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Making preservation a civic duty

Cleveland is the first city in the area to pen an easement agreement with conservationists

By CINDY HORSWELL
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CLEVELAND - In the chilly air, Geoff Newton, armed with binoculars and a spade, carefully wove his way through thick vines, underbrush and trees that snatched at his clothing.

"That's a black willow," Newton, a master naturalist, said Friday, pointing to a tree with shiny serrated leaves sprouting near the edge of the east fork of the San Jacinto River. "You can use its bark as a toothpick and it also has a substance in the bark that makes a natural aspirin."

On the other hand, he noted the yaupon, a native Texas holly with bright red berries and thorns poking through the underbrush to his right, also can be useful.

"Its scientific name is *Ilex vomitoria*. Indians ate its berries if they needed to make themselves throw up," he smiled.

Newton was one of a half-dozen naturalists who traveled about 45 miles north of Houston to inventory the plants and wildlife on a five-acre tract that the city of Cleveland plans to permanently protect as a natural green space.

The project is the first time a city in the Houston area has joined with a conservation group, Legacy Land Trust, to create a conservation easement that legally binds the city to leave it in its natural state.

The wildlife habitat, which will be called the City of Cleveland Preserve, seems incongruous with trucks and cars that travel overhead, crossing the Texas 105 bridge that spans the river.

Traffic also barrels down U.S. 59 a block to the west.

But the collision between this natural habitat and encroaching development is what makes the site a perfect candidate for a preserve, said Jennifer Lorenz, Legacy Land Trust's executive director.

"We need to protect land with high ecological value, so that native plants and wildlife will have a place to survive," she said.

In addition, she said the preserve provides flood protection by creating a buffer zone where floodwaters can be absorbed.

A large portion of the natural habitat along the San Jacinto River already has been destroyed, she said.

"People are bulldozing the property, scraping away all the natural habitat to turn it into sand and gravel pits. Then there's nothing there for the next 30 years."

Legacy Land Trust oversees 13 other conservation easements in the Houston area that permanently protect about 2,500 acres, most of it donated by private landowners.

"This is the first municipality in the Houston area to agree to a conservation easement," Lorenz said. "The importance of this decision cannot be overstated. Unlike 97 percent of the conservation easements which are private, this easement will be open to the public for nature observation."

Cleveland City Manager Philip Cook said he proposed creating the easement after discovering the city's ownership of the five-acre tract on the river. He hopes to make it a tourist attraction.

"We're known as a blue-collar town, but we are trying to diversify our city to draw more visitors here," he said. "This preserve will be ideal for people with an interest in nature, birding or being near the river."

Legacy Land Trust volunteers plan to help create unobtrusive nature trails on the site and clear out invasive plants, such as tallow trees and privet that are not native to the area and are crowding out the natural wildlife.

In addition, plans call for the site to provide a launching point for canoes and kayaks.

"We'd also like to see the site expanded in the future. We are looking at nearby property that has some beautiful ponds," Cook said.

Friday, naturalists spent the day making lists of a plethora of wildlife found on the land.

This ranged from the persimmon tree to the parsley hawthorn.

Also prevalent were native wildflowers such as morning glories, asters and violets; and birds such as the red-shouldered hawk and the yellow rump warbler who are wintering there.

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