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NEW EASEMENT PROTECTS RANCH ADJACENT TO FEDERAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

At 350 acres, the Cow Creek Ranch, one of NAPA's newest acquisitions, is not a small place. But it's also part of a bigger picture.

The owner, Torrance Nicksic, found the property on the last weekend of his search for a tract of scenic Hill Country land that was close to Austin, but not too close. The land he found was a perfect fit — accessible but in a rural area, and completely undeveloped except for old ranch structures.

The entrance of the ranch includes Cow Creek, an unusually clean and natural stream which flows year-round (except maybe last year). Behind the creek, hills and small canyons slope up to a hill with great 360° views, including Lake Travis. Austin is not visible, but the edge of town is only a few miles away.

But perhaps the biggest bonus of the property is what's across the road: nothing. And it's going to stay that way, because the ranch adjoins the federal Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge, established to conserve the songbirds of the Texas Hill Country, especially golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireos. The refuge will someday be more than 45,000 acres in size. So NAPA's conservation easement adjoins what will be always be a large expanse of open, rural and natural land close to one of Texas' largest metropolitan areas.

The ranch has been grazed in the past and small junipers are beginning to regrow around taller live oaks. The small canyons, though usually dry, contain live oak, hackberry, and walnut trees. In the easement, Mr. Nicksic reserved the right to build a couple of houses, leaving most of the property natural. He is open to the possibility of field trips in the future.



View of the Pedernales River from a ranch recently placed under conservation easement.

NAPA ACQUIRES EASEMENTS ADDING TO EXISTING PRESERVES

A welcome trend for NAPA in 2006 was the acquisition of some new conservation easements which are adjacent to preserves already acquired in past years. While preserves of any size have conservation value, larger tracts of land have special benefits for the movement of wildlife, and still more for preventing habitat fragmentation. Being close to people has negative effects for nature, some of which can be obvious — non-native plants that spread from yards, for example — but others that are subtle. The proximity of houses makes prescribed burning difficult, a serious problem for properties which can benefit

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MESSAGE FROM NAPA'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This is my last time writing the newsletter, as I am leaving NAPA to work for The Nature Conservancy in a similar position. I'm very excited about working for the Conservancy, but leaving NAPA is the hardest decision I've ever made.

A land trust is about two things, both of which are implicit in the name — the land that it conserves and the people who entrust their land to it. These two resources are inseparable and make up the strength of the organization. By either measure, NAPA is very strong. In my six years with NAPA, I have split my time between visiting some wonderful natural places in Texas and working with landowners and volunteers who are the nicest people I have ever met. And, I have been lucky enough to work for board members who have treated me like family.

The nice thing about a family, though, is that you can't leave it. I will still be involved with NAPA as a board member and there will be opportunities to work with NAPA in my new job. The Nature Conservancy shares many of NAPA's goals and both organizations work well with private landowners in Texas. Two of NAPA's oldest preserves (Ivy's Wildlife Refuge and Marysee Prairie) were given to NAPA by the Conservancy.

NAPA's importance in conserving land in Texas cannot be overstated. NAPA works statewide, including areas that are not currently served by regional land trusts. NAPA also will accept donations of properties of any size, provided that the land contains examples of natural habitats which are uniquely beneficial to native wildlife. I have been incredibly fortunate to work with an organization which has done so much and is founded on solid principles.

I have also had fun doing it, and I know that my successor in this job will enjoy the challenges and rewards that come with land conservation work.

It is a good time for NAPA — we recently began developing an updated strategic plan. A central part of the plan is to regionalize the membership of our Board to give more participation in preserve oversight to NAPA members in areas of the state where our preserves are located.

Meanwhile, NAPA continues to grow and take on new projects. Several of our recently acquired easements are additions to existing projects to make them more defensible and less fragmented. NAPA's work will continue uninterrupted as we continue to help landowners in protecting natural habitat.

— *David Bezanson*

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can benefit from burning to maintain grasslands or bogs. So there are many reasons why it is desirable to add new acreage to previously conserved areas. In 2005, NAPA was able to do this in several places, thanks to the interest of landowners who came forward with land donations.

An additional ten acres of valuable lakefront was dedicated by **George and Sue Russell** as the Pelican Preserve, located close to the 600 acres of land that the Russells have already conserved. A quiet peninsula in Lake Livingston, where land prices have skyrocketed, the preserve could have been home sites. Instead, it

will be used by animals, including white pelicans and bald eagles (among the most impressive sights in the preserve!).

