

AMIGO

Aransas & Matagorda Island Guardian/Orator
Fall 2009, Number 11 Volume 4

Managers Corner – by Dan Alonso, Refuge Manager

The drought continues to be a force to reckon with as the refuge received a meager 9.54 inches of precipitation from January through August. The average annual precipitation for the refuge is 37 inches. The few remaining waterholes with water were reaching hyper-saline conditions with salinities of 70 parts per thousand, which is not useable by most species of wildlife. Anticipating this problem the Refuge increased the effort to provide fresh water by launching the “Water for Wildlife Project” with the financial assistance of FAMI. Thanks to Annie Clayton and Cindi Barrett who were instrumental in moving the project forward. The project includes rehabilitating additional water wells and waterholes in critical areas without water. A bulldozer is being used to remove sediment, encroaching vegetation and reshape the holes to their original contour. To date, 19 waterholes on the Blackjack have been rehabilitated with the expert assistance of Mr. Frank Cortez, a former refuge Heavy Equipment Operator. Mr. Cortez was able to get water to seep into some of the waterholes by carefully clearing the accumulation of sediment. During one of these successful productions of water, Frank witnessed an amazing event: a whooping crane, one of two cranes which did not migrate north this summer, appeared out of the brush and helped itself to a long drink of fresh water while Frank operated the dozer.



The refuge continues to prepare for the return of the whoopers by monitoring acorn production, blue crab availability, planning prescribed burns, researching nutritious supplemental feeds if needed, and the possibility of conducting a radio telemetry study in association with the Crane Foundation. Tom's Stehn's recent trip to the crane's nesting grounds in Canada revealed 52 chicks in 62 nests, but unfortunately, Canada biologists recently reported that only 22 chicks (an average of .35 chicks/nest) currently survive. This production is not nearly sufficient to offset last year's total loss. We optimistically hope for a no net loss and return of 247 from last year's final tally of 247.

The newly constructed observation tower failed its final inspection due to excessive sway or deflection of the vertical columns. The tower will remain closed until the contractor remedies the problem. The text and illustrations of the interpretive panels for the tour loop have been approved and will enter production.

The Matagorda Island contaminant beach clean-up contract has been awarded to Clean Harbors Inc. of Houston, TX and work is scheduled to start in mid September. The refuge will be seeking volunteers to assist in the collection of other remaining trash which may pose entanglement or injury to wildlife soon after all containments have been removed by the contractor. Volunteers can contact Vicki Muller at Barto2357@hotmail.com for more information.

The official position of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the long-standing issue of dredging Cedar Bayou (natural fish pass on the south boundary of Matagorda Island) is: the Service is not opposed to the dredging and restoring natural flows between the Gulf and the bays but careful consideration must be given to how and where the spoil is removed and placed. The presence of endangered species and the federal nexus associated with the project require compliance with the Endangered Species Act and other federal statutes. The Refuge and the USFWS Ecological Services office in Corpus Christi are working with the Army Corp of Engineers and others to address the issue.

Recent additions to the Refuge staff include Jonny Giles, Refuge Law Enforcement Officer and Denise Ruffino, Deputy Project Leader.

Photo By: Carey Strobel

Wood Buffalo Whooping Crane Updates

By: Tom Stehn, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Aerial whooping crane surveys in Wood Buffalo National Park were conducted the week of August 17th by Brian Johns and Kathy St. Laurent of the Canadian Wildlife Service. The surveys are done when the chicks are fledging, a time period after which chick survival increases dramatically as they can fly to escape predators. Thus, the mid-August surveys are usually a good indicator of what number of chicks will make it to Aransas in the fall.

Brian Johns was quoted as saying, “Kathy St. Laurent and I completed surveys for fledgling whooping cranes and found 22 family groups, each with a single young. Habitat conditions were excellent with water levels higher than I have ever seen them at this time of year. In order to achieve these high water levels a much higher than average amount of rain fell during June (113.6mm or 2.5 times normal) and July (86mm or 1.5 times normal). Although the rain was welcome it came at a time when the young were still vulnerable to cool wet conditions and may have contributed to the lower than average survival of chicks to fledging age (0.35 chicks/nest vs 0.47). The high water levels will however, ensure that spring 2010 conditions are favorable. Given the number of young produced this year and the number of adults and subadults that were lost last winter, the population will decline in 2009.”



