

Preserving pieces of Texas

To keep their environmentally sensitive acreage pristine for future generations, owners turn to land trusts

Story by Ed Crowell

WHEN MELANIE PAVLAS can get away from paperwork at her small upstairs office on Main Street in Bastrop, she heads for the green part of her job amid rolling hills, prairies and riverfront trails.

As executive director of Pines and Prairies Land Trust, Pavlas is responsible for ownership and management of three nature preserves totaling more than 1,000 acres. At least once a year she visits seven privately owned farms and ranches in the Bluebonnet region to consult with landowners about how they're protecting their land under conservation easements held by the trust.

Founded as a nonprofit in 2001, Pines and Prairies operates in all of Bastrop, Caldwell, Fayette and Lee counties and in eastern Travis County.

Thirty-three other land trusts in Texas are chartered for similar work in specific eco-regions or statewide. Across the United States, 1,363 land trusts are intended to protect environmentally sensitive properties of all kinds, according to the most recent National Land Trust Census released in 2016.

Amid the forests, plains, deserts, mountains and beaches of Texas, 1.7 million acres are permanently protected by land trust ownership or conservation easements agreed to by landowners. No housing developments, shopping centers, gas stations or oil wells can ever be put on these lands.

Continued on page 20

Sarah Beal photo



Leigh Ann Moran photo





Melanie Pavlas, above, hikes with her dogs — poodle Ziggy, terrier Snoopy and big mastiff Clementine — at the Colorado River Refuge on the southeast side of Bastrop. This is the only refuge of Pines and Prairies Land Trust open daily to the public. At left, the sun rises over the Pecore Farm conservation easement in Fayette County, which includes 24 acres of never-plowed blackland prairie.



LAND TRUSTS

Land trusts are nonprofit organizations with a mission to conserve land and water. Such trusts began working in Texas in the 1960s and expanded in the 1990s. Today, more than 30 land trusts operate in Texas. They acquire parks and protected areas, own and manage nature preserves, and arrange conservation easements on private lands.

According to the Texas Land Trust Council, conservation acreage in or near the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative service area (including preserves owned by land trusts and private land under easements) includes:

Travis County — 41,969 acres
Bastrop County — 2,409 acres
Williamson County — 2,224 acres
Fayette County — 1,717 acres

Washington County — 523 acres
Lee County — 493 acres
Caldwell County — 479 acres

Read more about conservation easements, page 22



The sole portion of the Pines and Prairies Land Trust open daily to the public, the Colorado River Refuge near Bastrop is home to a variety of wildlife. A trailhead sign illustrates the birds a visitor might spot on the river's banks.



Continued from page 18

That may seem like a lot of off-limits acreage, but consider that Texas spans nearly 172 million acres. Less than 6 percent of the land is public and managed by local, state or federal governments.

The Pines and Prairies Land Trust owns and maintains three preserves — Yegua Knobbs near McDade, the Billig Ranch near Paige and the Colorado River Refuge on the east side of Bastrop. Only the river refuge is open daily to the public. Nature group events and volunteer opportunities are available at all the preserves by contacting the trust at pplt.org/volunteer.

Pavlas, formerly a wildlife biologist with the Lower Colorado River Authority, has headed Pines and Prairies for eight years. At LCRA, she was involved in studies of the black-capped vireo, then an endangered bird species protected by thousands of acres of managed habitat land in Central Texas.

At Pines and Prairies, Pavlas is assisted by a dozen volunteers, many of them certified master naturalists, who work at the preserves. At conservation easement sites such as Pecore Farm, a grasslands and blackland prairie property near Fayetteville, “we depend on landowners to maintain their own properties. But we consult with them and do yearly visits to each place,” she said.

No new preserve acquisitions are on the horizon. “Our strategy is directed

more at doing new easements that landowners might donate to us. The growth of our area is definitely a factor in trying to compete with the development offers that landowners get.”

About 1,500 acres across the Pines and Prairies service area are now under easements that continue in perpetuity, even if the property is sold.

The benefit of a conservation easement to a landowner, in addition to assistance in protecting the land, water and wildlife, is a lower tax bill. Property valuation is greatly reduced once an easement prohibiting future development is signed.

COLORADO RIVER REFUGE

This is the smallest property owned by the Pines and Prairies Land Trust. It is in Bastrop upstream of the Tahitian Village golf course and a Bastrop County boat launch park. But on the three miles of riverfront trails winding through the 65-acre Colorado River Refuge, visitors can feel as if the river environment hasn't changed in a century.

Bald cypress tower over the shoreline. Tall grasses hug the hillsides. Small streams flow to the river in gullies bridged by the trail. Songbirds hide in the brambles and thick woods. And post-oak savannahs and meadowlands spread through the upland parts of the refuge.

