

by Wesley Newman,
Katy Prairie Conservancy

The Katy Prairie: past and present

Located in the Coastal Prairie region of Texas and Louisiana, which is considered to be a southern extension of the tall-grass true prairie, is the relatively small and locally named Katy Prairie. It was originally about 500,000 to 750,000 acres in extent. Currently only about 200,000 acres are left undeveloped.

The Coastal Prairie region, in general, and the Katy Prairie specifically, is a diverse mosaic of emergent wetlands, upland grasslands, and riparian hardwoods. Two unique soil features are found on the Katy Prairie. These are mima mounds, associated with sandy soils found inland, and gilgai, which are associated with the clay soils toward the coast. Both of these features contribute to the diversity of the region by providing topographic relief in a relatively low-relief landscape. In many cases, an elevational gradient of only a few inches will produce a plant community shift from wetland dominants to purely upland plant species.

More recently, this natural prairie wetland system has been replaced with an artificial wetland system, rice farming. The shift

from a natural to an artificial system has actually contributed to an increase in the diversity and numbers of waterfowl found on the Katy Prairie. The Katy Prairie is home to an estimated 350 to 400 species of resident and migratory birds, along with 110 species of mammals, reptiles, and amphibians.

Currently the remaining Katy Prairie is under strong development pressure. Houston is expanding westward and development is inevitable. The Katy Prairie Conservancy hopes to acquire and protect from development 30,000 to 50,000 acres through the purchase of property and the use of conservation easements. Property owned and managed by the Conservancy will be maintained to represent the diversity of uses, current as well as historical, found on the Katy Prairie. Activities will include farming, cattle grazing, wetland restoration through mitigation projects, and prairie restoration. It is the goal of the Katy Prairie Conservancy to protect and ultimately provide access to an important historical, cultural, and natural resource. □

HGS Environmental & Engineering Dinner Meeting • Wednesday, February 9, 2000 • Jalapeños Restaurant, 2702 Kirby
Dinner 6:30 p.m., Presentation 7:30–8:45 p.m.