Exchange Trip to China

BY: Vicki Muller

In July, I was chosen to participate in a US Fish & Wildlife Service information exchange trip to China. The Service assembled a ten person delegation made up of managers and biologists from around the country. China has areas called National Nature Reserves (NNR) they manage for a variety of wildlife species like refuges in the US. I flew from San Francisco on a 12 hour direct flight to Beijing. The State Forestry Administration oversees the National Nature Reserves and threw a welcome banquet for our arrival. We were all pretty tired from traveling, not to mention it was 4 A.M. Texas time! The dinner was on a huge roundtable holding about 20 different Chinese dishes. Real Chinese food does not resemble American style Chinese food. They eat a lot of fish, tofu and chicken dishes with rice or noodles. There was so much food but I soon realized this was just the beginning of good food and great hospitality.

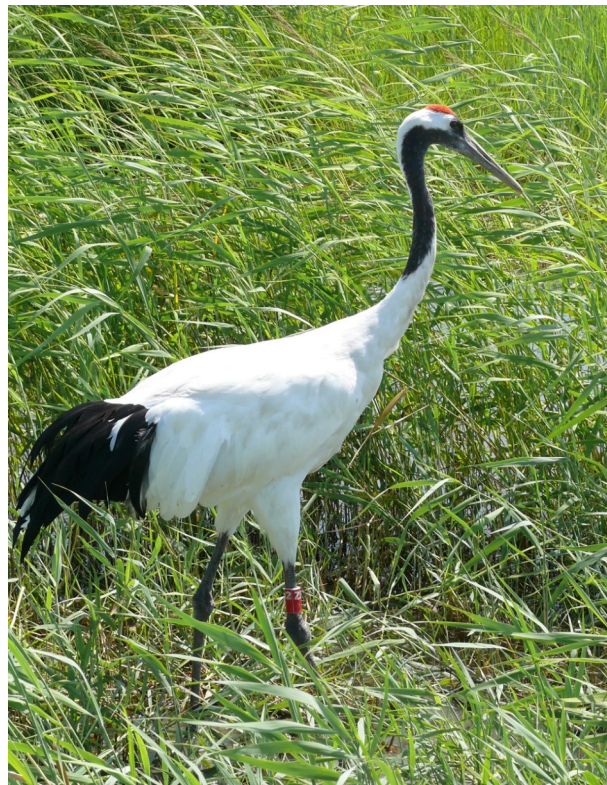


We traveled for two weeks on a tour of nine different nature reserves in Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces of Northeast China. We went to Changbaishan NNR on the China/North Korea border. This area has beautiful picturesque mountains; it looked very similar to Crater Lake National Park. We went for a hike in a stand of birch trees and saw a handful of songbirds, the most notable being an Eastern great tit. We also visited the Beijicun NNR, referred to as the “North Pole” of China which is along the Russian border. There were many Northern ravens and golden eagles flying back and forth across the border which is delineated by the Amur River. My favorite reserve we visited in the two weeks was Xianghai NNR. This area was made up of flat terrain full of freshwater marshes hosting a plethora of bird species. Some of these species included Eastern spot-billed duck, mandarin duck, Eurasian spoonbill, yellow bittern, purple heron, whiskered tern, white-winged tern, and my personal favorite, the northern lapwing. We spent an hour over this wetland bird watching one evening when all of a sudden the shorebirds behavior started to change. Then I spotted an Amur falcon! It swooped down attempting to capture a meal but missed. It was really nice to see such a thriving ecosystem. China is trying to incorporate

more habitat management techniques and that was our main purpose of this trip.

After our first two weeks of travel, eight of the ten people in our group travelled back to the USA, while myself and a biologist from Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge in Maine stayed for an additional two weeks. We travelled to Zhalong NNR, approximately 20 miles from the city of Qiqihar. We worked with the reserve employees to learn about their lands and the species of animals in which they protect. The reserve is about 519,000 acres in size and has 296 bird species. It is made up of a complex of permanent and seasonal freshwater wetlands, with the dominant species being *Phragmites australis* (common reed). They are known for the red-crowned cranes, which consist of a natural migratory flock and a captive breeding non-migratory flock. China manages nature reserves by protecting the cranes. The state owns the land. The local villagers conduct activities which include reed harvesting for paper production, fishing and grazing. Without this land, these people would have no livelihood and would face starvation or relocation. This differs from the US tradition where land is set aside as refuges and almost all human activities are precluded. This was a very educational, interesting learning experience in which I gained memories that will last a lifetime!