The refuge also offers a half-mile wheelchair-accessible paved path, called

the Cottonwood Kings Trail. Three parking areas provide access to the trails (a map is available on the land trust's website at pplt.org/preserves).

The trust acquired the refuge in 2004. Visitors can turn south onto either Lovers Lane or Tahitian Drive from eastbound Texas 71 and drive about four miles to reach 315 Riverside Drive and refuge parking.

YEGUA KNOBBS PRESERVE

On the drive from Bastrop to the land trust's Yegua Knobbs Preserve, Pavlas noted that when she was in high school in Austin she knew the family that owned the property. It was used for recreation and leased for cattle grazing. There is no house on the 302 acres.

Pines and Prairies bought Yegua Knobbs in 2004 to protect the unusual geology, natural habitats and historical significance of the area. (Yegua is the Spanish name for mare.)

The knobbs are a scattered anomaly of seven sandstone mesas that reach up to 750 feet above sea level. Two of the mesas are on the preserve, which is mostly in Lee County but also includes some Bastrop County land.

Settlers moved into the area before the Civil War, locating their farms and ranches along creeks and springs. The nearby town of McDade was established in 1869 as a railroad shipping depot for cotton. It unfortunately also became a

target for cattle rustlers and robbers who hid amid the knobbs and dense woods.

In 1875, a series of killings by outlaws began and vigilantes retaliated with hangings. The violence continued until late 1883, when a deputy sheriff was killed and seven suspected outlaws were hanged. A gunfight in front of the McDade saloon on Christmas Day that year left three more dead.

Historians note that despite the rough-and-tumble past, a large pottery-making company and a lignite coal mining operation flourished in the area in the decades that followed. At the time of the Yegua Knobbs purchase, a strip-mining operation near Elgin was interested in expanding to the area. Pavlas said that helped spur the trust's acquisition.

Pavlas unlocked a couple of gates to the preserve earlier this year and drove to the base of a grassy slope. Atop the hillside, archaeologist Cristin Embree and a couple of volunteers were digging 3-foot-deep test holes in the ground. They found red clay beneath the fine sandy loam topsoil, which could indicate this land was used by brickmakers and potters.

"The famous Austin sculptor Elisabet Ney got clay from this region for her work," Embree said. Some of the earliest manufacturing in Texas after statehood in 1845 happened around McDade with brickmaking, she said.

"Settlers built what were called 'groundhog' kilns that were mostly buried in small hillsides. If we find one, we'll carefully excavate enough to record its size and location and then bury it again to protect it from looting."



Yegua Knobbs, at left, is near McDade. It includes a marshy, spring-fed bog seen as potential habitat for the endangered Houston toad.



Elisabet Ney, the famous Austin sculptor, found clay for her work around the area now protected by the Yegua Knobbs Preserve. Her statues of Texas heroes can be found in the Texas and U.S. capitols.

If an archaeology record is established, the site will be recorded as a State Antiquities Landmark, she said. The exact location will not be available to the public to protect it from vandalism or destruction.

Pavlas walked along an old farm road, pointing out natural features of the preserve. A marshy, spring-fed bog surrounded by grass and mud is where the endangered Houston toad might be found someday. "That's the perfect kind of habitat that the toad likes," she said. "So we keep looking for one."

The burrowing toad's largest known population in Texas is in nearby Bastrop

County. What Pavlas does not want to see is more evidence of wild hogs. The preserve is pocketed with areas where natural vegetation has been uprooted by the voracious animals. The land trust employs hog trappers to keep destruction down.

Pavlas pointed out stands of 40-year-old loblolly pines. "These trees are going to keep thriving here because they are protected forever," she said.

BILLIG RANCH

Billig Ranch, about 10 miles south of Yegua Knobbs, was gifted to the land trust in 2008 by Erwin Billig. The land is 677 acres of post oak savannah that was once a working ranch.

The trust manages the land for Houston toad and monarch butterfly habitats. Several pastures also have been replanted with native prairie grasses.

Although the land is not open to the public, in September 2019, Pines and

Continued on page 22



From right, archaeologist Cristin Embree and volunteers Paula Weisskopf and Sunnie Gonzales dig and sift for red clay beneath the fine sandy loam topsoil of Yegua Knobbs Preserve. Clay could indicate that section of land was used by brickmakers and potters.

Continued from page 21

Prairies hosted a one-day open preserve day at Billig. About 30 people came for a guided birding hike and a walk around the property to look at grasslands restoration. Other similar events are being planned.

