

El Tokio Grasslands – Phase II

Protection of Migratory Bird Habitat of Desert Grasslands in the El Tokio GPCA (near Saltillo, Mexico)

Partners – Oklahoma, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Pronatura Noreste A.C., Universidad Autonomo de Nuevo Leon

Overview: The desert grasslands, located south of the town of Saltillo, in northern Mexico, are fairly high (6,000 to 7,000 feet elevation) grasslands important to numerous wintering birds as well as threatened resident species and a threatened mammal, the Mexican prairie dog. The project is directed to the protection, management, and restoration of grasslands on properties within the El Tokio Grassland Priority Conservation Area.

Through the creation of private reserves, agreements to create ejido reserves that prohibit cattle ranching and agriculture practices, and through cattle ranching best management practice trainings with ejido communities, Pronatura has so far helped improve more than 80,000 acres of habitat throughout El Tokio, and is currently working to enhance a further 66,000 acres at two ejidos. While significant in the number of hectares under agreement not all priority sites are still in need of protection and restoration. Pronatura, the Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon and ABC have recently requested funding from NMBCA for the protection of two sites in the Hediondilla Ejido. Funding for these projects would help protect the final 4,900 acres of a 34,500 acre grassland area known as Llano de Soledad. A second focal site is a 15,400 m² pond that at times attracts thousands of Long-billed Curlews. Finally, restoration activities at El Cercado, a private reserve owned by Pronatura Noreste that ABC helped purchase are needed. Reforestation with junipers and pines will take place, and a seed bank for native grasses will be established for future plantings. Soil management actions will be implemented to reduce erosion and maintain moisture for plantings. Outreach with the neighboring ejido community will help reduce the threat of the community illegally putting their cows on the El Cercado reserve, where higher quality grass remnants exist, and improve their cattle rotation regimes.

Threats - A significant threat is overgrazing of these naturally arid lands. Long over-usage by grazing goats, sheep, and cattle has caused serious erosion of already-thin soils, and of course loss of vegetation cover, not only of grasses but also of the shrubs upon which many of the native species depend. There has also been more rapid conversion of the land to agriculture in areas with irrigation from wells, especially for potatoes but also for other crops such as sorghum and apples.

Birds – In El Tokio more than 250 bird species are found, and high concentrations of grassland wintering birds occur, including significant numbers of Long-billed Curlews (seen in flocks to 20 to 50 in the area of the reserve, and as many as 3,000 have been seen in a single flock at nearby ponds). Mountain Plovers winter in the area, and it is the part of the wintering range for important grassland birds such as Loggerhead Shrike, Sprague's Pipit, Brewer's Sparrow and

Ferruginous Hawk. Also wintering in the area are Grasshopper, Lark, and Vesper sparrows and Eastern and Western meadowlarks. Passage migrants include the Upland Sandpiper and Swainson's Hawk. Resident birds of significance include the Burrowing Owl and Worthen's Sparrow, an IUCN Endangered species.

Previous Successes Achieved: ProNatura Noreste worked with Tanque Nuevo to establish a 20 year conservation easement on 11,672 hectares (28,830 acres), and wrote a management plan.

Specific Activities Supported: In 2012, \$28,000 is needed to support conservation actions, which include the following.

- Restoration of abandoned Agricultural Area (31 acres)
- Establishment of Native Seed Bank at El Cerado
- Two Community Outreach Workshops and Staff time to prepare and conduct workshops
- Field Costs, Project Oversight and Technical Review
- Fencing of Ponds
- Planning for development of additional pond

Matching Funds –NMBCA funds are currently being executed with Pronatura Noreste within the El Tokio grasslands; additional NMBCA may become available. Funds from the National Forestry Commission of Mexico for additional complimentary reforestation at El Cercado are expected.



