

AUDUBON CONSERVATION RANCHING



PROTECTING BIRDS
- *BY RESTORING* -
GRASSLANDS

PROGRAM PROTOCOLS

REGION: Texas Oaks and Prairies

December 2019

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Native grasslands are among the most altered and imperiled ecosystems in the world and one of the least protected. Throughout the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, these critical ecosystems are dwindling at an alarming rate as tracts are fragmented and degraded through unsustainable agricultural uses, proliferation of invasive plants and vegetation, encroaching human development, and poor grazing practices. As a result, many birds and other wildlife are edging closer to endangerment and even extinction.

Audubon addresses loss in ecosystem function and health through the conservation of focal bird species and the habitat they depend upon. We help the environment by helping birds. Since the majority of remaining grasslands are privately owned, grassland bird conservation can only be achieved through cooperative approaches that work with the farmers and ranchers that live and work on these lands. The Audubon Conservation Ranching program is an innovative, market-based approach that connects conservation-conscious consumers to farmers and ranchers that employ bird-friendly management practices in raising their livestock.

Each participating rancher will adopt a Habitat Management Plan (HMP) that is uniquely developed for their operation to address site-specific habitat and bird conservation opportunities. These plans are adaptive and can be modified over time to address changes in the landscape and landowner objectives. Audubon uses a “Bird-friendliness Index” to monitor birds on every certified ranch.

Program certification is achieved by following the HMP and a set of program protocols. The program rewards Audubon-certified ranchers by connecting them to premium consumer markets, thus providing continuing benefits to birds and people that share the land. Program certification is maintained annually through a third-party verification audit.

Regional Priority/Target Grassland Bird Species

Breeding	Wintering
Northern Bobwhite	Eastern Meadowlark
Dickcissel	Henslow's Sparrow
Eastern Meadowlark	Le Conte's Sparrow
Grasshopper Sparrow	Northern Harrier
Painted Bunting	Savannah Sparrow
Lark Sparrow	Sedge Wren
Loggerhead Shrike	Western Meadowlark
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher	Field Sparrow
Bell's Vireo	Harris's Sparrow
Bewick's Wren	Burrowing Owl
Black-capped Vireo	
Cassin's Sparrow	
Rufous-crowned Sparrow	
Yellow-breasted Chat	
Field Sparrow	
Greater Prairie Chicken	
Henslow's Sparrow	
Upland Sandpiper	



PROGRAM STANDARDS

The Audubon Conservation Ranching program standards are a set of rules and expectations that must be met for program certification. Principle among these is adherence to an Audubon-approved Habitat Management Plan (HMP). These standards provide a framework for participating producers to sustainably manage farms and ranches to benefit grassland bird species, while meeting specified practices for grassland and pasture management, forage consumption, animal health and welfare, and environmental sustainability. The annual third-party verification process provides assurance to consumers that Audubon-certified products meet program standards.

To receive and maintain certification, all properties enrolled in the Audubon Conservation Ranching Program must meet standards in 4 key areas:

- 1. HABITAT MANAGEMENT**
- 2. FORAGE AND FEEDING**
- 3. ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE**
- 4. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

1.

Certification is granted to farms or ranches which demonstrate compliance with the protocols contained within applicable Audubon Conservation Ranching Standards, as described below. Failure to meet these requirements will lead to the denial or withdrawal of certification for the audited farm or ranch.

Standards include both Required (R) and Suggested (S) protocols.

Required (R) protocols are designated as R(1), R(3), or R(3+):

- R(1) protocols are the most critical and require full compliance prior to certification being granted.
- R(3) protocols require full compliance by the end of the third year of certification. The 3-year transition period for these protocols recognizes additional time may be needed for operations to plan, finance, and implement certain program requirements.
- R(3+) protocols may take longer than 3 years to fully implement, and this will be noted on the HMP.

Suggested (S) protocols are aimed at encouraging continual improvement on enrolled farms and ranches. Noncompliance with one or a few of these Suggested protocols will not result in denial of certification. However, operators must demonstrate continual progress in meeting Suggested protocols with each successive audit until conformance with at least 75% of applicable Suggested protocols is achieved within 10 years.

