Caesar Kleberg Tracks

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CAESAR KLEBERG
WILDLIFE RESEARCH INSTITUTE
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Caesar Kleberg Tracks

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Learn More About CKWRI

The Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Kingsville is a Master's and Ph.D. Program and is the leading wildlife research organization in Texas and one of the finest in the nation. Established in 1981 by a grant from the Caesar Kleberg Foundation for Wildlife Conservation, its mission is to provide science-based information for enhancing the conservation and management of Texas wildlife.

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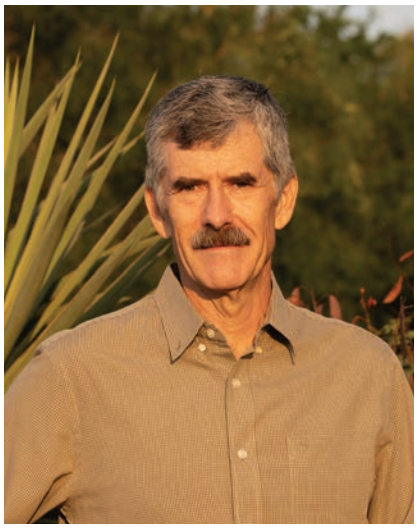
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FROM THE DIRECTOR



Just like wildlife and vegetation in the pasture, the CKWRI is always changing and adapting. This autumn, we welcomed three new faculty to the Institute. Dr. Weimin Xi is our new Frances and Peter Swenson Chair in Rangeland Restoration Ecology. Dr. Chris Malachowski is CKWRI's quantitative ecologist who will be working with many of our students and faculty to ensure their analyses are appropriate. Chris also brings a background in waterfowl ecology and management. Dr. Kayleigh Chalkowski is our wildlife disease ecologist and will be turning her focus on the many diseases that make managing Texas wildlife a challenge.

In addition to these personnel changes, CKWRI continues to expand its impact. Much of this we do through partnerships. One long-time partner is Borderlands Research Institute (BRI) at Sul Ross State University. CKWRI and BRI have a long history of collaborative research, and this year marked the beginning of an exciting new phase. Caitlin Camp Pappas enrolled as a doctoral student in the wildlife program at Texas A&M University-Kingsville (TAMUK). Her research, featured in the opening article of this issue of Caesar Kleberg Tracks, is conducted through BRI while she earns her degree through CKWRI and TAMUK. Her graduate committee has professors from both institutes. Caitlin is the first of four doctoral students who will matriculate at TAMUK while being advised by faculty from both BRI and CKWRI. This program is a productive collaboration that will expand capacity for both institutes.

Another change in our research portfolio is described on page 8. This change involves an insect that was only recently recognized as a pest attacking grasses in South Texas, the coastal prairies, and the Hill Country. Working with local ranches and a variety of other partners, CKWRI scientists are dedicated to understanding the impacts of pasture mealybugs on rangeland vegetation and the implications of those changes for wildlife.

The Tracks article found on page 12 highlights CKWRI's efforts to give our students unique experiences and skills so that they are marketable and will be a coveted force in wildlife conservation after they graduate. In service of that goal, students in the Institute's wildlife photography program recently spent 10 days in Costa Rica with their cameras, photographing wildlife, learning about a unique ecosystem, and seeing how ecotourism can help conserve wildlife and provide rewarding jobs.

Finally, CKWRI is blessed with dedicated supporters. They have changed CKWRI with their generosity and their wonderfully creativity approaches to friend-raising and fundraising. No other wildlife program in the country has supporters like CKWRI. So, enjoy this issue of Caesar Kleberg Tracks and, like the ever-changing view from your favorite hunting blind, see how CKWRI changes and adapts to best serve wildlife and those who love it.

All the best,

Dr. David Hewitt
Leroy G. Denman, Jr. Endowed Director of Wildlife Research



TRANSBOUNDARY MOVEMENTS OF BLACK BEARS AND POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF THE U.S.–MEXICO BORDER BARRIER

by Caitlin Camp Pappas, Justin French, Amanda Veals Dutt, Louis Harveson, and David Hewitt

The American black bear once occupied an extensive range across North America, from northern Canada and Alaska to northern Mexico. However, their distribution declined substantially during the early 1900's due to habitat loss, landscape fragmentation, and unregulated harvest. In Texas, black bears were completely extirpated from the state by the 1950s as populations retreated into the mountains of northern Mexico. Black bears were listed as endangered in Mexico in 1986 and in Texas in 1987. Following decades of effective management and changing public attitudes toward bears, populations in northern Mexico began to expand, and black bears naturally recolonized Texas in the late 1980's. One of the first documented signs of recolonization was the appearance of a female with cubs in Big Bend National Park.

Texas-Mexico Border - Rio Grande River

Today, black bears remain endangered in Mexico but have been reclassified as state threatened in Texas following the establishment of breeding populations in parts of the state.

Black bears are recolonizing portions of their former range in Texas, with recovery driven largely by dispersing individuals from populations in northern Mexico. Today, black bears have expanded throughout the Trans-Pecos region and into the Hill Country and parts of South Texas, raising new questions about how they will navigate increasingly human-altered landscapes. As bears recolonize Texas, they face multiple challenges, including land-use change, a changing climate, and increasing landscape fragmentation associated with urbanization, energy development, and the continued expansion of the U.S.–Mexico border barrier system. These changes may restrict bear movements and reduce connectivity between populations, potentially limiting the continued recolonization of the state and movement between Texas and Mexico.

Black bears make regular movements to and from Texas and Mexico and occupy large areas in search of food resources, mates, and new areas as populations expand. To better understand the influence of the U.S.–Mexico border barrier on black bear transboundary movement patterns, we focused on capturing and placing GPS-collars on individuals in southwest Texas, specifically Terrell, Val Verde, Kinney, and Maverick counties. Bears have been reported as far south as Starr County, and as far southeast as Duval County; however, these reports have been minimal, and no breeding populations have been documented south of Val Verde County. Since 2023, we have captured and collared 5 (2M, 3F) bears in Terrell and Val Verde counties. Due to low detections, we have augmented data from other border counties in west Texas, totaling 43 GPS-collared individuals (24M, 19F) from Brewster, Terrell, and Val Verde counties.

