

**Attwater's Prairie Chickens on the Edge:  
Galveston County, Texas**

**James F. Bergan, Ph.D.**

Jim Bergan was born and raised in Michigan City, IN. He attended Purdue University and majored in Forestry with a specialization in Wildlife Management. Following 2 years of an industrial internship with the Indiana Division of Wildlife during his undergraduate studies, he took a job as technician with the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory in South Carolina. He then attended graduate school at Texas Tech University working on a thesis project titled, "Aggression and Habitat Segregation among diving ducks wintering in South Carolina." Bergan remained at Texas Tech University and completed his doctoral dissertation, titled, "Survival and habitat use of mallards wintering in the Playa Lakes Region." Following graduation, he took a position as South Florida Waterfowl Program Leader in Okeechobee. In 1991, Bergan returned to Texas taking a position with the Nature Conservancy as the Mad Island Marsh Project Manager located at the Clive Runnells Family Mad Island Marsh Preserve in Matagorda County. Through a variety of conservation partnerships with corporations, foundations, local communities, and other NGO's, the Mad Island Marsh Project was developed as a model for the initial habitat restoration, enhancement, and research initiatives, becoming the Coastal Region Land Steward for the Conservancy. In February, 1998, Bergan became the Conservancy's Coastal Field Representative and opened up a new office in Corpus Christi to focus science, planning, and conservation action upon the Laguna Madre Region in addition to existing project oversight responsibilities.

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The Attwater's prairie chicken (APC) (*Tympanuchus attwateri*) has persisted in southern Galveston County, Texas despite a severe loss of coastal prairie habitat and deterioration of remaining grasslands. Historically, up to 332 APC's have been reported for the county. Presently, the only occupied habitat is located at the Galveston Bay Prairie Preserve (GEPP), owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy of Texas. This preserve, located north of Moses Lake, was donated to the Conservancy in 1995, by Mobil. The GBPP, consisting of 2,223 acres, was historically managed as a cattle ranch as well as for many predictions that it would be extirpated. The population has declined to a low of 10 in 1995, but in March 1998, an estimate of 36 APC's was documented. Overgrazing, Chinese tallow (*Sapium sebiferum*) infestation, brush encroachment, lack of proper fire management, introduction of tame pasture grasses, imported red fire ants (*Solenopsis invicta*), and urban sprawl have all acted to impact this population. Supplemental releases of APC's have taken place in late summer of 1996 (n=19), 1997 (n=18), and 1998 (n=2). Survival estimates have been surprisingly high relative to other documented releases of species from the order, Galliformes. During February 1997 (7 months post release), the survival estimate was 42%. Through March 1998, 5 birds had been recorded as mortalities from the 1997 release, 1 bird experienced a failed radio transmitter, the status of 4 birds is unknown, and 8 birds survived (s=0.44).

Presently, stewardship priorities include: 1) working with the APC Recovery Team to ensure persistence of the native APC genetic reservoir through supplemental releases, 2) implement proactive exotic brush control program to eradicate Chinese tallow tree, 3) reintroduce fire to ensure continued woody brush suppression and maximize restoration potential of site, 4) modify grazing management to allow longer deferrals, better grazing distribution, and recovery of overgrazed, species-poor areas, 5) design a vegetation monitoring system, which will quantify habitat restoration efforts, and 6) develop a community outreach and conservation education initiative with Texas City and other local communities to demonstrate the importance of APC and tallgrass coastal prairie restoration/conservation.