

White-tailed deer, nearly wiped out by unregulated hunting in the 1900s, are now plentiful.

Texas was down to seven nesting pairs of bald eagles in the 1970s due to DDT and other factors — now there are 200-plus pairs here.

Fewer than 100 brown pelicans existed in the 1970s, and now they're off the endangered species list.

American alligators, with their valuable skin, were upgraded from endangered (1967) to threatened in 20 years.

Aplomado falcons, Kemp's ridley sea turtles, eastern wild turkeys, peregrine falcons and many other Texas animals have come back from near extinction, thanks to the efforts of conservationists.



Eastern meadowlark

# SAVING SPECIES Sooner

THE **RECOVERING AMERICA'S WILDLIFE ACT** COULD HELP PROTECT TEXAS SPECIES IN PERIL.

For decades, Texas biologists have toiled over solutions for species teetering on the brink, with some success. But what if we could help more species, and help them earlier, before their situation becomes dire? The answer has come in the form of proposed bipartisan national legislation — the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, or RAWA — that could bring an estimated \$60 million annually to Texas (out of \$1.3 billion nationally) for natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation initiatives.

by **Louie Bond**

“For Texas, the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act would mean transformative change for people and wildlife, the kind of breakthrough that comes once in a generation,” says Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Executive Director Carter Smith. The agency plans to apply funds to implement the Texas Conservation Action Plan, a statewide “road map” for research, restoration, management and recovery projects addressing Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) and important habitats, along with much-needed fish, wildlife and nature education programs.

Passage of the bill — known formally as HR 4647, sponsored by Reps. Jeff Fortenberry and Debbie Dingell, a Republican and a Democrat — would amend the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act to make supplemental funds available for management of “greatest need” fish and wildlife species determined by the state to be at risk or in need of additional monitoring. Here in Texas, there are more than 1,300 imperiled fish and wildlife species, with another 400 or more at-risk habitat communities.

“This very important and creative legislative initiative provides smart upstream policy to avoid triggering the ‘emergency room procedures’ of the Endangered Species Act,” says bill sponsor Fortenberry. “By effectively putting preventative measures in place, we can now better protect habitat and wildlife from becoming lost or endangered. This will benefit farmers, hunters, anglers, boaters, birders, hikers and other wildlife enthusiasts, as well as the burgeoning field of ecotourism.”

#### BUILDING CONSENSUS

The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies convened a blue-ribbon panel in 2014, including 26 representatives from environmental/recreational groups and business/industry leaders (like Shell Oil President Bruce Culpepper, Bass Pro Shops CEO Johnny Morris, Hess Corp. CEO Greg Hill and more), chaired by Morris and former Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal. The panel reviewed several funding options, and in the end determined that using existing federal revenues from nonrenewable natural resources, such

as oil and gas, was a solution that would benefit both the economy and our fish and wildlife heritage.

In March 2016, they released a plan to provide \$1.3 billion annually from the up to \$13 billion already collected every year from energy and mineral resources leases on federal lands and waters. There would be no new taxes or additional taxes needed to fund the bill.

States would be required to provide a 25 percent match for the funds.

“This legislation is such a positive thing, such a win all the way around,” says Janice Bezanson of Texas Conservation Alliance. “It’s not just about warm fuzzies, it’s good for business. It’s good for the taxpayer and good for wildlife.”

RAWA was introduced in December 2017 and has gained momentum ever since. More than 70 legislators have signed on to co-sponsor the bill, balanced between both political parties. A national coalition led by the Congressional Sportsman’s Foundation and the National Wildlife Federation is working to pass the RAWA bill. Closer to home, the Texas



#### Spot-tailed earless lizard

Spot-tailed earless lizards were common historically, but 10 years ago, populations were found in fewer than 20 counties. Recent research has focused on developing habitat models, using radio telemetry to understand habitat use, monitoring known populations and performing surveys to locate additional populations. RAWA funding could fund more habitat restoration projects on private or public lands to increase connectivity between existing populations.



#### Guadalupe bass

Our official state fish, the Guadalupe bass, is a prized sport fish for Hill Country anglers. The experimental introduction of smallmouth bass to the South Llano River in the late 1950s and other locations in the 1970s resulted in hybrid populations. Since 2010, TPWD biologists have been reintroducing pure Guadalupe bass and helping conserve habitats. The goal is to restore and maintain at least 10 self-sustaining populations of pure Guadalupe bass in Hill Country rivers.



#### Pronghorn

During the past decade in Texas, more than 750 pronghorns have been captured (via helicopter net gun) from healthy populations in the Panhandle and translocated to the Marfa Plateau and the Marathon Basin to boost populations depleted during a historic decline in 2008–2012. With RAWA funding, TPWD can continue these restocking efforts and help landowners improve habitat connectivity by changing fencing to a style more conducive to pronghorn movement and by treating invasive brush.



#### Black skimmer

The decline in this coastal waterbird in Texas, where it occurs year-round, is so steep that it could be gone before long. One of the main causes of its decline is harassment, almost always accidental, while the bird nests on gravelly bars or beaches. When adults get spooked from their eggs or nestlings, they’re not able to protect them from the sun or predators. Unleashed dogs on the coast are also a threat.

