

# Putting the Focus on Conservation

Landowners and nature photographers have the opportunity to team up for a powerful purpose.

by Kindra Gordon



Through the lens of a camera, private lands are a photographer's delight — filled with scenic vistas, intriguing birds, insects and wildlife, and colorful plants and flowers.

But, those “photo opps” are a commodity often overlooked by a traditional cattle ranch. Now, a Texas-based nonprofit organization called the Images for Conservation Fund (ICF) is working to change that and help landowners capitalize on their efforts to preserve and protect wildlife.

“Many of us take for granted what our ranches have to offer,” says Gail Hoffman, who serves as executive director of ICF. She tells the story of the first time a photographer from Colorado visited the Texas ranch she and her husband Bruce own and operate with their son. “He had his nose to the ground photographing the bugs, the flowers, and the butterflies the minute he came through the gate. It was the stuff we took for granted everyday. . . . It was a very enlightening experience.”

And it's an experience many photographers — from amateurs to professionals — are willing to pay for,

which creates an opportunity for landowners and their communities to tap a new revenue stream from the nature photo tourism industry.

But there's an additional, perhaps even more important, benefit — the emphasis on conservation. “As landowners recognize the value of wildlife habitat through nature photo tourism, there is an incentive to keep native landscapes intact,” Hoffman explains.

With 90% of the land in the Western Hemisphere privately owned, many believe private landowners are the key to preserving more than 90% of all wildlife species for future generations.

Thus, Hoffman explains that the goal of ICF is to create a continual circle where conservation efforts produce wildlife, which attracts photographers, which creates revenue and puts emphasis back on the value of conservation.

Hence, ICF promotes a unique concept: Photography is the most powerful conservation tool on the planet.

## \$180,000 contest

How is ICF selling others on the value of conservation and the nature photo tourism industry it can attract? Through the Pro-Tour of Nature Photography tournament — which will offer \$180,000 in prize money in 2010.

The Pro-Tour pairs 20 landowners from a preselected, multicounty area with 20 professional nature photographers for a world-class tournament that takes place over a one-month period. An elite judging panel then selects the winning photographs in specific categories, and prize money is split between the photographer-landowner teams.

The first Pro-Tour was held in 2006 in the Texas Hill Country, followed by a second tournament in 2008 in the Texas Coastal Bend region. The 2010 event took place in the Laredo Borderlands.

Of the Pro-Tour, Hoffman says, “It has definitely raised the awareness among landowners of the value of conservation and the potential for nature photo tourism.” Several of the past participating ranches have now actively established photo eco-tourism businesses.

Among the success stories is the Fennessey Ranch at Bayside, Texas, which has been building a revenue stream from nature photography for the past decade and participated in the Pro-Tour in 2008 with photographer Rolf Nussbaumer. They were named the top landowner-photographer team for that tournament.

Of the experience, Sally Crofutt with the Fennessey Ranch says, “The contest being only 30 days is a wild ride for both the ranch and the photographer. It was great fun but a lot of intense work.”

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— Sally Crofutt

Crofutt reports that nature tourism has been a very viable asset for Fennessey Ranch, and she reveals, “We made more money from photography last year than we made from cattle. Of course, we need every penny of both enterprises!”

Crofutt says the income returning to real, working ranches is the great asset of



►“Bluebonnet,” by Rolf Nussbaumer, was taken at the Fennessey Ranch.



►“Painted Bunting,” by Sean Fitzgerald, was taken at La Ramirena Ranch.



►“Bobcat,” by Joshua Anderson, was taken at Rancho Lucera.

nature photography. “Any and all ranch revenue streams that keep the original owner on the land are important for our rural communities,” Crofutt points out. “Rural economies count on residents on the land. Those are the people who send their kids to school and use the local economy — and they are also some of the best stewards of the land.”

### A global goal

That’s precisely the outcome Texan John Martin was hoping for when he founded ICF in 2005.

Martin, a former certified financial planner, has been involved in conservation issues for more than two decades — he and his wife, Audrey, were motivated by concern

that their grandchildren “might only have books to view our natural treasures.”

Martin has said his ultimate goal through ICF is to produce a national conservation movement by establishing a private lands nature photo tourism industry that provides sound economic incentives for private landowners to protect and enhance the diversity of habitats.

As well, those who experience the nature photo tourism industry become new constituents for conservation — leading to that win-win-win scenario for the land, the wildlife and the people.

Looking ahead, ICF aims to grow the nature photo tourism industry on private lands from a \$2-billion-per-year industry to a \$100-billion industry during the next 25

years. They hope to do this through the promotion of conservation, the education of landowners and photographers, and development of regional organizations and photography competitions — perhaps even a Pro-Tour of the Western Hemisphere.

According to the ICF website, the organization’s mission will have been accomplished when “private landowners, nature photographers and country, state and city tourism entities throughout the Western Hemisphere have joined together to give an economic and visual voice to wildlife, landscapes, plants and scenic views ... and a thriving private lands Nature Photo Tourism Industry exists worldwide.”

