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## NEW PRESERVE PROTECTS RARE HABITATS IN RIO GRANDE VALLEY

The Lower Rio Grande Valley is one of the fastest growing areas in the country, with a unique culture. Unfortunately, little is left of the Valley's natural ecology, which is unique as well. Most of the Valley was plowed for agriculture decades ago. Most of the few remnants of native habitat are small, and they continue to vanish as subdivisions spread into formerly rural areas. They are used by rare animals and birds which migrate from Mexico to perch in the dry thorn thickets and dense woodlands of subtropical trees and brush.

The area's natural diversity and future quality of life depends on landowners like Pat Ginsbach and his sister and brother-in-law, Christine and Wayne Westphal, who donated land and a conservation easement to NAPA in December 2004.

The new preserve include a mix of brush habitats and ponds which follow the course of a resaca, or former river channel. The preserve contains many of the same habitats as nearby Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, which was an inspiration for Mr. Ginsbach growing up. "Santa Ana always fascinated me when I was a kid. My mom would dump me out there sometimes, to get rid of me I guess," he laughs. "I liked to just wander around."



Cacti grow in the shade of native brush thickets.



Retama flowers and palm trees line a resaca in the Harriet B. Ginsbach Wilderness Area.

The preserve is named the Harriet B. Ginsbach Wilderness Area, honoring Mr. Ginsbach's mother and spelling out the family's intention to maintain the area as an undisturbed "wilderness." Parts of the property were once farmed, but there are also patches of original Valley brush, one of the rarest habitat types in Texas. These areas are impenetrable thickets of shrubs and trees with exotic-sounding names — lotebush, granjeno, ebony, snake-eyes, mesquite, guayacan, brasil, coma, anacua, and prickly pear. Tropical sage grows in these thickets along with pink, white and blue-flowered cacti.

The animal diversity matches the plants. On the first visit by NAPA representatives, we saw spiny lizards, a ribbon snake, and colorful dragonflies; we heard leopard frogs and ducked to avoid a swarm of bees. Shovelers, grebes, and little blue herons flew; chachalacas lurked in the brush and Harris' hawks soared overhead. NAPA member Neil Ford saw 83

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species of birds on a one-day visit in December. Mr. Ginsbach has seen Texas tortoises and indigo snakes on his property — two uncommon “species of concern” — and other rare animals could occur. NAPA plans to contract field scientists in the Valley to inventory the preserve.

The property is owned by the family's farming operation, which grows native palm trees for landscaping and sells palm leaves to churches for use in Easter services. The family began converting their holdings from citrus groves to palms after the freezes of the 1980s. “Other farmers used to tell my dad he was nuts,” Mr. Ginsbach remembers. “Then a few years later (after the 1989 freeze) they were asking, 'Where do you get that palm seed?’” At first they solely supplied nurseries, then Harriet Ginsbach hit on the idea of selling palm leaves as well. Today, the company grows both non-native species and the native Texas sabal palm.

The company bought the easement property in the mid-Nineties to grow palms and also to conserve the native brush. The area includes a field which had been farmed, but its sticky clay soil was not ideal for cultivation. “Palms could grow there, but digging would have been tough, so instead of planting sabals I sat and watched it,” says Mr. Ginsbach. “Brush started coming in.” Now he directs workers to transplant native shrubs that come up in the palm groves to the field. Eventually the field will be native habitat.

The family also donated to NAPA a strip of land along the floodway which contains levees and strips of natural brush. The International Boundary and Water Commission stipulates that the levees must be kept cleared, but Mr. Ginsbach has pledged to maintain them to improve the diversity of these areas, too. He also hopes to control non-native plants, manage the deer herd, and build more wetlands.

Today, Valley towns like McAllen have grown together into a single city. Almost a million people now live in the area. “I moved away, but at the same time this place kind of moved away from me,” says Mr. Ginsbach. “It's getting so populated, it's lost its rural charm. But at least

I'm doing these restoration projects — it's a nice distraction from the other stuff that's going on around here.”



*Found only a few places in Texas, bigtooth ma-*

### **CONSERVATION EASEMENT NEAR MEDINA PRESERVES “LOST” MAPLES**

In 2003, Bob and Darlene Tusch started looking for a weekend place in the Hill Country, focusing on the canyons and streams of the Bandera area. One of the first properties they looked at was owned by NAPA board member Claude Albritton, who made a condition of the sale the donation of a conservation easement.

“At first, we said [the easement] was too new and too unknown for us to jump into it,” says Bob Tusch. “We never knew of one before that. Since it got into our vocabulary, we've found several people who have done conservation easements on their land.”

They didn't actually buy the Albrittons' property; instead, they decided on 120 acres near Medina on FM Highway 337, often considered one of the most scenic roads in Texas. But the easement idea stuck with them. And in December, Bob and Darlene donated a conservation easement on the new property they bought.