Alliance for America's Fish and Wildlife, a coalition of 100-plus organizations representing more than a million Texans, is working diligently to educate the Texas Congressional delegation.

### SAVING TEXAS SPECIES

Texas is blessed with amazing biodiversity — home to nearly 800 species of fish, 450 species of butterflies, 648 species of birds and about 5,000 species of native plants. Texas species and their wild homes are the draw for Texas' multibillion-dollar nature tourism industry.

To date, dedicated funding for Texas game animals has been provided by landmark legislation (Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson/Wallop-Breaux), while funding for the most imperiled comes through the Endangered Species Act, but there's not been much left for the vast majority of other species that are declining.

"Investing in species early is like changing the oil in your car — a little preventive investment saves you the outrageous costs of overhauling your engine," says John Davis, TPWD Wildlife Diversity program director. "It's most

fiscally responsible to focus on aiding species prior to precipitous decline. This not only provides ecological stability, but also regulatory certainty for local economies and industry."

TPWD is focusing on the Texas Conservation Action Plan, first created in 2005, then updated, expanded and refined in 2014. The plan serves as a road map for the conservation community to implement collaborative stewardship and identifies 1,310 Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Of course, TPWD also works to protect species that are in peril but not yet a "greatest need" species, like monarchs, which can also benefit from RAWA funds used for grassland restoration. Monarch conservation in Texas, like conservation for other insect pollinators, is all about creating, restoring and maintaining native habitat with a diverse mix of nectar-producing plants.

"Any efforts to restore native grasslands with a mix of grasses and forbs for the eastern meadowlark, northern bobwhite, dickcissel, scissor-tailed flycatcher and many other birds would certainly allow

the monarch to ride their coattails towards conservation," says TPWD ornithologist Cliff Shackelford.

TPWD has been involved with the Grassland Restoration Incentive Program to help restore grasslands and forbs (like wildflowers, including the monarch's preferred milkweed) used by many birds as well as lots of pollinators.

"TPWD has worked across the state on public and private lands to restore native prairies, grasslands and savannas, to benefit a suite of species," says TPWD invertebrate biologist Ben Hutchins. "RAWA could help TPWD meet the demand that we are seeing from Texas landowners who want to see these native habitats restored on their private properties."

The transformative funding would help not just fish, wildlife and habitats, but also people. If passed, \$12 million would be available each year to invest in nature education, with an additional \$6 million a year to invest in providing more and better outdoor recreation opportunities like hiking, paddling, bird watching and nature photography.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

Polls and surveys consistently show that Texas residents strongly support land, water and wildlife conservation and outdoor recreation. Land fragmentation, drought, loss of open space, competing demands for water and invasive species can disrupt these species and our enjoyment of them.

Collaborative, creative efforts can ensure that our imperiled populations and habitats survive. Individual action is important, but when we work together, the results can be transformative.

For Texas, the Recovering America's Wildlife Act would indeed mean transformative change for people and wildlife, the kind of breakthrough that comes once in a generation. But it won't happen unless people who care get informed, get involved and make their voices heard to their elected officials. For more information about what this would mean for our state, and to find out how to help, visit Texas Alliance for America's Fish and Wildlife at [txwildlifealliance.org](http://txwildlifealliance.org).



### Red-headed woodpecker

This U.S. woodpecker has declined by 67 percent in the last half-century due to the loss of open stands of mature timber. Small-scale fire and flooding can create pockets of preferred habitat conditions, but declines are caused by cavity competition from aggressive, non-native European starlings, which steal their nests. The open forests, also referred to as savannas, support lots of insects including aerial ones that this woodpecker is adept at capturing on the fly.



### Whooping crane

The Texas Gulf Coast is the main winter home for whooping cranes that breed in and around Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada. Our continent's largest species of bird is working tirelessly toward a comeback, but it's very slow-going. In 1941, only 16 whooping cranes remained in the wild. Now, they number more than 300. Nature tourists flock to the central Texas coast to see this charismatic species.



### Texas kangaroo rat

The Texas kangaroo rat used to be found in 13 counties (11 in Texas and two in Oklahoma) but is now known only in five. Since 2015, TPWD has funded three research projects: a genetic diversity assessment, a distribution study and new 2018 work on dispersal, fine-scale movement, habitat management and initiation of a captive population. The next step is to restore their habitats on a landscape scale.



### American bumblebee

Native bees play a crucial role pollinating plants in native and agricultural settings. TPWD has funded research to conduct surveys for Texas bumblebees like the American bumblebee, which has experienced substantial population decline over much of its range. With nearly 1,000 native bee species in the state, RAWA could be a game changer in terms of how we collect data and enact well-informed conservation measures.



### Texas horned lizard

Texas horned lizards once occurred throughout Texas, but now only a few isolated populations remain. Efforts to move Texas horned lizards from one location in Texas to another, with the hope of establishing new self-sustaining populations in previously occupied habitat, are underway. Several Texas zoos are also working to develop colonies for reintroduction programs. RAWA funding would pay for "lizard factories" to help with reintroduction efforts.

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