



# THE CROSTIMBERS AND SOUTHERN TALLGRASS PRAIRIE ECOREGION

*Preserving the last remnants of the fertile Blackland Prairie.*

## conservation profile

### The Barnett Shale

One of the most important geological features of this ecoregion is the Barnett Shale, an underground natural gas field that spans an estimated 5,000 square miles. The Barnett Shale is comprised of extremely dense, low-porous rock that until very recently was impervious to extraction.

However, thanks to advances in technology, what may be the largest onshore gas field in the United States is now accessible to drilling. Seventeen Texas counties have the potential for natural gas exploration or production in the Barnett Shale, making it crucial to the economy of much of East and Northeast Texas.

Exploration of the Barnett Shale is growing at a quickening rate. As such, it is imperative that conservation organizations, landowners and energy companies work cooperatively to protect surface lands and waters above the gas fields while facilitating the continued economic growth and development of an area home to millions of Texans.



Clymer Meadow Preserve (© Rainie Bishop)

America's great tallgrass prairie once extended from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, spanning 14 states and 140 million acres. This undulating ocean of grass was known as the "breadbasket of America" for the ceaseless bounty the rich farmland could produce. Travelers riding side by side on horseback could lose sight of each other in the tall, thick grass that blanketed the terrain.

Between San Antonio and the Flint Hills of Kansas lies a segment of this ecosystem known as the Crosstimbers

and Southern Tallgrass Prairie ecoregion. This is a land of variable soils – sandy loam supporting the crosstimbers and dark calcareous soils which bore the prairie grasses – interspersed with woodlands of oaks and other hardwood trees. It was once, literally, the land where the buffalo roamed and the deer and the antelope played.

The vast majority of this 76,750-square-mile ecoregion is found in Central Oklahoma and North and Central Texas. As such, the two state programs are working cooperatively



Clymer Meadow Preserve (© Lynn McBride)

to save this important landscape and the plants and animals found within it

Within the Lone Star State, the ecoregion is primarily defined by the Blackland and Grand prairies, the Post Oak Savanna and the Eastern and Western Crossttimbers woodlands. The Blackland Prairie once covered more than 12 million acres in Texas and Oklahoma. This diverse and dramatic grassland habitat has been reduced to a mere 5,000 highly fragmented acres today, making it one of the most imperiled ecosystems in North America.

In pre-settlement times, when it was home to Comanche, Caddo, Wichita and other plains Indians tribes, the Blackland Prairie was kept intact by a delicate balance of bison and antelope grazing and natural fire. The remainder of this fire-dependent ecosystem is threatened by large-scale development spreading out from Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio, Austin and other cities.

At risk are numerous bird species, such as the northern harrier, eastern bluebird, red-tailed hawk, cedar waxwing, dickcissel and meadowlark, as well as species of conservation concern such as Henslow's sparrow,

short-eared owl, Smith's longspur, interior least tern, painted bunting, migrant loggerhead shrike and bobwhite quail.

In North Texas, prairie conservation efforts are focused on the 17,586-acre Clymer Meadow Conservation Area. Time and development have transformed this beautiful landscape from an uninterrupted mosaic of grasslands, woodlands and wetlands into patches of disconnected habitat. Nevertheless, Clymer Meadow contains some of the largest and most functional Texas prairie remnants.

The 1,300-acre Clymer Meadow Preserve in Hunt County protects one of the largest and most diverse remaining examples of Blackland Prairie. After an absence of 150 years, bison have been re-introduced to the land and prescribed burning has helped restore the prairie's health. Clymer Meadow Preserve is home to the Conservancy's plant material center, which houses seeds harvested from native plants within the preserve for prairie restoration.

Nearby Cowleech Prairie Preserve protects 86 acres of rare, bottomland meadow wetlands that have never been plowed and Tridens Prairie

Preserve protects nearly 100 more acres of productive grasslands.

Historically, wooded areas – the “crossttimbers” of the ecological description – ranged from dense forest to savanna. These old-growth woodlands didn't produce the kind of timber prized by the logging industry and the steep, harsh terrain made the land beneath ill-suited for agriculture. As a result, centuries-old post oak tracts still stand, remnants of an ancient deciduous forest

These crossttimbers are a key link in the chain of oak forests that extends from Canada to Central America, providing habitat for numerous species of migratory birds such as the cerulean warbler, veery and gray-cheeked thrush.

In both Texas and Oklahoma, the biggest threats to the remaining crossttimbers are suppression of natural fire and the ensuing spread of highly invasive eastern red cedars.

The Nature Conservancy is forging new partnerships with private landowners to protect this crucial ecoregion. Through the use of conservation easements and other land-management tools in the Grand Prairie area, we're expanding the scope of our grassland and prairie conservation efforts. These strategies will be the foundation of our future work to galvanize landowners around the mutually beneficial goal of prairie conservation.

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