

The Arroyo Colorado Watershed Partnership Newsletter



Spring 2023

San Benito Wetlands drew international crowd during 29th Annual RGV Birding Festival

By Jaime Flores

The restoration of the 65 acres of wetlands and riparian habitat at the San Benito Wetlands is one of the most exciting on-going environmental projects in the Rio Grande Valley, and recently visitors from all over the world experienced it during the 29th Annual RGV Birding Festival.

The wetlands have attracted numerous rare birds in recent years, and in 2022 the RGV Birding Festival got special permission to visit the site during the festival for the first time since the wetlands had been restored. The initiative was a great success, and 386 visitors from 39 states and six countries visited the wetlands during the festival, Nov. 9-13, 2022.

Phase I of the wetland project began in 2009 with the restoration of four 1-acre polishing ponds. Over the course of 12 years and three additional phases, a total of 65 acres have been restored. As soon as the first ponds were completed and filled with water, birds and all types of wildlife began flocking to the wetlands. Since then, it has become a birding hotspot.

Members of the Arroyo Colorado Audubon Society discovered what an attraction the wetlands can be in November 2021 when they spotted a Fork-tailed Flycatcher in the area. The Fork-tailed Flycatcher is mainly found in Mexico, Yucatan and South America, and is a rare bird to be seen in the United States. For the next two weeks, birders from all over the world flocked to catch a glimpse of the flycatcher.

Additionally, a pair of Groove-billed Ani spent the 2021 winter, spring and most of summer close to the road bridge and were viewed at every bird count. *(continued on page 4)*



Birders flocking to view the Fork-tailed flycatcher. Photo by Jaime Flores.



Fork-tailed Flycatcher. Photo by Alicia Cavazos.



New project serving socially disadvantaged farmers saw successful first year in 2022

By Jaime Flores

This past year, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension economist Dr. Samuel Zapata collaborated with the Texas Water Resources Institute and county extension agents Vidal Saenz, Ashley Gregory, Hidalgo Co., Marco Ponce, Jennifer Herrera, Cameron Co., Rolando Zamora, Willacy Co., Omar Montemayor, Starr Co., and Dr. Juan Enciso to apply for a USDA-OPPE grant.

The team was awarded a 3-year grant, and the purpose of the grant program is to train socially disadvantaged farmers

and ranchers in sustainable agricultural production and management practices through a series of workshops.

A total of six workshops were held in 2022:

- Grow Your Farm, March 10, 2022 - 30 participants
- Goats and Poultry, May 26, 2022 - 60 participants
- Citrus Health, July 14, 2022 - 30 participants
- Pasture, Range and Forage, Sept. 15, 2022 - 75 participants
- Medicinal Herbs, Dec. 6, 2022 - 63 participants
- Making Sausage from your Harvest, Dec. 13, 2022 - 21 participants

Each workshop also included an educational section focused on business planning. Landowners were informed about how to apply for cost share assistance programs through the TSSWCB and USDA-NRCS, as well as how to apply for USDA and FSA loans.

The project team is working on planning and developing more workshops for 2023, and currently 5 workshops are planned, including business planning and marketing, crop production, irrigation management, small livestock production, and value-added practices. The training workshops will be held at the Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension Center in Weslaco, and at the Texas A&M Higher Education Center at McAllen.



Making sausage by filling casing with seasoned meat. Photo by Jaime Flores.



Seasoning the pork and beef cuts to make sausage. Photo by Jaime Flores.



Grinding seasoned meat. Photo by Jaime Flores.