Pavlas, who visits Billig Ranch often, said one land management goal there is to show that agriculture can co-exist with native ecology. A small number of cattle are likely to be reintroduced at Billig now that the prairie land has been restored. A tenant lives in the old ranch house on the property and would move the cattle around pastures to prevent overgrazing.

Erwin Billig “was a forward-thinking rancher who wanted to protect the land,” Pavlas said. “It was a big dream of his to restore the entire ranch to native prairie.” Billig died in 2013.

PECORE FARM CONSERVATION EASEMENT

Albert “Bert” Pecore was a successful 30-year-old Houston architect in 1955 when he started looking for a getaway place in the country. A friend mentioned a farm for sale in Fayette County.

What Pecore found were 85 acres with “little grass and two hackberry trees near the house, broken down pens and outbuildings, a small barn and an abandoned house built in 1857.” He saw the land’s potential, and bought it.

A few years later, he bought adjacent land, expanding the farm to a total of 194 acres. He designed and built a small white house on stilts that resembled the Galveston homes near where he kept a sailboat. And he bought 25 head of cattle because that’s what many of his neighbors did – grow grass to be eaten by cows to sell at market.

Pecore died in 2019. His step-daughter Leigh Ann Moran, who lives in Houston, visits the farm most weekends with her mother, Wilda Pecore.

Moran loves what the property eventually became – a model for land conservation. In 2016, the Pecores received a Lone Star Land Steward Award from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department for turning their farm

Conservation easements

Conservation easements are legal agreements between landowners and the “holder” of the easement. Landowners restrict certain uses of the property to protect natural, productive or cultural features. A government entity or qualified conservation organization holds the conservation easement. Landowners keep the property’s title and determine how the land can and cannot be used.

into a showcase of native grasses and protected soil, including 24 acres of never-plowed blackland prairie.

“What Bert learned over time is that conservation is easy,” Moran said. “You just leave nature alone, manage the invasive growth, and then the native grasses and flowering plants will come back.”

The Pecores signed a conservation easement in 2007 with Pines and Prairies Land Trust for the entire farm. The land will always be subject to the legal agreement’s provisions for natural resources management and prohibition of residential or commercial development.

What the Pecores accomplished under the easement is a lush landscape of five ponds and 10 fenced sections with a wide variety of grasses, plants and colorful waist-high flowers. It didn’t look that way in earlier decades when Bert planted only coastal Bermuda grass for his cows. But he eventually realized how detrimental cattle can be

to the land, compacting soil and eating grasses down so far that recovery is difficult.

Moran showed off the variety of growth in each pasture now and a section the Pecores called their nursery.

This is where they seeded and nurtured native grasses such as Eastern gamagrass, Yellow Indiangrass and little and big bluestem for transplanting. When mature, the grasses form tall, water-retaining bunches above natural carpets of clover and low, broad-leaf flowering plants.

Early this summer, 3-foot American basket-flowers with hand-size lavender crowns spread like a spectacular sunset over fields.

“We never planted any of these. The seeds just blew in from somewhere and grew because we were keeping the cows off this field,” Moran said.

She stopped in another section amid tangles of low-growing plants in a 6- to 8-inch deep green blanket over the soil.

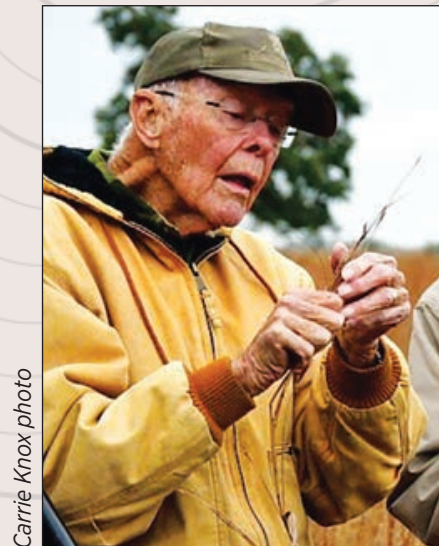
“Just feel the ground here. It’s soft and cool and damp,” she said, bringing up a handful of moist, black dirt from beneath the plants. “There’s no dry, cracked earth on this place because we let nature keep it covered.”

Neither Moran nor her three stepbrothers, all of whom will inherit Pecore Farm, are planning to move there or work the land. The property likely will be sold, she said.

What won’t change is the conservation easement and annual consultation visits by Pines and Prairies Land Trust. That oversight will continue no matter who owns the property.

As Bert Pecore said when given the 2016 award for his work on the farm: “We never really own the land. We are simply stewards for a time.”

Find out about open preserve days and other events at pplt.org. ■



Carrie Knox photo

Albert ‘Bert’ Pecore identifies a species of grass on the conservation easement he helped establish. Pecore died in 2019.