

# Mary Jo Bogatto

## TEEA 2013 Winner: Individual



Mary Jo Bogatto began Cactus Creek Ranch in 1995 when the 400 acres, which shares its eastern fence line with Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge in Cameron County, was mostly barren soil with a few blades of grass, mesquite trees, and local cacti. Her dream was to reestablish the native habitat and turn the ranch into an international learning center.

Ms. Bogatto immediately went to work making her dream a reality. In 1996, she worked with the Texas Nature Conservancy to plant 20,000 native plants throughout the ranch to restore plant diversity and habitat for ocelots, Aplomado falcons, and Texas horned lizards. She constructed ponds and wetlands that sustain numerous plant and animal species such as alligators, turtles, and a multitude of fish.

As president of Friends of Laguna Atascosa NWR, Ms. Bogatto played a key role in the acquisition of 27,000 acres of South Padre Island. She shares her enthusiasm and conservation knowledge as a certified Master Naturalist, hunter and junior angler instructor, and hunting and fishing guide with countless others. She raises awareness in Texas schools by hosting neighborhood school groups at the ranch where they can learn firsthand about native plants, habitat restoration, and birding, and through an activity book and curriculum she developed and copyrighted, *Conservation in the Curriculum*.

Ms. Bogatto also allows CCR to be used for numerous events and environmental studies. Currently, these activities are taking place on the ranch: the CCR and the Laguna Atascosa NWR are conducting a five-year study on duck nesting boxes and nesting structures for hawks and owls; the Texas Department of Transportation is working to create and construct the first protected ocelot crossings; and Texas Parks & Wildlife Department hosts Outdoor Spotlight, a hands-on camping workshop for

families. CCR has also hosted events for programs such as Ducks Unlimited, Valley Sportsmen, Texas Game Wardens Association, 4-H, and the local Boys and Girls Club.

Restoration has been so successful that the ranch has been added to the Great Texas Birding Trail while frequent bird bandings—attaching a band around a bird's leg or wing in order to identify individual birds from the band's unique number—help to develop scientific data on migratory and native birds. Ms. Bogatto dedicated 18 years of tireless work to restore Cactus Creek Ranch to its native habitat and serves as a model for habitat and conservation practices—a success that was recently rewarded with TPWD's Lone Star Land Stewards Award.