



# Opening the Gates to Education

Article and Photos by CLINT FAAS



On a private ranch in South Texas, Dr. Dale Rollins talks to a group of QuailMasters about the importance of making plant identification and education one of their management goals.

It was once said that “the purpose of education is to replace an empty mind with an open one.” When it comes to natural resources, it is safe to say there are varying degrees of “emptiness.” However, there is always room to grow if one opens his/her mind to the ideas of others and tries to learn from them.

With this in mind, TWA’s Conservation Legacy offers programs for all education levels, wildlife interests and goals. From elementary-age students to graduate students and from urban wildlife enthusiasts to fifth generation landowners, some 500,000 people a year participate in our programs. Of these participants, over 11,000 have the opportunity to learn hands-on while standing behind the gates of some of Texas’ wonderful private property.

With this many people taking part in education programs, accolades are most certainly due to all those who help make these events possible. Too many to attempt to list, there are countless state, federal and non-governmental agencies, teachers, biologists and volunteers who come together to make these programs successful. And, all too often, there is an unsung hero in their midst: the person who opens their gates to allow these events to take place, the person who enjoys seeing yellow school buses on dirt roads and lines of pickups bouncing through the pasture—the landowner.

The Texas Brigades motto says it best, “Tell me and I forget; show me and I remember; involve me and I understand.” By bringing participants out into the field and onto private property, they are

immersed into all things nature. They get to see and touch the very things they are being taught and begin to tie together the complexity of all that is around them. This is something that many times cannot be expressed in the classroom. It forms an appreciable connection to the land.

For students, it is a way to get away from the urban environment and see nature and all that it has to offer. It also helps them to understand how management of private lands benefits all people. Sadly, for some, this may be the first and only time they get to experience a privately owned, managed property in this way. In addition, from an adult standpoint, it allows people to observe how others have managed their property. Being able to visualize on-the-ground scenarios





can greatly aid in the planning and implementation of one's own goals.

As integral as field days are to TWA's education programs, it can, at times, be difficult to find willing landowners to allow access to their properties. Although many personal reasons exist for not wanting to open one's gates to "strangers," several of them can be expunged as misconceptions. On the other hand, many people feel that sharing the progress and information learned is just something you should do.

Rick Snipes of the Snipes Ranch views it as a way of giving and helping others. By opening his gates, he is allowing people to see not only their successes but their failures as well. Primarily a quail hunting property, the Snipes Ranch and its management practices are a true testament to what management can accomplish. Sharing this with others can help them make better management decisions and see examples of what can be done on any budget. Ultimately, by allowing others to learn about quail management on his property, attendees may be able to impact the species in other areas of the state as well.

Other properties, like the Dixon Water Foundation ranches, have made it their mission to teach all ages about natural resources and their management. With multiple properties across the state, the Foundation strives to show people how the land is managed for multiple species, creating healthy watersheds

to benefit future generations. Working with TWA has allowed them to share their unique message while providing both youth and adults an outdoor classroom to expand their knowledge. In working with properties that are actively managing land and wildlife, it helps TWA's educators shape their message based on what is currently happening in the world of management.

Landowners are often concerned about liability arising out of an injury to an invited guest on their property. To aid in minimizing this risk, during the last legislative session new and improved liability protections were passed for landowners. In addition to this legislation, TWA carries public liability for all events held at landowner ranches. Many of the properties that are utilized for field days also ask that attendees fill out their own liability release forms further adding to protections.

With these securities in place, please consider opening your gates to education for current and future generations of land stewards. It truly will make a difference, and you may learn something from it also! If you have already hosted a field day, a sincere thank you goes out to you from all of Conservation Legacy for your support of the programs. 🙏

*If you would like to learn more about adult or youth education field days, please contact Clint Faas at [cfaas@texas-wildlife.org](mailto:cfaas@texas-wildlife.org) or Leslie Wittenburg at [lwittenburg@texas-wildlife.org](mailto:lwittenburg@texas-wildlife.org).*

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