

Walker Family recognized by Texas Parks & Wildlife with Lone Star Land Steward Award

Established in 1996, the annual Lone Star Land Steward Awards recognize private landowners in Texas for their contributions to natural resource conservation and management. Private landowners are the key to effective habitat management in Texas, since 95 percent of Texas is privately-owned or operated. The program is designed to educate landowners and the public and to encourage participation in habitat conservation.

The “7 Oaks Ranch” of Crockett and Val Verde County has been selected to receive the 2021 award representing the Edwards Plateau Eco-Region. The property is located south of Ozona, Texas and northwest of Del Rio, TX within the Pecos and Devils River watersheds and at a meeting point of the Chihuahua Desert and Edwards Plateau convergence.

7 Oaks Ranch is a recreational, hunting and livestock property primarily focused on wildlife conservation and responsible land stewardship. The ranch was originally founded in 1934 and has been operated by the Walker Family for three generations beginning in the early 1960’s. Since 2005, the ranch has been jointly managed by ranch owner Kelly W. Walker, Sr. and his three sons Wayne, Philip & Caton. In March 2020, the three sons took on the leading role in managing the ranch following the passing of Kelly W. Walker, Sr.

“This award is a tremendous honor for our family, and we are grateful to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Foundation for bestowing it upon us. It’s a fitting tribute to our recently departed father, Kelly W. Walker, Sr., who personally invested with our family to achieve a multi-decade turnaround of the property after our grandmother, Ellen Ward, passed away in 1998 and Jack Ward in 2005. Dad was proud of his time living in Crockett and Val Verde as a young boy and other times throughout his life. We miss him greatly, and we’re happy that we were able to learn of this award before his passing,” states son Caton Walker.

“The award is a testament to the efforts of my brother, Philip, who has devoted significant amounts of time over the last eight years to making these conservation gains happen, both through his personal legwork and by building productive relationships with our many partners,” said Wayne Walker.

For decades, 7 Oaks Ranch mainly focused on raising large numbers of sheep and goats which had detrimental effects on range health due to overgrazing. The ranch focus changed dramatically when eldest son Wayne used the property – and many other landowners’ properties in the region – as a subject for his thesis project while working on his master’s degree in 2000. Soon thereafter, the ranch began de-prioritizing livestock in favor of practices to achieve long-term range restoration and

wildlife management goals. Prescribed fire was introduced in 2009 with assistance from Dr. Charles Taylor of the Sonora A&M Research Station and also with support of The Academy of Ranch Management.

7 Oaks Ranch focuses on a holistic approach to habitat management. A team of biologists and other partners were consulted to get the ranch pointed in the right direction, starting with a Wildlife Management Plan and an updated grazing plan. In addition, the Ag Appraisal was transferred to a Wildlife Valuation as the focus of 7 Oaks transitioned to wildlife and land stewardship. Wildlife Systems of San Angelo was hired to restructure the hunting model and assist the ranch in getting approved for the Texas Parks & Wildlife's Managed Lands Deer Permit Program in 2016.

The primary management goal of 7 Oaks Ranch is to improve range conditions and increase native ecosystem biodiversity following decades of overgrazing. This goal is accomplished through managing the range resource at a landscape scale by restoring the natural balance of the main ingredients needed by the arid grassland landscape (prescribed fire, herbivory under light to moderate stocking rates with the effective rotation and rainfall). Active management to achieve this balance began in the mid-2000's and the land is responding well – diverse native grasslands and native forbs are returning and woody species canopy cover is decreasing. This, in turn, is creating or restoring degraded habitats, thereby improving ecosystem health, and increasing the quantity, quality and diversity of native wildlife on the ranch. The Walker Family has observed species such as Bobwhite Quail for the first time in recent years. Deer herd quality is improving dramatically. Turkey numbers are up. Non-game species such as the Texas Horned Lizards, Elf Owls, Screech Owls and numerous snake species have been observed in increasing numbers in just the past couple of years alone. “The overall wildlife management goal of the ranch is to maximize what we've been given to the fullest extent and to use it to help others,” states Ranch Manager Philip Walker.

The holistic approach to ecosystem management mainly utilizes the “tool” of prescribed fire. Over 1800 acres were burned during 2019/2020 through a collaborative effort with the Texas Parks & Wildlife Foundation, Quail Forever and Desert Door Distillery. “Dollar for dollar, prescribed fire is the best way to control invasive brush, renew the grasslands and restore the soil,” says Philip Walker. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), US Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy and Crockett & Val Verde County Volunteer Fire Departments have also been critical partners who have supported the ranch's turn-around in the areas of prescribed fire, mechanical brush removal and infrastructure replacement and repair. The entire ranch has benefitted from being treated with prescribed fire since 2009.

Other ecological practices on the ranch include native seed planting, pollinator habitat creation, bird/bat/owl boxes, mechanical removal of invasive cedar, cowbird management, increase in surface water habitat and feral hog management. The

ranch also focuses on preservation of the area's dark skies and is a member of the International Dark Skies Association. Past and current range restoration and wildlife management practices on the property have been completed in cooperation with Laura Bush's "Texan By Nature", Texas Wildlife Association, Texas Parks & Wildlife, Texas AgriLife Extension, Monarch Watch, Texas A&M Sonora Experiment Station and Borderlands Research Institute.

"We want to give a big shout out to our hunting, livestock, academic and conservation partners and all the people who have supported us over the years. "Thank You!" said Caton, Philip and Wayne Walker.

Natural resources that provide income to the ranch include livestock grazing and commercial hunting but, like many ranches, maintaining a strong income flow is a constant challenge. The ranch has a proactive volunteer program which provides needed assistance in the field to accomplish aggressive land restoration goals. Volunteers have come from regional universities including Sul Ross State University, Angelo State University and Texas State University.

7 Oaks Ranch supports various regional organizations including The Shumla Foundation (rock art), The Society for Range Management, Texas Historical Commission's "Heritage Trails Program", The Devils River Conservancy and the Ozona Chamber of Commerce.

Originally all six Eco-Region honorees of the Lone Star Steward Award were due to be recognized in May 2020 at the Hyatt Regency in Austin but, due to Coronavirus prevention measures, the event has been rescheduled as a virtual program to be held May 27, 2021. Visit https://tpwd.texas.gov/landwater/land/private/lone_star_land_steward/ for more information.