Female black bear after waking up from anesthesia. A GPS collar was placed to track movement patterns. Photo credit: Matt Hewitt



We have documented 9 males and 2 females making transboundary movements across the three counties, including one adult male traveling almost 100km within a one-month period from near the Devils River State Natural Area to northern Coahuila, Mexico. None of these individuals that made transboundary movements have encountered a physical barrier since where they crossed, only detection technology has been used in securing the border. The Texas-Mexico border currently has infrastructure in place in South Texas and near El Paso, with the rest of the border having detection technology. However, there is currently active construction on infrastructure along the rest of the border, such as vehicle, steel bollard, and waterborne barriers which could potentially impede the movement of black bears. Other border infrastructure such as roads, human and vehicle traffic, and lights that could deter nocturnal activity could also influence movement.

Research from other regions along the U.S.–Mexico border suggests that black bears are unable to cross certain types of infrastructure, including 30-foot steel bollard structures, while bears have been documented crossing areas with vehicle barriers. These differences in barrier permeability suggest that the type of infrastructure used along the border may play an important role in determining where bears can move between Texas and Mexico.

To assess the potential influence of the border barrier system on black bear movements, we first sought to identify the landscape features that bears use while traveling through Texas and Mexico and the areas that may serve as important travel corridors. We analyzed habitat selection during long, exploratory movements, when bears were most likely to be moving across the landscape. At the population level, bears tended to travel through concave areas, such as valleys and drainages, as well





Ph.D. Student, Caitlin Camp Pappas, taking measurements from an anesthetized female black bear.



Black bear visiting a barrel trap.

as areas with gentler terrain and greater vegetative moisture and productivity. However, we found considerable variation among individuals in how bears responded to topography while traveling. This individual variation is important because bears may respond differently to landscape barriers depending on the routes they select. Our future research will use movement simulations to incorporate this individual variation and evaluate how different types of border barriers could affect connectivity. We will simulate bear movements under three barrier scenarios representing increasing levels of resistance to movement: no barrier, a barrier that may impede or deter, but not completely prevent movement, and an impermeable barrier that prevents movement. Comparing these scenarios will allow us to assess how different levels of barrier permeability could alter the movement of black bears across the Texas–Mexico border. This will also allow us to identify important areas along the border where bears are most likely to cross, which could help guide future mitigation strategies designed to maintain movement and connectivity across the border.

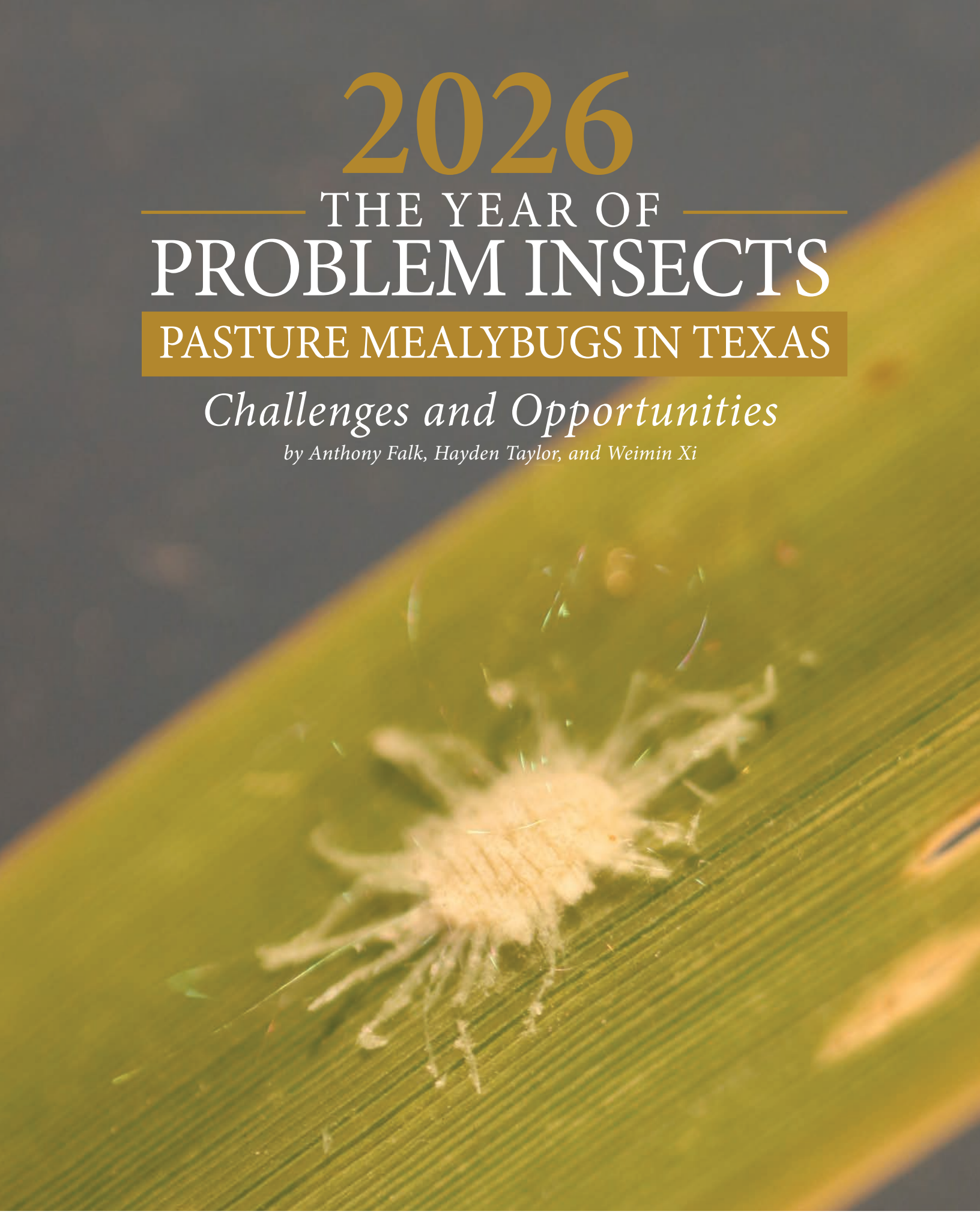
Understanding how black bears move across heterogeneous and fragmented landscapes is important for supporting the recovery of this state-threatened species in Texas and maintaining connectivity with populations in Mexico. Identifying the landscape features that facilitate movement can help inform future management decisions and conservation strategies as black bears continue their expansion in Texas.

