

CHAPTER 4. CONSERVATION HABITATS & SPECIES ASSESSMENTS

A. Terrestrial Habitats (List by ecoregion found in Appendix G)

1. Agriculture - Crop – Grassland

Rarity Rank: N/A

Synonyms: None

Ecological Systems: None

General Description:

This is a general category made up of diverse land cover and land use features of altered habitats resulting from human activity. These areas occur in every ecoregion throughout the state. The land cover types may include all or some of the following:

- Scattered woody and herbaceous vegetation representing orchards (pecan, citrus, etc.), vineyards, experimental plots, plant nurseries, roadway rights-of-way
- Row and cover crops consisting of various grain crops, cotton, sweet potatoes, soybeans, rice and sugarcane
- Fields that have been tilled or untilled containing exposed or partially exposed soil
- Fallow fields or areas which have been left idle during the growing season
- Utility rights-of-way
- Grasslands dominated by perennial graminoid plants (primarily pastures and/or rangelands)

Some species of wildlife benefit from agricultural production. Historically, agricultural practices and the type of crops produced were highly varied, and this provided a habitat diversity that favored numerous species. As this habitat became less diverse as a result of changing agricultural practices and larger tracts in production, the habitat quality declined for many species of wildlife. This was particularly true for resident and breeding edge/grassland species such as northern bobwhite, eastern bluebirds, dickcissels, rusty blackbirds, and many species of sparrows. In addition, the value of this habitat for birds migrating across these habitats has diminished.

Within this habitat type, there may be patches of “natural” habitat such as vegetated streambanks, embedded wetlands, and small blocks of forest which can serve as important breeding, dispersal, and travel corridors for various wildlife species when sufficiently large. While no species of conservation concern are dependent upon these habitats for survival per se, they often support some of the highest concentrations of these resident and migratory species. For example, flooded rice fields and crawfish ponds are extremely important to shorebirds, wading birds, and waterfowl. These fields are integral components of the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture (LMVJV) and Gulf Coast

Joint Venture (GCJV) plans for meeting the needs of shorebirds, wading birds, and waterfowl. Similarly, grain crops can support the highest populations of northern bobwhite and wintering sparrows when good field borders are incorporated into the farming operation. In fragmented habitats, conservation features on agricultural lands may serve to connect patches of natural habitat. Irrigation ditches are heavily used by wading birds and crustaceans, fencerows serve as breeding sites for some songbirds, and wooded drainages can serve as travel corridors for mammals, especially the Louisiana black bear.

Current Extent and Status:

There are approximately 7.8 million acres of farm land in Louisiana (Farmland Information Center 2004). Working agricultural landscapes can be greatly enhanced with proper planning. The Federal Farm Bill offers some of the greatest opportunities for these enhancements to occur because of the sheer magnitude of the dollars associated with farm programs. Typically cost-share, incentive payments, or both are provided to qualified participants. Invasive species such as *Triadica sebifera* (Chinese tallow tree) can be a problem on areas where no management is conducted.



AG – CROP - GRASSLAND SPECIES OF CONSERVATION CONCERN (49)		
AMPHIBIANS	American Woodcock	Falcate Orangetip
Strecker's Chorus Frog	Short-eared Owl	Reakirt's Blue
Southern Crawfish Frog	Scissor-tailed Flycatcher	Little Metalmark
	Sedge Wren	Creole Pearly Eye
BIRDS	Spragues Pipit	Southern Dogface
American Bittern	Loggerhead Shrike	
Wood Stork	Painted Bunting	CRUSTACEANS
Mottled Duck	Dickcissel	Sabine Fencing Crawfish
Northern Pintail	Field Sparrow	Ouachita Fencing Crawfish
Northern Harrier	Grasshopper Sparrow	
Northern Bobwhite	Henslow's Sparrow	MAMMALS
Yellow Rail	Le Conte's Sparrow	Southeastern Shrew
Black Rail	Smith's Longspur	Eastern Harvest Mouse
Clapper Rail	Rusty Blackbird	Louisiana Black Bear
King Rail		Long-tailed Weasel
Sandhill Crane	BUTTERFLIES	Eastern Spotted Skunk
Whooping Crane	Wild Indigo Duskywing	
Marbled Godwit	Cobweb Skipper	REPTILES
Dunlin	Dusted Skipper	Western Slender Glass Lizard
Short-billed Dowitcher	Yucca Giant Skipper	Gopher Tortoise

Priority Species Research and Survey Needs:

Southern Crawfish Frog: Present occurrence poorly known in Louisiana; known to exist on agricultural lands in adjacent states. Determine current use of agricultural lands by crawfish frogs in Louisiana, and determine which land practices enable persistent use by frogs.

