

Neighbors work at saving wetlands

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Pine Brook Wetlands Project

Pine Brook residents began restoring their tiny prairie wetlands in January 2008, and almost immediately, birds such as this yellow-crowned night heron found it and made it their home.

Ten years ago, John Jacob argued with his co-author. The Pine Brook Neighborhood Park didn't deserve to be listed in their *Texas Coastal Wetlands Guidebook*, Jacob said. The park, surrounded by new houses, was a suburban developer's idea of wetlands remediation — not a real wetlands. Or at least not much of one. Not anymore.

Hundreds of years ago, when buffalo and wildfire ruled what's now Clear Lake, the spot was only one of thousands of “prairie potholes,” shallow depressions in the grassland that sometimes held water. Birds loved potholes. And its aquatic-plants soil improved water quality, filtering the rainwater before it seeped to the bayous and out to the ocean.

After ranchers and their cattle moved in, the Pine Brook pothole survived mostly intact. But then the suburbs invaded.

Like other pasture lands around it, the low-lying five acres were bulldozed to make way for upscale houses. Then the developer found out that federal wetlands regulations prevented development on that five acres. So the land was given a little viewing deck, called a nature park (an amenity!), and left alone.

But if you want a prairie to survive, you can't just leave it alone. Surrounded by houses, without cattle or buffalo to trample saplings, the marshy grassland succumbed to trees. Almost all of them were Chinese tallows, a fast-growing species that native bugs and birds won't eat, and that crowds out native plants.

That's barely a functional wetlands anymore, Jacob told his co-author, Daniel Moulton. That ecosystem is crashing. It's almost gone.

Moulton, though, held his ground. Suburban development is quickly destroying Texas coastal wetlands — it's estimated that fewer than 3 percent still survive — so he argued that they should list even a wetlands as puny and pitiful as Pine Brook's.

Jacob allowed the listing to survive, but it hardly sugar-coated the state of affairs.

“May not survive long,” it said.

Boot-sucking mud

A few years ago, Debra Goode, a medical-business consultant, read about the pothole in her neighborhood newsletter. A nature lover, she'd planted her own yard to attract butterflies and birds. It bothered her to think that her neighborhood's nature park wasn't the ecosystem it ought to be.

She appointed herself to organize a rescue effort. She recruited a couple of neighbors to research precisely what it would take to remove the tallow trees, and what they found wasn't encouraging. The trees wouldn't be easy to chain saw: Some were 40 feet tall, but they often stood only a foot apart from each other, and in about foot of swamp water to boot.

In January 2008, she organized a series of neighborhood cleanup days. She wasn't sure people would show up. Pine Brook is a professional community, full of NASA engineers and consultants and astronauts — people who work long hours, don't know many of their neighbors, and hire services to mow their perfect lawns. Muck and chain saws aren't their scene.

But they came. Over the next few months, more than 85 people volunteered: whole families, retired executives, Scout troops and a shuttle commander.

In the most tallow-crowded part of the pothole, volunteers standing in the calf-high water formed a 100-foot-long assembly line, passing 18-foot cut trees from hand to hand to the water's edge, where an all-terrain vehicle could drag them away. Fairly often, you'd hear someone call for help and know that the mud had sucked off yet another person's boot.

They planted some aquatic plants, and at the pothole's edge, they added prairie grasses, vines and native trees. And freed from the tallows' shade, seeds long buried in the soil began to sprout. But still, in those first few months, the landscape — a sea of tallow stumps — depressed even Goode.

But to birds, the improvement was more obvious. That very first spring, waterbirds like egrets and herons moved back to the pothole. Migrating birds stopped over in flocks hundreds-strong.

The sight of them riveted Goode. *It's working*, she thought. *This is going to work.*

Earth's kidneys

“Maidencane!” Jacob crowed recently, pointing to a tall plant with its feet in the water. “That's a primo prairie grass.”

“Red-shouldered hawk!” said Glenn Olsen of the Houston Audubon Society.

They were standing with Debra and me at the edge of the pothole, and as they identified species, they sounded like little boys admiring cards in a Pokémon deck: “Sugarcane plume grass!” ... “A whistling duck!” ... “Oh, look at your buttonbush, girl!”

The Pine View pothole is a tiny, tiny piece of wetlands. But it represents a victory, and these days, prairie experts don't get to celebrate many victories. Jacob, who'd come so close to writing off the Pine Brook pothole, could barely contain himself.

“This is a world-class landscape,” he said, nodding toward the water. “And this kind of landscape is vanishing. People say that the rain forest is the earth's lungs. But these boys, the wetlands, they're the earth's kidneys. Everyone worries about the rain forest — about the lungs — but they don't understand that our wetlands are more threatened. Our kidneys are failing. And would we be any less dead without our kidneys than without our lungs?”

Olsen, tracking a bird, put down his binoculars and turned toward us. “This is a great example of what neighborhoods can do,” he said. “We need a thousand more Debra Goodes.”

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