

2017 Arkansas State Wildlife Grant Pre-proposal
Southwest Arkansas Blackland Prairie and Pine-Oak Woodland Habitat Restoration

Blackland communities of the Coastal Plain, as well as calcareous prairie and pine-oak woodlands and savanna, will be restored through the application of prescribed fire, and control on invasive species on five Wildlife Management Areas in southwest Arkansas (Rick Evans Grandview, Bois D'Arc, Sulphur River, Ozan, and Hope Upland), Grandview Conservation Education Center, and three adjacent private landowners. These restoration activities address two funding priorities (pine – oak woodlands and native grasslands). At least 15 Arkansas Wildlife Action Plan species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) will benefit from this project's landscape-scale restoration, which will increase the amount of suitable habitat available to SGCN at local (patch size) and regional scales.

SWG Funding Requested: \$55,000 (50%)

Amount and Source of Matching Funds: \$55,000 (50%) (Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and The Nature Conservancy)

Total Project Costs: \$110,000

Project Lead: Clint Harris, The Nature Conservancy, charris@tnc.org ; (903)280-0948

Project Partners: Brad Townsend, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission,
Brad.townsend@agfc.ar.gov; (877)777-5580



NEED: Blackland prairies and pine/oak woodlands were historically abundant in the south-central United States, occurring primarily in northeast and east-central Texas with smaller tracts in southwest Arkansas, northwest Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Before European settlement, there were approximately 12 million acres of this blackland ecosystem, but by 1975, only about one percent (~100,000 acres) remained. In the past 25 years, these remnants have been converted to agricultural fields, urban areas, and other land uses, further reducing the amount of extant blackland prairie. Beyond land conversion, other major threats to blackland remnants include altered fire regimes, the encroachment of invasive non-native and native plant species (e.g., eastern red cedar and white sweet clover), conversion to non-native pasture grasses (e.g., tall fescue and bermuda grass), and habitat fragmentation through development. The Byers/AD Smith Preserve complex, Columbus Prairie Preserve, Rick Evans Grandview are among the highest-quality blackland prairie complexes remaining in the state. Collectively, these sites encompass over 5,000 acres of blackland community types, including prairie and pine-oak woodland.

Grassland-associated birds such as Henslow's sparrow and painted bunting, and woodland birds including Bachman's sparrow and yellow-billed cuckoo have been observed throughout the blackland system.

Fire is the most important ecological process maintaining the distribution, composition, and diversity of blackland prairie and pine-oak woodland communities. Decades of fire suppression have altered the species composition and structure of prairie and pine-oak woodlands throughout the blackland ecosystem. Prairie openings have declined in size due to encroaching woody vegetation, and coupled with grazing, likely facilitated the invasion of eastern red cedar and other woody species. A lack of fire also facilitated woody succession in the pine-oak woodlands, resulting in high stem density and a minimal herbaceous layer.

Because so much of Arkansas's blackland and pine-oak ecosystem has been lost, restoring extant habitat is crucial to increase the number and viability of SGCN. This project builds upon decades of prior strategic work and planning as focus of efforts by various partners within the best remaining remnants concentrated in landscape-scale areas. Restoration of degraded blackland prairie and pine-oak woodlands at these sites within a landscape context will further this long-term effort and benefit at least 15 SGCN.

FUNDING PRIORITIES:

1. Woodlands (Sandhill Oak – Shortleaf Pine Habitat) – habitat management to increase habitat quality (structure and composition) and increase patch size.
2. Native grasslands (Sandhills barrens) - habitat management to increase habitat quality (structure and composition) and increase patch size. Specifically, for Monarch butterflies and other pollinators.
3. Implementation of habitat restoration and management for woodlands and grasslands for the benefit of SGCN grassland and woodland dependent species (see Table 1.).

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES: The purpose of this project is to increase scale of high-quality habitat at regional and local levels across southwest Arkansas to benefit SGCN that use blackland prairie and pine-oak woodland habitat by increasing the size, and logistical and

financial efficiency of prescribed burning by establishing larger burn units and cooperative burn crews, thereby extending ecological benefits well beyond the project period.

This project will restore and improve quality of blackland prairie and pine-oak woodland habitat at the regional and local scale by reintroducing fire, reducing woody encroachment, and invasive species on 5,000 acres across eight sites of southwestern Arkansas using mechanical and chemical methods and prescribed fire, thereby increasing viability of the SGCN that occur there. Project completion will take two years; proposal objectives are:

1) Fire Management Objectives:

- Restore fire to 5,000 acres once within two years, with average 80%-unit coverage.
- Attain moderate overall burn intensity for 70% of the burns.
- Post burn effects monitoring will be conducted after each fire.