Photos: A special thanks goes to FAMI for donating the whooping crane picture and matting for a gift to Zhalong NNR which I am presenting to their director, Mr. Lee.



Second photo: Red-crowned crane at Zhalong NNR. Photos by: Vicki Muller



2009 Turtle Patrol Season Results

By Ashley Inslee

The 2009 Matagorda Island Turtle Patrol (MITP) season came to a successful end on August 7th. Twenty-seven volunteers collectively contributed 1,514 man hours to patrol 5,293 miles of beach in pursuit of nesting Kemp's ridley sea turtles and stranded sea turtles. We successfully excavated seven nests and transported them to the incubation facility at Padre Island National Seashore. This led to 691 eggs being incubated with 548 hatchlings successfully emerging. One of these nests happened to be 100% infertile. Dr. Donna Shaver, Padre Island National Seashore, noted that infertile nests occasionally happen, especially among young turtles. The hatching success rate is 90.6% if the infertile nest of 86 eggs is not included.

Mike Burnett discovered tracks to an eighth nest on June 8th, yet the nest could not be located and the area was monitored for hatchling emergence and site disturbance. On August 4th, it was obvious that hatchlings had emerged a few days prior, and 76 egg shell fragments and 3 dead hatchlings were removed from the nest cavity. This is the second successful natural hatching that has been recorded on Matagorda Island.

The number of stranded sea turtles on the Texas coast has dramatically increased since last year. Tony Amos of the Animal Rehabilitation Keep (ARK), remarked that there were 172 stranded sea turtles total in 2008, and in July of 2009 there were already 176 stranded sea turtles on the Texas coast. On Matagorda Island, we have found 30 sea turtles stranded in varying conditions from skeletal to alive. Six sea turtles were rescued alive and five of those were rehabilitated and released. The sixth died five days after entering the Keep.

The volunteers for the 2009 season were persistent and dedicated. Both the sea turtles and staff at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge are grateful for their perseverance. I personally want to thank all of the volunteers that I have had the opportunity to work with. It has been a pleasure getting to know every one of you, and best of luck in the upcoming seasons!

Photos by :Ashley Inslee



Hatchling Kemp's ridley sea turtle



Nesting female Kemp's ridley sea turtle. Left to Right: Chris Jones, Mike Burnett, Ashley Inslee, Georgina Jacques; Front: Bettye the turtle

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service & Aransas NWRC Provide VFD Grants

by Ryan Vice



The US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), in conjunction with Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex (Aransas NWRC), recently provided funding for Rural Fire Assistance program to Austwell, Tivoli, Magnolia Beach and Lamar Volunteer Fire Departments (VFD's). All together the four departments have been awarded a total of \$27,500 as part of the Department of the Interior's Rural Fire Assistance program. These funds will help purchase hand-held portable P25 compliant radios, nomex Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to outfit members of the department and other items needed for fighting wildland fires. The additional radios will provide better communication among firefighters responding to wildland fires. The greatest benefit of the additional radios is increased firefighter safety during wildland firefighting operations.

The VFD's met several different requirements of the assistance program such as maintaining a cooperative agreement with the FWS and they must serve a community with a population of less than ten thousand. The VFD's must also cover 10% of the final equipment purchase price.

The Rural Fire Assistance program is primarily designed to increase firefighter safety and enhance the fire protection capabilities of volunteer fire departments. This is achieved by assisting those departments in meeting or exceeding accepted standards of wildland fire qualifications, training, and performance. Emphasis is placed on departments that protect rural communities and play a substantial cooperative role in the protection of federal lands.

FROM THE DESK OF THE PRESIDENT

By: Annie Clayton

Hello Friends,

Summer is drawing to an end and we are gearing up for the fall and winter months. As I am sure most of you have heard, last year was very hard on our cranes due to the drought. We are trying to assist the refuge in insuring that we don't have a repeat this year. We have switched the money we receive in the donation boxes to a whooping crane food fund to enable us to start the supplemental feeding program when they arrive this fall. We are also having a sale at the bookstore and 15% of the proceeds are being donated to the fund.

Be sure and check out our website, friendsofaransas.org. There are two new additions – a donation button and a link to our new Photography Club page. We are having our 1st event on Refuge Day, October 17th. If you are interested in learning more about nature photography or would like to pair up with a grandchild or child for a picture scavenger hunt this event is for you. Registration information is on the webpage. We would love to have you join us.

