



Bluebirds and other species of songbirds rely on native trees for their food and nesting areas.



ARE BIRDS A PART OF YOUR PLAN?

Article and Photos by **TAMRA BOLTON**

How healthy is your habitat? To help answer that question, Kenneth V. Rosenberg of the Conservation Science Program at Cornell Lab of Ornithology advises landowners, “Take a good look at your wild bird population because that’s a good indicator of the health of the total wildlife environment on your property.” Rosenberg is one of the leading experts in wild bird habitat and management. He warns, “Changes in a particular habitat’s balance often show up in the local wild bird population first and landowners, whether large or small, should be concerned when negative changes are detected.”

According to the 2014 State of the Birds report, there has been a steady decrease in certain species across Texas. The Eastern Meadowlark and Bobolink have experienced a steep, steady decline. With the loss of more and more land to development, many of our native birds are struggling to survive. Because Texas is in the Central Flyway migration route, we have a unique opportunity to help many more bird species than just our own native birds. The Lone Star State is home to more bird species than any other state, making us stewards of an important natural treasure. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, “Texas also has the highest private property ownership in the nation, over 90 percent” which puts Texans directly in the driver’s seat when it comes to wild bird conservation.

When asked what Texans can do to preserve our bird population, Dr. Rosenberg says, “The number one thing landowners can do is to keep wild or natural areas intact, and retain or use native species of plants whenever possible.” He also recommends using “integrated or biological pest control and protecting established habitat for foraging and nesting.”

Rosenberg understands that many landowners focus mainly on game birds and waterfowl for economic reasons, but recommends that all birds should be considered in a property’s management plan. Cardinals, Bluebirds, Roadrunners, Woodpeckers and even Hummingbirds have a purpose to fulfill in the landowners’ environment. Dr. Rosenberg continues, “Texas bird life is dependent on private property for its continued and healthy existence. This includes the threatened and endangered species such as the Golden-Cheeked Warblers and Black-Capped Vireos in the Hill Country, Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers and other pine specialists in the eastern Piney Woods, Lesser Prairie-Chickens and other declining grassland birds in the Panhandle, and wintering Whooping Cranes on the Coast, as well as the only U.S. populations of many Mexican bird species in the Lower Rio

Grande Valley and the King Ranch. Migratory shorebirds and other waterfowl frequent the rice fields of southeast Texas, and the entire coastal area of Texas is an annual stopover for hundreds of millions of migratory songbirds.” For this reason, Texas is a vital part of the entire North American wild bird conservation effort.

Many Texas landowners, like TWA members Joe and Martha Parsley, are already doing their part to help the struggling wild bird populations on their ranches in East Texas and Seymour, Texas, near Wichita Falls. On the Parsley’s East Texas ranch, they purposefully leave brushy areas, especially around creeks, for Cardinals, Mockingbirds, Carolina Chickadees and other common songbirds. These areas are also attractive to the Harris Sparrow, a migratory species that has suffered a troubling decline in recent years.

The Parsleys have also left a marshy area undisturbed for migratory ducks and geese. Maintaining sections of their ranch in native timber helps provide a possible home for the threatened Red-Cockaded Woodpecker and Pine Siskin. It also provides for other struggling species like the American Woodcock, Red-Headed Woodpecker, Chuck-will’s-Willow and the brilliantly



Protecting existing marshy areas for migratory waterfowl and other birds is one way landowners can help provide for struggling species year round.



colored Prothonotary Warbler. At their North Texas ranch, the Parsleys provide for different species such as the Roadrunner, Killdeer and Blue Jay, leaving edges and strips in hay fields to provide winter food, shelter and corridors for bird movement. They also provide year round feeding and watering stations so the bird population can remain healthy and viable, even during severe droughts or harsh winters.

While the Parsleys' main focus is on deer and game birds, they understand the importance of keeping all wildlife species healthy and vibrant. With wildlife viewing generating about \$1.5 billion in Texas each year, landowners, like the Parsleys, are seeing the benefits of non-game species. An increase in revenue and appealing to a new type of clientele are just two of the advantages they are enjoying. Martha says, "We had a couple from Florida come to the ranch just to see roadrunners in the wild.