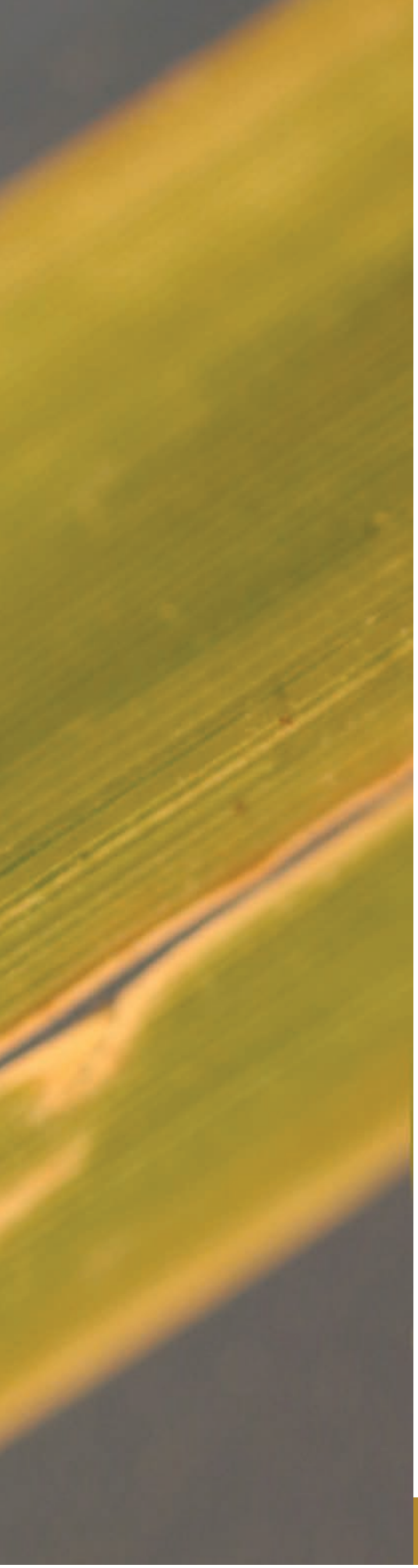
2026
THE YEAR OF PROBLEM INSECTS

PASTURE MEALYBUGS IN TEXAS

Challenges and Opportunities

by Anthony Falk, Hayden Taylor, and Weimin Xi





While much of Texas was focused on the New World screwworm (NWS) after its arrival in the state in June, another pest was quickly expanding across South, Central, and East Texas, largely unnoticed on the underside of grass leaves. Pasture mealybug (*Heliococcus summervillei*), a small, sap-sucking pest that looks fluffy with a wool-like wax coating (*Figure 1*) has now been identified in 70 counties in Texas, 22 counties in Louisiana, and 15 counties in Florida.

Pasture mealybug was first confirmed in South Texas in the spring of 2025, but is suspected to have been here for the last couple of years, possibly as early as 2022. Pasture mealybugs feed on the sap within leaves and stems of several grass species found across Texas. It is also causing extensive damage to sugarcane, corn, and sorghum in Louisiana and Florida. There is some indication from early field observations and reports from Australia that some grass species are less susceptible than others, leading to the idea that diverse stands of native grass may be able to survive this new pest through diversity.

Grass impacted by pasture mealybug will display yellow leaves that turn red, resembling drought stress when it shouldn't be. Depending on the severity, this leads to the grass becoming gray, brittle, and breaking off from the ground. This phenomenon is known as pasture dieback. The mealybug injects a toxin as it feeds, which can cause the red senescence observed as the early stages of pasture dieback. As this weakens the plant immune system, the plants are then opened up to secondary pathogenic infections. The combination of the two can lead to large areas of pasture dieback (*Figure 2*). Ranch managers are particularly concerned about how grass biomass losses translate into reduced cattle production and, ultimately, financial losses.

As researchers rush to find solutions, several insecticides have received emergency labeling. There are currently three insecticides labeled for use in range and pasture settings. The first product to be labeled was Sivanto Prime®. While Sivanto Prime® has shown to have some activity against the pasture mealybug, most results are mixed. Recently Sefina Inscalis® and Centric 40WG were also labeled for suppression of pasture mealybug in rangelands.

Figure 1: Pasture mealybug found on the underside of a leaf



Figure 2: Area of grass affected by pasture dieback

Apart from insecticides the best management recommendation available to date is to reduce available forage either through mowing or grazing. Although not researched in the U.S., natural predators have also been shown as successful control measures in other countries. With this knowledge, supporting pollinator habitat or forbs that enhance ladybeetle, lacewings, or predatory wasps may be beneficial.

If a large dieback or significant reduction in biomass occurs, restoration is likely to be required as a follow-up. Texas Native Seeds is currently working with collaborators to identify which species would be best suited to this type of restoration. We are also working with our partners in the commercial seed industry to increase seed production to be able to meet the new demand this may create.

Along with managing the pest where it is found, it is important to take action not to help advance the spread of pasture mealybug. It is currently thought that the pasture mealybug is primarily spread by equipment transport, commodity transport such as hay bales or silage, and potentially dispersal of nymphs via wind. To prevent transporting the pest it is recommended to either power wash, leave equipment on a hard surface for 48 hours, or spray with a permethrin product. Additionally, pasture mealybug can stick to clothes or shoes. A stiff-bristled brush rubbed against clothing after walking through affected areas has proven to be an effective way at reducing the spread via our foot traffic.

Regularly scouting pastures, hayfields, and rangelands will be critical at this early stage of introduction. If you suspect you have found pasture mealybugs reach out to your local Texas A&M Agrilife county extension agent, and they can help you collect a sample to send off for positive identification. Currently there is no mandatory quarantine or actions required following a positive identification.

Many questions still need science-based answers and further investigation. Urgent research is needed to better understand the biology and population dynamics of mealybugs, grass response and ecology, and the processes of pasture recovery, restoration, and improvement.