The new preserve, part of the former Elam Creek Ranch, includes rugged hills and a mile of Elam Creek, a tributary of the Medina River. It's located in one of the most significant natural

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areas in Texas, the rugged canyons of Bandera and Real counties. The hollows or valleys contain spring-fed creeks and habitat for the golden-cheeked warbler and other songbirds.

An important feature of the ranch are the many old bigtooth maple and chinquapin oak trees, which also occur at nearby Lost Maples State Park. "We didn't know they were here, but we sure saw them when we looked at the property the first time," says Mr. Tusch. The maples, which only grow at a few places in Texas and are known for their fall colors, are relics from the cooler climate of thousands of years ago.

The maples and other uncommon plants could increase with the removal of livestock, though game fencing may be needed to protect them from browsing by white-tailed deer. "We're seeing a lot of little two-inch maples come up," says Mr. Tusch. So far they haven't seen too many deer, perhaps because of the mountain lion that has been in the area.

The Elam family owned the property from the 19th century until the 1980s, when another family bought the place to have a horse ranch (the white board fences around a pasture are the only remnant of that experiment). Except for a residence, outbuildings and pens, the property is unimproved and has a wilderness character.

The aquifer under the property produces two strong wells in addition to seeps which run most of the year. "The water leaks out of the hills where the aquifer is exposed by the valleys," says Mr. Tusch. "An old rancher has said in forty years he never saw (Elam Creek) dry." Last fall at NAPA's invitation, a Texas Commission on Environmental Quality team conducted a biological assessment of Elam Creek and concluded that it was in natural condition.

The couple plan to improve the natural character of the property and perhaps someday donate it to a nonprofit organization or to the state. "We're so happy with what we've got," Mr. Tusch says. "We don't know if we'll move full time, but at the moment we're just enjoying the two locations."



*Will Watt holds a blue indigo snake, a resident of the Double W Ranch.*

**EASEMENT PROTECTS SOUTH TEXAS RANCH WITH COLORFUL HISTORY**

Will Watt has donated a conservation easement on 1,200 acres of his ranch near Three Rivers, the Double W Ranch, with very high wildlife values. The ranch is located about five miles from Choke Canyon Reservoir in a hilly, rolling section of South Texas brush.

Since acquiring the ranch in 2002, Mr. Watt has conducted extensive and costly restoration efforts, including prescribed burning and strip mowing to favor native grasses and create openings in the stands of native brush. Benefits for wildlife have been rapid: more than 50 coveys of quail were counted on the ranch last year. Most important South Texas plants and animals occur on the ranch, including deer, turkeys, songbirds, coyotes, javelinas, and blue indigo snakes, which are popular with ranchers because they sometimes eat rattlesnakes.

The Double W Ranch is made up of numerous subdivided tracts, the result of early land speculation launched in 1906 by Dr. Charles F. Simmons, a local landowner, and humorously re-

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counted in the *Handbook of Texas*: “Earlier in his career, Simmons had owned a patent medicine company in St. Louis that sold Simmons Liver Regulator. Now he employed his considerable talents for salesmanship in an extensive advertising campaign to market his land across the country. Claiming that only ten acres of his Live Oak County land would produce enough vegetables to provide a good living... Simmons convinced several hundred people from Texas and 29 other states to move to the county.” About 550 people lived in the new town at its peak, but when the promised railroad never came through, the town died.

Mr. Watt purchased the ranch from the Herring family, who reassembled the Simmons property in the 1940s. Today the snake-oil salesmen are long gone, but the indigo snakes are still around.

**IN MEMORIAM**

We were saddened by the passing of **Helen Prichard Chitty** on October 10, 2004. Helen died at 84 after a long career as a commercial artist. She loved the nature and culture of east Texas and in particular the woods, creeks and pastures near Hiram, where she grew up. In 2000, she donated her 22-acre property to NAPA as the Prichard Preserve. She was buried at Locust Grove Cemetery in Hiram, a short distance from the land that she loved.

**Dessie Frazier**, who donated her property as the Frazier-Runnels Preserve, passed away in October 2004 at 86 after a full and fascinating life. Miss Dessie grew up on her family’s farm property, which included the land that would be the Frazier-Runnels Preserve. She became one of the first black students to graduate from the University of Texas Medical Center School of Nursing, where she worked for almost forty years. She donated the preserve to NAPA in 2001 to honor her parents and grandparents, who farmed the land beginning before the turn of the century. Miss Dessie was laid to rest in the Rockwall Cemetery, under the tall pine trees adjacent to NAPA’s Catahoula Forest preserve. We honor her memory and we are grateful for her contribution.



Landowner Larry Shelton introduces ecology students from Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches to NAPA’s Grass Lake Preserve.

**PLANNED GIVING OPTIONS  
AVAILABLE TO DONORS**

Twenty years ago, **Ned Fritz** raised funds to purchase NAPA’s first preserve, Catahoula Forest. Now as we celebrate NAPA’s first two decades of success, we are pleased to announce the establishment of NAPA’s Planned Giving Program. This program is intended to assist our donors in making lasting gifts to NAPA that will leave a legacy of land stewardship.

As part of this program, we will provide our members with information about ways to contribute to NAPA while accomplishing long-range financial goals. Please consider joining those members whose gifts and bequests have helped to ensure that NAPA’s vision of conserving private land in Texas will continue to be realized in the future.

**MARK YOUR CALENDARS...**

**April 17: Explore Catahoula Forest Preserve.** Meet at 9:00 a.m. at entrance of Boykin Springs Recreation Area in Angelina National Forest. Bring lunch and plan to hike for 2-3 hours.

**May 28-29: Annual Retreat at Ivy’s Wildlife Refuge.** More details will be mailed to NAPA members in April.

Please bring family and friends to hike and camp at our preserves! For more details, contact NAPA at 512-804-1981 or [napa@texas.net](mailto:napa@texas.net).



*At the Cibolo Creek Preserve, a chipper chews up and spits out exotic privet.*

**PRESERVE NEWS**

**CIBOLO CREEK PRESERVE:** The City of Universal City has signed a lease with NAPA to use parts of the Cibolo Creek Preserve for public recreational enjoyment and will provide signage for hiking and foot trails. In exchange, NAPA has allowed use of part of the property to expand the city’s disc golf course. In February, volunteers and city personnel cleared lanes for the disc golf through wooded areas infested with invasive privet trees (ligustrum). The work is a “win-win” for NAPA and the city because it will open up the area and diversify the habitat while allowing better access.

**GRASS LAKE PRESERVE:** Students in an ecology class at Stephen F. Austin University visited Grass Lake and Naconiche Creek in February, led by **Will Godwin** and landowner **Larry Shelton** who showed them many of the features of the preserve, including beech trees and a golden mouse.

**GUNSIGHT MOUNTAIN RANCH PRESERVE:** Prescribed burning is a tricky business; weather conditions have to be just right. So when the NRCS agent and “burn boss” called owner **Dorothy Mattiza** at 7:30 a.m. and told

her they would be at the ranch at 9:30 to burn, she was ready. Dorothy, her family and friends with help from the Tarpley Volunteer Fire Department burned “black lines” (fire lines), then lit the fire which burned 70 acres of the “high meadow” — pastures which after two wet winters were infested with cedar (Ashe juniper). By noon the burn was complete. Dorothy plans a summer burn for another pasture. For now, the family can enjoy watching the high meadow green up after a successful burn.

**LOS RINCONES.** We are sorry to lose our tenant, **David Kapelle**, who has lived in the house at Los Rincones Preserve for the last year and a half. David painted rooms and stained the outside of the house, managed the property, and participated in work projects organized by the local chapter of Master Naturalists. The chapter is planning more workdays, and NAPA has received funding through the Texas Forest Service to continue caging hardwood trees.

**LOUISE HANES PRESERVE:** NAPA moved ahead with plans to restore the Louise Hanes property near Commerce to its natural state by contracting with **Matt White**, a teacher and prairie naturalist, to reintroduce prairie plants. Only small remnants are left of the diverse and scenic prairies that once covered North Texas. Last fall, Matt collected 20 gallons of seed from nearby native prairie remnants for introduction at the Hanes preserve, enlisting his family to help in drying and cleaning the seed. The plants collected include native sunflowers, blazing star, wild rose, wild indigo, gammagrass, Indiangrass, compass-plant, rattlesnake master, ironweed and prairie parsley — components of the natural prairies that once grew at the tract.

**MCAFEE NATURE PRESERVE:** The McAfee Nature Center has dissolved after achieving a number of accomplishments: raising more than \$50,000 and renovating the house owned by donor **Megan Biesele**, building trails, a gate and other improvements at the property, and most important, bringing students from Woodville schools to enjoy and learn from NAPA’s preserve. Megan and NAPA are now considering the next step for continuing their efforts.

## PROTECTING OUR LAND

More than **three-fourths of all Texans** now live in cities. As our state becomes ever more urbanized and altered, it is important that we continue to conserve the best of Texas' natural landscapes, including forests, wetlands, and prairies.

Please renew your membership to NAPA and consider making an additional donation to help us meet the challenge of preserving land for future generations of Texans to enjoy and appreciate.

NAPA's 73 existing preserves **desperately need** the time and effort of our members to maintain the land and to enhance and restore habitats. **Please contact David Bezanson at 512-804-1981 to get involved with NAPA's preserves in your area!**

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## MEMBERSHIP OR GIFT FORM

To: Natural Area Preservation Association, Inc.  
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\_\_\_ Membership \$30.00

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