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Nash Prairie Preserve

by Bronwen Taylor

This 400-acre prairie offers a snapshot of Texas as it used to be.

Nineteenth century Texas politician Rip Ford once said, “To roam amid the unchanging scenes of nature, where the foot of civilized man never trod before... and to realize that you constitute a part of these” produces a buoyant spirit. His words speak to a connection to nature all of us possess, and it’s that connection that has prompted The Nature Conservancy to protect the Nash Prairie Preserve.

The 400-acre tract is one of the last remaining segments of the Great Coastal Prairie, which once encompassed six million acres between Lafayette, Louisiana and Corpus Christi, Texas. Nash is a pristine piece of prairieland, largely unaltered by man or machine. More than 300 plant species have been documented there, including several rare species and at least one type of grass thought to be extinct in Texas since the 1800s.

Nash was once part of the KNG Ranch, which was run by Houston socialite Kittie Nash Groce. After she traded designer dresses for work boots, journalists described her as the “biggest rancher in Brazoria County to wear pants, lipstick and rouge.”

At the time, Kittie was not fully aware of the land’s botanical riches; she used the land to grow nutrient rich hay for her livestock.

In 2003 ranch stewards, including the congregation of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in nearby West Columbia, rediscovered the true significance of Nash. The gently rolling landscape provides habitat for 120 species of birds, many of which are in serious decline, and its diversity of plant life creates a natural seed source for other prairies in need. Father Peter Conaty of St. Mary’s describes Nash in simple, succinct terms, “In theology, we talk about a thin place where heaven and earth meet, where we will find God. And this is where I find God.”

Less than one percent of the Great Coastal Prairie still exists, and barely a fraction of it is virgin prairie like Nash. Now that The Nature Conservancy has saved this slice of the state’s heritage, the land will become a living laboratory and seed bank for prairie restoration across the Texas coast.



Return of the San Juan Islands Bluebirds

by Gavin G. Shires

Henry David Thoreau once said, “A man’s interest in a single bluebird is worth more than a complete but dry list of the fauna and flora of a town.” So what might he have said about the worth of a group of people interested in restoring an entire population of Western Bluebirds to a place they have long since been absent?

On the San Juan Islands in northwestern Washington, land use changes and a decline in tree cavities prevented the beautiful Western Bluebird from nesting there for more than forty years. Like a smile marred by a missing tooth, the absence of bluebirds from the islands – whose native fauna (apologies to Mr. Thoreau) also includes Bald Eagles, Osprey, guillemots, auklets, seals, porpoises, minke whales, and orcas – was something a coalition of conservation biologists thought needed fixing. Together, they formed the San Juan Islands Western Bluebird Reintroduction Project.

“There are always challenges in restoring a species to an ecosystem; you can’t just release birds and hope they stay. You have to consider what made them leave in the first place and remedy that. Otherwise you will be doomed to failure,” said Bob Altman, project leader with American Bird Conservancy, one of the coalition partners along with the Fort Lewis military base, Ecostudies Institute, San Juan Preservation Trust, San Juan Islands Audubon Society, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and The Nature Conservancy of Washington.

So the biologists erected nest boxes to compensate for the lost tree cavities – 600 in all, some made by schoolchildren with the Friday Harbor Elementary School Winter Enrichment Program, some by inmates in the Washington Department of Corrections’ Sustainable Prisons Project, others by local volunteers.

The San Juan Preservation Trust also purchased 120 acres of key bluebird habitat in the San Juan Valley to ensure a refuge for the birds long into the future.

Over five years, biologists have released almost 50 pairs of bluebirds on the islands, most caught at Fort Lewis, where the bird has thrived. Some have stayed and bred, producing over 200 fledglings during the five years of the project. This



year, 15 pairs successfully raised 74 young, providing real hope that the Western Bluebirds of the San Juan Islands are back for good.

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For more information on the Western Bluebird Reintroduction project, including a short video, visit American Bird Conservancy’s website at www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/domestic/western_bluebird.html.