While some research is already underway, it is critical that we continue to investigate mealybug biology and population dynamics, including population surveys and assessments of insect outbreak severity. There is a clear need to develop a standardized survey protocol for affected rangelands to accurately determine the abundance and distribution of mealybugs, as well as track their population changes over time. Because a significant portion of the population may be at the base of the grass and below ground in the soil,

soil sampling should be an important part of the survey process (*Figure 3*).

Grass response and controlling factors include understanding how mealybug infestations affect rangeland biomass, productivity, plant composition, and overall ecosystem dynamics. It is especially important to study what happens after key grasses die off which species invade and replace them, and how the plant community evolves over time. It would be valuable to study how different grass species respond to varying levels of mealybug pressure. This information could provide a foundation for restoration efforts following initial mealybug surveys, especially by identifying which grass species or mixes are more resilient against mealybug damage.



Figure 3. A large number of pasture mealybugs can be seen at the base of the grass and in the soil. Photo by Weimin Xi

Restoration of heavily damaged pastures will be essential at certain stages. The extent of grassland damage underscores both a significant opportunity and an urgent need for rangeland restoration and improvement, especially through commercially available native grass seed mixes. Different grass species appear to respond differently. One important question is which grasses, including specific native seed mixes, are best suited to various levels of pasture mealybug pressure and different regions.

The role of prescribed burns as a management tool is still less known. Although prescribed fires have been observed to have less effect on mealybug populations, further field experiments are needed to confirm these findings. Additional research will help determine whether prescribed fire can play a role in managing mealybug outbreaks or supporting rangeland recovery.

Greenhouse experiments and field trials are essential for assessing the performance and suitability of various native seed mixes under different conditions. These studies can help determine which seed mixes are most appropriate for future restoration efforts in South Texas and other regions.

Pasture mealybug outbreaks are a new threat to our rangelands, and we are working diligently to identify effective solutions. We are confident that, just as we have developed successful strategies to manage the New World screwworm, we will be able to address this challenge and minimize its impact on our grasslands.

Many researchers are currently working on this issue and information is changing rapidly.

WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY STUDENTS COMPLETE SUMMER STUDY ABROAD IN *Costa Rica*



by Brian Loflin

During the summer of 2025, a group of fifteen Texas A&M-Kingsville faculty and staff made a familiarization tour to Costa Rica. Sponsored by the Office of Global Engagement and the Provost, the group experienced the culture, history and natural science of this Central American country. This initial exploration was a precursor to additional future faculty-led study abroad programs for selected students.

As a result, adjunct faculty member Brian Loflin planned a ten-day study abroad program for TAMUK students who had previously participated in the Wildlife Photography program within the Rangeland and Wildlife Sciences department.

From June 27 through July 7, 2026, ten past students experienced a for-credit wildlife photography class designed to absorb the deep Costa Rican history and culture, and to concentrate on photographing the flora, fauna, and environment of this nature-rich country. Through these activities students learned the importance of the conservation value of their photography.

"Our inaugural Costa Rica study abroad course in the Department of Rangeland and Wildlife Sciences was a huge success," stated Bart Ballard, department chair. "The students witnessed many wonders of the country and observed wildlife and ecosystems they've only dreamed of experiencing. The logistical support from the Soltis Center was fabulous and provided a solid venue for future study abroad courses to Costa Rica."

After a series of flight delays and a midnight check in to the Aurola by Marriott Hotel in San Jose, everyone partnered up and went to their rooms for a much-needed recuperation. The next day's activities were delayed until a late lunch to give everyone an opportunity to rest and recover from the previous trip delays.

While walking the streets of San Jose to find lunch, the students had the opportunity to appreciate the local people, customs, shops, and architecture. This was the introduction to a week of culture, diverse habitats from lowlands to rainforests, and wildlife.





This jade effigy is representative of the pre-Columbian artifacts at the Jade Museum.

Located in the heart of San José, the Museo del Jade y de la Cultura Precolombina presented a great introduction to 2,000 years of Costa Rica's history and ancient civilizations through a modern, immersive museum experience.

The museum is a carefully curated journey into the beliefs, rituals, and daily life of the societies that shaped the region long before European arrival. Each gallery combines clear storytelling with visually striking displays. The collection features nearly 7,000 archaeological pieces, including finely carved jade pendants, ceremonial axes, ceramics, stone sculptures and gold objects dating mainly from 500 BC to 800 AD.

The group toured Best Pineapple, an organic farm to see one of Costa Rica's most productive crops. The farm is a family unit located in rich volcanic soils farmlands. The group took a drive by tractor pulled covered trailer through the acres of pineapples in all stages of growth. An interesting characteristic is that the land must be contoured so that gravitational watering can reach every plant. This process requires clearing large parcels. However, to conserve wildlife, strips of natural vegetation are left along the sides.

After the visit to farm, the group drove to Rio Puerto Viejo to board a motorboat for a cruise on the Sarapiqui River in search of photographic subjects. Fortunately, the boat was covered and offered comfortable protection during the rain that frequented in the afternoon.

During the hour and a half excursion we encountered an exceptional variety of Costa Rica wildlife for our lenses. The surprise encounter was a White Hawk, an unusual find, plus howler monkeys, iguanas, and numerous birds.

Top photo on previous page: Green Basilisk lizard by Daphney Pena

Bottom photo on previous page (pictured L-R): Bart Ballard, Robert Schmidt, Cody Williams, Daphney Pena, Madison Cruz, Justin Hernandez, Michael Stewart, Jessica Johnston, Alexandra Perez, Lauren Smith, Jesica SanLuis, and Brian Loflin.