Conservation Ranching Program Protocols

HABITAT MANAGEMENT	
<p>Each farm or ranch certified through the Conservation Ranching program must meet a set of protocols for bird habitat management that occur at 3 levels:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. General protocols that apply to every participating farm or ranch. 2. Regional habitat management protocols that define specific management requirements and performance benchmarks appropriate to that state or ecoregion. 3. Ranch-specific management requirements established in an Audubon-approved Habitat Management Plan (HMP). 	
GENERAL HABITAT MANAGEMENT PROTOCOLS	
1.1 R(1)	Remnant native prairie must not be converted.
1.2 R(1)	Reduction in perennial grassland acreage is prohibited (unless specifically noted in the HMP). Renovation of introduced grass plantings is allowed if reseeded to more beneficial perennial grassland or annual forages necessary to implement HMP grazing plans.
1.3 R(1)	New perennial plantings must not include exotic forages, unless specifically noted in the HMP. Exotic forages may be planted into croplands as short- term cover crops, and these may be grazed for forage.
1.4 R(1)	Fragmentation of grassland must be minimized, according to the recommendations of the HMP. New infrastructure needed to support agriculture must be placed as near as possible to existing roads or other development. Wherever practicable, efforts should be made to minimize fragmentation and habitat impacts in the siting of energy resource development facilities and road networks.
1.5 R(1)	Open grasslands across the farm must be maintained and/or increased. Tree encroachment should be prevented, and new tree planting in grassland areas is prohibited, except for new plantings adjacent to farmsteads, buildings, riparian areas, etc.
1.6 R(1)	Where reclamation of disturbed areas occurs (e.g., oil and gas pads, go-back lands, watering, salt, bedgrounds, erosional features, relocated roads, etc.), the seed mix must be comprised of native species.
1.7 R(3)	All stock water tanks shall be equipped with wildlife escape routes.
1.8 R(3)	At least 50% of the grassland on the farm or ranch must be maintained as permanent pasture; native prairie, native warm-season grass (NWSG) or wildlife-friendly cool-season grass (CSG) plantings. <i>Note: This may include whole fields enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), but not field buffer/border CRP practices.</i>
1.9 R(3)	At least 25% of the grassland area must be native prairie, or established to native grasses.

1.10 R(3+)	Efforts must be undertaken to control invasive species within native grasslands, according to the recommendations of the HMP. Control of invasive woody plants is required, where possible, except where native shrubs less than 15-feet tall are desirable for thermal and escape cover. <i>Note: Spot-treating native grasslands to control invasive species with selective herbicides is allowed as prescribed in the HMP.</i>
1.11 S	NWSG hay should be harvested no more than once annually to provide ample time to re-grow next year's nesting cover.
1.12 S	Not more than 50% of CSG acres should be hayed twice within the same year.
1.13 S	Hay, haylage, or silage operations should minimize direct impacts on wildlife by using a flushing bar. Cutting from the outside of the field into the middle should be avoided to prevent trapping or killing wildlife.
REGIONAL HABITAT MANAGEMENT PROTOCOLS Region: Texas Oaks and Prairies	
R (3+)	Conservation Ranches will consist of a minimum of 500 acres of perennial grassland, with at least 25% being native prairie/range and no more than 5% being monotypic seeded grassland. Perennial grassland acreage may include seasonal, temporary and ephemeral wetlands.
R (3)	Stocking rate and grazing duration must be managed through the winter to provide nesting cover of 8 to 16-inch stubble growth on at least 25% of native rangeland for the following year.
R (3)	If the ranch is in the bobwhite quail priority area, grazing levels should leave a minimum 250 nest sites per acre on at least 25% of the native rangeland on the ranch. Nest sites are defined as bunchgrass clumps, about 9 inches in diameter and at least 8 inches tall, but preferably, 12- to 16-inches tall.
R (1)	Forage quantity estimation should occur in October at the end of the growing season and stocking rates should be adjusted according to the ranch's drought management plan.
R (3+)	Wherever practicable, exotic grass pasture and hayfields should be converted to native pastures and hayfields. Enrollment in applicable federal or state conservation incentive programs is encouraged to help defray the costs.
R (1)	Harvest of native hay shall not occur between March 1 and July 1. No more than 50% of exotic hay shall be harvested prior to July 1.
R (3)	Grassland buffers and borders associated with crop land must be maintained in areas of at least 30-feet wide except where crop fields adjoin grassland.
R (3)	Periodic disturbance to set back woody succession, such as prescribed burning, shallow discing, or periodic grazing, is required to maintain ground-level openness.
S	Burning should not be carried out during primary nesting season March 1 to July 1.
S	Native warm season grass (NWSG) plantings should include a local suitable mix of at least 4 native forb species. <i>Note: Suitable forbs may include but are not limited to Maximillian sunflower, Western ragweed, Englemann daisy, Partridge pea, and Purple prairie clover.</i>

