

# MEXICAN GRASSLANDS CONSERVATION PHASE I

## PROTECTION OF MIGRATORY BIRD HABITAT IN THE EL TOKIO GRASSLAND PRIORITY CONSERVATION AREA

**THREAT/ CHALLENGE:** The North American Grasslands are some of the most threatened ecosystems in the world. Grasslands, short, mixed and tall stretch from the Northern Great Plains of Canada and the US to the Chihuahuan Desert Grasslands in Mexico. The loss of native grasslands to conversion to agriculture, or desertification and erosion due to poor livestock management techniques, along with contamination of food sources from chemical use and an increase in man-made structures on the landscape have had a dramatic negative impact on the populations of grassland birds. Many species have seen steep population declines in the last 40 years, some have declined by as much as 70%.

In the Chihuahuan Desert Grasslands, which cover most of Northern Mexico, land use and water use are significant drivers of loss of habitat for wintering grassland birds. In some areas cattle ranching has been the historical and traditional way of life. However, due principally to overgrazing, drought and poor management techniques ranchers are abandoning their way of life and selling the lands which are converted to agricultural plots. These plots tap the limited water resources of the local aquifers further threatening future grassland conditions, livelihoods and drinking water availability.

Grasslands which are ecosystems that have evolved with disturbance from fire and grazing are resilient and with proper management can be restored. Our challenge is to modify the way landowners manage their livestock, goats and cattle, to improve grasslands which provide the habitat for birds and other wildlife. Restoration infrastructure is needed to reduce loss of soil quality and the seed bank in the soil. Land and water use policies also need to be modified to conserve the regions dwindling natural resources.

**IMPORTANCE OF EL TOKIO:** The Commission of Environmental Cooperation of North America (CEC), The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and a host of other entities have identified 28 priority locations to focus grassland conservation efforts. These locations are called Grassland Priority Conservation Areas (GPCA's). American Bird Conservancy is principally working with our local partner Pronatura Noreste in two of these GPCA's in Mexico; El Tokio and Valles Centrales.

It is estimated that El Tokio hosts 30% of the global wintering Long-billed Curlew population and some 12% of all wintering Mountain Plovers. Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory has shown that El Tokio is the most important GPCA in Mexico for Sprague's Pipit. It is additionally winter habitat for more than a dozen other birds of conservation concern.

### PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

- 1. Project Goals:** Maximize the amount of grassland habitat available for grassland birds and increase the Great Plains population of the Long-billed Curlew by 10% by 2025.
- a. Phase I Objective:** Secure the protection of the 50,000 acre (20,000 ha) Llano de Soledad grassland.
- b. Phase I Objective:** Develop conservation agreements and conservation management plans to improve management of 123,500 acres (50,000 ha) of land for grassland restoration in El Tokio GPCA.
- c. Phase II Objective:** Work with ejidos to implement best management practices for grazing to improve the quality of grassland habitat and ensure ranchers maintain their land and livelihood on 123,500 acres.
- d. Phase II Objective:** Actively restore at least 25,000 acres of degraded grassland habitat.
- e. Phase I and II Objective:** Identify and protect critical water sources within El Tokio.

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**IN EL TOKIO, over 100,000 acres of grassland habitat has been secured for conservation.**

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**SUMMARY OF PHASE I: American Bird Conservancy (ABC) in partnership with Southern Wings has supported Pronatura Noreste (PNE) to successfully protect and restore native desert grasslands in Mexico's El Tokio GPCA.** This focal conservation area encompasses desert grasslands in the Mexican states of Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, Zacatecas, and San Luis Potosi.

