

Wetlands Conservation Assistance and Programs

On Earth Day 2004, President George W. Bush announced a new strategy for increasing wetlands acres and quality. He established an aggressive new national goal—moving beyond the “no net loss” of wetlands to have an overall increase of wetlands each year. The President’s goal is to create, improve, and protect at least three million wetland acres over the next five years.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offers the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) to improve the general environment of the country and to help achieve the national goal of increasing wetland acres. WRP is a voluntary conservation easement program offering landowners the opportunity to restore degraded wetlands on their property. Of particular interest is restoring those wetlands which have been converted to agricultural use. Through the WRP program, the NRCS provides technical and financial support to help landowners with their wetland restoration efforts.

Conservation practices applied through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) programs can also help improve or restore wetland functions and values.

Help for enhancing or restoring wetlands is available for any interested Texas landowner or group that wants to help to improve a wetland area. NRCS has offices in almost every county, with specialists trained in identifying wetlands and helping create management plans for them. The NRCS works in partnership with other agencies, tribes, local government and the private sector to protect and restore wetlands.

For more information on the NRCS conservation assistance and programs, visit the NRCS Texas website at www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov.

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WETLANDS

IN THE TEXAS BLACKLAND PRAIRIE

What is a wetland?

A wetland is the area that links land and water and has its own unique soil, plant, and animal communities. They are important to the health of our water and wildlife resources. Wetlands are areas that have, at least periodically, water-logged soils. They may, or may not, be covered by shallow water for part of the year. As a result, the plant community occurring on wetlands is dominated by species of plants that are adapted to conditions where there are extended periods of the year when the soil is saturated by water and deficient of oxygen.

The term wetland is often synonymous with swamps, marshes and bogs. But many of the nation’s wetlands are areas that are only seasonally saturated, ponded or flooded. During much of the year, these seasonal wetlands might not be easily recognized as a wetland. Such seasonal wetlands are commonly found in floodplains, slight depressions in uplands, and hillside seeps. The land use of wetlands might be cropland, rangeland, pasture, woodland or forestland, while many wetlands still support native wetland plant communities. Each has its own habitat values for wildlife.

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Wetland function and values

Wetlands are important because they provide numerous beneficial services for humans, animals and the environment. Some of the benefits include:

Reduced flooding

Due to location within the landscape, wetlands function like natural sponges, storing water and releasing it slowly. The temporary storage reduces peak water runoff and allows for ground water recharge. The ability of wetlands to store floodwaters reduces the risk of costly property damage and loss of life.

Increased water quality

The cleansing power of wetlands provides natural pollution control. Wetland plants and soils have the capacity to absorb and filter pollutants ranging from pesticides to animal wastes. In healthy watersheds, sediments which would potentially clog our streams, rivers, and estuaries are filtered by wetland ecosystems.