HABITAT MANAGEMENT PLAN (HMP) PROTOCOLS

The Approved HMP for each participating farm or ranch must include:

- An Ecological Site Description.
- A list of priority bird species and description of general habitat.
- A brief, farm-scale review of the current extent and quality of habitat available to priority birds.
- An accurately-marked Plan Map (e.g., aerial photo, hand-drawn map, etc.) which includes the following:
 1. Unique identification number for each pasture or field unit. (The use of Tract and Field Numbers assigned to properties enrolled in USDA Farm Services Agency programs is preferred.)
 2. Identification of vegetative cover for each unique pasture/field unit (i.e., grass or crop species, forest type, etc.).
 3. Identification of any important bird habitat management/protection areas (e.g., roosts, leks, prairie dog towns, wetlands).
- List of invasive/noxious weeds present on the farm.
- Reference to conservation or management plans, such as NRCS/SWCD Soil and Water Conservation Plans, and the areas of the property to which they apply.
- General and/or pasture/field-level habitat management goals and objectives:
 1. A defined grazing system, plan, or approach.
 2. Management actions, which may include fire management, mechanical harvest/removal, planting, or other actions needed to meet the management objective.
 3. Timeline for accomplishing management objectives (this may include an outline of annual milestones/actions to accomplish each management objective).
 4. Reference to detailed management guidance provided by accompanying fact sheets or internet-based information sources
 5. Reference to cost-share, incentive or grant programs applicable to assist with plan implementation.

The HMP is intended to be adaptive. Changes are expected to occur over time, but these must be approved by Audubon staff.

1.29 R(1)	The HMP has been developed in partnership with or under the direction of Audubon staff.
1.30 R(1)	A grazing system has been developed that defines combination of stocking rate, rest and rotation that improves range quality and grassland bird habitat over time. The final plan will represent a conservative approach to range/pasture management.
1.31 R(1)	Some technique is used to monitor range condition by pasture or paddock to ensure habitat goals are met according to the HMP. Range condition should be documented when livestock are moved among pastures.
1.32 R(3)	Grazing paddocks or pastures must be established according to plans laid out in the HMP.
1.33 R(3)	Grazing regime occurs according to the HMP, including the maintenance of areas designated as ungrazed or wildlife refugia. Documentation is maintained.
1.34 R(3)	Fire management, mechanical harvest/removal, planting, and other management actions are being implemented according to the HMP.

FORAGE AND FEEDING	
The Program certification includes protocols that ensure livestock can freely graze open grasslands. The protocols seek to minimize grain-based feed supplementation, as well as prohibit the use of antibiotics, animal byproducts, and GMO feed.	
2.1 R(1)	No feedlots or confined feeding operations are allowed.
2.2 R(1)	In-pasture feeding of grain and/or high-energy feedstocks is allowed as an interim measure during adverse weather, immediately pre- and post-calving period, and/or the final 90 days prior to slaughter. However, grain-based feed must not be provided on a free-choice basis and should not exceed 1.5% of the animal's body weight per day. Animals fed over these limits must be tagged or marked as they are no longer eligible for the program.
2.3 R(1)	Any supplemental feed should be spatially dispersed or presented in moveable feed bunks to minimize damage to soil health and conditions.
2.4 R(1)	No feed may contain antibiotics or ionophores.
2.5 R(1)	No feed may contain animal byproducts.
2.6 S	No genetically modified (GMOs) seeds or crops should be used in feed or food products (e.g., Roundup Ready or Bt crops).

ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE

Audubon's Conservation Ranching Program is focused on the restoration and maintenance of healthy, native grasslands that are managed largely or in part through sustainable grazing practices. Audubon recognizes that ranch operations and practices will vary across the landscape and depending upon the scale of operations and that producers understand and are committed to properly caring for livestock. All ranchers and producers participating in Audubon's Conservation Ranching Program must adhere to livestock production methods that reflect best practices for animal health and welfare. Persons who willfully mistreat animals will not be tolerated in this program.

The following protocols are the minimum requirements for the care and handling of livestock:

3.1 R(1)	All producers must follow known cattle/bison behavioral principles when working with their cattle/bison, where livestock are permitted to follow their natural and instinctive behaviors. Cattle/bison should remain on healthy pastures and shall not be confined except when providing veterinary care, for protection against inclement weather, or when handling and shipping. (www.grandin.com , www.stockmanship.com , http://www.bqa.org/programs/stockmanship-stewardship)
3.2 R(1)	Cattle/bison shall be kept in good health status at all times. Body Condition Scores (BCS) should fall within the BCS 4 – 7 range at all times of the year for each class of cattle/bison for minimum of 90% of all cattle/bison on the farm/ranch. <i>Note: The Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) has a BCS chart that details body condition scoring and provides images as well as scoring ranges. This can be found at www.beefimprovement.org.</i>
3.3 R(1)	Clean sources of water must be constantly provided to all cattle/bison throughout the year, and cattle/bison must be provided with adequate nutrition to meet their daily needs at all times of the year.
3.4 R(1)	Consumption of grains must be within a balanced ruminant diet that maintains the animal's ability to efficiently digest natural forages.
3.5 R(1)	Sick or injured animals must be treated to relieve their symptoms. Herd health and vaccination records must be maintained on cattle/bison at all times.
3.6 R(1)	Sub-therapeutic antibiotic use is strictly prohibited. Animals treated with antibiotics (including injectables and feed additives) for injury or illness must be tagged or marked as they are no longer eligible for the program.
3.7 R(1)	Animals must not be treated with hormones of any type.
3.8 R(1)	The handling and movement of cattle/bison must be managed as quietly and patiently as possible to prevent stress or injury. Electric prods are only to be used when the animal or a person is in jeopardy and only then as a means of last resort.
3.9 R(1)	All slaughter facilities used by producers must be USDA-Inspected or State inspected. Declaration of Product ID and Integrity must be signed by slaughter facilities handling Audubon Certified cattle/bison, indicating the facility can demonstrate clear chain of custody for Audubon Certified livestock and/or livestock products, and the operation meets or exceeds industry standards for animal handling.

3.10 R(1)	<p>Young animals may be purchased from non-Audubon Certified operations, provided: a) documentation of prior administration of vaccinations and/or medications is obtained from the seller; and b) an affidavit is obtained from the seller attesting that the animals were raised in conformance with the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sub-therapeutic antibiotic use is strictly prohibited. Animals treated with antibiotics (including injectables and feed additives) for injury or illness must be tagged or marked as they are not eligible for the program. Animals must not be fed any animal byproducts or be treated with hormones of any type. No feed may contain antibiotics or ionophores.
3.11 R(3+)	<p>Cattle/bison handling facilities must be constructed and maintained to facilitate ease of cattle/bison handling, comfort, safety, and calmness. Suggested guidelines for the construction and design of facilities can be found at www.grandin.com.</p>

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

The Audubon Conservation Ranching Program seeks to demonstrate that cattle/bison ranching can be an integral part of a healthy grassland ecosystem. Bird conservation is the ultimate goal of the certification, but this comes with the expectation that ranch management practices will lead to more broad environmental benefits. Environmental sustainability protocols ensure that ranching practices will result in cleaner streams, healthier soils, more pollinators for plants, and more carbon stored in the soil.

4.1 R(1)	Broadcast spraying of any chemical insecticide, herbicide, or fungicide is prohibited, unless specifically approved in the HMP for the control of undesirable species or vegetation.
4.2 R(1)	Seed treated with 'Neonicotinoid' insecticide seed dressings must be avoided.
4.3 R(1)	Pesticides containing "Neonicotinoid" substances must be avoided.
4.4 R(1)	Poisons must not be used to control predators.
4.5 R(3)	Unless specifically allowed in the HMP, grazing livestock may not have unrestricted access to riparian areas along streams second order or larger. Wetlands such as springs or fens may require similar protections as outlined in the HMP. Flash grazing of protected riparian buffers is permitted, as defined by NRCS Prescribed Grazing standards (528-1).
4.6 R(3)	Measures must be taken to protect streams from contamination by sediment, manure, or chemicals.
4.7 R(3)	Control measures for internal and external parasites must be limited to products that do not negatively impact non-target organisms.
4.8 S	Any fertilizer usage should follow a nutrient management plan to minimize runoff into streams.
4.9 S	No genetically engineered crops should be grown anywhere on the farm or ranch.
4.10 S	Chemical fallow should not be used to kill annual weeds after winter cereal crops are harvested unless approved in the HMP.



Declaration of Compliance and Understanding

I hereby agree to comply with the Audubon Conservation Ranching Program Protocols related to habitat management, forage and feeding, animal health and welfare, and environmental sustainability. My signature below acknowledges my understanding and agreement to implement the practices identified within the approved Habitat Management Plan for my ranch/farm operation.

I understand that bird species must be monitored as part of the certification of my property. I agree to allow staff of the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (or other Audubon partner) to enter my property and conduct this required monitoring. Monitoring results will be provided to me, shared with conservation planners, and may also be shared with the public via Audubon and retail marketing venues.

I understand that my participation in the Conservation Ranching Program is contingent on my cooperation and compliance with program protocols, and that this compliance will be verified through an annual ranch audit. Audubon retains the right to deny program participation if I fail to meet or make progress toward Habitat Management Plan implementation based on certification audit results.

I am fully aware that I may withdraw my participation in the Audubon Conservation Ranching Program at any time in written form.

Name (printed): _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Name (printed): _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____



Audubon Conservation Ranching Program Affidavit – Purchased Animals

Required Criteria for Purchased Animals

Operations participating in the Audubon Conservation Ranching Program may purchase young animals from non-Audubon Certified operations, provided an affidavit is obtained from the seller attesting that animals were raised in conformance with the following criteria:

1. Sub-therapeutic antibiotic use is strictly prohibited. Animals treated with antibiotics (including injectables and feed additives) for injury or illness must be tagged or marked as they are not eligible for the program.
2. Animals must not be fed any animal byproducts or be treated with hormones of any type.
3. No feed may contain antibiotics or ionophores.

Declaration: By signing below, the seller and purchaser of livestock to be sold through the Audubon certification program declare that the above listed criteria have been met.

NAME OF SUPPLIER: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

NAME OF PURCHASER: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____



**Declaration of Product ID and Integrity for Livestock Slaughter and
Meat Processing Facilities Handling Audubon-Certified Products**

I attest, as a representative of: _____,
Name of Service Provider (please print)

that appropriate steps are being taken to preserve the identity and protect the integrity of products being handled on behalf of:

Name of Audubon-Certified Operation or Business

These steps include, but are not limited to:

- **Animal/Product Segregation and Tracking:** The operation can demonstrate clear chain of custody for Audubon Certified livestock and/or livestock products, with records that document intake and origin of animals/products, segregation and tracking through slaughter, processing, and packaging, for each lot of final product bearing an Audubon Certified content claim. Steps are taken to ensure there is no commingling of like products (certified and non-certified).
- **Food Safety and Consumer Protection:** The operation has internal programs that monitor and ensure the continued safety and security of live animals and livestock products within their custody. The operation is in compliance with USDA or State inspection requirements, and meets federal and state employment regulations.
- **Animal Handling:** The operation meets or exceeds industry standards for animal handling and welfare. When handling Audubon Certified live animals, the operation complies with Audubon guidelines which prohibit treating or feeding livestock with antibiotics or growth-promoting hormones.

I declare that the foregoing is true and correct.

Name (printed): _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Title (printed): _____