

# Laguna Madre

## *A New Day... Un Nuevo Dia*

*“The fact that the President, George Bush’s first foreign visit has our country as its destination is a clear message of the interest his administration places on strengthening links with Mexico.”*

**President Vicente Fox, Mexico**

*“We are welcoming a new day in the relationship between America and Mexico. Each nation has a new President, and a new perspective. Geography has made us neighbors; cooperation and respect will make us partners.”*

**President George W. Bush, U.S.**

**The United States and Mexico share a 2,235-mile border and a long yet little known history of wildlife conservation. As early as 1936, wildlife managers from both countries have reached across the way to each other and have been quietly conserving the wildlife and wild places of the border region.**

**Story Ideas:** Ocelot tracking, birdwatching, and working with local Mexican communities

**Where:** Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Texas, U.S., and Tamaulipas, Mexico

**When:** Early November

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### **A Biological Corridor**

The Laguna Madre stretches 277 miles from Corpus Christi, Texas, to Rio Soto la Marina, Tamaulipas, with many other communities in between. Three decades of farming with agrochemicals has led to soil and water contamination. Recent industrial developments,

especially maquiladoras on the Mexican side, have also caused pollution. And many shrimpers are using techniques that destroy seagrass beds, an important wintering habitat for waterfowl. In response, conservationists on the U.S. side have developed a plan to create a Laguna Madre biological corridor from the Rio Grande delta to the Falcon dam. This would benefit all the wildlife in the area, including the endangered ocelot and the myriad of birds that make this part of the world a favorite of birders. Conservationists on the Mexican side are interested in mirroring this biological corridor. A start is being made by a Mexican grassroots group, the Comité Femenil para la Protección del Medio Ambiente en Río Bravo, Tamaulipas. Comprised of 30



professional women, this group, with a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is working to restore a slough across the border from the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge. The slough represents the only large parcel of undeveloped land near their community.

### Ocelots

“We trap them, take measurements, make sure they are healthy,” says Stephen Labuda, refuge manager at the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Using radio collars, the refuge staff keeps track of its ocelots. This small wildcat is recognized as endangered by both Mexico and the U.S. In the U.S., only 80 ocelots remain, all of them on the Texas-side of the Laguna Madre ecosystem. Of those, 35 are found at the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Due to the small size of the refuge’s ocelot population, inbreeding is a concern. To diversify the gene pool, Labuda forged a partnership with the Mexican State of Tamaulipas, where ocelots are more numerous. “How many are over there isn’t clear,” he says, but Labuda is offering to help Mexican biologists conduct a survey, after which he hopes to negotiate the transfer of some ocelots from Mexico to the refuge.

### Birds

Mark Conway, a teacher from Harlingen High School, Texas, volunteers at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, periodically catching and banding birds. Warblers, orioles, tanagers, and vireos...more than 400 species of birds can be found in the Laguna Madre, where seagrass beds feed nearly one million redhead ducks—a full 80 percent of the species’ population—and also provide the best remaining wintering habitat for the endangered piping plover. The Texas-side of the Laguna Madre is famous among birdwatchers worldwide, hosting about 700,000 binocular-toting tourists a year. The communities of the Rio Grande Valley benefit from these visitors to the tune of \$100 million

annually. Across the border, rancher Jorge Martinez is proving that the Mexican side is also a birdwatcher’s paradise. He is welcoming birders to his estate, El Rancho Rincon de Anacahuillas, where the Martinez family has practiced sustainable ranching for generations. As a result, the ranch is one of the most pristine remnants of the Laguna Madre ecosystem. Martinez hosts a steady stream of birders, proudly regaling them with amazing avian displays. His success has inspired his neighbors to consider the tourism potential of their ranches, as well.

### Fishing for Solutions

“In Mexico, sustainable development is a top conservation priority,” says Miguel Angel Cruz of Mexican conservation group Pronatura Noreste. “And in La Pesca, we are setting the example.” La Pesca is one of the fishing communities where Pronatura, with a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is realizing success. In the coastal communities of Mexico’s State of Tamaulipas, many impoverished families rely on shrimping to make a living. But some shrimping practices, such as dragging nets with lead sinkers along the estuary bed, damage the seagrasses that are vital to many of the birds of the Laguna Madre, and also adversely impact many aquatic species that perish in the nets as bycatch. Pronatura works with the shrimpers to devise better fishing techniques, such as net traps especially designed for shrimp. At La Pesca, Pronatura is also promoting ecotourism activities, such as sport fishing and birdwatching, which are expected to provide economic benefits to the community. In some cases, families are finding these opportunities more lucrative than shrimping and are hanging up their nets in favor of ecotourism. Pronatura hopes to repeat this success in the town of Mezquital further north, where destructive shrimping practices are still being used and the condition of the coastal environment stands in stark contrast to that of La Pesca.

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**  
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