In March 2012, the Gulf Coast Prairie Landscape Conservation Cooperative (GC-PLCC) funded the project, *Employing the Conservation Design Approach on Sea-Level Rise Impacts on Coastal Avian Habitats Along the Central Texas Coast*, for the International Crane Foundation (ICF) through the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI).

The purpose of the project is to use sea level rise scenarios to forecast habitat shifts along coastal prairies and marshes and project their impacts on habitat acres, nesting sites and food resources for whooping cranes as well as other wading birds, waterfowl, piping plover and other shorebirds, colonial nesting water birds and grassland birds.

At the heart of this project’s success is a conservation design approach known as Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC). The approach uses biological planning, conservation design, conservation delivery, and assumption-based monitoring and research in a feedback loop to achieve desired biological objectives.

The project is focused on the LCC framework that was created to concentrate on landscape-scale stressors, such as climate change, by providing science support for conservation activities. It involves the climate challenge of rising sea-levels in the Aransas and Matagorda National Wildlife Refuge Systems, located on the central Texas Coast.

The endangered whooping crane will be the first key species the project team will address. A primary focus during the start of the project will be the determination of current and future habitat needs for this species.

“Protection and management of winter habitats for the last wild North American whooping crane population is important for the recovery of the species,” said Elizabeth H. Smith, Ph.D., ICF Whooping Crane Conservation Biologist and Co-principal Investigator for the GCPLCC-funded project. “A multi-species and landscape approach is needed to address climate change impacts.”
In addition to her role as Gulf Coast Prairie Landscape Conservation Cooperative (GCPLCC) chair, Allison Shipp is the Associate Regional Director with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) where she is responsible for the coordination of science information with other USGS area offices, outside partners and for USGS science programs in the Southwest Region, including Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, and Utah.

Allison earned both her Bachelor of Arts in Biology and Master of Science in Environmental and Water Resources Engineering from the University of Texas at Austin.

What are the greatest strengths of the GCPLCC?

I think the greatest strengths of the GCPLCC are the people who are involved. The initial leadership of Benjamin Tuggle, Carter Smith, and Bill Bartush set the stage for how the Steering Committee would work and it has been phenomenal. The philosophy is we’re all in this together and we all want this to be successful.

What is your vision for the LCC and how do you plan to implement that vision?

My vision is that the GCPLCC will be the model LCC for agencies, states, tribes, and partners working together toward a common goal of making the best management decisions based on understanding the landscape and the ecosystems within that landscape. I think we implement that through the partnerships. We have to build trust and respect so that everyone at the table feels that their concerns are heard.

What partnership opportunities do you plan to take part in?

We definitely plan to continue to work with the Joint Ventures (JV) and Fish Habitat Partnerships (FHP) and states. We plan to continue to work with the newly established Climate Science Centers and to work across our boundaries with other LCCs. I think in the next year as we get our footing, I would like to see us be able to reach across the border to our partners in Mexico and look for other partnerships in our landscape similar to the JVs and FHPs, as well as universities.

What leadership qualities do you feel are most important in your role as the chair?

Focus. Being able to keep myself focused on the important issues and make sure that as a committee we have clearly defined what is important and are moving toward resolution. I think the ability to listen to and actually hear the concerns of everyone in the partnership is important. But in the end, after hearing what everyone has to say, my job is to help the committee focus on where we want to be and how we want to get there as a partnership.
Of course, it takes a dedicated team to accomplish this project.

The GCPLCC supports the ICF plan to use a team of experts to study the whooping crane. The ICF will collaborate with top organizations, such as the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, Harte Research Institute and Conrad Blucher Institute at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, The Nature Conservancy Texas, and Mission-Aransas National Estuarine Research Reserve.

The collective expertise of this team provides a multidisciplinary approach to assess available spatial information, identify distribution and extent of habitat for whooping cranes (as well as 12 other key avian species), and evaluate future habitat areas under various sea-level rise scenarios.

Smith believes the project has progressed at an impressive pace as a result of the concurrent work that has been accomplished by the project team and GCPLCC.

“The LCC funding in combination with the ICF’s primary contributors who support the Texas Program ensures that we are spending the requisite time needed to develop the habitat conservation maps within a short timeframe,” Smith said.

She adds there are many similarities in approach between the ICF and GCPLCC, most notably the understanding of power and productivity. The conservation design approach will be applicable to other coastal areas in the GCPLCC as we evaluate spatial data sets for use in habitat mapping, develop habitat crosswalks between regionally available land cover and land use data, and standardize avian and habitat metrics for a suite of avian guilds and representative species of concern, Smith said.

Next year, the ICF will celebrate 40 years of dedicated work to conserve all 15 crane species. The Foundation’s mission, since its origin in 1973, has been to work worldwide to conserve cranes and the ecosystems, watersheds and flyways on which they depend. The ICF is dedicated to providing experience, knowledge, and inspiration to involve people in resolving threats to these ecosystems.

