



4 WEEKS + 1,500 DONORS = \$4 MILLION

The incredible Texas fundraising blitz for the Deer Park Prairie

In what is now known as the fastest, most successful land conservation project in Texas history, the Deer Park Prairie, located in the southeast area of Houston, was saved by more than 1,500 donors who provided \$4 million dollars in less than four weeks. Fundraising is hard enough to do when you have a long timeline to do it in. We've written this article to prove that yes, it can be done in a much shorter time if you swallow your fear, put all resources to work for you and believe you can do it.

A Rare Find

The Deer Park Prairie is 52 acres of the highest quality coastal prairie along the Texas Coast. The prairie has never been plowed, and its historic root column remains intact.

It exhibits the micro-topographical variation that was typical of these prairies, with slight wetland depressions and small raised areas known as mima mounds. The variance in elevation and slight variation in soil

properties across the prairie set the stage for an incredible diversity of plant and animal life.

Over 300 native plants have been identified within these 52 acres, including several rare species that are found at only a handful of sites in the state. The diversity of flowering plants results in a healthy, varied population of pollinators. Over 50 species of birds have been observed on the prairie, including several species of grassland songbirds. The prairie's wetlands are suitable for a number of rare amphibian species.

The prairie was discovered in 2010 by a group of enthusiasts known as the "Prairie Hunters," who located

Opposite: **The Lawther – Deer Park Prairie, saved by an incredible campaign**

DON VERSER

the property by scanning aerial imagery of historic native prairie locations. Once found, they sought permission from the landowner to access it, which was granted. Upon seeing the varied topography, and the myriad grasses and flowering plants, which included several indicator species of high-quality prairie, they immediately knew that they had found something special. Plant inventories and plans for the prairie's preservation began immediately. Several conservation groups were brought into the fold. Texas Parks and Wildlife botanists visited the site. With every visit it became more evident that this prairie was perhaps the best example anywhere of what the entire Texas Coast once looked like.

The Race is On

Contacted by several conservation groups, the landowner indicated that he would be interested in selling the prairie for conservation purposes. However, as he had already been approached by a number of interested developers, and knew that the property could yield a significant profit if developed, he set the price at \$4 million, agreeing to hold onto the prairie for some time while the funds were raised.

Initial fundraising efforts were slow and unsuccessful. Bayou Land Conservancy (BLC) was approached in late 2012, with the belief that its experience and resources could result in the permanent protection of this special place. Throughout the end of 2012 and the first half of 2013 funds began to trickle in. However, in August 2013 the landowner informed BLC that he had received a bid for \$4.2 million from a developer and would have to sell the property. BLC negotiated a deadline of August 20 to raise the funds, and the landowner agreed to honor the initial \$4 million if the funds could be raised.

BLC immediately took to the media, and reached out to all of its contacts and members. Facebook outreach was a huge

assistance, with donations coming in from friends and family members from 17 different states—even Australians donated to save this prairie. One of our supporters thought we should try to get on the “Colbert Report” by offering to name a mound on the prairie the “Colbert Bump” if we got a mention on his show. We got hundreds of people to contact Stephen Colbert on his Facebook page. We never got the mention on the show, but his site was loaded with comments from people from all over the country asking him to talk about the prairie. We also got old-school media to cover this as a news story. So we got a double bump—without even getting the actual bump!

The media and social outreach of all kinds, including coverage from four television stations, two radio stations, multiple *Houston Chronicle* articles along with other area newspapers, Twitter, Facebook and even the Facebook page of the Colbert Report, made it possible for more people in Texas to mention the word “prairie” than ever before.

Success!

Remarkably, by August 20, \$3.2 million had been raised. The landowner, seeing the success of the campaign, extended the deadline to September 10, by which time BLC was able to successfully raise the funds and protect the prairie for future generations. The prairie is now named the “Lawther - Deer Park Prairie” for the landowner/developer who held on so that the funds could be raised—and accepted less than what he could have made to develop the land.

Bayou Land Conservancy will be donating the land in November to the Native Prairies Association of Texas while holding a conservation easement over the prairie to protect this incredibly special place forever. 🌿

JENNIFER LORENZ IS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND **MATT BUCKINGHAM** IS CONSERVATION LANDS BIOLOGIST OF BAYOU LAND CONSERVANCY IN HOUSTON.

Lessons Learned

- **Facebook is your friend—because it's about the reach of friends (and their friends, and so on)**
- **Tweet—not too often—but make it urgent!**
- **“Old-school” media does still work:**
 - Get an editorial writer of your local paper to write about your project; we did three times and we made the entire editorial page one day for our efforts.
 - Get the television stations out—nothing spreads like being on the visual news and having the local anchors know about your project and provide updates. People were riveted to our story.
 - Ask your supporters to ask the local stations to cover your story. The more people who ask, the more people the stations know will be watching.
 - Get your local NPR station out and don't overlook other radio stations. People get their information from a variety of news sources. The more you're on, the more people feel they're a part of something big when they do donate.
- **YouTube—literally the most important way we raised the money:**
 - We produced two short professional-quality videos (less than 4 minutes each) that we placed at the top of our YouTube channel. All social media linked to these videos. Our website was flooded as was our YouTube page.
 - These videos were the single most critical way to reach people who would not/could not get to see the prairie themselves, and it was the absolute best thing we did as many individual foundation board members said it was seeing one of the videos that made them want to donate.