

From Native Landscape to Backyard Habitat to... What's Next?

By: Kathleen Whelen and Carlos Humphreys. Photo By: Carlos Humphreys.

There are 1,157 of these in New Mexico, 56 are in Las Cruces, and only 4 in El Paso. Any guesses? They are National Wildlife Federation Certified Backyard Habitats. This is according to Anne Goddard, Communications Assistant with the National Wildlife Federation (NWF). One of these El Paso gems sits "right smack dab" in the city, next to a public park, two blocks from a high school, across the street from a church and surrounded by tract housing. And, our Parkland area neighbors love and appreciate it...

What began several years ago as native landscape project on an acre and a half is now a wonderful and most interesting 5-acre NWF certified backyard habitat, our gift to the community and the world we live in. Encouraged by the Backyard Habitat television program on Animal Planet, our home is home to many species of plants, birds, bugs, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals. Here is a good indication of how our habitat has matured over the past few years: On the first Saturday in May of this year our family participated in the Audubon Society Bird-a-thon and the Great Texas Birding Classic, spotting 28 species of birds, including a Blue Grosbeak, a Gambel's Quail, Western Tanager, Thrasher, Pyrrhuloxia, and an oriole, to name only a few. This was achieved in just over an hour and half of walking around the yard then just sitting still in one good spot by a stand of mesquites and cacti, observing all the birds that went

by. This experience totally surprised us and left us in awe. But there is more...

Walking outside one's own doors and seeing nature at its best with all the quail, rabbits, butterflies, and other wildlife was only one advantage of certifying our backyard habitat, and the major reason for doing it. What we didn't realize is how it would come into play for other possibilities, such as when a self-storage rental unit was going to be built in our area. A special ordinance was drawn up and mitigated to require a 10 foot natural landscape buffer around the newly developed storage units since it was close to what some in the city referred to as a "nature preserve." Another advantage of a backyard habitat is the possibility for an eco-business. Our youngest child started a butterfly business and sold plants, caterpillars and chrysalises at the Las Cruces Farmers Market, which was quite successful. But doing this meant we had to contact and work with the USDA to get a special permit to cross caterpillars across state lines. Once in contact with the USDA, we came to realize there are grants available for wildlife conservation, meaning we had to get farm designation to qualify for the grants. According to USDA, farm designation had to come from the state first, and since we had horses and were experimenting with growing a patch of alfalfa without irrigation canals, we were given farm designation by the State of Texas, which we could then use to go and apply to the USDA for a farm number so we can apply for conservation grants. We were told we were probably the first and only residential (R4) home in Northeast El Paso to receive farm designa-



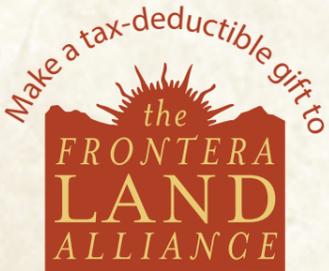
Whelen/Humphreys Native Backyard

tion. In all, our journey has been a remarkable one; we wish it on everybody. It is so nice that many people are going with native landscaping these days as this is the best way to contribute back to the earth and wildlife in this area. We highly recommend that everyone consider taking the next step of turning their native landscapes into a habitat by making sure wildlife have food, water, shelter and a place to raise their young. We know of other wonderful backyard habitats in El Paso; such as the amazing and very mature habitat on Atlas Street in Northeast El Paso, and a home/ranchette on Pendale road in the Lower Valley. Both of these are very mature habitats, complete with small "wetlands" or ponds. One can certify with either the NWF or

the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, or both. Certifying makes one really take stock and look closely at one's landscape, taking inventory, mapping, then working on improving one's yard to benefit wildlife the most. Once certified by one organization, you can apply to be certified by both, qualifying to be designated in the "The Best of Texas Backyard Habitats" program. For now, this is our next goal, with our final goal of maybe placing the property under a conservation easement someday in the future so that all our work will remain for generations to enjoy. The recent workshop by Frontera provided a LOT of good, useful, and wonderful information about doing this.

Note: Kathleen Whelen and Carlos Humphreys are Librarians and Texas Master Naturalists, among many other things. They live in their little house by the side of the road with their family and commune with nature at 6120 Quail Ave here in the Northeast El Paso SpiritLands. Although all the above habitats mentioned are private and not open to the general public, one can visit them virtually by way of the internet to see what the eagles and hawks see when soaring over them. Simply Google 4850 Atlas or 339 Pendale El Paso and check out the satellite map view. Enjoy! Peace...

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