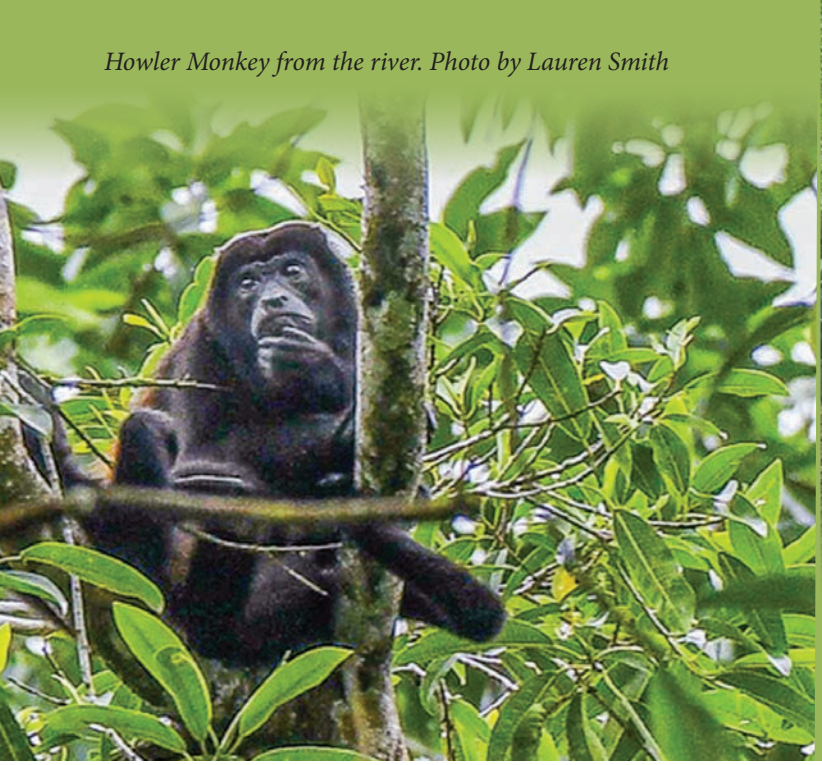
Cultivated pineapple in the field. Note mature fruits, plus numerous plants with flowering buds, the precursor to mature fruit. Photo by Brian Loflin



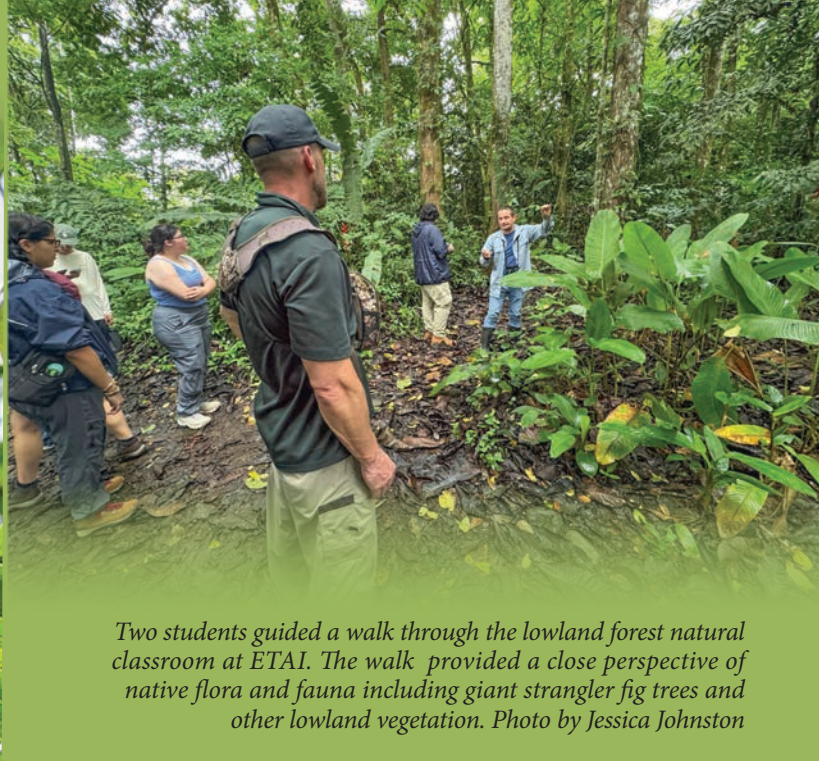
Everyone fit in our covered motor launch with cameras at the ready for a productive afternoon of photography. Immediately after launch the guide directed our attention to an adult male green basilisk "Jesus Christ" lizard, the start of continuous action. Photo by Brian Loflin



A mature White Hawk was spotted early on our river trip. While not rare, this hawk is a most infrequent sight. Everyone made good images of this bird. Photo by Michael Stewart



Howler Monkey from the river. Photo by Lauren Smith



Two students guided a walk through the lowland forest natural classroom at ETAI. The walk provided a close perspective of native flora and fauna including giant strangler fig trees and other lowland vegetation. Photo by Jessica Johnston

That night the group stayed at La Quinta Sarapiqui, a popular nature resort, combining a superb biological diversity with comfortable accommodations. It is an ideal base for avid birders and our wildlife photographers. The bungalows are surrounded by rich vegetation where we had an opportunity to photograph a variety of frogs and other fauna at night under flash and other artificial illumination.

We toured Escuela Tecnica Agricola y Industrial (ETAI) a school that graduates well-educated nature guides and hospitality workers for Costa Rica's booming ecotourism industry.

Instructors at ETAI presented our group with an overview of the 2,840-hour curriculum for educating and certifying ecotourism and hospitality guides. The courses include guide operations, working in local and protected areas, understanding use of technology, and English oriented to ecotourism.



Red-eye Tree Frog found during our night walk. Photo by Alexandra Perez

After completing the school tour, the group made their way by van through the lust countryside to San Carlos, near one of the most tourist-rich parts within north central Costa Rica. Located adjacent to the Monteverde and the Children's Rainforest lies the 550-acre Texas A&M Soltis Center for Research and Education. Located in a transition zone between lowland rainforests and highland cloud forests, this was our home for photography over the next five days.

Prior to our arrival, a shipment of thirty game cameras were deployed for fourteen days within five distinct habitats throughout the Soltis Center forests. During this period the cameras recorded over 11,000 images. Without false triggers, 118 frames had ten identifiable animal species. Interestingly, the White-nose Coati was the most frequent sighting followed by Agouti. It is important to remember that all photography of wildlife cannot be made in the forest or in the wild. Frequently, detailed images for publication or identification require careful placement, lighting and close up / macro photographic techniques. A lab studio is best suited for this photography. This is the case for the group photography of insects, reptiles, and amphibians.