They were so excited...they went out every day to spot them. The lady told me she had always wanted to see a Roadrunner and they saw plenty! When they left the ranch to go home, I have never seen a happier couple!" Non-consumptive wildlife users, like birders, are the fastest growing sector of outdoor enthusiasts and wildlife ranchers have a unique opportunity to expand their programs and benefit both financially and aesthetically from this popular pursuit.

According to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), identifying the wildlife and habitats already on your property is the first step to proper management. TPWD advises installing game cameras near feeding and nesting sites to discover which birds frequent your property. Too often well-meaning property owners clear their land, virtually destroying the existing habitat, and then

call the experts to help them with habitat management and conservation. Knowledge is power when it comes to developing a sound plan to support your local wild bird population. The 2014 State of the Birds report suggest that after you identify your birds, seek help from consulting biologists, forestry management personnel and other knowledgeable entities like the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, TPWD and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Non-profit conservation organizations like the National Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy and The Cornell Lab of Ornithology all have programs to assist private landowners in developing appropriate habitats or in maintaining existing habitats. They can also assist with creating a plan to protect certain threatened and endangered species and provide protection for migratory birds that may pass through your property.



TWA Member Martha Parsley points out several sites on their East Texas ranch where they have saved a diversity of habitat for the native and migratory birds that frequent their property.





Leaving ditches, draws and other erosion prone areas full of brambles, bushes and briars not only help prevent soil loss, but provides a perfect nesting site for many wild birds and other wildlife.

These organizations can give you the tools you need to enhance and create a beneficial environment for wild birds. While there is no “one size fits all” program for all Texas landowners, these organizations can help you choose what’s right for you and your property.

The following simple steps can be taken immediately to get you started on your habitat conservation plan:

- (1) Identify the species using your property so you can plan for specific needs.
- (2) Minimize habitat fragmentation by using existing roads, trails, and easements whenever possible, instead of creating new roads or trails.
- (3) Avoid disturbing sensitive areas such as streams and riparian zones.
- (4) Leave standing dead snags and dying trees on your property, unless they endanger structures or people.


Greg Grant, Research Associate at Stephen F. Austin State University advises that “dead trees are equally as important in nature as living trees.” Landowners across Texas have seen the loss of numerous trees since the 2011 drought. Often viewed as “eyesores,” Greg invites you to re-think your plan for these “gems of nature.” Dead and dying trees offer a wealth of food sources and provide nesting sites for many species such as Woodpeckers, Nuthatches, Bluebirds and Flycatchers.

People may wonder if providing a place for wild birds is worth the effort, but the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS) says, “Songbirds and other migratory birds are some of nature’s most magnificent resources.” Dr. Rosenberg would agree, “Birds contribute beauty in terms of color and song which enriches the lives of people everywhere – from cities, farms and ranches, to parks, natural areas and wilderness. It’s hard to put a specific value on that.” Songbirds also annually consume millions of insects. According to the USFWS, “Some songbirds eat as many as 300 insects a day during the summer months!”

Wild birds are important to Texas and Texans. Every landowner has an opportunity to be a part of the solution. To paraphrase the legendary conservationist Aldo Leopold, the landscape of any private property is the owner’s portrait of himself. What kind of portrait do you want to paint for future generations? Will your portrait be full of song and the whirring of wings, or will it be silent, devoid of the vibrant life wild birds bring to your land? Wild birds need to be an integral part of your investment. As a Texas landowner, you can be instrumental not only in preserving our native birds, but also insuring the future of all North American wild birds. 🐦



Leaving dead and dying trees can help give many bird species a nesting site, but they also provide an important food source for birds such as Woodpeckers, Nuthatches and Flycatchers.



Saving Family Lands Seminar
Land Conservation & Tax Planning
For Landowners & Their Advisors

**San Antonio
March 25**

**Fort Worth
March 26**

**Learn how to use the
voluntary conservation
easement to conserve
farms and ranches and
keep cherished lands
in the family.**

Register
www.txaglandtrust.org
(210)826-0074