**Key Actions:**

- ◆ Develop conservation agreements with three ejidos to facilitate the creation of ejido reserves as well ejido conservation management plans. The development of these agreements and documents is time intensive but local community buy-in is critical to long term success.
- ◆ Through conservation agreements 49,381 acres of the Llano de Soledad grassland has been protected. This is a critical wintering area for many migratory birds and holds the largest remaining Mexican Black tailed Prairie Dog colony, while being one of the most important locations for the Critically Endangered Worthen's Sparrow. The area was designated a "protected area" by the Mexican government, however, there were no formal protections in place.
- ◆ In El Tokio, a total of 115,778 acres have been protected through acquisition or enrolled in conservation agreements. This includes:
  - La Hediondilla ejido where a 4,900 acre reserve for wintering grassland birds was created. Here 490 acres of grasslands are being restored and two new water sources were created for the benefit of migratory birds. Of particular importance is the conservation of a pond which draws in thousands of Long-billed Curlews to forage, and roost.
  - Matehuapil ejido where a 28,829-acre ejido reserve with a 15-year conservation agreement was developed.
  - El Tanque Nuevo Ejido where a 37,867-acre ejido reserve with a 15 -year conservation easement was created.
  - Purchase of Lomas del Gorron (282 acres) and Cuatro Gorrones (296 acres) properties by ABC and PNE. Of this, 99 acres at the Lomas del Gorron has been restored for grasslands through implementation of erosion control measure and protection from grazing livestock. These efforts have resulted in increased grass cover leading to improved habitat for birds, other species. The endangered endemic prairie dog has returned and Worthen's Sparrow was also found for the first time in many years to be nesting in the area; a good sign of habitat recovery.



**PARTNER DESCRIPTION:**

Pronatura Noreste is a Mexican nongovernmental, nonprofit organization recognized by the National Council of Science and Technology as a scientific and educational organization. Pronatura Noreste is one of six regional offices of the Pronatura family, and has its headquarters in Monterrey, Nuevo León. The organization was created in 1998 by an Executive Board of Trustees committed to nature conservation. Its mission is the conservation of flora, fauna and priority ecosystems of northeastern Mexico by promoting society's development in harmony with nature. ABC has been working with PNE for the last 10 years.