To facilitate quality photography, natural sets were constructed using native habitat materials within a diffusion cube of translucent fabric. Lighting was accomplished by electronic flash with a small softbox to produce even, shadowless illumination. This setup provides exceptional access to and control of live wild subjects.

Tiny mobile subjects such as ants require special consideration for close-up photography. In general, the diffusing cube technique does not provide the control of a tiny arthropod specimen like an ant. They are simply too small and too fast for quality photography.

The solution to this issue is to confine the specimen to a small defined area. A petri dish or watch glass creates a small island that is provided to confine the subject in a much larger container filled with water. Most arthropods will not leave the confines of the "high ground' provided by the smaller dish.

Entomologists use black lights, or ultraviolet lights, to sample and study nocturnal insects in an area. The black light attracts night-flying insects, including many moths, beetles, and others. Many insects can visualize ultraviolet light, which has shorter wavelengths than light visible to the human eye. For this reason, a black light will attract different insects than a regular incandescent light. Cameras with macro lenses and electronic flash are used for the photography.





Top photo: Brian Loflin assists with electronic flash lighting in a diffusion cube with natural props for small subjects.

Middle photo: Photographing ants using the technique described. The famous Bullet Ant, known for the most painful sting in the world. Photo by Brian Loflin

Bottom collage: Selection of mammal species captured by game cameras. (Left to right, top to bottom) Agouti, White-nosed Coati, Tayra, Ocelot, Northern Tamandua, Paca.





Three-toed Sloth. Photo by Jessica Johnston

On Independence Day, the group travelled via van to Proyecto ASIS, a rescue center and sloth sanctuary located in the tropical rain forests near the Arenal Volcano area of Costa Rica. ASIS mission is to create intercultural connections and promote the building of a new environmental consciousness through service programs and educational tours.

TAMUK students in the wildlife photography program must enhance their writing skills within the classes by producing written semester projects illustrated with their photography. Moreover, they must also learn to post their images in social media, is an important tool in the communication process.

A part of the students' requirement for grade for this Study Abroad program is to write a report describing the many places visited, the photography there, and the tools and methods utilized.

Additionally, students must post their best images to Flickr and iNaturalist, two social media platforms, for introducing today's world to wildlife and conservation issues. iNaturalist's 300+ million listings are open data, used worldwide by thousands of scientists, conservationists, and researchers to further the cause of conservation.



Left: Jessica Johnston, Jesica SanLuis, and Alex Perez, found something in the trees at ASIS to photograph. All students had a professional kit of Nikon camera equipment, including long telephoto lenses. Photo by Brian Loflin



Right: Corydalus flavicornis, a Dobson fly photographed at the black light workstation. Photo by Cody Williams

Our group took the last day before the flight to extend our drive to the San Jose airport to take advantage of additional photographic opportunities. We crossed a walkway on a single lane highway bridge high over Rio Pinas Blancas. From that vantage point, a typical cross section of lowland tropical rainforest including river, riparian edges, dense forest, and the top of the canopy was appreciated. Photo by Brian Loflin.

In summary, our wildlife photography opportunity was unparalleled. We cruised rivers, photographed at night, captured images of mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and insects, as well as endless encounters with birds.

Our students have posted more than 1,000 images of over 300 species. Moreover, they have recognized that wildlife photography is not just about creating a collection of images but is a key professional skill that enables communication of conservation and management messages to landowners, agencies, legislators, and to the public.

As wildlife photographers, students participated in an important ecotourism activity. Wildlife photography is a major component of ecotourism that brings $1 billion to the country annually.

"This Costa Rica trip benefits TAMUK wildlife photography students by expanding their experience and growing their portfolios. The students also gain exposure to new cultures, environments, and wildlife. Such study abroad opportunities are life-changing for our students," said David Hewitt, Executive Director, Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute.



Silver-throated Tanager. Photo by Justin Hernandez



Green Hermit hummingbird. Photo by Cody Williams



Jim and Kathy Collins

DONOR SPOTLIGHT:
Jim and Kathy Collins

As a boy working on his uncle's ranch near Canadian, Jim Collins learned that clearing brush for cattle did not mean clearing all of it. Some thickets needed to remain for quail.

Hundreds of miles south, Kathy Cook followed her father across South Texas ranch country, listening as he explained the land and the wildlife he loved. Neither knew those childhood lessons would one day anchor their own family's conservation legacy.

"Our family is everything to both of us," Kathy says.

For Jim and Kathy Collins, ranchland is more than an investment. It is an inheritance understood through participation. Their son Vannie left private equity to manage the family's ranches and now oversees their day-to-day operation. Ranching was the only work he wanted to do from childhood. His four siblings are not involved daily, but all understand and support the family's commitment to stewarding the land.

The ranches have long been gathering places, especially during holidays. Those visits give the next generation a chance to absorb the family's values in the same way Jim and Kathy did: by spending time outdoors, accepting responsibility and learning from people who know the land.

"We start them off learning how to shoot and taking as many pigs as possible," Kathy quips.

Some of Kathy's favorite childhood memories were made with her father, Vannie Cook, a passionate quail hunter, rancher and land steward. As they drove across the family's ranches, he taught her about the land. He also instilled a love of quail hunting, although in the early years she was primarily the retriever of downed birds.

Cook began hunting big game in the mid-1960s. In 1974, Kathy accompanied him on a hunting trip to Angola, where they slept on cots in a pup tent.

"It was the best thing I'd ever seen or done," Kathy says.

Jim's defining lessons came as a teenager on his uncle Clark Mathers' ranch near Canadian.

His uncle shared his love of quail and put Jim to work clearing brush along the Canadian River. In the process, Jim learned that some native brush was worth protecting.

"We would always clear to improve the land for cattle, but we also left what was good for the wildlife," Jim says.

Though raised in the Panhandle, Jim's family came to the Panhandle via Archer County in North Texas. His mother was a McMurtry, and author Larry McMurtry was her first cousin.

According to family lore, the McMurtry ranch house was so small that the two oldest McMurtry boys—ages 16 and 14, the younger of whom was Jim's grandfather—rode to Clarendon and went to work for the JA Ranch to make room for the other children.

The brothers eventually homesteaded, accumulated land and entered the banking business in Clarendon and McLean.