2) Invasive Species Control Objectives:

- Conduct invasive species treatment on 100 acres.

Table 1: SGCN that will benefit from this project (20) species known from targeted blackland sites are in bold

anthophorid bee	Northern bobwhite
Bachman’s sparrow	Painted bunting
Brown-headed nuthatch	Prairie warbler
Byssus skipper	Red-headed woodpecker
Chuck-will’s widow	Red milkweed beetle
Diana	Robberfly
Henslow’s sparrow	Sedge wren
Lark sparrow	Texas milkweed beetle
Le Conte’s sparrow	Yellow-billed cuckoo
Migrant loggerhead shrike	Whip-poor-will

LOCATION OF WORK: Project activities will restore eight areas of blackland prairie and pine-oak woodlands in two counties (Hempstead and Miller) of the West Gulf Coastal Plain (Figure 1).

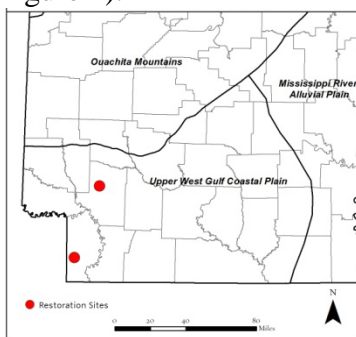


Figure 1: Project restoration sites

APPROACH:

Joint burn crews

Bigger more efficient Units
Year round burning

EXPECTED RESULTS AND BENEFITS: Historically, the blackland prairie and pine-oak region of southwestern Arkansas supported high species diversity in prairie and pine-oak woodland communities. These habitats were greatly degraded or destroyed over the past 150 years, and many of the species are now considered SGCN. This project builds upon prior strategic work and planning: a focus of efforts by various partners within the best remaining remnants concentrated in landscape-scale areas. This project will further efforts to restore 5,000 acres of native prairie and woodland habitat in a landscape context at both regional and local scales that we will maintain in future years, thereby increasing diversity and viability of 15 SGCN known from these eight sites (Table 1). Furthermore, cooperative burning across ownership and agency lines improves efficacy, reduces costs, and leads to better working relationships among partners and landowners.

BUDGET

	SWG Funds	AGFC match funds	Total
Personnel	\$36,648	\$47,000	\$83,648
Travel	\$ 4,000		\$ 4,000
Supplies	\$ 4,000	\$ 8,000	\$12,000
Other	\$ 250		\$250
Sub-total	\$44,898	\$55,000	\$99,898
ID	\$10,102		\$10,102
Total	\$55,000	\$55,000	\$110,000

*TNC’s indirect cost rate in its FY17 NICRA is 22.5%. TNC’s indirect rate is negotiated annually, and TNC will charge indirect at the federally approved rate each year.

ORGANIZATION AND STAFF QUALIFICATIONS:

Clint Harris is the South Arkansas Project Manager and has worked for TNC for over 11 years in habitat and fire restoration. During his decade of fire management, he has reached the qualification of RXB2 and has been on over 80,000 acres of prescribed fire. Clint is also trained in planning and implementing ecological restoration activities that include forest management and invasive species control.

Brad Townsend has worked in the Upper West Gulf Coastal Plains, for the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission since 2003. He received a B.S. degree in Forestry from the University of Arkansas at Monticello in 2003. His work area includes seven counties, and Wildlife Management areas in Southwest Arkansas, this includes Rick Evans Grandview Prairie WMA, the largest contiguous tract of Blackland Prairie in Public Ownership in the nation. He is an Arkansas Registered Forester and a state certified burn boss.

Griffin Park is the Region 5 Wildlife Supervisor and has worked for the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission for 26 years. He has served as a Habitat Biologist and Assistant Supervisor in the region before assuming his current position. He is responsible for managing wildlife and habitat in the seven southwest counties of Arkansas consisting of 2.7 million acres and 18

Wildlife Management Areas. One of these WMAs is Rick Evans Grandview Prairie WMA, the largest contiguous tract of blackland prairie in public ownership in the nation. Griffin graduated from the University of Arkansas at Monticello with a B.S. in Wildlife and Fisheries Biology. He is also an Arkansas Registered Forester.