

## Conserving Land in Texas

By Caleb Clarkson

One thing that Texas is known for is its immense size. It's the largest state in the contiguous United States and covers 171.9 million acres. At twice the size of Germany, the state spans many regions of different geological, biological, and historical importance. However, roughly 95% of the land in Texas is privately owned, a ratio that places it at 6th in the nation. Private land ownership is embedded deep into Texas's history, and many Texans take pride in their independence, self-reliance, and connection to their land.

In states with larger shares of public land, state and federal agencies often coordinate conservation efforts across many tracts of public land. However, in Texas, more conservation responsibilities fall on private landowners. While balancing conservation with the economic demands of a plot of land can be challenging, there are many ways that private land can be used to promote income while also promoting biodiversity.

Texas has many opportunities and resources that help private landowners promote biodiversity. One powerful tool is conservation easements. An easement is a voluntary agreement that a landowner can enter into with conservation-focused land trusts. Easements limit what can be developed on that land in the future, often to protect areas or plots of land with significant biological, cultural, or historical importance. By restricting commercial development, landowners can help prevent habitat fragmentation, a process where continuous stretches of habitat for wildlife are broken apart into isolated segments.

Easements can be flexible, too. Many easements allow the continuation of traditional land use, and some let landowners choose what can be done on the land in the future. What makes conservation easements so powerful is their longevity, as easements are permanent and still apply to land when it is inherited or sold.

In Texas, some tax benefits can come with promoting biodiversity and wildlife on private land, even if you don't have a conservation easement. Texas has many programs that provide tax deductions to those landowners who take steps to support wildlife habitats. Notably, the 1-d-1 Open-Space Agricultural Valuation Program allows properties to be assessed by their agricultural value and value to wildlife instead of their market value, which might significantly reduce the taxes evaluated for the land.

To achieve this, however, landowners must make a wildlife management plan and take steps towards promoting native biodiversity, such as brush control, controlled burns, erosion control, planting supplemental food plots, and more! There are a lot of opportunities where private landowners can make a difference in preserving Texas's beloved native species, while being rewarded for their hard work.

While all the possibilities can be confusing, Texas Parks and Wildlife offers services and technical assistance to landowners who might want to include wildlife management in their future property plans. TPWD even employs special biologists who work with private landowners and private lands!

While conservation in Texas might look drastically different from conservation in other states, private landowners in Texas have a unique opportunity to help shape our state's biological future. Whether it's through easements or small steps towards biodiversity in a wildlife

management plan, Texans can help ensure that their land remains beautiful and healthy for generations to come.

Photo: An Eastern Meadowlark enjoying protected habitat

Photo by Celeste Silling