master of Science degree in Rangeland Ecology and Management, both from Texas A&M University. A native of the Pineywoods of Northeast Texas, Blake started his TPWD career in central Texas in 2007.

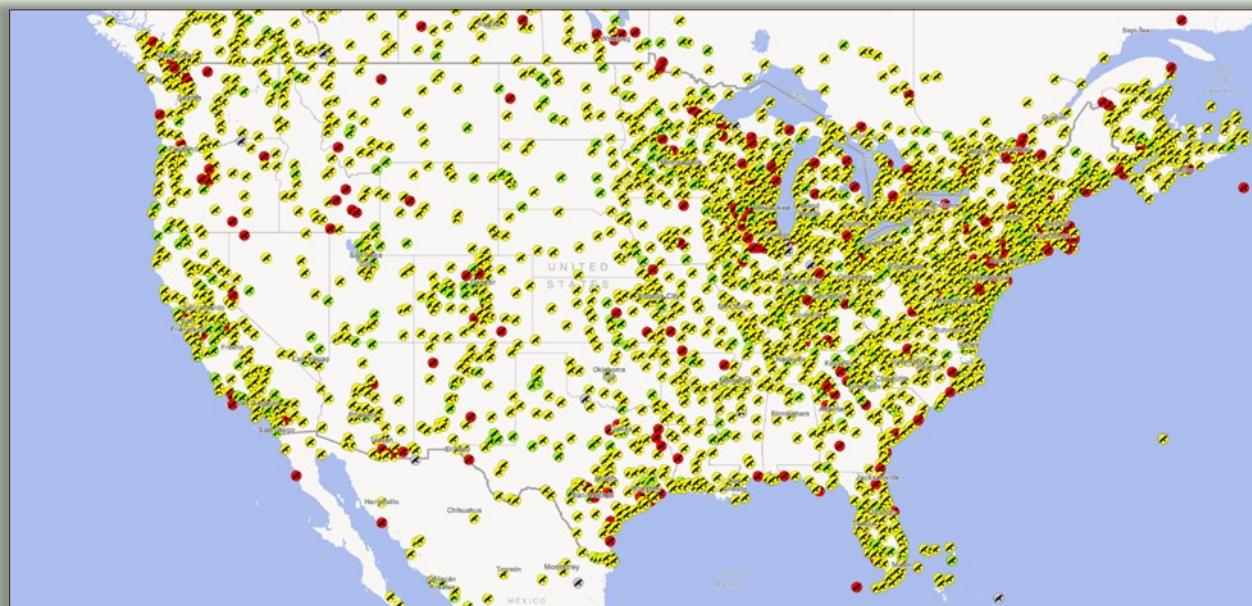
Christmas Bird Count

WRITTEN BY TANIA PEÑA

When people think of birdwatching, also known as “birding”, they don’t typically envision having to brave near-freezing temperatures and shiver-inducing wind chills. Yet, every year from December 14th to January 5th, tens of thousands of volunteers throughout the Western Hemisphere participate in the Christmas Bird Count, the world’s oldest citizen science wildlife survey.

History of the Christmas Bird Count

The first Christmas Bird Count took place on Christmas Day in 1900, with 27 participants covering 25 different locations spanning from the coast of California through the northeastern region of North America. Prior to this momentous event, the annual holiday tradition among outdoorsmen had been the Christmas “Side Hunt”, in which hunters would select different sides of a field, and whoever harvested the largest number of birds and mammals would win. Wildlife conservation and management was not yet an established science, however, it was beginning to take form. Many naturalists were noticing a decline in bird populations, including Frank M. Chapman, the ornithologist and pioneer in bird conservation who created the Christmas Bird Count to replace the “side hunt” tradition.



Christmas Bird Count – Count Circle Locations ; (Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, EPA, USFWS)

Why is the Christmas Bird Count Important?

The participants in the first Christmas Bird Count observed about 90 different species across all locations combined. In the most recent 124th bird count, participants observed an incredible 2,380 species setting the new record for this annual survey! As you can imagine, data collected from over a century is crucial for scientists to track the health of bird populations over time. The collected data can also offer insights into habitat loss, evident when fewer birds are found in areas where they were once abundant, as well as the impacts of climate change, reflected in changes to migration timing and routes.

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Christmas Bird Count, continued

Tracking changes that establish trends, such as the disappearance of certain species or overall population declines from certain areas, can help identify where conservation efforts need to be prioritized to protect vulnerable species.

How to Get Involved

Last year, 83,186 volunteers participated in the Christmas Bird Count. This annual survey has certainly come a long way and continues to grow in participation each year. Whether you are a beginner or lifelong birder, your contribution makes a difference. Many bird species are extremely difficult to spot, so an extra set of eyes on the lookout is always a welcome advantage! Participation in a Christmas Bird Count serves as a wonderful opportunity to expand your knowledge about bird identification and behavior. Not only is it a fulfilling past-time, but it can also connect you to other individuals with a passion for wildlife conservation.