“The success of the ICF’s many programs worldwide can be attributed to engaging communities in maintaining and improving the natural system health while continuing to provide economic livelihoods,” Smith said. “Our research and education focus in coastal Texas encourages collaboration among a diverse group of scientists, resource professionals, and coastal citizens to achieve meaningful results. Our dedication to maintaining a fulltime presence provides the continuity that is necessary to achieve common conservation goals.”

For more information please visit http://www.savingcranes.org/guadalupe-river.html
MEET THE GULF COAST PRAIRIE LCC VICE CHAIR MIKE CARLOSS

Mike Carloss was appointed vice chair of the Gulf Coast Prairie Landscape Conservation Cooperative (GCPLCC) in June 2012. What’s been the highlight of his role as vice chair so far?

He’s enjoying learning about new habitats that he had never known before. Being vice chair gives him the opportunity to meet new state, federal agency and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, and to hear stories from passionate wildlife supporters like himself.

And when it comes to stories, Carloss has big time coastal experiences that he’ll never forget, namely the BP oil spill. During the oil spill, Carloss spent an immeasurable amount of time in the field and coordinating state-level rescue and recovery activities. He focused his field efforts on the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries’ half a million acres of land and especially on coastal water-bird nesting colonies. You may have seen him on TV as he led news reporters through the devastation and recovery of the Louisiana Gulf Coast.

With his experience and passion for wildlife, Carloss is a welcome resource as GCPLCC vice chair. He received a Bachelor of Science in Wildlife Management and a Master of Science in Biology from the University of Southwestern Louisiana, now known as the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Carloss is currently the Biologist Director for the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and oversees coastal operations, habitat conservation and oil spill programs. During the next two years as GCPLCC vice chair, Carloss wants to learn how all of the LCCs work together and how they can help the species and habitats across all regions.

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THE GULF COAST PRAIRIE LCC AND COOPERATIVE ECOSYSTEM STUDIES UNITS

Recognizing the need for multi-state and international conservation science centered on landscape conservation, the Gulf Coast Prairie Landscape Conservation Cooperative (GCPLCC) has partnered with the Gulf Coast CESU to facilitate conservation science, develop regional partnerships, and enhance communication among partners in setting common goals and assessing shared science needs. This partnership leverages the resources of a network of federal agencies and universities to provide science and outreach that will guide landscape scale conservation planning, design, and implementation.

For more information on GCPLCC and CESUs visit:

- Gulf Coast Prairie LCC: http://gulfcoastprairielcc.org/
- National CESU: http://www.cesu.psu.edu
- Gulf Coast CESU: http://gcccesu.org/
Riparian Corridor Re-vegetation/Restoration Design in the Tamaulipan Brushlands and Gulf Coast Prairie Bird Conservation Regions

With the majority of the native habitats in Cameron County, Texas lost due to extensive habitat fragmentation, restoring the riparian corridor was an essential choice for priority funding. In order to allow for species adaptation under climate change, providing connectivity along the Rio Grande through its Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge is crucial. To allow for species adaptation, this riparian corridor must be restored to provide connectivity along the Rio Grande through its Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

A Gulf Coast Prairie Landscape Conservation Cooperative (GCPLCC)-funded project is currently under way to compare existing, mature riparian corridor forest habitats with habitats that are subject to past and ongoing re-vegetation/restoration treatments, and to evaluate select taxa responses to the differences in these habitats now and in the future, as the re-vegetated forests develop. This study is being conducted in South Texas with implications for Northeastern Mexico and is led by Dr. Timothy Brush (University of Texas).

Through the study, the GCPLCC will develop recommendations to improve future re-vegetation/restoration methods to increase carrying capacity and mobility for borderlands populations of priority riparian taxa including Gray Hawk, Red-crowned Parrot, Red-billed Pigeon, Rose-throated Becard and Neotropical migrant birds.

A Conservation Framework for Priority Species of Grassland-Shrubland Habitats of the Southern Great Plains

Managers, landowners and the conservation community all need clear guidance on proactively reducing land-use conflicts, and to ensure the long-term survival of priority grassland-shrubland species and associated habitats in the southern plains. In order to provide managers and landowners with specific recommendations for habitat management practices to recover and support priority species, creating a conservation framework was a strategic choice for GCPLCC funding. While substantial information does exist on the effects of fire and other management practices on grassland and shrubland habitats in the southern plains.

The GCPLCC therefore, is currently funding the project, to create a conservation framework based off of a consolidation of previously compiled information on the effects of fire and other management practices on grassland and shrubland habitats in the southern plains.

This project is being led by Michael L. Morrison, Ph.D. (Texas A&M University) and is taking place at the GCPLCC with emphasis in Oklahoma, Texas and Northeastern Mexico.

