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Fort Hood wins national conservation award

By Christine Luciano, DPW Environmental
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Volunteers and avian experts scan the training area for songbirds and raptors during the Fort Hood Christmas Bird Count outreach event, Dec. 15.

Photo by Christine Luciano, DPW Environmental

The National Military Fish and Wildlife Association recognized the Fort Hood Natural Resources Management Branch as award winners for the Natural Resources Conservation Management Model Program category at a ceremony March 16 in Spokane, Washington.

“In presenting this award, I want to highlight some of the many conservation achievements of the Fort Hood natural resources team ... or I could stand here half an hour going over the wonderful things that they do,” said Robby Smith, director-at-large, NMFWA.

NMFWA communicates, in-forms, and coordinates with professionals across the Department of Defense to protect natural resources while supporting the military mission through sustainable resource conservation. A few programs Smith recognized included monarch tagging, integrated pest management, wildland fire management, Christmas bird count and birds of conservation and mission sensitive species.

“They have the highest density of monarch detections which occurs during fall migration, when monarchs return to wintering grounds and funnel through the Texas central flyway,” Smith said. “To gain a deeper understanding of how monarchs use Fort Hood’s natural resources, the team established the monarch tagging program in 2017. Since inception, more than 9,500 monarchs have been captured, tagged and released.”

Through the National Wildlife Federation’s Mayors’ Monarch Pledge, Fort Hood Garrison Commander, Col. Chad R. Foster, will further illustrate the installation’s commitment to maintaining and restoring habitat for monarchs with a proclamation signing at the end of the month.

“Experiencing the monarch tagging effort firsthand with my son last fall, I truly appreciate the hard work, dedication and exemplary efforts of our biologists, environmental protection specialists, volunteers and community partners,” Foster said. “The upcoming monarch pledge is a testament to Fort Hood’s commitment to doing great things, educating the community and promoting conservation and stewardship.”

During the awards ceremony, Smith also shared how Fort Hood, during the past two fiscal years, saved over 40 beehives from being destroyed by working with local beekeepers who collected the hives at no cost to the government; removed 2,280 wild pigs that caused horrific damage to training lands and donated thousands of pounds of meat; and continued the wildland fire management of the largest contiguously owned natural landscape in its local region at over 218,000 acres.

“We have an awesome team here at natural resources, and I am proud of each and every one of our team members. We all know what our job is at Fort Hood, and we all have a sincere dedication to making the Great Place better,” said Tim Buchanan, chief of Natural and Cultural Resources Management Branch. “Of course, we could not accomplish our mission without the key partnerships that keep our daily contributions successful and provides shared benefits to Fort Hood and the local surrounding communities.”

Dr. Amber Dankert, supervisor of Fort Hood’s wildlife management, acknowledges teamwork and partnerships with internal and external stakeholders have ensured successes with mission readiness and sustainment.

“Our partnership with the Compatible Lands Foundation helps Fort Hood create conservation easements and a permanent protection of farmlands that border the installation,” Dankert said. “The benefits are a win for military training and preserving farmlands that provide opportunities like the FEAT farm.”

The FEAT farm, known as the Farmer Education And Training farm, is 72 acres purchased by the Compatible Lands Foundation as part of Fort Hood’s Army Compatible Use Buffer program and provides active duty, veterans and military family members agricultural training.

Additional successes of the program include 21 parcels and 5,282 acres protected in perpetuity; all easements monitored annually with zero easement violations; and established internal 1,000-foot buffers in maneuver areas to minimize dust and noise complaints and mitigate safety concerns on nearby highways.

“We have such a well-rounded program that we don’t just focus on one area,” Virginia Sanders, supervisor of Fort Hood’s endangered species, said. “We have strong programs across the board in everything that we do from species that are listed to ones we are preventing from listing to doing ecosystem management and gathering good baseline data.”

Sanders highlighted a few of her team’s successes, including a geolocator research project on the golden-cheeked warbler that will help to better understand the species complete lifecycle from migration and overwintering locations to migratory connectivity; the black-capped vireo program researching the minimum level of cowbird control necessary to ensure the species

continues to remain recovered and sustains a healthy population; and employing a healthy application of fire as the state of Texas starts to become hotter, drier and have more extreme fire behavior.

“Each person is a subject matter expert in his or her own field, but because our work requires an intensive effort in the field that we can’t collect all the data by ourselves,” Sanders said.

“Whether it’s doing deer surveys or netting of butterflies, we all have to support each other’s programs with labor. We all have to assist each other and we do a really good job of balancing that effort across the branch.”

The many initiatives from the endangered species, wildlife management and adaptive and integrative management programs illustrates how Fort Hood is balancing military readiness, while working to conserve and sustain wildlife and plant species and habitat.

“These are multiple wonderful things that you are doing for your model program,” Smith said.

“It is amazing and congratulations.”