Most Christmas Bird Counts are run by local Audubon Societies, birdwatching groups, or conservation organizations. These groups create “count circles”, or designated areas where participants will conduct a survey. There are plenty of count circles to choose from in the central and coastal areas of Texas. If you are a beginner, you can let the organizers know when you sign up, so that you can be grouped with someone more experienced to serve as a mentor. It is also important to mention if you have limited mobility, as some survey areas require certain physical capabilities if they are along advanced hiking trails or rough terrain. Observing birds from your own backyard is also an option that you can mention to the organizers upon signing up for a count circle. Instructions and official tally sheets will be provided for you to record your observations.

Useful Tools

Birding can be much more challenging in the winter months than the peak birding seasons during spring and fall migrations. For many species, male bird plumages are no longer as vibrant as they are during the breeding



Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Photo©TPWD



Volunteers conducting a bird count in central Texas. Photo©TPWD

seasons that take place during warmer months, making them more difficult to spot and identify. Furthermore, as any experienced birder can confirm, you will more often only get to hear a bird and won't be able to catch a glimpse of it at all. Songs are commonly utilized by birds during breeding seasons to advertise for potential mates and to warn nearby males to stay out of their respective territories. However, songs become much scarcer in the winter, and you are more likely to only hear calls. Calls are different than songs, typically being much shorter and generic vocalizations that are hard to distinguish among different species.

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Christmas Bird Count, continued

Luckily, technology has come a long way and there are now apps available that you can download on your smartphone to aid in bird identification. Merlin Bird ID is an app created by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, a leading organization in the advancement of bird research and conservation. To identify a bird in real-time, you can upload a photo or use the sound feature to create a live audio recording of bird vocalizations. If you were unable to obtain a photo or record a bird that you cannot identify, you can utilize the “Step by Step” feature and answer a series of questions to narrow down the possibilities of what bird

species you encountered. Another neat feature in this app is the “Explore” option, where a list of birds that you are likely to see at your location is provided. You can click on each species to see the likelihood of an encounter, species description, list of their archived sounds, and their geographic distributions. If you want to document your birding achievements and contribute to citizen science year-round, you can also download the eBird app and create an account to keep track of all the birds you see on your birding adventures. Before you know it, you may be jumping at any opportunity to increase the species count on your life list!



White-crowned sparrow. Photo©TPWD



Brazos Bend State Park Christmas Bird Count. Photo©TPWD



Tania is currently serving as the TPWD Wildlife Biologist for Hays and Travis counties. She earned a B.S. in Wildlife Biology and an M.S. in Wildlife Ecology from Texas State University. Although a native to north Texas, she now calls the Hill Country her home. Tania is deeply committed to helping local landowners achieve their land management goals to support native wildlife, particularly birds, as she is an avid birding enthusiast and a dedicated advocate for bird conservation.

American Badger

WRITTEN BY LAURA SHERROD

Recently, a badger was spotted during a routine nighttime deer spotlight survey in Lee County – an animal very rarely seen in our region! Badgers, specifically the American badger (*Taxidea taxus*), are not as common in Central to East Texas as they are further west in the state.

The American badger has a stocky body, short legs, long claws, and a distinctive black-and-white facial pattern. They range from 20-34 inches, including their tail, and weigh anywhere from 9 – 26 pounds, with the males being larger than females. Badgers are mostly solitary, except during mating season or when a mother is raising young. Mating occurs in late summer to early fall (July–September), but fertilization is delayed until December or January, ensuring young are born in spring. Young are born about 6 weeks later in an underground burrow. The kits are blind and helpless at birth, but they grow quickly. Weaning begins around 4-6 weeks of age, and they leave the mother's burrow by late summer to establish their own territories. A badger's lifespan in the wild ranges from 4 – 10 years.

Badgers tend to inhabit open grasslands, prairies, and areas with sandy or loamy soils, which are better suited for digging their burrows and foraging. While some of our region still has open grasslands, most of our counties are less favorable for badger habitat. Urbanization and the increased presence of wooded or forested areas has reduced suitable habitat for badgers throughout much of the region. Very few badger sightings have been confirmed across the counties in the region.

The badger is a highly effective hunter, often catching burrowing prey that other predators can't access. Their solitary and focused hunting style makes badgers a top predator of small burrowing mammals in their ecosystems. Badgers are persistent hunters and locate prey burrows using their acute sense of smell and hearing. They favor areas with abundant small mammals like ground squirrels, prairie dogs, or mice. Another favorite is one that many landowners battle in their fields – gophers!

Badgers are expert diggers, and their strong claws and muscular forelimbs allow them to excavate gopher burrows efficiently. Gophers are relatively large compared to other prey, offering a high caloric reward for the effort. Interestingly, there have even been reports of coyotes benefiting from badgers. The badger will dig into burrows, flushing prey into the open while the coyote waits to catch fleeing prey. While digging is the primary means of hunting, badgers are adaptable hunters and will seize other opportunities as they arise. If a prey animal, such as a rodent or rabbit, is on the ground, the badger will use its speed and agility to pounce.