Plant and animal habitat

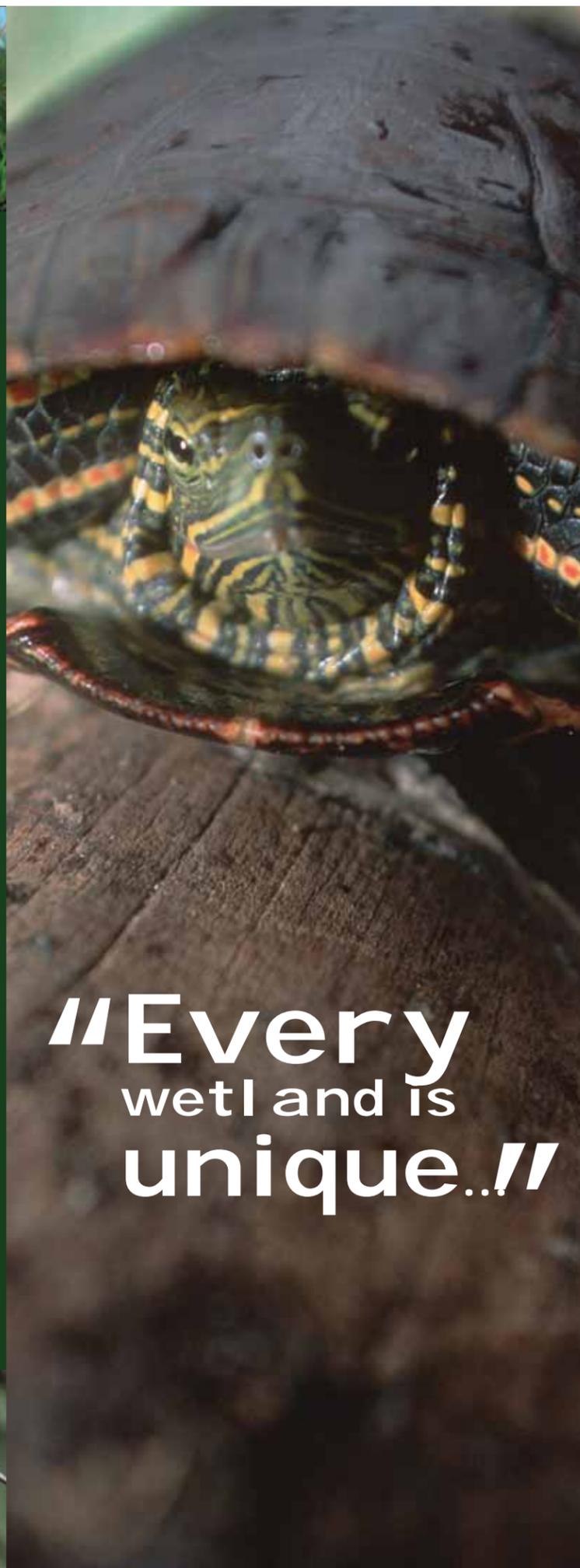
Many wildlife species are dependent on wetlands for their breeding, nesting, or feeding habitat. Waterfowl, wading birds, and shore birds are the best known wetland dependent wildlife. Wetland also provide habitat for many other wildlife species: deer, turkey, and squirrels. Equally important are many of our indigenous and/or rare amphibians found in this land form. Additionally, some of our nation's rare plants are found in wetlands.

Reduced soil erosion

Wetlands adjacent to water bodies protect against erosion by absorbing the force of waves and currents by the anchoring of plant roots to hold the soil place.

Personal Enjoyment

Wetlands are an ideal place to hunt, fish, canoe, view wildlife, take photographs or just relax and enjoy nature. They also make wonderful outdoor classrooms for people of all ages.



“Every wetland is unique..!”



What can you expect to see in a wetland?

Wetlands are unique, and their type, size and function vary. Wetlands also change over time and may function differently from year to year or season to season. These are very dynamic ecosystems.

Plants

Wetland plants contribute to the earth's biodiversity and provide food and shelter for many animal species at critical times during their life cycles. Some common plants that one might see in a wetland in the Blackland Prairie Area include:

Trees: black willow, green ash, cedar elm, and hackberry

Shrubs: buttonbush, roughleaf dogwood, coral berry, and swamp privet

Grasses: switchgrass, eastern gamagrass, broomsedge bluestem, cattail, and Indian grass

Sedges and Rushes: bulrush, spike sedge, flat sedge, and soft rush

Forbs: arrowhead, sumpweed, asters, cocklebur, coneflower, and curly dock

Animals

Many animals spend their whole lives in wetlands; for others, wetlands are critical habitat for feeding, breeding, resting, nesting, escape cover or travel corridors. Different types of animals can be seen during different seasons of the year. Some animals that one might see at a wetland in the Blackland Prairie area include:

1. Beaver
2. Common snipe
3. Great blue heron
4. Yellow-crowned night heron
5. Cricket frog
6. Leopard frog
7. White-tailed deer
8. Turkey
9. Squirrel
10. Egrets