Mottled Ducks: Research is needed on nesting success, brood rearing and brood success rates, molting habitat needs, and annual recruitment and survival rates along with other basic research to determine breeding and recruitment constraints.

Loggerhead Shrike: Monitoring of distribution, reproductive success, and evaluation of nesting habitat in Louisiana.

Rusty Blackbird: Initiate surveys to determine wintering population abundances and habitat use to augment Christmas Bird Counts.

Rails: Initiate intensive surveys to determine population densities and distributions in rice and crawfish farm habitats.

Species Conservation Strategies:

1. Shorebirds:
 - Work with landowners (especially rice and crawfish farmers) to implement management and conservation recommendations for waterbirds (especially rails) of SWG project T18 upon completion and USFWS waterbird management plan.
 - Partner with LMVJV, GCJV, USFWS and other interested groups to encourage farmers to manage water levels to provide habitat for shorebirds during migration, with an emphasis on early fall migration.
2. Early Successional Bird Species: Continue to encourage landowners to maintain areas in early successional stage to benefit these species.
3. Northern Bobwhite and Grassland Birds: Support implementation of recommended habitat restoration actions specified in Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI) and by LDWF quail and grassland bird task force.
4. Partner with LSU and University of Louisiana, Lafayette (ULL) to develop/update management guidelines/Best Management Practices (BMPs) for species of conservation concern that occur in lands cultivated for rice and sugarcane.
5. Promote safe and cost effective fire ant control and reduction of other plant and animal exotics on agricultural lands.

Threats Affecting Habitat:

1. Incompatible management practices and invasive species are the main threats to this habitat.
2. Expansion of sugarcane into the rice/prairie region of southwest Louisiana.
3. Clean framing practices which include the removal of hedgerows and fencelines.

Habitat Conservation Strategies:

1. Encourage planting of native species along field borders and filter strips to create micro-habitat for wildlife species (CP33 – NRCS program, habitat buffers for upland birds).
2. Encourage the development of “soft or feathered” edges on the agricultural landscape through natural succession, planting of native grasses, legumes and forbs, and small shrubs (plum thickets, blackberry, etc.) when appropriate, and management to maintain these habitats.
3. Encourage management of fallow fields to maintain early succession and to prevent invasion of woody shrubs and trees.
4. Encourage planting of native grasses and proper timing of mowing and haying to prevent destruction of borrows and nests in grasslands and rights-of-way.
5. Work with farmers, state (LDEQ, LDNR) and federal (NRCS, USGS) agencies, university extension services, local and parish governments, and the legislature to develop a comprehensive statewide water rights/use plan.
6. Provide farmers with information on federal/state incentive programs.
7. Secure funding for a position whose sole purpose is Farm Bill Programs/Agricultural Liaison.
8. Secure funding for LDWF positions to be located at NRCS regional offices to provide wildlife recommendations to NRCS District Conservationists as they develop farm conservation plans.
9. Actively participate in NRCS state technical advisory committee (TAC).
10. Develop and distribute promotional materials on federal/state incentive programs beneficial to wildlife geared towards farmers and NRCS/Farm Service Agency (FSA) personnel.
11. Partner with LSU Agriculture Extension to develop and implement strategies in this habitat.
12. Provide information on CWCS target species and habitats for teacher and other workshops (Future Farmers of America (FFA), Envirothon, etc.) to ensure their use in Louisiana schools.

References:

FARMLAND INFORMATION CENTER. 2004. Website. <http://www.farmlandinfo.org>