Don Wood and Jill Bryar Wood placed more of their ranch near Wimberley under conservation easement, bringing the total protected acreage to just under 350 acres — a sizeable tract of habitat in an urbanizing area. The second easement contains more oak-juniper-yaupon savanna and the head of a canyon cloaked in a thick stand of junipers, a quiet natural place.

One of the most dramatic and scenic places NAPA has worked is on the Pedernales River, which flows through bluffs formed of dolomitic

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limestone west of Johnson City. An easement donated by **Larry and Sami Germer** three years ago started the ball rolling for wildlife conservation on the stretch of river. Then in 2006, their downstream neighbors decided to do the same. **Roy and Carolyn Horton** of Knoxville, Tennessee, bought an adjacent ranch after living in Colorado and other places around the country, because they found nowhere they liked more than the Pedernales River. Learning about the Germers' easement, they decided to place their property under easement with NAPA.

At the same time, the owners of the next downstream property, a combination of rugged scenic bluffs and upland ranch land, decided to donate as well. **Elmer and Susan Rosenberger** maintain a cattle operation on part of the ranch and keep the bluffs fenced off, with just a couple of cabins to take advantage of the spectacular views. The three easements ensure that the area around the river will remain predominantly natural — enough to protect wildlife from the threats that come with living close to people.

NEW PRESERVE BUFFERS SCENIC HIGHWAY

You can enjoy one of NAPA's newest preserves without even knowing it — if you happen to drive down scenic State Highway 22, which connects the central Texas towns of Hamilton and Meridian.

A new conservation easement has been donated by **Doris Stevens** on her property, which hugs the highway for more than half a mile — including a steep bluff with dense wooded slopes. The property is located in a rural part of Texas which combines farm and ranch country with limestone breaks and prairies, much like the Hill Country.

Ms. Stevens' husband, the late Joe Stevens, was a longtime Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept. game biologist and was very familiar with the wildlife, land, and landowners of the area. He

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NAPA, PARTNERS CONSERVE PRISTINE HABITAT AT “BEAR SPRINGS BLOSSOM”

Peter and Marianne Bonenberger found the place they call Bear Springs Blossom — an island of old-growth forest and high hills in a canyon in Bandera County — by accident while splitting time between the Hill Country and Germany. They built a house in 1985, and soon realized they would have more neighbors than they wanted. So they bought more adjacent tracts to keep a county road from being built across the ridge. (After the county pressured one owner to sell, she put it in her will that it could only be sold to a neighbor.) Their preserve kept growing piece by piece — they even persuaded friends in Germany to buy a tract.

When 31 acres in the heart of the preserve went on the market, the Bonenbergers' persistence brought in partners to fund its purchase. They wrote a successful proposal to the Meadows Foundation (with technical assistance by the Nature Conservancy) for the acquisition. A condition of the grant was that a conservation easement be donated to NAPA. The total acreage protected around the Bear Springs canyon is up to 125 acres.

Marianne is a former schoolteacher, and the Bonenbergers hope to be effective teachers by example — “In Germany you learn about geology and nature study in second grade,” they point out. Coincidentally, they learned from local naturalists that the geology and vegetation of the Hill Country is similar to an area near their home in Ulm, Germany.



Bandera County canyons seen from the hilltop at Bear Springs Blossom Preserve.

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purchased the property with a state Veterans' Land Board loan because he was impressed with the high quality of its woodlands and wildlife habitat. "We hiked a good bit," recalls Doris Stevens. "We thought about building a little place there where we could go and be really out in the woods, but we never did. Instead, we'd just go up and enjoy it for the day."

The property is still completely undeveloped. A large creek runs under pecan, sycamore, ash, and buckthorn trees. Elsewhere on the preserve, a patch of prairie includes native bluestem and wildflowers, and limestone bluffs form a hollow which is probable habitat for golden-cheeked warblers. In the property's 100 acres are examples of all of the natural features that make north-central Texas unique.



A steep limestone slope and the head of a canyon on Doris Stevens' property.

In 2006 NAPA acquired **three new preserves in South Texas**, all significant and diverse natural sites! Profiles of all three projects will come in the next newsletter.

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At the Bear Springs preserve, the rules of Hill Country ecology seemingly don't apply — Spanish oaks grow as tall as a four-story building, and thickets of young cherry trees are undisturbed by whitetail deer browsing. Madrones, another scarce native tree, sprout everywhere. Peter Bonenberger has noticed that madrone seedlings occur only in the shade of junipers (cedars). Ironically, he says, developers often leave madrone trees but clear all the junipers, another example of why local ecology education is needed. Part of their secret is clearing juniper out of the canyons ("In 1995 we started clearing, and the more we could see, the more beautiful it got," Marianne says) and spreading the mulch to create soil, causing rapid regeneration of native grasses.

As part of their education efforts, the Bonenbergers send email bulletins to their members about environmental topics as well as heading up a local recycling program. A grant from LCRA bought the containers; the couple donate their time to take materials to San Antonio, and the recycling brings some funds back to the organization. For them, it's all part of making a difference in the spectacular part of Texas they have made their adopted home.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS...

Houston Area—Monthly Workdays at Marysee Prairie. Help to maintain a native prairie in the Big Thicket with 268 plant species! First Saturdays of every month. For directions and times, contact Susan Schinke at 936-829-5204.

Kerrville Area—Monthly Workdays at Los Rincones. Join Master Naturalists and NAPA's stewardship director, Kerry Olenick, at one of our oldest preserves. Workdays are usually on the second Tuesday of each month, but dates and times may vary because of conflicts, so RSVP to Kerry at kerryolenick@yahoo.com.

Other field trips will be scheduled in spring 2007. Please sign up for NAPA's email alerts at napa@texas.net for up-to-date information.

PRESERVE NEWS

BRUSHY TOP PRESERVE: With 400 feet of vertical relief, dozens of undisturbed canyons, lush grassland, and spring-fed streams, it was just a matter of time before the unprotected parts of the 3,000-acre Brushy Top Ranch would be developed. Located halfway between Austin and San Antonio, the area around Blanco is expected to grow dramatically in population. It's a nice surprise that the Estates at Brushy Top development has followed a plan of large tracts and greenbelts; and even better when one of the first buyers agreed to donate a conservation easement! **Scott** and **Anna Haire** are protecting two lots which slope steeply down to the largest reservoir on the property, including canyons with oak and cherry trees. This makes a good complement to the two easements that NAPA already holds, limiting subdivision of 1,600 acres of the ranch.

COLORADO CITY NATURAL AREA: In September 2006, representatives from NAPA, Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept., Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the General Land Office, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Lone Wolf Resources met to evaluate prairie and riparian area restoration efforts at the Colorado City preserve. Work in progress includes removal of saltcedar along the Colorado River, planting of native midgrass species on about 30 acres, control of Johnsongrass, reshaping gullies to reduce erosion, and planting native tree seedlings. NAPA's stewardship director **Kerry Olenick** will advise Lone Wolf in '07 on further removal of Johnsongrass and planting 300 saplings along the Colorado River.

ELAM CREEK PRESERVE: This beautiful ranch owned by **Bob and Darlene Tusch** is home to a diverse mixture of hardwoods featuring bigtooth maples. Unfortunately, recruitment of hardwoods is limited due to current deer pressure. To protect young bigtooth maples, chinquapin and Spanish oaks, and walnut trees, Bob Tusch and Kerry Olenick spent a few days cutting juniper limbs to form "cages" which should safeguard seedlings, with the long-term goal of a healthy canyon woodland.

HIGH POINT PRAIRIE PRESERVE: One of the state's first "green developments," Los Esteblos, has moved closer to its final goals, as lots are selling and a few houses are going up amid the woods and prairies under a NAPA easement. Meanwhile, the developer, **John Wood** of Prairie Home Ltd., donated the next phase of conservation easements to NAPA in late 2006. The conserved area currently stands at 625 acres.

RANCHO MADERA: After years of varied success and failures including prairie dog rescues, digging artificial tunnels, and prescribed burns, landowner **Jesse Wood** has successfully introduced a self-sustaining population of black-tailed prairie dogs at his preserve, Rancho Madera near Abilene. This year's use of fire was postponed due to a county burn ban, but he and a friend killed mesquite and enlarged the open area around the dog town. They have also started trapping hogs and hope to do another burn in February to keep the area open and in short grass, the dogs' preferred habitat.

TANGLEWOOD PRAIRIE: In July 2006, NAPA personnel, armed with a chainsaw and a tractor equipped with a shredder, cut back trees, shrubs, and woody vines in the open prairie. This should reduce the accumulated biomass and "open things up" for a flush of wildflowers in the spring.



Personnel from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Lone Wolf Resources walk through a revegetating area of the Colorado City project.

PROTECTING OUR LAND

More than 75 percent of all Texans now live in cities. As our state becomes ever more urbanized, it is crucial that we 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 **84** 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

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