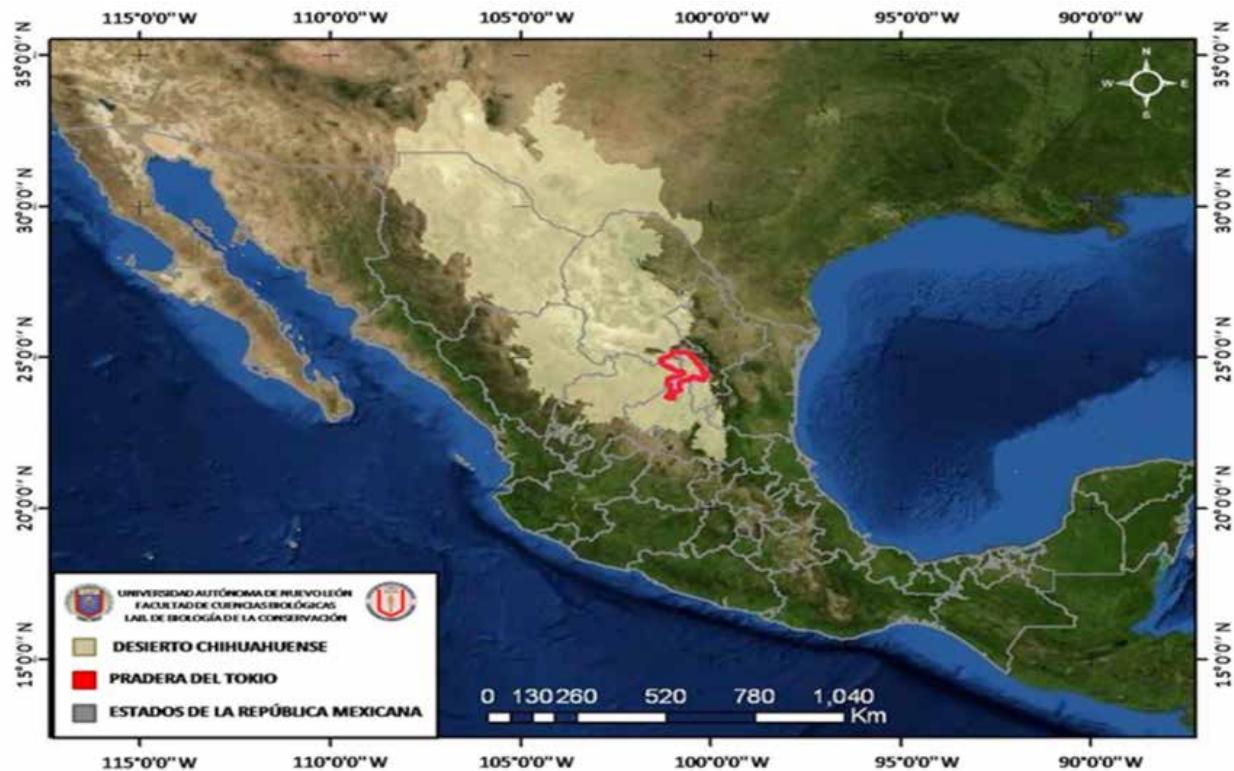


## SPECIES OF CONSERVATION CONCERN:

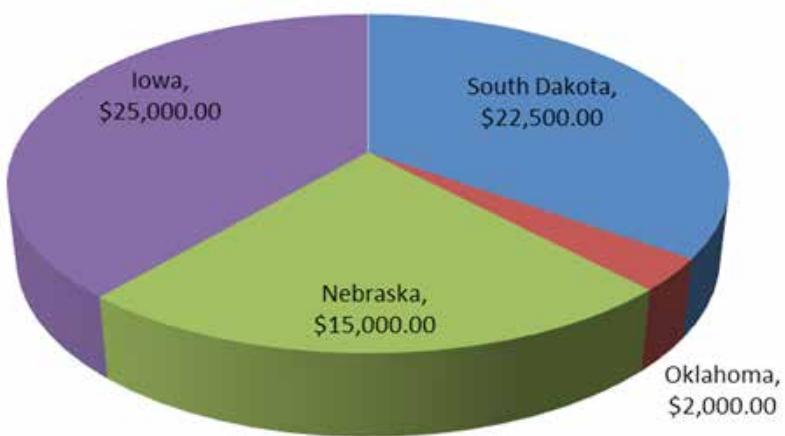
<b>Mountain Plover</b>	Worthern's Sparrow
<b>Upland Sandpiper</b>	Grasshopper Sparrow
<b>Long-billed Curlew</b>	Vesper Sparrow
<b>Baird's Sparrow</b>	<b>Lark Bunting</b>
<b>Sprague's Pipit</b>	McCown's Longspur
<b>Chestnut-collared Longspur</b>	(Lillian's) Eastern Meadowlark
<b>Swainson's Hawk</b> (stopover site)	Western Meadowlark
<b>Ferruginous Hawk</b>	Cassin's Sparrow
Golden Eagle	Scaled Quail
Aplomado Falcon	Northern Harrier
Prairie Falcon	Mexican Black tailed
Burrowing Owl	Prairie Dog
<b>Loggerhead Shrike</b>	Proghorn
Botteri's Sparrow	

**Bold** = priority





### — CONTRIBUTIONS BY STATE —



**PHASE II:** With our long term goal in minds, Phase II actions include developing a habitat corridor between the La India Ejido and the El Cercado Ejido and restoring grasslands and water sources on other ejidos within the El Tokio GPCA. Future Southern Wings funds will support the following actions:

1. Develop preferred goat and cattle management practices, and train communities on these goat management practices to implement on their ejidos.
2. Conduct active erosion control and restoration activities on ejido reserves under contract.
3. Identification and creation of new ejido reserves in habitat corridor

### — OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS —