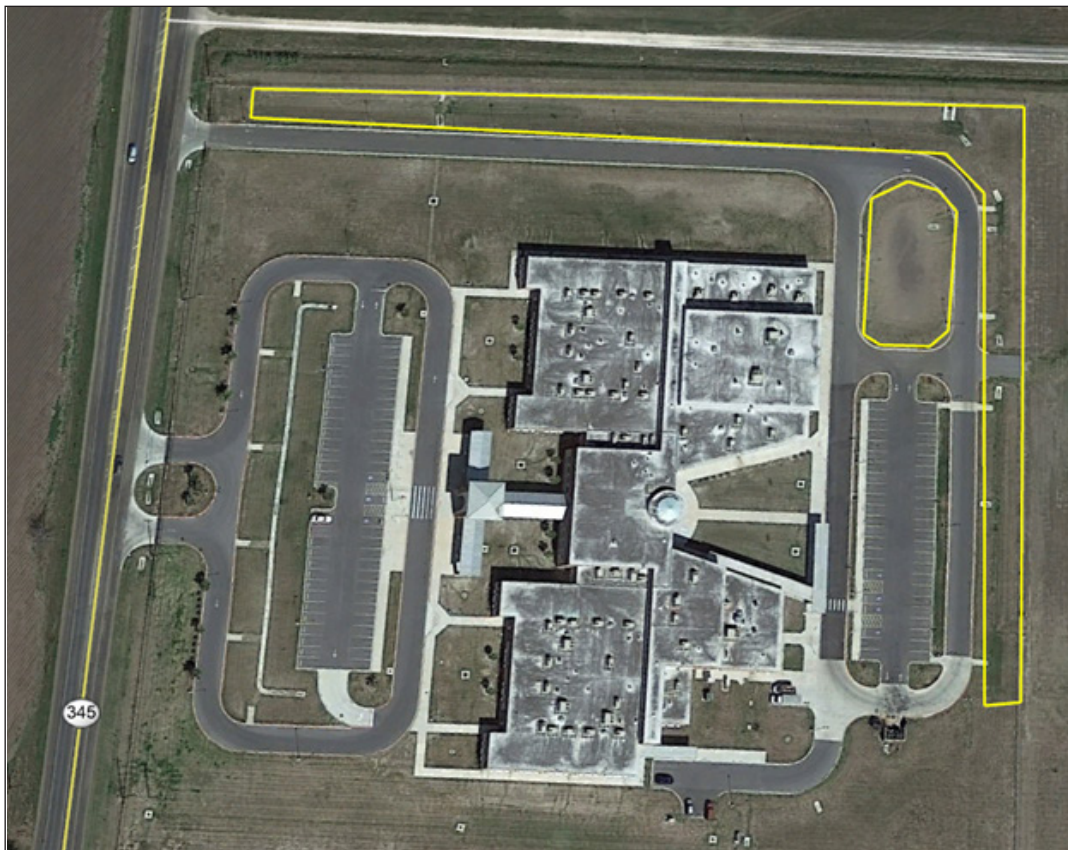
Rio Hondo ISD NPS Education and Coastal Stormwater BMP/LID Installation

By Jaime Flores

TWRI was awarded a TCEQ, CWA 319, NPS grant to provide the Rio Hondo Middle School students information on NPS pollution, water quality education and to install coastal stormwater enhancement BMPs and low impact development (LID) elements at the Rio Hondo ISD middle school to implement BMPs identified in the Arroyo Colorado WPP.

TWRI will work with native plant expert, Mike Heep, and Rio Hondo ISD to select native coastal vegetation to be planted in existing stormwater swales and detention ponds at the middle school that will reduce NPS stormwater pollution. Currently there is no native vegetation in the swales and ponds except for coastal Bermuda grass and the stormwater is starting to erode the base of the swales and ponds. The native vegetation will be planted by the middle school students and local volunteers during 2 planting day workshops. The native vegetation will not only remove NPS pollution from the stormwater but will also serve as

an outdoor classroom for the students at the middle school. Interpretive signage identifying the native vegetation planted and information on NPS pollution and pollution prevention will be installed in and around the stormwater swales and ponds. Science teachers will be able to use the area to provide project-based learning with an emphasis on key middle school earth science concepts such as erosion, sedimentation, deposition, stormwater, watersheds, ecosystems, weather and atmosphere, Point and NP Sources of pollution and BMPs to mitigate pollution. TWRI will also work with the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment at Texas State University to provide the Rio Hondo Middle School Science Teachers with Texas Stream Team certification training. Once they receive the training, the teachers will then be able to train the students to use the Texas Stream Team water quality sampling kits to determine water quality. This will provide the students will real world, hands-on training by performing physical and chemical testing. The project will begin in the Spring of 2023.



Yellow polygons represent proposed stormwater planting areas around Rio Hondo ISD Middle School.



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(continued from page 1) The Fork-tailed Flycatcher returned to the wetlands during the 2022 festival and was a huge draw to area. The total number of bird species officially documented at the wetlands increased to 219 during the festival, and it is now considered a must-visit location when birding in the Rio Grande Valley.

Read more about the festival:

- [Birding festival to offer first tours of San Benito wetlands](http://bit.ly/40mCaBv) | <http://bit.ly/40mCaBv>
- [Registration now open for Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival field trips](http://bit.ly/42VLa2m) | <http://bit.ly/42VLa2m>
- [TV celebrity 'Bee Czar' called in after city worker stung multiple times](http://bit.ly/3zd6S42) | <http://bit.ly/3zd6S42>
- [Swarm of bees almost cancels RGV Birding Festival field trip location](http://bit.ly/40Ji5VX) | <http://bit.ly/40Ji5VX>



Birders bird watching during the 29th Annual RGV Birding Festival. Photo by Jaime Flores.



Arroyo Colorado Watershed.



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