Cooler Weather Moves Refuge Projects into High Gear

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It is amazing how much the weather can change in just a short period of time, especially in Texas. The last time I wrote this article, we were battling 100-degree days, but now, my doors and windows are open wide, and I am enjoying beautiful 70-degree temperatures. Although the weather has been stifling, staff has been
busy in the greenhouse, large special projects have been completed, staff has assisted with multiple Master Naturalist and volunteer groups, and normal duties and responsibilities have multiplied as the weather has begun to turn nicer.

Refuge staff has been coordinating with TCU professor Dr. Dan Williams, or “Dr. Dan,” to provide his “Treks and Texts: Journeys into Nature” honors literature class with volunteer opportunities. During three visits to the Nature Center so far, students have split into teams and been assigned a specific section of trail. The students are responsible for trimming their section as well as repairing any erosion. Staff has been working with each team, discussing different management strategies and nature in general. By the end of the semester, the students will have worked on the trails a total of five class periods.

Another group that visited recently was TGB Partners. TGB is a consulting firm that designs and plans landscape architecture and environmental graphics projects. The firm schedules a service project annually and chose the Refuge this year. Despite the rain, the group helped collect native plants along the Crosstimbers Levee and transplant them around the parking lot. Quite a bit of construction has occurred on the levee and parking lot, so we are trying to rehabilitate the area. Natural Resource Specialist Michelle Villafranca helped the group select specific plants depending on habitat type and, while the group was diligently working, discussed some basic ecology.

In preparation for multiple outreach programs, Michelle, with the help of volunteers, grew several hundred native plants in the greenhouse to provide free of charge at different events. The first event partnered the Nature Center with the City of Fort Worth Water Department during its week-long Rally 4 Water. In all, 175 native plants were distributed to 35 attendees. The second event, Native Neighborhoods, is a program Michelle developed with another city employee. This event, a partnership between Nature Center staff and volunteers, City of Fort Worth Water Department, forestry
staff, and Chisolm Trail Community Center staff, took place at the community center. Forty participants received a total of 144 plants.

We are excited to announce that the Crosstimbers Levee has been repaired and the Crosstimbers Trail officially reopened. The trail has been closed for more than two years due to a breach in the levee. After long and extensive brainstorming, a plan was developed to install a 79-foot bridge over the levee to allow water to flow evenly between the marsh and river. The Fain Group purposely breached the levee with an 80-foot hole and installed a bridge to span it.

They then topped the levee with crushed limestone to serve as a hiking trail to access the Crosstimbers Trail. Once the Fain Group’s task was completed, it was up to Refuge staff to rehabilitate the construction area. Brush was removed between the river and parking area and along the marsh side of the parking lot. Staff installed a pipe rail fence along the river side of the parking area, wrapping the fence around the marsh side and along the road. Gates were installed to prevent unauthorized vehicle use down the levee and across the bridge. The parking lot also has a new layer of recycled asphalt pavement (RAP) that was provided by the City of Fort Worth Transportation/Public Works Department. Native grass hay was spread along the banks and areas where brush was cleared to prevent erosion and promote native plant growth.

In other normal operations, the bison were moved across the road to the central and south pastures in preparation for their annual vet visit and a move into the west winter pasture. Once the bison are moved to the west pasture, they will be off display for a few months. In addition, staff conducted our annual deer survey to help determine density estimates and monitor the deer population on the property. A total of three surveys were conducted on three separate nights, and that data was combined to establish the density estimates and herd ratios. Staff also baled hay in the bison hay meadow, which produced approximately 100 bales. The yield increased by approximately 30 bales from the last time it was hayed two to three years ago. Since the previous haying operation, the meadow has experienced two growing seasons and a prescribed fire. Haying serves as an essential management tool for our native prairies as well as a resource to supplement the bison’s diet when needed. We bale only native grass to ensure the best quality of hay for the bison.

When the weather becomes a little more bearable, our staff becomes even busier. Nicer weather also brings out more volunteer groups and allows for more outreach events. If you see staff out in the field, be sure to ask them if we are working on any cool projects, or come out yourself and help with the Natural Guard.