Jim and his sister were adopted through Catholic Charities in Kansas City because their parents could not have children of their own.

Jim's father began his career as a landman for Phillips Petroleum and later became an independent oil and gas operator. He died of colon cancer when Jim was 15. Several relatives helped guide Jim afterward, but the uncle with the Canadian ranch shaped him most.

Jim traveled by train from Amarillo to Canadian and spent summers, long holidays and many weekends working alongside the ranch foreman, Dell Krehbiel. He built fence, cleared brush, pulled windmills and tackled whatever else needed to be done.

"It was one of the best things that happened in my life," Jim says. "It kept me from getting into mischief, which I had a tendency to do."

The experience gave him a work ethic and the satisfaction of seeing a job through.

"I didn't want to disappoint my uncle or the foreman, but it was also the type of work that I could see the end result, and I learned to appreciate accomplishing something," Jim says.

Jim was also a strong student. On trips to Dallas for his father's cancer treatments, he became enamored with Southern Methodist University, making it a natural choice when the time came for college. Accountability remained important to him: He rarely missed a class and graduated with honors from the business school after studying finance. He later earned an MBA.

His father had taught him early to understand financial matters. He pointed to Richard and Bill Ware of Amarillo National Bank as men Jim could learn from; their grandfather had made the loan that helped Jim's father enter the oil and gas business.

"Having access to capital allowed a lot of people to succeed, especially my father," Collins says.

Near the end of his freshman year, Jim met Kathy, a McAllen native. Although they came from opposite ends of Texas, they had been raised with similar values and shared a love of the land.

Kathy's father was a prominent businessman and rancher who owned the Coca-Cola bottling company in McAllen and had interests in banking, real estate development, and oil and gas.

"Our family is everything to both of us."
- Kathy Collins



Collins Family


Jim and Kathy Collins

After a five-year courtship, Jim and Kathy married in 1977, after Jim completed his MBA.

Between his undergraduate and graduate degrees, Jim worked at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange for a cattle-oriented commodities firm that also traded currencies and other commodities. That experience later helped him land a job with the H. L. Hunt family, whose investments ranged from silver and pizza to fencing and real estate. As assistant to the president, he worked across the portfolio and gained the broad experience that suited him.

"I'm a generalist, so to speak, and having the various interests keeps me from ever getting too bored or stuck in an industry that isn't growing," Collins says. Kathy's father became ill not long after the couple married. After Jim had spent three years with the Hunt family, Cook asked whether he would consider moving to the Rio Grande Valley to take over the family businesses.

Jim and Kathy moved to McAllen in October 1980. There, they raised five children and taught them the importance of giving back to the community that had helped provide for them.

Jim again found himself energized by a diverse group of enterprises. He spent time in each one, from the bottling company to the ranches, learning from the experienced people Cook had hired—including the geologist, the ranch foreman and the people who ran the bottling operation.

The ranch Cook purchased in the 1960s was about 60 miles northwest of McAllen, in the South Texas Sand Sheet, prime country for quail. Cook had long understood that cattle could be used to manage and improve quail habitat. He adopted brush-management practices early, studied widely, attended seminars and enlisted scientists from what was then Texas A&I University.

Collins started learning more about quail from the research scientists at Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute. When quail scientist Dr. Fred Guthery told him bluntly that he was overgrazing, Collins took the lesson to heart. He learned the give-and-take required to manage cattle as rainfall fluctuated. From Dr. Tim Fulbright, he learned more about the value of native plants, the management of introduced grasses, and the importance of water and its proper distribution.

Jim describes the Valley as a "big melting pot" of people. Although the region has changed tremendously, he and Kathy say it has always been a wonderful place to raise a family. Their philanthropy is a way to give back to the region while honoring Kathy's parents. Jim and Kathy were recognized as Border Texans of the Year in 2025.

They have also honored Vannie Cook's legacy as a conservationist through their longtime partnership with the CKWRI, supporting research they have put to work on their own land.

"The research scientists are on the same level as the ranchers, and the work they're doing is always applicable, transparent and easily adapted," Jim says. "It is the best example of applied research I know."

While nature offers a certain tranquility, Jim says ranching is also an art—one that requires adapting to rainfall cycles, managing challenges such as feral hogs and invasive grasses, and accepting that the work is never truly finished.

Jim currently serves as chairman of Vantage Bank Texas and Rioco Partners, Ltd., a real estate investment, development and private equity company. Kathy previously served on the board of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation.

For Jim and Kathy, those business, philanthropic and conservation commitments are all part of the same inheritance. They honor the people who taught them, keep their children connected to the land and give the next generation the chance to learn by taking part. The ranches remain gathering places, classrooms and works in progress—a family legacy still being made.

A COLORADO TRADITION, A TEXAS LEGACY:

The Dupré Family's Annual Basalt Gathering

by Caroline Cage

Nine years ago, Cornelius Dupré and his late wife, Celia, planted the seed for what has become one of the most anticipated evenings on the summer calendar for Texans in Colorado. Hosted each year in Basalt, the event has grown into a beloved tradition — part reunion, part celebration, and part introduction to a mission close to the Dupré family's heart: the work of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute.

From its earliest days, the Duprés were clear about what they wanted this gathering to be. Rather than a formal fundraiser, the event was conceived as a "friend-raiser" — an evening meant to bring together the large community of Texans who summer in Colorado, celebrate the legacy of Caesar Kleberg, and introduce guests to the Institute's work in wildlife conservation and education. There are no hard asks, no pressure — just good company, good music, and a genuine invitation to learn.



That approach, it turns out, has been remarkably effective. Guests have consistently left the evening inspired, and that inspiration has translated into real, lasting support. Several attendees have gone on to establish their own endowments in the years following the event, a ripple effect that has quietly expanded CKWRI's reach far beyond any single night in Basalt.

Perhaps the most moving of these outcomes came in 2020, when Cornelius and Celia established the Celia and Cornelius Dupré Program in Wildlife Education. What started as a single gift has since grown to nearly $850,000 in value. Today, the endowment supports roughly 20 campers each year at the Texas Brigades' South Texas Ranch Brigade Camp, and this past year, its reach expanded further to support The Wildflower Camp, part of the Welder Youth Summer Camp Series.

