

Attwater's Prairie-chicken Recovery Program

Questions and Answers

What is an Attwater's prairie-chicken?

A chicken-sized bird that inhabits native coastal prairie habitat. Actually a grouse, this bird was once very numerous throughout coastal grasslands of Texas and southwest Louisiana. Although an estimated 1 million Attwater's prairie-chickens existed over a century ago, fewer than 50 remain in the wild today.

Why did Attwater's prairie-chicken numbers decline?

Like many endangered species, the long-term decline of Attwater's prairie-chickens is due to habitat loss. Today, less than 1% of the once expansive coastal prairies that the Attwater's call home remain in relatively pristine condition. As the prairie became more fragmented, catastrophic weather, parasites, disease, inbreeding, fire ants, and other factors increased their effects on prairie-chicken populations.

What is being done to help them out?

Immediate intervention in the short-term is needed in the short-term to prevent the impending extinction of this critically imperilled bird. To that end, an aggressive captive-breeding program is underway to provide birds for release into the wild to bolster dangerously small populations. A long-term solution will require strategic restoration of prairie habitat within the prairie-chicken's historic range. This restoration will be accomplished through a combination of partnerships (several already underway) with willing landowners (See *Safe Harbor/HCP for the Gulf Coast Prairies of Texas*). *It must be stressed that all recovery activities potentially affecting private landowners will be undertaken only with the full consent of those landowners.*

Is there a recovery plan and a recovery team?

Yes. A multi-stakeholder recovery team has been appointed that is composed of university researchers, state and federal agency representatives, conservation organizations, captive breeding facilities, and landowner representatives. The final recovery plan, developed by the recovery team and approved by the Fish and Wildlife Service, was revised in 1993 and lists the strategies necessary to recover the species.

Why is the Attwater's prairie-chicken important?

Biologically speaking, the Attwater's prairie-chicken is an indicator of the health of the environment it inhabits. Specifically, it indicates that the coastal prairie ecosystem is not doing well. Although the loss of this species or the coastal prairie ecosystem may not impact the average person today, their loss will be added to the many other systems already affected or threatened by humans.

From an economic standpoint, eco-tourism is rapidly becoming a multi-billion dollar industry in Texas. Visitors from all over the world come to the Attwater Prairie-chicken National Wildlife Refuge specifically to view prairie-chickens. In the process, they stay in local motels, fuel their cars at local gas stations, eat at local restaurants - all of which pumps money into local economies.

What is the public's attitudes toward the Attwater's prairie-chicken recovery program?

In general, the public's attitude is very supportive of these efforts. Tourists visiting the Refuge to view prairie-chickens are increasing and support the restoration efforts. Public events

devoted to the prairie-chicken have been very well attended. For example, the sixth annual Attwater's Prairie-chicken Festival sponsored by the community of Eagle Lake, Texas and APC NWR will be held April 7 - 9, 2000. One of the purposes of this festival is to raise the public's awareness of this critically endangered species.

How important is captive-rearing and release to recovery of the Attwater's prairie-chicken?

Current populations (less than 50 total, distributed among two widely separated areas) are almost certainly below minimally viable levels over the long-term. Computer simulations suggest that release of captive-reared birds is essential to averting the immediate extinction threat facing this critically endangered species. Having birds in a captive setting also prevents the possible extinction of the species due to a disease outbreak or extreme weather that could severely affect the wild population.

Who is involved in the captive breeding/release program?

This effort has been a shining example of cooperation among several organizations. Breeding facilities include the Houston Zoo, Fossil Rim Wildlife Center, San Antonio Zoo, Texas A&M University, Sea World of Texas, and the Abilene Zoo. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and The Nature Conservancy of Texas have provided financial and logistical support. Other groups providing support include Boy Scout troops #1001 (Rosenberg, TX) and #261 (Friendswood, TX), Adopt-A-Prairie-chicken donors, and the Tom Waddell Outdoor Nature Club, to name a few.

How is this program funded?

Funding for this program has been provided by Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act, Challenge Cost-Share Agreements, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service contracts, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department funds, conservation foundations, and private donations through the *Adopt-A-Prairie-chicken* program.

How many captive Attwater's prairie-chickens are there?

Approximately 100 Attwater's prairie-chickens are currently being held in breeding facilities. These individuals are used as breeding stock in order to produce additional young for release into the wild.

What are some of the challenges to raising these birds in captivity?

Captive breeding endangered species can be a challenging task since the zoo managers want to ensure that any losses or other negative effects to the population are kept to a minimum. Regular health checks help zoo managers monitor individuals. Ensuring that the birds have the right setting, including the diet, size of enclosure, and environmental conditions for the birds to breed, can be very challenging task. Any captive breeding program is susceptible to disease that could affect the entire population. Texas A&M University is continuing research on the reticuloendotheliosis virus (REV), a deadly virus that attacks the bird's immune system. Pinpointing the source of the disease and how it is transmitted are major questions that need to be answered to assist captive breeding efforts.

Where will these birds be released?

A two-phase approach will be used. First, existing populations will be supplemented near the Attwater Prairie-chicken NWR in Austin and Colorado Counties and the Galveston Bay Prairie Preserve in Galveston County. Phase two will involve release of birds into unoccupied habitats within their historic range. Sites currently under consideration for phase two include the Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge (Brazoria County, TX), the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge (Aransas County), and the Mad Island Preserve (Matagorda County) as well as private lands when feasible. All releases will involve only willing participants.

What is the status of the releases thus far?

A total of 167 Attwater's prairie-chickens have been released into the wild since 1995 (an average of 41 per year) at the Attwater Prairie-chicken NWR, Colorado County and Nature Conservancy of Texas' Galveston Bay Prairie Preserve, Galveston County. One hundred birds will be released in 1999. Survival of released captive-reared birds to the following breeding season has been better than expected (45% average), providing realistic prospects for restoration of diminished populations.

When will releases occur on areas other than the Attwater Prairie-chicken NWR or the Galveston Bay Prairie Preserve?

It is hard to say. The goal of the release program is to supplement existing populations in imminent danger of extinction first. This also depends on the number of birds produced in captivity to be released. It may take several years to stabilize the populations at the Attwater Prairie-chicken NWR and Galveston Bay Preserve.

How will releasing these birds, which are protected under the Endangered Species Act, affect landowners?

Releases will be conducted so as to minimize regulatory impacts to local landowners. Several 'tools' are available to accomplish this objective, including **Safe Harbor Agreements** (See *Safe Harbor/HCP for the Gulf Coast Prairie of Texas*). This program encourages restoration, conservation, and/or enhancement of prairie habitats while providing a "safe harbor" from future liabilities under the Endangered Species Act.

Where did the Attwater's prairie-chicken get its name

Henry Philemon Attwater (1854-1931) was born in Brighton, England and emigrated to Canada when he was 19. After collecting trips to the Rio Grande he eventually moved to Texas and between 1884-1885, supervised the Texas natural history exhibit at the World's Fair in New Orleans. An amateur naturalist for most of his life, including his retirement, he contributed to the knowledge and conservation of birds in southern Texas. Four small mammals are also named in his honor.

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