This conservation framework will focus within the breeding range of the Black-capped Vireo, which includes portions of five bird conservation regions. Based on currently available information, initial priority species for this project include Black-capped Vireo, Northern Bobwhite, Bell’s Vireo, Painted Bunting and Texas Horned Lizard.
Carter Smith currently serves as the executive director of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), a position he has held since January 2008, but his previous role as Gulf Coast Prairie Landscape Conservation Cooperative (GCPLCC) chair is a position he’ll always hold dear to his heart.

A native of Austin, Smith developed his passion for wildlife and the outdoors at a young age while roaming his family’s farm and ranch land interests. He has a wildlife management degree from Texas Tech and a master’s degree in conservation biology from Yale University. As a biologist, Smith has worked on a variety of research projects ranging from studying moose in the boreal forests of Saskatchewan to mule deer and pronghorn antelope in far West Texas to waterfowl in the Laguna Madre of Texas and Tamaulipas, Mexico.

“My proudest moment serving as GCPLCC Chair was when we made our first decision to invest in specific science projects because ultimately that’s what the LCCs are all about,” Smith said. “We agreed on half a dozen projects to fund, including mottled ducks on the coast and in-stream flow analyses that extends into Oklahoma. I mention those two because they reflect the diversity of our conservation area and the tremendous amount of needs that we have in this region,” he said.

As any LCC Chair can understand, Smith faced some challenges along the way.

“When I started as Chair we were in the start-up phase of the GCPLCC. There was a fair amount of trepidation with the initiation of the LCC concept across the country, how the LCCs would roll out and how partners would be involved, what funds would support the LCCs and how we could apply funding,” Smith said.

Smith added, we laid the foundation for the GCPLCC and built a spring board for what’s to come. By necessity, there’s a lot of structure, processes and organizational dynamics that go with starting a collaborative like this. Just as importantly, it’s about establishing trust, credibility and team work among partners.”

Smith said there are three things from the very outset of his position as GCPLCC Chair that made the GCPLCC successful.

“First, all partners were unequivocally committed to the values and merits of the LCC,” he said. “There was a strong spirit of commitment that was reflected in all of our plans we developed over the first year.”

Second, this LCC represents a classic bottom-up partnership in which everyone feels included and valued. All representatives from non-profit organizations to state and federal entities feel very much a part of the partnership, Smith said.

And lastly, the GCPLCC is blessed with a very dedicated and talented coordinator, Bill Bartush. Bill brings irrepressible dedication to the project, its partnerships and its goals and he is just an artesian well of energy, ideas and enthusiasm.

Smith serves on a number of conservation-related boards of directors and advisory councils and was recently named an outstanding alumnus by Texas Tech and the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. He is the current Chair of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and serves on the National Association for Fish and Wildlife Agencies’ Executive Committee.

Prior to his selection as TPWD executive director, Smith was with The Nature Conservancy of Texas, serving as state director.
GCPLCC SCIENCE TEAM MEMBERS

COASTAL
Member Affiliation
Jorge Brenner The Nature Conservancy
John Foret National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Sally Morehead-Palmer University of Texas – Mission-Aransas NERR
Jarrett “Woody” Woodrow U.S. Fish and Wildlife Coastal Program
Roger Zimmerman National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

TERRESTRIAL
Member Affiliation
Kyle Balkum Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
Mike Brasher Ducks Unlimited, Gulf Coast Joint Venture
Leonard Brennan Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute-Texas A&M University, Kingsville
Kirk Feuerbacher The Nature Conservancy
Mark Shafer Oklahoma Climatological Survey
Don Wilhelm U.S. Fish and Wildlife Partners Program

AQUATIC
Member Affiliation
Cindy Loeffler Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Scott Robinson Southeast Aquatic Resource Partnership
Ryan Smith The Nature Conservancy
Greg Summers Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation Fishery Research Laboratory

GCPLCC STEERING COMMITTEE

Member Affiliation
Chair: Allison Shipp U.S. Geological Survey
Vice Chair: Mike Carlsson Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
Jerry Holden Ducks Unlimited
Barry Wilson Gulf Coast Joint Venture
David Brown National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Tammy Whittington National Park Service
Jim Giocomo Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture
Jeff Pennington Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation
Jeff Boxrucker Reservoir Fisheries Partnership
Mary Gustafson Rio Grande Joint Venture
Tim Birdsong Southeast Aquatic Resource Partnership
Matt Wagner Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Andy Jones The Conservation Fund
Rich Kostecke The Nature Conservancy
Benjamin Tuggle U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Region 2
Emily Jo Williams U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Region 4
Salvador Salinas USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
Gulf Coast Prairie LCC Coordinator
Bill Bartush
(337) 266-8816
bill_bartush@fws.gov

U.S. Geological Survey Liaison for Science Coordination
Bruce Moring
(512) 927-3585
jbmoring@usgs.gov

Gulf Coast Landscape Conservation Liaison
Laurie Rounds
(240) 753-4471
laurie.rounds@noaa.gov

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