

Paving Houston's Wetlands

As the Texas House Speaker Billy Wayne Clayton once famously remarked: "Let's do this in one foul sweep"

Since Hurricane Katrina swept through, there's a fair chance that Americans know more about wetlands than they did before. Wetlands help control floods, filter toxins and impurities from water, and support migratory birds. If Louisiana's coastal wetlands had remained intact, the devastation from Katrina would have been less severe.

The Houston-Galveston area of the Gulf Coast of Texas, which was hammered by Hurricane Rita three weeks after Katrina, once had a lot of wetlands, too. But few areas of the country have lost so many so fast. The pace has accelerated since a 2001 Supreme Court decision that removed protection from "isolated wetlands" that could be used by migratory waterfowl. The Galveston Bay wetlands are among

the most important bird migration pathways in the country.

According to a November 2004 report by the National Wildlife Federation, the drain-fill-and-pave approach of Texas developers and politicians has put at risk 3.3 million acres of coastal-plain wetlands in the Army Corps of Engineers' Galveston district. Since 2003, scientists at the Texas Coastal Watershed Program, an extension of Texas A&M University, have examined hundreds of aerial photographs to document wetlands loss in the Galveston Bay watershed. This 2002 image shows the destruction of a formerly protected wetlands area, outlined in yellow, two miles from Galveston Bay and adjacent to Interstate Highway 45.

—Josh Harkinson



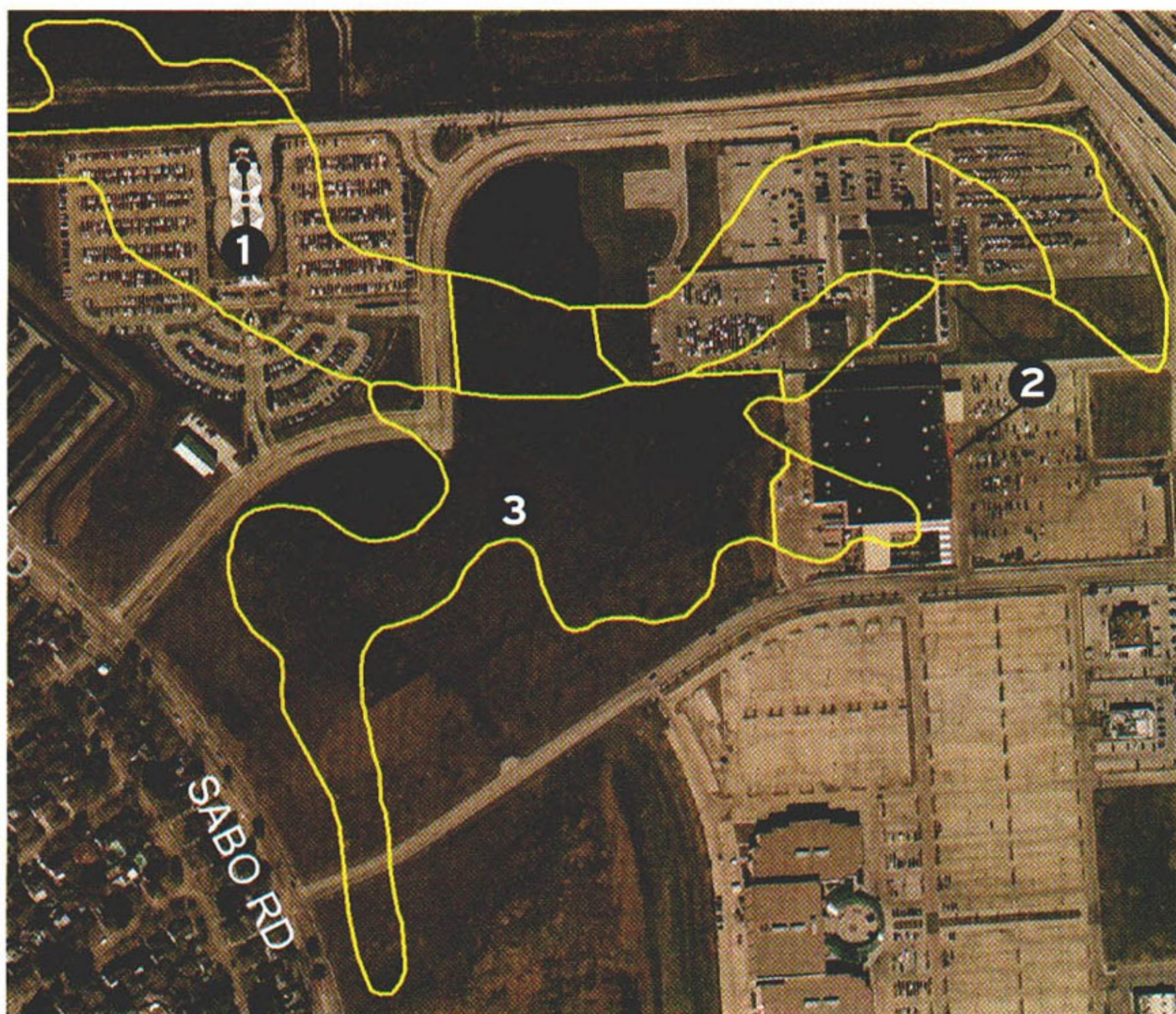
GREEN GREENS

The classic golf course has impeccably short grass, greens trimmed to eighth-of-an-inch perfection and maintained with an arsenal of chemical pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers. But some greens are getting greener. There are now at least 10 organically managed golf courses around the country, several of them created after local authorities approved the construction of a new facility on the condition that it be maintained without chemicals.

It's not easy keeping grass free of weeds, pests and fungi with nothing but organic materials, especially when it is subject to constant stress from being cut short and trampled flat by people pursuing a little white ball. At the Vineyard Golf Club on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, superintendent Jeff Carlson burns weeds or pulls them by hand and sprays bacterial insecticides to control bugs. Full sunlight and good airflow help keep the grasses healthy and the course is planted with disease-resistant varieties of turf. Carlson says he spends about the same amount on maintenance as he would at a conventional course, using more labor but saving money by not buying high-priced chemicals.

"We don't have wall-to-wall perfection throughout the entire golfing season," says Carlson, "but I think you wouldn't see a very big difference between our course and other private golf courses. Our members belong to some of the finest courses in the country, and we seem to be meeting their high standards." Whether or not the U.S. Open is ever played on an organic course, golfers may see another advantage. If the most prestigious lawns in the country can be maintained without chemicals and still look this good, perhaps the same thing could happen in their own backyards.

—SARAH EFRON



1. Fuqua Park and Ride lot for cars and buses, built in 1996 by the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, Texas.

2. Top: Carmax auto dealership, built in 1997. Bottom: Home Depot, built in 1998.

At the time these two "isolated wetlands" areas were paved over they were protected under federal law. Texas has no independent regulatory program to protect wetlands.

3. This remaining wetlands area, undeveloped at the time this photograph was taken in 2002, now houses a gated community called Alexan Gulf Pointe Apartment Homes. Units in the development include The Seagull, The Pelican, and The Sandpiper, in keeping with a time-honored tradition in the world of real estate that upscale residential areas be named in honor of the natural features (or creatures) that are bulldozed to make way for them.

—JH