American badger. Photo©TPWD

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American Badger, continued

They will also occasionally lie in wait near active burrows, especially those of ground squirrels or prairie dogs, to ambush their prey. Badgers will sometimes scavenge carcasses when available, especially in winter when their hunting success decreases.

Badgers serve as ecological engineers in ecosystems. They are made for digging, which aerates the soil, promoting plant health and growth. Their abandoned burrows are also critical habitats for many species, serving as ready-made shelters for a variety of animals, including reptiles, ground-nesting birds, and several species of mammals. These burrows, which are often extensive and multi-chambered, protect from predators, extreme weather, and even wildfires. Badgers can also serve as an important means of rodent control for farmers.

Unless you unexpectedly get lucky and spot a badger, finding badgers in the wild requires a combination of patience, observation skills, and knowledge of their habitat and behavior. Badgers are elusive and solitary, so sightings are rare. One of the best ways to determine if badgers are using your property is to search for their burrows. Burrows have wide entrances that are 8–12 inches across, and they are shaped like a sideways "D." Entrances are typically surrounded by a large mound of loose soil. If you think you have found a badger burrow, try putting out a game camera to catch their activity. You just might get lucky and see one of these elusive creatures!



American badger mother with kits . Photo©Ryan Hagerty. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



Laura Sherrod is the Wildlife Biologist for Lee county. She grew up in Dripping Springs and graduated from Texas State University with a Bachelor of Arts in Wildlife Biology. Laura was hired by Texas Parks & Wildlife in 2008, where she worked with the Big Game Program until accepting her current biologist position in April 2014. Laura offices in Giddings, and she enjoys helping landowners and wildlife management associations achieve their habitat and wildlife management goals throughout Lee and Fayette counties.

Upcoming Events

JANUARY

**24 Washington County Wildlife Society
Semi-Annual Meeting**
Washington County Expo Event Center
1305 E. Blue Bell Rd., Brenham, TX 77833
Social begins at 5:30 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.
Contact Washington County Wildlife Society at
979-277-6297 to RSVP

FEBRUARY

**1 New Landowner Workshop Series
Session I (Registration Full)**
Neasloney WMA
20700 SH 80 N., Gonzales, TX 78629
8:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.
Contact Olivia Kost at 737-240-9609
olivia.kost@tpwd.texas.gov
<https://forms.gle/erTUAPPjopu4rHYc9>

**7 Lee County Wildlife Association
Annual Meeting**
The Silos on 77
1031 CR 223, Giddings, TX 78942
Doors Open at 5:00 p.m., Dinner at 6:30p.m.,
Live Auction begins at 7:30 p.m.
Contact Greg Sherrod at 512-431-3558 or
Leecountywildlife.org

**28 Washington County Wildlife
Valuation Workshop**
Blinn Rankin Ag Complex
1409 Old Mill Creek Rd., Brenham, TX 77833
RSVP before February 24th, Includes lunch \$20
Registration, follow the link below.
<https://www.wcwildlife.org/event-6030103>
Contact Stephanie Damron at 979-277-6297 or
stephanie.damron@tpwd.texas.gov

*Upcoming Events, continued***MARCH**

1	New Landowner Workshop Series Session II (Registration Full) Neasloney WMA 20700 SH 80 N., Gonzales, TX 78629 8:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. Contact Olivia Kost at 737-240-9609 olivia.kost@tpwd.texas.gov https://forms.gle/erTUAPPjopu4rHYc9	29	New Landowner Workshop Series Session III (Registration Full) Neasloney WMA 20700 SH 80 N., Gonzales, TX 78629 8:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. Contact Olivia Kost at 737-240-9609 olivia.kost@tpwd.texas.gov https://forms.gle/erTUAPPjopu4rHYc9
15	Colorado County Wildlife Management Association Spring Banquet Columbus Hall (KC Hall) 3845 I-10, Columbus, TX 78934 Begins at 4:00 p.m. Contact Katie Edwards at 979-702-1935 or Catherine.edwards@tpwd.texas.gov ***Raffle tickets can be purchased at the TPWD Columbus Field Office at 316 Spring St Office 102 Columbus, TX 78934		

APRIL

4	Wildlife Tax Valuation Workshop Colorado County EMS 305 Radio Ln., #101, Columbus, TX 78934 Begins 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. RSVP Required Contact Katie Edwards at 979-702-1935 or Catherine.edwards@tpwd.texas.gov	11	Prescribed Fire Workshop Neasloney WMA 20700 SH 80 N., Gonzales, TX 78629 Begins 8:30 a.m to 4:00 p.m. Please RSVP by April 9 th Contact Robert Conrad at 830-203-0896 or robert.conrad@tpwd.texas.gov
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