We still have one Director at Large position open on the Board of Directors. The other one was filled by Paul Julian. We also have a new treasurer, Sam Burnett. A big thank you goes out to both of them for their willingness to help. I would also like to thank Sherrie Krause for filling in as acting Treasurer during our transition period. If you are interested in that last position please let me know. You can reach me at baldeagle6952@cableone.net or 361-286-3559 ext. 222.

I look forward to seeing you all at the annual meeting on Saturday December 5th. An election will be held for 2 Director at Large positions.

Welcome!!! Jonny Giles—Park Ranger/Law Enforcement Officer

I served 4 years active duty in the US Air Force from 1997 to 2001 with the 66th Rescue Squadron at Nellis AFB just outside of Las Vegas, NV. I served 3 tours to Kuwait from 98 – 99 and 1 to Incirlik, Turkey in 00. I separated from the Air Force with an honorable discharge in March, 2001 in order to continue my education.

I graduated from the University of Texas at San Antonio in 2003 with my BA in History and was lucky enough to meet my wife, Elizabeth there as well. In November, 2004 I graduated from the Park Ranger Training Program for my type II law enforcement certification and wilderness first responder certification at Northern Arizona University. In 2007, I graduated from Pennsylvania's Slippery Rock University with my MS in Parks and Resource Management and have considered pursuing a second MS in Criminal Justice through Sam Houston State after I return from FLETC early next year.

Elizabeth and I are both from the San Antonio area and are extremely excited to have the opportunity to be here working in a field we love so close to home...minus the mosquitos.

Submitted by Jonny Giles



Nature Photography Club forms at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

Ever thought you'd like to learn more about Nature Photography but didn't know quite how to get started? Even if you know something about nature photography already, have you ever thought about being part of a group that shares your interests and can help you learn more about the technical and artistic aspects of the Nature and Wildlife Photography?

The Friends of Aransas and Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuges (FAMI) have started a Nature Photography Club and invite you to be a part of it! The Aransas NWR Nature Photography Club is a group of photographers of all skill levels and experience who share an interest in promoting conservation and stewardship of the Aransas and Matagorda Island area through nature photography. Anyone who has a desire to learn more the natural environment of the Aransas area, about nature and wildlife photography, and to help achieve the clubs objectives of teaching photography to all age groups is welcome to join.

The club has a website at www.friendsofaransas.org/photoclub with information about goals, how to join, links to resources of interest to nature photographers, a gallery of photographs, and information about upcoming club activities.

Speaking of upcoming Club events: Saturday October 17, 2009 is a day of activities at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge celebrating National Wildlife Refuge Week! Photography Club activities at this special Wildlife Refuge event will include: a field shoot for small groups to be accompanied by experienced nature photographers; a FUN nature photography scavenger hunt for school-age children and an older family member; a lunch lecture at the Visitor's Center on a topic of interest to photographers; and an afternoon session in the Visitor's Center to process and print images using Adobe Lightroom. Please bring your own gear.

Activities start early Saturday morning at the Aransas NWR Claude F. Lard Visitor's Center. Check out the club website for details on how to register and for the schedule of activities for the day. Only a limited number of spaces are available for this event, so register soon.



The Friends are trying to accumulate used digital cameras for a loaner program we want to start.. We'd like your used digital cameras to loan out to school groups or people participating in our photo club. Please drop off you digital cameras at the front desk at the Refuge Visitor Center.

Anyone interested in building a float representing the Friends group and the Refuge for holiday Christmas parades, please contact Cindi Barrett at

cindibarre@aol.com

WEEKLY BIRD SURVEY

A weekly bird survey will again be conducted at the Aransas NWR from Sept. 2009 thru May 2010. Weekly group leaders have volunteered but we would like to build upon the teams. If you are interested and would like to become involved in a group as a helper or be listed as a substitute, please contact Barbara Bruns at 361-575-5505 or the Refuge 361-286-3559 for more information and schedules

STUDENTS AT WORK ON THE REFUGE

The Science Spanish Club in Port Lavaca, consisting of students from Travis Middle School and Calhoun High School have been planning some exciting events for the current school year. Students have traveled to the refuge off and on for the past five years and have developed a special bond with the refuge in Austwell and the Myrtle Foster Whitmire Unit in Calhoun County. Students helped with a trail project last year at the refuge. FAMI sponsored the group and provided a meal for their efforts. The students then began to ask questions about the friends group and wanted to know how they could get involved. Students began discussing ways they could get area students involved with projects at the wetlands and are now planning to educate themselves about the refuge. They plan to share this information with other area teens. Their plans include an initial junior friends meeting in November where all students will meet and discuss ideas.



