

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory's Site Partner Network:

LINKING THE LAND, BIRDS AND PEOPLE OF THE GULF OF MEXICO

WITH ITS CENTRAL POSITION between the Americas, the Gulf of Mexico is a natural obstacle faced by millions of migratory birds that must either cross or go around it each spring and fall as they travel between their breeding and wintering grounds. The habitats surrounding the Gulf are used by over 800

bird species. About 300 of those species are nearctic-neotropical migrants that rely on these habitats for their survival in order to rest and refuel enroute. The Gulf of Mexico region contains the Hemisphere's most important stopover habitat, but much of it is threatened by urbanization, destructive tourism development, and other land conversion activities.

The Gulf Coast Bird Observatory (GCBO) was founded in 1992 to address declining bird populations through avian research and the protection of Gulf coastal habitat utilized as stopover by migratory songbirds. The Gulf region is shared among three countries—the United States, Mexico, and Cuba—which includes eleven U.S. and Mexican states. To fulfill our mission, the GCBO has established a *Site Partner Network* and pledged to assist the conservation work of organizations and sites throughout this region. This network of sites currently includes 54 locations and 30 partners around the Gulf who are responsible for over 7 million acres of coastal habitat. Fifteen of these partner sites protect Gulf coastal habitat outside the United States—seven in the Yucatan Peninsula, seven in the Mexican provinces of Veracruz and Tamaulipas, and one in western Cuba.

Many of the partner sites are staffed by trained biologists or have scientists carrying out studies at their sites. Other sites have good volunteers, and still others use seasonal assistance for land protection activities. Some of the Network sites are actively involved in environmental education and habitat management, and pass along their knowledge and skills to other partners via the Network listserv. The strength that the GCBO brings to the partnership is to coordinate the partnership network, provide biological information, assist with conservation and management activities, and provide technical assistance in public outreach, scientific research, development and conservation planning.

The GCBO is also involved in assisting site partners directly in their conservation projects and efforts, such as providing funding for private lands conservation efforts, habitat mapping, easements and acquisitions. The GCBO also recognizes the important role of education in accomplishing successful conservation, and we have facilitated training workshops in local communities of the Yucatan Peninsula and developed avian ecology classroom curriculum for students along the upper Texas coast. These educational ventures have been a remarkable success and have generated a spreading enthusiasm for bird conservation.

A new way in which the GCBO is encouraging international cooperation among Gulf coastal conservation organizations is through a Sister-site Partnership Program within the larger network of site partners. Sister-site partnerships are mutually beneficial relationships between two sites with commonly shared features. The birds themselves are shared features, but sometimes there are also similar threats or habitat issues that the two sites can help each other manage. Each sister-site benefits from the other's experiences and resources, which translates into greater efficiency and results. Four of these sister-site partnerships are already functioning to bring about greater conservation impact.