The fact that an evening built around friendship and celebration could give rise to an endowment supporting hundreds of young conservationists over time speaks to exactly what the Duprés set out to create — a space where genuine connection to the land and its stewardship naturally inspires generosity.

CKWRI remains deeply grateful for the hospitality shown by Cornelius Dupré and his daughter, Angele Dupré Butchart, who have continued to host this special evening in Celia's memory, keeping her spirit — and her passion for conservation and education — very much alive in the gathering each summer.

This past year's event was especially memorable, with musical guest Robert Earl Keen taking the stage to close out the evening – a fitting note for a tradition that has always been as much about heart and community as it is about mission.

A *Swing* for WILDLIFE RESEARCH:

The Story Behind the CKWRI Golf Trip



In 2018, Jim Wikert had an idea: what if a golf trip among friends could also become a lasting source of support for wildlife research in Texas? That idea became reality when the inaugural group teed off at Bandon Dunes, launching what has since grown into one of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute's most beloved and productive fundraising traditions.

What started as golf trips to Scotland in 2004 and 2005, became an annual gathering, with the group traveling to some of the most celebrated golf destinations. The first official CKWRI golf trip was to Bandon Dunes. Since then, the trip has taken the group to Pinehurst, Whistling Straits, Kiawah, Sea Island, Streamsong, Big Cedar Lodge, and most recently, the Broadmoor. Each destination has brought together friends and supporters of CKWRI for a few days of golf, camaraderie, and a shared commitment to a cause bigger than the game itself — proof that Jim's trip truly puts the fun in fundraiser.

Since its inception, the golf trip has raised significant funds directly supporting the Institute's ongoing wildlife research, helping to advance science that informs conservation across Texas and beyond.

Jim's generosity did not stop with the golf trip. In 2020, Jim and his wife, Alinda, established the *James R. and Alinda Wikert Endowment for Quail Research*, creating a permanent source of funding dedicated to the study and conservation of quail. The endowment stands as a lasting legacy of the Wikerts' passion for wildlife and their belief in the importance of sound, science-based research.

The Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute is deeply grateful for the Wikerts' generosity, both through their endowment and through Jim's continued leadership in organizing the annual golf trip. What began as an idea on a golf course has grown into a tradition that continues to make a meaningful, lasting impact on wildlife research for years to come.



ALUMNI Spotlight

Matthew SCHNUPP

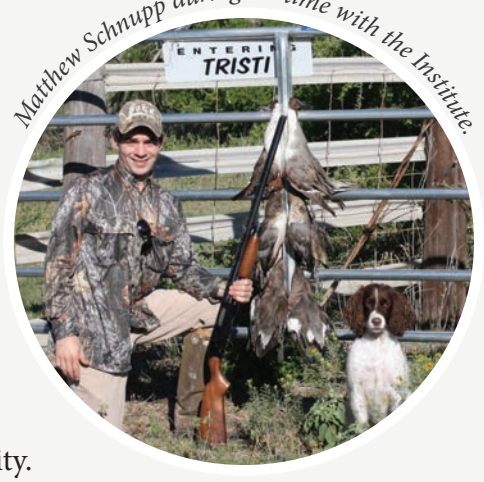
CKWRI Class of 2009 & 2016
Director, Bureau of Wildlife Management
PA Game Commission
Harrisburg, PA

What is your background with the Institute?

I started my M.S. at CKWRI in 2006. My research focused on improving the use of helicopter surveys to estimate bobwhite populations through helicopter-based distance sampling. I completed my M.S. in 2009 and later returned to complete my Ph.D. in 2016, studying the application of spatially explicit helicopter survey data for wildlife management on King Ranch. In the fall of 2009, I began an amazing career with King Ranch. I was hired as the Wildlife Biologist for the Santa Gertrudis Heritage Society (i.e., King Ranch shareholders) and eventually progressed to Chief Wildlife Biologist and Research Liaison. I helped manage wildlife across the 825,000-acre ranch while working closely with CKWRI faculty and serving as a research liaison for more than 50 graduate students. I also served as an adjunct professor at Texas A&M-Kingsville, teaching graduate courses in wildlife population estimation and large mammal ecology.

What are you doing now?

In 2018, I robbed Texas of one of its greatest assets - my wife, Jessica Schnupp, who also received her B.S., M.S. and Ph.D. in Engineering from TAMUK - and moved back east to become Director of the Bureau of Wildlife Management for the Pennsylvania Game Commission. Today, I have the pleasure of working with an incredible and talented team of biologists, statisticians, veterinarians and conservation partners to address some of Pennsylvania's most challenging wildlife issues. One initiative I am especially proud of is helping establish the Pennsylvania Wildlife Futures Program. Modeled in many ways after the CKWRI approach, Wildlife Futures is a partnership between the Game Commission and the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. The program expanded Pennsylvania's ability to identify, understand and manage wildlife diseases while strengthening collaboration among researchers, wildlife managers, other agencies and the hunting community.



Matthew Schnupp during his time with the Institute.

How does your time at CKWRI continue to affect you today?

The most important lesson I took from CKWRI was the importance of connecting research with management. I learned the technical side of wildlife science, but I also learned that research has its greatest value when it can be translated into practical management. That philosophy has followed me throughout my career. CKWRI also reinforced that wildlife management is a people profession. Building relationships among researchers, managers, landowners, and conservation partners is essential to successful wildlife management. The combination of sound science, collaboration and practical management that I experienced at CKWRI continues to shape how I approach wildlife management and leadership today. Lastly, CKWRI taught me to surround myself with people I like. I was very blessed to truly enjoy the people I worked with at CKWRI, and I carry that same mentality with me today. Most of my time outside of work goes to Jessica; our three children, Susanna (12), James (10) and Mary Margaret (7); and our 40-acre paradise, Merry Chase Farm. If you're ever in Hershey, Pennsylvania, stop by!



Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute
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The Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, a nonprofit organization, depends on charitable donations to support its work. By making a tax deductible contribution to the Institute, you will help us continue to provide science-based information for enhancing the conservation and management of Texas wildlife. Please consider making a gift today.

Learn more about how you can make a difference for the wildlife of Texas by visiting www.ckwri.tamuk.edu.



Michael Stewart