Students have been begging for a camping trip to the refuge for years. We have obtained permission from the school district for an overnight trip for students. The club is anxiously planning the first camping trip ever for about 90% of these students. Students will camp at the refuge and participate in activities to better learn about the whooping cranes on October 24th and 25th. Tents were a huge issue as none of the students had a tent to use. FAMI board member, Cindi Barrett wrote letters explaining the situation to several retailers and Bass Pro Shops has already donated four six person tents and several flashlights to the refuge for groups to utilize. We are hopefully waiting for more responses!

One project the Science and Spanish Club students are currently working on is to raise money to help feed the whooping cranes. Students were very saddened to hear about the recent losses in the whooping crane population and decided they wanted to help. Students are creating large paper cranes to put up in the hallways at Travis Middle School. There will also be information about the cranes next to the paper cranes. Students commented that kids are always needing paper, pencils and pens for class. So they are designing a logo/sticker to

GOING GREEN

A long term goal of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex is to convert to a complete solar power electric system. This conversion not only reduces energy costs, but by converting to an alternative energy solution it will reduce our carbon footprint in the earth's environment and act as protection against rising energy costs. Solar power is reliable, clean, environmentally friendly and economical. The solar photovoltaic system is an excellent means of reducing electrical costs, which in turn would free complex funds to then be applied directly to habitat management and wildlife conservation. Through solar power, the Refuge would become a leader in conservation amongst the Refuge system, while saving more than 123 Tons of greenhouse gases.

The Refuge decided to take another step into the future by converting the volunteer building's water heater into a solar water heater system. The system requires no moving parts and no external energy source except the sun itself. All this is done quietly, reliably and without pollution of any kind.

In August, FAMI and the Refuge worked together to make this innovative project happen. Alternative Power Solutions installed the hot water system and it is currently up and running full speed ahead!

By starting now and having like goals we can make small changes that have huge impacts. All eyes are on to the future as these two partners take steps to improve the world we live in today.

Article submitted by: Amanda McLaughlin

WANTED

Have a gently used tent that is gathering dust in the garage? Consider donating it to the Friends. We're trying to amass some 6 person tents to loan to student groups who wish to camp at the Youth Environmental Training Area.

Contact Sherrie Krause at sherriekrause@yahoo.com if you have a tent to donate!

place on these items. They will be available to all students at Travis Middle School. The proceeds will then be given to the refuge to purchase food for the cranes. Dan Alonzo, ANWR Refuge Manager, has offered to let two of the most involved members actually go and fill feeders for the cranes one Friday. Needless to say, the students are extremely excited!

Article by: Sherrie Krause



Aransas Lecture Series
Noon Program Schedule 2009- 2010 Season
Programs meet from 12:00 p.m. – 12:50 p.m. in the
Visitor Center Auditorium.

October 17, 2009 – “Tips and Techniques for Hunting White-tailed Deer and Feral Hogs at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge” by TPWD Education Specialist Brock Minton.

November 14, 2009 – “Alligator, Denizen of Refuge Wetlands” by TMN Norman Hirsch.

December 12, 2009 – “Whooping Cranes” by TMN Ray Kirkwood.

January 9, 2010 – “Aboriginal People of Coastal Texas” by TMN T.J. Fox.

January 23, 2010 – “Beach Treasures” by Calhoun County Extension Agent Rhonda Cummins.

February 20, 2010 – “Texas /Toxic Coastal Critters:Red Tide and *Vibrio vulnificus* (the flesh-eating bacteria)” by TPWD Biologist Meridith Byrd.

March 6, 2010 – “Matagorda Island Sea Turtle Project” by TMN Ray Kirkwood.

March 13, 2010 – “Birding 101, A Walk through Headquarters Habitats” by Bron Rorex.

April 3, 2010 – “Wildflower Walk” by TMN Ernie Edmundson.

REMINDER!!!
RENEW YOUR FAMI
MEMBERSHIPS
BY
SEPTEMBER 30TH!!

Barbara Bruns is looking for someone to volunteer to be the Christmas Bird Count compiler. Please contact Barbara at bruns64@yahoo.com or at 361-575-5505

IMPORTANT DATES TO REMEMBER!!

Sept. 26-27 – Archery Scouting permitted in the Hunt Area.

Sept. 26 – National Public Lands Day

Oct. 3-11 – Aransas Archery Hunt for White-tailed Deer and Feral Hogs

Oct. 10-11 – Rockport Seafair. Refuge will staff booth with information and fish printing for kids environmental education in the ABC School Children's Tent.

Oct. 11-17 – National Wildlife Refuge Week.

Oct. 11- The Big Sit birding event at the Observation Tower. This is like a bird-a-thon in that the object is to tally as many bird species as can be seen or heard within 24 hours. The difference lies in the area limitation from which you can observe. Contact Barbara Bruns at 361-575-5505 for more info.

Oct. 17 – National Wildlife Refuge Week Activities. Interpretive Van Tours at 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. (Reservations required). Ham Radio Station Operator Mike Thomas will try to contact other operators in the Central Flyway. New Refuge Photo Club will begin activities. Aransas Lecture Series program will be "Tips and Techniques for Hunting White-tailed Deer and Feral Hogs at Aransas NWR" by Texas Parks and Wildlife Education Specialist Brock Minton. Fly-tying techniques by Al Springstead of Rockport Flyfishers. Austwell Post Office will offer special pictorial cancellation for Matagorda Island Lighthouse postage stamp.

Oct. 22 – Refuge staff and volunteers will provide information booth at the Calhoun County Fair, Pt. Lavaca.

Oct. 30 – Refuge staff and volunteers will provide environmental education at Monarch Madness at Fennessey Ranch, Bayside, TX.

Nov. 7-8 – Rifle Hunt for White-tailed Deer and Feral Hogs

Nov. 7 – Interpretive Van Tour Training open to anyone interested in assisting the Refuge in providing guided tours to visiting public on weekends January – April. Call Bernice 361-286-3559 for more info.

Nov. 14 – Interpretive Van Tours at 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. (Reservations required); Aransas Lecture Series program is "Alligators, Denizen of Refuge Wetlands" by Texas Master Naturalist Norman Hirsch.

Nov. 21-22 – Rifle Hunt for White-tailed Deer and Feral Hogs

Nov. 26 – Thanksgiving Holiday. Visitor Center Closed. Auto Tour Loop open.

Dec. 5-6 – Rifle Hunt for White-tailed Deer and Feral Hogs

Dec. 5 – FAMI Annual Meeting. Any member in good standing is welcome to attend the meeting. Expect to receive your invitation in the mail in early November if you've renewed your membership!!!

Dec. 5 – Rockport Tropical Christmas Festival. EE Specialist Tonya Nix presenting whooping crane program.

Dec. 12 – Interpretive Van Tours at 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m., Aransas Lecture Series program about whooping cranes by Texas Master Naturalist Ray Kirkwood.

Dec. 18-19 – Rifle Hunt for White-tailed Deer and Feral Hogs

Dec. 19-21 – Tatton Youth Hunt hosted by Refuge and Texas Wildlife Association.

Dec. 25 – Christmas Day Holiday. Visitor Center closed. Auto Tour Loop open.

Week of Dec. 28 – Aransas NWR Christmas Bird Count. Call the Refuge for more info.

Dec. 31 – Aransas NWR Birthday.

Membership Application

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ Zip code _____
Home Phone _____
Other Phone _____
Email _____

Check here to go green, indicating that you will read your newsletter online and no longer receive it in the mail.

Membership Categories

- Senior (age 62+) - \$10.00
 - Student (up to age 21) - \$5.00
 - Individual - \$15.00
 - Family - \$25.00
 - Life - \$300.00
 - Business - \$150.00
 - Corporate Sponsor - \$500.00
 - Additional contribution \$ _____
 - Senior Couple (ages 62+) \$20.00
- \$ _____ Total Amount Enclosed

**Memberships expire
September 30th each year.**

FAMI Mission Statement

Friends of Aransas of Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuge (FAMI)

will work to support and assist the Aransas and Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex in its goal of enhancing habitat and wildlife and encouraging compatible wildlife-dependant public uses of the refuge through educational, interpretive, scientific and other activities appropriate to the mission of these Refuge.

Friends of Aransas/Matagorda Island
National Wildlife Refuge
P O Box 74
Austwell, TX 77950

